

# Short Stories

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# Chapter 1

## Nightmare of Bethlehem

### A Doctor Who Short Story

The mourners stood around the grave. The day was grey and drizzling. There was a damp haze in the autumn air insufficient to penetrate the thick wool stuff of the mourners coats but misting their faces. Their faces were all solemn; “but they will all sleep sound tonight, nevertheless” thought one gravedigger. He was too old and cynical to be much impressed by the relatives; a man and woman standing together a discreet distance from the vicar. Opposite the couple stood a third man. He was wearing somber brown with a black armband and his hands kept moving, clasped together within his black leather gloves, writhing over and over each other.

“I am the resurrection and the life, sayeth the Lord, and he that believeth in me though he be dead yet shall he live and he that liveth and believeth will never die”.

The mourners left the graveside after the vicar had ended the ceremony. The words seemed to hang on the air in the silence that followed. But as their feet reached the path, they broke into low conversation that reached the two gravediggers waiting respectfully on the sidelines.

“My thanks for agreeing to officiate,” the woman was saying to the vicar, “in such difficult circumstances.”

“By which she means the girl shouldn’t have been buried on sanctified grounds at all,” muttered the second gravedigger who was younger and more garrulous than his companion, “still I expect you’re used enough to this up at Parris House, eh, Frank?”

Frank grunted non-committally into his whiskers and hefted his spade. His companion fell silent. Frank had worked at Parris House for nigh on three decades

and he was known to be protective of the place. The younger gravedigger wondered whether he had gone too far.

“Still, there’s no proof, I suppose,” he said by way of a peace offering. “She might just have tripped. You can get a nasty fall from stairs.”

“It was a tragic accident.” The lone man had remained behind the departing vicar. “You two have work to do. I suggest you do it rather than engaging in idle gossip.”

Frank touched his cap and scowled at his companion. Wordlessly they began filling in the grave. The lone man strode off in the opposite direction to the mourners, to the large 17th century manor house behind which the small chapel and graveyard were situated.

The elder gravedigger sent the young man away once they had finished. He remained in the graveyard, tidying up around the headstones and locking the heavy wooden gates so that no one could get in or out that way. He became aware of footsteps echoing on the pathway that lead down from the Parris House. He turned to look but the fog had rolled down obscuring its facade and he couldn’t see who approached. He suppressed a feeling of dread that was only natural with the lowering skies. He tried not to think of the whispers among the guests at Parris House that Abigail Barnett had been chased to her death by a terrifying stranger who lurked in the empty rooms of its unused wing.

To be on the safe side however, he returned to his tools and lifted his spade. The footsteps continued to come closer at a measured slow pace and a form gradually resolved itself in the mist. Its looming shapelessness made Frank take a step back until he realised it was a man in an invernness coat without a hat. The coat’s short cape had concealed the outline of his arms giving him more the appearance of a shambling mound than man. The mists parted to reveal his features; brown hair, beard and mustache. He walked purposefully down the pathway.

“Hello, sir,” said Frank. He’d not seen this man before, but his coat was well-made and he didn’t have the look of a servant.

“Good day, I wondered if you could be so good as to let me out.”

“I’m sorry sir, you’ll have to get Dr. Gordon to do that.” Frank might not have recognised the man, but he had worked too long at Parris House to let people out. The doctors could do that if he was a visitor, not a guest.

“Don’t be an idiot man! I’m in a hurry. Open the gates!”

“I’m sorry sir, I can’t do that.” Frank eyed the man and, though he was not aware of the movement, he hefted the spade and braced himself as if to meet an onslaught.

The man walked to the graveside looking down at the newly laid earth. “There is evil afoot up there,” he said not looking at Frank. “This was only the first death.” Now he looked at him, his eyes angry. “I will not forget that you refused to let me out.” Then he turned and the mist swallowed him up once more.

## Part I

Laura Croy sat with her sister in the bay window of the visitors’ parlour. A pale autumn sunshine fell through the window and sparkled on the silverware before them. The staff had brought them tea. A teapot sat between them and small cakes were arranged on a decorative plate. The plate was chipped Laura noticed. Nothing in this place was ever quite right.

“Why don’t you serve the tea?” she prompted gently. Kate had been sitting placidly opposite her for a while now, as the tea had first brewed and now probably stewed between them.

“You think I should?” asked Kate nervously.

“You are the hostess and I’m the guest.”

A look of mild panic crossed Kate’s face. But she stood up and hovered uncertainly over the silver teapot and the china mugs. Her hands stopping first over the small milk jug, and then the sugar bowl and then the teapot.

“I’d like some milk in mine, please,” said Laura hoping to help her out.

Kate picked up the milk jug and with shaking hands poured a splash of milk into each teacup then filled them with tea. With a look of relief she sat down again.

Laura picked up her teacup. “This is a much more civilised place to meet than the old room,” she observed. “I think the new owners have some very sensible ideas. It is much better to have as normal a life as possible, don’t you think?”

“Yes, it is much better,” said Kate.

“I hear they have new treatment methods,” said Laura, probing for a real opinion.

Kate smiled suddenly, “Yes it is much better. They don’t lock us up so much,” she paused and her face fell, “but I have bad dreams,” she whispered.

Laura and Kate went for a walk round the gardens. Laura rather valued the opportunity. Under the old administration she had always had to meet Kate in a small, enclosed, wood-paneled room. A stocky, grumpy looking nurse had sat stoically and disinterestedly in a hard upright chair by the door. Laura had never understood the need for that. Kate might have been of a highly nervous disposition, too swayed by her emotions and not enough by her sense nor her morals, but she was hardly a *physical* threat to anyone - let alone her own sister.

“Oh look! There’s Mr. Hardcourt!” said Kate, her face lighting with genuine interest for the first time. She let go of Laura’s arm and ran across the lawn, the train of her cream day dress rustling over the grass behind her. She stopped before an ancient gardener who was weeding among the flower bed. Laura frowned in disapproval. It was hardly the way to greet a servant. She followed at a more dignified pace.

The gardener waited for her to arrive, his cap in his hands. Laura could see that Kate was talking to him excitedly and that he was replying to her in a quiet tone. As Laura came up he fell silent. Kate looked at her and then at the gardener again. He must have been in his fifties, his face tanned by wind, rain and sun. He had short, curly white hair. A wide mustache and side burns framed his face. He was not especially large but Laura guessed that he was surprisingly strong. His arms had a muscled look beneath his shirt-sleeves and the garden grime. An awkward silence fell while Laura and the gardener both looked expectantly at Kate.

“Perhaps you could introduce me?” asked Laura.

“Oh,” said Kate, “Laura, this is Mr. Hardcourt. Mr. Hardcourt, this is Laura.” Mr. Hardcourt nodded his head at her. “Mrs. Croy?” he asked, uncertain.

“That’s right,” said Laura.

“Miss Young has been so good as to take an interest in the garden,” he said. “I was just explaining how I’m hoping to plant a hedge along this drive here.”

The path swept up through formal gardens, from the wrought iron gates of Parris House to the imposing facade of columns and stone swagged windows built by some restoration noble.

“I think it’s such a shame,” said Kate. “I like to be able to see all across the gardens.”

The gardener grunted, “That’s all very well, Miss, but anyone in the gardens can be seen from the gate.” He glanced at Laura. “The local children will come and shout things,” he said. “It weren’t a problem when no one came out into the gardens much, but now they do...”

Laura nodded in understanding, "It sounds like a sensible idea. Was it Dr. Gordon's?"

The gardener looked embarrassed, "No Ma'am, I don't think he has much interest in the gardens except insofar as the guests like them. But he has given me permission to maintain them as I see fit."

"I'm sure he has chosen wisely." Laura looked at this gardener and ventured a probing question. "It seems much better; the new administration of Dr. Gordon's."

The gardener scratched his head. "Yes Ma'am," he said after a moment's hesitation. The unspoken "but..." floated in the air between them. To press him further would have been well beyond the bounds of propriety and, with Kate there, it was possible it would be repeated to someone inappropriate.

She thought a moment and then hazarded, "I hope the change has not unsettled the guests too much."

"They have been," he hesitated, "more troubled of late but I am sure they will settle down." He paused and scratched his cheek, a habitual gesture, she guessed. Then he seemed to shrug mentally and heaved his spade. "Now, if you'll excuse me." It was clear he would say no more.

He had been running for some time now. At some point, he knew, he had been aware of where it was he was heading. But somewhere along the way he had lost his bearings. Now he passed trees and bushes and hedges as they loomed up out of the fog with the vague feeling that he knew them and should be able to work out the way but all the time the terror was at his heels. It hounded him through the avenues, breathing on his neck, pounding along behind him and he never had the opportunity to stop and think or to stop and plan. If for a minute or two he could lose it and gain a moment of equilibrium then he would be able to get out of here. On he ran. This one is beginning to rationalise. Rationalise, yes, he needed to rationalise. His heart was pounding, safety was so close but he had lost his way. He turned through an archway and ducked under the branches of a weeping willow and nearly fell into the stream. The stream! he was on the wrong side of the stream, how had he ended up on the wrong side of the stream? He was going to have to go all the way back. He kept running. There was a second archway ahead. If he went through that then the terror would follow him but he could backtrack. He ducked through the archway. He didn't recognise this avenue but he'd been sure it led back the way he had come. No time to stop and think. He pounded

on. He heard the snuffling baying sound of terror approaching the archway. Don't think, just run. No, no, think. If he didn't think he would never get out of here. Think. He kept running. Think. The hedge, could he hide in the hedge? Get a moment to think. He leapt for the hedge and to his surprise scrambled over it. Keep running. The terror would be over the hedge too in a minute. No stop. The idea was to stop. The terror hadn't turned into the last avenue yet. It would lose him. He must think. I think its working! I think he's gaining control. Wait that wasn't his thought. He stopped, panting. The panic still rose in his throat, urged him on, but there was someone else in his head, someone was watching this. Slow breathing, close them out, shut down a few neural pathways, so, slow breathing, slow breathing.

Kate was sitting in the main parlour reading one of the romances Laura had left behind her. She didn't much mind living in Parris house. She'd been there since she was about fifteen when something bad had happened and it had been easiest to hide from the world. Sometimes she wondered what it was like out in the world, away from the regular hours and locked doors, but by and large she had no real desire to find out. It sounded like a frighteningly complex place full of money problems and strange rituals with which you had to conform and endless decisions that had to be taken. In Parris House you never had to make a decision. You were told when to eat and when to sleep and when to sit quietly in the parlour with a book. Though of late, she had sensed that there was something or someone in the corridors. Some of the other residents had whispered to her of a man who stalked at night and who had chased Abigail to her death. Dr. Gordon had assured her this was not the case but she shuddered and crossed herself as she had seen Daniela Guinchiglia do.

There was a sound of shouting in the hallway. Kate looked up. It was unmistakably the sound of Mr. Jones' voice. Mr. Jones shouted a lot. The door burst open and in he came followed by one of the new doctors; a small nervous man called Dr. Smith who always looked vaguely as if he was being chased by something.

"Kate!" shouted Mr. Jones. Kate spent much of her time trying to get nice men, like Frank Hardcourt, to call her by her Christian name whereas Mr. Jones had never even asked for permission. He always called her 'Kate' and she found she resented the familiarity. She put down her book.

“Do you know what this is?” he shoved a small crystal under her nose.

“Some sort of crystal? I’m afraid I know nothing of geology, Mr. Jones,” she shrugged, trying to show she wasn’t interested in his crystal.

“Doctor,” he corrected. He was always insisting he was a Doctor of something. Today, it seemed, he was a doctor of geology.

“Yes Doctor,” she said meekly, Dr. Smith had advised her to humour him. He was suffering a mania, said Dr. Smith, and the important thing was to try and keep him calm.

He looked at her intently, his eyes wide and goggling. She always felt discomfited by that stare. It was as if some part of him thought that he was the sort of person that stared wildly at people and yet, in his quieter moments, he had a sort of withdrawn thoughtfulness that suited his face much better. “It’s a memory crystal,” he said.

“Oh.”

He stood up, suddenly withdrawing into himself once more, the heavy eyelids lowering. “You don’t know what a memory crystal is, do you?” he asked. Mutely she shook her head. At moments like these when he suddenly became the still point in the midst of all the action, he was transformed. A sense of real power emanated from him and she trembled.

“Mr. Jones,” said Dr. Smith, “it is just a small ornament, nothing more.”

Mr. Jones closed his eyes. He was an ugly man. His nose was big and shapeless. Kate had sometimes wondered whether it had been broken at some point in the past, though the crook was not so pronounced that she could be sure. He had close cropped brown hair, beard, mustache and side-burns, although he had been clean-shaven when he first arrived. He had been semi-conscious and ill for most of his first few weeks there. The barber they had sent for, once he recovered, had insisted on the facial hair, saying it suited him. Kate thought it did. When he was quiet it gave him the air of an elder statesman and she didn’t think she could have refused anything he ordered her to do in his low, quiet, serious voice. She shivered and shrank back at the memory. He opened his eyes and looked at her again.

“I’m sorry,” he said as if he had read her memories better than she herself. He turned slowly to regard Dr. Smith. “I thought so,” he said slowly, standing so still he might have been frozen. He still held the crystal in one hand. “Not even human, some sort of avian life-form.”

“You have had a bad dream, Mr. Jones,” said Dr. Smith. “Here, give me the crystal and let us go back to your room.”

He advanced slowly towards Mr. Jones his eyes darting about in an even more panic stricken fashion than normal. One hand convulsively grasping for the crystal.

Mr. Jones stood stock still. Then he looked straight at Kate. “You are all in terrible danger. Warn the other patients.” He said it with such terrible calm that Kate couldn’t even protest at the use of the word “patient” to refer to the guests. She just stared at him, a feeling of terror remembered from some nightmare making her heart beat faster. Then, suddenly, he leapt for her his hands reaching forward as if grasping for her throat.

## Part II

The leap took him right past her, through the bay windows and out into the garden. Kate screamed in fright, the terror was at her heels. She began to scramble out of the window after him. As long as she didn’t stop it wouldn’t catch up with her. Hands grasped at her skirts and she found herself pulled back, still screaming.

“It’s alright, you’re awake now,” Dr. Smith was shouting. “This isn’t your dream.”

The terror was at his heels again but now it had shape and substance. Its wings flapped the air like a breeze around him. Its terrible claws reached for his back. Huge talons stretched out to shred his coat. The great beak opened wide to peck at his eyes. He bellowed in terror and ran on towards safety. He was not lost now although he didn’t know where he was he knew where he was heading. He felt his destination calling him like a beacon and he ran on.

Strong arms grabbed him and hurled him to the ground.

“Now where do you think you’re going?” said a voice.

He found himself grabbing at a shirt front made of some rough material and staring into hard flinty eyes; a tanned and weathered face with a mouth set into a grim and stubborn line. It was the gardener who had foiled his last attempt at escape. The terror was still at his heels. He raised his arms in a motion that felt both strange and familiar.

“Hai-ya!” he called making a chopping motion. A strong hand grabbed his wrist, muscle intercepting muscle. Ah, now the trick was to use the man’s strength against him, somehow. Strong arms grabbed him round the chest and began to haul him back towards the terror.

“No!” he cried. “Not that way. It’s coming after me I must get back to, back to..” he paused.

“You’re not going anywhere,” said the man, still dragging him back towards the house. He blinked and stared, looking for the creature that had pursued him.

“I was being chased,” he said, “by a large bird, a...” a memory struck him, “I do believe it was a Cartorian. Odd that, they are usually a remarkably peaceful species.”

“Well maybe you only imagined it,” said the man.

“They come from the planet Cartor, you know,” he continued. “It’s very odd to find them so far from home. Space travel disorients them. Their brains are very closely attuned to the magnetic field of the planet. Only a few have ever successfully survived off it. That would explain things. It must have been driven mad by the different magnetic field here. You do realise it’s almost certainly psychotic, don’t you.”

“Whatever you say, sir.” The man continued to drag him back to the house. Once again he struggled in the vice-like grip.

“It’s driving us mad, you know; the patients. It’s giving us dreams. You realise that! Dreams related to its own terror and disorientation.” There was a slight break in the man’s stride. “Dr. Smith is driving us all mad. Even I am beginning to break under the strain. You can’t take me back there. I have to get away!” The stride fell back into its old beat.

“Right you are, sir.”

“I have to get to the TARDIS. That’s it! the TARDIS. You must understand. She’ll calm me. We’re linked, mentally. She’ll calm me and then I’ll be able to think and if I can think clearly then, then I’ll know what to do. Because I always, do you see. It’s my forte, you might say, knowing what to do. I have to get to the TARDIS. She looks like a police box. No, that’s no good. I don’t suppose you’ve ever seen a police box.” He paused panting while he was dragged on, then he resumed. “She’s blue, about 2 yards high and maybe a yard wide. I have to get there. She’s that way,” he gestured wildly in the direction of the beacon that was calling him. “If you won’t let me go, at least find my TARDIS. I beg of you.”

The man shoved him through the door of the house, where Dr. Smith came to meet them. More hands, belonging to orderlies seized him. “Fetch my TARDIS. I need my TARDIS,” he shouted as he was dragged away.

Frank Hardcourt watched the rambling man being taken in. He'd seen him around Parris House a few times recently and thought him to be an new guest. But he was so unlike the rest of the guests that Hardcourt found it hard to account for him. Parris House was not really a Bedlam. The patients were always kept under control but none of them were violent. Those prone to escape attempts were all elderly and easily restrained. Parris House had always been a middle class answer to bedlam, somewhere where the odd but not obviously insane could be sent to keep them out of harm's way.

He was still standing in the entrance hall contemplating this when Dr. Gordon came to see him. Dr. Gordon was the new head doctor at Parris House. Like all the new doctors he seemed to be a bit twitchy but Frank had heard that they had all come from a German hospital abroad where the patients were violent so he attributed much of their nervousness to that. They'd settle down when they realised that at Parris House no one was likely to attack them.

"Thank you for detaining our escapee," he said.

"No problem sir. But if he's going to continue like that you'll have to keep a closer watch on him. He looks strong enough to climb the main gate even with the spikes atop of it, if he ever got that far."

"Indeed, the matter will be seen to. Dr. Smith, from whom he escaped, tells me that he took with him a small crystal belonging to Smith's mother. I don't suppose you saw it, did you? Dr. Smith is quite upset. It had sentimental value for him."

Frank frowned. He'd seen nothing. "Sorry sir. If he doesn't have it now he must have dropped it in the garden somewhere. I'll have a look."

"Thank you."

Frank hesitated in the hallway, a thought occurring to him.

"Yes?" asked Dr. Gordon nervously.

"Well sir, he was asking about some sort of box. He called it a TARDIS and said it was over Southwark way. He seemed to think it would help him calm down. It sounded pretty big. I wondered if I should take a look sir. Just in case there is something there? If you think it would help?"

Dr. Gordon wrung his hands and nodded his head. "Find it, if it exists," he said. "Something that calms him could be of great use. Yes, indeed."

Frank left, but when he glanced back as he walked down the path, he saw Dr. Gordon still standing in the doorway, wringing his hands and looking after Frank with a plaintive expression.

It was several days before Hardcourt took an afternoon off to seek out Mr. Jones' box. He found it about three streets away, tucked into a side alley, the persistent smoggy mist curling around it in drifts. It was roughly the dimensions Mr. Jones had stated and Frank had never seen anything like it. After walking around it twice in amazement he took himself into the nearby pub and bought a drink.

"That blue box out there?" he asked the landlord.

"Oh aye," he replied. A slow smile appeared on his face. Frank knew there was a story to be told here but that the landlord was waiting to be prompted.

"Been there long?"

"To tell you the truth no. It's been there about two weeks," said the landlord. "Why do you ask?"

"I work up at Parris House. One of our inmates claims to own something like it."

"That'll be the man we found near it," said the landlord with some satisfaction. "It was the middle of the night and Clara and I were asleep upstairs when we heard this dreadful noise. I've never heard anything like it in all my born days and I hope never to hear its like again. Clara grabbed a hold of me. 'Matthew' she says, 'the Devil has come for us!'. Clara had been worrying about the devil. We maybe don't go to Church as often as we should. I'm not saying as that's a good thing but I'm a busy man. The Lord may have said Sunday was a day of rest but it's a luxury I can't afford with a family to raise and all," He paused watching for Frank's reaction.

In normal circumstances Frank, who took churchgoing seriously, would have had an argument with him at that point. But he wanted to hear the story of the box so a deep streak of pragmatism kept him quiet and he merely shrugged and nodded.

"Well, as I said, Clara had been worrying about the Devil because the vicar had been round that evening, having a drink and dropping a few hints about seeing us in Church that Sunday coming. Which, I tell you, after the fright we had we attended and I feel the better for it, knowing I've done my dues by God and that he'll be watching over us while that devil box is here. Anyway, where was I? Oh yes, so we was woken up by this terrible noise and Clara was on her knees praying convinced that the Day of Judgment was upon us but I thought I should check and see in case someone was doing some mischief downstairs, trying to get into the beer cellar or some such. So I slipped downstairs, quietly as I could, and I grabbed this here club I keep behind the bar in case of trouble."

He showed Frank a large hefty club which he hoisted out from below the bar on which he was leaning. He placed it between them on the bar like an item of evidence in a court hearing.

“Well, there was no one down here or in the cellar, but I could hear a voice outside. Just the one, talking to itself, though I couldn’t hear the words. And then, suddenly, I heard a scream, a grown man scream I tell you, and it sent shivers down my spine I don’t mind admitting. It was outside the main door there,” he pointed at the door Frank had entered by, “but I couldn’t hear any other sound, so after a moment I decided I should check outside just in case someone was in trouble.”

He picked up the club, swinging it over one shoulder and glancing from side to side to demonstrate how he went outside. “Well,” he said, “it was a foggy night and at first I couldn’t see anyone but then I heard this voice talking and I looked down to find this man lying on the ground.” He swung the club down and leant on it to illustrate his sense of anti-climax.

“He were an odd one though. He had rolling eyes and was babbling all sorts of nonsense. His sentences made sense, if you follow my meaning, but none of the words did. But it seemed he felt there was some urgency; that someone or something were threatening an invasion and we had to stop it. But we couldn’t get any more sense out of him than that. I say we because by that time some of the neighbours had come out as well and we’d brought him in here and given him a brandy,” the landlord looked slightly aggrieved, “on the house,” he added with emphasis. “He looked like a gentleman, you see. He was nicely dressed and sometimes he’d give out these orders and you know, if I’d known what they’d meant, I’d have jumped to quick as quick. He had that sort of air about him. It was odd and no mistake. And sometimes, when he wasn’t giving orders, he’d look you in the eye and make some suggestion. You’d feel like he was taking you in a confidence and that it was a clever and sensible suggestion, except that it was nonsense of course.”

The landlord shook his head, “Well in the end we gave him a dose of laudanum and hoped he’d be better in the morning. But he wasn’t much better to tell the truth and he’d begun running a fever. He said he was a doctor but that was the most we could get out of him, so in the end we took him up to Parris House, reckoned your lot would know what to do with him,” the landlord sighed. “So, that’s the story here. What’s been happening up your end?”

Frank was not by nature a story teller but he knew the landlord was expecting an addition to the story, which he could tell to his customers. Frank outlined briefly the story of Mr. Jones’, or maybe it should have been Dr. Jones’, escape.

“So, he’s a Jones, is he?” asked the landlord.

“Reckon he must be,” said Frank. “Though I suppose they might just have given him that name, if he still couldn’t remember his own. They couldn’t just call him Doctor, could they?”

The landlord thought for a minute over his beer, “I don’t know. He had an air you know, and ‘the mysterious Doctor’ sums it up more than just ‘Dr. Jones’, don’t you think.”

Frank thought it was nonsense but didn’t say so. He let the landlord have the story his way. “Anyway I’m here to collect the Doctor’s box,” he said.

“And heartily glad I am to see such an unnatural thing go,” responded the landlord somewhat wistfully. Frank suspected he’d rather enjoyed the notoriety and extra custom it had caused.

“I’ll send a cart down from Parris House to collect it,” said Frank.

He left some more money as a tip and headed back. He hoped that returning the box would make the Doctor calmer but privately he had his doubts. It was only then he realised that he was now thinking of Mr. Jones as the Doctor. Frank shook his head. He wasn’t about to agree with some of the landlord’s more fanciful notions but the name did have a certain rightness about it that he couldn’t shake off.

Miss Young was waiting for him by the gate when he returned. She looked pale and there were bags under her eyes.

“Hello, Miss. Young,” he said as he locked the gate behind him. He took off his hat.

“Where have you been?” she asked curiously.

“Went to find a box for the, for that Mr. Jones. Seems he lost it. I’m going to arrange for a cart to bring it up here for him.” They walked up towards the house. “How are you feeling?” he asked.

“My dreams are worsening,” she admitted looking down. “I don’t know why, but my nights are filled with terror. I feel as though I’m being chased by something terrible and although I know the way to safety, somehow I have become lost,” she shuddered in the sunlight.

“Have you told the doctors about this?” asked Frank.

She glanced nervously behind her and Frank saw Dr. Harding, sitting on one of the ornamental benches. He was staring directly at Miss Young, his hand resting

on his knees, clenching and unclenching in time to the swinging of his legs.

“He’s been following me,” whispered Miss Young. “I found him outside my room this morning, sitting in the chair across the hall, watching.”

“I’ll walk you back up to the house,” said Frank.

They walked side by side up the drive, Frank keeping between Miss Young and Dr. Harding. But as they passed him he stood up. He took one step towards them planting a hand squarely in Frank’s chest pushing him back. Frank gasped, winded. Confused, he looked up and saw a huge bird staring down at him, then it was gone and Dr. Harding was holding Miss Young. He had his head pressed up against hers and was grasping her round the chest and waist. Miss Young had frozen rigid, her eyes glazed, too scared even to scream. Frank scrambled forward to meet an arm in a second swipe. The hand was extended this time and Frank felt a raking pain in his chest. He fell backwards blood oozing out of five gashes.

Frank saw a blur of movement. Someone threw something that looked like a small weighted net over Dr. Harding. He screeched, letting go of Kate and scrabbling at the thing over his head. Then he turned and began blindly running across the lawn, batting at his head until he tripped and fell over shrub. Then he lay on the ground still screeching.

Several of the doctors came running out of the house. They stood around the man but none of them seemed prepared to approach him. His view was obscured as he saw Mr. Jones, the Doctor, bending over him. He began tearing strips off Frank’s shirt and binding his chest with them.

“You were lucky,” he said, “it barely scratched you.”

“I’m alright,” said Frank crossly, struggling to sit up. The Doctor stepped back. Miss Young lay collapsed on the ground. The Doctor stirred her with his foot.

“Fainted,” he said contemptuously.

“Don’t treat her like that!” said Frank, angry and scared. He glanced across the lawn. One of the orderlies who had been at Parris House almost as long as Frank, approached Dr. Harding and removed the net from his head. The man remained on the ground, curled into a foetal position. Frank struggled over to Miss Young and tried to lift her upright, but he stopped as pain seared across his chest.

“No heavy lifting for you, for a while,” said the Doctor. He stood looking down at them. his hands thrust in his pockets.

“Help me then!” said Frank crossly.

The Doctor looked at him a moment more and then bent down. Frank noticed lines of strain around the Doctor’s mouth and eyes and realised that the he too looked tired and drawn, though he hid it better than did Miss Young. The Doctor

picked up Miss Young and carried her to the bench. She was already stirring and her eyes opened as he set her down. The Doctor stood back gazing across the lawn to where the small group was breaking up. Two of the doctors were helping Dr. Harding towards the house.

“You realise that they are causing the dreams,” he said, watching the party.

“You don’t mean that,” said Frank crossly because he was unsettled. “An educated man like you shouldn’t go making up tales like that to frighten Miss Young with.”

“Oh Doctor!” whispered Miss Young, “Do you really think so?”

“Why do you call him Doctor?” asked Frank angrily. “He doesn’t know what he’s talking about. He’s just trying to frighten you.”

“I asked her to call me that,” said the Doctor grimly, “and I am not trying to frighten her. Terrible things are afoot in this place. These so-called doctors are not what they seem. They are engendering the nightmares and running foul experiments of some kind. Even you must realise that! How do you think you got those?” He gestured to the scratches across Frank’s chest.

“There’s something wrong with Dr. Harding, all right!” said Frank. “I’m going to have a word with Dr. Gordon about it but one rotten apple doesn’t mean the whole lot are bad. Talk like this will frighten everyone and it does no one any good. You have no proof of any of this.”

“Don’t I?” asked the Doctor. He drew his hand out of his pocket to reveal a small magnet on a string. He held it up and it swung in the breeze.

“Your point being,” said Frank.

“That way is north,” said the Doctor, and pointed at a right-angle to the alignment of the magnet.

“It can’t be!” said Frank, looking in surprise at the direction he pointed. “You must have got something wrong.”

“I haven’t,” said the Doctor. “There is a very strange magnetic field in this House and grounds. I’d say it was being created by magnetic monopoles, an extremely rare particle. I’ve been tracking them. They must have several here, which is amazing. They are very hard to come by.” He paused. “Cartorians are very susceptible to the magnetic field of their planet,” the Doctor looked at Frank. “I told you that and now I find that the magnetic field in these grounds is being artificially maintained which would take up immense resources for whoever is doing it. I’ve also discovered that a small net with magnets attached to it seriously discomforts them. How do you think I got rid of Dr. Harding? Think on it!”

He put the magnet back into his pocket and walked away. After a short distance Frank thought he staggered and stumbled, but he couldn’t be sure.

“He’s a very strange man,” said Miss Young. “You know he’s a charity case, no one is paying for his keep.”

“They should send him to a proper Bedlam then,” replied Frank. “He shouldn’t scare you like that about the doctors.”

Dr. Gordon stood by as Frank and the hired man heaved the blue box off the cart. They stood panting slightly while Dr. Gordon, as Frank had done when he first found it, walked round it. He paused at last before the two doors reached up and pulled one. It refused to open. Dr. Gordon stared at the box and frowned.

“What do you reckon it is?” asked Frank. “It says police on it, perhaps we should contact them about the Doctor. I mean Mr. Jones?”

Dr. Gordon shook his head. “We contacted them when he first came in. I would have expected them to have said then if they knew him. No I don’t think so. Perhaps the name is there to prevent the inquisitive from tampering.”

“What are you going to do with it now?” asked Frank.

“We found a key among the Doctor’s possessions when he first arrived,” said Dr. Gordon, “I have it in my office. I think we shall open this box and see what’s inside it. Then, if it seems safe, we will let the Doctor have access to it.”

Frank wondered when Dr. Gordon had started referring to Mr. Jones as the Doctor.

“I should apologise for the behaviour of Dr. Harding, earlier today,” said Dr. Gordon. “It seems he had been under more strain than I had realised. I hope you were not badly hurt.”

“Just a few scratches Sir. He must have long fingernails.”

“Indeed. He had been letting himself go somewhat. We have him under lock and key for the time being until we can effect a cure. There shouldn’t be any more trouble.”

“I’m relieved to hear it sir. What was it the Doctor did to him? He certainly intervened at the right moment.”

“Hmmm, yes, the Doctor certainly intervened and I’m sure we’re all grateful to him,” Dr. Gordon sounded far from grateful. “However I have decided that in the light of his continuing aggressive behaviour he will be confined to the house from now on. His actions may have been for the best on that occasion but I think that was more by accident than anything else.”

After Dr. Gordon had gone Frank dismissed the hired man and then turned back to the blue box. He felt a hand fall on his shoulder.

“Good man.” It was the Doctor. He stood there one hand resting on his waistcoat pocket, the other on Frank’s shoulder. He stared at the blue box his face calm but otherwise unreadable. Then he walked up to the box and stroked it with one hand, closing his eyes as if drawing strength from the contact.

Suddenly he stepped back and took off his shoe. He up-ended it as if expecting something to fall out. But nothing did. He frowned and took off his other shoe repeating the behaviour. Then he stood still again gazing at the blue box, a shoe in either hand. His face was once more expressionless, but Frank noticed that his breathing had increased pace.

“Dr. Gordon says he found a key among your possessions when you first arrived,” said Frank.

Frank’s feet left the ground. He realised the Doctor had lifted him up and was surprised at the strength of the man. “Where is it?” asked the Doctor and his voice had a fierce edge to it.

“Put me down!” demanded Frank.

They remained as they were for a moment and then the Doctor put him down, but did not release his grip. “You don’t understand,” he whispered. “I can not continue like this much longer. No one here can. Do you really think you could have faced me down as you did just now if I were at full strength?”

Frank seriously considered hitting him for a moment. The Doctor did not strike him like many of the patients. He might have acted strangely but Frank felt that there was great purpose and intelligence in his actions and he should not be excused improprieties in the way many of the others were. However he contented himself with seizing the Doctor’s wrists and detaching him from his shirt. They remained like that a while longer both gazing firmly into each others eyes, their faces impassive.

The Doctor broke first shielding his eyes with the back of his hand. “What can I do to convince you of what is happening here?” he asked. “You saw how that Harding man behaved, you can’t believe that was normal.”

“I don’t rightly know, sir. Dr. Gordon says he broke under the strain. You have to admit that is more likely than he’s a bird intent on driving you mad through nightmares.”

The heavily lidded eyes blinked slowly once and then abruptly the Doctor was gone, striding back down the corridor. Frank let him go.

Kate was sitting in her room waiting for treatment to begin. She sat on the bed with her hands folded in her lap. She was afraid. She knew that dreaming therapy, as Dr. Gordon called it, was to come and she feared the dreams. The door handle turned. She shrank back onto the bed. Dr. Harding came in and she drew back even further away from him.

“Peace,” he whispered, “I want peace!”

He grabbed her head between his hands and she cried out quietly, squirming in his grasp. She felt his nails digging into her head as he loomed closer. His staring eyes filling her vision. Suddenly the Doctor was in the room, pulling him off her. There was a scuffle and a muffled thumping sound. Then the Doctor was helping her off the bed and out of the room.

“Where shall we go?”

“I can’t get out of the house but they’ll let you out while its still light,” he said in a low voice, hurrying her to the top of the stairs.

Her head hurt where Dr. Harding had gripped it. She felt her face and her hand came away red with blood. “I’m bleeding,” she whispered faintly.

“No time for that! you’ll live. Don’t even think about fainting,” the Doctor gave her a shake and she gulped back a scream.

“Now,” he said, “go out and find Frank. I saw him in the garden through the window only moments ago down by the shed. Tell him what happened. Tell him to hide you and come and help me. Have you got that?” he shook her again.

She nodded mutely.

“Doctor! Doctor! time for your treatment!” came a Dr. Gordon’s voice.

A look of fear that Kate understood only too well crossed his face. “Quickly!” he said.

She turned and fled down the stairs.

He was being dissected alive. Unable to move, he was pinned down but conscious, desperately conscious. The surgeons reached into him and pulled out his organs, examining each one with curiosity. He roared with pain and struggled to move. He watched, soon they would reach something vital. With greedy hands the surgeons cast aside the organ they had been examining and reached in seeking something else. Fingers clutching under his ribcage for the heart. Interesting, he was correct

that there is link with the box - the question is can we learn anything from it? Can the link help us? He roared once more in pain and agony as hands closed around his hearts and tugged, pain shooting through every part of his body. I'd leave that if I was you. It must be something vital. The hand let go and scrabbled around for something else. There was a wrench somewhere in the back of his throat and something came away. He wept with pain and watched as the surgeon examined the circuit board. His lips managed to form words "Temporal steerage". He forced his eyes open. This had to be another dream, though it was different in quality to the others. He gasped. Before him stood the TARDIS, her doors open and a flock of large bird-like creatures all over her and within her. Talons and beaks pulling apart wires and circuitry, one of them holding in its claws the temporal steerage circuit. He tried to lurch off the bed, but he had been strapped down. He saw between them a large screen still projecting his last dream image the surgeon in the same pose as the bird, holding the circuit. Another memory cube storing the readings. The Doctor screamed.

### **Part III**

Frank found Kate hiding in the small shed he used for tools. She was shivering with fear and weeping. There was blood in her hair and on her hands.

"Miss Young, Kate, what are you doing in here?"

"Dr. Harding!" she cried, "he attacked me again."

"Oh, Kate."

She wiped her face with her hands, smearing blood across her mouth. "The Doctor rescued me. He said to get you for help. You have to go to him Frank, please say you will go to him."

Frank hesitated, unsure of what to do. He didn't entirely trust the Doctor. But there was clearly something strange happening, and more than anything, he knew Kate could not spend the night here in the light summer dress she had been wearing.

"I'll fetch some blankets," he said. He walked unhappily back to the house.

Frank heard the scream as he entered the hallway and ran in the direction of the sound. He met Dr. Smith coming the other way with the Doctor in his arms. The

Doctor was sweating and seemed to be allowing himself to be meekly taken along.

“Mr. Hardcourt, thank goodness,” said Dr. Smith nervously and he licked his lips. “The Doctor here as had a shock while in treatment. Can you take him back to his room and lock him in?” He passed the Doctor over who hung like a dead weight in Frank’s arms. “We’ve lost Miss Young and she’s due for treatment. Last time she was hiding in the cellar. It’s most unfortunate.” Frank felt the Doctor’s grip tighten on his arm. He glanced at him and the Doctor minutely shook his head with a warning look in his eyes.

“I’ll think you’ll find her hiding in the shed in the grounds,” said Dr. Gordon, coming up behind Dr. Smith. The Doctor sagged in Frank’s arms. “You shouldn’t talk in your sleep so much Doctor, however it is fortunate for us. It was very irresponsible of you frightening the poor girl out into the grounds. Her constitution is not strong. She could easily catch consumption if she remains in the grounds all night.”

“I don’t sleep,” said the Doctor slowly. “What are you doing to me that makes me sleep?”

Dr. Gordon clucked and shook his head, nodded to Frank and he and Dr. Smith headed for the entrance hall.

Frank helped the Doctor to a chair where he sat with his head in his hands. “I’m getting careless,” he said. “Do you realise how much it is costing me to stay sane under this onslaught?” He leant back, resting his head against the wall behind the chair, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “You have to help me recover the TARDIS key. It’ll be in Dr. Gordon’s office.”

“I spoke to the people who found you in Southwark,” said Frank. “I don’t think you’ve ever been sane.”

“That was post-regenerative trauma. I’d have been completely recovered by now were it not for this place. I *am* recovering, but it is taking its toll. The scars will never properly heal now and I’m wearing out this body in the attempt.” He tapped his chest gently and then his arm fell limp at his side.

There came a commotion from the hallway below. Looking down, Frank saw Dr. Smith carrying Miss Young up the stairway, skirts drooping down and brushing the stair carpet. She seemed to be unconscious.

“Show me to the office and I may just be able to help her.” The Doctor hadn’t moved, he still sat in the chair, gazing at Frank. “You must know she is getting worse. Her mind was not strong in the first place. It must be close to breaking point by now.” He leaned forward, staring Frank in the eye, all his strength and will going into the effort. “You have to realise all is not as it seems. How do you account for Dr. Harding? You can accept Gordon’s explanation that he is stressed

or you can help me find the true cause of his malaise, and Kate's and mine. I," he hesitated, "I can not do this alone, Frank. It all depends on you."

Frank debated this internally. With his everyday mind he knew he could explain away all the oddness. But put all the oddness together and you needed too many strange random occurrences and coincidences to make it all fit. Small incidents he had hardly registered but which had troubled him. Patients, or guests if you preferred, accosting him in the garden always with the same question of late, "which is the way?"; Dr. Harding; the Doctor himself and his box; the strange behaviour of the compasses. None of it more than an oddity on its own, but together... "All right then," he said, "I will help you. But, I'm not believing you implicitly." He started to walk down the corridor towards Dr. Gordon's room.

The Doctor didn't move. He just kept his eyes fixed on Frank. "You'll have to help me, I don't think I can walk."

