

DOCTOR WHO

SHORT TRIPS AND SIDE STEPS

The TARDIS is depicted as a dark, boxy structure with a glowing blue light emanating from its front. It is surrounded by a dense field of colorful, radiating lines in shades of green, yellow, and orange, suggesting high-speed travel or a time vortex. The background is a dark, starry space.

A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES
EDITED BY STEPHEN COLE AND JACQUELINE RAYNER



*How many lives has the Doctor had? Perhaps more
than you think...*

Follow the Doctor and his companions as they take short trips around the universe – perhaps to a Wild West overrun with dinosaurs, to a land where robot rabbits roam, or a planet where the Doctor must marry or die – and then step sideways into other universes – worlds full of song and dance; planets made entirely of sweets; lands of movie monsters; places where the Doctor as we know him may never have existed at all...

This collection includes stories by Peter Anghelides, Trevor Baxendale, Steve Burford, Graeme Burk, Miche Doherty, Harriet Green, Jason Loborik, Steve Lyons, Paul Magrs, Daniel O'Mahony, Lance Parkin & Mark Clapham, Justin Richards, Gareth Roberts & Clayton Hickman, Gary Russell, Tara Samms, Mike Tucker & Robert Perry, Christopher M Wadley, and the last ever Doctor Who fiction of Lawrence Miles.

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DOCTOR WHO

SHORT TRIPS AND SIDE STEPS

STEPHEN COLE AND JACQUELINE RAYNER

BBC

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In memory of Helen Margaret Russell, 1953-2000.
Happy travels.

For Helen - JR

With thanks to Lucy, Matt, Gary, Justin and mike.

Introduction

As we write, poised on the crumbling edge of the 20th century (and eagerly awaiting the introduction of *The Karkus* strip cartoon into the holographic pages of the *Daily Telepress*), it seems *Doctor Who* has undergone an unexpected resurgence of interest. A long overdue dedicated evening on BBC2, talk of a film, even a series of terrestrial TV repeats, have all fanned flames that have steadily burnt for almost 40 years now. The future, now that The Curse of Fatal Death has proven that Doctor Who can still be fresh, innovative and relevant to a mainstream audience, is arguably brighter than it has been for quite some time.

So while looking ahead, there's surely no harm in looking back... even in looking sideways. When planning this book we decided that, as well as presenting a diverse array of short fiction concerning *Doctor Who* as we know it, we would celebrate also some of the apocrypha surrounding the programme - and explore alternate takes on its central concepts while we were at it.

It was always in the nature of the programme to experiment. Now that *Doctor Who* is - for better or worse - firmly in the hands of fans of the programme, there is a stronger obligation than ever to keep it as fresh and surprising as possible. We hope that the stories in this collection will cater for purists and revisionists alike, while also presenting some different points of view.

Oh, yeah. And to have *fun*.

Steve and Jac
December 1999

The Longest Story in the World

by Paul Magrs

Wisely, when the girl was asked, on pain of death, to entertain and divert him with a story, she decided to create the longest story in the world. This would, she thought, prolong her life. Every evening, as velvety dark settled on the palace of the Caliph, as the noise from the streets and the bazaars died down and all that could be heard from outside was the cryptic shrieks of beasts beyond the city's walls, she would slip him just one instalment of an immense narrative, and, doing so nightly through the years, she thought that her life would be spared.

This story, expounded luxuriously through humid, freezing, stormy, placid nights, might last as long as her natural life. The wicked Caliph, curled petulantly in his silk and damask sheets, would be satisfied and merciful. He listened to her stories (each evening's chapter would end, naturally, with a provoking, enticing cliffhanger) with his gilded guards, his vizier and his cage of salacious parrots. They would claw at their bars and the vizier's eyes would narrow to slits as the girl sat calmly on her stool in the emerald bed chamber and told her story. They were entranced despite themselves. She had snared them all in the fabulously infinite unfolding of her tale.

This was how, when she was quite young, she embarked on the telling:

The old man lived on a mountain slope in a small white house, much the same as the other houses in this ramshackle city. The countryside was dry as sand, and everyone who lived there was as poor as a pigeon. The old man lived with his granddaughter and it was a frugal, quiet life.

Each evening she would sit at his feet, in a perfect impersonation of a good, dutiful grandchild, and, perching on a stool much like the one where I sit now, she regaled him with tales.

She had clear emerald eyes. She would stare straight into the old man's eyes and he would grow discomfited, tugging his rug over his knees and wondering: Where does this child come from? How can she know such stories?

She would pretend that her tales were a kind of clairvoyance. She would tell her grandfather that his future would be very different from his present, reduced circumstances. The logs on the fire would crack and pop, making him jump, and he would find himself longing for

some peace and quiet and to stop this child rambling on.

When she had been younger he had delighted in hearing her wide-eyed, breathless inventions. Such nonsense she talked! Phantoms and journeys and miraculous cities in endless plains! As she grew older the old man thought she would grow out of creating her fabulous diversions, for what was fitting for a child to say became tantamount, in this land, to blasphemy in the mouth of an adult. But the girl showed no sign of putting an end to her tales.

The old man himself had no taste for fantasy. Like many of his people, he believed it sacrilegious and disrespectful to their godlike ancestors who had, through cunning and expertise, brought so many boons to their country. Why invent other myths? Such things could cause trouble. But, when his granddaughter was quite small, he drew some small pleasure and pride from hearing her fairy stories.

She told him that he would grow younger with every year. He would regain his youth and his strength and he would do battle with the doughty powers of darkness. Like a child, she cleanly split the world into opposing factions and placed him - his hypothetically goodly and heroic self - on the side of the angels.

He would, she said, slay monsters, infiltrate corrupt dynasties and empires and bring vampires to their knees in their own dust. Witches would tremble at the mention of his name (Ah, but which name? He would adopt many in his travels) and they would flee into the desolate night clutching their filthy rags about them at his passing. Demons, megalomaniacs, despots - all would fear his arrival in their lands. And he would transform himself again and again and he would be eternal. No longer this elderly wreck of a man.

The girl grew older. Still a child in her grandfather's eyes, but to the outer world she had almost attained maturity.

Still she was saying, with her earnest jade eyes fixed on his, 'You will make your home on a hundred worlds.'

She had grown older and bolder. She told him, 'You will fashion a machine that will bear us both beyond this land. You are brilliant and your talent will drive you to create a travelling engine of infinite capacity and potential. Your frustration with this place and your own mortality while you are here will fire the green jewel that will power your travelling machine. The machine will be vast inside, though it looks only a humble abode. Inside it will be like a city. A world of your own.'

He laughed. A dry, humourless sound. It made him ashamed to laugh at her ramblings, because she spoke in all seriousness. It isn't

kind for the aged to mock the illusions of the young. He said, 'And where, my dear, will this miraculous engine take me?'

'Why, anywhere!' she said, and clutched his knees. 'This is what I have been saying all along. You will go anywhere and everywhere and no one will harm you.'

Once again he found himself disturbed by her fervour. The girl was becoming obsessed. In recent months he had even wondered about having a court physician talk to her about her fantasies. But the physicians were notorious tittle-tattlers. No sooner had one of them taken his guileless granddaughter beneath his dubious wing, than he would have spread word far and wide throughout the court that the old man had raised and harboured a mad girl, a changeling and a witch and thus had endangered them all. They would both be burned and have their hearts plucked out.

It was all his own fault, the old man decided, because he had indulged her madness.

Yet he wondered, sometimes, given how little he actually knew of his adopted granddaughter's people, whether she might just have a little gift of sight. Her people - gone by then, of course - were so much more superstitious and barbaric than his own.

He took responsibility for this child. If she was mad, then he must protect her. The court and the city would have little mercy. Her kind of delusions were threatening - a kind of sickness that could make faith crumble as easy as masonry.

She would be flung out beyond the court, the city, the mountain itself. Into the forest and the foothills. She would be returned to the wolves and the province from which she came wandering as a lost child.

If the old man asked anyone for help, they would make him turn her out into the wilderness.

All he could do was protect her. Make her keep quiet in public. One day, at the open markets, as he was greeting friends - rather high-up senators whom he had known before he retired from that sort of work - his granddaughter went into one of her trances. The old man could see by the set of her jaw and the curious light that came into her eyes. He hustled her away from the senators, bidding farewell before she could break into one of her tales.

Walking home down the dusty hill she was babbling happily: 'All over the galaxy men are turning themselves into golems. They use minerals and metals, potions and machines to make themselves less creatures of organic, fleshly substances and more equipped to do harm

to others, to traverse the deadly frozen expanses between the worlds...' She caught her breath then, looking alarmed at him, her voice more urgent. 'They are already here, on this mountain. In our city, at work in the court. This place has already surrendered itself to their implacable machine-like will. This is why you must engineer our escape, Grandfather. It must be soon.'

The old man turned to her and he was testy with her. He took her hands and tried to dissuade her from raving. Couldn't she see the danger she put them both in?

She fled, then. He was left shouting in the street, the wind whipping at his robes and stinging his eyes as she disappeared in the crowd. He couldn't run after her. He had no chance of catching her. He could only pray she wouldn't find someone else to rant at.

The old man returned home to wait. He wanted to sit by the fire and wait for her to return. He would consider what to say to her when, eventually, the door unlocked and she slipped sheepishly in to apologise. To promise she would grow up less fanciful.

But what, he thought, as he trudged down the hill between the white house walls of neighbours he didn't even know, what if the child had already taken herself off into the wilderness? What if - hysterically perceiving herself to be a threat to her grandfather in her prattling heresies - what if she had fled back to the wolves?

He must be more optimistic. The child wouldn't be so foolish as to endanger them both. No one would know, he reassured himself, fumbling in his robe pockets for his keys to their house; no one knew the kinds of things she had been saying.

He was wrong.

When he entered their home he found that he had guests. They stood in the room, as if to attention. All were armed and grim, their faces in shadow, and it seemed they were denuded of all personality. Their leader had his long legs up on the table. He swung them off as the old man entered and he welcomed him to his own house. The old man spluttered his complaints. But he knew what was happening.

They had been watching and listening to the old man and his granddaughter. For quite some time, it appeared.

The girl bowed her head as she addressed the Caliph directly, in her own voice, once this instalment of the tale had ended. 'Tomorrow evening, Excellency, I shall tell another.'

'But what is this? A complete tale? What is its meaning?'

'That will become apparent only through accumulation of parts.'

Tomorrow we continue.'

'The same tale continues?' The Caliph's eyes narrowed greedily.

Boldly, the girl smiled at him. 'Oh, certainly, my Caliph. It continues and continues and continues.'

'Then,' he said softly, 'so long as it does, your life will be spared.'

She nodded and, under guard, withdrew.

A Town Called Eternity

by Lance Parkin and Mark Clapham

PART ONE

The campfire was the only source of light and heat out here - the cattle knew that as well as the men. There was starlight, but it barely reached the grassland: it only dusted the distant sea.

Jack was worried. 'Any rustlers will see this fire from miles around, Sheriff.'

The older man pushed the brim of his stetson up and nodded. 'Perhaps.'

'Where's the sense in it? We should be hiding out, waiting to catch them red-handed.'

'Your way sounds cold to me,' the old man chuckled. 'But the rustlers will go elsewhere.'

'Isn't that what you want?'

'No, I want to string them up. No, hanging's too good for them: I want to see them die in the dirt.' To emphasise his point, he drew his revolver and started jabbing it at hordes of imaginary bandits.

'Look, son, how long have you lived here?'

'Five years.'

'And I've been here thirty. I've been Sheriff of Eternity for ten years. I know what I'm doing.'

'But they'll see us.'

'They'll see us, sure. Two men: an old guy and a young boy who's never fired a gun in anger, maybe not even fired one at a tin can on a fence post.'

'Hey, sure I have - I'm a good shot.'

The old man stood and dusted himself down.

'I wouldn't have you here if you weren't, Jack, don't worry. Thing is, the rustlers will see us, but they won't see the dozen men I've got posted around here. They won't see Don Rivers hiding up on that rise, they won't see the McCarthy brothers behind that rock.'

'An ambush?'

'Yup.'

There was a gunshot, a hundred yards away.

'That was William Silas.'

They were up, the old man with his shotgun, the young man with his revolver. Jack stood silent for a moment. He could hear the Pacific Ocean, ten miles or more away; he could hear the wind, and he fancied he could even hear the sound of the piano playing in the saloon bar back in Eternity. But he couldn't hear any rustlers.

Then something fell lazily from the sky, rolling over itself in the dust and knocking the canteen over into the fire.

A terrible smell, like roast pork fat. It was square, covered in cloth. The young man watched it crackle.

'What the hell is it?'

'William Silas,' the old man replied, already scanning the darkness.

The young man turned and looked into the night. but all he saw were red dots, swimming in his eyes. Staring into the fire had done it, that and the tears stinging his eyes. Silas had been ugly, humourless, and the young man had never liked him, but to die like that...It would take time to -

The Sheriff died in front of him. There was a screeching noise, the air scored open by something like a scythe, and then the old man was on the ground with his gun beside him, trying to hold his guts in.

It wasn't a man. It wasn't rustlers that had done this.

The young man fired over the old man's head. He could see the bullet sail uselessly off.

He felt cold breath on his neck.

He turned.

Teeth like knives, skin like a tree trunk and glinting, alligator eyes.

He pulled his revolver up, trying to keep it level.

He died.

Peri woke up and it hadn't all been a dream.

Even before she opened her eyes, she knew where she was: she could hear the soothing hum of the TARDIS engines; she remembered that the smooth white walls had a regular round pattern.

Peri pulled herself upright, looked around her room, saw the pile of stuff the Doctor had brought in to make it seem more homely.

I want to travel.

That's what she'd told the Doctor a week ago, when they'd left Sarn. They'd travelled - the Doctor, eager to please, had decided to show Peri something of the future, and they'd spent a couple of days on Mars. Mars. She'd told him she was a botanist, so he'd taken her to meet some talking plants. They'd gone to Gelsandor. She said she liked sunbathing, so they'd travelled to a world with artificial suns. She

wanted an evening out and she'd gone ballroom dancing with a three-legged robot. Her home was a time machine, but not just a straightforward time machine, not something that looked like a time machine.

And it wasn't a dream, but it felt like one. It felt like make-believe, a kid's game.

She stood, stretched.

It was odd - she hadn't woken up needing a shower, she hadn't woken up with bad breath.

The console room wasn't far away. She left her room, walked past the food machine - she was a little hungry, but only a little, she realised - and opened the door to the console room, knowing she'd find the Doctor there.

He was standing at the hexagonal console, a piece of circuitry in his hand. He was in shirtsleeves, his coat hanging up on the hatstand. The column thing in the middle was rising and falling, a little unsteadily, Peri thought.

'Good morning,' the Doctor said brightly, before returning his attention a little too quickly to the machine in his hand.

'Hi.'

The Doctor didn't look up again.

'Er...is there somewhere I could make some coffee?' Peri asked. 'And do you want any?' she added quickly.

The Doctor forced himself to look up. 'The quickest way is just to ask the food machine for some.'

'Right.' Peri hesitated. 'Are you OK? You're blushing.'

The Doctor managed a weak smile. 'It's just...' He waved his hand over himself but looked straight at her.

Peri glanced down. 'My nightshirt? You've got a problem with Mickey Mouse?'

'It's more of a T-shirt,' the Doctor informed her.

Peri tugged the hem down, defensively. 'Hey, it's nearly down to my knees.' She'd found it in a room deep in the TARDIS that was laid out like a theatrical costumier's. 'I've got to sleep in something.'

Embarrassed, the Doctor continued to examine his circuit.

'Doctor, when we first met I was wearing -'

'Yes, yes,' he interrupted. 'Yes. I'll get the coffee.' He bustled past, carefully avoiding brushing against her. He glanced down. 'And a dressing gown.' He handed her the circuit.

Peri sighed, and began walking round the control console. They were in flight. She knew that because the column was going up and

down and the pitch of the engine noise was slightly different. Various lights, readouts and dials were flickering and whirring round. She was surprised that she recognised the symbols - they were Arabic numerals and Roman script, with the odd Greek letter thrown in every so often.

She kept hold of the circuit.

When the Doctor returned with a tray full of coffee things and a dressing gown tucked under his arm she had a question. 'Where are we headed?'

'Somewhere in the universe where they speak English...of a sort,' the Doctor said, looking around for somewhere to put the tray. 'We've seen your future, we've done some exploring, I thought we'd see something of your past.' He smiled a child's smile. 'The Wild West.'

The Doctor stepped from the TARDIS into an alleyway. It smelled right - wood, horses, smoke and leather.

'Perfect,' he said.

Peri followed. 'Wow!'

'Is that all you can say?'

'It's like a film set.'

'Is it?' the Doctor said, faintly disappointed.

'That's a good thing,' Peri said encouragingly.

'Oh good.'

'Are you really dressed for the part?' she asked.

The Doctor pushed up the brim of his hat. 'Stetson. I don't have the six-shooters - they aren't really my sort of thing.'

'But you're just wearing your ordinary clothes - the same coat you wore on Sarn and Mars.'

'I blend in anywhere. Trust me, I'm used to this sort of thing.' The Doctor locked up the TARDIS and they walked out of the alley and on to the main street. It was early morning, there was still an edge of dew in the air. The shops hadn't quite opened up; the first few carts were on the road.

'But I have to wear this?'

The Doctor looked her up and down. 'Cotton blouse, plaid skirt, sensible boots. Perfect.'

'Dowdy. I thought I'd be wearing silk corsets and hoop skirts.'

'You're not a dancing girl,' the Doctor replied gently. 'There may be a chance to dress up later. Let's see how things turn out.'

'Do you know where we are?'

'Earth.'

Peri smiled. 'I know that. I mean what town is this?'

The Doctor stopped in his tracks. 'Sea air.' He sniffed the air again. 'The Pacific Ocean - unmistakable.'

'The West Coast?'

'Yeah,' he drawled.

'Hey, I'm home. I guess we're in the 1880s.'

'About then. I aimed for about a hundred years before your time.'

The Doctor struggled to remember his history.

'If this is California in the 1880s,' Peri began, filling in the blanks for him, 'we've missed the gold rush, the silver rush and the coming of the railroads. I think the eighties saw a recession.'

'Oh,' the Doctor said. 'We could always pop back a decade or two.'

Peri shook her head. 'This looks great. I wish I knew what town this was. Mom and Dad were always proud they were fifth-generation Americans. I might meet my ancestors - I'm sure they were out here by now.'

The Doctor paled. 'Oh, I hope not.'

'Hey, what's the problem?'

The Doctor nervously flicked at the celery pinned to his lapel. 'There's a certain etiquette to these things, rules that have to be followed.'

'I've already thought about that - no telling anyone the future, no inventing things that weren't invented, try not to kill Abraham Lincoln, that sort of thing.'

'We're twenty years too late for that,' the Doctor murmured, 'but you're right - try to be sensible. Have you heard of the grandfather paradox?'

'No. Wait, hang on, I read some science-fiction novel about that - that's the one where you go back and kill your own granddad and he can't have your dad so you won't be born, so you aren't born, so you can't go back and kill your granddad.'

'The general idea of the story is that you *don't* go back and do that, but yes, that's the one.'

'You're the Time Lord, so does that mean you know what happens when you do? Have you ever wanted to try?'

The Doctor bristled. 'Not at all, I quite liked my grandfather - what I remember of him. Killing one's ancestors never really seemed sensible or polite to me.'

'They'd reached the saloon.'

'Time to make an entrance,' the Doctor told her.

He stood at the swing doors, then stepped through, Peri close behind.

The Doctor had been expecting everyone to fall silent, but he was disappointed. It was too early for anyone to be around, except for a woman cleaning the floor and a man refreshing the shelves with bottles of liquor.

'Howdy,' the Doctor said.

Peri hurried forward. 'He means "hello",' she said quickly.

The man raised his hat. He looked to be about Peri's age, perhaps a couple of years older. 'You passing through Eternity or here to stay?'

'Eternity,' the Doctor whispered to Peri. 'A town called Eternity.' He turned back to the barman. 'We're passing through,' the Doctor said. 'I'm the Doctor, this is my friend Peri.'

'The Doctor? Well, why didn't you say? Ellie, go and get the Sheriff. I'm Josh Larson, folks call me Old Josh. We've been expecting you, Doctor. You're here very quickly. What's your poison?'

'The railways are awfully good these days,' the Doctor replied vaguely. 'And we're fine, thank you. It's a little early in the morning to be drinking. You say I'm expected?'

'You are Sebastian Rowley? *Doctor* Rowley?'

The Doctor considered his response. 'Of course I am,' he said finally.

'You travel light.'

'I've brought a case or two.'

'You staying at the Hudson place?'

'That's right.'

'They water their beer down,' Josh said, leaning in conspiratorially.

The Doctor smiled. 'I'll bear that in mind.'

'Take a seat anyway. You want to freshen up, miss?'

Peri shook her head. The Doctor pulled a chair back for her, then took his place next to her.

Ellie had come back with a man in a plain blue shirt and a sheriff's badge. He had a white plaster block and some paperwork in his hand.

The Doctor stood. 'Sheriff, I'm Doctor...Rowley and this is my friend Peri.'

Old Josh chuckled. 'This here is Paul, the Deputy Sheriff. The new Sheriff is still settling in.'

'What happened to the old Sheriff?' Peri asked.

There was an awkward silence. The Doctor and Peri glanced across at each other.

The Deputy Sheriff laid the plaster block on the table. 'Begging your pardon, Doctor Rowley, but I don't think this is suitable for women to see.'

Josh clapped his hands. 'Ellie, start upstairs.' The woman nodded, happy for the break.

The Doctor glanced over to Peri, hoping she wasn't going to make a scene.

'It's OK, I wouldn't mind a look around the town. Is that OK, Doctor?'

The Doctor nodded. 'It seems safe enough.'

Old Josh helped her stand. 'I'd be happy to show you around, ma'am.'

'I'd like that.' Peri followed him out.

Paul pointed at the plaster block. 'That's why we called you here, Doctor Rowley.'

The Doctor took out his glasses and slipped them on before taking a look.

'We took it over at Comstock Creek, right where we found the bodies. First we thought it was rustlers, but rustlers don't butcher men who get in their way. Your wife asked what happened to the old Sheriff. Well, it wasn't pretty. Not even the Indians do that to a man - we knew then it must be some sort of animal, but we don't have no bears round here. Then we saw this and the new Sheriff suggested we get an expert in.'

The Doctor looked at the footprint and it took him a moment to come up with a response.

'Fascinating,' he said.

And it was. The Doctor recognised the distinctive claws - two rested on the ground, but the inside one, the thumb, was just a jagged scar where the enormous curved talon had scraped the ground. Here, perfectly preserved in plaster of Paris, was the footprint of a deinonychus. One of the most ferocious and intelligent dinosaur species, alive here one hundred and twenty million years after the period scientists had declared it extinct.

'Fascinating,' the Doctor repeated.

Peri looked at Old Josh.

He was a dashing figure, quite a dandy in his silk waistcoat and sharp suit, but there was something quite odd about the clothing that Peri couldn't put her finger on. She looked at the other men out about their business. Their clothes were as practical and unappealing as her own - denims and gabardines, working clothes. Josh was a barman, and something of a showman, but there was more to it than that.

Peri let it rest for a moment, soaked in the Californian sun that was

the same in any age. She'd never heard of this town, and she wondered if it still existed in her time, whether it had been renamed. It wasn't quite beachfront, but there was a view of sea. In a hundred years' time there would be freeways and golf courses; the town would have spread to the sand dunes and probably back to the hills on the horizon.

'Why do they call you Old Josh?' she asked finally.

Josh chuckled. 'On account of my age.'

'You're twenty-five, thirty at most.'

'I'm one hundred and ten years old, ma'am. I was born a week before America declared independence.'

Peri raised an eyebrow.

'Round about now, most folks tell me they don't believe me,' Josh continued. He paused. 'But you took that news in your stride.'

'I've travelled,' Peri told him, 'I've seen and heard a lot of strange things. You don't age?' She wondered for a moment if he'd got some freak genetic condition. She'd heard some babies got prematurely old, dying at eight years old as little wizened men. Perhaps Josh had the opposite. She realised now what was wrong with the clothes - they were out of style. The style during the gold rush had been slick, expensive fashions. His clothes were as anachronistic as leotards and baggy shorts had been on Mars.

'I aged until I was eighty. Then one day a man came to Chicago - that's my home town - and he was selling the elixir of life. Course, he wasn't the only person who's done that. Rogues and scammers go from town to town - it's a classic con. The usual way of doing it is planting people in the audience. They pretend to be sick, then drink some coloured water and - it's magic - they're well again.'

Peri thought of the televangelists back home who claimed - probably even believed - that they were really getting people to throw away their crutches. Come to think of it, all the washing-powder adverts, with paid actresses wiping a floor that magically became clean, used the same technique.

'If you knew it was a trick, why did you go along with it?'

'I told you, Miss Perry, I was eighty years old. I had a lot more than the five dollars the man was after, and it was a gamble I was willing to risk.'

'And the gamble paid off.'

'In spades,' he laughed. 'Not straightaway. It took a week - I looked five years younger every day. It got so I was worried it would never stop and I'd end up a baby. But I stopped a young man.'

'You stopped ageing?'

'I age one year for every ten, near as I can guess.'

'Wow.'

'Ever since then, I've been looking for the source of that elixir. For a hundred dollars, all I could get out of the salesman was that he'd found the fountain of youth in California. I came here, but for all the digging and mining that went on during the forties and fifties, no one found anything but gold and silver.'

'Perhaps the man was lying.'

'I thought of that. Hired men to find him, and find where he had been. He came from this town. I reckon it's around here, but I'm looking for one little fountain, and there's a lot of caves and gullies around here. People don't like claim-jumpers, they don't like people digging around. It doesn't help that I can't tell anyone what I'm looking for.'

'You told me.'

'I can tell you're a good woman, Miss Perry. Say, what's your first name?'

Peri giggled. 'Peri is my first name. It's short for Perpugilliam.'

'You don't say.'

'A family tradition. People usually have less trouble with the surname: Brown.'

Josh stopped in his tracks.

'What's the matter?' Peri asked.

'Can I make a suggestion, Perpugilliam?' Old Josh whispered. 'Don't tell anyone that. Look, I get on fine with Iziah Brown and his family, but there are a lot of folks around here who don't like their ways.'

'Iziah Brown?' Peri asked. My great-...I had a...relative...*have* a relative called Iziah. Could you take me to him?'

Old Josh smiled. 'Sure.'

'Sheriff...Sheriff!'

The Sheriff looked up from his map. 'What is it, Paul? I'm rather busy.'

'Rowley is here.'

'So soon?' The Sheriff seemed genuinely surprised. Paul could see why - the man was coming from Boston. Even if he'd jumped on the first train and hadn't stopped on the way it should take him more than four days. It was possible, of course, but Paul had learned that the new Sheriff was a suspicious man by nature.

'Describe him,' the Sheriff ordered.

'He's a young man, sir, thirty years old, I'd say.'

At that, the Sheriff was fully alert, fixing Paul with an intense gaze that he found unnerving. 'Slight, fair-haired? A pleasant, open face?'

'That's him, sir. You know him?'

'Is he travelling alone?'

'No, sir, he's got a young lady with him, a pretty brunette called -'

'Perpugilliam Brown.'

'You know them?'

The Sheriff was deep in thought. He stood staring over his map, clearly planning, taking this new information in and fitting it into his plans.

Paul tugged at his sleeve. 'Do you know them?'

The Sheriff shrugged him away. 'Yes. Where are they now?'

'Old Josh is showing the young lady around the town. The Doctor is going to the store. He's looking for something, but won't say what.'

The Doctor rummaged through the fossils.

'Extraordinary,' he said, picking out one specimen and quickly replacing it. 'Excellent,' he said, finding another. He turned to the shopkeeper. 'And these are just found lying about.'

The shopkeeper tensed. 'There's more to it than that. They have to be cut from the rock; that there's been polished and stained to show it up all the better. They are worth a dollar.'

'Oh, of course.' The Doctor picked out another one. 'Hadrosaur,' he said. 'From the period I'm looking for: the Upper Cretaceous.'

The shopkeeper busied himself dusting the counter. The bell jangled as a new customer came in, but the Doctor was engrossed and barely registered the new arrival.

'A hundred and thirty million years ago,' the Doctor breathed.

'No, sir,' the shopkeeper said.

'Well, give or take ten million years,' the Doctor said, a little hurt by being contradicted.

'No, sir, not that old. Nothing's that old.'

'He thinks,' a woman's voice told him, 'that the Lord only created the world six thousand years ago. He thinks what you have in your hand is just a fancy stone, or the remains of a beast that died in Noah's Flood. Be grateful, sir, because some of a like mind think what you have in your hand is the devil's work - Satan's way of deceiving us into believing what they would call Darwin's lies. Isn't that right, Ernest?'

The shopkeeper straightened. 'I don't want any trouble, Sarah Brown. You buy what you want and you leave.'

'Brown?' the Doctor echoed. He looked at the woman in a new

light. Peri had said her ancestors came from around here - 'Brown' was a common enough surname in this part of the world, but the Doctor knew enough about how the universe worked to suspect that it wasn't simply a coincidence. That said, Sarah Brown didn't look like Peri, not at all. She was blonde, willowy. He looked into her eyes. Blue, whereas Peri's were brown, but the Doctor sensed some of Peri's keen intelligence, and he already knew that Sarah Brown was not a woman to suffer fools gladly.

'Mrs Sarah Brown,' she said, holding out a gloved hand.

The Doctor kissed it, as he was sure was the custom of this period.

'I am the Doctor,' he said.

'Doctor who?' she asked.

'Er, Doctor...Rowley. Sebastian Rowley.'

Sarah Brown's eyes were wide. '*The* Sebastian Rowley?'

The Doctor declined to answer, fearing he was on shaky ground.

'I have read *On the World of Our Pre-history* a dozen times, sir. I'm honoured to meet you. I've read your journal, your account of your travels in Africa. I know everything of your life - and your views.'

The Doctor coughed. 'Well, it's always nice to meet a fan.'

'But I thought you were on a speaking tour of New England, sir. Truly, Doctor, if I had the money or could spare the time, I would have crossed the continent to hear you speak. What are you doing here, in Eternity?'

The Doctor felt a little overwhelmed by Sarah Brown, but he chose to adopt an air of nonchalance. 'Certain reports reached me. Events here. If you're a palaeontologist you must know already.'

'I took the claw print myself. I've seen the species that could make such a footprint.'

'You've *seen* it?'

'I mean, of course, that I have seen the bones. On our own land.'

'You must take me there,' the Doctor insisted.

She looked deep into his eyes. 'I will, Doctor, I will.'

The bell jangled, intruding into the conversation.

'Well, well, the Doctor and Miss Brown. Not *the* Miss Brown, I grant you, but *a* Miss Brown.'

The man's sheriff badge glinted in the morning sun, but the black trousers, shirt, gloves and ten-gallon hat seemed to suck the light from the room. His hands hovered over the holsters at his hips. His face was sallow, his beard and eyes as black as his clothing.

Sarah Brown stiffened. 'I am *Mrs* Brown, Sheriff Masters.'

'Of course you are.'

'Masters,' the Doctor said, rolling the syllables around in his mouth. 'Hardly your most inventive alias. What's the matter, old friend? Didn't you know the Arapaho for the word? Or perhaps you'd used it in some other scheme that went wrong. After so many failures, you must be running out of synonyms and anagrams by now.'

The Master smiled, revealing almost pointed teeth, and studiously ignored the taunt, however much it had hit home. 'My dear Doctor, I knew you'd follow me here. I knew you couldn't resist trying to defeat me again. Come now, Doctor, do you expect me to believe that your arrival is a mere coincidence?'

'Believe what you like,' the Doctor laughed. 'I'm here on holiday.'

The Master snarled, irritated, and drew his guns. 'Come with me.'

'Is it much further?' Peri asked.

Josh snorted. 'You wanted to meet them.'

'I thought they lived in the town itself.'

'The Browns live on their ranch. They like to keep themselves to themselves. It's a nice ranch - very tranquil. There's a good brook there, and me and Iziah go fishing most weekends.'

'Josh, what aren't you telling me?'

The Master had his back turned, so the Doctor took the opportunity to examine the lock on his cell. Or rather his cage, with its thick iron bars running from ceiling to floor, and some way beyond both if his attempts to dislodge them were anything to go by.

'The lock may seem simple, Doctor, but I have augmented it with some technology of my own invention. You will not succeed in opening it.' The Doctor forgot about the lock, and leaned in to see what the Master was doing. He was bent over a map, apparently of the local area, and he had some sort of portable energy detector in his hand.

'Do the townspeople know that their own Sheriff is behind the dinosaur attacks?'

'An idiotic question.'

'Was that an admission of guilt?'

'Doctor, whatever your views of my ambitions, you must realise that they stretch further than becoming a sheriff in the Wild West. This position of authority merely allows me to direct the human population in the way I require.'

'And, no doubt, your hypnotic control allows you to gloss over some of the more awkward questions.' The Doctor frowned. 'So the

dinosaurs have nothing to do with you?'

'They are merely a sign that my efforts are focused in the right direction.' The Master turned, cautiously, stared at the Doctor for a moment, and then returned his attention to the map. 'I have said enough.'

The Deputy Sheriff came in. 'The Doctor's companion is visiting the Browns, sir, with Old Josh. She's walking up there, according to Ellie.'

The Master absorbed the information. 'I have learned not to underestimate the abilities of your companions. She could still free you. While she is alive, that is. Resourceful as young Peri proved herself on Sarn, I doubt she'll be able to rescue you from beyond the grave. We'll soon catch her on horseback.'

The Doctor grabbed the bars. 'She's a young woman, she can't do any harm. It's me you want to kill.'

The Master smiled, a feral glint in his eye. 'I could have killed you a hundred times over, Doctor. I want you to suffer. I want you to suffer for ever for what you have done to me.'

He left, his deputy close behind.

The Doctor sagged. He had to be able to do something - if not to rescue Peri, then at least to alert her to the danger.

'I thought they'd never go.'

Sarah Brown hurried into the Sheriff's office, a determined look on her face.

'Sarah! Quickly, look for a key.'

'No need.' She held up a stick of dynamite.

The Doctor flinched. 'You do know what you're doing with that?'

Sarah was already fastening it to the lock. 'I use explosives in my excavations.'

'However can I repay you?' the Doctor asked lightly.

She clutched the Doctor's hands through the bars. 'Sir, there is a way. I have read even your more...obscure writings. I know your thoughts on free love. Your denial of marriage, your belief that the sexual act should not be a matter for guilt and social oppression, but is a beautiful gift. It's a radical doctrine, sir, but you'll find there are many that share your views on matters of...'

'Er...' the Doctor interjected.

'No, let me finish. I know you'll excuse my forwardness, but it would be the greatest honour of my life if I could bear the child of Doctor Sebastian Rowley. Such a child would surely be the brightest and best prepared of all men.'

The Doctor hesitated. 'I thought you were a married woman.'

'Sir, my husband Iziah not only shares my beliefs: he is the one that inculcated them in me.'

'All the same -' This was all rather unexpected, and - thinking of Peri and her bloodline - a number of complications immediately sprang to mind. Sarah Brown stared up at him with such sincerity that it took a moment for the Doctor to frame a reply.

'Sarah, I know for a fact that with you as their mother, your children will possess all the brains and spirit they will ever need.'

Sarah Brown caught her breath. 'Doctor Rowley, even your discouraging words are an encouragement. Now, sir, stand back - the dynamite is planted.'

The Master had just mounted his horse when he heard the explosion.

A cloud of brown dust and mortar billowed from the jailhouse, as the aftershocks echoed from the other buildings.

'Sheriff, that was the jailhouse!'

The Master was already on the ground, running back the way he had come. 'Of course it was, you dolt! It's the Doctor, he's trying to escape.'

The sound had rattled the windows, and people were coming out of their homes and businesses, seeing what it had been. The Master pushed a few of them aside.

The Doctor and Sarah Brown emerged, coughing and laughing. They pulled themselves upright when they found themselves surrounded by half the town, with the Master and his deputy at their head.

'It's Sarah Brown,' one of the townsfolk, the idiot shopkeeper, shouted.

The Master smiled. 'Of course,' he said. 'Brown. Sarah Brown, Perpugilliam Brown. I should have realised before.'

'Realised what, pray?' Sarah Brown asked indignantly.

'My dear Doctor, there was I about to cross half the county to find Perpugilliam, and I needn't have bothered. I could kill two Browns with one stone.' He drew the gun on his left hip, cocked it and fired it in a movement so fast and fluid he allowed himself a moment of pride.

The Doctor was on his knees, trying to stop the blood that was spreading across Sarah Brown's blouse. The woman's eyes were wide - an automatic reaction to the shock, the Master mused, or a sign she had seen the bullet coming? It was almost a shame he'd never know.

'Doctor, she is dead. You know it. Your efforts are futile. No final words. You can almost feel the timelines changing around her, can't you? All those possibilities closing. She'll never write a book, she'll

never address a public meeting, she'll never have children - or grandchildren, or great-grandchildren.' The Master chuckled.

The crowd had fallen silent.

The Doctor stood, his face dark.

'You people. You saw what this man did. He killed a woman, a woman you knew, in cold blood.' His voice was trembling, weak, but the crowd were beginning to respond to him, beginning to edge towards their Sheriff.

The Master chuckled, turned to face the ordinary folk the Doctor had turned into a lynch mob. 'You! I am the Sheriff, listen to what I am about to tell you. This man is not Doctor Rowley: he's an impostor.' The Master could hear his own voice. Calm, authoritative. In times of shock, the primitive mind likes to be told what to think to take away the burden of choosing a response. 'This man is a criminal, a cold-hearted rogue. You saw the way he killed this poor woman. Look at his face, look at the guilt in his face.'

As one, the crowd turned to confront the Doctor. It wasn't long before the first stone was thrown. Soon after that they were stepping towards the Doctor, cautious, but certain of his guilt.

'I saw it with my own eyes.'

'He's got a gun!'

'Killed her like a dog!'

The Master threw his head back and laughed.

'Bigamists?' Peri spluttered.

Iziah Brown laughed warmly. 'A little more than that, Peri.'

'Iziah's got six wives,' Old Josh informed her.

Two of them were here: Simone, a lean fiftysomething, and Dana, a large black woman in her late thirties. Looking at Iziah, Peri could barely believe it of the man. He was about forty-five, a slight figure. Charismatic, sure, and courteous, but someone you'd expect to find running a bank, not a harem.

'You've had four wives, Josh.'

'I had 'em one at a time, you rogue.'

Iziah and Josh clinked their glasses together and laughed.

'So what do you think of your Californian cousins, now, hey?'

Peri wasn't quite so amused. 'But...the women.'

Dana Brown came forward. 'I know what you're thinking - we're victims of abuse, or we've all been mesmerised into thinking this is God's will. Far from it. Iziah Brown is ahead of his time - we're not his slaves. Believe me, I know what that's like. We went into this with our

eyes open, we're free to leave. We're free to do what we want.'

Peri realised, with a start, that Dana wasn't merely old enough to remember slavery, but old enough to have grown up a slave. But this setup was a bit creepy. It had also dawned on her that there were five women here who could be her great-great grandmother. Actually, this far back in her ancestry, even Dana was a candidate. Six women. Looking over at Simone, Peri fancied she could see some resemblance to her father, but she was probably imagining it.

Iziah seemed to sense her unease. 'It's not the traditional way of doing things, I grant you,' Iziah told Peri, 'but this is the newest part of the newest continent of the world. Why should all the progressive thought come from London and Paris, hey?'

'This is nearly the twentieth century,' Simone added in her soft voice. 'In a hundred years, everyone will live like this.'

Peri smiled 'I doubt it.'

Iziah shrugged. 'In a hundred years, women won't just be a man's property: they'll have the vote; they'll be a political force.'

'A woman president!' Josh chuckled.

Peri laughed. 'A woman prime minister of Britain, at least.'

The Doctor didn't see it hit him. He wasn't sure what it was - an iron bar, a wooden pole. It didn't matter - it was enough to make him buckle at the knees.

A series of swift kicks to the ribs and stomach.

There were too many of them jostling at him. None of the mob could raise their arms high enough to swing a real attack at him, and their feet could do little more than tap at him, not kick. But there were so many of them.

Over it all the Doctor could hear the Master's laughter. He was watching them tear him apart and to him it was entertainment.

They rolled him over, and the Doctor was forced to shut his eyes to keep out the grit and the mud.

There was a noise over the jeers of the crowds, an electronic pulsing, like an alarm going off.

The Master's laughter stopped.

The Doctor was on his back again. He could see the Master push his way to the front of the crowd. The townsfolk pulled back out of respect for their Sheriff.

The Master leaned over, held the detector tantalisingly above the Doctor's face. It beeped steadily. 'You hear that? That is the sound of my victory. I win, Doctor.'

'Ssssarn,' the Doctor hissed.

The Master leaned closer. 'What's that you say? You surrender?'

'Sarn,' the Doctor repeated. 'You burned. I saw it.'

The Master chuckled, betrayed the merest hint of unease. 'A setback.'

The Doctor flexed his fingers, tried lifting them. His arm eased up from the dirt. 'No. More. More than that.'

The Doctor grabbed the Master's nose and pulled it off, watched in horrified fascination as his adversary's familiar face slipped off like a balaclava. The Master winced, clearly in terrible pain. The Doctor wondered if the false face had been some sort of bandage as well as a way of hiding his true appearance.

The Master's hand moved up, before the Doctor had a chance to catch even a glance of his face.

'Not feeling your best?' the Doctor managed.

'This Trakenite body is weak,' the Master rasped. 'But even this body will live longer than yours. And I'm going to survive, Doctor, I'm going to be immortal. I've found the fountain of youth.'

The Master stood, shielding his face from the crowd. 'Kill him,' he barked, before hurrying away.

The crowd swarmed over the Doctor.

Peri could hear music.

Either Iziah hadn't noticed, or he was used to it. Old Josh was talking to Dana and Wanda. Simone was busy bringing them iced water. They were out on the veranda, and Millicent and Venus were inside, but the music wasn't coming from the house. Peri tried to pinpoint it. There was a hill nearby, and she could see a cave entrance. The music seemed to be coming from there. But it wasn't...

'What's that sound?' she asked, finally, hoping someone would just tell her.

The wives stopped what they were doing and looked at Iziah.

'You can hear it?' he asked.

'Sure.'

'Hear what?' Josh said. He strained to hear. 'Oh my Lord...'

'A family secret,' Simone said.

'I've heard the music before. I felt it in me when I drank the elixir.' Josh was almost in tears. 'All these years we've been friends, and I've never noticed it before.'

Iziah took a deep breath. 'Well, Josh, Perpugilliam - I hope you can keep a secret, because I'm about to show you the fountain of youth.'

The world had gone mushy.

Blood in his eyes and ears, the Doctor knew, that was all. He tried to focus, but couldn't.

'I'm so sorry Peri,' he bumbled. But it had been painless for her - she'd never even been born, let alone suffered. A paradox, he thought, but one he would have to let the universe sort out. 'Hang him!' someone shouted. A young lad, a boy.

The Doctor felt the noose around his neck, felt it being tugged and tightened. He couldn't resist.

All he could think was an annoying, irritating thought: *how do the dinosaurs fit in?*

They dragged him the short distance to the gallows outside the jailhouse and then they hoisted him up. They watched him swing for a full quarter of an hour, with him too weak even to struggle or choke, before they cut him down.

Peri could feel something in the air as they walked through the cave, and the music was getting louder.

It was cool here, the air was full of moisture. Iziah and Old Josh carried oil lamps, and in their light Peri could see that there were also lanterns mounted to the walls. All five wives were with them, and all of them seemed giddy with anticipation.

'Sarah - that's the one wife of mine you've not met yet - collects fossils. This whole area is covered in them, but these caves in particular.'

Peri could see them now - bones, teeth, ribs, claws, packed on to the rock like a Roman relief. Immeasurably ancient. She knew where she'd ask the Doctor to take her next: California, in the Upper Cretaceous, to see these animals - perhaps these actual animals - in life.

'I can feel it, Peri - it's like the water I drank thirty years ago is still in my bones and it can hear the fountain.' Josh was springing along, his quest nearly over. 'How long have you known?' he asked Iziah. 'How long have you been keeping this from me?'

'Not long, my friend, not long. Sarah found it six months ago, after a minor earth tremor. Didn't dare touch it at first, but Sarah made her observations. She drank a thimbleful of it. All of a sudden, that cough she's had as long as she remembers cleared up, along with all her other aches and pains.'

'You should market it!' Peri said.

'There's not very much of it. And remember, we've seen the gold rush, we know what greed can do to people. I figure it's not going

anywhere. We can take our time deciding what happens to it.'

There was a light ahead.

'Here we are,' Millicent Brown said.

'What's the light?' Peri asked prosaically.

They walked towards it, into a chamber the size of a ballroom. There were half a dozen tunnels leading out of the room, and all but a couple were large enough for a man to walk down.

The centre of the room was a column of water, which was flowing up into the roof. It wasn't a gusher or a geyser, the water didn't seem to be under any pressure: it was just water, flying up as though the laws of gravity didn't exist. And it glittered with internal light. The ground was dry, and carpeted with the fossils of ferocious-looking dinosaurs. Had the fountain been here at the time of the dinosaurs? Had the dinosaurs drunk from it, grown whole again like Old Josh?

'The fountain of youth,' Dana announced, redundantly.

Peri could hear music, like an angel's choir. She could smell flowers, taste nectar and ambrosia. The air moved around her like a lover.

'What is it?' Peri asked. 'I mean, how does it do that? The Doctor will know.'

'The Doctor is dead,' a familiar voice declared.

Peri turned. 'You!'

The Master stepped forward into the light of the fountain. Behind him were half a dozen men, all with their guns raised, all seemingly dead to the world - hypnotised, Peri decided.

'The Doctor wouldn't understand this. He'd explain it, all right; he'd tell you this area has always had time distortions. He may even know there will be some disturbance to the timelines here in the early twenty-first century that rippled through the fabric of causality and affected the mineral composition of the rocks. But he wouldn't *understand*. You can feel, it though, Peri - you've crossed the timelines, you're sensitive to it. Imagine how it feels to me, a man who's travelled the universe for centuries.' He closed his eyes, savoured it.

Peri peered over at him. 'What's wrong with your face?'

The Master whirled to face her. His head had folds and bulges in it, like cloth.

'I barely survived Sarn,' he rasped. 'The Doctor left me to die in the flames. He left me like this!'

He pulled his face off. Underneath, shrivelled, charred flesh clung to a large skull. The nose had gone entirely. Tufts of wispy hair clung to the chin. Only the Master's piercing black eyes seemed unaffected by the devastation. This was a dead body, kept moving by sheer force of

will.

Peri screamed.

The Master placed his stetson back on his decaying head, discarding the mask he had worn.

Iziah leapt at him, but the Master swatted him aside. The Master's servants stepped forward, ushering Iziah, Old Josh and Iziah's five wives against the cave wall.

'What is he?' Venus Brown asked.

'It's the devil himself,' Old Josh told her.

Peri hadn't been rounded up with the others.

'Remove this glove,' the Master commanded, holding up his hand.

Peri did as she was told. Underneath was little more than a skeleton.

The Master chuckled, held his hand into the stream of water. A moment later he withdrew it and held it for Peri's inspection. The hand was smooth, with manicured nails. The hand of a young man.

'Powerful,' the Master proclaimed. 'Perhaps too powerful...' he said more quietly. He looked around, seeing a bucket.

'Bring that,' he ordered Dana Brown.

She stepped forward dutifully. The Master snatched the bucket from her, and angled it carefully into the fountain, trying not to spill any of the coruscating fluid.

Finally he drew back, the bucket full.

'Perpugilliam Brown, you are privileged to see the moment where I become truly immortal.'

He held the bucket aloft in triumph.

And Peri slammed herself into him, knocking him over, sending the bucket scuttling over the rock floor, the water sloshing into the dry ground, which seemed to suck it in.

The Master was already holding a weapon in his hand. Not his sheriff's six-guns, but the Tissue Compression Eliminator. Peri had seen it in action on Sarn - she knew just how deadly the weapon's effects were.

'Truly, you will suffer, Miss Brown. This weapon has a number of settings - not all lead to immediate death.'

He levelled the weapon.

There was an odd sound, a bit like popcorn popping. Another one, like gravel thrown across a tin roof. Elastic stretching. Bacon hissing on a grill. The sounds echoed from the walls and ceiling.

Iziah and his family were looking around, mystified. The Master hesitated, and something of his uncertainty appeared on the faces of his hypnotic servants.

A reptile's claw pushed out of the rock, swiping the air. A crocodile head poked out and gave a screeching roar.

'It's the water you spilled!' Old Josh cried out. 'It's bringing the fossils back to life!'

And all around them, the ground gave up its dead; the fossilised bones grew muscle and tissue and skin. All around, petrified teeth and claws were renewed; all around the dinosaurs were rising. They hopped to their feet, drew breath, scented prey.

Peri felt cold breath on her bare neck.

She turned.

Teeth like knives, skin like a tree trunk and glinting, alligator eyes.

Peri screamed.

Special Occasions:

1. The Not-So-Sinister Sponge

By Gareth Roberts and Clayton Hickman

The morning's sugarfall had frosted the grass a fine white. A light breeze stirred the branches of the liquorice trees and cast ripples across the lemonade stream.

The peace of the alien countryside was shattered by the roar of ancient engines as the TARDIS popped up from nowhere, and the Doctor and Romana emerged. The Doctor held up a finger, waited a second, licked it, held it up again, waited a second, licked it, and held it up again.

Romana began to fear the entire day would be spent licking and waiting. 'What are you doing?' she asked.

The Doctor licked his finger again. 'Sherbet.'

'Sherbet?' exclaimed Romana.

'Definitely. Lemon sherbet.'

K9, their computer pet, trundled out of the TARDIS. 'Affirmative, master,' he said. 'Your unscientific sampling is confirmed by my atmospheric analysis.'

'But that's impossible,' said Romana. She raised an eyebrow as the Doctor got down on all fours and munched at the grass like a cow. 'What are you doing?'

'Are you going to spend all day asking me that?' said the Doctor, between mouthfuls of the lush green grass. 'Get down here and have a munch.'

Romana, still dubious, followed his example. As she ate she was astonished by the grass's sweet chewy texture. 'It's delicious.' She frowned. 'Is this planet completely formed from confectionery?'

'Well of course not,' said the Doctor. 'It must be just this area. Possibly a release of enormous heat sometime in the past, causing gelatinisation of many of the natural features in this small zone.'

K9 piped up. 'Prognosis is dubious.'

'What's dubious about it?' tutted the Doctor, narked.

K9's nose laser slid out. 'Permission for low-level excavation?' he enquired.

The Doctor waved a hand airily. 'Blast away,' he said with bad grace. 'I don't know what you think you're going to find down there. It's quite

clear this effect is only local.'

K9's laser started to burn away at a nearby patch of ground. The Doctor nudged Romana and whispered, 'Have you noticed anything funny about him today?'

Romana nodded. 'Yes. A bit uppity, isn't he?'

'Yes,' said the Doctor. 'If I didn't know he was a collection of multiphase interloop circuits bussed in to a central input board and a tricyclic memory bubble, I'd swear he was sulking.' He tapped his head. 'I keep thinking I've forgotten something.' He whipped out his five-hundred-year diary and flicked quickly through it. 'First Sunday after the Feast of Rassilon. Fifty-eighth phase of the tri-Arctic moons of Manabulos 81. Bank Holiday, Denmark.' He snapped it shut. 'No, nothing there.'

'Hold on,' said Romana. She whipped out a much smaller, slenderer and altogether more dainty volume from her pocket and started to flick through it.

'What are you doing?' asked the Doctor.

Romana smiled. 'I thought that phrase was banned today. It's my easy-to-view, millennium-at-a-glance time-o-fax. The information's stored in a hyperspatial dimension twice the size of the fourth universe. And look, there's even a little calculator.'

The Doctor was about to make a disparaging remark of some kind, but then two things happened at once.

A fountain of thick white goo erupted volcanically from the hole made by K9's laser, just as Romana gasped in recognition and shouted, 'Great Gallifrey! It's K9's birthday!'

The Doctor tried to take in both of the things that had happened at once. 'K9's birthday?' he exclaimed as he tried to dodge the geyser. He dipped a finger into the goo and tasted it. 'Cream! We've struck cream?'

'Double, single or whipping?' asked Romana.

'Single, mistress,' said K9 sniffily. 'And yes, the temporal coordinates at which the TARDIS has materialised correspond to the relative dimensional datemark of this unit's inception.'

'Well, of course we knew that, K9,' said the Doctor. He nudged Romana. 'Didn't we?'

'Did we? Oh yes, of course we did. For sure.'

'Hmm,' said K9. 'As you "knew" for sure the composition of this planet's strata.' His radar ears twitched. 'The core of this planetoid is composed entirely of this substance.'

The Doctor was aghast. 'You mean to say there's cream in them thar hills?' he asked, pointing to a distant range of mountains.

'Affirmative.' K9 swivelled about. 'I have now completed a full spectropsychic scan. The hills are made of butterscotch. Nearby is a lake of strawberry jam. The clouds are candyfloss.'

'This whole planet is made of sweets,' said Romana. 'How wonderful.'

'Unless you're a dentist,' mused the Doctor. 'But then, I suppose if you were a dentist round here you'd make a mint.'

'No evidence of mints,' said K9. 'Request permission to explore.'

'Don't go wandering too far,' said the Doctor. K9 trundled off. The Doctor huffed. 'I just said, "Don't go wandering too far."'

'What's wrong with that?' asked Romana.

'Well, whenever I say "Don't go wandering too far,"' said the Doctor, 'people seem to hear it as "Wander as far and as wide as you like, get arrested and expect me to come and rescue you."'

'Not here,' said Romana. 'There's no sign of life.' She took the Doctor's arm. 'You know, I think we ought to get K9 something for his birthday.'

The Doctor wondered. 'What do you give the robot dog who has everything, hmm?'

'I think he'd just appreciate a gesture,' said Romana. She had a brainwave. 'Hold on. Have you heard of the Masterbakers?'

'The what?' asked the Doctor, slightly alarmed.

'The Masterbakers,' repeated Romana more distinctly. 'Of Barastabon.'

'Oh, *those* Masterbakers,' bluffed the Doctor.

'What say,' said Romana, 'I slip off to Barastabon in the TARDIS, and pick up a dedicated sponge? I'll be back here before you can say Theory of Parallel Matter.'

'And we'll tell K9 we baked it,' said the Doctor. 'Clever. Off you go, then.'

Romana slipped into the TARDIS. A moment later it started to disappear.

'And don't go wandering too...Oh, never mind,' said the Doctor.

He needn't have worried. A moment later the TARDIS reappeared in exactly the same spot. Romana tumbled out, carrying a cardboard box, and looking slightly ruffled.

'Are you all right?' asked the Doctor. 'How was Barastabon?'

'That was the easy part,' said Romana. 'But before I got there the TARDIS got knocked off course by a time storm. I arrived on the desolate planet Kendrax and soon discovered from a friendly native that your old enemy the Master had teamed up with the Daleks and the

Cybermen to invade and conquer the universe once and for all. I had only an hour and a half before their deadly Black Dwarf device was going to be focussed on Earth.'

The Doctor gulped. 'What happened?'

'I posed as a slave worker in one of the Daleks' loobitol mines and got into their base. Once inside, I exploited the differences between the Cyber Controller and the Dalek Supreme to bring the Master's so-called Galactic Alliance to its end. And then I went to Barastabon and got the cake.'

'Well done,' said the Doctor grudgingly. Secretly he thought Romana was showing off.

'Shall I go and give this to K9?' asked Romana brightly.

'Yes, yes,' said the Doctor. Romana set off and he followed on. 'Anyone can save the universe,' he muttered, 'but who can do it with style?'

They came upon K9 resting in the shade of a jelly bush. 'Ah, there you are,' said the Doctor. 'Guess what we've got.'

'It is not in my function to hazard inaccuracies.'

Romana held the box up and opened the lid. 'It's a cake.'

K9 trundled forward and extended his probe. 'Baked confection eaten at human birthday celebrations. Not relevant to this unit.' He studied the cake more closely, and saw that written on it in red icing was the message HAPPY BIRTHDAY, K9. His eyescreen blushed red. 'Master, mistress, this unit cannot configure speech patterns...'

'I think that means he doesn't know what to say,' said Romana.

The Doctor took an enormous Turkish sword from his pocket and prepared to cut the cake. 'Unless you'd like to use your laser, K9.'

K9 halted suddenly and his sensors clicked and whirred. 'Alert, master, mistress. This cake is not a cake.'

'Not a cake? Of course it's a cake, K9.'

'Negative. This is a living organism.'

The Doctor sighed and whispered to Romana, 'I hope you got a receipt from those Masterbakers.'

Romana was puzzled. 'Well, it wasn't alive when I bought it,' she hissed back.

The Doctor leaned over the cake and cleared his throat. 'Er, hello? Excuse me?'

'Oh, hello,' said the Cake.

'What are you?' asked Romana.

'Er,' said the Cake. 'I'm a cake, I think.'

'What sort of cake?'

'I'm a sponge.'

The Doctor snapped his fingers. 'I've got it! The unique atmospheric conditions here, combined with a trip through time and space with contact from the TARDIS's telepathic circuits, has given this cake a sentience of its own.'

'I think that's about it,' said the Cake. 'So I'd rather you didn't eat me. I mean, I know that's what cakes are for, but, er, well, I'm having trouble expressing myself, having only just gained my own sentience, you know, and I -'

The Doctor held up a hand. 'All right, all right. Of course we're not going to eat you.'

'Suggest,' said K9, 'the Cake be allowed to thrive in this biosphere.'

'A life form's just what this planet needs,' said Romana.

'That sounds fantastic,' gushed the Cake. 'I must say, I do like the look of this planet. I'll stay here, set up home, and one day I'll have slices. And they might have little cupcakes of their own.'

'Sounds lovely,' said Romana.

'Affirmative,' said K9.

'Go on, then,' said the Doctor. He placed the box on the ground.

And they watched as the Cake sprang out into its new world. It bounced away over the butterscotch hills and was soon lost to sight.

'Sorry about that, K9,' said Romana. 'We weren't to know *that* would happen.'

'Never mind,' said the Doctor. 'We can still make the best of it.' He picked a few scones from a nearby tree, dabbed some cream on them and passed them round.

'You know, Romana,' said the Doctor as he took his first bite, 'after today I'll never look at a jelly baby the same way again.' He grinned. 'Happy birthday, K9!'

Nothing at the End of the Lane

by Daniel O'Mahony

Part One: The Valiant Woman

A searing finger of light stretched into the clouds, trembled, and broke apart.

Barbara thought it was a new sun, a bright new star rising in the south. It turned the sky black, then rust. The light had the cast of a dying cigarette, and the air tasted as surely of coarse ash. She felt soiled, sick in her lungs, so she stopped breathing. She could still taste the air, but now it came through her skull, filtered through a membrane into her brain.

Her head swung back to the window. She felt her body evaporate as she turned, melting into a collection of memories, a distant sensation of weight and cold. The window was gone, too; she touched the world without barriers of flesh or glass. The bus turned the corner of Hampson Avenue but the familiar row of shops was no longer there. She saw the skull beneath the storefronts.

These are the last days.

London's buildings spread around her in rings and tiers. The guts of houses were scattered on the roadside, bristling with smoke. Further out, on the horizon, was the city of landmarks: Big Ben's tower, dark-dialled and chimeless; St Paul's dome cracked open; ravens flying from the toppled tower; the broken chimneys of Battersea - somehow more affecting than the other devastation. There was a ring of flame around the edge. Someone was burning the Home Counties. Despite the heat, London was frost-lined in permanent winter, and the ice was stained with blood.

If there were living things in London, they had surrendered their natural shapes. The rats might once have been people, living in sewers and behind cracked walls. The insects were now men, shambling through the wrecked city with their angular heads bent to the will of the new world. Other shapes, machine shapes, carried their geometric standard through the conquered streets. Large as life - larger - the slick black Thames spluttered, carrying barges and refuse and dark cargo out of the city.

Barbara screamed out on the desolation.

Barbara sits on the same old bus she's ridden every morning since August. It's just pulled away from the stop at the coal merchant's on Bestall Row. She's not screaming. She jostles as the wheels stumble on the road surface, her eyelids droop, spittle forms on her lips. She cold-sweats all over; except for an untouched patch of flesh just below her left shoulder. No one's looking.

She isn't screaming.

She ran. Her legs, her heart, pumped to a kettledrum beat. Storybook monsters were close on her heels. When she couldn't run, she hid in plain sight.

The new sun rose again and burst. It rained suddenly. The warm blast was wet, thrilling. Stray hairs glued themselves on to her forehead and neck. Embers fell from the red sky, and sparks. She picked one out of the air with the tip of her tongue. Her legs buckled and spilled from beneath her. She giggled. The laugh stuttered itself, a klaxon rising and falling.

The windowpane was still there, intangible. She tried to put her hand through it but caught a palmful of static. Flashpoint light filtered through the window, exposing the razor-sharp veins of every dormant fragment in the glass. The glass had a mechanical rumble; so did her stomach, part hunger, part nausea. The pressure under her temples was delicate and fluid. If she moved her head, she would feel the slippery pain shift behind her eyes.

The worst of it is over.

Above her, another distraction, was a sky made of fire and tiger-pattern clouds. Ships sailed through it, silhouettes that sang in alien voices. They looked like stubby little planes or flying saucers or rockets or giant moths or B-52s or the face of God, and there were more angles still to look from. They were the engine purr, the sparks falling, the ash sky, the living rust, the city and the sun, the random images in her head falling like bombs, hatching like new worlds, and the only word in her head was...

crammed together times and spaces collided in a burst

Exterminate!

A bell tolled overhead. She was afraid she'd had the attack at school but it rang again, a prissy pinging, reminding her of the bus. Her eyes wandered over a row of hollow faces, arranged unevenly opposite. There were no children. There was nothing curious or contemptuous about their eyes. A few registered something morbid as she watched them watching her. Her sickness unsettled them, making them sick. She smiled to reassure them, but under her skin her heart thump-thumpthumped.

There was a hiss of exertion from the bus as it came to a halt. Cold soggy air had a chance to drift in and cool her down. She had travelled barely a mile; the attack had lasted *centuries*. The stationary bus juddered excitedly, then seethed and swung back out on to the road.

London winters were harsher and darker than Barbara remembered. A spectral reflection rode alongside her, fading in and out as the bus passed through fog banks. She resented the severe, sexless face and the sculpted hair. Her eyes, subtle and strong, barely showed. She saw traces of visionary sickness in the stern lines of her face. The attacks bored her, made her queasy, but no longer frightened her. The bus, thoughtless, trundled on.

Anymorefaresplease?

A conductor came down from the upper deck and moved along the aisle. The grey cast of his uniform made him look as though he'd stepped straight from a telescreen. His voice betrayed a faint Caribbean tang. Barbara's accent, never strong, was already gone.

One day the attack won't end.

You'll never get back down to Earth.

'One adult return to Coal Hill,' she said.

'Are you all right, missus?' the conductor asked. He put a hand to his lips. Barbara reached out for her own face, in imitation. Her fingertips came back red. A glance in the window showed her the blood seeping from her lower lip. Her tongue licked over a tooth-shaped gash. She reached mechanically for a tissue.

Someone had once said, perhaps unkindly, that Barbara Wright was a typical schoolmistress. There was a sliver of flint in her heart, they'd added. She's taken that overheard remark away, nursed it, felt wounded whenever it came back to her.

Her reflection in the cloakroom mirror was a wisp under a fine skin of frost. It would have to do - there was nowhere more private on school premises. The staffroom had been deserted when she arrived, which suited her. She didn't want anyone to see her bleed.

For a year she'd been carrying a bottle of iodine in her bag, in case of emergencies. She dabbed a little on to her seeping, sore lip.

She bared her teeth to the mirror and tried not to scream.

Her lower lip burned. In the mirror the cut glowed a furious magenta. She covered it with make-up, trying to turn it into a full red smile. It ended up as a grimace. The old sickness was still rich in her stomach. The attack on the bus was the strongest she'd known as an adult.

Once Barbara would have said, perhaps unkindly, that Coal Hill was a typical mediocre London mixed grammar school. Some force of cosmic justice had set up the string of coincidences and disasters that landed her at the shadowy iron gates of the school, a few miles and twenty-three years from her birthplace. The meanest irony was that she found herself teaching a syllabus she enjoyed. She had enthusiasm to communicate. When she stood before a class, she didn't so much teach as sing. She had come to fear it might slip away.

Coal Hill was still a typical mediocre London grammar school but now it had a good teacher.

There was a faint knock. The door pushed open and a half-familiar face peered in.

'Hello,' he said. 'Who's in there?'

Barbara didn't turn. 'It's just me. Miss Wright'

Mr Chesterton was one of the science masters. She knew him better than most. She'd sometimes catch him smiling at her in the staffroom or in assembly, and feel not only encouraged but welcomed. He wore a familiar air, English and contradictory. She could picture him in a cardigan long before she ever saw him wear one; she imagined him reading A.A. Milne or the less Angry works of Kingsley Amis; she guessed his politics were Liberal, wrong but romantic; and he wore the school tie proudly.

'What are you up to? Are you all right?' He eased further through the door, comfortable in his movements. He wasn't a large man, only a little taller than Barbara. A lot of the girls thought he was very physical, very *disby*. Barbara wasn't sure.

She turned. Her mouth was still stinging. She made him a placid smile.

'I'm fine, Mr Chesterton, but thank you for asking.'

He smiled. 'You sound like a pupil when you say that.'

'Sorry?'

'*Mr Chesterton.*'

'I'm sorry. *Ian.*' She didn't feel at all awkward. Surprising. 'That's better. Every time someone calls me mister I age a decade.'

'I'll remember,' she said. 'Is something wrong?'

'I thought I'd better warn you. Assembly's five minutes early. Holy Tony's slotted in a couple more hymns.'

'I can manage hymns,' she told him. 'But thank you, Ian.'

She moved to join him at the door. Already she was in the assembly hall, her face raised to the ceiling, voice trembling and spirit rapt. Around her the other teachers and children wrung out their own

chorus, but she was soaring alone, and the pain on her mouth melted into air.

*He who would valiant be, 'gainst all disaster,
Let him in constancy, follow the master;
There's no discouragement, shall make him once relent,
His first avow'd intent, to be a pilgrim.*

After that the rest of the day might have gone smoothly.

Her last class was held in C4, the smallest of the history venues, inevitably cramped up with tired student bodies, all agitating to go home after the long and bitter day. Barbara was relieved that Thursday's timetable put her in with a good class, an attentive collection of fifteen-year-olds who'd come too far with their subject to give much trouble. None would give her trouble: she had started off with a fierce reputation and meant to keep it.

C4's other great disadvantage was its proximity to C3, home to Ian Chesterton's *stinks* lab. Today it stank. Sulphur seeped through the wall. Usually Barbara could ignore it, but today it reminded her of the iodine taste on her lip. Ian too - she expected to bump into him on the way home today. He'd be heavy with the mixed scent of chemicals and disinfectant soap. He always had the good grace to seem embarrassed about it.

One by one the class filed to the front to hand in their afternoon's work. Today's papers were an exercise she had devised to illustrate Huskisson's Sliding Scale using modern prices. She flipped through the first as the stragglers came forward. She would spend another week on the Corn Laws, then move on to the Chartist or possibly back to the French Revolution. She was saving Cromwell for warmer days.

Something obvious sat on the page in front of her, a taunt. It took her a moment to spot. She checked the name on the top of the sheet and went for the girl. Almost immediately she realised she was making a mistake, but her temper, building imperceptibly through the day, had taken over.

'What's this?' she asked. Demanded. Her victim shrank behind her desk.

'Please,' she stammered. 'I know it's wrong now I didn't realise when I put it in. I'm sorry.'

'I didn't ask for this in dollars and cents, Susan.'

The girl's head sank into her shoulders. She was a petite girl, and Barbara felt as if every harsh word was damaging her physically. The

other children, some sitting, some still gathered round the fringes of C4, were beginning to laugh, spotting a ripe opportunity in their midst.

'I thought we were using decimal currency. I didn't think...'
Barbara snapped then, snapped back at the girl, called her silly in front of the class. That was it; she'd gone too far.

