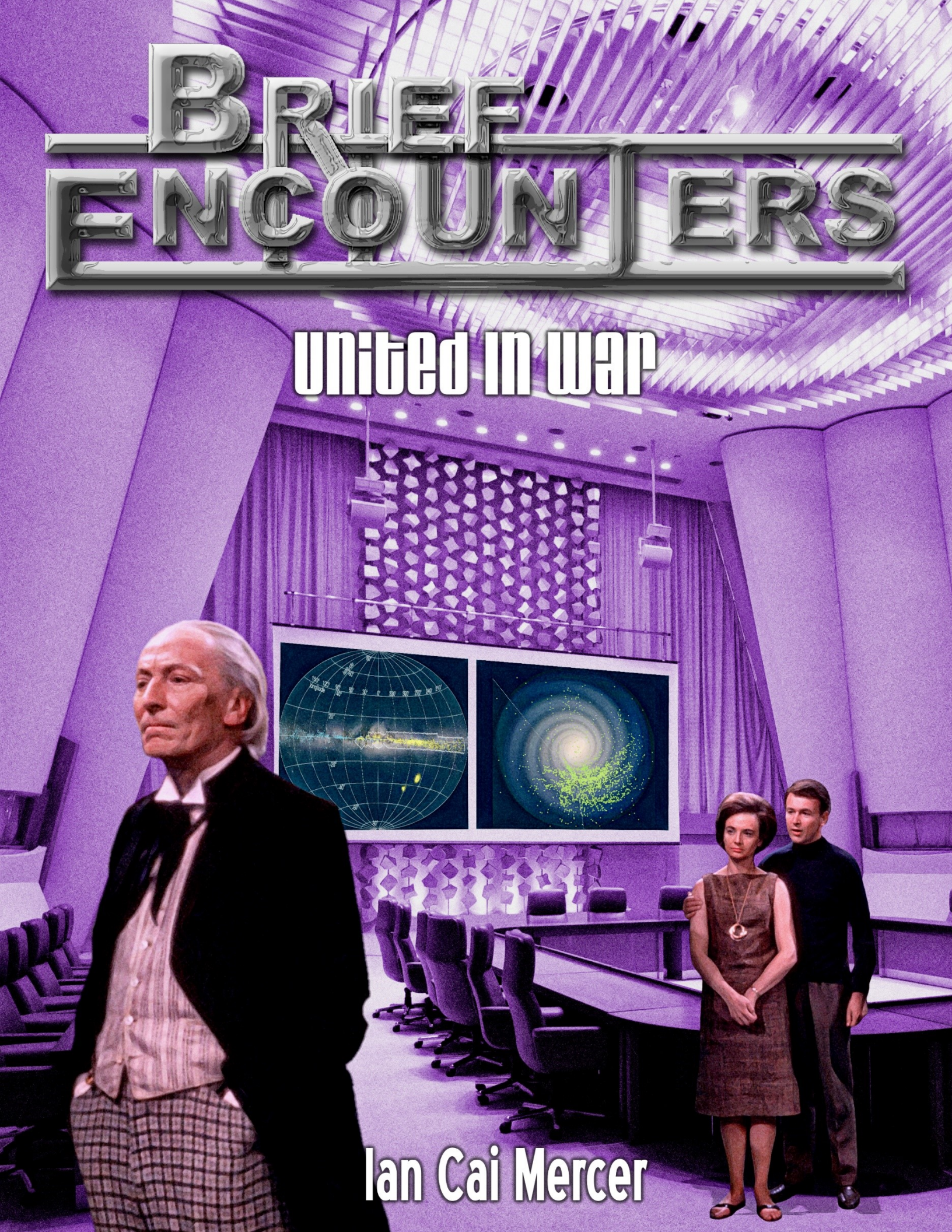


# BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

United in War



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It did not compute. The data was illogical, meaningless. The Probe analysed and re-checked the information that the subject had provided. Even under duress, the subject repeated his information, which had been verified as a truthful statement.

But it was illogical.

“Where are you going?” had been the initial inquiry, a simple question from its masters. “Well, I could tell you, but I am sure you won’t like the answer.” The prisoner had said, an attempt at evasion, which was why the Probe had been activated.

Designed to detect lies, falsehoods and secrets, the job description of the Mark 7 Positronion Mind Probe had been programmed by human scientists, though a batch of probes had been lost and subsequently found by its current masters. It prided itself on a successful interrogation, a job well done. Taken to its logical conclusion, an interrogation where the truth was uncovered was a time-consuming process. Not once had any previous subjects told the truth straight away, until this white-haired old man, who looked human, but internal scans showed a different physiognomy.