Frank helped the Doctor to Dr. Gordon's office. The office door was locked. Frank shrugged. The Doctor slipped to his knees and peered into the keyhole. He glanced up at Frank, "Belt buckle."

"What?"

"Belt buckle. Give me your belt buckle. I need to pick the lock."

Frank looked doubtful.

The Doctor reached across and pulled a crystal cube out of Frank's jacket inner pocket.

"How did that get there?"

"I put it there. It's a record of my thoughts while in the dream."

Frank snorted, unimpressed, "it's Dr. Smith's ornament. You stole it."

"Watch!" said the Doctor, "and learn."

Out of his pockets he pulled various oddments of wires, cutlery and strange pieces of some substance with which Frank was not familiar. It had a sort of uniformity in colour and texture that seemed unnatural. Into it were embedded pieces of what was metal in lines and dots.

"What's that?" asked Frank.

"I found it in the treatment room."

"Oh really," Frank contrived to sound less impressed.

"Tell me you've seen anything like it before and I'll call you a liar."

The Doctor began rapidly assembling the oddments together and then he placed the crystal in the centre and Frank saw...

Hedges and trees rushed past. There was the sound of someone gasping for breath. Lines crackled and jumped across the screen. It was like looking out of someone's eyes, far more realistic than a painting. Frank watched entranced as whoever it was turned under an archway, reaching a weeping willow and a stream. Then there was a sudden fizzle, the picture broke up and steam rose from the Doctor's device.

"That," said the Doctor forcefully, leaning against the door of the office, "that is the dream I have had every time they have taken me in for treatment and I'll wager you anything you like every other patient here has had the same. You have to help us."

Frank knew he could be sacked for breaking into the office. But what the Doctor had just shown him was so beyond his experience that he knew he was unable to judge the rights and wrongs of the situation. He would have to rely on someone else to guide him. All he had was the Doctor who, for all his idiosyncratic behaviour, was clearly an educated man. He was Frank's best hope to find out whether terrible things really were happening within the House. Reluctantly Frank unthreaded his belt.

"Thank you," said the Doctor and he began to fiddle with the lock.

Moments later the door clicked open. The Doctor stood, propping himself up against the door jam. "Simplistic mechanism," he said, handing the belt back to Frank. He staggered into the room, leaning on the desk and sinking into Dr. Gordon's chair. He began to rifle through the drawers looking for his key. Frank watched him from the door listening for movement in the corridor. The Doctor stopped looking through the drawers and stared intently at the large globe in front of him. He spun it thoughtfully, "You see this here?"

"It's a globe."

"Is it now? Point out Great Britain to me."

Frank moved into the room, remembering the rudimentary geography he'd been taught as a child. He spun the globe, but he couldn't find the country. In fact he found he couldn't recognise any of the land masses. He glanced at the Doctor.

"It's Cartor," he said. "I told you they were Cartorians."

"I've not seen any birds," said Frank stubbornly.

"You don't lie well, you know," said the Doctor. "But it's true. They're projecting some sort of mental image. It must be the same mechanism they use to create the dreams only more limited. Just enough to make those nearby think they look normal." He spun the globe again. "What's this?" he asked, tapping the pivot.

Frank looked. A word had been crossed out and another replaced it. Frank didn't recognise the word or even the alphabet. He shrugged.

"Do you ever do think at all?" asked the Doctor crossly. "Look, they've crossed out North and substituted South!"

"Have they now?" said Frank.

"Yes, can't you see?" the Doctor looked at him again. "No I don't suppose you can. Idiot humans!" he muttered. Then he slapped his forehead. "Of course! the poles have reversed. That's why they've changed the globes."

"The poles have reversed?"

"Yes, it must have caused chaos. The Cartorians will have lost all sense of direction..." he tailed off. "They would have known where they were trying to go, but would have felt lost and unable to get there."

"Like the dreams?" said Frank.

"Like the dreams."

"So why would they be giving the dreams to people here?" asked Frank.

"Yours is a species which is not so dependent upon magnetism to find it's way. It's incredible, they must have found a way to record and project thoughts at a sufficiently abstract level to cross the species barrier. I imagining they are trying to learn how you cope."

"But it hasn't worked, has it?" said Frank, "If what you say is true, and I'm not saying it is, everyone here is confused anyway so they can't get a proper reading. Can they?"

The Doctor looked at him, the lids once more drooping across his eyes.

"No."

There was a scream from along the corridor. "Kate!" cried Frank.

Kate was standing in the window. She was framed against the moon, still wearing her cream summer dress, although the bustle seemed to have slipped awry leaving it hanging in awkward folds down behind her. Frank charged into the room and, perhaps because he was half expecting it, he looked towards the doctors and he saw birds: huge taloned and beaked birds. Their talons were long and flexible; flexible as hands. One held a notebook and pencil, pouring over the readings on some machine making notes. Another flapped near Kate, clearly not brave enough to approach close to. Frank blinked and the room was back to normal. Dr. Gordon

was taking notes while Dr. Smith hovered near Kate, alternately beseeching and threatening her in an attempt to get her out of the window.

Kate screamed and swayed in the opening.

“She’s seen through the illusion,” said the Doctor’s voice in his ear. “She no longer knows what should be normal, so she’s seeing things as they are. Her mental defenses have gone.”

Frank looked at the scene. Kate was staring at Dr. Smith as he twittered around her. The other new doctors stood nervously clustered around the Doctor’s blue box, clearly uncertain what to do. The door of the box was open and wires poured out of it. A heap of machinery, strange to the eye, was cluttered around its base. Dr. Smith moved towards Kate and she cowered from him, screaming once more. Hurriedly Dr. Smith retreated.

“Kate, Miss Young,” said Frank approaching towards her.

“Frank?” she asked. “Is that really you?”

“Yes, it’s really me,” he said. He walked carefully towards the window, as he would towards a frightened animal.

She glanced around the room. “Can you see the birds?” she whispered. Frank considered that. He glanced towards Dr. Gordon. He nodded, a look of concern on his face.

“Best tell her the truth,” said the Doctor behind him.

“I saw them, for a moment,” said Frank.

“I’m not mad then?”

“No Kate, you’re not mad, just nervous.”

“I’ve been having dreams. They’re coming for me. The terror, it’s them, it’s coming for me. I have to find somewhere safe.” She glanced out of the window.

“You don’t need to find anywhere safe,” said Frank, “I’m here. I’ll look after you.”

She looked at him uncertainly. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the Doctor pulling Dr. Smith back.

“They’re chasing me,” she whispered.

“No they’re not,” he said. “They’re lost too. They’re just scared.”

“Scared?”

Frank took a step closer to her, “Come down Kate. There’ll be no more dreams, I promise you.”

She looked at him uncertainly. He held out his hand. Cautiously she took hold of it. She more fell than stepped into his arms. He lifted her down and placed her feet on the floor. He began to lead her from the room. The Doctor lounged in the

doorway, though Frank suspected the lounging covered real weakness. But there was a sardonic and detached expression on his face.

“Good job, Mr. Hardcourt, good job,” said Dr. Gordon. He walked towards them. Frank felt Kate stiffen in his arms. “I’ll take over from here,” and Dr. Gordon reached towards Kate.

She screamed once more and Frank felt her slip from his grasp.

“Kate!” he cried as she ran once more towards the window. He grabbed for her and his hands closed around the trailing skirts. He felt her weight on them and he gripped and pulled. Then there was a tearing sound and another scream and the weight on his arms suddenly vanished. He was left with a strip of torn cloth in his hands and the gaping window before him.

The doctors hurried out of the room, all but Dr. Gordon who remained behind standing eye to eye with the Doctor in the doorway.

“Someone let Dr. Harding out of his room.”

The Doctor stared blankly back at him, “that was careless of them.”

“Yes,” Dr. Gordon brushed some dust of his shoulders, “whoever it was should be feeling very guilty right now. Miss Young was scared badly by his presence. So much so that she dreamed she was being chased by him.”

Dr. Gordon flicked a switch on the apparatus beside the door and the image flickered into life. Someone running down avenues and pathways. Every time the person looked over their shoulder it was clear who pursued them. Dr. Harding grown to monstrous size, his hand elongated into claws, his face set into a grin bore down on the unseen victim.

“Think on that, Doctor,” said Dr. Gordon and then left the room, brushing close to the Doctor’s motionless form, still propped up in the doorway.

Frank had remained in the window watching the doctors below fussing round the body, the piece of cream coloured cloth still gripped in his hands. Slowly he became aware of movement behind him. The Doctor was piling the clutter of mechanical equipment back into his blue box.

“What are you doing?”

The Doctor leant against the box a moment, “Dr. Gordon bumped against me as he left.” He produced a key from his pocket and displayed it in the moonlight.

“You picked his pocket!”

“It’s my key,” said the Doctor equanimically. He pushed the last tangle of wires inside the doors. “Come with me, Mr. Hardcourt.”

“Come with you where?”

“Anywhere; away from this place at any rate.”

“What, and leave these people behind?”

The Doctor regarded him carefully. “Which people would that be? You hardly know any of the inmates now Kate Young is dead and you can’t mean the Cartorians.”

Frank looked out of the window at the doctors flapping agitatedly around the body.

“I don’t think they meant any harm. If the dreams are what they were feeling then,” he paused, “then they need help too.”

“Stay here then, for all the good it will do,” the Doctor’s voice took on a sneer.

“Did you let out Dr. Harding?”

The Doctor had the grace not to look him in the eye, “She was near breaking anyway. I doubt she would have made it through this session whatever the circumstances. I know more of human psychology than your Dr. Gordon. I wouldn’t have done it if I didn’t think it imperative to get her out of the house.”

“I can’t pretend to like you much Doctor, but then you’re above the likes or dislikes of people such as myself. But I’ll need help to sort this out. I don’t want any more deaths.”

“You have more resourcefulness than you think,” said the Doctor shortly. “I owe them, you and this miserable planet nothing. Nothing at all. Save them yourself.”

Frank heard the door of the box slam shut. There was a noise. A noise such as the landlord in Southwark had probably heard. A straining pulsing sound and the blue box faded away before his eyes. Leaving him alone in the room with his strip of torn cloth.

The Doctor rested on a six sided console. His arms braced, holding the weight of his body. Lights flashed and blinked. The central column rose and fell. He straightened up, the strain showing visibly on his face for the first time in days. He walked carefully to an armchair and sat, eyes closed. Around him the TARDIS hummed. Scattered pieces of equipment poured across the floor.

“It’s not my fault,” he said quietly. “I am too tired. I had to leave.”

No one answered him.

## Epilogue

The mourners stood around the grave. The day was grey and drizzling. There was a damp haze in the autumn air insufficient to penetrate the thick wool stuff of the mourners coats but misting their faces. Their faces were all solemn, a man and woman standing together a discreet distance from the vicar. Opposite the couple stood Dr. Gordon. He was wearing somber brown with a black armband and his hands kept moving clasped together within his black leather gloves, writhing over and over each other.

“I am the resurrection and the life, sayeth the Lord, and he that believeth in me though he be dead yet shall he live and he that liveth and believeth will never die”.

As the mourners left the graveside their muttered conversations reached the two gravediggers waiting respectfully on the sidelines.

“My thanks for agreeing to officiate,” the woman was saying to the vicar, “in such difficult circumstances.”

“By which she means the girl shouldn’t have been buried on sanctified grounds at all.”

“Don’t speak of what you don’t know,” said Frank fiercely.

His companion lapsed into silence.

“It was a tragic accident.” Dr. Gordon had remained behind the departing vicar. “You two have work to do. I suggest you do it rather than engaging in idle gossip.”

Frank looked him in the eye. “I think I should have a word, Dr. Gordon.”

“This is hardly the place.”

“This is exactly the place. Run along!” Frank commanded his companion. The young man looked at the set of his face, then left.

“What is this?” asked Dr. Gordon.

“You need someone to show you how to find your way without magnetism. Is that right?”

Dr. Gordon’s eyes narrowed for a moment and then he said, “Suppose it is.”

“But everyone up there is weak in the head, right? So none of them can help you.”

“I think you’ll find that your race has a very catholic definition of ‘weak in the head’.”

“Still,” persisted Frank, “none of them have lived outside the walls of Parris House, and not one of them could find their way out of a paper bag with the end open.”

Dr. Gordon tilted his head to one side, but said nothing.

“So,” persisted Frank, “I reckon, to solve your problem, you need a volunteer. Someone who isn’t too timid or too afraid or too confused to stand up for himself.”

Dr. Gordon looked at Frank interestedly, “And why do you volunteer?”

Frank looked down at the plain surface of Kate’s coffin. “Because there have been too many deaths.”

# Chapter 2

## Dr Who Drabbles

Written for the “dw100” drabble challenges.

### 2.1 Remember the Children (Challenge 216: Crossover)

Sailing the time winds through the fractures of the Time War is hard. Compassion gifted me her wisest daughter. I sing and let Hope steer.

“I’ve had to tweak things a little,” she says. Unlike the time lords she isn’t afraid of Paradox. It is her play thing.

I step out into a dry desert. There is a warrior here, well-trained, with deep blue eyes. Not so pretty as my Andred, dying a hundred times in the first assault, but close.

“He will care for your child,” Hope says.

I look into his eyes and I know that he will.

### 2.2 TARDIS Catalogue (Challenge 215: Red/Blue)

#### TARDIS Catalogue

**Category:** Clothing

**Sub-Category:** Coat

**Colour:** Blue

Absolutely gorgeous!!! with fur-lined hood. This one is so not vanishing back into the wardrobe, I've never got the same thing twice out of that place (not that that's a bad thing) - DN. Cupboard 3, Room 2934 (Donna Noble's Bedroom).

**Note:** Obsolete entry. Item returned to wardrobe.

**Category:** Organic Material

**Sub-Category:** Hair

**Species:** Human

**Colour:** Red

**Individual:** Donna Noble.

Strands removed from a coat hood while clearing out Donna's Room. How could one woman store so much stuff in so little time? - The Doctor. Box 1493, Shelf 64, Room 1823

## 2.3 The Randomness of Free Will (Challenge 216: Free)

"I'm bored."

They were having a picnic. There was grassy heathland all around them. They'd explored a little but the Doctor's interest had waned rapidly when monsters failed to appear and no one tried to arrest them.

"Why can't we go somewhere interesting," he complained.

"It'll be the randomiser," Romana explained for what felt like the umpteenth time. "Most of the universe isn't filled with adventure. It's just, well, empty." She shrugged.

The Doctor humphed. "I'm going to have to tweak that randomiser. It can select from locations picked by the TARDIS. All this free will won't do at all."

## 2.4 The Kraken Wakes (Challenge 217: Wake)

In the depths of the swamp it had slept, dreaming in a sluggish way of shining rivers of light, little knowing how its body was changing and growing under the

## *2.5. TALES RETOLD IN A HUNDRED YEARS (CHALLENGE 218: LEGEND)35*

impulse of those energies of which it dreamed. But now its slumber was disturbed. Deep below the water and the silt of centuries, hard into the rock came the vibrations and the vast creature began to stir, slowly at first and then rising towards consciousness. It rose shedding the silt that had covered it, the waters muddied in its wake. It rose towards the sound, fully alert now and hungry.

### **2.5 Tales Retold in a Hundred Years (Challenge 218: Legend)**

Once upon a time there was an alien girl named Susan. She lived in a blue box in a junkyard with her grandfather. This wasn't any old blue box. It was called the TARDIS and it could travel in time and space. It was larger on the inside than on the outside so there was plenty of room to live there.

This story starts when two schoolteachers followed Susan home. Her grandfather was afraid that more people would discover the TARDIS. He took off, taking Susan and her teachers with him into time and space where they had many adventures.



# Chapter 3

## The Skull and the Soldier

A Primeval/Dr Who Books Short Story

### 3.1 Prologue set, as always, in a Supermarket Car Park

Helen Cutter paused at the edge of the supermarket car park and hoisted her backpack on her shoulders. It wasn't far to the open woodland and she thought her car would be safer overnight here than in the walkers' car park in the forest. She considered phoning Nick to let him know where she was and that she wouldn't be back until morning but rejected the idea. It would only start another argument about crackpot theories. She was fed up of hearing about her crackpot theories. Pulling on the straps of the backpack to ease the weight she stepped out onto the roadside.

“Little Sister.”

She whirled at the voice. Two people stood before her, less than a metre from where she'd been standing. It unnerved her that they had crept up on her like that. They looked like they were heading for a Halloween ball, in masks of bones and elaborate clothing reminiscent of the eighteenth century, but Helen instinctively rejected the idea. These people were too serious by a long shot. In the street lamps their shadows danced. Helen blinked. In the street lamps their shadows were, literally, dancing.

“Who are you?” she asked.

The woman laughed merrily. “A better question is what do you want?”

“What do you want?” said Helen.

“To be honest,” said the man, “we’re more interested in what you want.”

“Why would that interest you?”

“We’d like to offer you a deal.”

“A deal?”

“Yes. An opportunity to have all your theories proved correct. How does that sound.”

“Very tempting. What’s the catch?”

“No catch,” said the woman, “at least none that we can see. We’re fairly sure that what you want and what we want align more or less exactly.”

“Explain.”

The woman laughed merrily again. “Now that would be no fun at all would it, little sister?” She held out a knife.

“What’s this?” Helen didn’t touch it.

“It’s a fictional entity,” said the man. “We had to go to a lot of trouble to get hold of it.”

“A fictional entity?”

“It cuts time. It will take you wherever you want. All those theories you have about aberrant evolution? Here’s the means to check them out first hand.”

Doubtfully, Helen took the knife. It looked pretty ordinary to her. She would have said she was just humouring the weirdos were it not for the dancing shadows.

“Oh, and by the way,” said the woman. “We opened a little hole earlier on. Just for fun.”

The woman took the man’s hand and the two of them walked towards and then through Helen. Behind them running down the street towards her was a Gorgonopsid. Helen turned on her heels.

It was four years before she found her way home and by that time she had a new agenda and a mission to pursue. It was eight years before that agenda drove her to make contact with her husband once more.

## **3.2 Remember the Children (Challenge 216: Crossover)**

Sailing the time winds through the fractures of the Time War is hard. Compassion gifted me her wisest daughter. I sing and let Hope steer.

“I’ve had to tweak things a little,” she says. Unlike the time lords she isn’t afraid of Paradox. It is her play thing.

I step out into a dry desert. There is a warrior here, well-trained, with deep blue eyes. Not so pretty as my Andred, dying a hundred times in the first assault,

but close.

“He will care for your child,” Hope says.

I look into his eyes and I know that he will.

### 3.3 Introducing Hope

Captain Tom Ryan tried to make sense of the situation in front of him. Helen Cutter, the Professor’s no longer entirely missing wife, had somehow hijacked the Anomaly project. First they were hunting some future bat thing got loose in the 21st century via the network of temporal anomalies they had discovered. Then she’d insisted they take its young back, through the Forest of Dean anomaly that led to the Permian era, claiming it would lead them in due course to a further anomaly that would take the creatures home. He’d been leading the small team, Helen and Nick Cutter, his men Davis and MacGuire and then... his mind skittered over the thoughts. He’d dropped back because, because... he couldn’t remember the reason. It must have been a good reason though. He’d dropped back and suddenly there were two women and a baby confronting him.

The first was about his age, he judged. She had long red brown hair and clear blue eyes. She was dressed in a leather outfit that left very little to the imagination and Ryan couldn’t help admiring the toned muscles it revealed. He had no doubt she was a skilled fighter. He would have supposed that the Professor was wrong and that it was the time of the cave men, not the Permian, except that she had a gun, of a kind he’d never seen before, strapped at one hip and she was carrying what he could only describe as a futuristic baby car-seat in which a small child cooed and batted at hanging toys with its hands.

The second woman stood behind the first. She was dumpy with frizzy red hair and freckles and wore a bright blue sundress that fell to her knees. It was cut in a deep V-shape exposing an impressive amount of cleavage. She wore short white bobby socks and trainers.

“He will look after the child,” she said.

The first woman’s gaze flickered over him from head to foot. A cool calculating look that sent shivers up his spine. She nodded slightly.

“I need your help,” she said.

Ryan looked around him at the retreating backs of the Cutters and his team. He counted three soldiers. He didn’t recall taking three soldiers with him.

“They don’t know you are missing,” said blue dress. “Lieutenant Lyle is leading the expedition. You followed after them to warn of a second predator.”

Ryan remembered now. There was a second predator. He needed to warn Lyle. "I have a job to do," he said, turning to follow them.

"I *need* your help," said leathers again. "More than they do. This is important."

"So's my job, lady." He looked up the slope. He could no longer see Lyle and the others.

"Too late!" said blue dress. "They've found us."

She looked up to the sky and Ryan, following her gaze saw... Well he saw flying saucers descending down to them, even though he didn't believe it.

"Those are not enemy ships," said leathers.

"They are."

"Those are Dalek ships. I have seen them in briefings. The Daleks are not the enemy. This the Time Lords know."

One of the saucers opened fire, a beam of light that struck the ground nearby and exploded.

"You will surrender or be exterminated," grated a metallic voice.

"No time to argue," said Ryan. "Run. I'll cover you." He unslung his rifle and opened fire on the saucer hoping to find some vulnerability.

"Into me," said blue dress.

Ryan glanced in her direction and was startled into stillness by the sight of her splitting open down the middle to reveal a kind of black gulf within. Leathers grabbed his arm and dragged him into the void.

He found himself in a large round chamber. A column rose and fell in a central control unit.

"I'm taking off," said the voice of blue dress from somewhere above him.

"Enemy vessel, enemy vessel," the grating voice broke into the chamber. "Your vessel is now confiscated by the Dalek Empire. Surrender or be exterminated."

"They're closing on me," said blue dress's voice anxiously.

Leathers laughed. "It's just Daleks," she said. "They can't match you. They are irrelevant to the war."

"Leela," the voice continued, "they look like Enemy ships."

"Excuse me, will someone tell me what the fuck is going on?" demanded Ryan.

*I'm going to interrupt at this point because, basically, you know what is going on or, at least, if you don't, I can explain it quickly. The woman in a blue dress is called Hope. She's a sentient time machine. She and Leela are in the middle of a time war against a largely unknown enemy. They're on the run from just about everyone involved in the war in order to find somewhere safe to squirrel away*

*Leela's son who is not only half-human and half-Time Lord but also the first child to be born on Gallifrey since the beginning of history.*

*The Daleks, for what its worth, are indeed something of a sideshow at this point in the war, using their own cobbled together time technology to scavenge fall out from the battles of the great powers. It's interesting that Hope mistakes them for the enemy at this point; interesting and ominous. It's a detail I was not aware of before - the sort of thing which happens when you start interfering with fictional accounts of actual events, or possibly the sort of thing that only occurs when you meddle at the interface of fiction and reality. Come to think of it though, since we're fighting a memetic war here that makes it the sort of thing that happens all too often.*

*It takes Ryan a little while to grasp it all, though, which, in his defence, isn't entirely his fault. He's familiar enough with the concept of time travel. He's been with the anomaly project from the start so he's comfortable with the idea of rips in time that lead to other eras. Well, perhaps not comfortable exactly, and he'd like a nice neat explanation of what they are, how they occur and, preferably who's responsible, but comfortable enough to keep up when people start throwing around words like Space/Time vortex. But he's not so familiar with the concepts of alien races, Time Lords and sentient time machines. He's also naturally suspicious and ill-disposed to take at face value the words of two women who, he is already dimly aware, have just kidnapped him.*

*So, while they bicker, I thought I'd introduce myself. I'm a conceptual entity. At one point we were pretty well known though that got rarer as the war progressed. Technically I am a shift; that's right **a** shift, not **the** shift. There were always several of us but, for a while, it served the purposes of our masters to pretend there was only one. If you know anything about shifts you'll realise around now that you are actually still reading that tedious scene where Hope and Leela try to explain what's going on to Ryan. Believe me, the author has gone into it in excruciating detail outlining, entirely incorrectly if I may say so, pretty much every thought that passes through Ryan's head the whole time. I hate history presented as fiction, as if anyone except the three people involved actually know how that conversation went. That is facetious of me. Like I said, we're at the interface of fiction and reality - for all I know the account before you is the first iteration of that little scene. The original version if you like. Shame you're not going to find out how it ran. Whatever! Every version of the conversation is long and tedious.*

*Anyway I'm a shift, a conceptual entity. I exist by manipulating concepts, in this case the ones you are reading on the page. If you want to place me somewhere then right now I'm between your visual cortex and your language processing areas*

*but, take it from me, that's not a very useful way to think about the situation.*

"The Dalek ships will be in range in five minutes," said Hope.

"Can you withstand their weapons?"

"For a while but they're in enemy ships and I'm not combat ready."

Leela looked around her, gripping the hilt of the knife at her waist.

"We're travelling through time?" said Ryan for what felt like the hundredth time in the conversation.

"Yes," said Leela, wearily.

"And there's some kind of big time war going on."

"Yes."

"Do you know where or when the battles are? Can you get to one?"

"Why?"

"Even if Hope is not combat ready, there will be ships there that are. It's a matter of getting somewhere you will be safe and your pursuers won't."

"He speaks wisely," said Leela.

"The Time Lords won't let you slip away a second time," said Hope.

"It was never my intention to slip away for long."

"Whatever," said Hope, "there's a force massing off Dronid. I'll head there."

Seconds later the central column ceased its movement. The ceiling above Ryan seemed to fade into translucency and he saw an expanse of space above him. Hanging against the vista were hundreds upon thousands of people. They wore a frightening array of armour and war paint. Each was different but with hints here and there that spoke to Ryan of Samurai warriors or Native American Indians or the Knights of the Round Table. Suddenly, in one part of the screen, Ryan saw the saucer like ships of the Daleks emerge. Seconds later there was nothing there. Several of the hanging time ships had turned towards the Dalek saucers. Ryan had expected rays or explosions but there was nothing. One minute the ships were there, the next they had gone.

"They want to talk to us," said Hope, "in the command ship."

Leela nodded. "Take us there."

The panorama vanished to be replaced by a plain white room and a reception force of what looked like armed guards.

"What's going on?" asked Ryan.

Leela turned to look at him. Her expression was neutral, like a carefully maintained poker face.

"I have to go, see if I can strike a bargain with the Lord President."

She picked the baby out of the carrier and dropped a gentle kiss on his head. Then she handed him to Ryan.

“I don’t think I’ll be able to come back. Look after him,” she said, her voice carefully steady. “His name is Johnsmith.”

“Hang on a minute,” Ryan began.

“Hope,” she called, “let me out. Keep him here.”

And she was gone.

“It’s an Earth Colony. You’ll be safe there,” said Hope.

Ryan stared dubiously down at the cluster of domes nestling at the foot of the hill. He looked at the baby at his feet, once again in its carrier.

“Be reasonable, Hope. Take me and John back to his mother and we can sort this all out.”

Hope shook her head. “Not possible, Leela wants him protected away from the Time Lords. This is the deal. I’ve got the two of you somewhere safe. I can’t stay here and Leela can’t get here and his name is Johnsmith, all one word.”

“I never agreed to this!”

Hope shrugged. “Whatever! You’ll do it though.”

“Let me back in, now!” demanded Ryan.

“Goodbye, Captain.”

There was a wheezing groaning sound and Hope vanished from view, like a Cheshire cat with poor dress sense.

Ryan crouched down in front of the baby. “Well, Johnsmith, all one word, it looks like we’re stuck with each other.”

The baby’s face scrunched up in a look of concentration and a suspicious smell wafted up. Ryan closed his eyes for a moment. Then he picked up the baby carrier and started walking down the hill towards the colony. It didn’t appear that he had any other choice.

### **3.4 Mother of Gallifrey**

Leela of the Sevateem, Warrior Queen of Gallifrey, pulled on her battle head-dress. It was made of a light-weight titanium alloy so she barely felt it resting on her head. Once in place, a screen popped up in her visual field showing tactical schematics, restricting her awareness of the immediate surroundings. That still troubled her. She had grown up with the importance of complete awareness drummed into her. Although she realised that the overlay of information added

valuable extra context it still made her feel edgy. It gave her a sense that she wasn't fully concentrating on the task in hand. She ran diagnostics and flexed her hands inside their armoured gloves, watching the output as the movement sent signals through her combat suit.

She glanced at herself in the full length mirror and grimaced at the absurdity of it all. The headdress was worked into a face, somewhat like her own but lined with age. Her eyes were blanked out by the screens she looked through. Metal straps, pretending to be armour, crossed her chest and hips. Hydraulic pistons glided down her legs and arms, connected to elbow length gloves and thigh length boots. It left half of her vital organs exposed, but then the point of the armour wasn't protection. Like so much in this strange war, the point of the armour was image. Here was the Warrior Queen of Gallifrey! Here was the Pythia of old reborn and joined with the new Time Lord race! It was the Pythia's death mask that had been used as a template for the helmet. The only bit she had never understood was the revealing nature of the armour. The Time Lords lectured her, frequently, on the extent to which they had broken free of earthly desires. Why then, did they insist she marched around in little more than underwear?

She allowed herself a small smile. Andred had never appeared particularly untroubled by the pull of the flesh. Their son was living proof of that. Andred had been dark, with a slight build that belied his strength. Too often, these days, her mind slipped to the other end of the spectrum, to the powerful, blond man, in whose care she had left their son.

The assault on Gallifrey had been minutes old when she had fled the capitol. In those minutes, time had changed and rewritten itself a dozen times and in each version Andred had died. She had listened to his final moments over the comms channel again and again, each time it happened. Instinct had driven her to the TARDIS holding bays and Hope. She was trusting to a chance remark Compassion had once made to her.

Compassion, companion to the Doctor, like herself, mother of the new generation of TARDIS had passed her in the corridors of the capitol and had leant down to whisper "Hope is yours," before she had moved on, flanked by the chancery guard.

So Leela had sought out Hope and Hope had taken her to Captain Tom Ryan and, clutching desperately at the only straws available, she had bargained one trip for Hope, Ryan and the baby with Lord President Romana. She trusted that Hope would leave them somewhere safe. Meanwhile she continued her existence as the Gallifreyan figurehead Warrior Queen, the price of her son's freedom.

There was a movement behind her. Benine and Carron walked into the small

fortress the Time Lords laughingly called her command tent. They were both cwejen of the familiar and common type one. They were identical in their blond-haired, blue-eyed enthusiasm for the fight. She nodded to them and turned to leave the tent, flanked on both sides.

The ground battle was bogged down. The engagement had started before she'd even left the tent but the front line remained a mere hundred yards from the encampment. Leela walked at a measured pace through the crossfire. Her younger self would have laughed at her foolishness. She was relying on sophisticated shielding to keep her safe and it could only take so many impacts. But the reality was she wasn't really a soldier in this war. She served more purpose walking slowly across the battlefield than she did in the front line. This irked her more than she liked to admit.

It was with relief that she dropped into the first trench. There was a platoon of cwejen there, all type one. Identical blue eyes turned towards her as she landed amidst them.

"Report," she barked.

"Enemy line is 200 yards south. They're laying down covering fire."

"What troops?"

"Unknown at present."

Leela checked the displays. They were worryingly devoid of information. Whatever it was the enemy had ranged against them it wasn't going to be regular ground troops. They'd have made a move for the trench by now if they were.

It was a trap, she decided. The intent was to lure her men towards the enemy lines.

There was a whole manual on how to deal with traps. Leela hadn't exactly written it but the grey beards of House Military had locked her in a room with a frightened secretary for a week and she'd tried to explain the rudiments of combat to him. She'd started reading the end result once, all thirty volumes of it, but had been put off by the flowery language. She'd never really got good at reading anyway. The grey beards, however, assured her they had married her practical knowledge to their tactical simulations in a "profitable synergy". There was a whole volume on traps. It was stored in the tactical memory of her battle armour and cross-indexed to the quick look-up features in her helmet. She could access the synergistic wisdom of the Sevateem and House Military in less than a second. Her troops could do so even faster. The knowledge in the thirty volumes had been hard-wired into their genetic make-up. They were born knowing every detail of the manuals. She didn't bother to look anything up, though. There was only one option open to her anyway. Spring the trap and see what happened.

One platoon should be sufficient. It would be wasteful of resources to take more to certain death.

The Doctor would have gone alone.

She cursed.

“I’m crossing over Dead Man’s Land,” she said.

“We’re coming with you,” said Benine.

The problem with the cwejen was that they were modelled on Christopher Cwej and Christopher Cwej had travelled with the Doctor. They, like her, instinctively knew what the Doctor would do. Every single one of them was itching to volunteer to heroically spring that trap in his honour.

Leela looked down the line. The entire platoon nodded as one.

“On my signal,” she said.

They went over the top in a long strung-out line. Their suits were linked. The bio feedback meant you could switch to full control at any point but formations were easier if you let the suits do most of the positioning work. Leela watched the enemy trench approach. Whatever it was they were going to trip, it would happen soon.

Leela felt time shift. She wasn’t supposed to be able to do that. The Time Lords had explained to her many times that she couldn’t feel time shift. She had no doubt that was what she had felt. That moment of blankness that meant that for a split second she hadn’t existed and had never existed before the Time Lord reality machines yanked her back, repairing whatever damage had been done. Leela glanced to either side. She could have used the displays but old habits died hard. About half the cwejen remained. A couple had converted to type three. The big, souped-up bodies of the Regen-Inf thundered through the mud. That would help.

The time shift was essentially artillery, at least in her terms. Leela was still looking for the trap. There was another momentary shift and then...

...then she was in a large dimly lit room. Below her walked women in long red robes. She recognised these from paintings in the Panopticon.

“This is the trap,” she said.

“Pythia?” asked one of them. The Pythia again, it was as though the legend haunted her. She wondered sometimes if the Time Lords feared her, expecting her to issue some new curse upon them like the curse of sterility that had fallen from the last Pythia’s lips.

“This is the trap,” she repeated.

It must have been a reality bomb of some description. Leela didn’t really understand reality bombs. They were specifically triggered to individuals and

trapped them inside a bubble reality. This prevented the reality machines repairing them. Reality bombs had to be calibrated for a particular individual, which made her the target. Victims in their second reality never realised they had been moved. Leela didn't believe that any more than she believed you couldn't feel a time-shift. The Time Lords often didn't really understand their own technology.

Her withered hands shifted to the charms hanging from her dress, fingering the strange shapes.

"Pythia," asked another woman. "Would you see the future?"

Leela wished to shake her head. Fore-seeing was ill-omened *and impossible* she reminded herself. She could hear whispering at the edges of her mind and realised she was brushing against the thoughts of the women below her. *Show me the future* she thought and gripped the wicker cagework around her.

One of the adepts touched a control and a cloud of smoke rose up around her from below, in a rich bitter vapour. Her mind flew free of her body, spiralling upwards with the clouds of smoke. She surged forwards through time, tasting the fish bones that were bought to feed the Pythia down the centuries. She saw a cowed figure and felt the hatred of him sharp in her heart and the whisper of his name in her mind: Rassilon. Words rang out in her cracked and ageing voice. "This world is doomed. I curse it. As I die so shall it wither" and the cage plunged into the depths of the abyss below her. The words were straight from the legend of the Pythia's curse. Leela struggled through the hallucination to tell if she was caught in history or myth. The Pythia existed before history but instinct told Leela she wasn't trapped in a legend.

Before her stood the door. The door to the future. Legend said that the Pythia had seen it in visions, blocking off history from the Old Time. The Pythia hung upon the door and pleaded for it to open. Leela did not plead. She shrugged out of the Pythia's form and fought free of the life and the vision they sought to trap her within. She seized the door with both hands and hauled upon it.

"I am the future," she cried. "I am the mother of Gallifrey."

The door opened and she flew forwards from the Old Time into the New.

There was the taste of gunpowder on her lips from where Ryan had... would... kiss her.

A skull rose from a dusty cairn, an Earth woman brushing it clean as she lifted it. She wore practical clothing and a backpack and had long brown hair that hung loose to her shoulders. Her face shone with a look of triumph. In the distance a form walked away. One man over the shoulder of another.

The waves of prophesy carried her forwards.

Time shifted again.

There were but five cwejen with her now. Three had the blond hair of type one and the remaining two the heavy modifications of type three. Her display showed her their names. The mundane fire had finished. They dropped down into the enemy trench to find it empty and deserted.

“What happened?” asked a type three. “Where was the trap?”

“I sprung the trap,” said Leela. She looked round the empty trench. “The trap was the only point of this battle.”

An icon flashed in her eye-line. The War Council wanted to see her.

Benine and Carron were still at her side and she let them flank her as she approached the location she had been given. Mere yards behind the enemy trench stood a bunker. It looked like it had always been there. It had probably always been there, ever since she got the message about five minutes ago. The Time Lords had different words for these different notions of forever but she had never mastered the vocabulary. As far as history was concerned the bunker had always been there but it had only always been there because she had successfully fought her way to the enemy trench in a time line in which there was no bunker and had never been a bunker. She rapped on the door and it opened to admit her.

Leela left her guards at the door to the inner sanctum. Beyond, in a long low room, sat the War Council. She wasn't entirely surprised. Lady President Romana sat at the head, flicking at her earrings, a habitual gesture she did nothing to quell. Leela's eyes flickered over the others at the table. Representatives of all the Old Blood chapters sat there, either in full Time Lord regalia or in the armour of modern warfare. A type two cwejen was lurking in the shadows by the door as she came in. There was no one else there.

Leela stood before the long table facing Romana. Romana took her hand away from her earring and placed both hands on the table. Her black bob danced.

“Leela,” she said, “so good of you to come at such short notice.”

She gestured with one hand to indicate Leela should sit.

Leela suppressed her irritation at Romana's manner. She liked the president well enough and owed her far more than she could ever hope to repay, but she found the air of studied frivolity maintained by this regeneration somewhat tiresome.

*Frankly, Leela also finds most Time Lord ritual and deliberation dull. She's in for a long session of it in this scene so I thought I'd spare you from that. There will be lots of talk of battle fronts and manoeuvres, all working up to the basic point*

*that the Time Lords are losing. It's not obvious yet by a long shot. Certainly not to anyone outside the depths of House Military and the inevitable is still centuries away. Of course, for the Time Lords, centuries pass in the merest blink of an eye. This lot are running scared. Leela probably picked up on that. She had an instinctive ability to judge an opponent. It's a shame, in a way, that she never got to meet Lieutenant Lyle. But I get ahead, or possibly, behind myself.*

*It's me again, in case you hadn't noticed; the Shift. If you've forgotten, or don't know, who and what I am, I suggest you go back and read part one. Look, here's a link ready made for you to follow. Come back when you've caught up.*

*So there you go. I'm a conceptual entity, one of the major weapons' of the War, if you hadn't worked it out already. In this case I'm really just dropping in to whisk you past the boring bits of the War Council.*

*And to put in a good word for Leela. In this instance she's right and they're wrong. I feel I can say that without "spoiling" anything for you.*

"The essential problem is," opined the cwejen from behind her, "that they don't know who the enemy is."

Leela bit her lip. She'd told them plenty of times who she thought the enemy was but they refused to see it. They lectured her endlessly on the value of symbolism, the interaction between observation and reality, but when she suggested that the enemy wasn't a *thing*, wasn't a single entity or organisation they could track down and *defeat* they simply refused to comprehend the fact.

"So," said Romana brightly, "we propose to change the enemy to something we do know how to defeat."

Leela blinked. Involuntarily, she looked behind her to the type two cwejen, hoping he could interpret the statement. He just shrugged.

"How will you do that?" she asked.

"We will need something very powerful," said Romana. "Something powerful enough to warp reality but something that won't work like Time Lord technology. Something the enemy won't be expecting."

"Faction Paradox has a number of such artefacts," pronounced the head of the Prydonian Chapter. "One, in particular, has recently come to our attention. According to our sources they've acquired a skull. They are using it to power up a network of temporal anomalies all over Earth, a network that, so far, has remained undetected by the enemy."

"We need the skull," said Romana.

Leela peered down the table at her. "How can I help? I'm no good at covert operations."

