

THE
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PROJECT

EVLUTION



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Evolution

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He emerged from the darkness with the realisation that he was still alive. Almost immediately, the Doctor winced, the groan escaping his lips calling him back to consciousness. Pain followed quickly, lancing through his body as he struggled to open his eyes. The last remnants of sunlight flickered through his eyelashes, torturing his throbbing head. He raised one hand to soothe the pain. With the attempt came his first awareness of sound.

Moans filtered through the fog in his mind to mingle with angry shouts. The Doctor thought he heard crying. Why was there always crying?

Panic gripped his hearts; their insistent thudding seemed to know something that he did not. Something was wrong. The Doctor heaved himself over onto one side, trying – and failing – to force himself upright. His hand pressed against something hard beneath his palm and he shifted, dropping back to the ground. He had to get up. He had to see.

“Doctor! . . . Doctor!”

Someone’s arms slipped around him and lifted his shoulders from the ground. Miss Rossi. She tried to cradle his head in her lap but the Doctor used her assistance instead to get himself upright, shoving her aside to survey the chaos. Just like the crying, too often there was chaos. That was the way of things, he supposed.

“Please. You have to keep still.”

Why was her voice so shaky?

The Doctor’s normally keen eyes fought to focus and rewarded him with an answer he did not want. The smoking ruins of a building created the backdrop to a carnage he knew he had been expecting. Satrigorns – Satrigorn *people* – were moving through a forest of twisted metal, searching through broken chunks of concrete and shattered glass. Most wandered aimlessly, expressions hollow. Others keened over bodies. He paused, shocked.

Dozens of the tall, lithe Satrigorns lay strewn across the courtyard and around what remained of the building – their smooth, translucent skin reflecting the light from fires still burning. Shadows danced across bare chests and glazed, unseeing eyes.

The Doctor inhaled sharply through gritted teeth. Some of those bodies were too small. He felt his mind resist, trying to go blank to spare him but the horror shuddered through his body anyway, threatening to cripple him. Some of those among the dead were children.

Hands reached out to comfort him and he slapped them away, struggling to rise. He felt someone restraining him and fought to break free, to run to them and help, to do something.

His hand brushed something on the ground, the thing he’d felt earlier, and his fingers closed around it mechanically. He pushed himself away from Val, staggering to his feet, swaying. The Doctor tore his eyes from the chaos and stared down at the long, cylindrical object

he was holding in his hand. It was the Time Vector Generator from the TARDIS.
What had he done?

* * * * *

Nine hours earlier

“EM is not a word!” Val protested.

“It’s a unit of measurement,” Tom countered, jabbing his finger at a page in the dictionary.

“It’s a terrible word then,” she complained, shifting her position on the floor of the TARDIS. What was the point of playing a game if the competition was so lacking? Tom was an intelligent man. This should hardly be difficult for him. Then again, maybe Tom’s ingenuity didn’t extend to word games.

She tapped one fingernail on the board between them. “C’mon, you can do better than that.”

The Doctor glanced down from where he stood at the flight console. “All of time and space and you play board games,” he sighed.

“Why don’t you try it?” Val challenged, pushing a tray of tiles toward him. “I haven’t looked. I swear.”

The Doctor straightened his cable knit sweater down over his waistband and appraised Val as though searching for a devious motive. Eventually he hitched up his navy trousers and squatted down between his companions, taking the proffered tile tray. His eyes narrowed as he examined the letters, then he began placing them all on the board, linking them with those already played.

“OXYPHENBUTAZONE. A twenty-first century anti-inflammatory drug,” he said. “That’s 1,778 points. I win.” The Doctor stood and turned back to his work.

Val and Tom shared a bemused glance and Val dumped her unplaced tiles into the centre of the board. Tom began flicking through the dictionary.

“Don’t bother –” Val began.

The TARDIS lurched, tossing Val and Tom to one side, the game skidding out across the floor. Val immediately flattened herself to the ground. Tom rolled and crashed into her as the TARDIS listed and shook beneath them. Alarms sounded in distress.

“Doctor?” Tom yelled.

“We’ve been torn from the Time Vortex!” he shouted, clinging to the side of the console like a limpet.

Val closed her eyes and held on tight. There were emergency procedures for this kind of thing. The TARDIS would right itself. The Doctor would – ah, damn, they were falling! She could hear the Doctor scrambling about and yelling above the noise of the shuddering TARDIS. Val hoped he wasn’t asking for assistance. It was all she could do to hang on.

The TARDIS gave one last, violent jolt and as suddenly as it had begun, the heaving stopped. In the newfound quiet, she could hear once again the gentle hum of engines. The contrast was shocking.

Val raised her head experimentally.

‘Miss Rossi. Mr. Brooker. Are you well?’ the Doctor asked, barely looking at them as he fiddled with some knobs on the console.

Tom regained his composure first and helped Val to her feet.

“Yeah,” she replied, straightening. Tom tried brushing her off but Val gently knocked his hands away. “What happened?”

“We’ve encountered some kind of a telepathic field. It pulled us from the Time Vortex a bit earlier than planned,” the Doctor replied, a small frown creasing his forehead.

“You mean we’re not at the Eye of Orion then?” Tom asked.

“You’re surprised that we’re not where we should be?” Val interjected.

The Doctor ignored the snipe. “The emergency protocols put us into free-float moments after we left the Vortex. We’re now in orbit around Satrigon and the year is –” he moved around to a screen, “– 3450. Hmm, long before the first human settlement. You know, you humans end up everywhere.”

“So you keep telling us,” Tom said curtly but Val simply nodded to herself. Yes, the TARDIS had emergency protocols and they worked just fine. She hadn’t doubted it even for a moment.

“I haven’t been here in some time,” the Doctor continued, watching the readout. “A lovely planet, Satrigon. The people are wonderful. Very welcoming. Last time I was here, they had only just discovered fire – fortunate really, since they treated me to a local delicacy called Tarnibor. It’s a type of giant slug. I imagine it would have tasted awful had it been raw.”

The corners of Val’s mouth quirked upwards despite her irritation. The Doctor would be the first to admonish her for joking around at an inappropriate time yet that didn’t stop him from being flippant while something serious was happening. At least, not when he thought Val and Tom were unaware of the severity of a situation. Not for the first time she wondered whether he did it to spare them the worry. Well he didn’t fool her anymore. The concerned crease in his forehead was still there so something was amiss. Tom also seemed to have noticed it.

“What kind of telepathic field?” he asked, mirroring the Doctor’s frown.

The Doctor ran one hand through his hair. “Even now the Satrigorns are a primitive species. They can’t have a telepathic –”

A dark, discordant note crashed through the conversation and Val clapped her hands over her ears, body tingling uncomfortably from the deep vibration. The sonorous tone grew more insistent, rising in volume. Her ears began to ache and she stared helplessly at Tom and the Doctor who also had their hands pressed to their ears. Panic began to set in as the sound wave showed no signs of abating. She cried out as it gathered into a crescendo then shockingly the sound released, a pulse thudding violently through her chest. The TARDIS shook with the impact.

“My TARDIS!” the Doctor yelled, throwing his hands into the air. The incredulous gesture proved to be a mistake and the Doctor was forced to throw himself at the console as the TARDIS once again lurched. The ship shook furiously and anything not nailed down jerked free to be tossed into a maelstrom of chaos. Val ducked as a perception filter inhibitor whizzed past her head and she threw herself toward a railing, gripping it for support. Her heart raced. *Too much crashing.*

“Doctor, what’s hap –”

“Someone is shooting at my TARDIS!” he shouted, cutting Val off with his indignation. “We’re landing. Now.” He fought his way around the shuddering console and reached for a lever. The Doctor slammed it upward with the heel of his hand and the TARDIS went into a spin. Tom crashed to the floor at Val’s feet and the Doctor disappeared beneath the console.

“Doctor?” Val shouted, alarmed.

“Can you reach the Synchronic Feedback Unit?” he asked, head reappearing above the other side of the flight panel.

“The what?” she yelled back at him.

“The wiggly-looking switch. Next to the blue button.”

Val stretched between the railing and the console, and seeing what could only be described as a ‘wiggly switch’, flicked it. The Doctor, who had dragged himself upright, threw a few more switches. Then, pushing up a lever, the TARDIS trembled as it rematerialized. The Time Rotor stopped and the ship fell silent.

Tom raised himself from the floor and threw the Doctor a disparaging look as he moved towards the door. “Stop right there!” the Doctor shouted and Tom froze. He glared at the Doctor and tapped his foot impatiently as the Doctor blatantly ignored him, returning his focus to the monitor at the console. He frowned in concentration, a small dimple appearing in his left cheek as he pursed his lips thoughtfully. “The TARDIS has caused a massive displacement of artron energy – more than usual I mean. It might be good to leave her for a while. She’s been through a lot.” After a moment, he waved towards the door. “Okay. Go on.”

Tom practically ran for the door and Val chuckled softly to herself as the Doctor followed him out. She bounded after them, eager to see what awaited them.

She stepped out of the TARDIS doors and stopped in her tracks, breathing out a sigh of wonder as the door clicked shut behind her.

Rolling hills of deep red grass dotted with low-lying scrub of varying but similar shades, stretched out before them. The land, a thick burgundy carpet sprinkled with tiny white flowers, flowed down into a valley where rocky cliffs erupted from the earth to form the valley. The cliffs, topped with densely growing trees, rose up on either side of the basin, stretching towards the sky to frame the mountain range beyond. Snow and ice glistened on those distant summits, their size and majesty making them appear much closer than they were in reality. The sun, so soft compared to Earth’s harsh fireball, washed the world with a watercolour brush, muting the hues so that the landscape appeared to arise through a mist. A river gently winding its way across the valley floor and disappearing around the base of one of the cliffs completed the vista.

Val smiled. After their terrifying adventure, a beautiful planet was most welcome. She bent to pluck one of the fat, red blades of grass from the ground, twirling it in her fingers.

“Red!” she exclaimed, marvelling at the rich colour and smooth, waxy texture.

Tom picked one of the small white flowers and handed it to her. “What kind of a woman picks grass and not flowers?” he asked, smiling with amusement.

“The flowers look like average flowers. The grass does not,” she answered, taking the flower from Tom’s outstretched hand. She held the two side by side.

“Not so,” Tom said. “The stem has a reddish tinge to it too.”

“So it does,” Val observed, bowing her head in acquiescence. “That’s odd.”

“Not all wavelengths of light can support photosynthesis, Miss Rossi,” the Doctor said. “The photosynthetic action spectrum depends on the type of accessory pigments present. As the atmospheric conditions of this planet filter out the sun’s longer wavelengths, these organisms have evolved so that the action spectrum overlaps the absorption spectrum of phycobilins for red blue-green light, and that –” the Doctor clapped his hands together sharply, “– is what allows these plants to grow. Wonderful, isn’t it? The non-absorbed part of the light spectrum, in this case red, is what gives the plant life here its colour.”

Val grinned at Tom who pressed his lips together, his shoulders shaking with silent laughter. The Doctor, the living, breathing answer to the question nobody had asked, walked

around in little circles, taking in the scenery.

“And since nobody has asked – the oxygen levels on this planet are approximately one half a percentage point less than what you are used to on Earth. If you get a headache or otherwise feel unwell, be sure to let me know.”

Val and Tom burst into laughter and the Doctor shot a bewildered glance at them. He shook his head and set off at a brisk pace down the hill towards the forest so that Val and Tom had to jog to catch up.

* * * * *

“Are you sure you know where you’re going, Doctor?” Val asked, glancing at her watch. “We’ve been wandering in this forest for almost half an hour and I’m sure we’ve passed this way before.”

“Not a clue,” the Doctor replied and both Val and Tom threw questioning glances at each other. “But the Satrigorn are forest dwellers and if we’re going to find anyone, it will be in here.” The Doctor’s expression contradicted the confident tone of his voice. Val studied him warily.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, her voice terse.

The Doctor gave Val a non-committal shrug.

“Give over, Doctor. I’ve had nightmares about that look,” Tom said.

“It’s too quiet,” the Doctor admitted. “The forests should be singing.”

“Singing?” Tom asked, pressing the Doctor for more information.

“Yes, singing. The Satrigorn will use words to communicate like all species with language, but they don’t talk about their feelings. They sing them. For every way of being, there are hundreds of songs. Those songs are sung throughout the forest and are joined by other voices to make new songs. The forest is never silent.”

Val frowned. “But it is.”

“It is,” the Doctor agreed.

The Doctor stopped in a small clearing and drew out his sonic screwdriver, pointing it at everything around him. A small scaly creature scuttled across the path before him and the Doctor snatched it up, waving the buzzing screwdriver over the flailing creature. The Doctor’s eyebrows drew down in concentration. “No artron energy,” he mused.

Tom glanced at Val, his bottom lip jutting out as he shrugged his shoulders in confusion. Val grinned.

“Never mind,” the Doctor said, returning the creature to the ground and peering into the trees. “Onward.”

The trio continued to wander the forest aimlessly. At least, it felt like aimless wandering. Val was sure they were heading in circles. She was just about to open her mouth to tell the Doctor just that when she noticed movement in the trees. Val squinted, trying to extend her vision through the dense, maroon foliage. There were people moving among the trees, heading their way.

The Doctor stopped, spreading his arms wide to prevent Val and Tom from going any closer. Or perhaps the gesture was intended to show that he was unarmed. The tall creatures that emerged from the trees were astonishingly beautiful – but the way they held themselves, along with the weapons they carried, imbued them with a sense of hostile aggression. The shortest of the creatures stood half a head taller than Tom and had eyes that peered suspiciously out from a distinctly feminine face. The tallest must have been over seven feet tall and he wore sleek, dark

grey armour that covered his arms, legs and most of his torso. Like the others, the upper part of his chest remained exposed, revealing iridescent skin the colour of mother of pearl. Most amazing of all, the heads of these creatures extended up into four thick tendrils that swept down the back of their heads to the napes of their necks like slicked back hair.

“These don’t look like primitive people,” Val said, noting the lack of spears and clubs she might have expected. “You’ve landed us on the wrong planet again, haven’t you, Doctor?”

“I’d hardly call that a landing,” Tom muttered.

“Be quiet,” the Doctor snapped, lowering his arms now that Val and Tom had pulled up short. “They are Satrigorns - but they should have only recently discovered agriculture, not high-powered weaponry. Be on your guard. Something is amiss.”

“Do we run?” Tom asked, looking around as though trying to figure out which direction the TARDIS lay in.

The Doctor drew himself back sharply, head jerking to one side. “If we make a run for it, how then would we discover what is happening here?” he asked, brow furrowing. “I could take a few readings from within the TARDIS I suppose but I’d never be able to gather all the data that I require.”

Tom shrugged, sharing an amused glance with Val. “You’re absolutely right, Doctor. What could I have possibly be thinking?”

The Doctor nodded sharply and began walking slowly towards the Satrigorn. “I have no idea, Mr. Brooker. You confuse me sometimes.”

* * * * *

“Have you taken the oaths?”

Val tried to focus on the person speaking to her and not on the gun pointed at her chest. Despite being such a beautiful creature, his voice was gruff. That seemed to reflect something about the Satrigorns, she thought. The building they had been taken to was a strange mixture of beauty and harsh, military-like orderliness. This room in particular was rather lavish and yet the corridors that had brought them here were bare and white, the monotony broken up only by the regular placement of sniper holes where soldiers could defend the building from enemies or insurgents.

The Doctor responded on Val's behalf, ignoring the three Satrigorns who aimed weapons at each of them. Instead, he directed his attention to a fourth man who had entered the room last. Val thought he must be a leader of some kind. The only unarmed Satrigorn, his attire was more ceremonial than the military uniforms the others wore.

“We are travellers. I'm the Doctor. This is Mr. Tom Brooker and Miss Valentina Rossi. Unfortunately, I must confess my ignorance of your oaths. Last time I visited, I learned of no such things.”

“Traveller? You lie,” the man accused. “The Gods have shared their wisdom with us for over two hundred years and there are not many species that live so long that you could have been here during the Time of Ignorance, as you claim. Who has instructed you in our history? Are you a spy?”

The Doctor ignored the questions.

“Why do you have a telepathic field around your planet?” he asked instead. “And what are these oaths you speak of? Moreover, who shot at my TARDIS?”

The Doctor's voice had taken on a dangerous quality and Val cringed. She felt an urge to

try to calm the Doctor before he said something regretful.

“You do not seem to appreciate your situation. You have come to us uninvited. We will ask the questions.”

The Doctor considered the man thoughtfully, the silence dragging out uncomfortably. In Val’s experience, this was not unusual. Either the Doctor rambled like a lunatic at people or kept them waiting as he carefully decided whether to grace them with a response. With the Doctor, there was no such thing as a conversation between equals.

“I have lived well beyond two hundred years,” the Doctor replied evenly, having decided to capitulate for the moment. No doubt, the Doctor would exact his price later. “The last time I visited, the Satrigorns welcomed me without weapons or malice. I anticipated much of the same yet you seemed to have advanced well beyond your time.”

The Doctor's tone made it clear what he thought of those advancements.

“What species would live so long as that?” the Satrigorn asked, leaning forward intently.

The Doctor stood a little straighter. “Time Lord.”

Surprisingly, the Satrigorn smiled - a broad spread of lips that Val thought gave the man a decidedly predatory look. Despite the cold expression, Val could not help but think that he appeared pleased. It troubled her.

“And these two?” the Satrigorn asked, gesturing to Val and Tom.

“Human,” the Doctor answered, waving his hand nonchalantly. “They are no threat to you.”

Val threw him a pained look and the Satrigorn leader motioned for the others to lower their weapons. They did so, stepping back to the edges of the room.

“My name is Keer,” he said, spreading his hands in a gesture of welcome.

Val frowned suspiciously.

“The Gods bestowed us with the Blessing two hundred and twenty years ago and it is this gift which lead us out of our Ignorance,” Keer continued. “We have been shown how to move forward as a species, ready to take our rightful place in the universe. Each of us has taken the oaths to serve, obey and advance the cause of the Colony. We would welcome one such as yourself, Time Lord – once you take the oaths, of course.” He smiled thinly, the expression never reaching his eyes.

“The Colony?” the Doctor asked, taking advantage of Keer's sudden willingness to answer questions.

“The Gods,” Keer clarified. “We work to fulfil their plan.”

“Odd name for gods,” the Doctor noted.

“It is not for us to question their will.”

The Doctor nodded and Val watched with fascination as the Doctor filed all of this new information into the part of his mind that monitored all the important things. Well, all the things that the Doctor thought were important anyway.

“Thank you. You have answered most of my questions to some degree of satisfaction. I will think upon what you have said,” he replied finally. “Now, I wonder if you would oblige me in answering one more.”

Keer nodded and the Doctor stepped up to him, nailing the Satrigorn to the spot with cold green eyes.

“Who – shot – my TARDIS?”

Val closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Next to her, she felt Tom stiffen. They would be running soon. She had a strong urge to bend down and tie the laces of her trainers into double-

knots. Val tried to judge how far they had come from the TARDIS but their wandering through the forest had scrambled her sense of direction. Even so, it would be a fair distance. She really should spend more time building up her cardio fitness.

“The Gods protect this planet,” Keer answered simply and Val's head jerked up, shocked out of her pessimistic planning. The Satrigorn did not seem in the least bit affected by the Doctor's barely contained rage.

“No, you have a long-range sonic weapon protecting this planet,” the Doctor accused through gritted teeth.

Val looked at Tom, their concerned expressions mirroring one another. “A what-weapon?” she mouthed. It seemed that this could still turn bad. Tom raised one finger to stall her while keeping all of his attention fixed firmly on Keer and the Doctor. As she turned back to the confrontation, a strange buzzing filled Val's mind. Val squeezed her eyes shut, trying to force the sensation out. Her vision filled with trees and she shook her head to dispel the image. Her eyes flashed open. *It makes no sense*, she thought, then wondered what it was that hadn't made sense.

Val wandered through a deep red forest, searching. She wasn't sure what she was looking for, only that she would know it once she found it. Sunlight trickled through the leaves in places, the dappled light glittering on a pond she had found in a small clearing. For a moment, she stopped to watch dragonflies skimming over its surface. At least, she thought they were dragonflies. Val smiled. Satrigorn was truly a beautiful and intriguing planet.

A rustle among the flowering shrubs on the other side of the pond startled Val out of her trance. She watched the place where she had heard the disturbance and a woman carrying a large hunting bow emerged. She had found what she was looking for.

“Valentina,” the woman said, hefting her bow. “Run with me.”

Val stared at her.

“How do you know my name?” Val rubbed at her forehead as though trying to remember something. “Who are you?”

The huntress smiled patiently. “I have been known by a thousand names and worn the faces of many more,” she replied. “Come. Run with me, Valentina, and take your place with us.”

“Us?” she asked cautiously, yet she edged closer. With each step Val felt her doubts fall away and her heart swelled, entranced by the woman's offer. To run wild. To be one with the trees and the forest and the animals. To feel the sunlight on her skin and the rush of wind in her hair. *Yes*.

The Huntress turned and disappeared back into the trees.

For a moment Val balanced between stillness and movement, poised on the balls of her feet, then worrying that she might lose the Huntress if she waited any longer, Val ran after her...

* * * * *

Keer did not respond to the Doctor's accusation. His gaze fell away, eyes glazing over and arms dropping to his sides. The Doctor frowned, stepping back to take in the room. Val and Tom also stood immobile, as did the three Satrigorn soldiers. Both were looking towards Keer but their eyes focused on nothing.

The Doctor moved to their side and reached out, almost touching Tom before pulling back. He had no idea what would happen if he made contact. Instead, he leaned closer, searching his face for any signs of recognition. Nothing.

