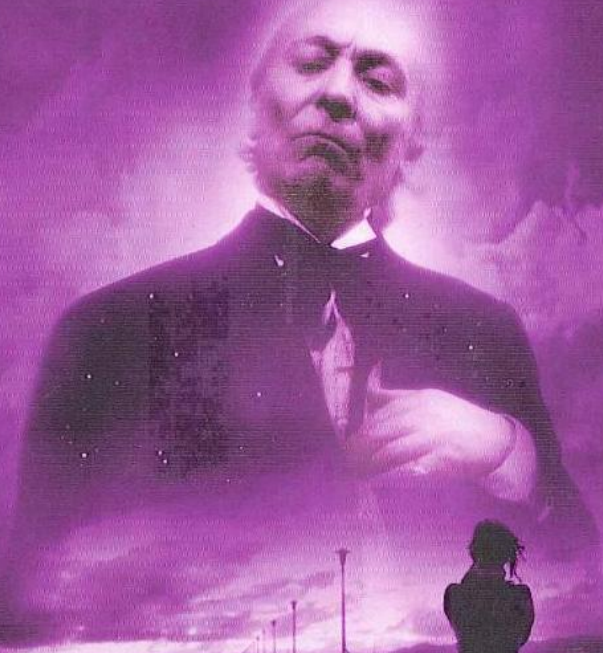


BIG
FINISH

DOCTOR WHO

SHORT TRIPS: FAREWELLS

A SHORT-STORY ANTHOLOGY



EDITED BY
JACQUELINE RAYNER



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The Mother Road

Gareth Wigmore

*An Adventure of the First Doctor,
with Susan, Ian Chesterton and Barbara Wright*

ILLINOIS

The forecourt of a Chicago hotel, downtown, the Sears Tower and the rest of the familiar skyline hanging in the heat like a row of knives above the oven in a plush kitchen. An old man seemed to be talking to himself as he stood near a couple of parked cars. Anyone driving past who happened to see him would have thought that there'd been a breakout at a well-to-do insane asylum; he was dressed wildly inappropriately for the heat wave, wearing thick check trousers and a three-quarter-length black coat, complete with waistcoat, wing-collar shirt and necktie. What was more, he was holding up a large black umbrella, which would certainly fend off any imaginary rain.

The Doctor was rather pleased with his parasol, which was keeping him in the shade. And although the heat was boiling up from the tarmac too, his long white hair and hawkish face were free of sweat. 'It's all quite a misunderstanding,' he was saying to thin air that had gone thick and muggy. 'I didn't think — how was I supposed to know what he was talking about? The man barely spoke English!' There was a pause, in which the Doctor glared about himself angrily, his lips pursed in frustration. 'Oh, Chesterton, aren't you ever going to be finished? We've got work to do!'

After a moment or two, a man's voice, slightly muffled, replied, 'You know, Doctor, it isn't as though this is the first time this has happened...'

'Chesterton, if I thought any harm could come to the TARDIS, I wouldn't be so free and easy about it. It can't be destroyed or damaged, and it can't go anywhere. No one can even get into it but me, with this key and this key alone.' The Doctor patted his breast pocket twice with his free hand. His eyes widened in horror — no key there — and he dropped his umbrella to one side as he felt around in his coat and trouser pockets until he found the reassuring, familiar shape. 'Yes, with this key and this key alone,' he repeated, brandishing it and giving a characteristic hooting chuckle of satisfaction before stashing it away again.

He leant down to pick up the umbrella but changed his mind and, still bending double, wandered forward towards one of the parked cars, a rather beautiful, if slightly battered, Oldsmobile 88 painted a fetching shade of purple. It was a classic American car of the 1960s — an enormous hood, two doors, a soft black top and curved lines, the chrome of its hubcaps and trim gleaming. 'I'll admit that the sooner we're in pursuit of the TARDIS, the happier I'll be, my boy. Aren't you even nearly finished, hmm?' Then the Doctor was all but knocked off his feet as Ian Chesterton slipped out from under the Oldsmobile on a wheeled

maintenance board, his face blackened with grease and damp with sweat.

‘Ah!’ said the Doctor, clapping his hands. ‘All done?’

Ian instantly brought a hand in front of his eyes to shade it from the violent sun, and then, thinking better of it, began wiping both hands on his borrowed overalls as he rose to his feet. ‘Now that’s what I call a machine, Doctor, one to love and cherish. Someone’s cared for that car — the same way you ought to care for the TARDIS.’ He was tall, dark and handsome in an unthreatening sort of way, with short black hair and a side parting; he looked the sort of man you knew would grit his teeth and get you out of a jam.

The Doctor bristled. ‘Chesterton, you don’t know the half of what I do to care for my ship, but she does — the ship does. Between us, the TARDIS and I might not be the most precise of navigators, but I keep her in tip-top condition and I won’t hear it said otherwise...’

Ian shook his head and clapped a grimy hand on the Doctor’s back. ‘The engine’s, what, maybe five years ahead of what I’m used to, but I think it’s fine. We can get on the road whenever you like.’

The old man’s face broke into a wide grin of delight. ‘Excellent, Chesterton! I knew she’d be a beauty. When I win at cards, I win big!’

‘Except for the TARDIS,’ Ian reminded him.

He dismissed that with a wave or two of his hand. ‘Oh, we’ll be back in the TARDIS in next to no time, I’m sure of it. Now, you go and get the girls and I’ll settle the hotel bill. Well, what are you waiting for, hmm?’

Ian had shut his eyes in resignation. ‘Doctor,’ he said.

‘What is it, my boy?’

‘Before we begin to drive 2,500 miles in search of your most important possession — which you’ve just lost in a bet, again — I am going to have a shower. An extra half-hour can’t hurt.’

The Doctor grabbed his coat lapel with one hand and patted Ian affectionately on the chest with the other. ‘Quite right, my boy, quite right. You go on. California certainly is a long way away so, after all, you’ve got a lot of driving ahead of you.’

Ian opened one eye. ‘Oh, please, no. Please tell me you can drive, Doctor. Please tell me Susan can drive.’

The Doctor looked blank. ‘Well, I never did ask very much about what they taught her at that school of yours, Chesterton...’

MISSOURI

‘Ah, St Louis,’ Barbara Wright said, sitting in the front left seat of the Oldsmobile as it passed a big white building with an enormous sign written on its side, ‘the perfect place for... frozen custard?’ She turned her head — a good head, with features slightly too large and sad to be beautiful, crowned with bobbed black hair straight out of a retro fashion catalogue — to the three slightly bored faces in the car with her and said, ‘I think we have to, don’t we?’ And she turned the wheel through ninety degrees, taking the purple-coloured car off the road and smoothly into the parking lot.

The trip down from Chicago had been fractious, to say the least, full of the usual long-drive family arguments. Ian had been cross with Barbara for having had a couple of drinks at the hotel, which initially doomed him to be designated driver, but he had of course really been cross with the Doctor and Susan for not knowing something so basic as how to drive. He suspected that the Doctor in fact knew perfectly well and was just being lazy; Ian confidently expected him to take the wheel at any moment. But they'd made steady progress along what both the teachers had been delighted to discover was Route 66, or the closest thing left of it.

'This is the great American road trip we're on, Doctor, the one people always talk about,' Barbara had said. 'Get your kicks on Route 66 — you must have heard of it, surely. It's famous! We may as well enjoy the scenery rather than just taking the motorway.'

'Interstate, Barbara, interstate,' Ian had chastened.

'What on earth are the two of you talking about?' Susan had leant forward to them over the gear stick, all amused and curious.

'Shall we sing the song, Ian?'

'Well, I think we should, Barbara.'

And they had both begun, neither of them entirely certain of the words: 'If you're planning to motor west / Take my highway, it's the best...'

The Doctor had kept quiet on that occasion. But the prospect of frozen custard seemed too much for him. He began to burble from the back seat about wasting valuable time, and banged his stick on the floor of the Oldsmobile so hard he nearly put it through altogether. As he wasn't driving, he didn't have a lot of choice in the matter. 'I don't want frozen custard!' he yelled when Barbara pulled in. 'If I wanted custard frozen, I could freeze it perfectly well myself!'

'I think it sounds rather yummy,' Susan offered, incurring a glare from her grandfather.

Once inside, the Doctor changed his tune, and while his friends were gawping at the menu as though it were written in ancient Mesopotamian, he'd already made up his mind. 'I'll have the triple chocolate pistachio sundae, with some strawberries if you please, young lady,' he said to a waitress who probably weighed as much as the four of them put together. 'And a skinny latte with a shot of vanilla — no, no, let me see, a shot of hazelnut.'

'This isn't custard,' Barbara was saying, flipping the menu over and sounding thoroughly disappointed. 'It's ice cream with all sorts of trimmings.'

'Welcome to the early days of the twenty-first century, Barbara,' the old man declaimed, leaning on his stick and looking out from their booth to survey the whole restaurant. 'Anything you want, you can have it — provided you can pay. A time of epicurean excess, a time of simmering global strife, a time of hamburgers the size of your head and thick shakes as big as your arm, of imaginary medical complaints and stress-related lives, of panic and terror, of genetic modification and salads with more calories than a chocolate bar. A good time for the greedy, a bad time for the charitable, and this country more extreme in both than anywhere else on your little world. In short, a nice place to visit.' He smiled at his friends, satisfied at his own eloquence, and allowed himself a quick

‘Hmm!’

‘Can I have a plain frozen custard, please?’ Ian said to the waitress, who hadn’t gone away and was looking at the Doctor with a panicked expression somewhere between ‘I love your sweet old man’ and ‘Don’t make eye contact with the weirdo’.

The waitress’s pen hovered over her notepad. Then she shrugged and told Ian, ‘We don’t really do plain here at the frozen custard house.’

Ian looked the menu up and down again, and drew a blank. ‘Well, what’s the closest you’ve got to plain?’

The waitress thought for a moment. ‘Fancy?’

Ian nodded. ‘Just a fancy frozen custard, then, please.’

‘And to drink?’

‘I’ll have a thick shake as big as my arm, please. As fancy as you like.’

KANSAS

Susan was dreaming. She and Ian were alone in a garden she’d known back on her home planet, having a picnic. Then suddenly it was dusk, and they knew that they had to get indoors before night fell — and that something was watching them as they ran, something nervous but dangerous, something that would fight her if it felt threatened by them. And then she felt its hand come down on her shoulder and woke with a scream.

The Doctor jumped when he heard it and let the steering wheel wobble, sending the Oldsmobile veering into the next lane. Fortunately, nothing was coming and Ian, in the passenger seat beside him, grabbed the wheel and brought the car back straight again. ‘Whatever’s the matter, child?’ the Doctor asked, slapping Ian’s hands away.

‘Sorry, Grandfather,’ came the response.

‘I just woke her up too quickly, Doctor, that’s all,’ Barbara said, taking her hand away from Susan’s shoulder. ‘I’m sorry, Susan, I just didn’t want you to miss Kansas.’

‘Miss it?’ the teenager said, yawning and stretching out on the back seat next to Barbara, looking into the blackness of the Kansas night. ‘It’s enormous, isn’t it?’

Ian laughed. ‘That’s right, Susan, it is pretty enormous. I dread to think how many times it could swallow England.’

‘But we only skirt it, you see,’ Barbara told her. ‘The old Route 66 just covers 13 miles of Kansas, the tiniest bit of it.’

Still yawning, Susan said, ‘What’s that in kilometres?’

‘Oh, about twenty, I suppose,’ Ian replied. ‘Hey, steady on, Doctor — we want to have a look round the place, not just whiz past it all.’

The Doctor didn’t slow down, and didn’t turn round to humour Ian. ‘Chesterton, now that you’ve taught me the rudiments of driving this ridiculous contraption, perhaps we’ll make progress a little quicker, eh? How tedious it is, travelling from A to B by having to go through every point in between the two. I may not always have an absolutely precise idea where the TARDIS is going, but

at least it gets there quickly.'

Ian winked at Barbara. 'We could always have got an aeroplane, Doctor,' he said, not for the first time.

'What, passports and ID checks and biometric scans? I don't think so!' The old man chortled, overtaking a truck — badly — and waving in a friendly fashion at its enraged driver.

'I was having quite a nice sleep, and there's not really much to see out there,' Susan said sulkily as the Oldsmobile skipped over a little pontoon bridge. 'Just more of the same, really. Oh, we were going through Missouri for ever. This is a stupid country, all flat and lifeless.' This sleepy petulance just added to the rather gamine charm that Susan had — the tousled, boyish black hair, the wide brown eyes and delicate features. She leaned forward, putting her hands round the Doctor's shoulders as he drove them on through the night. 'Can't we stop somewhere soon, Grandfather? It'd be nice to sleep in a bed tonight rather than in the back of this rickety old thing.'

'Less of that, if you please,' Ian said, pretending to be offended. 'This car's younger than I am. I think I'm holding up pretty well, considering I'm probably in my seventies by now, wouldn't you say, Barbara?'

'Ian, that's a point.' Barbara's voice was excited. 'Imagine if we're out there somewhere now, drawing our pensions and playing with our grandchildren.'

'Maybe we live in Kansas,' Ian said with a shrug.

'Maybe we do. Maybe London was too small for us after all the things we've seen — all the things we're seeing now, the alien worlds, other ways of living.'

'Maybe you're not on Earth at all,' Susan said, giggling. 'Maybe by the time you're seventy you'll still be in the TARDIS with me and Grandfather. You'll look as old as him by then, and I'll have to look after all three of you.'

'Oh, do be quiet, Susan,' came the Doctor's voice, stung into irritation. 'I am trying to drive, and the citizens of the United States of America come 2006 don't seem to have a great deal of regard for manners on the road...' The glare of headlights lit up his features, showing his eyes wide and bright, though tense. 'Perhaps you're right, child,' he continued after a moment, 'perhaps we should find somewhere to sleep tonight. Even I'm becoming a little tetchy, cooped up in here.' And then he added in a flustered manner, as though he'd suddenly thought it necessary, 'But I worry about the TARDIS, you see, even though it can come to no harm. I don't want to waste a minute if we don't have to!'

Barbara folded out a map on the back seat, looking at it with the aid of a pocket torch. 'There should be a motel in a couple of miles, Doctor. Who knows what it will be like, but it should have beds at least.'

'Yes, let's aim for that, Doctor,' Ian added, nodding conciliation. The Doctor wrinkled his nose in a show of unhappiness, but said nothing more, and when the motel lit up on the right side of the road in the headlights, he pulled the Oldsmobile over.

As they got out and walked through the empty parking lot to the reception, Ian pointed up at a sign sticking out over the highway, which announced 'First motel in Oklahoma! OK!'

'Hey, Barbara,' he said quietly, nudging her to get her attention. 'We're not in

Kansas any more.’
Barbara grinned.

OKLAHOMA

It was four in the morning, and the Doctor was gunning the Oldsmobile through Tulsa. He was getting a feel for this primitive machine now, he thought, this gas- guzzling monster of a mode of transportation. He’d even joined Chesterton for a look under the hood earlier and seen the appeal of its crude but beautiful V8 engine. It was like the man himself and the species he was such a good representative of, the Doctor thought with a little chuckle — frail but amazingly capable, provided it was kept well-oiled and fed with the right materials. He chuckled again, a little noise at the back of the throat that made Susan stir in the passenger seat on his right.

‘It’s all right, it’s all right, Susan, you carry on sleeping. I’m quite happy, just me and the road,’ he told her, looking over and smiling.

Susan groaned. ‘No, that’s it now. I’m awake. I’m awake.’ She saw the sun coming up and checked her watch, then gave way to more groaning. ‘Ten past four?’

The Doctor shushed her. ‘Even if you’re awake, keep it down, for the sake of our sleeping beauties in the back seat there.’ He nodded backwards towards Ian and Barbara, huddled into one another, with Ian letting out the occasional extravagant snore.

Susan gave a lilting kind of laugh. ‘They’re sweet. It’s only when they’re asleep they cling to each other like that. They spend all their time when they’re awake pretending they don’t want to. Where are we?’

‘Just coming out of Tulsa, I think. It looked a rather charming place, from what I could see of it in the dark. Now on to Oklahoma City and... and to whatever’s beyond that.’

They didn’t talk for a couple of minutes; Susan tried to get herself comfortable, wriggling like a cat against the back of her seat until she was looking directly across at her grandfather, her legs perched up underneath her. A railway crossing loomed up ahead; no barriers, but a freight train had already begun its way through, and the Doctor brought the car to a halt with a mild noise of irritation.

‘Grandfather?’

The Doctor turned away from the train. ‘What is it, child?’

‘I just...’ Susan’s eyes were downturned, her voice nervous. ‘I wondered... What if we don’t find the TARDIS? What if that man you gambled with has found some way to get in and he’s taken it away from this place...?’

The old man shook his head slowly, as though it were impossible — because he knew that it was. ‘It can’t happen, Susan, I say it absolutely cannot happen. We’ve been to hundreds of worlds and hundreds of times, and no one has ever managed to get into the ship, no matter how hard they’ve tried. The people of twenty-first- century Earth certainly couldn’t break in. Even if they could, they’d never be able to understand how to make her move. Buchanan doesn’t even

know that it's anything more than what it looks like — a police box from fifty years before his time. There's no chance of our losing the TARDIS. So you can stop worrying about that, hmm? What do you say?'

Susan looked away from him, towards the train and the great clouds of dust being thrown up by it in the early morning light. 'Then what if we can't find it? It's small, and this country's so big. We could lose it forever and have to spend the rest of our lives trapped here — can you imagine it? Trapped on Earth for ever!'

The Doctor sighed. 'Well, the TARDIS is small, I admit. But it's not inconspicuous here, like it was in 1963, no! In 2006, a police box is a thing to be noticed. That's why Buchanan wanted it in the first place — because he wanted to sell it, to auction it off in California to the highest bidder for its curiosity value, its novelty. An old English curio, he called it. Which is why we've got to get to that auction and either make sure it never happens or make sure we buy our TARDIS back!'

'But it's our only link to home, Grandfather.' The girl's voice was low and not entirely level. 'There's nothing else. If we lost the TARDIS, we'd lose our only chance to go home again. Think about it. We'd never see any of our people again.'

The last freight compartment had rolled by, but the Doctor didn't move on. 'Child, you know as well as I do we could never go back. We will never see our people again. You and I have said goodbye to that life for ever.' He put out a trembling hand and placed it gently on one of hers.

'But while we've got the TARDIS, we can dream about it, can't we?' she said, tears beginning to trickle down her face. 'I know you do too, Grandfather, I just know you do. I can't give up dreaming it. I don't want to!' She leaned over the seat to him, and they huddled together in the front, just as their human friends were huddled together in the back.

He let her cry, and kissed her forehead once. 'I miss the old life too, Susan — the friends, the places. And you're right that the ship is every bit as important to me as it is to you — it helps me remember all that we've left behind. But I'll get it back for the both of us. And I promise I'll never lose it again.'

TEXAS

Barbara stared at the sky through her five-dollar sunglasses. It was blue — cloudless and perfect and blue. The heat wave was chasing them west. She tilted her head back and forward a couple of times, gauging the colour with and without the benefit of the brown-tinted plastic. She decided she preferred it real, that harsh blue that stung the eyes like the pain of a long injection; besides, she didn't want to be left with a panda suntan. She blinked in the glare and closed her eyes tightly, the knockout afternoon sun searing the lids red on the inside. 'When I open my eyes,' she murmured, lips and tongue sticky in the heat, 'I'm going to be in London. In 1963.'

'Hmm? Barbara?' she heard Susan say.

'When I open my eyes, Susan,' she said louder, sounding quite determined,

‘I’m going to be in London in 1963.’

Susan sounded sleepy and puzzled when she replied, ‘But then I’ll have no one to put the sun cream on my back. I could ask Ian. I’m not asking Grandfather.’ Barbara turned her head and looked at Susan sternly. ‘You could ask Ian,’ she told her, but it wouldn’t do any good. Ian will be in 1963 with me. The Doctor will just have to do it for you.’

The younger woman pushed her own sunglasses down the exquisite, snub nose which Barbara secretly coveted. ‘You opened your eyes, Barbara. And you’re still in Amarillo.’

Barbara raised herself on one elbow and looked at the horizon, where the low buildings of the city soon gave way to the vast, sprawling, simmering yellow of the panhandle plains. ‘Blast,’ she said, her brow furrowing and all her long features drooping in mock-disappointment.

Susan giggled and waved a shapely bare arm in her friend’s direction. ‘You know that Grandfather will get you home eventually.’

Barbara lay back down on her sun-lounger, listening to the lapping of the pool’s fake waves a few feet away. ‘Eventually sounds like a long time — and getting longer every minute it takes Ian and the Doctor to fix the car. I can’t keep chasing monsters for ever. I’ve got things to do, people to be — teacher, wife, mother...’

The teenager shuddered. ‘Give me monsters any day. Not little monsters. Yuk.’

‘I’m serious, Susan! I’m spending my prime screaming at aliens, getting lost on planets millions of trillions of miles from home, and sunning myself in America forty years in my own future. It’s not really how I saw things working out.’

Susan lowered both shoulder straps of her bikini — it left little to the imagination — and reached for the factor 25. A passenger plane, fat like a bumblebee, drifted absurdly low and slowly overhead as it came in to land, and everything vibrated for a second to the pulse of its engines. ‘Rather be back in Coal Hill School, would you, teaching Cortez and the Mexicans to spotty tearaways who couldn’t care less?’

Barbara adjusted her one-piece swimsuit, glared at her pasty English skin a little accusingly and shrugged, lying back in that all-enveloping heat the same way she would in a warm bath. She picked up a garish-looking cocktail, complete with theatrical umbrella and stirrer, and said, ‘I suppose there are some compensations...’

Ian and the Doctor appeared at the poolside, both in begrimed boiler suits and sporting ten-gallon hats. ‘Ian and I have been shopping,’ the old man said in response to Susan’s laughter.

‘And we’ve fixed up the Oldsmobile good and proper,’ Ian added. ‘Back on the road whenever we’re ready — next stop Albuquerque.’

Neither of the girls moved. ‘How do you spell that?’ asked Susan. ‘And do you mind, Ian — you’re in my sun.’

Ian moved to his left, into Barbara’s sun. ‘I can barely say it, let alone spell it.’

‘Never mind Albuquerque, my boy!’ the Doctor cried, taking off his

enormous hat and wiping the tiniest amount of sweat from his brow. 'All that work on the engine has left me a mite peckish. And I've been telling Ian about just the place — we'll pass it on the way out of town. The 72oz-steak house — eat the whole steak in an hour and you get it for free!'

Ian glanced at his stomach; Susan and Barbara looked at each other and winced. The Doctor made a surprised noise at their lack of enthusiasm. 'They serve rattlesnake too — fried, I'd wager,' he offered, but found a similar lack of takers and a more vocal display of unhappiness about the menu.

'And pints of oil to drink, it wouldn't surprise me,' Barbara said, climbing off the lounge and plunging without further hesitation into the pool.

Ian, fully clothed and still wearing his hat, jumped in beside her with an enormous splash. He looked through his wet eyes up at the Doctor's surprised face, and said, 'Just a few laps, Doctor. I've got to make room for the ostrich burgers you told me about.'

'That's the spirit, Chesterton!'

NEW MEXICO

It was evening, after sundown, and Ian and Barbara were strolling through the central plaza of Santa Fe, for all the world like tourists. It was fiesta season, and there were still market stalls and traders plying their wares for the passers-by as they walked back from restaurants to bars and hotels. Most of the wares seemed to be dried chillies and tatty pieces of fake-Indian sculpture, but they were still things to pick up, laugh at, put back and happily walk on, past one low mud-coloured adobe structure to another.

'You folks newlyweds?' asked a gruff old vendor — all white beard and dungarees — from whom Barbara had bought a trinket in the shape of a Pueblo flute-player, which she planned to give to the Doctor purely to see the expression on his face. The two teachers just looked at each other and laughed. 'Well, you're in love, anyways,' the vendor said as he gave Barbara her change. 'You keep it that way, and have a good time while you're here. Here for the fiesta?'

They couldn't dodge that one, and Barbara quickly said, 'That's right. It has a wonderful reputation, and we're having a lovely time, thank you.' She thought that hit all the right notes.

The vendor's ears pricked up. 'Limeys, huh?'

'From London,' Ian joined in. 'We're driving the old Route 66 from Chicago and thought we were too close to miss Santa Fe.'

'Is that right? Hee! A couple of Limeys driving Route 66!' The old-timer seemed delighted. 'Well, you kids made the right choice. This place is worth seeing, all right. Ain't what it used to be, some say, but I've lived hereabouts my whole time and I say it's better than ever. Yep, better than ever. Now you go off and have a good night; if I ever make it to London, I'll look you up! Hee! Yeah, I'll look you up!'

The travellers thanked him and moved on, their mood bettered for having been exposed to such simple cheerfulness, freely given. They walked on alongside the governor's palace and down towards the art museum, hand in

hand, leaving the glow of the floodlit mud-red cathedral behind them. It was a nice evening to meander, still and warm but less humid than much of their journey had been, with the scent of chilli inescapable in every breath of air.

‘It’s not such a bad place, is it?’ Barbara’s voice was relaxed.

Ian looked around for a moment. ‘Bit blocky for me — hardly proper architecture. But nice enough. Better than Texas.’

‘I didn’t mean Santa Fe, Ian — I didn’t even mean America. I meant Earth, 2006.’

‘It’s not Earth, 1963, is it? Your own little personal phones so everyone can keep tabs on you 24 hours a day; half the people are the size of buses; there are millions of television channels solely to take advantage of idiots who don’t know better than to buy what people want to sell them —’

Barbara waved her little sculpture. ‘And those of us from 1963 are exempt from that kind of crime, are we?’ She laughed. ‘But it feels like home, Ian — it’s not changed that much. I bet we could walk through Trafalgar Square or Greenwich Park and it wouldn’t be so different.’

‘Stroll past the observatory,’ he said, smiling into the distance.

Barbara joined in the imaginary day out. ‘And down to the Cutty Sark for the afternoon.’

‘A pint of beer in a pub on the Thames — hey, you do think they still have bitter in England, don’t you?’

‘I’d put money on it,’ Barbara said with a grin.

Ian gawped in feigned horror. ‘Don’t make gambling jokes! That’s why we’re on this crazy road trip in the first place. Back on the trail tomorrow, into the hills and canyons and who knows what else of darkest New Mexico.’

Barbara shook her head. ‘Don’t you believe it. Do you really think even the Doctor could take us off the main road and so far out of our way as this, just by accident? He’s up to something.’

‘The thought had occurred to me too,’ Ian said, raising an eyebrow. ‘It’s just a question of what, and when he lets us in on it.’

They stopped, and Barbara let go Ian’s hand, turning to look up at him. ‘Do you think he’ll get his TARDIS back?’

‘I don’t doubt it for a second.’

‘And do you think he’ll ever get us home? To 1963? Ian, do you think we’ll ever get our lives back?’

Ian blew out a long breath. ‘One day, maybe. And in the meantime — well, we enjoy the meantime. You do enjoy it, don’t you?’ He sounded as though the thought had never occurred to him before. ‘Travelling with the Doctor, I mean — and with me?’

Barbara looked away from him, and out into Santa Fe. ‘I love it, Ian.’ Her voice was taut with honesty, almost bruising. ‘It’s the most adventurous, terrifying, exhilarating thing I’ve ever done. I’d hate to say goodbye to it. But it’s hard. It’s hard for you too, isn’t it?’ She glanced back for reassurance. ‘This is like a holiday — no monsters, no aliens, nothing horrible happening, no one trying to kill us, for once. But next time the TARDIS lands, it’ll be back to being scared out of my wits and making it out alive by the skin of my teeth. I am tired, Ian.’

He put a hand out and stroked her hair, tenderly. ‘Do you want us to stay, Barbara? Forty years in our own futures? We could, you know. Wave farewell to the Doctor and the TARDIS once and for all, and go back to England, 2006...’

‘Like Japanese soldiers crawling out of the jungle after the war and saying, “What? It’s over? When did that happen?” Barbara gave a brittle, bitter laugh at the idea.

‘Just like that. We could.’

Barbara’s eyes were wet. ‘We couldn’t. We couldn’t do that to our friends and families — our other friends and families, I mean. They’re waiting for us in 1963. The Doctor will get us back there. One day. In the meantime, we work at enjoying it. Just like you said. And we trust in this new family we’ve found ourselves part of.’

Ian wrapped her in a bear hug, and smiled from ear to ear.

ARIZONA

‘Imagine it! Just imagine the horror!’ the Doctor was telling a school party, while the official tour guide stood on one side, enjoying his talk in spite of herself. ‘You’re a peaceful child of the Sinagua. All day you work hard to survive in the forests and plains of this country. The land is tough, but good to you. It gives you crops; it gives you beasts to catch and eat. It feeds your family and it feeds you.

‘And then it turns on you!’ The old man theatrically slapped the front of one hand into the palm of another, making a couple of the smaller children jump. ‘There’s a rumbling in the land, deep earth tremors that knock you off your feet. Some last for seconds. Some last for hours. They become more violent and more frequent. You’re scared, your parents are scared. They turn to the tribe’s elders. But the elders are scared too. They don’t know what to do. Should they move on, leave this place that’s been so good to them? After all, it looks the same, it smells the same — but then there are the tremors, earthquakes now, causing trees to fall. Suddenly you can’t catch the same number of animals you used to for food. Why? Because they’re more sensible than man is — they’ve all gone!’

Susan hung her head in embarrassment. ‘Honestly,’ she told Barbara and Ian, ‘we can’t take Grandfather anywhere.’

As a professional who’d led school trips that resembled the queue for lifeboats on the Titanic, Barbara was actually rather impressed by the Doctor’s hold over the children. ‘They don’t seem to mind,’ she said. She was right: the thirty or so children — eight- or nine-year-olds — were lapping it up.

‘Let’s say at the last minute your tribal chief says that the land is cursed — that some god is offended with you all — and decrees an exodus. You pick up your possessions and try to flee, but what if it’s too late?’ He assumed a more conversational tone. ‘Now tell me, have you ever heard the thunder?’

Thirty heads nodded in unison.

‘Imagine the thunder — and multiply it a thousandfold! All at once, the sky is raining fire down on you. Great chunks of the earth that’s sustained you for so long have been superheated by underground lava and are flying through the air

like shrapnel from a bombshell. The forests that you played in burst spontaneously aflame and burn like so much tinder! You and your family run one way, only to discover that there's a lake of lava in your path — all the fires from the centre of the earth poured out on to your home — and it's coming your way.' The Doctor addressed a small boy at the front of the group. 'Well, what are you to do, hmm?'

After a moment, the boy said, 'Mister, you talk about it like you were there.'

'Perhaps I was,' the Doctor said with a wink. 'Perhaps you can be there too, if you imagine it hard enough.'

The boy shut his eyes and imagined as hard as he knew how.

'But many of the Sinagua survived. And when they wandered back to their old land, they found the earth covered in ash and cinder, better for farming than it had ever been — but with this majestic volcano soaring into the air from land that had been only meadow before!' And the Doctor threw an arm up to the vivid colours of the peak of Sunset Crater, in whose shadow they were all standing. It was a *coup de grâce* and the children recognised it, bursting into applause for what was obviously the end of the show.

The Doctor blushed and put up a hand to signal that there was no need. 'Have a wonderful time, children,' he told them, 'and learn every single thing you can while you're here. It's been a pleasure talking to you — thank you most kindly for listening.' And with that, he wandered away from the class and back over to where his companions were standing. 'Hmm!' he said as he approached them. 'I rather enjoyed that. Young minds, young minds, how often they're neglected...' Then he carried on, Susan trailing in his wake.

'The surly teenage temptress, the crazy, unpredictable old man...' said Barbara quietly as she watched them go. 'This is a family, all right.'

'Does that make you and me the boring, responsible middle children?' Ian asked cheerfully, taking her arm and not waiting for an answer.

CALIFORNIA

Ian edged the big purple Oldsmobile neatly into the Santa Monica hotel's parking lot, carefully checked out of one side window and then the other that he was between the two white lines, brought up the handbrake, then reached down to the ignition and switched off the engine. He turned to the others and let out a whoop of delight at just the moment that they did. Barbara leaned over and hugged him; the Doctor clapped his hands in glee and embraced Susan in the back. 'That's it, that's it!' the old man cried. Journey's end!

'Route 66!' Ian shouted.

'Done and dusted!' Barbara said, a wide smile splashed across her face.

'Thank goodness,' commented Susan rather less enthusiastically. 'We can finally consign this sweaty little box to the dustbin and find the TARDIS.'

Both the men looked grossly offended. 'Far from being a "sweaty little box", this car is a classic, child, as you may have noticed en route...'

'Never mind that, Doctor!' said Ian. 'The important thing is that we're here! We've arrived! Santa Monica! The end of the road! Everything west of here is

Pacific!’

‘That’s right, Chesterton. The great American road trip —what fun it’s been!’ the Doctor exclaimed excitedly. Then he coughed, edgily. ‘Why, if I’d known about it before, I dare say I might have wanted to travel it anyway.’

‘Oh, is that right, Doctor?’ said Barbara pointedly, incurring a nudge from Ian. She nudged him back.

They got out and shut the Oldsmobile’s doors one last time, looked out at the Pacific, vast and blue with crashing waves that made a mockery of the name, then wandered into the brightly lit reception. The check-in was the same as it had been everywhere else they’d stayed, except that the Doctor asked the clerk whether his room could have ‘one of those computers in it — you know, one with a connection to the... er, the...’

‘To the internet, sir?’ the clerk asked after a moment.

‘Er, that’s the thing,’ the old man confirmed, nodding profusely and trying to look as though it weren’t important in the slightest. ‘I merely thought it was time I had a look at how this internet works,’ he explained to the others in the lift. ‘Why don’t you come and join me in a bit, Chesterton? I imagine you’d find it fascinating.’ He coughed a little shiftily, and glanced at his watch. ‘You’d better give me an hour or two, though. I could quite do with a nap!’

Fifteen minutes later, Ian tried the handle of the Doctor’s room. It was open. There was the Doctor with his back to the door in semi-darkness, the room’s curtains drawn, sitting in his shirt sleeves at a table with a screen, tapping away at what looked like a typewriter keyboard and angrily saying to himself, ‘I most certainly did double-click!’ Ian crept into the room and got close enough to the screen to read it for himself.

A colourful logo across the top proclaimed that it was ‘RetroAuction.com’. Below that was a photograph of the TARDIS and the words ‘1950s ENGLISH POLICE BOX. Condition: reasonable. NB: will not open. Bids: 7. Time remaining: 2 mins 07 secs. Highest bidder: dr_who. Highest bid: \$350.’

Ian clapped a hand on the old man’s shoulder. ‘Caught you red-handed!’ he said. The Doctor jumped out of his skin. ‘What on earth are you up to, Doctor?’ Ian asked him, pulling a chair over to sit down next to him.

‘Quiet, Chesterton, quiet!’ the Doctor hissed in a stage whisper. ‘We’re at a very delicate stage in proceedings. I need total silence and total concentration! I’ll explain everything in a moment!’

The screen beeped and a message flashed up. ‘Oh no!’ it said. ‘You’ve been outbid by steam_r14. Please place another bid. Time remaining: 1 min 34 secs. Highest bid: \$360.’

‘Oh, no, you don’t!’ the Doctor snorted, his hands moving so quickly that Ian could barely see what he was doing.

‘Bid accepted! Congratulations!’ the screen read again. ‘You are the highest bidder for this item at \$400. Time remaining: 1 min 12 secs.’

‘What is this?’ Ian asked. ‘Some sort of... I don’t know, a computerised auction?’

‘Shush, my boy! We have to wait now.’

The two men froze over the keyboard, other than the Doctor having to keep

clicking a bit of plastic he called 'mouse' to show how the seconds had counted down.

'Oh, no! You've been outbid by steam_r14. Please place another bid. Time remaining: 0 mins 41 secs. Highest bid: \$500.'

'I will not be outbid! That TARDIS is mine!' the Doctor shouted, his fingers blurring over the keyboard again.

'Bid accepted! Congratulations! You are the highest bidder for this item at \$600. Time remaining: 0 mins 23 secs.'

The Doctor was indignant. Tut that in your pipe and smoke it, Mr Steam 14 or whatever your name is.'

'Last of the big spenders, Doctor,' Ian commented with a frown.

A nervous few seconds passed. Then, a new message flicked on to the screen: 'Congratulations! You are the winner of this item — 1950s ENGLISH POLICE BOX. Winning bid: \$600. Click here for collection details.'

The Doctor raised both arms in the air in celebration. 'Chesterton, I have just bought back the TARDIS!'

Ian couldn't help laughing. 'So I gather,' he said, beginning to peer at the wires stretching out of the back of the machine, 'although I admit I don't understand how. Are lots of these computers connected together somehow, and anyone who owns one can bid?' He took hold of the mouse and absently clicked it.

'Careful!' warned the Doctor, but a new message had come up. 'Congratulations on winning this item — 1950s ENGLISH POLICE BOX. Item must be collected directly from seller — Chicago, Illinois.'

The pair of them stared at the screen for a moment. Slowly, Ian put his head in his hands and looked at the floor. 'Does that mean what I think it means?'

'Well, I... I fear it does, Chesterton, I fear it does.'

'And how long have you known that the TARDIS never left Chicago, Doctor?'

The old man hooted nervously, his chin raised high in the air. 'Haven't you ever wanted to drive Route 66, eh? You must admit we all needed a holiday, and it was quite a lot of fun... Anyway...' Ian was unmoved. The Doctor coughed in embarrassment and reached for the mouse. He brought up a screen that had a large picture of an aeroplane on it and a logo that read 'quickflights.com', then turned to Ian with a guilty smile and said, 'I'll make the reservations in first class, shall I?'

Father Figure

Steve Lyons

*An Adventure of the Second Doctor,
with Victoria Waterfield*

She had dreamt about her father again.

She had run through the empty rooms of her old house, looking for him, knowing in a small, sad part of her mind that he was gone.

She had found him in her bedroom, in the mirror on the dressing table, amid all the other familiar knick-knacks — but when she had turned to face him in the flesh, he hadn't been there.

Whirling back to the glass, she had gasped at the sight of him falling away from her. She had reached out to him, crying for him as she hadn't done since she was a child: 'Papa! Papa!'

But the glass had blocked her desperate fingers, and he had been swallowed by shadows. And Victoria Waterfield had been left alone.

She woke in her *other* bedroom. In the TARDIS.

Something was wrong. Its gentle white atmosphere didn't soothe her as it normally did.

Her first instinct was to blame the nightmare for her disconcertion. Always before, her father had been a comforting presence in sleep, talking to her, reassuring her that he was happy and so proud of her. She didn't remember when she had last had one of those dreams. With that realisation came an aching guilt.

Had he left her because she had forgotten him; because she didn't need him any more? How could he think that was true?

The TARDIS wasn't moving. That was the difference. Normally, its subtle motion would have lulled her through the night. How long had she slept? Not long, she didn't think. Could they have landed again already?

Her stomach tightened at the prospect. Not another adventure. Not yet. She wasn't ready.

But then another thought occurred to her. A worse one.

The automaton waited.

It had waited a long time. Long enough for the weeds beneath its feet to grow wild and the bushes around it to spread their branches. Long enough for the erosion of the standing stone tablets to become perceptible, at least to its sensors.

But it waited still, although a human mind would have long since concluded that its vigil was pointless. It waited because the passage of time held no meaning for it. Because it had been *programmed* to wait. And to watch.

And to believe that, one day, no matter how distant that day may yet be, the time would come for it to stop waiting. And act.

Victoria's suspicions were confirmed in the harsh light of the control room. The Doctor was still there, his head buried in a panel beneath the console, making the odd little noise to himself. She watched him for a few minutes until he sprang out, registered her presence and greeted her with a broad grin.

'We're still in London, aren't we?' she said.

'I'm afraid so,' said the Doctor, his face lengthening mournfully. Then his eyes became hooded with thought as he operated a series of controls. 'Some residual... blockage from the Great... Intelligence's web...' he murmured distractedly. He stabbed at a final switch, and his eyebrows knitted together as nothing seemed to happen. 'Nothing to worry about. It'll just take a few more hours to flush out the system.'

'I'd like to go outside,' said Victoria.

That got his attention. He looked her up and down, appraising her; she could see the unasked questions behind his eyes.

He must have noticed the dress, all frills and white lace. Since leaving home, Victoria had revelled in the choice afforded to her by the TARDIS's wardrobes, surprised herself with her daring. Not now. Not today.

'I... I need some fresh air,' she tried to explain. 'I feel all... cooped up.'

He didn't challenge the logic of her story, just reached for the lever that opened the doors. 'Well, I don't see any harm in that,' he said. 'The Yeti are all gone now.'

But as Victoria skipped past him with impatient haste, the Doctor added a gentle caution: 'Just be sure to stay away from the railway tracks. And don't wander too far.'

Voices.

Three children, laughing and playing, their words hushed by the knowledge that they weren't meant to be here.

The automaton had experienced such intrusions before, but they had grown rare in recent decades. It processed the sounds and, factoring in environmental conditions, pinpointed their source. The calculation took it a little longer than once it would have done.

It brought its weapons systems online.

The foliage gave it cover. It moved between the bushes, diagnostic systems noting that its movement was no longer as swift or as smooth as it had been.

It could see them now, running around the stones, throwing a bladder filled with compressed air between them. Its left optical sensor was inoperative, but it turned up the right to full magnification, and scanned their faces. The patterns did not match the ones in its memory.

They had seen it.

They had ceased their games. They were pointing, and talking to each other in concerned whispers. The automaton increased the sensitivity of its audio receptors and scanned their conversation for key words.

They appeared to think it was a 'caretaker' or a 'tramp'. One of them argued

that it was a statue, but the others shouted him down. They feared it might be dangerous to them.

In such circumstances, the automaton was programmed to wait and observe. Pre-emptive action would only draw attention to its presence. As long as the humans failed to recognise its nature — as long as they remained ignorant, like all those before them — they would be no impediment. If they did not...

The targets were out of range. But the automaton had located their most likely entrance point to this plot of land, and charted the most direct route back to it.

Even allowing for its reduced speed, it could reach them.

The streets were still quiet, but people were returning to them. Victoria winced at the sounds of automobile engines, and choked on the fumes they left behind. She wondered how much more noisy the city would be on a normal day. A day on which it hadn't been evacuated due to an invasion of robots.

The air was chilly, but the sun was climbing in the east. It cast its light through the bars of the gate that still sealed off the Covent Garden underground railway station. Sitting on the steps behind that gate, her knees brought up to her chest, she felt like a prisoner again.

Perhaps it was for the best.

In the sanctuary of the TARDIS, it had seemed so much simpler. This was London, after all. Her home. Her old home. Almost exactly 100 years after she had left it. It didn't seem like such a great time span. Not after AD 3000. Not after all the journeys to other countries, other worlds. But when she looked at it now, through the bars, it was alien to her. Almost as alien as the quarries of Telos. In some ways more so.

She recognised the shapes of the market buildings, remembered her father taking her around them, and this only underlined to her how much everything else had changed.

And that he wasn't here any more.

She heard footsteps on the pavement, approaching her, and some instinct told her to run. Back into the station. A jangling sound, and the squeaking of hinges. She clambered over the turnstile again and crouched down behind the ticket barrier.

A man in a peaked cap tramped down the stairs, fumbling with a collection of keys. He didn't even glance in Victoria's direction. He opened the door to the little ticket office, and disappeared through it. A moment later, a light snapped on behind a dirty window.

And Victoria's heart was pumping, because suddenly, terrifyingly, it seemed like fate had taken a hand. Opened the gate. Like it wanted her to do this.

An alien world. But she was closer to him than she had ever been. Since the Doctor had given her the dreadful news; since he had whisked Victoria away in his wonderful travelling machine, and saved her from having to think about it.

Saved her from having to go back to her old life without him.

She knew she couldn't have faced it then, couldn't have coped. But now, it was time. Now that the Doctor had shown her there was so much else to the

universe, convinced her she could go on without him although she thought about him every day.

Time to say goodbye. She owed him that much, at least.

Victoria crept across the booking hall, keeping one eye on the lit window. When she reached the steps, she hitched up her skirts and broke into a run. She was out on the street before she could give herself time to think about it, time to doubt.

She knew the Doctor would be worried when he found her gone. He would have helped her. Jamie too. But deep down in her stomach, she felt that this was something private, something she had to do by herself. And anyway, she couldn't have told him.

In an odd sort of a way, she thought it might have hurt him.

It seemed like hours later that Victoria stepped off the bus, regretting her decision but committed to it, knowing now that she would have been missed, wishing she had left a note or something. When the big red vehicle had pulled up in front of her, bearing the name of the very area she needed on its front, it had felt like fate was giving her another push.

Then there had been the altercation with another peaked cap, this man calling himself a conductor. He had let her off the fare when she had burst into tears, even offered her a handkerchief and asked her in a kind voice where her parents were. She had said she was going to find them, and he'd let her know when they had come to the right stop.

Victoria hadn't realised how much she relied on the Doctor to guide her — even with the small things like crossing a city, finding a place she had visited a hundred times before. She hadn't realised how much she'd relied on her father before him.

She had no idea how she would get back to the TARDIS.

But for now, she was here.

It tugged at her heart to see the cemetery so neglected, overgrown plants reaching through the rusted iron railings. The padlocked chain on the gates was rusted too, as if it hadn't been used in years. She hammered on the bars with her fists and wept, as if somebody might hear her and help. Nobody came.

When her father had brought her here, as a child, the lawns had been well tended. Victoria had been able to hear the birds in the sky, not the growling of car engines and the hammering of— what was that? — some kind of builders' tool in the distance. It had been, if not beautiful, then at least tranquil. A fine resting place. Papa had told her that Mama was at peace here, and that she would always be remembered.

He would have found his way here. She was sure of that. Even though he had died on that terrible world...

She had to take care of herself for once. There was nobody else.

She followed the railings until she found a pair that had been bent apart, leaving a gap through which she could just about squeeze her petite form.

Inside the cemetery, weeds dragged at her ankles and thorns caught on her skirts. She couldn't see the path; no doubt it was overgrown too. All she could do

was keep struggling onward until she came to it. Then she could get her bearings. But suddenly, her foot touched something in the undergrowth.

Something soft and bulky. Something unexpected. She stumbled, and put out her hands to save herself.

They brushed against something clammy, and she gasped as she realised what it was.

Another hand. Connected to an arm. Connected to a body, pale and dirty, half buried, unmoving. And small.

For a moment, she thought somebody had opened a grave as a cruel prank. But the body was fresh, its face untouched by decay. The child could almost have been sleeping. Except that there was a red, sticky, melted mass where his chest and stomach ought to have been. And, nestling in the midst of that mass, incongruously: a football.

Victoria gasped and averted her eyes, feeling a surge of nausea. She had seen death before — all too often, it seemed, since the Doctor had entered her life — but she knew she would never, ever get used to it.

It was all too much. She couldn't deal with this. She needed the Doctor. She needed her father. She needed someone to advise her, to help her, to take the responsibility from her hands.

And, casting around in desperation, backing away from her gruesome discovery, she found someone.

He was standing, watching her from the bushes, silent and still.

She was almost overcome with relief. He had to be a groundskeeper. A man in authority. But she stopped herself before she could run to him. If he was a groundskeeper, then why were the grounds in such a state? And if he was meant to be here, then surely he would have come in by the gate — but the gate hadn't been opened.

There was another possibility, and it made her feel cold.

'Oh,' she gasped, unable to hold in the exclamation, although there was no one around to hear it. 'Oh, no! Oh, please, no!'

Victoria knew she should run, but she didn't — because now the man was striding purposefully towards her, and she could see...

She was frozen to the spot, gaping at him, gaping at something that couldn't be. It couldn't...

But she would have known that face anywhere...

The automaton's wait was over.

The young female's face matched the one in its memory. It hadn't even had to compensate for increased age, although so much time had passed. It did not question this discrepancy. Its masters had programmed it to recognise and destroy the human identified as Victoria Waterfield, and now she was here. It needed to know no more.

But there was an unanticipated variable. The female had stopped some way short of the primary location: the headstone. Like the children before her, she was out of weapons range. If the automaton was aware of its own culpability in this setback, it spared no processing time for self-recrimination.

It compared its options. It could cut her off from her nearest exit point — the gap in the railings — as it had with the children. But there was a risk that the female might know this land, might take another route and confound it. Once, the automaton would have been able to exceed her pace, but that was uncertain now. However, it had one more weapon: the greatest one in its armoury.

Its masters had known that emotions, and irrational connections to each other, were the weaknesses of soft, organic life forms. They had sculpted the automaton's face, its hair, its synthetic clothing into a form that the female would find impossible to resist.

The automaton started forward, certain that its appearance would confuse its target, maybe even bring her to it, gain it the seconds it needed. It brought its weapons systems back online. And, to complete the illusion, it spoke in a voice that had also been meticulously crafted:

'Victoria! Victoria, oh, thank goodness you're here. I've been waiting so long, but everything's all right now. Come to Papa, Victoria. Come to Papa!'

The monster was trying to say something.

Victoria thought she recognised her own name, but it came out as a slurred electric buzz, something familiar wrapped up in a nightmare.

Like the monster itself. It was supposed to resemble her father; that much she could tell. But the flesh had peeled away from part of its face, to reveal gold circuitry. Its left eye was dead, the socket surrounded by burn marks, and the pupil of the right flashed with an internal red light. It moved jerkily, dragging its right leg behind it, a mass of coloured wiring protruding from a gash in its knee. And it reached out to her, electricity sparking blue from its fingers and discharging to the ground like miniature lightning bolts.

She was terrified, but angry too. Who could have done this? Created this... this *abomination*? This mockery of a man whom she had loved so much, who had made her feel safe, and now she feared she would never find comfort in her dreams of him again.

Then her instinct for self-preservation took over, and Victoria ran. Not back to the railings, though — and that, she thought with a plunging feeling, was a terrible mistake. She threw a frightened glance back over her shoulder, and saw that the monster was giving chase, its damaged leg giving it a lurching gait but hardly seeming to slow it down. There was no way back for her now. No way out. But in that desperate moment of decision, she knew with hindsight, she had been unable to turn her back on her father — her real father. If she'd fled to the street, it would have felt like she was abandoning him again.

She didn't get far. She couldn't run in her Victorian skirts — they kept threatening to trip her — and she had no idea where she was going. And suddenly the fence at the other side of the cemetery loomed before her and she had to change course or be cornered — but the monster had anticipated this and it was moving to intercept her. Victoria shrieked, and found a renewed burst of speed. She passed the monster, but it had gained ground on her.

And she was backed up to the side of a crypt, and it was advancing. She couldn't run left or right — it was too close; it would catch her — she could only

shrink against the wall and try to plead with it although she was choking on her tears.

And the sparks from its hand had gathered into a ball of hissing, spitting blue death.

The Doctor came to her rescue, of course.

The automaton's sensors hadn't detected his approach. He was suddenly there, his tousled appearance tripping alarm bells in its head.

Its masters had known that, when Victoria Waterfield came here, the Doctor might come with her. Destroying her would fulfil the automaton's programming; destroying him would exceed expectations.

He was red-faced, out of breath, jumping around, waving a device in the automaton's face. Something tubular and silver. The automaton rounded on him, retargeted its weapons systems, and brought up its hand.

The Doctor pedalled away from it, his eyes bulging out of his head. The automaton unleashed a bolt of destructive energy, but somehow he twisted and turned and ducked under it, rolling to the ground beside a patch of newly scorched earth, knocking his little bow-tie askew.

It needed a moment to recharge. The Doctor took advantage of that fact.

He was on the automaton, all arms and legs, confusing its sensors. And suddenly, he thrust the tubular device into its empty left optical socket.

Its audio receptors were overloaded by a shrill, high-pitched shriek. They blew out, taking one side of its head with them. It was reaching up, clawing at its own eye with hands that were sluggish to respond to its commands, trying to remove the enemy device but unable to reach it.

And that shriek was growing louder, more intense, juddering through its metal skeleton, shaking its joints apart.

Too late, it accepted that its electronic life was over, gave up trying to save itself and turned instead to its closest target, seizing upon its last chance to fulfil its programming.

The girl, Victoria, threw up her hands and let out an ear-splitting scream that only added to the cacophony inside the automaton's head. Her image ran red and strobed, baffling its targeting array, but it couldn't muster the power to do her harm anyway.

The last thing the automaton registered was an error report from the engines that drove its legs, as the ground rushed up to meet its remaining optical sensor.

'How did you know where I was?' she asked, once the panic had subsided. Once the Doctor had retrieved his sonic device and the flickering flames inside the monster had died down.

'Oh, my dear Victoria,' he said, 'I'm just sorry I didn't see it earlier.' His face clouded. 'Even a bunch of soulless killers could work out what you needed better than I could. They knew you'd come back here, one day.'

'Then that... that *thing* waited for me...'

'For a century, yes. A monumental act of spite on the Daleks' part. They knew your father would have a memorial somewhere in the area. They sent their

replica to find it. Fortunately for us, they didn't know it would be waiting quite as long as it was.' He poked the dead monster with a toe, and something inside it — some mechanism — groaned, making Victoria jump. 'It was shielded against electrical attack, bullet-proof and as strong as ten men — but in the end, it was no match for a hundred years of your English weather.'

'I suppose everything dies in time,' said Victoria, in the quiet voice of a child. The Doctor looked at her. 'Yes,' he said softly. 'I suppose it does.'

She had said her farewells, but she couldn't bring herself to leave yet.

The headstone had been there for as long as she remembered — and, although it was crumbling, although the inscriptions had become hard to read, it seemed in this moment that it would be there forever.

She had seen her mother's name in the stone before. Many times. She had caught her breath as she had seen her father's beneath it, although she had known to expect it. She had thought it would look newer.

She'd apologised to them both for having stayed away so long, for not having been a dutiful daughter. She realised, with a lump in her throat, that even with a time machine she could not correct that mistake. She couldn't come to visit them in an earlier year, because the replica would be waiting for her.

When she thought she might be ready, she looked for the Doctor.

He was waiting for her with boundless patience, at the end of a pathway that she could just make out now. At the cemetery gates, which he had managed to open somehow.

He caught her gaze and smiled, and Victoria smiled back at him and went to him.

Her best friend. Her protector. She knew she loved him.

But she also knew now, as if for the first time, what he wasn't and could not be.

She had expected to have trouble sleeping — but with the TARDIS in flight and Jamie in the next room, snoring, oblivious, she had felt as if she were home again. For now. Now that she was leaving.

She had expected to dream of her father, but she hadn't. It was all right, though. The others were up already, muted voices drifting to her from the control room. She would go to them soon, be a part of their world again.

But for now, she lay and stared up at the ceiling of her room, letting its white expanse clear her thoughts. She drew in a deep breath and let it go, almost surprised but relieved to find that she felt no different now than she had last night.

It had been so long. So long since she had allowed herself to think about the future.

Victoria had expected to find two names on her parents' headstone. She had found them. But there should have been three, if only she had thought about it.

Almost exactly 100 years. She had been a child then. In many ways, she still was.

But she wouldn't go back.

The Bad Guy

Stephen Fewell
*An Adventure of the Third Doctor,
with Jo Grant*

Here, on the beach, just before twilight, was where it was to have ended.
Like this, as I remember.

‘Whenever I think of you,’ she said, ‘I’ll always remember you with fondness —’ She’d been trembling as she took my hand, her rings clustered cold against my fingers.

‘-- and that time, together, in the control room.’

She smiled wistfully, blinking back some tears.

I did not.

After everything we had been through, emotion was not a luxury I could readily afford.

What to say?

It was too hard to put into words all the thoughts she had inspired. The dwelling I wanted to build her upon the ruins of the settlement, sown with memory plants like saddleweed and eglantine. How my half-father would love her mischievous chuckle. What our children might achieve with her looks and my strength. There was so much to be said.

I opened my mouth and none of it came out.

Somehow I had to show her.

Her head inclined as I moved in for the kiss, and my lips only connected with the very corner of her mouth and the soft of a cheek. Then she gave the tiniest of hums before slowly drifting backwards — squeezing my hand with the firmness of finality.

Shortly, she let it drop.

Fondness, I observe, is not far from pity.

‘Come along, Jo,’ he’d said, placing a guiding arm around her shoulder and steering her towards the indigo box. Holding her.

‘Thank you for looking after her, Ptela. Keeping her safe. I’m most grateful.’ As if she had never been mine for a moment.

The steely gaze said everything — ‘I’ve won. I’m used to winning. So don’t try to beat me.’

I’d seen that look before, in the moments before he triggered the countdown. ‘Won’t you stay?’ I found myself begging. ‘Help us to rebuild our world.’ How demeaning. Anything to get her to stay.

In answer she did nothing but smile, squeezing her lips together at the same time.

‘Your people must find their own answers, Ptela,’ he announced loftily, his handshake warm and dry. ‘But I can think of no better person to lead them. Good luck.’

I did my best to commit her face to memory, aware that I was not doing a good enough job.

Too proud to ask her to stay; too angry to allow her to see how I felt.

One day, he went on to say, they would return to see how my people were getting along. Whether he meant it or not wasn't the issue.

It was clearly meant to be an end to the matter.

Quite different then to how it began.

We were deep within the craft. The walls had been darker there, like dirty snow or a flaw in the heart of a crystal.

Roshon had been staggering, leaning against me for support then pulling away as if the very touch of my skin scalded him.

By that time the seething purple mass had almost entirely subsumed the left of his body. I had to call his name every other moment to remind him who he was. Terrible.

Together, using what little we had of our strength, we had begun to prise apart the bulkhead.

But there was no need.

With horrific speed, two vinelike growths sprang from the shattered remains of his left arm and, at their caress, the portal spiralled apart. As it did so, emitting the chill of a large chamber beyond, someone tottered through it, backing away from the twitching fronds of a Thrematon horde. They chittered and seethed malevolently.

To be frank, I remember being more petrified of her.

With her elongated limbs and alarmingly wide blue gaze, my first thought was that she could only be the outcome of another of their hideous transformations. But as I gazed at her in panic, and the shrill cry from her mouth subsided, I knew it would be my job to protect her.

She had glanced back at her pursuers, as if to decide whether she was safer with them or us. Their sibilant approach and writhing tentacles made her choice a swift one.

Purposefully, Roshon moved forward, pushing us firmly behind him. Sweat was pouring from his brow as he fought to control his limbs one final time. 'Leave,' he gasped, staggering forward to block their path. 'Leave now.' I had never known him put others before himself.

Jo had clutched my arm in horror as the Thrematon horde entwined his stumbling form. A deathlike chill blanketed us. Their whispers of triumph filled the wintry air before the opaque bulkhead swirled shut, cutting him off from view forever.

The shock felt still, like the moment before a wave returns to the sea. It was white in colour. She had been stripy.

I had grabbed her wrist as we ran.

* * *

Now he was groping for mine, hastily kneeling beside me. The only pulse

was the triumph-drum in the hills above the shore.

‘I don’t know much about Ancetian physiology, Jo.’ His face furrowed with concern as he rubbed the back of his neck.

I had allowed my body to drop to the sand almost without thinking. The earth shook a little as if sensitive to my fall.

‘There doesn’t seem to be a pulse, but for all I know that may well be quite normal. Perhaps the modified mutagene is attacking his metabolism in some way.’

Jo expressed concern that the Thrematons might not have all perished in the explosion. Perhaps there were other ships in orbit.

If that were the case, there was no way they could just leave. Was there?

I raised one arm and gestured towards the interior of their ship. ‘Help me,’ I managed to rasp, hoping they would hurry me inside.

After a while, they did.

The floor of the chamber was cool after the hot sand of the beach. It was vast.

But lying there, I found myself largely enthralled by my view of his nostrils as his hands deftly roamed over the plinth before him. ‘The TARDIS isn’t detecting any activity in orbit, Jo.’

I groaned, distracting her from this outcome.

‘Doctor, I think he’s getting worse.’ She held my hand, as he strode off into the ship. ‘Don’t worry,’ she whispered, kissing and rubbing my hand as if it were cold. ‘Whatever they’ve done to you, the Doctor will put it right.’

My mind started to race.

He would be able to, wouldn’t he? He had that air about him.

After all, mere hours ago the world was ending; Roshon just the first of a thousand casualties blossoming into hideous life.

Now, it was over. Hundreds of Thrematons destroyed in the explosion. Many more undone when he — what was it? — reversed the polarity of their trans-fielum-mew-ta-jen.

The whole impossible situation resolved in little more than a day’s span. It was a transformation just as great as any they had triggered.

So, I knew I may only have seconds more of her company.

‘Stay with me, Jo.’

‘Don’t worry, Ptela, I’m not going to leave you. The Doctor’s fetching the medical kit.’

Everything would be fine, she said.

‘Don’t go.’

‘I’m not going anywhere,’ she repeated, ‘until you’re better.’

‘You saved my life back there.’

I had nodded, too dazed from fear and grief at Roshon’s loss. It was my brother who had saved our lives, I corrected her as we fled the bloated Thrematon craft.

She had said she understood, sweetly, eyes downcast. She had lost her friend too.

We took shelter in the depths of the forest, moving whenever we heard the

felling approach. As we crouched numbly in the gloom, she had gently asked for the story from the start, and had listened with care: occasionally repeating key events as if committing them to memory like an elder.

I had told how, hair matted, Roshon had screamed as it began. How all around bodies had fallen to the earth.

How the ships appeared on the Sabbath, lowering silently in the sky above our settlement. Thick, dark fluid falling upon the roofs, clogging our chimneys. Children crying as it stung their eyes.

Then, how they had twisted and driven their way into the ground. Piles of earth sucked upward into steaming heaps. Finally, only the burnished heads were exposed to the sepia sky, the body of the craft buried like a tic in a waterhound.

Two days later, Roshon had fallen ill.

That evening he had complained of the heat, before choking on his supper of algal gruel. Then, doubling up in agony, the first sporocyst erupted from his dark skin. Strange currents flowed beneath the surface of his shivering body. When they stopped, his stare was glassy. His spoon had clattered to the floor.

Finally I told how, as he had stalked from the settlement, others joined. The surface of the craft embraced them like sacrifices.

Throughout, she had gasped at the horror of it, and touched my arm in sympathy. They had to be stopped, she said, with a strange mixture of confidence and uncertainty.

Then her questions started. What had I noticed inside the ship? How long did the transformation take to progress? Had anyone ever recovered? The details seemed important to her.

Perhaps she wanted to tell them to the friend she kept mentioning. Perhaps she had forgotten he was dead.

Eventually she looked at me, her eyes strafing my features in puzzlement. 'They said —' she had stammered. 'They told us you were monstrous.' Roshon was monstrous now. Perhaps, to them, that was beauty.

Together we huddled in the undergrowth, united in grief and uncertainty. 'Don't worry,' I remember saying to reassure her, 'I'm not going to leave you.'

Now she was saying the same to me.

Putting that to the test seemed the only way.

As I lay there in the calm of their ship, I could see the underside of some sort of control panel. Blinking lights and a wattle of complex coloured reeds were masked only by her concerned expression. Those soulful eyes.

How could I be doing this?

She would have to stay. If I were to break it, tear out some vital component, there would be no way for them to depart. Then again, the power humming through the instruments might be unleashed upon me, and even if it could be done, she would never forgive such a destructive action.

No, there was only one way.

I allowed her face to fall out of focus hoping my gaze would seem remote. And glassy. Despite no longer making her out, I could feel her concern intensify.

She called for the Doctor. He would be back any moment with that medical equipment. I had to do it now.

It made her scream, but it was the only way.

‘We are the Thrematon horde,’ I rasped. ‘You cannot defeat us.’

As darkness had fallen the crash of trees stopped, replaced by a new sound. One that had filled my heart with a new hope. Drums.

It was a sign that somewhere people had survived, defiant in the face of aggression. Either that or they had yet to encounter what we were up against. I had explained to Jo that Roshon had been the percussionist in our family. As such he represented our interests in the tympanic bargaining at the beginning of every market day. He would always get the very best prices for our castor baskets.

‘You talk about him a lot,’ she remarked. ‘You must have been very close.’

I had explained it was our custom to honour the departed by passing the day of their death talking about their achievements and impact upon our lives. She wasn’t sure if she was up to that.

Eventually she had tried.

‘The Doctor is —was, well, a sort of scientist,’ she began, ‘and my uncle wangled me a job as his assistant. Skivvy, really, as it turned out, but I didn’t know that at first. Holding test tubes, you know, that sort of thing.’

I didn’t.

She had sniffed a lot and looked at the ground. Something in her eye, she shrugged. She couldn’t understand how she could miss home so much so quickly. Now, she said, she might never get back.

I knew then that I would be the one to look after her, to make her smile again and help her forget.

‘Turned out,’ she went on, ‘he wasn’t really a scientist at all. At least, not an ordinary one. He had secrets.’

‘But we were friends right from the off, more or less. Once he got past that whole trying-to-kill-him thing.’

She had seemed quite oblivious to the absurdity of it.

I had laughed. Then so had she. And we both did, together, for a long time — almost to hysteria.

It did, she eventually agreed, feel better.

But it was some time before she began again, and by that time, I was already in love with her.

I was hoping that she would follow me alone.

That way, once I had separated them I might have dropped the pretence and had a chance to explain. Without him around she had been so different; less uncertain about speaking her mind, less anxious for approval.

It was not to be.

As I lumbered mechanically back out into the sunset, she ran off to fetch him. Leaving the mystical space of their craft and heading into the forest, I could only ensure I broke enough branches that my path could be traced. No idea where to

go, though. How could she have chosen him over me?

As in answer, the earth trembled once more.

When the Thrematon ships had burrowed into the ground they had clearly roused the spirits who dwelled there. After the explosions, who knew what would it take to appease their restless anger?

If the world were still ending, it would do so with us together. Because, despite the Doctor, she was following me.