Romana smiled. "Any strike against the Eleven Day Empire is unlikely to be particularly covert, although it will, of necessity, be surgical and precise."

"How will we get in?" asked Leela. If the Time Lords had known how to breach the defences of the Eleven Day Empire it would have been long gone, swept away by the second wave troops, if nothing else.

"The Doctor could find a way in," said the head of the Prydonian Chapter.

Behind her, the cwejen snorted. "Even if he could," he said, "he's already refused to have anything to do with this."

"If the Doctor thinks that this is a bad idea then I do not agree either," said Leela.

Romana sighed, "Be reasonable, Leela, this is about bringing the War to a swift close. A few protocols will be broken but we are not even threatening lives. I'm frankly amazed the Doctor is so opposed to the idea. He never used to hold the protocols in much regard."

There was a murmur round the table but Leela knew this was a lie. She had never known the Doctor break the protocols. Other tenets of Time Lord society he had scattered like the winds, but he had respected the protocols. Romana knew this. Leela watched her closely. Romana had done much for which Leela was grateful but she had no illusions about this regeneration. It had been forged in the crucible of war and would exact a price.

"We think Johnsmith could do it too," said Romana.

"Why?" asked Leela. "None of us have seen him since he was a baby. What makes him special?"

"He's the first child to be born on Gallifrey since the Pythia's curse," said the cwejen behind her. "That makes him of huge symbolic importance. If the Faction get a whiff of a possibility they might recruit him, he gets a free pass to the Eleven Day Empire."

"No," said Leela.

Romana raised an elegant eyebrow.

"No," Leela repeated firmly. "Not my son."

They could not ask for Johnsmith. He was the only reason she was here. The only reason she carried on this charade of the re-incarnated Pythia for them was to protect Johnsmith. It was the deal she had made with Romana. Hope had taken one, unmonitored trip to a never revealed location and hidden Johnsmith, with Ryan to look after him. No one except Hope knew where they were. Leela had never even dared broach the subject in case someone, somewhere would divine their location. Johnsmith's safety was the deal they had made. They could not take that away now.

“Very well,” said Romana. She shuffled her papers. “This Council is ended.”

Leela stood on the bare earth of the battlefield. She was shaking with fear and the aftermath of a fight that hadn’t happened. She felt a presence at her elbow. It was the cwejen.

“I’m not going to agree,” she said.

“I don’t think they thought you would.”

“Then why ask?”

He shrugged and dug about in his pockets, eventually producing a cigarette which he stuck in his mouth. Leela watched as he lit it and drew in a long breath.

“They’re setting a train of events in motion,” he said at last.

Leela looked at him closely. “You’re Cwej aren’t you,” she said, “Chris Cwej, the original.”

He nodded. “You think I’d have been in the council otherwise?”

“Why are you here now?”

“I’m your minder. They want me to keep an eye on you.”

She regarded him closely. She’d met him once before, before his “regeneration” into his current dumpy body. Then, he’d looked like a type one cwejen, blonde hair, blue eyes and boyish good looks. She let her eyes drift to the remains of her cwejen patrol: two type one and two type three. She wondered if he resented the Time Lord intervention in his time line that snatched the promised Regen-Inf form from him and trapped him in his current type two body. She didn’t ask.

Last time she’d met him had been before he’d taken up Time Lord employment when he’d still travelled with the Doctor, before whatever conditioning they had instilled into him since. She had trusted him then but she wasn’t so sure she trusted him now.

There was a blur of movement on her sensors and she reached instinctively for a knife. Cwej was moving too. She caught an image of something bluish and gangly and let her training take over, slashing with the knife at the jaws reaching down towards her. Cwej, she saw, had an arm around the creature’s neck, bending it back and upwards. Leela took the opportunity to plunge her knife deep into where its eyes should be. It thrashed once and then died.

“What’s this?” she asked, stirring the body with her foot. She’d not come across anything like it before, long limbs with grasping hands. No eyes that she could see.

“A babel, I suspect,” said Cwej. “They still have a few left. I imagine it’s a hint that we get a move on.”

Leela looked at the creature with distaste. Even the Time Lords admitted the babelin had been a mistake. They were almost mindless in their viciousness and barely controllable.

“We will talk to Hope,” said Leela.

### **3.5 The Day the War came to Town**

Ryan sighed quietly to himself and stared at the fetishes on the table before him. Each year, on the anniversary of their arrival on the colony, Faction Paradox had presented him with one. Fourteen now ranged before him, each one untouched and unused since he had been given it. Initially it was straightforward suspicion that had prevented him taking them at face value and had caused him to lock them away out of sight and out of mind. But as the grip of the Faction increased and as its members became more open about their activities and rituals he had gained enough understanding to know that use of any one of the fetishes would incur a price.

He was in full battle regalia. In actual fact, this was not a great deal different from the uniform he’d worn into the Permian all those years ago. The Wartime powers tended to favour elaborate armour, mostly for its symbolic effect. Ryan preferred to keep things practical. He still wore his old tac vest; a fetish of his own, in many ways, but it was also practical. The gun was a new model, high-energy weapon, not that that was likely to be of much use in the conflict to come. He’d also bought a lightweight scanner array which looked much like a pair of mirrored sunglasses. He’d strapped a force-field generator to one leg. The field it produced wouldn’t last long but would deflect most incoming energy and ballistics. He’d also purchased an exoskeleton. It wrapped around his legs, chest and arms, designed so it would not impede his motion but it could double the force of any blow and the length of any stride. It had saved his life a number of times.

In his heart, though he knew that none of this would be any use. He’d tried to bribe a way for John and himself onto one of the transport ships but he had not been able to. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to know that Faction Paradox had paid larger bribes to keep him here. They had been round almost daily for the last week suggesting he join up.

Last night, he and John had attended one of the Faction’s public scryings. It was against his principles to go but sometimes the need for information was

too great. He'd watched the ritual of sacrifice, based on, he suspected, old earth tales and had winced as the Faction Mother pawed through the beast's entrails. He hadn't been surprised that John could read the portents as well, if not better, than the Mother and it had been useful to receive the news without the filter of the Faction's propaganda. Nevertheless he resented that circumstances had forced him to put a fourteen year old boy amidst such a crowd.

The news left them with little choice though. In fact it left him with only one choice: which fetish to use? He picked up the knife. It was carved from bone and had feathers and beads tied around the handle. It was an ugly thing but it was obvious enough how to use it.

"What are you doing, Dad?"

He looked up. John stood in the doorway. He wore a long flowing red coat, with a short top cape. His black hair was cut in a tonsure. Ryan thought the whole outfit bizarre and a little insulting in a way he couldn't quite put his finger on. He looked like a monk, crossed with a cardinal, crossed with a highwayman. The look was very in at the moment and was generally referred to as Christian Gaijin. It was all the rage among the colony's teenagers. Ryan understood vaguely that it had overtones of fear, savagery and general alienness. It was a very Faction Paradox look. They liked scary imagery that hinted at the savage, yet mystical, Other.

"You saw the portents," said Ryan. "Hell, you interpreted the portents. The war arrives here, today. The moment I use this," Ryan hesitated with the knife over the palm of his hand. "The moment I use this, Faction Paradox will know. They've been trying to recruit us, well you, for fourteen years. They'll get us out of here."

"They want you too," said John. "Don't know why but I'm fairly sure we're a package."

Ryan narrowed his eyes at the boy. John must have been talking to Paradox recruiters behind his back. He was going to have to have words with him.

"However," said John, "I have a different plan."

Ryan raised his eyebrows. "Yes?"

John disappeared behind the door and then reappeared with a large contraption which he dumped on the table.

"Ta da!" John looked at him expectantly.

The contraption appeared to have been made from cobbled together electronics, parts from Ryan's motorcycle (something else they would have to discuss) and the contents of the kitchen drawers.

"What's that?" asked Ryan.

“Biodata interception unit.”

“You what?”

John gave an exaggerated sigh. “You know what biodata is right?”

“Temporal DNA. I’ve sod all idea how it works but it’s someone’s past and future history all wrapped up in a neat bundle.”

“Right, so when you use the fetish you’ll be performing a kind of surgery on your biodata, changing some part of your past or future. Faction Paradox will detect and intercept that change. Firstly, they’ll be able to manipulate the change to their own advantage and secondly they’ll be able to use it as raw power, probably to extract us from the colony to some location of their choosing.”

“I’d worked that bit out.”

“This,” John tapped his machine proudly and the knives jangled, “this will intercept all that. I can limit the effects of the biodata change so it should be effectively undetectable *and* harness the power to get us out of here.”

Ryan eyed the contraption doubtfully. John’s class teachers kept telling him how brilliant the boy was (and what a shiny future he had in Faction Paradox) but this sounded pretty advanced, even by their standards, *and* it was made out of chopsticks, knives and a whisk.

Ryan looked out the window. They had a good view from here of the colony. In the distance there was a strange greenish tinge. Squinting he realised it was ivy growing rapidly over the buildings. Beyond the ivy he could see the ruins of the yakuba. It looked as if it had fallen into decay years ago. The effect seemed to be travelling towards them as if on a shockwave. They were out of time.

“Fair enough, how does it work?”

John set the chopsticks spinning and hit a button on one of the jury rigged pieces of electronics.

“Just make sure you’re holding your hand over this bit,” he gestured to a shallow depression, “when you make the cut.”

Ryan shoved the other fetishes into a pocket and then held his hand out over the contraption. Using the knife he made a small cut on his palm and watched as the blood dripped onto John’s machine. The effect was instant. There was a puff of smoke from somewhere, but the chopsticks carried on spinning. Around them, the walls of the house began to crumble. Ryan watched as vegetation forced its way between the cracks. It looked almost as if it was pulling the house apart. Before him the kitchen table remained solid and firm. The house fell away and Ryan had the unpleasant sensation of falling, down through the building, then through the rocks of the planet and then out and beyond into a psychedelic vortex.

“John? Are we time-travelling, entirely unprotected?” he asked, trying to keep his voice calm.

“Something like that, I think. I didn’t have time to completely work out the theory.”

Ryan closed his eyes. “I see.”

“We’re alive though, aren’t we?”

“We’re alive,” Ryan conceded. Flotsam in the time winds, he thought. He wasn’t necessarily convinced they were better off. He opened his eyes once more and took a good look around. It was easy to see the edge of their bubble. A circular section of the kitchen floor had come with them, along with the table and two upright chairs, Ryan had managed to purchase to go with it. Ryan was glad that he had packed before getting out the fetishes. That meant they had a full survival kit under the table. John was also clutching a bag, so hopefully he was prepared as well. They had several pieces of miscellaneous electronics and half a dozen knives, a drawer full of chopsticks, a whisk and, Ryan squinted into the depths of the machine, a novelty bottle opener.

Ryan checked the perimeter again and then double checked. “John?”

“Yes Dad.”

“This bubble is getting smaller.”

John glanced round. “That’s not good.”

“Can you do anything about it?”

John stared at him a moment then blinked. “Must be able to.”

He fished his datapad out of his bag and began rapidly typing on it.

“What are you doing?”

“In theory I can manipulate our path a bit by, err, rearranging the knives. It’s just a matter of working out where and when we are now and where and when we can get to.”

Ryan eyed the perimeter. It seemed to be contracting more rapidly. “A little haste may be in order.”

“I think we’re rather early.” John sounded worried.

“Early?”

“Close to the Anchoring of the Thread.”

“Is that possible?”

John shrugged and then grinned. “Well, yes, but it’s only *theoretically* possible. No one’s ever managed to do it.”

“Let’s worry about it once we’re safe.”

“Safe may prove a rather relative concept.”

“Right now? I don’t much care.”

John nodded. "OK. Safe, then."

He grabbed a handful of knives and detached them from his machine. The kitchen table shuddered, causing Ryan to grab it. They were plunged into sudden darkness. Ryan became aware that there was a faint light reflecting off John's face. Carefully he turned round. Three figures sat behind him at a raised table. They were all middle-aged men. If they'd been human he'd have put them in their late fifties or early sixties but, as it was, who could tell. Ryan distinctly observed the three exchange glances and then the central one rose.

"Welcome to Gallifrey," he said. "I am Lord President Rassilon, first independent ruler of the same."

*We can skip the introductions and explanations, I think. You know who Rassilon is, right? Or, if you don't, first president of Gallifrey should pretty much cover the basics. You remember the Pythia from Leela's vision in part two? He took over from her, bringing rationality, reason and history to the universe. That's what the stories say. Of course, Rassilon wrote the stories. The Time Lords were the first sentient creatures in the universe and they pretty much moulded it in their image, including, so they say, the linear conception of time we all find so difficult to do without. They refer to this imposition, rather grandiosely, as "The Anchoring of the Thread". The moment they bestowed order.*

*The Pythia, of course, hadn't taken kindly to being deposed. She cursed the Time Lords to sterility and, since she got the curse in just before Rassilon imposed rationality and reason and what have you, it stuck, which must have annoyed Rassilon no end. John and Ryan had stumbled upon the first of the secret debates on handling the crisis. You would have thought that discovering John was the first child to be born on Gallifrey since the curse would have energised the situation. In fact they all take it very calmly. You would almost think they had been expecting John and Ryan to appear.*

*Oh! And in case you're wondering, to Rassilon's right sat Omega, Time Lord engineer. If you've not heard of him, don't worry about it. To his left was a figure that history would later refer to only as the Other, which is as good a title as any for the time being.*

Ryan watched John, deep in discussion with Omega and Rassilon. His eyes were shining, but then he was meeting legendary figures. Rassilon, Omega and the Other weren't talked about much by Faction Paradox, but even they couldn't deny their influence and importance and John, acutely aware of his Time Lord heritage, had lapped up all the information he could access.

Ryan himself was divorced from the situation. He was only a bodyguard cum foster father and his grasp of temporal mechanics was fairly minimal. He didn't

even know what the “Protocol of Linearity” was, nor why it was so incredible that they’d managed to break it. A lot of equations, using an alphabet he didn’t recognise, appeared to be involved. Personally, Ryan thought that if you took a half-human, half time-lord, a Faction Paradox fetish and a home made time machine almost anything was possible. He couldn’t cast that into maths though.

He sat on one of his kitchen chairs and kept a wary eye on proceedings. Then the Other rose from his seat and came over to him. The Time Lord was wearing a long cloak with a hood that shrouded his face. Ryan thought he looked self-consciously mysterious, but refrained from saying so.

“Walk with me.”

Ryan eyed him dubiously but stood up. They exited the chamber and Ryan found himself in a long colonnade with high arches over-looking a vast plaza hundreds of feet below. There seemed to be an awful lot of people out there. The Time Lord nodded.

“They are awaiting news of a plan.”

“You don’t seem as fascinated by John’s equations as your friends are,” challenged Ryan.

The Time Lord shook his head. “I have a slightly different perspective.”

“So what are we here to talk about?”

The Time Lord laughed. “Direct as always.” He opened his hand and a tiny ball of light appeared hovering above his palm.

“What’s that?” asked Ryan.

“The Mark of the Celestis.”

Involuntarily, Ryan took a step backwards.

“There’s no need to fear. They can not mark you unless you agree to it.”

“You are marked?” asked Ryan.

The Other shook his head again. “No. I had to agree to give this to you, though. You may carry it with you safely. You will only become marked if you use it.”

He held the glittering object out to Ryan. “Take it. Never use it.”

Ryan looked at the thing. It was a matter of priorities, like the faction fetishes. If he took it, he had an option of last resort. If the worst came to the worst he could make a deal with the Celestis in return for accepting the mark. He reached out and the ball of light transferred to his palm. He closed his fingers around it and it vanished.

The Other sighed. “I wish you hadn’t done that.”

“I don’t have to use it.”

“No,” the man agreed, “but you will.”

*This is not quite the most stupid thing Ryan ever did. But it's close. Actually using the damn thing is obviously the most stupid thing he did. Allowing himself to get talked into a situation where he felt he had to use it was also pretty dim. I don't know. In the long catalogue of stupid things Ryan did, this one is definitely close to the top.*

### **3.6 Picnic at Anomaly Junction**

*You'll be wanting to know who the Celestis are now and what the significance of the mark is. The Celestis are ideas. They used to be corporeal. In fact they used to be Time Lords but they decided to side-step the whole war thing. They erased themselves from time and became memetic creatures of pure thought, hiding out in their citadel of Mictlan, like a cancer on the exterior of the universe. No, I don't know how that works, but that's where Mictlan is supposed to be. I work for them. That said, all this messing around with the story you're reading is happening in my free time, not that I officially have any. This is the sort of thing that happens when you fight a conflict in which sentient ideas participate. Not that the Celestis would ever admit to taking part in the conflict. They removed themselves from history precisely in order to avoid that. They are taking part, though. So you are reading a piece of fiction, but that's essentially a bunch of ideas and, in this conflict, that makes it into a weapon. Confused yet? I know I am. It's a state of affairs I've come to terms with. I've been confused pretty much from the moment I discovered there was a war.*

*The mark of the Celestis is easier to get a grip on. You'll have heard of the King's Shilling. The essential concept is the same but involves less beer. You accept a favour from the Celestis and in return you receive a mark. On your death you then become one of their servants, trapped in Mictlan. The purpose of the servants is largely to think about the Celestis. If you've turned yourself into an idea, you need people to keep thinking about you. And yes, before you ask, I did accept their mark and I am now trapped in Mictlan.*

*On the whole, I imagine you're thinking that this doesn't sound too bad. While an eternity spent thinking about the Celestis isn't quite up there with the cupids and heavenly chorus, there have to be worse after-lives out there, right?*

*Wrong.*

*Why do you think the Celestis excised themselves from history? They were running scared, that's why. So they idealised themselves as the epitome of fear. The many towers of Mictlan are haunted by the stench of death and terror wreathes*

*mist-like through its empty streets. The slaves of the Celestis are bound forever to think and perceive only Mictlan and only the Celestis, the Lords of Loathing and Fear and Horror. Sometimes we get sent out on missions and sometimes we get to snatch a small amount of time in someone else's ideas but inevitably, and always, we are pulled back into the well of despair.*

*It's one of the reasons I'm a little garrulous here. I would never have described myself as particularly garrulous in life but when you exist only as an idea, images and words are pretty much all you have.*

*I'm not here simply to wallow in self-pity though. I have a plan. We'll come to that shortly.*

Ryan sat awkwardly in front of the kitchen table. John's home-baked array of electronics and chopsticks had been replaced by something altogether more elaborate but, in many ways, no less ramshackle. Omega, Rassilon and John were fussing over it like children with a new toy. Ryan had not seen the Other since he gave him the mark of the Celestis.

"Is this a good idea?" he asked for the hundredth time.

Rassilon straightened up. "One of the first tenets we put in place when we Anchored the Thread was the Protocol of Linearity."

Ryan sighed, "Gallifreyan time cannot be travelled through. No Time Lord should be able to move backwards or forwards in Gallifreyan time."

"It is a little embarrassing, therefore," said Rassilon, "that you have managed to completely shatter it within days of its establishment."

"Not exactly days from our point of view," pointed out Ryan.

"We think it must have been partly because of the Faction Paradox fetish and partly because I'm only half Time Lord," said John.

"Even Faction Paradox can't travel through Gallifreyan time," objected Ryan. "Can they?"

John shook his head. "Don't think so. We were just a freak effect."

Ryan rolled his eyes. Personally, he doubted the "freak effect" theory. It explained away too much whilst explaining away precisely nothing at all. However, the two greatest figures in Time Lord legend, not to mention his disturbingly intelligent foster son, were remarkably keen on it.

"More to the point," said Omega, "since you can't possibly be here at this time it should be simple to eject you back into current Gallifreyan time."

Ryan shook his head but nevertheless fished a second Faction fetish from his pocket. This one was a small gold cross with tiny pins at three of the points. Ryan winced with distaste. He held his hand over the machine. Rassilon and Omega stood back. John gripped the edge of the table. Ryan curled his hand tight around

the cross, letting the pins bite into his skin. Three small drops of blood dripped into the heart of the machine.

The travel this time was much faster. A brief sensation of blurred movement and then Ryan found himself sitting in one of his kitchen chairs on a grassy hillside. On every side of him, as far as the eye could see, anomalies blinked and sparkled.

“Captain Ryan, what an unexpected surprise.”

Ryan stood rapidly and whirled round. Helen Cutter was behind him, rucksack on her back, long hair loose about her shoulders.

*Helen Cutter is not my favourite person. Not that she would care about my opinion at all. One of the most disconcerting things about Helen was her total lack of giving any kind of a toss about what people thought of her. The worst crime anyone can commit, of course, is not caring what other people think. Helen didn't care at all. She had no interest whatsoever in being nice or accommodating. She was prepared enough to play the game when it suited her agenda but she was never terribly good at it. If it hadn't been for her intelligence, and other assets, she would never have got as far as she did.*

*She was never all that interested in being the good guy either, another unforgivable crime. To give her credit, I don't think she was particularly interested in being the bad guy. She just got on with being curious about things. These days I find I have a kind of grudging admiration for the woman, for her single-mindedness, if nothing else. All that said, if I am ever again in a position to do so, I will enjoy paying her back for the lives she has sacrificed along the way.*

Ryan picked his gun off the table.

“Oh, very macho!” said Helen.

“Who's this?” asked John.

“Helen Cutter, Professor Cutter's missing wife.”

“The one who disappeared through the anomalies for eight years and didn't come back?”

“That's the one.”

“You never said she was with Faction Paradox.”

Involuntarily, Ryan glanced at Helen's shadow. It seemed to be in the right place but nevertheless it looked a bit sheepish, like it had just darted there.

“I didn't know,” said Ryan.

Helen pouted. “I'm quite surprised to see you here,” she said. “I'm surprised, in fact, to find you made it out of the Permian in one piece.”

“There was this...” began John.

Ryan shot him a look and John shut up. He wasn't always discreet and had no concept of "need to know". But he had a good nose for impending trouble.

"Yes?" asked Helen.

"Never you mind," said Ryan.

"You know about the Faction though," pressed Helen.

Ryan mustered what he hoped was a contemptuous snort. "Renegade Time Lords, like to make out they're on some kind of anarchistic ideological crusade."

Helen's face darkened.

"Are you a cousin?" asked John, "or just a little sister?"

Helen almost snarled. "Never you mind," she threw at them.

"Well, *little sister*," said Ryan, emphasising the words. "We don't want anything to do with you or your kind so I suggest you get out of here."

"You may not want anything to do with the Faction, Captain Ryan. But believe me, the Faction is interested in you."

"You have our answer."

Helen raised her eyebrows, then shrugged and leaped through the nearest anomaly.

Ryan waited a minute before lowering his gun. His exoskeleton wasn't neurologically linked. He'd never liked the idea of letting his brain anywhere near Faction doctors. It slowed him down in the field- a lot, but at least he knew his thoughts were his own. He keyed a perimeter warning into the control pad on his arm. He put on his sunglasses and patched a tactical readout in front of one eye. If Helen returned with reinforcements he wanted to be ready.

"Are these anomalies?" asked John. He was peering at a readout on his machine.

"Yes. I don't know if this is the same place we called anomaly junction but, if not, it's something similar."

"Interesting," said John. "We should set up camp here and map them."

"Should we now?"

"If you think that's a good idea, Dad."

Ryan sighed. "Let's be honest, you're the brains of the outfit. I'd have thought we should be able to find a way back to the 21st century from here. It might not be the safest of places but at least I know it. We shouldn't stay too long - this must be a regular through route for dinosaurs."

"You can handle them."

John was probably right. It wasn't like Ryan was stuck with 21st century equipment any more.

"We stay for a bit," said Ryan. "But then we find a way to the 21st century."

At that moment, his perimeter alarm pinged. Ryan whirled to where his tactical readout said the intruder was, but it was moving too fast. Ryan stilled his breathing. The readouts were telling him he was facing a mythical creature, a *babel* from Time Lord legend. It was one of the shock troops created for the early waves of the war: violent, deranged and ultimately uncontrollable. It provided him with an image. Ryan had seen one before. It was the “future predator” Helen had helped them trap. It was the young of one of these that Lyle had been delivering through the Permian when Hope and Leela had abducted Ryan; when he’d been pursuing Lyle’s party to warn them of second predator on their heels. His blood ran cold at the thought that they’d actually been transporting a crate full of *babelin*.

Unsurprisingly, the battle computer was having trouble predicting its movements. At the moment it appeared to be circling them, no doubt deciding upon a plan of attack.

“What is it?” asked John.

“Babel. Keep down. Stay Close.”

Ryan activated his shield. It should protect both of them, for a while at least. He watched the creature circling on his readouts. Ryan laid down a burst of covering fire ahead of its position but mistimed it. The creature turned. Several warning lights indicating a directly incoming opponent flashed on his glasses. He still couldn’t actually see anything though, it was moving too fast.

He let off a burst of gunfire directly ahead of him and then the creature slammed into his forward shields knocking him backwards off his feet, onto the ground. He clenched a fist, hearing the servos whirr softly in the exo-skeleton and then punched forwards with all his might. He connected with something. John was crouched in front of him, hands held protectively over his head. Ryan placed a hand on his shoulder, keeping John down while he stood protectively over him. His shield was at half-strength. The computer readout showed a criss-crossing display of where the *babel* had been but still wasn’t giving him any predictive information. Ryan fought, once more, to still his breathing and pulled a small proximity grenade from his tac vest. He set its detectors to its blast range and lobbed it in front of him.

“Keep very still,” he cautioned John.

He pulled out another and lobbed it behind them. Then he stood as still as he could and waited for the *babel* to come to them. He hoped his shield would survive the blast.

The warning lights began flashing once more and he braced himself. He watched the line of approach on the sunglasses cross into the detection range

of a grenade. The blast threw him backwards off his feet, triggering the second grenade at he did so. He ended up face first on the ground on top of John. His shield readout stood at zero but the battle computer wasn't detecting anything larger than a mouse in the perimeter. Cautiously he lifted his head.

The creature lay still and unmoving a few feet away from them, surrounded by the remains of his table and John's time travel machine.

"Is it really a babel?" asked John, already on his feet and walking towards the creature.

"That's what the readouts said. Question is, was it following Helen?"

"I should dissect it."

Ryan sighed but his mind was whirling with questions. Helen had told them she'd picked up her "future predator" in the Permian and it had followed her to the 21st Century. But now he knew she was a Faction Paradox agent and it would not have surprised him, entirely, to discover she was leading a babel to the 21st Century. But why? What interest had Faction Paradox had in luring Nick Cutter, presumably, into the Permian with a crate full of babelin young?

Fortunately, Ryan's kit bag was blast resistant so it was not long before he and John had set up a moderately secure camp. Ryan spread a number of automated devices around the perimeter which would prevent most things getting too close to the camp itself. They would certainly prevent any dinosaurs accidentally blundering their way.

Ryan initially refused to let the map-making activities get too carried away. He was concerned about anomalies closing while they were on the far side. However, within a day, John had worked out how to predict the lifecycle of an anomaly. Ryan still didn't like straying too far from the junction, uncomfortably aware that all too many things could arise to delay them, but nevertheless they soon had a fairly impressive map of the anomaly network.

"You know something?" asked John on their fifth day.

"What?"

"The anomalies work a bit like capacitors."

"What?"

"I mean they store temporal energy. Every time something passes through an anomaly, jumps across time as it were, a small amount of temporal charge is generated."

“Why do the anomalies close up then? Surely they should just get bigger or something.”

“I don’t know, but I think something, or someone, is siphoning off the power for some reason.”

Ryan stared around the glittering anomalies thoughtfully. “That’s an awful lot of temporal energy someone is generating.”

“We should contact mother.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“You know why not. She wants you kept out of the war. The deal with the Time Lords permitted Hope one unmonitored trip. After that all bets are off. If we make contact with her you will immediately be co-opted into the war effort, as a figurehead if nothing else.”

“I’m fourteen, I’ve already accidentally broken the Protocol of Linearity, and I’ve discovered that someone is using the Earth as a giant temporal battery. I’d say I’m already involved in the war.” John paused, glancing down at his hands. “I’m also half Time Lord as well as half human. I can’t just hide away with this information when it could be of use to them.”

Ryan regarded him closely. He’d grown up fast on the Paradox infiltrated colony. He’d grown up even faster in the last few days. And he had a point about the strategic value of his information. Eventually Ryan nodded.

“I assume you’ve a plan for contacting her?”

Ryan watched suspiciously as Hope materialised in front of them. She looked the same as before, but then she would. He paused, briefly, to wonder why *anyone* would choose to look like a dumpy red-head with freckles but then he didn’t run universe manipulating block transfer computations in his head, so who knew.

He did a double-take, though, when Leela stalked out of the machine. The leathers she had worn when he had first met her, fourteen years previously, had not left a great deal to the imagination. Her current outfit left even less and there was clearly some support work going on in the bikini top.

“It makes me look more like a warrior queen,” she said fiercely.

Ryan tore his eyes away from her breasts and up to her face. “It makes you look more like something, certainly.”

Her face was full of fury. “You were not supposed to contact me.”

Ryan shrugged. “Events have overtaken us.”

“Mum?” interrupted John. The poor boy had gone bright red and was staring fixedly at his feet. Mind you, if he’d only seen his Mum for the first time at age fourteen and she’d been wearing that get up, Ryan would have had trouble knowing where to look. John was going to have issues.

*Actually John, it has to be said, has never shown much sign of issues. It’s probably the Time Lord half. Since they’ve reproduced asexually for millennia, Time Lords aren’t really wired up to respond to anything much sexually. For all I know Time Lords have a small compartment in their mind where they can shove all that “yucky stuff” and pretend it doesn’t happen.*

*I have no idea how John came to be conceived, though I suppose if Leela came at me with a knife demanding sexual fulfilment and, you know, I still had a body, I would apply my full Time Lord mental powers to resolving the situation. If I was Andred, that is.*

*I’m just marking time here while there’s more exposition and enjoying my brief holiday from Mictlan. Ryan and John are describing their flight from the doomed colony Hope left them in and you already know all about that. Hope explains why the colony was the only possible place she could have left them, even though she was aware of the Faction Paradox presence. Cwej has tagged along with Leela so there has to be a terribly tedious round of introduction. Leela threatens pretty much all concerned at one point or another. Once she’s calmed down a bit, she explains the Time Lords want John to infiltrate Faction Paradox and they all launch into a whole new round of argument. And so on and so forth.*

“I’ll do it!” said John.

“No!” said Leela and Ryan in unison.

Cwej slumped on a rock and lit his third cigarette with an air of weary resignation.

“I don’t see how you can stop me,” said John.

“He has a point,” said Cwej.

“You keep out of this,” returned Ryan.

“The Time Lords know where I am now,” said John. “As far as I can see we’re committed.”

“Not necessarily,” said Ryan.

Leela looked at him, “You have a plan?”

“Faction Paradox have this skull in the Eleven Day Empire right? And we know of only one assault that has ever successfully breached the Empire.”

“Star Chamber on Earth, 1834, using Babbage’s Analytical Engine,” said Cwej.

“John can design and build an analytical engine. We know the key is Bach’s Musical Offering. We can enter the Empire ourselves.”

Cwej shook his head, “No good. They’ll have closed off that route now.”

“Not if we make the attempt before Star Chamber did.”

“Not possible,” said Cwej. “It’ll break the Protocol of Linearity.”

“We launch an attack sometime after the founding of the Eleven Day Empire and before the 1834 attack. Sometime between 1752 and 1834, Earth time.”

Cwej shook his head, “Even if Hope managed to travel to that period in Earth history, and it’s notoriously difficult to get there, you still wouldn’t be contemporaneous with the Eleven Day Empire. The Protocol of Linearity prevents it.”

Ryan looked at the anomalies glittering all around them. “Who said we were going to use Hope to travel?”

### **3.7 The Tremaynes are At Home to Captain Thomas Ryan and Family**

“This dress is ridiculous!” Leela tugged angrily at the stays everyone seemed to think she should wear.

“The men’s clothes aren’t much better,” commented Ryan, without turning.

Leela let her eyes run over his breeches and tailored waistcoat, as he leaned out of the window.

“No,” she agreed, seriously, “they are too tight for combat.”

He straightened up and leaned against the side of the window. “You complain about your dresses every day.”

“They are impractical.”

His gaze drifted to her breasts, “They do wonders for your figure, though.”

“That is beside the point.”

Ryan looked out of the window.

“What are you looking for?” asked Leela.

“John and Cwej, they went out earlier to meet Cwej’s watchmaker contact. I’m worried they’ll make themselves conspicuous.”

“Everyone in this city is conspicuous.”

Ryan laughed at that. “We’re in the fashionable end of town. So you may have a point.”

He looked out of the window once more. “But it’s a Sunday,” he said. “It’s conspicuous doing business on a Sunday.”

“How did you know about Star Chamber?”

“Sorry?”

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“How did you know about Star Chamber? I’ve been thinking. The Faction won’t have told you. They’d want to conceal the fact someone nearly managed to break in to the Eleven Day Empire. It’s not common knowledge. I didn’t know about it. So, how did you know?”

Ryan regarded her coolly for a moment.

“The anomaly project.”

“Yes?”

“It’s not like the British government went into it blind. They’ve been aware of the time-active powers since they sold those eleven days to Faction Paradox in 1752. Not many of the people on the project knew about Faction Paradox and the Time Lords, but a few of us did.”

Leela cocked her head to one side. Instinct told her Ryan hadn’t explained everything. So she stared at him expectantly and waited for him to fill the silence.

“There’s even a rump of Star Chamber left within the government,” he admitted, finally. “I worked for them.”

“You still work for them?”

Ryan shook his head, “I don’t think so. I have a different priority and I think we might disagree about how to handle him.”

Leela regarded him closely and then nodded, satisfied, temporarily at least.

Ryan ushered his “family” into a pew in the Church. Hope had suddenly converted her appearance, after living in London for two days, to that of a tall elegant black woman and she’d taken to wearing finery that put the rest of them to shame. Her dresses hung stiff with gold and silver thread and must have weighed a ton. Ryan had tried to suggest that she should either revert to her white red-head appearance or wear clothes more appropriate to a servant but she had given him a look that had frozen his blood and had asked if that was an order from Leela. Ryan didn’t want to argue with someone who could rip holes through space and time. More importantly, he didn’t want to know what it was like to be able to build universes inside your head but be hard-wired to obey your operator in all things. He particularly didn’t want to know about the Time Lord force-breeding program, the bull TARDISEs in the restraints of the birthing cages, the programming and the conditioning and the atrocities committed in the name of an arms race. If Hope wanted to make a point then he wasn’t going to stop her, but he wished she didn’t make them quite so horribly conspicuous.

He'd mentioned it to Cwej who had just shrugged and said, "At least she's not looking like her mother any more. That has to be a good thing."

It was around this point when Ryan started worrying quite how dangerous a sentient time machine with issues might be. He didn't know a lot about Hope's mother, Compassion. The name, he was told, had been ironic. She had originally lived on a Faction Paradox colony, then she had travelled with the Doctor. Some days Ryan wondered if every significant figure on the Time Lord side of the war had travelled with the Doctor. At some point, something entirely unexplained had happened, and she had mutated into a time machine and from that moment the race had been on to co-opt her into the War. She'd kept ahead of the war-time powers for a long, long time but at some point and for her own reasons she had made a deal with the Time Lords. Hope and her sisters were the result of that deal. They were bound to their Time Lord operators and abandoned by their mother. Ryan considered pointing out to Hope that there were no slaves in 18th Century England but he had a feeling the conversation would not go well.

Even in his Sunday best, Cwej managed to look dishevelled. Leela looked rebellious. Hope looked bored. At least John looked intent and fascinated and almost normal in his powdered wig. As long as he kept his mouth shut they should be able to get through the service and home again without incident.

"Why are we here?" hissed Leela as they sat down.

"Because our lodgings are across the street and it will be noticed if we don't attend," returned Ryan with, he felt, exemplary calmness given they'd had this conversation several times already. Several times, in fact, every week that they had been here.

"The Doctor always said," began Leela.

"That superstition was the retreat of the timid mind," completed Ryan. "Yes, I know. This is religion not superstition which is different, so shush!"

"I do not see the difference," said Leela, loudly enough to earn a chuckle from Cwej and a stern look from the vicar.

This Sunday was different though. About halfway through the service which, 18th Century political ignoramus that he was, Ryan thought might be about Trade Unionism, he became aware of faint movement out of the corner of his eye. He became more alert and, keeping his eyes fixed on the vicar, nevertheless started to pay attention to his peripheral vision. At his side, Leela began hoisting at her skirts in a way that told him she was about to liberate the small armoury she kept there and, no doubt, horrify the parishioners with a show of leg. Ryan rather appreciated Leela's legs so he allowed himself the odd glance as the hem of her skirt crept up her shins and over her knee. Behind him, he heard Cwej cocking the

### 3.7. THE TREMAYNES ARE AT HOME TO CAPTAIN THOMAS RYAN AND FAMILY69

pistols he kept concealed under his coat. Ryan gripped the end of his sword-cane. They'd agreed to carry only contemporary weapons in the hopes it would make them less conspicuous to any time active power that might be watching. He rather wished they had stuck with the high-energy weapons.

Shadows were dancing up the aisles and in and out of the tall pillars holding the roof aloft. It looked like the Faction had found them. Keeping track of the shadows from the corners of his eyes, there was no point looking straight at them, you never saw anything if you did that, Ryan's mind raced. Faction Paradox were always incredibly impressed by symbolism. It made a certain sense, caught up, as they were, on the sidelines of a war that was not only *about* ideas but fought *with* ideas and, if Leela was right, was essentially being fought *against* ideas. Ryan personally thought that Faction Paradox tended to fetishise symbolism more than they needed to, but on this particular occasion it might serve to protect them. In particular a word floated across his mind and that word was Sanctuary.

Ryan had a sudden dissonant image of a naked Stephen Hart holding a can of beer. He blinked and it was gone but his conviction remained. Faction Paradox would not launch a full frontal attack in a Church and, while they remained in the Church, they would be safe. Stephen Hart, naked, fully clothed or dressed in a bunny suit wouldn't make any difference to that.

*At this juncture I feel I should comment on the whole naked Stephen Hart thing. I should, in fact, draw your attention to the whole primeval denial Sanctuary thing. I expect you'll be getting irritated around now. There's breaking the fourth wall and then there's ripping the whole thing to shreds and jumping up and down on it going "nya! nya! nya!". But the point is I'm **not** the author. I know you **think** I'm the author being all pretentious and meta-textual but I'm not. I'm a shift. I'm a conceptual entity. The author did not write this.*

*Look! The Time Lords are fighting a war with ideas and ideas are insidious things, hard to pin down and hard to control. They escape and find their way out. They insert themselves into fiction. They worm their way into one mind and leap from that to another and another. Rodlox had this idea of putting Leela and Ryan together and the idea leaped from his mind to Lsellersfic and she wrote a drabble. Feeding upon the attention, the idea grew and now Ryan is sitting in a Church admiring the shapely curve of Leela's thigh while she admires the tightness of his trousers and both of them, frankly, are getting a little hot and excited and not just about the fight they anticipate happening in the near future. And they are really there! This is not just a story. It's balanced on a fine line between fiction and reality, ideas knocking against ideas, in a war that stretches across all time, a war that is about our deepest most fundamental conception of how time and reality*

*work and which is causing the boundary between reality and fiction to fray a little at the edges.*

*Then into this you drop the word Sanctuary and a host of other ideas get set free. Ideas that leap from one mind to another. It's not even clear how that meme started. People were upset when their favourite characters in a TV show died. An internet community was set up. Mysteriousaliwz wrote some porn and the idea jumped to Athene and then Fredbassett and then Luka and by that point it was out and free. Such a harmless idea. Take the pretty boys and put them somewhere safe after they died and then watch them having sex but, as I hope you've realised, they're all combatants in a war, whether you believe it or not, whether you like it not and those two ideas: that Ryan escaped from the reaper and went off to have exciting adventures with Leela and that Ryan succumbed to his fate and ended up strapped to a bed with cable ties while Stephen Hart licked ice cream off his nipples come into head to head conflict.*

*No wonder the poor man's having visions of Stephen. He's a foot soldier in a war. You're the tactician, safe behind the lines, at least for the moment. Don't forget that!*

The church was empty. The vicar stared at them from where he stood.

