

BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

SYMBIOSIS



Simon Tyler-Jones

Published by Jigsaw Publications/The Doctor Who Project
Vancouver, BC, Canada

Symbiosis

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A TDWP/Jigsaw Publications E-Book

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Typeset in Corbel 10 pt

Logo © 2009 Brian Taylor & The Doctor Who Project

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“This should just about do it!”

“What should?”

“This!”

The explosion was harsh and savage – a huge flash of sheer white heat followed by an ear shattering boom that threw Ben’s balance a curve ball and caused the Emod to flee. Amidst the pandemonium, Ben laughed. “Oh, nice one! I could have done without the bruises, mind, but nice one!”

As emergency sirens kicked in, another sound filtered through the smoke-filled air. A chuckle. An excited, almost maniacal chuckle. The Doctor’s chuckle. He was clearly pleased with his sabotage. Gleefully, he said, “Yes, it was rather, wasn’t it? It worked, it worked! I knew it would! We’ll teach them for taking over this world, won’t we? Hmm?! Here. Ben, Ben my boy ... Hold the cable for me. Something tells me it might become useful again. I feel it could be the key! Be careful, though. It’s still live.”

The sparks of the fusel fire still burning in his eyes, Ben took the cable. The end was blatantly live, crackling with bright, white hot embers that fell and landed on his shirtsleeves. Thankfully, they quickly died out.

“Now what, Doc?”

“Quiet, my boy, I’m thinking. Yes, what we have to do is quite clear. We must take advantage of the situation. Let me see, let me see... They seem to use power looped interfaces and ...a master computer brain! Everything is controlled from here. Yes, yes! Of course! That’s it, that’s it! It’s so simple! See that console – that one over there? That’s the source of their power. Everything is controlled from here. One central unit. Oh, what folly! Plug that cable into it, my boy. There’s a gap in the casing. It will short circuit everything. We’ll take them all down – just as I promised!”

His eyesight stabilising, Ben peered through the thinning smoke. He saw where the Doctor was pointing and swallowed. Between him and the console was a huge barrier. The entire throne room of the Emod. And the Emod would be returning shortly – as soon as they realised that the explosion the Doctor had set off was harmless. He glanced down the length of the cable. Would it stretch far enough? Could his nerves hold out when the Emod came back?

Ben thought back over the events since they had landed. The Emod had imprisoned Polly. Wired her up to some strange electronic device. Even in recollection, the sound of her terrified

screams caused his skin to bristle and tense up. He looked at the Doctor. The old man towered over him as he crouched on the floor, emphasizing just how imposing he could be. There was a great deal of strength in that old, wiry body – almost an essential, unstoppable life force. And when his resolve was made up you could never escape it in his eyes. Like now.

It wasn't simply his naval training and his ingrained sense of duty that made Ben grip the cable tighter in preparation for his ordeal. It was his cast iron belief in the Doctor. There was no question about that. He would follow him to the end of the world, any world. He could not, and would not, let the team down.

“Ok, Doctor. No time like the past, eh?”

The Doctor gripped one of his lapels, smiling thinly but warmly. “Quite so, quite so. But it's the future we must ensure continues. Just be careful. Remember, brain *and* brawn, my boy, brain and brawn...”

“Ah, don't worry about me, Doc – I'll keep my head. Just stay hidden until I've done my part.”

So, saying, Ben turned away from the Doctor and planned his path across the throne room. Although it was deserted at the moment, he couldn't afford to be complacent or draw unnecessary attention to himself. Better to be hidden in the first place than having to find shelter in the heat of the moment. Happily, he counted a few large ornaments that he could use as way stations. If he kept his cool and the cable was long enough, this should go to the Doctor's plan.

Instinctively taking a deep breath, Ben broke from his cover. Maintaining a running crouch, he padded over to his first port of call with ease. Grinning, he turned around to make sure the Doctor was safe. He was standing still, resting on his cane. Ben frowned slightly. He was using that cane more and more these days. In fact, despite the Doctor's apparent life force, the number of times he and Polly had had to wait for him to get his breath back in their recent adventures had started to worry them both.

