

THE

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PROJECT

SPONTANEOUS COMBUSTION



Jez Strickley

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*For
Tobias*

PROLOGUE

Quarr Manor stood on a grassy ledge on the eastern side of the hill, or rather down, from where it took its name. Below the blue-glass sky its western horizon presented a typical early-summer landscape of ripening cornfields and verdant grass. To the south, the seascape reflected the evening sunlight onto the rising downs, whilst a hazy bank of sticky air clung tenaciously to the shoreline, as though some infernal agency had laid siege to the land.

Dabbing at his brow with a polka-dot handkerchief, Quarr's longstanding custodian, Anton Garston, gazed out from his rooftop observatory. Of no great height, Garston was as broad as he was tall; his bronzed skin a loose, leathery coverall that bespoke of more than eight decades of life. His rheumy eyes spied the choking heat with apprehension, whilst his nervous grip tightened on the guardrail encircling the observatory's glass-built walls.

Gazing across Quarr's extensive grounds, Garston surveyed his walled garden with an expert eye, noticing how smartly the rows of potatoes had been banked by his gardener, Benning, and how the windows of the serpentine glasshouse hinted at the leafy jungle of tomato plants within its humid, continental clime. Yet there was something else in the garden, something he couldn't quite see. It was as though whenever he spied his target, it slipped from his sight, only to reappear at the edge of his vision once more.

As he struggled to focus his eyes, Garston realized that the flicker of movement he'd seen down in the garden was now somehow inside the observatory. Turning to face the intruder, a sensation of intense heat arose in his abdomen. Clutching desperately at his stomach, Garston's fingers clawed at the buttons of his shirt in a vain attempt to remove it. As he did so, however, the torturous boiling of his torso approached its dreadful climax, leaving him doubled-up on the observatory floor in untold agony.

With his tongue too swollen for him to cry out for help, Garston lay mute as he lost consciousness. Before oblivion stole him away for good, however, he glanced up at his left hand, somehow still grasping at the guardrail. He could plainly see the flickering silhouettes of flames just beneath his skin.

PART I: FIREBRAND

The evening sunlight caught the silhouette of a figure eagerly advancing up the narrow footpath that took the most direct route from the shoreline to the summit of Quarr Down. Despite the heat still radiating from the hillside, the gentleman concerned appeared to be quite at ease in marching ever upwards. This was in sharp contrast to his two companions, who were almost breaking into a run to keep up with him.

The leading figure called back to the pair below. "Do try and keep up. We can't afford to be late."

Tom was exasperated. "Then why, Doctor, didn't you land the TARDIS where we need to be, and not at the foot of the hill we've got to climb to get to where we need to be?"

The Doctor stopped dead in his tracks, smartly pivoted to face Tom and gave him a longsuffering look. "Mister Brooker, first and foremost this is not a hill; it is a down, and I would remind you not to forget that fact, especially when speaking with the locals. Second, you and I know very well that landing the TARDIS in the midst of things can cause a great deal of unnecessary misunderstanding. Better all round to enter proceedings with subtlety, wouldn't you agree?"

"Agreed," replied Tom, between gulping in mouthfuls of air as he endeavored to match the Doctor's pace. "But I'm sure you could have put the TARDIS somewhere near the top of this down, rather than at the very bottom of it. From what I can see, there's plenty of tree cover behind this stately home you want to visit. At least as much as there is in that gorge you dumped us in."

"Chine, Mister Brooker, not gorge, chine."

"Chine?"

"Yes, 'chine'. In this part of the world the steep ravines or gullies that are formed by streams cutting through the cliffs towards the sea, and which are sometimes host to a cornucopia of flora, are known as chines. There are dozens along the coastline below us. The one in which we left the TARDIS is called Quarr Chine, the down we're climbing is called Quarr Down, and the manor we're visiting is called Quarr Manor."

"Speaking of which," interjected Val, aware that a discussion on local etymology might be the final straw for Tom, "why is this 'Quarr Manor' so important?"

The Doctor lifted his gaze towards the chimney-lined roof of the Georgian villa, which now struck out from the skyline above them. "I've always wanted to unravel the infamous 'Fire of Quarr Manor'. According to newspaper reports of the time, Quarr spontaneously caught fire on an early summer's evening in 1908 and quite literally burnt to a cinder. No survivors, no witnesses. In fact, no bodies, or traces of any bodies were ever found. The verdict at the time was one of tragic misadventure. The vanished owners – a family called Garston, which by then had dwindled to only two living members – never seen again. Rumors at the time pointed to some sort of sordid insurance swindle, but I think there's a good deal more to it than that. Indeed, it's a favorite amongst paranormal enthusiasts, especially those fascinated by the phenomenon of spontaneous human combustion."

Turning to Val, the Doctor's voice took on a more persuasive tone. "Miss Rossi, shouldn't this be the ideal outing for someone as expert in the subject as your good self – and a prime scoop for the *Mysterious Times* to boot?"

Val took a small flannel from her beige shoulder bag and wiped the perspiration from her eyes. "I'm lost," she replied, her bewilderment rapidly taking the place of her earlier exertions. "I've been researching and writing about the unexplained for years, including plenty of cases of spontaneous human combustion, and I've never heard of Quarr Manor, never mind any sort of fire or strange goings on."

The Doctor gave Val a world-weary look. "My dear, the whole business was hushed up of course. I've been meaning to look into it for some time, hence our visit – on the eve of the fire, I might say."

A worrying thought crossed Val's mind. "But if this is a sensitive point in the history of this place, I mean with the fire being so well known and the cause of it a mystery, isn't there the risk that we might interfere in events and damage the local time line?"

The Doctor nodded. "Quite right my dear. Thus we are simply observers, innocent gatherers of information if you will, nothing more."

Val gave the Doctor a wry grin. "Based on how things have tended to go up until now, I'd say it's fairly unlikely we'll just be observers."

Raising an eyebrow in mock surprise, the Doctor once more turned towards the top of Quarr Down, and began purposefully striding up the final section of the footpath. Val looked at Tom. "Onwards and upwards, eh?"

"You're not wrong there," Tom remarked, and moved to follow the rapidly receding figure of the Doctor, Val just a few short feet behind.

Lilly Garston had never felt completely comfortable amongst the echoing chambers and corridors that comprised the labyrinthine interior of Quarr Manor, despite it being the seat of the Garston family for almost a century. Moreover, she couldn't fault the elegance of its late-Georgian exterior, which boasted a Roman-esque twin-pillared entrance that was particularly pleasing on the eye. But within its attractive whitewashed façade was a cold, museum-like ambience, which no amount of familiarity could diminish; in fact, ever since her first visit to Quarr as a young woman, Lilly had always preferred the much smaller and more cheerful

Quarr Lodge, with its cozy quartet of rooms topped off by a snug little attic. Now she was approaching middle age, but still Quarr made her feel uneasy. The family patriarch, her deceased grandfather Cornelius Garston, had insisted on keeping whole wings of the Manor sealed off, and its latest solitary occupant, her elderly Uncle Anton, had continued the tradition out of respect. Whatever the motive, the resulting sense of foreboding given off by the many locked rooms and passages certainly didn't make it any the more welcoming.

Entering the wood-paneled drawing room, Lilly instantly caught sight of her reflection in the ebony-framed mirror set above the tiled mantelpiece. Her worried expression in the spotless oval glass stopped her in her tracks. Why did she look so concerned? Her search for Uncle Anton had barely begun, yet somehow she knew that there was something seriously amiss about his absence. Turning away from her stern reflection, Lilly noticed that her uncle's agenda, a small moleskin notebook containing lists of appointments, had been left open on the chaise lounge set across from the fireplace. Lifting the agenda to her eyes, Lily scanned the latest set of notes. Strange, it seemed that Uncle Anton had not set any appointments for the whole week. Instead, he had written the words 'Down Gazing' across all seven days.

"Down Gazing?" Lilly said to herself, pondering her uncle's penchant for spending hours at a time in the observatory, looking out over the down and noting how fine the estate looked under the care of William Benning, the Garstons' longtime and much-respected gardener. Benning was only a handful of years younger than Uncle Anton, but his undergardener, Hilton Thatch, was a good deal younger and in recent years had taken to doing much of the heavy work, guided by Benning's wise counsel.

Lily noted that only the day before Benning and Thatch had left Quarr on an errand which would occupy them for the rest of the week. Perhaps, then, her uncle had decided to keep an eye on his vacant garden, whilst enjoying the breathtaking vista of the tranquil down land, contrasted against the restless seascape beyond. So, mused Lilly, Uncle Anton was up in that chilly box of glass of his, standing sentinel over a piece of England not yet marked by Blake's Satanic Mills. Closing the agenda, and placing it back on the chaise lounge, Lilly left the drawing room and made for the central staircase, from whence the observatory could be reached. As she passed the mirror over the mantelpiece, she noticed her expression was no less concerned.

Despite the summer heat, a few sparse patches of sea mist still clung to the gated entranceway of the Quarr Estate, which, lying just below the cusp of the down was not so exposed to the sun's rays until well into July. Gatekeeper to the estate was Quarr Lodge, a small, thatched cottage of some four rooms, set on a single flagstone floor. A dusty, cobwebbed attic was the Lodge's only dry storage space, and an adjacent woodshed, stacked high with neatly chopped firewood, afforded a modicum of shelter from the strong winds that swept across Quarr Down and the neighboring Hook Down for much of the year.

Inside the Lodge, an elderly woman wearing a plain cotton dress and a green apron tended to her lunch: a light repast of cold ham, bread and butter, washed down with half a pint of the local ale – her late husband's favorite. Iris Cooper had been a widow for almost a decade,

but the routine of preparing her lunch in the way that her Toby had always liked it was a habit she had religiously kept despite the intervening years.

Clearing the table, Iris glanced at the old wall clock mounted above the dresser: seven o'clock precisely, time to take in the washing and close up for the night. Although dusk wouldn't draw in for at least two more hours, she preferred to have the Lodge locked up before the failing light made the fiddly task of securing the various gates and shutters too difficult. As she approached the Lodge's front entrance, its solid pine door resounded to a series of rhythmic knocks, four in total, repeated after a brief pause. Whoever was on the other side was clearly insistent, which was a typical trait of some members of the Garston family, but the pattern of knocking was quite unfamiliar. Pausing to collect her walking stick, Iris carefully unbolted the door, mindful that she could still use the old catch at the doorstep to arrest the door if her visitor proved to be unfriendly.

Opening the door, Iris was surprised to find not one but three complete strangers standing before her: one woman and two men. The older of the men held out a hand and gave Iris a measured smile that bespoke of warmth and sincerity in equal measure. He sported mid-length brown hair swept back from his forehead in the style of many a dashing young man about town, and his piercing gaze hinted at a quick mind. Attired in simple light-brown trousers and an open-neck white shirt, the ensemble was topped off by a tanned jacked tossed over one shoulder. Instantly grasping the stranger's hand, Iris was taken aback by a sense of familiarity.

"Good evening, madam. My name is Doctor John Smith and these are my assistants, Miss Valentina Rossi and Mister Tom Brooker. We're here on topographical business from the Royal Society, and I'm afraid we're just a little lost. The tracks from Quarr Chine are rather perplexing, and we've been wandering for much of the late afternoon. I wondered, therefore, if you could tell us where we might find a reputable inn or public house, which would afford us some shelter for the night?"

