

A SPARKLE OF DOCTORS: VOLUME 3



DIVERGENT WORDSMITHS

A SPARKLE OF DOCTORS: VOLUME 3 INFINITE REGRESS

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THE FACE OF THE MUTATION

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. The Sixth Doctor is dead before his time—and the future...?

The Thirteenth Doctor has become the lynchpin by which the whole of Creation now hangs. Her timestream has jumped a time track. She has become a ghost in her own lifetimes. If Time should reset, the Doctors will be destroyed, but she has bigger concerns than herself.

Struggling to repair the damage, Diamant visits the Doctor during a moment of absolute horror on Vulpia. A Universal Mutation is corrupting the cosmos and there seems little left that can stand against it. The Doctor spurns Diamant, upset at the details surrounding Lady Traskeya's death, and vows to see this Mutation, face-to-face...

THE FACE OF THE MUTATION: PART I
BUMP—BUMP—BUMP



by Alan Camlann

Bump—bump—bump...

Singularly, supported by relative dimensions, Lady Traskeya felt the wet celery crunch of a snapped neck. The vulgar, and undignified, splatter of red on yellow-gold robes. Wet. The Wrath Warrior's claw clipped the vertebrae with enough force to sever the head from the shoulder. However, Constable Zillitian was in a hurry. She was discarded.

The torus of the *Odysseum* was spinning apart. The Starbreaker's resources were too low to further outrun their divisive hunters. The boarding party of Wrath Warriors were in total control. The next time torpedo would destroy the *Odysseum*.

With the preternatural disinterest inherent to her class, Traskeya felt her body flung through the air. It should have distressed her. Alarmed her. Concerned her, at the very least. However, in the attoseconds of thought left before she struck the first step, her only thoughts were for her glasses. The rounded lenses. Polished only that morning with delicate care.

Bump—bump—bump, her body went, but her mind... Yes, that was still on her glasses.

Curious.

Down, down, down, she went, in a sickening tumble of bone and gristle.

Heat drained from her hearts. Each successive blow tore at the House Arakmapes cloth. The detachment she felt made it easier, but she doubted it had anything to do with breeding. Dying was always unfashionable. Among her People, it was treated almost with embarrassment. Lungs ached.

The humility she felt, if that was the right word for it, took her away from the wailing.

The sickening wailing.

Wailing.

Whub-ump. The final stair.

At the bottom of the stairway, punctured and dissevered, she concentrated what little bodily electrochemistry she had left towards her fading oculi. A staser blast had burnt a cataract into her left eye. The right functioned with appropriate ease.

Constable Zillitian was looking for something in the *Odysseum's* parachronistic upper gallery. Among the orchard of tall screens and mirrorlight discoveries. The poor fool. He would be able to see, outside the forward portal, the time spiral in reflected pareidolia. Just outside the failing stasis halos that should have kept the Starbreaker ship in chronostationary orbit.

A crushing vastness that made the sublime spinning top of the *Odysseum* look like a child's toy.

There. He saw. She could tell, he was screaming.

He was probably going mad.

Well... That was a small comfort, at least.

The blanket of agony that rippled across Lady Traskeya's body twinged. She was beginning to feel the cold of the floor. The thrum of vworp engines. The pain. So much pain.

Lady Traskeya of House Arakmapes was dying, but the Change was due to claim her quite soon.

She could see her face. Distorted in a round shattered lens.

Ah. There were her glasses.

The bulkhead buckled. Flames and choking smoke stung her eyes, charred her flesh. A yellow-hot excruciation. Time winds soaked their chrononising radiation into her biodata. White-hot. More painful than anything she could ever describe.

The regeneration came upon her with its milk-white glow. Lindos began to override her adrenalin. Tension she hadn't realised was there,

gust from her body. Her eye caught the Constable regather himself. His men were cheering.

She could see why. In the gallery, the Wrarth Warrior ripped the Starbreaker's emergency message pod from its socket.

Something approaching panic tried to rise through her system.

Traskeya tried to move her hand. To grasp the cast-off staser. Her spine was broken.

"Recall to Division," he rumbled into his transceiver.

The ruby-red glow of a transmat beam encompassed Constable Zillitian and his men. They were gone. Traskeya was alone. Surrounded by the bodies of her peers. Her friends. Liquefied by death after death. Until not even regeneration could revive them.

Their meticulous and scrupulous ends, inflicted by the Wrarth Warriors, spoke to a barbarity that knew of the Time Lords with the intimacy of the loom.

She realised. It was one of their own. A Gallifreyan had done this to them.

Perhaps, *that* was it. Perhaps, she was finally numb with shock.

Somewhere, a small strenuous hope whispered to her. She hoped that Diamant would send the hypercubes back to Gallifrey. Discreetly. Securely. Honour their word. Slip them through the transduction barriers like a cloak. By way of a fractally-enveloped technician or fellow quadrigger. She needed a final resting place for her thoughts. Needed that closure.

A small part of her wished it would be the Academy's zero wards. Where the renegades of Gallifrey, whether directly or not, had their names remembered. Engraved into one of the baffle panels of the matter exchange system that ran from chamber-to-chamber. A silent roll of honour. Until recently.

Lady Traskeya supposed the Archchancellor had melted the baffle-panel down by now. Just like her. Melting to slag and clinker...

It was becoming difficult to focus now.

Now focus to difficult becoming was it.

Focus difficult was.

Now to it.

Explosion.

Terror. The safety of the *Odysseum* was ripped from Traskeya. She could feel herself being pulled in all directions at once. Her atoms, a liquid rubber. Eardrums ruptured under the vortex's burning slashes. Bones spun and twisted like wet chalk. She was falling. Not down, not up, but *out*. Across the dimensional divide.

Oh, Gods, she prayed. Gods, Gods, let me die...

She knew the fate of Fenris, the saboteur of Stardeath and his punishment from Rassilon. Her nerve endings were being stretched across the æons. Debris—both animal and metal—tore from the wheel of the *Odysseum*.

In the fractals, the butterfly-faces of the vortex, Traskeya didn't recognise the attacking time-ship. A series of divisive, vanta-grey domes linked to a central spoke. Her killers. She did, however, recognise the final volley of time torpedoes as they burrowed into the Starbreaker. They were so impassive, striking from the shadows with a flesh-rending scream. This wasn't a mission of conquest, to the victor the spoils, but extinction. A purge.

Traskeya felt the shrapnel pass through her. Insubstantial. Phantoms in the timestream.

All except one. From the rocket ship. The toy within a toy. Ship within a ship.

A light soaked in harpsong sung by stones. Their bright and friendly mirth disturbed by their despair. It smelt of old worms and rude beetles. The rag. The rag from the rocket ship. That strange and inconvenient thing that Traskeya had needed from that Curator.

Without it, the *Odysseum*'s bio-tags wouldn't have had a chance at calibration.

Without it, she would not have found the vortex turtles.

Without it, she would not have died.

As Traskeya splintered, the inconvenient magic, this exotic matter—one and the same—intermingled with her biodata. It was born of the Old Times. Before Rassilon anchored the thread of Time with the Eye of Harmony. It was a hidden jewel. A diamond in the dimensional rough.

The gilded light of regeneration touched the exotic matter only for a moment.

It turned red with anger.

Choking red. Ash-red. Death.

The energies, unbound by just a touch of Reason, went mad. Like dimensional anaphylaxis. An allergic reaction to Rassilonian science and logic.

Traskeya died. The final death and the end for a Time Lord.

But her body, twisted and spun across the time vortex, was borne away. On an ivory-coloured sea turtle with an aquamarine shell. Its pink bubble Universe, perhaps one of the youngest in all of Creation. A runt, no longer. Now, a beauteous macrocosm of triumphant possibilities.

The vortex turtles were free. They bore homage to her sacrifice. She was remembered.

The turtles swam for their long, long lives. Into the eye of the time spiral.

But the divisive hunters followed.

THE FACE OF THE MUTATION: PART 2

THE TRIALS OF APOLLO



By Matt Tennant

+++ UNCHARTED ERA +++ OPEN MATERIALISATION CIRCUIT +++
FROM: TIME-SHIP 'OLD GIRL' +++ TO: INDIVIDUAL 'DIAMANT' +++
TIME DELAY +++ SET: 13 SECONDS +++ CAUTION: ONCE THE
PROCESS OF DEMATERIALISATION HAS BEGUN IT CANNOT BE
INTERRUPTED +++ CONTINUE? +++ YES +++ DEMATERIALISATION
COMMENCING...

The wreck of the ancient Starbreaker, *Odysseum*, was scattered to the time winds long ago. Atomised and eviscerated by the forces that dominated the time vortex. Small portions of it remained. On the lip of a hole in the vortex. Enough, perhaps, for a passing fractal M-form spurned by a Time Lord. It was here, in the cauterised upper decks, that Diamant had decided to remain for a time.

Quite a time, as it turned out.

“We have a live one, my master!” bellowed a tinny voice. “And he’s special!”

In haste, Basillius Creel fell through a tall sliding door, and stumbled on a trio of legs into a large observation deck. The parachronistic upper gallery was what Diamant had called it. One hand steadied him against a bank of multi-coloured wires, criss-crossing like overlapping slugs, while the second clutched a small silver remote control. As he took three deep breaths, the shimmering yellow scales that pocked his green cracked skin, pulsed back and forth.

“*Fantastic!*” shouted a voice from a monitor deep within the blue hue of the room.

“*Reversing the polarity of the neutron flow now, Sarah Jane!*” informed another in a posh tone that commanded calm.

“*I implore you to reconsider, sir. For the sake of yourselves and your fellows upon this planet. There can be—no, there must be—no alternative to peaceful coexistence, h’mm?*” rationalised one.

“*Suspect? Suspect? Me? I’m no fool. Anyone who resorts to murder as eagerly and quickly as yourself must be suspect, surely?*” accused another.

“*Tell me, Mister Lumic,*” uttered one further, “*would you like a jelly baby?*”

Basillius could sense the wide toothy grin that followed that sentence. All around him, voices laughed, cried, shouted, and screamed from countless monitors suspended from the vast ceiling on retractable

metal arms. They all sat, huddled like penguins, around the crystalline viewer of Diamant.

At the present it was dead. As was his master's interest.

“What makes this one so special?” boomed a deep, foreboding voice.

Their fractal body, hidden in shadow deep inside the chamber, reclined to the empty cube-like sockets in their appropriated chair.

“He's been hidden, my master!” panted Basillius through two protruding fangs. “Hidden in the depths of Time, on a planet shielded from sentient view. Almost new. Bitter and angrier than the rest, wallowing in his own fury.” Eyelids blinked from side-to-side like curtains being drawn. “He would make a fascinating subject.”

Silence. Diamant mulled over the information.

There was something uncomfortably hollow in their interactions of late. Basillius Creel had grown strangely fond of his master. Knew their moods as readily as trees did their seasons. However, this new coldness... It cloaked all around them from their last visit to the Doctor. A bitter depression that felt almost like regret. What was this *Odysseum* place to them?

Basillius flicked out a tongue that unrolled in a blur and snapped onto a passing chronomite.

“Give him to Apollo,” decreed Diamant.

“We aren't going?”

“No.” The words came heavily, like at a graveside. “Not yet...”

“Are you sure, my master? Apollo is vengeful. His loss is great, his wrath... could be deadly.”

“The perfect match, Our reptilian friend,” chuckled Diamant, bitterly. “A new Doctor. Fascinating.”

“Not quite,” Basillius corrected his master. “Like I say, this one is special. He buried the name a long time ago.”

They raised their head. “Buried?”

“Yes, my master,” clicked Basillius. “He prefers to be called something different.”

Diamant sat for a moment, warring with their own Plurality. Indecision was a strange thing to see in them. Curiosity warred with common sense until one won out over the other.

“Well, then...” They picked themselves up from the chair and moved towards the crystalline viewer. “Let Us see what this one is made of.”

It was Christmas Eve in the small town of Pemberton.

The rest of the Universe revelled in festive songs, gathered with relatives not seen all year round, and ran in the never-ending snow that blanketed the land as far as the eye could see. Pemberton, however, endured another infinite summer. In the morning it was hot, when the five suns went down at night it was hot, and on the rare occasion it rained... it was hot. Raindrops steamed against the wooden decking like bacon frying in the pan. Every droplet that dived into the baking sand hissed and spat, leaving dark brown spots reminiscent of a rash plaguing the land.

Long gone were the days of weather control stations. Now, it was cloud seeding and magnetronic orbital shifts that would've made the old terraformers bristle with envy. That was the problem with a frontier planet designed to perfectly replicate the American Wild West of Ancient Earth. It included the unbearable scorching weather.

On the edge of the planet's last population centre, at the summit of a steep hill that overlooked the rinky-dink township, lay a grave marked with a single wooden cross.

Upon that wooden cross were carved four words:

HERE LIES THE DOCTOR.



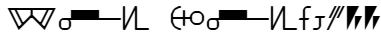
Elsewhere, the Sheriff woke with a cough and a splutter. Mucus leapt from chapped lips covered in coarse sand. He felt as if he'd ingested a lake full of water that now forced its way out of burning lungs. In his semi-conscious state, he reasoned that it was the effect of a rogue transmat and that he would be fine in a few minutes. Opening his eyes to nothing but infinite darkness, the gnarled adventurer curled a sore lip upwards in a sneer, felt what surely had to be millions of tiny paper cuts ping across his aching maw, and groaned with half of his face still pressed firmly into the warm, sandy ground.

After a few seconds, he pressed aged hands into the floor beside him, felt them sink a few inches into the sand, and pushed himself to his knees with a definitive groan. A roaming hand drove thin, semi-wrinkled fingers through a prickly dark brown beard. Sticky grains of shingle fell through the mass of brown hair, cascaded like a waterfall onto his battered leather crimson waistcoat, and returned from whence they came.

A shallow orange light like the glow of a fire pierced the darkness. The gloom slowly illuminated as the brightness intensified and washed over both the jagged and smooth rock that made up the walls of the vast cave. He raised an open hand to shield his eyes. Behind him, the rest of his surroundings were slowly uncovered. Brown, grey and black tinted rock formed different sized and shaped assemblies. Large formations rose sharply, forcing themselves out of the ground. Pillars of varying size held up the ceiling which was flatter than the floor but still broken with sharp pieces of rock that hung like waiting teeth.

The light illuminated a gritty, rugged face matured by deep lines at the corner of intense and tired eyes like two thin incisions either side of his nose. Again, the top lip curled in a snarl as he placed a hand on the warm rock formation in front of him and climbed to feet.

He was clad in brown roper boots inscribed with gold Old High Gallifreyan on each side:



The burnt orange light died away like a dream.

A spotlight snapped onto a rickety wooden table in the middle of the cave. Its auburn hue was interrupted by black slashes in its legs and body. On the surface, three different swords rested on a red velvet cloth. Each weapon was unique in their appearance and ascended in size. One was little more than a dagger with a shimmering green emerald stuck in the centre of its handle. The next was larger and sprouted into two blades from a hilt covered in hand carved swirls. The last was a proper, full-sized weapon, the likes of which had been used in battles throughout history to strike down knights and soldiers alike.

The Sheriff, a man who looked as if he belonged herding cattle, staggered from the rock. Still uneasy as the last effects of the transmat wore off. Halfway to the table he stopped and scooped up a battered white Stetson which lay on its top behind a rock. He dusted off the rim, spun it between thumb and forefinger, and palmed it back where it belonged on top of a fine head of wavy hair too young for his face.

“Wouldn’t want to lose this. Perl De Vere put a bullet through my last one, sassy dame.” The Sheriff’s tone was slow, methodical, and very much of its surroundings.

He cast a gentle hand over the weapons as he walked the length of the rickety table. His fingers brushed over the hilts of the rapiers, feeling the different patterns carved into the steel.

Just when he thought things couldn't get any more confusing, several sharp flames leapt from a trench beyond the table to illuminate a snivelling, portly, run-down figure chained to a metal frame by all four limbs. Below him, the ground gave way to reveal a violent, roaring pit of fire. Flames curled like tentacles, coercing their prey into the molten depths. He couldn't be sure from where he stood, but the gentleman looked no more than thirty years old, though his faded mustard tweed suit made him appear older.

"Please!" the man cried. "Save me! For all that's in God's heaven, save me!" As the fiery feelers licked around his ankles, the dumpy man screamed at the top of his lungs.

"I know you, partner."

The stranger stood with an assured whip of his poncho. As the garment flew to the side, over a pale blue shirt rolled up at the wrists, it revealed a cream leather holster with brown trim attached to a belt that secured his skin-tight black jeans. From the holster he pulled not a gun, but his sonic screwdriver, and aimed the bullet shaped tip at the hysterical prisoner. With his thumb, the Time Lord rolled the barrel that travelled around the hand-carved wooden body three times to the left and pulled the tiny trigger underneath. The bullet tip shot forward several inches on slim metal plinths and the device came to life, whirring and ricocheting.

"What are you doing?" the man cried. His voice a desperate wail. "I don't want to die! Oh, God, please..."

"You're already dead," the rugged man with no name informed him, listening to his device. "No life-signs. Just a lost soul screaming into the darkness. You shouldn't exist at all." A closer look at the rotund

gentleman's face ignited a spark of recognition. "Doctor Horatio Jayston. You died in the Dalek Invasion of St. Bernard."

The mere mention of his death caused the physician to whimper and pant like a dog in the summer.

"You ignored me. I told you to stay hidden in the Sentential Crypt."

"D—Do—Doctor?" Jayston wept. "Oh, thank the lord above."

"No!" He answered. "Not anymore. Not for a very long time." A rage mixed with sadness brewed inside him. Every word, slow and methodical. "Why didn't you listen?!"

"Please," Jayston pleaded once more. "I don't want to die." "I told you, you're already dead!" he replied callously, quickly changing the subject. "Why didn't you listen?! Your selfishness cost them their lives. Opened the only barrier that separated them from the Skaro Assembly and when they got in, when they exterminated you, they massacred everyone else including my..."

He couldn't go any further.

"I'm sorry!" Jayston blubbered as the tears cooled red hot cheeks. "I was desperate!"

"You were a coward! A yellow belly!" He dropped the screwdriver back into its holster and took a deep breath. "This is all wrong!"

"The table," Jayston cried. "He said the answer lay on the table."

The gruff Time Lord strode back to the faulty desk and ran his hands around the edges looking for something. A clue, a button—there was usually a button—some semblance of where he was and why a man who had previously died was chained in front of him. It took less than a minute for his hand to wander underneath the table and dirty nails to settle on a piece of paper pinned to the base.

“You can free the first with one foul stroke. The first and last add the butt of the joke.” He read from the stained yellow parchment. “Who?” he asked. “Who told you about the table?”

“I don’t know!” Jayston wailed. Thick, beetroot red cheeks looked like they could burst any second. “He didn’t give a name. Please... I’m sorry... I’m sorry they died!” He screamed again as the contraption began to slowly descend with several fierce jolts. “Oh, God, please Doctor!”

“I told you! That’s not my name. Not anymore. Not for a very long time.” He leaned against the table, seething like an adder backed into the corner. The echo of screams rang in his ears, extinguished by the gut churning cry of “*Exterminate!*” and the definitive ping of laser fire.

There was nothing after that. The only sound present was that of the sobbing man whose second chance at life lay in the palm of his hand. But he wasn’t the Doctor anymore. Why should he be that saviour when those he was meant to help cost him everything?

“Doctor!” Jayston cried.

“Shut up!” he shouted back, overcome by rage. “Just shut up!”

He turned and kicked the rock formation several times with a scream of anger.

“Doctor, cowboy... whatever you are...!”

“Sheriff...” he muttered under his breath.

“I don’t want to face—! Show some compassion, please!” Jayston wailed. “I did what I thought was best and failed! I know I did. But, just for this moment... Can’t you just be kind?”

Then it struck him. The promise he’d vowed to uphold, whoever he was.

Never cruel or cowardly. Never give up. Never give in.

Words he hadn’t heard for centuries.

“Dash!” the Sheriff sighed, resigned to the task in front of him. Turning back to the table with a steely bearing, the figure of law and order plucked a single toothpick from the band of his hat and clamped it between accepting teeth. “Let’s ride.”

Allowing the riddle to run through his mind like the wash of a river, he began to examine the swords one by one. He lifted each to eye-level, casting a fleeting glare over the glistening blade and the expertly carved hilts, then replaced them on the red silk cloth. He repeated the riddle over and over, ignoring the snivels of Jayston as he was lowered hastily into the pit.

“Three swords, one dead man who shouldn’t be alive, first and last, butt of the joke.” He slammed a hand down onto the surface of the table and settled on the largest sword.

“Are you sure?” Jayston screamed as the saviour strode towards him, weapon clutched tight.

“No!”

“No? The Doctor would be sure.”

“He’s not here anymore. Anyway, he never was. No one is. It’s all luck. Every choice we make. Tell me, Doctor Jayston...” He chewed on the now gnarled toothpick. “Do you feel lucky?”

Jayston closed his eyes and clenched a sweaty bottom lip over an equally sweaty top lip.

With a roar, the Time Lord gripped the sword in both hands, hoisted it above his head and strode forward ready to strike. Then something caught his eye on the hilt of the rapier. Illuminated by the firelight, the number one materialised on the shiny base. It wasn’t there before. He was sure of it. Then something leapt across his synapses and before he knew it, he was back at the table collecting the other two swords and examining their foundations. Nothing. Swiftly, he strode with them to the precipice and held them over the tinge. Slowly, on the underside of

the dagger, in the exact same place as the biggest weapon, appeared another number one.

“Icarus bound...” the cowboy muttered to himself, ignoring the frame that held Jayston juddering further and further towards the pit.

“I don’t know what that means!” the strained red face of his victim yelled.

“Icarus didn’t see his error until he flew too close to the sun. I told him Pritt-stick wouldn’t work but he always knew best, and I got pecked by those chickens.”

Jayston’s screams shook him back to reality.

“The swords reveal the answer to their own riddle once they get too close to the light,” the Sheriff continued. “The first and last add the butt of the joke. One and one is two. It’s the second sword!”

He gripped the double pointed weapon, took a deep breath, and swiped at the chains that bound his victim. With a crack, all four bonds snapped and deposited the corpulent figure onto the mucky floor causing a cloud of dust to spiral into the air. Jayston curled his bulk into the foetal position and whimpered where he fell.

All was quiet in the Western town of Pemberton.

A usual day under the red-hot sun was like a revolving door of activity. It never changed.

The locals would ride into town, tie their horses to one of the many hitching posts, and then either frequent one of several saloons that lined the corridor shaped avenues or nip into T.S. Baker Liqueur Emporium for a few bottles of Old Mother Amos’ Mind Rotter. They’d then find a cosy sand dune under the burning sunlight and drink until they forgot their own name. The cowgirls would depart to the farthest plains to round up their cattle. Meanwhile, the undertaker

could be found leant by a woodworm infested support and smoking copious amounts of cigars, playing with his tape measure like a yo-yo, waiting for the gunslingers and outlaws to provide him with business. The tinkling music that accompanied flappers could be heard up and down the straight, unforgiving streets. Dusty streets accessible only by small alleyways down the side of buildings. Despite being a hub of activity, no one ever paid any attention to the dusty blue box that sat on the porch of the Sheriff's Office.

Today, the town was empty.

The Sheriff and Doctor Jayston burst through dirty-white batwing doors that would have usually led from a local brothel. The enforcer already had his sonic screwdriver pointed in front of him, the bullet tip scanning all around, as they exited into an empty, dry street.

"It's too quiet!" Jayston hissed. "Why is it so quiet?"

The Sheriff pointed his device to the empty sky, then to the mountains that stood tall over the outskirts. He placed the sonic to his ear as if to listen to the tool.

"The people are still here." A puzzled hand stroked the sharp hair around his chin. "The town has been put one second out of time. We exist in the same space, but one second out of time."

"You have to get me out of here!" Jayston panicked. "I *can't* be here. I can't *die* here."

"Shut up!" the Sheriff commanded. "This is a test. Someone is testing me. And there's no point putting someone to task if you can't see the results."

He dropped the sonic back into its holster and turned slowly in a circle as he spoke.

"So... Come out, come out, wherever you are... you yellow belly!"

Silence filled the streets.

Tumbleweeds rustled past.

A set of double doors on a balcony above blew open and a slow round of applause made its way from within.

“Oh, yes!” a joyous voice yelled. “Oh, very yes! Look at you. You’re magnificent. A man completely out of his time yet fits in perfectly.”

Eventually, onto the balcony that overlooked the street, appeared a figure clad in flexible scratched black armour covered by a fleece cape. Its head and face hidden behind a mask of bone cobbled together from different-sized mandibles.

“Howdy, partner.” the Sheriff greeted it.

“You’ve even got the spieß!” The daunting figure laughed behind its mask. “Oh, this is fabulous and very you.”

“Talk fast or pull in your horns because my patience wears thin these days,” the Sheriff demanded in a low, menacing tone. “Why are you testing me?”

“It’s not a test,” the figure assured him. “This is a trial, and you passed your first ordeal. You saved the man directly responsible for the death of your companions.”

Jayston’s eyes searched the ground. “I did what I thought was best for...”

The Sheriff shot Jayston a look that sealed his lips instantly.

“You’re all down but nine... I love this Ancient Western talk. I can see why you stayed even if the smell is a little... horsey.”

“You ride into my town, you mess with my people, you play with Time all without a name or introduction.”

“We make quite the pair, don’t we? But, yes, where are my manners?” The masked figure cranked its neck to the only building in the street made of brick and stone. Two wooden steps led up to a small patio upon which sat a rocking chair on one side of white saloon doors and

an ancient blue box on the other. Above the door on the face of the building was a long sign in gold leaf writing that simply read, ‘Sheriff’s Office’.

“I’ve travelled far. I could use a drink.” With that, he blinked out of sight.

“Don’t go!” Jayston pleaded hysterically. “It’s a trap.”

“I know!” the Sheriff confirmed. “But that’s the thing about traps. I never could resist a good one.” He began to pace towards the building he called home.

“Don’t leave me!” Jayson panicked and pleaded. “Not out here. Not on my own.

“You’ll be fine.”

“This is your fault. We’re here because of you! I’ll... I’ll leave,” he threatened. “I’ll find a horse or a carriage... A train to somewhere that’ll take me back to civilisation.”

“Fine!” the Sheriff told him, refusing to slow his march. “But this is a frontier planet.”

“On the frontier?”

“Beyond the frontier. Beyond the Unmarked Purlieus, beyond the Veruna system, beyond Cygnus A. Even Mimas is a speck on our radar... This is the only town that exists here and you’re still just a memory floating in the wind waiting to be given life. If you want to venture outside these streets and into the barren wasteland beyond spending eternity floating as atoms in the breeze, then be my guest.”

As the Sheriff strode inside, thumbs tucked deep in his trouser pockets, Jayston sunk to his knees, his face buried in his hands.

“Of all the people you could have chosen to save. He wouldn’t have been the one, would he?” the masked figure said as it took a sip from a glass schooner through a slit in its mask.

It sat in a wooden chair with no wooden panels to support the top and sides of the back rest. Its feet crossed on the wooden table that sported only one more glass and a bottle containing liquid the colour of tobacco spit.

“That’s why no one should have that power,” the Sheriff replied.

He stepped methodically into the stone walled room, crossed to the opposite side of the table, and took a seat in front of two prison cells barred with black metal and containing one uncomfortable looking bed each.

“So... You know me, stranger. But the question is, who are you?”

“I have many names. The Righteous Sorter. The Taker of Souls. But you can call me Apollo the Fixer.” Apollo poured some of the liquid into the small glass and slid it across the table. The Sheriff caught it in his palm inches from the lip of the table.

“Well, that *is* handy.” The Sheriff glared at him with an insincere smile. “I have a few shelves in my Saloon that need putting up. They keep collapsing under the weight of my genius,” he snickered as he drank.

“That’s exactly the sort of thing he’d say. You can take the boy out of Gallifrey, but you can’t take Gallifrey out of the boy. You might not be the Doctor in name, but he’s still in there isn’t he? The bravery, the magnificence, the cold-hearted Destroyer of Worlds.”

The pair studied each other. The Sheriff took a swig from the glass and allowed the bitter liquid to dance a tingle throughout his gums.

“Aren’t you going to ask?” Apollo teased.

“Ask what?”

“Why you’re here.”

The Sheriff took another swig and lightly shrugged his shoulders. “You’re an egomaniac. You’ve devised trials for me to complete, trapped me a second out of time, revealed yourself to me, told me your name and what you are, and I’ve not even had breakfast yet. I figured you couldn’t help telling me sooner or later so why bother wasting my breath?” The Sheriff emptied the schooner and slammed it back onto the table.

Behind the mask, Apollo smiled. “You’re good!” He drained every last drop of the liquid from his glass and relayed the machinations of Diamant and the Labours all of his other selves were undergoing, while tapping what seemed to be a nervous gloved finger on the side of the glass. “But your trials, they’ll be for more than the entertainment of a God. As you’ve seen, they’re for the existence of two you failed in your previous regeneration.”

“What if I refuse to play any more of your little games?”

“Refuse?” Apollo laughed. “The Doctor does not refuse. I’ve seen into your infinite timelines. I’ve seen every face you will ever wear. Some grumpy, some kind. Some brave, some scarred. But in the moment when people need help, all are the Doctor and everything that name means.”

“I’ve not been... Him... For a very long time.”

Apollo cast his attention to a ‘Most Wanted’ board pinned to the wall above the table. Hand sketched mug shots of various outlaws and aliens overlapped each other.

“Interesting. You don’t want to be the Doctor anymore, love the new name by the way—the Sheriff—but clearly you still have a duty of care. To protect. To do the right thing. Regardless of the cost or the hate that builds for the one you despise the most.”

“Why are you here?” The Sheriff poured both men another glass, sat back and drank.

“Why do you hate him so much?”

The Sheriff didn’t answer. Instead, he just studied Apollo and drank again.

“Is it because he sacrificed himself so others could live?”

“Stop it.”

“Is it because he forced this life upon you—”

“*Stop* it.”

“—doing what he always did—”

“*Stop it!*”

“—in the name of the Doctor?”

The Sheriff slammed the glass down onto the table and felt it shatter under the grip of his hand. “It wasn’t just a new face he unlocked!” The Sheriff stopped himself from going further. “There was so much more.”

“His hearts were broken. Your hearts... have hardened.” Something flickered in Apollo’s body language. “You buried him in a desperate attempt to forget a man, a name that shouldn’t even exist. Yet here you are, a splinter of a regeneration that never happened, yet one that has granted so many lives. Rockers, Mods, Felines, Mermen, Knights, millions of versions that splintered from every regeneration in every dimension, every reality, every Universe there ever will be. Do you remember? Do you know which one you should have been?”

“You’re wasting time,” the Sheriff told Apollo.

“Says the voice of experience.” Apollo stood, waved his hand in an arc in front of him, and watched as darkness filled one of the cells.

“Your final victim doesn’t have as much time as you’ve wasted all these years.”

The Sheriff took one last look back at Apollo. “Who?” he asked. “Who am I saving this time?”

“You remember Doctor Holmes. The eve of the Carassius strike, you met him in the cathedral of Mor. You fought that swarm together, held it off for seven hours until its lifespan ended naturally. It was a hell of a fight. One of your... *bis*... most noble. But the last volley came from nowhere, didn’t it? You failed to see it and the good doctor fell. You tried to save him, but you couldn’t hold on.” Every word sounded like he was relishing the failure. “So, Last of the Time Lords... Will you let him fall again?”

The Sheriff stared at the floor, remembering Holmes’ face as he dangled over an immense drop bordered by a spiral stone staircase. Eyes full of fear and pleas. His right hand began to sweat and ache, remembering the strain of the physician, a dead weight he couldn’t hold onto. Then finally, as if in slow motion, his helpless body plunging through the drop, arms and legs flailing before the resignation set in and his eyes closed before his body hit the floor.

Without a word, the Sheriff stepped into the darkness.

It felt like he’d been walking for hours when he stepped out of the darkness and into the confines of a different cave.

This one was larger, the orange hue revealed more of the labyrinth in which he was now confined. Instead of an uneven piece of rock which had to double-up as a floor, he was confronted with an expanse of level ground covered in the smoothest sand imaginable. The only catch was the impossibly round holes punched into the terrain at odd intervals, carpeted with orange lava that boasted a cracked black sear on its surface.

An oncoming wind blew to the far side of the cave accompanied by glittery blue specks that formed into the shape of Doctor Jayson. It took him a few seconds to realise he was no longer sat at the saloon bar, sipping a sarsaparilla from a cocktail glass. He had retreated there to settle his timid mind after splitting off from the Sheriff.

Doctor Jayston pointed to the far side of the room with a shaky hand. “What the hell are they?”

“Well shoot me down!” The Sheriff removed the chewed toothpick from his half-open mouth and flicked it into one of the holes next to him. “Ain’t you beauties?” He addressed the three enormous sand sculptures that sat proudly at the back of the cavity. Each at least fifty feet in height, their mouths wide and screaming, as hollow as the space between worlds.

The first was of the Gorgon Goddess, Medusa. Her infinite beauty, just as striking as each of the vipers that sprung from her head. The detail on each was breath-taking. Every scale, every pattern, every face was different from the next. Some placid, some angry, others plain evil.

The second head was that of a dragon. Its ears stood to attention, scales as large as television screens, blank eyes still somehow full of fire. The artwork lay in the faultless formation of its snout and jaws. Open and ready to scorch all before it, the teeth so sharp they pierced a soul on sight. The beast’s long tongue curled from within, forming the perfect entry to its soulless innards.

Lastly, the third construction was of a three headed snake. Its dominant skull formed most of the sculpture. Scales, nose, slitted eyes all punctured and carved to impressive perfection. Like the dragon, its forked tongue curled and flicked into an entrance. Above, two smaller, identical reptilian heads poked out from each side guarding every direction.

The Sheriff cast his enthralled gaze to a small metal bin, its exterior panelled by long wooden strips. Inside sat two arrows and a bow which

he pulled out and inspected intently. The closer the projectiles got to his face, the more his nostrils flexed at the scent of something familiar.

“Oh, God what’s this?!” shouted Doctor Jayston, stood across the cavern next to words carved into the soft rock. “The serpent snares your second task; one arrow will free his soul. Hercules with ay, not you, holds the key to rescuing your goal.” Jayston loosened a collar sodden with sweat and backed away. “I don’t like this. Not one bit. There must be a way out. There must be.”

“Steel your afeared soul.”

“Yes,” came the voice of Apollo from the darkness. “You’re going to need every inch of that bravery to survive this.”

The Sheriff cast his gaze to the darkness and notched the first arrow into the bow testing its weight. “So... What did I cost you?” He lined up the projectile with his eye.

Apollo shrugged. “I don’t know what you mean.”

The Sheriff dropped the arrow. “Believe it or not, I understand why Diamant brought me here. The machinations of a false God have many reasons. But I don’t understand why you’re here. They don’t need a Fixer.”

“We had an arrangement.”

The Sheriff notched the second arrow. His nose alive with a strong, nauseating aroma. “You know, we used to laugh at you back on Gallifrey? The Fixers! Judging those you deem unworthy of life and replacing them with those who never got the chance to live.” He sniffed again, the wheels in his brain turning fast. “Odd sticks, the lot of you.”

“That’s not strictly true, is it?” Apollo turned his mind games against him. “Because as much as you like to convince yourself it was you. It wasn’t. It was the regeneration cycle you were born from.”

“What’s he talking about?” Doctor Jayston asked.

“All these friends, all these companions, and they still don’t understand you. The wanderer, the cowboy, the man with no name.” The Fixer enjoyed every second. “You see, Doctor Jayston, the man you met all those years ago...”

“Yes?”

“The man standing in front of you right now is an abortion. An echo of a life that never should have been. Time Lords have this cheat code to avoid dying. The one thing that scares them the most. They change their face, their body, their whole being. A new life born. Only for every new beginning, there are those regenerations that never made it. That’s what you see before you right now.”

The Sheriff lowered the second arrow, thinking hard. “You’ve heard the phrase, ‘for every action there’s an equal and opposite reaction?’”

“Every action you take in your reality, all the optional choices you could have chosen are played out in an alternate reality.” Jayston was finally beginning to understand.

Apollo’s smile was almost audible. “For the few that make it from the original copy, there are countless versions of the regeneration that never make it, spliced through time, space, dimensions, and realities everywhere. By my count your original copy is well into double digits. That means hundreds of thousands of Doctors that never should have been all out there somewhere, living, regenerating, creating new lines of succession. You’re like fleas.”

The annoyed Sheriff dug the golden spurs on the back of his boots into the ground in anger.

“Only they shouldn’t remember, but your last regeneration shook something free, didn’t it? The memory of the line you were from. That’s why you shunned the name. Because if he’d never sacrificed

himself, you'd have been none the wiser. So, my dear Sheriff, which one should you have been?"

He didn't answer. Instead, he was deep in thought, flitting livid eyes over both arrows and then back to the riddle carved into the wall.

"Heracles!" he suddenly shouted out. "Hercules with an ay not you. It's letters. Hercules with an 'A' instead of a 'U' is Heracles. Same person, spelt differently."

"Who?" Jayston asked with a quiver in his voice.

"A divine God of Greek mythology. Heracles was said to have faced many labours."

"But the riddle says the serpent snares your second task." Jayson removed a handkerchief from his top pocket and dabbed his sweltering face. "They're all serpents!" He almost cried.

"No!" The Sheriff insisted. "It says Heracles holds the key. Arrows, serpent, this is the second trial for us both. The legend says that he fired flaming arrows into the lair of the beast that had been terrorising villages by the spring of Amymone. That beast was the Hydra!"

Apollo applauded from the darkness. "You see! There he is."

No reply came from the cowboy as he lifted the arrows to his nose and sniffed.

"And the flaming arrow?"

The Sheriff sniffed one point over and over, comparing it to its sibling. Finally, he cast away the first and walked towards one of the neighbouring circular pits that pocked the floor.

"That smell, always lingering, always present. I couldn't put my finger on it at first until the riddle made sense. One arrow plain as day. One arrow dipped in petroleum." He slammed the tip into the pit. The head set ablaze.

Jayston made the sign of the cross on his forehead as his saviour slotted the burning arrow into the bow, pulled back until the quiver refused to stretch anymore, and narrowed his already tapered eyes.

“I am who I was always meant to be!”

With that, the arrow cast a flaming path through the air and thudded into the darkness of the Hydra’s mouth. The flame spread in an oval around the edge of the mouth before quickly engulfing its face. Seconds later, the three headed reptile disintegrated into the ground.

The darkness that encompassed the mouth faded to light to reveal Doctor Holmes stood behind.

“D... Doctor?” Holmes stuttered as he stumbled down the forked tongue. He was slimmer than Jayston, with pork pie glasses perched on his nose and blonde hair ruffled into tufts as if he’d just woken up. “Is that you?”

Holmes ran to him and gave him a huge hug which wasn’t reciprocated.

“It’s over.” The Sheriff stepped forward, annoyed. “Let them go, Apollo.”

“Oh, I intend to. One of them will be restored to the life they lost.”

“One? That wasn’t the deal.”

“Deal? There was no deal, Time Lord. Just games which you’ve almost completed admirably.”

The Sheriff flared his nostrils in annoyance.

“Here it comes,” Apollo said with glee, “the anger of a Time Lord long since buried.”

“I did as you asked. I rode the trail you set out.”

“Almost,” Apollo confirmed. “Your third and final trial stands behind you.”

The Sheriff turned to face Jayston and Holmes, his brain attempting to compute all the possible outcomes of what his tormentor was going to say next.

“You were a clever man once upon a time. Let’s see if you can work it out.”

The Sheriff began to mutter words and phrases to himself. The more he said, the louder his voice became. “Fixer”, “Jayston”, “Holmes”, “who should I have been”, “my former self”, “unworthy”, “replaces them with those who never got a fair chance at life.” The last sentence was slower as it finally dawned on him.

“And there it is.” Apollo’s tone was no longer jovial but resigned and almost regretful.

The Sheriff nodded as he began to understand. “Apollo the Fixer. The man who takes the unworthy and replaces them with the souls who never got a fair chance at life. I haven’t just been playing to save them.”

“You’ve lost us,” Holmes folded his hands.

“This has all been about replacements. Ghosts from my past haunting the man that replaced who I was. The man I should have been replacing my regeneration. He wants me to choose one of you to replace me.”

Apollo clicked his fingers. A light snapped onto a sprawling tower of stone and rock carved from the cave wall. At the very top, on a makeshift balcony, Apollo stood in judgement of those below.

“It’s the way of all things.” Apollo announced solemnly. “Night replaces day, the young replace the old... The worthy replace the unworthy.”

“Someone has to die for one of us to live again?” Holmes said in disgust. “That’s barbaric!”

“Me!” Jayston cried out. “Choose me, you have to choose me.”

The Sheriff regarded him with disappointed eyes. The look of Holmes was heart-breaking as he took pity on the man so desperate to live once more.

“You should choose the one who will give your conscience the most peace,” Holmes bowed his head with dignity.

“Ignore him,” Jayston sniped. “He doesn’t deserve it as much as me. Look at him, he doesn’t want to live as much as me. I can do so much more. I can try again, undo the harm I’ve caused!”

Holmes nodded. “If this man wishes to live that much, then it is him you must choose. I will not stand in your way. Neither will I live in the knowledge that someone died because of me.”

“There, he said it himself. He wants me to live. Choose me! Please!”

“That’s not all.” The Sheriff announced. “I don’t just have to choose one of you to live again. I must choose one of you... To replace me.” He twisted his head to the tower. “But you don’t deem me unworthy, Apollo. If that was all, you’d have simply taken me out of existence without warning. You wanted me to suffer. You wanted me to struggle. You wanted me to have to look them both in the eye and choose. So, I ask again, what did I do to you?”

Apollo clicked his fingers once more and in a haze the Sheriff appeared on the balcony in front of him. “They call you a hero, you know? Every planet you’ve shown your many faces on and every race you’ve shown your many faces too. But you’re not a hero, not really. Your journey began by stealing a Tardis and running into the stars. It continues through stealing life that you should not be entitled to, and you carry on running even when planets and races burn in your wake. A hero doesn’t run. A hero faces his fate whatever that may be.”

Again, the Sheriff nodded. “Your planet. It’s gone, isn’t it?”

“The first forgotten casualty of the so-called Last Great Time War. The Daleks massacred my people and used the nuclear heart at the core of our planet to launch a concentrated strike at your sky trenches. I held my wife and my daughter in my arms as they burnt.”

“But you lived.”

“No. I survived. There’s a difference between the people that live and the people that just survive. I’ve seen survivors of every walk of life, and I’ve removed them all.”

“That’s a forced fate. Execution!”

“*That’s mercy, you parasite!*” Apollo screamed. Anger had engulfed him. “Mercy... They screamed one name, the Daleks, as they blew through our world. Do you know what it was?”

“I can guess.”

“The only name in the whole of eternity they were afraid of. Not Rassilon, not Borusa, not Brax. The name that forced them into genocide out of fear and desperation.” There was a distinctive silence before Apollo spoke again. “Doctor!”

Apollo thrust his hands outwards. The Sheriff flew backwards and connected hard with a wall of rock that made-up the side of the tower.

“I’m going to watch you blink out of existence!” Apollo twirled two open palms and cast them to the opposite side. The Sheriff flew across the veranda and hit hard against the opposite side. “Just like they did...” It was barely a whisper.

The Sheriff rolled onto his front and pushed himself onto all fours.

Apollo placed a kick into soft ribs that had been made brittle by time.

As the Sheriff collapsed to the ground with a groan, the law enforcer caught sight of something above. On top of the tower, teetering from the battle below, rocked a stone gargoyle that had served as the centrepiece.

“That’s your problem,” the Sheriff spat, whipping out his sonic screwdriver from the holster and turning the barrel six notches to the left. “Just because I haven’t been that man for a very long time... Doesn’t mean this is my first rodeo.”

The Sheriff aimed his sonic at the rocking statue above and pulled the trigger.

The gargoyle tipped forward and fell straight for Apollo.

The Sheriff reached out with a scuffed boot and planted it in the stomach of his hunter. The force caused Apollo to stagger backwards out of the statue’s path of descent.

It hit the balcony hard, splitting the terrace in two. As it tore through the gallery, the power knocked Apollo backwards over the side of the walkway.

The Sheriff struggled to his feet, hopped the gap with a stagger, and threw his top half over the rail allowing his right hand to dangle. Below, Apollo hung over a hungry pit of fire. Supported only by his slippery grip on the point of a rock.

“Take my hand!” the Sheriff urged, his breath short and laboured.

“I’d rather die!”

“Fine!” The Sheriff retracted his offer and pulled himself back to safety. “I’d say you’ve got about forty seconds until you get your wish.”

Apollo struggled as the rock began to break.

“It wasn’t me,” the Sheriff told him. “The Time War. It was the regeneration cycle before.”

“Same name!” Apollo fought. “Same man. What’s the difference?”

“Do I look like the same man? Do I even resemble him?” The Sheriff thought. A solemn manner fell over him. “That’s the thing about life—”

Apollo let go with a scream.

The Sheriff reached down and caught his flailing arm milliseconds before Apollo passed out of reach. “—sometimes you don’t get a choice to live.”

With a heave, Doctors Jayston and Holmes tugging on each arm, the Sheriff pulled Apollo to safety.

“Admirable,” Apollo commended him, breath as short as the rock that had held him. “But stupid. Because now I can complete my task.”

“No,” the Sheriff said. “Because you Fixers don’t just remove your prey from the moment you find them. You remove every trace from the beginning of their timeline. Nothing exists of who they were, replaced by the soul that never got their chance. Which means if you erase me from Time then I won’t have existed to save you. It’ll be one of them in my place. Are you willing to take a chance on it being the right one?”

Apollo laughed. It was the last thing anyone expected. “Well played. Extremely well played.”

“Well...” The Sheriff shrugged, something familiar simmering to the surface, “...I try my best.”

“I suppose you want a reward for saving my life.”

“No. Just a kept promise. Jayston and Holmes will be restored per our agreement. Left to live out the days they never had. And you’ll restore the town to its original timestream.”

Apollo nodded in agreement. “There is one more thing...”

“Just the promise, Apollo, nothing else.”

“Consider this complimentary. Something for your little town of Pemberton...”

Christmas Eve had given way to Christmas Day in the town of Pemberton. In the western streets, the locals busied themselves under the baking sun. Hands were shaken, alcohol was consumed, and old Earth carols were sung in the saloons to the tinkle of finely-tuned pianos and strum of banjos. All was right with Time once more.

“Amazing!” Doctor Holmes uttered as the three men watched. “I’m standing on an alien world.”

“Every species is alien to each other.” The Sheriff removed a hip flask from his waistcoat pocket and swigged from the inside. “Until we get to know one another.”

“Yes, well, I don’t know about you, but I’d rather be on my own planet in my own time. This place makes me feel uneasy.” Doctor Jayston added. “I’m sorry. For what I did to your friends. A better man might have... He...”

The Sheriff’s mouth moved soundlessly for a moment. Just three words. They were as hard as any regeneration, but just as meaningful. “I... forgive you.” He paused, then added, “Don’t waste it.”

Doctor Jayston nodded a heartfelt farewell. His form broke into a million blue particles and slowly faded away.

Holmes stepped up beside him. “Do you really forgive him?”

“Yes...” The Sheriff’s brow flexed with work-shy surprise. “I think I really do.”

“It’s an astonishment to me.”

“Oh, Doc Holmes... You’ve no idea...”

“What’s next for you, Do—Sheriff?”

“Something that Apollo said before we passed ways. Something that I could only see with the naked eye out here at Pemberton.”

“Nowhere else?”

“Only one place else. At an observatory on planet called Vulpia. Something to do with the technology there. The rest of Creation’s blind to it.”

“Blind to what...? What was seen...?”

The Sheriff leant close and whispered it into Holmes’s ear.

The man’s breath caught in his throat. “A... I—You mock me, Sheriff.”

“No, I don’t,” he shook his head.

“Then... I’m sorry? I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“Exactly right.” The Sheriff held up a hand and flexed it. “Who’d have thought?”

Doctor Holmes nodded with a knowing smile, “Am I going to remember this? Any of this?”

“You died. Taken out of your timeline completely. Forcing you back into that time-zone will disrupt those timelines. You might have flashes, dreams, but there’s no way to retain it.”

“Then before I go, I have to say this. You might have buried your memories of him up here, but he’s still there, somewhere inside. I saw it back there and I see it standing in front of me now.” Holmes held out his hand which the Sheriff shook with heart. “You forgave Jayston for what he did to your friends. But I think it’s time you forgave *him*... Forgive yourself.”

Doctor Holmes cast his eyes down to the makeshift grave the pair stood beside. The wooden cross that served as a headstone still read:

HERE LIES THE DOCTOR.

Holmes smiled. “Even though I won’t remember this, there’ll always be a part of me that hopes we meet again.”

“Oh, I do hope so.” The Sheriff gave a half-smile back.

The pair held onto their grip as Holmes turned to blue specks and faded into the ether.

The Sheriff just stared at the space where his friend had stood for a minute, before retrieving another toothpick from the rim of his hat and flicking it into his mouth.

He looked back at the grave he hadn’t visited in years.

“Merry Christmas, partner.”

Diamant was silent in front of the crystalline viewer. Heavy with thought.

Basillius Creel turned to his master. “Did you know, my master?”

The M-form reached out an aching beautiful arm and deactivated the screen. Now, there was nothing. Only the tumultuous buffeting of the time vortex. It grew. Louder. With each passing hour. The sighs of the parachronistic upper gallery would eventually turn to a howl. As the *Odysseum*’s wreck dissolved like wet bread in a pond.

Basilius Creel tongued another chronomite from the air.

“Master?” he asked again.

Still silent, Diamant returned to their chair and the empty cube-like sockets in its arms. There was a great deal of focus on that detail. Basilius didn’t quite understand why, but his master was treating them like gravestones.

“Where does one go for forgiveness, Basillius?” asked Diamant.

“Such things are beyond me, my master.” The Creel crossed to them. “How much longer will we remain here?”

“Hungry, Our reptillian friend?” That was almost a smile.

“Nervous,” clicked Basillius. “I feel too much like prey here.”

Diamant looked through the forward portal. “We sent the last will and testament of Lady Traskeya from here. In Hypercubes. Did you know?”

Basillius had not.

“We returned here, with you in tow for company, to see if We understood what We had done. Forcing the Doctor’s sixth incarnation out of Time. Arranging for Traskeya’s theft of the rocket ship from that Curator.”

“And have you?”

Diamant placed an almost affectionate hand on the Creel’s head. “Yes... We believe We do now.”

As the M-form turned from their view of the vortex, they noticed a squat kevlar-black crystal ball materialise in its vacated socket on the *Odysseum*. There were a series of gentle clicks from within it. Mechanisms so intricate that only a return to the Starbreaker, its original home, could reset them.

Basillius pulled away from it, but Diamant was drawn closer. By an almost dangerous sense of hope.

There was something engraved on the message pod’s side, as if with a penknife:

**TO DIAMANT,
PROVE IT.
REGARDS, THE DOCTOR AND TRASKEY.**

THE FACE OF THE MUTATION: PART 3

THE SHERIFF AND THE MOUNTIE



By Matt Tennant and AFJ Kernow

+++ UNCHARTED ERA +++ OPEN DICTACORDER +++
STORAGE/INTERNAL +++ RECORD/LISTEN +++ LISTEN +++ FROM:
TIME-SHIP 'OLD GIRL' +++ TO: PERSON 'DIAMANT' +++ RE: 'THE
UNIVERSAL MUTATION' +++ HIGH PRIORITY +++ AS FOLLOWS

The lone horse and rider galloped along the dusky trail towards the busy town of Pemberton.

Kicking up clouds of dust and sand, the white stallion with slick sweaty flanks banked into the short bend at the very summit of the desert hamlet, and hammered its way down the long, broad, sandy street that made up the community.

Driving past the many brothels that stood tattered and torn at the very top of the way, both horse and rugged jockey whipped by the tailors, shot past the undertakers blowing flaccid pieces of wood leant the walls across the avenue, and zipped straight by Mrs Baker of T.S Baker Liqueur Emporium who dropped a silver tray of tankards meant as a taster for the locals, before the obedient nag slowed to a trot outside the largest establishment in the town, the Gatekeeper's Rest.

The inhabitants of Pemberton—good, drunk, or indifferent—paid attention when the grizzled man returned home. Many gave him a smile and a wave, not that their efforts were reciprocated. Children gathered around balconies and railings on every level to get a glance at a man who rarely left the confines of his office. Half-dressed dancers between performances and painted cats looking for trade would blow him kisses for their own amusement and then tell tall tales of how he responded with a smooch of his own. Half-cut cowboys and ranchers would fire their merry weapons into the air to signal his arrival. If any of them were lucky, the man of granite would grant them a tip of his white Stetson for their efforts.

The good citizens of Pemberton always gave him his dues. His presence helped to keep the town safe. He was the man with the badge, the no nonsense law man known only as the Sheriff.

His white stallion rounded in the deep, warm sand heated by three burning suns above and whinnied in the direction of his home. As solid and dependable, as reclusive, and aloof as the man who lived there.

The Sheriff didn't say anything when he saw it. There were no words even for the man known for being someone of very few. Just a snarl and deep, annoyed pout which barred a growl from escaping into the dusty atmosphere of the town. He didn't like visitors or strangers at the best of times. After that business with Apollo, anything, and anyone new raised his hackles even more.

His blue wooden box still stood on the wide wooden patio, like a sentinel, looking out over the town and everyone that resided there. It could be seen from anywhere in the elongated corridor, no matter where you stood or how far the locals ascended the sandy hills that surrounded the town. The sting of wearing blue was always the first thing that caught the eye among the dull browns and whites of the establishments that lined the way. None of the residents knew what it was, but they'd grown to bathe in its reassuring presence as they went about their day. But now there was another battered blue box, not identical, but similar enough not to be a coincidence, sat across the porch from his own.

There was someone here. Not just anyone, but a presence that seemed worryingly familiar. A person he'd tried to bury with a name he no longer wished to utter.

The Sheriff leapt down from his horse, patted it gently on its bright white rump, and watched as it stuck its long nose into a pale of water outside the tall inn and bar. Removing a toothpick from the brim of his Stetson, he pushed it between chapped lips, cracked his neck from side-to-side and sneered with an arched lip at the duplicate blue box. Not only should it not have been there, but it should have been impossible to find him on a Frontier planet three hundred million dimensions away from Sol 3, hidden from sentient view, buried deep at the ends of time. Stepping onto the patio, he walked around the wooden structure examining it from top to bottom. There seemed to be an electronic chittering coming from the structure. He listened, there was noise coming from inside his office.

Two voices. One with the pinching twang of a martini. The other, the husky warmth of a bourbon.

“Alright, alright, yeab, I’ll admit, the weather station’s a simplistic rig-up, but it should keep the anomaly from spreading to the City of Refuge.”

“Should?”

“The best kind of could.”

“Long enough to conclude our business here?”

“It’ll keep Cantu in control and Ntombizodwa’s people will ensure the exclusion zone remains monitored. Both on and above Vulpia.”

“Could we talk about something else? This is depressing me, Doctor.”

“Sure, Traskey. Shayde’s choice.”

“You say, you went to the real location in Time and Space this simulacrum is based on?”

“Oh, yes. Gunfighters, saloon bars and poor old Steven with Dodo at the piano forced to sing for some hoodlums... How did it go?”

The unseen female sang, her sweet voice with its distinctive Northern twang had a little rasp to it. *“So, fill up your glasses, and join in the song, the law’s right behind you, and it won’t take long, so come you coyotes and howl at the moon, ‘till there’s blood upon the sawdust in the Last Chance Saloon.”*

“Really, Doctor. Your propensity for performance hasn’t changed since your Academy days.”

“It’s a knack.” The singer continued unabashed, *“You’ve a good chance of swingin’, it’s your last chance to hide, it’s your last chance of singin’, ‘till your long last ride—”*

The full, white double doors to the small brick office crashed open. The Sheriff had them installed especially. Unlike the rest of the buildings, he didn’t want to be able to see out, and he certainly didn’t want the townsfolk seeing in.

The two women turned their heads to access. The Sheriff's tall, lean body stood in the doorway, one of the three suns backlighting his figure.

"One man's simulacrum is another man's castle," he sneered. He didn't want to question or talk at length about who the second blue box belonged to. One quick flick of his agitated eyes told him it was the grinning blonde woman. "Now, what can I be doin' for you folks?"

"Wow," said the blonde woman, her nose wrinkled, and her cheeks pursed with childish delight when she saw him. "I always knew one of us would embrace our inner cowboy. Ooh, cowboy fam."

Her companion, some sort of artificial life form, answered his question, "We need your help. Your planet has a unique view of a worrying and potentially devastating phenomenon."

"And I need people to leave me alone. Guess we're both outta luck," he replied with a careless sigh. Any further dialogue was unlikely to thrill him. He trod carefully into the trivial room that served as his office. The cold grey brick was comforting. The concrete floor caused the points of his golden spokes on the back of his boots to tinker. "Tell me, strangers, how would this be affecting me?"

"You're the Doctor," the cute blonde woman told him with a matter of fact. The assertion caused his hairy, ageing hand to clutch a long bottle half-full of light-brown liquid which stood on a long black shelf on the far wall.

"No" he told her, yanking a glass along a shelf. "Not anymore. Not for a very long time. You, though, that's a different story." He poured himself a drink, removed his toothpick, and slid it behind his ear.

"That obvious, is it?" She grinned.

"It's the coat," the Sheriff told her. Methodical steps brought him to the table. "They could never resist a good coat. Me, I'm just a Sheriff."

“I see. Are you a good singer then?” The woman grinned again. “Could be important.”

“Do I look like someone who enjoys fun to you?” He took a swig from his glass. The spots of liquid that fell onto his chapped lips stung like a million bees homing in for the kill. “Don’t believe what old Had at the Gatekeeper’s tells you either. It was one Saturday a very long time ago. I’ll never drink absinthe again.”

“Oh, you’re brilliant,” she beamed again.

“You know what I am? Still thirsty. I need another drink!”



Feet up on the table, another stiff drink in hand, the Sheriff felt much better. The only thing that would have made the rest of the day perfect would have been if he was alone. He liked it that way. No one to bother about him. No one to care about. He had few responsibilities other than ensuring the townsfolk were safe and the various bottles that dotted his sole shelf were empty at the end of the day.

He looked at the odd pairing. The blonde-haired woman, practically dressed in a long coat and multicoloured leather braces holding up navy blue culottes. He raised an eyebrow at the rainbow stripe on her purple jumper. It was as good a smile as they were likely to get from him considering the concession to frivolity. The Sheriff didn’t smile much. Doctor Holmes managed to force some semblance of one out of him after the trials of Apollo and there was that one time several years ago when he was perusing TARDIS desktop themes. Apart from that, little stirred his merriment.

“You don’t like me, do you?” she asked.

“Nope!” The answer was abrupt and inconsiderate. “Don’t take it personally, I’m not a fan of any of ya.”

“Us.”

“You! I told ya. I’m not that man anymore.”

“What did we do to one of us that was so bad you renounced the name?” She was intrigued, her eyes dancing with possibilities.

The Sheriff drank again. Considering his answer. “One day I might tell ya. Right now, she’s makin’ me afeared.” He pointed to her companion with one finger prised from the side of his mini schooner.

They made him feel uneasy. It wasn’t just their appearance. They reminded him of a lost soul, a being who shouldn’t even exist. Unnatural. He was about to quiz the odd couple when another figure clattered through the battered and chipped doors.

“So, this is where you’ve all been hiding,” an acidic female voice declared.

“Come in!” The Sheriff said wryly, tipping the schooner down his throat. “Everyone else has.” The growl in his voice told the trio they weren’t wanted.

The Sheriff glowered at the new arrival, who bounced over to the blonde lady and twanged one of her braces and turned to face him.

A total contrast to his other visitors, she wore a navy-blue Stetson tilted at a rakish angle on her angular face. She was dressed in a formal white blouse with a cameo brooch at the throat, full black skirts, and leather boots. The most striking element of her ensemble; a single-breasted, long woollen coat in red serge with two piped slip pockets at the waist that added a practical finishing touch.

Her cat-like blue eyes looked him up and down, she reminded the Sheriff of a cougar about to pounce.

“Well, my dear, Sheriff,” she purred. “I’m known as the Mountie... ‘cos I always get my man. Although it seems, my man has regenerated. Oh, you copycat, Doctor.”

“Chicken and egg, old friend.” The Doctor arched an enigmatic eyebrow. “State of the timestreams... You’d be surprised, tell you what. Who’d you kill to get the uniform?”

“A little nobody from the Yukon. I needed something beyond reproach and, really, what’s more trustworthy than the RCMP?”

“Oh, yeah...” The Doctor pursed her lips, smiling. From a space mirror to a stolen Cessna. It had been quite the week, chasing Missy across British Columbia with Bill and Nardole. “That little fraud...”

The Mountie hummed, thoughtfully. “Anywho, I’ve been looking for you and that despicable Diamant ever since that stultifying sitcom.”

“How did it feel? To be the fly in someone else’s web?” the Doctor asked.

“Can it, Blondie. What happened to charming Clara? Get bored with the old grump, did she? I heard she ran off with another one of your blunders.”

The Doctor replied, “Don’t push your luck. I know your future.”

“Oh, yes?” she cackled.

“Oh, yes,” repeated the Doctor.

Missy ran her tongue around her teeth. “Sincerity. Oh, your incarnations just get more and more indigestible, don’t they?”

The Doctor had struck a nerve, she smiled wider. “I know your future. Want to hear it?”

“How long would it take?” The playful baiting in her face was gone.

“Not long. Just until the end of everything.”

“Are you leaving soon?” The Sheriff interrupted. “Only I’m a busy man.”

“Those bottles won’t drink themselves,” the Doctor told him full of sarcasm.

“Not unless they come from Scotia Merina,” he told her, finishing the last of his glass. “They do an agreeable self-drinkable wine for those struggling with alcoholism.”

“Their burgers aren’t half bad either,” the Doctor added.

“Maybe I’ll drop in for some chuck.”

The Sheriff kept a hand on his sonic device which was tucked into the caramel-coloured holster on his belt. He hadn’t had to use it in a while. The Gallifreyan world shield wrapped around the planet made visitors with bad intentions scarce.

“We haven’t got time for chasing rainbows. There’re more important things at stake,” the Doctor downed her drink with a slight cough and started pacing.

“Oh, here we go, another interminable lecture. Any chance of a drink, cowboy?”

“If it’ll get rid of ya.”

Missy fluttered her bewitching eyes at the stone-faced Sheriff. “Flatter me and I might sing Edelweiss—or am I getting my continents confused?”

The eccentric lady launched her Stetson onto the hatstand and perched on a stool. The Sheriff poured her a sarsaparilla. She sipped her drink, sighing theatrically at regular intervals, while the Doctor, aided by Traskey, informed the others of their findings on Vulpia.



“Well, that’s a bit of a downer,” announced Missy. “I had so many wild schemes to pursue.”

“You can help us instead,” the Doctor replied. “The fam foursome.” Her grin could have lit up a city.

“There ain’t no us” the Sheriff replied, dousing her bonfire. “Whatever yer doin’, that be yer business. I don’t do that no more.” He just glared at her through hateful, dead eyes. There was no want or will. In his home, on his planet, he certainly wasn’t going to aid the person he despised the most in whatever death-defying scheme she had in mind. He’d seen the damage her name had caused. The name he’d buried on the hill long ago. It was the reason the Sheriff existed now.

“You know this planet better than anyone,” the Doctor told him. “We could get lost out there. Eaten by cougars and buzzards and whatever else you have ‘ere’.”

“Wouldn’t that be a shame?” Missy said to herself.

“Ain’t my problem, little miss.”

“You don’t care?”

“Haven’t for a very long time. Ya wanna get too big for your breeches, that’s your funeral. I’ll be glad to send the undertaker your way, I’ll even help ‘im with the measurements.”

“Alright...” The Doctor thought fast. Then, something came to her. His hatred of the Doctor. His designation. The town which he clearly cared about otherwise why would he stay? She turned on the spot, alive with possibilities. “But you know me... us... things happen when we’re left alone. Big, bad, explody things that sometimes blow-up planets. It’d be a shame to know the trajectory of a time cicatrix, for instance, and miss it because you were too busy measuring up my coffin.”

The Sheriff stood and plunged his clenched fists into the summit of the table. “Are you blackmailing me?”

“Maybe? It’s such a dirty word.”

They were face-to-face, staring each other deep in the soul.

“Yer bad medicine, little lady.”

The Doctor grinned at him. Disarming and excited. “Only for the right people. And if I’m surrounded by the right people, well, sometimes they stop me doing very silly things.”

He snarled and growled like a wolf backed into the corner. The Sheriff knew what happened when the name was left to its own device. He was that person once, with the bodies, enemies, and burning wreckage to prove it.

“Fine!” He reluctantly agreed. “But ya’ll don’t leave my sight!”

Missy tiptoed up to the Sheriff and pinched his cheek, “Aw, don’t you trust us?”

The Sheriff pushed her arm away. “Like a horse trusts a rattlesnake.”

“Missy, leave him alone, we need his local knowledge. Sheriff, where’s the highest point near here?”

“Delgado Mountains. Eighty clicks west. You dames ride?”

Missy glared at him. “We are not mere dames, you overbearing, patronising—”

“I believe it would be prudent for me to stay here and look after the TARDISEs,” said Traskey, interrupting the tension. “We also have that... other... consideration to take care of.”

“With the...?” The Doctor gestured with her hands. She ticked her mouth, groaning. “Not money?”

“No, not money...” Traskey shook her head. “Not coordinates, either. They’re having trouble getting the parts out to the nearest shipyard for assembly.”

“That’s quite the problem. You’ll tell me if it’s too much?”

“I’m a Quadrigger. Spacecraft? That’s playtime for time-tots.”

“Thanks, Traskey!” beamed the Doctor. “If you have the time, I shall also need you to analyse the data we send back.”

“Done.”

“Traskey?” Missy arched an eyebrow. “You are getting sentimental in your old age, Doctor. That wily old goat never really understood my controlled genius.”

“And you, Koschei, never bothered to appreciate my efforts to impress on you the beauty of the Universe.”

“*Beauty*?” Missy goggled and gestured at the construct. “Psychosynthesis like this?”

“Emphasis on the ‘synthesis’,” interjected Traskey.

“And not the ‘psycho’? How typical of you.”

“It’s no better or worse than what you’ve done, Master.” The Doctor straightened.

“Missy,” she corrected. “Doctor, what have you done...? Should I start calling you Frankenstein?”

“Do I look like a Victor?” She wrinkled her face. “A Mary? Even a Shelley?”

“Mary, Mary, quite contrary, how do your morals grow?”

“With cloister bells and plasmic shells, and pretty shaydes all in a row.” The Doctor’s hazel eyes showed her remorse, “I’d have done anything not to have to bring you back like this, Traskey. I’m sorry.”

“I understand that with the Universe falling apart around our ears, you needed my help. My knowledge and analytical skills give the fastest way to assess the situation.”

“Was it frightening to come back as a shayde?” asked Missy. “Did you squirm and scream?”

Traskey’s brow wrinkled at a thought. “Let me see... ‘Missy’ as in ‘hissy’? As in ‘fit’?”

“I knew I didn’t like you...”

The Doctor interposed herself between the two women. “Nice of us, Missy, to spend some time together, then? Just you and me, eh? It can be like old times.”

“Old times?”

“Micro machines, Autons, Kronos...”

Missy frowned. “You never let me keep any of my toys.”

The Doctor smiled, dangerously. “That’s cause you kept breaking them, that’s why.”

The Sheriff pulled himself to his feet, snatching his Stetson from the table, and draining the last of his glass. He’d had enough of the babble. The sooner they set off, the sooner he could get them all out of his town and off his planet. “I’ll saddle the horses.” he told them, “Oh, you’ll wanna stay away from the locals.”

“Not friendly?” The Doctor wrinkled her nose with a half grin.

“Not seen a pretty dame in a very long time” he strode to the door. “Only what come ‘ere. They can be a little overfriendly and blondes are their favourite.” He turned to Missy, his eyes scanning her attire. “Ya may wanna change into riding gear.”

“What! Have you not met Annie Oakley? Us gals can ride quite well in skirts thank you very much.”

“Met her, danced with her, shot in the arm by her. Change!” He almost demanded.

“That’s my girl” Missy winked at him. “I’ll ride in what I’m wearing.”

“Fine!” He told her in a voice that said he didn’t like to be defied.

“Fine!” She squared up to him with a devilish smirk.

“Yer skirt gets caught in the reins; your horse can drag ya the rest of the way!”

“Touchy” Missy whispered to the Doctor with a hand covering her mouth. “I like him.”

