

THE
DOCTOR WHO
PROJECT

KEEPSAKES

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Galactic INH

COSMIC CRESCENT™



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Keepsakes

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Prologue

The ship slipped discreetly through the space between the stars. Barely large enough to carry one person, the sleek black outside resembled a high-tech coffin. Within it something breathed, yet it knew not where it was. Inside its mind something stirred, a separate consciousness grew, slowly trying to take over one thought at a time. It would have grown faster had the creature's normal persona not been so strong. Even in this subdued state, it could not win, yet.

This journey was a desperate measure. A last gasp. The ship and its contents were not expected to return, so the people who had sent it had offered its incumbent a little sentimentality for the journey; they had let them take a few keepsakes along...

01 – A Collection

There were corridors, some short and straight, others long and rambling. Off of these, more corridors. At the beginning of the day Tom had entertained the idea of mapping some them, but now, a couple of hours on, he just wandered, punch drunk with monotony.

It wouldn't have been so bad if some of the doors were unlocked, but every single one stood fast against his efforts. Finally, he sat down on the floor and sighed, frustrated. In truth, there was another reason for his investigations; he'd hoped to find the computer room that ran the ship. He'd assumed the console at the front of the ship was just a pretty interface, and that somewhere back here there must be a room housing a proper machine; a machine he could use his skills to investigate a little further.

It wouldn't have been so bad if the Doctor had let him take a look at the console once in a while, but the Time Lord seemed wary of either Tom or Val pressing anything. It wasn't for the want of trying; in the past few days Tom had hung around as much as he could to offer help, but the Doctor kept saying he had it all under control. Just once Tom had managed to sneak a peek at the electronics under the surface when the Doctor had lifted a panel up for investigation, but somewhat unsurprisingly, it had been like nothing Tom had seen before.

Tom yawned. He hadn't expected it to be so, well, dull. It's a SPACESHIP, for heaven's sake, whatever it looked like from the outside. Tom looked at the floor and shook his head - even the floor was weird. He'd expected everything to be metal, constructed, but so few areas were. Even the ones that were seemed to be little more than bolt-ons, not part of the original ship. Tom placed his palm against the brownish ground and pushed. It felt spongy. Like the old thin gym mats they used to have at the clubs his parents would drop him off at. The smell of those mats came back to him. Plastic, rubber and decades of ill-washed feet.

Tom looked at his hand. On its' surface a thin film of water reflected the lights above. He touched the floor with his other hand; it was dry. He pushed down again and inspected his palm. Wet. That didn't seem right. Nothing seemed right.

Tom was about to get up when he heard the humming. Not mechanical or electrical, but human. The pitch alternated through about five tones until it rested on one, growing louder and closer by the second. Tom stayed still. Maybe life wasn't going to remain so dull after all.

The Doctor walked around the corner, and stopped humming. "There you are, Tom," he said. "Knew it wouldn't take long to find you. Follow me."

The Doctor paused and offered Tom a hand up. Tom took it, and was shocked by the voracity with which he was pulled to his feet. The Doctor looked at his hand and smiled.

"Interesting thing, this ship, don't you think? Especially to someone like yourself?"

Tom frowned. "Like myself?"

"I know your strengths, Tom," the Doctor said, brushing his right hand along the wall as they walked. "Don't let them become your weaknesses."

Tom, not knowing quite what to say, changed the subject.

"What were you doing back then, with the humming?"

"Oh, finding you."

"By humming?"

"Sending out waves and getting them back. Classic stuff."

"But to do that you'd need to..."

"Know the sounds of the whole ship?"

"Yes."

The Doctor stopped at a door. "Yes. Now if you'd care to open the door."

"This one?" Tom asked. The Doctor nodded and Tom pushed it open. Inside the room was dark, but gradually the light got brighter, revealing shelves of books.

"A library?"

"Oh, much more than that," the Doctor said fondly, "A collection."

Tom walked inside and another childhood smell greeted him, one of dusty pages, of evenings spent in the attic with boxes full of yellowed newspapers and the occasional dead spider.

Tom looked closely at one of the shelves. What he had taken to be books were in fact folders no thicker than his thumb. "You can take one out," the Doctor said from behind him. Tom reached forward and picked the nearest one. It was made of blue cardboard, its sides stretched taught by its contents.

Tom lifted the flap and looked inside. Part of his mind was looking for dead spiders, or dead aliens, or whatever it was that space ships had lurking in the corners. He pulled out the top publication.

"It's a comic," Tom said.

"Logically, I cannot fault you. But it's *more* than just a comic." The Doctor took it out of Tom's hands to admire. "It's number three hundred and twenty two in the Crescent Cortex series. This is the one where Sally finally discovers that her father is an impostor from Janter, sent to fool Sally into displacing the Hogarth Time Krung into the split sun, thus rendering all electrically charged races under his power. What a plot twist that was! Never work, of course; pure sci-fi."

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't worry; you're not supposed to understand. After all, it's number three hundred and twenty two. That's a lot of back story to catch up on. Still, if you have the time, you should find numbers two to three hundred and twenty one within these walls. The Crescent Cortex series was one of my favourites."

"You don't say?"

"I do."

Tom watched as the Doctor moved across to the far side of the room, bent his considerable frame and extracted a folder with precise care. "I think I'll read this one."

"When do you get time to read them?"

"You find time," he replied, quite solemnly.

The Doctor turned to go. "You said you had number two onwards; of the Cortex Crescendo..."

"Crescent Cortex..."

"Crescent Cortex. What happened to number one?"

The Doctor half turned in the doorway, "Now's there's another of life's mysteries. You know, I just can't remember." And with that, he was gone.

Without the Doctor's knowledge of the filing system, it took Tom over half-an-hour to locate numbers two to ten. When he had them all, he slipped them inside an empty folder and took them back to the living area of the TARDIS. When he entered the main room, he stopped.

Valentina Rossi was sitting, pencil in hand, running her finger down an almost impossibly large page with almost impossibly small print. Tom stood a few seconds and watched as she ringed off first one entry, and then some way down the page, another.

"I hope they aren't the originals you're marking?"

"Oh, there you are. I thought he might have dropped you off somewhere. Supernova, black hole, you know."

Tom, who was an expert in thick skin, walked into the centre of the room and sat down. "This," Valentina continued, "is an index to an index, to what must be one of the largest cookbooks in the universe."

Tom waited for her to laugh, but as the seconds ticked by, he realised she was serious. "Cookbooks?"

"Yeah. I asked his nibs if he had any books worth reading, and this is what he showed me."

"A cookbook?"

"Yes, a cookbook. What've you got?"

Tom looked down at his folder, he'd almost forgotten about it. "Err, comics."

"Comics?" Valentina sneered, "You freak."

"Freak?"

"Alien comic-book freak."

"You're the one pouring over an *alien* cookbook, drawling like it's one of its own recipes. I think I know who the freak is around here. How on earth do you even know what the ingredients are?"

"You idiot, I'm not drawling over the ingredients. It's the cross-referencing I'm fascinated by..."

Tom laughed but failed to open his mouth, so it came out a snort. "Cross-referencing? I've heard it all, now."

"You have no appreciation of the work that's gone into this."

"You're right - and guess what - I don't want to have any appreciation of the work, either. Now be quiet, I've got comics to read."

"Yeah, like you're not just going to look at the pictures."

Tom opened the comic, but watched Val over the top of it. She returned to her cookbook, turning pages over with a loud 'Whump!', gasping at some new level of culinary organisation, and making small scribbling notes with her pencil. "I know you're looking at me." She said finally. Tom looked at the comic.

"You're having too much fun. It's a book about food."

"How many have you ever read?"

"Not many. Well, none."

"Well, then, be quiet yourself, and read your magazine."

"Comic, it's a comic."

"There, I said you were a freak."

02 – Issue One

The Doctor paced. Space-time continuum saver he might be, top-notch genius it couldn't be argued, but when it came down to the whereabouts of his Crescent Cortex, issue one, he was just as useless as the rest of us. He could almost picture the cover in his mind. The split sun was on it, off to one corner, and an android of some sort. Big menacing thing. And Sally, she was on it. What a hero Sally had been to the young Time Lord. She had it all; intelligence, beauty, wit, debonair. She was a force to be reckoned with. The Doctor whistled through his teeth as he tried to piece together the fragments of words and artwork into an understandable story. There was a time when he knew it all, every exclamation, every line, but that time had long since passed.