Dismissing these thoughts, Ben turned back to his current mission. Tugging the cable to ensure it hadn't snagged on anything behind him, he set off again. Keeping low, scanning the room just in case any of the Emod had returned, he made it to second base – a huge, decorative carving of some native animal. Taking in the carved horns that covered its body, Ben was thankful it wasn't the real thing. He was also grateful that Polly wasn't there right now. Even though it was just a statue, she would have probably screamed the place down.

Her eyes wide and terrified, Polly lay on the slab. Gagged and unable to call out, she strained at the restraints that held her down. As Ben watched from the doorway, restrained by a light touch from the Doctor, an Emod scientist nodded to its aide. The technician crossed to a control panel and hit a few buttons. The scientist and the technician backed away a few paces as the machinery warmed up and power surged through it. Within seconds, electricity sparked from it and the whole contraption started to tremble and shake. Even though she was gagged, Polly still managed to scream as the energy slammed into her body.

Ben made to stride forward, but the Doctor's grip tightened. The old man pulled him back and out into the corridor.

“Not yet, my boy. We need to find a way to take them all out, not just one or two.”

“But Polly -!”

“We'll save her, Ben. We'll save her.”

As Ben sought solace in the Doctor's eyes, Polly cried out once again ...

Ben mentally kicked himself for his glib speculation about Polly's reaction to the statue – however accurate it might have been. He had to stay focused. Just like the Doctor would. Looking back, Ben squinted. The Doctor was still there at their hiding base, but he wasn't resting on his cane anymore. In fact, the cane was no-where to be seen. Instead, he was flicking through some kind of book. Concentrating, Ben could just make out the word "Diary" embossed on the leather binding. Ben was about to call out to him but stopped himself just in time. If the Doctor wanted to consult his diary, who was he to question him? It was just strange that he had never seen it before.

Steeling himself for the next stage, Ben located his third place of refuge and set off for it. With each footfall, he was becoming more and more aware of the distance he was putting between himself and the Doctor. Although he was keenly aware that the Doctor was quite capable of taking care of himself, Ben never liked it when the Doctor wasn't right there with him. Mutual respect and protection, that was the key. Realising that he was only here doing this because of that code, that the Doctor trusted him so implicitly, Ben forged on.

As he neared third base, he froze. He'd heard something. Concentrating, he strived to discern what it was. As he did so, he felt a sudden, sharp tug on the cable. Startled, he whipped around, thrusting the cable out in self-defence, maintaining his balance by firmly placing his other hand on the ground behind him. He sighed in relief. It was the Doctor.

"Doc," Ben breathed, lowering the cable, "What on Earth are you doing?"

The Doctor didn't reply at first. Instead he raised an admonishing finger and reached inside his frockcoat. Before Ben's incredulous gaze, the Doctor tugged out a bulging white paper bag. Offering the bag to Ben, the Doctor smiled. "Gobstopper?"

Ben shook his head. Keeping his voice low, he said, "You risked your neck to come over here to give me a gobstopper?"

The Doctor nodded. "I thought you might be a bit peckish. It can be tiring work tugging a cable around with you. We have to keep your strength up, don't we?"

"Err, yeah, I guess so. Thanks, but no thanks, Doc."

The Doctor snorted. "Ah, well. More for me, then." So, saying, he popped one of the boiled sweets in his mouth. After a few seconds, the Doctor looked confused. He looked at the bag as though it were alien to him. Harrumphing, he thrust the bag back into his pocket.

"Are you alright, Doctor?" Ben asked, concerned.

"Hmm? Alright? Of course, I am," the Doctor snapped. "Why shouldn't I be?"

"Because you've left your place of safety just to offer me a sweet. Because you're using words like 'peckish'." His attention was captured by the Doctor's eyebrows. Normally, they arched upward when he was questioned. They were now beetling down. He shook the thought aside. "No reason, Doc." He suddenly remembered what he had observed earlier. "Hey, talking of keeping your strength up, where's your cane gone?"