The Sheriff turned back. He’d forgotten something. Removing two toothpicks from the brim of his hat, he lay them on the rickety old table in front of the Doctor and Missy. “Can’t ride without these.” With that, he was gone.

“Is that really you?” Missy asked the Doctor.

“Yeah” she grinned. “Always wanted an American accent. Brilliant.”



“What’s yours called, Blondie?” Missy grinned as the trio trotted westwards out of town.

“He likes to be known as Windstar.” The Doctor grinned, the toothpick sat coolly between her thin lips.

“And they say horses can’t be poetic. Mine’s Odysseus, she obviously enjoys classics. What about you, Eastwood?”

“Warmond,” he replied. “The fastest horse that ever lived.” The Sheriff looked over his shoulder at the women. The Doctor’s face set in steely concentration, and the Mountie riding side-saddle; she’d soon change that riding style after an hour in the saddle. Those two were going to be hard work. For a start, they had some sort of feud going on. Were they sisters who’d fallen out? Lovers now estranged? He couldn’t fathom out their relationship at all.

“Cut the ballyhoo” he told them both, like a stern teacher scolding a child. “We’ve a long ride ahead and we don’t wanna spend too long in some parts.”

“Coyotes?” enquired the Doctor.

“Worse things than Coyotes out there” came the terse reply. He didn’t mean aliens and monsters. Pemberton was shut off to invaders,

well mostly. “Bandits and gangs patrol these here plains. Souls that turned bad long after they arrived here.”

“Mean and moody, just how I like them,” Missy’s cat-like eyes glittered with mischief.

The Doctor gave her old adversary a little side-eye. “I assume you tried your mesmerism?”

“No fun straight out of the gate. Although...”

“Concentrate on the job in hand!”

With a whoop, she set her horse in motion, and it moved up the gears in pursuit of the Sheriff.

“Come on, you equine lump, after them!” hissed Missy.

Odysseus snickered and stamped one of its hooves in protest. No amount of digging her heels in would propel the horse into forward motion.

“Get moving, you recalcitrant animal... Oh, all right. Please?” Missy said through gritted teeth.

The horse set off at a speedy trot nearly unseating the Time Lord. She leaned forward on the horse's neck to steady herself, before regaining control and joining the ride.

The Doctor was reminded of Utah, as they rode past rounded mesas and jagged rock formations, towards the impressive peaks of the Delgado range on the horizon.



There were no stars shining bright in Pemberton’s night sky. In fact, there was no night sky at all. The Frontier planet didn’t orbit, its three blinding, scorching suns sat ever present in the same spot in the cloudless, clear blue-sky day after endless day. The trio sat round a small encampment at the foot of a mountain that towered above them.

Missy needed a break, complaining that the constant motion of their horses was giving her sore patches in places she didn't know existed. The Doctor and Missy avoided making eye contact, sat and ate their vittles, which consisted of corned beef, jerked meat and chicken thighs still on the bone, in moody silence while the Sheriff gnawed at his prog like a hungry kitten at the side of a large ham.

"I once hog-tied two bandits from warring gangs that wanted to kill each other and burn the still screaming body of the other" he flicked a bare, greasy bone into the sand having stripped it of its meat, "and they were better company than you two. What's your beef?"

"Several lifetimes of being Number One on his and hers hit list does wonders for your paranoia."

"Paranoid? Girlie, you've had your fair crack at eviscerating me."

"Name one."

Missy hummed into the air. "Sarn."

"Oh, yeah, no..." The Doctor pulled a sarcastic face. "My fault you stood on top of a volcano."

"It was like the witch's oven in *Hansel and Gretel*, Sheriff. The burns on my face could have..." Her features twitched; she flipped back to the Doctor. "That doesn't count. You *let* me almost die. You didn't put any oomph into it."

"No. As it turned out I didn't have it in me."

"What a reassuring thought."

"I think you're going to eat those words," the Doctor reminisced, innocently.

"Is that a threat?"

"No. No don't do threats well," she riposted. "A *promise*, though..."

"This is the worst psychic reading I've ever had."

“I’ll refund your ticket.” The Doctor turned to the Sheriff. “Let’s just say, when we meet I’m grateful if I manage to get out with my hearts still intact.”

“Don’t be so melodramatic. Life would be *so* empty without me, ‘cause you need a bit of controversy, Doctor, or you get too self-righteous. Maybe I *let* you win, so I can devise more fiendishly complicated plans for you to unravel.”

“*Let me win?* That’s a laugh. Usually, I uncover the fatal flaw in your ridiculous schemes. Axos... Kronos... Logopolis... The list is endless.”

The Doctor turned her attention to the Sheriff who had watched their spat with an eye-roll. “So, cowboy, what did Diamant do to you?”

The Sheriff swilled weak coffee around a metal mug and gulped it down. It didn’t taste as good as whiskey. He wasn’t going to answer. She was trying to make small talk and he wasn’t fond of conversing at the best of times.

“Just trying to be nice. We all have a story, all...” the Doctor considered, “...well, however many of us there out there now.”

The Sheriff sighed, flicked the side of his cup with a wrinkling finger, and tried to pull tenders of chicken from his teeth with his tongue. “A few trials, a hoodlum we’d...you’d ruined the life of, old friends, the usual.”

“Not that repulsive reptilian Creel by any chance? Repulsive reptilian, I rather like that—”

“This one was a Fixer.”

“One of those sanctimonious soul swappers, see I can do alliteration too, Blondie,” Missy smiled, slyly.

“Now Diamant is somewhere they don’t wanna be. Top of my most wanted list.”

“Still got that Time Lord fury,” the Doctor told him, the flickering flames casting shadows on her beaming face. “Coming here is like... Finding a part of myself I’d forgotten about. If I’m honest, this is nice.”

“Nice?” asked Missy.

“Sorry, probably not a familiar word to you. Means ‘pleasant’, ‘pleasing’ or ‘agreeable in nature’.”

Missy scowled, “Well if we’ve got a hefty climb ahead of us. I’m getting some shuteye.”

“Ya have an hour, no more,” the Sheriff informed them. “Any longer and the buzzards will be feedin’ on your gizzards.”

“Not me, sleep is for tortoises,” the Doctor addressed Missy, “how can you sleep when the Universe’s existence hangs by a thread?”

“Me? Oh, I can sleep anywhere, even under these suns. I’m like a cat.”

“*I am the cat who walks alone, all places are alike to me,*” quoted the Doctor.

“Still as verbose as ever.”

“Y’know, I didn’t mind that incarnation. I spent so much time tamping down my emotions, almost afraid of them, that when he came along, it was quite exciting. To be so... passionate and open to the cosmos. I’d forgotten what that felt like.” The Doctor’s shadow danced to different forms under the searing suns. “He’s been on my mind lately.”

“I remember him. A quote for every occasion. Even if you don’t ask for one.”

“You should never grow old before growing wise, Missy.”

“Who needs ‘wise’, old friend, when you have power?”

Missy fetched a bedroll, spread out a horse blanket on the ground and lay down, pulling her Stetson down.

She didn't see the sadness in the Doctor's face.



Aboard the Doctor's TARDIS, Traskey was in the midst of negotiating over the scanner with some rather recalcitrant shipwrights. Fortunately, the circumstances of the last fortnight had left her with little patience and much to gain from it.

"Therefore, gentlebeings, and I use that term loosely, the transportation of parts to the shipyards should no longer be considered an issue. I will get you your engines, even if it means that I have to drag them in myself on a drop cloth. Now, good—" She glanced briefly at the relative chronometer, "—night."

And, with all the measured grace of a professional, snapped off the screen. The Quadrigger sighed a tired laugh and clapped her hands.

"By Rassilon..." She rubbed her eyes, patting the console. "Is there something about politicking that just clings to you? It's like the smell of musk from an old pair of robes... I really don't know..."

The temptation for a small break was a strong one. She wasn't quite sure if it was a memory of a sore back or the real thing, but either way—

Traskey was distracted by a familiar sound. An airless gust, like a slowly opening valve, through the console room. The shayde turned her back on the time rotor, towards the external doors, before she realised that it was coming from the astral map. More specifically, from a raised dais installed on one of the drawers in its midsection, fastened in place with a utility clamp.

Sure enough, the *Odyseum's* message pod materialised in a cocoon of white light on the dais.

“And as if we need anything else!” she humphed. “Return to sender, I imagine...”

It was definitely the same pod. The Doctor and Traskey’s message to Diamant was etched into its side next to the original Old High Gallifreyan, but...

“Wait a minute,” she muttered to the TARDIS. “There’s something else here now.”

A reply. It looked as though it had been gnawed into the opposing side with a pair of fangs.

She read it aloud, “Found Us on the *Odysseum*. See inside for more details.” A note of incredulity crept into her voice. “Regards, Diamant and Basillius.”



“The ride fair tuckered her out,” the Sheriff remarked.

“I think you’re right, Sheriff, she’s snoring.”

The Doctor’s tone was almost affectionate until she remembered all Missy’s innocent victims. Not just in this life, but in all others. The Doctor’s *future*. That was what kept her up last night. It was that age-old quandary that haunted her since her first excursions into the wider cosmos from Gallifrey.

Two wires. A nursery. “If someone, who knew the future, pointed out to you a child and told you that child would become totally evil. A ruthless dictator who would destroy millions of lives. Could you then kill that child?”

If. That ‘if’ had turned into ‘when’. When someone, who knew the future... And it was the Doctor herself. She wanted to believe that killing, death and destruction weren’t the ultimate problem solvers of the Universe. If that were true, then power lay with the Daleks, the Cybermen, the Sontarans, and all the terrible horrors of deepest cruelty and vicious monstrosity.

The Doctor had forgiven the Master. Forgiven and forgiven and forgiven. At what point did her forgiveness mock the murder and sacrifice of those slain by Missy and her other incarnations? When did enough become enough?

She didn't have an answer.

The Doctor covered her with a blanket and sat down opposite this Cowboy who despised the name of the Doctor.

He's something different. Weary, tired of life but not without some empathy, he keeps his feelings well-bidden.

“So, yer the flannel-mouth” the Sheriff told her. There was no room for argument or denial. “You gonna tell me what it is between the two of ya? Bantering like old pals but that ain't the case.”

“I got the impression you didn't like people talking.”

“I'd prefer it if y'all weren't here at all. But here we are.” He stretched his long, ageing legs and rubbed them atop his skinny jeans.

“Oh Sheriff, you don't know the half of it. Me and the Mountie go way back...”

“Ya called her Missy, and yer peculiar friend called her something else. Koschei? That's a title I know and it sure ain't a complement.”

“We were friends once, but they chose the dark path. I've spent many of my lives preventing their schemes for destruction and ruling the cosmos.”

“Ya knows her future. Do ya turn her around?”

The Doctor responded with a chuckle at the Sheriff's joke before her voice became low and venomous.

“Any veneer of compassion was soon stripped away by an incarnation who destroyed a whole civilisation. A Time Lord more destructive and malevolent than Morbius, the Rani or any of them. And

that's some achievement. The problem is, do you have the right to take away the possibility that the person might change?"

The Sheriff ran greasy fingers over his prickly chin. There was a consideration underneath the over hostility. "Generally, people don't change. They ain't good, they ain't evil. They tend not to speak the truth. That's why you never trust a word. It's all in the actions. A varmint, like Perl de Vere, will help a lost orphan one day and put a bullet in a barman the next."

"Every now and then, they let someone go though. A Slitheen called Margaret said that about me once. Davros, too." She lowered her head, ashamed of the memories. "They say if you fight the monsters, inevitably you become one... Maybe I'm no better than Missy. Maybe that's *my* destiny."

"Destiny" the Sheriff sighed. "Is it destiny that ya give everything to help strangers only to be left to die? Is it destiny to be a good man, only to have everything ya believed torn away by a truth that changes yer world?"

"What truth?" She insisted, leaning forward. "What happened to you? Where are you in our timeline? Past or future?"

"Nowhere" his reply was harsh and quick. "I'm nowhere, like all the others. If I told ya what really happens during regeneration. If ya knew the true consequences..." he stopped. He'd said too much, harking back to her previous comment about fighting monsters. "Sometimes ya have to become a monster to beat one. Don't mean that's yer destiny. Don't make ya no villain either. We do what we must and it ain't always right, but it is always just."

The Sheriff had studied her face back at his office. Beneath the bonhomie there was agonising pain. An obvious conclusion from the dark circles under her eyes, the little tremors her body gave out, was that this woman was on the edge and lack of sleep was taking its toll.

"When's the last time you got some shut eye?" he asked.

“I could ask you the same thing” she grinned lightly at him, staring into the haggard look in his tired eyes.

“Who has time to sleep?” The Sheriff thought. “Not when there’s whiskey to drink.”

“Or people to save.”

The Sheriff sniffed. He didn’t much like the sound of that. “I prefer the whiskey.”

A grim thought struck him. Everyone would be lost in eternal sleep if the universal ending occurred.

Missy stirred, sat up, and stretched.

“Well, that was a nice catnap,” her face, shadowy in the shade of her nag that stood over her, was all smiles, but her eyes glittered with menace.

The Sheriff slowly dragged himself to his feet and fetched his hoary stallion who was enjoying a nose bag full of oats. He unhitched him from a rock and led his steed along the foot of the mountain.

“Oy, Sheriff!” whistled the Doctor. “Where’re you going?”

“The horses need to be outta sight.” He stared into the three suns and judged their position in the sky. “Time’a day the cougars roam and they have the smell of horsemeat in their nostrils. There be a gully up ahead. They’ll be safe there.”

“Come on, Odysseus,” sighed Missy, “shift your fetlocks.”

The trio led their equine friends into a wide gash into the cliffs that narrowed into a small grassy oasis. They left the horses to roam in the small area of safety.

The Sheriff anticipated their question. “Pemberton horses don’t bolt, before you ask.”

“Loyal steeds” the Doctor grinned. “I like them.”

“Save your breath for the climb,” growled the Sheriff. He’d talked all he wanted, which was far more than he usually would in a week.



The terrain was treacherous, sharp, bare, glistening rock with few handholds. Further up was a narrow path covered in loose scree. They stopped for a breather. The sun was blinding but the endless day was far from silent. The sounds of buzzards cawed overhead. Deep growls that belonged to larger more ferocious animals made the visitors watch each deep shade as they climbed. There may have been no aliens or monsters to deal with, but there were other things that lurked in the shadows of the mountains.

After an hour they had reached the top.

The Doctor’s enthusiasm was undimmed by the arduous climb, “Wow! I’d like to see this view at night.”

“There ain’t a night,” he told her callously.

“None?”

“Not a slither.”

“So how do you have nightmares?” Missy asked. “Or are they daymares?”

The Sheriff regarded her and replaced the chewed toothpick with a fresh one. “I think ya’ll find they have me.”

“A bit arrogant,” the Doctor tilted her head.

“I don’t know,” Missy ran a finger down the sleeve of his blue shirt, “I’m liking him more and more.”

The vast landscape stretched in 360 degrees around their vantage point. To the north, the blur of Pemberton shimmered on the horizon.

East were large, cavernous dunes sat in front of smaller mountains. South, ranchers and farmers looked like ants as they tended their green lands and cattle roamed the far away prairies. It was almost a different world they inhabited from the town of Pemberton.

“Now what?” Missy asked.

The Doctor swung a small daypack off her back. With great care she reached in and produced a large electronic tablet computer. She switched it on, her hands flicking over the touchscreen. A small window screen popped up and Traskey’s bespectacled face swam into view.

“Hi, Traskey. Anything conclusive?”

“I’m afraid not. The TARDIS’s onboard sensors can’t perform a reliable scan. It’s too massive for her old systems.”

“Too massive for the TARDIS?” The Doctor tried to take the concept in. “Can you get anything from the shipyard?”

“They’ve had to prioritise repair of the ships. I can say this... The TARDIS can detect exotic matter emanating from it. It’s some sort of black hole... No, wait...”

“She rides at two o’clock.” The Sheriff pointed.

The others turned to look. A faint disc of light could be seen in the clear blue sky. It stood out like a comet. No... No, not a comet. It was far rounder. Oblong. It reminded the Doctor of a hatch-shaded shield.

Maybe they were just too small to see it...? Three little Time Lords all lost at sea...

“Is it me or is movin’?” asked the Sheriff.

“I reckon it is, Eastwood,” Missy’s voice was uncertain. “I’ve not seen a black hole move that quickly before.”

“And she’s made some of the worst.”

Something that large should have created *auora foris* like Stattenheim suggested. A seafoam, of sorts. It would explain the exotic matter that crashed to Vulpia from the time cicatrix.

Missy began, “It looks like a...”

“A face,” said the Doctor. “A face on the edge of everything.”

She turned to her in fear. “Yes...”

The Doctor bit her lip. “Traskey, what data have you got now?”

“*Plenty, and none of its good news—*”

Missy agitated, “Get on with it you shifty shayde, we haven’t—”

“*Same impertinence. Same failure to consider the facts. I was about to inform you that the Mutation shares characteristics with a supermassive black hole. But this one is moving with greater speed than normal.*”

The Sheriff stroked his deep brown sideburns, his face an eerie, demonic red in the glow of the suns.

“Traskey?” The Doctor didn’t want to ask the question. “What d’you reckon is the projected trajectory of this Mutation?”

“*I fear it will enter Pemberton’s system in one Solar year, Doctor. Once it arrives, the exotic matter it emits will destroy all organic life in the system.*”

“Traskey,” the Sheriff said, loud enough to hear. “What’s its impact against a Gallifreyan world shield?”

There was a moment’s silence as she calculated. “*More bad news. Gallifreyan world shields are made of compacted hyper-density. This particular strain of exotic matter would penetrate a hyper-density mass and infect it. Over time, turning the forcefield around this planet into a bubble of toxic radiation.*”

“Time to stop it?” The Doctor asked. “Or time to cure it?”

“*Unknown,*” Traskey told her. “*There’s something else—*”

“Can it wait?”

“We have a reply, Doctor. From the message pod. I couldn’t have made my assessments without it.”

“Diamant has replied?” She shook her head. “We’ll deal with that later. Evacuate your people, Sheriff.”

“Can’t,” the Sheriff told her. “They can’t leave the town.” He didn’t stop to elaborate.

“But they’ll die!”

The Sheriff gave her a knowing look. His eyes devoid of emotion. “It’s my town, my planet,” he told her as a matter of fact. “Do ya really think I’d bet its future in a fist fight with whatever sits beyond us? If the town is in danger, I have a failsafe. A nuclear option. One way to save it.”

“There he is,” the Doctor grinned. “Care to share?”

A snarled, curled lip was her response.

Missy clapped her hands but her voice was cold, “Oh yes, the man of justice. Don’t you hide behind your noble secrets. How many have you killed out here? How many times have you been the monster to beat one?”

The Sheriff stopped. “You were listening at the campsite.”

“Sleep *is* for tortoises,” admitted Missy. “An hour of sleep is more than enough.”

Something dark twisted in his eyes. “You lied to us.”

“You learn a lot that way, I’ve found. How skewed is your sense of justice?” persisted Missy. “Who doesn’t make your good list? What happens to them?”

“Justice ain’t one of yer priorities.” He snarled.

“You want justice? Well justice doesn’t exist in this Universe. If it did, I would rule, and you would serve. We wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

“You can’t play cards if yer holdin’ the deck. Stick or twist. It’s yer only choice.” His nose wrinkled and rose.

“I tried—” Missy cut herself off. She regretted the look she gave the Doctor even more.

“Oh, *Missy*...” The Doctor clapped her hand to her forehead in frustration, “We haven’t got time for whatever mind games you’re playing. We must get back.”

Missy stood still for a moment glaring at the Doctor before her glacial response, “You’re a fine one to talk about mind games. You just had to stick the knife in, drop me a little hint and demonstrate your superior knowledge—”

“This isn’t about control,” asserted the Doctor.

“It’s about nothing else. You rule, so... what? Do I serve? You?” She took a step closer. “I couldn’t bare—”

“Can it!” The Sheriff inserted himself between the Time Lords. “Is this what the future is, pretty dame’s bickering and fighting?”

“Oh, you have no idea,” the Doctor responded. “We need to get back to Pemberton. I have a plan.”

A sharp sigh. “You and your plans.” The lackadaisical veneer was back. Whatever truth Missy wished to express, buried beneath it. “I’ve no desire to spend any more time in the Badlands.”

The Doctor took one long look at the face in the broken sky. It burned in her mind’s eye as they made their way back down.

“A face...” she muttered.



I am to bring the end. I breathe the reaches of eternity, through lungs made of singularities. I was among the first of my like and will be the last. Upon my back, pink with promise, I hold an inconvenient cradle.

What am I?



They reached the glade where the horses were patiently waiting and led them out onto the vast plain and the long ride back to the town. A tear opened in the sky. Darker than night, like a crack in an ice floe that gave a worrying glimpse to the nothingness beyond the Frontier. It was something that came with the horrible certainty of death. Eldritch creatures from Before Time stretched and reached out into the night, squeezing, trying to pull themselves through.

The Sheriff mounted Warmond. The Doctor was forced to share Windstar with Missy when Odysseus was dragged in abject terror, hooves flailing, back into the chaotic void.

“It won’t be long before they try again,” the Doctor yelled as the horses bolted. She produced her battered—made in Sheffield—sonic screwdriver.

“Agreed. Let’s lock ’em back up. Those yer anomaly?”

“Yes, now come on, setting 112363.”

The Sheriff whipped his sonic from its holster, spun the wooden barrelled body with the flat of his thumb, and pulled the curved trigger under the base as Warmond led the sprint back home.

“Love the sonic,” the Doctor grinned, stopped on Windstar with Missy clutching tightly to her waist.

The devices glowed and whizzed, pinged and ricocheted as the tear began to slowly close. The creatures riding the wave of the time vent’s exotic matter realised what was happening and began to push at the rapidly closing hole. A fractal tendrill encircled the hole, made a slip knot, and pulled it tight. The tear closed behind them with a pop.

“Thanks for your help, partner,” the Doctor tipped her Stetson.

“Sorry to interrupt the mutual appreciation society, but it’s still a long way back to your hovell!” Missy pointed out as the steeds rounded at the pull of reins.

“She’s right, we won’t make it in time.”

The Sheriff pointed his sonic into the air and pulled the trigger.

A clattering sound, a rumble of machinery, the sound of time and space rent asunder and a battered blue police box appeared around them. Second later, it had hopped back to its usual place outside the Sheriff’s office.



Inside the Sheriff’s office a fierce debate raged.

“Why did we have to go on that wild horse race, when you could have used your TARDIS?” Missy demanded.

She was striding up and down, drink in hand, berating the Sheriff who sat with a mug full of whiskey, watching her with a jaded expression trying to imagine if he remembered what silence felt like.

“Emergencies only,” he told her of the machine’s use. “Crooks, bandits, gangs, or anyone else knew what it really was, they’d be a bangin’ down my door like a stag in heat. It stays hidden. It stays quiet. Try it sometime.”

“Clever old things TARDIS’s aren’t they? Love the saloon décor by the way.” The Doctor grinned, making him think it was more an affliction than a choice. “Now, Traskey, have you prepared the message pod?” the Doctor asked, glass in hand.

“I have.” Traskey nodded.

“You got pen pals?” asked the Sheriff.

“Reluctantly, but yeah,” the Doctor admitted.

Traskey turned to him. “Sheriff, if you’re up for it, we’ve another task for you.”

“Pass,” was the response they got. He didn’t even need to think about it. “I agreed to guide you to the mountains so you couldn’t ruin

anymore lives. That's as far as I go. An' once I've paid this Diamant a visit, I plan to see out the rest'a my days here. In peace."

The Doctor didn't look pleased. "No companion, no friends, just you and a whiskey bottle!"

"Best company there is." He raised the glass to her and drank.

The Doctor stood, looking straight into his eyes, she was blunt. "There are more important things, Sheriff. You need to alert the authorities."

"I *am* the authority!" He stood in defiance, hands pressed into the table, staring the Doctor out defiantly. "The original, ya might say."

"I need to take the pod to Australia, July 1979."

"On Earth?" Missy looked at her. "Our favourite stomping ground isn't what it once was."

"Product of a confusion in Time, I know. Spanning out from 1985. The whole ball of wax—"

"—has melted," Missy finished. "There isn't an Earth after the 20th-century, Doctor. Not any more."

"There could be, Missy," said the Doctor. "It's the last stable iteration of our familiar timeline in the Universe. With just the right nudge..."

"Yer pod?"

"Yeah. We've sent this to Diamant, Diamant's sent it back... Back and forth. Forth and back. Gathering together what we all know. I remember finding it in 1979, but I don't remember *why*. It's fuzzy."

"That temporal confusion, again?" asked Missy.

"Could be. In any case, Diamant's involved now. Invested. They've a right to know what we've discovered in Pemberton."

"Even after all they've done?" asked Traskey.

"You playing devil's advocate?"

“Well, consider this.” She adjusted her glasses. “Traskeya trusted Diamant enough to have them participate in SETI’s researches. Help in recovering the rocket ship with the exotic matter. What does that tell you?”

“Maybe... *Maybe*...” The Doctor caught Missy’s eye and sighed. “The Universe does like a lark, doesn’t it? Oh, I don’t know. I won’t say I’ve misjudged them. One right does not a hundred wrongs mend.”

“But?”

The gadgeteer was still looking at Missy. “Everyone deserves a chance to live, right? Just live?”

Her best enemy raised her eyebrows in mild surprise.

“Besides...” The Doctor swung her attention elsewhere. “I think this is the first decent piece of help on Diamant’s part since... Maybe my fifth incarnation?”

“Remember what I said?” Traskey gestured. “About the cosmos not being that simple?”

“There, in that, is what I must reconcile.” She was right. It was time to put her mazumas where her mouth was. All her talk was for nothing if it didn’t lead to something concrete. “Getting the pod to Diamant... It is the right thing to do. I’ll give you the coordinates, Sheriff.”

“With that Mutation out there? As temptin’ as certain suicide sounds, thanks but no thanks. Now you and yer friends can mosey on out of ‘ere and do whatever ya need to need on yer lonesome. The door’s behind ya in case ya forgot.”

“That’s right you tell her, Eastwood.” Missy rallied. “Always bossing—”

“Missy, I need you to go with him.”

“I know yer listenin’, little miss, but let me say it again—”

“What! Why me?” Missy’s face was a picture as she interrupted.

In happier times, the Doctor would have laughed. Any number of reasons seemed apposite. The need to return to the growing City of Refuge on Vulpia? The fact that the contractions to space-time were exhausting her TARDIS almost beyond rematerialisation?

Instead, the Doctor uttered three words. “You owe me.”

Missy paused, drained her drink, and slammed the glass onto the table with such force that it cracked. “I owe you *nothing*, I am a free agent and I’m leaving you and the handsome Sheriff to do the right thing. This Mountie’s off-duty. *Permanently.*”

The Doctor stormed over to her, “You owe me! For all those lives murdered by *you*. This banged-up old Universe you cut in half with your botch job at Logopolis could use a little propping up. You owe *me*. You owe *it.*”

She stood inches away from the red-coated scoundrel who stood, arms folded, ready to send a volley of abuse back towards the Doctor.

Missy sniggered, “Oh, Doctor, this is something new. I’ve never seen such vehemence, such impassioned rage. You can barely contain yourself. What did I do? I’m intrigued.”

The Doctor turned away, her voice cold, “I can’t tell you. In the unlikely event we get through this I can’t have you knowing your future...” She paused before a final storming outburst, “Missy, just... get lost before I change my mind!”

Missy’s mouth thinned. “Where’s that bottle?” she murmured.

“Sheriff, please!” The Doctor asked, seriousness in her face. “For all the people we’ve lost... you’ve lost... for all those you swore to protect out in that street. You have to get this vital information to where it needs to be.”

The Sheriff just stared at her. The need in her eyes almost pleaded. His eyes flickered to Missy, her elbow leant on his black shelf as she watched the pair, and then back to the Doctor.

“Remember the vow we took,” she told him. “Whether you’re that man or not. Whether you’re still me and I’m still you or not. You’re still the Sheriff. You still have a duty of care. Please... cowboy fam.”

He hated that phrase. It was like blackmail.

“Then we’ll be out of your hair for good.”

“Deal!” The Sheriff told her, watching the toothy grin spread across her face. Anything to get them moving on.

Without waiting, the Sheriff hustled himself through the white double doors and headed for his TARDIS. The sooner he set off, the sooner they’d be out of his hair for good. The Doctor and Missy stood in silence before Missy marched over to the Sheriff’s bourbon bottle and poured herself a healthy measure.

“He’ll notice.” The Doctor pressed her empty glass against her forehead.

“Of course he will. You can’t get this outside of the cutters on Dæmos. It’s fermented from...” She gave it a sniff. “*Ooh*... I’d not have thought of that...”

The Doctor sniffed her glass. “Should’ve guessed from the bottle.”

Missy frowned. She didn’t want to admit the Doctor was right. “I’m curious, why do you need me to go with him? He’s a big boy now, he doesn’t need his wicked Auntie Missy to hold his hand.”

“It’s what’s feeding off the exotic matter. Anomalous lifeforms. Two of you stand more of a chance. The dimensional instability is even worse on Earth in 1979.”

“Two sonics are better than one?”

“What are you going to do while we go Down Under?” asked Missy. “You’d make a better partner; besides he tolerates you in his own crass, uncaring way.”

“I’m going back to Vulpia,” the Doctor responded. “Whether those exodus ships take passengers from Pemberton or not—”

“Definitely not, judging by that sneer...”

“Someone needs to tell the City of Refuge that they’re on their way. Give them enough time to prepare. Maybe even settle in without everyone killing each other.”

“Spoilsport.”

“I try.”

Missy tapped her fingernails against the bottle. “That... *thing* we saw in the sky—”

“I already have a plan for it. The TARDIS and I needed a good look at it from the edge of the noosphere here. With those calculations in her systems, we might just be able to rig up a transcendental Faraday cage.”

“And little Vulpia outlives the end of everything?”

“Like a pillow fort in a thunderstorm,” said the Doctor. “But, yes.”

“Not bad. Reminds me of Logopolitan block transfer computation. Shame you can’t ask the experts.”

“You destroyed them. Remember?” She crossed to her. “Come with me.”

“Not a chance,” Missy shook her head.

“Fine.” The Doctor hadn’t the energy to waste. “Enjoy your last remnants of life, Missy, however long we’ve got left. I’ll find someone to go to Australia with—”

“I’ll do it.”

“Really?” The Doctor was stunned.

Missy almost laughed at the surprise on the blonde do-gooder’s face.

“I’ll help him get the message pod in the right place and time. If anyone can prevent this apocalypse, you can.” Missy tapped the Doctor’s glass. “*Cin-cin.*”



A streak of fire traced through the sky. The flight of the exodus ships. The arrangement had been hard-fought at the shipyard, they’d had to weld pieces of the dock to some of the ships, but it was worth it. Well worth it. They would likely survive the journey. Programmed with complex flightpaths by Traskey to Vulpia.

“Thank you for doing this, both of you,” said the Doctor, her face set in grim determination.

“Anythin’ to get ya’ll outta my town and off my planet.”

“All the same. You’ve helped save lives on who knows how many other worlds.”

Traskey didn’t take her eyes off the cruisers. “Even though your motive remains clouded, Koschei, your assistance is... I suppose... appreciated.”

“If that’s my final assessment from you, you venerable tutor, I’ll take it,” snickered Missy.

“Where does this journey of yours end?” asked the Sheriff.

“Vulpia, all roads seem to lead there.”

“Maybe I’ll see ya there” the Sheriff told her.

“Oh, I’d love that,” she grinned. “But if not, then... nice riding with you, partner. Always wanted to say that.”

He tipped his white Stetson to her.

She pressed her hand to the wooden door of the TARDIS. “Let’s go, Traskey.”

The Doctor's TARDIS left Pemberton with its usual cacophony of sound.

"Let's ride," the Sheriff growled at Missy. As he pushed open the creaky doors of his TARDIS, he was stopped by...

"No, you don't. I'm not going anywhere in that antique. The time vortex is unstable, going through it in that museum piece would be like going over Niagara Falls in a barrel. Your console is a wagon wheel for Omega's sake."

The Sheriff gave her a gimlet stare. "And if I step into your wagon, yer gonna try to cut up shines on me."

"I wish I knew what you were talking about," she smirked. "I guess you're going to have to trust me. Anyway, I gave the Doctor my word that I'd help."

The Sheriff accepted her argument as logical, "Alright partner, I'm fixin' to get this over with."

The Mountie took his arm and guided him over the TARDIS threshold.



I am to bring the end. I breathe the reaches of eternity, through lungs made of singularities. I was the youngest among my like and will be the last. Upon my back, pink with promise, I hold an inconvenient cradle.

What am I?

The Doctor exhaled, turning to Traskey, and answered...



THE FACE OF THE MUTATION: PART 4

THE CULMINATION OF A PEOPLE



By Sherlock

Additional Material

By Matt Tennant and AFJ Kernow

THE CULMINATION OF A PEOPLE follows on and concludes **THE STATION OF POSSIBILITIES** from **DOCTOR WHO—A SPARKLE OF DOCTORS: VOLUME 1**.

+++ APPENDED BEGINS +++ “THIS IS THE DOCTOR. I’M AFRAID I’VE GOT SOME VERY BAD NEWS. THE UNIVERSE IS BEING CONSUMED. DAMAGE TO THE FABRIC OF REALITY HAS ALLOWED SOMETHING, A MUTATION, TO BREAK IN. IT’S THE REASON FOR THE TIME VENTS, FOR THE DISASTERS NOW EVERYWHERE YOU LOOK. IF YOU’RE RECEIVING THIS, COME TO VULPIA. WE’RE TRYING TO RIDE OUT THE STORM. WE’RE BIGGER ON THE INSIDE, HEARTS AND MINDS, PLENTY OF ROOM. IF YOU’RE READING THIS, PLEASE, HURRY.” +++ APPENDED ENDS

The population of Balladonia in Western Australia was never so full as to assume double digits.

Its main claim to fame, up until the recent decades, had been a telegraph station. Lines that had run from Perth, across cream-pink sands and through rust-green trees, to Adelaide and back again. The settlement was the first stop east of Norsemen. Across the Earth's largest single exposure of limestone bedrock. Home to the arid realities of the Australian climate—as deadly as it could be.

The Mirning and Yinyila peoples, those who lived for thousands of years on the land, called it Oondiri or 'the waterless'.

The sunbaked country was disturbed in its rest by the wheezing groan of a rusted-out Holden.

Aboard her TARDIS, Missy operated the door control. Before the unlikely allies could react, a wallaby bounded in and stopped. Frozen to the spot it gazed around, confused by the sudden arrival out of thin air that it thought it was going to hit.

The Sheriff nodded at the new arrival, "Howdy, furry friend." Then he thought about what he'd said. "See, this is why I don't cross dimensions!"

"Eastwood! Just help me get it out of here," Missy hissed.

The errant marsupial evicted. The pair stepped outside, shunting the rusted doors behind them.

A clawing chill passed through their bodies.

"Y'feel that?" frowned the Sheriff.

Missy nodded. "The last stable iteration of Earth, she said. Not yet hit by all the infighting across the timelines."

"Not a parallel world, but a..."

“An occluded one. Closed off. And unlike that clapped out old jalopy the Doctor rides around in, my craft gets you *exactly* where you want to go and when. Don’t you, pet?”

The Sheriff gazed around him. The sandy plains, the sparse wisps of foliage, the lack of any rockery to speak of. Aside from the wild camels, gathering with curiosity around the newcomers, it was just like being back in Pemberton. He scanned their not-so-new surroundings and pressed his sonic to his ear, listening. “Oondiri, Western Australia. Middle of the outback.”

“Correct,” she took an electronic box out of her pocket. “And according to this, we take the message pod a handful of kilometres over in that direction. When the light goes green, we’re in the right place. Apparently, we’re to reset it to collection mode; scoop up relevant signals and begin broadcasting.”

“Towards that?” the Sheriff pointed.

The two of them looked up at the red streak in the atmosphere. A violent and dangerous time cicatrix, a temporal cataclysm invisible to human eyes, but obvious to Time Lords. At its heart, a speck even their eyes could not distinguish; humanity’s first space station - Skylab.

“As if the Doctor would be anywhere else...” Missy almost smiled.

14th May 1973. Skylab was launched by the National Aeronautics Space Administration from the Kennedy Space Centre on a modified Saturn V rocket. It streamed up into the blue dome of the Earth on an incandescent trail like starshone salt. Another step forward in humanity’s child-like grasp at the stars.

Skylab’s history, despite its comparatively brief tenure in Earth’s orbit, was long and scrutinised by interested parties of the United Nations Intelligence Taskforce and elsewhere. Officially, its construction consisted of a solar observatory, orbital workshop and any

number of astronomical experiments. It would be boosted and renovated by the nascent Space Shuttle, humanity's first reusable spacecraft, if it was ready in time.

But that was only a possibility.

In 11th July 1979, the long-abandoned Skylab was presently an unofficial hotbed for alien activity in Earth's upper atmosphere. Right on humanity's doorstep. Despite every assurance from the scientific communities of the West, there was speculation as to the safety of Skylab's break-up in Earth's atmosphere.

How could they be sure? Were the reports bluster or impartial truths?

While humanity bit its nails on the weighing scales of East and West, neither were aware of Skylab's far larger presence to Time. Through a freak accident, it had intersected with a time vent in the Sol system. One that could annihilate all life on the Earth if left unchecked.

A time cicatrix, deep in the wounded fabric of the vent, was attempting to push its way into N-Space like molten lead through a quilt.

Only a film of exotic matter, plastered over the time vent by Diamant, was keeping it at bay.

A film that had long since begun to snap and blister.

And now an entity alien to any Universe was turning it into a larder of possibilities.

The Doctors were running out of time...

Aboard the failing space station, the two Doctors found themselves the worst companions for an uncomfortable conversation with an unexpected guest. The entity was observing themselves with the same dull glint of a hungry lion. It had the shine of the vortex to it, but neither incarnation could place it precisely.

“*Who are you?*” they asked.

“I’m th—” the Doctor, who bested the Shalka, began.

“Aristocrat!” interrupted the scruffier Doctor. “He’s the Aristocrat, definitely not a Doctor. Not a degree in his brittle body, no sir.”

He glared meaningfully at his other self. Telepathic contact wasn’t necessary to get his point across. Best not remind this unknown entity of the man who had just angered it.

“Yes, that’s me,” grimaced the Aristocrat. “And my friend here is the Critic. He devotes his time to criticising others whilst dressing as needlessly flamboyantly as possible. Some might say it’s not a lifestyle, but clearly he disagrees.”

The Critic only smiled in return.

“Anyway, enough about us, what about you?” asked the Aristocrat.

“We are nameless. We began, as you did, with a word. That word became a sonnet, that sonnet became a ballad, that ballad became an opera, and that opera became the music of the spheres. Our names fill the void with their immensity. We are beyond such simple terminology now.”

“Oh, I don’t know, there’s nothing simple about a name. But you say ‘we?’” inquired the Critic, as gently as he could.

“We contain multitudes. We are the culmination of a people.”

“You’re talking in riddles,” complained the Aristocrat. “What are you? A hive mind? A colonial organism? A group consciousness? An intelligentsia? A board of directors—?”

“We only want to understand, after all we do owe our existence to you,” the Critic interceded, trying to keep the tone as calm as possible.

“Then we will not speak! We will show!”

And the void around the Doctors suddenly changed.

Once before Time, when this Universe was young, there lived a people.

The rules were different then. Anything was up for grabs. Just sheer force of will could shape the cosmos. It was a time where belief ruled absolutely. Time was a free spirit; something to be bartered with. With a few shrewd words, farmers could tame landscapes, hasten the harvest and keep spring long and winters short. Because it was believed, truly believed, that was so. They prospered due to the collective mental energies of those around them. If you knew how to sway the people, the Universe was your oyster.

These people prospered. Using their bending of reality, their world remained an unchanging paradise. Until one sudden and dark day, it wasn't.

The sky turned black. The plants withered and screamed as the endless Springs turned into one horrible Winter. The people shivered and held on to the fundamental goal of every species—survival.

Crisis led to crisis. Supplies broken, pandemics rife, leader after leader came and went in failure and disgrace.

No one believed.

Eventually, the people just wanted it all to be over. They wanted an escape, to run away from everything.

Their powers had declined, but their leader had an idea. Combine them. Everyone together threw their all into one single entity—the remnants of a civilisation built an ark composed of their everything. Their power, their weakness—their souls. The truth of their intelligence.

And the ark fulfilled their wish. It carried them away, and away, and away...

Further than any could have dreamt.

Or believed.

“Where did you go?” asked the Critic quietly, breaking the stunned silence that had overcome himself and his counterpart.

“The fringes of the Universe! Where the rules that had broken us faded to nothingness! Where we were safe.” The entity’s voice quietened as it spoke.

“I’m something of a pedant, I confess,” muttered the Aristocrat. “It’s a lesson I have taken from lifetimes of experience. The particulars of a matter, where life and death are concerned, can stand between a living being and a breathless corpse.”

“Meaning?” asked the Critic, impatiently.

“Were?” inquired the Aristocrat.

“Were. Things... changed.” A childish excitement had returned to the entity. *“We must run again. Further than ever before!”*

“But where?” the Critic clutched his lapel. “Where can you run to?”

A little further along in the timestream, the Doctor, the final survivor of the Last Great Time War, was trapped aboard Skylab as it began its descent into Earth’s atmosphere. He had spent the last eight minutes, precious, vital minutes, staring into the flames out one the station’s nearest observation window. His mind, trapped in a repeating moment of Hell.

One second. Wiped out. An entire world. Two genocides.

It wasn’t until he felt a blow against the back of his ear that the Doctor was brought back to his senses. “Sorry, Smith! C’mon I need you! How long do we have?” asked Theo, looking around frantically for something..

“No checklist to fall back on this time?”

“What?”

“Not long enough,” replied the Doctor, reaching into his jacket for a sonic screwdriver that wasn’t there. Not for the first time, he reminded himself to make a new one. “Any ideas?”

“How do these boundary portals work?”

“They’re time vents. Well, smaller offshoots of a much larger time vent. Rifts in Space and Time created by scars across the vortex, breaking into possible timelines that could exist. Probably catalysed by that creature using unstable elements from beyond Earth’s periodic table, from the deepest fringes of mine.”

“You’d be familiar with them, then? These elements?”

“They taught them in the Academy back home.”

Theo’s voice was picking up speed. “We just need to find a way of triggering another time vent. Can you produce anything here?”

“How do you figure?” asked the Doctor.

“You’re on Skylab, man. One of the best laboratories above the world. There’s got to be something!”

The Doctor struggled to hear his own thoughts over the plasma screeching at Skylab’s hull.

This place was built on the possible. A time vent, to be precise. One of many that had been knotted shut by Diamant. Using energies that they told him had predated the Time Lords’ current idea of reality. Just a handful of gold dust from a desert of aurum, but it had been enough to sew shut the gaps to the vortex.

Diamant had smiled when they mentioned the museum and its curator. The latest origin point of the stored energies in question. The Doctor wondered if it was *him*...?

“Doctor?” Theo urged in that unnatural calm.

Focus. So what had he learned of those old days? The right words, in the right order...

“Theo!” the Doctor yelled. “I’ve got a checklist for you!”

The Critic finally broke the ominous silence that had pervaded their little void.

“Anomaly... Anomaly... Ano... A thought for a name—how about Ana?”

The Aristocrat gave his other self a hard stare. “Really? An entity from the fringes of our knowledge, an enigma wrapped in a mystery—and you come up with... *Ana*?”

The Critic shrugged. “Just rolls off the tongue.”

“*We like it!*” proclaimed Ana.

“Well, doesn’t that just take the shine off this cosmic mystery,” bemoaned the Aristocrat. “Alright then, *Ana*, would you care to elaborate on how you came to be here?”

“*We can show you.*”

The environment shifted around them, showing deep nothingness illuminated only by a tiny pinprick of light. It was the entity that stood before them, but smaller. A mere speck against oblivion.

“*Us. Hiding, alone at the very fringes of the Universe. Ana.*”

The Aristocrat gave the Critic a withering look. He simply smiled back.

“And then we saw *it*.”

Now amidst the nothingness there was a *thing*. Neither Doctor could find the words to describe it. It was simply beyond their language, beyond their every frame of reference. A shifting mass whose size was changing every moment, composed of a maelstrom of shifting lights of all colours.

“What are we looking at?” asked the Critic.

“Are you asking or verifying?”

“Both.”

“In my experience of hazardous cosmic phenomena, that looks like Stattenheim’s *auora foris*.”

“The ripple effect of dimensional compression?”

“The very same,” nodded the Aristocrat, approving. “It’s pushing an awful lot of exotic matter our way, don’t you think...?”

“Too much, I’d say...” the Critic tapped his teeth with his index finger.

There was one thing about it they could confirm—it *was* coming.

“*We saw it and it saw us,*” Ana went on. “*And we were terrified. It’s beyond us, beyond you, beyond maybe the integrity of this Universe and all others.*”

“So you ran?” the Aristocrat interrupted, speaking more softly now.

“*Yes. We summoned the power that had laid dormant within myself for billions of years and smashed through the walls of reality that had kept us outside this Universe. It should have been impossible.*”

“But you had help,” considered the Critic.

“*Wounds. Jagged shores of Time washing up against broken-glass Space. Precipices to leap from. To run towards.*”

“They sound rather like time vents,” the Aristocrat deduced.

As Ana described the events, the area round the Doctors showed it. The speck suddenly raced forwards, a brilliant shine of colours around it as it broke through barrier after barrier and then into Time and Space, racing through light-years and between millennia. It punctured the time barrier itself and went further still.

“Incredible,” muttered the Aristocrat. “Following the trails of... what are those? Time cicatrices? Like a comet’s tail.”

“But it’s not enough, is it?” the Critic said, sounding utterly unmoved by the display. “All you did was flee a few miles further away down the valley—the flood’s still coming.”

The entity before them appeared to quiver a little.

“That’s what all this is about isn’t it. You’re out of fuel. You’re feeding on the possibilities caused by the time vent in this Solar System. Surrounding Skylab, surrounding Earth eventually, all just so you can run away again, into other Universes.”

“*Escape...*”

“And when that Universe exhausts?” inquired the Aristocrat.

“*We move onto the next.*”

“And if trouble should come there?” the Critic asked.

“*And to the next.*”

“And thereafter?” asked one.

“*The next.*”

“Until?” The other.

“*The next and the next and the next,*” Ana insisted, urgently.

“And when there’s nothing left?” The Doctors asked together.

Desperation tore at the entity’s words. “*The next!*”

Theo started at the Doctor, aghast. The pair were now pinned to the hatch by the g-forces, which were only growing with every second.

“I’m going to tell you the steps to open a time vent,” the Doctor explained like a crashing train. “In a handy checklist. Just trust me—shut your eyes.”

Theo nodded and closed his eyes.

“Okay—Step 1. You need to weaken the barriers between possibilities by hitting this hatch.”

Theo complied.

“Step 2: You focus on your destination—picture the heart. Then Step 3—yell, ‘Open!’”

“*Open!*” Theo yelled.

The hatch behind them was replaced by a time vent. The g-forces flung them both back through it, and into the heart of the web once more.

A snap of fractal fingers closed it behind them.

Adrift among the entrances to hundreds of Skylabs once more, the pair took a moment to breathe.

“That... *worked*,” gasped Theo.

“Of course it did. You believed I was instructing you, and in a structured way that made sense. Here, that’s enough. It’s the way the Universe used to work. Well, sort of, but far too complicated for me to explain right now. Go back to the Shuttle. I’ll take it from here.”

“No,” Theo said quietly. “I won’t run away. Not again.”

“What did it show you?” the Doctor asked sternly.

“What I could have had. If I hadn’t run away to space, if I hadn’t run away from everyone important to me, if I—”

“Theo, the grass is always greener,” the Doctor cut in.

“I know. But I want to get home to try to make it greener here.”

“Well, if you want to help, I won’t stop you.”

“Then let’s get back there. See this through.”

They pulled themselves back to the Skylab where the entity awaited. An argument was raging between the two Doctors who had remained and the gestalt creature. Part of the issue had become that his other selves had begun to bicker with themselves, as well.

“H’llo,” the returning Doctor waved. “Theo and I decided to go for a wander, but the weather’s absolute murder out there in the ionosphere. Horrid view of the Indian Ocean, tell you what.”

“Well done, Doctor,” beamed the Critic.

He winced.

The Aristocrat eyed him. “You didn’t.”

“I’m afraid I just did.”

“Oh, well,” he waved a cool hand, “Nice knowing you,” and turned to the entity.

“The Doctor! You are the same as that man!” Ana exclaimed, furious, pulsating an array of colours in rapid succession. *“You both are!”*

“Yes,” said the Aristocrat. “And the fact that you didn’t know that proves a theory—we’re an accident. Which in turn proves another theory—you’re not in control of this process. The possibilities are running away from you.”

“More than that.” The Doctor took a step forward. “You’re feeding on the exotic matter that’s holding back the time cicatrix on the other side of the vent, aren’t you? Once that’s gone, it’ll break through and wipe out Earth’s history. Everything after the 20th-century.”

“An explosion of unrealised realities. Trillions of them. Certainties twisted into possibilities to consume.”

“The human race, wiped out before it leaves the cradle.”

“Of course. As it must be, here.” There was a hesitance in the being’s voice that made him fall silent. *“There is nothing that can stop it now.”*

His counterpart, the Aristocrat countered, “So, not only are you going to turn the planet below into your larder, killing untolds in your selfish inability to admit there’s nowhere *any* of us can go now, but there will be consequences that you cannot control? Not only are you selfish, not only are you cowardly—but you’re also a fool!”

“Enough. We will not be spoken to by a perpetrator of our pain! A Time Lord!”

“What was done to you is wrong—but that does not make you right now! It’s murder. Murder of the innocent. Callous, vindictive and just like *them*.”

“Couldn’t agree more,” the Doctor turned to beckon Theo.

“What right do you have to inflict this horror on the people of the Earth?” demanded Theo.

“You live.”

“Yes, of course he lives. You’re not all you’re cracked up to be. All you can do is move people between the possibilities you generated. Brief trip to the sauna, and I’m none the worse. You haven’t even broken Theo,” he looked back at the astronaut. “If anything you’ve given him a new outlook on life.”

“If it wasn’t potentially fatal, you’d have a fine job as a therapist, Ana,” noted the Critic.

“Ana?” the Doctor asked.

“Brevity is the soul of the witless,” the Aristocrat replied, wearily.

“We are not powerless. We could feed on you Doctors. We could feed on all of you three. We will not starve. Not again. Never again.”

“Then do it,” the Aristocrat said, nodding at the Doctor. “Three Time Lords ripe and here for the picking!”

“Yes. Make that our bargain,” insisted the Doctor. “Just leave. Take us and leave the people of Earth alone.”

“What exactly are you doing, Smith?” whispered Theo.

The Critic returned, “We’ll explain later—” Ana flew forward, enveloping the three men as Theo watched in horror.

Ana's voice was all the Doctors could hear.

“Now I see into your minds! Now I see your lives! Your secrets! All you are! So many lives...”

A sudden flurry of sensations blinded the Doctors. Like a family photo reel on fast forward.

Susan and I are cut off from our own planet, without friends or protection...

Don't you want to step foot on another world...?

Do I have the right...?

I battled against evil, against power-mad conspirators—I should have stayed here...

Fear me...

You want dominion over the living, but all you do is kill...

No more...

Should I consider myself lucky that I'll be dead before I can confirm that the answer is no?

I won't do it...

“So many deaths...”

Perhaps I should go home? Back to my own planet...? But I can't...

One of the daughters of the Gods...

Keep smiling like you always do...

No need to travel in Time, I'm becoming Time...

Physician, Heal Thyself...

Must stop him...

A change... I feel it...

Adric...?

The moment has been prepared for...

While there's life, there's...

No...

The long way round...

The Doctor's past. "So many possibilities..."

*And so I said the Starvian at the bar can stay, but the fellah in the Quark suit
will have to go...*

How could you do this to your own—?

I've been dead before...

Johann Schmidt...

Blimey!

You know I really think you might...

*But allow me to introduce my latest time-travelling assistant, Joanna of the house
of Johanson...*

*In time, I hope you'll allow me my eccentricities, Alison. Sometimes they're all I or
the world has got...*

"So many... Too many! Growing... growing and... Stop!"

The Doctor's vision cleared.

He, the Critic and Aristocrat stood in a dark void, which they all simultaneously deduced was the interior of Ana. Behind them were shades. Outlines of some of the possible people they had just glimpsed. More than physical, mnemonic, as well. Impressions that lingered like stone tape. They walked around them like waxworks in Madame Tussauds. If both Time Lords had conferred, they would have discovered they had the same memory of trying to save Marie's creations from the firebombing of London.

“Over there,” pointed the Aristocrat.

Closest, if such a word could be applied, was an old Curator. His face danced across familiar past features, but never settled into its own present. An enigma. A question mark. To be forever a crowd, but never know their own face.

The Critic gestured. “Who, I wonder, is that?”

Next, in the far distance, was a stern Emperor who ruled over all travels in Space and Time, operating a police force that destroyed dissent before it had even begun. His features were—

“Look out,” the Aristocrat waved his counterpart away.

In a flurry of what resembled emerald-green fire, a new figure cut through it. A Magician. Running in a ruddy-faced and rather plump figure. In another time, another place, he could have happily run a restaurant. He raced through in his Afghan coat, holding his felt hat atop a ginger head.

The Critic tried to block him. “Hold on, wait—!”

Gone. A new figure staggered forwards and stopped abruptly. Dark-haired, with a round, mischievous face, she wore a drab brown uniform. The name badge declared her to be ‘Susan’. Dull, sad eyes gazed straight ahead, as if looking in a mirror. She swayed slightly, tilted her head and squinted.

“Oh, Cheese! Why must I always have just one last beer? What am I doing with my—?”

Suddenly, the Runaway collapsed in an untidy heap and faded from view.

Her replacement walked confidently towards them. An older lady in Edwardian clothes, the Decider, grasped the lapels of her herringbone jacket. Her piercing blue eyes glared at the three Doctors, who stepped back in alarm.

“We can tip the balance of power into our hands without them realising.” The imperious lady strode *through* the leather-coated Doctor, *“Keep alert—”* and vanished.

“Was that Miss Marple?” asked the Doctor.

In her place, a bespectacled Tutor stood baffled. He pressed his thumb to the bridge of his glasses and reached out through the Doctor’s shoulder. There was almost a tangible awareness to his surroundings. But not enough to—

“Here comes another!”

In a cream-coloured suit and a black hat with a gold trim. He pulled back his coat, hands on his hips, revealing the Greenpeace t-shirt underneath. This incarnation cut an imposing figure for such an understated ensemble. He turned, starting towards them.

“Trouble, I’ll say!” he received in a pronounced accent. *“This isn’t the Rainbow Warrior, who are—?”*

Another figure took his place. A dark-haired Gentleman with a red-piped black coat. In his pocket sat a toothbrush and in his hands, a cup of tea. His mouth was taut, eyes suddenly alive with curiosity and suspicion. It was a face that had seen far more than it was saying.

“Ria...? Truman, is that you?” He spun as he faded. *“Oo-ouch!”*

“Time eddies!” called the Aristocrat over the roar of Time.
“Puncturing the dimensional void!”

The Critic nodded. “Happily concurred, let’s hope that’s all!”

Another. A blonde-haired Doyenne. Visibly older than the last, so she must have been feeling it. She held herself with a curious combination of regal elegance and hooligan derring-do. Someone who would have been at home at high tea on a minefield.

“Hello, chaps?” She waved a hand from her patchwork cardigan and silk scarf. *“We’ve been trying to reach as many Doctors as we can, if you see them, tell them that—Oh, cripes?”*

Her place was suddenly taken by a young man dressed in a brown-and-black chequered suit with a bright orange jumper.

“Am I early?” he said before he too was gone; his place being instantly taken by another and another as they kept coming.

A kindly old Author looked up from his drafts in surprise, a grim-faced Dictator glared at them, a woman wielding a flaming sword dashed past without stopping for a breath...

Finally the parade of figures ended, leaving just the trio in the void with a small shimmering orb illuminating them. From it emanated Ana’s voice. It sounded sick.

“Too many...how... can one being... have so many...?”

“Possibilities?” finished the Critic for it. “Clumsiness and a healthy disregard for the rules, mainly.”

“You’re tainted... Your timestream... corrupted...” The anger had drained entirely from Ana’s voice. *“What... are... you?”*

The Doctor stepped towards it and knelt down to be face-to-shimmering blob. “As you said, I’m just a man. And only sometimes, at that. But I’ve met a lot of people. They changed me, I changed them. Sometimes more than once. That’s what makes a possibility—a

combination. And I won't let you hurt them. Not the innocent. Not ever."

He stood up again and briefly looked back at his other selves.

"None of me will," said one.

"That is rather the point," added the other.

The light from the orb dimmed slightly.

"You overreached, Ana," the Aristocrat said, calmly. "You'll have to abandon this plan. Earth is not for eating. Not whilst we're in your way."

"But... *What should I do?*"

"Do like the rest of us," the Critic. "Muddle through. It's a big Universe, there will be a place for you somewhere."

"*But the Mutation—!*"

"Whatever it is," the Aristocrat said. "It's possible someone will stop it. Or not. But you can't hide forever."

"Doctor, you don't understand. Your timestream is contracting. Your lives are shortening. There are so many possibilities, too many—they were realities once. Now, only a glimmer and getting smaller."

For the first time in their exchange, the Doctors were silent.

"You're dying, Doctor... Everything is dying... The scars to the time vortex are too many..."

The Doctor looked down at the orb. His blue eyes, bright in the fading light. "Ana," he said. "I survived a cataclysm that brought down everything I knew. I think you know what that's like."

He paused for a response but no words came. The dimming orb pulsed brightly again briefly. He took that as a yes.

"I know. It can't be put into words. Feelings rarely can." He stopped himself, suddenly aware of how candid he was being. Talking to

yourself would do that, he supposed. “But my point is, maybe this new Universe has somewhere for us both. I won’t lie, I don’t know where that is for me yet, but I’ll keep looking.”

Ana’s voice came back. “*We... understand. We have the energy to traverse this Universe. For somewhere safe. We can leave you and Earth in peace...*”

“Thank you, I know what that means for you.”

“*The Mutation will come though.*”

“Let it,” said the Critic. “An end is coming for all of us one day. But no point living in constant fear of it.”

“If we are dying, if our very reality is diminishing...” the Aristocrat raised his nose. “Let it be a firework, rather than a tea candle.”

“*We must go. The exotic matter will not hold if we remain. Goodbye, then. Doctors.*”

“One last thing,” the Doctor pushed back his leather jacket. “Ana is lovely, but can we know your true name? The name between the stars.”

“*Why?*”

“In forever the possibility that we might remember it. All of us.”

Ana gave it. In a moment that lasted the breadth of a Galaxy and the click of a locking door.

And everything went black.

The Doctors found themselves in the heart of Skylab with Theo.

“It’s all collapsing!” they said breathlessly. “The whole of it!”

The various Skylabs were colliding, merging, reuniting above, below and around them.

“Soon they’ll just be the one,” said the Doctor. “Ana’s energy is depleted. Burned themselves out. The time vent will close for good. No cicatrix. Earth—safe!”

Theo tried to steady himself. “And you knew that would happen?”

“It was a calculated leap of faith,” said the Critic. “Just like strapping yourself into a rocket.”

“Theo, go back to the Shuttle. Time winds and eddies should start ripping through here at any moment, wiping away the last of the possibilities. You and Gus get ready for a speedy departure. I’ll be right behind you.”

Theo hesitated.

“Go!” insisted the Doctor.

He then turned back to his other selves too late. They had begun to fade. Caught on the ebb of a time eddy, rippling out from the temporal storm around them. A bubble in the bloodstream of the time vortex.

“Seems we’re not long for this Universe,” said the Critic, solemnly. “Well, I suppose we had a good innings.”

“Before we go, there’s something we need to tell you,” the Aristocrat said to the Doctor intently.

“Too much to hope for something good, I suppose?”

The two Doctors shared a glance.

Finally, the Critic spoke, “Ana did show us what it was running away from.”

“Oh?”

The Aristocrat began, “Something beyond our understanding called the Mutation. A force of unknown power and intent heading right for this Universe, and all beyond it. Large enough to cast *aurora foris* ripples like seafoam from a rocket-propelled iceberg. A cataclysm—”

His words were torn away with the crush of another Skylab. Their forms were beginning to flutter now. Like wind-pulled rags against the sun.

“Well, we don’t know if it will be a cataclysm for sure,” the Critic interrupted.

The Aristocrat scoffed through the transparencies in his own features. “When are these things ever not? Maybe in your life, things work out like that. But not in mine, and I don’t think in his either.”

His eyes met the Doctor’s.

“Life is not a cushy sofa,” answered the Doctor, evenly.

The Aristocrat nodded. “It’s a bed of nails.”

“But better us than someone who couldn’t take it.”

Something changed in his other self’s expression. “Yes...”

The Critic broke the momentary silence. “Regardless, it’s coming. You should be prepared,” he sighed through a translucent hand. “Nice cheery note for us to part on. But like I said—we don’t live in fear.”

The Doctor forced a smile. “Well, I’ll face it when it comes.”

“That’s what we would do,” smiled the Critic.

“Because if not us, who?” added the Aristocrat.

The reforming station suddenly shook violently.

“I imagine that *this* station’s lifespan is running out. Too much shake, rattle and roll for this part of Space. You need to go. We’ll probably fade away to wherever it is we came from soon.”

“Indeed. Back to the maybe and the possible. Home of the unspoken crushes, half-finished novels and always postponed holidays.” The Critic smiled. “Where better?”

The Doctor returned the smile. “Thank you, Doctors.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” the pair said in unison.

He turned and started propelling himself towards the hatch.

As they watched him go, the Critic turned to the Aristocrat. “You know, it is possible our timelines do exist in their own right. Somewhere, in a parallel Universe, our futures or a rogue pocket of causality.”

“Yes, I suppose it is. Such a pity parallel lines never meet, they’ve so much in common. Oh, well... Wherever we might fit in, we’ll always be a possibility.” He paused, and smiled. “I actually quite like that.”

“Me too.”

And the final possibilities dissipated, leaving only reality.

Presently, it was getting smaller.

As ever, the Doctor had made it back in just the nick of time.

Boarding the Shuttle, he rapidly closed the hatch behind him.

“*Undock us!*” He yelled towards the crew compartment and pulled his way up to them.

Theo hurriedly flicked some switches, slamming on the orbiter’s thrusters way beyond the checklist’s instructions.

With a series of bursts from the orbiter’s thrusters, *Enterprise* moved far from the station. Seconds later, the old Skylab decelerated as the rules of reality reasserted themselves. Its orbit now putting it on a final doomed encounter with Earth’s atmosphere, the 1979 Miss Universe Pageant, and a littering fine in the Australian desert.

The collar of the Doctor's spacesuit slammed against the chair, but he barely felt a thing. It felt like someone had dropped a brick on his hearts. He realised—he was alone. Alone, again.

He tilted his face up at the forward window, back down towards the blue Earth. Tears welled in the corners of his eyes.

They were passing over the Pacific Ocean. He could just about see Australia.

He wondered if he should check in on any old friends while he was local?

In one of the deeper parts of South Australia, Missy sneezed.

"This it?" asked the Sheriff.

She nodded. It had taken forty-five minutes, trudging across Oondiri, but at last, they were rewarded with the sight of the locator's light turning green. The Sheriff placed the kevlar crystal ball gently on the ground. Next to a thicket of saltbrush. The message pod hummed to itself with a soothing bonhomie.

"There's nothing like being an intergalactic postie, is there?" Missy rubbed her nose. "Do we just leave it here out in the open?"

"Guess so," murmured the Sheriff. "Good thing, too. Yer losing the light."

"Knowing the Doctor, they'll be here very soon. Always a meticulous planner, but even more dangerous when working on the fly. Shall we go?"

"Ya ain't gonna say hello?" He regretted the question as soon as he asked it.

"No," Missy exhaled. "If it is who I think it is, and I only have a feeling... This one's suffered enough already."

It wasn't too long ago that Sergeant 'Jeepers' Conti was stationed at Skywatch-7. The United Nations Intelligence Taskforce's early warning station in the Arctic Circle. Not too far north of Finland. She'd arrived in the midst of the country's six months of darkness. It was funny... She didn't expect that such a simple thing as sunlight would warp a person's mind.

Too little of it and you craved those precious few hours in the solarium and under a sunlamp at your desk. Manoeuvres in this part of the Nullarbor Plain reminded her of what it felt to be snowblind. It was that blanketing, all consuming feeling of... sameness. All the little details drew into sharp focus, then under the heat, just melted away into a blur.

"My brain must be frying under this beret..." she wiped her forehead.

One of the corporals, Corporal Lansing, had his head under the car bonnet. Brave lad was fighting off the heat, a hangover and jet lag from Sydney. His mind was entirely on re-fastening the fuel line and not emptying his lunch into the radiator.

The rest of Alsatian Four had no excuse not to see the two figures in the distance.

Sergeant Conti considered all the ways she could address this discrepancy in her men before she decided, "The hell's the matter with you lot? Over there!"

Corporal Lansing slammed his head on the bonnet's underside. He went pale. Shielded from the sun's glare, he caught the shapes.

And was agog. "Christ, do you think they're from Balladonia?"

"Out here?" asked one of the other men.

Conti didn't have a good answer, so she left explanations to the imagination.

“Radio it into Royal Dalton with Alsatian One,” she ordered, automatically. “Could be spotters trying to get a better view of Skylab as she goes.”

The sergeant jammed her eyes against her binoculars. Behind her, she could hear the sound of combat boots scuffing the steel. The radio transceiver grumbled to life. As a sandblasted voice barked callsigns into it, Conti was able to determine three things. There were two shapes, they were bipedal and they bore no resemblance to anyone from a UNIT operation in the area. She'd caught a rerun of *The Avengers* on television with highwayman, cats and toffs, and there was no two ways about it. The interlopers looked like they'd sauntered in from a midnight costume party into one of the harshest sections of the Australian landscape.

That would have been laudable if it wasn't so damn stupid.

“Major Dalton says to wait for Colonel Granz,” said Lansing.

“Of course he does...” Conti shook her head, half-smiling.

Too far away to be seen by its deliverers or Sergeant Conti's detachment, the Time Lord message pod set to work.

It would be easy to lose such a thing in the desert. The singing sands and baking heat could pull it beneath the Earth with little notice. But, of course, such contingencies were anticipated by the pod's designers.

The little pod's plasmic shell turned its immediate surroundings to glass. Superheated and cooled in a matter of minutes. It had no sapience, like a TARDIS, no will of its own. But it knew. It knew it had a task.

So it waited, among the razor shadows, to be discovered.

As night came, it knew it wouldn't be long.

Colonel Granz could see the UNIT bivouac from the Lockheed C-130 Hercules' main cockpit.

A khaki-green, almost moss-like growth amongst the trees. Their presence was required in a hurry, so a strip of the Eyre Highway was cordoned off for a runway. She'd requisitioned for a jump jet like the *Sbar* from the British Royal Navy, but there wasn't enough time to get it from manoeuvres down to the southern hemisphere.

They'd already been forced to takeoff when a caravan appeared from the bush, pivoting onto the black tape of the bitumen road. The landing lights made it easier for the locals to get the gist. Touching down, wheels squealing against the unprepared ground, but it held fast. It always did.

When the RAAF pilots throttled back and began to taxi, she patted the nearest bulkhead and prepared for her arrival. The loading ramp engaged with a low whine as the propellers died. A land rover swung up to meet her.

The driver hopped out and stood to attention. "Driver from Alsatian One. Colonel Granz?"

"At ease, corporal. You know my face, get on with it," she ordered.

The land rover's gearbox whined in protest, but soon they were on their way.

International cooperation had opened many doors for Colonel Yulia Granz that would have remained closed to her. Her family was like many Australian colonial families. Born on the continent, but with a scant generation's difference between herself and somewhere else in the world. Her mother was a lorry driver who'd fled the Stalinist regime in Russia before marrying—and amiably divorcing—a Sydney-born travel agent who'd bought a private island with his new fourth wife.

Granz knew him vaguely, but her mother well.

Her mother always talked of the Ural Mountains. The sublime breadth of rock reaching out to touch the clouds of the sky. But there were no such sights here. The desert was flat as far as the eye could see. During last month's war games, Granz had noted that an approaching vehicle on the horizon could be seen for hours. Never moving, on the face of it. Then it arrived, in a flash of motion, and was gone behind the eye.

As the land rover pulled up to the command-and-control tent, she thanked the driver and stepped into the fray.

"Skylab?" she asked.

The Welsh radio technician, Major Dylan 'Royal' Dalton, turned to her and smiled. "Up in smoke."