Iris released the Doctor's hand and paused before answering, carefully taking in her unexpected visitors. The woman appeared to be from a Mediterranean country by the look of her complexion, but with her auburn hair worn in a modest braid over one shoulder and her blue eyes, she could have equally been a local. She was a little taller than Iris, and wore a plain mauve blouse and matching slacks, and a green cardigan which she had left unbuttoned. The other man was less of a mystery: tall with curly brown hair and more of a farmer's tan from hours in the field, his green eyes had a playful quality and his blue corduroy trousers and red sweater were contrasted against a cream shirt.

"I'm Iris Cooper, former cook to Quarr Manor and now retired to Quarr Lodge as the estate gatekeeper." She pointed across to the track that led away from the estate. "I'm afraid the nearest inn is the *Crown and Horses* at the foot of Hook Down, nearly two miles from here. If you'd like to come in, however, I'd be happy to make you some tea before you move on. It is a long way, but there's still enough light to guide you if you've a mind to it. I must say, I hadn't heard from Mister Anton that there would be visitors to Quarr in these days. You are visiting Quarr Manor, are you not?"

"Indeed, madam, but not just yet." The Doctor's voice held a note of intrigue. "We must survey the Tall Stone first, the standing stone just behind Quarr Manor. It's a delicate

matter and time is vital, so it's important we're all square with the stone first, before meeting with, err, Mister Anton."

"Well, as I said, you're welcome to stop here awhile. Please, I'd be happy to host you."

Val smiled. "You're extremely kind, and the rest will do us a world of good."

"Absolutely, I really couldn't agree more," chimed in Tom, who had no intention of letting the Doctor pass up their opportunity for a well-earned break.

Outnumbered, the Doctor nodded and beckoned to Val and Tom to enter the Lodge ahead of him. "Yes, we would indeed be delighted," he muttered, with just a touch of sarcasm.

Iris led them to her sitting room, which contained a brace of pine chairs facing the fireplace, and a single upholstered armchair to one side, next to which was a small table on which lay a copy of a newspaper, opened on the crossword page. Iris smiled apologetically. "I'm afraid there aren't many chairs. I don't get company often. The reading chair was a present from Mister Anton when I came to the Lodge. My late husband, Toby, and I used to live in the servants' quarters in Quarr Manor. Toby was valet to Mister Anton and I kept the kitchen. When Toby died, I asked to be moved to the Lodge. It happened to be vacant and there were just too many memories in the Manor for me to stay there. Mister Anton was very kind and I've been the gatekeeper ever since."

Motioning for her guests to sit, Iris went to the kitchen to boil up water for the tea. The Doctor, seemingly still energized by the hike, indicated to Val and Tom to sit whilst he gazed out of the sitting-room window at the track leading to Quarr Manor. "We'll take tea and then make for the standing stone. It's less than half a mile from here, and it should give us an ideal vantage point from which to observe the Manor before we do a quick recce."

"We're spending the night outdoors?" asked Tom, his eyes widening just a little at the idea of a chilly night on the exposed ground just beyond the Lodge.

"The fire is due to begin in less than twelve hours. It's imperative we see what's happening outside before we take a look inside. Of course, if you'd prefer you may both stay at the Tall Stone, as the locals call it, and enjoy our host's hospitality if and when available. I dare say the stone has some charming history attached to it, which would satiate a timid curiosity. However, I aim to get to the bottom of this fiery mystery; and if that means a few hours outdoors then so be it."

As the Doctor finished, Iris re-entered with a tea tray containing four china teacups, a teapot and a small plate of plain shortbread biscuits. Tom's eyes lit up. "Shortbread is my favorite. Thank you!"

Iris gave Tom a wide smile as she passed out the biscuits. "It seems that you and my late husband have something in common. He loved shortbread as well, that's why I always keep a packet or two around. Old habits, you know."

"Have you been at Quarr long?" asked Val.

"All of my life. Quarr Down is in my blood." Iris poured the tea and gave the Doctor a questioning look. "Tall Stone, you say? Measuring it or something are you?"

"We're here to establish its veracity as a Neolithic place of worship. But I dare say you could tell us a great deal about the stone yourself, Mrs. Cooper, isn't that right?"

“Yes, I could. There again, so could any of the people living in Hookstone or thereabouts. The Tall Stone is part of our history, our heritage. Nothing can change that, no matter what folk might say.”

“What do you mean, Mrs. Cooper?” Val asked, her journalistic instincts sensing a story to be told.

Iris took a long breath. “No one’s sure who raised the Tall Stone, or what it was used for. But, tales of curses and dark practices have followed it over the years. After the Manor caught fire in ’51, Mister Cornelius, the first Garston of Quarr Manor, dismissed most of his staff. They protested at the Tall Stone, held all-night vigils and the like. Toby was sent to move them on, and a few days later, he took to his bed and never left it again. His illness had nothing to do with the Tall Stone, or any curse, but once the local busybodies started gossiping the story stuck, like mud. It made coping after he passed away even more difficult. Being able to stay here, at Quarr Lodge, and keep myself to myself, was a huge help.”

A thought crossed the Doctor’s mind. “Losing your husband must have been hard, Mrs. Cooper. And Mister Anton’s support was so important, I dare say. You say he dismissed most of his staff after the fire. But I’ve been researching the Manor and the local records don’t tell of any fire. That’s a little odd, wouldn’t you agree?”

“I don’t know what you’re implying, Doctor Smith. All I can say is that I was there at the time and a fire there most certainly was. No one knows what caused it. There was some talk at the time of lightning, but the sky was clear that night. Mister Cornelius shut off the damaged parts of the Manor and never left the place again. I still remember how he looked in those last years before he died: a face full of duty, but somehow just as full of anger. After he passed away in ’60 Mister Anton took over, and kept the Manor all-but deserted, save for the occasional visit from Miss Lilly since she took up residence in Hookstone.”

“Fascinating,” mused the Doctor. “I wonder why Mister Cornelius was so keen to seal off the Manor. And if he did choose to keep news of the fire out of local records he must have had a very good reason.”

“As it happens,” continued Iris, “the current heir to Quarr Manor, Miss Lilly, is a most obliging lady. I’m sure she’ll be happy to help you with your work here when...”

Before Iris could finish her sentence, an ear-piercing shriek came from the direction of Quarr Manor.

The stairs to the observatory ran directly from the central staircase that led from the main hall to the three upper floors and their corresponding north, west and east wings. From above, Quarr Manor was shaped like the letter T, with the horizontal east-west wings somewhat shorter than the more elongated north wing. The observatory perched where the wings met, some thirty feet above the ground. With the elevation afforded to it by Quarr Down, which itself reached a little over six hundred feet above sea level, the view was quite spectacular.

Taking the final set of stairs to her uncle’s precious glass chamber, Lilly hesitated at the frosted glass door, which lay very slightly ajar. A distinctly unpleasant odour had reached her nostrils, which clearly emanated from the observatory. Lilly associated it with an overcooked

leg of pork, but there was more to it than that. Within the sickly stench was mixed the smell of burnt cotton and wool... and hair.

Stepping into the observatory, Lilly stood stock still in utter shock. There, just a few feet from her, lay a crumpled mass of scorched flesh, shaped like an arm. Close by, another, similarly burnt form hung from the guardrail, its carbonized digits stuck fast as though welded to the spot. On the ring finger, Lilly could see the blackened shape of her uncle's signet ring. Between the two limbs, a dark patch of scorched flooring vaguely resembled the outline of a head, torso and legs. Gazing around the observatory in continuing shock, Lilly saw that aside from the two burnt limbs and blackened floor there were no other traces of her uncle. Finally, as the full realization of what had seemingly happened sank in, Lilly found she could move again, and a moment later she let out a long, terrible scream.

It never ceased to amaze Tom how fast the Doctor could run. Despite never engaging in any sort of regular exercise, the Time Lord could suddenly put on a turn of speed, and maintain it, like a well-trained athlete. And it seemed that since his regeneration, the Doctor could move a yard or two quicker than his previous self, invariably leaving Val and Tom to take up the rear. Fortunately, the gravel drive connecting Quarr Lodge to its grander neighbor was only a couple of hundred yards long, and largely flat ground with just a slight rise at the end, enabling Tom to more or less keep up with the Doctor until they reached the Manor, and Val only a little way behind.

Rapping on the imposing oaken doors forming the main entrance, the Doctor was unsurprised to find no response. Patently, at that very moment attending to unexpected visitors was not high on the list of priorities for the Garstons. As Tom, and then Val, raced to join him, the Doctor pointed to the side of the Manor and began sprinting towards another, smaller entranceway set back from the walls. Possibly a servant's door, it contained a single large lock at chest height. From his pocket, the Doctor removed a rod-like device with a series of hooks at one end. Inserting it into the lock, he began manipulating the tumblers.

"Wouldn't your sonic screwdriver be quicker?" gasped Val, still catching her breath.

"It looks like an old-fashioned latch-and-bolt affair to me, which would prove a little tricky for sonic impulses to shift. It ought to prove somewhat faster using an old-fashioned lock-pick."

As the Doctor finished, a resounding click came from the lock, and the door creaked ajar. Pushing open the door and entering a small passageway beyond, the Doctor signaled for Val and Tom to follow. "Remember," whispered the Doctor, "we're not here to interfere. Follow my lead and we'll be in and out without upsetting events."

"Apart from helping the resident damsel in distress, that is," quipped Tom.

The Doctor gave Tom another of his longsuffering looks. "So long as we keep a low profile, that isn't necessarily a problem."

Another bloodcurdling scream came from above them, the despairing sound suddenly cut-off in mid-cry.

Lilly had briefly fainted after first yelling out. When she came to, she found herself lying prone on the observatory floor, within reach of her late uncle's remains. Struggling to her feet, she backed towards the doorway and slowly retraced her steps to the landing below. Pausing to gather her wits, she was abruptly confronted by the hazy silhouette of a person, roughly six feet tall. The form was vague, as though viewed through opaque glass, and when it moved it did so with jerky, erratic movements, reminding Lilly of a silent film she'd seen, in which the frames had unexpectedly jumped in places and made the actors change position in sudden jolts, as though short passages of time had simply been deleted.

Still in shock, Lilly gazed speechlessly at the figure, aware that what was before her could be just a hallucination; an effect of her recent experience in the observatory. Then the figure vanished, and she found the strength to scream again, releasing her fear in a single sharp cry for help. As she did so, however, a force from behind struck her, knocking the breath from her body and propelling her against the landing wall. Tumbling to the floor, Lilly looked up to see that the bizarre shape had reappeared behind her, and now was moving even more erratically than before. Straining to see beyond the smoky veil that hid the figure's features, Lilly briefly caught a glimpse of a man's face etched in horror and pain, before the shape once again disappeared.

Sitting up and leaning her battered body against the wall, Lilly saw yet another strange man appear before her before she again lost consciousness.

Leaving the servants' passage and arriving in the main hall, the Doctor looked upwards, towards where he judged the scream had issued. Spying the central staircase, he smartly ascended the upper three floors, quickly reaching the short landing which acted as a break between the central staircase and the final climb of stairs to the observatory. There, propped against the landing wall was a petite woman dressed in a simple floral skirt and lace blouse. She looked for a moment in the Doctor's direction before sagging to the floor in a dead faint.

Rushing up to the woman, the Doctor quickly lifted her head and checked her eyes. Her pupils dilated just enough to indicate she had merely fainted, and reading her wrist pulse supported his diagnosis. Noting that no bones appeared to be broken, the Doctor indicated to Tom, who had just arrived, to help him lift the woman into a seated position.