They were old enemies, she had explained, although she didn't really know why. That's how it had all happened.

This man, the Master, and her friend had known each other a long time. Had a rivalry that locked them forever in a sort of pattern. The Master would have some kind of plan, Jo had said. On this occasion, to dominate her planet and conquer its inhabitants.

'A bad guy,' she said. 'You know, like the Thrematons.'

And whenever they came across him, this Master had tried to kill the Doctor. Often in the most elaborate ways.

Sometimes he had held her captive, to force the Doctor into danger. Hypnotised her, gazing deep into her eyes. Forcing her to carry out his will.

Hello, Miss Grant, he would say with a knowing air, as if he enjoyed being caught while up to no good.

He was almost charming, she concluded.

Except when he was trying to kill the Doctor.

'I bet he'd give anything to be here now. To see what's happened.' This time it was hard to tell if she were sobbing or laughing.

Back then, I had wondered what on earth her friend could have done that someone should go to such lengths.

Back then.

Now, as I stalked through the forest, I started to understand.

Every so often I would have to stop. It was the only way to tell if they were keeping pace with me. Whenever I heard his strident tones, I would set off once more.

Eventually I came to one of the clearings. Fallen trunks littered the ground. Abandoned engines lay to the left and right, branches protruding from their maws like monsters frozen mid-meal.

This was one of the places they had rigged their equipment; slim masts that broke the surface of the forest floor and stretched upward to where the leaf canopy once grew — sinister substitutes for the forest's former occupants.

Even now the spheres attached to them still gave off a chill.

Behind me I heard them emerge from the foliage.

'There he is!' she cried. She used to clutch my arm that way.

I turned and did my best hiss of defiance.

* * *

Just as they had done when they had captured us.

Back then, our plan had been foolhardy, but in her presence you'll have noticed my sense of risk to be somewhat reduced.

At first we thought the chill was the approach of nightfall, but soon I was shivering. My open-necked jerkin was designed for midday in the forge and so afforded little protection.

Dangerous as it was, we had decided the only way to keep warm was to move onward through the forest. Breath cloudy on the air, it was not long before we came across more of the Thrematons' handiwork.

Ice crystals sparkled on every branch. A staring tree shrew was poised mid-journey around the girth of a trunk. Leaf litter had crunched beneath my moccasins.

And beyond all this, a frozen nothing as far as the eye could see, where once a mighty forest had stood. The very air was petrified.

That's when, in the freezing deadness, Jo had decided there was nothing to lose.

They were a monument, he said, to the defeat of the Thrematons, so on his instructions the pylons had been left standing. As I weaved around them, my palm almost adhered to their cold surface.

Terror-forming he had called them. And they had been.

But he had explained that, just as they had done with our bodies, these masts were meant to change the world so it was more to their liking. As if that wasn't what he did.

I staggered and fell. The tremors were becoming increasingly violent.

How dare he just swan off? Leave things this way; the whole of creation sickening and crying out in indignation.

That's when I changed direction for the settlement. I don't know why.

Perhaps because it was where it all began. It was where I had planned the two of us should live once this was over. Still could, in the right circumstances.

It seemed a fitting place to end things, because I finally understood this man that Jo had told me about.

This must be how he felt. The bad guy.

The vast burnished resin hull of the Thrematon ship curved skywards. We were to scale it.

Somewhere in there, where I had rescued — then lost — my brother, we would make a stand. In there, where Jo had seen her friend perish, dark matter erupting from his skin like jam squeezed through a muslin bag. I gripped the coarse rope and climbed ever upward.

'Grab my hand.'

The wind was whipping her hair into her eyes. Above us, not far ahead, I could make out some sort of indentation or pore in the surface.

On the ground below, the Thrematons were spitting upward, hitting the hull below us as we climbed.

'Don't let it touch you,' I yelled, the wind catching at my words.

We had squeezed through the sphincter-like opening into the glacier corridors of their ship. Whispering filled the air.

Jo looked at me in sudden terror. She told me she had never done this sort of thing without the Doctor.

Then she had smiled.

Taking my hand, she pressed it to her lips.

‘What are you doing?’ I had asked, returning the gesture in puzzlement. It turned colder. That’s where it ended.

Because that’s when we were taken.

The Thrematons had finally won.

This was how our victory looked.

The remains of my village teetered on the edge of the vast crater where the Thrematon mother ship had once sat. Earth and volcanic glass poured down its sides towards the shimmering haze at its bottom.

The heat was unbearable, catching the roofs of the few remaining dwellings. It was as if all the heat the Thrematons had stolen had been released from imprisonment to roar out its freedom.

None of this made sense, I was aware of that. I just couldn’t think of another way to keep her with me.

The hot earth shook.

I ignored their cries to wait.

We sat there for a long time. Waiting to die.

Occasionally the cell would thrum with power as, somewhere nearby, the Thrematons continued their hideous work.

The cold, I remember, seemed to follow them around.

Eventually she had broken the silence.

‘Ptela, would you —’ She interrupted herself awkwardly.

I asked her what the matter was, but it took some time for a response. ‘I was going to ask if— if you would hold me.’

I asked her if she was cold, but no. It was a custom on her world, used to comfort the worried or distressed.

It did not work.

As I carefully placed my arm around her, her whole frame shook and her breathing changed alarmingly. But I was not to stop, she said, until she felt better. And as I held on to her, I found my body responsive to the muted flutter of her body, her — what was it? — heartbeat. Time slowed. I held her, as tight as I dared, feeling a new world pulsing within her small frame. Awoken from a life only half lived.

Eventually, she had told me to let go now.

On the lip of the crater, the sulphur made my eyes stream. I was so tired that I could barely maintain a standing position.

‘Fight it, Ptela,’ he was shouting. ‘The Thrematons are controlling your mind.’ Coaxing me to focus on his voice, he stalked across the ash towards me. Jo

followed in his wake, half crouching in his silhouette.

Slowly he withdrew something from his pocket. It span and glinted with light from the burning below. His voice held a mixture of gentleness and command at the same time. I felt myself giving up, but gladly. Jo hung behind, completely out of view now. Soon he was close enough to grip my shoulders. His cuffs scratched my bare skin. Looking deep into my eyes, I knew it would not be long before he saw the deception. I couldn't avoid his gaze.

'Ptela...?' He frowned.

He would have told her. What else could he have done?

This was what the Master had known. Only with him out of the way could things be the way I wanted.

I twisted away, and pushed.

'I'd like you to have this,' she'd said, reaching for something around her neck. 'What's the matter?' I asked, as her face fell into a frown.

'My locket,' she said. 'I've just remembered I — I lost it. On our last trip.' She slipped a ring off her finger instead. Her pale skin had darkened. I didn't consider she might have been lying.

'I'm fine,' she said hurriedly, avoiding my question.

'Among my people, a reddened face is a sign of hunger.'

'Oh, no,' she said, 'I'm blushing.' She pressed my hand against her cheek. Then she gave me the ring, and held me.

'Jo,' I found myself saying, 'I am truly honoured. I accept.'

Still locked in an embrace, we fell.

The screees were sheer and stung, and it was impossible to gain a footing. We tumbled down through the sulphurous haze towards the burning light below. The ground lurched and cracked.

Hitting a rock finally dislodged his grip. I grasped frantically for a hold on its blackened surface. It scorched, but I managed to get one, glancing round to see him falling onwards, faster than before.

Eventually, further down where the gradient became less steep, the Doctor also came to rest. He lay prone for a while, but soon was calling instructions to me.

Before long, a rope spiralled down towards us. Overhead, Jo was shouting something too.

Immediately though, she was drowned out by a tremendous groaning as the ground lurched beneath us. Sand and earth slid past each side like a river. Gripping on for life, my body was pummelled by a wall of heat.

I turned, shielding my eyes from the glare of the glowing lava that was bubbling where just seconds before he had lain.

The yellow smog lifted for a moment.

Just long enough to see the Doctor totally submerged by the molten lake.

* * *

From behind the resinous bulkhead had come a dull crump. The tiny cell shook. Jo staggered on her hooves, clutching at me for support. Her eyes were wide, like a startled animal. I couldn't help but gaze at her.

'The Thrematons,' she had gasped. 'They've started the countdown.'

I pulled her tight towards me. Water fell from her trembling face on to my forearms.

Burnt air rushed into the space, and sparks burst from the entrance. The harder she had held me the less it all mattered.

With a shriek the bulkhead irised open. There he stood, stick outstretched. 'Doctor, you're alive!'

'You killed him!' she cried.

I had.

'We are the Thremato—' I began, but was too exhausted from the climb to go any further.

'Jo,' I finally gasped, 'I've fallen in love with you.'

But she was ignoring me. Staring down into the crater for a sign of hope.

'I interfered with their individual climate control,' he had said, grinning. 'Turned, if you like, their central heating up.' A small sphere glittered between his fingertips. Behind him, I could see the bodies of several Thrematons. Even in death, some were slowly returning to Ancetetian form.

'Until their terraforming was complete they were each relying on these little things. Portable atmosphere.' He tossed it into his pocket.

Jo was ecstatic. 'But you were dead,' she had said. 'You were infected by that purple fungus thing. I saw you.'

He tweaked her tear-stained cheek.

'I'm afraid their little attempt at genetic engineering didn't bargain with a Time Lord metabolism, Jo. Eventually my own DNA persuaded their mutagene to work for me, undo all the work it had done. It was quite a pleasant micro molecular conversation as I recall. Nice line in witty repartee, Thrematon mutagenes.'

He wagged his ears.

'Portable atmosphere,' he glared. His jacket was smoking.

'Useful for keeping your cool.'

The small sphere dropped to the earth, rolling away from the steaming edge of the crater. She ran to his side.

I was suddenly fearful of what he might do to me. The most frightening thought was that he might forgive me.

He had shown no mercy to the Thrematons.

They had already witnessed what he could do to their technology, he had said. Before long the Ancetetians they had transformed would be back to normal. It was not too late though to stop the countdown, dismantle their terraforming equipment and return to their own planet.

Strangely, in his presence, their whispering took on a kind of sense. Only worlds unspoiled by pollution and technology were suitable for them, they chanted, and this one was the only one for thousands of light years.

I never did discover what their decision had been, for at that point he had told me to go and release the other captives from the cells, and flee the craft. Instinctively, I obeyed. I don't know why.

I took the explosion as an answer of sorts. It wasn't until I had picked myself up from where the blast had blown me that I realised.

Jo hadn't come with me to help.

This time, however, he left us alone together.

To end things, I heard him advise her, sometimes someone has to be the bad guy.

'Can't we just...' she began, 'be friends.' The words came easily, as if she had said them before. I think perhaps she had.

'You don't understand — I only did it for you. I did it all for you, Jo. Without you, winning means nothing.'

'I can't stay with you,-Ptela,' Jo cried. 'This place is so different from my home. I could never live on your world.'

'We could go somewhere else. Take me with you.'

'My planet is so different to yours.' Her tone said better, not different. 'You'd never adjust.'

Any excuse.

'It's not an excuse, Ptela. We can't take you. The Doctor won't take you. Not after what you've done.'

So it finally came out that I was right. It was the Doctor.

Every time we had talked about him she'd been hesitant. As if she were frightened by what she might say. As if putting it into words might cheapen or betray it. As if she might be forced to acknowledge feelings best glossed over. And when I asked her what was really going on between them, I glimpsed an anger and fight I'd never seen directed at the Thrematons.

'Why can't you accept that it is not going to happen? It just cannot happen. I don't want anything more from you.'

Then why did she ever, even for a second, allow me to believe that it could?

Silence descended then.

I thought for a long time before I could say these words in return. By then of course Jo had long since gone.

But I say them still to the ring she gave me; imagining things had ended differently. Each time they get a little more apt, a little more formal. And each time they offer a little more consolation and a little less hatred.

This time they are like this —

'Thank you for your kindnesses to me, but you never should have given them. Thank you for showing interest in me. You never should have done.'

'For all your protests, you didn't need a friend, Jo. I am sure you must have

plenty already.

‘You just wanted to leave without feeling any guilt or responsibility.

‘If you had never kissed me, I’d never have dreamed you could have been mine. That future, those possibilities, those hopes would never have taken shape in my imagination. Now, in time, I might well have dismissed them, but a hope unfulfilled never fully dies.’

As hard to kill as the Doctor.

And now I can see, clearer than ever, that she’s just like the Thrematons. Planting something in my heart that has changed me, and will never die.

Separation Day

Andy Campbell
An Adventure of the Third Doctor,
with Sarah Jane Smith

‘I’m delighted to meet you in the flesh at last,’ the hologram said. ‘First of all, allow me to offer you a cup of tea — the first cup of properly made tea, I’m willing to bet, that you will ever have tasted.’

The hologram approached us, slipping silkily through her polished steel desk and reforming with a delicate little whisper on our side of it. She looked eagerly at me with her huge blue eyes, then at Tom, then at me again, as if willing us to accept her offer. For a moment — perhaps through a glitch in her program, perhaps for deliberate emphasis — her smile stretched impossibly wide for her face. The effect was disconcerting, but the hospitality seemed genuine.

‘We are probably unique in the entire Earth Empire,’ the hologram said, ‘in that we still insist on adhering to all 11 of the golden rules for preparing the perfect cup of tea, as laid down by George Orwell on 12 January 1946.’

Tom and I exchanged a wary glance.

‘Indian tea only,’ said the hologram. ‘Use a china or earthenware teapot. Warm the pot first. Make the tea strong. Never imprison the tea-leaves in a bag. Take the teapot to the kettle and not the other way round, so that the water is still boiling at the moment of use. Shake the pot after preparing the tea. Be sure to use a cylindrical cup. Remove the cream from the milk before adding it. Put the tea in the cup first, and the milk second. And finally, of course, no sugar.’

After all this detail it seemed impolite to decline, but Tom and I were keen to get through the interview without unnecessary delay.

‘Perhaps later?’ he said, looking at me.

‘Yes, maybe a little later,’ I agreed.

‘Of course,’ said the hologram, acknowledging our decision with a little bow of her head. ‘Well, on to business.’

While waiting outside in the reception suite I had imagined our interviewer in a formal business suit, but the hologram was dressed in what appeared to be a pale blue ball-gown. As she drifted around her gleaming metallic office, the dress fluttered and billowed in an exaggerated romantic fashion, as if she had been strolling outdoors. It was an artificial effect, the air in the room being perfectly still, but I wondered whether the company had known how appealing I would find it.

An image set into the wall showed the company’s director, a bespectacled man in a fawn suit. It was an old-fashioned picture of the two-dimensional type, but altered periodically to display different views of his face. Behind the glasses, the director’s eyes appeared extraordinarily dark, especially when a change in the angle of the image seemed to turn him to stare straight at me. Those eyes appeared alive with a peculiar fervour that I had noticed before in portraits of historical figures, especially eminent scientists. Maybe it was simply a hunger for

knowledge, but in the director's eyes it seemed mixed up with something else: something more unusual, which I could not for the moment identify.

The hologram halted in the middle of the office. Digital symbols were weaving themselves into the air in front of her startlingly beautiful face, and she peered into them.

'First permit me to confirm some personal details,' she said. 'Mr Thomas Charrington. Nationality: European. Age: 18 years, two months and four days. Life expectancy, extrapolating from current lifestyle trends: 82 years, eight months and 19 days. Machine-assessed IQ on the Terman index: 137. Does that all sound correct?'

'Yes, that's correct,' Tom replied. But he sounded disgusted with himself, as I had known he would.

'A most impressive IQ,' the hologram remarked. 'Close to genius level. I must say, we don't see many like that.' She turned to me. 'And Miss Emily Rutherford. Nationality: European. Age: 17 years, ten months and 12 days. Life expectancy, extrapolating from current lifestyle trends: 89 years, one month and six days. Machine-assessed IQ on the Terman index...'

Here the hologram paused, and her brow furrowed prettily. She squinted into the floating array of digital characters, and raised a slender hand to poke about in them. The display of characters billowed like cigar smoke and then reformed, but her puzzled expression remained.

'This must be a data error,' she said finally. 'Forgive me, but are you quite sure you've understood what's meant by IQ, Miss Rutherford?'

'I'm afraid so,' I said. 'It's a conventional abbreviation of intelligence quotient. A way of measuring individual cognitive potential, pioneered in the twentieth century and perfected in the twenty-second. Technically, it's a person's mental age divided by their chronological age, then multiplied by a hundred to eliminate troublesome decimals. It's assumed to be a normally distributed psychometric index with a standard deviation of 15. The average for all human beings is a hundred by definition; the asymptotic ceiling is 200, after which the necessary arithmetic ceases to be reliable.'

There was an uncomfortable pause.

'And what about yours, Miss Rutherford?' the hologram asked at last. 'You read it correctly,' I said. 'One hundred and ninety-two.'

Her gaze shifted from me to Tom, and back to me again. As understanding dawned, her beautiful blue eyes swelled with unfeigned sympathy.

'I'm so sorry,' she said. 'Now I see why you're here.'

'Naturally, there's no choice,' said Tom in the gentle, careful voice that he would never have raised in anger. 'It's the one thing we can still do for each other.'

'You've come to the right people,' said the hologram, placing one hand on my shoulder and the other on Tom's. Synthetic solidity flooded through her fingers long enough for her to give each of us a reassuring squeeze.

'All right,' I said. 'Tell us what you have to offer.'

'Very well,' said the hologram. 'I'm sure that with intellects like yours there'll be no need for me to go over anything twice. Separation Day Incorporated was

established by the director a little over ten years ago, in order to fill a previously unoccupied niche in emotional counselling provision. As the friend who referred you to us may have explained, our service is rather specialised. It applies only in cases such as your own, when two people are forced by circumstances to separate against the will of both.'

My eyes strayed to the glittering star-field outside the window. I saw my face reflected in the window, floating palely against the blackness of space: an unquestionably plain and podgy face, with a rather sallow complexion. I didn't find it hard to look away.

'Not all of our clients are lovers, like yourselves,' the hologram said. 'On various occasions we have catered for platonic friends, for siblings, even for colleagues. But always there are just two people, and always the parting is both unwelcome and inescapable. In each case we provide closure by ensuring symmetry. Our philosophy is that life events seem complete only if they finish in exactly the same way that they start. For a surprisingly competitive fee, we will generate the perfect setting in which the two of you can say your unavoidable goodbye: we will rebuild the environment in which you first met, just as it was one year, six months and 13 days ago. Drawing on contemporary three-dimensional recordings we will reconstruct it, molecule by molecule, in one of the currently empty chambers located elsewhere in this station.'

'So it's true you can do it?' Tom asked.

'I know what you're thinking,' the hologram said. 'Why not just go back to the scene of your first meeting without professional support? Why do you need our services at all? But an informal return would never be satisfactory. How could you ensure that everything was the same? The time of day, the temperature, the ambient noise, the distribution of dust on every surface, the paths of the insects as they move through the air — we reconstruct **everything**, down to an atomic level of detail. Only in this way can it be guaranteed that all the emotional responses from your original encounter will be perfectly duplicated. And in answer to your question, Mr Charrington, please don't doubt that we can do it. We can give you back the library, just as it was on that first special day. Just the two of you, and 92,313 books. There has never been a place or time in the history of the universe when small details have mattered more than they do to us.'

At the mention of the word 'library' I already felt transported back there. It has always struck me as an extraordinary place — magical, you might say — a single immense circular chamber containing one of only four non-digital fiction libraries remaining in Europe. Its centrepiece is a marble reproduction of the nineteenth-century statue 'the Kiss', three metres tall and therefore considerably larger than Rodin's original, mounted on a broad circular plinth. Dozens of long wooden bookcases radiate from it like the spokes of a wheel, and polished reading tables are positioned between them. Sunlight slants in through the vast mullioned windows spanning floor to ceiling, and high above is the vaulted arch, elaborately decorated in sky-blue and gold. But what really fixes the atmosphere of the library, creating a deeper impression than any of its visual elements, is the pervasive scent of all those thousands of books: the smell of paper and dust and

leather, a smell inextricably bound up with an impression of scholarly authority, a smell to make you nostalgic, I suppose, for the less hectic phases of your life.

I had felt drawn to the library many times since early childhood, and the day I met Tom began like many others. I was seated at a table, believing myself alone in the building, and slowly leafing through a leather-bound edition of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, when I gradually became aware of the presence of another person just in front of me. Austen had had her purifying effect, and my mind was ready to work quickly. My eyes cannot have taken more than a second to travel up Tom's body to his face, but before my gaze reached it I had already discerned from his clothing that he was male, and I automatically tensed, ready for the usual chastening experience of making a fool of myself. But when I saw his face, as shamelessly handsome as the youthful hero of a Greek painting, my nerves subsided again. If he had been only ordinarily attractive, I would have fretted about making the right impression, about not saying the thing that would drive him away or make him laugh at me. As it was, his physical appearance put him so unambiguously beyond my reach that I immediately abandoned any hope of impressing him, so that for once I was able to relax.

We introduced ourselves, and having established that I was a regular patron of the library, he was keen to ask me all about it. His visit, it appeared, had been inspired by the library's sheer novelty value: he had been wondering what it would be like to read from a page instead of a screen. He had already noted the tides of some of the books on his way to my table, and was fascinated to learn that I had not only heard of all the books, but had read most of them. He was keen to do more reading, and sought my recommendations. Watching his face carefully for signs of boredom, I described some of my favourites, a selection of literary classics spanning 500 years from the eighteenth century onwards. Miraculously, he seemed to find me interesting: he was so attentive I felt sure that at any moment he would roll up his sleeve and start typing notes. By the time I suggested that we go and have a cup of coffee together, I felt as remote from myself as if I had been transformed into one of Austen's heroines. I did not feel afraid when I asked to see him again: I was simply an actress speaking the requisite lines. He said yes; that was the first day.

'How would you feel about one week from today?' the hologram said. She had been speaking for the whole time that my mind had been elsewhere.

'I'm sorry?' I said.

'Your Separation Day. If it's agreeable to you both, I can schedule it for one week from today.'

While my mind had been in the library, I had managed to forget that the interview was even happening. Dragged back to reality, I was suddenly assailed by a wave of misery so intense that for a moment I thought it would make me cry out. But Tom took hold of my hand.

'One week from today,' he said, sighing, replying for both of us.

'And this will be the cost,' the hologram said. Blushing slightly at the obligatory reference to money, she deftly gestured a row of digits into the air.

Tom and I stared at the numbers. The price of our separation — the financial price, that is — had so far scarcely entered our thoughts. Since enlisting the

company's services seemed the right thing to do, we were naturally willing to settle any bill without discussion. But this was something unexpected. The company would have to draw upon the latest technological wizardry to recreate the library from its component atoms upwards, and by no stretch of the imagination could this figure possibly cover their costs.

'That's unbelievable,' Tom could not resist saying. 'How can you do it so cheaply?'

'Don't worry about a thing,' the hologram said. 'We'll do a beautiful job for you. It's our guarantee.'

It's extraordinary how clearly this whole story comes back to me, now that I have made up my mind to tell it. The passage of time since these events took place has not faded the memories at all.

The seven days that Tom and I spent between our initial interview and our Separation Day return to my mind with particular vividness, because never before or since have I experienced pain of that kind. I suppose it is only in the depths of despair, when it is a struggle to make it from one breath to the next without screaming, that you truly realise the futility of all those platitudes from well-meaning friends, the ones who want to convince you that time is the great healer and that one day you'll surprise yourself by waking up and finding that you're happy again. When you feel as if only cowardice is keeping you from suicide, you are unlikely to be soothed by remarks of that nature. I didn't want to leave Tom; Tom didn't want to leave me; but we had no choice but to part, and that was the horror of it.

After we had separated I could go through my whole life trying to replace him, and the curious thing was that when people told me I would eventually find somebody else, I believed them. Even without Tom, I did not expect to be alone for ever; I had no doubt that one day I would find my second-best, and settle for him in a philosophical spirit. That was what I had to commit myself to: to spend the rest of my life striving to find something less good than the thing I was now giving up. The desolation of facing that prospect, recognising the stupidity of it, while clinging to every precious minute with Tom as the days ebbed away, was a deeper nightmare than I can convey.

Lying in his arms each night of that final week, I pictured the inexorable process of regrowth that would be taking place in the space station, as Separation Day Incorporated's artificially intelligent mainframe painstakingly moulded a perfect duplicate of the library out of a sea of raw molecules. I have no idea what such a process actually looks like, but I know how it appeared in my mind: shelves and chairs and tables coalescing in slow motion out of a whirl of fluorescent particles, dragging themselves creaking into the appropriate right angles; books sliding into existence on the shelves, the leather bindings slipping from the air to enfold them, ink sprinkling across blank pages. I wondered how the two embracing lovers of Rodin's statue would look, blossoming up out of nothing to solidify in the air, and whether the mainframe would feel any pride in its artistry as it locked them into their eternal kiss.

But three days turn into two very quickly when you don't want them to, and

48 hours quickly become 24, and soon our Separation Day arrived.

Before we left Earth for the station, we did our best to match the company's attention to detail. We dressed in the same clothes we had been wearing when we first met, and we made sure our hair was just right. We even recalled that Tom had had a suntan on the day of our first meeting and, although it was now winter, he restored it artificially.

As our shuttle docked with the station, the sympathetic voice of the hologram seeped in through the walls of our cabin, priming us for our part in the ritual. We would be transported from the shuttle into the reconstructed library by matter transposition; no one would accompany us there; no one would observe us as we uttered our last goodbye in the strictest privacy. As on our first day, we would be alone in the library. When it was over, only when we were ready, we would be flown back to Earth in luxury. For the return trip there would be two shuttles, of course: our separate journeys would have begun.

Matter transposition is an expensive way to travel, and at that time I had experienced it only once before. The sensation is curious: it is as though you feel a ghost of yourself going on ahead of you, then a moment later your flesh catches up and inhabits it. Tom and I were transported simultaneously into the duplicate library, and as the sensation of queasiness subsided we looked around to see whether the company had kept its promises.

It was astonishing. Naturally, they had reconstructed every object in the great circular room, from the towering Rodin sculpture at its centre to the most insignificant item on the shelves; but that was only the beginning. As I wandered among the shelves I saw that they had faithfully reproduced every spot and blemish on every spine; some of the books, by design, were placed upside down; some were wedged with apparent carelessness between others, not touching the shelf beneath them. Nothing had escaped the company's attention: the minutest detail had been jealously scrutinised and pedantically reproduced. But that was not the real achievement. As the hologram had promised, they had succeeded in capturing the very flavour of the air. The temperature, the evocative scents of paper and leather bindings, the patterns of light on every surface, the drifting motes of dust, even the digitally programmed flight paths of the moths had something unquestionably right about them, so that although I may not have been consciously aware of all these details 18 months earlier, each of them contributed something to the perfection of the experience now.

And, of course, it was agony. I think Tom and I realised at almost exactly the same moment that we had made a terrible mistake. 'Life events seem complete only if they finish in exactly the same way that they start,' the hologram had argued. But as I looked around me and considered what Tom and I were about to do, I began to wonder for the first time how the company could possibly believe that maximising the emotional intensity of a difficult farewell could be a good idea.

'We'd better find your table,' Tom said hoarsely.

We moved hand in hand between the shelves, breathing the warm sweet scent of dust and paper, towards the table where my copy of *Pride and Prejudice* would be waiting. We were almost there when Tom touched my arm and turned

me gently to face him.

‘Do you think you can go through with it?’ he asked, looking earnestly into my Ayes.

‘Do you?’

‘Well, we’ve no choice, have we?’ he said. ‘We can’t change our minds.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘We can’t change our minds. We’ve talked about it for so long. We can’t live an impossible life, can we? If there were an alternative we’d have thought of it.’

He kissed me for a long time, and when he moved his face away I saw there were tears in his eyes. But he managed to say, ‘Well, you can tell me about Jane Austen one more time.’

The leather-bound edition of *Pride and Prejudice* was lying open at the right page. We moved to the table to examine it together, leaned over the yellowing pages and looked.

Tom sniffed, peering at the book. ‘Did they...’ he began cautiously, then his voice trailed away.

I think he was about to ask me whether the company could have overlooked something, but already the sight of the book had turned me cold. Even before I looked closely at the text, I felt obscurely menaced by its artificially regular appearance. Something had gone wrong with Austen’s masterpiece: a curiously systematic violence had been done to it. I moved my fingertips hesitantly over the brittle yellow paper, carefully reading the words:

‘Collision! Collision! Collision! Collision! Collision! Collision! Collision! Collision! Collision!’

Tom was as unsettled as I was, but he managed to regain his composure first. ‘I bet I can guess how it ends,’ he said.

But I felt hypnotised. I was still reading:

‘Collision! Collision! Collision! Collision! Collision! Collision! Collision! Collision! Collision!’

I managed to break the spell by a conscious effort, and looked up. Another nearby table swam into focus. A large hard-backed book lay open there as well. I moved to it as if in a dream.

‘Tom,’ I said. ‘Have a look at this.’

On the opened pages of this book there were no words at all, just an etching. It depicted a cross-section of a planet, with a vast and hideous creature coiled at its core. I closed the volume very slowly, but despite my care the noise as it slammed shut echoed startlingly around the library. I examined the spine of the book. No author was referred to, but the title, embossed in gold lettering, read simply: ‘We’re coming!’

‘Something’s gone wrong,’ I said.

A moth, weaving its way between us, abruptly popped and vanished in a tiny flicker of light. Tom and I stared in bemusement at the point in the air from which it had disappeared.

A ponderous creaking sounded behind us, and we turned together to look. Something was happening to one of the enormous wooden bookcases extending from the middle of the library to its circumference: ripples were passing

rhythmically through the wooden shelving, as if we were viewing it through a heat haze. But the movement was not an illusion, because with each ripple the books shifted and wobbled on the shelves, destabilised by the waves of distortion in the wood.

Dust was shaken from the upper shelves in improbable quantities, sifting down on to the books below. Presently, a vast and ancient tome tumbled from the highest shelf, and when it struck the floor it ruptured in a cloud of dust and scraps of paper, disintegrating so completely that a moment later no trace of it remained.

‘It’s getting darker,’ Tom said. I raised my eyes and saw that it was true: the sky- blue of the vaulted ceiling was darkening, as if night were falling in the library. But not even that was the worst: the worst was the increasingly insistent creaking from the direction of the enormous Rodin sculpture. I did not dare to look at the embracing marble couple; there was too great a risk that their posture would have changed.

‘Someone’s eye for detail is starting to look questionable,’ Tom remarked as we surveyed our destabilising environment.

‘They promised us we wouldn’t be watched,’ I said. ‘We were told we’d have complete privacy. No one’s coming to help us.’

Now there was a new noise, adding itself to the discordant symphony of the rest: an electronic bleeping, increasingly submerged beneath a rhythmic grinding scrape. A patch of light appeared in the air, faded, then pulsed back more strongly, while beneath it a bulky blue shape began to form. As the grinding reached a crescendo the shape resolved itself into an upright blue box, its edges hardening, its defining lines sharpening, solidity flooding through it, until with a terminal crunch the noise of its arrival abruptly ceased.

As we stared at the box, voices became audible from within it: one male and one female. Then one of the front doors folded inwards, and the owners of the voices cautiously emerged. They were as surreal as anything we had seen so far: they might have been characters from a period novel, perhaps even one of my favourites. One of them was a very pretty dark-haired girl in her mid-twenties, wearing a leather jacket in a style unseen since the twenty-first century. The other was a tall aristocratic-looking man, apparently in his mid-fifties, with flamboyantly styled white hair. He was dressed in fashions even more antiquated than those of his companion, unashamedly eccentric in his ruffled white shirt, black bow tie and green velvet jacket. Looking back now, the most curious thing was that before the two visitors even said anything, their very presence — especially the man’s — made me feel that perhaps everything could still be all right. It is hard to say what it was about their appearance that had that effect on me; nevertheless the effect was very strong.

For a while the couple gazed around their increasingly unstable surroundings.

The girl was wide-eyed with astonishment, while the man was more pensive, stroking his chin as if thoughtfully assessing the extent of the problem. Then, suddenly remembering his manners, he stepped forward, took my hand and kissed it. At this unforeseen piece of gallantry I felt more disconcerted than ever,

but the man's smile was so delightful that I had to smile back.

'How do you do?' he said softly, enunciating the words with aristocratic precision. 'Miss Rutherford, I imagine. A pleasure to meet you. I'm the Doctor.'

'I'm Emily,' I said. At his use of the archaic word 'doctor', I was reminded of a book I had read when I was three years old. Beneath a picture of a kindly looking man had been the sentence: 'When you're feeling bad, the doctor makes it better.' I hadn't thought of that book in 14 years.

The Doctor turned to Tom and shook his hand.

'And Mr Charrington. Sorry to butt in, old chap. But delighted to meet you, all the same. It's a relief to have got here, I must say.'

'I'm Tom,' Tom told him.

Meanwhile the girl had been left behind at the door of the blue box. 'Ahem!' she said emphatically, impatient to be introduced.

'Forgive me,' said the Doctor. 'This is my assistant, Miss Smith.'

'Sarah,' she corrected, smiling cheerfully. 'Hello. It's quite a place you've got here.'

'Yes, well,' the Doctor mused, thoughtfully observing the rippling of the shelves. 'You seem to have a few problems. I suppose it was to be expected — still, a most unusual effect.'

'I don't like the look of that statue,' Sarah remarked. I saw what she meant: the white marble surface of the embracing figures was crawling with unnatural patterns of light.

'Are you from the company?' Tom asked.

'Company? Good gracious, no. We're just... tourists. But we do have a good reason for being here. A mission of mercy, you might say.'

'Where are we, Doctor?' Sarah asked.

'Well, since this charming young lady and gentleman are who I hoped they would be, I imagine we're in the anterior chamber of a space station in geostationary orbit over Neptune.'

'That's right,' I said. 'It's a library— I mean, a copy of a library. Do you know why it's collapsing?'

'Yes, my dear,' said the Doctor gravely. 'I rather suspect I do.'

'How do you know our names?' Tom asked.

'A friend of mine told me whom to expect,' said the Doctor. 'You're here to say goodbye, aren't you?'

'Yes,' I said. 'We're here to say goodbye.'

'Well, then, things are quite simple. You mustn't.'

'But we have to,' I said.

I became conscious that Tom and I were holding hands, and Sarah, in consequence, looked puzzled.

'**Why** do you have to?' she asked. 'You seem to be getting on all right.'

'IQ,' said Tom gravely.

'But what's your intelligence got to do with it?' Sarah asked.

'Isn't it obvious?' Tom said. 'You know how this government thinks. Our IQs are too far apart. They differ by more than fifty points, and that's the maximum permitted disparity. Ever since Emily and I became a couple, our lives have

deliberately been made difficult in a hundred different ways. Already it's impossible for us to get work, other than the most menial that you could imagine. If we're still discovered to be together after the age of twenty, our work permits will be withdrawn altogether. There are all kinds of social services we're already denied access to, and it's getting worse all the time. We won't ever be allowed to marry, or to live in the same place. If we have children they'll be regarded as genetically disadvantaged by the discrepancy in their parents' intelligence, and schools will refuse to accept them. If we become ill, hospitals may withhold treatment. As far as the authorities are concerned, we've opted out of normal society. We don't pay our taxes, because we aren't allowed to.'

'But that's terrible!' Sarah said, with such simple force that I felt as if I were recognising the unfairness of our predicament for the first time.

'For a long time we were defiant,' I said. 'Now I'm afraid we've given in. We can't carry on, so we've come here to say goodbye properly.'

'But there has to be something you can do!' Sarah exclaimed. 'Anything's better than just giving up. Can't you meet each other in private?'

'There is no privacy any more,' Tom said. 'You must know that. Everything is recorded, everywhere, all the time. The government values knowledge above everything else. That's how the company was able to reconstruct this library.'

'But I don't understand,' Sarah said. 'Which of you has the higher IQ?'

'I have,' I said.

'Well, why didn't you just deliberately do worse on the test?'

'Because I didn't know I'd have to,' I said. 'My IQ was assessed before I met Tom, and so was his. The figures are assumed not to change with age, so we're stuck with them.'

'I'm terribly sorry,' said the Doctor gently. 'But I can only say to you again: the two of you *must* change your minds.'

'But if you aren't from the company,' I said, 'why should our separation matter to you at all?'

'In a very short while, Miss Rutherford,' the Doctor replied, 'it'll matter to everyone.'

'It's getting darker,' Sarah said. 'What's going on here?'

'Don't touch anything, Sarah,' warned the Doctor. 'If you do, you could be drawn into the instability. Stay close to the TARDIS: her presence may help to damp down the nearby molecular disruption. Miss Rutherford, Mr Charrington, you do the same.'

'TARDIS' apparently meant the blue box, so the four of us huddled obediently round it.

Tom pressed the palm of his hand warily against the battered surface of the box. 'It's vibrating,' he said nervously. 'It feels like it's alive.'

'Don't worry,' said the Doctor. 'That's not part of what's happening here. It's perfectly normal, she does that all the time.'

'What is happening here, Doctor?' I asked.

'You must let me come to that in my own time, my dear. Now listen very carefully.'

But now we all had something else to listen to: a hideous brittle cracking from

he direction of the Rodin sculpture. We turned to look, just as the heads of the lovers broke free from their kiss and swivelled slowly to regard us with blank baleful eyes. The two mouths, formerly melded in a single sweep of marble, now gaped raggedly. The man's right hand broke free of his partner, leaving a gaping bloodless wound at her hip. Already the two figures were straining to stand; only the circular plinth, which formed a solid piece with the statue, prevented them from rising and heading straight towards us. Sarah clapped a hand over her mouth to suppress a scream.

'Are we going to die, Doctor?' I asked.

'I'm afraid it's much worse than that, Miss Rutherford. But that plinth should hold them for a while yet. Let's use the time wisely.'

'In the place where I come from,' the Doctor said, 'everybody knows everybody else. Not just from the outside — from the inside. The minds of all my people are connected. Now there's one particular fellow whose judgement I thoroughly respect. A very old man, who spent half his life sitting under a tree behind the house where I lived as a little boy. He's been speaking to me for the past few days — inside my mind, you see. He warned me to find you, and stop you.'

'Stop us from separating?' I asked.

'Yes, that's right,' said the Doctor. 'Because that old man has seen exactly what happens if you do. He's shown me everything.'

'But what possible difference could our parting make to anybody else?' I asked.

'You separate today, Miss Rutherford,' the Doctor said, 'and then you remain alone for 12 years. Some of your friends believe you will never fully recover from the trauma of losing your dear Mr Charrington here. But after 12 years, you finally meet someone new: a Mr Housman, a cellular technician. He asks you repeatedly to marry him, and eventually, because you're so lonely, you agree. After two years of marriage you give birth to a son. You call him Daniel.'

The Doctor's refined, dignified voice was becoming hypnotic. High above us, the artificial sky of the ceiling was still darkening, casting deeper and deeper shadows over his face as he spoke.

'Naturally Daniel exists only because you marry someone other than Mr Charrington,' the Doctor said. 'But the point is that he grows up to be an insufferable bully. When he goes to college, I'm sorry to say, he victimises another student so comprehensively that that boy takes his own life. As a result the chief lecturer of the college, Professor Henderson, becomes disillusioned with academia and hands in his resignation. He therefore fails to meet Professor Mirsky, who joins the college staff three years later, and they never have the opportunity to collaborate in research.'

All around us, the vast bookcases were rippling and disgorging books. Everything in the library appeared to be straining towards its own dissolution; the marble lovers were writhing incessantly in their efforts to detach themselves from their plinth. The only oasis of stability in the entire room was this bizarre blue box, the TARDIS, the one object which had no right to be there. In response

to this, we huddled all the more closely around it.

‘Without Henderson’s restraining influence, Mirsky devotes his considerable intellect to munitions research,’ the Doctor said. ‘After almost a decade his work culminates in the development of Close Gas, a weapon so unspeakable that no government in the world will admit to using it. But it is openly used by a Scandinavian terrorist organisation, with the loss of over 200 lives in a primary school in South Africa. The father of one of the children who dies in the massacre has underworld connections, and he manages to arrange the destruction of the European factory producing the gas. After that, things get worse very quickly.’

I looked at Tom and Sarah, who seemed as hypnotised by the Doctor as I was.

‘When the munitions factory is destroyed, the development of many other weapons systems is delayed by several years. Foreign Alliance powers take advantage of Europe’s vulnerability and choose their moment to invade. A powerful Chinese corporation decides to protect its interests in the West by stepping in and wiping out the forces occupying Europe. Shortly afterwards a still larger corporation, based in Australasia, becomes fearful of the growing power of its rival. The two corporations go to war. Every nation on Earth is drawn into the conflict.’

Beneath our feet, the wooden floor was beginning to undulate. Ordinarily it would have been polished to a reflective glow, but I did not dare look down now; I was too frightened of what I might see.

‘There are billions of deaths,’ the Doctor said. ‘But perhaps the most regrettable of all are those of two visiting diplomatic envoys, aliens of the Vorlat species, in an exchange of missile fire. The Vorlat are a benevolent people, but their culture makes no distinction between accidental killing and assassination, and soon they are drawn into the conflict on Earth. Unlike humans, they are unskilled in the arts of war, and are quickly obliterated. They are therefore not present to act as mediators when, four decades later, interplanetary conflict breaks out between two highly aggressive military species, the Malorians and the Vulzene.’

Here, the Doctor paused for a moment, frowning as if steeling himself to deliver the worst.

‘With nothing to restrain the space war, it gains irresistible momentum, and more and more planets are dragged into it. Finally it spreads to affect the Stratocracy of Jesh. Now the Jesh take war so seriously that they make most other military species look like children playing at soldiers. Since their involvement threatens the stability of the whole galaxy, a family of very ancient and powerful creatures, the Shandance, attempts to intervene. By your understanding, the Shandance might as well be gods. Soon other primordial beings, the Jatiri, vast monsters who dwell for millions of years coiled up in planetary cores, wake up and confront the Shandance. From that moment, it’s a war of gods that draws in *everyone*, everyone in the universe. The last terrible battle is known as the Collision. At least that’s what it’s called for the one day that it rages, because after the Collision there are no historians left to tell the story. In fact there’s no one left at all — anywhere.’

I stared at the Doctor. As the seconds passed it became clear he had finished

his story, and the expression on his face confirmed that he had meant every word. Tom and Sarah were gazing at him too, and the horror-struck expression on Sarah's face suggested he had told her very little before arriving at the station. I suppose I should have been terrified, but what I felt instead was a cold flood of despair, far worse than terror.

'But what about all the disruption?' Tom said. 'Why is everything in here coming apart?'

'Reality is expressing its anxiety about the threatened future,' said the Doctor. 'It's communicating with you in the only way it can, trying to warn you of the consequences of your actions. Look at the sculpture.'

'Of course,' I said. 'How could I have been so slow? When the lovers separate, the results are hideous. It's a message, isn't it?'

'Why didn't you tell me?' Sarah said.

'Because there was always a risk that we wouldn't get here,' the Doctor said. 'The TARDIS is — well, not entirely reliable, as you know.' He sniffed self-consciously, perhaps slightly embarrassed at his decision not to be open with her earlier. 'And, well, there didn't seem to be any point in telling you about a disaster that we might not be able to stop.'

'But this isn't just any old disaster,' Sarah protested. 'You're talking about the end of *everything*.'

'Yes, Sarah, I'm afraid I am.'

Meanwhile my mind was racing. 'I can't believe it works like that,' I said. 'Like what?'

'Like dominoes falling. I mean, it's nonsense — isn't it? Causality can't be so fragile.'

'But don't you see, "fragile" is precisely the right word,' the Doctor said. I saw in his eyes that he was desperate to convince me of what he was saying; yet, even now, his voice remained gentle and elegantly modulated, his scrupulous courtesy still not compromised, even by his fear.

'Have you ever stopped to reflect on the improbability of your own existence?' the Doctor asked. 'Have you ever thought how much more likely it would have been for you never to have been born? Think about your parents, and your grandparents, and all your ancestors before them, stretching back through human history. And even before them, before the evolution of *Homo sapiens*, still more ancestors, not even of your own species, but mammals, reptiles, fish — all linked directly to you by blood, receding into remotest prehistory. That makes millions of couples. If any one of them had failed to meet for any reason at all, if anything had prevented them from having offspring, if any one of those offspring had not survived — then you wouldn't be here now, and you wouldn't even know that you had failed to exist. Your whole life has been hanging on the thinnest of threads, Miss Rutherford. The odds against you ever existing are trillions upon trillions to one. That's why your life is so precious. That's why everybody's is.'

'But that's just philosophy,' I said. 'It's metaphysics. I thought—'

'You thought it was just an idea, and didn't correspond to anything real? That's a natural mistake, but it's a serious one. Every one of your ancestors had

the absolute power of life and death over you. Simply by failing to reproduce, they could have deleted you from history. And in just the same way, everyone currently alive has limitless power over the generations to come. All those potential lives depend on your most trivial decisions. Nothing you do is inconsequential. Whom you meet and whom you don't, whether you decide to love someone or walk away from them, whether you choose to turn right or left at a fork in the road — every moment you are shaping history, implicitly deciding for billions of potential people whether or not they ever experience existence. You see, Miss Rutherford, from the perspective of humans in the future, everyone currently alive is a god — and a frighteningly capricious god at that. Even if you don't have children of your own, your influence over the future is scarcely diminished. You make an indelible mark on history just by causing the meeting of two people who do have children.' I thought of my dear friend Julia, as beautiful and elegant as I never was, who met her fiancé only because I introduced her to him. At the time I had been proud of that piece of matchmaking; now I only shuddered.

'But the philosophical works I've read have always assumed that causality finds ways to repair itself,' I said. 'According to Syme's predictions, a universe that is sufficiently robust to have developed in the first place should have self-regulatory mechanisms to circumscribe the influence of any one person, so that major cosmic events always happen on schedule regardless of how individuals choose to behave.'

'Some of the time that's true,' the Doctor said. 'But not this time. Your separation establishes a causal sequence with its own momentum. Today is the last opportunity to stop it.'

'But isn't it irresponsible to interfere at all?' asked Sarah. 'Even if you do persuade Tom and Emily here to stay together — well, according to what you said, won't you be wiping out millions 'of people who only exist if they split up?'

'I've thought about that, Sarah. But if Tom and Emily separate, in a very short while there won't be anyone at all. I must trust my mentor's predictions.'

'And can you?'

'I have to. Chaos theory assumes that causality is fundamentally unpredictable, but that's a fallacy. Time Lord arithmetic is equal to it.' He turned to Tom and me.

'Well,' he said, 'it's your decision. I can't make it for you. Will you stay together?' Tom and I turned to look at each other. Finally I said what we were both thinking.

'I'm sorry, Doctor,' I replied. 'just don't see how we can. But I promise you, it'll all be all right. If I ever meet a man called Housman, I won't marry him. I won't even speak to him.'

The Doctor shook his head with a wry little smile that indicated he had expected exactly that reply. 'But you will, my dear,' he said. 'You'll forget that you ever believed me — and one way or another, you *will*.'

As I said earlier, it's astonishing how vividly all these events come back to my mind; describing them is proving easier than I expected. But now I come to the

difficult part, the part that I still have nightmares about. It's a horrible thing I have to relate — insupportably horrible, I felt at the time — but I must tell it anyway. As we stood by the TARDIS we heard the distinctive buzz of matter transposition, and a human figure bloomed into existence nearby. It was a short, middle-aged man in a fawn suit, with old-fashioned spectacles perched halfway down his nose. I immediately recognised him, from the images on the wall of the hologram's office, as the director of Separation Day Incorporated. The darkness of his eyes was even more striking than it had been in the pictures: the irises were almost as black as the pupils. He seemed distinctly uncomfortable as he looked around, as if undecided which should disconcert him more, the disintegration of the library or the unexpected presence of the Doctor and Sarah. As might have been expected, he seemed especially disquieted by the sight of the two violently squirming figures of the Rodin sculpture. His hands fluttered nervously as he peered around him, taking in each unwelcome detail, his expression alternating between anxiety and helpless disapproval.

'Local molecular disruption,' he gasped. 'And an alien intrusion,' he added, his eyes settling on the Doctor and Sarah. 'Needed to come in person, and deal with — I mean, it's hard to say which hurts more. It's all pain, isn't it?'

'What do you mean?' Tom asked.

'There's no law against it, is there?' asked the director, gazing beseechingly around our little group, his black eyes urgently searching one face after another. 'You can break someone's heart any time you like. You can decide unilaterally to end a relationship, but you can't decide unilaterally to maintain one. Not amenable to logic, really.'

'What?' I said.

'I wanted to make sense for you,' jabbered the director. 'Man in suit's such an easy role to play, should be. But it gets too much, and now all this surrealism. I wish it would stop, it keeps me awake at night.'

I could make no sense of what he was saying. Sarah and I exchanged a look that told me she was equally bemused. With no idea how to reply to the director's gibberish, Tom simply reached out to steady his shoulder. The director did not actually appear in danger of falling; it was a symbolic gesture, a vain attempt to calm the man's racing mind.

The Doctor's response was different: he was staring at the director as if seeing right through him. The two men's eyes met, and they held each other's gaze. It was as if each recognised the other as something quite different from what his appearance suggested.

'You must abandon this pretence, sir,' said the Doctor firmly. 'If I am to help you, you must show us who you truly are.'

A shockingly loud sound came from the director. It seemed to issue not just from his mouth but from his entire body, but it was unmistakably a howl of relief. His posture abruptly changed, his upper body snapping wider as if his left shoulder had explosively dislocated. Three of us stepped back simultaneously in an involuntary reaction, but the Doctor did not flinch.

'Come on, man!' he urged. 'It's too late for deception. You must let go.'

A hideous metamorphosis was overtaking the director. His head was shaking

wildly, bouncing from one shoulder to the other in gyrations that looked violent enough to break his neck. His entire body was shuddering, relinquishing its fragile façade of humanity more openly with each second. The fluttering of his fingers had accelerated to a blur; already there seemed to be more than five digits on each of his hands. His torso was shifting and bloating into unnatural forms inside his fawn suit, and I waited for the thin material to tear. But there was a new surprise: the material had been part of him, and already patches of it were running like liquid, melting into his rapidly greying skin.

I looked at the Doctor, who was confronting the director motionless and unblinking, his hands on his hips. I reasoned that either he felt nothing at all, or that he was accustomed to monsters: his steadfast gaze never faltered.

Now the director was lurching and spinning in a kind of obscene dance. Particles of organic matter were shaking free of the surface of his skin and raining down his sides, but somehow they never fell clear of him: always they were reabsorbed into the mass of his body and contributed to the continuing transformation. His uncontrolled movements spun him momentarily to face me, and I saw that his face was no longer even remotely human. The black eyes had swelled monstrously: heavy with liquid, they bulged like an insect's eyes from the diminishing surface of the scalp. The nose had deflated almost to the point of disappearance, while the mouth had expanded into a gaping hole that looked fit only for howling. Somewhere in the remote distance I became aware of Tom and Sarah, as rigid with horror as I was; and underlying and permeating the whole scene, the unwavering will of the Doctor, who had sought this transformation because he alone could see that it was necessary.

The director's body was still deforming, warped by rivers of internal movement. His disguise of clothing had completely vanished now, and his mottled grey skin was a mass of wounds. Some of the wounds broke open with harsh popping sounds, and I heard Sarah scream: now each wound was a howling, gasping mouth to match the one that bisected the director's head.

'And that's the end of that!' the director yelled frantically. 'There's no going back! Never see you again! Final farewell and my world gets worse! Where's the humanity?'

Some of his shouts were starting to overlap, and I wondered whether they were issuing from more than one of his mouths.

'Can't think about the future!' he screamed. 'Built it round you anyway! Where's my friend going to be? It's not natural, you know! Not beautiful at all!'

A black limb wriggled free of the contorting mass of his body, flexing its shiny black claw in the air. The Doctor took a pace forward and gently grasped the claw, staring determinedly into what remained of the director's face.

'Now listen to me,' he said. 'The environment is destabilising, and you can use that. If you take hold of part of it, you will be swept up in the instability and destroyed. That's the only release possible for you now, but you must do it quickly.'

One side of the director's face split open into a third eye, even larger than the others, staring appealingly into the Doctor's face. A shutter of skin flitted briefly over it, a remarkably human blink of confusion and dismay. 'When you're

feeling bad, the doctor makes it better,' I thought. 'The doctor has the power to heal.'

'You can do it,' said the Doctor, and he released the creature's claw. 'You can end the pain.'

The director may have nodded his understanding; his head was too comprehensively deformed for us to be sure. Then he turned resolutely and shambled towards the huge sculpture at the centre of the library, his shapeless body still bloating as he moved. The two lovers were on the point of breaking away from their restraining plinth: slivers of marble were spraying incessantly from the base of the statue. The director extended tapering grey arms towards the lovers at the exact moment that they succeeded in-tearing themselves free. His arms quickly grew long enough to enfold both the man and the woman into his embrace, and they swivelled their malformed marble faces to survey the wretched creature between them.

Ripples of distortion washed from the statues into the director, and his body, fractured and blasted apart in an eruption of organic fragments; the outrush of air sounded like a vast sigh of relief. The explosion was powerful enough to take the lovers with it: they shattered into a storm of white marble fragments. We braced ourselves, waiting for the flying debris to cut into us. Instead the explosion collapsed in on itself, all the fragments swiftly reabsorbed into the destabilising environment.

'What *was* he?' Sarah cried.

'We don't have time for explanations now, Sarah,' said the Doctor, glancing up at the blackening ceiling. He turned to us. 'Now, Miss Rutherford, Mr Charrington. We don't have a great deal longer. I ask you again: will you stay together?'

I took hold of Tom's hand. As we looked around the library, we could see how right the Doctor was. Everywhere the bookcases were fracturing and caving in; some of the books were spontaneously detonating in plumes of yellow dust, as if tired of waiting to be released from their shelves. The wooden floor was forming waves that threatened to throw us off our feet. Soon the environment would no longer be able to withstand the tidal forces washing through it, and it would wrench itself apart, leaving only four people and a peculiar blue box tumbling around in a vacuum.

I looked at Tom, at his wonderful face, his beautiful gentle eyes. I remembered the hologram's calculations of our life expectancies, and for a moment, despite the turmoil on all sides, I had only one thought in my head. Sixty-four years without him. What a waste of all that time.

'You woke me up,' I told him. 'No one else understands me. I love you.'

'You have to decide,' urged the Doctor.

'I love you too,' Tom said. 'But I don't know what to do.'

'You can change your mind,' Sarah said. 'It's *always* all right to change your mind.'

'We can't live an impossible life,' I said, but I was ceasing to mean it.

Tom's expression became firm. 'I can't live without you,' he said. 'And I won't.'

I shifted my gaze from Tom to the Doctor.

‘Well, Miss Rutherford,’ he said coolly, and I sensed the desperate pride he was taking in retaining his composure to the very last. ‘What are you going to do?’ I looked at him and felt my head clearing, perhaps for the first time.

‘Not to save the library,’ I said. ‘Not to save the future. I just can’t live without him.’

Tom’s arm was around me, and he pulled me protectively towards him. Over his shoulder I could see what was left of the library. No shelves or books were visible now, just a blizzard of swarming debris raging on every side. The black sky of the ceiling was breaking up, releasing a flood of whirling fragments that was swept up amongst the rest. We were at the eye of the hurricane now, sheltered only by the proximity of the TARDIS. The roar of the library’s destruction was deafening.

‘I’m changing my mind,’ I said, looking into the Doctor’s eyes.

All around there was still only chaos, a seething ocean of molecules turning black.

‘Don’t look at *me*,’ yelled the Doctor over the howl of the storm. ‘Look at *him*.’ I turned to Tom.

‘I’m changing my mind,’ I told him.

He nodded. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘So am I. I’m not losing you.’

Then came a silence so abrupt and complete that I wondered whether anything at all existed outside Tom’s embrace. But when I finally looked beyond him, I saw that everything was back in place. All the features of the library had snapped back into their proper positions in a moment: the walls, the shelves, the Rodin sculpture. And when I stopped holding my breath, I could smell books.

A little while later, the four of us were seated at a reading table, the duplicate of the one where I had first met Tom. I noticed that Jane Austen was once again saying what she should.

‘What happened to the director?’ I asked. ‘Why did he turn into that creature?’

‘He was always that creature,’ the Doctor said. ‘At least, as long as the company has been in business. His human shape was just camouflage for the benefit of clients. When he came in here, the trauma of what was happening, and what I said to him, encouraged him to abandon his disguise.’

‘But why was he in such an awful state?’ Sarah asked.

‘I can only guess at that,’ the Doctor said. He turned to me. ‘You say the company arranged to reconstruct the place where you met? So that you could say goodbye properly?’

‘Yes, that’s right.’

‘Well,’ said the Doctor, ‘doesn’t that seem rather a curious thing to want to do?’

‘It felt wrong as soon as we arrived,’ Tom said. ‘It made the pain of separating worse.’

‘Precisely,’ said the Doctor. ‘That was always the intention. If you’re already suffering, the last thing you should do is the most *poignant* thing. “All farewells

should be sudden, when forever”.’

‘Pardon?’ Sarah said.

‘Lord Byron said that — well, actually I suggested it, and he rephrased it. Nice chap, George. I got on with him famously.’

‘So you mean the company was prolonging the agony deliberately?’ I asked.

‘Precisely,’ the Doctor said. Their aim was to produce maximum distress in their clients. My guess is that Separation Day Incorporated was a research project from the beginning, no doubt funded by that unpleasant government you were telling us about. I imagine they wanted to investigate human emotion, but they would have needed *extremes* of emotion for it to work. What they chose to call their director looked to me like a research organism — probably starting life as a single biological cell engineered to gather data about human emotion, which the company could analyse later.’

‘So the creature grew as it learned,’ I said. ‘But in the end it must have absorbed so much grief from the company’s clients that it began to empathise with them. That’s something the company would never have foreseen. That’s why it was in such a desperate state — the poor thing must have been racked by continuous psychological agony.’

‘Indeed,’ said the Doctor. ‘All it had ever known were unbearable goodbyes. Its misery would only have grown worse. Oblivion was the best that I could offer it.’

‘That’s why the price was so low,’ Tom said suddenly. ‘The company didn’t want to put off any potential clients.’

‘Yes, quite,’ said the Doctor. ‘But without their research organism, I think it’s safe to say the project is now concluded.’

‘And the Collision?’ I asked.

‘That future won’t happen now. The possibility was wiped out the moment you changed your minds — or at least, the moment you both knew you meant it. Once you made your choice the universe relaxed, and restored this delightful library to its former state.’

‘You saved us,’ Tom said.

‘Oh, not a bit of it,’ the Doctor said, although he did look pleased with Tom’s remark. ‘You did that yourselves. I’m just sorry I couldn’t be more persuasive in encouraging you to stay together. There’s a reason why I couldn’t be, I’m afraid.’

Here he faltered, something I had not expected. Sarah looked at him curiously.

‘Something happened to me a while ago,’ the Doctor said. ‘A short time before I met you, Sarah, though I never discussed it with you. I lost somebody — in a manner of speaking.’

‘Josephine,’ breathed Sarah. ‘The girl from UNIT’s staff. I heard about her.’

‘She found a wonderful relationship,’ said the Doctor, seeming to gaze through us and beyond us. ‘A romance, just like yours, Miss Rutherford. It was the best thing for her. But it cost me my best friend.’

I saw a little flutter of pain pass through Sarah’s eyes as the Doctor said this, but he seemed not to notice.

‘So I confess I’ve been feeling, shall we say, *ambivalently* about human

romantic relationships, Miss Rutherford — even when they do no harm at all.' Suddenly he appeared to collect himself, and got to his feet. 'Well, I suppose our business here is concluded. I think we should take the two of you home. You can visit the real library, to say a renewed hello.'

'There'll be a lot of opposition,' I remarked.

But Sarah smiled at us both. 'Oh, I think you can handle it,' she said.

And when I looked at Tom, I knew she was right.

That's my story. That's what happened on Separation Day: the first day of the rest of our lives, as the saying goes. And curiously enough, Sarah's optimism was vindicated more quickly than Tom and I could have hoped. In the end, we had to endure only another five years of persecution, after which the government toppled: rather spectacularly, it has to be said. Its more liberal successors repealed the regulations relating to intellectual disparity between romantic partners, along with a lot of other indefensible bureaucracy. That left us free to marry, so we did. It was during that period that the culture of constant surveillance was being jubilantly swept away throughout the whole of Europe. The camera-smashing seemed to go on for months, until I thought that people would never tire of it. There's nothing quite so intoxicating as reasserting your liberty, I suppose.

And now all that is ancient history. It's amazing how quickly time passes, and it only accelerates as you grow older. That's what prompted me to tell this story: in honour of the anniversary, as it were, because Separation Day was exactly fifty years ago today. I have no complaints or regrets about the life that Tom and I have shared: it's been marvellously ordinary, which is more than I could have dreamed of. We've had arguments, of course, but only about five or six, and I don't think that's too bad in half a century together. Just being in his company still makes me happy, and excited, and optimistic about the future. We even had a wonderful son, whom we chose not to call Daniel. He grew into the kindest man you could ever wish to meet.

As for the Doctor and Sarah, Tom and I have two competing theories. The first is that we simply imagined them: for if the Collision was a genuine threat, what more natural thing for the universe to do than to cause us to hallucinate two angelic visitors, who would conveniently say *exactly* the right things to make us stay together?

But the second theory is the one I like better: as ridiculous as it seems, I believe they were real people, genuine travellers in time, who from their perspective may have left the station only five minutes ago. And because I believe they exist, I have hopes for them. I hope the Doctor learns to leave Josephine in the past, and move on to new things, just as she did. I hope Sarah learns to cope with the fact that the Doctor used to have someone else at the centre of his life. Most of all I hope that by preserving the future of the universe they haven't left themselves with more work than they can handle; but then, no doubt they'll be able to deal with the problems one at a time as they arise. If they travel together for long enough, it's even possible that Sarah may become the Doctor's new best friend. Perhaps he believes he'll never get over Josephine,

perhaps he doesn't even want to; but as Tom and I can testify, you can always change your mind.

The Very Last Picture Show

Andrew Collins

*An Adventure of the Fourth Doctor,
with Leela*

The final time they came for her, it was a bitterly cold November night. Stars spattered the velvet sky like neon dandruff on a vampire's lapel.

Pulling her coat closer about herself against a sudden squall, Connie Watson walked purposefully along the moonlit street towards the 24-hour petrol station on the main road. She was irritated. The minicab driver who had brought her back from the gate-night classic' screening of *Casablanca* had been chatty to the point of intrusive, and his cab had smelled of kebab. Worse still, he had mistaken her for her neighbour Mrs Peartree, whose custom he then claimed, at length, to prefer. In spite of this, Connie had over-tipped him. And just when she thought she was settled in for the night — telly blaring and kettle on — she'd opened up the fridge and realised she was out of milk.

A small fleshy woman with pouchy eyes and a fussily primped helmet of lacquered grey hair, Connie Watson shivered as the wind picked up and the branches overhead waved and rustled. She could probably do without tonight, she thought as she trudged onward, but Chairman Meow would never forgive her in the morning. A bowl of milk and a plate of ham was the chairman's regular breakfast, and had been since he was a kitten, long before Alfred had died. The thought of her late husband brought a tear to her eye. She brushed it away crossly, blamed the frosty night, and turned the corner.

Leaves danced round her feet as the wind persisted. She should have wrapped up warmer, maybe worn a woolly hat. Aside from her, no other living soul roamed the frosty street.

In the wake of another biting gust, the orange streetlamp above her suddenly flickered and died. A second later, taking its cue, its neighbour also guttered and fell dark. Then, all along the street, in uncanny succession, every streetlamp faltered and failed as if they were birthday candles extinguished by a giant's breath.

Connie shivered and looked to the sky. The stars were disappearing in a spreading stain of black. Something was blotting out the night, something that was descending rapidly and bringing with it a muffled shroud of silence. The immense shape came closer, and details slowly emerged from shadow, eerily lit by strobing red and green pinpricks around the shape's perimeter.

The flying saucer was huge and faintly glowed a mottled dull silver. Concentric panelling rippled in an eye-twisting heat haze. It seemed to slow, and in an instant it was noiselessly hanging directly overhead.

A central aperture irised open, and Connie was suffused in a sudden column of hissing white light. She screwed her eyes tightly shut as the air erupted all around her. Abruptly, the world was full of flying dust and leaves and litter and twigs.

Connie coughed as dirt flew into her mouth. Enveloping her was a tornado of stinging debris and autumn rot, and she felt herself being lifted off her feet.

‘Here we go again,’ she thought as she ascended into the light.

‘This is not the steaming jungle of Kentillion 12 in the first quarter of the Millennium of the Zargobeast.’

‘What was that, Leela?’ The Doctor emerged from the TARDIS, jamming a shapeless hat on to his unruly curls.

‘I said this is not the steaming jungle of Kentillion 12 in the first—’

‘Yes, yes, I heard you, Leela, I heard you.’ The Doctor raised his hands in a ‘shushing’ gesture.

‘But that is where you said we would land, and that is not where we are,’ Leela persisted, gesturing into the smothering white void. ‘You have brought us to the wrong place.’

‘If this even is a place,’ muttered the Doctor, peering at the surrounding whiteness. The solid blue shape of the TARDIS behind them was a stark intrusion into the empty space, which felt at once claustrophobic, yet fuzzily infinite. A colourless mist seemed to hang heavily in the air. Even the ground they walked upon seemed insubstantial and pale. He rallied. ‘Very well spotted, Leela. This certainly isn’t a jungle. That’s very perceptive of you.’ Shoving his hands into the pockets of his long brown coat, the Doctor strode forward several paces before wheeling round to observe the deficiency of landscape with narrowed eyes. Ignoring Leela’s glower at his blatantly provocative condescension, he sniffed the air, and then grinned broadly. ‘Well.’ He shrugged. ‘You know what they say about the best laid plans of mice and men...’