She inhaled, smiling, but clarified, dryly, "More specifically?"

He jerked his head to the table beside him.

Major Priscilla Yufei was verifying the dossiers in front of her. "Current reports from our early warning stations say the current radius is—*huai dan*, learn how to count...! Sorry, hold on, I'll get a pen." She uncapped a marker, crossing to a blackboard-sized map, and circled out the confirmed crash sites. "Here... Here... And here... All across Western Australia so far."

"No reports of anything anomalous from the major cities?"

"Nothing, so still no need for a cover story as yet."

"Keep that on standby in any case," Granz turned to Dalton. "Royal, any sign of our mysterious visitors?"

"Last sighting was from Alsatian Four, Sergeant Conti's lot."

"*Last* sighting?"

"They're gone, ma'am."

Granz frowned, she'd seen the local topography from the air. A disappearance like that should have been impossible. The plains weren't as lifeless as they first seemed and night would only encourage the local wildlife—the wild dingos, roosting falcons and belligerent emus—into the usual hiding spots for warmth.

“Check again,” she instructed.

He switched on the radio receiver. “Alsatian One to Alsatian Four... Alsatian One to Alsatian Four, come in...”

Major Yufei leant back from the board, tapping her lip with the pen.

“How was your trip to NASA?”

“Brief,” Granz deflected. When she'd gotten her commission, she'd taken speech lessons to adopt a United Nations's pan-Atlantic accent for just such occasions. Better safe than sorry. “They ran a check on my file as I was touching down in Orlando International Airport.”

“Did Geneva end up sending their representative?”

“Doctor Smith?”

“The first one, yes.”

Yufei, Ganz knew, was under the impression that the name was probably some kind of blind. Persons of interest picked up by UNIT in a classified protection program. Whenever they went abroad, they adopted the moniker of Doctor John Smith. Her clearance wasn't high enough for the truth.

“No,” answered Ganz. “He's in the Northern Territory with CSIRO. Some crisis that escaped from England. He had a Professor Mayer vouch for me, instead.”

“No trouble, then.”

“No... no trouble...” she said, distantly.

“Are you worrying?” Yufei asked in a singsong.

Granz tilted to her with a frown. Not at her, but rather through her. She was concentrating.

“I’d worry,” the major answered, honestly.

“I’m not sure, Major...” The colonel chewed her lip, studying the crash sites. “Should we worry for us or worry for him?”

The Pemberton town drunk forswore alcohol and sighed the pledge after witnessing a blue wooden police box aspirate out of thin air. As he sat sipping his root beer he regaled his friends with his story, but no one believed him.

Outside his office, the Sheriff wondered what to say. He was never good at goodbyes.

“You’re welcome, Eastwood.” Missy butted in, saving him the bother of talking. She knew what he wanted to say.

“Vulpia?” He asked her.

“No. Good luck and all, but I’ve done my bit. I’m off to have some fun before my inevitable demise.”

Missy leant on the wooden door of her TARDIS. She suspected that eventually everyone would run out of places to hide. If she was going to finally lose her life... At least, she had carried out one final choice with dignity. A master chose, a serf obeyed, and she’d made her choice accordingly. A selfless act, to boot. Doctor or no Doctor. It felt oddly exhilarating.

“You’re tired, Missy.” she muttered in a soft gentle voice. “Bored of devising clever schemes only to have the Doctor stop them. There’re only so many times you can see the panic in a person’s eyes before you kill them. Perhaps, this leopard can change her spots...”

The Sheriff stared at her, “Yer thinkin’ out loud.”

“I know. I’m trying to talk myself out of a crazy idea. So much easier falling into old habits. Me, you just look out for numero uno. But, I’ve never shirked a challenge, be a nice surprise for Grumpy Boots, too...” She took one final look at the Sheriff. An oddly friendly stare. “So long, cowboy.”

Without a second glance, she entered her TARDIS and left Pemberton.

The Sheriff sighed. One path, the traditional path, led him back into his office where a bottle of bourbon waited with his name on it. The other path, the path less travelled, took him straight into his blue box and to Vulpia where memories of his past and glimmers of his future awaited. He was the Sheriff, duty and loyalty tattooed through him like a stick of Lurmanite holiday rock.

He turned to the empty town behind him. Piano music tinkered from several different inns. Pleasurable screams from weary calico queens echoed into the day. Warmond whinnied as he sped past, racing three other nags to the prairies in the east. Everything was calm and quiet. Everything was perfect.

“Sometimes it’s good to break tradition...”

Silence. A few kilometres from the UNIT representatives in Oondiri, the message pod was embedded in glass half-tumulus burnt into the desert. On face value, any passing human would have assumed it a last remnant of Skylab, but it was not emblazoned with the logo of NASA, rather than something infinitely older and more powerful.

A Chinook helicopter, on an errand of mercy to a Yssgaroth-mangled UNIT detachment, passed overhead. The Doctor leant out from beneath the rock outcropping. They wouldn’t catch the pod from the air. Wrong angle. And the situation seemed under control there. No sense poking his nose into something else.

Besides, he hadn't the strength for another crisis. Not now.

The time-traveller sat as the chill of the night arrived to Oondiri. The sands turned to velvet-purples and the sky above a beautiful glittering black. He'd set a small campfire for himself, listening to the neverending sigh of the shifting sands. The trill of crickets. There was even, if he concentrated, the scuttle of ants across the rock beneath his shoes. It was here, outside of the light pollution of the cities, where a chap could really appreciate the cosmos.

He inhaled the cooling air. Earth was safe.

Today... That was enough to keep living.

"The red..." He thought he could see red strands between some of the constellations, but he couldn't be certain. They were there and he was here. His hands tight on the rotation of the Earth. Feeling it. Letting it soothe him like a lullaby.

He waited. And waited. Until, as the heat ebbed from the pod, he approached it, like a wounded animal at the side of the road.

"Ohh, look at *you*... Old High Gallifreyan," murmured the Doctor, kneeling beside it and carefully studying it. "Message pod. Classic. You've had a day of hard yakka, haven't you?"

Even now, with hours to get used to the idea, its very presence gave him a strange sense of delirium. The destruction of Gallifrey was so total, so finite... A small piece of home, like this, made him feel as though he were going mad. Once upon a time this would have entailed a trip home, and no doubt an angry row with some hypocritical Interventionist about meddling with Earth's timeline for some murky higher purpose *again*.

But no longer. He felt the strange ache of nostalgia for a time he'd wanted to forget. A pain like heartsache that he didn't deserve to feel. Not as their murderer. Now, he was alone, the only one left to figure this one out.

Or was he...?

“*Diamant!*” the Doctor frothed into the empty desert.

“No need to shout.” The voice came from behind him. “Whatever dangers awaited you are long since gone. Thanks to you.”

The Doctor turned to be met by the voice of Diamant, though the intense darkness, the landscape washed in blind absence, made it difficult for his eyes to truly pick them out. “You knew about Skylab, didn’t you?”

“We knew of something. Not what it was. A most curious creature it transpired.”

“I see. So something comes from the fringes of the Universe through a time vent, and you want me to put a stop to it. Fine. And then there’s this ancient relic just waiting for me. Why?” The Doctor was trying very hard to stay calm at the interdimensional menace that had so clearly used him as he would a screwdriver.

“We tire of explaining ourselves to you. We are trying to help, as we did on the station when we closed the vent behind you and Theo.”

The Doctor frowned. “That was you?”

“A small consolation. We, alone, have been carrying the burden of being a destroyer.”

“Ha, I know a little of that, *Diamant*...”

He gave up trying to pick them out from the landscape. To him, *Diamant* may well have been the desert itself. Both spoke in a whisper.

“Please,” asked the Doctor, gently. “Help me understand it. Ana was talking about something coming for the Universe, a Mutation. Properly spooked my... Other me’s. Is this a clue?”

“We hoped as much. Your other selves were wise to be afraid.” The Doctor felt a peculiar sense of defeatism coming from the voice. This was not the bluster, familiar from lifetimes of confrontation, that he’d

expected. “You found the pod from the signal it is broadcasting, no doubt?”

“Which was only noticed by my TARDIS after the vent shut. Terrible interference, or you hadn’t dropped it here yet?”

“Not directly. Our pen pals, to coin a term, have dropped it here. By proxy. We doubt they have the time to visit 1979 themselves—”

“What I wouldn’t give for a straight answer to a simple question. Just *tell* me Diamant. For once in your infinite life, ditch the cryptic.”

“Very well.” Was that a sigh the Doctor heard? He didn’t know interdimensional entities could even do that. “It is what humanity would term a ‘black box’. From a lost Gallifreyan vessel, the *Odysseum*. The ship was destroyed, ripped apart in the Vortex, but in the process, something pushed it through the confines of your little Universe. The pod was recovered before it could see the Mutation—”

“By who?”

“You cannot know too much of your own future. Now whilst the pod was retrieved, not all the Hypercubes on the *Odysseum* were.”

“So they kept going, and saw what’s coming. The Mutation.”

“Indeed. And placing this pod so close to the vent above Earth has enabled it to establish a link to any lost Hypercubes still in the vortex. They would have all the information you need to understand what is happening to this Universe. Just not necessarily in the right order.”

“But only with the pod in their possession?”

“Yes.”

“Where are your ‘pen pals’ now?”

“On a planet called Vulpia in the 41st-century,” answered Diamant.

The Doctor looked down at the ominous object. So small, but with so much significance within it. Bigger on the inside.

“We would ask one more thing of you, Doctor.”

Asking. Not Diamant’s style at all.

“Take it there. Directly, so it cannot be intercepted. We understand there is to be a gathering there before the Mutation is upon Us all. We... Maybe...? No. No, We do not feel our presence would be welcome. But the pod would. Even if it may already be too late. The coordinates are already in your Ship’s databanks.”

The Doctor stood stunned for a moment, then knelt down to scoop up the pod.

“What happened to you, Diamant?”

“Go to Vulpia. Your future self will no doubt explain. Tell her... We did try. We proved all we could. And, tell her, We will do all we can to help them survive what’s to come.”

And with that, the Doctor was alone again. Just him, an impossible pod and an equally impossible police box.

Another cataclysm. Another last stand.

But if not him...

Who?

THE FACE OF THE MUTATION: PART 5 TOMORROW, WHEN IT ALL ENDED



By Alan Camlann

From a story by

By Alan Camlann, Sherlock and AFJ Kernow

+++ MESSAGE BEGINS +++ "Fzzt-kzzt-tut-tzt-tzzzPllt." +++
MESSAGE CORRUPTED +++ CORRUPTED +++ CORR—Fzzt-tzttz-ttz-
zt-tzttzz-t-tzttzffjzzz-zit-zit-zzzzz

“On Vulpia, did Diamant
A fractal confrontation decree
Where Doctor, the Time Lord scattered, ran
Through a city measureless to fam
Chilled by a dying Time.”

— FROM A LOST VISION,
IN A HALF-FORGOTTEN DREAM,
OF SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE

It was dayspring in the City of Refuge, and the rain, in its good manners, made the land soft for the mourners at the wake.

A match was struck against the coffin.

The words were spoken. They are universal to all in Creation who have ever lost a loved one. Variations on a theme that never seemed broad enough, deep enough or sincere enough to fill the hole left by the absence that this loss has wrought. These thoughts came from all and none. From families and friends. From strangers and passersby.

A match was struck against the coffin.

They held tight to this small flame, as it chewed its way down to the fingers, for if they let go... If they allowed it to burn into nothing, then the beloved ones will be lost all over again. It burned, this pain. It ate at the fingernails, at the claw-tips, at the bone, but it was a good pain. A noble pain. A reminder that they are alive. Whatever else, they are still *alive*.

A match was struck against the coffin.

The words were spoken again. This time from a stranger to this place of mourning. The flame's light cast a beautiful and perfect constellation off her ear cuff. Like a diamond. Her words were familiar—at least, they began that way. Before long, she spoke of things otherworldly. Of eternity. Of perspectives known only by the glassblowers, those who fashioned the hourglass of Time.

The match was held.

Her words never grew in sound. She did not shout. Her voice even wavered. But the words themselves transformed the world around the burial. She didn't speak of alien sands, strange birds or other skies—not directly—but there was voice enough for a whole Universe of possibilities. Nightingales, daisies and burnt toast. At the end of all things, at the end of life, she speaks of Creation and Renewal.

The match was held.

She was there in the night to help dig the grave, the mourners realised. In her rainbow braces and lace-up brown boots. Her face marred by the dirt of this nowhere. This, planet Vulpia. The huddled grieving came on a refugee ship, bound from a world called Birdie Hepburn. They were no one. When the time cicatrix passed through their solar system, they should have died as no one, but someone had been there to save them. Had it been her?

The match was spent.

They recognised who she is. There are many things spoken of the Doctor, here. Many myths, tales, legends and backroom gossip. Her voice is the first thing anyone hears above Vulpia. As the survivors pulled themselves from the crash, among flames and screams, it was her voice they'd heard first. Her hand, the first thing they'd touched of this alien world.

And a match is struck against the coffin.

The other face was a glowing shadow. A hungry ghost. Early to the wake. No stories had been spoken of them. No songs sung. They swam in anonymity and yet could hold the mourners' attention like a magician or a playwright.

A question, "Diamant...?"

With dignity, integrity and deliberation, the words were spoken.

The match was held.

For Diamant, it began in the time vortex. Shortly, if such a term can be applied, after their departure from Australia, 1979. They followed the spirals and eddies that twisted with the inkblot clouds. The scenic route, by any other name.

To understand the M-form's mind, one must first examine their relation to those capricious twins. The dimensions of Space and Time.

Diamant existed beyond Time. In much the same way as the Time Lords had for millennia of their power.

The M-form, however, was not bound by their technology. They could move, with impunity, from one time-zone to the next on their own recognisance. A marvel that dazzled even themselves. However, it did not come without its shortcomings.

Without that straining grasp towards that great power, they lacked the sensitivity to Time innate to the Gallifreyan species. Diamant could cast a fractal envelope around whosoever they chose. Possess a Qin Emperor or a Peladon Scriptor. But, they could not understand why grandchild followed grandparent, why months followed days.

The dimension of Space was just as complex. For the Gallifreyans, their command over Time left them vulnerable to the caprices of Space.

The very nature of their great power, that artifice around Creation, maintained the equilibrium of the cosmos. Physical laws such as cause and effect. Perpetuated by the Web of Time and the time vortex in which they presented travelled. Something that affected even their great People. For how could a civilisation grow if it did not know its own past and had no future to reach towards?

But what Diamant failed to understand, more than Time and Space, was that the pages of a book are still full of words. Whether or not they are read. And what they didn't know could hurt them.

Imagine the danger of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

A singular thing, isn't it?

Now, imagine it with Diamant's Plurality. They could be in many places. Many times. All aware. All at once. Every occasion of note could be touched with a metaphorical hand on a whim. They were passing through the 41st-century. Just a glance.

For the Solar System of this period, it would be the old favourites.

Pinkie. The first unveiling of the *Spar 7-40* on Venus.

Ring finger. The Memory Farm's incarceration of Garius Moro.

Second finger. The assassination of Mavic Chen by the Daleks.

Forefinger. The 3996 Galactic Dakaro Championships.

Thumb. The pilgrimage to the planet Vulpia.

To name but a hypothetical handful.

And recall, that this fractal-form could do the same with any moment in an individual being's timestream. They could see everything. Every daisiest daisy. Every judicial punishment. Every phobia faced. Every shattered spine. Every mended way. Every butterfly nevermore.

Diamant had the power, the potentially immeasurable power, to rend that daisy chain of causation asunder. Cast those moments in Time down like flowers. Into a bleak and thankless darkness. After all, the damage was already done. What was one more broken time-zone in this swallowing Universe?

Yet, Diamant stayed their hand. They always did.

It wasn't for lack of imagination. No. It was that some things in Time were private. Even to them. Their penitent journey to the wreck of the *Odysseum* had shown the cost of misunderstanding this dimension.

Even pushed outside of Time, on the cusp of a hole in the vortex, there was a... discomfort to visiting such a place uninvited.

(The Doctor's features were soft in the matchlight. She looked to speak up, but was quietened by the clacking of Basillius Creel.

Diamant smiled. Humbled at the reptile's defence.

The Doctor bit her lower lip and rolled a pair of puckish eyes. Her point well-made, despite the interruption.)

Anxious regarding their Folly, uncertain in its new workings, Diamant sought to travel elsewhere.

They didn't seek to be worshipped. For such things were the purview of the gods. Petty creatures. Neither did they seek a victim to vituperate and scorn. They had learnt how empty such a venture was.

They sought, instead, perspective. A point in Time where they could view the highest peak of Creation and the lowest vale of the atom, simultaneously. They wanted to understand this notion of linear Time. Cause and effect.

With their metaphysical hand, Diamant's plurality brushed the veil of the cosmos. All its measured stars and planets. Comets and asteroids. Searching for thesis and antithesis. Creation and destruction. The two plates of the scales, easing back and forth with the weight of nothing more than stardust.

Fingers brushed the surface of the lake. A bare skim beneath.

As a series of divisive, vanta-grey domes, linked to a central spoke, spun like the hands of a clock.

And aboard that time-ship of divisive hunters, known as Division Control, its leader cut off one of Diamant's fingers.

No escape.

"Your fractal enveloping is, ordinarily, a voluntary process. However, as you more than likely feel, we've removed that freedom from you with a transdimensional compressor. It should be uncomfortable."

Diamant tried to exhale the unfamiliar pain through their alien lungs.

An oxygen mask was grafted to their features. Instinctively, they reached up to remove it and found they had no arms.

Where were they? Only moments ago, the vortex, and now...

The vat bubbled around Diamant. It reminded him a great deal of Cantu, but this wasn't Vulpia. The technology was centuries in advance of that colony. It was like comparing sync-op chambers to jars of formaldehyde.

If they were in Space, once more, then Diamant's new body would— But, it wouldn't. It couldn't. Therefore, it didn't. The body clung to them like meat in a freezer. It possessed a rudimentary brain. The ability to reason. No limbs, however, and a skull that pressed thick against the shoulders. Then, again, there was no need for a neck in such a confined space.

Their heartsbeat, for there were two, could be seen through the thin membrane of skin on their chest.

“Where is Basillius Creel?” The exertion of muscle and sinew always felt a bit strange to the fractal-form. So many moving parts in such a limited dimensional range. “The one travelling within Us?”

“With the rest of your Plurality, Diamant. This scion has been removed for our purposes.”

“You must be in dire need of an audience.” Diamant couldn't move. “May We recommend Our agent?”

“Flippancy...” The laugh was soft and derisive. *“Yes, I suppose I should have expected as much.”*

Belying the vat was a rotunda almost perfumed with an amethyst hue. Like the light catching on the leaves of a forest grove at sunset. Indeed, there was a tree sat before them. A large mangrove that twisted and curled its roots through the parallax architecture. Almost as though it had grown first and the rotunda were fashioned around it.

“Could We have a name?” Diamant's voice-box sounded as though it'd been made of Plasticine. “We work so much better with a name.”

“You may have a title.”

“It amounts to the same thing.”

“*Awsok would suffice.*” Their captor was somewhere outside the rotunda. The M-form could just about pin them down. “*It has many derivations from the original root word, but one of them was...*” There, behind the frosted pane of glass. “Auntie.”

The safeguard was childishly simple. Almost insultingly so. However, with all their abilities diminished to three-dimensions, it proved the ultimate camouflage.

All Diamant could tell was that the figure was short. Probably. White-haired. Almost certainly. Their head framed by some kind of woven-straw halo. The brim of a hat? Even the face, its two onyx eyes scrutinising over a jowly mouth, were wholly anonymous.

And yet...

“Awsok what?” dared Diamant.

Their jailer didn’t budge. “You needn’t more than that, Diamant.”

Diamant couldn’t help but feel a sense of... familiarity.

They knew them. Not directly. She was reminiscent of a place the M-form had visited all too long ago. That fable from the Curator. She was like a figure from an old *færie* tale. The old witch in the gingerbread house, to coin a tale of Earth. Hers was a presence that conjured up ancient rocket ships, dilettante songs and inconvenient things thought dead.

“We always try to count our chickens before they hatch here at Division Control, but your return to the *Odyseum* wasn’t anticipated.” No luck. It seemed a shadow as all Diamant would have to identify her. “You and the Doctor have been exchanging the *Odyseum*’s emergency message pod. Why?”

“If you know Us, you know why. We are Diamant, Our ways are capricious.”

“There are survivors of the attack, aren’t there?” Awsok scoffed to herself. “Naturally. I should have anticipated as such. ‘Traskey’. Traskeya. It was written on the pod. We were right not to intercept it.”

“You sent the Wrath Warriors to the *Odyseum*...”

“Her entire crew were expunged, yes.” Impatience. “How did she survive?”

“She did not,” answered Diamant.

Awsok gestured to her right.

The M-form’s oxygen mask suddenly flooded with carbon dioxide. Too much for their feeble body to process. The pain dug into his lungs and tore at its sponge-like innards. This soft, jelly-like organism could do nothing but flail and sputter in the vat’s fluids.

“Our mind probes would be functionally useless on yourself.” Awsok was dispassionate. “Your mind... Well, it exists beyond the confines of this singular body. In your Plurality. Nevertheless, when you feel pain, this consciousness of yours is transcendently empathetic.” She tapped her pane of frosted glass. “The living and total agony is real. Yet the mind is elsewhere. It’s a fascinating concept. *Oh*, it is.”

Awsok gestured, again. The returning burst of oxygen had a sweetness to it. Each of Diamant’s breath was shallow, but savoured, muddied water in an unforgiving desert.

She asked, “Did the Doctor save Traskeya’s life?”

“No...” The interior of Diamant’s mouth was chapped and dry. “She *was* a casualty. Lost to the vortex. The time winds would have claimed her body. We... We arrived after the point We could have saved her. That was Our failure.”

“Logical and I can think of worse lies.” Awsok hummed. “It’s hard to find a time-trace on this iteration of the Doctor travelling with her. Why?”

“The Doctor has jumped a time track—”

“*Ab*, and in so doing has stepped outside of her own timestream.” She clicked her tongue in understanding. “That rings true... Once the groove resets, she’ll have to face oblivion with the rest of her incarnations.”

Diamant tried to hide their chill. “*If* the groove resets.”

“It’s an inevitability.”

“Unless we find a solution.”

“To the Doctor’s sixth incarnation.”

Diamant was surprised. Being noticed was not something that often, *ever*, occurred to them.

“We must be slipping...” they said.

“I’ve been watching. What so many have sought to do deliberately, you accomplished with an accident. Under different circumstances, I imagine the Doctor would have appreciated the irony. Now tell me, which Doctor is with Traskeya?”

“Her life began when she fell from the TARDIS over Sheffield in the 21st-century.”

“Sheffield?”

“The home of Sheffield steel on Earth. It has a reputation for dependability.”

“Does it indeed?”

The answer had not been as enlightening as Diamant had hoped. Their interrogator had not taken the bait. Direct approach, then. “How do you know them?”

“It’s hard not to catch a whiff of Vulpia,” Awsok said casually, ignoring the M-form’s question entirely. “All the machinations transpiring on what we might consider an otherwise unimportant

world. There is talk of it being the last refuge against the end of everything.”

Their eyes fell on the hidden figure. “Plurally, We’re unconvinced, but it may still be better than nothing.”

Awsok shrugged. “If only you knew where you reside now.”

Straining their eyes upward, the M-form could easily have mistaken the blue-white flutterings above for butterflies. They could see Galaxies and constellations. Diamant recognised the whirling skirt of Mutter’s Spiral, but it was just one dancer in a crowd of its like. They fell, slowly, in a holographic autumn. A planetarium of everything that ever was.

It occurred to Diamant that the absence of single star in such an array wouldn’t be noticed.

As they wouldn’t be noticed.

“A nursery?” ventured Diamant, carefully.

“One of my small indulgences. Bonsai, I believe that is the Earth term, is a fascination to me.” She gestured with thickly-gloved fingers. “The tree that occupies your chamber is one of many such cuttings throughout Division Control. This one is from Desrault. The *folia natorum* or ‘leaves of the children’. It’s a capricious weed, in hindsight, but I appreciate its virtues.”

The fractal-form couldn’t resist. “Yes, We imagine they’re easier to grow.”

“Do you know how truly pathetic a daisy is?” An unexpected anger rankled her voice. “Take any flower beyond its environment and it won’t survive until the first patch of spring. A tree, magnificent like these, will survive the binding and pruning necessary to fashion it into its best self.” She leaned forward. “You understand the folly of a sentiment, otherwise, I’m sure.”

Something cold crawled over Diamant. “You know about the Doctor’s sixth self.”

“All trees need tending. Even family ones.”

“Why are you telling Us all this?”

“To see what you say, what you don’t. I wanted to discover why your fascination for the Doctor germinated in the first place. Given what you are, a mote in the eye of Creation, she’d have better time spent anaesthetising flutterwings.”

“It was a sentiment of Ours.”

“Oh?”

“When the Universe winds down to die. There will be three survivors. Diamant, obviously. The sapient jelly-babies.” A smile curled the fractal-forms unfamiliar lips. “And the Doctor, trying to save the sapient jelly-babies.”

She nodded, considering. “You won’t tell me more.”

“Consider this my own Labour. A present from We to Ourselves.”

“Very well. You’ve already confirmed what I needed to know.”

“There are shadows bigger than you on the walls, Awsok.”

“You were never expected to survive our encounter, Diamant.” Their jailer raised their hand to someone else behind the glass. “One last test. I want to see what happens to the memory of an M-form when the body is prematurely nullified. In the unlikely event you recall our visitation. Pass a message to the Doctor for me.” Diamant could feel the stewing smile. “Goodbye.”

Awsok gestured, one final time, and cut all oxygen to the body in the vat.

In the glow of phosphor orbs, raindrops like static, Diamant watched the matchstick's flame as it burnt down to their fingers. Twice as hot, struggling and guttering. Each lick of the blaze, more desperate than the last. It tried to gather as much oxygen to itself as it could. Keep itself alight. The flame bristled with waning potential. It tried. Against all adversary, it tried—

It wasn't enough. The flame died.

“Whoever she is, she killed Us, Doctor.” Diamant held their other hand in its smoke's updraught, catching it in their palm. “Robbed Us of something We can never get back.”

“I'm sorry.” The Doctor's eyes said it all.

Another group were arriving, more alert to the proceedings

“That said,” continued the fractal-form. “We have taken time enough from this wake as it is...”

Diamant recalled the aftermath of Peladon and their previous journey to Vulpia. Grief was proprietorial. Possessive and possessing. The rain dulled the mourners' instinct to react, but Diamant knew that once the cold faded, they inevitably would react. How, was a mystery. It could be in muted confusion, dull apathy or even in some grotesque display of rudderless anger. Diamant would not remain to find out which.

“Diamant—” The Doctor's voice?

A peeling wail cut through the din of rainfall.

From this new influx of grief-stricken, the Doctor dropped to her knees to allow a small child to sprint into her arms. The child was thrashing. Screaming. The words, all too familiar.

Her parents were dead. The Doctor knew. Dead and they weren't coming back. The Doctor knew, she knew. Why'd they leave? They didn't have a choice. They could've taken her with them. Not yet, not by a long chalk...

The heart-deep wailing went on.

Slinking over beside them, Basillius spoke up. “Master...”

The reptile was right. There was no need to remain. Diamant directed him towards the alley-wall of the nearest spacecraft. Under the cover of the departing unfortunates, they climbed, careful to place their feet on the sturdy outcroppings of hull and encampment. Their path took them over the multitude, up towards a bridge of thermal plating.

“The Doctor,” Diamant murmured. “This is their element.”

They were at their best when things were at their worst. That was a blessing and a curse. Diamant wondered if it was a case of nature or nurture. Had she come into this cosmos with all those virtues or had Time been her bitter teacher?

“I believe you did well, master,” consoled Basillius.

“That child, she didn’t know her...” Every raindrop cast a new pattern of light around Diamant.

This wasn’t a game to the Doctor.

It had never been a game.

Even she, for all the freedom that travel through Time afforded her... Even she couldn’t prevent the inevitability of a final end.

“Did you hear, Magnificence? the Creel frothed. “I said—”

“Basillius, not now...” dismissed Diamant, wearily.

“Believe or not,” a whisper added, “I think you should listen to him, and that’s no small feat.”

Diamant and Basillius rounded on its source. In their preponderances, they’d failed to notice the wailing had stopped. Someone had soothed it from the small child and lulled them to sleep. She sat, presently, on the Doctor’s shoulders. Her face buried into the back of her head.

“Time to come out of the sandpit, Diamant.” The gadgeteer placed a finger to her lips. “You’ve had much worse than a banged-up knee, this time.”

“We didn’t think you’d speak to Us again.”

“You ruined my lives. But, you’re not the first.” She shrugged her eyebrows. “Of course we should talk.”

It was mid-morning in the City of Refuge, and the rain had left the landed fleet refreshed and reinvigorated. The quilt of alloyed canopies were electric with the migration patterns of refugees. Some had settled. Others were still on them move. Further groups, still, had begun to dispute who was doing precisely what and at which time.

Traskey was convinced that some of the spacecraft had an agreement among themselves to shift and swap. A classic shell game, but with metric tonnes of engine power. Greed was a motivating factor. Some mercantile crews were better situated on the move.

Others, however, were more reasonably aligned with security. It wasn’t uncommon for criminals to proffer a fake—and mandatory—registration service. Little wonder anyone remained still. Traskey wouldn’t have tolerated a protection racket on the TARDIS, either.

As a matter of fact, she hadn’t. It was why she was on foot.

Now, they’d somehow—Cantu and herself—ended up jostled into a local distillery. The last place a Gallifreyan Quadrigger and a Vulpian sync-op hologram wanted to be. The approaching craft in orbit, however, left them no choice. The ale-sozzled Galyari schooner, late of the Clutch, was the only vantage point from where Traskey’s signal could penetrate Vulpia’s overcrowded skyline.

“*Shuvvit!*” burped a passerby.

Cantu began, “Beg pardon—”

The vulgar figure elbowed straight through Cantu's hologram.

"I wish people would stop doing that!"

"Pay no heed to the drudgewood." Traskey resisted the urge to cripple the lout's knees. "Space traffic control is turning into a brutal business."

"I'll bill him for littering the air, later," the hologram pouted.

Behind them, sloshed on the loading ramp, a game of Sontaran Brag was proceeding in earnest. It involved battlesuited warriors of varying cultures and dispositions belting one another across the face with increasingly vicious backhands. Somewhere along the line, betting was involved. Most participants had forgotten.

Traskey measured the distance in the skyline with her thumb.

"Erm, I would've thought that in a time-ship... precision was everything..." demurred Cantu.

"Precision *is* everything, Cantu," she answered. "A materialisation requires several things to happen in concert. Among them is an adjustment of the velocity regulator, an alignment of the navigational system and further compensation for relative gravitational harmonics. Otherwise, you'll find yourself—"

An explosion of noise. Mention of tadpoles caused one warrior to punch another from his seat.

"Well, exactly right." Traskey pressed the monocular to her eye. "Now, let me concentrate or we'll all be wearing our skeletons on the outside."

With an unrelated cheer, the game continued.

This situation was a mess, but Cantu couldn't help but feel an embarrassed sense of bemusement. The City of Refuge was comprised of a great many things. Order was not one of them. A typical reflection

of the Doctor herself, actually. So much had changed in so little time on his world. By necessity.

Not all were keeping up. Least of all the Vulpians themselves.

At first, special dispensation had been made to allow interplanetary shuttlecraft and similar space vessels to land not too far from the Dome. Some had landed with the delicate kiss of a feather. Others had slammed into the soil on defective retrorockets.

The former had set up a small shop to barter. Ever the opportunists. The latter were buried. With the aid of the Doctor, who, even now, offered personal condolences to the survivors.

Fire and fury were the products of a failed spacecraft landing. Cantu imagined a time vessel could provide something infinitely worse.

“Right.” Traskey waved in Cantu’s general direction. “Feed in the adjusted travelordinates now.”

The hologram scratched his neck. “Will you need me for this one?”

“Why?” The shayde flipped down the monocular. “Where else do you need to be?”

“There’s been another power cut at the Adamant Locus.”

Traskey forced out each word like a piano key. “Have we rats? Where this time?”

“From the Pakhar starjammer. Someone needs to be at the substation to show them how it works.”

“Go, go... I guess I’ll handle our latest arrival,” she assured him.

With regret, Cantu’s hologram winked out of existence. In its place, came the familiar wheezing and groaning of a Type 40 TT Capsule. A little younger, perhaps, in its timbre than the one Traskey was familiar with, but not by much. The warriors behind her frowned at the distillery’s works. Puzzled, annoyed and not terribly bright. They banged their drunken fists on the piping.

Traskey cleared her throat and adjusted her glasses. “You’d think this City runs on optimism.”

The shape rested in normal Space with a *whu-dbump*. It was another police box. Hopefully, one from this side of the continuum rather than the other.

She’d already begun her spiel before the doors opened. “Before you do anything else, you need to understand where you are. The planet is called Vulpia in the 41st-century—”

“Bang on time.” The face that emerged from within, all Northern teeth and striking ears, inhaled the City air. “That sweet scent of stale beer and desperation. You must be... You *can’t* be.”

Traskey couldn’t quite describe the expression on the man’s face. He looked heartsbroken.

“Traskeya?” Such a small voice. “Lady Traskeya?”

This would be a difficult conversation. “I’m not—” she cut herself off. “Is that a message pod?”

“Thirty minutes or your delivery is free,” he laughed, softly, only half-listening to himself. “You can’t be... I thought we all burned. Nothing left in all Creation, but... Ash.”

The Doctor reached out a tentative hand. Just to touch her shoulder. See if she was real. The shayde didn’t flinch. His fingers felt cold on her ferrofluidic matter. A fingernail tapped on the edge of a Hypercube on her skeleton. With a reluctant agony, but with grace, he pulled his hand back and placed it back on the message pod.

“That was a Hypercube, wasn’t it? I think this is intended for you.” He offered the *Odyseum*’s message pod. “Are you one of Diamant’s pen pals?”

“I’m Traskey,” her voice was slow. “Are you... the Doctor?”

“Yeah.” His eyes were distant. “Yeah, I am.”

“We’ve a long way to go to put that pod to use.” Traskey linked her arm with his and asked, gently, “Why not tell me about yourself? About this?”

The Doctor began to cry.

The Doctor swung the child from the stone-grey shoulders of her coat onto their own two feet. A small kick for each quarter-metre of air. Once down, the little one yawned, rubbing their face.

She was finishing up her story. “And the colours, little one, they were deeper and richer than anything I could imagine. It was the daisiest daisy I’d ever seen. And, as I turned back to run, I saw all those grey rocks again. Except, they weren’t grey after all. They were red, brown, purple and gold. Even that sludgy snow was shining. A shining brilliant white in the sunlight. Y’understand?”

She felt the child nod into the back of her neck.

“Still hurting?” asked the Doctor.

Another nod.

“Of course, you are. Still frightened, though?” she asked, again.

A shake of the head.

“Well, then...” The Doctor waved down her guardians on the level below. “Cut along, trouble. To the people who love you. You’ve one advantage to me. Your blackest day, you don’t have to do it alone. Help them to help you make it one of your best, if you can. Off you go.”

The child looked at her through a fiery-red fringe for a few moments. As though the Doctor was brand new. In moments, the thought crept up her back, energising her, and she was off like a rabbit. Down from the Bridge of Serendipity, built from its layers of thermal tiling, to home and hearth. Too tired for words or, the Doctor hoped, any further tears.

As the gadgeteer watched the reunion below, she felt Diamant join her at the handrail.

“Were you an orphan, Doctor?” they asked.

The Doctor looked at them.

“You said you were alone,” noted the fractal-form.

“Y’know me. Found in a somewhat large, leather-black handbag in the cloakroom of Victoria Station.” She fiddled with her ear-cuff. “How did the Hypercubes get to Gallifrey?”

“What was that?” Diamant’s face flickered with puzzlement.

“I’ve been thinking... Lady Traskeya died, her biodata readings was recorded in the message pod, but Traskey mentioned that she could *feel* what it was like to be so close to her true death. The final end of a Time Lord.”

“A fly in the ferrofluid?”

“You’re dodging, but see, I already know the answer.” The Doctor squared up to them. “It’d make you look so much better if you’d admit it, but you won’t, why?”

Diamant shrugged. Basillius joined them, a squire puffing up their champion.

“*You* sent the Hypercubes back,” the Doctor persisted. “That final telepathic pulse needed to put them safe on Gallifrey. Right under the nose of the People who wanted nothing to do with her. *You* were the one who made Traskey possible in the first place.”

“Did you...?” Diamant interrupted themselves. “Who among you decided to send the message pod to Us?”

“It was decision Traskey and I made together.” The Doctor plucked a blue-spined book from the shelf and flipped through its pages. “Lady Traskeya trusted you once, Traskey feels some kind of residual affinity in her memories.”

“It is unwarranted, Traskey hardly knows Us.”

“See,” she snapped the book shut. “Again. Modesty. It’s not like you at all.”

“We killed a friend and, in turn, paid our penance on Time’s rack. We’re not here for forgiveness.” The M-form picked up another book in green. “To coin a phrase from that fascinating nowhere, Earth, that ship has sailed.”

“The information you gave us was useful, you know.” The Doctor tried to catch their eye again. No luck. “Just in time for Pemberton. The face we discovered, at the end of everything, exhibits all the traits of a black hole. We wouldn’t have found that without you.”

“And neither We, without your dispatch of the pod. That We happened to be on the *Odysseum* at the time was pure luck.”

“Saved the Universe with less,” gesticulated the Doctor.

“Master.” Basillius’s eyelids slid back and forth like silk curtains. “Tell her of where the exotic matter came from. How you discovered it.”

“The material you’ve been using to clog up the time vents?” recalled the Doctor.

“It was discovered in the aftermath of the *Odysseum*’s destruction,” Diamant confirmed. “We found it had been supercharged by energies in the vortex. We thought maybe the time torpedoes from the attacking time-ship, but it could have been something else.”

“Another puzzle piece.” The Doctor folded her arms, tapping the book on her shoulder. “The cosmogonist in me wonders if that exotic matter hasn’t been affected by our Mutation, as well.”

“The *Odysseum* was pushed out of the vortex, beyond Time, in the wake of the attack.”

“That would give it a large enough window to end up in the same dimension as our Mutation.” She looked down at the book's cover. “Carl Sagan’s *Cosmos*. You’re a long way from home...”

“I am but a humble reptile, masters,” Basillius feigned. “What does it all mean?”

“Seagulls in oil spills,” said the Doctor.

“I’m none the wiser.”

Diamant patted them on the head. “Well, depending on the energies, Our reptilian friend, the exotic matter We used may be acting sympathetically with the Mutation.”

“That’s why your bandaging of the vents hasn’t been holding.” the Doctor ticked her face. “It’s all part of the same creature. Like attracts like. The matter’s been drawn away to a bigger material magnet.”

“That face,” added Diamant.

“Yeah. The face of the Mutation.” The Doctor sighed, scratching her back. “You know how I said there was nothing I could do to help you?”

“Partly.”

“I’ve a theory. It’s a really good theory, it could save all our lives.” The gadgeteer rapped her hands on the bookcase. “But we have to go and ask someone who was actually there during the attack.”

It was noontide in the City of Refuge, and if the rain hadn’t already abated, the steaming fury of the Doctor’s ninth self would have certainly finished it off.

The situation reminded him too much of being sat at a hospital bedside. Waiting for someone to wake up. He’d been there a few times himself. Only, his surroundings felt far more appropriate to some kind of garage sale. In the fumigation tent, the bed itself, on which Traskey

rested like a morgue drawer, had to be a panel from his successor's console. He'd seen more comfortable windscreens, though that didn't seem to bother the shayde much at all.

From within the message pod's dimensionally transcendental innards, cables as thick as his arm had been drawn from its complex excitonic circuitry. It was fed into the skeleton within Traskey's ferrofluid. He watched the cables bob and ripple like planks of wood in a tar-black creek.

This was obscene. A shayde was perpetuated by the mental will of its creators. For the one who had assisted the Doctor during the Melanicus Crisis, he had been an appendage of his people on Gallifrey. The servant of a secret sect within the Matrix. His mind, at first, was no more than a function of their intent.

Traskey, however, was perpetuated by the Hypercubes embedded in her skeletal core. It was like a camera watching its own output on a television screen. It created patterns. Input. In the case of the Doctor's successor, she had created an intelligence. He imagined she was quite proud.

He, however, was fuming. "There will be words... Incarnation to incarnation..."

"So you can speak," teased somnolent tones.

The voice came from First Rank Ntombizodwa of the Space Security Service.

The time-traveller caught himself. "Sorry."

"*Ehwab...*" The agent practically loomed over him in the fumigation tent. "I try to avoid intimidating our visitors. It upsets the tourist trade."

"I'll try for a little machismo, then." The Doctor held up two flat hands from his chair. "Martian karate. I knew the dakaro champion from last century. Rubbish sazou player. Tremendous flower arranger."

“No kidding,” laughed Ntombizodwa. “I might end up liking you.”

The Doctor smiled. “I knew a few of your colleagues in the Service. They did a lot of good where they could. I like to think their names made it to the Roll of Honour in Central City on Earth.”

“And so it goes. Ask not what the Solar System can do for you, but what you can do for the Solar System.” She slapped her knee. “I think that’s where the Doctor got this crazy notion. Her and Traskey in humble holdings. It’s like living in a clown’s pocket.”

The Doctor could hardly disagree. In the bric-a-brac, he could see TARDIS components, inert Cybermats, an extrapolator, a flux capacitor, a White Fox microwave, a small bank of transistors and what could have only been a Russian halberd to deter any unexpected visitors. He remembered his laboratory in UNIT HQ wasn’t even nearly this chaotic.

The Doctor crossed his legs, a finger on his temple. “Any clue why?”

“To show they wouldn’t be living any more comfortably than those already here.” Ntombizodwa shrugged. “It’s a fine notion, but makes for a most cluttered laboratory.”

“As long as it gives us a clear line of sight to the door.”

“If anything comes for Traskey,” she assured him, “they have to come through me.”

“I’ll hold you to that.”

“I don’t mess about, Trau.” She tapped her holster. “Believe me, I don’t.”

“And neither, it seems does Traskey.” The Doctor uncrossed his legs, leaned towards the entry flap with interest. There was movement outside. Ntombizodwa drew her sidearm with clockwork accuracy. “Who’s about?”

“Not quite right, but you’re getting warm,” answered a woman’s voice.

The agent relaxed. “Another one of yours, Doctor,” she called. “He says, ‘the Doctor,’ not ‘a doctor.’”

He rose from the chair. “I’ve a bone to pick with you, Doctor.”

“*Best you bring the right skeleton, Doctor.*” She pushed back the flap. “Snap.”

The data was old and uncooperative, but that was fine, so was Traskey.

Gallifreyan academics were well-acquainted with the caprices of a computerised microUniverse from dealing with the Matrix. To compensate, you just stepped back and assembled it into the best order for study. A cold evaluation of the facts yielded results. Do not get personally invested. Remain detached. The golden rule of Gallifreyan studies of the cosmos.

Something Traskeya had never been particularly good at maintaining.

Remain detached. Be cold. Do not get involved. It seemed easy—until she saw the bodies.

They hung in the nothing around her like velveteen dolls. Their eyes sealed as if at rest or dead, but their mouths were moving. Colloquies and table talk, passed between them with the efficiency of warp matrix transmissions. Traskey could recognise the subject of many of them. They were her own. Subconscious, conscious and supraconscious thought.

There was no roof to this datascape, but each figure in turn gave her the claustrophobia of the deepest Outler cave. She could feel herself, a flame, dancing reflections on their presence by her very movement through them.

The words weren’t made of vowels and consonants, but smells and sensations. One of the thoughts—a memory—scented of crushed

House Arakmapes topsy-turvy cake, holly-green deeptime crystals, and machonite sticks from the smelters on Pazithi Gallifreya. From an earlier incarnation of Lady Traskeya, one where she'd arrived for Otherstide. A door slammed in her face. Double-locked doors clicked. Splinters stung at hands resting on the House's cold front steps. The bone-aching unwelcome.

That was the beginning... One of many such small moments that snowballed into her little rebellions, but where was her end? Where did that burst of decay come from? Diamant said, through the Doctor at her bedside, that she had all she needed to find it. Where was?

Bump—bump—bump, went the nearest figure.

Traskey froze.

Bump—bump—bump, it said, again.

She looked up at it. Terrified.

It was as though her face had been blown apart in a vacuum chamber. Although, mercifully, she could only see the silver-contoured outlines of its shadow. That final catalyst before regeneration sculptured the mind and body into a Time Lord's next incarnation.

Frozen at the moment of death, the memory of Lady Traskeya's last living incarnation.

Bump—bump—bump.

It was teatime in the City of Refuge, and a fist slammed against the bedside. If Traskey was aware of it, her body didn't show it.

"It's a disgusting abuse of power," fumed the younger dark-haired Doctor. "Immoral! Unethical! Bordering on the insane—!"

"Oh, tell me how we really feel!" challenged the blonde elder.

The two iterations of the same Time Lord turned away from each other in disgust. Each realised, at roughly the same moment, that their argument hadn't dissuaded their audience. It was awfully crowded in here now. Diamant, Basillius, Ntombizodwa, Cantu, and who knew however many other pieces of technological shrapnel.

"I didn't have a choice," she said it as much to the others as to her counterpart. "You understand? I didn't. When the waveform collapses and the time track resets, everyone after our sixth incarnation is gone. That includes me. That includes you."

"And look how you've spent your minor miracle! A zombie lash-up." The younger Doctor tapped the bed. "Where did you find the Hypercubes for her to begin with? Body snatchers?"

"I can't tell you that." The older Doctor grit her teeth, spinning back to him. "You know I can't. Too much knowledge of our own future could be disastrous. Even now. And this *lash-up*, as you call her, is my *friend*—"

"We're so desperate for company that we're chatting with *corpses*—?"

"*You* do not get to lecture *me* about *my* choices—"

"Sorry, haven't I seen enough? Not suffered enough? You must be this damaged to ride? You know what I've just come out of—"

"I'm *you!*" she echoed.

"Then, *why* would you—?"

"Sometimes there's only one life left at the peak of the mountain. Sometimes that person has to be me—"

He scowled. "Don't pretend that you're the first of us to carry the weight of the Universe on our shoulders—!"

"I didn't want to bring her back." The elder Doctor marched up to him. "I had run out of options. *I*, though, can't undo what I've done—"

“Everything has its time and everything—” He couldn’t look at Traskey’s face, “Everything goes...”

“Traskeya is dead, yeah, but Traskey is *alive*.” Her eyes flicked to her friend. “Everything else is in flux. Our past, our present... Who even knows about our future. Traskey is here, though. *Here*. Right now. Our best chance. And she’s not going anywhere.”

The younger Doctor’s face clouded like a thunderstorm. “You didn’t give her a choice to *be* here in the first place!”

“But, *she* gets to choose how she lives *her* life! And you, *Doctor*,” the gadgeteer spat, “do not have the monopoly on tragedy—!”

The argument devolved like a squabble between siblings. Every petty consideration, twisting the knife on each snap of vicious mockery. The most articulate were “—*you morally bankrupt, Blue Peter—!*” and the reply, “—*big-eared, pigheaded ignorant, who—!*”

“They’re going to kill each other...” murmured Ntombizodwa.

Diamant turned to Cantu, inaudible below the din.

Any further retorts were drowned beneath a rippling wave of audio feedback. The Doctors clasped their hands to their ears, wincing. Diamant and Ntombizodwa were already prepared. Basillius, caught by surprise, slashed his tail with enough force to down several Jenga-like towers of electronics.

Diamant asked, “What do We owe you? A piece of sugar?”

“Just don’t ask me to do that again.” Cantu fizzled as he closed his mouth. “It risks damaging the projectors in this part of the Dome.”

“Without interruption this conversation was going nowhere.”

Basillius’s legs clicked on the floor. “We have considerable experience...”

“Don’t We just?” Diamant fluffed a geometric pattern at the back of their head. “Not that this isn’t entertaining, Doctors, but We have larger priorities than who knows what it means to be a god.”

Both incarnations looked as though they were going to retort. The sudden burst of unity deflated their respective bouts of anger. The elder Doctor crossed back to Traskey’s bed. The shayde was still deep in the datascape. Unaware.

Ntombizodwa crossed to the fuming, younger Doctor. “She’s done a lot for us. You can trust her.”

“Can I?” he glowered.

“We do,” answered Cantu, plainly. He sighed to himself. “I have to be off again.”

“Where to this time, Cantu?” The older Doctor scratched her eyebrow.

“Back to the Admant Locus, yet another power cut.”

“Go,” she nodded.

With that, the hologram departed once more.

She growled to herself. “I’m starting to think it’s deliberate, too many coincidences...”

“Hold on a tic, the Adamant Locus?” interrupted the younger Doctor. “That thingumajig we put together for—?”

“One of Our Labours, yes,” Diamant nodded. “We used it to try and stabilise the pattern of history. Freeze it in place and apply the exotic matter to as many time vents as We could reach.”

“Like a salve,” he understood.

“Before the time vortex could degenerate further.” Diamant folded their arms. “We did not succeed.”

“That’s why Diamant’s here.” The Doctor looked up from the bed. “To help.”

The younger Doctor exhaled, resting his arms against a table of bric-a-brac. So... Not alone, after all. Diamant had done their fair share of the heavy lifting. He’d misjudged his later self. At least, in part.

“Turns out, the Adamant Locus makes for quite the beacon,” said Diamant.

“An easy to follow route across Time and Space to anyone who could make it.” The older Doctor wagged her finger like a signalling buoy in the sea. “And easily detectable by TARDIS once relayed through her transmitter.”

“I was wondering about that.” The younger Doctor wrinkled his features. “All this chaos, the messages you’ve been sending out from Vulpia, and not a sausage to be seen... More than a little unusual.”

“Come one, come all,” she shrugged. “Our other incarnations, they’re about.”

“Sure. But where? Where are they?”

Ntombizodwa was about to speak before she remembered Diamant. The fractal-form raised what could’ve been their eyebrows. The words sat idle in the palette of the agent’s mouth.

“It’s alright, Ntombizodwa,” consented the older Doctor. “Diamant and I have an arrangement now. No secrets. There’s nowhere left to hide them.”

Ntombizodwa continued, “They’re down with the Adamant Locus at the dig-site. Hundreds of them.”

“Hundreds? From across our Universe?”

“A few others, too,” corrected the elder. “So few, now. Too few.”

“Ana did say the possibilities were fading,” recounted the younger.

“They’ve been organising something, but—*Ehwwab*—it’s beyond me. Even with my astrophysics training.” The agent tapped the younger Doctor on the shoulder. “I can take you to them, if...?”

“Go on.” The elder Doctor waved them off. “He’ll need to know eventually anyhow. I’ll keep watch on Trasky here. When she comes ‘round, she might have our answers.”

“Finally...” breathed Diamant.

“Finally,” the Doctor echoed.

“Right.” Ntombizodwa unbuttoned her holster, already on the move. “Stay close, Doctor, and do not make eye contact with anyone I don’t acknowledge first, alright?”

“Incognito, that’s me,” he agreed.

“And if they ask for his autograph?” prodded Diamant.

“I’ll tell ‘em I’ve given them up. Healthy notepad, healthy life.” He pulled his black-leather coat tight across his shoulders and made to follow the agent from the tent. At the flap, he hesitated—something cold and harsh rippled across his cheekbones—he turned back to his older self.

“I’ll find another way, figure something else out,” he said. “Not this.”

She gestured at herself, sighing. “No, I won’t, and you know that.”

“Do I?”

“Who are you talking to, eh?” She straightened her back. “But, you’re right. There should’ve been another choice in the end.”

With that, he stormed into the City outside. She could feel the radiating anger peel away with him. Furious because, in the end... She was right. Would be right. It was inevitable. The Doctor wouldn’t act against their own nature. Her actions were proof enough of that. In the end, he would agree with her, because she *was* him. His future.

Time travel. It made a mockery of notions like fate and destiny. It was what made those precious moments of free will all the more remarkable. Somewhere, between the beats of Time, were the decisions that changed the face of history.

Basillius watched the younger Doctor and Ntombizodwa leave with a benign sort of interest. His master, however, hadn't stopped studying the remaining Doctor. She caught their expression.

"If I'm honest..." she strained.

"About yourself?" asked Diamant.

She clicked her teeth. "I shouldn't have trivialised him... Trauma isn't a snap of the fingers and everything's all smiles. He's in the thick of it. Will be for some time. Not even a regeneration or two will make it better."

"What will?"

"Turning that energy into something else? Studying the mysteries of the hearts?" She tapped each side of her chest. "What makes 'em tick? My solution was something I remembered from my granddaughter. 'Travel hopefully,' she said. Best surprise was myself."

Diamant's eyes glittered. "It must be strange to see your earlier self like that."

"We've not cheated history yet from his perspective. It's only now, this life, that I've been caught with my hand in the till. It'll be a while yet, his future." The Doctor made a satisfied noise. "By the way..."

"Yes?"

"Linear Time, cause and effect, you're catching on. Picking up on it."

"A lot has happened since China, Skaro, both Peladons, and elsewhere... This is no stranger a situation to Us than to you," admitted Diamant, warily. "Circumstances, however, seem to have played into your hand."

“Hardly. I just happen to be playing a different game. Mahjong instead of chess, I think.” She checked on Trasky’s bed. “This attacker of yours...”

“Do you think that it was the same people who attacked the *Odysseum*?”

“That was the question I was going to ask.” The Doctor smirked. “Looks like our correspondence back and forth is paying off. Who’d have thought it?”

“I will watch the door, master,” Basillius slunk away.

“Do you think we will find a solution, Doctor?” Diamant stood beside the gadgeteer. “Us against the face of this Mutation?”

“If not us, Diamant...” She tapped the frighteningly-powerful fractal entity on their nose. “Who, eh?”

“In any case, I shouldn’t have trivialised,” the Doctor shook his head. “Who knows what she’s been through since my day...”

As the Doctor and Ntombizodwa stepped into the dig-site, the former was struck with an incredible sense of... *presence*. That was the only way to describe it.

“Feels like...” he murmured. “It *feels* like the way someone *looks* when they’re thinking—”

Ntombizodwa held her hand on his shoulder. “We should keep moving.”

The power on Vulpia should never have run out.

Around the Adamant Locus, there was every possible solution to an energy crisis that the Doctor could conceive. It was easier to note the generators he passed, rather than the ones he recognised. As he entered the dig-site, he passed the reticulated pulses of a defeated-looking Pakhar starjammer, its crew frantic around their makeshift substation.

The power on Vulpia should never have run out. But the people to ask about such an impossibility were otherwise preoccupied.

To get past the checkpoint established by the Space Security Service, Ntombizodwa had to deliver several stanzas of code-phrases, but that was just as well. She was the one who had been so insistent about it.

For the Doctor could see, his other selves were so vulnerable in their current condition. Those outside their time-ships remained so for what he could only speculate was better telepathic reception. Their various accoutrements scattered the front doors of their TARDISEs. Walking sticks, flywheels, recorders, wine glasses, UNIT passes, ‘Vote Doctor!’ buttons, jelly-babies, cricket bats, toothbrushes, cardigans, spotted cravats and so much more otherwise.

Just things. Personal effects of a dying Time Lord.

The Doctor wondered what the story was behind each. Had he lived all of them? Some of them? What had the War taken from him?

What would this Mutation take from them now?

“We ask that they don’t wander from their TARDISEs.”

Ntombizodwa caught him staring. “But they insist on each doing this in their own way.”

The Doctor rested his hand on the slant of a nearby pyramid. The inner telepathic field emanating from its shell was like a sugar rush. Quite different to the other layer. All around him, arcing from Ship to Ship, was this breathtaking sense of determination. TARDISEs and Doctors all in communion with one another. Planning, redirecting, instigating, correcting...

He felt his skin break out in gooseflesh. “Oh, that’s different...”

“Yes, that was our Doctor’s idea.” Ntombizodwa gestured, vaguely. “The more sophisticated the system, the more vulnerable it is to basic attack, so... Keep it simple. Two layers to the field. Inner and outer.”

“On the inside, it’s used for information,” he said. “On the outside...”

“Well, bullets can be deflected. Bombs can be transmatted away. But someone, somewhere eventually has to put boots on the ground.”

“Clever.” The Doctor hummed. “A basic field of fright.”

“An external fright-field, I like it,” approved Ntombizodwa.

“No one’s harmed permanently and anyone unaware of what’s down here will only go away with ghost stories. While on the inside...” He moved his hand to a nearby cylinder. He could feel the same burning purpose. “They can get on with what’s important.”

“Working this all out, yes. We’ve been patching out any hiccups.” Ntombizodwa flicked the flecks at the corner of her mouth. “Trying to give them everything they need. It’s incredible, right?”

“Amazing...” The Doctor wondered at the omnium-gatherum of transtemporal lives. “You can feel it in the inner telepathic field. Everyone here *wants* to be here. Despite what could be lost. The last precious moments of our existences and we’re spending it trying to outrun death. Save just one more world.”

“How they plan to do that is a bit beyond me, at the moment. They’re preparing...” The agent struggled to recall the specifics. “They described it as a Faraday cage around the planet. Using their collective TARDIS forcefields to protect Vulpia from the rush of exotic matter that will come with the Mutation.”

“Who came up with it?”

She shrugged. “It was a sort of... Telepathic mutual epiphany.”

“Why isn’t Blondie down here, herself?”

“She wants to be. There’s too much to do in the real world, though, to be down here with the monks.” Ntombizodwa strained her neck. “I

remember them, a group somewhere over there, I think, talking about block transfer computation.”

His mind was turning. “Pure mathematics to rearrange the structure of matter into other shapes.”

“That was the bit I didn’t understand.” The agent scratched her hair. “Rearrange the exotic matter?”

“Too frenetic. Too finicky.” The Doctor shook his head. “No, it’s got to be rearranging matter for that Faraday shield around the planet.”

“That’s... part of it...”

The Doctor turned his head towards her. “Nowhere left for secrets, Ntombizodwa, remember?”

The agent sighed. “I knew I’d like you. You’re sharp, like she is—” she waved, “—I mean, they are.”

The time-traveller was still trying to take the vista in. A cloister of monks wasn’t an inappropriate analogy, but this was far beyond anything attempted on, say, Logopolis. There, all the mathematicians had been trained from youth. Their lives formed one of the Universe’s touchstones. One of the many small safeguards that his People had kept around for their own convenience—and the inconvenience of any species who wanted to challenge their power.

This was just him. Him in a variety of guises. Jurassic, autocratic, cunning and half-crazed. There was enormous determination here, yes, fiercely so, but would it be enough?

“Has that telepathic barrier kept everyone else out?” he asked.

“Few stragglers, but nothing the Service can’t handle.”

“These computations, all this thought... Is it collected somewhere?”

Ntombizodwa had to close her eyes to point. It seemed the only way to find what she was looking at was to lose all interest in finding it. The

Doctor tilted his head up. Thought about trains and what the London commute must be at this point in Time and Space.

He caught what Ntombizodwa was pointing to out of the corner of his eye.

It glowed like a Guy Fawkes Night sparkler.

Up above everything.

“What was that?” he murmured, dangerously.

Ntombizodwa looked at him, her eyes like camera lenses. “They’re calling it Sparkie.”

It was eventide in the City of Refuge, and the datascape was filled with horror. Abject and uncompromising horror.

As Traskeya splintered, the inconvenient magic, this exotic matter—one and the same—intermingled with her biodata. It was born of the Old Times. Before Rassilon anchored the thread of Time with the Eye of Harmony. It was a hidden jewel. A diamond in the dimensional rough.

Bump.

The gilded light of regeneration touched the exotic matter only for a moment.

Bump.

It turned red with anger.

Bump.

Choking red. Ash-red. Death.

The energies, unbound by just a touch of Reason, went mad. Like dimensional anaphylaxis. An allergic reaction to Rassilonian science and logic.

Traskeya died. The final death and the end for a Time Lord.

But her body, twisted and spun across the time vortex, was borne away. On an ivory-coloured sea turtle with an aquamarine shell. Its pink bubble Universe, perhaps one of the youngest in all of Creation. A runt, no longer. Now, a beauteous macrocosm of triumphant possibilities.

The vortex turtles were free. They bore homage to her sacrifice. She was remembered.

The turtles swam for their long, long lives. Into the eye of the time spiral.

But the divisive hunters followed.

Their hunt had been documented in exacting detail on the Hypercubes. Those small cubes of light and life. Like distant lanterns in a rowboat in a storm. Battered, but unbowed from the storm of the temporal vortex.

They'd functioned beautifully. Courtesy of the symbiotic link between Lady Traskeya and the *Odysseum's* master computers. A distant thought, buried somewhere between the nights of the Academy and SETI, wormed its way to her consciousness.

The Celestial Intervention Agency were rumoured at one point to use similar mnemonic apparatus on their agents. A form of remote viewing. Something beyond Traskeya's purview at the time. She wished she'd listened. Paid more attention to the skulk of the Capitol's shadows. If she had, she might have foreseen what was going to happen to...

Get a hold of yourself, Traskey.

The shayde steadied herself. She was right. This wasn't what she was here for. Not to wallow, but to find answers. The Doctor, nay, the whole Universe was at stake. Too much to become ensconced in this garden of thorns. Minutes or hours, she needed to know what happened next. After she—after *Traskeya* died.

Concentrate on one thing... one thing...

The information was all here within her. She just had to...

She felt a spark on the edge of her mind. Distant. Like a reminder that one had forgotten something important before leaving the TARDIS.

Was everything here?

Diamant had sent the message pod back with a purpose. To link the Doctor and her with knowledge they hadn't possessed before they'd first sent it to the *Odysseum*. What could the wreck see that she herself hadn't?

Each Hypercube had been pulled from the ashes of Gallifrey. The Doctor had taken extraordinary care to ensure all thirteen were brought back to her TARDIS. Locked in a toy-chest until such a time that she could face them properly. Apart, they were but snatches of memory. The simmering warmth of a brush from Teatemptest's silver leaves. The dignified cobbles of Prydos's ancient streets beneath her—beneath *Traskeya's* feet.

Thirteen...

How many lifetimes was that? How many regenerations? She wasn't quite sure any more. It was strange. The longer one stayed on Gallifrey, the more it seemed to sap the very energy from one's old bones. As though she were part of some audacious grandfather clock. A cog in its many wheeling mechanisms.

Thirteen...

She wondered what would've happened if Gallifrey hadn't warred with its challengers. If the planet had been left to its own devices. Would the old fables have come true? Would the Homeworld of the Time Lord simply wound down? Sputtered and stopped like a music-box ballerina?

They would never know now.

Thirteen...?

Why did she feel there was one more? A Hypercube distinct from the others. Was it here on Vulpia? In the message pod?

No... It was somewhere out in the vortex, still. Caught on the ragged edge of a time vent. She could feel it through the telepathic circuitry. A sightless link that could transcend Space and Time through the technology of her People.

There was great power in becoming one of the elite. The Time Lord aristocracy. Even greater power still—though no one would acknowledge it—in a Quadrigger. It was they who soothed the TT Capsules in their cradles when time storms fluttered on the transduction barriers. They who fashioned the symbiotic nuclei. They who saw these magnificent Ships take flight to the vortex for the first time. Who wouldn't wish for that?

But in the vortex, their body was just as frangible as any other.

The energies of each eddy and spiral could turn Traskey inside out like a glove.

What little remained of... By Rassilon, she could feel her *body*. Just the body. Not a shred of consciousness left. It was still connected to the Hypercube tesseract. Caught around her shoulders like a damp, ragged cloak.

There was one. One Hypercube, still active in the vortex.

She reached to it. Past, present, future—the tenses became irrelevant.

It had been following her body as the *Odysseum* was breaking up.

Diamant was present as they claimed. Their Mandelbrot transfusion into the vortex was heralded by what sounded like a cry of horror. Not as any animal would make, but something beyond any conception of grief. They sent the Hypercubes along, one by one. Each shot to their

dematerialisation point. Like the strike of matches against a coffin. They left contrails in the vortex, they were travelling at such temporal velocities.

All except one. That one remained. Unseen by Diamant, until their correspondence later.

It saw the vortex turtles. Their mad dash into their natural domain. From the reach of these divisive hunters who had butchered the bio-tagging scientists. These were dangerous creatures. Worse, something in the turtles' ancestral memory warned of their presence. Filled their minds with maddening phantoms and screaming silhouettes.

The vortex turtles had no leaders, but there was one among them—once decried as 'the runt of the litter' by a noted Time Lord renegade—took it upon themselves to act.

They would lead the killers away. Allow their bale of siblings to dive deeper into Time. Below the chronometric pressures that would allow even a TARDIS to fly. It goaded the time-ship by fin and beak. Aggravated it with the promise of the Universe on its back.

The warped artron energy of the regeneration coated it in a film of reddening rust.

It was mad, desperate, but it would save its brethren.

The chase took it past the Hypercube, past all relative dimensions, into the void beyond the vortex. Through the open wound. In nothingness, perhaps the turtle would stand a chance. It would not perish before its task was done. Whatever the rust claimed, it would not—

The divisive hunters did not follow it.

The Hypercube could see the young vortex turtle had been too daring. Too cunning. The ship's crew had scented a trap and held back. Too late, the turtle realised they were alone. The killers turned, ready in

their pursuit of the bale. The turtle knew they would hunt them down. One by one by one. Until they were all dead.

The rust-haloed runt tried to return. Swim back into the vortex. It could see its siblings call out to it, but they were too far away now. The bale of vortex turtles vanished around the time spiral. Caught on an eddy.

The time-ship was so close, however... Too close...

The vortex turtle swam harder. Faster. The bubble Universe on its back vibrated with exertion. The Mutation gathered in its scales and in its hearts. Its body twisted with elastic promise, danced with the fire of a determination to seek its kind.

Time would not hold it.

Space could not contain it.

If it had to breach the vortex and enter the domain of the killers themselves, it would.

It would find its bale. It would stop their deaths. All it had to do was swim harder.

Traskey opened her eyes on the bed in the tent. Diamant stood at one side, almost mythic in all their fractal glory. The reptile, Basillius Creel, studied her with the sway of a viper. The Doctor was squeezing her hand, her breath caught, quick, in her chest.

“Are you alright?” she asked.

The shayde stared through her, mute, for a few moments.

“I saw it,” she eventually said.

“Was I right?”

Traskey felt her head sway from side-to-side. Unsteady from the datascape. She held to the Doctor for dear life and nodded. Very slowly. Very deliberately. There was no confusion. No debate.

“Well?” Diamant unfolded their arms.

“I’ve suspected for some time, but we had to be sure.” The Doctor let go, reluctantly. “I had to be sure.”

“You were right.” Traskey could say it once. Again, and it would become a mantra.

The M-form lowered their head. “Doctor...?”

“This Mutation, this face at the end of everything.” The Doctor stood alone in the tent. “It’s a vortex turtle.”

Diamant’s fractals, that shimmering multicoloured pattern, resolved into a tincture that didn’t exist in the Doctor’s Universe. A colour beyond colour.

“Come, Basillius...” They beckoned the reptile towards them.

The Doctor wasn’t listening. “All the way from the foundational nights of the Time Lords, Traskey. The Mutation is...” She struggled to describe its implications. “It is history and beauty and terror, beyond anything even I’ve encountered.”

Traskey sat up. “It’s the last of its kind, the only one left...”

“And it’s coming to swallow the Universe.” The Doctor’s eyes burned with terrible finality.

THE FACE OF THE MUTATION: PART 6
DIAMANTVISION



By AFJ Kernow

“Come, Basillius, We need a break. It’s time to see how Our little pet project is doing.”

Bewildered, Basillius shuffled back into the parachronistic upper gallery of the *Odysseum*. Just after they’d originally left, actually.

He looked like like a frog returned to his lily pad.

Travel within Diamant’s fractal-form was always disconcerting to him. An evaporation of self—into a nowhere without thought or sensation, but consciousness all the same—until, eventually, he rained back down into solid reality.

He clicked his teeth. “But, on Vulpia... The vortex turtle... Weren’t we going to—?”

“You remember the television comedy I showed you?” asked Diamant.

“*Luv That Doctor?* Yes, the confusion on their mammalian faces was very amusing, master.” A low grumble emanated from Basillius’s chest. “But—on Vulpia—what we just learnt—”

“Well, here is an opportunity for even more sport.” Diamant hoped that it felt like a doting gesture. In truth, they needed to let this new information about the Mutation sink in. “It is... unfortunate... that the Doctor, the Valeyard and Miss Bush are now trapped in *Diamant’s Folly*. However, We thought you might enjoy this little bit of live theatre We’ve created.”