"Val, would you see if there's somewhere on this floor where we can make this lady more comfortable. Tom, I want you to stay with her whilst I check the observatory, it looks like that might be the source of our troubles."

Tom nodded, moving to support the woman's head. Val jogged down the short passageway that formed the landing beneath the observatory and quickly found a small bedroom at the very end of it. Rushing back to Tom, she helped him raise the woman onto her feet and guide her slumbering form to the room, before making a dash for the observatory.

"Hey," said Tom, "where are you off to?"

“Checking on the Doctor. He told you to stay with our ‘damsel in distress’, but I’ve done my bit. I’m going to see what all the fuss is about; after all, it’s not often that I get to see a live case of the paranormal face to face.”

Without waiting for an answer, Val shot out of the room. Tom looked down at the woman, noting her porcelain skin and high cheekbones. “Typical English rose,” he said to himself, before catching sight of a dark mark on the side of her neck. Looking more closely, Tom could plainly see a burn running from the lower left side of her neck towards the centre of her shoulder blades. As far as he could tell, the burn was in the shape of an outstretched hand.

Taking the observatory stairway one step at a time, the Doctor’s senses were acutely aware of some sort of energy release that had swept through the landing only moments earlier. The energy became palpable as he approached the observatory, and felt not unlike the tingling sensation given off by static electricity. Reaching the observatory’s frosted glass portal, the Doctor gingerly pushed it open and entered the light-filled room resting atop Quarr Manor like a single crystal, set into the centre of a cross.

The static-charged atmosphere reached its peak as the Doctor stepped towards the middle of the chamber. The awful sight of the two burnt limbs, either side of a shadowy patch of carbon-scored flooring, was the only indication that there had once been a complete body lying there, before being consumed by an extraordinary force of heat. Producing his sonic screwdriver, the Doctor began to scan the observatory, his concern growing as the probe gave off a particularly high-pitched whine indicative of a very special radioactive wavelength. Suddenly the whine cut out and the sonic screwdriver went dead. Staring intently at the now silent probe, the Doctor noticed that it had automatically entered hibernation mode, a self-preserving mechanism which rendered it unusable for up to an hour. Pocketing the device, the Doctor turned to face Val, who had just joined him. He gave her a hard look. “I thought I’d told you to find a suitable refuge for Tom’s Edwardian damsel?”

Val ignored the question. “I... I never thought the sight of a burnt arm, at least his arms, would be so unsettling.” Taking hold of the guardrail for support, Val felt a wave of nausea come across her.

“You shouldn’t be here. For what it’s worth, any corpse can be unsettling, however diminished it happens to be. There’s nothing more we can do for this poor fellow, and there’s unlikely to be anything else we can learn from the observatory. I suggest we alert the very kind Iris Cooper to what has happened here and see to it that our fainted lady – and whoever else might be here – leaves Quarr Manor forthwith. In a very few hours another firestorm will occur, this time consuming the entire house. If we can get it evacuated before then we’ll have at least saved a life or two, even if the mystery remains unsolved.”

Val’s astonishment at the Doctor’s final comment was strong enough to still her nausea. “You’re not seriously going to give up and head back to the TARDIS, none the wiser about what caused the infamous fire?”

"I may have an idea, but it's only half-formed. If I'm right, however, we're dealing with an extremely dangerous situation for which there's little protection outside of the TARDIS. When my curiosity is dampened, it's usually for a very serious reason."

Val silently nodded, suddenly even less comfortable than when her nausea was at its strongest. Descending the stairs to the landing, Val noticed the Doctor staring intently at the hand stuck to the guardrail, before following after her. Once at the landing the pair made for the bedroom where Val had left Tom and the unknown woman.

Despite a heavy limp in her right leg, Iris had made her way to Quarr Manor in good time, reaching the entrance only a few minutes after the Doctor, Val and Tom. Of course, the charming Doctor Smith had very firmly told her to stay put, but a lifetime's service to the Garstons of Quarr had given her a sense of loyalty above and beyond that of any other employee. It had been the Garstons who had helped her Toby at the end, when his illness had finally taken away any hope of recovery; and it had been they who had protected a grieving Iris from prying eyes and wagging tongues by installing her in the Lodge. If a Garston was in peril, wild horses couldn't stop her intervening.

Taking out her key to the Manor from her jacket pocket, Iris went to open the main door. As she did so, however, she caught sight of a sudden movement out of the corner of her eye, accompanied by a low, mournful cry. Turning towards the movement, she saw that it came from inside Quarr's conifer-lined grove, just a short walk from the driveway. Realizing that Doctor Smith and his friends were probably already inside the Manor, Iris decided to forestall her entry by just a few moments to check the grove.

By now the sun was beginning the final phase of its journey across the sky; its rays weakening as it gradually dipped towards the sea-sky horizon. Although the light was still strong enough to see by, the elongated shadows and red-hued grass presaged imminent twilight. Reaching the grove, Iris looked about in bewilderment; the injured person, possibly Benning or Thatch, was nowhere to be seen. Yet she had definitely seen someone, and the call for help had seemed so very real. Surely it couldn't be the dreams she'd had after Toby's death, coming back to haunt her all over again?

"Right," Iris murmured to herself, "let's have one more look around and then head back to the Manor. Doctor Smith will probably..."

Iris' voice trailed off as she caught sight of the movement again. It was a jerky, spasmodic action belonging to a man-like shape lying supine on the ground. But it had moved. This time it was at the far side of the grove, near a wrought-iron gate, which opened onto Mutterstone Lane, the road connecting Quarr Manor to the small village of Hookstone below. Peering at the shape, Iris fancied for a moment that some poor fellow had misjudged his leap over the gate and badly fallen upon its unyielding metal bars. Then the desperate motion of uncoordinated limbs and twisting torso began all over again, and Iris stood rigid, biding her time until the convulsion was over.

As the figured began to still, Iris slowly moved towards it, wary that any sudden movement might startle the person and make matters worse. As she grew nearer, she could

plainly tell that the violent fitting, if indeed that was what the movements were, had been replaced by a fierce shivering that wracked the whole body. Drawing next to the figure, Iris leant down to see the face, and drew back with a sudden intake of breath.

Tom stared mesmerized at the burn mark on the woman's neck. He had seen enough burns in his time to know what ought to happen to the damaged skin afterwards, and yet here there were no tell-tale signs of the blistering that was part of the healing process. Instead, the burn had taken on a strange translucent quality, as though somehow the skin itself were slowly but surely fading away.

Leaning in to get a better look, Tom found himself reaching out his hand to touch the strangely glowing flesh.

"I wouldn't get too much closer if I were you," observed the Doctor, gently taking Tom's arm and moving it away from the woman's neck. "I'm afraid she may be suffering from something much worse than a simple burn."

Tom gave the Doctor a puzzled look and turned to Val, who had entered after the Doctor. "It's kind of growing paler," he said, "as if the skin, and even the flesh and bone beneath it, were gradually disappearing."

Val peered over at the burn to see for herself. "What now, then, Doctor? First, there's a case of spontaneous human combustion in the observatory, and now *The Lady Vanishes*? This little excursion of yours is beginning to turn into a real tour of the unexplained. Arthur C Clarke would be in his element."

"This is no time to be flippant, Val. What may have been just another case of arson, or a fairly crude insurance fiddle, is looking more and more serious by the minute. For now, whatever you do, don't touch any part of this woman's injury. With a little luck she may yet pull through, but with the burn so close to her neck it's going to be touch and go."

Tom swallowed hard. "So we might be too late. She's dying?"

"Difficult to tell, I'd need to get her to the TARDIS to be able to diagnose her injury properly, and perhaps arrest the cellular decay, but even then I think the location of the trauma, so close to the brain, makes her survival a long shot at best."

"Cellular decay?" Tom's voice held a note of incredulity. "What does that mean? She got hit by a death ray and it's still eating away at her?"

"Short answer: yes. Longer answer: it's a little more complicated than a death ray, as you so eloquently put it; and like lightning it may strike anywhere at any time – including right here in this room. It hit the observatory, and pretty hard given the state of its occupant at that time. Presumably, this woman went to check on whoever was in the observatory and as she did so it struck again, but with far less force, hence the partial wounding. Unfortunately it's not the sort of injury that easily heals. Furthermore, it's very possible that the observatory has been acting like a sort of electricity conductor, drawing these ultra-hot energy surges to it and the rest of the Manor. And whoever's unlucky enough to be inside it at the time.

"Enough of explanations; we've got to get this woman out of here and into the nearest refuge – most likely Iris' cottage. If my theory is right, the range of this phenomenon is

relatively limited, hopefully only to this Manor and its grounds, if not just the Manor itself. But I can't tell for sure. Now, stop gawping at me and let's go!"

Mindful of avoiding the burn, the Doctor took the woman's shoulders whilst Tom held her legs as Val led the way back down the central staircase. Reaching the main hall and the front entrance, Val sprinted ahead and shot back the three heavy bolts that held the door in place. It swung wide open, letting in the cool evening air and scent of lavender from the nearby grove.

As fast as their burden would allow, the Doctor and Tom moved in the direction of the Lodge, oblivious of all but their desperate task. As Val followed them, however, she noticed an odd movement coming from the far side of the lavender-scented grove. Realizing that her friends were already well on their way to the Lodge, and hopefully safety, she made a brisk detour into the grove, intent on finding out what the movement could be.

As she reached the wrought-iron gate at the far side, a ghastly sight came into view. Holding her hand to her mouth, and trying not to gag, Val tried to make out what she was looking at. Unable to comprehend the evidence of her own eyes, she turned away for moment to gather her wits. Turning back again, she suddenly realized that part of what she was looking at was Iris.

At least that was the best way Val could describe to herself what she was seeing.

"Quickly, lay her on the table; I want to give her wound a closer look."

Barging into the Lodge, the Doctor and Tom placed the still-unconscious woman on the kitchen table, whereupon the Time Lord delved into his inside jacket pocket and took out a bizarre-looking contraption that looked like a cross between a handheld telescope and a television aerial. Holding the instrument's single lens as close as he dared to the burn mark, the Doctor began taking readings.

"Hmm, this isn't as bad as I thought. It seems that this woman's constitution is unusually robust. Her cells are resisting the molecular unraveling quite well. It seems that Lilly Garston, for I assume that this woman is the person to whom Iris referred, may survive yet."

Tom's expression lightened a little. "Is there anything we can do to help her?"

"Ideally she needs a good dose of Idris 40." At Tom's puzzled stare, the Doctor explained. "It's closely related to the radiation that caused this injury, but it has the opposite effect."

"Which would be?"

"Binding her cells together, thus countering the effects of its contrary, Idris 20, a powerful by-product of matter-transmission accidents."

"You mean a teleport?"

"Precisely. Someone has used a faulty teleport mechanism and caused a mis-phase. It means that some poor soul is yo-yoing at the end of a teleport beam, partially materializing at random points within the beam's circumference. Each time their materialization fails and goes into a mis-phase their body gives off an enormous burst of thermal radiation, burning – or even incinerating without trace – whoever or whatever is within its reach. Hence, the body parts in the observatory. But even if you're more fortunate, like our sleeping lady, and the mis-phase is

weaker, the slightest contact with the mis-phasing object or person causes the cells to begin unraveling at a molecular level.”