The laughter around her was callous, shocking. Paranoia: *are they laughing at me?* A glance at Susan, cowed, told her otherwise. Unexpectedly, Susan shot up from behind the desk. Barbara almost felt struck, almost stumbled back.

'Of course,' she blurted, 'we don't have decimal currency yet. Cents and dollars,' she added, a low, longing murmur.

The girl dissolved back into her seat, looking as foolish as Barbara felt.

Of course - Barbara felt the words moving silently on her mouth, as though they had captured something profound. She gazed down on the fringe of dark hair, on the mute china-doll face. Susan Foreman had been a problem from day one, for too many inexpressible reasons.

'You'll stay behind after class Susan. I want to talk to you.'

The silence that walked her to the front was sudden and intense. Miss Wright had taken another proud step towards becoming the feared disciplinarian she had longed to be.

She turned over the blotting paper in her hands: an inky butterfly stained it, caught in a scratched hexagon. It had been dry and folded inside one of Susan's copybooks. There was a low buzz at the back of Barbara's head when she studied it. It looked unearthly.

'What does this mean?' she asked.

Susan sat alone at her desk in the middle of the room. C4 was cavernous without the usual throng. Chillier, too - the heat left the room with the class. Susan, passive, appeared mummified by the cold.

'I didn't mean to snap at you,' Barbara said. Partly she wanted the girl to open up, but there was a genuine wound to heal, too. 'I just think you're much too bright to make a clumsy mistake like that. Is everything all right?'

Susan's books always came in filled with odd fragments of paper. Stories mainly. Barbara had enough to fill a folder, or a novel. Singly they looked childish and imaginative, something that hadn't been worked out of the girl's system, but the more Barbara gathered the more disturbed she felt.

'Is it true you've written a book, Miss Wright?'

Taken aback, Barbara nodded. 'Not quite. My dissertation was published.'

Susan perked up, genuinely interested. 'What's it about?'

'The fall of the Aztecs.' Susan's question pleased her. South American history had been her speciality. Not unexpectedly, it wasn't taught at Coal Hill. 'How do you know this Susan?'

'Everyone talks about it.' Her head moved and twitched as she spoke, her body shaking under the grey fabric of her dress. 'We gossip about you all the time,' she stammered on. 'Only we don't c-call you by your real names.' Her lips tightened suddenly, realising that she had given away too much playground lore.

'Really?' Barbara feigned a relaxed interest. 'What do they call me?' Susan's head bobbed slightly. Silence beat.

'Rosa Klebb,' she said. 'You know, from *From Russia with Love*.'

'I haven't read it.' Barbara lied. She didn't feel moved, one way or another.

Susan grinned, the smile of the condemned. *The French Revolution next*, Barbara decided. She sensed Susan would enjoy it.

'I'll be honest with you.' She sighed, or perhaps yawned. The tired, dead time after school was catching up with her. 'You're in a good class, probably the best in the school. You're the most able, definitely the brightest pupil I have at the moment.'

The little face glowed - pride or maybe fear. When she had been silent and defiant there'd been an alien arrogance in her face, something dispassionate, something sexual. That was gone. As Barbara talked, the girl was turning baggy and shapeless.

'Coal Hill being what it is, you'll be going on to university as a matter of course,' Barbara half smiled. It was a subversive little statement. Susan, still glowing, barely noticed. 'But you have a real talent. You have potential, Susan, and I think it would be best if we started to hone that. You can be achieving now rather than later, do you understand?'

Susan's head nodded unsteadily, as though it were about to drop off.

'I think you ought to specialise. I've got some details of supplementary teaching and home tuition that you might like to look at and -'

'Home?' Susan's voice was as delicate as her face. Now it was sharp.

'Yes, I know it doesn't sound very attractive, but it would only be a couple of hours a week,' Barbara explained patiently. 'You don't have to decide now, but you should give it some -'

Susan was already away from her desk, the legs of her chair scratching on the floor.

'Susan?' Barbara protested.

'I can't,' she pronounced shrilly. 'My grandfather wouldn't let me.'

She was making for the door. Barbara glided across the floor to intercept her, heard a sheaf of papers raining from her desk, barely looked but stretched out steadying hands to clutch at Susan's arching bony shoulders. The girl dropped easily away from her and between the door jambs. Barbara swung and found Susan's face, reddened, teeth bared, eyes sparking, frantic breathing through the grille of her teeth.

'*Susan*,' Barbara heard herself wailing. Miss Wright the disciplinarian was gone. 'I'd need to talk to your grandfather anyway. Maybe I should -'

Susan cut her off again. 'He doesn't like strangers!' she barked.

She was out of the door. Barbara went after her.

Susan hissed, burning colour in a monochrome passageway.

'*He doesn't like strangers!*' That was a snarl, a real snarl. Then she ran down the corridor and was lost out of sight.

Ten minutes later Barbara blinked. Ian Chesterton shambled by, swathed in his large dark raincoat. He raised a cheery hand and tipped his head to her. Barbara was paralysed. Every muscle in her face was aching, and there was blood on her mouth.

Susan avoided her gaze for over a week, becoming an undistinguished blur in classes whose faces otherwise grew familiar, saying as little as possible. After a week Barbara's patience ran out and she took a request to the deputy headmaster. Another week's wrangling got her an answer.

Mr Kint was a thin but robust Irishman. He had a sardonic slab face that would crack, in happier moments, into a thoughtful, gentle mask. When he came back to Barbara his lips were pinned back on his face. It was not one of his happier moments. His voice was rich and bitter, like wine.

'Try to remember,' he warned her, handing over the address, 'that this is a modest little school and we'd best be closer informed of your... initiatives in future.'

Barbara took the address mutely. She had already convinced the headmaster that she was acting in Susan's best interests, and Kint was simply irritated at being outmanoeuvred.

'I just want to talk to her grandfather,' she replied softly.

'The child's been here barely five months,' Kint rumbled on. 'She might just be having difficulty settling in.'

Barbara took the barb without a word. But she asked, 'Do you know which school she was at before she came here?'

Kint kept quiet.

London policemen had become strange, chubby creatures in Gilbert and Sullivan uniforms. Barbara remembered noble, angular men, *dangerous* men, skins glazed with sweat and blackened by smoke. They'd put on flab in her absence. The one she found prowling in the fog that evening might have been Dixon himself - from the tele, not the film - his clothes bleached by mint-white fog. He tipped his head at her as she approached. She asked after Totter's Lane.

The weather obscured everything, including the street plaques. The street lamps were smashed, dark and useless, but the fog had a faint luminescence, enough to see by. The constable pointed her deeper into the damp heart of the fog, before turning, silently, to be eaten by it.

Totter's Lane was a glorified alley, dank, dirty, cast in brick. Barbara's first thought was that it was a dismal place to live, but as she moved down the street she began to doubt that anyone lived here at all. In the first five minutes she passed a garage, a row of lock-ups, a railway siding, but no houses, and no sign of life. A cat spit-screamed, startled her. Children, silhouettes, flashed in and out of the fog, on bikes, but she was used to children. The first of the raw house fronts she found was number 92, then 90. Heartened, she moved on.

She almost walked straight by number 76. If the fog hadn't parted at the right moment, she would have skipped it altogether, and moved down the next terrace. But it was there, a great nothing between Numbers 74 and 78, a nothing with gates.

I.M. FOREMAN
Scrap Merchant
76 TOTTER'S LANE

It was the right name at least. Anything else on the gates and she would have dismissed it as a clerical error, but here was Susan's surname in foot-high painted letters ahead of her.

There was probably a house inside, she guessed, on the yard. Susan had always suggested that her grandfather was a doctor.

Is she ashamed of living here?

She wondered what to do now, and as she wondered the gates swung in on themselves, as though nudged by her curiosity. Cautiously, she moved through, reminding herself she had an excuse, and there was no need to be frightened. The air on the far side of the gate felt warmer and stickier than outside, and the clammy dampness vanished, replaced

by a spicy tang. There was no fog.

None at all.

There was much less space in the yard than she would have guessed from the gates; every available square inch was filled with junk and clutter. She put her head round the gate and knocked it on a large, ornate birdcage. The disturbance set a table and a hat stand toppling. They crumpled silently and slowly, throwing a mushroom of dust into the air. The headache whine in Barbara's head grew sharper, like panic.

Now would be a good time to give up and go home.

You've stepped through a magic door and stand on the cusp of another world.

A line of railings glistened against the far brick wall, spars rusting out of the warped bracket, tips sharpened into assegais. A plaster head, its skull caved in - *a good rock-thrash on the temple would do it* - watched her balefully with one good eye. A hooded madonna prayed from a side table. Her every step set the premises shaking and the bric-a-brac whispering.

She stumbled through the wreckage, reminding herself that she was looking for a building, no matter how small, that might serve as Susan's home. Instead she found herself starring at a police box, a plain London police box, unremarkable except for its surroundings.

Well, they're hardly going to be living in there!

She put her palm to the side of the box.

Under her fingertips, faintly but certainly, there was a vibration.

Countdown to TV Action

by Gary Russell

This story takes place between *Zeron Invasion* and
The Deadly Choice

Dr Who sighed and considered the two invitations in his hand. Both had arrived at his country cottage in that morning's mail (old Hooper the postie had even winked as he handed them over - both envelopes were laced with perfume) and both spelled trouble.

One was from Dr Who's friend Miss Brown, a local newspaper reporter he had first met shortly after his exile to Earth by the Time Lords, asking him to accompany her to a formal dinner in aid of the Lindfield Society.

The other came from Miss Young, a rather more flighty young lady who wanted him to accompany her to a party being thrown by the makers of that dreadful daily television drama, *The Squire of Crampton*. Miss Young had recently been working for the television company in some secretarial position.

Trouble was, both were to take place on the same evening: next Thursday. Of course, the easiest thing to do was to go to neither - but Dr Who could immediately picture their disappointed faces. No, he would need a genuine third option to get him out of this mess. Vogans, Uggrakks and Daleks were nothing compared with young human females in a mood.

The telephone rang. Dr Who hoped this would be the beginning of some new adventure to take him away - preferably off Earth, and long enough for next Thursday to pass without recrimination.

'Hello? Dr Who speaking.'

'This is Peter Tait, secretary to Oswald Holland at the Ministry of Defence. The minister would like to talk to you. Would you hold the line, please?' Tait was gone before Dr Who could reply and, after a couple of clicks and buzzes, a new voice could be heard.

'Hello, may I talk to Dr Who?'

'You already are, Minister,' snapped Dr Who. He didn't like the minister very much. Men from the ministry tended to have small, closed minds. 'What can I do for you this time?'

The minister cleared his throat. 'Datted odd thing, you understand.

Film crew vanished. In Devon. By the sea. General Maxwell-Lennon thought this would be right up your street, if you get my drift. So, pop down to Haylock-on-Sea and sort this mess out, what? Gone to film some archaeologists, as we understand it. Must dash. Toodle-pip.'

And Oswald Holland was gone.

'I'll give you "toodle-pip",' muttered Dr Who. Still, it would get him out into the open air, and Betsy could do with a good drive.

A few hours later, map unfurled on the passenger seat, Dr Who, sporting a long, flowing cape, was driving his sprightly yellow Edwardian roadster along the road to Devon, ruffled white hair blowing in the wind. He frequently overtook little red sports cars, doing a good ninety as he nipped around tight corners, the souped-up engine coping excellently with the small roadways. Angry drivers flashed headlights or beeped horns, but Dr Who took absolutely no notice of them. He'd passed driving tests on a hundred planets.

Within a matter of hours, he was in the tiny seaside village of Haylock-on-Sea, the fresh air revitalising him after the journey. The first thing he noticed after parking Betsy and wandering down the main street was how quiet it was. The familiar cawing of the seagulls that populated the English coastline was conspicuous by its absence, and without it, the atmosphere was strangely muted. The second thing he noticed was the distinct lack of people. It was mid-afternoon on a glorious July day. Even if there weren't any tourists milling around, the locals ought to have been going about their business.

'How odd,' Dr Who muttered, echoing Oswald Holland's thoughts.

From the corner of his eye, he saw a blur of familiar blue passing behind a couple of parked cars. Civilisation, at last.

'Excuse me,' he called out to the policeman. 'I say, old chap...'

But the policeman completely ignored him.

How rude, Dr Who thought, moving a tad faster, hoping to catch up with the wretched man.

'Excuse me,' he called again.

This time, the policeman did seem to react - and walked straight into a postbox.

If Dr Who thought this would give him an opportunity to strike up a conversation, he was very wrong. The policeman still ignored his calls but instead wandered back to between the two parked cars where Dr Who had first spotted him. Turning crisply on his heel, the policeman once again faced the postbox but stood motionless now, eyes closed.

As Dr Who finally reached him, the policeman's eyes opened and he

mouthed counting to himself.

'Three, two, one...' And he sprang into life again, walking back towards the postbox. Dr Who was relieved to see that he didn't blunder into it this time, but neatly sidestepped it. As he did this, a butcher's shop door opened and an old man wearing a blue-striped apron and straw boater walked out, and greeted the policeman.

'Mornin', Jack,' he said.

'Morning, Mr O'Neill,' replied the policeman.

Without another word, the butcher went back into his workplace and shut the door. Simultaneously, another door opened - this time that of the local post office. A small, elderly lady with glasses on a chain around her neck and a blue cardigan shuffled out. She smiled at the policeman. 'Hello, George...' she said, and then grimaced.

'Jack,' said the policeman.

'Jack,' the elderly lady echoed and disappeared back inside.

Without breaking step, the policeman turned around and retraced his steps to the butcher. Dr Who was not too surprised therefore when O'Neill the butcher came out but didn't utter a word. He merely turned back to his shop, placed his hand on the doorknob and closed his eyes. The policeman had similarly shut his eyes and was again counting under his breath. On three, O'Neill silently re-entered his shop, and the policeman again approached the post office. Sure enough, the elderly lady emerged, this time greeting him as Jack and the two discussed the weather.

Dr Who's observation of this bizarre ritual was interrupted by a hiss from behind him.

'Oi,' said a quiet voice, 'You. Dandy. Come here.'

Dr Who walked towards the bedraggled man who had spoken. Unshaven, hair a mess, his eyes flicked around wildly, as if terrified he might be seen talking to Dr Who.

'You're not from round here, are you?' The man reached out and felt Dr Who's Edwardian cape and ruffled shirt. 'No, you're a stranger!'

'Who are you?'

The man opened his mouth to answer but no words came out. 'I...I don't remember.' Then he shrugged. 'But my name's not important. You're from the government, aren't you? Come to find out what's going on here, yes?'

The man was perceptive, Dr Who had to credit him with that. 'Yes, the Government sent me. I've come to find a TV film crew actually, but I must say I'm intrigued by this village.'

The bedraggled man took a step back. 'The film people? No...no not

them. You can't be with them!"

Dr Who held out his hands, to show he meant no harm. The film crew obviously filled this poor wretch with a terrible fear. 'I'm not 'with' them, just *looking* for them.'

But the bedraggled man turned and ran away, through some bushes and around the back of a small cottage. Dr Who tried to chase after him, but he had vanished completely.

A cat stared up at Dr Who instead, looking very hungry and unkempt. It mewed plaintively and, when Dr Who crouched down to pet it, it rubbed its cheek against his hand, purring furiously.

'No one's taken much notice of you recently, have they?' Dr Who said.

'Can I help you?'

Dr Who stood up sharply and faced a large woman, in an ill-fitting gingham dress, a white apron wrapped around her waist. Her hair was tugged back in a fierce bun and it flashed through Dr Who's mind that there was enough of her to make two or three reasonably-sized women.

He smiled. 'Good afternoon, madam. My name is Dr Who. I'm a scientist, looking for the archaeological TV crew who were supposed to be nearby. Have you seen them?'

The large woman frowned, and then shoved a pudgy hand inside her apron, pulling out a sheaf of papers, and began thumbing through them, shaking her head as she scanned each page. She gave Dr Who another sharp look, cleared her throat and put the papers away.

'Can I help you?' she repeated.

Before Dr Who could respond, a new voice sounded from behind him. He glanced around and, for a moment, thought the bedraggled man had returned - but quickly realised something was different. The clothes were the same, certainly, but the hair looked... odd. And the eyes, nose, no, the entire face had changed. Younger...

The hair was a wig, he realised. It was as if the man Dr Who had spoken to earlier had been replaced by someone else entirely.

The large woman also seemed momentarily surprised by this, but after a short pause she simply asked him what he was doing in her garden. The bedraggled man said he was a down-and-out tramp called James Baikie, looking for his sister, whom he hadn't spoken to in ten years as he'd run away from home after discovering their father having 'relationships' with the local nurse while their mother was in hospital (she'd been injured apparently when a new neighbour's dog had run out under her bicycle while she had been dashing to see the old lady who lived alone in a farm after *her* husband and sons had been killed in a

plane crash in Venezuela).

Dr Who wasn't sure which was more perplexing - that this strange man who wasn't who he had been moments earlier was explaining his life story in one long sentence, or the fact that the large woman replied in a series of unfinished words, splutters and giggles.

'I'm so sorry,' she said finally, and the bedraggled man just smiled.

Before Dr Who could butt in, the woman cleared her throat loudly and again asked the bedraggled man if she could help him. And he promptly launched into the same story, word for word, breath for breath. It was as if Dr Who wasn't there.

Leaving these apparently mad villagers behind him, Dr Who made his way back to Betsy and drove off, heading further towards the coastline. He hoped he might find some answers there.

He could see the dig easily enough as he drove closer - vast marquees and Land Rovers picked out the spot, on the side of a steep hill overlooking a natural bay. Also there was the distinctive green and grey livery of the BBC3 vehicles: a generator lorry, a small Winnebago with MAKE-UP written on a large white sheet of paper taped to it, and a huge canteen truck, the side hatchway open and a couple of grimy dishes and plates abandoned there. The strangest thing was that, for a pretty steep hill, there was no grass, bushes or trees. The hillside was completely bare of everything but mud and grime. He knew TV crews could be a little...careless sometimes, but it was unheard of for them to destroy the locality to this extent.

Parking Betsy in as dry a patch as he could find, Dr Who inspected the canteen first. Where there were meals being served, there were usually people.

Nothing.

He walked into the kitchen itself, and winced at the smell of decayed food. He sniffed cautiously at a bottle of milk. 'Open two days, possibly getting on for three.'

Leaving the canteen, he popped his head into Make-up, but, apart from some abandoned magazines there were no clues there either. He wandered towards the marquee, correctly assuming that the dig entrance would be beneath it. He sniffed around the upturned earth - it was harder here, protected from the elements - and rubbed some between his fingers. 'Not been disturbed too recently - again, I'd guess at two days. This is most odd.'

Then he heard a noise. A shuffle somewhere. A soft moan...

'Hello,' he said, rising to his feet. 'My name is Dr Who and I'm a

scientist looking for the archaeological TV crew.'

No answer.

'I'm a friend. Who are you? *Where* are you?'

The scrabbling sound again. Dr Who traced it to a trestle table, covered with a tarpaulin. Slowly pulling it away, he revealed a young boy, who stared up at him in terror.

'Please, mister, it wasn't my fault they all went away!'

Fifteen minutes later, Dr Who had made friends with young Timmy Drake and they were sharing hot, milkless tea, and a couple of cup cakes that weren't too stale. Timmy explained that he was there with his dad, the famous actor Pelham 'Daffy' Drake, star of Miss Young's favourite programme, *The Squire of Crampton*. The Drakes lived locally - indeed, to the locals in the village Daffy was a bit of a celebrity and superstar. He'd been asked to be present when the TV scientist Jeremiah Scratch began the dig, being filmed for a BBC3 science programme. While Dr Who didn't know Timmy's dad, he knew of Scratch. The two had met often; Dr Who often obliged whenever BBC3 needed an expert in outer space on their shows. Scratch was an unpleasant, arrogant man, but no villain.

Timmy explained further that, the moment Scratch had entered the tunnel into the hillside, he had discovered a strange growth on the sides of the tunnels that he claimed hadn't been there when they first began digging. Timmy remembered his father saying the strange moss was growing on his gumboots, and one of the cameramen had pointed to some on his precious equipment.

'What happened then, Timmy?'

Timmy took a deep breath. 'Well, Dr Who, the trees came to life and started walking around. Then everyone went into the tunnel - the cameraman, soundman, the director. Even the nice lady from Make-up. They just marched in and then the grass sank underground and my daddy made me hide under the table while he went looking for Mr Scratch and the others.'

'That was very brave of him, Timmy,' said Dr Who kindly. 'And braver still of you to stay put. Well done. I just hope that your father hasn't been kidnapped, murdered or eaten by these walking trees.'

Timmy looked as if this thought hadn't occurred to him previously, his eyes widening in fear.

'Of course, that's unlikely,' Dr Who added hurriedly. 'Trees rarely eat people.'

Timmy did not look any the less fearful. 'There is one other thing,

Dr Who,' Timmy stammered. 'I watched from under the table and, although everyone else had vanished, I did see Mr Scratch come back out. He was carrying a strange glass thing.'

'What was it?'

'I don't know.'

Dr Who sighed. 'Describe it, Timmy.'

'Oh, I see. It was sort of like a globe, but see-through. I think inside I could see the moss stuff. But I'm not sure.'

Dr Who thought about this. Then nodded. 'Of course, I should have guessed.'

'What?'

'Somehow this moss is a living life form, and it's taken over Scratch, as well as absorbing the memories of the film crew. Scratch must have gone back to the village, and that's infected all the villagers. Now they're living their lives like actors in a dreadful daily serial. And that poor wretch I met, the real James Baikie, must have broken free of the thing's control! When he spoke to me, whoever's controlling Scratch was alerted to the fact that I was there. So they replaced him with a "new actor", hoping I wouldn't notice.' He smiled. 'All I have to do is find Scratch, destroy that globe and everyone's minds will return to their rightful bodies and everything will return to normal.'

Timmy was open-mouthed with admiration. 'Gosh, how did you work all that out?'

Dr Who patted Timmy's head. 'Because I'm Dr Who and I'm a scientist.'

Twenty minutes later, Dr Who and Timmy drove back into the village, which was deserted once again. Parking Betsy outside the local pub, the 'Cap'n And Buried Treasure', Dr Who told Timmy to stay put. 'This could be dangerous, Timmy,' he warned.

But, as soon as Dr Who had gone inside the building, Timmy got out of the sprightly yellow Edwardian roadster and sneaked up the driveway that ran along the side of the pub, jumping up at the frosted windows, hoping to see Dr Who inside. But he was not tall enough, so he tugged on some vines growing up the brickwork and began climbing them, hoping to get to a larger window.

Inside the pub it was dark. Dr Who turned on all the lights and, sure enough, seated in the centre of the room was Jeremiah Scratch, frowning at the globe in front of him. It was bigger than Dr Who had expected, about the size of a ripe Venusian GuzzleFruit, or a well-endowed Earth pumpkin. Inside, the moss was clearly moving about

and Scratch was nodding at it, presumably communicating using alpha waves and some kind of thought projection.

Dr Who was about to disturb Scratch, when there was a shout from outside the pub.

"Timmy!"

Dr Who ran out and glanced at Betsy. The boy wasn't there.

"Dr Who, save me, please!"

'Great Venusian vegetables!' exclaimed Dr Who as he saw Timmy, hanging upside down, held by the now living vines that had detached themselves from the pub wall. Walking on their roots, they approached Dr Who.

'Stop!' commanded a voice from the pub doorway. The vines stopped moving but didn't relinquish their hold on Timmy - which was just as well as he might have been badly hurt hitting the concrete driveway if they had.

'Scratch!'

'Ah, yes, my old sparring partner, Dr Who,' said Scratch. 'Oh, they mocked me. *You* mocked me. *Everyone* mocked me - saying that television would make experts, scientists and thinkers redundant. Saying that the stupid little talking-picture box would one day take over teaching the youth of today. That one day television would mean people need never leave their armchairs. That they could learn from the living room. Shop from the living room. Listen to music from the living room. That one day TV would take over the world! But my new friends have shown me, there's a new revolution going on. They will help me destroy the evil force of television by controlling it with me. We will broadcast signals that will make everyone destroy their televisions and read books. Go to lectures. Visit museums.' Scratch laughed maniacally, almost weeping with joy. 'Oh yes, Dr Who, you may ignore me, but at your peril. When television is gone, mankind will need people like me more than ever. They won't pension *me* off. Never! No. Not ever. Ever!' He let out another cackle of delight.

Unseen by either Scratch or his new best friend, Dr Who, young Timmy Drake was scrabbling around in his pockets for the glasses he never wore. The sun was shining brightly and, as he trained the lenses on the vines holding him, the sun's rays hotted up and the vines began smouldering.

As their grip lessened, Timmy let himself drop a bit, grabbed the main stem and swung himself to the ground.

Dr Who turned at the sound and took in Timmy's ingenious plan in

an instant. 'Well done, Timmy.'

'Where's my daddy?' Timmy yelled at Scratch, who was not laughing any more.

'Hello Timmy,' said Daffy Drake, coming out of the pub behind Scratch. 'Here's Chipper, your pet dog. Shall we go and play ball with him? Up on the heath, behind the village where the escaped convicts are hiding after they ruthlessly shot Mr Langford the post master a few weeks ago?'

'I don't have a pet dog,' Timmy wailed.

'Woof,' barked Chipper as if gently pointing out he was wrong.

'Listen to me, Scratch,' Dr Who said. 'Surely you don't believe this alien moss is telling you the truth? Aliens never do that, and I should know. I think you'll find it has a far more sinister purpose in taking over a TV film crew and making these poor stereotypical English villagers think they're in Mr Drake's daily drama!'

Daffy Drake froze suddenly, then blinked and went back into the pub, followed obediently by Chipper. When he emerged again, he carried the globe. 'It is time,' he enunciated slowly.

'No,' Scratch shouted. 'It can't be. I haven't destroyed Alexandra Palace yet!'

But Drake dropped the glass globe to the ground, where it shattered. Before everyone's astonished eyes, the tiny pieces of moss came together and from all over the village more moss swarmed to join it. The roadway was briefly carpeted in green until the lumps formed themselves into a shape - the shape of a smallish man, but with bright-green skin, big pointed ears, a snout and huge almond-shaped eyes. Somehow, some of the moss transmuted into a white spacesuit, gloves, boots and a lethal-looking laser pistol, which the creature aimed at Dr Who.

'You guessed too much, Dr Who. For that, you must die, like all the creatures on this backward, primitive, insignificant planet. Except those that photosynthesise, of course - they will become the new Masters of Earth!'

Dr Who put his hands on his hips and sneered pompously at the little green alien creature. 'Oh, of course, I should have guessed.'

'What is it?' Timmy asked.

'He's a Klepton Parasite from a planet within the constellation of Badia. They can control all plant life anywhere. Why are you here, Klepton?'

'Our plan is to destroy all life...'

'Except that which photosynthesises,' completed Dr Who. Then he

frowned. 'If you need light to photosynthesise yourself, how come you lived inside the hill?'

The Klepton's snout widened, which Timmy assumed was a smile.

'We are Kleptons. We are alien to you and owe you no explanations. All you can do is accept your domination, subjugation and ultimate destruction!' He stuffed his hand into his pocket and brought out a small green device. It was ticking.

'A bomb!' exclaimed an anxious Timmy.

'No,' Dr Who said. 'I recognise that. It's a Kleptonic Advance Guard Chronomancer. It tells our parasitical little friend here when his main invasion fleet is to arrive.'

'When?' asked Timmy.

'Soon.' The Klepton turned to Scratch. 'You, of course, will be saved, you have served us well. Take these strangers into the hostelry and prepare the hypno-ray.'

Moments later, Dr Who faced a huge projector apparatus set up on the billiard table in the saloon bar.

'The hypno-ray I presume,' Dr Who said. 'This is what you found under the hill, wasn't it, Scratch? You used it on everyone from the film crew, absorbed their minds, and now they populate this village.'

Timmy beamed at his new mentor. 'You know everything, Dr Who.'

Dr Who shrugged. 'Not everything, Timmy, but I'm a scientist and all things have a rational explanation if you consider them logically.'

'I want to be a scientist when I grow up,' Timmy replied.

Dr Who looked serious. 'If you grow up, Timmy. I fear the Klepton Parasites and Mr Scratch will ensure that we become television zombies for ever. Forced to say lines and make moves predetermined by others until one day someone decides we've outlived our usefulness and we get cancelled. Or transferred to some other less popular medium, like books. Or worse - ' Dr Who shuddered - 'audio!'

Scratch emerged from the bar area. 'Are you ready to become a player in the grand daily drama series that is life, Dr Who?'

Dr Who shrugged. 'It doesn't matter a jot, Scratch. You see, I have guessed the Klepton Parasites' plan now. They will use television to broadcast their death rays. Despite what they've promised you about destroying television, they are going to use it. Millions upon millions of people on this world spend six hours a day watching TV. It won't take the Kleptons more than ten hours to wipe out all life. Rather than help rid the world of television, Scratch, you're helping television rid the world of people!' Dr Who thrust forward his bound wrists. 'Free us,

man. Save the world.'

Timmy implored Scratch, 'Look at my daddy, Mr Scratch. They made him a zombie, like everyone else. That cannot be right, surely?'

Scratch opened his mouth to answer, but stopped. Framed in the doorway, eyes staring blankly ahead, no lines to speak, no moves to make, was Daffy Drake. Chipper the dog was similarly stupefied.

And Scratch realised that Dr Who was right. How could he have been so blind as to not see the truth? 'They lied to me,' Scratch muttered. 'The *moss* lied to me!' Scratch looked around and saw a billiard cue, lifted it and brought it down hard on the hypno-ray projector, smashing it.

The effect on Drake and Chipper was instant - they both woke up. The dog tried to get its bearings, realised it didn't know who Drake was, barked ferociously and ran into the street.

Drake himself rubbed his eyes, taking in his son and a stranger tied up, and Jeremiah Scratch waving a billiard cue around. 'Scratch? Timmy? What is going on?'

'Dad!' Timmy stood up but couldn't run over as his feet were bound. Scratch ran to the bar, found a steak knife and quickly freed his prisoners. 'I must destroy the living moss,' he muttered and dashed off.

'Let him go,' Dr Who said and introduced himself to Drake. 'Your son is a brave boy, Mr Drake. You should be proud of him.'

Scratch stood in the middle of the village main street, looking for the Klepton. Around him, the villagers were standing around looking confused, although not as confused as the film crew, who wondered why they were dressed up as villagers as well.

From out of the police station ran the bedraggled man Dr Who had met earlier. The real James Baikie. 'He saved us!' Baikie cried. 'The man from the Ministry has saved us all!'

And Chipper the dog (whose name wasn't really Chipper, but Brutus) bit his ankle!

But of the Klepton, there was no sign.

The Klepton was back at the archaeological dig, in the Outside Broadcast scanner van, making final adjustments. Attached to each camera was a vat of green gas which, using advanced Klepton science, he would broadcast live into millions of homes the world over.

He chuckled to himself. Nothing in this world could stop him now.

Dr Who was running for Betsy, followed by Timmy, Drake and

Scratch, who had agreed to help because he had been so cruelly betrayed. He was carrying two massive plastic cylinders, and some lengths of hose pipe were wrapped around his shoulders. As he threw them into the back of the car he pointed towards the coastal road. 'The dig,' he explained breathlessly. 'He'll use the cameras to destroy the world!'

'How do you know?' Daffy' Drake asked.

'He's Dr Who,' Timmy replied happily. 'He's a scientist!'

The Klepton had set up one spare camera to monitor the skies, watching out for the incoming invasion fleet. Yes! There it was. He got out his pocket communicator and reported to the ship. 'Home in on the frequency of this primitive camera,' he told his fellow Kleptons.

Dr Who braked hard and his new friends jumped out of Betsy and ran towards the cluster of BBC3 vehicles.

'Which one?'

'The one that controls the cameras and everything,' Dr Who yelled.

'Look out!' Scratch stood still in shock. 'The trees are coming to get us!'

Sure enough, over the brow of the hill, three or four trees were walking on their roots 'Timmy, Mr Drake, back of Betsy, quick,' Dr Who ordered. 'Deforestation! Stop the trees!'

Drake frowned, but Timmy understood and dragged his father to the strange cylinders Dr Who had carried.

'Of course,' Drake sighed. 'Weedkiller!' They attached the hoses to the cylinders and began spraying the trees.

Dr Who burst into the scanner van only to be greeted by the Klepton's blaster aimed at his chest. 'Time to die, Dr Who!'

Scratch walked in slowly. 'You betrayed me, Man of Moss!'

'You betrayed yourself, foolish human,' snapped the Klepton.

'Now it is time for your kind to pass into ignoble history and this planet to become the latest outpost for the glorious Klepton Kingdom!'

While he ranted, Dr Who was watching the monitors. On one, he could see the Klepton fleet hovering over the sea, ready to land. Surreptitiously, he twisted the camera dials and knobs.

Scratch lashed out at the little Klepton, punching him on his snout. The Klepton swung a fist back and punched Scratch's knees, and the two fell to the floor, fighting.

Dr Who quickly seized the opportunity to pull an electrical panel

out from the control board and reversed two wires. 'I've neutralised the polarity!' he declared.

'No!' shrieked the Klepton, but it was too late. The Klepton fleet lost its homing beacon and crashed variously into the sea, the rocks or the side of the cliffs.

The Klepton scrambled for his blaster but, before he could fire it, Dr Who and Scratch hurried out of the van.

The Klepton followed them, yanking open the door - and was faced with a pile of dead trees - and with Daffy Drake and his son squirting weedkiller straight at him.

With a terrible screech of agony and anger, the Klepton Parasite turned brown, crisp, brittle...and finally was reduced to dust.

Three days later, Dr Who was a guest of the Drake family at the party celebrating 1000 episodes of *The Squire of Crampton*, enjoying fizzy pop and some delicious sandwiches with them. There was a knock on the door and Dr Who's friend Miss Young opened it, to be greeted by Jeremiah Scratch.

'Mr Scratch,' said Dr Who. 'Any luck?'

Scratch nodded furiously. 'Indeed, Dr Who, indeed. The powers-that-be have created a new channel. BBC4 will be devoted to nothing but educational programmes. I underestimated the power of the medium badly. But never again.'

'And,' added Miss Young, '*The Squire of Crampton* has been renewed for another ten years.'

'Excellent news all round,' Dr Who smiled, slurping his fizzy pop. 'What about you, Timmy? What does your future hold?'

Timmy smiled happily. 'Me? Oh, I'm going to be just like you, Dr Who. I'm going to be a scientist!'

The Queen of Eros

by Trevor Baxendale

The balcony overlooked a wide square dominated by a statue of some ancient dragon - a twisting figurine impaled with a multitude of spears. The monument was dwarfed by the crowd of people filling the area around it, however. There were too many to count, especially from this high up, and the noise was incredible, rising up from ground level in waves of thunderous joy.

The Doctor stepped back from the edge of the balcony, into the cooler gloom, out of sight. The cheering boomed more loudly. The bright sunlight flared on the marble of the balustrade, blinding him for a second.

'This isn't right,' he said. His voice sounded lighter and smaller than he had intended. Clearing his throat, he added, 'I don't like it.'

For a few moments all he could hear was the dull roar of the people outside. Then he heard Asheya step out of the shadows, her feet bare on the glazed stone floor. She was his equal in height, and beautiful, probably. She was smiling at him - a genuine smile full of the same simple happiness and relief that had prompted the crowd to gather outside the palace.

'It's all right,' she said to him softly. 'They're full of joy, that's all.'

'It isn't right,' the Doctor repeated, looking away. The window was a bright archway of yellow light, the balcony glimmering in the afternoon sun.

Asheya walked up to him and rested her hands lightly on his shoulders. 'All is well,' she told him, in that low, musical voice that could sometimes seem almost hypnotic. 'You have brought joy and happiness to our planet, and the people are grateful. They are celebrating, that's all.'

The Doctor dragged a hand over his chin, his mind racing.

'The crowd is delighted,' Asheya told him, as another wave of cheering swelled up from the square. 'Their beloved Queen has at last found a mate, and the future of all Eros is thus assured.'

Her fingers slid up through his long brown hair, so that she could pull him down towards her and kiss him full on the lips, passionately and deeply. She tasted of all the sweet, exotic spices to be found on the planet. Slowly they parted, until all he could see were the amber pools

of her eyes.

'I love you,' she said.

He was still tense, she could tell that even before she touched him. The way he stood, the set of his shoulders; every muscle in his body indicated tension. It was only to be expected, she supposed, given what he had been through, but she knew he healed quickly and sensed that his unhappiness was caused by something other than his injuries.

As she watched those worried blue eyes dart once more to the balcony overlooking the square, Asheya again recalled her first sight of him. Had it been only thirteen nights since Zoleon alerted her to the arrival of the strange blue box in the palace gardens?

The box - the Doctor's TARDIS - had materialised between the aubora trees in the sun grove, a sure sign, in retrospect, of what was to come. Auboras was the bringer of life, of love. There was no more venerated god in the Erosan pantheon.

Asheya had watched him on the scanner, at Zoleon's direction.

'He is beautiful,' she remembered saying.

Zoleon had been instantly alert. 'But *alien*, Your Majesty...'

The Queen had shrugged. 'Not noticeably.'

The Doctor had walked around the gardens with his companion, examining this piece of decorous foliage or that statue, talking all the time in a voice that was hurried but precise, soft yet fine. The Erosan sunlight picked out an auburn shine in his otherwise dark hair as it fell in an exciting tangle around his stiff wing collar.

'We would meet him,' said the Queen simply, aware of her Royal Adviser stiffening beside her. Zoleon urged caution, of course. There was something about this long-haired alien he took an instant dislike to. Perhaps, suggested Asheya, it was because most men on Eros were either feeble-bodied scientists or weak-minded thugs. This man appeared to be neither.

Her curiosity piqued, Asheya ordered his immediate capture. But, as a concession to Zoleon, she agreed that the girl accompanying the stranger was of no value. She could be killed if necessary.

The speed with which the guards surrounded the Doctor and Sam was impressive, and the Doctor congratulated them on it. Predictably, none of the surly-eyed brutes cared for his compliment. The nearest swatted him with the weighted end of his short electrospear and sent him sprawling through the undergrowth trailing sparks. Another two hauled him to his feet, kicked him, cracked his head again for good measure,

and then dragged him off. He was dimly aware that Sam was also being brought along, and hoped they weren't being too rough with her. Or that she wasn't being too rough with them, for that matter. Then the surprises started.

They weren't taken to a dungeon, or even a prison cell to await interrogation. They weren't even accused of some local murder, which was nice. Instead, the party of guards dragged them into a vast room that the Doctor conservatively estimated as about equal in size to Westminster Abbey.

Colourfully decorated people thronged on either side of a wide central walkway of polished silver. Elaborate costumes and jewellery glittered in the light cast by a gigantic leaded window dominating the far end of the hall. It was designed to represent a stylised sun, wavy swords of yellow light radiating from a central, burning, red orb. Planets or moons were dotted around its jagged circumference.

It might have been more impressive if he and Sam hadn't been standing with the tips of spears resting inches from their throats. At the far end of the room stood a magnificently ornate dais. A series of wide, circular steps led up from the polished floor to a massive throne adorned with precious metals and gems of every colour. On either side lay two dozing lizards the size of tigers, with stripes to match. As the Doctor and Sam were propelled towards the foot of the platform, one of the lizards opened a narrow eye and glared at them balefully. Then, as if deciding these alien visitors represented no threat, the beast slowly closed the eye and resumed its sleep.

On the throne sat a beautiful woman with long, thick, dark hair and bright eyes. Her skin was soft but tanned beneath veils of satin and metal jewellery, with an unsheathed dagger on her hip. One glittering diamond hung on a chain in the middle of her forehead.

The woman's attention was fixed on two men standing before the throne, stripped to the waist and circling each other, looking for a chance to fight. They were armed with thick leather bullwhips. For a few minutes the air was split by the cracking of the whips, and the spray of blood and sweat. Eventually a brutal exchange of lashes resulted in one of the men falling to his knees, blinded by a strike to the eyes. His fight was clearly over.

At a nod from the Queen, one of her muscular guards stepped forward and decapitated him with one swipe of a massive curved sword. The Doctor shut his eyes instinctively, only to hear the dull thud of the severed head hitting the floor. He squeezed Sam's hand as a pair of dwarves, slaves to judge by their demeanour, scuttled forward and

dragged away the corpse. Another scooped up the fallen head and stalked off with it under his arm.

Only then did the Queen seem to notice the Doctor's arrival. Careful to avoid the smears of blood by his feet, the Doctor cautiously approached the throne when prompted to do so by the tip of a spear in his back. He was uncomfortably aware of the proximity of the Queen's executioner, now busily wiping the gore from his golden sword.

The Doctor dropped to one knee and bowed his head. 'Your Majesty,' he said, surreptitiously beckoning Sam to follow suit.

'Who are you?' the Queen asked, her voice echoing haughtily around the vast room as it fell suddenly quiet.

'Your Majesty, I am known as the Doctor. Allow me to introduce my young friend -'

'What brings you to Eros?'

'Erm, a slight navigational error, Your Majesty, which -'

'He means he's lost,' said Sam.

There was the briefest, but most terrible pause.

'I gave you no leave to speak,' said the Queen, with the sort of casual menace that only people with supreme authority can manage. She made a tiny gesture to one of the guards. 'Kill her.'

'Wait!' cried the Doctor, ducking beneath the spear held near his own throat and deftly pushing aside the one aimed at Sam's neck. 'Wait, wait, wait. There's no need for that.' Everyone was staring at him in shock. 'Is there?' he inquired hopefully.

It soon became apparent that everyone was waiting for the Queen's reaction. And she was merely staring at the Doctor with the slightest hint of a smile on her lips.

'Why not?'

'Why not?' echoed the Doctor. He looked at Sam, who was standing paralysed with the tips of three spears resting against the skin of her throat. The Doctor suddenly felt the pinprick of another touching his own skin. Suddenly the coppery stench of the congealing blood on the floor was almost overpowering.

'Because', the Doctor ventured, realising that everyone in the entire throne room was hanging on every word of his reply, 'I don't want you to.'

There was a muffled gasp from the crowd, and Sam's eyes widened in despair. The Doctor looked at her and shrugged, in a that's-the-best-I-could-think-of fashion.

'*You* don't want me to?' the Queen echoed in disbelief. 'I am Asheya, Queen of Eros. My word is law on this world. I am undisputed ruler by

right of blood over every continent. I command armies of men, legions of servants. Every single person on this planet is my willing slave. What does it matter to me what *you* want?

The Doctor's lips pursed slightly and his spine stiffened. 'Your Majesty,' he said quietly, 'I speak only for myself.'

The Queen sat forward slightly, studying him. 'You're a bold one, Doctor, but you've a cool tongue. This... girl. Is she your mate?'

'No. She's my friend.'

'Do you think she is beautiful?'

The Doctor licked his lips, aware that he was certainly talking for Sam's life if not his own. Aloud he said, 'Not particularly.'

The Queen sat back. 'I see. Do you think I am beautiful?'

'You *are* beautiful. My opinion doesn't matter.'

The Queen smiled, very slightly. One of her advisers, a middle-aged man with an iron-black moustache and small eyes, leaned down and whispered something to her. She listened, but did not look at him.

'Zoleon, my most trusted adviser, thinks I should have both of you killed,' she told the Doctor. 'He thinks the girl is ugly and discourteous, and that you are too glib.'

'Your Majesty, I seek to speak only the truth,' said the Doctor. 'And, if you will allow me to, I will vouch for my friend's behaviour in your most Royal Court *from now on*.' He emphasised the last three words for Sam's benefit.

The Queen was smiling. 'I did not give you leave to speak, Doctor. But I have ears as well as eyes and you are strangers to Eros. I would speak with you some more, in private. If you are willing to vouch for your...friend during your stay here, then I shall allow her to live.'

Sam opened her mouth to say something, but the Doctor silenced her with a single glance.

'You are wise to heed the Doctor's advice,' the Queen told Sam. 'But your continued safety depends upon his good behaviour as well.'

'Your Majesty!' exploded Zoleon when he was alone with the Queen once more. 'I must protest! What right did this alien Doctor and his mate have to address you so? He should have been slain for his temerity!'

Asheya actually laughed at her Royal Adviser's genuine indignation. 'Do be quiet, Zoleon,' she said, fingering the strangely shaped key to the blue box that she had confiscated from the Doctor. It tingled against her skin as she looped its chain around her neck. 'I wish to talk to this Doctor in private. Only then shall I decide what should be done

with him. If he displeases me, then your executioner's sword can drink his blood. If he pleases me...well, we shall see.'

Zoleon's lips compressed into a furious white line, but he said nothing more.

The Doctor was waiting for her in the royal guest suite, sipping wine and staring out of the window at the city of Erosia spread like a glittering display of jewels as far as the eyes could see. For a few seconds she admired once again the chestnut hair, the fine velvet coat and silk cravat. He dressed unlike anyone in her culture, but carried himself like a lord.

'This is quite an honour,' he said suddenly, startling her. The effect was not unpleasant, but she couldn't see how he might have known she was standing behind him.

'Your reflection,' he said as he turned around. 'In the window.'

He was smiling, and it was a handsome smile. There was a strange light in his eyes - something that looked as though he was both wary of her yet amused by her. Truly, Asheya had never met his like before.

'I admired your...courage in the throne room today,' she told him. 'There are not many who would defy me.'

The Doctor had begun to stroll around the room, admiring the richly woven tapestries and precious metals. 'Is that what gives you the right to take a man's life so casually?'

Asheya was unused to defending her actions. 'You refer to the execution?'

'It was murder,' said the Doctor shortly. There was steel in his voice now, and Asheya found it unsettlingly exciting.

'The man was a thief and a beggar. He had more than he deserved when I granted him the right to trial by combat.'

'He was defeated and in pain,' stated the Doctor with disgust.

'I know. His execution was an act of mercy.'

The Doctor snorted. 'If you like.'

'Anyway,' snapped the Queen, 'the truth of the matter is that it is nothing to do with you. One again I have to ask: who are you to question *me*?'

'Who am I?' His voice was suddenly as soft as silk. He walked across the room until he stood as close to her as anyone had ever stood. A *frisson* of nervousness made her tremble involuntarily, and she could tell that he had noticed her discomfiture. 'Perhaps I'm your conscience, Asheya,' he whispered.

'No,' she replied with a shudder. 'You are my prisoner!'

"Then why are you so nervous?"

'Because...you stand so close to me.' She could not believe that she was speaking to him like this. Her voice felt rough and strangely unsuited to the task. 'It is not permitted.'

'No one's trying to stop me.' She could feel his breath in her hair now.

Asheya closed her eyes. 'I...cannot.'

'But you're the Queen of Eros,' he said. 'And I am your prisoner.'

'I don't want you as my prisoner, Doctor.'

'Then let me go,' he replied. 'Give me back the key to my TARDIS. I'd like to leave.'

'No!' Her fist closed on the silver pendant hanging on a chain around her neck.

'So I am a prisoner. And so is Sam.'

He stepped away from her abruptly, and she gasped slightly as the strange connection was broken. She felt as if she had been utterly open to his senses, dizzily so.

'Steady, steady,' he whispered, helping her to a nearby couch. It had almost felt as though he had been controlling her emotions, her desires. She sat heavily, the roaring in her head gradually subsiding to a rhythmic pulse. His voice was soft and low in her ear: 'You...are very unhappy, Asheya. Very lonely. Very beautiful. But I cannot help you.'

'You must!' Asheya bit her lip hard, refusing to give in to the hot pressure of tears.

He shook his head, and gently stood away from her. 'I shouldn't even be here. Where's Sam? I want to see her.'

The Doctor was more shaken by his altercation with the Queen than he cared to admit. His mind was in turmoil. Sometimes he could glimpse the future, remember things that hadn't yet happened. All part and parcel of being a Time Lord, he supposed. But the mental union he had experienced with Queen Asheya had taken his breath away, and opened up possibilities that even his mind's eye had refused to look at.

He opened the door to Sam's quarters and walked in. She was sitting on a marble bench, dressed in a metal bikini and a few scraps of transparent silk.

'Don't say a word,' she hissed. 'Just get me out of here *now*.'

'What?' he said, sitting down next to her.

'How could you do this to me?'

'What?'

'This!' Sam gestured sharply at the golden bra, which clinked

embarrassingly as she moved. 'I feel like something out of *Flash Gordon*. What's the matter with you?'

'Oh, nothing. Are you all right?'

She sighed explosively. 'You're round the twist, you are. Watch my lips, Doctor: get - us - out - of - here! I'm due to be "pair-bonded" with an Erosan man tomorrow. How could you let me get into this position?'

'Interesting choice of words.'

'I saw the way that Queen woman was looking at you. No wonder you don't want to leave.'

The Doctor waved his fingers in agitation. 'Sam, Sam, Sam. Listen. We're both in trouble here...'

'Huh!'

'The Queen has taken an unhealthy interest in me personally...'

'I'll bet!'

'...and my response will have a direct bearing on your future.'

'What do you mean?'

'You saw what she was like. She rules this planet with absolute power. She has an army of sycophants waiting to act on her every whim. But she's a troubled woman, and I can't predict what she will do or think next. She holds the power of life or death over us both.' He had got to his feet so that he could pace properly as he spoke. Finally, he rounded on her. 'All I ask is that you play along, at least for the time being, while I try to stall her and find the TARDIS. Then we can both leave Eros at the earliest opportunity and with the minimum of fuss.'

'And by that you mean no bloodshed.'

'Exactly.'

Sam took a deep breath. 'I've done some funny things for you in my time, Doctor, but let's get one thing straight: there's *no way* I'm going to go with any of the hairy-armed primates that pass for men on this stupid planet for anything. Or any one. Do I make myself clear?'

'Abundantly.'

'Good. Then get yourself back to Queenie and sweet-talk her into giving you the TARDIS back double-quick.'

Asheya refused to see the Doctor again until the following morning, when she sent Zoleon to invite him to accompany her on a kelmak ride. The Doctor apparently had not slept - his bed was untouched - but appeared fresh and clean at the royal stables as the sun rose above the city ramparts.

Even though he could never have seen a kelmak before, the Doctor

rode his with an easy confidence that Asheya had somehow expected. The normally fiery animal she had given him, Blaze, obeyed his every command.

'I've always liked horses,' the Doctor told her as they left the city behind and headed towards the beach. 'Even reptilian ones.' He gave the scaly green neck of his kelmak an affectionate pat with the palm of one hand.

'It is obvious you have ridden before,' Asheya commented without rancour.

'Oh yes. Sometimes with another Queen, on an entirely different planet...Must pop back and visit Balmoral again soon.'

Asheya smiled. 'You are trying to make me jealous.'

He shook his head. 'Not at all. But I am used to coming and going. Where have you hidden my TARDIS?'

'Your blue box is safe.'

'As safe as Sam?'

'Safer. I cannot order a box to be killed. Burned, perhaps. But what would that matter?'

He didn't reply, but his eyes had become hooded and thoughtful. 'Asheya, about last night...I hope you don't think I intended that to happen.'

She looked at him curiously. 'It was a sign,' she said.

'A sign?'

'That we are meant for each other.'

The Doctor frowned. 'I beg your pardon?'

But she just laughed, and shouted, 'Come on!' as she kicked the heels of her boots into the tough flanks of her kelmak. 'Let's race!'

Blaze took off after his stable mate like a scaly whirlwind of legs. The Doctor wound the reins around his fists and crouched low, standing in the stirrups so that the reptile could really fly. Wet sand sprayed into the air as the beast's mighty talons tore into the beach in an effort to catch up with the Queen. With the wind whipping his hair behind his head, and the smell of the sea in his nostrils, the Doctor pushed Blaze faster and faster. Gradually, the kelmak's feet beating a thunderous tattoo and its breath snorting like fire, he began to draw level. He could see Asheya was smiling, catching the occasional flash of her white teeth as she looked over her shoulder. The sound of her laughter was carried back to him.

Eventually the kelmaks tired and slowed. Asheya led them into the surf to cool to their feet. The water splashed and swirled as they brought them down to a canter.

'I always enjoy an early-morning ride,' Asheya told him, grinning hugely. The flanks of her kelmak heaved with the exertion.

'What's this all about, Asheya?' the Doctor asked. 'What do you want?'

'Company. A friend. A lover. Someone who sees me for who I am, not what I am.'

'Me?' The Doctor brought his mount to a halt and patted its sinewy neck.

'You're different from anyone I've ever met before,' the Queen told him. 'I knew it the moment I saw you. What we experienced last night proves we were meant for each other.'

'I only came here by accident. I won't stay.'

She circled him on her kelmak, leaning forward in the saddle and resting her hands across the reptile's shoulders. It took a moment for the Doctor to realise that she was also panting, as she regarded him with those lioness eyes. 'Doctor, hear what I have to say before you dismiss me out of hand.'

'Go on.'

'Until the crowned ruler of Eros consummates a royal marriage, no Erosan of normal stock can bear children.'

The Doctor huffed. 'That's a ridiculous rule.'

'But it is so, nevertheless. Since I became Queen at the age of four, no child has been born on Eros for an entire generation. And that is despite attempts by my advisers to arrange marriages for me. Liaisons I have always managed to avoid.'

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. 'Do tell me how.'

'Each of my intended mates died tragically before the marriage could take place.'

'I see.'

Asheya's mount had begun scrabbling in the wet sand with one of its dexterous feet, and after a moment it came up with a squirming eel in its talons. The kelmak's huge head darted forward and began to tear the eel apart with its beaklike jaws. Adjusting her balance so that the kelmak could continue its savage meal unhindered, Asheya said, 'I have devised a secret breeding programme, but so far it has proven useless.'

'I assume Sam has been incorporated into this breeding programme?' the Doctor asked tersely.

She nodded. 'Perhaps her alien blood will revitalise it. And perhaps now you realise that life is not so cheap on Eros after all. But it remains a fact that I *must* marry a man of my choosing, and soon.'

'Before your people perish?'

'Before they rise up and kill me.'

The Doctor took a deep breath and let it out slowly. The sound of the kelmak feeding on the fatty innards of its prey was getting on his nerves. He let his gaze settle on the distant horizon, where the morning sun had turned the sky a vibrant crimson.

'I can't help. Sorry.'

She leaned across and placed a single finger on his lips, and he stopped talking. 'I *have* chosen my mate, Doctor. It is you.'

He shook his head, and she scowled. 'You cannot defy me! I am the Queen of Eros, and I will be obeyed. No man refuses *me*. I am determined that you will accede to my wishes. And, while I have your precious TARDIS, you can never leave this planet!'

And with that she jerked on the reins of her kelmak, forcing it to hurl the bloody remnants of the eel away and gallop back towards the city.

The Doctor had been quite shaken by the sudden change in Asheya's mood. They had returned to the palace in uncomfortable silence and he was left to explore it alone. Her only conditions were that he could not visit Sam, or attempt to escape. Either would be punishable by death - for Sam.

He spent some time looking for the TARDIS, but it proved a fruitless mission. The Queen had hidden it well. He stood in the palace gardens for several minutes just staring at the empty square of grass between the aubora trees where it had materialised.

The Queen found him there, and for a while they walked with each other through the gardens. He hoped that she might let slip some vital clue as to the whereabouts of the TARDIS, or at least something he could use as a lever to force her to let him and Sam go. At the same time, he couldn't help but argue against the institutionalised violence of Eros, something she didn't seem to find a problem.

'That's because it is you perpetrating the violence,' he said, as they walked back into one of the opulent palace corridors.

Her eyes flashed angrily, the colour of flame. 'You don't know what you are talking about!'

'Yes, I do. You might not wield the sword, but those who do, do so on your orders.'

'So I have blood on my hands. I will not shirk from that fact, if that is what you expect.'

He fixed her with an equally angry glare. 'I never know what to expect from you.'

"Then expect this, Doctor: I am determined to use any means necessary to have my way. Don't forget that we can all be touched by violence."

In the short silence that followed, they both became aware of another person standing by the vast doors leading to the Queen's throne room. Zoleon stood there, his gloved hands clasped before him as though in prayer, his deep black eyes glittering like coals. It was the first time the man had smiled at the Doctor.

That smile stuck in the Doctor's mind even after Zoleon had bowed and left them to their argument. Asheya's explosive temper seemed to have been diffused at least, and the Doctor continued in a more hushed tone: 'Will you never learn? Violence doesn't solve anything. And, if you think you can hold me to ransom with threats against Sam, then go ahead and try. Because if you harm that girl in any way you won't get anything out of me but more trouble than you can possibly imagine. *Think* about it.' And with that he turned and his heel and left her standing there, drop-jawed.

In the early hours of the following morning, they came for him. Five burly men carrying batons attacked him in his room. He had been sitting in a chair, facing the window, trying to locate the TARDIS telepathically but without success. Meditation didn't come easily on Eros.

Violence did, of course.

Asheya was not in a good mood when Zoleon asked to see her. In other circumstances she might have refused an audience; but he was her Royal Adviser, and he insisted the matter was pressing.

She was in her private rooms, apparently admiring the rising of the sun in its swirling firmament, but in reality turning her last conversation with the Doctor over and over in her head until she couldn't remember who had said what.

'Your Majesty, I have grave news,' began Zoleon, after his customary low bow. His dark eyes glittered in anticipation as the Queen looked sharply from her reverie. 'It concerns the alien Doctor, Your Majesty,' he continued grimly.

Asheya felt a chill spread through her veins like frost. 'What...has happened?'

'Your Majesty, the Doctor has attempted to escape from the palace, despite your direct orders forbidding such an action.'

Zoleon's eyes never left those of his Queen. She stared back at him

like a startled animal, every vestige of her royal heritage gone. For a moment she looked like any other frightened woman.

Zoleon pressed on. 'The Palace Guard intercepted him, but he chose to fight.' Asheya's eyes closed. 'To his credit, he fought bravely. But he could not match the skill of your guards, ma'am. I fear that the altercation proved fatal.'

The Queen took a long, shuddering breath and gathered all of her strength before asking, in a whisper, 'You are sure of this, Zoleon?'

'Your Majesty, I have seen the body.'

'I don't mean...that. I mean, are you sure he was killed trying to escape?' As she spoke, the Queen's words grew firmer and louder. 'Are you sure?'

'Your Majesty?'

'Damn you, Zoleon!' she snapped, hurling a goblet of wine clear across the room with one angry swipe of her open hand. 'The Doctor would not have attempted to escape! Not while I still hold the life of his friend Sam in my power!' She looked at her adviser with dark, burning anger in her face. 'He would not!'

'But, Your Majesty -'

'Be silent, Zoleon!' Her voice rang out like the strike of a sword against stone. 'Your guards are plotting against me. That much is obvious. I shall have every last man of them slain before dawn!'

Zoleon stepped forward, his black-gloved hands held up to placate her - or defend himself. 'This simply is not true, ma'am. It pains me to say it, but you are quite mistaken. Cut me down now if you do not believe me, but do not turn your wrath on innocent men.' He stood next to her, close enough to touch her, but not daring to. He could feel her rapid breath on his face, see the tears in her eyes. 'Every last man of your Palace Guard would willingly lay down his life for you, ma'am. You know that. They have the hearts of grilons... but none of them possess wits sharper than their swords.'

'You wished him dead, Zoleon.'

Zoleon bowed his head reverentially. 'My lady, I have made it no secret that I did not like your alien suitor. It is, after all, my job to advise you to the best of my ability. But I am not blind to the finer feelings you believed yourself to have felt for him. I am, therefore, truly sorry to have brought this news to you now. It seems that we can all be touched by violence...'

She physically flinched at the words. 'Where *exactly* did you leave the body?' she asked when she could finally stomach talking to him again.

'The alien's remains were left for the skavars, Your Majesty,' Zoleon

replied without a hint of remorse. 'The fate that awaits all unwelcome visitors to Eros.'

She did not see Zoleon withdraw. Asheya had turned her attention back to the window, and the view across the bay to where the sun had finally shed the bonds of a distant horizon and was now soaring in a coruscating sky.

She would not cry. Not yet.

'What do you want now?' asked Sam when Zoleon came to see her again. She'd grown used to his acidic threats and snarled insults in the last day or so; perhaps he got a kick out of it. But there was something different in his manner now. He seemed almost relaxed. When he told her about the Doctor she realised why.

'And now you're going to have me killed too?' she managed with some difficulty.

Zoleon simply shook his head. 'There are worse things than death,' he muttered as he turned to leave. 'It's rather amusing, actually. Not even the Queen will believe your alien friend is dead. But she'll learn the truth of the matter, as you will, when we bring back his bones from the scavengers.'

The Doctor woke up in a silk-cushioned bed. For a time he just lay there, glad to be alive. Everything else could wait.

The more he regained consciousness, the more he felt the pain. Most of it had resolved itself into a dull, persistent ache - in his guts, his ribs, his neck and head. Some of it was sharp and agonising - his eyes, face and jaw, and the cluster of nerves just below his left clavicle. That probably meant the collarbone was cracked. Using this as a starting point, he slowly worked through his injuries until he was satisfied that none were permanent. A tiny spark of consciousness somewhere inside his dazed head congratulated him on his stoic reserve, but in actual fact he knew he had just been beaten senseless.

After a long time, he tried getting up. This triggered a deluge of new pains, some of which made him gasp as he stood up and hobbled over to the open window. He squinted through bruise-puffed eyelids at the view: a magenta lake under the wild skies of Eros.

Only then did he remember what planet he was on.

He must have fainted, or collapsed, or simply gone back to bed. He was woken by Asheya, whose face hovered inches from his own as he opened one painful eye. The tingling on his swollen lips was the memory of a kiss.

He sat up suddenly. 'How long have I been here?'

'You have slept for only a day,' she told him. 'Relax. Lie back. You are hurt.'

The Doctor brushed away her hand and swung his legs from the bed. He was naked - his clothes lay cleaned and pressed on a stool at the foot of the bed. Using the bed for support, he stumbled over to them and began to get dressed.

'Stop,' Asheya urged him. 'This will do you no good.'

The Doctor shook his head, pulling his shirt on over ribs that were a patchwork of livid purple bruises. 'Where's Sam? What's happened to her?'

Asheya rested her hands on his arms, firmly holding them still. His chest heaved painfully. He estimated two, maybe three broken ribs.

'Sam is safe and well, I give you my word,' said the Queen. She couldn't disguise her pleasure at the sight of him. 'I am so glad you are still alive.'

He frowned. 'What? Of course I'm still alive. It'd take more than a bit of fisticuffs to see me off.'

'I found you abandoned outside the city walls,' she told him, her arms circling his waist. 'You were half dead already, left for the skavars.'

'Skavars?' He stepped nimbly from her embrace and continued to get dressed.

'Flesh-eaters which roam the steppes outside the city. They were already sniffing around you, attracted by the scent of your blood.'

'Then you must have risked your own life,' said the Doctor wonderingly. 'Unless these skavars can distinguish between an alien visitor and a beautiful queen.'

She lowered her eyes. 'They...would have attacked me regardless, yes.'

Something caught the Doctor's gaze as she spoke, or perhaps his sixth sense. He strode back across the room to her and grabbed her wrist, pulling the arm straight. Across the inside of her forearm were a series of deep curving scratches. As he looked, more became apparent on her left leg and thigh. Ugly scabs had already begun to form on the lacerations.

'They *did* attack you,' he breathed.

The Doctor regained his strength quickly, although the contusions were still painful. He was forced to accept a period of convalescence on the Queen's private island nonetheless, sometimes alone when she had to return to the palace for a time. Occasionally he would go swimming, or

allow himself to fall into a healing trance as part of his recuperation. He ate whenever Asheya returned, because she always brought with her supplies of fresh fruit and richly cooked meats.

Despite the apparent luxury of the island, the Doctor was keen to get back to the palace.

For her part, Asheya now realised that there were people there who would do the Doctor harm despite her own wishes, and therefore insisted that he stay here for his own safety.

'That's all very well,' he said as they shared a scuhj fruit, 'but what about Sam? What about her continued safety?'

For a while the Queen said nothing, concentrating instead on the fruit as she used her jewelled knife to cut away the rind. Eventually, almost reluctantly, she said, 'She is safe.'

The Doctor thought this over. 'I need to see her.'

'I cannot allow it.'

'You can allow anything you like. You're the Queen of Eros.'

'Sam is now a part of the breeding programme.'

The Doctor's stare hardened. 'Asheya, if you are to get any cooperation from me, you must understand this: the safety of my friend is paramount. Do you understand? Whatever it is you want from me, Sam is non-negotiable. Ensure her safety and then we can discuss conditions.'

Asheya returned to the palace that evening, calling Zoleon to her room.

'I want the breeding programme halted,' she told him.

Zoleon, predictably, was scandalised. 'Your Majesty! The future of all Eros relies on the -'

'The future of Eros relies on me, Zoleon.'

'Yes, ma'am, but...halt it? Completely?'

'You heard correctly. Make certain that the Earth girl, Sam, is unharmed and free of her obligations. Show her to private quarters within the palace.'

The light dawned for Zoleon now; she could see the flicker of comprehension behind those coal-black eyes. 'You still feel for the alien Doctor, ma'am?' he ventured.

'You are presumptuous, Zoleon,' she replied icily.

A rather cruel smile settled on his thin lips. 'Your Majesty, there was no future in your relationship with him.'

She stiffened. 'We shall see. May I remind you that the position of Royal Adviser, like every other position in the palace, and *every other subject under my rule*, relies on my indulgence?'

Sam resisted the urge to smile at Zoleon as she walked out of the harem. The old goat hadn't given her any explanation for the sudden cancellation of the Queen's breeding programme, but Sam detected the Doctor's hand. She *knew* he couldn't be dead. He wouldn't give up the ghost on as cheap and nasty a planet as this - and he would never let her down.

'No bones, then?' she queried.

Zoleon just stared at her, almost lost in thought. Then he said, 'You believe the Doctor still lives, don't you?'

She nodded. 'Sure I do.'

Zoleon said nothing. He didn't even stop to insult her. He just turned on his heel and left, a thunderous look on his face.

The Doctor was impressed, despite himself, when he heard the news. 'The breeding programme has been halted? For good?'

Asheya smiled and nodded, excited by the confused look in his large blue eyes.

'This is excellent news,' he laughed. 'May I see Sam?'

'Perhaps, when we return to the palace.'

The Doctor bit his lip. He was bored with the island and desperate to see Sam again. But he knew it would be pointless trying to push the Queen too far too soon. He settled for an alternative route, and asked her if she had considered any other changes to Erosan society.

She looked puzzled. 'Such as?'

He shrugged. 'Well for a start you might want to halt public executions. Institutionalised violence. Slavery.'

'These things are nothing to do with Sam.' Asheya seemed genuinely confused.

The Doctor took her hands in his and sat down with her on a bench that overlooked the purple bay. 'It *isn't* anything to do with Sam. It's to do with what's right. I didn't ask you to halt the breeding programme. I asked you to make sure Sam was safe, that's all.'

She frowned. 'But it seemed wrong to allow the programme to continue.'

'Exactly. And the same thing goes for the executions, the violence and the slavery. Sam or no Sam, I would still believe that.'

'I think I understand what you are saying. But, Doctor, it is not a simple matter. This is my planet, my people. They expect things of their Queen.'

'Such as children,' the Doctor mused, and she smiled.

'That too.'

'Asheya, these are your people and they expect you to rule over them. Only you can decide how you do that.'

The Queen said she would think hard about what he had said.

She took him back to the mainland that night, and returned him to his room in the palace under the cover of darkness. She told him would be allowed to see Sam the following morning. In the meantime she would have to see Zoleon and tell him that the Doctor still lived.

Although the Doctor was delighted with all this, he was disappointed that Asheya found it impossible to make that final commitment to changing her world for the better. Equally, he realised, she found it frustrating that he still refused to accept her as his mate. But, as a concession to him, Asheya granted the Doctor permission to see his TARDIS again.

It was in the palace dungeon, of course. A prisoner, just like himself. But he couldn't deny the exhilaration he felt at the prospect of seeing the old thing once more. It didn't matter to him that the key rested on its chain around the Queen's neck - there was always the spare if he needed it.

In the end, it was academic. In the flickering yellow glow of the torchlight, the old police box stood in the shadows, bound securely by huge metal padlocks, chains and thick leather straps to the dungeon wall. With a sigh, the Doctor slid his sonic screwdriver back into its pocket. He rested one hand against the old blue paintwork, felt the soft warm hum of the TARDIS through his fingers once more.

'Your Majesty, I would speak with you.'

There was something in Zoleon's tone that alerted Asheya to the impending trouble. It was a kind of coldness - the sort of remorseless chill she associated only with winter decay.