There were other copies he could have bought. The print run may not have been large, but it had been a few million at least, he was sure. And he knew a number of people who'd still be able to put their hands on an original. Yet none of them would have been his copy. The thumbed copy. The copy with the rip on the front page which had made him cry when he'd done it. The copy he'd stayed up nights reading by the slightest of lights so as not to be found out.

That was the Doctor's copy and the rest paled in comparison. On every other day the comic's final whereabouts had been just a niggler; a question mark at the back of his brain that may or may not be answered; may or may not be forgotten. But since Tom had mentioned it, the final resting place of that treasured issue had become an all consuming quest.

Valentina walked into the control room. She waited for the Doctor to notice her, and when he didn't she cleared her throat.

"Ah, Valentina."

"Doctor. You seem... preoccupied."

"I am. I am. I have something to remember, yet for the life of me can't remember it. Any suggestions?"

"What do you have to remember?"

"Where I put a comic."

"A comic?" she said, scornfully. "Not you as well? When did you last see it?"

"Over nine hundred and fifty years ago."

"Well, I can see why you can't remember," Valentina said with a smile. "My advice, for what it's worth, is to stop trying to remember where you last saw it, and try instead, to remember when you first *didn't* see it."

The Doctor paused. "First *not* seeing it? Now there's an idea. I'll have to work on that. Thank you."

"Glad I could be of help."

Valentina watched as the Doctor walked to the table and moved some papers around in an agitated way. "I get the feeling you don't read comics?" he asked her.

"Not really. Not my thing. Did an essay on the pointlessness of them at university. It wasn't called that, of course."

"How was it received?"

"Got an F. Seems I touched a nerve with someone." The room grew quiet, all but the noise of the TARDIS ticking over. Valentina was not sure if she should pre-empt the conversation that had been repeating in her head for the past day. "Doctor...?"

"Yes?"

"About my brother... about what I asked..."

Immediately the Doctor looked awkward, and Valentina wished she'd kept her mouth shut. "I cannot help," he said. "I cannot go meddling. Too much meddling causes problems. Bigger problems. I wish I could. I so wish I could."

"I'm sorry I asked. It's just... it's just not knowing..."

"The Olerm Conference," the Doctor exclaimed.

"The what?"

"That's the first time I didn't see the comic, at the Olerm Conference. I shouldn't have been there, was pretty much a stowaway, and I took my carry bag with me. I wanted to read the comic on the journey and it wasn't there."

"Oh, right," Valentina muttered, annoyed at the way her brother's disappearance had been discarded. "Sorry, I'm going to have a rest."

The Doctor watched her go. He so desperately wanted to tell her. But he couldn't.

Two hours and fourteen minutes later the Doctor appeared in the living quarters, a determined look on his face. "What's up?" Tom said.

"I did some rooting around, in the archives; I think I may know where I lost the comic."

"Really? I read issues two to ten, they were good."

"Aren't they!"

"So, we have a plan to get number one?"

"Not a plan," the Doctor said. "A location. Come on. We'll be there soon."

By the time Valentina found the two men, they were in the console room, looking like excited schoolboys. Their smirks didn't help her mood at all. "So we have the where," she said, "What about the when?"

"Oh, that's easy," the Doctor said. "Present day."

"Oh, right," she replied, "And what exactly is present day to a time traveller?"

“Good question. Present day is more of a TARDIS term than anything else. You see this beautiful ship grows, like a magnificent tree. And like a tree, it has its’ rings, its’ age. When the TARDIS is not in any specified time, it reverts back to travelling in the time of its age, and that’s what I call present day.”

Valentina shrugged. “I’m not sure I’m any clearer.”

“How much longer?” Tom asked, studying the dials to see if any sense of them was sinking in. He had one of those sorts of brains, the type that remained receptive even when its owner was not. The amount of ambient knowledge he was able to pick up frightened him sometimes. He’d hoped it’d be a benefit to him here.

The Doctor frowned at a dial. “We’ve arrived. She’s just finding it a little difficult to park.”

“That often happen?” Valentina asked.

“A bit.”

Tom and Valentina watched the Doctor operate the console as if it were a complicated church organ. “Hold this,” he said, motioning to Valentina to grab a length of rope. “Keep it really tight. Lean back into it.” Valentina wound it round her arm and leant back. “Perfect. Tom, do you see that piping behind you?”

Tom turned and saw the three inch thick pipe running out of the floor and into the ceiling. “Yes.”

“Grab and hold onto it. Just in case it gets a bit bumpy. Don’t want anyone to get hurt.” There was a shudder, a creaking, and a scraping noise, before the room went quiet. The Doctor smiled. “All done. You can let go...”

Then came a tremendous crunch and the room lurched before righting itself. The Doctor smiled again. “Now where was I? Oh yes, you can let go now.”

The companions glanced at each other, before releasing themselves from both the pipe and the rope. Valentina stretched her shoulder. “I never did catch our location.”

“Because I never said it. Come with me, let’s have a look.” The Doctor walked to the door and took hold of both handles. “My colleagues,” he said, opening the doors, “This is Earth...”

The Doctor trailed off, then closed the doors before either Tom or Valentina had had chance to see the outside.

“Um, I don’t want to sound, spoilt, or anything, but we’ve *been* to Earth. In fact, we live on Earth.”

“What?” the Doctor said distracted. He started walking back to the console. “Oh, yes. No, not that Earth. Not your Earth. Another Earth. It’s a common name. People look at the ground and call their planets Earth. It’s the other planets they give the fancy names to.”

“Something’s wrong, though, isn’t it?” Valentina said taking a step closer to the door. “It wasn’t what you were expecting?”

“Please, stay away from the door.”

Valentina, who was still annoyed with the Time Lord, moved a step closer, and gripped the handle.

“Please stay away. It’s not safe here.”

“But you brought us here.”

"Stay away from the door," the Doctor repeated, but Valentina was already turning the handle. The Doctor pressed a button on the console, and a dull click sounded inside the door. "Central locking." He admitted.

"Got an immobiliser, too?" Tom said.

"You can't bring us all the way here, open the doors and then shut them again. What's the matter?"

"You want to see? Really?"

Valentina nodded, "Yes, I want to see."

The Doctor pressed the button. The door clicked again.

"Brace yourself."

Valentina opened the door, Tom stepped in behind her. In front of them was a grassy plain which rolled in beautiful curves away from the TARDIS. The sky was a raft of rich purples, rippling above them like waves at a riverbank.

And far in the distance, stood a windmill. Silver and gleaming.

"It's beautiful," Valentina said. "Whatever's the matter with it?"

Tom moved away for a moment, and then came back, holding out issue two of the Crescent Cortex. Valentina took it from him and held the cover up to the scene in front of the TARDIS.

The two matched exactly.

Valentina shut the doors. "Is this some sort of alien space-time continuum comic book joke?"

"No," replied Tom.

"Is this what you two have been up to since I've been asleep?"

"No," replied the Doctor.

"Are you sure?"

The Earthling and the Gallifreyan looked at each other and nodded. "Yes."

"Then... how?"

The Doctor cleared his throat. "Well, it would seem the landscape of the planet we have just landed on has been transformed into the landscape depicted on issue two of the Crescent Cortex."

"But how?" Valentina repeated.

"Not sure. But I suppose we ought to investigate."

Tom smiled. "That's a bit more like it."

"But be warned, there's danger out there."

"How can you be so certain?"

The Doctor looked a little frailer for a moment. "Because, my friends, there's always danger."

03 – Find Sally

Valentina grabbed her coat, her notebook and her pen. She put the pen and paper in the inside pocket of her khaki jacket, and clipped its belt together at the bottom. Tom appeared putting on his coat.

“You look like a train spotter,” Valentina said.

“And you look like a guerrilla soldier, but do I complain?”

The Doctor walked past the door. “Everyone ready?”

The companions fell-in behind him, walking in time with his long gait.

“Got the comics?” the Doctor asked.

