

BRIEF ENCOUNTERS



JACK OF ALL TRADES
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Jack of All Trades
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“Chief Justiciar, I don’t know how to explain it.”

Xaul Gertiaars clenched and unclenched her fist a couple of times, took a seat, and pinched the bridge of her nose. Not for the first time, Xaul reflected on how total suppression of information in a dictatorship made it so damned difficult to get straightforward answers. The young, trembling systems analyst standing before her, biting his tongue, was so concerned he would take the blame for this transgression that he was doing mental somersaults to avoid stating exactly what had happened.

“Young man,” she said, lowering her voice to conjure an air of sympathy. “Just tell me what happened. I can see you are not to blame.”

“I don’t know—”

“Just tell me,” she repeated, trying not to sound snappish.

He swallowed, and turned back to his control desk, haltingly entering the access codes. “You see this failsafe. Prevents anyone but us from gaining access. But this person—they must have been some kind of genius ... tripped it.”

Xaul followed the rows of text. “Not so much a genius as someone with a lot of time on their hands ... more than usual.”

“Exactly. I almost thought one of the Elite might—” Again the technician bit his tongue, and again an interesting theory was stamped out for fear of angering a justiciar.

If only he knew, Xaul mused, how long ago she had run out of anger. Preserving the status quo of the Huxley Union, satisfying the tyrannical whims of the three emperors, was by now a matter for bitter laughter rather than fear. Also, as she gained in years and pondered what kind of world she was leaving behind, Xaul reflected more morbidly on the part she had played in enforcing its callous injustices, perpetrating its ingrained corruption and crime. The only thing that kept her from forsaking her pledge and leaving the Union to destroy itself in its own corruption was worry over her son’s fate. Though they never spoke of it, she knew that soon enough the young man would take one of the freighters out of the system, start a new and

uncertain life outside the frontier, rather than inherit her accursed mantle. He would rather die than be a justiciar. He saw how it had taken the life and the integrity of his mother.

If only this young man knew that all that kept Xaul from joining the anti-Imperial progressive movement was plain, lousy cowardice.

“Don’t worry about that,” Xaul insisted. “You must speak plainly, or else I can’t find the underlying cause of this. The Emperors are far less likely to demand punishment if you help me find the culprit.”

She hoped he bought that logic. In truth it was shaky, as the Emperors were inclined to punish based on whim. It was another reason the disparate Hux territories were on the brink of pulling apart.

“You were saying,” she continued hopefully, “you thought it might be one of the Elite?”

He gave a tight nod and continued. “It couldn’t be one of the Elite, though. The access codes were expertly faked. As well as the time it took to break through, it must have taken incredible programming knowledge. Far beyond even our most skilled saboteurs. It was only on the second manual baffle-check that the forgery was detected.”

A spark erupted from the nearby control desk. He glanced down at the panel and his eyes widened. “Oh my, Chief Justiciar, your hand! I’m sorry, I didn’t know that junction box was open!”

Xaul snatched the hand away, cradling it so he did not examine it too closely. “It’s fine ...”

“But you must have burned it ...”

“No, I only rested it there for a moment.” She looked down at the counterfeit limb, the cybernetic hand she had worn for years since that accident and whose existence she had to conceal from any prying eyes. Reluctantly she flashed it in front of his face, wiggling its six lifelike fingers. “See? No harm done.”

He nodded, thankfully satisfied. Even a lowly technician knew that cybernetic enhancement was against the law. How ironic, Xaul considered, that such a trivial accident might have turned the tables of their little interrogation.

She straightened her posture and resumed her business-like tone. “If we could return to this matter, for the moment I’m less interested in *who* it was than what this hacker accessed. After all, thanks to the baffle-check we will be able to trace the source—and knowing what they were after might give us more of an idea of the nature of the threat.”

The technician was growing more confident, and there was only a brief hesitation before he enthusiastically got to work on the vast, security-encrypted computer core that this mysterious hacker had so thoroughly penetrated. “I’d say it was more likely an off-worlder ...” he opined. “Once you see the areas he was interested in.”

The screen changed from a view of the Hux Prime Planet to across the span of the Union. As the worlds flew by, Xaul nodded in understanding. “Telemetry from our space probes?”

“Exactly. But then you see ...” Reams of technical data filled the screen: everything from space routes to incident reports from recent cargo thefts. All this, and much more, had been downloaded by the enthusiastic criminal.

Xaul frowned as she studied it. “This information is worthless. There’s no value in those coordinates.”

“Only according to legend ...”

“Oh, yes, I know those old space-farers are prone to telling tall tales,” Xaul said impatiently. “But officially, that nebula has no strategic or scientific interest to the Imperial Court.”

The technician nodded hesitantly, and Xaul once again felt she was insulting the young man's intelligence.

"What was the last freighter that went by that nebula?"

A surly mug shot filled the screen.

"Here's the location of the access point. We could probably track down our hacker to within a league of there."

Xaul was already a step ahead. "If our hacker wants to go out to that nebula, then I'd bet they'll be looking for that pilot. If we put out any alert, they might fly. Whereas if we wait for them to make a move, we might get in ahead of them."

Xaul issued the systems analyst with a formal writ thanking him for his cooperation, which would hopefully absolve him of official responsibility. 'Hopefully' being the operative word: the Huxley Union had a way of twisting its own regulations to punish everyone except the criminals who most deserved it. Even as she set out to trap this malefactor, Xaul wondered—not for the first time—if whatever crime lay at the bottom of it could possibly compare to the offences she had perpetrated in her official capacity.

"I'm sorry, I can't accept this."

A-ha, the bartender thought. We have a connoisseur.