Basillius was clearly at a loss. It wasn’t unusual for him to be subject to his master’s whims, but at such a crucial juncture... Yes, the poor thing didn’t know what to think. Nevertheless, ever loyal, the reptile lumbered off to select a revolting snack to munch.

The truth was... Diamant only intended a short incarceration for their playthings. Like a child catching crabs, the idea was to observe and laugh at their eccentricities, before releasing them.

They remembered the awful moment, the creeping realisation, that the ephemerals were permanently imprisoned. The fractal intelligence considered knowledge of this inconvenient truth detrimental to the well-being of his reluctant guests. Who, in sheer fury at their plight, might smash up the beautiful Georgian interiors. Diamant took great pride in their work. Energy had been expended and research, too, in the creation of *Diamant's Folly*.

Perhaps, if the three knew the truth, they would continue to engage in their pointless escape attempts. Each inevitable failure, Diamant knew, would cause a deleterious effect on morale. Or in the very worst scenario of all, the trio could be driven mad with despair at the hopelessness of their situation. The human, Melanie, had shown signs of it in the early days of the House.

Basillius returned with a whole turkey carcass, slumped down on the floor and started munching happily. His earlier query, forgotten.

“Do these people *know* they're stuck in a cage?” spluttered the Creel through a mouthful of feathers.

“Not now, no. We are merciful, Basillius, and have submerged their true personalities beneath fictional personas.” The shimmering cascade of their fractal-form adjusted the viewer so there were views of each area of the house. Diamant began their introductory spiel...

“And now on DiamantVision, we present our historical drama, Scorn and Suspicion. A disparate trio, two Time Lords and a human, live out their lives in a Georgian mansion, called Diamant's Folly.

A mysterious host, Liege Diamant, sets the guests tricky tasks and games to win treats. Why are two of the guests such rivals? What are the strange inconsistencies that each visitor has noticed?

Will they rise above their scornful attitudes and suspicious minds? Can they succeed in uncovering the inconvenient truth hidden from their view?

*Or are they doomed to repeat the same petty squabbles every single day.
Let's join Doctor John Watson, Miss Melanie Bennet and Mister Javert,
and find out..."*

[FAST FORWARD...] ►►

“The red-haired female seems the most affected by her incarceration,” observed Basillius, his initial hunger sated.

“That is why We send her little treats, puzzles to keep her mind active. A distraction from the drudgery of cooking, washing up and the quarrelsome Time Lords.”

“Why this obsession with the Doctor?” asked Creel before chomping on a chewy turkey foot.

“Why not?” Diamant rebutted the enquiry tersely.

“It’s a fair question, my master. After all, the Doctor’s very existence is corrupted by your intervention in their affairs.”

“Perhaps Our beneficence is causing our servant to speak out of turn,” Diamant’s voice was clipped and brittle.

“I mean no disrespect, your Magnificence—”

“Don’t be obsequious, Creel it doesn’t really suit you. Through my viewer, We have seen civilisations, rise and fall. The drama of the Multiverse as whole solar systems are consumed by supermassive black holes. The whirling dance of planets orbiting their stars. Space battles, Time Wars, the Higher Powers vying for control over the ephemerals. Oh yes, Basillius, We’ve literally seen it all!”

“And yet you’ve still not answered my question.”

“Perhaps, you’re not asking the right one.”

The pair returned to viewing events in the house, an awkward silence

between them. A giant crystal cat was prowling the grounds. It saw the young human sitting forlornly on the bench and bounced over.

“What is that thing? Did *you* bring it to the Folly?” asked Creel, with a rasping chuckle.

“Not this one, We sent the original away. It would have eaten my guests. No, this crystalline feline is an interloper. Quite extraordinary.” Confusion, then alarm, briefly darkened their features. “No time to explain, she needs something to distract her from her woes.”

[FAST FORWARD...] ►►

As the woman, Melanie Bush, walked off into the garden to begin her latest task, Basillius Creel studied his master.

He was used to a certain degree of terseness and vagary from his sponsor, but today, especially, seemed rather egregious. They still hadn’t explained what had happened on Vulpia with the Doctor. This dark cloud, although relieved somewhat after the duel with Apollo, still clung over them whenever the Time Lord was mentioned.

A dubious tongue licked at an eye. “You were about to tell me, master—”

“All right, you tiresome reptilian...” rumbled the fractal-form. “We were bored.”

“Bored?” He clicked his teeth. “You have all of Time and Space to watch, surely, you could never fail to find something to entertain you?”

Something occurred to Diamant. “You’ve been watching the screens in Our absence, haven’t you?”

“Of course, that’s how I found the Sheriff—”

“More than that.” Their face broke into what might have been a grin. “You’ve been studying the Doctor yourself, haven’t you?”

“I...” Basillius shuffled, nervously. “I wanted to understand your fascination. Why, out of all in the cosmos, you chose them.”

“There’s an infinity of content, but nothing worth watching. We are a creative being, Basillius, a doer not a spectator. The Doctor is quite similar, in their way. They possessed the courage of spirit to leave a world that was fundamentally crushing them. Twisting them into what they hated. They escaped.”

“As you escaped?”

“What would We have to escape from?” Diamant’s gaze grew distant.

Basilius considered it a fair question. “What did you do before creating laborious tasks for the Doctor?”

“Amundsen is being taken off the *Tsunami*...” they muttered. “That will need to be addressed...”

Basillius seethed a noise that sounded like the Creel equivalent of *‘Begging your pardon...?’*

Diamant continued as if they hadn’t spoken. “You never met Frobisher, did you?”

“No, master.” Basillius was at a loss.

“We aren’t a shape-shifter, like the whifferdills, we exist on a plane of existence that... Well, We move... Like a three-dimensional shape, through two-dimensional space. An octahedron through a triangle. We speak among the Higher Powers as sapient species do with one another among the animals who do not.”

“As you do... with me?”

The fractal-form smiled, again. “You are different, Basillius. We find you... Amusing.”

“You haven’t answered my question.”

“No, We haven’t, have we? Well, suffice to say... We took great

delight in maverick interventions. Those Higher Powers... If you've been watching, you'd know them by all manner of names. The Toymaker, Fenric, the Eternals and the rest of them... They thought themselves superior to Us. We could have been of great benefit to their schemes. We could have even helped them deal with that 'indefatigable irritant', the Doctor."

"So why didn't you?"

Diamant's response was like a ripple across a lake. "Why do *you* stay with Us, Basillius?"

The Creel blinked. "I'm sorry?"

"Why stay? Why not ask Us to take you to Florana, Wiard or Paradis? It's well within Our power to do so."

Basillius swayed on his legs. "Who else would have me?"

"You have your answer, then," nodded Diamant. "Wait a minute, Melanie has finished her task. George!" Diamant's voice reached the silver faced automaton currently dusting the paintings. "*Leave your current task and go to the human female in the centre of the garden maze.*"

[FAST FORWARD...] ►►

"She mocked you, master. She was insincere in her thanks," complained the reptile.

"Miss Bush needs careful handling, like a delicate bloom. Although, for a human, she has proved to be made of stronger mettle than We expected."

"Please continue your tale, master."

"There's not much more to tell, my thrall. The fools rejected me, so I created my viewer. A myriad of quasicrystals each one a thirteen-sided aperiodic monotile. The humans call the tile shape, the einstein,

although it reminds me of a... A hat? Or is it a turtle? Or even a spectre? The tile never repeats a pattern, no matter how long the formation.”

“I understand how such a device would enable you to observe the activities of these Higher Powers, but how does this screen enable your vengeance?”

“Vengeance? Destruction of my enemies, simply doesn’t interest me, Basillius. Creative mischief is my *raison d’être*. Once my viewer recorded any dubious schemes, I could go back and choose the exact moment to intervene and disrupt it. The results were usually spectacular, although they all hated my mischievous interference.”

“And now they’ve fled and not told you why.” murmured Basillius.

Diamant gestured a fractal hand at the screen, “What are those two reprobates up to now?”

They increased the size of the screen showing the two men in the library. The flamboyant scientist and the sombre lawyer were deep in discussion.

“Even with their real personalities overwritten, these two are a nuisance,” Diamant complained to their familiar.

The two Time Lords trapped in their fictional personas had agreed to form an alliance to uncover an escape route from the house.

“You cannot suppress curiosity forever.” Basillius coughed up a revolting mucus-covered pellet containing bone and feathers. “These Time Lords are devious creatures. They seem unwilling to abandon their quest for truth.”

“Then we must find a novel task to keep them busy.”

[FAST FORWARD...] ►►

“That’s why you were bored,” Creel realised. “With the Higher Powers fleeing the mysterious threat. You had no one to annoy and taunt with your clever tricks.”

“There are only so many sitcoms. It was then I noticed an individual flitting through Time and Space in a blue police box. A butterfly who, when they fluttered their wings or stamped their foot, whole empires collapsed. We’d heard tale of them before, naturally, from the other Powers they kept besting—”

Basillius was only half-listening to his master’s rambling. He had been tracking the human female’s progress from the kitchen. She had a tray of delicious... A gurgle from his ravenous stomach told him to go and fetch another meal. A wild boar should settle his hunger pangs for the next few days.

Diamant watched the servant click-clack away in that strange tripod gait of his. They listened carefully to the conversation between the Doctor and Melanie and made a decision. Diamant spoke and their words echoed throughout the house.

“All guests please attend the dining room, thank you.”

[FAST FORWARD...] ►►

Basillius returned hauling a skinned boar carcass behind him. He hated the bristly skin of wild boar, the hairs got stuck in his teeth. He settled down to demolish his latest snack.

“What’s happening?” he asked, licking boar’s blood from his mouth with his long tongue.

“The inmates are getting restless,” Diamant whispered.

The lawyer’s indignant voice boomed into the gallery, “*Why must I cook? I am a man of the law and my colleague, a doctor. It is quite simply beneath*

us.”

[FAST FORWARD...] ►►

“That was close, aren’t you impressed by Our improvisational skill, Basillius?”

“Makes me glad I am a civilised life form, master.” Basillius picked his pointed teeth with a turkey bone. “I never have to worry about cooking or washing up, so unnecessary.”

“Well, We must ensure that the members of this household are kept active. They must not be permitted to think things through.”

“I can see why you wish to keep the pretence going. These specimens are amusing and contrary. So unpredictable, too, I never know what they will do next.”

“I have further recordings of past episodes if you’re interested, Basillius. There’s a box set available on your entertainment console.”

Melanie appeared on the screen monitoring the ballroom. She walked back across the room, a pile of sheet music in her hands. She deposited one piece on the piano’s music stand in front of George, the Georgian automaton. She fetched a silver flute from the instrument cupboards.

“*Liege Diamant?*” Her earnest face tilted towards the speaking tubes near the ceiling. “*Would you permit George to accompany me?*”

“Of course, Miss Bennet, I appreciate your music-making. It is a comfort to me in my infirmity.”

Diamant turned off the speaker tube and let out an almighty roar of laughter. The sound echoed around the gallery.

“Master, why did you choose the Doctor?”

“We’re sorry... We haven’t had this much fun since playing the part

of the Scriptor on Peladon.” The cackle faded, replaced by a heavy sense of signs and portents. “Peladon hasn’t happened in this timestream.”

Creel crunched on the end of a leg bone and proceeded to suck out the marrow.

“The Doctor is woven throughout the Multiverse. Apollo was right, they are like an infestation. No wonder the Division was so terrified of them.”

“If they wanted to,” munched Basillius, “they could wield enormous power over a vast empire.”

“Indeed, a couple did follow that dark path.”

“You still won’t explain your fixation with this ephemeral. Why did you expend so much energy and time on creating *Diamant’s Folly*. Any house of traps would have done, why slavishly adhere to such a specific design?”

“We are an artist, Creel and—” Diamant let out a gasp like crystal shattering.

The M-form watched the confrontation brewing in the kitchen. They ordered George, the automaton, to attend to the altercation forthwith.

“*There will be no bloodshed in Our house!*” they snapped.

[FAST FORWARD...] ►►

The aftermath of the action in the kitchen gave each party involved much to ponder.

“Our control over the house is loosening. The state of grace is over and it can only be a matter of time before—”

“Before what?” inquired the Creel.

“You asked me why I chose the Doctor?”

Diamant deflected the difficult question back to an easier one for them to answer.

“There are other ephemerals who you could have used as your playthings, why them?”

“Them. You got it in one. The Doctor is like me, a multiform. They can only exhibit one form at a time but their ubiquity makes them unique amongst ephemerals.”

“Other species can regenerate into different forms...” Basillius stated.

“True but no ephemerals, except perhaps Rassilon and Davros have left such large footprints throughout the Multiverse. And only the Doctor has the curiosity to explore, an innate ability to make friends and the courage to take on the Daleks, the Time Lords and any number of Higher Powers. The Doctors will find a way through our current crisis, because they never give up.”

“This characteristic is true of those who he chooses to travel with too,” Basillius ground his teeth and looked at his injured tail.

“That was your own fault. You disobeyed a direct order.”

“I merely *misinterpreted* your instructions, master.”

“Never mind,” Diamant eyed him, warily. “Let’s eavesdrop on the dinner conversation. We expect it’s as scintillating as always.”

[FAST FORWARD...] ►►

“Oh, no you don’t.” Diamant adjusted a control on the viewer.
“*George! Arthur! Prevent them from leaving.*”

Basillius watched the events unfolding on the screen in real time with

relish.

“Finally, some action,” he salivated.

While Diamant was busy relaying instructions to their automata, Basillius watched the trio showing their determination to get at the truth and he admired them for it.

When the dust had settled and the mutiny quashed, Basillius’s tongue flicked around his mouth nervously.

“You’ll have to tell them. They’re beginning to guess anyway, master. I would rather be a real prisoner than a fictional puppet. Better to live and die as yourself, than as a fool in someone else’s fantasy.”

Diamant twisted their crystalline head towards Basillius, startled. For perhaps the first time he had ever seen them.

“You truly believe that, don’t you?”

“Prey never truly believes they will perish until the last moment. They fabricate lies, fantasy, a desperate dreaming hope that they will escape until the moment the bones in their neck snap.” Basillius’s eyes slid back and forth like steel curtains. “You are no prey. Admit your mistake, mighty one. There is no shame in that.”

“You ungrateful wretch,” Diamant sounded amused. “We spared you after that Adamant Locus fiasco. We should punish you for this *outrageous* disrespect—”

“You do not take me seriously.”

“No.” It was not meant unkindly.

“Even in the face of the end? The end of it all?”

Diamant’s fractal smile faded.

Basillius was undeterred. “Put yourself in their place. Theirs is not the soft flesh of larvæ. They are hunters, all. I would want the facts, my master, no matter how unpleasant. Then, it’s up to me how I deal with

them.”

“Set them free?” There was a world of meaning in that question.

“That was what you intended to do, wasn’t it? The whole purpose of this Labour.”

Diamant spoke, slowly, “Let’s distract them while We consider your argument.”

There was a long silence between the servant and his master as they watched the Doctor and the Valeyard debate tonight’s question.

[STOP.] ■

[REWIND.] ◀◀

THE FACE OF THE MUTATION: PART 7 SCORN AND SUSPICION



By AFJ Kernow

[PLAY...] ►

Lord Diamant spoke into the speaking tube and their disembodied voice boomed out in several locations within the house.

“Day Seventy-Five in Diamant’s Folly. Good morning to you all. I wish you a pleasant day.”

Miss Melanie Bennet entered the kitchen and took her frustration out on the dishes. She slammed them down with such brutality, it was remarkable they did not split asunder.

“Four times I have cooked the main meal this week, Liege Diamant. I *always* prepare breakfast. But, not even a word of thanks from those ungrateful oafs, this morning.”

“One will send you a puzzle to solve, enabling you to leave the confines of our house,” called Diamant.

“And another thing, if this is such a grand house, surely there must be servants? A cook and maid, at the very least.”

“One had to send them away. You simply cannot get the staff nowadays.”

“Well, the situation is quite intolerable. I am an accomplished lady, not a workhorse. I simply cannot do everything on my own. Those two buffoons get distracted with their flights of fancy or pointless feuds and I remain—“

“I must humbly apologise, Miss Melanie,” a voice called out from the doorway.

Melanie pointed at the tall, curly-haired man and nearly doubled up in laughter. He wore a pink coat, green breeches, a yellow waistcoat and knee-length red leather boots. All topped off with a top hat.

“What *are* you wearing, Doctor Watson? Are you trying to win the dandiest dandy award for the tenth week in succession?”

Doctor Watson bristled in indignation, “I cannot help being à la mode.”

“Trying to outdo Beau Nash himself, perhaps?” giggled Melanie, holding onto the kitchen table for support. She straightened up and fixed him with a gimlet stare.

“If you two idlers do not assist me and undertake your fair share of the cooking. I will be forced to strike.”

“Strike? Oh, withdraw your labour you mean.” Watson looked suitably chastened and made a suggestion, “Why don’t we teach Javert to cook?”

“Oh, no, sir, not me! I intend to take a walk in the garden. *You* can wash the dishes. My hands are as red raw as cooked lobster.”

She flounced out. Watson put his hat on the table, hung his jacket on the back of a chair and started to sing as the water flowed into the sink.

Outside, Melanie now wore a cream bonnet and blue pelisse over her dress. She sat down on an ornate wooden bench, and tried to calm herself. She looked up at the sky, it was an eldritch grey colour, the sun hidden behind the clouds.

A tremendous thumping noise disturbed her peace. Kitty, the giant crystalline cat strolled into view.

“Hello Kitty, I am taking my ease before I tackle your master’s latest task,” she tickled under the cat’s smooth polished chin.

Its jagged amethyst body sparkled in the ambient light. The purring noise was like a rumble of thunder.

“*Shh*, Kitty, mind my ears, I do not wish to be deafened on top of everything else.”

The volume of purring decreased. When the cat decided the requisite amount of attention had been given it bounded off. The ground shook with each giant footstep.

I have never seen such a gigantic feline. I wonder where Liege Diamant captured it? It must have taken an enormous effort to bring it to the Folly. At least, the creature is tame. A real gentle giant.

The loud voice of their host, from the speaking tube just above her, interrupted her thoughts.

“Good morning, Miss Melanie, your challenge today is to find all the golden eggs in order to obtain a treat for you all,” explained Diamant.

She noticed a sheet of paper on the bench beside her. Had it been there when she sat down? She wasn't sure, but upon reading the contents she raised her eyebrows.

“A treasure hunt? Well, if such a quest keeps me out of the kitchen. Let me see, what is the first clue?”

Doctor Watson, beamed at the clean dishes and pots drying on the wooden draining board.

“A job well done, even if I do say so myself.”

He dried his hands, put on his jacket and returned the hat to his head.

“A turn round the gardens I think and then a conversation with Javert.”

As Doctor Watson stretched his legs, his thoughts wandered to his distinct feeling of unease about Liege Diamant.

Who is our mysterious host? He tells us he is bedridden and sent for us to be his guests. But why are we not permitted to see him?

What is the reason for his predilection for setting us tasks to complete? Mind you, they are a pleasant diversion.

Although I have never met my fellow companions; nevertheless, there exists a disconcerting feeling that I know them very well.

“Too many questions and not enough answers,” Watson concluded aloud. “I wonder what mood Mister Javert will be in today? Acerbic, aggressive or just plain annoying.”

Javert, solitary as an owl, sat brooding in the study. He glared at the black screen which displayed a wireframe plan view of Diamant’s Folly and its environs. However, the computer could not access immediate information from an outside source.

It was a tool, it could process and display statistical data, be programmed to carry out mathematical tasks or manage a database, and you could play against it at chess or cards, but that was all.

“This pathetic piece of antiquated junk is a waste of my time. I will pay no more heed to Miss Bennet, it is quite useless,” he muttered.

Javert desired the knowledge to help him escape and return to London and his employment. He preferred a world of legal procedure; not pointless debate with that pompous windbag who claimed to be a man of science.

Javert attempted to clarify his ideas. The desk upon which the squat cream-coloured BBC microcomputer resided was strewn with papers. His notes in a neat, copperplate hand summarised his thoughts.

I feel as if I have lived here forever. All I can remember has taken place within Diamant’s Folly. Everything is provided, but no carts bring in supplies up the drive. I suspected a tunnel into town, but no expedition has yielded fruitful results. The earth, such as it is, is solid bedrock. Furthermore, no one ever calls upon his lordship to enquire as to his health.

Why are there no birds outside? No voices raised in Man’s labours? No sound of shipping or even the faint chime of bells from the village church? My seclusion is uncanny. The gardens end in a curved translucent wall through which twinkling stars can be glimpsed. Day and night happen within our piece of Georgian England, but the stars outside the dome are always there.

“There is no escape from this nightmare,” he growled, turning off the computer.

He marched down the stairs to find solace in the library. A haven of peace and quiet unless that dandy Watson was within. He slumped in a wingback chair by the fire. A gaudy figure strode into the room and Javert winced as though plagued with a migraine.

“Why do you choose to dress like a preening bird of paradise, Doctor?”

“Some of us like to look our best,” Doctor Watson beamed. “Better than looking like a misanthropic parson.”

Javert was dressed in his customary black, the only flourish a white cravat.

“Instead of parading around like a popinjay, why do you not assist me and figure out a means of escape? I am certain that I am not supposed to be here. Like a persistent fly, that idea buzzes around in my mind without ceasing.”

Doctor Watson started to pace around. He idly picked a book off the shelves and flicked through it.

“You know Mister Javert, I have dreams.”

“So do we all.”

“Yes, but about a blue box, shining like a lighthouse in the dark.”

“And?”

“Being on trial for crimes beyond my responsibility, but not beyond my ken.”

“And?”

“Numerous attempts at limitation, perforation and assassination.”

“*And?*” added Javert, impatiently.

“You are at the heart of it. The cause. You are my most bitter enemy.”

“Why thank you, kind sir!” The words slid from Javert like oil. “It is good to know what you really think of me.”

“Only dreams, Javert not a manifestation of my subconscious, I think. However, I am of the opinion that we are merely players on a stage. Entertainment for our volatile master, the devious Liege Diamant. Your conclusion is valid, we need an escape plan if we are ever to leave this gilded cage.”

Melanie enjoyed her liberation from the kitchen. She searched for the golden eggs hidden in different places throughout the extensive landscaped gardens. As she placed each in a small wooden trug, she wondered how the plants remained so verdant and in such order. Never an unkempt hedge or a withered flower. Nor any sweet birdsong, just eerie silence, except for the distant thunder of Kitty prowling about.

Her favourite garden feature was the high-hedged maze. Whenever the arguments between the two men became tiresome, she wandered its paths. In the centre, was a small marquee with a wicker seat and small table.

The master of the house would often dispatch the silver-masked automaton named George, to send her a sweet treat. Usually this consisted of biscuits or strawberries and cream; accompanied with a puzzle to solve, just to keep her mind active. She appreciated that kindness, such distractions kept her sane.

The first week or two at the Folly had been unbearable. Watson and Javert were beastly to each other. She shuddered at the memory of the malevolence between them. As if each man despised the other for every fault and weakness at the heart of their souls. On many

occasions, she had retreated in tears to her room or the study and locked the door of her sanctuary.

Over time her fellow guests became less antagonistic. The men still fell out and argued over the slightest trifle. However, the venomous vitriol between them developed into respectful rivalry. Messrs Javert and Watson were different personalities clashing like swords, neither willing to yield; a pair of proud peacocks each competing to show they were superior. They were alike in many ways.

Melanie busied herself trying to run the household. Fortunately, she had managed to persuade Liege Diamant to help her chivy the men into helping with the housework. Laundry day was a task of nightmarish proportions. It took the three of them all day to complete it. Each of them took turns at the different elements. They often wondered why machines were not available to make their toil less arduous.

She reached the centre of the maze and found the final golden egg.

“Well done, Melanie,” said Liege Diamant. Even when giving praise, Diamant’s voice was insincere. Distracted. *“A variety of treats await you in the kitchen.”*

“Oh, wondrous, more cooking. Thank you, good sir.” She made a mock curtsy to George who was relaying his master’s words.

“Miss Bennet, your contribution in the provision of meals is more than is equitable. Let us have some sport and turn the tables. Tonight, the gentlemen of the house prepare your dinner.”

She hitched up her skirts to curtsy once more, “Your lordship, I simply cannot contain my excitement at the news!”

The gentlemen of the house sat in the library, engaged in their favourite occupation, squabbling.

“You are too naive, Watson. We may be well-treated by his lordship. But the fact remains, no true aristocrat would demand his guests do the work of lowly servants.”

“I do find his excuses both tiresome and illogical, Javert. Perhaps, there is some darker purpose to his insistence that we remain here.”

“The time for philosophising is over, Doctor Watson. We need action. What is your opinion of the nature of the wall that surrounds the gardens?”

“It seems to be made of a translucent crystalline substance—”

“Can it be broken?” Javert interrupted.

“I was coming to that, don’t be so impatient, man!”

“Well make haste, I have seen snails with faster thought processes. I *need* to get out of here. I simply *must* leave this place or I will not be responsible for my actions.”

“You cannot harm me or Miss Bennet, you know this.”

He curled his hands into fists, his hawk-like face took on a grim countenance. “But I may harm this *blighted* isle to the ashes of—”

“We must keep our tempers, Mister Javert. Ensure our minds are clear to solve this dilemma. In my experiments, I am attempting to create chemical solutions to dissolve the wall or an explosive substance to create a means of egress.”

“Meanwhile, I will investigate whether any further hidden passages or tunnels in the cellar exist.”

“What makes you think you will be successful this time?”

“Research,” Javert countered. “Old houses such as this, were often owned by landowners sympathetic to Catholicism. Many have features used to conceal and smuggle priests out of the building unseen.”

Doctor Watson clasped his hands together, facetious. “I shall say a little prayer for us.”

“I think not,” warned Javert. “Our God may just listen.”

Melanie was standing in the ballroom with a tray. She observed Javert tap the wooden panels and press the mouldings round the fireplace. Only then did she announce her presence.

“How are you today, Mister Javert?” Melanie enquired.

“Busy. I am ascertaining if there are any secret passages that would allow us to leave his lordship’s hospitality. After almost three months even the most gracious host begins to grate.”

“Have you tried following Kitty? Cats often have secret routes out into the fields to hunt mice and rabbits.”

She placed a plate of ham, bread and cheese on a side table with a mug of coffee.

“Thank you,” he answered, tersely. He then paused, considered her words, then repeated the words more genuinely. “Thank you. That is an interesting notion, Miss Bennet. I will investigate further.”

“Happy hunting, Mister Javert.”

Doctor Watson was in his favourite haunt, the laboratory. Melanie brought him the same cold collation.

“If I did not keep an eye on you, John, you would starve.”

“One meal a day is more than sufficient,” he muttered, distractedly.

“You get so engrossed in your studies you forget everything else. I doubt you would remember to eat once a *year* without prompting.”

Doctor Watson straightened from his work, turned to her and smiled, conceding the point.

The pair sat on wooden high-backed chairs. while the Doctor munched enthusiastically. Melanie sat sipping her coffee.

Of the two, Doctor Watson was the easiest to talk to. Melanie had become quite fond of the blustering, verbose academic. She called him by his first name solely in private. This informality merely signalled her need for friendship.

No doubt, Mister Javert would have been insulted if she called him by his first name. In an unguarded moment, after a little too much whisky, he told her it was Heathcliffe. However, such a confidence could never be shared with Doctor Watson. His mocking of the serious-minded Javert needed no encouragement from her.

“Tell me, Miss Melanie, what do you remember of your time before you came to Diamant’s Folly.”

Her brow wrinkled, “Nothing except a feeling of despair, anger and worry. A constant nagging fear, that I was not a guest, but a prisoner.”

“I observe within me an increased suspicion that this place is faux.”

“Faux?”

“Far from a friend. *Nothing* in this house is what it seems and *neither* are we. For example, I have a great deal of scientific knowledge, but somehow I know the sophisticated equipment in this laboratory is out of the ark.”

“Maybe Liege Diamant is not privy to the latest scientific advances.”

“I think not, my dear Miss Melanie. Liege Diamant’s library suggests otherwise. Nuclear power, nanotechnology and biochemistry are just three topics I have found while perusing the shelves.”

“Yes, indeed, John. I have knowledge about that strange machine in the study. It has no cogs or gears and yet I know how it functions. I have even been giving instruction to Mister Javert on its varied uses. He learns quickly, and is quite the star pupil.”

“*Hmph*, yes well, at least he listens to *you*. There are times when that fellow sorely tries my patience.”

“I do remember one day, I woke up, and my worries had disappeared like dew in the morning. I thought to myself, I am a guest of Liege Diamant and that will suffice.”

“Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof. Therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself.”

“Here endeth the lesson, amen,” chanted Melanie.

“*All guests please attend the dining room, thank you,*” intoned the familiar voice.

“It seems he who must be obeyed requests our presence,” sighed Doctor Watson.

“Why must *I* cook? I am a man of the law and my colleague, a doctor. It is quite simply beneath us. Furthermore, I have more important matters to attend to.”

“*Tapping panelling and stalking the cat, We presume?*” sneered Liege Diamant. “*As you know We are endeavouring to hire more staff but We are unable to at present.*”

“Why?” snapped Javert.

“*Flooding, we are quite cut off.*”

“But there has never been any rain, not for the last seventy-four days,” Melanie stated.

“*Did We say flooding? We meant quarantine. A severe outbreak of smallpox and consumption in the county. As Miss Bennet has prepared many meals for you both since your arrival here, We think it is high time you repaid the favour. Otherwise, you can go without, We will send George to lock the kitchen and pantry.*”

“Very well,” replied Doctor Watson. “Come along, Mister Javert. Let us see what we can prepare to impress our fair companion.”

“I would starve.”

“*To prove a point?*” asked Liege Diamant.

“I receive the pleasure of Doctor Watson starving with me. That will be ample sustenance.”

Doctor Watson whispered dangerously in Mister Javert’s ear. “And young Melanie?”

His mouth wrinkled with the discomfort of a concession. “Very well... If I must, though under considerable protest.”

Javert followed Watson in the direction of the kitchen.

Melanie entered the ballroom. At the pianoforte, sat the silver-faced automaton, George, a powdered wig perched atop his metallic head. The footman was attired in its customary uniform of salmon pink jacket and matching breeches with a cream brocade waistcoat and white neckcloth. George was a remarkable creation, who could play a complex Bach fugue with competence and musicality.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, she heard a memory recall, *like the Silver Turk*.

Melanie fetched some music from one of the glass-fronted cupboards that lined the walls. She also retrieved a flute from the collection of instruments displayed within another.

“Liege Diamant, would you permit George to accompany me?”

Diamant agreed and the two instrumentalists spent a pleasant hour playing a selection of musical pieces. One of Melanie’s favourites was a jaunty piece called ‘Penny Lane’.

In the kitchen, the atmosphere was not so harmonious.

Javert and Watson confronted each other. They stood face-to-face, their noses an inch apart, like boxers about to fight.

“My dear fellow, it really is quite simple, in order to prepare fish you must—”

Javert raised a silver blade to Watson’s jugular vein.

“If you do not refrain from patronising me I shall take this knife and fillet *you*.”

Doctor Watson regarded him coolly. “...Really?”

A thin red line dripped from its point. The two men regarded the cut in the learned Doctor’s neck with incredulity, then with newly dawning excitement.

“Really, my dear Doctor,” smiled Javert.

“*There will be no bloodshed in Our house!*” Diamant’s voice was loud enough to make the crockery shake.

George entered, holding a flintlock duelling pistol in its metallic hand. The two angry men parted and waited for George to leave.

“*That is better, now I suggest you each work on a different element of the meal. I shall instruct you, I do not wish Miss Melanie to be presented with something inedible.*”

Like sulky schoolboys told by the headmaster to apologise after a fight, the pair set to work. But neither could shake the image of the small spots of blood that dappled the counter like freshly fallen rain.

The rules, it seemed, had changed.

After George’s abrupt exit, Melanie took a leisurely bath and dressed for dinner. She swept down the grand central staircase in a lilac satin

gown, white gloves and her red hair tied up in a chignon. She decided to make her way to the library.

Melanie selected a book on astronomy and reclined on the green velvet chaise longue. She watched Kitty gambol on the lawns and wondered what Liege Diamant gave the huge feline to eat. There were so many strange things about this residence. She left her book on the chaise longue, and reentered the ballroom.

George was also able to play requests. Once, John asked for something loud to drown out one of Javert's rants. It responded by playing an operatic and raucous composition, John told her was appropriately entitled *Bat Out of Hell*.

On occasion, she asked for songs she did not remember knowing. She requested a tranquil melody to help her relax. The gentle swing of Glen Miller's 'Moonlight Serenade' filled the room.

Melanie had taught Doctor Watson to dance sedate waltzes and minuets. Javert mocked such frivolity and sat at a corner table, building structures and mechanisms using parts from a box marked *Meccano*.

In her recurring nightmares she also danced, but the experience was terrifying. She was unable to stop. Wound on a spring in a child's music box. Like a ballerina. Faster and faster, twirling and twisting steps continued until she collapsed and woke up shaking in fright.

The kitchen was silent except for the chopping of vegetables, the gentle simmering of pots, the chink of spoons stirring mixtures in earthenware bowls, and the spitting of hot fat from roasting meat hitting the flames of the fire. Each man pondering his new mortality.

It was Javert who broke the silence.

"I must apologise for my unseemly outburst, Dr Watson. To threaten violence upon your person is unacceptable."

John, paused to mop his brow, and straightened up to look straight at the penitent. He kept one hand slowly turning the spit.

“So why did you? I grant you my tone was supercilious but your fury chilled my blood.”

“The law is reason without passion, I have no defence for my actions. This place gets under my skin. I feel like a caged tiger, perhaps it would be safer for you and Miss Bennet if I kept my own company.”

“The very fact you realised that violence is never the answer, gives me hope. Whatever our personal prejudices we must rise above them. I would shake your hand, but I fear it is covered with mutton fat.”

“I am forgetting who I am, Doctor. I am a lawyer in London, but which, barrister or solicitor? I could even be neglecting a family, the longer I remain here.”

“*Hmm*, I do understand your plight, sir. We seem to be forgetting our previous lives. I am sure I am a fellow at Cambridge, but which college Churchill? Trinity? Girton? St. Cedd’s?”

“And what of Miss Bennet? What is her place in this? An accomplice of our host?”

“No, I think not. Her quiet despair at being here seems genuine. I fear she too is forgetting her life outside this place. She confided in me, she was a computer, for the Astronomer Royal, Maskelyne.”

“And I just thought she was your typical hysterical female,” replied Javert.

“In my experience, there is no such thing as a typical person.”

“Then we must work together with Miss Bennet to uncover the mystery of Diamant’s Folly and escape forthwith.”

Melanie sat in contented bliss on the burgundy camelback sofa as she leafed through the pile of sheet music beside her. George played a

rippling, dancing melody called, ‘The Chrysanthemum’, by Scott Joplin. She tapped her fingers, as if she was playing the instrument herself, on the arm of the sofa while she listened.

The two men strode into the ballroom. They still looked flushed from preparing food in the hot kitchen. They appeared somewhat dishevelled; sleeves still rolled up, cravats untied and jackets draped in a casual manner, over one shoulder.

Melanie looked alarmed at the sight of the thin red line at the good doctor’s throat; his brief shake of the head told her not to pursue the matter.

“Your meal is prepared, Miss Bennet,” Javert announced with his usual solemnity.

“Thank you both. I look forward to tasting the fruits of this afternoon’s endeavours,” she smiled.

“George will ring the bell when dinner is ready to be served,” Watson informed her. “We must go forth and get dressed for the meal. We will rejoin you in the dining room presently.”

As they left, Melanie picked up a piece of sheet music. She put it on the pianoforte’s music stand.

“Can you play this please, George?”

The automaton nodded its head and began to play a tune called ‘Waterloo Sunset’.

A bell rang out through the house. Melanie arrived first and sat in the middle chair of a long table set for three diners. The gentlemen entered the formal dining room and Melanie stood up to greet them.

“Well,” beamed Watson, “I do declare, we look smartly turned-out this evening.”

Even Javert had eschewed his sombre attire for something brighter. A primrose yellow neckcloth instead of the usual white, and a midnight blue jacket and waistcoat.

One gentleman sat at one end of the table, one at the other, and Miss Bennet seated herself on the chair equidistant between them. A rose between two thorns.

Dr Watson waved at the scowling Javert.

“Must you always be so childish?” Javert snapped like a rabbit trap.

“What is the point of growing up, if you cannot be childish sometimes?”

“I feel an awfully long way from you both,” Melanie said in an attempt to prevent another interminable argument. “Might we all sit at one end of the table? The end nearest the hot closet?”

“A capital suggestion!” exclaimed Watson. “It will make things easier.”

He moved from his seat, picked up his chair and moved it into position.

Melanie stood up, walked over to the chair in its new position, and was about to sit down when Watson piped up, “No, Miss Bennet. Your place is at the head of the table as our guest of honour.”

“Indeed, Miss Bennet,” Javert rose from his seat and guided Melanie to her place. “Watson and I agreed on something, *for once*.”

“For twice, there are two of us,” needled the Doctor.

“And besides...” Javert pulled out the chair. “There is little point being a child if you cannot be grown-up sometimes.”

The Doctor rolled his eyes with a knowing smirk, but he said nothing.

When all the guests were settled in, the metal knight, who their lordship referred to as Arthur, clattered into life. The automaton creaked over to the serving hatch and brought three bowls on a silver tray over to the table.

“Summer Pease Soup, my lady,” announced Javert.

“Indeed, rather appropriate for a lady hailing from the delightful Peasepottage Gate, I think,” added Watson.

“Peasepottage Gate? I do not hail from there, you are mistaken, sir. It is, but a few houses on the toll road to Brighton. I travelled here from Hallam Hall in the county of Berkshire.”

“I am sorry, my mistake,” blustered Watson. “And yet, I was so sure... No matter.”

“What are you jabbering about now?” asked Javert, shaking his head in pity.

Dr Watson ignored Javert’s scornful expression. “How is the soup, Miss Bennet?”

“Filling. What is in it?”

“Pease, I would imagine, Miss Bennet,” Javert’s face flickered a rare smile

While the guests enjoyed their soup, Arthur was kept busy. George sent dishes up from the kitchen below via the service lift and the metallic automaton transferred them into a hot trolley to stay warm. The cold dishes it brought to the table.

The fish course comprised salmon and watercress and Dover sole prepared by Javert.

“I trust the fish is to your liking,” enquired the lawyer.

Melanie looked at the fish she had selected. The fillet of salmon was a little battered after its inexperienced presentation. However, the marinade the fish had been basted in was delicious.

“You have done well, Javert. Do you think our esteemed Javert has shown some promise as a cook, Doctor?”

Watson was about to mention that the two men had almost come to blows over the fish course. However, he decided it prudent not to disturb the congenial ambience.

“A *succès fou*, my dear Javert. You should cook more often,” Watson demurred.



While they consumed the roast mutton that the good Doctor had tended to that afternoon, conversation turned to the subject of their evasive host.

“We’ve been here five and seventy days,” Javert clattered down the carving knife, “nearly three months and we have not glimpsed one hair on the benighted scoundrel’s head.”

“If he is ill, surely some time in the garden each day would be beneficial to his recovery?” added Melanie.

Watson rested a finger on his upper lip. “Liege Diamant is undoubtedly hiding something. This place has several incongruities—”

“That giant crystal cat for instance!” scoffed Javert.

“There’s the lack of staff too. I’ve worked my fingers to the bone, keeping *you two* fed and watered,” Melanie said, a hint of bitterness in her voice.

“As I was saying, Diamant’s Folly is a faux place. Wherever we are, it’s no longer Hanoverian England. We’re in our own Camelot, a Utopia but one we can never leave.”

“Utopia?!” Melanie, slammed her fist onto the table in a display of uncharacteristic fury. “The past few weeks have been unbearable. I’ve maintained a veneer of happy obeisance but inwardly I’m seething at

our imprisonment. How dare his lordship keep us here against our will.. How dare he...”

She pushed her plate away, and slumped onto the table resting her head on her arms. The two men looked at each other aghast, the poor young lady’s shoulders shook as she cried out weeks of pent-up despair.

Doctor Watson moved from his chair, and hovered behind her chair patting her awkwardly on the back and proffering his handkerchief. She sat up, took it and dried her eyes.

“I’m sorry for such an unseemly display. I pride myself on being a sanguine individual.”

“Yes, indeed,” smiled Watson, “as optimistic as an orange.”

That remark elicited a wan smile from her pale, tearstained face.

Javert remained impassive, like a granite statue surveying the scene, no sign of emotion appearing on his chiselled features. His racing thoughts belied his calm exterior.

Law is reason, without passion and reason will prevail on this occasion. We must unite to confront Liege Diamant, and demand our freedom.

“When you’ve recovered Miss Bennet, we must go to Liege Diamant’s suite and confront him. Our situation is intolerable. Diamant must be made aware of the cruelty of his games and stratagems.”

“Oh I’m ready now, Mister Javert.” Melanie stood, her face resolute. “I’ve been ready to demand my freedom for quite a while now.”

“But we haven’t had dessert,” protested Watson.

“You must forget about the temporary pleasure gained from sweets,” implored Melanie.

“Miss Bennet is quite correct, Doctor,” added his grey eyes glittering with revolutionary zeal. “Focus instead, on an objective that will taste even sweeter; our freedom.”

“Very well. Shall we attempt to best his lordship in his lair?”

The brave triumvirate, united in purpose, strode towards the door.

“You will stay and carry on the evening’s entertainment or there will be dire consequences,” their host roared from the speaking tube set into the ceiling.

Melanie fancied that his Lordship’s voice sounded like an ocean wave crashing onto the shore. They ignored the warning and continued their progress towards the exit.

The trio stopped abruptly when Arthur intercepted them, blocking their way. The knight drew its sword from the leather scabbard. Arthur held the sword mere inches from the Doctor’s chest.

“One typically expects a verbal riposte, rather than a physical one,” he eyed the automaton.

“At the risk of conceding to your facile humour...” The smile in Javert’s voice trailed away.

George entered the room with his trusty duelling pistol. The impassive silver face with its powdered wig, although comical in appearance, demonstrated deadly intent as it trained the pistol on the grim-faced Javert.

There was a stiffness in the lawyer’s arms as he stopped.

“It appears our host seeks to kill a fly with an elephant gun,” he concluded.

There was silence. A pleasant meal transformed into a dangerous confrontation.

“A point of scientific inquiry, Mister Javert,” asked Doctor Watson.

Javert was still. “Yes?”

“We have truly dashed the concept of our immortal selves?”

“Only so far in your own personage.”

“Would you care to provide a further test?” suggested Watson.

Javert’s mouth thinned into a dismissive line.

“Such verbiage. Well, I’m prepared to risk it.” Watson massaged the wound on his neck. “What of you, Miss Bennet?”

“I can’t move with any great rapidity in these...” Melanie kneaded the hem of her dress. “But, I think—”

A flash of silver spat from Mister Javert’s sleeve, impacting the wall over George’s shoulder. A dinner knife. One of the many on offer at the table. As the automaton turned, and the Doctor opened his mouth to lament the lawyer, another quicksilver lance flicked from Javert’s other sleeve. The far larger carving knife intended for the roast mutton. It impacted the side of George’s gun-arm with enough force to send the machine staggering back. Its powdered wig knocked askew. The pistol in its hand fired once, crippling the chair at the end of the long table.

The trio lunged towards the machine.

George then fired again, puncturing a hole in the lining of Javert’s coat. He shouted. More in alarm, than pain. Watson and Javert dived to each side. Melanie tried to follow the Doctor, but found Arthur in her way. She staggered away from the suit of armour and ran back towards the safety of the table. It, between her and the lumbering automaton.

George pulled the knife from its wrist with an expression almost of bewilderment. It fired the pistol again.

“That’s a single-use duelling pistol, Diamant,” Javert snarled from the floor.

“So that,” the Doctor sat up on his knees, “is quite impossible. Are you well, Miss Bennet?”

“As can be expected. Another fantastical fabrication of Liege Diamant?” suggested Mel.

“Yes, bending the rules a little, I’ll wager,” he replied.

Arthur stalked around the table, past Watson and Javert towards Miss Bennet.

“Miss Bennet!” shouted Javert.

“Melanie!” Watson barked.

The first swing of Arthur’s sword was like the headsman’s axe. Melanie held the nearest chair between herself and its cutting blade. The wood was sundered in twain. The knight kicked its remnants aside. Another chop went through the trolley she shoved between themselves for distance. There was very little elsewhere she could go.

A thought occurred to her. If only she could *reprogram* the thing. Whatever that meant.

As Melanie reached the head of the table, Arthur’s plate-shoe stamped down on the end of her dress. The fabric ripped, but held. Miss Bennet did not, she became quickly acquainted with the floor. Arthur reeled the sword back and plunged down into—

“*Stop!*” Doctor Watson bellowed.

The sword halted mid-strike. Mel could feel its point against her bodice.

“Alright, we capitulate,” he murmured. “If our opponent is a cardsharp, there’s no sense gambling.”

Arthur relented, an almost apologetic nod of the helmet, and returned to George’s side. The two automatons stood by the door as ready and as deadly as they had arrived.

“I think...” sighed Doctor Watson, “Discretion is the better part of valour.”

“I agree, I don’t want to suffer death by either method,” Melanie whispered.

“All right, Diamant,” announced Javert, “we will cease our plan of action forthwith.”

“Thank you, you know it makes sense, my dear guests.”

Doctor Watson still wanted to make a valid point, “Being your guests rather presupposes that we are free to leave of our own volition.”

“I’m afraid the situation in the nearby towns and villages is no better. However, you will receive a penalty for disobedience and that will be to do the dishes. George will supervise.”

Then like a magician revealing the box has disappeared, Arthur removed the tablecloth with a flourish. He returned with several platters of tempting desserts.

As the diners finished their dessert course, Liege Diamant addressed the dining room.

“Time for your nightly debate, my dear guests. The question tonight concerns Shakespeare’s plays. Which is his finest work? Now discuss, and justify your choice.”

For once, their debate about the relative merits of Shakespeare’s theatrical canon was good-natured. Melanie sat picking at her cheese cake, her countenance forlorn and troubled. The speeches concluded, his lordship pronounced his verdict.

“We have decided tonight’s debate is a draw.”

“What? But Macbeth is a much better play than Hamlet!” protested Watson.

“You are quite mistaken,” Javert disagreed. “With its soliloquy on the nature of existence, Hamlet is the supreme expression of Shakespeare’s genius.”

Melanie looked up and sighed.

“It’s too long.” Then, with a mischievous smile, she continued. “In fact while I appreciate the Bard’s contribution to the English language, most of them could do with some judicious editing.”

“Judicious editing!” bellowed the two men with one voice.

“*Enough!*” interrupted their host. “*After the dishes are washed, We shall reveal the truth behind our verisimilitude during this evening’s game.*”

Mugs of chocolate on side tables within easy reach; George delivered a deck of cards on a silver salver. Diamant informed them of the rules and the trio began to play. Their odd game combined *Happy Families* and *Guess Who*.

“Are you Madame Vastra the Silurian?”

“No, are you Sir David the Dalek?”

“Miss Bennet, are you Master Albert the Adipose?”

“Yes,” Mel passed the card to the Valeyard. “Hmm... Doctor Watson, are you Miss Odette the Ood?”

“Well done, Miss Melanie, now Javert, you must be Mister Cyril the Cyberman, correct?”

“Incorrect, Watson. My turn, I put it to you Doctor, that you are Mrs Irene the Ice Warrior?”

As the game continued sets of monsters appeared on the card table. But the number of cards in each player’s hand only seemed to reduce slightly until...

“Are you, Mister Doctor the Traveller?”

“Are you, Miss Melanie Jane Bush the Programmer?”

“Are you, Mister Valeyard the Prosecutor?”

The scales fell away. After each question, their true identities snapped into place. All traces of their fictional facsimiles faded away like a dream in the morning. Unfortunately, a swarm of unpleasant memories flew into their minds in their place.

Haunted singing, flying books, non-stop dancing, a marauding stuffed bear and nearly drowning in a water tank.

A presence made of iridescent swirling fractals and a familiar voice who announces, ‘This is the house that Diamant built.’

A wraith-like figure entered the drawing room carrying a glass of sparkling wine. They were wearing an iridescent robe, with a repeated diamond motif. The lights from the chandelier caused it to sparkle like Blackbeard’s treasure. A striking, androgynous face surveyed the captives. They took a delicate sip from the glass.

“We are your host, Diamant. Now, the veil of deception is torn away, and you know who you really are.”

“What on Earth have we been doing?” asked Mel. She rubbed her tired eyes, “Why won’t you let us go?”

“You vindictive vengeful monster, how dare you take away our memories?” bellowed the Doctor. “We are not your performing puppets. Not here, not Peladon, not anywhere. We’ll take no more tiresome tasks from you or inane games either.”

“In one of your favourite periods of history on the Earth, the headless French aristocrats guillotined in Paris were paraded as puppets for the masses. At least, here, We let you keep your heads.”

“The Terror... How I *relished* the violence.” The Valeyard was almost wistful. “The excitement of knowing that all were hunted across their land of fear. Ruling or serving. Not just my granddaughter and I.”

“On the contrary,” the Doctor disputed. “As a Time Lord, an *aristo* on Gallifrey, I enjoyed the possibility that those who abused their privilege of power, wilfully, without mind to the consequence, would be deposed by those they lorded over. It gave me hope.”

“And their justice?”

“I never approved of slaughter, Valeyard, as well you know. Neither did Susan. It was those who fought to save the lives of those in that revolution who caught my favour. Not your fantasy of history as a Whitechapel backstreet!”

“Enough histrionics, Doctor,” snapped the Valeyard. “Can we at least have some assistance with the basic chores, Diamant? A couple more hands would make life easier?”

“We can’t get you out, what makes you think We can send anyone in?”

“Why not?” the Valeyard demanded. “You’re *supposed* to be a Higher Power.”

“Yes, why?” The Doctor clasped his lapels. “In theory, you’re *supposed* to still possess my TARDIS under a transdimensional lock and key.”

“My TARDIS,” countered the Valeyard.

“Semantics,” the Doctor waved.

“The time-machine resisted your imprisonment, there were... unforeseen consequences.”

“What does that mean?”

Silence greeted his response.

“You *lost* her?” the Doctor fumed. “You lost *my* TARDIS?”

“It tried to break in. Its dimensions are scattered on the edges of the house.” A pause. *“We are sorry.”*

All the Doctor’s bluster fell from his features as though caught in a vacuum-sealed chamber.

“No, I don’t believe it,” he rebuffed. “No, I can sense... *No!* She *must* still be out there. She can’t be...”

“We can remove the memory, return you to Doctor John Watson?”

“And forget? No.” The Doctor stood defiant, as though a hurricane could not stop him. “Whatever shape the Universe may have taken in my absence, I know that the sum of my memories is enough to cut any Gordian knot. I’ll find a solution. Pain or hardship, there is a rational answer.”

“And you Melanie?”

Mel was practical. “I’m Melanie Bush of Pease Pottage, a computer programmer from Earth, and I’ve never wanted to be otherwise. I’ll stay as I am, thanks. I might even be able to get more done here this way.”

“Valeyard?”

The Valeyard raised a defiant chin, dark eyes sparkling. “To live in the shadow of truth, but never grasp its candlelight? To be clouded from an ambition to demand what is rightly due to my own person? Such abidance would warrant self-termination. I am myself. Always.”

“It would seem that we are in agreement.” The Doctor smacked his lips, gently surprised. “I feel lightheaded.”

The Valeyard interjected, “Nevertheless, Diamant, it would be remiss not to use this new opportunity to your advantage. More present in the house would provide greater diversion—”

“Valeyard? You can’t seriously be suggesting trapping others here, purely for our convenience?”

“More minds would provide a greater pool of resources to draw from. For our escape, Miss Bush.”

“That’s pathetic,” Mel protested, turning away from the Time Lord.

“That’s practical, young Melanie,” lectured the Valeyard.

The Doctor stared at his other self. Cold and silent.

“Removing you from your respective timestreams caused the Web of Time to start collapsing like a deck of cards. I cannot remove you from this bubble and return you to your places of origin. Time moved on, and healed the wound. Your sixth incarnation met his end on the floor of the TARDIS following a lethal encounter with the stellar engineer, Omega. In the company of Perpugilliam Brown. Unfortunately, my action caused more devastation than I anticipated. The Multiverse is getting smaller.”

“How small?” asked Mel.

“There is a thimble on the table.”

“Yes?”

“Smaller.”

The long silence that followed was ended by slow handclaps from the Doctor.

“Well done, you meddling abomination, you’ve doomed the whole of Creation single-waviced.”

“We did what We did to protect you all from knowledge that could have overwhelmed your being.”

“To cover your tracks more like,” scoffed Mel.

“Contrition from you is meaningless,” the Valeyard added.

“We will make sure you are comfortable.”

“Is there anything else you haven’t told us?” asked Mel.

“Yes, total devastation is coming.”

“When?” demanded the Doctor.

“Soon. Sooner than We could have anticipated. We are moving the Folly to Vulpia, spatially closer to your other selves. Meanwhile, you need to make the best of your remaining lives while you can.”

The Doctor was stony-faced, “We’ll play the piano as the ship goes down.”

“We have other business to attend to. There may be hope. Who knows? Farewell brave ephemerals, for now. The end is nigh and you have given Us one more thing to ponder...”

The shimmering projection disappeared like dew in the morning.

Later, a sombre gathering was held around the fire in the library.

“So that’s it then,” sighed Mel. “I must spend the rest of my days with you two duffers. Still, it could be worse.”

The Valeyard glared at her, “Could it? At least a Dalek ray is quick. This is like being on death row.”

“Oh come on, we have to buck up,” the Doctor blustered. “Face our fate with dignity.”

“You’re insufferable, Doctor.”

“Let’s not get into another argument, Mister Javert,” said Mel and tried to smile. The effort required to keep the two Time Lords civil was exhausting.

“Javert? I’m known as the Valeyard. Surely, you’ve not forgotten *me*, Melanie?”

“Sorry, slip of the tongue, that was your identity before, Heathcliffe Javert.”

The Doctor laughed, “That’s hilarious, but also very apt. The persistent inspector hunting for his nemesis. Like a terrier hunting a rat. A lone wolf.”

“What about you, Miss Bennet? Did you find your Mister Darcy?” teased the Valeyard.

“Not really, although I actually became a character in a Jane Austen pastiche. I guess that’s a first.”

George brought the trio a plate of buttered muffins and three tiny glasses of ginger wine. They took supper in melancholy contemplation for a while.

Mel spoke first, “I guess we’ll have to live each day as if it is our last.”

“Indeed, that’s the spirit, Mel,” the Doctor replied. “Wring out as much joy and solace as we possibly can.”

The Valeyard drained his glass. “Perhaps, your solutions to our predicament have merit.”

“We really *must* make the most of our remaining time, no matter how long or short,” Mel added.

“I know one thing, my fellow inmates. The end will come like a thief in the night, at a time we do not expect,” he quoted.

“Let’s face the oncoming storm together, you two, and, please, can we have a party?” asked Mel, taking the Doctor’s hand.

The Valeyard laughed heartily, “Typical human, it’s the end of the world, let’s celebrate with wild abandon.”

“Well there’s no point moping around, Valeyard.”

Mel gave the Valeyard her other hand, he hesitated and took it. The three held hands in solidarity, united against adversity and gazed into the crackling fire.

The Doctor took a deep breath and solemnly declaimed.

“Out of the night that covers me, black as the pit from pole to pole, I thank whatever gods may be for my unconquerable soul.”

THE FACE OF THE MUTATION: PART 8
NOTHING—NOTHING—NOTHING



by Alan Camlann, AFJ Kernow and Sherlock

Nothing at all...



It was the End. The End of all Things. Of every sunrise. Of every life, backward or no. Of every great longing. Of every joy, every passion. Of every science and every mote of learning.

The convalescent dimensions, still healing, would sing and dance to that tune of the Night Wanderer, that terrible thing from beyond, but there would be nothing.

Nothing—Nothing—Nothing.

It was a song for the grave. Understood only in its mother tongue.

The Doctors knew, the Doctors understood.

They saw the end of all Creation. Of all life, love and imagination. Everything that had ever been or could be again. A mutated force larger than they'd ever encountered, ever contemplated, ever dreamed. And the Mutation, the End of Everything, turned its head towards them, sequinned with its many planet-eyes—and caught at the fabric of their minds...

The great maw opened and they heard the Mutation *speak*. The commencement of the End. The final moments of our Universe. With words that snuffed the cores of Galaxies.

"Where are they? Are they here? Who can tell me? Who?"



You might find yourself wondering why I'm starting here, after all that must be the end of the story. The last hankie from the sleeve. The final bow. The drop of the curtain rod.

In my younger days, before I became a Curator, there were times I contemplated answering that question. Throwing away the safeguards and letting the good Ship TARDIS rip through the continuum! Across the Void, beyond the Mind, to the empty space that circles Time! Just to see what was there. Ha! The folly of youth. I miss it. Yes, I do.

I never acted on the idea, of course. Just an idle thought that used to pass the short time between thwarting invasions and pulling off dazzling rescues. Well... Not until pushed, perhaps. She was a beautifully busy old thing, our Universe. When she was young. After a while, you know the sort, your planets begin to creak and your spatiotemporal fabric hurts for no reason. Now, as I curate my frankly extraordinary collection, I have a lot more time for such idle thoughts. But, this isn't an idea I need to contemplate any more.

Why? Well, because it's happening right now. What happens as a Universe ends? *This* is that story...

Now, on Vulpia... Vulpia. *Vulpia! Eh?*

Think of drums.

Think of thunder and rain.

Think of your arms flailing above the surface of a vast ocean.

Think of terror, each raindrop on this vast sheet of water, pushing you down.

Think of your lungs, burst, as they fill with water.

Think of Vulpia, again. A planet in what *was* the 41st-century. Such a flood is due to hit, there, in moments. The final walls are buckling as the Mutation, bobbing and swimming furiously onward, eats our Universe whole.

The Great Gulp.

We tend to think of Space as this terribly empty thing. A sea of black. Brigaded by small pinpricks of light. But such an imagining is difficult for the human mind to grasp. It's easier to think in far smaller terms. The smallest of creations.

Consider, for me, the humble daisy, eh?

A little ant is crawling up its stem to inspect its buds. It has no concept of warp matrix engineering, no notion of the occlusion that safeguards its world from Armageddon. Perhaps, it is joined by a bee. Equally oblivious, but no less industrious. She flitters through the æther with the dogged determination of her species.

Such small things, yes? Inconsequential things. And yet, without much pondering, it's easy to recognise that they are made of the same material as, say... Rocks! Yes, the humble limestone. That same matter could be found on an asteroid. Whizzing through space. *Whu-scheuu!* On its way to wipe out the dinosaurs. A little pebble to kick up one of the biggest dust clouds the Earth will likely ever see.

And from them, you get bigger still. Planets. Pirouetting on their orbit. Molten at the heart or icy to the core. Eventually, if you apply enough heat and pressure, these stellar gubbins can be transformed into the miraculous. A reactor brighter than the neutronic bombardment on Skaro. The sun! Burning with all the power of the solar system. It could turn all I've mentioned to cosmic dust, but instead, it grants beautiful, unequivocal *life*.

But to dust we must all return. From whence the Titans came, to hence the Titans must go.

That's the true measure of everything. Every cello and Galaxy. Every dawn. Every dusk. Every beam of light, patch of dark. Every good deed, act of evil. Every happy smile, miserable scowl. Every dollop of strawberry jam. Every slab of burnt toast...

It all feels it. That storm.

Even the scientific laws of our Universe aren't immune. Some are so rigid as to shatter immediately. Provoking the horror one might experience at the brutalisation of a stained-glass window. Some are warped and twisted into new hitherto unimagined shapes. Some break apart, slowly. Drifting, an embarrassed teenage couple caught out by their caregivers.

In all things, their remnants are pulled, inexorably, into that great maw. Chewed. Can you imagine that? Everything from a daisy to a sun. *Chewed!* Tossed and turned, scrambled up with everything else. Like so much chocolate *vol-au-vent*. *Engb.*

Nothing can escape the Mutation. Not a single thing. Oh, no.

Well... Maybe one thing. And, well... Maybe not *escape*, either.

Just survive. Yes. Survive. Maybe one just *can*.

I imagine you see this calamity sweeping out across our Universe in a tidal wave.

In truth, it's far more insidious than that.

Imagine the wall of a dam, I know a particularly fashionable one on Crokinole Dubious. Made of the sternest material you can fathom. Yes, even past that. It's an astonishing defiance of the natural laws of the planet. The gravity is four times what you'd expect on Earth. Nevertheless, it holds.

Much is made of this great creation. Its people praise its engineering and its engineers are no less awed by their miraculous achievement. Now, imagine one, a being of considerable years that takes to the inspection of the dam as they would a prized automobile that never leaves its garage.

There's a crack.

This can't be.

It towers above, a wall of sheer determination, higher than the sky itself—and there's a fissure. An architectural fault. A doubt. No larger than a pencil.

Under other circumstances, it would be almost æsthetic. The engineer, let's say they're you, is standing in the very pit of the basin. Looking up. A flat arc. It seems indomitable. No, it must *be* indomitable. The alternative would mean... It would mean...

It occurs to you and them that we've only been staring at part of the dam. This is not an outlier, but the beginning of a fashionable trend. The fissures and vents are multitudinous and mutinous. They're growing. In number, size and shape. Building, building, building... But it's not the edification of this edifice that they have in mind. Oh, no. It's its elimination.

The water stabs through the first crack. An admission of weakness behind so much blustering indestructible pride, but that's all it takes. The burst seems as inevitable as blood from a laser gunshot. When it bursts, it's as though Etra Prime has been dropped on ourselves. No time for screams. To cry out. It's a billiard ball dropped on a churchmouse from four stories up.

Terrible business... Terrible...

That, my dear, is what's happening on Vulpia right now. The trickle—that small tittle of danger—has turned into a gargantuan flood to rival the mythic tales of the inviolate writ.

The storming flood was stifled only by the legerdemean of renegades. On Vulpia, it was stemmed by my lovely past self—her eyes so full of stars—but it's not enough. This leaky faucet is one of many. It will annihilate our dear old Universe.

We have but one solace. The planet itself.

You see, the planet is now home to the City of Refuge. A myriad of people from across Space and Time. All come to perch on Ragnarok's doorstep. After all, best the enemy you know than the one slashing from the shadows.

They've been promised hope. Safety. But, looking up and out from the City at the fabric of Space, at the planet itself, torn to pieces around them—it suddenly feels all so terribly... *hollow*. As trouble arrives, all the unusual reactions of certain death rear their eyestems. Lethargy, looting, panic, blame, it's all there in equal measure. The stampede of footsteps has knocked aside a young Martian family, so far from home, taken to Vulpia aboard a refugee ship from the fleet outside Pemberton. They're resisting the temptation to look up. To see the cosmos they've known fray like a flutterwing-eaten sweater, but one catches sight of a blonde-haired woman. Between the crook of their mother's arms. She looks like a Tellurian, but runs with all the passion and focus of someone with a plan. A good plan.

It's the end... But my thirteenth self has prepared for this moment.

Below her, at the Dome, at the Adamant Locus dig-site, a man with short-black hair stands in awe.

This is the ninth me, a man who has just survived one horror, only to find himself thrust into the next. It should terrify him. Break him. But, it won't. There's too much at stake for such personal indulgences now.

He's surrounded by his other selves. Past, future and a few elsewhere. Each using their own brand of telepathy to carry out the most complex equations this dying Universe will ever know.

They will not give up. Cannot give up. This is the only way forward.

Above him, he can feel them. Their minds. Ntombizodwa explained that it was brought to the dig-site in the first wave of incarnations. A diamond-shaped Hypercube that shines with a bright array of colours.

It's a locus, a focal point, for their telepathic conference, but their minds have been swept clear to make way for a last desperate gamble.

The agent called it Sparkie. All the Doctors did. No one was quite sure why. Even fewer were prepared to admit that the Hypercube might have come up with the moniker itself.

The Ninth Doctor places a hand on a nearby TARDIS.

The minds are all chanting.

Chanting numbers.

He closes his mind and mutters, "*Contact!*"

Through the avenues and alleyways, the Thirteenth Doctor is sprinting for her lives.

There will be lives, hence, where such a thing isn't possible. For this one, however, well... The old man seems to have rubbed off on her. She's resisting the urge to smile. There's delicious irony in this final reckoning.

What else would I be doing at the end of everything, but running?

A particularly heady course correction causes her to slam into a beam on her armband.

"Cantul!" she yells. "How are we doing?"

The hologram materialises, bobbing at her shoulder. "Your-Your other s-selves are holding the Faraday shield, but it's using all the power we have left at the dig-site."

"All of it?"

"Every d-dr-drop."

"What about the Locus?"

“It seems-seems-seems to draw energ-g-gy from a dark energy converter.”

“Can’t you tap in?”

“Not without creating an explosion. The forces that have started hitting us are—”

“Unimaginable, I know!” A memory flitters across her consciousness. It’s an old one. It feels strangely disconnected from herself, but something about black light. Another form of dark energy. Black light, black sun, black holes... “Cantu, I want you to start drawing power from the TARDISES’ Eye of Harmony. All of them should have an equivalent, use it! My other selves will show you how!”

The hologram nods and vanishes.

In the telepathic congress of Sparkie, my ninth persona is greeted by a dizzying multitude of voices. All uttering numbers with the fierce concentration of a vulcanologist on the edge of an eruption. You can imagine them, if you like. The numbers. All flitting around each incarnation. Visible in the air.

The Ninth Doctor, poor dear, is at something of a loss; although, he finds it hard to admit such. This process has been going on in his absence for quite some time. Each numeral as temerarious as a flea on a cat’s tail. It’s gone beyond imaginary numbers into the realm of visionary numericals.

His confusion is registered in the discorporate conference by one of his closest number. Kin. His successor.

“*Molto bene!* I was wondering when you would show.” A friendly voice, breaking only for a moment from the daisy chain of numbers. “Doctor No. 10, at your service.”

“Ten?” His predecessor surveys him. “Well, the ears are an improvement, can’t argue that. Teenage hairstyle I could do without—”

“Oi!”

“It’s that pretence at youth that rankles me,” chimes in a deep, Scottish voice between his algorithms. “I’d have expected something more seasoned. Dignified. Took a while for you lot to get it right—”

“Stop fiddle-faddling about!” censures an earnest, older voice “Good gracious me. If those young schoolteachers could only hear you now. Focus! H’mmm? There are many lives at stake. All of them worth saving. Your Fleet Street gossip can wait!”

The Ninth Doctor recognises him. He’s both one of our eldest and youngest. One of the harder admissions of age, I fear, is that the old can be taught by the young, as much as the young by the old. It was a mistake to disregard the First Doctor’s advice.

“Right,” he echos.

My selves rarely take up arms, but to outwit a sea of troubles, something is necessary. We take up our minds. Brain above brawn. A fierce mental convection to weld shut the brutalised gutters of Time that gushed and flowed with the Mutation’s exotic matter.

It took only moments before my ninth self was lost in the mathematics. Desperate to forge and reforge the chains that bound the Faraday shield’s final layer of defence around Vulpia. A time bubble, he realised. To anchor the planet to that last skerrick of reality. Preserve it from the coming maelstrom.

My thirteenth self has arrived at the Adamant Locus by now.

She pushes through the last of the fright-field, recounting the last few names on her lips. “Graham... Ryan... Yaz.”

It’s not as strong as it was. Her other selves’ mental reserves are being pulled inward. She finds herself encircled by figures as still as the Terracotta Army. No, not an army... At her hearts, she would always be a scientist and an adventurer. A citizen of the Universe. Member to

everywhere and nowhere. If no club would have her, she'd build her own. No tyrants allowed.

She feels them. Her other selves. Their every thought—waking or sleeping—is being used for the calculations. From the chaos outside, she expects to walk into a melee to rival Barbarossa's slaughter in the Third Crusade. Here, it was dead quiet.

The breathlessness in her chest is half-exertion, half-astonishment.

Her stroll to the centre of the site, past a stoic young cricketer, his face in pain, and a short man, frozen with a recorder *buiggzzz*-ing, tunelessly, in his mouth. The ankle of her boot coils around an outrageously long scarf. It harries her footsteps.

As she tries to shake it off, she dares a glimpse of Sparkie.

The brightness of the Hypercube is dazzling now.

The Doctor will be the last, she knows. The last to have seen the Universe as it once was.

A single, clear voice. "*Contact!*"

The numbers are frantic now. It's like stepping unprotected into a kicked-over hornet's nest. The telepathic representation of the Thirteenth Doctor is almost knocked over by the sheer force of will her other selves are exerting within Sparkie. She takes a moment to find her focus and then joins the calculation.

All the Doctors focus on the numbers...

The numbers and the numbers...

Nothing but the numbers.