"Cane?" the Doctor snapped irritably, absent mindedly patting the pocket that held the bag of sweets. "What cane? Whatever are you talking about?"

"Your cane. The 'never leave the Ship without it' cane. The one you had a few moments ago. That cane."

The Doctor's expression cleared instantly and his eyes gleamed, young before their years. "Oh, that old thing. I've decided I don't need it anymore."

The images of him and Polly sat waiting for the Doctor as he used that cane to recover came back to his mind, unbidden. "Oh, come off it. You know you can't walk far without it these days."

"What? What nonsense. I'm quite sprightly for my age, Ben. See." Ben felt his mouth gape as the Doctor promptly touched his toes ten times. He had never seen the Doctor so agile – or physically reckless. Before Ben could regain his composure, or even comment on the athletic display he had just witnessed, the Doctor lifted the cable from his grasp. "Actually, I'll do the next stage, Ben. I assume it's that vase you're heading toward?" Ben nodded, dumbly. "Good, good. I thought so. Right, here goes." Giving the cable a testing tug, the Doctor set off for the vase in a blaze of activity.

Still dazed by the Doctor's sudden burst of energy, Ben made to follow him. His mind was perturbed. There was something very odd in the Doctor's behaviour. He would never leave a safe haven until he knew it was safe, especially to offer him a sweet. And yet he had just done. Also, where had that age defying display of athleticism just come from? And then there was his voice. No, not his voice, but rather the pattern of it. It just seemed wrong. Memories of a fellow sailor surfaced. Peter Wright. A comrade who had contracted a disease that, over time, had left him impervious to pain. When he first discovered he was ill, and the side effects of the illness became apparent, he had done daft things, little things. He'd held his hand over a candle flame, stabbed a pin into his arm – childish things. However, as time went on and the fever ravaged his body, he'd pushed himself to do increasingly outrageous stunts. He ran out in front of oncoming cars, jumped off high walls and, disturbingly, developed an open addiction to self-harm. He lost all sense of perspective as his nerves withered and died. Had the Doctor contracted something similar? Surely, for a man of his years what he had just done must have hurt... and yet he had just sprinted from their current location immediately afterward. Ben remembered what had happened to that sailor... he had never truly forgotten it. No-one would. He doubted if anyone could forget the sight of someone who had launched themselves from the eighth floor of a tower block. If the Doctor had somehow caught something similar, he had to guard his back. Emerging from behind the statue, he saw, too late, that the doors to the throne room were opening. Rooted to the spot, mid-crouch, he cried out to the Doctor.

"Hmm? What is it, my boy?"

Ben smiled. That was more like the Doctor. Perhaps he was imagining things? Was this mission praying on his mind, making him paranoid and overanxious? He really, really hoped so.

As the Doctor turned around, an Emod trooper stormed into the room, its gun raised, primed and firing. Ben felt his bile rise again at seeing the upright crocodile image of the Emod. Despite his immediate concern for the Doctor, he found himself reflecting. He'd seen so much since Polly and himself had followed the Doctor back to the TARDIS that day. Handing over the key had opened the world, no, the Universe to him. Excursions to the past, trips to his future... Robots, despots, supreme weapons of devastation... And yet it was in the detail that Ben fully saw and understood the true alien nature of the cosmos. That statue back there. Basically, it was a woodland beast so like one from Earth, and yet nothing like. The Emod. Essentially, a crocodile, and yet one that walked upright, wore studded armor, imprisoned worlds for their plunder and ... spoke. However, Ben didn't have time to dwell on it. A blast from the warrior's gun sliced through the Doctor's white hair, blackening a trail through it.

“Oh, my giddy aunt!” the Doctor exclaimed, dropping the cable as he hopped from foot to foot. Wildly, he slapped at his smoldering hair.