She let her gaze fall on him as he approached the steps to her throne. Her right hand hung over the arm of the chair and gently massaged the leathery muscles of her tame grilon. Despite her languid posture, she felt tense and uncertain of her position. She had a wild premonition that everything was about to change - for ever. It was something in Zoleon's posture: was he drunk, or did he just no longer care?

'Your Majesty, am I to understand correctly that you have the alien Doctor alive and well in this palace?'

She blinked. 'Yes, Zoleon.'

For a moment he said nothing, he just stared. Then, he seemed to reach a decision. 'Is this alien to be your consort, ma'am?'

'You speak very bluntly, Zoleon.'

'I regret that, ma'am - but I fear that my words cannot match the bluntness of my thoughts.' A vast stillness suddenly filled the throne room. 'And I still await your answer.'

The grilon snarled quietly at the Queen's feet, sinews twitching.

'I love the Doctor, it is true. I wish him to be my consort,' she said eventually. Her mouth felt dry.

'Then, ma'am, I have no choice but to force the matter to its natural conclusion.' Zoleon drew himself up to his full height, his noble profile raised to face his Queen directly. 'If you cannot take the action necessary to end this matter, then I must. Your Majesty, I demand my right to challenge your suitor to mortal combat.'

'Mortal combat?' echoed the Doctor, in the kind of voice a man might use if he had rather been hoping for good news. 'I suppose that is "mortal" in the universally accepted sense of the word?'

There had barely been time to enjoy his reunion with Sam. They had hugged, briefly, until the Doctor had gently pushed her away when the Queen joined them.

'He is well within the bounds of Erosan law,' explained Asheya, casting the Earth girl an uneasy look. 'Eros has a long tradition of trial by combat.'

'Why doesn't that surprise me?' The Doctor placed his fists on his hips and swiped at the edge of a rug with his shoe. 'It couldn't have been a race to finish the *Times* crossword, could it? Or even a game of cards. No, it *had* to be mortal combat!'

'It is worse than that,' Asheya went on.

'Worse?' echoed Sam incredulously.

For the first time a note of genuine fear seemed to have entered the Queen's voice. 'If you should be killed, Doctor, then Zoleon would have the right to marry me instead.'

'Whoa,' said Sam. '"Instead"?''

Asheya continued to address the Doctor. 'I have given you every concession I can.'

'Except my freedom.'

'I cannot allow even that, now.' Asheya blinked back the tears that threatened to come. 'For you I have spared Sam's life. Halted the breeding programme. Ignored my oldest adviser. Tried to understand you. Risked my life. Please, allow me one concession on your part in return for all that I have done. Don't let this be for nothing!'

The Doctor didn't reply at once. Sam realised that she was holding

her breath. What had been going on between these two?

Eventually the Doctor just gave a resigned sigh. 'There's never any choice with these duel things, is there?'

While the contest was arranged, Asheya spoke to Sam alone for the first time. Something compelled her to talk to the Doctor's companion, to explain the situation in person. It was stupid, but she couldn't help it. The Earth girl tried to remain aloof and dismissive, but Asheya could sense the turmoil inside her. When Asheya told her that she had chosen the Doctor as her royal consort, Sam's response was instant: 'That's ridiculous.'

'It is the day for blunt speaking, obviously.'

'No, I mean it. No offence, but - he's the Doctor.' Sam was starting to frown, as if beginning to doubt the truth of her own words. 'He just doesn't do that sort of thing. Does he?'

'Whoever wins the fight will marry me,' Asheya explained once more, as though to a very dim child. 'It is very simple. And the Doctor must win, because I love him.'

'Uh-huh. And does he love you?'

'Of course.'

'Pfah! He's just said that to get him out of a tricky situation.' Sam paused. 'Although, when you think about it, situations don't get much trickier than death-or-marriage contests. Oh, Doctor, how did you get yourself into this mess?'

'Do not worry, Sam. The Doctor is very fond of you, and I am willing to let you live here on Eros as well.'

'Gee, thanks.'

'In fact, I am willing to arrange a marriage for you also.'

Sam shook her head. 'I wouldn't endure an arranged marriage on any planet, for anyone. Not even the Doctor. I've already told him that.'

Asheya found this hard to believe. Men and women mated on Eros only through arranged marriages. How could Sam refuse? And yet...Asheya had killed her own intended partners to avoid exactly that, hadn't she? Was it the *arrangement* that had offended her so?

'And another thing,' continued Sam. 'I'm not from Eros, and neither is the Doctor. He won't agree to an arranged marriage any more than I will.'

'But the Doctor has given me his word that if he survives the trial by combat, then he *will* marry me!'

For a moment Sam looked shocked. 'But...well, he's bound to say

that, isn't he? Look at the alternative!"

Asheya now looked confused. Why was everything so complicated? And now Sam appeared to be pressing home her advantage: 'And besides, he's only stuck around on this crummy planet this long because you've kept his TARDIS from him. Give him the TARDIS back, and see how long he stays.'

The duel was to take the form of a whip fight between the Doctor and Zoleon. The Doctor had hoped that his recent injuries would preclude him from anything more strenuous than a game of hoopla, but his Gallifreyan powers of recuperation betrayed him. By the time he stood in the throne room, stripped to the waist before the throne and the Queen's assembled guests and courtiers, he was fit enough to fight.

He could see Sam sitting to one side of the room, looking both anxious and embarrassed. He gave her as confident a grin as he could manage.

Zoleon's whip split the air with a few loud cracks as he practised on one side of the arena. The sweat made the muscles on his arms and chest glisten in the coloured light of the stained-glass sun behind the throne.

At a signal from the captain of the Palace Guard, the contest began.

Zoleon's whip lashed across the intervening space and caught the Doctor across one shoulder. The crowd gasped as the skin tore and blood welled from the cut immediately.

The Doctor made a few good attempts with his own weapon, but the whip snatched ineffectually at the air in front of Zoleon's smiling face. Then, with a snarl, Zoleon surged forward, his whip singing past the Doctor's upraised hand and biting into his chest. More blood mixed with the perspiration running down his stomach.

The Doctor tried to coil his own lash around Zoleon's ankle in the hope of tripping him up, but he wasn't nearly skilful enough. In return, Zoleon's leather flicked at the Doctor's face and reopened a scar on his cheek. The Doctor staggered back, nearly losing his balance on the slippery silver floor. Zoleon lashed again, the whip cracking and licking across his opponent's bare back.

The Doctor was now in full retreat, his lips drawn back from his teeth with pain and frustration. But nowhere seemed beyond the reach of Zoleon's angry, spitting whip. He even found himself backing up the steps of the throne dais, as if seeking the protection of the Queen. Zoleon thought the same thing - there was a fire in his eyes now, a death-lust. Belatedly the Doctor realised that this man actually did want

to kill him - here and now.

But *I* don't want to kill *you*, he thought. That's hardly an equal contest, is it?

Zoleon's whip wrapped itself around the Doctor's throat and the Royal Adviser yanked it brutally downwards. The Doctor choked and staggered, dropping to one knee. He couldn't get so much as a finger between the leather coils and the blood-slicked skin of his neck. Zoleon's boot smashed the Doctor's own whip from his clumsy grip, and then the man brought his full weight to bear on the noose. The Doctor's eyes bulged as he found himself unable to draw a single breath. Zoleon's face filled his vision: madly glaring eyes, teeth bared, spittle gathered at the corners of his mouth. The man was breathing harshly, but not from the exertion: it was the anticipation.

It occurred to the Doctor that he could no longer hear anything - except for the deafening rush of blood in his head.

Then the pressure on his windpipe eased and Zoleon stepped away, victorious but merciful. Or so the Doctor thought as he fell to his knees and gasped and coughed until his chest hurt. Gradually the buzzing in his ears turned into the excited murmur of the crowd. He forced himself to look up.

Zoleon was walking down the steps from the throne, a hilt of a dagger protruding from his back.

Just left of the thoracic vertebrae, thought the Doctor. How had it got there?

Zoleon's knees gave way and he lay full length on the polished silver floor, rendered into nothing by a mere six inches of sharpened metal. Only then did the Doctor recognise the jewelled hilt that projected from the lifeless flesh.

Asheya's knife.

Someone was helping him to his feet. He stood up and looked at the Queen, who also was now standing. She was looking at him with a mixture of relief and terror. Slowly she walked towards him, and rested a hand on the lacerated skin of his cheek.

'Forgive me,' she whispered. 'I could not bear to let you die.'

It was Sam who washed and bound the Doctor's wounds. 'I don't care what you say, the woman saved your life and you know it.'

'That's no excuse for murder, Sam.'

'So what was that Zoleon creep trying to do to you? Teach you to line-dance?'

The Doctor winced as she tied the knot in the bandage across his

shoulder. 'All right, you win. I'm glad to be alive - I always am. But I gave my word to Asheya that I would marry her if I survived the duel.'

And so, later, the Doctor went to see the Queen. She was waiting for him in the royal chambers, which led on to a wide balcony overlooking the city square. News of the contest had spread fast, and of course the impending marriage. There was much cause for rejoicing among the poor people of Eros.

But not for the Doctor.

Now he could still taste her on his lips, still feel the rapid beating of her heart through the material of his waistcoat. He'd dressed appropriately - the stiff collar, the silk cravat, the jewelled tiepin. He wanted everything to be right for her. It helped disguise the fact that his body was a mass of cuts and contusions, too. Helped him believe he was who he thought he was.

She looked up at him, her fingers still embedded in his hair. Her eyes were as tawny and predatory as those of a lioness - the Doctor had once faced a hungry lioness in Africa and he recognised the look. As he looked down into those black pools of desire he could see his own reflection, his own worried frown.

Slowly, as slow as a lover's caress, she slid her fingers out of his hair and down the sides of his face. A muscle in his jaw twitched as her velvet-soft fingertips stroked the length of his duelling scar.

'I love you,' she murmured, and she meant it. Her lips parted only slightly as she spoke.

He went to speak and was surprised to find his mouth dry. Asheya saved him the trouble. She placed a finger softly against his teeth and smiled. 'Don't say anything. I know what you are thinking. When we first met, our minds and hearts touched. I know your every thought, because I love you. And now you are thinking: How do I get out of this? How do I get away from here? From this place where I do not belong. Well, the answer is simple. You go. Your blue box has been released and now stands once again in the palace garden. Your friend Sam awaits.'

'But, Asheya -'

'Hush. I have not forgotten the things you have said to me, or the lessons you have tried to teach an unwilling student. Knowing that you will only stay with me on Eros because I have the power to keep you here is not good enough for me. In my heart, I know that you cannot willingly be my consort. And I think I understand it in my head, as if that counts for anything. But perhaps you have given me, and Eros,

something far more important than a royal consort: you have reminded me that absolute power can be used to change things absolutely.'

He licked his lips, almost at a loss at what to say. Anything he said now would appear trite or dismissive. In the end, he leaned down and kissed her, closing his eyes tightly as she pressed the breast-warm key of the TARDIS into his hand.

Asheya watched from a window in the palace as the blue box faded away, its little lamp blinking on and off until that, too, had disappeared. She felt in her chest a sensation that combined the massive weight of grief with an exhilarating sense of freedom. It was intoxicatingly powerful.

She also recalled the Doctor's friend's last words to her before his trial by combat: *give the Doctor his TARDIS back and see how long he stays.*

When the tears finally came, they were uncontrollable.

The Android Maker of Calderon IV

By Miche Doherty

'Excellent.'

The old man took the final servocircuits proffered by his blank-faced robosistant, and set them gently in place inside the thoracic cavity of his greatest creation. Closing the chest wall, he regarded the dormant figure with pride. Tall, lean and elegant, it was dressed in velvet smoking jacket and ruffled shirt. Every crease on the tanned face was just right, every white hair on its head indistinguishable from the real thing. One flick of a remote switch, and it opened its eyes, instantly aware.

'Who are you?' asked the old man.

'My dear chap, don't you remember me? I'm the Doctor.'

'Perfect. But you don't have to fool me: I created you.'

'That much is in my programming, yes. Would you mind terribly if I asked why?'

'For a very simple reason, my dear Doctor. For revenge.'

In an unknowable region that is neither time nor space spun a blue box, its tiny weathered exterior belying the immense volume within. Along helical pathways that traversed light years and millennia, slipping between parallel realities and through antientropic loopholes, the TARDIS sped towards its appointment with destiny.

'Everything was meticulously prepared,' said the old man. 'Dictatorship of Calderon IV was mine for the taking. A benign tyranny of science - a genuine technocracy. Then you turned up.' He jabbed the android Doctor in the chest, spitting in his fury. 'All my years of planning ruined in an hour and a half.'

'Steady on, there's a good fellow. I'm not really me, you know?'

'Of course.' He paused. 'But soon you will be.'

'I'm afraid I don't quite follow.'

'The Doctor left soon after the failure of the coup. Everyone thought me dead - they still think so. Nonetheless he left behind a communications device. If ever he was needed, this would reach him.' He held up a small box with a signalling key on top. 'I still have one or two friends in high places. Now the device is mine.'

So saying, he pressed the key three times. A muted beep was the

only sign that a message had been sent.

Inside the TARDIS, Sarah flipped listlessly through a first edition of *Tristram Shandy* while the Doctor worked on his new improved sonic screwdriver. She knew she shouldn't complain about being bored - a girl can't spend every day being menaced by cowled figures and prepared for ritual sacrifice - but after a couple of uneventful planetfalls she found herself wishing that something would happen.

At which point, of course, something did.

A red light flashed on the console, and the TARDIS shuddered as it suddenly changed course. The Doctor reached out a long arm and flicked a switch.

'Calderon IV,' he said. 'I wonder what's wrong?'

'Five years. Five whole years of solitude and unceasing work, of tiny triumphs and colossal setbacks. I have been an android maker all my life, but no one has attempted such a perfect simulacrum as I have built. It was thought impossible. Soon all the world will know what I have achieved.'

'Mm, yes. Well, now that you've built me, what exactly do you want me to do?'

'When the Doctor returns, he is sure to be invited to the citadel. Once there, I have arranged that he will receive a secret message which will lure him into the catacombs. You will be waiting for him.'

'And I kill the Doctor, and return to the citadel in his place?'

'Precisely. Then you will ask to be allowed to address a special session of the Praesidium. They will not deny this to the Doctor. Once they are gathered, you detonate the explosive device built into your cranium.'

The android rubbed a finger down the side of its long nose. 'Yes, I see. A short life, but a packed one.'

Then came a bleeping from the control panel in front of them, which signalled the arrival of the TARDIS.

'The market square,' breathed the old man. 'Perfect.' He switched the viewscreen to show the marketplace, then began swivelling round in his chair, unable to contain his excitement.

'Excellent,' he said, drooling repulsively. 'Excellent...excellent.'

In the square came a strange sound like the trumpeting of a mechanical elephant, and the TARDIS appeared. Some of the elders recognised it, and word spread quickly. 'He's back! The Doctor's back!'

From his underground laboratory many miles away, the old android

maker and his creation watched as a crowd began to gather.

'Now, Time Lord,' said the old man, 'prepare to meet your Nemesis.'

The doors of the blue box opened, and out stepped a man and a woman. The man was long-limbed, with a generous mop of curls. But the hair was brown and the face was wrong - far too full of teeth. When he spoke, his voice was booming and cheerful.

'Well, if it isn't my old friend Eknar! And Tembal - good to see you - you remember Sarah? Oh, of course, you don't recognise my face. Traded it in for a new one. Do you like it? Well, I can't stand here trading gossip with you lot all day. Who rang?'

The old man stared at the simulacrum he had so painstakingly built, then at the image on the screen, then back again. His lips moved soundlessly, his eyes were dead. Finally he managed a croaking whisper.

'Bugger,' he said.

Revenants

by Peter Angbelides

That which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been; and God requireth that which is past.

- Ecclesiastes 3:15

'The trick to banging your head against a brick wall,' he said helpfully, 'is knowing when to stop.' The door remained stubbornly locked, its blank metal surface dully reflecting his frowning features. 'This door won't open. That much, at least, is staring us in the face.'

Guin stood next to him, and watched him lick his palm and run it over his head in a futile attempt to control his unruly red curls. He tugged his mustard-yellow waistcoat down to straighten it, but it sprang up immediately, revealing a stretch of crumpled white dress shirt.

'You're sure this is the way out?'

'I'm positive,' Guin said, indicating the door, 'that this is where we came in.' But he'd already wandered off, and she realised he wasn't listening any more. From behind her, he gave a delighted cry. When she turned and saw his eager expression, she bit back her irritable comment.

He was standing on the far side of this odd, deserted laboratory, grinning hugely and pointing a marvelling finger at a smoky wraith materialising out of thin air a metre in front of him. 'Maybe it's the map I was looking for,' he suggested.

It was a hazy image, and it was coalescing in the middle of the room. Was that a 3-D image? Guin couldn't quite make out the edges. She wished she could remember where she'd left her specs.

They made themselves comfortable on a hard laboratory bench while the image resolved itself.

He blinked at it in disbelief. 'Oh, I say.'

'Yes, I'm as surprised as you are,' said Guin, staring into the image projection and leaning so close that her nose seemed to touch it. 'She seems to ring a bell?'

'Well, her hair's too short to be stylish, her last-season jacket doesn't match her trousers, and she's marching around the place as if she thinks she owns it. So I'll grant you that it's distinctively Professor Guinevere Winchester.'

'As well as you can tell through this snowstorm,' grumbled Guin.

'Are you tuned in properly?'

He fiddled with the controls. Immediately the image got worse.

'This is the twenty-sixth century, isn't it?'

'Yes, Guin.'

'Still a couple more years until they can get decent Channel 5 reception, then. Pity, I was looking forward to seeing the news. No, hang on - whatever you just did, do it again. The picture's clearing.'

Whatever he'd just done, he did it again.

Guin favoured him with her end-of-seminar smile, her *quod erat demonstrandum* grin. 'See that chap there? Hair that's never seen a brush, open-toed sandals and socks, the last afghan coat in the galaxy.'

'It's me.'

Guin nodded emphatically. 'Distinctively the Doctor.'

In the image projection, the Doctor was taking long, loping strides along a curving grey-white corridor. Although close up the walls seemed flat, the view in the distance revealed that they actually curved away to the right. It was like looking at a horizon on a beach, and realising that the world wasn't flat. This place must be huge.

Guin was jogging irritably after the Doctor, her shorter legs unable to keep up with his determined pace. 'I thought you said, Doctor,' she puffed, 'that you didn't make house calls.'

He stopped abruptly, and she stumbled to a halt behind him. 'This is no ordinary courtesy visit,' he snapped.

Guin didn't like him when he got peevish on her. 'Yes, yes, and the Schrödinger Institute is no ordinary deep-space research station. And doubtless these corridors are the cleanest in the known universe. They should be, it looks like no one's been using them.'

The Doctor narrowed his eyes at her. 'Well, perhaps we have arrived a little early.' He abruptly vanished through a door in the corridor wall that Guin hadn't noticed before. Within seconds he had reappeared, and was brushing dust off his long, grubby coat. 'Broom cupboard,' he explained, unabashed.

The lighting in the corridor just perceptibly rose, and then dipped to its previous level. Up to that point, it had been flat and even, a soft diffused illumination from the ceiling and walls. 'Put another coin in the meter,' said Guin.

They continued their search. Most of the doors along the inner curve of the corridor were firmly shut, and no amount of pushing, sliding or fiddling would open them. Guin found one door that did open, and called the Doctor back to help her investigate. The cramped

sleeping quarters revealed behind it proved to be surprisingly small and disappointingly empty. A half-finished glass of water rested on a cluttered night table, which in turn stood beside an unmade bed.

'This place is occupied, then.'

The Doctor nodded. 'I do wonder where the research team can be.' And he was haring off down the corridor again. 'You'll be impressed when you meet this chap. He's the most experienced temporal-quantum-research scientist this side of Habarnia Bogrognoga.'

'Yeah, yeah,' said Guin carelessly. 'You've met one temporal-quantum-research scientist, you've met them all.'

'Oh no, I never tire of old Tasdevin's company,' replied the Doctor, oblivious to her sarcasm. 'Though he is a bit obsessive, like most research scientists.'

'I know the type, from the university,' said Guin. 'If they're not worried about securing government funding, they're fretting about whether their work will get them immortalised in the history of their discipline.'

'That sort of thing,' the Doctor said, nodding. 'But I wonder what my friend Tasdevin's been doing to upset the Time Lords.'

Guin was surprised that the Doctor had agreed to pursue this inquiry for the Time Lords, although he'd been infuriatingly vague with her ever since the mental message had arrived in the TARDIS. Sometimes she got the impression that he wasn't used to having an academic as a travelling companion, and that on the whole he'd have preferred someone with none of the assumptions and prejudices about intellectuals that came from twenty-five years work in a museum. A fifteen-year-old schoolgirl, for example, with nothing more to worry about than the colour of her lipstick. Which was a coincidence, really, since that was what Guin sometimes used to wish she was, after an especially taxing meeting with the Board of Trustees.

When pressed on the contents of the message, the Doctor had explained that he'd rather help his old friend Tasdevin than have some ham-fisted Time Lord bureaucrat handle the investigation.

So now here they were, standing in a small canteen and surveying half a dozen place settings. At each was a partly consumed meal, real food and not space pills, all congealing on brightly patterned plastic crockery.

It can't have looked much more appetising when it was originally served up, reflected Guin, though it was hard to imagine anything looking particularly appealing in the flat even lighting of this strange space-station complex. Herself included. She was just thinking this

when the faint light surge flickered around them again.

'What do you think your mate Tasdevin's been up to, then?' she asked as they stepped out into the corridor again.

'The last I heard was that Tasdevin was trying to harness temporal quantum particles to create a perpetual-motion machine, which will solve his homeworld's energy crisis.'

Guin rolled her eyes at him.

'Not to mention put the Galexticity Corp out of business,' continued the Doctor. 'What's the harm in that?'

'It's impossible, for a start,' retorted Guin. 'So he'd need to start well before breakfast if he was hoping to finish it by teatime.'

'Precisely,' said the Doctor. 'As I said, what's the harm in that? Come on.'

Guin slumped against the wall. 'No, just leave me here and come back for me later, when my legs have recovered. A fortnight should do it.' She offered him a feeble wave. 'Bye, then. See you Tuesday week.'

'Come on!' insisted the Doctor, tugging her jacket sleeve like an eager child.

'You sound like you know where you're going.'

'See?' said the Doctor smugly. 'I *did* know where I was going.'

Even Guin didn't like to remind him that this was thirty minutes later. She'd trudged behind him in sullen silence all that time, while he rattled on about Tasdevin's original blueprints and the absolute trustworthiness of his own long-term memory.

As they'd walked, the Doctor had also explained that the station was so huge because it was mostly taken up with an enormous temporal accelerator. 'The size of Oxford,' he'd declared.

'City walls or ring road?' she'd muttered back.

'And this accelerator throws instantons into a quantised orbit around the central laboratory complex, which is ringed by this shielded corridor. Everything else is on the inner side - kitchens, bedrooms...'

'Broom cupboards.'

'Yes, broom cupboards, canteen and...tadaaa!' He threw open a double door and dived through, his afghan flapping and wafting the scent of patchouli around him. 'And the central core,' he declared with a flourish.

Guin stepped in after him, and gaped. The room was the same even temperature as the rest of the space station, but she still felt a shiver run through her. She tugged her tatty brown jacket tighter around herself like a comforter.

All the previous rooms they had seen had seemed almost ludicrously cramped. Now she thought she knew why - most of the available space must be given over to this enormous chamber. Guin had stood in the basilica of St Peter's, goggling upwards in awe at the ceiling way above her. There was nothing artistic or formal about this place here, however, but the scale of its construction struck her dumb for several minutes. Trunking and cables snaked over a gigantic unsupported dome hundreds of metres above her. Far below these, narrow channels spiked out in all directions from a group of monoliths positioned in the exact centre of the floor.

'It's like a technological Stonehenge,' whispered Guin.

The Doctor chuckled. 'You still have so much to see, Guin,' he said. 'When I've shown you the Gates of Martontigan in the Platirion Galaxy, you'll think that Stonehenge is a child's construction kit.'

'I can remember my parents first taking me to Stonehenge,' said Guin. 'So don't knock it. It's Britain's favourite old ruin. After Barbara Cartland, of course.'

'Sometimes you can be so parochial.'

'Sometimes you can be so patronising,' replied Guin. 'And besides, this place knocks your TARDIS into a bit of a cocked hat, doesn't it?'

'Nonsense,' snapped the Doctor in a petulant tone. Still, her comment had made him look up sharply from the control console, where he was now working. 'The TARDIS technology is transcendental; this is all manifestly physical.'

'Incapable of being the root of an algebraic equation with rational coefficients,' said Guin at once, peering at him over her spectacles. 'You make this sound as easy as pi.'

'Don't get irrational with me,' smiled the Doctor, puzzling over a computer keyboard as Guin drew near him. 'Think Immanuel Kant rather than Ferdinand Lindemann.'

'That's a circle I can't square,' said Guin, 'but no matter.'

'Matter is the whole point,' said the Doctor. 'How can this equipment possibly be sustained in the physical universe, without transcendental engineering? There's not enough power, surely...' He slapped his forehead, and then rubbed it as though he'd hurt himself. 'Of course, that black hole we steered around before we materialised. Phew! No wonder the Time Lords were displeased.'

He seemed distracted by something in front of him. 'Look at this. It's a keyboard for data entry. How quaint!' He typed a few characters, and the thin bracelets on his left wrist jingled. 'Hmm, that's odd. Some of these keys are stuck.' He poked at the keyboard in front of him with

growing agitation. Eventually he balled up his fist and struck it a resounding blow.

'You think that's strange,' said Guin from where she'd been investigating the contents of a nearby desk. 'Have a look at this.' She picked up a few sheets of notepaper from the top of the desk and waved them under the Doctor's nose. Then she gestured to the remaining papers. 'Your turn.'

The Doctor reached out for the remaining sheaf of notes. Guin smiled broadly at his reaction. 'How very peculiar!'

The papers wouldn't budge. As Guin had already discovered, they were stuck to the table. Furthermore, they would not fold or crumple. It was as though they were cast in iron, though they looked in every respect like hastily discarded notes.

Guin rapped her knuckles across a bright-orange cup which stood on the desk. It didn't make a sound, and nor did it shift position. Beside it, a blunt-edged paperknife was equally unmovable. Yet a pencil and a paperweight both lifted easily from the surface.

'What would your friend Tasdevin have to say about this, then?' asked Guin.

Before either of them could comment further, there was a crashing sound on the far side of the laboratory as the doors sprang open, and an angry figure clattered its way towards them. He was a balding man, at least two metres tall, and in his fifties, Guin reckoned. He reminded her of one of the museum's education officers, a man whose face had furrowed into a permanent scowl, except that her education officer didn't carry bulging boxes of odd equipment around with him. And wouldn't be seen dead in a beige jumpsuit, either.

The Doctor and Guin moved towards him, but the man ignored them, walking right past. He seized a sheaf of notes from the Doctor's desk, and gave them a cursory glance. After casting them back on to the desk, he hurried off towards the tall standing blocks in the centre of the room.

'Er...' said the Doctor. Then he hissed at Guin, 'If you want to know what Tasdevin would think, now's your chance to ask him.'

The doors clattered open again, and a younger figure with slicked-back dark hair raced into the room, her feet skittering to a halt on the shiny white floor tiles. 'What are you doing?' she shouted across the room, throwing her head back as she did so. The gesture made her slop some of the contents from the bright-orange cup in her left hand.

'Leave me to it, Groote,' Tasdevin shouted back from the centre of the room.

Guin shuffled across to stand in front of the newcomer, Groote. She mentally rehearsed her apology, the one she always used when she and the Doctor bumped into angry strangers. She rubbed her palms together briefly to ensure they didn't feel too clammy before she offered a formal handshake.

Groote seemed to be staring right past her, glaring at Tasdevin. Guin got only as far as 'Hello, I'm Guin, and this is my friend...' before Groote stepped abruptly into her.

She stumbled back, trying to avoid a collision but knowing that Groote was going to knock her down.

Except that she didn't knock Guin down, she just...well, she just passed right through her. Guin fell over backwards anyway with surprise.

The Doctor helped her back to her feet. They stood together, watching Groote.

Groote paused briefly beside the desk to set down her orange cup in exactly the same place as the one that was already there. She continued across the room, reaching Tasdevin in moments. The two scientists in ugly beige uniforms stood arguing in the middle distance, an incongruous confrontation because Tasdevin was so much taller.

'How rude of her!' said Guin, still baffled. On a whim, she went back to the desk full of immovable objects on which Groote had placed her cup. Guin could see only the immovable orange cup from before, so she gave it an experimental nudge. To her embarrassment, it easily toppled over, and spilled its contents over the desk. The papers were sodden within seconds.

She hadn't noticed Tasdevin returning to the desk. She had the disorientating experience of seeing the back of his bald head suddenly appear in front of her eyes, as though from nowhere. She felt the Doctor pull her gently back away from the desk, and she saw that Tasdevin had just stepped through her. He was stooping to tap at the keyboard that, minutes before, had not worked for the Doctor. It was obvious that he couldn't see them, though he was also making a more conscious effort to ignore Groote, who was practically shouting in his ear.

'Are we invisible?' asked Guin, and then wondered why she felt the need to whisper.

'Well, obviously,' said the Doctor, reaching up and waving his paisley scarf in front of the face of an oblivious Tasdevin. 'You'd think he'd remember me.'

'Maybe he's overlooked you,' said Guin sarcastically, knowing how

little the Doctor enjoyed being teased about his height. 'Though how could he mistake you dressed like that? You are distinctively the Doctor.'

'Indisputably,' said the Doctor, unabashed. 'Good to see old Tasdevin again. I just wish he was glad to see me on this occasion'.

They listened to Tasdevin's colleague, Groote, for a moment. The woman was evidently trying to persuade Tasdevin not to complete an experiment. She put her hand on Tasdevin's shoulder in what was obviously supposed to be a calming gesture, but it looked a bit odd because she had to reach up so high.

Tasdevin shrugged off the objections, and Groote's hand. 'I'll go down in history as the man who started perpetual motion,' he was saying, 'and I'll be around to see it for as long as I wish.' He tapped a few more keys. Then he stalked back to the tall equipment in the centre of the huge room, trailing the protesting Groote plus the unseen Doctor and Guin in his wake.

Guin was intrigued to see Tasdevin pull a small box from his apparently random pile of equipment, and flip open its lid. It was like a kid's school lunch box, but in place of half-eaten cheese sandwiches it was crammed with wires and connectors.

Tasdevin reached up to about his head height and stuck the box into the back of one of the standing obelisks. It snugly and impossibly slotted into the space where an exact replica was already fixed. With one further press of a button, Tasdevin stepped away from the artificial obelisk, pushing Groote casually out of the way. Guin wondered why Groote had stopped protesting, until she saw that Tasdevin was pointing something at the woman scientist. It was the paperknife from the desk.

'Don't be stupid,' he said to Groote.

Groote's eyes were wide with fear, hardly knowing whether to stare at Tasdevin's face, or the knife, or the box of tricks that was starting to hum in the obelisk.

'Me, stupid?' she managed to croak. 'Don't do this, Tasdevin.'

The light level in the room flickered up briefly.

Tasdevin threw another switch on the obelisk. Guin could sense, rather than hear, powerful engines heaving into life somewhere deep in the space station.

She didn't have time to speculate on the likely cause, however, as the double door crashed open once again. Three panting figures burst into the room and stared about wildly.

The middle figure was a mad-eyed bearded old man. 'Stop him!' he

yelled to Groote.

Tasdevin held Groote back with the paperknife, but directed his sneering riposte at the newcomers. 'Too late.'

Guin looked at the Doctor to see his reaction.

The obelisk beside Tasdevin transformed suddenly into a blinding pillar, and everything around Guin exploded in a brilliant silent white explosion of light.

It took Guin a moment to realise she was in the same room. The Doctor stood before her, rubbing his eyes like a kid who's just woken up. There was no sign of Tasdevin, nor of any of his fashion-victim associates.

The Doctor hurried over to the main double door. 'Locked,' he announced in a disgusted tone. 'Or worse.'

'And look at this,' observed Guin. On the table full of research materials, the horrid orange cup was standing up again. Guin tapped the surface of the liquid inside, and wasn't surprised to find it was solid. The papers beside it were unsoaked, and fixed solidly to the desk surface once more. She looked up at the Doctor. 'What do you mean, *worse?*'

He shuffled the few movable papers in front of her. 'I don't like to speculate.'

'Yes you do,' she countered.

'Well, I'm not going to until...Oh dear, it appears the more interesting of these research notes are at the bottom of this pile, so we can't read them.' He waggled the few portable papers at her, as though this explained everything.

Guin sat down in the desk chair, which rolled backwards a short way under the impetus. 'If they were killed or transported by whatever it was, how are we still here? We were between the lot of them. And how did all these things on the desk get...er...reset?'

'Reset?' The Doctor tapped his fingers at the computer keyboard, testing to see what responded, the bracelets on his wrist making a faint musical sound. 'A keyboard,' he mused. 'How quaint.'

'So you said.' Guin noticed the Doctor was staring at her, his eyebrows shooting up into his straggly fringe.

The Doctor reached out and spun her in a delighted circle in the chair. 'Professor Winchester, how often have I told you what a brilliant mind you have?'

He sounded like one of her associate curators, buttering her up before confessing his exhibition wasn't ready. 'Not often enough. But

start any time you like - I can withstand any amount of flattery.' She studied him more closely. '*Now* what are you doing?'

He was carefully placing the loose research notes over the paperknife on the desk. Then he pushed her backwards in the office chair until she was sat in front of the double door. 'I wonder...'

The Doctor released the chair, and stepped back to consider Guin where she sat.

No sooner had he done so than the double doors behind her slammed open. Guin yelled, and nearly leapt out of the chair with shock. There was a brief, disorientating feeling, and she gave another little shriek. It was Tasdevin, moving with his loping stride over the floor away from her. He'd just walked through her again - through her, and through the chair, as though they were nothing more substantial than a 3-D image. Guin heard the doors behind her creak open again. The woman, Groote, charged past her and into the room. Guin seized at the nearer handle, but missed it as the door slammed. When she tugged at the handle, she found the heavy doors were shut fast again.

'What are you doing?' shouted Groote.

Guin whirled around, and her sense of guilt turned to a kind of puzzled embarrassment when she worked out that Groote was yelling at Tasdevin.

'Leave me to it, Groote.' Tasdevin shouted back.

The Doctor was staring over his shoulder, trying to get a good look at the equipment he was carrying. He must have realised that it was futile to worry about jostling someone who couldn't acknowledge his presence, and so plunged his head through Tasdevin's back and submerged his face in the little box of gizmos that the scientist was carrying.

Guin hardly had time to react to the bizarre sight of the Doctor half buried in Tasdevin's noncorporeal body before Groote had hurried over, still shouting, and obscured the view.

A moment later, the two arguing scientists were stepping towards the computer table. Guin laughed to see the Doctor stooped in midair, like a dog wondering what's happened to its dinner bowl. Undeterred, he scurried over to join Tasdevin and Groote.

When he got to the table, he picked up the orange cup and dashed it down again. The cup shattered into fragments across the floor. Guin jumped with surprise, but Groote and Tasdevin noticed nothing.

Groote's shoulders had slumped as she seemed finally to acknowledge that shouting wasn't a very persuasive line of argument. 'Please. Don't complete the experiment.'

Tasdevin shrugged her hand from his shoulder. 'I'll go down in history as...'

'Did you see that?' the Doctor said, nudging Guin's arm. 'He put his hand right *through* those papers and pulled the paperknife out. He's palmed it now. I was a dab hand at magic tricks myself in a previous life, but that was *most* impressive!'

Soon Tasdevin had installed his equipment high in the obelisk at the centre of the room, and Groote had continued her unsuccessful pursuit of him. The Doctor capered around them both, with all the wide-eyed concentration of a kid watching street theatre for the first time.

'Me, stupid?' croaked Groote. 'Don't do this, Tasdevin.'

Unsurprisingly, Tasdevin did it anyway. Guin noticed the lights flare again.

'Power up,' said the Doctor, a second before Tasdevin threw the switch on the obelisk. 'Aaaaand...cue the bearded lunatic!'

Guin followed the Doctor's theatrical gesture towards the double door behind her. It obligingly crashed open, disgorging a small group of breathless figures into the huge room.

'Stop him!' yelled the maddest of the three new arrivals.

Guin was strangely fascinated in the rerun of Tasdevin's threat to Groote with the paperknife. She could just make out the Doctor behind the two scientists, peering closely at the equipment in the obelisk. He was reaching out to touch it.

'Too late,' mouthed Guin, just as Tasdevin spoke the same line. The world exploded into brilliance again.

'Can you tell what it is yet?' asked the Doctor.

Guin had just finished knuckling her blinded eyes, and was staring at the translucent afterimage on the white-tiled floor. It looked like a red setter, except that red setters were red and not tartan of course. As the odd shape faded, she considered the Doctor's question, and put her spectacles back on. At last she said, 'It's a time loop.'

'Eight out of ten, silver star,' said the Doctor. He ignored the way she then slapped him on the arm. 'We're experiencing a time echo. But were are ourselves unaffected. I wonder why. Because I'm a Time Lord, perhaps?'

'Speak for yourself, Doctor,' Guin snapped, fixing him with a baleful look now that her vision had returned to normal. 'Unless something more than your charisma has rubbed off on me.'

'Or, more likely,' continued the Doctor, oblivious to her sarcasm, 'it's because of what Tasdevin and his colleagues have been doing.'

The Doctor hurried over to the centre of the room, and began to examine the piece of equipment that Tasdevin had slotted into the back of the obelisk. He spent a few exasperated minutes trying to reach up and pry inside it with his long, thin fingers. Pressing hard on buttons and switches proved equally unrewarding. 'No,' he sighed eventually, 'it's like the paperknife: it just won't budge. I'd venture to suggest that the plinkton bracket has confabulated the interstitial quarterface in the parallel spangulated grompits.'

That wasn't what he really said, but his actual words made about as much sense to Guin. 'Stop dazzling me with your unhelpful jargon,' she sniffed. 'Even a museum director is unlikely ever to have met a whatever you said he was.'

'Temporal-quantum-research scientist,' said the Doctor with exaggerated patience. 'But even a jobbing electrician could spot what's wrong with this lash-up.'

Guin studied the innards of the equipment, craning her neck to look where the Doctor was pointing his accusatory finger at Tasdevin's handiwork. 'Rush job?' she ventured. 'Some cowboy done this for yer, mate?'

'He's connected the blue wire to the red wire, and no mistake,' said the Doctor. He dusted his fingers on the fake fur of his afghan coat, and then stuck his thumbs defiantly in his waistcoat pockets. 'Have you learned nothing since you came aboard the TARDIS?'

'I'll come clean - I've bunked off a few classes.'

'Well, if I could alter this piece of tenth-rate temporal engineering, I could break the time echo that it's induced.' The Doctor scratched his left sideburn in a contemplative fashion.

'How can you tell?' asked Guin.

'Well, if I could alter this piece of tenth-rate temporal engineering, I could break the time echo that it's induced.' The Doctor scratched his left sideburn in a contemplative fashion.

'Stop teasing, Doctor.'

'Well...' began the Doctor, but stopped when he saw her scowl. He continued gloomily: 'Who knows how many more times we're going to meet old Tasdevin? I'm getting sick of the sight of him. And I can't change this equipment: it won't shift a nanometre.'

'So we're stuck in this time loop.'

'No,' insisted the Doctor. 'Tasdevin and his colleagues could have escaped, and this is merely a temporal *echo*.'

Guin frowned. 'How can they be here, but be somewhere else at the same time? They can't be real *and* be ghosts, surely.'

The Doctor went to the desk and sat down heavily in the chair. 'One theory about ghosts', he said glumly, 'is that they are physical manifestations that are temporally displaced. So they seem to be returning to their old haunts as revenants.'

At this point, the doors burst open once more, and Tasdevin charged across the tiled floor towards them.

The Doctor remained at the desk, morosely watching events repeat themselves again. Tasdevin wafted through him where he sat. Shortly, Groote made her clattering appearance. By this point, Guin had sidled over to the main doors, though not before they had closed firmly once more. 'Not a nanometre,' she said to herself as Groote started shouting at Tasdevin. 'So how did *she* get in?'

Guin looked across at the Doctor, who had descended into one of his blue funks. Groote had just moved away from the desk, leaving behind her ghastly orange cup. The Doctor pushed it slowly to the edge of the desk until it toppled on to the floor and smashed into a dozen pieces. He studied the spreading pool of liquid incuriously.

Guin thought about this as the argument between Tasdevin and Groote continued to build. The Doctor had been falling into these dark moods all too often recently, particularly when the subject of the future came into conversation. He would talk darkly of his next regeneration, and then sit and stare despondently into space like this.

Then she thought about the orange cup. Before Groote had put it on the table, the previous cup - in exactly the same place - couldn't be moved. But when Groote had put it down after she'd finished with it...Of course!

The doors behind her burst open once more, and the three others came charging in as though they'd run a marathon. Guin took her chance and slipped through the open doorway.

She wasn't really sure where she was going, and had got only a few hundred metres away from the laboratory before the lights flared up briefly. She counted the seconds, waiting for the blinding flash. In time, she said, 'Too late.'

But nothing happened.

Or nothing she could see or hear. Just the briefest of feelings in her mind, like when you think you've experienced something before but cannot remember when.

How odd, she thought, to have *déjà vu* in a completely featureless corridor. At least it made a change from a ventilation shaft, she reflected. There'd been a lot of those on recent adventures with the Doctor.

Guin walked a long way around the curving orbital corridor before she noticed that, for several minutes, there had been no doors to either side of her. Deciding that she must be walking deeper into the workings of the research station and further from where people would gather, she turned and started jogging back in the opposite direction. Her legs were killing her, and her calves ached. Perhaps she should have taken her daughter's advice last year about support tights.

When she reached the laboratory again, she paused to listen for a while. The double door was fixed immovably in place, but she could just hear Groote's shrill voice berating Tasdevin.

Guin had jogged only a few minutes further along the corridor when she was frightened out of her wits and almost knocked over as a bearded figure leapt at her - so close that she could see the name tag on his horrid beige uniform: 'Fauler'.

To be strictly accurate, Fauler leapt *through* her, of course. Guin's instinct made her throw herself against the far side of the corridor, which meant at least that the two other scientists suddenly emerging from the same door didn't also charge right through her too. They hovered in the doorway as their colleague hurried off down the corridor.

'He can't be allowed to start the regenerator!' Fauler called back to them.

The larger of the two other men lolled against the door jamb. 'It's all go around here, isn't it, Suso?'

'It is if you're not on a fixed-payment contract like us, I suppose,' grinned Suso, and gave him a small shove. 'We'd better catch him before he really does have a heart attack.'

Well, reflected Guin, she knew where they were going.

She stepped into the room they'd just left, and discovered it was the small canteen. Several plates of unappetising food were abandoned on the table. She moved around the small table and nudged a few of the garishly coloured plates with a tentative finger, then pushed a few of the chairs with her foot. She found that they all moved. So, she decided, no one was going to come in and handle any of those items in the room, and she'd probably be undisturbed until the echo repeated.

Wait a minute, why was she worrying? They were hardly going to see her and arrest her, were they? This time-echo thing was proving rather difficult to decipher, she thought, and she needed to try to pay more attention.

Now Guin spotted a small oblong device sitting in the middle, and she recognised it as a small computer. It reminded her of the palmtop

computer that Lance had left in his sock drawer; she'd returned the socks, with all their toes cut out, but she'd kept the IBM WorkPad for herself.

As she picked up the little computer, the lights around her flared briefly. She smiled to herself. That meant that the echo was about to start again.

She sat in one of the chairs. She managed to decipher the controls on the front of the palmtop computer, struggling to focus through her spectacles, and had just got the device to display some interesting information when it simply vanished from her hand.

Across the table from her, Tasdevin was looking straight at her. 'If you don't want it, then don't have it,' he said to her.

Guin went cold. Where had he come from? She stared around the table, and saw that three other scientists were now sitting in the other chairs, and were laughing at her.

'What choice do I have?' said a voice in her head.

Guin leapt to her feet in alarm. The chair didn't move, and she stumbled awkwardly out from the gap between the chair and the table.

She could now see someone in the place where she had been sitting. She scuttled round to look at his face, aware that the others were still looking at this man - van Ruysbroeck, his name tag said. He continued to explain to his laughing colleagues that it wasn't his fault that the food dispensers on the research station weren't exactly five-star.

Guin considered the members of the group: the balding figure of Tasdevin, sitting slightly back from the table and scowling; Groote, her hair scraped back severely from her forehead, studying him thoughtfully; the cheery-looking youngest man, Suso, was slapping more of the food on to his plate, tucking in with a gusto that the concoction barely seemed to warrant and earning a look of disgust from van Ruysbroeck. It was odd to see the plates, cutlery and food being placed into exactly the same positions as the stuff that was already on the table. Time was catching up with the room.

The remaining man, Fauler, was staring at the palmtop computer in his hand, and scowling even more than Tasdevin. Guin could feel the tension between them, like a storm gathering. When her attention returned to their conversation, she heard Fauler quietly and fiercely berating Tasdevin about some safety procedures. Tasdevin was objecting to all the unnecessary bureaucracy, insisting that they had to cut some corners or they would not conclude the work before their funding expired.

Eventually, Tasdevin shoved his chair back and stood up angrily,

looming over them from his full two metres. 'I don't need lectures from you, Fauler. You didn't even want the original experiment to proceed.'

'History,' snapped Fauler dismissively, still engrossed in his computer display.

Tasdevin smiled grimly, and pointed at Fauler with the fork still in his hand. 'Then I won't let history repeat itself.' He tossed the fork on to his plate. 'I've initiated the first phase and -' he checked his watch - 'and that should have kicked in now.'

Fauler slapped his computer down on the table, and glared furiously at Tasdevin. 'You've done *what?*'

'Calm down, Fauler,' said Tasdevin with mock concern. 'Remember your angina.'

Fauler jumped to his feet, alarming his colleagues with the sudden movement. 'Don't get personal,' he spat, gesticulating angrily towards his computer on the table, his grey beard bristling. 'And don't try to distract me. I can see from these records that you have exceeded our funded brief, Tasdevin. You're a fool if you thought I wouldn't work it out.' He rounded on the other scientists, encompassing them all with his sweeping headlight stare. 'Our research chief here is working on more than a perpetual energy supply. He's got some delusion about immortality.' He tapped the palmtop computer with one thick forefinger.

Tasdevin went bright red. Guin could see the veins sticking out in his neck. 'And you have the barefaced cheek to suggest I was being personal!' he snarled.

Groote stared at Tasdevin, her face a picture of horror and disbelief. 'Is this true?'

'Fauler, you could only have discovered...' Tasdevin composed himself with a struggle. 'He's been reading my personal diary,' he concluded. 'It wouldn't surprise me if he'd downloaded the entire thing to his palmtop, the fuzz-faced little weasel.'

Suso stroked his own beard apprehensively.

Groote, however, continued to study Tasdevin in dismay as he was gathering several boxes of equipment from a side table. 'You wouldn't do this to us, Tasdevin,' she said weakly.

But Tasdevin was already striding out of the room.

Groote turned on Fauler, who had sat down and was scowling at his palmtop. 'Oh, well done, nicely handled, Commander Fauler. I'd better go after him.' With this, Groote hurried out of the canteen after Tasdevin.

The remaining three scientists sat in embarrassed silence for a while.

Guin tried to get a good look at the palmtop computer, though she couldn't pick it up or manipulate its controls - one of the three must still have to make use of it at some point.

It was while she was pondering this that she overheard a snatch of conversation that made her concentrate. The word that made her ears prick up was 'Galextricity'. It didn't take long before she had worked out that Commander Fauler, van Ruysbroeck and Suso were all working for the Galextricity Corporation, and that Tasdevin obviously didn't know this. From what the Doctor had said about Galextricity earlier, they were hardly going to be hoping Tasdevin would succeed.

At this point, however, the lights flared. 'Well,' Suso observed, 'he hasn't managed to iron out that bug in the system when it boots up. I worry about this place plunging into darkness every time he starts the damn thing.'

Fauler suddenly jumped to his feet again, scattering crockery. 'Idiot!' he snapped, and Guin couldn't work out if he was talking about Tasdevin or Suso. 'The notes in his diary are clear. If he runs this experiment cleanly, the cat's out of the bag. Galextricity will go down the pan like the Brilliant Corporation did, and we can kiss goodbye to our company contracts.'

With a speed belying his feeble frame, Fauler scuttled out of the canteen.

Suso and van Ruysbroeck got to their feet wearily, and followed him. They could make out Fauler's departing shout from outside: 'He can't be allowed to start the regenerator!'

At the door, van Ruysbroeck leaned on the jamb. 'It's all go around here, isn't it, Suso?'

'It is if you're not on a fixed-payment contract like us, I suppose.' Suso pushed van Ruysbroeck into the corridor. 'We'd better catch him before he really does have a heart attack.' And with this they raced off after Fauler.

Guin scraped a chair back from the table, and seized the palmtop computer. She was delighted to find that she could pick it up and operate its controls, once she'd taken off her specs and could focus on it close up.

She was in the middle of a particularly interesting document when she dropped suddenly and landed on her bum.

The room was full of chattering scientists again, suddenly appearing like guests at a surprise party. The palmtop was back on the table, and the chair had resumed its original position, dumping her on the canteen floor. The scientists again began to slap ghostly versions of the food,

crockery and cutlery into their predetermined positions.

Guin went and sat by the food dispenser, and watched patiently as the sequence of events started again.

She pondered how she could get back to the Doctor and tell him what she knew. The laboratory doors would be blocked to her until the last person had opened them, and that was when Fauler and the others burst in near the end of the time echo. But when Tasdevin stormed out of the canteen Guin had a better idea.

'Oh, well done, nicely handled, Commander Fauler,' said Groote. 'I'd better go after him.'

So Guin went after Groote. She chased alongside the woman, keeping pace with her until she reached the laboratory doors. When Groote pushed the doors open, Guin held her breath and jumped through the scientist, entering the laboratory ahead of her. It was only at this point that she remembered she'd left her specs back in the canteen.

Groote chased into the room, and skittered to a halt on the white tiles. 'What are you doing?' she shouted at Tasdevin.

Tasdevin stared at Groote, as though he'd never expected this outburst. The Doctor, however, was lounging by the computer to the side of the room, and parroting the dialogue of each of the participants. Lance used to do that when they went to the RSC, Guin remembered. She'd hated it then, too.

Guin hurried over to the Doctor, and hastily tried to explain what she'd learned about the other scientists.

'Yes, yes, yes,' said the Doctor in his infuriating way, 'I had a look at the notes on this computer here - I've had plenty of opportunity. Poor old Tasdevin believes he's found a way of stabilising his own small portion of space-time, so that it constantly recycles and he will never age.'

'Immortality, in effect,' smiled Guin, watching the two scientists arguing. 'Why just be remembered by everyone in your field when you can simply *outlive* everyone in your field?'

'Mystical nonsense, of course,' continued the Doctor. 'And he's overcompensated for the range, enveloped most of this research station in the time field, and caused a temporal positive feedback.'

Guin blinked at him. 'But that's a violation of the fundamental laws of cause and effect.'

The Doctor nodded. 'Well, the poor fellow is obviously deranged - thinks he's God, if I read between the lines correctly. In which case, he should remember that "God requires that which is past".'

Guin laughed, and stepped aside as Groote and Tasdevin breezed past them. She watched Tasdevin fiddling with his box of equipment. 'If he thinks he's God, that probably explains why he thinks he can break the three First Principles of Time.'

The Doctor stared at her, baffled. Guin reminded him that he'd given her the complete lecture on the Laws and Principles of Time only the previous week. 'I didn't bunk off that class,' she recalled.

'And you didn't fall sleep before the end,' remembered the Doctor.

Guin cleared her throat theatrically. 'The Three Principles of Time. One: time equalises. No system can exist in which no present time is converted into past time. Two: entropy increases. In an isolated universe, future time cannot transfer to past time. Three: absolute zero time cannot be attained by any procedure in a finite number of steps.'

'Pedagogical pedantry,' snapped the Doctor. 'You academics are all the same.'

Guin snorted at his comment. 'Didn't you also tell me you originally had to resit three of your final papers in Temporal Theory?'

The Doctor glared at her. 'Practice beats theory any day. It boils down to "time loops can't exist for ever". Not without eventually consuming vast portions of the past, and look what happened when the Time Lords tried that. So the real Tasdevin must exist somewhere else now, fondly believing that he has time-looped his body's regenerative process indefinitely. Which, let's face it, will be a real disappointment when he spots those first grey hairs.'

The main doors burst open, and the wild-haired Fauler charged into the laboratory, gesticulating madly.

'Meanwhile,' continued Guin, 'this whole research station is repeatedly going through the same timed loop...'

'Timed echo...'

'...timed echo, and consuming the past exponentially.'

'You really were paying attention to me the other day, weren't you?' The Doctor was trying not to look too impressed.

Guin smiled sweetly at him. 'I pinched myself to stay awake'

At which point Tasdevin rudely interrupted them as, its work completed, his machine exploded silently around them again.

They sat by the computer desk and waited patiently for the scene to play out again. 'I hate repeats,' muttered Guin. 'I didn't even allow Lance to keep his Shakespeare videos in our sitting room.'

'And that was grounds for divorce,' said the Doctor. He smiled at her reaction. 'You've told me this before, I'm sure.'

'So?'

'Well, you're starting to repeat yourself.'

Guin shuffled uncomfortably. She'd sat on the desk, but something was sticking in her leg. It was one of the pieces of paper, curled up at the edge, but as unmoving and as unyielding as stone. 'It's tricky to do things, isn't it? Because you can't touch things that the scientists themselves will touch during the time echo until they've finished with them.'

The Doctor jumped repeatedly on the spot where he stood, the bangles at his wrist jingling. His straggly red hair bounced up and down more wildly than ever, and his eyes were as bright as his yin-yang button badge. 'You're a genius, Guinevere!'

She studied her nails in mock modesty. 'It has been mentioned.'

'No,' insisted the Doctor, pulling her off the desk and on to her feet just before Tasdevin and Groote swept past again. 'I can switch the wiring in the obelisk at the last minute. I'll have to be quick, mind you: there won't be much time before Tasdevin throws that final switch.'

The Doctor moved over to study the obelisk, bobbing up and down on his toes as he re-examined the connections in the machinery. Guin saw him nod, obviously satisfied that he knew what to do when the time came.

Tasdevin stepped in front of him, oblivious to his presence as ever, and slotted his version of the device into exactly the same spot. The Doctor studied his bald spot. 'I shall be glad when I really do see the back of old Tasdevin,' he said.

Tasdevin pressed the button and moved away, whereupon the Doctor immediately stepped up to the obelisk and tried to fiddle. 'Oh curses,' he muttered as he stretched up. 'I can't reach the wretched thing. Give me a bunk up, Guin.'

She boggled at him. 'You have to be kidding.'

He stared her down. 'Quickly, now! Or do *you* want to discombobulate the thrungeblock?' he seemed to be asking.

'Well at least take your heavy coat off,' she insisted as she hunkered down.

For a little man, the Doctor was a heavy weight, thought Guin. He waggled about on her shoulders as he struggled with the innards of Tasdevin's device.

'Hurry up, Doctor. I don't want to go through this again. I've seen the future, and it sucks.'

'Predetermination's a funny thing, Guin,' replied his muffled voice from above her. He was probably talking through a mouthful of wires.

'Did I ever tell you about the wise woman I met in my fourth incarnation? At least, I think it was my fourth - I'm starting to lose track. She told me not to be afraid of heights. That was advice I shouldn't have heeded.'

'If she could see you now,' grunted Guin.

'She'd probably claim she already had done.' The main doors burst open and in blundered Fauler, chased by van Ruysbroeck and Suso. The Doctor and Guin didn't look over at them.

'Aha!' cried the Doctor. 'That should do it.'

'About time,' groaned Guin.

The Doctor dropped back to the tiled floor, and favoured her with a big smile. 'About time,' he said. 'Very droll.'

'Stop him!' yelled Fauler.

'Too late,' said the Doctor and Guin.

'Too late,' said Tasdevin. And then he and Groote simply faded away, like a Polaroid picture in reverse. Guin turned just in time to see the same thing happen to Fauler, van Ruysbroeck and Suso.

'Time to leave,' said the Doctor briskly, rubbing his palms together. 'The problem is solved, and the Time Lords will be happy.'

'Where did they go?'

'They were just echoes, remember. Somewhere else, Tasdevin is convinced he's made himself immortal, but his perpetual-motion stuff will never work. What's more, Galexticity will have to rely on other dubious scams to beat their competitors.'

Guin looked around the silent laboratory 'So how can this research station continue to exist?'

'An anomaly within an impossibility,' said the Doctor. 'The Schrödinger Institute will wink out of space-time as soon as we leave - we're the only things keeping it in existence by being here.' He scurried over to the computer screen and rattled at the keyboard. 'Let's see if we can work out where the TARDIS is. Maybe this thing has a map in it...'

'I think I can remember the way,' said Guin, who had already reached the laboratory doors.

They were both securely locked shut.

'Oh no,' she groaned, striking the shiny metal surface of the doors with her fists. 'Do you ever feel like you're banging your head against a brick wall?'

'Perhaps they lock automatically,' said the Doctor, coming across to join her. 'Don't keep hitting them. The trick to banging your head against a brick wall is knowing when to stop. This door won't open. That much, at least, is staring us in the face.'

He frowned at his reflection, licked his palm, and ran it over his head. His hair stayed just as it had been. He made a further vain attempt to straighten his waistcoat. 'You're sure this is the way out?'

Guin pointed at the door. 'I'm positive', she said, 'that this is where we came in.'

Please Shut the Gate

by Stephen Lock

It could calculate the years passing but had no sense of them. It hurtled through space, not knowing nor caring for the name of its destination. It was still receiving instructions. Numbers and symbols radioed directly into its brain told it speeds and angles. How to turn and where to go. And what to do when it got there.

It had no sense of anticipation, of occasion, nor even of its own importance. It simply hurtled through space, getting closer and closer to the cold red planet.

'Mars!' exclaimed Zoe with delight, peering round the TARDIS door. 'What year?'

The Doctor didn't answer her for a few moments, he was too busy squinting up into the salmon sky. '1999. December.'

'Oh.' Zoe felt a pang of regret, then swiftly chided herself for being idiotic and irrational. 'I was going to say I felt nostalgic for a moment, but we won't colonise Mars for ages yet.'

'No, indeed,' the Doctor agreed, vaguely. 'There's something about this time, though...and this place.'

Zoe sniffed. 'Seems a pretty typical Martian landscape to me.'

But the Doctor wasn't listening. 'Border of the southern polar cap...' he muttered under his breath as he fished in a pocket for his diary. 'Latitude 76 degrees. Now why should that...'

He put the unopened diary back in his pocket as Jamie's voice sounded from behind the TARDIS. 'Hey, will you look at this! Someone's been here before us!'

Zoe swapped a puzzled glance with the Doctor, then walked round the stout police box shell of the ship to see what Jamie was on about now. She shook her head to see the goosepimples on his bare legs. She doubted the combination of atmospheric density jacket and kilt had been tried out by a good deal of interplanetary explorers.

'I see what you mean, Jamie,' said the Doctor, pressing his palms together in an expression of concern.

Jamie turned to Zoe and nodded with satisfaction at the Doctor's reaction. Zoe just shrugged. She couldn't see much to be concerned about. There was a canvas tent, the remains of a small fire, and the weathered remains of some cooking utensils. By the state of them,

they'd been here for years.

'What do you make of it, Doctor?' Jamie asked, going over to stand by his friend's side.

'I think,' the Doctor said at length, 'that someone's been camping.'

'Och, I could've told you that,' huffed Jamie, and turned to Zoe for support. 'You said people won't get here for ages yet. Hey, it's not those Ice Warriors, is it?'

'No, no, Jamie. No, I hardly think our scaly friends are responsible.'

Jamie looked dubiously at the Doctor. 'Well, who then? I mean, what are people doing here at all?'

'Well, *we're* here, aren't we?' Zoe said lightly, turning away to signal her lack of interest in the subject. 'We shouldn't presume we're the only time travellers who've been to Mars.'

'Well, it's terribly irresponsible of these people to leave this lot lying around,' the Doctor announced, poking in the pink sand at something or other. 'An anachronism like this on the planet could cause no end of problems when the architects of the future arrive. Outrageous vandalism!'

Jamie's muffled voice called out to them. 'Mil...'

'I mean, why can't people just tidy up after themselves!'

'Mill... *Millets*.'

Frowning, Zoe turned round to see what Jamie was talking about. He'd gone inside the tent and was staring at something intently. 'What did you say?'

The Doctor jumped up in horror and a cloud of red dust, clamping one hand over his mouth as if in fright.

Zoe stared at the pair of them, more confused now than ever.

Data continued to assault the probe's computer mind, routine signal traffic coming and going until the on-board processors received the trigger signal. Two basketball-sized aeroshells detached themselves from their unwieldy transport and rocketed towards the planet, soon attaining a speed of 200 metres per second. The microprobes inside were designed to punch into the planet's crust to a depth of two metres, hunting for deep-frozen secrets.

The advance guard.

The Doctor was practically hopping up and down in alarm. 'He said Millets! Didn't you, Jamie!'

'Aye,' said Jamie, his head poking out from the tent flap. 'It's written on a label in here.'

'On a label?' the Doctor echoed, his voice rising a pitch in disbelief.

Zoe began to feel a little miffed at the thought she was missing something obvious. 'What's bird feed got to -'

'Oh my giddy aunt,' the Doctor said, turning helplessly on the spot like a small boy suddenly desperate for the toilet. 'Oh, well, now we know, don't we!'

'Aye,' said Jamie, in that cocky way that Zoe knew meant he had no idea what he was saying yes to. But she could see now the dust had settled once more that the Doctor was holding something in his hand. Something smooth, thin and hooked, with a hollow, circular end.

'What's that?' she asked.

'A pipe,' the Doctor said, shiftily.

'Doctor?' she asked again.

'Oh, all right, then.' He seemed to deflate, even under the padding of his quilted jacket. 'Not *just* a pipe. It's *my* pipe.'

Zoe frowned. '*Your* -'

There was a whistling noise, followed by the distant sound of what might have been an explosion. Zoe felt the ground shudder under her feet.

'Oh, my word!' the Doctor said, and Zoe noted he was grateful for any distraction. 'What was that?'

There was another faint impact.

'Someone's shooting at us!' Jamie shouted.

'No, Jamie,' the Doctor said, scrutinising the distant horizon for signs of danger. 'No, I don't think so. I don't think that was any kind of explosion. If they were firing at us they'd be pretty rotten shots, wouldn't they?'

'Whatever the projectiles were, I'd estimate both impacts to have occurred about 200 kilometres away,' Zoe said breezily. 'We're way out of any possible danger here.'

The Doctor grabbed for his diary again and started turning the pages feverishly. 'Or are we?' he muttered.

The machine couldn't feel the pull of the planet's gravity as such, but it responded to it, booting up programs and assimilating readings, compensating, thrusting, slowing its descent. And, all the time, new instructions, checks and crosschecks sparked through its circuits.

This was the crucial time, now. Its metal shell was warming up as it flew through the atmosphere, instrumentation on board moving into new alignments and transmitting streams of data back to its creators as it approached final descent.

'You mean it's going to land right *here*?'

'That's right, Zoe!' the Doctor cried, shoving his diary back into his pocket and ineffectually attacking the ancient green canvas of the tent. He stepped back gratefully as Jamie did a more convincing job of collapsing the thing. 'I thought I recognised the location. Yes, it's coming here. Just as I did.'

'When was that?' Zoe asked, wide-eyed.

The Doctor shrugged, crossly. 'A lifetime ago. I remember now, I'd promised to show Ben and Polly the coronation of Queen Victoria.'

'And you didn't even land on the right planet,' Zoe surmised.

'I was only a few million miles out,' the Doctor said defensively. 'But I...Well, I couldn't just up and leave could I? A new world, new experiences...'

Zoe nodded primly. 'You didn't want anyone to think you'd landed there by mistake.'

'I wanted them to see the Martian dawn!' the Doctor said sharply. 'It's a wonderful sight...Breathtakingly beautiful, everyone should have the chance to see it.'

Jamie looked at him suspiciously. 'Ben and Polly never talked about a beautiful Martian dawn to me.'

The Doctor looked sheepish. 'Ah, yes...well...We never *did* get to see it, I'm afraid. The TARDIS's lateral drift compensators decided to start working while we were trying to toast marshmallows. Nearly took off without us.'

Zoe folded her arms and looked round at the mess. 'So no time for clearing up, then?'

The Doctor studied a mud splash on his trouser leg very closely. 'No,' he agreed.

'Outrageous vandalism, eh?' Jamie remarked, looking over at Zoe and smiling.

The Doctor couldn't have look more crushed if he'd been run over. 'Well I wanted to go back, of course I did, but when I tried, the TARDIS got the wrong South Pole. Landed on *Earth* again, not Mars, the silly old thing.' He glared at his ship. 'And what a pickle *that* landed us in!'

Jamie finished pulling down the tent and crumpled it up into a huge green bundle. The Doctor took it from him and almost collapsed under the weight.

'I don't know why they'd want to send a wee box of tricks to a place like this,' Jamie remarked. 'There's nothing to see.'

Zoe smiled mischievously. 'You think they'd settle for sending the

first Scotsman up into space 200 years earlier, wouldn't you!"

"It's what's under the ground they're looking for, Jamie!" the Doctor said, dropping the tent by the TARDIS door and checking his watch. "Signs of life. Life in any form they can find."

"Then they'll be pleased to see us," Zoe said mischievously.

The Doctor looked at her aghast. "But they mustn't find us! Imagine the conundrums that would cause! Those noises we heard were the advance microprobes landing. The Polar Lander itself can't be far behind them!"

"But if it's in yon diary," Jamie said, "does it not say what the thing *did* see?"

The Doctor rushed back over to the ancient campsite and started picking up old spoons and tins. "I don't *know*, Jamie! Someone's spilt something on the bottom of the page!"

"Aye, and I wonder who *that* could've have been," Jamie muttered as he helped the Doctor in gathering the debris.

Zoe was about to pitch in and help when she noticed a tiny spot of blackness form silently on the rocky plain. It was getting bigger.

She realised it was a shadow.

"Quickly, Doctor! Jamie!" she shouted. "The Lander, it's coming! It's heading straight for us!"

"Will you not give us a hand, then!" Jamie complained, and his words stung Zoe into action. She realised a part of her was revolted by the thought of getting her hands dirty in the icy red soil; the part she'd hoped she'd left behind on the Wheel.

Gritting her teeth, she joined her companions scrabbling in the dust.

The Mars Polar Lander had spent precisely eleven months in transit. Unthinkingly it sent back data on its speed of descent and bearings to its creators, just as they unthinkingly sent prayers in an attempt to influence its imminent landing.

It began building an image of the new world spread coldly before it.

"All in!" the Doctor yelled. "Quickly! All of it!"

Zoe stared up at the probe as it got larger and larger, dangling from its parachute. She reckoned it was one metre tall by almost four wide, and estimated its mass to be 500 kilograms. A ridiculously bulky and primitive package. It was a miracle it had got here at all.

"Oh *Jamie*!"

Zoe looked across in alarm at the Doctor's cry. Jamie must've caught his foot in the collapsed tent and fallen, knocking the Doctor

down with him. They were scuffling about in the shadow of the TARDIS, but their efforts to free themselves from the heavy green canvas and snaking ropes seemed only to be entangling them more.

'Stop panicking!' Zoe ordered her friends, ignoring their angry protests that they were doing no such thing. 'You're making it worse!'

She pulled frantically at the twisted fabric, folding it back, and a few seconds later Jamie was clambering to his feet.

'Quickly!' moaned the Doctor, struggling as Jamie hauled him bodily from the canvas cocoon.

Zoe looked up and gasped. 'Doctor! We're too late!' she yelled as the probe's shadow fell over them with horrible swiftness.

'It's right on top of us!' Jamie shouted.

'No!' the Doctor cried, grabbing hold of Jamie's arm.

Zoe shut her eyes. She couldn't believe this was happening, that out of this entire planet the TARDIS had to choose the very spot that the space probe was due to -

CRUNCH.

The terrible noise forced Zoe's eyes wide open, and she saw that both the Doctor and Jamie were wincing. She looked up.