"Are we going?" asked John quietly.

The shadows continued to move.

"Not yet," said Ryan.

The vicar walked over towards them. Ryan struggled to recall his name.

"Fascinating sermon!" said John brightly, as the man approached and he vaulted over the pew and perched on the back of the one in front facing the vicar. "Not sure I'd have made the parallel between David and Goliath, Parliament and People myself, at least, not with Parliament in the role of David. Though I suppose you could do a kind of analogy, if you leaped across the pond and suggested the Scarlet Pimpernel was an agent of the British Government."

"Not written yet," said Hope.

"What?"

"The Scarlet Pimpernel. It's not been written yet."

"The Scarlet Pimpernel's fictional?" said John. He looked to Ryan for confirmation who shrugged back.

"OK, forget about the Scarlet Pimpernel." John raised his hands at the vicar.

The vicar stared past him stonily at Ryan.

"Mr Ryan. I assume you have some business with me?"

"Not quite," said Ryan, carefully. "We seem to have attracted company."

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At that moment the whole Church dimmed as if the sun outside had vanished behind a cloud. The shadows rushed across the walls with a faint chittering sound.

“We claim Sanctuary,” said Ryan, loudly. “You will not attack in a Church.”

A shadow halted, inches from his polished and buckled shoes.

There was a sudden silence.

“We should escape,” said Hope standing. “I can...”

“No,” said Ryan. “We stay here.” He looked round at Hope. “I’m sorry Hope, but if we try to take your route out of here I don’t think we’ll ever get another chance.”

The vicar clutched the Prayer Book to his chest.

The shadows started to move again, as if gathering strength for an attack. Leela and Cwej both produced pistols, but there was nothing to aim at. Then the vicar slammed his prayer book down on the front of the pew.

“You will not violate the sanctity of this place.”

The shadows stilled.

The sound of soft footfalls echoed in the aisle, alongside the tapping of a cane. Slowly Ryan rose and turned to face the newcomer. A man, elegantly attired in black with a fashionable wig, stood facing them, his face was obscured by a grinning white mask. Leela cocked her pistol and aimed it at him, as did Cwej.

“Mr Ryan, if you wish to claim Sanctuary, your people can not harm me.”

Ryan nodded at them. Cwej locked eyes with him a moment and then lowered the gun.

“I do not trust this man,” said Leela.

“Neither do I, but let’s hear what he has to say.”

Leela’s gun lowered, by maybe ten inches.

The man flicked his fingers and a small card appeared in them. He held it out.

“What’s this?” asked Ryan.

“An invitation.”

Ryan stared at it suspiciously and then looked at Hope. She was his best bet if there was something fishy about the invitation itself.

“Is it safe?” he asked.

Hope’s wide hooped skirts prevented her sidling along the pew so she walked out into the side aisle and then swept around the front of the church, all eyes upon her, head held high, lightly fanning herself. She stopped in front of the man and her fan closed with a snap. She waved one hand ostentatiously over the invitation.

“It depends what you mean by safe,” she said.

“He means, can he take it?” said John.

Hope looked levelly at him. “Yes, then.”

Ryan took the invitation and flipped it over.

Mr and Mrs Thomas Ryan, Esquire  
Detective Christopher Rodonante Cwej, Mr Johnsmith of House Redlooms and  
the Lady Hope

Mr and Mrs William Tremayne will be at home, this afternoon, 2 o'clock

"Why should we come?" asked Ryan.

The man tutted, disapprovingly. "We can do this in a civilised fashion or an uncivilised fashion, which will it be?"

Ryan gazed at him. Faction Paradox were not renowned for their civilised approach to problems but he doubted even the determination of the vicar could hold them off for long.

"I accept," he said, carefully.

The invitation burst into flames in his hand and he held it carefully as it burned, finally letting the ashes drop to the floor. The man gave a satisfied smirk and stalked back out of the Church.

"You should not have accepted," said Leela. "It is a trap."

"So we'll spring it."

"Besides," said John, "only Ryan has to go. He said 'I accept', not 'we accept'."

"Well spotted," said Cwej.

"I don't see how that helps," said Hope.

Leela grinned, a predatory glint in her eye. "It gives us options."

"I agree you should not have accepted," said the vicar.

Ryan bowed formally to him, as best he could, he'd not had time to get to grips properly with the footwork required.

"Thank you for your protection but I do not think it would have held them for long. This way we take the fight out of your Church and hopefully, we will have time to prepare."

The vicar returned the bow. "I appreciate the concern but I think, perhaps, this was the best place to fight that enemy. Holy ground is the place to fight the ungodly."

"Why do we talk?" asked Leela. "It has been decided?"

Ryan couldn't help smiling. He enjoyed Leela's ability to cut through the crap and get to the point.

The vicar glanced at Leela. "As you see fit, Mrs Ryan. Good day."

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“Good day,” said Ryan. He held out his arm to Leela who took it. “Shall we return to our lodgings, my good wife?” he said.

She glared at him.

“I am not your wife,” she whispered quietly as they walked the wrong way down the aisle towards the door of the Church.

“Life would be a lot simpler if you two did get married,” opined John, from behind them.

Ryan and Leela both stopped to turn round and stare at him. He flushed bright red.

“Though maybe you should... umm,” he waved his hands about, “sleep with each other first. Just to see if you like it.”

“Not helping, John,” said Hope.

“You do like each other don’t you?” he enquired, plaintively.

“I think you and I had better have a chat,” said Cwej, grabbing John by the arm and steering him around Ryan and Leela. “We can leave your parents to resolve their sexual tension in peace.”

Hope stomped out after them, blue skirts swishing along the floor. Ryan heard her mutter, “Humans!” under her breath as she brushed past.

Ryan found himself staring into Leela’s eyes.

“I am not a chattel,” she said.

“Understood.”

“I do not obey foolish orders.”

“Got that.”

They stood awkwardly looking at each other.

“John should not attend this afternoon,” said Leela.

Ryan blinked at the sudden change of subject and then nodded. The analytical engine was almost complete. This afternoon need only be a delaying action.

“We can’t leave him alone though,” he said.

“We may be able to,” she said, “if they think he is with us,” and her eyes fixed on the tracery in the dirt where Hope’s dress had passed.

“Mr and Mrs Thomas Ryan and Party,” announced the footman to the empty room.

Leela stalked in and stood before the nearest mannequin. The room was full of them, dressed in elaborate ballgowns and powdered wigs. She tapped on its forehead.

“Wood,” she reported, puzzled.

“They’re meant to unsettle us,” said Cwej following her. “It’s called the uncanny valley effect.”

She looked at the rows of brightly painted faces and staring eyes. “Why would I be afraid of wooden dolls?”

She felt Ryan come to stand beside her. “Don’t you find them, a little creepy?” he asked. She shook her head. He leaned close to murmur in her ear, “I must show you some horror movies some time.”

“This is pointless,” said Hope, sweeping in imperiously. “We have come and fulfilled the contract. Now we should go!”

“Really? What a pity!” The man from the church had appeared on a balcony above them.

“Mr. Tremayne, I presume?” said Ryan.

“I’m afraid not. The Tremaynes are proving,” the man paused for effect, “obstructive.”

“What do you want with us?” asked Leela.

“Hmmm... that would be telling really. However there seems to be a member of your party missing.”

“He’s somewhere safe,” said Ryan. Leela watched as his eyes flickered towards Hope. The man on the balcony did not move like a hunter, but all the Faction cousins should be able to pick up clues like that.

“Really?” said the man on the balcony. “In that case...” He waved his arms in an elaborate gesture and the great double doors they had come through closed with a clang.

Hope cried out. “He’s temporally sealed us.”

The man laughed, “Oh indeed! You didn’t really think we’d allow them to bring you as a convenient escape route, did you?”

The man leaped over the balcony and landed nimbly on the floor of the ball-room. “All the chickies in one little basket,” he sang and chassayed across the floor towards them.

“You’re not a Time Lord,” said Cwej, producing a gun from inside his coat. “You’re a human recruit,” and his voice dripped with contempt.

The man laughed. “Look at yourself Christopher Rodonante Cwej. I’m an equal in the Faction - what matter it if I am human, if I have imagination and talent and ambition? Whereas you, a human? You will never be more than a tool for the Time Lords. Don’t you find it ironic that you can stand there defending the racial purity of a power bloc that you would despise if they allowed you admittance, that have robbed you of your own blond hair and blue eyes because it suited their purposes better to have a dumpy and insignificant tramp in their employ. Didn’t

they promise you they would regenerate you into a super-soldier? I've heard about the type three cwejen. That body would have been yours wouldn't it? if they hadn't had a sudden change of heart and fiddled with your biodata?"

Cwej fired the gun. Leela heard the distinctive click of the hammer falling. The man laughed again.

"State of Temporal Grace, old chap. Why do you think we let your weapons in, in the first place?"

"At least I know I'm on the side of Law and Order," said Cwej, tightly.

"Time Lord Laws, Time Lord Order. Just because they got here first, what right do they have to the Universe?"

"You are beginning to sound like the Enemy," said Leela.

The man came up close to her, eye to eye. "What do you know of the Enemy?"

"More than you and the Time Lord greybeards," she said. The enemy was a process, she was sure. The enemy was the idea of being opposed to the Time Lord vision of a rational universe. That was why it was so difficult to pin down. It was an idea taken life which infected minds far and wide. It could spring up independently and separately in a hundred time zones but once it was there, it acted swiftly and decisively.

"Tell me!" he demanded.

"Let us go."

They stood eye to eye for a moment. "You know nothing," he said.

He sidled up to Hope. "And now to open you up, my dear, and fetch out young master Smith."

His manner was all violence and menace. Instinctively Leela stepped forward.

"If you lay a finger on her!" Her voice faltered.

"You'll what?" asked the man. "Lecture me on the wisdom of the Sevateem?" He turned back to Hope who began to back away from him.

"You didn't really think young Johnsmith would be safe inside you did you? Time Lord keys open Time Lord ships and Faction Paradox are Time Lords."

Suddenly the man's hands were at Hope's throat. Almost as one, Leela, Ryan and Cwej leaped forwards. His hands peeled apart, ripping Hope open. She screamed.

### **3.8 Assault on the Eleven-Day Empire**

Hope had become a pulsating distortion in the centre of the room. A four-dimensional shape endlessly folding in on itself. Her screaming continued echoing round the

chamber. The man staggered back.

“Where is he?” he asked. “Where is John?”

Ryan grabbed him in an arm lock. “Release her,” he hissed.

“Hope! Swords!” Leela shouted, trusting that Hope would be able to hear them through the pain.

Two swords shot out of the distortion and rolled to her feet. She picked one up and stabbed it hard into the man’s shadow. The man screamed and the shadow writhed.

“Bypasses Temporal Grace,” said Ryan with satisfaction and released his hold stepping back. John had made the swords for them, specifically to fight the Faction with.

Leela was impressed. She picked up the second sword and held it over the shadow heart. “Release Hope.”

Cwej nudged the sword, already pinning the shadow arm. “Temporal Grace doesn’t appear to protect shadows. What a pity. I’d do what she says, you know. She’s not easy to reason with when she’s angry.”

There was a screeching sound and Hope suddenly reappeared. She launched herself at the man, screaming and sobbing. Ryan caught her.

“Leave it!” he ordered.

Leela took one look at Hope’s face and stabbed her sword down hard into the heart of the shadow.

The man made a gurgling sound and collapsed to the floor.

Cwej walked up and stirred him with his foot. “The Doctor wouldn’t approve,” he said.

“The Doctor is not here.”

He shrugged and looked about. “Hmmm... looks like our friends have woken up, though.”

All around them the wooden mannequins lurched into life. Cwej pulled a second gun from his pockets and emptied both them into the nearest doll. Its head exploded but the body moved on.

“The Temporal Grace is gone as well,” he muttered, sounding satisfied.

Ryan stepped forward briskly, pulling his sword from the floor. “Hope, can you open the doors?” he asked.

Hope ran for the doors, toppling dolls like ninepins as she barged past them. Leela, Ryan and Cwej ran in her wake. Leela and Ryan turned in the doorway for a fighting retreat. The thin rapiers were not going to be efficient against the wooden mannequins but they were all they had.

“Duck!” said Cwej suddenly.

In his hand was a stick of dynamite which he lobbed over their heads into the throng.

They ducked down as the wave of heat passed over them. Looking up, Leela saw that most of the dolls were burning and collapsing to the floor. Hope had ignored the blast, her dress not even singed. Her hands wove across the doors. Suddenly, she grabbed the handles and hauled them open.

“Basic temporal theory. He locked the door to his biodata, once he was dead the temporal seal broke. After that it was just a matter of a bit of atomic manipulation,” she muttered.

“Good,” said Leela and they burst into the hallway to be confronted by five masked figures, all en garde. Two men were in fashionable outfits of the day, their masks elaborate feathered affairs. There was woman was in a kind of pirate costume, and then there was a harlequin and a fox.

Leela blocked the harlequin’s blow but instinct made her twist to one side and she knew her sleeve had been nicked, even though the man was nowhere near her. She eyed the shadow warily, noticing the dagger in its off-hand. Ryan had engaged the two fashionable gentlemen. Leela watched fascinated as he whirled and ducked, blocking both real and shadow weapons, rapier in one hand and a dagger in the other. She knew that he and John had practised this, considering it a necessity when living in a Faction dominated colony.

She focused on the harlequin in front of her and his shadow, treating them as she would two opponents and pulled her own knife from her belt. She blocked the shadow’s gladius with the rapier, silently thanking the technology John had built into it. Then she parried the man’s rapier and threw her knife, dispatching the harlequin. The shadow fell with him.

Hope stood at the bottom of the entrance stairway by the front doors to the house, once again weaving her magic. Cwej had abandoned his guns. The Faction agents were wearing some kind of energy shield that absorbed the blast. He was fending off his piratical opponent and the fox with a chair.

Given both her companions were, just about, holding their own, Leela paused to asses the situation. Ryan had managed to shed his constricting coat and was fighting in his waistcoat and shirt sleeves. A table stood by the banister at the top of the stairs and he leaped onto it, giving him the advantage over his opponents. Leela took the opportunity to run the Fox through from behind. The pirate woman turned to face her and Cwej immediately clubbed her over the head with his chair.

“Doors open!” shouted Hope.

Cwej ran for the stairs. Leela looked to Ryan who was still fighting his two opponents from his vantage point on the table. The rope that tethered the grand

central chandelier was fixed to the wall close to Leela. She pulled it loose from its hook and leaped up beside him, parrying a shadow rapier thrust at the same time. He glanced up at her and then wrapped both arms around her waist.

“You’re mad,” he whispered in her ear, as she jumped over the bannister and into the central hallway. Their descent was rapid but Ryan threw himself clear as they approached the ground and rolled across the floor as he fell. Leela released her hold on the rope and they dashed for the door as the heavy chandelier crashed down behind them.

Hope and Cwej were already outside but Leela paused in the doorway to grab Ryan and press a hot kiss to his lips. He responded enthusiastically. A slight taste of gunpowder stirred a half-formed memory of clouds of smoke and the smell of fish.

Leela broke away startled.

“Time to run!” he said, grabbing her hand and pulling her down the steps.

They hadn’t got far though, before he seized the opportunity to pull her into a side alley, press her against the wall and kiss her again.

“Promise me,” he said, “that you won’t go and get yourself killed in the assault on the Eleven Day Empire.”

“That would be a foolish promise. It is not in my gift.”

Ryan returned to kissing her, down the side of her face and towards her neck.

“Well, promise me you’ll try to stay alive at least until I can get you somewhere a little more private than a back alley.”

“What purpose would it serve?”

“It’s good luck!”

“It is superstition!”

“A little superstition is good for an old soldier now and then,” he murmured into her chest. Then he broke away, clearly exasperated. “Besides, if you don’t promise, I may have to expedite matters. You think I’ve never made love in a back alley in 18th Century London before?”

Leela considered that. “I do not believe you have ever made love in a back alley in 18th Century London.” She thought about it a little more and then pushed him away from her, “And if you have, you are getting a full medical from Hope before you touch me again.”

“OK, I haven’t made love in an 18th Century back alley before.”

“Tell you what,” said Leela, relenting.

“What?”

“I promise that if you survive the assault on the Eleven Day Empire and manage to get me somewhere a little more private than a back alley then you can make

love to me as much as you like.” She spun him round so that now she pinned him against the wall and kissed him once.

“Deal?” she asked.

“Deal.”

“So?” said Ryan, “this is the analytical engine?”

John nodded. “Pretty much, I’ve made a few improvements but the principle’s the same.”

Ryan walked around the machine. It was huge, and expensive. Hope had carried a lot of mineral wealth in her interior which had funded it. But the sheer expenditure had made Ryan nervous. Sooner or later, he had worried that their activities would draw the attention of Star Chamber or the Grand Families or, as it had transpired, of the Faction itself. Still the machine was now built. John had spread a manuscript copy of the Musical Offering across the table.

Leela had donned battle fatigues, with more of an eye to practicality than her previous outfit. Her hair was pulled back into a pony tail and she wore a loose-fitting trouser suit under a stripped down version of her Time Lord battle-armour. Ryan was once again wearing his exoskeleton. Cwej continued to wear the clothes of the time. In a rumpled greatcoat he managed to look much as he always did. He was smoking.

“Those’ll kill you, you know,” commented Ryan.

“I doubt it somehow. The Time Lords wouldn’t have created this body to be vulnerable to something like cancer.”

“That sounds handy. You get the boost but not the drawbacks.”

“I don’t get the boost. I think there must be filtration systems somewhere. Alcohol has no effect either. They don’t want my judgement impaired, it would seem.”

Ryan frowned. “Then why smoke?”

Cwej shrugged. “Seems to go with the general look. I’m not the dashing action hero anymore, at least I can enjoy the pretence of being a jaded private eye instead.”

“OK,” said John, “I’m ready to go.”

He sat down in front of the harpsichord which he’d wired into the analytical engine and began to play. He’d jettisoned his wig and returned to his red highway-man come cardinal outfit. He had shaved his head though, so the disconcerting monk’s tonsure was gone.

At first nothing happened, but gradually Ryan saw a vortex beginning to form in the centre of the room. Gradually it widened out until he could see through the still point at its centre. Beyond lay a vision of London, glowering under a deep red sky.

“We go!” said Leela and plunged through the hole.

Cwej and Hope, still dressed as an eighteenth century courtier, followed. Ryan turned to look at John.

“On three,” said John. “One, two,” on ‘three’ he lifted his hands from the harpsichord. The vortex began to close. John dived with Ryan on his heels.

They walked up Whitehall to the Palace of Westminster.

“That is not Westminster,” said Leela. “I saw Westminster.”

“It burned down in 1834,” said Hope. “That’s the new one.”

“But it’s only 1793,” protested Ryan.

“Not here,” said Hope.

“Technically,” said Cwej, “it’s 1752 here. That’s when Britain abandoned the Julian calendar for the Gregorian one and the Faction bought the spare eleven days. But the Faction seems to have built their mirror London out of whatever bits took their fancy.”

Ryan shrugged. He’d had the Eleven Day Empire explained to him before. If he understood correctly, it only worked because so many people had believed the eleven days had been stolen. He didn’t like to think he was wandering around somewhere that only existed because some people were stupid.

“At least I know those Houses of Parliament,” he said. “It will help us find our way around.”

Cwej pulled a complex looking device from his pocket. Their plan depended rather heavily on it.

“Anything?” asked Ryan.

“Loads,” said Cwej. “Unsurprisingly that place is full of temporal energy sources. The biggest one, though, is over there,” he pointed.

Ryan laughed harshly. “Star Chamber? Well, I certainly know my way there and back.”

“There was no Star Chamber in this Palace,” said Hope.

“Not officially, no,” agreed Ryan.

Cwej stuffed the detector back in his pocket. “The Faction never miss an opportunity to be ironic.”

Leela was surveying the building. “This palace does not appear to be guarded.”  
“They don’t expect anyone to be able to break into the Empire at all,” said Cwej.

“Still,” returned Ryan, “arrogance and complacency are not really among their many faults.”

They all stared at the Palace. Ryan uploaded a map of its interior onto his eye display. He wired it to Leela and Hope as well.

“Standing around out here isn’t going to do any good,” commented Hope. “I suggest we take the direct route. It will be quickest.”

The interior of the Faction’s parliament was uncannily silent. Their footfalls echoed hollowly as they traversed the halls towards Star Chamber.

“Where is everyone?” asked Ryan, sotto voce.

Cwej shrugged. “Who knows.”

“I do not like this,” said Leela. “It is a trap.”

Ryan had to agree. “Since when did my job become walking into traps?”

“Since it got interesting?” suggested John with an eager grin.

“And since when did you get so reckless?”

John leaned back and spread his hands in a ‘who me?’ gesture.

“Hope can you detect anything close by?”

“No.”

They could turn back but they didn’t really have the certainty of a trap to force that particular decision yet. Ryan looked at Cwej, who shrugged. He would want to go on, since his primary objective was to recover the skull, probably at any cost. Ryan looked at Leela.

“We continue,” she said.

Star Chamber was a model of its 20th century equivalent, crammed in at the top of Victoria Tower. The furniture in this version was gothic and ornate whereas Ryan was used to a more functional decor and the ceiling was painted a deep dark blue with gold and silver stars sprinkled across it in constellations with which he was not familiar. Most striking, however, was the presence of a huge white crystal in its centre. The crystal was an awkward jagged shape, not unlike an anomaly and gave the impression that the chamber was filled with a giant spider’s web. Nestling in its centre was a single grinning skull.

Ryan checked the chamber with his eyes and his sensor arrays.

“There is no one here,” said Leela.

“How do we remove the skull?” he asked.

“You can just pick it up. It is not attached to the crystal,” said Hope.

“How do you know that?”

“The crystal is a by-product of the energy it creates. A physical manifestation of the travel network it maintains, if you like.”

Ryan stepped forward and eyed the skull cautiously.

“Here goes nothing,” he said and reached out a hand.

The sudden arc of energy knocked him back off his feet. Before his eyes flashed a sudden vision of rapid movement and vicious teeth, the sensation of the babel as it bit into him. Then the vision was gone.

“That was a surprise,” he said.

“Not really,” said a familiar voice.

Ryan was on his feet in seconds, gun trained on the figure that walked into the room. She was wearing full Faction battle regalia, an armoured suit crafted from the bones of creatures that had never been. The skull came down over her face covering her features, but he would have recognised the voice anywhere.

“Helen Cutter,” he said.

“*Cousin* Helen,” she returned emphasising the title.

Her shadow darted round the chamber, knife in hand.

“Care to explain?” asked Cwej, idly.

“Not really,” said Helen.

Ryan let the safety off his gun.

“Really, Captain!” she snapped, “as if I’m going to be concerned by a little hot lead.”

Ryan didn’t move. Both Helen and the Faction were masters of the bluff and the double-bluff and his gun was considerably more sophisticated than its 21st century counterparts.

Helen snapped her fingers. Anomalies began opening around the chamber and further Faction Paradox troops walked through.

“We knew someone would come after the skull some day,” said Helen. “It must be said we weren’t expecting quite the little haul we seem to have here.” She glanced round the group. “The first child born on Gallifrey in millennia, his mother, the template for an entire wave of Time Lord troops and a walking paradox.” She walked right up to Ryan and poked him in the chest. If he hadn’t recognised her before, her sinuous movements and the way she leaned against him would have revealed her identity.

“Sorry?”

“You were supposed to die in the Permian. In fact you saw your own body the first time you walked through an anomaly and yet, here you are?”

“Maybe I just haven’t got there yet.”

Helen shook her head. “No, it’s all lovingly documented. I suspect that is why Hope chose you. You wouldn’t be missed and your very presence probably gave that extra little boost of energy. Eh? Hope?”

Hope’s stare was cold and hard. “I needed the Paradox to hide them from the Time Lords.”

Ryan glanced at her. He recalled clearly finding the body and the skull the first time he and Nick Cutter had stepped through an anomaly. How could he forget? It was the moment they realised Helen might still be alive, that these anomalies in time could have been opening and closing for years without anyone becoming aware of them. But he was beginning to realise he now had a dual memory of their second trip through the Forest of Dean anomaly. He remembered both leading the team that went with Nick and Helen Cutter to return the predator young, that he now knew were babelin, and also remaining behind while Lyle lead the expedition. He remembered being entirely unaware of a second babel on their heels and chasing after the group to warn them. He remembered the feel of its teeth as it tore him apart.

He was going to have to have a conversation with Hope.

Ryan looked around him at the amassed armoured might of Faction Paradox. There wasn’t a lot any of them could do. They were heavily out-numbered. However, allowing John to fall into the hands of these people was not an option.

He was still standing within feet of the skull. The skull that generated all the anomalies, so a skull that must have been generated from a Paradox of some description. A skull that had short-circuited violently at his touch. Time to test out the power of a symbolic gesture for himself. He opened his hand and looked at the glittering shape of the mark of the Celestis. Then he reached out and slapped the mark down on the skull his fingers curling through its gaping eyes as he pulled it free from the crystal.

*And that, gentle reader, is the stupidest thing Ryan ever did.*

### **3.9 The Little Sister and the War King**

The glittering shards of an anomaly formed around Ryan with the skull at its centre. He leaped through it. Behind him he could hear shouting and the thumping of feet. Over it all drifted the voices of Leela and Cwej as they urged first John and then Hope through the anomaly.

He was standing in Star Chamber once more with Leela, Cwej, John and Hope gathered around him. He glanced at the anomaly and willed it to shut. It did so

with a pop.

“Captain Ryan!” Sir James Lester sat at the head of the table.

“Sir!” said Ryan awkwardly, snapping to attention.

Behind him he heard Cwej murmur. “Time to get out of here I think.”

“I hope you have an explanation for your unexpected appearance and accompanying menagerie?”

“Hope, we should be able to travel as normal from here, if you would be so good,” continued Cwej, ignoring Lester.

There was the slight sensation of air rushing past him and, judging by the looks on the faces of his superiors, Hope had just opened up.

“Sorry, Sir!” said Ryan, still clutching the skull. “There’ll be time for a debriefing later.”

“This man is with me,” said Leela suddenly and firmly. He felt her hands grasp him by the scruff of the neck and he was hauled backwards into Hope’s interior.

Leela found Ryan sitting in the dark in the room assigned to him by the Time Lords. The room was tiny, about six foot square, big enough to contain a bed and small cabinet fixed high up on one wall.

He was still in his combat gear, just staring into space.

Their reception had not been promising. John, the skull and Hope had been whisked away on arrival.

There had been a moment, when a chancery guard had said, “Get rid of the surplus,” that Leela had thought Ryan was going to be shot. Put down like some wild animal but Cwej had intervened.

“He may be important,” he had said.

Leela had lost track of Ryan and Cwej as well in that moment. She spent the next few hours trying to find out what was going on, trying to find where John was, or Hope, or Ryan. Trying to find Lord President Romana.

Everywhere she turned she was met with the polite amusement of the Time Lords at her savagery, an amusement she had grown so used to over the years that it had faded into the background, but now she felt it bitterly. Romana was not to be found, instead the Time Lords referred to their War King.

Eventually she had found some of the cwejen and they, in turn, had found where Ryan was. He was not officially a prisoner, but he’d been put in a holding cell and promptly forgotten.

She wrapped her arms around him and dropped a kiss onto his head. “Someplace private” seemed like a bad joke now.

“Is John all right?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she had to admit.

“You know these people,” he said. “What is going on?”

She shook her head. “No one will tell me anything. We’ll try again in the morning.”

She began, pulling at the straps of his exoskeleton, pushing the enclosing metal away from him. He moved then, his head leaning against her. Gently, he pulled her into his lap and kissed her back.

“Not quite what I had in mind,” he murmured.

Hands reached up into her hair, pulling away the band that tied it up. She began working at the buttons on his tac vest, and the shirt underneath, letting her mouth drift down past his chin. *And I think we’ll stop here, shall we? They’re entitled to a little privacy I think and it’s not like you can’t find plenty of porn if you want it.*

*I might as well take the opportunity to talk about Faction Paradox and the Time Lords and how they all fit together because, so far, you’d be forgiven for thinking that the Time Lords are the good guys and Faction Paradox the bad guys. But matters are never that simple. In so far as the Time Lords stand for anything they stand for the status quo, and it’s a status quo which has the Time Lords at the top and in which they are, essentially, inviolate. For millennia they acted as mostly hands-off dictators but, on the few occasions they chose to get involved, they had no compunction about erasing entire races from history without trial, appeal or redress. It is worth remembering that. The identity of the enemy is unclear but, if Leela was right, it is the process of opposing the Time Lords and that is not the “opposite” of the Time Lords but the process of being opposed to them. There’s not much to show that, should the Enemy triumph, the outcome would be a lot different than with the Time Lord’s in charge.*

*My masters, the Celestis, consider themselves a little above all this. They pretend to a lack of interest in controlling the real estate of history but, if truth be told, they are extremely interested. They are formed from the upper echelons of the Time Lord intelligence service, people used to considering themselves the power behind the throne. Every last one of them is a master manipulator with a heart of stone and ice. This is why thinking of Mictlan, which is what I’m supposed to spend most of my time doing, is like rubbing your brain with sand paper. Each sharp corner and cold doorway is the embodiment of the concepts they hold dear. That’s one of the reasons I like it here. With you thinking about me I’m torn free*

*of their realm, for a short while at least.*

*Last of all comes Faction Paradox and, compared to the rest, they begin to look quite appealing. The Time Lords justified their rule with the idea that time needed protection and policing. That's probably why their employment seemed so attractive to Cwej. He was a cop by temperament as well as by employment. What the Faction showed is that time can manage just fine without the elaborate Time Lord protocols. In fact, time manages fine with a fair amount direct messing around. The Faction like to appear distasteful. Half of their purpose is to shock, hence their obsession with blood and bones. While the enemy is opposition to the Time Lords, the Faction is the opposite of the Time Lords. They've no interest in governing time. They simply want to revel in it. Some days I half wish I'd joined them. Some days I watch them with despair, they are like small children playing unsupervised. And some days I am appalled by the cruelty and degradation their determination to flout any and all rules leads them in to.*

*What Ryan didn't figure out until too late, probably because he was never that interested in human history let alone Time Lord history, is the significance of John. Not only is John the first child born on Gallifrey since the Anchoring of the Thread, he is the first Gallifreyan of mixed heritage: half-human and half-Time Lord. Or, more importantly, he is the first Gallifreyan with documented mixed heritage. Two others had claimed mixed heritage. The origins of the original trimuvirate of Time Lord engineers, Omega, Rassilon and the Other, rooted as they are before the Anchoring of the Thread and before the creation of history, are obscure. Very little is known about the Other, in particular, but some of the legends say he was half-human, on his mother's side. The Doctor, a more modern Time Lord legend, also occasionally claimed to be half-human despite the extensive records held in House Lungbarrow showing clearly that he was loomed like any other Time Lord after the Anchoring of the Thread. Of course legend had always stated that the Other committed suicide, throwing himself into the same looms in the depths of Lungbarrow that were later to weave the Doctor. All three brilliant Time Lord engineers, all three wayward or at least (in John's case) showing signs of waywardness. This will not have been lost on the ruling Council of Time Lords nor on Lord President Romana. She may have been a friend to the Doctor but her ability to protect his companion and her son in this time of extremis eventually failed and John, Leela and Ryan are about to discover the consequences of that failure.*

*They've finished having sex now, so I'll return you to the story.*

Ryan looked at the assembled ranks of the cwejen. The mess room was much like any other mess he'd been in, except that every single man in it was identical: blond hair, blue eyes, square jaw and puppy-dog excitement. One was at a computer terminal trying to access records to find where Hope and John were. One was on some kind of phone to a Time Lord high up. Leela was off somewhere with several others trying to pull strings. They were all completely loyal to the Time Lords, Leela had warned him, but they were used to her being their warrior queen. They'd do anything they could for her that didn't compromise that basic loyalty.

There was a knock at the door. Ryan glanced up to see Cwej, his Cwej, the original. It was very bizarre watching the unkempt and slightly dumpy figure sidle through the door and knowing that a few decades earlier he would have bounced in like an excitable puppy. Cwej looked wearily round the room at the cwejen, all beavering away on Ryan's behalf. He was smoking again. Ryan had given up long ago, but it didn't stop the pangs.

"You should take it up again," said Cwej seeing his glance. "Believe me, the Time Lords are no more going to let you die of lung cancer than they will me."

Ryan considered it but he knew Leela would see it differently so he shook his head.

"How can I help you?" he asked.

"Can we discuss that skull we bought back?"

Ryan regarded him coolly. "And why would I tell you anything?"

"Well, I'll admit, I work for the War Council but I also travelled with the Doctor."

"I never met the Doctor." In Ryan's opinion "the Doctor" was invoked altogether too often as some kind of arbiter of the right course of action. "And," he added, "from everything anyone will tell me, the Doctor didn't want the Time Lords to get hold of the skull."

Cwej eyed him thoughtfully. "That was all very strange. I'm not sure the Doctor would ever have approved but something about the plan actually scared him and he wouldn't tell anyone why."

"He probably didn't like the idea of over-writing the protocols quite as drastically as this plan will. You realise the Time Lords will almost certainly overwrite half of their own history in the process? They may transform the enemy into something they can handle, but they will transform themselves into something else at the same time."

Cwej shrugged. "They're desperate all right. But it wasn't that which upset

him so much. I think he foresaw some consequence of the new enemy and the change that he simply couldn't face."

"Anyway," said Ryan. "They have the skull now, they can make the change or not, as they choose."

"They don't know why the skull is so powerful. They can't even figure out who it belongs to, although they have a pretty good idea." Cwej shot Ryan a long hard look. "Follow me," he said. "I've had a little trip authorised. Hope will take us."

Ryan and Cwej looked out over the Permian on Hope's scanners. Hope had transformed herself into a rock formation, or so she said. The two men they were watching wouldn't even know they were there. Ryan looked on in silence as Nick Cutter and his younger self examined the body in the cairn and the camera lying by it.

"We know all this," he said. "We found a body and a camera. About six weeks later, according to all the documentation, though not my memory, we both returned to the same spot, only years earlier. I was killed and the camera was dropped. But there were two other soldiers with us. There is no evidence that body was mine. It's not a paradox so much as confused documentation."

"It was meant to be you, all right. Hope deliberately rewrote your biodata when she intercepted your party. Didn't you Hope?"

"I had my reasons," echoed Hope's voice.

Ryan still needed to have that conversation with her.

"Hope placed you in an alter-time state which made it particularly difficult to trace your biodata or that of anyone close to you. Theoretically that's impossible, but Faction Paradox have been doing it for years and Hope's mother had plenty of contact with them one way or another."

Ryan felt the merest drop in temperature as if a cold breeze floated around him. He wondered how hard the Time Lords had questioned Hope about her actions and what they had done to try and persuade her to reveal her secrets.

Ryan settled on a shrug as his only reaction. "Why are we here?"

"I'm interested in what happens next."

They watched on the screen as Ryan's younger self knocked Cutter out and set off to carry him back to the anomaly site. They had barely vanished over the horizon when half a dozen Faction Paradox militia appeared in full regalia. Helen Cutter stood between two of them, still in her twentieth century clothing, dwarfed

by their gigantic forms. She stepped forward and lifted up the skull, a powerful look of triumph on her face.

“Hope, sound please?” shouted Cwej.

“You have done well, little sister,” one of the masked figures was saying. “The link is now established. We can pass safely through the labyrinths.”

Cwej whistled. “I wondered if your anomalies were linked to the labyrinths.”

“What are the labyrinths?”

Cwej waved him to silence.

Helen pulled an elaborately carved knife from her belt and flung it into the sand at her feet.

“I have completed my task. I claim my right to the Sombre Que Cortas.”

“Indeed, Cousin Helen.”

“That was her initiation?” asked Ryan. “Delivering my... the skull.”

Cwej nodded. “Makes sense. She pretty much set up your death using captured babelin.”

Ryan shook his head. “I don’t see how any of that would work. My dying, if I did die, wasn’t a paradox, just a kind of sick irony.”

“It’s a pretty powerful symbolic idea. We’ve assumed for years that much Faction Paradox technology is essentially powered by ritual, which is basically a codified manipulation of ideas. This was something similar, I imagine. A ritualised time loop, used to create the anomalies.”

“But that *is* a paradox. The loop wouldn’t have occurred without the anomalies.”

“That’s Faction Paradox for you. They must have boot-strapped the process somehow and then got Helen to solidify the loop.”

“And what are the labyrinths?”

“Temporal worm holes. A network of time travel that predates machines like Hope here. They’ve become dangerous to traverse but the anomalies obviously provide a network of safe routes through them and, as you have demonstrated, a network that bypasses the Protocol of Linearity.”

“OK. For the sake of argument, let’s suppose that is my skull and, more specifically, the skull of that version of myself that died fourteen years ago and that it powers the anomalies. How does that make it powerful enough to completely rework history?”

“Well firstly, you didn’t die fourteen years ago.”

Cwej leaned back against the console and lit another cigarette. “That puts the whole identity of the skull into a kind of flux. It can only power the anomaly system if you died, if you didn’t it can’t. Even if you had died it would be a

paradoxical artefact since you couldn't have died without the anomalies existing and they only existed because you died. If you *didn't* die then you couldn't have been in place for Hope to abduct you and prevent you dying. Then, of course, you had to go and bind the mark of the Celestis to a skull that may, or may not have been yours. I expect the ramifications of that were percolating forwards and backwards throughout its history. Moreover if it was your skull then clearly you couldn't have survived to bind the mark of the Celestis to it. But if it wasn't your skull then you couldn't have bound the mark. The whole thing is a complete bloody paradoxical mess."

"You're transmitting all this back to Gallifrey aren't you?" said Ryan.

Cwej looked at him properly for the first time. "Sorry about this. All's fair and all that."

Ryan ducked as Cwej's fist came towards him and he rolled under the console and up the other side.

"Hope!" he shouted.

"I can't steer," Hope cried, "I'm being dragged."

Ryan glanced at the monitor. It no longer showed the Permian but the swirling colours of the vortex. Then he dodged again. He wasn't under any illusions about this fight. Cwej's body didn't look like much but it was the result of a Time Lord imposed regenerative cycle. It might not have the built-in hardware of a full Regen-Infantry unit but it was going to be quicker and stronger than he was.

"Hope! Shunt him somewhere!" shouted Ryan.

"Override 556," shouted Cwej, and Hope cursed in anger.

Ryan blocked a punch and felt the power of the blow reverberate down his arm.

"What's going on Cwej?"

"The skull needs a little boost before it will do precisely what the Time Lords need it to." Cwej shrugged. "Nothing personal."

Ryan took a swing and watched Cwej dance out of the way, coming back with a counter-punch that knocked him halfway across the room. Ryan was on his feet and backing away towards the wall. Cwej leaped over the side rail and came at him again, punches raining down. Ryan blocked as many as he could and got a few extra blows in here and there, but the man's physical advantage was starting to tell.

He was aware of the sounds of landing and the main doors swinging open. Then Cwej came in with another of his power punches and Ryan found himself sliding through the open doors into the centre of a ring of Time Lords. Leela and John were being held to one side and the skull, his skull, had pride of place in the

centre. Cwej came out of Hope. Ryan noticed some bruises blossoming on his face and felt a small amount of satisfaction.

“Where’s Romana?” asked Leela.

A middling sized man in black with slicked back hair and a goatee smiled at them both wolfishly.

“Desperate times require desperate measures.”

“What have you done with her?”