“Oh, my giddy... what?” Ben blinked in bewilderment. What was the Doctor doing? He closed his eyes briefly and sighed. There really was something wrong with the Doctor. Re-opening his eyes, the situation was no better as it was the same. However, if the Doctor was worried about the burning, that was a good thing. It meant he still felt that he wasn't like Wright. This didn't alter the fact that whatever the illness was, the Doctor had it. “Doctor... Are you sure you're alright?”

The Doctor paused, mid-hop – a marionette in freeze frame. “Do I look alright? I've just been shot at.” To all intents and purposed he appeared to be sulking.

Before Ben could reason or react further, another beam slammed into the vase, shattering it. As the fragments rained down around them, the Emod Emperor entered his throne room. It saw them both immediately, but something else caught his attention.

“My vase!” he shouted, shrilly, “You shot my vase!”

The warrior lowered its weapon. “My lord, I apologise, but ...”

The apology went no further. Ben watched, horrified, as the Emperor raised his own gun and shot his warrior dead.

The Doctor fixed the Emperor with a hard gaze. “There was no need for that.”

Ben smiled. If the Doctor was ill, he was still able to bring himself back, battling the fever. He stood erect; imperious, proud but just. However, Ben's pleasure in seeing this was short lived. The Emperor moved his blaster to cover the Doctor. “Ah, the fire starter. Do you rule this planet, old man?”

“Well of course I don't.”

“Well, I do.”

“Not legitimately, Sir.”

“Nevertheless, I do. And for as long as I do, I will decide what is and isn't needed. For example ...” Ben felt his pulse quicken as the Emperor turned the blaster away from the Doctor and brought it to focus on him. “Is he really needed?”

The Doctor bristled. “More than you will ever know.”

Despite the tension that surrounded the moment, Ben felt pride swell within him. He rose from his crouch and crossed to stand with the Doctor. The gun covered him every step of the way.

“Well, he is decorative, I'll give you that. But not as much as my vase!” Snarling, the Emperor fired his blaster. The beam sizzled through the air, slicing through Ben's trousers, searing into his ankle. Ben cried out, falling to the ground. The Doctor's composure crumbled. With a rapid round of, “Oh me, oh my” he dashed over and knelt beside Ben. Even in the aftermath of shock, Ben saw the Doctor pause and look at himself as though he was questioning his own behaviour. Was he sensing he was ill himself? What was wrong with him? And, more importantly, what had caused it? Was it something in the wildlife or the atmosphere? Had he been bitten and simply inhaled something? But here, on this planet, even if he knew, would that really help? It was, in all probability, a totally alien disease, capable of anything. What could it do to him? It was clearly already affecting his behaviour, altering it. What else would change? However, even as these thoughts ran through Ben's mind, with a jolt, the Doctor became stern again, shooting the Emperor a murderous glance.

“Oh, please,” the Emperor groaned, “Don't be so dramatic. It's on a low setting. He'll recover.”

“That is not the point. Ben, are you alright?”

Ben’s eyes were watering with pain, but he nodded. “Yeah, Doc. I’m fine.” ‘I’m still not entirely sure about you mind, but ...’ The Doctor lightly touched where the beam had connected, and Ben cried out in agony. “Ow! Ok, I will be fine...”

The Doctor clapped his hands together happily and bounced from his knelt position into a squat.

“Doc, be careful, you’re ill... Don’t move around so fast... You could be hurting yourself...”

“Ill? Me? Nonsense! Now, just let me look after you, shall we?”

“Okay, whatever you say, Doc.”

The Doctor proceeded to perform an elaborate, and animated, operation. Although Ben tried to reason that this energy was coming from both illness and a sense of urgency, they just looked at odds with the Doctor’s usual demeanor. As he lay there, the Doctor took a small stoppered bottle and pen knife from his frock coat. Gripping the knife between his teeth, he unplugged the bottle and poured the liquid over Ben’s wound. It stung like crazy, causing Ben to wince and derail his train of thought.

“Thought is good, always good, but at the moment just accept that I’m here for you, yes?”

Ben nodded, then started. Had the Doctor just been reading his mind? It wasn’t the first time he had questioned if he was capable of such an activity. However, the moment, and the notion passed as the Doctor extracted a large, red, white spotted handkerchief from his top pocket. It was a handkerchief that Ben didn’t recognise.