Leela frowned. ‘No, Doctor, I do not know what they say.’

The Doctor hesitated. ‘No, I don’t suppose you do,’ he said, and fixed her with a sombre look. ‘They gang aft aglay, Leela.’ He adjusted the coils of his lengthy scarf and turned away.

From the corner of his eye, the Doctor watched his companion’s response with indulgent pride. She was a tall, lithe young woman, with a cascade of deepest brown hair, and healthily tanned skin stretched over finely toned muscles. Her brown eyes shone with intelligence. The revealing animal-hide warrior’s garb she wore spoke of a far earthier and grounded existence than that afforded by the ethereal blankness of their surroundings, yet he could already see her assessing and adapting, evaluating the qualities of this new environment. Or lack of environment. She really was quite extraordinary. And she hadn’t even felt the need yet to pull her knife.

Having given the Doctor’s last comment some thought, Leela reached a conclusion. ‘Your words have no meaning,’ she said.

‘Well, of course they have a meaning,’ he said imperiously. ‘My words always have a meaning. It means no matter how well you plan, things will often go wrong.’

‘So you have planned and things have gone wrong?’

‘Exactly.’ The Doctor beamed.

‘And your plans often go wrong.’

‘Well...’

‘And the Mice and the Men — these are the names of gangs?’

‘Not quite.’ The Doctor squinted thoughtfully into the distance. ‘You see, “gang” is a Scottish transitive verb meaning “to go”.’

‘A transi...?’

‘You know, you ask altogether too many questions.’

‘What is “Scottish”?’

The Doctor gave her a pop-eyed stare. ‘Haggis, bagpipes, Robbie Burns, deep-fried Mars bars... Now, a question I would like answered is: do you see something over there?’ He pointed.

Leela followed his gaze. ‘I_ I am not sure.’

‘I think I see something.’ The Doctor’s eyes narrowed. ‘Yes, I’m certain there’s a structure of some sort. Let’s find out, shall we?’

‘Do you think that is where we will find the mice?’ Leela looked hopeful as she trotted beside him.

‘Forget about the mice,’ the Doctor murmured.

They melted into the fog.

Three eyes on stalks wobbled as they observed a monitor screen. On the screen, a tall, curly haired man and a slim woman were walking through whiteness.

‘Who are they?’

‘Beg your pardon, Captain Grugvengler, sir?’

‘I said, “Who are they?” A stubby grey digit was thrust at the monitor. ‘They’re not part of the program.’

‘Couldn’t say, sir.’

Grugvengler’s three eyes narrowed in a frown.

‘I love you, darling.’

‘I love you too.’

‘I can’t bear that we should part.’

‘Oh, my dearest darling.’ The man’s voice, throbbing with emotion, boomed around the auditorium from surround-sound speakers, while a warbling orchestra underscored each over-enunciated syllable. ‘One day this terrible war will be over, and we will be back in each other’s arms.’

Richard and Debbie nestled comfortably together in the dark. The plastic arm between their seats was raised, and an immense bucket of popcorn balanced between them. Richard’s hand rested on Debbie’s thigh. The thin bracelet at Debbie’s wrist sparkled as she absently popped a handful of popcorn into Richard’s mouth. He chewed slackly.

In front of them, the flickering silver light silhouetted rows of attentive heads, while on the movie screen, giant black-and-white figures went about their melodramatic business.

‘I wish, oh, *how* I wish you didn’t have to go.’ The woman’s eyes shone with unshed tears, and the music swelled.

‘But I must, my sweet one, I must.’

‘Oh, Trevor.’

‘Oh, Cynthia.’

‘Oh, Trevor!’

‘Oh, Cynthia!’ The man’s slick moustache glistened like a lovesick mollusc. He hefted his backpack and turned to the steaming train, which whistled despondently.

A flickering shadow skittered across the screen. For a brief moment, half the picture was obscured, and then the shadow was gone.

The woman lunged at her beloved. ‘Kiss me, you wonderful heroic fool.’

They kissed. The entire string section went into gushing overdrive.

Richard absentmindedly plucked some popcorn from the tub and raised it to Debbie’s mouth. She leaned forward and gobbled it distractedly.

A noise from behind them momentarily attracted Richard’s attention. It was a loud chomping punctuated by slurps, noisy belches and the occasional enthusiastic ‘yum’. He turned his head toward the source.

A couple of rows back, a shadowy figure moved. Richard squinted, his eyes readjusting. The thing appeared to be a huge insect, the size of a Doberman, with a pointed spiny body and busy mandibles. Its dark amber carapace glimmered in the cinema’s gloom.

As it moved, the long antennae atop its head waggled in the beam from the projector. It was nibbling on what remained of a waxen-faced man whose face wore a frozen expression of bemusement. A ragged, bloody hole was all that was left of the man’s chest. One dead hand still clutched a bag of popcorn, which was slowly spilling on to the floor.

As Richard watched, the creature’s spiky head lifted, and it looked directly at him through glowing compound eyes.

It raised a wickedly pincered foreleg and gave a cheery wave. ‘Hello,’ it said in a scratchy voice. It seemed to consider for a moment, then it extended its other pincer, in which was clutched a bloody human leg, complete with shoe.

‘Yum?’ it said hopefully.

Richard watched it for another second, and then turned back to the movie. He crammed another fistful of popcorn into his mouth, the thin bracelet at his wrist sparkling. Debbie snuggled closer.

After a moment, the crunching and slurping behind them recommenced.

It was an old brick building, standing in grand isolation amid the whiteness. Large elaborate neon letters above the wide front doors proclaimed the cinema’s name: the Empire. Beneath this, in smaller black letters picked out against a dusty white background, were the words ‘Now Showing: ***The Very Last Picture Show.***’

‘Now, why would there be a cinema in the middle of nowhere?’ the Doctor mused.

Leela and the Doctor approached curiously and climbed the steps to the entrance. An empty ticket booth stood between the opaque glass doors. They pushed the doors open and stepped through.

The foyer was richly draped and smelled of buttery fat. Posters and enlarged

motion-picture stills were dotted all around the walls. The burgundy flock wallpaper dissolved into shadows as it approached the high ceiling.

‘No one is here,’ Leela said.

The Doctor strode over to the nearest framed posters and examined them closely, peering with interest at the poster for *The Long Goodbye*. To his left, an unmanned concession stand lined the back wall, coffee pots steaming cheerily, glass display cases full of Poppets and Opal Fruits. Flanking it were the heavy doors into the auditorium, through which could be heard the muffled sounds of a movie in progress.

‘They’re all watching the film.’

‘The mice...?’

‘More likely the men. I thought I told you to forget about the mice.’ He stuffed his hat into a pocket. Then he breathed on the glass surface of another poster, *A Farewell to Arms*, and lifted his scarf to polish it.

‘Why do they watch this film?’

‘For entertainment. Usually. For instruction, distraction...’ The Doctor peered at another picture frame where a teenage Uma Thurman was gazing from the lurid advertisement for *Kiss Daddy Goodnight*. He pointed to the wall on his right. ‘*The Goodbye Girl... Farewell My Concubine... Goodbye, Mr Chips... Au Revoir Les Enfants*. I think I detect a theme.’ He grinned broadly. Leela, have I ever taken you to the pictures?’ Before she could reply, the Doctor turned to the snack counter and banged it with his palm.

‘Shop!’

Twin shafts of light sliced through the dark. They danced briefly like fireflies on the backs of heads, and moved on.

At the rear of the auditorium, beneath the flickering rays of the projector, stood two still figures, sweeping their narrow torch beams across the audience. Each figure wore a white shirt, purple waistcoat and matching bow tie. The first was a middle-aged woman in a black skirt, with a bleach-blonde perm and clownish make-up. The nametag pinned to her ample bosom identified her as ‘Betty’. The second — a pimply, greasy-haired youth — wore trousers at half-mast to reveal grubby white socks. This, his nametag attested, was ‘Liam’.

An instant before their beams came to rest on a slumped, gnawed-looking head, a twitching shadow detached itself and dived into the gloom, surfing the darkest edge of shadow at the border of the light.

Betty and Liam clicked off their torches and moved down the aisle.

They pushed their way along the row. The seats’ occupants distractedly shuffled to let them past, their eyes never leaving the flickering screen.

Reaching the body, Liam grabbed it under the armpits, and hoisted it easily. Betty took what remained of the legs, and they hauled the carcass back along the row toward the aisle, the dead man’s neighbours once again shifting obligingly to let them through.

Two rows in front, someone glanced incuriously back at the scene, and then blandly returned his gaze to the movie screen. Liam and Betty manoeuvred the body towards the ‘Staff Only’ door at the back.

The movie played on.

‘Problems in the isolation area, Captain Grugvengler, sir.’

Grugvengler’s three eyes swivelled on their stalks to regard his deputy.

‘The ushers are reporting another loss, sir.’

‘Another? Now really, this is just getting out of hand.’ He considered for a moment. ‘I’m probably going to have to go in there to sort this out.’

He remained sitting in his plush command chair, chubby fingers drumming on the overstuffed arm.

The rear doors of the auditorium swung open and the Doctor and Leela entered. No one had responded to his calls for service, so the Doctor had scooped up a tub of popcorn, rummaged in his coat pocket, and dropped the gold doubloon he found there on to the countertop. Then he had ushered Leela into the cinema.

Leela shook the carton. ‘What is the purpose of this?’

‘You eat it.’

She sniffed the contents tentatively. ‘It is greasy,’ she said. The Doctor encouraged her to keep her voice down as they found a pair of threadbare seats together at the edge of a row near the front.

‘There are a lot of people,’ Leela observed in a loud whisper. She watched the young couple nestling next to her as they stared up at the screen, chewing. Tentatively, she dipped into her tub and sampled the contents. As she did so, perceiving from her neighbours that this was the ritual, she dutifully watched the antics onscreen. She chewed disappointedly. ‘It tastes of nothing,’ she said, and took another handful. ‘It is bland and boring. Not like freshly cooked meat.’

‘I told you, the hot dogs weren’t fresh,’ muttered the Doctor, eyeing the people around them thoughtfully.

Leela spoke through another mouthful. ‘It is tasteless and dull.’ She took some more.

Amused, the Doctor watched her as she continued to shovel popcorn into her face.

Within moments, Leela was watching the movie with rapt attention. The Doctor himself found that he was tuning out, looking about him more and more, at the oddly blank faces in the semi-lit gloom. The movie was fairly standard fare — boy meets girl, boy and girl meet monster, monster meets city, and city meets destruction. Judging by the prevailing theme of the posters in the foyer, it was probably called something like *Goodbye, Tokyo*, the Doctor mused.

Something scuttled at the edge of his vision — black on black, more felt than seen. He turned to look but there was only darkness.

The sense of disquiet that had settled on him as he stepped out of the TARDIS was growing. Perhaps it was the strangely subdued audience. Perhaps it was his irritation with the movie itself, or the relentless booming of the surround-sound speakers. Most likely, he realised, it was Leela’s sudden uncharacteristic hush.

He knew that he could rely on her as a barometer, and Leela was always curious: she demanded accuracy and understanding. However, the action was just washing over her as she catatonically munched her popcorn. And where was this place anyway?

A shadow briefly moved across the picture.

The Doctor uncrinkled a bag of jelly babies from his coat pocket and popped one into his mouth. Jelly babies helped him think. There was a darting movement in the shadows on the ceiling. He definitely hadn't imagined that. He looked up, then looked about him once more, and then a piece fell into place as he became conscious of something that had been niggling at him. The theatre was about three-quarters full. Every single person in the cinema wore a thin bracelet, which sparkled on their wrist as their hands transferred popcorn from tub to mouth.

Every single one was eating popcorn.

He was glancing at the bracelet worn by the young man seated next to Leela, when the man turned his head and looked directly at him. His expression was blank, but there was the suggestion of awareness buried behind the eyes. The young man opened his mouth and exhaled a sigh. 'Haaahhhh...' His mouth closed, and then opened again, his voice this time a hoarse, barely audible whisper. 'Haahhh... huurghhh... hellp usss.' And he turned back to the movie and stuffed some popcorn into his mouth.

The Doctor's eyes widened. Leela remained staring at the movie screen as if nothing had happened.

Light momentarily spilled into the auditorium as the rear doors swung open and then closed with a creaking swish. Two figures marched down the aisle, their torch beams flickering across the patrons. The Doctor turned in his seat just as the figures came to rest at his shoulder. Torchlight flashed in his face.

'Can I see your ticket?'

The Doctor squinted, holding up a hand against the glare. The speaker's voice had been female, and he could also make out a thin male standing beside her. Both wore bow ties. 'Hello,' he began. Glancing down, something else about the figures caught the Doctor's eye: in the hand not holding the torches, each figure clutched an elaborate ray gun. They too were levelled at his head.

The Doctor nudged Leela. She didn't respond.

'Are you meant to be in here?' one of the figures — Betty, according to her name badge — demanded.

'Well, now...' The Doctor worriedly nudged his companion again. 'My friend and I were just...' He turned to peer at her: she was still completely absorbed in the film, jaws chewing away. '... eating popcorn,' he finished darkly, an edge entering his voice. He gently took the tub from Leela's hands, placed it on the floor, and shook her. Leela seemed to awaken, and took in the scene with surprise.

'You are intruders,' said the other figure, Liam. 'You are not part of the program.'

'Program, eh?' The Doctor slowly stood, pulling Leela up with him. 'It's interesting you should mention that. Which program would that be, exactly?'

Betty and Liam stepped back to allow them out of the row.

Leela tensed and sprang. She aimed below the level of the flashlight beams, and took down Betty like a rugby player thwarting a try. There was a heavy thump as they landed, and an energy bolt narrowly missed the Doctor's head as it streaked to the ceiling.

Liam pivoted and pointed his gun down towards the struggling pair.

Making a grab for Liam's arm, the Doctor tried to turn aside his aim, but the youth was unnaturally strong. He elbowed the Doctor viciously, and the Doctor fell awkwardly into the laps of an oblivious elderly couple. Struggling to right himself, he couldn't help but notice that all the while, the seated pair simply gazed vacantly ahead.

Liam was attempting to get a clear shot as Leela and Betty rolled in the aisle. Leela desperately worked to disarm the woman, whose dropped torch was flashing crazily around the room as it was kicked and jostled in the struggle. Large twitching shapes scurried in all directions as they sought to retain the shadows. The human audience remained unresponsive in their seats.

The Doctor leapt on Liam's back, desperate to distract his aim, while on the floor, Betty was choking Leela with savage force. Leela summoned all her strength, and with a choked cry, she threw the woman off her. Betty went flying and hit a chair hard.

Her head rolled off.

It clunked down the aisle. The severed neck sparked, and wires trailed as it bounced down the shallow steps to the front row.

The headless body twisted and lunged for Leela again.

Richard's eye was distracted as a severed head came spinning to a rest beneath the screen. It rocked briefly on one heavily rouged cheek, and then was still. A blackened wire trailing from the neck sparked angrily, causing blonde curls to smoulder.

Looking to his right, Richard saw a man clinging like an ungainly limpet to the male usher's back.

Then Debbie lifted popcorn to Richard's mouth. He succumbed again to darkness.

Liam bucked and whirled, trying to dislodge the Doctor, who clung on in desperation. It couldn't last. Finally, he began to slip, and Liam gave a great heave, sending the Doctor flying over his shoulder to barrel into Betty's advancing body. Betty staggered — but only momentarily — and then she continued her advance on Leela.

Realising he still had something tightly clutched in his hand, the Doctor looked down to find that it was one of Liam's arms, gushing a shower of sparks from the severed shoulder joint. He used it to hit Betty. She rounded on him.

'Run, Leela! Get out of here!'

Leela vaulted over the front row of chairs and darted towards the neon exit sign at the front. Liam raised his gun to fire and the Doctor looped his scarf around the adolescent android's remaining arm. He yanked in time to deflect the

energy bolt, which hit a crawling something halfway up the wall. The thing squealed and fell with a thud.

Roughly, the headless Betty grabbed the Doctor by the shoulder. Liam swung his ray gun back to cover him.

The Doctor raised his hands. It was only then that he noticed how quiet it had become. The movie soundtrack — which had punctuated the struggle — was gone, replaced by a ringing silence. Then a gargling voice boomed around the auditorium.

‘Who are you?’

The android usheress loosened her grip, and the Doctor turned to look up at the giant movie screen.

At the three bulging eyes that were staring back at him.

The exit door burst open and Leela raced out into the shiny white emptiness. Her footsteps slowed for a moment as she tried to get her bearings, then wide-eyed, she sprinted on into the mist.

‘Hello there.’ The Doctor smiled and waved at the creature on the screen. ‘I’m the Doctor, and I’m afraid you just missed my friend Leela. As did your android here.’ He gave the one-armed Liam a friendly pat. Liam lurched. The Doctor quickly removed his hand.

The manifestation on the movie screen was like the product of an unhappy union between a warthog and a blancmange. His bloated, bristly body was poured into a loud checked suit. His three eyes, emerging from the centre of his swinelike face, pivoted watchfully on their long stalks between pointed gristly ears. Atop his head he sported a bad comb-over.

‘What are you doing aboard the good ship *Boo to the Goose*?’ he rumbled.

‘Ah, is that where I am? How terribly interesting.’ The Doctor grinned widely. ‘I’m afraid I was having a little misunderstanding with your colleagues. One of them quite lost her head. I’m so terribly sorry, I don’t believe you introduced yourself...?’

‘I am Grugvengler,’ snarled the alien. ‘Of the G’Ug.’

‘How splendid for you.’ The Doctor smiled politely.

‘Now tell me what you are doing here,’ the alien growled. ‘You are not one of the tagged. Could it be that you are the one who is eating my soldiers?’

‘Soldiers?’ The Doctor looked about him at the mixed bag of catatonic humanity slumped in their seats. ‘Did you say soldiers?’ He watched the popcorn, the glazed stares and the twinkling of the bracelets. ‘Did you say *eating your soldiers*?’

‘Enough!’ Grugvengler waved his pudgy fist in anger. ‘If you do not wish to cooperate, you can be made to conform. Usherbots, prepare him for in-flight entertainment!’

Leela had run. She wasn’t sure why. The Doctor had told her to run, so she had run. It was not like her. Her instinct had been to fight, but she trusted the Doctor — he was a wise shaman, her teacher and her friend. When he told her

she must run, she had run.

That was still not like her.

Leela shook her head in annoyance, trying to clear the fuzziness that lingered still. The trance had crept over her without her knowledge, and she did not wish for it to claim her again.

She slowed. A ghostly Leela was approaching through the misty whiteness. She stopped, and the approaching figure also stopped.

Cautiously, she crept forward, her hand hovering near her knife. The other Leela did the same. As she warily approached, she realised that what she was seeing was her own likeness reflected against a milky surface. Raising a tentative hand, she pressed against it gently. It was solid.

‘Hello?’

Her hand caressed the smooth barrier. Slowly, she knelt, exploring the unseen obstruction all the way down to the floor. Feeling what appeared to be a crease where the wall met the floor, Leela whipped out her knife and inserted the blade into the crack. She grunted.

After a moment of levering and prodding, Leela straightened, re-sheathed her knife and banged her fist against the barrier.

‘Show yourselves! I know you are there. I feel your eyes watching me.’

Nothing happened. Leela’s blurred reflection mirrored her frowning disappointment. She thumped the wall again.

‘You are cowards. Lurking behind your wall like worms beneath a stone. You are weak and spineless creatures with no honour.’

Leela waited a moment to see if her provocation had stirred a response. There was nothing. Resisting the urge to give the barrier a final petulant slap, she turned and stalked away.

The mists closed around her.

The android ushers pushed the Doctor ahead of them up the stairs.

‘You know, I could fix that arm for you if you asked nicely,’ the Doctor told Liam. The android ignored him.

They arrived at a door marked ‘Projection Booth’ and the Doctor turned to Betty as she opened the door and pushed him through. ‘Are you sure I can’t help you get your head on straight? Or just on?’

‘Wait in here,’ said Liam.

The door slammed against the Doctor’s protestations. There was a clunk as it locked. He turned and peered into the chattering gloom. Something dark scurried away in his peripheral vision. The projection booth was automated, he realised; no one was needed to supervise the running of the films. There was something in here with him, though, of that much he was certain. There was more to the noise in here than just the rattling of the projector. He turned at the sound of a pattering scamper.

In the far corner he could just make out a small mound of human bodies. Dark shapes moved across it.

An angular insect head suddenly reared out of the dark. The thing was about chest height, chitinous and spiny. Its compound eyes glowed. More of the

creatures emerged from the lurking shadows. The first creature moved forward. 'Hello,' it said as it advanced. Turn.'

'Ah,' said the Doctor as he whipped out his sonic screwdriver.

Leela had made her way back cautiously to the cinema. All the way there, she had felt curious eyes watching her.

Choosing not to approach from the front, she slipped round the edge of the building until she found an open window. Then, climbing nimbly on to the sill, she slipped headfirst through. She rolled like an acrobat as she hit the tiled floor beyond, and came to rest in a standing position with her knife drawn in readiness.

Part of the room was partitioned into small cubicles, while the opposite wall was lined with basins and hand driers.

A woman stood leaning against a basin, gazing hollowly into the mirror above.

As Leela made her unconventional entrance, the woman turned in surprise.

'Hello, dear,' she said. 'Are you new?'

'Excuse me. I say, hello! Excuse me!' The Doctor's voice boomed as he competed with the reverberating soundtrack. On the immense screen, a light aircraft was leaving a misty airstrip. The engines rumbled.

After a moment, the film cut out and the three-eyed alien was back, squinting down into the suddenly silent darkness.

'Ah, there you are,' said the Doctor cordially.

'What... What are you...? I thought you were...'

'Locked up and being converted? Yes, well, I really don't have much of a taste for popcorn, especially when it's drugged. And, frankly, I just wasn't terribly keen on spending too much time in a projection booth teeming with weevils.'

'Eh?'

'I'm very sorry to have to tell you this, Grugvengler of the G'Ug, but you have an infestation of intergalactic space weevils. Nasty, but nothing that can't be dealt with by a good exterminator and a bit of judicious spraying.' The Doctor grinned. 'Now, let's see if we can't get this all sorted out so that I can find my friend and be on my way.'

'But how did they get on board?'

'The eggs were probably in the popcorn. Did you get it wholesale? Cut price?' The three eyes narrowed. From somewhere just off-screen came a mumbled voice: 'Sorry, sir.'

'Now, weevils are omnivorous, and while they're not usually predatory, they can't seem to resist sitting targets. They are starting to acquire a taste for human flesh, and I'm simply not going to tolerate that. Humans are a particular favourite species of mine. Which reminds me...' The Doctor dropped his affable attitude and his voice became steely. 'What are you doing with these humans? Hmm? What are you up to, Mr Grugvengler of the G'Ug?'

* * *

‘They call us Grugvengler’s Army,’ said the woman — Connie Watson, she’d said she was called.

‘You are warriors?’

‘More like unwilling mercenaries.’ Connie looked at Leela steadily. ‘We are all abductees, swiped in secret and tagged for experimentation. But Grugvengler’s an opportunist; he’s a maverick who knows how to manipulate their implants to his own ends. We’re collected when our services are required and returned when the job is done.’

‘But you are old.’

‘And some are young, some are crippled, and many unfit. Like he cares, as long as he gets paid at the end of the job. We’re snatched from our lives, primed for our mission, then let loose on the latest enemy. The only thing is —’ she turned troubled eyes to stare at Leela the in-flight entertainment is different this time. I think we’re being prepared for the end. I don’t think we’re expected to return.’

Leela stared at Connie for a moment, then asked a question that had been bothering her. ‘Why are you not in a waking sleep like the others?’ she said.

‘Ah, well,’ Connie replied. ‘I never much liked popcorn. Gets stuck in my dentures.’

‘So let me get this straight. You’re basically a puny bunch of nerdy aliens who are too cowardly to do your own fighting but too egotistical to admit your limitations. You regularly abduct an unfortunate scattering of humans, rob them of free will, and use them as your personal army, despite their unfitness for the job. How am I doing? I mean look at these people; they’re not soldiers — they’re teenagers, office workers, pensioners...’

‘They’re my retirement fund, Doctor,’ Grugvengler cut in. ‘They’ve been a lucrative business and they’re about to engage in their last great battle. There are voyeuristic races in this galaxy that just love a good blood bath, and will pay top dollar to watch it. I’m sending my team “over the top” for a Reality War channel on Kentillion 12. They’re audience favourites, but it always pays to quit while demand is high. It will be a glorious slaughter. I anticipate record ratings. I, of course, get a share of the box office.’

‘No.’

Grugvengler looked surprised. ‘No?’

‘No.’ The Doctor’s face was thunderous. ‘I’m going to stop you.’

‘Oh, I think not, Doctor.’ Grugvengler’s bizarre image began to shrink. ‘You see, I’m going to stop you from stopping me.’ He was rapidly diminishing in size as he spoke, as if the camera were widening out from a close-up. ‘And that, Doctor —’ Grugvengler was now a small figure at the bottom of the screen is because I am in control.’

He stepped from the screen and into the auditorium, and glared defiantly up at the Doctor. In the flesh, Grugvengler was smaller than he had appeared on the movie screen; the top of his head was just about level with the Doctor’s waist. Flakes of dry grey skin speckled the top of his shiny pate between greasy strands

of hair.

The projected view on the screen now showed the control room he had just vacated. Grubby brown walls gave way to chunky green control panels apparently rendered in Bakelite, and highlighted by dim yellow lighting. Surrounding the empty brown-leather command chair, several other three-eyed warhog creatures sat at the control panels, trying to look busy. They peered shiftily out into the dark of the cinema.

Grugvengler's hand dipped into his jacket and emerged clutching a remote control. The device was boxy, with three rows of coloured buttons, and a bobbled aerial on top. He waved it triumphantly at the Doctor.

'You can't stop me, Doctor! See how my mighty zombified army awakes!' He pressed a big red button. Nothing happened.

Grugvengler muttered and shook the remote control. The Doctor waited patiently, an expectant smile on his face. Grugvengler peered at the device, gave it a shake, and very deliberately pressed the big red button again.

The people in the cinema seats began to shift and moan. Slowly, they hauled themselves to their feet and looked blearily around, popcorn spilling from laps unheeded. The thin bracelet at every wrist now pulsed with a red demonic light.

Disentangling herself from her boyfriend, one girl stood up and stretched. Beside her, the boyfriend opened his mouth wide and gave a hissing snarl. The girl joined in.

Grugvengler's piggy features beamed with pride as he turned to the swaying, shuffling ranks. 'Kill the Doctor,' he bellowed. 'Kill the intruder!'

The Doctor sighed and held his sonic screwdriver aloft. He pressed a button.

From behind Grugvengler, Liam and Betty emerged through the emergency exit doors. Liam had both his arms, and Betty's head was back in place. As the zombified humans shambled towards the Doctor, the android ushers began to close in on the little alien.

'I took the trouble to fix your androids,' the Doctor explained. 'I even made one or two adjustments. After all, my friend and I damaged them, and it's only right to take responsibility for one's actions, don't you find?'

The G'Ug in the projected control room watched nervously out of the corners of their eyes.

'And the thing is,' the Doctor said, gesturing at the nearest humans who were now reaching for him and drooling, 'I think that if we were to restore free will to these good people, then they might consider that **you** had actions for which you needed to take responsibility.'

Liam snatched for the device in Grugvengler's hands, and the little alien danced away, alarmed, clutching it to his chest.

'Humans are thinking, feeling, cultured beings.' The Doctor hesitated. 'Well, most of the time they are, anyway.' He cleared his throat and was about to resume his tirade when a noise distracted him. It was the scuttling, tapping sound of thousands of insect legs. Grugvengler had also become aware of the sound; he was looking around himself warily, still maintaining a safe distance from the androids. The humans had stopped their advance on the Doctor and were scenting the air keenly, their expressions alert.

The noise intensified, until it was a persistent thundering.

Weevils poured from every corner, emerging from beneath the seats, scuttling down the walls, climbing from behind the dusty drapes that hung at either side of the movie screen. They flowed through the rear doors in a glimmering amber tide of angular bodies.

The massed humans scanned the room hungrily.

Grugvengler, whose path back to the screen was being blocked by the androids, pushed his way forward into the crowd. Liam followed, while Betty remained to block his retreat.

The young woman next to Grugvengler was watching the weevils with predatory stillness: suddenly she gave a hiss and pounced on the nearest one. As she leapt, her boyfriend too sprang forward to grapple an insect.

As if a dam had broken, throughout the auditorium the zombified humans began to attack the creatures that had preyed on them as they slept. The weevils were no match for the enraged humans. Carapaces cracked, multi-jointed legs twitched. The Doctor looked on, speechless.

In the projected control room, the G'Ug had abandoned all pretence at nonchalance, and were watching events in consternation, their eyestalks swaying.

The stream of weevils continued to surge through the rear doors, driven forward by a loud and exultant yell. 'Yaaaahh!' Leela burst in, followed by a woman of advanced years whom the Doctor did not recognise.

Pushing his way through the writhing mass of humans and insects, Liam finally caught up with Grugvengler. He grabbed the little alien and held him fast by the collar, confiscating the control device.

Leela stomped up to the Doctor. 'You are consorting with the enemy!'

The Doctor looked surprised. 'Consorting? Oh, no, I wouldn't say we were consorting.' He called to the alien across a sea of struggling bodies. 'We were just having a bit of an old chin-wag, weren't we, Grugvengler?'

Struggling in Liam's iron grip, the alien opened his mouth to retort. A piece of popcorn sailed through the air and into Grugvengler's mouth. Reflexively, he swallowed. At once, his expression slackened and his eyes glazed over. The woman who'd come in with Leela walked up to him, her head held high.

'My Alfred was one of your "troops",' she said, the last word dripping in disdain. 'He died on one of your pointless campaigns. I've had to soldier on without him. Now it's just me, and Chairman Meow. I have a responsibility to that cat, and to myself, and I can't keep going on like this. It has to stop. All of these people have lives and loved ones, and they deserve to make their own choices. I have to finally bid my husband goodbye, and you —' her voice cracked '-- you are done here.'

'Your plans gang aglay, ugly one!' Leela told the alien.

The Doctor looked at his companion approvingly. 'Very good, Leela,' he said.

All around them, the battle had continued raging. The humans had attacked mercilessly and the weevils had been falling back, taking heavy losses. Now, the insects had finally found a means to retreat; a steady flow of weevils was heading towards the movie screen.

As the insects began to pour into the projected control room, and the humans followed, the G'Ug panicked and fled.

'Come on, Leela,' the Doctor said, striding into the screen, 'we've work to do...'

Once the weevils were corralled in the flying saucer, the nervous and remorseful G'Ug were easily persuaded to return the humans to their homes. Without the influence of Grugvengler, the crewmembers were, as Leda insisted on pointing out, as timid as mice.

Sometime during all the chaos, Grugvengler disappeared. Betty and Liam were charged with finding him. They were still searching when the Doctor and Leela finally departed.

Grugvengler sat alone in the empty auditorium, outlined by the flickering light of the projector. He gazed blankly at the giant screen. Slowly, his hand lifted popcorn to his mouth.

'Yum.'

Grugvengler's hand paused. He turned in his seat toward the source of the scratchy voice.

Directly behind him sat a weevil, regarding him hungrily from glowing compound eyes. Its great amber head swayed gently and its antennae wagged. For a moment their eyes locked, and then the weevil started to climb over the seat towards him.

'Hello,' it said.

Into the Silent Land

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*An Adventure of the Fourth Doctor,
with Romanadvoratrelundar*

I

He was dreaming about the garden again.

It was late in the spring, and the first roses were beginning to bloom. Autumn Damasks they were, a particularly fragrant breed that dated as far back as eleventh-century Persia, which is precisely where he'd obtained the seeds during his travels. A brief, pleasant stopover with Susan, Ian and Barbara that had, for a change, been free of misadventures.

Of course, the roses, like the garden, didn't actually exist. They were part of a dreamscape his subconscious had created over the centuries — a psychological haven he could retreat to when his wearied mind and body needed to rest. He'd been spending time in the garden for a few days now, although he couldn't fathom the reason why; he couldn't even remember the last time he'd thought about it. What he did know was that he'd begun to prefer this fictitious countryside to the constant hopping about the universe in which he normally engaged, and the thought of remaining here had a certain appeal to him. Cavorting up and down the time stream was for younger men, and it had been a very long time since anyone could refer to him as being a young man.

Perhaps, he thought as he gazed out of the window, it was time to consider retirement. Or at least turn his attentions to cultivating tulips, if only to give the poor roses a break from his obsessive tinkering.

But those were topics to be internally debated on another day, he decided. Right now, there was a spectacular, sun-drenched morning to enjoy, just made for a bit of puttering about the garden, and he'd had quite enough of sitting in the house, staring at the walls — even if they weren't real. So, he picked up his thick canvas gloves, his pruning shears and trowel, and his wide-brimmed sun hat, and ventured forth.

The flagstone path gently sloped away from the Victorian-style house and down the hill, curving around towards the back, past the large, glass-paned greenhouse containing his African violets, to end at the vine-covered, wire-frame arch that served as the entrance to the rose garden. He walked with a light, easy step, head tilted back, enjoying the sunshine and thrilling to the breeze that whispered past his ears to flutter the edges of his hat. He paused a moment to inhale deeply, filling his lungs with the intoxicating scent of fresh air, fresh soil and the heady perfume of roses in full bloom.

'A glorious day,' he said contentedly as he continued his walk. 'Absolutely marvellous.' So marvellous, in fact, that even his joints had stopped aching — for now. He felt like a man half his age... and considering just how long he'd been living, that was saying a great deal.

It was only when he was making his way past the greenhouse that he realised something was wrong.

The face he saw reflected in the house's small glass panes... it looked different. Not that he didn't recognise it; he knew its features quite well, of course — it was his face, after all, why shouldn't he? The ears were a trifle unappealing, the teeth a little too oversized — mind you, he did like the nose; had, in fact, always considered it a vast improvement — but still, it was his face, all right. The problem was, it just wasn't the face he was expecting to see, certainly not in this rustic setting. The one belonging to the older, grandfatherly man he'd been several lifetimes ago. The one with the overbearing ego and the shoulder-length white hair. Well, perhaps he still possessed some of the former — Romana certainly seemed to think so — but as for the latter... He whipped off the sun hat to find, not snow-white locks, but an unruly mop of dark brown curls. He frowned.

'This isn't right,' he muttered. 'Not right at all...'

'Come to tend my roses this time, have you?' said a sharp, demanding voice.

He turned to face the speaker. Standing a few feet away was the white-haired man who'd been missing from the reflection, looking as tall and stern and imposing as he remembered.

The Doctor. This was his home, his garden. And he didn't seem at all pleased to see his guest.

'I asked you a question, young man,' the Doctor said bitingly. 'You've been availing yourself of my home and my good nature long enough. Have you now decided to tend my roses, or just muck about the garden like the other two did, adding your own touches?'

Still as charmingly brusque as ever, the traveller thought. Good nature, indeed. He looked around, towards where the Doctor was gesturing. Beyond the boundaries of the rose garden stretched two enormous tracts of land, one populated with tiny blue forget-me-nots, the other with double-bloomed hollyhocks. Combined with the roses, it all made for a veritable sea of colours, spread as far as the eye could see. It was a breathtaking sight, a marvel of landscaping, but something about the whole scene felt... wrong.

No, he realised. It wasn't the location that was wrong. It was him.

He shook his head. 'I shouldn't be here.' He paused, then turned back to the Doctor. 'Should I?'

The old man clasped the lapels of the black frock coat he wore, then tilted back his head slightly, so he could look down his nose at his guest. 'And why not, hmm? What makes you say that?'

'L...' He rubbed his right hand through his mop of curls, then grimaced. 'I didn't think it was my time yet.'

The Doctor snorted. 'Everyone thinks that, young man. If we were allowed to choose the time of our passing... well, I imagine we'd all choose to be immortal, and never have to face the issue.'

The traveller ran the edge of his index finger back and forth beneath his lower lip for a few brief strokes — a nervous tic he'd recently acquired. 'I suppose... It's just that I don't remember losing my spot in the queue, so to speak.' He pulled at

his lower lip with the thumb and forefinger of his right hand for a bit, feeling the Doctor's stern gaze practically boring holes in him.

'But I thought this was all just part of a dream,' he muttered, then hesitantly gazed at his host. 'Isn't it?'

'That is a distinct possibility,' the Doctor agreed.

'Well, that brings some measure of relief,' he said gratefully, although he felt anything but relieved. 'So, is my being here meant to be a warning of some kind? A sign that my final hour may be approaching? That I should prepare myself for the worst?'

'How drolly melodramatic,' the Doctor commented drily. He went back to looking down his nose, acting every bit the professor berating a particularly thick-headed student. 'My boy, dreams are whatever you make of them. And since this is your dream — if, indeed, it is a dream — then anything I say to you could very well be only what you wish to hear.'

'Ah.' He returned to gently tugging at his lower lip for a few seconds. Then he smiled awkwardly. 'You wouldn't happen to know what that is, would you?'

The Doctor started. 'What what is?' he demanded.

'What it is I wish to hear.'

The Doctor frowned. 'Do you enjoy playing the fool, young man, or am I to understand from your behaviour that the level of my intelligence slips downwards with each regeneration?' He grunted. 'If that is the case, I imagine I should be a complete imbecile by the time my lives have run their course.'

'Well, I prefer to think of it as we're becoming more... personable,' the traveller replied with a smile.

The old man's frown only deepened in response. His eyes narrowed, and he silently glared at his unwelcome guest.

The traveller's smile faded under the heat of that withering gaze. For the first time, he began to wonder if this was a dream. If it truly were, he was fairly certain he wouldn't have imagined the Doctor as such a crotchety old bear...

'All right,' he began, get us say that this lovely garden is nothing more than part of the dreamscape I — we — created for when we — I — need to rest, and that you're here because...' He shrugged. 'Well, because you were first.'

'Go on,' the Doctor said.

'So, perhaps your role is to act as a guide of some sort. To enlighten the rest of us in the ways we can best prepare ourselves for... when our times come.' Another shrug. 'Or at least to point us in the direction of the tool shed so we can assist you with the roses. I notice the La Ville de Bruxelles are looking a bit wilted...'

'A guide?' The Doctor snorted. 'Do I look like the poet Virgil to you, young man?'

'No,' the traveller agreed with a smile. 'But then no one would ever confuse me with Dante Alighieri. Too tall for the part, you see.'

The Doctor grunted.

'So. I know why I'm here, and I have a basic idea of why you might be here as well.' The traveller waved at the fields of blossoms that lay beyond the roses. 'But what, then, am I to make of the extensions to your garden? What

significance do they have?’

The old man sneered. ‘I assure you, they were not my idea. The little tramp apparently got it in his head that he needed to leave behind something of himself before he moved on. That operatic dandy who followed him did the same.’

‘I don’t understand,’ the traveller said. ‘Why would they feel the need to do that?’

‘To show that they had been here,’ the Doctor explained. ‘That they had existed.’ He eyed his guest warily. ‘I wonder what you’ll insist on planting when the time comes...’

And then the TARDIS shuddered to a halt as it materialised, and roused the curly haired traveller — a Doctor now well into his fourth incarnation — from his slumber.

The Doctor sat up and swung his legs over the edge of his bed, on to the carpeted floor; he groaned softly as his back muscles tightened from the small exertion. Ignoring the painful twinges, he leant over and put on his shoes, then pushed off the mattress to stand up, and looked around. He didn’t use his room all that often — in fact, he rarely used to sleep — but lately he’d been feeling more and more fatigued, and found himself retreating to the solitude of this chamber with disturbing regularity. It didn’t possess the personal touches that Romana or any of his previous companions had added to their own rooms — no potted plants, no souvenirs from his travels, no reminders of home — but then he’d never been long on sentiment. Thus, he kept his furnishings simple: four-poster bed, a few antique chairs, a roll-top desk, chest of drawers, and a walk-in wardrobe that contained more clothes than he ever remembered needing.

Attached to the chest of drawers was a large vanity mirror, and it was that which drew the Doctor’s attention. He stepped over to gaze at it, and was pleased to find the mop-haired reflection he’d been expecting. He took some comfort in that— for a split-second, he’d been worried he’d find a white-haired old man in its polished surface. But then his gaze drifted upwards, to inspect the once-dark curls.

Another grey hair, he noticed. Quite a few of them, really. Sprouting like weeds in a once verdant garden. When had that started, he wondered.

‘Well... one or two grey hairs is nothing to worry about,’ he assured himself. He tilted his head back, to study his features, looking down his nose at the reflection. ‘Besides, grey hairs can make one look quite distinguished...’ He shrugged. ‘Well, more distinguished than I already am. And on most civilised worlds, they’re usually considered a sign of great wisdom.’ He slowly turned his head from side to side, admiring the view. ‘Yes... And after 750 years, I can honestly say I’m the wisest person I know.’

He grinned broadly, but it was a false smile, a forced smile. It lacked the humour, the whimsical spark that normally lit his blue eyes. And it quickly evaporated, leaving him with only a sombre, ageing man staring back at him from the glass. A man who looked every one of those 750 years.

He inhaled sharply, ready to loose a weary sigh, when he suddenly caught a whiff of something in the air. A flowery tang that seemed to fill the room, like a

heady perfume.
Or the scent of roses.

II

Romana had never been to Maine before, but it seemed a pleasant enough locale. A bit too cold and snowy in November for her liking, though; she could have done with the full-length coat she'd sometimes worn during her first incarnation. But the Doctor had put a stop to that notion before they'd left the TARDIS, explaining that a bright white fur might be considered a sign of disrespect by the members of the congregation they'd come to join. And as she looked at the veritable sea of grieving, black-clad men and women gathered before them at the graveside, Romana had to admit the Doctor had been right in his belief. It would have been the height of rudeness to show up in colourful garb for such a serious occasion.

Hannah Gites had been an acquaintance of the Doctor's, and that was all he'd said on the subject after he'd set the coordinates, although she'd asked why they were travelling to late-twentieth-century America. He'd been more forthcoming with information after the TARDIS had landed. Hannah was an old friend, not a former travelling companion, whom the Doctor had known for close to two decades. The news of her unfortunate passing that he received via space-time telegraph wasn't entirely surprising to him, he explained — she was over ninety years old, and humans lived such tragically brief lives — but it still clearly affected him.

'Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind,' he'd commented, then smiled sadly. 'I don't think John Donne would have disagreed that such a sentiment could apply to women as well.' And then he'd walked into the depths of the TARDIS, presumably to prepare himself in some way for the service they were about to attend.

Romana did likewise, settling for a black, ankle-length woolen coat with black fur trim on the collar and cuffs, to go with the black skirt, gloves, boots and midnight-blue sweater she'd selected. Her shoulder-length blonde hair was tied back — more to keep it from swirling about her head in the frost-tinged breeze than any desire to appear stylish — and tucked under a tall, heavy lambskin hat the Doctor had given her. To hear it had belonged to one of his earlier incarnations had been a bit of a surprise; he rarely talked about his other selves, even in passing.

She had been even more surprised when she'd walked into the TARDIS control room a short while after she'd got ready to find that the Doctor had taken his own advice and dressed in a more conservative manner... well, conservative for him, that is. The eyebrow-raising clash of styles he usually leant towards — from battered felt hat to scuffed shoes — had been replaced by a more uniform look of burgundy hat, coat, waistcoat, boots and trousers. Even the impossibly long, multi-coloured scarf that always trailed around the Doctor's feet had been swapped out for another of equal length, but of a more subdued black-and-red woolen pattern.

It made him look... well, like an adult was the first thing that had popped into Romana's mind, although she immediately felt guilty for thinking it. There was nothing childish about the Doctor, although, she had to admit, there were moments when he acted in an almost childlike manner: fairly hopping about when he was happy, brooding and poutish when he was angry. His mood swings were often as difficult to gauge as his staggering choices of attire.

Yet, it wasn't only his clothes that were different, she had realised. There was something different about him, as well — in his demeanour, his body language. The way his shoulders hunched and his head leaned forward in an oddly vulture-like posture. The dull gleam in his normally bright eyes. The wisps of grey sprouting among the brown curls, and the deep lines that had appeared on his face. When, exactly, all this might have happened, Romana couldn't begin to guess; she hadn't really noticed the changes before. The Doctor had always seemed so young, so full of life, even for someone of his advanced age, that it was almost impossible to now think of him growing old.

But the evidence was right before her. He looked weary. He looked sombre. He looked... ancient. As though the spirit had been drained from him. As though the years had finally caught up with him, and now weighed heavily upon his shoulders.

Could he be reaching the end of this incarnation, she wondered. It was always a possibility for a Time Lord — none of them was immortal, after all. If so, Romana had no doubt that, barring some catastrophic circumstance, he would regenerate when this body had reached its end, whenever that might be. And it was more than likely the new incarnation would be just as insufferably headstrong as his predecessor.

And yet...

And yet, even though the Doctor would go on living in some form or another, having grand adventures and risking his life time and again, she suddenly realised that this man standing beside her, this particular Doctor, would be no more. And Romana couldn't help but feel a bit melancholy at the prospect.

The service ended just short of an hour later, and the mourners began filing out of the cemetery; eventually, the only people remaining were the two travellers, a pair of gravediggers waiting to fill in the plot, and a woman in her forties — Hannah Gites's daughter, Giselle, according to the Doctor. Slowly, she turned to face the visitors, but didn't seem all that surprised to see them. She made her way across the snow and up the small rise to join them.

'Are you the Doctor?' she asked.

He smiled politely. 'I am. And you must be Giselle.' He gestured towards his companion. 'This is my friend, Romana.'

'My condolences on the loss of your mother, Miss Gites,' Romana said as they shook hands.

'Thank you,' Giselle said. She turned back to the Doctor. 'Thank you both for coming. I wasn't sure if you'd received the notice.'

'Paying my respects is the least I could do for Hannah,' he replied. 'She passed gently, I hope.'

‘Yes, thank God,’ Giselle said. She paused, and stared intently at him for a few moments.

‘Is there a problem?’ the Doctor asked.

‘I’m not sure,’ Giselle admitted. ‘It’s just that, from the way Mom used to describe you, I was —’

‘Expecting someone else?’ The Doctor grinned. ‘I get that quite a lot.’

She nodded, though it was clear she had no idea what he was talking about. ‘Your mother was a remarkable human being, you know,’ the Doctor said. ‘She was a great help to me in my hour of need... as I know she was to a great many others.’

Giselle nodded, and smiled wistfully. ‘Yeah, that was Mom, all right. Always ready to lend a hand, no questions asked. I understand you’re like that too, from what she told me.’

He smiled. ‘Well, I do have my moments...’

Giselle nodded again, clearly none the wiser, then started. ‘Oh,’ she said, and reached into the large handbag she carried, to rummage through its contents. ‘I thought it was a long shot you’d actually show up, but I brought this along anyway...’ She came out with a small leather-bound book, which she handed to the Doctor. ‘Mom said you forgot to take it with you after your last visit, and she wanted me to make sure you got it.’

The Doctor smiled wistfully as he gazed at the tiny volume. ‘Yes... I was in a bit of a hurry that day.’ He dropped the book into one of his coat pockets. ‘Thank you.’

Giselle gestured back over her shoulder, in the direction in which the mourners had filed out of the cemetery. ‘Well, I really have to be going. Everyone will be coming to the house tonight, and I have to get it ready. You know, Doctor, you and Romana are both welcome to join us. I’m sure we’d all love to hear your stories about Mom.’

For a moment, the Doctor’s face brightened, and it seemed to Romana that he was going to accept the invitation. But then he gently shook his head. ‘I wish we could, but Romana and I have to be going ourselves.’ He patently ignored his companion’s quizzical stare.

The Doctor — turning down an invitation to a large social gathering? There must be something truly wrong with him, she thought.

Exactly what that might be continued to elude her as they made their way back to the TARDIS. He’d fallen into one of his contemplative moods — she recognised it by the faraway look in his eyes, and the way he tugged at his lower lip — leaving her to her own thoughts. Most of those, however, focused on how best to get him to talk about whatever was troubling him — to ‘open up’, as human psychologists often said in the information she’d come across while studying methods of Terran psychotherapy. (There had to be some reason why the Doctor was so drawn to Earth and its inhabitants, after all; she thought the answer might be found by examining case studies of the human mind. It wasn’t.) The problem was, the Doctor rarely took advantage of a sympathetic ear when it was offered, although he was more than willing to listen to someone else’s

troubles when they needed to get something off their chests.

She glanced over as he trudged through the snow. The ends of his scarf trailed along on both sides of him, leaving behind a wobbly set of tracks that looked as though some drunken, bow-legged cross-country skier had passed this way.

‘So, what was it that made Giselle’s mother such a remarkable human being?’ Romana finally asked. ‘Did she help you stop an alien invasion? Devise a way to prevent the collapse of the space-time continuum?’

‘Gardening,’ the Doctor answered.

That caught her off guard. ‘I beg your pardon?’ she asked. ‘Did you say—’

‘She helped me with my gardening,’ the Doctor replied. He held up a hand and wiggled his fingers. ‘Hannah had marvellous green fingers.’ He came to a sudden halt, eyes fairly bulging from their sockets as an idea apparently struck him. ‘Gardening... You know, I never focused on that until just now,’ he muttered, rubbing his jaw in contemplation. ‘What an amazing coincidence...’

Of course, being the Doctor, he didn’t bother to elaborate on the nature of the ‘coincidence’. He just grunted, then set off through the snow once more.

‘And it was her gardening skills that made her so exceptional?’ Romana asked.

‘Well, of course not!’ the Doctor snapped, as though she’d been foolish to ask. ‘Anyone with a decent understanding of horticulture can plant a few seeds and spread some fertiliser around. Do you think so many people would have attended the funeral of a simple gardener?’ He snorted derisively, and quickened his pace.

Romana hurried to catch up. ‘You’re being obtuse again, Doctor...’ she said with more than a hint of annoyance.

He stopped short again, and wheeled around to face her, eyes wide as billiard balls. ‘Am I?’ He sounded surprised.

‘Yes,’ Romana answered as she drew alongside.

‘Ah,’ said the Doctor, pulling on the syllable until it was almost as long as his scarf. ‘Well, Hannah was a poet of some renown, whom I met during a brief sojourn in America. She wasn’t famous — most of her work was released through small publishing houses, but she did have a fairly large readership. Of course, I wasn’t aware of that when I met her. It was her garden that got my attention; she had the most incredible collection of roses. I stopped to ask her advice about some La Ville de Bruxelles I was having some trouble cultivating, and we got to chatting.’ He smiled. ‘She got me to buy one of her books over tea.’

‘And thus a friendship was born.’

‘Yes. She was a fascinating woman, and her poetry spoke volumes about the human condition: love, loss, kindness, the redemption of the soul. Her words brought joy and comfort to many people; more than she ever realised, if today’s turnout was any indication.’ The smile faded. ‘And yet, she was always concerned that she hadn’t done enough with her life. That when she died, she would fade from memory without ever leaving her mark in the world.’

‘Well, from the number of mourners,’ Romana said, ‘I’d think it impossible that anyone could forget her.’

‘Indeed. As the saying goes, she’ll continue to live on in the hearts and minds of the people whose lives she touched.’ He scratched his jaw. ‘I wonder if the same will hold true for me...’ he muttered cryptically.

III

She found him in the TARDIS’s library, still wearing the burgundy-and-black ensemble. The scarf and coat lay draped over a thick-cushioned reading chair; the hat was set at a rakish angle atop a bust of Pallas near the chamber door. The Doctor was slowly pacing back and forth across a large Persian rug that lay on the parquet floor, near the first of the innumerable mammoth bookcases, whose shelves seemed to stretch up and out towards infinity. In his left hand was an open book, his gaze fixed on whichever passage had caught his attention. The thumb and forefinger of his right hand, meanwhile, were engaged in gently pulling at his lower lip.

‘Change of scenery, Doctor?’ Romana asked.

He slammed the book shut and spun round to face her. For a moment, he looked almost like a child caught doing something he shouldn’t, eyes wide in surprise, mouth slightly agape. Then he jammed his right hand into his trouser pocket, puffed out his cheeks, and exhaled sharply. One of those typically Doctorish gestures meant to stall for time while he formulated an answer.

‘I noticed you’ve been spending quite a lot of time in here since we left Earth,’ she added.

‘Well,’ he began with a small shrug, ‘there’s nothing wrong with a little change from time to time, is there, Romana? Change of scenery, change of attitude —’

‘Change of wardrobe?’ Romana interrupted with a smile.

The Doctor glanced at his attire and grinned. ‘Precisely.’ He slid his hand from his pocket, to gesture at the coat and scarf. ‘It seemed appropriate, given Hannah’s passing. Besides, I think it looks quite —’

‘Morose?’ she offered with a playful smile. ‘Funereal?’

He frowned, clearly annoyed with her assessment. ‘Fashionable,’ he rumbled. “Fashionable”: Her smile broadened, and she pointed to the flared lapels of his shirt collar. ‘With question marks on your lapels? Isn’t that a bit —’

‘Questionable?’ the Doctor asked slyly.

‘Silly,’ Romana said.

“Silly?” snapped the Doctor. “Silly?”

‘Silly,’ she repeated. ‘Trifling. Frivolous. A lack of common —’

‘Yes, I know what “silly” means,’ he interrupted snarkishly. He turned away, as if to return to his ruminations, then spun back round. ‘You’re not exactly the pinnacle of sartorial splendour yourself, you know,’ he added huffily.

She decided to let the remark pass without comment. Instead, her left eyebrow crept upward in a quizzical fashion. ‘Are you all right, Doctor?’

‘I’m perfectly fine, Romana,’ he said quickly. ‘Couldn’t be better.’ He scrubbed his right index finger under his nose, like he was scratching an itch, then waved the hand towards her in a dismissive gesture. ‘Look, isn’t there

something you could be doing right now instead of hanging about and insulting my clothing selections?’

‘Such as?’ she asked.

Again, his cheeks puffed out as he exhaled. He rubbed his hand through his mop of curls. ‘Oh, I don’t know. Checking on the omni-directional impulse stabiliser so we don’t accidentally materialise inside-out on our next trip; you know how it’s been acting up lately.’ A shrug. ‘Fixing the chameleon circuit. Making a pot of tea.’

‘Tea?’ Romana asked incredulously.

‘Tea,’ the Doctor repeated. ‘Boiling hot water poured over dried leaves to create —’

‘I know what “tea” is, Doctor,’ she interrupted snarkishly.

‘Good!’ he replied. ‘You’ll find some excellent Darjeeling in one of the cupboards in the pantry. Give a shout when the kettle starts whistling.’

And with that he turned and strode off, boot heels clomping on the wooden floor as he moved down the rows of bookcases.

For a moment, Romana stood rigid, slowly burning over the way he’d so sharply dismissed her. Make some tea, indeed, she thought darkly.

Then she noticed he’d left behind the book he’d been reading. With all the theatrical gestures the Doctor relied upon to distract one’s attention as he spoke, it was small wonder she’d missed out on the one that had transferred the book from his hand to the small table on which it now rested.

She walked over and picked it up. It was a collection of Terran poetry, the one Giselle Gites had presented to him: *The Sixty Best Poems of England* — Hannah Gites, editor. And he’d turned down the corner of one of the pages to mark his place.

‘Well, of course, Doctor,’ Romana muttered sarcastically. ‘Why bother using a bookmark when it’s so much easier to just manhandle a page?’ She sighed, then opened to where he’d left off: a verse titled *Remember* by Christina Georgina Rossetti:

‘Remember me when I am gone away,’ she read aloud. ‘Gone far away into the silent land.’

Romana frowned; she didn’t like the sound of that. And as she continued reading, the frown deepened.

‘When you can no more hold me by the hand,

‘Nor I half turn to go yet turning stay.

‘Remember me when no more day by day

‘You tell me of our future that you plann’d:

‘Only remember me; you understand

‘It will be late to counsel then or pray.

‘Yet if you should forget me for a while

‘And afterwards remember, do not grieve:

‘For if the darkness and corruption leave

‘A vestige of the thoughts that once I had,

‘Better by far you should forget and smile

‘Than that you should remember and be sad.’

She closed the book and set it back on the table. 'Oh, Doctor,' she muttered worriedly. 'What is it that's troubling you...?'

IV

He was dreaming about the garden again.

'You're wearing out your welcome here, young man,' the Doctor said, with a frown that seemed to start at his hairline and end at his toes. 'This is not some hostel for the troubled of mind, where you can simply barge into my home and settle in whenever you feel the desire to do so, and I won't have it treated as such.'

'Well, I hate to be a bother,' the traveller replied as he walked down the flagstone path towards his host, 'but I'm curious about something you said before.' He grinned knowingly and tapped the side of his nose with a long index finger. 'It's in our nature, you know — being curious.'

The Doctor hmphed and grasped his lapels. 'very well — ask your questions. I imagine I'll never have a moment's peace until you have your answers.'

'You mentioned that my... predecessors felt the need to prove they existed. I'm not certain what you meant by that.' He held up a hand before the Doctor could answer. 'And please don't tell me you're only going to say what I wish to hear, because what I wish to hear is an explanation.'

The frown cracked —just a hair. 'Decided to stop playing the fool, hmm? About time, I say.' He turned and began strolling down to the garden, his guest falling in step beside him. 'I've been watching you, young man, and I must admit you've done far better with your time than I initially expected.'

'My time,' the traveller noted. 'You make it sound as though it's nearing its end.'

'All things end, dear boy,' the Doctor replied with surprising warmth. 'Just as all things change. And never is that more true than for Time Lords. Each of our incarnations lives a hopefully full, productive life, and then either the advancement of our years or some unfortunate incident causes us to regenerate. To change. To metamorphose, like the butterfly, and begin life anew in another body.'

'But we remain the same person, despite the change.'

'Precisely,' the Doctor replied, 'as it is for all our people. In our case, you and the others represent different aspects of me — splinters of personality given form and function.' He glanced at his guest's Bohemian appearance. 'Although what part of me could have produced you escapes me...'

The traveller smiled. 'The more carefree side of you, I should think.'

The Doctor grunted, then continued. 'When one aspect of a Time Lord's life comes to an end, you don't think it simply dissipates into the ether, do you? Of course not! It returns to that area of the mind that spawned it, and becomes part of the next incarnation's memories.'

His guest frowned. 'So, I'll become just a memory...'

'As we all do when our time has passed,' the old man said. 'You weren't the

first Doctor who ever had to deal with Daleks or Cybermen, you know. You're merely drawing upon my experiences for reference.'

His guest nodded. That was true, but... 'And the additions to the garden?'

'As I told you, young man, they were not my idea. It started with the little hobo, when the High Council of Time Lords forced his regeneration as punishment for his — our — prior... indiscretions. He was quite upset that his identity was to be supplanted by another, and worried that no one would remember him when the next incarnation took his place.

'That concern grew when the High Council wiped all memories of him from the minds of his companions, and returned them to their respective time zones seconds after they should have left with him on their travels. For Zoe and Jamie, it was as though he'd never existed. And when he was deposited here, he did the only thing he could think of doing before he moved on.'

'Leaving a marker of sorts,' his guest said. 'To prove he had existed.'

The Doctor sneered. 'Forget-me-nots. I always thought I had more of an imagination than that...' He shook his head. 'As for the one who followed — your direct predecessor... well, he was never the type who'd be willing to admit if someone had a better idea. He'd initially wanted to erect a statue; I was certainly having none of that. He had to settle for a garden, although it galled him that the little tramp had thought of it first.'

The traveller nodded. 'Yes, he did possess a fairly sizeable ego... although what part of you could have produced him escapes me...' He glanced at his host with a sly smile.

The Doctor merely glared back at him until his guest looked away.

'Now, what about this next incarnation?' the traveller asked. 'When is he supposed to make his entrance?'

The Doctor tilted his head back, in the direction of the house. The traveller looked towards the top floor, and realised that someone was watching them from a window in the attic. He was too far away to be seen clearly, but the traveller had a general impression of an all-white attire, and an almost blank face, as though the features of his future self were yet to be decided.

'Not just yet,' the Doctor said with a knowing smile. 'Not until the time is right. But trust me, young man — the moment has been prepared for.'

'Yes, I suppose it has...' the traveller muttered.

A weight settled in his stomach. Until now, all this talk of memories and markers and gardens had been nothing more than an interesting, if slightly disturbing, look into his own thought processes. But here he was, staring up at his own future, and suddenly he could feel the remaining moments of his life ticking away. A life that would soon belong to another. It filled him with a sense of dread, of loss, of .. inevitability.

The old man extended his hand, which his guest limply shook. 'Farewell, Doctor,' he said to his younger counterpart. 'We won't be seeing each other again until you're ready to begin your journey towards... what lies out there.' He nodded past the roses, past the forget-me-nots and hollyhocks, to the horizon.

The Doctor ran a hand through his curly mop of hair, and grimaced. 'You wouldn't happen to know what I'll find out there, would you?'

‘Now, why should I tell you if I did, hmm? I thought perhaps you’d want to find out for yourself.’ His host smiled gently, and tapped the side of his nose with an index finger. ‘It’s in our nature, you know — being curious.’

The Doctor frowned at him. ‘I never could abide gallows humour...’

V

A day after their discussion in the library, Romana looked up from her repairs under the TARDIS’s hexagonal control console — grudgingly working on the omni-directional impulse stabiliser, which had needed adjustment — to see the Doctor enter the control room.

He looked solemn, distant.

‘Doctor,’ Romana finally said after a moment or two, ‘I understand that you prefer to keep your own counsel, and I’ve never tried to pry into your affairs —’

‘But?’ he asked.

‘But it’s obvious that whatever it is that’s troubling you is consuming your thoughts.’

‘I’ve been thinking,’ he replied. Romana decided not to bother pressing for information; knowing the Doctor, she’d have her answers soon enough — for good or bad. ‘In a valley on a far away planet, there’s a large face carved into the side of a mountain. My face.’

When she was finally able to recover from the shock, Romana said, ‘Really, Doctor, I didn’t think you were that vain.’

‘Oh, it wasn’t my doing,’ he replied. ‘A tribe called the Tesh carved it over two centuries ago as a... well, as a sign of respect.’

‘The Tesh...’ Romana searched her memory of what she’d read of the Doctor’s travels. ‘So it’s the planet where you met that savage you left back on Gallifrey?’

‘Leda.’ The Doctor nodded. ‘Yes. It was her homeworld. Or at least the planet where her ancestors’ colony ship crashed.’ He fell silent and drummed his fingers on the edge of the console. The puzzled expression on his face made it clear he was silently debating whether to set landing coordinates for that distant world. ‘How do you think you’ll be remembered, Romana?’ he finally asked. ‘When you’ve reached the end of your lives, I mean.’

That was an odd question. ‘Why do you ask?’

‘Oh, just curious,’ he commented offhandedly, although it was obvious he was hinting at something.

‘I’m not sure,’ she admitted. ‘I’ve never really thought about it. I certainly wouldn’t have my face carved on a mountainside in order to remind people where I’d been.’

‘Better than having no reminder at all...’ he muttered.

‘Doctor, what is this all about?’ Romana demanded. ‘You’ve been behaving in an unusual manner — well, more unusual than I’ve come to expect — ever since Hannah’s funeral. Why do you have this sudden interest in how future generations will remember you?’

He stared at her for a moment, then looked away. She was about to press him again when he muttered, ‘I’ve been having a recurring dream lately. Well... not

exactly a dream, really — more like a series of conversations with a prior me.'

'And what do you talk about?'

'Gardening,' he said, then fell silent.

'Gardening?' Romana asked. That seemed to be a popular topic with him these days... 'Like your discussions with Hannah when you visited her?'

'Yes...' he said slowly, as though in a trance; then he snapped awake and turned back to her. 'What? No, this is entirely different. It's more about... well, leaving one's mark in the universe.'

'Leaving one's mark?' Romana asked, eyebrows raised.

'Yes, leaving one's mark!' he snapped, then wiped away the spittle on his chin with the back of his right hand.

Romana sighed. 'Come now, Doctor. I didn't think you of all people were the sort who dwelled on such trivial matters.'

'Neither did I,' he said, his voice a soft rumble. Then he glared at her. 'And what do you mean by "trivial"? This is my life we're talking about!'

Romana wasn't about to be drawn into a meaningless debate, not when she was more interested in getting to the heart of his morose introspection. 'So, what is it about gardening that makes the dream so disturbing for you?'

'It's not the gardening,' he replied, 'so much as its meaning.'

'And that would be...?'

'Retirement. Being put out to pasture.'

Romana frowned. 'Doctor, Time Lords don't "retire", we...' Her voice trailed off as she suddenly realised what he was implying. 'Oh.'

'Indeed,' he said.

'But what does that have to do with this concern of yours about being remembered?' Her eyes widened. 'He didn't say this was your last incarnation, did he?'

'No,' he replied.

'Then I don't see why you should be so upset. You've already regenerated three times. I'm sure the new you will share some of your... more unusual character traits. Regeneration might alter our personalities, but it doesn't affect who we are inside.'

'But he won't be me,' the Doctor replied in an exasperated tone. 'And in case you hadn't noticed, I've got quite used to having me around.'

'But you'll still be the Doctor, no matter what you look like.'

'No, he'll be the Doctor,' he replied. 'I'll just be a bit of memory tucked away in that cluttered repository I call a brain.'

'But that doesn't mean you'll be forgotten, if that's what's been worrying you,' she countered. 'Think of the battles you've won, the injustices you've righted, the countless billions of sentients you've saved by your actions, even if most of them will never know of your involvement. If you believe a new body will make the cosmos suddenly forget the man responsible for all that, then you really haven't been paying attention to what you've accomplished. You've done a great deal of good with this life, Doctor, and you still have a great deal more to do with it before your time is done.' She smiled gently. 'And when that time comes, then, as the saying goes, you'll continue to live on in the hearts and minds

of the people whose lives you touched.’ The smile became a wry grin. ‘If nothing else, think of that giant head carved into the side of a mountain. If that doesn’t count as proof of your existence, I’d be hard-pressed to come up with an alternative.’