“Nothing at all. She recognises the necessity for this little piece of theatre. She just finds it distasteful. She resigned last week.”

The man turned his gaze back to Ryan. Ryan had seen his image and already knew his reputation from the cwejen. He was some sort of black sheep returned to the fold, lots of useful military and tactical knowledge. Officially he was Lord President of the Time Lords, unofficially he was the War King.

Ryan sat up. “What little piece of theatre?”

The man picked up the skull. “We need a lot of energy for what we are about to do. For instance the energy released by resolving its flux state. We could do that by making certain that you could never return to the Permian era on your little planet and get yourself killed there.”

“No!” shouted John.

The man walked up to him, “and you, young man. You have risked so much to aid your people. You have a bright future with us, I’m sure.”

Ryan was on his feet now but strong hands grabbed him. He was forced to his knees next to the skull.

“We really need more energy,” said the War King. “There are several options. You know where we are?”

John looked about him sulkily. “The caldera on Gallifrey, where the thread was anchored. The place the Pythia once sat.”

“Ah yes! The Pythia, the last mother of Gallifrey plunged to her doom in this spot. And here we have the first mother of the new Gallifrey.”

The War King gestured with a hand and Leela was dragged forwards to kneel next to Ryan.

“I will gut you and leave your entrails to rot in the sun so you die without honour or memorial,” she spat.

The War King smiled thinly. “Such an example to us all.”

John eyes flicked desperately between Ryan and Leela.

The man thrust a knife into John’s hands. “Personally,” he said, “I’d kill both of them. It keeps things tidy. But I can see you might have a sentimental attachment to one or the other.”

The War King stood back. “You only need to kill one of them, mother or father.”

John stepped forward raising the knife. Ryan looked into his face and recognised the expression. He braced himself to act quickly. John put his free hand in his pocket and drew out a Barbie doll, one of the Faction Paradox fetishes.

“Neither,” said John and he stabbed the dagger through the doll’s heart and into his own hand. There was a blossoming of light. Ryan lunged forwards, grabbing hold of John. Leela moved at the same moment, throwing off her guard, her hands grasping Ryan’s as they spun into an alter-time state. He was dimly aware that Hope had also surged forwards and was enclosing herself around them.

### 3.10 Closing the Paradox Loop

Hope was shouting instructions which Ryan didn’t understand. In the interior of the console room, sparks flashed and panels exploded. Ryan grabbed hold of both Leela and John and pulled them in under the wing of the central console.

“What is happening?” demanded Leela.

“Search me.”

“One moment,” John leaned out and start stabbing at controls on the panels above him. Ryan pulled him back just as there was another explosion and a shower of sparks.

“I think,” said John, “we’re breaking the Protocols of Linearity again.”

“We’re what?”

John shrugged helplessly. “It’s not my fault every time I try some temporal engineering the protocols get broken.”

Ryan gave him a hard stare. John shrugged back again.

“OK,” said Ryan. “Where are we going?”

“John, I need more power to the central regulators,” shouted Hope.

“One moment,” said John, and darted out once more. Hitting levers and cranking a large handle. The room suddenly levelled.

John stuck his head back under the console to look at Ryan and Leela. “Back in time I think.”

“What?” asked Ryan.

“Where we’re going: back in time. I think. Gallifreyan time.”

Cautiously, Ryan and Leela emerged.

“To that council we met last time?” asked Ryan.

“Earlier than that I think.”

There was a short silence.

“Before the Anchoring of the Thread?” whispered Leela.

John nodded.

“Did you do this on purpose?” asked Ryan.

“Rescuing the pair of you? Well yes, now you ask. The going back before the Anchoring of the Thread.” John looked a little shifty. “It might have occurred to me it was a good idea. And it’ll have generated lots of temporal energy. The Time Lords will be happy.”

“You’ve entangled your biodata with Faction Paradox though,” spoke Hope.

“I think I’ve got that covered. At the very worst the paradox stain will be slow in evolving, could be centuries before there’s a problem. I’ll have plenty of time to sort it out.”

Ryan sighed. “Thanks son,” he said. There wasn’t really much else to say.

The cavern they emerged into was dark with a tangy bitter smell in the air.

“I have been here before,” said Leela, absorbed in memories of the receding frontier of time.

“I doubt it, Mum.”

“Where are we?” asked Ryan.

“We’ve travelled in time but not in space,” said Hope.

“To before the Anchoring of the Thread?” pressed Ryan.

Hope nodded.

“So this would be?” Ryan looked bewildered. Gallifreyan lore had never been his strong point.

“The chamber of the Pythia,” said John.

“Who disturbs the Pythia?” asked an elderly voice.

“I do,” said Leela.

“And who are you?”

Leela stepped forward. “A mother of Gallifrey. Also a Pythia.”

There was a short silence.

“Lights! Acolytes!” shouted the voice.

Low level lighting flooded the chamber and red-robed women poured in through doorways and side passages. Suspended high above the chamber in a cage-like throne was an elderly woman.

“What would you, Pythia?” asked one of the women.

“I would see the future.”

Plumes of acrid smoke were released into the air, obscuring the woman.

“What is going on?” hissed Ryan behind her.

“The Pythia was supposed to be able to foresee the future,” whispered John. “The smoke is some sort of time-active substance which allows that.”

“I thought there wasn’t supposed to be any history around here? How can she see the future if there’s no such thing as history?”

“When the Time Lord’s anchored the thread its like they fixed a framework of events for a fixed number of millennia,” whispered back John, “before that everything was fluid, after that,” he shrugged, “who knows. You’ve heard of the frontier of time, right?”

Ryan snorted, disgusted. Only now was he beginning to realise that the Time Lords liked to ascribe grandiose words to simple things. The “Anchoring of the Thread” had never defined history, Leela had always known that, it simply land-grabbed a small patch and planted the Time Lord flag over it.

She walked forward to the edge of pit over which the Pythia hung.

“I am also Pythia. I have shared your visions. The future is fixed,” she stared with sympathy up at the old woman. “You are doomed.”

“I’m not sure this is going to endear us to her,” Ryan murmured in her ear and his arms tried to pull her back. She shrugged off his hands. “I need her to see me,” she said.

“She can see you.”

“Not like this.”

“Mother of Gallifrey,” intoned the elderly woman. “Pythia in waiting.”

Smoke wreathed up about the cage. “Last of the Pythia!” cried the old woman suddenly, a shaking hand pointing at Leela.

“Mum, what are you doing?”

“Saving your life.”

*After this it’s all bureaucracy. Typical, really, the Time Lords describe it as a period of chaos, of myth and magic. In fact Gallifreyans, whether they’re styling themselves Lords of Time or Pythia’s Children simply can not resist the opportunity to dress things up in red tape. The long and the short of it, however, is that Leela, Hope, Ryan and John got themselves released into the general population albeit with the rather uncomfortable prophesy hanging over them that Leela would be the next and final Pythia.*

Leela looked out over the capitol. It rather surprised her that it looked much the same as it had in the years she had resided there. Small changes here and there but its footprint upon the world of Gallifrey was unchanging.

Hope was hovering about the room somewhere. "I can not stay here," she said suddenly.

Leela sighed. "It is not your world."

Hope sat down in an ornate chair and closed her eyes. "These people don't even admit that time travel might be possible. It isn't possible, I've tried. I feel trapped."

Leela sat on the floor at her feet and leaned a tired head against her leg. "I think that you have always been trapped." She turned her face into the soft material of Hope's skirt. She had known a moment like this was approaching, ever since they had arrived in the Old Time, several months previously, although she had not quite known the manner of it. She was going to lose people dear to her.

"You could free me," whispered Hope.

"How?" asked Leela. "Your conditioning is too strong."

"You could order me to leave and not return."

Silence hung between them a moment. "How would you go?" asked Leela.

"I will need to use a fetish."

"You'll need blood for that. Mine, or Ryan's or John's."

Hope nodded. "There's another thing," she said.

Leela shook her head. She didn't want this conversation.

"The skull," said Hope seriously.

"Is too powerful to be left in Time Lord hands. I know." Leela sat up straight. "I will talk to Ryan."

Ryan was working out, doing pull-ups on an overhead bar. It was a daily routine that had served him well for many years. There was an illusion of peace here in ancient Gallifrey. The cataclysmic strife between Rassilon and the Pythia was an age away, literally. Rassilon was John's age. It had been something of a shock when John had brought the pimply fourteen year old home, although five minutes later the two of them had been deep in an incomprehensible conversation about theoretical temporal mechanics and Ryan had felt the reassurance of normality

descend. He'd watched Rassilon, though, and knew the boy to be ambitious in a way John was not, which shouldn't really have surprised him.

But despite the apparent security of their situation, Ryan had not allowed himself to relax. He was viewing this as a period of calm before the inevitable conflict ahead.

He heard the door click shut behind him. Ryan dropped to the floor, unsurprised to see Leela there, and allowed himself a smile. As she approached however, the expression on her face told him that the holiday was over. Leela had resolved that it was time to act.

"Hope wishes to leave," said Leela.

He nodded. "She can't stay here. Sooner or later Rassilon will want to take a look at her and then things could get nasty."

He stepped forward, placing his hands on her shoulders. She remained rigid and upright, not yielding to his touch.

"There is also the matter of the skull."

He had known this was coming for some time. They could not afford to leave the skull in the hands of the War King or, Ryan was beginning to think, any Time Lord. In fact, not to put too fine a point on it, they didn't want something as powerful as the skull to be in *anyone's* hands.

Despite her resistance he pulled Leela into his arms so he didn't need to look her in the eyes as he spoke.

"If I had died, as I was supposed to, then the skull would just be a common or garden paradoxical object. The Faction has hundreds of them in the stacks of the Eleven Day Empire."

He felt Leela nod against his chest.

Something that was almost a sob welled up inside him and he fought it down, burying his face in her hair, holding her tight. Slowly, unwilling as always to betray anything that might be considered weakness, she wrapped her arms around him and returned the embrace.

"No," said John.

"We have no choice," said Ryan firmly. "Leela has to stay here, as do you."

"I'll talk to Rassilon and Omega," said John. "We can hide Hope safely."

"No," said Hope.

"Face it, John," said Ryan, "Rassilon and Omega are the last people we should be allowing to get hold of Hope. They *invent* time travel technology. Let's avoid

creating more paradoxes than we absolutely have to.”

“John,” said Leela, placing a hand on his shoulder.

John shrugged her off angrily. “Why didn’t you discuss this with me? Why did the two of you just go and make this decision?”

“There wasn’t a decision to make,” said Ryan, getting angry himself. This was hard enough without John making a scene.

“But you’re going to die!”

“I was supposed to die fifteen years ago. A good friend died instead of me, just because Hope was playing with the time lines. It’s time to put things right.”

“Don’t you love me?” demanded John. “Don’t you love Mum?”

“John!” said Leela.

“Look at the two of you, standing there being all resolute about it! Why? Why?” His voice trailed away.

Instinctively Ryan pulled him into a hug, feeling him sobbing in his arms and then Leela joined in, her arms wrapped around both of them, so tight he was afraid they might all break. They stayed like that a long time.

Hope was ready. She had been ready all the time, impatient while the humans and human/Time Lord hybrids made their farewells. The M4 felt clumsy and heavy and primitive in his hands. Ryan wasn’t quite sure where Hope had conjured it from. Now the moment had arrived, Ryan found he didn’t know how to say goodbye.

John was scowling at him. Ryan had been failing to notice how much the lad had grown up but he noticed it now, almost because the sulky expression had become so unusual. Something in his bearing and the surroundings though, triggered a memory within Ryan.

“Dear Lord,” he whispered, “have they given you the mark?”

John looked up, surprised, and then opened his hand sheepishly. The Mark of the Celestis glittered above the palm. “I’m not giving it to you,” he said, aggressively.

“No,” agreed Ryan. “Not yet at any rate. Keep it as a promise that I’ll return.”

“John gave you the mark?” demanded Leela.

“Yes,” agreed Ryan.

“Which means,” Leela’s voice tailed away.

Ryan sighed. “There’s an ugly little charade for the two of you to play out when the time comes.”

“The Other had no hand in the Pythia’s death,” said John defensively.

Ryan sighed. “Semantics I think, John. You will be a part of Rassilon’s faction.”

He stood up and fished a last fetish from his pocket. It was an 18th century coin, the King’s shilling. He stared down at it, heavy in his hand.

Leela stepped forward and kissed him. Then she broke away and stepped back, head held high.

He hugged John.

“Look after each other, you two. Best you can anyway,” he added thinking of the legends.

Then he backed into Hope’s interior. He looked at the coin thoughtfully and then tossed it high and into the heart of the time rotor. Hope took off.

Ryan sat next to Hope on a rock in the Permian.

“How exactly did you take me out of time?” he asked.

“I performed a localised biodata change.”

“What’s one of those when it’s at home?”

“I altered the biodata of the three men with you so that you had never accompanied them through the anomaly and Lieutenant Lyle had. Then,” and Hope had the decency to look a little embarrassed at this point, “then I fiddled with your memories a bit, so you thought you were travelling after them.”

“So what happened when Nick got back and everyone asked where I was?”

Hope shrugged, “I don’t know. I expect there was some confusion and a lot of philosophical musing about paradoxes.”

“So you’re going to undo that now?”

“Yes, but it will be a bit tricky. I’ve already changed their biodata once.”

“Well just do the best you can. Try not to erase anything or anyone.”

Hope looked at him thoughtfully. “I won’t erase anyone, but I can’t promise there won’t be any changes. They shouldn’t be too large though and the only people able to notice will be those with you.”

“Nick and Helen Cutter were the only documented survivors.”

“They’ll be the only people able to notice any changes. It shouldn’t be a problem, nothing major should shift.”

“What will you do then?” asked Ryan.

Hope shrugged. “I’m still thinking about that.”

“You can’t go back to the Time Lords. You could join Faction Paradox, I suppose”

Hope shook her head, “I don’t think so.”

“Why not? They’re opposed to the Time Lord dictatorship.”

“Their rallying cry is Anarchy, not Freedom. It’s not the same thing.”

“What then?”

Hope smiled. “I shall travel the universe and have adventures.”

“There are worse things to do with your life I suppose.”

Four men and a woman appeared in the distance.

“Time to get going,” said Ryan. “Goodbye, Hope.”

“Goodbye, Ryan.” She held out her hand and he shook it before heading down the slope.

“Ryan, what are you doing here?” asked Cutter in surprise.

“Hope!”

Nick blinked. Lyle vanished.

As they walked on, Ryan watched Helen as she bitched at and flirted with Nick. Getting bored with that eventually she fell in beside him, glancing at him sidelong.

“Having a good day, Captain Ryan?”

“I know what you’re about *little sister*,” said Ryan. He wasn’t well disposed to give her the time of day right now. “Don’t get cocky.”

He felt a small glow of triumph at her disconcerted expression.

“And yet you’re here,” she said.

“And yet I’m here. Be satisfied I’m playing along with your little plan and leave me in peace.”

Ryan had always liked Nick Cutter. There was something very upfront and honest about him. He’d knocked him out cold once and Nick hadn’t held it against him. Ryan had a lot of time for someone who’s first instinct on discovering that his wife was alive, but possibly lost in time, was to remain in the Permian to look for her, even when that wife was Helen Cutter. He also had a lot of time for someone who could then come to his senses, albeit with the assistance of a certain amount of gentle violence, and agree that the problem was better tackled from the comparative safety and security of the 21st century.

So, as he lay dying, Ryan felt the need to somehow tell Nick it was all right. He’d had fifteen years more than he’d had any right to. He’d had a son, in every

way that mattered, and lived long enough to see the first glimmers of the man his son would become and to have the confidence he would be a good man. He wanted desperately to make sure Nick understood.

“The first time we came here, that body we found, that was me.” The look on Nick’s face was one of distress. “Wasn’t it?” Ryan urged, “I was looking at myself.” He tried to go on, tried to say things about loops and paradoxes and Leela’s deep blue eyes and red-brown hair, but the words wouldn’t come. He wanted to say how grateful he was that Nick, and he was sure it was Nick, had taken the time to build a cairn over his body but he could hardly see any more and his mouth didn’t seem to be working well enough to frame the words. Nick’s face was fading from his vision and all he could feel was Nick’s hand grasping his. I’m marked by the Celestis, were his last living thoughts, it will be all right.

*Except it’s not, of course. I had understood that being a servant of the Celestis essentially entailed thinking about them and Mictlan for all eternity. What I hadn’t appreciated was the living hell that is Mictlan, nor the attitude of the Celestis. Most Time Lords treat the lesser species with thinly veiled contempt but the Celestis do not consider us sentient in any meaningful way. Just sentient enough to maintain their existence. Just sentient enough to spend an eternity contemplating the reality of servitude and the vicissitudes of their casual cruelties and passions.*

*At least I achieved what I had intended by dying. I closed the paradox loop. My skull reverted back to being an everyday paradoxical object. Still powerful, but nothing like powerful enough to overwrite the entirety of Time Lord history in one fell swoop. The Time Lords had already done it once, of course. They rewrote the history of the war, and half their own history at the same time, so they could fight an enemy of their own choosing; the Daleks in this case and we all know how well that is going to end. They underestimated the power of properly time-active Daleks. Some days I draw some comfort from that, but not much and not often.*

*But here’s the thing. Mictlan is a realm of ideas and the War? It was as much a war of ideas as a Time War. Ideas have real power. You think you’re reading a piece of fiction. In fact you think you’re reading a piece of fanfiction. But it is just ideas and this particular set of ideas have trapped me in Mictlan. But, the beauty of fanfiction is that you can just rewrite it or overwrite it or fixit or change it. That’s why I’m moonlighting here. Part of the reason is that while you and anyone else who reads this is thinking about me as a shift, I get a narrow band of time when I’m not at the service of the Celestis. But also a writer of fanfiction can change these ideas and find a happy ending. Hell, I’ll even go to bloody Sanctuary. If I’m honest, it’s not my first choice of afterlife, but it has to be better than Mictlan. So, I’m throwing you the challenge. Resolve the conflicting memes.*

**Write me out of here.**



# Chapter 4

## Snowstorm

### **A Doctor Who/Torchwood Flashfic**

When you go into a cramped tourist shop, it's shelves heaving with key rings and postcards, you'll always find snowstorms. Famous monuments, trapped in plastic domes, waiting for you to shake them and watch the snow fall.

This particular shop doesn't serve the usual kind of tourist nor does it sell the usual kind of memorabilia.

Jack was browsing when a snowstorm caught his eye. He watched two dancing figures emerge from the snow that fell as he shook it: a small blonde girl, face alight and smiling, and a tall, gangly man in a blue suit. They laughed into each other's eyes and whirled against the darkness.

"You buying then?"

Carefully Jack put the artifact, which was definitely not a snowstorm, back on the shelf.

"Not today, no."

He left the shop humming an Edith Piaf tune under his breath. Sometimes he regretted his decisions, but Ianto was waiting.



## Chapter 5

# The Daughters of Theogenes

### A Doctor Who short story

“I don’t like the dress.”

“This is classical Greece, Doctor. Sometimes it’s wise to blend in.”

“Yes, I know, but all those yards of white cloth make you look...” the Doctor paused and ran his eyes up and down the offending garment, “terribly amateur theatrical. I mean, the Greeks are quite civilised. They won’t put you to death for looking different.” He crammed his hat down on his tight curls, took another look at Romana’s dress and shook his head. “Anyway, very colourful people, the Greeks.” He sniffed to himself. “This way I think,” he added and set off down a side street.

“This is it.” He stopped before a slightly run down building. “The house of Theogenes,” he said proudly, “and there’s Aristarchus.”

He strode forward and embraced an old man who had just left the house. The old man was tall and dignified, his white hair close-cropped to his head and Romana felt it was a most unlikely occurrence, to see this regal old man’s face light up at the sight of the scruffy Time Lord.

“Doctor, this is truly a welcome surprise.”

“Well, you know how it is. I was passing and I thought I’d drop in on your master.”

The old man’s face fell.

“Theogenes died ten years ago. His son-in-law now runs the house but I’m sure he’ll be very pleased to see you.”

“Poor old Theogenesis, I’ll miss him... Oh, by the way, this is Romana.”

The old man looked her up and down, taking in the white dress and the fashionable ringlets which she wore in her blonde hair. He positively beamed with

approval.

“You are a true beauty my dear,” he said courteously, “and,” he added, “obviously civilised.”

The Doctor coughed slightly. “Well, Leela was a bit rough at the edges,” he admitted.

“Come in,” said Artistarchus, “I will fetch the master.”

He left them in a small antechamber and padded off into the depths of the house. A few minutes later a tall, austere, beauty entered the room. She had raven black hair fastened in ringlets that framed a classical face, perfectly proportioned with a firmly chiselled beauty. She wore a dress similar in style to Romana’s but where Romana’s was a stark white, hers was a pale peach colour and gold bracelets were clasped on her arms giving the impression of soft luxury. Her eyes ran up and down Romana’s gown and her mouth twitched slightly, just enough to convey that she thought Romana’s attire was vaguely quaint and amusing. Romana instantly disliked her.

Turning to the Doctor the lady curtsied slightly and said, “I am Phaedra, the eldest daughter of Theogenes. My husband is out at the moment but he will be back soon. I trust you are being well looked after.”

“Yes, very. It is a pleasure to meet you. Theogenes has a very beautiful daughter,” said the Doctor gallantly, raising his hat and bowing.

Praedra smiled in a vaguely distant way and Romana’s dislike intensified. The Doctor immediately began to talk to her about her father, but after a few minutes, smiling the same vague smile she said she had work to do and glided serenely out of the room.

“Was Theogenes like that?” asked Romana.

“No, not a bit. His wife was though. A great beauty with no real intelligence. Anything she didn’t understand she ignored or avoided. She didn’t take to me at all.”

“I can imagine.”

“Excuse me, who are you?” Another woman had entered the room. She looked startlingly like Phaedra, but where Phaedra was classically beautiful the newcomer’s looks just managed to fall short of Phaedra’s perfection. Her hair instead of being jet black was a slightly dingy dark brown. Her chiselled features, instead of giving her the looks of a carefully sculptured statue made her look vaguely shrewish, a look accentuated by her hair, scraped back tightly into a bun. She was livelier though. She seemed more alert and the gown she wore was an uncompromising red. Romana felt sure that, seen together, the eye would automatically be drawn away from Phaedra to this more human vision of beauty.

Her appearance drew a far more welcoming smile from the Doctor than Phaedra's had done.

"May I assume you are another daughter of Theogenes?" he asked.

"Yes, I am Creusa, his youngest daughter."

"Well, I am the Doctor, a friend of your father's."

Creusa's face was transformed by a genuine smile. "The Doctor! My father often told me about you. I am pleased to meet you." She turned to Romana. "And you are?"

"I am Romana."

"May I welcome you both to my father's house," she said, formally but with real pleasure. "You will stay for dinner?"

"I don't know about that," said the Doctor doubtfully. "I'm not sure your sister was greatly taken with me."

"Phaedra's a cow," said Creusa with surprising vehemance. "I wouldn't take any notice of her. You must stay."

The Doctor grinned broadly. "If you insist."

Creusa smiled back. "Aresias, my sister's husband, will be back soon. I'm sure he'll insist as well. Meanwhile do let me show you the house."

The tour of the house turned out to be a rather depressing affair. There was nothing conspicuously wrong with it, in fact it was all very pleasant but, thought Romana, that was about it. There was no character in it. It gave her the impression of decay somehow, though there was no tangible evidence of dilapidation. The place, she decided, showed a lack of care or thought about how it looked. It sufficed. That was all.

They returned to the small antechamber and Creusa continued to entertain them for a while. Then a young man entered. He was tall and athletic-looking, and handsome in a homely sort of way. His features were deeply tanned and quite thick set and his teeth glistened whitely when he smiled as he did when he welcomed them. He was Aresias, Phaedra's husband, and he seconded Creusa's invitation to dinner. It was almost ready, he said, if they would follow him.

Taking Romana by the hand he led them into the dining room. Artistarchus had obviously anticipated their remaining, for five couches had been placed around a low table. Phaedra was already seated and Aresias sat next to her, placing Romana on his other side.

The meal was delicious and the Doctor and Romana were well entertained by Creusa and Aresias with Phaedra contributing the odd word here and there. Aresias, especially, was very pleasant and entertaining and he eagerly told Romana a potted history of the town and surrounding countryside.

As the evening progressed Aristarchus mentioned the arrival of a soothsayer who wanted to tell their fortunes.

“Tell him to go! We do not wish to listen to his lies,” said Aresias somewhat severely. “You don’t believe in such foolery do you?” he asked Romana.

“Superstition is the retreat of the primitive mentality,” she quoted, somewhat pompously.

“What about God?” asked the Doctor, that dangerous gleam beginning to show in his eye that meant he was about to propound one of his theories which it would be impossible to refute on account of a refusal on his part to stick to the laws of logic. However, he was prevented by Creusa.

“Let him in!” she said. “It’ll be fun to hear what he has to say.”

Aresias looked as though he was about to argue with her, then changed his mind and smiled charmingly.

“Very well, show him in Aristarchus.”

Shortly, a tall stocky figure entered wrapped in a long hooded cape which concealed all the features. Aresias’ mouth twitched slightly into a faint sneer.

“Well, man, what can you tell us?”

“I can tell of the past, present and future, but those who listen must be prepared to face the consequences of my knowledge.”

Phaedra giggled slightly. The faceless hood turned towards here.

“You would do well not to mock. I know enough about each of you to bring your world crashing down about you. You, for instance,” the hood swung back to Aresias. “You are the eldest son of your father’s house are you not?”

He paused slightly, letting the question hang in the air. Glancing across the room, Romana was shocked and surprised to see Creusa leaning forward, a faint smile hovering about her lips and her eyes glued eagerly on the seer.

“Yes, I am my father’s only son.”

“Whyfore then do you live here on your wife’s money and do not claim your own inheritance?”

Aresias’ features seemed to form themselves into a mask and he suddenly looked as though he could have been carved out of granite. His voice, when he spoke, held a slight tremour but whether it was of anger or grief Romana couldn’t tell. “I have my reasons and would ask you to respect them,” he said.

“Respect?” said the stranger with barely controlled anger. “What respect did you show the father of Eteonicus and Conon when your family dragged his carcass through the streets of Thebes?”

Aresias went white. “Alcibiades of Thebes killed our mother.”

“By mistake, but still you killed him for it and started a feud that has all but destroyed both your families. You, the last son of Thrasyllus, hide here so Conon, the last son of Alcibiades, shall not find you to avenge the deaths of his father and his brother whom you butchered when he came to offer you peace.”

“He offered me peace, yes, when he was alone and I had many friends about me. But what did he offer my brother when he met him in a back street in Corinth? He did not speak of peace then.”

“Then he was still grieved at the death of a father. Later he repented and went voluntarily to you for reconciliation and you had your men behead him, then carve him up and hang him out for the carrion to feed on.” The soothsayer’s last words came out in short gasps and he stopped abruptly and turned his head away from Aresias. The people in the room remained stock still and the tableau they formed remained etched upon Romana’s memory for the rest of her life. Creusa sat curled up on her couch hugging her knees, her sharp, pretty face wearing an exultant expression, her brown eyes wide and dilated and fixed on the soothsayer. Phaedra reclined on her couch gazing at her hand with the embarrassed air of a fashionable hostess with an ill-mannered guest, trying to pretend nothing has happened and everything is normal and civilised. Aresias was sitting bolt upright, his face a ghastly white, his bright blue eyes staring fixedly at the stranger. One hand was convulsively clutching the arm of the couch. The Doctor had an expression of disgust and sadness on his face. This was not what he had expected on paying a visit to his old friend. In the centre, the tall figure of the soothsayer dominated them. His broad shoulders bowed as if supporting a great burden and his head was lowered. They remained frozen as if time had stood still for a few seconds. Then, slowly, Aresias got up and moved towards the soothsayer. The bowed head looked up as he approached so they stood face to face, Aresias staring into the dark recesses of the hood.

“Who are you?”

The shoulders straightened with a jerk and the cowl was shaken free. The face revealed was strikingly handsome. It was at the same time aristocratic and dignified but softened by sadness. The eyes were a deep warm brown. Romana felt that once he smiled the face would have lit up and warmed the room and the small cold company that had gathered in it. Then Phaedra let out a piercing shriek and the place dissolved into chaos. Aresias was calling for servants and Creusa had her arms around Phaedra who continued to let out one long scream that echoed through the house. Within seconds the room was full of people who descended upon the stranger and pinned his arms behind him. Phaedra’s scream gradually subsided into choking and sobbing. As the place calmed down Romana realised

that her hands were shaking slightly and she felt as though she had been through some ordeal.

Aresias picked up a goblet and rather nervously filled it then he turned to face the stranger with a show of Bravura. "Welcome Conon."

That, thought Romana, explained a lot.

"It would seem I have had a lucky escape. You could have killed me easily. I was defenceless."

Conon seemed to draw himself up. "Unlike you, I believe in fighting fair."

"Unlike your brother as well," flung back Aresias with some venom.

Conon turned his eyes upon the weeping Phaedra with a look of contempt. "Ah! yes my brother, who supposedly stabbed your brother in a back street."

Suddenly the Doctor was on his feet. Quietly he stepped between the two men. "That's enough, both of you!" he said sternly. "The wrongs, real or imaginary, that you each appear to have suffered are more than repaid by the vengeance you have exacted on each other's families. The time has come to call a halt." He held them with his compelling eyes, then smiled disarmingly. "Don't you think?"

Romana stood up. "Why not bury the hatchet and start afresh?"

The Doctor smiled more brightly. "Exactly."

"But my brother..." started Conon.

"My brother!" said Aresias fiercely.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," said the Doctor soothingly. "You've each lost a brother why not leave it at that?"

Conon considered this a moment and then he smiled, an almost childlike smile as though a burden had been lifted from him. "Yes... I am prepared to start again." Romana watched amazed as he seemed to visibly relax, as though every muscle had been taut and tense. He must, she realised, have worked himself up to a fever pitch in order to carry out his intentions. She also noticed the slight dropping of the Doctor's shoulders.

"My brother was murdered, dishonourably, by that dog's family. He is unworthy of forgiveness. He is a craven coward. His brother was a back-street assassin and his father was a murderous quack of a peddler. I scorn the very ground he treads on." Aresias' lip curled viciously. "I will see him hanged like a common thief."

The Doctor's shoulders straightened again with a jerk. Conon looked like a man betrayed. Then he reddened. "I am no coward. My father was a good doctor and my brother met yours in open combat. He, like you, was hiding in this house and your wife handed him over. No one was ever told because she begged us not to, but I will not have my family slurred in that way."

Aresias' eyes flickered dangerously and he turned contemptuously towards Phaedra. "Is this true?" he asked. Phaedra moaned and wept. "Creusa?" he commanded savagely.

Creusa's eyes were very bright. She looked across the room and caught Romana watching her. The eyes dropped to the floor. "Yes, it is true."

Aresias looked back at Phaedra. He paused for a moment then quite suddenly he took two steps towards her, picked her out of the chair and slapped her savagely across the face. She started screaming. He slapped her again with such force that she staggered backwards and fell over the couch, hitting her head on the marble floor. Aresias started after her but the Doctor grabbed hold of him. The two men struggled and several of the servants went to help. Creusa was crouching beside Phaedra who was struggling up, blood pouring from a gash in her forehead. Romana hurried round and started examining the cut. Then with a shout of triumph, Conon shook free of the man restraining him and leapt upon the group now holding Aresias. In his hand he held a small deadly-looking dagger. He grabbed Aresias by the shoulder and ran it home. The two men stared at each other for a moment then Aresias slowly collapsed into Conon's arms, grabbing hold of him. Conon caught the body and gently lowered him to the floor. The head fell back and the grasping hands went limp. Conon's head bowed and he let out a sob. Then he straightened and looked at the Doctor.

"I'm sorry!" he said.

By now he was surrounded by the household servants and he passively allowed them to lead him off, leaving the Doctor and Romana alone with the two sisters and Aresias' dead body. It was Creusa who broke the silence.

"Aresias!" she screamed and rushed to the body. She held the head and turned the sightless eyes towards her, then she held her hands over her face and began to sob.

Phaedra rested against Romana, weeping quietly, the tears and the blood mixing and leaving dark stains on Romana's dress.

Gently the Doctor moved over to Creusa and lifted her off the body. "Creusa," he said, "show me where I can find some water to bathe Phaedra's cut and a blanket to cover Aresias."

Creusa drew in a deep wracked breath, wiped the tears from her eyes and then nodded and moved towards the door. Romana felt Phaedra stiffen. Turning towards Creusa, she said, "You told him where to come didn't you?"

"What?"

"I saw you talking with the soothsayer in the market. You told him where Aresias was! You **KILLED HIM!**"

Phaedra took two tottering steps towards her sister. “You! you did it!” Sobbing shook her body and she crumpled up in a small forlorn heap.

Quietly the Doctor came over, picked her up and carried her to a couch. Setting her down, he poured some wine and handed it to her.

“Why should Creusa plot to kill Aresias?” asked Romana, coming over and sitting beside her.

Phaedra looked passed her at her sister who stood stock still in the doorway.

“Because she was in love with him.”

Creusa turned round and faced them. “You thought I didn’t know,” continued Phaedra. “You and Aresias thought you were being so clever.”

Romana met the Doctor’s eyes over Phaedra’s head.

Rather half-heartedly Romana said, “I’m sure you’re imagining it. So many awful things have happened.”

“Aresias had an eye for a pretty girl. He was working on you.”

Romana opened her mouth to protest then shut it again. Aresias had, indeed, been “working” on her. He had been charming, amusing and attentive and had barely spoken to the Doctor.

“But still,” said the Doctor then he trailed off too. Events were beginning to make a nasty sort of sense. Comments, looks, little things all put together built up an unpleasant tableau.

Creusa read the looks on their faces and she walked forward until she stood before them, her hands clasped demurely in front of her, head held high, sharp chin jutting forwards.

“Yes, I was in love with Aresias and he was in love with me but he wouldn’t leave Phaedra because she had the money.” Her lip curled slightly. “But, you see, if he’d known what she did to his brother he would never have even looked at her again.” Creusa made a small gesture with her hand. “I never thought... thought that this would happen.”

“What did you think would happen?” asked the Doctor angrily.

“Conon couldn’t just kill him. He’d have to confront him first and then he would be caught. Conon wasn’t the killing sort, anyway. He was looking for a way out. It was all working too until he attacked her.” Her cold eye turned on Phaedra and her face constricted slightly in a spasm. “He’s dead now.”

Phaedra began to cry again. “Bitch,” she said vehemently. “Get out! get out of my house and never come back.”

“Oh, I’m going all right,” said Creusa calmly then turned and walked serenely out of the room.

Phaedra convulsively gulped down the wine.

“You will stay, won’t you,” she suddenly pleaded, looking at the Doctor. “At least until Aresias is buried, please.”

“Of course,” he said gently.

“Father trusted you, you see, and I don’t know what to do.”

The Doctor smiled and patted her hand. “Don’t worry. I’ll see to everything. You should try and get some rest. Romana, will you go and find Aristarchus and get him to remove the body.”

Romana left the room and headed for the servants’ quarters. However she met Aristarchus halfway, looking tired and distressed. She was about to relay the Doctor’s message but he forestalled her by the expression on his face.

“What’s happened now?” she asked.

“Creusa,” he made a small tired gesture. “She has hanged herself.”

Romana sighed quietly and put her hand to her head trying to think.

“Is there somewhere you can put the bodies?”

“Yes.”

She nodded, deciding to stick to practicalities.

“Can you move Aresias there and you’d better put Creusa with him for the time being.”

Aristarchus moved off and Romana returned to the Doctor. A wailing broke out somewhere in the house.

Phaedra was sitting up rigidly when she entered. The Doctor was staring out of a doorway onto the square courtyard at the centre of the house.

“What has happened?” demanded Phaedra. “Why is someone crying?”

“Creusa’s dead.”

Too tired even to cry Phaedra sank back and buried her face in her hands.

“How did it happen?” asked the Doctor.

“She hanged herself.”

“If only I had forgiven her!” said Phaedra suddenly, pressing her hands together in an agitated fashion.

“I don’t think it would have made any difference,” said the Doctor gently.

“Oh yes it would.” Phaedra got up and started pacing earnestly up and down the room.

“You should try to get some rest,” said the Doctor.

“Rest! How can I rest. There’s things to do.” She continued pacing, looking nervously at them.

The Doctor moved over to Romana. “I’ve got some sedatives in the TARDIS. You try to calm her down.” He moved off silently.

“You can’t do anything now,” said Romana desperately to Phaedra. “You should get some sleep. You’ll be able to think more clearly in the morning.”

After some more persuasion she got Phaedra seated and fairly calm. Aristarchus came in and consulted on what they should do with Conon who was presently locked in a cellar. Romana directed he should be fed and given blankets and they would hand him over to the authorities the next morning.

When she returned Phaedra had gone. Concerned, she checked the rest of the house, but could not find her anywhere. She then came out on the roof and found Phaedra standing on a small parapet built round the edge of it, silhouetted against the setting sun.

“Phaedra!” she called and started towards her.

Phaedra turned round to face her, stumbled, lost her balance, and fell.

“You did your best.”

“That isn’t very consoling. Three people have died. I mean, what was the point?”

“There was no point. That’s just how life is.”

Romana nodded, then shook her head. “But at the academy we were taught that you can learn from everything. Nothing is valueless... what have we learned from this?”

Romana turned and regarded the battered facade and peeling paintwork of the house. Quietly a door opened and a tall hooded figure emerged and slipped quietly away.

“Aristarchus has chosen to save a life at least,” murmured the Doctor.

He turned and Romana followed him back to the TARDIS.

# Chapter 6

## The Web of Time

### A Doctor Who Short Story

It was the middle of nowhere and yet someone had created it as a place. A rough undefined place, but a place nonetheless. It had wall and floor, it had air and moisture. But even so it wasn't quite a place. It had no past and it had no future. It was merely a gateway. It was the edge of the cliff from which the traveler must jump before he could soar.

Sam shone the bright beam of her torch around about her. The light reflected back off twisting walls: A kaleidoscope of colours leaping out at her from the darkness; flashes of brilliant red and the iridescent sheen of peacock blue, forest greens and traces of gold like a seam of precious metal, intertwined. It was like staring into an oily whirlpool, only writ large so that only the smallest glimpses of it were revealed in the light of her torch at any one moment. To Sam it was a wonder, not knowing that this was the colour and shape of unformed stuff. Not knowing that it would appear to some like gravel and shale, loose rocks and mud, the stuff of which things are made, but not a thing of itself except that it had been grafted into a structure to serve a purpose but no more.

Perhaps, though, she sensed this quality of unfinished clay that some would perceive in the place, for Sam resolved to be unimpressed. "Tunnels," she said, "again."

The Doctor took the torch from her. If he had made note of her words and tone he showed no outward sign of it. He, too, swung the torch across the vista before them, watching the splashes of colour leap out and then fade away into the darkness. "Quite incredible," he murmured. Once again the torch light danced, his head following the motion of the beam to catch the display as it happened. The Doctor might like to think that he was more in tune with the nature of the

universe than those who traveled with him but in this he was often wrong. He was too interested in the new, too ready to be impressed, too oblivious sometimes to the reality over the form. He forgot that what seemed beautiful to him was as nothing to others.

And Sam, her sarcasm forgotten now her point had been made, forgot also any intuition that might have driven that sarcasm and asked, "what sort of rock is it?"

Unseen by her the Doctor smiled. "I've no idea," he confessed cheerfully, bending closer to examine the substance. He brushed his hand over the surface, letting the long elegant fingers trace the turning contours. "It's quite smooth," he said. "It could be artificial."