“Wonderful. We’ve got a fiery phantom that either fries or disassembles his victim. So, how long before this thing stops ‘yo-yoing’ and just runs out of power?”

“Oh, I dare say around the time Quarr Manor goes up in smoke. It’ll probably release one final discharge near some particularly flammable part of the house and that will be that. Which reminds me, what’s keeping Val, and where’s Iris?”

Val slowly approached Iris, careful not to get too close to the shape next to her. Although to call it a shape, thought Val, was something of a misnomer. A shape implied line and content, a location in space playing host to an object, animal or person. This was no conventional shape. It was a bundle of misshapen flesh and bone, and somewhere in its midst could be found contorted limbs and a face fixed in an expression of untold agony.

“Iris,” whispered Val, “I think you should move away from... it, just to be safe.”

Iris gave Val a confused look. “I only wanted to comfort him, you see. I heard his cries. They were just like my Toby’s.”

“Yes, you did the right thing, but I think it’d be better now if you moved towards me, slowly,” coaxed Val, aware that any sudden movement could upset the creature and cause harm to Iris.

“I’d like to move, my dear, but I’m afraid I can’t. Something strange happened when I touched him...”

Iris’ voice trailed off as she lifted her left arm into full view.

“I thought she was with us!” snapped Tom, riled by the Doctor’s accusatory tone.

“I dare say she was!” snapped back the Doctor, “but she isn’t now, and neither is our kindly gatekeeper. And staying outdoors on this of all nights isn’t a safe option.”

Placing the odd telescope device back into his jacket pocket, the Doctor looked at Lilly. “You’d best stay here, Tom. I’ll find Val and Iris and return as soon as I can. We can’t leave Lilly Garston unattended, and nor can we abandon Val and Iris to another of tonight’s terrors.”

Tom frowned. “Another terror? What are you saying?”

“Incendiary visitants are one problem. But partially-phased visitants are another.”

“Meaning?”

“Teleport accidents are more common than you would think. Say your starship has lost control, only there’s no lifeboat. There is, however, a teleport. The ship is crashing and its systems are shorting out, but it’s your only hope. So you teleport. And because the systems are in disarray, when you land the beam reassembles your atoms as though someone had tried to join the dots blindfolded.”

“I get the picture. But why is a... a partially-phasing teleportee, a danger?”

Leaving the Lodge, the Doctor yelled back his answer. "Because their flesh is like glue, Tom, molecular glue."

Iris lifted up her arm and Val gasped. Where her hand had been, hung a single, fleshy tube of skin, which flowed into one of the vague, limb-like appendages of the creature. Iris' hand had sunk into the creature's hide and become conjoined, its molecules knitting a new pattern of cohesion. Iris and the creature were becoming one.

Iris gave Val a slow, sad smile. "I only want to hold his hand, my dear. I only wanted to hold his hand."

PART TWO: FIRESTORM

As night closed in on Quarr Down, a baleful moon shone a cold light upon the thick patches of gorse growing along its slopes. The tracks of short-cropped grass, which formed a virtual maze of pathways across the down, took on a slippery texture as the dewy air gave up its surplus of water to its earthly neighbor.

Moving across this treacherous surface, the Doctor quickly navigated his way along the short drive between the Lodge and the Manor, aware of the many smaller paths on either side that would snare him in a web of confusion if he didn't concentrate.

Reaching the entrance of Quarr Manor, the Doctor briefly stopped to spy his surroundings. The gloomy entranceway of the unlit Manor gave off an eerie quality that made him feel particularly wary, as though there were someone inside its black interior, intently watching his every move.

Leaving the entranceway, the Doctor crossed a strip of well-kept lawn on his way to a small grove of wild flowers, guarded by a ring of soaring conifers.

"Typical," the Doctor remarked to himself. "For an Englishman, even a garden set upon an isolated piece of down land needs its own private sanctum. But away from the prying eyes of whom, I wonder?"

Crossing the grove, the Doctor began to make out the outline of two figures, next to which loomed a similar sized mass, which he took to be part of the grove. Then, as he drew nearer, he realized his mistake.

Tom sighed. Somehow, he'd managed to be left holding the baby, or in this case an Edwardian lady, who sported a very unusual trauma. To ease his impatience, he began to look over some of the photographs on Iris' dresser. One in particular stood out. It was a family shot: two parents and six children, each formally dressed in evening attire. Given their clothing, Tom assumed they were members of Iris' much-adored Garston family.

"I wonder where you are now?" muttered Tom. "That manor house feels like it's been abandoned for years."

"They're all dead, I'm afraid," explained Lilly. Startled, Tom turned and saw her sitting up in the armchair into which he had placed her after moving her from the rather less comfortable kitchen table.

In his surprise, Tom literally jumped a foot into the air, falling against the dresser in the process and knocking some of its photographs and ornaments to the floor. Scrambling to pick up the fallen items, he looked warily at Lilly before replying, more than a little nervous of her contagious wound.

"Please don't be alarmed. My name's Tom Brooker. My friends and I were here with Mrs. Cooper when we heard your call for help. We brought you here because we thought there might still be a risk of fire at the Manor. Rest assured, once we know it's safe for you to return we'll escort you back."

"I don't remember too much," said Lilly, seemingly oblivious of Tom's half-baked excuse. "There was something in the observatory, something that frightened me. And then a sensation of heat, incredible heat."

Lilly stopped and stretched her left hand towards the back of her neck. Tom raised his hand to check her, but then drew back. Noticing Tom's movement, Lilly abruptly lowered her hand and gave him a questioning look. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"You've got a nasty burn on your neck, which reaches as far as your shoulder blades. It's best not to touch it; we think it's, well, infected, and we need to get you a special sort of vaccine to sort you out."

Lilly slowly blinked, still feeling groggy. "Now I remember, there had been some sort of fire in the observatory, and..." She trailed off, her right hand reaching up to her mouth to stifle a cry. "Uncle Anton, he was, he was burnt to nearly nothing, there in the observatory." Trailing off again, Lilly lowered herself back down into the armchair, exhausted by the terrible recollection.

"You're safe now," comforted Tom. "You really must rest. My friends will be back soon, and then we'll be on our way to getting you all fixed up."

Lilly nodded again, and watched as Tom finished arranging Iris' half dozen photographs. Glancing at the picture of her father, Lilly returned to her earlier comment. "You were right, you know, about what you said about Quarr being abandoned. The 1851 fire swept across the estate and struck several parts of the Manor, stealing away my grandmother and four of my father's siblings. My grandfather never forgave himself – or his surviving sons – for outliving the inferno.

Tom looked puzzled. "This is the same fire that saw your grandfather dismiss almost all his staff?"

"Yes. What of it?"

"Oh, I'm just curious. It's funny, but fires tend to be surrounded by stories and rumors, and I'd heard of a fire at Quarr from a friend of mine, but not in 1851. Perhaps he got his history mixed up. Anyway, talking about fires reminds me how cold it is. Would there happen to be a fireplace somewhere in this cottage?"

Before Lilly could answer, Tom noticed a strange glow coming from outside the sitting-room window. Looking out, he caught sight of a translucent figure surrounded by an aura of crackling energy. Strangely, despite the figure's ghostly pallor, its face was quite visible; its

mouth stretched wide in a soundless scream and its eyes fixed in a fearful, sightless stare. Before Tom could react, the phantom vanished, only to reappear in the short passageway between the kitchen and the sitting room. Without wasting another second, Tom snatched up Lilly and tore out of the Lodge, careless of where they went as long as it was far, far away.

Striking out into the night, Tom soon lost himself and Lilly in the knot of paths crisscrossing Quarr Down which, only a few minutes earlier, the Doctor had managed to avoid. Pausing for breath, Tom looked about, hoping to get his bearings. In doing so, he saw the shape of a small building just ahead of them.

Rushing forward in desperation, he launched himself and Lilly into its cramped interior just as the phantom appeared once again, only a little way behind them. This time, however, it held its form long enough to begin advancing towards them, hands outstretched in a beseeching fashion. Keeping himself between the fiery threat and Lilly, Tom held his breath and braced himself for its terrible embrace.

“Val,” whispered the Doctor, “don’t speak, just move towards me, as slowly as you can.”

The Doctor’s voice held a hypnotic quality, which Val found reassuring. Stepping towards him, she kept her gaze averted from the tragedy unfolding behind her. Reaching him, she fell into his arms in sheer relief. “You took your time,” she said in a lowered voice.

“You shouldn’t have gone wandering off alone,” retorted the Doctor in an equally quiet tone. Edging closer to Iris and the creature, the Doctor produced the telescopic device he had used earlier and made a careful survey of the fused flesh. Before speaking, he gazed at Iris’ eyes, trying to gauge just how much of her personality remained. He shook his head.

“I’m exceedingly sorry, Mrs. Cooper, there’s little that we can do. This... person is most terribly injured. It’s also leaking a rather dangerous sort of energy – an energy that can bind, as well as burn.”

Iris dropped her head for a moment before replying. When she did speak, her words were slurred and the Doctor and Val had to concentrate to understand her. “I feel awfully sleepy, Doctor Smith. It’s about all I can feel at the moment, though. My body seems as light as a feather; it’s as if I’m dreaming.”

“What you’re experiencing tends to have a calming effect on some people, Iris. In the end, it will send you into a blissful, and everlasting, sleep.”

Iris gave the Doctor a slow, knowing smile. “I’ve waited ten years to go to sleep and forget my pain. This time is as good as any. I’ve told Valentina already; I only wanted to give this poor man a little comfort. He was so lonely and afraid. And his pain ran so deep I could almost touch it.”

The Doctor’s face became intensely serious. “Iris, we don’t have a great deal of time, and it’s very important that I learn who this person is and where they come from, before it’s too late. I’m going to need your help, Iris. Will you help me?”

Iris slowly nodded, her eyes wandering listlessly as her focus began to wane. Realizing he was very nearly too late, the Doctor quickly took a plain black pen torch from his trouser pocket and began flashing its soft yellow beam into Iris’ fading eyes.

Val frowned. "Are you trying to hypnotize her?"

"I'm putting her conscious mind to sleep so that her subconscious can surface, as it were, and let me access the thoughts of the poor fellow lying next to her."

"You're going to try and communicate with the thing that's killing Iris?"

"That 'thing', as you call it, is a person, probably alien and most definitely dying. All the evidence I've seen points to this person being the victim of a serious teleportation accident, and I absolutely must find out what happened so that I can stop things getting worse."

By now, Iris' face was fixed in a trance-like expression, her eyes wide open and staring blankly straight ahead. Pocketing the torch, the Doctor took a long slow breath before beginning. "My name is the Doctor. Do you remember what your name is?"

A strange, labored voice came from Iris' lips. The accent and tone belonged to her, but it was obvious that it wasn't Iris who spoke. "Gomley. Navigator Gomley, of the Survey Ship *Atlas*."

"It's good to meet you, Navigator Gomley. What was your flight plan?"

"En route to Stanjel Prime on a survey run of newly-industrializing planets. Sol III was our final hit."

"Stanjel Prime? You're a long way from home, Navigator Gomley. Do you remember how you came to leave the *Atlas*?"

"We were in fixed orbit when an unexpected solar flare disabled our shields and disrupted our systems. When the damage overran the engine core, we were forced to evacuate via the teleport. We had no other choice; the lifeboat ejection system had already been shorted out by the solar flare."

The Doctor sighed inwardly. "How many crew, Gomley?"