As he stared, the Doctor felt something brush at his mind. For long moments he remained

motionless, caught somewhere between caution and confusion. *I'm not this indecisive*, he thought, rubbing at his head. He had the vague awareness that he wasn't thinking clearly. A barely perceptible buzzing touched the back of his mind, like a fly in the room that kept distracting him.

The Doctor jerked back when Tom's eyes began to flicker from side to side. The buzzing sensation fled and he breathed a sigh of relief to see Tom alive. Waving one hand in front of Tom's face, he pulled his sonic screwdriver from his pocket. He passed it around and over his companion's head, trying to confirm the obvious. His eyes widened nonetheless. Tom was dreaming.

* * * * *

Tom sat back, watching Val and the Doctor talk. They seemed to be completely unaware of his presence despite being only a few paces away. The two of them stood around the flight console, heads together. Tom couldn't understand it. He was the one who specialised in computers and technology. Why would the Doctor teach Val how to fly the TARDIS? That didn't seem right or fair.

It felt like hours before they finally noticed him, the Doctor turning to regard him with a knowing smile.

"Come," he said, running his fingers lightly over one of the panels. "Take your place with us..."

* * * * *

The Doctor wandered around the room, examining each person in turn. All exhibited signs of being in a dream-like state – increased heart rate, rapid eye movement, delta brainwaves. As he concentrated on his work, the Doctor's mind began to clear. He had already guessed that the telepathic field was somehow responsible for the rapid evolution of the Satrigorns, something that Keer had confirmed, even if his version had been steeped in mysticism. Yet the purpose of this evolution, and who was responsible for it, still puzzled the Doctor.

He stood watching his companions, wondering how long the phenomenon would last when one of the soldiers slumped to the ground. The Doctor dropped to his knees beside him and everything seemed to happen at once.

"How can you have moved?" Keer demanded of the Doctor just as Val gave a startled yelp. Tom threw a comforting arm around her shoulders but his head swivelled from side to side as he sought someone to blame for what had just happened.

"Doctor?" Tom asked hesitantly, eyes full of questions and confusion.

The Doctor ignored him, instead focusing on the fallen Satrigorn. He thumbed his eyelids open, examining his pupils and then leaned down to search for a heartbeat. It occurred to the Doctor that he knew very little about Satrigorn physiology, and perhaps even less now that it appeared they had changed significantly since he last had contact with them. Regardless of where the man's heart might be, the Doctor could determine no pulse.

"This man is dead," he announced, rising.

Keer stepped up to the Doctor, eyes burning with fervour.

"He was not strong enough to accept the wisdom of the Gods," he said, motioning for the two remaining soldiers. Both approached their fallen comrade, picking him up and removing him

from the room without any indication that they were disturbed by his death.

“And it appears that you, Time Lord, have been spurned by the Gods entirely.”

“Pfft. Hardly,” the Doctor scoffed. “The gods have not rejected me. I just have some telepathic ability and am obviously not as susceptible as y—”

Keer cut him off as the soldiers returned to the room, their number now totalling six.

“We will be ready soon and cannot risk the chance that one such as you might jeopardise our plans. I hope it will only be a matter of time before you take your place with us. If not, well, we will see.”

Keer addressed the soldiers. “Arrest them,” he ordered.

The soldiers stepped forward as one, two taking hold of Tom and Val to pry them apart.

“Doctor?” Val cried out, trying to free herself. “What just happened?”

Val set her jaw determinedly but the catch in her voice revealed the depth of her fear. The Doctor could see – even from here – that Val’s struggle to understand her experience might be more frightening than her arrest on a strange planet. Even so, the Doctor did not answer or make any move to help. Instead, he calmly raised his hand and in contrast to the usual way of things, tried to stop Tom and Val from making matters worse. Neither of them noticed.

Tom had hooked his arm through Val’s to prevent them from being separated. Val fought ferociously to evade the grappling hands of the soldier behind her. Another two Satrigorns joined the fray.

The Doctor gave the lot of them a long-suffering look. It could only be a matter of time before the Satrigorns resorted to weapons again.

“Stop fighting them,” the Doctor sighed, permitting the remaining two soldiers to approach from either side and seize the Doctor’s arms roughly. He didn’t resist, however the Satrigorns’ natural height meant that the Doctor’s feet bounced along the floor as he was being marched across the room. The Doctor held himself erect, trying to maintain some shred of dignity. He did not like giving in like this. Not one bit. Yet he would bide his time and bite his tongue, for now.

Tom and Val had finally been separated, each now in the custody of two soldiers.

Keer stood near the door, watching the fracas through a mask of cold disapproval.

“Detain them separately,” Keer ordered and the Doctor felt true concern for the first time. Separating them would interfere with his plans and prevent him from keeping an eye on Tom and Val. Who knew what might happen if this telepathic event occurred again?

He turned his head, stretching to look over his shoulder as he was half lead, half carried past Tom and Val.

“The telepathic field is causing hallucinations,” the Doctor told his companions. “You have to resist it. The dreams, the hallucinations, they’re not real.”

The Doctor lost sight of them both as he was taken from the room.

“And now?” Tom shouted after him, his frightened voice carrying down the corridor. “What about now? Is this real?”

Had his hands been free, the Doctor would have rubbed at his temples, the memory of that incessant buzzing still lingering in his mind.

* * * * *

Keer watched in silence as the Time Lord was placed under arrest. The other two had made a pleasant scene of resistance as his soldiers dragged them from the room, but somehow this man

called the Doctor had made them look like personal retainers escorting their king.

The Doctor treated all this with a distinct lack of concern. Yet for the briefest of moments, when the Doctor had demanded to know who had fired upon his transport ship, Keer had seen him lose control. His eyes had shone with the power and fury of a collapsing sun and for the first time since the First had chosen him to represent the Colony, Keer had felt fear.

A dangerous man and a Time Lord. Keer would need to speak with the First.

Once alone, Keer placed the coronet of his station upon his brow and rubbed his fingers lightly over the points at his temples. Almost immediately, the soothing voice of the First caressed his mind.

“Why have you summoned me?” the First asked, his voice deep and resonant in Keer’s mind. Keer sighed, a satisfied smile spreading across his face.

“The one you have prophesised has come, First. He is here with two humans.”

“Where was he found?”

“In the Mynid Quadrant. Further away than where we expected their ship to crash.”

“Their ship does not crash, Commander Keer. It will have materialised somewhere within walking range of his capture. Find it.”

* * * * *

The Doctor sat in his new, albeit temporary, accommodation examining the construction and contents of his prison cell. A large mat woven from a plant-based material, most likely a palm of one species or another covered the simple concrete floor. The prison complex lay underground so there were no windows. The bed was of modest wooden design and the ‘amenities’, if they could be so-called, consisted of nothing more than a bucket. The Doctor wrinkled his nose in distaste. It was properly indecent.

Odd as that was, the most distinctive feature by far was the front wall and door of the cell. Both had been fitted with clear sheets of polymethyl methacrylate. Tiny holes stretched the width of the wall in a wide band, allowing for some movement of air and sound. The Doctor tapped on the wall lightly, scrutinising its manufacture. It would take thousands of years for a species to evolve to the point where they could produce a resin of this kind, of any kind.

Just as intriguing were the signs that indicated the cell had once been fitted with metal bars. In particular, the holes where those bars had originally been that drew his attention. They were perfectly round and lacked any kind of degradation – no crumbling of concrete around the holes, no rust stains from the bars. The bars had not been installed long before being replaced by this newer feature.

The Doctor cracked his knuckles and drew his sonic screwdriver from his pocket. No one had even bothered to search him. He tossed the device into the air, catching it with a small flourish. Time to get out of here.

The lock on the door was pitifully simple and looking at it through the clear door taught him all that he needed to know about it. An unsophisticated mechanism held the door locked magnetically. The keypad facing into the corridor allowed access with the correct code. The Doctor sniffed. Any power outage would release the lock. The electrical components were crude and the lock hummed unceasingly. Or perhaps that was the fluorescent lighting?

The Doctor placed his sonic screwdriver up against the Perspex behind the back panel of the lock, and set it buzzing. The door clicked open obediently.

Smiling at his handy work, the Doctor pushed tentatively at the door and looked up to

discover that he was no longer alone. A Satrigorn guard stood a few paces away, having come to either investigate or do the rounds of the prison. The two of them stared at each other wordlessly and the Doctor held out his sonic screwdriver, shrugging apologetically. The other man stepped closer.

The Doctor wasted no time. With a heave, he shoved the door open, slamming it into the guard.

To the Doctor's annoyance, the guard didn't go down as easily as he had anticipated. He grabbed the door and tried hitting the guard with it again but that wouldn't work a second time. The guard sidestepped the door easily, reaching for his weapon. The Doctor threw himself at the Satrigorn, trapping the guard's hand before he could retrieve his gun. They both went to ground, the Doctor landing roughly on top of the startled Satrigorn, the breath rushing out of his lungs.

The Satrigorn opened his mouth and the Doctor fought to prevent the scream he could see coming. He clapped his free hand over the guard's face and swallowed a scream of his own when the Satrigorn bit down hard, trapping two of the Doctor's fingers between sharp teeth.

The Doctor felt pain and anger flare to life within him as he yanked his bloodied fingers from the Satrigorn's mouth. Eliminating this threat had taken far too long. They would draw attention. The Doctor had to end this now. He had to find his companions.

He brought his head down sharply and smashed his forehead into the Satrigorn's face. Through a fog of pain, the Doctor heard the guard cry out. Teeth gritted, the Doctor fumbled for the guard's holster and pulled the gun free. Without hesitation, he jammed the sleek weapon into the young man's chest and pulled the trigger.

The weapon had no recoil and yet the Satrigorn certainly felt the impact. His body jerked as the laser tore through him, the energy from the beam dispersing as it hit the floor. Dark red blood began to seep slowly out from beneath the guard's body as the nameless man writhed on the ground, groaning as he took long, agonising moments to die.

When all fell silent, the Doctor heaved himself off the guard and onto his knees. He shoved the gun into his waistband. Wiping blood from his hands onto his trousers, the Doctor caught sight of Keer standing at a junction near the end of the corridor. Keer smiled.

"Come," he said, beckoning. "Take your place with us."

Something was wrong. The lock on the now open cell door still buzzed like a fly in the room that wouldn't go away. The Doctor rubbed at his temples. Buzzing. Something was very wrong. The Doctor *pushed* at that sound, forcing it from his mind.

* * * * *

The Doctor sat on the bed in his cell, chest heaving, hearts racing. Gathering up his courage he very deliberately lowered his eyes to his hands and let out a long, relieved breath. His hands were clean. No gun. No blood. The Doctor turned wide eyes on the door just as slowly. It was still locked.

Taking a few steady breaths, the Doctor thought back to the moment when the Satrigorn had brought him to this room and left him alone. Since then there had been at least three occasions where he had perceived that odd buzzing sound again, barely distinguishable in the same way that a high-pitched ringing in ones ears was often only noticed in the silence of an empty room. The Doctor had been able force out the sound with little effort, successfully resisting the telepathic manipulation. Unfortunately, it seemed that this time he had failed. The realisation left a bitter taste in his mouth.

The Doctor rubbed his hands through his hair and down his shirt, trying to scrub the memory from his skin. Small wonder that Tom and Val had been so shaken by their own hallucinations. If they had been anything like his own...

Tom and Val!

The Doctor leapt to his feet. He had to find his companions and get them out of here.

The Doctor slipped his sonic screwdriver from his pocket and the familiar motion sent a chill down his spine. The memory of his violent escape didn't fade as it might in a dream and retracing his steps only made the memories more vivid. He may as well have done all this before.

Disturbingly, the memories felt like those created when he altered history. Being a time traveller meant that the Doctor had many memories of divergent events existing in his mind simultaneously. Only his connection with human companions allowed him a glimpse into how others perceived this experience. Most considered it extraordinary.

Now he wondered how he could have such recollections without any evidence to suggest he had participated in the events that had created those memories. Even more concerning were his actions within those memories, as at least some of them had most surely been of his own devising. The Doctor blew out a breath with a huff. He may not have physically been a part of those events but he had experienced them in some way far more potent than any dream.

The Doctor clasped his hands together and pressed steepled forefingers to his lips. It didn't matter. He wasn't his memories, no matter how real they felt. He was his choices. Here and now.

An uneasy thought crept into the Doctor's mind.

The Doctor had all of his memories from past regenerations. And the choices he made now were often, and blessedly, different to those he would have made in earlier incarnations. If he was not the same man as before, then who was he?

The Doctor shrugged. Time enough for philosophy when the danger had passed. Keeping a watchful eye on the corridor, the Doctor touched his sonic screwdriver to a point just behind the rear panel of the lock and set it buzzing.

The door clicked open obediently.

To the Doctor's dismay, a guard appeared almost immediately at the junction near the end of the corridor. The Doctor stared, momentarily paralysed. *It can't be him*, he thought and let out a relieved breath when he realised that the guard was not the same man from his memory.

He was much younger, the Doctor noted. Possibly still a child by the standards of many species and certainly an adolescent if not. The Doctor put the sonic screwdriver back into his pocket and slowly raised his hands to show the young guard that he was unarmed.

The Satrigorn tipped his head to one side, making no move to reach for his weapon or call out for help. The Doctor narrowed his eyes, waiting and the guard blinked, watching the Doctor with curious eyes. The unlocked door suddenly felt like a test as the Satrigorn waited to see if the lab rat would make an escape attempt.

Reaching out, the Doctor very deliberately poked the door with one finger. It swung open on silent hinges. Raising both hands again, the Doctor stepped slowly out of the cell.

"What's your name?" the Doctor asked in his calmest voice. The tone felt awkward. The Doctor took one tentative step towards him.

"Jandar," the young guard answered, taking a small step back.

The Doctor stopped moving. "It's alright. I'm not going to hurt you," he said. "I just want to make sure that my friends are safe and well."

Jandar nodded but took another step backward. The Doctor kept one hand held out, trying

not to startle him into turning and running at the first opportunity.

“Do you know where they are? My friends?” the Doctor asked.

“You shouldn't be doing this,” Jandar said, ignoring the Doctor's question. The Satrigorn's hand crept down towards the gun at his hip, open palm coming to rest lightly on top of the weapon.

The Doctor held the young Satrigorn's eyes, continuing to make slow placating gestures without moving any closer. Jandar's fingers were twitching ever so slightly as they hovered over the gun. Not a good sign.

“I just want to find my companions. We won't cause any trouble. We just want to get back to my, err – spaceship, and be on our way.”

“You can't,” Jandar said, hand tightening on his weapon. “You'll be part of it soon. Part of us.”

The Doctor's eyebrows shot upward issuing an involuntary challenge at the claim.

“Do you really think so?” the Doctor said and his sniff of disdain caused Jandar to frown, disapproval replacing his earlier curiosity and confusion. The Doctor needed to find Miss Rossi and Mr. Brooker. They were much better at this than he.

“What are we to become a part of?” the Doctor asked, trying to change tact and soften his tone.

Jandar gave himself a little shake as though dispelling his discomfort. His hand still gripped the weapon; perhaps even more tightly if that were possible. The young Satrigorn's eyes shifted uncomfortably, suddenly unable to meet the Doctor's eyes.

“Part of we who serve the Colony, of course. You will take the oaths soon and . . . and help us to take our . . . our rightful place.”

The Doctor pursed his lips, his thoughtfulness hardened by an intensity that made him step forward in spite of his better judgement.

“And where is this 'rightful place' of yours?” the Doctor asked, studying the Satrigorn as conflicting emotions raced across the youngster's features. Pride, confusion, caution, fear. It was this last emotion that worried the Doctor most. Frightened children with guns. The Doctor felt his insides go cold.

“Anywhere we want,” Jandar said, his voice drifting to some faraway place. “The Colony will lead us through the Gateway to the worlds beyond, and they will be ours.”

“Gateway?” the Doctor asked, his attention sharpening to a fine point that he released like an arrow at the young Satrigorn. It struck with deadly accuracy as the Doctor's gaze held Jandar in place. Jandar stiffened and those vague eyes suddenly regained their focus. He looked at the Doctor as though it were the first time that he had seen him. Perhaps it was.

“What's happening to us?” he asked, fear turning those large, childish eyes to liquid.

“The gateway?” the Doctor asked again, risking another step closer. “What is the gateway? Tell me.”

The moment of clarity was short-lived. Jandar's eyes glossed over and slid away from the Doctor uneasily like oil sliding off water. The Doctor took another step closer and Jandar convulsed as though the slight movement had shocked him. His eyes began to shift and blink rapidly, his fingers twitching against the weapon that he still tightly gripped.

Could he cover the distance between himself and the Satrigorn before the weapon was drawn?

“Go,” Jandar said suddenly, his body rigid.

The Doctor jerked back, surprised.

“Pardon?”

“Go,” the Satrigorn repeated and his hand began to shake as it held his weapon trapped in its holster.

“Are my companions that way?” the Doctor asked, eyes flickering between Jandar's face and his hand. The Doctor held one hand out to him. “Why don't you show me where they are? You could come with me.”

“Go!” the Satrigorn shouted and slid the gun from its holster.

The Doctor ran.

* * * * *

Tom sat on the floor of his cell, back propped up against the metal framed bed. He wiped the sweat from his brow, shifting his weight to relieve the numbness in his buttocks. He didn't get up to sit on the bed though. A part of him thought it ridiculous, but Tom couldn't bring himself to move. Not yet. There was a small comfort in being huddled on the floor, knees drawn up to his chest that couldn't compare with the comfort of the bed. Tom knew that he must look a little unhinged. Right then he didn't care.

In the short time that Tom had been imprisoned here – he thought it had been a short time – he had experienced two very different hallucinations. Glancing around at the walls that contained him, he fervently hoped that this wasn't a third.

It had seemed so real. It still felt real, like memories barely a year old.

He had been a very profitable dealer in the arms trade, partnered with a woman from his past. Tom had been rather attracted to her. He might even have developed feelings for her, eventually. Tom had been shocked to discover that Lucy had been a weapons dealer but had moved past that minor moral objection once he'd had the chance to think things through. There was a lot of money to be made and who could hold that against a man trying to make his way in the world?

That wasn't how it had happened in truth, of course. In reality, he had distanced himself from Lucy Calamahoy as soon as he had discovered her true identity. Yet in his mind, there had been a time when Lucy had asked him to take his place with her, and he had.

His second hallucination – or was it his first? – was such a contrast that Tom had to marvel at his own latent creativity.

Tom had been a florist of all things. He had been happily wiring and taping flower stems for a brilliant arrangement when a colleague had brought the mail in, including an invitation to attend a conference. He had been in the process of putting his work aside to register online when he had suddenly found himself sitting on the floor of this room.

Tom shook his head to try to dispel the memories but they stayed with him as any other recollection would. He had been that arms dealer, and had been that florist. The memories lay nestled in his mind next to all the others he could summon to consciousness at will, although these new memories seemed not to have any others directly attached to them. Perhaps that was the key to telling the difference between truth and fiction.

He thought back to a time when he had gone to the seaside as a child. Tom didn't remember how he got there or what had happened afterward. In fact, the only thing he did remember was being frightened when he had begun to drift away from the shoreline. Tom probably hadn't been in any real danger but at eight years old, it had certainly seemed so at the time.

He sighed and closed his eyes. He assumed most of his memories were somewhat disjointed like that. He knew now that he wasn't a florist but at the time, it felt like he had been. Could he be hallucinating right now? What if being trapped in this room was only real until he woke up? Then this would be the new memory that felt real. The thought made his mind boggle.

"Bloody hell!" he said, kicking out at a nearby bucket. It clattered onto its side and rolled across the floor.

"Tom!"

The loud whisper floating from somewhere up the corridor startled him out of his disquieted reverie. Tom jumped up and bounded to the front of his cell, both of his hands thudding dully against the plastic wall. He leant close to the small holes that stretched the width of the wall.

"Val?" he whispered back. For a moment, no reply came and Tom rubbed his fingers very deliberately over the tiny air holes, trying to reassure himself that this wasn't another fabricated reality.

"Tom? Are you in here somewhere? Ah, hell."

"Val?" Tom called in a low voice. "Is that you?"

"Tom? Thank goodness! I thought they'd taken you somewhere else when they separated us. Where are you?"

Val pitched her voice low. Tom looked out of the front wall into the stark white corridor, searching for a defining feature. Almost everything in this place was uniform, from the smooth, largely unadorned hallways to the floor to ceiling Perspex walls that were the main feature of each cell. Tom thought back, trying to remember what he had seen when the soldiers had brought him here. He thought there might have been the odd fire extinguisher or air conditioning vent. Beyond that however, everything had been identical. The complex reminded Tom of a hospital, or perhaps even more disturbingly, an asylum.

"They must've taken me a different way to you," he said. "I'm in the cell in front of a large crack in the wall. The really long one. Can you see it?"

"I think so," Val replied. "You're probably about four or five cells away. There's a metal ring in the wall opposite me. It's like one of those, those – things that hold torches."

Tom pressed the side of his face closer against the clear wall, trying to see up the hallway.

"A torch sconce," he said frowning up at the fluorescent light that bathed his cell in a sickly glow. Odd. The medieval-esque feature looked out of place in the electrically lit prison. He turned back to the wall, putting his mouth close to the holes in the wall.

"Val?"

No response came.

"Val?" He called again, louder this time.

"Is this real?" Val answered finally, her voice unsteady.

"I think so. Yes."

What else could he say? It seemed real enough.