Ben chided himself. You *are* getting paranoid, lad, he thought to himself. It’s a handkerchief, Ben, that’s all.

Laying the handkerchief down, the Doctor took the pen knife and cut through the damp fabric that surrounded Ben’s wound.

The Emperor chuckled. “Oh, how very touching...”

The Doctor ignored him. “Now Ben, my boy, this *will* hurt. Are you ready?”

“Considering what these things are putting Polly through, just get on with it, Doc.”

The Emperor snarled again. “These ‘things’? Be careful, decorative one. You’re only alive because the old man values you so much.”

Ben gritted his teeth as the Doctor started to ease the fused fabric from his wound. “He’s not an old man. He’s the Doctor.”

The Doctor paused. Looking Ben right in the eye, he winked, “Yes,” he said, slowly, too slowly for the Doctor, “And I always will be, Ben. I always will be.”

“Yeah, I know.” So, saying, placing the Doctor’s intonation down to illness as he tried to shake his unease at how glistening ... fevered ... youthful ... the Doctor’s eyes were looking.

Clenching his teeth, Ben made fists with his toes in preparation for the removal of the square of trouser the Doctor had cut out. The Doctor peeled it slowly and although it hurt intensely, it was soon over. Sighing, his eyes still watering, Ben felt the Doctor first ease his shoe off and then roll the hem of his trousers up. As he watched, the Doctor upended the bottle again, soaking the handkerchief. He then tied it around his exposed ankle, securing it with a hard, tight knot.

“Now, are you ready to try standing?”

Ben nodded, and the Doctor offered him his arm for support. Ben grabbed the offered help and started to rise. The Doctor was suddenly stiffer again, more measured. Was the fever

wearing off? Sadly, he doubted it. Although he was no medical student, Ben knew full well that one major symptom of a fever was that they ebbed and flowed. He laughed, despite of the situation. “Hey, Doc, this is a bit of a role reversal, isn’t it?”

The Doctor looked perturbed. “Hmm? What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s usually me and Pol supporting you.”

“Yes, yes.” The Doctor said, quickly, dismissing his own question. He held Ben steady, that wiry, inner strength keeping him secure as he tested his weight. “That’s as maybe, my boy. But we’re a team. We support each other. Indefinitely.”

“That goes without saying, gov. You, me and Duchess.”

Ben jolted as his weight stabilised. His ankle hurt like crazy, but it was bearable. However, so low was the blast wound that he elected to remain unshod in fear of dislodging the protective handkerchief.

A low, guttural roaring sound made both Ben and the Doctor look to the Emperor again. “Are you two quite finished?”

The Doctor pointed at the Emperor. With a start, Ben realised that he was longer wearing his ring. “We won’t be finished until you’ve answered a few questions, my man.”

The Emperor laughed – a harsh, primal sound to Ben’s ears.

“I have allowed you both to live following an attempt to set fire to my palace. Who are you to demand explanations – of any order?”

“You’ve allowed Ben to live because it amused you to see me tend to him. That is all.”

The Emperor nodded. “I cannot deny that. You are a curious species.”

“Why?” the Doctor asked. “Because we care? Because we bond? Because we value each other?” Throughout the tirade, Ben noticed that Doctor was wringing his hands together, his delivery breathless again... but not through tiredness. Quite the reverse. It was energetic. The work of a much younger man. Ben shuddered. That youth thing again. That’s what had disquieted him earlier; twice before.

Before he could think on this further, the Emperor curled its snout in disdain. “People? People? People are mere hatchlings, totally replaceable. They are born, they die, more are born to replace them. It is things that are important – one off creation that last in their own unique glory. That is why we search the galaxy for such treasure.”

“Oh!” The Doctor cried, exasperated, “There’s just no talking to you, is there?” He stamped his foot and started to pace around the room in circles.