“Oh well, if you really must know, I am going to see a giant rabbit, a pink elephant and a purple horse with yellow spots, what do you make of that then hmm?” he said, chuckling. The data indicated no hint of deception, a slight heightened cheekiness but no outright deceit. The Probes circuits began to overheat, its coolant system failing as it tried to process that statement, that illogical statement.

It failed; its circuits fizzled and shorted out. In human terms, it had a nervous breakdown. And the day had begun so well.

*SEVERAL HOURS EARLIER...*

Ian was impressed. “Well, I must say, this is a better type of spaceship than the one around the Sense-Sphere,” he observed.

The Doctor tutted, gripped the lapels of his coat and cast a stern gaze at the science teacher. “Well thank you for stating the obvious Chesterton,” he chided

“I think it’s rather nice,” Barbara said, attempting to keep the peace again. Susan had wandered over to a computer bank.

“Grandfather, look at this,” she said, drawing the other three over. The machinery hummed as the Doctor fussed over it. “Yes, well I’d say it’s a transgalactic array, possibly 60<sup>th</sup>

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or 61<sup>st</sup> Century,” he said. “Yes, that’s what I thought, judging by this receiver,” she replied, pointing out an audio bank.

Ian shook his head. Before he could comment, the audio equipment hissed.

“Hello Doctor? Ian, Susan, Barbara. Has the TARDIS arrived yet? We are ten minutes out, so sit tight, out,” the voice said. The four travellers were bewildered at being called by name.

“Doctor, who would know we’re here?” Ian asked.

The Doctor turned his head, his eyes narrowed and hawk-like. “Yes, Chesterton, that is a good question, a very good question indeed,” he replied, tapping his finger on his chin. Whoever was on their way seemed to know all about the time travellers, but would they be friend or foe?

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Star Major Valum Korlek was a Retro-ist; one of those beings that looked to the past as a better time, although he was also a realist, much of what Retrology taught was just wishful thinking. He was not a dreamhead, but his past encounters with the enigmatic Doctor had made him wistful. This would be their first meeting from the Doctor’s perspective, and the time traveller had been specific about what Korlek could reveal to his younger self. Their last adventure had been perilous enough, but the stakes were much higher now and the consequences of failure dire. The fact that he had convinced the three Intergalactic empires of the sector to meet for a third time was a minor miracle. This conference was the final chance to try and reach an accord, the stakes at their highest, and the tension palpable throughout the region. A lot of others were waiting on the outcome, watching.

Korlek sighed as he checked they were on course. Notifying each of the powers of the Sculptor Group that he would be escorting a mediator to the conference had caused more than a few headaches, but the ship, *The Midnight Runner*, was on schedule. He called the bridge.

“Any updates Marchor?” he asked his aide.

“None,” Marchor replied in a clipped tone.

“Several identification challenges. Peacekeeper patrol two reported a meteor shower in Sector 9 and had to retreat, but nothing new. We will be arriving in five minutes,” he finished.

“Good,” Korlek replied. “When we dock, I will bring The Doctor and his friends aboard,” he finished.

“Yes sir,” Marchor replied.

Korlek cut the connection and stood, brushing down his uniform. This was one reunion he had been looking forward to for an exceptionally long time.

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After a heated debate, the Doctor and Ian had finally agreed that a cautious yet guarded approach to the matter was what was needed.

Susan had taken the audio at face value. Barbara was wary, The Doctor curious and Ian suspected a trap. If it was a trap, then they had to either fight or retreat into the TARDIS. Curiosity had won out over caution, as it usually did. “We seem to have more lives than the proverbial cat,” Ian observed, to which the Doctor tutted, and Susan suppressed a giggle.

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They stood back, close to the TARDIS, just in case and watched the hatch leading to the outer docking port. A cruiser-class vessel was lining up and about to connect. Ian had wrenched a pipe loose and was holding it ready; the Doctor gave him a stare. "Just don't do anything provocative young man," he admonished.

The cruiser took several minutes to align and then connect. The Outer hatch whirred and hissed as pressure was stabilised. Then the hatch opened.

Barbara gasped at the sight of the near-human alien that strode through the door. Dressed in a light blue military uniform, he had a silvery sheen to his skin and ears that curved to a point. He smiled warmly, raising a hand in greeting.