Tom looked at the mechanism that kept his door locked and shook his head in confusion. Any power outage would render the system useless. Tom wished he could gain access to it. If he could break open the back of it, he might be able to bypass the electronic system by disconnecting the power or shorting out the circuit. It didn't matter though. The lock lay on the other side of the door.

"The Doctor will get us out of here. Val?"

“He’d better hurry then,” Val answered. “I hate this place.”

“He’ll come. He always does.”

Tom heard Val bark a harsh laugh.

“He didn’t once. I had a... a dream, a hallucination. The Doctor didn’t come and I left you to the Rutans. It happened, Tom. I remember it.”

“It didn’t, Val.”

“It did! In my mind it did. I left you. I’m sorry.” Hysteria tinged her voice. Tom knew that only the strength of her will kept Val from dissolving into tears.

“It’s okay, Val,” he said.

“It’s not okay,” she said, stressing the point. “I’ll never do it again. I swear.”

The fire in her voice would have fooled most people. Tom imagined Val squaring her shoulders and setting her jaw, but the small quaver in her voice belied her veneer of steeliness. In that moment, Tom knew that a small part of her looked for forgiveness, or perhaps even redemption. It broke his heart.

Tom wanted to tell her that she had done no such thing. That she had never done anything that required an apology, but right now, he knew Val didn’t need to hear that.

“I know you won’t,” he said instead, hoping that would be enough for now. It would have to be.

For long moments, the buzzing of the fluorescent light was the only sound he could hear.

“You’re right. The Doctor, he’ll be here soon.” Val said eventually. She laughed suddenly, a throaty chortle that made Tom smile. “No doubt he’s threatening to drag this whole planet to whatever galactic council or federation exists at this time – if he hasn’t already caused a riot of some kind.”

Tom froze. The Doctor could be relentless when angered and their ill-treatment and imprisonment was sure to push the Doctor beyond the bounds of civility. Not to mention the fact that the Doctor wanted someone to take responsibility for firing on the TARDIS. Tom was suddenly sure that if they didn’t get out of there soon, the Doctor would have the Satrigorns howling for blood. He could see it now - the Doctor refusing to cooperate, demanding their immediate release, offending the Satrigorns with every sentence. No one could raise the ire of an entire species in quite the same way the Doctor could. A few choice words from the Doctor and their imprisonment could very quickly become an execution.

Val must have been thinking along the same lines because he could suddenly hear her swearing.

Tom glanced around the room and spotting the bed, began to drag it to the centre of the room. Maybe if he could somehow increase the amperage of the light he could blow a fuse and cut the power to the cell. It was a long shot. The locking mechanisms were likely to be on a separate circuit and all he would achieve would be to plunge his own cell into darkness. Better than nothing, he supposed. Perhaps if someone came to investigate he could overpower them. Getting Val out would be much easier once he could gain access to the locks from the outside.

Tom stood on the bed and examined the light. This wasn’t going to work. He needed tools – and about six hairdryers. He huffed loudly. Tom wouldn’t have to do this at all if the Doctor had just allowed him to take the new sonic screwdriver. It didn’t make sense to build him one and then be precious about actually giving it to him. Tom began unscrewing the light from its fitting.

“What in all of the Magellanic Cloud Galaxies are you doing, Brooker?”

Tom spun, almost losing his balance.

The Doctor stood outside the door, sonic screwdriver in hand, bemused expression on his

face. If he hadn't been practically jittering on the spot, Tom would have said he looked to be rather enjoying himself at catching Tom unawares. Tom jumped down from the bed.

"Doctor?" Val called from her cell. "Is that you?"

"Yes, Miss Rossi," the Doctor replied but Tom spoke over the top of him.

"It's okay. It's him." Tom turned to the Doctor. "Took your time, didn't you?" he said, only half in jest. The Doctor's mouth twisted into a wry smile as he bent to the lock with his sonic screwdriver. The door opened with a click.

"We need to get out of here and make ourselves scarce. Right now," the Doctor said, ignoring Tom's question. Tom felt his face twist into a grimace as he wondered what the Doctor had done to evade his captors. How much time did they have before they came charging in here after him?

The Doctor pushed open the door and Tom rushed past him to check the corridor. Mercifully, it was empty. For now.

"You're most welcome," the Doctor said as Tom headed up the hallway towards Val. He didn't stop until he reached the door to her cell then turned to see that the Doctor had caught up to him, sonic screwdriver at the ready.

"Thank you," he said belatedly.

"Get out of the way, Brooker," the Doctor grumbled, edging Tom out from in front of the door.

Tom watched Val as the Doctor set to work on the lock. One look at Val's face told him he had been right that she shared his concern about the Doctor's temperament. She had her face pressed to the front window as though expecting an ambush. Then Val did something very strange. She bent down to double-knot her trainers.

"How far behind us are they, Doctor?" she asked as the door swung open.

"I don't know," he answered. "I'm not sure if anyone will be coming just yet. Maybe in a little while. Maybe not at all. It would certainly be an interesting experiment to see if anyone comes for us but not one that I'm willing to wait around for."

Both Tom and Val frowned as the Doctor began to jog back the way he had come. Val looked at Tom and shrugged, heading after him.

"Doctor," Tom said, hurrying to catch up as they jogged back past the cell that had held him. "Maybe now isn't the right time to say 'I told you so' but if you'd just let me take the sonic screwdriver, Val and I would already be back at the TARDIS waiting for you. Don't you think it's about time you let me have it? I'm not going to lose it and I don't appreciate being made to keep asking for it. It makes me feel like a kid. I'm a big boy now," he told him, sarcasm dripping.

The Doctor stopped and spun so suddenly that Val crashed into him with a grunt.

"Would you please repeat that?" the Doctor said, steadying Val even while his eyes never left Tom.

"Um, I said, I'm a big boy," Tom grumbled, his inflection making the statement sound like a question. Saying it aloud made Tom realise how ridiculous he sounded. It didn't help his cause. As long as he sounded like a child, the Doctor would continue to treat him like one.

"No, about my screwdriver," the Doctor said. "Why would I give it to you? No offense, of course."

"Not your screwdriver. Mine," Tom said. "Why build me one and then refuse to give it to me?"

The Doctor drew back sharply as though slapped and Val gasped aloud.

"When did you make Tom a sonic screwdriver?" she asked, turning an accusatory look

on the Doctor. She clutched at the pocket in which she kept her TARDIS key.

“I didn’t,” the Doctor answered, still staring at Tom. “Why would you think I’d built you a sonic screwdriver?”

Tom’s eyebrows drew down in confusion and not a little bit of annoyance.

“Look, if you just don’t want me to have it...”

“Tom, I have never made you one. We have never even discussed the possibility of you having one.” He narrowed shrewd eyes at Tom, studying him intently. “Could you be mistaken?” The Doctor’s emphasis on the word ‘mistaken’ was loaded with so much meaning that Tom felt himself shrink like a fading flower under that unflinching gaze. Anxiety gathered in the pit of his stomach.

“But I’ve seen it.” Tom pinched the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger, squeezing his eyes shut. “We talked – we spoke about... Oh, God. Please tell me we’ve spoken about this?”

The Doctor shook his head and Tom drew in a deep breath, understanding blossoming in his mind. These were not true memories. He had hallucinated again and Tom could not have said when or where. Val clearly understood the horror he felt. She had one hand clapped over her mouth, her bright blue eyes glittering above unsteady fingers.

Tom looked from Val to the Doctor and back again, feeling like a bug under a microscope. He wondered what he must look like to them right now. The Doctor stared at him as though trying to solve a puzzle. Had the Doctor experienced anything like this? Or did his alien nature protect him from the hallucinations? What about Val? Had she had any more, or was it just him?

“I guess... I guess that never happened then,” he said, wishing that Val and the Doctor would stop staring at him as though he were deformed.

A shout echoing through the corridors startled everyone out of their silent contemplations.

“Never mind,” the Doctor said. “We have more pressing needs to attend to.” And with that the Doctor sprinted off down the corridor.

* * * * *

The Doctor had memorised every twist and turn in this warren of a prison, having concluded that the most reliable method of finding their way out was to go back the way he had come. The risk of course, was the probability of meeting Satrigorns coming the other way. Left, right, right, left – he was relying on the weak assumption that Jandar would not yet have gathered the courage to raise the alarm. It was a theory that the Doctor felt distinctly uncomfortable with, although Tom’s delusion had him feeling even worse. He would have some trouble on his hands if his companions began to lose their grip on reality.

More yelling reverberated through the prison, even louder this time. Tom and Val shared worried glances but fortunately, the shout was not the herald of their impending doom. It had been too characteristic of suffering for it to be a call to arms. Of course, one could never be entirely certain, so when the Doctor and his companions happened across a Satrigorn woman shouting to herself in one of the cells, he had to admit to a small measure of relief.

The Doctor had already seen this woman when he had last passed this way. Then she had been still and silent, an empty shell marking the seventh left hand turn the Doctor would have to take. With only one prisoner for every dozen or so empty cells, people were a simple way to

signpost the correct path. Now the woman snarled and clawed at her own face, throwing her head back to howl before scrambling up onto her bed to huddle and moan quietly.

“What's wrong with her?” Val asked, approaching the door slowly. She peered through, leaning down to get a closer look at the woman.

“Many who are brought here come to suffer as she does.”

The Doctor, Tom and Val all spun towards the voice. In the cell behind them, another Satrigorn woman stood behind the Perspex wall, hand pressed lightly up against its surface. The Doctor's brow furrowed. He had not seen her when he had last passed this way. “Who are you?” he asked.

“I was called Rumi.” She sounded weary, her whole posture tired, yet she darted furtive, uneasy glances at the woman in the cell opposite her. Rumi pointed at the woman who now rocked back and forth, making the bedsprings creak. “She was Belrin.”

The Doctor paused to regard her thoughtfully. *Was?*

“I am the Doctor,” he said. “Do you know what is wrong with her?” He jerked a thumb over his shoulder towards Belrin.

“The madness comes for many when the Gods turn their face away from us.” Rumi blinked back tears. “It will come for me.”

Belrin sat back on her heels and shrieked as though trying to bring Rumi's darkest fears to life. Tom tried to draw Val gently back from where she had returned to staring anxiously at Belrin but she shrugged him off.

“She's bleeding, Doctor,” Tom said, stepping up beside Val. The Doctor stood in the middle of the corridor, passing glances between Belrin and Rumi.

Belrin had begun to weep, oblivious to being watched. Translucent, violet-coloured blood trickled down one side of her face where she had managed to gouge a line of skin from her own cheek. Moments later, she began to shriek again.

Rumi backed away from the screaming woman until she bumped up against the wall at the back of her cell. She pressed herself against the wall, staring at the other Satrigorn with wide, wet eyes. The Doctor wondered how close the two Satrigorn women had been before Belrin had slipped into the realms of insanity.

“The telepathic field has driven her mad,” the Doctor said, watching Rumi carefully as he spoke. He slipped one hand into his pocket, fingering his sonic screwdriver. “The Satrigorns have been forced into accelerated evolution. They are being introduced to advanced concepts that are exponentially increasing the capacity of their brain function.” Rumi closed her eyes, shaking her head from side to side. The Doctor pressed the screwdriver up to the locking mechanism and set it buzzing. The door clicked open but Rumi stayed in her cell.

“So the telepathic field is increasing the Satrigorns' intelligence and the hallucinations are a symptom of that,” Tom speculated.

“No, not a symptom,” the Doctor said, shaking his head. “They are the cause. The hallucinations are the method by which these ideas are integrated into their minds. I suspect Belrin's mind began to resist at some point.”

Val turned from the door to look at the Doctor. “But that makes no sense. I haven't hallucinated about advanced technology or suddenly become any smarter.”

“Not yet,” the Doctor said. “Remember, the Satrigorns have been undergoing this process for over two hundred years. They are born within the influence of the field. We're still being integrated into their telepathic matrix. Until that happens, our hallucinations are likely to be random.”

“And what happens when we've been - integrated?” Val asked, looking warily at Belrin. The Satrigorn had fallen silent again.

“Once that happens, I imagine the cause of the Colony will be our cause also.”

“And then the downloading begins,” Tom said.

“Precisely,” the Doctor affirmed. “That is my current hypothesis.”

“Hypothesis?” Tom said. “You mean you're not sure?”

“One cannot be absolutely certain about everything all the time, Mr. Brooker,” the Doctor said. “Otherwise the pleasure of discovering the truth would be non-existent.”

For some reason Tom ducked his head to hide a smile, an odd gesture given Tom's mild tendency to behave as though he did indeed know everything. The Doctor frowned at him and Tom smoothed his features.

“So let me get this straight,” Tom said. “The telepathic field is a Brain-Computer Interface, like the technology being developed to help people control prosthetic limbs with their thoughts?”

“Yes, it's a direct neural interface,” the Doctor agreed. “Only in reverse so that it is the people being controlled, not the technology. And on a much larger scale. And without computer chips or implantation devices. Actually no, it isn't like that at all.”

Tom shrugged, used to the Doctor's inane explanations.

“And this prison is – what? A place for those who aren't properly integrated?” Val asked, looking around at the mostly empty cells.

The Doctor nodded, a quick jerk of his head.

Tears began to flow down Rumi's cheeks. “No, we are the abandoned ones,” she wailed. “The Gods have rejected us.”

“We have to help her,” Val said, turning on the Doctor with a distinct air of irritation. “Use your sonic screwdriver. Let her out.”

“No!” Rumi shouted, suddenly racing out of her cell to grab the Doctor by the back of his sweater. Both Tom and Val jumped, startled.

“Why not?” the Doctor asked, shaking Rumi off and regarding her curiously. “We helped you.”

“You cannot help her,” Rumi told him sharply.

As if on cue, Belrin again tipped her head back and howled a cry of such anguish and rage that the Doctor could hear the woman's throat stripping raw. Rumi pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes.

“Who is she?” The Doctor asked,

“I told you,” Rumi answered softly, her eyes dropping to her feet.

The Doctor looked at Rumi uncertainly but did not press the issue. He returned his attention to Belrin, moving cautiously towards the cell door and Rumi made another weak attempt to snatch the Doctor's arm. Tom flung one arm out, catching her wrist and Rumi shook him off angrily, folding her arms across her chest. The interaction did not register with the Doctor. His sole focus had become the woman in the cell whose scream had cut short the moment the Doctor had placed one hand up against the plastic door.

Belrin turned slowly, aware for the first time that there were people watching her. With that awareness, the madness fled from her eyes, replaced by a sharp comprehension that disturbed the Doctor, particularly after bearing witness to her psychosis.

Belrin swung her legs off the bed and walked with a casual saunter over to the door as though she hadn't been losing her mind only moments earlier. Coming to stand opposite the

Doctor, she moved in to peer down at him through the door, violet-coloured blood beginning to dry on her cheek.

“Doctorrrrrrr,” she drawled, swaying like a deadly snake sizing up its prey. Behind him, the Doctor heard Rumi groan.

“Yes, I’m the Doctor. And you are Belrin.”

Belrin chuckled; looking genuinely amused but didn’t respond immediately. Instead, she moved even closer, pressing her forehead against the transparent door as she locked her mauve eyes onto the Doctor. Her height meant that she needed to bend to hold herself at eye level with him. “You won’t get away,” Belrin whispered with a small smile.

The Doctor smiled back, meeting her eyes steadily. “And why do you say that?” he asked, bringing his face even closer to the door to meet her challenging gaze.

The Satrigorn woman’s smile broadened. Silence dragged out. The Doctor opened his mouth to repeat the question and suddenly Belrin threw herself up against the wall, both hands banging loudly on the surface. The Doctor, Val and Tom all jumped back.

“Because I seeeeee you, Doctor,” she hissed. “I see you and we are coming for you.”

A flash of silver in Belrin’s left hand caught the Doctor’s attention. He filed the information away.

“What is she talking about?” Tom demanded, his hands resting on Val’s shoulders protectively.

“I have seen your mind,” Belrin seethed. “You will succumb. In the end you will help us, Doctor.”

Again, the Doctor fingered the sonic screwdriver in his pocket. There was no possibility of letting her out now. Belrin was beyond helping - at least for the time being. The Doctor shook his head, a gesture of deep disappointment, though in that moment the Doctor could not have said whether that disappointment was for Belrin or for himself.

“You’re not going anywhere,” he told her, beginning to turn away.

The Satrigorn raised her hands to her face, drawing her nails down her cheeks and leaving deep, bloody gashes. She never even flinched.

“Doctor of the TARDIS, I don’t need to go anywhere. We will still catch you.”

Val gasped. “How does she –”

The woman raised her hands to the wall again, beating her fists against it so that the entire wall trembled. Her screaming began again in earnest.

“Run, Doctor!” she shouted, throwing her head back and laughing maniacally.

From somewhere down the corridor, the sound of banging gathered into a wave and rolled like thunder towards them as other prisoners throughout the complex took up the cry.

“Doctor of Gallifrey, always running. Let me see you run now. RUN!”

The word tore from her throat as the woman who was once Belrin hammered on the wall, shrieking until a wet, gurgling sound told the Doctor that she had ruptured something in her throat. She continued to shriek anyway - a raspy bubbling that made Val cover her ears, her face twisting in disgust. The Satrigorn kept up the steady rhythm as she beat against the door, blood from her face and hands smearing over the cell wall as she threw herself up against it repeatedly.

“You heard her. Run!” the Doctor shouted, grabbing Rumi by the shoulders and shoving her ahead of him to get her moving. He pulled his sonic screwdriver from his pocket and suiting his own words, sprinted off down the corridor, passing Rumi who had finally found her feet. “This way!”

Together the Doctor, Tom, Val and Rumi bolted through the prison to the sound of

banging and screaming. There would be no stealthy escape now. This cacophony would soon bring the guards down on them. The Doctor began to scan the walls and ceiling as they ran for another way out, lamenting that he hadn't had time to formulate a Plan D. Plans B and C had already gone completely by the wayside.

A prisoner wearing nothing but raggedy trousers flung himself against the door of his cell. His iridescent muscles flexed threateningly as he raised his hands to smash them against the front wall.

"Doctor! Once holder of the Key to Time. Should I come to get you now?" he hollered.

The Doctor skidded to a stop, head swivelling as he took in and processed any information that might help him. Another prisoner on the other side of the hallway began to hit his head against the wall. "Or should I wait?" he rasped, nails clawing at the air holes in the wall. "Should I bide my time?"

"Doctor!" Val shouted, gripping the Doctor by the arm and trying to drag him along with her. "What are you doing?"

Ignoring Val, the Doctor did one last sweep of his surrounds then continued running down the corridor. Howling and taunts chased them as they raced through the maze of hallways, each Satrigorn they passed slamming themselves up against the door as though trying to break through. The group kept to the middle of the corridors, trying to remain as far away from the cells as was possible.

"They can't get out, right?" Val asked. "They're just crazy. They –"

"– can see us," the Doctor yelled over his shoulder. "They don't need to get out. The prisoners are being used as surveillance. We are being watched."

Both Tom and Val's eyes narrowed suspiciously as they ran past the next prisoner.

"It matters not, Doctor. I have seen your mind. You will come to me!" Another Satrigorn shouted - a woman this time. She was slumped on the ground by her door, having exhausted herself. The woman slapped at the wall weakly.

"What's that in her hand?" Tom asked, shouting over the racket as they dashed past. "Is that..."

"No time," the Doctor snapped. He used both hands to push off from the wall and propel himself around a corner. Tom, Val and Rumi ran close behind.

"Doctor, I think she was chipped," Tom called, his voice beginning to come in ragged breaths.

"I know," the Doctor said, not stopping.

"But you said it wasn't like a Brain-Computer Interface! 'No implants' you said."

"I was wrong!" the Doctor shouted, exasperated. The admission churned at him, frustration and anger boiling in the pit of his stomach. These were the people who resisted. Somehow, some of the Satrigorns had managed to fight the effects of the telepathic field – and doing so had interfered with their integration into the matrix. This 'Colony', or whoever was deliberately evolving this species, had to find some other way of controlling them. Either that or kill them. The Doctor had been wondering why so many of the cells were empty. The experiment didn't look like it was very successful. If the Satrigorns weren't killing those that resisted, they might have been killing themselves.

"But if all the prisoners are chipped, Doctor..."

"I know, Brooker! One problem at a time."

"This problem we need to deal with now!" Tom shouted, pulling up short with Val.

The Doctor glanced over his shoulder at Tom but his focus immediately shifted to Rumi.

She had stopped a little further up the corridor, her shoulders slumped, head bowed.

Val beckoned to Rumi. "Come on!" she shouted, but the Satrigorn woman didn't move.

"They brought me here when I could no longer hear the Gods," she said, her shaky voice barely audible above the rumble of fists pounding against doors. Screams and obscenities swirled through the complex. "But I think I knew. Gods help me, I knew. Why are they doing this to us?"

She opened her hand slowly and stared her palm. A profound sense of sadness swept over her features and her face crumpled.

"I don't know – but I'm going to find out," the Doctor promised. He felt the weight of that promise settle on his shoulders and accepted it as he had accepted the same burden countless times before.

"She was my mother."

The Doctor sucked in a sharp breath. He was unsure whether he actually heard Rumi whisper the words or if he had read her lips. Either way, it didn't matter.

So Belrin had been her mother. Something stirred in the Doctor and he felt the temptation to close his eyes - to take a deep breath and sigh his empathy for the woman he was watching lose everything in front of him. There were larger things at stake however. He held up his sonic screwdriver.

"Let me take a look at that," the Doctor said, taking a few tentative steps towards Rumi. "I can deactivate the computer chip if you just let me see your hand."

"The First can see everything. I'm sorry."

"Just let me—"

"The First will know. The First knows all. There is no chance for us. Just go."