"Minimum complement: myself, Pilot-Captain Wurmfeld and Survey Officer Rauch."

"How long since you teleported?"

"A few hours, I think. Then she found me, and the pain eased..."

Iris' face abruptly sagged and her head fell forward. She did not raise it again. The Doctor made a brief visual check of Gomley's twisted frame and gave another sigh. "They're both gone, Val. They're both gone."

Val wiped a tear from her left eye and looked away, unable to watch anymore. The Doctor stepped back and turned to observe Quarr Manor, his head alive with thoughts.

"Stanjel Prime lies on the edge of the Milky Way Galaxy, Val. Its dominant race has a humanoid frame and the most amazing sense of taste; if you ever want your culinary skills tested, the Stanjelians are second to none."

Val didn't conceal her sarcasm. "It never ceases to amaze me how you can think of trivia in the middle of a tragedy."

The Doctor gave Val a piercing glare. "Taste buds happen to be one of the last groups of cells affected by Idris 20, a usually harmless radioactive side effect of teleportation, hugely magnified on this occasion by a faulty retaining field. When Gomley materialized, his atoms reassembled as though a toddler had thrown them together. I'm surprised he survived this long. His crewmates are our greatest concern now, however. And yet, they may well be the answer to this problem."

The Doctor took out his sonic screwdriver, observed that it was now working again, and pointed its sonic beam at the part of Gomley's dead body that he took to be the mouth. The sonic screwdriver emitted a low buzzing sound, at which the Doctor gave a satisfied murmur and switched it off. "It seems that Gomley was right; he has been here only a few hours, not more. Which means that given the *Atlas* was in fixed orbit when all this happened, we still have two or three hours left to get it as far away from Earth as possible."

"To avoid it crash landing here?"

"If it were likely to crash land we'd be in a lot less trouble. Since its systems were so badly scrambled by solar radiation, I can only assume its engine runs on a type of matter exchange principle, probably stabilized by a heavy element like Gardium 40. If so, when it makes planet fall, it'll trigger a firestorm that will lay waste to most of the British Isles."

Val took a sharp intake of breath. "But you told us the fire only destroyed the Manor?"

"According to the history books, that's true. But who knows, perhaps there was an inferno on Earth in 1908? This mystery is deepening, Val, and we need to tread very, very carefully."

The Doctor passed his hand over his face and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "There's still time to re-route the *Atlas*, but we'll need to use Gomley's fiery cohorts to help us."

"Won't that be a bit tricky, considering they appear at random and burn anyone who gets too close?"

"If you play with fire, Val, you must always use a very long match, and mine happens to be as long as Quarr Manor is high."

"The observatory?"

"Yes, the observatory. It seems to be a focal point for the teleport beam. If I can drum up enough static electricity, I may be able to draw our teleporteers to the observatory. That will establish a teleport anchor that should last long enough for me to use the beam to transport myself aboard the *Atlas*. Once there, I can divert its course into deep space."

"I'm hearing a lot of ifs and buts and maybes in all that, Doctor. And isn't it dangerous to use that beam?"

"We've no choice, Val. Right now, millions of lives are at risk. Is there really any argument against my plan that doesn't sound just a touch selfish, if not to say hollow?"

Val remained silent, and looked back briefly at Iris' body. Finally, she replied. "What's our next move, then?"

"We need to get back to Tom and the lady who I take to be Quarr's last-surviving Garston. Then, you and Tom return with her to the TARDIS and some much-needed medicine for that burn of hers, whilst I head for the observatory. With any luck we'll have all this cleared up with time to spare."

Val looked at the conjoined bodies again. "What about Iris and... Gomley?"

"If my plan works out, the fire that is supposed to consume Quarr will still happen. Iris' and Gomley's remains will be destroyed with it."

A bright beam of light suddenly illuminated the grove. Val looked across the grounds to a point somewhere between the Lodge and a wood just outside the estate. Anxiety gripped her. "What was that?"

“Wurmfeld or Rauch, mis-phasing again. We can only hope Tom and Miss Garston are safe.”

Tom opened his eyes and squinted into the dazzling light.

“Still alive,” he whispered in relief. He saw the humanoid torch, which had stalked them from the Lodge, had not moved a single step closer. Instead, it had remained frozen just a few yards away, seemingly unable to enter the small building in which Tom and Lilly had sought refuge.

Lilly leaned against the far wall, gazing in astonishment at the burning figure. “This is the estate chapel, Tom. I’d like to think there’s someone watching over us, but somehow I think the reason may be rather more mundane.”

Tom looked up at the chapel’s stucco-decorated ceiling. “Is the roof by any chance lined with lead, Lilly?”

“I think so – it keeps the rain out.”

“Well, aside from waterproofing your family chapel, it’s also stopping our friend out there from reaching us. I guess the lead blocks the teleport beam.”

Lilly shook her head. “Teleport beam?”

“It’s a long story,” replied Tom, “but my friend, the Doctor, thinks some people have tried to evacuate their... well, their aeroplane, let’s say, and the method they’ve used is causing... this...”

Tom trailed off as the figure outside the chapel briefly solidified to reveal a male humanoid, wearing a silvery one-piece suit. He was about the same height as Tom, and although he appeared relatively well-built, his shoulders were unusually narrow, creating the impression of a delicate frame not used to load bearing. But it was his countenance that drew the greatest attention. It was etched in such fear that Tom found he was unable to meet the intruder’s pleading gaze for more than a moment. Then the face reverted to its flaming countenance. Before doing so, however, Tom heard the figure utter one anguished word: “Help.”

Tom and Lilly stared mutely at the figure, both confronted by a phenomenon beyond their time. Then, it flared brilliantly and vanished once more.

As Tom and Lilly gazed at the space where the figure had only a moment before stood, the space abruptly filled with two corporeal shapes: the Doctor and Val.

“Am I glad to see you!” exclaimed Tom, rushing forward to hug Val.

“Don’t get too excited just yet, Tom,” admonished the Doctor. “I’m afraid we’re still in a great deal of trouble. Speaking of which, how is Miss Garston’s injury?”

“I feel a little better, Mister..?”

“Doctor Smith, Doctor John Smith. And this is my good friend, Miss Valentina Rossi. I must say, I’m quite surprised to learn you’re feeling better. Your injury was life threatening.”

Peering at the part of the burn that was on Lilly’s neck, the Doctor’s eyebrows rose in astonishment as he saw that the wound had nearly healed. Drawing out both his telescopic probe and his sonic screwdriver, he began to scan Lilly’s burn with greater and greater

wonderment. "I, I find this hard to fathom, Miss Garston. Your wound is nearly healed. Your constitution really must be quite unique."

"I'll take that as a compliment, Doctor Smith. It must be all those years in Africa that toughened me up."

Val looked about the cramped interior of the chapel. "How did you end up in here?" she asked.

"Pure luck," said Tom. "The teleportee appeared in the Lodge and came after us. We stumbled in here with him on our heels. Luckily, the roof of the chapel is lead-lined, which I reckon insulated us and stopped him from coming in. Right, Doctor?"

"Absolutely, Tom. The teleport beam can't penetrate that particular element, which is why you were relatively safe in here."

Tom frowned. "Relatively?"

"Well, whoever is trapped in the beam can still release dangerous amounts of thermal radiation, and thus set fire to their surroundings. As you said before, you were lucky."

Tom visibly gulped. "How do we stop this teleportee from incinerating anyone else?"

"It's become a good deal more complicated than that, Tom. It seems that we have at least two teleportees to combat. We need to get back to the observatory for my plan to work, but I need to make sure there's a secure location within the Manor first. Miss Garston, would there happen be a part of Quarr Manor which possesses a lead-insulated roof?"

"Yes, the library has a portion of reinforced roofing, which includes a layer of lead. My uncle, Anton Garston, had it installed shortly after he took up ownership. He was very fussy about the library and he wanted to keep it safe from lightning and the like. I imagine that after the great fire of '51 he was somewhat paranoid about losing his precious book collection to another inferno."

"Indeed. Mrs. Cooper told us about the fire that damaged the Manor in the middle of the last century. And, despite the time that has passed since then, it is making me feel more and more uncomfortable."

"Why would that be?" asked Lilly. "My father always said it was caused by a freak bolt of lightning. There was no deliberate act; it was simply a terrible piece of bad luck."

"Exactly, and I've never been too fond of depending on luck for deducing the truth. Moreover, to have fire-related deaths occur, albeit some years apart, in exactly the same place twice is equally suspicious."

Lilly's face began to redden. "Are you accusing my family of some sort of ghastly fraud, Doctor Smith?"

"Far from it, Miss Garston, but I do have a nasty feeling that the fire that tore through Quarr Manor in 1851 and the events happening tonight are somehow connected."

Val looked confused. "How is that possible? The fire that wrecked the Manor happened almost sixty years ago."

"I'm still working on that part; Val. Getting on board the *Atlas* should help me find the answer. Now, we've no more time to lose. Miss Garston, since you seem to be almost as right as nine pence, would you please take my friend Valentina to Quarr's library? You'll both be safe there until I've sorted things out. I'm sure Val will fill you in on events on the way."

Val shook her head. "What if the teleportees make an appearance between here and the Manor? I mean, aren't we safer staying here? Or at least getting outside the area of the beam and simply heading for the TARDIS?"

"You would be, if I weren't planning to draw the teleport beam to the observatory. It's said that the eye of a storm is utterly calm; in the case of a fluctuating teleport beam, the same is more or less true. When I attract the beam, the closer you are to the observatory, the safer you'll be. As for the TARDIS, it's just too far, which makes the risk of a 'teleport strike' a good deal higher."

Val silently nodded, but inside she felt that the Doctor was concealing something from her. However, she'd known the Time Lord long enough to understand that if he were hiding something, then he had a good reason to do so.

The Doctor turned to Tom. "My plan involves two pairs of hands, one of which belongs to you. You're going to join me in the observatory and keep the teleport beam stable whilst I'm aboard the *Atlas*."

"The *Atlas*?"

"Must I explain every little detail?" He sighed, exasperated. "Oh, very well. I'll tell you on the way to the observatory."

Ushering them out of the chapel and back towards the drive, the Doctor noticed a glowing light in the direction of the Lodge. Suddenly, a blinding flash appeared in the inky-black sky above the little cottage, as a pillar of flame rose above the treetops.

The Doctor waved the others ahead insistently. "Hurry," he said, "it looks like our firebrands are fire-storming elsewhere. The way to the Manor should be clear."

Crossing his fingers, the Doctor followed the others, mindful that the fire in the Lodge meant that the teleport beam was now on the move again, with its trapped passengers liable to make a re-appearance within the grounds of Quarr Manor at any moment.

The observatory stood proudly upon Quarr's roof, its gleaming frame of glass brilliantly reflecting the moonlight as it had done for almost a century. Below it, the rooms of the Manor once inhabited by Anton Garston were now as silent as those chambers sealed since the fire of 1851. That devastating blaze had ripped through the east wing in a series of deadly blasts, killing Cornelius Garston's wife and four of his six children. In the rooms affected by the fire, there were no survivors. Furthermore, there had been little or no remains, so powerful had the inferno been.