He knew the man sitting in the high booth of the lounge was a visitor. It was a warm day in the Central Continental Hub, and yet he was dressed from head to toe in an outfit of tailored black leather, embroidered with red stitching and topped with an odd frilled collar of white lace protruding from the neck. The bartender saw all sorts of looks and styles, but this garb was entirely unfamiliar. Therefore he must be a visitor.

Considering that, it was strange he was so brazen. In theory the Huxley Union loved visitors, and welcomed trade. In practice, so many of the young wanted to go off-world by any means necessary that travel was prohibitive. Additionally, there was a great deal of propaganda circulating about off-worlders and their nefarious agendas. Therefore, when they did get visitors they tried to blend in, not make a fuss.

This man clearly didn't get that memo. Even aside from his ostentatious aristocratic clothing, he carried himself with a high-handed manner. Such a man would ordinarily be prey for the hustlers and con artists that lurked around such cosmopolitan surroundings.

But the bottom-feeders wisely kept their distance. The stranger didn't appear to be carrying weapons, but instead he made his face into an armament. The eyes surveyed their surroundings with world-weary disdain. The mouth, framed by a pointed black beard, was perpetually set in a sneer.

And thus, when the visitor slid back the jug of root-hooch and declared it unacceptable, the bartender nodded and went to get another. This bartender, who had thrown patrons twice this man's size out the door, was inexplicably enthralled by him. He would even strike the first jug off the visitor's bill—even more unheard of in this establishment.

As he walked away, the visitor snapped a gloved hand. It was an infuriating gesture, and yet the bartender obligingly turned back.

"Also, I'm looking for one of the frontier pilots. I believe he goes by the name of Frinx. He's recently returned from one of the outer worlds."

"Who shall I say wants to see him?"

"Whom," corrected the visitor.

“All right,” the bartender replied hotly. “Whom?”
The visitor’s sneer widened. “The Master.”

It was strange to think about being the evillest man in the universe. It tended to make one feel self-conscious. In previous lives, the Master had not perhaps considered his actions—or thought of them as pragmatic, shrewd, only evil depending on one’s point of view. This new incarnation, though, was overtly, consciously aware of his dark heart. Reflexively, innately even, he rejected and disdained the good—those empty and paltry pleasures that people who have no material successes or achievements in life embrace.

Tonight, for instance, would for any other person—any of the universe’s infinite population of nice dullards—have been a glorious night to be alive. It was a late summer’s day in the Central Continental Hub of the Huxley Union’s Prime Planet. The sky was bathed in a glorious shade of pink, twin suns were setting, bathing the vivid green waters like a great watermelon. The multi-coloured leaves of the trees in the plaza were rustling in the breeze. The air was sweet with the vivid fragrances of all the flowers in bloom. Up and down the plaza, people were in a celebratory mood, hawking wares and serving up food. Love too appeared to be in the air, everywhere one looked. Couples held hands and gazed fondly at the night sky, where the odd shooting star conferred its blessing on their bliss. Any normal person would have smiled and joined in the fun.

Not the Master, though. He pushed past those couples, taking particular delight in barging past so aggressively that their hands separated. A gang of children kicked a ball around amiably, and when it rolled the Master’s way, he punted it onto a nearby rooftop. And the colours in the sky nauseated him, almost as much as the pungent aromas of over-ripe flowers and Hux cuisine wafting over the warm air.

Could he take pleasure in them, though? Could he imagine not being the Master, only being an innocent, carefree ordinary person? Once, countless lifetimes ago, when he was incredibly young, he remembered his sense of wonder as he learned about the outside universe. This was a most unusual trait for a prospective Time Lord, and was vigorously discouraged at the Academy by peers and tutors alike. He remembered that there was only one other youth who shared that curiosity and that interest. The other, though, left it nascent and undeveloped, whereas the Master—when he took that title for himself—saw the natural progression from admiring to needing to own. His desire for conquest was really logical; his friend the Doctor’s simplistic delight in exploration for its own sake was by comparison stunted, immature. In that respect, he was not really evil at all; merely honest. With the limitless perspective of time and space afforded a Time Lord, knowing how ingrained suffering and destruction were, it was merely rational.

The Doctor made him self-conscious too. It had not been too long since they last tangled, when those alien Preservers had synthesised their own Doctor to take the place of the genuine article¹. The Time Lords themselves had set up that catastrophe, hoping to ally with the Preservers. When they swooped in to try to resolve it, the Master was sure he would end up on Gallifrey, finally facing punishment for his misdeeds. But he outwitted them and got away again, and here he was in a section of space in Galaxy M97, about which there was intriguingly scant information back home. It seemed a good enough spot to lie low. He had been fluttering on the

¹ See *The Doctor Who Project: The Last Doctor*.

edges of the Huxley Union for some time, seeing what opportunities arose. But even skulking here, spending anonymous and colourless years accumulating knowledge and slowly progressing his plan, the Master could not quite lose his apprehension that the Doctor was behind his back, ready to foil his plans and thwart his ambitions like the incorrigible goody-two-shoes he was. Sometimes he couldn't fathom that they had ever been friends.

"Yes?"

The Master shook himself out of his idle daydreaming to rest his eyes on the bartender, returned with a fresh jug of root-hooch, and a surly and swarthy young Hux, with scaly skin, long green hair and shabby rope-like clothing.

"As you requested, sir," the bartender said, indicating the surly young fellow. "This is Frinx." The bartender glanced toward his visitor, and said with feigned politesse: "And Frinx, this ... is the Master."

Frinx grunted and slid into the booth. The bartender flashed them a mirthless smile before he withdrew.

Frinx slouched in the seat, kicking the air and biting his dirty fingernails to indicate his contempt. "So what do you want anyway, Master?"

