



# DOCTOR WHO

## THE GHOSTS OF PELADON by ALAN CAMLANN and AFJ KERNOW



THRILLING ADVENTURES IN SPACE AND TIME

**DOCTOR WHO**

**THE GHOSTS OF PELADON**

**ALAN CAMLANN  
and AFJ KERNOW**

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# CONTENTS

- **DEDICATION**

- **WHO'S WHO?**

1. "Terror in Walpole"
2. "Slaves to Circumstance"
3. "Answers in Mount Ruttervoir"
4. "Violent Ends"
5. —Epilogue

- **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

**For Brian Hayles**

*Creator of Peladon, Aggedor and its fascinating history.*

## WHO'S WHO?

Born from a fatal case of blood poisoning, the Sixth Doctor has made for the most unpredictable incarnation of the infamous Time Lord to date. Passionate and boisterous, his apparent egocentrism and irascible demeanour belies a genuine care for his friends and the peoples of the planets he visits.

In his travels, the Doctor is accompanied by two companions. American botanist Perpugilliam "Peri" Brown and Xenon shape-shifter Avan "Frobisher" Tarklu. The first, he inherited from his predecessor during a crisis on the planet Sarn. The latter, from a stellar-wide manhunt for the Time Lord by the malevolent profiteer Dogbolter.

Together, the Doctor, Peri and Frobisher's roving have brought them to many worlds and cultures from across the cosmos. This is another such tale.

“His coming shall be full of terror and darkness.  
His cry shall be heard in the night;  
And Death shall walk in the land of Peladon.”

— **THE WORD OF AGGEDOR**  
**“PELADON: THE LANDS OF LORE.”**

# CHAPTER 1:

## “Terror in Walpole”

The blue fire of the storm above ripped and tore at the soft fabric of the night sky. Unyielding quicksilver clouds were punctured with blossoming static. Lightning slashed through the sublime and haunting veil of atmosphere like a switchblade through the tarred fur of an Aggedor.

The planet was known as Peladon.

A place of the eerie and the majestic. The three moons that crested above were curiously absent this evening. As though the taiko drumbeat of thunder had terrorised them into a Galaxy that seemed so wide and frightening. Yet the slate mountains of those like Megeshra and Ruttervoir reached up their pointed fingers in veneration of these dark heavens. The air itself smelt of unguarded violence and the agitation of a wild world with bared fangs.

It was there, somewhere on the slopes of Mount Ruttervoir, that Frobisher said, quite plainly, “We’ve been in worse scrapes.”

“Really?” asked Peri. “Stuck up a tree with wolves at the bottom seems pretty bad to me.”

At the bottom of the tree, large red-and-grey-striped cualagans growled and snarled. Their prey was arranged on different branches like ornaments on a Christmas tree. A black-and-white penguin, a dark feather-haired American botanist dressed in a navy-blue trouser suit and a curly-haired Time Lord attired in a garish multicoloured coat.

“I’ve worked out where we are,” announced the Doctor, proudly.

“Can you think of a way to get rid of our friendly neighbourhood predators, instead?” asked Frobisher. “Quickly? Before the sun disappears completely?”

“Start singing.”

“With respect,” Peri began, tired from fear, “I don’t think a sing-song will improve my mood at the moment, Doctor.”

“Noise, my young Peri!” The Doctor jumped up and down dangerously on his bough. “A high-pitched song might scare them away. How about *The Star-Spangled Banner*? Like most national anthems of your world, it’s far too high for most to sing.”



Frobisher had encountered the song during his research into Americana and the semi-regular TARDIS movie nights. While Peri knew it from painful renditions at high school.

“Come on, nice and loud. I’ll accompany us,” the Doctor produced a small piccolo from his capacious pockets. He started playing and Peri and Frobisher joined in with a quavering duet.

The Doctor stopped. “You’ll have to do better than that, that’s hardly enough to scare a mouse.”

“Why don’t you sing?” complained Frobisher.

“I’m trying to set up an ultrasonic repellent, but I have to build it up gradually or I’ll deafen us,” the Doctor explained.

The trio restarted their song. As the tune reached its repeated high notes, the cualagans became restless. Another verse began and as the tune increased in pitch the creatures began to yelp in pain. They started to run, to race back to their dens to escape the ultrasonic racket.

“Well done, everyone, I think our audience voted with their paws,” quipped the Doctor.

He helped his companions down from their treetop refuge.

“You *know* where Diamant’s dumped us?” asked Peri.

“Yes, I do.” He pointed over her shoulder. “Look behind you, Peri, it should be familiar.”

An awesome granite structure appeared in a flash of lightning. Perched on the cusp of a large overhang like a leering bat. Its crenulations and turrets stood impervious, almost proud, in a weatherworn ivory-white against the assault of the elements.

“That’s the Citadel,” she said. “We’re on Peladon.”

“How should I dress?” asked Frobisher, referring to his metamorphic abilities.

“Gothic,” advised the Doctor.

Massive dark clouds now covered the sun completely. Darkness swept across the landscape, forcing the Doctor to deploy his penlight. Rain began to hammer down on the travellers.

“So, who is this Diamant anyhow?” asked Frobisher.

The Doctor waved a hand. “They and I share a history, that’s all you need know.”

“We’ll need a little more than that, Doctor,” Peri countered.

The rover trudged through the storm in silence for a moment, collecting his thoughts and memories. Peri wasn't surprised. The Doctor's experiences of travel were exhaustive to summarise. He held out his hands with his fingers pointed.

"Diamant are a trickster, a troublemaker and an explorer like ourselves, my young Peri. Albeit with far less scruples. I met them a long time ago..." He peered through the gloom. "In there, I should think."

Barely visible through the downpour, they sprinted to a nearby cave at the bottom of huge cliffs that formed the base of Peladon's mighty mountain.

Under cover, Peri turned to Frobisher. "Still no luck?"

"On what, perp?"

"Your shape-shifting. Another bout of monomorphia?"

Frobisher tensed, then shook his head. "Still nothing. It's been a busy day. When it passes, I'll let you know."

"I only ask because we seem a long way from the TARDIS..." Peri turned back to the Doctor, gently tapping him on the shoulder. "Doctor?"

"What?" He guessed the question from her expression. "No, sorry, I can't sense the Ship from here, she must be quite a distance from us."

"She'll land eventually, though? Right?"

"Eventually, and knowing her, near enough for our purposes. For now..." The Doctor wrung out his coat. "We will just have to survive the elements."

Frobisher cleared his throat. "Doc, how do we know our friendly cualagans don't use this as a base?"

"We don't, my penguin chum, but would you prefer a soaking?" The rover fluffed his sodden curls.

"I don't think this cave is used by the wolves, look." Peri pointed at the flaming torch ensconced on the cave wall. "Wedged between those stalagmites, there."

The Doctor inhaled. "Curious."

"How d'you figure?" asked Frobisher.

"That isn't where the smoke is coming from..."

"*Stay where you are!*" snapped a voice from the dark.

The Doctor swung around in front of his two charges.

Further into the cave mouth, a group of men wearing rough woollen tunics huddled together for warmth around a small, smoky fire. There was a dead deer on the ground nearby, the result of a successful hunt. The Pel closest to them was blonde. His hair held a distinctive burgundy stripe that separated the two halves of an otherwise asymmetrical face.

The tall, stocky man asked, "Ho, traveller. Who be ye?"

"Well met. We seek shelter from the rain," replied the Doctor. "Our carriage was sundered by a mudslide and we have nothing. We ask for nothing. Could we stay with you until this torrent subsides?"

"What is that *creature*?" a younger man gestured.

"Don't say anything," Peri told the whifferdill out of the corner of her mouth.

"He's quite harmless," the Doctor said with a smile, "a flightless bird that we keep as a pet, nothing more."

"Quack," added Frobisher.

"You still have not told us who you are," the older man persisted.

"We are travellers from the stars," replied the Doctor.

"No one lives on other worlds." His back arched. "It's the king's Law."

"Which king?" The Doctor seemed unperturbed.

The older man drew a vicious looking knife. "King Peliak. Come with us to Walpole."

"Somehow, I don't think so." The Doctor moved in front of his companions.

"Our headman in the village will decide what to do with you."

"Will he, indeed?" he breathed, tensing.

Frobisher shrank back. "Smooth moves, Doc."

Something happened among the assembled group of Pels. Hunters, both beleaguered and unquiet, shrank back from the Doctor, Peri and Frobisher. With the surety of footwork that was often found among those who had discovered something that existed within the inexplicable.

"The bird... It talks!"

"Can we both agree that neither of us have shown conspicuous intelligence at this moment?" the Doctor conceded to the whifferdill.

Peri peered out from behind the Doctor's back. "It dances, too," she added with a diffusing wink.

"On and off," admitted Frobisher with a wave of a flipper.

The Doctor's eyes flicked, cat-like, from his two friends. "Does that change matters?"

The senior man among the party held his flaming torch aloft, their only source of illumination as the lightning storm silhouetted the other side of the mountain peak. Two men marched on either side of their prisoners through the fine drizzle. Others carried the hunter's trophy of slain deer.

Peri's collar was soaked with rain and sweat. The journey was long and, quite often, over treacherously unsteady ground. The Doctor handled it with his customary aplomb, but it took a few decent efforts to help Frobisher up some of the steeper slopes.

By the time they'd reached the cluster of huts that made up the village of Walpole, hewn with far less grace than the Citadel, two of Peladon's three moons had risen into a star-filled sky.

In one of the huts, the TARDIS crew were bound with iron chains. Likely left over from the construction of the well. They were left with a small fire that sent flickering shadows around the walls.

"Just once," Frobisher moaned, "can't we land somewhere the locals don't put us in the slammer?"

The Doctor wrinkled his nose. "That's a terrible double negative."

"A little trust and common decency that's all I ask," Frobisher continued. "It's not as if anyone got anything done in places like this."

The Doctor wiggled a diffident head. "Marco may disagree with you."

"Who?"

"Marco Polo, I think. We've his diary in the TARDIS library."

Peri sidled up to Frobisher. "They seemed awfully interested in you, though, didn't they?"

"Behold! The waffling whifferdill!" He struck as much of a pose as he could bound in chains. "Amaze at his twelve special phrases. 'Help me!', 'Let me out!' and 'Why me?'"

"Well, you did have to open your big beak, didn't you?" smiled Peri.

“It’s one of my favourite pastimes.”

Peri’s attention was caught by the Doctor. His eyes were narrowed, watching the flames dance on the walls of their hovel, a thousand miles and a million years away.

“Doctor?” she asked.

“*Mmm?*” the time-traveller’s eyes refocused.

“Where are we? I mean,” Peri shifted so her back was braced against the wall, “I know we’re on Peladon, but there’s more to it than that, isn’t there?”

“You wanted to see Erimem again, didn’t you?” he smiled, sadly.

“Old friend?” asked Frobisher.

“One of the best,” she smiled. “How far are we out?”

“Temporally? Sorry to say, this is prespacial history. On my previous visits, even the lowliest peasant would know about extraterrestrial visitors to the planet. Ask for our spaceport visa, and so forth. Here, I’m afraid we’re as much out of step as I’ve ever been on Peladon.”

Peri clicked her tongue and nestled against her knees. “Shame.”

“So, what do you think this headman will do with us?” asked Frobisher. “Is this the kind of world where I have to worry about being basted in an oven?”

The Doctor’s eyes rolled upward to the ceiling as if speaking within earshot of a particularly waspish piece of architecture. “I suspect our friend will refer the problem upwards to this, King Peliak, and from there...”

From there, the king of Peladon would decide the travellers’ fates.

The throne room was spacious, with a high ceiling and a wooden throne perched on a raised dais at the far end. Its ornamentation was stark. Austere, not for any lack of clout, but purely to ensure that he himself was the central focus of the entire chamber. Every small concession to comfort or security was strategically placed so all lines of sight led back to him.

Two muscular guards flanked the figure sitting on the throne.

Even seated King Peliak was an impressive figure.

Broad-shouldered and straight-backed, the familiar Peladonian hair with its burgundy stripe crowned a scowling face. A craggy face, with a straight nose, piercing blue eyes and thin-lipped mouth turned down at the corners. The two floor candle-stands at either

side of him warmed his arms. He raised one to smooth his dark beard. The fire was all that could be heard over the preening of the candle-dancing Droll, but the king's thoughts crackled far louder than the flames.

Beneath the dais, the figure kneeling in his presence was unusual. A subject of his kingdom and therefore under the command of the king, but the Scriptor was never one to fit to custom. His hair was cut short, rather than allowed to run free across the shoulders, as was the custom of a Pel man. The robes were made of a plum-red material more fitting for that of the Princess Sorella, though the seamster assured Peliak that nothing had been taken.

"Get up, Scriptor," rumbled King Peliak.

"Sire." The Scriptor bowed with a flourish of arms as he rose. The Scriptor's face was almost beaked. Like the messenger bird that sat tightly on his shoulder. A curious hairless vruachag of a creature, his seneschal, but eminently useful in matters of state.

However, in his dour mood, Peliak was struggling to remember precisely how.

"You are enjoying the diversion?" asked the Scriptor.

"No."

"Neither am I," the seneschal hummed. "It lacks..."

"Yes..." The king reached beside his throne, past his Judgement, the steel blade affixed by his side, to a coil of braided leather. "What news do you bring me from Xorek that he cannot bring himself?"

"Not Xorek. The missive comes from the village of Walpole."

"Again with that rambling fool, Malpesh..." Peliak tightened the whip around his fist.

"No, your Majesty. Trojak."

"*Abb...*" He canted his head.

The Scriptor stood to one side as Peliak swung the whip out into the candle dance. At the king's Droll. The reveller howled, candle wax dripping down onto each closed hand. His king lashed out at him again.

"Crawl!" he shouted. "Crawl, dog!"

The king's Droll did as he was bade. Another strike sliced the top off the left candle, the man stumbling around on his knees.

"If not for Trojak's people, we would have cut that village to the ground..." Peliak growled. "Surely we have taken every father and mother by now?"

“Apparently not, sire.”

“Why does he bother us now? *Crawl!*”

The minstrel’s howls fell on deaf ears. He held tightly to the lit candles. To let them slip from his fingers would mean an instant death.

“Strangers in Walpole,” said the Scriptor. “Unusual. They’ve all the bearing of members of the Court...”

“Perhaps a kingdom from beyond the mountain range?” suggested Peliak.

“Perhaps...” the Scriptor turned his head. “Your Droll is running out of places to go, sire.”

“So, I see.” Peliak ran his tongue across his teeth, driving the Droll up against the unblemished stone wall as though he were corralling wild dogs. “Who found them?”

“A party of hunters—”

“*Ab... Where can you run, Droll?*” shouted Peliak. “*Where can you go?*”

“Sire, I...” the man winced.

“Run! *Go along, run!*”

The Droll tried, arms scratching against the wall, but he hadn’t the strength left. All of his energy had been spent in his moment of sheer terror. His legs buckled beneath him. The motley was torn and slashed by the whip. Every crack against his body was met with a shudder of pain until every tension, every moment of apprehension, evaporated into velveteen stillness. Only the rigid curl of the Droll’s fingers, like the edges of paper caught in a fireplace, remained.

King Peliak tilted his subject’s lolling head with his boot. “What happened?”

“He’s dead, sire,” noted the Scriptor.

“So soon...”

“Yes.”

Peliak exhaled. “A shame. The apothecaries can dispense potions to cure most maladies, but there’s one I find most insidious of all.”

“Boredom?”

“The creeping sickness.” The king, in a quieter voice, returned to his throne. “Better to kill the infection before it spreads.”

“We shall have to find another,” chided the seneschal, lightly. “To replace the Droll and that one from the kitchens—”

“Enough, Scriptor,” Peliak yawned. “Such concerns are your affair, before Xorek’s, or did I pay too little for your rank?”

“I endeavour to *earn* my rank, your Majesty, in your service.”

He barked a laugh. “Just ensure Xorek collects the strangers from Walpole at sunrise. The terrain is treacherous, but not insurmountable.”

“Of course, your Majesty,” the Scriptor bowed deeply.

Peliak’s fingers traced the sword. “And if he loses another equinna, I’ll have his head.”

“Naturally.” The Scriptor walked backwards to the exit, keeping an eye on the king as he left.

Peliak rested a hand against his chin and smiled. Now, he remembered why he kept his seneschal around. Whatever else the Scriptor may be, he certainly was no fool.

Dawn. Peladon’s twin suns broke cover and began their climb, like untethered mountaineers, into the sky.

Light filtered into the hut where the TARDIS crew had spent an uncomfortable night. Warmed by its rays, Peri woke from sleeping against the Doctor’s back and shivered in the seething cold. The rest of her body ached from lying on the hard, unyielding ground, but she was alive and with friends.

Frobisher raised a friendly flipper. “Mornin’, Peri. This hotel will *not* get a good review.”

“Hi,” she smiled and sat up. “How did you get your flippers free?”

“I may not be able to shape-shift but I can shrink the ole flippers a bit and wriggle free.”

At their left, a female Pel pushed open the door, a rectangle of wood scraping against the stone-carved door frame. She was younger than she likely appeared. For her size, her face was wrinkled like the bark of a tree. The product of a lifetime spent tending to the needs of Walpole.

She froze at the sight of Frobisher.

“It’s alright,” he tried. “I don’t bite.”

She dropped three wooden bowls on the ground and fled.

“Rats...” was all he could say.

“Is that breakfast?” Peri shifted to the Doctor. “Hey... *ah*, Doctor? You awake?”



The Doctor's eyes snapped open. "Wide awake. Someone had to keep vigil on us while we slept."

He stretched and walked over to the bowls. He, too, had managed to free himself during the night. Almost casually, he undid Peri's hands and passed the bowls out to his companions.

"I did a gentle reconnoitre of our vicinity," the Doctor told them.

"And?" asked Frobisher, hopefully.

"We're too close to the centre of the village. If we accosted the guards, we'd be easily spotted by anyone at home."

"Where are we, Doc?"

"I've a friend in Peladon's future, a visiting emissary, who ultimately knew the terrain far better than I did, but I believe we're on Mount Ruttervoir. Megeshra's steeper cousin."

Peri took a tentative sip at the thin gruel in her bowl and gagged. "*Oh...*" she searched around for an appropriate word before falling back on, "Yuck!"

"Yes, I know, made with unpasteurised goat's milk, I expect. No cows on Peladon. Too harsh an environment. No lush pastures."

"And a bit grittier for being thrown in the dirt," added Frobisher.

"Thank you, Farmer Giles." Peri put the bowl down.

The entrance of the older man from the hunting party, the one they'd learned to be Trojak, prevented any further discussion. "Get up and follow me. Guard Captain Xorek is waiting."

The Doctor folded his hands together. "Oh, how nice, we were just talking about old Guard Captain Xorek, weren't we? Lovely smile. Magnificent tailor."

Trojok grabbed the Doctor by his lapels and lifted him to his feet. An impressive feat given how he'd previously been sitting cross-legged on the ground. Brown eyes warned of danger above greying bushy mutton-chops. Ragged from self-neglect and the labours of the day. Like the man himself.

"If I were you, I'd keep your yapping mouth shut," he urged, rather than threatened. "Xorek doesn't like wise-mouths."