The Doctor clenched his jaw in frustration and began to move towards Rumi but she stepped back suddenly, glaring down at him with such hatred that the Doctor recoiled.

"Rumi..."

"Stay back!" she shouted, gripping the wrist of her upturned hand. Rumi tensed, the veins in her neck standing out against her pearl skin. The muscles in her arms and shoulders grew taut as she fought her own strength. "The First can see my mind. Leave now."

Tom reached forward to grab hold of the Doctor's arm. "Doctor, maybe we should —"

"No," the Doctor snapped, tearing his arm from Tom's grasp. "Rumi, just let me —"

"I can't... Please..."

The hand that held her wrist began to shake and for the first time the Doctor noticed that Rumi was not only staring at the implant in her hand – she was trying to prevent herself from reaching for something – something Tom had already seen; a 3-phase electrical panel bolted to the wall.

Rumi squeezed her eyes shut and tears spilled from beneath her lashes. She threw her head back, baring her teeth and bracing herself against the war raging inside of her. She screamed through gritted teeth.

"Leave," Rumi gasped. "Please... go!"

This time it was Val who grabbed the Doctor's arm, her face pale as she watched Rumi losing her battle. Rumi's face contorted, shifting between rage and desperation. She moaned, her pain etched clearly on her face and the Doctor took a few steps back, torn between the decision he wanted to make and the one he knew he had to. He grunted loudly through clenched teeth and turned away. At that precise moment, the prisoners throughout the complex fell eerily silent.

The last thread of Rumi's self-control snapped. With a shriek, Rumi ripped open the

panel and began tearing blockers and wires from the fuse box. Immediately the corridor was plunged into darkness and hundreds of magnetic locks clicked dully as they opened throughout the complex.

The prisoners were free.

Exalted cries filled blackness as the captives scrambled from their cells, hunting through the corridors like beasts that had caught the scent of their quarry.

“This way!” the Doctor shouted, despite knowing that Tom and Val couldn’t see where he was going. The Doctor was unsure himself. He held his sonic screwdriver out in front of him, the device creating a tiny pool of light. It would have to be enough. Tom held onto Val as they stumbled in the dark after the Doctor, following the flickering light of the sonic screwdriver like a beacon.

The Doctor had lost his method of finding his way through this maze but he knew that they must be close to the cell from which he had escaped. He hoped fervently that the darkness was hindering the prisoners as much as it was hindering them. He could hear them, scavenging about in the dark, coming for them.

Escaping back to the TARDIS and getting off this forsaken planet was beginning to feel like the only option. He didn’t like it but the Doctor had to wonder whether he really had a choice in the matter anymore. Behind them, the sounds of screaming rang through the corridors. The howling ahead of them let the Doctor know that the Satrigorns behind them were only the start of their problems. If more guards or military reinforcements hadn’t already arrived, they would soon.

A shadow in front of him resolved into the silhouette of a Satrigorn and before he could slow himself, the Doctor slammed into the shape at full speed. Both thudded to the ground, the wind rushing out of him as he landed heavily on the person beneath him.

“Doctor!” Val cried and the Doctor struggled to extract himself from the tangle of arms and legs. The man on the ground fought to pull himself up but made no attempt to strike at the Doctor. Val reached down to help the Doctor and Tom pounced on the fallen Satrigorn, hauling him to his feet. Regaining his balance, the Doctor pressed the button on his sonic screwdriver, shoving the light in the other person’s face.

“Jandar,” he gasped, letting the light go out briefly in his shock.

“This way,” the young guard whispered, reaching out to try to pull the Doctor along with him as he turned away. “I can help.”

“We need to get out of here now, Doctor,” Val argued.

The Doctor risked precious seconds. “Why would you help us?” the Doctor asked hurriedly, ignoring his companions’ attempts at dragging him away.

“I don’t know,” Jandar answered, his voice sounded odd in the darkness – close and intimate in a way that made the Doctor feel exposed. It also had that disturbingly vague tenor that the Doctor recalled from his last interaction with the Satrigorn.

“I can show you. Please,” Jandar said. “I could have called more guards. I did not. I locked down the prison.” Did the Satrigorn sound – proud?

The Doctor dared to pause for a moment to consider Jandar’s offer but even while his mind raced with possibilities his ears strained to hear how close the other prisoners might be getting. Everything felt so imminent, the pressure of keeping everyone safe closing in on him. It was as though fate was breathing down his neck and the Doctor didn’t believe in fate. He understood fixed points in time – and this wasn’t one of them. He had a choice to make. The prison was in lockdown. They wouldn’t be leaving through the front door. The Doctor still had a

choice; it just wasn't much of one.

"Give me your gun," the Doctor demanded, having made his decision. Jandar might be as untrustworthy and temperamental as a poisonous snake but escaping a prison in lockdown without inside help was going to be more than a little tricky. The screams were getting louder. Closer. Rumi had been right behind them. Where was she now?

Surprisingly, Jandar handed over his weapon without hesitation. The Doctor held it in his hands for only a moment before turning and shoving it into the closest set of hands he could reach – Val's. "Let's go then," he said, consoling himself with the knowledge that he now had someone to interrogate about what was happening on this planet.

Jandar led the Doctor, Tom and Val around a corner and through a door that opened into another room. Tom tripped, sending something clattering into the darkness and Val stumbled over him, almost falling. The sound – as loud as it was – was deadened by the size of the room. It was tiny and its occupants now rubbed shoulders with one another as they clambered to make space for themselves.

"What is this?" Tom hissed. "If you've led us into a trap..."

"It's a cleaning cupboard," Val groaned, picking up something from in front of her feet and moving it out of the way.

"It's a maintenance storeroom," Jandar explained, not seeming to notice their suspicion. "We can get out this way. Come on."

"Wait," the Doctor said sharply. "Lock the door."

"No lock," Jandar said, and then shockingly he giggled. "There's no lock," he repeated in a singsong voice that made him sound even younger than he was – and completely insane. "Best just to go."

"Go where!" Tom growled under his breath as the cries of escaped prisoners approached.

A crash against the door made everyone jump. The Doctor and Val threw themselves up against it, holding the door shut while howling prisoners beat against the wood.

"Tom," Val gasped, struggling as the door lurched open and slammed shut behind her – once, twice, three times. The Doctor redoubled his efforts, planting his feet into the ground. Val slid down the door, trying to lever herself into a better position. "There was a broom or mop or something. Brace this thing!" she shouted.

Tom scrambled about in the dark while the Doctor and Val fought with the door. Jandar may as well have not been there. He blended into the darkness somewhere in the room, doing nothing at all to help. Instead, he muttered, "Come on, come on, come on..." repeatedly until the Doctor considered leaving him behind. The thought did not last long.

The sound of something heavy scraping along the ground told the Doctor that Tom had found something. Val yelped when it struck her foot.

"Get out of the way," Tom grunted and Val moved to help him while the Doctor struggled on his own to keep the door closed. Together, the trio managed to negotiate their way around shifting what turned out to be a supply cupboard in front of the door.

"Quick!" Jandar whispered, gripping the Doctor's hand and pulling it to one side of the door. The Doctor tried to snatch his hand free before realising that Jandar was trying to lead him to the rung of a ladder that ran up the wall beside the door. In the blackness, the Doctor could not see where it led.

"You first," the Doctor said, roughly shoving Jandar in front of him. He would not trust the Satrigorn at his back.

The Doctor kept back, adding his weight to the door as Jandar began to climb. He

motioned for Tom to go next before realising that no one could see him. Nevertheless, he heard Tom usher Val ahead of him towards the ladder. Only after his companions had started to move up the ladder did the Doctor allow himself to move away from the door. Thankfully, it held though he wasn't confident that the cupboard would hold it for long. The Doctor placed his sonic screwdriver between his teeth and planted his foot on the bottom run.

Up the ladder they scrambled, away from the commotion that rang in the corridors below them. The sound grew dimmer the higher that they climbed and the Doctor wondered how high that might be.

"Doctor?" Val whispered and a hand reached down to clasp his own, guiding him in the dark safely over the top of the ladder and into what the Doctor recognised as the wide opening of a workers' station at the entrance into a ventilation shaft. He still couldn't see a blasted thing but there was no mistaking that dull metallic thud his knees made in the small space as he crawled around beside Miss Rossi.

The Doctor felt around for the electrical box that he expected might be somewhere near the top of this ladder. Maintenance workers needed lighting.

As anticipated, his fingers located a small button and he pressed it. Low-level LED lights faded in along a long stretch of square aluminium tunnel ahead of him and the Doctor grinned around the sonic screwdriver still between his teeth. He plucked it from his mouth and pointed it at the circuit board around the light switch. The dim lights glowed brighter and he breathed a sigh of gratitude. Beside the manhole he had just climbed through was a hatch door. With a flourish, he dropped the door into place and sealed it using his sonic screwdriver. Perhaps they might yet find their way out of here.

Jandar sat huddled off to one side, his knees pulled up under his chest. The lost look in his eyes told the Doctor that the young guard had taken flight of his senses yet again. The unpredictability of the Satrigorn's behaviour had the Doctor deeply concerned. Jandar was not a prisoner so he wasn't chipped. The First, whoever that was, did not have direct control over him in that sense – but how long might it be before the Satrigorn lost his mind completely? Clearly, he was resisting the influence of the telepathic field and it was having an adverse effect on him. Could he still end up like Rumi or Belrin?

The Doctor had to find out more. He still did not know anything about the gateway Jandar had mentioned earlier. He still didn't know why the Satrigorns were being evolved – or by whom. His ignorance gnawed at him, amplifying his feeling of impotence. He had to find answers before the telepathic matrix integrated his companions completely. He knew nothing that might convince him otherwise. And if that happened, he would lose them. Already they were beginning to doubt their own realities. Tom worried him most of all with all his talk about sonic screwdrivers and his assertions that the Doctor had built him one. Val might also believe in a different reality without any of them even knowing it yet. If he couldn't get them out of here, it was only going to worsen.

Jandar was the closest thing to a solution that the Doctor had at that moment and the only reasonable chance of finding out what was happening on this planet. It was time to get some answers. He crawled over to the Satrigorn and fixed him with such a glare that Jandar pressed himself up against the wall of the ventilation shaft as though trying to push his way through it.

"What is the gateway?" the Doctor asked, his tone harsh.

Jandar sat staring at the Doctor with dead eyes that contained not a flicker of emotion. His mouth had compressed into a thin line as though he were clenching his teeth to keep from speaking. His whole body was rigid.

The Doctor's own eyes narrowed to slits as he studied the adolescent in front of him. "Say something," he demanded but Jandar remained motionless. Tightening his jaw against his rising frustration, the Doctor reached out and slapped Jandar hard across the face. The force whipped the young man's head around to one side but the Satrigorn simply turned back to face the Doctor, not saying a word.

The Doctor had had enough. He launched himself at Jandar, wrapping his hands around the Satrigorn's neck. All of his senses seemed to enliven at once. Beneath his hands, Jandar's skin was hot. His knees felt uncomfortable from kneeling in the ventilation shaft. The buzzing from the LED lights hummed in his head.

Something felt wrong.

The Doctor launched himself at Jandar, wrapping his hands around the Satrigorn's neck. All of his senses seemed to enliven at once. Beneath his hands, Jandar's skin was hot. The buzzing from the LED lights hummed in his head.

Something felt wrong.

The Doctor launched himself at Jandar, wrapping his hands around the Satrigorn's neck. All of his senses... The buzzing from the LED lights hummed in his head...

Something felt wrong.

The buzzing . . . it hummed . . .

The Doctor launched himself... *What is the gateway?* ...himself at Jandar... *Gateways lead somewhere.* ...wrapping his hands around... *The buzzing...*

Something . . . was . . . wrong . . . The Doctor *pushed* at that sound.

The Doctor launched... *Where did this gateway lead?* An incessant hum pressed down on his mind. The Doctor *pushed* at it harder...

* * * * *

The Doctor stared across the entrance of the ventilation shaft to where Jandar still sat huddled to one side. Like last time, this hallucination had caught the Doctor completely unaware. Then he had been able to resist the effects of the telepathic field as soon as he had started to become lucid. This time the Doctor had literally fought to free his mind from the manipulation. Knowing that he was slowly yielding to the telepathic integration troubled him in ways that he had not felt for some time.

The Satrigorn stared back at the Doctor, his wide eyes sparkling with some unidentifiable emotion. Perhaps it was fear. Val and Tom lay on their sides a little further up the tunnel, both motionless. The Doctor crawled over to them, running his hands over their bodies, searching for signs of life. To his relief both were breathing, their chests rising and falling steadily. As expected, both Tom and Val's eyes flickered back and forth with the unmistakable rhythm of REM sleep.

The Doctor sat back on his heels, hands resting in his lap as he watched over his companions who lay sprawled side by side in front of him. They looked peaceful in spite of the horrors that they might be enduring right at that very moment. The thought upset him, his lips compressing, eyes softening but the Doctor didn't allow himself to indulge in his wistful contemplation for long. He turned back to regard Jandar, shifting around in the low ceilinged room to confront the Satrigorn. The Doctor squared his shoulders.

"Right," he said firmly. "What is this gateway and where is it?"

Jandar hesitated. "You pulled away from the Gods," he breathed. So, it was awe that

shimmered in the Satrigorn's eyes.

"The gateway," the Doctor urged, trying not to let his impatience seep into his voice. "Tell me about it."

"You pulled away. The Gods came to you and you – you turned away." The Satrigorn looked both appalled and impressed. The combination was disconcerting. The Doctor sighed.

"You are resisting the telepathic field too," the Doctor pointed out, watching Jandar closely for his reaction. "My companions are unconscious. You are not."

"The Gods have turned away from me," he said, lowering his eyes to his lap. Suddenly they snapped up, fear flooding his features. "Don't tell anyone. Please. I'll be locked up. I guard the prison and I see what happens to the people brought here. I see the – the *thing* they put in their hands. I don't know what it is but I see what it does to them. The prisoners aren't people anymore. They become – something else. Please don't tell anyone!"

It was the longest and most coherent speech the Doctor had heard from the young Satrigorn. And there was something else. Beneath Jandar's rational and entirely understandable fear ran a current of defiance. It was small but it was there – the tiny thread of rebellion that had prompted the Satrigorn to help them. That this young man had begun to find himself again in spite of the effect of telepathic field gave the Doctor hope.

"You didn't raise the alarm," the Doctor told him. "And I won't share your secret."

Jandar nodded his appreciation. "Only a God would be able to spurn other Gods and get away with it, I think," he said, smiling up at the Doctor reverently.

The Doctor sighed. Independent and critical thinking might take Jandar a while yet.

"The gateway?" the Doctor urged. Behind him, he heard Tom and Val stir. He turned only briefly to make sure that they were well. Val sat wrapped in Tom's arms, her face ashen. Tom stared over the top of her head at nothing. They were alive. That was all that could matter for the time being.

"We have been building the gateway for generations. The Gods have shown us the way." Jandar tapped the side of his head gently. "In here."

"And what is the gateway for?"

"To take us to our rightful place," Jandar responded dutifully. "Often when the First speaks we are told that the gateway will lead us to the place that was promised to the Colony and that we, as their creations, will take back what was theirs. We will be rewarded for our service."

The Doctor didn't like the sound of that one bit. In fact, he hadn't liked the sound of this gateway from the very first moment that Jandar had mentioned it. He had hoped that it might have been a metaphoric phrase for something mundane and harmless but he wasn't ignorant enough to have actually believed that. The Satrigorn were building some form of vortex manipulator or wormhole creator.

"So you've seen the First?" The Doctor queried, darting another quick look over his shoulder. Val had her face turned into Tom's shirt.

"Oh no! The Colony is veiled. We dare not look upon the Gods nor have the First speak to us with his own voice."

"Whose voice does he speak with then?" the Doctor asked, eyebrows drawing down to frame inquiring eyes. He dared not be too elaborate with his questioning now that the Satrigorn was actually providing him with some useful information.

"It is rare but when the Gods speak with us, it is in here," Jandar said, tapping his temple with one finger. "Usually Commander Keer speaks with the authority of the Gods." Jandar spoke as though what he was saying were common knowledge and the Doctor supposed that on

Satrigon, it was.

“We need to get out of here.”

The Doctor turned. Val was sitting up straighter now but her eyes were haunted. “Something is changing in me, Doctor,” she murmured in a vague voice that bore little resemblance to the feisty, practical or even brusque tone that she usually used. “I’m losing myself. For a moment I could *feel* the Satrigorns.”

“You need to fight it,” the Doctor said, his voice stern. “Someone is raising an army and unless you want to become a part of it then you’d better get a hold of yourself. I won’t have my companions running off to join the invasion of some far flung galaxy; do you hear me, Miss Rossi?”

The speech was ridiculous he knew, but it had the desired effect. Val looked at him with a mixture of confusion and offence. After a moment, Val’s lips spread into a small smile.

“No, sir. Of course not, sir,” she said, saluting.

Tom on the other hand, seemed to be lost in his own thoughts. “These hallucinations – they’re not entirely fabricated. They are possibilities – possible versions of us. If we’re being evolved like the Satrigorns then wouldn’t the brain be trying to work out what kind of thinking it will be doing? What kind of people we will be?”

The smile fell from Val’s face. She looked disturbed all over again, though whether her concern was for Tom or for herself the Doctor couldn’t tell. The Doctor was beginning to feel a fair amount of concern for his own self. If Tom’s theory was correct then what did that say about him? So far he had only hallucinated about killing and torturing people. He would have plenty of time to live, regenerate and evolve. Is that the kind of person he would become, given enough time?

“You said you’ve been building the gateway for generation,” the Doctor said, returning his attention to Jandar. “When will it be ready? When will the Satrigorn leave?”

The Satrigorn might take another two hundred years to mobilise their forces and launch an attack on whatever star system they intended on conquering. Getting his companions to safety was his first priority if that were the case. They wouldn’t last much longer within the influence of the telepathic field. He wasn’t even sure if *he* could. That would be the last thing the universe needed – subservient Time Lord leading armies to war on the whim of an unknown aggressor.

Jandar smiled broadly then frowned as though realising that he wasn’t supposed to be so full of pride anymore. The poor young man had no idea which feelings were his, and which had been created for him. “The order has only just been given. The journey is to begin at the end of this cycle,” he said.

The Doctor’s brow furrowed. “Do you mean the current solar cycle – at the end of the year? Or do you mean one of the lunar cycles? There are four moons orbiting this planet – which one?”

Jandar cocked his head to one side as though unsure of what the Doctor was asking him.

“No,” he said finally. “This cycle. At nightfall.”

* * * * *

Crawling through a ventilation shaft could have been much more uncomfortable than it actually was. Fortunately, Satrigorn were much taller than humans. Therefore, this tunnel – which she supposed would see the occasional maintenance worker – had a slightly higher ceiling than any other she had crawled through recently.

Val readjusted the gun stuffed into her waistband at the small of her back and smiled, a wry twist of lips that held no humour. Chasing the Doctor through a ventilation shaft on an alien planet shouldn't feel like a relatively normal event. Yet it did.

The Doctor had muttered something about the TARDIS 'doing it to him again' and had taken off down the ventilation shaft, propelling Jandar in front of him like some kind of hunting dog that needed more coaxing than should have been necessary. It had only been after about twenty minutes of crawling that the reality of the situation had sunk in. The Satrigorn were going to invade at sunset.

Val felt sorry for the inhabitants of whichever planet the Satrigorns were going to invade. At the same time, she couldn't help but to wonder what the point of trying to stop them was. Wars were waged everywhere – in every place and in every time, she had learned. What difference did one more make?

Part of her felt heartless for thinking in such a way. Normally she would be much happier to play her part in helping the Doctor prevent such a travesty. This was a different situation however. Right now, she couldn't even be certain that what she was doing was really happening. She had no way of telling whether this was just a hallucination and every time she came out of another one, the difficulty in distinguishing fantasy from reality became a little harder. She was beginning to over think the possibilities and doing so was placing such an enormous strain on her that she had no choice but to try to suppress the thoughts entirely whenever they surfaced. Thinking on them too long would surely send her insane – if she wasn't headed in that direction already.

When she awoke from a hallucination, how did she know that she had awakened? What if she was just shifting from one hallucination to another? What if they had never actually landed on Satrigon at all? Maybe something had gone wrong with the TARDIS – she had heard the Doctor talk about telepathic circuits and their like. What if they were still speeding through the Time Vortex on their way to the Eye of Orion?

This line of questioning had become standard in the last couple of hours. Val couldn't help but think that she might wake up on the TARDIS floor at any moment. In many ways, she hoped that she would. Val figured she might be happier knowing that the last few hours hadn't happened at all. Doubting her own mind was wearing on her, and once she started mentally interrogating herself, one question invariably led to another.

With that very thought, a new series of questioning forced its way into her mind, burrowing like a worm into her brain.

What if she was lying in a hospital bed somewhere surrounded by doctors? What if her whole life was the creation of a tormented mind trapped in a coma? After all, Val was exploring the universe in a time-travelling spaceship that looked like a blue police box with a man called the Doctor. If that didn't sound completely bonkers, nothing did.

Surrounded by doctors. The Doctor.

Val stumbled, landing on one forearm roughly, hair falling into her face. She paused in that awkward position, unwilling to resume her crawling as a rising fear threaded its way through her. Pressing her forehead into her fist, she drew in a deep breath to try to control her growing panic. Val's head rang and her chest ached with the possibility that all of this – meeting the Doctor, travelling with him through all of time and space – could be a lie.

Tom reached out from behind her to place a gentle hand on her ankle. "Are you okay?" he asked and Val felt her angst begin to subside.