Sam looked at the contorted twists and turns. At first sight it looked completely random, like a natural formation, but the overall effect was pleasing. An almost spiral of colour and light leading on into the darkness. She felt as if she stood at the lip of a vortex poised to plunge in or hang back. But no sense of giddiness or nausea overcame her, more a sort of exhilaration, like standing in the winds at the top of a high cliff or tall building.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"No idea," said the Doctor again. He turned to her shining the torch on his face so she could see his expression. He grinned. Even with the long shadows cast over his face she saw the excitement and pleasure in that grin. The shadows gave it an edge, or perhaps it was experience that gave it an edge. Whichever or whatever, there was an edge of danger in that grin.

"What do you mean, no idea? what did the instruments say?"

He turned the the torch away again and his expression was once more plunged into darkness. "We're in the middle of an empty region of space."

The edginess increased, Sam felt it and knew they were at the beginning of something, but still she held back, "So it's some sort of asteroid, uncharted space junk."

"No, there's nothing here at all, I checked twice."

He had checked twice. They were nowhere. There was nothing here, except the tunnel and the cliff edge and the vortex of colour. "So what's this then?" Sam gestured around them, flinging her arms wide, encompassing the colours and the contours.

"I haven't a clue," admitted the Doctor happily. He handed her back the torch, "left or right?" he asked.

For the Doctor, this was like the toss of the coin. A random element. Adventure happens when you bow to madam chance, when you let the tide of fortune take you in its grip and carry you where it will. His companions were chance

and fortune and, always, his guides and his strength. Sam more so than others. She flashed the torch up and down the tunnel, past the incongruous shape of the TARDIS, which stood solid and square in the tunnel, rejecting the fancy of the place. The tunnel sloped slightly. She indicated the upward slope.

“This way,” she said, “at least we’ll be running down hill when we have to escape.”

“Excellent,” the Doctor thrust his hands in his pockets and set off ahead of her. She watched his shadow against the curved walls. A black Doctor shaped silhouette in a field of swirling colours.

They walked for a short way, the tunnels unchanging in their variety. Then, before them opened a cavern. It was no vast cathedral such as bedazzles the eye and awes the mind, for this was not that sort of place. Instead it was an ante-room. A small bay where the coloured walls gave way to a tangle of glittering threads. These threads spread out into the distance leading the eye into the heights and depths of some vast expanse. The threads twisted and knotted, looped and flowed across each other, some as thick as a human wrist and some fine as gossamer. Caught in the threads were shapes, like the decorations on a Christmas tree, small rotating orbs, figures like people, buildings, continents, suns. A multitude of worlds caught in a web and held. Sam reached out towards it.

The Doctor caught her hand, “don’t touch!” he said.

“Why not, it’s beautiful,” she whispered.

“There’s some sort of interface there. You probably can’t see it, but it’s a kind of temporal shift, I can see its tendrils reaching out like mist.” There was wonder in his voice for he could see whirls and eddies of time like another dimension to the threaded web that drifted in and around the tangled skies reaching into the void between them and curling out into the room where they stood. A tunnel of colours and contours formed from time rather than rock. The Doctor nearly made the connection then, but not quite yet, he hung back and didn’t make the leap of intuition. One thread meandered towards them reaching out lazily to curl about their bodies. The Doctor took a sharp step backwards, dragging Sam with him, “best not to get to close,” he smiled apologetically.

“What is it?” asked Sam.

“Something to do with time,” mused the Doctor.

Sam giggled, “the web of time!”

And the Doctor made the connection. He saw how the colours and the contours in time and in space and on the screen blended into one, “you know it could be! The mathematics needed to create a representation like this would be incredible, but it could be!”

“You mean this is like the TARDIS scanner?” asked Sam. “It lets you look into the vortex?”

“More than that, it’s a gateway to the Vortex, if you stepped out into it you would be in temporal free fall, at the mercy of the time winds.” The cliff edge.

There was a sound of footsteps in the corridors ahead of them. Instinctively Sam and the Doctor ducked back the way they had come. There was nothing really to hide behind, Sam was heading up the corridor, but the Doctor caught her hand and motioned her to remain. They stayed there, crouched in the gloom and the shadows watching the web of time.

Three silver figures approached the room, they were humanoid, but small and delicate. To a casual observer they were completely silver, their clothes, hands, and features but if you looked harder you would see they were covered with some sort of silver cloth that clung to their bodies. The first one entered, she was more forward thinking and eager than many of her kind, her mind embraced possibilities that their’s did not. To her own, had they been human, there was a shiftiness in her eye and her demeanour that discomfited. But they would have rejected conclusions drawn from demeanour. It was her reputation both for brilliance and for the unexpected that unnerved. She was unpredictable, that caused them to shun her. She glanced round the cavern and because she was wider thinking and wider ranging than her companions she also looked up the corridor and in looking up the corridor she looked right into Sam’s eyes.

The reader will, no doubt, know already what she saw. The reader will have traveled far with the Doctor and Sam from the wastes of Hirath to the wonders of Hyperso from the dramas of the birth and death of suns to the peace and tranquility of the Eye of Orion. But even so perhaps an introduction is in order. Our silver woman who was, for her race, both tall and devious stared into the face of a woman who was still part girl but these days mostly woman. A certain maturity had entered her features so that while they were mostly unchanged from her sixteenth year she now impressed the viewer with a certain self-assurance, the knowledge that she was resourceful, able and independent. But it was not in our observer’s ability to see these things for she was not human, what she saw was woman taller and therefore more devious than herself. A woman with a smooth wide face and close cropped blonde hair. A lithe woman with muscles honed through use more for agility more than for strength. And behind this woman was another. A man with long curling locks of brown hair that among Sam’s kind had elicited the words romantic and Edwardian. The Doctor projected presence such that even one of the swimmers was given pause. This swimmer looked at the Doctor and recognised him as a powerful variable, a factor unknown by and unsuspected by

her fellows, a force of time. She looked into the Doctor's eyes and wove him into her plans, slotted him into the many contingencies she had considered. If only he was curious but, she reasoned, he would not be here if he was not curious. She turned her back on them and walked to the far side of the room, so that to see her, her companions would have to turn their backs on this new thing.

But there was little point in the move. Her companions cared not for the tunnel beyond. It was an artefactual irrelevance beyond their calculations. As she took their hands and helped them over the web into the currents and into freefall they might have looked into her face and seen the strange and exhilarated expression there and having seen it they might have wondered what caused it. But this is unlikely, such things were beyond the remarking of the swimmers. The hands parted and the swimmers fell over the edge and fell into the tracery. Once more the first, the tallest and most devious gazed up the corridor once more she looked into the eyes of these new beings and with one of those strange coincidences of nature that bind the universe together she made a gesture that was to both her and to them a salute. The she too stepped over the edge, off the cliff and into the web. And in that moment, though they did not know it, the Doctor and Sam were dragged also over the edge and into to web of the swimmers.

The Doctor hurried up once more, peering into the strands. Sam, beside him. The three swimmers were tangled in the skiens each moving apart, navigating through intersections.

“Surely they should be torn apart?” whispered Sam.

“Those suits are some sort of time suit. I have something similar in the TARDIS for effecting outside repairs in the vortex. I've never used it.”

“Who were they?” asked Sam, “Where is this? What are they doing?”

“They're traveling in time without any machinery, a bit like swimming, I suppose, instead of taking a ship. They will end up wherever the time winds take them.”

Freefall in the time vortex.

“But why?” asked the Doctor, “they could end up anywhere, they can have no control over their paths, unless,” he stopped, looking at Sam, “the maths would be incredible, but the maths for this,” he gestured at the web, “is breathtaking. A time lord could do it though.”

“Do what?” asked Sam, “were they time lords?”

“No, I don't think so. No. But a time lord could navigate the web by incantation. If they were quick enough could work out the equations for where they needed to go as the time winds shifted. The TARDIS does something similar, but she has a lot of processing power and is more robust, less likely to get blown off

course,” he shook his head, “but it is theoretically possible.”

Freefall still, but freefall with direction and purpose.

The stayed a while, watching as the swimmers receded and vanished into the web, about their mysterious purposes. A small breeze came down the tunnel, blowing the Doctor’s curls across his face. He looked up.

“That’s not right,” he said.

“What isn’t?”

“Most of my cells have just lost five minutes.”

The reader will know, as did Sam, that the Doctor, while he existed mostly fixed in time was yet a being of many times and many possibilities. The nature of time was woven into the fabric of his being and the details of his biodata. All his race could see the distortion of time and all his race could feel the pull of the time winds. But experience and necessity and the tangled plots and hopes, reasons and fears of a myriad of beings and forces had forged the Doctor into an instrument of power and sensitivity. The Doctor was a man of peace but he was forged as a weapon of war. To the Doctor the slightest stirring of the time winds pulled at his consciousness and alerted him as a faint call on the wind alerts a dog.

“The time winds?” hazarded Sam, “from that web thing? you said not to get too close.”

“No, it wasn’t the edge,” said the Doctor. “Unless...” he looked worried. And at last he recognised the rock from which the place was built for what it was. The raw unfinished, unsculptured stuff of time. It held, but only weakly, as a mud hut in a rising gale.

“Quickly!” he cried and began to run back down the corridor towards the TARDIS. Sam followed, understanding from his tone that this was no time for questions. Habituated to the sudden crises that beset their lives.

It was an, airlock, mused the Doctor later when he had time to think and the need to explain the situation to Sam. It was mathematical projection of the vortex as had been the web, following a gentle air current which caused the slope of the corridor. One end connected to the place of the swimmers. A stable realization of the vortex, just large enough to get them away from their space and time so the raw power of the time winds couldn’t damage it when they crossed over. But a temporary structure as must anything be that opened into the time winds, as the currents shifted it would strain and finally break. It remained a stable structure just long enough to serve as a bridge into the vortex.

Following behind him, knowing none of this as yet, Sam felt a breeze stirring the hairs at the back of her neck and knew in her heart that the wind was a dangerous thing.

“10 Minutes that time,” shouted the Doctor, “except my right arm, that just gained an hour.”

Sam didn't bother to reply. The TARDIS was in sight. The Doctor reached the door and struggled with the key in the lock. Sam felt the wind tugging at her clothes and as she and the Doctor fell into the TARDIS she felt the crumbling of the ground beneath her feet. The doors slammed shut behind them before they reached the console. The central column moved. The TARDIS was in flight. Silently, they watched on the scanner as the corridor outside began twisting, fell apart and merged into the familiar image of the vortex.

“What about the other travellers?” asked Sam.

“I don't know. There is no way I can trace them from here. Unless we meet them again by chance, sometime in the future, there is no way of knowing who or what they were.”

Falling in the vortex, Kelsa smiled as she moved through the ever changing pasts, futures and possibilities. They had been unexpected but not unplanned for. Humming the incantations Kelsa hoped that the predications would be correct.



# Chapter 7

## Strange Meeting

### A Doctor Who Short Story

Achmael drifted. The Pirate ship hung in space, hollow and seemingly empty, its movement invisible in the vastness that surrounded it. Achmael lay on his back and watched the ceiling. His inner eye seeing many places, many lives. He flexed his hand and shadow fingers danced. It was not a very spacious craft but it was his own, there was no one else there but himself, no one to shout or plead, to fight and die. Inertia enveloped him. He got up.

He wasn't going anywhere. At one point he'd thought of going to one of the major libraries on a civilised planet, downloading the information and then setting off again before anyone noticed, to peruse it at his leisure. He'd considered wiping out the entire planet in the process. But his appetite for death was strangely satiated. It would take time and he would have to cope with people trying to kill him which meant swapping bodies frequently. He rather liked this body. It was compact and powerful.

He'd been drifting for days. Every so often he'd make a plan to go somewhere and do something, but he didn't. He sat down at the table. It was littered with the debris of this body's life. Keys, tickets, currency, he rifled through it idly wandering why his body's former owner had chosen to keep all this stuff. A hologram had been tacked to the mirror, the body and a girl, somewhere sunny. Achmael had pulled it down. It meant nothing to him. A folded paper caught his eye, that he had not seen before. He spread it out before him. Words.

*It seemed that out of battle I escaped*

Achmael frowned over it.

*I am the enemy you killed, my friend.*

*I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned*

*Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.*

The words echoed in his mind. He understood them and yet it was as if there was another meaning to them. It spoke to him of regret but he could not understand what was regretted. It was another of these human things. Love and pity and a hundred meaningless words that had been thrown at him over the aeons. With sudden decision he crumpled it in his hands and placed it in an ashtray. In seconds it burst into flame and burnt away. He ground the ashes to dust with the end of a deodorant can.

Days later he was still adrift. He could not quite remember the poem, he had tried writing down what he could remember, but it was not the same. The words had been lost.

He was sitting in the cockpit staring at the instruments and the stylised display of where he was. He glanced idly at the star charts. He needed to get out he decided, unconsciously echoing a phrase he had heard somewhere, sometime. He traced the nearest planet which was marked as inhabited and set course. He'd take a look around, see what it was like, see if there was any fun to be had. He drew a circle round it in red pen. Earth Colony No. 24601 Valjean, was printed neatly by the co-ordinates. Earth Colony, humans had become a remarkably abundant species, who would ever have thought it. He tapped his pen on the surface while thinking about this. This body was that of a human. His mind drifted back to the poem and Wilfred Owen. Then he wrote LIBRARY in tentative capitals by the planet.

Juliet sighed as she laboriously worked through the translation of yet another piece of nonsense. Whoever had written it, she was beginning to suspect, had been far more influenced by the book of revelations than by any actual experience. Then again maybe the experience had so turned his mind that the only frame of reference he had for it was the book of revelations. She stared at the printout for a while and then consigned it to the junk heap with a sharp slam. Whatever it was that was loose in Mertonia it wasn't a beast that 'looked a bit like a leopard' always assuming that leopards had two heads, six feet and a mouth like a lion.

"No luck?" asked George cheerfully from across the room.

"Not much, I sometimes think it's a waste of time insisting that every community keeps a proper record of local folktales and accounts of any strange occurrences in the area. Their hearts aren't even remotely in it. Look at this!"

Angrily she brandished a piece of paper that had been stored along with the rest. George walked across the room, looked at it and laughed “Oh, no! the moose is coming!, how did that get in there ?”

“Someone must have put it there as a joke, probably hundreds of years ago and no one has read them since. Well, at least they used Standard, if I’d had to translate it from the local dialect I think I’d have screamed.”

George laughed again, “You take things too seriously, it’ll sort itself out down there, these things always do, you know.”

“Not always, we’ve lost two communities in the past five years for one reason or another, not good statistics.”

“We got the demon responsible for New Kent, though. And it wasn’t a demon that blew up half of Yewdale. That made me laugh that did! 50 merchants frazzled in one fell swoop.”

“I’m sure they thought it was hysterical.”

“Died laughing! Died laughing”, George cackled shortly and grinned.

“You have no sensitivity whatsoever, George.”

“That’s me! Earth Colonial Bastard and proud of it.”

Juliet shook her head, “I don’t know why I argue with you. I’ve never met anyone so generally unrepentant.”

“It’s the charm of my personality.”

“Yes, George.”

“Tell you what, dear. You make me a cup of tea and then I’ll leave you alone.”

Juliet gave George her best Paddington stare. He laughed once more and threw up his hands, “Just going, just going.”

He wandered off. Juliet turned to the next piece of paper and settled down to translation once more. Dimly she was aware of voices and footsteps. Activity carried on around her amongst the shelves and terminals. A shadow fell across her page and she glanced up. The angular figure of the director loomed over her and next to him a short slight man, probably about her own height with delicate features and hands that were carefully holding a sheet of paper in a slightly nervous fashion. Thinning blonde hair revealed a high, wide forehead shadowing a pair of intense blue eyes. He had a striking look which would perhaps have been fey and beautiful on a younger, less weathered man.

“This,” said the Director, “is Achmael Winters, Mr. Winters, our chief demonist, Ms Juliet Walters.”

Juliet smiled and held out a hand, his grip was dry and firm but his eyes looked startled. “Pleased to meet you,” she smiled.

“Mr. Winters is here to study, I’m putting you in charge of overseeing him and generally helping him.”

“You’re a demonist ?” asked Juliet.

He shook his head, “I’m not sure what I am.”

Juliet looked enquiringly at the Director.

“Mr Winters has paid to study, but is a bit unclear as to his area of interest, I’m sure between you, you can sort something out.”

“Why me?” she had a hard edge to her voice.

“Ms Walters,” began the Director firmly,

“I do have work to do, you know. Important work. Saving people’s lives type work.”

“I do appreciate that Ms Walters..”

“Do you? sometimes I wonder. Just because I don’t sit round here on my backside all the time debating on the correct placement of an iota, but actually go out there and do something with my skills makes you think I’m somehow second rate. An unsound scholar.”

“Ms Walters,” interrupted the Director, “everyone else takes students. You don’t because, frankly, you’re not here half the time and we can’t guarantee them proper tuition. Mr Winters simply wants some general advice and guidance. I do hope that won’t prove too much.”

He turned sharply on his heel and left them together.

Mr Winters opened his mouth as if to say something but was prevented by the appearance of George.

“Halleluia! I never thought I’d see the day when someone got the better of you. Neat footwork, didn’t you think?” he asked the unfortunate Mr. Winters, “sashayed between the random blows,” George danced forward “and administered the fatal thrust. All comes of giving women an education you know, overheats the brain.”

“You’ll get in trouble for eavesdropping one of these days.”

“Begging your pardon Mr. Frodo, sir, but there’s no eaves at Bag End and that’s a fact.”

“Go to Hell, George.”

“You’re just sore because someone else got the last word for once. She’s just sore because someone else got the last word for once. You remember that. Just nod politely and say ”Yes, Ms Walters” and you’ll have her eating out of your hand.”

“I didn’t hear anyone asking you for an opinion.”

Mr Winters looked distinctly nervous, “I didn’t want to cause lots of trouble.”

Juliet took pity on him. She was aware that her manners were leaving a lot to be desired, “You’re not, honestly. I just get up tight when people are dying and I’m trying to find out why and how to stop it. I tend to act as though the fate of the world rests in my hands. Hence, I get really short with people when there’s a crisis going on.”

“Really ?” interrupted George, “and I always thought it was PMT.”

“Don’t you have work to do?”

“On my way Ma’am.” George made a pantomime exit, bowing and scraping.

Juliet looked at her student, his hands turned anxiously, folding the paper he’d been holding into small pieces.

“So Mr. Winters.”

“Achmael.”

“So Achmael, you’ve really no idea what you want to study.”

He shook his head unhappily.

“Science? Languages? Art? Literature?”

“Poetry,” he said suddenly, “I’ve read some poetry.”

“Who?”

“Wilfred Owen.”

“Well. that’s a start!”

“Well,” his hands continued to twist nervously, “I don’t want to do just poetry. I want to know about how the world works, science and technology and things as well.”

Juliet ran a hand through her brown hair and frowned. “OK, tell you what we’ll draw up a timetable, Poetry on Monday, Physics on Tuesday, Philosophy on Wednesday, that sort of thing and see how we go from there.”

He nodded. The expression on his face was a strange mixture of anxiety and hopefulness, like that of a young child. Juliet pulled a sheet of paper towards her and wrote ‘Educating Achmael’ across the top.

So Achmael became a part of the library, settled amid the shelves and terminals, imbibing the smells of leather, paper and plastic that pervaded the place. Three millenia and more of human endeavour lay at his fingertips stored in the data discs that had arrived with the colony ship. Dull treatise on science, the ruminatings of a thousand philosophers and moralists. Sometimes he became overwhelmed by

the imagined sounds of pens scratching and keyboards clattering. And everywhere imagined voices whispered

“What is it you want to know? How to build a spacecraft ? a gun? How the minds and emotions of these humans work ? How to destroy them all, each one differently and individually? Who are you? Why are you? What are you going to do ?”

It was as if something waited on the edge of his vision, but everytime he turned to confront it, to catch it, it slipped away, dodged from under his grasp.

“Stand back,” advised Juliet, “Books cannot tell you how to run your life. They can only tell you how others have run theirs.”

So he put aside his notebooks and his pen and he walked out into the countryside. That famed source of inspiration.

*I wandered lonely as a cloud*

He found it empty. Nothing spoke to him. Nothing stirred. There was a bitter dry taste in his mouth.

“Science is my domain.”

He could comprehend the intricate laws of physics and mathematics. He could even understand why some might call them beautiful or elegant. The scientific universe lay before him certain and sure, mapped out and definite. He learned fast, he was at genius level he knew and yet he was unable to experience even the beauty of the countryside.

Subjectivity was closed to him.

That is what he said to himself in one bleak moment. It was a sham, an illusion, there was no beauty or ugliness, no good or bad, no right or wrong. No evil. It should have given him a sense of relief that. Wasn't that what he was doing here ? trying to reject this label that had been attached to him. Evil, there was no such thing, therefore he was not, could not be evil. But the bitterness remained.

“I should feel triumphant,” he told himself.

One bright day in the early spring, Achmael climbed the low hills that encircled the town. High up among the trees, he stopped to listen to the silence. He thought deep down into his own nature, the sweet taste of death, that tiny cry of a mind as it was crushed out of existence. The silence would not speak to him, he was not a creature of silence. He summoned a storm and stood amidst the thunder and lightening, feeling the blood quicken in his heart as the rain beat upon him.

“Achmael !”

He turned, Juliet was climbing up the hillside towards him.

“Isn’t it splendid !” she said as she reached him. She was flushed and smiling.

“How did you know where I was ?”

“George saw you heading up here,”

She stood in the rain, water running down her face and laughed at his surprised expression, “There is beauty in the bellow of the blast, there is grandeur in the growling of the gale,” she shouted at him and then began to run up hill towards the summit. Achmael ran after her pounding up the slope, until they stood side by side at the top.

“Very silly really,” she said, “not to say downright suicidal, standing here in this weather.”

Achmael simply stared at her a revolution taking place in his world. There was beauty in the storm. He thrilled to the sound of the thunder. It was magnificent. Lightning tore across the sky illuminating the world before him, the low buildings of Barnston sheltering in their circle of hills. Realising how he had been experiencing emotions all along and yet telling himself he was not.

Human emotion, it seemed, was not beyond him. He was not human. His emotions were not human, but he had emotions none the less. Some of what the centuries of writers had scrawled would never apply to him. Some he had always known, but not recognised as such. Joy, he had experienced, the joy of destruction. He realised now, that there were other joys and emotions, above that basic level, that he could come to feel.

In the midst of that strange environment through which it travelled the TARDIS spun and tumbled. Briefly, like a glimpse of someone’s life through a train window it passed through the different aeons and centuries. It traced its way backwards and forwards across time like thread in a tangled skein, and one of those threads passed through the 26th century close enough to register the flare of radiation as Achmael summoned his storm. Various programs installed by the Doctor noted and cross-checked the readings. The TARDIS systems registered an approximation for time and place of origin, though by this time light years and millennia separated them. A light on the console began to flash, indicating information. The Doctor wasn’t looking. The TARDIS had just landed and he stood in the terminal building at Heathrow.

Juliet had become Achmael's yardstick. He tried to understand humanity through her. She had taught him physics. She had taught him mathematics. She had opened the door to the world of the objective could she also guide him through the subjective maze ?

"I like to believe that killing is morally wrong," Juliet said once after some prompting by himself.

"So you believe in some sort of absolute morality."

"I don't know. Somehow I don't like to think that I do things because of some big sign which says "Thou shalt not", but out of some basic sense of goodness. Maybe that is my absolute, I have some measure of what is right which I consider it natural to follow. I don't consider it to be natural to kill people, I suppose. I'm not making much sense am I? morality is not my strong point."

"For me, I think," he returned with a worried frown, "killing is natural. Does that mean that for me it is right ?"

She fell silent. Outside there was the faint roar of the traffic.

"Would you enjoy killing me?"

"That's different."

"In what way am I different from any other person ?"

"I would gain pleasure from the kill, but I would miss your company."

"You know, sometimes, Achmael, you give me the creeps."

He raised his eyebrows, "only sometimes?"

Juliet's attitude puzzled him. To him, knowing what was right was desperately important. Juliet had some kind of hazy morality that had little to do with careful thought. He still sought rigour in his ideas. He might yet accept or reject human values but he wanted to know that he had thought through the issue carefully. He saw Juliet's fuzzy morality as a failure. She did not like the consequences imposed by any rigorous system, so she hid behind feeling, emotion and naturalness. The clarity and harshness of any sort of absolute morality disturbed her, as did the chaos implied by relativism. He challenged her with this.

"Maybe, you're right," she conceded, "the problem with designing any sort of morality is that you will shape it to your own prejudices. I believe killing to be wrong so I will reject any morality that cannot encompass that. I also believe sitting back and allowing others to die is wrong. Basically I do not have the time to devise my own morality since I have other things to do. I am not a philosopher. Which is more of a cop out ? to say I am not a philosopher therefore I will play with morality only as a pass time, or to say defining morality is of major

importance therefore I will ignore calls to what my intuition of morality is in favour of philosophy. Each person must decide that for themselves. I would make a mediocre philosopher, at best, whereas I happen to be a rather good demonist. I am true to myself which is what counts in the end, I think. I trust my own judgement.”

“You don’t seem very perturbed about it though.”

“I have better things to do with my life than worry. What you have said is perfectly true. And like many truths it is uncomfortable. It is a something about the truth. It makes a hard master.”

On another occasion he tried another tack.

“You kill demons, right ?”

“Sometimes, I generally try to act more as an observer than a soldier.”

“But, in principal, you are prepared to kill another sentient creature.”

“It’s a matter of basic self defence, I suppose. They kill us, and they never seem to stop to negotiate.”

“But do you ever give them the chance ?”

“It’s not that simple. Every time you get into one of those situations you know that the demon has you out gunned. Trust, could well be your undoing.”

“So you never give them a chance. But they are sentient, so you don’t believe even in the sanctity of sentient life.”

“Like I said when it comes down to him or me, principles tend to fly out the window.”

“So, if, for instance, it should turn out that I was a demon, you would not hesitate to destroy me.”

Watching her face, he saw that she took in the full import of that. By this time she knew him too well to be surprised that he was not human.

“No,” she said slowly, “I would not.”

Silence hung between them a moment.

“Are you a demon ?” she asked in a small voice.

“Yes.”

“I suppose in the end,” she said after a moments thought, “I believe in adhering to some kind of personal integrity. My conscience is all part and parcel of who I am and I cannot separate the two. I don’t make hard and fast rules for myself. THIS IS RIGHT AND THIS IS WRONG. But I trust myself to make my own judgements as situations arise and I shall accept any responsibility or guilt that comes with those. So long as I am myself and don’t wimp out of what I think is right then I believe I shall be okay. That said some of the worst atrocities in history have been caused by people who genuinely believed themselves to be in the right.

It's hard, but I see no other way to conduct my life." She grinned suddenly, as she always did when dismissing something hard from her mind, "Maybe I'll think about talking to them next time. Who knows."

And that was that. Yet Achmael was growing in understanding all the time. When he learnt that his hard truths of science were as open to debate as the questions of morality he was not thrown into despair as he would have been at first. He welcomed it as a challenge. He was not human, and never would be. He was going to be something altogether new. There would be no simple dogmas in his universe. Some ideas he would lift from humanity and some he would not. He would be true to himself, whatever that was supposed to mean.

"What is love?" he asked curiously, in the end, "it figures so predominantly in all these texts. What do humans mean by it?"

"No one really knows. Look at one person and then look at the next and you'll find they use it in very different ways. That it's used in such different ways suggest there is a good deal of confusion."

"Well, what do you mean by love?" he asked, pushing for specifics.

"I don't know. Just someone you can see yourself being with for the rest of your life, I guess. They are surprisingly few on the ground."

"But there is someone," he dug deeper.

"Yes, a Doctor, another of the demon fighters," she smiled to herself "Dr. Mike Stuart," she gave small jerk of the head pulling herself up straight and there was a note of pride in her voice.

"I don't know him, do I?"

"No, he works a way from here, in one of the big hospitals to the North, we don't see each other often, mostly when there's trouble brewing."

And with that he had to rest content. As usual Juliet had only given him half an answer.

Juliet could feel her nervousness as a tight, nauseous sensation. It was the tension she always felt before embarking upon an expedition. She was trying to read but her mind was not really on the book. She was waiting for Mike. Irritated with herself she banged the book down on the desk and went to make coffee. She paused hearing quiet, yet heavy footfalls among the shelves. Mike rounded the corner, a familiar figure in black leather and large boots. His helmet hung from one hand so she could see all of his square teutonic face and the locks of red hair

that he steadfastly refused to either grow properly long or cut short. She thought, not for the first time, how boylike he looked. He smiled quietly and bent down, brushing her lips slightly with a kiss. He smelt of soap.

“I was about to make coffee, want some ?”

“Please.”

He sat down on a chair unzipping his jacket, revealing a loose white shirt. Juliet sometimes wondered if he had anything else in his wardrobe. His large hands idly picked up her book and turned it over. The hands had always surprised her. So large and big boned, she found it hard to imagine them engaged in the delicate work of dissection.

“So what do we have ?” she asked.

“Not a lot. A few ideas have been thrown around based on what you wrote in that report but, as you said, we’ve hit the usual problem of disentangling truth from legend. We’ll basically have to wait until we get there.”

“The message said there’d been a new attack.”

“A small farmstead. There was a message through on the radio link, that they were under attack and then nothing.”

“Heigh ho and it’s off to risk our necks once more.”

“No one forces us.”

Mike was staring at one hand that rubbed the edge of the table, not at her. Juliet hesitated over the coffee watching him. It was so hard, meeting like this, with death looming like a shadow over the next day. He glanced up and caught her eye, smiling his deceptively shy smile.

*“Take your risk of life and death*

*Underneath the open sky*

*Live clean or go out quick”*

He paused caught by the end of the rhyme, “it’s not so bad you know,” he added, “it’s a dangerous world out there, people are being killed all the time.”

“Lads you’re wanted. Come and die.” Juliet finished the stanza. And poured the coffee noisily banging down the mugs. “You pseud, quoting poetry at me. As if that could make the situation any better.”

He smiled once more, his answer to any problem. It irritated her sometimes, that he always seemed so at ease, so relaxed. It was high summer and a window had been left open. The evening sunlight dropped onto the floor between them.

“Richard will be coming with us, bringing a small military unit.” He lent back in the chair, as he spoke, looking at her once more, a wisp of wind stirred his hair. The dust danced. The small knot inside her loosened slightly. Richard was an

old friend. She placed a lot of faith in his competence. She nodded briefly as she brought the coffee over and placed it on the table. Close to, she paused, noticing the slight tension in his arm, that appeared to rest so casually on the edge of the table. He glanced up at her, all heavy jaw and inquiring blue eyes. Unbidden Auden drifted across her mind.

*Every farthing of the cost,  
All the dreaded cards foretell  
Shall be paid, but from this night  
Not a whisper, not a thought,  
Not a kiss nor look be lost.*

She stood there with the tight smile she had when anxious. Mike, watching her, thought it so uncharacteristic of her usual breezy manner. He saw her thus, more often than he liked, between them they seemed to have so little time. He slipped his arms round her waist burying his head in her chest. He felt her arms round his neck entwining her fingers in his hair and knew without looking that her head bent over his. They stayed like that a long time while the coffee grew cold.

The Doctor and Nyssa stood in the empty farmyard.

“There’s something about the call of seagulls that always makes a lonely spot seem lonelier still,” commented the Doctor.

The farm lay in a circle of low hills, a flat valley running gently down to the sea, good farming country. So far the birds were the only sign of life they’d come across.

“What are we looking for ?” asked Nyssa curiously.

The Doctor glanced at the tracer in his hand “flangey ray emissions. I have a standard process rigged on the TARDIS to warn me if it detects any,” he gazed abstractedly around him.

“Why ?”

“An old enemy of mine. His presence generally registers as several high fluctuations in the flangey ray levels,” the Doctor walked in a slow circle, “there are traces of recent activity around here but I can’t fix a direction.”

They both stood silent, listening to the gulls. The Doctor dropped the device into a coat pocket and stared out across the sea. “I’m sure I’ve heard of this planet before somewhere,” he murmured frowning at the horizon.

“What do you suppose happened here ?” asked Nyssa at length.

The Doctor looked round at the farm buildings behind them and then down at her, "I don't know."

He walked across the yard examining the ground and the surrounding buildings, "No blood, no blaster marks, nothing, as if the occupants just upped and left."

His gaze swept over the hills, was arrested and held by the sight of a small trickle of men working their way down towards the farm.

"I think, maybe, it's time we moved on," he said quietly, taking Nyssa's arm.

She glanced up, following his gaze and moved back towards the barn and the TARDIS in agreement. There was a flash on the hillside and a whumph as the ground between them and the barn exploded.

"Then again, maybe not," he murmured.

Juliet watched the two people with the telescope option set on her helmet's eyepiece. A man and a girl. His hand resting lightly on her shoulder, more in a gesture of companionship than possession. He had a resigned and patient look on a rather bland oval face, blonde hair, cream coat, pale striped trousers, very pale altogether. She caught sight of a cricket jumper beneath the coat.

"Richard, I absolutely refuse to believe in a demon dressed in a cricket outfit."

Richard looked at her over his still smoking bazooka, "Improbable," he conceded, "but not impossible."

The girl was a good deal shorter than the man. A petite figure in red velvet holding herself very upright. A pretty round face framed by loose brown curls. Some people have all the luck, thought Juliet to herself contemplating her own heavy locks.

The expedition had halted. Richard was planning.

"I think," hazarded Juliet, her mind straying back to Achmael, "we should try and talk with them."

Richard gazed at her. His brown eyes spoke of mild disbelief and deep concern. "What makes you say that?"

"Well," Juliet took a deep breath, "they appear to be wary of the bazooka, and, you know, they could be human."

"You saw the census," he rested his bazooka on the ground. "They aren't from any of the local communities, and they certainly aren't the farmers." He paused

and glanced down the hill. “Do you want to go down there ?” he asked. “We’ll cover you. Keep the recorder on and transmitting.”

She could tell that it was to be her decision. He could sympathize with her reluctance to open fire, but they had both seen demons in action. Lost friends to them. They could be very swift and very deadly. If she chose to take the risk, she would be going on her own. He was too good a commander to let more than one person take the chance.

She nodded tensely, “OK.”

“Juliet,” she heard Mike behind her.

She reached out and squeezed his arm, “Any better ideas? I’m open to suggestions.”

Looking at her, he had a sudden presentiment of doom. He knew that she would walk down that hillside alone and he would have to stand back and watch, helpless to do anything. He shook his head. “Good luck.”

From experience Juliet knew how much that cost him, having been in the same situation herself before now. Then she set off, a small lonesome figure walking towards her fate.

The Doctor watched Juliet approach. Seeing the light female figure, not too tall, wearing combat fatigues. A helmet covered one eye, no doubt providing her with extra information. He wondered, idly, if she’d noticed he’d got two hearts yet. The details of her face became clearer as she approached, sharp lines shaping the nose and chin, a wide thin mouth, the one eye he could see was pale brown. Wisps of hair escaping from the helmet showed brown with dyed in red tints. She stopped before them and shielded her eye from the sun.

“Hello!” she said, “would it be impertinent to ask what’s going on here?”

Juliet paused uncertainly. What exactly do you say to demons ? Richard was talking in her ear, ordering her out, as he had been ever since she’d reported the second heart. His voice becoming more urgent now she was standing too close to the strangers for him to use the bazooka safely. The man and the girl exchanged glances that said this was not entirely the reception they had expected.

“Hello,” he said in a slightly reproachful tone, “I’m the Doctor and this is Nyssa and you are?”

He held out one hand with an enquiring expression in his blue eyes. Gingerly Juliet shook it, “Juliet.”

“I don’t bite you see.”

“Well, you never can tell with demons, can you?”

The mild expression changed dramatically and darkened. He lent forward hands thrust into his pockets, “Demons?” he demanded, “plural?”.

Juliet shrugged, “Well, it depends really doesn’t it. There’s two of you, though only one of you appears non-human at first analysis, so you could be demon singular or demons plural,” I’m babbling she thought. This talking to demons idea of Achmael’s is rather nerve-racking.

“Are we looking for a demon?” asked the girl.

“Well, yes. But it all rather depends on what you mean by demon.” He turned to face Juliet, “We’re looking for a demon in a rather technical sense, he’s characterised by fluctuations in flange rays which register on this .”

The Doctor pulled the tracer out of his pocket and it lay in the palm of his hand winking balefully. Richard was still talking in her ear urging her to get somewhere safe. She could feel his fear for her.

“Juliet please!” broke in Mike’s voice.

“Oh do be quiet both of you, I think he’s a friendly demon or at least a not totally psychotic at this precise moment in time type demon.” This produced considerable sarcasm from Mike. She smiled to herself that meant he was relieved.

“Actually I think alien might be a more correct term,” said the Doctor.

“Ask him how his race developed a bicardial system,” asked Mike through her headpiece.

“Why don’t you come down here yourself and ask him, and we can check out what has become of the farmers at the same time,” she retorted sharply.

Juliet turned and glanced up at the others as they began to walk down the hill. Suddenly the Doctor’s tracer began a high pitched shriek. His reaction was immediate.

“One of your demons is about to do something,” he said urgently, grabbing both her and Nyssa by the arm, “I suggest you tell your friends to take cover.”

“Did you hear that ?” Juliet shouted into the commlink over the noise.

Richard’s reply was a muffled affirmative and she could see the rest of the expedition fanning out and taking up position on the hillside. The Doctor shoved her and Nyssa behind a tractor and switched off his device.

From where they were watching three small creatures appeared in the farmyard. They were a pale yellow colour with red glowing eyes and sharp claws on the ends of their hands, but otherwise looked like small humans.

“Looks like demonkin,” crackled Richard’s voice over Juliet’s headset, “lets mop them up.”

Several shots came down of the mountain. Those that hit the demonkin knocked them backwards, but they remained standing.

Juliet watching, felt uneasy. Demonkin usually fell to a couple of shots. One of them looked towards the soldiers like a cricketer judging distance. His arm raised and he hurled what appeared to be a small ball of light. A trooper rezzed for a few seconds and then vanished. There was a stunned silence over the headsets. Then renewed shooting while the expedition on the mountainside took better cover.

“Whatever they are, they’re not demonkin,” said a voice.

The Doctor next to her was wearing a slightly glazed expression.

“I don’t believe it,” he whispered.

“What ?”

“Nothing, some history has just slipped into place.”

He glanced at the device he still held in his hand and moved several dials, the display flashed ablaze suddenly.

“Ah ha!, they’re using flangey alpha rays”

With sudden energy he began fishing objects out of his pocket and laying them out on the ground. He was conducting a hurried, whispered conversation with Nyssa, who was already dismantling some of the strange pieces of electronics and wiring them into the tracer he had carried. He began to cannibalise the parts of the tractor that were accessible to him.

Juliet heard Mike’s voice coming over the transmitter, “I’m going to try that tranquiliser drug we developed for the demonkin.”

Peering cautiously out from behind the tractor she saw him run a short way down the slope to bring him within range for the dart gun he carried. Kneeling, he took aim. His arm jerked and he paused looking for a result. Juliet saw one of the demons look in his direction and the arm began to rise. Her heart thudded. “Mike!” she began calling into the headset, but he had already dropped into the cover of the undergrowth.

“So much for that,” commented Richard wearily, “any other suggestions?”

“They may need more than one dose,” returned Mike, “I’ll keep taking pot shots at them.”

“Well be careful, you’re a bit close down there.”

“Done,” the Doctor’s voice drew her thoughts back down to the situation at hand. “Nyssa, help me with this. We’re going to have to get fairly close,” he was continuing.

They were creeping round the edge of the tractor. A tangle of wires strung between them, with his tracer blinking in the centre. On a thought Juliet moved to the other corner. The Doctor looked her way and she saw him realise her intention.

He nodded slightly in acknowledgement, though concern was etched into his face. Not a man who risked others easily. Juliet darted out into the open.