"Well, Doctor, you have changed," he said. The travellers swapped glances. "Now I know you have many, many questions, some I will be able to explain, several I won't," he began.

"How did you know we would be here?" Ian interrupted.

"Ah," he replied. "That is difficult, but suffice to say, Doctor, that though this is the first time you have met me, the first time I met you was a while ago, but for you it has not happened yet," he explained.

The Doctor chuckled. "I see, oh yes. Oh dear, oh dear. Well, I suppose it had to happen eventually," he said.

Ian was annoyed. "Care to explain Doctor? Think there's something I'm missing here," he asked.

"You and me both," Barbara whispered to him.

Susan stepped forward. "I think I understand. You've met us some time in the past and told you to come here, but it has not happened for us yet, correct?"

Korlek nodded as The Doctor clapped his hands and rubbed them together. "Yes, Susan that is exactly right," he confirmed.

Ian shook his head. "I swear even Albert Einstein would find himself bamboozled by this machine of yours," he said.

"Ah yes, the TARDIS," Korlek said, looking over to the machine before focussing back on the Doctor. "Doctor, I need you to mediate a dispute at the Third Intergalactic Peace Conference. I promise that I will explain everything enroute. Do I have your consent to move your vessel to our hold? Will you come with us?" he asked.

The Doctor gripped his lapels thoughtfully. "Hmm, you're asking me to trust you with my ship and our lives eh?" he said, then turned to his companions. "Well?" he enquired. Ian shrugged, looked to Barbara, who nodded, then to Susan who smiled and nodded. "Oh yes please, Grandfather," she enthused. "I've read all about this period- the alliances, great advances, the council of giants, the Universal peacekeepers, the intergalactic driveships and all that," she finished breathlessly. That piqued Ian's interest. "Really? Well I suppose if you think of galaxies like islands, then having ships that could sail the void between them would be quite handy," he remarked. Barbara nudged his elbow. "You don't get two votes to go you know," she told him.

The Doctor sighed, seeing he had been outvoted. "Very well, very well, if you all insist," he reluctantly conceded. "I will remind you that success is not guaranteed, and this voyage could be fraught with danger, yes?" he turned to Korlek. "Would you be able to guarantee our safety, no I think not. Still, I admit I have a burning curiosity to find out what all the fuss is about," he paused for a second. "And if my future self has assured you of our co-operation, then who am I to stand in the way, hmm?" he finished.

"Well, guess we're going on a starlit cruise then," Ian joked.

The Doctor lifted a finger and chuckled. "Yes, yes, indeed my boy. In fact, you could say it's just the ticket!" he remarked. The group groaned at his bad pun as they followed Korlek onto the cruiser. The TARDIS vanished, transferred to the hold and then the cruiser detached from the station, and they were on their way.

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A short while later, they had rested and been refreshed, then joined Korlek and his aide Marchor in the briefing room.

A holographic projector highlighted the local region of space. "Oh, look Grandfather, it's the Sculptor Group," Susan pointed out.

Korlek nodded. "Yes Susan, you are correct," he confirmed. "Lying five million light years beyond the Local Group, we began at Waystation Tantalus," he said, pointing at the projector where a number of circles appeared representing galaxies in the group.

"Our destination is Station Zenox, just less than twelve million light years from the LG. Situated in contested space; it has become a neutral outpost set up by the Universal Intelligence and Enforcement Division. UNITED has been tasked with delivering a diplomatic solution to the troubles in this region," he said, pausing for a moment.

"There are four major races whose empires have clashed repeatedly over the past few centuries, all capable of intergalactic travel," he said.

"Then there are the Changelings, if you believe in that kind of thing," Marchor muttered. "Sorry?" Ian asked.

Korlek shook his head. "Take no notice of Marchor; the Maffei sector has its own issues." He threw a glare at his subordinate. "Anyway, the first empire involved is the Dexian Protectorate." The picture highlighted four galaxies in blue, then zoomed in on one. "This is the spiral galaxy commonly known as NGC 247, though the locals call it Dexius Majorus." The picture faded and was replaced by an image of a white-furred Dexian in grey armour.

"Oh, it's a giant rabbit," Susan observed, making Ian grin.

"Now, now dear child," the Doctor admonished

"They are quite deadly, I can assure you," Korlek said. "They are a militaristic expansionist regime, as is our second race," he finished, pointing to the projector.

The picture changed, this time Ian gasped, Barbara dropped her jaw in astonishment and Susan snorted. "A pink elephant?" she asked.