"*Oh?*" the Doctor challenged.

"He cuts their tongue out."

"*Oh...!*" he nodded, flippant.

"*And* those who stand with them. Do you follow me?"

Now that the Doctor did take seriously.

He answered, levelly, "Alright..."

Trojak let go of him and the three of them followed him in silence.

In the space between the ramshackle huts, a row of armoured men stood beside a small, unusual cart. There was something strange in the way its wheels were constructed to join to their axles. Peri recognised it as the kind of feathering used to stop ships from taking on water.

At its side, a Pel strode towards them. His blonde hair was quaffed by his armour and his eyelids, rounded in their sockets like billiard balls, flared with intensity as he spoke. Like a hive of bees.

He gestured to Peri. "You and the bird."

She helped Frobisher clamber on. Naturally, the Doctor moved to do the same, but a guard held him back.

A small man with an immaculate tuft of grey beard and a wizened moustache approached. His full cheeks spoke of a baby born to laughter, but the wrinkled crow's feet around his dull blue eyes hushed such ideas with a hard reality under the threat of the whip.

"Xorek," he rubbed his knuckles, "it is agreed?"

"If it will stop your prying, Malpesh," Xorek shook his head snarling. "The princess has no interest in your love letters."

"*Love* letters?" The robed figure's moustache trembled. "You mean she hasn't actually read—?"

Trojak placed a hand on Malpesh's shoulder. "Later."

"Yes..." He blinked away the reaction, addressing Xorek. "Yes. It will."

"You're a bad liar, Malpesh, but frankly I don't care." His armour clattered as he raised his arm. "Move out all of you!"

"Hey, wait a minute!" interrupted Frobisher. "What about the Doc?"

"Where are you taking him?" Peri demanded. "We've a right to know."

"Shut up, the pair of you," waved off a guard.

The Doctor's hands were retied. "Look after one another. Peri—Frobisher—!"

At Trojak's beckoning, the Doctor was pulled away with a yank. There were simply too many for him to overpower them. As the cart began its rough journey to the outer edge of Walpole, the Doctor was led back to an altogether different fate.

Peri and Frobisher sat in silence through the bumpy ride towards the huge mountain and its imposing castle. Over crag-filled land and through the sea of sand. Neither saying a word to the another. The odd expression and shift of body language was more than enough to convey everything they needed.

*Do you think we'll see him again?* Frobisher pursed his beak.

Peri swallowed. *He'll find a way.*

The Citadel of Peladon was smaller than in Peri's previous visit, the stonework not as weathered. The cart trundled through the main gate under a portcullis that resembled the insignia of the Royal Court. Xorek ordered the duo out of the cart, checked their bonds and marched them through the bleak stone corridors.

Peri noted that the Citadel had no softening fabrics, curtains and tapestries unlike last time. The only ornamentation was a large, painted coat of arms. A stylised lightning bolt with two crossed swords underneath. Flaming sconces lit the way. They burned with the rank smell of sour milk. She shivered and blew into her hands. The fires on the wall provided scant warmth as they were led into the throne room.

Xorek pushed the pair to the floor. "Bow down strangers, show respect to the king,"

They lowered their heads; Peri began to speak, "Pleasure. Your Majesty, we—"

"Be silent... *maid*," Xorek growled.

"Peri... Be—*careful*," Frobisher muttered, *sotto voce*.

"I'm alright," she reassured him. "I'll be... I'll be alright."

"Why is this maid dressed like this? She displeases me and shows disrespect to the royal throne."

"Sire." Xorek stepped back.

Peliak's lethal blade swung back with the certainty of a guillotine. There was the squeak of a door opening, a figure entered. They approached the throne and knelt.

"*Ab*, Scriptor..." Peliak rested the point of the sword on the floor as though it were a walking stick. His chin resting on its hilt. "You have further news about the strangers?"

The Scriptor kept his head bowed and replied, "They told the villagers that they were from the stars."

“Sent from the Cosmic Veil?” His lip curled into a smile too broad for his face. It sent shivers down Peri’s spine. “Now, that I refuse to believe. Whoever they are, they must make themselves useful. Send the maid to the kitchens. Make sure she is dressed in a manner that befits her status.”

Xorek bowed, pulled Peri roughly to her feet and marched her out of the throne room.

Frobisher’s beady eyes stared unblinking at the Peladonian monarch.

“What strange fowl are you? You have wings but cannot fly, or you would have escaped by now.”

Frobisher’s eyes hadn’t left the empty doorway.

“Answer me,” demanded the monarch, levelly.

The whifferdill turned back. “Frobisher, your lordship, I’m originally from a place called Xenon, but I’ve been told I have an uncanny resemblance to an Earth—”

“What is Earth?”

“Another world far away from here. Penguins are just one lot bumping around the continents.”

“You lie, *pen-quin*, there are no worlds except Peladon. We know this to be true. Don’t we, Scriptor?”

“Oh, yes, sire,” he nodded, certain.

“The question is what to do with you. I wonder, given your size... Are you good eating?”

“Oh, no, sire.” Frobisher waved a flipper. “I’m tough, full of gristle and tiny bones that’ll catch in your throat.”

The king sat still for a moment. A twitch in his eye.

*I’m dead. I’m going to join Peri in the kitchen, but roasting on a spit,* Frobisher thought.

Peliak’s shoulders shook, he threw back his head and his booming laugh filled the room. The Scriptor, still kneeling, looked up in surprise at this rare display of royal mirth.

“I like your wit, bird. You shall become king’s Droll and entertain me. Be warned, I am not easily amused.”

“How uneasily amused?”

“The body of your predecessor,” the Scriptor walked over to him, “was fed to an Aggedor.”

“Well, who doesn’t like a challenge?” asked Frobisher.

Admittedly, with more bravado than he felt.

The Scriptor leant down to his ear. “You won’t last long, whifferdill. Mark this.”

The Doctor attempted to keep his balance. At first, he thought purely in the practical senses, but he discovered more and more in the metaphysical sense. His mind was unwinding like a clockwork mouse under the starlight crackle of incense wafting from burning floor candle-stands at his chained ankles.

He’d eaten a hearty meal before leaving the TARDIS, had plenty of rest and lacked any sort of head injury, yet he was struggling with something that should have been parochial to a Time Lord like himself.

His sense of dimension.

The chamber was, at once, both too large and not large enough to accommodate all within it. What stood within a metre of himself, soon turned into kilometres and back again. There was a very serious danger, he decided, that he’d begun to hallucinate.

“Oh, Good Gallifrey...” he muttered.

At the maw of the chamber, a cloister of robed figures bled across the stonework. Their chants echoing within the Time Lord’s skull. He was having difficulty focussing on their shape. They leapt forth like shadows on a desert plain until he could smell the cloth. Soaked in some kind of tincture not unlike linseed oil.

The Doctor tried to blink some semblance of order into the proceedings.

*“Hail the Might of Aggedor... All hail... Hail Aggedor... Hail his Mighty Name...!”*

“Oh, marvellous, the local religious cult...”

The daisy-chain figures ignored him. *“Hail the Might of Aggedor... All hail...!”*

“His glossy pelt and button eyes... All hail...!” undermined the Doctor.

A single hand was held aloft in the churning incense.

As it stretched its fingers, it seemed to puff and grow before settling to its natural dimensions. It belonged to Malpesh, who threw back his hood and turned to the Doctor. His eyes were red, watering from the ashen perfume. A druid. At the moment, very much his own caricature. Not that his features required much encouragement.

The Doctor cleared his throat. “You know, one of these lives, I’m going to see a jolly good physiotherapist for the circulation. With all this wear-and-tear, I’m surprised I don’t cramp more often.”

“Why have you come to us?” The voice seemed to come almost from *behind* the Doctor. Through the wall.

“Malpesh,” warded one of the other acolytes.

“Trojak, I lead here. You lead there. He must, at least, be given the opportunity to speak for himself.” The oldster jostled the hand from his shoulder. “We are not the barbarians of the Citadel.”

A pause, then Trojak answered, “Alright.”

“You wear your allegiances quite cleanly,” nodded the Doctor.

“So you say.” He took a step closer. “Who do you serve?”

“No one, I’m a free agent.”

Trojak searched his eyes, trying to distinguish the truth from the lie. He shook his head with a low growl and stepped back. A hand against his brow.

The mousey Malpesh elaborated for the Doctor’s benefit. “You’ll not have witnessed this custom before. We mean to offer you to Aggedor.”

“Why?” asked the time-traveller. “What purpose does it serve?”

“You do not dress in the manner of the Court, but you have the stance, the walk of one such as the Scriptor. You cannot conceal it.”

The Doctor tilted his head. “This is an interrogation?”

“Yes.”

“*Abb...* Well, well, now. What could I have that you could possibly want, *hmm?*”

“Questions are pointed. They invite only one answer. Simply...” Malpesh opened his hands, “*think* on what we’d wish to know, and it will come.”

The Doctor opened his mouth to speak and found his tongue lying flat against his teeth. A nasal *bumpb* prevented him from uttering a single word. Hallucinogens served a number of purposes. One of which, if he wasn’t careful, would be their equivalent of a truth serum. Some secrets, such as those of the TARDIS, had to remain his own.

The Doctor’s words came slow and thick. “I’m impressed... Ordinarily, my respiratory bypass system would filter out such an attempt, but this might just be primitive enough to work.”

“The persecutions our followers serve are far worse.”

“I imagine that comes next. Got a tame Aggedor ready for me, have you?”

“Aggedor cannot be tamed. Aggedor is our... well, in the terms of your King Peliak, a holy, inviolate God.” His voice began to swirl and echo. “Xorek has accused me of leading his mighty army. Never directly, but always, oh, so clearly.”

“You resent him.”

“He wearies me,” the druid whickered.

“Not many of you are there? One, two, three... ten, eleven, *twelve*.” The Doctor smiled. Delighted at the concrete mathematics behind the answer. “A dozen against the heathen masses. Do you work in shifts?”

“The Might of Aggedor number far more than you see here. We remain hidden while Peliak persecutes us. He does not share our faith.”

“It must be nice to have a captive audience for once,” the Doctor nodded, understanding. The remark’s apparent innocence left neither Pel sure of whether or not to take it seriously. “Is your faith formalised? Do you have a holy writ and so forth?”

“Our records were destroyed in the purges. Now, we rely on the Speakers.” Malpesh tapped his hollow chest. “Like myself. I’ve had any number of accusations, but that’s all they are. Accusations.”

“I see. I imagine it’s not much fun being religious with an atheist for a monarch.”

“Oh, he believes in a faith,” chortled the druid. “Don’t misunderstand us in that.”

“Himself.” The mutton-chopped Pel placed a finger on his lip. “Malpesh, this doesn’t serve us.”

“No...” The druid’s voice twanged with disappointment. “You... You are right, Trojak. I suppose it doesn’t.”

“This was why Xorek left him with us.”

“Yes, I understand that now.”

“Afraid I don’t.” The Doctor raised his eyes with a gleam. “Why are you telling me all this?”

“Because soon you will beg for mercy, stranger.” The headman made it sound like a sad inevitability. “No one has done anything else. There’s no way out. Either you’ll tell us what you know or you’ll come to know nothing at all. Unshackle him and bring him to the pit.”

The pit was in another chamber adjoining the entrance hall. Down a trapdoor of solid wood, fitted with rusted hinges on one side, although the Doctor very much doubted that anything could have moved it beyond the strength of the mob. It looked innocuous. Like a disposal chute or a disused well.

As they forced him down a wooden ladder with pickaxes and rakes to the sandy floor, he found it wasn't too far from the truth. A rough-hewn tunnel, fortified with stone, led into abject darkness. The acoustics told him if it couldn't have been more than ten metres deep at most. Above was the only exit.

The followers arranged themselves around the semi-circular opening, some sitting on the door itself. They raised their arms to the ceiling and began to chant. The words were caught by the strange echo of the tunnel and channelled down into its depths.

As if in reply, a bestial roar clawed its way to the senses.

The Doctor held his hands to his face, trying to steady himself, flush the remainder of the hallucinogens from his system. All the terrors of the imagination were filling the gaps in the night.

As he slowly lowered his hands, he saw the bellowing howl raise itself from the dark.

To attack.



## CHAPTER 2: “Slaves to Circumstance”

In the Citadel’s kitchens, Peri was trying to quantify her misery in a way that would make her feel really satisfied at how wretched the situation was.

Her fingers were wrinkled blue with cold. Splinters from wooden ladles and cuts from metal platters stung in the cold water. A part of her, naively, perhaps, had anticipated the twentieth-century sink. The kitchen was a far cruder affair than that.

During her first task, vegetable chopping duty, she sustained a nasty cut to her thumb on a blunted knife. Blunted deliberately, apparently. To prevent assassination attempts in the Royal Court via collusion with the servitors. Her superior, upon seeing her hands red with blood, had relegated her to dishwasher.

At the king’s command, she’d been forced out of her clothes and into the uniform. A rough woollen dress with a linen apron. On her head sat a square of brown cloth, tied under her chin with a piece of twine that itched whenever she turned her head.

She didn’t know where her trouser suit had gone. The other women had been amazed at the fabric used to make it, so she suspected it had ended up under someone’s scissors. She tried telling them the truth, but the revelation fell on deaf ears.

Peri worked hard to reduce the huge pile of dishes to a handful. She’d received something of a fright, initially, as the nook where the clean dishes were stored was arched not unlike a fireplace or dumbwaiter. Something skittered in the dark. Far larger than a rat. It had been a little boy. The women were relegated to the kitchens, but they still had children. Kids, who needed to be fed, clothed, educated and perhaps didn’t always have fathers to accommodate.

By now, Peri and the youngsters had a game. She’d play peek-a-boo whenever she saw one and, in return, they’d stop the stacks from overbalancing.

It was during one of these bouts that Cook bellowed at her. “You, the perishing star-girl, come here.”

Peri shook the slimy water off her hands and dried them on her apron.

It was easy to mistake Cook for someone at least seven-feet tall. She certainly had the presence. In truth, however, she couldn't have been any more than five, at the very most. She had a bob of red hair cut above the neck, fulsome yet pointed cheeks and an upturned mouth under a rounded chin.

"Yes, ma'am." Peri bobbed a quick curtsy as an afterthought.

Cook frowned, but then she always frowned, and studied her with brown gimlet eyes. "I'll have no court fripperies here. Obedience and hard work will be enough for me. Can you carry a loaded platter without dropping it?"

"I like to think so, ma'am."

"Answer my question, yes or no?"

Peri nodded and, in minutes, found herself waiting on a bunch of nobles in a grand banqueting hall. She nearly dropped a platter of roast chickens when she saw the only female in the room. A delicate silver crown designated her regal status. If not a queen, then certainly a princess.

They locked eyes. A sudden startling fascination. The Doctor called it *jamaïs vu*—the discovery of something never seen before.

The woman's eyes hardened.

Peri quickly looked away and delivered her edible delights. They were seized on by the men who chomped on them with undisguised relish.

"Yeah, yeah, hope you choke..." she muttered.

As the children were bundled away like Dickensian orphans, away from the eyes of Cook, Peri found a companion to help her wash dishes later that evening. The girl was petite and couldn't have been more than sixteen-years-old. By Earth standards. She had a delicate chin that galvanised into a strong jaw and deceptively kind eyes.

"Peri," said the botanist.

"Your name?" the Pel asked.

Peri nodded. The girl pulled a wooden bowl from the sink and dried it with a rag.

"Orgala," she answered.

"Have you worked at the castle long?"

"Since my twelfth summer."

Peri raised her eyebrows. *Poor kid, not much of a life slaving away for those oafs.*

A stab of regret punctured Frobisher as he saw Peri return to the kitchens. His current accommodations amounted to little more than a biped-sized cage in one of the more casually-maintained hallways of the Citadel.

He had to wait to be summoned into the banqueting hall.

To entertain the oafish lords and their terrifying ruler. He, too, had been dressed in a manner appropriate to his station. He now wore a green woollen waistcoat and red-felt conical floppy hat.

“Dunce,” he gave the hat a flick. “What the heck are you doing here?”

The Scriptor informed him his presence was required. Frobisher trotted in and quickly scanned his audience. Most were lolling drunkenly in their seats. Some were even snoring, their heads resting on the wooden table.

“*Ah*, my Droll,” Peliak clapped his hands loudly. “Wake up, you indolent wretches! Wake up!”

Frobisher stifled a chortle as the meatheads were jolted into consciousness.

“Oh, Droll, what revels do you have for us?”

“Do you desire danger, intrigue or humour?”

“Humour!” he thumped his sword on the table. “Humour! By the Gods!”

“Well, your Majesty, let me tell you hilarious tales about a little Gaulish village...”

The Doctor once again sent a prayer of thanks to escapologist Harry Houdini, as the ropes that bound his hands fell to the floor.

It coiled around his ankles, a Venusian asp twisting like rubberised liquorice. Its clam-like scales glistened in the—*No*. Its neon-blue fangs dripped—*No!*

The Doctor moved to the back wall of the pit. Surely down here the air was clearer? Surely? Otherwise, wouldn't the hallucinogens be affecting the Aggedor, as well? He found the idea of being perforated on the animal's tusk due to a chemical misunderstanding less than appealing.

The time-traveller tore his cravat from around his neck and tied it to his face. He breathed deeply into the fabric. The scent of antique bookshops and vanilla. His mind began to clear. Sparked by a stray

thought, he produced the piccolo from his pocket. Just in time, as the shaggy-furred beast with curling tusks bounded into the pit.

It reared up on hind legs ready to strike.

The Doctor dived to one side.

Aggedor's claws struck at the wall. Iridescent moss, like dayglo sticks, flared around the gouges in their disturbance. On one knee, the Doctor readied his instrument of choice and cast his mind back to the bronzed skies of Venus and his old friend, Dharkhig. His eyestalks quivering in empathetic laughter to the traveller's own amused giggle. The Doctor's piccolo, this time, not only produced a haunting low-pitched lullaby, but a flickering light show that lit up the gloomy space. The Doctor could see every plucked chord rise like dust motes in sunlight.

The beast hesitated in its attack.

It started to sway from side-to-side. To the slow beat of the melody. The multicoloured lights reflected in its eyes. Eyes that started to close as the beast went down on all fours. It padded towards the Doctor purring slightly. Finally, it could resist the hypnotic tune no longer, and curled up into a snoring ball of fur.

With the final chord, borrowed from a world on the other side of the Galaxy, Aggedor slept.

Above, the reaction from the chanting acolytes was stunned silence.

Light shone down on the Doctor's face. "Satisfied?"

"What can you tell us of the Citadel's demands for workforces?" rapped Trojak.

"Nothing you don't already know, but that's not really the question you wish to ask, is it? What you mean to ask is do I mean you harm?"

"Do you...?" asked Malpesh, warily.

The Doctor pet Aggedor behind the ear. "No more than I do to this chap here."

Something altered in the reddened sapphire eyes of the druid. The rover wasn't certain, but there was every chance that the Might of Aggedor hadn't developed a total immunity to the incense of their rituals. What they saw could easily have been as chaotic as his own distortions.

Malpesh issued an instruction. "I'm satisfied. Bring the stranger up."