By now, Ben had seen enough. The Doctor’s behaviour was way too erratic now. Anything could happen. And Polly was still held prisoner. Ben decided it was time for him to take charge for all their sakes and join in the exchange. “Yes, but who creates those things? Surely that’s where the value is. The soul that goes into the process.”

“The soul? The soul of what? A Memphiad? A Triogliqual? Transient, totally transient. Tell me. Where you come from, do you have factory workers?”

Ben nodded, “Yes, of course we do.”

“Do they work and then retire?”

“Yes.”

“Are more then hired to carry on the work?”

“Yes, but what’s your point?”

“The factory. That is constant. It lives on through so many life spans. Employees are meaningless, in whatever capacity.”

“That’s harsh.”

“Really? Do you value every blood cell that works day by day to maintain and run that body of yours?”

Ben frowned, “I’d never even considered it ...”

“Perhaps you should. Take this Doctor of yours.”

“What of him?”

“We know him.”

Ben blustered on, hoping to disguise the unease he felt at hearing that revelation. “So what? That’s not surprising. He’s traveled around for years.”

“Yes, but how many years? Certainly, more than his physical appearance would have the universe believe. Ask yourself, seriously. Do you really, really know him?”

“Of course, I do!”

The Emperor chuckled. “Oh, I doubt that. And don’t be too sure of your personal belief in him. You’ll leave him eventually.”

Ben snorted derisively. “That will never happen.”

“Oh, it will. We’ve seen to that. For both of you. Anyway, Doctor – let’s get back on track, shall we? Are you a worker or a one-off creation? Are you the factory through which so many different people, so many different faces will pass – all working so hard, all doing the same tasks, but, ultimately in the end, just another individual ‘doing a job’?”

Ben was confused. “I don’t understand.” For the first time since he had elected to take charge, Ben looked for the Doctor. “Doctor?”

“Ahh, Ben,” the Doctor said from behind him, his voice somehow lower, deeper. “I’m afraid I know exactly what he means...”

A sudden musical blast caused Ben to spin around and look at the Doctor. The lined face, the high forehead, the long white hair... weren’t there. Instead, a shorter man with a mop of black untidy hair was staring at him. His clothes looked like the Doctor’s, but they were disgruntled, battered. And he had a recorder in his hands. His eyes were apologetic, but pleading.

“What the Emperor just said is true, Ben. Well, some of it. I’m the Doctor. The same Doctor you knew...”

Ben felt his pulse race, driven by anger. “You’re not the Doctor! You’re wearing his clothes, but you are not him. What have you done with him? Where is he?”

“Ben!”

The man tooted on his recorder. “It’s a different look to the factory, but it’s the same inside.”

Ben ignored him. “He’s here somewhere! I’ll find him! I’d know the Doctor anywhere!”

“BEN!”

Another toot. “Would you, Ben? Would you, really? I hope so. Because I am he. I really am the Doctor.”

Ben couldn’t believe it. But what if it were true? What if this was just another of the wonders he was to experience in his current life? If so, how? And, of much more paramount importance, could it be that the Doctor, his Doctor, was somehow still here in the body as this strange, bizarre man?

“BEN!”

As if his mind didn’t have enough to content with, Polly was shouting at him.

“Polly, not now!”

Polly! Polly was trapped – corridors away! How could he hear her?

The Emperor raised his gun again. “I think you’ve confused him enough. Don’t you?” He swung the gun to cover Ben. “Time to put him out of his misery.”

As the Emperor went to fire, the Doctor leapt in front of the barrel. The discharge caught him square in the chest and he fell to the ground in a crumpled heap. Ben instinctively rushed to his side. “Doctor? Doctor? If you really are the Doctor, I couldn’t. I, I... Oh, no. No. No, no, no, no, no. I couldn’t stand to lose you. Not again.”

Ben roughly shook the Doctor, but his body was lifeless. Unbidden, the tears welled in Ben’s eyes. Overcome by grief, he felt the world around him slip away into darkness.