Along with some of the family bedrooms and a set of guest quarters, the east wing had housed Quarr's ballroom, a once glorious chamber of rich mahogany walls and marble flooring, complete with an array of Renaissance-inspired paintings and flower-themed stucco set into ceiling. To complete the spectacle, its external wall was lined with soaring windows which presented the ballroom's guests with the most magnificent views of the estate and Quarr Down beyond, save, of course, for the conifer-lined grove which lay outside the ballroom's otherwise superb vantage point. In fact, aside from the observatory, the ballroom offered the

most complete perspective of the Quarr Estate. This was one of the reasons why its solitary occupant had located herself there for so long.

In the years that had passed, the ballroom had become adapted to its new guest, mixing its Georgian aesthetic with one of a far more unearthly style. A great piece of ironwork stood in the centre of the room, housing a series of delicately posed discs, composed of a lighter metal that appeared out of place amongst its heavier setting. Spreading out from the ironwork was a mass of piping which moved in snake-like fashion along the floor and across the walls until it met once again within the ironwork, forming a complex circuit reminiscent of a Mobius strip. An intricate web of plastic-like material unseen on early-twentieth century Earth covered a Victorian bureau, located close to the inviting row of windows. In turn, the bureau was attached to the ironwork via a thick cable of the same bizarre material that coated its exterior; and the ensemble was topped off by a set of brass knobs and handles built into the part of the bureau where documents and writing implements would normally be stored.

The ballroom's occupant had been feverishly manipulating the bureau-turned-control unit ever since the first teleport beam had struck the observatory and all but incinerated Anton Garston. Later, the anguished figure had helplessly watched as the fiery beam had struck its deadly cargo across Quarr, and had heard the desperate calls of suffering issue from the grove. The watcher understood all too well the import of the burning ray of light and the terrible cries that had followed it.

Raising the hand that still hung free at her side, Pilot-Captain Wurmfeld spoke with barely formed lips into her communicator unit. "*Atlas*, this is Wurmfeld, do you read me?"

PART THREE: COMBUSTION

The moonlight had made the time travelers' and Lilly's brief transit from the chapel to Quarr Manor comparatively simple. However, for the quartet of racing figures caught in that heatless illumination, the journey could not end quickly enough. At least entering Quarr Manor the second time around proved easier for the Doctor, Val and Tom, as Lilly produced a key to the main entrance and proceeded to open its weighty door.

Inside, the Manor greeted its visitors with near total darkness, only the moonlight, drifting its way through a handful of high-set windows, affording them a modicum of vision within the main hall and its adjoining corridors. To remedy this impediment, Lilly deftly moved towards an oil lamp set into the wall and raised its low-burning blue light to a bright yellow flame. Pointing to the end of the hall, Lilly led them to the central staircase. Standing on the first stair, the Doctor looked at Val and Lilly. "The library will be the safest place. Its lead roofing will keep you free of unwanted visitors – be sure not to leave it."

"Understood, loud and clear," replied Val, giving the Doctor and Tom her most reassuring smile. "How will we know when it's safe to come out?"

"We'll come and find you," said the Doctor. "Whatever you do, stay put."

With that, the Doctor pointed Tom towards the uppermost floor and began rapidly ascending the staircase. Tom sighed, "Here we go again," he said, and moved to catch up with the Doctor's rapidly departing figure.

"Okay," said Val to Lilly, "where's the library?"

"Follow me, it's impossible to miss. It's just outside the sealed-off east wing. Oddly enough, for a place where one is usually silent, it has a very noisy neighbor."

"And that would be?"

"The ballroom."

The Doctor reached the observatory and looked across at the untouched remains of Anton Garston. Taking a plain sheet he had found in the small bedroom where they had earlier placed Lilly, he laid it over the two burnt limbs and the blackened, body-sized mark between the two.

As the Doctor finished laying the sheet, Tom entered and took a series of deep breaths to steady himself. Then he looked across at the sheet and nodded. "I guess that could have been us if we hadn't found the chapel."

The Doctor stood up and began to look about the rest of the observatory. "Don't dwell on the twists and turns of fate, Tom. What's done is done. It's the here and now that matters, particularly for us. Now, listen carefully. I aim to attract the teleport beam here and use it to reach the *Atlas*. I'll then see if I can shift it onto a new course away from Earth and return via the beam. Once the beam appears, I'll need to enter it very quickly. When I vanish, however, the persons trapped in it will appear before you and remain there, within the confines of the beam, until I return. They won't be able to leave the beam, but they may be able to communicate. Whatever happens, you must follow my instructions and ignore anything that the teleporteers may attempt to say to you – they'll be extremely frightened and liable to use any means to persuade you to help them. Under no circumstances are you to deviate from my orders, is that understood?"

Tom nodded in acknowledgement. "I'll do my best, Doctor. But this plan of yours is confusing me. Surely if this teleport beam is unstable, at least insofar as it's worked so far, how can you use it without ending up in the same mess as these evacuees?"

"The sonic frequency I'm going to use to attract the beam will keep it steady long enough for me to get to its point of origin in one piece. And that's where you come in."

The Doctor produced his sonic screwdriver and handed it to Tom. He then moved towards the sheet and proceeded to manipulate the limb beneath, which still gripped the guardrail. Returning to Tom, he produced Anton Garston's signet ring. Taking back his sonic screwdriver, he placed the ring in the centre of the observatory, and pointed the probe at it. Although the sonic screwdriver proceeded to emit no sound, the ring began to give off a subtle hum, which steadily began to make Tom feel queasy.

"The teleport beam is liable to short out my sonic screwdriver," explained the Doctor, "so I'm using a proxy teleport attractor – the signet ring – to draw it here. The ring was exposed to the teleport beam just a short time ago, so it should contain enough residual radiation to act as a homing beacon for the beam. All you need to do is keep the sonic screwdriver pointed at the ring until I return. Clear?"

"Clear, Doctor, it all seems pretty easy to me."

"My instructions aren't difficult to comprehend, Tom. Keeping to them will prove harder, however. Remember, whatever you do, don't move or switch off the sonic screwdriver. If you do, the teleport beam will break and I'll be trapped on the *Atlas*. Meantime, our fiery visitors will lay waste to the Manor and the spaceship above our heads will come hurtling down and turn the United Kingdom into a cinder heap."

Tom's eyes widened for a moment as he digested the Doctor's words. Then, as the Doctor finished speaking, a steadily growing light began to appear in the observatory. Shielding their eyes, the Doctor and Tom squinted at the centre of the observatory, where a single column of light had begun to appear around the ring. Initially the light had an orange hue, but then it changed to red and then back to orange, as though its power were fluctuating, or its content changing. Giving Tom a thumbs-up sign, the Doctor leaped into the column and promptly disappeared.

A fraction of a second later a man appeared in the column, hands reaching forward in exactly the same way as the figure that had stood before Tom at the entrance to the chapel. This time, however, the person could speak and Tom could hear him.

“Help me,” cried out the man in an agony-filled voice. “Please, you’ve got to help me.”

“Well, this is what I call a library. Your uncle must have been a real bookworm.”

Val was gazing about the book-lined room in wonderment. She adored visiting libraries, the older the better. Many was the evening she would lose herself amongst the countless tomes which filled the TARDIS’ library – or least the one that she had discovered during one of her many expeditions into the time ship’s seemingly endless interior. But now she found herself inside an authentic Edwardian library, momentarily distracted from the horrors of the past few hours.

“I guess it must take years to build up a collection like this?” asked Val.

Lilly looked at the volumes around her with a certain sadness. “I think most of the works here were gathered by my grandfather. As I understand it, he wanted to create a centre for learning at Quarr, which would attract the finest thinkers of the day. He was inspired by the Parisian salon culture in the years before the French Revolution. He thought the heavenly view from the observatory would attract poets and artists, and the library would bring writers and philosophers, all of whom would conjure up wonderful new ideas within these walls. After the fire, he spent his final years cut off in here for days at a time. Oddly enough, when Uncle Anton took over the Manor, he also spent a great deal of time in here. Are you a keen reader too, Valentina?”

“I’ll not deny it. I’ve always loved literature and I’m a journalist by trade. In fact, before meeting Doctor Smith I investigated unusual, you might even say unearthly, phenomena. Now I’m more or less doing the same thing whilst travelling with Tom and the Doctor.”

Lilly frowned. “My father always said that travelling was a way of avoiding something in one’s life. Are you avoiding something?”

For a moment Val was stumped for an answer, so direct was Lilly’s question. “I’m curious by nature, Lilly. As it happens, I’m not avoiding anything; rather I’m looking for someone: my brother, Vincent. He went missing a few years back and I’m hoping that whilst I’m with Doctor Smith I’ll find a clue that will lead me to him. Does that answer your question?”

Lilly silently nodded, chastened by Val’s revelation. Seeking to change the subject, she turned to the large circular window that provided the library with its main source of light. Next to the window a beautifully decorated family tree, set out on vellum, hung in an ebony frame. Lilly sighed as she glanced over the names of her relatives. “You know, Valentina, the Garstons are a bit like the Tudors; headed by a man who thought his family would last forever, and yet in just three generations it’s all over. I’m the last surviving Garston. When I die, the family name dies with me.”

Val moved closer to the diagram and began reading the various names. "So the fire that hit the Manor in 1851 killed nearly all of your father's brothers, his mother and his only sister – it must have been a terrible event to live through."

"To tell the truth, I don't think he or my uncle ever recovered from it. After the fire my father never stepped foot in Quarr again; and he always warned me that no good could ever come of the place. That's why I didn't come here until after his death."

"I guess, then, no one has ever looked into the Manor's locked-off rooms?"

Lilly briefly hesitated before answering, as a long-buried memory unexpectedly surfaced. "Not long after I first visited Quarr, I asked Uncle Anton if perhaps he ought to open up the east wing and restore its damaged rooms, and finally put the past to bed, as it were. That was the first and last time I ever saw him lose his temper. I didn't ask him again."

Val looked sympathetically at Lilly, and then returned her gaze to the library. Surveying its vaulted walls, a thought struck her. "You know, there's something strange about this library. On the one hand it feels as though it's been jam-packed with books over the years, with not the slightest bit of space wasted, and yet on the other hand..."

"On the other hand," finished Lilly, "there's a whole wall left empty."

Both women turned to look at the far end of the library, which stood conspicuously bare next to its book-filled perpendicular neighbors. Val glanced at Lilly, and then moved towards the bookless wall. Reaching out to touch it, she felt the varnished wood beneath her fingertips. "It seems like a regular wall to me, touch wood," said Val, knocking on the glossy surface. As she did so, however, a dull metallic sound rang out. Val looked questioningly at Lilly. "You said the library ceiling is lined with lead. What about its walls?"

Lilly moved over to where Val stood and gingerly struck the wall. Again, there was the sound of metal beneath the veneer of mahogany. "I... I imagine my grandfather, or perhaps my uncle, was particularly mindful of soundproofing the library. You see, this is the wall which the library shares with the ballroom."

Val was incredulous. "You mean the same ballroom that's been locked up and left to rot for nearly sixty years?"

Lilly stood motionless as Val's words sank in, suddenly acutely aware of the uncomfortable feeling she would tend to get when moving about the Manor by herself. The feeling didn't ease when she saw Val cross over to the two adjoining walls, pull out a handful of books and begin rapping on the wood panels behind. The only sound Val could make was the bass thud of wood. She looked again at Lilly, her eyes alight with determination.

"I know the Doctor told us to stay in here, but there's something very suspicious about a metal-lined wall in a mansion like this one. What's more, it's just possible that the ballroom contains a clue to the mystery of the 1851 fire. Wouldn't you like to know what really happened back then, what tore your family apart?"