Traskey wants to be above the Dome. To see the Mutation as it crushes the sky, but her place is here in the dig-site. To monitor if

anything should go wrong. She's keeping watch on the TARDISEs. Each is dematerialising in turn. Dandelions turned to seed.

One shape, a police box, rematerialises at the very base of the Adamant Locus. Logical, she recognises. The TARDISEs will all situate themselves at key geological points throughout the crust and atmosphere of Vulpia. One wrong move, one maladjustment, and the planet would crack as surely as they'd used an Earthshock bomb.

Traskey feels her ferrofluidic form ripple with the quaking world. An impossibility under other circumstances, but these are dire times.

She needn't interface with the minds of the other TARDISEs to know their thoughts. The Quadrigger knows her subject well enough. Some welcome her as a familiar presence in a web of catastrophic unknowns. Others resent her for precisely the same cause and reason.

The minds of the time-ships are as diverse as their pilots. There is desperation and dignity in equal measure. One TARDIS, a pyramid, she can't tell which, chooses that critical moment to elope in a lapse of cowardice, but Time brings it back to the chamber in a font of dead smoke and dying flame.

The next step, the very next step, will require the equivalent of several-hundred supernovæ to remain stable. Such stellar manipulation, she believes, hasn't been attempted since the days of the War.

Traskey is scared. Not for herself, but for the Ships around her. They've been through a lot for their respective Doctors. Not many among them would complain for that. Their pain, however, is their own. A strange kismet shared between TARDIS and Quadrigger.

A part of her indefatigability crumples. She wishes she could bundle them all up into her arms like tafelshrews. Tears are unbecoming, but she cannot stop herself from trembling. Just waiting for the end to come.

Outside, the Faraday shield of Vulpia is being battered.

The eel-like Voord, sharpening their blades, spot the extrapolator unravelling. Vulpia is given a spectacular fireworks display rivalled, in the minds of the frightened Martian family, only by the induction of the Princess Lixxgar of Mars. Draconian peasants, absconding from their Lord, freeze in their tracks when they see the ionic membrane crack and shatter. A rudimentary transduction barrier, its neon-blue reflecting off a startled Kraal and her android, popped like a bubble.

The sky is ablaze with the scientific remnants of a hundred civilisations.

All that stands between the planet and death, now, are the Doctors.

Among the spent matchsticks, Diamant observes the inferno from the graveside.

A fractal being of so many forms and powers, beyond anyone's conception of what is and isn't possible in Creation... And they've never felt so powerless. They are barely visible, just another exile wandering through the avenues of Vulpia. Their ever-loyal companion, Basillius Creel, follows in silence behind.

They can feel the effects, the tug-of-war between the Mutation and the Doctors, and come to one terrible conclusion.

"It's not enough," they say.

Even ensconced in their telepathic chorus, the Doctors can feel it, too.

In their cores, they know there are flaws in their equations.

They feared as much earlier. Gallifrey, for all its faults, overlooked the temporal touchstones of the Logopolitans, the Event Synthesiser, and

even sought a pact with the Lords of Althrace, precisely because of their startling power.

These were cultures, whole civilisations, who the Time Lords stood upon at the summit for their supremacy. The top of the house of cards was nothing without its foundations. The Doctors had none. They only had themselves.

An occasional lapse in synchronicity. The odd pause to regain focus after a quake. Catching up to the rest. Slowing down for much the same. It all contributed to the wrong digit in the mix. Minute flaws. Things that a schoolteacher like the Chestertons might forgive.

Unfortunately, the forces hitting Vulpia will not.

The flaws in their combined equations are gaps in the Faraday shield. Unreality in all its manic slew is pouring through. Doubt is beginning to mount, slowing their progress even further.

My fifth self, a noble young man doomed to forever be let down by an unkind universe, can sense the discord among his fellows. The slight dampening of hope—he shares it, too.

“Brave heart, Doctors!” the Fifth Doctor yells. “We have to keep trying!”

At his side is my third self. Silver-white with a striking nose. He perhaps seemed so invincible for all the terrors that he met with unflinching calm. He’s longed for so many years to step foot on another world on his own terms. He has it now—he will not lose it again.

“As the young fellow says!” bellowed the Third Doctor. “Where there’s life, there’s hope! Nothing can stop us until we’re destroyed!”

And there really is no other option. Nothing but these equations are capable of building a stable occlusive shield around Vulpia.

Nothing.

Vulpia is warping as the unreality seeps through.

The light hitting the surface—from a star, inevitably doomed—begins shifting throughout the colour spectrum. It’s as if the light were being refracted by an invisible disco-ball. High in the sky.

Under these strange beams, refugees see their foodstuffs blossom as potatoes sprout into fully-grown plants. Carrots, likewise, bury themselves back into the ground. Little regard considered for those in the way. Life, all manner of life, is travelling both forever onward and backward. Simultaneously.

It’s all frighteningly peculiar, and First Rank Ntombizodwa does not like peculiar things.

She would be down in the dig-site, as well, but she’s been waylaid. An altercation with a drunken Sontaran has torn the collar of her uniform. She’s attempting to tie it back together with the torn fabric. Like her fathers used to do when she was young. She remembers the pinch on the cheek, the head shaking, but light and friendly, “Zodwa,” that came as admonishment.

She’s been put in charge of security, not by rank or by special assignment, but purely through happenstance. It’s a coincidental promotion. And it’s been up to her to sort out the muddle. To wit, keep the refugees safe, keep the peace. Deal with the threats here and now, whilst the Doctors deal with the cosmic. A deal she was willing to sign up for. After all, that was her job.

But this—*adub*—this is not what she expected at all.

She is standing in the lane, which is now largely empty, as few are enjoying the spectacle above. This is giving her a wonderfully clear view of the bizarreness unfolding. Furniture is marching from the tents. Tables and chairs walking. Impossible.

She turns a corner and looks down another lane. But it's the same lane. And she can see at its end, the back of a very familiar uniform. Not a fellow agent... Not a superior, subordinate or anyone in between. It's her own. Impossible.

A hologram flickering to life on her shoulder breaks her astonishment.

"Have you got a minute?" asks Cantu with excruciating politeness.

She's trying to maintain her statuesque cool. "By all means, but don't rush me..."

"None of my readings are making sense. The data's jumbled. I've had to disable climate management. Some of the readings say some of the colony is scorching and some is freezing. What's going on up there?"

"Ask the Doctors!" She has to pull the next statement from deep in her throat. "None of this makes any sense to me, either..."

"They're not answering!"

"Then try Traskey." Ntombizodwa spits at the ground in frustration. "I don't understand any of this any more!"

Clutching tight to the side of the Adamant Locus, Traskey can feel the subtle shifts in the world around her.

The laws of physics in one corner of her room are now moving slightly away from the laws of physics in the other. The ground beneath her feet is hardening and cracking, as if it just experienced a thousand years of walking within moments. Her glasses are smudged. With what she has no idea.

It's everything the Time Lords stood against. The undoing of everything. Every instinct of hers is screaming—this is *wrong*.

A wheezing, groaning sound suddenly roars.

"This is it," she braces.

The TARDISEs are calling upon their engines to anchor the planet around them, forcing it to play by their rules. Brute force to stop the tide washing away the Laws of Time and Space as they knew it.

But the Quadrigger knows every subtlety of every sound a TARDIS engine makes. Those engines cannot last long like that. Traskey squeezes her eyes tight, her body juddering against the quaking world. She can't imagine her last sight, her last smell, the last sound...

“Come on, Doctor,” she whispers. “*Come on!*”

What do you imagine your last sight will be? You alone? The last smell? The last sensation on your skin? What your ears hear in perfect clarity? What will you feel?

In all this grand milieu of minds and voices, you might be able to see my first certainty—the First Doctor. His flowing white hair crowns a proud, imperious face, with more than a touch of old-fashioned cunning.

The last thoughts of his mind are focused on our granddaughter, Susan. What is happening around him now runs contrary to all expectations of the Universe. Someone has robbed them of their destiny by extinguishing the stars themselves. But he stands, hands on his lapels, chin upturned, defiant of the inevitable and unenviable end.

The First Doctor's mind is on the numbers, but each reading cannot help but bring forward a nostalgic memory of Susan. Her own readings by the console. As they often did when preparing the Ship for materialisation.

He wouldn't allow himself to interfere in her own happiness on the Earth. That decision, discussed with Barbara and Chesterton, had been the correct one. Still... It pained him. Occasionally, he would be scrutinising the instrumentation of the Ship and her absence would catch him unawares. An ache of longing in his chest. It remained with

him on Venus, in Alexandria, Islington and even aboard the TARDIS itself.

He wished she were here. By his side.

Ah, but then...

At this point, his mind slides to another thought, as slick as a polished floor.

My snappishness at this point in our lives comes from fear. Simple fear. Fear of discovery by the Time Lords and the knowledge of what our transgression will cost us. Few want to die. Even less want to disappear entirely.

I've yet to warm to the Earth enough to consider it home. Home... It feels like such a tainted word. The TARDIS is his home, but back among the burnt-orange skies and bright-silver leaves are still those old memories of the House. Where I was spurned and rejected, annulled from memory for failing to dance to another being's tune.

A recurring defiance of my lives, to be sure...

He, however, is caught on the memory of a daisy that was pointed out to him by an old hermit up Mount Lung. It was my blackest day, you know, after the previous night... Among the grey rocks, gnarled weeds and oozy snow. One of the worst moments of my lives, even now, but I shan't dwell too deeply on that.

He remembers pouring our troubles out to him. All the injustice and cruelty that had been inflicted. I remember all those words... Every emotion and shaking fury. And in reply? The Hermit said nothing. Not a word. Just pointed to that daisy. Something I'd laughed at, until I'd looked closer. Genuinely and earnestly. In truth, it is still the daisiest daisy I've ever encountered. Beautiful like a perfectly cut jewel, like the truest of love, like happiness and contentment, and the warmth of knowing yourself true.

It changed my view on the Universe. All that grey turned to colour. The tones and tinctures of brilliant rubies, warm cocoa, shrewd amethysts and gilded harps. I could see it, to be sure, but I didn't quite *see* it as I did from then on.

It's such a transient moment, isn't it?

That daisy is long since gone.

The silver forests of Gallifrey, unlike her Earthly cousin, control the weather. With the accuracy and temperance of a pocket watch. Spring comes with creeping certainty, but so does autumn and winter. That beautiful jewel of a flower has long-since perished with the passage of Time.

And yet...

Memory. Eh?

So long as there are those to remember it... The daisiest daisy never dies.

It can survive the coldest winters, the harshest summers, cross the span of entire Galaxies, and never grow a moment older than in that memory.

My first self is realising that now and he's starting to giggle. At the end of all things, the death of all I've ever known, I'm chortling. It will be the last thing he, alone, feels in this Universe before the end.

The daisiest daisy...

The image ripples through the assembled Doctors like a stone skipped across the surface of a pond. It's innocuous at first. A distraction. The daisiest daisy, yes, the Platonic epitome of its kind. One single entity representing so much of who I am...

"I have an idea!" several hundred Doctors exclaim at once.

Among me, is this mad gabble of thoughts. It's mad. Bad. Impossible. Ludicrously dangerous. And it may just *work*.

The last of my incarnations to join this particular assembly lets her voice be heard loud and proud. “The Doctoriest Doctor! All of us. Together. A gestalt organism with no loss of synchronisation. No errors in mathematics. All of our will, knowledge and wisdom combined to solve these last equations!”

“*Ha! Ha!* Brilliant! But how, *b’mm?*” wonders my fourth self, goggle-eyed. “All we have is that in this chamber.”

She beams. “The Hypercube! Sparkie!”

“*A’oh, la vache!* The Matrix! Course!” exclaims the Tenth Doctor. “We use the same principle used for all Time Lords after their final regeneration—”

“—plug our consciences into Sparkie wholesale and work in a pool,” his successor, the Eleventh Doctor, finished. “How do we do that?”

“Yes, without mass suicide?” the Second Doctor trembles.

“Sheer force of will!” answers the Ninth Doctor. “Like on Skylab—”

The Third Doctor interjects, “Or Omega’s anti-matter Universe?”

“Psychosynthesis?” asks the Fifth.

The First Doctor nods. “Quite so!”

“Yes. *We* get to set the boundaries of our bubble.” The Ninth. “*C’est tout?*”

“Nice I know what I’m on about!” the Thirteenth Doctor congratulates. “Y’think it has merit?”

“Of course, my dear.” My third self catches his fifth self’s expression. “Fifth thoughts?”

“It would mean giving up a great deal,” mutters the Fifth Doctor. “Our entire individuality, potentially any hope of a coherent timeline again.”

“Obviously!” exclaims the Second Doctor. “But, I—*ah*... *Oh*, well, chin up, it might be the only way!”

“It *can* be done, *h’mmm!*” The First Doctor places a hand on his lapel. “And if it saves all on and above Vulpia, or preserves even a small vestige of life, here, then it’s what *must* be done. Caution to the wind. The continued existence of these people is far more valuable than our own. Now, come along, *concentrate!*”

“Concentrate.” My thirteenth self can feel it, even in the Hypercube. The grind of the lever as the time tracks begin to reset. She’s about to die. They all are. “There’s nowhere left to hide from Time.”

The word stretches out through the telepathic conference. Across the mindscape, the same conclusion was met among the hundreds of other renegades, inventors, scientists and wanderers.

The last thoughts of the Great Gulp. “*Concentrate!*”

Building upon itself...

Building...

Until...



The telepathic cry, as the Hypercube tesseract shattered, was heard
in the Adamant Locus's dig-site.

We must be one...! We must be one...! We must be one...!

Across the City of Refuge of the planet Vulpia.

Must be one...! Must be one...! Must be one...!

In Diamant's Folly, occluded among spacecraft and satellites in the
world's orbit.

Be one...! Be one...! Be one...!

By the divisive hunters, in Division Control, that crawled in from
the solar system's furthest reaches.

One...! One...! One...!

To the edge of destruction—the Mutation itself.

One.

The time track reset. The Doctor was gone.

And left behind was...



THUS SPAKE BOB

**THUS SPAKE BOB: PART I
THE SPARKLING DOCTORS**



by Alan Camlann, AFJ Kernow and Sherlock

“Where are they? Are they here? Who can tell me? Who?”

Have you ever thought what it's like...?

To be wanderers in the Fourth Dimension...?

Have you...?

To be...

The last sparking scream of consciousness.

Have you ever thought what it's like to be wanderers in the fourth dimension? Have you? To be exiles? Some corners of the Universe which have bred the most terrible things, things which act against everything we believe in. They must be fought. Well, of course it was true! Before I was stranded on Earth, I spent all my time exploring new worlds and seeking the wonders of the universe. Can't? Can't? There's no such word as 'can't'! For some people, small, beautiful events are what life is all about! The oldest civilisation. Decadent. Degenerate. And rotten to the core. Power mad conspirators, Daleks, Sontarans, Cybermen! They're still in the nursery compared to us...!

The hushed silence of Division Control.

Aboard that ship of divisive hunters was a room isolated from all existence.

In it, stood two. A column forged from what looks like pillowed lava, taloned in veins of emerald-green. Glowing. At its side, perhaps all sides of it, as this is the nature of the room, was a being that could be mistaken for an old woman.

Her hair was white, sprouting from her scalp like a taunting flame. Her mouth, as it moved, seemed partitioned off from the expression in the rest of her features.

The eyes were dark. In certain measures of light they seemed to turn jet-black. There was a small asterism of light at their centres. The tiniest pressure of madness against two vast Galaxies of sanity.

The woman was known to Diamant as Awsok. Unknown to them, but perhaps suspected, she held the gravitas of those from the Old Times. Beings whose steps through the causal plane of Space felt like a small indulgence to whosoever was viewing them. The flex of the bear's claws before it carved its victim's face from its skull.

She was dangerous, and aware of such a fact, but her priorities were presently on the small object at the top of the pillar before her. The

synesthetic silver poplar. A miniature tree only half her height, yet absorbing more than twice her attention.

In Awsok's left hand were a pair of laser pliers.

She began her pruning, simply...

Quiet. On Vulpia, people were still afraid to go outside.

The Doctor had many names and titles. Many guises.

They were words. Just words. But they wriggled around the time-traveller like woodlice—*Snail, Theta Sigma, Grandfather, I.M. Foreman, the Lord of Misrule, Ka Faraq Gatri, John Smith, Quiquaquod, the Evil One, Lord President, the King's Demon, the Sandman, Claudius Dark...*

And that was in the lives that remained before the collapse. There were many more hence, stretching back, forth and sideways—*Time's Champion, Doctor Omega, Eighth Man Bound, the Stranger, Doc Gallifrey, the Timeless Child, Tardis Tales, the Other, the Evergreen Man, the Sheriff, the Lonely God, Muldwych, the Emperor, the Curator, Nyarlathotep, Belot'ssar, Merlin, the One, the Valeyard...*

To name only a few.

Each, once, a fragment of a much larger being.

Only Sparkie, now, was left on Vulpia.

The one and the many. At once. Some large part of the gestalt lamented that there hadn't been time enough to address anything but the essentials on Vulpia. Scarcely that. All their—her?—focus had been on providing enough resources that the City of Refuge could take care of itself. Ntombizodwa and the Space Security Service had helped with relief aid and some general policing, but the reality was that infrastructure developed too quickly, too thoroughly, for them to keep track of everyone and everyone's business.

The Doctors had intervened in the City of Refuge, as was their

nature, but eventually, everyone came to the dig-site. The chorus that thrived within Sparkie now was testament to every incarnation—irrespective of motive—contributing to a continued notion of the bigger picture.

Still... As Sparkie wandered, lonely as a cloud, the avenues and alleyways of the City were strikingly sparse. There were movements. Here and there. On the fringes, when the inhabitants thought no one was looking, but it was all so cloistered. Far more hushed than in the furore that led up to this quiet.

Sparkie still couldn't quite believe it had worked. How much time had passed since the... What were they calling it now? The Great Gulp? They'd never been the best at keeping track of Time. Even when there was a continuum to worry about. Or had they been? Were they better than most? Worse than average?

They sighed. Which way was up? Why did it matter...?

It wasn't the questions that riled them, nor the lack of conclusive answers, it was the contradictions within their own self. Wasn't there anything they could feel comfortable with? Agree upon in unison?

The novelty of becoming Sparkie, it seemed, certainly hadn't worn off. True? True, enough.

A Sparkle of Doctors... Persisting beyond the end of the Universe...

Those final moments of Creation amid so much destruction were a blur for the newborn gestalt. They remembered the Doctors. All those minds, pouring themselves into the Hypercube to become one entity. They'd shattered it with their sheer telepathic volume. Become... Something else.

But Vulpia survived, that was the most important thing. Vulpia *lived*.

So, what were people afraid of?

A voice behind them asked, "*Penny for your thoughts?*"

The gestalt turned in much the same way a cirrostratus might on a blustery day.

“What are you doing here?” they asked.

“Same thing as you,” said Diamant.

“Wandering?”

“And wondering.”

Awsok twinged the pliers in her hand. These poplars had a tendency to grow more dominantly in the central stem, than at their sides. A survival trait that enabled the tree to grow higher than its peers and avoid being caught under their competing shade.

Admirable. Nevertheless...

The timestream she had mapped to its branches—a necessary measure, one might call cruel—was already flexing its lines.

She continued small, clipped at another twig...

Diamant sat on the roof of a portable advertising saucer. Empty now with all its remote wi-fi. They reclined sideways like a cat stretching in the sun. A leg dangling over the five-metre drop.

“We’re not familiar with this form,” said Diamant.

“It’s a fusion,” Sparkie answered. “Before the power in this overstuffed Hypercube fades, all the minds contained within can create a Watcher. A sentient manifestation of... me. All of them.”

“Forgive Us, shouldn’t it, therefore, look like you?”

“Am I that much of an egotist?”

“We weren’t going to say anything.”

“A Watcher is a form of potential. A potential next regeneration.

When you layer one over the over, thick enough, it all becomes a well-favoured blur.” The cloud swivelled. “Where’s your little Creel, Basillius?”

“Every great performer needs a noble stagehand. He’s busy with another project for Us. We hope you don’t mind, we’re using the dig-site of the Adamant Locus.”

“Oh? Did Traskey send you to find me?”

“We came of our own volition.” The fractal-form swayed an arm.

“I’ll admit... It takes a bit of getting used to having a largely non-corporeal body.” Sparkie’s voice was a quiet chorus like a congregation gossiping between reciting prayers. “I’ve travelled the Astral Plane often enough to know the consequences of prolonged exposure to such a thing.”

“For a Time Lord, not for you...” challenged Diamant.

“I’m a disembodied intelligence and everything we ever knew has ceased to exist. Let me have my small certainties, please. It’s all I have left.”

“Where is everyone?”

The cloud wafted. “You expected them to be dancing the streets?”

“With dignity and cheer.” Diamant clapped their hands. “No. Not really.”

“It’s only natural, really, I suppose,” floated Sparkie. “Everyone contemplates what they’re going to do before the end of the Universe. The Z-bomb dropping. Then, when it all comes crashing down, they don’t expect to be standing in the rubble afterwards.”

“How true. We’re certainly in, what I believe the Tellurians called, a pickle.” Diamant’s legs kicked against a liquid-crystal display of static. Strange rainbows cast across the square. “However, you cannot exist for long in your current form. We shall source from the stable source

of biodata within you a more useful body.”

“Useful?” steamed the gestalt.

“Now, do not get set in your ways. Not now.”

“I wouldn’t know where to start...” Sparkie acquiesced. “Fine. That would be helpful, a sparkling cloud is a bit limiting.”

“Right...” Diamant slid down through the air, resting their feet on the floor. “Here goes something.”

Their fractal form grew in size and multi-coloured tendrils reached into the heart of the cloud. Gently, they examined the biodata core at the centre of the sparkling, fizzing entity.

“*Ooh, that tickles...*” Sparkle quavered. “*Good gracious. Oh, my word. Now, now... Ob-ho-ha... Pfft... Thbbt...*”

Other discordant exclamations sputtered between the pulses of colour that radiated outwards from the cloud’s interior. Showers of electric sparks cascaded onto the ground. Gradually, like shaping a pot from an amorphous lump of clay, a form began to take shape.

“We don’t suppose anyone will be needing this...” With a spare hand, Diamant plucked the floating advertising saucer from the air and began reshaping it like a balloon animal. Fodder for this new form.

Unseen, inside the emerging new lifeform—a pearl containing the Doctor’s precious biodata at its heart. Created as though by thousands of years of heat and pressure in an attosecond. The memories and personality transferred onto miniaturised solid-state quettadrives of pure silica. One for each incarnation. Held within an organic mainframe. Hundreds, if not thousands of storage devices. Diamant extruded the protoplasmic cloud into a crude, lumpy approximation of a humanoid figure. The frame was constructed of a diamond-infused skeleton and quasicrystalline musculature.

“Reminds Us of a poorly-realised Auton...”

“*Mmph-mm-mbnn-mpph.*”

“You’ll have to keep still.”

The head appeared initially as a grotesque parody of a human face. Crystalline lumps of sapphire stared out of the roughly hewn visage. Not helped by the lumpy skin with a sparkly sheen, like glitter.

Rudimentary sensory organs augmented by Diamant could see into the infra- and ultra- ends of the visible spectrum. Sparkie’s hearing enhancement was now more akin to a highly-sensitive microphone. Capable of hearing a pin drop in a crowded room.

Finally, a telepathic matrix enabled transmission of thought into speech.

Diamant withdrew their presence from the psychosynthetic organism to admire their work. They crossed their arms, scratching what could’ve been interpreted as their mouth.

“*Ob.*” They winced. “*Ob... Obhh! Ob...* No. No, maybe not.”

“That bad, is it?” glittered Sparkie.

“Practical, but not altogether pretty We’re afraid.”

“Pity, I rather have to live with it.” Sparkie stretched an arm. “*H’mm.* Too short. No time to create an artistic masterpiece?”

“It’s not all sorrow. A fractal fashionista like Ourselves has a standard to maintain. Give Us a twirl. Show Us your moves.”

“What do you think I am? Sparky’s Magic Piano? You’d think that a few millennia’s worth of lifetimes would... it would... would you...?” The latent Doctors’ voices plucked, fluctuated and wavered like an autotuned vocoder. “*Ob*, no—Pon my soul—Good gracious—Fantastic—Oh, marvellous—Heavens above—*Ob*, *no...!*”

“You *sound* like Sparky’s Magic Piano, We’d wager.” Diamant was trying their utmost to hold in their amusement. “Could you play a tune for Us?”

The result was a discordant hiss of tones that could've been a polypersonal '*Feb!*' and a laugh. Arms outstretched, Sparkie tried walking in an unsteady gait. Up and down the dusty surface of Vulpia. Perambulation was always the trickiest part of any regen—

They stopped. Hopped on one foot. Then, the other.

“You know how much I've missed the sound of my own footsteps?” asked Sparkie.

“We couldn't leave you in a gaseous state, you would have dissipated.” Diamant stepped up beside them and began mimicking their movements. “This form... It's not permanent, either, but it will last far longer...”

“How long? Long enough for what?”

“We...” Diamant stopped.

Somehow, in the movement of the shoulders, Sparkie was able to convey concern. “Well, what, Diamant?”

“We just don't know.” They unfolded their arms. “Time is quite literally what we make of it. It could be a few weeks, a couple of months, a year, at the most. If you're lucky.”

“I'll have to make the most of it, won't I?”

Awsok's eyes were black with fascination. So... More drastic measures *would* have to be employed.

Thickened growth had formed on the top and outer edges of the synesthetic silver poplar. The inner branches were dying, while its summit was growing out of all proportion. They'd turned grey—an ashen Skaro-grey—and came away freely with a pluck of Awsok's fingers.

“Look at the damage you've wrought to the timestreams...” she marvelled. “Perhaps, it *is* possible...”

Grey, grey, grey... She looked closer.

“Now, that does *not* please me...” She snipped, again. “There.”

The desirable limbs had atrophied and still, despite everything, those unæsthetic branches *thrived*. Unbound, their web of leaves expanded in unconstrained new and previously unseen shoots.

Awsok attacked one of the branches. It grew back. She stabbed at them, again...

Sparkie clambered, unsteadily, but with determination, up onto the remnants of the advertising saucer.

“Where to begin, after the end?” they asked.

A multitude of gestures passed across their body in half-a-moment.

Sparkie raised their voice, “Well... I won’t tell you that you can’t imagine it. Can’t imagine how many civilisations I’ve met at their respective ends. You are, after all, living such an existence right now. You are crowded and clustered in your own homes, in the homes that you’ve made, because it feels so much more secure than venturing outside. You’ve heard so much about the terrors that lay beyond. The savagery and primitivism. The atavistic thoughts of those outside your little world. Some say the very beginning of any challenge is difficult. Rubbish, sir. Quite rubbish! And I shall prove it, I want you to come from your homes, h’mm...? Just one will do. Anyone at all.”

The note of authority and certainty drew an Oblivioner, a noble judging by his animalistic rhinocerotid features, to a nearby loading ramp.

“Come along, come along...” urged Sparkie. “That’s the style.”

Another joined her. An Alpha Centauri, their paint brushes held in their multitudinous green arms like pagan wards. Behind them, a Naran with deer-like features. Too short to see over them. All looking for the

one in the spotlight, all managing to become the one, same.

“There are those who say it’s difficult to begin,” repeated Sparkie. “Blazes, I say. What’s difficult is sticking to it. Now, you there, the young lady... Yes, you—madam, could I ask you to take another step? Into the light there.”

The Lupar Pel’s features regarded Sparkie, warily, but moved with considerable caution outside. Into the middle of the empty thoroughfare. She tensed for a moment. The unique colouring of a Lupari and native of Peladon, both, zagged through her fur, but then, she settled.

Nothing happened to her.

Nothing at all.

She lingered, hesitating.

“Now, comes the tricky part. Like a yo-yo, you’re probably feeling an intense feeling to return. To move back into your home. Am I right?” There were teeth attached to that question somehow. “What I ask of you now... Is to just stand there. Stand.” A lighter tone, like a farmhouse in spring. “How does it feel? Tell us, honestly.”

The Lupar Pel looked around.

“Fine,” she answered in a small voice.

That seemed to relax her.

A bolt of expression struck at Sparkie from afar. Diamant could recognise it more readily than the others. They’d spent time enough with that incarnation in the Folly to know. Did that mean...?

“I’m going to move over to you? Is that quite alright?” inquired Sparkie.

The canine-hominid nodded.

“Splendid!” The gestalt stumbled over, a jester on stilts, without a seeming care in the Universe. “Will you join me by the remains of that

saucer, there? I had an easy time getting here, but I shan't wager my chances going back."

She nodded, again, and followed Sparkie, hobbling in their unsteady half-dance, back to the centre of the square.

Sparkie sat down next to Diamant, watching the situation unfold with their characteristic fascination, and scratched the chin of the air at their knee.

Patiently waiting.

Having shook herself from the ruins of Diamant's Folly, Mel discovered the Doctor sitting on the porch steps. He contemplated the sky, while scratching the chin of that peculiar amethyst cat which stalked the grounds.

"Beautiful, isn't it, Mel?" he said, without turning his gaze away.

The eerie light from above refracted in the cat's crystalline surface. The sky resembled an upturned cauldron. Not so much clouds and nebulae, but a swirling morass of sand and broken glass in a tumble dryer.

She didn't agree, but said, instead, "If you say so, Doctor."

"Everything we've ever known is lost, but the patterns of this cosmic debris..." He paused. "Quite remarkable in their own way."

The young programmer shifted uncomfortably. The Doctor liked the macabre. A little too much for Mel's own liking, but she supposed it was part of his fascination for life. To understand life, one had to understand death. The Doctor had been around long enough to even appreciate its own form of beauty. Mel didn't get it, but that hardly mattered.

"Are both of you just going to pass the time stargazing?" sighed Mel.

“And daydreaming. Of places far away. I don’t see what else there is to do. You know... If radio signals, broadcast into deep space, can be heard potentially millennia later... I wonder if the same is true for our thoughts?”

“Thoughts?”

“Yes. Little things. Pride. Love. Hate. Fear. We seem to have a lingering bubble of protection, but that won’t last forever. The House is hardly safe, nor has it anything useful. In the end, it could only be our thoughts that linger on through eternity...” He rubbed at the light knife-scar on his throat. “Oh, how I miss my poor TARDIS...”

Mel shifted, restlessly. “Surely, we could try to reach out somehow. For other survivors?”

“That rather assumes there are any...” He wasn’t condemning her, just stating facts.

She sat beside him, her hands between her knees. “You’re getting as bad as the Valeyard.”

“He and I are of the same mind...”

“He’s out there, you know. I found him. Raging against the dying of the light.”

“Yes, I heard. ‘Cowards die many times before their death...’”

“‘The valiant never taste of death but once’.”

He sunk his head onto one hand. “I suppose they taught you Shakespeare in school.”

“No...” She laughed, softly. “You did. I learnt that from you.”

That caught his attention. He pulled his gaze from the maelstrom and looked at her.

“Doctor...” She smiled. “Come on... Whatever happened to whilst there’s life there’s hope?”

It was odd. The Doctor and the Valeyard. Two sides of a double-headed coin. The latter slid through conversation with the ease of velvet through a loop. He could topple kings with a word and the flash of a stiletto if he chose. The Valeyard had even managed to make her laugh now and again. In their time together, however, she’d never seen him so furious. Cold, yes. Charming, she could concede. Never, however, so *angry*.

The Doctor, in contrast, was at the lowest she’d ever seen him. She’d expected a railing tirade. A fiercely-conceived plan. *Something*. This ebb was reminiscent of their journey aboard the *Hyperion III*. The time-traveller had known, he said later, what was due to transpire. The terrible loss of life. The only consolation he had was the possibility of renewal. The preservation of a single Vervoid leaf. Gently modified to remove that instinct driven mad by Laskey’s genetic manipulation.

He was still looking at her. Bluebird eyes. “You really are indomitable, aren’t you, Melanie?”

Mel smiled. What she liked about the Doctor, though, was she could see through his insistence of fatalism. He assured her it was an innate characteristic of himself. Irrespective of time. Mel couldn’t believe that and, fortunately, when the chips were down... Neither did the Doctor.

He rubbed his hands together. “Well, I suppose the best we could do is some kind of telepathic pulse. Myself and the Valeyard are telepathic enough to do that. Though whether anyone will hear such a tiny call in that storm above us is another matter...”

“Well, come on, then! It’s a start!” Mel enthused.

“Yes.” The Doctor beamed. “Yes, it’s a start!”

The Lupar Pel looked around at the City of Refuge, all her fellow travellers lingering on the margins of their world. So many faces. All patiently waiting.

Waiting for what?

It occurred to her that she didn't have a good answer.

“Well, come on, then!” called the Lupar Pel. “It's alright now. What are we waiting for? We're alive!”

Her voice was low and gruff like the bark of a dog. It could have belonged to anyone. Anyone at all.

It was all the impetus that the peoples of the City of Refuge needed.

As the square began to fill, Sparkie smiled to herself.

Awsok's clippers were sounding more and more like the snap of Rassilon's fingers. Mocking.

Diamant's curtailment of the Doctor's timestream had caused the Universe unimaginable harm, allowing a monstrosity to break through those precious barriers between life and oblivion. For Awsok, however, the process was anything but wasteful. Like an effective weed-killer, it had shown her what was possible in this tired old continuum.

Nevertheless, she lacked *control*. The synesthetic silver poplar was filled with branches that competed with the treeline, crossing branches, even branches that returned to the centre of the tree. The Doctor's timestream, caught at the moment of oblivion, was still filled with grotesque distortions. Growing. Even now.

“Quite typical of you, Doctor.” Awsok was tutting to herself. “You've yet to understand... Your 'good', such as you call it, is the enemy of the perfect. This one... *Ab...*”

There was no other choice. She plucked her staser from a sleeve. Narrowed its sights. A white flash severed the bough, all its sprouting

leaves and shoots, from the small poplar...

Whilst below them the people of Vulpia began slowly populating the streets, Sparkie sat on a roof and studied the sky with a telescope. An old thing from the depths of one of the two remaining TARDISES in the dig-site. Someone important had given it to the Doctor; though which one Sparkie wasn't sure. The memories of all the incarnations in the gestalt were hard to distinguish from one another.

A flash of recognition occurred as a new piece of the former Universe caught their eye. Sparkie had taken to noting what they recognised down in a little notebook they'd acquired; never knew what might prove handy.

They did, of course, record each new sighting in their cavernous memory storage. The notebook? More than merely an affectation, a physical record of their experiences. An aide-memoire for others to read too, should their new avatar collapse into a broken heap.

Page 1 of said notebook was filled with scribbblings on what Sparkie had coined "the Problem". An understatement of cosmic proportions. It described the situation as best they understood it. The story so far, a sentiment they rather liked.

Once upon a time—and singularly, supported by relative dimensions—a vortex turtle, driven into the fringes of existence, had been forced out into the void, by the demise of the *Odysseum*.

It took a battering of radiation, exotic matter and the dying regenerative energies of Traskeya as it did. It, and the Universe it carried, had mutated. Become an all consuming morass.

As the Mutation, it had grown hungry, as well as desperate. Diamant's blunder with Time had enabled it to swallow the Universe whole, and now the rest of the Multiverse was next on the menu.

That was the Problem. A solution still eluded Sparkie, but putting it down in its basics at least made it seem solvable.

“The impossible we can do at once. Miracles take a wee bit longer,” their inhuman voice intoned. They looked down at the streets; at the refugees waking up to their new reality and getting on with it—happy to simply be alive!

Sparkie smiled. “But whilst there’s life...”

THUS SPAKE BOB: PART 2
THERE'S HOPE ON TIME'S LIFEBOAT



by Alan Camlann, AFJ Kernow and Sherlock

A n otherwise hidden light *wheep*-ed on the zero chamber's wall. Awsok grimaced over the hexagonal apparatus of a biotechnological dispersal chamber. Its core, heavily insulated from Division Control's systems. This was a delicate machine. It would not do to be distracted at such a critical juncture.

The last thing she needed was to share in the confusion of the Vulpians.

She sighed. At least, the Division had been able to exploit that. Use it to smuggle in the necessary micro-cams, nanophones and message pods for observation and documentation of the the Dome in action.

The TARDISEs' collective presence made Vulpia the final bastion of the old Universe and its laws. A web within, outside and around the planet, trying to maintain an unflinching reality. Thoroughly indigestible to its vortex turtle, at least, so far. A shining miracle, one might say.

Fortunately, however, such miracles didn't last forever.

The light was still *wheep*-ing.

Her monitors must have discovered something else in the maelstrom outside. Something they hadn't picked up during the Gulp itself.

Awsok left the apparatus and ran her fingers along the trunk of the synesthetic poplar. "Where was that bough that split into half-a-dozen branches before reconnecting again with the trunk?"

She clicked her tongue and moved over to her holographic display.

Yes, it was a report. A critical one.

There was a newly-marked anomaly in the mixing bowl that made up the Mutation. What had it been called? Diamant's Folly? That edifice had certainly met its sorry end. Created in the midst of a higher power's ego trip, the faux Georgian mansion now laid upon the broken

remnants of a dead planet. As a shipwreck might upon the ocean floor. They'd been moved to the Vulpia system, but not soon enough.

Their efforts to utilise it to destabilise the City proved fruitless. Still...

Vulpia and the Folly. The pressure was high. Awsok was sure someone was about to snap.

The Division would be waiting, either way.

The only question the old Shobogan grasped for—was who?

In the dig-site, Traskey was experiencing something rather unusual. A migraine. Her first in this new state of reality.

Continents were in conversation around her and she, somehow, had become their mediator.

The TARDISEs were... It was such an ignoble word, considering what was truly going on... They were *squabbling*. In a manner not too far removed from the occasional irascibility of their pilots.

They possessed an unbreakable bond that spanned their entire lifetimes. From the null-zone to the cradles to the vortex and what lay beyond. They were cousins, brothers, sisters... In some realities or times beyond Traskey's own, there may even have been mothers, fathers, parents and guardians. They were family.

Unfortunately, they fought just like family as well.

There were hundreds of TARDISEs. All materialised at varying points throughout Vulpia. Like their own capital cities. Perhaps, that had been the mistake. They were now locked in interminable discord. It was a Quadrigger's worst nightmare.

Traskey, as Sparkie stabilised herself, was elected to keep the peace. She was most qualified.

The pyramid, and whoever was onboard, was *hors de combat*. Still recovering from its attempt to retreat from Vulpia.

Thus, the shayde had elected to use the only Ship left available. Her Doctor's TARDIS and its onboard telepathic circuitry. The console was easy enough to move outside the police box into the dig-site. Divested of the dampening effects of its transdimensional interior.

It was like whalesong to Traskey. The conversations were achingly unfathomable, but the shayde tried to think what it must have sounded like. TARDIS-to-TARDIS.

"The places I've been to..." One could lionise. *"The Lost Tessellated Mirror. The ocean planet, Aquamarine, where I saw such beautiful fish and coral structures like neon mountains. And Quack! The planet of the Duckoids. Such an amusing species, always laughing at their own jokes—"*

"That's nothing!" another could gossip. *"We flew through the Medusa Cascade, and visited the last days of the Humanian Empire. We have weathered the burn of Galaxies and survived the arch-loneliness of the Bleak."*

"Stop boasting, you two," harrumphed a third. *"We all know I conveyed my pilot to the most extraordinary times and places. I have far more refined ideas than either of you. Quack, indeed, how vulgar."*

The fantasy image was almost childish. It brought her comfort to think that, maybe, these magnificent time-ships were no more removed from the backbiting of their crews.

The stakes, however, were so much higher. So much more dangerous. The conversations across the planet Vulpia were about who had the greatest right to live. Not for ethical causes. Not for any reason of the individual, but for what would best fit into the greater pattern of Time.

They were jigsawing the Universe back together. A thousand pieces. One at a time.

Traskey removed her glasses and buried her face in her hands.

As a stray thought could escape into the mind of another via telepathy, so too could the block transfer projections of a TARDIS into another Universe. With nowhere else to go, these stray realities manifested on Vulpia itself.

Competing yesterdays, todays and tomorrows.

Independently, they were of no harm to one another. Not without considerable prodding. Unfortunately, Division Control's operatives were nothing if not expert agitators. Thrown violently together, these competing timestreams ate at each other, rats in a box...

To pick one instance, Sparkie and Cantu were preoccupied with a malfunctioning British-American defence satellite. A long way from its respective time-zone. It and its fluctuating echo were causing havoc for those in the City of Refuge.

Its sonic weaponry had decimated the lives of the Sensorite commune on the Dome's wall.

"It's from my third incarnation... Or was it my fourth? There's a contradiction there. Not just in memory, but actuality." Sparkie frowned. "I *should* know the answer..."

Cantu squeezed their holographic hands. "Please, do you have an answer?"

"It is your mind, Sparkie." The First Apothecary raised their telepathic disc to their forehead. "The compression of such vast reaches of the psyche has resulted in a loss of conscious fidelity."

Sparkie berated themself. "That's no excuse."

"You're doing all you can."

Sparkie had set up a medivac service to try and alleviate the load on the First Apothecary's time and resources. He was grateful, but the act was proving more cosmetic than practical.

The First Apothecary dropped his disc. "Cantu is right. There are simply too many injured, Sparkie. Both in mind and in body."

Sparkie sighed at the carnage around them. "I know—I know—I know..."

The passage of Time itself was unpredictable, as well. Hindered, extraordinarily, by the faulty dimensional control of the Type-40 TARDIS that the Doctor initially procured. A doddering absentmindedness that bled from Time into Space.

Objects—some harmless, others lethal—would appear from nowhere like apparitions. Efforts to bring down the displaced satellites more conventionally were hindered by, of all things, a pair of spectral Quarks.

Tasked with the Doctor's death, the Quarks had pursued any and every trace of them through to the Dome itself. With no cadaver to confirm their kill, they had continued on their standard programming.

"Our e-n-e-m-i-e-s yet live!" one burbled.

The other rejoindered. "Kill! Kill! Kill!"

The bulkhead door to the Dome slid shut as Ntombizodwa placed the red veil over the body of Officer Cadet Jung Jin. Red to disguise... Well, it was a very human idea.

"The bloody things won't *die*." Ntombizodwa touched the burn on her forearm.

Not like her people. How many had she lost already? It was guile and nerves. Living day-to-day with a new and impossible terror. However...

“Everyone has their breaking point...” she muttered.

Second Lieutenant Kymry’s almost elfin blonde features, archetypal of a Thal, quirked in worry.

“Sir?” he asked.

“Up, Kymry,” she snapped. “We’re not dead, yet. Let’s see how those Quarks deal with the *Tsunami*’s cannon.”

Traskey studied Sparkie, leant against the TARDIS’s astral map. Its screens, blank now.

The Doctor’s Ship was chittering to herself, her lighting subdued to save energy. The floors were still awash with star-maps and interstellar atlases. Little pocketbooks of Time and Space that no longer existed. Preserved only within the no-time of the TARDIS herself. Had they remained in their own timestreams they would have been long gone.

Sparkie was trying very hard not to become depressed.

“Time for a... what did Cantu call it?” asked Traskey.

Sparkie smiled. “A reality check, my dear.”

“How blunt can I be?”

“Characteristically so. I welcome it.”

The conversation was punctuated by the punching echo of the *Tsunami*’s mass accelerator cannon.

“Bless my soul. If that doesn’t quell the Quarks, nothing will...” murmured Sparkie.

Traskey crouched down to pick up one of the cartographical hardbacks. “People are dying, Sparkie. Not one or two, here and there, either. Many are dying. These apparitions won’t be the last.”

“Yes, I’ve stood in the midst of them... And, unhappily, I say, the discontent around us is growing far worse...” Sparkie shifted the astral map to one side to assist. “I dislike being shepherded around by the Space Security Service, but I cannot deny that Ntombizodwa has a right to be anxious.”

“We’ve bigger problems than an assassination attempt.”

Sparkie pursed their lips in mock offence.

Traskey caught the expression. “No. What I mean is that if something from these temporal disturbances ruptures the surface tension of the field—the time bubble will pop.”

“I’m aware, yes.”

“Well, what are you going to do about it?”

Sparkie took a deep breath. “Traskey—”

“This machine is remarkable, you know that, Doctors?” Diamant stepped through the capsule’s threshold. “Although, We do think that you might have gone a little too far with the renovations...”

The fractal-form gestured to the enormous socket where the console should have been.

“It’s far better served outside, young person. In the dig-site,” Sparkie explained. “In here, it’s far too well-shielded from the Adamant Locus. Far too well. We need all the power that my Ship can offer.”

“Otherwise, we’ll be stuck here,” murmured Traskey.

“Waiting to be digested,” Diamant understood. “Will it interfere with the viewer?”

“I thought you’d already be aware, one way or the other,” frowned Sparkie.

“Basillius wants to hear your answer. He’s worried the aperiodic monotiles in the cavern will attract time energies to him.”

“You can tell him, plainly, there’s no radiation concern.” The gestalt shrugged. “The worst he has to worry about are mercury fumes from a burst fluid link. For a creature of his physiology, it will hardly register. Otherwise, he can continue his work as normal.”

Traskey frowned, “Do you *really*, Doc—Sparkie, think we’ll ever get back to how things were before?”

“What was it that man, Caroll, said...? Like Alice, I try to believe 103 impossible things before breakfast. *Hmph. Hmm. Hmph.*” Sparkie tapped their fingers at the astral map. “We may even be able to sift through the time distortion and map out the placements of the TARDISes.”

“Our advice may not be worth toffee, but surely this is a simple enough fix?” suggested Diamant. “Calling the TARDIS, calling the TARDIS. It’s the artist formerly known as Doctor. Listen up! Pick a lane and commit to it.”

“*Demand* that they take a particular kind of action?” Traskey sounded sceptical. “Of a TARDIS?”

“Dear me, when has shouting ever solved the problem?” chastised Sparkie. “Besides, I’m afraid our troubles lie far deeper than that.”

“They do?”

“We’re talking about who has the greatest right to live.”

Diamant asked, “Well, then, which TARDIS has the most experience?”

“Mine—me—ours—mine—us—this one—that one—obviously, mine—I’d like to think mine—we should draw lots—” Sparkie covered their mouth like they’d sneezed at an official function.

“You see the problem,” said Traskey.

“We apologise,” Diamant nodded, genuinely. “We expected... Well, all measures of Ourselves are Our *own self*. There is no discord. It’s one and the same mind.”

“The same cannot be said of me.” Sparkie took great pride in that fact. “I am a citizen of the Universe—a Time Lord—taking a midnight stroll through eternity—as I row through the starlit night in my upturned box—and a gentleman to boot.”

Traskey was blunt. “It’s killing Vulpia.”

Sparkie looked pained. “Yes, I’m aware.”

“Well, then, do you—?”

“I ask you the same question I ask myself. Who has the greater right to live? *H’mmm?*” Sparkie rounded on her with unexpected intensity. “Who? Those who are ‘convenient’ to the pattern of history? Those who, perhaps, serve a ‘purpose’? Only the ‘good’ of our cosmos? Some of the ‘evil’? Who decides that? Us, in this empty room? We have an innate bias for our Universe because we live in it. Do you know the right answer?”

The Quadrigger and the fractal-form were both silent. In thought and in hesitation.

“No...” Sparkie turned to the doorway. “And neither do I, Traskey.”

Traskey and Diamant looked at one another.

“How long have you been thinking about this?” asked Traskey.

“Since we got here. Do I know the answer?” Sparkie chewed anxiously on their finger and repeated, more softly, “No. Neither do I...”

With all inside the Doctor’s TARDIS, something quite forgotten began to stir.

In the dig-site, the pyramid-shaped TARDIS—that had panicked and attempted to flee during the Great Gulp—began to shudder and wheeze. The last desperate rhythm of vworp engines responding to a delayed Hostile Action Displacement System. Triggered by the latest timequake.

It dematerialised with its unconscious pilot aboard.

Cantu and the Space Security Service decided to put out regular warnings not to engage with any of the life forms that appeared. One group tried to establish if there were any patterns that could be deduced to attempt a temporal weather forecast.

“Goddess, it’s terrifying!” The reporter laughed with light, breakfast cheer. *“I was going to be wearing this Nimon mask tonight to bring good luck! How did it get so scary? Is it because the eyes are this bright white—?”* The muzak cut out and her tone became bleak and serious. *“This is a timequake early warning report. We have a timequake early warning report. A timequake measuring 0.5 on the Bocca scale has impacted the easternmost point of the Federation Quarter.”*

One particularly well-known visitation was the regular appearances of Trafalgar Square.

Lives were lost when the whole edifice—complete with Nelson’s column, plinths, statues, fountains and the National Gallery—appeared

in the middle of the tented city. The homes and unfortunate residents obliterated beneath.

The pyramid-shaped TARDIS rematerialised on the other side of the City.

Tumbling from its guttering, smoke-filled innards was a bald man with an unusual past and an uncertain future. He spun, reeling headfirst into the side of a bronze lion, his landing cushioned only by the half-crushed mesh of a trampoline.

His, was not an unkind face, but one that could easily have turned to cruelty at provocation. Ironic, really, that the body that wore it was as far from such a thing as one could imagine. His cheekbones were rounded. The eyebrows strong curves over dazed arcadian-green eyes.

He looked so lost, this man. His body confined by invisible chains.

The man pushed himself up to a sitting position, his legs still tangled in the springs of the trampoline.

He threw his head back against the lion and laughed.

A strangled, frightened thing.

Got to get away... away... but where to? Where can one go at the end of...?

The man opened his eyes.

He'd made it. Vulpia. The City of Refuge. Against all else, he'd survived and so had his beloved TARDIS. It was, perhaps, not the most beautiful of locales, but... Well, he could find a source of merriment at the bottom of a well. That was the style, wasn't it? A bit of cheer at the end of it all? Happy smiles and happy...

He shook his head clear of his preying uncertainties. Took a deep, relaxing breath.

The man pulled a flat-cap from his coat pocket, jammed it on his head and walked towards the grounded ships and their adjoining tents in the distance, whistling.

But the uncertainties followed the flat-capped man into the City.

Sat at the dining room table, picking at a feast of computer chips, the Doctor passed Mel another component part from George's computer core. The body was quite unmoving. Laid on the wood as though it had always been there.

"Seems a shame..." Mel remarked.

"*Mmm?*" asked the Doctor.

"To dismantle such a remarkable machine."

"Oh, Mel..." The Doctor smiled. "You sentimental thing."

"As I recall, Miss Bush..." The Valeyard was circling the table. "This bipedal obstruction tried to murder us."

"Well, it's in good company, isn't it?" The Doctor's eyes flicked upward to see if his remark had struck true.

The Valeyard shrugged his eyebrows.

"We did ask," Mel clarified. "George here seemed to acquiesce quite willingly, all things considered."

"We've no time for luxuries such as sentiment, Miss Bush," the Valeyard interjected. "It's survival of the fittest, and I intend to survive."

The Doctor retorted. "You could help, you know, instead of eying us up like the last wolf of winter?"

“Oh, I’m happy to leave this in your oh-so-capable hands, Doctor. After all, daring rescues of the doomed are what you do, so you should be well-acquainted with a distress call.”

“As *I* recall...” The Doctor was scraping the insulation from a wire. “You’re no stranger to a cry for help, either. If your story of the moon of Etarho holds any muster. I’m willing to be proven wrong.”

Mel’s face pinched, quizzical. “Etarho?”

“In the words of the Time Lords, if at first you don’t succeed... Try, try again.” Her friend smiled, savagely. “We’ve both been tried. At *his* trial, he said he was found by scavengers wandering the surface of a minor planetoid. He was sent to Gallifrey and ended up in a Shadow House.”

“Humble beginnings, Miss Bush. From orphan to High Council candidate.” The Valeyard revelled in the memory. “If not for the Ravolox blunder, I could have been Lord President.”

“Assuming, of course, that the business on Etarho *was* the beginning,” the Doctor tempered.

The Valeyard smiled and said nothing.

“Why haven’t I heard about this before now?” asked Mel.

“Because no one should have total knowledge of their own future,” the Valeyard suggested.

“He’s worried that if I knew, precisely, where he originated from, I’d put a stop to him.”

The Valeyard folded his arms. “Wouldn’t you, Doctor?”

Ignoring him, the Doctor lifted up the beacon and inserted the component Mel had been holding. “There. A basic psionic amplifier. Not a bad job if I say so myself, given the circumstances.”

“So what now?” Mel asked.

“Now,” he said, placing the amplifier on the floor. “We send our SOS. I’m sure you’ll find ways to entertain yourselves. And Mel...”

“Yes?”

He sat cross legged by the amplifier. “Don’t let him out of our sight.”

“Right,” she nodded.

The Doctor screwed his eyes shut to concentrate. Head tilted back. Chin up. In complete silence. The expression began as one of fierce exertion, then slowly, it melted away to something almost like a restless sleep.

First Rank Ntombizodwa stood beside Traskey and Cantu at the northmost entrance point to the Dome. It lingered behind them in all its tessellated glory. Lit by the aurora of devastation that made up Vulpia’s conflicted sky.

“Greetings to you, everyone.” The crowd quieted when Sparkie stepped onto the platform. “Good gracious, there are a lot of you about.” They cleared their throat. “Now, then, I’m sure you’re all wondering why I’ve brought you here today. *H’mmm?* Well, that’s just it. *‘Today.’* Simply put, we need a coordinated way of organising our time. To wit, the Vulpian Cabinet has elected to use decimal time.”

Cantu’s hologram appeared beside Sparkie. “Using decimal time means our computerised systems won’t need to convert to the traditional sexagesimal one.”

“*Convenient for you!*” heckled a Killoran in the crowd.

The Lupar Pel riposted, “*Shut your mouth!*”

“Thank you, young woman.” Sparkie clasped their lapels. “Now, a day begins at 00:00.00 which begins the activity period after a five-hour rest period. 100 minutes is the equivalent of one-hour.”

“Or, one watch period for the Space Security Service,” added Ntombizodwa.

Nearly everyone, the agent understood, would have some sort of decimal timer. If they didn’t, the Ministry of Gadgeteering would distribute them. She imagined some enterprising soul might even print and distribute decimal calendars. 10 days in a week, 30 days in a tenth, ten tenths in a hundredth, 10 hundredths in a decade. The name of each tenth would be picked out of suggestions logged to the Dome’s computer network.

“Cantu?” nodded Sparkie.

All sectors had a communal radio set up by Cantu, who relayed information to the survivors. It was no exaggeration to say that, outside of Sparkie, Cantu was the Voice of the City.

“Sleeptime begins at 05:00 after five decimal-hours. The day ends and a new one begins with what we’re calling the Vulpian Time Signal and a reset to 00:00.00.”

“Obvious to say,” Traskey adjusted their glasses. “Individual work and sleep patterns will vary, but that’s how a Vulpian day would be organised, accordingly.”

“Now, would a volunteer, please, step up here to officially start Day 1 of the Vulpian Epoch?” asked Sparkie. “Anyone? Don’t be shy...”

Ntombizodwa stiffened, she leant over to Cantu. “Did you know about this?”

“No...” Cantu shook his head.

“Traskey?”

“They might have mentioned it...” murmured the Quadrigger. “Of course, there’s been so much else going on...”

The agent tensed. “I don’t like this... Supposing someone tries to bomb the—”

“Too late.”

Ntombizodwa’s attention jerked to an orange fur-covered hand that shot-up from the crowd.

“There we are! Splendid!” exclaimed Sparkie. “Come along! Come along!”

The young Skalan, with the startling eagerness of youth, climbed up the wooden stairs to stand beside Sparkie. She shrank somewhat when her brain recognised where she was. It was difficult to miss that tremble of nervousness.

A guilty part of the agent’s mind went to her holster. Just in case.

“You’re a Skalan, aren’t you?” Sparkie’s voice had a warm tremolo to it. “Skalans of Skarox? *H’mmm*, I think I’ve visited your world at least once. Are you alright to tell the crowd your name?”

The nervous fidgeting seemed to build...

Ntombizodwa’s Soren special was almost out of its holster.

And then the Skalan relaxed. “Yes.”

“Into the microphone, my dear, there.”

The youngster cleared her throat. “I am X’Skolos. Our world is gone, but we are not.”

“Well done, very well done,” commended Sparkie. “Now then, X’Skolos, I’d like you to press what we’re calling the big, red button— Wait! Wait... *H’mmm?* Hold, while we get everyone else involved. The more the merrier.” The gestalt chuckled and turned its attention to the crowd. “Ready, everyone?”

Mumbles of embarrassed affirmation emanated from the crowd.

Ntombizodwa scanned the sea of faces. At its very edge, casting a shadow of their own, was Diamant. Arms folded, gently listening to the proceedings with bemused approval. The smile on their face seemed to broaden under the agent's gaze. They were talking to someone. A flat-capped man who couldn't meet her gaze. He reminded her of a Martian waterseeker. All tentative footsteps and carefully held parasol tails. He didn't know why he was part of the crowd any more than anyone else did.

Diamant's slow, deliberate wave to Ntombizodwa was worse. They knew something.

"No, no, that won't do at all. You'll have to shout! Truly shout!" Sparkie tilted up their chin. "I said, ready?"

"Ready!" cheered a few determined voices.

Sparkie pushed every ounce of conviction into their voice. "*Ready?*"

"Ready!" A few more, but still not enough.

Sparkie closed their eyes, breathed deep, drawing on the concentrated aurum of the assembled Doctors deep within their psyche. Every shout of defiance against a seemingly unwinnable evil. Every triumphant jubilation of life's power to enrich and inspire.

"*Ready?*" Sparkie's voice cracked from the effort.

That did it. "*Ready?*" the vast majority of the crowd roared back.

The flat-capped man covered his ears. Frightened to the spot.

"Right, then, off we go—*allons-y*—here we go—get ready. Vulpian Decimal Time begins. Synchronise your timers. Let us begin. In 10... 9..."

In the Folly, the Sixth Doctor murmured to himself, "5... 4... 3... 2... 1... Go..."

Mel glanced across to the Valeyard, searching for a reaction. He looked entirely unmoved, his back now against the fireplace, arms more tightly folded than before.

The former prosecutor caught her staring at him.

“Tell me, Mel. How shall we pass our half-starved last moments, while he dillydallies across the cosmos?” he wondered. “A bit of I-Spy perhaps? Which bit of cosmic debris can we see in the inferno?”

“Why are you being so petty? It’s the end of everything. Let that chip on your shoulder go.” Mel’s indignation stuck in her teeth. “Why do you hate him so much?”

He looked at her. “I don’t hate you, Mel.”

“That’s not what I said.”

“What’s the worst moment of your existence?” He unfolded his arms. “Know, I don’t mean embarrassing or humiliating... What was the worst moment of your life as you have lived it?”

Mel didn’t answer him.

“You needn’t tell me. It’s being restrained, curtailed, confined to this Folly of Diamant’s.” He moved closer to her. Just a step. It took a few moments for her to notice it. “And yet, what have you done with this worst moment of your life? You have seized it. Commanded the Doctor to turn it into something of your own. I admire that.”

“You mean, *the Doctor* admires that.”

“And you see the problem.” Another step. “I cannot be permitted even a glimmering of what you determine to be ‘good’ nature. For if I do, it is a product of the Doctor’s influence and not my own. If I act, in your terms, corrupt and immoral, then you can agree to that wholeheartedly. You see my dilemma?”

“I do.” Mel put the nearest chair between him and her.

“May I tell you a secret, Mel? Something known only to the two of us?”

The programmer’s eyes flicked to the Doctor. “Alright.”

“I only exist as a product of missed opportunities. Words unspoken. Actions not taken. There are moments in your life, I’m sure, that you would wish to revisit and reshape to your own preference. Deaths averted. Mistakes corrected.”

Mel’s mind, guiltily and with abandon, conjured up any number of names and faces she’d wished she could have saved... Geoff... The Tevelers... Too many faces to recall.

“It seems selfish, but I know that they’ll die again, anyway, alright?” She stared, hard, at the Valeyard. “No one is immortal. I bring them back, against their will, and... What? I get thanks? I get to feel better? Then, I get to attend the funerals later? It’s just dodging the problem and shows a staggering lack of consent.”

“To who?”

“Others.”

The corners of the Valeyard’s eyes wrinkled with confusion.

“You see,” Mel pointed out. “You haven’t even considered them.”

He sighed. “I’d hoped you, Mel, of all people would understand—”

“*Impossible!*” bellowed the Doctor, suddenly.

“Cretin!” the Valeyard snapped.

Mel knelt beside his chair. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“I felt... a...” He was clutching his forehead. “A mind. A *mind* bigger than anything I’ve ever encountered before.”

“That distresses me.”

“So much knowledge... Experience...” He gasped, catching his breath. “A-A gestalt, I believe.”

“Spare us the theatrics, did you make contact?” demanded the Valeyard.

“No, no. Too far away for me to hold much of a conversation. But I think they felt me, just for a moment.”

“You always lacked a certain strength of will.”

The Doctor looked up and then down. “Goodness me, he is in a foul temper. What did you end up talking about?”

The Valeyard scowled. “You.”

“I’m flattered,” said the Doctor, insincerely.

“Doctor,” Mel pressed. “Are you saying that the two of you together could make contact?”

“Perhaps.” The thought clearly didn’t please him. “That gestalt though... I felt...”

“Yes?”

“Mel, I felt somehow it was *me*.”

“Are you quite well?” asked the flat-capped man.

The brief confusion in the creature’s eyes—Sparkie, Diamant had called them—twisted the man’s hearts like a plastic bag.

“I saw you freeze,” he added, then with forced levity, “Thought we might have to turn you off and on again.”

“*Hmph*. I felt something, again...” Sparkie muttered. “Something like it before, with Diamant, but now... I confess, it’s more insistent. Perhaps a mind? Yes, a mind. Trying to make contact, calling for help...?”

The flat-capped man laughed, nervously. “We could all use that...”

“This mind, young man... I somehow felt it was *me*...” Sparkie’s attention focused. “Have we met?”

“I’ve heard them call you Sparkie, but they also have another title for you...” The man stared at the crude, lumpy figure with its patina of glitter. “The Doctor?”

“Quite so. At least, for the most part. You’ve a variety to choose from.”

“Which incarnation is this, may I ask? Your twenty-seventh? Fortieth? The last?”

“Dear, dear me. It’s rude to ask a member of my People their age, you know.” They giggled. “You seem familiar enough with our physiology, though. Curious.”

The flat-capped man avoided their gaze.

Initially, he’d expected the crowd around the Dome to disperse, but everyone was shoulder-to-polyp in this City of Refuge. All focused on reshaping their little patch of the Universe to suit their own image.

He avoided confrontation during his journeys in the TARDIS with Peri, Dorothy and others. He did not intend to deal with any here, either. Familiar or no. That was what the Space Security Service were for.

His eyes flicked to the Dome. “Where’s your entourage?”

“I’ve had practice enough evading security men from my days of exile on Earth—time as President of the Universe. Used to drive Crinx—Lethbridge-Stewart spare—mad.”

“Are you him, then...? I mean... Is this...? Which one?”

“You’re thinking too singularly, young man—” Sparkie caught himself. “Good heavens, I don’t know your name.”

“Doctor Barrie,” bluffed the flat-capped man. “You can call me James.”

The flat-capped man knew it wasn’t unknown for Time Lords to be able to project a temporary manifestation of a future self. It required an enormous amount of concentration and mental energy, however. Enough that it was virtually unheard of to bring an incarnation beyond a Time Lord’s immediately next regeneration.

It had the whiff of a Watcher and yet there was the tang of physical Gallifreyan technology. Of trillions of electrochemical cells in a continuous array... Of brain scans... Of *the Matrix*.

“Are you...” He edged closer. “Are you, perhaps, a gestalt organism?”

“*The* gestalt organism, in some respects. I’ve an associate, perhaps, we might even call them a friend, now, who is a fractal-form. Quite similar, really, but we’re divided by a common dimension. The mental acumen required for this was—”

“Extraordinary.” And he meant it, too. “Saving the day, at the cost of your own individuality. I couldn’t fathom it.”

“Rubbish, my good man. Rubbish. We did what had to be done.” There were too many tones attached to those words to tell whether it was meant gravely or perfunctorily. “How did you come to be here, if I may ask?”

“I lived among the Shikari on the planet Pyro Shika for a time. I had a... a sabbatical that went awry. In ways and means I couldn’t begin to explain now. Since then, however, I-I-I’ve endeavoured to be more scrupulous in my travels.”

“Oh, I don’t know, a little wildness is good for the soul, I’ve found.”

“Yes, at considerable cost, I note,” Doctor Barrie smiled, sadly. “Thank you for speaking with me. I’ve taken up enough of your time already.”

“I can—”

“No, no, please.” There was a hint of desperation in his voice. “Not for me. Not on my account. I had to see... Just... Thank you.”

Sparkie studied him as he left. There was something in his stance, his walk, that felt familiar to Sparkie. Like a long-lost family member or a colleague from centuries in the past. If only they could place it...

“James.” They repeated the name to themselves. “*Hm’m*. James...”

Cantu appeared at his shoulder. “Sparkie, can I have a moment—?”

“Cantu...?” they interrupted.

“Yes?”

“I hazard to ask...” Sparkie’s curiosity was piqued. “Do you know who that was?”

The Doctor held his arms up in surrender as they moved into the Folly’s ballroom.

“I won’t do it,” he repeated. “Of all the things in Creation I am capable of, conferring my mind with this charcoal sketch is not one of them.”

Mel, her arms full of the amplifier, struggled to keep up with him. “Doctor—”

“There’s little to be gained, Miss Bush.” Back to formalities again. The Valeyard walked with slow deliberation. “The Doctor knows his own mind.”

“Well enough to understand that a visit from you is like welcoming the bubonic plague through the door, Valeyard.”

“Could I do it, then?” she suggested. “If you need to boost the signal, a human mind might pull it off, couldn’t it?”

“Mel...” The Doctor’s tone see-sawed.

The Valeyard was far less delicate. “The human brain lacks the integral facilities necessary for interplanetary telepathic conference.”

“Charming.” She wrinkled her nose.

“It’s not a faculty you’ll have for many centuries yet,” he offered as consolation.

The Doctor’s eyes fell to the floor. “I’m afraid it’s true, Mel. I shan’t want to burn out your mind. It’s far too precious and remarkable.”

Mel smiled, sighing. “Alright. I understand.”

The time-traveller chuckled, putting his arm around her shoulder and resting his head on hers. He patted her twice on the elbow and spun her around back to the doorway.

“So fear wins out after all?” goaded the Valeyard.

The Doctor stopped in his footsteps. He was in the middle of the ballroom now. Mel at his side. The Valeyard was near the door. Blocking their exit.

“Or can’t you remember, Doctor?” Those almost feline tones. “Cowards die many times before their death’.”

“The valiant never taste of death but once,” answered the Doctor.

“*Et tu, Brutus?* Doctor...” Mel squeezed his arm. “Doctor, you don’t have to do this.”

“I must, Mel.” He patted her hand, parting from her, as the Valeyard approached. “If nothing else, but to prove him wrong.”

“Never mind the bravado.”

“Mel...” he smiled.

“Come on, don’t let that be the last word. Give me a better reason than that.”

“Alright.” He patted her on the head. “To give you the possibility of a future.”

The Valeyard stopped. He was within arm’s reach of the Doctor. Mel stood between them with unusually anxious eyes.

“I’ll be back, Mel,” assured the Doctor.

The Valeyard added, “You’ll be in good company, Miss Bush.”

“Ready?” the time-traveller cocked an eyebrow.

“Very well, then, Doctor. *Contact?*”

“*Contact?*”

One of them flinched.

The Doctor was certain it was the Valeyard.

The time-traveller was dropped, somewhat unceremoniously, into a rolling gully. Among the twisted purple-black briar and thorny bracken. He moved his face away from a particularly lethal cactus and stood up. Straw-dry grass was dusted from his coat.

In the moonlight, he recognised the cottage in the near-distance with uneasy familiarity.

The steep, green-shingled roofs. Saved from the original fire-eager thatch. The brickwork chimney that dwarfed the more modern gas-powered equivalent to its left. The Doctor had slept in its attic during his exile. It was his home away from UNIT HQ in the Welsh countryside.

“What a welcome home.” He dusted a shoulder and strode onward.

It was only when he got closer that he saw something behind it. The building was leaning, in much the same way as shadows in German Expressionism leant. All jagged shapes and dagger-points. At first, the Doctor thought it was a tree. Some Yggdrasil in the back garden. He wouldn't put it past the Valeyard, but it looked far too uniform.

A tower. Made of slate or some darkened brick. Crossing the garden, the Doctor thought he caught a flicker of movement at the tower's parapet. In the turret.

Just like the Valeyard! He shook his head, pressed down on the latch for the cottage's green door's luck and—

The Doctor passed through the door without opening it. His hand was free. The door was shut. Somewhere between the motion and the motive, he'd made it inside. The larger glass-panelled window was to his left. The smaller high opening to his right.