Tom nodded. “Yes.”

“Then it’s time.”

The Doctor opened the door, stepped out and waited for Tom and Valentina to exit.

“Well, come on,” he urged them.

“Where are we headed?” Valentina asked.

“No ideas, you?” the Doctor asked, shutting the doors behind his companions.

“The windmill?” Valentina said. “It looks like it might be inhabited.”

“You make the assumption that meeting people is a good thing.”

“I suppose. But it’s the best suggestion I’ve got.”

Tom nodded, “I’d go to the windmill.”

“Agreed, then,” said the Doctor. “The windmill it is. I’d use the TARDIS to get there, but it had enough trouble setting us down here. Are we all feeling fit?” This last statement was received by less than convincing mutterings which the Doctor chose to ignore. “Best make a start.”

The rolling hills were spectacular, though every inch was covered in thick, heavy grass, which made their progress harder going.

“This place is amazing, Doctor,” Valentina said.

“No, it’s not,” he replied, dismissively.

Valentina looked to Tom for support, but he was walking with his head down.

Valentina stopped. “Why did you say it like that?”

“Like what?”

"Like I didn't have the right to say anything?"

The Doctor stopped; he looked upset. "Did I say it like that?"

Tom paused. "I didn't hear you say anything."

"I'm sorry," the Doctor continued. "I didn't realise. I just meant that something has gone wrong here. What you see is a fabrication, a lie. Come, look over there."

The Doctor placed his hand on Valentina's shoulder. It was an assured touch. "Look, over there." Valentina looked to where the Doctor was pointing. "Do you see the way the light fades; the way the colour dulls?"

Valentina saw what the Doctor meant. In the distance a clump of tall trees grew, and just a few metres before them, the landscape seemed to change. The vegetation was no longer neat and cared for. Tangled weeds grew so tightly there appeared to be no way through. Even the purple of the sky darkened to a threatening grey.

"Why's it like that?"

The Doctor paused. "It's not been changed yet. Or perhaps it never will be."

"Meaning?"

"I think, well... there's a chance that's as far as issue one went."

"Issue one? You're talking about that comic again?"

"It's all linked in. However odd it seems, something has replicated as much of issue one as possible. I suspect that the frames don't progress any further than the edges you can see."

"But how could this happen?"

"My dear Valentina, if I was to question everything I see, well, I'd have a lot of unanswered questions. I'm sure it'll all be explainable in the end. It generally is."

"But don't you want to investigate it?"

"We are. Just by being here we are investigating it. Whether we look at the edge, or proceed to the windmill, we are investigating."

Up ahead, Tom turned round. Valentina could see an issue of the comic in his hands. It annoyed her even more. "Are you coming?" Tom asked.

The Doctor looked towards Tom, and then back at Valentina. "Are you coming?"

"I'm going to look at the edge. I'll catch you up at the windmill."

"Okay," the Gallifreyan said. "Be careful."

Valentina smiled. "You too."

"Where's Valentina?" Tom asked as the Doctor fell into stride beside him.

"She's exploring. Following a hunch. Good for her."

The two men continued towards the windmill.

"What do you think's inside?" Tom asked.

"I can't remember," the Doctor told him.

Tom frowned. "You've been here before?"

"The comic. Issue one. There was something inside the windmill. Don't know what. Can't remember what. Uh..."

Tom looked round. The Doctor had stopped, his hand on his head.

"What's the matter?"

"Don't know. Feeling a little... disorientated. Think I'd better sit down for a minute."

"I'll call Valentina," Tom said.

"No, no. let her go. I'm sure it'll pass. You feeling okay?"

Tom nodded. "Feeling fine."

The Doctor lurched forward onto his knees, one arm desperately trying to support him, the other on his head. "Sally!" he called out.

"Doctor!" Tom called, running to his aide. He crouched and supported his shoulders. A spasm wracked the Doctor's body, spinning him round, till his head rested on Tom's forearms.

"Sally," the Doctor whispered through the pain.

"Hold on," Tom said, "What should I do?"

The Doctor closed his eyes, "Find Sally."

Then he was limp in Tom's arms. "Oh, God," he said. *Without the Doctor*, Tom thought, *what am I going to do?*

Then, a second later he thought, *Without the Doctor, I can investigate the TARDIS unhindered.*

Tom stopped and thought about his thoughts. He should really be trying to help the Doctor, but part of him just didn't want to very much. The Doctor treated him like a child, and it annoyed him. Tom carefully laid the Gallifreyans head on the floor, and stood up. He looked towards the windmill, but felt no compunction to go there, not when the pull of the TARDIS was so great.

Tom bent down again. "Sorry about this," he said to the Doctor's unconscious body as he rifled his pockets for the key. He found it, and also his sonic screwdriver. "That will definitely come in handy," he murmured, before getting up and heading back the way he came.

04 – The Edge of Space

Valentina was on her own, and that was fine. Let the boys sightsee at the windmill; she had other places to be. She had an edge for a story, had developed it over the years, and right now she knew she was heading in the right direction.

Comics! She thought. *COMICS!*

It didn't matter how old the Doctor claimed he was now, the fact of the matter was he was off chasing comic books. *How narrow-minded was that?* There'd been a time when she'd been in awe of the Doctor, but now she had the feeling there'd be a thing or two she might be able to teach the Time Lord herself.

Her legs were feeling tired, she'd been travelling for about ten minutes, and had a good ten more before she reached the edge. She might be fit enough for the cycling machines down the health club, but striding across the surface of another planet seemed a lot harder.

Different atmosphere, her rational brain thought. "Different *everything!*" she said.

And she stopped walking for a few moments. She convinced herself it was so she could catch her breath, but it wasn't that. It was her brother again. Not for the first time recently, Valentina wondered whether her brother was on a planet like this one. Lost, alone. Or maybe whoever had taken him was holding him captive, maybe even torturing...

"No," she said aloud. "He is resourceful. He'll be safe."

And before she had time to get over emotional, she started walking once more.

If I'm to find him, I have to stay strong, she thought. Then she almost threw up on the spot. About fifty yards ahead of her someone lay on the floor. A man or boy. She couldn't see much of him, but it *could* be her brother. She closed her eyes for a few moments, opened them again. He was still there.

Valentina ran.

"Let it be him," she whispered as she ran. "Let it be him." But the nearer she got to the prone figure, the more she realised he was too young, but the realisation didn't slow her, didn't make her falter; for while it may not be her brother, it was possibly *someone's* brother, definitely *someone's* son, and the mantra she had been chanting changed from 'Let it be him' to "Let him be alive."

And then she was there, standing over him, crouching over him. She put her hands on his shoulders; she knew better than to move him. His skin was warm, and there was a breath, she felt it on the back of her hand.

“Hey, can you hear me?” she asked. The boy looked no more than ten years old. Human shaped. He didn’t respond. “Hello?” she called a little louder. When nothing happened, she sat up, brushed her hand across her face, and held it in front of her mouth as she tried to think of what was the best thing to do. *Stay with him*, her mind said, and she knew she could do little else. If monsters came or the night was freezing she knew she would stay with the boy.

Something touched her knee. Valentina moved backwards, but it had been the boys’ hand. He had woken and was now looking as frightened as Valentina herself must be looking. She smiled at him, nodded imperceptibly. “My name is Valentina,” she said. “I’m here to help you.”

The boy looked into her eyes but said nothing.

“Are you hurt?” she asked. The boy moved his other arm gingerly, and then his feet. He carefully pushed himself up into a crouching position, like an athlete waiting for the starting pistol to go off. Valentina stood and offered her arm for the boy to support himself. He accepted it.

“You understand me?” she said. The boy nodded; or at least she thought he did. He hadn’t looked at her, more just nodded to the floor. “Can you speak?” she asked.

The boy turned to face her. There was a surgical dressing applied to the left side of his throat. He opened his mouth but only a faint croaking noise came out.

“Don’t worry,” Valentina said to him. “You don’t have to talk. I need to get you to see the Doctor. He’ll know what to do.”

The boy turned and started walking toward the windmill. “Don’t!” Valentina said, then when he didn’t stop, she said, “Wait, I’ll come with you,” and she hurried after the ten year old who seemed to know exactly where he was going.