His cheeks coloured slightly with embarrassment. ‘Well, I do tend to make a big impression on some people...’ he admitted with a small grin.

As Romana had hoped, her comments seemed to have done the trick for his bout of melancholy, for the Doctor’s spirits seemed much higher than they’d been in quite some time. Either that, or he was putting on a good show for her benefit and hiding his true feelings...

‘What do you think about taking a holiday, Romana?’ he suddenly asked. ‘I could do with a bit of relaxation.’

‘Holiday?’ She quickly held up a hand to cut him off. ‘And, yes, Doctor, I know what a “holiday” is.’

‘Splendid! Have you ever been to Brighton?’ He shook his head before she could answer. ‘Well, of course you haven’t! Locked away in your ivory tower on Gallifrey like all the other Time Lords —’

‘All the other Time Lo—’ Romana began.

‘—and Time Ladies,’ he continued, loudly talking over her, ‘you’d never shown any interest in going anywhere until you barged your way into my TARDIS.’

‘I’d hardly consider my home an “ivory tower”, Doctor,’ she said with some amusement. ‘And I didn’t “barge in”, as you well know.’

He grunted. ‘Yes, well, you’ll find the Brighton Pavilion considerably more interesting than your stuffy old apartment,’ he promised.

‘Oh? How so?’

‘I haven’t the slightest idea,’ he replied. ‘I missed its opening the first time. But, really, anything is better than hanging about on Gallifrey...’

VI

He was dreaming about the garden again.

And wondering if it was too late in the season to consider planting some tulips...

Wake

Jake Elliot

*An Adventure of the Fifth Doctor,
with Nyssa of Traken and Tegan Jovanka*

He's here again.

Verin only managed a quick glance at the man before he passed out of sight behind a catafalque but Verin was sure he recognised him. A more slightly built figure than before, but still wearing a long coat. Beige, this time. There were two girls following in his wake as he strode ahead in that characteristic way he had. The appearance might change, but you could always tell. Verin wasn't sure how long it had been since the man had last been here, but there was only one reason his sort visited the Necropolitan. He'd find out in time.

Verin was in a hurry. He'd been left on his own to clear up after a particularly violent rendering. The other senior attendant, Cora, was trying to reschedule subsequent ceremonies while the room was refurnished. And now there was a Rite of Crystal to prepare, numerous silicate and mineral extracts to arrange in intricate mourning patterns for the funerary bier. Verin hated organising exequies for petrological life forms.

Along the corridor, Verin could see the billowing ceremonial robes of a Solemn One.

Not now, of all times, he thought and swore under his breath.

The Solemn Ones were the omni-denominational, intra-dimensional funeral officials who ran the Necropolitan. Verin had to bow and go through a complicated series of gestures to extend reverent thoughts. The Solemn One barely even acknowledged him, swishing past with the most perfunctory murmur from the shadowed depths of his cowl. Verin was certain he felt a pat on his head too. He glowered at the departing figure.

The Necropolitan was an official place of mourning, a neutral zone for those wishing to grieve or pay last respects according to their particular custom. It existed to cater for all races, religions and philosophies and for this reason was dimensionally interstitial. The oldest parts of the Necropolitan, where the catacombs were now situated, were supposed to be constructed from bone, the carved remains of enormous creatures from the beginnings of the universe. This was one of the more pervasive myths about the Necropolitan, one of the ancient stories that resurfaced from time to time, and although this was a point Cora among many others disputed, Verin thought there was something in it. The catacombs always smelled funny.

A bell tolled from somewhere nearby. Verin looked around, scanning the corridor behind him where he could only see the diminishing figure of the Solemn One. There was a funeral party heading this way. That meant at least another five minutes of genuflection and ritual obeisance. Verin hurried forward — in contravention of at least three edicts on funerary behaviour — and darted through the archway leading to the Theosophy of Water, which he could take as

a short cut. After a few minutes making his way past the Pools of Memory and muttering brief extracts from a generic homily, Verin abruptly slowed his brisk walk as he saw someone approaching. It was Styles, the shop steward for the professional mourners known as the Grievers. Verin measured his steps to the accustomed pace. Styles was a stickler for the observation of proprieties.

‘Lamentations,’ breathed Styles, making the first of what looked to be a comprehensive series of signs.

Verin took a chance and interrupted. Will you be attending the Crystalline Departure this afternoon?’

Styles lowered his arms with a pained expression.

‘There will be a delegation of Grievers, of course, as is proper. I have to meet with the Solemn Ones. My members were displeased with the conditions they had to work under at this morning’s rendering.’

Verin shrugged. ‘It was a bit messy,’ he agreed.

Styles cast him a disdainful look.

‘Anyway,’ continued Verin. ‘I’d better hurry on. I’ve got plenty to do.’

Styles offered him a thin smile. ‘Please refrain from hurrying. It is not permitted.’

Verin stood extremely still and drew in a long, steadying breath as he watched the Head Griever glide away. Verin wondered how deep the Pools of Memory were.

One of the girls reminded him. She spoke quietly but Verin was near enough to hear, although in the chapel hush the rest of her sentence was wrapped in echoes.

Doctor. That was it. Funny that he hadn’t been able to remember on his own. It must have been some time since the Doctor had visited the Necropolitan. When would it have been?

Verin stood beside one of the pillars lining the central hall. This was a place of remembrance, where those who wished to mourn without any funeral service might do so. The hall was vast, too large to see the circumference or the ceiling, with small alcoves honeycombing the walls in which mourners could place artefacts to remember the deceased. Verin often thought that the Time Lords must have had a hand in the architecture.

Verin was standing in attendance for a nearby mourning party. An old man, a woman in a shiny space suit, and something that looked like a desiccated aspidistra in a Bath chair were in silent contemplation in front of an alcove. The plant kept shaking with rustling sobs.

On the other side was an elderly man in Victorian dress with surprisingly long grey hair. He was supporting himself on a stick and staring gloomily at a small withered white flower he had placed in the alcove.

The Doctor had his head bowed, his hands clasped behind his back. He was lost in reverie, his two companions standing on either side of him in dignified silence. All of them occasionally glanced at the small metal star placed in their alcove.

The woman in the shiny space suit touched one of the plant’s leaves and

turned to Verin. 'We're ready to go,' she whispered.

Verin bowed and clasped his hands in front of his chest before he led them away, their footsteps echoing amid the thousands of other mourners moving at a decorous pace through the hall.

His hands still glittered, Verin noticed, smudged from the various mineral deposits he had sprinkled for the Rite of Crystal.

When they reached one of the archways that led out of the hall, Verin stopped to take off the purple sash he was wearing and replaced it with a white one. He folded the purple sash according to the six conventions and posted it down the chute.

'Would you like me to show you to the portal now?' he said politely.

The plant shook and tapped its leaves together in a complicated rhythm.

The old man peered at the aspidistra with an ear trumpet in his hand. 'No, thank you,' he replied, looking from his rattling companion to the woman and then at Verin. 'We will visit the gardens first.'

'Thank you,' said the woman, beginning to push the chair.

Verin bowed again.

As he walked away he caught sight of a number of Solemn Ones. They were walking quickly and the figure leading them had broken into a jog.

That wasn't allowed. Solemn Ones were only ever permitted to move quickly during terpsichorean ceremonies.

Verin approached, trying to look as though he was going about his usual duties.

The Solemn Ones gathered around a doorway leading down to the catacombs, all of them hurrying through the procedures for greeting and then talking rapidly between themselves. Several other attendants appeared from the steps to the catacombs, one of them gesturing behind him with a look of shock. A Solemn One glided away and soon a bell chimed softly.

'What's going on?' said an attendant who had arrived behind Verin. 'I don't know,' said Verin.

'They've found something down there,' said another attendant. 'No one's saying what it is, though.'

The bell continued to toll, sounding innocuous enough, but it drew more attendants and Solemn Ones who knew it was a summons. Some of the visiting mourners had noticed the gathering as well and were starting to walk over, looking inquisitive.

Through the archway came another Solemn One, maintaining a dignified pace but moving swiftly enough to confound Styles, who was trying to keep up without contravening any rules. He seemed to be complaining about an illegal blue box that was parked where it shouldn't be and could cause obstruction or injury to his members. The Solemn One ignored him.

'What's all this about, then?' enquired another voice behind Verin. 'I don't know,' Verin repeated.

The Doctor stepped past him with a smile. 'Not to worry,' he said brightly.

Verin watched as the Doctor neared the group. He patted his pockets, produced a hat he scrunched up again and put in the other pocket, before

rocking on his heels and addressing the Solemn Ones.

He'd not changed. Not inwardly. Verin recalled him arriving before. Older-looking then. White hair. Slowed by age. He performed mourning rituals in front of two separate alcoves, paying tribute to his recently fallen companions. Verin recalled that one of the alcoves contained a handful of sand while the other held a neatly folded utility belt. The Doctor had remained there for a long time, his head held back as if standing to attention. Another time, he had appeared younger, more flamboyant, with a velvet coat and silvery hair. He wasn't there to mourn, it appeared, although he looked bereaved. Instead, he wandered around the garden for days, staring out across the sapphire fields.

Funny lot, the Time Lords. When it came down to it, they all marked the important events of their lives with ritualised contemplation. Despite the Necropolitan being a place for everyone, it was they who most frequently came here, and who were the strictest adherents of the regulations. Several of them, Verin considered, he knew by name.

His line of thought was broken by Styles. The Head Griever waved a hand to get his attention.

'Lamentations. I don't • know what's going on here, but it all looks highly irregular. What's most pressing is this blue box currently taking up space in the preparatory area for excarnations. If it doesn't get dealt with, we'll be out.'

Verin nodded. 'I'll have someone look into it.'

'Verin? What's happening?'

Verin turned to see Cora striding towards them. He heard a snort of disapproval beside him.

'Cora. Now that you're here, would you be able to assist our Head Griever?'

Verin bowed and left. Cora had even less time for Styles than Verin did.

In the meantime, whatever the excitement, Verin had to travel all the way to the cloisters on the other side of the Necropolitan. A funeral party were arriving tomorrow from a planet where the dead accelerated to an unstable adipocere and he had to ensure their rooms were completely dehumidified and no one had left soap in the bathrooms.

When Verin walked back from the cloisters he passed a Solemn One who was holding a large green scarf in front of his face and stooping to touch his head against all the door handles along a corridor. Another Solemn One recited eulogies from a book.

Verin couldn't recall precisely, but he was sure it was a ritual for when something had gone wrong. He stopped to watch for a moment, trying to think what it meant, and heard a door open behind him.

'Um, excuse me,' someone said politely.

Verin turned to see one of the Doctor's mourning party. She was dressed in a dark-coloured suit, her face framed by a tumble of curly hair.

'Is the Doctor back yet?'

'I'm afraid I don't know,' said Verin, wondering if he had been mistaken for someone else. 'Where has he gone?'

'Oh, I'm sorry,' she replied, realising her error. 'I'm Nyssa. I'm here with the

Doctor. He went to help the people in the robes when they found the body in the catacombs.'

'Body?'

Nyssa looked concerned. 'Hadn't you heard? Someone was found murdered.' The Ritual of the Green Silk.

There was a very good reason Verin hadn't been able to place it. He was far too young to have witnessed it before. It was only performed when a death occurred at the Necropolitan and that was one of the most strictly observed rules: this was a place for mourners and departed only. Deaths must take place elsewhere. Nobody had died here for centuries. It was taboo.

'I see,' said Verin calmly. 'I'll let him know that you're waiting.'

Nyssa thanked him and shut the door.

Verin frowned. A death at the Necropolitan. Worse still, she had said it was murder. Of course, the Solemn Ones would not let the majority of guests know that anything was wrong. They would smooth things over, maintain the appearance of glacial calm and impeccable probity. The ripples and ruffles from the event would be discreetly covered, obscured by ritualised order. And if anyone looked, they would see just another dead body.

Far in the distance, the Solemn One with the green scarf in front of his face was still touching his forehead against door handles. Verin smirked to himself, suddenly recalling that this ritual would have to be performed on every door throughout the whole of the Necropolitan. It would take weeks.

Verin heard the bell chime for a meditation period.

The chapels of rest would be free for at least an hour, plenty of time for the attendants to freshen the flowers, blushed crystals and solid algebras. If it was quiet enough, they might even be able to re-tie the bouquets of temporal flux.

Despite the Necropolitan being an officially recognised neutral zone, where even incompatible ontologies maintained a precarious *entente cordiale*, it was surprising that disputes never occurred. Inevitably, all the requisite harmony and tranquillity features had been developed over time, but the most soothing muzak or grace enhancers couldn't do much to stop mortal enemies taking pot shots at each other. Verin thought back over the past few days. There were the space burials for the victims of an internecine conflict several light years away — the Necropolitan had been chosen for the service because of its distance from the events, in both senses. Plenty of opportunity there for a revenge killing. Similarly, they had dealt with the remains of a recently executed serial killer. Verin didn't know much about this — it had been undertaken amid the strictest secrecy, in case of protests or media attention.

And there were the Beast People attending this morning's rendering, a bloody ceremony where the immediate family tore the body apart, thereby sparing it the indignity of being eaten by enemies, according to the custom.

On a whim, Verin took out his com-pad, checked there were no mourners around, and asked the console whether the Beast People had left yet. The console bleeped and displayed a departure record. Verin tucked the com-pad away, not reassured. They'd left an hour after their allotted time.

Two crews of attendants were busily at work in the chapels of rest when

Verin arrived. He walked through them quickly, inspecting what had already been done and supervising things that remained. The crews were full of furtive whispers about the afternoon's drama.

Verin caught sight of Cora, fine-tuning a holographic orrery in which a giant spider sat at the centre.

'Has any more been said about the incident this afternoon?' Verin said after they had performed a cursory greeting ritual.

'That would be the one where I had to deal with the blue box?' Cora said drily. 'Styles was all ready to go to arbitration before I talked him out of it.' He switched off the hologram. 'But I suppose you mean the other incident.'

He waited while two attendants walked past carrying dead flowers from the altar vases.

'The deceased was a visiting funeral director from one of the out-world subsidiaries,' Cora explained in hushed tones.

Verin shook his head. 'That's terrible.'

'At the very least. This could be disastrous if they decide to make something of it, and worse if Styles finds out they don't recognise Grieviers.'

'Are the Solemn Ones aware of any suspects?'

Cora shook his head. 'I don't believe so. One of the mourners is assisting the investigation. The Doctor.'

That would be about right, from what Verin knew of the Doctor. He frequently arrived in places prior to something going wrong or some danger being exposed. It was as if disruption trailed after him.

'Perhaps he may be able to help,' said Cora.

'Perhaps,' agreed Verin thoughtfully.

The bell tolled once again, indicating the end of the period of meditation. Cora and Verin paced around the chapels, inspecting the attendants' efforts then ushering them away before any of the mourners returned. Cora bowed and left with them, keen to prepare for some of the late-night ceremonies, while Verin remained. He activated the dimmer controls and began to light the rows of candles, creating little flickering dots of flame stretching back behind him.

He should go to bed soon. There was a lot scheduled for tomorrow.

The Trevelyn Orbit was home to some of the neatest and tidiest people in the galaxy. If they could do anything to avoid inconveniencing any other life form, they would. When gravitational forces began to tear their worlds apart, they escaped in a massive starliner, booked burial space at the Necropolitan in advance and began the thousand-year journey. They would be reaching a docking portal some time today, with just over one million mummified corpses requiring funerary attention.

Verin carried the plans for the Trevelyn Orbit interment to the Solemn Ones for approval. Space was cleared in the catacombs in readiness and the final procedural speeches needed to be delivered over the forms.

As Verin rounded the courtyard leading to the Solemn Ones quarters, the Doctor dashed across the flagstones.

'Ah, good,' he said, drawing to a halt as he saw Verin and taking a breath.

‘Now, very important. I need to speak to someone in charge. It’s about one of the Solemn Ones.’ The Doctor held up his hand. ‘No, don’t worry. Everything is under control. Can you just direct me, please?’

Verin pointed across the courtyard. ‘Through there,’ he said.

‘Thanks,’ said the Doctor and bounded off, his coat tails flapping.

Verin frowned and looked through the archway the Doctor had just appeared from. He began to walk forward, cautiously, wondering what was going on. Perhaps it was his imagination, but he was sure something moved in the gloom. Verin stopped and peered. There was a slight rustling.

‘Hello?’ he called out uncertainly.

A Solemn One seethed out of the darkness, the ceremonial cowl still draped around the shoulder sash, exposing the withered death’s head.

Verin immediately stooped and began to extend reverent thoughts but the Solemn One waved these away.

‘We have been raised prematurely,’ the Solemn One hissed. ‘A mourner, prohibited, interrupted our peace.’ The Solemn One indignantly dragged the cowl over its sunken, leathery features. ‘Performed an examination of our being,’ it breathed in hushed, awful tones.

The Doctor.

Of course, he wouldn’t know. If he found a Solemn One at rest... if he checked for vital signs... He wouldn’t know that the Solemn Ones were revenants.

‘Is there anything I can do?’ Verin called out after the departing Solemn One.

‘No.’ The figure turned slightly. ‘If anyone wants me, I’ll be in the catacombs.’

Perhaps it would be better to seek out the Solemn Ones a little bit later. The Trevelyn Orbit ship hadn’t even raised docking protocols yet.

Verin walked back across the courtyard.

Behind him, he could hear the Doctor striding back the way he had come. ‘He’s over here...’

Verin looked at his com-pad. The Trevelyn Orbit ship had arrived, ready to disgorge its lifeless passengers. Verin wished he had more time — the rooms he had prepared the day before could still do with a final dehumidification and there were several other mourning parties to attend to. At least he’d found a Solemn One to incant over the forms.

Verin put away his com-pad as an attendant walked alongside him, leading a row of brightly coloured orbs that bobbed in the air. The attendant carried a large butterfly net, held across his chest. These mourners were gaseous clusters; catastrophically flammable. They needed constant supervision in case they drifted too close to a cremation or funeral pyre.

‘Lamentations.’

Verin turned to find two Grieverers making sympathetic gestures towards him. Verin returned the formal greeting.

‘We are anxious to find the Head Griever. Have you any knowledge of his whereabouts?’

Verin looked surprised. It wasn’t like Styles to be unavailable to his members — generally he took a dutiful pleasure in being a constant presence, there to

intercede at the merest suggestion that events were contravening the Grievers' rights.

'Not recently,' said Verin. 'Is he perhaps already waiting for the Trevelyn interment?'

Styles was particularly hot on delayed ceremonies.

The Grievers conferred and bowed their farewells.

There was a little time before Verin was required at the catacombs so he made his way to the cloisters to take a final humidity reading, passing through the main hall as he did so. Everything was running in the usual efficient, reassuring manner. Ashen mourners, weighed by grief or the sheer scale of the place, were led to alcoves or directed to other memorial features by the numerous attendants. Solemn Ones occasionally moved through the corridors and courtyards, carefully deployed to generate dignity. Everything looked calm.

Strange that Styles should have gone missing. And there was the death that occurred the day before. Unheard of events, both.

Perhaps the Doctor's aptitude for uncovering mayhem had come to the Necropolitan after all.

Verin shook off the thought. If things were happening, he'd know about them. One of the senior attendants would be involved. No, everything was pretty much the same as it ever was, Verin decided. It never got very lively around here.

He reached the cloisters and checked the humidity readings. Quite safe. Nothing to get excited about.

On the way to the catacombs he encountered a funeral party engaged in the Rite of Elegant Turning. This was a custom pertaining to itinerants and nomads, where it was felt to be disrespectful to leave the remains in one place. Every so often, the bones would be transferred from one vault to another. In this instance, the remains were ashes and had been stored in two linked glass bubbles. When the ashes drained from one into the other, the device could simply be upended.

Verin slipped through a doorway, keen to avoid the rituals required to acknowledge an Elegant Turning. He was always left feeling giddy when the blood rushed to his head.

In the narrow reliquary, Verin was surprised to see the end of the Doctor's coat lying on the floor, a beige puddle extending from beneath the doorway to a store cupboard.

Perhaps the Doctor had dropped it.

Verin walked over to retrieve the coat, wondering if he had enough time to return it to the Doctor before the ceremonies in the catacombs. As he drew nearer, he saw that the key was still in the lock and it was being rattled and pushed from the other side.

Verin turned the key and pulled the door open.

The Doctor tumbled towards him, falling on his coat, and his two companions stared at Verin in alarm.

'Decided what to...' the Doctor began, picking himself up and wiping his coat before he looked at Verin. 'Oh. I thought you were someone else. Thank you for that. I was nearly there.' He put his coat back on. 'Nyssa, Tegan, come along,

there's not much time.'

The Doctor bounded away and his companions hurried after him.

'Thank you for rescuing us,' one of them said politely before running after the others.

Strange people.

Maybe it was some obscure ritual he'd never heard about.

The route to the catacombs was curiously deserted. This was one of the things about the Necropolitan that Verin always appreciated — despite the vast size and the universe full of beings who came here to mourn, it was still possible to find pockets of quietude. Sometimes, if he was conducting maintenance work or architectonic rituals in one of the neglected theisms, Verin could spend the whole day without encountering anyone else. Just him and the accumulated presence of resting millennia. It was a comforting thought.

One thousand steps down into the catacombs.

The chill air moved past him in eddies as Verin ducked under a swollen knuckle of rock and stepped into the outer regions of the catacombs. Far below, he could hear the sounds of movement as the Trevelyn ship was emptied. Verin took out his com-pad and requested light. Small points of illumination, discreetly studded into the surrounding rocks, lit up the path. Verin began walking towards the Trevelyn interment, listening as the steady drone of the Solemn Ones grew louder.

The rock — looking ever more like massive discs of vertebrae along this section — was bisected by narrow walkways through which attendants could pass and place the wrapped remains in hollows cut in the wall. So far, everything seemed to be going according to plan, the lines of attendants and Solemn Ones bearing the bodies to their final resting places before going back to collect more. It helped greatly that the people of the Trevelyn Orbit were about the size of Verin's com-pad.

Over by a group of Solemn Ones who read from books of service was a couple of Grievors, ululating as quietly as possible. Styles had raised the point that they were being asked to perform their functions in dangerous conditions as excessive noise could cause a rock fall. The idea had caught on.

Still no sign of Styles. It wasn't like him to miss an event as big as this. Inevitably he'd manage to find one infringement or other, however negligible.

Verin was just about to join the other attendants in moving the bodies when a bell began to chime insistently.

Verin looked up in horror. Something was going wrong, after all the planning he had put into this. He saw the Grievors break off and look at the Solemn Ones. The Solemn Ones hesitated, glancing among each other. From somewhere nearby, Verin was sure he heard a voice call 'Doctor!'

Verin began to walk towards the Solemn Ones, intending to consult.

As Verin moved away, he failed to notice movement in one of the hollows behind him. The ceremonies were fought away as something clambered awkwardly out of the small space and a figure significantly larger than Verin's com-pad made its escape out of the other end of the walkway.

There.

A million people of the Trevelyn Orbit securely and successfully laid to rest. Things had moved faster after the Solemn Ones checked with the rituals and found there was nothing against carrying the bodies in handfuls.

Verin looked on with satisfaction as the last of the hollowed burial ports were painted with the necessary insignia.

They had done a good job.

Whatever the alarm had sounded for earlier, the problem had passed. Probably a strike threat by Styles or a misread ritual that had led to disgruntled mourners. Hopefully it wasn't a stray soap dish Verin had overlooked.

As he reached the top of the stairs and emerged into the courtyard, Verin was surprised to see the Doctor and his two companions flanked by Solemn Ones. The Solemn Ones all wore bright bands over their robes and had adopted Aspects of Benediction.

'Thank you, Doctor,' said the Most Honourable Solemn One. 'The people of the Necropolitan owe you an immeasurable debt of gratitude.'

The Doctor responded with a little shrug and grinned.

'Nyssa, Tegan, let's get going.'

The three of them turned to the blue box and trooped inside. Verin looked on in bemusement. The box began to make a strange droning sound that grew louder until it contravened several regulations on acceptable noise levels. Then it was gone.

Off on more adventures around the galaxy, no doubt, getting into exciting situations. Living dangerously.

Nothing ever really happened around the Necropolitan.

The Velvet Dark

Stewart Sheargold

*An Adventure of the Fifth Doctor,
with Tegan Jovanka and Vizlor Turlough*

It was a grey day, a day for solemnities.

Tegan watched as the simple, unadorned wooden coffin was lowered into the ground. Black dirt trickled in streams on top of it. Rain poured into the hole. She shivered at the claustrophobic finality of it all. She did not feel grief for the man they were burying. She didn't want to be here, in the bitter cold, marking the end of the Doctor's best enemy. The Time Lord had paid for everything, even made sure there were flowers for the grave, striking white lilies no less, livid tongues suggestive of violent death.

She glanced across at Turlough, wrapped up in a black Russian fur coat down to his knees, his orange crop startling. His teeth were chattering; he looked just as displeased as she was. Nyssa should have been here, she thought with a pang. Her friend and former companion had never truly believed her father had died, but that he was still struggling with the Master's hold over his stolen body. In a sense it was the last remnant of her father they were burying. Had the Doctor even considered that? She turned to the Time Lord.

The Doctor was grave and still, staring wide-eyed into the blank space of earth that was slowly being filled with coffin. To think, all the Master's wishes for domination, for control, still resulted in him being incarcerated in a small oblong box, buried six feet under. Tegan wondered what the Doctor was feeling; the Master had once been his friend. Perhaps a sense of relief that the feud was finally over? Or was he shocked to find that an indomitable Time Lord could finally die; would something be missing without the arch machinations of the Master? She was embarrassed by how fundamental he had become in defining the Doctor himself.

The priest had reached the 'ashes to ashes, dust to dust' part of the rites. Would such an all-powerful being as a Time Lord actually deign to become merely dust and ashes? Tegan had seen the extraordinary physical regenerative qualities that the Doctor possessed. Would the Master lay insensate but whole under all that earth? Even for him that was somehow too cruel. Perhaps that was why he had asked the Doctor to arrange his funeral rites. He had clearly feared death, considering all the nefarious schemes he had thought up to steal fresh bodies and new lives for himself.

Tegan saw the Doctor was rubbing agitatedly at the note that had simply materialised in his coat pocket. She had found him in the Cloister Room, moody and captious. He'd been reading the note and humming distractedly a low, sonorous melody.

'What's that?' she'd asked.

Mistaking her enquiry he'd replied, 'Mozart's *Requiem: Introitus*.'

'I meant the note.' He'd guardedly handed it to her. 'My old friend...' it had

started. She wondered how long ago the Master had written it.

She looked up and found Turlough watching her. He glanced askance at the Doctor, once, and she nodded complicitly. They may not want to be involved in this, but they were there to look after him. Judging by his pained expression, he had taken this hard.

‘Excuse me?’ The rotund pink-faced priest waited, head inclined for some reaction to his past words.

Tegan looked at him blankly. She realised he must have finished the rites. He frowned at her and eyed the ground. She remembered. Begrudgingly, she scooped up a handful of wet earth and tossed it into the grave. It thudded on top of the coffin. There, the deed was done. Now he could be covered and forgotten. Turlough, unfamiliar with the ritual, hesitantly followed her action. The Doctor stood for a while longer, an incongruent frown on his youthful face. Tegan walked around the grave and gently took him by the arm. ‘Doctor?’

He blinked and turned to look at her. For a moment he seemed elsewhere, his eyes glazed with memory, then recognition dawned and they turned their kind, vulnerable blue. He gave her a weak smile. ‘Thank you, Tegan,’ he said, and he took a deep breath.

The Doctor stooped, took up a large handful of muddy earth. He looked at it for a moment, perhaps weighing it, like justice, against the worth of the man in the coffin and everything he had taken from them. Then he turned his hand and let it fall quickly into the grave, the white note fluttering down amidst the dirt. He wiped his hands clean. With that gesture he seemed suddenly back to his old self. Though sometimes crotchety, the Doctor could never remain morose for long. He pulled at his coat lapels to keep the rain out, the red piping striking in the grey day. ‘Well,’ he said, giving both his companions a measured look, ‘let’s sort out his effects, and then —’ he paused I think it’s time for tea. Come on.’ He strode away; he did not look back. Tegan and Turlough shared a worried look.

‘Do you think he’s all right?’ she asked.

Turlough rubbed his hands together in that smug way he had that made her tense up. ‘I’m sure he’ll be fine.’ He watched the retreating Doctor’s back, coat tails flapping in the wind. ‘Let him do this. Get it out of his system. They were friends, once.’

‘Then we can get out of here.’ She shivered. The rain spattered infuriatingly on her plastic mac, weighing her down. It was as though something malign had come to visit its last respects.

‘Yes.’ Turlough smiled sheepishly at her. ‘I don’t like it here either.’

A small moment akin to friendship passed between them. Tegan let it go. But she gave him a reluctant smile. ‘Come on, then.’ They followed the Doctor back down the green hill to the waiting nursing home.

Mrs Monaghan was missing again. Laura had told her a number of times that she shouldn’t walk about by herself. She wasn’t as able as the other patients. She had accidents. They would find her after half an hour’s panic stuck in a broom closet or locked in a toilet cubicle, curled around the bowl. Always there would be livid marks and bruises on her face and her arms from where she had

presumably bumped into walls and doors. She said she had been attacked, that there was something that came out of the boiler room she had to flee from. It was searched, of course, and nothing was found. Sometimes, and she was ashamed at such thoughts, Laura wished they could tie the old biddy down. At least then they wouldn't have so much trouble from her.

She had a peculiarly binding relationship with the old woman; it was uncanny how often it was Laura who was able to search out her hiding place. But she had been searching for forty minutes now and had found nothing. Not an errant slipper, not a tipped chair. A small seed of real anxiety was growing in the back of her head. She calmed herself and thought through her progress. She had checked the television room where a few patients were waiting for their regular shows or playing card games; the kitchens were off limits but she checked them too, the pantries empty of her charge; every broom and linen cupboard, every closet in the manor all held only their requisite sheets, clothes and cleaning implements; she had unlocked the big steel door to the disused mental wing and looked in all the padded cells; the nurses' station was white and empty. There were only the grounds left to check, and the boiler room, both secured by locked doors, for which she had the keys.

She considered what to do next. Perhaps she should go back to Mrs Monaghan's room. There was a likelihood that she had returned there; it had certainly happened before. If not, then perhaps she might find something in the room to help decipher the woman's disappearance. The room seemed darker when she returned, full of shadow play, the grey day bringing on evening before time. The rain hissed at the window, wind blew in from a gap, billowing the bottom of the heavy curtain. Laura was suddenly frightened; the movement seemed sinister. She marched in and flicked on the switch. Light blazed in the room for a second, then there was a sizzle and a pfut and the room plunged back into darkness. Laura sighed. The wiring in the manor was so old, this was always happening. She hated changing light bulbs because of the inordinately high ceilings. She walked over and tried the bedside lamp. It worked and threw out an amber circle across the bed and the floor.

It was clear that Mrs Monaghan was not here. There was a terrible heaviness about the room though, it pressed into her; the hairs on the back of her neck went up. The darkness encroached upon her. She stepped quickly into the lamplight. As she did so she kicked something under the bed; she jumped and her heart hammered. Shrugging away the dark, her curiosity got the better of her and she bent down to see. Something small. Under the bed. She reached in and took it, brought it out into the light.

At first she thought a child had left a doll behind during visiting hours. Then she looked closer and took in the green woolen skirt, the purple flowered blouse and the grey shawl that Mrs Monaghan usually dressed in. Her eyes moved over the doll, the intricacy of the weathered face, the fineness of the brown-dyed mushroom bob. It was the eyes that confirmed it — they stared out in a grimace of terror. One of the loafers slipped off the doll's foot. Laura dropped the tiny figure and screamed. She had found Mrs Monaghan.

‘It’s a rather small room for someone who had such lofty ambitions, isn’t it?’ said the Doctor wryly, gazing about at the old pine single bed, the chest of drawers, the worn antique cupboard. A small window next to the bed let in the weak light of evening. The room smelled of antiseptic. ‘Certainly a comedown from a TARDIS.’

Tegan could sense the Doctor becoming maudlin again. She wondered if he was thinking of when his time would come, his final regeneration. Would he go gentle into that good night or, like the Master, strive for enduring physical corporeality? She couldn’t imagine the Doctor ever dying a finite death. ‘We should get started,’ she said, eyeing Turlough pointedly. It irked her but the Time Lord seemed to regard Turlough’s suggestions more readily than hers. The boy did tend to be rather more obsequious, but he had a lot to make up for. She still didn’t trust him, even after his repentance for the whole Black Guardian fiasco, but the Doctor had blithely shrugged off his induced assassination attempt and let him on board. It was odd but Turlough seemed like the only alien aboard the TARDIS. She had to keep reminding herself that the Doctor wasn’t human. Perhaps that was the reason; Turlough could sympathise with the Doctor’s foreign perspective.

Taking her hint, Turlough opened the cupboard. The hinges squeaked loudly.

The Doctor whirled about and slammed the door shut. He leant against it, wincing. ‘Gently, Turlough, gently. This is still the Master we’re dealing with here. We should be careful.’

Tegan looked at the room in an entirely new light. The thin pastel drapes seemed able to hold a threat.

Turlough was put out at the Doctor’s judgement of him. ‘I had considered that, actually,’ he sniffed. He grabbed the handle and the Doctor took his weight off the door. He pulled it open. Nothing leaped out at them. Tegan peered in. Inside, despondent and limp on a silver coat hanger, was the Master’s black velvet costume with the elegantly stitched, brocaded collar. The Doctor reached out and touched the velvet, frowned back into solemnity. ‘I wonder how he ever came to be here?’ he mused.

Tegan gave a hollow laugh. ‘He turns up like a bad penny wherever he’s least expected.’

The Doctor threw her an irritated look. She actually flinched at the force of it. Surely he wasn’t becoming defensive of the Master now? She found herself filling with frustration and anger. She may have a limited human view of events, but she could not just cast aside what the Master had done to her, to Nyssa, to them all. He had not been her friend. She resented this effort they were making in remembering him and the Doctor’s dubious forgiveness. He did not deserve it.

She looked the Doctor squarely in the eye. ‘You mentioned tea? I think I might get some. You two seem capable of sorting this out on your own.’ She made plain the barely restrained recrimination. Grudgingly she threw out, ‘Do you want any?’

‘Yes, that would be nice,’ the Doctor said kindly, and she hated the relief she heard in his tone at her leaving. ‘Turlough?’

‘Ah, no, thank you,’ he said, unable to look at her.

Her stubbornness kicked in, made her want to stay, get in the way, disrupt their clique. But she left anyway.

Just in from the front door to the manor, there was a small alcove where guests could hang their coats and hats on the hatrack and leave their wet umbrellas in a special bin. Not many people registered that it was there and only remarked upon it when nurses or doctors took their garments to hang up. It was a small, secretive alcove, perfect for hiding in during, say, a game of hide and seek.

The silence of the hall was broken by a strange wheezing, groaning noise that grew in volume. A faint shape began to take form in the alcove. The noise built and the shape took on more solidity, as though the sound was the very thing that was maintaining it. The sound pulled and heaved and then stopped with a dull finality as though it could simply exert itself no more.

Where there had been empty space before, there was now an apparent wooden coffin in the alcove. The coffin sat there, doing nothing, and then it shimmered and warped and in an instant had become a grandfather clock. 'Tempus Fugit' was written above the stopped pendulum. It was a beautiful but battered antique. The clock was silent for a moment. Then it began to tick-tock to itself, and gradually the sound sped up, as though to align to the correct time. The pendulum developed a smooth, exacting rhythm.

There was movement behind the glass body of the clock. Shadows spilled into the pendulum compartment. The wooden door opened unexpectedly. A trickle of dirt cascaded from the interior. A hand reached out, clinging to the edge of the clock. A scarred and very burnt hand, the flesh peeled from the bone, veins popping from the hideously bloated fingers. Something decrepit stepped out of the clock. Then, slowly, the antique vanished with a grinding noise. A moment later the nursing home shivered, as though in fear. The figure gave a hollow, resounding laugh.

The tears had come and Laura could not quell them. She guessed it must be the shock. What had happened to the old woman? There was something coldly disturbing about dolls, she thought, and their lifeless imitation of real breathing people. But Mrs Monaghan had been a real breathing person, now turned into something plastic, artificial, something with no meaning. Laura wiped her eyes, got her breathing under control. She was a nurse, she had seen much worse than this. She wished she wasn't the only one on duty. Indeed, Sheila should have been here by now. Oh, God, what was she going to do?

'Hello? Are you all right?' asked a heavily accented female.

Laura looked up smartly. A young woman was standing in the doorway to the nurses' station. She was dressed in a very tight, very short black miniskirt, a vivid scarlet shirt with an over-sized collar, high heels, and, oddly, a black plastic mac. She had strong, rather stern features, wide intelligent brown eyes, dark hair done in a short boyish cut, and a mouth brightened with red lipstick. She held two mugs of tea and cocked an eyebrow inquiringly.

For a moment Laura was so startled by this image that she couldn't speak.

Then, as if something clicked inside her, more tears began to pour out.

The woman rushed over. 'You're not all right,' she said, as though it were a diagnosis. 'Here, have a cuppa. It'll make you feel better.' She pushed a mug into Laura's hands.

Laura sipped, and, strangely, felt better right away. She enjoyed the warmth of the mug on her palms.

'See,' said the woman. 'Always works.' She smiled a kind, genuine smile and offered her hand. 'Hi, I'm Tegan. What's your name?'

Because she was so disarmed by the brusqueness of Tegan's approach, she found herself replying automatically. 'Laura,' she said, and her hand was shaken roughly by the other woman.

Taking a quick sip of her tea, Tegan looked at her and said, 'Now, Laura, how about you tell me all about it.'

And Laura found herself telling the woman everything. About Mrs Monaghan, the doll, even the patients' frequent claims of strange noises in the night. She told her about the wiring problem, the need for constant vigilance from the staff, even her wishes to get out of here one day and finish that course in horticulture she had begun years ago. Tegan listened attentively and did not question a single thing Laura said. Only when she had finished did the stylishly attired woman speak. She was frowning. 'I'd like you to show me where you found this... doll.' She paused and swallowed nervously. 'You see, if I think it's what it is, and I really hope it isn't, then I've seen it before.'

Laura was surprised. 'Really? Where? What does it mean?' She found herself becoming very anxious at that. But Tegan's sturdiness and forthrightness was something she could measure herself against and become stalwart.

But Tegan wouldn't say. A haunted look had come into her eyes. She was remembering something. Finally she spoke, her eyes widening with dismay. 'It means that he's still alive. And we're all in danger.' She placed a hand on Laura's arm. 'I have a friend I'd like you to meet.'

Looking at the Australian woman — she had finally figured out the accent — she felt her doubt fall away in Tegan's conviction. All right, she thought. At least she wasn't doing this alone any more.

She stood up, readying herself for action.

'Ms Henderson?' asked a voice from the doorway.

She flinched. Turned sharply. Relaxed somewhat. 'Mr Burrows. Is there a problem?' It can't possibly be as big as mine, she thought.

He shuffled his feet awkwardly, like a child, his pyjama bottoms riding high up his ankles. 'The boiler,' he said, and his voice was fearful and scratchy. 'It's making funny noises again.'

Instantly she was reminded of Mrs Monaghan's similar worry. And the dread came rushing back to her.

'I think there's someone down there,' he said.

* * *

Turlough stirred his mashed potato desultorily, pushed the peas round his

plate. This kind of food reminded him too much of Brendon School. Mess Hall dinners. Mass-produced stodge. The roast beef was so tough he could have mistaken it for rubber. The peeling, sickly green wallpaper didn't help dispense the illusion, nor the clackety hard steel chairs and tables of the dining room. Or perhaps it was just him?

The Doctor was happily devouring his meal with great gusto. He took a swig of his juice, glanced at Turlough. 'You're not eating?'

Not that, thank you,' he replied.

The Doctor shrugged and transferred plates, dropping his own empty one in front of Turlough. 'It's good for you, you know. You'll need the energy.'

'Why?' he asked stubbornly.

'We may have to leave quickly. Running could be involved.'

Turlough frowned. 'You still think the Master may have left booby traps?'

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. 'Don't you?' He sighed. 'I know him. We were rather alike when we were at school together.' He was suddenly crestfallen. 'After all this feuding, it's strange to think that he has finally gone. I had hoped that one day I might get through to him. To my old friend, buried deep in there.' He frowned at his unfortunate wording.

'This has been difficult for you, we know.'

'Yes, I suppose it has. I've never liked goodbyes.'

'So what do we do now?' Turlough almost smiled at the question. They had found nothing of consequence in the Master's room. A few scientific magazines — one bookmarked with a newspaper advertisement for masquerade costume hire, 'all tastes catered for' — Holst's *The Planets* on compact disc, a small brass telescope and a shaving mirror. The black velvet costume, limp as a hooked fish, had been the only evidence the Master had occupied the space. He was a solitary individual, composed only of himself. Turlough almost felt sympathy for his last lonely days spent in this sterile, exile environment. Almost.

The Doctor's fork clattered on the plate, done with the meal. He turned to his companion. 'I think it's time we found out from the other patients what the Master was like during his final days.'

'I doubt he was very sociable,' replied Turlough scathingly.

Will you —' The Doctor visibly restrained himself. He'd been prone to these small fits of temper recently. 'Just see what you can find out, okay? I'd like to know.'

'What exactly?'

'What he was doing here. And what he did with his TARDIS.' His tone was dark at that.

'And how will these people be able to help us?' Turlough gestured to them dismissively.

The Doctor shook his head and tsked. 'You've clearly never had a grandparent, Turlough. The elderly are prone to a good bit of gossip.' He looked around at the patients slurping and gabbling at the table. 'I expect they know absolutely everything there is to know about what's going on here.'

'Scuse me?' asked a croaky voice from behind them. 'You're new 'ere, aren't you?'

They swivelled in their seats. An elderly man in a dressing gown was peering down at them hawkishly. The Doctor beamed at him. 'Yes, we are. New recruits. This is Turlough, and I'm the Doctor.'

'Oh, you're the new fellow?' enquired the old man. 'Been expecting you, they 'ave. Bit late, aren't ya?'

Turlough stifled a smile. The Doctor noticed and frowned petulantly at him. 'Ah, yes... a little. My schedule keeps me rather busy. Actually, we're here to take care of a particular patient. I wonder if you remember him? He was buried today.'

The old man's eyebrows went up in surprise. 'Not much you can do for 'im, then, I 'spose.'

The Doctor smiled politely. 'Not in the medical sense, no.'

'E the one with the burns? Stayed in his room a lot?'

Turlough piped up. 'That could be him.'

The Doctor pounced on the description. 'Burns? Had he been injured?'

The man creased up his brows. "'Spose so. I never had a chance to ask 'im.' He gazed myopically at the Time Lord. 'Shouldn't you knows this, bein' 'is doctor an' all?'

The Doctor looked sheepish. 'Unfortunately I never got to see the body. I was called in at too late a stage, you see.' He perked up. 'I did read the report on the deceased, though. Natural causes, apparently.'

'Ironical, considering it wasn't his body at all,' said Turlough sarcastically.

The Doctor ignored him and went on. 'So no one saw hide nor hair of him while he was here?'

'Part from his specialist.' The old man began to shuffle his feet, glanced up at the TV in the corner of the room.

'His specialist?'

'Mr Tase. Head of the home. Now, 'scuse me, but my programme's startin' and I always watch it every week. Nice to meet yous. 'Spose I'll see you round.'

'Yes,' said the Doctor politely, then, 'Well, that was interesting.'

'Hmm,' Turlough agreed. 'Fascinating character. Full of pertinent information.'

'You know, sometimes I think you actually dislike travelling with me, Turlough,' he said provocatively.

'Sorry, Doctor, I'm just not very keen on this place. It feels... wrong.'

'I know what you mean. It does seem oddly familiar.' The Doctor looked at him, concerned. Then he relented. 'All right. I'll have a quick chat with this Mr Tase, just to reassure myself, and then we'll head back to the TARDIS. How does that sound?'

But Turlough wasn't listening. He had been watching the old man stagger to the television set and turn it on with the remote. An older set, it had taken a moment to warm up, a fizz of ozone in the air. 'Perhaps you were right, Doctor,' he said.

The Doctor looked up at the face of the television high up in the corner of the room. A dulled image appeared, the picture filled with noise. It seemed to be a situation comedy, judging by the laughter track and the fast-paced edits. What

was worrying was that he recognised the actors. For each and every one of them had the saturnine, goateed face of the Master.

‘Well, there’s no one here now,’ said Tegan, both relieved and exasperated. The boiler room may have seemed empty, but it hummed with power, the pipes overhead pumping water, the great round steel boiler throbbing with an evident raw energy. The fire inside threw out a menacing red glow through the glass plate. Nevertheless, Tegan was tense and expectant. There was something wrong, she felt.

Laura stepped down the last of the stairs, footsteps reverberating unnaturally. ‘Everything seems normal. That’s the usual sound the boiler makes.’

‘What’s through there?’ asked Tegan, pointing to a dark room beyond the machine.

The nurse shivered and wrapped her arms about herself. ‘That’s a mortuary. When one of the patients dies we sometimes put them down here for safe-keeping before the designated funeral home picks them up.’

‘Bit morbid, don’t you think? Putting them in the cellar.’

Laura shrugged. ‘It was Mr Tase’s idea. The head of the home.’ She gave the room a quick look. ‘There’s nothing here. Can we go back now?’

‘Hang on,’ said Tegan and went forward to the boiler. ‘Or don’t you listen to your patients, even when they’re obviously very frightened?’

‘They have been complaining more than usual,’ Laura replied, and frowned. ‘Strange disturbances, that sort of thing.’

‘I’m not surprised,’ said Tegan humourlessly. ‘Things tend to go a bit funny when the Master’s around.’

‘The man you told me about?’

‘Yes. Though what’s worrying me is that he’s supposed to be dead. We attended his funeral this afternoon.’ She glanced back at Laura to show her she was serious, and to make sure the nurse was still capable. ‘I just want to check the boiler...’ she said. Looking about, she found an oily rag hanging on a pipe above her. Winding it around the hot handle, she took hold and twisted. The door opened easily and furious heat surged out. Tegan took a step back at the intensity.

After a moment, when she grew accustomed to the warmth, she bent and peered inside the fat boiler. She gasped aloud when she saw what was inside. ‘You’d better have a look at this,’ she said in a tone that brooked no argument.

Laura quickly came to join her, and looked inside. Within the flames there were a number of tiny bodies, their clothes shrivelling, skin crisping. Underneath the intense heat was a smell of hair burning. Tegan retched, remembering how her Auntie Vanessa had met a similar fate. Laura squealed.

Then the boiler started making a horrid groaning sound, as though it were having trouble digesting. Tegan slammed the door shut, burning herself; she cried out. A figure stepped out from behind the machine. In the sick-red glow, Tegan could make out hideously scarred features, flesh cauterised into an ugly burnt approximation of a face; teeth leered over the gums, eyes boggled insanely. Laura began to scream. Darkness flowed from the figure in waves. It reached out

a hand to them and Tegan recognised the device it held. A slim black rod with a flowering end.

‘You,’ she said, appalled.

The figure laughed — a smooth, sinister chuckle — and pressed the trigger on the device.

The Doctor had been all set for a confrontation with the elusive Mr Tase in his office when Turlough had reminded him of Tegan. He’d stopped in his tracks, sheepish that he hadn’t thought of her whereabouts or safety until that moment. He’d quickly shifted gears, and gone in search of the nurses’ station, which had been resolutely empty and unhelpful. The manor was eerily quiet. They had searched for a patient to ask, but no one seemed to be around. Fortunately, they had come across one old man wandering the corridors, who had complained about the boiler making strange noises, and explained that he’d made the same declaration an hour ago to Nurse Henderson and her pretty Australian friend. And then the Doctor had uttered those words that Turlough so disliked. ‘Let’s split up.’

‘Do you really think that’s a good idea?’ he’d offered.

‘Oh, I should think it’s me he’s after, not you,’ the Doctor had said casually.

‘That makes me feel so much better.’ The Doctor had noted his sarcasm.

‘Yes, well, be careful in any case. Who knows what things the Master keeps in his cellar.’ He’d reached into his pocket and withdrawn an odd but now familiar silver shape hanging on a chain. ‘The TAU’S key, if things get really nasty.’

‘Doctor...’ Turlough had protested. ‘What if Tegan’s not down there?’

‘She will be,’ he’d said decisively, patting his companion on the back. ‘You’ll be fine.’ Then, already preoccupied with finding Mr Tase, he had dashed off down the threadbare corridor. Turlough had watched his coat tails disappear with a rising sense of unease.

Now, he’d reached the end of the stairs. His cautious progress had seemed as slow as an age. ‘Tegan?’ he called out in a mouse of a voice. It had to have been the basement, he thought ruefully.

The room was swathed in a sickly red light emanating from the fire in the boiler itself. There was an uncomfortably warm subterranean gloom. He quickly passed the boiler and, finding the dark room behind it, went through. ‘Tegan?’ he whispered fiercely. The boiler clanked behind him, causing him to leap a mile in the air. Then it settled; the place was charged with expectant energy. The hackles went up on the back of his neck and he whimpered, hating the sound of it. The quiet was that of something waiting in the shadows. He wasn’t going to say it but he couldn’t resist. ‘Is anyone there?’ Nothing replied.

His torch picked out metal cupboards and two fat slabs in its actinic light. It looked like a morgue. His anxiety went up a notch. There was clearly no one here. So obviously he was going to have to check the morgue drawers, a silver wall with handles. He reached out and took hold of one, flinching at the cold steel. Gritting his teeth, he pulled the drawer. It slid open smoothly and smacked to a fast stop when it was fully extended. It was also empty. He felt better about that. There were still five to go.

Just when he thought he was going to find them all empty, his luck ran out. Tegan was in the fourth. Someone had wrapped her carefully in the long, black plastic mac she had been wearing. Its similarity to a body-bag was disturbing. Turlough leapt into action. He gently slapped her cold, pale face. She looked drained in the torchlight. 'Tegan? Tegan, wake up!' He was aware of how loud his voice had become, aware of the shadows lengthening in the light. He swung round; his peripheral vision blinked as though someone had been standing there, watching him. He was sweating heavily. He didn't have time for gentility. He slapped Tegan hard across the face, trying not to enjoy it too much.

Wha...!' She spluttered awake. He helped her to sit up. Her eyes goggled for a moment, then settled on him. 'Turlough! Thank goodness you're here! It's him! It's the Master, he's —'

'Not dead.' He nodded. 'Yes, we know.'

She frowned. 'Did you just slap me?' Her strident tone was cutting. Turlough cleared his throat, stifling a smile. 'Come on, let's get out of here.'

'Where's the Doctor?' she asked.

'Gone to see the Head about how things are run around here.' He gave an ironic pout. 'I imagine he'll be needing our help quite soon.'

Tegan gasped aloud, swung herself off the steel drawer. Wait! I just remembered. It wasn't our Master!

Turlough frowned. 'What are you talking about? Are you all right?'

'Fine, thanks,' she said brusquely. Snatching his torch, she strode into the boiler room. Turlough found her poking around near the big round steel machine. 'It was a cadaver, a corpse. But he had the Master's weapon.'

'The TCE?'

'Yes. And he had dolls of the patients, and he was burning them!' She closed her eyes for a second to forget the image. 'It was horrible.' She looked at Turlough and could see he was dubious. Unable to find the rag, she bunched up the material of her shirt and used it to shield her hand from the heat as she opened the door. 'Go on, look,' she said, her eyes turned away. 'Laura's gone in there.' There was a tear in her voice.

Turlough bent down and peered into the cavernous interior, flames crackling and writhing. A terrible stench drifted from the boiler in waves. At first he saw nothing, but then he made out tiny limbs — legs and feet, shoes melting. His eyes ranged over these, and he found to his horror that at waist height every tiny figurine had become a white, chiselled Ionic column. And as they burned down, the coals they became looked exactly like... It was then that he suddenly realised. 'I think we're in bigger trouble than I'd thought,' he said.

Which was when four pyjama-attired patients suddenly appeared from the dark and surrounded them. Their faces were blank and chilling, hypnotised. In one hand they held needles, scalpels, sharp medical implements intended to harm. In the other, each held the tiny corpse of a nurse.

The Doctor had arrived at the Head's office. Surprisingly, it had been difficult to find, situated as it was at the top of the building. As though he hadn't wanted to be disturbed, which only strengthened the Doctor's suspicions. Emblazoned

on the door in large black letters were the words 'GENERAL MANAGER'. It was enough to frighten any poor patient away. The Doctor reached out and knocked boldly.

'Come,' said a masterful voice from within. He entered cautiously.

Inside, the room was dark, small, yet decorated lavishly in an oak-panelled dado. There was a bookcase filled with medical journals against one wall, and a verdigris chaise longue against the other. Along the back wall there was a desk, scattered importantly with piles of papers, as though to give credence to its purpose as the hub of the home. A lamp cast a gentle glow across it. A high-backed swivel chair faced away from him.

The Doctor cleared his throat. 'You can stop hiding behind façades. I'm here now. And I want some answers, *Mr Tase*.'

A deep-throated, gloating chuckle beyond the chair. A burnt, skinless hand flopped down over the side. 'My dear Doctor...' That soft, hypnotic voice he remembered. 'You have been so relentlessly predictable. It's almost been disappointing.'

'Yes, I have been rather too careless.'

'But you had to be sure,' said the Master and there was amusement in his tone. 'I knew you'd come for that reason alone.'

The Doctor sighed, angry that he'd been duped. 'Why are you doing this? Is it another of your schemes for dominion? Or did you just want to humiliate me before planning my no doubt complicated death?'

There was a slight pause. 'This may surprise you, Doctor,' said the silky voice, 'but I don't want to kill you. This time.'

The Doctor frowned. 'Then the patients... What have you done with them?'

'Euthanised them,' said the Master coldly. 'You see, *I'm* the doctor here.'

The Doctor was horrified. 'That wasn't necessary!'

'Oh, but it was, Doctor, it was. Through their deaths they're helping me.' He chuckled evilly. 'Just as you will agree to help me.' At this, the black leather chair swivelled around dramatically — to reveal the cloaked remnants of a decayed, withered man. Eyes leered and lips jutted obscenely; the skin had peeled and stretched, only veins and organs showed, somehow existing.

The Doctor was shocked at this vision, and yet his natural compassion reigned at the pain the Master must be in. It certainly explained his madness. He'd never expected to see this incarnation again. But... No. His natural Time Lord instinct recognised that this was his Master, the one who had stolen Nyssa's father's body for his own. He straightened, suddenly in the superior position. 'Well, well, you do seem to be in quite a spot of bother this time. You look like you should have stayed six feet under. What happened? One of your traps backfire on you?'

The Master hissed. 'The Time Lords did this to me. Because of you.' He creaked forward in his chair. 'I advise you to take this very seriously. And your mocking humour will **not** be tolerated.'

The Doctor lay back on the chaise longue, stretching himself out, unworried. 'What makes you think I'd help you?'

The Master smiled thinly as much as he could, and brought up a slim black

rod with a flowering end. 'This mainly,' he said. 'And...'

The door opened and Tegan and Turlough were shunted in, followed by the gaggle of on-edge patients, needles and scalpels poised. The Doctor carefully stood up.

'And them,' finished the Master, motioning to the companions with his TCE.

'Doctor!' yelled Tegan shrilly. 'Are you all right?'

'Fine, Tegan, fine. You're not hurt?' She shook her head.

The Master looked them over with a sneer. 'The redoubtable Doctor's companions. Now that we're all here, I have a nice trip planned for all of us. Doctor?' His mad eyes stared at the Time Lord.

'Doctor! You can't be helping him.'

He glanced at Tegan, frustrated. 'Who said I was?'

'Doctor,' said Turlough calmly. 'None of this is real.'

'That's right,' put in Tegan. 'We found black roundels in the boiler. He's using the patients as fuel for his —'

'TARDIS,' finished the Doctor.

'You knew?' Turlough was incredulous at the Doctor's lack of trust.

'I had my suspicions. I didn't find the sitcom funny for one.' Throughout, the Doctor had remained between his companions and the Master, perfectly still and composed. The TCE was point-blank on his hearts. 'It's an old trick of the Master's: materialise his TARDIS around the real object, absorb it, and control everything within.'

The Master grimaced, his face ripping with the action. 'Well done, but I'm afraid this charade has come to an end. Doctor? Shall we?' Without waiting for confirmation, the Master pressed a button on his desk console.

Tegan pulled free from her elderly captor. 'No! You can't. I won't let you harm any more patients.'

'Tegan!' yelled the Doctor and he moved to intercept her. There was a kerfuffle of kicks and scrapes and shouting. The TCE bloomed with a circle of red light. Then the entire nursing home vanished with a wheezing, groaning noise, like an expiring patient.

It was a forest of bare, gnarled trees, fingers tangling each other up as though constantly fighting. They made a sinister, hollow clacking noise as the wind rubbed them together. It was a forest filled with fairytale dark, a haven for who knew what manner of devious, harmful beasts.

A sound rent the air, intruding upon the stillness. And then an Elizabethan manor, all half-timbered and mossy, shimmered into existence, somehow managing to fit itself among the close-knit trees. After a moment, the manor shivered and in a swift movement folded itself into a small rectangle and was suddenly a grandfather clock. The clock shivered again, and then, deciding this was the correct form to assume in this place, solidified. Time started with a great clunk from the pendulum. Five people stepped out of the clock.

* * *

Tegan left the TARDIS first, with two patients chaperoning; then the Doctor, seeming very cowed and drawn, and lastly the Master, covering him with the rude black device.

‘Excellent, we’ve arrived,’ said the Master. ‘I trust no more demonstrations of power will be needed to ensure your cooperation, Doctor?’

‘I would have helped you anyway,’ he replied, dejected.

‘You would have strung me along until you found a way to thwart me. I know you of old, Doctor.’ He chuckled. ‘This way I have some insurance.’ With a free hand he took out a small snuffbox and opened it. Inside lay the miniaturised form of Turlough, black coat making him seem like a caught furry bug. The small boy glanced up fearfully at the looming disfigured terror. Tegan could vaguely hear his tiny shouts for help.

‘If you harm a hair on his head...’

‘I don’t think you’re in any position to threaten me, Doctor.’ The Master snapped the box shut, and rattled it for good measure, smirking. The Doctor took a step forward. The Master shoved the TCE directly in his face. ‘Careful, Doctor,’ he said, amused.

‘Look, I don’t know what you want me to do, but I will do anything I can to help you!’ The Doctor’s voice became raised with desperation. ‘I give you my word. And when we’re done you will return Turlough to his normal size and we will go our separate ways. I will not attempt to stop you.’ The Doctor looked agonised.

The Master looked down at the box, considering. Finally he relented. ‘Very well.’ The box went back into a fold of his tattered cloak. The Master gestured magnanimously with the TCE. ‘After you, my dear Doctor.’

They trudged through the dim forest for seemingly hours, the trees looming grotesquely over them, obstructing their passage with sharp twiggy fingers, tripping them with thick roots. Animals cried somewhere in the darkness. To Tegan each step was laboured; she felt weak with exertion and a terrible knowledge that Turlough’s condition was her fault. She looked at the Doctor. He hadn’t spoken to her. His voice when the Master had picked up their friend had been a broken, empty sound. He’d muttered, ‘Not again.’ She’d only been slightly relieved when the Master revealed he’d changed the setting and that Turlough was still alive. He’d squeezed the doll, and then every card was in his hand. The Doctor had given in because of her; her stupid impetuosity had almost got Turlough killed and had placed them all in the Master’s power. She carefully manoeuvred herself next to the Doctor, her captors shifting position as she did so.

‘Will he be all right?’ she asked gingerly.

The Doctor looked into her. ‘I don’t know, Tegan. I hope so.’ She felt even more guilty at that.

‘You can’t really mean to help him?’ she asked candidly, her faith in him undiminished.

His look was one of utter defeat. ‘What choice do I have?’ he said sadly.

The Master, listening in, chuckled. ‘None if you want to play with your friend

again,' he said cruelly. 'We're here.'

Tegan looked up and her mouth dropped open. The forest had suddenly opened out into a clearing and before them stood an enormous Gothic castle of black stone, with crumbling turrets and battlements, a drawbridge and a moat.

'That's a little incongruous,' remarked the Doctor.

'Not for a prison,' spat the Master.

'Ah,' replied the Doctor. 'This whole fiasco is beginning to make sense.'

'Not to me,' said Tegan stropishly. 'And I don't see why we had to walk all the way here when we could have used his TARDIS.'

'Because, my dear Ms Jovanka, I don't plan on letting certain powers-that-be know that I can escape.'

'But only within a limited range?' asked the Doctor, curiosity piqued now he had parts of the puzzle to play with.

'My TARDIS was able to fix upon one planet only.' The Master was very bitter about the fact.

'Let me guess.' The Doctor clearly enjoyed teasing his enemy. 'Earth.'

'That backward, benighted planet. The people are centuries old and yet still haven't crawled from the mineral slime technologically or intellectually.'

'And, of course, these powers-that-be watch Earth constantly for signs of interference.'

The Master smirked. 'Yes. The only benefit was that I was assured of ensnaring you, Doctor.' He prodded the Time Lord with the TCE. 'Enough talk. Inside.'

Tegan's two captors shuffled her along as well, needles ready to prick at the slightest sign of resistance.

Inside, the castle was a nightmare. After the relatively normal stone courtyard, they travelled down corridors padded with black studded leather. Spikes of sharp steel ran along the ceiling in a complex webbing, drawing them in to the centre. Night-black artworks hung on the walls with slashes of bright, bloody colour. Tegan tried not to look at them. She imagined she saw the paintings writhe, figures leering out at her with sinister grimaces.

'You can tell a lot about a man by the art he collects,' murmured the Doctor worriedly.

Mannequins with velvet masks, each clothed in the Master's black, decadent costume appeared at every turn, startling Tegan. She took hold of the Doctor's arm.

'Brave heart, Tegan,' he said, but he didn't sound so sure himself.

Eventually, they arrived in the throne room. It alone was covered entirely in luxurious black velvet. Along two walls were rows of grotesque, seemingly melted mirrors. There was a single object at the back of the room, covered with a red silk sheet. And at the far end of the room on a metal throne shaped into a rising phoenix sat a dark-clad figure in a monk's robe. The hood covered the head and was brocaded around the tip. The figure stood and spread his arms. 'Why, Doctor, I'm so glad you could join me.'

The Doctor sniffed. 'I should have guessed.' He glanced at the fixed grimace

of the Master behind him. 'So which one is the real you?'

The figure chuckled evilly and motioned them forward. As they passed through the room, Tegan noticed frightening dark terrors seething and bulging from every mirror. At the foot of the dais they looked up at the Master. 'How I have longed for this moment, Doctor. When I am the ruler and you are the ruled.'

'Are you going to tell me why I have to help you, or shall we play a few more games?' Tegan was shocked at the real anger in the Doctor's tone.

'This is why you have to help me,' replied the Master bitterly. And he removed the cowl. Where his head should have been there was only deep, frightening darkness.

Quite characteristically, the Master explained everything.

'So you didn't escape this time,' said the Doctor wryly.

'I went to Gallifrey to help you, Doctor,' he said with iron in his tone. 'Begged by the Time Lords to rescue you and your past selves from the Death Zone. They promised me forgiveness. A new regenerative cycle.' He paused and then spat, 'But they exiled me instead!'

They had ripped his last body from him, and he had only managed to hold on to himself with a barely conceivable strength of will. He consisted only of dark now. He had raged at the indignity of it all, at the unfairness.

'Who are you to talk about unfairness?' cried the Doctor, hard-eyed. 'I've learned all about it here,' the Master replied.

The devious and fickle Time Lords had placed him here where no one would find him, where he would live out a meagre existence, if he could. They took back his TARDIS and tried to reprogram her. But she remembered him, searched him out. He had been so relieved when he'd found the old grandfather clock in the woods one day. Unfortunately he had not been able to cross the threshold, some limiting program that held. He'd pushed and pushed, and had nearly died in the attempt. But to his amazement, when he came to, he'd been confronted by the deathly grinning visage of his last life. His TARDIS had created a construct which was, in some sense, his Watcher, a form he could manipulate and, partly, inhabit. He'd realised how he could use it as a vessel. So he sent it in his TARDIS to watch for advantages, to search for help. He'd almost despaired when he learned that it could only manage the jump to Earth. Occasionally it brought him humans, apparently intelligent. They whimpered and he usually killed them. Then, he'd seen the advantage he had in his knowledge of the blue planet. And he had formulated a crafty, elaborate plan to ensnare his best enemy. They had been friends once. This time the Doctor would help him.

So he had waited for the Doctor. And the Doctor had come.

'Well, now you know what it's like,' said the Doctor childishly. 'Having a whole universe at hand, and then having it taken away from you.'

'With your help, I shall be getting it back.'

'Going against the Time Lords is very dangerous! I should know.'

'Rubbish!' yelled the Master angrily. 'They let you go about doing your impossible acts of goodness. You're a political expediency, Doctor. They

wouldn't waste the energy to hunt you down.'

'You don't understand. I **don't know** how to help you.' His brow cracked, face fell. The blackness within the cowl swirled, perhaps a smile. 'That's all right, Doctor.' He paused. 'I do.'

The Doctor was instantly alarmed. 'Then why the explanations?'

The Master shrugged. 'I like the game.' And with that, he pulsed with a surge of energy, and two bolts of dark flew from his head. One went into Tegan, who was thrown across the room. The other was absorbed by the silent, immobile Watcher Master. It happened so quickly, so unexpectedly. The Doctor turned to help Tegan. And the real Master placed a bag over his head and pulled the cord tight about his neck.