“A fool this Cæsar to stand against the Citadel of Gaul!” laughed Peliak. “By Sherak, what sport we could play with these old tyrants.”

Echoing the fools of many a kingdom, Frobisher was delighted to discover that the potential satire of his tellings had gone straight over the king’s crown. He took it for what it apparently was. A tale of strongmen at the seat of indestructible power.

It was difficult, however, to dismiss the unblinking gaze of the Scriptor. He stood like a lightning rod at the king’s side, waiting for the moment where a bolt of infringement would galvanise him to action.

“We are most amused by your tales, my Droll.” Peliak wiped a tear from his eye. “Scriptor, escort the bird to the kitchen. Make sure the kitchen maids give him some food and drink.”

“At once, my king.” The Scriptor bowed.

Leaving the throne room, the duo walked down the gloomy corridors of the Citadel towards the kitchen. Tension crackled in the silence between penguin and seneschal until the latter’s thin, curling voice sneered at Frobisher. “You won’t be able to keep his Majesty amused for long.”

“You have no idea how entertaining I can be. I’m a triple threat, friend.”

The sneering smile twisted the Scriptor’s face like calligraphy. “You mean harm to King Peliak?”

“Of course not. I mean I don’t just tell funny stories, I juggle, sing *and* dance.”

“Peliak is a capricious monarch. One day, *you* will be the victim of his anger.”

“As you have been?” asked Frobisher.

The pair reached the kitchen before the Scriptor could offer a deflection. He ordered the kitchen staff with marionette movements. “Find some vittles for this foolish bird.” He moved to stalk away, but not before offering a shred of unsolicited advice. “Better to stuff your mouth with food than questions...”

As Frobisher perched on a stool, he noticed a familiar figure among the servitors. Beleaguered, but otherwise carrying a stack of plates towards an arched nook with the resolute determination of someone too tired to stop.

“Peri?” he called.

The botanist swung to face him. An unexpected snort of laughter nearly sent her stack of plates straight to the floor. Fortunately, several pairs of tiny hands reached out from the nook and pulled them aloft. She whispered something to them and crossed over to the king’s Droll.

“Cook’s off-duty for the day.” Peri wiped her fingertips. “Only a handful of us are left to clean up.”

“You look *ridiculous*,” summarised Frobisher.

“You can talk,” she nudged him, smiling. “You look like a refugee from a Renaissance fair.”

“The renaissance of what? Bad taste?”

“Well, at least you get a bit of colour in yours, I’m stuck with—”

“What is *that*?” accused a tremulous voice.

It was Orgala, staring at Frobisher, wide-eyed.

“*That* is a whifferdill. Frobisher’s the name, entertaining’s the game.” He gave a little bow.

“So your first gig for the king went well then?” Peri asked him.

“At the moment, he’s easily pleased, but that Scriptor’s another matter.”

She leant against the table. “You’ve done a little snooping?”

“Didn’t have to, as it turns out, he doesn’t like me. He called me a whifferdill.”

“Oh, I really don’t like that...” muttered Peri.

Frobisher nodded. “He’s not what he seems, perp.”

“At least you don’t need to worry about dishpan hands,” she grimaced.

“You got any fish?”

“Only *relah, Fro-bish-er*,” Orgala offered.

She fetched him a small platter of sprat-like fish. Frobisher had the distinct impression that they’d been wriggling only moments ago. They curled almost like fresh prawns. There was a lemon-like scent to the way they were prepared.

“That’ll do me,” Frobisher gulped down the fishy treat.

“What do we eat, Orgala? I’m starving.”

Peri and Orgala sat beside Frobisher, picking at a meagre meal of gritty bread, ham offcuts and a mushy pear-flavoured dessert.

“Have you seen the Doc?” asked Frobisher.

Peri shook her head. “I’m worried about him.”

“Yeah, me, too, perp.” He rested his head on her shoulder. “Me, too.”

After their meal, Orgala took Peri to the female servants’ quarters under guarded escort. Frobisher, meanwhile, waddled down the hallways of the Citadel alone, trying to find a quiet place to sleep.

*If all else fails, I’ll wedge myself in a bookcase and call it a night...* reflected Frobisher.

“*Hey, Droll!*” The shout came from behind him.

Frobisher turned to see a stocky guard smiling down at him.

The whifferdill adjusted his general expected eyeline. The voice had towered over him, but if anything, this guard seemed to stand solid like one of the Doc’s mash-turned-gelignite concoctions from the TARDIS galley. He looked like the sort of guy who could bounce gold bars off his chest and laugh it off.

He was also deceptively quiet.

“On Xenon, we say good evening,” greeted Frobisher, slowly.

“Deputy Grelen of Stokebram.” He tapped his chest with a closed fist. “You seek a place to lay your head?”

“Sure do, friend.” Frobisher’s lip curled. He’d try a small lie.

“That Scriptor fellow didn’t tell me where I was s’posed to kip. I was wondering where I could go? Any ideas?”

“I’ve come from the guardhouse?”

“I don’t snore,” offered Frobisher.

Grelen stepped aside like a standing stone. “It’s just down past the stables through here.”

“Right.” The whifferdill nodded, paused and tempted fate. “Why me?”

“It’s no secret we guards like you. Anyone who can improve King Peliak’s temper is welcome.”

Xorek’s shouts could be heard down the corridor. “*To your stations, dogs! Move yourselves!*”

“Nearly past curfew, though. C’mon.” Grelen clenched his jaw, picking up his stride with remarkable nimbleness. “We haven’t much to offer. Everything is built to purpose, but if you’re alright sleeping on one of the bunks, you’ve a place with us.”

Frobisher kept up through sheer forward momentum. “Thank you, Grelen, I’m bushed.”

The Doctor sat as a guest of Trojak at a stone table at the centre of Walpole. In the light of the staked torches, he could see the headman's face tanned by work on the slopes. This wasn't a Pel quashed by an uneasy crown, but the same duties of anyone else in the village. The way he was regarded, it was almost as though he'd become headman by default.

After a simple meal of bread and goat's cheese, Trojak drank some foul-tasting beer and glared at the Doctor. The headman had still not made up his mind on how to regard the rover. A tourist, a trickster or something far more malevolent. The drink was not helping matters.

The Doctor had wisely only asked for a tipples. "You're deciding what to do with me."

"It's not easy..." Trojak rumbled.

"I am prone to the odd ecclesiastical eccentricity." The rover took a small sip. "Product of my upbringing. What did you see under the haze of incense?"

Malpesh, sitting with steepled fingers, nodded. "Oh, a great many things. None stranger than what transpired in the pit. Aggedor spoke and vouched for your character."

"That is what he claims, at least," Trojak disputed.

The Doctor was all innocence. "You don't agree?"

"You're still here, aren't you?"

"A decision I find eminently sensible," the rover smiled.

The headman grunted, not unkindly, running a hand against his mutton-chops.

"Aggedor, eh? Well, I suppose spirits come in many forms," remarked the Doctor, off-hand, staring into his cup.

"Quite, quite!" nodded the druid.

The Doctor almost instantaneously caught his meaning. "Oh, my. Do you mean to say you believe me to be...?"

"If he is who you mean to be," Trojak cautioned Malpesh.

"*Ab...*" The Doctor placed his cup, pinched at the stem, on the table. "I'm not a prophet of Aggedor or what have you, but I am a friend of Peladon."

"Perhaps, a being from the Cosmic Veil?" inquired Malpesh, eagerly.

"Oh... A bit further beyond that," the Doctor gestured.



“So...” Trojak coughed, exuding fermented fumes. “You *are* a Spirit, then?”

“Doctor.” If not for their oral histories, the druid may have pulled out parchment and quill. “If I may ask, to which constellation do you belong? Vathek, the Stormswallower? Otrantis, the Rock Serpents? Perhaps, Udolphix, the Killing Boulder?”

“Kas—” The Doctor pursed his lips. “—tigation may only bring an answer from me, at this point. I’m as mortal as any fellow. You could’ve asked my companions thus.”

“What good *are* you, then?” asked Trojak, exasperated. “What’s stopping me sending you straight to Peliak? You’ll just be another mouth to feed and I’ve more than enough here in Walpole. Can you work? Cook?”

“Practically everything, Trojak, but it’s best I leave at once.” The Doctor rose. “My friends are at the Citadel and, therefore, so must I be.”

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible,” Malpesh rubbed his chin. “Not until Xorek returns.”

The Doctor slumped back down. “Why ever not?”

“The path can only be traversed by equinna trained in the Citadel stables,” informed Trojak. “They’ve been specially outfitted for the journey.”

The druid was in agreement. “*Mm*, yes, try it on foot and you’ll find yourself falling for hours, Doctor.”

“They only come to take those fit enough to serve the king. The men as guards, the women as servitors.”

“A tyrant’s typical lack of imagination,” huffed the Doctor.

“Trojak, could we hide him here?” asked Malpesh.

“He’s not a member of the Court, Malpesh. You can curry no favour here.”

“That may be...” The druid’s features flushed. “But he has a powerful aura, Trojak, whoever he may be.”

“I wouldn’t mind a hard day’s work,” offered the traveller. “Idle hands make the... Never mind. I’d prefer to preoccupy myself while I conceive of a means to reach my friends.”

Trojak turned to Malpesh. “He can work on the slopes. We’ll need men like him if this Long Cold is to continue. But first, he must lose those garish garments.”

With all the reluctance of a butterfly shedding its cocoon, the Doctor removed his coat and placed it on the length of the table. “Keep it safe.”

Each member of the TARDIS crew now had their place in Peladonian society.

As the Long Cold approached, the Doctor spent his days digging trenches, planting root vegetables and repairing Walpole’s village buildings. He tried to explain the nature of his Ship and how searching for it would yield a bounty suitable enough for a whole season’s harvest. Unfortunately, Trojak proved rather trenchant in his stubbornness. It was like arguing with an ox. Grudgingly, however, the Doctor could see his point. Peladon’s mountains were treacherous at the best of times. A hunting party was one thing. A full excursion to locate a vehicle that may or may not be present at its eventual landing site would take months, at best. Months that took vital defenders away from the village. For now, the time-traveller would toil and consider his alternatives. A bit of impromptu ingenuity was not beyond him.

Peri graduated from washing dishes to preparing desserts. Her cheeks flushed red from baking cakes in the bread oven. Her hands were beginning to callous and the mildew of the kitchens invited a cough that she could feel like a pinned butterfly between her shoulders. She’d considered escape, but there was only one passage in and out of the Citadel she could use with speed. The front gates. It would be all too easy for a servitor to receive a bouquet of halberds in the spine or an arrow through the back of the head. She and Frobisher had only narrowly escaped the Ordoheed in Natasia Tor. Not too long ago. Here, without the resources of the 82nd-century or even her own 20th-century, she didn’t want to chance it. Neither was she willing to leave without Frobisher.

Frobisher, as the king’s Droll, had the plum job. Revels and light entertainment. It was like being a portable television set. Although, he did need a quick set of wits to save him from disaster every night and the continued strain was proving as bad as a monomorphic sprain. Soon, King Peliak tired of silly stories, so Frobisher changed his act to elaborate juggling routines and performed simple magic tricks. These tricks had brought Frobisher a degree of celebrity within the Citadel. He spent his free time in the guardhouse playing

dice with Deputy Grelen and his fellows, listening to their stories of Peliak's cruelty. With mounting frequency and alarming colour.

And, eventually, the Doctor, Peri and Frobisher suffered the one malady that those in their position could never afford.

They lost track of time.

Autumn was growing long and cold, and the Doctor was out in the forest gathering wood when the guards came to Walpole.

Between the swings of each axe strike, he caught sight of them on the edge of the clearing. They rode into the village on equinna bridled in Citadel regalia. A small cart, severe and cruel-looking, rolled behind them.

Empty.

Once again, Peri and Frobisher hadn't returned.

Instead, came Xorek with his demands. "*Where's your tribute, Trojak? Where?*"

Dropping his axe to his side, the Doctor crossed to the ossified branches tangled like wooden cobwebs on the edge of the dell. He could see Trojak gesture at a small selection of foodstuffs. Bread, a few chickens in cages and some bedraggled-looking fruit and vegetables. All laid out on a straw mat that likely held far more nutritional value than the assembled goods.

"*That's all we have.*" Trojak's voice was too plain to be confident. "*The rain blights our crops and we barely have enough to feed ourselves.*"

They'd certainly tried. He wiped his nose on his sleeve. A nasty bout of the common cold had halved the productivity of all in the dell, including himself, but their problems stemmed deeper than the season's malady.

While he'd never voiced the opinion aloud, the Doctor was under the distinct impression that Walpole had perhaps been founded on a shelf of solid bedrock. Nothing grew because there wasn't the soil to do so. Scientifically, it was a fool's errand and anyone of merit with an inquiring mind could've seen that.

"*This is pathetic.*" Xorek's equinna whickered in agreement. "*Get your villagers here now.*"

As Trojak rang the large brass bell, one of the other woodsmen stopped hacking at their nearby tree. "'Tis the summons," he said, conspiratorially.

"Aye—I mean, yes, it is rather," nodded the Doctor.

They returned to the village with heavy baskets. Carried on their backs, it slowed their progress long enough to see others leave their chores. As they crossed the outer limits, the Pels unable to work gathered their children together. Soon enough, a frightened group of men and women faced Xorek and his assembled guards in the centre.

Ordinarily, the Doctor, shouldering his axe, would have stood out by virtue of his unusual pallor, but his blonde curls were long since tarnished by the hard months' labours. Among the other inhabitants of Walpole, he looked every inch the peasantry that Xorek despised.

"You are not working hard enough, scum," Xorek spat as he paced up and down. "King Peliak requires your fealty and your tribute. If you fail in either of those duties, punishment follows. You know this."

"We know," acceded Trojak.

The Doctor pushed his way through the crowd up towards the headman. "We have barely enough to eat."

"Then, we must reduce the number of mouths you have to feed," Xorek derided.

"Trojak, stop him." His urgings were level and quiet.

"I cannot, Doctor—"

"You must. There's no way we can fulfil those demands."

The headman looked at the traveller with a weariness that seemed to extend to his fathers and forefathers. A Sisyphean lack of will. He couldn't even bring himself to nod assent to Xorek. To be complicit. It was too soul-breaking.

The guards started dragging out villagers from the group.

"Not my Nialing!" denounced his fellow woodsman.

Xorek drew his sword from its scabbard and slashed the man down.

The Doctor marched towards Xorek. "*You vicious—!*"

"*Dog!*" He swung the blade at the Doctor's face.

Nimble, the time-traveller brought his own weapon up to his eyeline. Horizontally. The shining blade bit into an arm's thickness of hardwood. *Chok!* The handle stood as the only defence between the time-traveller's nose and his attacker.

Xorek's sword stuck fast. The Doctor pushed back.

The barest hint of a grin dared to the traveller's lip. He could see the armour weighing the man down. He was close to toppling Xorek from equinnaback. From there, they could—

A thick pain cut through the back of the Doctor's skull. He caught sight of the pommel on another guard's hilt as he pitched backward. It rose to strike him again. The traveller persisted, but an unexpected kick from Xorek loosed his footing. He tried to grab the bridle to pull himself upright, but another kick sealed his descent.

The villagers scattered.

"Stay where you are!" snarled Xorek.

The time-traveller fell sideways into the mud. There he lay. Still.

Xorek's equinna stood close enough to trample him. "Get up!"

None of the villagers of Walpole dared go near him. Even the intimation of movement was met with a slash through the air from Xorek's sword.

"*Back!*" he warned, as if hacking away rabid cualagans. "*Get back!*"

Only Trojak, cowed and obeying, crossed to the Doctor and placed his hand against his forehead. The stranger's features were pale, his skin almost icy to the touch.

"He's dead, Xorek," he stated, flatly.

"If he wasn't, he would have wished he had been," Xorek informed Trojak, coldly. "You will find their bodies in the usual place. All of them. *March!*"

He followed the procession of villagers walking to their death.

Shaking his head, Trojak left the Doctor where he lay.

His epitaph, "It was not to be."

Peri had finished her chores for the day. The hard work had eroded her usual bright, upbeat demeanour, and in her heart, anger burned like fire. Peri slurped down her bowl of watery vegetable soup until a guard burst in. She leapt to her feet, head bowed. She had learnt the hard way that this was a man's world, and women were less than nothing.

"You, star-girl," he shouted. "Can you make a posset?"

Peri sighed. "Yes sir, I can make one for you."

"Not for me. For Princess Sorella."

She quirked an eyebrow. "The princess?"

"Get on with it. She will have your hand if you take too long."

*I have to beat the milk and infuse the spices, you stupid jock. I can't just stick it in the microwave.*

“Lucky I have two,” she dared.

The guard, fortunately, didn't hear her.

As she stirred the small pot over the fire and sprinkled in the spices. Her mind raced, full of worries.

*Where the hell is the Doctor?*

All sorts of rumours were whispered round the Citadel. The colourful stranger was either dead or riding wild Aggedors round the forests or even working as a labourer in one of the villages. Another rumour said that he was a spy for King Peliak uncovering disloyalty among his subjects.

Another thought pricked at her consciousness. *Why's Frobisher so chummy with the palace guards all of a sudden?*

The posset warmed her hands as she followed the guard to the princess's chambers. The guard left her and she knocked on the door. It was opened by a solemn young woman in a brown linen shift.

The chambermaid walked back to continue her brushing of the princess's hair. Peri had met any number of royal descendants over her years of travel in the TARDIS. Some of whom she'd become close friends with.

Clothed in a plum-red velvet, Princess Sorella held herself with a sense of inhuman grace, so practised that Peri likened her to a ballerina about to attempt *Swan Lake*. Her hair was silver-blonde and shoulder-length with that striking burgundy streak, so common of Pels, running down its length.

The servant started to plait it and Peri placed the bowl in front of the princess.

She was about to leave when the princess called out to her. “Star-girl?”

“Yes, your Highness?”

“Come here, I will sup my posset and we shall talk before you return to your quarters.”

The servant plaiting her hair was dismissed with a graceful flick of a hand to a small alcove off the main bedroom. Perhaps no larger than a standard pantry. She closed the two slatted wooden doors behind her.

“Cosy arrangement,” observed Peri.

“Sit here, star-girl.” Sorella gestured to a hessian footstool stuffed with hay. “I wish to know your secrets. Why did you arrive at the palace in the company of a giant bird?”

“This could take a while...” Peri pondered how best to explain. “The bird is a special lifeform from a place far away called Xenon. My world is called Earth, I know you won’t believe me, but it’s all true.”

“It’s not so strange. My world is Megeshra.”

“Right,” Peri smiled.

“It is the province of my birth. We use ‘province’ in this realm, rather than ‘world’ to describe territory.”

“Oh...”

The princess hadn’t understood after all. “We know you as star-girl, is that your birth name?”

“No, princess, my name is Peri, short for Perpuilliam Brown.”

“Peri is a pretty name. It’s like the name of a blue flower here. The perismilla. What is life like on your Mount Earth? You must tell me...”

Peri opened her mouth to speak, but another of Sorella’s lithe hands silenced it. “But... not tonight.” Her eyes flickered to the servitor’s quarters. “I will send for you. Later.”