05 – Not So Fast

Tom had felt guilty before, which is why he was certain that he wasn't feeling it at all now. He was an opportunist – had to be. Without such a trait he would never have been as successful a hacker. If you didn't have what it took to exploit every opening that presented itself to you, then you might as well throw yourself in jail.

He kept an eye out for Val, though he couldn't see anything of her. Probably off finding ingredients for her universally oversized cook book. Val didn't really matter, anyway. She wouldn't understand, so there was no point wasting time trying to make her understand. No, he was finding this out for himself.

The blue box of tricks was a quarter of an hour away. Tom was excited; he almost felt like skipping, and he hadn't skipped in a long time. The word Pandora flashed in his mind and it made him smile. Was this what it would have felt like to be on the brink of opening up that box of secrets too? Maybe he'd look the word up when he'd got into the TARDIS' architecture.

He'd just finished thinking this when his legs decided to stop working. Then something tightened around his ankles and he fell over, face forwards. Within a second there were people around him, and his hands were being pulled behind him and roped together. "Hey, get off," he shouted. There was a pause. Someone whispered.

"He speaks our language?"

"He speaks in tongues, Greenside, that means nothing. They must pay."

"But *they* don't speak our language?"

Another pause. Tom decided it was best to keep quiet.

"We'll take him back. We'll see what he has to say. Blindfold."

What little Tom could see was blacked out. Whoever these people were, they were strong. One of them hoisted Tom up onto his feet with ease.

"I mean no harm," he said. Unfortunately this was met by a pain in his back.

"Keep quiet. You will have your chance to speak."

Tom was prodded forward, one of their hands closed around his right wrist.

"They don't normally just give in," Greenside said. "You know what happened to Moon..."

"Just stop thinking," the one who was in charge said. "We have orders..."

"I understand orders just as much as you do, crimson; I just don't allow them to stop me thinking..."

"Your cheek will get you into trouble. Keep yourself in line. Remember the order of things."

"The order of things. How could I forget?"

Tom was gently nudged forward, before a hand came to rest on his elbow as a guide in his blindfolded state. They walked for a while, the thick grass growing thinner, until there was little on the ground but dirt. Leaves and branches started to brush by his arms and head, and the temperature cooled enough for Tom to surmise they'd entered some sort of forest.

"Stop," Crimson said, and Greenside held Tom's arm harder. "There's something following us."

"What?" the younger whispered.

"More of his kind, I expect. Wanting to free him."

"Then why don't we free him? He is unarmed. Can you not see why they are hostile when we take their kind prisoner?"

"We are saving ourselves, our people."

"We are doing nothing of the sort."

Then Tom heard the movement too. It was coming from a different direction than the voices of his captors. Greenside moved his hand from his arm to his shoulder and gently pushed down to get Tom to crouch. The movement came again, louder this time, gaining momentum, till at last whatever it was, was running, and towards them.

"This is not them," Greenside said. "This is a Promode."

Tom's blindfold was removed. "What are you doing?" Crimson spat.

"Giving him a chance to live." Tom felt Greenside start to undo his hands. They were in a shallow hollow, the moss covered ground stretching out behind them, up and over a fallen tree.

Tom's bonds loosened, but before they were finally free, he watched in horror as Crimson was lifted out of the hollow, as if on a giant spring, away from them. "Run," Greenside said, and the pair of them ran away from where Crimson had been snatched to.

"I'm sorry," he heard Greenside say repeatedly. They ran through the trees; tall thin trees, with rough bark, that snagged at their clothes and skin.

"Where are we going?" Tom asked.

"I don't know," Greenside admitted. "The Promodes are fast and deadly. We will fare better split up. One of us may survive."

"No!" Tom said, but by the time he turned round, Greenside had gone, heading off to the left. Tom ran to the right, hands still bound behind him. He was frightened. He believed in death, simple no-heaven death, and right at the moment, it sounded as if it was coming through the trees for him.

Then, another scream, off from where Greenside had run. Tom altered his course slightly to ensure he was heading directly away from him. He was too young, too clever, and damn it, too plain arrogant to die now.

The ground rose slightly, but it didn't slow the Earth man. Instead he lengthened his stride, gritted his teeth and fought his way upwards. At the top, the trees thinned, and beyond that, it almost looked like a clearing, an unnatural cessation of trees.

Something whipped by his shoulder and thudded into a tree in front of him. He didn't have time to stop and inspect it, but the glance he afforded told him enough. It was a bone, a sharpened bone. The trees were almost gone now. Running into the clearing would be suicide, so Tom ran around the line of trees searching for a way out. Unfortunately, all he found was a wall of rock. It stood in his path blocking the way forward and to the side. He turned round but the Promode, the bone-thrower, was behind him. He was going to have to enter the clearing, find another way round.

Tom dipped his shoulder and cleared the trees. Almost instantly, there was a cracking sound, as if the ground had split in two underneath him. He thought he noticed dust rising from the floor and, sensing the danger, he started to tense.

As he brought his right foot forward, Tom felt movement from under his feet, unbalancing him, propelling him toward the centre of the clearing. The dust he'd thought was rising of its own accord was, in fact, being forced up by rocks which were rising up through the surface of the earth. The crack of sound was followed by a rumbling and shaking of the ground.

Tom stumbled onto his left knee, and the vibrations shook his body. In front of him the rocks continued to push their way up, rising with a thunderous noise, obscuring the sunlight. Tom reached out and gripped onto one of the stones. Slowly, the rocks stopped moving and the rumbling subsided, to be replaced by a deep animalistic, growling noise.

Tom fell onto his right side, felt something pierce his skin. He cried out, but a moment later the wind was knocked out of him. Something was by him, struggling and snarling. Tom, a man who had known little physical violence in his life, didn't know what else he could do apart from roll up into a ball to protect himself for as long as possible. He felt hard feet land on his torso a couple of times, felt the hot breath of some animal as it snapped around his face. *Where's the Doctor?*, he thought, quickly followed by, *I've got to get out of here!*

Tom forced himself up onto his knees and glanced around. There was a mass of confusion on the path in front of him. Two creatures fought so ferociously that it was difficult to see what either one looked like. Tom picked up a splintered branch to defend himself. One of the animals kicked out and pushed the other against a rock on the far side, putting daylight between the two of them. The attacker was a biped with multiple tentacles coming off its torso, each with a barb and two gripping fingers on the end. Its flesh was the colour of the rocks around them, dark grey. Its face was square and flat, with light grey marks at each of its corners that it seemed to be using as eyes. There was no visible nose in its face, yet its teeth were sharp and long. It looked a ferocious predator; so who was fighting it?

Does it matter? He thought, *I should just run.* But Tom couldn't. Some semblance of morality prevailed, and instead of backing away as normal, Tom moved forward, towards the battle.

As Tom stepped closer to the fight, the creature looked towards him and snarled convincingly. Tom watched as the other figure got to its feet, a gun and a make-shift shield in their hands. The Promode looked from Tom to the other person, and back to Tom again. It roared before turning and scaling the rocks using its tentacles, over the top and out of sight.

“Thank you,” said Tom, the pain reappearing in his side.
The person stepped forward, tipped their hat upwards and smiled. It was a beautiful smile.

“My pleasure,” the girl said. “My name’s Sally. Sally Cortex. And who the darn may you be?”

06 – Big Wheels Turning

It stood over a kilometre high, and that was just above the surface. Impossibly constructed, yet obviously there, its silver surfaces reflected sunlight at high intensities, and its four sails swung round even when there was no wind to push them.

It was The Windmill, and within it, something stirred.

Valentina was becoming concerned; really concerned. The boy was still silent, and the steely look on his face did nothing to calm her. She had given up trying to speak to him ten minutes ago. A couple of times the boy had stumbled, not over the terrain, but due to weakness, as if he were still not fully recovered. But it wasn't him which concerned her most; it was where he was heading.

The Windmill was ridiculously high; dizzyingly high. She had stopped attempting to look up at it, and instead kept her head down and pretended it wasn't there. It was like something out of a children's story; not a happy children's story, but a Grimm tale. Inside the Windmill would be danger, a witch perhaps, or a troll; something which wouldn't take kindly to having guests. Fear had grown in her chest, and it continued to tighten, restricting her breath.