When the Doctor awoke he found he'd been tied. He was able to turn his head. He looked about. He was still in the throne room, atop a cold metal bench. Judging from the position, it was the object that had been covered by the red velvet. Typically showy of the Master to glamorise his torture device. He was secured by thick leather straps.

'Ah, Doctor, I'm glad you're awake. I wouldn't want you to miss the show. Particularly as you're the star.'

He struggled, just to see how well his limbs had been tied. Expertly, it seemed. 'It's no use struggling,' said the Master with particular relish.

'What are you planning to do?' The Doctor finally discerned the dark figure standing just beyond the foot of the slab.

'I need a corporeal body, Doctor. This dark is merely what I could remember.' There was a terrible pause. 'So I'm going to steal one of your lives.' He stopped to let the fact register, like a man who has perfected his megalomaniacal statements. 'There may even be enough of a connection between us for me to reoccupy a physical resemblance of my old body.'

'Don't be stupid!' yelled the Doctor, desperation creeping in. 'It won't work.'

'We shall certainly give it a try,' said the Master, chuckling.

'I'll stop you.' There was righteous indignation in the Doctor's tone.

'Tied up like that? I think not. No, Doctor, this time I have won.' He took out the tin snuffbox and shook it about. 'I really wonder how much you value the lives of your companions to make such inflammatory statements.'

The Doctor glared at him, lips trembling. 'Don't,' he said.

The blackness swirled in the Master's hood. 'Speaking of companions, meet my latest.' He gestured and a figure walked into the Doctor's sight.

'Oh, no.' There was real despair in his tone. 'Not you, Tegan.'

It was his companion, and yet transformed. She wore a voluminous black velvet gown, the skirt hooped and billowing around her slight form, the bodice tightly fitted to her chest, long black gloves etched with gold filigree on the cuffs and the fingertips, and an intricate brocaded collar a mirror image to the Master's velvet costume. Over her face she wore a black lace veil, her lips looming vivid red behind it, and behind her lay a crushed velvet train almost the length of the entire room. She was his bride, wed to the darkness.

The Doctor closed his eyes at her terrible transformation.

‘Doesn’t she fit the part beautifully?’ The Master stroked her velvet collar lovingly. He lifted her veil.

‘Let her go,’ urged the Doctor. ‘You don’t need her!’

‘Oh, but I do, Doctor. She’s going to play the part of your executioner.’ The Master reached down. Something metal scraped along the stone. The Doctor blanched when he saw what it was. A metre-long, gleaming metal spike, geometrically perfected and smooth, a ball at the other end. The Master ran his gloved hands along it appreciatively. ‘It’s magnificent.’ He handed it to Tegan. She took it without a word; her blank eyes remained on the Doctor at all times.

‘Now, let’s begin!’ pronounced the Master. He walked away.

With a clunk of mechanics and a grinding, the slab began to lift sluggishly from its horizontal position. The Doctor felt his weight shift, the straps cut in painfully to hold him upright. Once vertical, the slab twisted sideways and anchored itself in the stone again. The Doctor was now directly facing the throne at the other end of the room. In between, lay the mirrors, six either side. He suddenly realised how the Master intended to do this. Twelve mirrors in total; 12 regenerations. He couldn’t just steal a regeneration from a Time Lord, he had to channel it through all his previous lives until it came to what he was now. It was quite a risk, but also quite ingenious. The Master had lost none of his cruelty or shrewdness. He realised with horror that this might actually work.

Tegan stood before him, rigid as a spear. He had to break through the conditioning. ‘Tegan, I know you’re probably angry at me right now. But it’s the Master who’s doing that. He’s tapped into your resentment and frustration towards me.’ He stared point-blank into her eyes. ‘Please listen to me, Tegan. Concentrate on my voice. It’s the Doctor, your friend. You must concentrate to break his hold. Please, Tegan...’ ***Keep saying her name.*** ‘Tegan—’

The Master shouted at him from the other end of the room. ‘It’s no good, Doctor. You never were very good at breaking my conditioning.’ He pressed a button on his throne.

The floor shuddered, and a stone slid away beside the Doctor. An enormous birdcage rose out of it amid steam. It was a twisted metal thing, with hundreds of sharp metal thorns on each bar. In it was a patient, naked but for a wide strip of studded leather about his middle. The Doctor could see the same was happening at the other end of the room. Hurriedly, Tegan secured it to his slab with rubber hoses, metal clamps. Conduits, he thought, so his previous selves couldn’t snatch away the regeneration. The Master had thought of everything.

‘Excellent,’ hissed the black robed figure. ‘There’s only one thing to do.’ With that he sat back on his throne and beckoned to the grotesque, decrepit form of his Watcher. The burnt figure slowly took the steps to the throne and sat down. For a moment there existed two Masters in the chair, and there was an amount of thrashing as though one did not want to be absorbed. A wave of blackness flowed from the cloak and into the perpetually grinning figure. And then there was only the Watcher. He quickly shrugged on the cloak. ‘Now, my dear,’ he said to Tegan, and his voice rumbled down the room, ‘take his life.’

‘Tegan! Wait!’

But she had already brought up the metal spike. She placed it against his left

heart. The Doctor took a breath.

Tegan drove the spike into his chest, puncturing his heart.

The pain was immense, like a sun had gone supernova in his body. The heat flowed out of him. The Doctor gritted his teeth against it. Sweat stood out on his forehead. His face felt cold. He could feel a great part of him pushing against the metal intruder in his body. Tegan was holding it in.

Through the white-hot burning sensation, he heard the Master say, 'Now, remove the pin.'

'No, please,' the Doctor gasped.

Tegan plucked it out. The surge of energy flew from him, throwing his companion across the stone floor. It charged down the rubber hose into the cage and into the poor patient kept there. His life force tossed and threw the human about like a ragdoll, burning him beyond recognition. He was unable to hold it. But then he wasn't supposed to. The Doctor could only watch, broken and helpless, as it travelled like electricity into the first of the mirrors. The glass warped and bent as the Master within tried to grasp it. But it quickly leapt to the next, crackling and arching between opposite mirrors, leaving anguished cries behind. For one moment it didn't seem as though the final mirror would let it go, but then it leapt into the conduit, the patient frying and growing with enormous energy. As soon as he fell it shot straight into the Master on his throne. He seethed and hissed with electricity, his body steaming and crackling. The metal phoenix behind the throne, wings spread grandly, watched the Master's rebirth from the shadow.

The Doctor, bound, watched all this with chagrin. Tegan's body on the stone was contorted. The Master writhed on his throne. The mirrors grasped and thrashed. He wanted to yell with anger. Yes, of course, he thought. He knew how to stop this. He wouldn't let the Master win, not like this. He summoned reserves of strength he barely knew he possessed. Then he opened his mouth and he screamed. It wasn't a normal scream. It registered in octaves that human ears could not hear. The scream spiralled out into the room like a lethal arrow.

Every single mirror exploded, spraying shards of glass. Dark forms flowed out of them. They headed straight for the throne.

'No!' yelled the Master, as they took hold of him. 'It's mine!'

The Doctor watched as the darkness swelled until the throne was covered in a cloud of buzzing black. Something pushed itself out of the Master.

It shot across the room, poured itself back into the Doctor, and struck him into unconsciousness.

Later, when Tegan had released him from the slab, and they had restored a very disgruntled, bruised Turlough to size, they stood around and wondered what to do with the Master.

'Leave him for the Time Lords,' Turlough suggested nastily.

'I can't do that,' said the Doctor. 'I know what exile is like. I can't blame him for trying.'

'He tried to kill you!' said Tegan in disbelief, and there was anguish in her eyes for her part played; he'd have to be gentle with her.

‘No, he didn’t,’ he corrected her. ‘He tried to steal one of my remaining lives.’ He looked down at the velvet-clad man. Those saturnine features and that trimmed goatee were unmistakable.

‘You can’t defend him! Not after all this!’ Turlough was upset; being shrunk and kept in a snuffbox had not humbled his attitude.

‘I’m not defending him,’ said the Doctor, his voice raised. Tut I do understand him.’ He shook his head. ‘And admire him to an extent.’ Tegan hurrumphed. ‘The strength of will he must have to combat all his previous regenerations and win, that’s formidable.’

‘He still stole your life. That’s one fewer for you.’ Tegan pulled at her velvet gloves guiltily. She no doubt wanted to remove the disturbing outfit.

The Doctor managed a smile. ‘Actually, he stole a small piece from every one of his past regenerations. That’s what maintained him.’ He tapped both his hearts. ‘I think I’m all still here. Quite healed.’ He paused to consider. ‘And if I didn’t know better, I’d suspect he knew that this wouldn’t work. That he expected to lose. It rejected him, you see.’

‘Perhaps he likes to lose,’ remarked Turlough, sharing a covert glance with the Doctor.

There was a wheezing groaning noise that echoed throughout the padded room. A grandfather clock materialised in the centre of the room. ‘Just in time,’ murmured the Doctor. ‘We’ve got a whole nursing home and some very confused patients to get back to Earth.’

‘And what are you going to do with him?’ asked Turlough, nodding at the velvet man on the floor.

The Doctor’s companions turned to him as one for his decision. It felt good to have them back again, their trust complete in him. ‘I don’t know,’ he said. Tut I’ll think of something.’ His smile was a little too wicked.

Life After Queth

Matt Kimpton
*An Adventure of the Fifth Doctor,
with Tegan Jovanka*

Queth lurched towards its fate, threading an n-dimensional line through existence towards its inevitable termination.

Of course, in another, rather more accurate sense, it did no such thing. The idea is frankly asinine. There can be, by definition, no change in n-dimensional phase-space, where time is just another unchanging axis, the infinity of events a static block of fact, the marvellous tracery of the universe fixed and complete. There is no movement. No was, will or could be. Only is.

This is why phase-space is so dull.

Nevertheless, the world moved. As the plane of the present slewed on through the slab of history — for all that neither of them existed or did any such thing — the planet edged ever closer to its destiny. And then, some would say, a box appeared. This too is patently drivél. Things can't appear in phase-space. They're either there or not.

Nevertheless — the box appeared. This is why real life is so exciting.

'Extraordinary! What's this green stuff?' asked the woodlouse.

'Moss,' said Tegan wearily. She'd said a lot of things wearily recently, from 'Just a wall' to 'Roundels, apparently' to 'I don't know, leave it alone', all of which were apparently desperately exciting to their current, hopefully soon-to-be-ex, passenger.

Oh, yes. *Passenger*. Their hideous, alien, gravity-controlling insect passenger, which had tried to kill all of them on Frontios, and which the Doctor had viciously dealt with by inviting it into the TARDIS and giving it a lift somewhere else.

The thing gaped at her, antennae quivering in excitement. 'Moss! What is moss?'

'Well, not this, if we're going to be technical,' came a distracted-sounding voice from somewhere in the vicinity of Tegan's knees. 'I'd have said more of a liverwort, really. See the rhizoids? Very simple structure. No sign of protonemata, either, although that could be the time of year...'

Tegan glanced down. The Doctor was kneeling against the stained, rocky wall of the cave opening, where the alien liverwort was no doubt making a terrible mess of his period knees. He was frowning at the wall through half-moon glasses, fingering a few leafy fronds of what Tegan had so casually and erroneously dismissed as moss. He held some up to the light, presumably for the woodlouse to get a better view of the laughably simple rhizoids. 'What do you think?'

The giant woodlouse — it was actually a Tractator, Tegan recalled, and called itself the Gravis, although she wasn't sure why she was supposed to care — shuffled forward, body swaying with the weight of its bulky shell. Its slanted, almond-shaped eyes, with wavy lines in place of pupils, gave it a thoughtful,

cunning air. 'I don't know, Doctor... What's a year?'

Tegan sighed. Her own limited stock of patience had been exhausted about twenty minutes into the trip, when the woodlouse's boundless enthusiasm for learning about the TARDIS had run up against the limits of her knowledge of it — which pretty much amounted to how the bit in the middle went up and down, and what you pulled to open the door. Since then she'd been cooped up inside in an increasingly foul mood — 'Just a short hop!' the Doctor had promised, and then, when pressed after 12 hours, gone off on one about temporal perspective and tangential chronomass — with nothing to do but try to explain the function of a wicker chair to something evolutionarily incapable of sitting down. No wonder their other travelling companion had wanted to sit this one out.

'Doctor...' she hinted. 'Furlough will be waiting...'

'Just a moment, Tegan. There's something not quite right here.'

No kidding, she thought. This was supposed to be a waste-disposal mission — drop off the leader of the despicable Tractators on some uninhabited planet where it couldn't kill anybody, then head back to Frontios for tea and victory — and now the Doctor had gone and made friends with it. Only hours ago they'd had to forcibly prevent it from using zombified human colonists to excavate its planet and turn it into a spaceship, but trust the Doctor not to let that get in the way. Kolkokron was a nice change from the barren crags of Frontios, at least. The TARDIS had barely even managed its usual trick of landing in a desolate cave, choosing as a compromise this rather pleasant mossy hollow in the side of a forest-filled crater. The trees seemed almost supernaturally verdant, forming a thick canopy webbed together by curving, interwoven branches that hung down in loops and threads to plunge back into the rich, moist earth.

There was no birdsong, no whirr or chirrup of insects, but the air was an orange-grey mist of rain hissing gently all around them, softening the distance into hazy suggestion and smelling of just-cut grass. It was, Tegan decided, stupid and unfair.

After all, this was the first peaceful place they'd seen in months, and they'd gone and brought a monster with them. She'd much rather have brought the surviving colonists here and left the Gravis to its shiny caves and stupid gravel, but the Doctor had been adamant. He couldn't be seen to interfere, for reasons that presently eluded her but probably included the words 'Rassilon' and 'Laws of Time', and that meant moving the woodlouse. It was Kolkokron or nothing.

The Doctor stood up abruptly, brushing bits of phoney moss from his hand.

'This isn't Kolkokron,' he said.

Beside him, the woodlouse looked astonished, inasmuch as that was possible for a six-foot crustacean with no moving features. Essentially it just flapped its paws. 'It's not?' it screeched, in a voice of pure, grating evil. 'Golly.'

Tegan snorted. 'TARDIS technology comes up trumps again.'

'Nothing so straightforward. The TARDIS says this is Kolkokron. It's certainly in the right place. I cross-referenced the coordinates from the Yyb Fissure — that's barely a meteor's throw away. And yet...' He waved a hand expansively at the dense forest that lay before them. 'That's not Kolkokron.'

'It is certainly a mystery, Doctor!'

Tegan scowled. 'It's only a planet. Maybe you just don't recognise this bit.'

'Impossible. I know Kolkokron like the back of Mimas, it's completely without life.'

'Ah! And lacks this fascinating liverwort!' Flap, flap. Idiot.

'Exactly,' said the Doctor. He stuck his hands in his pockets, surveying the forest before them with a pensive air. 'I had wondered whether all this had been brought here recently, some sort of planet-forming, but it looks native enough. Plant-only biospheres leave a very distinctive evolutionary footprint.'

The Gravis wiggled its antennae in glee. 'Then the logic is unassailable. We have discovered an anomaly in space and time!'

Tegan glared at the back of its head, which looked exactly like the rest of its lumpy hunch of a shell. 'Or,' she offered, 'we're lost.'

'Indeed,' it crowed. 'Lost in a spatial-temporal distortion it will take all our wits to unravel!'

Tegan rolled her eyes.

'Now, come on,' scolded the Doctor. 'There's a mystery here, Tegan. Don't you think we should make some effort to solve it?'

'No,' she said. 'I think we should get back to Frontios.'

'But what about the anomaly?'

'Nuts to the anomaly. Turlough will be wondering where we are.'

'So am I. That's the point.'

Tegan sighed. The woodlouse had bobbed its way over to the cave mouth, and was now delicately clambering out into the open air. It was making excited little noises about how big trees were, and how colourful everything looked, and how it had always imagined sky would be flatter than that. It was just possible she hated it now even more than when it had been trying to kill her and use her corpse to drive a digger.

'It'll do though, won't it?' she pleaded. 'I mean, the wretched thing looks happy enough.' She lowered her voice to a whisper. 'Let's just take off while it's not looking.'

There was a pause. The Doctor gave a little cough. While the Gravis trundled on its merry way down the slope outside, doing its gravelly best to whistle, a nasty feeling formed in Tegan's stomach. The promise of a row.

'Doctor... You did **tell** it we were leaving it here?'

He shifted uncomfortably, faffing about with his glasses and feigning sudden interest in a wobbly hinge as an excuse not to look at her. 'Try to understand, Tegan... The poor creature's been under a lot of stress. Finding out the humans it killed are sentient... The loss of its extrasensory drone bodies... Falling over...'

'Doctor!' Tegan said, incredulity rising in her throat like very angry vomit. She knew it wasn't exactly the Doctor's style to drop the Gravis off a cliff or something while it was unconscious, but this was ridiculous. 'You can't get squeamish about abandoning it, the thing's a murderer! You should have killed it when you had the chance!'

'He has apologised, Tegan,' replied the Doctor reproachfully. 'Anyway, what would that achieve?'

'It would have served it right!'

The Doctor frowned. 'What a peculiar idea. Still, it's too late now.'

'Not for us. The place is uninhabited, we can just zap off back to Frontios.'

'What, and risk exposing him to an unknown psycho-quantum field? No. Not until we find out what's going on. Then we'll... Then we'll abandon him. I promise.'

Yeah, thought Tegan. And I'll drop you back at Heathrow first thing. The Doctor's promises had a way of taking a while to come true.

'Come, companion Tegan, let us explore!' shrieked the Gravis from outside, where it was busy discovering the joy of rain. 'There is a mystery to solve here!' Tegan sighed. It was going to be one of those days. Again.

It is important to remember that events only happen once. If that.

Even the most casual inspection of the so-called 'nature' of the alleged universe will demonstrate that time, itself a parochial absurdity of purely academic interest, is a linear concept. Even if it were to be admitted that Queth was moving through phase-space towards its doom, then (which it is not, such a notion being arrant conceptual tosh), it certainly couldn't be said that it were doing so for a second or greater time. Not only can a complex space-time event not have an ending, it absolutely cannot have ended countless times already.

Such claims are twaddle. Drivel. The baldest of dash. The poppiest, one might say, of cock.

Queth was hurtling — or rather not, as change is an almost violently meaningless concept — towards its certain if purely notional doom, for the first time, the last time, the absolute and only time.

Again.

The Gravis wasn't good with hills, it turned out. Particularly ones made entirely from thick, dark mud, alleviated only by the occasional hidden tree root or treacherous extrusion of unexpected rock. It had fallen over twice, the first time with great enthusiasm and the second rather less so, and Tegan was growing heartily sick of levering it out of the slime. So far they'd explored a couple of hundred yards of muddy forest, and solved precisely nothing.

In fairness she wasn't doing much better herself — she liked to think of her leather miniskirt as a practical choice for the discerning girl-about-the-cosmos, but her heels weren't doing her any favours, and her timeless, streaky punk top was slick with rain. The Doctor, of course, was his usual mix of frowning curiosity and bursts of sudden, boundless enthusiasm, merrily leading them in the direction of where he claimed to be able to see a pall of dirty grey smoke rising over the trees. CA sure sign of a level-4B technology!' he'd promised, although Tegan was fairly sure that was a pencil.) He strode across the muck with something amounting to glee, extolling the virtues of what, to Tegan, was perfectly ordinary dirt, as the lumbering woodlouse levered its way out of another blasted pothole.

'Tremendous nitrogen levels, you see,' he was saying. Or something like that, at any rate: she'd just caught a heel on something unwise. 'Rich sunlight, plenty of water, all the mud you can eat... Must be marvellous for growing dahlias.'

‘I know little of these... “dahlias”, Doctor,’ said the Gravis, struggling out of a small pit. It flexed its antennae forlornly, a haze of bright pink light forming around the veiny, tentacular branches above as it tried to lift itself with its stupid gravity powers. The only result was a splatter of dirty rainwater as the canopy temporarily gave way, showering the creature with twigs and rotting leaves. ‘Are all planets so... mouldy?’ it asked, when it had fought its way upright again. Tegan wouldn’t exactly have called it whining, but there was definitely a less joyous tone to its voice.

Typically, the Doctor didn’t seem to have noticed. ‘Not at all, Gravis! Infinite space, infinite variety. There are worlds of metal, deserts of glass... Oceans of gas so thick you could walk across them... Cities made of meat, and people made of kelp.’

‘Eww,’ said the woodlouse. It was something of a revelation.

‘They’re not all like that,’ Tegan pointed out, stumping onwards. ‘I mean, a lot of them are just rocks. Gallifrey’s rubbish. And Frontios is a dump.’

‘I am fond of Frontios.’

‘Well, it’s a paradise compared to most of the planets this close to the galactic rim,’ the Doctor pointed out. ‘Barren wastelands, most of them. All rocks and boulders.’

‘Kolkokron’s nice, though,’ Tegan interjected hastily, giving him a meaningful glare. ‘Isn’t it?’

‘Oh. Oh, yes. Splendid. I admit, it is a bit rocky...’

‘I am fond of rocks,’ said the Gravis, walking into a tree. Tegan shook her head and walked on, pretending not to notice. The Doctor’s taste in companions had gone really weird since he’d changed his face and got into cricket, she thought. First Turlough, then that useless android who sulked in its corridor and refused to talk in anything but binary, and now Casper the Friendly Tractator. The sooner they got back to Frontios, the —

‘Ululululul!’

An unearthly shriek rang through the trees, piercing the stillness and her eardrums all at once. Bad news, she knew without thinking. This was no background forest noise, but a full-fledged, purposeful howl. As if in accompaniment, the branches started to rattle against one another in staccato beats, the weblike canopy shaking with echoes of distant movements.

‘Doctor? I thought you said this planet was uninhabited!’

‘Well, yes...’ he said, looking around fretfully. ‘I also said it was Kolkokron, and look how that turned out.’

The cry came again, echoing oddly through the web of foliage, sounding like the call of some otherworldly beast. Well, no, it sounded like a chicken gargling, but she wasn’t about to take any risks.

‘Hide!’ she yelled, realising too late that in ‘avoiding otherworldly hunter’ terms she would have been better off whispering, or perhaps tapping people on the shoulder. Still, she grabbed the Doctor by the arm and hurled them both down into the damp undergrowth, which turned out to be composed of waxy, rhubarb-sized leaves that smelled faintly alcoholic. And almost immediately, he picked himself up and ran back the way they had come. What was he thinking?

‘Doctor? Tegan?’ called a voice dripping with what sounded like evil but which the Doctor had assured her was only mucus. Of course, the dratted Gravis. It was still standing by its tree, yards behind, oscillating twitchily back and forth in confusion. ‘What is that sound? Where have you gone?’

She despaired sometimes, she really did. She picked herself up with a sigh, ready to follow the Doctor back to fetch it, but as she did so the cry came again, closer this time. This one sounded more like a chicken being strangled. But the next one sounded like a chicken saying, ‘Shut up, idiot! Do you want to tell the whole world we’re here?’

‘Yes,’ gargled another voice, nonplussed. ‘Isn’t that the point?’

‘Oh, stop being contrary, Loff,’ snapped a third.

‘Don’t have a go. You’re always having a go.’

‘*Ulululu!*’

‘Oh, shut up, Trehv,’ said several voices at once.

Tegan realised with a start that she was standing in full view of whatever was coming, and pelted back to the others, who had still barely budged an inch. There was a **zzchming** of what sounded suspiciously like a laser, or a phaser, or one of those other things that ended in ‘aser’ and pain. She thought she saw a flash of blue somewhere away in the trees.

‘Run!’ she shouted to the Gravis. It looked at her blankly. It didn’t, Tegan realised, actually have any legs. Didn’t bode well.

‘Not that way, the **other** way!’ something shouted.

‘*Ulululu!*’

‘Oh, don’t set him off again.’

‘Are those... **aliens**?’ the Gravis asked the Doctor, thrilled at the prospect. Despite the Doctor’s best efforts to spur the woodlouse on, they were ambling away with all the urgency of a picnic.

‘Could we go a bit faster?’ she urged, over the Doctor’s babblings about xenomorphic biocompatibility. ‘I think they’ve got guns.’

‘Ooh, what’s a gun?’ asked the Gravis. Tegan fought the urge to kick it. Behind them, gargled cries of ‘Death to the Outsiders!’ echoed ever closer through the trees. That was familiar territory, at least, although the heckles that accompanied them (‘Outside what, exactly? I mean it’s a forest, how much more outside can you get?’) were a new and exciting variation. She glanced back towards the unseen voices — which seemed to be going in circles and squabbling — and applied her shoulder to the Tractator’s shell, trying to get it to move onwards.

‘It won’t do you any good, you know,’ said a voice from right behind her.

Tegan spun round. There was no one there.

‘Not that it’ll make any difference me telling you that. Blinkin’ predestination, it’s a mug’s game, really, isn’t it?’

Tegan stared. There **was** someone there, for certain values of ‘someone’, and indeed ‘there’. Hanging from the forest canopy by a long, sinuous tail — no, by two tails — was an ugly, rumped, warty creature with dull, dirty scales. It looked a bit like an armadillo would look if an armadillo had a face full of clacking mandibles, a pair of prehensile tails and a home on a planet of mud.

‘Doctor...’ she said.

‘Oh, have you found a friend, Tegan?’ he asked distractedly, busy levering the Gravis off a small stone. ‘Well done, we could do with more of those. Although personally I find the philosophical rejection of free will rather unconvincing.’

‘Well, you can’t help it, can you?’ said the creature. ‘Que se blinkin’ ra, innit? You want to duck about now, Tegan.’

Tegan didn’t know how the thing knew she was called Tegan, or indeed how it knew she was supposed to duck, or indeed generally what the hell was going on. However, two years aboard the TARDIS, off and on, had honed her instincts to a razor-sharp edge of terror. When someone said ‘run’, you ran. And when an alien armadillo said ‘cluck’...

She hurled herself to the ground. A bolt of blue-white energy shot through the air where she had been standing a moment before, hissing as it turned the rain in its path to superheated steam. It slammed into a tree trunk yards away, and... something went wrong with her eyes. It was as if the world bulged out from the impact point, the forest seen for a moment through a grotesque magnifying lens before slamming back to nothing. The trunk had gone, but there was no hole, no smoke, no fire... The canopy just drooped a little lower there, the adjacent trees bent absurdly inwards, as if the space had simply been removed from existence and the world stitched back together around it, seamless but smaller.

‘Twit,’ came a voice from the trees.

‘Well, you try aiming something with your *hands*,’ something else retorted. ‘I’d like to see you manage it.’

‘Look out, Doctor!’ shouted the Gravis excitedly, as another shot hissed past them, wiping out an innocent clump of rhubarb. More by accident than anything else, the mobile chaos in the trees finally broke into the clearing, resolving itself into half-a-dozen more space-armadillos, all firing in random directions. With a **zzchming** of energy, a patch of mud by the Tractator’s shell popped out of existence, prompting a woodlousy squeak of excitement.

‘There he is! Next to the tree!’

‘What tree? We’re in a *forest*.’

‘Watch out, don’t shoot Nuss!’

Zzchming!

‘Oh, for Phoon’s sake... what did I just say?’

The scaly little creatures swung rapidly through the trees, tail over tail like inverted monkeys, alternately ululating and telling each other to pack it in. Their bodies hung pendulum fashion from the ropelike branches, tiny mandibles clacking at the head of the lazy L of each body, just above the tiny, toylike guns they held in their front legs. There were only about six of them altogether, but then, thought Tegan, they only had to not miss once.

‘Don’t worry, they all miss you,’ said the first, apparently psychic armadillo from a few feet above. She rolled over in time to see it drop lazily down from the canopy and plonk itself unceremoniously beside her, chewing on a bit of fruit, as another shot zzchminged through the trees and evaporated the spot where he

had been hanging. 'Name's Chaugh, by the way. Resistance is futile.'

'Is it? To what?'

'Well... anything, really. That's predestination for you.' Tegan stared at it. 'Just making conversation.'

Zzchming! Zzchming! Zzchming! went the armadillos, bubbles of forest imploding on every side. The Gravis seemed positively delighted by the whole thing, looking around eagerly and emitting an 'ooh!' of excitement at every close shave. Tegan gave it a wretched glare, and decided, on balance, that she'd rather take her chances with being shot than lie here listening to it, accompanied by the armadillo equivalent of Nostradamus.

Pulling herself to her feet by the shell of the captivated woodlouse, she was just in time to see the newcomers swinging to an erratic, seesawing halt in a rough semicircle around the Doctor. 'We have you surrounded, Time Lord!' crowed the closest one as she brushed herself down. The constant drizzle made it a completely pointless exercise, but she felt she had to make the effort.

'No, you haven't,' she pointed out irritably. She was tired and muddy already, and being shot at hadn't improved her temper. 'Half of you aren't even facing the right way. And there's a massive gap over there.'

'Kratt, I **told** you to cover his flank,' muttered the first speaker crossly.

'That's not his flank, it's his side,' said, presumably, Kratt — a scrawny little creature with a lopsided head, hanging near the back of the group and sulking.

'Don't be such a pedant!'

'Oh, leave him alone, Plong,' chimed another.

'You keep out of this!'

'Ululu!'

'Shut up!'

This was directed, she assumed, at Trehv, who turned out to be the smallest armadillo. He was hanging upside down, aiming enthusiastically at a mossy rock, and didn't give the impression of being quite all there. Plong gave him a long, hard glare, as if daring him to go ululu again, before attempting to regain his momentum.

'Doctor!' he said grandly, in the manner of someone embarking on a long-rehearsed speech.

'Why does everyone know my name today?' grumbled the Doctor. 'It's terribly off-putting, I —' He was silenced by Plong, who was looking daggers at him, inasmuch as this is possible for an armadillo. 'Sorry, do go on.'

'Doctor!' Plong began again, with a stern cough. 'Tegan! And Gravis! We, the Queeth of Queth, greet you, and by the will of the people and the knowledge of Phoon, apologise for what we are about to do.'

The Doctor and Tegan exchanged worried glances. 'This is nice,' said the Gravis, peering up short-sightedly at Plong with every sign of fascination. 'Does this sort of thing happen a lot?'

'Like you wouldn't believe,' muttered Tegan.

Plong waited for them to finish before resuming, with a cross little hmph. 'The Time of Isolation is nearly upon us,' he said, after a moment's pause to remember where he'd got up to. 'The Doctor must not be allowed to interfere.'

According to Phoon's great plan, and to safeguard our planet, our future and our cats, we sentence you —'

'Did he say cats?' asked Tegan. This was turning out to be quite an odd day.

'We sentence you—'

'What's a cat?' asked the Gravis.

'We *sentence* you,' snarled Plong, 'thank you, yes — to removal from the physical universe.' On his gesture, the armadillos swung closer, tightening the circle and occasionally bumping into one another and swearing. Plong did his best to ignore them. 'No appeal is permitted. Execution is immediate. Prepare to be Isolated.'

'Don't worry,' muttered Chaugh, as the circle of armadillos levelled their guns at her head. 'They don't do it.'

The Gravis gaped, although in fairness it would be hard pressed to do anything else. 'Execution?' it rasped, the bizarre dangly bits in its mouth rippling outwards in alarm. 'You mean... these creatures intend to kill us?' It sounded terrified, which was a bit rich coming from something that had been intending full-scale planetary invasion the day before. It gave a wheezy scream as Plong raised an arm, and inexplicably threw itself to the ground — or at any rate fell over fairly purposefully — landing face down in the mud with a sad little splatter. It lay there on its belly, scrabbling at the mud with its pathetic flipper paws. Tegan felt faintly embarrassed.

'Now wait a moment!' cried the Doctor, waving his hands in the air for a chance to speak — and stepping defensively, Tegan couldn't help noticing, in front of the Gravis, leaving her directly in the line of fire. 'That's Phoon's great plan, is it? Safeguard the planet, don't permit me to interfere, that sort of thing?'

A general ripple of agreement ran through the tangled branches. 'Yes!' it went, and 'Phoon's great plan!' and '*Ulululu!*'

'Never going to happen,' muttered Chaugh from somewhere near Tegan's knees.

'Ah, ah! And how do you know that?' the Doctor demanded, demonstrating the ancient art of making it up as he went along. 'Is he here?'

Phoon, said the general consensus, was not here. Phoon, added a vocal minority, was dead. But Phoon, insisted a large contingent led by Plong, would have wanted them shot.

'Please do not shoot me with a gun!' added the sobbing Gravis from its puddle. Tegan rolled her eyes.

The Doctor frowned up at them through the drizzle, feigning confusion. 'He's not here? Then how can you be sure what he'd have wanted, hmm?'

Tegan couldn't quite believe they were even trying this. 'He left orders,' said Plong, fixing the Doctor with a steely glare that might have been more effective if he wasn't eight feet away and an armadillo. The Doctor beamed back at him unfazed.

'Ah, but how do you know he did? Maybe that's just what he wanted you to think.'

'It is what we think.'

'Well, there you are then. Dare you take that risk?'

He held the gaze, gambling on an empty hand, and several empty heads. The Queeth of Queth looked at one another, bemused. Chaugh continued to pick dolefully through the leaf-litter, while Trehv revolved slowly on the spot, one tail caught in his mandibles. The sword of Damocles hanging by the thread of ignorance.

Very slowly, the Doctor lowered his hands. A tiny, self-satisfied snort drifted up from Chaugh. 'Told you,' he sniffed.

'Splendid. So perhaps now you'd like to put those things down and explain this plan to us like civilised creatures? And help us get our friend up out of the mud, it plays havoc with his uropods.'

'And then can we shoot you?' asked Kratt hopefully.

'We'll see.'

Free will, it has often been noted, is neither.

Past and future, schism and spinward, throughstream and counterphase; the terms are arbitrary. Every point in phase-space, throughout every dimension, already exists. If actions do determine what comes after (which they don't, of course, because there is no after), it is only because they too are determined by what came before (although, of course, there is no before).

Nobody said you were going to like this.

There is no room for freedom. Those clusters of phase-space nodes that call themselves people have no more 'choice' in their 'actions' than characters in a story already written. Even if time existed, which it doesn't, even if time repeated, which it can't, still, people would not be free.

Try as they might—and they would, for that too is inevitable—no one could save the world.

'So Phoon *has* saved the world?' the Doctor asked, for easily the severalth time. It was proving a frustrating task to get a straight answer from the armadillos, and the reason why was cleaning its mandibles with a twig.

Nope, not remotely,' it said, spitting out a pip. It was Chaugh.

'Yes he has!' said Plong, who was hanging above him, swinging angrily by the tails.

'He hasn't, you know,' said Chaugh. 'We're all doomed.'

'Yes he has,' chorused the others. There was no denying it, this was gripping stuff.

The day, if that's what it was, was turning cold, the faint white suggestion of a sun sinking lower in the mist. Tegan's excitingly streaky punk top now clung wetly to her back in the drizzle, snapping chill slaps down her back every time she lost her grip on the Tractator's slick shell. Overhead, armadillos swung in excited circles in the rain, offering useful advice like 'Pick it up', 'Don't drop it again', and 'Oh, you did'. The Doctor crouched in the mud, trying to get some sense out of the others about Phoon and his plan, whoever-and-his-whatever they were. Tegan couldn't tell if he was genuinely interested, playing for time until the creatures forgot about killing them, or just trying to get out of helping pick up the bug.

Still, thought Tegan as she set about once more levering the wretched Gravis out of the mud, it was marginally better than being shot.

‘The world has been saved,’ Kratt was explaining calmly to a baffled Doctor. He was apparently one of the brighter Queeth, and as such one of the few not doing headstands in the rhubarb. ‘Phoon’s plan guarantees it.’

‘Does it heck,’ muttered Chaugh moodily. The end is seriously nigh. Twenty-three and a half, 24 minutes tops.’

‘Splitter.’

‘Now, hold *on...*’ said the Doctor wearily, squatting between them with his hands clasped between his stripy knees. ‘Saved from whom, exactly? What precisely is Queth supposed to be in danger from?’

‘Nothing. It’s perfectly safe.’

‘No, but if it wasn’t...’

‘It is.’

‘Mysterious enemies,’ Chaugh chimed in morosely. ‘Dunn° who they are. Been hunting us for as long as anyone can remember.’

‘They’ve destroyed all our home planets,’ added Loff from a tree. ‘It’s been awful.’

‘But no longer!’ Plong assured them. ‘Phoon has made sure of that.’

‘No he hasn’t,’ added Chaugh. Someone threw a nut at him.

‘Phoon has a plan,’ said Kratt matter-of-factly, shushing the others into quiet with a spare tail. ‘The Echo Effect will surround us. The Time of Isolation will begin. Queth will be protected from all dangers, and for all eternity.’

‘Yeah, that’s true enough,’ admitted Chaugh. He held a piece of leaf up to the light, gave it due consideration, and popped it in his mouth. He chewed it thoughtfully before adding, ‘Still gonna end, though.’

‘No it *isn’t*.’

The argument pinged interminably back and forth, tugging Tegan’s attention this way and that like some crazy alien tennis match. She resolved not to let herself get sucked in. She’d had enough of interminable arguing in the TARDIS; enough of the end of the world on every world they’d landed; enough of crazy alien tennis that time on Kasteru, and enough of the armadillos about two minutes after she’d met them. She’d frankly had enough of the Gravis too, but her misery could do with the company, and at least dragging it out of the mire made her feel useful.

At last, with a final grunt of effort, she managed to roll the thing over. Blobs of carapace squelched slowly back into the mud to leave it lying forlornly on its side, brownish water puddling around its middle. ‘This planet is... not friendly,’ it informed her weakly, once she’d picked the mud out of its wibbly mouth bits.

‘You’re not kidding,’ she muttered, the sound of gargly argument all around them. ‘Occupational hazard with time travel. No one’s ever pleased to see you.’

The creature struggled gamely to right itself, a haze of pink wrapping around nearby tree trunks for purchase. ‘I do not mean the animal tree creatures,’ it wheezed, as it wiggled its antennae for all it was worth. ‘This ground is... cruel. I tried to burrow into the safety of the earth, but the earth is not safe. It is dirty and wet, and it has bits in it.’

‘Well, that’s mud for you,’ said Tegan.

She tried to sound spiteful, but she couldn’t really work up the enthusiasm. After all, in her experience disillusionment was what life was all about. For Tegan it had been becoming an air hostess. She’d wanted to fly, not stand on the sidelines looking pretty and answering idiot questions. The 1980s hadn’t been ready for that, so she’d turned to the future; travelling in an alien time machine capable of visiting any planet in the cosmos, any moment in the whole of recorded history... just so she could stand on the sidelines looking pretty stupid instead, and *asking* the idiot questions.

The dispirited woodlouse was simply discovering a universal rule. It didn’t matter if you took the money, opened the box, or climbed inside it and took a spin round the galaxy: all choices led to disappointment. Made you spit blood just to think about it, Tegan thought bitterly. But then what could you do?

‘There you are, Gravis!’ cried the Doctor suddenly, springing to his feet and scattering armadillos in all directions. He bounded over to clasp the Tractator by the closest things it had to shoulders, beaming at its disgusting mouth and failing in any way to congratulate the mud-stained Tegan for doing all the work. ‘Just the chap we were looking for. We have a new mystery to solve!’

The woodlouse looked quietly aghast. ‘Oh,’ it said. ‘Good.’

‘You see, it seems this planet — which I hardly need remind you isn’t supposed to be here in the first place — is in a situation of some peril. In fact it’s going to be destroyed by mysterious enemies in about twenty minutes.’

‘No, it isn’t!’ shouted Plong from the rhubarb.

‘Yes, it is,’ said Chaugh.

‘Yes it *is*,’ countered Loff, who had got a bit lost.

‘... or else it isn’t,’ the Doctor concluded. ‘There’s a certain amount of disagreement on the issue.’

‘Oh, no, there isn’t!’ chanted Loff.

The Gravis swivelled to look around itself, antennae jiggling in panic. Little blips and blops of pink appeared and disappeared in the air around it, whipping branches back and forth at random, and twanging Trehv into the rhubarb with an excited yip. ‘The... *world* is going to end?’ it gasped, raindrops zizzling down its shell as it quivered all over.

The Doctor looked rather startled, doing that calming little hand gesture that Tegan found so infuriating. ‘Ah, well, now, we can’t be sure of that,’ he said hastily, over the sound of Loff insisting that they could. ‘That’s rather the point. Chaugh is convinced Queth can’t be saved, but the others are equally sure it already has been. Fascinating, don’t you think?’

‘No!’ shouted Loff enthusiastically. They did their best to ignore her.

The Gravis gave a pensive wobble. ‘Yes, it is most... fascinating,’ it wheezed, in a voice that wouldn’t fool a four-year-old. The Doctor beamed delightedly. ‘Either we cannot save this planet, or we do not need to do so. So, perhaps... we should return to the TARDIS?’

Tegan felt a reluctant surge of admiration. That was the sort of crass cowardice she could respect. It was almost like having Turlough with them.

But the Doctor was having none of it. ‘What, and lose out on all this?’ he

cried, striding around in the rain and gesturing grandly at nothing in particular. 'Give up on finding out what happened to Kolkokron? Never get to the bottom of Phoon's plan? No, no, there's always a chance, always a choice. Always something you can do if you dig deep enough. I thought you liked mysteries.'

The Gravis blanched beige, looking helplessly at Tegan. She shrugged. If the Doctor wasn't interested in hearing her opinion, the damned thing would have to handle him itself. 'But how can we hope to help?' it squeaked. 'The planet's destiny is fixed.'

Fair point, thought Tegan. 'Maybe they should just get another one? I mean, no offence, but this place is useless.' There was a pause. It wore a variety of quizzical expressions, all aimed in Tegan's direction.

'How would we do that?' asked Kratt eventually.

She was floored. 'I don't know... in spaceships and things.'

'What're they, then?'

Pathetic. She was an idiot dressed as a bigger idiot, on a planet full of idiots who thought she was the biggest idiot of all. She gave up and sat down on a tree stump that turned out, predictably, to be rotten to the point of mushiness. No wonder the Gravis had usurped her. It was a woodlouse with the IQ of a man, and she was a woman with the IQ of an air hostess. She should just stay quiet like a good girl, and let the grown-ups talk.

'Come to think of it, that's rather a good point, Gravis,' said the Doctor thoughtfully, flicking his frock coat aside to jam his hands in his trouser pockets, and showering Tegan with mud in the process. He'd completely ignored her comments, of course. 'If the world is either definitely saved or definitely doomed, why bother trying to kill us?'

'To prevent you from interfering with Phoon's plan!' shouted Plong immediately, button-eyes shining. He'd been waiting for an excuse to shout something for ages.

'Ah, so it can be interfered with? The future isn't fixed?'

Tegan bit her lip. She absolutely, resolutely was not going to ask what he meant. 'They didn't try to kill us,' wheezed the Gravis, out of nowhere.

Nobody said anything for a moment, except Tegan, who went, 'What do you mean, Gravis?' before she could stop herself. There were no words for how stupid she had become.

'I had not realised. They said Prepare to be Isolated. That is not the same as death, is it?'

The Doctor, pulled up short mid-deduction, spun on his heels to stare at the nearest armadillo. 'It's not?'

'No,' Loff explained, or rather failed to. 'You'd have been in a wallet dimension.'

'Satchel dimension,' Kratt corrected, winning himself several foul looks.

'A... pocket dimension?' suggested the Gravis. Tegan scowled. She'd been about to say that.

'Was it?'

The Doctor's brow furrowed. 'That's certainly what the implosion effect suggests. Snipped into a vacuum universe, severed from the rest of creation...

Cut off from cause and effect, so we couldn't interfere with their destiny. But why go to all that bother? We'd still be dead.'

'No, you wouldn't. It's condom fizzles,' said Loff proudly. There was another one of those clumsy silences. Tegan determined to sit still and let the grown-ups deal with it.

'What?' asked the Doctor at last.

'Quondam physiques,' Kratt confirmed, more or less. 'What you do is, you put a cat in a box...'

'Quantum physics, yes, I know what it is, I don't understand the relevance.'

'It's the Fundamental Theory of Phoon, ain't it,' volunteered Chaugh, who had been poking with interest at the Gravis's bottom. Tegan preferred not to wonder why. 'You can't change the future, so what you do instead is, you hide from it. No one's around to see you, that means no one knows if you're alive or dead, and that means you're both.'

The Doctor glared at him. 'Claptrap,' he retorted, after a moment of grimacing contemplation. 'Utter tripe.'

'It's not! It's all part of Phoon's plan!' cried the massed armadillos, except Chaugh, who didn't seem to care either way, and Trehv, who was squealing somewhere in the undergrowth pretending to be a Gravis. 'That's how he's going to save the world! It is the power of the Echosphere!'

The Doctor stared at them, aghast. It wasn't often he was rendered speechless, but this seemed to have done the trick. Tegan would have to remember it for use when she could do with a spot of peace and quiet. 'Of course. The "Time of Isolation". That's your plan? Erase yourselves from the real-space universe, so no one can tell whether you've been destroyed? No wonder you're confused about what's going to happen, it's quantum uncertainty on a grand scale.'

'No, it isn't.'

'It's also insane.'

'Is not!'

It was an all-too-familiar scene. Aliens hellbent on doing something genocidally ill-advised. The Doctor railing against the nearly inevitable. Tegan swept along in the middle of it, following nothing.

'I... do not understand,' the Gravis whispered to itself, as the argument zipped back and forth.

'Join the club,' muttered Tegan, surprised. She could hear the Doctor yelling about science in the background, which was one of his favourite things to do. He seemed to be chiefly concerned with explaining the difference between a cat and a planet, which Tegan hadn't previously considered to be very high up their list of priorities, but she assumed he knew what he was doing.

'Hang on though, I thought you were enjoying working all this out?' she objected. The woodlouse looked at her like she was mad. It was looking decidedly the worse for wear, she realised; bits of dead leaves stuck to its muddy underbelly, sodden fur clinging wetly to its carapace, and with a definite droop to its antennae. It had never left the safety of its tunnels before, come to think of it. Never been faced with the Doctor's enthusiasm. Never had to avert an

apocalypse. ‘Never mind,’ she said.

The Doctor was still going off on one about cats. Something to do with this thing of locking them in boxes, apparently, which seemed a thoroughly reprehensible way of carrying on, although he claimed it didn’t matter if you didn’t look. Tegan couldn’t see that standing up in court.

‘Come on, you,’ she told the Gravis, clambering wearily to her feet. It looked at her blankly, although whether it meant to do or just happened to look like that anyway was open to debate. ‘He’s shouting long words. That means he’s about to save the world.’

‘Then... what are **we** about to do?’

She shrugged, pulling her sopping top straight around her and squaring her shoulders into the drizzle. Idiot question. ‘We watch him.’

‘Honestly, what **nitwit** taught you about the Schrödinger’s Cat Principle?’ the Doctor was crying, with such urgency his voice skidded into a higher register on random words. ‘Building a vacuum universe isn’t like putting up a Wendy house, you know.’

‘**Mitten** universe,’ said a voice from the trees. No one took any notice.

‘You really think you can escape your doom by hiding in a separate dimension? Without a focal space-time matrix? Or a vortex anchor? Or the slightest conception of coherence physics? And you’ll be okay because **no one will see you die?**’

There was a sharp silence, broken only by the sound of Loff falling out of a tree. ‘Is that wrong?’ asked someone in a small voice.

‘Yup,’ said Chaugh glumly. ‘Seventeen minutes till the end of the world, by the way.’

The Doctor closed his eyes, and took a careful breath. ‘Then I think you’d better take me to this Echosphere of yours, don’t you?’ he said. ‘There isn’t much time.’

Change is impossible without time. Time is impossible without change. It is trivially obvious, therefore, that time itself cannot change.

Even if history existed. Even if it repeated. Even if people had free will. The same choices would be made, the same events would repeat, the same history would play out, every time. No, don’t look like that. It would.

There are no second chances. The loop of time does not go round and round until things end another way. The fate of Queth does not hang in the balance, waiting for the scales to fall.

There is a junction in phase-space called ‘Queth ends’. So Queth would end. Get used to it.

The Echosphere was a disappointment, Tegan thought. But then these things always were. The fabled Gallifreyan Matrix had turned out to be a bit of a damp squib too, and the Big Bang had been rubbish. So it should have come as no great surprise that the ‘Sphere was nothing but a big metal ball, about twice her height, so streaked with rust, water stains, bubbly patches of red-brown corrosion and the inevitable mud that she could barely make out its original colour. The whole

thing looked on the verge of collapsing at any moment, which would be, she thought, the perfect end to the perfect day.

It was sitting at the very bottom of the crater, where the trees thinned out to bare rock — or to what would have been bare rock if it wasn't covered in more damned mud — surrounded by huge, ribbed metal cables, obscure bits of broken machinery and, now, a growing host of stropky armadillos. The pall of smoke they'd seen from afar rose from it in uneven clouds as the drizzle sizzled away on contact, no doubt boiled away by some sort of ghastly radiation, which was probably eating away at her insides even as they spoke.

There was no sign of how it was supposed to save the planet, or destroy it, or indeed do anything at all except sit there and rust. It was all rather depressing.

'Thirteen minutes till the end of the world,' announced Chaugh, who was now perched on her left shoulder, despite her considerable efforts to the contrary. She smacked at him, but he dodged expertly away and bit her ear instead.

'Now what, Doctor?' she asked, before the woodlouse could get there and say it for her.

The Doctor prodded at what might once have been an important piece of technology, and his finger went through it in a small rain of rust. He pulled it out again and wiped it on his jumper, patting the panel apologetically. 'I don't quite know,' he concluded, voicing a thought Tegan could have applied to a dozen things without trying. 'The core systems seem functional enough, but the energy buffers have gone the way of all technology. How on earth were you expecting to power it?'

'Not telling,' snapped Plong from a wonky control bank. He'd been in a foul mood ever since the interminable argument over bringing the Doctor had ended, concluding in favour of doing so by three votes to one, with one abstention and one sort of ulubloohooey noise. 'It's a secret.'

'It's our greatest achievement,' explained Loff proudly, from atop a crumbling metal box that might once have been a control panel and was now a sophisticated arrangement of holes. She tail-gestured at the 'Sphere. 'The Genius of Phoon.'

'It would have to be. There's no solar battery, no planet-sink, no gravity-lens... Not nearly enough stored energy for what it is.'

'But what is it?' Tegan asked, before she could stop herself.

'It is a hybridised electromagnetogravitic device for detecting quantum echoes of far-flung events,' came an exhausted, wheezy voice from the trees. Tegan looked up in surprise. She'd almost given up on the Gravis — it had valiantly started trudging down here, but at such a torturously slow pace she'd more or less assumed it would have given up. Yet there it stood at the edge of the clearing, carapace gleaming in the twilight. Its antennae were drooping down past its chin, the once shiny skin of its belly was caked with dried mud, and the thick, crusty white veins snaking over its chest and arms were pulsing with exertion. For a giant genocidal woodlouse, it looked surprisingly pathetic.

'Well done, Gravis!' said the Doctor, without missing a beat. 'It detects the... the ripples, if you like, of quantum displacement through the universe.' He

caught Tegan's blank look. 'You know, how particles, when split, remain in contact at a quantum level? So that if one collapses the other will adopt the same phase?' Her look became, if anything, blanker. 'The basis of Hamilton-Jacobi teleportation?'

She shook her head. He looked a bit crestfallen. 'Well... it's like that,' he finished lamely, tugging experimentally at what may or may not once have been a lever, and which in any case came off in his hand. He looked at it in surprise. 'The whole thing's obviously a remnant of a previous civilisation. But these creatures think it can save their world — cut it off permanently from the universe at a quantum level, so that no observer can collapse and actualise the waveform of their destruction.'

'And can't it?' asked Tegan once he'd stopped talking; clinging to the bit about saving the world, like a life belt in the flood of gabble.

The Doctor stuck his hands in his pockets, pontificating grimly. 'Oh, no, it can do it all right. You've seen it happen — those echoic pulse regulators they're using as guns. But if you cut something off from existence, it ceases to exist. That's what it means. And I'm just guessing, but I don't think total annihilation is what dear old Phoon was looking for.'

Tegan wasn't honestly surprised. She'd seen a few of the other Queeth lurking in the shade of the trees, giggling, chasing their tails and having complicated arguments about mud. The odds of any one of them doing something scientific without messing it up wholesale were about on a par with her chances of going five minutes without asking a stupid question.

Talking of which, the Gravis had opened its mouth. She could almost hear the quantum echoes of the words 'I'll explain later' rippling back from a few seconds in the future, and decided to save them both the effort. 'I understand all that,' she lied smoothly, eliciting a snort of disbelief from Chaugh. 'But what else can we do? I mean, if the alternative is having their enemies blow the place up...'

'But that's just the point!' cried the Doctor, slapping his palm down hard on a control panel, which sank mournfully into the mud behind him as he strode around with sudden, angry energy. 'The effect doesn't have to be localised, otherwise the 'Sphere could only detect itself! If I can persuade it to suppress the quantum reality of something other than Queth, I can drop a different target into a vacuum dimension.'

'The mysterious enemies!' cried the Gravis, much to Tegan's embarrassment. What did it say when a woodlouse made a better job of following things than you? 'You can use the Echosphere against them!'

'Yes, that's what I just said,' said the Doctor testily. 'However, it does rather depend on them letting me in on their little secret. "The Genius of Phoon", whatever that is. I'll have to shift the Schrödinger nexus, and that means having access to the core systems. I can't get that without power. I can't *save* them without power.' He turned to Plong, folding his arms. 'You understand? If you want your planet to be saved, if any of you want to live beyond the next 13 minutes —'

'Eleven minutes.'

'How time flies — then you must show me the Genius of Phoon. It's the only

way.'

The Queeth looked at one another. And then, as one, all eyes turned to Plong, except Trehv's, which went round in little circles. On his throne of broken machinery, Plong drew himself up to his full height — although given that this was only a foot and a half the effect was slight to middling — and set his face in what, had he any recognisable features, might have been a determined expression. He managed to hold it for three whole seconds before deflating utterly.

'All right,' he said. 'It's round the other side. You better come and have a look.'

And before Tegan had even had time to take it in, the Doctor was breezing off round the 'Sphere with a handful of distressed armadillos in his muddy wake, leaving her standing there like a lemon. She started to trudge resignedly after him like a slightly more proactive lemon, but then found herself, inexplicably, hanging back for the Gravis to catch up. It was plodding along determinedly, head down, rain soaking disregarded into the thick black fur between the mucousy, overlapping pustules of its shell. And yet... Tegan was sure she could see fear in its eyes. Unless that was more mucus. She gave it a weak smile, feeling a bit stupid just walking along in silence. 'All right there, Gravis?' she asked feebly.

It swivelled to look at her, having to halt its progress to do so. 'Things are certainly... exciting, Tegan,' it rasped, trying none too successfully to keep the fear from its voice. 'We have been captured! By alien creatures! And... the world is going to end!'

'Welcome to the TARDIS,' Tegan muttered.

'It is all most exhilarating,' said the Gravis unconvincingly, moving on again, and looking ahead to where the Doctor was crouched beside the Echosphere, poking at something with a stick. 'And now... we must wait on the sidelines, yes? Hoping for the wise Doctor to find a solution?'

Tegan felt a bit put out. 'Not just that,' she said defensively. 'I'm usually right in the thick of things. Or, well... I get locked up, at least. Or possessed. Or locked up and possessed. Um. But sometimes I escape. And then get locked up again.' She tailed off, her mind a blank. 'You know,' she said. 'Heroics.'

The Gravis looked at her with large, sad eyes.

'You all die in ten minutes, by the way,' said Chaugh gloomily, his sharp claws scratching at her shoulder through her top. 'Sorry, it was all so exciting I forgot to say.'

Everyone is going to die. This is what is known as a fact of life. Indeed, it is the only fact of life; everything else is just coincidence.

Specifically, Chaugh is going to die in two and a half minutes. The Doctor is going to realise he has overlooked something vital in six minutes. The Gravis is going to do something monumentally stupid in seven and a half minutes. Everything on the planet will die in ten minutes, when, as has been more than amply foreshadowed, the world is going to end. And the Doctor and Tegan will make a miraculous escape, at least for the time being. But then you knew that already. It's very nearly a fact of life.

***However, while not one of them will live beyond the next ten minutes, the Queeth as a species nevertheless survives. Forever. In a manner of speaking.
This is what is known as an exception.***

There was quite a crowd of armadillos now, as their numbers were swelled by curious newcomers drifting in from nearby trees. They were grouped around one of the boxy lumps at the base of the Echosphere, where the bottom fifth or so arced gracelessly beneath the mud, barely supported by the plinths of perforated metal around its circumference. These were clearly more than mere pedestals, however, graced as they were by the sort of ribbed metal dome and corrugated fin that said 'higher technology' in a voice even Tegan could hear. Every now and then one of them fell off.

'The Genius of Phoon!' Plong proclaimed from a neighbouring plinth, just as Tegan was plodding up with the unhappy Gravis in tow.

Phoon's Glory, isn't it?' said Kratt, who was curled up around some nearby rusty cabling. 'Wasn't there a memo?'

'Yeah, Trehv ate it,' added Loff.

'Well, whatever,' said Plong. 'Good, isn't it?'

Tegan looked. One side of the nearest pedestal had been ripped off, exposing a mass of metal intestines. Metal tubes wound around blocky pistons and shunt-housings; hoses of ugly, mottled brown plastics linked broken pipes to blackened valves, to inexplicable little round things with bits sticking out. Something fizzed fitfully in the puddle of dirty rainwater that had collected at the bottom, bright green fluid gulping to the surface from some submerged outlet.

She poked at it with a toe —

'Don't let it touch you! Mentasynthasynthetic acid, or something very like it.'

— and stopped moments before touching the surface, slowly rewinding her movements to squelch her foot squarely back into the mud. You knew where you were with mud.

The Gravis blinked; an impressive sight with its huge eyes, and the first time Tegan had seen it use them for anything more than an impassive stare. 'Mentasynthesis?' it boggled. 'You mean that this is... a mental absorption process? The creatures power their machines with their minds?' As idiot questions went, Tegan had to admit, it beat the pants off her plan of going 'what?'

The Doctor wore an expression of muted fury. 'Oh, yes, Gravis. Primitive, stupid and ineffective, but yes. This is the source of it all. All their power... those guns... that stupid plan... the Genius of Phoon. A broken fuse-box. It seems Phoon had no more idea about technology than the rest of them. And now they're all dead.'

'What?' asked Tegan, caught off her guard. Dammit.

'Yeah,' said Loff. 'Practically everyone I know. Bike, Namf... Phoon, of course... All the clever ones. Into the bath.'

'Wait a minute...' said Tegan. Something was starting to fall into place in her head. Kratt. Plong. Trehv. All of them. 'The intelligent Queeth killed themselves? So that you lot could survive? The ones who — aren't intelligent?'

Kratt beamed, lopsided head wobbling with pride. Plong nodded so enthusiastically he dropped his gun. Loff dribbled in a faintly affirmative fashion.

Trehv... was just Trehv. The elite of Queth. And they'd done it on purpose.

She'd been wrong about this planet, Tegan thought. The Gravis could keep it. 'Except that's not quite true, is it?' said the Doctor sharply, interrupting her train of angst. 'There isn't enough power. Not everyone who was supposed to soak themselves in that toxic concoction could bring themselves to do it.' He smiled, just past her shoulder. 'Could you, Chaugh?'

The creature by her ear sniffed dismissively. She craned her head back to get a look at him, scaly and unrepentant on her shoulder, his coiled tails shifting round her upper arm. 'Not much point, was there?' he said morosely, nodding his head at the Doctor with a little click of his mandibles that somehow contrived to come across as a grimace. 'Can't change what's going to happen. That's why it's called "What's going to happen", see. Plus, I'd seen in the Echosphere that I wasn't going to do it, you can see the spot I was in.'

Tegan frowned. 'You seethe future? In the Echosphere?'

The Doctor waved her down with a hand. 'Yes, yes, a phase-space projection, that's what it's *for*. The Gravis will explain later.'

'Pretty depressing idea, I can tell you that,' said Chaugh, shifting on her shoulder. 'You don't want to see your own death, it takes all the fun out of life.'

Eight minutes, by the way.'

'Have we saved the world yet?' asked Kratt, tails flicking merrily across what were probably quite important bits of Echosphere innards. 'Only Trehv needs to go to the toilet.'

'Won't be a problem for long,' Chaugh promised. 'The Doctor wants to have a look in the 'Sphere first, identify the threat. Won't work, of course, but there you are. You can't stop the world ending, or him trying. But this is where I die.'

'What?' asked the Doctor. *Hah*.

'I've seen it,' said Chaugh. 'I jump into the acid bath, in 38 seconds. None of this lot have got the brains to power it up, so it's gotta be me.' Tegan realised, belatedly, that he was no longer perched six-footed on her shoulder, where he'd been gloomily counting down to their destruction. He'd reared up on his hind legs, tails unwrapping themselves from her arm, and was looking down at the bath of whatever-it-was with an expression of resigned irritation, flexing his multiple knees. 'Thirty-one...'

'What is it doing?' the Gravis asked, alarmed. It jerked its limp antennae, the only result some pinkly redirected drizzle. 'Do not let it jump!'

'Wait a sec, I've got my foot stuck,' grumbled Chaugh. 'I knew this would happen.'

'Wait!' Tegan yelled, although she wasn't sure why. He'd been frankly getting on her nerves. 'You don't have to do this. You're a free... thing...'

Scuse me, can you just lift your — Oh, that's got it.'

Tegan forced herself not to grab him by the tails and shake him. 'You can't kill yourself just because you know you're going to! That's not a reason!'

'Tell that to the future. Twelve seconds.'

The Doctor looked aghast. 'Chaugh, please... There has to be another way.'

'Eight, seven... Pity really, there's a good bit coming up in a minute.' Chaugh shrugged. 'I dunno, predestination, eh? Can't live with it...'

They grabbed for him. It was already too late. The scaly body zipped through the air, tails slipping through Tegan's grasping hands by millimetres, and splashed into the rancid liquid at her feet. She could hear the scales cracking as the acid ate into them, even as his body stiffened into immobility, pitching under the surface like a dropped pencil. The liquid clouded with sudden foam. Something frothed crimson in the liquid. There were... lumps. And then there weren't.

The pool lay still, only dimpled by the rain.

'Horrible...' Tegan whispered. No wonder the poor creature had been so depressed, knowing that was in store for him. She hated herself for letting it happen. Or rather, she decided, she hated everyone else — and especially him. He didn't have to have done it. He could just have walked away. Like her Auntie Vanessa always told her, you always have a choice. You could always —

'Poke it with a stick!' shouted Kratt, scampering eagerly around the machinery to get a closer look. The other armadillos were already clustered in a group around the box, claws flaking rust from every surface as they jostled for a better view.

'Cor,' said Loff, peering down with interest. 'Don't they go a funny colour?'

'Leave it, please...' Tegan choked, staggering away from them, and the Gravis, and its uncomprehending eyes. 'Just leave it.'

The Doctor strode forward. 'That was unnecessary,' he snapped, shooing away the crowd of them to crouch in the mud, studying the mechanical entrails that spilled from the puddle. His hands, tracing the connections, shook. 'A stupid, pointless waste of life. There are a hundred ways to power this machine. A thousand. No one need have died.'

'So?' said Plong, clambering up the ribbed side of one of the 'Sphere's many supports as if to reassert his authority. 'That's what people do, isn't it? Die?'

The Doctor didn't answer. He just set his face in a neutral frown and fiddled with the taps on the acid-filled tubes. Tegan cast about herself, feeling suddenly alone on this dark, muddy planet. Plong was wrong, she knew that. It was like a little mantra. But everywhere she went, people died. Some of them were robots and some of them were armadillos, and quite a lot of them were actually quite annoying up until the point where they got pointlessly killed, but they were all equally dead. These days she couldn't even remember their names.

'Crikey,' came Kratt's voice from somewhere. 'Is it supposed to do that?'

Tegan looked up, blinking useless tears out of the way. Where moments ago there had been a grotty metal ball, there was... well, there was *still* a grotty metal ball, but now there was something behind it. No, not behind... To one side. Only not any of the sides she was familiar with. All around her, stunned armadillos gaped at the sight. It was as if the globe had become a strange, swollen hole into some other place; a black void filled with a delicate silvery web of infinitely thin strands, glittering with the light of sideways stars.

'What the hell is that?' she asked. If idiot questions were the order of the day,

she could at least be an angry idiot.

The Doctor had leapt up on Kratt's words, pressing his hands against the surface of the metal ball — only now they somehow seemed to have moved through the metal, into the void beyond. 'Salvation, if we're lucky,' he muttered, hands deep in a place that shouldn't have existed, pushing and pulling the image into new and confusing configurations. 'It's a five-dimensional image-map of localised phase-space, courtesy of Chaugh's mental energy.'

Gosh, thought Tegan. You live and don't-quite-learn.

'His mind must have provided the last of what was needed to power up the 'Sphere. And just in time, look.' The Doctor pointed to a web of lines that looked, to Tegan's eyes, like any other web of lines, albeit with some pretty unlikely perspective. 'See, there's Queth at the present moment...' He moved his finger in a direction she wasn't entirely familiar with, following the complex routes through implausible angles as they came to a confused tangle, and then disappeared in an impossible fog of nothing. 'And there it isn't, in five minutes time. Chaugh was really very good, you know. There's a knack to understanding five-space. I'm amazed he could make anything of it at all.' He gave a bitter half-smile. 'Hope for them yet. Always assuming, of course, I can find their mysterious enemies, relocate the Schrödinger nexus, adapt Phoon's technique to work on a non-local target and drop every weapon of matter destruction out of space-time, all without access to the echoic pulse regulators, before they blow up the planet.' He looked at her. 'So you might like to stop asking questions for a bit and let me get on with it, hmm?'