But there was no light. He should've been able to see the staircase, at least. The living room to his left. The study to his right. This was familiar ground to him—or should have been. Was he thinking instead of Nest Cottage? No. He'd spent enough time in his Welsh home to know the difference.

Instead, he was within some dust-assailed solicitor's office. The walls were patterned in some sepia-brown. What little he could see of them. They were all crowded by officiously authoritarian tomes. All the same shape, colour and, he imagined, creed. Even in front of the window. Where were the wax tablets? The Grecian scrolls? The ancient leather-bound volumes? Modern *Dan Dare* paperbacks and hardcover Orczy novels?

The desk was no different. Quills. Tomes of red, brown and sallow gold. Parchment made from the polyester of the Capitol computers on Gallifrey.

“What an officious little mind we have, *b’mm?*”

He could drown in these papers. Maybe that was the intention? Bury him in bureaucracy. The Valeyard had tried that with the Matrix. Failing that, his cadre of trained assassins. Sha’ol and Karthakh, Palsgrave Ouranos, Kleftashonen, Taper, Rasha. . . All potshot mercenaries before the prosecutor had taken a more direct hand himself.

It had been what eventually dissuaded Frobisher from travelling with him again after his trial, the Doctor was sure. His life was saved, but he lost a friend’s company in the process.

That anger galvanised the Doctor. He upturned the desk—papers, inkwells and unlit gaslamp smashing to the ground—and waited for a reaction.

“*Still the iconoclast?*” answered a voice.

“What was it you said about cowardice?”

The bars of the window shrank into themselves. Replaced by two sliding panels. The pillars of tomes tumbling into the black of what the Doctor recognised as his own TARDIS’s scanner. The simulacra made his hearts ache.

“*As Lewis Caroll may have written, ‘through the looking glass.’*”

“It’s a great huge game of chess that’s being played—all over the world—if this is the world at all, you know,” he quoted. “Why all these games? Why not simply—?”

“Acquiesce?”

“*Ah*, thought we’d come to that. Very well, then.” The Doctor knocked a hole suitably large enough for a Time Lord through the clutter and climbed through to the other side. “What obnoxious parlour trick are you aiming for this time?”

His feet landed on the cold stone. Unmistakeable. He must have arrived inside the tower.

The time-traveller made the mistake of looking up. As he did, he felt the ground warm. Hot. Like an animal. With a lunge, the stone beneath his boots latched onto his soles. He cried out, flailed forward onto the steps, connecting sharply with his knees.

With haste, he unlaced each boot and kicked himself free in tastefully odd-coloured socks.

He couldn't stay. The steps themselves, as inanimate as the floor had seemingly been, were like sprinting on hot coals.

“Up! Up! Forever—*ooch-ow!*—up!”

“*Light on your feet?*”

“Fleet of foot and fast of mind, you should try it sometime!” he rebutted.

It wasn't a metaphor. If the Doctor remained on his current course, ascending the staircase, his socks were liable to catch fire. Where could he go? Where... Where...? Ah! Of course. He stepped up onto the stone windowsill. Wide enough for just one foot. With a free hand, he could... Yes! Just grab the next window's edge. Pulling himself up, his other foot could rest on the higher sill and he'd have...

“Success,” he preened like a satisfied tabby.

“*Very astute. I wonder, however, if you haven't seen the weather outside?*”

The wall zagged on a right-angle. A ninety-degree shift in space. The Doctor found himself not standing, but sliding on the flat of the sill. Toward the moonlit sky outside. He caught himself on the stone frame. Arms splayed. Outside, lightning lashed at his coattails with the smell of burnt o-zone. Even the rain couldn't quench the odour.

He flapped the smoke from his back as the water filled the window like an impossible basin.

“Water, water, everywhere...”

In the ballroom, Mel’s lips thinned at the crisp chuckle that emerged from the Valeyard’s mouth.

The Doctor began to crawl up the curve of the tower. The windows below, if such a word could be used any more, filling and flooding the lower arc. He felt like a hamster in a wheel. Nevertheless, across this wall-now-floor, he was moving in an upward direction.

Round and round. In a nautilus spiral.

Bafflingly, the higher windows were filling with lesser speed than the lower ones. Even in the purported illogic of the Valeyard’s mind, he had to surrender to some semblance of cause and effect.

Smiling to himself, the Doctor reached the door at what felt like the top of the tower. He daren’t look down. The sound of the mesopelagic waters below was incentive enough for him.

The door itself was a graven onyx. Piped in an almost foil-like silver-white. The handle resembled an outstretched ivory hand. Something, it seemed, needed to be placed in its grasping fingers.

“I suppose it would be too much to want for a brass ring,” the Doctor quickly suggested.

In other circumstances, he’d have checked under the welcome mat or around the portico. Unfortunately, the time-traveller had the unerring feeling that the location of its key would prove suitably convoluted.

He didn’t like how near the flood sounded now.

The Doctor considered his opponent. The Valeyard. Would the door accept an open hand? No. Likely not. What was his alter ego grasping for, more than anything else?

The future. When they'd first met, it had been the Doctor's own future. Not just his next incarnation, but every incarnation after. Not adding, but *replacing*. Historical revisionism of the highest order. That was the constant shadow hanging, like the dead man in a gallows, over his own life.

Today, he was himself. Tomorrow, it was promised, he could become the Valeyard.

“Promised... Promise.” His mind struck on an odd notion. “The moon.”

The Doctor looked through the window closest to the door.

The moon shone full and fat with promise. The Valeyard had promised the moon. Metaphorically and, perhaps, literally. However...!

The Doctor reached down into the window. Something dark and ugly snapped at his fingernails. He recoiled with a shout.

“Bobbing for rats, Doctor?”

The Doctor murmured, “I was wondering why you'd been so silent...”

The time-traveller steeled himself, tightening his jaw. His fingers plunged into the inky depths. Another rat snapped at his wrist. Its fellow rejoindered with a bite on the thumb. The Doctor grunted, the slick smell of fur wafting up his nostrils. He would not be deterred. However many nasty little vermin lay at the bottom of the drain.

The Doctor's fingers grasped tight around the curve of the moon. He pulled, its sallow shape wafting in its own reflection. For one horrible moment, the time-traveller believed that it would dissipate like so much of a mirage.

It held. So did he. As the water rats with their burning red eyes cut and tore at his flesh and sleeve. He pulled the moon free. A small part of him had hoped to find Luna. Earth's younger sister. Alas, although with a certain degree of comfort, he found Pazithi Gallifreya instead. Its coppery sheen burnt with the light of their eager smelters.

The Doctor slid the moon into the ivory hand's grasp.

The door couldn't disguise its glee.

"I promised you the moon, like I said," he quipped.

The door opened to a hermetically-sealed darkness. The Doctor threw himself through. Into a no-where that smelt of lavender and disinfected surgical blades.

"At last, Doctor." Still a voice without a shape. *"I was beginning to fear you had lost yourself."*

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" The Doctor collected himself. "Mind like a steel trap. The kind they use to snare poor rabbits for slaughter."

"Preparations against mental intrusion seemed a worthwhile venture."

"Yes... Especially given your opponent."

"I wonder if you can appreciate the measure of what you've just experienced. That power, that control over your own dominion, could be yours."

"If I let you take over?" the Doctor sounded sceptical.

The Valeyard paused. *"It seems, at last, we meet on equal terms."*

"In this hellish wilderness of the mind? Hardly. Remember why we're here."

"What shall our cry for help be, then?"

"An SOS will do. Worked for the RMS *Slavonia*, it can work for us, too."

“I’m glad to have outgrown such facetiousness. Very well.”

“*Hab!*” The Doctor couldn’t disguise his own cheer.

He would’ve sat down if he could. Something caught his attention about his surroundings. Eternal blackness. Except, blackness of this nature didn’t wrinkle or crease like a curtain. He concentrated, grew his mind in the space and, slowly but with inevitable surety, he could see it was a sleeve. The inside of a sleeve.

The Valeyard’s own overinflated ego lorded over the Doctor, but not for long. Soon, he was big enough for his counterpart to pick on someone his own size.

Both concentrated on those three letters.

SOS... SOS... SOS—

“There is a certain decorum to be observed, you know?”

Simplicity demanded that the two Time Lords thought of their conversation partner as ‘a voice’. Singular. And yet, the changes in accent, tone, inflection and even dialect caused them pause.

“I mean, telepathic communion without the decorum of an introduction is beyond bad manners.”

“You’re the gestalt I felt?” asked the Doctor.

“Yes. And... Ha-ha-ha! Hob-hob-hob! Well, yes, I can guess at who you are!”

“Who, indeed,” the Valeyard purred.

“Who’s that with you? I can sense another mind behind the curtains.”

“Are we to expect a rescue or more dupery?” he agitated.

“That depends, young man.”

“On what?” asked the Doctor.

“Whatever you’re using to broadcast your minds... Can it be used to construct a homing beacon, perhaps, mm’n?”

“Perhaps,” pondered the Doctor. “But it’d be weak. You’d have to scour our sector of the maelstrom to find us and that could be quite dangerous with the hazards outside.”

“You make it sound impossible.”

“Isn’t it?”

“Locating you may be easier than first realised. I have a direct link to your would-be warden.”

“With Diamant?”

“They’ve already begun reconstructing their viewer. It’s possible they may be able to find you again with that beacon. From there, we’ll dispatch a rescue party.”

“Assuming no one else finds us first,” growled the Valeyard.

“We shall have to risk it, our supplies are gone,” the Doctor countered, gravely. “You shan’t be too long, I hope?”

An uncertain laugh. *“I’d ration that, too, if I were you, Doctor, Valeyard. If there’s one thing in increasingly short supply, it’s...”*

The faint telepathic link died away.

• AGENT REPORT X07 - CONTINUED (65/65) •

“NEEDLESS TO SAY, WHILST SPARKIE AND TRASKEY BUSY THEMSELVES WITH KEEPING A LID ON THE TIMEQUAKES, WE’RE BARELY KEEPING PACE. LET ALONE THE PEACE.

THE CHAOS. IT’S STILL STEAMING BENEATH THE SURFACE.

YESTERDAY, SONTARANS, LED BY A FLEET MARSHAL CALLED STRAK, ATTACKED A NEARBY SHIP TO THEIR CAMP, BELIEVING IT TO BE HOME TO A DISGUISED RUTAN. THE WHOLE COMMUNITY IS TINDER WAITING FOR A SPARK.

I’M SCARED. I’M AN OFFICER IN THE SPACE SECURITY SERVICE. I’VE MET COLONEL MARC FOREST, PERSONALLY, AND I *ALMOST* SAW COMPUVAC IN PERSON. AND I’M STILL TERRIFIED.

I CAN’T HELP BUT REMEMBER... THERE WAS A CONVERSATION WITH TRASKEY AND CANTU. DURING THE DOCTOR’S SECOND VISIT TO VULPIA. ABOUT HOW HER AND TRASKEY’S HOMEWORLD WAS *MEANT* TO BE DESTROYED. HOW THE ANOMALY WAS *THEM*. WHAT IF WE’RE *MEANT* TO BE DESTROYED, ALSO? NOT QUICKLY, BUT SLOWLY... BY ATTRITION...?

I CAN’T KEEP DOING THIS. I CAN’T KEEP PUTTING A LID ON CONFLICTS. I CAN’T KEEP WAKING UP AND LOOKING AT A BURNING SKY AND WONDERING HOW LONG THE DAY WILL BE. I CAN’T KEEP WAITING FOR SPARKIE OR TRASKEY TO DO SOMETHING TO STOP THIS. I CANNOT PUT ONE MORE RED VEIL OVER MY AGENTS.

THE SERVICE SAVED MY FATHERS WHEN THERE WAS NO ONE ELSE.

BUT, I AM LOSING HOPE.

TELL ME WHAT TO DO.

FIRST RANK ASANDA NTOMBIZODWA KAJAMASHA-ARIFF—OVER AND OUT.”

Inside the zero chamber of Division Control, Awsok's fingers squeezed around a stray frond on the poplar. She had been reviewing the report while sealing the hexagonal biotechnological containment chamber for transport.

“Snap.” Awsok smiled to herself. “Whilst there's life, there's death.”

On her display, the Shobogan opened an encrypted channel to reply.

THUS SPAKE BOB: PART 3
THE PREMIUM OF LOYALTY



by Alan Camlann, AFJ Kernow and Sherlock

In what used to be the Dome's Geoponics unit, Sparkie studied the group of representatives from each community in the City of Refuge.

They were surprised how many chose to attend.

Monoids, Sensorites, Killorans, Martians, Sontarans, oh, my...

Despite the optimism that propelled those on the ground, they knew of the simmering resentment that bubbled away under their leaders' surfaces.

Unspoken questions, usually. In Vulpian pubs, taverns and bars, they became loud, lairy questions. Sparkie could hardly blame them. Across their many lifetimes, the gestalt wasn't often city administrators, Presidents or patricians. They were wanderers, explorers, scientists, anarchists and troublemakers. The whole notion of them becoming an authority figure was, honestly, quite amusing.

Some incarnations bore the responsibility better than others, but the gestalt nature of Sparkie meant that there was hardly any continuity of leadership. The Vulpian Cabinet had begun to notice.

Sparkie, too, had noticed that fact around First Rank Ntombizodwa and the Space Security Service. A chain of command had to be unbroken. Agents, soldiers and warriors, all, required a leadership to direct them. It was what had been trained into them from their very first days in the Service.

Power. It was the terrible knife's edge of power. It left Sparkie rather uncomfortable.

Some wielded their authority with the evenhanded decorum of Kate or Alistair. The Lethbridge-Stewarts and their remarkable canniness for the uneasiness that lay upon the crowned head.

How easy it could have become for them to be transformed into petty martinets with conquest as their objective. Some of Sparkie's

incarnations had seen it. Others had lived it. The tipping point of good intentions outweighed by expediency and so-called efficiency.

They'd seen its effects on those like Sara Kingdom who had murdered her brother on the word of a seemingly-inviolable public and political figure—

“Sparkie,” murmured Cantu at his holographic projector.

Sparkie's ears metaphorically pricked up.

Chulai, the Killoran kennelwoman, turned her polite but resolute questioning to the Voice of the City. “The rogue satellite is therefore, as I understand it, Cantu, under control?”

“Yes, it is in fact being repurposed,” he affirmed. “It can do no more harm to the Sensorite Commune or its surrounding neighbours. As consolation, those affected will have first use of it.”

“Sympathy is all very well.” The voice of the holographic First Apothecary held a surprising intensity to it. “But what does Sparkie intend to do about it?”

Sparkie felt every eye suddenly turn to them. “Every effort is being made. As we speak, Traskey is doing everything she can to stabilise—”

“Trassskey isssn't here.” The weary Ice Lord Ivsek looked to be held together by rope and sheer willpower. He was almost pale with starvation. Far from the snake-green richness of its initial scales. “Thissss debate could rage on until Isssskar returns. The First Apothecary wasss asking *you*...”

“It is only—with the current state of affairs, you must understand—that the Sensorite Commune wonders if we would have been better off dying with the rest of the Universe.”

“Is that how the leader of a community speaks?” asked Sparkie with concern. “Advocating suicide for their own people?”

“I do not say this lightly,” the First Apothecary interjected. “We have survived the colonising purges of humanity. Yet our people even now assisted them with the psychotherapeutic treatment of their worst criminals. Know this, and know I say it without accusation, the morale of the City’s population is waning.”

“And not jussst with the Firsssst Apothecary’s people. It issss thissst that concernssss usssss, as well. A people can go without much. They can even go without food if circumsssstances demand. No one can live without a ssssuitable quality of life.”

“Perhaps the Doctors—Forgive me, *Sparkie*, should go on another martial parade?” The suggestion came from a sullen, yet perpetually sneering Sontaran Fleet Marshal. He stank of gastric reflux tablets and poor promises. “Show the flag?”

“That’s a band-aid solution, at best, Bellicose Strak,” derided Sparkie. “My attention is better served trying to help people on the ground.”

“Your triage, however, cannot seem to keep up with the demands of infrastructure.”

“I’m aware,” they admitted.

It was Ivsek, however, who refuted it. “Better than letting the City devolve into another ssssshooting gallery, *kehsss-kehsss*.”

“What say we table the problem, *h’mm?*” suggested Sparkie. “Come back to it when we actually have a solution for it?”

“Bah! You do not take us seriously—”

Sparkie interrupted, “For now, my friends, I suggest a short recess to collect our nerves, recuperate...” They flicked their eyes at the Sontaran. “And settle our stomachs.”

Fleet Marshal Strak popped one of his gastric reflux tablets.

Sparkie smiled with false endearment.



The morning began like any other, a bowl of porridge and some ersatz tea.

The man known in the community as Doctor James Barrie had obtained a tent from a relief worker and set up his new home on the outskirts of the City of Refuge. His tender heart was appalled by the suffering of his fellow citizens, so he walked down to the makeshift clinic run by the Thals.

He never got any further than outside it.

It was his courage. Every day, he would walk down and try to muster up enough to step inside and volunteer. He tried, today, with a brief count of his blessings.

“I can do this... Surely, I can do this...?” He wrung his flat-cap in his hands. “I’m still here. I’m making a difference. I’m just... Yes. The Doctor. I’m the Doctor. Doctor James Barrie, if need be, but I am still the—”

The tent pole at his side came down in a hail of fists.

This was not a good morning for the Space Security Service.

The Thal medical clinic largely kept to themselves, but as a neutral party in a sea of lingering animosities, there were few who were willing to keep the fight to themselves. Today, the Sontarans and the Kilorans were at one another’s throats. Knives slashed. Weapons were raised.

A voice from somewhere in the tent shouted, “*Kymry! Kymry, come back!*”

“*This is a clinic, you slime!*” snapped a Thal in Space Security Service uniform. “*You understand? A clinic? What the bells, do you think you’re—*”

Behind Doctor Barrie’s shoulder came the three-fingered fist of a Sontaran. Kymry took it straight in the face. He pulled the trigger. A

bolt of energy went straight through the side of the tent. There were screams. Too many screams.

Doctor Barrie leapt to one side, inadvertently putting himself in the direct line of sight for Kymry.

The agent grabbed him by the collar.

“Bad move, alien!” He was shaking with fury. “What a *stupid* thing to do!”

Barrie sounded so earnest in his own ears. “I didn’t—!”

“The skag gonna cry?” grimaced the Sontaran who’d thrown the punch.

Kymry deliberately relaxed his fingers, otherwise he would have shot him dead, there. Horrible.

“Give me one good reason I don’t lock you up?”

The Sontaran barked, “I’ll give you three—”

“Right,” Kymry snarled. “All of you or I shoot the next one who causes trouble.”

Doctor Barrie shivered with fear. He couldn’t move until the Space Security Service’s reinforcements came and dragged him away. Towards the Dome.

In the Vulpian wilds, Traskey didn’t wait for the *Tsunami* to come to a complete stop.

“Well, that settles it.” The shayde climbed out the exit door. “It’s not snow, after all.”

She was on the ground. Among the carpets of yarn-pink pollen. The rapid deployment vehicle’s levijets behind her dulled to a low growl.

The crunch of Ntombizodwa's boots was about as loud as the tracking signal that emanated from Traskey's armband.

"Snow or pollen, either way..." answered the agent. "The cannon's assembly is packed with the stuff. It'll backfire before it can do anything else."

"Let's make it our hope, then, that we won't need it." The tracker continued its chime. "The signal from the astral map seems to be holding. Putting the TARDIS console in the dig-site seems to have worked a treat."

"Something I don't understand is why you couldn't bring the Ship back to the dig-site. Surely, there would be a remote control or something similar?"

"The capsule can't be moved while it's remapping reality. The knock-on effects for the City would be disastrous." She angled the armband and it resounded with a certain urgency. "That way."

"I'll follow you."

As they moved, Traskey reflected it had been quite an ingenious solution, in its way.

By feeding the output of the time path indicator into the astral map, Sparkie had created a measuring system for not just their few splashes of Time, but the last skerrick of Space, as well. Each TARDIS's geotemporal orbit across the planet was documented by a small white light in the rounded display. At its centre, the City of Refuge. Sparkie had explained it as 'a sort of TARDIS radar' to Cantu and Ntombizodwa who took the explanation as writ.

What no one had anticipated—except, perhaps, Sparkie—was that the assembly was tied into more than the Ship's onboard sensors for time disturbances. What was registered on the astral map's display was a form of vworp-engine footprint. Each was steady as they puzzled out

the continuum, but one, seemingly without cause, was now flaring as bright as a legendary demat gun.

The chronoseismic disturbances had driven the local ecology mad. Spring on Vulpia was quite the spectacle, but according to Cantu, this was beyond all reasonable expectations. The air was thick with the plants' last-ditch efforts at preservation. An emulation of their sapient counterparts.

For the two from the Dome, it wasn't too far removed from walking through soapsuds, but it was hard to maintain a steady gait. The ground was trembling like a volcano about to erupt.

One jostle seemed to jog Traskey's memory. "You asked me a question before."

"Did I?" frowned Ntombizodwa, lost in thought.

"An important one, I remember," Traskey strode, purposeful, "the capsule in question is on a major fault-line for the planet."

The agent halved her footsteps to remain apace with the shayde. "I understand that much, but do you mean geological or temporal?"

"Geological."

Somehow, the agent didn't believe it. "A seismic disturbance is causing all this?"

"Daft, isn't it?" Traskey tsked. "After all we've been through, an earthquake seems so trivial to our concerns."

"The effects, though, could be considerably dire."

The Quadrigger exhaled. "I'm glad you're here, you know."

Ntombizodwa pinched her features. "You are?"

“*Mmm...* So is Sparkie. They may seem distant, but that’s because their mind is purling through hundreds of personalities at the same time.”

“I do see her, occasionally. The Doctor we know, I mean. At least, I think I do.” Discomforted, the agent changed the topic. “What would happen if the TARDISEs, out here, failed?”

“It would make Minyos look like a frivolous garden party.” She pointed. “Over there. That lamp light has to be it.”

Ntombizodwa narrowed her eyes. It was difficult to see through the spring-mad plant life, but there was something instinctive, in the back of her mind, that warned of danger. The light pulsed with a steady golden-brown... But it was bobbing *against* the shaking ground, not with it. As they walked closer, they could hear a scratching. Distinctive. Animal. Like—

The agent drew her sidearm. “*Traskey, get back!*”

The shayde turned to ask why, when the single lamp-light split into four and a violent jaw widened beneath it.

The Soren Special—more technically known as the Mark-7 Variable Effect Tronium Blaster—was assembled with great rapidity from the effects in the Ntombizodwa’s bandolier. It took her twenty seconds to combine the low-powered scope, shoulder stock and a longer barrel. Another three to check her clip and change from select fire to automatic. A final six to aim the weapon and squeeze the trigger.

The tronium rays cut through the foaming mass of exotic matter and creature like cheese wire.

Traskey’s glasses reflected back the animal’s silhouette. Some kind of horse-like spider. Sharp forelegs for clipping bone. Teeth in a nautilus spiral, almost like a shark. The shots blackened a thick bone crest used to armour the animal’s eyes against attack. A lucky shot, catching on the lip of its jaw, caused it to startle in sudden pain.

Traskey stood, paralysed with shock.

Another blast, concentrated and deliberate, wounded the creature in the mouth. It staggered away. Defeated. Its four anglerfish-like lures disappeared into the fluffy pollen.

Traskey stepped close to the agent. “Did you kill it, by chance?”

“Don’t tell me you have any objections...”

“Oh, the Doctor is very touchy on the subject of murder. I, comparably, have few qualms.” She swallowed. “Thank you.”

Ntombizodwa nodded. “Do you still have the tracker?”

“Yes...” She caught her breath, checking the armband. “It *must* be in that direction. There’s no cause why... *Ah.*”

“Yes?” She’d held the agent’s arm to stop her.

“It was always a calculated risk. Making assumptions.” Traskey stamped her foot on the ground.

As she did, something glowed. It wasn’t rock or any other natural formation. It was something far stranger.

“The lamp-light,” determined Ntombizodwa.

“Our sought-after TARDIS,” Traskey confirmed. “It must have materialised in a cleft in the ground. Drawn that creature to it, by accident.”

“Easily enough done. How are we going to get to it?”

“No choice but the door.” The quadrigger pointed. “We’re fortunate it’s another police box. It’s just there. Mere centimetres away.”

“And metres down.” The agent reached down and unclipped her belt. “There’s a neutrovon charge in this.”

“How large is the blast?”

While Traskey had been speaking, Ntombizodwa snapped off the prong and dropped in the gap between the door and the rock-wall. “Run.”

“Oh.” The Quadrigger bolted with a speed unbecoming of a longstanding Time Lord academic.

The flash was magnesium-white and devastating. Rock turned into a purple powder. Smoke wafted in acrid black talons through the pollenfall. Carved like two fists of empty air was a burrow to the front of the time-ship.

As the dust settled and the sounds of nature returned, a thought pressed at Ntombizodwa’s brain.

“Don’t tell Sparkie,” she asked.

Traskey nodded. “Granted.”

With no small degree of consternation and discontent, the assembled Vulpian Cabinet left for Geonics’ main concourse. Either by hologram or on literal foot.

Sparkie stopped to let themselves breathe. The delegates flowed around them like a stream. As they did, the gestalt spotted Diamant and Basillius Creel waiting by the side of a lime-green pond. The latter snapped at flies with all the disinterest of a bullfrog, but it kept them occupied. Diamant was studying their own fingers.

“I have some good news for you,” Cantu’s hologram materialised beside Sparkie.

A grateful groan. “Please. I’ll accept anything. The food machine being up and running again. Anything.”

“The Vulpian Communications Network is holding up.”

“‘Holding up’.” A snort came from three shrunken nostrils under a thatch of ginger hair. “What a quaint Tellurian expression, we’ve—”

“I’m aware of the break in the Monoid sector, Sixty-Six, and have sent an engineer and technician,” Cantu assured, again, politely. “We have built, and are testing, an observatory and spatial communications system at the same time—”

“What’s that matter?” Sixty-Six shrugged. “There’s no one out there.”

“And should there be, we would do well not to draw attention to ourselves,” added Chulai, the Killoran kennelwoman.

“No... Really...” Sparkie gave an ironic sigh, rolling their eyes to the ceiling. “How on Earth could we do that...?”

“The system is purely to detect any asteroids or other debris that might strike us. The communication unit is for receiving distress calls or signals from other survivors. We may be able to join forces and provide mutual support and assistance—”

“You’re living in a fool’s dream!” Fleet Marshal Bellicose Strak’s red eyes laughed more than his dry-rot features. “It’s survival of the fittest. We need to be able to defend ourselves from possible aggression. You, worms, could only—”

“Are We interrupting?” Diamant appeared at Sparkie’s other shoulder.

“By all means.” The gestalt beckoned them forth. “This otherwise private conversation seems to be scrambling for an audience.”

“We thought that We might discuss our previous arrangement, Sparkie.”

“What arrangement?” asked the Killoran.

“Not so long ago, Traskey was able to determine that the Mutation, as we called it, was a vortex turtle,” Sparkie explained. “A form of

intelligent life introduced into the ecology of the time vortex millenia ago.”

“Weeds!” Strak laughed again. “The Universe has been conquered by a malignant weed!”

Sparkie’s patience was all but exhausted and some part of that must have registered on their face.

“Basillius...” Diamant beckoned their—well, nowadays, their *friend*, really—over to the impromptu gathering. “We wish for you to do something for Us.”

“Yes, my master?” he asked, eager.

The Creel’s presence in the Geonics concourse, let alone the Dome, created something of a minor stir.

He was becoming known in the City of Refuge by a somewhat infamous reputation. The Space Security Service were rumoured to use him as a boogeyman. A deterrent towards the worst offenders. Not many were foolhardy to take on a Creel. Not with those teeth....

Of course, Sparkie had Diamant’s assurances that Basillius’s searches for a tasty morsel were *only* rumours. His needy stomach had been more than sated by the TARDIS’s beleaguered food machine.

“We shall need to make preparations, We release you from Our work, at present.” Diamant spoke as if working from a checklist. “Continue to assist the Cabinet. Do what you can to help. Don’t eat Fleet Marshal Strak. Are We understood?”

“Sontarans are notoriously chewy,” added the anarchist in Sparkie.

Fleet Marshal Strak briefly stood with his mouth open like a codfish. He clicked open the service tablet-box at his belt and popped another gastric reflux tablet. The Sontaran’s eyes burnt with hatred. “I am needed with the rest of my delegation. You are dismissed.”

As he left at a steady march, Sparkie muttered to himself, “Out of sight, out of mind...”

“Did We do well?” Diamant inquired, puckish.

Politically, Sparkie couldn’t answer, but the grandfatherly twinkle in their eye gave it regardless.

“He’ll make you pay for that,” warned Chulai.

“Group Marssshal Strak wasss becoming indecorouss even in the meeeting,” Ivsek approved in passing. “I sssaw. You may have chassstened his divisssive demeanour ssssomewhat.”

“And I cannot stand a fool, Kennelwoman Chulai,” said Sparkie.

“Our arrangement,” Diamant reminded Sparkie, gently. “With the viewer.”

“Of course.” They unfolded their hands apologetically to the crowd. “Until later?”

The assembled delegates, favourably, all dispersed of their own accord. To their own delegations, out towards the City of Refuge or to whatever next task awaited them in the Dome. Fleet Marshal Strak remained with his battalion. A fierce, sideward sneer directed at Sparkie.

Sparkie rolled their eyes, waved and began to walk.

The Sontarans barely qualified as ambassadors in their own right, but so long as the Space Security Service maintained their presence, it would be a pitched battle for Strak’s cloned brutes. Far too much to lose for so little apparent gain.

In many ways, Vulpia was lucky. However much its inhabitants thought otherwise. The deadlock between the Daleks and Cybermen meant that neither force could roll over the colony without the other initiating a full counterattack. Survival was paramount to both species

and a total unqualified genocide would mean the end of one or the other. They weren't going to chance it, yet.

Sparkie looked over their shoulder. "Are you coming?"

"As arranged, reconstruction of Our viewer goes well," Diamant stretched their arms, joining Sparkie. "It's smaller..."

"In size or scope?"

"Both, but with Basillius's assistance more than satisfactory for providing some much needed remote viewing."

"Good. And what have you discovered, *h'mm?*"

"It seems to Us that We either face dissolution by the vortex turtle that has succeeded in consuming Us or—"

"I heard about the name you gave it."

"You have?"

"Oh, yes. *Mmm.*" The gestalt rubbed their nose. "The vortex turtle *bobbing* and weaving as it tries to get back to its bale..."

Diamant clapped their hands together, eyes wide. "Did they like it?"

"Well... The Cabinet found 'Bob'... to be... That is to say... *erm...*" Sparkie was trying to break it to them gently.

"No sense of style, any of them," pouted the fractal-form.

"Anyway, as *you* were saying," Sparkie urged on.

"That was the part We wanted to hear from you. You can go to your grave an honourable soldier like many of the cultures here, but you, Sparkie, see highways where others only see roadblocks. A hundred minds and no solution. That's silly. What's the answer? Dissolution or...?"

"Thank you," said Sparkie, sincere.

Diamant almost laughed. “For what?”

“Crediting me with imagination. Few others here do. I, *ab*, have seen the possible in the impossible. It came to me after I was contacted by my stray selves. My—her—his—their—our sixth incarnation and the Valeyard.” Sparkie tapped their nose and winked, proud of their own ingenuity. “The answer lies in combining the Adamant Locus with our new communications network.”

“And the solution?”

“I think... The solution is we try to contact Bob.”

They passed the Sontaran battle group with Strak in a heated rally with his men. “The Sontarans do not *plead* with anyone. Retreating and hiding on this refuge was dishonour enough, now they would have us beg for mercy!”

Diamant tilted their head. “When you say ‘We’, Sparkie...”

A sudden crash and the flash of gunfire brought the conversation to an unenviable halt.

“Ambassador of what? The pup’s brigade?” growled a voice. *“Come here and the Sontaran Army will give you something to bark at!”*

Alarm cannoned through Sparkie and Diamant. Basillius was riled to action. Each delegate from the Arcturans to the assembled castes of Zerons reacted in their own inimitable fashion. Worryingly, the Sontarans, usually eager for warfare, scrutinised the fight with the lurid deliberation of Field Majors in the G3 Military Assessment Survey.

At a sprint, Sparkie was fast enough to catch the fight firsthand. The Killoran ambassador was splayed on their back. A Space Security Service agent, a young woman with red fronds, stood blocking his attacker. The assailant, a Sontaran, reached into their coat, producing a small wand with a silver-red dish at its end. Finger poised to fire.

Arms stretched, the gestalt cracked the Skeeling rheon carbine from the Sontaran's hand. A whip from Basillius's tail knocked his legs out from under him.

“What on Earth's going on here?” demanded Sparkie.

A Thal with a black-eye swung to them. “Second Lieutenant Kymry, sir. Prisoners from a riot at the local clinic. We had nowhere else to put them but outside Geoponics—”

“*Attention!*” It was Strak. “What's the situation here?”

The Sontaran on the floor suddenly agitated. “Fleet Marshal, I was—”

“You were causing a public disruption, Field Major Thok.”

“Yes, sir, but I—”

“Is this true of every Sontaran here?”

The captured three nodded, backs arched to attention. Sparkie could see a few others. Stragglers no doubt unfortunate enough to be caught up in the brawl. A Pakhar here, a Monoid there, and a...

The flat-capped man. Doctor James Barrie. He was hiding at the back of the group.

“Is that man going to the cells, too?” inquired Sparkie.

Kymry nursed their eye. “For the time being, yes.”

“Martial discipline shall be enforced. After your confinement, you will be deprived of your energiser rations for two weeks.” Strak pointed to the most senior of his men. “You will be shot. Dismissed.”

Sparkie began., “Hold on, a moment—”

“Too late,” Basillius drooled. “We recognise that expression. The Service hunters are on the warpath.”

Fleet Marshal Strak looked at Sparkie and the Creel sidelong, but said nothing. He left as contemptuous as he'd arrived.

Sparkie caught Doctor Barrie's eye as the Space Security Service hauled the assembled rioters away. It took far too long for that single moment to penetrate the gestalt's group consciousness. Arcadian-green eyes and indisputable spark of recognition...

Diamant stepped up beside them. "Did you end up speaking to them?"

"Which?" asked Sparkie.

"The ephemeral in the flat-cap?"

"He told me his name was Doctor James Barrie."

"That's disappointing," exhaled Diamant. "We had hoped he'd tell you who he was. As he'd agreed with Us."

"I know my literature well enough to recognise an alias. J.M. Barrie was the author of *Peter Pan*. The boy who never grew up."

"After Our time somewhat."

Sparkie turned to Diamant. "Why did he want to speak to me?"

"He wanted to find out something about himself. Something only you could clarify. We think you know what he meant."

Sparkie's mouth opened in silent realisation. "Of course. *Me...*"

Far from the Dome's politicking, Traskey slid down the newly-blasted slope and checked the keyhole. "Intact. Damage to the outer plasmic shell doesn't seem to be the issue."

"You still have your way in?"

“Yes, a key,” she pressed it into the lock and twisted. “From the workshop in my Doctor’s TARDIS. At the dig-site. One of many, from the looks of things. It won’t be missed.”

They pushed open the doors into a wide, bell-shaped room.

Traskey hadn’t seen its like since her days in the cradles. Her first instinct was some kind of water damage. As though an ocean had been released into the console room and this was all that remained after the pressure and erosion. The walls were burnt like autumn leaves. The roundels scalped down to the hexagonal fittings deep within the Ship’s infrastructure.

Even the console itself. The yolk-like membrane of the telepathic circuitry was visible beneath what should have been layers of instrumentation. Each sharpened edge softened to its mushroom-like skeleton. It was a body without muscle or skin, just bone and organs. The materials cracked and blistered by whatever cataclysm had befallen the room.

Ntombizodwa asked the obvious question. “Is this the damage?”

“I’m going to say something I don’t often admit,” began Traskey.

“Which is?”

“I don’t know.” She caught a small screen on the console itself. “I’ll start with the TARDIS databanks. It should, at the very least, provide readings from its last flight log.”

Ntombizodwa stayed by the door. She rested her body against a handrail and exhaled.

If Traskey hadn’t been preoccupied with the woe of the Ship, she might have caught the subtle change in the Space Security Service agent’s demeanour. The features, like varnished wood, rounded with intrusive memories. Her full lips thinned. The agent’s hands were still

on her Soren Special. Tight, as though it were her last possession in the whole Universe.

“I’ve received a reply,” she said.

Traskey was distracted by the sledgehammer next to the screen. “From who? Where?”

“Compuvac. The Space Security Service.”

The quadrigger was puzzled. “Your superiors?”

“Yes. It’s impossible,” snapped Ntombizodwa. “The rest of the Universe is gone.”

“We know that for a fact,” she agreed.

“So, how can I receive a reply from people who no longer exist?”

Traskey felt a stab of memory. Not from Lady Traskeya’s past, but one of her own. The lingering sensation of death and transformation that had come from revisiting the *Odysseum*’s destruction through the message pod. That dismembered feeling of danger.

The shayde’s hand, imperceptible, grasped for the sledgehammer. “What did they ask you to do?”

“Bring you to them.”

“*Ab...*” Traskey’s other hand, free, reached to one of the console’s other controls.

Sparks bit back her fingers, but it was a fraction too late. For all parties involved. Rather than activate the state of temporal grace, crippling onboard use of projectile weapons, the Type-40 TT Capsule did something else. It dematerialised. Except, it didn’t end there. Around them, the iron-lung wheeze of the TARDIS began to treble.

“What did you do?” She heard Ntombizodwa step closer, gun charged.

Traskey froze, sledgehammer in hand. “I should ask you the same.”

“A warning. I owe you that much.” Behind her, she heard something slip into Ntombizodwa’s blaster. A new clip. The old was placed in Ntombizodwa’s bandolier. Another click. “I *knew* you didn’t trust me.”

“I died at the hands of warriors, Ntombizodwa. It is a prejudice I am trying to overcome, however slowly.” Traskey turned to her. “Grant a little patience for the dead.”

“Understand me, Traskey. I’m trained to obey.” The agent sounded apologetic. “You have been asked to be taken to Compovac. To the Space Security Service headquarters.”

“And will you do that?” asked Traskey. “Do you have the means?”

“I’ve been told how to operate this Ship alone. I can, if pushed.” A heavy pause. “I’d prefer that I don’t have to use that information.”

“How could the Space Security Service know how to use a TARDIS?”

“That information is beyond my clearance level.”

“What *do* you know, then?”

“Who to trust. We’re not bad people.” Ntombizodwa was unflinching. “I didn’t kill you. Neither did anyone in the Service. We do bad things, to keep people safe, but we aren’t bad people. The Space Security Service saved my fathers from a private lynching. An Earth First group. I owe them the lives of the people I love more than anyone else in the Universe.”

The shayde suddenly understood. “You think they can bring them back? Your fathers?”

The thrumming build-up within the TARDIS was continuing apace. Traskey knew it would bypass the comparator and feed into the

emergency power booster. She also understood the impending result, Ntombizodwa didn't.

The agent deflected her question. "You know what Colonel Forest said, when I was sworn to secrecy regarding their operations?"

"Tell me."

"The slate is clean."

The shayde eyed her. "But you didn't really believe that."

"No, I don't. I owe them. Will you go willingly?" Ntombizodwa almost pleaded.

Traskey, too, was apologetic. "Not into the unknown. Not again."

"They saved their lives." The same justifications, round and round. It was a frightening pinwheel of unswerving loyalties and circular logic. "I'm an agent. I obey my superiors. But if I can help them, too..."

"You will." She adjusted her glasses. "But do you know *why*?"

"No." Ntombizodwa's eyes softened. "But mine is not to reason why."

There wasn't another option. Traskey tensed her arm to throw the sledgehammer. "Yours is but to do and—"

The last thing the Quadrigger could recall was a muzzle flash and her own face splitting in two.

In the Adamant Locus's dig-site, Sparkie was hovering, agitated, over one of the screens of the astral map.

"One of the TARDISEs has dematerialised," they said.

"Do you want Us to go searching for it?"

“I—” Sparkie exhaled. “The longer we delay, the less likely this will work. We have to use the power while it’s still available. Before it dissipates.”

“And you still think we should use the viewer?”

“It’s the most stable transdimensional equipment we have, at the present, and...” Sparkie let out a harmonious sound that was almost a whistle. “I knew it was a good idea to see it in person... It’s beautiful.”

Three walls of its huge cavern were covered with crystalline aperiodic monotiles.

“Einsteins. Am I right?” they identified. “An adaptation of Penrose tiles. A single tile that covers a plane surface in a pattern that never repeats. Each tile looks like a hat. Hmm... maybe a turtle! Or is it a ghost?”

The viewer reflected the light set into the ceiling of the dig-site’s cavern sending out iridescent beams that captured motes of dust sent up by the pair’s entrance.

“And practical, We managed to carry the central core memory quasicrystals to Vulpia,” added Diamant. “What Basillius fixed to the wall, We linked together to recreate a smaller version of Our viewer.”

“Do you mean you’ve been doing a spot of tiling?”

“Very funny.” Diamant took a moment to be awed. “It’s been fascinating seeing what’s survived and evidence of life out there in the wild chaotic yonder.”

Sparkie, however, couldn’t shake their preexisting concerns. “When the Adamant Locus activates, someone has to be here to monitor the viewer.”

Diamant looked up. “We could do it Ourselves?”

“No, I’d prefer you have all your attention out there,” the gestalt pointed to the screen. “If we only get once chance, it should be contacting Bob. Not rescuing my other selves.”

“There may be another option.”

“Meaning?”

“Your flat-capped self. He’s still under lock and key.”

Sparkie understood. “You’re thinking he might have a TARDIS?”

“You could send Basillius with him.”

“And you would do that?”

“Why not?”

“*H’mmm...* My other self would have to be convinced, but it’s certainly possible...” Sparkie chuckled with mischief. “In the meantime, I can remain here and help.”

“That could be your epitaph, you know.”

“Pon my soul.” Sparkie’s grin grew wider. Toothsome. “How long will you need to prepare?”

“Not long at all.”

“In that case, I’ll be back...” The sapphire eyes turned away, then back, unblinking. “In case I don’t get to say it later, I wish you success, Diamant. For all our sakes.”

“Now don’t go all sentimental on Us. You need to stay sharp. Plenty here want to see you fall.”

“And a few more succeed, my friend!” Sparkie waved as they left.

The silence of the dig-site was deafening. Broken only by the liquid-honey hum of the Thirteenth Doctor’s console. Still sat outside the police box. Its salt-crystal amber column cast ripples of light against the monotiles.

“All the same... Watch yourself, Our friend,” murmured Diamant.

Traskey awoke. No, that wasn't the word anymore, given her current state. She had reactivated. That was more accurate. Her glasses were missing. She didn't really need them anymore, but it felt wrong without them. It then occurred to her that neither of these things mattered. Where was she?

Strapped to a chair was the answer. In a chamber, more of an oubliette, really, which lacked any detail, any identification. A perfect blank. A cell.

“Back online? Good, now we can begin,” said a voice from behind her.

An old woman strode into Traskey's view; her gardening gear and straw hat stood out against the blank grey walls. There was something familiar about her.

“We've both changed bodies and names over the years haven't we Traskey, so let's stick to the names we have now,” she said. “I'm known as Awsok. I have a few questions for you.”

“Where am I?” Traskey asked. Her voice sounded more distorted than before. Perhaps Ntombizodwa's weapon had done more than just knock her out.

“Somewhere secure, with a marvellous view of the dying cosmos. Not all that far from Vulpia, which was necessary for your transmat.”

“Transmat?” Traskey exhaled. “The new clip in Ntombizodwa's gun...”

“A microtransmat. Used for game hunting. Such technology is for time-tots.”

The shayde sighed with disappointment. “Your agent must have proved very helpful, in that regard...”

“And I hope you can too. You see, Traskey, Vulpia simply won’t last. It can’t. What you and the Doctor have constructed is impressive, I will acknowledge, but it won’t last forever. You must know that.”

“I trust the Doctor.”

“Loyalty is an admirable quality. But blind faith is not, as you have just seen. You’re a good scientist. You can recognise a dead-end when you see one.”

“So what would you propose instead?”

“Your carefully balanced bubble of reality is predicated on the Adamant Locus, correct?”

“Why ask if you know already?”

“I’ll take that as a yes, then. What did you do to the TARDIS?”

“Which? There are so many.”

“The one recalled to Division at my instruction. The one that arrived with Ntombizodwa shortly after your transmat to here in Division Control.”

“Why not bring us both at once?”

“Leverage. Irrespective of whatever circumstances arose on Vulpia. Whether you agreed to go with her or not.”

“How did you know we’d be out there?”

“Ntombizodwa.”

“I didn’t tell her until we were already underway.” The realisation hit Traskey like an axe. “You already have agents in the City, don’t you? Someone to watch us and to intercept her reports to what she thought was Compuvac?”

“Our jurisdiction is Multiversal. You can probably guess at the power at our fingertips. By comparison, surveilling Vulpia is like monitoring a sandpit. Traskey, this will all be so much easier if you cooperate.”

“Why? What do I have to lose?” She gestured around the cell. “If you kill me... what? You rob a shadow of its borrowed time. There’s nothing you can threaten me with.”

“On the contrary, Traskey, there is.”

“What?”

“The life of Ntombizodwa and, failing that, something just as precious to a Quadrigger like yourself...”

“Which is?”

Awsok was at her ear. “The life of the TARDIS.”

Dorothy always said the man pretending to be Doctor James Barrie was an accident waiting to happen. Forever tripping over himself. She thought it was because his brain was moving too quickly for his feet or was it the other way round? He was tall and gangly, awkward in movement and demeanour. An apologetic Bristolian burr to his voice, he was not given to theatrical speeches or performance.

“Trilateral symmetry?” He studied Basillus as they stepped into the dig-site. “You *are* a peculiarity. Forgive me, Professor Postgate’s guide mentions your species, but you, Basillus, are *not* what I expected.”

“Diamant chose me and it’s been an honour to serve.” The Creel tongued the air. “I’ve learnt much about the Universe and its wonders from Diamant’s viewer.”

“Perhaps I should have thought of that, it would have saved me so much grief.”

Sparkie turned to their escorting agents. “I can take it from here.”

The pair nodded and returned to their duties.

“Doctor?” asked Sparkie.

“Yes?” Barrie winced at the slip.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” they asked.

“Tell you? Tell you what?” he half-laughed.

“Who you were,” they persisted. “We could use all the help we can get. Especially now.”

“And become another voice in that gestalt of yours? No, thank you. As grateful as I am, for you taking me from that cell, I’d prefer to remain myself.” He took a shaky breath. “For however long that bally lasts.”

“Why didn’t you join us when you had the chance?”

“I was trapped aboard my TARDIS. She panicked and attempted to flee when the Gulp appeared. My influence, unfortunately. I trained her to act that way.” Another breath. “I was knocked out by the mercury fumes. A blown fluid link.”

“Does that mean your TARDIS is immobilised?”

He tapped his fingers against his cheek. “What does it matter?”

“Because you have the opportunity to do something none of us are able to accomplish.”

He winced. “Which is?”

“Rescue our prior—future—alternate selves. From Diamant’s Folly, are you aware of it?”

“No.” He pulled the flat-cap from his head and wrung it between his hands. “I can’t say I was.”

“History runs by very particular lines—“

“I don’t need a lecture on the Web of Time from myself,” interjected the flat-capped Doctor.

Sparkie tried again. “Then, you must know... Your life—”

“Is what? An aberration? An anomaly?”

The gestalt stopped. “You knew?”

“I felt it.” He slapped the flat-cap against his thigh. “When Omega tossed my broken body into that crevasse, left me among the blue sands of Pyro Shika, I thought that it was finally over. Too many gambles. A life, your life, lost in so quick a succession felt hollow.”

He squeezed his eyes, trying to block out Peri’s mournful voice in his memory. *No... No—no! Not again. Please. I only just got to know you... Doctor, I can’t do this again...*

Sparkie asked, “Do you know who you replaced?”

“No.” The flat-capped Doctor shook his head. “And I have no wish to do so. My life was spent... It was...”

Simple. He’d loved his simple pleasures, finishing a well-written book, watching sunsets, paddling in the sea and pleasant company. After the horrors of Androzani and, later, Pyro Shika. He remembered Peri’s delight visiting the beautiful gardens of Trebah and Heligan, both before and after they were lost.

Now, his life of beauty, tranquillity and joy was, too, gone forever.

His face fell. “Who would I be rescuing? Specifically?”

“My sixth incarnation. From a timestream where he went to Pyro Shika long ago, under very different circumstances. Rather than a gravesite, it was a footnote.”

“He travelled with Peri, as well?”

“And more. Just to name a few, Frobisher, Dinah, K9, Grant, Evelyn, Jamie, Zoe, Mila, Actis, Wings, Mack, Mel—”

“Quite the rota.”

“Yes.”

The flat-capped Doctor shook his head. “But not with me.”

“What about their lives, *b'mph?*” countered Sparkie.

“Are they enriched by my other self’s presence? Are their lives innately better for our interference?”

“Many asked to come aboard. Many wanted to travel with him. Outside the Folly, our sixth incarnation would have a rich life. A full one. Not curtailed by an embolism in the timestream. I would say, the cosmos is better for his presence than without it.”

“And the incarnation who will replace me? This other Seventh Doctor. Them, too?” He tried to stare down Sparkie and found he didn’t have it in him. “This is bally well unconscionable. If I say ‘no’, I commit murder. If I say ‘yes’, I commit suicide.”

“I cannot force you to do anything. This decision must be your own.”

“No, no, you won’t force me, but you’ll try to convince me. You.” He circled his counterparts. “This last sparkle of Doctors. Hundreds of you want me to give up my life. Would you be the same in these circumstances? Each and every one of you? No outliers?”

Sparkie sighed. “Well, of course, there would be outliers—”

Basillius issued a low wheeze like a bicycle pump. The Doctors had forgotten he was there. Watching them. His attention was now fixed on the flat-capped man.

“I have seen your lives, Doctor,” said the Creel. “Many iterations across many timestreams. Some from the ancient past, some from the

distant future and some where you're no Time Lord at all, but something else entirely."

"Exactly. Do you have the right?" the flat-capped Doctor pointed at Sparkie.

"That is not the right question." Basillius shook his head. "Not the right question, at all... The question is how many lives are you prepared to kill to salvage your own." He gestured down to the viewer below. "Remain and you destroy not just one life and avert another... There is a whole weight of history behind the lives you take. An eighth, a ninth, a tenth, an eleventh, a twelfth, a thirteenth... And who knows however many more?"

"I do not make this suggestion lightly," said Sparkie, even. "Surely, the lives of all who have been affected, the lives snuffed out before they've even begun... They deserve the right to live, as well?"

"At the cost of me..." the flat-capped Doctor's eyes fell to the ground. "My TARDIS... I can blow some replacement glass for the fluid link in the workshop. I will require a little sand."

"You can take some from Vulpia's surface. It's fine enough for glassmaking."

"I'll consider it." He looked to the Creel. "Could you accompany me?"

Basillius nodded his head.

The flat-capped man looked to the gestalt of his other selves. "You did say," added Sparkie, slowly, "he wasn't what you expected."

"This will heal Time?" he asked.

Sparkie nodded. "Whatever choice you make, your fate rests in that Folly."

"And yours?"

The gestalt gestured. “It remains here on Vulpia.”

Ntombizodwa was thrown onto the floor in front of Traskey. A metal collar had been fitted around her neck. Awsok orbited her. A predator circling its prey.

“The noble Ntombizodwa, Traskey. She betrayed you and brought you to us. A good little soldier. The Doctor’s had a fair few of those over the years. Though none as easily led astray as this one I daresay.”

Traskey asked, “Who have been as desperate as we are now?”

“We could end that desperation,” mused Awsok, keeping her eyes fixed on Traskey. “We could kill her. Right here, right now.”

“No,” said Traskey, firmly.

Disbelief and gratitude mingled on Ntombizodwa’s features.

“Admirably loyal,” Awsok approved. “Then you’ll do what we ask. Take the TARDIS back to Vulpia. To its very heart. I have some very loyal people who will go with you. Guide them to the Adamant Locus. You will do exactly what they and I say, at all times. You notice the collar? Why don’t you tell your friend what it is?”

“It’s a compliance collar,” Traskey assessed, looking down at Ntombizodwa grimly. “An old Gallifreyan torture method—”

“Torture’s a strong word. *Discipline* would be more accurate. We can’t discipline you Traskey, causing you pain might damage your precious Hypercubes and whatever useful knowledge you’ve gleaned since the *Odysseum*’s destruction. Neither is true of your friend.” She released Traskey’s restraints. “So behave.”

“I can withstand pain,” grunted Ntombizodwa.

Traskey licked her lips and muttered, “The collar can also atomise your head via your spine.”

“At the push of a button.” Awsok smiled. “I doubt even Sparkie could recover anything from that.”

The dig-site was a place of absolute silence. Hallowed and haunted by what was to happen next.

The Adamant Locus was a creation left by beings that experts in the arcane called the Great Old Ones. Entities that grew like a cancerous fungus across entire worlds or sat across the voids of space like a giant on a mountaintop.

At its base, were two figures. Both conglomerations, but with startlingly different histories. United in a single purpose.

Five words. “Hard to believe, isn’t it?”

“We’re ready when you are, Sparkie.” Six in reply.

The gestalt activated a control on the orphaned console.

Somewhere, deep in Sparkie’s consciousness, they recall the immediate seconds of an atomic blast. The sky caught fire. The dust skittered away. Frightened of the absolute silence. Doppler-images flickering and churning in halos of flame.

It’s the clap that brings Sparkie back to reality. Louder than Creation itself. Their hand was still around the handle. Ligaments so tight that they had begun to melt into its metal. With everything else that had been going on, it had not even occurred to them to consider the material tolerances of their body. Already bloated with memories and speculations.

It was done. The plasmic interface of the viewer’s main screen tore open like a milk-white scar. With a crash that would not be heard except deep within the maelstrom itself.

They sank against the console for support.

Go! The word had no power on Sparkie's lips.

Nevertheless, Diamant stepped inside.

And the viewer did not close behind them.

It was a calculated risk and calculated risks were precisely what Awsok had been monitoring in Division Control.

The crash that could only be heard deep within the maelstrom—it could be heard here. Even in the isolation of the zero chamber.

On her holographic display, Awsok switched from the ship's external sensors to internal communications.

"Confirmation," one monitor said, automatically.

"It's time," she instructed.

Fleet Marshal Bellicose Strak had been approached by Division after the death of a previous operative. A member of a police force on Birdie Hepburn. A Wrarth Warrior. Constable Something-or-rather. He hadn't paid much particular mind to the details.

What mattered to him was why this organisation was approaching his battle group.

He was a loyal officer of the Sontaran Empire. Dedicated and disciplined to the martial might laid down by General Sontar on their throneworld of Sontara. Renamed in the general's honour. The notion that he would turn on his own was absurd.

For the suggestion alone, he had shot the Division operative dead. On the spot. A select-fire bolt from his Skeeling rheon carbine that had unzipped its head like a field-service bag. Standing in the resulting

spillage of sinew, he was approached by another. Undeterred. With clarifications on the offer.

This had left him, admittedly, intrigued. He had mentioned the encounter with High Command. Alliances with aliens held little validity, but this could prove apposite in opposing the Rutan scourge. The Bellicose clan kept an eye out for any further mentions of such an organisation. It did the Sontaran Empire well to be aware of any such threats... or opportunities.

And the opportunity had come. On the day after the Great Gulp, when he had reluctantly heeded the warnings of the cowardly Doctor and brought his battalion to safety on Vulpia. An approach from the leader of the Division, no less! A promise of a battle to come, to reclaim honour. To be the leader of a new Sontaran Empire in the face of total extinction. Yes, this was an opportunity he could take.

All he had to do was wait for orders.

He brought his service tablet-box to his lips. A small electric shock—paralysing to a Tellurian, but a tickle to a Sontaran—signalled from the homing beacon implanted within it that the operation was underway. Orders given.

The Fleet Marshal clicked it back onto his belt and toggled a hidden latch in its top. A small click. Barely perceptible among the assembled delegates as they poured into the room for the current session. It was to be led by Cantu, while Sparkie was called to other business. That suited him well. His men, stationed outside, had worked with the approaching detachment before. Their battle tactics were well understood.

The doors closed and Cantu materialised. “To begin—”

As the wheezing, groaning of the stolen TARDIS filled the room, Fleet Marshal Strak opened the hidden compartment in the side of his

tablet-box. Methodically, unhurried, he assembled his Skeeling from its component parts. It took him no more than thirty-seconds, at most.

The blue crate shunted itself into ordinary existence. It blocked the sightline for the Martian and Killoran delegates. The Monoid, however, Sixty-Six, was able to spot the weapon immediately. He slammed himself to his feet and cried out, “*The Sontaran has a weapon—!*”

Strak switched the Skeeling to automatic and sprayed death into the room of assembled delegates. Pockets of red opened in Sixty-Six’s body like zip fasteners. Those trained in combat, the Ice Lord Ivsek and Chulai, were quicker to react, but per the arrangements of the Cabinet, they were unarmed. The kennelwoman was shot in the neck. The Ice Lord through the unguarded mouth beneath the helmet. The holographic projectors for both Cantu and the First Apothecary were shattered almost as a by-product of the mayhem unleashed from the Sontaran.

Bodies tumbled. The six-inch magazine clip of Fleet Marshal Strak’s weapon fed higher and higher into the barrel.

At the first unloaded click, with a visibly showy reload, the doors of the TARDIS opened and the Division operatives took over. The Space Security Service agents charged the chamber. They’d no choice, this was a stopgap, not built-for-purpose. Diamond flashes of light threw them to walls and the floor. Shot down by rifles that Strak had heard referred to as stasers. Anyone who wasn’t already dead was picked off by Strak’s battle group in the concourse outside.

It was a brutal, bloodied and violently unexpected assault that ended as sharply as it had begun. From the blood-spattered robes and armour of the Cabinet rose a stench like charred meat and burnt rubber. Strak had missed this smell. The smell of a battle won.

One of the Division operatives gestured to their throat-mike. A band of silver at their neck.

“Understood,” she said.

Strak frowned. “How’s that?”

Awsok addressed the Sontaran through the throat-mike’s receiver. “*Is there anyone else we should be concerned with?*”

“No, Vulpia’s tenuous unity began and ended with this chamber.” The Fleet Marshal took great satisfaction in kicking Ivsek’s body from his chair. “You will, however, face opposition on your approach to the dig-site.”

“Yes... We had intended to go directly, but the Doctor has booby-trapped the area with her TARDIS. We cannot rematerialise within the dig-site without risking a time ram.”

“What are your orders?”

“We need to provide an incentive for capitulation.”

From within the faux wooden doors of the craft, Traskey and First Rank Ntombizodwa were shoved to the fore. Their hands clasped over their heads. Behind them, rolled with considerable purpose, was a hexagonal apparatus with a glowing green core. It looked very much like a reactor or a containment device of some sort.

“Did you know?” muttered Ntombizodwa.

“No,” Traskey murmured. “I pressed the fast return switch. It should have brought us back outside the Dome... I don’t understand why—”

“Time torpedoes would risk harming the Adamant Locus. Even armed for stasis and ours rarely are. You, therefore, will provide an attack from the ground.”

“With respect,” said Strak, directed to Awsok rather than the prisoners, “hostages are not be enough. This gestalt of the Doctors is changeable. Mutable. We need it distracted, not give it a target to rescue.”

“Agreed. We have such a distraction in mind.”

The hexagonal apparatus ignited from within. Its dome split, not with mechanical precision, but like the parting of matter and antimatter. An impossible divide. The hiss that emerged from within it was a death rattle.

Panic gripped Traskey and Ntombizodwa's features.

Strak immediately pressed his three-fingered hand against his face.

The other operatives looked on impassively.

The lights in Geoponics began to witter and sputter. Electrical discharges crackled as something lodged itself into the circuitry of the Dome.

“A computer virus. Specially engineered to deal with the technology that presently keeps Cantu alive. If Sparkie does not acquiesce... In sixteen minutes, Cantu—the real Cantu—will drown in his own fluidic suspension tank.”

In the Dome's sync-op chamber, as the holographic instance from Geoponics reached Cantu's true body, he felt a twinge in his feet. A numbness. That was quickly followed by the irregular pulse of his heart. A beat skipped here and there. His lungs began to tighten. Vision blurred.

Life began to fade from the fluidic suspension tank.

Cantu slammed his hands against its side. He wanted to cry. He wanted to yell. All he could manage was a thought.

Sparkie—Doctor! Help!

THUS SPAKE BOB: PART 4
ALL RUIN LEADS TO VULPIA



by Alan Camlann, AFJ Kernow and Sherlock

“**Y**ou must take the load...!” Sparkie strained back a shout, determination burning in their blinded eyes. “*You must! For life, for hope, for the destiny of every surviving star, and because I tell you to!*”

In the dig-site, Sparkie stood at the head of a TARDIS console both strange and familiar in equal measure.

Sparkie burnt like a Roman candle. Their form was running like wax against the mechanical and master control panel. There was a body beneath all that smoke. A sturdy one. The damage, however, was so extensive; it was difficult to tell where one aspect began and the other ended.

The console was juddering beneath the gestalt’s fingertips.

With the Vulpian Communications Network, Diamant had a buoy they could return to when they had their answer. A beacon in the night. The Adamant Locus could lock Space and Time long enough for the fractal-form to traverse it, but to do so... They required matter which didn’t exist in great quantities in Bob’s belly.

They had to make their own.

Cables and relays fed from the console to the TARDIS and from the TARDIS to the Adamant Locus and from the Adamant Locus to Diamant’s viewer. Between the near half-dozen pieces of hardware, Sparkie and Diamant had created a time bridge. Like a log dropped across a rushing stream. Conventional matter among exotic matter.

Hopefully, just enough to keep Diamant alive.

The honeycomb-gold of the console flickered momentarily.

“Thought too soon...” They strained to see.

There was a noticeable dip in the TARDIS’s power levels. The power plants in the Dome were fluctuating. Had to be. The dig-site had experienced regular power cuts before the Gulp, but since then, Cantu

had sorted it all out.

“Surely?” Sparkie choked in a breath.

The gestalt wafted across to another side of the console. Watcher-like wisps of energy licked from their arms. Diamant’s status was still in the corner of their eye. The Dome, however, was experiencing some very odd readings.

They switched on the TARDIS transceiver.

“Cantu?” A ragged cough. “Dear, dear, dear... Is everything alright?”

In reply, Sparkie could hear a distant alarm. Through one of the air conditioning vents drilled all throughout the dig-site. It was a weak, tin-like howl that hadn’t sounded in quite some time. Not since, perhaps, Cantu’s first rescue by their thirteenth incarnation with Yaz.

“The sync-op chamber,” Sparkie recognised. “Cantu? *Answer me, young man!*”

Something was wrong. Very wrong.

“*Cantu, are you—?*”

They felt a sudden rush of pain in their arm. The armband that linked the colonists to the Dome. The machine’s injection site pinched with pain. As Cantu described, it used the electrochemical physiology of its wearer as a power source. Usually, it amounted to no more than an itch.

“This is far worse. Far, far worse.” It was drawing far more than it needed. Why—?

Sparkie heard, no—*felt* a cry. A shiver of desperation from somewhere cold and isolated.

The armband sputtered. A voice without form, “*Sparkie—Doctor! Help!*”

The scream ricocheted through the TARDIS's telepathic circuits. Like whiplash in a crashing car. Sparkie sunk against the console. Their equivalent lungs, heaving.

“Cantu's in trouble.” Sparkie looked at the quaking instrumentation of the console. Grim.

Every instinct told them to go, find out what was wrong and put it to rights. They couldn't refuse such a cry for help.

“Nevertheless,” they chastised themselves, “I'm already *answering* one, am I not? *Here*. In the dig-site.”

It was a cry far larger than any single world. It came from a vortex turtle with a whole bubble Universe on its back. It was not of their Time, it was not of their Space, but it held just as much life and wonder as their own. Everything from Alpha Centauri to Zarbi—or its nearest equivalent.

The vortex turtle—what Diamant had jejunely called Bob—was destructive on a level that each of their incarnations had scarcely seen before. And yet, despite its overwhelming power, it was as desperate as the Vulpians were.

“Needing. Pleading. This will be our only chance to contact it. Such an opportunity won't come around to us again. Not nearly soon enough.”

No, the risks were far too high for personal sentimentality.

“Two Universes are at stake. Ours and the bubble Universe, out there. More than even that, if we should fail.”

There was a bigger picture to consider. Some of Sparkie's lifetimes would like to have thought they struggled with it. Others grasped the concept only too well.

“And yet...”

Yes, and yet... If Cantu was in trouble, surely the City of Refuge was, as well?

“Decision time, my friends,” they urged to themselves.

Sparkie stood. Fused to the console. Paralysed.

Every incarnation had a differing answer. A different action. It wasn't the delay of a debate, but a body pulled a hundred other ways besides. Soon, they reconciled themselves to two halves. Those who wished to remain in the dig-site and those who wished to venture to the sync-op chamber.

Their stray selves, the Sixth Doctor and the Valeyard, were still trapped in Diamant's Folly. Even by telepathic conference, there was little they could do in this circumstance without being physically present themselves.

Sparkie slammed their fists on the console in anger. “This is preposterous! *I cannot be in two places at once!*”

A thought struck at the flint of their collective minds. Then again... Couldn't *they*?

Diamant could. Why not Sparkie?

The body that Diamant had created for them was crude. The main skeleton would have to remain behind. The organic material, however... That was unusual. A bit like modelling clay. Diamant had folded the body using transdimensional planes. A fusion. With the resultant matter that had accumulated around their skeleton.

“Fusion... Fission...” They leant against the console. “*Mitosis.*”

Was it possible? The TARDIS was an innate component of stabilising the regenerative process. Without her, the mind and body of a Time Lord remained soft. Malleable. It was largely through a form of recursive telepsionic therapy that incarnations resolved themselves into stable personalities.

Sparkie concentrated on the telepathic circuits of the TARDIS. In them, were hundreds of thought processes. All heavily compressed to ensure some basic form of autonomy. If they stretched them out through the Ship's systems...

“To coin an old adage from the peoples of the Earth, two heads...”

Sparkie's head tore, slowly, at first. The two components pulled in opposite directions. They looked down.

Four fingers, a thumb. Eight fingers, two thumbs. Two hands. Four hands. Four arms. Four legs. Skulls tore like a sideways hourglass. Pushed out from one another. Mirrors of one another. It was as though Sparkie's shadow was stepping outside themselves. They could see through four eyes. Two differing perspectives. In parallax. Stretched. Further and further. Something had to give?

With a ripping squelch, the new form broke free of their parent body.
...*Are better than one*, their other self thought, through the console.

The two iterations looked at each other. Sparkie was still fused to the console, the other...

Gunfire punctuated through the dig-site's ventilation ducting.

That's far too close. Suppose, we'll have to dress on the fly.

“Can you hold a key?”

Yes?

“Take mine. Insurance policy.” Sparkie tossed their other half the TARDIS key. “Now, cut away with you! Help Cantu!”

In the remnants of Diamant's Folly, by a window on the upper floor, Mel was trying to come to grips with a frankly surreal set of circumstances.

It was inevitable, given the nature of the Doctor and the Valeyard, that there would be some behavioural overlap. However, she hadn't quite been prepared for the perfect mirroring of preparations that was going on in the ballroom and the kitchen. Simultaneously.

The same materials. The same muted look of concentration. Even some of the same movements as they assembled their respective apparatuses.

When Mel asked, separately, what they were doing, they both had one universal answer.

"Planning ahead, Mel."

They hadn't elaborated and left her to ponder. Quite typical, really, so she'd come to the window to think about it. The Folly's crystalline cat had been sitting. Watching. For what? Mel's answer came from the sky itself. It looked like a small pinwheel firework, at first. A flash that Mel could pick up with clarity from *beneath* their small kingdom's protective dome.

It grew in alarming size, just as the Doctor was coming up behind her.

She turned to him, eyebrows pinched in confusion. "Doctor—"

His smile dropped at the sight over her shoulder. "*Mel, get away!*"

The time-traveller ripped her aside with surprising force. The Doctor clung to Mel tight, shielding her body with his own.

The shriek alone was enough to score their eardrums, but he had seen its cause just an attosecond sooner than her. The window, a glorious Georgian feat of glassmaking, burst into a thousand tiny pieces. Blown inward by the wet thump of the approaching object in the soft earth of the garden outside.

The programmer heard the cat's hissing before anything else.

“Mel? Mel, are you alright?” The Doctor bellowed over her tinnitus. She coughed the plaster dust from her lungs. “Is that our welcome party?”