The Mars Polar Lander had impaled itself on the roof of the TARDIS. It was as if a clunky metal parasol was now shading the police box from the thin Martian sunlight. The probe wavered as its parachute caught in a careless breeze, then toppled off the battered roof, landing upside down with a horrid crash and the sound of things rattling about inside which clearly weren't meant to. It rocked on its back like a large metal crab, trying feebly to right itself, then lay still.

For a long time, no one said anything.

Jamie shook his head and breathed out noisily. 'Can you no...flip it over or something? Fix it up again?'

The Doctor shifted his weight from foot to foot, clearly unsettled. 'It's a little late for that, I think,' he sighed.

'At least it didn't see anything untoward,' Zoe said quietly.

'Years of effort and millions of man hours, all for nothing,' the Doctor wailed, stamping his foot in frustration, then choking a little on the dust cloud he created.

A thought struck Zoe, and she suddenly got an attack of the giggles. The Doctor's indignant glare and Jamie's confused face only made things worse.

'Of course, you know the *really* ironic thing about all this, don't you, Doctor?' she said with difficulty, pointing at the ruined probe. 'Back on Earth, they'll blame it on *human* error!'

Turnabout Is Fair Play

by Graeme Burk

They took me even deeper into the cave and pushed me into what looked like a cell. My rear end doesn't have as much extra padding as I thought, as I discovered when I fell flat on it.

The Javaman pointed his stun gun at me. He sounded like David Bowie, even though he actually looked like Tattoo from *Fantasy Island*. 'Do be comfortable, Doctor. When I power up the Dorganator, that is a luxury you won't be afforded.'

'Oh. Ha ha.' I sneered back.

'You know, the legends claimed you were a much wittier adversary. It seems they were wrong.' The Javaman turned on his heel and walked away.

'Yeah, well, you smell too!' I said, trying to get up.

'Tsk.' the Javaman muttered. What a creep.

Great, Peri, now you've really gone and done it... I swore, if I ever got out of the Doctor's body, I would put a bullet straight through it.

It all started with that headache. I woke up with my head totally throbbing. I pulled myself up on the TARDIS console and rubbed my forehead. I was about to ask the Doctor for a Tylenol when I realised that the console seemed lower. I scratched my head, and found that my hair was curly. Really curly.

And the cuff of my jacket had yellow stripes.

That's when I remembered I wasn't wearing a jacket when the console went kablooie. In fact, I realised, this cuff belonged to the Doctor's coat. So what was I doing wearing the Doctor's coat?

It was then that I realised the Doctor was nowhere to be found. I called out, 'Doctor?' Only it sounded totally weird.

I checked my hair again. It was really, really curly.

And everything seemed like I was a foot or so taller than normal -

And I was wearing his pants - trousers, he'd insist on calling them - and they weren't even baggy on me, and -

Oh no.

I ran out into the wardrobe and looked in the mirror. I saw the Doctor screaming back at me.

Oh, *yuk*.

At this point, I started to figure out what had happened. The Doctor and I were arguing about something. I mean, when aren't we? He was ignoring me and playing with the console. And then it exploded. And when I woke up I looked like the Doctor.

That was when I put my hand against my now-flatter chest and realised that I had two heartbeats.

I was actually *in* the Doctor's body.

And of the *real* me, there was no sign.

I could feel my headache getting worse.

So what are you supposed to do when you're stuck in the Doctor's body?

I'd seen *Freaky Friday*. I figured the Doctor had to be in my body. Unless my body had been disintegrated in the explosion, of course, but hey, I didn't even want to think about that.

I decided to go searching for me.

At first I tried searching the corridors outside the console room, but it became pointless after a while. By the time I'd passed the same boot cupboard four times I knew I was going round in circles.

I went back into the console room. I checked one of the computer screens and it said something like '*Volnax VI 2nd Lunar Cycle, Humanian Era, 3978*' and nothing else. I know how to operate only two controls on the TARDIS console: the scanner and the door. I tried the scanner first, but it was just static. Great. The console must be damaged. That just left the doors.

I pulled the red lever.

The phone booth part of the TARDIS was parked in some large rocky place. It's always rocks and sand with us.

At first I tried running, but the Doctor's frame wasn't built for long distances and I was wheezing for breath after a while.

Boy, he needs to lose a few pounds.

I was beginning to wish that I had swapped bodies with the cute, athletic version of the Doctor I first knew, when I discovered the rocks I was walking along led to a sand dune. And that sand dune had footprints. Footprints made from women's size 8 Nike running shoes. My running shoes.

My footprints - the Doctor's footprints, whatever - led predictably toward a series of caves about half a mile away. And stuck in the body of Blubbo the Time Lord, every step seemed twice as heavy.

But as it turned out, I didn't get the chance to move the Doctor's body any further. I heard people running behind me on the sand. When I turned around I found four tall guys, all of them very buff, very good-looking, and very blond. They looked like Californian surfers, except for the red and green body paint that covered them from head to toe in patterns that made them look tie-dyed.

'Hi!' I said, and winced when I realised how unnatural that sounded with the Doctor's voice. 'Could you guys give me a hand?'

The surfer guys just stared at me. They weren't even blinking. Finally one of them said, 'You are the Doctor.'

Then the others said in turn, 'You are the Doctor' and then they said it in unison. They were all glassy-eyed, like the zombies in midnight drive-in movies. I was really starting to get creeped out by them.

I figured I should tell the truth right away. I held up my hand to stop them. 'No, you see, I'm actually his companion, Peri. You see...'

I was interrupted when all four shouted, '*You are the Doctor!*' and circled me.

Even in the Doctor's body I started to get that awful feeling somewhere in the pit of my stomach that I usually get when things get weird.

I summoned up all the pomposity I could and tried to bluff them. 'Yes, all right, I *am* the Doctor.' I paused, realising that it sounded weird to hear the Doctor's voice enunciate the 'r' at the end of his name.

'Now, if you...*plebeians* will kindly desist in your... *circumlocution* and let me pass, I have urgent business to attend to.'

I moved myself forward. One of the surfer guys grabbed me by the shoulder and squeezed my neck hard. I sank to my knees and howled in pain.

'The Javaman wishes an audience with you,' all four of them said in unison.

I slapped his hand off of me and tried to right myself. 'Let go of me, you creep!' I shouted.

I felt something, or someone, hit the back of my head. Hard.

I woke up with an even bigger headache.

I was about to ask the Doctor for a Tylenol when I remembered I had been in the Doctor's body. As I struggled to get up, I was heartbroken to find nothing had changed.

I could tell from the dampness and the echoing ambient noise that we were inside one of the caves. It was dark, but my Gallifreyan eyes adjusted to it immediately.

'Welcome to the land of the living, Doctor,' I heard someone say. 'I've been expecting you.'

Oh no. I recognised that tone of voice. It was the tone of voice used by A-1 nut-bar megalomaniacs the galaxy over.

I was about to say that this was all a big mistake when I turned to face the A-1 nut bar. Or to look down at him, in fact. He was about three feet tall, and he was dressed in the usual combination of leather and a dentist's shirt. If that wasn't bad enough, he had a pathetic excuse for a beard, too. He sat on a large, fancy-looking throne made of gold and encrusted in sapphires and rubies. His legs barely dangled off the red velvet cushion on the throne's seat.

'Who the hell are you?' I asked.

'I'm surprised you haven't heard of me, Doctor.'

'Yeah, like I care.'

'You may call me the Javaman.'

'Big deal. What kind of name is that?'

'I was responsible for the insurrection on Wermir Colony A. I'm wanted by the Space Security Service, you know.'

'I guess I haven't been by the post office lately to see your wanted poster.'

'The Guardian of the Solar System personally signed my death warrant.' He sighed wistfully. 'Dear old Mavic. It's a shame we didn't see eye to eye on some key issues, or we'd still be working together I'm sure.'

Wonderful. A name-dropping, self-opinionated, diminutive megalomaniac. Peri, today is your lucky day.

'I suppose you've been wondering why I've brought you here'.

'Uh-huh.' About time.

'No doubt you recognise the design of the Dorganator.' He pointed a stubby finger upward. There was an elaborate structure above him that looked like a spider web made of crystal. The crystalline threads hung from the stalactites above him and were spread out along the entire surface of the cave's ceiling and gathered together just above the top of the throne.

'I haven't got a clue, but I'm sure you'll tell me.'

'I'm surprised,' he smiled. 'It's a massive theta-wave emitter. You are, of course, familiar with theta-wave emissions.'

'No.'

'You must be trying to flatter me by feigning ignorance.'

'No.'

The Javaman's eyes narrowed. 'They're emissions on the high end of

the mu spectrum capable of synthesising and transmitting thought patterns. The Dorganator is named in honour of Professor Dorgan's advances in the field of refraction and transmission of theta waves.' He paused. 'I used to get Christmas cards from Dorgan, you know.'

This was worse than a conversation with the Doctor.

'Let me guess. You can transmit your thoughts through it, right?'

'Ah, yes, of course, you saw how I projected my thoughts into the minds of the native Volnaxians. They have only been a proving ground for the capabilities of the Dorganator. Once it is at full power, I intend to use it as the most effective invasion weapon ever conceived.'

'Y'know, I'm sure that's real interesting - *really* interesting - but I'm actually looking for someone. I don't suppose you've seen -'

'Which brings me to why I've brought you here.'

Oh *boy*...

'Using the Dorganator I was able to find you through the telepathic circuits of your TARDIS and bring you here. I've followed your exploits in all your forms for many years, Doctor.'

Had no one in the future heard of the medical advances surrounding the use of Thorazine?

'I hate to break it to you,' I said delicately, 'but I'm not the Doctor.'

The Javaman was not impressed. 'Oh, come now, don't offend my vast intelligence. There are only two people in the known universe who dress that tastelessly.'

I clearly had to try harder. 'Look, that giant Christmas tree ornament of yours must have somehow fiddled with the TARDIS's telepathic circuits. I've got the Doctor's body but I'm actually his companion, Peri. Somehow our minds switched.'

The ugly little troll just clicked his tongue. 'Oh, please,' he chided. 'Credit me with an intellect on a par with your own and spare me the "I'm-not-the-Doctor" gambit. Corporelectroscopy is a scientific implausibility, and my considerable imagination as a scientist is one of the reasons why I won the Dastari Prize for two consecutive years.'

The Javaman shifted on his throne and summoned one of the Volnaxians standing behind me. 'We can do this the hard way or the easy way, Doctor. I want the secrets of time travel. You can either give them to me voluntarily, or, when I power up the Dorganator to full intensity, I'll take them from you - thought by painful thought. Like this.' He closed his eyes and the crystal lattice above him began to glow. Energy crackled from thread to thread of the web, and then there was an unholy noise. And the poor Volnaxian native who had come forward doubled over, clutching his head in pain.

'Stop!' I screamed. The Volnexian was wailing and tears were streaming down his face. His limbs were flailing spasmodically. I tried to run over to help him but the other Volnexians grabbed my arms. I screamed some more: 'Stop! Stop! Stop! *Stop!*'

The noise stopped. The Volnexian was lying on the cave floor, crying and holding himself in a foetal ball. The Javaman raised an eyebrow. 'The Volnexians are such a small labour force I can't afford to kill him, but you get the general idea.'

'You sick bastard -' I spat.

'Tsk.' The Javaman shook his head. 'I was under the impression you never used obscenities, Doctor.' He reached beside him and pulled out what looked like a stun gun.

He squinted his beady little eyes. 'Believe me, Doctor, not even your considerable mental resources will be able to withstand the theta emissions at full intensity. You can have a little while to decide what you want to do while I power up the Dorganator. Now move.'

They left me to sit in my cell for quite some time. The Dorganator clearly took a while to power up, which gave me some time to try to sort out the pros and cons of my situation.

Cons: I was stuck in a cell in the Doctor's body. The Doctor was possibly in my body but was nowhere to be found. There was an undersized psycho outside threatening to torture me if I didn't give away the secrets of time travel, which I didn't have.

Pros: If I was tortured to death, I might regenerate into someone better looking. And, if not, I'd have six more chances to get it right. That was, unless my mind was completely destroyed first.

I ran out of pros after that.

I remembered that the Doctor used to have a knack for pulling useful items out of his pockets, and so I decided to have a look through them. I found a paper clip, a cigarette lighter, a copy of *Burmese Days* by George Orwell and a firecracker. He could have at least left me a lockpick.

I just wanted to spend a quiet day in the TARDIS, maybe having a swim, and then eating microwave popcorn in the TV room while watching next year's episodes of *Magnum PI*...but I forced myself to concentrate on what the Doctor do if he were here in this situation.

I decided in the end he'd probably be very irritating and quiz me on what I had observed, just so he could then demonstrate how he came to better conclusions quicker.

So what had I observed? The Javaman didn't believe me when I said

I was *me*, which meant that while the Dorganator allowed him to project his thoughts, he couldn't read other people's minds. OK, so what else? He knew a lot about the Doctor and was desperate to impress him. He wanted to face off with the Doctor - which was probably why he refused to believe I wasn't the real thing.

I had to think harder. This was usually about the time the Doctor pointed out something brilliant.

I looked around the cell for inspiration, but there wasn't much to see. The passageway and cell were hewn out of the rock, and the door was made of solid timber and locked from the other side. There was ventilation and light from a small, but very deep, hole that must have gone four or five storeys through the rock to the outside. In fact there were some dried-up flowers where the light mostly congregated on the ground - the Volnexians must have grown them in that patch before the Javaman showed up. Unfortunately the hole was way too small for me to get out, even if I'd been in my own body.

The dried flowers looked familiar to me, though. They had tall, brittle stalks and large, spherical seed pods with brown and silver leaves that were circular and curved. The leaves themselves were coloured differently than any type of flower on Earth, but the general shape looked vaguely familiar. I tried to remember my sophomore botany notes.

Then I realised the vague memory floating in front of me wasn't from my college courses at all, but from the dorm rooms of some of the more...relaxed people in my class.

Papaver somniferum. Poppies with seed pods that contain significant quantities of morphine, codeine and thebaine - the principal alkaloids found in opium.

I wondered if the actual purpose of this cell was to be something like a sweat lodge. It would explain the need for a room this far down in the cave, and explain why the flowers were being grown in here. The hole in the ceiling could be used as a flue as well as a light source.

Still, I figured I should leave the armchair anthropology to the Doctor. It was time for some botany.

Now, conventional wisdom is that the seed pods need to be cut open and the juices extracted from the live poppies to produce opium. But my classmates demonstrated that, even dried, the seed pod itself can still be used. You can even infuse it in hot water to make -

"Tea with you Doctor? How charming, and, dare I say, positively civilised of you." The Javaman had managed to produce a second, less

ornate chair and a silver tea service for the occasion. 'I haven't had tea since that diplomatic reception for the members of the Galactic Federation Council. But won't this be a trifle strong? It's been steeping almost ten minutes.'

'Tea, when properly prepared should be almost...*Jovian* in strength.' He wants the Doctor, I thought, I'll *give* him the Doctor. I opened the lid to the teapot and checked the tea. 'See, almost a perfect ebony, er, hue.' I pointed up to the Dorganator above, 'Now, I was wondering if you could explain to me this...munificent work of crystalline artisanship...'

The Javaman looked up admiringly at his handiwork. Some coarsely ground-up seed pods slid out of my sleeve and dropped into the tea pot.

The Javaman went on at length about vibratory frequencies and the mu spectrum and the optimum nature of the Volnexian caves. I just smiled and nodded the whole time, until suddenly I realised he was asking me a question.

'Do you think that the fractal range of the crystals can be expanded using harmonic resonance?' he asked again.

'Well, that all depends on the, um...fractal resonance.' I quickly grabbed the teapot. 'Would you like some?' The Javaman nodded and I poured a cup for the both of us.

He grimaced as he tasted the thick black liquid. 'Are you *sure* it has to be so strong?'

'Most assuredly. I said to, er, Archimedes once that a good strong pot of tea will put some hair on your chest.' I faked a sip myself.

'But Archimedes lived before tea was even discovered.'

'His point exactly.'

The Javaman nodded and sipped a long sip. 'The bitterness does grow on you, I must say.'

'Indubitably so. It's a...mellifluous experience.'

'Now, Doctor, you were going to tell me about time travel.'

Now for the hard part. 'Yes...uh, what would you like to know about it?'

'Well, everything.'

'Yeah, OK.' I noticed he was still drinking the tea. Hopefully this wouldn't take too long. 'Well, it's like this. I'm a Time Lord and, uh, Time Lords travel in, uh, time.'

I winced inwardly at how lame I sounded. I tried to think of something the Doctor would say. 'It's all to do with the Rassilon Imprimatur.'

'The Rassilon Imprimatur?'

'Yeah. The Rassilon Imprimatur. It's...Uh, it's all to do with the mental...acuity...of Time Lords.'

'So, you're saying that Time Lords travel through time using the power of their minds?'

'Well, yes! You see, if you think about it, time is all to do with the mind. We're here in this moment and then in the next and it all has to do with how we perceive things.'

'So how does a TARDIS work?'

Oh, hell! I knew he was going to ask that. He was more than halfway through his tea. Why wasn't it taking effect?

'Well, a TARDIS. That's easy. You see, the TARDIS is a centring point for the mind of a Time Lord. It's like a reservoir of mental power and with it I'm able to move the TARDIS simply by perceiving the past, present or future.'

Uh-huh.

The Javaman looked perplexed. 'You're telling me that the whole secret of time travel is based, solipsistically, on one's philosophical perception of time?' He started to slump a little in his seat. The tea was finally taking effect.

'Yeah, er, absolutely. After all, time...time is an illusion.'

'But how does a TARDIS do that? There must be a technical explanation.'

Damn. 'Well...the TARDIS uses zeiton crystals, which work with a time-vortex drive that feeds on...beta...gamma...energy generated by the mental power from the, er, Eye of Orion...'

The Javaman looked at me. He was blinking rapidly and staring off into the nonexistent distance. He didn't speak for almost a minute. I stopped breathing. I had him, I *had* him.

Then he glared at me, fiercely. 'You've been talking complete cobbles, haven't you?'

Damn! Damn! Damn! The tea hadn't worked!

'We'll see if you will be so flippant once the Dorganator is activated,' the Javaman spat. He closed his eyes and the crystal web started to glow.

It was time for Plan B.

What the hell *was* Plan B?

I reached into my pocket. The firecracker. Maybe I could distract him long enough to get out of the cave.

Energy discharged from thread to thread of the web.

I lit the firecracker and threw it near the throne. I ran like a

quarterback into the Volnexians, but still they grabbed my arms and pinned them behind me.

The firecracker went off with a loud bang. The Javaman, startled, audibly yelped.

Then there was a surge of white-hot energy that moved up from the Dorganator's base above the throne along all the strands of the web. The furthest ends of the strands started to shatter, one by one.

The Volnexians look bewildered - the Dorganator must have stopped influencing them. 'Run!' I shouted at them, pointing to the cave mouth. They got the message and bolted outside.

The main tendrils of the Dorganator started to explode into jagged shards and hailed down on the cave floor. The awful noise started up but this time the Javaman was shrieking. All of the energy of the Dorganator seemed to be bouncing back on him, as his throne was blanketed by bright light.

I wanted to help him, but the stalactites had started to fall and the cave was rumbling ominously.

I had no choice. I ran as fast as I could.

I was at the sand dune when the cave mouth collapsed on itself. So much for the ultimate invasion tool. Knocked out by a firecracker.

I stood there and looked at the cave for a while. I knew I shouldn't feel sorry for someone like the Javaman, but I couldn't help myself.

It was then that, for no particular reason, I realised I had been full-out running for a fair distance and hadn't even so much as wheezed once. How did I figure out how to use a respiratory bypass system?

Still. There was nothing left to do but walk...back...

...to the TARDIS.

Except, suddenly I was *inside* the TARDIS. I was standing in front of the console and my finger was pressing a button.

My finger! And I was wearing *my* clothes! And the console seemed the right height again.

I put my hand to my chest. There was only one heart beating under my touch.

I was back in my body.

About ten minutes later, the Doctor walked inside the TARDIS and nonchalantly strolled up to the console. He shook his head. 'I really don't know how you can get around in that thing.'

That arrogant...

It was good to see him.

'Speak for yourself,' I shot back. 'I don't suppose you would care to explain how the Dorganator switched our minds over.'

He waved his hand dismissively. 'The theta emissions created a feedback loop in the telepathic circuits.'

'How did you get us back to normal?'

'Really, Peri, it's best not to think about it. Corporelectroscopy is dangerous knowledge, best left to the Time Lords.' There was a long pause while the Doctor fiddled with some more switches on the console

I audibly cleared my throat. 'So where were you the whole time?' I prompted.

'You were still unconscious when I woke up and so I went to investigate the cause of that little...unpleasantness,' he replied as he moved around the console to do whatever it was he did to put the TARDIS in flight. 'I employed some stealth to elude the Volnexians and the Javaman and I sabotaged the Dorganator, although I must admit, you managed to help with that - albeit in a very crude way.'

I couldn't believe it. He was barely back in his own body more than ten minutes and already he was being patronising. 'Crude!' I snarled. 'I had to take on that creep alone.'

'Yes, and you provided an admirable distraction, although I don't think you really captured my natural loquaciousness. I knew you'd be fine with the Javaman. He was a rank amateur - "strictly bush-league" to use your parlance.'

'*Bush-league?* He was *psychotic*, Doctor.'

The Doctor didn't look up from the monitor he was checking, but I could see he was smiling. 'Well, we all have to start somewhere, Peri. You can't take on Davros on your first time out, you know.'

I shook my head and made my way to the door in search of a hot bath and some Billy Joel. But before I left, I stopped and turned to him. 'You know, Doctor, I never thought I'd say this, but you really are like most men in one important respect.'

'Really?' the Doctor looked up. 'What's that?'

I smiled. 'You're all nice to have around, but, when push comes to shove, a woman can do just fine without you.'

The door shut before I heard anything more.

Special Occasions:

2. Do You Love Anyone Enough?

by Norman Ashby

They stood with their faces turned to the vacuum, although we perhaps shouldn't ask exactly what they were standing on, or precisely what was protecting them from the cold. It's enough to say that they were standing on the edge; possibly the edge of the universe, possibly just the edge of the galaxy, but either way the view couldn't have been better. They watched in silence while the dimensions collapsed in on themselves, while the grandest of the suns quietly folded itself out of existence, while the planet that had once been Earth vanished from sight and the planet that had once been Gallifrey faded away into less than nothing (because *nothing* requires space, of course, and space had ceased to mean anything by that point). The continuum slipped peacefully away, leaving only two people to remember it.

Romana felt the Doctor nudge her arm. She looked down, just as he held out his hand and showed her the tiny little giftwrapped present that sat in his palm. She spent a few moments just staring at it, and therefore missed the sight of the last few constellations of Mutter's Spiral melting away into the Blue Shift. It didn't matter. Once you've seen the first billion stars disappear, the rest are pretty much the same.

'For you,' said the Doctor.

Romana unwrapped the present slowly and carefully, making sure she didn't rip the paper, just in case the Doctor wanted to put it back in his pocket and use it again later (it'd be typical of him, really). The object inside was small and caramel-scented, the outer layer of chocolate sticking to the wrapper as well as her fingertips.

'The very last Rolo in the universe,' said the Doctor. 'Happy Valentine's Day.'

'You old romantic,' said Romana.

Nothing At the End of the Lane

by Daniel O'Mahony

Part Two: The Watchers On The Walls

Oh, bloody hell -

What happened? Someone get. Did anyone see? She just. Did anyone? She looks dead. Bridget, get. Did we hit her? Is she dead? Went down like. She looked sick. She just fell. Going to get blamed. Her legs went. Bridget get Mrs. Are you all right. Like cardboard. Are you all right, Miss? Thwack with the ball. On the ground. Breathing, she's still. That wasn't how it. Wake up! Was never hit. Folded underneath her, like card. With a bloody hockey stick? Crack went her skull. Didn't touch her. She just fell. Please *wake up!*

Miss Wright?

Blue-topped and white-skirted, their calves slicked with mud, hockey staves dropped or dragging, the third-form girls converge around Miss Wright. It rains gently, damp spotting. Barbara, today's shivering stand-in Phys. mistress, curls out on the right wing of the field, hardly breathing, whistle cord a garrotte round her neck. The children cluster, blanched, morbid, excited. With their bodies, they fence her off.

Her hair tangles, soaking in the mud. Her hands fold under her flapping birdwings. Her eyes shiver; fluttering beneath film-thin skin. Some players saw her kneeling in the puddles, heavy head rolling before she slipped on to her side. They saw blood dribbling from her nose. Seabirds circle and croak in the grey sky.

Barbara Wright looks newborn.

Electric light kept the gloom out of the staffroom. It lent Mr Kint's skin a leathery quality, as though his body were heavy - baggy. He leaned forward from the sofa, a prayer-like curve to his shoulders, his hands locked together in a club.

'Has it gone from you now?'

Barbara nodded. There was mud still in her hair and rainwater patches under her clothes but the buzz beneath her ears had subsided. Kint didn't seem convinced. He cocked his head, distracted. Nothing gave way in the hood of his eyes. Behind Kint, behind the sofa and the gap of the room, were a row of grey windows - television screens smeared with sluice. The rain tapped against them, politely, again and

again and again.

'That's good to hear,' Kint responded, distantly.

Ian appeared from the cloakroom, bearing a trayload of mugs and a supportive smile.

'Tea?' he asked.

It was bitter with a crease of milk and so hot it burned her tongue. Kint let his stand, never once raising it to his lips. Whatever he had to say next wouldn't be welcome. He was holding back with it - embarrassed? She couldn't tell.

Ian shovelled sugar into his mug, then made for the door.

'Will you stay, Mr Chesterton?' Kint asked abruptly. His gaze stayed fixed, slightly to Barbara's left. Ian looked back, the Classical mistake.

'I have a class in twenty-five minutes,' he protested.

Without thinking, Barbara interjected. 'Please stay, Ian.'

Ian nodded coolly and seated himself on the edge of the room. Barbara's eyes flicked across him. He looked bashful, like the biggest kid in the school, hauled up before the headmaster for some terrible, trivial, unspecified misdeed. Ian's eyes shuffled round the room trying not to light on anything that might return the gaze. They went from Barbara's chest to Kint's back, to the windows, then round again full circle.

'Harvey,' Kint drawled, invoking the spirit of the absent headmaster, 'and I are very concerned about your condition.' Numb, Barbara nodded. 'As you may know, certain governors opposed your appointment.' (*Barbara hadn't known; it stabbed; Kint's voice trembled as he resumed.*) 'This... whatever it is... They don't like the idea of you being around their children. There were no strong feelings, but there was disquiet. Harvey pushed for you. You have our support.' (*He slipped, then, into silence.*)

Barbara glanced again at Ian. He was pretending not to listen. His tie, Kint's tie, were the only splashes of colour in the grey, grey room.

'I'm grateful...' Barbara began, haltingly. Kint raised a hand, a gentle silence.

'You're not a great teacher, not yet. You have it in you, but you need experience. You're better than a student, but you still look like one. But you look less like one than you did at the start of September. Do you understand what I say?'

Barbara nodded. She felt like the small, guilty pupil now. Ian gave her a sideways glance, her co-conspirator.

'You're never going to be a bad teacher,' Kint added. 'Nor a mediocre one, which is why the governors won't hear about today.'

Distraction almost broke across his face, and he looked away, hiding it. Ian had perked up and was paying closer attention.

Kint's features broke, returning to the inscrutable normal.

'Don't think we haven't noticed you've been ill. We'd prefer to hear about it from you from now on. We'll treat this afternoon as an aberration and keep you off the field in future. But you're too secretive - it wouldn't hurt to talk. Do you understand?'

'We' meant Coal Hill. She could hear the creak of its ninety year history in his voice; she was being invited to join in. Even before term started, Barbara had been keeping a discreet eye on the public-school vacancies. She looked at Kint, the black hollow of his eyes, and realised that he knew. He blinked, basilisk-slow.

There were five seconds of guilty silence, then Ian broke it. 'I really think I should -'

'Another minute,' Kint said.

We don't think your heart is in it.

We notice you don't mix.

We think you should have made more friends by now.

That was Kint's sense. Rather than face him, Barbara made a weak smile for Ian. He gave a timid nod, an endearing sight, and Barbara's smile broadened to show some teeth.

'Anyway, it's good that you're feeling better. Take the afternoon off now, rest over the weekend, and we'll see you on Monday. Is that all right?'

Thickening leaves stuck on the windows. Barbara's eyes went to them. They curled and crumbled, falling in brown flecks. Briefly there was frost, then sunlight - heavy and crimson. Another part of her was exchanging words, pleasant words, with Kint. The sun faded, the rain welled, hail hammered. Rotting vegetable mush on the window made her feel dirty; there was playing-field mud still on her face.

'That's fine.' The words tasted strange.

She thought she said her goodbyes to Kint. When she looked up he was gone.

Ian cocked his head and laughed gently. 'I'm not sure I needed to hear all that!'

Barbara shook her head. 'He's not very subtle, is he?'

'Oh no,' Ian replied. 'He could teach Machiavelli a thing or two.' 'Well, we could all do that.'

Ian laughed. Barbara laughed. They weren't quite in time.

'Look, Ian,' she said. 'If he wants us to socialise then I think that's fine. Could I offer you dinner one evening? Not tonight, but tomorrow

maybe.'

Ian feigned thoughtful consideration.

'Well, I hate to miss The Avengers...' he joked. 'No, tomorrow's fine! It won't put you out?' Practised hesitation.

'I love cooking. I'd enjoy it. Do you like Indian food?'

'Just so long as it's nothing like Korean!'

'Then that's settled.'

She looked to the windows, to the light thinning through the endless rain. It was definitely brighter.

Ian bristled. She sensed the question before, abruptly, it was spoken.

'Can I ask, what is... the matter?'

Barbara shrugged. 'I don't know.'

'But when you have these fits someone must -'

Another shrug. 'They're not fits. I know what it looked like, but it's rarely that bad.'

'So what are they then? What do you call them?'

Attacks.

'Episodes,' she said.

Her eyes liquefied and her skin scalded in the heat. That was in the instant following the flash. The next, a great wind set her tumbling through the aft; like the Wicked Witch of the West. Her flesh boiled off her bones and her bones melted.

'You've been dreaming that for over a year?' Ian spluttered. She hoped she hadn't put him off his curry. 'I would have gone mad after all that time.'

'It would be worse if I dreamed with sound. Or colour,' she added.

He raised one of her wineglasses to his lips. They had reached a warm, relaxing low point on the bottle. The spectral professional reserve she'd feared might mar the evening was gone.

'What about you?' Barbara asked. 'What do you dream about?' He never told her.

Saturday afternoon hadn't been as tense as she feared. She was good at preparations, at cooking, at tidying, at choosing the right thing to wear. It was good to practise them again. It was a breezy day; the open windows let in just enough to clear away the stale air of her life. She resolved to make the most perfect - though not the hottest - curry ever tasted in the Occident; she wouldn't, she couldn't, but it would satisfy. She felt good that afternoon, and when she wasn't working she was busy rehearsing the conversation - every line.

Ian arrived a minute and a half later than she expected.

'I like this,' he said, as she took his coat. 'It's very compact. Very

cosy.'

There were a hundred things wrong with the flat, but Ian was far too good-natured to draw attention to the fact that her sofa looked, from certain angles, peculiarly like a fold-down bed; that he would have to walk through the steamy kitchen if he needed to use the bathroom; and that she'd forgotten to turn off the tele and a mannequin was bellowing from the screen with the voice of Spike Milligan.

She twisted it off. The picture faded and cooled.

'We can still watch if you want,' Ian suggested.

Let's not. She waved him to sit down and made for the kitchen.

'Honestly,' he declared through the half-closed door. 'I love Peter Sellers.'

'You do?' she called back. 'I met him once.'

Nothing was quite ready yet. That was fine, Ian seemed happy.

'He has a new film out next month. I thought you might like to see it.'

'I very rarely go to the pictures, Ian,' she told him.

'It could be interesting. He's doing it with the same chap he did Lolita with.'

She framed herself in the doorway and pursed her lips. Ian perched, relaxed, on the edge of the sofa, a happy echo of Kint's staffroom pose from the previous day. His fingers sat on the surface of the coffee table. He'd be eating off that soon enough.

'You haven't read that, have you?'

'*Oh, Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins*,' he mocked.

'As people who work with children, I think we need to set an example.'

'The number of times I've had to confiscate copies...' Ian shrugged and smiled, his hands slapping gently on the side of the bed. He looked eager, also hungry.

'I'm afraid it's not quite ready yet.' *Smooth, apologetic, scripted.*

It was fascinating to watch Ian eat. She was meticulous in her table manners and disliked eating in public, afraid that people would think her fussy. Ian seemed to be the opposite, not messy, not rude, but unselfconscious. His jaw *worked* on his meal. He wasn't hurrying now, but she suspected that his languor was for her benefit, to make her feel relaxed.

That felt good.

They ate, but mainly they talked.

'So,' Ian asked, 'what exactly do you think Roger's up to?'

She frowned, looking up from her curry. She was half squatting on

the floor opposite. Behind her the telescreen was still warm. Ian was wearing his schoolboy expression, a wide inquisitive mask. He would have been a good boy to teach.

He was asking about Kint. The question seemed innocent enough but she swallowed.

'I don't know,' she said, finally. 'I can't get through to him. We seem to be on different planets. He doesn't like me.'

'You don't think so?'

'Actions speak louder than words.'

'I get the impression he likes you a lot. Or he's very protective of you.'

'I'm not sure I like the sound of that. Do I need protection?'

'No, but you... keep yourself to yourself. You can't help but notice that. He wants to encourage you, not force you. He's a good staff man. He can tell if something's wrong, and he can get it sorted out.'

'I get the impression that he's Harvey's... not his spy, not exactly... his hands. He handles the... unpleasant jobs.'

'You get that, too?'

Muted, shared laughter.

'Poor Harvey -' Ian was sympathetic - 'lives in the clouds.'

'Is he a good teacher, though?'

'He was my teacher.'

'Ah!'

'This is really very good. You are a... wonderful cook.'

'Thank you, Mr. Chesterton. B-plus?'

'Oh, at least an A.'

Softened, shared smiles.

'Roger's not had a good year, anyway. He's doing his best.'

'Really?'

'Did you meet Miss McGovern? No, of course not. She had your job. History.'

'What happened?'

'She left in inauspicious circumstances. Roger was very close to her, closer to her than she was to him. He's been worn down lately.'

'You think he resents me?'

'No! You have a very cruel view of the world, you know.'

'What happened to Miss McGovern?'

'She's getting on nicely. She has a job with a scientific consultancy doing research for Labour. They're a *trendy technology* group I think, very into avant-garde science and politics. Ecology I think... *Silent Spring* sort of thing. You know it?'

'Yes. I carried a copy around with me for about six months. Then I read it on holiday. On the beach in Australia. I must say it cheered me up a great deal.'

'So she's happy anyway. Hey! I saw that face. It sounds as if you don't approve.'

'It's not her... Oh, Ian, I'm just not a Labour person.'

'I didn't think you were somehow. You realise they're going to win next time?'

'I know, I know. It hasn't been a good year for my side has it? Ahhhh, they're not my side. I'm not that bothered, honestly?'

'Well, I'm a Liberal and we never win.'

'You're a Liberal? Surely not.'

'I believe you're never this sarcastic at school.'

Cutlery sliced through meat, tapped on china.

'So, Barbara, did you enjoy Australia?'

'Not really. It wasn't really a holiday. It was a rest, that's all. From him.' Then she said, 'I was tired. I'm running out of lives!'

I don't think I've been as relaxed as this in ages.

It's good wine. Good, given that it's cheap off-licence plonk.

Silence from Ian. For a second. Then, 'Do you think about him much?'

'When I want to. I have to really want to, to bring him back in front of my eyes. The rest of the time he...' Her hand went up. 'I'm sorry. I can't talk about this.'

Ian shook his head emphatically. She saw through the pink blur of her hand.

How many fingers am I holding up?

She collected herself: 'Miss McGovern. Something you said,' she added.

Ian looked grateful for the change of subject.

'What's a history teacher doing in a science think tank?'

'She did a little science as well. Actually, she was better than I was, particularly with astronomy. Which is a shame because I wanted to be an astronaut!'

'Now she's going to put the first Briton in space?'

'I think the first Briton in space will be a woman.'

'I think it's far more likely to be a chimp. Though it may be a lady chimp.'

'I don't know if that's what they're doing. Lola had a science-for-breakfast mind. A great history teacher as well. If you mixed the two of us together we might look like her.'

He smiled. She did too, curiously.

'It's funny. I was thinking the other day that science and history are very similar subjects. You have to use metaphors all the time, to teach and to learn.'

'You could say that about any subject. Mathematics.'

'That was my next thought. But maybe history and science use the same kind of metaphors. Then I gave up. I'm not French enough to think it through properly.'

'What are you scared of, Ian?'

Understandably, he looked surprised.

'What's brought this up?'

'History and science. It scares me when they get together. History of weapons was one of my specialities. You know, before the Great War there was no military science. Then the Germans thought of using poison gas on the enemy, and that's how it started. They had a scientist working on perfecting deadlier gases. And this is the... the poison they used in the death camps. And he was a Jew. The man who thought of using gas as a weapon. He was a Jew. And they used it in the camps.'

Less surprise on Ian's face now, more shock.

'You're scaring me now,' he said, and in a little way he seemed to mean it.

'I'm sorry, Ian. I just get worked up about these things. I'm a history teacher so... the only thing that scares me is the end of history.'

'Literally or metaphorically?'

'Both, I think. They're working on a new Bomb. It's one that goes off in the atmosphere. That means that the radiation spreads and kills everything, but because there's no ground detonation all the property stays intact. Between them Russia and America could kill everyone on Earth thirty times over. What does that tell you about the minds of the people who rule us?'

'I think you're upset.'

'Yes, I'm sorry. I shouldn't force this on you.'

'No, I'm just surprised. I always thought you were very conservative.'

'I am very conservative. I think I have a very conservative view of the Bomb.'

'What did you do last October?'

'You really want to know?'

'Really and truly.'

'It surprises me that I don't have any children.'

'I see.'

'There's no need to be suggestive. I was married then. Honestly,

Ian!

'Do you still think about it?'

'I dream about it. Every night since then. I dream my eyes are liquefying and my skin is burning. That's only in the moment following the flash. There's a firestorm that lifts me as though I'm Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*. Then I literally explode. Every night.'

'Things have got better since Cuba, I think. Things have relaxed.'

'I hope you're right.'

'I thought you said you didn't go to the cinema.'

'*The Wizard of Oz*?'

'I was young. I saw it just after the war. I spent the second half crouched behind the seat. I was a Blitz baby. They evacuated me when V1s started dropping on our street. I was burned by V1 wreckage - I've got a scar on my back to prove it. And none of that terrified me as much as Margaret Hamilton painted green!'

Ian peered curiously at her and suddenly she could read his thoughts.

Can I see the scar?

'That's very honest of you,' he told her.

Later still, he had to go. He struggled into his coat, a dark, heavy swathing thing. It seemed to be stealing him away from her.

'Mr Kint's strategy seems to be developing nicely,' he said, cheerily.

'I'll try not to play chess with him,' she said.

'You'd better not try playing me.'

He looked confident. 'Why's that?' she asked.

'Because', he confided, 'you'd beat me.'

tomorrow we shall be a public spectacle, a subject for news and idle gossip

Her skin prickled. Something else woke her. She inhaled and tasted blood, every breath shimmering with a million tiny pieces of sharpened metal. The night air was thin and rare; the effort of breathing made her giddy and her exhalation came out as a fine white mist.

She sweated. There was a wet swathe down the front of her nightgown, another down the back, gluing the fabric to her spine. Her breasts felt tight, etched with pain. There was blood at the back of her throat, a perfect bead, too large to swallow.

i just believe them

She got out of bed. Her naked toes brushed against a floor that

might have been metal or plastic but felt like neither. The bedroom was half a mile across and her reflection filled the curved mirrors of the walls. She twitched slightly, and her many faces rippled out of the angles of the glass.

The walls were pockmarked. She hadn't noticed before.

please... you must take us back... you must

The tele was fizzing in the other room. She must have left it plugged in. Irritating - it was five miles' walk away, on the other side of the... flat? She set out, pacing through white corridors. Footsteps echoed. Doors rose and fell, to the left, the right, in the floor, above her head. The walls were bare white bricks, or smooth and panelled, or transparent and glazed with fantastic machinery, or covered by disconcertingly flowery wallpaper. Suppressed power shook the walls. It reminded her of her flat.

disguising itself wherever it goes

The telescreen showed tigerskin, butterflyskin symmetries. BBC-tv was long over. Did they always show this during closedown, after the final respectful note of the national anthem? Visions formed in the expanding patterns, howlround shapes that should not be seen.

everything you do is reasonable, and everything I do is inhuman

She glanced over her shoulder. The bed was unfolded in the corner, its ruffled cover forming the strange terrain of another world - a lifeless planet of valleys and peaks and rippling dunes. She had walked six feet since waking.

The screen was blank and talking to her.

Barbara's lips parted; spittle seeped out, no words. Her skin felt slick and slippery. She saw herself reflected on the cold dead screen.

A SERIES OF ADVENTURES IN TIME
AND RELATIVE DIMENSION IN SPACE
WILL THRILL AND EXCITE YOU

TRAVEL BACKWARDS, FORWARDS, SIDEWAYS AND
INTO MATTER.

The screen crooned. It had a nauseous, seductive voice. She brushed it with her hand - static crackled, unfelt on her fingertips.

HISTORIES THAT HAVE BEEN READ, AND WRITTEN.
A DROP OF OIL, A MOLECULE, UNDER THE OCEAN.
ALIEN WORLDS SCORCHED DRY BY DYING SUNS.
WOULD THAT SATISFY YOU?

Frantic, Barbara grabbed a pillow from the end of the bed and pushed it hard against the glass.

ONE DAY, YOU WILL GET BACK... YES, ONE DAY.

TO LEAVE NO GRAVE ON THE EARTH.
TO TRAVEL AND BE FREE AND AFRAID.
TO RIDE THE WHEEL OF FORTUNE.

The screen was hissing. White noise, building into a charge. Detached, Barbara watched herself sobbing - there was a wet swelling pushing at the walls of her skull, the only thing she had really felt, since she had woken.

If this counted as being awake.

Arrogant light blazed under the pillow and Barbara fell back. The pillow exploded out of her hands. Barbara, afraid that what she saw was real after all, put her hands on the screen and caught a giddy rush in her throat, in her abdomen. An annihilating glare blazed in the glass.

White-out.

She knelt before the screen, not sleeping, for the rest of the night. It was cold; it had never been plugged in; and it was watching her. She imagined a hand touching the back of her unkempt hair, then fingers tracing the dead skin on her shoulder.

well, don't you feel it?

She remembered what school had been like as a child - a string of endless undistinguished days bled together in her memory. The next week was like that again for her. She didn't know why she avoided Ian, but she did. She wasn't sure what she could say to him.

Thursday brought her history class back to C4. The children found her distracted and passionless. It was their last day of the Corn Laws. Their faces were dull, remote from their subject, too young even to have clear memories of rationing. They were looking forward to starting the French Revolution. From C3 there was a rotting vegetable smell; Ian was up to something with chlorophyll.

It was a relief when the bell rang and the day reached a close.

One of the girls caught her eye as the others filed out - elfin, reedy, a fawn-coloured figure with made-up eyes. Tired, Barbara didn't recognise her for a moment.

'Can I borrow your book?' she asked. 'On the Revolution?' She put her hands together in a bony clasp. 'You're right about my studying more. Miss?'

Barbara thought, and nodded, and went to fetch her copy.

She stopped on the way, knocking on the door to C3. It was almost empty as she went in, the class long dispersed but the pungent vegetable stink still filling the room. Ian Chesterton sat at one of the benches, his back arching wearily. He half glanced over his shoulder,

but no more. It was as though he had been expecting her.

She was suddenly more cheerful. After a week she finally had something to say to him - a problem she could share.

'Still here?' he asked. He sounded happy.

'No, I've not gone yet. *Obviously*.' She smiled, moving closer to him through the body of the room.

'Sorry, that was a daft question.' He sounded as affable as ever.

She half-spoke, a soft apology, then: 'It's been an awful day,' she exclaimed. 'I don't think I'm a good teacher, Ian. I don't understand this job.'

'Don't say that! What's your problem?'

This would be it.

Now -

'Susan Foreman,' she said airily.

Ian's head came up sharply, fixing on her. The curiosity she saw in his eyes was heartfelt, shared between them. She felt happy again.

Now - wherever this might lead - they would go together.

Dr Who and the House on Oldark Moor

by Justin Richards

This story takes place between *Dr Who and the Daleks* and
Daleks - Invasion Earth, 2150AD

'I thought you made a pretty silly gladiator,' Susan said. She was sitting on a high stool in among the ordered chaos that was *Tardis*, swinging her legs back and forth.

'Hey,' Ian admonished.

Barbara concealed a smile and smoothed down her tight purple cotton jumper, pulling the end of it over her orange slacks.

Only Dr Who did not react to the comment. 'As I was saying,' he said in his measured, elderly voice, 'about 64 bc.'

'Does that matter, Grandfather?' Barbara asked.

'Oh yes. Yes indeed. It matters very much, I should say.' He clicked his tongue. Then his eyes widened and he nodded at Susan as if to say: Go on, tell her why. His lined face cracked into a smile, his moustache bristling as he jerked his head back slightly and clasped his hands behind his back.

'Without a reference point, we can't reverse-triangulate and set the controls to take us home,' Susan said. Her tone made it obvious what the eight-year-old thought about her older sister's lack of technical sophistication.

'You mean we have to know where we're coming from to see how to get to where we're going?' Ian asked.

Dr Who nodded. 'Well done, lad,' he said. 'That's it exactly.' He whipped his hands from behind his back and tapped the ends of his fingers together in a blur of rapid movement. 'Now then,' he declared, 'let's push the lever and see if we can't get back home, shall we?'

The lever to which Dr Who referred was not unlike a full-length signal-box lever, but bright red. It was set into a hydraulic drum in the floor. Barbara was closest to it, and she pushed the lever forward carefully. It gave a satisfying 'thunk' as it reached its limit. A moment later came the familiar sound of *Tardis* breaking down into its molecular components ready to be reassembled in a new location and a new time.

'Well, I'll be glad to get home to a warm bath and some rest.' Ian

grinned at the others, his face a perfect expression of his naive belief in the inherent simplicity of life.

Dr Who smiled back at him. 'Hot buttered toast,' he mused, 'oh dear me, yes.' His fingers continued to beat a tattoo against each other as *Tardis* whined back into existence. 'Now then, let's have a look at the scanner and see where we are, shall we?'

All four of the travellers turned towards the monitor that would show them their first glimpse of the outside world. When it appeared, it was dark and misty. It was a barren wilderness for as far as the swirling fog would permit them to see.

Dr Who frowned. 'Dear me,' he muttered. 'I don't think that's our garden, is it, Susan?'

He reached for the door control.

'What are you doing?' Ian said in sudden alarm.

'We have to get a new reference point,' Susan told him as she pushed herself down off the stool.

'So we know where we are and where we're going,' Barbara added as she followed Susan and her grandfather. 'Remember?'

Ian stared at the opening doors. The first wisps of fog were already curling through the dark opening. 'Oh, yes,' he said quietly. But he was talking to himself.

'Susan,' Dr Who called into the fog. 'Susan, dear - don't wander off.' He could just make out the silhouette of his granddaughter as she stooped to examine the ground.

Behind Dr Who, Barbara was looking around her. Ian was standing just outside *Tardis* with a blank expression on his face. 'It's so cold, and damp,' Barbara said.

'Foggy,' Ian hazarded. 'Lots of...fog.'

Dr Who raised a patient eyebrow and went to see what Susan was doing. As he grew closer, he could see that she was examining an outcrop of rock that sprang from the thinly grassed landscape.

She looked up as he approached. 'Look, Grandfather.' Her face was a picture of excited interest as she pointed to the rock she was sitting on. 'It's quartz, mica and orthoclase-feldspar.' She slapped her hand against its surface as if to prove her point.

'Is it indeed?' he said, pretending he hadn't known. 'It's orthoclase-feldspar, is it? Most interesting.' He nodded with apparent enthusiasm and was repaid with his granddaughter's grin.

'Rock?' Ian asked as he reached them.

'Granite, lad,' Dr Who said quietly. 'Possibly we're on Dartmoor or

some such place.'

Ian shrugged. 'Well, that's good enough for me. I vote we have another go.'

'Yes,' Barbara chimed in. 'Can't we just try again?'

Dr Who bobbed his head to and fro by way of sympathetic disagreement. 'Tardis is a precision instrument,' he said. 'We need good solid data with which to set the directionometers. Supposition and suspicion unfortunately aren't precise enough.'

'So what we need,' Barbara said, 'is a calendar and a map.'

'Where?' asked Ian, peering into the gloom.

'Nowhere,' Barbara replied. 'I was just saying -'

But her answer was cut off by Susan's shrill call: 'Why don't we ask someone?'

'Ah,' Dr Who brightened and straightened up. 'An excellent idea.'

'Oh yes, that'll be easy, won't it?' Ian snapped. 'Excuse me, Mr Stranger, but could you please tell us where and when we are?' His sarcasm was only slightly reduced in impact as he stumbled over the rocky outcrop where Susan had been sitting.

'Why don't we ask her?' Susan said, pointing into the thinning mist ahead of them.

At that moment, the moon emerged through the layer of fog, casting a dreamlike pallid glow over the barren wasted landscape. In front of them, less than twenty yards away, was a young woman. She was walking slowly towards them, the moonlight shining through her flowing blonde hair so it seemed to glow. She was wearing a thin white gown which was pressed against her body by the breeze. As she walked, one leg pulled free of the garment, visible up to the thigh before disappearing again into the folds of thin material. Her eyes were open but wide and unfocused. Her feet were bare, scratched and bitten by the rugged landscape.

'Who is she?' Barbara whispered as the woman approached. 'Is she all right?'

'I'll say she's -' Ian's comment broke off into a sudden fit of coughing as Barbara turned towards him.

Dr Who ignored them both. 'Madam,' he called out. 'Excuse me, just for a moment.'

But the woman seemed not to hear. She kept walking straight towards the group, her eyes fixed on a point in space somewhere behind them.

Dr Who stepped in front of her, gently taking her arm and drawing her to a halt. 'Madam,' he said again, more gently, almost softly now.

'Madam, I believe you may be sleepwalking.' He waved his free hand in front of her face, to no discernible response. He frowned a moment, then turned the woman round and ushered her back the way she had come. 'Perhaps we can help you back home,' he murmured. 'Always nice to have an evening stroll, isn't it? But I do find slippers are such a boon on these occasions.'

From somewhere in the distance came the faint noise of a hound baying, lonely and mournful across the moors. Dr Who glanced quickly at his companions, then hastened his step.

The house was blacker than the night. Its dark towers and ramparts were silhouetted against the sky so that it looked like a crude cutout, a façade rather than a real building. It was at once comical and forbidding.

They paused for a moment to take in the sight. And that was when the woman spoke.

'Where am I?' she gasped, looking round in sudden amazement. 'What am I doing here?' Then she seemed to realise that she was in the company of strangers, and wearing nothing but her nightdress. She shrank back, pulling away from Dr Who's gentle hold.

'It's quite all right,' he reassured her. 'We mean you no harm, I do assure you.'

She looked at them in a mixture of surprise and shock. Then she caught sight of the house, and froze.

'You know where we are?' Ian asked.

She nodded, her mouth still hanging half open.

'Is that where you live?' Barbara asked.

She nodded again. 'We are on Oldark Moor,' she said quietly. 'That is my home. Oldark House.'

'Then kindly permit us to escort you home,' Dr Who suggested. 'I think you could do with some warm clothes and we would welcome a little hospitality and information.'

'Was I sleepwalking?' the woman asked quietly as they approached the house. 'Again?'

The front door was a heavy, dark, wooden affair braced with bands of metal. In its centre was a large iron knocker. Ian reached out for it just as the door swung open. He kept reaching, passing his point of balance, arms suddenly flailing as he disappeared into the house beyond with a cry and a crash.

The figure standing in the doorway seemed not to notice. He was

tall and aristocratic, light-brown hair pushed back from a high forehead. He was perfectly attired in white shirt and cravat beneath a dark waistcoat and full-length jacket. His face was long and angular, etched with concern as he reached out a hand towards the woman. A narrow furrow creased between his eyebrows as he drew her close to him.

'My dear, you're all right.' He kissed her once, on the cheek, then held her at arms length and looked at her carefully. 'I was so very worried.' His voice was cultured, mannered and precise, slightly nasal in the inflection. Then he seemed to notice Dr Who and his grandchildren. He smiled thinly, and ushered the woman into the hallway behind him, negotiating her around Ian as he stumbled out again clutching his head. 'I'll be with you in a moment, my dear,' he murmured. 'Have Ripper get you a warming drink. You must be frozen stiff.'

Then the man turned back to Dr Who. 'And so must you.' The inflection implied a question.

'Indeed.' The old inventor nodded vigorously. 'Allow me to introduce myself. I am Dr Who, and these are my grandchildren - Susan and Barbara.'

'Hello,' Susan said, pushing past Barbara for a better view of the man.

'How do you do?' Barbara said as she tried unsuccessfully to push her sister back out of sight.

There was a slight pause as Dr Who stared at Ian, as if trying to recall where he had seen him before.

'Ian Chesterton,' Ian said after a moment. 'Er, friend of the family.' He grinned inappropriately, nodding his head as if he had just made an invaluable contribution to a particularly learned conversation.

'And I am Count Tarkin,' the man in the doorway said. He stepped aside and beckoned for them to enter. 'But I am forgetting my manners. Come in, please. There is a good fire in the drawing room, and I'm sure Ripper will find you something sustaining if you so wish.'

'Thank you, sir,' Dr Who said as he peered round the hallway with interest. 'I hope we are not intruding. We found the young lady wandering on the moor.'

'My wife,' the Count explained as he led the way through. 'Veronica. She has taken to sleepwalking, I'm afraid. She does not usually stray beyond the confines of this house, but it is as you can imagine a concern to us all.'

Veronica was sitting in the drawing room, staring into the flames of

the fire. She was wrapped in a heavy cloak now, and nursing a small brandy. She looked up as they entered.

'Thank you so much for your help,' she said at once. 'I should be miles away if it weren't for you, I'm sure.'

'That's all right,' said Ian, an ornamental urn wobbling dangerously in his wake. The Count stilled it with a quick movement of the hand.

There was a polite cough from behind the door, and Ian leapt in the air.

'Ah, Ripper, there you are,' said Tarkin. 'Some drinks for our guests, perhaps?'

'Of course, sir.' The manservant was old and stooped, the tails of his coat almost reaching the floor behind him as he turned towards Dr Who and his friends. 'And will you be staying the night, sirs, madams?'

'Well...' Barbara began.

But the Count cut her off. 'Of course, you must stay. What am I thinking of? I'm sure you have had a difficult enough journey already without this needless delay.'

'Hardly needless,' Dr Who said. 'But thank you. We shall certainly avail ourselves of your hospitality.'

She lay awake for a while, wondering what had woken her. Then she climbed out of the huge four-poster bed and went to the window. It was still the middle of the night. If anything, the world beyond the heavy curtains seemed darker than it had been when she went to bed. The house seemed to be the only building on the moor for as far as Susan could see. The mist had cleared, and the moon shone intermittently through heavy, drifting clouds.

As she looked out over Oldark Moor, she heard the sound. She did not remember having heard it before, yet it was familiar, and Susan knew that it was the sound that had woken her. It was a scratching, scraping sound. Regular and repeated. It was coming from the room above.

She was not a girl to leave a mystery unsolved, however slight it might turn out to be. So Susan walked boldly to the bedroom door and opened it. Outside was an oak-panelled corridor. They had each been given a room off this same corridor, and, as she stepped out of her room, Susan saw a dark figure stepping out of one of the other rooms. It turned towards her.

And nearly leapt out of its skin.

'What are you up to?' Ian demanded in a harsh whisper.

'I heard a noise,' she retorted.

'Banging?' He sounded nervous.

'Scraping,' she told him. 'What about you?' She walked briskly up to him. 'That's not your room,' she pointed out.

'Oh, er, no.' He gave his idiotic annoying grin, teeth gleaming in the dim light. 'Just checking on Barbara. Thought she might have heard the...'

'Banging?' she asked.

'Scraping,' he said.

But, before either of them could comment further, the noise came again. 'It's above us,' Ian said in surprise.

'I know.' She set off down the corridor and he hurried after her.

'Where are you going?'

'To the attic,' she told him. 'Come on.'

Ian stopped dead in his tracks. 'I'm not going up there,' he said. 'There could be anything. Rats, mice...anything.'

Susan looked at him for a moment, then turned abruptly and continued. At the end of the corridor was a short flight of steps which ended in a closed door. The attic.

Ian hurried after her again. 'All right,' he said. 'So you talked me into it.'

Then he gave a loud squeal and disappeared head over heels.

Dr Who knelt by the body, feeling the bruised neck for any sign of a pulse. After a moment he stood up again, his face grim, his nostrils flaring. 'Hmm,' he pronounced. 'Well, this chap is dead. Been dead for a while before you stumbled across him, I should say.'

'But he seemed all right when he showed us to our rooms,' Barbara said.

'Perhaps he was ill,' Ian suggested.

'He was strangled,' Susan said simply. 'You can tell from his neck.'

Dr Who nodded. 'I'm so very sorry to say that you're right, Susan, dear.' He clasped his hands behind his back and considered a moment. 'Yes,' he said at last, 'I think we should wake the Count and tell him what has happened.'

'What about the noises?' Susan asked. 'From the attic?'

As if in response, there was a muffled thumping from the door at the end of the corridor. They all turned sharply towards it. The thumping paused, then started again. There was the faint sound of a voice, too.

'Come along,' Dr Who whispered as he made his way carefully towards the door. 'You too, lad.'

At the top of the stairs, close up, they could hear the voice better. 'Help me, please,' it called, barely audible through the door. 'He's locked me in here. I can't get out. Please, somebody, help me.'

Dr Who and his companions exchanged glances. The voice was faint, muffled by the heavy door, but it was unmistakably that of Count Tarkin.

Dr Who lifted his hand and rapped smartly on the door. 'Can you hear me, Count?' he shouted. 'There's no key, but we'll try to find a way to get you out.'

There were more muffled sounds from behind the door, but the words were too faint to be made out.

'Come along,' Dr Who ordered and climbed back down the short flight of stairs.

'Where to?'

'Why to find the Count's wife, of course. Perhaps she has a key.'

'What do you think happened, Grandfather?' Barbara asked as they made their way down the main staircase and along towards where Dr Who guessed the master bedroom was located.

'It seems to me,' Dr Who said, 'that somebody broke into the house, perhaps some burglar. He killed the manservant and locked the Count in the attic.'

'So he could still be here?' Ian asked nervously, looking round.

Susan clicked her tongue. 'We'll be all right,' she told him.

'Let's hope the Countess has not been inconvenienced,' Dr Who said quietly.

They had to awaken Veronica. She listened in astonishment and increasing anxiety to Dr Who's story.

'I don't have a key to the attic,' she told them. 'My husband has always forbidden me to go up there. His work...'

Dr Who patted her hand gently. 'Never mind, my dear. We'll just have to force the door open. Barbara will stay here with you until we're back.' He raised an eyebrow at Barbara, and she nodded back at him.

Barbara sat on the bed beside Veronica. 'Have you been married long?' she asked. It was probably best to keep the young woman talking.

Veronica shook her head. 'Less than a year.' She smiled thinly, her eyes moist. 'He was such a loving man...' Her voice tailed off.

'Was?' Barbara asked before she could stop herself. 'I'm sorry, I -'

But Veronica shook her head. 'Don't worry.' She stared off into the distant corners of the bedroom. 'Recently, these last few months, he has seemed so distant somehow. That's why I started to sleepwalk, I

think. He spends more and more time at his work, in his laboratory.'

'Laboratory?' Barbara frowned. 'He's an inventor, like Grandfather?' she asked.

Ian's shoulder was sore, and the door was battered but apparently unbroken. Since it was up a short flight of stairs, it was impossible to take a run at it. And, since it opened outwards, he was trying to force it the wrong way.

'We'll never get through this door,' he told Dr Who.

Dr Who agreed. 'We need some sort of implement. An axe perhaps.'

'Veronica might know where there is one,' Susan pointed out. They returned to the master bedroom, and explained the problem.

'Perhaps in this laboratory?' Barbara suggested.

'Laboratory?' Susan asked.

'Yes, I was telling Barbara, my husband is an inventor, a scientist.'

'Really?' Dr Who said. 'Most interesting. A laboratory? We must certainly take a look at that.'

The laboratory was in the cellar of the house. A door from the main hallway led down a steep flight of stone steps that turned into a massive stone-walled cavern. Ian stopped so suddenly as he turned the corner of the stairs and looked down that Barbara stumbled into the back of him and he had to run down several steps to keep his balance.

The walls were lined with wooden shelves on which were all manner of glass jars and bottles. Their contents, even from this distance, looked organic and unpleasant, immersed in murky liquids. The floor, like the walls, was flagged with stone, and in the centre of the huge room stood a massive wooden table. Beside it was a smaller table, on which rested a metal dish containing what looked like surgical instruments. There was a small saw by the dish. Around the top of the table was an arc of electrical apparatus, wires and cables twisted together into a mesh that rose up towards the high ceiling. Hanging down from this mesh were several long prongs of metal with dishlike attachments hanging off them. On either side of the apparatus was a large sphere of opaque glass held in place above the level of the table by another network of cables.

As Ian was taking all this in, Dr Who pushed past him and continued down the stairs into the room. He was rubbing his hands together in evident interest. Susan ran down the stairs to join him, and together they began to examine the mass of cables and wiring.

'We're looking for an axe, don't forget,' Barbara called down the

stairs. She turned to Veronica who was behind her. 'Do you know where there is one?'

The woman shook her head. 'I've never been down here before,' she confessed.

'Never?' Ian asked as they descended into the cellarage.

'I am not permitted,' she said simply. 'Yet, it seems familiar.' She looked round again as they reached floor level. 'From my husband's descriptions of his work.'

'And what is his work, exactly?' Barbara asked.

But before she could reply there came a shout from the top of the stairs behind them.

'What is the meaning of this intrusion, may I ask?' The Count's voice echoed sharply round the laboratory as he strode down the stairs.

'My dear Count!' Dr Who crossed to the stairs and stood in front of him. 'So we managed to weaken the door enough for you to make your escape, I see.' He clapped his hands together. 'How very satisfying.'

'Escape?' The Count frowned.

'From the attic,' Ian said.

The Count's mouth dropped open slightly. 'You have been in the attic?' he asked. There was a glint of worry in his eyes beside the anger now.

'No,' Dr Who said. 'We were looking for an axe or some similar implement with which to force the door open and help you out.'

In answer the Count marched to the centre of the room and leaned heavily on the table. He stood motionless for a while, his back to them. Then abruptly, he straightened and turned. His face seemed drawn. 'I can see I must explain some things to you,' he said, his voice as strained as his face. He held out his hand, and Veronica ran to take it.

'What is it, my dear?' she asked.

The Count took a deep breath. 'I am sorry,' he said. 'Truly I am.'

'Sorry?'

'To have kept secrets even from you, my darling.' He raised her hand to his mouth and kissed it gently. 'It was not I that you heard in the attic,' he said. He shook his head sadly. 'You see...' He stopped, sighed, looked at his wife as he seemed to consider his words. 'I have a...brother,' he said.

Veronica gasped. 'In the attic?'

The Count nodded sadly. 'A poor unfortunate who, for his own good, must be kept confined. His madness is, alas, beyond any help or treatment known to medical science. But tonight I fear he managed to escape and roam freely round the house for a while before I was able to

confine him again.'

'And he killed the servant?' Ian asked.

The Count nodded. 'Perhaps I have been too generous to my brother keeping him here rather than agreeing to have him confined in a proper institution,' he said quietly.

But his final words were lost in the sound from above - a tearing, wrenching of wood and metal.

'Weakened attic door?' Dr Who hazarded when the sound had ended.

The Count passed them at a run, taking the stairs two at a time. For a moment they stood watching. Then Ian's eyes widened, and he turned to follow, the others close behind him.

They were in the drawing room. The likeness was uncanny. Only the fact that one of them seemed older, more haggard, differentiated the two brothers as they stood and surveyed each other from opposite sides of the fireplace, like duellists preparing to do battle.

Dr Who waved his companions to silence as they stood and watched the confrontation. Veronica stood with them, her face a mask of confusion and worry.

As if suddenly aware of their presence, the older brother looked across at the newcomers. 'So,' he said, 'what lies has he been telling you?'

'Are you...Are you really his brother?' Veronica asked, her voice shaking.

The older Tarkin laughed. It was a hollow, mirthless sound. 'Is that what you've been told? The mad brother in the attic?' He shook his head, a mixture of sadness and pity, before turning to the younger man. 'I taught you better than that, surely. I gave you a brain. Why don't you use it?'

The younger Count was more relaxed. He actually smiled as he replied calmly. 'It's no good trying to talk your way out of this,' he said. 'My friends here know the truth. You should not have killed Ripper.'

'Me?' the word was an explosion of surprise and outrage. 'Why don't you tell them the truth? I suppose he discovered the truth at last. I no more killed Ripper than I am your brother. Father, more like. Wouldn't you say?' He shook his head and sighed. 'In my own image,' he murmured so quietly they only just caught his words.

The younger Count turned to Dr Who and his friends. 'You see,' he said quietly. 'Quite insane, I'm afraid. These...delusions, they get worse every time.' He turned back to his brother, and now there was a pistol

in his hand, pulled in a single fluid motion from the pocket of his jacket.

'So that's the answer, is it?' the older man asked, his voice surprisingly calm. 'Poor insane brother shot while trying to escape from his attic prison? More palatable than the truth, I suppose.' He turned towards Veronica, his arms stretched wide as a hint of desperation crept into his voice. 'Can't you see what he's doing, my dear? You of all people, Veronica, should know who I am.'

She shook her head, her mouth opening and closing silently as she looked from one brother to the other.

The older man took a step forward. His right hand was now close to the mantelpiece, close to the large ornate silver candlestick that stood at its edge. The candle flame guttered with the slight breeze of the movement. 'You married me, Veronica,' he cried out, 'can't you see that? You can't believe this *creature*.' As he spat the final word, his arm shot forward, sweeping the candlestick from the mantel, sending it crashing towards the man with the gun. A moment later, the older Tarkin followed, leaping forward, arms outstretched towards his brother's neck.

'Stop them, lad,' Dr Who called out as the two men struggled. The gun clattered to the floor, was kicked away by a flailing foot as the older Tarkin struggled to bear his brother to the ground.

Ian grabbed one of the brothers from behind, he had no idea which, and tried to pull them apart. But he was flung away. He crashed into the fireplace, sending burning logs scattering in a shower of sparks. With a cry he leapt out of the grate, patting desperately at his trousers.

Behind him, one of the logs rolled on to the rug, sparks trailing in its wake. In a moment the room began to fill with smoke as the heavy material caught fire.

Dr Who and Susan were hugging each other tightly in the doorway, Barbara cowering behind them as the smoke thickened. Ian pushed his way through the choking fumes to join them, just as Veronica gave a cry and leapt forward, into the smoke. Ian tried to grab her, but failed.

'Come back, madam,' Dr Who called out.

'Let's get out of here,' Ian shouted.

But none of them moved. They stood transfixed by the tableau: the two brothers, wreathed in flames as they fought out a desperate ballet while Veronica tried to pull them apart. For a moment the image was frozen in time and space. Then the young woman was flying across the room, smoke swirling round her as she fell. Her head struck the stone firesurround, and was knocked suddenly sideways with a loud crack.

Her head lolled to one side, her eyes staring wide and empty across the room towards the travellers.

There was a cry of rage from one of the brothers, but there was no way of telling which. Then the two struggling men broke their grip and were hurled apart. One staggered through a sheet of flame, catching fire and thrashing wildly through the smoke. The other stumbled to where Dr Who and his companions stood. It looked like the younger of the two, but it was impossible to be sure as his blackened features loomed out of the fog of smoke. Together they staggered into the hallway.

'Get out,' Tarkin hissed. 'Get out of here while you can.'