He gave her a grim smile and plunged back into the 'Sphere, leaving her feeling oddly at a loose end for someone with five minutes to live. She slouched off into the mud a little way to escape the excited chatter of the armadillos, who were bickering over what sort of nut a five-dimensional phase-space map was, and stood in the rain feeling pointless.

Away by the 'Sphere, the water in the broken pedestal stared at her, willing her to admit her failure. Cries of '*Ulululu!*' and 'Somebody find a bucket!' drifted past her ears. She tried humming a tune. Four minutes? It was like waiting for an apocalyptic bus.

'Did the creature... die?'

She turned around, surprised. The woodlouse loomed at her out of the rain, with an expression of unfathomable woe on its stupid face. How long had it been lurking out here, awkward and forgotten? It had been silent since Chaugh had jumped into the acid, she realised; as surplus to requirements as her.

'You saw it happen, didn't you?' she retorted. 'What's it to you?'

'I am sorry, Tegan, I... I find it hard to comprehend. These creatures — they are sentient beings, like you?'

'Stretches credulity, doesn't it?' she muttered, eyes on the distant Trehv, who was trying to untie his tails with his teeth.

'Then I do not understand. This is what you meant by heroics? To dissolve in acid?'

Tegan shrugged, sidestepping away from the memory.

The Gravis swayed gently in the dark. 'I do not think I like your exciting

adventures with the Doctor, Tegan. There is so much death. Even for heroes. The universe is not as... nice, as I had hoped.' It stopped, ugly almond eyes shining in the gloom. Tegan held its gaze, uncertain. Surely that was just rain dripping down its cheek? Surely.

'*What?*' came a familiar voice from the Echosphere. 'But you *must* know!'

It was the Doctor, his cry coloured with anger and just a tinge of panic. She wrenched her gaze away from the woodlouse, half with relief, to see that the crowd around him had grown to a throng, cheering him on as he wrestled with a non-specific armadillo. Honestly, you leave him alone for one minute...

'You *must* have realised. You can't be under attack for that long without asking who was doing it!'

She jerked her head at the Gravis, but it was already dragging itself back across the mud towards the 'Sphere like a faithful, hunchbacked puppy. She'd have laughed at its dogged loyalty if she wasn't too busy doing exactly the same thing herself, jogging dumbly across some stupid planet to ask questions only an idiot would ask.

'What's happening, Doctor?' she panted, hoping it came across as ironic. They had, she was uncomfortably aware, barely three and a half minutes to Armageddon, and this somehow didn't look one of those 'hurray, we have saved the day' moments.

She arrived well ahead of the lumbering Gravis, to find a calf-high circle of scales and confusion, with the Doctor in the middle, grasping a captive armadillo and practically shaking it in fury.

'Tell her,' barked the Doctor, thrusting it at her face as if in demonstration of some incontrovertible proof. It was Plong, she realised, hanging upside down by both tails, to the mixed delight and bewilderment of the new arrivals. 'Go on! Tell her what you've done. All that planning, all that sacrifice — and you don't even know.'

'Don't know what?' asked a voice from the crowd.

'That's what he's saying! We don't *know*,' said another, with a distinct lisp. 'Cor, he knows his stuff, doesn't he?'

'Well... I dunno.'

'You've been under attack for your entire history,' said the Doctor, his face clearly one that had had enough of that sort of thing. 'You've been fleeing as long as your species can remember. Every planet you've ever settled on has been destroyed within generations. And you *never asked who by*.'

Tegan recognised Kratt bouncing up and down on a broken metal crag, several hands in the air. 'Ooh, ooh, I know! The mysterious enemies!'

'Don't give me that, a mystery isn't an answer!' snapped the Doctor, seeming to reach a pinnacle of breathless fury. He waved at the glowing Echosphere with an irate gesture. 'There's nothing in there. I've looked. No mysterious enemies, no sudden asteroids, nothing. Queth isn't destroyed, it just ceases to exist. It just drops out of all contact with the rest of the universe.'

Tegan blinked. Tut what could do that to a whole...'

Vrrum, went the Echosphere. In the gathering dusk the tangled ball of silver thread was the only thing lighting the crater, and it had started to pulse.

Oh. Idiot question.

‘Doctor —’

‘I heard.’

All around, the armadillos were perking up at this turn of events, chattering to one another and saying important things like, ‘It went vrum!’ Plong wriggled in the Doctor’s grip, bending up to see the ‘Sphere, eyes boggling in the silver light.

‘It’s beginning,’ said the Doctor. Thoon got it back to front. His plan won’t save Queth from its fate, it is its fate. The more he tried to change the future, the more fixed it became. Three minutes.’

Vrrum.

But... but... Chaugh couldn’t be right. The future wasn’t fixed. There was always a choice.

‘Stuff predestination,’ Tegan yelled at him. ‘Just reset the controls!’

Vrrum.

The Doctor looked at the ‘Sphere, his expression hopeless. ‘But there isn’t an enemy to target, I can’t anchor the Schrödinger nexus...’

‘Forget the enemies, just shift it somewhere else! Wipe out a moon or something.’

Vrrum.

The Doctor wrinkled his forehead, juggling ideas as if they were the threads in the ‘Sphere. He handed Plong to Tegan without looking, cracking his knuckles. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘I suppose there might be just *one* chance...’

Zzchming.

Not vrrum. Zzchming.

And then, where the phase-space map had been a moment ago, where the ‘Sphere had been before, right in front of where the Doctor was standing, a sphincter of space-time puckered inwards, shrank to a vanishing point of nothing and popped out of existence. The Echosphere was gone. The world shook.

‘Hurrah!’ cried the Gravis, antennae wiggling wonkily in enthusiasm. ‘I have saved the day!’ It was standing in the mud behind where the ‘Sphere had been, stained and bedraggled and vibrating with triumph. One flipper-shaped paw was wrapped around a tiny, bulb-shaped lump of metal. Plong’s gun. Tegan had wondered where it had got to.

‘I... have saved the day, haven’t I?’ asked the woodlouse, a tremor in its voice.

As if in answer, the ground lurched suddenly under Tegan’s feet, throwing her against a jutting cable support with enough force to ping-pong Plong into the mud. There was a grinding howl from deep beneath the earth, rocks rumbling against one another with the distant echoes of a sound like **zzchming**. The trailing cables around the now vacant centre of the crater snapped and groaned as they rode the shifting ground. A torrent of armadillos swept past, surfing a current of mud and going ‘wheel!’

‘It’s an earthquake!’ shouted Tegan, wishing she hadn’t felt the need to.

‘Tectonic disruption, certainly!’ the Doctor shouted back, fighting to keep his

balance on the ever-shifting mud. ‘Lumps of the planet disappearing, disturbing the balance of the geological plane!’

‘What, and that’s different enough to be worth pointing out right now, is it?’ she yelled back.

‘It is if it means the TARDIS is closer than it was. Right, change of plan!’ he shouted, his voice rising as the ground bucked beneath him. ‘Evacuation time! The process is irreversible without the Echosphere, but there’s still one place we’ll be safe. Plong! Kratt! Loff! Organise everyone you can and get them up to the cave near where you found us. You’ll know the one, it’s full of liverwort and a big blue box.’

‘What, put them all in the TARDIS?’ yelled Tegan. ‘Won’t that get you in trouble with the Time Lords?’

‘Desperate times, Tegan,’ said the Doctor shortly. ‘Come on! All of you!’

And with that, he grabbed an armadillo in each hand and set off, fighting to stay vertical against the shuddering of the land as he pounded through the mud in the direction they had first come. Like some mad cricketing pied piper, he was followed by a trickle, then a flood of armadillos, swinging through the trees, scampering across the mud on all six legs, and asking impatiently if they were nearly there.

‘Where are we going again?’ they gargled to one another.

‘Evacuation, he said.’

‘Where’s that?’

The ground bucked and shook, squeezing and shrinking to accommodate the bubbles of space imploding out of existence all around, occasionally wiping out some unlucky armadillos as the crater grew smaller by fifty-yard bites. Tegan started after them, the grey-brown flood flowing uphill towards the ever-closer site of the TARDIS, and safety. But, inevitably, she found her head turning back towards the ‘Sphere, or where it had been until recently. There was a large, round hollow there now, subsidence or warped space from a particularly mighty *zzchming* not far beneath. And slumped in it, half rolled into a ball and making a horrible blaring noise, was the Gravis.

It might have been crying. It might have been going to the toilet. But Tegan was, to her constant irritation, a nice person at heart.

‘Gravis?’ she asked gingerly, wondering vaguely if the fact that the planet was being wiped out of time as well as space meant they’d have longer or shorter to get away. ‘Are you okay?’

The Gravis looked at her with huge, wet eyes as she approached. Of course that might just have been because Tractators have huge, wet eyes, but she had a feeling that this time it meant something. ‘You must leave me,’ it croaked as she drew near. ‘I think I’ve sprained my metatarsus. And... I have doomed a planet to oblivion. I deserve to die.’

Tegan looked at it, down in its hole. Oh, the temptation. ‘You’ve changed your tune, haven’t you? Look what you were going to do to Frontios.’

It gazed at nothing, anguished eyes shining in the darkness. ‘I only planned to give it a gravity engine,’ it pleaded. ‘Make it mobile. I thought... I thought space travel would be *fun*.’

‘Yeah. So did I, once,’ said Tegan, surprised by the bitterness in her voice. Out of the corner of her mind’s eye, she could see Auntie Vanessa glowering at her, unimpressed.

So this thing had doomed a few planets. Who hadn’t, these days? It had made a few wrong choices... but at least it had made them.

Tegan made one too.

She tottered down into the hollow, grabbed the woodlouse under its stubby paws, and yanked it to whatever it used for feet. The crater was barely more than a dip in the ground now, the ground lurching every other second as the planet ate itself into nothing. The cave with the TARDIS, if it was still there, could only be a hundred yards or so away.

‘Brave heart, Gravis,’ Tegan muttered. She took the Tractator’s weight on her shoulders, and together, wheezing and groaning, they trudged up the hill behind the last of the struggling armadillos.

They might even make it.

***Two minutes later, Queth ended.
Told you.***

It was a wasteland. A cold, cracked plane strewn with rocks and boulders, zigzag fractures exposing the darkness beneath. Scant stars shone bravely in the utter blackness above, pinpoint steady in the thin air.

‘What’s this?’ said Kratt. ‘This is ***rubbish.***’

‘What are we going to ***eat?***’

Tegan ignored them, picking her way across the fractured landscape to find some stable ground. The laundry vortex in the TARDIS had done a good job of returning her clothes and hair to their former glory, but she didn’t fancy her chances with these heels.

Behind her, the Doctor shaded his eyes from the non-existent sun to look out over the vast expanse of nothing very much. ‘Well, here we are!’ he said infuriatingly. She exchanged glances with the Gravis, who rolled its eyes. It wasn’t buying it.

She gave in. ‘Here we are where?’

The Doctor grinned, unrolling his stupid yellow hat. ‘Exactly where we were, I hope. A few light years from the Yyb Fissure, second star on the right and straight on till...’ He caught Tegan’s look just in time. ‘Kolkokron,’ he finished. ‘Straightforward materialisation reboot, except that now space-time has shifted to repair the hole where Queth used to be. Hence the original mix-up with the coordinates, you see.’

Tegan didn’t, but she saw no reason to point this out. ‘And this is where we’re leaving the arma—the Queeth, is it? They don’t seem too pleased.’

The Doctor gave a distracted glance at the dozen or so creatures around them — a tiny sample of the hundreds currently stowed away in the TARDIS, clinging on to roundels, hanging from the hat stand and turning up unexpectedly in Tegan’s wardrobe. ‘Ah, well, no,’ he said, with a preoccupied air. ‘Can’t disrupt the timelines, you see. They have their own destiny.’

They watched as a Queeth rolled past their feet, probably the victim of yet another argument about who exactly the mysterious enemies were who had blown up the planet. Away in the distance she could hear Plong shouting about condom physics. It could only be a matter of time before Trehv trod in something important.

‘Talking of which...’ The Doctor turned to the Gravis with a cough. He was looking suddenly awkward, Tegan realised, hat bashed on to his head and both hands stuck in his pockets. Abruptly, she remembered why they’d left Frontios in the first place. To abandon the woodlouse here. Not that that wasn’t exactly what it deserved, she’d do it herself in an instant if she had the opportunity, only...

Only...

The Gravis oscillated gently on the spot, looking as expectant as could reasonably be asked of something with no facial muscles.

‘I’m afraid this isn’t going to be easy for either of us, Gravis, said the Doctor. ‘I’m not very good at goodbyes, and you have proved yourself a very able companion, but the fact is —’

The woodlouse wobbled. ‘No,’ it said.

The Doctor was taken aback. ‘I’m sorry?’

‘No, Doctor,’ said the Gravis. It reared itself up backwards, antennae raised in what seemed like determination. ‘I know what you would ask, but I must decline. I cannot become your companion.’

The Doctor drew a puzzled breath. Tegan kicked him before he could say anything. He could be really very stupid sometimes.

‘The truth is... I do not like space travel, Doctor,’ rasped the Gravis, a hint of shame in its croaky voice. ‘I like... rocks. Rocks do not kill people, or have to make terrible decisions. Or do brave things and then die. They are just rocks.’ It paused, the far-off whoops of colliding armadillos punctuating the silence. ‘Forgive me, Tegan. I am not brave or heroic like you. I shall remain on Kolkokron.’

The Doctor looked... Well, it would be hard to say how he looked. Whatever it was, he covered it up quickly, forcing a cheery grin. ‘Well, there we are, then!’ he beamed, or tried to. ‘Kolkokron. Yes, why not. Plenty of rare n-waves to feed on, solar flare activity minimal...’ He bounced gently on the balls of his plimsolls, taking off his hat to glance up at the sky. ‘Gravity playful but not too cheeky. A splendid choice.’

An odd look passed across his face: part relief, part dejection. He held out a hand to the Gravis, who looked at it in alarm. ‘Well, no hard feelings,’ the Doctor said manfully. ‘Probably for the best in the long run, the old girl’s getting a bit full up, what with air hostesses and androids and things. And let’s face it, you would never have fitted in an air duct.’

He grabbed the woodlouse’s unsuspecting flipper and gave it an affirming shake that made the whole creature wobble. With a last, irresolute nod, he turned on his heel, raising his voices to the armadillos, still rushing around contradicting one another and falling off things. ‘Come along, Plong! All of you! Change of scenery.’

‘What’s a scenery?’ asked gargly chicken voices as they rounded themselves up and fell off things.

‘It doesn’t matter, he’s changed it.’

‘Yes, but what *into*?’

‘*Ulululu!*’

Perched on their spur of rock, the Gravis sucked the dangly worm-things back into its mouth with a shuddery breath. It might, Tegan realised, be the Tractator equivalent of a stiff upper lip. ‘Farewell, Tegan,’ it croaked. ‘I hope... you make a braver choice than I.’

She looked at it. Horrible thing. She was glad to be rid of it.

‘Oh, Gravis,’ she said. ‘I will miss you.’

If there was a message in the look it gave her, Tegan couldn’t read it. But she could still feel it standing resolutely behind her as she tottered back to the TARDIS, heels catching in every fissure. Back to comfort, back to the routine, back to the big blue box, where the Doctor was urging the remainder of the Queeth across the threshold. Back to being an idiot. *And* she’d broken her heel. She refused to look back.

‘One unwanted passenger down, 400 annoyed armadillos to go,’ she snapped, her usual filthy mood restored. ‘What are we going to do with them?’

The Doctor picked up a particularly dense armadillo who was trying to walk through the wall and threw it inside. ‘I told you, they have a destiny. We’ll take them back to Queth.’

She gave him a look. ‘But... Queth’s been destroyed...’

‘It is a time machine, Tegan. We’ll drop them off 300 years or so ago, that should give them time to evolve the sort of intelligence they’ve just wiped out.’

The Doctor located the last of the wandering armadillos, pushing them none too gently through the oblong of darkness into an unseen space filled with ululating confusion and cries of, ‘You’re standing on my *toe*.’

‘So... wait a minute, they’ll be their own ancestors?’

‘Explains a lot. Nothing like inbreeding to grow yourself a Phoon or two.’

‘And... what they were saying about every planet they’d settled on being destroyed...’

‘All Queth. All the same event, infinitely looped.’

‘And when you asked what senseless idiot had taught them about the Schrödinger’s Cat Principle? That was actually—’

‘Yes, thank you very much for pointing that out, Tegan.’

She stared at him. Her head whirled. ‘But isn’t that creating a, you know, a paradox? What about the laws of time?’

‘It’s been a long day, Tegan,’ said the Doctor wearily, rolling up his hat. ‘Let’s just let time work things out for itself for once, shall we?’

Tegan fought to understand. So the Queeth would flee from Queth to Queth; evolve, and flee from Queth to Queth... Always remembering that their last planet had been destroyed... Always exploiting the Echosphere they’d find to keep this planet safe... Always killing Chaugh, and destroying the planet, and fleeing from Queth to Queth. Trapped doing the same idiotic, obvious things, forever.

Round and round the circle went...

‘Tegan? Are you ready?’

The Doctor stood at the doors of his silly little spaceship, one arm flung into the blackness within, towards the sound of argumentative squeaking.

So, drop this lot off, and back to Frontios. And then — who knew. Heroism.

Deaths unaccountable. Capture, escape, corridors; corridors, capture, escape.

Round and round the circle went.

She gave in and looked back at the Gravis, already merrily levitating rocks into the beginnings of a makeshift tunnel, back where it belonged. Maybe she really was an idiot. Or maybe it was time to be brave at last. Maybe it was time to choose. That was the thing about destiny. You couldn’t live with it —

* * *

Queth ended.

And then, 300 years earlier, a box appeared. Four hundred squashed and weary passengers disembarked, looked around them in confusion, and vowed— those with the wit to do so — that this would be the last time. That they would not lose this New Queth. Whatever sacrifice it took, whatever tools they could find, this time things would be different.

And Queth lurched towards its fate, threading an n-dimensional line through existence towards its inevitable termination.

This is why phase-space is so dull. Things cannot change. The five-dimensional line of existence cannot twist at will through space and time: discontinuous, inconsistent, lurching from catastrophe in the far future to disaster in the distant past, to a life in the present, suddenly resumed. Destiny is just that. You don’t get to pick the one you want. You cannot choose your own adventure.

That’s what makes real life so exciting.

Black and White

John Binns

*An Adventure of the Fifth Doctor,
with Peri Brown*

PART ONE

‘Hey! You could have helped me with a bag or two, you know.’

Peri regretted the petulant tone in her own voice instantly as she followed the Doctor in through the TARDIS doors. After all, every one of the contents of the four bulging carrier bags she had with her had been bought on the Doctor’s credit account, so the least she could do was be nice to him.

‘Kidding. I’m kidding,’ she added quickly. But the Doctor’s breezy demeanour showed no signs of his being upset by the remark. He could seem like an eager young schoolkid at times, it was true, but she was confident he could give as good as he got.

Sure enough, he shot her a sarcastic look as he propped the panama hat on to the hat stand and hung up his coat. ‘You’re quite sure you bought enough?’ he said, shooting her a mock-disapproving look.

‘Well, I reckon it’ll do for now,’ she said.

They’d spent the best part of the day shopping for clothes in Regent Street, and frankly Peri was pretty darned pleased about it. Not that it hadn’t been her due, all things considered, after a two-day stint stoking up a rebellion in some dirty stinking twenty-fourth-century city and then — as if that hadn’t been punishment enough for her — four interminable hours of cricket.

It had come as a very pleasant surprise that the Doctor was not only prepared to make it up to her with a trip to London, but could steer the TARDIS accurately enough to get them there in the right decade and — best of all, if she was honest — was able to pull a favour and get them a suite on the top floor of the Dorchester. Fair enough, he’d then done the guy thing and followed her grudgingly around the clothes stores, looking thoroughly bored — he seemed a lot more comfortable in Hamleys, actually, looking at teddy bears as if they were some alien species or something; it was almost impossibly cute — but she had to admit all the same that it was better than any date she’d had in a good long while.

‘Y’know, I think I could get used to this,’ she said lightly as she dumped the bags underneath the nearest panel of the console. ‘Hitchhiking round the galaxy, saving aliens from oppression.’ She caught the Doctor’s eye, and sure enough it had a sceptical look. ‘Occasionally dropping in to buy clothes, catch a show.’

He smiled at her, but it seemed to be a little forced. ‘I still think Victor would have hated that production, you know.’

She made a face. They’d been to see *Les Misérables*, and namedropping about the author seemed like the only thing he could say about it. He’d probably carry on until she seemed impressed. ‘Yeah, well,’ she said instead.

He reached over and pulled the door lever. The low mechanical sound of the doors closing heavily behind her felt a little weird for a moment, as if she were being shut in. She felt the tiny detail of her St Christopher's between her fingers, and shuddered at the rush of cold air from the ship's air conditioning.

Shaking it off, she said, 'Okay then, Doctor. I need to freshen up a little, put my feet up...' It took him a second or two to catch on.

'Of course,' he said. 'We need to find you a room.'

He set off quickly from the console room, as if seized with a new mission. She barely had time to pick up the bags and follow him through the inner door.

God knows what she'd do if she didn't keep up with him and lost her way in there, she thought suddenly. She'd seen enough of the TARDIS to know it would take a long time to find her way back if she did. She was used to travelling and making her own way around: she'd hitchhiked to Washington on her own, backpacked around Europe with people she barely knew. But three days in to this vacation, all space and time on the itinerary, she wasn't sure enough of her new — what? Home? Or just a means of transport? — to feel safe walking through it alone.

'Not so fast,' she called after him. But he was already rounding the corner, and nearly out of view. She almost had to run to keep up with him.

'Let's see, let's see,' he was muttering to himself, and before long they were walking through a corridor with him pausing at each door, looking puzzled and/or looking in, shaking his head, looking puzzled again. She only managed to see inside one or two of the rooms, but pretty much every one in this part of the ship seemed to be stacked full of books, crammed in on rickety-looking shelves, like those second-hand bookshops her dad spent hours in when she was a kid.

'I'm sure there's a bathroom around here somewhere,' he said at length, looking back at her as he walked, as if in an attempt at explanation. 'And one of the bedrooms is round the corner from it, if I remember rightly. That could be yours, if you like.'

She shrugged a little, not really knowing what to say. Pretty much anything would do for her at this stage, she reckoned: she'd stayed in some rough places in her time, after all, and her room with Janine at college wasn't exactly the lap of luxury either. But she was glad at least Turlough's room wasn't the only one on offer; even she had some standards to maintain.

'Sure,' she said eventually. But she couldn't be certain he was even listening. It seemed like he was enjoying looking through the rooms in his own ship, rediscovering things he probably hadn't looked at in years. She couldn't see him making time to relax between travels, somehow, and she wondered how many of those books he'd actually read. And was there really any need to read them anyway, when you could just nip back in time and have dinner with the authors?

It seemed like an age before they turned into a much broader, homelier-looking corridor, with softer lighting and a much subtler version of those damned big circles that seemed to cover every wall of the ship. Much to Peri's relief, he opened two doors opposite each other, and introduced what he called

‘the fifth bedroom’ and ‘the fourth bathroom’ to her.

She liked the look of the fourth bathroom a lot: unusually for the TARDIS it seemed to have allowed itself a colour scheme, with a large deep blue bathtub sitting invitingly in the corner. The bedroom was less impressive, not too small, but filled with some pretty nondescript pine and bamboo furniture. She threw her shopping bags on to the bed and sat her Hamleys bear on the bedside table, but it didn’t make it feel any more like home.

‘The laundry room’s just at the end of the corridor,’ the Doctor said to her. ‘I’ll leave you to settle in for a while.’ He looked eager to get away, as if standing in the doorway of a young woman’s bedroom was the sort of thing that made him uncomfortable. ‘How does dinner in a couple of hours from now suit you? I can cook us something.’

She resisted the urge to sound impressed that the Doctor was capable of cooking. Relieved was more like it, anyway: she’d half-expected him to live on a diet of vitamin pills and water, and her expertise didn’t stretch to much more than toast and eggs.

‘We can eat in the kitchen, just left at the end of the corridor,’ the Doctor said. He pointed left, but headed off towards the right instead, adding, ‘If I’m not there, I’ll be in the vegetable garden.’

He was gone before she could figure out her reaction. The vegetable garden, huh? Yeah, she could live with that...

It turned out to be a fairly well-stocked vegetable garden, in fact, and the Doctor had managed to rustle up enough to make a pretty decent stir-fry. She found him in the kitchen as promised — she didn’t ask whether it was the first, fourth or fifth kitchen — which turned out to be a large and formal-looking affair almost like a small cafe. There was one dining table just a few feet away from the cooking area, with four place mats and a candle, and four wooden chairs ranged around it. A small, dusty wine rack sat invitingly in the corner. Feeling refreshed and enjoying the aroma of the onions and mushrooms as they simmered away, Peri sat back in her chair as the Doctor stood attentively over the wok.

‘So, I guess this has been a typical week for you so far,’ she said to him. ‘Space adventures in the weekdays, then back home for some R and R at the weekend?’

‘Earth’s not my home, strictly speaking,’ he reminded her, looking back over his shoulder with a small smile. ‘And no,’ he added, ‘I wouldn’t call it typical. Come to think of it, though, I’m not sure what is.’

‘Yeah, but this stuff isn’t unusual for you, is what I mean. All the running around and getting shot at. You do more of that than you do of the shopping and the watching cricket.’

‘Er... yes.’ He didn’t look away from his wok, and she had the sense that he felt bad about it.

‘I mean, it’s okay,’ she added. ‘I like getting shot at as much as the next guy, I guess. It’s just nice to know we’ll get some downtime once in a while too, you know? Just to recharge the batteries.’

She got up and walked over to the wine rack, choosing a Californian white.

‘I mean, I can see why you do it,’ she went on. ‘You know, guys like the

Master would just be running the galaxy if there weren't guys like you around to stop them. And the slave workers on... what was it, again?

'N'Tia,' the Doctor obliged her.

'Yeah. That's it.' It was going to take her a while to get the hang of planet names.

'We couldn't just leave them there, I can see that. You got a corkscrew?'

He nodded and opened a drawer, then seemed to focus himself on turning off the hob and fetching two plates from the cupboard. Peri persisted, though. It seemed important.

'What I mean is, I can see you've got some kind of a mission going on here, you're not just a tourist.' She started opening the wine. 'And, you know, I don't expect it to be all safe, or all fun; just as long as some of it is, then that's okay.'

'Y'know?'

The Doctor was laying the food out on to the plates, and didn't make eye contact. 'I'm glad you think that way,' he said at length. 'But you shouldn't have to. I don't look for these battles on purpose, you know. And I don't have any right to put you in danger.' He looked at her briefly, with what seemed like a very sad smile. 'You can always go home,' he said.

Peri laughed at that, despite herself. 'You've got to be kidding,' she said. She grabbed some matches from the table top and took the wine to the table. 'Even mortal danger's better than living with Mom and Howard,' she said. 'I'm serious.' She lit the candle, and stared into the flame for a second as she realised just how true that absurd statement really was. A sudden wave of relief came over her, as it hit her just how far from them she'd travelled.

He came over to join her, put their plates of food on to the table. But he was still avoiding eye contact. She decided to change tack. 'Anyway, thanks for the shopping trip,' she said. 'I'll bet Turlough didn't get as good treatment for his first week.'

The Doctor frowned. 'Actually, no,' he said. 'But then he was attempting to kill me for most of the first few days, which I think makes him a special case.' His delivery was so deadpan that she couldn't help laughing.

'Well, I guess we're both better off, then, huh?' she said. And he smiled again, but for real this time.

'It wasn't his fault, actually,' he clarified, after a sip of his wine. 'One of my enemies had him under their influence.'

'Okay, yeah. One of your enemies. Check.' She started on her meal. 'I'll bet there are a lot of those, dotted around the cosmos.'

'One or two.' He shrugged.

'Well, hey,' she said. 'That's what you get for having a mission.'

He gave her that weak smile again.

'Thing is, you don't always have it that easy, I'll bet.' She caught his surprised expression and added quickly, 'Working out who to fight with, that is. I mean, you've got the Master exploiting people, you've got the N'Tians being oppressed by those guys from whatsitsname...'

'Bagrabon.'

'Right, yeah. But what if it's species A versus species B, you know, and it's six

of one and half a dozen of the other? You must get that sometimes. Or maybe the only thing you can do to help species B causes as much damage as species A would have done without you. Must be hard.'

'That's true,' he said thoughtfully, almost to himself. He stabbed a mushroom decisively with his fork. 'It used to be easier, I think. But sometimes it's not clear at all what you should do. Or if you should do anything. If you followed my people's rules, you'd never do anything at all. But I like to think you develop an instinct for these things, over time.'

She looked at him for a moment, and thought he probably knew what she was thinking. To judge on looks alone, you wouldn't think he'd had long enough to develop such an 'instinct', at least not one you could be confident about. And honestly, could there ever be time enough for that?

And he was frowning again. It seemed as though he wasn't convincing himself either. She decided to give him a break.

'So, tell me then,' she said, leaning forward across the table. 'How d'you know Victor Hugo?'

The rest of the evening passed pretty pleasantly, and she climbed into bed at 11.30. Or at least, that's what her watch said, which was still set to London time from this morning; whether time had any meaning aboard the TARDIS was a question that simply made her dizzy.

She lay awake for a good half an hour before she got to sleep. Just before she did, she heard the sound of the TARDIS engines, faintly but as if from all around her, as if reverberating through the walls. And though it was days since she'd left her Mom and Howard in Greece, and since she'd stepped aboard the ship, somehow this time she got a deeper sense of leaving something behind for good.

PART TWO

After he'd washed the dishes and put the pots and pans away, the Doctor set the TARDIS back in motion again. It wasn't that he planned to go anywhere in particular until morning, or at least he wasn't consciously thinking of that at the time; nor was there any problem with the ship staying in his suite at the Dorchester for another night. It was just that it seemed the right time to move on.

He spent a little time at the console, tinkering with room configurations, before retiring to his study. There was something that had bothered him about the way the rooms were structured at the moment, with all those library rooms stored along one corridor. If anything happened there, a fire or a flood, he'd lose almost all his literature in one go. It didn't bear thinking about.

He supposed it was what Peri had said earlier that made him think about program five. He guessed it had been a few months since he had last looked at the problem, and he was depressed to find that no new solutions had popped themselves into his subconscious in the meantime. He could be reasonably confident that the program wasn't going to overrun the TARDIS computer or cause any significant memory problems for a good few years yet, but there was little point in dragging it out if there was no better answer out there. Better to just

go right ahead and use the only solution he'd thought of, even if it did feel like cheating.

Without meaning to, of course, the fact was that Peri had put her finger on the exact nature of the problem. This really was a matter of 'species A' and 'species B', neither the obvious aggressor or victim, both living their virtual lives inside the TARDIS computer. There was no clear necessity for intervention, no clear time scale. It didn't shout out for a solution or give him a mandate to do whatever needed to be done, no matter the consequences. It wasn't, in other words, what he was used to.

And yet, the Doctor couldn't help feeling that for him, for someone with — in Peri's words — a 'mission', something like program five shouldn't be hard to do at all.

It should be a mild diversion to while away the hours; the Time Lord champion's equivalent of a chess game or a crossword puzzle. Or a game of cricket, perhaps. It certainly shouldn't defeat him, or present an insoluble challenge. He shouldn't have to think of giving up or cheating. They simply weren't things the Doctor should ever have to do.

He pulled on some clothes and headed back to the console room. Looking at the program in its current state, he thought, taking a look at the state of play, might help him intuit the answer, to revive that supposed 'instinct' he had told Peri about. If he didn't have that, he couldn't help thinking, there really was a good argument for spending the rest of his days watching cricket and taking his companions on shopping trips. It would certainly be an awful lot safer than the lifestyle he'd been leading of late.

He pulled a large wicker chair up to the console and started typing at the computer keypad. A short sequence of keys and a password later — and just as on previous occasions, part of him wished that he had never guessed that password — the visual representation of program five flashed up on the scanner screen.

The Doctor was surprised how far the program had progressed since he had last looked at it. The relatively simple patterns of black and white pixels across the screen had now become much more complex, with clusters of pixels forming weird and varied shapes. A number of the black pixels had formed themselves into discrete and evenly sized 'bodies', like virtual insects. The white pixels had developed a more varied selection of forms, with long stringlike shapes jostling for position amongst growths of what looked like ethereal forest.

There was a small amount of movement still, though it seemed more hesitant and less frantic than the last time he'd inspected the program. It was clear, though, that both black and white pixels had grown significantly in number; less than a quarter of the screen now showed the green background colour. As for which side was winning, it was now much clearer than last time that black had gained the upper hand, swarming across the screen in greater numbers and with better organisation than its white opponent.

Not for the first time, the Doctor couldn't help but be impressed by the program's design: like all the best simulators of evolutionary pressures, its parameters had been set in such a way that progress would often be

unpredictable and surprising. Just a snapshot of the program at this stage was enough to show what a brilliant and creative mind had been at work in its inception.

He looked away from the screen. Did it help him, he wondered, to be any more certain that the black species was now in the ascendancy? It surely didn't mean that he could be any more sure that intervening on behalf of white was the right thing to do; it could just as easily mean that black should be aided to dominate and achieve an evolutionarily stable state.

For a brief moment, the Doctor considered how the virtual species living inside his ship might see him if and when he intervened. For generations in their terms, they had only known each other; what kind of visitation would it be, for a third party to arrive apparently from nowhere, like a force of nature?

One thing was for sure, he thought. The last thing they would expect would be that their intervention had come from someone so hesitant, so unsure of what it was he had to do, so very afraid of unintended consequences, that any kind of deliberate intervention was now almost impossibly hard.

He ran his hands over the keypad, staring at the screen, as if willing the elusive answer into him through his eyes and fingers. But the solution proved persistent in its absence, as it always had.

Peri's watch told her it was around a quarter past three, and she assumed from the dimmed lighting of the console room that the TARDIS must broadly agree. Now that she thought about it, there was no reason to be surprised that the Doctor was still up and about. Was there any reason to think he needed any sleep at all?

The greenish glow from the scanner screen lent the room a pretty, eerie sort of atmosphere, though, and there was something about the way the Doctor just stared at it that she didn't much like. She had the feeling that if she just carried on standing there and didn't say anything, it might be hours before he turned round and noticed she was there.

So, 'Hey there,' she said instead. 'What's the video game?'

He seemed to start, and turned in the wicker chair. He looked oddly younger and smaller to her than usual, out of that cricketer's outfit, wearing casual faun trousers and a black cardigan over a plain white shirt, his hair a little messed up. A pair of half-moon glasses that she'd never seen before set off the juxtaposition perfectly. He looked more than ever like the earnest student, old before his time, the weight of the world resting inexplicably on his young shoulders.

'I thought you'd be fast asleep,' he said to her. 'You've had a long day.'

'Well, what about you?' she said. 'Or don't Time Lords need any sleep?' She took a few more paces towards him, leaned herself against the console.

'It's for tortoises,' he seemed to mutter. 'There's plenty to get on with in the small hours, you know. I've been known to go on a trip or two by myself.'

'But not tonight, huh?' She indicated the screen again.

'Hmm,' he said. 'Yes, well, it's a computer program one of my companions devised, an evolutionary simulator. It's been causing some problems for the TARDIS's memory capacity, and I've been meaning to sort it out for a little

while.'

'And tonight's the night for sorting. Okay,' she said, and found herself trying to suppress a yawn. 'So this is like, I dunno, a simulated ecosystem, is it?'

He raised his eyebrows at her, she couldn't help thinking out of surprise that she knew some long words.

'I didn't flunk all my classes, thanks,' she told him. 'You've got two rival species competing for limited resources, and you've got a system of mutation and selection. That's why you've got all those weird patterns coming through with the black and white whatsitcalled...'

'Pixels.'

'Sure.' She looked back at the screen for a moment. 'Hey, you know a lot of those white ones look like weeds to me,' she offered, but he just gave her that pained look he sometimes did. Not that you need any help from me, I'm sure.'

He gave a noncommittal sort of look, and turned his gaze back to the screen. A good few seconds passed with her waiting for him to say something else. She wondered if she should just leave him to it and go back to bed, but she doubted she'd be able to sleep for a little while.

'So why not just wipe the program, if it's taking up memory?' she said eventually.

He seemed to wince a little. 'I'm afraid it's a matter of artificial sentence,' he said, 'or at least it might be, depending on how the program turns out. I can't say I'm terribly happy about just turning it off, certainly not at this stage.'

'Yeah, I guess so,' she said doubtfully. 'So it ends up living with us aboard the TARDIS forever, then?'

He took off his glasses. 'No, certainly not,' he said. 'Once the program stabilises and a sustainable ecosystem emerges, it'll be safe to deposit it somewhere else. On Earth, in fact.'

She managed to look suitably impressed. 'Yeah?' she said.

He nodded. 'An interesting little place called the Proofrock-Mills Intelligence Museum. Established San Diego, in the year 3009. Should be the ideal home for it, I think. I've always meant to pay it a visit anyway, and I think the ship would enjoy a chat with some of the residents.'

Peri shifted her position on the console a little, and thought she was probably losing track of what the Doctor was saying. Maybe it was time to go back to bed after all, she thought.

'It's just that I can't wait forever for it to stabilise,' the Doctor was saying, 'and the program's running as fast as it can already. So I either deposit it before it's stable and risk endangering the museum, or I give evolution a little... push.'

He gave her another of those weak smiles, and she did her best to smile back. It seemed to her that he looked every bit as tired as she was, but she didn't like to tell him as much.

'I'm sure you'll work it out,' she said. 'I'm going to go back to bed, I think.'

He nodded slowly, his mind clearly still mulling over the problem. She felt a momentary sense of annoyance at whoever it was that had set this program in motion, creating such a headache for him. Couldn't they have helped him out with it while they were still on board the ship? It seemed unfair to her.

‘Goodnight,’ he said lightly. She was just about to kiss him goodnight when he turned slightly in his chair, back towards the keypad. She considered administering a hug instead, but thought it safer not to. For all she knew, after all, hugs might cause Time Lords to have fatal seizures, or maybe make them pregnant, both of which she could do without. So she just wished him goodnight instead, and walked back to her bed.

It was a good hour or so before the Doctor finally made his decision. With the TARDIS already drifting through the vortex, he did not have to wait long between setting the coordinates and hearing the familiar chime of the central column signalling their arrival. He reset the computer screen to display their location, which read:

PROOFROCK-MILLS INTELLIGENCE MUSEUM
SAN DIEGO, USA
4.30AM, 8 AUGUST 3010

The scanner showed the museum’s deserted entrance foyer, a giant and sleekly designed affair in silver and chrome. He pulled the door lever and rose to his feet in one movement, then turned and walked through the TARDIS doors.

The museum was dimly lit and cold. A single security robot stood at the reception desk, and turned briefly to look in his direction. After a second or so a red light flashed twice on its torso, which the Doctor took to be a sign that it was unworried by his presence. He looked around him for some sort of guide to which intelligences were where, and eventually worked out that it was behind him: a huge display screen filled with lurid green text, resembling a departures board at a rail station or an airport. He saw several entries that caught his eye before he found what he was looking for, including:

FLOOR 5, ROOM A: ‘PIONEER’ (2857). EXPLORER PROGRAM
DEVELOPED FOR SECOND WAVE OF MARS TERRAFORM
PROJECT. VIEW FROM 9AM.

FLOOR 2, ROOM F: ‘UNITY / COMMUNITY, FOURTH ATTEMPT’
(3004). MULTIPLE PERSONALITY PROGRAM, TAKEN OUT OF
COMMISSION BY SPANISH GOVERNMENT AFTER MADRID
RIOTS. VIEW ALL DAY.

FLOOR 9, ROOM C: ‘LOVE, (2897). FIRST KNOWN EXAMPLE
OF TWO INDEPENDENTLY DESIGNED PROGRAMS THAT
HAVE CHOSEN TO RUN IN TANDEM WITH EACH OTHER.
VIEW FROM 9AM. UNSUITABLE FOR CHILDREN.

And then:

FLOOR 3, ROOM D: 'BLACK AND WHITE' (3009). SIMULATED
STABLE EVOLUTION PROGRAM WITH UNKNOWN
PROVENANCE, DONATED BY UNKNOWN BENEFACTOR.
VIEW ALL DAY.

He decided to take the stairs to the third floor. The first exhibit to greet him — literally — was a field research program that someone had humorously designed in the shape of a giant bloodhound, which looked at him dolefully as he entered, and licked its lips. It was tethered to a man-sized post with a screen and keypad set into it, which looked like some sort of visitors' book. The Doctor peered at the latest entry, which read: 'Cute! I want one — Sarah and Michael Chambers.'

He thought for a moment and added: 'Take it off the leash — The Doctor.'

He wasn't sure, but he could have sworn the dog winked at him as he walked away.

There were dozens more such exhibits in the rooms that followed, some similarly designed with human aesthetics in mind, others simply represented on screens with explanatory notes and diagrams. Most had equivalent visitors' books like the bloodhound's, and several also had other screens that showed translations of what the intelligences were saying to each other. As a concession to visitors, some of the exhibits had flashing lights or other indications of the interactions between them. But otherwise, the Doctor had only the eerie feeling that unintelligible chatter was going on around him constantly, conducted in complete silence.

He found Room D after about ten minutes. Although it took him a while to realise it, the exhibit he was looking for had been given pride of place, on a massive screen taking up the whole of the wall facing the entrance. He barely registered the holographic screen with its scant set of explanatory notes, which noted in a gossipy sort of way that it had been donated in mysterious circumstances the previous year, by what it called 'an anonymous benefactor and friend'.

The reason he hadn't recognised the program at first was that it had changed beyond all recognition. There was no sign of the black and white pixels forming their various flora and fauna, and no trace of the green background colour he was used to from the TARDIS scanner. Instead, the screen was filled with a beautiful ocean of grey, smoothly swirling and flexing itself around in giant, boundless shapes. He found himself drawn to it, staring as closely as he could at the finest detail, but there was no sign of the rough pixel pattern he had expected. He wondered how on earth it had been achieved.

The visitors' book was at the far left side of the wall, and he walked over to it with some trepidation. Predictably, there was a range of responses from the visitors, some simply not understanding it, others even finding it a spiritual experience.

But it was the last entry that floored him most. 'You won't find the solution for a while,' it said. 'Give it a regeneration or two — The Doctor.'

He read it a few more times to himself, even looking around him a little — in the hope, he supposed, that he'd see a mysterious figure disappearing behind a

door, or a rush of air as the faint outline of a blue box disappeared from view. But there was nothing.

He supposed he should feel reassured about this, but somehow it wasn't quite what he had wanted. He looked again at the giant screen, and that swirling mass of greyness. It was certainly beautiful. But now that he looked at it again, the overwhelming sense he had was of something finally, permanently lost.

He stood there looking at it for a few moments longer, and then turned to go back to the ship. Suddenly, he realised that he felt extremely tired. The walk back to the TARDIS seemed to take a very long time.

PART THREE

Peri had to dust down the mirror on her dresser before she could look into it properly: it obviously hadn't been used for a little while. The collection of toiletries she'd picked up at Harrods looked a little meagre now that it had been set out on the dresser, but at least her hair was in a better state now that she'd picked up some decent hairspray. Not that the Doctor would notice, she thought ruefully.

She counted herself pretty pleased with the new outfits she'd bought too, and particularly with the top she'd chosen for today. Of course she'd no idea if where they were going was going to be warm and sunny or bitterly cold, but she was just going to have to deal with that as it came. There'd be no point in travelling, after all, if you wanted life to be predictable.

And nor did she know whether today was going to be one of those days where her life would be in danger. That, she supposed, was something else she was going to have to live with. She stared at herself for a long time while she pondered that, and said a silent prayer for her — and the Doctor's — safety. She had a feeling that of all the people in the universe she could travel with, the Doctor gave her just about the best chance of coming through each day alive and unscathed. It was a warm, comfortable sort of feeling, to be cared for, one she hadn't experienced for a good many years.

She left the room behind her and walked along the corridor to the kitchen, where she busied herself for a while making coffee and breakfast. There were even some eggs, which made her wonder whether the Doctor had some chickens stored around here somewhere. She reminded herself to ask him sometime.

She was on to her second round of toast when the Doctor walked in. 'Morning,' he said lightly, and headed for the cafetière.

'You know, what we really need in here is something to play music on,' she said. 'I brought some tapes with me, you know.'

The look of near-horror on the Doctor's face was priceless.

'Or I could play them in my room, maybe,' she added with a smile.

'I've set the coordinates for a really beautiful planet,' he told her. 'Sort of an equivalent of your tropical rainforest. I thought it might appeal to you.'

'Yeah, okay,' she said. 'No being shot at today, then.' She was surprised herself at the disappointment she heard in her voice.

'Hopefully not,' he said. 'But let's deal with that when it happens.'

She took another bite of her toast. 'So, did you manage to sort out the computer program thing?'

He seemed to hesitate for a moment before replying. 'Yes, eventually,' he said. 'Not such a problem, really.'

She noticed he was avoiding her gaze again. 'Well, that's good,' she told him. 'I'll bet you're glad to have that out of the way.'

He took a sip of his coffee, and looked thoughtfully at her. 'Yes, I am,' he said at length, and nodded. It was as if he was trying to convince himself of something. But she got a feeling that there was no point in asking him about it any further, and so she let it pass.

'Okay, then. Rainforests,' she said instead.

'Indeed.' He seemed to brighten up instantly, and raised his mug as if to toast their new day. 'I think I'd like to go exploring,' he said thoughtfully.

It was the most hopeful thing she'd heard him say in a long time. She raised her mug as well, and smiled broadly.

'You know, I'd like that very much,' she said.

Curtain Call

Joseph Lidster

An Adventure of the Sixth Doctor

I think, by now, you can guess what this letter is for. It's to say goodbye.

It's coming up to midnight on 30 March 2006 and, as I write this, the rest of the ward sleeps. They sleep not knowing what the new day will bring. Whatever it brings for them, though, I won't be here to see it. I'll be far, far away. Saved by the Doctor.

Firstly, I'd like to apologise to the nurses here. They've all been very friendly, especially Karla and Gbemi. They've tried to see me as being more than just another Section 3, cluttering up the NHS. I feel bad about leaving them because they have tried to help me. Of course, if Dr Dominic Omosan had listened to me in the first place, I wouldn't have been cluttering up anywhere. I wouldn't have been taking a bed from someone who might have genuinely needed it. Because, despite what Dr Omosan thought, I wasn't — indeed, I am not — psychologically disturbed. However, as I'm about to embark on a new journey I'll try not to show too much bitterness. This is a new day for me. A new day that will see the start of my new life. For me and for the creature inside me.

Karla, Gbemi, Paul (who I would always meet as he returned from the smoking garden — please, Paul, give them up) and those few others who will even notice that I'm gone... you've all tried to speak to me and learn about me and, I believe the modern expression is, *reach* me. I know I've been somewhat cold with you all but I didn't really know how to talk to you. Now I'm leaving you, though, I can tell you what brought me here.

As you know, I'm Agatha Ellis. I am 36 years old and I was born in Hove (which, despite what Dr Omosan may think, is not Brighton). My parents, Peter and Molly, were, respectively, 53 and 46 when I was born. I think it's fair to say I wasn't planned. However, 1970 was a different world to the one of today. Killing unborn babies wasn't as popular. Therefore, my mother went through 12 hours of labour which resulted in me entering the world. A side effect of my birth was that she died. You can already see where this is heading, can't you? Only child with a middle-aged father and no mother? That's right, it wasn't the best start to life. However, I loved my father and he loved me. My earliest memory is of him taking us to a beach (I'm not sure where — not Brighton, anyway) and digging a huge hole in the sand. Then he asked me to pour the sand back on him, which I did. I remember finding it really funny that Daddy was stuck in a hole in the ground. I think I stopped laughing, though, when he started to shout, 'Look at me! I'm like mummy!'

I can just see Dr Omosan's report. 'Ellis clearly had an unhappy childhood with no mother and a mentally unstable father. She was also bullied at school.' That bit is true. I was bullied at school. I remember my first day, which apparently not many people do. I was five and I remember it was raining so I had on these bright red Wellington boots. I was absolutely terrified about leaving

my daddy but, because I had the shiny, red boots that he'd bought me, I knew I was going to be okay. I remember waving to him as he stood at the school gates. He waved back and told me to work hard and make mummy proud.

I don't recall when the bullying started. To be fair, at the beginning it wasn't so much bullying as segregation. I just didn't know how to play with the other boys and girls. I'd sit in the corner of the playing field, reading books about pirates and investigators. There was another girl called Fiona and she'd been born with a hole in her heart. She also had nits, which meant she was the first one to appreciate how cruel the other children could be. Perhaps sensing that I was in some way similar, she became my friend. We used to pretend we were Nancy Drew and her sister. I'm not sure Nancy Drew actually had a sister but we needed one so that we could investigate things together. The other children used to pick on us because we were different but it didn't matter because we were usually busy solving crimes with the Hardy Boys (who were actually invisible but we worked with them anyway). Then, when we were both ten, she moved away with her parents and I was left alone. The other children weren't exactly sympathetic about my loneliness and started to call me 'Smelly Elly'. This continued throughout junior school and only lessened a few years into secondary school when the others began to develop individual personalities. By then, though, it was too late for me. I'm sure it's the same for all of us: who we were and how we were treated at school makes us who we are later in life. Only now, as I'm about to go somewhere so very new and so very exciting, will I be someone else.

So in secondary school, as we all matured, the bullying stopped but I remained separate from the others. Always different. Actually, looking back, I'm not sure I spoke to a single person for six years. Except for Dad, of course. But then he died when I was 17. As the other girls in my year were going out and kissing boys, I was burying my father. A side effect of this was that I failed my A levels and had to leave school. I tried to look on the bright side. This would be a new start. I could go anywhere. Do anything. I could be anyone. I got a job in Woolworths.

Sorry about this, Karla. I know you especially don't like it when any of your clients ('You're not patients, you're clients!') is maudlin but, frankly, just for once, I'm going to be honest about who I am. For once, I'm not going to shut myself away and pretend that everything is all right. It wasn't all right.

My three glorious years at Woolworths weren't anything to write home about. I ensured that the pic'n'mix was fully stocked and that the top twenty LPs were in the right order. And, occasionally, if I was 'lucky' and we got busy, I got to go on the tills and exchange pleasantries with those who had ignored me at school. Then, alone on the night of my twenty-first birthday, I looked around my parents' old house. Their lives trapped in photographs and china ornaments and postcards from somebody called Mavis who lived in Clacton. Their lives surrounded me and I knew, I knew I had to get out. I packed a few clothes into a suitcase and took a taxi to the train station. Of course, because I didn't live in a film, I wasn't able to just dramatically get on a train and leave, singing goodbye to my old life. No, I had to wait overnight in the waiting room for the 7.32 to

London King's Cross.

Singing goodbye? Well, you'll know about that, won't you, Gbemi? Do you remember how we both discovered that we shared the same love of old musicals? That morning, a few weeks ago when I heard you singing *I Could Have Danced All Night* and I said to you how much I loved *The King and I*. And you said the same and we had something in common! And I told you how my father had been a member of our local amateur operatics society and we talked about which musicals were our favourites and you said *Sweet Charity* but I preferred *Fiddler on the Roof* and we both agreed that *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* was just a bit silly although we both liked Howard Keel! Looking back, that conversation may have meant nothing to you. You probably forgot about it as soon as you went home to Bayo (who I'm sure does love you). But I remember it! Every word!

So, on the day after my twenty-first birthday, I arrived in London. The first thing that surprised me was all the different types of people. Gbemi, you're my friend and yet you're from Nigeria! In Hove, everyone had been, well, from Hove. Suddenly, I wasn't just different from everyone else. We were all different from each other! This, I knew, was a good sign. Because my father had been quite well off, I was able to provide a deposit on a flat in Streatham. It was small but it was new. That first night... I remember I was so excited. There I was, Agatha Ellis, in my own flat in London! I'd done it. I'd escaped. It had been surprisingly simple. A few days later, I got a temping job as a secretary at a local insurance firm. I walked in with my head held high. The other girls welcomed me with open arms and, at lunchtime, they invited me to a local café. They were eager to learn all about me but... I had nothing to say. I just didn't know what to say! I really tried, you know. I tried so hard to say words that might reach them. Words they might be interested in. The silence became longer and more awkward until one of them started to tell the others about the night out she'd had with her boyfriend. I smiled and nodded as the others laughed and joked and, then, I watched as the conversation just exploded. They talked over and interrupted each other and three of them started talking about something else before one of them knocked their sandwich on to the floor and the others laughed and then, as she bent down, another noticed that the café had the same tiles that she had once had on her kitchen wall and they all laughed as another said she'd once been to a man's flat and he'd had this tacky picture on a wall and she'd laughed and they all laughed and the conversations merged and became this loud noise. And I sat there. In silence. Unable to contribute. I wanted to tell them about my mother or the red Wellington boots or Nancy Drew or the pic'n'mix at Woolworths but I couldn't. There just wasn't room in the conversation. There wasn't room for me.

The next day, I stayed at my desk and ate a sandwich.

And for 15 years that is my life. My alarm clock going off at 7.00 and me pressing the snooze button. At 7.15, me getting up and making a cup of tea. Letting the tea cool as I take a shower, then drinking it as I get dressed. Leaving the house at 7.45 and catching the 7.56 train from Streatham Hill. Arriving at Sydenham at 8.18. Walking into the office at 8.24 and sitting at my desk.

Spending my day typing and then, from 1996 onwards, dealing with individual insurance claims. Lunch at 13.00 which I eat at my desk and then, at 17.00, back to the station for the 17.08 to Streatham Hill. Arriving back at my flat at 18.03. Eating my dinner and watching television until 21.30 before retiring to bed and reading for thirty minutes. Then, setting my alarm clock, switching off the light and going to sleep. Five days a week. Fifty-one weeks a year (the other week usually spent decorating or cleaning or recognising Christmas). For 15 years. One hundred and eighty months. Seven hundred and eighty weeks. Five thousand, four hundred and seventy-nine days. I could continue, but I think I've made my point.

So you see, Dr Omosan, if I am in anyway disturbed or, as you laughingly put it, 'upset', then I think I have a right to be. It doesn't mean I'm mad or delusional. It does... it did mean, however, that I was susceptible.

It's coming up to midnight on 30 March 2006 and I'm thinking about how, nearly nine months ago, my life changed. Nine months. I wonder what's that a reference to? Haha, you'll be laughing, won't you, Paul? 'All right, Agatha?' you used to say. 'Getting fatter? Is Mr Kipling still really spoiling you?' You and your adverts! Always getting them mixed up. Seriously, though, give up the cigs. I'm getting out of here. There's hope for you too.

So, nine months ago and we're in July. In fact, it was the last Thursday of the month — the twenty-eighth. I was going through a phase of doing my shopping on Thursday nights instead of at the weekends — as a break to my otherwise mundane routine. Well, I say it was to break up the routine but I'd been doing it for three years. I'd catch the 17.08 back to Streatham Hill as usual but, instead of returning to my flat, I'd walk to the 24-hour Tesco. My shopping didn't need to take long as I bought the same things each week. Despite this, I used to take my time because it was something to do. So, that's where I was on 28 July 2005.

And that's when I met him.

It was shortly before 20.00. The store was practically empty. A group of students was staring aimlessly at the crisps and snacks. A few other shoppers were slowly and silently wandering down the various aisles. Everything was bright under the fluorescent lights but you could tell it was the evening. There wasn't the hustle and bustle that usually characterised such places. I was standing at the frozen foods section, trying to decide whether to go for the ready-made meal that was half price or the one that gave you extra Clubcard points. Either way, the grey stuff inside the cardboard would taste the same. Suddenly, I felt someone brush past me. I froze and wasn't sure what to do so I muttered an apology then started to walk.

'No, I'm sorry,' called a voice.

I stopped walking.

'It was my fault,' he said.

I turned around. A man was standing where I had been. He looked to be in his late thirties. He wasn't especially handsome, but his eyes were lit with... well, with a passion for something.

He smiled at me. 'You know what it's like in these places. You wander about like a zombie and end up forgetting there are others here. I'm sorry for bumping

into you.' His smile was nice. Friendly.

I could feel my face burning red, so quickly thanked him for apologising and turned back, hoping I could find something on one of the other aisles.

Later, I stood at the checkout, packing my food into two carrier bags. Toiletries and household goods in one bag, food in the other.

'We meet again!'

I looked up and there he was, behind me in the queue. I blushed and smiled. 'lib!' he exclaimed. Tesco's quality meal-for-one range!

I looked down as the conveyor belt continued to shunt my purchases towards me.

'Me too!' he said loudly, pointing at his own purchases. 'The name's Godfrey. Fancy a drink?'

Me? Agatha Ellis asked out on a date! Well, take your shocked expressions and multiply them by, 0000h, a million. Then you might have some idea of my own expression as I tried to concentrate on making sure the tinned food was at the bottom of the bag and the eggs were near the top.

There was a dramatic pause, during which the chorus line of shoppers could have sung every song from *West Side Story*, and then I answered.

'Yes, please.'

After we exchanged names, he took me to a quiet wine bar next to the old cinema. He held the door open for me (just like that handsome delivery man, Karla!) and we went in. I could feel everyone staring at me. They were all so young and good-looking. They looked like actors while I felt fat and ugly as I clutched desperately on to my carrier bags. In fact, the whole place looked like a set from some ITV drama special. There were so many colours and the music... the music sounded a bit like jazz but with a modern dance beat which I actually quite liked. The man, Godfrey, led me to a secluded booth and I carefully sat down. The booth was dark with cream walls and a mahogany table and, when he sat down opposite me, it felt as if we were the only people in the world. The actors and the colours disappeared and I began to feel calm and even relaxed. A waiter came over and asked what we'd like to drink. Godfrey asked for a cappuccino. I had to hold my hand over my mouth to suppress a giggle. The waiter looked down at me and asked what I would like.

'The same, please.'

He left and Godfrey looked at me.

'What's so funny?' he asked, smiling.

'A cappuccino. I've never... well, I've never actually heard anyone ask for one before.' My voice fell to a whisper. 'I wasn't sure they even existed in the real world.'

Godfrey grinned. 'You're having one too!'

'I didn't know what else to ask for.'

He laughed. 'Agatha, you're amazing.'

I felt myself blush again as the waiter returned with our cappuccinos. Now, they were amazing. The cups were made of pure white china and the coffee was simmering beneath a layer of creamy-white froth. There was even a light skin of dark brown chocolate sprinkled on to the foam. I felt like a film star.

And, for an hour, we talked. He asked me about my life and I told him. We talked about the weather and, obviously, we talked about the terrorist attacks. I told him how I hadn't changed my journey. I was still taking the train to work every day. He looked at me and, for a brief moment, reminded me of my daddy. He looked proud and then I felt proud.

'You're a real individual, aren't you?' he asked, sipping at his cappuccino.

I looked down at the table. 'Don't be silly. I'm just doing what everyone else is doing.'

Suddenly, as I remembered the seventh (or 7/7 as they've taken to calling it), I felt sad. Not because of what had happened but because of how even more lonely it had made me feel. I thought about the days following the bombings and I thought about my workmates and the excitable people on the television. The attacks seemed to have brought them all together even more. Everyone talking about how they felt united and defiant. And all I'd been able to think about was how I'd been the only one not getting any '1.7 OK?' text messages. How, even when something so terrible and huge happened, I was still alone. And, of course, thinking that had made me feel so guilty.

Godfrey reached over and took my hand. I tried not to flinch and looked up.

'We're in a city of seven million and yet somehow you stand out. Everyone's carrying on as normal, including you, but...' He shook his head again.

'What?' I asked, smiling.

'I don't know,' he said. 'You're not like the others. You're so... innocent.'

I looked down again and began to run my fingernail though the grooves in the wooden table.

'Agatha, can I ask you a question?'

I took a sip from my cappuccino. 'Yes, Godfrey?'

'I... I... can we... well, could we meet again?'

I nearly choked on the hot coffee as foam went up my nose. 'I... well...'

I trailed off, not sure what to say. He held on to my hand. 'Please.'

I looked out of the window at the couples walking towards the station. I watched as the world, as usual, continued to walk by. Then, after taking a deep breath, I said I would like to see him again.

And so for the first time in my life, with my cappuccino and my friend and surrounded by beautiful people, I felt like I was there. I felt like I mattered.

Stop laughing, Paul! I bet you're thinking I'm making this up! I know — fat, frigid Agatha in some hot romantic love story! Agatha who doesn't drink or smoke or even swear! Yes, I know what you say about me behind my back :) Well, it's true. A man wanted to take me out. I couldn't believe it at the time and... well, perhaps if my life hadn't been so different to everyone else's, I might have been more suspicious. But, after 15 years of silence, someone was talking to me.

Just over a week later, we met again outside the National Film Theatre. I'd never been there before and couldn't quite believe that this was in the same city as the endless grey- and red-bricked houses that I passed each day on the train. It was so bright and modern and lively and exciting and... just special! It was like all silver!

I was surrounded by silver and crystal and I was on a date! And not only that, but it meant I was doing something at the weekend. When the girls asked each other on Monday, 'Good weekend?', I would finally have something to tell them. I'd be one of them. Godfrey took me to see a film called *A Matter of Life and Death*. It was beautiful. A man was somehow given the chance to cheat death because of his love for a woman. An angel was trying to take him away to put things right but even he was moved by the love the two main characters felt for each other. I don't think I have ever felt so affected by anything. Not even my father's funeral had made me feel so... emotional. It was pure love and... and I cried my eyes out. I couldn't stop crying. I cared so much about them and that was something I'd never felt before. I know, it's so silly, isn't it? That somehow I might care more about two characters played by long-dead actors than I might about anyone in the real world. We left the cinema and stepped out into the blinding sunlight and, suddenly, the world had changed. I looked at the laughing crowds as they mingled and chatted and ate and drank and walked and sang and... and I was part of it! After a false start, Agatha Ellis had finally joined the human race.

Godfrey wanted to take me to some posh Chinese restaurant but I begged him to let us stay there. He bought us wine and we sat outside the cinema. He listened as I told him about my parents and my childhood and my job and about who I was. And, hours later, after the sun set behind the gleaming London Eye, I found myself shivering in the cold night air. He smiled and he asked me if I would like to go home. We climbed into a taxi, which drove us back to Streatham. We pulled up outside my flat and there was a pause. The day was over but I didn't want it to end. The taxi driver asked me if I was getting out. I just sat there in silence. And, then, I asked Godfrey if he would like to see my flat. We could have a cappuccino (I'd bought a machine!) and we could watch my copy of *Fiddler on the Roof*. He asked me if I was sure. I smiled back at him and we left the taxi. We walked up to my front door and, then, I let him in.

On Monday morning, the girls greeted each other with their usual stories of drinking, parties and dates. I wanted to tell them. I needed to tell someone but I was still in shock. I'd woken up on Sunday morning and Godfrey... he'd gone. No note. No goodbye. No curtain call. He just wasn't there. I felt so ill inside. At first I tried to convince myself that he'd had some kind of family emergency. I desperately tried to think about what he'd told me about himself. I realised, though, he'd told me nothing. I'd been so thrilled about someone paying me attention that I'd selfishly not enquired about him. I didn't know if he had any family or where he lived. I didn't even know his surname. For the first day in 15 years, I didn't hit my targets at work. This upset both myself and my manager so the next day I resolved to pull myself together. I wasn't the first woman to be duped by a man and I probably wouldn't be the last. As the days and weeks passed, I tried to forget about Godfrey and resigned myself to the fact that my life was never going to have that moment when the heroine bursts into song as her life changes and everything builds towards the happy ending.

Then, over a month later, I realised there was something inside of me. Something alien. I went to see my GP, Dr Omosan. He did tests and confirmed

what I already knew. I was pregnant. I didn't know how to feel. I was both terrified and excited. Terrified because I didn't know what to do. My life was so structured and settled and... I was me. I'd never really felt or been shown love so what if I did that to my child? What if I brought another 'Smelly Elly' into the world? Then I told the girls at work and their excitement was contagious. They bustled around me, offering me food and baby clothes and suggestions for names. Suddenly, life in the office revolved around me. They were also excited about mine and Godfrey's forthcoming wedding. I couldn't let them think I was having a child out of wedlock so decided that my fiancé would have an accident beforehand.

And for four months I am alive. I'm happy. I'm someone.

Christmas Eve 2005 and, for the very first time, I was excited. The girls had given me so many presents. All right, I'd be opening them by myself but at least they weren't just from myself. I'd arranged them all around the little silver tree and, gently rubbing my stomach, had gone to bed. As I lay there, listening to the wind outside, I spoke to my baby. I promised I would never let it be lonely or sad. I would make sure it was always someone special.

Suddenly, I woke up as I heard someone in the room. I desperately tried to reach for the light switch but then... two small pools of white light appeared at the end of my bed. They started to shine brighter and brighter, lighting up the room. It was brighter than daylight and I had to shield my eyes. I tried to move but couldn't and then I saw him.

Godfrey was stood in front of me and the silver light was shining out of his eyes.

I tried to speak to him but no words came out. And, as I watched, he reached forward and placed a hand on my stomach. Suddenly, through my skin, I could see my baby. It was glowing, reacting to his touch. Godfrey's mouth was moving as if he was talking and my baby was glowing like bright mercury and...

Then it was morning. After about an hour, I stopped screaming and phoned Dr Omosan. He was clearly annoyed at having his Christmas Day spoiled but I continued to shriek down the phone at him. I needed to have this thing taken out of me. I cried as I told him about what had happened and how, if he didn't come and help me, I'd take it out myself. He told me to not to upset myself and that he'd send someone to help. I believed him.