Korlek shook his head. "Nothing to laugh about, Susan. In their last war they adopted a scorched planet policy and laid waste to an entire satellite galaxy rather than accept defeat," he told them.

That wiped the smiles from everyone's faces.

"That's barbaric," Ian commented. Korlek nodded in agreement.

"Yes, the Lamin could be described as luminous/fluorescent pink elephants, but it is something no creature in its right mind would say aloud for fear of being disintegrated on the spot," he concluded, then turned and changed the picture again. This time the creature seemed Equine, with a long snout, flared nostrils and huge fangs. It was also purple, with yellowish spots. Ian and Barbara shared a look. "Please tell me we're seeing the same thing," Ian asked. Barbara grimaced. "It certainly isn't Black Beauty is it?" she asked, making him grin.



“Speaking of spots,” Korlek explained. “The Sass’Japham are even more ultrasensitive, so never call one a purple horse with yellow spots if you don’t want your head bitten off. They are proud and any perceived slight of their honour will be challenged,” he finished.

Korlek sighed, and then changed the picture one final time. The being featured was truly alien to the four-time travellers, who each reacted distastefully to its monstrous appearance.

“Now,” he said. “How would you describe a Medusoid?” he asked.

Ian pursed his lips for a second. “I would say it’s like a jellyfish,” he observed.

“Yes, indeed, Chesterton, to your limited understanding of the universe, maybe,” the Doctor agreed. “But, to ascribe it in parochial, human terms, it’s like a hairy jellyfish,” he amended.

Barbara nodded. “But with teeth, a leg and a claw,” she added.

“And three eyes,” Susan finished. “How bizarre,” she exclaimed.

Korlek nodded. “Well, the other three races were repulsed by the Medusoids and their swarming ability. The Triumvirate was established shortly after the Second Medusoid War, when five galaxies had been infested and the three empires combined forces to drive the hordes back. The Intergalactic Alliance stepped in to save the Medusoids from extinction and quarantined the few remaining spawn worlds. Then we opened the abandoned worlds in the Acteon galaxy for colonisation.

“Now it seems the peace and harmony of the Triumvirate is over, so the conference is to stop the tension from escalating into all-out war,” he finished.

“You mean like a stand-off?” Ian asked, memories and images of Russia and America from his own time coming to mind.

Barbara shivered slightly. “Imagine,” she said. “An inter-galactic cold war,” she muttered.

“Terrifying,” Ian agreed.

Korlek nodded. “Exactly, it is a flashpoint that could spread across the galaxies. At the moment, an uneasy truce is in effect. I have been assured by the leaders of the three factions that they will abide by it for the duration of the conference. What we do here could affect the fate of trillions of beings,” he finished.

The Doctor nodded thoughtfully. “Hmm, yes, yes indeed. However,” he said, scratching his nose “I am sure you will figure out a way to stop that from happening, yes?” he smiled.

Korlek smiled back. “Ever the optimist, Doctor, maybe that’s precisely what we need,” he replied as he closed the holographic projector. “Well, now you know the background to the conflict, I think we should...”

He was cut off by the blaring of alarms and the cruiser shuddered, making them all reel. Another shudder rocked the ship harder. Susan clung to the Doctor, very much afraid and Barbara held Ian’s hand for comfort. Marchor checked a sensor station.

“Major, Dexian Patrol Destroyer on port side. They’ve ordered us to stand down and prepare to be boarded,” he finished.

Korlek shook his head. “Unbelievable. They know who we are.” He paused and chewed his lip thoughtfully. “Fine. Slow the ship and prepare for docking. Tell them I will receive their visitation with honour and fortitude,” he finished as he turned to The Doctor and his companions. “Well, time for you all to meet a Dexian, see why this is no laughing matter Ian,” he warned, a grave look on his face.

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They gathered by the outer hatch and had a shock when a troop of Dexian soldiers strode out, weapons held ready in their forepaws. Ian shook his head. The hologram had understated their stature. The description of tall, grey or white-furred rabbit-like aliens was deceptive. These were warriors, alert, martial and merciless. Even with his National Service training, Ian could not hope to best even the least of them. Ian could tell the Dexians were itching for a fight. Any provocation would do. The hard stares, twitching of noses and trigger fingers were all ominous signs. He understood how bigoted and dangerous these creatures really were. He nudged Korlek. "I see what you mean, nothing to laugh about there," he muttered.

"SILENCE!" a Dexian shouted, making them all jump, though Korlek was not fazed at all.