No. Tom was real. She had to believe that. Tom was real and she would hang onto that.

“Just had a moment,” she said in a low voice. *A BLUE box. That’s mad* – Val squashed the thought ruthlessly. “I’ll be alright. This planet is just, getting to me.”

Tom patted Val’s ankle, the only part of her he could reach. “Yeah, me too,” he admitted. “We’ll be out of here soon, Val. We will.”

Val clung to his words.

* * * * *

By the time Jandar and the Doctor had led them all out of the ventilation shaft, Tom was thoroughly sick of crawling. The shaft had come out on top of a small outbuilding somewhere within the forest where they had first come upon the Satrigorn soldiers after leaving the TARDIS.

Tom placed his hands on both hips and leaned back, stretching his back out. Val stood with her arms raised above her head, tilting her body from side to side. The Doctor turned from Jandar to sweep a glance across at his companions.

“Mr. Brooker. Miss Rossi. Still with me, I hope?” The Doctor’s eyes narrowed slightly as he examined each of them in turn, his eyes lingering a moment longer on Val.

“That depends on what the plan is,” Tom said, peering into the trees for any sign of the Satrigorns. “We need to get back to the TARDIS, Doctor. I’m not even sure that we’re actually having this conversation and Val says she can *feel* the Satrigorns. That sounds an awful lot like integration. I don’t want to think about how close that is to being complete.”

The Doctor chewed the inside of his bottom lip thoughtfully, green eyes misting over as his mind turned inwards. Tom glanced over at Val who looked back at him and shrugged.

“We can’t,” the Doctor said after a time. “The Satrigorns have built a machine that can create a wormhole and Jandar here says that they are ready to invade at nightfall. If we are lucky – *really* lucky – the wormhole will only be able to traverse through space. Even if that is the case, the Satrigorns could move an entire army across the universe in a moment. The result would be devastating.”

“And how many other wars are being fought, Doctor - right now at this very moment?” Val challenged. She shoved her thumbs into her pockets, a milder version of putting her hands on her hips. “What makes this one any different?”

The Doctor fixed Val with such an expression that Tom wanted to shrink back on her behalf. The Doctor clasped his hands and stood like that, motionless, staring at Val with alien eyes that shone with the light of a thousand memories. That look always made Tom wonder if he had ever really known the Doctor; made him wonder if he ever really could. That expression was as physical a barrier as any solid wall. Once the Doctor put up that wall, there was no getting inside.

“The gateway,” the Doctor snapped, breaking the trance. “That’s what makes this war different, Miss Rossi. Do you want the entire population of a planet that is under the control of a warmongering psychopath landing on your doorstep? Earth wouldn’t stand a chance. Not many planets do when ambushed like that. You should see it. A whole planet –” he sliced his hand like a knife through the air in front of him, “– cut down before they even know what has happened. *That* could happen to Earth in the blink of an eye.” The Doctor began to pace, the forefingers of his left hand pressed into the side of his forehead. He turned his irritation on Tom.

“Do you have any idea how many times I’ve had to stop someone from obliterating your planet or enslaving your species – and now you want me just to walk away just because you two

are feeling a little unsure of yourself? Gah!”

The Doctor’s anger emanated off him in waves. He stood staring at Tom and Val as though challenging them to contradict or even attempt answering him. Suddenly he glanced up at the sun, perhaps noticing for the first time that it was already well on its way towards the horizon. The misty sunlight washed the trees with a soft orange light, making the red foliage glow.

The Doctor prodded at Jandar, urging him out in front of him. “Show me where this gateway is,” he ordered sharply and then jogged off into the trees leaving Tom and Val with no choice but to follow.

Val was the first to chase after him, tapping Tom on the elbow. “He’s just feeling guilty,” she said quietly as she loped past.

Tom opened his mouth to respond but the Doctor spoke instead, calling back through the trees. “If Jandar is wrong and the gateway looks like it won’t be completed for some time, we’ll return to the TARDIS. We can come back another time.”

Tom sighed. It was the closest thing to an apology as they were ever going to get. “Yeah, I know,” he said to Val, even though she was already out of earshot. “He’s just got a mad way of showing that he cares.”

Tom shook his head and ran to catch up.

* * * * *

With one hand, the Doctor shielded his eyes from the late afternoon sun. He lay on his stomach amongst the trees growing along a rocky outcrop, looking up at one of the most impressive – and intimidating – military establishments the Doctor had seen in quite some time. Its complexity astounded him.

Val and Tom lay on either side of him – Tom whispering softly to Val across him as he surveyed the building that dominated their view. Val shifted awkwardly on her elbows, sending tiny streams of ochre-coloured sand tumbling down the steep incline in front of her. The Doctor suspected that it wasn’t the uneven ground making her uncomfortable.

Jandar sat behind them, staring disinterested at the sky. It hadn’t taken the Satrigorn very long to lead them to their awkward hiding place. A narrow game trail that ran through and along the inside edge of the forest meant that they had been able to follow the river while remaining hidden within the trees. That wide river now twinkled with pale amber jewels of sunlight, serving the Doctor with the constant reminder that the sun was significantly past its zenith.

The path of the river divided the land, bending back on itself to create a narrow strip of land that sat nestled within the curvature of the water flowing around it.

At the top of the river bend, opposite the narrow peninsula and across from where the Doctor now lay, a military base loomed starkly against the sky.

The Doctor smiled without any trace of humour. That peninsula looked like a finger, pointing at the base accusingly. *Appropriate and completely justified*, the Doctor thought. Along that peninsula, in the shadow of the building across the river, lay a settlement – if it could be called that. It was more of a shantytown. He couldn’t see anything that looked like decent shelter. Instead, houses constructed from whatever materials people had been able to scavenge, dotted the landscape. The lucky ones had pieces of tin or corrugated iron roped together to form something that imitated housing. Other had tents and tarpaulins. Most were a combination of both. Two bridges extended out from the settlement and crossed the river to either side of the

base where people wandered back and forth, going about their duties.

“That’s where your people live while the Colony builds its war machine?” the Doctor said, glaring back at Jandar.

“Of course not!” The Satrigorm looked offended. “Only those who cannot work live in the Holding – the very young and the elderly – and childbearing women,” he added, almost as an afterthought. “Everyone else serves the Colony. I began my service at seven solar cycles,” Jandar said, a proud cast to his features.

The Doctor and Val sniffed their derision simultaneously but Tom sat up, leaning around to face Jandar. “The Holding? So that’s the foundation of your economy?” he said, pointing a finger out at the opposite side of the river. “That’s the pride of your advanced species – child slave labour and stolen wealth?”

Jandar said nothing. He shifted a little to extract what looked to be a food bar from his pocket and began to eat. Tom threw him a dirty look and turned his back on him. The Doctor glanced over as Tom settled back down beside him.

“They’re still finding their way,” he said to Tom. “Almost every species builds their empire on the backs of a slave class – and the Satrigorm have less of a choice in the matter than say, the human species did.”

The Doctor didn’t necessarily mean the comment to be an insult but the expression on Tom’s face clearly told him that he took it that way. It was the truth though and no amount of diplomatic fast talk was going to change that fact. The Doctor settled in to focus on the puzzle in front of him – the problem at hand.

Behind the main building of the military base stood an enormous archway of brass that looked like a figure-eight with the bottom dug into the ground. The gateway twisted into the shape of a Mobius so that its edges ran around both the inside and the outside of the circle.

“I wonder whether that pattern continues beneath the ground,” he said, drawing the pattern in his mind.

“What?” Val asked.

From this distance the gateway looked like a halo that arched over the square building but the Doctor estimated that it must have been at least a couple of hundred metres behind it. It was also large enough that a hundred Satrigorm could walk through it shoulder to shoulder. Not that anyone would ever walk through it of course. No one could survive the Vortex without some kind of shielding. Even the TARDIS could be destroyed or damaged within the Time Vortex if the proper precautions were not observed.

“They must have ships somewhere – and only for one trip I’d say,” the Doctor thought aloud.

“What kind of ships?” Tom asked.

The contraption was sure to be crude at best, despite its grandiose appearance. The Doctor was sure of it. This was not the kind of technology designed for frequent space-time travel. The gateway – the wormhole creator – would be a one-way superhighway and at that moment, it wasn’t active. The Doctor could see straight through it to the hills beyond.

“What are those things around the building?” Val asked, pointing at four electrical resonant transformer circuits that grew out of the ground. They stood in a square around the building, one cylindrical pylon at each corner, each coiled with copper spirals that served to conduct the energy produced. They would almost certainly then feed that energy into a reactor. The transformer circuits towered into the sky surpassing the building by half its height again. Nevertheless, they were still not as tall as the gateway.

These solid-state coils had three major functions as far as the Doctor could tell. The first was to power the gateway. The coils spun at an incredible speed, whirring almost silently at a velocity that created enough electromagnetic energy that it could easily outstrip the output of any number power stations the Doctor had come across.

“And there it is,” the Doctor said softly, forgetting that Val had asked him a question.

A flat dish the shape of an enormous hexagonal frame drum hung suspended between the tops of the pylons. The Doctor lay motionless as he contemplated this second function of the structure. The coils on the transformers would produce a range of frequencies and digital switching circuitry would turn the coils on and off within the audio range required. The Doctor estimated that the circuits would cut in and out at intervals of about 20 times per second in order to produce a frequency of 20-Hz, a low resonance modulation that would generate a square wave – if the digital circuits were one hundred percent accurate of course. The gathered wave, together with the electromagnetic radiation by-product could then be unleashed through the disc as a pulse, aimed at any object designated by the targeting system.

The Doctor had found the long-range sonic canon that had shot at his TARDIS.

Veins popped out in his neck as he clenched his teeth. The very sight of it offended him. Undoubtedly, its function was to protect the base from any perceived threats. And the TARDIS had flown right within its reach. That was the problem with the emergency protocols. Going into free-float without first having the chance to run a scan of the TARDIS’ exterior meant that the TARDIS could end up rematerializing in the middle of an asteroid belt. That was always dangerous.

The Doctor’s mind turned to the final function of the coiled transformers and this foul mood was only exacerbated. This purpose was a little more ambiguous unless the person observing the structure knew what to look for – or could feel it, as the Doctor could.

Something needed to power the thousands of transmitters installed along the curved arch of the gateway. Each antenna was positioned in a slightly different configuration and sent out a signal that the Doctor could reasonably theorise was part of a much wider system. To create such a web there would need to be a number of these positioned across the planet.

“Those –,” the Doctor said, pointing at the rooftop, “– are transmitting the matrix that supports the telepathic signals coming from somewhere within the building. There must be a computer mainframe controlling all of this technology – the matrix, the power, everything. I need to get to it.”

“Oh, you’ve remembered we’re here,” Val said, shifting onto her side to look up at the Doctor. She dusted fine gravel from where it had dug into her skin of her forearms.

“How do you know the signals are coming from the building?” Tom asked. “They might be coming from anywhere. I don’t want to try breaking into a military base if we’re not sure that what we need is in there.”

The Doctor propped himself up on his elbows, eyes distant. “I can feel it,” he said, turning his head as though listening for something. “The web spreads out across the planet from this spot. If I can get to the mainframe I can take it offline.”

“I thought you said the gateway was the priority?” Val said, frowning.

“It is,” the Doctor replied. “The mainframe will control the entire base and the most logical way to deactivate the gateway is to disengage the power.”

“So, we just turn off the power and that will shut down the gateway, the telepathic field *and* that thing that looks like an EMP – which judging from the look on your face is what shot the TARDIS?” Tom asked. “Ah yes, definitely. Okay, well that’s too easy. Let’s go.”

“It’s a sonic cannon,” the Doctor corrected. *What look on his face?* “And you know just as well as I do that flicking a switch just won’t do, Mr. Brooker. There will be safety precautions and an emergency system. The whole system needs to be shut down using the correct sequencing. Only then can we destroy the mainframe – once it is offline.”

Tom squinted at the massive weapon. “Simple mistake,” he said. “Anyway, I’m sure you can just, I don’t know – reverse the polarity of the neutron flow in the mainframe, or something?” Tom asked.

“What – and kill us all?” the Doctor snorted. “I need to take the mainframe offline, not blow it up. Destroying the transformers without taking them offline first would release a devastating amount of energy. Shutting everything down is going to have devastating consequences for the Satrigorns regardless of how careful I am.”

“Wait,” Val said. “If the Satrigorns are going to travel through the gateway, won’t that mean they will move beyond the influence of the telepathic field?”

The Doctor shot a surprised look at Val, his eyes widening slightly. “I don’t know,” he said, sounding astonished even to him. “I can feel the field originating from here. Perhaps this Colony will take the computer with them?” Even as he said it, the Doctor knew it sounded ridiculous. He didn’t like what the field was doing to him. Methodical thinking seemed to be more difficult on this planet. “All the more reason why the gateway – and this telepathic field – needs to be destroyed.”

“So you’re going to send the Satrigorns back to the Stone Age then?” Val asked. The Doctor could tell just by looking at her that Val was wondering what would happen to the Satrigorns once their unnatural evolution had ceased. Miss Rossi was inquisitive like that – always thinking a few steps ahead. She didn’t seem to be having any trouble thinking straight at the moment.

“Not quite,” the Doctor answered. “Destroying the telepathic field won’t reverse their evolution.”

“How are we supposed to get inside?” Tom asked, squinting at the base. “The area around the building is completely exposed. There are people everywhere – soldiers and workers. Servants too I’m guessing. What if we can’t get in?”

The Doctor sighed heavily. He was still working on that part of the plan. “We don’t have much of a choice. We’ll have to create some kind of a diversion so I can get inside. Trying to shut everything down without going to the mainframe would mean we’d have to destroy the transformers and that would take a lot of energy.”

“Is that an option?” Val asked. “How do we do that?”

“It’s *not* an option,” the Doctor answered, his tone hard. “Something like the Time Vector Generator from the TARDIS could deliver enough radio static energy to the transformers but that would almost certainly set up a relay loop. It would blow up half the base and –” The Doctor turned to look over his shoulder. “Where’s Jandar?” he asked suddenly. All three turned around to look for the Satrigorn. He was gone.

“Move!” the Doctor commanded, scrambling to his feet and grabbing Val by the arm to haul her up. She looked around confused but leapt to her feet.

Tom was much slower to move. “What are we panicking for? We should just wait here for him,” he said, casually climbing to his feet. “He’s probably just taking a –”

“He’s too unpredictable” the Doctor interrupted. “He might be bringing soldiers. I’m surprised it took him this long. I’d hoped...” The Doctor trailed off, turning to run back into the trees behind them but Tom didn’t move to follow. Instead, he tipped his head to one side, a small

smile on his lips.

“Calm down, Doctor. The Satrigorn just want to serve this Colony of theirs. Maybe we should just help them out.”

The Doctor stopped, fine gravel grinding beneath his shoes as he spun to glare at Tom. He dropped Val’s arm, his eyes honing in on Tom. Tom jerked back and looked around as if suddenly aware that he was standing.

“Doctor?” he whispered, confusion and fear creasing his brow. “What’s happening? I felt them. The Satrigorns. Felt them inside my head...”

Val reached out to Tom, empathy lining her face. “It’s okay. Come on,” she said gently.

Tom nodded and gave himself a little shake, which did nothing to shed the uncertainty on his face.

“Come on!” the Doctor snapped, snatching Val’s arm again and dragging her towards the forest. This time Tom followed without hesitation, plunging into the trees after them.

* * * * *

Snapping branches and the rustle of leaves marked their path through the forest as the trio ran. Val yanked her arm back from the Doctor, looking back over her shoulder as she ran. Tom was still behind them, fighting through the willowy branches that flicked back at him after Val and the Doctor had pushed through the undergrowth before him. “Maybe Jandar did just wander off...” Val began but a shout from somewhere in front of them drew everyone up short.

All three strained their ears to hear where the commotion was coming from. “This way,” the Doctor said, changing direction and lunging into the more densely growing trees off to one side. Val turned to wait for Tom but he was already running. He passed Val, catching her hand as he moved past and pulling her along behind him. Val whipped around, staggering after him.

“Where are we going?” Val called up towards the Doctor who was fast disappearing ahead of them. She saw him leap suddenly, crashing into the trees, arms flailing wildly.

“Watch your step, Rossi!” he called without looking back and continued on, not answering her question. Val let go of Tom’s hand as they came upon a small brook trickling along the forest floor. She leapt across the rocky stream, slipping on a patch of moss on the other side. Val fell, landing awkwardly in a lilac-coloured shrub, sharp thorns biting into the bare flesh on her arms and legs. She shouted her surprise and pain as she struggled to disentangle herself. Val stumbled to her feet just as the sounds of pursuit reached her ears and she shot a desperate glance back across the tiny rivulet.

Tom stood with her back to her. Val frowned. “Tom,” Val called across to him, an uncertain quaver to her voice. “Let’s go.”

Tom did not turn. Instead, he walked away from her on unsteady legs to bend and peer into the trees. Val stared. “Come on!” she shouted at him. What was he doing? She stood frozen, poised on the ball of one foot and ready to run as Tom turned slowly to look at her over his shoulder at her. Confusion and sorrow warred on his face and Val opened her mouth to call to him. He shook his head, silencing her. He closed his eyes as three Satrigorn soldiers burst from the trees behind him, led by Jandar.

The shock snapped Tom out of his stupor and he lurched away from them. Two of the soldiers pounced on him before he taken a step, hauling him back.

“Tom!” Val screamed, moving to jump back across the brook. From behind her, a crashing of leaves resolved into the Doctor. His hand wrapped around her wrist, fingers digging

into her skin as he dragged her back into the trees.

“No!” she shouted, pulling at him but the Doctor didn’t let go. “Run!” he hissed but Val put all of her effort into trying to get away from him. A fired shot hissed over their heads and Val dropped, still hanging from the Doctor’s arm to dangle at his feet.

“We’ll get him back,” the Doctor promised, yanking Val roughly to her feet. Tears of frustration stung the back of her eyes. Val gave once last, futile tug at the Doctor’s arm and gave up. She turned and fled as another shot cut through the air above her, her guilt at leaving Tom tearing through her. She’d promised...

Together the Doctor and Val stumbled through the forest. Sharp branches leapt out at them, brambles catching on her clothes as though trying to deliberately slow her. Her hair whipped in her face, obscuring her view. Behind them, the soldiers shouted for them to stop, voices deep and resonant with the authority of one military-trained. The Doctor plunged on, pulling Val towards a rocky outcrop. He shoved her to the ground, skidding down beside her to slither beneath an overhang that barely left a gap above the forest floor. Val didn’t need any more encouragement. She wiggled in beside him and the Doctor dragged a fallen branch across the opening.

“We have to go back for Tom,” Val whispered but the Doctor nudged her warningly with his elbow. Footsteps crunching among the leaf litter struck Val silent and she held her mouth close to her forearm, trying to muffle her ragged breathing. Her heart thudded in her chest, so loud that she thought that the Satrigorn could surely hear it. The smell of damp earth and peat filled her nose. Beside her, the Doctor peered out of the gap, eyes focused entirely on the movement outside. Val was too afraid even to do that. Shifting her head so that she could see might disturb something on the forest floor and bring the Satrigorn down on them.

Something moved beneath her right leg and she squeezed her eyes shut, too nervous even to hold her breath. She tried to regulate her breathing – anything to try to be more silent. Long, slow breaths. Quiet. The warm breath on her arm helped her to focus her attention on calming herself.

Long moments passed and the footsteps grew quieter, the sound finally vanishing altogether. That was when Val realised that she still had Jandar’s gun digging into her back. The awareness sent a wave of regret crashing down on her. She wanted to throw her head back and howl with despair.

The Doctor placed one hand lightly on Val’s arm. “We need to get back to the TARDIS,” he whispered and Val looked at him, horrified. “We can’t leave –”

Val sat watching the sunset over the water. If she squinted, she could just make out Venus shining above the horizon, the flickering starlight barely discernible in the orange and scarlet blaze of the setting sun. Something about the distant planet stirred her thoughts – a memory of a memory that flowed in to brush the edges of her mind and ebbed away again like the gentle waves that lapped at her feet – in and out. With each new wave, the memory came closer, tantalising her with the sensation that she might soon be able to grasp it and remember. The possibility filled her with excitement and summoned the sense of wonder that had been secretly nestled in her heart for as long as she could remember. That yearning rose up and washed over her, her heart twisting in her chest, tears springing to her eyes. She had lost something so great. Was losing something? Was *going* to lose something? Val frowned. Something didn’t make sense.

Movement at her side diverted her attention and Val turned her head to see a silhouette approaching. She smiled as the faceless person sat at her side, joining Val in her silent vigil.

Instantly the profound sense of loss began to evaporate. It was still there of course, a small thing that lingered deep within her and always would, but the sharp immediacy of that pain was gone. Another gentle smile touched her lips.

“Surrender, Doctor!” The words boomed through Val’s mind, cutting into the vision of her twilight dreaming and scattering the images like clouds before an oncoming storm. The visuals were replaced abruptly with a *sense* of the Doctor and – someone else. Val could not see them – not in the traditional sense. Instead, she felt them.

“We have your companion.”

In her mind, Val gasped. *Tom*. What would they do to him? Would the Satrigorns wait for his integration or would they implant one of those computer chips into him as they had with the other prisoners? Would they use him to get to the Doctor? They wanted the Doctor for some reason. Would the Satrigorns kill Tom if the Doctor didn’t surrender?

Her terror and guilt at leaving Tom tumbled through her body as the weight of her helplessness threatened to overwhelm her. Not for the first time, Val hoped desperately that this wasn’t real. The sense of her own impotence seared her soul. So caught up in her own fear, Val almost didn’t grasp the next words that battered into her mind.