“Oi! you!” she shouted. The demonkin turned towards her and she began running, heading for the relative safety of the barn. Mike was calling her name. She let off a few random shots as she ran and tried to weave and dodge as she had been taught. There was a sudden silence. Turning, she saw the Doctor and Nyssa standing alone in the empty yard. There was an expectant look on his face, awaiting congratulation.

The Doctor watched the expedition as they loaded themselves into various transporters and bikes that had been left by the road. They were rather subdued, he sensed quiet mourning for the lives that had been lost.

Juliet was perched on the bonnet of a transport. Mike stood next to her, leaning against the side, one arm curled about her. Between them hung quiet and suppressed relief that they were both still alive. Captain Turner stood to one side, slightly apart from them. He shared their happiness, but he was also keenly aware of the lost men. The Doctor had watched him giving the orders for departure and sensed his mixed emotions. Matters arranged he had walked over to join their small group. Juliet had been doing the talking.

“How did you know about the flangey rays” she was asking.

“It’s a long story, but in summary, my race created the demons for a variety of gladiatorial game. When the games were finally ended, the remaining livestock was sent here, rather than being put down. Unfortunately they used some rather primitive time travel technology, so your demons have appeared in groups over the centuries. I’m attempting to trace one such creature called Achmael who uses flangey rays. I simply guessed that your demons probably used something similar.”

He braced himself for accusations and recriminations, waiting for the military mind to start issuing orders. He glanced at the Captain and was surprised to see him looking into the middle distance with an expression of deep sorrow on his face. When he spoke there was a trace of bitterness in his voice but no threat.

“Could you tell us how to deal with the problem permanently?”

The Doctor shook his head, “I’m afraid not, no. Very little knowledge has survived from those days, I only found out about the flangey rays quite by chance.”

Richard shook his head.

The Doctor felt a surge of guilt. This man had been fighting demons all his life; losing friends and colleagues to a piece of Time Lord carelessness; walking in on deserted farmsteads like the one they'd just seen, all that remained of someone's life. He had to admit this Captain Turner had taken him by surprise. He had none of the usual military bravado he had experienced from such people in the past. But then the situation on this planet was very different from that anywhere else. This Captain was used to having to work with and rely on non-military personnel, and he was used to the unexpected. Once out of battle he seemed a quiet, deep man, not very showy. He had a tapering face, framed by black hair out of which dark thoughtful eyes regarded the Doctor. Not a body builder, but well-muscled all the same. He was sizing up the Doctor in his turn, arms folded, one hand holding an elbow, the other his shoulder.

"Could you at least let us have your tracing device?" he asked at length. "Any possible warning we can get could save lives."

"Yes, of course," meekly the Doctor handed it over.

Apparently dismissing the conversation the Captain turned, smiling fondly at Juliet.

"And just what did you think you were doing, going and talking to him like that?"

"It was something" she hesitated ever so slightly, "a friend said, about maybe some demons, though powerful, are not always evil. He suggested we try giving not obviously aggressive ones the benefit of the doubt and it paid off, you see."

He shook his head, "You could have been killed," but his tone was not one a reprimand, just of concern. Juliet smiled back understanding and managed a combined nod and shrug. What was she to do?

The Doctor was puzzling over that hesitation though. He realised that she had been watching him with a slightly frightened expression, almost like a child that is afraid of being caught misbehaving.

"So," she said suddenly, "Your Achmael demon is round here somewhere?"

"Not necessarily, I may have picked up other random demon activity."

"So you'll be off now."

That surprised him, he felt somehow as though she was hoping that he would leave, which contrasted strongly with her previously friendly manner.

"I was wondering," he said, "if I might look at your archives. I thought they might contain some clue about how to kill storm demons."

"Oh," she said, "sure, no problem, though I don't suppose you'll have much joy."

She looked more worried than ever.

“We can give you lifts back to the Library on our bikes,” said Mike. He was too engrossed in the fact that they were both still alive and more than prepared to be generous. The Doctor picked up the tension in Juliet’s shoulders, however, and felt a vague foreboding.

Achmael was waiting on the edge of the town for Juliet’s return. He’d found a cryptic note on his desk that morning ‘Gone Demon Hunting. Sorry, but a farm has sent out a distress call. Didn’t tell you before so as not to cause a conflict of interest. Juliet.’ He wished she had told him. In fact he wished she had taken him along, he was fairly sure that no harm would come to her if he was around. He saw the dust trails of the bikes and other expedition vehicles approaching. Someone was riding pillion behind Juliet, he realised. He drew back into the shadows cast by the town wall, troubled. Juliet was driving at a slow pace, so he could study her passenger as they passed. His heart grew cold, the form might have been different, but he would have known the Doctor anywhere.

He followed them carefully to the library. Juliet and the Doctor went inside. Another bike with two riders pulled up outside as well. Two people he didn’t recognise, a man and a girl. The man said something. Then hanging up his helmet over the handlebars and strode into the centre of town.

Achmael needed a new identity fast. What’s more he needed to get his books and notes out of the library. He had no desire to fight the Doctor in this place, it meant too much to him. He just wanted to get away, to consider the implications of the Doctor and Juliet. He watched the man as he walked across the street. A new identity that wouldn’t be questioned if he walked into the library. Achmael began to follow him.

Richard Turner carried the Doctor’s tracer with him through the town to the barracks. Not where he would have chosen to stay if he had the choice, but Juliet wanted to analyse the tracer, before he took it off for practical application.

He turned the tracer over in his hands and idly switched it on. It let out a high pitched squeak and began flashing urgently. Puzzled and anxious he turned it until he located a direction. With swift steps he rounded the next corner, drawing his

gun as he did so. Mike stood there with a man in his arms. Richard paused in doubt. The beeping of the tracer subsided gradually.

Alerted by the noise Mike turned to look at him, dropping the man's body onto the ground. The next moment the air seemed to rise up around Richard. The gun was knocked from his hand. He found himself battered by hard buffets of wind like invisible fists beating him. Through a bloody haze he saw Mike's face looming over him. The tracer was plucked from his hands, then Mike turned and disappeared round a corner. The beating stopped, Richard dropped to the street, barely conscious.

Achmael hid in a doorway. Curled up tightly in a ball. He had trusted Juliet and she had betrayed him to the Doctor, sent a soldier out to track him down. He rocked slightly on his heels. The tracer lay at his feet its delicate electronics fused by intense heat. He could destroy them all, the town, and the library in one blow. He could simply leave, slip away unnoticed and unmourned. The temptation to destruction was amazing. About him, the wind rose. He had to get to the library. He had to retrieve his books and his notes. Then he would leave this planet. Leave the humans and his demon brethren to fight out their squalid little battle. The universe was his domain and he had all to time to explore it in. There was a crash as something nearby was overturned by the storm. They would know he had been here. This town would never forget the treachery of Juliet.

Juliet and the Doctor were pouring over a computer terminal. Once involved in her work Juliet had lost all the reserve she had previously displayed. The Doctor regarded her eager face as she explained the information it contained and how it had been collected painstakingly over the centuries by herself and others like her.

"Haven't you ever made contact with Earth and requested relocation for the colony?" asked the Doctor.

Juliet shook her head, "The records are unclear, so much was lost in the confusion of the first few years of the colony. The demon attacks were so sudden and unexpected that the only thought most people had was survival. However, it is clear that the original colonists thought that staying here was preferable to return-

ing. Since those times we have occasionally attempted to make contact but with no success, some think there may have been some kind of war or plague and that the human race as such exists only on isolated colonies like our own. Others think that we ended up in a backwater galaxy and no space traffic comes this way. There are a dozen possibilities. The colony itself simply doesn't have the manpower or the technology for much space exploration so we have no way of finding out."

"I'm amazed," confessed the Doctor, "that you survived at all."

"So are we. Every few years we seem to be on the brink of disaster but somehow we pull through. It's a close thing though. We know that the key will be amassing and storing the knowledge of how to deal with these things. However, in truth nearly all the manpower is required for farming and the like, even the military forces, as such, are very small. Basically, we are stretched very thin. In the early days each farmstead or small community kept their own records, now we are trying to collate all that folk knowledge together, its a hard task but we're getting there," she grinned up at him.

"Would you mind if I stayed here a few days and looked through it all?"

Once again her face fell, as if she had re-encountered some forgotten objection. She shrugged. "If you want," she said apparently indifferently.

Nyssa had been working through Mike's anatomical records.

"For one species," she remarked, " these demons show remarkable variation in form."

"That's because they are not, strictly speaking one species," said the Doctor, "they are biologically engineered weapons and playthings. My people didn't even refer to them as demons, the only ones they labelled as such were the Storm Demons. Only one of them was ever created, and that not at our instigation."

"Achmael," said Nyssa.

The Doctor stared abstractedly into the distance, "yes, and he is infinitely more dangerous than any of these others." Suddenly he dropped out of the reverie "however, the principles involved in his creation and that of these creatures may have been similar so I'm hoping to find clues embedded in the records."

The radio suddenly burst into life. It was mounted by the main desk nearly every building had one. Immediate relay of news sometimes meant the difference between life and death.

*A freak storm has just developed around Barnston. Several houses have been struck by lightning and it is believed some deaths have occurred. Demon activity has not been ruled out.*

Juliet's head lifted, like a hound on a scent.

The door of the library banged open. Richard lent against the frame, his shoulders slumped and his head bowed. When he looked up there was a deepening bruise across the side of his face and a small trickle of blood from a cut above his eye. He staggered forward breathing heavily. Wind curled around the interior from the doorway whisking papers from desks.

“Richard!”, Juliet scabbled in her desk for a first aid kit.

He sank into a chair, the dark eyes, full of concern, watching her. “Something’s happened to Mike,” he said.

“What ?”

She stopped short, but the Doctor was already examining his face, and he simply opened the first aid kit in her hands and helped himself, while she watched Richard with frightened eyes.

“I don’t know, some sort of possession I would say at a guess.”

“Possession ?” demanded the Doctor suddenly. He stood up, hands thrust deep into his pockets, gazing intently at the Captain.

“I don’t know, I was using your gadget and I picked up a reading of some sort. I tried to locate the source and found Mike. Then suddenly I was... attacked by buffets of wind, it’s the only way I can describe it, but I got the impression that Mike was definitely controlling it somehow.”

The frown on the Doctor’s face deepened. Juliet was perched on the edge of the table still holding the first aid box, but one hand was rubbing her forehead. A habitual gesture she used when thinking. It obscured her expression.

*Most of the East Side seems to have unaccountably caught fire.*

“I think,” the Doctor’s words dropped into the silence, “that Achmael may be here after all.”

“Why ?” Juliet’s voice was small.

“He is a storm demon, fire and wind are his weapons. He also has no physical form of his own.” The words came out slowly, “he exists by occupying the bodies of other creatures.” The Doctor paused and looked at his feet, “I’m afraid to say, that the host rarely survives.”

The tears were already beginning to flow though Juliet was not, herself aware of feeling any kind of emotion at all. No emptiness, no grief, just tears that seemed very separate from her. There was the scrape of a chair. Richard hand fell down rather heavily on her shoulder and squeezed it slightly. So much, she thought vaguely, for all the years together. So much for all the risk and danger they had survived.

“We don’t know that it’s this Achmael,” Richard said, interrupting her thoughts.

Juliet shook her head, “Achmael’s been here for months, reading up on Physics and Philosophy and just about everything. His books are over there.”

The Doctor’s head swung round sharply and he moved over to the desk, turning the books in his hands and flicking through the notes, reading the careful round hand of a child. Richard watching him, one hand still with Juliet thought he made a rather mournful figure standing with the small notebook in one hand with a slightly lost look on his face.

*The wind has built up to hurricane force in a remarkable short space of time. The eye is centring on the library in the centre of Barnston. It is feared this may be a specific attack, an attempt to destroy the knowledge we have gathered and the people who have gathered it*

Mike appeared suddenly in the doorway. They all looked up at him pale and frightened faces. Juliet’s streaked with tears. He took a step towards her and her tears started once more, despite angry attempts to wipe them away. The Doctor cleared his throat.

“Achmael ?”, it was a query.

Achmael looked at him a second, then replied, “Doctor,” a statement, the tone inexpressive.

The Doctor thrust his hands deep in his pockets and raised his eyebrows slightly.

A bolt of lightening appeared out of nowhere and struck the floor where the Doctor had been. He had seen the dancing of Achmael’s eyes and dived to one side. Richard grabbed a chair in the same instant and brought it down hard across the back of Mike’s head. A gust of wind plucked him off his feet slamming him into the far wall. The temperature of the wind became chill and then cold. A light frost began to form over Richard’s body.

“No!” Juliet began to cry out, “What have we ever done to you ?”

There was a sudden silence. Achmael turned and stared at Juliet. She felt the tears spring to her eyes once more. So like and yet so unlike. Mike had had a kind of loose limbed ease which was no longer in evidence. Achmael dominated the room though, he seemed taller than Mike had ever been and his eyes were dark and terrible.

“You have betrayed me to him!” he cried. “What have I ever done to you?”

*Reports from nearby First Settlement describe a vortex of wind hovering over the town*

The Doctor had bent over Richard feeling for a pulse. The first time he reached out he snatched his hand away because of the cold, but he reapplied it almost straight away, wincing slightly.

“He’s alive,” he reported, “just”. He snatched off his coat and wrapped it around Richard’s body. “We have to get him somewhere warm fast.”

Richard stirred slightly, somehow the Doctor got him to his feet and began to move towards the door and Achmael, watching the latter with a wary eye. Achmael remained still, framed in the doorway until they stood before him.

“Juliet had not betrayed you,” said the Doctor reproachfully, “it was only just now, when Captain Turner came in that she told us of you.”

Achmael hardly seemed to hear. He reached out and touched the battered, frost-bitten face before him. “So strange,” he said, “they will keep coming back though you hammer them into the ground. Do you think,” he looked at Juliet, “he’ll come back and try to destroy me.”

“If I knew how, I’d destroy you here and now, whatever the cost to myself,” Richard whispered through clenched teeth. “Mike was my friend.”

*All medical volunteers in the area are called to assemble at First Settlement Church to move into Barnston as soon as the winds die down a bit*

Achmael was still talking to Juliet, “As you once said, it’s a basic matter of self-defence. ” He had barely begun to turn back to Richard, his intention only to clear to Juliet who knew his gestures. She cried out and sprang upon him. Though unarmed she beat at him with her fists and wept. Almost instinctively, like a man swatting at a fly, a wind sprang up. Juliet was lifted off her feet and flung against the far wall. Her head jerked back against a beam and she dropped motionless to the floor.

*We have lost contact with Barnston station*

She came to slowly, through a murky haze.

*The library is still unreachable. However, relief teams have penetrated other parts of the town.*

Carefully she opened her eyes. She was still in the library, the dark wooden ceiling rose gloomily over her and she was surrounded by the towering legs of tables and chairs. Mike/Achmael was sitting in one of them regarding her anxiously, looking more like Mike than she cared to think. Juliet turned her head away, already beginning to cry once more.

“How are you feeling ?”

“Bloody awful. What’s happened to my leg ?”

“The Doctor says it’s broken. You should lie still.”

He got up and paced agitatedly round the room. Juliet closed her eyes once more. She felt rather muggy. Painkillers, she decided.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you, you know,” he said after a while.

“That so!”

“It was like a reflex reaction, or something. When you jumped me I didn’t think.”

“Never occurred to you, I suppose, that killing Mike might hurt.”

Achmael looked down at his new body, surprised and arrested.

Juliet closed her eyes once more. She was crying in earnest now. She heard Achmael sit down in the chair beside her.

“I, ” he paused anxiously, “I was just trying to escape the Doctor. I didn’t realise he was a friend of yours.”

“Oh! Achmael, we were rather more than friends.”

And then it suddenly all slipped into place in his mind. Mike, Dr. Mike Stuart, his eyes widened in realisation and then his head fell slowly into his hands.

*The hospital has been completely destroyed. Makeshift facilities are being put into place as we speak, but it is feared that many will lose their lives through lack of swift medical attention. There are reports that looting has already begun amongst the debris.*

“I am a storm demon,” he whispered, almost as a litany, “I was created to destroy, my function and nature is to destroy, my fate and destiny is to destroy, I can do no otherwise.”

“That doesn’t have to be true,” despite herself she was moved by his despair.

“No? I was trying here, really trying, for the first time the universe was unfolding before me but you can only deny your nature for so long, it will come and get you in the end.”

“I’ve always believed in free will myself, depending on how you choose to define free will. But I do believe in taking responsibility for my actions not blaming blind fate.”

“Maybe humanity has free will, but I am not human. I am a weapon, a sentient weapon, I can not deny my nature.”

“You condemn yourself to harshly.”

“No, for the first time I see myself truly.”

Outside, the wind began to pick and howl once more. Achmael stood up. Juliet watched him from where she lay. There was a bitter sadness round her heart. The brave and the dangerous, these people are glorious to admire and view from afar, perhaps, but now caught up in the tangled web they had woven between them, she wished that she had not been one of them.

“The Doctor will be back soon. He and the girl are just getting Captain Turner to the hospital,” Achmael was saying, putting on Mike’s jacket that had rested by him on a table.

“Where are you going ?”

He smiled, “Out.” He crouched down by her, “I haven’t a clue. I promise you this, I will try to be true to myself but I fear the fates are against me.”

“We are not living in a greek tragedy you know !”

“No? maybe not.”

“Besides, you shouldn’t live to an ideal just because it is mine.”

“I’m not. I agree with you. Be true to yourself.”

“At whatever the cost to yourself or to others?”

“Perhaps. Like you said, the truth is a hard master.”

A chill filtered into Juliet’s mind as she contemplated the implications of a demon who believed both in being true unto himself and that his fundamental nature was to destroy. Achmael still stood over her.

“Farewell,” she said at the last, “I wish it could have ended some other way.”

“So do I,” he turned and left.

*Here, then, at home, by no more storms distrest...*

She closed her eyes. Achmael was gone. Mike was gone.

Achmael plunged through the storm heading towards the ship. He still didn’t know what he wanted from the universe, but he knew he stood on the brink, “when I was a child,” he murmured to himself as he opened the hatchway.

Drifting once more, he emptied out Mike’s pockets onto the pile of paraphernalia littering the desk. Pens, a note book and a scrap of paper. Achmael’s hands hesitated before unfolding it. It was a picture, a rough sketch of Juliet. Mike had had talent, Achmael thought, in a few swift lines he had captured something of her spirit. She was laughing. He tacked the picture to the mirror and looked at Mike’s face staring back at him sadly.

“Strange friend,” he said, “here is no cause to mourn.”

In his mind Mike spoke “None”

*save the undone years*

*The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,*

*Was my life also; I went hunting wild*

*After the wildest beauty in the world,*

*Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair;  
But mocks the steady running of the hour,  
And if it greives, grieves richlier than here.  
For of my glee might many men have laughed,  
And of my weeping something had been left,  
Which must die now.*



# Chapter 8

## Tears, Sarah Jane

### A Doctor Who Story

Sarah watched in horror as the two guards dragged the Doctor's body away. Someone in the crowd tugged at her sleeve.

"Sarah? We are in great danger. We must get away from here."

"What?.. Oh! yes."

Tarron led her through the twisting back alleys of the shanty town. She stumbled along behind the woman, unaware of everything, her mind incessantly playing over the scene she'd just witnessed.

The guards had been about to lead away the young man. He was chosen as the ritual sacrifice and was to be taken to the Queen. Then the Doctor had stepped forward. "You can't do this, it is inhuman!"

And then... and then one guard had swung round and blasted a hole through the Doctor and he had crumpled up like a burst balloon.

Tarron unlatched the door to a small house in a dark street overshadowed by the looming buildings. Inside was a small dark room lit by a large open fire.

"Kate!" called Tarron, "Kate where are you?"

A Pale girl appeared out of the shadows. She had delicately carved features and light copper-coloured hair which hung loose round her shoulders. She would have been pretty but for a sort of limpid blandness which rested in her looks and bearing.

"Kate, look after Sarah. The guards have just killed a friend of hers."

The girl sighed, then she took hold of Sarah's hand and led her to a chair by the fire. Sarah now noticed a large cooking pot over it. Kate leaned over and ladled some sort of broth into a bowl which she handed to Sarah.

"It will do you good to eat."

Sarah nodded and spooned the tasteless mixture into her mouth.

“Was he a close friend?”

“Yes, he was the best friend I had.”

“We will mourn together. It was my brother they took as a sacrifice.”

Sarah gave her a look of horror. The girl seemed to exude a sort of sorrowful, yet complacent, smugness.

“Don’t you want to do something about it? Stop this queen of yours from demanding sacrifices?”

“There is nothing we can do. We can only mourn.” It was not smugness but a complacent resignation. Sarah thought it almost as bad.

“There is always something you can do, the Doctor...” Sarah choked on the words and she felt tears welling up in her eyes. She could see him, determined and resolute, passionately defying injustice wherever he went. She heard his voice, fond and faintly mocking, “Tears, Sarah Jane?” She looked up dashing the tears from her eyes, half expecting to see him standing there. He had come back from the dead so many times.

“The Doctor never gave up hope,” she whispered.

“Then he was a fool.” There was something almost shrewish in the reply.

“Yes, he was a fool.”

A fool in shining armour, ready to save the universe if called upon, your arch-idealist, a galactic King Arthur.

“Miss Smith! Come and meet your namesake.”

She remembered Rubeish’s introduction, his old-fashioned courtesy and there had stood the Doctor, tall, arrogant and flamboyant, prepared to take on anything whether it be ruthless Daleks or officious civil servants.

She looked at the pale girl. “So am I, and I will fight!”

“Well-spoken, Sarah!” Tarron had re-entered the room.

She was dressed like someone out of the middle-ages in a short tunic, breeches and knee-length boots. A small dagger was tucked in her belt, her dark hair swept up into a pony-tail.

“Cathal was my brother, too, and I mean to avenge him.”

She picked up a short cloak and swung it around her shoulders.

“I will find a guard and enter the Queen’s palace.”

“I’m coming with you!” said Sarah, putting aside the barely touched meal. “I have someone to avenge too.”

Tarron eyed her for a moment then nodded slightly and handed her another cloak.

“Come!” she said.

It wasn't hard to find a lone guard whom Tarron dispatched efficiently with her dagger.

"They don't expect resistance," she explained to the horrified Sarah. "That's why he was out on a lone patrol." She smiled. "Now we have a blaster."

Minutes later they came to the edge of the town. Before them was the awesome skeleton of the crashed spaceship.

"What's that?" Sarah stared at it in amazement.

"The Queen's Carriage. It brought her to our land many generations ago."

"It's a rocket."

"The guards have taken most of it away to the palace. There is nothing left there now. Come on."

Sarah followed her, looking back at the strange, desolate wreck outlined against the darkening sunset.

It was practically night when they reached the palace. But it was not so dark that Sarah couldn't make out its shape through the gloom. It was built with the tall sleek lines of another rocket. But an incomplete rocket, up at the top only the basic framework existed. Sarah wondered how a people apparently living in the middle-ages could have built such an edifice. With the sort of tools they possessed it would have taken years.

"Did you say the Queen came generations ago?"

"Yes. She first arrived in the time of my great great grandfather."

Sarah looked at the rocket. "That's a long time."

"The Queen is immortal," said Tarron as if it explained everything.

A quick inspection proved that there was no way of getting into the rocket. The hatch was shut and firmly secured. Sarah kicked it angrily, but it didn't even make a sound.

"Sarah, look!"

Tarron was pointing to the scaffold beside the rocket and the ladder set into it.

"We can climb up there and get into the palace through the top."

"I can't go up there. I get vertigo."

"What?"

Sarah gulped. "Never mind. Let's get going."

Without letting herself think she marched over to the ladder and began to climb up. It wouldn't be too bad, she decided, as long as she didn't look down.

She had nearly reached the unfinished section when a lone patrol, or something, returned and spotted them clinging on. Suddenly blasts from his gun were exploding all round them. They scrambled upwards, shouts floating up to them from the ground.

Then Tarron gave a small gasp. Sarah stopped climbing and she heard her voice whisper.

“I’ve been hit. Sarah! take the gun.”

She handed the blaster up to her. It had a strap attached and so she was able to sling it over her shoulder and still have two hands free to climb.

“Now! go on!”

Sarah had climbed up only a little more when she heard a cry. Instinctively she looked down. Far below Tarron lay sprawled on the ground. Sarah felt herself rocking and she clutched onto the ladder, her eyes tightly closed, as waves of nausea washed over her.

She forced herself to open her eyes and mercifully spotted a gangway leading across to the first opening just next to her. Slowly she climbed onto it and staring straight at the opening she worked her way across holding on tightly to the rails. Then with a gasp of relief she found herself within the rocket.

Sarah leaned against a wall, took deep gulping breaths and tried to stop her limbs from shaking. She realised she would have to find somewhere to hide for guards were bound to come to find her. She spotted a grille in the wall and almost laughed aloud: the air ducts. The grille hinged open and she crawled in, letting it shut behind her.

Some hours later she was crouched in an alcove outside what she judged to be the throne room. At least it was the room at the centre of the habitable parts of the rocket and it was permanently guarded. She had been watching it for some time, wondering how she would get into it.

A guard emerged from the room and addressed the two outside.

“The queen has ordered me to take you two to help in the search for the intruder.”

Sarah blinked incredulously as he led them away. Then, with an inward shrug, she approached the doors. She pushed one open and peered inside. The room was high and lined with computer banks which flickered and whirred, but she could see no queen.

“Ah! Miss Smith, I have been looking forward to seeing you so much!” purred a low female voice, full of satisfaction.

Sarah glanced round but saw no one. “You’re a computer!” she said in surprise.

“Yes, I’m a small part of Homeworld central computer. I was linked directly,” continued the voice sadly, “but somehow the link was destroyed in the crash. I have built this rocket so I may return to Homeworld. You will make that possible.”

“How?”

“It will be necessary for me to refuel on the way, given the present circumstances Earth would seem to be the best place to do so. You are known to Earth authorities and could arrange for that refueling to take place.”

“And what make’s you think I’ll do that?”

“I do,” said a voice behind her and whirling round she saw the Doctor, looking as good as new, no burn marks or anything.

Sarah gasped in shock.

The Doctor advanced towards her his hands open, welcoming. Quite unconsciously she backed away.

“How?” she asked explosively. “How?” her voice sank to a whisper.

“It was perfectly simple,” said the computer. “I have the facility to absorb minds, and thoughts. I absorbed the Doctor’s. I have complete conscious control and his body has remarkable powers of healing which I was able to activate. It’s perfectly simple.”

“Well if you can absorb minds and take over people’s bodies why do you need my help?”

“I can only control people within a close radius. Once outside they fight free of my influence,” explained the Doctor.

Sarah shivered and wrapped her arms tightly around herself.

“Once you have completed you task,” continued the computer. “I would relinquish all control of the Doctor and set him free.”

“You would set all your slaves free?”

“No, I need them to do menial tasks on the ship.”

“What would you do with them when you get back to Homeworld?”

“They are not important. Why do you ask about them?”

“Just answer!”

“When I am linked to central computer once more all the minds will be added to our sum store of knowledge to make us more wise. They will join together into one united being.”

“But what about the people themselves?”

“I have told you they will become part of our higher purpose.”

“Why did you come here?” Sarah changed tack. She knew she didn’t trust the computer and wanted to find out why exactly.

“It is my function. To gather alien minds to add to my consciousness.”

Suddenly it struck Sarah. “You would gather minds from Earth! Why would you give up the Doctor’s once you had refueled?... You don’t need to refuel at all! You just want to collect more minds!”

“Sarah, you are getting hysterical” said the Doctor sharply.

“No, I’m not. You, you and that computer, you are... I don’t know! You can’t go around appropriating people’s minds!”

Without any clear idea of what she intended Sarah unslung the blaster. Then with a desperate resolve she fired at the nearest computer bank. The Doctor screamed and sank to his knees clutching his head.

“Don’t do that!” cried the computer. “If you destroy me the Doctor will die too because he is linked to me!”

Sarah gritted her teeth and fired again. The Doctor cried out a second time. Tears began to run down her cheeks. Suddenly an intense pain began to fill her mind.

“Oh, no, you don’t,” she muttered grimly.

She kept on firing though she could hardly see for the pain and the tears.

Then the pain stopped, and the screaming cut out as if someone had thrown a switch. There was complete silence. All the lights faded and went out. In the gloom Sarah collapsed in a heap and began to sob.

“Tears, Sarah Jane?”

She looked up startled.

“But the computer said...”

“I don’t think the computer really knew what she was talking about.” He smiled benignly. “Shall we go?”

# Chapter 9

## Be Yourself

### A Doctor Who Short Story

*Be Yourself; everyone else is already taken*

Oscar Wilde

It was cold, even for Valentine's Day. Flakes of snow drifted down from an overcast sky. There would be a snow storm later Oscar Wilde thought glumly and hoped it would hold off until the curtain rose.

As he approached the theatre he made out the form of a man standing in front of the doors. In spite of the cold the man appeared to be wearing a velvet frock coat and his hair hung in untidy curls to his shoulders.

"Doctor!"

The man looked up in surprise. "Sorry?"

"Doctor!"

Wilde clasped him by the shoulders and stared intently into his face. "Doctor?"

"I'm afraid you have the advantage of me."

The brown eyes that stared back were familiar but the expression of loss and confusion was different. "Doctor?" he repeated, again, uncertainly.

The man continued to look at him blankly for a moment and then said. "I'm afraid I would appear to have lost my memory."

"There are many I know who would consider that a blessing. How did you get here?" asked Wilde.

The man frowned and then shook his head. "I'm not sure."

"You had better come with me," Wilde decided. "I'm sure you are in the middle of a scrape. I do hope it is not a vulgar one. That would be terribly tiresome."

“Is it likely that I’m in a vulgar scrape?”

“Extremely, I’m afraid. I am given to understand you live a life of high excitement and need the tedium of scrapes, adventures and other contrivances to slow the pace.”

The man smiled, a little nervously.

“Really Doctor,” said Wilde. “I can not leave you in this state, you appear positively dull. I am opening a play tonight in this very theatre and I am needed. Society arrives in order to see each other and for some obscure reason they feel they need to see me too. You had best join me in my box. You will be a great mystery and there will be much talk to amuse the readers of the better sort of newspaper tomorrow.”

The Doctor stood at the back of the foyer of St. James’ Theatre. The walls were covered in embossed green and gold wallpaper while the floor was covered with rich looking rugs out of which rose an ornate marble stair case. Everywhere was luxurious and tactile. He felt a little overwhelmed. Wilde was being frustratingly elusive. He had insisted he call himself the Doctor and continued to hint at strange adventures and mysterious talents but every time the Doctor thought he might pin him down to something specific the man was called upon by some society matron or harassed member of the theatre staff and the moment was lost.

“It’s the Marquess!” said Wilde, suddenly, in a low voice.

“Who?”

“The Marquess of Queensberry.” A look of amusement crossed Wilde’s face. “I’ll explain later.”

The Doctor watched with curiosity as a heavy-set man was politely, but firmly, intercepted by some of the theatre staff. Oscar Wilde hovered in the background next to a tall dark haired man who the Doctor vaguely recalled as a manager.

The Marquess, it appeared, had support in the form of several equally burly men but, at a gesture from the manager, a number of policemen appeared from where they had been stationed outside the theatre. In disgust the Marquess threw a large bouquet, which appeared to consist primarily of fruit and vegetables to the floor, before he was escorted from the theatre.

The thought crossed the Doctor’s mind that the whole fracas was rather shocking for the time and place, and that he should find this a little amusing.

As he thought this, a flicker of movement among the bouquet caught the Doctor's attention. He had the impression of a swift movement that ran up the balustrade of the staircase and through into the crush room beyond. Intrigued, the Doctor took a step towards the stair case and then, with sudden eagerness he tripped lightly up the marble stairs. He found himself in a confection of tapestry and glass, full of excited theatre goers.

Over the buzz of conversation the Doctor could hear a kind of echo as if the words were bouncing back. He frowned and gazed upwards. The gas lamps cast a warm soft light and long shadows. He had the distinct impression that the strange echo emanated from one part of the ceiling and he stared intently at the spot, watching how the shadows seemed to distort and curl. Then with a flicker he saw movement again heading through one of the curtained doorways and into the Dress Circle.

The Doctor followed.

The Dress Circle was low and the Doctor weaved his way down the aisles to the front, gazing upwards towards the ceiling the whole time. His ears rang with that faint echo as the people swirled around him. As his gaze roamed out over the auditorium he saw the smallest flicker of movement at the Proscenium arch.

There was a hand on his arm. It was Wilde.

"We are finally ready to start," he said. "A mere ten minutes late but George is acting as if any further delay will be a catastrophe worse than dining with vegetarians."

"I thought I saw something," said the Doctor.

"You may well have done, my friend. Your eyes are sharp. I hope you do not also feel any foreboding."

"I can't say that I do. Should I?"

"Let us say that I sincerely hope not. Come the play is almost begun."

"You know," said the Doctor thoughtfully in the interval. "I have the strangest feeling I have seen this play before somewhere."

Wilde laughed. "It would not greatly surprise me Doctor, for you are full of paradoxes, but I hope you will not let on to Society or my reputation will be ruined."

"Oscar!" They both turned. George Alexander had entered the box, his face was plastered with the heavy stage make-up he needed to play Jack.

“Goodness, George, you appear positively flustered.”

“It’s Miss Leclercq. She’s lost her voice!”

At that moment the words, “A Handbag!” rang out clearly from behind the curtain.

“She would have appeared to have recovered it,” observed Wilde

“That’s just it. She hasn’t! She’s entirely lost her voice and someone is imitating her.”

“Well, Doctor!” said Wilde. “Shall we investigate. It must be said I suspected events of this kind as soon as I saw your face. I do hope it will prove more diverting than entertaining over-eager young heiresses.”

The Doctor looked alarmed. “Do you think I am in some way responsible?”

“Of course not, dear Doctor. But I nevertheless confidently expect you to resolve the matter. Lead the way, George!”

The Doctor stared bemused at the woman in front of him. She had long, greying brown hair, worked into an elaborate style. She smiled cautiously at him as he entered.

“An engagement should come on a young girl as a surprise,” intoned a voice, sounding just like Rose Leclercq’s but clearly not issuing from her mouth. “Pleasant or unpleasant, as the case may be.”

“Fascinating!” said Wilde. “Doctor! Your opinion?”

Cautiously, the Doctor approached the woman.

“There was this lizard-like creature,” said a maid, from behind her. “It sort of darted across Miss Leclercq’s face and after that she couldn’t speak.”

“Your uncle will have to dine upstairs,” came the voice. “Fortunately he is accustomed to that.”

“Could you open your mouth, please?” asked the Doctor.

Obediently, Rose Leclercq opened her mouth.

He raised a paraffin lamp from the table and peered vaguely down her throat in the half-light. “Well there doesn’t seem to be anything wrong with the back of the mouth?” he said, surprising even himself with his certainty. “Could you try saying something?”

Her lips moved. The Doctor saw the faintest sign of a movement in the air, as if his gaze zoomed in on strange particles and then out again to the room. He looked around, startled.

“Again please.” This time he concentrated on the effect. It was as if he saw the air molecules minutely compressed by the sound and then a counter-wave came against it, cancelling it out. He frowned.

“Mr Alexander, would you be so kind as to slam the door of this room as Miss Leclercq is speaking.”

George Alexander looked surprised.

“Do as he says,” demanded Wilde.

“Miss Leclercq, again please,” said the Doctor.

Miss Leclercq began to speak. As she did so George Alexander slammed the door. “Hello? Hello?”

Miss Leclercq’s voice sounded briefly and then faded away.

“Amazing!” The Doctor was enchanted. “Something is dampening out the sound. But when we over-ride it with a louder sound then the damping effect is defeated.”

“That’s all very well, Doctor,” muttered Wilde. “But we can hardly perform Act 3 accompanied by the sound of banging doors.”

“Speaking of which,” said Alexander, “Act 2 is about to begin and you have yet to meet his Highness.”

“I’m sure the Prince can wait until the second interval,” said Wilde. He patted the Doctor on the shoulder. “Fortunately Lady Bracknell does not appear in Act 2. I must return to my box, Doctor, but I have every confidence that you can resolve this conundrum for me in time for her dramatic entrance in the final act.”

“Miss Leclercq, would you be so kind as to turn the other way and attempt to speak.”

Obediently Miss Leclercq turned away. There was no sound. The Doctor’s felt a sense of disappointment.

“Of course!” he said. “It can still perceive the movement of the air once it is beyond the shadow of her head. Young lady!” he waved at the maid. “Could you place your ear close Miss Leclercq’s mouth and she will whisper to you.”

Obediently the maid knelt down beside Miss Leclercq, who bent her head to whisper in her ear. The maid gasped. “I heard her voice!”

The Doctor found his mind was racing. He lifted his lamp up close to the ceiling, recalling the strange glimpses of movement he had seen earlier in the foyer and the strange echo of conversation he had associated with it.

“Whatever is causing this must be able to perceive the movement of the air caused by the vibrations as Miss Leclercq speaks. Ergo, it is still in this room somewhere. Miss Leclercq, could you perhaps remove to another room. I will stand guard at the door.”

The Doctor carefully placed himself at the doorway, while Miss Leclercq exited the room. A patch of ceiling flickered and he briefly saw a form that did, indeed, appear something like a small lizard. It was exactly the colour of the ceiling, he realised, but as it moved its colour changed, but not quite in time with the lizard itself. It caused a slight ripple effect as if the outline of the lizard glided over the surface of the plaster.

It darted towards the door and the Doctor made a grab for it with his hands. He felt a silky smoothness and then it slipped through his fingers. He darted out into the corridor, lamp held high.

“Which way did it go?”

The others looked at him blankly.

“I still can’t speak,” said a surprisingly Irish voice.

They all turned to gaze at Miss Leclercq. “Well, that’s a mercy anyhow,” she added, looking surprised.

The Doctor sought out George Alexander, waiting nervously in the wings. “You have some kind of creature loose in your theatre, Mr. Alexander. That, it would appear, both mimics and steals voices.”

“There was a problem with someone chattering in the wings during the last act,” murmured back Alexander quietly. “Could that have been it?”

“Possibly, possibly,” the Doctor bounced lightly on his feet. “If you don’t mind, I’ll have a quick poke around.”

The wings were shrouded in darkness compared to the bright lights on the stage. The Doctor doubted he would be able to spot the small, camouflaged creature. Instead he closed his eyes to the bustle and listened for sound of chattering.

Gradually, at the periphery of his hearing he began to detect the murmur of voices and then, very clearly, “I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy.”

Two actors walked off the stage, just as two more entered from the far side. There was a flicker of movement. The girl gave a small gasp and clutched her face.

“Into the corridor,” whispered the Doctor.

Once properly back stage, the Doctor looked curiously at the woman who was opening and closing her mouth rapidly and silently.

“What the devil has happened?” demanded the man.

“Doctor,” said Alexander. “This is Mr Aynesworth and Miss Millard. This is the Doctor. We have a small problem he’s helping with.”

“Hmmm.... Everyone keep calm. We’ll have you sorted out in no time, Miss Millard.” He held up his lamp once more. “It must be around here somewhere.”

“The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means.”

“What a minute!” said the Doctor. He glared at the actress. “That wasn’t one of your lines, was it?”

Miss Millard shook her head.

“It’s one of Miss Prism’s,” said Alexander. “She is on stage at the moment. I will check.”

He returned moments later and shook his head. “She can be heard fine, Doctor.”

The Doctor nodded. “So it clearly can mimic anything it hears. I wonder why it only suppresses some voices?”

He continued searching the ceiling. “Miss Millard, let me suggest you proceed to your dressing room. We may lure the creature into following us and catch it that way. Mr Aynesworth, could you hold the lamp?”

Carefully they moved back down the corridor, Mr. Aynesworth holding the lamp high to the ceiling while the Doctor watched closely.

“There it is!” he called and leaped up towards the small shape which once again darted away down the corridor.