Dr Who reached out for him. 'Come with us,' he said. 'There's nothing you can do here now.'

The Count shook his head. 'Veronica,' he gasped. 'I must find Veronica.' Then he stumbled back into the smoke and was lost to them.

They stood on the moor and watched Oldark House burn. The windows were holes through the dark silhouette into the heat of the fire. The doorway was a mass of flame now.

'You were lucky to get out,' Ian remarked.

Count Tarkin nodded. His face was smeared with black. His sleeve was charred and the red of his blistered arm was visible beneath in the moonlight. He pulled his wife close to him. 'Indeed,' he said. 'We all were.'

'I thought you were dead,' Barbara confessed to Veronica.

She smiled, her face seemingly unaffected by the smoke. She hugged her husband. 'Thank you for coming back for me,' she said, and kissed him on the grimy cheek.

'Yes,' Dr Who said, 'well. I am sorry about your brother.'

The Count nodded. 'Poor, tortured soul,' he said quietly. 'I trust that he has now found peace at last.' He turned back towards the burning house.

'And we must be on our way,' Dr Who said after a while. 'Goodbye. Thank you for your hospitality. And for putting us right about the date.'

The Count smiled. 'Not at all. It has been my pleasure.' He smiled. 'If nothing else, I trust you have warmed yourselves by the heat of a good fire.'

For a moment he and Dr Who looked at each other. Then Dr Who turned away, ushering his grandchildren and Ian in front of him.

'Sorry about your house,' Susan said as she turned to go.

The Count shrugged. 'Property is replaceable,' he said levelly.

'But people are not,' Dr Who added with a knowing nod.

The Count smiled in reply. But he said nothing.

The fire was burning most fiercely in the drawing room where it had started. It scorched its way up the curtains and across the plasterwork of the ceiling. It ran molten across the hearth and up the wooden panelling and the door. It ate through the furniture and spilled over the floor. And in its midst, a body lay where it had fallen against the firesurround, blonde hair blackened and flesh drawing back from the flames that engulfed its nightdress. Another body lay across the first, a burning arm stretched across her, as if in a hopeless gesture of protection. A final embrace of husband and wife.

Gone Too Soon

by Christopher M. Wadley

The problem with time travel was the glimpses of the future it allowed. Most people, normal people, breezed through life, blissfully unaware of what awaited them around the next corner. The Doctor knew what waited. And the Doctor did not want to know.

He sat alone in his TARDIS, staring at the ceiling, musing. He had thought of himself as invincible, indestructible, a one-bound-and-he-was-free kind of guy. He had imagined that his sixth incarnation, wittier, braver, stouter and more assertive than the rest, was going to last him for years. Now, on a journey into his personal future, he had discovered information that he was to be robbed of life in his prime. In that ironic way that people do, having learned of the short while left to him, he had spent that time doing absolutely nothing.

'I'm sick of this!' he announced to thin air. 'It isn't fair! Just as I'm getting used to a body, I have to sacrifice myself in some hopelessly heroic way and start all over again!' He folded his arms dramatically, jutting out his bottom lip. After a moment, he relaxed, dropping his hands to his lap again. Sulking was no fun if you did not have an audience. He drummed his fingers on his knee. Suddenly, a thought occurred to him, a mischievous thought, one that was sure to annoy those with authority over him. A smug, feline grin cracked his features.

'Oh, yes,' he muttered to himself. 'Yes! Normally I'd say I couldn't possibly...But what if my next persona turns out to be staid and dull? Then I *really* couldn't possibly. Whereas now...'

The Doctor leapt to his feet, a blur of colour and activity. His patchwork coat flowed behind him as he ran his large hands over the buttons and switches on the TARDIS console. The time rotor juddered into life and his ship was sucked into the time vortex.

'Whereas now,' he concluded, 'I can do whatever I like!' He stuck his thumbs into his waistcoat pockets and smirked.

The Doctor climbed the hill majestically, head held high and proud. The wind lifted the golden locks of his hair, blowing them behind him like the mane of a lion. He stumbled over some loose shale, but never faltered from his path. At last, he reached the summit, and looked down. Vast, rocky plains surrounded him, the terrain a mixture of reds, blacks, greens and greys. A light breeze played around him and he

breathed deeply of the mid-morning air. He threw out his arms to either side of him, thrusting his chest forward. And then he shouted.

'Halloo!' he cried. The sound reverberated out, echoing back to him from each exposed surface. He chuckled. Then he pulled an elaborate penknife from his pocket. He squatted on his haunches and felt with his hands for a smooth piece of rock. Gently, methodically, he carved out some tiny letters. Then, thrusting his hands into his pockets and whistling a marching tune, he strode back the way he had come.

He was the first life this galaxy would see, and the last for a good long while. This was the Dawn of Time in the universe and, while the Doctor rarely got up at dawn, he had left proof of his early-morning constitutional in carved, untidy handwriting. The message said, THE DOCTOR WAS HERE.

The second stop on his journey called for more preparation. He had always prided himself on being able to hold a tune in his baritone voice, and had toyed with a descant recorder and the harp, but he had never made the effort to properly learn a musical instrument. Despite his chosen profession, he never seemed to have the time.

Now, locked in the inner sanctum of his TARDIS, he worked until his fingers bled. The teaching book he had chosen promised to have him playing the guitar in fifteen days, but this did not account for muttering and tantrum time. Eventually, after eighteen days, he could pick out a simple tune, and was ready.

He landed in Hamburg at twilight, enough time to find a suitable vantage point. He found it hard to look surreptitious while carrying a guitar case, and so had changed clothes for once. Admiring his black jeans, black polo-neck sweater and charcoal blazer in the mirror earlier, he had wondered if he had made the right decision with his costume; if nothing else, black was more slimming.

Despite his extensive travelling around the universe, the Doctor was still essentially naive. Some of the sights he saw in Hamburg surprised him, and he was quick to retreat from the neon glare of the central strip. He finally positioned himself in a darkened alley behind a seedy-looking club, the smell of overripe bins wafting towards him. He waited. And he waited. Finally, the figure of a young, fair-haired man swaggered towards him. The Doctor stepped purposefully from the darkness and blocked the young man's way.

'Eh, what's yer problem?' the young man asked, frowning in consternation.

'No problem,' said the Doctor. 'Just happened to be passing, taking

the night air. But...you have a problem, don't you?' The Doctor fixed the young man with a penetrating stare. 'There's somewhere else you'd rather be, isn't there?'

The young man looked shocked, and tried to avoid the Doctor's gaze. He found himself transfixed. 'What you talkin' about?' he protested.

'That charming lady friend of yours,' replied the Doctor. 'There she is, at home all alone. The rest of the boys will manage without you. Why not take the night off?'

The young man moved as if to protest, but something about the Doctor's argument seemed strangely convincing, compelling. Now that the young man thought about it...

'Yeah,' he said. 'Yeah, why not?' With that, he turned on his heel and vanished into the night. The Doctor sighed. He never liked using hypnotism, despite his expertise, but in this case he felt partially justified. The young man was someone else who needed to grasp every second left to him.

Backstage at the club, the resident band were fighting like cat and dog.

'I'm getting sick of this,' said one of the guitarists. 'You can't keep covering for him! If Stu doesn't turn up tonight, he's out of the band!'

Suddenly, the Doctor arrived, tuning the bass guitar strung about his neck. 'Don't worry, chaps,' he said. 'I'm here!'

'Who the 'ell are you?' the drummer asked, his three fellow musicians staring open-mouthed. The stranger proffered a hand.

'Hello,' he said, 'I'm the Doctor. I'm a friend of Stu's. He asked me to step in tonight.'

'But...but...ow do we know you can play?' the leader asked. The Doctor helpfully plucked at his instrument, and played a brief riff. The band members looked at each other.

'Now wait a minute...' At that moment, the decision was taken from their hands: the scruffy club manager burst from the stage, insisting that the band begin immediately or seek other work. With a shrug, the bandleader shook the Doctor's hand.

'You'd better not stink, or they'll eat you alive!' And, with that, they were hustled on to the stage. The amps were turned up, the band gave their instruments a beating and, to the rear of the stage, his broad back turned to the audience, the Doctor played along to an unwitting crowd. For the first time in his life, for one evening only, the Doctor was fab.

His next trip was the first of two that caused the Doctor some

trepidation. Sometimes his journeys were random and he had no idea where he would turn up but, when his route was planned, there were some places to which he had never purposefully strayed. Even with his disrespect for rules and authorities, some moments he still regarded as private, some places he did not interfere. Still, the Doctor felt that he had missed out in some very important areas of the life experience. Tonight, he was grasping the bull by the horns. Germany, music, already linked in his mind by Hamburg, suggested the exact location to him: Bonn, 1770.

All was quiet as the Doctor arrived in town. He sauntered through the streets, peering through open-shuttered windows to take in domestic details. An aspect of time travel that he had taken some time getting used to was the stench of the past: only recently on some worlds had sanitation reached anywhere near the standards of his home. He knew that tonight his destination lay in the less salubrious areas, and would possibly smell worse. The sacrifices he made!

And then there it was before him. He hesitated before going closer; even he, the man of a thousand name-droppings, was nervous about interacting with historical figures in such a direct fashion. Steeling himself, he trotted through the cobbled courtyard, through two large wooden gates and up a rickety staircase to a corridor outside an attic room.

'I'm with the doctor,' he announced misleadingly to the frowning, pacing man on the landing. He was rewarded with a curt nod. The man held open a door, allowing the sounds of panting within to escape.

'There she is,' the man grunted. Then he leaned closer. 'No need to take too much care,' he whispered to the Doctor. 'I do not really want it.' The Doctor scowled and continued into the room.

A thin-faced, broad-nosed woman was lying on the bed, an aged physician busying himself around her with the assistance of two portly ladies. The Doctor positioned himself discreetly by the door, able to observe events without overstepping the bounds of decorum. He soaked in the atmosphere while events took their course.

He had thought that babies were supposed to cry, but in all other ways the experience went far beyond what he had been led to expect. The sheer excitement, the miracle of the tiny, struggling child suddenly coming into being, the sense of relief for the mother, the anticipation for the child's future...A tear welled in the Doctor's eye, surprising him. He had always been passionate, but never openly emotional. He wept for all the long years that he had gone without witnessing a birth; he wept for knowledge that had finally led him to find time. Most of all,

though, he wept for the child, and the life he knew that lay before it.

Once the room had emptied (his presence largely unnoticed in all the hullabaloo), the Doctor stepped up to the new mother, cradling her baby half-heartedly on the bed. She was less in the glow of birth, more in an alcoholic haze, and thus his intrusion did not alarm her.

'Madam,' he said, 'congratulations.' And then, the leap, the banned interference that would make all the difference. He took a small velvet bag, pulled closed with a drawstring, from his pocket. 'I have bought you a gift. A sum of money.' He placed the bag beside the bed. 'Your husband, Johann, does not want the baby. This money is leverage. You must persuade him to keep it, under any circumstances. Birth is a miracle, the child is a gift and, believe you me, the world will be a poorer place without your son. Do you understand?' Despite her condition, the mother nodded. She reached out and gently touched the Doctor's hand. The Doctor felt awkward.

'What are you going to call him?' he asked with a cough.

'Ludwig,' the mother drawled.

Then, the one last trip, the most difficult one of all. His recent journeys had been motivated by anger at the impending loss of his sixth life; but he still had seven lives left to him. One day, the end would be just that. Would he be mourned when he was gone for ever? He hoped so. First, though, there was something to put right. A visit was required to a place he had been to many times - but not *that* many, and never at the right times. He owed the old man, owed him in all kinds of ways. This was the man who had first introduced him to freedom of expression, to art, to music; who had, indirectly, led him to his two previous journeys.

He arrived at early evening, walking slowly towards the primitive dwelling as on his last journey. The old man showed no surprise. The Doctor stayed with the old man for a night and a day. They talked about life. The Doctor read stories. They ate together. Finally, the Doctor tucked the old man in, and held the man's hand as the life seeped from his body.

'Thank you for coming back,' the old man gasped with his last breath. The Doctor rose, covered the old man's face and left. He never returned.

Now, finally, the Doctor was ready. He regretted that he must pass, but regretted more the fact that it had taken his foreknowledge of this to stir him into action. He had imagined bemoaning the fact that his sixth persona had gone too soon. Not any more, though. He seemed to have had time enough after all. Time for all the important things.

Reunion

by Jason Loborik

'I know someone who can help you. He'll show you the way.'

I sighed heavily and let out a beer-sodden burp. I wanted to tell her what I thought of the idea, but I've never found speech easy seven pints down the line, so I left it. The street was swaying now, and I propped myself up against the door of the King's Head, contemplating my fate in the hands of the most beautiful girl ever to have bothered striking up a conversation with me. I wondered if she'd somehow seen past the pot belly and premature baldness of a very average solicitor, and wanted to get to know the real me. Like hell. I'd seen that sincere, well-meaning expression before. She'd sensed a weakness and gone straight for the kill, ready to drag me off to her happy-clappy tin church in Hackney.

With considerable effort, I focused on her again. No, I was wrong there, too. Something about those eyes. I'm sure it was because of them that I'd bared my soul to her in the first place. Or maybe it was because it was my own bloody thirtieth-birthday party and nobody else had bothered to talk to me apart from this gorgeous stranger. But why was she so intent on learning my entire life story? I couldn't keep silent any longer.

'Are you hoping this is going to be the start of something beautiful?'

It was out before I could stop myself. It wasn't even close to what I *intended* to say, but then that's the curse of booze - in my experience it's always the most excruciating lines that come back to mock me first thing the morning after. Still, even as I winced, she lost her serious look for a second and laughed. She took my hand and gazed at me with those awesome brown eyes. 'You know, I think it really could be.'

She licked her lips and I gazed dumbly at the vapour trails of her breath in the chill December air. She was close now and she smelled so sweet. 'Please come with me.'

So, I plodded along after her like a puppy, a warm glow inside me. 'Where are we going?' I ventured, scanning the remark again to check there'd been no suggestive intonation.

'East Finchley tube. You said you lived in Kennington, didn't you?'

I let out a mad cackle, totally inappropriate, the sort you can pull off only when you've had too much. 'Sounds cosy.'

She gave me a strange look, so I decided to shut up for a minute in case my next line was even worse. I racked my brains for an interesting, everyday subject to talk about - tricky when I could barely walk. As we approached the entrance to the tube, I noticed a board for the *Evening Standard* and felt compelled to read it out loud: "Five dead in tube accident." Hey, did you read about that? Wasn't it some engineers working...'

'...on the Jubilee Line extension,' she finished, matter-of-factly. 'Yes, I did. They were working on an excavation site at Westminster, but the walls collapsed on them, crushing them to death.'

So much for the small talk. She stood staring at the sign in silence for a few moments, as if in some small act of remembrance. Then she was off again, quicker this time. I took a deep breath and tried to clear my head. The cold air had done me some good, but as we got to the steps a feeling of nausea overwhelmed me, worsened by the stench of stale urine. I paused, momentarily distracted by the litter swirling around my feet in the cold breeze. 'Can we rest a second?'

'Why?'

'Well, er...' Wasn't it obvious? A minute ago I could hardly stand. I thought I'd done pretty well to get this far without keeling over.

She took my hand again and smiled her magical smile. 'You can rest on the train. And remember, the sooner you meet my friend, the sooner he can help sort out your dreams.'

Friend? I tried to remember when we'd got on to that subject. The dreams had been on my mind a lot lately, sure, but I'd firmly decided not to discuss them with anyone. They scared me to death.

We reached the platform and I headed longingly for a seat, but she kept on walking. 'Hang on.' She took me further down the platform and then let me sit. I slumped down gratefully and closed my eyes, but something was nagging me and I opened them again.

'Why's it so dark here?'

'What do you mean?' Her voice was different, no longer soft and soothing, but edgy, impatient. She was scrutinising her watch and, when she looked up, she glanced away from me.

'It just seems like this station isn't really open, that's all. Should be more people here this time on a Saturday night. When did we leave the pub? What time is it now?'

She turned slowly to face me. The concerned look had gone, and she had this sly expression on her face, as if she was really satisfied about something. Her long wavy hair was ruffled by a sudden gust as a low rumbling echoed in the distance. She held up a finger to her

perfect lips.

'Don't worry. We're just in time for the last train.'

When I think back to this particular point in my life now, I can hardly believe how easily a complete stranger had gained my trust. I could have walked away then, saved myself so much trouble, but instead I chose to go with her, unwittingly drawn into the most terrifying and bizarre journey of my life.

Just my luck, the tube carriage we'd chosen was completely full. I searched for a seat and found one - the only spare one - towards the front. I turned to offer it to the girl, hoping she'd insist my need was greater - and that's all I remember until I woke up in a sitting position, with a very sore neck.

I felt for my wallet, and was surprised and pleased to find it was still in my pocket. The train was moving now, but there was no sign of the girl. I couldn't believe it. What an *arse* I'd been! I tried to think through the events of the last couple of hours, where I'd met someone whose only apparent reason for pulling me was simply to shove me on to a bloody train. What the hell for? Where was she now, and what had happened to me? I scanned everyone in the carriage quickly - no potential axe murderers, thank God: they looked far too done in themselves, sitting in silence, staring into space, not moving.

I did a double-take. I was right: each of them had exactly the same blank, expressionless face, and no one so much as twitched. The other odd thing I noticed was that they were all male, about my age. Even odder was the fact that this didn't freak me at first - my thoughts were still full of the girl, and the bizarre way she'd acted. I turned to the man on my left - a huge, bearded bloke clutching on to his newspaper like grim death.

'Excuse me, mate, are you OK?'

No response, just the same empty stare. He barely seemed to be breathing. I turned to address the rest. I'd never been one for public speaking on the tube - they're always full of nutters - but then again I'd had seven pints. 'What's wrong with you all?' Still nothing.

That did it. A jolt of fear shot up my spine. I staggered up, intending to leap off the train, then realised the train was still moving. Panicking, I glanced up at the tube map, but I didn't have a clue where I was; in fact, judging by the speed we were going, we must have overshot several stations during the last few minutes without stopping.

Without stopping.

A mad girl had tricked me on to a trainful of zombies and now there

was no way I could get off. I made a sudden dart towards the dividing door six feet away, intending to pelt down to the driver's cab. I slipped, twisted, and came crashing to my knees, my flailing hand somehow managing to grab the handle. I hauled myself up and looked into the carriage beyond. It was completely empty. I turned back to look at the passengers in my carriage - they were still silent, still held the same creepy stare, as if they hadn't even noticed me. I looked past them into the other adjoining carriage. That was empty, too. The bitch must've put me on this one deliberately.

'Someone tell me what the hell's going on!' I didn't mean to scream, but then I'd never been freaked out of my skin like this before. Of course, there was no reply, but I felt the atmosphere on the train change suddenly. The stale, musty smell of the carriage was replaced with the acrid odour of burning wood. Flames began to dance in front of me, I felt myself falling...

...into my dream, except now its lucid, somehow real. I'm shut in a box, a confined airless container; no light, only blackness. Then the walls are starting to scorch, I can smell them catching, the sound of flames licking the outside, trying to find a way in. And beneath me the floor turns molten. Moments of relief as the heat subsides, then I panic - the container fills with water; I'm sinking, and I reach a hand to my throat, trying to raise my head to take one last gasp before the water sluices over me, and...

...I came round again, back in the carriage, the atmosphere back to normal - well, back to how it had been before. I lay in silence for a few seconds, and noticed there was no vibration in the floor. The train must have stopped - I could get off. I tried to jump up, but felt a hand come down on my shoulder. I looked up. A man was standing over me - short and fat, bald with round specs, his eyes narrow and bloodshot. And standing beside him was the girl.

'Sorry, mate, you're not going anywhere,' said Fat Man, wiping his brow with a foul-looking handkerchief. His voice was high, wheezy, as if he had asthma. 'We need you.'

The girl grabbed me with both hands and hoisted me effortlessly back into my seat. I sat there, my head reeling, my knees smarting. I looked at the passengers. Each was holding up his hand to his throat, each breathing heavily.

'What the hell's going on?' I yelled at the girl.

No reply. She simply ignored me and watched Fat Man blankly as he performed examinations on each of the passengers, shining a torch

into their eyes. He worked his way up the row opposite and stopped at a man sitting directly across from me. He looked knackered. He was slightly built, with a drawn, narrow face, and slicked hair, parted to one side. He was engulfed in a thick, grey parka, many sizes too big, and wore half-mast, cord trousers revealing stripy brown and yellow socks. Poor sod.

'This one's no good,' rasped Fat Man, waving his hanky dismissively at the man in the parka.

I gazed in horror as the girl produced a gun and aimed it at the man opposite. He sat there, the same stupidly vacant expression, oblivious to his imminent death, as unaware as me as to what he'd actually done to deserve it.

'Stop!'

For a split second, I couldn't believe it was me who'd said it, a hero for the first time ever. But the sensation was short-lived as the gun swung in my direction and Fat Man seized my throat with a chubby paw. 'You're not here to interfere,' he breathed. I looked at him closely. His skin was dry, flaky, like he had a bad case of eczema.

'What have you done to her?' I croaked - his grip was so tight I could hardly breathe.

'Why? Do you like her?' he sneered. 'I hope you aren't getting any ideas, scum. She's mine. She doesn't even know who you are any more.'

I glanced at the girl. Her eyes were wide, lifeless, like a doll's. I daren't say anything else, but as he relaxed his grip and turned away, back to the man opposite, I slid my hand into my right coat pocket and flicked the switch on my Dictaphone. With hindsight, it was a pretty pathetic act of defiance, but at the time it made me feel a hell of a lot better.

The girl took aim once more, and I shut my eyes tight, willing myself into selfless sacrifice. There was silence for a few seconds. No, there *was* a sound, but it was coming from outside the train. Almost inaudible at first, it grew louder - high-pitched, like some flute or pipe. It was a tune, and one I recognised - yes, a Beatles song, wasn't it? The man and the girl could obviously hear it too, and their eyes darted around the carriage as if to fathom where exactly the noise was coming from. The tune suddenly went all over the place. The same line was attempted once more, then the playing stopped altogether.

'See what that was,' rasped Fat Man.

The girl moved to one of the outer doors, just as a man appeared on the other side. He was wearing funny old clothes, a mop-top haircut and a huge grin on his face. 'Be with you in a minute,' he called,

exaggerating his mouth movements, although we could hear him perfectly clearly. He started fiddling with the door control and suddenly reminded me of the mad sweet-shop man I knew as a kid who always took half an hour to unlock his door in the morning. He used to wear a stupid bow tie, too. Seconds later the door slid open and the newcomer boarded the train, making brrrr-ing noises and flapping his arms wildly, attempting to warm himself.

'You chose rather an awkward spot to get stuck, didn't you?' he said, smiling.

The others didn't answer. They seemed stumped for words all of a sudden. Fat Man looked the stranger up and down, unimpressed by the tatty black coat and shapeless, checked trousers. 'Who are you? A tramp?'

'No, I'm the Doctor,' said the man without missing a beat, as if this was a common misconception. And you?'

'My name is Dobtcheff. This is my associate, Martha.'

'Is it?' The Doctor sounded interested, but was actually now busy examining the man that Martha had been about to kill. I stared at him, trying to work out who this latest inmate in the asylum was. I couldn't. He seemed unperturbed by the utter bizarreness of the situation, and apparently blind to the fact that Martha was now aiming her gun at *him*. Either he did this kind of thing all the time, or he was a total headcase. Either way, he'd probably just saved my life.

He finished his examination and turned to Dobtcheff. 'Excuse me, ah, Mr Dobtcheff, but why have all these people been hypnotised?'

'They haven't...' said Dobtcheff, slowly, now regarding the Doctor with curiosity.

'Oh, I see.'

'Do *you* have any theories about what's happened to them?'

'Well I think, er...perhaps...'

'Yes?'

'It seems perfectly obvious to me that, er...'

'I'm waiting...'

Martha punctuated this last remark by shoving the barrel of her gun against the Doctor's neck.

'It's obvious that these people are under your influence,' blurted out the Doctor. 'Although for what purpose, I can only guess for the moment.'

Dobtcheff moved closer, smiling. 'Have a guess.'

The Doctor relaxed suddenly, a smug half-smile on his lips. 'Yes. It seems rather odd to me that you're stuck here with a carriageful of

acolytes when there's a source of time distortion not very far away. Not a very powerful source, I'll grant you, but rather more than you'd normally expect to find in London.' His smile widened, charmingly. 'If this young lady kills me, you'll lose the chance of my expert assistance, and I imagine you need a lot of help right now.'

He was cool, I'll give him that.

Dobtcheff backed away from him, considering this. 'All right, Doctor,' he said. 'You bought yourself a bit more time, but one more word and you're dead.'

'Can I practise my recorder, then?'

'You what?'

'Oh, please. There's this tricky bit in "Hey Jude"..."

'Shut it. *Now!*'

'Oh, very well.' The Doctor turned to me and winked and I realised he'd noticed I was the only one not hypnotised. I was desperate to find out who the hell he was and what plans he might have for getting away, but for now all either of us could do was watch, helplessly.

Dobtcheff had now positioned himself between the rows of seats at the far end of the carriage. Slowly, he raised his palms to the side of his head, and began making low, whispering noises, barely audible to us at the opposite end. The Doctor watched with keen interest, his eyes scrutinising the passengers, looking for some kind of reaction. Minutes later, it came. The two men nearest Dobtcheff suddenly joined in the whispering, without prompting, still staring into space. Seconds later, the next two men started, then the next two, then the next...

Panic swelled in my stomach once more. I wasn't part of this, I couldn't be. Whatever this...this *ceremony* was, it was nothing to do with

-

hera sota iega sra

What was that? The man next to me was chanting now. His voice was quiet, but I blocked my ears with my hands to keep it out -

hera sota sek saytas sgoto

I couldn't keep it out; it was there, in my mind. I was thinking it, I don't know how; the words made no sense - it was nonsense, gibberish - but I was thinking it now and I could only say the words out loud -

ba soaga sko sayus ni siesa iega

*abera soti esek atas ui skoa
sgua sayus soaga ui hera iega*

It wasn't just my voice: the others were in my mind too, like dozens of people whispering different things in my ear all at the same time. I wanted to scream, anything to stop the words falling out, anything to blot out the relentless voices as each forced its way into my mind.

Then I was a part of it.

Suddenly and clearly, the voices became one, intoning in unison, and the meaning of the chant was clear - not the words, not the language itself, but I understood the purpose. We were all together, one voice. I could feel our strength and power increasing, the energy coursing through my body as our minds interwove and connected. The air all around me was charged. I was surrounded by something, an aura, which lifted me and held me and made me feel I could do anything.

Then blackness came.

'Ouch!'

The Doctor had slapped me hard in the face. 'Come on,' he whispered urgently. 'Now's our chance.'

He half dragged, half carried me out of the carriage and we stumbled through so many empty compartments I lost count. We made it to door of the driver's cab and collapsed, panting out of sight by the exit doors.

My head felt ready to burst - I was shattered. 'We've got to get out, they'll follow us,' I said.

The Doctor shook his head. 'They're all still in shock. They'll need some time to recover, especially since I broke the seance.'

He wasn't making sense. 'Seance? You mean he was contacting a dead -'

'- spirit? I think whatever Dobtcheff is trying to communicate with is alive, at least in a sense.' The Doctor looked at me, thoughtfully, his bright eyes twinkling. 'Perhaps "communion" would be a better word. Oh dear, I do hope he hasn't succeeded. I've a terrible feeling he's up to no good at all.'

He'd lost me. 'What exactly happened in there, Doctor?'

The sparkle in his eyes was gone, his brows furrowed. 'You tell me, er, Mr...'

'Blackwood. Call me Dan...'

'You were part of Dobtcheff's ceremony, at least until I broke you out of it. It's obvious you aren't as susceptible to his control as the rest.'

He clapped his hands together enthusiastically. 'Now, I want you to tell me everything.'

I stared at him. He wasn't being very clear. 'What do you mean?'

'Everything that happened tonight before I arrived, anything at all out of the ordinary, whatever you feel may be relevant.'

I didn't want to, but somehow I found myself offloading everything on to this mad, scruffy man. God, what a night! I'd turned thirty and suddenly needed therapy from total strangers. I told him about the girl, how she'd got me on to the train. I even told him about the recurring dream I'd had all last week, and how I'd experienced it so...realistically on the train tonight.

I came to the end of my story, but he almost seemed disappointed. 'But what happened while you were part of Dobtcheff's gathering...' he muttered.

'How do you mean?'

'Well, from what I saw, you behaved as a single entity, one consciousness. I'm sure he was using you to achieve something very specific.'

'Right, OK...'

'But what exactly?' The Doctor seemed to be talking to himself now. 'I'm sure it must be something to do with the time distortion I picked up.'

'What the hell *is* time distortion?'

'Well, er, that's a tricky one,' he replied, not looking at me. 'It can be caused by many things, but this particular source is definitely on the move. It's very slow, but drifting in this general direction, I'm sure.'

'Why don't you ask Dobtcheff what it is?' I joked, lamely.

'In a minute,' he replied. 'But first I think there are more answers in your head.'

'I've told you everything I can remember.'

'I'm sure that's true, but your conscious mind is suppressing your traumatic experiences'

I'd had enough. This maniac was spouting some totally weird crap now, while the fat flaky one a few doors down entertained himself with his performing zombies. I didn't want to be part of this. As far as I was concerned it was all over. We could get into the driver's cab, get the train to the next station and leave everything to the police, or whoever. I'd wake up with a hangover the next day, feel rough for a few hours, and that would be it.

'Please, Dan, I can help you.' He crouched beside me, and looked at me dolefully. Why wouldn't he shut up?

'I don't want any help.' Damn! Tears were starting to prick my eyes. I felt like I was back in the infants'.

'Do you know how long you were part of Dobtcheff's little congregation?'

'Who cares -'

'Fifteen minutes.'

'What?'

'You were there for fifteen minutes,' he said, his voice warm and mellow. 'I had to wait until I thought it was safe before I could free you, without fear of being followed. Dobtcheff used you for all that time, so you see that must mean you have some memory of it all, locked away.'

He seemed utterly sincere, but I just couldn't believe it. Dobtcheff had only put me to sleep, hadn't he? Surely I couldn't have been *that* traumatised.

'I can help you, but you must trust me.'

I rubbed my eyes, vigorously. I was tired, I ached, and I didn't have the will to argue any more. How could I? I didn't see anyone else falling over themselves to help me. I nodded, resignedly, and he pulled an old gold pocket watch from inside his coat.

'Oh, wait a minute...'

The Dictaphone was bleeping in my pocket - the first side had finished. I took it out, flipped the tape, then set it going again. 'You're sure?' asked the Doctor.

'Well, no point in missing anything now.'

The watch swung to and fro before my eyes, and within moments I must have been under. I remembered nothing of the following few minutes from memory - I learned everything from the tape, though it took me weeks to summon the courage to listen to it. Here it all is, word for word:

Please tell me where you are, Dan.

I'm travelling far below in the earth. I like it. I can move anywhere, through the chalk and clay, through the lime and silt. I'm moving so fast. This is wonderful, it's like nothing I've ever felt before. I can go anywhere I want.

Where are you going?

Already there. A light, a bright light, powerful and warm.

What are you doing there?

To be part of it. I want to be part of it. Need to join and take control, make it work.

Make what work?

[Voice becomes scared] *Help me, I'm trapped. Don't know where. Feels like a box. No air. Its black all around. No light at all. It's hard to breathe.*

You can breathe, Dan. Can you move at all?

Yes, yes, I can. The wall is burning though, too hot to touch. Flames...I can hear flames outside. There's fire all around me. I'm scared. I don't want to be here. Please let me out of here...

You'll leave soon. What else do you feel?

Nothing...wait. My head, it feels...different...not my own. Not my own hands, either [Starts to panic] *What's happened to me?*

You're fine. Nothing's going to happen to you. Do you feel anything else?

The floor. Too hot to touch. It's melting, giving way. Water coming in from somewhere. I hate being here, I hate everything. Why am I here? Why did they do this to me?

Who's 'they'?

[Voice changes: lower, coarse, angry] *The ones I was to contact. They attacked. No warning. I only wanted help. Now I'm here, left to die in this filth!*

All right, now you're leaving that place.

Yes, I'm out. Out in the water, no fire, only water, but its cold now. I can't survive in the cold for very long.

[Pause] But can you survive in water?

[Silence]

Can you live in the water?

Of course I can. But I need to surface. Must find one on the surface. It's the only way I can stay alive...

You've reached the surface now.

And now I'm happy. [Laughs]

Why are you happy?

I got one. Got one of them. The scum were all standing there, come to see the spectacle, come to watch me die, and all I had to do was choose one of them. Simple. And now they'll pay, not now, not for a long time, but in years to come they'll pay, their kind...

You said you'd 'got' one. Who have you got?

Young, warm flesh, still in the mother. It accepts me, it has no will yet. Now, vulnerable, whole, perfect. It sleeps inside the mother and I sleep inside it. It carries me now, so I can divide myself, feed, grow stronger until...

Until?

Until your time. Now. Now we have the means.

That was it. When I came round, the Doctor's grave face came into focus.

'Is everything OK?'

'Fine, Dan. Thanks to you I've got a good idea of what Dobtcheff is doing, but first I need to try something.'

'What's that?'

'Outside, in the tunnel.'

He took a small pen-torch device from his pocket and held it up to the door control. The object emitted a shrill chirruping and the door opened. We both jumped out into the cramped space between the train and the tunnel and stood there, scarcely daring to breathe.

'Hear that?' he whispered.

I listened, intently. 'Sorry, no.'

He pressed his ear against the wall of the tunnel. 'What about now?'

I did the same. This time I could hear something, a deep, ominous rumbling, reverberating through the tunnel wall. 'What do you reckon it is, another train coming?'

'That's easily checked,' he said, magicking a small box from another pocket.

I snorted. 'How come you always happen to have the right piece of equipment in your coat?'

'Force of habit,' he replied. Although I'm actually rather fortunate to have this device on me. You see, I've only just used it - or was it about thirty years ago now...? Oh, it doesn't matter...'

I scratched my head. He was right, it didn't.

The Doctor disappeared under the train, and a few seconds later he jumped up again, the lines on his face even deeper with worry. 'No current fluctuations at all, so there isn't a train coming. But I'm rather afraid that means something else *is*.'

I was about to ask him what, when he shoved me sharply away from him. 'Down,' he whispered, hoarsely, flapping his hands.

We heard footsteps from the carriage. It had to be Martha. I relaxed a little, then remembered she had a gun. Bugger. The Doctor was gesticulating wildly now, trying to instruct me in what to do, but my head was starting to feel woozy and I couldn't understand what he was on about.

Too late. Martha's gun barrel appeared in the doorway and without thinking I lashed out to grab hold of it. I caught it firmly, but she was stronger than she looked and she slowly twisted the barrel towards me. 'Doctor!' I yelled.

He was already at the controls and the door snapped shut, just as a shot rang out, ricocheting off the tunnel wall. I screamed and staggered back, sliding down the damp wall, a searing pain in my side.

The Doctor leapt over to me. 'Are you OK?' He examined the wound closely. 'Just a graze. You were lucky. Can you stand?'

I nodded and as he helped me up I saw Martha - the door had closed on her neck. She didn't even struggle, she just stood there, silent and still. My foot caught on something and I bent down to pick it up. Martha's gun. That changed things a little. The Doctor was staring at me though. 'I hope that won't be necessary,' he said, quietly.

'So do I, but it gives us the edge, I think.'

He sighed. 'Come on, we've got to stop this lunatic plan of Dobtcheff's.'

He hurried off and I tried desperately to keep up, ignoring the stabbing pain in my side. 'What plan?' He stopped dead, and I went smack right into him. That's all I needed. 'What is it now?'

'In your dream, you talked about water rather a lot. You mentioned it again when I hypnotised you.'

'What about it?'

'We're on the southbound branch of the Northern Line, yes?'

'Yes.'

'And it passes under the River Thames?'

'Well, yes.'

'Interesting.'

I had a sickening feeling we were already too late. The light was dimmed in the carriage, and as I boarded, the stench of charred flesh made me want to retch. The passengers lay slumped in their seats, eyes closed, limbs hanging loose, their heads lolling to one side. Dobtcheff, or what I assumed was Dobtcheff, was still at the back of the carriage, but sitting down, his head between his knees, completely covered by his coat.

The Doctor spoke first, very quietly. 'They're dead, aren't they?'

'Yes, already,' muttered Dobtcheff. 'And they were supposed to be the strongest.'

'How did you know?'

'They were the ones who answered the call. Their minds connected in their dreams *with me*. We are here for reunion.'

I looked in horror at the smouldering bodies. Would I have been one of them if the Doctor hadn't got me out? I tried to keep my voice steady. 'Why am I here, Dobtcheff?'

He laughed, hollowly. 'Because you like a pretty face.' Then his voice became a snarl. 'You're here to make up the numbers, scum. You didn't connect, not properly. You didn't answer the call. But I knew we were

in you, and you were the best I had to hand.'

The Doctor took a step forward. 'Now that's a very good point.'

'What?'

'You took over one body - a human baby - a long time ago. You separated yourself down the generations, until you could recombine. But you underestimated human genetics. Not as easy to infest as you'd believed, are they? I just wonder how much of the real you is represented by the poor individuals on this train.'

'It doesn't matter,' croaked the pathetic figure. 'I'm as complete as I need to be.'

Yet again I was out of my depth. The Doctor was suggesting that everyone in the carriage was descended from one child - including me. We all carried something within us, we were all related, somewhere along the line. I looked round the carriage, stunned. Forty or so of my... my *relatives*. All dead.

The Doctor was still ranting. 'You aren't complete!' he raged. 'What about the ones who died before they passed your parasitic infestation on to the next generation? What about the ones who didn't obey your call to be here?'

Dobtcheff stood up. I gasped at the figure before me. He was no longer human: I could make out fully developed scales over his face, glinting in the half-light, pincer-like claws where his hands once were.

'What's happened to you?' I breathed.

'His true self,' murmured the Doctor. 'There were enough splinters of him here to effect a physical transformation. It's breathtaking, really.'

'What now?'

The Doctor looked around the train. 'Can you hear that?'

I listened. It was the low, throbbing noise I'd heard in the tunnel, and it was getting louder by the second.

The Doctor took another step closer to Dobtcheff. 'Your ship is coming here, isn't it?'

Dobtcheff waved a pincer, which I took to be a yes.

'Are you quite sure it will work after hundreds of years?'

'It already is. When the excavations dislodged the ship, the power cells became activated. The autorepair cycle was virtually complete and the ship began sending out a telepathic distress call to bring us together. The engines must have started up and the ship began to drift. I couldn't reach it at Westminster - too closely guarded.'

'Oh, I know,' said the Doctor with mock sincerity. 'It's so much handier to take the tube, isn't it?' Then he turned to me. 'The ship is the cause of your dreams,' he said quietly. 'It connected with the parasite

dormant within you and made you experience the final moments of the creature before the ship sank. Quite a trauma - but then you know that, don't you?' He turned back to Dobtcheff. 'There are a few things I don't understand.'

'Go on,' said Dobtcheff, amiably, perhaps because I now had the gun, or maybe he was just buying time.

'How did your ship come to be buried in the earth?'

'We arrived hundreds of years in the future,' said Dobtcheff. 'We wanted help to defend our planet. Many ambassadors were sent to contact the governments on this planet to ask directly for that help.'

'You mean, rather than send a distress call, you decided you'd turn up on the doorstep in person?' asked the Doctor, incredulously.

'That is our protocol,' spat Dobtcheff, as if the Doctor was incapable of understanding the concept.

The rumbling was uncomfortably loud now, and the carriage was starting to vibrate.

The Doctor looked up. 'So you mean to say you turned up outside the Houses of Parliament in a tatty old spaceship and expected them to throw together a battle fleet for you. Rather optimistic, surely?'

Dobtcheff bristled. 'There was nothing "tatty" about our warships, Doctor. They were built to spread terror wherever we fought. Mine was the only one to make it through the vortex intact, but when I arrived, I was attacked before I had chance to communicate.'

'Hmm,' said the Doctor, thoughtfully. 'That's humans for you. They must have found the sight of your ship terrifying indeed.'

'Emergency failsafes cut in, I spiralled back over 800 years in time.'

Slowly, this all started to make some kind of weird sense to me. The report I'd read about the tube accident must have had something to do with all this. It mentioned the archaeological excavations at Westminster and how the area had been part of the Thames hundreds of years ago. If this Dobtcheff really did have some kind of spaceship, it must have sunk into the river, but had ended up buried in the ground as the land was gradually reclaimed, lying there dormant until now.

My thoughts were interrupted by a sudden shock wave. The whole of the carriage lurched, then righted itself.

'And it's coming here, like an obedient dog, ploughing through the clay beneath London,' continued the Doctor.

'Yes, it will be here very soon.'

'Poppycock!' bellowed the Doctor.

'What?'

'Whatever is heading towards us isn't your ship at all, is it? An

enormous warship burrowing its way deep underground? I think the vibrations would be considerably greater, don't you?'

Dobtcheff's whole body began to shake, he was seriously annoyed now. 'You're nobody's fool, Doctor,' he hissed. 'You're right. I abandoned the mothership in a smaller craft at the precise moment it disintegrated. It was this ship that travelled back over 800 years. With the mental energy of these humans, I have programmed the controls to home in on us.'

'But this is ridiculous,' yelled the Doctor, marching right up to Dobtcheff. 'It will break through the tunnel and kill us. You might have set it going, but you haven't the power to control it properly.'

His face filled with horror, as if something even worse had just occurred to him. 'Which tube stations are we between?'

'That is irrelevant.'

'I said which stations?'

Dobtcheff didn't answer, but it wasn't hard to work out. 'If we're near to Westminster, then we're probably between Embankment and Waterloo,' I told him

'As I feared,' glared the Doctor. 'So, even if your ship doesn't crash into us, it could break through the river bed, and if that happens the water will sluice through and kill us all. Is that what you want?'

'I need to get back,' gasped Dobtcheff. 'The ship will take me...I must send a distress call...'

'Stop it, man,' raged the Doctor. 'You think one foolish act by man justifies this abominable revenge? You can't do it. I won't let you!'

By now, the shuddering was so violent, I could barely stand. I hit the floor and the Doctor joined me, covering his ears to block out the scream of the ship's engines. It was deafening, as if a 737 was about to smash right into us. Time itself seemed to slow down.

'It's going to kill us!' I yelled.

'Maybe it will,' he called back. 'I'm rather hoping that the tunnel engineers knew their craft...'

He never finished the sentence. With a tremendous roar, the ship impacted somewhere above us, sending us sprawling. The lights went out and I braced myself, expecting the ship to come tearing through the middle of the carriage.

But it didn't. Gradually, the roar of the engines died away and slowly we picked ourselves up. The train was in total blackness, and a shiver ran through my spine. It suddenly felt very cold. I heard the Doctor clap his hands. 'How very impressive - a small craft with time-travel capability, but it's still no match for solid Earth engineering!'

I wondered what had happened to Dobtcheff. 'Are you there, Dobtcheff?' I called into the darkness.

No response.

My fingers tightened on the gun as I edged forwards. I listened hard for the sound of his breathing.

'What happened, Doctor?' I asked.

'We were lucky: the ship wasn't strong enough to break through the tunnel; presumably it has shut down now to conserve power. It's reached its destination, after all.'

'But what about Dobtcheff?'

'Well, we'll see, shall we? But be very careful.'

I inched my way forward. The stench of the bodies was overpowering, but I felt I had to make sure that Dobtcheff was dead. My head suddenly began to throb; I lost my balance, and fell headlong into one of the bodies, the gun hitting the floor with a clatter. I heard a sound, a gentle whispering.

hera sota iega sra

No, please, not again. I attempted to stand upright and reached out to steady myself. Something grabbed hold of my hand in a vicelike grip. 'I don't die that easily, scum,' breathed Dobtcheff in my ear. He seized hold of my head in his pincer-hands and dug the razor tips into the sides of my skull, tearing at the skin. I screamed, and tried to pull free, but my struggles only intensified the pain.

'Now you are going to help me. You will join with me.'

'No, I won't do it, you murdering...!' The tears were streaming down my face now as I fought to block the pain from my mind. But what the hell was the Doctor doing? Why wasn't he helping me? I felt control slipping away, and I started falling once more, spinning, floating. I left the carriage and found myself...

...back in the box. Again it seemed real, but this time I could see detail. The area was small and, as I looked around, tiny lights flickered and blinked, and I realised they must be controls of some description. The controls to Dobtcheff's ship.

'Concentrate.' It was Dobtcheff's voice inside my head. 'Help me. We must maintain contact so I can initiate the sequence.'

I moved closer and reached out my hand, but there was nothing there. I didn't have any hands. I looked down. I didn't have a body, I didn't *feel* anything.

One area of the controls suddenly started flickering more rapidly than the rest. A high-pitched whine pierced my ears. 'That's it, I've done it,' whispered the voice in my head. 'Perhaps I should apologise, scum.'

You weren't as weak as I thought. I couldn't have done it without you.'

'What?' I shouted. 'What have I done?'

The reply came from another voice altogether, still inside my head. It was the Doctor. 'Dan, it's me. You must concentrate and help me reverse the sequence. Together we can do it.'

'What are you talking about? What have I done?'

Dobtcheff has used you to activate the autodestruct sequence,' he said, calmly. 'He knows he cannot escape. We must reverse it, or the ship will explode, taking half of London with it. Now, concentrate!'

'But I don't know what to *do*!' I screamed, desperately trying to shut the whining noise that was searing through my brain.

'I know what Dobtcheff did,' he shouted. 'I linked with him, too. But you must keep your thoughts clear of him, don't let him into your mind again whatever happens.'

I tried desperately to do as he asked, but the pain was too great: I felt as if my brain was being sucked out of my skull. Thoughts of Dobtcheff and his disgusting, pincer hands came swimming back into my mind as I fought to keep control. I tried so hard, I thought of anything - the girl, the passengers, the Doctor, the stupid tune he'd been playing in the tunnel. I knew I had to keep my thoughts clear. But I was so tired, I didn't have the will, I couldn't stand the pain any more...

My eyes snapped open. The lights of the carriage were back on and I looked up, groggily. The Doctor was hunched over the inert form of Dobtcheff. I didn't need to ask anything. The creature was lying in a pungent pool of slime, and I knew he was dead.

After that, everything else is all a blur to me. I scarcely remembered how I got to the next station. I have vague recollections of being rolled on to a stretcher and taken off the tube, and I could have sworn I saw the Doctor disappear into a large blue box at the end of the station platform, which faded into thin air. He never even said goodbye.

And so I've written all this down. I don't know why. It's cathartic, I suppose, maybe even therapeutic. I can't comprehend anything that happened that night, still less believe that I might still have something alien inside me, lying dormant, waiting until the right circumstances where it can...

No, the Doctor said that couldn't happen. That much I do remember. The ship was dead now: he'd deactivated it. Dobtcheff was dead too. Yes there are probably other splinters out there somewhere, the fortunate sods who weren't summoned to his freak show. Can they

still hurt me?

I keep thinking of the Doctor and how I helped him. How I was strong enough to help him overcome the creature's power. It's OK. I'll be all right.

I've fought it once, I know I can do it again.

Planet of the Bunnoids

by Harriet Green

Vicki was in the corner of the console room, frowning and tutting over a book. After the third 'tut', the Doctor could stand it no longer. 'What is it, child? What's wrong?'

'Well, it's this history book, Doctor,' she replied. 'I just don't believe it! It claims that back in Earth's past there were wolves who could talk. Isn't that ridiculous! Animals can't speak! There's something about pigs, too.'

The Doctor took the book from her. '*The Big Girls' Book of Bedtime Tales*. This is fiction, my dear. It didn't really happen.'

The young girl looked sceptical. 'Well, why bother about it then?'

'It's supposed to entertain.'

She sighed. 'What a silly idea. In my time we read improving books, not silly impossible things like this.'

'Things like what?' asked Steven, striding into the room.

The Doctor waved a hand dismissively at the young man. 'Oh, this child here doesn't believe in fairy stories.'

'What?' Steven was incredulous. 'You never dreamed of being Sleeping Beauty, Vicks? Or Cinderella, carried off by a handsome prince?'

Vicki shrieked as he picked her up and swung her around the console room.

'Put me down, Steven! You're not a prince!'

He grinned at her. 'But you do agree I'm handsome, then?'

'I didn't say that!' She yelled again as he tossed her in the air and caught her. 'All right, all right! You're handsome! Now put me down.'

The Doctor smiled indulgently as Steven dropped the girl back on her chair. 'Come, come now,' he said. 'Don't you want to see where we've landed, hmm?'

'Let's look at the scanner, Doctor, quickly!' cried Vicki. 'I wonder where we are.'

The scanner hummed into life. The three gazed at the screen, trying to make out details of the landscape outside the ship. 'Looks like a field,' said Steven, doubtfully.

'It's probably Earth again,' sighed Vicki. 'It's always Earth'

'That', the Doctor flustered, 'is a gross exaggeration.' A movement

on the scanner screen caught his eye. 'What's that?'

'What's what?'

'There. Something moved.'

'I see it!' Vicki cried. 'It looks like...a rabbit. We *are* on Earth, then, Doctor.' She turned away in disappointment.

Steven was still looking at the screen. 'I wouldn't be so sure about that. Look again.'

She did so. 'What?'

'That's no ordinary rabbit. Look!'

Vicki screwed up her eyes. 'You're right! It's eyes...seem to be flashing! And those whiskers...'

'...are antennae,' completed Steven. 'It's a robot rabbit!'

Vicki seemed lost in a dream world. 'A robot rabbit...' she breathed. 'A bunnoid!'

'What's that, child? What do you say? Bunnoid?'

Vicki waggled her hands above her head in a vague approximation of rabbit ears. 'Oh, don't you think that's a good name for a robot rabbit, Doctor?' She pointed at the scanner, where the creature was hopping closer, twitching its cute metallic nose. 'And wouldn't it make a lovely pet! Oh, do let's go outside now, please. I wonder if it can talk!'

The Doctor and Steven exchanged glances. 'I remember someone saying earlier how they thought anthropomorphising animals was "silly"...' murmured the Doctor.

Vicki cast her eyes to the ceiling. 'This is a completely different thing. And anyway -'

'Well, I suppose having a robot pet would save on food bills...' said Steven hurriedly, interrupting.

'But not electricity bills,' said the Doctor. 'Still, it seems to be perfectly harmless, perfectly harmless. I don't see why we shouldn't have a little look outside.'

Vicki gave him a huge smile as he operated the controls, and was the first through the doors.

Vicki screamed.

'Vicki!' cried Steven, dashing out of the TARDIS after her. 'What is it?'

She pointed a trembling finger. A group of large, blue-skinned humanoids was approaching, clawed hands stretched out in front of them.

'Back in the TARDIS,' Steven said. 'Quickly, Vicki.' He pulled her back - and tripped over the Bunnoid, which had hopped up unnoticed

behind them. The Bunnoid's whisker-antennae quivered and buzzed - and then the creature scampered into the ship, the doors humming shut behind it.

'Doctor!' yelled Steven. 'Doctor, quick, open the doors!'

'It's no good, Steven,' Vicki said, banging on the doors anyway. 'I think the Bunnoid must be stopping him...'

'Some pet,' muttered Steven.

The pair turned, their backs to the TARDIS. The alien creatures were getting closer, closer...

Vicki grabbed Steven's arm. 'Steven...we're trapped.'

The Doctor was most indignant at being held in his own ship by a foot-long mechanical mammal. 'What is the meaning of this, hmm?' he demanded 'I insist you open the doors and allow me to see my young friends!'

The rabbit wiggled its fibre-optic whiskers.

'Will you stop that! You're disrupting my scanner!' The screen, no longer showing the field outside the ship, was covered in static. Or - was it?

The Doctor peered closely. Deep within the distortion, a figure seemed to be forming.

WELCOME, DOCTOR.

The voice wasn't coming from the scanner. It wasn't coming from anywhere inside the console room...

NO, DOCTOR. I AM SPEAKING TO YOU INSIDE YOUR HEAD. MIND TO MIND. UNFORTU-ZZZB-WHRNZ-QUBARTIAL TELEPATH. KXNZZZNZZ-BRM PERFECT CONTACT. TRYING TO FOCUZZZ.

'Well, quite,' agreed the Doctor. 'While a number of my people do have great telepathic abilities, it is not a skill that I myself have ever expended much energy upon. The ability's there, of course, the ability's there, but...'

I UNDERSTAND.

'But that's not the point! Why are you keeping me here? I assume this -' he gestured at the Bunnoid - 'creature belongs to you.'

INDEEDZBMPHDOES. THE BUNNOIDS, AS YOUR YOUNG FRIEND CALLED THEM, WERE THE SERVITORS ON MY SHIP. THEIR CIRCUITS ARE TUNED IN TO THE FREQUENCIES OF MY MIND, ALLOWING ME TO CONTACTSMZMPHFQURZZND, TO A CERTAIN EXTENT, TO REACH THE MINDS OF OTHERS NEAR BY.

'I see. And why would you want to do such a thing, hmm?' The figure on the screen was still indistinct, and, for want of a better focus, the Doctor was kneeling down to address his remarks to the Bunnoid. It twitched its nose in response.

MINE IS A SAD TALE.

'Aren't they all?' muttered the Doctor.

I AM A PIONEER OF MY PEOPLE, THE LAPINOS - TRAVELBZZNNNT THE STARS AND BRINGING BACK DESPERATELY NEEDED EXPERIENCES TO ENRICH OUR LIVES, UNTIL A TERRIBLE CRASH STRANDED ME ON THIS ZZZPQWING PLANET. MY PEOPLE LIVED FOR SENSATION, DOCTOR - NOTHING ELSE MATTERED. AND NOW WE HAVE NOTHING ELSE. HAVING NEGLECTED OUR PHYSICAL FORMS - WE FINALLY LOST THEM ALTOGETHER. MENTAL STIMULATION IS ALL WE HAVE LEFT.

The voice was becoming more distinct, and the screen was finally clearing. All it showed was a giant, pulsating brain.

I SENSE THE REVULSION IN YOUR MIND, DOCTOR. THANK YOU. YOUR FEELINGS FEED ME.

The Doctor averted his eyes from the scanner.

SHAME - AND PITY? NOT AS GOOD FARE, DOCTOR.

'You consume emotions?' The Doctor frowned. 'I've never heard of such a thing, never! It's simply not possible.'

He could almost imagine that the voice was smiling.

DOUBT, SUSPICION, INCREDULITY? THANK YOU, DOCTOR. I EAT THEM ALL. BETTER THAN THE CRUMBS OF THOUGHTS I HARVEST FROM THE PRIMITIVE BLUE-SKINNED NATIVES OF THIS PLANET - MY BUNNOIDS CREATE ILLUSIONS OF ADVENTURES FOR THEM, BUT ALL I GET IN RETURN ARE PATHETIC TABLE SCRAPS THAT WILL NOT EVEN ALLOW ME TO POWER THE COUNTDOWN TO TAKE-OFF, LET ALONE FLY MY SHIP BACK TO LAPINO.

'Well, I'm very sorry for you, obviously, far from your home, cut off from your own people -' The Doctor was lost in thought for a moment. 'Yes, terrible, terrible. But I fail to see what good it will do you to keep my young friends and I apart.'

DON'T YOU, DOCTOR? I NEED EMOTIONS. AND YOU ARE FORGETTING THAT THE STRONGEST EMOTION OF ALL IS FEAR. I AM ABOUT TO FEAST.

Vicki was kicking out, trying to break the grip of the blue-skinned creature that carried her.

Steven, in the clutches of two of them, couldn't even manage *that* level of resistance. 'Vicki? Vicki, are you all right?'

'I'm all right, Steven -' Her words cut off with a shriek.

'Vicki?' cried a suddenly worried Steven.

'I've just laddered my tights on a branch!'

Steven gave a snort of relief. 'Well, you won't have to worry about trees for much longer, Vicki. Looks like they're taking us into that cave.'

Vicki sighed. 'Oh, I hate caves. They're always so dark and smelly.'

'Don't forget cold.'

'Oh yes, cold. And me with not even a whole pair of tights to keep it out. It's not fair, Steven.'

The Bunnoid was hopping round and round the console room in consternation as the brain-being raged at the Doctor.

THIS IS RIDICULOUS! I HAVE THE BOY AND THE GIRL CARRIED OFF BY FEARSOME-LOOKING ALIEN CREATURES TO AN UNKNOWN FATE IN A FORBIDDING CAVE, AND THEY DON'T EVEN HAVE THE DECENCY TO FEEL TERRIFIED! SLIGHTLY APPREHENSIVE, YES, BUT MAINLY IRRITATED ABOUT MINOR DAMAGE TO THEIR CLOTHING.

The Doctor smiled smugly. 'You underestimated my young friends. They have faced Daleks, Vikings, the terrible Chumbliens. These aliens hold no fears for them.'

CONDESCENSION TASTES BITTER, DOCTOR. BUT I NEED STRONG EMOTIONS! I MUST HAVE THEM!

The Doctor glared at the Bunnoid, then remembered to switch his gaze to the brain-creature on the scanner screen. 'I understand your desire to return to your own planet, but this is not the way! Can't your people send out a rescue ship or something?'

WITHOUT A STORE OF EMOTIONS, I CANNOT REACH OUT FAR ENOUGH TO CONTACT MY HOME. I HAVE NOT SPOKEN TO ANOTHER OF MY KIND FOR SIX SPACE MONTHS - WITH THESE NATIVES' PATHETIC EXCUSES FOR EMOTIONS I CANNOT EVEN ACCESS THE COMMUNICATIONS SYSTEMS -

'Not even with the additional scraps you've ingested from my young friends, hmm?'

The Bunnoid suddenly began thumping a rear paw on the floor excitedly.

YES! I MAY NOT HAVE ENOUGH ENERGY TO POWER THE SHIP, BUT MAYBE I CAN AT LEAST COMMUNICATE WITH MY PEOPLE!

The Doctor sensed the voice's focus shift, although he could still hear every word.

ATTEMPT ACCESS COMMUNICATION LOG - NOW.

There was a buzzing, whirring sound, and an electronic voice. 'Communications accessed...daily communications received.'

ACCESS MOST RECENT COMMUNICATION.

'Most recent communication - ' Another voice, softer than the brain-creature's but similar in tone. 'Lapino to Explorer, Lapino to Explorer, come in, please, Explorer.' A pause. 'Explorer, we have received no communication from you for six space months. We must now conclude that you are not returning to Lapino. Therefore, if we do not hear from you within the next space day, we will use our combined powers to send a wave of mental energy to destroy your ship, so the technology does not fall into alien hands. Message ends.'

ONE SPACE DAY! COMPUTER, WHEN WAS THIS MESSAGE RECEIVED?

'Message received half a space day ago.'

The Bunnoid was zooming round the console room in great agitation, and the Doctor groaned in pain as an anguished cry echoed in his head. Wincing with the effort, he spoke to the brain-creature. 'Come now! I'm sure this is a great blow to you, but after all, you knew you couldn't escape that way, so it makes little difference to you, hmm?'

The form on the screen began to shake alarmingly.

OH, IT DOES MAKE A DIFFERENCE, DOCTOR, I ASSURE YOU. I WILL NO LONGER BE STRANDED ON THIS PLANET, FAR FROM MY HOME AND MY PEOPLE.

'You won't? Then that's a good thing, surely?'

I WILL NOT BE STRANDED - BECAUSE I WILL BE DEAD. SUCH A MENTAL FORCE WILL DESTROY NOT ONLY THE SHIP, BUT EVERY LIVING THING ON THIS PLANET!

The Doctor tutted. 'Now then, don't you think you're being just a little bit melodramatic?'

PERHAPS THAT IS THE ANSWER, DOCTOR. FOR I DO NOT INTEND TO DIE.

'Good, good.'

I WILL AVERT THAT FATE. I WILL CONTACT MY PEOPLE.

'Excellent!'

I WILL CAUSE SUCH EMOTION IN YOUR COMPANIONS THAT CONTACT IS ENSURED. ONE OF THEM WILL FACE THE FEAR OF DYING - AND ONE WILL HAVE TO COPE WITH THE HEART-RENDING GRIEF OF BEING UNABLE TO SAVE THE OTHER.

The Doctor smiled. 'That's the spirit.' Then a double-take. 'You're going to kill one of my young friends? I won't allow it!'

I'M AFRAID, DOCTOR, THAT YOU HAVE NO CHOICE IN THE MATTER. MY BUNNOIDS ARE ALREADY TAKING THE NECESSARY STEPS...

Steven and Vicki were ushered into the depths of the cave. Vicki suddenly halted, grabbing Steven's arm. 'Steven!' she hissed.

'What is it?' he whispered back.

'There's something else in here with us. In front of us, look. I can see a pair of bright eyes.'

'Yes, yes, I see. They're burning like fire,' breathed Stephen. 'And coming closer...'

They tried to edge backwards, but their way was blocked by the blue-skinned creatures, making frantic forward gestures. Then Vicki giggled.

'Vicki!'

'It's all right, Steven. Look! It's only a Bunnoid!'

Steven breathed a sigh of relief. 'Well, thank goodness for that. I was imagining all sorts of monsters.'

There was a clattering, chattering sound. Vicki peered into the darkness, and gasped. 'I was wrong, Steven. It isn't a Bunnoid.'

'It isn't?'

'No. It's *hundreds* of Bunnoids.' She grabbed his arm, as the Bunnoid mass emerged from the shadows. As one, the robots stopped. As one, they lowered their ears - ears from which small glowing nozzles protruded. Ears which were, very obviously, ray guns, and which were pointing straight at the time travellers.

'Stop!' The Doctor was furious. 'I will not let you do it!'

YOU CANNOT STOP ME, DOCTOR. AND YOUR RAGE IS ONLY HELPING MY CAUSE.

'Maybe I can't stop you - but what if I came up with a better plan, hmm? One that would give you all the power you needed, without causing any harm to anyone?'

AND WHAT IS THIS WONDERFUL PLAN THAT WILL

ALLOW US ALL TO LIVE?

'Ah.' The Doctor gazed desperately around the console room for inspiration. His eyes lighted on Vicki's discarded book. 'And they all lived...happily ever after...' he murmured.

WELL, DOCTOR? YOU ARE WASTING MY TIME. AND TIME IS SOMETHING I HAVE LITTLE OF.

'Well...have you studied the books of Earth at all?'

I HAVE NOT.

The Doctor shook his head. 'Oh well, never mind. A very famous man on Earth once wrote a letter saying...' He paused. 'Faith, hope and charity, but the greatest of these is love.' No, no, that's not it... 'Love, honour and obey, but the greatest...' No - oh, anyway, the point is that love is the greatest emotion of all. That's all that matters.'

LOVE? THIS IS AN...EARTH THING?

The Doctor snorted. 'You claim to live by emotions yet you don't understand the concept of love? I pity you. Yes, I pity you.'

YOUR PITY DOES NOT SATE ME, DOCTOR. TELL ME OF THIS EARTH THING CALLED LOVE.

The Doctor picked up *The Big Girls' Book of Bedtime Tales*. 'I shall do better than that. Are you sitting comfor-' He glanced at the giant pulsating brain. 'Well, never mind that. I'll begin. "Once upon a time..."

"...and they lived happily ever after. The End." There, now.'

It may have been the Doctor's imagination, but he sensed that the brain-being, had it had any tear ducts, would have been fighting back tears.

I CAN READ YOUR MIND, DOCTOR, came the voice inside his head. AND IT IS YOUR IMAGINATION. HOW EXACTLY DO YOU THINK THAT THIS TREACLY RUBBISH CAN STIR EMOTIONS IN YOUR FRIENDS?

'Treacly rubbish, sir? Never! It is my firm belief that the young people in that story found a great deal of emotion in falling in love - enough to power a ship and more! And we shall make it so my young friends experience a similar sensation.'

THEY ARE ABOUT TO FALL IN LOVE? BY THIS AFTERNOON?

'They are indeed. We must create a scenario whereby instant love is guaranteed. And there is no greater power than that of a story! Now, as speed is of the essence, a slight tweaking of their perceptions is required, I'm afraid. But I'm sure your Bunnoids are up to that.' The Doctor placed his pince-nez on his nose, and adjusted them to the right

angle for observing near-floor-height rabbits. 'Now listen to me - this is what I want you to do...'

The Bunnoids withdrew their ears. Steven and Vicki breathed sighs of relief. Were they safe now?

One of the creatures hopped forward, and Vicki drew back in alarm. But the rabbit did nothing but gambol around Steven's feet. 'Steven,' she said, 'I think that Bunnoid wants you to go with it.'

'Well, it can keep wanting! I'm not leaving you.'

The Bunnoid lowered its ears. Vicki spoke up hurriedly. 'Oh, it's all right. I'm not afraid. I'll be fine here in the cave. Anyway, the Doctor's bound to rescue us soon. He always does.'

'Yes, you're right.' Steven stood up squarely. 'All right, rabbit features, I'm coming.'

The Bunnoid shepherded him out of the cave.

I SEE ONE MAJOR FLAW IN YOUR PLAN, DOCTOR.

'Oh yes? And what is that, may I ask?

THIS...STORY REQUIRES THREE SPEAKING ROLES. THE NATIVE CREATURES AND MY BUNNOIDS CAN SERVE FOR MOST OF THE CHARACTERS, BUT...

'What d'you say? Three? Nonsense, two main characters are all it needs: my young friends Steven and Vicki.'

I THINK NOT, DOCTOR. THERE IS ONE OTHER FIGURE WHO IS A MAJOR CATALYST FOR THE PLOT - WITHOUT WHOM, IN FACT, THE PLOT COULD NOT HAPPEN. AND IF THE PLOT DOES NOT HAPPEN - WELL, THEN I WOULD HAVE TO FALL BACK ON MY ORIGINAL PLAN: THAT OF DEATH.

The Doctor gave the brain-creature an extremely hard stare. 'All right, you've made your point. But just don't think that I'm going to enjoy this...'

The brain-creature sounded extremely smug. I SHALL BE WATCHING THE TALE UNFOLD, DOCTOR, it said. AND I THINK I SHALL ENJOY IT. OH, AND DOCTOR -

'Yes, yes, what is it now?'

DON'T FORGET YOUR PROPS...

Vicki was sweeping the floor of the cave with a broom made from dead twigs tied to a tree branch. 'Oh, woe is me,' she sighed. 'Left to slave here while my two ugly blue-skinned sisters go to the ball. Oh, how I wish I could be there too, and meet

the handsome Prince Steven.'

There was a flash of light, as if of a torch turned hastily on and off and the Doctor appeared in the cave.

If the brain-being had had hands, it would have clapped.

'Why, who are you?' gasped Vicki.

'Well, isn't it obvious?' grumbled the Doctor. I'm your... Really, this is intolerable...'

YOU'RE WASTING TIME.

'Yes, yes, all right, all right. I'm your...fairy godmother. Yes, that's who I am.'

'I never knew I had a fairy godmother!' exclaimed Vicki.

'Well, you do, child, so just accept it and let's move on, hmm? I am here to see that you go to this ball affair.'

Vicki jumped up and down. 'Oh, Fairy Godmother; how can I ever thank you?'

'Just get me a pumpkin. Hurry, child, hurry, we haven't got all day, you know.'

'Here you go,' said Vicki, handing over a large round stone, 'one pumpkin.'

'Good, good, now just imagine that these rabbit things are mice, would you?'

'Those are mice, Godmother,' said Vicki, obviously puzzled. 'They hide in the wainscoting and steal the cheese.'

'Ah yes, so they do. Well, I'm going to...I'm going to...'

GET ON WITH IT!

'...wave my...magic wand, and turn them into a coach and horses.' The Doctor waved a fluid link in the air.

'How clever you are, Godmother,' said Vicki. She sighed again. 'But I can't possibly go to the ball looking like this! Why, the prince wouldn't look twice at me in these rags!'

'He'd better do,' mumbled the Doctor under his breath. And then aloud: 'Well then, my child, you'd better put on this... beautiful silken gown.' He shrugged off his overcoat, and passed it over.

'Oh, it's beautiful! Thank you, Godmother. But...'

'What is it now, child?'

'My feet are bare and dirty...'

OH NO THEY'RE NOT! chanted the brain-being, getting into the spirit of things.

'You're wearing perfectly good boots,' muttered the Doctor, 'Though I see you've laddered your tights...'

'If the prince sees them poking out from beneath this silken gown -' she tugged the lapels of the jacket - 'he'll know I'm not really a princess...'