The Master was impressed; Frinx had said his title so sarcastically it barely sounded grandiose. "I've heard about your recent journey to the nebula."

Frinx straightened, suddenly alert. "Impossible."

"Not for anyone with basic computer-hacking skills. Even the children of my planet would be able to do it."

Frinx shrugged. "You've got smart kiddies back home, then. I have nothing to say. You know I could go to jail for even talking about it."

"Yes." The Master poured two glasses of the murky brown liquid. A thin layer of sulphurous-smelling steam was rising off the top. He clinked his glass against Frinx's. "You could also report *me* to the authorities. I have no doubt your Justiciars are already tracing me."

Frinx shifted in the seat.

"Uncomfortable?"

"Wouldn't you be? I haven't been doing those cargo runs for my health." Frinx looked at the Master's Elizabethan-styled black leather doublet and hose, and frilled lace ruff with disdain. "A posh fellow like you may not realise it, but there aren't exactly a lot of legal ways to make a living in our cosy little Huxley Union. And if you want information about it, you'd better be able to pay."

The Master shook his head. "Don't insult my intelligence, Frinx. Believe it or not I didn't expect you to trust me or think I had an honest face. Why not check your system-credit account?"

Frinx pulled the chunky credit-block from his pocket, and a moment later his eyes widened. "What the—? I haven't even *seen* that much before."

"Consider it a down payment."

"You can get more?" Before the Master could reply, Frinx waved away the oncoming pithy remark. "Yeah, yeah, I'm forgetting your baby nephew could crash the entire Union's economy tomorrow." Frinx leaned forward, sipping his root-hooch thoughtfully. It sizzled on his tongue with a pleasant pain. "What would I do to get the rest?"

"Take me out there."

"What? I barely made it back the last time. On top of all the questions, I'd definitely end up behind bars."

"It isn't illegal to do that run, is it?"

“Oh they wouldn’t get me for that. There’s no shortage of phoney charges to pin on the likes of me. I don’t know what kind of crimes you’re used to—” Frinx leaned forward and flicked the corner of the Master’s ruff before saying snidely, “Probably snatching old dowagers’ purses by the looks of you. But the Union has made it almost impossible for the likes of me to make an honest living.”

“Then you’ve nothing to lose by accepting my offer.”

“I could just walk away with the fortune you gave me. That’d be the smart bet, wouldn’t it Master?”

The Master shook his head. “Oh but Frinx ... you aren’t that kind of scoundrel.”

“Scoundrel?”

“Rogue then. You enjoy the adventure. You fancy yourself a cut above the usual smugglers and con artists. And with, say, double or even triple that system-credit in your bank, how much larger could you live, eh?”

“If I make it back. You don’t seem to get it, Master.”

“I think I do. And I think I get you, Frinx. I think you’re willing to take the risk.”

The Master’s line of taunting was not working. The pilot drained the nasty beverage and slid out of the booth.

“There’s also the information.”

Frix stopped in the alcove, and asked, “What information?” without turning around.

“That thing in the nebula. There’s a reason it’s acquired the status of legend. There’s a reason old space-farers spin ghost stories about it and warn each other of its power. It spoke to you, didn’t it Frinx? And it confirmed all those stories are true. That truth is what you fled from, what you fear the most.”

He turned and scowled. “And what would an off-worlder like you know of our legends?”

“Enough to know that your society is cursed, haunted, and that is the reason for it. Imagine knowing why ... imagine how powerful that could make you.”

The man ran his long fingers along the top of his bright green scalp. The Master was sure those words had just enough honey to trap this particular fly. He could be quite persuasive when he was on form.

But then some commotion broke out from the front door. The Master was quick enough to spot the stiff silver uniforms of the Gendarmes, and bolted out the back way.

The sultry air of the Central Continental Hub’s plaza hit the Master, which was a blessing, for in rocking back on his feet he missed the low swing of a Gendarme’s rifle. The Master kicked at the man’s shin, which tipped the burly officer forward. The Master pressed home his advantage, cracking the clod roughly in the spine and then bashing his helmeted skull into the brickwork his weapon had hit.

Two other Gendarmes sprinted toward him, clearly a little shocked at how this lone stranger had so comprehensively overpowered their colleague. One or two energy pulses from their weapons whizzed over the renegade Time Lord’s head. By now the Master’s blood was truly up, so he seized the rifle from the heap on the ground, dialled the weapon’s setting higher, and sprayed two lethal energy blasts at the approaching officers.

He tutted. “The Hux’s finest, eh?” he admonished, before dashing down the alley. At the corner of the plaza, the fleeing Frinx collided right into his arms. The Master remarked sardonically: “Not pleased to see me again?”

“They’re after you, aren’t they? Just what I need, to get mixed up in this.”

“Don’t deny it. You *want* to know the truth, Frinx. It’s nagged at you ever since you left.”

‘Truth.’ Frinx laughed bitterly. “What a novel concept.”

“What’s wrong with your world? With this entire miserable society? Come with me and you can find out.”

Frinx paused a moment as the black-clad renegade ran toward the spaceport. He took a deep breath. He came close to turning his back on the man, but at the last minute he could not.

Xaul knew immediately the raid had not gone as planned. The Hubworld Gendarmerie assured her that nobody was better at ‘strikes’. It was now an hour later, and she and two of her personal prefects were looking around the toppled tables, crushed doors, and other rubble that littered the empty bar.

Worse still, the mastermind of this misbegotten venture, Centurion Vafrel, repeated his earlier assurances as he kicked over a cracked jug of root-hooch. “Best we could have done, Chief Justiciar. Nobody’s better at strikes.”

She mouthed some distinctly offensive oaths, but Xaul decided to bite her tongue and take a breath. The Centurion didn’t seem to realise how lucky he was that she had stayed silent; he certainly didn’t seem to sense her grave disapproval, instead continuing to placidly survey his Gendarmes’ handiwork.