“Of course.” Turning to leave, Peri’s toe caught on something beneath the armoire. She tilted her head, catching a gold leaf title on a leather-bound tome. She didn’t recognise the contents—come to think of it, she hadn’t seen so much as a pamphlet since she’d arrived—but the reaction from the princess was... unusual.

Sorella wasn’t disturbed. That was too provocative an emotion. No, she was *concerned* by Peri’s discovery. Clearly, it wasn’t something on the expected reading of a young lady of her stature.

The cover read—*The History of the Spirits of Mount Megeshra*.

The botanist recalled how in the Victorian era, there was a moral panic over women being allowed to read Gothic fiction. Something about moral corruption or whatever. The Satanic panic in her own time was trying much the same with those morning cartoons.

History had a habit of repeating.

Peri put a finger against her lips with a shush and kept walking.

She didn’t catch the princess’s reaction.

Lying in the mud of Walpole, the Doctor's initial impression of Trojak had been he was bluffing to Xorek. Now, he had the uncomfortable suspicion that the headman really had meant what he said.

Was he dead?

He certainly didn't feel that way.

The pain, however, was inexcusably certain. Paralysing, even. It was sharp enough that it took some time before the motor functions of his body reasserted themselves. He sat up, humbug trousers stretching out beneath him towards a newly prepared fire. It had been the smoke that must've roused him from unconsciousness.

"I do hope that's not for me," he muttered.

He heard a bowl clatter at his left. He turned. Trojak stared at him, stunned. "You're alive?"

"Yes, but I don't deserve to be..." The Doctor rubbed the welt beneath his blonde curls. "Why on Gallifrey didn't you try and stop him?"

"Who?"

"*Him.*" The enunciation hurt. "He who took your people. Surely you have power here?"

"There were too many..." Trojak's words sounded too rehearsed, too familiar. "If I acted unprepared, many more would've died in the panic."

"I would've helped you, Trojak, many would."

"Must we have this discussion now? You're alive, what else matters to you?" He offered the bowl of gruel from a nearby campfire. "Eat."

The Doctor waved away the food. "I am one more mouth to feed, as you said, but I'm also one more brain than you had before. A remarkable one."

"Modest, as well."

"Modesty won't free those people." The Doctor winced, pulling a hand damp with red from his scalp. He persisted, "We still have a chance. Trojak. Who decides who lives and dies? You or them?"

"They..." Trojak inhaled lungfuls of air. "Our people are already dead, Doctor."

"How long was I out?"

"Barely over an hour."



“Surely, there’s still—”

“The guards are on equinnaback. By the time we reach them, they will have sent the bodies over the cliff-face at the Throat of Trade by swordpoint.”

The Doctor sighed. “The Romans called it the Tarpeian Rock.” He clenched his hands into fists. “It’s an all-too-conceivable evil for a mind as closed as... What *was* the head guard’s name again?”

“Xorek,” muttered one of the women by the fire. “He took my father... I’ve... I’ve no one now. Why do they do it?”

“They like it,” growled Trojak.

“I’m sorry, my dear,” the Doctor consoled.

The headman swung to face Walpole’s edge. “You’ll have to help us bury the bodies. No avoiding it now.”

“I will, of course,” he nodded. As Trojak left to summon others, the rover added to himself, “No one deserves to live like this. These violent delights will have violent ends, Doctor, and it won’t end with a near miss. We must work out how to fight against this reign of terror.” He studied the headman. “Before this Long Cold gets any worse...” he added.

Excused back to her armour-clad escort, a young boy called Rolas, Peri felt like an absolute tourist.

The stench of the Citadel was masked by fragrances more pleasing to the royal nose near Princess Sorella’s quarters. As she returned, the familiar vulgarities of the kitchen returned to plague her nose. Peri never quite got used to it, but the sickly sweet aromas of dried meat and pickled preserves were starting to feel like home. That distressed her on some level.

The guard remained at his post as he always did. Outside the main door.

Peri descended the stairs to return the bowl, nearly tripping over where the Scriptor sat, devouring a chicken leg. “Still up working are we? Good. Glad to see you earning your keep. Life can be so dreary in luxury.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t know, sir,” she replied with as much sarcasm as she could muster. “Is that all, sir?”

The Scriptor didn’t reply. She just wanted to get away back to her uncomfortable bed, but the Scriptor grabbed her arm. He put his wizened face, mouth still greasy from chicken, right up to hers.

“Remember, although they all call you star-girl, you are just a servant. Nothing more, Peri.” He released her arm. “Now fetch me some ale and get out.”

She brought him a tankard of foul-smelling ale and fled to the safety of the servants’ quarters.

She found a distraught Orgala, lying face down on her bed. She turned the girl over and in the candle light was shocked to see a vicious welt on her face, split lip and the beginnings of a black eye.

“What happened?”

“It was my fault... I got in the way.”

“Of what?” asked Peri. “Who?”

Orgala shook her head, lip trembling, she tried to bury her face in the stonework, but Peri wouldn’t let her. She held the girl in her arms until each sob turned into a shiver of cold. She hushed and cooed. It was difficult to tell how long she’d been aboard the TARDIS, but Orgala, Peri reflected, couldn’t have been more than ten years her junior. That made her terribly angry.

She fetched some water and a rag to try and bathe the girl’s wounds.

By the time she returned, Orgala was touching the bruised purple, testing to see if the bone had broken beneath.

“Who did this to you?” Peri asked, softly.

Orgala sat up. “Xorek, and it was my fault. I’m scared of him, my hand shook while serving his ale and I spilled some on his tunic.”

“And he hit you? That big knucklehead against a young girl. In my country, there’s one place for men like him. Prison. At best.”

“I’m lucky not to be in the dungeons myself...” murmured Orgala.

“Listen to me,” Peri entwined her fingers with hers. “No one has the right to hit you. No one. If the Doctor were here, he’d think the same. He’d sort this place out, help the people depose that tyrant Peliak...”

“You speak like a child, Peri.” She meant it kindly, Peri knew.

“They’ve got good sense.” The botanist’s mind raced. “Look. We’d better get some sleep, Cook will shout at us if we’re dozy tomorrow.”

“How do I explain this to her?” Orgala gestured to her face.

“Tell her... Tell her it was an idiot’s mistake, you’re not to blame,” Peri answered, moving to her bunk. “It’s not far from the truth.”

Under the *pit-pat* of his webbed feet, Frobisher rubbed his sore throat and made croaking noises. He leant forward, sucking air through his nostrils, trying not to upset any of the calcified mucous that had gelled around his thyroid.

*I’m pinked if I’m going to drink that disgusting beer for recreation. I feel like death warmed up and served on a slab of cracked pavement.*

En route to the kitchen, he saw the Scriptor slink off down the hallway with a transformative dubiousness that would make any shape-shifter envious. That man was everywhere. The king’s eyes and ears. A sly and dangerous fellow. Most staff in the castle gave him a wide berth where they could.

Doing the same, Frobisher found a small pottery bottle and sniffed it, smelt like some sort of fruit juice. He sipped it. *Way too sweet for my taste but sure feels good on the way down. Like hard ice melting into drinking water.*

He went to the guardroom. There was a cheerful shout from those on duty.

“Ah! Tholin tells us you were in fine voice tonight, big-bird!”

“Just trying to stay alive, Grelen.”

“And so you shall, the king is soothed by your ballads. Can you sing to us tonight? Sing us the rock song.”

“I can’t disappoint my public,” sighed Frobisher.

The gumshoe sang the old Queen crowd-pleaser, *Hammer to Fall*. They had no grasp of the finer details and meaning of the strident lyrics, but clapped their hands and stamped their feet joyously. For every bewildered start, there was the comfort of knowing that none of them knew he sung off-key. It was almost enough, just for a moment, to forget the circumstances of how he’d arrived here.

It was halfway through the second chorus that the smiling scowl of the Scriptor’s face appeared at the door. “Stop this racket at once. You are the palace guard. Kindly remember that or you will be replaced.”

The Scriptor left and, sure he was gone, the guards jeered and whistled their disapproval at his back.

Frobisher tried to resume the revelry, but a new gloom had descended over the barracks. The soldiers became preoccupied with far darker thoughts. Prompted by the reminder of their rank and service.

Rolas, one of the younger guards, told the group. “Xorek ordered the execution of twelve villagers from Walpole today. I was there. I had to kill two defenceless old men. One of them told me he forgave me...” he stopped, tears flowing down his cheeks.

“*Ey*, Rolas, we know. We’ve had to do it too.” Grelen patted the young man awkwardly on the back. “The faces of innocents we have killed haunts our dreams, my boy.”

Emotion was not shown openly amongst the guards. The belief among the barracks was that the toll was bad enough without doubling it with grief, but the men made allowances for Rolas’s youth and inexperience. The boy would learn. That had always been the way.

Frobisher, however, had other ideas.

“Why don’t you guards stage a coup?” he asked, almost nonchalantly.

“A what?”

“A coup, an uprising, a rebellion.” Frobisher leant forward. “Surely, if enough of you mobilise, you could take down Xorek, maybe even the king himself.”

“That foolish talk will end in us losing our heads.”

“All of us?” he asked, dubious. “The *whole* garrison?”

Grelen tried to be patient. “It is true, Peliak can seem an unjust ruler.”

“Xorek his wicked right hand...” added Rolas, bitterly.

“Hush, boy. But to rise up against him?” Grelen tamped his knees. “We honour the throne, whoever sits upon it, big-bird. It’s not our place to judge who is worthy of it.”

“And Xorek?”

“Who do you think gives you your bed?” He gestured. “Speaking of which, off with you. We must begin night patrol and you know what happens to all found in the curfew.”

“Right, right...” the whifferdill nodded. “Slit ear-to-ear.”

“Pel-like. Quick and painless.”

As Frobisher lay on his bunk, he had his doubts about that. Wherever he went, it seemed, whatever their province—whether

strength through nutrition or strength of arms—everyone seemed a prisoner here. It was fortunate, in some respects, the Doctor hadn't been taken with them.

Those vital few moments in the throne room when they'd first arrived could have sent the Time Lord's head spinning from his neck.

Frobisher hugged the bedframe. *If he does die, then Peladon will be the end of the road for star-girl and big-bird.*

## CHAPTER 3: “Answers in Mount Ruttervoir”

Under the cover of night, during an uneasy calm between Peladon’s constant thunderstorms, the rest of Walpole had retired to sleep. The last embers of conversation snuffed out in courtesy of their closest neighbours. The Doctor and the headman sat on blocks of unhewn granite, together in the mist, mending the last of the damaged roofs from the hail.

Trojak stirred a log of wood in a pail. “What did you call this, Doctor?”

“Strictly speaking, Trojak, it doesn’t have a name.” The amorphous slime was bright grey with small flecks of red, like ruby shards, purred into its mix. “It’s a water-repellant compound that comes from the laboratories aboard my Ship or, at least, the formula did. I’m glad you found it.”

“Not me. Malpesh.”

“Yes.” There was a note of light disapproval in the Doctor’s voice. “He does seem like the sort that would go rifling through other people’s pockets.”

“He’s fascinated by your origins.”

The Doctor braced an orphaned section of thatched roof against his knee. Its black fibres strengthened with moss and water-absorbent vines. “A genealogist?”

“I think he still believes you may come from the Citadel.” Trojak rubbed his face. “Sometimes I think he’s the only one who holds out hope that we will have as much influence on them as they have on us.”

“*Ab*, an optimist.”

“Anyway...” Trojak daubed the mix on the thatch. “It’s all been returned. All except the... What did you call it?”

“Slide whistle.” The Doctor held up a hand before Trojak could protest. “No trouble at all. It’ll tell us when the children are coming. Although, I’d rather prefer to have my coat returned wholesale, if you don’t mind.”

“You’ve already done so much for us. Far more than I ever expected.” The headman thought on it. “Perhaps, one day, when this I’ll give it back to you.”

“I am rather fond of it. I and it have been through much together.” The Doctor lay the thatch down, wiping his hands. “There. No more leaky roofs.” He looked at Trojak. “You’re concerned that if I get it back, I’ll simply leave, aren’t you?”

“You haven’t forgotten your friends.”

“No, and I have to believe they are still alive, I must. But there are equally as chilling concerns here, right here, in Walpole.”

“The Long Cold?”

The Doctor glanced at him. “Your Speaker of Aggedor.”

“You’ve seen Malpesh, too?” Trojak rubbed his neck.

“Anger like that is rarely well-disguised. I gather he was never a particular fan of Peliakism?”

“The Might of Aggedor was here before Malpesh and will, we hope, be here after him. I didn’t bring him to the cliff that day because I knew he wouldn’t be able to stomach it.”

“How long until you decide ‘no longer’, Trojak?” asked the Doctor.

“I reached that point some time ago, but what can we do?”

“We must act together. Villagers, the Might of Aggedor and anyone in the Citadel we can rally to the cause.”

“Malpesh seems almost willing to usurp Peliak, these days,” replied Trojak.

“That seems somewhat out-of-character.”

“If it means gaining influence over Princess Sorella, he’ll try. He wants to convince her to allow worship of Aggedor without fear of attack from Xorek’s men.”

“It’s not an unreasonable wish. I think when we told him about the massacre yesterday, his hatred of the king strengthened. If we don’t act soon, he’ll try something on his own initiative.”

“He’d never make it over the terrain.”

“Nevertheless, he’ll try.” The Doctor folded his hands. “Trojak, I need to get into the Citadel. I got Peri and Frobisher into this. I must get them out. Surely, someone must know a way?”

“It can wait until the morning.”

The Doctor’s shoulders squared in an unexpected flash of anger. The rover pushed the thatch aside and shot to his feet, his hands in his pockets. He glanced, apologetically, to Trojak. The headman understood. The Doctor struck him as someone who took life’s difficulties with a pauper’s fatalism. The frustration wasn’t directed

at him, just at being hamstrung for so long. Inaction and stagnation gnawed at the traveller.

Trojak tried to soothe him. "Sleep, Doctor."

"I'm..." He put up a hand, he didn't want to hear, "...going for a walk. I'll be back by the next sunrise with answers. Somehow... Somehow, *with* answers."

The next morning, the kitchen was filled with solidarity. Much pity and sympathy was shown to Orgala. The kitchen servants cursed the wicked Xorek for causing her injuries.

Unfortunately, as sunlight bled through the hollowed high windows, Peri discovered that every maid told a story of cruelty. One girl wasn't fast enough up the stairs, another hadn't made enough beds, and a further still had been in the way while she was scrubbing the floors. That was why the children were down here. Not only to protect them, but to save time between chores.

Among them was Emerada, Princess Sorella's chambermaid Peri had seen the previous night. She was studying Orgala's back, knotted with healed tissue from a dozen other misdemeanours. The young woman winced as the cuts were bathed with clean water and dressed as best as the servitors could.

"It'll only bruise, at worst, you've been lucky," nodded Emerada.

"Lucky?" Peri was sickened. "*Lucky?* You should down tools, refuse to cook any food until the brute is punished."

"Peliak's guards would punish us or worse," Emerada glanced to the nook. "I can't keep the princess waiting..."

*Riiiiip.* Cook tore a fistful of feathers from the fowl flesh reclined on her table. Her frown engraved with a trembling fury. Eyes low. She said not a word.

Peri implied, "C'mon, Cook, this can't be allowed to go on."

"That it can't, girl. Xorek can't be allowed to get away with doing this to my maids." She cracked her knuckles with her fingers.

"Tonight, we'll put something in his ale. His guts will be heaving by the morning."

"It's not enough."

Cook turned to her. "It's been my life and the life of every woman and a few young men, until they're found out, since memory. Nothing changes in this blasted castle."

"Can't we do more?"



“What do you suggest, *eh?*”

“Cook,” Emerada returned. “The Princess Sorella has requested the presence of your maid.”

“Who? I’ve got no maid...”

The chambermaid pointed to Peri who blinked. “Me?”

“Oh, you mean star-girl. Is that y’er name, Peri?”

“More often than not...” nodded Peri, a little starstruck by the request.

Cook huffed a laugh. “Well, I shall want her back to prepare the midday meal.”

“I shall see to it that she returns in time,” replied Emerada.

Peri gently thumped her fist against the table. A plan was beginning to form in the hedgerows of her mind. She followed the chambermaid up the stone stairs to the main door.

“Peri!” Cook yelled across the kitchen.

The botanist stopped by the doorway guard.

“We have our ways, make sure you honour them. For all our sake.”

True to his word, the Doctor was returning down what the Pels called the Throat of Trade back towards Walpole.

He wasn’t happy.

The rover understood now. Even weeks—perhaps a month or so—later, it was still an impossible journey on foot. He’d seen it for himself.

Natural erosion had created a long corridor of loose wet sand that sucked any unwary traveller to their doom. The Citadel’s equinna must have been slaughtered by the half-dozen on a regular basis trying to navigate the ecological minefield. It was only the engineering genius of the Pels and, keyly, the resources of the Citadel, which prevented it from becoming a woesome epitaph to Citadel travel.

His stubbornness in the face of such adversity was beginning to wane. He’d overcome worse on other darker worlds, but his main adversary here was time. The time needed to pool together resources would far outstrip his friends’ lifespans. Natural or otherwise. The Walpole Pels clung to the Might of Aggedor as a life raft in a sea of king-ordained violence. Their life and livelihoods sharpened on a savage and uncaring blade.

What was he to do? Could he—?

The flutter of wings drew him from his ruminations. For a brief attosecond, he allowed himself to hope that it was Frobisher. Calm reason massaged that impulse straight from his mind. No hopes raised, no hopes dashed. He hadn't the time to wallow. Now...

The homing vruachag's wingspan was held like a feathered curtain under the overhang of rock. It shook itself, feet clicking on a rock, trying to dry out before returning to the sky. On its head was a small half-hood. Reminiscent of the Citadel guard's helmet. Attached to its leg were small leather-bound circlets for missives and messages.

The Doctor lowered himself to his haunches and crept towards it.

If he could, perhaps, grab the bird...

He moved closer. The vruachag's eyes regarded him with an almost sneering disdain. No chance at charming the creature, then. With a bound of energy, he leapt at its feet—just as a loop of rope dropped over his hands.

An unexpected jerk pitched him forward over the rock. The homing vruachag scattered in a flurry of feathers and screeching. The Doctor's attacker yelped with a hiccupping scream he'd only heard when the TARDIS had a near miss with a time eddy.

"Malpesh!" derided the inverted Doctor.

"Doctor...!" The druid gulped. "I thought you were one of the guards."

"Before or after you snared me?"

"What?"

The Doctor held up his bound hands. Malpesh grimaced, mortified, and unbound the knot. "Where did it go?"

"We've not lost sight of it yet." The Doctor held a hand over his brow, peering at the ærial inkblot of consternation. "It looks like it's travelling down to Walpole."

"Yes, I've been wondering about that..." Malpesh's grin was full of oddly-spaced teeth. "Our messenger birds rest in a small coop over there."

The building was practically invisible in the landscape. A Neolithic barrow inserted into the mountainside like a pillbox. The homing vruachag halted, briefly, on a barren tree outside of it, before vanishing into a slit in the rock.

“Neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night...” nodded the Doctor.

“I hoped that if the bird were delayed indefinitely, someone might come looking for it.” Malpesh had a nervous half-wheeze, half-laugh. “It’s amusing, but I never bothered to ask—”

“Who makes sure all are present and accounted for?”