'All right, I'll wave my wand again -' the fluid link sloshed - and you're wearing glass slippers. You know, it's supposed to be fur slippers - it was a mistranslation. Why anyone would think it a good idea to wear glass slippers I've no

idea -'

IS THIS RELEVANT?

The Doctor frowned. 'All right, all right, I'm getting on with it...'

'Who were you speaking to just then, Godmother?' asked Vicki, puzzled.

'Oh no one, no one, never mind all that, just get off to the ball now, hmm?'
replied the Doctor.

'How can I ever thank you, Godm-'

'Just go, child! Go, go! And remember to leave by midnight!'

'May I have this dance?' asked Steven, approaching across the grass.

'Oh, Prince Steven, of course,' cried Vicki.

'The band play divinely, don't they?' he murmured, as he swung her around.

'Oh yes, they do!'

Steven was gazing deep into Vicki's eyes. 'Oh, beautiful stranger! I think we were made for each other!'

'Prince Steven! I -'

Suddenly a clock began to strike.

'Oh no!' cried Vicki. 'It's midnight! I must go.'

She dashed off towards the cave entrance. Halfway there a blue-skinned creature stopped her and forcibly removed one of her ankle boots, throwing it back towards Steven.

The young man picked up the boot, and gazed after her. 'I have found my bride!' he proclaimed. 'Now I must search the land until I find the foot that this glass slipper fits. And then I shall marry the woman who wears it!'

'Well, I think it's all going splendidly, don't you?' The Doctor turned off the reel-to-reel tape recorder and replaced the fluid link in the TARDIS console, then addressed the brain-being. 'We'll just let young Steven try the boot on a few more of these alien feet, then get them together and you can have your emotions and be gone from here.'

YOU THINK THIS PAIR WILL FIND LOVE WITH EACH OTHER? TRUE LOVE?

'Yes, yes, at least for your purposes. That's the whole point of the exercise.'

I DO NOT AGREE. THIS 'LOVE' IS PART OF A FICTION, IT IS NOT REAL. A FALSE EMOTION CANNOT FEED ME.

'You are underestimating the power of a good story.' The Doctor grew expansive. 'A story can make you laugh, make you cry...make you care. Imagine how much stronger that effect can be if you are *part* of the story, hmm?'

YOU ASSURE ME THAT THEIR FEELINGS WILL BE REAL?

'Indubitably! For as long as your illusion lasts. Then you can restore reality to them and we can all be on our way!'

AND IF I CHOOSE NOT TO RESTORE THEIR REALITY...?

'What?' raged the Doctor.

I'M NOT SURE IF IT WOULD BE...FAIR. YOU WILL HAVE DRIVEN YOUR FRIENDS TO FIND LOVE WITH EACH OTHER - A GREAT THING, YOU SAY. CAN I DESTROY THAT? PERHAPS THE ILLUSION WILL BE TOO STRONG TO BREAK, AND THEY WILL WANT TO REMAIN BEHIND, TOGETHER. OR PERHAPS...YOU WILL MAKE THEM.

The Doctor stared. 'What do you mean by that, sir?'

YOU HAVE PUSHED YOUR FRIENDS TOGETHER, FORCING THEM TO FEEL WHAT YOU ASSURE ME IS THE STRONGEST EMOTION POSSIBLE. MANIPULATING THEM. USING THEM FOR YOUR OWN ENDS.

The Doctor shouted at the screen. 'Ridiculous! Ridiculous, I tell you! I was acting for the best!'

THIS IS SOMETHING YOU OFTEN CLAIM...

The Doctor stared suspiciously at the pulsating brain. 'And what do you mean by that exactly?'

YOU HAVE ACTED ON BEHALF OF MANY IN THE PAST, DOCTOR. YOUR GRANDDAUGHTER, FOR EXAMPLE.

'What? How do you know of her, hmm? And what business is it of yours, anyway?'

The brain-being glowed. OH, SHE IS WRIT LARGE IN YOUR MIND, DOCTOR. YOU ABANDONED HER, ON A WAR-TORN PRIMITIVE PLANET, WITH A MAN YOU KNEW NOTHING OF. SHE DID NOT WANT TO STAY THERE; YOU MADE THE DECISION FOR HER - FOR YOURSELF. YOU THOUGHT YOU KNEW BEST - BUT YOU DIDN'T. SHE HAS RESENTED YOU EVERY DAY OF EVERY YEAR SINCE.

'No! That's not true!' The Doctor clenched his fists.

OH, BUT IT IS. SHE HAS SUFFERED AND SUFFERED AND SUFFERED - BECAUSE OF YOU. A pause. AS HAVE YOUR OWN PEOPLE.

'What?'

DO YOU DENY THAT YOU LEFT YOUR OWN PLANET FOR YOUR OWN SELFISH ENDS, CAUSED DISTRESS TO YOUR OWN PEOPLE, ABANDONED THEM WHEN THEY NEEDED YOU?

The Doctor frowned. 'You can't possibly know anything of my past.

'That simply isn't true.'

ISN'T IT, DOCTOR? YOU FORGET, I CAN READ YOUR MIND.

'Preposterous! Preposterous, I tell you!'

THEN LET ME REMIND YOU OF OTHER THINGS. PEOPLE WHOSE LIVES YOU'VE DESTROYED. IAN AND BARBARA, WHOM YOU KIDNAPPED FROM THEIR OWN PLACE AND TIME TO SAFEGUARD YOUR EXISTENCE, EVEN THOUGH YOUR SAFETY WAS NEVER IN ANY DOUBT. AND RACES YOU'VE USED, MANIPULATED. THE SMALL VANTINIS OF DOLPHUS III, WHOSE GOD-IDOL YOU TROD ON 'ACCIDENTALLY', THUS RENDERING THEIR ENTIRE CIVILISATION MEANINGLESS. THE BUGMEN OF TRIPSIS, WHOM YOU INCITED TO WAR AGAINST THEIR NEIGHBOURS IN ORDER TO FIND YOUR LOST PEN! THE -

'Enough, enough!' the Doctor shouted.

YES, replied the brain-being, IT IS ENOUGH. THANK YOU, DOCTOR.

The Doctor took a second to recover his composure. 'What do you mean?'

'LOVE, FEAR, GUILT. YES...BUT THE GREATEST OF THESE IS GUILT. YOU ARE NOT SO HARD-HEARTED AS YOU MAY SEEM, DOCTOR. I HAVE ENOUGH EMOTION TO POWER MY COMMUNICATOR NOW. THANK YOU.

The TARDIS crew members gazed at the scanner screen, and watched the brain-creature's spaceship taking off.

'You'd think he might have let us have *one* Bunnoid as a pet,' said Vicki. 'After all, we did save his life. Somehow.'

'Yes - how did we do that, Doctor?' asked Steven. 'My memories are sort of...confused.

The Doctor waved a hand dismissively. 'Oh, it's nothing for you to worry about, dear boy, nothing at all. And you, my dear -' he turned to Vicki - 'wouldn't really want a pet that could shoot you with its ears if you didn't give it enough lettuce, would you?'

'I suppose not.' Vicki suddenly giggled. 'I don't know why, Doctor, but I suddenly had this mental picture of you in a tutu!'

The Doctor affected to ignore this. Steven laughed. 'What a ridiculous idea, Princess!'

'Pardon?' said Vicki.

'Sorry.' Steven looked puzzled. 'For a moment I thought of you

as...Princess Vicki. How odd!

'You've been reading too many fairy stories, young man,' said the Doctor.

'Princess Vicki does sound a bit strange,' pondered the girl. 'If I ever became a princess, I think I'd have to change my name.'

'Well, that's not very likely to happen, now, is it, hmm?'

'No, I suppose not,' agreed Vicki. 'A tutu...'

The Doctor frowned. 'That, my child - in fact this whole adventure - is something I would thank you both to never mention ever again.'

And they never did.

Monsters

by Tara Samms

Mum blotted her sticky red lips on the tissue and smiled at herself in the mirror, looking herself up and down in her new outfit. You'd think she was going out on a date, not taking me to the doctor's for the fifth time in two weeks. Having fluffed up her hair, she swung round to face me, looking at me with disappointment as usual.

'You're looking so pale, Kirsty.' I didn't say anything back. 'We've got to get you well again, Kirsty. You know I'm doing this all for you. You know that.'

She looked just a little pained (she's so good at doing that), a little concerned, perhaps, at my silence, but not surprised. I'd told her a fortnight ago I would never speak to her again if she made me have the tests. She'd gone and done it anyway. I was asleep, of course, when they pushed the tubes and the cameras inside me, but I bet Mum was watching me as it happened. Looking at me with her lips pursed and her hands clasped in just the same way. The proud mother waiting in the wings while I performed for all those doctors. Kirsty, the amazing sickly child, baffling medical science once again as she lies back and lets the masked men open her up and take a good, long look inside.

'Get in the car, Kirsty.' Mum had become all disapproving. She knew she couldn't *force* me to talk. She'd seen me in moods like this before. Anyway, I'm almost thirteen now, I'm not a kid.

'And put your gloves on - it's cold outside,' she added.

I remember looking out at the frosty pavements and the white sky as we drove down to the surgery, and thinking how lucky David was. Wishing like anything I could get away with the things he does. Wishing I could have a life of my own.

David glanced furtively about the street and took a puff on the communal ciggie.

'Worried Mummy's going to catch you?' Nigel mocked. The rest of the gang laughed. 'Bunking off and smoking? Tut, tut! She'll smack your bony.'

'My old dear wouldn't dare lift a finger to me,' David said quickly. He took an extra-big drag, feeling his lungs crackle hot as he inhaled and tighten, terrified he would choke. He'd be dead if he choked. He'd never live it down.

In the end, he blew the smoke over Pete, and made *him* cough instead. That got a laugh from some of the others. Nigel watched David closely, a faint smile on his face.

David handed him the fag. 'Let's play pass the butt.'

'Pass the butt?' Nigel scoffed. 'That another one of your public-school games after lights out?'

A few stupid laughs from the others, but David ignored them. 'Everyone has a puff - but as soon as the fag goes out the person left holding it has to swallow it.'

Pete groaned, then laughed, and reached out for the ciggie straightaway. David relaxed a little as the gang looked on expectantly, accepting his idea. He guessed that, since about all this gang did was hang around street corners or mess about down the spinney, any new way of passing the time went down well. The weird guy in the duffel coat that David had noticed across the street had to be in the same boat. He had nothing better to do than watch the lads mucking about as he sat all alone on a bench outside the parade of shops.

The hard chair in the doctor's surgery had put Kirsty's bum to sleep. No release yet, though. Mum looked as if the doctor had just spat in her face.

'What do you mean, "negative"? ' she said.

Dr Rochford blinked at her through his thick glasses, and patiently said it all again. 'None of Kirsty's tests show anything unusual, Mrs Fisher. It's as straightforward as that.'

'Straightforward?' She pointed at Kirsty. 'How can you say that when she's in so much pain? Look at her! You think I can go about my business and just ignore it?'

Kirsty just stared sullenly down at her shoes. They were too small. She needed new ones.

Dr Rochford tried again. He was one of Kirsty's kinder doctors. 'Mrs Fisher, Kirsty's been through a lot just lately. I think perhaps we should just wait and see -'

'No. That's easy for you to say, but to just stand back and watch my own daughter live in such...' The tears welled up in Mum's eyes. Few could resist this little performance. Dr Rochford passed her a tissue and waited for her to compose herself again. 'It breaks my heart, it really does. She was such a lively child, she really was.'

She's done it again, thought Kirsty. Got the doctor's full attention while I sit here ignored, trying to remember if I've ever seen a

photograph of myself looking 'lively' over the last ten years. 'What about endometriosis?' Mum said suddenly.

Dr Rochford narrowed his eyes. Kirsty wondered for a moment if he'd been stumped, but then he turned to look at her again. 'Have you started your periods, Kirsty?'

Kirsty blushed furiously and looked down at her shoes.

'Oh yes, Doctor,' Mum said. 'Oh, back when she was eleven. The pains tend to get worse around twice a month, don't they, love?'

Kirsty looked at her mother's fat, tear-stained face, and wondered if she really understood anything about pain.

'Mrs Fisher, ovarian cysts in a girl Kirsty's age -'

It was no good; whatever Dr Rochford tried to say it was no good. Mum had been reading up again. She'd found a new scapegoat, a new pursuit to champion. 'Listen, Dr Rochford, surely some kind of dysmenorrhoea could explain...'

Kirsty drifted off. She couldn't be bothered to listen. It didn't matter how big the words were, the meaning was always the same. A needle, a scalpel and a tube. Kirsty decided that was all there was to medicine these days. Dr Rochford was still looking sceptical but Mum was only warming up.

Mum would win. She always did.

A cheer went up from the gang, followed by guffaws of laughter as Barney ended up with the fag butt. He stared ruefully down at the little orange stub, then swallowed the thing down whole and licked his lips.

'Got any more?' he asked, to the loudest laughs yet.

'That's a good point, Barney,' Nigel said. 'We're all out of cigs.'

The boys turned out their pockets for spare change. David had a fiver in his pocket, but he wasn't about to tell them that. He pulled out fifty pence, which was swiftly snatched by Nigel and added to the coppers in Pete's cupped hands.

'David,' Nigel instructed, 'go over to Golly's and get us eight ciggies.' Pete passed over the cash a little reluctantly. 'And nick us some food while you're there. Chocolate and crisps.'

David was getting tired of Nigel scoring points off him. He wasn't a new boy now: he'd been in the gang for three weeks. 'Why should I?'

Nigel smiled nastily. 'Because I say so. And because we're going on a mission tomorrow night.'

The other boys looked at each other with a kind of nervous excitement. David had heard about these 'missions' but there hadn't been one since he'd joined. 'Oh yeah?'

Nigel nodded. 'You know that old building in the spinney?'

'The mausoleum,' David said.

Nigel mimicked his voice. 'That's right, the *mausoleum*. Where the Duke of whatever's buried with his family.'

It wasn't a duke: just some man who'd put a lot of money into keeping the forest well tended. But David didn't see the point in arguing.

'What we gonna do?' Ben asked.

'We're gonna break in,' Nigel said. 'We're gonna wreck it.'

David stalked off to Golly's, uncomfortable at having to walk past the man in the duffel coat. He had the most stupid idea that the man had been somehow overhearing Nigel's stupid plan. The stupid plan he knew he'd end up going along with, just to fit in.

But the man wasn't staring any more. He was talking with some girl in a bomber jacket and black leggings. She had the word 'Ace!' on her back in naff writing, like something out of the 1980s. The jacket swamped her top half but her legs looked slim and shapely. The man was looking at her really seriously. Perhaps he was trying to pull her.

David pushed open the door to the newsagent's. There was old Mr Golieweski, his shrivelled old Polish prune face squinting into the light. David wondered how he kept going. The newsagent's had started opening all night these past few weeks; Nigel had bragged he'd gone in there at two in the morning once and threatened to call the police if he didn't sell him some booze - reckoned he knew Golly didn't have a licence to open late. According to Nigel, Golly had agreed to let the boys buy all the cheap fags and booze they wanted, as long as they kept quiet.

David reckoned that was a load of toss. Nigel was always shooting his mouth off.

Mr Golieweski peered down at him. 'What would you like, young boy?' he wheezed. David had been coming here all his life, and still Golly didn't know who he was. Good. That would make it easier to nick off him.

David counted his money out. 'Are ciggies still ten pee each?' The old man nodded. 'I'll have eight, then.'

As Golly turned away to pick out the cigs, David looked around to see what he could pinch. A couple of chocolate bars fell easily into his jacket pocket, but then the girl with the bomber jacket came in. He did up his jacket quickly, sweating a little. He could see now she was quite pretty, with a big friendly smile. Then she saw Golly hand him the

cigarettes and she frowned a little. David felt himself blush slightly.

The old man solemnly held out his hand for the money, and David passed it over.

'Bit dodgy, isn't it?' the girl said. She sounded like she was trying to be a bit hard. 'Selling those things to schoolkids?'

'I'm seventeen.' David lied, indignantly.

'Yeah, right,' the girl said. 'And I'm forty next week.'

Golly shrugged his drooping shoulders. 'I'm just trying to make a crust.'

David skulked off. 'Anyway, I guess that's your lookout,' he heard the girl tell Golly. 'If you don't mind, I've got some questions I'd like to ask you...'

When David came out, the man in the duffel coat was looking at him again. David noticed that Nigel and the others had crossed the road. Aware of their eyes on him, he spat on the pavement in front of the bench. The man didn't react.

'What are you staring at?' David challenged.

'The sign in that window,' the man said, his gaze not shifting. His voice was quiet, had an accent, a bit Scottish, maybe. 'Would you mind moving? You're in my way.'

David turned automatically to look at the faded scraps of card in the window. One stood out obviously as the sign in question. It was headed *Friends from the Sky!* and was advertising a meeting for some kind of flying-saucer-watching society.

The guy looked to be in his forties. He had a sad, thoughtful face, looked a little bit goofy. No threat.

'You a nut or something?' David said boldly.

'Something,' the man replied.

David felt himself flush again as Nigel and the gang walked over to join him. Seven of them, they surrounded the little man in his duffel coat. Still he went on staring at the sign.

'This guy giving you trouble, David?' Nigel asked.

David didn't say anything. There was the faintest of smiles on the man's face.

'Spare us some change, mate?' Barney tried, holding out his hand in front of the man's face. They were standing, the man was sitting, but David saw he wasn't in the least intimidated.

'I don't have any. It's with my friend, Ace.'

Laughter from the gang. 'Ace? What kind of name is that?' Pete said.

'That's a really "street" name,' Nigel enthused, deadpan. 'Come on, mate, you must have a bit of cash to spare us.'

'And what would you spend it on?' the man enquired.

'Drink and drugs,' quipped Barney.

'And sex,' added Pete, and they all laughed. Except the man.

'In such a hurry to grow old,' he said. 'Innocence is such a terrible burden to carry, isn't it?' The man frowned. 'And yet you feel so much heavier when you lose it.'

'These kids giving you a hard time, Professor?'

David spun round, saw the girl had come out of the newsagent's.

'It's "Ace",' Barney said, with a thumbs-up sign, and everyone started creasing up again, until the man on the bench stood up. Everyone took a step or two back, instinctively.

'No problem, Ace. Our young friends were just going about their business.'

'Professor?' smirked Nigel. 'She's your pupil, yeah? Very nice! Studying a bit of oral, is she?'

The others laughed, but David saw the Professor was staring at him, and he somehow felt he couldn't join in. He was glad when Nigel, still smirking, led the others away.

David could feel the Professor's eyes on him as they crossed the road again to huddle round the usual spot on the corner, divvying up the fags and crowing over the chocolate.

'What a bunch of creeps,' Ace said. 'Nice to see schoolkids haven't changed much in 2000 AD.'

'Oh, things are changing, Ace,' the Doctor said. 'Depend on it.'

Ace looked at him and jerked a thumb towards the newsagent. 'Anyway. He can't help us, in there. He admitted he was open most of the night, but since he can't see much further than his cash register...'

The Doctor didn't seem fazed by her news. 'Our Friends from the Sky', he read aloud, 'are coming for the chosen few. Make sense of the lights in the sky by coming to...' He squinted in irritation. 'What's the address, Ace?'

Ace peered at the sign: '666 Saddo Avenue,' she said. The Doctor only scowled. 'Come on, Professor. You haven't even told me why we're wandering round like this, yet.'

'I did,' he complained, drawling the words as if attempting to invent new vowel sounds. 'You just weren't listening.'

'So tell me again.'

'Lights in the sky and missing persons,' the Doctor said mysteriously.

'Well, wherever these missing people have ended up, I bet it's somewhere a lot more exciting than -'

The Doctor cut her off, suddenly sitting bolt upright. 'Tell me, Ace, this newsagent. Does he sell...food?'

'Er...yeah. Think so.'

He nodded urgently. 'Pies and pasties and the like?'

Ace felt the hairs standing up on the back of her neck. 'Yeah.'

The Doctor smiled broadly and handed her some coins. 'I'll have a cheese-and-onion pasty, please. Get something for yourself.' He glanced over at the gang of boys across the road. 'We've got a busy day tomorrow.'

David looked unhappily at his reflection in the bathroom mirror. He had a neon spot on his chin, and set about squeezing it with grubby fingers. The skin was red and raw by the time he'd finished, and he noticed Kirsty's cover stick on the cabinet. He rubbed it over the inflamed skin, but it was about six shades darker than the colour of his pasty face, and he swore.

Kirsty didn't know she was born, he thought moodily, looking at his reflection. She'd always been Mum's favourite, ever since she was little, been treated like she was made of glass. What time did Mum ever have for him? Since he was five he'd been left to get on with things all by himself at Goldington, packed away out of sight with the other boarders. He used to like coming back home for visits. Now he was back for good, it stank. Dad claimed he couldn't afford Goldington any more, so here he was. Billy No-Mates in his little sister's crappy comprehensive.

He rubbed the make-up into his skin. Maybe when the red had gone down a bit...

Two more years and he knew he'd be out of here, with nothing whatsoever to show for it. He wasn't going to achieve anything, and it was all Mum and Dad's fault. Moving him just as he was starting his GCSEs...Why should they get away with it? Nigel and his bunch of monkeys weren't real mates, he could see that. But everyone here knew each other already; they all had their little groups...It was pathetic. Nigel had only started talking to him after he'd learned David had had more detentions after a month than anyone else in the year. Nigel had liked that, despite David's posh accent. So here he was, the new kid with a point to prove to friends he didn't care about in the least. And Mum and Dad cared about him even less.

He jumped as Kirsty burst into the bathroom, falling to her knees in front of the toilet. A few seconds later she was sick.

'Oh, gross!' David cried as she honked away. 'You all right, Kirsty?'

She looked up at him, her long narrow face white as a sheet, bloodshot blue eyes welling up. 'Do I *look* all right?'

'What is it, something you ate?'

She looked down. He wondered if she was going to be sick again. She was weird, Kirsty. Lived in her own little world. He thought maybe he'd get to know her better now they were back living together, but she hardly said a word to him. Not that he even saw her that much - not even at school. She was always off sick.

Kirsty looked back at him. 'You're wearing my make-up, aren't you?' 'No.'

'It costs loads. Ask me if you want to use it.'

David sniffed at the toilet. 'That smells nice.'

'Shut up.'

He crouched down beside her, rested a hand on her shoulder.

'Isn't there anything the doctor can give you to make you better?'

Kirsty turned to him. 'A new mum?'

David stood up and rolled his eyes. 'Oh, not again, Kirsty.'

'No, David, listen, please -'

'Forget it.'

'Please! I think Mum's put something in my food again.'

'Just shut up. You're sick, that's all.'

'She wants me to be sick. It makes sure she gets attention, that's why she does it.'

'You're sick all right,' David shouted, pushing her over on to her side. 'Sick in the head, got it?'

'You've not been here, you don't know -'

'You should catch a ride with the UFOs when they come - you don't belong in the real world. Go and join the saucer people!'

'Shut up!'

'They're having a meeting tomorrow, I saw it in Golly's window. "All sick little creeps welcome", it said.'

Kirsty rolled away and hugged herself, crying against the bath. 'She's going to kill me!' she sobbed. 'She'll kill me one day and nobody cares!'

The door was pushed open, and Dad stood there, almost timidly in the doorway, staring at the scene in disbelief.

'What's going on here?' he asked, slowly.

'Nothing,' said David. Kirsty, sobbing silently, didn't contradict him.

Kirsty lay in bed until early afternoon, feeling as if a rat was in her stomach trying to claw its way out. It was cold, and she huddled under her duvet with her knees under her chin, staring at the stars on her

ceiling that glowed so brightly when the light was out. Now they were just slabs of sickly yellow plastic against the dimpled surface. Not like stars at all. But last night she had seen real lights in the sky - flashes and splashes of glowing colour in the darkness, like nothing she'd ever seen before. And she'd thought of what David had said about saucer people.

It was like a sign.

Eventually, she heard the click of the front door. Mum was doubtless marching off to the doctor's again with her fresh beaker of Kirsty-bile. She dressed in minutes and stole out of the house, into the freezing day. With any luck, Mum would think she was still sleeping off her sickness and wouldn't come looking till teatime.

Kirsty went to Golly's and, with a flood of relief, found the card David had been talking about. He hadn't just been having her on, and now she was just in time. There was a meeting of the Saucer People at 3.30 that afternoon.

She decided to buy a Lucozade to keep her going on the journey. Golly smiled at her as she slipped into the shop. 'Hello,' he said. 'Can I help you, my dear?'

'It's me, Mr Golly, Kirsty.' She smiled. 'You never remember me.'

'Forgive a foolish old man for not recognising a beautiful young lady sooner,' Golly wheezed. 'Will you be wanting a cigarette?'

He took out a cigarette and held it out to her. Kirsty's bashful smile turned to a puzzled frown. 'No, thank you.'

'Chocolate, then?' Golly asked.

Kirsty shook her head, her stomach lurching at the mere thought of sweets. 'No, just this drink, please.'

Just then a girl came through the door. She was about twenty or so, quite cool-looking in an old-fashioned sort of way. A bit of a tomboy. As Kirsty watched she breezed up to the counter and smiled at Golly. 'All right? I'll have one of those sandwiches.'

'Of course, Miss...Miss Ace, wasn't it?' said Golly. Then he gestured towards Kirsty. 'Would you like to join our little party?'

Miss Ace smiled at Kirsty. 'Looks a happening do, but I'm off to meet the Saucer People. Can't stop.'

Kirsty's heart leapt. 'I'm going there, too!' she breathed.

Ace looked at her. 'Oh yeah? Bunking off school, are you?'

Kirsty said nothing, and Ace smiled. 'Well, you'd better go there with me, I reckon. Let me keep an eye on you.' She winked at her as she handed Golly money for the sandwich. 'Don't want your teachers finding out, do you? I'm wicked at truancy. You'll never get caught.'

Kirsty found herself smiling back, and wished that her coat was

black, too, instead of being pale blue with a big stain on the front. She followed Ace to the doorway.

'Come by again, young woman,' Golly called, laughing heartily. 'Have that bar of chocolate.'

'Never miss a trick, do you?' Ace said, shaking her head.

'I'm just...'

'I know,' Ace said. 'Just trying to make a crust.'

'He's a bit full on, isn't he?' Ace remarked as Kirsty led her along the new housing estate on the outside of town. 'Who does he think he is, the Milky Bar Kid?'

Kirsty didn't know what she was on about. 'I've known him all my life,' she said.

'Oh.' Ace tried to take Kirsty's hand as they crossed the road, and Kirsty awkwardly pulled it back.

'Sorry,' said Ace. 'Been with the Doctor too long.'

'Doctor?' Kirsty looked at Ace with sudden suspicion.

'Mate of mine.' Perhaps Ace realised something was wrong, as she changed the subject. 'What are you going to see these flying-saucer nutters for, anyway? You shouldn't really be going strange places by yourself.'

'*You're* going there.'

'I'm bigger and uglier than you.' Ace pulled a stupid face as if to try to prove it.

It looked like it was getting dark already. Kirsty wondered if her mum would be home yet. Realised how nervous she was about what she would hear at this meeting.

'You think they're nutters, then? Not telling the truth?'

Ace smiled. 'We'll see.'

The mission was going ahead.

The gang traipsed along the road heading for the spinney. David didn't want to do this. He'd feigned illness at lunchtime, but he'd known that as an escape attempt it was useless. As Nigel said, no one wimped out on a mission. Now David found himself almost wishing his mum would magically appear and drag him away, ground him for a month for bunking off. Take things out of his hands.

Street lamps flickered on in alarm as night began to fall. As one, the gang of boys turned on to the footpath. David held the steam cloud of his breath as the mouth of the forest came into view and got larger, wider. Soon jagged conifer teeth were scraping at the boys' coats as

they pushed through, Nigel leading the way in silence.

Little daylight intruded on the spinney. The chilly wet air with its sharp, Christmas smell hurt David's lungs more than fag smoke. Twigs snapped and mud churned under their feet, but their noisy progress through the wood was strangely deadened by the tall trees all around.

'Is that a ghost I can hear or just the wind?' Steve wondered aloud in a spooky voice.

'Just the wind,' Pete said, and made a fart noise. The others laughed a little, but their voices rang hollow and flat.

'It's not a ghost,' said Nigel, suddenly stopping dead. 'How can it be?' He pointed ahead.

David peered into the gloom and realised the old stone of the mausoleum had crept into view.

'All the ghosts are in there,' Nigel went on, turning to him. Smiling. 'And they can't get out. Not yet.'

Kirsty felt a pang of disappointment upon entering the headquarters of Friends from the Sky. It was a living room, like her own. Only smaller. Still, she reminded herself, appearances were often deceptive. Now she sat perched on the edge of a hard sofa, listening intently to Group Leader Chester's words, while Ace sprawled back, not bothering to hide her boredom. There were chairs cramming the room, like the ones Kirsty sat on in assembly, and all but one of them was empty; a middle-aged woman sat crunching her way through the plate of free biscuits she'd taken from the coffee table.

Chester seemed not to mind his small audience. Balding, wearing a chunky cardigan like Kirsty's dad, he seemed a kind man, standing at the front and speaking with quiet confidence about how the aliens were coming from beyond the solar system.

'Soon now,' Chester said, his voice dropping to a whisper, 'very soon, they shall make contact with those who believe in them.'

'Yeah, right,' Ace said, yawning noisily. 'Call you up on the phone, will they?'

'They will take us away from all the misery on Earth to begin a new life among the stars.'

'All four of us?'

Chester cleared his throat, went a little red. 'We have many more members in our circle.'

'All washing their hair, are they?'

'Shut up!' whispered Kirsty, shooting Ace a dark look.

Chester smiled, but he looked very sad. 'We turn on our TVs every

day. What do we see? Death. Destruction.'

'Nutters,' Ace muttered.

'Our Friends have seen what our world is like. They picked up our TV signals.' He laughed, softly and knowingly. 'Cruelty, injustice, the ignorant masses of the Earth thrive on it, don't they?' The woman in the chair helped herself to another biscuit. Chester continued over her crumping. 'Our Friends couldn't believe what they saw so they've come to look for themselves, first-hand. You've seen the headlines - they've started taking people already. People who are so glad to be in their new world, they never want to come back.' He seemed so happy. Kirsty wished like anything she could be that happy herself.

'They want to help those of us who believe that things could really be different,' Chester went on.

Kirsty believed him. She remembered the light she'd seen, thought about all the missing people the police couldn't find. She wondered if these space people might believe her about her mum, and if they might take her away.

Chester looked round the room as if each chair held a warm friend before letting his eyes settle on Kirsty. 'They see us all, every one of us. See the love we are longing to share.'

'Right, that's it,' Ace said, jumping to her feet. 'We're leaving.'

Chester smiled again. 'We're *all* leaving. All of us who believe.'

'Yeah?' Ace marched up to him like he was some bully on a playground, not just a kind man wishing people would understand him. 'Well, I saw the way you looked at Kirsty. And I'll tell you what *I* believe.'

'Ace, don't.' Kirsty could feel her hopes slipping away.

'I believe you've made all this up. It's rubbish.'

'Your mind is closed, that's all,' said Chester, patiently.

'It's been opened by more things than you could ever believe, mate,' Ace stormed. 'That's how I *know* this is all crap. Crap made up by some lonely little pervert.'

'I think you should leave,' Chester said, white-faced. 'Our Friends detest violence and they won't come if...if they...Please. Just go, please.'

Kirsty held her head in panic. This was a disaster. She ran from the room and flung open the front door. It was night-time now. Wiping tears from her eyes, she glanced back and saw the woman still sitting there with the biscuits as if nothing had happened; saw Chester, sitting down and trembling on the sofa; and Ace, looking back at her, concerned, giving her the sort of look her mum gave her in front of the doctors.

Kirsty ran off, as fast as she could.

The old wooden door was finally giving way.

Nigel had brought a crowbar with him, nicked from his old man's hardware store. That had got them started. Then each of the boys had kicked it in turn, again and again, harder and harder as their patience dwindled and their determination increased. Nigel rattling the heavy handle, encouraging them, all the time, like a teacher proud of his pupils. Cold sweat, and breath puffing out like steam. Swearing and laughter. Rubber soles skidding against damp oak.

'It's giving. It's going to give,' Nigel said.

Why am I doing this? David thought as his bruised foot kicked out again. Pete joined him, grabbing hold of his shoulder to keep balanced as he kicked the door again himself. Teamwork. There was a splintering noise like giant bones breaking.

'That's it!' Nigel said. 'Now, out of the way. I'll finish it.'

Three charges at the door and he'd made good his promise. The door gave way, slid open a few inches, and they all cheered. Ben kicked it once more and it opened enough to let someone squeeze through.

'Now,' Nigel said, shining a torch up at his face, speaking in a spooky voice. Was that door keeping us out - or something else in?'

Nervous laughter.

'In you go, David,' Nigel said, shining the torch into his face.

'No way.'

'Do it.'

'Why?'

'Same reason you do everything else,' Nigel said, invisible behind the blaze of light scorching David's eyes. 'Because if you don't, I'll make you.'

The torch beam snapped off. David couldn't see a thing, but felt a shove in his back. 'In you go, Davey,' said Pete, shoving him forward.

He felt damp wood against his face. It felt colder *inside* the mausoleum than it did outside. Holding his breath, he pushed his body against the gap and started to squeeze through. For a terrible moment he thought they were going to close the door on him, leave him trapped inside. The stone and the door formed a jaw that held him for a moment, before someone pushed against him and he tumbled through into the blackness.

He fell against something made of stone and recoiled, crying out. He heard laughter from outside, then made out a dim silhouette as someone followed him through. He took a step back instinctively; then

he smelled BO and realised it was only Pete. Pete made a ghostly noise, a wail that felt too noisy, too stupid for this dark little chamber that had known only peace and the dark for so many years.

Unless - maybe Nigel was right. Maybe there were things in here waiting to get out. It was too dark. He strained to listen. That was something, there - no, *there*. Wasn't it? A scraping noise from inside?

'Where's that torch?' he said, angrily.

The others were squeezing through now, one by one, until he could hear all six of them breathing in a ragged chorus. The acoustics in here took the noise and made it fuller, fatter. Like they weren't just boys in here. Like they were something else.

The torch clicked back on, and Nigel balanced it on a sill beneath a small stained-glass window. David could see two large altars bearing stone caskets. Candlesticks. Shadows. Then a noise made David jump; he realised it was a heavy zip opening, saw Nigel crouched over his bag. Then he found himself staring at an array of chisels and mallets.

'What are you all waiting for?' Nigel said, hefting a large hammer, then passing it to Steve. 'Let's do it!'

The chisel was heavier than it looked. David glanced round again at the cold, cold stone walls.

Do it. Do it fast, and get out.

The mausoleum was quite small. It wouldn't take long to wreck it.

Kirsty leaned miserably against a street lamp. She was freezing cold and hungry despite the burn in her stomach. She kept wishing she'd taken some of the biscuits from the meeting. It didn't seem fair that the stupid fat woman would be leaving with Chester and the Friends while she didn't stand a chance.

She'd glimpsed that cow Ace trying to follow her as she ran, but there was no sign of her now. She was alone, on the edge of the estate. The thought of facing her mum again made her want to cry.

She never wanted to go home. Not ever.

Despondent, Kirsty trudged over to the parade of shops. The light in Golly's, as ever, was burning brightly. Kirsty shied away as the door opened and a woman and her kid walked out. Only when she was sure the shop was empty did she sidle inside.

'Hello again, young lady,' wheezed Golly as she closed the door behind her. 'You look tired and cold. You want that chocolate, now?'

'Yeah,' said Kirsty. 'I want a Flake, and a Galaxy.' She paused. 'Please.'

Golly's saggy face brightened in a smile. 'Help yourself, my dear.'

The boys ran wild. Whooping, calling out, bringing down their hammers again and again. David found himself strangely exhilarated. He'd expected dark fingers to grip him by the throat the second he brought down his chisel cautiously on the damp stone, but there had been nothing. He'd hit the casket again, harder. Still nothing.

Nigel had been winding them up, and with the relief of that realisation, with the fear melting away and meaning nothing, David found himself hitting the stone harder and harder. Only his arm, ringing with the impact, seemed to object. This place was dead, it didn't care what they did.

He heard a window break, and laughter like the broken glass. As the boys kept busy, their shadows danced on the walls and the high ceiling as if they were celebrating.

Then the torch went out. David heard it clatter to the floor.

'What was that?' said Ben, his voice hoarse. 'I felt something touch me.'

David strained to listen in the dark, the fear, still fresh, rising back up in him.

'Right,' came Nigel's voice. 'Which one of you is a bum bandit?'

'Pick up the torch.' That was Steve, ignoring Nigel for once. 'I heard something.'

'Me too,' said David. 'Kind of a scraping noise.'

Where was the door? He was totally disorientated. One of the others bumped into him and both of them shouted out. Nigel shushed them frantically.

'Christ, there *is* something in here.' Pete sounded like he was peeing his pants. 'There is, there *is*.'

'Are you all proud of what you've done here today?'

The boys shouted in fright. The voice that rang around the stone room was low, dry, accusing, *old*. David tried to join the others in running through the dark, but something bony and hard hooked his ankle and brought it up sharp. He twisted and fell with a wail. His palms stung as they slapped down hard against the stone floor. Someone trod on his foot - one of the others, getting away. He heard twigs snapping, feet skidding in mud, and felt like he was going to cry. The others were just leaving him here, alone, to face whatever this *thing* was -

The torch was switched back on with a quiet click. David stared in disbelief: it was the bloke in the duffel coat from the bench the night before. He was carrying an umbrella by the wrong end, pointing it at

David. The handle, a curved red wooden hook, was the only colour in the gloom of the mausoleum.

'The bloke - a professor, wasn't he? - didn't look happy. 'It wasn't my idea,' David said immediately.

'The man seemed to consider this. 'Wasn't it?'

'No, it was...' David paused. 'It was -'

'I'm known as the Doctor. I'm not the police. I'm not interested in names.' He smiled, slyly. 'David.'

David felt his heart sink. He could be in real trouble. The old duffer didn't react as David got carefully to his feet. Just stared at him. 'What are you going to do?' David asked.

'You must've asked yourself the same question,' the Doctor said casually. 'Must've asked yourself again and again on your way here. Worried about it, imagined it, what it would be like, how it would feel.'

David said nothing. He felt more afraid now than ever.

The Doctor looked at him a little harder. 'You almost didn't go through with it, did you? You didn't want to. You're not quite like the others, are you?' He turned his back on David, studying the damaged stone of one of the caskets. 'Or you weren't, anyway.'

'Well what about you?' David challenged. It was easier to raise his voice to the man's back. 'What are you doing here?'

The Doctor said nothing for some time. 'I was looking for monsters.' David stared at him. 'Why so surprised?' the Doctor asked him. 'Didn't you expect to find them here too? Evil always lurks in the shadows, doesn't it? In the dark?'

'Don't be stupid.' David gestured about him, uneasily. 'There aren't any monsters here.'

The Doctor let another moment pass. Then he said, 'Seems we've both reached a realisation.'

With that, he turned and squeezed back through the doorway with some effort.

David heard the man's footsteps slowly receding, felt relief mingling with alarm. To leave now would risk meeting the Doctor again, who might land him right in it, but to stay here alone...He looked round, surveying the room in the dim light of the torch, taking in the damage they'd done, at the shadows sneaking back in as the batteries wavered.

'There *aren't* any monsters in the dark!' David shouted. And of course, there was nobody and nothing around to disagree.

Kirsty had eaten the chocolate and drunk a cheap can of orangeade there in the newsagent's. Golly had let her sit down on a chair behind

the counter. He'd said she could pretend to help him serve the customers (like she still played stupid games!), as long as she stayed out of sight when people came in. He could get into trouble, otherwise.

The chocolate hadn't made her feel any better, and the orangeade was starting to churn in her tummy. She pulled a face as her guts twisted.

Golly peered at her. He looked concerned, and rested a hand on her shoulder. 'Are you feeling all right?'

Kirsty winced. 'Tummy-ache.' She felt dizzy, too.

Golly leaned closer. He smelled funny. 'Perhaps you should lie down and have a sleep.'

She blinked at him, blearily, then let her eyes rest closed a moment. When the bell rang to announce another customer opening the door, her whole body jerked as if she'd been sleeping. She stood up. Golly was now the other side of the counter, and Ace, red-faced and surly, was standing staring at her.

'Kirsty?'

'Go away.'

'Kirsty, I've been looking everywhere for you -'

'You've ruined everything for me, just go away!'

Ace looked hurt. 'You can't have believed all that stuff about Friends from outer space coming to take you away?'

'I think you should leave,' Golly said. He sounded cross.

'What are you doing here anyway, Kirsty?'

'Just leave me alone!'

Golly nodded. 'Leave here. Leave us be.'

Ace took an uncertain step towards the door.

Suddenly, Kirsty froze. Golly had his back to her, and she could see there was something wrong with the back of his bald head.

It was split, as if there was a deep cut in the skin. And, as he moved to open the door for Ace, the back of his head started to hang open. A thick flap of pink skin, like raw flesh waiting to bleed, had come loose, and under it was -

Kirsty screamed. Golly turned round, faster than she'd ever seen him move before. Ace tried to push past him to get to her, but Golly grabbed hold of her with one arm and threw her. *Threw* her, just like that, through the air and into the side of the counter.

Ace didn't get up again.

Kirsty saw Golly scuttle towards the door and flip the OPEN sign over to CLOSED, and she wanted to scream, but found she was too tired. Too tired to do anything but watch with sleepy eyes as Golly

started walking towards her.

'You left me behind.'

Nigel and the gang were huddled under the street light as usual, as if nothing had ever happened. David stared round at them in turn, still panting from his run back through the soaking forest. Only Nigel looked him in the eye.

'Too slow, weren't you?' Nigel said, smirking. 'Try to keep up next time.'

'Next time?' David echoed. 'In your dreams.'

'You let us down, Davey.'

David scowled. 'Piss off, Nigel.'

'Oh yeah? Want to leave, do you, poshy?'

David wished that the words he *wanted* to say would come to his lips. 'What about that bloke?' he said at last, avoiding the question.

Nigel shrugged. 'What about him?'

'He's a nutter. He knows it was us. He could grass us up.'

'He doesn't care.' Nigel lit up a fag. 'He walked straight past us, didn't raise an eyebrow at us.'

'What?' David felt a flush of relief. 'He didn't say *anything*?'

Nigel, still smug, shook his head and puffed out a cloud of smoke and steamy breath. 'Just tried to get into Golly's. But it's shut.'

'Shut?' David frowned. 'That's a first these days.'

'Looks like nobody's home,' Nigel went on. 'So we'll just have to try a little harder to get in, won't we?'

David couldn't believe what he was hearing. 'What?'

'We got interrupted back in the spinney. Mission not completed. Can't end the night on a downer, can we?'

'You want to break into Golly's? You're mental.'

'He's not in. How often does that happen? Never be a better time to nick ourselves all those ciggies, will there?'

'Get going, David,' Steve said.

'Forget it. No way.' David shook his head and backed away. Nigel grabbed hold of him by the hair and pulled hard. David cried out, fell to his knees. 'You couldn't keep up with us,' he hissed. 'You got to try harder.'

David wanted to squeal with the pain, but bit his tongue. 'I'm not getting done for doing a shop over.'

'You can either risk that,' Nigel hissed, 'or you can be *sure* of getting the crap kicked out of you by every one of us here. Right now.'

'I want to go home,' Kirsty said, sniffing.

She and Ace were locked in a cupboard under the stairs. A bare light bulb shone down on them and the mountain of old newspapers they sat on. It stank in here, like something had been to the toilet.

Kirsty was terrified. She'd woken up just as Golly had chucked Ace in here and said something about not being long. That he needed to get 'some things ready'.

She could die here.

'I want to go *home*,' Kirsty repeated, feeling fresh tears running down her face.

Ace was kneeling by the peeling door, rattling Kirsty's hairpin in the lock. 'You don't want to go home,' Ace said, with forced cheerfulness. 'You want to run away, remember? With people from outer space.'

Ace said it in a way that didn't make it sound stupid, or unbelievable. 'You don't believe in any of that,' Kirsty said, guardedly.

'I do. Just not from a loser like Chester.' Ace turned to face her and forced a smile. 'Listen. What is it you hate about your family so much?' Kirsty didn't say anything. Ace shrugged at her silence. 'I wanted to run away when I was your age. I hated my home, see. My mum and dad...' She became very quiet. 'Well. I knew they weren't really mine. They couldn't be, right? No way. They were well naff.'

Ace reminded Kirsty of one of her teachers, the supply one, who always tried to speak like her pupils but who was hopelessly out of touch with the language they used. Even so, Kirsty was good at recognising pain and she could see Ace wasn't just telling a story.

'So what did you do?' Kirsty whispered. 'When you wanted to run away?'

'I did it, didn't I?' Ace said, beaming, suddenly all cocky again. 'Did it in the end. Ran away so far they'd never catch me. Never.' She attacked the lock again. 'You can't believe adults. Not all the time. Running away *can* help, if you're doing it for the right reasons. Like you've just got to get away, you know, or you'll go mental.'

Kirsty found she had stopped crying. Ace wasn't trying to talk her out of it: she was actually being encouraging. Taking her seriously. It scared her for a moment, even more than wondering what Golly was going to do to them when he came back. She couldn't believe what she was hearing.

It meant that someone might believe her. She couldn't mess it up.

While Ace continued to pick at the lock, Kirsty took a deep, shuddering breath and let out at last the things her mum had done to her. The bright accusing eye of the bulb above her stared on,

unblinking, as she let everything tumble out at last.

David crept into the pale light of the hall beyond Golly's kitchen, holding his breath. The back door had been left open - surely someone had to be inside? Golly wouldn't shut up shop and leave the place unlocked, would he? Unless something had happened to him. He might be dead. Lying somewhere in the dark, a cold body waiting to be tripped over.

David gripped his hammer hard with both hands for reassurance. He knew this was the most stupid thing he'd ever done. If he got caught...

The walls of the narrow hallway seemed to be closing in on him. There was a funny smell in here, of old people, but mixed with something worse he didn't recognise. Then he saw a chink of light spilling from a doorway ahead. It seemed to make the gloom about him darker still: he couldn't see anything else. But he kept on - the actual shop part of the house had to be along here somewhere. But now he could hear crying. A girl crying, faintly. Jesus, someone *was* here. If he got caught now -

His foot pressed against something fleshy. There was a small, furry bulk in front of him.

He opened his mouth to shout but someone beat him to it. A cry of surprise rang out, there was the sound of something metal clattering to the floor, and David realised it was the Doctor in front of him, on all fours in front of the doorway, still in his duffel coat, sucking on squashed fingers and scrabbling for some kind of tool with his free hand.

Terrified, David dropped the hammer and turned to run, ignoring the Doctor urging him in a hoarse whisper to stay where he was. Suddenly the light in the hall cracked on, and he shut his eyes instinctively.

Then something grabbed his throat and squeezed. He opened his eyes but they didn't adjust to the light in time. He could hear something breathing. It sounded like an animal, but the fingers bruising his neck felt like a man's.

'No!' the Doctor shouted. 'Leave him alone!' He felt someone pulling ineffectually at his legs, but that only made the pressure build in his temples faster.

'I know you!' the Doctor shouted, agonised. 'A criminal. An alien. A killer!'

David was dropped to the floor. In a panic, he crawled forward on

his hands and knees, banging into a door - or a wall, he wasn't sure which - panting for breath. Vision began to return to him. And then all he could think was that he must've died after all, and that he was in hell.

Less than a yard away was a low mound of red, stinking meat, bristling with tufts of hair of every colour.

'This is what you do.' (The Doctor was talking to whatever had been waiting for them.)

Fleshy sacks like melted plastic, piled on top of each other. He was staring at eyes, children's eyes, their whites turned grey, tears that were yellow and smelly trickling along clammy folds.

'You've run till you can't run any more. Now you need to rest, need shelter, safety, a place to warm and nourish you.'

Little teeth were pressed into the meat pile like decorations; little nails and fingers were trying to scrabble a way out.

'So you've made an old man's home your charnel house. Preyed on the defenceless, the young, the lonely. You killed them - tricked them and killed them - to build -' his voice caught *'to build this. Your means of renewal. A flesh cocoon to make you strong.'*

It spoke while David stayed on all fours gibbering. It had taken the old man's voice, just as it had taken everything from everyone it could.

'I'm just trying to make a crust,' it said.

And David heard it stamp over to pick him up and kill him.

'No!' The Doctor threw himself against the thing - he must've, because David could hear the sounds of a struggle. But David couldn't look now. His eyes were screwed up tight. He was breathing through his mouth so he didn't have to smell anything, but it was too late: the smell was inside him, and he felt too sick to move.

The struggle sounded one-sided. The Doctor thumped into the wall, babbling about how he wouldn't let the thing take anyone else, that he'd die first, that the thing's own kind were hunting for it, that whatever it had done, whatever it wanted to do, the running was over now.

'Run, David!'

Even paralysed with fear and shock, David could tell from the Doctor's voice that he was beaten, and that the thing would have them both soon.

'Get out of here!' the Doctor croaked. 'You can do it. Run! Run away home, as fast as you can. Run!'

As the Doctor's voice died away into a gurgle, David finally did as he was told.

Just as Kirsty reached the end of her miserable story, the door sprang

open. Ace, perhaps more shocked that her lock-picking had actually worked than at Kirsty's mad babbling, smiled at her. Kirsty grinned with delight. The door opening just like that after she'd let out every dark little secret had to be a sign, didn't it? She felt hope.

'Nice one, Doctor,' Ace said, pocketing a tiny tool. Then she squeezed Kirsty's arm and led the way out into the hallway.

Kirsty could hear the sounds of a struggle coming from the room opposite.

'Rescue party,' muttered Ace, picking up a hammer from the floor, but Kirsty, swallowing hard, didn't know if she was talking about them or whoever was in the room. Ace moved towards the closed door, just as a figure threw it open and bolted, making Kirsty yelp, racing through into the room beyond, knocking things over in its haste to get away. It was too dark to see properly what it had been, but now Ace stormed through the doorway. Kirsty felt rooted to the spot. Everything was happening too fast.

'Oi, you!' Ace bellowed. 'Pick on someone your own size!' She charged into the filthy room with an angry yell.

Kirsty peeped through the doorway through a crack in her fingers. She saw Golly trying to strangle a little man, bashing his head against the wall. Beyond that she caught only a blur of pink; she turned away instinctively as Ace swung the hammer right down on Golly's head.

It hit him with a strange sound. As if Golly was only flesh on top, that he was stone beneath. There was a weird kind of shout, and a thump as something hit the floor. Then she heard Ace asking if the man - who had to be her friend, the Doctor - was all right.

But Kirsty didn't really hear what they were saying. A bright-blue light, neon and cold, like a spotlight sweeping in search of something so dark and clever it could hide itself anywhere, had suddenly started blazing through the kitchen windows.

David was vaguely aware of the jeers and laughter of Nigel and the others as he sprinted from Golly's. Then, when the blue light passed like a tidal wave overhead, he heard the mocking voices turn into yells of panic.

He didn't look back.

Kirsty jumped as Ace and her friend staggered into the hall behind her.

'What is that, Professor?' Ace shouted, shielding her eyes from the light.

'Company,' the Professor, or the Doctor, or whoever he was,

croaked, rubbing his red neck. 'That thing's own kind are coming to mete out their own brand of justice.'

Kirsty felt her stomach twist again. 'The Friends? The Friends in the sky?'

The Doctor looked at her sadly. 'They're no one's friends. Not on this world.'

'But you're wrong,' Kirsty began. 'They're coming to collect people who -'

'God, Kirsty, don't you get it?' Ace snapped. 'That's crap. Fairytale stuff! If you want to come with us you'll have to -'

Kirsty looked at her, wide-eyed. 'Come with you?'

Ace's face flushed and she looked at her feet. She seemed a lot younger somehow. 'Well, I thought...well, you want to run away, don't you?'

'Yes, I do,' said the Doctor, quickly. He'd started looking around as if expecting other horrors to come crawling out of the walls at any second. 'And we'd better start now. We mustn't be witness to this.'

Ace turned to him. 'But that bag of filth could get away if we leave!' she protested.

The Doctor shook his head and gestured at the light that seemed to be growing still brighter. 'No. There won't be any escape now. Not now they've found him.'

Then he started to flap his arms, ushering them away as a farmer did chickens in a yard.

They risked stopping to look back only when they were as far as the street lamp across the road.

Kirsty's mouth fell open in amazement. For a moment she thought she'd gone deaf: there was no noise, just a pressure in her ears as the light struck Golly's little newsagent's. It was as if sound had been deadened by the brightness, or simply overlooked by whatever was responsible. A tornado of what looked like TV static built up inside the bright-blue beam, then weird shapes, things that could've been vast leaves, dark and dead in a gust of wind, flapped down on to the house. They blurred and shifted until they were inside.

Kirsty jumped as the world went abruptly dark around her. The Doctor's hat had fallen over her eyes. It smelled fresh and clean.

'No peeping,' he muttered, but his voice seemed to be inside her head. 'Remember?'

Her ears still felt blocked, numb. When sound did come back to Kirsty it was with a scream she knew she would remember until the day

she died, a scream you didn't just hear but you *felt*. It seemed to go on for ever. She could never describe it, not really. Only the way the scream ended - the way it died away in her head, shifting and becoming a shriek of her own.

The hat was pulled away. For a while, all Kirsty could see was blackness. Then she realised that Ace was crushing her face against the thick padding of her bomber jacket, clutching her to her like a doll. She was safe again, and the screaming died away for real this time.

When she finally dared to pull herself away from Ace's coat and look around, there were no lights in the sky, and only rubble where Golly's shop had been.

David lay shivering in his bed. He was sure that if he lay there long enough he would wake up and find that none of it had really happened. The light was on. He could hear the sound of the TV downstairs, and Mum shouting at Dad in the kitchen about something or other. Everything was normal. They were probably worried about Kirsty staying out so late. They were used to his being out late, and weren't bothered.

The last few hours kept rolling and tumbling past his eyes. The mausoleum, the fleshy thing in the living room, what he'd thought was Golly...and the Doctor. The Doctor linked all of them together, somehow - not just because he'd been there, but just because of who he *was*. David knew it.

He wanted to tell someone about it all, wished he could tell his parents, that they'd believe him, or that they'd even bother to listen. Maybe tomorrow he could try to find Nigel and the two of them could talk. He still remembered Nigel screaming louder than anyone else. Like a girl.

David screwed up the sheets he lay on with shaking hands. He'd got away. Been given a second chance. He could do things differently, maybe.

Yeah. Tomorrow, he and Nigel would talk.

Ace stared after Kirsty, now just a little blue blob running headlong down the street. She turned to the Doctor, bathed in the flickering orange of the damaged street lamp.

'Why did she just go off like that? How could she go back to her mother after -'

'She's terrified,' said the Doctor simply, still staring at the empty space where the newsagent's had been. 'She's so very young.'

'But her old lady's a psycho!' Ace felt herself getting worked up again. 'Poisons her, then carts her off to doctor after doctor so she can be cut open and fiddled about with, just for the attention!'

'Munchausen by proxy,' the Doctor commented vaguely.

Ace frowned. 'Do what, Professor?'

He glanced at her. 'It's a medical condition. Young Kirsty's mother is very sick herself, then, I'm afraid.'

'That's all you can say?'

'That I'm afraid? Yes. That's why I just said it.'

Ace stared at him, doing his away-with-the-fairies act, the cold wind ruffling his hair as he stared into the night. Suddenly he cocked his head as if he'd caught a scent. A few moments later Ace could hear distant traffic, and the cry of a cat. It was as if life, normal, boring British life, was daring to creep back here now that the light, and the creatures that had travelled inside it, had gone.

'We should stay to help her.'

'We can't. There's no time, no time.'

'Why?' she asked plaintively, trying to keep calm. She wasn't sure she had the energy to pick a fight with the Doctor right now. 'What were those creatures in the light, anyway? And that thing that took the old guy's face?'

'Does it matter?' The Doctor sighed. 'Monsters. They were just monsters. Who they were isn't important. There's something else we must recognise.'

Ace stared at him. 'Professor?'

'The monsters...They used to know their place. In the shadows, in the crypts, roaming the moors...' He turned and started trudging morosely down the street. 'But they've grown wiser. Bolder. They've figured out that the first place people come looking for monsters is in those dark, empty places, and they don't want to be found. They don't want to be stopped. So they've come to join *us*. Come out into our cosy, well-lit world.' He turned up the collars on his duffel coat. 'They like it here.'

Ace felt the hairs rising on the back of her neck. 'So? We'll stop them. We'll stop all of them.'

The Doctor's face crumpled, his voice dropped lower. 'It's getting so hard...So hard to keep one step ahead.'

The Doctor stayed silent all the way to the TARDIS, hidden away deep in the spinney. Ace found the wind had been taken out of her sails. She couldn't think of a single word to say.

When the blue box left Earth, the lantern on its top glowed fiercely

in the blackness, on and off, on and off, on and off, until there was nothing of it left.

It was eleven o'clock when I got back home.

Mum was waiting up of course, in her big pink dressing gown that makes her look like Barbie's evil stepmum. She must've sent Dad and David off to bed.

So, as usual, it all ended up with Mum and me.

She wanted to deal with me herself, of course. She was so angry with me she couldn't speak. It was clear I'd been a terrible disappointment to her again.

Eventually, quietly and calmly, she asked me where I'd been. So I told her. I told her everything. About going to Chester's, and the things he'd said. About how I wanted to run away. About Golly, and being locked up, and meeting Ace and the Doctor. About Golly's burning down and lights in the sky and the Doctor and Ace looking after me...About how I'd wanted to go with them but that I was just too afraid, too scared of the unknown, and how I'd just had to run away from my only chance to leave her and this hole behind for ever.

She didn't say anything. Just stared at my face all tears and snot, as if trying to work out why some freaky fairy story of mine was getting me so worked up. She gave up after a while and went upstairs. I followed her. Went to my room.

I felt strangely calm for letting it all out like that. I put out the light and I wasn't even scared. Then I took down the little luminous stars that had been glowing on my ceiling since last Christmas. It just seemed the right thing to do. The light seemed too bright, it was hurting my eyes.

I slept, and slept easily. When I woke up I found it was ten o'clock. Mum had let me sleep in. I didn't understand why she was suddenly going easy on me so I tiptoed downstairs and found her in the lounge. She was dressed up, all smart again. Her lips were ruby red, her hair in curlers.

She got up and hugged me to her. I pulled away and looked up at her, confused. She said she'd been out to the shops that morning. There'd been a crowd gathered round the space where Golly's shop used to be, and talk of the blue lights in the sky, and newspaper people and TV crews, all there.

She looked at me, that look of dismay she always gives me in front of a doctor, and I looked around, convinced one or two would come out from hiding behind the curtains. But instead I noticed a small piece

of card, charred round the edges.

It was the card Chester had put in Golly's window for his club. You know, talking about the Friends from the Sky. She must've picked it up. And beside it was a business card, neat with small print I couldn't read.

'They're all talking about it,' Mum said. 'Everyone. It'll be on the news tonight.'

I looked at her, uncertainly. 'So you believe me?'

'Of course I believe you, Kirsty. Of course I do.' She studied me, as if looking for something. 'Now I've talked to these people myself.'

'People?'

Mum sat me down in the armchair. 'I saw the card on the floor and I went round to see that little man - Chester, is it? And I told him who I was, and he remembered you, you know.' She smiled, smugly. 'And there was someone with him, someone very important, who had heard about what had happened and had come to ask questions. Someone *very high up*.' I could see she was almost bursting with excitement. 'Someone who works alongside the PM! On very, very important, secret things.' She carried on, as if I was just a little girl and she was telling me fairy stories. 'And he was very interested in you. Very, *very* interested. I told him about the people you said you saw last night. You know, who took you away from the lights.' She cleared her throat. 'Well, we talked it all over, and he...Well, he says it often happens like this.'

I felt my whole body grow cold. 'What happens?'

'People believing funny things when there are lights in the sky. Funny memories. Getting ill. But it's OK.' She tried to hug me again. 'I told him all about your problems. This man knows people. High-up people. *Experts*. He wants to send you for some...special tests. To find out what's really been happening to you.' She smiled. 'It's for your own good, Kirsty.'

'But Mum, I -'

'He's calling later to arrange it, when he's finished asking people questions. But he was ever so excited when I told him about you, Kirsty. He should be calling any time now.' She smiled, patted my hand. 'That silly doctor hasn't been able to do a thing for you, has he? But maybe these special tests will get to the bottom of things. It'll be worth it, in the end.'

Her hand was dead weight on the back of my own as she crouched beside me, like a dog standing guard over its food.

Together, we waited for the phone to ring.

Special Occasions:

3: Better Watch Out: Better Take Care

by Steve Burford

The cold light of the winter's moon spilled down and illuminated the man and the woman. The woman was incongruously dressed in what appeared to be some kind of school uniform complete with straw boater. The man...well, he was just dressed incongruously. 'Honestly, Doctor,' began the woman, 'I don't see why we couldn't have simply...'

'Shhh!' said the Doctor, jabbing a finger urgently towards his lips and spread-eagling himself against the bricks of the wall they had both just scrambled over. 'Think ninja!'

Romana glared at him, but the Doctor was too busy scanning the garden that lay before them to even notice. 'Now!' he hissed, and struck out, weaving a crazy and unpredictable path across the lawn, covering the ground in enormously long strides that Romana couldn't hope to copy. 'Come on!' With a sigh, Romana marched away from the wall. By following a straight path and making no effort to conceal herself from anybody she was able to reach their destination long before the Doctor.

They stood to one side of the large country house. The Doctor pointed. 'French window,' he hissed.

'*Fenêtre*,' Romana responded promptly and with rather a smug smile. The truth about the Mona Lisa wasn't the only thing she'd learned during their recent escapade in Paris.

The Doctor pointed again. 'Lock.'

'*Piège*.'

'Very good.' He grinned, something he did rather well, particularly when a full moon was illuminating all of his teeth. 'And key.' He produced something flat and plastic almost out of thin air, applied it dexterously to the windows and opened them. Romana was still trying to work out the French for 'credit card' when a thickly robed arm reached from inside and pulled her roughly in. 'Don't dawdle!' hissed the Doctor.

The room was unoccupied and unlit, except for the warm, comforting glow of a log fire that had been banked down for the night. Apart from the odd crackle the only sound was the ceaseless ticking of a brass carriage clock on the mantelpiece as it counted away the few remaining minutes to midnight. The Doctor was striding to the

fireplace, apparently unperturbed by the lack of real light, as if he was intimately familiar with the layout of the room.

'All right, Doctor,' said Romana, in the 'enough-is-enough' tone of voice she'd decided was best suited for the occasion. 'We're here. Now would you mind telling me *why* we're here?'

The Doctor was fussing in the pockets of his unusual new coat, muttering to himself as he did so. 'No glass of sherry. Not even a mince pie. You'd think if anyone had a sense of tradition it would be him. Here, hold this, will you?' The last was addressed directly to Romana as he suddenly thrust something into her hands. For a second she thought it was some kind of animal and she almost screamed and dropped it before she felt the metal arms and realised what it was. She hooked the metal around her ears and went to look at herself in a nearby mirror. Yes, she thought, there was something to be said for a white beard. Perhaps with her next regeneration...

A sudden cry of triumph from the Doctor drew her attention back to him. 'You're not going to wear that, too, are you?' she said aghast. 'Not as well as...' Words failed her, so she simply gestured to the outfit the Doctor had adopted for that night's work. It wasn't that she objected to red velvet, and the white trim was just like something she might have worn herself once. But as for that hood...

'Of course not,' said the Doctor, all indignation. 'Now just be a good little helper and -' He broke off as if seeing her for the first time. 'Who gave you that?' he said, pointing to the false beard. 'That was a present from Prince Albert. Just you look after it,' and he turned back to his work.

Romana sighed yet again, and waited patiently. Her eyes wandered around the room, coming to rest on a small lacquered table displaying two framed photographs. She moved over to inspect them. From behind her came a muffled thump followed by a not-so-muffled exclamation of pain. She glanced back to see the Doctor sucking his thumb. She could have made a comment about the inevitability of injury when attempting to do what the Doctor was attempting to do with just a shoe. Wisely, she did not. She turned back to the photographs.

The first was a head-and-shoulders shot of a woman, smiling into the camera with the comfortable confidence of middle age. She was, Romana decided, the type of woman whom a certain type of a man would describe as 'handsome'. The second picture was a full-length shot of a man and a second woman. He was standing proudly and ramrod straight, dressed in full military uniform. The woman was dressed in

something distressingly pink with matching hat, and appeared to be pinning something on to the man's chest. A difficult task, Romana thought, given the profusion of ribbons and medals already there. She turned back to the Doctor, who was busy making more muffled thumping noises at the mantelpiece. 'Is this him?' she asked.

'Yes,' said the Doctor, intent on his task.

Romana nodded and replaced the photograph. 'I thought so.'

The Doctor looked up. 'Did you? Why?'

Romana gestured expansively. 'This. The garden. The house. Its contents. Everything. They all seem the sort of things the man in that photograph would gather around himself.'

'Including a very old, very hard, very impenetrable oak mantelpiece,' the Doctor said, regarding the same bitterly. He returned to his work.

Romana walked over and stood close by him. 'Are you friends?' she asked.

The Doctor stopped. 'Friends?'

'Yes,' said Romana, unfazed by his irritation. 'Friends. Are you?'

The Doctor blustered. 'Well, I mean, "friends". It's such a vague term. So relative. So malleable. So capable of infinite interpretation. So...'

'So are you?'

'Yes!' The Doctor flinched at his own sudden volume, put his finger to his lips and repeated his answer as a whisper: 'Yes.'

Romana nodded. 'I thought so.'

The Doctor turned back to the mantelpiece, turned back to Romana, went to speak, thought better of it and turned back to the mantelpiece. Then he turned back to Romana again. 'Why?'

Romana gestured expansively a second time. 'This,' she said again. 'And the way you talk of him. And the way you've written about him in your diaries,' she added.

'You've been reading my diaries!'

'You told me to.'

'I told you to always have something sensational to read on long journeys. I didn't tell you to start quoting from my innermost thoughts and feelings as put down on paper.'

'As *occasionally* put down on paper. You're not exactly thorough.'

'I keep very busy. Besides -' the Doctor tapped his head - 'it's all up here.'

'Like the TARDIS dematerialisation protocols?'

'Yes.'

'And the transdimensional induction routines?'

'Yes.'

'And the exact location of your second-favourite scarf?'

'Yes!'

'You forgot all of those things last week.'

The Doctor opened his mouth for an instant retort. Unfortunately, it wasn't there. '*L'esprit de l'escalier*,' he said finally.

'The spirit of the staircase?' Romana translated uncertainly.

'It's what the French call that feeling when you think of a witty retort five minutes after the time you should have made it.'

'Oh.'

'So be prepared.' The Doctor returned to his task leaving Romana with the increasingly familiar feeling that although, strictly speaking, she had clearly won their little verbal altercation, the real victory had, nevertheless, been the Doctor's.

Five minutes later, the two of them were making their way back across the lawn. 'Now will you explain to me, Doctor, what all this has been about?' Romana asked plaintively, her voice slightly muffled by all the cotton wool around her mouth.

'Yes, yes,' said the Doctor. 'In the TARDIS. For the moment I just want you to repeat after me, "Ho! Ho! Ho!" Come on! "Ho! Ho! Ho!"'

Back in the room they had just left the clock ticked on, the fire burned away and a gaudily coloured sock containing two oranges and a walnut swung gently from a nail knocked into the mantelpiece by the Doctor's shoe. Attached to it was a card, just visible in the fire's dying light. 'Merry Christmas, Brigadier,' it said.

Face Value

by Steve Lyons

This story takes place after one version of *The Ultimate Adventure*.

'Ladies, gentlemen and Alpha Centaurians, we bid you a warm welcome to the galaxy's most relaxing holiday resort. Please follow the pink arrows out of the landing bay and assemble in our reception area, where our Happy Campers will greet you. You will recognise our Happy Campers by their colourful attire and by their smiles. They are here to ensure that your stay at Leisureworld is a pleasant one.

'Once you have been shown to your sleeping cubicles, please check your compu-screen for this week's events. You may be interested in our talent competition on Monday evening, or in Thursday's Glamorous Life Form Parade - and you youngsters will want to check out show times at the Captain Millennium Space Theatre.