Lilly slowly nodded. "But it's locked, Valentina. How do you propose that we get in?"

Val took a penknife from her cardigan pocket. "The Doctor's not the only person who knows his way around locks, you know."

The Doctor seldom travelled by teleport, and the disorienting journey from the observatory to the *Atlas* had reinforced his opinion of matter transmitters. Arriving in a plain metallic cubicle, just large enough to house a moderately tall man, he immediately stepped out into a short corridor that ran from the teleport chamber to the ship's bridge. Taking a small, compass-like device from his jacket, he proceeded to scan his surroundings. "Interesting," murmured the Doctor as he pondered the readout. "It seems that this ship isn't just leaking engine core fallout, it's also emitting some sort of temporal dampening field. Of course, that would mean that the *Atlas'* drive system uses time dilation to reduce journey time. But if that field were operating when the crew teleported..."

The Doctor stopped mid-sentence as the suspicion he had been nursing since learning of the 1851 fire began to gain strength. Pausing to let the disquieting news sink in, he pocketed the handheld scanner and looked about him.

"Hmm, looks like a Mark Two Star Hopper to me," he remarked, moving smartly along the corridor. Entering the spacious two-tier bridge taking up the bulk of the *Atlas'* main body, he noted that it followed the traditional layout of survey vessels of the time. The cockpit was housed in the lower tier and its two command consoles – one for the pilot-captain and the other for the navigator – were each lined with multiple banks of propulsion and navigation instruments. Looking upwards, the Doctor noted that the upper tier was dedicated to the survey officer, with its array of scanning tools signaling the ship's principal purpose.

Intent upon navigating the *Atlas* out of terrestrial orbit, the Doctor quickly seated himself at the pilot-captain's console and began to study the instrument banks. As he did so, however, his sense of anxiety spiked as he took in the information flowing across one screen in particular. Looking concernedly at the monitor, the Doctor began searching the controls in front of him for an interface terminal to the *Atlas'* onboard computer. Finding a terminal, he activated the interface protocol.

A hum of static indicated that the interface was online. The Doctor spoke into the terminal's built-in speaker with particular precision, ensuring that his words were properly enunciated. "*Atlas*, please confirm data readout on engine core monitor."

A soft, synthetic voice responded. "Monitor is functioning normally. Data on engine core is accurate."

A thin film of perspiration gradually appeared on the Doctor's face as he continued to interrogate the computer. "*Atlas*, the engine core monitor indicates a temporal dilation field was active until a very short time ago. Please confirm."

"Field confirmed."

Angrily switching off the terminal, the Doctor looked about him in despair. "Idiots!" he snapped at the empty vessel. "You used a temporal dilation field to fold back space and travel all-but instantaneously between locations, but then you chose to evacuate by teleport whilst the field was still running. And what was the result? At least one of you mis-phasing to death, another left hideously malformed on arrival, and yet more innocent lives lost simply by being within the compass of your lethal teleport beam. On top of all that, you risked being teleported through *time* as well as space."

As the Doctor's terrible suspicion was finally confirmed, a series of low-pitched bleeps issued from a speaker set into a nearby console, and a voice rang out across the cockpit. The voice gave identity to the Doctor's fears. "*Atlas*, this is Wurmfeld, do you read me?"

Instantly the Doctor froze. Again the voice came over the intercom system. "This is Pilot-Captain Wurmfeld to *Atlas*. Gomley, Rauch, are you there? Please respond."

Unable to remain silent any longer, the Doctor finally spoke. "Pilot-Captain Wurmfeld, this is *Atlas*. Where are you, Wurmfeld?"

The Doctor's question was met by static. He tried again. "Wurmfeld, my name is the Doctor. It's imperative that you tell me where you are. If you're transmitting using a locator frequency it may influence what's left of the *Atlas*' navigation systems, and right now navigating your vessel is the only way I can help you."

More static, rising and falling like waves on a shore. Then he heard a voice that was all too familiar, followed by a cry of sheer horror. Then the speaker went dead.

When Tom had entered the observatory with the Doctor, he had imagined that he would be once again left on guard duty. Instead, he found himself using the sonic screwdriver to keep the errant teleport beam in place, whilst standing face to face with the terrified person caught in it. Trying his best to focus on holding the probe steady, Tom fought with all his might to ignore the pleading figure who stood petrified just a few feet in front of him.

The stranger's voice had a strange, distorted quality, as though it were passing through water. This didn't make it any less comprehensible, however.

"Can you see me?" said the figure. "I can see you. My name's Rauch, Stor Rauch. You've stabilized the beam, haven't you? I know I'm no longer moving, so it must be stable. Who are you? Are you from a rescue ship? Did you receive our distress signal?"

Tom remained silent, fixing his gaze on the sonic screwdriver.

Rauch raised his hands, imploring Tom's attention. "Please, please answer me. You must be able to hear me, surely? You've locked the teleport beam, so you must be trying to help me, right? But I still need to materialize. There's not much time. Tell me, how are you locking the beam? Are you using a substitute teleport?" Rauch's voice suddenly changed, becoming frantic and intense. "What are you using? For crying out loud, speak to me!"

Tom winced, still keeping his eyes fixed on the silver-handled probe. His mouth grew dry and his heart began to pound as the tension mounted. Finally, the temptation became too great and he stole a glance at the person trapped in the beam. Immediately he wished he hadn't. Rauch's desperate, imploring eyes bore into him, burning with a mixture of pain and anger. Yet there was something else. The face was beginning to shift and blur, as if it were made of molten wax. As Tom watched, he realized that the effect was not confined to the head, as the torso and limbs too began to lose definition. Then, and most terribly of all, Rauch began to scream in a series of convulsive bursts, his voice fluctuating between falsetto and baritone as the beam proceeded to alter its color and density. Wiping the sweat from his eyes with one hand, Tom looked at the sonic screwdriver, concerned that it might be malfunctioning. But the probe remained unchanged, its power and frequency readings displaying normal function.

Tom looked upwards towards the night sky and the spot where he imagined the *Atlas* to be orbiting. With the teleport beam looking increasingly erratic, he drove his thoughts towards the spaceship and hoped with every ounce of his being that the Doctor understood that his time was running out.

Val felt herself tensing up as she approached the sealed door adjacent to the library. It was clearly not part of the original Manor, but rather a product of hurried workmanship on the part of Cornelius Garston, who had rushed to lock off the east wing in the wake of the fire. Strangely, Val could feel the hairs on the back of her neck begin to stand up as she approached the door, as though some dark force were urging every instinct in her body to turn around and leave the door well alone.

"Lilly," said Val, her voice just a touch strained. "Are you sure you're okay with us breaking into the ballroom? There's still time to leave it if you'd prefer."

"I've waited long enough," replied Lilly, her tone firm. "I have a feeling that this will be my one chance to see what happened back in '51, and hopefully bury some old family skeletons once and for all."

With Lilly in full support, Val began working on the door lock with her penknife. Finding the tumblers took longer than expected, and she needed to switch blades more than once as she set about turning them and releasing the bolt. With the door free, Val gingerly turned the rusted doorknob and pushed the door a little way open. A cold draught caught her in the face and she instinctively drew back, her senses once again warning against entering the sealed-off wing. Mustering her courage, Val stepped through the doorway, almost immediately followed by Lilly. The passage ahead of them immediately presented a once ornate door, now dulled and peeling from years of neglect. Following Lilly's directions, Val moved towards the door and slowly opened it.

What she saw took her breath away. The entire room had been converted into what looked like some sort of space-age laboratory. Metal tubing lined the walls, and ran across the floor in a series of serpentine until meeting at the centre of the room, where a bizarre structure of discs was assembled. A shadowy, hooded form standing next to a console-like unit, not dissimilar to a Victorian bureau, completed the fantastic scene.

As Val took in the astonishing sight, she suddenly realized that the hooded shape was moving. At that moment, the familiar voice of the Doctor could be heard coming from the console unit.

"Lilly, that's the Doctor's voice," said Val, as the figure turned towards them. Raising a gnarled limb, it pulled back its hood to reveal a face twisted and shrunken out of all recognition. As Val stood in mute horror, Lilly gave out a sharp cry and instinctively stepped backwards, knocking into one of the wall-mounted pipes in the process.

The figure appeared unmoved by their reaction, nonchalantly flicking a switch on the console and then taking a step towards its unexpected visitors. Val quickly moved in front of Lilly, her hands raised in greeting. "We don't mean you any harm. We thought this part of the Manor was, well, unused. We're sorry to intrude on you."

The figure stopped in its tracks and looked with half-closed eyes at Val. Then it turned back to the console and continued to manipulate the controls.

Val looked at Lilly, who was still gathering her wits, and then returned her gaze to the deformed figure. Choosing her words carefully, she continued to keep her hands raised in greeting. "Are you from the *Atlas*? We want to help you."

The figure glanced up at Val, and allowed its lipless mouth to widen just a little as its stunted tongue worked to shape the words it wanted to say. "I am... I am Pilot-Captain Wurmfeld, of the survey ship *Atlas*. What... what do you know of the *Atlas*?"

As Val's brain raced for a safe answer, Lilly interrupted with a question of her own. "Did you start the fire?" she called out, her voice hard and clipped.

The figure's eyes widened as it took in Lilly's accusation. "I... I teleported, but the signal fluctuated. I did not seek to harm the inhabitants of this... place. A power surge stabilized the beam and I materialized here. But... there was a temporal distortion involved in my landing. My arrival did not correspond with my departure."

Val suddenly completed the puzzle the Doctor had only just solved himself. "You teleported through time as well as space, into the past, and ended up here fifty-odd years ago – that's how you've had time to build all this. That's why Quarr Manor's east wing was sealed off. It was done to hide you, right?"

Wurmfeld gazed with only partial focus in Val's direction, her voice slurred with the effort of speaking. "I was found here, after the fire of which you speak. They protected me, the old one and his son. I have been here for a long while." She pointed a misshapen arm towards the structure at the heart of the room. "They helped me build this device so that I could return to my vessel, my crew. But the lights this evening tell me... I am too late."

Lilly moved towards Wurmfeld, her face beginning to smart with anger. "You destroyed my family. And all these years, you've been lurking in this room, infecting the Manor with your *illness*."

"Hang on, Lilly" interjected Val, "this, this person never meant to..."

"Don't lecture me!" snapped Lilly. "This *thing* has haunted my family and my home long enough. I want it out! I want it out of Quarr Manor now!"

Before Val could stop her, Lilly launched herself at Wurmfeld, tearing at her tangled limbs and bloated torso with a terrible fury. In return, Wurmfeld simply crumpled like a broken puppet, her damaged frame unable to withstand the vicious assault. Tumbling out of control, the pair fell into the ironwork in the centre of the room, triggering a shower of electrical sparks and a plume of oily smoke. Looking through the smoldering web of metal, Val could see Wurmfeld caught up in the machinery in a motionless heap, whilst Lilly lay senseless just a foot or so from her antagonist. Before Val could approach either of them, a flash of energy ripped through the ironwork, forming a blinding pillar of light. For a moment, Val thought she saw a male figure in the pillar, spread-eagled like the Vitruvian Man, then the light cut out, and there was no sign of Lilly or Wurmfeld. Looking aghast at the empty chamber, Val ran for the door, intent on reaching the observatory and Tom.