“Quite, quite!”

Inspiration alighted behind the Doctor’s eyes. “How long has the vruachag been missing?”

“Oh, long enough,” he nodded, proudly. His heart sank. “But there’s no telling if they’ve been missed now, unfortunately.”

“A thought occurs, dear Malpesh. We’ll have to be quick. This way.”

Together, they hiked down the track towards the coop. The Doctor was considerably faster than the old druid, his green boots thudding against the compacted soil, as he made his way to the opening.

He peered gently inside. Just in time to see a gauntleted hand pull the bird into the main coop for inspection.

Malpesh was out of breath, gulping between whispers. “What did you see?”

“A guard,” mouthed the Doctor.

The druid nodded, taking the time-traveller’s word for it.

The Doctor dared another glimpse, catching the back of a helmet, as the vruachag was taken beyond the main chamber through an open door. It slid shut behind him. Flush with the wall as if it had never been there in the first place.

The time-traveller climbed up in through the opening. “That was close. If we’d been just a few minutes later...”

“We’d never have seen him.” He pulled Malpesh through.

The druid pulled a paper fan, one of the Doctor’s own, from his sleeve and waved it across his sweating features.

“What else did you take?” asked the Doctor.

“Nothing of consequence,” Malpesh bluffed.

The time-traveller cocked an eyebrow.

“Nothing that I thought would be missed.”

“*Mmm...*” Crossing over to the wall, the rover attempted to pull on the unlit sconces that studded its surface. Red sleeved arms led

dexterous fingers across every potential fault or falsehood that the hidden door had to offer him. “Nothing.”

A slow-burn anger rose through the druid. “It can’t be nothing. They can’t kill, murder, cheat and exploit and we receive nothing.”

“Quite so. Let’s see...” The Doctor held his palms flat beneath his chin and began murmuring to himself. “Let’s see... Alpha Centauri mentioned that they’d chosen a number of sites for that Federation survey. Megeshra seemed the most likely. It was closely placed to the Citadel and a more established political capital. However, they did look at Ruttervoir, but why wasn’t it chosen? It was a good reason, I’m sure...”

“What was that?”

“Nothing, nothing...” waved the Doctor. “An incantation from my own mythology. Where do you get your water for the village?”

“The skies above.”

“Why have the wells, then? Like Aggedor’s pit.”

“They aren’t wells, Doctor. They’re sinkholes. Aggedor rests where the mountain’s embrace is at its most compassionate.”

“Seismic instability!” the Doctor snapped his fingers. “*Ab-ba!* Of course. Ruttervoir is on a tectonic plate.”

The druid frowned. “How does this help us?”

The Doctor placed his arm around the old fellow’s shoulders. “Let me tell you the story of Mohammad and the mountain...”

In her quarters, the Princess Sorella was sitting with two ladies in fine linen dresses stitching a sampler. Peri canted an eyebrow at the impressive needlework required to twist the constant storms of Peladon into harp strings and strands of stylised hair. She hid a twitch as she realised that the figure in question was likely the king.

“It’s a good likeness,” lied Peri.

Sorella caught her out of the corner of her eye. “*Ab*, Peri, I am pleased to see you.”

“You as well, princess,” Peri bobbed, a gesture that felt all the more uncomfortable every time she did it. “You sent for me?”

“Yes, I understand that you come from the Province of Earth. I’ve never heard of such a place. Is it beyond Megeshra?”

Peri opened her mouth, but it took a few seconds for her voice to start. “You could say that...”

“And yet,” Sorella frowned, quizzically, “you are here?”

“Yeah, that was my reaction after the first week or so.”

“You do not wish to be here in the Citadel?”

“No. I’ve a friend somewhere out in the provinces who was left behind in our recruitment. I worry about him. There are days I think he’s okay, but then there are days where I feel he’s one step from death.”

“Not an unusual state of affairs for such a man, by your tone,” noted Sorella.

Peri sighed, swallowing her first instinct. “My opinion doesn’t matter, your Majesty. If I said ‘I want to go’, what would change?”

“I’ve heard such sayings from many who travail in the kitchens. I never go down there for that such a reason. It may sound callous, but leadership requires... distance. You cannot worry for the life of an ant when the equinna in the forest are aflame.”

That gave Peri pause. *Just who’s speaking there? You or King Peliak?*

The princess put down the sampler. “Distance, but not ignorance. Now, what is life like on this Earth of yours? Sit here and tell me.”

Peri looked at the spare room on the bed as though it were the nozzle of a Cybergun.

“Please,” encouraged the princess, patting the silk.

Peri obeyed, carefully, “What is it you want to know, princess?”

“What was your role in your world?” Sorella returned to her stitching. “Were you a maidservant, as you are here? I have heard the guards compliment you on your manner.”

Peri snickered. It was a nice thought. “Not quite. I studied plants and—”

“You were a healer for your king? That is a noble calling.”

“No, your Highness, we don’t answer to a king in my land. I was a student at a university... A place of learning.”

“No king?” scoffed one of the princess’s companions. “Your world must be overrun with thieves and scoundrels.”

“You think highly of King Peliak, then?” asked Peri.

“All young girls think highly of their father,” Sorella answered.

Peri tried to disguise her reaction behind a sneeze. “Yeah, well, I’ve met a few dozen people who claim to be from perfect worlds and they’re all liars.” The botanist chewed the words, sarcastically. “At home, we have a leader, but they are chosen by the people to rule justly for the people. At least, that’s the idea. Everyone gets one vote and whoever gets the most is elected leader.”

“The peasants get a say?” The princess stopped stitching and raised an eyebrow. “Your world is a strange place. I presume only the men get to vote?”

“Oh, no, your Highness. Not by my time. On Earth, most women can vote, we even have women as leaders. Most women are *not* under the control of men. We can choose our own path. Although, some men still think like Xorek and Peliak and treat women like dirt on their shoes.”

“But we are weaker than the men,” said the other noblewoman.

“How?” Peri asked.

“They are stronger.”

“Define ‘strong’.”

“Cleverer.”

“Define ‘clever’.”

“And we do not deserve to be their equals.”

“Says who? We give birth to them. Some of us die doing it. We look after them when they are boys. Without us, frankly, there would be no men. I heard that there were boys who hid in the kitchens as women. What about them?”

“They are less than both.”

“What a stupid worldview.” It just slipped out.

Princess Sorella stared at Peri. “Megeshra Province is different from your Earth. Our laws ensure that everyone, including women of rank like myself, know our place in the eyes of the law.”

“And they are?” asked Peri.

“Not easily overruled. Particularly with my father as king.” Sorella ignored the question, but the botanist had a feeling it hadn’t been her intention. “Could you imagine the wild terror of a kingdom without the rule of law?”

“Law isn’t about hierarchy, it’s about justice. It should exist to reinforce the rights of others to choose, surely? Not bury them when their problems become an inconvenience to those in power.” Peri chewed her lip. “Before I was even born, there were women who marched against our rulers to honour that sense of justice.”

“They overturned the law?”

“Yeah. Brave women disrupted their cosy little set-up until they *had* to listen to our grievances. Told them we *must* be treated as equals. And their men followed them because they weren’t ‘just’

women, they were people. People to be loved and respected. They *deserved* a right to choose.”

“Peri, what would that even look like?” Sorella’s question sounded so awkward.

“Sorella—princess... It never stops at things like gender. They always find other reasons to hate you.”

The princess’s companions spoke up. “Maid—”

“Let her speak,” Sorella held up a delicate hand.

“Sorella... You will always be your father’s daughter, if you choose, but there will come a point where you stop being a girl and have to become a woman. Maybe you’ll end up ruling and have your own children.”

“It is expected.”

“You think you would have sons, right?” Peri picked at the idea. “But what if you have daughters? What will you have to tell them?”

“What my father told me.”

“And your mother?”

The question provoked something alien in the royal face. She ceased being the princess of the Citadel of Peladon and simply became Sorella. No different a species or class than Peri herself. She looked almost human.

Blood pooled from beneath the needle where it had pricked her fingertip.

“Sorella, you’re bleeding,” muttered one of her companions.

“What?” the princess returned. “Yes... Yes, an unfortunate slip.”

Red spattered her stitched father’s neck.

Aware she had been too forthright, Peri apologised, “I’m truly sorry, your Highness. I didn’t mean to offend you.”

Sorella regained her composure. “Such passion is unusual here.”

“I’ve said all I’m willing to say... Shall I return to my post?” asked Peri.

“You have given us much to consider.” The princess nodded.

“Return to your work, Peri.”

Back in his sleuthing days, Frobisher had spent a great deal of his time learning how to adopt personalities and disguises that the common-variety thug would find innocuous. It was a more difficult task than it sounded.

The social engineering required for a wiretap was quite different to the verbal judo required for an archival request from the big corporations like Amorb or IntraVenus Inc. Still, when he got it right, it shaved days, if not potentially solar years, off the work required to see his clients' jobs through.

In that same vein of ingenuity, the Court of Peladon was graced with a portable theatre.

Once it was set-up, it resembled what the Doc and Peri had identified, eating ice cream in a French park, as a Punch and Judy tent. The idea had always stuck with the Frobisher, but until now, he'd little opportunity to implement it. Things always got so busy once they stepped outside the doors of the TARDIS.

He'd made a few puppets, too. Their features were rendered as private in-jokes to himself. Kaon, the Lorduke of Zazz, Azovka, Mæstric, Professor Kane, any number of faces that they'd encountered in their travels over the years. Some of the recreations were pitch perfect. Others required a little more imagination on the part of the participants. None would be familiar to the Court, but maybe, just maybe, it'd buy him a few more days.

Quickly and fortunately, he'd discovered Peliak was enthralled. Twice by the hilarious Punch and Judy routines and three times by the thrilling Greek and Roman legends that Frobisher performed.

The Scriptor, however, was far from amused. He sat fuming that Frobisher still enjoyed the king's favour. The gumshoe had gambled on a rigged roulette wheel and somehow still won. And it was certainly rigged. That couldn't be denied anymore.

Still, there was more to this seneschal than a simple case of jealousy. It had piqued his old gumshoe instincts and his own suspicions had long since mounted and galloped away. His position in the Court was stable enough that he'd at last been able to give himself time to think.

However, the events of the day conspired to derail that newfound freedom almost permanently. Frobisher sat in the guardhouse, his head resting on his flippers.

It'd been following the afternoon's performance in the throne room. King Peliak passed judgement on his subjects with ruthless certainty.



“My king, these wretches of Stokebram are withholding tribute from you,” Xorek had said. “They do not understand the tribulations we face here in the Citadel of Peladon.”

“Indeed,” King Peliak stood. “This edifice has stood for my fathers and forefathers. Every stone to be maintained. Every sconce to be lit. We house more than three-hundred within these walls.”

“Sire...” One of their number in a faltering voice replied.

“And what say you?”

“We gave all we could spare, but our children are weak with lack of food. We did not wish to disobey, but surely—?”

“Surely, what?” He stepped down from the throne’s dais. “Surely, you know how to fashion the stone?”

“No, sire.”

“Then, you light every sconce?”

“I... No!”

“Perhaps it is you who house the three-hundred here in the Citadel?”

“Your Majesty, we never intended—”

“Enough. My laws are to be obeyed.” He lumbered back onto the dais. “And your ingratitude is more than I can stomach. If there are too many mouths to feed, then we can dispense with you. Xorek, their sentence is death...”

“No...!” the man screeched.

“But not the youngest two, Guard Captain. They can go back to their village and tell them the fate of those who defy King Peliak.” He pointed. “You were warned.”

“What you ask is impossible,” spat the villager.

“Not to the king.” Xorek drew his sword.

“Not to I,” nodded Peliak.

“Oh, no...” Frobisher muttered.

“What did you say?” asked the sharp-eared Scriptor.

All eyes in the throne room turned to the whifferdill.

There were any number of excuses he could level at himself. He was exhausted from his performance. Preoccupied with the Scriptor’s constant surveillance, too. Beyond that, his mind was pinwheeling with possibilities on how to escape the Citadel with Peri in tow. They had to find the Doctor and the village of Walpole where they’d been first abducted. There were too many considerations. Too much to worry about.

King Peliak squinted. “Do you disagree with my justice?”

The villagers' eyes smouldered, like ash, ready in their defeat.

“No, your Majesty, of course not.” Frobisher felt like such a heel.

Broken from his reverie, the wooden planks beneath Frobisher's guardhouse bunk sank. He glanced briefly at Grelen whose face told the whole story. The Pel exhaled through his rounded teeth, a solid hand against the wall as if to steady his shoulders.

“Who were they?” asked Frobisher, simply.

“They were from my village, big-bird. I grew up with two of them. Long ago, my father was among them, the headman of our village.” He was nodding almost automatically. “We hear, among the heretics, they sacrifice those who don't belong to their beasts. The principle here is much the same.”

“Peliak ordered their deaths, for what...?” muttered Frobisher. “Trying to protect children, those who can't defend themselves?”

Grelen's chin tightened to a point. “I can't have been much older than they were when I came to be here in the guardhouse. The life of a guard is a good profession. A noble one. We honour what that throne represents, the Citadel it stands within, but...”

“Grelen, what if it had been you?” Frobisher looked to him, through him, past the eyes into the man's memories. “What if one of those kids had been you?”

The Deputy's face betrayed no emotion. No thought. The whifferdill, however, had keen enough sight to notice the Pel bury his hands between his knees. His fists were shaking with rage.

“Y'know, the right person in the wrong place could make all the difference in Peladon,” Frobisher suggested.

Grelen sighed. “I can't take you to the armoury.”

“Just give me access, then.”

“Then what? You're big, bird, but not that big.”

“Grelen... What if it had been *you*?” Frobisher persisted. “There must be other guards who feel the same. It was only a couple nights ago that Rolas was sobbing his eyes out. That didn't feel too uncommon here.”

A growl came from deep within Grelen's chest. It was the sound of a Pel coming to terms with the fact that he would be fighting against the very institutions that had raised him. To take up arms against the king was tantamount to taking up arms against his own father.

The growl did not come easily.

“Aye there are dissenters,” Grelen admitted. “But we must tread carefully. Xorek is Peliak’s right arm. The Scriptor, his senses. He listens at doors, and watches everyone in the Citadel from noble to maid.”

“I’ve a friend who might be able to help.”

“The star-girl?”

“Yes.”

Grelen shook his head. “The Scriptor is watching her very closely.”

“Grelen...” Frobisher placed his flipper beneath his beak. If this goes sideways, I’ll take full responsibility. Make it my hide under the whip, but if I don’t make it out, I want you to take Peri to a friend of mine...”

In all his days in service to the king, Rolas had never experienced a seismic tremor firsthand. Not a one. On the contrary, his time as a guard had been largely nothing but sedentary. Largely devoted to patrols of the Citadel’s quite stable hallways and, occasionally, to the villages that neighboured close on Mount Megeshra.

Rolas held his arm aloft, the vruachag gently wafting its wings to keep balance. Sediment dusted the nape of his neck, causing his armour to itch.

The guard couldn’t help but feel that this journey to check on the homing vruachag coop for Walpole was a punishment. Xorek’s means of letting him know that he’d caught the boy’s eyes reddened with tears. A weakness, sure, but a private one. Intended for the guardhouse and nowhere else. Rolas had the unnerving feeling that not even Grelen’s haven was safe from the surveillance of the Scriptor.

It was a miserable assignment to accomplish on his own, but for all intents and purposes, a quiet one.

That was until he heard the mountain crack in half like a poleaxe slammed into its summit. He’d been warned of this. Sometimes lightning struck at just the right frequency to cause an avalanche. The side of the mountain was giving up its lofty stoicism in favour of an unbridled tectonic tantrum.

However much fear Rolas felt was nothing compared to the vruachag on his arm. The messenger bird was trapped without the

sky. In a passage no larger than the mammal's own wingspan. Its only source of light, the torch in its other arm.

Simply put, the vruachag went absolutely wild.

The noise unleashed a flapping, shrieking visitation from the boy's worst imaginings. Rolas's armour shielded him from the worst of its talons, but the startling shock was more than his already frayed nerves could take. He dropped the torch to the ground. The vruachag screeched into the darkness. Damn his post! Damn his duty! He sprinted back down the passageway and lunged for the internal lever.

The hidden door to the coop swung open too slowly for the young guard.

He scrambled out into the open air. It didn't matter where he went now, so long as he—!

A moment.

A fact struck him right between his five senses. On his hands and knees, Rolas noticed the ground beneath him was perfectly stable. Stone cold and immobile. As though, it had always been that way. As he hunched, gulping down lungfuls of air, his rational mind caught up with his emotional body.

He noticed three things.

Firstly, the seismic scream came from a font of light, like a child's toy, crackling against the empty coop's viewing slat. However, it couldn't have been any larger than his own head.

Secondly, Rolas heard the words, "I said, it's called a Giant Galactic Glitter! Full of sound and fury, to quote the Bard..." from someone else dashing through the coop.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, before Rolas could stop the flurry of motion—the Doctor and Malpesh had already reached the secret door.

Rolas spun around on his knees, but it was far too late. The pair slipped through, found the lever and sealed the secret door behind them. Most gallingly, with the wave of two gentlemen who'd won the bout before it had even begun.

With a greater haste than usual, Emerada visited Peri in the Citadel kitchens.

The abductee from Walpole, and a world further besides, was looking the worse for wear this day. Peri's hands were pruned burns

from the inconsistent hot water. A combination of wire scrubbers and sand pulsed red-raw pain through cuts in her palms. The pile of plates at her side didn't feel as though it was getting any smaller.

Orgala helped Peri stand upright. "You must rest."

"Can't at the moment," she shook her head. "Too many worries, too many nightmares. I'll be alright, really."

"Who are you trying to convince? Me or yourself?"

Emerada stood for a moment behind them. Patiently waiting for the conversation to end. Eventually, she decided it would be more prudent to stand at their side. Where she could be seen. Her excitement was palpable.

"Emerada." Peri's head swung almost woozily with exhaustion. "You're early today."

"With news." The chambermaid cleared her throat, lowering her voice. "The princess has heard of another group of peasants sent to their deaths by King Peliak."

"So? Why the excitement?" Peri snapped. She caught herself and cursed inwardly. "I'm sorry. It's been a long day."

"Perhaps your last." Emerada couldn't hide the enigmatic hope in her voice.

Orgala asked, "What do you mean?"

The chambermaid seized her by an arm. "The princess wants the women of the Citadel to prepare to confront her father."

Peri dropped her scouring brush. "Wait... All of us? For real?"

"Yes," Emerada nodded. "She wanted me to pass on a message to the kitchens. She will meet with Cook and yourself tomorrow morning. Here. Under the cover of issuing instructions for tomorrow night's supper."

"Just after breakfast, right?" Peri clarified.

Emerada nodded again, more vigorously. "Together, we'll plan our strategy."

"Does Cook know she'll be meeting with the princess?" asked Orgala, innocently.

"Cook knows everything that goes on in her kitchens." The burr of the red-haired matron rumbled behind them.

Peri turned to her. "It's a risky plan. Especially bringing Sorella here, to the kitchens."

"You disapprove?" Cook inquired.