'As you explore the Leisureworld dome, you will be struck by the sights outside. Krennos offers the most exotic plant life in the cosmos, forever bathed in the calming light of two moons. We have provided observation lounges from which you can enjoy this unique spectacle. However, please remember that the dome exists for your protection.

'You must not be tempted to leave it.'

'There you are!' proclaimed the Doctor. He swept a garishly clad arm wide, to encompass the length of the transparent dome in the mid-distance. Then he placed his hands on his hips and regarded his three companions smugly, as if expecting to be applauded. 'Leisureworld! I told you we were on the right planet, didn't I? Well, didn't I?'

'Yes, Doctor,' sighed Crystal. 'You did.' Reclaiming a foot from the mud, she inspected the damage to her shoe. Zog produced a cloth from somewhere beneath his brown and grey fur, and hurried to assist her. 'Oh, what's a few hundred yards between friends?'

Jason grinned, as tirelessly cheerful as ever. 'A few hundred yards across swampland!'

'It's as if this horrible mud *wants* to drag us down,' complained Crystal.

'I did warn you, Cry: when the Doctor takes you on holiday, it's best to dress for the dark side of Skaro.'

The Doctor looked wounded. 'The TARDIS is getting on a bit, you know. You can't expect the old girl to be a hundred-per-cent reliable.'

'Oh, Zog!' groaned Crystal, as the diminutive Aldeberian managed to prise her shoe free and began to polish it. 'Will you stop fussing around me?'

The Doctor drew Jason to one side, conspiratorially. 'Actually, I think there may be a small problem. The TARDIS's internal dimensions have been a little odd recently: rooms appearing where they shouldn't, that sort of thing. Have you noticed anything?' Jason shook his head. 'Last night, that young lady over there almost wandered into your room by mistake. It was fortunate I spotted her in time.'

Jason turned away quickly, and changed the subject. 'What are we doing here, Doctor?'

'Investigating. Leisureworld is reputed to be the most relaxing place in the galaxy, and yet the atmospheric conditions on Krennos are similar to those on Earth. I can't abide a mystery!'

Jason started as a flock of small, leathery birds screeched across the sky, their spindly forms silhouetted against one of the full moons. 'Well, I can't see anything "relaxing".'

'And, of course,' the Doctor continued, 'there's the small matter of the disappearances.'

'Now that, I *can* understand.'

'Oh, not from here. Most people return from Leisureworld quite happy and contented. Then, a couple of weeks later, they get the urge to go...Oh, what is it, Zog?'

Zog was pulling at the hem of the Doctor's multicoloured coat, jabbering in his high-pitched voice. 'Slow down, slow down,' said the Doctor impatiently. 'I can't -'

Zog waved Crystal's muddy shoe beneath the Doctor's nose, excitedly.

'Crys!' cried Jason.

A globe of light shone through the trees. It hung in midair, unsupported. Too large for a torch beam. And it pulsed, in a hypnotic rhythm.

Crystal stumbled towards it, heedless of the thick shrubs in her path. Jason raced after her, roots clutching at his feet and slowing him down.

'Don't look at the light!' the Doctor shouted after him. Jason already knew that instinctively - so he was surprised to realise that he was staring right at it. He wrenched his gaze away and, for a moment, could see only the dark, circular imprint of the light on his retinas.

Then something tripped him, and he pitched headfirst into the wet

mud.

He tried to stand, but something held his ankle. He rolled on to his back and saw it: a brown, thorny vine. He pulled it free, cast it aside and watched in disbelief as it reared up like a snake and struck again, wrapping itself around his leg.

At least the Doctor had reached Crystal. He planted himself in her path, cutting off her view of the light. He placed his hands on her shoulders and stared into her eyes with determination. 'Resist it, Crystal. It's trying to enslave you. You must not look at it!'

Crystal blinked, dazedly. 'Doctor...?'

Jason planted his free foot in the mud and pulled with all his strength. The clinging vine was uprooted; it flopped to the ground, dead, as Jason stumbled to the Doctor's side. 'There's something going on here,' he warned. 'The plants...'

The Doctor nodded brusquely, his expression grave. 'I think we'd better run.'

A yellow flower hissed at Zog, who shrieked and buried his head in the Doctor's coat.

Warm sweat crawled down the Manager's face. He reached for his pills, even though he had taken one only an hour ago. His hands trembled and he couldn't open the capsule.

'Well?' said Susie, in her usual acerbic tone. 'Are you going to do something or not?'

'Th-three people, you say?'

'Four life forms,' she reminded him, with a laboured sigh. 'Outside the dome?'

'Outside the dome.'

He succeeded in opening the capsule, but dropped it. White pills skittered across his desk, and the Manager felt a familiar hot glow in his cheeks.

'Look,' said Susie, exasperatedly, 'people have been disappearing from Leisureworld for weeks; that's why we were scanning outside in the first place. Now we've found something, it would be nice if we investigated it. Are you going to let me do that, or not?'

'I need to think about it,' blustered the Manager. 'This is highly irregular.'

'There's no time for that. Just give the order, you fat idiot!'

The Manager's voice rose an octave. 'I beg your pardon?'

'They could die out there, before we've had a chance to find out -'

'I hope you don't talk to our residents like that!'

Susie gritted her teeth. 'That isn't important now. Will you just -'

'I think your attitude is extremely important, young lady. We have fifty new residents today, and it is imperative that our staff make the right impression.'

'That's it!' snapped Susie. 'I should have known better than to expect you to make an actual decision for once. I'm sending two people out there.'

The Manager shook with rage. He levered himself to his feet, but his legs felt weak, so he dropped straight back into his chair. 'I give the orders around here. Do you have a problem with that, Susie?'

'I don't think you can do the job. No offence, but you just have a pathetic personality.'

'I know,' sighed the Manager. He began to scoop the pills back into their capsule, but one of them found his mouth instead.

The dome was tantalisingly close. Crystal could see a good number of Krennos's spindly birds, perching on top of it. She tightened her grip on Jason's hand and renewed her efforts to fight her way through the mud and the undergrowth. The Doctor was several steps ahead, stopping every so often to give them an impatient look as he let them catch up. Zog scampered between the Time Lord and his companions without apparent difficulty.

Without warning, Jason fell over. Crystal screamed.

'It's happening again,' cried Jason, as he strained to pull his left leg from the mud that had claimed it halfway up to the knee.

Crystal felt it, too: something reaching for her, dragging her down. She squealed, kicked out, tried to pull both feet from the mud at once, lost her balance and was only saved from falling by the Doctor.

'Come on,' he urged, grabbing one of Jason's arms and motioning to Crystal to take the other. 'Quick, before it can get too good a hold.'

Jason's leg had almost disappeared now. Crystal did as the Doctor had said, and slowly, inexorably, they began to pull their companion free. 'That's it!' grunted the Doctor. 'That's it, we're beating it!'

Zog shrieked a warning, and the Doctor leapt aside as a beautiful flowering plant swiped a prickly branch at his face. 'Doctor, look!'

Crystal pointed to where a hatch had opened in the side of the dome and something had emerged: a flying platform, ringed by a low rail. Standing on it were two humanoid figures, each clad in white trousers and a yellow-and-pink-striped jacket. But Crystal's attention was taken by their yellow, globe-shaped heads. Their simple faces consisted only of circular black eyes and thin mouths set into broad

smiles.

'Over here!' cried the Doctor, gesticulating wildly as he struggled towards the oncoming vehicle. Crystal helped Jason up and tried to follow, but something took hold of one foot and then the other. She panicked, tried to free herself and succeeded only in falling to her knees, burying both her arms up to the elbows. For the longest time, she stared helplessly at the surface of the swamp, and felt herself sinking into it.

Then, over her frantic screams, she heard the hum of an engine and realised that the platform was hovering by her shoulder. Strong, familiar hands took her armpits and pulled. The engine protested as it shifted into reverse, and Crystal was hauled to safety inch by painful inch.

The swamp relinquished its grip, at last, and she collapsed on top of Jason as the platform lurched upwards and backwards with renewed speed. 'Th-thank you,' she gasped. 'Thank -' The words froze in her throat as the moon face of one of her rescuers loomed over her.

A helmet, she realised, feeling foolish and willing her heart to slow down. Of course, he was wearing a head-concealing helmet. She smiled weakly as he helped her to stand and she took in her surroundings for the first time.

The other smiley-faced man stood at a control panel, steering the platform with a joystick. They appeared to be heading towards the dome. Jason lay on his back, breathing heavily, while Zog capered about agitatedly. Somebody was missing.

'Doctor,' gasped Crystal. 'Where's the Doctor?'

Looking back, she saw the answer immediately. She almost froze with horror at the sight of him, flailing his arms as his head disappeared beneath the mud. And they were flying away from him. 'Our friend's still out there,' she cried. 'You can't leave him!'

'Too risky,' grunted the pilot. 'We're almost out of power.'

'No!' Crystal didn't think, she just acted on instinct. She seized the joystick and pulled it, spinning the platform around and sending it into a dangerous bank. For a joyous, hopeful second, it sped towards the struggling Doctor.

Then the trees themselves reached out, took hold of the flimsy vehicle and tore it apart.

Crystal threw up her hands as twigs clawed and scratched at her face and hair. She felt the platform sliding out from beneath her and then she was in the swamp again, fending off attacks from all sides, blinded, and it was all she could do to take Jason's proffered hand and let him lead her through it all.

They stumbled on to a clean, plastic surface, and a hatch whined shut behind them. The air took on the stale scent of recycled oxygen. They had reached the dome. Crystal's muscles gave out and she collapsed, lungs heaving. Jason was beside her, as always, and Zog and their two rescuers had also made it.

The Doctor was nowhere to be seen.

'Don't cry, Crys. I've seen the Doctor get out of worse scrapes than this.'

"Doctor". The Manager failed to control his trembling voice. "They keep talking about this "Doctor". You don't think they mean...*the* Doctor?"

Gerry shrugged. 'I only saw the other bloke for a minute. He didn't look like him.'

'And Zog,' came the voice of the female prisoner, rendered tinny by the monitor's speakers. *'Oh, Jason, what have they done with poor little Zog?'*

'He'll be OK - they haven't mistreated us, have they?'

'Apart from locking us up in here, you mean?'

'The Doctor will rescue us, Crys. You'll see.'

'Of course,' said Susie, as if enjoying the Manager's discomfort, 'we have heard he can change his appearance.'

'Does it matter?' said Gerry. 'There's no way he could have survived out there. Ken and I were lucky to hold on to our own lives!'

'Serves you right,' muttered Susie.

'You what?'

'For volunteering to go outside just because you fancy me. I'm not impressed, you know.'

Gerry shot her a look that could have been anger or embarrassment, but which, thanks to his smiling helmet, just looked odd.

'Jason?'

'Yes, Crys?'

'Can we do.. you know...what we do best? I think I'd feel less scared if we did.'

'Well, the Doctor isn't here to disapprove, is he?'

The Manager cut the audio feed to the security cell, suddenly aware that breathing wasn't as easy as it used to be. 'That's it!' he stormed. He wanted to be assertive, but he sounded like a petulant child. 'I want them released. Give them the run of the resort. Make them welcome. If they're the Doctor's companions, I don't want them to suspect what's happening here.'

'So, how do we explain having thrown them into a cell?' asked Susie.

'Think of something,' ordered the Manager, flustered. He faltered,

as he saw what was happening on his monitor screen. 'What the hell are they doing in there?'

Intrigued, Susie moved around his desk and peered over his shoulder.

'They're singing,' she said.

Jason and Crystal took their positions on each side of the door, as keys jangled in the lock. As the first of two Happy Campers peered into the room, Jason brought the metal tea tray down hard. It clanged against the yellow helmet and vibrated out of his hands.

'No, Jason,' groaned Crystal, 'not the head!'

'Oh yeah,' he said, sheepishly.

The Happy Campers fell to their knees. 'Don't hit us,' they wailed in unison. 'We don't mean any harm.'

Jason and Crystal exchanged a bemused glance. 'We're...not going to hurt you,' said Jason, retrieving the tray and brandishing it uncertainly.

'But you did lock us up!' Crystal reproached them.

'It was a mistake,' bleated one of the Campers.

'We thought you were...' began the other.

'That is, we...'

'Another group. We thought you were the group that booked a...a Seven-Day "Jailbreak" theme holiday!'

'Brilliant! I mean, yes. Yes, we did.'

The first Happy Camper climbed to his feet, tentatively. 'Your holiday in Leisureworld will, of course, come free. To compensate for the inconvenience.'

'We'll even get your furry friend out of Pet's Corner. He can stay with you.'

'We're very sorry. So dreadfully sorry.'

They had found a sonic shower and vibrated the plastered mud from their clothes. Now, Jason and Crystal sat at a table in the Hawaiian Ballroom, once again visibly the dapper eighteenth-century French nobleman and the stylish nightclub singer. Zog lay at their feet, curled into a ball. On a stage at one end of the rectangular room, six Happy Campers had linked arms and were dancing from side to side, singing 'Happy Days Are Here Again'.

'They're out of key,' complained Crystal, shouting to be heard.

Jason grinned. 'You should go up there and show them how it's done.'

'I'm being serious. The staff here are hopeless. They don't know

how anything works in that electronic gym, and the swimming pool's closed altogether. Then there was all that hoo-hah with the rubber shark and the indoor boating lake.'

'And the slasher movie in the Captain Millennium Space Theatre.'

'And as for the food...'

'Perhaps it's the first week of the season.'

'No,' said Crystal. 'There's something going on here, I know there is.'

A Happy Camper appeared at Jason's shoulder, and coughed politely. 'The Marquis de Saint Evremonde D'Isigny de la Tour?'

'That's right,' beamed Jason. 'Jason for short.'

'Oh? Exactly how is "Jason" short for all that?'

'You'll have to ask the Doctor.'

The Happy Camper seemed to flinch at the Doctor's name, then composed himself. 'Your sleeping cubicle has been prepared, sir. If you and the young lady and the...um, thing down there would care to accompany me?'

The Campers on stage concluded their song. But one of them fell over, and brought the whole line crashing down on top of him.

The lights had dimmed, to create an artificial night within the Leisureworld dome. The moons of Krennos shone into the observation lounges. Music no longer bled from the ballrooms, nor did the clinking of glasses sound in the bars. Even the hysterical remonstrations of stressed parents had been stilled, although that had taken slightly longer.

From the area of the closed swimming pool came a shrill, terrified scream.

Zog squeezed himself out of a ventilation grille and scampered along the corridor.

In the main security office, an alarm went off. The Manager leapt to his feet, spilled cold coffee into his crotch and fumbled with the monitor controls.

'I knew it,' he moaned to himself. 'I knew they'd cause trouble. It's like they can't help it!'

He reached for the communications console and issued a dome-wide alert.

The words crackled into Gerry's ears, as he stood guard at the swimming-pool entrance. He felt his heart sinking.

'What is it?' asked Susie. She'd have known, if only she had deigned

to wear her own helmet - but she had told the Manager some time ago that she wasn't prepared to look stupid for his sake. Anyway, Gerry liked to see her long, black hair - and even her face, when it wasn't scowling.

'An intruder in the pool area,' he recapped.

'What? How?'

'Through one of the grilles. It's that animal thing the Doctor's friends brought with them. We're supposed to find it and...' He hesitated, not wanting to speak the words.

Zog raced past them, waving his front paws in the air and shrieking.

'I get the idea,' said Susie. She reached down to her belt and pulled off the white, plastic, box-shaped object that outsiders were supposed to think was a radio. She flipped it open and it clacked into a new configuration: that of a gun.

'It's seen too much,' the Manager's frantic voice buzzed inside Gerry's helmet. 'Kill it. Just kill the damn thing now!'

Time and again, the Doctor's fingers slipped through Crystal's. Time and again, he was dragged beneath the soft earth. Each time, his screams echoed in her mind, as he died in front of her and she couldn't do a thing to help him.

What probably woke her was the realisation that his face kept changing. She saw a stocky arrogant man in a colourful costume, a white-haired, ageing dandy and a tall, imposing figure in a light suit and Greenpeace T-shirt. In the end, she dragged herself out of the dream, just to think clearly and be sure that she hadn't forgotten what he looked like.

Jason's side of the bed was empty. Crystal should have been more concerned about that, should have felt more than a tiny pang of loneliness. But she was too tired. He had probably gone off to explore, or to do something terribly heroic, leaving her behind because he thought he was protecting her. Any other time, she would have followed him.

She became aware of a low-pitched humming sound. She rolled on to her back, though it hardly seemed worth the effort, and tracked its source to the plastic light fitting on the ceiling. Odd, she thought. She should investigate that more closely. Tomorrow, perhaps.

Right now, she felt far too lethargic. Her eyelids had closed without her realising it.

She sank back into a sleep, which, this time, was mercifully free of dreams.

The cubicle door clicked softly open, but Crystal didn't hear a thing.

Jason was still trying to find a lavatory when Zog careened around a corner and ran into him, his head impacting at an unfortunate height. Jason fell over, and Zog danced up and down beside him, shrieking.

'What are you doing here?' gasped Jason. 'I can't understand what you're saying. You'll have to show me.'

Zog pointed a paw at Jason's head, two claws outstretched.

'Men with guns?'

Zog mimed a circular shape around his own head, then stretched his twisted lips into a macabre grin.

'*Happy Campers* with guns?'

Two Happy Campers appeared at the corner. They had guns.

'Ah. I think I see now.' Jason got to his feet, his hands raised, as Zog took shelter behind his leg. 'We can talk about this, can't we?'

One of the Happy Campers aimed his gun at Jason's head, and fired - then cried out as, apparently, the weapon's recoil surprised him. The gun shot a laser beam into the ceiling, then clattered to the floor. The Happy Camper blew on his fingers, ruefully.

'Ooh, are you all right?' asked his colleague, concerned.

Jason took Zog's paw and ran.

'Go after them!' screamed the Manager into the communications console. 'Kill them. Kill them both! And, while you're at it, kill the girl, too!'

He fell back into his chair. Its pedestal snapped beneath his weight, and he landed heavily on the floor. He felt a sharp pain in his chest. 'I won't let this happen,' he swore to himself. 'It won't happen. The Doctor's dead. I just need to get rid of those annoying companions of his and I can get everything back to normal.'

He wanted to know what was happening, but he was too weak to stand up.

'I hate this part of the job,' grumbled Gerry, as he and Susie searched for the fugitives.

'I know,' said Susie, sounding more compassionate than Gerry had ever heard her. 'But it has to be done, doesn't it? We can't afford to be exposed.'

'Sometimes, I think we should be. I just want this pretence to end.'

'And do you think I'd still want to sleep with you if you went back to the way you were?'

Gerry's jaw dropped. He was glad that Susie couldn't see his face.

But he spoiled it by betraying his astonishment in his voice. 'You...you mean you...I...?'

'Of course I do. I'm not going to, though.'

'W-w-w-w-w-?' considered Gerry.

'Unlike you,' said Susie - well back to her old self now - 'I have the force of mind to control my hormones. I'll make my own decisions, thank you. No chemical imbalance in this flimsy little body will make them for me.'

'But,' said Gerry, plaintively, 'isn't that the point of *having* the bodies?'

The Manager's screen showed the inside of Crystal's cubicle. As he watched, somebody switched on the main light, washing out the picture's colours. He saw the girl's face clearly as she slept on, under the influence of the enervator, blissfully unaware.

He could just leave her, of course, let her be processed like the other tourists. But he'd spared her once already, and look what had come of it. The only safe way to deal with friends of the Doctor was to destroy them, once and for all.

On the screen, two Happy Campers walked into view. Two of the Manager's best men. Two of the least squeamish. 'Do it, do it!' he willed them, under his breath.

They did it. Twin laser beams blasted holes in Crystal's head. Death was instantaneous; she wouldn't have felt a thing. The sight was sickening, and the Manager turned away from his monitor quickly, fighting to keep his medicine down.

He tried to steady his breathing. He wasn't out of danger yet.

He spoke into the communications console, breathlessly. 'The girl has been eliminated. You must track down the boy and the animal and destroy them, too.' A pleading note entered his voice as he added, 'It's the only way I'm going to get any peace!'

He leaned against his desk - his chair lay in a mangled heap behind it - and sighed heavily. He felt a familiar craving and reached for his pills, wishing that this useless, defective body of his had just had the right mixture of elements in it in the first place.

There was somebody behind him.

He turned and met the suspicious glare of the mud-spattered Doctor.

He burst into tears.

'OK, you're right, I admit it,' wept the Manager. 'We're Chameleons and we've been kidnapping everyone who comes here and stealing their

identities and I'm very, very sorry.'

'You're what?'

He recoiled from the Doctor's frown. 'You did know all that?'

The Doctor hesitated for a second, then waved a dismissive hand. 'Of course I did. And, of course, I know precisely what you're up to. But, if you'd like to confess anyway...?'

He was trying to see past the Manager, to the monitor that had just relayed the image of Crystal's death. He couldn't have seen that, the Manager realised. He tried to block the Doctor's view with his body, fumbling behind his back for the OFF switch.

Susie's voice came over the communications console. 'Manager, about that girl.'

The Doctor raised a suspicious eyebrow.

'Girl?' the Manager babbled. 'What girl?'

'The Doctor's companion,' said Susie, tartly. 'The one you just had shot through the head with two laser beams at close quarters.'

The Manager closed his eyes and hyperventilated.

'It wasn't her,' said Susie. 'It was Madeleine.'

'Madeleine?'

'From the kitchens. She's been complaining for weeks that she wanted a better-looking body. It looks like she just took one without asking.'

The Manager looked at his monitor. Crystal's corpse had devolved into the natural, featureless shape of his own kind. He let out a sickly groan. He didn't know whether to feel frustrated at his people's behaviour, or relieved that the Doctor had one thing less for which to punish him.

'I think you have some explaining to do,' said the Doctor, archly.

'Yes,' said the Manager, resignedly. 'I have.' He operated the console. 'And Susie? I think it might be best if you *didn't* kill the Doctor's other two friends now.'

Crystal woke with a start. She lay still as she adjusted to not being where she'd expected to be. She screamed, as she saw that she was in fact lying on top of a mound of bodies. She flailed about in alarm, and the bodies shifted beneath her, which wasn't at all helpful.

She was in the pool, she realised. Leisureworld's swimming pool. And no wonder it had been closed to the public.

The water had been drained, to make room for more people than she cared to count right now. At first she thought they were all dead - that this was some impromptu plague pit - but the ones nearest to her,

at least, were breathing. Fortunately for Crystal, she was quite near to the side. She scrambled towards it, trying not to think about what she was crawling over but unable to stop herself from exclaiming, 'Yuck, yuck, yuck, yuck, yuck!'

She hauled herself on to the red tiles, just beginning to wonder how she had got here. Feeling something around her left forearm, she looked and saw that it was a white band with controls set into it. When she pulled at it, it came loose easily.

She threw the band aside and made for the door.

Jason had forgotten about the men with guns and the secrets they wanted to keep. He had forgotten about Crystal and the Doctor. He paid no heed to Zog, who hopped beside him, jabbering with concern and trying to hold him back. The sole thing that occupied Jason's mind now was the ball of light and the need to go to it. Only the unyielding, clear plastic surface of the dome kept him from answering its call. But, after a few minutes of beating his fists against that obstacle, an idea entered his fogged mind.

He felt blindly along the wall, his gaze reserved for the light. He found a hatchway, neither seeing nor caring about the warning sign upon it. He felt a thrill of elation as he swung the hatch open and a breeze wafted into his face. The next thing he knew, he was lying on his back, with Crystal sitting on his stomach.

'What happened?' he murmured blearily.

'I found you halfway out of the dome, that's what. One of those horrid will-o'-the-wisp things tried to tempt you outside.'

Jason's memories flooded back, and with them came a sense of urgency. He eased Crystal aside and sat up. 'The Happy Campers. Crys, they were chasing us. They tried to kill us. We've got to -' His voice tailed off, as he realised that two of his moon-faced pursuers had stepped into the observation lounge.

'Er, no,' said one of the Happy Campers, nervously. 'Actually - you're going to laugh about this - but it looks like there's been another slight misunderstanding.'

Jason opened his mouth to respond - but a tremendous rending sound interrupted him, and propelled him to his feet. He turned to look at the outside wall, simultaneously backing away from it.

The ball of light was no longer visible. Gnarled branches had risen up to form a latticework pattern across the transparent side of the dome. And the dome itself was shattering, fractures crazing across its surface. The branches probed at the cracks and widened them, and

Jason's first panicked thought was that they were reaching for him.

They hadn't been able to lure him outside. So, they were coming in after him instead.

'I fought you on Earth, didn't I?' said the Doctor. 'That's right, I remember now. There was an atomic explosion on your world. It altered your race's genes, made you lose all trace of individuality. You tried to compensate by stealing the identities of others.' He frowned and directed an accusing stare at the Manager. 'I let you off with a warning.'

'And we tried to keep our promise, I swear it.'

'Captain Blade, I assume?'

'I took that name once, yes.' The Manager felt surprisingly calm, now that things could get no worse. So calm, in fact, that he puffed out his chest, spread his arms wide and sang:

*I promised that my people would no longer be a menace,
So, with tails between our legs, we left - but shortly, we passed Krennos.
The temptation was too much, for Leisureworld seemed just the tonic:
Tourists far from home - so handy for life forms chameleonic.
We took the staff's identities, then noticed something creepy:
That the cubicles were fitted with machines to make you sleepy,
We decided to increase the power of each enervator.
We took in guests who went to sleep and didn't wake up later.*

*We sent our copies to their homes lest people were suspicious,
But they headed for our home world when the moment was propitious.
You may think that we've been naughty, yes, you look at me aghast,
But you don't know how it feels to be somebody at last.*

Oh, you don't know how it feels to be somebody at last!

'Have you finished?' asked the Doctor.

'Yes, thank you. Sorry, I don't know what came over me.'

'I'd say you picked the wrong person to assimilate.' The Doctor began to pace up and down, hands clasped behind his back. 'You also picked the wrong world to do it on. There are a few things about Krennos that you don't know. It's alive, for a start.'

'You're right,' said the Manager. 'I did not know that.'

The Doctor ignored him. 'It has a rudimentary intelligence. I happened to be able to shut down my respiratory functions and

communicate with it, on a basic level, telepathically. I persuaded it to release me. Others haven't been so fortunate.'

'People have been disappearing for weeks!'

The Doctor was lost in thought. 'I don't think Leisureworld was ever intended to be a holiday resort, not even by its original owners. They were sapping the vitality from their customers and feeding it to the planet, to keep it contented and dormant. But why?' It was a rhetorical question, apparently, as he proceeded to answer it himself. 'So that their scientists would be safe to examine it. They probably wanted the secret of its metabolism. It's incredibly efficient; to maintain an entire ecosystem on such a small amount of energy...'

'So, the real Manager wasn't really in charge? He had no leadership qualities at all? He was just a bumbling figurehead put here to disguise what was going on?' The Manager pulled up an undamaged chair and sank into it. 'Oh God, that explains everything!'

'And you really didn't suspect any of this?'

'We absorb personalities, not memories.'

'I see. So, you sent the scientists - or rather, your facsimiles of them - away and used the resort staff to run Leisureworld, because they appeared to be in charge. You used the enervators but neglected the feeding apparatus.' The Doctor's face suddenly twisted into a scowl, and he loomed over the Manager angrily. 'You unmitigated idiot, do you see what you've done? You starved Krennos until it was forced to wake up and serve itself. For the past few weeks, it's been building itself up by absorbing the few people it can lure out of the dome. But now, it's strong enough to launch an all-out attack. You've jeopardised the lives of every single person on this planet to serve your own selfish needs!'

The Manager's head was wet with sweat. He tugged at his collar, uncomfortably. 'You know,' he whined, 'you're much scarier than you were last time.'

That was when they heard the first screams.

For weeks, Krennos had been gathering its strength, concentrating its resources upon the alien construct within which it could sense so much wonderful energy. It felt something a little like satisfaction now, as it wormed its limbs into the flimsy walls and prised the construct apart. Its feast was revealed at last.

The Happy Campers panicked in the face of flora run amok. Snakelike creepers slid across Leisureworld, demolishing walls and seeking out its occupants no matter where they hid.

One of the creepers found Crystal. It wrapped itself around her

chest, and she screamed as she was dragged towards the beckoning swamp. Zog took hold of her feet to anchor her, but the plants were strong and he was only dragged along with her. Even Jason's attempts to pull the creeper free were futile, and short-lived. Another tendril seized his ankle, and, strain as he might, he couldn't reach his partner any more.

The Doctor acted quickly, but not quickly enough. Thinking to reactivate the feeding apparatus - to placate Krennos with some of his own life force, if he could - he navigated the corridors of the dome with long, urgent strides. But a solid mass of writhing vegetation blocked his path, and only when he turned back did he see that he was surrounded.

Even the birds contributed to the mayhem. They knew that each humanoid ingested by Krennos would increase their own chances of survival. Penetrating the dome, they used their claws and beaks to blind and confuse their hapless victims, and ultimately deliver them into the planet's clutches.

The Manager just ran, without direction or purpose. There were tears in his eyes, and a gnawing sickness in his stomach.

Crystal was being pulled out of a jagged hole in the dome's side. She clutched at its edges, eyes widening with fear as her knuckles whitened and her fingers began to ache.

The Doctor backed up against the corridor wall as plants closed in on both sides. He closed his eyes and concentrated, hoping to regain his telepathic communion with the intelligence that controlled them. But he wasn't inside Krennos this time, and it wasn't listening anyway.

'I suppose this is poetic justice for the Vervoids,' he muttered to himself as he was overwhelmed.

As the door to the conversion room bulged out of its frame, the Manager cowered behind the Chameleons' processing equipment. He had come here because he had thought it would be the safest place, the last part of the dome that the plants would reach. Since arriving, he had done nothing but curse himself for his cowardice, while still being physically unable to leave his supposed shelter and do anything productive.

He hated himself, he realised. Or, rather, he hated what he had become. What the machinery in this room had made him.

And, as the door gave way and he stared at his impending death, the Manager made a decision - one that surprised him a lot.

Fast and furious as the attack had been, it ended suddenly.

The plants that had threatened to suffocate the Doctor fell away from his face, dead and withered. Crystal's struggles bore fruit, and she was able to scramble back into the dome. Jason ran to her and hugged her. Even those who had been taken outside dug themselves out of the mud and returned, bemused but relieved.

They found their explanation, eventually, in the conversion room.

The Doctor nodded wistfully to himself, as he inspected the corpse of the Chameleon that had once been the Manager. His skin was green-tinted, and thorns grew from his side, but those features were fading now as he returned to his natural blank state. By his head, a white armband hung from a dead branch.

In a darkened storeroom, Susie and Gerry disentangled themselves from each other, eased open the half-buckled door and surveyed the lifeless creepers that had, until seconds earlier, been doing their best to gain entrance.

'Well,' said Gerry, nonplussed, 'it looks as if we aren't going to die after all.' He paused, then added, 'So, I suppose you've changed your mind again now?'

'Too late,' said Susie. 'It's the hormones, I'm afraid.'

They closed the storeroom door again.

The Chameleons were surprisingly compliant, after that. The Doctor told them they'd have to be 'deprocessed', but, leaderless now, they raised no objection. They were like guilty children, thought Crystal, caught with their hands in the biscuit tin.

She watched as the first few took their places at the conversion machine, their 'templates' having been dug out of the pool and seated beside them. The original Happy Campers woke, confused, as the faces of their copies melted, losing definition until they were lumpy, grey and featureless. Crystal felt sorry for them - and even more so when Susie and Gerry arrived together, their hands joined, their eyes red and blotchy. They were losing what they had only just discovered.

'You both know what the Manager did,' said the Doctor kindly. 'He must have known, when he tried to borrow the planet's identity, that the strain would be too much for his body. He put Krennos into a coma of sorts, but he gave up his own life in the process, to save us all. I doubt if that noble impulse was any part of the spineless creature he was impersonating. I think it came from somewhere much deeper inside him.'

In the Hawaiian Ballroom, he delivered a somewhat sterner lecture to the real Manager and his staff. 'I have dismantled your energy-leeching apparatus. I suggest you don't attempt to rebuild it. Krennos is in a stupor, but it will wake up. In a few days' time, it will be dangerous again. Contact your homeworld. Tell them you need to evacuate before that happens. Then make sure they leave this poor planet alone.'

'What about the Chameleons?' somebody asked.

'You'll take them with you.' The Doctor raised a hand to quell mumbles of discontent. 'They've agreed to recall everyone that has yet to be deprocessed from their world. In return, you will help them to find a cure for their affliction.'

'Why should we?' demanded a shrill voice. The Manager pushed his corpulent form towards the front of the assemblage. 'Why should we do anything to help them?'

The Doctor threw back his shoulders and looked down his nose. 'Because, if you prove to me that you can show some compassion,' he replied, placing equal emphasis on each word, 'then I might not report your actions here to the High Council of the Time Lords!'

Crystal looked at the small cluster of Chameleons that stood at the back of the room, showing no reactions to anything. She wanted the Doctor to be right. She wanted to believe that their condition wasn't hopeless.

Then her eyes alighted upon two of the shambling, misshapen hulks, and she was sure of it.

'Look, Jason,' she whispered, grinning. 'That's Susie and Gerry, isn't it? Holding hands.'

'I'm not sure,' said Jason. 'I think the one on the right used to be Gerry, yes. But the other one was that blond guy from the cleaning staff, wasn't he?'

'Oh,' said Crystal. 'Well, that's nice too, of course.'

'What about Krennos?' asked Jason, as they slipped away quietly. 'Will it die now?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'It can survive quite nicely on its own - so long as no one else interferes with its feeding cycle and, shall we say, raises its expectations again. It may feel a bit peckish for a while, but it'll soon adjust. It can draw enough energy from the birds and the other creatures that live here to keep itself satiated, at least in its semidormant state.'

'And you're sure it's safe to go back to the TARDIS?'

'Perfectly. For the time being, anyway.'

They had reached a hatchway now, and the Doctor led the way out into the swamp. Crystal paused to drink in the sight of the colourful flora, tinged in silver from the dual moons. 'It looks so beautiful from here,' she breathed.

'Well, as we've learned,' the Doctor reminded her, 'appearances can be deceptive. Come along now, Zog, there's a good little furball.'

Patronising imbecile, thought Zog. You will regret that remark, and so many others, when I have the secrets of your time machine and reveal my true nature at last. This paltry universe will belong to me - and on that day, I shall take great pleasure in destroying you, Doctor!

Storm in a Tikka

by Mike Tucker and Robert Perry

This story takes place between *Dimensions in Time* and *Search out Science*

The neat circle of glass pulled away from the rest of the window with a delicate chink. The cat burglar known to East London as the Cobra placed the glass disc carefully on the floor and reached through the hole with a black-clad arm. The door latch clicked open and, pulling his night-sight goggles over his eyes, he slid into the dark.

The storeroom of the Walford Tandoori was a mess of ladders, wallpaper and paint, evidence of the recent redecorating. The Cobra hoped that the till would be equally full of the evidence of the takings from their grand reopening. He had been among the hordes of customers eating there earlier that evening, watching with quiet satisfaction as the night had worn on and the orders had continued to come in thick and fast.

Scanning the floor ahead of him, he threaded his way through the cluttered kitchens to the restaurant. The till was perched on top of the gaudy bar. The Cobra crossed to the front door and unbolted it. He always liked to have more than one avenue of escape. Crossing back to the till, he slipped a small pencil-like device from his belt, and adjusted a control. A beam of needle-thin light lanced from its tip and molten metal fell from the till as the laser cut out the lock.

He smiled in satisfaction and turned the power back to low. A sudden noise made him start. His head jerked up and the beam from the laser torch sliced across the walls. The tiny decorative mirrors in the plaster sent the red beam dancing across the restaurant in a crazy cat's cradle of light. The Cobra tried to adjust his goggles. The walls were beginning to swirl, to blaze with inner brilliance. He screamed.

When the light faded the Cobra was gone.

There was a chuckle of satisfaction from the shadows. With a soft ching the till drawer slid open.

The drone of distant police sirens drifted through the early-morning air of London's East End, mingling with the muted dawn chorus sounding in the distance. The combined noise of man and bird was drowned out by the elephantine trumpeting of something else and, with a shuddering

thump, the police-box shape of the TARDIS materialised on the wet Walford tarmac.

The door creaked open and a scruffy figure in checked trousers, dark jacket and battered straw hat peered out. He stared around in disappointment.

'What's it like out there, Professor?' A girl's voice drifted from inside the TARDIS.

'Oh, well. Rather dull actually, Ace.' The Doctor stepped out on to the street. A girl in jeans and a bomber jacket pushed out past him.

'It looks like Earth again.'

'Yes, Ace.' The Doctor looked around him. 'Yes, I'm rather afraid that we've landed back in Walford.'

Ace groaned. 'But we just left here.'

'Yes. The Rani's TARDIS must have left a residual time trail. We've got caught in its wake.'

Ace shivered, pulling her jacket tight around her shoulders. It was cold. She sniffed at the air. She could smell food.

'Here, something smells good.' Ace looked around. There was a small restaurant nestling in the glow of a street lamp. 'I wonder if they're open.'

'You can't be hungry again, Ace - we only ate a few hours ago!'

'Proper food, Professor! Not bars from the TARDIS food machine!' Ace had become heartily sick of TARDIS catering, and it was rare that the two of them had time to cook properly. She crossed the road. The Doctor called after her.

'I doubt they're open, Ace. It's very early in the morning.'

Ace glanced over at the restaurant. There was a flash of light from inside. 'I think someone's still in there. I can see a light. Won't be a minute.'

'Oh, well, be careful. Remember the last time you had a curry.'

Ace scampered over to the restaurant. The Doctor looked around uneasily.

The door to the TARDIS pushed open further and a boxy, doglike robot nudged past him and on to the roadway.

'Master...'

'Yes K9, what is it?'

'Unusual energy signature detected.'

'Really?' The Doctor fumbled in his pocket and pulled out his pocket watch. It snapped open with a delicate clink. He peered at it worriedly. 'Yes...Yes, there are some peculiar readings.' His face creased. 'K9, go and fetch Ace, would you.'

'Affirmative, master.'

With a whine of motors K9 trundled over to the restaurant. The Doctor peered at his pocket watch again.

'I don't think I like this at all.'

Ace pushed open the door to the restaurant and peered into the darkened interior. 'Hello. Anyone at home?'

She frowned. She was sure she had seen a light, and if the door was unlocked...She felt her way forward, her eyes slowly becoming used to the gloom, steadying herself on the chairs that lined the narrow room.

'Mistress.'

K9 was silhouetted in the doorway. Ace frowned. 'I'll only be a few minutes, K9. A couple of shish kebabs and we'll be away.'

'Danger detected, mistress.'

Something glinting on the bar caught her eye. It was like a small torch. She picked it up, then noticed the open till.

The Doctor's voice drifted from outside. 'Ace, come on. Something's not right here.'

Ace stared at the open cash register. 'Too right, Professor,' she murmured.

She held up the penlike object. A thin, pencil beam of red light shot from the little tube. It bounced between the mirrors. A laser torch. Ace fumbled with it, trying to turn it off. She shouldn't have picked it up. Her prints were all over it now. If she got caught in here...

'Mistress, sensors indicate energy signature building. Danger! Danger!'

Ace turned for the door, and stopped, rubbing at her eyes. The red light was still ricocheting between the reflecting surfaces, like a lattice. Something was wrong...The walls seemed strange - seemed suddenly to bulge, to bend and stretch like molasses. The red cloth patterns on their gold base began to swirl and dance, breaking and drifting into new patterns which to Ace had a decidedly alien feel. There was a muted chuckle from the gloom.

Out in the street the needle in the Doctor's pocket watch began to quiver wildly.

'Ace?'

He looked up at the restaurant. Alien light was dancing through the window.

'Ace! K9!'

Stuffing the watch back into his pocket, the Doctor hared across the

street, but by the time he reached the restaurant the light had faded and the window was dark once more.

Ace struggled upright, aware of heat beating down on her back and sand in her clothes. She forced her eyes open, squinting at the brightness. Desert stretched away from her in all directions. She shook her head. K9 was on his side in the sand.

'I don't think we're in Walford any more.'

There was a muffled squawk from K9.

'Okay, K9, I'm coming.'

She pulled him upright. 'Are you OK?'

'Affirmative, mistress. No damage has occurred.'

Ace peered through the glaring sunlight. Two suns hung in the pale-orange sky, low over the distant dunescape. Sand swooped around them in a huge amphitheatre. Nestling in the valley below them was a stone temple.

Another planet. Ace rubbed at the back of her neck.

'How the hell did we get here, K9?'

'Matter transporter, mistress.'

'Can you get us back?'

'Negative.'

'Great.'

She looked around the bleak landscape. The only thing she could see was that temple. 'Any suggestions?'

'Suggest examination of structure in valley.'

'Well, there's nowhere else to go.'

The two of them began to edge their way down the sliding dunes, Ace half carrying the boxy shape of K9, until they stood at the base of the towering monument.

Ace skirted round it. There was no sign of life, no sign of occupation. Just a statue, a towering female figure, swords clasped in each of her four hands.

Ace stared up at it in fascination.

'What do you reckon, K9?'

'Some kind of primitive altar, Mistress. Observe patterns etched into the stone.'

Ace looked. They were the same as the wallpaper in the Indian restaurant! 'Flocked stonework. Brilliant.'

A black-clad figure suddenly loomed over the top of a dune, faceless against the sky.

'Danger, mistress, unknown hostile.'

Ace spun, balancing on the balls of her feet, muscles tensed ready to ward off the intruder.

'Who are you?'

The figure pulled off its balaclava, revealing a thin-faced man with a mousy moustache. 'I'm not going to hurt you. Trust me.'

'Trust you...with a 'tache like that?' Ace relaxed slightly. 'Who are you? What are you doing here?'

'I'm known as the Cobra,' the man replied, drawing himself up to his full height. 'You might have heard of me.'

Ace shook her head. 'Sorry, mate.'

'The newspapers gave me the name. I'm the cat burglar who's been terrorising Walford!'

'Never heard of you,' said Ace.

The man seemed to deflate. 'My name's Chance, Morgan Chance,' he said. 'I'm as lost as you are, but I really wouldn't stay here.'

'Oh, yeah? And why's that?' Ace edged around him warily.

'Because I don't know what they'll do if they catch us here!'

'Who?' Ace peered around.

'Danger, mistress!'

A dozen black-robed figures suddenly appeared on the tops of the dunes, silhouettes against the blue sky, huge knives drawn and glinting in the light of the suns.

'Them,' said Chance.

The Doctor burst into the restaurant.

'Ace! K9!'

There was no sign of his companions.

The Doctor struggled through the tangle of tables and chairs and threw open the door to the kitchens. Nothing. No one. He edged through the gloom. A flicker of light suddenly caught his attention. One of the tall fridges was open. He crept forward. He could see a hand protruding round the door.

'Ace? I can think of better places to hide.'

The Doctor pulled the door open and three bodies tumbled on to the cold tiled floor.

His face grim, the Doctor knelt down and examined the bodies, shuffling to avoid the ever growing pool of blood. The three were obviously the staff of the restaurant. Each had had their throat cut, and recently, too.

The Doctor stepped back into the restaurant. In the distance he could hear police sirens. There had obviously been an alarm

somewhere. He didn't have much time. He pulled out his pocket watch again and examined the readings.

'Yes...Some kind of crude matter transmitter. Now if I can just calculate the frequency.' He began to tap furiously on the tiny keyboard.

'You are far too late to save your young friend and your computer.'

The Doctor started. A figure hidden in the shadows stepped out into the pool of light cast from the street lights outside.

'Too late to save them from what? From ending up like those poor devils out there?'

The Doctor danced backwards as the figure advanced.

'It is their honour to be sacrificed to Kali, wife of Shiva the Destroyer...As it will soon be yours!'

There was a sudden flurry of movement behind the Doctor. He felt his arms pinned by strong hands. He felt something soft slipping around his neck, then tightening. He couldn't breathe...

No one moved; no one spoke. A dozen pairs of eyes stared at them from beneath diaphanous black head-wraps; they were surrounded. Ace tensed as the circle slowly began to close about them. She saw K9 extend his nose laser. From the corner of her eye she saw Chance strike an inept karate pose.

The sword of one of the silhouettes swept down and their assailants surged forward. She triggered the laser torch and flinched at its sudden light. K9 blasted several figures who tumbled into the sand.

Surprised, their attackers appeared to draw away from her. Unarmed, Chance could only flail with his fists as the black-robed figures swarmed over him, forcing him to the ground, dragging him into the temple. Ace sprinted after them, swearing and shouting. More figures were appearing over the dunes, with spears this time, jabbing at her with short, quick thrusts. They appeared merely to be trying to drive her off. Ace fell back. The robed figures didn't seem interested in fighting. They didn't seem interested in her at all, any more.

An elaborate call-and-response ritual, in a language Ace didn't understand, seemed to be getting under way in front of the statue. A priest came and cast his eye over Chance and nodded. As Ace watched the Cobra was stripped and forced, screaming, to his knees.

Ace stepped forward. 'K9! We've got to do something!'

Robed figures barred her way, sword blades glinting under the suns, fanatical determination in their eyes. K9 stunned them but more took their place, barring their way.

'Power levels running low, mistress.'

Ace's shoulders slumped. There was nothing she could do.

The ritual continued, building in intensity. Ace shouted obscenities, then pleaded with the figures to stop. There was the flash of a blade against the orange sky and then...Ace closed her eyes to blot out the awful moment.

Silence followed, long minutes of silence, as Chance's blood soaked slowly into the parched sandstone surface of the altar. The mournful peace was ended by a deafening crack that rolled around the valley like thunder. Ace stared in horror.

'K9! The statue. It moved!'

With slow hesitant movements the black idol hauled itself from the wall, eyes blazing red. The warriors and priests fell to their knees and the blades of the idol's huge swords swung in sweeping arcs. The robed figures fell apart, sliced like fruit, and the statue let out a bellow of guttural laughter.

The blazing eyes came to rest on Ace. K9 glided in front of her, head raised defiantly.

Suddenly flickering fingers of energy began to leap from stone to stone, the painted patterns swirling and merging, and the monstrous gibbering figure faded from view.

Ace stared at the alcove where the figure had been, running her hands over the smooth indentations.

'But it was just a statue...'

'Not a statue, mistress. Alien life form.'

A sudden thought occurred to her, and her eyes widened in horror. 'If that matter beam brought us here, then that thing could be on its way to Earth!'

The Doctor came to on the floor among sacks of vegetables and tins of paint. The smell of fresh paint and Indian cooking filled his nostrils. It took him a moment to work out that he was lying on his back, still in the kitchen. At the other end of the room a short, tubby, Indian-looking man in a grubby apron appeared to be cooking.

He rubbed his neck and got to his feet. 'As nice as that smells, I really don't think you should be here.'

'Should I not?' the little man answered. 'This is my kitchen. I am preparing the sauces for tonight's diners.'

'But you don't understand,' the Doctor flustered. 'You're in terrible danger. I was nearly killed out there.'

'For that, I am ashamed, good sir,' the Indian replied. 'My hospitality

is impugned.'

The Doctor took a step forward, and peered closely at him. His face darkened with realisation. 'You...' he whispered.

The little man beamed at him. 'You recognise me,' he said.

'Yes,' said the Doctor, trying to sound authoritative. 'I am a Time Lord! May I ask what are you doing here?'

'Preparing the sauces for tonight's diners, as I say,' the man said. 'And waiting. But the long wait is so nearly at an end.'

The Doctor's face darkened dangerously. 'No...you can't...'

The little man beamed. 'I do look forward to these times,' he said.

'No!' bellowed the Doctor. 'You must put a stop to this!'

'I cannot,' the man replied.

'Of course you can!' the Doctor shouted. 'Your powers are incalculable!'

'And yet I am powerless to contradict the prophecies. Every billion billion years or so in our time cycle we must fight, she and I. The physical location is fixed, whatever local peoples may build around it. And now the time is nearly upon us. I await her arrival.'

'That may be sooner than you think,' the Doctor cried. 'Your restaurant is full of Thugee!'

'Then she is coming...' He picked up a huge spoon and began stirring the bubbling pot that sat on the stove.

'Well, if you won't put a stop to this, I must!' the Doctor shouted, and ran from the room. Back in the restaurant the cultists were all crouched on the floor, faces buried in the carpet in supplication.

The walls were starting to warp. The Doctor stared as the patterns in the wallpaper began to swirl with necromantic energy, curling in on themselves to form a tunnel of light. The mirrors flared and with a crackle of power a figure began to form in the glass.

'She comes!'

Her skin black and cracked, her four curved swords gleaming, Kali stepped through the mirror.

Ace tried not to look at the corpses scattered over the churned and bloodsoaked sand, as she haltingly picked her way back to the altar. She pulled a cloak from one of the mutilated figures, draping it over the body of Chance, which sprawled on the sacrificial slab.

All she wanted to do was get away from here. Trying to ignore the smell of blood that hung in the air, she moved about the walls of the temple, examining the swirling patterns carved into the polished marble.

She caught a glimpse of her reflection and stopped. The face of a frightened girl looked back at her. She acted so tough, but now, without the Doctor, trapped on an alien world...

She shook her head angrily and stared defiantly at herself in the glassy stone.

She stopped.

Reflections. Like the mirrors in the restaurant. She had accidentally triggered the matter beam with the laser torch. Which could mean...

'K9, what was the purpose of this, of the ritual?'

'Ritual mostly of ceremonial purpose, mistress.'

'And him?' Ace nodded at the covered corpse. 'Why kill him? What point could it have?'

'Sensors indicate complex DNA scanners in altar. Logical conclusion is that blood provides accurate targeting co-ordinates for matter transmitter.'

'So if Chance was from London...'

'Then that is where the creature will materialise, mistress.'

'We've got to get back, K9.' Ace pointed the laser torch at one of the marble slabs. 'We've got to try to get back and warn the Doctor.' She switched it on. The thin beam of light bounced about the walls, and faded to nothing. Ace's face fell. It wasn't strong enough, not on these slabs. She turned to K9.

'How are your power reserves?'

'Building, mistress.'

'Have you enough power to activate the matter transmitter?'

'Negative, mistress. Estimate three minutes until critical power level achieved.'

Ace chewed at her nails. Three minutes. God knew what damage that creature could do in three minutes.

'Hurry it up, K9, hurry it up'

The Doctor stared in horror at the figure before him. Black limbs cracking and snapping, Kali stared around her surroundings and snarled.

One of the genuflecting figures climbed slowly to his feet, and cried, 'Welcome, Kali! After an eternity of waiting, I greet you!'

'No, don't go near it!' The Doctor reached out a futile hand as the huge figure, its head scraping the ceiling, looked down at its acolyte.

The four swords swung hissing through the air and the Doctor heard wet thumps as the priest's body landed in different corners of the restaurant. The other acolytes remained motionless, petrified on the

floor.

The Doctor felt his breath catch in his throat as the red eyes swung around and fixed on him

'What the blazes is going on in here?'

Kali reeled and spun to face the woman in the doorway. With a hissing roar she slashed out and the swords shattered the door frame.

The woman fled screaming. 'Beppe! Call the police! Beppe!'

Kali loomed in the doorway bellowing into the night after her. The Doctor watched as she stood spitting at the threshold of the restaurant. She made no attempt to step outside. The mirrors continued to flicker.

A desperate plan struggled for coherence in the Doctor's brain. Gritting his teeth, he dived forward, hit the floor and rolled between the legs of the stone goddess. He felt the whoosh of sword blades slicing the air. He sprang to his feet and bolted through the door into the kitchens. In the restaurant Kali's minions lay cut to pieces around the room. A few still crawled towards the door; as the Doctor watched, their goddess slew them, one by one.

The plump chef was at the Doctor's shoulder, wiping his fat hands on his apron. He pushed past the Doctor.

'No!' The Doctor tried to stop him. 'She'll cut you to pieces.'

Kali swung to face him. Livid bolts of energy crackled between them as they came together. It looked more like a dance than a fight. Light flared from the mirrors, bounced off Kali's swords, swirled around her immortal enemy's chubby body. His hands seemed to glow, to absorb and reflect the lethal aurora.

The Doctor tapped his teeth nervously. He had no idea exactly how powerful these beings were - but he had to do something to contain the two battling gods, contain their battle...Of course, he had no way of reaching the TARDIS, and heaven alone knew where Ace and K9 were. As the battle raged, the Doctor tensed himself to try to get past the whirring blades.

It was like being under water, looking out on to dry land. This must be how a fish felt. Ace was floating, bobbing, watching with bemusement as that great ugly black statue fought with a little, fat, brown-skinned man. K9 floated alongside her, looking faintly ludicrous.

K9 had finally been able to use his nose laser, and they'd managed to open this weird tunnel again. As suddenly as before they'd been snatched up into it - tumbling through a swirling cat's cradle of light. They were getting closer and closer, the restaurant beginning to rush towards them. Through the kitchen door she could see the Doctor.

'Doctor!' Her voice sounded incredibly distant.

She tried to move. She floundered helplessly. They were going to land right in the middle of the battle!

'Ace...! K9!'

The Doctor watched in horror. Sometimes Ace's resourcefulness confounded him. Wherever she'd ended up, why couldn't she have stayed there? He stared at her and the doglike shape of K9, reflected over and over again, tumbling towards each of the giant mirrors that lined the walls. There was a distant snapping sound, and a blaze of light. As the Doctor watched, Ace and K9 tumbled from the walls and on to the floor.

The Doctor dived through the kitchen door and ran out into the restaurant. Energy bolts flew about him. Savage swords cleaved through the hot air. The little Indian wheeled between the blades, the serene smile never leaving his face.

'Ace, come on!' the Doctor shouted, running at her, grabbing her jacket and dragging her through into the kitchen.

'K9, generate a force field!' he bellowed. 'We've got to contain these two, stop an age-old prophecy coming true.'

'Affirmative, master.'

K9 began to hum with power, and a shimmering force field started to flicker around the walls of the restaurant.

'Now at least I've got time to think.'

Ace shook her head. 'K9's not exactly running on full power. He won't keep that up for long. Professor, if this thing can come through the mirror, surely it can go back?'

'It's not that simple, Ace,' said the Doctor irritably. He began to race around the room, pulling open cupboards, peering under tables.

He stooped and picked up one of the tins of paint that were untidily stacked against the wall. He prised off the lid.

The Doctor pressed his fingers to his lips. 'It came through the mirror...I wonder...'

'What are you doing?' Ace asked.

'Acting out of desperation, Ace!' said the Doctor, opening more of the tins. 'Kali came through the mirrors. These beings aren't from our dimension. Technically they can't exist here. They must be maintaining their presence by artificial means. Now our friend out there is probably an avatar...but in Kali's case, it's my guess that the mirrors are acting as some kind of energy feed. Come on!'

The Doctor peered out from the kitchen door. The bizarre fight

between the two Gods was increasing in pace, the two of them whirling through the shattered restaurant. The blades of Kali's swords were nothing more than glittering blurs, like the blades of some manic helicopter. The air in the room was crackling with alien energy.

'Now running on backup power, master.'

K9's voice was getting weaker.

'Hang on, K9, just give us a few more seconds!' The Doctor took a deep breath.

'Oh well. Here goes.'

Ace stared at him in horror. 'You're not going in there?' The Doctor said nothing. 'Professor, you'll be cut to pieces!'

The Doctor shushed his companion. 'Not if I'm quick! Now, hold that.'

He thrust a huge pot of emulsion into Ace's hands, grabbed the decorator's brush and plunged it into the paint.

Kali swept past the door, her swords slicing chunks from its frame. Ace ducked as lumps of wood sailed past them. When she looked up the Doctor had vanished from the kitchen.

Ace stared in horror as the Doctor danced and weaved through the battling aliens, the brush held out in front of him, slopping paint on to the mirrors in untidy strokes. Energy bolts crackled around him, making his shock of hair stand on end. She could hear little yelps of pain from him above the clamour.

He dived back to the kitchen door, waving the brush at her. 'More paint! Quickly, Ace, more paint!'

The dripping brush flicking paint everywhere, the Doctor dived into the melee once more.

Ace shook her head in exasperation. 'What does he think he's doing?'

Over half the mirrors were now covered in white paint. There was a bellow of rage from Kali and she turned her blazing eyes to the little man dodging around her feet. She lashed out at him, but her movements seemed slower, more sluggish. The Doctor tried to duck past her and back to the doorway but Kali caught him a glancing blow and he tumbled to the floor.

'Doctor!'

Ace launched herself out of the kitchen, snatching up a chair and smashing it against the monster as she reached down for the Doctor.

With a roar Kali turned on her but the little Indian stepped closer, his hands moving in complicated patterns.

Hissing with frustration Kali turned back to him, driving him

backwards.

Ace scrambled over to the Doctor and hauled him to his feet.

'Ace! It's too dangerous out here!'

'I can help! Just tell me what you're trying to do!'

The Doctor waved the brush frantically. 'We must paint out all the mirrors! Kali's using them to maintain her solidity in this dimension.'

'Then why don't we just smash them?' Ace hefted a chair leg. 'That would be quicker than -'

'No, Ace!' The Doctor caught her arm, his voice panicky now. 'If you do that then we'll have hundreds of smaller mirrors. Now, if you must help, then get another brush!'

A bolt of energy sent them diving back to the safety of the kitchens. Ace snatched up another brush and followed the Doctor back out.

The two of them frantically tried to paint out the remaining mirrors, all the time watching for the swords. Kali began to stagger and weaken, aware of the Doctor and Ace buzzing around her like flies, but unable to relax in her battle.

'Master...'

K9's voice was a weak croak.

'Nearly there, K9! Nearly there!'

The Doctor painted out the last of his mirrors with a flourish and turned in triumph to Kali. Her black skin was almost translucent now, her energy field a weakly flickering glow. With a banshee wail of frustration she lashed out at her attacker. The swords slashed through his apron and he staggered and fell. Hissing, Kali turned to where Ace was busy with the final mirror.

'Ace! Look out!' roared the Doctor.

Ace ducked as the swords whistled over her head. She rolled to her feet, snatching up a shattered table leg, pitifully small against the blades of Kali, who, with a final burst of energy, gathered herself for the kill.

'Force field no longer operational,' K9 said.

The Doctor dived back into the kitchen and snatched up the paint tin. Bounding into the restaurant he swung the five-litre tub with all his might. A wave of paint splattered over Kali, Ace and the last mirror. With a final burst of flickering energy the creature vanished, her screams reverberating through the restaurant.

The silence was deafening.

The Doctor crossed to the fallen body of the Indian. The little man sat up, staring at the two gashes in his apron.

'She is stronger than I remember...'

'Yes.' The Doctor's face was stern. 'And without our help you would

have lost.' He was angry now. 'More people have died! How long must your stupid battle continue?'

The man shrugged. 'Until one of us is defeated. That is how it must be.' He cocked his head and stared at the Time Lord. 'Perhaps I will see you in another lifetime.'

There was a whirl of golden light and he was gone.

'Professor...'

The Doctor turned. Ace stood there glaring at him, only her eyes visible from under the paint.

The Doctor struggled to suppress a smile.

'Ah, Ace. Sorry about that, but -'

Ace held up her hand. 'You can apologise to me later. Right now I just want a shower.'

The Doctor picked up K9, while he held open the shattered restaurant door for them. The sound of police sirens was getting closer and closer. Net curtains twitched from houses all around. People were beginning to gather in an angry crowd outside the pub.

The Doctor pushed open the door of the TARDIS with his foot and quickly ushered Ace inside.

Ace squelched across to the console. 'So, are you going to tell me who that man was?'

The Doctor put K9 down and sighed. 'A being with great power, trapped in a cycle of ritual.'

He smiled sadly. 'I'll tell you all about it one day, Ace.'

Ace crossed the console room. The Doctor hurried after her. 'Now, you just stand still, Ace. You're going to get paint over everything. K9, have forty winks, then go and fetch a towel. We've just been invited to take part in a quiz show, and we're not exactly looking at our best...'

The policemen cautiously approached the now silent and dark restaurant. They crept across the square, feet crunching on broken glass.

Powerful torch beams pierced the air, catching on the shape of a police box in the centre of the chaos. Suddenly a monstrous trumpeting filled the night. As the policemen watched, the box faded into transparency and silence returned to the Walford street, silence broken only by the distant drone of police sirens and muted birdsong far away.

Nothing at the End of the Lane

by Daniel O'Mahony

PART THREE: THE ONLY LIVING THING

Susan swayed ponderously. In her mind she might have been dancing. She had her back to the door so Barbara didn't catch sight of her face, but she could imagine the tight-concentrated trance the girl would be wearing. Susan wasn't the type to go hysterical over The Beatles. Her interest would always be more focused.

It wasn't The Beatles. It was someone drabber, squeakier, lots of guitars but little else. The noise piping from Susan's transistor had drowned the sound of the door opening, and the girl kept moving. Her shoulder blades ground together and the cloth of her dress rippled accordingly. It was a tight fawn-coloured item, fastened with a black collar around the neck and tight around the waist, the strands ticking to the girl's hidden rhythm. She kept her feet firmly on the floor, but her pins buckled and warped to keep her balanced. Filament light sheened over the dark grey nylon on her legs. Her left hand moved the most. She turned it through the air by her side, by her head, making a bulb of it, a half-fist, splaying, stroking the air, nothing.

Barbara hadn't realised that Susan was so... *physical* - no, that was the wrong word. It came with her intelligence, something synergetic. She had the harsh metal lustre of the modern; she was a girl of the sixties, if not the seventies; she made Barbara feel out-evolved.

She belonged to the future.

Ian was a comforting presence at Barbara's shoulder. He nudged her forearm.

She spoke Susan's name, loud.

Susan's shoes skittered, falling out of their lock with the floor; a shock moved across her shoulders. For a moment Barbara thought the girl was going to scream but she just bobbed her head slightly and put a grin of embarrassment on her lips. She didn't even bother turning red.

'They're great, aren't they?'

Nothing about her was predictable but her strangeness slipped away into the beats of the tune. She was a schoolgirl again. Barbara moved in close to her, closer than was comfortable. Susan shrugged, not minding, and her head dipped slightly, eyes lowered. Ian had a grim little smile.

Susan could see it but Barbara could only feel it. He slipped through the gap behind her into the room, moved round the edges. She had seen tigers that moved like him, not hunting, not stalking, but describing the limits of their territory. It felt as if they were ganging up on the girl, manoeuvring her into a trap. She tried to make a kind face to compensate.

Susan wore a lot of make-up. There was a vain pink painted on her eyelids; she already had large brown pupils, on the verge of smouldering. They didn't seem to fit with the puppy fat of her face or the Ronald Searle pout on her lips. As far as Barbara knew, she hadn't discovered boys yet.

Hard to believe she's only eight years younger than me.

The mood guitars scraped away in the palm of her hand.

'Who?' Barbara asked, meaning the group.

'It's -' she declared, excitedly, not realising Barbara couldn't hear her above the mood guitars. *John Someone - Smith? - and someone else.* John Smith and His Companions?

Susan's sly embarrassment had gone; she was infectiously enthusiastic about the group. Barbara stood at the heart of the storm, intensely calm. Ian, still following the slow circle round C4, lent her strength. Susan, standing right in front of her, lent her something else. With the three of them together she might be able to get something done.

'They're up two to nineteen... oh, no! The other way round!' Susan chirped.

'That's very good,' Barbara purred, *for a bloody racket*. Next week they'd be back at nineteen. Someone must have beaten them; not that it had discouraged The Coal Men, or whatever they were called. The tune repeated, repeated, repeated.

Susan, her paradox girl, peered at her eagerly. Barbara, briskly silent, forgot she had a reason for talking to her. Ian came to her rescue.

'John Smith is an interesting choice of name,' he said, a wisely avuncular teacher gone native. He completed the circuit, coming to rest just next to Susan. They'd caught her in a pincer. Ian sank into a chair at one of the children's desks. There was a creak, louder than the radio. 'Someone would call himself John Smith if he didn't want to be noticed, wouldn't you think, Susan?'

'That's very interesting, Mr. Chesterton,' Susan replied, guying him. 'I wouldn't have thought of that.'

'I'm asking you to turn the music off, Susan' he said pointedly.

Susan mumbled an apology and killed the noise.

She turned back to Barbara. 'Is that *The French Revolution*?'

Barbara had almost forgotten it, nestled in her arms. Susan took it and her eyes dropped away, losing interest in the teachers beside her. Ian rocked in and out of focus - Barbara's eyes were fixed on Susan's energy, the intelligence. Vulnerability too. It was all part of her spell.

'It will be interesting.' That was almost condescending. 'When do you want it back?'

'You can keep it until you've finished it, Susan.'

'*Tomorrow*,' the girl said.

Something crawled in the girl's tone. Barbara experienced a sudden jolting sickness, wet in her mouth. She might have blurted out her questions there and then, if Ian hadn't intervened.

'The weather's getting worse outside. Can I offer either of you a lift?'

'I don't mind the fog, Mr. Chesterton. I find it's very *sensual*.' Her voice crawled again. Barbara itched at the sound. She gasped.

'Susan, I really think -'

Again, Ian kept calm and broke across her outburst.

'Barbara?'

She nodded brusquely, gave Ian a surreptitious warning glance, before turning back to Susan.

'Take care,' she told her, 'the fog's getting thicker. I'll see you in the morning.'

Evening was seeping in, and the brown of Susan's eyes flickered and licked.

'Yes, tomorrow, I expect,' she said, simple words on a haunted, trembling note. 'Well, goodbye.'

Ian's car smelled of dust and plastic. It had warmed up quickly, taking the edge off the cold evening, but Barbara kept her hands folded on the warmth of her lap. For the first minutes, as they sat in the car park, the engine coughing and the headlamps dim, she became disheartened. Ian insisted they wait, partly because he hoped that Susan might still take up his offer of a lift; partly to give her a head start if she decided to walk after all; and partly to talk.

She could barely flex her fingers from the cold. She remembered her attack in the flat on Sunday morning, how rare and icy it had been then; it tasted the same now. She swallowed mouthfuls of metal and bled inside.

'There's no sign of her,' Ian remarked. 'She could still be reading.'

'Let's just go.'

'What are you doing for Christmas?' he asked suddenly. 'Going somewhere warmer, hopefully. I haven't any plans.'

'That sounds familiar,' Ian said. 'Perhaps we should join forces.'

Barbara rubbed her calves together, impatient, trying to generate heat. They crashed like icebergs. He'd picked the wrong time to ask.

'You're not sure I want to do this,' she suggested. He hung his head a little.

'I'm uneasy,' he admitted, 'but it's good we're doing it together.' She gave him a quizzical look. 'Safety in numbers?'

'Not quite. It's just... If you're doing this it can't be wrong. I don't think you're that sort of person.'

She blinked at him, wondering what to say. His profile half lost in the shadows.

'Let's talk about it later,' she suggested.

He didn't turn to her, but his head made a flat nod. One of his hands went lightly to hers, clasping it briefly, stroking some warmth into it. She felt better.

'Shall we go?' he asked.

Ian drove silently, cautiously, but there was little traffic. Mist clung to the car as it clung to the houses, and all the outdoors things. London froze in candyfloss, preserved like a fantasy or a memory. In 1940 and 1666 and 2164 it was burning, at this very moment yet decades, or centuries, away; the flames left the swaddled pristine ghost untouched. Barbara lost herself and her sense of time in the city lights, which hung from pavements, from cars and from windows, and came slicked with colours through the fog.

And suddenly they were there. Ian's headlights struck the gate.

IamFORman

The engine died. Barbara almost jolted out of the passenger seat. Totter's Lane appeared deserted.

Now she was here, on the verge of intruding on a pupil's home, Barbara caught the first pang of doubt. Ian picked up on her mood, and offered her a warm, wise smile. It wasn't comforting, not completely. She sensed, wordlessly, how he was indulging her, guiding her, helping her. She suddenly realised that he wasn't concerned about Susan, not as much as he was concerned about her.

They sat silently in the car for a moment, bodies and faces angled away from each other, awkward. The fog breathed around them, sucking the heat out of the car, out of their bodies. Barbara imagined

she was talking, then Ian, though she couldn't make words out of the silence. Then she could:

'The fact is,' Ian said, stumbling, 'it's curiosity. Susan's a puzzle and it's driving us both a little mad. *There are some things man was not meant to know*. Do you ever get that feeling?'

He wasn't convinced. Something about his tone made her defensive. A moment later he spoke again, quietly suggesting that there would be a simple explanation to the mystery Susan. Barbara wasn't convinced. There was something *unearthly* about Susan, something real - Susan was a person, not a puzzle to be solved. That was what made her so difficult; and what made Barbara so... excited.