“It is only a matter of time before we have you too, Doctor,” the voice continued. *“You can run but you will come to us in the end – willing or not. I will be waiting.”*

The Doctor. Val felt her anger burn to a white heat, turning her heart to lead. It was always about the Doctor.

* * * * *

“...I will be waiting.”

The Doctor *pressed* at the voice, forcing the presence from his mind. The entity invading his thoughts snapped back, fleeing – but the Doctor was unsure whether that was because he had successfully managed to resist, or if the owner of the voice had left of his own accord.

He turned to Val at his side, his eyes meeting hers in the shadow cast by the rock under which they hid.

“Val?”

The light in her eyes and the grim expression on her face seemed an unusual response to the threats that had been broadcast into their minds. The Doctor did not doubt that Val had heard it. The telepathic field would transmit without discrimination. Everyone would have heard the demand for his surrender.

When Val didn’t respond to the Doctor’s questioning look, the Doctor shrugged and began to crawl out from under the ledge. He turned to help Val but she ignored his proffered hand, scrambling out of the small space on her own.

“As I was saying –” the Doctor said, trying to distract Val from what had just happened, “– we have to get to the TARDIS.” The Doctor scanned the sky through the leafy canopy, noting the position of the sun. They were northeast of the TARDIS, about... Val was still silent and the Doctor cut short his survey, turning back to Val.

“No,” she said when their eyes finally met.

“Miss Rossi, we need to –”

“I said no,” Val said, turning away from him to head back the way they had come, but the Doctor dropped one hand onto her shoulder to prevent her from leaving. “Let go of me!” she yelled suddenly and the Doctor drew back at the vehemence in her voice.

“I’m going back for Tom,” she declared, her anger giving way to panic again as her voice began to rise in pitch. “I said I wouldn’t leave him.”

“Miss –”

“I *promised* I wouldn’t leave him.” Val was looking everywhere except at the Doctor, refusing to listen to reason. She turned to try to leave again but the Doctor leapt in front of Val. He gripped her by the shoulders and brought his face close to hers so that she had no choice but to acknowledge him. “Miss Rossi –”

“Stop it!” Her eyes were wide with anxiety. She pulled away from the Doctor. “Spare me the persuasive Time Lord crap.”

“Val, listen to me! There’s no time. If we don’t do this, Tom is as good as dead. We all are. You have to calm down or you’ll get him killed.”

Val recoiled sharply, anger burning in her eyes. She drew back one arm and the Doctor had time only to look at Val curiously before her hand struck him hard across his left cheek, biting into his lip and whipping his head around. Her mouth dropped open in surprise but the shock was short-lived. Val’s face contorted into fury.

“Don’t you dare say that,” Val said, stumbling back from the Doctor. “Don’t you dare make this about me. This is about you. It’s *always* about you.”

Trying to ignore the sting, the Doctor wiped at this corner of his mouth, a thin spot of blood smearing onto his thumb. He had to get Val out of here – and Tom. The effect of the telepathic field was clearly taxing her.

“You need to listen to what I’m saying,” he said in a low and insistent voice. “We need the TARDIS. They may know where we are and they certainly know we are coming. We can’t simply walk into the base now. We’ll be able to take the TARDIS directly inside.”

That wasn’t entirely true. The Doctor hoped he would be able to get the TARDIS into the base. Unfortunately, the concentration of telepathic and temporal energy emanating from that control centre would make materialising the TARDIS so close to such a disturbance virtually impossible. The TARDIS had been attracted to the telepathic field in the first place. That would be what had torn them from the Time Vortex – but the fact that the TARDIS had materialised so far away from the military base had not gone unnoticed by the Doctor.

Val had stopped and was staring grimly at the Doctor. “We’re not leaving Tom behind?” she asked, eyes narrowed suspiciously.

“What do you take me for?” the Doctor asked before he could stop himself. This wasn’t her fault. Val was becoming paranoid. He had to be careful. “We will take the TARDIS directly into the base. It will be easier rescuing Tom once we have everyone off guard.”

Val’s jaw tightened and for a moment she looked as though she might still try to run off. Suddenly she gave one sharp nod and pressed one hand into the small of her back as though pressing out a kink.

“Then let’s go get Tom,” she said and broke into a run.

* * * * *

Adrenaline kept Val going as she ran through the forest long after she thought she would tire. She kept up with the Doctor almost stride for stride despite the path being a difficult one. Branches and low-hanging vines whipped at her as she ploughed through the undergrowth, narrowly avoiding ditches and branches that had fallen across her path.

She wouldn’t be able to keep this up forever, of course. Her worry for Tom kept her

going but soon her physical limitations would begin to take their toll. Every step she took towards the TARDIS felt like one more step away from helping Tom. Val knew that to be illogical. She didn't want to admit it – but the Doctor might be right. The best way to help Tom would be to return to the TARDIS. It was the safest course of action and meant that she could return for Tom even faster than if she had she chased after him. It still didn't feel right though, and her anger lingered.

A treacherous voice crept into her mind as she ran. *What if they got back to the TARDIS and the Doctor simply left?*

Val stumbled over an exposed tree root and she caught herself moments before losing her balance entirely. The Doctor didn't notice and Val regained her footing, continuing to run. They burst from the tree line a few minutes later and once again found themselves at the bottom of the hill where the TARDIS had landed. She would make the Doctor return for Tom. She felt again for the gun hidden beneath her shirt.

"Come on," the Doctor called, snapping her out of her grim contemplations. The Doctor did not pause to see if Val still ran behind him. He leaned forward and shifted his gait to run up the incline. Val followed but discovered that she had reached the end of her tether. Fatigue came crashing down on her as she faltered, almost falling again. This time the Doctor did turn around. He was at her side in moments, grabbing her hand. "Come on," he said again. "No time to lose."

Together the two of them staggered up the hill towards the fold in the land that hid the TARDIS from view. Val breathed heavily, her chest heaving and her side hurting but she pressed on. It was just a little farther.

Both the Doctor and Val darted cautious glances behind them, checking for signs of pursuit as they ran. The light on top of the TARDIS appeared as Val and the Doctor began to crest the hill. Val opened her mouth to speak but the words caught in her throat. She made a strangled sound, her relief cut short. Two Satrigorn soldiers stood either side of the door, guarding the TARDIS.

Val didn't hesitate.

She drew the gun from beneath her shirt and aimed the weapon without breaking her stride. The Doctor's mouth dropped open as Val moved past where he'd stopped to negotiate with the guards. There was no time for that.

"Val!" the Doctor shouted, throwing one hand out as though the gesture could stop her.

"Get out of the way," Val commanded, jerking the gun in the direction she wanted the soldiers to move. Neither stepped aside, although both shifted uncomfortably in their places.

"I'm serious," Val snapped, voice cracking like a whip. She stepped closer, steadying the gun with both hands and squaring her shoulders as she levelled the weapon at the chest of the man standing to her right. "I'm not going to give you another warning."

"Miss Rossi..."

"Is this real, Doctor?" Val asked suddenly, not taking her eyes off the soldier in front of her. "Because if it isn't then I can't really kill him, now can I?"

"Then there would be no point in pulling the trigger," the Doctor pointed out.

His logic, spoken so calmly, caused her mind to reel, which in turn only served to increase her anger. Sometimes Val felt as though everything were normal; that she was certain everything was as it should be. Then the doubts began to creep in. Was she just being paranoid – or was she waking up to the reality that she was hallucinating?

"Is this real?" Val shouted, hands beginning to tremble. If she put down the gun then they wouldn't get to the TARDIS. If she pulled the trigger, she might kill someone. Was she prepared

to do that? She wasn't thinking straight. She needed to help Tom. He wasn't an illusion.

"Yes, this is real," the Doctor said.

"How do you know?" Val demanded, tears pricking the corners of her eyes. "Are *you* even real? Have you ever been real, Doctor?"

Val, still staring at the Satrigorns, did not see the Doctor squeeze his eyes shut briefly, lines of worry etched into his face.

"Well? Are you?" Val repeated, knowing the question to be stupid. A figment of her imagination probably wasn't going to own up to be fictional.

"Of course I am," the Doctor said softly, a downward turn of his mouth the only sign of his disappointment. "Just give me the gun. Don't do something I know you'll regret."

Val ignored him. One of the Satrigorns reached down slowly.

"Don't!" Val said and the guard's hand snapped back up, away from his hip.

"Our lives are forfeit if we ignore our orders to guard this box," the Satrigorn said. "Put down the gun or kill us. We will not stand down."

Val lowered her weapon an inch. She couldn't kill someone, could she? Her finger twitched on the trigger.

"No!" the Doctor shouted, reaching out.

A spray of blood burst forth from the Satrigorn's chest and Val rocked back, her mouth falling open. The gun dropped from her hands and tumbled to land at her feet. The Doctor rushed forward, gathering Val up as she stumbled back from the nightmare playing out in front of her. The second Satrigorn guard collapsed to the ground, another violet flower blossoming in the centre of his chest. Val found her voice and screamed, sliding through the circle of the Doctor's arms to the ground. Fear and confusion paralysed her.

"Val, it's alright – it's alright," the Doctor consoled, having seen what Val had not. He dropped to one knee to try to scoop her up as he watched over his shoulder at Jandar who had stepped out from behind the TARDIS. He held a gun limply at his side.

"I knew them," he said, emotionless eyes sweeping over the dead Satrigorns. He considered them for a moment before looking up at Val and the Doctor. Val stared wide-eyed, her heart racing. "I'm sorry," Jandar said. "For turning you in, I mean. I don't know why I did that." He gestured at the dead guards. "But I fixed it, see?"

"Put the gun down!" the Doctor shouted at Jandar and without any hint of hesitation, the Satrigorn let his weapon fall to the ground as though it were a trifling thing.

The Doctor helped Val to her feet, Val leaning on the Doctor for support as together they staggered to the TARDIS. The Doctor unlocked the door and turned to face Jandar who had followed them; Val still tucked under his arm.

"Can I come with you?" he asked, childish voice emphasising his youth. The Doctor regarded the Satrigorn with an unreadable expression.

"There is nothing I can do for you, Jandar," the Doctor said finally. "You'll have to find your own way." With those words, the Doctor shut the door in the Satrigorn's face.

The sound of the door clicking shut and the abrupt silence that followed made Val realise that she was safely inside the TARDIS. Her face crumpled, relief and shock rushing from her in a wave of emotion. Her whole body shook. "I didn't . . . I wasn't going to . . ."

The Doctor held her awkwardly as Val cried into his arms. Suddenly she jerked back, panic washing over her and filling her with dread. "Tom!" she gasped, scrubbing tears from her face with the back of her hand. "We have to go. We have to get back..." Val tried to pull herself from the Doctor but he held onto her tightly so that she couldn't move away.

“Shhh,” he soothed, holding her steady. “The world can wait. I’ll set the TARDIS to rematerialize in the base five minutes early. That shouldn’t hurt.”

Val looked up; eyes taking in the man who she thought might not be real. The Doctor glanced down at her and shifted self-consciously. He had no idea what he was doing, no idea of how to comfort her, but he was trying anyway. Val forced herself to hold his gaze, biting the inside of her bottom lip to keep it from quivering.

The Doctor drove her mad sometimes. Val couldn’t count the number of times he had dragged her into danger. Of course, the Doctor had never led her anywhere that she hadn’t been prepared to follow, and he had always done everything he could to keep her and Tom safe.

The realisation hit her at full force. Val had grown used to the adventuring. She had become accustomed to living life at breakneck speed. Most of all, Val had grown used to the Doctor. She had come to take him for granted.

Val blinked slowly. She could feel her eyelashes, heavy and wet on her face. She took a deep, steadying breath and tried to get a hold of herself.

This man was no illusion. He had shown her the wonders of the universe – opened her eyes to the vastness of possibility and changed her life in ways that she could not begin to measure. And she would never understand him. He was the Doctor.

Val tried to feed all that emotion – her regret, her gratitude, her apology, into her eyes. She was afraid that if she spoke she wouldn’t be able to maintain her composure. Dissolving into tears would only make the Doctor uncomfortable anyway.

The Doctor gave her a tiny nod, acknowledging her remorse as though he could read her mind. Maybe he could. There was so much about the Doctor she didn’t know – would never know.

Val gently pulled away and tried not to notice the expression of relief that flittered across the Doctor’s face. There was only so much intimacy the Doctor could handle. That much she *did* know.

“Let’s go,” she said, turning her attention to the flight console. Val wouldn’t drag out the apologies. It would only heighten her shame and make things even more awkward. Nor would she let her paranoia get to her. This might not be real, but she would deal with that after they had Tom back.

The Doctor bounded past her, no second invitation required. He locked the doors then whipped around the console, concentrating his attention primarily on the TARDIS scanners. “Five minutes ago,” he said, tapping away at a numeric-style keypad. Val didn’t recognise the symbols.

The Doctor glanced up at the screen and pushed a button. The monitor flickered and he frowned. “Still too much artron energy in the area,” he mused and flicked a row of switches in rapid succession. The TARDIS scanner bleeped.

“Doctor,” Val said impatiently.

“One moment,” the Doctor said, holding one hand up to stall her while he scrutinised the screen. After a moment, he grunted. “I thought the TARDIS had displaced more artron energy than usual when we materialised. I was wrong.”

Val shook her head. “It was bound to happen sooner or later,” she quipped, trying to compensate for her recent behaviour. The Doctor didn’t notice.

“No, don’t you see? I took readings in the forest. There was no artron energy in any of the sentient life forms. Not in the plant life. Not in the creatures. But there is artron energy somewhere – and it wasn’t here when I was here last.”

Val shook her head, exasperation creasing her forehead. “Does that really matter? We need to get Tom.”

“It means that something has changed, Miss Rossi.”

The Doctor began furiously punching at buttons on the scanner and Val jittered, her jaw set in frustration as she watched the Doctor. The scanner beeped again. “The artron energy is in the telepathic field,” the Doctor said, his head bowed in deep thought as he rounded the console. He threw a lever and the TARDIS engines roared to life. “That’s not a good sign.”

“Why not?” Val asked, regretting her question immediately. Asking meant the Doctor would answer.

The Doctor pointed wordlessly at a switch and Val flicked it on. He then pulled down hard on a lever, engaged the inertial dampeners and the TARDIS shuddered as it dematerialised.

“Two reasons,” the Doctor replied, seemingly oblivious to Val’s impatience despite thrusting the space/time throttle immediately into its full position. Clinging to opposite sides of the flight console, Val and the Doctor shifted their balance without conscious thought – Val jerking her arms as though the TARDIS was a horse that she could make go faster.

“One – Only time travellers could have brought artron energy here so either the gateway has already been used or the Colony are time travellers. Two – Integration into the telepathic field means a person’s mind is connected to the mainframe’s transmitter; an electrical component.” The Doctor drew his sonic screwdriver from his pocket, pointing at something on the console. He pressed the button and a spark leapt from one of the switches. “For a time traveller like you that means integration would cause a massive release of artron energy.”

“And that’s a problem because...” Val snipped off her words sharply.

The Doctor brought his fist down on a large button and the TARDIS vibrated. His brow furrowed and he leaned across to peer at the scanner while trying to maintain his grip on the two levers in front of him. “That’s not right,” he muttered.

What’s not right? Val thought, not willing to risk another lengthy conversation by asking the question aloud.

The vibrating TARDIS began to shudder and it slowed as though trying to force its way through the Vortex. As the resistance grew, the shuddering became more and more erratic.

The Doctor gripped the levers tightly, his knuckles turning white.

“Don’t – get – temperamental!” the Doctor roared and Val flinched. It took her a moment to realise that he Doctor was talking to the TARDIS and not to her. “Hang on!” he shouted.

Val grasped the flight console tighter and suddenly the TARDIS *bounced* as though hitting a rubber wall, changing direction abruptly. Val was ripped from the console by the force and tossed backwards. She slid across the floor, slamming into a railing. The Doctor, by some twist of fate, managed to remain on his feet. His forearms flexed as the Doctor fought the controls, his focused attention making it look as though he were piloting the TARDIS through sheer force of will. Perhaps he was.

Val struggled back to her feet, hugging the railing to her chest. Sparks leapt from the console as Val watched, a passenger unable to do anything useful. The Doctor released one of the levers to flip a switch, and the trembling TARDIS gave one final lurch before all sound and movement ceased abruptly.

“What happened?” Val asked, hesitantly releasing her grip on the railing.

“It’s the telepathic field. The TARDIS is refusing to get too close to the matrix’s point of origin.”

Despite having asked the question, Val barely heard his response. She ran for the door

before the Doctor could stop her, opening it a crack. She peered out, then closing her eyes, took a deep breath and closed the door again. Frustration and anxiety churned away in the pit of her stomach.

“We’re not in the building,” she told the Doctor, unable to meet his eyes in her disappointment. “We’re not in the bloody building!” Val turned away from him, pressing her forehead up against the door. She knew it wasn’t the Doctor’s fault. Sometimes the TARDIS seemed to do whatever it liked.

The Doctor came up behind her, placing a hand on one shoulder. She turned, but the Doctor moved her aside gently and opened the door, leaning out of the TARDIS above her.

“We’re closer,” he said. “Much closer. We’re around the other side of the base. Come on. I need you to do me a favour.”

Val cringed. The last time the Doctor had asked her for a favour, she had ended up holding a tripwire for an hour while the Doctor defused a Sontaran mortar.

“What do you need?” Val sighed.

“I need you to convince me to take the Time Vector Generator,” the Doctor answered, striding back across the floor towards the roundels at the opposite end of the room.

“But you said destroying the transformers wasn’t an option,” Val protested, worry creasing tight lines around her eyes. “You said using it could set up a relay loop through the entire system – ‘blow up half the base’, you said.” Nothing frightened Val more than when the Doctor broke his own rules. It meant that things were going downhill – and fast.

“It wasn’t an option,” the Doctor agreed, his tone solemn. “But now it might need to be. We *need* to take this gateway offline.”

Val grabbed the handle of the door again, eager to be looking for Tom. “Why can’t you just sneak into the base and shutdown the mainframe like you were going to before?”

“And like I said before – they have Tom and know we are coming.” The Doctor rubbed his thumb and forefinger along his eyebrows as though trying to smooth away a headache. Val ran her hands through her hair, gripping fistfuls at the back of her head as she struggled to think clearly.

“We don’t know where Tom is, Doctor. You can’t go blowing things up without knowing where he is.” Her voice had begun to creep up an octave.

“No,” the Doctor agreed. “I’m not going to resort to such measures if I don’t have to, Miss Rossi – but I need a Plan B.”

“So take the Time Vector thing then,” Val said, frustrated. “You don’t sound like you need any convincing.”

“The Time Vector Generator will give me enough power to destroy the gateway from a distance if I have to – but removing it from the TARDIS will cut all power to the Dynamorphic Generators. It can severely damage the TARDIS if taken out for too long. Worst-case scenario – the time warp fields leak out of the console and the TARDIS is displaced in time. We’ll be stuck here.”

“Are you asking me to talk you into this, or out of it?” Val moaned, her frustration at breaking point.

“I don’t know,” the Doctor replied in a low voice.

“We both know you’ve already made up your mind, Doctor. Stop trying to absolve yourself of the responsibility.”

The Doctor looked at her. “If I can’t shut it down from the mainframe, I have to use the Time Vector Generator. I don’t have a choice.”

“There’s always a choice,” she said.

“Not for me there isn’t.”

Val met the Doctor’s eyes and said not a word. There was no point and they both knew it. The Doctor turned away from her, reaching up to one of the roundels. “You need to go outside. The Time Vector Generator is the dimensional control unit of the TARDIS. It connects the exoplasmic shell with the TARDIS interior.”

Val looked at the Doctor’s back, a confused twist to her mouth and the Doctor glanced over his shoulder.

“It means the TARDIS will become an ordinary box.”

Val felt her eyebrows begin to climb but she turned and opened the door, stepping out of the TARDIS.

A few moments later, the Doctor emerged holding a long, black rod. It was perhaps a foot in length, maybe a bit longer, with the exposed end capped in gold. The Doctor’s fist hid the other end. The Doctor began closing the door behind him but Val reached out, holding the door open. Inside, the TARDIS was empty. It was as the Doctor had said – an ordinary box. The revelation was as startling as when she had first seen that the TARDIS was bigger on the inside. That was something else that Val had become accustomed to. She shook her head in disbelief and shifted her focus to the Doctor.

“Doctor, I need to find Tom. I need to make sure he’s not in the base.” Val watched the Doctor closely for his reaction but he gave nothing of his thoughts away so she continued. “If I can find him, we can create a diversion so you can get to the mainframe. If he *is* in the base – well, creating a diversion somewhere else will help you get in to rescue him. Either way, I can’t stay with you.”

The Doctor looked set to argue but Val fixed him with a stone look of determination. The Doctor returned the look but when Val said nothing and showed no signs of relenting, his expression became thoughtful. Eventually he nodded. “It seems you too have made up your mind, Miss Rossi. Very well.”

“Try to wait for as long as you can,” Val said, glad the Doctor hadn’t put up a fight. “You can’t get captured or we’re all screwed. I’ll do what I can to divert their attention.”

The Doctor held her eyes. “Good luck,” he said.

“You too, Doctor.”

Val began to walk away.

“And be careful,” the Doctor called after her and Val stopped to look back at him.

“The hallucinations – you have to keep fighting them.” He nodded once, a slow deliberate gesture.

Val returned the nod having already made the decision to keep fighting. She turned her back and headed off into the trees.