Peri shook her head. “No. Just be aware the walls have ears. The Scriptor seems to know everything going on in these levels.”

“We’ll have to chance it, star-girl. Because you’re right...” Cook wiped her hands clean and smiled. A small expression that changed the entire makeup of her face. Like a latch pulled and a door swung open. “You’re right, Peri. You’ve always been right. Unless we do something, King Peliak will see us all dead. More of my maids. Gone. Murdered without consequence like the animals we bring to slaughter.”

Peri gripped her shoulders. “You’re doing the right thing, Cook.”

“I should’ve done something sooner. *Huab*.” Cook hunched her shoulders. “You must’ve been growing on me.”

“Like a fungus,” the botanist smiled.

“*Mmm*. Move over.” Cook assumed Peri’s duties at the sink. “I always follow Her Highness. Whatever the cause, she has decided to sue for change with her father, so must we.”

“At Peri’s insistence, most likely,” Orgala noted.

A new shot of adrenalin, born of vindication, erased any of Peri’s previous exhaustion. She was alert. Ready for action.

“What do you need from me?” yawned Peri.

Before Emerada could answer, Cook interjected, “When the princess arrives, bustle about, look busy. For now, get some rest. Emerada, prepare those dishes that need to be taken to the banqueting hall.”

“Right,” the chambermaid bounced to her new responsibilities.

“Off you go,” insisted Cook.

Peri began climbing the stairs. “What are you going to do?”

“Orgala can help me prepare Xorek’s *special* beer.” Cook’s gimlet eyes took on a unique undercurrent. “Never antagonise those who make your meals. It’s time we really hurt the monsters of this Citadel.”

“I’ll see you later, then,” nodded Peri.

“Peri, I...” Orgala turned to her and went quiet.

Surrounded by the hidden gamines and guttersnipes of the alcoves, Perpugilliam Brown had taken two steps and fallen fast asleep against the kitchen stairs. The children draped a blanket across her shoulders and moved her gently aside.

As she slept, the first of Peladon’s three rebellions began to take shape.

Within the passages that riddled the mountain, the Doctor carried a flaming torch to light his way and followed Malpesh. Malpesh pointed out symbols that his predecessors had carved on the walls to act as markers.

The Doctor beamed. “Well, now, this must be a veritable gold mine for a Speaker like yourself, Malpesh.”

“Hold the light steady for me, Doctor. I need to... yes, I think, I’ll...” the old druid was absorbed by the designs. “I know the configuration, but their purpose down here... I’m afraid it’s beyond me.”

The rover held the light up towards the designs for a moment, pursing his lips in concentration, then took several strident steps back into the dark. Far enough back that Malpesh’s eyes seemed to widen in the dark.

“Don’t mind me, old chap,” assured the Doctor. “I’m just trying to enlighten our conversation.”

Sure enough, without the interference of the torch’s flames, the symbols were allowed to exude their own emerald phosphorescence.

“A star map,” realised Malpesh. “There’s Otrantis... Udolphix... Vathek...”

“Reminders for those in the underdark of what the skies above must have looked at by night. Your ancestors, most likely.”

“Quite, quite! Directing our present selves,” gasped Malpesh. “They look like diamonds...”

“Yes... Yes, I suppose that’s one way of putting it.” The Doctor’s footsteps resounded in the dark. “The sky has never been so clear before, I never quite knew when we were, but with this as a point of reference...”

“You can rediscover the passage of the other Spirits?”

“Or other stellar bodies.” The Doctor gave the druid a small start as he patted him on the shoulder. “Thank you, for your help, Malpesh. This maze rivals the Labyrinth of the Minotaur.”

“You are more than welcome, Doctor.” He gestured. “I believe this tunnel leads into the Citadel.”

“How can you tell?”

Malpesh gently eased the torch into a current of air that caused the light to dance and sputter.

“Air pockets,” the Doctor smiled. “Now, why didn’t I think of that?”

He clasped his hands together. “I must organise the Might of Aggedor and discuss our demands.”

“Let me not detain you. Remember to bring my coat, *mmm?* Here, take this.” He handed the torch over to the druid. “Farewell, Malpesh, and good luck.”

“Good fortune.”

The Doctor nodded and walked down the narrow passage into the silence.

Behind him, he could hear the druid’s rapidly retreating footsteps. Malpesh’s only obstacle upon his return would be that guard, but even if circumstances turned ugly, the torch would win him a few vital moments to flee.

The passage before the Doctor came out in a small chamber that contained firewood. Stepping round the huge piles, he opened the wooden door in the far wall with two strident arms. Each at eye level. Ready for action.

Nothing.

The corridor was lit with flaming torches, the Doctor placed his torch in a vacant sconce and crept forward. He halted, ducking into a small alcove, as Xorek stalked down the hallway with his bloodied sword. Unpleasant and harried. Retrieving his penlight from his pocket, the Doctor’s thoughts turned sharply to Diamant.

*Another all-powerful being that plays with lifeforms like pawns on a chess board. Why have they sent us to Peladon? Do we, perhaps, help the Pels overthrow their despotic king?*

This was a long and bloody road in the Doctor’s own affairs.

To become a part of history was to become a part of its own laws. Foresight did not grant godhood. No matter how much those, even among his own kind, would have preferred to think otherwise. It was that eternal struggle to rationalise the predetermination of the past with the knowledge of free will.

Time was much like the neural pathways in the brain. Plastic and elastic. The more energy that flowed down a particular path, the more likely it was to be directed that way in the future. The Web of Time, as a structure, rejected alterations to the continuum as readily as a small child stamping their foot at a typhoon. Howl, bellow and call, but the tides of Time still swamped all.



Humanity was one species that struggled most keenly with the inconsistency of these temporal states. Barbara, dressed as Yetaxa among the Aztecs, hoped to ease the suffering to come when Cortez arrived from Spain. Not an ignoble goal. He himself had offered Alexander the Great an opportunity to live by other means beyond his ken, but the king refused for his own reasons. In both instances, those who'd lived as part of that time-zone had rejected the means to transcend its own knowledge and wisdom from outsiders.

The Doctor could understand. It was no different than tourists offering unsolicited advice to the locals on how to live out their existence. The perilous 'uplifting' of colonial ideals. He, Peri and Frobisher did not have superior knowledge, only broader knowledge. If they had, there would be no point in travelling in the TARDIS to begin with.

Around a hewn spiral staircase, he ascended to an upper level of the Citadel.

Besides, beyond the arrogance of assuming such superiority was the temptation for something far darker. Historical revisionism. Bad enough when attempted through second or third-hand history books, but devastating firsthand in the time-zones.

The Doctor massaged his temples with his forefinger and thumb. Too many were drawn to the temptation of perfection...

*You can't rewrite history. Not one line.*

Whose idea of 'perfection', though? That was always the question. Where was the line between the well-intentioned like himself, who kept the balance of history for others' freedom to choose, and creatures like the Daleks who sought power only for their own twisted selves?

*You can't rewrite history. Not one line.*

Because history will rewrite you.

Time always found ways to fight back.

## CHAPTER 4: “Violent Ends”

In the tunnels, Malpesh knew he'd taken a wrong turn when the next right he made nearly dropped him into the sky. It was an opening. The rock-studded ground was almost the mountain's length below. The walls, Malpesh noticed, were reinforced with compacted stone, so the abrupt drop clearly served some—

The druid swallowed.

Xorek's chosen method of execution among Walpole's villagers.

He knew its purpose before the first body rocketed past his eyes to the slopes below. Above, the guards of the Citadel were dumping more unfortunates to defy Peliak's rule from the king's battlements. Malpesh strangled down a gasp of horror and outrage. The sight left him paralysed. Another body fell. Too fast to identify anything definitive from, but larger than the other. And another.

Malpesh crept along the lip of the opening.

He squinted up at the underside of the Citadel turret.

On its peak, just before the edge of its squared teeth, he could see the plum-red garb of the Princess Sorella. He'd seen her only once. Just for a few days.

It had been during an unusual visit to Walpole with Xorek in tow. To partake in the local culture and show the royal colours or however that figure of speech went. Upon her departure, Malpesh remembered she had taken a tome with her that he'd longed to see returned. A forbidden text. One that could never be replaced. However, if it served her purposes, he could live without it. That was a tenant of their faith, after all. All history to be remembered in a hush.

In his interactions with Princess Sorella, Malpesh had noticed she demonstrated a curiosity to other ways that her father fundamentally lacked. In fact, Malpesh had the distinct impression the excursion was intended to quell any thoughts the princess had to innovation. Prove the unworthiness of such ideas by their very being. He hoped, if anything, the Might of Aggedor—hidden or not—proved a heady match for such monarchic ignorance.

It only struck him then that he still had no idea whether his letters had made it to Her Highness.

Above him, the princess's cheeks flared with anger. All the grace and elegance he had seen from her in Walpole was still well on display, but her grip on its fineries were slipping. Not for the bombast of Peladon's elements, but for each cadaver, like a pummelberry from a tree, dropped from the castle's edge.

Another body. Another defiance.

She swept out her arm. A gesture that mirrored her father and the guards halted. Even through their helmets, Malpesh could sense them bargaining with her. Her word was law, *except...*

Whatever hold the Princess Sorella had over her guards proved short-lived.

Xorek returned from within the Citadel behind her. His sword drawn. The monster barked something that was lost under the whipcrack of skyward thunder. Sorella started. Affronted. Whatever he'd said hadn't befitted her apparent station.

Xorek shoved her aside. Hard enough to send her stumbling. He grabbed her by the forearm to stop her falling and hurled her against the edge of the crenulations. A rough safety.

The men continued their duty.

Cast askance, Princess Sorella gained an unusual perspective of the cliffside below. Malpesh could see her fully now and, it occurred to him, the reverse was now true. Princess Sorella looked down at the druid. The druid looked up at Princess Sorella. As angry as her. As powerless as her. A peasant and a royal. Both trapped under the heel of King Peliak.

Their horror was replaced by something else.

A new certainty. Born—although neither knew it entirely—of the Doctor and Peri Brown.

Whatever misapprehensions they'd had over their actions from hereon in, were firmly exiled in an instant. Turning from the revolting act mounting in the vale below, the Princess of Peladon and the Speaker of Aggedor rallied to their own respective causes.

Come what may, tomorrow would be different.

Whatever blood need be spilt to achieve it.

The second of the three rebellions against King Peliak began to take shape.

On the opposite side of the Citadel, the Doctor turned the corner and found himself in a rather large set of kitchens.

The rover loped down the stairs like a stray cat. The beam of his penlight galloping with him. He looked for all the world as though he'd always been there. Indulging in a bit of late-night snacking. It was only when he was rubbing his thumb against the rim of a rather unseemly mug that he caught a familiarly welcome sight.

Peri had the air of well-rested exhaustion, nibbling at a piece of fruit, and Frobisher, dressed in his Droll's green waistcoat, was gulping down small fish like he was a seal at an aquarium show.

The Doctor switched off his penlight.

"Closing time already?" he gasped, affectedly. "My, my, you'll never keep your clientele this way."

"Doctor!" Peri ran to him and hugged him. "Where have you been while I've been slaving away in the kitchen?"

"Slaving away on the slopes," he answered, honestly. "I've probably been cultivating the very crops you've been mangling into a stew up here."

Peri looked up at him. "Look, do you want food or not?"

He made equivocating noises. "Very well, I shan't say anything," and smiled, patting her shoulder affectionately.

"No, no, spill the proverbial beans, Doc," Frobisher crossed to him. "I'm running out of ways to keep his nibs entertained."

"Entertained?" The Doctor and Peri separated, as he pulled up a nearby stool, quizzical. Realisation dawned. "Oh, you're Peliak's jester..."

"Surprised?" asked Frobisher.

"Well, it's not your usual affair, you must admit."

"You and me both, but I am delighted to be proven wrong. I just worry about closing night. I don't think my adoring fans are going to let me go quietly."

"Well, I think we—" Hunching forward, the Doctor shuddered suddenly as his lungs emptied in a vibrato of coughs.

Peri turned to him. "You alright?"

"Mildew in the tunnels." He waved it away. "And a persistently bad cold. I think I shall need a little drink and a bite to eat. I've been walking for miles under sheer bedrock in the primordial dark."

"Okay, Doctor, just don't try the beer," smiled Peri.

"Uninspired?"

"Inspired, more like," she qualified.

“Splendid use of vocabulary,” he commended, snorting back a blocked nose. “Now, you two, tell me what’s been going on up here.”

To the Princess Sorella, the throne room was a place as familiar and homely as her own quarters. She had sat at the banqueting table on her father’s knee since she could walk. A small privilege that she had taken with a child’s humility. She’d never demanded anything. Never wanted for anything. She knew how transient those who demanded, unruly and wild, of the king were treated. Her father was constant. Her mothers fleeting.

At this very moment, though, she didn’t care.

“I have eyes to see, father,” protested Princess Sorella.

King Peliak rested his chin on his sword. “And what do you see, Sorella?”

“The blight on Ruttervoir is getting worse.” The same phrase, she felt, retold however many countless times before. “Soon it will reach Megeshra and we are no closer to understanding it than we were before. Killing more of our people will not change that.”

His eyes were closed. “It is not your providence to determine how I govern our people, daughter.”

“Princess.”

Peliak’s eyes opened. “What was that?”

“*Princess Sorella,*” she repeated. “Your Majesty, I am your daughter and... and I always will be... but I am also a princess of the Citadel of Peladon. For my fathers and forefathers. I will come one day to rule over one of the provinces. That is not our whole realm, but still a great responsibility.”

“And one not to be squandered.” The leisurely tones in his voice began to harden like ice.

“No.” Her hand brushed against her crown. “But I cannot remain only your daughter, I must also be the princess. That is my right and my duty.”

“Surely, your thoughts are mine?” he puzzled. “Your needs, mine. Your views, mine.”

“Perhaps they’re not.” She shook her head, sad with desperation. “Perhaps I am my own person and I hold my own counsel. Perhaps that is a good thing.”

“What could you have to say that I would have never heard before?”

“I want the freedom to choose, father.”

His face darkened. “Do you not have it?”

“The freedom to choose for others. Give them their freedom.”

His back arched, his bearded features looked on her not dotingly, but with an air of almost... She couldn't believe it was anger. She wouldn't. Sorella saw no longer her father, but the king. An alien and terrible being she'd seen loosed on others. Never on herself.

Perhaps, that was about to change.

His mouth moved. “They are freer within the walls of the Citadel of Peladon than they ever could be out there on the mountains. They are within arm's reach of my guidance, my counsel and my law.”

“And yet so many die, father.” Princess Sorella met his eye. “So many of them *die*.”

“So many fail, daughter.”

“I don't want...” She held back her tears. Fear, more than sorrow prompted them. “I don't want to believe my father is a murderer and...”

“And?”

Sorella steeled herself. “I don't wish to believe King Peliak to be a liar.”

His hand hovered beside the throne. “You are beginning to bore me, daughter. You would not do well to bore me.”

“Did you ever intend for me to rule?” she asked. “Was I ever going to be anything other than *your* daughter?”

“You wish the truth?” Peliak dipped his head.

“I wouldn't be here seeking it otherwise.”

He ran his fingers through his beard. “This impudence will pass.”

It took a few moments for that to sink in for Sorella.

“What...?” she managed.

“It will pass. You will mature beyond this and agree with me once more,” he leant back. “As you have in the past. It is inevitable.”

Sorella was stunned. “Has nothing I've said moved you?”

“It is nothing I haven't heard from the village of Walpole, Stokebram and many, many others...”

“Surely that *means* something?” She stared deep into his eyes, trying to find the bluff, the misapprehension. “Surely it must? From your own daughter, at least.”

“You wished to be more than my daughter. You must also be the princess.” He smiled. “The princess does not govern. Only the king.”

“And anything I’ve said—?”

He leant forward. “It is meaningless, daughter. You haven’t the mind for it.” He waved a hand as if dusting the arm of his chair. “Away.”

Sorella cast her thoughts back to the kitchen and her meeting with Peri and Cook among the servitors of the castle. Plotting with a reluctance now far from her thoughts.

She’d seen the exhaustion, anger and fear in their faces. It was why she’d never visited the kitchens. She’d thought because it wasn’t her place. In reality, it was cowardice. To avoid seeing the faces scalded and scolded by the brutality of the king’s Court. The regime that let people like Xorek thrive and Walpole’s villagers wither.

It was very easy to fend off each challenge sitting on the Citadel’s throne. Princess Sorella wondered how King Peliak would react if he were in the kitchens, instead?

On a kitchen stool, the Doctor flicked a furtive finger through a battered copy of *Moominpappa at Sea* and listened to Peri and Frobisher’s tales of the Citadel. The botanist’s own tribulations as servant and slave, and the whifferdill’s Scheherazade routine whose tapestry of illusion frayed ever thinner by the day.

“And not a single transmogrification?” asked the Doctor.

“Nothing,” Frobisher admitted. “Although... I suppose each day’s new entertainment was a shape-shift in its own right.”

“Certainly some unusual shapes being thrown down here.” Peri rubbed the dead skin from her hands. “I think there’s more of me in that mash than there is potato...”

“What about King Peliak, though? What can be done, skipper?”

“Among wider Peladon? *Mmn*. I won’t lie to you both.” The Doctor bookmarked a page with his thumb. “Things are as bad as they can get in Walpole. If the conditions there continue, I don’t see many in the village surviving beyond the next winter.”

“What’s midwinter look like on Peladon?” asked Peri. “Hail and icicles?”

“That’s not too far removed from the truth, my dear Peri. The rain never ceases. Even in the darkest hour of solstice. Without food for themselves, never mind for the Citadel, the carnage for Walpole and the villages like it will be absolute. Still, *still*, there is contention, however, over whether or not they should fight back.”

She leaned over. “Oh, *reassure* us, why don’t you?”

“Well, we might be able to do something about that,” Frobisher announced, proudly. “I’ve got Peliak’s guards to consider confronting him. If the king refuses to listen to his own guardsmen they might join with the villagers and enact a regime change. Clever, right?”

“I think I’ve helped convince the women of the castle to stage a protest against their treatment, too,” added Peri. “I think I’ve managed to convince Princess Sorella there’s another way. A better one. She’ll be talking with her father about it now.”

“And I think I’ve found a way to help the Might of Aggedor bring...” The Doctor closed the paperback and tapped it against his upper lip. “Something’s wrong.”

“Worried Peliak’s gonna take your head off?” Frobisher asked.

“Scared Aggedor wants to use you as his chew toy?” smirked Peri.

“Overconfidence. Precisely that.” He pointed at his friends.

“Things are going far too well for us.”

“Speak for yourself,” exhaled Frobisher.

“I mean now,” the Doctor clarified. “Precisely in this moment. We were sent here by a third party, if you recall?”

They nodded. Peri remembered. “Diamant, I think you said.”

“Surely this is no different to one of those Time Lord cases?” asked Frobisher.

The Doctor shook his head. “My People tend to act in the best interests of Galactic History. Not always, but as a general rule. There are more instances of Telos and the protection of Earth, then there are of Marinus and cataclysm of the Worldshapers.”