Finally, Xaul said, “Dare I suggest, Centurion, that our target required a bit more finesse than your goons were capable of?”

“I wonder, Chief Justiciar, if you really appreciate—”

“I certainly do, Centurion. And you of all people should appreciate that the fear we instil in our people largely depends on an efficient, organised security force. Thus, this level of bungling is bound to strengthen anti-Justiciar and anti-Imperial sentiment.”

Xaul’s prefects had locked into place behind Xaul, and the trio were bearing down on Vafrel in a way that threatened a sinister turn to their discussion. The Centurion opened and closed his mouth a few times. None of the three moved. Wisely, he chose to remain silent.

Xaul flashed him a cruel smile. “Now get out of my sight before I write you and your surviving morons up on the charge of compromising my arrest.”

The Centurion was wise enough to obey. She wasn’t beaten yet, though. Making sure neither he nor his imbeciles were near, Xaul and her prefects returned to their armoured commute-pod and jetted across with all possible speed to the spaceport.

The Hubworld Inter-System Spaceport teemed with Hux, as well as inhabitants of various other Union worlds. Uniformed officials lurked at every gate and doorway, rudely opening bags and searching personal items—and just daring anyone to refuse permission.

For the first time since he had arrived in this wretched dictatorship, the Master really thought about how much he stuck out. The heat of the planet was also getting to him, and he chose to loosen his ruff and dab at his neck. Next to him, Frinx was moving purposefully and selfishly. Luckily, the Master could keep up with the young rogue, because he knew he wouldn’t wait for him.

Frinx stopped at the appropriate docking terminal, but the Master gripped his arm.

“What is it? The border officials? They’ll just give us a routine check. I’m not carrying any contraband ... are you?”

“We can’t use your ship to get away.”

“What? Why not?”

“If they tracked me down to that bar, they’ll know I wanted to see you. Your trip to the nebula was in their database.”

“You’re too cautious, Master. You’ve got to learn to trust your ... gut.” As he confidently declared this, Frinx saw the unmistakable figure of Chief Justiciar Gertiaars prowling the catwalk above the docks.

He did not relish seeing the smug face of the off-worlder, but when Frinx turned around, the Master was no longer around. “Master?” he hissed, pushing past the listless and brow-beaten crowds. “Master! Where are you?”

Panic rose within Frinx. If the officials already had his ship under observation, there was no way off-world. His only hope of escape lay with this clearly untrustworthy, clearly villainous man. How could Frinx have thought—barely an hour ago!—that he had the measure of him, that this ‘Master’ was a harmless buffoon who didn’t know how to operate in their rough world?

“Frix!”

He whirled around, but still didn’t see the Master. Then, at a far docking terminal, he saw a diminutive man wearing the Master’s leather tunic and ruff. The officials had waved him through, not even looking him in the eye. Why would they pay any attention? This was an elderly fellow, with the hunched back and pinkish dreadlocked hair fronds of a Hux near the end of his life.

Nevertheless, he spoke with the Master’s sneering, educated tones. And behind the rubbery face Frinx saw the Master’s black eyes. He beckoned Frinx over.

The old man wearing the Master’s clothes had a sonic tool buried in the door mechanism, digging it in to trip the docking seal on the vessel. Finally, the doors duly slid open. Thanks to the thick throngs of visitors, there was a solid wall of distraction that allowed Frinx to slip through the terminal without any officials seeing him. When he reached the old man at the docking port, Frinx looked on in some shock as he peeled off the old pink face and threw it to the ground before climbing inside the star-skiff.

The traffic monitors informed Xaul minutes later that a star-skiff registered to Legion Representative Daglit had taken off and gone to warp-drive without authorisation, already deviating from its assigned flight plan. She was utterly unsurprised to find Daglit, protesting vigorously about the theft of her star-skiff, in the VIP lounge.

“We could try to trace the warp signature?” the controller suggested.

Xaul nodded. They may as well go through the motions, but a star-skiff of that rating could get where it was going and back before they detected the signature. Procuring a vessel to pursue would take similarly long. The nebula was as forbidden to officials as it was to every other Hux.

Xaul resigned herself to the inescapable fact that the trail had gone cold under her very nose.

There were a few nasty moments when Frinx struggled to get the star-skiff up to speed before they were in orbit, but thankfully the helm finally cooperated. Nothing would have set alarm bells off like seeing a rough lift-off. Only when they had reached warp speed did the Master exhale. The young pilot looked across at him and smirked.

“Not so cool and collected as you make out, eh?”

“Hardly surprising with that take-off. It was about as smooth as that wretched beverage in that bar.” He rubbed his chest ruefully. “Wonderful.”

“Bit of heartburn, eh?”

“Yes, and for your information, with two hearts it feels twice as bad.”

Yeah, well, my *one* heart bleeds for you, Master.” Frinx activated the ship’s autopilot and rubbed his temples. “If you don’t mind, I’ll lie down and ... get a few hours rest. The ship should be fine on autopilot.”

“Believe it or not, I have some experience piloting these kinds of craft. Significantly more advanced ones as well.”

“So why did you drag me along again? Just for some company I suppose.”

The Master was on the verge of a withering put-down, but the remark caught him off-guard. “Perhaps. There’s an old friend of mine ... he swears by the need for travelling companions. Perhaps he’s right ... and of course, there is the matter of you knowing the precise coordinates of the object buried at the heart of that nebula. I understand it isn’t a spot you end up at by accident.”

Frix nodded and left the narrow cockpit without another word. The rest of the vessel was more luxuriously appointed, as befitted one of the Union’s wealthy nabobs.