The surrealism of a gigantic Windmill on a different planet was also more than a little off putting. Valentina wasn't sure why she doubted other windmills existed in the universe, but it was still odd, as if they'd been stolen from Earth. She hadn't realised she'd ever feel so attached to the flour making devices.

She was pleased that it was still quite a distance away; Valentina guessed at about an hour's quick walk. *There ought to be more people*, she thought to herself. A windmill of this size should have more industry happening around it. Something flashed across her eyes, a thought, but she dismissed it with the speed at which it came. *Too many horror books*, she thought.

The boy stopped. "What are horror books?" he said to her.

"Sorry?" Valentina managed. "You heard that? I said that out loud?"

"I heard you say 'horror books'," the boy confirmed. "What are they?"

Valentina watched the boy for a second, who in turn watched her with an unwavering quizzical look that was almost unreal, as if his inquisitiveness was borne out of some mechanical desire as opposed to organic.

“They are books that are meant to scare you.”

“Scare you? Books that can scare you?”

“Yes. You do get scared don’t you?” she asked him.

The boy frowned. “Not anymore.”

From within the trees a figure watched the woman and boy set off toward the windmill again. It was unsure of what it should do. It was even unsure of what itself was. But it thought it needed these people. Thought that if nothing else, following these figures at least gave it something to do, and that maybe in the meantime it would work out whether or not it should keep them or destroy them.

Valentina was pleased the boy had spoken. Speech was a connection between them now, and if he talked once, maybe he’d talk again.

“What’s your name?” she asked him.

“I don’t know,” he replied.

“Mine’s Valentina.”

“Val-en-ti-na,” the boy repeated. “I’ve not heard that name before.”

“What were you doing on the floor back there?”

“I am sick,” the boy said. “If I do not reach the windmill, then I will die.”

The breath caught in Valentina’s throat. “Die?” she said. “How are you sick?”

“I am weak through sickness. That’s what I feel. I cannot tell you what from.” The boy suddenly stopped and went quiet for a moment. Then he looked up at the woman. “They won’t tell me what I have. They hide it behind a lie. They say this place is a holiday. I see in their eyes it is not. I feel in my body an illness. These are as separate as I say them. Something is not right. The windmill holds the key.”

The boy turned and continued up towards the windmill. Valentina followed once more.

The windmill had one door, for the picture said it had. It had five sails, no windows and a beautiful untarnished copper top, for the picture said it had. On a table in a room sat the Doctor’s comic, much as he would have remembered it. And as it sat there, something as light as the breeze turned its pages, sought out new truths in what it had found. It compared the pictures to the scenery it saw around, and changed what it saw fit. Mountains had become rock formations, seas had become deserts, and deserts had been transformed into lush rolling hills. Nothing stopped it in its task.

As true as black and white, the land had changed to its own truths. But there was something that hadn't been. A blue box. The pages of the comic riffled through. It couldn't see a blue box; thus the blue box shouldn't be there. It would have to deal with it. But not now. The energy it had was being used to change the bigger picture. Finishing touches could be left to last.

The boy fell. It looked to Valentina as if it happened in slow motion, but it was just the way the boy fell, first onto his knees and then sideways, that made it look as if it was in slow motion. Valentina, weak herself, ran to his aid. The boy was led on his front, arms outstretched in front of him.

"Are you all right?" she asked him, as she bent over his small frame. "Can you hear me? What's happened?"

The boy whispered something, but Valentina couldn't hear it. She put her arms under the boy's left ribcage, and gently eased him onto his back. Valentina gasped at what she saw. His skin, which a moment ago was opaque, was now changing. She could see some of the veins beneath his skin.

"What's happening to you?" she asked. "What should I do?"

The boy's eyelids flickered as he fought to keep hold of his consciousness.

"Help me," called Valentina, as she crouched next to the boy's prone body. "Somebody help me!"

From out of the forest to their right, a figure ran as fast as it could toward her. Valentina swivelled round and put herself between the boy and this runner. The runner, sensing Valentina's concern slowed, and stopped.

"Who are you?" Valentina asked.

"I am Greenside," the man said. "I mean no harm. Let me look at the boy."

Valentina watched as Greenside, cut and bruised from his escape of the Promode, made his way slowly to the boy. He barely looked at him, before he shook his head.

"It has returned," he said.

"What has returned?" Valentina asked.

Greenside ran a hand through his hair. "The elders said the windmill was created because the illness had returned, and I didn't believe them."

"Illness? You've seen this before?"

"Not I. Many hundreds of years ago this planet was hit by a plague; all but the outer regions died in this way. We thought it had been defeated."

"Defeated? How?"

"The elders know. They have kept the truth to themselves."

"Well, will they know how to cure him, these elders?"

"They might," Greenside said. "But we cannot take him there."

"Why not?"

"Because it is a plague. It will kill them, as surely as it will kill us."

"Kill us? You mean we're infected already?"

Greenside nodded. "I am afraid so."

"Then we must make a stretcher to carry him."

"Carry him where?"

"To the windmill. We must all travel to the windmill together."

And the Doctor lay on the grass, unconscious, his mind elsewhere. Around him grass grew rapidly, as if nature had suddenly forgotten how slowly time passed. It crept up over his coat and trousers, his shoes and head, till, within two minutes, nothing more could be seen of him, and this Doctor was hidden from the rest of the world.

07 – Definitely Not Nothing

“Sally *Cortex*?” Tom repeated to the blonde woman who stood surveying the scene around them. She had untied his hands and as they stood there Tom rubbed the marks the rope had left.

“Reckon you had a pretty lucky escape from that Promode, mister.”

“Sally *Cortex*?”

“Yep, it’s still the same any which way you say it.”

“But you’re a...” Tom trailed off. He’d never told anyone they were only supposed to be a comic book character.

“I’m a what?”

“Nothing.”

“I’m a nothing? You telling me I’m a nothing?”

“No, no. No, you’re definitely not nothing. You are definitely something. After all, you saved my life.”

“I did, didn’t I? Guess you must owe me?”

“Owe you?”

Sally smiled. “Aw, just joking with you... did you tell me your name?”

“Tom. My name’s Tom.”

“Tom? Well, it’s short, if nothing else!”

The two figures stood looking slightly awkward.

“Um, how did you get here?”

“I was following that Promode. Knew he was up to no good. Never met one that ain’t.”

“No, I mean, how did you get onto this planet?”

Sally frowned. “Funny you should ask me that. You know something about it?”

“No, I was just wondering.”

Sally slapped Tom on the back; it felt like she meant it. “Best we get ourselves out of here. I’ll tell you on the way.”

Sally moved off towards the forest again. “Do rocks come out of the ground here often?” Tom asked.

"As far as I know. They've been doing it ever since I came to. Sure makes it difficult to remember where you are."

"When did you 'come to'?"

"Boy, you ask a lot of questions. Must have woken up about ten days ago. Don't know how I got here. Can't remember anything much. Apart from my name."

"And how to fight."

"Yeah, that kind of came natural to me."

"Where are we going now?"

"I've got a base with some food. I've not eaten today; sure you might like something too after your trip."

"Yes, that'd be good." Tom agreed. He followed Sally as she made light work of the terrain. "And, thank you. For saving me. I didn't react very well."

"We all have the capacity to learn, Tom. Even you men." They both laughed, and the noise echoed out into the forest.

Valentina was impressed with the skills of Greenside. He had disappeared into the forest and returned no more than ten minutes later with the materials he needed for the stretcher.

"My people live in the forest. At the age of seven we move away from our parents and live on our own. We learn skills like these from an early age."

Valentina watched as Greenside put the stretcher together nimbly. She wanted to ask him questions yet his focus seemed so intent on what he was making. As she waited she stroked the boy's hair gently. His breathing seemed laboured, and it worried her. There was nothing she could do to help him. She didn't even know if the windmill was the right thing to do. But the boy had said it was, and he seemed to know what to do.

Greenside was about her height, with olive skin, as if living in the forest had somehow made them absorb some chlorophyll into their skin. He was thin yet strong; he didn't seem to have any issue with stripping bark or removing branches from the logs he'd found.