The atmosphere in the room grew heavy. The three time-travellers were well aware of the cost that had come from the Worldshapers and their vicious time-warp. The ordeal on Marinus hadn’t been that long ago. It had taken only a moment of negligence for the entire future of a planet to be hijacked and



remoulded into a brutalised wasteland. One slip had been all that Time needed...

“And Diamant?” Frobisher asked, quietly.

“I can’t say the same of them, no,” rebuffed the Doctor. “I’ve no trust for their motives or their results. Given our history, this must be one of their Labours. A test.”

“Makes you miss exam conditions...” mused Peri. “Alright, what do they *want* us to do?”

Frobisher suggested, “Maybe, they want us *not* to do something.”

Peri turned to the Doctor. “Did you ever figure out when we were?”

He nodded. “There’s a phosphorescent star map hidden in one of the passageways into the Citadel that elucidated matters. The Citadel is testament to King Erak’s tyranny, he demanded its construction, but we must be some time after Sherak’s discovery of the Aggedor.”

“Why’s that?” she asked.

The Doctor shrugged. “It’s since fallen into an obscure occult fancy. History is filled with such peaks and vales, this must be one of poor Aggedor’s vales.”

“What about contact with other cultures? Other planets?” noted Frobisher.

The Doctor shook his head. “No Princess Ellua of Earth yet. Her spacecraft isn’t due to crash for quite some time. I think we’ve arrived on the cusp of the Long Cold.”

Peri wrinkled her brow. “So, where does that leave us, really? Soon-to-be-survivors of the bitterest winter on Peladonian record?”

“*Ab-ha!*” The Doctor seemed to have it. “What if our particular Labour here is to survive and not to interfere?”

“But, interfering is what we do best, Doc.”

“Yeah, stick up for the little guy,” insisted Peri. “Overthrow the tyrants and let the people decide their own future. Fight for justice, truth and good. Isn’t that what we do?”

“I’ve had this conversation with you before, Peri.” He tapped her on the shoulder with the book’s edge. “Even we must be careful. The pattern of the Web of Time cannot typically be altered by those within the time-zones. We, however, as time-travellers exist outside of that with the power to reshape the Universe.”

“If we choose.” She looked to him. “What difference do we make?”

“Peri, I know for a fact you aren’t that naive,” he chastened, gently. “You can’t be. Not after everywhere we’ve been.”

Peri looked away. Somewhere, buried beneath the other emotions on her features, she knew that he was right. The young botanist just didn’t want to admit it.

Frobisher pursed his beak. “Where’s Peladon on the Galactic Atlas, Doc?”

“Strictly speaking?” The Doctor pared back the layers of his memory like a Telefax terminal. “61-4-291-192-2791, but that likely means nothing. It’d be more efficacious to elaborate that Peladon is intrinsically entwined with the history of dozens of Federation worlds that even by your 82nd-century still have an impact.”

“What can we do?” Peri shrugged, plainly.

The Doctor nodded, decisive. “We must be like ghosts and leave no footprints.”

“A bit late in the age for that, Doc,” Frobisher hummed.

“We’ve all set things into motion, Doctor. Even you.” Peri stood up and crossed past the table. “How are we going to stop them now? Do we even have that right?”

“We had no right to start anything in the first place,” apologised the Doctor.

She turned away from him.

“Peri, listen to me.” He moved to her, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder. “As myself, I would wish for nothing more than to carry through our intentions. I’d see it through with flying colours, Peri.” He leant closer. “However, as a Time Lord, I also have responsibilities to the wider pattern of history. The consequences if we continue are too extreme for so many lives. We’d kill so many planets in so many Galaxies with our negligence. If we act now, we might be able to avoid that bloodshed.”

Peri’s head drooped into the sink where she’d spent so many waking nights.

“It’s not fair,” she mumbled.

“I know.”

“Who promised you fair, perp?” asked Frobisher from the table, softly.

She sighed. “No one.”

“All we can do is what is right,” empathised the Doctor.  
“Sometimes it cannot be pretty or nice, but it must above all be right. Alright?”

Peri conceded. “Alright...”

“Right.” The Doctor nodded, turning to the whifferdill. “We’re all agreed, then?”

“We’re complicit, at least,” Frobisher acquiesced. “I remember the Hedrons, Doc, I know what happens if we get this wrong... You said that we must all be like ghosts. What if we did just that? Would that convince them not to listen?”

“What?” Peri frowned. “Put sheets on our heads and scare them back into feudalism?”

“Put another way, we need to put the genie back into the bottle.” The Doctor paced up and down, his hands clasped together as if in prayer. “Otherwise our actions will have devastating consequences for Peladon and the remainder of the Galactic Federation.”

“How long have we got?” Frobisher slid down from his stool.

The Doctor stared darkly at them both. “Hours. At most.”

“Why here, Malpesh?” asked Trojak.

Beneath the mountain, the headman could feel the oppressive weight of the point where Ruttervoir met Megeshra, but what struck him as most unnatural was the silence. Abject, almost agonising silence. The constant roar of thunder and rain was hushed away to the steady drip of water where stalagmite met stalactite.

“It leads directly to the Citadel,” the druid beamed. “To the Princess Sorella and to the answers that we’ve been seeking about the Long Cold.”

Trojak gazed around. “I should let you rifle through strangers’ pockets more often.”

“We could live down here,” he suggested. “Free of Xorek and his men. Free of the obligations of Peliak and that Citadel.”

The headman scratched his muttonchops. “But what of food?”

“What of it?” shrugged the druid. “We can steal it from the Citadel, surely?”

“Wouldn’t that invite further wrath upon us? Isn’t that what we’re precisely attempting to escape? You must think ahead, Malpesh—”

“At least, *I* am prepared to do something, Trojak.” He stabbed a finger into the headman’s chest. “When I die, what happens to the

Might of Aggedor? All our accumulated knowledge? They've destroyed it all, only the oral history remains. What then?"

Trojak didn't have an answer. "Have you explored these passageways more thoroughly?"

"The guard who ran away, he had a map on him that helped navigate these depths." Malpesh produced it from his sleeve. "Here."

Written on thick vellum, the routes were carved with the edge of a scalpel into the dried animal skin. It took little imagination to decipher their meaning, but then, that was the point. The guard's map could be used by anyone. Anyone at all.

"What of this?" Trojak pointed. "This bulb in the rock that opens into a wider chamber?"

Malpesh's face broadened into a grin that sent his eyes almost tapdancing with giddy animation. He beckoned the headman through the passage, lowering himself to all fours like an arachnid, and shuffling through a grimace in the rock. Just large enough to fit a Pel.

Trojak followed and found the druid gripping at the nape of his robes. He was about to protest when he realised that barely a metre away from them was a sheer slope down... down... down... towards a heady musk of...

"It smells like the Aggedor's pit," whispered Trojak.

Malpesh's grin was full of teeth. "Look below, headman."

Under the natural phosphorescence in the stalactites above, a mound of matted fur like cualagan pelt, slept on its tusk. Its breaths, rhythmic and measured, as if at any moment it could heave the mountain asunder with its arms. Confident and complacent.

They knew the animal well. It was fed beneath Walpole with what little scraps it couldn't fend for itself.

"A-Aggedor..." Trojak fumbled.

A chill entered Malpesh's voice. "Bring the others."

When the browned hem of Peri's dress caught on the edge of the armoire in the princess's chambers, she tore it clear, running her fingernails through her hair. She stood before Sorella herself, accompanied by Cook, Orgala and a few other servitors from all across the Citadel. There were even representatives among the noblewomen there.

All listening to her change of heart.

“Sorella,” she continued. “You can’t reason with Peliak. He’s afraid of nothing and no one. If you try to stand against him, he’ll... he’ll take away even more of your rights. He might even...”

Princess Sorella kneeled in front of her. “You’re afraid, aren’t you?”

“Of course, I’m afraid.” nodded Peri. “You bet I’m afraid...”

“But not of him. Of yourself.”

The botanist started, her mind here and elsewhere. “Huh?”

“You taught us, Peri, that women are the strong ones,” Sorella smiled. “Without us, without our hard work the kingdom would fall apart. We will show King Peliak just that. The women of Peladon must be respected or the Citadel will fall about his ears. Who here agrees? Show your hands.”

Peri stared as all the women raised their hands in the air.

“You see?”

“I...” Peri saw. How could she not?

“Whether you march with us today or in a day hence, know that you brought us here to this point. Be proud of your accomplishment, Peri. No one else could have done it.”

“I know... I know and that’s why I think you’re all making a big mistake,” urged the botanist. “Please. Peliak won’t tolerate any sign of disobedience. He’ll kill all of you and be glad for it. I’ve misread the situation here. Please *listen* to me, Sorella, don’t do this.”

“It is settled, Peri,” smiled Princess Sorella. “The womenfolk of Peladon *will* march.”

Her assembled rebellion flowed out from the room, leaving only Sorella, Cook and Orgala alongside Peri. The young servitor’s black eye hadn’t healed, but Peri could see a fire burning in her heart. Hot enough to scald anything it touched.

“You’ll die...” said Peri, softly. “You’ll all die.”

Orgala held her by the shoulders. “Better to die for a purpose, than to someone else’s sloth. Better to die for a reason, than just as a piece of garbage. Are we wrong?”

“Of course not.” Peri looked around. “None of you deserve this...”

“No, girl,” Cook pulled the botanist upright. “We deserve better. Don’t lose heart now.”

Sorella checked the hallway. “Is the draught prepared?”

“It’s done,” nodded Orgala. “We’re ready, your Majesty.”

“Come!” The princess held her head high. Higher than she ever had before. “We shall ascend to the throne room.”

It wasn’t in Peri’s nature to simply sit on the sidelines. She’d played peacemaker between the Doctor and her fellow travellers in the past, but it wasn’t in her nature to stay detached. As she watched them leave, Peri decided that if they were all to be damned, it’d be best they be damned together.

She rallied.

Similarly, in their quick march towards tragedy, the guardhouse was bristling with mutinous assembly.

To Frobisher, the previous atmosphere of drunken revelry seemed a distant fantasy. There was a cool, coldblooded precision to how the guards conducted themselves as they roused from their bunks to the common area. It seemed with each minute that passed another handful of young lives joined beside Grelen.

He was trying everything he knew to slow the assault, but no sleight of tongue could help him here. “Look, Peliak’s in too strong a position. I’ve checked.” Frobisher was still breathless from his tobogganing down the hallways. “Anyway, why listen to big-bird in the first place? I’m the king’s Droll, I throw shapes and keep my head, I’m not a soldier like yourselves. What difference does my opinion really make?”

One of the younger guards returned from the doorway.

“Any sign of Rolas?” asked Grelen.

The guard shook his head “He hasn’t returned from Ruttervoir, but we’ve something more pressing. The women have finally begun to mobilise.”

“Did you see—?” Frobisher was cut off.

“Alright, we’re shuffling out!” hissed Grelen. “Quiet as you can.”

“Grelen—”

“I thought over what you said, big-bird...” Grelen pulled a halberd clear from beneath the wooden slats of his bunk. “I made a request of Xorek for greater access to the armoury. He permitted us through. Do you know why?”

“I couldn’t possibly imagine,” lied Frobisher.

“The guardhouse had concerns about the rising threat of retribution from the surrounding villages. Concern that the deaths

from Stokebram and in Walpole would foment rebellion. Word travels fast. Even beyond the homing vruachags.” The stout man’s jaw hardened. “Do you know what he said?”

“He agreed with you,” murmured the whifferdill. “As a matter of fact, he probably gave you those weapons gladly, didn’t he?”

“We would arm ourselves against our own people most keenly.” The halberd came down hard against the ground. “Why not the king, I decided?”

“The women.” Frobisher understood. “You think Princess Sorella’s plotting a coup.”

“I’ve confirmation of it. A few of the gamines in the kitchens wish to become guards one day. They say it is true.”

“Loose lips...” the whifferdill cursed.

Grelen donned his helmet. “Peliak is a tyrant, he must be deposed so one of greater merit can sit atop the throne. Princess Sorella would be a just ruler for the people.”

“*If* that’s her intention, Grelen.”

“I cannot ask my men,” he looked at the assembled garrison, “any of you, to kill unjustly in the name of a man who uses the throne as a plaything to excuse his own failures. Anyone who wishes to remain. Do so now.”

Two Pels in the back removed their helmets and sat beside their bunk. Frobisher couldn’t read their expressions. One looked far too old and stubborn to fight. The other fidgeted with a youthful indecisiveness.

Grelen nodded. “Form up and move out.”

The assembled guard of the Citadel of Peladon marched through the wide arch that separated the guardhouse from the stables where the equinna rested. The sudden rush of motion barely startled the animals. They were trained for it. Their heads merely jostling from side-to-side at the impertinence of having been awakened so soon.

“But are you *sure* all the guards are onside?” asked Frobisher.

Grelen patted the nearest equinna. “They’ve sworn allegiance to our cause.”

“In my experience, people will say anything to your face and then stab you in the back.”

“I know Xorek,” he chastened. “It is easy to tell his men in the garrison. They speak a little too loud, wear their bribes a little too

proudly. Among us, our fellow guards are honourable. They will not go back on their word.”

“I don’t buy it,” Frobisher shook his head. “What guarantee do you have?”

“I—”

A yelp came from their side. Grelen and Frobisher helped up a stumbling guard, their foot caught on a bridle. Their squeak was far too high for a man of their age.

“Are you well?” asked the deputy.

“Sir,” they nodded.

Frobisher watched them go.

“We all have secrets, big-bird. Just like you.” Grelen’s hand tightened on his halberd. “This isn’t my first and it will not be my last...”

“I always suspected some overlap with the kitchens,” nodded Frobisher. “These kids... They’re relying on you, you know.”

Grelen squinted. “More than you could possibly imagine, Frobisher.”

“If you’re wrong, it’ll not be just *our* heads on spikes, Grelen, yours and mine...” the whifferdill swallowed. “It will be theirs, as well.”

“I know,” murmured the deputy.

With that, the third and final rebellion joined the growing unrest in the Citadel of Peladon.

“Malpesh? Malpesh!” The Doctor whickered to himself. “This is a fool’s errand. *Malpesh?*”

Leading from the hidden door back into the mountain’s underdark, there was no sign of the Speaker of Aggedor. Only the phosphorescent star map. The rover was relieved in many respects. Without the impediment of another Pel, all he would have to do is seal the passageway leading back to the vruachag coop outside of Walpole.

It would take some rudimentary explosives.

Fortunately, the somewhat unusual results of his culinary preparation aboard the TARDIS proved efficacious this day. From a hardy bowl of mashed potato, he’d been able to create a lump of energite. Large enough to fit as a lump in one of his hands. Strong enough to blow a hole in a dam wall.



Now, all he needed was a detonator to catalyse it. Instinctively, one hand still full of energite, he patted the pockets of—

“Your coat, Doctor.” From the darkness of the hidden passage, a folded mound of red fabric sat primly on the outstretched arms of Malpesh.

“You found your way back here,” the Doctor sighed, slipping on the coat.

The druid smiled. “And not alone.”

The *twoo-ouph* of a slide whistle signified the emergence of everything the time-traveller had feared. In discovering the passage, Malpesh had convinced Trojak to bring the village of Walpole into the mountain. He could see all manner of Pels and their children gathered into a half-starved militia. The light in their eyes, however, belied the hopelessness of their situation. Either they’d been driven mad, which the Doctor found unlikely in so short a period of time or the situation among the Might of Aggedor had changed dramatically.

“Malpesh, what have you found?” The Doctor pocketed his energite.

The druid’s eyes were red from incense. “I spoke with Megeshra’s Spirit, she has allowed us the might of her Aggedor.”

The ridged pig-like snout of the animal broke through the villagers like a bear dancing on a ball. The Doctor was aghast. The hallucinogens from the incense had tricked the olfactory capacities of the animal into its own daydream. It was now infinitely suggestible.

“Stumbling blind to the horrors of someone else’s nightmare...” he muttered.

“We could stay in the dark here, forever, Doctor. In fear. Constant and unending fear as we sit in the pit of Aggedor.” He was addressing the assembled villagers as much as the traveller.

“The Citadel, however, is just beyond these stars. We can slay the king, if we must, and be left in peace to the underdark.”

“How can I explain to you...?” grappled the Doctor. “How can I make you see reason?”

But he couldn’t. How could he dissuade a man from a delusion that he himself had known to be absolute certainty? It was, after all, how the time-traveller himself had become such an object of

fascination to the druid. To rob Malpesh of that would be to rob himself of the power to intervene.

Trojak stepped from the crowd. “Will you help us, Doctor? Can you?”

“I have no choice.” The words stuck hard against the Doctor’s teeth as he gazed up at the Aggedor. “I’m with you, Malpesh, Trojak. Until this dreamer awakes, I must be with you.” He placed a hand on its tusk. “I am sorry.” He turned to the assembled villagers. “Sorry for all of you.”

For when the Aggedor inevitably awoke from its hallucinatory stupor—driven to attack on the behalf of the animals that had invaded its den—things would turn very ugly indeed.

Sat in the throne room, King Peliak steamed in his own frustrations. His nobles were all slumbering. Loudly. Nothing he could do, not even breaking their fingers, could rouse them.

It was clear something was afoot in his Citadel. Something dire.

True to form, the Scriptor entered with a measured haste. “Your Highness, the people are marching to the throne room. You are in danger.”

“Let them come. I do not fear a rabble and they may yet provide answers.”

Xorek sprinted into the chamber, his sword drawn, and eyes wild. “*Sire, don’t drink the beer, it’s laced with—!*”

One of the young maidservants, her eye blackened, threw herself at the back of his head with a measured punch. The blow toppled him forward to the ground. His nose cracking against the stonework. The star-girl held him down and made sure he didn’t get back up to retaliate. Peliak couldn’t help but smile.

Peri ushered the Princess Sorella forward. “He’s down. It’s clear.”

“And finished,” Orgala spat on Xorek. “He’s finished.”

“After that display, you might be quite right about that,” observed King Peliak.

“*Peri?*” The voice was unmistakable. It was that of his Droll, that foolish Frobisher. “Peri, are you here? Remember what the Doc said we’d...”

As his words trailed away, the throne room filled with what must have been half the guardhouse. With Deputy Grelen at its head. His low-slung jaw and brooding eyes always made him appear a strange

caricature of himself to Peliak's eyes. Here, in this place, however, he exhibited a new purpose. It was almost as though the king were seeing the genuine article for the first time. Had he known, Peliak would never have allowed Xorek to make him deputy.

The king raised a lazy hand. "Speak."

"Father..." It was Sorella who answered. "You have created this unrest by your unjust treatment of the people. I represent the women of Peladon. We demand equality and respect for all. You need us more than you realise. If we withdraw our labour, could you cook and clean for yourself? We bear and rear the children of Peladon. Surely, this role demands honour."

"Honour? Respect?" Peliak laughed, a cruel twist to his lip. "Do you not have it, princess?"

"You're beginning to bore me, father," answered Sorella. "You would not do well to bore me."

The king rose from his throne, drawing his whip. "You insolent...  
*pup!*"

*"Even the mighty Aggedor goes against you, Peliak!"*

Peliak swung his head. In the doorway, the gleeful taunt came uncharacteristically from the mousey druid, Malpesh of Walpole. Behind him stood what must have been a sizeable majority of his village.