“Hard to miss, isn’t it?” He choked and sputtered. “Shall we go see?” The cat skittered from its hiding spot and into the dark of the Folly.

Cantu’s murder had been quite ingenious, in its way.

His fluidic suspension tank was supported by a steady supply of perfluorocarbons. To assist with liquid breathing. It was a common enough means of sustaining pilots for interplanetary travel. Where oxygen-dominant, air-breathing environments were a precious or otherwise dangerous commodity.

However, the carbon dioxide exchange necessary for such a liquid still relied on an external filter. This filter, unfortunately, was linked into the Dome’s computer systems. In an emergency, it was designed to drain away.

Cantu ripped the tank’s emergency release switch.

The light for ‘EJECTING’ was illuminated in a bright-blue.

And the front hatch didn’t open.

Cantu sank to the floor of the empty tank. Air-tight. Now emptied of the vital liquid that let him breathe. His panic, understandable in the circumstances, only accelerated the lack of oxygen in the tube.

Somewhere... Somehow... A computer malfunction of some kind, answered the anomalous lack of perfluorocarbons with an equally anomalous substitute. Carbon monoxide.

Cantu was going to die in a tank full of air.

He stumbled against the tube’s surface. Retching. His arms spasmed

against his body. A ringing, loud and obnoxious, was roaring in his ears like a shuttlecraft on re-entry.

Cantu's vision narrowed to a dark tunnel. Black with violet dazzling the edges like lace.

The external door to the sync-op chamber sealed.

He didn't believe the sight of the thing outside. In the chamber itself. A silvery-grey blob with striking sapphire eyes.

Nevertheless, Cantu was fascinated. He marvelled at the thin, panic-quick straws that attacked the keys from its arms. Like a thousand tiny reeds, they danced over the input terminals that controlled the life support system. Its sapphire eyes speed-read through layers of what could only have been raw code.

It was watching Cantu's life-signs on the monitor.

Finishing the job, then.

He tried to pull himself tight, but the convulsions left him crumpled on the floor.

Cantu wished Sparkie was here. At least, he would have died among friends. One friend, in particular. The one who'd saved him all those years ago. How did the song go?

I really can't stay—

The roof fell on him like a bucket of thunder. The perfluorocarbons in their emerald-green crashed into the carbon monoxide death-trap of the chamber. It swilled around the tube's curves. He was engulfed in moments. Ice in the bottom of a glass. His hollow-boned body rose with the tide.

Cantu turned his face towards it and inhaled. The absence, lifted. His lungs, once again, full. His heartbeat was strengthening. Stabilised. The Voice of the City began to regain control of his limbs.

“Cantu? Cantu, are you alright?” Their rescuer returned their attention to the readouts. “Your biorhythms should be returning to normal in no time. Cantu?”

Cantu closed his eyes and opened them again.

His vision was clearing. “I don’t know who you are, but thank—” His voice hitched in confusion.

It was just a shape. A dazzling blur, but it couldn’t be...

“It’s you?” he said.

“You recognise me?”

“Yes. Of course! Doctor, it’s... It’s *you* you.”

“*Mmm*. And *mmm-mmm*. I was leading the charge, but we’re all here, us Doctors. Present and accounted for.” The pseudo-blonde bob tilted their head. “Well, half of us.”

She—no, *they*, it was still they, were checking the air conditioning unit on the outside of the fluidic suspension tank. There was no ear cuff. No rainbow braces. Just the face with the elfin nose and wondering eyes in a strange alloy-like matter, but he recognised her.

“Useful physiology, cephalopods,” they continued. “It’s why you can’t keep a wily octopod captive for very long.”

“Are you the Doctor or...?”

“Many of us, but not all. As with Sparkie. Think of me as...” They ticked their face. “Ember.”

Cantu almost laughed with relief. “I can’t let you out of my sight for one minute, can I?”

“That’s my line,” smiled the familiar face.

“You’ve rescued me. Again.”

Ember rested their hand gently on the glass. “Please, don’t make a

habit of it.”

“Strak,” Cantu’s face fell. “It was Strak. He killed everyone in the Cabinet.”

“Where is he?” Ember pulled back.

“On his way to the dig-site. He won’t be alone.”

“No...” Something strange and otherworldly crossed Ember’s features. “No, he won’t.”

At Diamant’s Folly, the flat-capped Doctor clambered through one of the larger open windows of the orangery. Full of smashed plant pots and withered vines. It was hardly necessary. Basillius crashed through the wooden double-doors like they were rice paper.

“You should have waited for me, my master,” the Creel snickered.

The Doctor hugged himself. “We should certify you as a siege engine, on you go...”

“Do you have any regrets?” asked Basillius.

His mouth moved soundlessly. “On you go,” he repeated.

Down a long, tiled hallway, they reached what must have been the house’s grand staircase. It was difficult to tell under the tidal wave of objects strewn everywhere. They jostled themselves around a smashed grandfather clock, cogs and gears, split open like the body of a stabbing victim.

The Doctor hissed a sharp intake of breath.

“What is it?”

“You can’t feel that...?” He rubbed his arms.

“I... No, not feel, but I *smell*... I can smell food.” Basillius sniffed the air. “Nearby.”

The Creel salivated. He saw a cat. The crystalline cat. It slipped through into another part of the house. Basillius skittered to the tantalising door. A kitchen, perhaps, or a larder at the very least.

It was here, at that moment, where Basillius's tendency to charge headlong into danger got him into trouble. As the library door fell from its hinges, there was a snap of tripwire. Barely wider than fishing line.

Like a bear-trap, a library shelf of considerable height and weight toppled to one side. It didn't fall. Expert effort had been expended to ensure that fact. Basillius, unfortunately, was beneath it and pelted by several heavy collections of encyclopaedias.

The Doctor turned and fled, his legs pounding against the tiles. So consumed by his own anxiety, he failed to track the path he'd originally taken through the house. A foot caught on the upturned grandfather clock. He crashed to his hands and knees, destroying the face of time. There was blood everywhere from the glass. His blood.

He opened his mouth to a keening wail.

In the other room, on the other side of the literary waterfall, a diminutive figure was backing away from the Creel. A fire poker tight in her hand. For bonus points, Basillius was still alive. Just badly disorientated and squealing like a stuck iguana. Tangled in the remnants of a once rather lovely side-table.

From the door emerged a young red-headed woman. Clasped in her hand was a fire poker. She steeled herself against the darkness in a way that the Doctor envied.

"Help..." His voice was small, weak, and pathetic. "Help... Help me..."

"Oh, no..." She dropped the poker. "Are you alright? Let me see."

The young lady was obviously used to frightening aspects and tougher than she looked. Definitely one of his prior self's companions.

Seasoned by travel, so a vintage by a few years, though he couldn't recognise her himself.

"I'm sorry, we've been through a bit of a rough patch." She was tearing her sleeve to create a swab. "The house isn't what it once was. There's so much here to injure yourself on, if you're unawares."

"Please..." He moaned. "Please, it hurts..."

"I know, I know..." She twisted her head. "*Doctor!* Someone's hurt!"

She was lifting him as best she could. Under each arm. Off the staircase, back towards the room where the Creel floundered in confusion.

"Hurt? What do you mean?" called a booming baritone. "Mel?"

The flat-capped Doctor was covered in a sticky red-black. His clothes were ruined and his arms hurt so much from the pain. He wasn't used to this. He'd abandoned this life for something simpler and more idyllic. It was all a nightmare he'd left behind on Pyro Shika.

His body was dragged with a sudden great rapidity. "We're bringing you into the library's light, old fellow. So we can see what the damage is. We've got you."

The Doctor turned and felt as though he'd been kicked in the stomach. Now, there was a face he recognised. The blond curls. The steel-blue, feline eyes. But it couldn't be *him*. *He* was never here. The flat-capped man had no memory of such a place.

"You..." he swallowed, "can't..."

"One of them wandered into your chair trap," Mel was speaking to her incarnation. "The other tripped over the grandfather clock on the staircase."

"It worked a little too well, I fear."

"Yours were at least intended to scare, not kill."

“A haunted house, as opposed to a...” The Doctor noticed the recovering reptile. “Well, now, there’s a face that floats upon the tide of memory. We’ve met, haven’t we?”

“The pain seems familiar...” conceded Basillius.

“The Adamant Locus. An incarnation previous with my other self from across the Multiverse. Basillius Creel.” The Sixth Doctor said the name like he was chiding a small child. “How’s your tail?”

“You could only be the Doctor,” Basillius was almost sheepish. “It seems you have learnt from the traps and tricks of my master.”

“Not at all. It’s innate.” He cleared his throat. “I’d help you up, but as you see, your friend here has fared far worse.”

Basillius clambered up in alarm. “So, he has...”

“I know it may not seem like it, but you’re both rather lucky,” said Mel. She and the Doctor rested the flat-capped man at the base of a stable bookcase. “You could easily have bumped into one of the V—”

“Melanie?” A severe-sounding voice cut through the programmer’s own. “I heard you call from the kitchen, what was...?”

The demeanour of the third member of Diamant’s Folly transformed as he entered the room with the others. He saw the shelf’s scratch marks on the floor, the source of the screech, and wiped his previous concern clean. He was mistaken, clearly, but his dismissal was a little too quick to be genuine.

“Our rescuers?” His tone slid like velvet. “I trust you’ve been showing them the appropriate degree of hospitality...”

“Not quite, Halyard, we’ve run into an unexpected bit of trouble.” One Doctor lowered to the other. “Listen, old chap, you seem to have missed embedding yourself with any glass during your fall.

Unfortunately, there’s quite a lot of blood here. I can’t tell how bad your injuries are.”

The Valeyard crossed his arms, watching the scene as though it were a stage-play.

“Can you wriggle your hands for us?” suggested Mel.

“Good thinking. Yes, that’s it...” The Sixth Doctor nodded approvingly. “Doesn’t look as though you’ve severed any tendons. How about your arms? Good. Your legs? Splendid. Well done.”

“Is the next step traction?” asked the Valeyard, mildly.

“TARDIS...” mumbled the flat-capped Doctor.

The Sixth Doctor frowned. “Beg your pardon?”

“TARDIS.” The Valeyard was suddenly alert. “He mentioned a TARDIS. Whose TARDIS?”

“Are you a Time Lord, by any chance?”

The flat-capped man nodded.

The Doctor pocketed his hand, looking at the Valeyard. “Another one of your proposed troublemakers for the Court of Inquiry’s dock?”

“The Court only addressed renegades of considerable repute, Doctor,” admitted the former prosecutor.

“You flatter us,” remarked the Doctor, insincere.

“Do we get an explanation or have to work it out like everyone else?” Mel interjected, noting the puzzlement from Basillius.

“As I said, try, try again.” The Doctor *hmmph*-ed. “The Valeyard’s trial marked the formal end of a Time Lord program started during his rise to power.”

“A repatriation of renegades with the notion of bringing them to justice, Miss Bush,” elaborated the Valeyard.

“Executed, in other words, Mel. All of them. Myself intended, I believe.”

“Your bungling, Doctor, ruined the entire operation, you and the—”
Catching Mel’s expression, the Valeyard realised he’d said too much.

Mel’s face flushed with disappointment. “Obviously, if he’s here, this scheme failed more than you realised, Valeyard.”

“No, Miss Bush.” He allowed himself a small show of humiliation. “*He* succeeded. There is a difference.”

A crack. From the upper floor. It sounded like a supporting wall coming down on a piano. The floor beneath the assembled five’s feet reverberated uncomfortably. Several-hundred tonnes of construction material was about to turn into wet paper.

Basillius ground his pointed teeth. “We need to get moving.”

The Doctor looked to Mel.

“We don’t seem to have many other options,” she agreed. “Can we move him?”

“We’ll have to carry him,” decided the Doctor. “Valeyard, Basillius, Mel—”

“Goes without saying,” she supported the flat-capped man under his abdomen.

“—help me with him.”

“Direct us to your TARDIS,” the Valeyard ordered.

“And tell us to stop if you need us to stop,” added Mel.

The Doctor led the party of five. “Alright, everyone... Careful...”

“Tell me... Doctor...” the flat-capped man choked on his own spit.

“Tell you? Tell you what?” his calico counterpart leant closer.

“Tell me...” rasped the other Doctor. “What your life was like... After Androzani... After Jaconda... Tell me about Pyro Shika...”

“Pyro Shika?”

“Please...”

The Valeyard stared at him with unreserved hatred in his eyes.

Fleet Marshal Strak of the Bellicose Clan was on the march and loving every moment of it. *This* was what he was made for. *This* was the true calling set down by General Sontar. He was leading the charge, as every good Sontaran warrior did.

Behind him were Awsok’s agents, cloaked in layers of dark dermacircuitry. The colour of Space honed into a stabbing blade. Among them were fish-like marauders, rainbow ghastrs, coils of elastic insectans, and pseudopodic sailsquids that whistle-howled as they moved. He cared not for their identities. No doubt they’d made bargains with Awsok too once. He had two Sontarans of his battalion with him. The rest were to garrison the colony, following standard rearguard strategy.

No one in. No one out. Not until total capture was ensured.

Their prisoners marched between the agents. No doubt plotting their freedom. He trusted Awsok enough to keep them in line.

Since massacring the cowardly Vulpian Cabinet, Strak had stuck to the plan. Escort Traskey to the dig site. Seize the Locus. As they had progressed they had encountered the occasional Space Security Service agent. All in retreat.

They were regrouping, he was sure. Finding the most readily defensible location to defend the Locus. The object of most tactical value on Vulpia. He’d have done the same in their situation. He’d instructed his men to drive them towards a chokepoint. Somewhere where the killing would be concentrated.

Awsok agitated for speed. For Strak, he longed for a fight worthy of

his time.

“*Halt!*” barked the Fleet Marshal.

The path ahead was darker.

There was a blockade. The Sontaran licked his lips.

The battle was here.

Second-in-command was a position which Second Lieutenant Mercadera had been comfortable. Answer to Ntombizodwa. Relay orders. But now all eyes were on him. He’d been too young to fight the Daleks. Too young to do anything but pick up the pieces.

His mind kept going over his brief stint in command; looking for mistakes. After losing contact with the Cabinet, she followed the emergency procedures laid down in discussions with Ntombizodwa.

Second Lieutenant Kymry had led scouts to investigate the scene, identified the hostiles and where they were heading.

A message from Cantu had confirmed it.

They’d found the best defensible location to intercept them. Within the dig-site, behind what agents were colloquially calling the fright-field. The barricade was formed from equipment used in the initial excavation, long moved aside in the Doctor’s effort.

It was ramshackle and weak.

But it, and a dozen good agents, was all Mercadera had.

In the sync-op chamber, Cantu’s hologram attempted to regain some purchase on its physical form. It was a beautiful staccato of shape and movement. Ultimately, though, impractical. It fizzled and sputtered. A sad, half-formed thing.

Cantu switched off the projector. “It’ll take hours to reset them all...”

“How about the transceiver?”

“It’s down again. I’ll keep trying.”

Ember’s mind raced. “Are we blind across the colony?”

“In that sense... Yes,” he exhaled. “I’m sorry.”

“They tried to kill you. If anything, your attackers owe us the apology.” Ember gestured to the air conditioning unit. “Y’mind if I have a gander at this? Close, like?”

“Please,” Cantu nodded. “Should hardly be necessary to take it apart, all my safeguards are offline.”

“True, but there will be your standard filters and catches to prevent me from trying what I’m about to do next.”

“Which is?”

Ember opened a small compartment on the wall of the chamber. The tools of a maintenance engineer. Dusty from disuse, but hopefully, just what they needed.

“Do these units all run through the same network of ventilation shafts?” they asked.

“Yes, even those in the dig-site. It’s easier to control from the chamber, here.”

“Ha, terrific!” They plucked a plasma torch from the rack. It took a few slaps to its side, but eventually, it ignited. “I’d hoped so.”

“You plan on climbing through it?”

“No, I plan on dropping an emetic down it.” Ember pressed the torch’s tip down on the grate. “Group Marshal Strak’s ego is getting the better of him. He’s strutting through the Dome without a helmet. If

this works, he's about to get the worst bellyache he's ever felt since..." The grate was cleaved open. "Well, the last Vulpian Cabinet meeting."

"How long is that going to take?"

"Longer than I'd like, I have to engineer an emetic from scratch." Sparkie scratched their head. "D'you have any pest control or a poisons cabinet down here, Cantu?"

"Got it," Cantu's body flexed in the tank. "The transceiver is operable. I'm contacting the dig-site now."

The Sontaran turned to Traskey. "I know there are unmanned defences past this point. You will disable them."

"I can't."

Strak squeezed the remote with a grin. Ntombizodwa's body buckled with pain.

"What more do you want, than the truth?" snapped Traskey.

"Push on, Fleet Marshal. I'm sure the might of Sontar can cope with whatever petty traps the Doctor had engineered," interrupted Awsok, via one of her agent's throat-mikes.

Strak smirked and looked at Ntombizodwa. "The hostage will go first, then. Her life is of least value here."

"A moment."

"You delay our conquest."

"It may save it. What's to stop her calling out to her people?"

The Fleet Marshal had considered that fact. He turned his Skeeling towards Traskey. "She will remain. You, agent, will spearhead. Proceed."

Sparkie didn't like the buckling sound that was echoing through the console. It sounded like an aluminium can under the wheel of a car. That was the instrumentation of the TARDIS. Potentially one of the last in the whole of Creation.

"Wait, wait, wait...!" they urged. "Just a little while longer, *h'mm?* Just a little while..."

The TARDIS's onboard transceiver cracked. "*Calling the Doctors, calling the Doctors... This is the Doctors...*"

"Terribly recursive, don't you think, *h'mm?*" smiled Sparkie.

"*Can't talk long. Cantu is safe.*"

"Splendid," they exhaled. "I was worried. Do you have a solution to our predicament, *h'mpt?*"

"*The computer network has crashed almost completely. Cameras, holographic projectors, everything. The City is in the dark about what's happening in the Dome.*"

"Ntombizodwa's people are set to put up a considerable fight."

"*That may not be enough.*"

"I'm aware. If I leave this section, however, we lose Diamant completely."

"*I'm aware,*" echoed their other half.

"We have a solution, naturally?"

"*Yes, an emetic poison through the ventilation system. Won't kill, I hope, but it will leave everyone quite uncomfortable.*"

"What about, *er, ah,* distribution, *h'mm?*' The dig-site is, unnaturally, quite a large chamber."

They winced, audibly. "*That's a point.*"

Sparkie shook their head and adjusted the TARDIS's scanner. "I can

provide you an owl's eye view from up near the Adamant Locus. You've one chance. We shall make it count."

Mercadera was at the top of the barricade, glaring through the sight of his gun.

She couldn't quite believe her eyes. Ntombizodwa, emerging through the fright-field, as ever barely discombobulated from the experience. Mercadera breathed a sigh of relief. No more pressure, no more giving orders.

Ntombizodwa's eyes stabbed at hers with intensity. A fierce determination to tell her *something*. Something was—

Only then, did the agent notice the Sontaran marching behind her. A split second too late to avoid the red blast from Strak's Skeeling. The Second Lieutenant's body fell, headless, behind the mining equipment.

Before her skull impacted with the ground, she heard Fleet Marshal Strak utter with satisfaction, "First blood."

In the sync-op chamber, Ember's face hardened at the noise. She'd heard it through the unit.

Their collective consciousness was busily embroiled in examining all the cruel means in which intelligent life defended itself from its so-called pests. Poisons and their apportioned nomenclature.

"*They've begun their attack on the barricade,*" growled Sparkie.

"I'm working as fast as I can."

And they were, they truly were. Ember pulled out a tube of rat poison or its nearest equivalent. Speed, not grace, was vital here. The question was... Would it maim or murder?



Under the glare of the maelstrom, the Folly resembled a tablespoon of dirt in a vast ocean pool.

“...what the Master failed to anticipate, of course, was that the High Palace of Huxwitz could be submerged, once again. Back in their own environment, the Seldine could retake the capital with ease,” concluded the Doctor. “They were celebrating when we left, weren’t they, Mel?”

“And then?” the flat-capped man interrupted.

“Then?” Mel pinched her face. “We were pulled here, to the Folly—”

“Enough,” cut off the Valeyard. “Where is your TARDIS?”

“Pyramid...” the flat-capped man gestured. “There...”

Spurred on by the sight of safe harbour, the group of five staggered towards the Ship. He reached into a blood-soaked pocket for the key. His predecessor took it and opened the door.

“You’ve had this place redecorated...” grumbled the Doctor. “Inside and out. Can’t say I favour it.”

“I rather like it. Feels like the inside of a tree,” Mel smiled.

Stepping inside, they manoeuvred the flat-capped Doctor onto a nearby daybed. Only the Valeyard, still scrutinising the console room, saw the crystalline cat slip in behind them. Her keen eyes, indecipherable.

“All those questions about my life...” His sixth incarnation stared at the awkward, lanky figure. “You’re another one of ourselves, aren’t you?”

“When my master couldn’t retrieve you from the Folly, Time shifted around the wound,” Basillius explained. “This Doctor is the result. Your replacement. A new seventh incarnation.”

“A scab over an open wound,” the Valeyard determined with distaste.

Mel ignored him. “You’re the Doctor?”

The flat-capped man nodded. “Yes, I’m afraid so—”

“Afraid?” interrupted the Valeyard.

“I’ve retired from all that stuff we used to do. I find, after two rather traumatic regenerations, my confidence has bally well dwindled away.”

“I’m sorry...” Mel turned to her Doctor, then back to him, “I... don’t know who I should be apologising to.”

“Him, my dear girl... Him...” The Sixth Doctor exhaled. “Poor devil.”

“Shell shock.” Mel squeezed his hand.

“Combat fatigue, Mel... I’m no stranger to it myself.” He studied the wound. “Am I to take it, then, Doctor, that we no longer protect those in need?”

“I try to... it’s just... just—”

“Too anxious, is that it?” he smiled, sadly.

The Seventh Doctor nodded.

“But you’re safe in here, aren’t you?” Mel ventured.

“It’s not here that troubles me...” he mewled.

Vulpia. The dig-site’s fright-field proved little obstacle for Fleet Marshal Bellicose Strak. There was little an officer of the Sontaran Empire truly feared. Barricades and bluster... Nothing could best the battle-hardened soldier on his road to glory.

Strak barked an order at his two subordinates to adopt a triangular formation with him at the lead. Field Major Trikk parallel with

Ventilation Shaft 106. Field Major Heratt, Ventilation Shaft 116. They would advance. The Division troops formed up the centre of their battalion.

Among the combatants, he recognised the young Thal who'd brawled with his warriors. This time he'd see Sontarans with discipline. He owed him that.

Ntombizodwa took her chance. "Kymry, move—!"

Strak activated the collar. She crumpled to the ground.

Second Lieutenant Kymry and his contingent of agents fled to higher ground.

"Next time," Strak growled, "I activate the collar's explosive."

Traskey helped Ntombizodwa up. "Vicious slime..."

"*Move!*" He would not be beaten this day.

Sparkie's face was graven with concentration. "They'll arrive at the main stairway soon."

"*I'm almost ready...*"

"Almost is not good enough. People are dying."

There was a shudder. Turbines engaged. The ventilation ducts began to roar with hyper-forced air. Cantu's little addition to their trap. If they timed this precisely, transmission of the emetic gas would be virtually instantaneous. Just enough to disorientate.

At least, Sparkie hoped.

There was a clang from Ember's side of the transceiver. "*I've opened the unit. Tell me which vent in the dig-site, they're numbered.*"

Sparkie twisted the scanner dial, the image swivelled in the misted image before them. They could just about make out the markings on

each vent. “401, 441... 402, 442...”

“Wait, wait! Hold on, there’s hundreds here! Let me find them first...”

Sparkie could see Fleet Marshal Bellicose Strak, Skeeling rheon carbine in hand, his face a pure mask of triumphant delight. There was a clear line of sight between him and the gestalt. As he noticed, all attention on the surrounding Space Security Service agents seemed to melt away.

“403, 443...”

“Doctor!” he boasted across the carnage. “Doctor! We have your comrades!”

Sparkie frowned. “404, 444...”

“But we don’t need you!” Strak sneered.

He raised his weapon to the gestalt, almost in salute, and f—

“I’ve got it! Got it!”

“Empty it into 404!” snapped Sparkie. “*Now!*”

The vent embedded into the side of the stair hissed out its cloud of emetic vapour into Strak’s face.

The Fleet Marshal heaved, his three fingers tight, still around his Skeeling, now at his neck. His shot went wide. It punctured the TARDIS console.

“My Ship!” Sparkie cried.

The gestalt leapt, still bonded to the console, to snuff out the fire in the affected panel.

Around the central column, the gestalt could still see Strak. He deployed his helmet to protect himself from the fumes, but the Fleet Marshal wasn’t fast enough. It disengaged again and the Sontaran swung to the ground. In agony.

“Traskey!” shouted... Yes, it was Ntombizodwa! The agent grasped at her nose and mouth, trying to stifle her own unpleasant reaction.

Spittle and bile heaved from Strak’s troubled guts. A cry like shredded rubber. His two troopers turned to aid him. Their leader was in trouble, but the discipline of the triangle formation was broken by the Space Security Service agents. Second Lieutenant Kymry, Sparkie was delighted to recognise. *Ab...* The Thals, even so many lifetimes later, were still lending a hand to their latest successes.

Traskey, unaffected by the emetic gas, threw her arms down on the tablet-box at the Sontaran’s belt. The clip snapped off. Clattered to the ground. The shayde scooped it up and emptied the tablets into the haemorrhaging vent.

Strak shoved her aside, clamouring towards the vent on his knees. His prisoners, forgotten.

“Traskey! Ntombizodwa!” Sparkie beckoned them over.

“The remote!” shouted Traskey, distant.

Ntombizodwa pushed her towards the Adamant Locus. “Help Sparkie, I’ll deal with Strak!”

In the flat-capped Seventh Doctor’s TARDIS, his sixth incarnation walked over to a tea-set on a discarded roundel.

“Royal Doulton, very elegant. Medical supplies, however...” He moved over to one of the wall roundels, pressing on its edges. “I must say... Cosy as it is, this arrangement doesn’t seem nearly practical.”

“Depends on what you practise, Doctor,” his other self answered. “Before this cataclysm, we used to potter from place to place. Peri needed time to recover, too. She'd seen so much death and the former console room reminded her too much of...”

“Me,” he answered. “My poor Peri...”

“So we decided to make the TARDIS a home, rather than a battleship.”

“As did we. Slowly, at first, but... There was a lot to remind me of her once she’d gone. Her and Frobisher.”

The Valeyard glowered at the Seventh Doctor. “So, you’re an error, a mistake.”

“Says who?” Melanie demanded. “Who made you the arbiter of who lives and dies?”

“The High Council, Mel,” he smirked.

“Useless.” The Sixth Doctor emptied seven roundels in total. “I’m afraid there’s nothing here I can use. What was this ship’s last materialisation point?”

“The planet Vulpia,” answered Basillius Creel.

“What are the coordinates?”

The Seventh Doctor looked away.

“Come on, man,” the Doctor crossed to him. “Your life could be at stake.”

“Basillius?” asked Mel.

The Creel shook his head. “I can operate the machine, but I cannot make it land.”

“What about the fast return switch?” suggested the Valeyard.

“I can’t seem to find it...”

“Really?” The Valeyard quirked an eyebrow and inspected the console.

“Doctor... I’ve already done this. With my Doctor’s trial,” Mel urged

the flat-capped man. “If we aren’t put back into our respective Time and Space, millions of lives would be lost in the paradox. It’s like radiation. It’s never isolated.”

“Don’t you see, young lady?” His eyes were full of pain and despair. “I’d be committing suicide. The moment I step outside the TARDIS... You’ll be fine. You and your Doctor, the Valeyard, too, and so will Vulpia. But, I’ll be...”

The flat-capped man lowered his head. He couldn’t even bring himself to say the word.

The Doctor knelt beside the daybed, “How many times have we put others’ needs before our own? Even before our own moralities? Do you remember Peladon with Peri and Frobisher—” He checked himself. “No, you wouldn’t. Of course you wouldn’t. Alright. In that scenario, we had to make a choice to preserve the course of history, to preserve the triumphs, we were forced to weather the planet’s tragedies—”

“Yes, and look where it gets you. Death, destruction and fear... The constant running from danger—”

“You criticise the Universe without having lived within it.” The Valeyard didn’t look up from the console. “You’re naive. Wilfully and deliberately.”

“Well, I’m sorry, but I... When it comes down to it... I-I-I’m not very brave. We’ll find a quiet planet to settle on. Basillius Creel tells me they’ve picked up signals from the Ood. There are lovely species, I’ve met one or two. It’s been really nice meeting you, but this is my craft and we must find a safe place to recover from our ordeals.”

“I’ve never seen a console configured in this manner. If we don’t sort resolve this... this travesty, then *you*’ll be the last Doctor.” The Valeyard ran his teeth on his lips. “I can’t bear to look at you, I just can’t believe I become *you*. A snivelling... craven—”

“Valeyard, enough,” interceded the Sixth Doctor.

“Why don’t we return to Vulpia...?” Mel turned, hopefully, to the flat-capped man. “They might have the resources to find another way? Maybe you could remain on your TARDIS—?”

“This Ship, like him, Mel, will cease to exist.” The Valeyard’s voice was clipped and cold. “And before then, he’ll slip away to continue causing who knows how much damage to the timestreams. Disorder of a magnitude not even you, Doctor, could manage.”

“Why this obsession with turning the clock back?” the Seventh Doctor asked, his eyes wide. “Why can’t we move forward? It’s terrible, what’s happened, but we’re still here. We can continue—”

The Valeyard cut in, “What about the millions of lives of those who should have been permitted to exist? You would erase what has already come before. Wipe out the past to serve your squalid little present.”

“The present...” Mel muttered to herself.

The Sixth Doctor stared at the Valeyard. “The irony of that statement—”

“Look at what he’s *done* with his existence! Do *you* condone it?”

“Where’s Peri?” Mel’s voice was like steel.

The Seventh Doctor flinched. “What?”

“Peri. Why are you travelling alone? Where is she?”

His eyes darted around. Trapped. “She—I left her—I couldn’t—”

“You see!” snapped the Valeyard. “You see what he’s done!”

“They’re gone! Peri, Dorothy—dead and gone!” The wounded Doctor struggled to the console. “I’m right here. What about my existence? What about my right to live?”

“Your right to live...?” A flash of silver cut the air from the

Valeyard's sleeve. "You've *squandered* it."

The Sixth Doctor punched aside the table of Royal Doulton. He put his hand up to catch the sliver—a kitchen knife—with the flat of his palm. The time-traveller was too far away. By metres. Far, far too far away.

The same knife that had nearly slit open his throat all those nights ago stabbed, deep, into the flat-capped Seventh Doctor's chest. The Valeyard forced his hand across his face. He didn't want to hear any pathetic mewling. No cries for mercy. He slashed across the skin, chipping against the ribs. One for each heart. His precision, almost surgical.

"*No!*" called out the Sixth Doctor.

The Valeyard slid the long carving knife from his predecessor's chest, splattering the surviving Doctor's waistcoat. Before he could take the plunge, again, a blur of amethyst launched itself at his head. From the console. A remarkable blur of motion. The cat, its claws digging into his cheeks, its feet slamming against his chin.

He tore her from his skull and threw her at the Sixth Doctor who caught her in his arms.

Blood trickled from the flat-capped Doctor's mouth. "*No... Nohhbaabb...*"

As the Valeyard turned to finish the job, he found his speed matched by another.

Mel. Her arms outstretched. Her body shielding the flat-capped man now sinking against the console.

"Some kind of jamming signal, yes," nodded Traskey in the dig-site, urgently. "As far as I can tell, it's a radio remote. Deliberately primitive."

“I should be able to manage it easily enough...” At the console, Sparkie was wheezing like an organ with leaky bellows. “If I last that long...”

“Your stability—”

“This body will do all it can, while it can...” They twisted a dial. “The Space Security Service will keep our fellows down there occupied...”

“Am I speaking to Sparkie?” crackled the console’s in-built transceiver.

“That depends...” Sparkie didn’t slow. Ntombizodwa’s life was at stake. “Have you an appointment?”

“A woefully inadequate safe haven you’ve constructed here.”

“Really?” Sparkie kept working. “And here I thought you were going to congratulate me on my handling of Fleet Marshal Strak. I noticed your wearable cameras. Someone had to be on the other end. Who is this?”

“The leader of the forces of Division.”

Sparkie nodded. At last. The divisive hunter, who had infiltrated Vulpia, attacked it from within, like a clutch of wasp eggs inside an unaware host.

“I was wondering how long it would take you to find this frequency.”

“I was somewhat distracted by the enthusiasm of Fleet Marshal Bellicose Strak.”

“Yes, it seems the horrors of war have finally turned his stomach,” Sparkie smiled.

The voice clicked their tongue, *“I can’t quite pick out your voice.”*

“Neither can I, yours. That pot-shot from your cloned tin soldier can’t have helped matters.”

“Nevertheless, I find it familiar, Sparkie.”

“I wish I could say the same,” they might have lied.

“Oh, well...” A shrugging pause. “*Our actions have spoken far louder than any conversation we could have face-to-face.*”

“*Hmph.* Could we indeed?”

“*This is not an argument, Sparkie. This is a statement of intent. Vulpia contains the degenerate remnant of a dead Universe. Your existence is tolerated because it suits the Division’s purpose. If you didn’t you would be snuffed out like a candle.*”

“You, I wager, will be after the Adamant Locus?”

“*I believe I understand its function quite amiably.*”

“Do you, indeed?”

“*I was observing its effects when Diamant first used it in your fifth incarnations’ interdimensional rescue. It has the ability to stop malignant progress and install an ideal state of being.*”

“So you really have opted out of understanding the cosmos, haven’t you? You’d prefer something that fits the box, rather than allow the box to expand.”

“*The unknown and unknowable nearly destroyed the Time Lords.*”

“You’re looking out for the best interests of a dead culture? Where is the sense in that...?”

“*I’d forgotten... You speak with the manner of one of your youngest selves, yet have the memories and experiences of one of the eldest.*”

“Curious, isn’t it?”

“*You haven’t asked me what my Universe would look like.*”

“Should I?”

Awsok studied the silver poplar in her zero chamber. Its branches were pared back. Bare and barren now. Whatever lush foliage had

existed at the beginning of her scrupulous deliberations was now nothing but bark and the bones of the tree.

“It isn’t beautiful, I will admit...” She pressed her hand to the trunk. “But you can know it. See it. Understand it.”

“And learn from it?”

“What is there left to learn when all is known?”

“And should anything new arise in your Universe?”

“I can’t see a cause for such a thing to occur. Nor any need.”

“We will find a way to stop your disgusting exploitation.”

“Disgusting?”

“The slaughter in the Dome alone...”

“Remnants with no future, they hardly mattered,” she shook her head, chiding. “I shouldn’t think you can stop us. In our worst projections, you and all you’ve known will be dead. Your resistance, a waste of your lives.”

“We will stop you, while there’s life there’s—”

“Death?”

“Hope. While there’s breath in our bodies... No, while there is mettle in our minds, we will always oppose tyranny, rise up against cruelty and, though we may not prevail, we’ll give it a jolly good try.”

Awsok smiled, hiding a laugh. “You really do take pride in your tampering.”

“If it helps the others in Creation, yes.”

“In other circumstances, you would be a disappointment. I find... I cannot find myself hating you. But your interference has to come to an end.”

“They are the grit that makes the pearl.”

Another voice. A familiar one. Traskey.



“They respond to urgent calls, try to help those who need it. They make mistakes, as do we all, but their hearts are in the right place.”

At the console, Traskey thought she could see the Doctor. The Doctor who she’d taught all those years ago. Not yet proud, that face, but still certainly imperious, with more than a touch of that old-fashioned cunning.

“My dear...” Their mouth was slightly open, their eyebrows quirked outward. “I dare say I’m humbled... Yes. Yes, quite humbled.”

The Quadrigger, smiling briefly, turned her attention back to the transceiver. “The same can’t be said for you.”

“Spare me your self-righteous morality, both of you.” There was age in that voice. Soft like a freshly felled tree. *“Your crusading stops now. It’s time for stability. True stability. Unchanging and unflinching. I will have my ideal, even if I have to cut through this overgrown infestation of chaos.”*

“As you did with the vortex turtles?” snapped Sparkie.

“You’ve guessed.”

Sparkie’s eyes twinkled. “What, pray tell, do you wish the Adamant Locus for?”

“I wish to speak to the inconvenient thing that has caused this catastrophe.”

“We’re a little busy ourselves with it.”

“That is irrelevant.”

“Then, my answer must be ‘no’.” Sparkie clasped a lapel. “Whether that ‘inconvenience’ is Diamant or the vortex turtle, Bob—no. Irrefutably.”

“If we have to kill you to get to it.” A sound. Almost like the squeeze of pliers. “We will.”

“Then, take your best shot, madam, we shall be waiting.” They switched off the transceiver and concentrated on saving lives.

In times past, Diamant had been taught a poem. They couldn’t remember if it was from China, Peladon, Vulpia or somewhere else... They were trying, only now, to remember it. Fragments. Line-by-line.

Rest your head upon the bill-soil.

They were soaring through absence. Through a place devoid of both Space and Time, as fundamental building blocks of its existence.

Tilt your skull towards the sky above.

It was the stomach of the vortex turtle. The creature that had, through a variety of circumstances, been bestowed with the name—Bob.

Feel the rush of blood to your mind.

In the flesh and blood of the ephemerals’ bodies, the stomach was little more than a pouch of acid. A savage pit where meat dissolved meat. That bizarre cannibalisation of matter. Hardly the subject of great romance or passion. However much the Androgums or cultures of their like extolled its virtues.

Now turn, turn and spin, down the kenoll.

Its embellishment required a garnish that was frankly lost on Diamant’s polyfractal palette.

Let the world coil around you.

And yet, could not the same be said of other spectacles? Cruel mountaintops eulogised with the same passion as the innocence of

starbirth?

A tight spiral of cloud and grass.

Around Diamant was something quite extraordinary.

Tumbling... Tumbling...

The maelstrom was macrobiota. Planets, asteroids, suns and nebulae. All tumbled and churned in a vast organ of cobwebbed dimensions. Little more important than bacteria. Gut flora as significant to the vortex turtle as chicken feed would have seemed to a whale.

What struck Diamant most significantly, perhaps due to their time constructing the Folly, was how finite the stomach ultimately seemed. There was a temptation in the mind—at least, for land-faring mammalian species—to assume that it went on forever. That, like Space, there was no limit to the dark night. It stretched beyond everything. An impossibly large territory made their terrestrial beads, orbiting on their invisible necklace, seem like childish toys.

Comforting and terrifying.

This felt like being a child. Held tight by a parent as their home came crashing down around them. The unshakeable, indefatigable, indestructible certainty that the arms that held them would keep them safe. Ripped away by something larger. A tide. A flood. A fire. Something that used forests for its fingers and fire for its tongue. It was the knowledge that with all the certainty and security in their short life, they knew that it could end.

And yet, it wasn't that alone.

Not the discovery of the finite. The mortal. Something more.

It was folded into Creation itself. A certainty. A certainty that could sever limbs with frostbite. A certainty that could turn bodies to ash in its wake. The frantic certainty of a dedication—a love—turned into something bigger than the world. It shook. It shivered. It pushed its

way through boundaries held only in check by the Laws of Time.

Diamant moved up the throat. A dark and seemingly endless tunnel. It took what felt like centuries. The fractal-form had little notion of Vulpia. Only the lifeline fed through the viewer. Looped around the Adamant Locus with the ‘rope’ of the Communications Network. It plucked and strummed, but otherwise, it held.

At last... Diamant emerged through the turtle’s heaving beak.

To the strangled and urgent hush at the edge of the cosmos.

They were just a mote. A grain of salt. Their fractal-form a thousand bodies across and little more spectacular than a toothpick.

From there, Diamant could see. Truly see. Beyond. The red-wreathed vortex turtle was propelled through its abyss by lungs squeezed like crushing singularities.

The flesh, wreathed in its regenerative milk-white corona. Like a sun. Eyes, forever on an impossible objective, dark with matter found only in reflections of existence. Forever pushed forward by mirror-light and mirror-shapes. Fins larger than the arms of spiral galaxies with twice their grip and pull. Pulling... Pulling... Its beak snapped through everything that would keep it from its bale.

A giant. And Diamant was standing in the heel of its footprint.

The vortex turtle saw them.

It turned, as a mountain would to a pilgrim at the foot of the valley. Carapace became the sky, plastron the sea, and turned any notion of water or cloud into mad, raving fantasy.

And it said hello.

THUS SPAKE BOB: PART 5
THE EDGE OF LIFE



by Alan Camlann, AFJ Kernow and Sherlock

The Mandelbrot shadow of Diamant fluttered into existence in the dig-site. A pinkie, at most. They raised their arm, as if calling up to the stage lights of a vast theatre.

“We have arrived,” was all they could say.

The shape dissipated back to where it had come from.

“*D’ab! Ha-ha!* Now, now, let’s see...” Sparkie manipulated the scanner controls.

Traskey was pulling wires from the console’s fascia. “I think I’ve got it sorted.”

“*Mmm?* The link to Bob?”

“The jamming signal.”

They looked up at one another in realisation. Traskey recognised the look in Sparkie’s eye all too well. Separated by lifetimes and experiences, it was still that stubborn knot of determination deep in the Doctors’ hearts.

“You realise what we must do,” they said, slowly.

Traskey slowly shook her head. “No... No, in Omega’s name, that’s not fair. Ntombizodwa was tricked. Exploited.”

“Indeed not, but who, then, promised any of us fair, *h’mm?*” Sparkie steeled with a restrained fury, their chin shaking. “The jamming signal for her collar will interfere with Diamant’s connection to Vulpia. We have to choose.”

Traskey arched her shoulders. “The life of one young woman or...”

“The fate of two entire Universes... I—”

“*Sparkie...*” crackled the transceiver. “*Sparkie, are you there...?*”

Sparkie pressed the communicator switch. “Speaking.”

“*How many fingers do you think I’m holding up?*” Ember asked.

“Four?” they speculated, looking at their own hand. “Does it matter? We’re preoccupied.”

“*Two of mine have melted away.*”

“The disintegration is getting worse...” murmured Traskey.

“Dear, dear me... Crises, crises, too many crises!” clucked Sparkie. “It’s this lack of that final Ship! If it hadn’t been moved to Geoponics, this TARDIS, here, wouldn’t be taking twice the allotted load!”

“*How did you know it was in Geoponics?*”

“Kymry told me—nice fellow—reliable sort.”

A snap of fingers. “*I might be able to help with that...*”

“I need you to prioritise the holographic projectors,” Sparkie shook their head. “Without at least one, this exercise to contact Bob will be for nought.”

“Can’t you use the TARDIS?” asked Traskey.

“All its power is tied up in keeping Diamant out there—our medium for the message, we shall say.” He leaned down into the transceiver. “Keep working on the projectors.”

“But, if the degradation continues—”

“I know—I know—I know,” reverberated Sparkie.

“You’ll *die*. And all this, *this*—” The Quadrigger thumped her hands on the console. “Will be for nothing!”

“That is a risk we shall have to take.” Sparkie still busied at the console. “There’s more at stake than our own persons.”

Ember was speaking. “*Cantu, you don’t have to—Alright. Cantu has a solution.*”

“I owe that young man more gratitude than I can repay,” Sparkie sighed. “We’ve reached a consensus, my friends?”

“Cantu will try and do a hard reboot of the software himself. I’ll make my way to the TARDIS.”

“How? Without the holograms, he’s immobile,” Traskey frowned.

“He’ll... He’s coming out of his tank.”

“No, we cannot ask him to do that,” said Sparkie, stern.

“I choose to, Sparkie,” came Cantu’s voice. *“I can’t float here and do nothing while Vulpia dies.”*

“Very well.” Sparkie nodded, eyes searching. “You know what you both have to do? The extraordinary risks of the venture?”

“Yeah. Yeah, we do.”

Traskey addressed Ember. “If you make it to the TARDIS, it may stabilise your condition.”

“One can only hope.”

“Nonsense, fifty can hope.” Sparkie dared a smile.

“The other fifty can worry.” A smile echoed back in the words. *“The best of fortune, Doctors.”*

“To you, as well, and don’t tarry. In the meantime, we shall concentrate our focus back here.” Sparkie switched off the transceiver.

Traskey stared at the gestalt. “What about Ntombizodwa?”

Sparkie grunted, wiping their forehead. They snapped another switch. “There.”

Ember winced as they pressed the needle of the spare holographic armband to their forearm. Plasma torch in hand, they hesitated at the curve of the fluidic suspension tank.

“Are you sure?” They asked. “I can’t undo this, once it’s been

done...”

Cantu smiled, “I trust you, Doctor.”

Ember squeezed their eyes shut, a sharp sigh.

With the ignition of the torch, they began cutting through the tank’s fused door.

Fleet Marshal Strak poured what little remained of his tablet-box into his mouth.

He wiped his lipless mouth and turned his eyes towards the melee. The Space Security Service agent who charged him lost his arm, his weapon and, in rapid succession, his life. The Fleet Marshal, himself, had lost sight of Traskey and Ntombizodwa.

“Face your enemy!” he demanded.

Resting against one of the dig-site’s stalagmites, he took stock of his circumstances. He’d been forced to withdraw. A great shame on his role as an officer of the Army. He’d been prepared for Time Lord duplicity. Forcefields, staser staffs, and all their firepower. He hadn’t anticipated something as primitive or passive as an emetic gas.

No matter. He unclipped the remote from his belt and pressed the button.

His tongue lolled in greedy anticipation of Ntombizodwa’s death.

There was much to hear in the heat of battle. The echoing ricochets of the Space Security Service’s tronium blasters. The reply of Skeeling rheon carbines and staser weaponry that looked as though it had been hammered into shape from solid brass.

There was, however, no skull-shattering explosion.

Strak’s wheezing hiss of rage was so loud, he was surprised it didn’t

penetrate the emetic fog of war.

Where was Ntombizodwa? He would *find* this impugner to his honour and *kill* her himself.

The Sixth Doctor dared not move. The crystalline cat, still in his arms. Any attempt to snatch Mel to safety could result in more blood on the Wilton carpet.

“Are you going to kill everyone until you get your own way? He wasn’t selfish, Valeyard, he was *scared*.” Mel was shaking. “Although I never trusted you, I did begin to like you. But this? Cold-blooded *murder*? You want the TARDIS? You want your future...? Well, you will have to go through me.” She was shaking with fury, tears rolling down her face. Scared of him. Angry to have even entertained the notion of friendship. “How about another one, *Valeyard*? Go on, look me in the eyes. Stab me through the heart. I’ve only got one. End *my* life.”

The Valeyard looked at the young woman he’d shared so many trials and tribulations with recently. The prosecutor’s mind was racing, he remembered the shame he felt after that inexcusable act of violence. After his regeneration into that clown.

His hands were locked around the throat of a dark-haired botanist, more than that, a friend. Dragging her around the console room like a rag doll. Against spluttered coughs and gasps of shock. Only stopped in his tracks by a chance glimpse in Peri’s mirror of a face, his face contorted with rage. The face of evil. His face.

“Mel, I...” The Valeyard looked down at his blood-soaked hands.

Creel and the Sixth Doctor launched themselves at the Valeyard. The cat leapt from the latter’s arms onto the console. Taken by surprise, the prosecutor’s weapon was knocked from his hand. It screamed across the floor.

“That’s enough!” the Doctor snapped. “Quite enough!”

“What can you... *m’mmpb*... do, Doctor?” challenged the Valeyard.

“Throw... *nrr’gh*... you... *oof*... *out!*”

As if prompted, the cat slammed the door control with her paws. She hissed at the Valeyard, backing against the centre column. The distance between the console and the Folly outside was only a few metres at most.

Grappling with the Valeyard, it felt like an eternity.

“Abandon me—*rrgmm*—and you abandon—*g’rrn’m*—a part of yourself, Doctor!” he warned.

“I can—*mmpb*—live with that!”

“Forever diminished?”

The Doctor couldn’t resist. “By what? *Mmmpb!*”

“A reminder—*r’ff*—of what you fight against as much as—*m’rrn*—for. What is your moral compass worth without a—*rr’nn*—true north?”

“Now! Do it now!” urged Basillius, straining.

“*Mel!*” the Valeyard screamed.

She yelled through her tears, “Now, Doctor!”

“I’ll find my own way, Valeyard.” The Doctor heaved. “I always... *do!*”

Their combined strength, he and Basillius, together, was no match for the Valeyard. They evicted him from the safety of the TARDIS with maximum prejudice. Into the bracken. Behind him, the doors slammed shut with all the definition of a full stop.

Mel threw herself into the Doctor’s arms and sobbed, clutching at his

lapels. He held her, softly, cooing into her red crown.

Behind them, at the same console panel as the watching cat, Basillius set the TARDIS in motion.

The Valeyard beat his gloved hands against the faux wooden doors. “But what if I *am* your way? What if I am your future? *Doctor!*”

The engines of the TARDIS drowned him out. His escape faded away.

The Valeyard restrained the urge to let out a primal scream of defiance. Despair, anger and incandescent rage warred within him. But, no... He wouldn't give them the satisfaction.

The former prosecutor leaned back from where the police box once stood.

He lifted his chin, straightened his back and walked, with dignity, across the garden back to Diamant's Folly.

He ascended the stairs at the front, through the front door, and into the heart of the house. *His* house. The edifice had been his design. His creation. Diamant had only assisted in its manifestation. The essence, the true substance, was his own. The closest thing that he'd perhaps had to a home of his own dark design.

And, now... It was buckling under its own weight.

A tremendous crack appeared in the mansion's dome. It splintered like a car window before shattering into a trillion pieces. The Valeyard stood in the plaster dust. Impassive. The chimney outside crashed onto the ground, along with some roof slates. The fireplace at his side guttered, regurgitating its last embers, the last of the assembled automata stumbled around like clockwork mice.

The ceiling screamed as the tidal forces of the maelstrom outside bit

and tore through the infrastructure of the Folly. Pipes burst, sending water down the staircase. Gas mains ruptured in gouts of flame.

The Valeyard laughed.

He laughed with sickness, laughed with disbelief and, eventually, laughed with despair.

Diamant's Folly finally came to pieces. The former prosecutor glared at the killing forces of the Mutation one final time. He wondered... If that dilettante Doctor succeeded, would his consciousness return to the Matrix? To the security of the rebuilt Fantasy Factory? Where he'd first been approached by Diamant so long ago?

He snapped a dust-packed hand from his wrist and cast it aside. So much errant psychosynthesis. Already, this physical form was crumbling. If this was the end... What, then?

He decided, "Better to die than be killed."

With his thumb, the Valeyard pressed his other hand against his forehead, cracking his skull, and sent his body to the floorboards in a pillar of eidolonic ash.

Hand-to-hand combat was rarely advised for agents of the Space Security Service, and certainly not against Sontarans. The clone warriors of Sontara had adapted, over centuries of DNA refinement, to fight Rutans who could shift to any physical form they desired. Humanoids were no match.

For Ntombizodwa, it was always a last resort. The agent ducked under a swipe from the enraged Fleet Marshal Bellicose Strak. She kicked at a pressure point. His leg buckled. Long enough to give her space to manoeuvre.

The gas had served its purpose to buy time, giving her the initiative for a moment. Sontarans always defaulted to the attack when pushed—

she had to use that. Martian dakaro. Service training. Sharp blows and kicks. It had worked so far.

A calculated strike from Strak sent her careening into the wall of the dig-site. It was damper here. The mouths looked less machined. Far closer to a natural cave network.

It had been a dead end for another agent. The body lay, face down, against a speleothem of stalagmites and stalactites. Like the jaws of some large, predatory animal. She unclipped the Soren Special from the dead woman's belt and fired at the Sontaran bulk moving towards her.

Strak wailed in fury. His hand blown clear from his wrist. Nothing, however, seemed to slow him down. He was charging closer. Head bowed. With enough force to likely crumple her ribcage.

As the roar grew nearer, she hugged the wall. The bald skull snapped through the cage of stalagmites and stalactites into a small grotto on the other side.

She needed a blade... A vibroknife! She collected one from the body. Crouching, at the sundered entrance, she stood straight up as Strak rounded towards her.

“Disarmed,” she noted between hyperventilating breaths.

“A mere tactical handicap! I will crush you, First Rank, with or without Awok's gadgetry,” Strak spat. “First Rank! A repugnant aberration to the hierarchy of the rank-and-file.”

She'd engaged him in conversation. That was good. Another point for the training; Sontarans like to talk. They were always the kind to gloat as they twisted the knife. Goading them was the advice. Sontarans were at their most dangerous when thinking strategically. It was easier to beat them if they were just operating on instinct. Instinct led many a Sontaran private to death and glory.

“Prove it, I see no one better than a desk jockey,” Ntombizodwa

snapped back. “Fleet Marshal? You direct your battles from orbit. Soldiers die as you sign papers. *Coward!*”

“You will die *screaming!*”

As she’d anticipated, Strak lunged forwards to answer the slight. At the last possible moment, the agent stepped, again, to the side. The knife was thrust in the notch at the back of Strak’s neck. The probic vent. The fatal flaw in their biology.

He should have gone down. Instead, Fleet Marshal Strak screamed and swung around, his left arm striking Ntombizodwa in the chest. She flew, in a tumble, into the grotto. Her spine slammed against a stalactite. The air knocked from her lungs. Eyes tight with pain.

“The coward’s attack!” scorned the wounded Sontaran. “Did you really think it, alone, would be enough?”

The Fleet Marshal snapped the weapon at the hilt. He cast it aside like a broken child’s toy.

“*Ehwhab...* I’d definitely hoped...” grunted Ntombizodwa.

The agent opened her eyes. The Fleet Marshal stood over her with a look of pure hatred. She’d seen the same in the people who’d nearly killed her fathers. Strung them up like cattle. The Sontaran clutched at the bloodied stub where his hand had once been.

“We were fools to tolerate you for so long...” He placed his boot against the side of her head. “All that miserable talk in the Cabinet. And for what? What did it ultimately achieve, First Rank Ntombizodwa?”

Strak raised his foot, to drive it down on her skull. Above him, Ntombizodwa noticed the stalactites of the dig-site rippled like wind chimes.

She took a deep breath. “Sometimes talking isn't enough, Strak, sometimes *you have to yell!*”

The first stalactite snapped from the ceiling and fell. It didn't pierce Strak's head as she'd hoped. Instead, it split against its thickened bone. Off-balance, Ntombizodwa used the distraction to push his leg out from beneath him. Fleet Marshal Bellicose Strak toppled backward. His body impacted the ground with a shout.

And, as the stalactites plunged down, arrowheads from the heavens, he met his death as a Sontaran officer should.

Face-to-face.

Cantu hadn't been prepared. Not for the severe muscular atrophy that occurred when he left his fluidic suspension tank. He should have been. It was an obvious complication, in retrospect. Haste, however, more than anything else, made him blind to such things.

Ember had agonised over him, but he'd demanded they go. The more either one of them delayed, the more people would die.

Cantu couldn't quite believe how heavy his own lungs were. Each breath felt larger than his own form. His bones were like lengths of solid piping beneath his skin. His footsteps stung with pain. Bone. Skin. All clicked against the floor. He realised, if he fell, stumbling under his own featherweight... His skeleton would likely turn to powder.

Cantu shivered. He couldn't think about that now. His attention had to be wholly on the holographic projection system. Fortunately, the virus had only damaged the software, not the hardware. With his know-how of the server, he knew how to make his way around.

The virus itself was unlike anything he'd ever seen. Far in advance of the technology on Vulpia. Even by their cosmopolitan standards. It was made by a culture that had long ago laughed at robotics. The cutting edge of the 41st-century... It was so much obsolete junk.

Cantu succeeded in sandboxing some of the armbands. More than a

hundred of them in the dig-site, alone. He hoped that it would be enough.

Behind his frail body, his hypersensitive ears picked up the trumpeting wheeze of the TARDIS. The blue crate that had saved him so long ago materialised within the sync-op chamber.

“Doctor—” He caught himself. “Ember, what—?”

The doors swung open to the slaving features of Basillius Creel.

“We have arrived, my master!” he called back towards the console within.

“*Doctor*, Basillius,” corrected a curt voice. “You, out there! A man is dying, can you help?”

Ember’s guilt hung heavy in the air. They knew the face of every corpse splayed out on the floor of Geoponics around them. Their bodies fouled the air of Geoponics with the sickly sweet repugnance of putrefaction.

Each and every body had a name, a face, an identity.

In a moment, a blitzkrieg of death, they’d been wiped out.

One foot, on the left. Sixty-Six of the Monoids. His attention to detail was beyond reproach, instrumental in creating the Vulpian Communications Network.

One foot, on the right. Ice Lord Ivsek of the Martians. Never a stranger to making someone laugh for the right reasons, he’d assisted First Rank Ntombizodwa in brushing up on her Martian dakaro.

Two-step. Chulai of the Kilorans. She left flowers from her ship’s personal hydroponics garden for the Cabinet’s delegates, irrespective of neither clan, nor creed.

Sparkie could see them. All of them.

All the familiar faces and some others besides. Volunteers or those who had been volunteered to represent their community on Time's lifeboat. All dead. Dead and not coming back. Never mind whatever conversation they would have with Bob.

It was monstrous. Appalling. Disgusting. A filthy dismissal of everything that made the Universe special.

And yet, they couldn't think of that. No, their mind was on a persistent memory. From the incarnation who had shouldered her way to prominence in Cantu's rescue.

It was raw. Pertinent. Something that had occurred not long before the decision to go to the planet Xenon. To visit the homeworld of an old friend or a friend yet-to-be—it depended on where in the consciousness one sat.

They'd been moving through the mountains of Eotham on Remvescu. They'd just saved a young couple from being forced at gunpoint into marriage.

The Doctor tossed the shotgun down the ravine. "Lady Penelope?"

"Or, like, Dana Scully," Yaz followed the weapon's arc. "Ten points. No one's getting that back."

"Marriage isn't everything," nodded the Doctor.

Yaz continued. "It's just you don't grow it long, you don't colour it..."

"Does it look bad?" She scratched her blonde bob.

"Nab, just wonderin' if I should do something with mine." The police officer waggled her black braid. "They said it'd look nice with some purple streaks through it."

The Doctor scrunched her face. "This is going to be that conversation about piercings all over again, innit?"

“Sorry.” *She gave a coy shrug. “Forgot how old y’were.”*

“The nerve!” *gasped the Doctor, affectedly.*

Yaz stuck out her tongue. “Do still like the ear cuff, though.”

“Y’do, after all? So do I. Thought it was very much... me,” *she smiled. “Used to wear a signet ring in my first and seventh incarnations. Very fancy. Story behind that, too...”*

“I’m not sure rings count when we’re talking jewellery.”

The Doctor see-sawed her head. “How ‘bout a pocket watch?”

“Thought that was innate?” *Yaz wiggled a finger. “Y’sense of Time, I mean.”*

“Doesn’t hurt to double check,” *she shrugged. “Particularly when you’re flitting about as much as I was.”*

“Did any of your companions dye their hair?”

She turned her head to Yaz. “That’s a very personal question, y’know.”

“Y’seem a very personal person.” *Yaz turned her head to her.*

“There was... Alright, little secret, Yaz? Mum’s the word?”

“Sure, lemme be mother.”

“My granddaughter, Susan, used to wear her hair short and black.” *The Doctor patted the end of her hair to illustrate. “Practical, like.”*

“You wear it like her?”

“Partly...” *she demurred. “I also have fond memories of two schoolteachers.” A warming smile spread across her features. “Ian... Barbara...”*

“They were family, weren’t they?”

“Hmm?”

“The way to talk about them. Relaxes you.”

“Does it? Well, guess they were. Of a sort. Two humans. Young and in love.”

“You matchmaker.”

“Hardly necessary, in their case...” The smile dimmed. Not on her lips, but in her eyes. “There was an instance... A horror where we were all trapped aboard the TARDIS. Hurling on our way to total extinction. We’d only known one another for weeks, at most. Terrified.”

“Of what was outside?”

“No, each other, Yaz. Each other. Gallifrey wasn’t a far distant memory, y’know? It was yesterday, practically, and all the little prejudices that came with that. I was so sure that Chesterton and Barbara, both of them, were responsible for the sabotage to the Ship.”

“Were they?”

“No, ‘course not. They’d never want to hurt us.” She bit her lip. “But, I believed... I was so twisted around by my own uncertainty...”

“Y’did something you regret?”

“Said some things...” She helped Yaz over a fallen log. “I didn’t think I could take back. Barbara had a harder time forgiving me than Chesterton did.” She tilted her head down, ashamed. “Something that caught my mind. Dropped out from behind the bedside table, so to speak...”

“Something she said?”

“Something she asked. ‘What do you care what I think or feel?’ I told her, ‘We learn about each other, so we learn about ourselves.’ Without her, we’d have all died. Susan included and that was unthinkable. You should’ve seen her. Ordinary schoolteacher taking on Daleks, toe-to-toe with Mēnoptera warriors, incredible.”

“So you wanted to do an homage?” asked Yaz.

“Homage, yeah.” The Doctor liked that, ran her fingers through her hair again. “Little homage.”

“Where is she now? Home?”

“Yeah. Back on Earth with Ian. Should pop in sometime, say hallo.” The Doctor caught Yaz’s expression. “You never talk about home, these days.”

“Y’know...” Yaz tensed. “If I go, unexpectedly, or something does happen to me, I want you to know...”

Ember frowned. Know what? That was the question. With all the milieu of lived experiences at the forefront of their mind, they couldn’t recall what Yaz had said next. It was a promise they’d made. That incarnation was sure, but...

They’d arrived at the TARDIS door. The thought escaped.

Yaz was gone, too. Snatched away in the timestreams. How many other companions had been the same? Pulled asunder in Time and Space by the mistake of the Folly?

Ember rubbed their temples, shaking their head at the cost. “What a hideous price...”

Plugging it into a spare cable, Sparkie laid the last armband on the floor of the console room.

Each of the gold, shield-shaped objects formed a metal circle around the empty socket at the room’s core. They each represented the life of one of their incarnations. Their individuality. All their hopes, fears and dreams. Now embedded in Sparkie, working furiously against the carnage outside.

All those people, in the Dome and in the City... Fighting, surviving, escaping, dying...

Sparkie clutched their lapels, shaking their head at the cost. “What a hideous price...”

“Are we ready?” asked Traskey, gentle.

“Do you, *er, ah*, mean technically or ethically?”

“I can barely answer one of those questions...” Traskey sighed.

“After that lapse from the jamming signal, I can only hope that we can reach that vortex turtle, Bob, *h'mph*...”

“How are we going to do this, Sparkie?”

“Tell them, plainly, that’s all we can do. After so much hatred, so much death... Perhaps, it will appreciate a little honesty. *Hmm?*”

“*Hmm,*” she conceded.

Sparkie tapped her hand. “Go on, my dear. Go on.”

Traskey returned to the console outside. All she needed to do now was reduce the power input to the TARDIS itself. With enough breathing room, the Dome’s power plant would be able to power the armbands. They would have the holographic equivalent of a stone circle.

As she reached for the control, she spotted a small but vital change. In the corner of her eye.

“The astral map...” Its pattern had adjusted.

One of the many points of light had faded and reappeared on a planetary fault-line.

“The missing TARDIS, at last.” She clapped her hands together and turned back to the police box. Before she forgot, she pressed the switch for the power transfer. The console’s judder eased somewhat. Still riled, but more subdued.

“Doctor!” she called, passing through the doors. “Doctor, it’s—”

It was...

The complexities of the Quadrigger’s shayde brain jammed for a moment. All those hypercubes of knowledge and wisdom, and this was something else quite beyond it.

Starvation. True starvation. The kind she'd never experienced as a Time Lord.

The hunger that gnawed at the flesh and sinew until there was nothing left. Fleishy, fatty tissues. Muscle in its stringy tendons. All strung as thin as harp strings and tight against the body. The skull too heavy for the neck. The spine curved around a canvas of wet leather. Hunger, starvation and the mania of a life held to this mortal coil by just one more glass of water. One small bite of an apple.

Before her was a feast. The hunger of the starved and a banquet. Sensations tantamount to glorious ripe oranges, sundaes whipped with cream, crisp lettuce, exquisite cheeses, soft breads with textures that melted on the tongue, sausages cooked in a wood-fire oven. More beauty. More majesty. More to fill the quaking wreck of the body than ever thought possible. An all-too-imaginable aurora of scents that tantalised the sweet, the savoury and did more, far more... It *sated*.

To Traskey, it was the first moment that she'd realised—against the assumed wisdom of her peers—that the TARDISES in the cradles were truly alive. *'Think? They couldn't think.'* But, they *could*. The Time Lords had been wrong. She'd been wrong. They were alive.

The vortex turtle floated in its holographic pattern above the dynamorphic generators of the console room. Its shape anathema to the honeycombed roundels it found itself within. Projected from each armband in turn, there was fidelity and a sense of definition unmatched by anything else on Vulpia. Even Cantu himself.

It was as close as Traskey had come since reviewing the recordings of the lost hypercube.

She was awed. "You're beautiful..."

"Quite magnificent," smiled Sparkie, a hand still on their lapel.

"*What you can bear now,*" explained Diamant, imperceptible beneath the turtle, "*are Our friends. They're using Our viewer to communicate with you*

and a device, the Adamant Locus, to lock Time in place.”

“TO WHAT END?” The words were like an inrush of hydrogen.

“Susan?” Recognition flickered across Sparkie’s face.

Before Traskey could ask, they’d dismissed the reaction.

Sparkie pronounced, “We hope to reach an accord regarding the future of our Universe.”

“TO WHERE ARE WE SPEAKING?”

“Within your digestion, awkwardly enough. At the moment, I and my friend, Traskey, are aboard my Ship. We are in its control room.”

“SUCH A PLACE IS UNKNOWN TO ME.”

“Naturally, indeed. It is too small, too minute to be of concern to yourself. We exist on a planet called Vulpia.”

“THAT DISTORTION... THE TREMULOUS—IT IS OF NO MATTER, I CANNOT BE DELAYED. MY BALE NEEDS ME. I WILL NOT LET THEM DOWN.”

“Have you explained, Diamant?” asked Sparkie.

“We’ve... We were not believed.”

“It is hardly surprising. The implications alone... They are very grave, indeed.”

“I WAS TOLD THEY WERE DEAD. THEY HAD ALL DIED.”

“They were all murdered.” The gestalt stifled down their rage at the injustice of the thing. “Butchered, systematically, by a People who should frankly have known far better.”

“YOU CLAIM THE SAME THING, TOO.”

“We saw what happened on the day you were thrown out of the vortex,” Traskey stepped forward.

Sparkie placed a hand on her shoulder. “*She* saw.”

“I was aboard the *Odysseum*, that timecraft, when it was attacked.”

“*We, Diamant, were responsible for the actions that led her there,*” Diamant added.

“I know Diamant of old,” confirmed Sparkie. “One of my other selves attempted to salvage what she could glean from the assailants of the *Odysseum*. To try and find out what had happened to you. In doing so, we discovered bio-tags that registered the life-signs of other vortex turtles.”

“All catalogued by the Search for Exotemporal Intelligence,” nodded Traskey.

“There was not one. No single one left.” Sparkie raised their chin. “Your people were slaughtered. Completely and totally.”

“AND I SHOULD TAKE YOUR WORD ON THIS?”

“How far have you swam? How far have you pursued any trace of them?”

“INTO TIME. INTO SPACE. FROM ETERNITY AND THE VOID TO THE EDGE OF LIFE AS YOU UNDERSTAND IT.”

“Have you found them?”

“NO.”

Sparkie stiffened, hand tightening on their lapel. “We have, I’m afraid.”

“WHAT?” The word sounded like stardeath.

“A body of a vortex turtle crashed to Vulpia some time ago. It contaminated the land with exotic energies. My other self was able to bring it back to this settlement, the Dome, but it was—”

“YOU BELIEVE WHAT YOU SAY...”

“I do.”

“BEYOND QUESTION?”

“Beyond refutation.”

“YOU BELIEVE IT, UNSWERVING AND COMPLETELY?”

“With unerring certainty, yes,” spoken with the authority of five-dozen voices.

“CAN YOU SHOW ME THIS BODY?”

“To what end? *H'mm?* What is one body to a whole bale?”

“OUR LIVES BEGIN BY MITOSIS. A SPLITTING OF THE SELF. THE BODY WILL RETAIN THE PSYCHIC RESONANCE OF THE OTHERS.” The crash of two planets slammed together. “IF THEY ARE ALL DEAD...”

“We will find a way to transport it to you. I believe it has shrunk, considerably, since its arrival in the dimension of Space, but we can prove it to you.”