"Captain, I am Major Korlek, Grand General Torven is expecting us. Any delay in reaching the Conference will incur his displeasure. I am sure that you will wish not to be the source of that, will you?" he asked, taking a deep breath. "And he has said any who would break their oath would face the Shaming Rack for breaking the armistice, is that what you wish?" he finished. The Dexian Captain stared back, his whiskers twitching, then huffed. "Very well, you may continue to the station, we will not escort you though," he relented, then turned and strode out, his soldiers following him. The hatch clanged shut and the Dexian ship departed. Korlek breathed a sigh of relief.

"Well, that was easier than expected," he said, turning to the Doctor and the others. "I will need to return to the bridge and get us underway again, Marchor will show you to the rest lounge, if that is acceptable to you?" he asked.

The Doctor nodded. "Yes, thank you, that would be most agreeable," he said, comforting Susan, who was calming down after the encounter. Ian patted Barbara on her shoulder. "Are you alright?" he asked. She nodded. The Doctor wagged a finger. "Well I did say this might be perilous didn't I? Shall we?" he said as Marchor turned and lead the way out.

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A short time later Korlek called from the bridge.

"It may be of interest, Doctor, but we are passing the Acteon galaxy, or Sculptor as it is more commonly known," he informed them. Marchor pointed it out of the portside window.

Ian was impressed, but noticed the Doctor and Barbara deep in conversation, so sauntered over. "What are you two whispering about?" he asked.

Barbara stared at him, a grave expression on her face. "I was just comparing the situation to the Cuban missile crisis," she said. Ian shivered at the memory. Great Britain was caught in the middle between the USA and the Soviet Union as tensions skyrocketed between the two super-states. For one terrifying moment, the entire world held its breath. But then it passed, and humanity breathed a collective sigh of relief.

"Yes, I remember," he half-whispered, then stared hard at the Doctor. "But we can make sure it doesn't happen here, can't we Doctor?" he asked.

The Doctor pursed his lips, then nodded. "Yes, yes indeed we can," he said, patting Barbara on the shoulder before rising from his seat. "There are a few questions I'd like to ask our Major, you coming?" he asked.

Ian grinned and nodded; now they would see some action. He helped Barbara up and they walked over to where Marchor was pointing out other galaxies to Susan through the window.

“Excuse me, young man, but we need to see Major Korlek right away,” the Doctor commanded.

Ian was not sure what to make of Korlek’s aide. He was human, but appeared sullen, gaunt, and the expression on his face made it plain that this was the last place he wanted to be. He stared at them, as if bored by their presence.

“Of course, follow me,” he replied curtly as he strode off without waiting. The Doctor and the others scrambled after him and were glad he was guiding them as the group walked through the maze of corridors, especially when the ship shuddered.

“What’s happening?” Susan cried, hugging the Doctor.

Marchor pointed up the corridor ahead of them. “That way will lead you to your time machine, I must return to my station,” he said, hurrying back the way they had been and going into a lift before they could stop him. Ian tried, but it did not open for him.

The ship shuddered again. “Attention,” the voice of Korlek called through a tannoy system. “All hands to emergency stations. Storm warning. Emergency bulkheads on standby closure in case of any hull breaches.”

Ian looked round, flustered. “Why did Marchor lead us this way?” he wondered.

The Doctor clacked his tongue in annoyance. “Never mind that Chedderton, stop dithering and let’s get back to the ship. At least we’ll be safe there.” He took hold of Susan’s hand and led the way. Ian looked to Barbara, who shrugged, and they followed, though with the Doctor apparently in a huff, the gap between the two pairs of travellers had widened. This became an issue when the vessel rocked again, and air began to escape somewhere between them. Alarms screeched and an emergency bulkhead door slammed shut, separating them.

Ian and Barbara were cut off from the Doctor and Susan and the apparent safety of the TARDIS.

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Susan had become hysterical when the door slammed shut and the Doctor was doing all he could to calm her down. Hissing air escaping did not help.

“Hush child, now come along,” he said, ushering her down the corridor as alarms blared. He spotted a door, hoping it to be a lift. Too late he realised it was an escape pod and sat down, making sure Susan was strapped in as the pod launched.

“Oh dear, oh dear,” he muttered as they both held on, the pod speeding away from the ship and the meteor shower.

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When the bulkhead had snapped shut, Ian had tried to find a way to open it, to no avail. He tried bashing it, hurting his fist. “It’s no use Barbara,” he admitted.

