

## THE ORION EXPRESS

Written by: Misha Lauenstein

Season 33 ▪ Story 9U

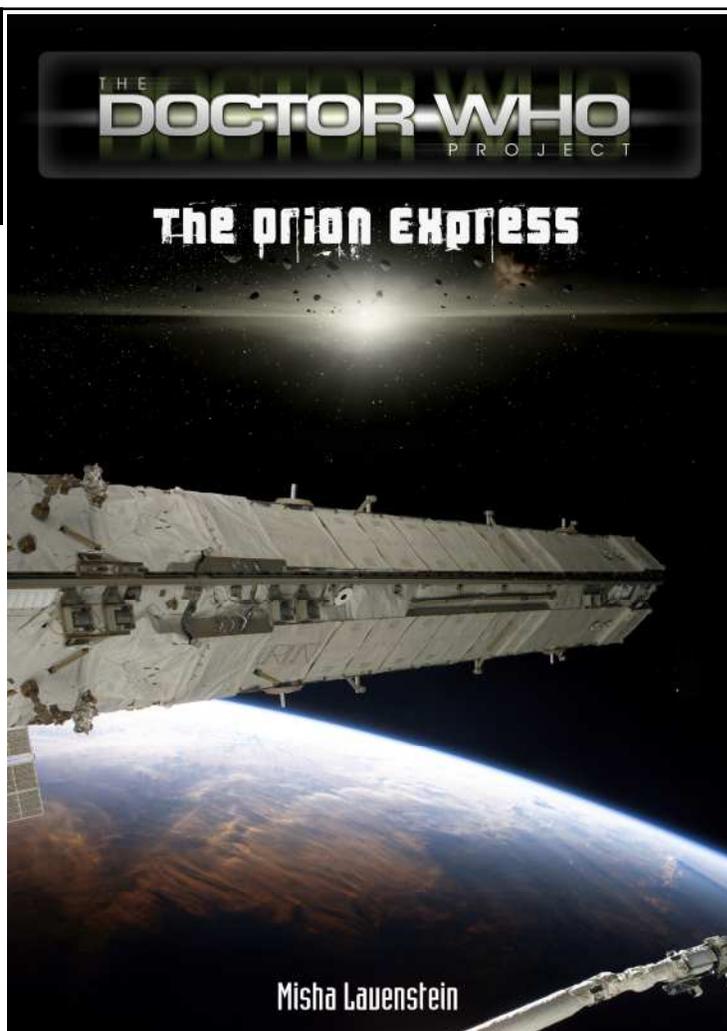
Reviewed by Jez Strickley

Fostering a new companion is a delicate art, and after Jodie van de Wetering's *Freedom Fighter* did a fine job of introducing Rachel 'Silver' Silverstein, it is down to Misha Lauenstein and his Season 33 offering *The Orion Express* to consolidate her status as the Doctor's latest assistant. Lauenstein is one of *TDWP's* veteran contributors, and his gift for good writing puts Silver's fate in safe hands.

Lauenstein's winning strategy involves dividing his story into four well-paced episodes which see the Doctor and Silver each following parallel plot lines, loosely connected at the beginning and the end. Clearly Lauenstein knows his stuff, and he keeps his episodic writing tightly structured. His first instalment sees the Doctor doing his best to take Silver for a ride aboard the interplanetary Orion Express. His plan, however, quickly backfires when the TARDIS deposits them inside a gigantic cargo bay, whereupon the time machine and Silver are unexpectedly loaded onto a space freighter. There, the Doctor's new assistant must face the manifold hazards of her first extra-terrestrial experience alone. Meantime, the Doctor takes off in hot pursuit of his new companion and his TARDIS by boarding the Orion Express. Once aboard his discovery of a dead passenger warns him that this will be no ordinary pleasure cruise.

The second episode builds upon its predecessor in fine style. The Doctor must tackle a ship-wide infection and Silver must locate the TARDIS whilst avoiding the occasional rodent-esque alien, the freighter's robotic vermin-exterminator and finally a telepathic octopus-like creature, which Silver unwittingly releases from its cargo container. Eliminating vermin also proves to be a challenge for the crew of the Orion Express, as the unnamed plague is followed by a parasitic wave of small dog-like creatures known as Astarian Weedles. As a result of this new threat the Doctor and his fellow passengers are once more faced with a quarantine lockdown, succeeded by an unexpected attack by a group of space pirates. In turn these new arrivals are spectacularly dealt with by a group of inhumanly strong and agile passengers, whose true identities create yet another twist in the tale. The plot then hits top gear as one surprise after another is fired off in quick succession. This medley of twists and turns is both gripping and fun, demonstrating a writer who, with tongue firmly in cheek at times, is really enjoying the business of story telling.

Lauenstein's writing is assured throughout. His quick-fire approach produces a speedy narrative which also manages to balance pace against the need to make vital pit stops along the way. Such pauses include brilliant one-liners and



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well crafted supporting characters. The Orion Express' stewardess, Harjit Singh, for example, is particularly well portrayed over the course of her pithy sparring sessions with the Doctor. Still further, the Time Lord's comment as he ejects a Martian jug out of one of the ship's airlocks, and the *Star Trek* reference regarding Captains Kirk and Picard are sheer magic.

The parallel plotting of *The Orion Express* affords our heroes the chance to shine independently of each other. For Silver, in only her second adventure, this is an important move. Her action-packed, largely solo follow-up outing helps to cement her character. Moreover, it proves that she is quite capable of handling bug-eyed nasties without the Doctor

having to nursemaid her every step. On the flipside, the Doctor-based plot line is firmly rooted in murder mystery territory, presenting him with yet another exciting puzzle to unravel – in amongst which he also manages to enjoy a good cup of tea. The Agatha Christie-inspired side of the adventure should come as no surprise considering the title of the story, and Lauenstein himself is certainly no stranger to whodunits having already co-written Season 32's *No Rest For The Wicked*. On this occasion, however, he swaps the claustrophobic interior of an asteroid-based penal colony for the luxurious surroundings of a space liner, in which the body count reaches a level of which Robert Holmes and Eric Seward would be proud.

*The Orion Express* is a gem of an adventure backed by great writing. Its plot line will keep you guessing right up until the end and its conclusion will leave you keenly anticipating Misha Lauenstein's next offering. Let's hope we don't have to wait too long for it.

**Rating: 10/10**