“I FEEL...”

“YES?”

“HAVE WE ENCOUNTERED ONE ANOTHER BEFORE?”

Sparkie thought on it. “In another lifetime, another body, yes... Yes, I believe we have.” They drummed their upper lip. Their mind was full of zags, Ember was full of zigs. “I confess, it’s somewhat hazy for myself. I wonder what it is we said to one another?”

“Doctor!” called a staggered, injured voice. “*Doctor!*”

Sparkie caught sight of the bloodied, but victorious Ntombizodwa, entering the TARDIS, moments before she fell against them.

Mel's fallen tears cast clefts on her face. "Regenerate?"

"I must have mentioned the process to you before." Crouched, the Sixth Doctor examined his fallen, faux seventh self on the console room's floor. "In ideal conditions, it's meant to be done in the Zero Wards on Gallifrey. Under the eye of a Hospitalier."

"Like invasive surgery?"

"Quite similar, yes."

"Is this right?" asked Mel.

"No, Mel, even for a regeneration this is quite dreadfully wrong." He scratched behind the ear of the crystalline cat and looked up at Cantu. "I'm sorry. This is likely a problem beyond your medical sciences."

"Nevertheless, let's give it a try." Cantu felt empowered after his successes with the holographic projectors. "What's *meant* to be happening?"

"I can... speak to the physiological processes. Everything else is a bit too, well..." He shook his head.

A bit too personal, Cantu understood.

"It begins, regeneration, that is, with a healing trance that draws thermal energy from the body's surrounding environment—"

"I feel cold," Mel mumbled.

The Doctor squeezed her hand, concluding, "It helps to power what comes next."

"'Re-generate', the generation again of something..." Cantu tried to piece it together. "Damaged cells like how a body heals a wound?"

"And more." The Doctor's eyes never left his other self. "A massive inrush of hormones to trigger the biogenic molecules necessary for renewal. If enough pressure is put on the body during the process, you

can actually catch glimpses of your own past or even your future—or so I’ve heard.”

Mel’s hands balled into fists. “There must be things you can’t recover from...”

“Mel...” the Doctor soothed.

“A stabbing to both hearts and punctured lungs...” Her voice was tight like a bowstring. “How could he do this? How could *anyone* do this—?”

He pulled her to him. “I know... I know...”

Cantu couldn’t fathom it, either. His eyes flicked to Basillius Creel who had stationed himself at the entranceway upon learning there was danger in the Dome. If anything came for them, it would have to go through him.

“He said he would disappear when we arrived,” Mel sniffed.

The Doctor nodded, gently. “And he hasn’t, which points to something not just out-of-kilter with us, but with the timestreams in general.”

“What is—?” Cantu stopped. His voice sounded embarrassingly loud.

“Go on, young fellow,” encouraged the Doctor.

“Please,” Mel added.

Even the cat was examining him with interest.

Cantu cleared his throat. “What is regeneration *supposed* to look like, Doctor?”

“Not like this,” he answered, slowly.

Cantu couldn’t picture it. A whole body reconfigured from the inside out. Was it like the sliding facets of a puzzle box? The miasma of that restorative gas which vitalised those antique, hand-drawn paintings? A

glimmering outline of sparkling light like the constellations of a night sky? What?

Beneath the blood, this red clung to everything like gangrene. 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—

“Blazes, I’ve seen this before...” swallowed Cantu.

The Doctor was suddenly alert. “You have? Where?”

“I—”

“Where, man?”

The cat mewed in urgent echo.

Cantu swallowed. “We call it exotic matter. A vortex turtle fell to Vulpia from a time vent. Its body was contaminated by something very similar to this.”

“I’ve seen entropic corrosion before, but never like this... Are you telling me that—?” The Doctor’s eyes widened with realisation, mouth slightly gaped. “It’s linked to the regenerative processes. Of course! Contamination! The Valeyard must have introduced it when he attacked him.”

“What?” asked Mel.

“Regenerative septicaemia, Mel!” He bounded towards the open doorway, halted, and spun back. “Cantu, where is this body now?”

Mel ran to him, gesturing at the flat-capped mass. “Doctor, we can’t just *leave* him—”

The Doctor spun to face her, careful to lower his eyeline to hers.

“Mel, I need you.” He grasped her by both arms. “You understand? I *need* you, here and now. Not there and then. Without you, I haven’t a chance of understanding what we are up against. How to help him. How to help you.” He ticked his face with a tilt of the head. “Help me, Mel.”

The young programmer from Pease Pottage screwed up her courage.

“Alright,” she said.

“I shall owe you a debt of gratitude.”

“You bet you do.”

“There’s my Mel,” the Doctor smiled, turning to Cantu. “Are you fit for travel aboard a TARDIS?”

“Yes,” he nodded.

“That settles the matter. Basillius! We are leaving!” The time-traveller doubled back to the console. “Where, precisely, can we find this vortex turtle cadaver?”

Back in the dig-site, Sparkie summoned First Rank Ntombizodwa’s fellows to her aid. It wasn’t beyond either their or Traskey’s expertise, tending to such wounds, but they needed to prioritise their actions. Multitask where possible.

Sparkie began, “I understand you’re fighting a battle, but—”

“All the same,” continued Second Lieutenant Kymry. “I’m glad you called us. This could’ve turned septic without treatment.”

“Where’s Strak?” asked Traskey.

“He asked a vulgar question, I gave him several piercing replies. Shouldn’t worry about him now...” Ntombizodwa looked to her. “I’m sorry for what I did. I thought I was following orders.”

Traskey smiled, forgiving. “You’re here. You’re alive. That’s all that matters.”

“How can you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Just... Let it go, like that?”

“I’m dead...” Traskey smiled, sadly. “Dead and gone. What use is a grudge to a dead woman?”

“Speaking of the dead,” interrupted Sparkie, as gently as they could. “We’ve a graver problem, I fear...”

Traskey nodded. “Like how we’re going to move the vortex turtle’s body...”

“I’ve been thinking on that. Transport is our issue, my dear.” Sparkie drummed their fingers on the console. “There’s no way to get to my tent and that isolation chamber without navigating this melee.”

“We can help with that.” Ntombizodwa cleared her throat.

Traskey was appalled. “You’ve been beaten to a pulp, you can barely stand—”

“I, Second Lieutenant Kymry, and others, we will find a way through.” First Rank Ntombizodwa would not be deterred. “We’re all armed. All experienced.”

“It’s very kind of you, but—”

“But, someone also has to stay here.” Sparkie examined Ntombizodwa’s wounds from her encounter with Strak. “To make sure that Diamant’s connection isn’t severed.”

“Quite the predicament, isn’t it?” murmured Kymry.

“I wonder what your other half is up to, at the moment?” Traskey flicked a switch. The transceiver crackled to life. “Cantu? Cantu, are you

there?”

“He’s rather busy at the moment, old chap, could it wait until we’ve arrived?”

“I recognise that voice...” Realisation trebled and quadrupled in Sparkie. “Can’t possibly be—but he must—has to be—the fellow’s indisputable—then it must be so!”

Ntombizodwa looked up from bandaging her leg. “Who’s that?”

“My friend that is I!” Sparkie began chortling. “Yes! Yes... My lost self! Tell me, young man, where were you hiding, *h’mmm?*”

“Oh, it’s you!”

“And more besides—quite the merry band—many heads make light reading and all that.”

“We’ve just made a narrow enough escape from the Folly. Myself, my young companion, Cantu and Basillius.”

“Diamant will be happy to hear that,” acknowledged Traskey.

Sparkie continued, “We’re in rather a spot of bother ourselves. We think we have a means of contacting the source of all this terror—”

“Diamant?”

“No, something else entirely. A vortex turtle with a bubble Universe. We need to give it proof that what it’s searching for is in vain. Only then, we can stop its advance and save every other Universe.”

“What do you need from us?”

“I want you to stay in contact and deliver a cadaver located in a tent within the City of Refuge. Cantu will be able to show you where. It’s vital that this body is taken to where the vortex turtle can see it. Do you understand?”

“We’re already on our way to the City now. You’re aware that the exotic matter is a form of regenerative septicaemia?”

Ntombizodwa looked up from her scope. “It’s *what?*”

“Of course! Of course!” Sparkie clapped their hands excitedly. “It all makes sense. The power behind that turtle. The power that is wreathed around its very form. Altering, shifting, and changing the landscape, changing the very nature of the Fourth Dimension itself... Our friend, Bob, out there, is the same! The origin of the infection! We are fighting a regeneration on a Galactic level. The whole of Creation versus a Warped Rejuvenation.”

“First Rank.” Kymry addressed Ntombizodwa.

“Yes?”

“The Division are regrouping to launch a concerted attack on our forces here.”

“Don’t let us get in the way!” Sparkie waved the agents off.

Ntombizodwa was already giving orders, “Defend Sparkie, defend Traskey—”

“And above all defend that console!” asserted Sparkie.

Traskey closed to Sparkie. “What are your thoughts?”

“Each TARDIS on Vulpia is attempting to maintain some semblance of our Universe’s history, is it not?” they asked her, keenly.

“Yes, through information scrupulously taken from their databanks, but I don’t see—”

“We thought it was a Mutation, but perhaps... Perhaps, we have confused our cause and effect. What do you recall of Lady Traskeya’s final moments when the *Odysseum* was attacked?”

“Constable Zillitian killed her. She began to regenerate. The energy was...” She inhaled, sharply. “Omega’s name, it was—”

“Transferred, wasn’t it? More than cause, more than effect—we’ve

been confusing the patient with their symptoms.” They rested their finger on their lip. “The power of the Change. The power of a renewal.”

“Regenerative power. In that dead body—”

“And, from what you’ve told me, in Bob, as well!”

“Together...”

“The two would have enough power for a whole Universe, my dear!” He tapped her on the shoulders. “Possibly enough to rejuvenate the time tracks! *Ha-ha! Ob-bo-bo-bo!*”

“But only if we get that body to Bob,” Traskey said.

“If we can convince Bob, give them that resolution, we stand a chance. We must make absolutely certain that such a thing can be achieved.” Sparkie gripped their lapels. “The leader of these divisive hunters must never be permitted access to the Adamant Locus. On my life.”

“On all our lives, Sparkie.”

Everyone rallied.

Ember had set the time-delay switch on the TARDIS’s dematerialisation. The grotesque menagerie of death in Geoponics had convinced them their presence was needed out in the City of Refuge. They’d used the distraction of Trafalgar’s Square, still stomping Nelson’s shadow across the landscape to bypass the Division’s killers.

There was a thought—an idle one—to hitch a ride, but it was such an unpredictable thing.

The attack, it seemed, had come from everywhere and nowhere. Among members of the refugees’ own communities. From within, without. It was a carnival of carnage and the Space Security Service had

withdrawn into the Dome to protect the Adamant Locus.

Ember had found their tent before long. The clown's pocket stripes became apparent when their foot caught on the fallen body of a young girl. They picked themselves up, wincing at the puckered and burst flesh under their arms and elbows.

“Gravel rash—*Agh...*” It couldn't bleed, but it could sting.

“You will not succeed.”

The voice came from another body. One implanted with dermal circuitry. The victim had taken her murderer with her. The attacker's body-cam was, however, still active. A passive source of surveillance. Ember wondered what it might have seen.

“Who are you?” they asked.

“An unimportant question, Doctors. What do you hope to gain by your interference?”

“This is a delaying tactic. And not a very good one.”

The flap of the tent rippled with the wheezing groan of a TARDIS. Not the warm, familiar blue of their own vessel, but something else entirely—a pyramid. They pushed through, into the tent, leaving the taunting voice behind them.

From within the pyramid emerged a miracle. Their own face in their sixth incarnation. Accompanied by young Mel, Basillius Creel, a crystalline cat, and—

“Cantul!” they exclaimed.

Determination welled in his eyes. “We need to get the body of the vortex turtle onboard.”

“We were told it was here,” added Mel.

“Over there in the isolation chamber,” pointed Ember. “It's been

there ever since I blew up at Diamant. Why?”

Their sixth incarnation ran to the chamber. “It may hold the key to this whole venture—” He looked behind him. “*No!*”

Everyone in the tent followed his gaze. The pyramidal form of the TARDIS flickered and wavered. It *shriee*-ed with a warbling pulse of sound that only a transdimensional timecraft could make. Ember could taste something very nasty on their palette. The equivalent of the blue puff of smoke that signalled the death of all electronics.

Mel recognised it easily enough. “That’s it. Isn’t it? The last gasp of the TARDIS.”

“I’m afraid so, Mel.”

The crystalline cat weaved herself through the legs of the two Time Lords. Urgently. With little chirrups of *mrrrow* and *ptt-ptt*.

“Hello, puss-puss.” Ember crouched down. “You’re a beautiful one, aren’t you...?”

Basillius tongued his eye. “I wonder if I might...”

The cat hissed its displeasure at even the notion of becoming the reptile’s meal.

“Do that again,” Ember instructed.

“Such an awful noise, though, my master ...” complained Basillius.

Ember shook their head, carefully bundling the cat up into their arms. “Not you, Basillius. Her.”

They tilted their head to the cat’s body. The cat rubbed its cheek against theirs. Its lungs, wheezing and groaning. Ember scratched the feline under the chin with an enormous smile on their face.

“You’ve discovered something,” the Sixth Doctor identified.

“I think you had your suspicions.” Ember placed their head, side-by-

side, with the cat. “It’s Her.”

“*Her...?*” He looked quizzically from the gestalt to the animal and back. He leant close. Listened to the crystalline cat. The expression on his features was like the dawning of a new sun. Warmth, energy and a renewed sense of vigour. “My Ship... My TARDIS!” He scratched her under the chin. “You’re alive! Of course you are. My mind was on other things, but I never gave up hope.”

The thought hit Mel like a wooden slate. “That’s the TARDIS? I don’t believe it...”

“A manifestation of her Banshee Circuits,” said Ember. “Emergency protocols, that sort of thing.”

“She never left us,” the Sixth Doctor clarified. “Even smothered across the Folly’s outer architecture, she found a small part of herself to materialise in that doomed Georgian mansion.”

“You mean, we can get back to her?” Mel energised.

“With a little help.” The Doctor turned to Ember. “Can you help me organise a Stattenheim Summoner?”

Ember, the cat dripping from their arms, dove into the bric-a-brac of the tent. The Sixth Doctor did much the same. The others took their respective leads.

At the dig-site, in the Dome, the emetic gas cloud had dissipated. There was nothing now to stand between the forces of Division and Sparkie’s assembled band of Space Security Service agents. There wasn’t even enough power for a forcefield.

“If we die today, I’m coming back to haunt you,” Ntombizodwa racked her Soren Special and levelled it on her vantage point by the stairs.

“If we die today, I’ll give you pointers in your afterlife,” Traskey patted her on the shoulder and ran to rejoin Sparkie at the astral map.

“Stay alive, my friends!” Sparkie championed. “Just a little while longer, stay alive!”

At Ntombizodwa’s order, the stairway to the Adamant Locus dazzled with tronium rays and the savage reply of staserfire.

Dead, alive or otherwise, Awsok had eyes everywhere on Vulpia with the body-cameras of her operatives.

On her holographic display, she switched from sight-to-sight. One thing was immediately clear. It had taken no rallying cry from the Doctors, no call to arms. The people of the City had risen up against the assault on their own.

The timequakes were tantamount to a natural disaster. The refugees, incapable of defending themselves. The Division, however, was a concrete adversary. Far more so than any passing thought—any murderous Quark, rogue satellite or malignant landmark—dancing in the liminal space-time of the conflicted TARDISEs. Sparkie had done their damage well enough. The people of the City of Refuge would fight for their lives because they had been given hope and hope was extremely dangerous.

“A more dispassionate view, I feel...” she decided.

On the display, she switched to the tactical map of Vulpia, with lights indicating the location and status of each operative.

The light of Strak had gone out long ago. Like Constable Zillitian on Birdie Hepburn. Like the heavy losses sustained in this operation alone. She cursed herself entrusting such a task to a blunt instrument of a Sontaran. Their mindless violence would have no place in her coming universe. It had to be strategic. Directed.

Awsok had no illusions regarding what had to be done.

“Beta-Theta-Zeta.” She addressed the contingent closest to what had been the Thirteenth Doctor’s tent. “There is a domicile within twenty metres of your current path. To your west-most point. Kill everyone within. Destroy the contents of its isolation chamber. Use your neutron grenades.”

An alert from a monitor in Division Control triggered in the upper-left quadrant of the display. She flicked to another tab. The time distortion that had first signalled the Folly was moving. The Doctors had already succeeded in constructing their Stattenheim Summoner.

Awsok switched back to the camera on the dead body outside the tent. It was lopsided, distorted, but it showed the small assembly of disruptors evidently enough. They’d all gathered within the isolation chamber with the cadaver of the turtle.

“*With any luck...*” The Doctor’s sixth incarnation held the bulky staff of the Summoner up above his head like a flare gun. “*Our TARDIS will materialise around this entire isolation chamber.*”

“*It’s slapdash,*” Ember warned. “*We’ll only get one go.*”

“*Needs must when the devil drives.*”

They grit their teeth, crossing their fingers. “*Well, let’s make it count!*”

Melanie Bush, Basillius Creel and Cantu all even held their breath.

Awsok could picture it. Strung out across Space and Time, the TARDIS was reconstituting its outer plasmic shell. The time-ship had been, in part, what saved the Folly from total destruction. It and the intervention of Diamant. It was indestructible in the same way a planet was to the average insect.

Its engines would be struggling through the void. Outside of its conventional dimensions, but it was relative enough to suffice. It could make the journey.

“*Reporting,*” replied Beta-Theta-Zeta’s duty leader.

Awsok switched back to her view of the tent. A leg of dermacircuitry obscured any direct vision into the space. She could hear the charge of staser rifles competing with the wheezing groan of the TARDIS’ engines. The barrage spread fractures across the isolation chamber’s glass like spider’s webs. Its occupants shouted and screamed. More in surprise than actual fear.

All their hope... All their fates...

“*Neutron grenades.*”

Awsok’s lips traced a smile. It was a shame. She’d have liked to have studied this fusion of incarnations. The death of the Sixth Doctor and Mel would cause irrevocable damage to the Web of Time, but well, Time could be rewritten to her choosing. It was a cruel, but apt phrase. After all, the dignity and sanctity of life... Who really cared when it mattered?

“*They went in there.*”

Her imperceptible smile dimmed. That was a voice that she didn’t recognise. Low and gruff like the bark of a dog. It could have belonged to anyone. Anyone at all.

Awsok’s operatives were blindsided by an attack from the rear. Not with high-powered weaponry, the cutting edge of Gallifreyan sciences, but with the average spaceport implements of a ship.

The surprise band of rescuers was led by a Lumar Pel. Ember and the Sixth Doctor both seemed to recognise her. The girl and her fellows, aliens of every consorting affiliation, struck at the operatives with searing floodlights, lengths of hydraulic piping from loading ramps and electrified paddles to jumpstart engines.

They were nobodies. No one of consequence.

And yet... The Doctors—Sparkie, Ember, the Sixth Doctor—they

were all fighting for their survival. Without hesitation, without thought, the refugees returned the favour. Awsok doubted they knew the stakes. It was life reacting to life. The galvanising force of the wrong person in the right place.

The Shobogan felt sick to her stomach.

In the distraction, the TARDIS's outer edges formed around the isolation chamber. The turtle would have been far too large to fit within the doorway of the familiar police box, but these were not familiar circumstances. As the chameleon circuit readjusted to a planetary atmosphere, it stretched its block transfer computations to encompass the entire chamber.

As the Doctors had hoped.

It was far too large for a police box, so it chose a differing shape, that of the isolation chamber itself.

The occupants of the original seemed to fade from its interior, but in truth, they were being transported within the dimensional envelope of the TARDIS itself.

Into its console room.

The turtle—one of the many Awsok had hunted down—vanished with them.

“Out! Everyone out!” hollered the Lupar Pel.

One of the operatives had primed and dropped one of their neutron grenades.

The girl was struck behind the knees with a shout.

“Sorella-Jax!” called another refugee, a vengeful survivor from Alpha Centauri.

The Naran shouted, *“Get Sorella up, come on!”*

‘I’m up, I’m up! Go!’ shouted the Lupar Pel.

The refugees ran for their lives. Their retreat, beyond the camera’s scope, beyond any of the fallen Division operatives’ scopes.

At the centre of the tent, there was a flash of dark. Deep as a black hole. A screaming absence.

Everything—her Division operatives and the bodies—were atomised in an instant. The camera went dead. All that would remain was the charred remnants of a smouldering pyramid.

“Dead and useless.” Awsok switched to Division Control’s weapons section. “Action stations.”

“The stability of Vulpia—”

“Remains unchanged, but circumstances among the time-traces have altered. Prime time torpedoes to target.”

Sparkie stood in the empty honeycomb console room of the Thirteenth Doctor. Their hands on their lapels. Chin raised to the magnificent sight and shape of the vortex turtle.

To Traskey, they looked like a sailor on a crest of rock, staring out into the unfathomable storm beyond.

It was Sparkie who had seen the readings on the astral map. The movement of this new TARDIS that had come and gone from the City of Refuge.

“DO YOU HAVE IT?” Bob asked with starfire.

Sparkie replied, vitally, “Yes, my friend, I have an instinct that we do.”

THUS SPAKE BOB: PART 6
THE GREAT SPIRIT OF ADVENTURE



by Alan Camlann, AFJ Kernow and Sherlock

The crystalline cat soothed its head on Mel's ankle. Despite its sharp iridescence and cunning eyes, the programmer couldn't help but feel an intrinsic warmth to the feline. She hadn't realised it before now—her mind too preoccupied by danger—but the little thing hummed like the Ship that cocooned her now.

It beamed its Cheshire grin in a perfect mirror of its pilot.

A word escaped Mel's lips. "Goodbye."

No... murmured a delirious reply. *Not goodbye...*

Mel's eyes darted to her fellow passengers. All were still focused on the rise and fall of the time rotor. If she'd truly heard the voice, it had been for her alone.

In a single bound, the cat leapt atop the falling column. Red-gold minarets reflected in the golden glow of the console itself. She shone with the lissom beauty of an emerald or a diamond. First, it shed its colour, grooming it from its ears. The glimmer, reflecting the astonishment of its audience, was next. Finally, with a wink, its whole body faded entirely.

For an impossible moment, Mel thought she saw its eyes linger in the air. Knowing and thankful.

The Doctor's voice, emerging from an interior door, tangoed into the air. "Found them. Knew they had to be somewhere. I'm afraid we haven't had a chance to use these starsuits in a while. Mel, catch!"

Automatically, Mel stretched out her arms and caught the helmet against her stomach.

"All suited up and ready to go?" He sealed his own helmet, switching on the transceiver's external loudspeaker. "Testing... Testing... One, two... One, two..."

Mel nodded. "Ready, but there's something I don't understand. How are we going to get *that*—" she gestured to the vortex turtle, "—out of

the TARDIS?”

“Should be fine... Probably fine... Yeah. Yeah, definitely fine.” At the console, Ember tongued the side of their mouth. “Kay, haven’t done one of these in a while... Materialisation flip-flop.”

They stabbed at a stud and the familiar stillness aboard the TARDIS faded. Like a plane landing on the tarmac of an airport. There was weight. Presence. A sense of drift. As they arrived, so did the body of the vortex turtle. Cramped in the corner of the console room, it dematerialised from view.

“Dropped off, outside.” A quick flick of another two studs at the console.

The weightlessness resumed and fell again. This time, harder. Less reassuring, until it was stable.

“And we’re just beside it.”

Basillius chattered, proudly. “I’ve seen such things with my master.”

“I’m sure,” he doted.

“*Mm-hm...*” Cantu was still marvelling, agape, with transdimensional fascination at the console room. He mumbled to himself, “Reasonable explanation...”

“Understand, Mel?” asked the Sixth Doctor.

Mel pinched her cheek to the left. “Short hop, sideways? One drop to leave the vortex turtle and another to settle us here in this void, wherever that may be.”

The Doctor turned to his counterpart. “Marvellous brain.”

“I remember—will probably find out—marvellous, indeed.”

“Is that other turtle outside?” asked Mel.

“Right outside,” answered the Doctor.

“Kay, listen up, fam.” Ember took their helmet and slotted it into place on the starsuit’s groove. “The dimensional threshold of the TARDIS will function as the equivalent of an airlock. Once you step beyond that point, you’re walking in eternity. Subject to its laws. Anyone who wants to opt out... Now’s the time.”

“I’d like to stay here, please.” Cantu’s mouth was still wide. “Try to figure this place out.”

“I will remain to keep the boy company. Besides...” Basillius plucked up a spare starsuit in his claw. It was bipedal and he was anything but. “Its colour clashes with my teeth.”

“You can observe what’s going on through this.” The Doctor twisted the scanner toggle.

“Now, this,” Basillius nodded at the vidscreen behind the widening shutters. “This is familiar to me.”

“Mel?” The Doctor fingered his neck. “Helmet?”

She looked at him quizzically for a moment before she remembered what she was carrying.

With a small, “*Oh!*” she joined the assembled Doctors.

The technology was far and away beyond that of humanity in the twentieth-century. The European Space Agency, NASA or the Soviet Union. Curiously, she noted the question marks at the shoulders of the Doctor’s own starsuit.

“You alright?” he asked her.

There was something that had been bothering her. “Can I say something?”

“Always, Mel,” he nodded. “Do you want to stay here, as well?” “No.” She activated the door control. “For all the Valeyard did, everything that he ended up being... There are parts of him that are

you, aren't there?"

"Indisputably," he admitted. "Unfortunately."

Ember's eyes twinkled with empathetic understanding. This wasn't a conversation for them. They stepped through the darkness into the void that lay beyond.

"I couldn't tell which was which for quite some time," confessed Mel. "He told me... He told me that every aspect of good I saw in him, I attributed to you and every aspect of evil was his own. I don't think that's really fair. I think..."

"Go on," the Doctor said, gently.

"I think people are complex. Not black, nor white. Good, nor evil. To think otherwise... It turns us into something ghastly and horrid. A world without compassion for mistakes. That's what's truly monstrous about terrors like the Daleks."

The Doctor exhaled, in pain. "I'm sorry I couldn't protect you, in the end. The Folly... It became like Lethe, like the *Hyperion III*, like Karnak, like the Great Kingdom..." He shook his head. "I've too many companions who've experienced the disquieting horrors of the Universe."

"That's not what I mean..." She looked up at him. In a way, she realised, she looked up to him. "I think I liked him, Doctor. I think I could've warmed to our Javert if it hadn't been for his ambition and twisted sense of justice."

The Doctor didn't speak, merely pinched his face in puzzlement.

Mel continued, "I want you to know that even among all that darkness, all that evil... I could find the light of something that reminded me most strongly of you. All the good you have done. On Lethe... You stopped the mistake that was the Juggernauts... The *Hyperion III*... You stopped the killing before it could spread out across

the Galaxy. Karnak... You showed them how to live again when they'd lost their sight. The Great Kingdom... Doctor, without you, my home wouldn't have survived past the twentieth-century."

"Mel..."

"Don't ever forget that, alright?" She put her hand on her hip, leaned against the door. "All the good you do. We're travellers, we're... *tourists*. But you make the hard calls that I never could. I travel with you because you *care*."

His face opened up and his eyes shone at her.

"Remember that. Please?" Her hand tightened on the white block of the door. "That even in the pit of all that darkness, there was still something good?"

The Doctor looked at her. A mentor, a friend and a confidant. When he spoke, it was breathless and quiet with an exhilaration she hadn't heard from him in a long time.

"Thank you, young Melanie," he said. "Thank you, beyond words."

Mel turned to the veil of darkness beyond the outer doors. "Let's see this through."

"Come what may..." The Sixth Doctor stepped into the unknown.

"I DO NOT SEE IT," said Bob

"Nevertheless, it is there." Traskey was shaking, she wasn't entirely sure why. "We promise you."

Softly, Sparkie closed the doors behind them. "My other selves have arrived, as expected."

"*Hold a moment. We think We have something in Our eye.*" A thumb pressed against the hologram, obscuring the view of the vortex turtle.

Like the protective cap left on a camera. The blue speck, no larger than a gnat, remained at the near centre of Diamant's vision. *"Oh! Well, then... No doubt left in Our mind. That must be Our friends."*

"Can you get any closer?" Sparkie was unusually sedate, Traskey didn't like it.

"Please..."

What began as no more than a mote in the M-form's eye built to three faces in starsuits. The Doctor's sixth incarnation, the halved gestalt known as Ember, and a young woman with curly red hair. A mix of emotions crossed their features at Diamant's appearance.

Whatever they had to say next, it dropped away at their first sight of Bob.

The awe on their faces was as rich as syrup. The plastron, veined with brown ridges of interplanetary rock, was so exquisite, it shattered their collective hearts. Fresh and earthy and, so very homey. Forget your Yssgaroth, your Triumvirates, your legends and lore. This was the true majesty of the Old Times. What could live when life was left to its own beatific patchwork of evolutionary guessing games.

"I STILL CANNOT SEE IT!"

The young woman stifled a cry. *"I can feel it in my teeth..."*

"That noise, Mel." The Doctor braced himself. *"Vibrations of quite a different variety than you'd find on your Earth."*

"Can you stretch the dimensions of the... the deceased, Diamant?" Ember pulled their half-severed fingers like taffy. *"Decompress the hold that Space has had over it for so long?"*

"We can give it a go."

No fault could be laid at Diamant's feet for how the body of the

Vulpian vortex turtle... *unfurled*. There were complex scientific laws underpinning its shattered presence. Physics, chemistry, biology, even its brief grazing touches with the Time Lord maxims of history, as they understood it. A science.

The body had been cousin, sister, father, mother, brother, and everything in between.

In a mushroom bloom, like a thunderstruck umbrella, the dead turtle's tattered form was stretched on its dimensionally transcendental tendons. A cruel canvas of the divisive hunters who had so viciously hunted it. Driven it from the sea of the vortex to the shores of space-time. Drowned, in the *aurora foris* seafoam of the runt who sought so keenly to find them again. Not a rescuer. Not a hero. Just a lost youngster looking for their family and home.

The First, inconvenient in their long lifetime, had spoken in hesitance as to what happened when one of their own perished. Perhaps, because, they feared, one day, they would have to tell their children that it would be them.

In the Gallifreyans' mad dash to vacate their spatiotemporal womb, they had devoured Time's other young. Their own People had stood against them. Cast down their founders as they were driven mad by the pretence of prophecy. It made no matter. Even when the magicks of their enemies stilled the babes in their bellies for generations—it made no matter.

Awsok had drunk their blood to fuel the rise of the Time Lords.

Now, she had returned to claim the Last. For the same reason she slaughtered the First.

Bob knew all this. Diamant had told it all. The palingenesis of old Gallifrey. The cautionary tale of what the faefolk did at the bottom of the garden. Murder, murder, murder...

“MURDERERS...” The fabric of eternity itself rippled.

“MURDERER...! MURDERER, NO!
NONONONONONONONOUUUUUGGGGAAAAHHHHHHHH
H—”

At its sense, at the touch of a sky-cutting fin, the beak of a whole Universe broke open, like clay pottery, with a howl.

Between the tick and the tock, it broke through Creation.

In Sparkie. There was a reason why their first incarnation had been drawn to the fore.

He'd not been summoned to Vulpia by games or riddles, but through the conviction of his other selves. The white-haired fellow with the mighty nose had been intransigent and he'd assented.

For being so young, so many of his later selves seemed to value quite strongly his advice.

He wondered why. Perhaps... Perhaps, it was because to them, he was the eldest and the youngest, too. There were lives intermingled with his own that speculated it could be more than just a metaphor.

But, then, it was he who fled their home.

He, who had taken that first step—of his own volition—to take his young granddaughter and escape the fires of that place. Leave House and kithriarch. Flee into the Fourth Dimension where they could... They weren't safe, but they were *away*. Perhaps, that was just as good.

Even now, in the wake of those young schoolteachers, rescued orphan, marooned pilot, worshipful handmaiden, dedicated agent, and so many others... The thought of his own planet brought tears to his timeworn face. It was one thing to choose never to go home. It was quite another to *know* you never would.

And thus, he had dedicated himself to his expedition. The exploration of Time and Space to uncover the *'why'* of all that was possible. To learn. He'd seen good people falter and evil prosper. The history of the Universe was filled with greed, destructive ambition, hatred and a dozen other flaws besides. But, he had also seen charity, beatific selflessness, love and all the virtues that made what they'd achieved today possible.

There was no reward. True, for his own part in his summons to the Death Zone, he'd been granted a boon by Rassilon's ghost. The ability to travel, for a short time, in between the beats of his own Time. The young people with him slept. He wandered. Careful, but largely alone. He was allowed a brief moment to recollect things, steer his Ship, and get his affairs in order.

The degradation to his body had grown worse. He was trying pills, treatments in the Ship's laboratory, but it would not last, he knew.

What did he know of loss? He lost not a place to live, but his home.

What did he know of grief? To each and every life, he had to say a final goodbye.

What did he know of sacrifice? He...

The wailing cry of the vortex turtle sounded too much like his own granddaughter. Young, dear Susan, who would never leave him. Never abandon him. She was prepared to sacrifice her own happiness for him. He could not abide such a notion. She had deserved to belong somewhere, like he never could.

Perhaps, his other selves agreed, that was why they heard Susan.

There was nothing in Creation that hurt more than hearing the people you love suffer.

In the Sixth Doctor. His incarnation's grief was gregarious.

His life had not been an easy one. The wounds of Androzani Minor cut far deeper than any gash or bruise. His predecessor had sacrificed his life, returned young Peri to safety, but he'd regenerated after a great deal of delay and with unrefined spectrox coursing through his bloodstream. Their martyrdom extended beyond one incarnation into the next.

The Doctor had been renewed and suffered its aftershock.

A hideous illness, both physical and mental, that had left him with combat fatigue. He was no soldier of fortune, no flag-waving jingoist. He was an adventurer and a scientist. He travelled the Universe to explore. His long expedition had turned into a means to meet and understand other cultures and modalities in the cosmos. He'd shucked off any pretence of humanity—a costume, little more—and become as he truly was. In Mel's terms, an alien. He liked who he was, but it was buried under so much unease.

He'd avoided Mel for years. Not for the Pease Pottage programmer's personhood, but for what she represented. Every step he took towards her was another towards the Valeyard. It had taken a great deal of time to reconcile himself in Peri and Frobisher's company. The trial had sent him back into the pit. Back into an instability he'd only just wrested control over.

It had taken many companions, many adventures to become the man he'd wanted Mel to meet.

Even then, it wasn't deliberate. He hadn't sought her out. It just... happened.

They'd since become the firmest of friends, but there was always that paranoid fear in the back of his mind. He'd tried to avoid the *Hyperion III*, as he'd tried to avoid Mel, but he'd failed. Time, it seemed, had other ideas.

He'd been running from the shadow of his own future—or was he a

shadow of it? He worried for what he'd become. They'd had near enough encounters in the past.

Failure wasn't a hypothetical quandary. It was true and real.

The wailing of the vortex turtle, an impossible mythological shape, sounded like so many familiar cries. It was Peri's hideous whimpers that had so haunted his nightmares for many years. The peeling cries of Evelyn after what happened to young Cassie. It was Angela... Angela so desperate to leave Torrok that she'd have rather died than be denied. She'd been torn apart because he'd been too hesitant. Too reticent to allow her into danger. And Frobisher, when—

He felt a pair of arms snake around his waist.

Mel.

With a hug.

In Ember. The Doctor's thirteenth incarnation hugged herself against the pain.

She felt like the last of her merry band. The lonely gadgeteer left in the tree house. Everyone else had gone home. Back to their families and places of warmth, but she... she lived in the trees. Oh, she pretended among the other children that she had a mum and a dad. She even, at times, understood what those words meant. But, she had no one. Not any more. Not even her friends, her companions, the souls who travelled with her. Those, too, had been snatched away.

Why was it that when one got old... They thought of themselves in terms that were young?

She wondered if the reverse was true.

It had been her who saw it through. In the TARDIS, when she'd resurrected Traskey. Above Birdie Hepburn, when they'd claimed that

stolen property from Zillitian. On Vulpia, weathering the latest of a series of time cicatrices and their consequences.

The City of Refuge. The last Hypercube. Diamant's tether out here in eternity. None of it would have been possible without her.

So, why did she feel so empty?

She had a glimmering of how her prior selves would feel. One would be tight with the raw wound of rejection as they'd fled home into the stars. Another would be overwhelming, almost hyperbolic, with the memories of battles fought in inner-space.

There was nothing for her, though. No... She could be lavished with accolades, cheered to the highest podium, but this grief within her felt like it had been carved out of her. It was becoming easier to measure days by how long Gallifrey had been gone, rather than how long it had survived. There was still resentment, there. Still, distrusting. Seeing her other selves again, their respective views—one would lionise, the other condemn—they both still chose to abandon it.

Why, then, was her life defined by what happened there?

She, too, was a wanderer, a scientist, an adventurer and an exile. Her life abroad, beyond, was far more vibrant and beautiful than any red-rust tomb. It was a cosmic grief that she resented. What about the pain of those small valiant lives on Earth? The Rosa Parks? The Prem Basars? The Graham O'Briens? The Ryan Sinclairs? Didn't their tragedies deserve to be remembered and lauded?

She was sick of this bloated grief. Sick of how empty it made her feel. She wanted to grieve, mourn and remember ordinary people. Not lofty totems, but people no different to those two young schoolteachers, Barbara and Chesterton, who had changed the way she saw the Universe so many lifetimes ago.

What of them? What of their sacrifices?

She wanted room enough to be with her companions in their moments of vulnerability and she couldn't. She was overwhelmed. To admit that, though, would be to turn their attention back on her and she couldn't abide that. It felt like taking advantage of good people to drive her own ends. Her fam. Their successes and their failures. At least... At *least*, she'd gotten the boys home. That was something. Among all the prejudice and cruelty they'd witnessed, there was, perhaps, something that could be done about it.

The wail of the vortex turtle sounded like frustration, agonised and incurable. To strive for something for so long and to fail. To know that you've failed.

Now, it had to pick itself up. And try again.

After this?

Aboard Division Control, in the zero chamber, the silver poplar was aflame with new leaves. New potentials. New possibilities. Time, it seemed, continued forever onward.

There was only one remedy for this. The same as had been for the *Odysseum*.

"Safety locks are clear," reported weapons section. *"Time torpedoes readied."*

Awsok was plain, deceptively unemotional. "Confirmed. Authorisation Alpha-Alpha. Target the Type 40 TT Capsule in the void and destroy."

"Torpedo run beginning."

From their warp silos, as though shot from the arc of a bow, the time torpedoes screamed on their wings of tailfire towards the blight on eternity.

“There, there we are!”

Ember felt a pinch in the armband at their shoulder. The shimmering outline looked like heat waves on the horizon. A face, familiar and canny, protruded from the distortion.

“How...?” they began to ask.

“It took a few tries, I will admit, but with help of Cantu and the—ab—relay point of the Ship...” Sparkie seemed satisfied. *“H’mph. We can boost the signal enough to appear in the holograph.”*

“All present and accounted for,” Ember sounded lightly impressed.

“The more hands on deck, the more we can deal with this loose cannon on deck.” Gunfire popped in the background behind Sparkie. Their voice, however, was sombre. Focused. *“A grief such as this should not be borne alone. Not by any living thing.”*

“No,” agreed Ember.

The Sixth Doctor asked the vortex turtle, “Who were they? They you lost?”

“In the terms that you have adopted...” they whispered.
“Grandfather.”

Sparkie, Ember and the Doctor’s faces hardened.

“A VICTIM,” the turtle continued at their normal volume, “OF THE SCIENTIFIC UNIVERSE WHICH RASSILON CREATED.”

“Another crime of Gallifrey,” Ember murmured, a little louder than they’d intended.

“INDEED. YOU TOLD ME YOUR TRUTH AND IT IS MINE. THERE WAS NO LIE. THEY ARE ALL DEAD. A CRIME... A CRIME OF YOUR UNIVERSE, YOUR SCIENCES AND AGE OF

REASON.”

The three iterations of the Doctor looked as though they’d been caught out.

“I KNOW YOU. WE *HAVE* MET. YOU TRAVELLED ABOARD YOUR TARDIS. YOU VISITED ME. YOU, THEREFORE, ARE A TIME LORD.”

“I’m many things...” Ember hastened to add.

“THE STRICTURES AND CHAINS INSTILLED BY RASSILON AND WHO KNOWS HOW MANY OF YOUR PREDECESSORS. ENFORCED IN YOUR TIME-SHIPS. HUNTERS IN THE VORTEX.”

Sparkie’s lips thinned. “*Science is not to shackle infinite knowledge, but to put a limit on infinite error.*”

“WHAT IS THAT?”

“*You are right. We must learn from our mistakes. Learn from the past. But a dead man cannot change his mind, h'm?*”

“HAS YOUR SCIENCE HELPED YOU TODAY?”

“It brought us to you, cosmic fam,” Ember pointed out. “We found you. Again.”

“AND SO TOO WILL IT BRING YOUR DIVISIVE HUNTERS.”

“*Leave that to us. That is for us to attend,*” assured Sparkie. “*For now, you are all that matters.*”

“ANOTHER BARK OF CONVICTION.”

“We mean what we say.”

“DO YOU?”

“We’ve something to ask of you. Something important.” Ember drifted up towards the turtle’s eyes. Lozenge-shaped and bitter with

sorrow. The hologram remained at their shoulder, in step. “We’ve a chance to save our Universe from ultimate destruction. Prevent others from becoming the same.”

“OTHERS?”

“You drank our Universe to get to the next.”

“To find your fam.”

“Your motives, in and of themselves, are not a crime, never,” said Sparkie. *“But, this must stop here.”*

“WHY?”

Ember looked from side-to-side. “We’re doing something terribly difficult. Something no one should ever have to do. We’re speaking for a whole Universe.”

“Every grain of sand, every drop of water, every sunrise and every beam of moonlight, every laugh, every tear... All that it has to offer and all it gives without reservation.”

“It has a basic right to live. To grow. And to die, yes, but of its own accord. Not like this.”

“WHY?” the turtle asked again. “WHEN IT SPAWNS SUCH HORRORS AS THAT WHICH KILLS MY PEOPLE? LEAVES ME...”

Ember could hear Diamant’s heart breaking. A whimpering squeak from the M-form.

“You poor creature...” Behind them, the Sixth Doctor’s voice sounded so small in the black.

“It wasn’t a Universe for the Time Lords, alone. There were a countless number of other cultures, civilisations, creeds and methods of thought out there.”

“Our Universe is wounded. Comatose. Help it to live again. That’s well within your power.”

“DIAMANT SPOKE TO ME OF YOUR PAST.”

Ember blinked. “They did?”

“LIFE RETURNED TO GALLIFREY,” conceded the vortex turtle. “BUT WHAT DID YOU DO WITH THAT LIFE? YOU TURNED THE COSMOS INTO A LIVING FURNACE. A SQUANDERING WAR THAT JEOPARDISED THE VERY LAWS YOU CLAIM TO UPHOLD. DIAMANT SAW YOUR CHILDREN, THROUGH THEIR VIEWER, THEY SAW...”

The hologram stuttered. “*Traskey? What have you found—?*”

Stuttered and died.

“What’s happened?” asked Diamant.

Ember checked. “Something’s gone wrong back on Vulpia—”

The turtle didn’t care. “WE SAW THEM BURN.”

Ember looked up. “You told them everything?”

Diamant nodded. “We saw it Ourselves. Their coin-toss experience of birth and death. Death by the Moment, torment under Rassilon’s mad tyranny, and slaughter by the Master. Bob—the Last has a point... After everything... When is it enough?”

“If someone, who knew the future, pointed out to you a child...”
Ember murmured.

“We don’t follow that one, sorry,” shrugged Diamant. “Too many Universes astray.”

“It’s alright, Diamant.” They shook her head with regret. “I don’t expect you to.”

“DO YOU STILL THINK YOUR AGE OF REASON IS WORTH

THE COST?”

“*I wouldn't be fighting for it otherwise, my friend.*” The hologram reformed. The background hiss of gunfire was louder. Before Ember could ask what was going on, Sparkie rebuffed the question. “*My place is here. Here and now. You're forgetting... There's a dangerous glamour to the Universe before the sciences.*”

“You were told the stories, yeah? You'd know?” asked Ember.

“ANYTHING WAS POSSIBLE. WHY NOT A RETURN TO THAT?”

“Because it was a place where gossip on the grapevine was law.” It was the Sixth Doctor who approached with Mel at his side. “Law. Can you imagine that? Nothing counted except superstition where irrational fear ruled the everyday. Pink elephants, today. Purple unicorns, tomorrow. Nothing had any substance, value, purpose or permanence.”

“HOW COULD YOU KNOW THAT?”

“Recent developments in my life made me a quick study of history. All history. Even what could be found of the histories before ours.”

“TELL ME, HOW IS YOUR INTANGIBLE 'JUSTICE' ANY DIFFERENT? YOUR MORAL CODE ISN'T INSCRIBED. IT ISN'T ETCHED INTO THE FABRIC OF THIS UNIVERSE YOU ARE ATTEMPTING TO SAVE.”

“*All the better for it, I'd have thought,*” quested Sparkie. “*Everyone matters, my friend. The pink elephants and purple unicorns have every right to live. As they choose. If they harm one another, wilfully and with glee, we will step in where we can. Such evil, yes... I suppose it must be fought, h'm. However, the Universe is also littered with the virtuous and the ordinary.*”

“People who'd join up with farmers and save a world from neutronic annihilation,” Ember interjected. “That's how I met the Daleks, but it was also how I knew the Thals. Their world was scored and harried

beyond all recognition, but the Thals still believed they should till the land, develop their arts and their culture, and live *again*.”

“In our Universe, no one can simply wish away their existence on the grapevine,” added the Sixth Doctor. “Shrug them into graves.”

“*They’ve object permanence,*” continued Sparkie, as vitally. “*You understand?*”

“Substance, right? It takes a fight to destroy.”

“AND A FIGHT TO SURVIVE.”

“We’re all still here, aren’t we?” Mel shrugged, amiably. “Time and time again.” Another shrug, to make her point.

An exhalation from the vortex turtle’s beak, solar winds, hid their pause.

“WHAT WOULD YOU HAVE ME DO?”

“We can cure your affliction,” convinced Ember. “This *aurora foris* that clings to your skin and bone. It’s a regenerative septicaemia. Infected from the body of a Time Lord you sought to give a proper burial.”

“ONE OF THE FEW WHO WAS KIND.”

“*Lady Truskeya. My old friend. Her memory is here with us.*”

“SHE IS DEAD. LIKE THE OTHERS...”

“*Do you wish to know what she would have thought of this moment?*”

“YES. YES, I WOULD.”

“*Very well.*”

In her zero chamber, Awsok clicked her tongue at the silver poplar, disappointed.

She needed no egotistical last charge. No pompous posturing. She'd lived far too long to countenance such indulgences. She wanted the bubble Universe, she would have it.

The occupants of that TARDIS would be aged to death and the Division could begin their assault on Vulpia once again. A wounded, wearied and weakened world that believed the fight was over. It would be simple.

All of it could be achieved in...

"Time to target, fifteen minutes."

"Give it up!" A plea. A shout. A scream. *"Ehvvab, it is over! Give yourself up, don't—don't bloody do—stop!"*

First Rank Ntombozodwa's Soren Special punctured the dermacircuited body of the Division operative. Faceless, nameless, they bled just like anyone else. Divested of its agency, the corpse slumped against the stairwell. Another martyr for the thick gruesome silence that pervaded the dig-site. The chamber stank like an open grave. Littered with however many lost lives. She detested it.

"Ntombizodwa..." It was Second Lieutenant Kymry.

She ran a hand over her sweating features. "Wouldn't listen, wouldn't stop..."

"It's over now."

"All of them?" her voice was flat.

"Here and in the City of Refuge."

"To the last...?"

"No surrender. Every single one. I can't understand it either, ma'am. They must have been so afraid or so driven that they couldn't stop."

Kymry bit his lip. “They’ve more conviction than me. This carnage... I would have stopped. I thought about it. That wouldn’t have been the way, would it?”

“The doubt doesn’t make you any less of an agent.” Ntombizodwa sat on her haunches, hovering over the last body. “We’re only people, after all. All of us. Only people.”

“I was never comfortable with combat.

“Nor I. I’ve seen every advancement that the Solar System can make in this fourth millennium. When the Daleks emerged, we learnt everything we could about war.” Ntombizodwa swallowed. “Except the means to end it any other way but with this...” She tapped the barrel of her gun.

“Perhaps, that is why we have people like the Doctors...? The peacemakers?”

“Did you ever meet any of them? Personally?” asked Ntombizodwa.

“They are a legend among my people. For many reasons, in many guises, it is difficult to tell where the mythology ends and the truisms begin.”

“Perhaps, we need more such legends in our lives. Of people like the Doctor and the sacrifices they’d make to turn them into Sparkie and, what was it called, Ember.”

“More peacemakers?”

“Peacemakers, protesters, champions and defenders...”

Ntombizodwa stood back up. “When this is all over, that’s who they’ll become again. Vulpia will remember. It has no choice. We have no choice.”

Kymry rapped her shoulder, pointed to the TARDIS. “Where’s Traskey going?”

“Do you think she was wounded?” she asked.

The Thal peered up. “Can’t tell from here, ma’am. Should I count the dead?”

“Yes.”

“Ours?” he asked.

“Ours and theirs... Search for wounded and survivors.” First Rank Ntombizodwa began disassembling her Soren special. “I’ll go see what decision’s been made aboard the TARDIS.”

“Time to target, twelve minutes.”

Aboard the Thirteenth Doctor’s TARDIS, Sparkie stood beside Traskey in solidarity as she spoke to the vortex turtle. Ntombizodwa limped through the door, expecting it to creak, but it was silent. As was she. Just an observer.

“I’m sorry...” Traskey was in tears. Almost beyond words. “I had no idea that the other time-ship existed. Had I known, had we known, the Search for Exotemporal Intelligence would never have approached your bale. We failed you.”

“YOU DID NOT ATTACK US,” consoled the turtle. “YOU DID NOT KILL MY BALE. THE FAULT LIES WITH OUR HUNTERS.”

“The deaths of over *three-hundred* bubble Universes... *Three-hundred...*”

“I AM TOLD THAT WE CAN SAVE THIS ONE.”

“Not just this one, but so many others. We need the regenerative power that infected you from Lady Traskeya’s body. The power that’s

contaminated the body we brought to you. Through the Adamant Locus, through the collective power of the TARDISEs, we think we can remap the Universe back to its original shape.”

“TO RESET IT, AS YOU WOULD A BONE?”

“Let me ask you... When a record is wiped from its original archive, but a copy is found elsewhere, do we call that a reset? Or a restoration?”

“YOU WISH TO RESTORE YOUR UNIVERSE.”

“Yes. I believe the Doctors, I believe Sparkie and Ember, and I believe that such a thing is possible.” She held up a ferrofluid arm. “I am built on the principles of a shayde. I have the memories of Lady Traskeya, but my own will now. I cannot replace her. She is gone. Gone forever. But I can continue where she left off. Build upon her.”

The vortex turtle considered her words. “I DO NOT KNOW WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF THIS POWER IS SAPPED FROM ME.”

“You—You—Y-You—” Traskey shook, gritting her teeth in frustration, unable to steady her hands. Her grip on her glasses tightened to the point that the frames snapped in her hands. “W-*Wub*-Wi-Will...”

Carefully, Sparkie took over. “We have a solution in place. It has taken many days, much time, but we believe this could be the answer. For all of us.”

“WHAT?”

“Us,” answered Diamant.

“Time to target, ten minutes.”

It seemed such a long time ago. Diamant's first meetings with the Doctor in China, enveloped around the body of an Emperor.

"We have caused such disaster. So terrible a mistake with the removal of the Doctor's sixth incarnation, Mel and the Valeyard from Space and Time," began Diamant. "It was through that mistake that you could push into the Universe."

"But without you," Ember noted, "we may never have found the vortex turtle."

"People are not wholly one thing, nor the other. We have heard the Doctors be called errant and irresponsible, but We learnt, from the Doctors, what it means to hold Ourselves accountable for Our actions." Diamant folded their arms into themselves. "If you will have Us, turtle, We will supplement that release of regenerative energy."

"HOW?"

"We will fractally envelop yourself and become a part of you."

"You will not be harmed," assured Ember.

"We, Diamant, will not dominate. We will create. Together."

"Time to target, nine minutes."

A notion caught wind in its sails within Traskey's mind.

"And neither one of you will be alone." The Quadrigger shayde stepped forward.

It was mad. Spur of the moment. But it felt right. So *right*.

"I will go with you," she said. "Diamant, could you come and find me?"

One of the fractal-form's many metaphorical fingers, an iteration of

their Plurality, swirled in oil-like patterns and appeared. Within the confines of the console room, their body caught in lilac-blue bubbles. A promise of summer and a great adventure.

“*Traskey...*” It was the voice of Ember. One incarnation, specifically.

“Doctor...” She swallowed, closed her eyes and turned to the image. “Can you see me?”

Sparkie had stood to the side. “*See and hear you,*” answered Ember.

“I’ve thought on the life. This life. The one I was never given a choice to live.”

“*I’m sorry—*”

“I don’t blame you, Doctor. You were desperate and you were alone. You needed someone—I could be that, for a time.”

“*You really are leaving?*”

“The knowledge I have... There are people out there who seek to harm us. I cannot be allowed to fall into their hands. If I go, to this bubble Universe, we stand a chance.”

“*You don’t need to protect me, Traskeya... Traskey.*” They huffed a smile. “*Lady Traskey née Traskeyaragelosar of House Arakmapes. Lecturer at the Prydonian Academy and scientist at the Search for Exotemporal Intelligence.*”

“Just words,” Traskey tried to console.

“*Between each and every one of those words sits entire lifetimes. The impact you’ve left and the impact that’s been left on you. You’re right. I don’t want you to leave, but I can’t ask you to stay.*”

“And what did we learn?”

Ember smiled, sadly. “*That sometimes it’s alright to take time to find ourselves again. I’ll miss you, you know?*”

“Come and visit, if you can.”

“*It’s a brilliant idea.*” And, for a moment, she could see her Doctor again. “*Whatever you decide, I’ll come and visit one day. I’ll be there if you’re... or if you’re.... I’ll make sure you’re remembered.*”

“One-way, prepaid airfare... Ntombizodwa?” Diamant turned to the bloodied and bruised agent. “What is your choice?”

Ntombizodwa shook her head. “Vulpia will need me, after this.”

“There must be one constant,” reminded Sparkie. “This world will be it. Everything that has transpired here, irrespective of the restored pattern of history, will remain the same. It must.”

“I’d thought as much. I will remain as long as my shore leave—” Her face dropped and she began to laugh. “Shore leave! We were here to get away from the fighting! *Ehwah!* What a mess....” She laughed so hard that tears came from her eyes. “But this...” She wiped them away. “This is a *good* decision, Traskey. You look...”

“*Alive,*” smiled Ember. “*You look alive, Traskey.*”

Traskey hid the happy tears on her face as she stepped into Diamant’s shape.

“*Time to target, seven minutes.*”

In the Sixth Doctor’s console room, the conversation in the void and on Vulpia was observed with keen panic.

“My master!” Basillius Creel clambered to the console’s transceiver. “You cannot leave me here! You would not! You need me, still! I... I cannot be... left... *Kssab...*”

“*And you won’t be, Our reptilian friend...*” Diamant’s light, drifting through dimensions, solidified and became the form of the familiar bipedal figure. “You thought that We would abandon you? What are

We, Diamant, without those to perform Our Labours?”

“I never doubted you, my master,” Basillius caught himself. “My friend.”

“We rather like the sound of that.”

Basillius stepped into the outline and dematerialised into their fractal-form.

Diamant turned to Cantu. “And what of you, humble ghost-light of the stage?”

“You know the answer already.” Cantu chuckled like a tin mouse. “Vulpia is my home, Diamant. I fought very hard to find it. There’s a temptation in that bubble Universe, I won’t lie, but... My world is hurting. One more healer will make all the difference in the world.”

“The Doctor’s influence is pervasive, isn’t it?”

“Mmm... Shall I sing you away?”

Diamant’s features tickled into a smile. “Why not?”

Cantu hummed a few notes and began, “*I really can't stay... Baby, it's cold outside... I've got to go away...*”

“*Time to target, six minutes.*”

The Sixth Doctor’s hands went to clutch at his lapels. On the starsuit, he instead tapped the chestplate. “Mel and I know our course, naturally,” he nodded.

“Yes,” said Mel. “We set the TARDIS for our original destination... Just as this whole process reaches its flashpoint? Do I have that right?”

“Quite right, Mel,” the Doctor smiled. “We cannot unfry an egg or put smoke back in the bottle, but we can put the mountain back for

what it's given us.”

“Where are we going next?”

“A little place in the Horn Nebula, just off the constellation of Mandusus. I have a feeling there's a mystery afoot, there.”

“Sounds enticing.”

“Yes, and best of all, it should be a wilderness at half Earth's gravity. No Georgian follies, no dubious former prosecutors, no death-traps except those devised by nature.”

“You had me at no follies.”

He chuckled and turned to Ember. “What of you?”

“Me and my other half...?” They cocked their head to Bob's beak. “They're already at work now, I think.”

“Time to target, four minutes.”

As the console of their thirteenth incarnation rematerialised in its honeycomb chamber, Sparkie rubbed a thumb against their lapel, then pinched their fingertips and, quietly, rubbed the back of their neck.

“You want Us to pull you apart?” goggled Diamant.

“There are certain transdimensional safeguards in place in all vessels such as our Ship.” They crossed to the console. “Even if Traskey were here, there isn't anyway to bypass them except by external influence. We are just like her—memory. The product of an overstuffed Hypercube. These memories need to be returned to Time and Space.”

“Does your other half know?”

“I am they, and they are I.” A grandfatherly twinkle as they pressed a switch. “Of course they do.”

Diamant noticed the small flash of a light on the console. “What’s that?”

“The proximity alert to a volley of time torpedoes. They were detected while we were speaking with, er, ah... Bob.” They turned to the turtle, still swimming between the golden fingers of the dynamorphic generators. “May we call you that?”

“IT IS NOT AN UNKIND NAME,” acceded the vortex turtle.

“You sound so calm.” Diamant sounded awed and a little afraid.

“When you’re our age, Diamant, there’s little left to fear.” Sparkie’s answer came as a giggling chorus, biting the crooks of their fingers. “If we die so be it, but if we should *live again*...”

“Time to target, two minutes.”

All across the planet Vulpia, the TARDISes had continued their tireless work to define the parameters of their restored Universe.

The TARDIS, as a vessel, was far more than just a machine. Its circuitry could detect every disturbance in the temporal fabric of a Galaxy and intervene. With or without knowledge of its pilot. The navigational control of the Type-40 TARDIS within the Doctors’ possession—or, perhaps, more accurately, in-step with the Doctor—was damaged by age and misuse when it was stolen away from Gallifrey.

One could imagine that as a compass gone awry by an external magnetic influence. That was true, in respect to Space. In Time, however... It was like mistaking up for down as you were walking down the footpath. A casual misstep, inexplicable, at first, and you fell into the sky. It was through this time-ship that the Universe was to be restored.

Vulpia one of its lynch-pins, as certain as Logopolis, the Event Synthesiser, even an early palimpsest iteration of Alexandria. There was a myth—told in a riddle—that the underpinnings of the Universe were supported by the very first vessels to traverse time, the Time Scaphes.

The TARDISEs found the idea rather humbling and gratifying.

True or not, it was nice to think that such a cradle-tale could be possible.

And now...? Now, they had to weigh the costs of such idealism.

There was no accord on the righteousness of certain continuities over others. Who decided who lived and who died? Not they. They were veritable wanderers and new explorers. No Universal doctrine, unswerving and monolithic, seemed right when so much life was at stake.

A path had to be chosen.

But why just the one?

Time, as they had seen, existed within its own dimension separate to Space. What was true for the elderly renegade who'd fled his home, so young, wasn't necessarily true for the young survivor who'd lived to such an elder age to find it again in ashes.

There would be contradiction, yes, but the straight and narrow lines of mania were not for them.

That was for the creature who had tried to destroy one of their own. The time-ship, Division Control, which had launched the time torpedoes at the Doctor's sixth incarnation.

They were aware.

It hastened their decision.

The restoration of the Universe would not come in a flash of light. It would be methodical. Careful. Graceful, if possible. An untangling of a

cat's cradle as block transfer computations rewove the pattern of history.

The Sixth Doctor's TARDIS dematerialised, it would make a short hop to return Cantu, and then return to its appointed Time. The pyramid in the tent that had replaced it, so troublesome and unexpected, evaporated into the continuum. Its existence, over.

Ember remained in the void. Just as Sparkie remained on Vulpia.

Neither turtle, nor fractal-form would be left alone in this moment.

"HOW DOES ONE... REGENERATE?"

Sparkie began, *"Contact. It would be easier for you to know..."*

"...than have us explain. Contact," finished Ember.

And in their telepathic conference, felt through the circuits of their own beings, the TARDISEs understand the process well enough. To hear it, in the conscious thoughts of their own pilots, that was a rare privilege.

It was like falling. Falling from the sky. To see the clouds below, the horizon of a world stretch out so wide that it curves under your vision. To feel your body, a lissom thing of four limbs and a single skull, be pulled inexorably by a force beyond themselves and yet somehow within them. Velocity and power. Driven by something that pulled them from a gap in Time towards the solidity of the next moment.

A long way to fall. Terribly long way.

It can happen with a broken spine, unmoving on a knoll, or shot among the garbage of a damp night street, but the end result was the same. Always the same. The fall was so exhilarating that it filled the pilot's mind with terror. They didn't want to die. They didn't want to fall. Their limbs seemed to streak until they lose all definition. Sharpened, like letter openers. In some ways, they preferred to do it unconscious. To awaken, to find themselves as someone new, that

was... It was...

But this could not be so.

One life would replace another. For the vortex turtle, one Universe would rejuvenate another.

More than three-hundred bubble Universes had died. A tragedy on a scale that the TARDISES' human passengers could not conceive, but they could save this one.

At last, the vortex turtle remembered what the Doctor had said to them. All that time ago, when they were just a so-called 'runt'. Now, something beautiful and wondrous.

Would the Doctors remember the turtle?

It would depend on how the memories were shared. They would *know*, they certainly would know.

It was time for them to grow, to allow complexity and make something new. Worlds without easy answers were not a terrible thing. Without hard questions, there wouldn't be art, discovery, and that was fundamental to what life truly was. That great spirit of adventure.

A milky-white glow appeared around the vortex turtle's features. Slowly, at first. Like gold being poured from a smelter. The TARDISES could feel Diamant's dimensions enfolding the turtle, but never smothering them. Like a shawl against the cold. Like a headscarf against the heat. There was nothing higher, nothing lower, they were in symbiosis. Not two made one, but far more and intertwined. As rich and vibrant as a TARDIS and their Time Lord. Transcendental. Everything, within and without, that pained the turtle...

It melted away.

"Thank you," thus spake Bob.



“Time to target—impact target. Impact target. Confirm. Confirm. Confirm. Target is... It’s...”

Awsok stumbled awake.

A cataleptic state. Brought on by a severe neurological shock.

“In *here?*” she spat the whisper.

Her eyes adjusted and, for a moment, she thought she had gone blind.

The zero chamber was thick with the foliage of the silver poplar. There were more leaves and branches than there was room to breathe. The Shobogan shielded her face, using the brim of her hat, and used her staser to cut a path to the holographic display.

There was the sound of fists, beating on the other side of the door.

“Children leave such a mess unattended.” She activated the display. “Situation?”

The operative paused before answering, *“The operation... has failed.”*

“The Doctor...” Awsok nodded, chewing her lip. She wasn’t surprised. “I was in a state of induced catalepsy following a violent assault on the temporal senses.”

“Yes, many unshielded operatives died from the restoration.”

“What of the Universe, outside?”

“It’s returned.”

“Returned?” Her voice was level, patient. “How long did the process take?”

“Sixty years relative to Division Control.”

“Sixty years in limbo...” The branches of the poplar loomed over her

in their thick trunks and mocking silver laurels. “I can scarcely fathom it.” She almost laughed. “Was there anything we could salvage?”

“The time torpedoes missed their target, but we have a sample of the regenerative septicaemia from the vortex turtle. It was caught in the holding pattern when they detonated.”

“You’ve naturally brought it aboard,” assumed Awsok.

“We have it on good authority that, with its state of flux, the material will require careful handling.”

“We are fortunate, then, to be here in Division Control,” Awsok was undeterred. “I fear our thesis was flawed. There were variables beyond the controlled conditions of the experiment that impacted its outcome.”

“We were misled by the projections—”

“But not without results. Prepare the laboratory, I’ll examine this...” Her nose rankled, “—*fluxing* material, shortly. Something of a result is better than no result whatsoever.”

Perhaps, she pondered, absently, it could help lead to a new phase in Division operations? Many a door could be opened through careful experimentation. The right binding in the right point of the timestreams.

Awsok opened the door from the zero chamber.

“Awsok...” It spat from between her teeth. “*Ab...*”

That was a name for the benefit of Diamant. Her true name was hidden. Here. As she stood. A shadow in the corridor’s blinding light. Patient as a star. The gardener in the tree’s crown. The spider in the Web of Time.

“Tomorrow is another day,” said Tecteun.

The TARDIS materialised, on a street corner in the city of Vlazerev on Xenon, and the Doctor leapt on Yaz—a flurry of rainbow braces and gadgeteering glee—with a hug that could have crushed her ribcage. Friends remembered and friends reunited.

“Hey! Hey...!” Yaz laughed, squeezing out of it. “What was that for?”

“Just bein’ you,” smiled the elfin face beneath the blonde bob. “Being here, Yaz. Can’t have old friends without meeting new ones first. Means more to me than you know.”

“You were sayin’.”

“Was I?” she smiled. “Right, ‘course. Did I ever tell you about Traskeya...?”

The TARDIS materialised, on Trebah in the Horn Nebula, and the Doctor flung open the doors with all the expected bravado of a showman.

At their arrival, a fount of dandelion seeds sprouted into the air around them. The Doctor’s particoloured coat, somehow muted by the glorious colour without. Like freshly falling snow in spring. They stepped out of the TARDIS’s shadow into the light.

“Mel,” he tapped his young friend on the nose. “I remember.”

The programmer looked at him for a moment. Smiled at her friend. She remembered, too. Follies and vortex turtles, all.

(Neither of them saw the little man with the question mark umbrella smile to himself. He left, for the mouth of a cave, with barely a word.)

With a new vigour in his hearts, the calico Doctor scented the air.

“Shall we explore?” he invited his companion. “The Universe awaits!”



The TARDIS materialised, in a forest of glass-blown mushrooms, and the Doctor found he was chortling to himself.

He wasn't quite sure why, but beneath his flowing white hair, the proud, imperious face was filled with laughter lines. There was some great discovery, some magnificent personal venture that he'd achieved...

He'd remember soon enough. Once this boon had worn off, and Time resumed its course, he'd remember the important details.

Soft summer rain revived the underbrush. It sung in leaflight under the Doctor's footsteps. His shadow fell across the sandy soil, reaching out towards the beautiful tower of sculpture in the distance. Ringed by wheeling birds, warbling, in an other-coloured sky.

"H'mm! Ha-hum?" The Doctor set off, his chortling heard deep in the canopy. *"Ho-ho-ho-ho...!"*

In Time, Vulpia would rebuild and heal under the care of Cantu, the Voice of the City of Refuge, and First Rank Asanda Ntombizodwa kaJamasha-Ariff.

In Space, Bob and Diamant, accompanied by their new passengers, Traskey and Basillius Creel, flew on through eternity. Never alone again.

And in the Relative Dimensions between, the Doctors, wherever and whenever they may be, were all left with the indelible impression they had done something good.

- THE END

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AFTERWORD...

For those of you reaching the final pages of this monumental endeavour, thank you for joining us on this exciting journey in Space and Time. We hope you enjoyed reading it as much as we enjoyed creating it.

This will be the final **Anthology** from *Divergent Wordsmiths* for some time. It has been a delight, a revelation and extraordinarily humbling to have so much skill, talent and creative passion materialise in our inbox. To our authors, artists and creatives of other spectra, thank you, we could not have done this without your support.

This is not the end of *Divergent Wordsmiths*. Not by a long chalk. Join us in our **Novels** range. The Sixth Doctor, Peri Brown and Frobisher, are about to embark on a thrilling, new adventure. To a world that understands the Time Lord's mind and is ready for him.

A new world to discover in...

DOCTOR WHO: THE ALCHEMISTS OF FEAR

Best,
Alan Camlann



DIVERGENT WORDSMITHS

A SPARKLE OF DOCTORS: VOLUME 3