Barbara nodded. “Maybe we should try and find a way to contact Korlek?” she suggested.

“Yes, come on, I’m sure there’s a sixtieth century equivalent to a telephone around here somewhere,” Ian said. Barbara smiled as she took his hand, and they turned back down the corridor.

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Susan’s sobs had subsided to whimpers and sniffs. The Doctor kept checking their trajectory, patting her hand to keep her calm.

“Well, my dear, it seems we’re being drawn into the Sculptor galaxy,” he said, trying to stay as light and as cheerful as he could. “I am sure Chesterton and Miss Wright will have alerted Major Korlek to our predicament. We will hopefully see them soon.” He only half-believed it himself.

A proximity chime sounded, so he looked out the porthole again. A strange ship was rising out of the galaxy, like a piece of coral, but with several tendrils waving around.

He smiled in triumph. “Oh Susan, look at that, we’re being rescued,” he enthused. She looked and gave a slight smile as it came closer.

A tendril wrapped itself around the pod and pulled them toward the strange vessel.

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Barbara had become sick with worry, not that Ian could blame her. Without the TARDIS or the Doctor, they were stranded. He looked round; they had still found no sign of a communication device, nor any of the crew, even though they were now clear of the storm.

Barbara’s immediate agitation seemed to have subsided, overtaken with a subtler preoccupation. Ian could tell she had turned her thoughts back to the parallels between this and the Cuban missile crisis.

“Hey, at least we know the human race makes it this far. Has to count for something, right?” he asked.

Barbara nodded, so Ian took her hand.

Ian and Barbara continued on their way and were relieved when they finally encountered a crewmember. They were both glad to meet a crewman who offered to show them the way to the bridge.

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The first thing the Doctor and Susan noticed was the slight smell. Then three creatures hopped into view. “Medusoids,” Susan whispered. The middle creature hissed as its tendrils waved.

“Where are you going?” it said.

The Doctor was indignant. “We will tell you nothing, you hear me, nothing,” he insisted. Susan was getting scared as the trio advanced.

“Then we will use the mind probe to discover the truth!” The leader insisted.

The Doctor grinned, whispering to Susan. “Don’t worry my dear, I know just how to confound these machines.” he said as they were led deeper within the ship.

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Ian and Barbara had been escorted to the bridge. Korlek had not been happy that Marchor had abandoned the travellers.

"I am sorry, I thought they would be safer in their vessel, and I needed to get to my post," he explained. Ian still was not convinced, but there was no actual proof of malice, so he chose to let it go, for now.

"What about the Doctor and Susan?" Barbara asked.

"Ah yes," Korlek continued. "An escape pod ejected from that section, so I've alerted our ships to find them, and it appears that we will have an escort. A Lamin ship is in range."

An image appeared on the main viewscreen. It was certainly pink, Ian thought to himself.

The Lamin Captain shook his trunk. "This one would be honoured to escort your vessel to the station," he intoned in a gruff voice.

Korlek bowed his head. "This one accepts this gracious honour with humility and respect," he replied.

Then they were on their way again.

"But what about the Doctor and Susan?" asked Barbara.

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While the Doctor was busy short-circuiting the Mind Probe machines (and enjoying himself a little too much,) Susan had calmed down and was having a conversation with Zlikk'Litz, the leader of this tribe.

"So you see, we never intended to end up here, but Grandfather thinks he can help at the conference, so we must get back," she explained.

Zlikk'Litz bobbed up and down on his single leg, his tentacles quivering. "How interesting," he squeaked. "None of the Medusoid tribes were invited. We may be a convenient scapegoat."

"Yes, it seems so," she agreed as she took a deep breath. "This is why you should release my Grandfather. He is the only one who might be able to help you."

"Indeed," Zlikk'Litz agreed, surprising her. "It will be most satisfying to see the faces of the delegates when he appears beside us," he said as he hopped out of the door. Susan got up and followed him.

The Doctor had released himself after the last machine fizzled and died. A Medusoid hopped in to check its progress and squealed in alarm, its tentacles and claw waving as it hopped out again. He picked up the probe to examine it. "Hmm, I wonder?" he mused to himself, then chuckled slightly. "Yes, yes, I see," he said, reaching into his pocket to take out a small screwdriver.

He was tinkering when Susan entered with Zlikk'Litz. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"Well I remembered what that young fellow Marchor said about Changelings. Do you remember we met one once? Well, I remembered there was a sonic disruption of its Morphic Field, so I thought, what if we could induce it hmm?" he chuckled.