Tom couldn't take it anymore. Rauch's alternating high and low pitched screams cut into him like a red-hot blade, twisting and turning his stomach into a nauseous knot that felt as if it would never come undone. Then, just as he thought he had reached the end of his tether, the teleport beam cut out, taking the pitiful figure of Rauch with it.

Tom stared in panic at the sonic screwdriver, still subtly vibrating under the pressure of the beam it was emitting. Then he looked at the signet ring lying on the observatory floor, now charred and warped beyond use. With his hope for the Doctor's safe return all-but crushed, Tom dropped to the floor in utter exhaustion, not knowing what to do next. Suspended somewhere between waking and sleeping, he only just recognized the familiar footsteps racing up the observatory steps. Rushing up to Tom, Val knelt down and cradled his head in her hands, tears welling up in her eyes.

"Lilly's gone, Tom. We found another *Atlas* crewmember, and some sort of homemade teleport. And now they're gone, they're both gone."

Without answering, Tom simply stared up at the night sky covering the observatory in a velvet mantle, his eyes coming to rest on a tiny speck of light between the shoulders of Orion.

Looking over the data scrolling across the *Atlas'* various monitor screens, the Doctor's face steadily grew paler as he took in the awful reality unfolding before him. The ship's engine core was so damaged that there was no way he could persuade it to leave orbit. It was now no longer a question of *if* the *Atlas* would crash into the Earth, but *when*. He glanced across at the navigation systems. There was just the remotest chance of moving the crash point to a less populated area, but the impact on the planet would still be devastating, with a firepower far greater even than the earliest atomic weapons.

"Right, let's see what you've got for me," said the Doctor, his fingers playing across the navigation console. A fresh stream of figures appeared on the readout screen. Studying the information, he slammed his fists against the console, his frustration finally boiling over. "You've given me a few degrees to shift the crash site, I grant you that, but the course is so delicate there's simply no way the autopilot can handle it. I've no choice but to remain at the controls..."

Staring at the starscape on a main viewscreen, the Doctor contemplated the course of action set out before him. The best he could hope for was a crash somewhere in the east of Imperial Russia. But it still meant more needless death and destruction. Yet what was the alternative? Do nothing, and allow the *Atlas* to wipe out a heavily populated landmass? To say nothing of the damage such an event would do to established history.

The Doctor was so caught up in untangling the possible consequences of his actions that he failed to notice the urgently flashing teleport indicator until the ship's warning klaxon cut in. "That's not right, that's not right at all," he observed, sharply turning from the console and rushing back to the teleport cubicle.

Reaching the cubicle, the Doctor saw that its outer shell was leaking black light – a sure sign of malfunction. A moment later and the cubicle discharged a hulk of mangled flesh and bone, barely humanoid in form. What appeared to be a triumvirate of barely-formed heads was

set into a distended abdomen, whilst a brace of limbs formed a single circle of flesh ringing its blistered and pendulous torso. For the rest, a pair of stubby legs struggled to bear its weight, whilst two more arms and hands were conspicuous by their normal positioning.

The Doctor hid his revulsion as he surveyed the terrible admixture of bodies before him. "Since I didn't activate the teleport at this end, I take it that someone triggered a second beam which collided with the one anchored in the observatory? If so, I can only presume I'm addressing Pilot-Captain Wurmfeld *and* Survey Officer Rauch. And someone else, perhaps?"

Receiving no answer, the Doctor looked with pity upon the tragedy before him. "It seems the *Atlas'* children have finally come home."

"Home..." came the gasping reply from a zigzag mouth belonging to the middle of three heads. "...at last."

The Doctor nodded. "You've been marooned for an awfully long time, Pilot-Captain Wurmfeld; nearly a lifetime by the standards of those you've been hiding amongst. But if you've understood any of what has been happening in the last few hours, you'll know that there's nothing to be done about the *Atlas*; it's going to crash on the planet below, at the cost of untold lives. At best, we can divert it just a little."

The mouth curled into what might have almost been a wry smile, if it were not so badly distorted by the folds of flesh piled around it. Somehow, however, its bloated lips and jagged tongue still managed to produce the odd monosyllabic word. "No... more... hurt. I... move... ship."

The Doctor shook his head. "You're not making any sense, the autopilot isn't good enough."

Again, the mouth gave a half-smile, and this time it was its broken body that responded. Slowly at first, and then with more confidence, the multiform being made a series of desperate yet determined movements, which steadily shifted its bulk along the corridor towards the bridge. Following warily behind it, the Doctor noticed that its back contained an odd scar: a burn mark in the shape of a hand.

"Oh, Lilly," mouthed the Doctor, placing his hand against the corridor wall to steady himself.

In far less time than the Doctor would have imagined, the multiform reached the bridge and positioned itself in front of the pilot console. Using its two free upper limbs, it gripped the steering column and began to manipulate the controls built into it. The Doctor looked on incredulously as the hum of the engine began to build.

"If you activate the engine drive, in the state it's in, it's all over. But if I transport you back to Quarr, using the teleport, I might be able to restore you – all of you."

The multiform turned towards the Doctor. Of its three heads, the one that seemed to belong to Wurmfeld looked at the Doctor with tear-soaked eyes. "No... more... hurt..." she said, and pointed the Doctor towards the teleport cubicle. "I... built... port... in Quarr. Beam... safe... for... you..."

As the engine hum shifted into a whining drone, the Doctor realized that he had seconds to make his choice. Instinctively he reached out a hand to the multiform, but then drew it back as he realized the danger of touching it. With a look of anguish, he swung round and hurled

himself down the corridor and into the teleport cubicle. Crossing his fingers on one hand, with the other he punched the activation panel.

The night sky over the observatory was brilliantly cloudless, allowing the moonlight to glitter on the glass walls and flood the chamber with its half-light. Val couldn't tell how long she had knelt over Tom, but it seemed like an age. He had barely moved since she found him, so drained was he by his encounter with Rauch.

As Tom began to show signs of stirring, there was a flash not unlike lightning at the edge of Val's vision. Looking towards the source, she realized she had only seen a reflection of it from one of the rooftop windows overlooking the Manor's east wing. Gripping Tom's shoulders, she gently shook him.

"Tom, wake up. You've got to wake up. Something's happening in the east wing. It could be the Doctor, or Lilly, or... I don't know, Tom, I just know we've got to go and look. Please, just wake up!"

Val's final frantic appeal stirred Tom and he began to sit up. "I, I feel so very tired," he remarked, rubbing the back of his neck.

"You can sleep later. Come on, we've got to help the Doctor, and the light I just saw might be a clue."

Tom drowsily nodded and followed Val down the observatory stairs and onto the landing below. There the pair raced to the central staircase and the east wing. Reaching the once sealed-off door, Val cautiously crossed the threshold and made for the ballroom, Tom only a few feet behind her. Entering the ballroom, Val gasped as she saw that the metallic centerpiece, smoking but intact when she left, now presented an utter ruin. Its framework was bent and buckled and its discs strewn about the room as though some great storm had swept through it and scattered everything in its way.

Fearful of what she might find amongst the iron wreck, Val kept her distance and simply stared about her, too numb to speak. Tom, now fully awake, stepped towards one of the discs closest to them, and studied its scorched and blackened surface. So engrossed was he that he failed to notice the Doctor moving across the room to meet them.

"I say," remarked the Doctor, "you two could look a little more cheerful. It's not every day that a jerry-rigged teleport booth actually works, you know."

Tom jumped back, startled by the Doctor's appearance. "I wish you wouldn't do that," he said, rushing forward to greet him.

"It's hardly difficult, given how much time you spend daydreaming, Mister Brooker. As it is, we must leave this place. We only have a matter of minutes before the fire will start."

Val, who had felt nothing but relief upon seeing the Doctor, suddenly felt anxious again. "Fire? Fire from where?"

"From Wurmfeld's teleport system, of course! The mess behind me is just the beginning. When I teleported back the energy release smashed the receptor frame, but it also discharged a massive dose of thermal radiation into the focusing net." The Doctor pointed to the mass of pipes lining the walls. "Once the build-up reaches critical this Edwardian mock-up of a

Stanjelian teleport rig won't be able to hold the pressure. It'll be quite a fireworks display, and I for one would prefer to view it from a distance. Now, stop standing about and let's go!"

Running out of the ballroom and back to the staircase, Tom yelled out, "What about the *Atlas*? And where's Lilly?"

"The *Atlas* is crashing over Siberian Russia and Lilly..."

Tom couldn't hear the Doctor's final answer, as a sudden sound of exploding metal from behind them drowned out his words. Running even harder, the trio tore out of the Manor just in time as an even greater explosion burst through the centre of the roof, blasting the observatory into the sky like a rocket, and sending the rest of the Manor into an inferno from which there would be no escape.

The Doctor, Val and Tom did not stop running until they reached the foot of Quarr Down and the moonless opening to Quarr Chine. Pausing to catch their breath, they each looked back at the summit of the down, which was aglow with the fearsome fire that was consuming Quarr Manor.

The Doctor looked at his two companions with a hardened expression. "It seems that the riddle of the Fire of Quarr Manor has been solved. But I dare say it was a close call. Perhaps my curiosity is getting in the way of my better judgment."

Val shook her head. "The fire was going to happen whether we were here or not. And perhaps if we hadn't come then Iris would have died alone in the Lodge and Gomley too for that matter."

"It's hard to tell with time, Val," replied the Doctor. "Sometimes I'm doubtful, very doubtful."

"Well you got the *Atlas* shifted," Tom pointed out. "That's got to be something worthwhile. You've saved millions of lives, there's no doubt about that."

"I guess the crash is part of history, anyhow," pondered Val. "Where did you say you'd diverted it to?"

The Doctor gazed at the starry sky, considering the final course upon which Wurmfeld had taken her ship. "Siberian Russia, like I said before. The region in particular is densely forested, but contains few human settlements. It's called Tunguska."

EPILOGUE

On the morning of the 30 June 1908, an explosion took place over eastern Russia close to the Podkamennaya Tunguska River. The impact was felt some forty miles from the epicentre, and laid waste to eight hundred square miles of forest. The first investigation into the impact, led by Leonid Kulik, did not take place until 1921, with a further expedition, also conducted by Kulik, held in 1927.

The source of the impact is still open to conjecture, although it is widely maintained that an asteroid entered the Earth's atmosphere over Siberia and exploded whilst still airborne. The aerial explosion accounts for the lack of asteroid debris, which would have been consumed in the blast.

The force of the impact generated roughly 135 times more explosive power than the atomic bomb detonated above Hiroshima.



Travelling back to a quiet English backwater at the turn of the twentieth century, the Doctor decides to give Val and Tom a taste of the paranormal when they visit Quarr Manor, the location of a mysterious fire which saw the Georgian mansion burnt to the ground with not a trace of a survivor to be found.

With just hours before the infamous fire is due to take place, the time travellers discover a sinister case of spontaneous human combustion in Quarr's rooftop observatory, sparking fears that a supernatural force is at work. Soon a terrible dilemma faces the trio, as the Doctor begins to realise that Quarr's fiery visitant is just one of the dreadful effects of a terrible space accident, which threatens to unleash a firestorm across the whole of the British Isles.

Battling an anonymous threat which strikes without warning, the Doctor soon discovers that sometimes there is no good decision, as he faces the awful choice of sacrificing the few to save the many.

This is another in a series of original fan authored Doctor Who fiction published by The Doctor Who Project featuring the Tenth Doctor as played by Laurent Meyer

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