* * * * *

Val had no idea where to begin. She trotted along the edge of the forest, scrutinising the landscape around the military base from what she hoped was the relative safety of the tree line.

The entire area bustled with activity. Slaves ran everywhere instead of walking, the children ducking from one Satrigorn to another. Val guessed they were passing on messages. Some carried what may have been refreshments. Others helped with manual labour. Soldiers appeared to be directing workers as they milled about, carrying boxes and tools to and from the

building. One slave carried what looked like a roll of copper wire, another what looked like weapons of some kind.

Val searched for anything that might give her a clue as to where the Satrigorns had taken Tom. He could be anywhere, she knew that, but Val wasn't prepared to give in to her growing despair. Not yet.

She continued her search, squinting at any group of gathered Satrigorns to see if she could spot Tom. Sometimes Val thought she caught a glimpse of him, only for it to turn out to be a slave-child going about their duties. The youths, generally shorter than the adult Satrigorns, were of a height similar to Tom and herself. At one point Val spotted two soldiers carrying a long, slender object between them and Val's heart had caught in her throat until she had figured out that they had been carrying some kind of elongated crate.

Val was getting nowhere. As time went on, she became more and more restless. The Doctor wouldn't wait forever. She would have to create some kind of a diversion soon but had no idea how she was going to do that. Val sat on her heels, peering out of the forest and trying to go through the problem methodically.

If she couldn't find Tom then she was going to have to help the Doctor get inside the base. To do that she would have to get the attention of everyone around the building and draw them away. She certainly had her work cut out for her. The base was surrounded by Satrigorns.

Val sighed. These were trained soldiers. How was she supposed to get them to abandon their posts? The two Satrigorns who had been guarding the TARDIS had made it clear that they were not going to ignore their orders. Of course, that had been a slightly different situation. They had known what they were dealing with. Val needed to shock these people into action – to give the Satrigorns a reason to move from their posts or at least create enough of a distraction that the Doctor could get into the base. Tom had to be in there. Val was sure of that now. He was nowhere else that she could see.

An inkling of regret wormed its way into her. Part of Val wished she had stayed with the Doctor. If Tom was in the building then Val felt like she should be going in there after him – but then who would create the diversion? And how?

Fire.

The thought came suddenly and clearly. Many years ago, in what seemed like a lifetime ago, someone had told Val that if she ever found herself in trouble she could yell 'Fire!' and not waste her breath on calling for help. Everyone responded to 'Fire'. Maybe the Satrigorns would too.

Val narrowed her eyes, straining watch the movements of the Satrigorns near the river. A pair of binoculars would be handy right now. Val made a mental note to get a pair if they made it off this planet alive.

One of the Satrigorns Val had been watching ducked behind a large wagon filled with what looked like rubbish being carted from the site. The contraption looked odd lined up next to the two more modern vehicles beside it. Val leaned forward to watch as the Satrigorn squatted, placing a bag on the ground and reaching up to drag something from the cart – a piece of cloth. The Satrigorn tore the cloth and wound a strip around one hand. Val frowned. Something about the Satrigorn looked familiar.

Rumi! Val gasped. What was she doing there?

Val made a lightning-quick decision. Rumi was hiding. That meant she was trying to avoid notice. Val might be able to use that to her advantage. Val crouched low and dashed from the trees towards the cart.

“You tried to kill us,” she hissed as she came up behind Rumi. The Satrigorn woman spun, eyes wide with shock until recognition dawned on her face.

“Please,” Rumi said, holding out the hand she had wrapped in cloth. “I’m sorry, look! I cut it out.” Blood was already beginning to soak through the cloth. Val gasped, darting cautious glances around to make sure that they hadn’t drawn attention.

“Show me,” Val demanded, unwilling to trust the woman until she had seen for herself.

Rumi unwound the makeshift bandage and held up her shaking hand. The deep gouge in Rumi’s palm was all the proof Val needed. She felt sick.

“Why are you here?” Val asked quietly. “Why are you hiding?”

Rumi’s face shifted from fear to anger.

“I have lost everything. The Gods – they are false. I don’t believe...” Her eyes dropped and Rumi struggled with her emotions. “The man that was with you – the Doctor,” she said the name awkwardly. “He said we are being controlled by a field. That we are being manipulated.”

Val nodded, pressing herself up closer to the wagon. There wasn’t time for chit-chat.

“The Doctor is going to destroy the telepathic field,” Val said. “Will you help me?”

“How?”

“They have Tom, the other man who was with me. Do you know where he is?” Val asked, too afraid to hope.

Rumi nodded. “He is being held in a shelter near the river. They will take him back to the prison. There’s nothing you can do,” she said apologetically but Val’s heart was singing. He wasn’t inside the base! She could create the Doctor’s diversion, which might also give her the opportunity to rescue Tom.

“Now. *You* need to help me.” Rumi continued, looking Val full in the face. “I will not wait for the – the Doctor. I will destroy this field myself.”

“No, that’s not what I meant!” Val protested. “I need something to create a fire with.”

Rumi nodded. “Yes. That is a good idea. They will be looking for me. A diversion will be good.” Rumi yanked her bag open and rummaged through it. “Here,” she said, pressing something into Val’s hands. “Count to thirty. Then you can use this to set the cart on fire.”

Rumi picked up the bag and slung it over her shoulder, walking away briskly before Val could stop her.

* * * * *

Squatting on his heels, the Doctor peered around a low wall and across the huge courtyard. Like all good military establishments, this one had the perimeter cleared entirely of obstructions. There was nowhere for anyone to hide. The area was however, full of people.

Despite his predicament, the Doctor’s thoughts turned briefly to Jandar. He should never have trusted him – not for a single moment. Jandar was always going to be unpredictable and unpredictable meant dangerous. The risk certainly hadn’t paid off and now he was alone, without his companions. He really needed a diversion right now. He needed Tom and Val.

The Doctor shifted awkwardly in his crouched position. The Doctor hoped they were still resisting – that they were still alive. He pushed the thought from his mind. He could do nothing to help them now. The Doctor scratched a hand through his hair, ruffling it in frustration. He needed to think this through – needed to prioritise.

The Satrigorns wanted a Time Lord. That was unsurprising given that the Satrigorns intended to time travel. Perhaps they were having difficulty with the temporal configurations or

maybe the Satrigorns simply wanted to increase their chances of success with a Time Lord at the helm. Either way, he needed to take this system offline – now. He didn't know how much longer he could resist his integration into the telepathic matrix. Once that happened, there was no turning back. He would become a weapon to be used with impunity, and there would be nothing he could do about it. He looked at the Time Vector Generator in his hand. Could he do it – even if hesitation meant his integration? What would the Colony do with a subservient Time Lord?

The question made him think of Val's earlier observation. How *would* the Colony maintain telepathic control over the population if they planned to move beyond the reach of the field?

The Doctor stared at the entrance that stood across the courtyard. The doorway appeared tiny at this distance and yet the wide double doors now seemed so tantalisingly close. He had to get inside. It would be easier to avoid the soldiers once he was within the compound.

Ideas flitted through his mind as he surveyed the courtyard, discarding plans as quickly as he made them. Slowly a network of strategies came together.

Suddenly Satrigorns began pouring out of the courtyard like ants scuttling from an anthill to defend their queen. The courtyard didn't empty entirely, but a large portion of those who had been going about their duties shifted their attention to the commotion that had broken out on the southern side of the building, close to the river. Dark smoke billowed up against the darkening sky, filling the air with smoke and ash.

Taking a deep breath, the Doctor rose from his hiding place and walked briskly across the courtyard, making a direct line for the entrance. Running would only draw –

A sharp ringing in his ears stabbed at the Doctor and he stumbled, thudding to the ground on his knees.

* * * * *

"I told you that you would come to me, Doctor." The deep voice resonated through the Doctor's mind, crashing against the inside of his skull in waves. *"You resist well but in the end you will come to us. You will take the oaths and serve."*

The Doctor fought to push the voice from his mind but it lay across his mind like a blanket of midnight, pressing down on his own telepathic ability. The Doctor pushed back at that pressure, using all of his strength to keep the darkness from enveloping his mind entirely. The opposing forces shuddered against one another, each fighting the other for supremacy.

The web touched him, a soft brush across his mind and awareness exploded to life inside of him – the Satrigorns, all of them. The Doctor could feel them nestled in the back of his mind – could sense the intricate network of thought, all linked to, and influenced by, one centre of awareness. The mainframe. It pushed upon him thousands and thousands of images, blurring through his mind so that he was unable to grasp any one of them.

The Doctor struggled against the tide, closing off his mind to the onslaught. It felt like holding back an ocean with a cup. With one final heave, the Doctor expended all his strength closing the door in his mind and the images cut off abruptly.

The Doctor found himself near the centre of the courtyard, on his knees with his head held in his hands and the Time Vector Generator pressed against his temple. Sweat slicked the Doctor's hair to his brow and ran in rivulets down the nape of his neck. His head felt heavy and thrummed with a pressure that pressed behind his eyes painfully. The Doctor raised those eyes slowly to see a dozen or so people standing together in front of him, the building looming darkly

behind them. The sun had almost disappeared below the roofline. How long had he been like that?

“Do that again and I’ll –” the Doctor grunted, his voice weak.

“You will do what, Doctor?” The voice, coming from a physical mouth rather than from inside the Doctor’s head sounded much less ominous. It was thin and reedy, bearing little resemblance to the sonorous tone that had rattled his mind. The Doctor squinted painfully, looking up from the ground to try make out the group of people standing in front of him. They were taller than even the Satrigorns and impossibly thin – wispy, ethereal creatures that stood grouped together, blending into the lengthening shadows. Beyond that, the Doctor could not make out any features. They were still too far away. He shook his head – no, they were veiled. That was why they looked so wispy. Sheer veils of opaque cloth draped the creatures from head to foot, a band of golden metal holding the cloth over their heads.

“Who are you?” the Doctor demanded, straining to raise his voice. “What planet are you from?” His head pounded and his vision blurred. Something about the creatures seemed to *shift* and the Doctor shook his head to clear the wool from his head. One member of the group took a few steps forward, leaving the other to remain standing in the shadows.

As the entity approached, another voice came from behind the Doctor. “They are Gods, Time Lord. You have the honour of being spoken to by the First.” The voice sounded vaguely familiar. “You’d do best to surrender. It would be a tragedy to have to kill you before you have taken the oaths. You have been chosen.”

The Doctor turned towards the voice. *Keer*.

“Chosen for what?” His eyes swept past the Satrigorn Commander to take in his surroundings. The courtyard was full of people again – soldiers and workers, labourers and children. They all stood, backed against the perimeter of the courtyard as though trying to get as far away from the creatures as possible.

The Doctor let his head fall forward. His vision was still blurry and keeping his head up took effort.

“What for?” the Doctor repeated. He would not attempt to stand until he was sure he could.

“For your TARDIS.”

The Doctor’s head whipped around, in spite of his pain, to face the First. A wave of dizziness consumed him. “What did you say?”

Behind him, Keer grunted his displeasure at the Doctor’s insolence.

The First spoke again. “I said, ‘for your TARDIS’, Doctor.”

The Doctor gritted his teeth, dread blossoming in his mind. “What do you need with my TARDIS?” he asked, feeling a piece of the puzzle sliding into the right place in his mind. The familiar sensation brought the Doctor an odd measure of relief. The telepathic attack had muddled his mind but if he was thinking, it must slowly be clearing. The realisation did nothing to abate the concern growing in the pit of his stomach though. If he thought a bit harder, he would know why these creatures wanted his TARDIS.

The First laughed, his sardonic chuckle echoed by the members of the Colony standing behind their leader. Their images *shifted* again, their forms shimmering – and the Doctor rubbed the heel of his free hand into his eyes. There was something there – something he wasn’t getting. Something... Realisation dawned on him suddenly. “The gateway,” the Doctor breathed. “It isn’t functional. You haven’t got it working yet.”

Another member of the Colony approached to stand beside the First. “It was never meant

to be functional,” he said harshly and behind the Doctor, someone gasped. “The Time Lords think they have the rights to the secrets of time travel. They left us –”

The First turned his veiled head so sharply towards the speaker that the bitter sounding man turned and walked back to his place. The movement caused the air to ripple in front of him and the Doctor’s eyes widened. “Ah!” he breathed, the sound a mixture of fascination and contempt.

The creatures before him were wearing perception filters.

With that awareness, the cloudiness subsided some more. His mind still throbbed but the veiled, ethereal figures dissolved from his sight – and with it went the Doctor’s disgruntled amusement.

“You’re human!” the Doctor exclaimed, unable to suppress his surprise. Despite his earlier decision, the Doctor tried to stand. He wavered and Keer approached from behind, pressing down on his shoulder to keep him from rising.

Where the Colony had been standing, a group of new people emerged. Humans – men and women ranging in age – stood behind the man who called himself the First. The fraud was repulsive and only heightened by the simple, form fitting clothes the humans wore. In his weakened state, the Doctor had had difficulty penetrating the filter – but the Satrigorns would never be able see through their deception. All they would see were gods.

The First spoke again. “I can’t say I’m impressed, Doctor,” he said smirking. The man was much shorter than the Doctor was and looked to be around seventy years old. “The Time Lords are fabled for their strength of mind. You have been a bad example.”

“You’ve been trying to lure Time Lords to Satrigon,” the Doctor accused, ignoring the man’s insults. “You’ve been evolving the Satrigorns; creating an army – for what? To steal a TARDIS and invade some defenceless planet with a custom-made war machine?”

“For a race so arrogant, you surely miss a lot,” the First said, glaring at the Doctor. “The Time Lords were always interfering. It was only a matter of time before the telepathic field and the ‘gateway’ brought one of you to us.”

“So you thought you would just shoot at my TARDIS!”

“Naturally,” the First answered calmly. “It brought you here, didn’t it?”

The Doctor struggled to maintain his composure, the effort causing the veins to stand out in his neck and sending another wave of dizziness coursing through his head. “Who left you?” the Doctor grunted, shifting his unsteady gaze to the man who had spoken earlier.

The First bared his teeth, anger tightening the muscles in his face. “Our forbearers were to be the first human time travellers but the Time Lords got wind of their plans. They went ahead with the experiment in spite of their protestations. Since no one came to get them when it all went wrong, we can assume that the Time Lords refused to help. We were abandoned here.”

The Doctor grimaced, shaking his head. “No, the human colony of 55,000 ceased their research.” Even as he said it, the Doctor knew he was wrong. The telepathic field contained artron energy and if the gateway wasn’t functioning, it could only come from one place – time travellers. How had it come to be contained in the field?

“We were abandoned,” the First continued. “Either by the colony, the Time Lords or both. It matters not. Once you are integrated, we will return with your TARDIS and our army to take what is rightfully ours. We will lead the human colonies into a new age of evolution.”

The Doctor searched his mind for some way that he might still get into the building but his head still pounded – humming relentlessly from the psychic attack. The gateway might not be functional but the telepathic field was. If they attacked him again, might he be able to fend them

off a second time? Had the matrix already integrated Tom and Val? His hand tightened on the Time Vector Generator.

“Well you’re out of luck,” the Doctor said, trying to buy some time while his mind whirled. There had to be another option. He raised the cylinder weakly, pointing it towards the transformer circuit at the closest corner of the building. He couldn’t do this. People filled the courtyard – soldiers, workers, servants... children.

“I’m not going to help you,” the Doctor said, his head throbbing. “Give me access to the mainframe so I can shut it down, or this –” the Doctor waved the Time Vector Generator slightly, a wobbly, weak gesture, “– will do it for me, only with much more damage. I *really* don’t want to do that.”

The Doctor was still too far from any of the transformer circuits. The arc of energy from the Time Vector Generator would not reach them from where he knelt. The Colony didn’t know that though. The Doctor wrestled to focus his mind. He needed about ten good seconds of sprinting to get close enough.

The First waved a hand and the row of soldiers on the east side of the perimeter trained their weapons on the Doctor.

“Only a Time Lord can pilot the TARDIS,” the Doctor said, blinking to try to clear his head. “You’re not going to shoot me.” If he could get himself to his feet, he was sure he could cover that distance before they could stop him.

“No, I’m not,” the First agreed. He gestured again and half a dozen soldiers appeared, dragging two people struggling between them.

“Doctor!”

Val!

The Doctor squeezed his eyes shut, his mind racing. He snatched at the thoughts streaking through his mind but they slipped away. An ember of white-hot anger flared within him. If they had Val...

“I have seen glimpses of your thoughts, Doctor. Tiny slivers. I was too far away to glean much but I have seen your tortured mind. You will not risk your companions.”

The Doctor frowned. *Companions? Both of them?* The Time Vector Generator felt like a burning brand in the palm of his hand. The Doctor turned to see both Val and Tom restrained by a group of soldiers. His head thrummed.

‘I was too far away to glean much...’

The buzzing . . . it hummed . . .

Something felt wrong. Was he hallucinating?

“Oh, I’ll do it,” the Doctor threatened, gripping the rod tighter and trying not to think about how the energy from the Generator might relay through the system. There was no telling where the point of detonation would be. It all depended on how the energy grid ran through the complex and where the grid energy storage was located within the building.

The Doctor tried again to stagger to his feet and again Keer pressed him back to the ground. The Time Vector Generator felt so heavy. Was Keer bluffing or would he really do it? He held his head in one hand, trying to ease the pressure. “My companions – you’ll just kill them anyway once you’ve integrated me.”

“Perhaps,” the First said. “Or maybe you will do it for me.”

* * * * *

Val stared at the Doctor as she struggled with the soldiers holding her back. “Doctor!” she cried out again, but the Doctor cradled his head in one hand, slumped onto his knees in the centre of the courtyard. Her own head still reeled from what must have been her last hallucination, if she could in fact call it that. There had been no visions, no false memories implanted into her mind. She had been one with the Satrigorns – had been inside their heads. Once again she had *seen* the Doctor. Somehow, in a way that she could not explain, Val had *seen* the Doctor as though at the end of a rope in her mind – in all of their minds. And she had *watched* as they had pressed down to subjugate him. Val had kept herself back, willing herself away from the collective oppression.

Tom grabbed Val by the arm, drawing her close and the soldiers jerked him back roughly. Tom clung on though, fighting them. “What is he doing?” Tom panted as he struggled with the soldiers. “He can’t be hallucinating or we would be too.”

“I don’t think he is,” Val whispered, her eyes drifting back to the Doctor of their own accord. “Or maybe I am.”

* * * * *

Something was wrong.

The humming still vibrated through the Doctor’s head. *Could* he be hallucinating still? The thought came upon him alone, and rang empty in his mind. No sensation of lucidity or any feeling of oppression accompanied his reflection. Was that because he was not hallucinating, or was it because he was integrating?

“Give me your weapon,” the First ordered. “Now.”

The Doctor shook his head. “No,” he said, and the word barely made it out of his mouth. “No,” he said again, more forcefully – and the Time Vector Generator burned hotter in his hand. His choices were rapidly dwindling. There had to be another way.

The Doctor turned. Val and Tom had stopped struggling and were watching him with wide and afraid eyes. They were waiting for him to do something.

The First gestured to the soldiers and one drew his weapon, levelling it at Val. She gasped and Tom began to struggle again in earnest.

The Doctor’s mind raced for answers. He had to concentrate.

‘I was too far away...’ Something in those words reached out and shook the Doctor, crying out for attention. The First had said he’d been too far away and could only get glimpses of his mind. There was something else there. Something he wasn’t grasping. The Doctor fought to clear his head and Val’s words came to him unbidden. *‘If the Satrigorns are going to travel through the gateway, won’t that mean they will move beyond the influence of the telepathic field?’*

The clouds in his mind slowly parted.

The First hadn’t said ‘You were too far away’ – he’d said, *‘I was too far away.’*

“Leave her alone!” Tom yelled at the Satrigorn holding Val. The Doctor pushed the sound from his mind.

“I said, ‘give me the weapon,’” the First repeated harshly, “Or I will kill her.”

The Doctor’s mind raced faster, picking up speed as it tumbled along, weaving together all the disjointed pieces of information that he had filed away in his head.

It was the Doctor’s proximity to the First, not the mainframe, which had allowed the First to attack him directly. The mainframe wasn’t controlling the telepathic field.

“It’s you!” the Doctor snarled, levelling the First with a stare that had brought lesser men

to their knees. His anger fuelled him and at last the Doctor pushed himself to his feet.

“You’re assimilated with the mainframe. No...” He paused. That wasn’t quite right. “You *are* the mainframe,” he spat, correcting himself. Another piece slotted into place.

“Telepathic circuits?” the Doctor asked, trying not to show his desperation. “You are using telepathic circuits? You can’t be passing on all that information to an entire species on your own. You must be linked.”

The Doctor turned his attention to those people still standing in the shadows. “You’re directing your collective knowledge through him,” the Doctor jabbed an accusatory finger at the First. “And he’s sending out the signals into what – a transmitter? You’re magnifying the range of your brain signals and drawing the Satrigorns into the matrix to evolve them.”

The First did not respond, instead gesturing again to one of the soldiers holding Val. The soldier spun her around by the arm, throwing her ahead of him into the courtyard. The Satrigorn took two long strides towards Val and shoved her again. She stumbled ahead of him, crying out as he forced her toward the centre of the courtyard. She regained her footing, darting panicked looks around her, her eyes showing the whites all around. The First and the other humans moved back to allow the soldier through. He pushed Val roughly into the space in front of the Doctor and her panicked gaze swept over him, pleading, but when the soldier raised his weapon and forced Val to her knees, her sad eyes settled on Tom.

Tom shouted wordlessly and tried to run towards Val but the Satrigorn soldiers dragged him back. Tom threw his head back, smashing the Satrigorn behind him. A mass of soldiers fell on him.