She tried to break the tension in the car, telling Ian about the girl's confusion over the decimal system. That was it, she realised, the moment she had gone too far and Susan had become her fascination. The more she replayed it in her mind, the more morbid it became.

Ian turned to her at last, his mouth half-gaped in amazement. 'She couldn't be American or French, could she? No...'

He paused, a gauze coming over his eyes. He had his own peculiar stories to tell about Susan, long descriptions of other instances of her intransigence, but Barbara no longer needed to hear. They were making a litany of justifications and the details didn't matter. She didn't hear Ian's words, following only the pitch and tenor of his voice. They were meant to reassure her, to fire her; they worked.

'There's so much we'll never know,' she said dreamily, not sure even if they were talking about Susan any more.

The girl conjured herself out of the fog. Barbara saw her head first, her tight black cap, the dark, shaggy hair poking out at the back; her pale coat and skin blended into the white of the fog. She moved furtively, not hurrying, but still skittling towards the gate at a fair speed.

Barbara hushed Ian and alerted him.

Susan glanced over her shoulder before slipping through the gates.

'It's like she thinks she's being watched,' Ian observed.

Well, she is, isn't she?

With her real voice all she could say was: 'Should we go after her? She's on her own in there.'

'We don't know that. She's a teenager. Had you thought she might be meeting her boyfriend?'

She hadn't, and the thought of it made Barbara uneasy. It seemed too neat and normal for Susan. She didn't mention it to Ian, but laughed, trying to dispel the image that had risen to the forefront of her mind.

'I'm just scared,' she said, numb. 'For her,' she added.

Ian was practical. 'I think we just have to get on with it. Time to go.'

As she climbed out a blast of cold air beat into her. She wrapped her coat even tighter, but the chill felt numb on her scalp, under the crest of her skull, ice forming on the bone. She would have winced, even cried, if Ian hadn't been watching.

London could be malignant. She hoped to get used to it.

Ian didn't seem to have noticed the cold.

A train clattered by, the sound rising to a violent crescendo, as they entered the yard.

Ian led the way; Barbara held back at the gates, recalling her last visit here. Things had been moved in the last few weeks: something was gone, nothing she could describe. It was still a collection of dust and dead objects, with only the hint of hidden treasure under the dark. She saw only silhouettes in the mist-light, and the junkpiles had shadows like dormant monsters, locked in ice.

Nothing moved.

Ian's torch beam passed over the surfaces, picking out fragments. There was a crash, a coarse yell from Ian, and the pinlight went out. The dark grew denser. Barbara, distracted, scanned the shadows for a sign of Susan. Ian's back rose ahead of her, by one of the tables, setting Barbara's heart thumping. She had thought, briefly, that she'd found her.

Ian was half brusque, half apologetic, ashamed at losing the torch.

Barbara called Susan's name aloud, trying to coax her out of hiding. Ian took up the call, half-heartedly she felt, trudging around the yard in search of her. Barbara held back.

Susan wasn't here. Or she was here but she was hiding.

There must be some other way in and out of the yard.

Disappointed, Barbara drifted away through the half-familiar corridors of rag and bone, lit by the faint nimbus of light reflecting off each piece. Ian had mounted a flight of steps and was hollering Susan's name at something short of the top of his voice.

There was a stout metal box in her path; it hadn't been here before. Its lid, a solid hinged plate, was padlocked tight. Barbara took the lock in the palm of her hand and toyed with it. A limp *thump* shook the lid. She frowned.

Ian was suddenly at her side. 'She can't have got out without us seeing her.'

The lid trembled again.

She'd had enough. 'This isn't right, Ian. Nothing here feels right. We

should get help. The police. Something.'

Ian gave her a curious glance, got an eyeful of quiet determination, and agreed.

And, from the other side of the yard, a raucous fit of coughing broke the still of night.

'Susan?' Barbara asked, though as she spoke the hacking, fog-choked cough broke out again.

'No,' Ian mouthed. 'I think we should move.'

He broke across the yard - unthinking she scampered after him - and concealed himself behind the rotting wood brackets of the steps. Barbara crouched low behind him, puzzled, frightened, embarrassed in equal measure.

A crease of darkness crossed the yard to the strong box; a key shone; there was a faint noise, like rust squealing; then another, even softer sound.

Susan.

Barbara breathed and her breath crystallised and echoed through the yard.

Ian shushed her but the shape at the box had caught her outburst. The lid thumped back down. The glint of the key slipped back into darkness.

Ian rose.

Barbara stayed cowering, clutching her coat. She looked down dispassionately at her knuckles, watched the clench bleed them white. She'd walked into this place, she had led Ian into it, and he was standing now, talking to the man in the darkness, and he didn't realise what was happening, and she did. It was pure, all around her.

Fear.

'I don't know you.' It was a man's voice, abrupt, rather elderly and less terrible than she thought. It was laced with suspicion, but it made her calmer. It was a voice she felt she had known forever.

Your imagination is running away with you.

'We didn't mean to intrude,' Ian said.

Barbara rose to stand by Ian, making herself seem as demur and apologetic as possible. They were going to have explain themselves, and would sound ridiculous.

'Hello,' she said.

Barbara saw the old man clearly, or as clear as the night made possible.

'Why are you here?'

He was asking her.

Her first thought was how birdlike he seemed, not simply in his aquiline face or the expanse of his dark, winglike cloak, but in his stance, his eyes; he was a bird of prey, impassive and humourless. Her second thought was that he was ancient but robust, a healthy white that would have looked pasty on a weaker man, his skin smoothed rather than pocked by years; his groomed white hair worn like a crown. Her third thought, as she caught a glimpse of his Edwardian clothes, his cravat, his artificial grace, was that he had stepped out of another time, as wedded to the past as Susan...

...as his granddaughter was to the future.

He was also familiar, and dangerous. There was too much. She forced herself to stop looking at him.

'We were following a girl. A pupil of ours.'

That was Ian. The old man gave him a stern glare - *I wasn't talking to you.*

'A girl? You're searching for this... girl... in my yard.'

'She came in here,' Barbara replied. 'We followed her in.'

The old man's hand curled through the darkness. 'Why were you following her?'

'We're very worried about her,' Ian insisted.

'What does it matter to you?' the stranger barked. 'Why can't you leave us alone?!'

'We heard her just as you came in.' Ian's reply was forceful. Barbara realised she had underestimated him.

She felt much weaker, sick and slowblooded as the old man's gaze fell on her. He was talking in riddles and Ian barely seemed to notice.

'Don't you know where you are, schoolteacher? Yes, I know what you are, I know. You can find anything here, not just sights and objects, but sounds too! You can hear the thundercrack from the birth of this universe. Who knows what that might sound like to the untrained ear? Who indeed, hmm?' He chuckled, slightly, to himself.

'I heard Susan,' Barbara insisted, indicating the chest. As she pointed she looked at it again, wondering if she hadn't been mistaken. It didn't seem likely that the girl could be in there.

The old man's prompting tone made up her mind. 'You heard no kind of Susan.'

'Then what did we hear?!' she snapped back.

He glowered at her for a moment, sizing her up. Then his eyes went to Ian; he drew him aside, close to a sheltered overhang of scapyard spoils, excluding Barbara. He addressed Ian in a conspiratorial whisper, designed so she wouldn't hear.

Her eyes flipped from their backs to the smooth, unbroken surface of the box.

If Susan was in there, she wouldn't have much air.

Barbara's stomach turned. She tried to keep herself calm, under control, killing the suspicions of her imagination. It didn't help: a sick and familiar sensation was brewing in her guts, at the back of her head, in the surface of her skin.

Ian's voice floated by. Very calmly, very reasonably, he was asking to look inside the box.

She looked back at them, in time to see *grandfather* turn away from Ian and pick a bulky oblong out of the junk pile. She couldn't see it clearly. His fingers, bone-thin, traced its outline; he might have been genuinely intrigued.

'Have you ever imagined,' *grandfather* mused, 'that you could walk into a junkyard and find yourself whisked away to another world, or another age? Sometimes I look at these pieces... I think this is filthy and disgusting.'

Barbara took measured steps towards him, kept her tone reasonable. 'I don't understand what you're saying. Are you Susan's grandfather? I'm Miss Wright, her history teacher from Coal Hill - she must have mentioned me. Or Mr Chesterton.'

'Oh, I know those names.' The object went back onto the floor, then he was facing her, mild, mocking courtesy back in his voice. 'You don't understand me. Of course you don't, oh my dear you wouldn't understand. The words I am using are hardly the words you want to hear or the words you were expecting. Those aren't *your* words. They belong to someone else, schoolteacher! Not to you.'

'Do you seriously believe that Mr Chesterton is hearing the same words you're hearing? Right now I could be telling him that you are both busybodies. I'm telling him that you should both leave, *now*. But that's not what you can hear.'

'I want to make sure that Susan is safe first,' Ian interjected. 'With or without your help.'

'You see how easy it is.' The eagle-face made a sneer, the bird-wing hand a sweeping dismissal. 'We're arguing now over the box! Does it matter what's inside, if she's in there or not? I don't think so!'

Ian was talking; the old man was talking; their voices collided senselessly, all recognisable sounds wrung out by the white pain noise under her skull. She looked from one to the other, thinking again and again of Susan in the box, fingers pushing helplessly at the inside lid while outside there was meaningless meaningless

babble

Ian gave Barbara a fierce look.

'He's not going to help us. You were right earlier, we should get the police.'

There was cold sweat under Barbara's hairline. Ian was roused, but he didn't understand the urgency. He probably hadn't even heard Susan's voice, just taken Barbara's word for it.

And I have been known to hear things that aren't there.

'You can fetch Dixon of Dock Green for all I care,' Mr. Foreman - Doctor Foreman, *whoever* - said.

Ian's attention was back on the box, where it should be, but Barbara found her gaze swinging back to the stranger. He had his back to them, showing them the heavy sweep of his cloak - and something small and delicate cradled in his hands. He was chuckling softly to himself. Maybe he was listening.

Barbara put her hand to her face. It was hard to see, but she was shaking.

'Ian,' she said. 'Sometimes I imagine seeing and hearing things. When I'm sick -'

'Barbara!' Ian banged hard on the top of the chest. 'You're not sick. I heard her too.'

'Are you sure? You're not just saying that?'

Ian nodded. His fingers played impractically on the lock, which held. Without turning the old man addressed them.

'Why do you listen to that poor woman? She deserves your pity, nothing more. She's certainly not qualified to teach. Susan told me all about her; her condition is well-known and I sympathise, but you shouldn't let her lead you on these foolhardy adventures. You might never get back home again.'

Barbara felt a fluid headache rising up the back of her neck, hurting.

'Take her home, schoolmaster. Take her home before the tea gets cold.'

Ian wasn't to be taunted. 'And Susan?'

'Do you believe there's anything you can do for that child now? She's safe now, so much safer than she would be.'

'You might think so. We're going to fetch the police.' Ian turned to her. 'Barbara?'

There were two bursts. One in her stomach; wet and acidic, nothing unusual.

One in her - not quite in her head - but in the air, just to the side and behind her left ear. It felt like *noise*, the sound of an ancient engine

turned over at last after years of neglect. She sensed the voice of a machine speaking, raw language cascading through her, permeating her skin, her sweat, the soft surface of her brain, with...

with ideas so strange they came out sick

'I don't feel very well,' she told Ian. She held her hands up to him, flat. They shook. Six pairs overlapped in her shifting vision, in her many eyes.

She watched as the bird-man, the man in black, took his damp and dirty find (*a picture frame, the trapped imago cleaning itself crumbling to dust, unpainting as she watched*) and tapped it on the back of Ian's head.

A memory of red.

Glass fell like spring dew.

Ian arched.

Barbara's guts heaved. She opened her mouth and moved her head down.

Grandfather growled, not with a human voice. He lifted an ebony cane and drove it up into Ian's ribs. Blood dripped, glistening in black and white. The rod rose above Ian's back, then dropped.

Ian dropped, too. Black rain, spoiled glass, still tickled in the air.

'No!' Barbara screamed, collecting herself. With a grunt of effort, she pitched herself towards Ian's attacker. He dropped the stick.

'Leave!'

Ian on his knees.

The staff tumbling.

'Alone!' Barbara screeched. Somehow she got her hands on to the shoulders of the cloak, her thumbnails on the smooth papyrus round his throat.

A clatter of wood on concrete, glass tinkling, Ian baying.

The old man stepped out of his cloak, leaving only night in her hands.

She swung round.

His full fist came down - impact.

The right-hand side of her face caved in, bloody and sick and singing.

Grandfather bought his fist down again. Through a half-reddened gauze she saw the object he'd been toying with, the tiny jug that had dented her face.

It shattered on her eye.

Her legs gave; she stumbled back into a heaped table of scrap. A nail tore away one of her sleeves - she felt it, unseen, imagining the tip gouging her elbow. Another edge caught her back, ripping through her

coat and blouse, and a spike split her skirt in two. They missed her skin, less than inches.

Pieces of jug dug into her face. She felt herself bleed.

Then she sank, out of the world.

Eventually Ian contrived a stretcher from the strange trees and they carried her into the safety of the ship. In her conscious moments she saw their faces, their concern, hovering around her, and knew she was dying.

Ian, dear Ian, frantic with worry. She meant a lot to him, as much as he meant to her. He spoke, or his mouth moved, though what sounds it made she couldn't tell. A confession, maybe. She never knew.

Susan had never been as easily read. She looked distracted, face caught under the triple suns of the otherworld. Then as the large TARDIS console light glowed round her head, she was relieved.

The terrible creature was locked safely out, and would die of red death on the third nightfall alongside - maybe - their few remaining friends. It bothered Barbara that they valued her safety more than that of an entire world.

You can't change history. Not one word.

The Doctor was most frequently at her side. He kept his thoughts well hidden but for once they were more obvious. He had been crystal-clear to her only once before, but she'd misread him then, mistaking fear for malice and hurt for suspicion. The Doctor, whose face had the sharpness of a bird, the wisdom of a magician and the timelessness of the sky, had lost all those qualities. He was just a frail old man, ashen-faced and weakening. Maybe that was his big secret.

She crossed herself. Not a Catholic, no, but she crossed herself. She knew her hand hardly twitched.

'What's your name?' she asked him, later when she was no longer dead.

'My dear, I can hardly tell you that,' he purred over the lip of his mug. Earl Grey tea. Oddly, she'd introduced him to it. She wondered if she wasn't taming him.

'Please,' she said, 'it would mean a lot to me. Who are you? Doctor... what?'

He smiled. 'You've taken my soul. Let me keep my name.'

She thought, then nodded, agreeable. 'That sounds fair.'

He chuckled, the most distinctive of his little foibles. His personality was hard and inscrutable now, but she could imagine him after a few years, losing his faculties with each changing moment. She would hate to be with him still when he was no longer as strong or clear-sighted as he was.

'The terrible creature that attacked me,' she asked. 'Do you have any idea what it was?' She remembered the gelatinous pressure on her face, seeping into her mouth, through the gaps in her teeth. She remembered an unsympathetic intelligence, trying to learn her and absorb her. It had made her sick, for the first time since she joined - been forced to join - the Doctor on his travels.

When they had torn it away from her, Ian had dropped it on the floor and stamped and stamped until it had burst. They had found nothing inside, just slick, translucent goo.

'I really couldn't say.' The Doctor became pensive; Ian and Susan were trying to avoid talking about the incident but it was clear the Doctor, like Barbara herself had replayed it in his mind. The fact that the Doctor had no answer for her was the most frightening thing.

'You must have some idea. Even a guess.'

'I believe... You must understand, there are boundaries, even for the TARDIS. The authorities of a certain era have ruled foresight impossible, though as for who and why it's as much a mystery to me as to you. It's possible that this was a... guardian. Hmmm?'

It's still here, she thought.

'But it's over now and I suspect we shan't see its like again.'

'It gave me terrible dreams, Doctor.'

'I know, my dear, and I'm sorry.'

Later she asked, 'Are you honestly trying to get us home?'

'Of course.' It was the truth. She didn't doubt it.

'What if I said I didn't want to leave?'

He looked quizzical, as though the possibility had never occurred to him.

'Tan does,' she went on. 'I know he's treating this like a big adventure, but there are times when I can see the strain getting to him. He misses 1963, and if he could get back there I would go with him. But...'

'But you wouldn't be entirely unhappy if you never saw your home time again?'

She wouldn't have put it quite like that. That morning, she had walked for the first time since the attack. She'd studied herself in the mirror, seeing a fresh tan and scars, new-formed muscles, lean flesh and - in her eyes - lean intelligence when she'd been becoming dull. None of the fear she might have expected.

'I've changed since we met,' she admitted.

'We all have.'

'I won't say I've become more human - quite the opposite in fact. I used to be a very cynical person. Can you imagine that?'

'It's not beyond my powers.'

She chuckled, just like him.

Three weeks after the attack, she was fit again. It was good to move again, and to explore the depths of the TARDIS. She had the idea of mapping it one day, then changed her mind: it was important that it remain a great unknown quantity, not a riddle to be solved with time and persistence. She enjoyed the strange, alien emptiness of the ship.

There were no windows. Everything else was fine.

She shared a room with Susan. It was the girl's face she woke up to every ship-

morning, gazing at her sleeplessly from the far pallet. Susan was another mystery she no longer needed to unravel. Every day she watched this brilliant infant alien wash, dress, eat, behave in every respect like a perfectly normal schoolgirl. Still, she wondered how painful it must be for her - for both of them - to wear these barbed human disguises, purely for the teachers' benefit.

'Why don't you share a room with Ian?' Susan had asked, at the start of their journey. She had shaken her head and laughed.

'It wouldn't be proper Susan,' she insisted.

'Well then, what would be proper?' The girl was surprised, maybe even angry. 'Is it proper to share a room with me?'

She sneaked through Ian's door, careful not to wake him. She found him stretched out on his pallet. There was a book folded on his chest, not a sword, though he was proud and noble as a knight, a carved effigy on a tombstone, Sir Lancelot himself.

She touched his hand. She would never kiss him, of course, unless he wanted.

She looked at her fingers, seeing the filthy goo of the dead alien crawling on her skin.

'If you and Ian ever leave, and Susan, too, I suppose,' the Doctor had confided, over tea. 'I shall be at a loss. I can't imagine myself travelling without company again, or at least not for long.'

She shook him frantically and he began to stir. She screamed, and her voice carried through the ship.

IT'S STILL HERE! DOCTOR, IT'S STILL ALIVE!

IAN! WAKE UP!

DOCTOR! HELP US!

IAN!

Around her the roundelled walls were crumbling.

A hard, throaty bell chimed, chimed, chimed.

She couldn't see so clearly. Everything in her right eye became smeared and out of focus. She couldn't open or close it fully without wincing. The right of her face was tender. Her left eye was slightly keener, and caught the glint from the junkyard floor, barely a foot away.

It took a painful effort to move her head. With her good eye she saw Ian opposite her on the yard, spread-eagled on the concrete. He looked dead - no, he grunted suddenly and tried to move. Then the old man stepped out of the shadow and rapped him across the back with his cane. Ian sighed and sank back down.

Grandfather stooped over the body, swinging his cane like a club. Apart from his clothes and age he looked savage, a primitive man, triumphant over the prone form of his prey, more animal than human.

No, he wasn't even that. She saw a collision of solid black and white with the semblance of a shape, moving on the yard.

He wasn't looking at her. She snaked out her hand and snatched up the glint. Her arm was ragged, cloth and skin scratched by the junk that had caught her.

The brute shape grunted and loped away, still crooked, into the shadows.

The glint was a key, sitting on the palm of her hand, a plain Yale key. She glanced up at the strongbox, realising what it was for. *Grandfather* must have dropped it in the struggle, or earlier.

She forced herself to stand, to hobble across to the box. She fumbled with the key, missing the groove on the padlock, once, twice. It took the third effort to get it in. All the while the old doctor was roaming the yard, his coarse breathing underscoring every second. She was trapped with the monster.

The key turned.

The lid came open with a squeal and a crash that was sure to attract *grandfather's* attention. It didn't matter. She had found Susan, curled up inside the box, just as she had feared and imagined. Her head, trapped in the corner, had an uncomfortable crook and her skin was pinched and colourless. There was a faint blue on her lips. She might have been sleeping peacefully.

Barbara's hand went to the girl's neck, searching for a pulse. It was icy in the box, and Susan's skin was just as cold.

'Oh,' Barbara murmured. 'Oh, Susan.'

Grandfather was standing behind her, very close, his cold breath on the back of her neck. She hadn't heard him at all, at least not until he broke out in a muffled fit of laughter at her back.

'Cursed spite,' he purred to himself, 'that I was born to put it Wright.'

When she turned he was further than she imagined. Three good clear yards away, twirling his cane like a truncheon. His mouth was open, wide and bare, exposing a line of perfect white teeth. Barbara gave him a look of pity and disgust.

'She said you didn't like strangers.'

'Ah, children,' he sighed in reply. 'Children.'

She flung the padlock at him but it curved wide of him. The old man giggled, and kept his ground. Then he flung his cane at her. She batted it aside, listlessly. There didn't seem any point to this, now she had lost.

She thought of asking him why he had locked Susan away, whether

he meant to kill her, and what he meant to do now, but the questions would have sounded empty. Instead she crouched on her haunches, putting her hand to a numb line on her calf. Her fingers came back bloodied. Everything in her damaged eye was tinted red.

Grandfather was pacing towards her, deliberately. She didn't want to look up, or see his face again.

To one side of her there was a warped fence, more rust than metal. The spars had fallen out of the old frame and lay in a dead rank on the floor. She reached for the nearest and pulled it loose. The frame protested, but after a scrape it snapped off. The shaft was rust-textured and icy to touch. She wrapped her fists around it and rose to face the oncomer. The tip of the spar was a spearhead, a cold iron spike.

The old man paused in his measured tread, then resumed. She doubted she looked formidable enough to do him any damage. The spear alone wouldn't dissuade him. She might fend him off, if only for a few minutes. She would have to leave Ian, to run and get help.

She had no time, no time at all. The old man was too close. He'd retrieved his cane. With a flourish he struck at her. The point bit into her temple above her left eye, grazed and fell back.

His scored face broke open, beaming. 'Why aren't you dead?'

She dropped the spear, so that the head poked at him. She jabbed feebly and he made contemptuous laughter. The cane slashed left, right, skimming past her head. The night drew in round her, and on the air, a hard, throaty bell chimed, chimed, chimed.

She thrust the spear hard at him, and the tip cut into his chest. His clothes, his skin especially, yielded like butter.

Barbara half laughed, and kept pushing. She watched his eyes widen - his mouth, too, silently. *Grandfather* gasped - the air seethed out of him.

Her fists tightened, forcing the spar on in, eyes studying the crease forming on the old man's lips, wondering how this must be feeling for him. The rod shook in her hands but she kept driving. It became an effort suddenly, as flesh gave way to bone. A few jerked thrusts cracked into it. There was a little pop from somewhere inside his body and the effort of the spear became a lot smoother.

The cane dropped to the floor. His hands flailed and his face broke.

Bashful, Barbara cocked her head away, but pushed onward, deeper into him. It didn't seem to matter how hard. The spear creaked but stayed rigid. It was growing heavy too, as though all the old man's energy, all his gravity, was leaking into it.

She felt light-headed; if it was fury it felt strange.

Another thrust, another crack, and the tip of the spike came out of the old man's back. That was around the moment that he died.

If anything the struggle became fiercer. His legs gave way and suddenly there was nothing supporting him but the pin through his body. The spear, dense with his dead weight, tried to shake out of her hands. She felt layers of skin scraping away as the textured metal fought against her palms. A curve formed on the rod, so sharp it looked as though it would snap. The old man's body drifted down to its knees, his head lolling, a sigh on his lips.

Barbara fought the rod down, bringing the point to the earth with as much care and patience as she could muster. The corpse lowered flat in a series of slow gentle movements, and Barbara stood over it, blooded fists still locked around its shaft, eyes cast down on the man she had killed.

Ian coughed. She looked up, found him half sprawled, half sitting on the ground where *grandfather* had beaten him. He looked as cheery as he could manage, under the circumstances.

'That was...!' He broke off, spluttering. 'I wouldn't have thought you had it in you.'

Barbara tipped her head slightly. The blood swelled under her right eye, ripe for bursting.

'Is he dead?' Ian asked.

'Oh, yes,' Barbara told him.

'You look a sight,' Ian added, an eerie hint of desperation in his voice. 'Are you hurting?'

She had to think about that one. 'No,' she decided, wistfully. 'Not any more.'

Ian hack-coughed and shook his head and smiled. The cough and the smile vanished eventually; the tremor of his head didn't.

'Susan's dead,' Barbara said.

He swung back his head, exposing the bare lump of his neck but hiding his eyes. Then his hands covered his face and the frame of his body began to rack. She didn't hear, but she saw him cry. It looked strange, an odd thing to do.

'I suppose we'd better get that policeman after all,' she remarked. 'I expect I'll be under arrest soon. I'll get a doctor, too. They're both dead, so I'll just find one for us.'

She craned her head up to watch the stars. A hole broke in the mist; the moon was down; there was inky blackness that filled suddenly with the November constellations, tiny specks, unimaginably large, suns every one. They turned in the skies, following the great arcs that would

last millennia. Some were burning bright, and they were already dead.

The ordeal had shaken the sickness out of her. The only pain she felt was on the outside, where she'd been slashed and bludgeoned and beaten. The swelling in her head had receded. She felt like turning cartwheels in the yard, just to make herself dizzy, to bring down another attack.

Ian gave off a low, plaintive squeal.

Barbara looked back down to the ground, to the body of the man she had killed. His pale skin filled the night with a burning white light, but he was no longer moving. She glanced over her shoulder at Susan, dead in the trunk, and Ian, moaning and beaten on the ground. She had a sudden responsibility. She dabbed the blood on her face tenderly, with a dry hanky - her bag had dropped, the iodine spilled in the fight. Feeling a little more prepared, she tottered uneasily to the gates.

'Don't leave me,' Ian called.

She turned back to him. 'I'm just going to get some help.'

'I think you're in shock, Barbara,' Ian warned.

'No, I'm fine,' she assured him. 'I'll talk to you about Christmas later, OK?'

Barbara!

The temperature dropped out on the street. There was no noise in the air. She heard a television buzzing in the distance - no, it was just tinnitus, a little hiss under her ears. Behind her the junkyard gates flapped open and closed in the night breeze.

She looked either way down the street. That was when it caught her eye.

Well, it's a police box! What on Earth's it doing here?

Ian was right. She turned to look for him, but there was no sign of him on the street.

She looked back at the box. She hadn't seen it before, but could easily have missed it in the fog. It was unmistakable this time; the roof light was pulsing, sending a warm blue beacon through the fog. She took one step, two, towards it, and watched as one of the door panels swung wide open. Inside there was darkness.

She imagined stepping through the doors, and being half blinded by an impossibly bright blaze of whiteness. Then she wouldn't be able to see at all.

She remembered saying: *Is this really where you live, Susan?*

She took a few more wary steps towards the box. Her shadow crept across the pavement before her.

A Town Called Eternity

by Lance Parkin and Mark Clapham

PART TWO

Sometimes the dead just won't rest. Take this fella, for instance: he calls himself the Master, and he won't lie down and die for nobody. Master of his own destiny, even if that means defying the almighty himself, a hickory-smoked corpse in a jet-black suit. He came to Eternity for the fountain of youth, and it looks like he found it. Used it to heal his hand and, seeing as how that water's pretty strong stuff, he decided to draw up a bucket and heal himself the slow way.

Course, now he's gone and spilled the darn stuff everywhere, and so all them dinosaurs are back and kicking, their fossils brought back to life by that sparkling immortality juice. They don't wanna stay dead either, though it won't be the same story for anyone caught by those teeth.

And then there's the Doctor, left swinging from a noose by the population of Eternity. He's been cut down and taken to the local undertaker's, and we'll leave him there on the slab for now. The Doctor may be dead, but there's some folks who are in worse trouble...

Long-dead bones sprang from the ground, rippling muscle and leathery skin knitting itself around them, tying fossils together into living, snarling beings. The floor crackled with energy where the fountain's healing waters had fallen. Dozens of reptilian beasts unseen since the Cretaceous sprang to life - from dusty fossils to rampaging monsters in seconds. They stood on their hind legs, swaying slightly, cold eyes darting between the various targets before them. Peri met the gaze of one and looked away, afraid to be fixed by that inhuman stare, afraid the fear would show and the monster would pounce.

'What are these creatures?' wailed Millicent Brown shrilly, taking shallow rapid breaths. 'What's going on?' She was about to lose it, and that was the last thing Peri needed.

'Josh!' Peri hissed, flicking her eyes in Millicent's direction. Josh gently put one hand on Millicent's shoulder, and gave her a hearty slap round the face with the other. The woman seemed to calm down slightly, too stunned by Josh's slap to ask any more questions. A couple of the other women seemed on the verge of tears, but Iziah tried to keep them calm.

There were about half a dozen of the reptiles now, more popping out of the ground as the water seeped into the dust. They stood on their hind legs, their short forelegs tipped with vicious claws. With their long heads and birdlike gait, they looked like reptilian ostriches from hell.

'Ah,' said the Master, stretching the vowel more than was strictly necessary. 'Velociraptors, I do believe. I remember them from *Jurassic Park*.'

'I'll take your word for it,' muttered Peri. 'Do they bite?'

The Master chuckled deeply, a guttural sound emerging from his wrecked face. 'Oh yes, they certainly bite. They are quite the archetypal predators, and would prove most amusing if they weren't in the way of my own resurrection.' He threw his head back and laughed at nothing in particular. 'As it is, they are nothing but another obstacle.' He clicked his fingers, the sound deadened by his leather gloves. 'Men, shoot these monsters!'

Still hypnotised, unable to comprehend their situation, the Master's posse drew their guns, their movements limp. The men raised those guns and fired at the creatures, with the listless air of uninterested children. They clearly had no idea of what they were doing. The gunshots echoed around the cavern, muzzles flashing in the blue light from the fountain.

The room erupted into mayhem as the newborn creatures reacted to the shock, flying at the posse with tooth and claw. One of the monsters flew back as shotgun pellets tore at its side, and it let out a high-pitched shriek. But another beast took its place, dodging low to sink its teeth into the belly of the man who shot its sibling. Peri winced, suppressing the scream she desperately wanted to release.

With the Master's attention focused on the bizarre battle, his hostages were left neglected in the opposite corner. Peri recognised an opportunity to get them out of danger, and made a break for their side of the cavern.

'Now!' she screamed, pointing to a tunnel while running towards her overextended family. As Peri ran towards them, the Browns and Josh seemed too shocked to move, transfixed with the battle between the Master's hired hands and the recently revived dinosaurs. Peri, for her part, didn't want to look, didn't want to know.

'Down there,' snapped Peri, pointing to the tunnel. She didn't know where it led, but the way they had come in was blocked by the dinosaurs, busy struggling with the Master's posse. 'Come on,' she insisted, dragging the nearest wife to the entrance.

The Master's hypnotic conditioning of his men was breaking down as they gradually fell before the onslaught. Soon the survivors were running, the 'raptors' close behind them. There was a brief silence in the cavern.

Josh reacted first, bundling Millicent into the narrow corridor and slapping her behind to keep her moving. She made some squeal of protest, but didn't stop. The rest soon followed. Peri dived in, grabbing Iziah by the hand and pulling him with her. The screams of one of the Master's posse echoed around the cavern, as the slowest fell to their pursuers. Peri tried to ignore the noise, to the extent that she almost didn't notice Dana's shriek of alarm as she was pulled back into the cavern.

'Don't stop,' snapped Peri to the rest of the Browns as they began to dawdle. 'Josh and I will get her back.'

'Will we hell!' exclaimed Josh, but Peri grabbed him by the shirt and dragged him with her as she re-emerged into the cavern.

She found the Master holding Dana by the throat, the woman's feet dangling above the ground. By the sparkling light of the fountain they could see her face turning red as the clawed, desiccated hand squeezed the breath out of her.

'I may have got the wrong one last time,' sneered the Master. 'But don't worry, I'm willing to work my way through your ancestors until I tear away your timeline, Miss Brown. If there's one thing that's more satisfying than killing your enemy, it's making sure they never existed.'

Peri barely managed a gasp of protest as Dana's neck snapped in the Master's hand. The reddened, unlid eyes of the monstrous Time Lord stared at Peri, as if expecting her to disappear, to simply unravel out of existence. Peri wished she didn't feel so relieved to still be there, wished she had time to worry about Dana's death.

'Oh well,' shrugged the Master, as Peri felt tears swell in her eyes. 'Plenty more to go, eh?'

'Damn you,' screamed Peri, enraged. She grabbed Josh's lantern, tearing it away from him. She noticed the look of fear in the Master's eyes, the way he dropped Dana's corpse to the ground and raised his mismatched hands in a weak defensive gesture. He was afraid of the flames, of burning again. 'Will you stop killing my relatives!'

She threw the lantern hard, and it smashed against the Master's shoulder, spilling burning oil over most of his upper body. He staggered away, whimpering to himself, as if in disbelief that he should be immolated again, the flames chewing at his black suit.

'Peri,' said Josh, as the Master crumpled to the ground. 'Remind me

never to be ungentlemanly toward you. You're a dangerous woman to know.'

Curtis looked the Doctor's corpse up and down. It was in good condition, all things considered. In thirty years as an undertaker he'd seen many a hanged man, and rarely did they lie dead in such a tidy state. This villain hadn't even soiled himself, and, if it wasn't for the dirty great rope burn around his neck, he could just be sleeping. It wouldn't take much to make him presentable enough for mourners, but Curtis wouldn't bother. No one mourned outlaws, vagrants or any lowlife who ended their miserable lives swinging from the gallows.

'I say we have him stuffed,' said Pete, Curtis's assistant. 'If he's a famous outlaw, we could display him in the front. The undertakers in Trinity have had the Hampton brothers on display ever since they were taken down by Sheriff Cutler, and people come from miles around to see 'em.'

'I say we just stick him in the ground,' said Curtis gruffly, his voice brooking no argument. 'This is a place of rest, not a freak show. Even a villain like this one deserves a proper burial. Though we won't waste a good coffin on him. There's some old sacks out the back - we'll shroud him in those.' Pete didn't move. 'Well, go and fetch 'em!' barked Curtis.

Pete mumbled to himself as he went to get the sacking, leaving Curtis alone with the body again. He looked the dead man up and down.

'Fine clothes,' Curtis said to himself disapprovingly. 'Too fine for a good man. Fancy sorts always come to a bad end.'

'Actually,' said the Doctor, voice croaking as he sat up on the slab, 'where I come from, this is considered positively underdressed.'

A different kind of pain broke through the low, burning agony of his scorched flesh. He had become used to that over the many years since he had gone beyond his final allotted regeneration. That pain was an old companion. This pain was different, a hideous, gouging pain, cutting through his upper arm -

The Master came back to consciousness with a jolt. He had lost control when the Brown girl set him aflame, fear more than pain driving him into catatonia. But even he couldn't sleep through a velociraptor trying to chew his arm off, its razor-sharp teeth digging deep into his scorched flesh.

'Infernal creature!' he roared in annoyance, punching the beast on the nose. 'I am the Master, I will not be chewed upon by the likes of

you.' He punched the creature again, and it let go, skidding back on the dusty ground. It was clearly unused to carrion that fought back. The Master grimaced as he tried to drag himself to his feet, each movement a challenge. He didn't have time to deal with this stupid creature. The Master fumbled for his TCE, lifting it slowly, trying not to prematurely alarm the creature. It pounced just as he pressed the trigger, the blast causing the creature to fly back through the air, life leaving its body as it shrank and withered to a miniature husk. The tiny body landed in the fountain of youth with a splash.

Seconds later it emerged, alive once more. The Master chuckled painfully as he watched it run across the cavern floor. The creature was still only a few inches tall. It scurried over to him, squealing.

'So, it is possible for a living creature to emerge from the waters unscathed, is it?' the Master asked the tiny dinosaur. It squealed in reply and tried to nip his ankle, so he kicked it across the room, where it landed with a frustrated squeal. 'Well, if the waters are safe, I can think of no reason to postpone my resurrection any longer!' His voice echoed around the chamber.

The Master chuckled to himself as he stepped into the fountain of youth, his chuckle developing into a fully fledged insane cackle as the waters washed all his wounds away.

The undertaker had fled the moment the Doctor spoke to him. Unsurprising, really, thought the Doctor, rubbing his bruised throat. Unfortunately, most victims of a lynch mob didn't have a respiratory bypass system to fall back on. On Gallifrey, hangings were less a form of justice, more a risky hobby for seedy Cardinals with regenerations to spare.

The Doctor pulled back the sheet on the other table, and looked at Sarah Brown's body. Another victim of the Master's insanity. Now Peri would have gone too, deleted from history, her family tree re-formed without Sarah. All because of the Master.

The Doctor had let the Master die, supposedly, burnt to a crisp in the fires on Sarn. It had been a painful decision to make, even then. And it had been for nothing, the deranged renegade simply escaping his fate once more, to return with another futile and brutal scheme. The Doctor could stop him, but never permanently. The two Time Lords seemed locked into a tedious, unbreakable cycle of violence, a centuries-long death dance where neither was ever truly obliterated, where the main casualties were among the fragile humans who came between them.

The Doctor shook his head, and covered Sarah's body. The least he could do was protect the rest of the Brown clan from the Master and his tamed lynch mob. The Doctor hoped he might get to them in time. The Master wasn't one to rest on the job.

He was expecting a disturbance when he left the undertaker's, and so sneaked out the back way, determined not to be lynched twice in one day; that would be terribly inconvenient and might seriously damage his reputation. To his surprise he found the main street deserted. After checking one way and the other, road safety being important even in premotorised eras, he nipped across the street, hiding in the doorway of the saloon. The Doctor peeked over the swing doors, searching for signs of life. The saloon was empty. No one at the tables, no one serving behind the bar. The Doctor thought this more than a little odd, especially for the middle of the afternoon. Perhaps there was a temperance drive at work.

'Who's there?' said an aged voice from the corner. The Doctor, still suspecting some kind of trap, gingerly stepped into the saloon to get a look at the speaker. An old man sat at a corner table, an empty glass in front of him. He was staring blindly into the middle distance, head swaying from side to side as he tried to catch any sounds. The Doctor didn't think the old man looked like any of his enemies in disguise, and neither did he seem like any other kind of danger, so he stepped closer.

'Don't you know it's rude not to answer a man when he asks a civil question?' snapped the blind man.

'I'm sorry,' said the Doctor hurriedly, feeling rather ashamed. 'My name's the Doctor, and I would have introduced myself sooner, but...' He trailed off.

The blind man snorted. 'Creeped out by how quiet it is, were you? Everyone's gone mad, that's why. Whole lot of 'em were running around, saying how they'd hung one of the Browns, and how they were gonna go hang the rest. Madness. Even the barkeeps have gone, and what use is mob justice when it leaves a man thirsty?'

'A mob, you say?' said the Doctor. He slapped the table in realisation. 'Of course. The Master's exercise in mass hypnosis must have gone too far. They lynched me, but their bloodlust hasn't been satisfied yet. That's the problem in trying to condition a large group of people: you don't know how individuals are going to interpret the influences placed on them. The Master's gone too far, and triggered a bout of mass hysteria in those poor people.'

The blind man shrugged. 'I don't know it's them you should feel sorry for. Not when they reach the Brown ranch, anyways.'

'You're quite right,' said the Doctor. 'I need to get there and snap those people out of their trance.' He rubbed his neck thoughtfully. 'Not that it did me much good last time,' he added to himself. 'Thank you for all your help.' He leaned over the table, grasped the blind man's hand and shook it warmly. To his surprise, he found the ageing man wouldn't let go.

'One thing before you rush off,' hissed the blind man ominously, squeezing the Doctor's hand.

'What do you want?' asked the Doctor hesitantly.

'Pass us a whisky bottle from behind that bar, friend,' said the blind man. 'A man could die of thirst in this place.'

They had found their way out of the caverns via a crack in the hillside, and had stealthily made their way back to the Brown household: Peri, Josh, Iziah, Millicent, Simone, Wanda and Venus. Although it was only a short distance from the hill to the house, they were forced to follow a route that allowed what little cover was available. They didn't want to attract the attention of the creatures still lurking in the cave, or the Master himself. Peri had had quite enough of that bearded lunatic for one day.

When they reached the house, Wanda and Millicent were left on the front porch to keep a lookout for dinosaur activity, while Iziah showed Josh and Peri the weaponry available to them. Peri was surprised but pleased to see she was being included as one of the boys. Perhaps it was Iziah's libertarian attitudes. Perhaps shock had made him forget a woman's supposed place. More likely it was because Peri seemed to be the only person with any understanding of what was going on, which frightened her more than anything. Even Old Josh, in spite of his mystical encounter, was out of his depth. Where was the Doctor when she needed him? Dealing with monsters was supposed to be his department; she was just the companion. The responsibility of having to be the smart one of the group felt a little too much for her.

Josh was examining one of Iziah's shotguns, aiming it at the wall and staring down the length of its barrel appreciatively.

'Would this stop one of those things?' Josh asked. It took Peri a second to realise he was talking to her.

'I - I suppose so,' she said, trying to sound confident. 'My dad never allowed me near guns,' she added weakly.

'Well, I bet your daddy never let you near any of *this*, either,' said Iziah, gingerly lifting a small box and placing it on a table.

'What's in there?' asked Peri.

'Explosives,' said Iziah. 'For mining, but I think we have a better use for them now.'

'Shoot,' said Josh. 'A dose of that would blow them critters' heads clean off.'

'Great,' said Peri without much enthusiasm. She was sure the Doctor could find a more elegant solution to the dinosaurs than blasting them to pieces. She couldn't see him as the type who resolved problems with dynamite.

Their conversation was broken off by Venus shouting for them to come quickly. Before she could react, Peri found that Josh had pressed a gun into her hand.

She looked at it. The weapon was a pistol, a six-shooter. Just like in the Wild West. Peri considered spinning it on her finger, but decided it would probably go off if she did that.

She followed the other two out on to the porch, where they were joined by the rest of the Brown clan. Instead of a pack of ravenous 'raptors approaching, there seemed to be some form of unruly procession, a large group of men and women slowly making their way along the dirt track to the house. Peri breathed a sigh of relief.

'Don't drop your gun too soon,' muttered Iziah. 'That looks a lot to me like a lynch mob.'

'Shoot,' muttered Peri.

The Master stood in the fountain of youth, the flow of water passing over his entire body. He could feel the invigorating properties of the water working their way through him, strange energies even a Time Lord could not understand. He sighed ecstatically as his body, that feeble humanoid body too weak for a being such as he, was restored to full health.

He stepped out from the fountain reborn, the elixir of youth in his veins. He threw back his head and laughed, using the full capacity of his restored lungs. The sound was music to his ears. There was a spring in his step, even with his boots full of water, a feeling of vitality and youth he had not felt for many years. The tiny velociraptor ran up to him again, and he kicked it across the room once more. Its suffering made him happy. In such a condition he would be unstoppable, and his infallible plans for universal domination would no longer...fail.

His boot crunched something into the dirt. He looked down to see a few pieces of broken glass, the remains of the torch that infernal Miss Brown had burned him with. No, he could not leave yet, not until he had taken a terrible revenge on the Doctor's young friend.

As the Doctor had suspected, the lynch mob was moving towards the Browns' farm on foot, following the pace of the slowest. And with them all under the Master's influence, the fastest were moving at a sluggish, drugged stumble. The Doctor watched them from a nearby hill, careful to keep out of sight.

He had been given directions to the Brown farm by the blind man, and had 'borrowed' a horse from a stable behind the funeral parlour; it was clearly an undertaker's horse, having a small shovel hanging from its saddle. The Doctor overtook the mob easily enough, taking a slightly more circuitous route to avoid a direct encounter. He was hoping his posthumous appearance might have some effect on the hypnotised mob, and didn't want to reveal his survival too soon. There could still be time to avoid bloodshed. First he had to find any members of the Brown clan still alive, and tell them of Sarah's death.

The Doctor used his heels to spur his horse onward, feeling slightly guilty at driving the creature so hard. But there was no alternative. He had little, if any, time to spare.

The Master raised his hands in a placating gesture as he approached the velociraptors. The creatures were gathered around the entrance to the caves, picking at the remains of both the Master's former lackeys, and the few 'raptors who had succumbed to gunfire before the humans were overcome. The Master stepped gingerly towards one, ready to lock eyes with the creature once it looked up. Hypnotising nonthinking entities was a tiresome business of humming in a soothing way while maintaining an authoritative manner, a dull process. But to have such magnificent, vicious beasts tamed to his will would make it all worthwhile. He might even breed a few in his TARDIS, use them to conquer a world or two, perhaps expand their brains to make them more intelligent. Yes, an army of intelligent dinosaurs. With such forces behind him he would be unstoppable.

One of the creatures looked up from its feast and straight at the Master. He held its gaze, making a hissing sound the beast would understand. Soon it would be tamed to his will.

'What can we do for you, Deputy?' asked Iziah Brown, shotgun cradled in his arm. His surviving wives, the Peri girl and Old Josh stood ranked behind him, all armed to varying extents. The Brown clan wasn't going to give in without a fight.

'You've gone too far this time, Iziah Brown,' replied Paul, the Deputy Sheriff. There was an unfamiliar slur in his speech, a slightly

glazed expression in his eyes. Massed behind him were the gathered townsfolk. Iziah recognised Ellie from the saloon, Ernest the store owner; some had been hostile to Iziah and his wives, others had been friendly. None of them had seemed like this before. They were unnaturally quiet, simply nodding in agreement as Paul spoke. Some had guns, others just sticks. One boy had a length of hangman's rope ominously coiled around one arm.

'How have I gone too far, Paul?' asked Iziah, uneasy. He didn't feel he was really able to communicate with the Deputy, that Paul was in some way not really in charge of his senses. 'Now come on, you've always been a self-righteous son of a bitch, but this is taking things too far. Can't you see this is nothing more than a witch hunt?'

'Witch?' repeated Paul. 'We had to hang the Rowley man after what he did to the witch, your wife. Now we're going to do the same for the rest of you. It's for the good of the town. You've gone too far.'

'Doctor?' gasped Peri, but Iziah was more worried about what Paul had implied about his wife.

'What do you mean "did for", Paul?' he asked desperately. 'What's happened to Sarah?'

'Dead,' said Paul simply. 'Shot down like a dog by...by the Doctor.'

'No, it can't be true,' said Peri, running up to Iziah and tugging at his sleeve. 'The Doctor would never hurt anyone - it must have been the Master. Look at their eyes, Iziah, they're all under his spell. They don't know what they're doing.'

'Peri's right,' added Josh. 'They don't even know why they're here. This doesn't make any sense. You going to string me up too, Ellie?'

'Gone too far,' croaked Ellie, eyes wide. She lashed out at Josh with a broom handle.

'Gone too far,' echoed Paul, raising his pistol.

'Gone too far,' chanted the rest of the crowd as they began to advance on the Browns.

The Master moved his hand to the right, a silver coin held between thumb and forefinger. The heads of the dinosaurs followed the coin's movement, like spectators at a tennis tournament.

'Yes,' said the Master, chuckling to himself. 'Very good. Just follow everything I do. Attune yourselves to the tone of my voice. After all, I am your Master now.'

Peri backed away. She had seen *Night of the Living Dead*, and therefore knew that hiding in the old farmhouse wouldn't hold off an army of

zombies for long. But it was the only option they had.

Suddenly, a handful of townspeople lunged forward, battering her with sticks and tools. Bursts of white clouded Peri's vision as blow upon blow rained down upon her. Although the attacking crowd seemed rather half-hearted in their blows, as if they weren't truly committed to what they were doing, Peri still couldn't escape. Never mind the grandfather paradox: she was going to die before she was born. She couldn't help feeling that this somehow qualified as cheating. She sank to her knees beneath the assault, felt consciousness slipping away from her...

...and then the attacks stopped. She could hear a strange metallic thumping sound, accompanied by an apologetic mumbling. Then she felt a hand on her shoulder, shaking her until she opened her eyes.

She looked up to see the Doctor leaning over her, a shovel in one hand.

'Doctor?' she mumbled. 'So they didn't lynch you.'

'Well, not exactly,' said the Doctor sheepishly. 'Now let's get you inside before this lot start fighting back.'

As soon as everyone was back in the Browns' house, the Doctor was surprised to find the man who had been with Peri grabbing him by the throat.

'You the Doctor?' demanded the man. 'Is it true what the Deputy said - that you killed my wife?'

'Iziah, no!' wailed Peri, but one of the other women held her back.

The Doctor gently pulled Iziah's trembling hands away from his throat. There was little resistance. He was clearly in deep shock, and didn't have much fight in him.

'You must be Mr Brown,' he said quietly. 'I'm afraid your Sheriff Masters killed Sarah, but convinced the townspeople I murdered her. He can be very persuasive like that. I'm so sorry about your wife. She seemed a quite remarkable woman, and I shall remember our short time together fondly.'

'Wives,' said Peri firmly. 'The Master killed one of Iziah's other wives too.'

'Excuse me?' said the Doctor, in a momentary lack of comprehension. Then he looked around the room. There was Peri, the hunched form of Iziah Brown, Old Josh...and four attractive women of varying ages.

'Ah,' said the Doctor. Then, to expand, he added a slight mumble. 'Well that would explain why your timeline is still intact, why you're still

here.' He gestured to Peri in a vague way. 'Any of these ladies, I suppose, could be your...?'

'Exactly,' said Peri, putting him out of his misery.

A change of subject was needed, to lift the conversation and take everyone's mind off their problems. The mob had backed off slightly, but would soon resume their assault, even those who had been on the receiving end of the Doctor's shovel. In the meantime they needed to think of something else. A problem. The dinosaurs, the ones this Rowley character had been called in to hunt down.

'Tell me,' said the Doctor. 'You haven't met any dinosaurs on your travels?'

The Doctor listened as, stuttering over the less plausible details, Peri recounted her adventures in the caverns, the elixir of youth and the bones popping to life.

'Fascinating,' said the Doctor, when she had finished. 'Quite fascinating. I suppose a recent seismic disturbance - an Earth tremor, in local terminology - disturbed the fountain, brought the water into contact with those fossils before now. There could be quite a few of the creatures out there, menacing cattle and the like. Quite a nuisance, really.'

'Nuisance?' exclaimed Venus. 'They ate the old Sheriff alive, tore out his guts and spread them over ten full yards, so they say.'

The Doctor looked pained. 'Thank you for filling us in on all the details, Mrs Brown. Thankfully, although efficient predators, these creatures are not used to dealing with anyone smarter than them; we should be able to round them up easily enough, by laying a few simple traps. Then Peri and I can take them back to -'

He was interrupted by Simone running into the room, breathless and flushed.

'The mob,' she wailed. 'They're trying to batter in the back door.'

Iziah lifted his shotgun resignedly. 'Looks like we're going to have to get rid of them the hard way.' He pressed a pistol into the Doctor's hand.

'No,' exclaimed the Doctor, waving the gun at arm's length, holding it by the tip of the barrel like a dead rat. 'No, you mustn't, these people are merely under the influence of mass hysteria caused by the Master's excessive use of hypnotic conditioning. All we have to do is break the spell, bring them back to their normal selves.'

'We tried reasoning with them,' said Josh. 'I even tried appealing to Ellie with my charm and fine nature. All I got for that was the wrong end of a stout stick.'

'Wouldn't be the first time your "charm" got you there,' muttered Venus facetiously.

'Well, thank you for your kind support, ma'am,' replied Josh tartly.

'Please!' said the Doctor. 'This isn't helping my concentration at all.' He paced desperately, trying to think of a solution to the problem, but he had always found the human mind an irritatingly complex and irrationally structured organism to deal with. He tossed the gun Iziah had given him from hand to hand, unsure whether to get rid of it or not. Even he was confused now.

A crash came from the next room, presumably the sound of the mob breaking into the house. Josh and Venus pushed over a table, jamming the connecting door.

'Doctor,' said Peri. 'If you don't come up with something soon, we're all in for a nasty shock.'

'That's it,' said the Doctor in delight. He pocketed the pistol distractedly, making a mental note to return it to Iziah later. 'Peri, you're a genius. What they need is a good shock, a really big surprise. We don't need to fight them - that's what they're expecting. We need to do something else, something that will unbalance their fragile sense of reality.'

'And this is supposed to *help*?' asked Josh disbelievingly.

'Precisely,' said the Doctor. 'These people are running down a very narrow behavioural track, focusing on very simple emotions. Complicate matters just a little, and they will soon revert to their normal behaviour patterns.'

'Doctor,' said Peri coldly, 'this is the screwiest thing you've ever suggested.'

'Thank you,' replied the Doctor, rather pleased by this response. Now, everyone, drop your weapons and think of something strange you could do when that door breaks down. Remember, irrational times call for irrational actions. They'll be expecting us to fight, or be afraid, so do the opposite: sing, dance, be happy!

Josh rolled his eyes to the ceiling. 'We're all gonna die.'

The Brown family had to die, Paul knew it. The Sheriff had told them to execute the man known as the Doctor, and Paul knew the Sheriff was always right. He didn't know how or why, he just *knew*. Paul was the Deputy Sheriff, it was his job to protect the town and its people. If that meant breaking a few heads to do so, then so be it. After stringing up Doctor Rowley it had been obvious what needed to be done next: root out the rest of the outsiders. And the Browns had never fitted in,

with their heathen, ungodly ways. They had this coming.

As a few of the stronger men hammered at the door in the Browns' house, Paul readied himself to deliver justice. It was his job, he knew it. When the door broke down, he was the first to step through the splintered wood into the next room. He was certain of what would happen when he got there, of the natural order of things. He knew his place in the world, what had to be done.

But when he stepped into that room, and looked around him, he wasn't sure of anything any more.

Peri had, on the *longueurs* of a holiday afternoon when she was younger, watched many a dreadful old film about medieval times on television. In many of these films, which were full of Hollywood inaccuracies and anachronisms, there would be evil kings or barons, ensconced in their cardboard back-lot castles with their gangs of brutish lackeys. These villains and tyrants would often require entertainment in between plotting against the swashbuckling heroes. They would call for a jester, and that jester would have to caper and dance for the villain, on pain of death. Peri felt an empathy for those jesters of old as she and her companions tried desperately to shock a lynch mob out of their dementia.

Venus and Wanda went for the emotional overload option, diving on a couple of men at the front of the mob and kissing them, hugging them, telling them how glad they were to see them. Iziah was singing a merry Christmas carol, thumbs in his waistcoat pockets. Simone and Millicent were dancing a primitive can-can, smiles fixed on their faces and fearful trickles of sweat rolling down their temples. Josh was juggling with candlesticks, while standing on one leg. The Doctor was singing a song telling everyone to stop doing something or other, while doing a silly dance to accompany it.

Peri had decided to pretend to be a dog, and was barking for all her worth.

It seemed to work. Those at the front of the mob looked bemused at the bizarre tableau before them, their propensity for violence being replaced by a slight befuddlement. Of course, they were then pushed out of the way by those at the back, so everyone had to keep up their routines.

'Right, everybody,' shouted the Doctor over the racket. 'Let's go outside so we can confuse the rest. And whatever you do, don't act normally until I tell you to.'

Peri replied with a resigned yapping, and the singing, dancing,

hugging, barking, juggling procession made its way through the trashed remains of the Browns' house, through an increasingly docile crowd and out through the back door. There they found the rest of the mob, who seemed about to attack until they too were disarmed by the group's bizarre behaviour. Pretty soon they too dropped their weapons, staring vacantly at Peri and her friends. After ten minutes or so of this, their audience seemed pretty tame.

'Can we stop yet?' asked Iziah. 'My throat is killing me, and I'm running out of carols.'

'Right, everyone,' said the Doctor, still in mid-dance. 'Let's slow down, see if they react badly.' Gradually the Browns, Josh and Peri slowed their various activities to a halt. The townspeople stared blankly on.

Peri panted, exhausted by her canine impersonation. She looked at the former mob. They looked lost, unsure of what to do.

'Josh,' hissed the Doctor. 'They trust you. Tell them to go home.'

'OK, people,' said Josh loudly. 'It's time to call it a night. You go home, go to your beds, and we'll all be friends again tomorrow, you hear?'

There was a murmur of assent, and the crowd began to disperse.

Peri was impressed. 'Josh, you really knew how to deal with them.'

Josh grinned. 'Miss Brown, when you've worked in a saloon as long as I have, you know how to lay down the law to a bunch of confused, angry people. It's part of the job.'

'While a Sheriff's job,' boomed a familiar, velvet toned voice, 'is to lay down the law for *all*, and to recruit the best available persons to aid in the enforcement of those laws.'

The Master walked through the crowd a man renewed. His sheriff's costume was battered and torn, but his previously scarred and burned body had been restored to full health. His pitch-black eyes gleamed with satisfaction, and he walked with a youthful swagger Peri had never seen before. He was followed by half a dozen of the dinosaurs Peri had seen restored to life in the cavern. To her horror they followed meekly in his wake, under similar hypnotic control to the townspeople.

'Well,' said the Master, 'how do you like my new deputies, Doctor?'

'I'm sure they're very good,' replied the Doctor. 'But where are you going to stick their little deputy badges?'

The Master chuckled. 'Irrelevant, Doctor, irrelevant. With an army of such beasts at my disposal, I shall be unstoppable. And yes, Doctor, they are totally under my command. With one word of command they attack, another word and they become passive once more.'

The Doctor raised a sceptical eyebrow. 'Hypnotically controlled dinosaurs, eh? Don't you think that, as domination plans go, this one is...well, a little silly?' He stuck his hands in his pockets, nervously waiting for a reply.

'Silly?' boomed the Master. 'You think my plan is silly, Doctor? Let us see how silly you feel my reptilian servants are when they tear you limb from limb.'

The Master took a deep breath, clearly bracing himself to utter the word of command and set the beasts loose. There was the crack of a gunshot, and the Master clutched his chest. He fell to the ground in a crumpled heap, unable to utter even a sigh.

The Doctor looked at the pistol in his hand with distaste.

'I had to shoot him,' he told Peri, a note of apologetic sadness in his voice. 'There was no other way.'

Peri shrugged casually. 'Don't apologise to me. I'm glad you shot him. Best thing you could do, really.'

He frowned at her. 'I don't know whether to be grateful or appalled that you feel that way.'

Peri took his arm in hers, plucking the gun from his limp fingers and tossing it aside.

'Don't worry about that now,' she said firmly. 'Worry about them'. She nodded towards the dinosaurs, who were mingling around in between the stragglers from the town. Neither reptiles nor humans seemed fully aware of their surroundings, and Peri was afraid the whole situation would descend into screams and bloodshed at any second, as the people panicked and the 'raptors' attacked.

'Ah yes,' said the Doctor. 'I see what you mean. This needs careful handling. Iziah, could you fetch some rope, please?'

'Certainly, Doctor,' replied the bigamous Mr Brown. 'There's some just back here.' He returned quickly with a few long coils wrapped around one arm.

'Good, good,' said the Doctor encouragingly, taking a length of rope. He began to tie one end into a noose. He briefly paused, looking at the loop of rope in his hand with a haunted look Peri couldn't decipher. Then he resumed his work.

'Now, all of you,' he said. 'Take a length of rope, and tie it into a lasso. Peri and I have some sedatives in town, but in the meantime we need to tie these creatures down so they can't go wandering off. They should be fairly docile for the immediate future, but be careful as you slide on the rope.'

The Browns, Josh and Peri nodded as they took lengths of rope

from Iziah, and knotted them in the appropriate way. Peri, to her shame, found she couldn't tie a decent knot to save her life. Literally.

'Got one,' said Josh excitedly, leading a lassoed velociraptor like a dog. 'Can I keep him, Doc?'

The Doctor frowned. 'Give him a while for the conditioning to wear off, and I think you'll find he's less than fully house-trained, Josh.'

'Oh they are trained, Doctor,' croaked a familiar voice. 'But to obey my commands.' The Master, shirtfront stained in blood, staggered forward, his TCE levelled at the Doctor.

'I should have known,' said the Doctor. 'You never stop, do you?'

'Did you really think a bullet could stop me now, Doctor? It inconvenienced me no more than the gallows stopped you.' The Master coughed, and blood dribbled down his chin. 'But now I shall cut you down to size, Doc.'

The lasso dropped around the Master's torso, and Josh pulled it tight. Then he slapped the rear end of the velociraptor - still tied to the other end of the rope - so hard that it broke into a run. The creature dashed off into the distance, a cursing Master bouncing along behind it.

'Thank you, Josh,' said the Doctor cheerfully. 'A very elegant solution to the problem. Now, let's round up the rest of these creatures.'

A few days later, the Doctor stood alone in the cavern that held the Fountain of Youth. He smiled weakly as he watched the water flow up from the ground, defying gravity as it defied all other laws of nature. A temporal freak, a liquid that reversed the effects of time. A tiny velociraptor, presumably created by the Master, ran around his feet, squeaking - another oddity.

It had taken days to fix most of the damage the Master had done in Eternity. With the aid of a tracking device and a tranquilliser gun, the dinosaurs had been rounded up. Some had already died, consumed by the paradox of their own existence, while others had mutated, reverted, fluxed into another continuum. The elixir clearly wasn't safe, certainly not safe enough to risk any more resurrections. Old Josh had been a very lucky man, and who knew whether he would entirely avoid side effects? The dinosaurs had been driven into a dark corner of the TARDIS, to be locked away where they could do little harm. The Brown's house had been repaired, and a new sheriff would be on his way. The hypnotic effects of 'Sheriff Masters' had worn off, leaving a sensation among many of the townspeople that something important had occurred, but that they couldn't decide quite what.

Some wounds would take longer to heal: the Brown family buried two of their own, in simple plots near the family home. After seeing the mutations caused by long-term exposure to the elixir, no one suggested it be used there. The whole incident was a part of Peri's family history the Doctor suspected she wouldn't wish to have seen. Stepping into history was never an exercise in nostalgia: there was always some nasty and unexpected detail the record books had left out. It was a risk that, thankfully, Peri still seemed willing to take.

All that trouble over the Fountain of Youth, something that should, logically, heal rather than harm. But the Doctor knew that humans, and most other species, acted in illogical ways. The fountain could only be a curse on those who guarded it, a magnet for trouble. And the Doctor knew from Peri that the Brown family had no such legacy.

So it was with regret that the Doctor placed the last stick of dynamite in the grotto. Perhaps it would be dug up again in some future time, and be put to good use. The flaws in the formula could be ironed out, to make it safe.

Or perhaps not. Holding back death, cheating time - there was always a price to be paid.

The Doctor took another look around the room, checking the fuse wires and fixing the details in his memory. Then he picked up the tiny dinosaur, slid it into his pocket, and left the cavern.

Outside, Iziah stood by the detonator, his wives, Josh and Peri gathered to watch. Iziah stepped back from the detonator, gesturing to the Doctor.

The Doctor knelt down, placing his hand on the plunger. Was this the right thing to do? He looked to Peri, the woman who represented the fate of the Brown family, who had as much a decision in their destiny as anyone.

Peri nodded.

The Doctor slammed down the plunger.

Special Occasions:

4. Playing with Toys

by David Agnew

It was a black room of treasures that he had thought lost. There was a safe in it which had once held pieces of the Key to Time. They'd adapted it into a fridge, and now kept cream cakes in it. The Doctor forgot the exact reason why, but it had seemed the right thing to do at the time.

The pair of them swept in there together at the end of another perfect, perfectly silly day. A light bulb, dangling from a length of frayed cord near the door, glowed warmly as they entered.

'What shall we do now, Doctor?' the blonde woman said, throwing off the white beard, losing none of her jollity with it.

'Wha- ' The Doctor spun around to face her with urgency and alarm as if a million volts had run through him, but only so he could then crumple into pantomime exhaustion to make Romana smile. 'You know, I think I'm a little tired for one day.'

'Well, I suppose you *are* getting on a bit,' Romana said sweetly.

'Getting on?' the Doctor echoed, authoritarian and aloof. Then he smiled reflectively. 'I suppose I am.' He walked over to the safe-fridge and nudged open the door with a booted foot. It was empty, and he tutted.

'Do you remember what we did on our travels yesterday?' the Doctor wondered.

Romana sat on a *chaise longue* and eased off her shoes, wiggling her toes to celebrate their freedom. 'We had fun.'

'Yes, I know, we always do. But the details.'

'Does it matter? The details are always changing.'

'Mmm. I wonder sometimes if I should have read the small print a little more closely,' the Doctor reflected. 'You know. When we came here.'

'It's not such a bad arrangement, while it lasts,' Romana reminded him, stretching out luxuriously on the *chaise longue*. 'We go on and on and on. Wind us up and watch us go.' She sighed, contentedly. 'You know, I'm a little bit tired myself.'

'Go to sleep,' the Doctor said. 'The universe will still be here tomorrow.'

'But we watched it end this morning,' Romana answered a little petulantly.

The Doctor put a bony finger to her lips to hush her. 'I expect there'll be others along. In pairs like policemen. Or in threes, maybe, like buses.'

'I'll see you then, then. Good night, Doctor.'

The Doctor watched her drift off. Her face was smooth and unlined, as if time could never presume to touch it. Her cheeks were still rosy from the Christmas cold. The blooms of colour didn't sit well with her snow complexion, but they'd fade. She'd be herself again by morning.

He straightened, and paced further into the room. It seemed to stretch on and on into the shadows. A few moments later he almost tripped over something. A large crate had been discarded here, and he huffed indignantly before stooping to examine it.

It was a toybox.

The Doctor looked around him as if expecting the owner to walk out of the shadows. He didn't know why or how, but suddenly he could feel the perceived importance of this box. As with all the most precious of things, it had been lost at some point, or mislaid, or put away out of sight, all childhood mystique intact. But the more he looked at it, the more he sensed that the children remembered it too fondly to leave it here for good. At night in this dark room he could imagine them all coming here, big and small, creeping in after midnight feasts and rummaging through the box. Taking toys and trying to remember how they had played with them before, long ago...and, a little embarrassed by those childhood games now they were older, they would change the rules. Make things harder, more difficult to follow.

The toys looked battered but well loved. Happy toys, the Doctor decided, glad for use, knowing no better. Their only purpose was to be played with, until they fell apart.

He turned to show Romana, beaming with a child's delight himself, but then frowned to find how far he'd come into the shadows. He could barely make out his friend's sleeping body on the Louis Quinze, lying there like a discarded doll.

Looking again at the toybox, he felt unsettled for a moment. There was one toy in the chest that seemed brand new; an exquisitely carved Chinese mandarin doll. Somehow it seemed far too important to be played with. Too grown up. Ah...The folly of growing old, thought the Doctor.

Of course, nostalgia had many ways to tickle the soul. The parents

had bought these toys for their children, and, as time drew on, they would remember. They wouldn't know the children had been sneaking in to play here in secret, they'd only recall the looks on their faces when they were little, and when the toys were new and shiny. The delight of delighting somebody else. He could relate to that.

But what if the parents didn't know their children any more? The Doctor frowned to feel a gnawing sense of worry somewhere inside. Those little people had all grown up, taken friends and lovers. Their parents couldn't hope to understand them now. But still they would take the old toys and wave them in their children's faces, hopeful to please as they once had. Puzzled at the muted response, they would perhaps buy new toys and try again.

Where was the harm in that?

The Doctor snorted, tried to will away his feeling of unease. Just then, a flickering, whirring, ticking noise started up from somewhere behind him, and he realised that the dark here was no gratuitous mystery: a movie was about to be shown. But it was warm and stuffy standing in the shadows, and something tickled the Doctor's cheek. He scratched absently, his attention caught by the hypnotic noise of film running through sprockets, and when he took his fingers away they were coated with something sticky. He felt the other side of his face, more puzzled than alarmed, then looked down at his hands in the dusty light beam of the projector.

Someone had daubed a thick, red greasepaint circle on both his cheeks. And now he tried to turn to call to Romana, to wake her and tell her this, he found he couldn't. His joints had stiffened up. Ropes were holding him. Or strings.

Thick vermilion curtains parted, opening up a rectangle of light as the movie began to play, but the Doctor didn't recognise the images at all. After a while, tiring of standing there helpless, he began to sleep too.

Vrs

By Lwrnc Mls

nd n the yr tw thsnd, th Cybrmn rlsd th cmptr vrs tht dstryd ll th vwls.