"So, Grelen, you spoke truth," nodded the king. "The chance of rebellion from Ruttervoir was always in our midst."

As he spoke, the Doctor, Peri and Frobisher, despite their best efforts, were gathered to the front of the crowd. The Time Lord took the opportunity while he could. A little good could perhaps be affected yet.

"You've an opportunity here, Peliak, to right a series of terrible wrongs inflicted against your kith and kin." The Doctor drew his arm wide, somehow encompassing each of the three cornerstones of Pel society in turn. "These people have shown they are willing to unite."

"Against me," growled King Peliak.

"And against the Long Cold that threatens your realm." He clutched his lapels. "Do you believe that you can stand alone against such a phenomenon and live?"

"While I live, the kingdom of Peladon lives on."

“At the expense of your heir? Her future? The future of those she serves and serve her? You would risk all that?”

“Where’s Xorek...?” Frobisher, closest to the ground, was the first to notice his absence.

Peri searched the crowd. “Dammit...!”

“Where is he, Peliak?” demanded the Doctor.

The king didn’t answer.

The Doctor turned. “You there...!”

“Scriptor,” answered the seneschal.

“Where?”

“It was Grelen who suggested the idea of revolt.” The Scriptor shrugged with unnatural calm. “Contingencies were put into place to handle such an occasion.”

The king stood from his throne, thick eyebrows scowling. “If I leave this room, alive or dead, within the next day... Xorek has been commanded to destroy the food-stores for the entire Citadel.”

Trojak stumbled. “Everything?”

“Everything.” The king took each dangerous step towards the door with leisurely abandon. “Strike me down. Destroy me. But if my reign as king should end, so too shall any hope of the lands of Peladon surviving the Long Cold.”

“He’ll do it, too,” growled Peri. “They’re as nuts as each other.”

The Doctor tapped her on the shoulder, Frobisher on his head. He had the terrible look of someone attempting to excuse themselves from a funeral. Although his face betrayed no emotion, Peri and Frobisher had spent enough time in his company to recognise the sadness behind his eyes.

“What can we do?” asked Cook.

“We’ll figure out something,” Sorella reassured.

Grelen sunk against the wall. “I got us into this...”

“Where are the stores?” inquired Sorella.

Orgala shook her head. “It’s too far to reach from here.”

“Can he see us from here?” demanded Trojak.

“There’s direct line of sight for the doors...” Grelen threw off his helmet.

“Aggedor,” Malpesh almost wailed. “Aggedor, I call upon the Spirit of Megeshra. Surely... Surely, she can provide guidance?”

A sharp pain gripped Frobisher as the Doctor grabbed him by the scruff of his feathers. Peri, too, could feel a similar pinch.

He pulled them through the furore of crowds as measured discussion was overcome by the panic of chaos. The three time-traveller's bodies buffeted against beautiful royal fabrics, sodden peasant's garb, the torn remnants of servitor's rags, and the occasional cuirass of an armoured Pel guard. All the motley parade of Peladon. Presented for their edification in their deepest moment of tragedy.

It wasn't the souring nature of the crowd that had prompted the Doctor to flee, however.

It was Aggedor.

As he'd anticipated, the hallucinogenic properties of the incense had evaporated. No Venusian lullaby was going to soothe this beast now. The writhing terror of the surrounding Pels, their sweat and shouts, drove it into a state of fear. From there, as the Citadel's inhabitants shoved and battered against it, like an animal rattled in its cage, the Aggedor's own panic rose to gorge. It needed to flee. To run. Return to the dark where it had been nesting. Free of this malign influence that had driven it to such unfamiliar caves.

Its instinct turned to a killing mania.

The Aggedor went wild.

Pulling his friends tight to him, the Doctor didn't see who fell first. He heard Malpesh's voice sever sharply in a gargle. Grelen's halberd scraped against the tusk, but there wasn't enough room to manoeuvre, then he, too, fell silent. Princess Sorella was gathering her people towards her. Her father screaming something at the carnage. One of the wall sconces was snapped loose. The smell of flame and smoke burst through the throne room into the hallway.

But that was all behind them now.

All that could be heard in the hallway was the gentle ruffling flame of the torches, the bursts of thunder and the *pitter-patter* of the unceasing rain.

The Doctor could feel Peri's tears against his waistcoat.

Frobisher was heaving.

He wouldn't be deterred. Not now. Not when they were so close to getting out of this alive. "Keep walking. To the passageways. *Keep walking!*"

## EPILOGUE

Midday. The beach was on the fourth moon of Wiard.

Frobisher recognised the fact from three other satellites that sat in almost perfect conjunction. The string of moons and their single planet framed between the cubist ribs of Space Station L-12. Hung heavy in the sky. Paled by the crystal-blue of a tropical stratosphere and low-slung clouds.

Along the sky's spine, where azure met cerulean, unhurried tourists walked along the wicker piers leaving nothing but thoughts of the present moment. Their swimsuits and casualwear, the only twitches of movement in the vast ocean. Aside from a cooling breeze and the lap of the waves on the sandy beach, the resort was still. Absolutely still.

As was the TARDIS.

Within the transcendental time-ship, the mood was noticeably bleak.

One if its number had already left to escape it. Peri had donned the nearest item from the hatstand—a sailor hat in leghorn straw from what the Doctor remarked was ‘the more fashionable end of the 1870s’—and sat down on the nearest wooden sunchair outside. Her mood far from sunny itself.

At the console, the Doctor checked the information system's records on the nearest vidscreen. A hand in his pocket. “Peladonian history: King Peliak... attempted coup during the Long Cold... Unsuccessful. Any better, Frobisher?”

From the open doorway, Frobisher scratched his head. “Yeah. Better, Doc, thanks.”

“One more treatment in the laboratory before we leave, I think,” he nodded.

“What caused it?”

The Doctor wrinkled his brow. “You were dancing to the whim of a madman for quite some time, my friend. I would put your latest bout of monomorphia down to pure exhaustion.”

“Things could've gone very differently if I—”

“Not another word against yourself. Shan't stand for it. You did your best.”

“What about us? Did we...?”

The rover toggled a nearby stud and leant back. “No mention of any penguins, championing scullions, unusual star maps or multicoloured coats. Just three spirits who led the people astray...”

Frobisher nodded. Solemn. He raised a webbed foot to take a step forward onto the wicker weave and stopped.

The whifferdill shook his head. “I’m never stepping outside the TARDIS again...”

“Here or there, the mood’s the same,” Peri called, sour, pulling her legs up under her knees. “The only difference is out here you’ll get burnt.”

Frobisher felt the Doctor pat him on the head. “A little Vitamin D, I think. Help build up any deficiencies from Peladon’s overcast atmosphere...” He crooked a finger. “Come along, my penguin chum.”

The Doctor, as he always did in the face of tragedy, took the first step into this brand new world. A planet that knew nothing of their previous trials and tribulations.

Frobisher followed.

There was an electric enthusiasm to the resort’s air that stood Frobisher’s feathers on end. As if there was a want, a *demand*, for him to conform to a shallow giggling joke, rather than feel anything.

From a tray, Frobisher picked up the nearest exotic fruit juice and poured it down his beak. The electronic sensor, registering the glass’s absence, displayed a twenty mazuma charge in LCD lights on the tray’s edge. He didn’t care.

“Doctor...” Peri’s voice slowed. “Isn’t that...?”

Frobisher looked up. It was impossible. Peladon was thousands of spatials away, at least. It couldn’t have been him.

As the Scriptor walked towards them, the trio stared at his eyes which became swirling twists of colour. His voice changed from the thin reedy timbre of an old man, to the sound of a river coursing down a mountainside, overlaid with a deep, bass voice.

“Now, is your time of reckoning,” intoned the Scriptor.

“Diamant!” the Doctor pointed. “It was you, watching us all along.”

“Of course, Doctor.”

“What, us, too?” asked the whifferdill.

“Of course, Frobisher. We kept tabs on every action of the Doctor’s faithful minions.”

Peri stood up to face Diamant. “Minions? Now listen here, you creep, you abandoned us. We had no choice but to get involved with what was happening.”

“Were you responsible for... *this*?” Frobisher gestured to himself. “My monomorphia hasn’t been this bad in a while.”

“Nothing to do with Us, Frobisher.” Diamant turned to the Doctor. “Let Us get down to business. Are you happy with your conduct on Peladon? Do you think you’ve done a good job?”

“Does it matter?” he deflected.

“What’s wrong with trying to help the oppressed?” demanded Peri.

“Nothing, Miss Brown. But what gives you the right to decide which regime needs overthrowing? You couldn’t wait to enlighten the natives. Peri knows best. There are many, so many Pels who are dead because you encouraged them to rebel.”

“I know that more than anyone!” she snapped. “God... I know that more than...”

“When the Doctor realised, we did try and stop them. We tried to...” Frobisher started to say before he lowered his beak to his chest.

“This is what your meddling does, Doctor. It’s a lesson you never learn. Innocents are thrown under that monstrous lie of the Greater Good.”

The Doctor’s glare hardened. “Potted history, Diamant, what did the Gallifreyan records miss?”

“In the original timeline, with Malpesh dead, Peliak will see the potential for Aggedor as a force for order. The king’s own wounds will be advertised as his efforts to ‘tame’ the animal to his will. Many die. Your Deputy Grelen is among the casualties. Peliak’s daughter—”

“Sorella,” interjected the Doctor, pointedly. “Her name was Sorella.”

“She will be too wounded from the attack to attempt another open rebellion in her lifetime.”

“That’s horrible...” Peri swallowed.

Frobisher’s eyes were distant. “And I encouraged Grelen to try...”



“Eventually,” continued Diamant, “due to their collective influence, unaware of one another, the king and the princess independently eventuate the religion that spawns the High Priests. The Might of Aggedor will remain a fringe cult, but that religion will play a significant part in Federation—”

“Enough.” The Doctor thumbed his waistcoat. “Tell me the worst, what’s the result of our presence?”

“Your interference unravels established history. The Citadel no longer survives the Long Cold. All three-hundred starve. Without that political capital, there is no one for Princess Ellua of Earth to turn to in her time of need. Peladon never contacts or enters the Galactic Federation—”

“And, let me guess, instead becomes target of the Earth Empire?”

“You and We know better,” Diamant wagged a finger. “After the discovery of trisilicate and a dead member of royalty, Peladon will be used to extend the dying colonial rhetoric of an Empire kicking and screaming its way into a Federation. Peladon competes against Mars, Centauri, Arcturus, the Fifth Galaxy and even, eventually, your precious Earth, demanding independent dominion status.”

The Doctor looked to his companions. “Millions die.”

“And now?” asked Frobisher.

Diamant hesitated. “Peladon will remain in the dark ages. You merely accelerated the inevitable, but that was a close one.”

“For all of us.” The Doctor stepped within a hair’s breadth of Diamant. “Dabble with my life in these Labours if you must, but leave my friends out of it. This will be the last time.”

“Or else?”

“Or else...” He tapped them in the chest. “I might just find out how far that Plurality of yours truly stretches. Think on it.”

Diamant understood the threat. “Your reaction was not what I expected.”

“No?”

“No...” They nodded. “Very well. It was never Our intention to destroy.”

“It never is. Leave us be. The ghosts of Peladon can fade into the darkness where we belong.”

Diamant turned to leave, but had just one more parting shot. “Enjoy the sun.”

“I’ll work on my tan.” The Doctor smiled, affectedly.

In a swirl of oil-like patterns, Diamant seemed to catch on a ray of sunlight and was vanished in an updraft. Like lilac-blue bubbles. Higher and higher until no one would've been the wiser for their passing visit.

In their place, the Doctor stood, his hands in his pockets, staring out at the silhouette of Space Station L-12. From his left, he pulled the lump of energite from the Citadel kitchens into his hand and threw it with as much force as he could muster. The shock of impact against the water caused it to combust. It blew in a spectacular font that caused nearby tourists to applaud.

Peri wrapped a hand around his arm. "Better?"

He nodded, placing a hand against the back of Frobisher's head. "As that dreadful Diamant said, that was a close one."

"How can we continue?" Peri stared out to sea. "I'll feel like I'm treading on eggshells. A lot of people died because of us."

"Grelen was an honourable man, Doc," muttered Frobisher. "His death is on me. Him and everyone who died from Stokebram. Thought I was doing the right thing, but I got him and who knows how many others killed."

"You? I led those poor women to their deaths." Peri sounded angry. "I gave them so false a hope, they clung to it like it was their last. It didn't matter. None of it mattered."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that..." murmured the Doctor, so softly it could easily have been mistaken for a seagull on the wind.

"What?" his friends asked in unison.

The Doctor turned to face them, the barest hint of a smile on his lips. "Diamant. Why bother coming to us on Wiard, a whole Galaxy away in the 41st-century, to gloat, if they knew with absolute certainty that we had failed?"

Peri and Frobisher digested the fact for a moment.

"Come to think of it, there wouldn't be a point, would there?" asked the whifferdill.

"Diamant brought us to Peladon," the Doctor noted. "Marooned us at the top of that tree at the mercy of baying cualagans. We may have acted in haste, we can easily blame ourselves, and we are certainly not beyond reproach... But our actions were halted before they could grow any worse. Not by Diamant, but by ourselves. *We* made that choice. Not them."

A minute of silence betrayed their unease.

“Erimem’s future is safe, at least,” Peri tried, as consolation. “We didn’t take that out from underneath her.”

Something caught the Doctor’s eye. “Come with me for a moment.”

He walked over to a crook of white metal, shaped like a hunched lamppost, and pressed a stud beneath the vidscreen. “*We, of the Alpha Centauri delegation to Peladon, welcome the construction of a new embassy. We hope with the aid of Queen Erimem, in her role as Federation ambassador, that this will be the first of several such outreach programmes to strengthen ties between Peladon and the wider Galactic community.*”

The picture shifted to a GBC1 presenter. “*In further news, the first Peladonology exhibition curated by a native Pel has been unveiled on the planet Kaltarr in the Museum of—*”

The Doctor muted the vidscreen. “As I’ve said to you before, history does not begin or end when we arrive or leave, my friends.” He held a hand on his lapel. “Its time patterns are in constant flow like water down a sculpture. You can’t change a single line of history, but that’s not limited to tragedies, you know. Its triumphs are true, as well. You wouldn’t imagine how many would want to change those.”

“How long were we really on Peladon?” asked Frobisher.

“A month or two, at the very most, but consider what you were able to do with that time. Consider!” The Doctor sat on the nearest sunchair. “You rallied royalty and their guard to your cause. With enough will and drive of your own to create bonds that were prepared to withstand the strain of war.”

“What about you, Doctor?” Peri asked.

“I may... have assisted with the Long Cold.” He scratched his neck. “Where I could. A small nudge in the right direction. Insulation in their thatching, among other things. Enough to keep any stragglers in the village alive.”

“Hey.” Something occurred to Peri. “Sorella lived. How many others lived, too?”

“It’s impossible to say,” answered the Doctor, honestly.

“Yeah, but... Suppose that Cook, Emerada or Orgala made it out? Their minds wouldn’t have changed, they would’ve...” She couldn’t help but grin. “I saw a book on the spirits of Peladon in her chambers. Do you think the High Priests came from their influence?”

“The High Priests of Peladon, whether earnest or misguided, always try to act in the interests of the *people* of Peladon. Always. I’d say there was a very good chance. Perhaps, that is Malpesh’s legacy, also?”

“And Grelen?” asked Frobisher. “And the others killed...?”

“Sorella lived,” repeated the Doctor. “That means that Xorek, or even her own father, couldn’t lay hand on her.”

“Wait a minute...” He jostled his head. “Doc, that implies that there were more than a few in the garrison at the guardhouse who still followed Grelen’s spiel.”

“The protector perishes, but his creed lives on.”

“Diamant did say we accelerated things...”

“You cannot change history. Not one line. Not its tragedies, *nor* its triumphs. It wasn’t a victory that day, but perhaps...” The Doctor raised his finger. “We only saw the tragic failure of *that* day. Perhaps, the wider history tells a greater story of triumph.”

“Gotta admit, it’d be interesting to find out,” Peri chewed her lip.

The Doctor un-muted the vidscreen. “*This first exhibit from the reign of Queen Thalira tells...*”

“Shall we?” he invited.

Battered from their experiences on Peladon, the Doctor, Peri and Frobisher took their first opportunity to relax in the sun of Wiard. Peladon’s unyielding quicksilver clouds and the blue fire of its storms receding deep into their tired memories.

The Doctor pulled an arm up behind his neck and closed his eyes.

This was only a short detour, he knew. Later, after its passengers had rested, the TARDIS would flash on its way, hurtling through the vast coral Galaxies of Space and the wending hourglass of Time, in search of another wondrous horizon.

**– THE END?**

# SCOREBOARD

Diamant was everywhere in nowhere. Reclining, if such a word could be used in the context of Their Plurality, in the dimension where thoughts go when they are forgotten.

Here, They were in Their element.

Extending Themselves beyond the dimensional vanishing points, towards the central axis of Time from the empty space that circled it, required a certain degree of... concentration. Frankly, the experience, when prolonged, could prove an absolute bore in the wrong circumstances.

Had these been the wrong circumstances, They wondered?

“We were so sure...” They deliberated with Themselves. “So sure that his hubris would trip him up.”

“There was more behind his bluster than We expected,” another aspect tutted. “He certainly wasn’t invulnerable, but his enduring determination, his persistence, that was something we overlooked.”

“It does seem to be a certain enduring character trait.”

“A lot had changed since China. There was a chance...” The fractal M-form sighed. “No, We’re quite right. We discovered far more than We expected, just along different lines.”

“Well,” shrugged another aspect, “onwards and upwards.”

Diamant found that expression rather quaintly amusing. Its many fingers, all faces of differing shapes and contortions, chuckled as the Doctor might once have.

“Should We try another incarnation, again? This one seems rather content with his own demons.”

“Does he?”

“For now.”

“And more so than King Peliak.”

“Boredom as a disease... How true that was. Even if he was ultimately an untoward wretch.” Diamant shifted Their lower wavelengths. “That said... These ephemerals can be pushed far further than We initially expected.”

“Perhaps, We’re not finished with this incarnation...”

“Perhaps not...”

“Inner demons?”

“The Doctor’s travels through Outer Space are well-known, what if his own through Inner Space?”

“We shall look into it for Us.”

A further element added, “We think it’s time We called in a specialist.”

“Yes,” They agreed. “A being who will take great delight in, let Us say, ensnaring our multicoloured Doctor?”

“They must be someone who will *entertain* Us, too,” clarified the other aspect.

“It is decided, then. What fun We shall have building Our house of nightmares.”

“How far can the Doctor be pushed?”

“Given what’s coming...” The Plurality’s fractal redshift resembled what temporal physicists may have interpreted as a smile.

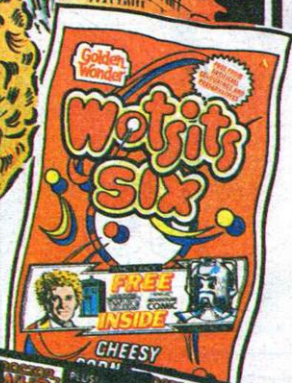
“As far as we dare.”

**– TO BE CONTINUED!**

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