"You think the conference could be infiltrated by them, Doctor?" Zlikk'Litz asked.

The Doctor nodded as Susan helped him modify the equipment. This would help a great deal, once they got to the station.

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Ian and Barbara were impressed by the conference room itself. It was a large round room in uniform grey. A pot of red and yellow flowers in a corner seemed out of place, a slightly bizarre contrast. But then Ian looked round at the clash of colours of the uniforms and creatures assembled. Psychedelic was an understatement.

All the delegates were laden with weapons, not a good sign. While they had encountered the Dexians before, the garish pink-skinned and blue armoured Lamin looked grumpy and mean. The group of Sass'Japham in their sand-coloured uniforms were very intimidating. A Sass'Japham warrior glared at them with its glowing eyes. Korlek stood facing them.

"The Doctor is on his way. This issue will be resolved," he announced. There were snorts and grunts from the delegates, as if none of them wanted to be here. Ian remembered the files Korlek had shown them, making it clear that each race would rather annihilate each other and that this conference was an unwanted compromise for them all. He nudged Barbara.

"Feel better, now we know the Doctor and Susan are okay?" he asked. She smiled. "Yes, though we're not out of the woods yet," she said, her eyes flicking to the delegates.

Ian realised she was still thinking of the Missile Crisis, as well as being unnerved by all the hard stares they were getting. He got it, they were outsiders, aliens. Even though all the delegates were stood as still as statues, the tension was almost at snapping point.

They were waiting, all waiting for some slip-up, one mistake. An insult, a slight to their perceived 'honour' or image. He grimaced, that was it, as with medieval knights or Samurai, these were martial, but under strict instructions. They wouldn't be the ones to 'fire first'. He decided to take the bull by the horns and test that theory, so took a step closer, making them all turn their heads.

Ian addressed the delegates. "Look, I know none of you want to be here, that all of you would rather fight pointless battles, but what about a better way? An honourable way. Isn't that worth a little more time and effort?" he finished. The Lamin shook their trunks while the Dexians twitched their whiskers. A Sass'Japham warrior took a step forward, towering menacingly over Ian, its fangs bared, and purplish snout lowered in disdain.

"Who are you to dictate terms to us little human?" he snarled. Ian gulped as Barbara tried to pull him away, but he pulled his arm away, squaring up to the lumbering warrior. "Look, it's nothing to me, but three times you've tried to reach an accord. That tells me you really do want an alternative," he paused, seeing that several delegates were nodding, that they actually agreed with him. Then he thought of something Korlek had mentioned earlier.

"Yes, three times, four if you count your alliance to drive the horde back. So if you don't want to see it through, there's the door, though the question you'll have to ask yourself is could you bear the shame and dishonour of leaving? I think not," Ian finished.

Barbara stood beside Ian. "And if anything happens to us, the Doctor won't be happy and then you could end up on the shaming rack couldn't you?" she told the warrior, who was alarmed by her brazenness.

The Leader of the Sass'Japham, seated in an ornate chair, laughed in amusement. "A female that speaks true to the mark," he said. "You are right; this is a matter of honour, distasteful as this talking is. We will carry on waiting a little longer for this Doctor of yours Korlek. Whether we will accept his words will be decided then," he finished.

Murmurs of agreement echoed from the others, though the warrior who had been chastised stared daggers at Ian and Barbara as he re-joined his group.

“Better keep an eye on that one,” Ian muttered. Barbara nodded. “I think I understand the situation a little better now,” she said. Ian nudged her elbow. “Oh do tell,” he prompted as Korlek moved a bit closer to listen in.

“Some of them don’t seem to want to fight anymore, but as it is a matter of honour, then they can’t risk backing off because they would lose face and be ashamed,” she shrugged. “It’s brinkmanship, plain and simple, just sabre-rattling. Their own pride and hubris won’t let them back down,” She turned to Korlek. “What do you think?” she asked.

He smiled, just then a junior aide rushed in, holding a tablet device. He showed Korlek a picture of a ship attached to the station like a Barnacle to rock. Korlek raised an eyebrow, realising it was of Zimordion design, “Changelings, damn,” he whispered, only Ian catching it.

Korlek raised a hand. “Delegates, we seem to have been boarded by Zimordion Infiltrators, we should...” Korlek was interrupted by a laser blast, just missing his head. Ian turned, where Marchor had been standing, a Medusoid had appeared.