They brought me here — to the home we all share. The psychiatrist was very nice and explained it all to me. I was being detained under Section 2 of the 1983 Mental Health Act (although I was quickly promoted to Section 3 after they caught me with a pair of scissors on New Year's Eve). Apparently, I was a risk to both myself and my child. They didn't care that we were all at risk. They were too busy doping me up with something called Lorazepam. I don't know what's in it but it makes me sleepy so forgive me if things seem a little hazy from here. Although I was tired, I never slept. Every night, I'd lay awake in my little pink room waiting for Godfrey to return. You'll remember how I never spoke to any of you for weeks. I was so paranoid and... I vaguely remember that time I attacked you, Paul. I am so sorry about that but I really thought you were one of the aliens. In fact, that's about the only thing I can remember until a few weeks

ago. And that's when someone else came into my room.

It was 03.24 and I was sipping a glass of water. I had to sip it slowly as they didn't allow me to have much. Apparently, a week before, they'd caught me pouring jugs of water down my throat, trying to drown the creature or something.

I don't really remember. So, I was sipping the water quietly, listening to the sound of everyone sleeping when, suddenly, my door opened and a head appeared. He raised a finger to his mouth and, when it became apparent that I wasn't going to scream, he came in. He was tall and engulfed in a horrible multi-coloured coat. He had fair curly hair and he looked as though he hadn't slept in years.

'Agatha?'

I nodded.

'I'm the Doctor.' He smiled at me. 'How do you do?'

I just shrugged as he walked towards me. Then, taking my hand in his, he spoke again.

'I believe you.'

'What?' I whispered.

'Go to sleep. I'll come back tomorrow.'

And I did. I went to sleep. I've no idea what he did but I suddenly felt safe. The next night, he came again.

'How are you tonight, Agatha?'

'Who are you?' I asked.

'I'm the Doctor and I'm here to help you.'

I looked into his eyes. They looked as though once they might have sparkled with life. Now, though, they seemed dull. Old. I asked him if he was all right. He looked surprised at the question and told me that he was fine. He reached into his coat and pulled out a bottle of misty, blue liquid.

'What's that?'

He explained that it was a herbal remedy. It would help me sleep at night so that I could be alert during the day. He would make sure Godfrey didn't return. I didn't even question him. I just let him pour a few drops into my water. As I raised the glass to my mouth, I paused. 'Can we talk?'

'You need to sleep.'

'You believe me. You understand that something's happened to me. You're the only one I can speak to.'

He took the glass out of my hand and we talked. That night I told him about my life. He understood and sympathised. He said he knew what it was like to be an outsider, to be lonely. Then he told me who he was. Are you ready, Paul? You ready for this? He was an alien! A real alien! How crazy is that? But, for some reason, perhaps because of Godfrey or perhaps because of being in this place, I instantly believed him!

He was from a planet called Gallifrey, but he'd left it because he hadn't got on with the other aliens. He was travelling the universe in a time machine with a young woman called Melanie Bush. Apparently she was from Pease Pottage, so not too far from where I'd grown up. That was obviously the only similarity

between the two of us, though. She was travelling the universe, fighting monsters and helping people whereas I'd moved to London to process insurance claims. I said I would like to meet her but the Doctor wasn't sure. Apparently, they'd just been to this planet called Caliban and something there had upset Melanie. I asked what had happened but he avoided the question. He told me that he knew what Godfrey was and what he'd done. He wouldn't let anything happen to me. Satisfied, I drank the cloudy blue water and slept.

This continued day after day, night after night. A new routine but one that I enjoyed rather than endured. Each night, I'd talk to him and then sleep and each day I'd feel that little bit better. I can't explain how he did it but he saved me.

One night, we talked about change. He told me about how he'd changed so much in his life (although, oddly, he talked as if he'd had other lives). Apparently, when he'd been younger he'd been different. He told me how he'd been sad and confused and violent and, well, he described it as suffering from a sickness. Smiling, I said how he was in the right place here, but then I stopped as I saw how serious he had become. It felt weird having someone confide in me. His face was dark as he told me about fighting aliens and vampires and how he'd felt like he'd been trapped with a monster inside of him fighting to get out. His voice was getting more and more agitated. As we sat there, in my little dark room, the paint peeling from the walls and the eerie sound of wind whistling outside, I shivered and asked what had changed him. He took hold of my hand and whispered, 'My friends'. I quickly pulled my hand free. I'd never had that. Never known it. Not since all those years ago when Fiona left me had I felt that thing called friendship. He told me about someone called Peri and how she'd helped him to keep going. She'd trusted him and stayed with him and her friendship was what had changed him. I tried not to sneer but he looked hurt at the expression on my face.

'That's what friendship is all about, Agatha. Trusting someone to be there for you.'

Again, I tried not to react but then he said, 'And that's why I'm here. I'm here to be your friend.'

I started to cry. Perhaps, had my life been different, had I allowed myself to have friends, then I could have changed. I could have been someone else.

'Oh, I'm so sorry,' he said quietly. 'I didn't want to upset you.' And then he told me about how he'd also travelled with a talking penguin and we both began to laugh.

Gbemi, the next day was when you and me talked about musicals and you told me about Bayo cheating on you. And, after each night of talking to the Doctor, I now found myself able to talk to you a lot more. I forced myself to tell you how I was and to listen to you tell me things. I even convinced you to stop giving me the Lorazepam.

A few nights ago, I finally asked the Doctor what we were going to do about the creature. He looked at me, his face half lit by the bedside lamp. His eyes stared right into mine.

'It'll be born and then I'll take it away.' Suddenly, he smiled. 'You could always come with us if you like?'

I shrugged, sipped my blue water and slept. I dreamt of travelling the universe with the Doctor and Melanie. The three of us, together.

And then, tonight, something terrible happened. I was waiting for the Doctor to come and see me when, suddenly, I felt the creature inside of me move. I looked down at my own belly and saw that it was glowing again. The silver light was shining through the blankets and lighting up the room. Before I had a chance to scream, I heard someone talking in the ward. I climbed out of bed and went over to the door. I eased it open and looked out. Godfrey was there. He'd come back! Then, from behind one of the concrete pillars, I saw the Doctor appear. He stepped towards Godfrey, who suddenly lunged at him. Then, as the Doctor told him to leave, Godfrey's eyes opened and the silver light shot out. The two streams of light shot into the Doctor's eyes and I listened to Godfrey taunting him.

'Witness the future, Doctor! Just as the woman can't escape her fate, neither can you escape yours.'

I wanted to run out, wanted to save my friend. But, as they rolled around, scattering tables and copies of **Woman's Own**, I stood still. Frozen to the floor. The Doctor managed to roll on top of Godfrey and hissed at him. His face was so... angry! I've never seen anything like it! He told Godfrey that he would save me as he himself had been saved. He also said something rude about fate, which I won't repeat here. Then, laughing in his horrible, horrible way, Godfrey just faded away into nothing. I watched as the Doctor slowly stood up. He looked around the empty ward and carefully began to put the magazines back on to the table. He looked so quiet and thoughtful. I watched as he tidied everything up and I watched him take one long deep breath before starting to walk towards my room. Quickly, I closed the door and got back into bed. He came in and, without a word, poured some blue drops into my water. I asked if he was okay and he shrugged, forced a smile and stood up.

'Agatha, I'll be back tomorrow and I'll take you with us. The three of us can go anywhere and do anything. Nothing can stop us.'

And he vanished once more into the darkness.

There's a problem though. I want to go with them, I really do, but I can't. I heard what Godfrey said. Wherever we go, I'm always going to be me. I'm always going to be Smelly Elly, sitting by herself at the edge of the playing field. The little girl that nobody wanted. I've tried so many new starts. School. Woolworths. London. Each time, I've still been me. Unable to change. Writing out this letter has convinced me of what I need to do. It's okay though, Doctor, you've still saved me. You were so shaken by your fight with Godfrey that, after you'd given me those precious drops of blue, you left the bottle behind. I'm looking at it now. The lamp is shining through the glass, bathing everything in a comforting pale blue light. You were always so careful to only give me a couple of drops each night...

... and I've drunk it. Every I mean drop not pill. No pills. Something's happening. It's darker. The creature inside me isn't moving so now we'll all be safe. And, yes, I'm definitely dropping off. I know this is it so I just want to apologise to you all for not being able to be someone else. Karla, Gbemi, Paul, I

hope you all live long, happy lives. Doctor, thank you so much for being my friend and I hope... I hope you and Melanie find happiness on whichever path you take. It's 23.59 now. One minute to midnight. This is my curtain call. Who knows? Maybe I'll see you on the other side. Maybe we'll

Utopia

Darren Sellars

An Adventure of the Seventh Doctor

The digits on the clock face began to melt; the numbers breaking down, stretching and contracting by equal measure — the glowing red characters morphing smoothly into a new moment in time — Monday morning, 7.00am.

Registering the time, the shutters on the panel windows came silently to life. They lowered in unison with an aria that drifted effortlessly from speakers hidden nearby. Dull light flooded into the office, increasing as the shutters sank into the wall below, running parallel to the ascending pitch of the anonymous alto.

The light shone through Morgan's eyelids as he stood by the window. He smiled: he hadn't felt this energised for some time. Opening his eyes he was — for a split second — disappointed by the view. Rain streaked down the glass, partially obstructing the view outside: the weather filters were on the blink again. Damn things, he cursed, haven't worked in days. He was glad to finally be leaving. When he founded the Genetic Nuclei Exploration Corporation all those years ago, things were so much easier; he had fire in his belly back then. That was before the board took over and 'diversified' as they were so keen to state on numerous occasions.

Now all that was left of his originally proposed project was in this office. Fifty years of research condensed into one small space, while scientists — not even born when the company was founded — worked on projects he had never even heard of just one floor in either direction. He was in a cell of his own making. Nevertheless, until his official retirement later this week, he was still technically in charge...

He gazed out through the torrent of water on the pane on to the plaza below, and felt a brief glimmer of pride. A well-ordered mass of gleaming white spires stretched outwards from the building he stood in; reaching for the heavens. Symmetrical, ordered, perfect. That was his legacy — success.

Others had not been so lucky. During his life he had been witness to several of his peers falling by the wayside, undone one way or the other. Dennerman was the most recent, murdered mere weeks ago. So much for refusing governmental protection; if the terrorists were that determined to undermine the scientists' work, he was glad to accept the ministry's money.

Still, as far as he was concerned, after this morning the uncertainty was behind him. It was over. Once the contracts were collected, he need never have to worry again.

He glanced over at the papers spread out on his desk, then at the clock: the glowing red numbers stared back, partially obscured by the crystal turtle-shaped paperweight that stood inches away. Just over two hours now. Two hours until the man from the ministry arrived to collect the contract — the fruition of his life's work. He stared at the blank space where his signature would go. Plenty of

time, he thought. It had taken him so long to get to this point; he was determined to savour every last moment. For a brief second he considered re-reading the contract one last time, then dismissed the notion as paranoia and returned to gazing out of the window.

He heard the door to his office slide open behind him: his PA.

‘Élan, until the man from the department arrives could you make sure I’m not disturbed, please?’

There was no response.

‘Élan?’ He turned. Where he expected to find his assistant stood a small man, dishevelled and unimpressive, dressed in a white linen suit. He stood, propped up on an umbrella by his side — the oddly shaped handle held tight in his left hand; in his right, a manila folder. He had a grave look on his face.

‘Can I help you?’ said Morgan archly, more etiquette than a question.

‘No, thank you, Mr Sturgess,’ replied the man, a Scottish twang to his voice. ‘I’m actually here to help *you*.’

Morgan was flustered, taken by surprise; he wasn’t expecting them so early. ‘Have you come about the papers? I’m dreadfully sorry, I wasn’t expecting you for another two hours or so. My assistant didn’t tell me —’

The man stopped him mid-sentence.

‘No, Mr Sturgess, I’m not from the ministry. I’m what you’d call a... concerned party.’

Morgan snapped back — annoyed by the man’s presence — as he moved to his desk. ‘I think you had better leave.’ He pressed the intercom buzzer on his desk. ‘Élan, call security — we have an intruder.’

The intercom responded with white noise.

He tried again. ‘Élan?’ He fumbled at the intercom, desperately attempting to contact back-up. ‘Hello, security? Are you there? Hello... Hello? Anyone?’ Again, static echoed back at him.

The intruder began to stride towards Morgan, the umbrella twirling in his hand as he walked. ‘I can assure you that I’m not here to hurt you, Mr Sturgess.’

Agitated by both the man’s impudence and the malfunctioning intercom, Morgan let out a frustrated grunt and stormed towards the door to his office, pushing past the trespasser as he did so.

The intruder responded with calm indifference as Morgan thundered past him. He reached the door. It remained firmly shut.

He backed away and looked around the seal in confusion — aware of the small man’s eyes burning into his back — and made to leave again. Still nothing. In frustration, he jabbed at the operation panel by its side in an attempt to open it. No response.

‘I would prefer it if we were undisturbed,’ the man remarked.

Morgan spun to face him. ‘What do you want?’

‘Only to talk.’

Morgan was livid with impatience. ‘Talk?’ he spat.

‘That’s all, Mr Sturgess. To talk. I assure you it won’t take long.’

‘No demands?’

The man met Morgan’s icy gaze with one of his own. ‘I would be lying if I

said there were no demands, Mr Sturgess. I **do** have a favour to ask of you.'

'And what would that be?' enquired Morgan. He began to cautiously approach the man.

'To cease any further exploration into the research you are conducting, Mr Sturgess. Destroy the materials you have, and forget your research ever existed.'

Morgan snorted with laughter; the man was quite obviously deranged. 'Oh, is that all? I advise you, my friend, that if that is your agenda, then you should give up any attempt right now and leave. I refuse be threatened.'

'Oh, I'm not here to threaten you, Mr Sturgess... simply to advise on a course of action.'

'And if I don't follow your... advice?'

'The results would not be pleasant,' the man replied.

Morgan's eyebrows rose at this response. 'No threats, eh? That was -a promise easily broken.'

'It wasn't a threat, Mr Sturgess. Merely stating a fact.'

Morgan blanked the man, and began the walk back to his desk. 'I have no interest in what you have to say. Get out.'

'You will be interested, Mr Sturgess...'

Morgan's pace quickened; as far as he was concerned this conversation was over.

'... it concerns the Utopia project.'

Morgan froze.

He turned to face the man. 'The Utopia project is not in the public domain.'

'Of that, I am aware,' the man stated, matter-of-factly.

Morgan's eyes narrowed. This was certainly a well-informed protestor. Not even the lower-ranking members of the boardroom knew about Utopia. 'Who are you?'

'Oh, yes.' The man suddenly looked apologetic. 'My apologies for being so rude. I'm the Doctor.'

Morgan tilted his head, curious. 'Doctor...?'

'Just Doctor will do for now, Mr Sturgess.' It was obvious that he was not willing to offer any further information.

'Just what is it that you're a doctor of?'

'Presently, I have an interest in genetics.'

'It must be a very **keen** interest to know of a project that doesn't officially exist...'

The Doctor's gaze wandered. 'Oh, I keep my ear to the ground, Mr Sturgess — you know how it is,' he replied, pacing the floor.

Morgan turned and traversed the last few metres to his desk and made a show of picking up the papers that lay there. 'I'm afraid I don't. Industrial espionage was never a strong point. I'm sorry, Doctor, if you want secrets I can't help you. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm a busy man. If you want to learn more about the basics of genetics, I suggest you visit a seminar or chat to someone else.'

'I already tried that, Mr Sturgess... but I was unable to reach him: Albere Dennerman... I believe you know him.'

Morgan looked up from the papers. 'Dennerman died several months ago.' The Doctor's face dropped. 'Yes, I know... Unfortunate business.' He saw the look of distrust on Morgan's face.

'I assure you, the unfortunate events surrounding Mr Dennerman were not my doing. But, nevertheless, now that I have your attention...' He turned and stared Morgan in the face. 'I have to warn you, Mr Sturgess, as far as the Utopia project is concerned, you're playing a very dangerous game...' His glare remained fixed on Morgan as the words drifted out between them.

'Dangerous?' Morgan balked — as much as he didn't want to discuss anything with the horrible little man, he found his pride getting the better of him. 'With my work, entire strains of disease could be wiped out! Things never thought curable centuries ago could be eradicated now before a child is even born — diabetes, heart conditions, skin cancer — anything. We could erase genetic abnormalities from a person's entire family tree. Healthy children, Doctor — just imagine it. And you have the nerve to tell me that's dangerous?'

'I commend you on your enthusiasm, Mr Sturgess. However, implanting a lab-created gene directly into the foetus, pre-implantation genetic diagnosis?' He surveyed his surroundings as he spoke — a bustling photographer taking a mental picture of the layout and contents of the environment. 'If I recall, that was tried before in the early part of the century with little success... Gene therapy was one thing but...'

'Gene therapy was a dead end! Inserting healthy cells directly into the patients had no lasting effect — a trait in the human body couldn't be changed by just one gene. There could be as many as ten, fifty, even a hundred affecting the feature in question. Fifty years ago scientists were only capable of looking at two at a time. You would need hundreds of embryos in order to sift the genes needed to bring out a single facet of a personality. PGD was impossible! Today, thanks to GENECORP's research, we can clone thousands of embryos in these labs!'

The Doctor moved closer, and Morgan suddenly realised that despite his diminutive size, he was no less intimidating than a man double his height. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but the man seemed larger in some odd way. 'That's all well and good, but how much further could that research be taken, Mr Sturgess... eradicating the gene that produced skin tone for instance? What about height? Weight? Shyness? The gene that some believe leads to homosexuality?' The Doctor's eyes widened as he continued to probe inquisitively. 'Just how much of a jump would it be to create the perfect designer baby, the perfect human. A master race: more intelligent than its peers, with greater longevity, stronger, faster, more able to survive? That's when it becomes dangerous. Racial purity, Mr Sturgess. I've seen it. It's not all it's cracked up to be.'

Morgan was growing tired of arguing his point against some stranger whose only objective seemed to be to refuse to listen. He had done enough of that over the years and he'd be damned if he was going to defend his work on this, his last day on the project. 'The Utopia project is not a passport to racial purity, Doctor. It is a health programme — created to benefit mankind.'

'Well, lots of people *claim* benefits, Mr Sturgess, without being entitled to do

so...'

The Doctor fumbled in his pockets and, after several seconds, held out a paper bag towards a surprised Morgan.

'Would you like a Jelly Baby?' he enquired, apparently changing the subject.

Morgan eyed him dubiously, regarding the proffered item with suspicion.

'I assure you, Mr Sturgess, they're quite safe. Here.' He removed a solitary brightly coloured object from the bag and placed it in his mouth. 'I used to have a tremendous fondness for them myself,' he continued wistfully, talking as he chewed. 'Never used to be without the things. I've only recently rediscovered them.'

Tentatively, Morgan reached into the bag and took one — it was pink, dusted in a strange white powder, and, he thought, obscenely foetal. Deformed even.

The Doctor seemed intrigued by Morgan's choice. For all the light in the room, Morgan could have sworn the other man's eyes darkened somewhat.

'Do you know you can no longer get them?' the stranger informed him, a hint of sadness in his voice. 'Several years ago the company producing them decided that the range of colours on offer was too great. They could save themselves a fortune, simply by eliminating just one colour. The colour you hold in your hands.'

Morgan placed the sweet in his mouth and began to chew. It was sickly sweet. The Doctor smiled. 'Afterwards,' he went on, 'they patted themselves on the back for making the company such a vast profit. But the curious thing was, a great many of the customers who bought the confectionary actually liked that colour. Not the green, or the orange or even the black — but that one. Of course it made no difference to the taste. No, it was nothing as tangible as that. They just missed that colour being in among the rest. The opportunity to choose *that* one in particular above all the rest.'

As if to illustrate the point, the Doctor peered into the bag in his hand.

When he looked up he did so directly into Morgan's eyes, unblinking.

'Millions stopped buying the things. Some wrote to the company asking them to reinstate the pink ones, but to no avail. After all, what did they know? It was only one colour: not worth the money it took to produce. A simple, aesthetic variation. Quite silly for people to feel so strongly about something like that, and yet people do, don't they?'

Morgan felt inclined to nod in agreement, despite being unsure as to why.

'So, the company simply brushed the concerns aside. The only colours that concerned them were green in the wallet and black at the bank. Unfortunately, the losses the company received as a result of that decision far outweighed the profits they had made by stopping production. They couldn't have foreseen it because it was a quirk of humanity, and they couldn't respond to it because you can't justify something that simply is...'

Morgan found the tone of the Doctor's story to be as insipid as its subject, and as difficult to swallow. 'Forgive me, but is there some point to all this?' he demanded tersely. 'Or are you simply a lobbyist with a sales pitch to flaunt?'

The stranger smiled distantly. 'Those that do not learn the lessons of the past are doomed to repeat them for an eternity, Mr Sturgess. What point is there in

history, in your memory, if you don't use it wisely?"

Sturgess ran a hand through his greying hair. 'Look, I'm sure you make a splendid after-dinner speaker or bar-stool philosopher...'

The Doctor resumed his tale, ignoring the ill-disguised contempt in Morgan's words and chewing thoughtfully.

'The result of their short-sightedness wasn't as unforeseeable, however. Bankruptcy...' He swallowed. 'No more Jelly Babies.'

There was a moment of silence, an ideological stand-off.

Suddenly, the little stranger hoisted up his oddly shaped umbrella, swinging it around him. In the airy expanse of Morgan's office, it found no obstacle in its path. He might as well have been a blind man in a football stadium.

'Imagine all this, gone for no other reason than to save on cochineal...'

'Nonsense!' Morgan snapped, incensed.

The umbrella stopped, pointing directly at Sturgess.

The Doctor's voice was barely a whisper when he replied.

'That's precisely what they thought.'

Morgan had had enough of the stranger's impertinence, practically choking on the jellied sweet as he blustered, 'I haven't the time, patience or inclination for your stories, particularly ones as circumspect as —'

'I am just demonstrating,' the Doctor interjected, letting the umbrella drop to his side, 'how surprising it is that even the smallest change could affect the fate of the largest group of people. One wrong decision and you're history. And history is a nice place to visit, but you wouldn't want to live there, Mr Sturgess.'

He offered the bag once more.

'Another? No? Good man. Rots the teeth...'

Morgan gave a faint sneer as he watched the intruder pocket the bag.

'I suppose you're now going to lecture me about all the dentists who blew their brains out because confectionary sales plummeted?'

'Actually, I wasn't,' the Doctor replied, deflecting the withering sarcasm with his own. 'But well done. Your brain is starting to work.' He picked at his teeth absently. 'I really should have stayed off the things. But then we each have our own little vices, don't we? Power, glory, riches... the occasional sweet.'

Morgan stepped towards the stranger, his face the colour of the sweet that had brought down a conglomerate. 'What are you insinuating?'

'I don't believe I was insinuating anything,' replied the little man, a hint of mischief in his voice.

Morgan grew defensive. The Doctor was toying with him, like a cat with a mouse. This infuriated him: the man was stood here, in his office, treating him as an object of amusement.

'For your information, the work invested in the Utopia project was nothing to do with power or fame. The research was — and has always been — intended to benefit mankind.'

'And supposing I asked you to stop — to benefit mankind — would you?'

The Doctor's eyes bored into Morgan's; eyes that having seen so much had grown weary of finding the same petty motives behind those of others.

'You're in a minefield, Mr Sturgess. What do you do?'

‘I’ve no time for riddles, man. Will you please just go back to whatever hole you crawled out from —’

‘You do **nothing**, Mr Sturgess. That’s what you do. When you can’t be sure of the implications of your very next step, that’s precisely what you do.’

Morgan found he could not break the stranger’s gaze. Such a little man. Such an absurd little man. And yet...

‘Destroy the Utopia project,’ the Doctor growled, his lip curling with a fury he would no longer conceal.

Morgan easily matched the fury, shaking with emotion, his hands flexing as if he meant to strangle those blasphemous words from the stranger’s neck.

‘You’re crazy!’ he spat. ‘You’re a madman!’

The Doctor ignored him. Instead, he busied himself with searching his pockets.

‘Ah-ha!’ he exclaimed suddenly, removing his hand. In it, he held a small, silver- effect cylinder. It looked no more or less than a cigar container to Sturgess. ‘I obtained this from a friend,’ the Doctor explained, staring at it as he held it up in his hands, as if remembering some long-forgotten detail.

Morgan blanched, fearing that this lunatic was perhaps some self-appointed assassin. After all, wasn’t there as much of the Utopia project in his own head as there was standing about them?

What...?’ he stammered, his rage suddenly quenched by the ice of dread. ‘What is it?’

The Doctor glanced at him cheerfully.

‘This?’

He held it up, letting the harsh neon light glint on its smooth, burnished surface.

‘This is **your** pink Jelly Baby...’

He twirled it playfully.

‘It’s not a powerful charge,’ he continued matter-of-factly, ‘but combined with the equipment and materials in here, it should be sufficient.’

‘How dare you! How **dare** you come in here with your insane ramblings, expecting me to just stand here and watch you destroy fifty years’ work...’

The Doctor looked at him, a terrible determination in his expression, but far less terrible than the sombre pronouncement he was about to make.

‘I’m not going to destroy anything, Mr Sturgess. You are...’

Morgan almost choked on his own laughter. ‘You’re insane!’

‘Yes... you’d be surprised how often I hear that,’ lamented the Doctor, and he placed the cylinder down on Morgan’s desk.

‘I sincerely doubt that,’ jibed Morgan in return. He watched the bothersome little man as he retreated away from him and began to pace around the expanse of the office. If this was the best the anti-genetic protesters could come up with, then it was a joke.

The Doctor approached a shelf in the furthest corner of the office where various photographs were on display. He set down the folder for a moment and picked one of them up, an old sepia illustration in a battered frame. It contained an old, frail-looking subject.

‘I’m afraid that smashing my personal possessions will not persuade me to take your threats any more seriously, Doctor.’

‘Mr Sturgess,’ replied the Doctor sedately, never taking his gaze away from the photograph. ‘If you knew me, you would know that I abhor violence and seldom turn into a petulant child in order to make a point.’ His brows furrowed. ‘A relative?’ he enquired, referring to the old man in the picture.

‘My grandfather.’ Morgan relaxed slightly. He found himself warming to the Doctor. Despite his earlier demeanour, at his age he seemed quite harmless. He was no more of a threat to Morgan than Morgan himself would have been to a twenty-year-old.

The Doctor continued to stare at the picture, noticing a tattoo on the arm of the old man. ‘A survivor...’ There was a look of immense sadness in his face. He looked incredibly feeble himself. Morgan almost felt sorry for him.

Morgan nodded sagely. ‘It was taken just before his death. He died on New Year’s Eve when I was very young. Everyone was singing...’ Morgan became glassy eyed. ‘My father began to cry.’ His voice trailed off as he stared into the distance, lost in the past for a moment. ‘It was the only time I ever saw him upset. He was hollow afterwards. Empty.’

The Doctor continued to look at the picture, at the weathered and broken face of the man within. Morgan continued, unsure exactly why he was telling the stranger this.

‘I had always respected my father, but to see him so destroyed by a memory... at first I was embarrassed — ashamed that such a strong man could turn so easily into a wreck. But, as I got older... I understood. Understood what had happened. They were evil. Pure evil... I often wonder why someone hadn’t seen what was coming. Why didn’t they stop it, before things got out of hand?’

The Doctor turned his attention from the photograph to Morgan, his eyes lost in sadness.

‘Who’s to say *why* they didn’t, Mr Sturgess? When faced with a choice, who’s to say they never believed that something so heinous could happen? Evil is a matter of perspective. The Swastika *was* originally a symbol of peace... It’s still used by Buddhists to this day.’

Morgan barely registered the Doctor’s statement. Instead he continued to stare into space. ‘But surely someone could have acted.’ It was as if the little man before him could provide the answers to the questions Morgan had asked himself all his life.

The Doctor’s voice was solemn. He looked back at the picture in his hands. ‘If only...’ He stood for a moment, staring, and then returned the image back to the shelf. Picking up the folder, he turned away from the photographs and continued, his tone once again gaining strength. ‘But hindsight is a terrible thing, don’t you agree? Like the Jelly Baby, all we can do is learn from those mistakes. Prevent them being replayed.’

‘And that’s what you’re here to do, is it? Prevent me from making some terrible mistake?’ Morgan was suddenly awoken from his melancholy by the Doctor’s statement — it was just another ploy to achieve his aims. Morgan was livid; the arrogance in his tone was obvious. ‘I must warn you, Doctor, that I

respond just as negatively to guilt as I do to threats.'

The Doctor paced determinedly over to the window, taking in the view outside. The rain had subsided momentarily, allowing the brief glare of sunlight through the clouds to illuminate the city outside. 'Mr Sturgess,' he finally began, and again Morgan picked up the trace of aggression that was there before, 'I neither think you naive nor stupid. Kindly do me the favour of treating me in the same manner.'

Morgan looked away, belittled by the Doctor's comment.

The Doctor stared, regarding the cityscape outside with disdain. 'So dull,' he whispered softly. 'No colours or shapes. Is that what you're striving to achieve? Everything in its correct place... Like the view?' He gestured outside. 'A soulless, grey progression towards the horizon. The march of humanity ever onwards, with a fixed face and a fixed tear in the eye as a testament to what was lost? It's not a pleasant sight, Mr Sturgess. Believe me when I say that.'

'I'm extending life expectancy, Doctor — not creating monsters.'

'Monsters are where you least expect them, Mr Sturgess.'

'Maybe you should have told Dr Smith this at the Koshland Symposium during his speech all those years ago. You would have obviously spared me and countless others from the waste our work and research has obviously been.' It was a glib comment, designed to thrust at the little man.

If the Doctor noticed the riposte, he ignored it. 'Who?' he asked, turning to face Morgan.

'Dr Smith,' Morgan replied, recalling the middle-aged man with white hair. 'He was —'

'When was this?' the Doctor asked, a look of confusion wrought into his face. 'The Aludium institute. The late nineties. Why—'

The Doctor suddenly looked unsteady on his feet, visibly shaking. He opened his mouth as if to say something but nothing came. In that instant, Morgan saw the shadow of something terrible flash across the man's face. He looked in pain. As if the weight of the world were on his shoulders, he outstretched his arm, attempting to steady himself on the handle of the umbrella.

Morgan took a step forward, concerned, but the Doctor held up his hand to keep him at bay. Instead the little man sighed, taking in a long slow breath and regaining his composure, drawing himself up once more, his gaze fixed upon the obstructed skyline beyond the glass. For what seemed like aeons they both stood there in silence, Morgan unsure as to what had just transpired; debating whether he should push the issue. As if sensing Morgan's uncertainty, the Doctor spoke once more, his voice low.

'Immortality is a vastly overrated concept, Mr Sturgess,' he said, his face silhouetted from the sunlight outside. 'With it comes stagnation... Imagine a world with no change, without even the *prospect* of change. A world where your whole life is planned out from beginning to end from the day you were born. No respite, no escape. Do you really think that would benefit mankind? Some of your religions would consider that a form of purgatory.' He looked down for a moment and, when he spoke again, Morgan caught a hint of defiance in the old man's voice. 'I know I would.'

‘It wouldn’t be that way!’ exclaimed Morgan, aware despite all his earlier bravado that he was now pleading his case. ‘You talk as if I’m leading humanity into a dead end! Can’t you see what this would mean to this planet? No more disease, no more death. That’s what my work will have achieved!’

‘Mr Sturgess...’ said the Doctor. He waited until he had Morgan’s full attention before he delivered the next line. When he did so he looked him squarely in the eyes. ‘Do you honestly think that’s what your research would be used for?’

Morgan was speechless. Stunned at what the Doctor was implying.

‘As admirable as your reasons for your research have been, trusting it blindly to your government — any government — could be considered by some to be a tremendous risk. Do you think that they would have the responsibility to use your research for merely altruistic reasons?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘What “I mean”, Mr Sturgess...’ He stepped forward towards Morgan. ‘You have war; you have starvation. You have tribes and sects and Group A and Group B, still — after thousands of years — clamouring for a foothold on what is — when all is said and done — a small rock in space.’ His voice rose in pitch, the ‘R’s in his speech rolling; flecks of spittle shooting out at each plosive, each step towards Morgan another indictment — another condemnation. ‘They lie and cheat and they steal. They enforce their will upon the most unfortunate group that takes the time to listen. There is hatred and xenophobia on a massive scale and, given the slightest provocation, half of the world’s population would eagerly rid the planet of the other half. If not for physical differences, then for greed. Is this the kind of world you want your “baby” project to be unleashed upon?’

Morgan began to turn away dismissively, but the Doctor grabbed his arm, forcing him to listen.

‘Imagine what your grandfather went through. The image that so scarred your father: the hunting down and persecution of millions — the systematic destruction of an entire race of people. How much easier would that have been if the aggressor never even had to lift a finger to achieve the same results?’

Morgan cast a sharp glance at the Doctor, suddenly realising where the conversation was heading. ‘Get out,’ he whispered.

‘Imagine if the Serbians had the same solution.’

‘Get out!’ Morgan’s anger was rising. He reached out and felt his fingers brushing the crystal turtle that lay on his desk.

‘Or the Hutu militia.’

‘I said *get out!*’ He was shouting now.

‘What would the Red Covenant have done five years ago had they possessed the fruits of your research when they flooded into South Korea, Mr Sturgess? How much worse could the devastation have been then?’

Morgan gritted his teeth now, the view of the little annoying man before him enveloped in a haze of red. His outstretched hand clasped the crystal turtle.

‘For that matter, how would any governmental body, already adept after several hundred years of lies, several hundred years of cover ups, of

misinformation, of wars started on a deception, of disregard for their own subjects and a hatred of everyone else's, continue their vigilance over a society ever changing?"

He leaned towards Morgan conspiratorially.

'They would take away that change... How better to keep a society in check, to keep a society pure, than to make everyone equal in quite a literal sense. Of course, there would be no disease of any kind, but there would be no need for any... undesirable elements either, Mr Sturgess, no need for anyone... different. Is that what you want to witness, Mr Sturgess? A new —'

'Don't say it,' warned Morgan, hatred just under the surface. He knew what was coming before the words had even passed the Doctor's lips.

'Final Solution?'

'GET OUT!' Morgan lifted the paperweight up over his head, ready to bring it down upon the man before him.

The Doctor slammed down the manila envelope, spilling the contents across the desk, covering the governmental paperwork beneath.

Morgan stared — jaw agape — in horror, the images on the photographs hitting him with a combination of revulsion and fascination. He teetered for a moment — taken off guard at the sight — and slumped down into the chair behind him.

The paperweight dropped to the floor and smashed. It went unnoticed.

'That's how I know...' whispered the Doctor, standing over Morgan, poker-faced as he stared down at him. 'Because I've seen it, Mr Sturgess... I've seen it first hand.'

Morgan struggled to cope with the scenes before him. 'It's a lie!' he shouted.

The Doctor's voice remained softly spoken, but steady as a rock. 'I wish it were, Mr Sturgess. I honestly do. It begins small. But then again, that's how it always begins, isn't it: small. A family pet getting too long in the tooth? Have it replaced with an exact copy. Eye problems? Implant new ones, ones that see forever. It's only a short jump from there —' he gestured to the pictures '— to here... implementation of breeding farms designed to keep the stock pure... Untainted... Holding camps for undesirables...' He held Morgan's gaze. 'Just like last time...'

He paused for a moment to let that last sentence sink in.

He began to pace slowly around the desk, encircling Morgan as he continued. Morgan found the movement reminiscent of a vulture, as if at any point the little man could finish him off and pick over the pieces without batting an eyelid — this little man who had seemed so non-threatening. He was helpless before him in his incomprehension at what was happening — frozen with his fear as he listened, nothing more than carrion.

'The human race has a great destiny, Mr Sturgess. But that won't be achieved by playing around with life as a child would with plasticine.'

There was a crunching as the Doctor stepped on to the remains of the turtle. Regarding the object beneath his feet, he brushed the shards absent-mindedly with an outstretched toe as he spoke, curving a small arc in the powdery crystal — it was an almost childlike motion.

‘Mankind’s great advantage,’ he continued, ‘is its capacity for change. You adapt, as a species. It’s what helped you crawl out of the oceans all those millions of years ago when the other species on this planet foundered. Just imagine what that predilection for change could achieve in the next million years. Just think where you could be. Masters of space... time. Are you ready to say goodbye to that possibility because of pride, Mr Sturgess? I’m not sure I am...’

Morgan was struggling to hold a grip on reality. ‘But... but what if I don’t sign the papers? If I don’t hand them the research this wouldn’t happen! I could refuse, make my research private.’

The Doctor passed behind him, his words finding their way into Morgan’s head as he walked. ‘Do you honestly think that after years of funding — of pulling the strings — they would let a small matter like that get in the way of things? Do you think they would allow you to take it back? This comes down to power in the end, Mr Sturgess. What would they do to achieve that power?’ He reached the front of the desk once more and stopped directly in front of Morgan, leaned in towards him. ‘Think about it... Think back to Dennerman. Don’t you find it curious that with all the resources at the disposal of the governmental enquiry, he was never found?’

Morgan’s throat became dry as the full realisation of what the Doctor had just said sank in.

The Doctor sat down in the chair opposite Morgan, his voice heavy with the gravity of his words. ‘They own you, Mr Sturgess. I’m sorry. I know it isn’t easy to hear, but it’s the truth. Rest assured — one day, someone will pick up where you left off. But it won’t be through the funding of a decrepit system of government looking out for their own agenda.’

Morgan was now fighting to breathe; his head was swimming.

The Doctor continued, seeing the strain in Morgan’s face. ‘One day, humanity will see an end to the limits placed upon it.’

Then he stared him straight in the eye. ‘But not today, Mr Sturgess. Not today.’ Morgan sat deathly still: a broken man, destroyed.

The Doctor watched him for several moments, letting the conversation rest, then eased himself up slowly on the handle of his umbrella, turned, and began to walk towards the door, the tap of his footsteps echoing in the large chamber as he strode slowly away. Morgan remained at the desk, his eyes transfixed on the documents before him. He was speechless, praying for an answer that would not come.

He looked up, frantic desperation in his eyes, hardly able to speak as the bile in his stomach rose — only now realising that the Doctor was about to leave. ‘Tell me,’ he pleaded, ‘how do I stop this, what do I do?’

As he reached the door, the Doctor turned and regarded Morgan with an expression of pity. ‘That isn’t my decision to make, Mr Sturgess,’ he replied softly as he pressed the release button. The door opened without incident.

‘But... but this isn’t possible. How can I change this?’ Morgan cried. ‘It’s not real. It hasn’t happened. I can’t change something that hasn’t happened!’

The Doctor remained in the doorway, brooding — his silhouette conveying the presence of someone much larger than his simple size gave him credit for. He

took in a short breath, and when he spoke, although almost thirty feet away, Morgan heard him as clearly as though he were stood next to him. 'We do what we feel we have to,' he said simply. 'You have a choice, Mr Sturgess. Right here and now you have a choice... That is more than a great many people get.' Then he turned and was gone, the door sliding back into place behind him.

For several minutes, Morgan sat motionless, continuing to stare at the door, afraid to move, wishing the Doctor would return. He didn't. His stomach churning with dread, Morgan steeled himself to look at the papers spread out on his desk once more. They stared back, filling him with images of horrors perpetrated in his name that he had never even thought possible until today.

He looked at the clock. The red numbers stared back, counting by the moments; taunting him. It was only 7.15. Only 14 minutes since the Doctor had walked into his office. Fourteen minutes since his life had changed suddenly, irrevocably.

The intercom chimed, shocking him back to reality. Élan's voice crackled over the speaker. 'Mr Sturgess, the ministry has just called. They were asking if they could reschedule the meeting... Apparently they want to take possession as soon as possible.'

He didn't answer, instead staring at the intercom in terror.

It chimed again. 'Mr Sturgess?'

He didn't respond, a cold feeling of dread overtaking him. A thousand thoughts swirled in his head as he struggled to put some meaning to what had just transpired.

It was as the clock moved over to 7.16 that he saw it. His eyes darted towards the small silver canister perched on the edge of his desk...

The explosion — when it hit— was later reported to be heard up to almost two miles away. Emergency services rushed to the scene and all weather filters were moved away from the local area and deactivated for a period of 36 hours in order to prevent damage from the smoke as it swirled upwards from the remains of the seventy-eighth floor in a large black column and away into the morning sky. The irony was that this had been the first day in several months the filters hadn't been necessary, the morning's usual precipitation making way for an otherwise clear summer's day.

At least 16 people in total were reported injured at the scene with only one fatality: the entrepreneur and founder of GENECORP, Morgan Sturgess. As the media descended upon the remains of the GENECORP building, several of them noted that it had been a miracle that more people had not been hurt in the blast.

Cordons were immediately and efficiently set up in order to prevent any more intrepid members of the public from approaching the smouldering lumps of wreckage that had recently impacted into the ground, while several passers-by and witnesses were interviewed at the scene who all reported that nothing out of the ordinary had been witnessed that morning. No one seemed to notice the small, crumpled, strangely dressed figure of a man walk right past the cameras and interviewees, away and down into the dull grey mezzanine, and into the

general populace...

The Wickerwork Man

Paul Magrs

An Adventure of the Eighth Doctor

That summer, Dad retired from teaching after forty years. Mum and I gritted our teeth and braced ourselves. We knew he would take it hard. We knew there would be terrible repercussions for his enforced captivity and inactivity. He had devoted himself to teaching, all those years, all that effort, and now they were sending him home for ever.

It was poor Mum I felt sorry for. She'd never see the back of him. This was the end of her fun, I was sure.

Dad finished up his last week before the summer holidays with a certain amount of dignity. Only in his very last lesson did he allow himself to rail at the nasty-natured, shiftless Year Tens who'd blighted his final year in the profession: 'You lot don't know you're born! You'll never be anything! You'll never have to work or try to accomplish anything! You simply don't want to!' And all they did was laugh in his face and watch him limp out of that place with his wooden stick. Poor old fool.

I'm Peter, the son. I live at home with my parents. Even at the age of 22. I suppose I'm as shiftless and idle as all the kids my dad's been ranting and moaning about, these final years of his illustrious teaching career. He brought me up to be as useless as they are. Oh, well. I'm full of allergies, that's what it is. I've got all the paperwork to prove it. Actually, summer is a nightmare for me, what with midges and pollen and what have you.

Dad himself has always been busy busy busy. He can't stop himself. So, when he retired, and the staff had presented him with a few engraved knick-knacks and an oversized farewell card, he flung himself into all the house improvements and manly household tasks he had been carefully saving up.

Shelves went up. Little rails and hangers in the bathroom. And he was forever out in the garden, hacking and chopping and getting himself all in a sweat over his compost.

The cellar became sacrosanct: all the glass jars filled with pins and screws and bolts and hooks, everything labelled fastidiously. From down there we could hear sawing and banging and all sorts, all night long. All of it was methodical, patient, neat. Dad is the very opposite of me and Mum, who both tend to be slipshod.

'I think that's what's put you off doing anything much careerwise, Peter,' Mum laments. 'Your dad being such a perfectionist. Such a professional.'

'You're right,' I sigh. 'What chance do I stand? It's so demoralising.'

This is us, chatting like this, complicit as we steal away from the house and into Mum's Octavia, and head across the city to the Trafford Centre. While Dad's labouring away in the cellar, we thought we'd have a shufti round Selfridges and John Lewis. This time of year might mean end of term and no more school to teachers — but to Mum and me it means summer sales and bargains galore.

That was the night we saw the table and chairs.

Our family had never gone in for outdoor dining before.

The same thought entered both Mum's and my heads at the same time. An idea of gracious living. A large parasol to shield us from the blazing July sun, as we sipped chilled white wine and nibbled on a niçoise salad. We'd recline and read our magazines and chunky summery novels. We'd laze about on these wonderful wickerwork chairs at our new and swishy wickerwork table.

It was marvellously reduced in price, and it was the very last set in stock. Mum and I — habitués of sales seasons — knew that it would go in a flash to someone. We had to strike now. She jabbed the buttons on her mobile, but could she raise Dad? No, he'd still be down in that cellar, sleeves rolled up, hammering away or somesuch. Mum gnawed her thumbnail and I heard it crack. I winced.

'Let's just buy it,' she said decisively. She fished out all of her credit cards and was immediately set upon by sales people. When could they deliver? Could she get a further reduction? What colours did the parasol come in?

I stood watching, beaming. Mum was never happier than when there was a big transaction going on; a large new purchase in the offing. It was while I was standing there, in the middle of that gleaming, gorgeous, cathedral of a shop that I noticed the Doctor. And he had noticed our table and chairs.

While Mum was sitting at a desk, signing all the papers, jabbing in her PIN number and undergoing the whole ritual of conspicuous consumption, the Doctor was running his hand along our table. He was examining it from all angles like a garden-furniture expert. He straightened up at last. 'Hmm,' he said, fixing me with a stare.

I stared right back. This was our table and chairs now. He needn't think he was nipping in.

He had very clear, sharp grey eyes. His face was angular, pensive, rather handsome. I flinched at that first exchange of hard stares, I must admit. He had all this glossy, wavy dark hair and he was dressed — I still don't know why — a bit Mr Darcyish or something. With a cravat hanging down and a long velvet coat. There was something about him that stopped you wondering why he looked so odd, or where he came from or what he was doing. The Doctor just **was**, somehow.

He wandered over to me and tapped his nose knowingly. 'Are you having a barbecue, then?'

I nodded and I couldn't quite get my words out. Not like me. I felt a fool, standing there in calf-length shorts and a stripey T-shirt. I felt like I was the one dressed strangely. The Doctor's breath smelled like he'd been eating sweets.

'That's the idea,' I said. 'You're not after it too, are you? It's the last in stock, this table and chairs, and Mum really wants it for my dad. He's just retired and she doesn't think he's got long to live and...' I was about to go into this whole sob story, hoping that the Doctor would be the type to be taken in by it. Instead he put a finger to his lips.

'What's your name?'

I told him. He nodded again.

'I don't want the table and chairs, no,' he said. 'I was just checking it.'

‘What for? Woodworm?’

‘Unusual vibrations,’ he said, frowning, and reaching a hand out to the table again. ‘Sentience.’

‘What?’ I started laughing.

Suddenly he said, ‘Invite me to your barbecue.’

‘What?’ I was starting to sound like an idiot.

‘I mean it,’ he gabbled. ‘Invite me right now, and I’ll come. Seriously. This is a once in a lifetime chance. I’ll come round and — oh. But not shrimp. Don’t do shrimp, I won’t come then. Other than that I’m not faddy at all.’

Out of the corner of my eye I saw that Mum had finished up at the sales desk. She looked flushed with triumph and pleasure. Her blush clashed with the orange of her trouser suit. She frowned when she saw me talking with a strange man. Then she started titivating her hair and marched towards us.

‘You don’t know where we live...’ I said.

‘Yes, I do, Peter. Well, I’ll find my way there. So — am I invited? Saturday early evening, hmm? Okay. I magnanimously accept. Bye, then.’

And he darted off, in the direction of the electronic appliances department, much to Mum’s annoyance. ‘Who was your friend?’ she asked, giving me a funny look, like I go talking to strange men in shops all the time. Like she can talk!

We thought that Dad would kick up more of a fuss about our extravagance. It’s the usual way. Something Mum’s bought, or something I’ve chosen, or some *folie à deux* we’ve dragged back from the shopping centre. Usually he’s stood there, berating us, telling us neither of us brings in a living wage, and we’re sucking the lifeblood out of him. We’re selfish, silly, greedy people.

So at first we didn’t say a thing about the wickerwork table and chairs.

‘You’re very subdued this evening,’ he said, as we struggled with the macaroni cheese Mum had flung together out of what was left in the cupboards. ‘Didn’t you buy anything nice at the shops? That’s not like you.’

‘Nice, he says!’ laughed Mum.

It was in the middle of the following morning that the van pulled up in our cul-de-sac. Dad was pruning the hedges at the front, making everything symmetrical and precise. I heard him shouting out, ‘I’m afraid your instructions *must* be wrong, then. We *haven’t* ordered...’

And I heard Mum’s mules slapping on the path as she ran out to explain. ‘Oh, erm, we have, actually, darling...’ She only ever called Dad ‘darling’ in front of delivery men.

I crawled out from under my duvet and peered out of my window to see. There were the table and chairs, swathed in packaging, being offloaded from the back of the van. I saw Dad sling down his hedge trimmer in a fit of pique. I was confident that Mum would soon talk him round. She would have to. We needed him to work the barbecue. Neither of us could do it.

She would tell him: gracious living. Alfresco. Like being on the continent in your own back yard. She would sell the whole concept to him, I was sure.

By the time I was up and about and I'd settled on the day's ensemble, the delivery had been made, chits had been signed and the van had gone. The table and chairs were unpacked and set up on the back patio. The parasol was up and Mum and Dad were standing looking at it, waiting for me to come out and give my verdict.

It was everything we had hoped for. It transformed everything around it.

'Do you like it?' Mum hesitantly asked Dad.

'It's all right, I suppose.'

She winked at me. Now she had to get him down the shops to buy a barbecue and about a ton of frozen food and lashings of booze. That was the next thing.

'I don't know how you two twist me round your little fingers,' Dad said, shaking his head. They were getting into the car. 'You two are spoiled, that's what it is.'

Mum laughed. 'Just think how lovely it will be. All our friends and family round on Saturday. All admiring our new things. It'll be like a proper retirement party for you. Much better than that pathetic send-off you had at work.'

Dad looked rueful. 'That's true.' And, as he got into the driver's seat, I just knew that he was picturing himself in a chefs hat and pinny, tongs at the ready: master of the griddle.

I went out that night and, by the time I came home on the last train, I saw that Mum and Dad were still out in our garden. They had bought paper lanterns and blazing wax tapers. They were sitting at our garden table with tall glasses of gin.

'Look at you two, sitting out in the dark!'

'Oh, it's lovely, pet,' Mum sighed. 'Look, even your dad's relaxed.'

He hoisted himself up in his wickerwork chair. It was true, usually he would be down in his basement doing his DIY stuff. How had Mum got him to unwind so much?

'Rather comfy, this,' he said.

It was a balmy evening. No breeze, no chill in the air. The dark garden was fragrant and the air was soft.

'There's a police box by the railway station,' I said.

They looked at me.

'It hasn't always been there, has it?' I asked. But I've lived here all my life. I've been catching trains into the city from Levenshulme station since I was a toddler. I'd never seen that tall, battered box before.

'Some new community policing thing, maybe,' Dad said. 'Putting bobbies back on the beat.'

Mum didn't look convinced. 'Are you sure it wasn't a public convenience?' I tutted and went in to fetch myself a drink.

Funny thing about that night. Much, much later I went to bed. Mum and Dad had already gone. I thought — or maybe imagined — that they were making eyes at each other. Which is pretty disgusting at their age, frankly, but good luck to them anyway. I sat out there smoking a couple of ciggies, enjoying the night.

A breeze struck up, round about midnight. A delicious, balmy breeze, that seemed to come from a long way away. A breeze that brought a hint of foreign places. Exotica. The beech trees out back shushed and swayed and the noise was like the ocean. There were a thousand rustlings and whisperings in the night. All the windows in all the houses were black and suddenly — I don't know where it came from — I felt a tiny stab of fear. The wickerwork creaked beneath me. A creak like a slowly closing door. A noise that niggled me and made me stub out my fag on the decking and hurry indoors.

I slept deeply, with troubled dreams that I couldn't recall later. I woke in the very early hours. Dawn broke early. The sky was metallic, hard, shiny. I went to the loo and peered out of the back window on an impulse.

Dad was sitting out there, alone, on one of the wickerwork chairs.

What did he think he was doing? He'd die of cold. Of rheumatic fever. He'd be sitting there covered in dew. I gave a little rap on the window pane with my knuckles.

He must have heard. He didn't look up. He sat staring straight ahead. The silly old thing was still in his pyjamas. His feet were even bare.

That next day was when I felt like I was going crazy. I walked along to the high street to pick up a few groceries and when I passed by the station I stopped and blinked. That tall blue box had gone. I frowned, all the way round Iceland. By the time I'd picked up a newspaper and some milk and passed the station once more, there it was again. Bold and blue as you like. I felt like someone was playing games with me. No one in the bus queue seemed to have noticed anything untoward, but there was the box again, right outside the Turkish takeaway. The one that advertises 'doner barm's'. I sidled closer to the box and touched it, briefly, snatching my hand away when I realised that the box was tingling. It was vibrating, I was sure, as though it was alive.

The bus came along then, and all the queue went shuffling on board the double-decker to Piccadilly. I'd once seen an old drunk throw a bottle of sherry at a young student on that bus because she'd been talking too loud. Seriously. That's what it's like on that bus.

Just then one of the doors of the box creaked open. I jumped and fell back. Someone was stepping out and I almost fell over in shock, because it was that fella from Selfridges the other night, the one in the cravat who'd said he was coming round our house on Saturday.

'Did you knock?' he said, smiling.

'What on earth are you doing in there? Jumping out at people...' I sounded reproachful, I know, but my heart was hammering away.

'Where?' He looked confused.

'What is that thing? What's it doing here?'

'Oh, it's you,' he suddenly said, smiling broadly and tossing back all of that hair. He stepped out of the box and locked the door. 'Remember? We met in that big department store. Your mother was buying garden furniture.'

'Of course I remember.'

'I'm the Doctor,' he said. 'Tell me, Peter, how are you getting on with that

table and chairs? Nothing unusual about them?’

I shook my head. ‘Should there be?’

His face seemed to cloud over suddenly. ‘I’m not sure. I’ve been checking everyone’s gardens within a ten-mile radius. That’s a lot of suburban gardens. A lot of garden furniture.’

‘Hmm,’ I said.

‘And I don’t think all of them are affected. Just the wickerwork ones.’

‘Right,’ I said.

‘Yours had the most powerful emanations, though.’

‘Did it really?’ It was hard to know what to say in reply to that. It almost sounded like a compliment.

‘Well,’ he said. ‘I must be getting on. There’s a couple of other things I need to look into.’ With that, he started marching off under the railway bridge, towards the Stockport Road.

‘Hang on, you still haven’t explained what you’re on about and why you hang around in a wooden box...’

But he was gone. I touched the box again and it was definitely giving off a slight tingle. Softer, more gentle than static. Hadn’t he said something about the wickerwork giving off vibrations?

I wondered if he worked for the manufacturer or something.

Mum was hot-tonging her hair in the kitchen, which wasn’t her usual place for self-grooming. I walked in and there she was, staring out of the window at the garden. ‘He’s done nothing all day,’ she said in a stage whisper.

I set down the bags of shopping. ‘Who, Dad? Well, he’s retired, isn’t he? If he wants to enjoy the sun, why shouldn’t he?’

‘But it’s not like him, is it?’ she said. ‘Look at him! Just sitting there at the new table. He’s hardly moved at all. I took him out a cup of instant coffee and some Nice biscuits earlier, and he just said thank you. And that was it!’

I understood her at once. Dad hated instant coffee, and Nice biscuits.

‘He isn’t himself at all,’ Mum said gloomily. ‘What about all his projects? What about all the DP/ and woodwork? I’m even missing the sound of hammering and banging, though I never thought I’d say that.’ She gave a sudden shriek. ‘You don’t suppose he’s having a breakdown, do you? That happens sometimes, doesn’t it? When a retired person finds themselves adrift, without a role...’ Mum looked close to tears as she finished up tonging her hair. Just wish he would talk to me, Peter. Tell me what the problem is. Some men talk to their wives. He never has. He’s always been in a little world of his own.’

I couldn’t believe it. I’d not seen Mum so upset in years. She’s such a happy, contented soul usually. Something must be very wrong for her to get herself so wound up.

I went out to have a word with my dad. Me and him have never been close. I know I’m probably a mummy’s boy. I always have been. When I was a kid, Dad tried to get me to play football and he’d embarrass me by joining in and running about with a ball. Or he’d want to talk about cars or sport or something, and I’d get embarrassed for him. I suppose I froze him out. I made him feel stupid. He’s

never known, really, how to carry on with me.

‘Dad?’

He glanced at me. There was a strange look in his eye. His face looked subtly different somehow. ‘Peter.’ He smiled. I realised he was wearing one of his work suits. He was sitting at the wickerwork table just like it was his teacher’s desk at school. His eyes were gazing vacantly at invisible pupils’ desks.

‘I thought you were getting on with the new bookcases today, Dad,’ I said. ‘The ones for the sitting room. You were right in the middle of putting them together.’ He shrugged. ‘I suppose I was.’

‘It’s not like you, to go off a project halfway through.’

‘Isn’t it?’ He frowned. Then he held up both his hands and looked at their calluses and lines. ‘I love working with wood, don’t I?’ he said. ‘I’ve always tried to interest you in it. In all my little projects. You’ve never really been bothered though, have you, Peter?’

I smiled, shaking my head.

‘Remember that garage I made for you when you were a kiddie? For your Matchbox cars?’

I did. Though I always hated toy cars, and couldn’t see the attraction in *brmming* them along, Dad’s toy garage had always been a favourite. A beautiful, multi-storeyed object with a working lift. I’d imaginatively converted it into a department store. Its ramps had become catwalks for miniature fashion shows.

‘There’s something satisfying about working with wood,’ Dad said. ‘It’s still alive. It responds to your touch. It’s just flesh, you see? And it’ll do what you want, given the right touch...’ Now he was stroking the creaking wickerwork of the table and there was an almost feverish light in his eyes.

‘I was always so clumsy at making things,’ I said.

‘Yes,’ he said, chuckling. ‘You were, weren’t you?’ Then his voice hardened, curiously, as he looked at me. ‘How will it feel, to leave no impression on this world? Have you thought about that? What will you feel like, when you realise that you will contribute nothing useful or beautiful, hmm? Will you be able to stand that thought, Peter?’

I took a step backwards. It was a horrible thing for him to say. ‘What do you know about it?’ I told him. ‘How do you know what I’ll contribute to the world?’

Dad shrugged. He said, in an amused tone, ‘Time runs out. It’s always running out. I can’t see you changing your ways much. You’ll just drift through. Shopping, chatting. A small life. A pathetic life. Much like your mother’s. Never mind. What a pity. A shame, really. But never mind.’

I couldn’t believe I was hearing this.

These were the thoughts in the mind of the man who fiddled away in our cellar! Who tapped and banged and hammered away underneath our feet! Whiling his time away making his silly shelves and whatnot and doing his DIY. And there he was, feeling so superior all that time. Feeling like what he was doing was so important— and his own wife and son were useless and futile. So that was the truth and now it was out. He hated us! He must do, to tell me what he just had.

Mum must have been right. He was having a breakdown.

We ended up inviting everyone we knew for Saturday night. And, when the time came, and our garden was heaving with friends, relations and Dad's ex-work colleagues, he seemed okay. He seemed back to his old self. He was in his pinny and working away at the flash-looking barbecue set Mum had talked him into buying. He'd also bought every kind of barbecue implement you could imagine too. Dad likes to be well equipped.

Everyone was getting pretty carried away on the drink. We had this huge bowl of murky-looking punch that everything had been tipped into. I was standing there with my ladle, making sure everyone had a try. Then, all of a sudden, the Doctor was standing there, holding out his paper cup and grinning. This time he was in an open-necked white shirt. I was glad he'd dressed down a little. I'd have to explain to people who he was, and it would have been even stranger had he been standing there in fancy dress.

What would my parents think? That I was about to run off with an older bloke? 'I said I'd come,' he smiled over his drink. Still, he kept sipping it as we talked. 'I'd like to know what you're up to,' I said quietly, glancing round to see if anyone was without a drink.

'I just do whatever I'm required to do,' he said. 'Wherever I happen to be. And right here and now, there's something very important I need to sort out. Some particular person, or being, who needs to be sent packing.'

'Oh, yes?' I said. When I looked at his steely eyes, there was something about the Doctor's tone that made me lose the sense of what he was actually saying. But I knew I would just go along with whatever he told me. Funny, that. Usually I'm more headstrong.

Mum was standing there, all of a sudden. She'd brought a plate of corn on the cob, all sizzling and smelling delicious. She was looking pretty hot too, was my mum. She'd been and treated herself to a catsuit affair and her hair was spectacular. She held the corncobs under the Doctor's nose and beamed at him. 'Weren't you the one in the shop the other evening?' she purred.

'Hmm?' he said, distracted. 'Yes, um. When you bought your... garden table and chairs. How are they working out, by the way? No problems?'

'What?' She blinked. She didn't know how to take him. Mum was doing some pretty heavy-duty flirting, but it wasn't having the desired effect at all. I hung back, embarrassed for both of them. 'Are you an expert in garden furniture, Mr...?'

'Doctor, actually,' he said. 'And this is just a passing interest of mine. It's a particular set of garden furniture I'm interested in. A set that is made from a particular type of bamboo. From China.'

'Oh, yes?' she said. 'I think ours is synthetic, isn't it, Peter?'

I shrugged. How should I know?

'I assure you,' said the Doctor, suddenly very serious, 'that your table and chair set is built from real wood. Ancient wood. Far more ancient than anyone — even its manufacturer — suspected.'

‘How interesting,’ Mum said, taking his empty cup and passing it, with hers, to me for refilling. She wasn’t about to give up her flirting just yet. ‘So you think it’s more valuable than we knew, eh? If it’s an ancient antique and all.’

‘Valuable?’ He frowned heavily. ‘I don’t care about that. And neither should you.’ He took the second cup of punch and drained it absent-mindedly. ‘What should concern us is how deadly it is.’

‘Deadly?’ Mum looked as if she was about to laugh in his face. ‘Our patio furniture is deadly?’

‘If I’m right,’ he said, ‘then it’s extremely deadly.’

We looked across the patio, through the crush of casually dressed guests, all swaying about to the summery music, under the spotlessly blue sky. We stared at the table near the barbecue set, where it seemed innocuous enough, under its freight of paper napkins and bowls of colourful salads.

‘Beware Goomba,’ said the Doctor, very quietly, so that we could barely hear his words.

‘Goomba?’ said Mum, and then she finally did laugh. She shook her head and patted him on the shoulder, saying to me: ‘Peter, I don’t know where you find these funny friends of yours. Goomba!’ And off she went, shaking her head. I saw her heading in Dad’s direction. Dad was waving his new stainless-steel implements with aplomb, showing off and impressing the ladies clustered around him. Great gouts of controlled flame were shooting out of the barbecue-machine thing.

‘Doctor,’ I said, ‘L.’ I turned round, just in time to see him striding away through the crowd, and out of the garden. Right, I thought. You don’t get away as easily as that. You don’t come round here and make a few spooky, cryptic asides, and then sneak out without a sensible word of goodbye. I struggled through the seething, sweltering party, out the garden gate, and up the alleyway at the side of our house.

I knew where he was going. He was striding along determinedly, head down, marching down the winding, leafy streets, back towards Albert Road and the railway station. He went straight past the bus queue and, sure enough, right up to the doors of that police box. He unlocked the door, glanced around sharpish — and that’s when he saw me, outside the kebab shop.

‘Who’s Goomba?’ I said.

He rolled his eyes. ‘I suppose I’ll have to tell you now, won’t I?’ He nodded at the door into the box. ‘Be my guest.’

‘In there?’ He nodded, and I darted in.

What it reminded me of in there was when they do up an old bank or something, and make it into a nice theme pub, like they have in the city centre. So you’ve got this large space on several layers, pillars and potted palms and stained glass. But then you’ve got comfy seats and mood lighting and all that. Well, that’s what his TARDIS was like inside.

It was a bit of a jumble sale, really, but you could see that he was dead proud of it, so I said I was impressed by it and everything. I’m used to looking at people’s flats and whatnot and saying the right things about what they’ve done with the space. Like, warehouse flats in town and stuff.

Anyway, I made all the right oohing and aahing noises about the deceptive interior of the Doctor's blue box.

He was over at what I thought was some kind of writing desk in the middle of the room. I followed him and realised it was covered in control panels, all lit up and blinking.

'It's quite good, this,' I said. 'And you get all of this inside that little box?'

He looked up from his control-panel thing. 'Hmm,' he said. And that's when he explained what it was called, and how it could go anywhere in time and space. 'That's a dizzying prospect,' I said. 'A nice one, though.'

'Well,' he said. 'I promised I'd explain to you what the danger is.' He pressed a number of switches and twizzled a bunch of dials. Then he told me to look at the ceiling, where a huge screen was opening up and crackling into life.

'Mum was keen on a plasma screen thing,' I said. 'But the salesboy blinded her with science.'

'Watch,' the Doctor said.

'What am I looking at?' It was some kind of prehistoric swamp, all glowing with lurid colour and just about 3D. It was like being at one of those cinemas where it's all real as life, or so they say. I wouldn't fancy that much.

'This is China,' he said. 'Or what will become China, in several million years' time.'

'Really?' I said.

'Look at the bamboo,' he told me. I could hardly avoid it. Huge knotty spears of the stuff, spiking up in every direction. It was hard to get a sense of scale, but it all looked enormous to me. 'Look at that particular plant.'

'What, the one with the face?'

I'd spoken the words before I'd thought them out. And the plant did indeed have a face. It was the most malignant and evil-looking face I'd ever seen. Its glowing red eyes were glaring out at me.

'*That's* Goomba,' the Doctor said. 'At least, that's how he was, back then, all that time ago.'

'He's awful,' I said.

'He doesn't belong on this Earth.' The Doctor sighed. 'He's a creature who slipped through from some other dimension. He's a tree god of tremendous power and wiles. He floated through space, looking for somewhere to plant himself .. and came to Earth in a terrible lightning storm at what you would probably call the dawn of time. Anyway. He's a nasty piece of work.'

I licked my lips and they tasted bitter, suddenly, from all of that punch I'd been drinking. 'Where is he now?' I asked, dreading the answer.

The Doctor looked at me very solemnly. 'If I am right — and I think I am — Goomba, or what's left of him, is sitting in the corner of your garden, being used as a salad bar.'

What did I expect the Doctor to do?