The Master too could have excused himself and sampled some of the collection of exotic liqueurs in the cellar, or perhaps unwound with some reading—at the moment he was working through an enjoyably atrocious novel called *The Three Body Problem*, by some Earth scribbler.

But he found himself incapable of rising from the seat. Something kept him rooted to the helm, desperate to chart its course. Perhaps it was the sense that some voice was calling to him, a voice just out of his earshot ...

The monotony of travel across one level of space, through one time, quickly grated. Yet the Master did not move. He lost all perception of the passage of time; indeed, his vision grew blurry, and his senses numbed.

Thus he was chagrined to be taken by surprise when he heard the familiar voice behind him.

“Fancy meeting you here.”

His pulse quickened to see the Doctor himself, that old best friend turned worst enemy. He looked as he had when the Master last saw him: now in his eleventh incarnation resembling a handsome young Black man with a severe buzz-cut, wearing a cosy cable-knit fishing sweater and a loose shambling green balmacaan coat.

“My dear Doctor,” the Master purred. “What an unexpected pleasure.”

“How touching.”

“It was only a matter of time before this sector of space got the benefit of your sickly ministrations. How did you learn I was here?”

The Doctor grinned sheepishly. “I can’t leave you alone, can I?”

“Sometimes I wonder what I would be, what I could do, if you weren’t shadowing me at every opportunity.”

“Huh!” The Doctor’s nostrils flared dismissively. “If it weren’t for your crushing need to murder me, you’d be a model Time Lord? Don’t flatter yourself.”

The Master rose from his chair, his gander up. “Why? Why don’t you acknowledge me? All I ask is your recognition, but you ... you’re too vain for that.”

“Vain? Me?”

“Of course! The Doctor, so promiscuous in his do-gooding he can’t even confine himself to one archenemy. Ask most people who your number one foe is, and you know who they’d say? The Daleks! Those second-rate pepper-pots.”

The Doctor cocked an eyebrow. “What puts you at number one, do you think?”

“The personal touch, of course. When I’m plotting your death, you know it comes from deep, burning, lives-long hatred.”

The Doctor nodded thoughtfully. “How touching. Anything else?”

“The scale of my ambition.”

This provoked another nod from his enemy. “Oh, there’s none grander, I’ll give you that.”

The Master felt a faint glow of pride at the compliment. “When I think of all the millennia, all the plans I’ve hatched to bring you down, all the times you’ve defeated me ...”

“Hardly seems worth it, does it?” his enemy replied with infuriating glibness.

“No, Doctor, it certainly doesn’t. But perhaps I can put that right once and for all.”

The Master reached for his Tissue Compression Eliminator, only to find he was no longer wearing his tunic. He was in a long, loose-fitting nightgown.

He was no longer in the cockpit of the star-skiff either; he was standing in the Continuum Chamber of Prydon College. At its raised dais, Cardinal Borusa himself looked over his lectern sternly, clutching a pile of ancient photon scrolls.

“What kind of Time Lord will you ever amount to?” the ancient tutor croaked. “And you, from such a privileged background. Call yourself a master? Ever heard of the Terran expression ... ‘jack of all trades, master of none?’”

Laughter rang through the Continuum Chamber. The Master looked around and saw his classmates—including the Doctor, as he was all those ages ago—pointing and jeering. His cheeks reddened.

“Jack! Jack! Jack! Jack!” they chanted mockingly.

“I’m *not* Jack!” he cried, his voice reverting to its squeaky childhood tenor. “I’m the Master! The Master! And you will obey me!”

The Master jolted awake. He was still in the cockpit of the stolen star-skiff. He slapped his cheeks, tugged at the hairs of his beard, and felt reassured. The Doctor hadn’t been here; he hadn’t lost his temper; most importantly, that flashback to his childhood had never happened. It was all just his overactive imagination.

Then he felt the burn of humiliation. For it was not solely *his* subconscious that had created those visions. Something was out there, rooting around his mind. The Master’s humiliation deepened. He’d been taken in by the illusion, he believed the Doctor really was there with him and he really was back at the Academy. Whatever was reaching out to him now knew something personal about him and his inner demons. He cracked a fist against the helm controls and went to find Frinx.

What was worse, Frinx wondered? The strange nightmare that gripped him as soon as his head hit the pillow in the stateroom of the strange craft, or finding himself face to face with the grim, black-bearded visage of the Master when he awoke?

“Describe it,” he commanded impatiently.

“What?” Frinx replied groggily.

“Tell me what you dreamt about, you fool. I can sense the minds, but they won’t contact me. Not directly, anyway.” He paused and grimaced. “You ... your kind ... must be sympathetic.”

“I assume you had a bad dream yourself?”

The Master adjusted his ruff in discomfort. “Yes.”

“What did *you* dream about?”

“An old enemy ... childhood ...” A trace of what might have been embarrassment washed over the Master, and he shook his head. “Nothing that any freshman psychoanalyst would be surprised by. But it was more real, more vivid. Through it I sensed another presence twisting my thoughts, preying on my insecurities.” He looked out the porthole at the opaque purple of the nebula. “In my experience that’s what these disembodied forces tend to do.”

Frixn nodded. He may not trust this stranger, but they were out here together alone, and depressing though the prospect was, all they had was each other. With that in mind it made no sense to hoard information. “My dream ... was about another smuggler who betrayed me.”

“Ah, so I was right. Both related to memories. Therefore the mind out there in the nebula is trying to learn about us through our subconscious.”

“If you say so. I do remember a voice ... now that I’m awake I can just remember the impression of it. It sounded like my father.”

“Did it say anything that might be useful?”