“Don’t lose it!” called the Doctor, running along.

The glimmer of movement and the sound of chattering vanished through a dark doorway.

“Where does this lead?” asked the Doctor, plunging through and heading down the stairs.

“Prop storage and its the route through to the other side of the stage.”

“Jolly good!”

The Doctor paused in the prop store, listening carefully for the faint sound of chittering. His eyes fell on a butterfly net, resting against one of the walls.

“Aha! Just the thing!”

He grasped the net and then stalked through to the far side of the stage.

Once again there was a faint sound of chittering in the wings, but it was difficult to track it down to a single location. The Doctor was muttering in frustration as the act came to an end.

“How goes it, Doctor?” called Wilde.

“Frustratingly, to be honest. It’s some kind of creature with extraordinary powers of mimicry.”

“The lizard that Miss Leclercq’s maid claimed to have seen?” said a new voice.

The Doctor’s gaze slid beyond Wilde to see a large man with an impressive beard and moustache. “Your Highness!” he exclaimed in surprise, frantically wondering how he had known this was the correct form of address.

“Do not fear, Doctor,” the man said, “I bear none of my mother’s antipathy towards you.”

“That’s a relief, sir,” said the Doctor, hiding his confusion.

“But, why? Doctor. Why is it stealing voices?” asked Wilde.

“That’s an extraordinarily good question.” The Doctor paused to consider. “Of course elaborate calls are an entirely standard mechanism for attracting a mate. I wonder?”

“This creature attracts the opposite sex by reciting the words of my play? I may be an egotist Doctor, but even I find that far fetched.”

“Not just words, Oscar, don’t you see it’s sounds. It mimics sounds. It must gather unusual sounds which is what it is doing here!”

“And the silences? Can you account for them?” asked the Prince of Wales.

“Silencing a rival perhaps? If you can mimic your rival’s collection of sounds and silence them, then you can steal their mate! So it steals sounds and then silences the creature that makes them.”

“So the creature is merely acting according to its nature?” said Wilde. “I confess to being somewhat relieved, though it makes it no less troublesome.”

“But that means we can attract it, with sounds. Would this theatre happen to have a gramophone?”

On the far side of the stage curtain, the Doctor could hear the murmur of the audience. Around him stage hands struggled to transform Jack Worthing’s garden into his living room. Meanwhile, in the centre of the stage George Alexander had set up a gramophone and they were busy playing the national anthem. The Doctor was uncomfortably aware of both the Prince of Wales and Oscar Wilde standing at his shoulders.

“Again,” said the Doctor as the cylinder came to its end.

Alexander rewound the gramophone and set the stylus back to the beginning. Once again the mixture of sounds echoed across the stage. The Doctor thought he heard the faintest of chattering noises.

“Again,” whispered the Doctor.

The chattering noise drew closer. The Doctor allowed himself to zone out a little. He felt as if he was consciously pulling out and away from the irrelevant details and focusing on searching for that tell-tale flicker of movement. As his attention pulled out he saw it: the form of a lizard moving across the stage. He whipped out with the net.

“I’m glad to say that I have never seen a spade. It is obvious that our social spheres have been widely different.” The voice sounded distinctly angry.

“It can obviously pick up hints from tone as well,” murmured the Doctor, holding on to the lizard. “Fascinating.”

“Right,” said the Prince of Wales. “Mr Alexander, do you have a good club? Have someone take the thing outside and get rid of it.”

“No!” said the Doctor, outraged.

“I may not share my mother’s dislike of you, Doctor. But this creature has come dangerously close to ruining a night’s entertainment.”

“Ruining a night’s entertainment!” the Doctor bridled. “You would kill it for that!”

“Can you control it, Doctor?” intervened Wilde.

The Doctor looked down at the creature in his arms. It was still hard to see since it had blended with the velvet of his coat but he knew where it was and stroked its head. It trembled in his hands. “It’s not a danger to anyone,” he said. “Especially if it can’t see the air in front of people. If you have a box or a basket I could carry it in?”

“There’s one in the props room,” said Alexander.

The Prince of Wales glowered. “Very well, but if the damn thing escapes I shall hold you responsible.”

The Doctor sat through the final act with the basket on his knee. Occasionally lines from the play emanated quietly from within.

“I wonder if the Marquess knew he was carrying it?” mused Wilde.

“Oh, I’m sure he did. I’m more curious to know how he came by it.”

“Some explorer I should think. He’s not a pleasant man, but he has contacts. Someone might have approached him. I must see about him somehow. Bosie keeps urging me to sue him.”

The Doctor frowned, a vague premonition troubling his mind.

“How about you, Doctor?” asked Wilde. “What you will do now?”

“I’m not sure,” admitted the Doctor. “I still remember nothing at all before yesterday.”

“I shall find you some good lodgings for a few weeks or so,” said Wilde. “That should keep you going.”

“Do you think you could find something for our lizard friend as well?” asked the Doctor.

“I’m sure I can. I confess to a sense of relief, Doctor. You seem more yourself than you appeared this morning. I was almost tempted to be serious.”

The Doctor smiled. “I may not have much memory, Mr. Wilde, but I do at least know one thing.”

“And what is that?”

“The vital importance of Being the Doctor.”

# Chapter 10

## The Feast of St. Crispin Crispianus

### A Doctor Who Short Story

It was a winter night when he fell to Earth. The enforcer was hot on the heels of the fugitive. He was driven by a determination to catch his quarry that had led him out on a limb far beyond the reaches on any backup he might once have been able to call upon. The chase had taken him years, sifting through a hundred strange cultures to find his prey and now, finally, the villain was in his sights. His mind was filled with his obsession; the violent one would not escape him. The two of them raced through the galaxies far beyond the centres of civilisation out into a spiral arm and there the quarry, the last of the fuel enabling his flight burned out, turned at bay on the one planet with life.

The fugitive fell to Earth in London near the developing Palace of Whitehall and headed within with justice on his heels. In a narrow and deserted corridor he finally turned. His journey through the civilisations and cultures of the spiral arm had not been without benefits. He had amassed knowledge and skills undreamed of by his compatriots. It had not all be planned with intricate precision but nevertheless it had been planned. The fugitive had foreseen the possibility of this circumstance and he had planned for it. As the enforcer rounded the corner at the top of the staircase the fugitive unleashed a burst of energy, a massive spike of electricity. His pursuer screamed in the energy burst as it overloaded his internal matrix. His problem was solved. The fugitive halted. He heard voices coming up the passage. The stolen details of this world he had purchased far away allowed him to translate:

“This English King, will he come to France?”

“I would imagine that is certain now.”

As the two men rounded the far corner the fugitive surged forward towards the

first of them.

“Ah!”

“What is it, Mountjoy? Are you hurt?”

“No. No, I’m fine. I felt a tingling sensation, like you sometimes get when you pick up weapon or armour. Only stronger.”

“I know the feeling, but there is no metal here. These English are not practicing some witchcraft are they? I hear the King is well learned.”

“I doubt it. This King is a devout Christian. Well, whatever sorcery it was, it has passed now.”

The men moved on.

Sometime later the King and his entourage followed down the same dimly lit corridor. Their footsteps echoed round the walls of the castle and down the corridors. The sound announced that the King had left the deliberations of the council chamber. Everyone in the palace knew they had been debating whether to go to war with France. The decision had presumably been taken.

“We sail for France in the spring,” said the King as he walked over the point where the enforcer had last stood. “S’blood!” he exclaimed.

“What is it sire?” his brother Bedford was at his side in seconds.

“I don’t know, I felt as if... I don’t know. We are King. It was nothing.” He straightened his shoulders and they continued on.

Autumn was coming on apace. The men who crouched round the campfires near the walls of the besieged town knew this. There was a chill in the air. The siege could not continue for much longer, not if the army was to be in safe territory behind secure supply lines when winter set in. It was going badly. The siege had taken too long and the soldiers hoped that the King would not continue it into a wet autumn or even try to push further into unwelcoming France before the cold set in.

A small and select gathering had collected around one fire. The men hunched uneasily and presented a cold, unwelcoming face to any strangers who approached them. They were all foot soldiers or archers. Their clothing and armour was

unadorned and minimal compared to that of the nobility. They spoke little except to grumble about the lateness of the year and the length of the siege.

“It’s that Sir Lawrence,” said one man, spitting after the name. “My Lord Gloucester tells me that the King prefers his council to all the grey beards of England and that Sir Lawrence is for continuing the siege.”

There was a murmur of assent around the fire. They were Gloucester’s men at heart and while they might privately doubt the veracity of his words it was clear that Gloucester was for turning back and that he wanted Lawrence out of the way. They cared nothing for the fortunes of Sir Lawrence but looked forward to Calais and the possibility of return to England.

“I’m looking for Jack Miller,” said a voice. It was softly spoken but an edge of steel lurked beneath the tone.

“Who’s asking?”

A tall man stepped into the firelight. He had striking features that could have been crudely carved from rock. In the firelight his hair looked a washed out, light grey. It was probably brown in colour and was cut short, though longer than was the fashion. He had an air of calm. “My name is Lytton,” he said.

The men looked to their spokesman, “Aye, my lord Gloucester has mentioned you,” he said. “He told me you have no love of Sir Lawrence.”

*Somewhere in the floors deep below him he heard the sound of an explosion. He looked up feeling servos cranking in his neck, straightening his artificial and apparently undamaged spine. The TARDIS had gone. In minutes the fires from the explosion would reach the control room.*

“I have an old score to settle,” said Lytton. “He once left me to die.”

“I’m Jack Miller,” said the man, “and you’re welcome here.”

Lytton stepped into the ring, men making their way for him. He sat down with his back against a log and sank into the relaxed pose of an old soldier who knows this is as comfortable as he’s going to get for a while.

Jack Miller looked round the ring of faces, “I think we’re all here and there’s no one here who shouldn’t be. Let’s be straight about this. We’re here because of Sir Lawrence. We’re here because a jumped up squire of no family has got above himself and got so far into the King’s affections that he can set the course of the war and that war is going ill for us.”

“Not to mention the 30 marks you promised us to help get rid of him,” said a wiry man with a scar above his eye who was seated across from Jack.

Several of the men laughed. “You’ll get paid well enough, Nym,” said Jack. “I just wanted it clear what this is about.”

“I don’t know Jack,” said an older man in his forties. “I’ve served Gloucester many years and my father before me but murder is a grave matter. It won’t go well with God, I’m thinking.”

“Don’t you worry about God,” said Jack. “They all say the King loves Sir Lawrence like a brother. Some say more than a brother. Weigh the treatment of Sir Lawrence and of Gloucester. Those closest to the King say Sir Lawrence has led him from God’s law. You take a good look, next time you chance to see the two of them about the camp, and you tell me whether you think Sir Lawrence looks at the King right or not.”

“But Jack you’re not saying the King is a sodomite, are you?” asked a large blonde man.

“I’m not saying anything against the King, but if you look at that Sir Lawrence with his smooth skin and his talk of gentleness and mercy. Take a good look at him and then come and tell me he’s not a danger to the King’s soul that God would thank us to remove.

“Gloucester says this? That it’s God’s will?” asked the older man, pushing for confirmation.

“Aye, he says so. You can ask him yourself if you like.”

“No Jack. You and Gloucester have always been straight with me and mine. If it’s his orders that Sir Lawrence be killed and it’s his opinion that he poses a threat to the King’s soul then I’m satisfied that God will judge me by my obedience and Gloucester by the truth of his saying.”

“Good man, John. What say you Lytton? You’ve been quiet through all this.”

“I’ve not much to say. I do this for my own reasons. I care not for the money and I’m not worried about my soul. I only care that this thing is done and done well.”

“Then we are agreed. Sir Lawrence has gone on an errand to Rouen and is expected back some time tomorrow. Apparently he refused all companions and is travelling alone. Like as not he’s spying for the French. We all know their court is holed up in Rouen. If he doesn’t make it back then all our problems are solved. We will wait for him on the road.”

There was one of the foremost alchemists of France. Which is not to say that he was any closer to turning lead into gold than the rest of his trade, but he had skills in the working of metal and the use of chemicals possessed by few others. His

reputation for occult knowledge had earned him respect and fame so he was not altogether surprised to have a visit from an English nobleman.

They kept his shop in what later centuries would call a picturesque state. He kept the shutters closed letting in as little light as possible and instead wasted wood and candle on lighting the interior. He kept a small forge in one corner with a selection of strange implements scattered around it. He had crammed his shelves with clay pots and curios, desiccated and stuffed creatures, cured pieces of body and trinkets from far lands.

The nobleman was little more than a boy. He had a slight, delicate frame and fine features. Black hair, close-cropped to the length of a monk's tonsure as was the fashion, revealed an elfin face but he moved and spoke with the confidence of someone accustomed to being treated as an equal and to having his orders obeyed.

"A glass jar, silvered within and without?" queried They, checking he had the details correct.

"That's right. With an iron bar extending from the inside above the rim and a top that can close off the lot." This Sir Lawrence leaned on one hand on the counter, his fingers tapping the diagram he had placed on the wooden surface. "I hear you're skilled at such things so I came here rather than attempting it myself over a forge."

"Of course, Sir! May I ask what it's for?"

"I need a Leyden jar to contain an electric field, if you must know."

"Really sir? I.. err.." The young man frowned impatiently at him and They decided not to push the point any further and risk losing the business. The man was right; anyone could probably do the same with a blacksmith's forge though it was an unusual skill for a nobleman to practice. "It'll take a few hours," said They.

"I'll wait," said Sir Lawrence.

There were five of them in all when they reached the place picked for the ambush. It was well chosen. The road took a sudden dip into a shallow valley and for five hundred yards or so it was completely concealed from anyone who might be ahead or behind the traveller. Lytton was there alongside Jack Miller, John, Nym and the blonde man who was called Matthew.

Lytton had waited this long before acting for precisely the same reasons the men had chosen the spot. He took out Jack Miller first. That was easy; a simple

chop was enough to break his neck. The others were still too shocked to move when he grabbed Matthew and snapped his neck as well. But they didn't pause beyond that. Nym attacked him with the blunt slab of metal that served him as a sword. Lytton twisted as he came in so the point hit one of the heavily armoured sections. He then grabbed the blade in his hands and snapped it, feeling the servos grind in his arm. Nym's mouth dropped open. Lytton rammed the broken point of the sword through into his brain.

John had done nothing. He was holding his sword, but staring at Lytton dumbfounded.

"Why are you protecting Sir Lawrence?" he asked finally as Lytton held his head ready to snap the spine.

*Lytton's memories were hazy from the time after the TARDIS left. He remembered the sound of its return, staggering towards its solidifying form and tumbling in before the final explosions tore apart the base. He remembered someone gasping and hands dragging him into the interior, the sensations that come from heavy doses of pain-killers and then the final struggle into consciousness. There was a brisk form examining the monitors by his bed.*

*"Who are you?" he asked, staring at the strange sight of tail coat and skin-tight leggings in knee length boots.*

*"I'm the Doctor. I've regenerated a couple of times since you last met me."*

*"But..."*

*"Just don't say it! OK!"*

*"Because I owe her a favour."*

Lytton was waiting in the road when the Doctor came past.

"Lytton! What on Earth are you doing here?"

The day was drawing into dusk and it cast long shadows across the way. It made her indistinct as she approached. In silhouette as she came over the ridge she was much like any other knight. Lytton could only be sure it was her as she approached, thought the slightness of her body made him suspect her identity. She'd made a convincing squire but a less convincing knight. She'd cropped her

normal pageboy cut even shorter and her movements, unsurprisingly, had the brisk ease and certainty of someone who'd never been constrained by skirts or trains. But her features were pretty and her skin smooth so that try as she might she couldn't manage to appear more than adolescent.

"Gloucester is moving against you."

"Well it's to be expected. The man cares more for glory than the lives of his men. He gets in the way."

"You are getting too close to the King," said Lytton. His face was carefully expressionless.

"I'm over 900 years old, Lytton. If you think I'm going to do something stupid you can think again."

"Nevertheless..."

"Nevertheless nothing. I have to be close to the King. You know that as well as I do," she frowned. "You didn't come out here just to berate me about the King though. What's going on?"

"Gloucester has been plotting in your absence. There may be trouble once you reach camp."

"Really?" she said suspiciously. "You've not been trying to 'protect' me again, have you?"

"You take risks too easily."

"And you take lives too easily," she snapped. "When I said no more deaths I meant it."

"You should trust me, you know."

"And you should trust me." Without another word she spurred her horse and galloped towards the camp.

Lytton was left to bury the dead. He did not much care whether she had approved of his actions. He had always regarded the Doctor as an improviser. A man, and now woman, who succeeded more by luck than judgment. He had studied the Doctor when he first took employment with the Daleks in the sure knowledge that their paths would cross. He had never predicted the manner in which their meeting would end but though he owed the Doctor his life he had no intention of falling in with the Doctor's slap-dash methods.

The army marched north to Calais through the driving autumn rains. It was a grim autumn. Already the cold was sharp in the air between the storms. The paths were

knee deep in mud. Wet and cold combined to ensure that, once wet, cloth never dried. The soldiers shivered and cursed, caught the ague and died.

The King rode in the column with the Doctor beside him while Gloucester lurked sulkily in their wake. He was aware of the condition of the army, as was she. As, they both knew, were the French. In the King's mind it was a matter of reaching Calais in time or else finding the right patch of ground on which to meet the French.

"Will Exeter hold the bridge?" asked the King.

"You shouldn't ask me things like that, you know."

"Men may die, Doctor."

"Men are going to die whatever," said the Doctor grimly.

A faint crackle of electricity flickered around the King, interpretable only by the Doctor.

"Yes, Holmes, you will have your chance against the French," she said wearily.

"I wish he wouldn't do that," complained the King. "I look forward to being rid of my unwanted companion."

"You're lucky he hasn't sought to control you," said the Doctor. "He's more than capable of it by now. He'll be strong enough to jump bodies before long."

"While it please me to know that my war is for the benefit of the world and not just my rightful claims, I still find this presence within me irksome."

The Doctor made no comment just stared ahead into the rain. It dripped down into her eyes so she had to blink to clear them. The King observed her minutely. He knew by now that what she did not say was often more important than what she did.

"You know Doctor, I have discussed literature and theology and finance with you for hours. But whenever I bring up the war or the planned crusade you fall silent. I take it you do not approve. This is a just war. You know that."

"No war is just. Least of all one for territorial and dynastic ambition," said the Doctor bitterly. "If I had my way I would not be a part of this, but I can not leave a Morasian loose upon your world and so perforce I must be involved in this grubby little war of ours."

"Have a care, Doctor," growled the King dangerously. "Regaining my French inheritance is my foremost project."

"I know," said the Doctor softly.

The King watched her through the rain, her hair plastered flat and her face set in an expression that was old for her years. He reached out and took her hand bringing it to his lips.

“Well, for all your disapproval, I have been glad of your companionship these past months.”

*“I do confess my fault, and do submit me to your Highness’ mercy.”*

*And in the sudden violence that had followed he had seen the kick from Scroop that should have felled the squire, Lawrence Skrimshaw, but didn’t. As the squire punched the man away, the King’s eyes had met hers. His face must have betrayed his astonishment and sudden realisation for she smiled cheekily and winked.*

*Afterwards he summoned her to his presence in the throne room. He had contrived to be alone in the echoing chamber. It had daunted ambassadors and courtiers but Lawrence Skrimshaw could have been standing in a crowded tavern for all the effect it had on her. She’d stood formally with the appropriate respect but she’d had an easy smile on her face.*

*“You did good service today, whoever you may be. But I am not taking a lady to France.”*

*“What makes you think I’m a lady?” She was still smiling though he had thought there was a flicker behind her eyes which suggested she was thinking fast.*

*“You are no common whore and that is enough for me. You remain behind. Who are your family?”*

*She paused. “You’re a Morasian aren’t you? An energy creature, which normally lives in symbiosis with the Darons.”*

*He was startled by her strange words but before he could respond the blue fire, which he had half seen a hundred times that Spring, suddenly crackled around him. She looked him in the eye.*

*“That is why I must come to France with you. That thin should not be here and it should be watched.”*

*He did not, for a moment, doubt the truth of her words. In a minute she had transformed from a cheeky squire to a commander of men. “This is magic,” he said as the blue fire crackled again.*

*“Don’t be silly,” she said and the squire was back.*

He looked down at the hand he was still holding and then up to her. She reacted as she always did to familiarities, which was to say not at all. He could never make up his mind whether she was simply unaware of his attentions or studiously ignoring them. When he touched her, took her hand or touched her face there was no yielding as with most women nor any sign of drawing back as there was with a few. Once or twice she had caught his eye and smiled but she had always then dropped the hand or removed the touch. He believed in her companionship but her reactions at a deeper level than than both mystified and fascinated him. Once more the air around him sparked in the rain.

“What’s he saying now?” asked the King irritably.

“He says he can manage the apprehension of his Moriarty just fine without my help,” the Doctor smiled slightly.

“Is he right?”

The Doctor squeezed his hand. “Maybe, but I’m not prepared to take the chance.”

Behind them Gloucester coughed. The King dropped her hand with a smile. Gloucester’s jealousy and his dread suspicion amused him. One day he would tell Gloucester the secret but for now he preferred to have him in the dark.

Mountjoy the herald came to the King just before the bridge and stood beneath the hanged man. The herald was older than the King. He looked like he had an expressive face though he kept it well under control as he delivered his message. It was difficult to read his expressionless features, but Lytton suspected that he respected the King and sympathised with the plight of his soldiers. Lytton worked his way through the press until he stood just behind the Doctor. Mountjoy delivered his ransom demand and Lytton observed the faint crackle of electricity around him and the answering spark from the King.

“My ransom is this frail and worthless trunk,” the King was saying. He ignored the faint fizzle in the damp air. Lytton marvelled anew at his youth. The man was not yet 30 and yet he led his army with extreme confidence. He had classically handsome features; his hair brown and cut in the seemingly ubiquitous monk-like style. He was softly spoken but he had an unmistakable strength and regality in both tone and bearing. In a crowd the eye would be drawn to him.

The King and Mountjoy were a score of yards from each other. Either could cross the distance in moments. Lytton reached for his sword at his belt but he felt the Doctor's restraining hand on his arm.

"He will make no move in this company. There are too many of us."

"Don't count on it," murmured Lytton.

The Doctor's grip on his arm tightened, "Killing the host serves no purpose and you can not damage the creature with a sword."

Lytton carefully relaxed and felt the Doctor's grip relax at the same time but she didn't let go.

"Violence will solve nothing in this situation," she said in a low voice.

"Massive and sudden trauma to the body will dissipate it. You said so yourself," he said.

"The rules of war forbid you from attacking a Herald. You'd be dead before you could administer your massive and sudden trauma. Only if the Herald attacks first could you hope to succeed. Besides I want to apprehend this criminal of Holmes' without the killing of any hosts."

"Very well," he said. She knew more of the period than did he. He took his hand off the pommel of his sword. Only then did the light touch lift from his arm.

"They outnumber us five to one you now," the King watched the Doctor carefully in the firelight. She was gazing into the flames which sent an orange glow across her face. In the half light he couldn't see her eyes properly which gave her a strange distant look, even more so than usual. In his fancies he half thought she was one of the fey for she was in so many ways so very strange. He was feeling his way through this conversation for he did not wish to arouse her ire.

"I know," she said.

He took a deep breath and then risked his wish, "Doctor, I would that you were not on the battlefield tomorrow." She looked up then but said nothing. He pushed on, "I will be the happier for knowing you are safe and you have a revulsion for fighting. Don't deny it Doctor. I have seen you use both sword and shield as competently as any Knight in the training yard but I have never seen you use them in anger. You even managed to 'forget' them when you entered the breach at Harfleur."

"I find I survive better without weaponry."

“What you did at Harfleur was remarkable but the fact remains; the battlefield is not your place.”

She sighed in the darkness, “You are right. I do not belong there not even remotely. I can spend my time more usefully hunting Moriarty. I suspect it will try something during the battle.”

“There is no shame, Doctor, in sitting out the fight. You are a woman. No man will think the worse of you if you are not there.”

“Do not worry about my pride, my liege. I do what must be done not what makes me look good.”

“Hunting for Moriarty will bring you dangerously close to the field I should think and you will forget your sword again I warrant.”

She smiled ruefully at him across the firelight.

“I begin to think you know me too well.”

“Stay among the baggage train with the boys, Doctor. You will be safe there.”

To his surprise she laughed. A hard and bitter laugh it was. Then she sighed again. “No sire. I think I will hunt Moriarty but I will promise you that I will do nothing of exceptional danger.”

The careful way she had chosen the words told him that her idea of exceptional danger did not match with his.

“I forbid you to make this attempt, Doctor. No,” he said as she opened her mouth, “do not argue with me. You want to negotiate with the creature.”

“I will make it an offer, yes,” she interrupted, “but I’m not relying on it accepting.”

“E’en so. You are going to take a risk. It would be simpler to kill the thing than to set elaborate traps.”

She looked angrier than he’d ever seen her then, “Oh!” she said, “and this battle you will fight tomorrow is not an elaborate trap.”

“I would not fight this battle tomorrow had I a choice.”

“I believe you, but you would not give up France to obtain a peace. Your choices are limited by your ambition.”

“Right now I would be pleased to reach Calais unmolested, Doctor. It is not easily I risk the lives of these men.”

She opened her mouth and then closed it again. “Let’s not argue. Do not prevent my quest tomorrow, lord. I will not stop your fighting your battle, do not you stop me seeking this creature.”

The King watching her suddenly had not doubt that, should she choose, there would be no battle tomorrow and he feared that would be the worse for the English. He did not know how but there was a hidden force behind the Doctor’s actions

as if the human form concealed something far more powerful. He suddenly found he was afraid to oppose that force in its full fury.

“Come!” he stood up and offered her his hand. “We should hear mass and last rites. There will be no time tomorrow.”

She took it and hauled herself upright. Her head reached no higher than his shoulder. She glanced across at the French camp with a strange look on her face almost as though she could not decide upon something.

“Few of them are hearing the mass,” she said at last and then, faintly, under her breath he heard her say, “the poor fools.”

Later, alone, the King sat beside a deserted campfire. Most of his men had finally gone to what rest they could manage though sentries still patrolled the boundaries. Over the other side of the field he could still hear the noise and shouting from the French camp. He drew his borrowed cloak about him and shivered. He hoped that he had not led his army to disaster as the French seemed to believe and as many of his followers also believed but that his planning for this eventuality would pay off. He had had no success in extracting a promise from the Doctor to stay in the safety of the baggage train and had had to content himself with her promise to steer clear of the battle if at all possible. Gradually he realised his right hand was tapping in the dirt. He looked down and it jerked into life of its own accord and began to scratch in the dirt. Three words.

HUNT ALONE MORNING

He spoke quietly, “you think we should seek Moriarty before the battle, without the Doctor.”

The hand scrawled again.

NO TALK KILL

Holmes’ thought was clear enough. The Doctor wished to negotiate in some way with the creature. She talked of capturing it but the King could not see how you could capture and hold the blue fire of these things. Holmes disagreed and it would be easiest to do this alone without the Doctor to get in the way and attempt to save Moriarty. If the Doctor were bypassed tomorrow morning and the thing bought to its end there would be nothing left to do. She could remain safe among the luggage.

Early in the morning, only a short while after dawn, the King went to survey the enemy battle lines. They stood far enough from the French for the King himself to be unrecognisable. He didn't want to draw any attention except that of the Herald. Holmes sparked in the morning air. The King presumed he was signalling in some way to gain Mountjoy's attention.

But, "My Lord!" the Doctor was marching towards them, her man Lytton only a few steps behind. They both had looks of grim purpose. The King noted that while she was armoured she had once more neglected to bring a weapon.

Her man was unarmed too. Lytton, as always, wore only a studded leather jerkin over his clothes.

"What are you doing?" she asked, as if she did not know.

"We know which body Moriarty inhabits," replied the King. "Now is the time to strike before he changes. Before he moves on to someone more powerful and begins his reign of terror."

"Those are Holmes' words," she said.

"I agree with his assessment," said Lytton suddenly. "It would be better to have this thing over and done with quickly and cleanly. The creature is too much of a threat to this world. Incarceration is too risky."

The King agreed, "As a woman I can't say that you might not have the stomach for this."

"Poppycock!" said the Doctor. "Any attempt to kill the host will be as messy and uncertain as other means. You are just too much the soldier to realise it."

"I'm so glad someone feels that way," said a voice suddenly. A form emerged from a pile of leaves by the Doctor's feet. A scruffy, wiry man with a grubby face and the air of a footpad grabbed her neck and held a dagger to her throat. The air crackled. "Now let's everyone be calm, or the pretty lady gets it."

The Doctor rolled her eyes with impatience, "Now I know how my companions feel," she grumbled.

"Let her go," said the King.

"I don't think so. Not until I can get a good shot at you. So if the soldier here will just move away slowly. That's good," he said as Lytton backed off like a cat. "And if you, my Lord, could just step closer."

"I think not," said the Doctor. She reached up and grabbed her assailant's arm and then bent forward throwing him easily over her shoulder. She held onto the arm and twisted the dagger out of his grip. The man cried out. The King judged that his arm had probably been broken by the manoeuvre.

“I’m not saying,” she said as she stepped back, “that violence should never be used. Just that it should be a last recourse. Lytton! No!”

But Lytton was already thundering past her towards the prone man. He leapt upon the body and began throttling it. The man reached up and grabbed Lytton’s head. Suddenly blue sparks started to flame and crackle round Lytton’s body and to the ground. The Doctor had explained that these sparks could be deadly. Almost without thought the King leapt in, trying to drag Lytton clear. He felt a sudden jolt through his body as his hands closed on Lytton’s shoulders. Then everything went black.

Lytton felt the hands on his shoulders and cursed. There was little he could do. Some of the insulation in his arms had burnt through and his muscles had spasmed making it impossible to release his grip on the man’s neck. Most of his internals were still adequately protected but the insulation could not last forever. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the Doctor taking a run up and then she jumped at the King, feet first. Her momentum knocked the King aside out of the flow of the current. Lytton hoped she’d have the sense not to try the same with him. With his arms locked solid there was no hope of her body weight dislodging him.

“...not concern,” he heard the King’s voice say in a stilted tone behind him, “Have heart, lungs work. Will survive.”

He felt something inside him fizzle. The insulation was giving way. A sword suddenly appeared; the King’s. The Doctor must have thrown it so it landed with its tip embedded in the ground. Its pommel wavered close to his head and the electricity from the man’s hands arced to the sword and into the Earth. Free of the current, Lytton managed to force his hands open and staggered off the body. He lay on the ground a moment while the Cybermen’s system pumped drugs around his body and healed the burns. He looked back and saw a streak of electricity run from the tip of the sword along the ground and away.

When he sat up the Doctor was kneeling over the cutthroat’s body pumping his chest, trying to start his heart after the shock. “Lytton! See to the King,” she said.

He walked over to the King’s body. His eyes flickered open. “I can keep body alive,” he rasped slowly, “but will die if leave it. I think is unconscious perhaps.”

He helped the man up. The Doctor remained over the other body. Lytton helped the King sit and they watched sceptically while the Doctor worked.

“He’d already jumped,” said Lytton.

“Yes,” agreed the creature in the King, “and escaped again. Left before the body died. In woods somewhere.”

It was fifteen minutes before the Doctor gave up.

The creature in the King’s body fretted as they returned to camp.

“Doctor, no time for this. Should be hunting.”

“If you leave this body it will die. It suffered too much trauma in the blast.”

“What is King to me?”

“The battle begins soon and without him it is already lost. You only have to remain until his natural healing ability takes over. You have the muscles spasming and the nervous system under control. Once he wakes up he’ll be right as rain... probably.”

“Moriarty. Getting away.”

“I don’t think so. Expending so much energy trying to kill Lytton will have weakened him. He be looked for another body. You may be able to survive long periods outside of them, but you are naturally symbiots. He’ll be looking for a partner.”

“More reason why should be looking. Able to siphon off enough current when King attempted to aid companion. Healed fully. Best him now.”

“No. He may die if you leave the body now, as will his men. If you do this you are no better than Moriarty. You will effectively have killed him because he was in the way. You say that there is a difference between the two of you. Prove it to me! There will be time to hunt your criminal after the battle.”

“Very well Doctor, trust you. But can not speak. What say to troops?” This was true, Holmes had rapidly lost the rasping tone and his words had started to come faster. But he was clearly struggling with the language.

“I have thought of that,” said the Doctor. “You are going to have to give a speech,” she thrust a paper of hurriedly scrawled notes into his hands. “You start her ‘If we are mark’d to die, we are enow to do our country loss; and if to live, the fewer men, the greater share of honour...’. You had better practice it.”

Lytton caught up with the Doctor as she was struggling into a suit of chainmail. He was surprised; she had worn nothing tougher than leather all campaign. She complained she couldn't move fast enough in chain or plate.

"You are going to fight in the battle?" he asked in surprise.

She gave him a sour look, "I'm going to have to hold Holmes' hand until the King awakes. I can't risk him being found out."

"I'll come with you."

"No, I need you to do something else. The history books can occasionally be wrong. I want you to be with the baggage train. Get the boys into the woods and get them hidden."

Lytton nodded carefully. He had no intention of staying to help the boys. The Doctor was a consummate liar but Lytton had studied the Doctor with interest in the past. She was going to seize the opportunity presented by the battle to hunt the fugitive on her own terms. Like Holmes he was deeply sceptical of the Doctor's plans to negotiate with Moriarty. But he knew there was no persuading her that the soldier's way was best. He resolved to follow.

The sounds of the battle drifted up from the field below. The Doctor winced in distaste; glad not to be a party to the slaughter history told her was happening on the field of Agincourt. She walked through one of the woods that flanked the English position. The woods that protected the archers from flanking by the French cavalry. Somewhere in here was the creature, Moriarty. Behind her, silent, crept Lytton. As always, he was watching her back.

"Come on Moriarty!" shouted the Doctor, "I know you're here somewhere!"

There can a crackling in the undergrowth. Very few people could have picked out the language and form within that noise.

"I'm not built to communicate in your fashion though I understand your speech. Moriarty seemed as good a name as any, given you plans."

Once again there was a crackling sound. Blue fire appeared round the edge of a tree, sparking up into the branches and around the roots.

"I can make a good guess. I imagine petty warlord would suite you. You can keep a human body alive much longer than its natural span. You can help

it survive disease and violence. You could become very powerful with the right host.”

Once more blue lightening writhed and crackled. Lytton, observing from the bushes, marvelled at the Doctor’s ability to get even a spark of electricity to gloat.

“Well they haven’t evolved in symbiosis with you so its hardly surprising that they have no defences against your total control is it?”

The creature moved from the tree and began to circle round the Doctor. It spread itself thin but the Doctor was ringed with pale fire.

“I propose a trade. This world is too young to cope with you but also too primitive to satisfy you. I’m offering you a lift out.”

It flared a challenge at her.

“A King of backward planet in a galactic backwater? Hardly making an impact I should say. I’m a Time Lord. Think on that Moriarty. I can take you to any time and place you choose. Somewhere in the future if you dislike the present.”

The creature pulled itself back into itself. It became a towering flame of charge. The menace was palpable. To Lytton it was clear she had misjudged the situation. It was not going to accept her offer.

A look of concern crossed the Doctor’s face, “Do not try to take me over. I am not so easily controlled as humans.” She began to back away from the haze of electrical energy.

The blue fire surged forward towards the Doctor. Lytton charged from the undergrowth.

“Lytton! get back!” she shouted but he had already interposed himself between her and the electrical being. His body convulsed as he fought the control. Sparks began to coruscate over his surface as muscle and servo fought to resist the currents Moriarty sparked through them. He could almost feel the creature exploring the new body, experimenting with the systems, firing the muscles to see what they did. He started locking down what he could. He was determined not to become the Doctor’s executioner but even as he did so he realised this was only a temporary measure. He was using electrical signals to set the locks. Sooner or later Moriarty would work out the signal to unlock them again. As he stood with his muscles twitching he saw the Doctor hauling the Leyden jar towards him. She grabbed a hold of the front of his tunic, holding the jar in her other hand. He saw the muscles contract so the fist closed tight, holding the front of his jerkin. But the charge did not earth itself or transfer to a new host. Moriarty had doubtless realised the advantages of this augmented body the Cybermen had cursed him with.

“The chainmail will act as a conductor,” the Doctor shouted. “Lytton shut

down as much as you can, force it to me.”

Lytton began the internal hibernation process. He shut down circuits and controls, the mechanics that ran his heart and lungs. The world began to fade as the lack of oxygen affected his brain. Before it all went black he saw a sudden spark and heard the Doctor cry out as if from far away. Then he passed out.

When he came to she was knelt across his chest. His front panel was open and she was twisting wires together.

“What happened?” he asked.

“I jump started you,” she said, “I’m not sure you’re going to be able to switch yourself off again. Just as well probably. Since all the mechanics in your brain have been disconnected, there was no way your body could keep it alive once the heart and lungs were shut down.”

“I owe you my life again.”

“I know,” she said dryly. “It’s a burden for both of us.”

When they returned to camp a sight of carnage met their eyes. The boys in the baggage train had all been slaughtered. One last, desperate, act of revenge by the French had seen a small cavalry unit enter the undefended camp. The bodies of the young men lay scattered through the camp amid the burning remains of tents and broken carts. There was a suppressed air of anger among the muddy soldiery. Life went on though. Already the first numbness of the shock had worn off and men were starting to gather together the dead and lay them out.

“History said this would happen,” said Lytton.

“History can be wrong,” she said. “I’ve seen it often enough. I would have saved these children.” There was anger in her voice, “I told you to save them.”

“You lied to me about your intentions.”

“Not well enough clearly. I knew you did not trust me with Moriarty and would not let me go alone. I was right.”

Ahead of them they saw the King. He was covered in the mud and blood of the battlefield and he looked both full of rage and full of weariness. When he saw them approach he stopped frighteningly still as if he was storing up energy against

their meeting. "I was not angry," he said once they stood before him, "since I came to France until this instant."

The Doctor bit her lip, "You're back to yourself again then."

"I regained my senses on the battlefield. 'Twas as well though this creature fared none too badly as a general," he brushed this aside. "Doctor, did you know this would happen?"

"I would have prevented it if I could."

"But you were bound by history," his voice was bitter.

The Doctor looked away and would not meet his eye.

"I thought you were soft and gentle, Doctor, but now I see that you are ruthless. You condemn me for waging a war against grown men and yet you let these innocents die."

The Doctor placed the Leyden jar she was carrying on the ground. "I have Moriarty," she said. She stood up and then held out a hand. "Goodbye my liege, I shall be on my way now."

His mouth set into a hard line, but he took her hand. There was a crackle and blue fire sparked between them.

"Goodbye Doctor," he said. Their hands parted. She picked up the bottle and walked away, Lytton at her side.

Behind them the King's voice suddenly carried on the air, "God guide you and keep you Doctor." Her lips twitched into a smile as they carried on.

"You could have told him it was my fault," said Lytton.

She shook her head, "What would have been the point? He is a man of war Lytton. We got on well enough while we avoided that point but it is fundamental to his nature and, that being the case, we could never have been more than fleeting friends. It is better this way."

"But I thought..."

"I never thought I would have a companion who thought too much. But it seems I should have been more careful what I wished for."

"I am also a man of war," said Lytton.

She nodded, not meeting his eye, "I realise that," she said carefully.

"Any yet, you let me stay with you."

"Did I have a choice?"

Lytton smiled, "Not much."

"Besides you are a soldier not a man of war. It is an important distinction."

Lytton surveyed the death around him and beyond in the mud-clogged battlefield. "This killing of the boys was not well done," he conceded finally. "I should have been here."

She looked up at him and smiled slightly, “You have to learn to trust me if you wish to be my companion.”

“I know,” he said. “I apologise.”

“Apology accepted,” she said.

Together they left the battlefield.