I'm not sure. He had all the answers, didn't he? And the super, whiz-bang, outer-space gadgetry, so I suppose I expected him to sweep into action and save the day, or something. It seemed like the kind of thing he might do. Instead, he

slumped down in a high-backed armchair. He picked up a stack of old Jack Kirby comics and started sipping at a cup of tea, calm as you like. He didn't offer me any tea. I just stood there, dumbfounded at his manners.

'I'll be off then, shall I?'

'Hmm?' He peered at me over his comic. How was his tea still hot, I wondered vaguely. 'Oh, yes, off you go then. If anything untoward happens, let me know, will you?' He smiled and nodded absent-mindedly.

God, I once went out with a bloke who read American comics. He was a bit weird, as well, come to think of it. They start thinking it's normal, all that dashing about in silly costumes and battling huge, elemental creatures.

But... the Doctor really did live inside this Gothic, cavernous tomb. It really was hidden inside a police box. Ergo he really did have weird powers of a particular sort. And I had walked into something beyond my understanding. It was all true.

But the Doctor wasn't playing any more. 'Just shut the door after you, would you?' he called airily, as I headed towards the exit. What had I done or said wrong, I wondered.

Soon enough, I was back out on sultry Albert Road. The stone was still warm from the day's heat and the air was choking with petrol fumes and kebabs. Luckily no one saw me creeping out of the police box and clicking the door closed.

I stomped home crossly. What had he shown me those strange pictures for, anyway? Goomba the bamboo monster from the dawn of time? Thrashing about with his eyes all ablaze; a spirit from another dimension, all voodoo and splenetic fury.

As I hurried through the darkness towards home, thinking of the back garden lit with tapers and the friendly noise of our oldest friends and neighbours, I was starting to doubt what I had seen. The Doctor had hoodwinked me. I was tipsy on that punch, that's what it was. He'd shown me some clips from some ridiculous old monster movie — some Ray Harryhausen-type twaddle — and I'd fallen for it. My jaw had dropped open. That's Goomba! The stone-age bamboo monster! Of course! Honestly. I must be mental. Or rather, I'm credulous. I'd listen to anything some good-looking bloke was telling me. I'd fall hook, line and sinker. That's what Mum would say. She's always saying I'm too soft. I'd be taken in by anyone. I can't help it if I've got a trusting nature.

As I rounded into our leafy, dark street I realised that our party had quietened down somewhat. That seemed early, to me. I hurried to our cobbled side alley, and there I bumped into Dad's young headmaster, Anthony Danby, and his wife, Melanie. They were slipping out, looking relieved, I thought, as they headed for freedom. The headmaster was one of the new, young, liberal breed that Dad disapproved of, but Anthony played football, so Dad said he was okay.

'Oh,' said Melanie, noticing me. 'We have to get back for the babysitter. Can you tell your parents we had a lovely time?' She seemed jittery somehow as I nodded. They hurried away to their car and I was left wondering why couldn't they tell Mum and Dad themselves?

I soon had my answer.

I swung open the garden gate and found that all of the guests were busy on the lawn. They had abandoned the patio and the barbecue and they were working together, busily, on the dark lawn, lit only by the tall wax tapers. I recognised a few faces in the concerted hurly-burly: Mrs Evans, Dad's school secretary, and Mary Mead, our lollipop lady, and Jessica Northspoon from down the road.

They appeared to be doing DPI. All of them. Spread out on the lawn with all of Dad's tools and heaps of old wood. Crates and boxes and sticks of old furniture. Banging and tapping and hammering together. I'd wondered what all the noise was. Familiar as it was from Dad's DIY den, I hadn't expected a noise like this, magnified and in the open air. There must have been twenty or so of the remaining guests, mindlessly splicing together chunks and hunks of wood.

They were building something.

Dad was at the bottom of the garden. He looked feverish and golden in the guttering light. I could hear him, exhorting them to work faster, faster.

'Build him! Build him!' Dad was hissing at our party guests.

I didn't like the look of this one bit.

I veered away from them, hoping not to be seen, and hurried towards the back door. I kept well clear of the new dining table and chairs. The patio set sat there, looking bare and innocuous enough. But now I knew for sure that there was more to it; that the Doctor had been right. With an almost superstitious dread, I skirted right past it and into the kitchen.

Mum was drinking a tall glass of gin and chewing on the ends of her hair. She was watching the lawn activities through the window. 'Oh!' she gasped at me. 'Where have you been?'

'Never mind that. What's going on?'

She gave a very fake laugh. 'It's your dad's doing. DP / gone mad, I suppose! It's like one of those make-over programmes. He's got them all at it, look!'

'But they're, like... possessed,' I said.

Our party guests seemed to be redoubling their efforts, even as we watched. They were working in concert, in deepest concentration, knocking pieces together and passing them over for further work, wordlessly, as if they were all aware of the grander design, the final shape that these unwieldy jigsaw pieces would eventually take on.

'What are they making, Mum? What has he got them all doing?'

Mum looked stricken. 'I don't know. I think he's really flipped. You've seen his behaviour recently, Peter.'

'But why are they just blindly following him? And doing what he tells them?'

'Your father can have a very commanding manner,' she said.

'I don't like this,' I said. 'It feels wrong, somehow.'

'I took round a tray of nibbles,' she said dolefully. 'And no one was interested. No one even looked. Not even Mr Roberts from Windsor Road. He's 85 and — look! — he's working like a demon.'

Now they seemed to be putting pieces together, bang in the middle of the lawn. They looked like Egyptians toiling to put up the pyramids. Or children

building up a bonfire... piling and piling the wood in a heap; nailing it together as if for a gimcrack crucifixion...

'I think we should stop them,' I said.

'How?' Mum said nervously. 'They won't listen to us.'

I looked at her. 'You know what's causing this, don't you?' She shook her head and I dragged her to the kitchen door. I pointed at the new table set on the patio. 'The Doctor was right. It's that thing. Whatever was inside it... has got inside Dad. That's what's behind this. Goomba.'

'Oh, really, Peter.' Mum rolled her eyes and grasped the Gordon's gin from the breakfast bar. 'This is Levenshulme. We don't have ancient bamboo voodoo spirits round here.'

'I think we should destroy the patio furniture. Before it's too late.'

She squawked. 'If you were the one earning the dosh, I doubt you'd be so keen.'

'How can you talk about money at a time like this?' I was having to shout now, over the noise of our party guests. They had joined in with the rhythmic, primitive chanting started by my dad: 'Build him! Build him! Build him higher! Build him up!'

'Money!' cried Mum. 'That's all you ever think about, young man. That, and spending it on designer labels and gadgets and tops and shoes and bags and everything. I wouldn't care, but you don't bring a penny into this house. You never have!'

'What?' What did that have to do with anything? My brain felt fuddled, by a mixture of confusion and shame. Mum was drunk, Dad was demented and there was some ghastly ritual going on in our garden. 'Build him! Build him higher!'

'I blame myself, Peter,' Mum slurred, chopping up a lemon savagely on the bread board and dunking the slices in her tall glass. 'I've encouraged you to be as greedy and silly as I am. Your dad was right. I've turned you. I've made you materialistic and queer and nasty-mouthed.'

'Good!' I found myself shouting back. 'Good! I'm glad!'

'No, it's not good, Peter. Look at you! You don't do anything apart from bitch and moan and shop for bargains. Now you want to smash up the patio furniture! Just because your poor old dad is enjoying himself .. and you want to spoil his fun!'

'Fun!' I yelled. 'Mum, that's not fun he's having! The poor old bugger is possessed!'

'Possessed!' She laughed, staggering a bit on the new kitchen tiles. 'Possessed, he says!'

'Yes,' I said, lowering my voice. 'And I think you are, a little bit, too.'

'Possessed!' Mum shrieked, delightedly. 'I like that! By Goomba, I suppose, eh? By Goomba the bamboo god!'

And then I looked at the DIY zombies at the bottom of the garden. All the banging and hullabaloo of construction had abruptly ended. They had seemingly completed their task.

It was an effigy of something that was not quite a man. It had a recognisable if rudimentary semi-human shape. Its head was huge and hollow and its thick

arms were upraised, stretching out. There were two black holes for its eyes.

Dad and the others were clustered before it. They were evidently proud of and pleased by their handiwork.

How had they managed it? How had a ragbag assortment of staid teachers and local geriatrics managed, in less than an hour or so, to rig up this wooden monstrosity? The effigy had a weird look to it. Its dark hollow eyes drew you in. Its clumsy hands seemed to be reaching out for you.

Mum and I stared at it. We forgot about our argument. A chill silence reigned through the garden.

‘Goomba...’ Mum hissed then, in a low voice. She shuffled out of the kitchen, scraping the heels of her stillies.

‘Mum...?’

‘Woorrrssshhhiiipppp hiiimmmmm...’ Mum moaned, as she clipped past me, brushing off my words of protest. She let her gin glass crash and tinkle on the patio flagstones. The party guests took up her eerie, ecstatic chant.

‘Mum!’ I yelled, as she strode off across the grass to join them. ‘Gooooommbaaa! Gooooommbaaa! Woorrrssshhhiiip Gooooommba!’

They were all swaying now. The wax tapers guttered and spat tall flames.

Shadows danced and flickered across the hulking wooden brute of an effigy.

I fled. I fled from my own home. It was dark by now and I was scuttling away through familiar suburban streets, feeling lost and exiled and that I could never go back. It was a sensation and a predicament I’d imagined occurring to me — as a result of any number of my misdemeanours — but never had I suspected it would come about as a result of what this night had seen.

First I hurried round to the station, dodging past a few rough-looking drunk blokes. Taxis were zipping by, on to the Stockport road — and their orange lights hoving into view made me realise I had precisely no cash with me.

The police box had gone again. I could have stamped my feet on the pavement and performed a dance of fury like Rumpelstiltskin. The Doctor had nicked off again. He was completely unreliable.

I nipped up the steps to the station platform. Surely there’d be the last trains still running, shunting into Piccadilly. I’d be able to nip on ticketless, find somewhere in the city to hide out for the night. I was running blind and panicked, I knew. I’d been shocked out of my senses by the sight of Mum and Dad and their guests bowing down before that homemade god.

I ran to the end of the platform. From the very end you can see the backs of our houses. From my bedroom window I’ve always been able to see and hear the trains roaring and clanking their way in and out of Manchester. Now I was perched at the end of the platform, a runaway, staring back at my home.

And there they still were, in the blazing firelight.

From this distance, perhaps it didn’t look like anything much out of the ordinary. A family barbecue with a crowd that wasn’t, actually, all that rowdy. A statue hulking over them, unmoving. Some weird kind of construction; an art installation, perhaps. A bit of fun.

From here you would never know the strange intensity of what was going on

in our garden. Thank God I hadn't been affected, I thought. Thank God I'd kept my head, while those about me fell in thrall to Goomba.

I was staring down at our garden when a hand fell heavily on my shoulder. I just about leapt out of my skin. I swung round at the Doctor, swearing wildly.

'It's all right,' he murmured. 'You should learn to mind your language, you know.'

I swore again, and kept going till my heart palpitations stopped. There he was again, in his green velvet and silvery-grey silk waistcoat. He was staring with great interest across at our back garden, where the worshippers were swaying and moaning in ragged chorus. His eyes were gleaming.

'I see that Goomba has made his presence felt,' he said, frowning. 'Run away, did you? Were you hoping to escape into the city?'

'I don't know what I thought,' I admitted. 'I came looking for you, but your blue box had gone.'

'Yes,' he said. 'Urgent call. I had something else to attend to. You don't think I undergo these adventures one at a time, do you? Sometimes I juggle a whole load at once. Just for the fun of it, and just because I can. Well, sort of.'

'What?' I wasn't in the mood to listen to him babbling on.

'Look at that,' he said mildly, leaning forward over the metal railing. 'How interesting.'

I watched, appalled, as several wooden fences between the gardens sagged and collapsed heavily on to flower beds. There was a great creaking and grinding of wood; a splintering and snapping of planks and branches; a rending and ripping of panels and boards. Near us, the chipboard nailed to the broken windows of a condemned building was wrenched off with a great crash. 'Who's doing that?'

The Doctor's eyes were better than mine. He could see that no one was physically yanking these boards and fences apart. Some terrible disembodied force was affecting this damage.

I watched as the fragments of wood lifted up and sailed through the dark air, towards our garden, as if drawn by some peculiar form of magnetism. Even the tall beech trees and the venerable evergreens had started to stir, their branches thrashing about in frustration.

'Goomba is growing,' the Doctor said. 'He's building himself up.'

We could just about make out the sight of the wood attaching itself to the body that our barbecue guests had fashioned for him. The moments passed and he grew larger and more grotesque; his body thick and stolid like the bole of an ancient tree.

Then we heard his voice. His worshippers shrieked gleefully as he opened his colossal mouth and roared his name to the south Manchester skies: **'Gooooommbbaaa!'**

'I think it's time we did something about this,' said the Doctor, turning sharply on his heel, and marching quickly down the platform. I hurried to keep up, and found that he was muttering away, seemingly to himself. 'Perhaps I've let it go too far. I should have just taken the garden furniture and left. I shouldn't have let them get this deep...'

‘What are you saying?’

‘Oh,’ he said. ‘I’m just thinking aloud. I might have made my usual mistake. You know, got myself so interested in it all, and what might happen and everything and... um, I might have let things go too far.’

‘What will Goomba do?’ I was panting, keeping up with his pace. We tripped quickly down the tiled stairways. Very careful not to trip. Those steps are a nightmare.

‘Oh, Goomba will do what displaced, misplaced evil gods from other dimensions always do when they get themselves a willing pack of lackeys.’

‘Take over the world?’ I said. ‘Enslave mankind?’

The Doctor stopped in his tracks. ‘You’re very good at this, aren’t you?’ We started running again, down to the station’s exit. ‘You see, there might be an ecological angle to this too. Goomba’s been stuck on this world, all during man’s time on the planet. And he’s a plant, you see. He might be a bit miffed at the way you lot have — you know — treated your environment and so on. He might be out for revenge.’

‘I suppose he might,’ I said. ‘Why doesn’t he declare revenge on pandas, then? They even eat bamboo.’

‘I’m only surmising,’ said the Doctor. ‘Based on long, long experience of dealing with baddies.’ He fished around in his pockets for his police box keys. ‘Come inside,’ he said, and I hopped in after him, loving the cool and echoing quiet within, which seemed like a world apart from the fervid voodoo heat of our back garden.

‘We need to stop his influence spreading outwards,’ continued the Doctor. ‘He’s put down roots, as it were, in the minds of your family and friends. Now his influence will spread outwards. Within days you’ll have a religious cult of Goomba operating here. The world’s eyes will be drawn to his influence. People will follow. He’ll bring them to him, and he’ll make them all do his bidding...’ The Doctor looked up at me and grinned. ‘We’re going to nip this in the bud.’

He pointed me in the direction of a kitchen alcove, where I would find a kettle and everything I needed to make two cups of sweet milky tea. It would calm my nerves, he said, and would I mind bringing his over to the console? He was finicking with the controls and I gathered that he was going to fly this box of his over to our garden, rather than take a short walk.

‘If I can just get us to materialise **around** the effigy...’ he murmured, spinning tiny dials and concentrating.

Minutes later I brought the tea over. I’d found what must have been the best china in one of the cupboards. I was just stepping up to the console, the cups and saucers tinkling in my hands, and saying, ‘Are you nearly —’, when I tripped, and fell full length, hard on to the console.

Tea splashed everywhere. The Doctor cried out as a series of small explosions fired off across the controls. Sparks and steam shot out and sizzled around us, making me jump back painfully on to my feet. I was scalded and ashamed. Then the next surprise: the blue glass columns atop the console had started to rise and fall, making a crashing, grinding, wheezing noise that was rising to a huge

climax. 'What have I done?' I said, in a very small voice.

The Doctor's face was dark with anger. He stood there very still, and then he sprang into action, poring over the damage I had caused to the instruments. 'We're in motion. You've pitched us into the vortex.'

Well. I didn't know what that meant exactly, but it didn't sound good, did it?

'I hadn't finished calibrating the exact figures...' he said, busily wafting away smoke from the smouldering circuitry.

'I've always been clumsy,' I said. 'I was always hopeless. I'd never have been able to do the DIY and stuff my dad can do... I've got awful coordination.'

The Doctor shushed me. 'It might not be so bad. You might have put us only a little way off course...' He was squinting up at the read-out on an ancient television set that was hanging from one of the iron pillars. I couldn't read what the scrolling text was telling him, but he seemed satisfied. Sort of.

'We're about to...' The wheezing and groaning of the engines cut off abruptly, with a deeply felt sigh of exhaustion. 'Land,' he added, his voice struggling to sound more hopeful. 'Thanks for the tea, Peter,' he said.

As promised, we hadn't moved very far at all. We emerged from the box at the end of our street. It was light. Bright, spangling daylight. 'When is this?' I asked, quietly. I sniffed the air. I don't know why. What does a Saturday smell like? Any different to a Wednesday?

The Doctor seemed perturbed by the daylight thing. 'We might have been pushed off course... slightly.'

'Slightly? What does that mean?'

'I don't know,' he snapped. 'You were the one who went dropping hot tea everywhere.'

Actually... this day we had landed in did have its own distinctive smell. A woody, ashy, acrid scent that came wafting out on the summery breeze. 'Bonfires...' I said.

The Doctor was way ahead of me. He led the way down the street to my house and, once in the side alley, it was obvious where all the thick, curling grey smoke was coming from. There was also a crowd of people standing there, queueing patiently to be let in. They were quite ordinary people, all ages and types. Just the sort of people you would see on the high street. Each of them had a piece of old furniture. They were carrying hat stands, foot stools, broken chairs. One poor old man was carrying a whole door, and looked like he was being squashed under its weight.

'Uh,' I said, cross that I could hardly push through into my own garden. 'What's this? *Bargain Hunt*?'

The Doctor gave me a dark, worried look. 'Let's hope not. I had a terrible time at a car boot sale, not too long ago. Awful time, with these haunted knick-knacks and...'

'You can explain it all later. What's this lot meant to be doing?'

'Tributes to Goomba, I imagine. His influence has spread. Look at them! They are utterly entranced! It must be several days later, I imagine...'

'Days! But...' I looked around wildly. I hurried to the side wall, where there

were footholds, I knew, for climbing over if you lost your key for the gate. I was desperate to get over. 'But what's happened to my parents?'

The Doctor shoved me, helping me to clamber up. Once I was astride the crumbling wall, he hopped up effortlessly beside me, which was annoying. No one in the patient queue took any notice of us. And, by then, we were too caught up with what we could see in the garden. We had to crane our necks upwards to take it all in: Goomba had grown until he was almost as tall as the beeches. His head was swollen now, till it was the size of a summer house. He was a curious assemblage of furniture and broken wood. I could see what had been our posh new table and chairs, protruding from his chest and woven into the overall design. Branches were growing out of him, here and there, and now those two hollow eyes were glowing a fearsome red, just as they had in the ancient footage the Doctor had shown me.

'He's reaching his apotheosis,' said the Doctor quietly.

'His what?'

'His... I mean, he's got very much bigger.'

He was on fire too. That was the weird thing. Why hadn't he been reduced to ash and smouldering cinders? That whole huge body rested atop a crackling bonfire, which was sending out those suffocating grey fumes. Transparent flames licked outwards and upwards, but Goomba simply sat there, basking and relishing the heat.

'Look,' said the Doctor softly. 'Inside his head.'

I choked. I don't know why I hadn't seen at first, but there was a small, human figure plainly visible inside that hollow head. An oldish man, clinging to wooden struts, red-faced and streaming with sweat. It was Dad. His head was hanging down and he looked as if he was nodding off. But then, as we watched, and the local acolytes on the lawn fanned the flames, and fed them more household furniture, Dad raised his face to the heavens. The expression on that face was exultant.

I opened my mouth to shout out, but the Doctor stopped me. 'That'll do no good.'

'But he'll die! That thing's a tinder box. He's out of his mind, and doesn't even realise the danger he's in...'

'Too late,' said the Doctor. He swung both legs over the wall and dropped lightly on to the flower beds below. I dropped a little less lithely. 'I mean it,' he added. 'I'm sorry, Peter. But your dad's a goner. You must see that. He's Goomba by now. His mind has been completely taken over by that hideous, wretched creature.'

I stared at the flames, and the wooden god rising above it all. 'We can still save him,' I said. 'The hose! It's got five settings! It's really powerful. We can put out the flames...'

'That won't bring back your father's mind. He has been absorbed, Peter.'

That wasn't going to stop me trying. I was amazed none of those brainwashed lackeys had thought to hide the hose, or even bothered to stop me dashing past them and on to the patio. I hefted the hose nozzle like a gun. 'Right,' I said, and twisted it to full.

The flames hissed and roared in fury. The smoke turned black as the wood was dampened. A mist of rain was flung everywhere round the garden and I laughed — I even laughed — as the acolytes howled out in displeasure. I was raining on their — well, not parade, exactly. Their pagan rites to an alien voodoo god. That's what I was raining on.

Goomba himself shrieked out loud as the water lashed against his wooden form and the flames were driven back. His branchlike arms flexed and thrashed; his clumsy, sinister fingers warded me off.

'Peter, no!' the Doctor was yelling. 'You'll make it worse!'

'How can it be worse?' I shouted back. took! I'm doing something practical, for once in my life!'

I tried to make out the figure of my father, held trapped inside the head of Goomba, through all the hissing steam and smoke. Weirdly, there were rainbows in our garden, and the servants of the voodoo god were stamping and thrashing about inside those glimmering arches of colour, sliding about in all the mud. I drove them back with fierce blasts of freezing water.

Then the water pressure gave out. All of a sudden, it just stopped.

I whipped my head round, and there was Mum, standing at the outside tap. She glared at me. Her eyes were a venomous, unearthly red.

'You dare to jeopardise the apotheosis of Goomba?'

'What?' I'd never seen her like this. 'Mum? Stop being possessed! Stop being so weird! You've got a mind of your own! Throw off this evil influence!'

'See?' cried the Doctor, all hearty and gung ho, interposing himself between Mum and me. 'Did you notice that, Peter? Your mother used the "apotheosis" word. I told you that's what was happening. I know an apotheosis when I see it.'

'It is the hour of dread, Goomba's final becoming on this earth,' she told him in a dull lifeless tone.

'Oh, good,' said the Doctor, smiling. 'I'm glad we've managed to catch him, before the off. My ship was knocked off course by a few days or so, and I thought we might not. So he's leaving, is he? And how many human beings has he managed to enslave?'

'Enough,' hissed Mum. 'Enough to take him through to his own world.'

'Oh, good,' said the Doctor. 'And he'll just burn them all up to a crisp, will he? Or will he be eating them? And has he informed his new followers of their imminent fate, hmm? Because that's not fair, if self-sacrifice is the price of admission. I think newbies should be informed, myself. Perhaps Goomba should produce a brochure. Or a mission statement, perhaps. What do you think, Peter?'

I was watching the zombie-like followers picking themselves up. Some were piling up the wood and attempting to light it once more. Others had opened up the garden gates to let fresh acolytes in. And the rest were turning their wicked attentions to us... 'He's going to kill them all, isn't he?' I said.

The Doctor nodded quickly. 'Goomba needs sacrifices. He needs their... life essence, we could call it, to use as fuel. To help him slip through the dimensions, and return home. And, thanks to our slight delay, he has just about made a success of it.'

My heart was pounding. 'It's my fault! Mum and Dad have lost their minds,

and everyone's gonna get burned to a crisp... and it's all down to me!'

Mum fixed her blazing, hate-filled eyes on me again then, and suddenly she seemed to recognise me. But not in a good way.

'You!' she shrieked. 'You are the son! You are the one who escaped from Goomba! You are the one responsible for bringing Goomba to this place... to Levenshulme...'

'Mum, snap out of it,' I shouted. I was very aware that the worshippers had formed a solid wall around us. There was absolutely no chance of escape. And now the flames were taking hold again of the massive form of Goomba. Even soaked, the wood still managed to catch light.

'She can't hear you any more,' said the Doctor softly. 'All of them are the same. All of them speak with the voice of Goomba now.'

Then, as if in reply, that huge, shattering voice came booming out of the vast effigy. '**Goooooommmmbaaaaa!** Goomba will speak with you!'

We were swept along in a tide of zombie neighbours. They were all filthy, as if they had been out here for days without rest, building this pyre. The Doctor, Mum and I were caught up in the crush. Only the Doctor and I weren't wearing mad, ecstatic expressions at the hideous sound of Goomba's voice.

'I am almost ready,' said the creature, 'to make my departure from this world.' A ragged cheer at this, from his exhausted acolytes, though I gathered his going wouldn't bode well for any of them.

'You have served me well, you human beings from the place known as Levenshulme. Goomba has waited many thousands of years to be served so well, and to leave this world far behind. You will be rewarded lavishly for the sacrifice of your physical beings.'

I heard the Doctor give a polite cough, over the mutterings and sobbing of the servants of Goomba. 'Hello? Goomba? Could I have a word?'

The wooden god's eyes blazed. He was a terrifying sight, it has to be said, with those hungry flames licking around him, and growing ever higher. I stared into those scarlet eyes, and I could still pick out the silhouette of my dad, crouching and cowering inside that hollow head.

'Who addresses Goomba?' the creature demanded. 'Who still has a will of his own?'

'Ah,' shouted the Doctor. 'I'm rather afraid that'll be me. Though I'm not sure why I sound so apologetic about it. I'm pleased, frankly, to have my own free will left! What with all this lot being possessed and everything. You've given them no choice, have you, about giving up their physical forms for you? You're simply taking their life essences from them, to propel you into the outer dimensions. They haven't been given any choice in the matter at all!'

Goomba leaned forward slightly. You could tell he was absolutely livid. 'What manner of creature are you, to defy me thus? I am Goomba!'

'We know who you are! You've left us in no doubt, after all that shouting. I'm just pointing out that what you're doing here isn't actually very fair...' The Doctor grabbed hold of my arm, dragged me closer through the crowd of acolytes and whispered sharply, 'You've got to climb up there. Up his back. It's the only way. I'll keep him occupied.'

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. '**What?** I can't climb! Especially not up a thing like that... It's on **fire!**'

'It hasn't all caught light yet,' the Doctor hissed. 'You'll find a way up there. You must! You've got to grab your dad and get him out of there. I've just realised... we can do this! We can save them all! Prevent Goomba from burning out all their minds when he vanishes from this dimension. If you get up there, drag your dad out of the effigy's head, and get him away in time... Goomba will just be burned up. No transference and no transfiguration. Just ashes!' He grinned at me. Even there, in the middle of that hideous nightmare, he grinned at me: delighted with the simplicity of his plan. 'Go on, then!' he urged. 'You have to do it now! I'll keep Goomba chatting.'

'I...' I said. 'I...'

'What is it?' the Doctor frowned.

'I can't climb. I mean... I can't save his life. I can't do it.'

'Why not?' he snapped.

'I can't do anything, that's why. I'm useless! I'll mess it up!' I must admit, of all the times to have a crisis of confidence, this wasn't one of the better moments.

'Rubbish,' the Doctor cried. 'You push yourself through this crowd, get yourself up there and do the business. Now, go!'

We could hardly hear each other above all the ecstatic moaning and chanting and the crackling of the flames. But something in the Doctor's words had pushed me on. As I hunched my shoulders and pushed through the crowd, shifting them aside, buffeted back here and there by their eagerness and the force of the heat, I realised what it was that had spurred me on so effectively. The Doctor had faith in me. He hadn't even had to say so. He just knew I could do this.

I slipped out of the crowd, along the shade side of the garden, and down the very back, where the compost heap was. It was quieter here and, when I looked, the Doctor was right.

The flames hadn't quite reached the back of the effigy. They were concentrated at the front, on the heap of branches and wood at Goomba's feet. Suddenly I could see a way to climb up the back of the creature. There were footholds and handholds everywhere. If only he stayed still, and didn't notice that I was clinging on for dear life... I braced myself and ran forward...

'What do I care,' Goomba was bellowing at the Doctor, 'for the lives of human beings? What are they to me? Merely fuel.'

'They'll hear you, Goomba! I'm sure they won't be very pleased to hear that.'

'Their minds are gone,' he shouted. 'While I live, their minds are useless. They have no thoughts of their own.'

'Except for the one in your wooden skull, eh, Goomba?' cried the Doctor. 'Except for him. He still hangs on to some of his intelligence, doesn't he? Because he provides the vital spark, doesn't he? He's the flint that strikes up the spark to propel you across the multiverse. Without him, you're lost, aren't you?'

I was yanking myself up the twisting branches that formed the wooden god's calves, then the thick planks that his thighs were made out of. This exchange of his and the Doctor's was booming out all around me.

'That is true,' Goomba admitted. 'The human being here inside me was the

first human Goomba made proper contact with. He is vital indeed.'

'Oh, yes,' called the Doctor mockingly. 'That was back in the days when you were just a set of garden furniture, wasn't it? How galling that must have been for you! How riled you must have been! The great god Goomba, reduced to garden furniture! You were even reduced in a sale because no one really wanted you!'

'Silence!' the creature roared. He twisted about and I was almost flung off, into the trees. I was aching and sweating like mad now; red hot from the exertion, but also the creeping flames. I was far away enough from them not to be in danger just yet, but their heat was intense. 'You may not speak to me like that!' Goomba screamed. 'Seize him, my servants!'

I could see, through gaps in the hollow creature's body, that the Doctor was being manhandled and dragged to the ground. I could see my own mother in that savage melee, tackling him down on the lawn.

'You won't win, Goomba!' the Doctor bellowed, still undeterred. 'Creatures like you never do...'

I was hoping Goomba wouldn't suddenly become aware of my presence, as I scaled up his neck, hand over hand. Then, suddenly, I was at his head, which was a sort of cage, all latticed and woven from sticks and branches. It was all quite ingenious, the way his acolytes had built him. It was a shame he was evil, really.

But there was no time to dwell on the aesthetics of the bamboo god. I had to rattle on the wooden bars of the cage, I had to squeeze open a gap and I had to get my dad's attention before it was much too late. 'Dad!' I hissed. Would Goomba hear me? Where were his ears? What would he do when he realised I was there?

Dad was slumped by one of the glowing eye cavities. He looked just about dead with heat exhaustion and madness.

'Dad! It's me! I've come to get you out of here!'

He jerked awake at the sound of my voice. What...?'

Below, the noise was even more fierce. It sounded as if that crowd was baying for the Doctor's blood. They wanted to rip him to shreds for blaspheming against Goomba.

'Do not destroy him!' Goomba shouted. 'We will take his essence too. Nothing must be wasted. Not a single drop...' The voice echoed horribly inside that wooden skull. I was half inside now, dragging myself between the jagged woven branches.

'Get yourself away, Peter,' said Dad. He waved at me feebly. 'He's going to murder us all. There's nothing I can do to stop him. You must get yourself away...'

Dad's face was contorting as he forced these words out. He was struggling desperately to retain control of his own mind: just enough to warn me to flee.

'I won't leave you,' I shouted. 'You're coming down from here with me.' I reached out my hands to him.

'The flames!' he shouted. 'They're higher than ever. We'll never make it down...' This was so much like a movie I couldn't believe it. Everything was

coming to a climax all together, and at the very last moment. The only thing missing was the touching moment of understanding and reconciliation.

Dad looked at me. 'You're... you're going to save me?' He staggered to his feet, choking on the thick fumes that were issuing up through the gaps in the struts of wood. 'You, Peter? You've come to save me? I didn't think you'd ever do that. I thought you didn't think much of me...'

I grabbed hold of his skinny old arms and dragged him through the middle of the skull, which had started to rock now. Goomba had realised that something was going on. Those fearsome red orbs of his eyes were flashing horribly. 'Of course I'm here to save you, you silly old fool!' I helped him haul himself through the gap in the wood. I hung on and supported him while he yanked himself free. 'Why did you do it, Dad?' I asked him. I couldn't help myself asking it. 'Why did you give yourself up to this creature?'

'I was redundant,' he said. 'There was nothing left for me. Nothing here. My work was finished. You and your mother didn't need me... didn't love me... not any more...' Together we were climbing backwards down the body of Goomba. 'This creature needed me. He came to me and explained just how much he needed me. I was flattered, I suppose...'

I couldn't believe it. He thought Mum and I didn't love him any more? He was depressed, so he gave his mind over to an evil god from the dawn of time? We jumped the last few yards, on to the churned up lawn. We were coughing our guts out. Dad was okay though. I helped him to his feet and held him in a bear hug. 'Retirement really doesn't suit you after all, does it?' I said.

He didn't hear me. There was an almighty racket from the acolytes. They didn't sound very happy at all.

'Goomba!' the Doctor shouted out challengingly. 'Talk to us! Speak to us! Why have you gone quiet?'

'The effigy is dead,' my dad said. 'Goomba is no more.' I stared in horror, as his eyes flashed that terrible red. He pushed me aside and stalked round the now blazing pyre, and he silenced his servants by holding up both hands.

'Goomba!' he cried. 'Goomba is gone!'

And then Dad collapsed on to the ruined lawn.

Mum, the Doctor and all the others came running. Dad was lying too close to the flames. His clothes were smouldering and scorching and, together, we only just managed to drag him away in time.

The servants of Goomba suddenly stopped in their tracks. It was like all of them remembered something very important, all at the same time. They jerked awake and stared about themselves.

Mum, the Doctor and I clustered about Dad. 'Give him air,' the Doctor said. 'Step back.' He clapped me quickly on the shoulder. 'And well done, by the way. You've saved us all, you know.'

I didn't get a chance to bask in that moment. We all watched as a weird, will-o'-the-wisp thing came whooshing out of Dad's unconscious body. It was like smoke, pouring out of him. It joined the smoke from the pyre, plunging upwards into the summer afternoon sky.

Now the wooden effigy was properly taken hold of by the flames. It crackled

and shivered and blazed away. Within an hour it had burned away to almost nothing.

By then, all of its acolytes found themselves returned to consciousness, pleased to be their own selves again and still alive. And we had called ambulances, and were left with the prospect of how to explain all this chaos to the authorities.

A bonfire out of control. Barbecue guests with smoke inhalation. A father and son hospitalised through their own silliness, in building a bonfire in the shape of a voodoo god. It had been too big for their suburban garden and very nearly caused a disaster.

That was how it was all reported. In the local press and on the news.

Dad and I had been kept in for observation for a couple of days. They had put us in the same ward. When the news came on, we were laughed at and ironically applauded by the other men in there. It was mortifying.

Then I was forced to watch hour after hour of gardening shows and house make-over shows on the TV.

Dad and I didn't talk about Goomba. I think it was for the sake of our sanity that we pretended the local news got it right. Father and son got carried away building a summer bonfire. Barbecue madness in south Manchester.

At visiting hour that evening, in came Mum, dolled up to the nines, and the Doctor, swishing about in his velvet coat. He brought us some sweets and a strange-looking cactus. 'It's alien,' he confided, 'but it isn't nasty, if you see what I mean. It won't take you over. I don't think so, anyway. Though that does remind me of a funny story.'

'We won't stay long,' Mum said. 'I know you two have a lot to talk about. Father-and-son things. You don't get enough time like this to talk together usually. We'll leave you to it.'

'What?' Dad struggled to sit up, fighting with the stiff white sheets and blankets. 'Where are you going?'

'Shopping,' Mum grinned, shouldering her bag. 'I mentioned the Trafford Centre — I haven't been out for days — not since this horrible business began. But the Doctor's made me a better offer.'

'A better offer?' I asked, warily.

'He says he knows some smashing shops,' she said eagerly. 'Places he's sure I've never even heard of.'

The Doctor was grinning too. 'That's what your mum needs, while you two get yourselves healthy again. A little light shopping. A nice meal somewhere. A run out.'

'She does know, doesn't she,' I said, 'that you're talking about, like, time and space?'

The Doctor shrugged. 'I think so. Does it matter? I doubt anything would shock your mother.' He ruffled my hair, which I hate.

'Are we ready, Doctor?' Mum asked, giving Dad a peck on the cheek.

They went, leaving Dad and I in companionable silence.

'I hope your mother doesn't buy anything silly,' said Dad.

The Three Paths

Ian Potter

An Adventure of the First Doctor

The locals themselves have many names for the mountain, almost seeming to choose which they use on whim — often referring to it as Ouacqsmal, the Capricious, Balmeç, the Vine Bearer or Bispouin, the Sun Blocker, in consecutive sentences. To confuse the unwary further it seems the mountain can be masculine, feminine or neuter at will, much like the antic witch dancers of pre-protectorate legend, so extreme care must be taken when seeking directions in the old town.

However, whilst this Protean Animism may occasionally ‘wrong-foot’ the uninitiated traveller, the experienced ethnographer soon detects subtleties of context which dictate the nomenclature and gender to be adopted in most cases, and, although it is by no means essential for everyday intercourse, an awareness of the natives’ lingering attachment to such quondam notions can aid the serious student materially in interpretation of the more impenetrable indigenous poetry, art and jokes. Indeed, the natives’ curious cosmology might almost be said to excuse some of their more barbarous pre-colonial customs.

From *Under the Shadow of Mount Delacroix,
Airey and Haldeman’s New World Gazetteer*
(second revised edition)

The black-and-white figure the youth assumed was his father lurched forward, pulling himself from the hungry grey soil. Its button eyes were mismatched and cracked, and yellow bones protruded from its threadbare coloured waistcoat. Its piebald fur mouth lolled open as it staggered towards the water’s edge.

‘It’s not safe here,’ it said somehow, through a throat more missing than present. ‘Not safe.’

It placed a golden-petalled garland like its own around the young man’s neck, its badger-bristle pelt brushing against his skin. It was cold.

‘You’ll need this,’ the figure insisted, its voice a wheezing TARDIS rasp, as it arranged the wreath on his shoulders like a fussy house servant preparing him for visitors. ‘And one of these too.’

As the young man watched, the creature tore off its left hand matter-of-factly and held it out to him, still wriggling. Soft-toy stuffing fell from the wound, and where it hit the dry earth beneath them, pale plant life stirred.

‘It’s for the boat trip,’ the father thing gasped as brittle twigs began to attack it from below. ‘An oar for you to stick in.’ Its slipped-stitch mouth seemed to smile

somehow.

The young man took the severed hand without question and clambered on board the small blue boat behind him. His 'father' didn't follow.

'Aren't you coming with me?' he asked. The soft-toy corpse didn't answer, just launched the battered wooden dinghy into the black water.

The young man held out the creature's own hand to it, to help it aboard, but it merely pushed its old owner away. The creature fell to the ground, panting, sickly yellow grasses wrapping themselves around its ragged felt-and-bone feet.

'I'll meet you on the other side of the river,' the creature called as the garland about its neck began to twitch and tighten in sympathy with the plants below.

'What river?' the young man whispered back. The darkness his old craft was sliding into seemed to be a lake, or a sea even, and there was no far shore in sight. 'Which side?'

The half-man answered faintly as it was pulled underground. 'I forget,' it called hoarsely in a voice like the wind. 'Everyone does in time.'

The young man knew he'd never see his father again and yet he could not weep. It was if the dust of that receding shore had clogged his eyes somehow. He pressed on into the darkness in his leaky boat, steering a path into the unknown with his writhing hand oar, and, as he travelled on, cold inky water began to fill his craft, seeping in through the cracks in its old wooden hull and pooling around his ankles.

Slowly, the icy black water engulfed the young man, and he woke into whiteness and old age, without ever finding land.

The antique clock in the corner chimed two as the Doctor opened his eyes, as if to say that even here, in this timeless place, it was the middle of the night. The ship's control room was in semi-darkness, the column at its centre still. The melodious background hum suggesting the TARDIS had come to rest again.

The Doctor shivered, trying to shake away the last of his nightmare, and rose unsteadily from the chair he'd slept in, his bones complaining as he stood. The chair's magnetic field had done nothing to ease his pain. If anything, he felt stiffer and more fatigued now than he had before. As he straightened up, rubbing his hands to get the blood circulating, the stuffed toy he'd unwittingly held in his sleep fell to the floor.

'Sorry... Hi-fl,' he mumbled, the toy's name taking a moment to come to him as so many names seemed to these days, and gingerly bent to pick it up. This little toy panda had meant a lot to a friend of his once, standing in for the whole world when he'd been utterly alone. It seemed wrong it was still with the Doctor now that friend had gone. 'And sorry, Steven, too,' he added softly as he replaced the panda on its throne and thought about its owner, now guiding the people of some alien realm without this last reminder of his home by his side. Even this panda had left him once of course. The Doctor remembered clearly the look of joy on little Bobby Zierath's face as Steven had handed it to him, and the bitterness with which the adult Robert had returned it too soon after.

The Doctor sighed, his breath misting in the air. 'Brave, brave boy,' he said to himself through chattering teeth, thinking of both Steven and Bobby in turn, then

stopped.

Why was he so cold?

He walked slowly over to his old store chest to find the fingerless woolen mittens he often wore when not feeling quite himself, and leant forward to retrieve them. As he did so, he caught sight of his reflection in something metallic within. The face gazing back looked curiously distorted in the half-light, pale and bloodless and somewhat fearful too. The Doctor hardly recognised it. He crouched down to examine the ghostly face more closely and as he did, it vanished, his breath steaming the dagger's blade that had held it.

'Of course!' he chuckled, watching a fresh plume of water vapour condense with his words, his fingers dancing up to his mouth as if to grab them from the air. 'Steam!' It was no wonder his joints ached so — the ship's temperature must be close to freezing.

He scuttled to his workbench to examine his instruments, impatiently brushing aside entomology textbooks, jinning pliers and microscopes until he found the device he was after — an old brass Fitzroy barometer with more mercury in it than he'd ever have admitted to anyone. Thirty degrees Fahrenheit, its thermometer confirmed, and the crystals in its storm glass presaged snow.

'Local atmospherics or fault, though?' he pondered aloud, drumming at his lips in thought. 'That's the question.' He skittered over to the central console, seeking confirmation of his readings, his blue-stoned ring feeling heavy on his hand as he tapped and twisted the controls with rheumatic fingers. The heating controls seemed to be functioning normally, but it was difficult to feel confident about any of the ship's readings now the fault locator was broken. The fault locator of course claimed it was working perfectly, which made repairs to it almost impossible.

The Doctor switched on the external scanner, and a glance at the flickering monochrome image on the screen explained for the cold in an instant. It was night outside the ship too, and there was little in the view to recommend it. Fizzy grey snow lashed a fizzy grey mountainside under a dark heavy sky.

The ship's multidimensional interior was acclimatising to its surroundings again. It was presumably meant to be a boon; preventing travellers getting decompression sickness or suffering a sudden embolism in the move from one environment to another, but all it ever seemed to have done for the Doctor was give him damp interior walls and prevent the occasional draft when he opened the doors.

'You know, I really must uncover the code sequence to stop this.' He tutted to himself, rapping the glass of an instrument dial. One of these days the ship was bound to end up somewhere inimical to life, and it would be prudent to be able to find that out without boiling or freezing to death on arrival. He scribbled a little reminder to this effect in his notebook, and, after a minute or two trying to decipher his notes on the ship's thermostatic control systems, put on his white silk scarf and his lambskin hat for warmth. He sat back down in his magnetic chair and tried to rest again, but all inactivity did was remind him of his joint pains and how cold he was, so after a few uncomfortable minutes he decided to take a stroll instead.

The Doctor briefly considered inviting his latest travelling companions to join him on his excursion, as he fumbled with the clasp of his outdoors cloak, but quickly decided against it. Ben and Polly were unwilling explorers at the best of times and unlikely to be much cheerier for being woken at three in the morning, ship time, for a walk in the snow. Let them sleep through, he decided. The cold clearly hadn't reached the depths of the TAMS they slept in yet and they'd only want breakfast at four and their beds by tea-time if he woke them now. Besides, ever since they'd left Cornwall, it seemed that everywhere he and his new friends had arrived had been icy and unwelcoming, and he felt sure they'd berate him for yet another arctic landing spot.

He lit an old oil lamp with a Maxwell's Demon Lucifer, opened up the doors and stepped out to face another mountain, another howling wind, and, with luck, another little mystery he could fill his head with.

The view beyond the doors jolted the Doctor from his introspection.

The night sky, merely dark on the scanner, was a honey-deep amber, and a familiar moon hung overhead in it. Beatitudes swarmed around his oil lamp, heavy with evening nectar, pot-bellies helium-full. He knew at once where he was.

He'd stood on this mountain before, smelt the weanskrike and tristort on the sharp wind, chased tafelshrews through its snows. At the Academy, they'd called this place Cadon; in the family home, Lung; in the legends of unhappened days it was called something else again. Far below, to the north, he could see the Capitol lights. He was home.

Had they finally reeled him in then, he wondered. Was it 'Come in, number one, your time's up' so soon?

'No,' he shouted angrily to the wind. 'It can't be! I refuse to believe it.'

His cry echoed in the air for a second, startling a foraging cobblemouse nearby into taking flight with a high-pitched squeal. Somewhere, a little way off, an owl hooted derisively in reply.

'What do you have to say to that then, eh, gentlemen?' the Doctor added after a moment, looking about himself slowly. No fluffier response came, and, after a moment or two more, he began to laugh. 'Quite so! Quite so! Nothing! No, if you'd recaptured me,' he reasoned, addressing an invisible tribunal with a raised finger, 'then there'd be dressing up to be done, wouldn't there? Representatives of the Houses on parade, all collars and lipstick, yes? Age-old binding rituals to intone and all manner of forms and folderol for the record?'

Still no booming disembodied voice echoed forth to contradict him.

'At the very least I'd expect Agency men here surely, play-acting at divinity.' He waved his lamp in an arc about him triumphantly, no grandly robed figures appeared from the shadows. 'Yet not a peep from any of you. Ergo, no one here to peep!' He chuckled to himself again.

'So, who *has* brought me here, then?' he demanded of the darkness. His people's taste for grand theatrics surely meant they would have made more of his return than this. This was the work of someone with a far sparer sense of drama.

The Doctor felt his eyes drawn to the mountain's summit. Some way above

him, at the three-named mountain's peak, just visible through the falling snow, was a small tree, its leaves glinting dimly in the moonlight. It was a tree the Doctor knew of old, and he knew the answer to his question lay there.

Apprehensively, the Doctor began his ascent; retracing the spiralling path he'd last followed half a lifetime ago. The wind scoured his face, and grey snow clung to his eyelashes as he half walked, half climbed to the mountain top through the darkness, almost blinded and deafened by the snowstorm, feeling his way towards the summit. Unbidden, century-old memories swam to the surface of his mind.

'What's this mountain's true name, sir?' he heard his younger self ask his mentor, his child's voice booming in the firm and masculine tones of a thirty-year-old. 'My cousins call it Lung, and Old Lady Nine Teeth calls it Plutarch in her stories, but at the Academy they call it Cadon and laugh when I use the other names. Which is it truly, sir?'

'Ah, that is a question for the mountain, not me,' his mentor replied, in his curious sing-song voice. 'But know this: whatever you call it will change the way it is climbed.'

The way the Doctor was climbing it now, by moon and lamplight through blizzard and biting wind, the mountain was undoubtedly Plutarch — the place of dark tales from the untimes before that Lady Nine Teeth had told him so often in his youth. The shadows held menace, the ground fought his feet, and the wind seemed to scream curses in forgotten tongues. It was a place of ghosts and vampires again tonight. Terrors the history books denied seemed indisputable and awful truths as the Doctor struggled on through the darkness.

Shortly before dawn, the Doctor reached the mountain's summit and the bare twisted tree that grew there. By some quirk of meteorology, the storm seemed calmer here, and the Doctor was able to clear the frost from his eyes with his scarf. Under the tree, in a knot of wild sarlains, sat an elderly man, as old and gnarled as the tree itself, his grey hempen robe lightly crusted with snow. Like the sarlains he sat among he was battered by the wind but unmoving. It was the Doctor's old mentor, the one-eyed hermit he had visited here as a child, munching quietly on a silver apple just as he had a hundred years before. The hermit didn't look up at the Doctor's arrival. He had an apple to finish. The Doctor waited, catching his breath and regarding his guru suspiciously. His fuse-wire hair and papery skin were unchanged by the years, yet to the Doctor's older eyes, he now seemed much less ancient than he had before.

'You're back, then,' the hermit said eventually, carefully planting his apple core in the ground before him.

'Yes, yes, so it appears,' the Doctor replied, brushing a patch of snow from the ground with his cloak, and seating himself on it. 'It's... fortuitous that our returns should coincide so neatly, is it not, sir?' he said, lowering himself stiffly into the familiar cross-legged position he'd once found so easy and removed his scarf.

'Isn't it just, my child?' The hermit smiled back, holding his pupil's gaze with his single good eye. 'Thanks for the khata,' he added, and picked up the discarded scarf.

'I've been pulled back, then, I presume?' the Doctor asked.

His mentor seemed to think for a second. 'Maybe,' he said gently, 'but don't worry, not by them.' He gestured vaguely to the north and the glinting Capitol lights, shimmering like stars through the snow, then draped his new scarf around his neck. 'Bit soggy,' he said.

'Did you bring me back, then, sir?' whispered the Doctor, leaning forward conspiratorially; in awe of the power such a task must have taken.

The hermit giggled. 'Oh, you did that yourself, I think,' he said dismissively. 'Subconscious mind and all that. I really haven't the "you know" for that kind of caper. Part of you wanted to be back here, I suspect, and "Hey, presto!" I just happen to have followed.' He tapped his nose. 'I've been keeping an eye out for you, you see,' he added and winked. Despite himself, the Doctor found his gaze drawn to the empty eye socket that remained open.

'But there are laws, barriers —' he protested.

'Unless, of course, laws and barriers can be breeched?' the old man suggested wryly.

The Doctor toyed absently with his ring, remembering its part in his escape so long ago.

'But I thought return was impossible,' he said.

'Oh, yes, probably so, as impossible goes, absolutely,' the hermit said airily, picking at his teeth for bits of apple. 'Play havoc with the fillings, these metal fruit, you know. Yet here you are.' He smiled and leant forward. 'This is, I believe, the same night you left here, and that shouldn't have been possible really either. I think you may have returned through the same loophole in the laws you slipped out through.'

The Doctor was dumbfounded. Could it be that down in the jewelled city far below them, he was slipping away even now?

'You do make rather a habit of rule-bending, after all,' the hermit continued, spitting a piece of foiled apple peel into his scarf. 'Would you like tea, child?'

'Most kind, most kind,' the Doctor found himself saying, his mind elsewhere.

The hermit waggled his fingers and a bone-china tea service appeared before them in the snow, brazenly challenging the laws of physics to stop it and the rules of aesthetics to find it incongruous. 'I'll be mother,' he said, and poured tea for them both.

The Doctor took a sip. The tea in his cup was dark and stewed and not quite to his tastes, but it was at least warm. The hermit lifted his cup in response. 'Your health,' he said. 'Transmigrate the yak's butter, would you?'

The Doctor couldn't see any.

'Feel free to do it with your hands in your pockets if need be,' his mentor went on. 'I seem to recall you always found it easier that way.'

Trying hard not to think about it, the Doctor put his hand under his coat and on the third attempt produced a rather ugly silver cow-shaped cream jug from within and passed it to his companion. 'Sorry about the serving vessel, sir,' he explained, 'a little stiff in the wrist these days. Rheumatism. I'm using a magnetic flux device to ease it, but...'

The hermit nodded sympathetically. The solidified yak's milk in the jug was too thick to pour from the cow's mouth, so he spooned some from the opening

on the cow's back and dropped it in his cup.

'I know just how it is. Have you tried copper bangles at all?' he said, stirring two lumps of milk into his brew. 'A chap I know in Cambridge swears by them.'

'Really?' said the Doctor.

'Oh, yes, frequently. Do you have any copper with you, at all?'

'Not to speak of, sir,' the Doctor faltered in reply. 'Just a couple of Bronze Age Greek obols, and a daguerreotype,' he added haltingly, indicating his breast pocket. 'My granddaughter.'

'Oh, can I see?' asked the hermit, rubbing his hands.

The Doctor pulled the picture from his jacket. It was a sheet of silver-coated copper in a little leather carriage case. The image of the girl on it was just a film of tarnished metal that could have been wiped away with a finger if it hadn't been covered by glass. She looked very serious, which was hardly surprising when one considered how long she'd had to stand stock-still for the photograph to be taken.

The hermit tilted the picture in his hands to see it clearly. 'Takes after her mother,' he said disinterestedly. 'Can I see the obols too?'

The Doctor produced them from his waistcoat. The coins were battered and green with age, Agamemnon's head and the Mycenaean lion almost indiscernible on them. The hermit didn't seem impressed.

'Ah, you'll want to hang on to most of that, then,' he said dismissively, handing back the coins and picture and rather showily magicking a plate of biscuits from the air. 'Probably not enough there, anyway.'

The Doctor sipped his thick salty tea in silence.

'Why have I returned, sir?' he asked eventually.

The hermit shrugged. 'Who knows, my boy? Perhaps you never fully left. You flew far, of course, but I suspect your homeland's soil remained on your shoes throughout, somehow.'

'But I made myself an exile!' the Doctor spluttered.

'Indeed, and how better to keep your home in your heart?' his teacher replied. 'Arrowroot?'

The Doctor declined the proffered side plate. 'I let go of my last link with this world long ago, sir!' he protested, remembering the moment he'd closed the door on the girl in the photograph, forcing her to walk her own path at last. 'I cut myself off entirely.'

The hermit looked up from the biscuit plate, suddenly holding the Doctor with his sole misty blue eye. 'Yes. But did you let yourself go, Theta?' he said simply. 'My name is not Theta,' the Doctor rejoined sharply.

'Oh, Snail, Theta, whatever,' the hermit continued. 'It doesn't matter, child. What matters is that there comes a time when we all have to stop being who we were, let what we've become come undone, and I think that time is coming for you. It's time for you to let your old self go, to die or be reborn.'

The Doctor suddenly felt as if he was thirty again, terrified by tales of undead and unborn gods, and the monsters that ate you from within.

'I'm scared to, though,' he confessed. 'Everything I've become, everything I've learned, all the wonders I've seen — I don't want to lose them, sir. I don't

want to stop being the me you helped create, sir.'

The hermit sighed, as if disappointed. 'Then walk down the mountain, Snail,' he said earnestly, 'return to your shell. The Capitol awaits. Your younger self has only just slipped away, they've probably no idea you ever left. You could probably live forever back there, if you were careful and tried hard.' He bit into a Bath Oliver and swept a dew-drop from his nose. 'It would feel like an eternity, of course, but you'd have your books, your studies, your games. You could train roses and prune bushes, nurture a garden, and pretend it was the cosmos you were weeding. You could perhaps even transmigrate yourself some copper bangles with a little practice and patience.'

The Doctor considered his choices. Death, change, or a return to the world he'd left. It might be fitting to end his travels and his days here, back among his own people, sharing the wisdom his travels had brought, and that, no doubt, was why the ship, or perhaps he, himself, had brought him back. But then being fitting had never really been his strong point.

'Did I ever tell you the story of the Penultimate Evil?' the hermit asked. The Doctor shook his head.

'Thought not, it's one of Lady Nine Teeth's really. It's a good one though, and quite low on undead, for her.'

The hermit took a sip of tea and began to recite his tale.

'In the unhappened days that went before,' he said, 'before they went and never happened of course, there was a child, and his people were at war against the greatest evil imaginable, an evil that they called the Penultimate Evil, because they knew the limits of their imagination.'

The Doctor smiled.

'History had taught them there's not enough space to write down all of time in, and certainly not enough time,' the hermit went on, 'and just when you think you've seen it all there's always something worse, so penultimate the evil remained.'

'Now, this child, like many a child, loved tales of war and heroism, and the tales he loved the best were tales of the war against the Penultimate Evil. He knew all the heroes' names and the weaknesses of all their enemies, and, like many a child seduced by nonsense tales, he wanted to be a hero himself when he grew up and to fight in the people's war. So, all his young life he trained to be a warrior, learning to defeat minor evils first — slowly working his way through the league tables of cosmic villainy, from Quarks to Piscatarians to wristcom hailing-tone designers and beyond, discovering their weaknesses and vanquishing them, one by one, until one day he had bested them all and he became a man. Not much of a man, perhaps, but a great general and a good soldier to boot.'

'And on the very day he took command of his silver-prowed ship ready to face the enemy, the war ended anti-climactically in one of those freak ontological accidents that always seemed to be happening back then. No one knew how or why, and now those days haven't happened any more we can't even be sure if, but happen it did as much we can say any unhappening happened back then in never. The Penultimate Evil was annihilated with nary a heroic self-sacrifice

performed. To be honest, I think it was this kind of thing going on so much that made the unhappened days unhappen completely in the end, but what do I know, I exist. I was probably never there.

‘Anyhow, poof, enemy gone. The young man didn’t know what to do; the reason for his whole existence had evaporated overnight. He had already vanquished all the universe’s less significant evils in his training — there was no one left to fight. In his distress, he sought advice from the wise old lady his people called the Crone, seeking her out in her cave in the southern mountains.

What should I do, oh, Crone? he cried, somewhat tactlessly revealing the name his people gave the poor thing. “What should I do?” He said it three times but you get the idea.’

The hermit paused in his tale and sighed, just as he always used to all those years before, and, because he knew it was expected, the Doctor prompted him to continue.

‘And what did the Crone do, sir?’ he whispered.

The hermit smiled. ‘She gave him a sword to slay the Ultimate Evil with,’ he said, then yawned and scratched his nose.

The Doctor waved his hand dismissively. “Be careful if you fight Nietzscheans lest you become a Nietzschean yourself”, is it?”

‘Perhaps,’ the hermit said. ‘I always thought it was a koan about how hard it is to draw up league tables.’ They sat for a while and looked at each other in silence. ‘Do you have a sword for me?’ the Doctor asked suddenly.

‘No, but I do have a gift if you’ll accept it,’ the hermit said gently, pulling something from his sleeve and proffering it to the Doctor. ‘Something to give you new heart, perhaps.’

The Doctor took it. It was his old page-a-year diary, left here so long ago; a small black leather volume with gold embossed letters on the front, about 500 pages thick and filled with dimensionally transcendental scrawl. He opened a page at random to find his younger self reflecting happily on a summer’s day skimmer ride with his best friend, drawing a monster he called Torvic in the margins and looking forward to a week of infinite-regression calculus in the autumn. The young man in the entry seemed a stranger to him now, the days related, familiar yet distant, like a half-forgotten childhood fiction. It wasn’t who he was any more. This was where his old self lived now, he realised, as words on a page, nowhere else. The person who’d called this world home, and had fled it all those years ago, promising himself he’d return one day — who was probably fleeing it even now — could never go home again, because he no longer existed.

Suddenly the Doctor felt elated. There was nothing to fear. He’d changed already. Everyone he’d ever met, everyone he’d held dear and let go had changed him without him realising, this coming change, the final letting go, would be no different.

‘Thank you for showing me the right path again, sir,’ the Doctor said eventually. ‘I’ve done no such thing, Doctor,’ the hermit answered carefully. ‘I’ve merely given you a small push on a mountain top. The way you roll down now is up to you.’

They laughed together longer than the joke deserved, and at dawn they

parted.

As he made his slow, halting descent, the Doctor looked down at his old homes in the cold early light — the family house nestling atop a nearby promontory, rococo and wild, the Academy, brooding in stark shadow below it, and, at the mountain's foot, the crystal-domed Capitol, clean and glistening in the dawn. He had a lot of history in those homes down there — too much, probably. He blew a kiss to the past which froze on his lips, and, hugging himself against the cold, headed down to the box that held his future.

About the Authors

JOHN BINNS edited the *Doctor Who* fiction collection *Silver Carrier*, in which many of today's *Doctor Who* novelists and television script writers sharpened their teeth. For Big Finish, he has edited four *Short Trips* anthologies — *A Universe of Terrors*, *Steel Skies*, *Life Science* and *2040*. *Black and White* is his sixth short story for the range.

ANDY CAMPBELL teaches A-level psychology in a college in Merseyside. He has been a fan of *Doctor Who* since the early seventies, when Jon Pertwee's exploits as the Doctor were more than enough to hook him on the series for life. In the interest of balance he also enjoys horror films, eighties music, the books and essays of George Orwell, and the short fiction of M. R. James, Stephen King and Ramsey Campbell. *Separation Day* is his fifth story for the *Short Trips* series. He seems to be making a habit of writing in the first person as a young, super-intelligent woman, but is unsure why. He is currently working on a non-*Doctor Who* novel.

ANDREW COLLINS (not to be confused with the journalist and broadcaster of the same name) is the real name of Andy Coleman, a British actor/writer currently working in Los Angeles. He plays Jarrett in CBS's *The Bold and the Beautiful*. In the late nineties he variously wrote, produced, directed and performed in the cult show *Newsrevue* in London and Edinburgh. For Big Finish, he has written three previous short stories including *The Invertebrates of Doom* for *Zodiac*, the first *Short Trips* collection. He has appeared in several *Doctor Who* audio dramas, including *The Fires of Vulcan* and *The Church and the Crown*, as well as *Earthsearch* and the *Gallifrey* series. In the latter, he was married to Leela.

JAKE ELLIOT is a graduate of the Creative Writing MA at the University of East Anglia. He has previously had work published in the magazines *Flux* and *Spiked*, and the anthology *Paper Scissors Stone*. His work has been broadcast on BBC Radio 4 and he is currently working on a novel.

STEPHEN FEWELL is an actor and writer. He plays Jason Kane in Big Finish's range of *Professor Bernice Summerfield* audio dramas, and has also appeared in five *Doctor Who* plays. He has now written three short stories for the *Short Trips* range, and has also contributed to the *Professor Bernice Summerfield* collections.

MATT KIMPTON won the Proteus New Voices Award with his first stage play, *Act of God*, and followed it up with *The Talking Cure*, which won the Cambridge Drama Festival and was later showcased by *Three Weeks* as some of the best new writing on the Edinburgh Fringe. He has since written for *The Author*, *The Guardian* and *The Independent*, and on TV was one of the winners of ITV's comedy showcase *Shoot the Writers*. His current projects include a children's guide to

philosophy, as well as a sitcom about the end of the world.

JOSEPH LIDSTER has written extensively for Big Finish's series of *Doctor Who* audio dramas, with his second play, *Master*, being described by *Doctor Who* Magazine as 'the most moving *Doctor Who* story ever'. He's written five *Doctor Who* plays as well as scripts for Big Finish's *Sapphire & Steel*, *Professor Bernice Summerfield*, *UNIT* and *Tomorrow People* ranges. He's also written 11 short stories and a novella for the same company. He is currently creating an online gaming world for the BBC's *Doctor Who* spin-off websites.

STEVE LYONS has written twenty novels, 11 of which feature the Doctor and his companions — including *The Witch Hunters*, *The Crooked World* and *The Stealers of Dreams*. He is also responsible for numerous audio dramas, comic strips and short stories. He has 'worked with' characters from the worlds of television, comic books, toys and games, including the X-Men, Strontium Dog and Sapphire and Steel. His recent work includes the novelisation of *Bryan Singer and Dean Devlin's The Triangle*, and the detective adventures of Mrs Lucinda Batt for *Crime Confidential* magazine.

PAUL MAGRS has written a number of novels and short stories. His most recent book is *Exchange*, published by Simon and Schuster. He lectures in Creative Writing at Manchester Metropolitan University.

IAN POTTER has written comedy for TV's *The 11 O'Clock Show* and radio's *Week Ending*, and worked behind the scenes on a number of TV shows, perhaps most notably Victor Lewis-Smith's *Ads Infinitum* for BBC2. He's also had a radio play produced by the BBC and stage plays performed at the Contact Theatre, Manchester, the Crucible Theatre, Sheffield, the Theatre in the Mill, Bradford, and the West Yorkshire Playhouse, Leeds. He's a curator of television at the National Museum of Photography, Film & Television, and an occasional contributor to Radio 4's *Front Row*. This is his fifth short story.

JACQUELINE RAYNER (editor) has written a number of novels and audio plays for *Doctor Who* and its various spin-offs. She has also been a project editor for BBC Worldwide's range of *Doctor Who* fiction and put together three previous *Short Trips* collections for Big Finish — *Zodiac*, *Companions* and *The Muses*. She has written two novels to tie in with the new series of *Doctor Who* — *Winner Takes All*, which came out in 2005, and *The Stone Rose*, due for publication in 2006.

STEVEN A. ROMAN made his professional writing debut in 1993 with the release of *Lorelei*, a horror comic book series. Since then, he's written a variety of projects, including the novels *X-Men: The Chaos Engine Trilogy* and *Final Destination: Dead Man's Hand*; short stories for the anthologies *Untold Tales of Spider-Man*, *The Ultimate Hulk*, and *If I Were an Evil Overlord*; and the graphic novels *Lorelei: Building the Perfect Beast, Vol. 1*, *Sunn* and *Stan Lee's Alexa*. Among his upcoming projects are the time-travel comic series *Time Passages* and the

graphic novel *Lorelei: Building the Perfect Beast, Vol. 2*.

DARREN SELLARS has now written two stories for the *Short Trips* range. His previous contribution was *Never Seen Cairo* in 2004's *A Christmas Treasury*. He lives in West Yorkshire.

STEWART SHEARGOLD is the writer of the audio dramas *Professor Bernice Summerfield and The Mirror Effect*, *Professor Bernice Summerfield in The Masquerade of Death* and *Gallifrey: Imperatrix*. He has also written various short stories for Big Finish. His forthcoming projects include a further *Professor Bernice Summerfield* audio, *The Tartarus Gate*, *Gallifrey: Warfare* and a *Doctor Who* audio, *Red*. He lives in Sydney and works in television.

GARETH WIGMORE is probably best known in *Doctor Who* circles as one of the producers of Seventh Door's fanzines in the 1990s. He has written several short stories for Big Finish, has been a regular writer for the likes of *TV Zone* and *Film Review*, and lives and works in London.

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