His hair was brown, though it caught the light of the sun which made parts of it almost shine like gold. He wore a leather waistcoat over some green cotton like undershirt. His Hessian-type trousers finished just above the ankle, where moccasins could be seen with thick soles, and beaded patterns on the top. Valentina tried to see what they were but Greenside moved too fast.

"They are the patterns of my forefathers," Greenside said. Valentina looked up to see him looking down at her. "They look after me. On my right foot is the God of the Forest. He is a butterfly, quick, agile and a survivor. On my left foot, the Goddess of the Earth, she is an ant, strong, hard working and cooperative."

"A butterfly and an ant?" Valentina said smiling. "I like it."

"Do you have Gods where you come from?"

"Yes. Many like you."

"What are yours called?"

"I've..." Valentina started, and then paused. "Lost my way a little," she finished.

"We all lose our way. It is a test from the Gods themselves. Where would belief be without disbelief?"

Greenside smiled. It was a genuine smile, yet one he also found difficult to share with someone else, and it faltered after the briefest of moments.

Valentina stood up. "You have made this well," she told him.

"I hope it lasts the journey."

"I think it will."

"Now, carefully," Greenside said, gesturing to Valentina to help lift the boy onto the stretcher. "One, two, three, lift."

The boy was lighter than she'd expected, and she was able to move him easily.

"Thank you," she said to Greenside. "Thank you for helping me."

"If you think the windmill will save us, then I'm helping us all. Come, let's move."

The figure in the trees watched as Valentina and Greenside picked up the stretcher and moved off toward the windmill. It felt better about itself; felt more in control. And as it had watched them, it had realised that these people were important. Or at least one of them was, but it was still unsure which one.

It hadn't formed the ability to talk as yet; neither had it understood what they were saying. It felt things being altered in its brain. Its word for trees had only been created a few minutes beforehand, and now it knew grass, sky, windmill, man, woman, illness, and finally kill. It knew the word kill very well. Knew what it meant, knew how to do it, even knew that it went against everything. But that didn't stop the figure smiling, even though it didn't know what to call its mouth yet.

08 – A Villain is Born

Tom had forgotten about the TARDIS, and how much he had wanted to get into it. If he'd known that there was the opportunity to meet people like Sally on his adventures with the Doctor, he'd gladly give up computers all together. At least, that's how he felt now that he was near her.

They had made it back to her base which was little more than an alcove in the rocks, and were sitting looking out over the land towards the windmill.

"So don't you remember anything?" Tom asked her.

"I woke up and was lying on the grass. The sky was dark red and I felt thirsty." She subconsciously took a drink from a rough wooden cup as she said it. She was more than beautiful, he realised. She was interesting. Interesting; he hadn't used that word about a woman in a long time. Tom wasn't sure what to do about the comic. She was a character from it; as much as the Windmill was part of the landscape. But she was also real. He could see her, touch her, smell her. How on earth did she manage to smell so good out here?

"Do you remember your family?" Tom speculatively asked. He knew the Doctor had mentioned something about Sally's father when they'd been talking in the TARDIS.

"Nope, not a thing. Guess I got one, or had one, at least. How about you?"

"Yep, I got a family. Mum and Dad, normal thing. But they're a long way away."

"Brothers and sisters?"

"Nope, just me."

"So, you're alone here, too?"

"You could say that." Tom said, only slightly guilty about the lie.

"That's a shame. Good looking boy like you."

Tom blushed. He looked away over to the windmill.

"What's that over there?" he asked. "Can you see it?"

Sally got to her feet, and opened a small pocket on her belt. Out of it she produced a pair of binoculars. Tom watched her as she put them over her eyes and adjusted the focus.

"Seems like it's a couple of people carrying a stretcher. One of them's a native. The other one... looks like she may have come with you. Here, take a look."

Tom stood up and took the binoculars. He recognised Val at once. And the other man could have been Greenside, but it was hard to tell. He couldn't see who was in the stretcher.

"The girl is a travelling companion," he said. "Her name's Val."

"Well, they're heading for the Windmill."

"Do you know anything about it?"

"You don't need to know anything about it to be in fear of it, and if they're going there, they'll need all the help they can get." Tom took the binoculars away to see Sally already picking up equipment from the floor. "I assume you're coming with me?" Sally asked him.

Tom nodded. "Just lead the way," he told her.

The TARDIS normally goes unnoticed. Yet on a world where increasingly little is actually as it should be, the TARDIS was as visible as the windmill. Crimson's body had been found and the others like him and formed a party to avenge his death. The Promode was long gone, but it had only taken a couple of hours for the blue box to be found. They had attacked the box, yet none of their weaponry had made even the slightest mark, further solidifying their assumption that it was created by the windmill. With little else to hand, the party had built a large bonfire around the outside, piled halfway up the doors. One of them stepped forward, and threw his burning torch into the wood. Six others then did the same, and within minutes, the fire had taken a hold, and the party set up camp to watch the flames consume the wooden box.

"Will we reach them in time?" Tom asked Sally as they set off through the thick grass.

"They will reach the Windmill before us I think. But we can still try. It feels right."

Tom frowned. "Feels right?"

"Since I came to, certain ideas seem to possess a right-ness about them. Going to the Windmill now is one of them. I don't understand it."

Tom stopped, no longer able to keep the truth from her. Sally, sensing something was wrong, turned and faced him. Tom reached into his pocket and produced Issue 2 of Crescent Cortex.

"Here," he said, and offered it to Sally.

She stepped towards him and took it. She looked at the cover, and then to the Windmill.

"I don't understand," she said.

"Look inside. This is a..."

"Comic. Yes, I know it is, for some reason." Tom watched, as page by page, Sally read the story.

"My father," she said, touching the page. "I'm looking for my father. He is a good man, who has been wrongly accused. Yes, I know this now."

Turmoil was breaking loose in the Windmill. It had seen the comic. Issue two with all new plot twists. It could evolve once more. New places to build, details to be filled in. Part of it enjoyed creating the story. In everything there is wonder and excitement.

It saw the shadowy figure. And it watched as it stepped out of the shadows.

The figure in the trees stepped forward. Up until now he hadn't been aware of what it really looked like, but now in the setting sun, it realised for the first time that it really was little more than a shadow. As it moved forward, however, it began to change. Hands formed, pale, slightly wrinkled skin emerged. Hair grew out of its scalp, and the contours of its face formed, then grew textured and light. Clothes appeared on its body. It wore a khaki jacket, with a pistol in its belt. The figure was slim, elegant, yet moody and dangerous. Between its lips a thin cigarette appeared, with almost impossible wisps of smoke rising from it. On its jaw line, stubble emerged, and a scar just under its right ear smoothed itself into place. Boots came last. Black and hardwearing.

The dying embers of sunlight peeked over a cloud and caught the figure on the cusp of the forest. Out of nothing a person had been made; a villain had been born.

And it knew what it had to do.

"But..." Sally said for the third time. "My father, he isn't a good guy. He's out to kill people."

"I know. You don't find out until issue three hundred and something that he's like it. I'm sorry."

"Tom," Sally said, looking up at him. She looked weak and vulnerable, hardly able to stand up. "I'm nothing more than a comic book character."

"You are not nothing, Sally. You are most definitely not nothing."

09 – No Remorse

Valentina's arms were getting painful, but she didn't want to stop. She thought that perhaps her breathing maybe getting slightly more difficult, but put it down to the task of carrying the stretcher moreover the possibility of the illness Greenside had told her she must have.

The Windmill was close. No more than half an hour and she was not going to rest. "Stop," Greenside said, and Valentina did. She looked round and noticed him looking out over the landscape to a fire that was burning many miles away. The sky was much darker now.

"What is it?" she asked.

"My people," said Greenside. "They are burning something. The way the flames move, the shape of the fire, it reminds me of a sacrificial offering. Strange."

"Greenside," Valentina said, "Can you feel something?"

"When in the Windmills shadow you can feel its influence. It has power beyond our understanding. It reaches for the stars. It knows about them. About how they work."

"Yes. That's exactly it."

"Come, let's keep going. I think I'm starting to feel unwell."