Frixn tried to remember the details, but even as they spoke the dream was evaporating, leaving only the sensations hanging in the air: the betrayal, the distance, the loneliness. “Maybe that’s it! Maybe it isn’t what they were saying, but maybe they were using the memories to stir vulnerability. Remind me of what’s led me here ... remind you of the insecurities that make you ... well, the way you are.”

The Master pouted. “And what’s wrong with the way I am?”

“Well, you must sometimes wonder ... I mean, you’re clearly putting on a show. All this ‘arch-villain’ stuff, isn’t it to impress people? Isn’t it, deep-down, compensating for neuroses?”

The Master stared at him blankly. “What did I tell you about second-rate psychoanalysis? But ... well, you may be right. About the intent, not about my problems.” He stood to depart, and in the manner of the truly defensive, turned back in the doorway and added, “The only reason I’m insecure is making a flawless plan but needing someone like you to pull it off.”

“Sure, Master, whatever you say,” Frinx said soothingly. The evil Time Lord gave him one last scowl, grunted when he saw it only added to his amusement, and left for the flight deck.

The great ship hung in the centre of the nebula, as if cushioned by the purple clouds. It was a long, crystalline structure, its curving hull studded with jagged outcroppings and implements. It was only as they approached it that Frinx got a sense of its enormous size: larger than any spacecraft he had ever seen. It was like approaching a vast city, and those spiky turrets bolted onto its side were like the ugliest and tallest skyscrapers of the Hub City.

Frixn drew the shuttle to an airlock. A cursory scan revealed a breathable atmosphere, but he decided to don his protective gear anyway. The Master demurred—likely out of stubbornness—and so they looked a rather odd pair as they stepped into the vast hollow at the centre of the ship, one helmeted and gloved and the other wearing some antiquated fancy dress.

As if to compensate for the lack of protection, the Master had his gloved hand gripped around the handle of a tube-like weapon tucked into his doublet.

It took a full two hours to reach a junction leading to other areas of the ship. They climbed into a lift shaft, which groaned into life seemingly one cogwheel at a time. Finally, with some audible resentment, the lift began its ascent, but the whole way up it still rattled and clanked in protest at ferrying these two strangers.

Perhaps it was the monotony of these mechanical groans and distant clunks—that caused the Master to break the silence. “Did you get this close on your previous journey?”

“No. I never guessed there was a ship here. I felt those voices ... they weren’t welcoming.”

The Master stroked his beard. “I wonder why they wanted to keep you away. It doesn’t make sense, you would think they would welcome people who might help them.”

“You think there are people alive on this ship?” Frinx stepped from the shaft into another dark, haunted-looking space, an unending stretch of metallic corridor that looked like the ribcage of a long-dead giant.

“Of course! That’s what that subconscious message was about. You didn’t think they were ghosts, did you?”

Another wail rang up from a lower level. “The thought had crossed my mind.”

The Master looked at Frinx witheringly.

“Well, put my mind at ease, Master! Tell me more about this ship. I assume you know all about it, since you know everything.”

His lip curled in gratitude. Frinx was fast learning that ego massage was the best course of action.

“This is called a Lifeship. They departed many aeons before your empire flourished, at a time when the universe was new and records are scarce. Even my people know little about the civilisation that built them. Only that some calamity threatened them, enough that they fled their world with race banks to start again on other worlds.”

“But they got stuck in this nebula?”

“Another ship got stuck in the time vortex. I believe it’s a design flaw.” The Master tapped a nearby control panel. “Those structures, the pointy bits added to the outside, they aren’t original features of the design. The ship is intelligent to a degree, so it adds and absorbs technology from others as it goes along.”

“And that’s a flaw?”

“Well, it leaves them vulnerable to running aground, falling into these traps. It’s too busy repairing itself to notice the surroundings and evade them.”

“What about the people?”

“They’re not in control. Perhaps one is pulled out of stasis every so often to make sure the ship is on the right course, but even that doesn’t seem foolproof. Look at this ship—it wouldn’t be stuck here if someone could get it out. The systems all seem fully functional.” The Master tapped a nearby instrument panel, which flashed to life and showed various abstract readings he seemed to understand. “As I suspected—full power cells, but no life signs.”

Another high-pitched wail emanated from beneath them. “So what’s that?” Frinx asked, his voice trembling. “Don’t tell me that’s the ship settling.”

His fears were not allayed when the Master simply shrugged and kept walking.

Frinx lost track of time, and the inner guts of this ship made him feel even wearier. He was relieved when the Master finally stopped inside a room that interested him. Its ceiling-spanning viewing port and heavy, chunky panels suggested it was the flight deck of the great vessel. Frinx could see that the species that piloted this must have been a race of giants. He could barely reach the lowest level of the organ-like rows of controls.

The Master heaved himself up onto the desk and walked around it like a little boy in a fairytale giant's kingdom. He nodded at the screens, which showed more of the alien script and more incomprehensible system diagrams. Of course, Frinx could not even comprehend the scale of the ship or its mission, so it was no wonder such schematics meant nothing to him.

His thoughts were broken by the unsettling sound of the rogue breaking into laughter. The low and malevolent chuckle echoed around the space, causing the periodic groans and rattles to distort and sound still more disturbing. If the ghosts—ghosts Frinx was certain were still around—were indeed haunting them, then it only made sense that they would team up with this fairly creepy man.

Frinx collected himself and reminded himself that this was not the evillest man in the universe. He was some low-level gangster with delusions of grandeur, who was trying to intimidate him. With that in mind, he summoned all his nonchalance as he asked, "Well? Are you going to share the joke?"

The Master looked at him and laughed again. "Don't you see, Frinx? The power is all here. And I can seize it for myself."

"Power? What power?"