Ian pulled Barbara down and the delegates took cover as other Medusoids hopped into the room, firing laser pistols and brandishing swords. They were engaged by the delegates, though Ian noticed the warrior he had stared down was hanging back behind his Leader who had taken cover behind his chair. The Medusoids seemed to be protected by a force field, but that did not stop a couple of Dexians and a Sass’Japham striding forward and engaging with their own blades. Ian sighed, wishing he had a weapon.

So engrossed in his own thoughts, he did not realise another ship had docked as a deep humming began. The Medusoids shimmered, changing into pale, rock-like creatures, dropping their weapons and falling to the floor in pain. Ian noticed the warrior as well as a couple of other delegates had also fallen. Korlek raised a hand. “Cease fire,” he ordered. The Doctor entered, taking in the scene. “So what’s all this fuss about eh?” he said as Susan and Zlikk’Litz entered, pulling a cart piled with equipment untidily lashed together.

UNITED troops entered, taking away the fallen. Marchor had reverted to human form, nursing his wounded shoulder.

“This explains a few things, like why you abandoned the Doctor and his friends,” Korlek mused. “I suppose you were to sabotage this conference?”

Marchor nodded. Korlek gestured to the UNITED guards, who led the Changeling out. Korlek then turned to the Doctor.

“Great timing. Think you could address the delegates now?” he asked. The Doctor nodded gravely, stepping into the middle of the floor, all eyes upon him.

“It’s always easier to point a finger and blame the person next to you than to take a step back and look at the facts. Jumping to conclusions is easy, especially when another party is deliberately misleading you—as these so-called ‘Changelings’ have been. Even going as far as infiltrating and nearly sabotaging this conference, fuelling distrust and prejudice against each other and the Medusoids.

“Now you must pool resources, create a combined defence and exploration fleet. Learn to work together, yes? These Changelings are a threat, but what about others, hmm?” the Doctor waved a finger. “They could be out there couldn’t they? These UNITED people could help if you let them. Yes, yes, why not? Learn to co-operate and trust each other, that’s the way forward yes?” he finished, gripping his lapels, staring at them, as if daring them to argue. At the moment, none would dare.

Korlek smiled. “Then we are in accord?” he asked.

Each of the delegates nodded.

Korlek inclined his head. "Thank you all," he said as he held out his right hand. "For your honesty," he held out his left. "Integrity, candour ..." He brought them together and bowed in salute. "And your commitment to our cause," he finished. The delegates each copied the gestures and departed, the Medusoids hopping out last of all.

The Conference had been a success.

Ian grinned at the Doctor as Susan and Barbara hugged. Once again he had to marvel at this mysterious wanderer in Time and Space.

There was so much they could learn from the Doctor and Ian was more determined than ever to experience as much as he could before he and Barbara returned home.

"Well, Doctor," he said, returning to the matter at hand. "That was a good speech, think they'll live up to it?" he asked.

"Indeed, I hope so, my boy, I hope so," the Doctor replied. He sighed then turned to Korlek. "I hope my solution meets with your approval Major?"

Korlek grinned. "Yes Doctor, spectacular. You've made a massive difference," he said as they made their way to the storage hold. "Thank you again," he said, then frowned. "Or thank you for the first time would be more apt," he amended.

"Ah, yes the perils of time travel," the Doctor mused. "Well, I must say I am now looking forward to our next meeting, but before you let anything slip, I suggest we had better be along our way!" he finished, grinning. He opened the TARDIS door and ushered the others in. "Goodbye, goodbye!" he called as the doors closed and the TARDIS vanished with a roar and a groan.

They were off on another adventure in time and space.





The TARDIS brings the Doctor, Susan, Ian, and Barbara to a craft en route to Station Zenox, a neutral outpost established in the 61st century to resolve the powder-keg of trouble to which this region of space has been prone.

It is a desperate time in galactic history: the outset of the Third Intergalactic Peace Conference. Four mighty empires – the Dexian Protectorate, the Lamin, the Sass'Japham, and the Medusoids – stand in dispute, and their enmity is unwavering. They are welcomed aboard by a man named Korlek, who needs the Doctor to conduct the conference.

Can peace be achieved? Is Korlek a friend or a foe? And will the Doctor withstand a persistent mind probe?

This story features the First Doctor, Ian, Barbara and Susan and is set in between *Planet of Giants* and *The Dalek Invasion of Earth*

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This is another story in a series of original fan authored Doctor Who fiction published by The Doctor Who Project featuring the First Doctor as played by William Hartnell