They set off once more. As they neared the swinging sails, the ground grew slightly steeper. Valentina did nothing more than lean her body into it and kept putting one foot in front of another. It was something she'd learnt on the hikes she'd done as a teenager. It's a mentality, a way of disconnecting with the pain and the fear.

"You are strong, Valentina," Greenside said to her. "I thought you would not be when I saw you. But I was wrong. You have inner strength."

"I've dealt with a lot in my past."

"Yes, I can tell."

"I don't suppose your ancestors wrote down how you get into the Windmill, did they?"

"In a way. You see, the Windmill will always let you in. It just... well, never lets you out again."

Sally's father's cigarette was still burning as he walked over the terrain. He thought of little but the stars beyond. He knew how to get there. He wanted to get there. The illness that had created him was still inside him, and it was powerful. It was greedy. And it had remembered something about the blue box, something that meant it could get off this meagre planet, and infect whatever planets and times it wanted to.

He stopped. He'd heard something nearby. Someone nearby.

Tom put his hand over Sally's mouth to stop her shouting. They had seen the glow from his cigarette getting nearer, and had moved themselves into a dip where a trickling stream made pretty tinkling noises as it went past.

"That's my father," Sally said to Tom. "That's the man who wants to take over the universe."

"Yes."

"We have to stop him, before it's too late."

"How?" Tom asked. This was all getting too surreal to take in. These people were characters from a comic book. How could any of this be real? "Wait a minute," Tom said. "I've got an idea."

"What is it?"

"I read the comic where you find out about him. I read the words that you said when you realised what you had to do. If only I could remember them."

"How would I bring my father down?" Sally looked up. "Hang on, where's he gone? I can't see him anywhere."

Tom looked around too. "I think we better move back."

"I'm not running away. That's not what I do." Sally scrambled up the side of the dip and stood out on the top. Before Tom had had time to react, a loud report rung out and Sally fell to the ground clutching her side. Her father appeared out of the darkness.

"You're not going to stop me, Sally," Tom heard him say. "You may be my daughter, but, like my bullet, you're a pain in my side. You won't mind if I take this now, will you?"

Her father took Sally's pistol and put it into his boot. Then he stood up and looked around. "Why?" Sally asked.

"Because I can," he replied. "Have a good evening."

Tom watched as he walked away. He waited a few seconds before scurrying up and over to Sally.

"I'm sorry," she said to him.

"Hush, don't speak. We need to get you better again."

Sally shook her head. "I'm dying, Tom. I can feel it leaking out of me. You go and help your friends. Leave me here."

Tom shook his head. "I'm not leaving you here."

Sally smiled, reached up and touched Tom's face. "Save your friend," she said, and breathed her last breath.

Tom was shocked. He felt anger well inside of him. Her father would be made to pay for this. Tom shut Sally's eyes, and leant down and kissed her on the forehead. "I'll come back and get him," he told her.

Valentina put the stretcher down. In front of her the Windmill stood. Smooth metal as far as the eye could see. She turned to Greenside, who could hardly stand.

"You must take him inside," Greenside managed through laboured breathing. "Before it's too late."

"You must come, too," Valentina said, going to him.

"It is too late for me," Greenside said.

"With all due respect, Greenside, you're coming with me if I have to haul you in there myself, okay?"

Greenside smiled. "Okay. I feared I would slow you down."

"Come on. I'll drag the stretcher. You walk beside me."

"Very well, let me secure the boy."

Greenside checked the straps across the boy's chest and legs. "All fine."

"Thank you. Now all we need is the entrance."

Greenside raised his arm and pointed. "Look."

Valentina followed his gaze. The metal in front of them slowly faded to reveal a grey room beyond. Valentina picked up her end of the stretcher.

"Ready to rock and roll?"

"Rock... and..."

Valentina smiled. "Come on, in we go. Oh, and let's try and stay alive, too."

10 – Four Told

Tom was running with an energy he didn't really understand. With the Doctor down and Sally dead, it only left Val to help, and she was headed to the Windmill. It was crazy; his whole world had gone crazy. All these years, numbers, strings, bytes and variables had all made perfect sense around him whilst his peers looked on in confusion. Sit Tom down in front of a computer, and he could open up the world for you, make it all make sense, because he was doing the hard stuff, the stuff other people didn't understand. At the age of nine, Tom hacked into the London 2012 Olympic computer and gave Togo all of the medals, just because they hadn't won very much. They had never found out who'd done it. Three years after that, he had routed the entire automated postal system to deliver every single letter in the country to the door of his ex-friend, just to see what would happen, and three years after that..., well, enough to say that they were still talking about the day the whole of year passed every single exam they took with an A*.

Tom was bordering on a genius. He flew through exams like they were hardly there, revised if he felt like it, turned up at school when they came and fetched him. But everyone knew what Tom Brooker was like. He even caught some of the teachers giving him admiring looks as he was chaperoned back into school. Tom had his own rulebook. It had his name on, and was pretty much empty anyhow. He lived for himself, the next hack, the buzz of adrenalin. He wasn't ever going to be made to work, to worry, to care.

But now, here he was, running with everything he had through an artificial landscape on an alien world, wanting to save a woman and a Time Lord he hardly knew. This wasn't right. He shouldn't be doing it, yet every muscle in his body was doing it, and that was a whole new adrenalin rush to experience.

Valentina, Greenside and the boy were in the grey room. The entrance they had walked through had returned to what looked like a solid wall, which meant there was nowhere to go.

Greenside sat on the floor exhausted. Valentina put the stretcher down on the floor and put her arms around Greenside. He didn't say anything, just sighed. Some might call this hopeless, but Valentina had been here before.

In the months after Vince's disappearance, she had been the one her parents had turned to, to rely upon. She had sat for many hours, her arms around her mother, who in turn would sob, then try and smile, only to break down and sob some more. Valentina couldn't cry though. If she cried, then who would her parents have to be strong? Her father had continued with his work, his trips abroad becoming more frequent and longer in duration. When he came back he was distant, and his drinking was heavy. She remembered many times when she'd stay at her parents, only to wake up to hear her father pressing keys on the piano downstairs. Vince had been a grade eight pianist, but her father didn't know anything about music. It was as if he was trying to reconnect with his son through the disjointed notes. It had made her very sad indeed.

It took a year to realise he wasn't coming back. She worked a lot from home during that time, compiling information on other missing people whilst doing the day job. The spare room at her house was plastered with newspaper cuttings and pictures of Vince and other people, like in one of those police dramas. But however she tried to piece something together, there was nothing. No clues. The walls might have been bare for all the useful information she'd compiled. His disappearance was inexplicable, unexplainable, so that was the only route she had.

And, of course, she was now a statistic too. What on earth would her parents be thinking now? She was feeling ill, too, though she daren't tell Greenside. He was relying on her, as her mother had relied on her. And she wasn't going to fail him. Valentina did what she had done for the past five years. She channelled her hurt, her pain, and she mentally built a shield around her heart to protect her, to keep her strong, to ward off the dangers.

Valentina wasn't going to lose. She wasn't going to be lost.

Sally had lived for ten days. She had woken and experienced life. She had accepted it almost immediately. She had found a camp, got food, made fire. She was a very accomplished person. But she hadn't been a person. She had been made. Created because an illness had found a comic book and liked what it had seen.

But that didn't matter. Even when Tom had shown it to her, Sally hadn't been fazed. If she was merely a comic book character, then she was going to be the best one there ever was. Nothing was going to stand in her way.

Not even death.

Sally opened her eyes. She was led on the grass, her clothes slightly damp, but apart from that, fairly intact. She sat up and looked down to where the bullet had struck her. There was nothing there. No blood, no ripped clothes, no pain.

Sally was back, and she smiled. She touched the place on her forehead, felt Tom's kiss there. She turned and blew him one back, then set off in the direction she knew her father had taken.

Sally had a father. In her heart she'd loved him for years. In her mind she knew he must be killed. But she didn't die, so how could he? It was going to be an interesting reunion.

Things that are invisible do exist. Secrets, pain, love. And if love exists, then so does hate, and greed and hunger. And like a planet forming around a sun, these emotions can impact and build and take on a shape. A personality; intelligence, if you like.

And this intelligence can reach out and manipulate what it sees, as the wind blows the leaves on the tree. And if enough wind exists, the leaves can be knocked, toppled, destroyed.