"Think of it. A ship that can absorb and assimilate any technology into its framework. With that I can make weapons undreamt of ... outgun even the Daleks or the Deathsmiths ... finally have the way to unyielding conquest!" More hysterical, unhinged laughter rang out.

Frinx backed away from the madman, who then narrowed his evil gaze. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Nowhere."

"Don't think of abandoning me here. I ... I need you ..."

"What for?"

"I ..." He trailed off and his vision settled on a shadowy spot in one corner of the flight deck. "You ... it can't be you..."

There was no one there. But as Frinx turned to the door through which they had come, he saw two shambling creatures in the darkness, staggering uncertainly on massive hooped legs, grasping, fur-covered claws reaching for him.

The Master couldn't believe his eyes. It was the Doctor again, strolling across the flight deck, that insufferable swagger even worse after all these regenerations.

Worse, he remembered, only because he was imagining it so. His own mind was the architect of this present misery.

"No ... no, this is another hallucination," the Master insisted. "Why you? Why does it pick you?"

"I must preoccupy you," the insufferable do-gooder replied with a smile. "But also because I encountered another Lifeship. It wants to learn about us ... about the Time Lords."

A dark expression crossed the Master's face. Realisation dawned. "I've been lured here."

"Yes," the ersatz Doctor said cheerily. "They counted on your drive. They knew if they tried to dissuade you, you'd only try harder to get to the secrets. Now they have you."

“But I’m not alone ...” The Master gestured toward Frinx, struggling with two nightmarish creatures at the doorway. “Frix! Stay there!”

Frix heard the Master call for him, but couldn’t hear what he said. Frankly, he couldn’t trust that the man was stable.

He ducked from the razor-sharp claw that loomed down on him. A sizzling heat filled the air above, and a high-pitched whine. In a trice, the creature was gone, and at the floor a tiny, doll-sized corpse of it lay.

Frix ran through the gap, avoiding the clutches of the second creature.

He dashed into a circular hatch. A terrifying descent followed, entirely in darkness but surrounded on all sides by trembling and groaning, as if the ship itself were squeezing him through its depths.

He rolled out into the very cavern they had arrived in. Frinx paused at the airlock, but shrugged. Frinx wasn’t betraying the Master, he reasoned. The man had no master but himself, so Frinx was merely showing him the same courtesy.

He kept telling himself that as he jetted the star-skiff out through the nebula, pushing its engines to breaking point to clear the area and forget all about this terrible decision.

“Betrayed, Master, eh?” the false Doctor snorted, chuckling with the giddy high pitch of his first incarnation. “Tut tut tut. When will you learn?”

“Learn? What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s your own fault, isn’t it? I trust my companions and so I can always rely on them. You never trust anyone, so you always end up alone, trapped, defeated.”

“That isn’t true! You’re alone as often as I am! And your victories are momentary and small, all setting you up for the day I finally defeat you!”

“If you get out of here alive,” the Doctor shot back. “Which I highly doubt.”

“Enough of this,” the Master shouted. “Get out of my mind. Who are you? What do you want?”

“You know already,” the imposter told him menacingly. “We are the people of the Lifeship *Phenomenon*. The pilots are Savried, Toff-Ma, and Binchall.”

“Yes, but where are you?” the Master shot back. By way of demonstration he blasted the illusory Doctor with his Tissue Compression Eliminator. As he expected, the device harmlessly ruffled the air, leaving the smug face intact. “Perhaps Frinx was right. No life signs ... perhaps you really are ghosts.”

The false Doctor’s face flared with anger. “No! We exist! Our thought patterns have influenced the whole of the Huxley Union, driving them to return us to power.”

“And yet they remain far away, locked in their own pointless feudal squabbles, and you remain here. You’ve held them back. You’ve prevented your rescue, you’ve sealed your own fate!”

Only after he had triumphantly blurted this revelation out did the Master realise it was far from prudent to say it. Sure enough, the shambling creature took a few more halting, puppet-like steps toward the evil Time Lord.

The Lifeship’s mouthpiece, the phantom Doctor, said grimly, “Perhaps you have sealed *your* fate.”

A furry claw clutched the Master's neck and squeezed.

As his vision went dim, through his waning faculties, the evil Time Lord croaked, "Kill me ... if you like ... I can always ... regenerate ..."

The false Doctor smiled cruelly. "Oh, we're quick learners. We'll make sure you don't, Master."

Frinx barely paused to think until the sinister opacity of the nebula gave way to the more familiar starless black of the outer rim worlds of the Huxley Union.

Two factors had kept him from dwelling on his thoughts. First, of course, there was the building sense of guilt at having left the Master to die in the clutches of those horrible creatures. Second, he felt the suffocating grip of the Lifeship's disembodied mind pulling him back, as if holding his head underwater.

Such was its nauseating pull that Frinx sighed in relief to find on dropping out of warp drive, his ship surrounded by frontier police vessels, and a 'Surrender' message transmitting onto his shipboard communicator. As he lowered his defences and awaited the boarding party to take him away, Frinx wondered if any criminal had come along so quietly, or been so relieved at the prospect of rotting his life away in prison. As long as he never had to set eyes on that accursed nebula again, Frinx would be a happy man.

"Talk about good fortune, eh Chief Justiciar?"

Xaul Gertiaars had barely returned to her office when the wire came down from the Frontier Rangers.

Xaul shook her head. "This Frinx criminal ... turned himself in? Pled guilty to *all* charges? Even the murder of that Gendarme?"

Her oblivious parajustice nodded. "I have the transcript, taken by Parajustice Veral, right in front of me."

Xaul shook her head. "But the surveillance at the spaceport shows a second man ... *that* is the person who committed these crimes, not this minor-league smuggler." Xaul stroked her chin contemplatively. The stiff cybernetic limbs of her artificial hand flexed awkwardly; she hoped the parajustice hadn't noticed. Xaul tucked the hand out of sight below her desk. "Doesn't he realise if he gives us a lead onto that criminal, we'd commute his sentence?"