It wasn’t a peasouper, but the fog was characteristically thick as it swirled around the dark, night-lit street. Office workers were going home and the young, trendy and swinging were milling about to enjoy whatever London had to offer. Ben shuddered, involuntarily looking up at the Post Office Tower. What was it about that thing? Ever since he had seen images of it in the papers, he’d felt uneasy. It wasn’t the structure, but the feeling he got from it. As though it would affect him in some way. All rubbish, of course. It was a building, just a building. Nothing more. What on Earth could it do to alter his life?

Ben frowned, focusing on the cold night around him. With a sinking feeling, he saw the nightclub’s name glow across the street. He’d been drawn back, hadn’t he? Again. He couldn’t spend another evening there. Could he? Realising he had no-where else to go, Ben made his way to the Inferno.

Ignoring the ‘oh, he’s here again’ expressions at the entrance, Ben made his way downstairs. Apologising automatically as he accidentally brushed against people, he clattered down the staircase. So many people, and yet he felt so alone. Even in the navy, he was alone. He did his duty, he had the camaraderie of his crewmates, but in his bunk, at night, he was alone. Although this wasn’t shore leave, far from it, it was what they all dreamt about while away. And here he was, in the heart of it. And still he felt alone.

Resting his elbows on the bar, he looked, indistinctly, for someone to serve him. Or rather someone to allow him to have a drink until his cheque came through.

Bar staff saw him and passed him by – used to the story. Ben buried his face in his arm. “Lager, isn’t it?”

Ben looked up. Tall, glamorous and sassy, the blonde one from the night before was offering him a pint.

“But I can’t pay for it...”

She shushed him. “Just drink it.” She looked him straight in the eye. “I don’t know what it is about you, Sailor Boy, but I do know you’ll pay up and come true. I trust you.”

Confused, but thankful, Ben thanked her.

He thanked her again when she slipped him his next pint.

And the one after that.

As she made to move off, Ben grabbed her arm. “Why do we come here?”

She shook his grasp off. “What do you mean? It’s a nightclub.”

“Yeah, but why do we come here? Are we looking for something?”

She laughed, “We’re all looking for something, baby. But the universe isn’t in a pint glass. It’s in the people who hand them to you.”

Ben frowned. “Whatever you say, Duchess.”

She leaned closer, “Actually, that’s the key...”

“The key?”

“Yeah, we’re all looking for the key. Whoever owns it, well, they’re the one, aren’t they?”

Ben laughed, “If you’re trying it on, you’re starting to trip me out. I have no idea what you are on about.”

A light touch on his shoulder made Ben turn around. With an almost electric shock, Ben saw that a man in a rather disheveled suit was standing next to him. The newcomer clasped his palms together and coughed. “Well, Ben, hopefully, one day you will.”

Before Ben could even ask how the newcomer knew his name, a colossal racket sounded from the top of the stairs. Instinctively, people swung in the direction of the sound ... and one by one started screaming in abject terror. A procession of seven-foot-tall crocodiles filed into the nightclub, firing strange looking weapons indiscriminately. Solid bolts of light swathed through the crowded room. Décor smoldered, glasses shattered and before Ben’s horrified gaze people fell, dead, to the ground.

The stranger was galvanized amid the ensuing chaos. His eyebrows tense, he knitted his hands together, wringing them. Within mere seconds, a plan swam across his face and he barked it out.

“Ben, Polly, run! Get behind the bar and stay there until I call you.”

“But – “

“Don’t argue, Ben. Just go!”

Polly grabbed his arm. “Come on, sailor. He seems to know what he’s on about.”

Ben looked at the man, and the moment swirled to a slow-motion tableau. As people ran, screaming in near mime, the man smiled. It was a wide, genuine smile, one full of warmth and yet one resting beneath eyes of steely determination.

“Yes, I do rather, don’t I?”

Ben smiled, too. “Oh, Doctor!”

Polly shouted out after him, “Ben!”

“Ben!”

Slowly, the world, the real world, came back into focus. As his senses established themselves one by one, Ben realised that he was on his back, and that it was cold.

“Ben!”