It is nature. It is natural.

There were whispers starting to get through. Forgotten things that were awakening in the Doctor's brain. He was remembering the last time he was here. He was remembering why he was here. The unconscious mind still hears, still stores the conversations. These conversations are locked away. And now the Doctor was unconscious again, they were starting to break free.

The Doctor's breathing changed. It quickened. REM sleep returned, and in his mind, imaginary people acted out the whispers he was hearing. He watched on, prone, all the while aware he was holding his first edition Crescent Cortex tightly in his hand.

This is what he heard.

11 – 963 Years Ago

The laboratory was cold. It was that way to try and stop the spread of the disease within the young boy. Five figures stood around him. They all wore masks.

“The results are negative again. He has no way of fighting this. He will fall.”

“But we are Time Lords. We have seen the future. We have lived the future. This boy cannot fall. For all his impudence, arrogance, extravagance, he is a good man.”

Then another man enters. They turn and watch.

“This disease did not infect him,” the new man says. “It is him. Part of him. It threatens him because it knows it has no place in him, that it will be displaced.”

“How do we destroy something that is him?”

“He must be sacrificed.”

A silence filled the room.

“You want us to kill him?” one of them said, finally.

“I will do it,” said the new man. “I am... qualified to.”

“But he will die.”

“Oh, come, come. We are Time Lords. We die all the time.”

“But he is young.”

The new man went to the boy and put a hand on his hand. The Doctor felt the comic being removed.

“He is young, and old, and all the ages in between. He shares our minds. I will make amends.”

“We can’t let this man kill the boy. Not so young. Not whilst there’s still a chance.”

“But there is no chance. I heard you say it. There is no chance.”

The five men waited for a moment, in silence, yet arguing in their minds.

“Very well, then,” one of them said. “Destroy this life. We have run out of choices.”

The new man said. “Leave me alone. I need to do this alone.”

The Doctor heard the noises of the men leaving.

“You will remember this boy. You will know who I am. I am sorry.”

And that is where the whispering stopped. The boy remembered no more.

12 – Better

Tom reached the Windmill. He banged on the metal and waited. Nothing happened.

“Come on!” he shouted. “Let me in!”

Valentina opened her eyes. She felt as if she’d been asleep. Beside her Greenside was still alive, but hardly. She turned to see the boy, he was looking different. He looked stronger. Valentina reached back and put her hand on his forehead. Yes, it was warmer than before. The boy had been right after all, the Windmill was saving him.

The fire was dying down. The party of men had seen the miracle, but none of them was daring to say it. The box was unscathed. It must be to do with the illness.

One of them stepped forward. “This world is no longer understandable.”

“Then you better step aside and let me worry about that!” Sally’s father said. “That blue box belongs to me.”

The natives were worried, but wise. “Then you may have the box,” they said. “We will leave in peace.”

“Why, that’s mighty fine of you,” he said.

The party withdrew, all the while their eyes on the man.

Sally’s father walked across the ashes as if they weren’t there, and in a second they were gone. He put his hand on the smooth wood. “Right, now all I got to do is find a way in.”

The Windmill felt the presence of the boy. The boy was its' owner. The boy believed in the world that it lived in. The Windmill must save the boy. The Intelligence could blow no more, and left. It had other places to be, other traps to set.

And as the Windmill saved the boy, it learned where it belonged. It was nothing more than an image on a page which had been brought to life by a disease. It understood that, and when the boy was at last rid of the danger, the Windmill disappeared, in an instant.

Tom stood even more confused than ever. He was no longer on the thick grass plains, but on a sandy dune. There, in front of him, Val was knelt over a boy on a stretcher and Greenside. He went over to her.

"You okay?"

"Yes. Yes. I'm okay."

"Who's the boy?"

"I don't know. But he was ill. And now he's better."

"Greenside?" Tom asked. "Is that you?"

Greenside looked up and nodded. "I, too, am better. The air, tastes different."

The boy opened his eyes. "We must find the Doctor," he said. "He is in danger."

13 – Together

Sally felt different; less real. As if at any point she may not exist anymore. She didn't break her stride.

The Doctor looked up. Above him he could see stars. He liked the stars. He sat up. The grass was gone. About half a mile away, he sensed the TARDIS. He stood up.

"Now just you stay where you are!" a girl shouted behind him.

The Doctor turned around and stood stunned. There, in front of him, was Sally Cortex, looking as beautiful and courageous as she ever had.

"Sally," he said. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

Though she would never have admitted it, Sally suddenly felt more real than ever.

"What are you doing here?" the Doctor asked her.

"I'm on the trail of my father, he's heading that way."

The Doctor smiled. It was a mischievous smile. "Well, as it happens," he said, "So am I."

Sally's father turned around as they approached him. He got out his gun and fired.

"Now that's just rude," the Doctor said. "And also, misinformed. You see, Sally's father, they never did give him a name, only shot one bullet in the first two issues of Crescent Cortex, and as you've used it up on Sally, and then you get no more chances."

"I don't need bullets to kill you. I am you."

"You're part of me. But a little like a human appendix. Not required anymore."

"I exist, though. I can walk and talk now."

"Yes, that is a bit of a puzzle. Still, it'd be boring if I knew *everything*."

Valentina, Greenside, Tom and the boy walked through the dunes.

"There," the boy said, and he picked up an open canister which lay half buried in the sand. "Now, hold my hands I can take us there faster."

Greenside immediately held the boy's hand, followed by Tom and Valentina.

A rush of wind almost blew the Doctor over.

"Wow!" Tom explained. "That was fast!"

Sally's father took a step back.

"Oh, look," the Doctor said. "Here I am."

Valentina looked at the boy. "That's you?"

"In a way, yes."

The boy looked at the Doctor and smiled. The Doctor smiled back.

Silently, for no one knew what was about to happen, the boy walked towards Sally's father, who seemed rooted to the spot.

"It's okay," the boy said to Sally's father. "It's okay."

Sally walked past the Doctor, too. Tom saw her.

"Sally, you're alive."

"Thank you, Tom. For the kiss."

All three of them converged at the same point. There was a light, and then on the floor, only the canister remained.

Tom looked at the Doctor. "What?"

Epilogue

The Doctor picked the canister up. "Inside here is a part of me. A part I didn't need. I was sent to this planet because they thought it was a disease that the scientists based here could cure, but they were wrong.

"Somehow the disease got out of the canister, found the comic that I'd lost and created this world that I'd idolised so much as a child. Over and above that, I'm not sure of the exact dynamics."

"Where is the comic now?" Tom asked.

Greenside moved his hands forward. In them were the curved pages of Crescent Cortex Issue One. "I found it, when the Windmill went."

"Thank you," the Doctor said.

"Thank you," Greenside replied. "Our world has returned."

"And it will remain that way. I will not leave the canister here again."

"Again?" Valentina said. "What do you mean again?"

"You must wait here a moment," the Doctor instructed. He opened the TARDIS door, and went inside. Within seconds it had disappeared, only to reappear again.

The door opened. The Doctor looked out. Valentina gasped at the sight of him. "Are you all right, Doctor?"

The Doctor shook his head. "No. I am not. And I must make amends. Come, travel with me."

Tom and Valentina went into the TARDIS, but before she closed the door, Valentina stepped back out and kissed Greenside, who was unsurprisingly surprised. She got back into the TARDIS.

"What did you do that for?" Tom asked.

"Well, if you get to kiss Sally Cortex, I don't see why I should miss out."

Tom smiled. It was good to be arguing again.

A long time ago, the Doctor mislaid a prized possession,
a keepsake - Issue one of his cherished Crescent Cortex comic collection.

He's tried not to think about it until now,
but when he finds Tom lost in the TARDIS' myriad of corridors,
it unlocks in him a need to find it once more,
and he journeys to the last planet he remembered having it.

But immediately the Doctor sees the danger;
somehow the landscape of this planet has been transformed
into the landscape pictured in the comic.

When the Doctor succumbs to an unknown illness,
it's up to the separated Tom and Valentina to solve the mystery,
with the help of some very mysterious characters,
including a mute boy, and the Doctor's childhood heroine.

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