The parajustice shrugged. "According to the transcript, that was all made clear to him. He gladly confessed. They say they've never seen someone so happy to go into custody."

Xaul rose from her desk and looked outside. "And what about the nebula? Is there any mention of what he saw in there?"

"They seem keen to brush that aside, Chief Justiciar. Our official edict is to pass down a sentence for the Gendarme's murder and anti-Union contraband smuggling."

Xaul frowned. "This isn't the first time ... I wonder if there's something in those tall tales about that nebula."

"But really, Chief Justiciar, why would the Emperors want to keep that secret? What could they even know about it?"

"What indeed?" Xaul sighed. "Meanwhile, where are we to go to hear this case? I don't suppose they're bringing him back to the Prime Planet?"

“No, no. It’s Frontier City. Way out in the rim-sectors.”

Xaul stretched, her bones cracking in premature protest against the forthcoming, arduous journey. “Oh well. No time like the present, I suppose.”

“I must say, I thought you’d be happy, Chief Justiciar,” the parajustice said. “It’s not every day a case solves itself.”

“No, I suppose not. I should be ...” Xaul smiled. Maybe part of her wished the criminal luck in getting away. Maybe in her old age, she wanted to break a few rules, rather than uphold them.

Unwittingly enough, the Master had set in motion the course of his own salvation. For as soon as his TARDIS set down in the Huxley Union’s Third Imperial Era, its sensor equipment began gathering data. Unbeknownst to him, when they last encountered him in Camelot in 936, the Time Lords took the precaution of bugging his TARDIS, in exactly the same way as they had once bugged the Doctor’s during his fifth and sixth incarnations. Not that the Time Lords were likely to act on the information they received from the renegade, but in theory they could always take him back to Gallifrey if they had a mind to. So the data from the Huxley Union, including the close proximity of the Lifeship *Phenomenon* and its possible timeline-altering presence in the nebula, was duly transmitted back to the temporal monitoring bureau.

Thus, the Time Lords became aware of one of their lingering unsolved mysteries: who exactly launched these Lifeships and for what purpose? And thus, it took relatively little time for one of the other Time Lords, who went by the title of ‘the Waiter’, to make his way to the Lifeship in a Type 73 TARDIS. It was this time craft that was grinding into existence at the moment the Master was being throttled by Savried’s hairy-armed, mindless bovine creature.

The Master could feel life draining from his body, and in that brief eternity, was given to reflect on his mixed emotions about life. After all, he had thrown away his allotted twelve regenerations with indecent haste, and spent many of the following centuries either on the verge of death in a raddled, skeletal husk, or else an interloper inhabiting the body of Tremas.

For so long during that period, he had clung to life, sought to preserve it or extend it, whether by the Eye of Harmony, the Keeper’s Source, numismaton gas, or the mysterious energies possessed by the Cheetah People. Finally he had succeeded, leading to a painful rebirth using the crystals of Pendryx Prime². During all that desperate running around, though, he had never actually considered what he enjoyed about life, or why he felt it worth extending.

Now that it was over, perhaps the Master could reach some internal peace. Perhaps he could try, in as compromised a way as being throttled by a mindless servant of a malevolent disembodied intelligence could allow, to end his life with dignity and serenity.

Perhaps he could have done that, but a moment after the Master pondered this, he heard the unmistakable grinding of TARDIS engines. The characteristic ‘Vworp’ sound was a semi-tone higher, suggesting a newer model. But he didn’t care if it was the Lord President and armed Chancellery Guards. All the Master knew was that it would provide just the distraction he needed.

² See *The Doctor Who Project: The Soul Men*.

Sure enough, the talons of his executioner relaxed, allowing him to slip away. Before he knew it, he sprinted down the corridor, and dived through an escape chute. He was half-tempted to go to the newly arrived TARDIS, but he knew that the Time Lord within would hardly be friendly—and his arrival might just distract the Lifeship and its crew long enough for him to escape.

He wondered about that young, selfish, and treacherous Frinx. The Master was sure he hadn't even thought twice about leaving and saving his own skin. Whatever the Doctor would tell you about the people of the universe and their fundamental decency, this was the Master's experience—and it came from just as much cosmic perspective.

Down the end of one hatch, another hairy, buffalo-like creature was shambling with the same eerie puppet-like gait. The Master's way was barred. He dodged left, then right, and in his stumbling he chanced upon a recess set into the wall. He dived inside head first, and sighed in relief to find himself in the cocoon-like embrace of an escape pod.

As he drifted through space, reflecting on another perfectly good masterplan run aground, the Master wondered about the future. And he wondered about those visions. After all, for all that they were conjured by the Lifeship's mind-invading pilots, that imagined schoolyard taunt—"Jack! Jack! Jack!"—that was the creation of his own mind.

The Master stared out the window, doing his best to avoid taking any lesson from this experience.

TO BE CONTINUED IN SEASON 46 OF
THE DOCTOR WHO PROJECT

The Huxley Union is a brutal place, and Chief Justiciar Xaul Gertiaars is one of its most formidable figures. Now she has her sights on an audacious criminal who has retrieved one of the Union's most jealously guarded secrets: the possibility that the Union's harsh totalitarian society is the result of a malign alien spacecraft beached in a nearby nebula.

Finding a petty thief to aid him, the criminal makes his way to the spacecraft, reckoning its secrets will be child's play for someone of his calibre. But he has not reckoned on the consciousness still alive within the ship, and its power: it can delve into the mind, and reveal to him that he may be a jack of all trades ... but a Master of none.

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