And there was nothing wrong with his hearing.

Craning his neck, he looked toward the source of the voice. Long blond hair swam before his blurred vision. “Duchess?”

Ben felt arms grab him, holding him tight. He tried to return the hug but couldn’t move. Adrenalin pumping, he knew he was restrained. And, apart from the straps that held him and his underwear ... he was naked. He felt his face flushing, turning red with embarrassment.

With a sudden, almost physical jolt he remembered the Doctor.

“Polly! The Doctor! He’s ...”

The weight on his chest eased as Polly rose. “Right here. We got here just in time, Doctor. He’s okay!”

“Well of course he is, Polly. I told you we’d save him, didn’t I?”

The voice was new, but familiar. It was the deeper, slower voice.

“Doc?”

“Later, Ben. Let’s concentrate on getting you free, shall we? First things first and last things fourth. Now, let me see... Ah, yes.”

Ben felt the restraints slacken and fall away and he sat up, flexing his limbs. His vision still rather blurred, he looked around him, searching for the Doctor. He wasn’t there. But he was. Ben smiled.

Sliding off the slab, he took in the room around him. It was the one he’d seen Polly trapped in. Of course! It had all been the other way around. Polly hadn’t been captured. He had. All that he had just done had been a hallucination – a side effect of his torture at the hands of the Emod in which his mind had rambled. It hadn’t happened. Or had it? Perhaps Polly and the Doctor had done it. Had he somehow been allowed to sense it all even though he was unconscious? If so, it reinforced how strong their bond was.

Glancing at the floor, Ben saw the fallen bodies of the Emod scientist and technician. It looked as though he had guessed right. He decided to test his theory further.

“You secured the cable, didn’t you? Took them all down.”

Polly laughed. “Me? No. It was the Doctor! Right under their noses, too.” She paused. “Hey, how did you know about the cable?”

Ben just winked at Polly, turning to face the Doctor. Their eyes met. The Doctor looked nervous, as though unsure of their friendship. “The Doctor, eh?”

Polly nodded enthusiastically.

Ben stepped forward, laying a hand on the Doctor’s shoulders. “Well of course it was.” The Doctor raised his eyebrows and Ben smiled. “Who else would it be?”

EPILOGUE

Later, years later, Ben was running, Polly in tow.

“Well,” he said, “That’s us sorted out.”

Polly nodded, slightly out of breath. “Yeah, I guess so. Hey... Hang on...”

Ben frowned, “What?”

“We’ve just left the Doctor. Why?”

Ben shook his head, shocked. Rather rougher than he had intended, he brought them both to a halt. “I don’t know.”

Polly grabbed his shoulders. “We’d never leave the Doctor, Ben. Something must have happened. Think!”

Panicked, Ben thought – and then the realization came. It wasn’t pleasant.

“Pol, it was the Emod! Remember them?”

Polly shuddered, “Yeah. What they did to you – I’ll never forget it!”

Ben nodded, “Well, they must have implanted something. They said it would be us that left him in the end! This is their revenge!”

Polly’s faced blanched. “But we can’t leave him, Ben. He needs us! Quick, let’s go back!”

Turning on their heels, Ben and Polly ran back through Gatwick Airport’s main runway. They searched everywhere, asked everyone. However, they never found the Doctor, or Jamie, again.



Nobody could ever question Ben Jackson's loyalty.
In the navy and now in time and space, he was someone to be trusted,
someone to have on your side. He was unshakable. With Polly and the Doctor, this trait had
become symbiotic. Together, they were a team, a unit - rock solid in taking care of each other
no matter what the Universe may throw their way.
And right now, as Ben moves quietly through an alien control room,
this solidarity is needed more than ever.
Polly has been captured. Imprisoned by the Emod, her only hope of salvation
rests with Ben and the Doctor.
However, as time passes and Polly's would be rescuers strive to reach her,
Ben finds himself undergoing a personal trial of faith.

ISBN 0-918894-28-X



This is another in a series of original fan authored
Doctor Who fiction published by The Doctor Who Project