The Doctor clenched his jaw and fought to remain undistracted. The answers were beginning to click together in his mind. He had to hurry.

The First was controlling the telepathic field. It was emanating from him then transmitted into a larger field. A human mainframe. That was how the Satrigorns could travel in the TARDIS and remain under the Colony’s control. They would only need to figure out how to integrate another transmitter into the TARDIS and create a new telepathic field on-board. The Doctor sighed heavily. Yet another use for a subservient Time Lord. *He* could do that.

The Doctor had two choices now. Both had consequences he didn’t like. He glanced down at the Time Vector Generator in his hand. It was one more choice than he had had a moment ago. It was just a matter of what he was willing to risk most. This could end him.

“Last chance, Time Lord,” the First seethed.

The Doctor closed his eyes, then tipping back his head, allowed himself to be integrated.

* * * * *

Tears of fear and frustration brimmed in Tom’s eyes. He battled beneath the pile of soldiers until one pressed a knee painfully into Tom’s back. He cried out and the other Satrigorns pressed their collective weight onto Tom’s arms and legs. Tom continued to shout until his throat was raw.

“Doctor!” Tom shouted, afraid to pull his eyes away from Val who was holding his eyes with her own. He couldn’t look away. He wouldn’t. “Doctor!” he shouted again. Why was he just standing there?

* * * * *

The Doctor opened his mind, reaching out for the telepathic field.

The weight of the field came rushing to meet him, slamming into his mind. The Doctor buckled beneath the weight and the presence of the Satrigorns burst into life within him. He could feel an entire species – their collective thoughts, their hopes and their fears. And overshadowing all of these basic instincts, the Doctor sensed a zealous single-mindedness that stole the individuality from each of those cowering in the back of his mind.

The Doctor trembled and cried out, reeling from the violation. Instinctively he began to push back, fighting against the force that enveloped his mind, probing at the darkness blanketing his thoughts in a cloak of wretched desolation.

As he pushed, his strength met with its opposing force. A flood of memories assaulted him, his own and others crashing into his mind in a tidal wave. Those memories swirled in his mind, pools and eddies of images that drew the Doctor's thoughts away from... from – *what?*

* * * * *

Val cried out in pain, struggling to keep herself back from the collective surge forcing itself upon the Doctor. She watched in despair, fighting to keep her own mind from being swept up in the psychic offensive.

She had promised the Doctor that she would fight. She had sworn that she would not leave Tom. Part of her remembered that she had been somewhere else, somewhere other than in this detached nightmare. Val couldn't remember where that was though – not for the life of her. She just held on, clinging to the memory of her promises.

* * * * *

The Doctor looked into the Untempered Schism... *No!* That wasn't right. Something was very, very wrong.

A low hum filled his mind. *Buzzing...*

Awareness of his reality returned abruptly, thudding into his mind. The onslaught of images continued and the Doctor fought with his overwhelming desire to flee. Only dimly aware of his body, his legs convulsed as though trying to abandon the sheer force of will that kept them locked at the knees.

The Doctor opened himself up further, mind raging as he battled to remain in control of his own thoughts. His head rang with the effort. As images and impressions downloaded into his brain, the Doctor searched frantically for their origin. Somewhere in that maelstrom of consciousness, the Doctor could sense that source – an entity at the centre of the field.

The mainframe. The First.

The Doctor attempted to launch his consciousness further into the web but his attack met resistance. The two forces shuddered against one another as they had before, neither giving way to the other. The telepathic field was the First's domain – but the Doctor had always known that.

The Doctor had already opened his mind. He had dropped the defences that protected him from psychic manipulation, save of course for that one part that the Doctor kept closed at all times. That part of him was wrapped in all the defences he could muster, concealing the secrets that he had kept hidden from the universe for centuries – must *always* keep hidden...

Fear gripped his hearts as the Doctor accepted the truth that his instincts were intent on refuting. He would not be able to integrate until he had surrendered completely. That the knowledge in his mind would be taken from him if he lost control was a certainty.

Dread filled him. He could lose everything. And to make matters worse, he might not be able to regenerate if it all went wrong.

The Doctor threw open the final door to his mind.

The full force of the matrix swept in, crushing the last of the Doctor's telepathic defences. He surrendered completely, embracing the invasion of his mind. His awareness flowed out across the telepathic field, a wave that gathered momentum as it swept through the minds of everyone who made up this collective consciousness. Where once he had sensed the web of communication that existed between the First and the Satrigorns, the Doctor could now *see* that connection – could feel it in every single fibre of his being. And with his newfound awareness, the Doctor felt the presence of the First.

Their consciousness came together, clashing with brute force. The Doctor's mind *clicked*, fully integrating into the system – and a tidal wave of artron energy burst from the Doctor.

* * * * *

Tom floated in the void of collective consciousness, held in stasis by the battle between the First and the Doctor. He could see both clearly, his mind's eye witnessing as another joined their ranks. Tom fought on, straining to hold himself separate.

All of a sudden, blue fire erupted from the Doctor, sending a torrent of energy flooding up into the matrix. He watched, breathless, as the power crackled across the Doctor's skin, encasing his entire body in light.

* * * * *

Rumi sprinted down a corridor. She knew where she was going. Every Satrigorn knew the labyrinth inside the Centre, if not what actually went on in there.

Since learning from the Doctor the truth of her worthless existence, Rumi had decided that she would end this – *needed* to end this. It wasn't hard to figure out where the telepathic field originated. This was the 'Centre' after all. She laughed, a mocking wheeze that sounded hollow in her ears.

Rumi thought perhaps that she might be a little mad, though whether that was from being manipulated all her life or losing everyone she had ever loved, she wasn't sure. Either way, she didn't care.

* * * * *

The Doctor fought to control the artron energy streaming from his body. The blue energy raced through and across his skin. His mind clashed with... something. *Someone?* Fatigue sapped away at his strength and the Doctor became aware of an overwhelming sense of glee. It was not his emotion.

You are mine, Time Lord!

Yes, the Doctor thought, and smiled. It was time. He would serve the Colony but first he must take the oaths.

No...

The Doctor pulled himself back, turning aside. He had to hurry. He was losing himself, in every way possible. His leader – *no, he is human!* – had the advantage of holding the full

strength of the field and the hive-minded Satrigorns behind him. But fighting the First unarmed had never been what the Doctor intended.

Battling to stay lucid, the Doctor drove the artron energy before him, feeding the threads of energy out into the field. His mind rode those rivers, tumbling as though riding white water rapids, the consciousness of the First fighting him at every turn.

The Doctor fought back, gasping sharply as he felt the First reach into that part of his mind that he kept concealed. Impulsively the Doctor reacted, moving to slam his mind shut but it was too late. He could not close his mind now even if he wanted to.

Again, the Doctor turned away, riding threads of artron energy out across the globe, slowly wresting control of the telepathic field away from the First.

* * * * *

Blue fire raced across the sky, spreading out in an intricate web that emanated from the Doctor. The random bursts had ceased, the energy spinning into fine filaments that fled across the telepathic field and out across the planet.

Satrigorns trembled where they stood, forced to bear witness to the destruction of their gift, the blessing that had allowed them to hear the voice of the Gods. In their mind's eye, the Satrigorns saw the Doctor. Together they felt his presence flow into their minds, seizing control and usurping the Gods.

The awareness in their mind *snapped* and the comforting presence of the Gods was torn from them, leaving in its wake a hollowness of such depth that the Satrigorns wailed in terror. The shock staggered each of the Satrigorns and at that moment the ground shook, an explosion tearing through the Centre.

* * * * *

He emerged from the darkness with the realisation that he was still alive. Almost immediately, the Doctor winced, the groan escaping his lips calling him back to consciousness. Pain followed quickly, lancing through his body as he struggled to open his eyes. The last remnants of sunlight flickered through his eyelashes, torturing his throbbing head. He raised one hand to soothe the pain. With the attempt came his first awareness of sound.

Moans filtered through the fog in his mind to mingle with angry shouts. The Doctor thought he heard crying. Why was there always crying?

Panic gripped his hearts; their insistent thudding seemed to know something that he did not. Something was wrong. The Doctor heaved himself over onto one side, trying – and failing – to force himself upright. His hand pressed against something hard beneath his palm and he shifted, dropping back to the ground. He had to get up. He had to see.

“Doctor! . . . Doctor!”

Someone's arms slipped around him and lifted his shoulders from the ground. Miss Rossi. She tried to cradle his head in her lap but the Doctor used her assistance instead to get himself upright, shoving her aside to survey the chaos. Just like the crying, too often there was chaos. That was the way of things, he supposed.

“Please. You have to keep still.”

Why was her voice so shaky?

The Doctor's normally keen eyes fought to focus and rewarded him with an answer he did

not want. The smoking ruins of a building created the backdrop to a carnage he knew he had been expecting. Satrigorns – Satrigorn *people* – were moving through a forest of twisted metal, searching through broken chunks of concrete and shattered glass. Most wandered aimlessly, expressions hollow. Others keened over bodies. He paused, shocked.

Dozens of the tall, lithe Satrigorns lay strewn across the courtyard and around what remained of the building – their smooth, translucent skin reflecting the light from fires still burning. Shadows danced across bare chests and glazed, unseeing eyes.

The Doctor inhaled sharply through gritted teeth. Some of those bodies were too small. He felt his mind resist, trying to go blank to spare him but the horror shuddered through his body anyway, threatening to cripple him. Some of those among the dead were children.

Hands reached out to comfort him and he slapped them away, struggling to rise. He felt someone restraining him and fought to break free, to run to them and help, to do something.

His hand brushed something on the ground, the thing he'd felt earlier, and his fingers closed around it mechanically. He pushed himself away from Val, staggering to his feet, swaying. The Doctor tore his eyes from the chaos and stared down at the long, cylindrical object he was holding in his hand. It was the Time Vector Generator from the TARDIS.

What had he done?

“Doctor, please,” Val’s voice came again, quietly insistent. “You need to sit.”

“He can’t sit.” It was Tom. *Where had he come from?* “We need to go.”

Tom’s voice sounded anxious and unsteady. “The Satrigorns are in shock but they won’t stay that way for long.”

“The Doctor’s hurt,” Val argued, reaching up to press something to his head. The Doctor reached up with her and pushed his hand beneath the cloth Val was holding to his scalp. He winced as he touched a deep cut and his hand came away bloody.

“Did I...?” the Doctor mumbled. He cleared his throat and tried again. “Did I...?” *Did I use the Time Vector Generator?*

“No,” Tom answered quickly. “You did – something, to the telepathic field. I think you destroyed it.”

“But the base...” Val cut in. “Rumi said she was going to destroy the field. The whole thing blew up. She must be...” Val glanced back toward the building, her eyes filled with sorrow. The Doctor followed her gaze unwillingly.

“Rumi?” he asked, confused. His eyes came to rest on a group of people lying on the ground only a short distance away. Not Satrigorns – human time travellers who had lost their way in more ways than one.

Most lay lifeless, still forevermore. Others groaned, shifting on the ground in their pain. The First lay on his back, looking up at the sky as though stargazing. For a moment, the Doctor thought he was dead, but then the man blinked.

The Doctor stepped towards him but Tom held him back. “Doctor, no.”

The First drew himself up then slumped to one side, struggling weakly to raise himself from the ground. The Doctor watched impassively as the man flopped pitifully on the ground. He reminded him of a dying fish. The Doctor blinked, his face stoic. The man once worshipped as a god, looked old and worn. Instead of an arrogant smirk, the old man whose name the Doctor had never learned, lay propped on one side, staring blankly. His mouth gaped open dumbly, tongue lolling. His mind had been broken.

Something crashed onto the ground in the distance, the sound followed by a shout. Closer by, a woman screamed.

The Doctor turned away and for the first time noticed that both Tom and Val also looked worse for wear. Val's cotton shirt was shredded about her arms to reveal cut and grazed skin beneath. Her hair was dishevelled, her face smeared with grime. Tom looked only mildly better. A fine, white dust covered his hair and clothes. A dark patch marred one cheekbone.

Tom looked at the Doctor and raised one hand to the bruise on his face. "I'm fine," he said gruffly. "Come on. We need to go. This whole place is about to go up like a tinder box."

The Doctor snatched the wad of cloth from Val's hands and pressed it to his head, wincing again at the sharp pain. He hadn't done it, hadn't resorted to using the Time Vector Generator.

And it hadn't made a difference.

He tugged himself away from Tom and crossed the courtyard to stand before the people of the Colony – or what remained of them. There was nothing he could do for the First. The Doctor turned his attention to the other humans, moving to kneel beside each in turn to check their vital signs. Only three lived, and perhaps not for much longer. The Colony had suffered the worst of the blast and those that lived were likely to have also had their minds broken when the telepathic field snapped.

Reluctantly the Doctor stood and swept his gaze over the turmoil yet again. What he saw did nothing to soothe the distress that sat like a cold lump in his chest.

Tom was right. The Satrigorns were becoming rowdier. Moans and cries had already begun to give way to angry shouts – shouts that were gradually becoming a chorus. As the Satrigorns sought to make sense of what had happened, their shock and disbelief transformed into rage. These people had been under the influence of the telepathic field for their entire lives. What would they do now they were free of it?

A dull thud exploded in the air behind them, and the First, who had still been struggling to sit up, collapsed back to the ground. Val gasped, spinning to see where the shot had come from. Tom grabbed her by the shoulders, pulling her away roughly. The Doctor turned slowly.

Standing behind them with weapon raised was Keer.

"Keer," the Doctor said, holding one hand out toward him, palm up.

"Human," the Satrigorn murmured, his voice as dead as the expression on his face. Before the Doctor had a chance to ask him to surrender his weapon, the one-time commander who spoke with the authority of the gods raised the gun to his own head and pulled the trigger.

Tom and Val buried their faces in each other's hair as the Doctor watched Keer fall.

The act of violence seemed to release those still caught in their dazed stupor and all hell broke loose. The Satrigorn began to riot.

Satrigorns picked up whatever was to hand and began to threaten each other, some arguing loudly, others resorting immediately to brutality. Many of the Satrigorn began to run screaming from the base, heading for the town – the 'Holding' – across the river. The bridges filled with fleeing people, although a large number stopped in the middle, undecided about what they were doing and where they were going. Those bridges became congested and a different kind of panic set in. The Satrigorns had no idea who they were fighting or what they were running from. Some turned in their flight to re-join the great number of fights that had broken out.

The Doctor watched the directionless uprising, his memories failing to recall a time when he had witnessed such confusion on a mass scale. These people had been taken from their natural evolutionary path and were now to be left to their own devices.

"Doctor, there's nothing you can do," Tom shouted over the racket, as though reinforcing

the Doctor's own thoughts. Somehow, Tom managed to make the statement sound much less accusatory than it had any right to be.

An elderly Satrigorn hobbled over towards them, face twisted into loathing. "I saw you!" he screeched. "I can no longer feel the Gods. You did this!" He pointed an accusing finger at the Doctor and it shook with fury.

Tom put a hand out to hold the old man back from reaching the Doctor and the Satrigorn twisted around to grab at Tom. Val leapt towards them, pulling the man away but Tom fended him off easily. The Satrigorn fell to the ground and lay crumpled in a heap, weeping. Tom's face went slack with guilt.

"We need to go," the Doctor said. "The telepathic field is destroyed. The gateway –" The gateway had never been functional and ironically, it still stood, unscathed. The transformer circuits that had powered the base was demolished however, as was almost a quarter of the building.

The Doctor turned away from the chaos, ignoring his pain and striding off towards the forest that hid the TARDIS. He was done. There was nothing more the Doctor could do. Tom and Val followed without a word.

Satrigorns howled, the sound echoing eerily into the newly fallen night. More fires burned now, lit by rampaging Satrigorns.

As the Doctor approached the darkened forest, an itch in the middle of his shoulder blades compelled him to turn and glance over his shoulder one last time. In the distance, a lone figure sat on a broken wall, the firelight illuminating his features with an unnatural glow. Jandar. The young man watched the Doctor, their eyes meeting across the devastation. For long moments, the two looked at one another – then the Doctor turned away and, stepping into the forest, abandoned the Satrigorns.

* * * * *

"Not too much damage. A miracle under the circumstances," the Doctor said from beneath the flight console of the TARDIS. "I think I've misplaced the conservatory though."

Unable to see his face, Tom was unsure whether the Doctor was being serious or was trying to make a joke to ease the tension. Tom felt uncomfortable regardless. It seemed callous that they should be here, safe within an impenetrable fortress while outside a war raged.

"It will take a couple of minutes before the engines are powered up." The Doctor pulled himself up and Tom glanced across the console at Val and the Doctor. Both seemed lost in their own thoughts – just as he was lost in his, he supposed.

Val had come for him. Tom was still reeling from that memory. The sight of her appearing out of nowhere had filled him both relief and awe – and no small amount of fear.

When Val and the Doctor had fled after his capture, Tom had known that they were leaving him. The hallucinations and uncertainty had made him paranoid. With utmost conviction he had known that Val and the Doctor would return to the TARDIS and leave him stranded on that forsaken planet.

But Val had returned. She had found his new prison and had marched into that miserable shack, almost certainly anticipating her own capture. Seeing her utter disregard for this logic might have made him smile – instead he had realised just how much he had feared for her in that moment.

Tom tried to focus on something else but his thoughts kept drifting back to all the new

memories in the back of his mind – the real ones and the imposters. Once the telepathic field had snapped, his thoughts had become clearer. No longer did he doubt his own reality yet the memories created by the hallucinations stayed with him.

“We could use the telepathic circuits,” the Doctor said suddenly into the silence. “Erase the past nine hours or so. What do you think, Mr. Brooker? Miss Rossi?”

Tom and Val looked at once another, questions passing between them as they studied each other in silence. Eventually Tom nodded, having come to the same conclusion that Val had.

“No,” Val said. “We owe it to the Satrigorns,” she paused, pensive. “Besides,” she added. “We might remember doing things that never happened, but that’s not who we are. We made other choices.”

“She’s right,” Tom agreed. “I’ve made a few of mistakes in my time.” Tom grinned. *Okay, more than a few.* “It’s kind of nice to know that there are some I didn’t make.”

The Doctor nodded. “Our morality is the result of our actions then – not our thoughts nor memories,” he clapped his hands together as though the matter was settled. “You’ve joined an elite club,” the Doctor said, looking Tom and Val in the eye by turn. “Not everyone can know the choices they might have made.”

“But didn’t,” Val stressed.

“But didn’t,” the Doctor agreed.

“I could have been a florist!” Tom piped up suddenly, trying to lighten the mood. Val and the Doctor turned to him in confusion. Tom smiled self-consciously. “I’m just saying... I *could’ve* been.”

“Well, Tom gets to remember being a florist...” Val smirked and Tom gave her a withering look. “And the rest of us get to remember the other choices we haven’t made.”

“And the ones we did,” Tom said, thinking of Val’s decision to return for him. He gave her a significant look that he hoped she understood. Val’s lips curved into a gentle smile but when he glanced across at the Doctor, Tom immediately wished he could retract his statement. The Doctor leaned on the console, his features dark and solemn.

“And the choices we *had* to make,” Val said, trying to ease the Doctor’s conscience.

The Doctor nodded once, a barely visible gesture.

“What will happen to the Satrigorn now?” Tom asked and Val glared at him, shaking her head furiously behind the Doctor’s back. Tom shrugged apologetically.

“They have dark times ahead,” the Doctor said simply, reaching across the console to power up the atom accelerator.

“But some of the Satrigorns were already resisting the telepathic field,” Val said. “Surely that means they are strong enough to cope?”

“Yes, the Satrigorn were developing some immunity to its affects. They might have even broken free of their own will eventually... Perhaps in the next few thousand years or so.” The Doctor sounded weary and cynical.

“And now?” Tom asked. “How will the Satrigorns survive without the Colony to control them?”

The Doctor sighed, moving around the console to stand beside Val. He leaned across her, flicked two switches and activated the inertial dampeners. He shrugged, eyes downcast as he wrapped one hand around the lever in front of him. Slowly and reluctantly, the Doctor pulled down hard on the handle. The TARDIS vibrated gently as it dematerialised.

“Survival of the fittest,” the Doctor said quietly. “Evolution always finds a way.”

Thunder foreshadowed his coming, and from the clouds fell one sent to destroy us, tearing apart all ties that bind. Born of the failing sun, he did stretch forth his hand and snatch up the light, to do battle with his blade of blue fire. His defiance did race across the sky, turning day into night and all that is, and all that was, fell under the shadow. And the Gods, betrayed by servants who failed in their oaths, withheld their grace and turned from their people in vengeance. Weep for your salvation!

He has bound and burned us with famine and plague and washed the blood of the innocent with tears of despair. Yet we shall find the Gods again and be welcomed into paradise, for we deny he who was born and reborn and shall be born again. Turn your face away from the dread lord who tempted us from our grace and shattered the realm with his coming. Beware the destroyer of worlds. Beware the Doctor...

-from the *Book of Lore*
by Dahrin Tondir, Hand to the First of Mynid
Satrigon High Council, 6042 AE, the Third Age



While traveling to the Eye of Orion, the Doctor and his companions encounter a powerful telepathic field that tears the TARDIS from the Time Vortex. Crash landing on the planet Satrigon in the year 3450, the Doctor discovers that the primitive species he once knew has become an advanced military civilization, in just over 200 years.

When the time travellers begin to succumb to the effects of the field, the Doctor and his companions become caught in a race against time to find out what is accelerating the evolutionary rate of the Satrigorns -- before worlds are destroyed and the lines between reality and illusions are dissolved permanently.

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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