

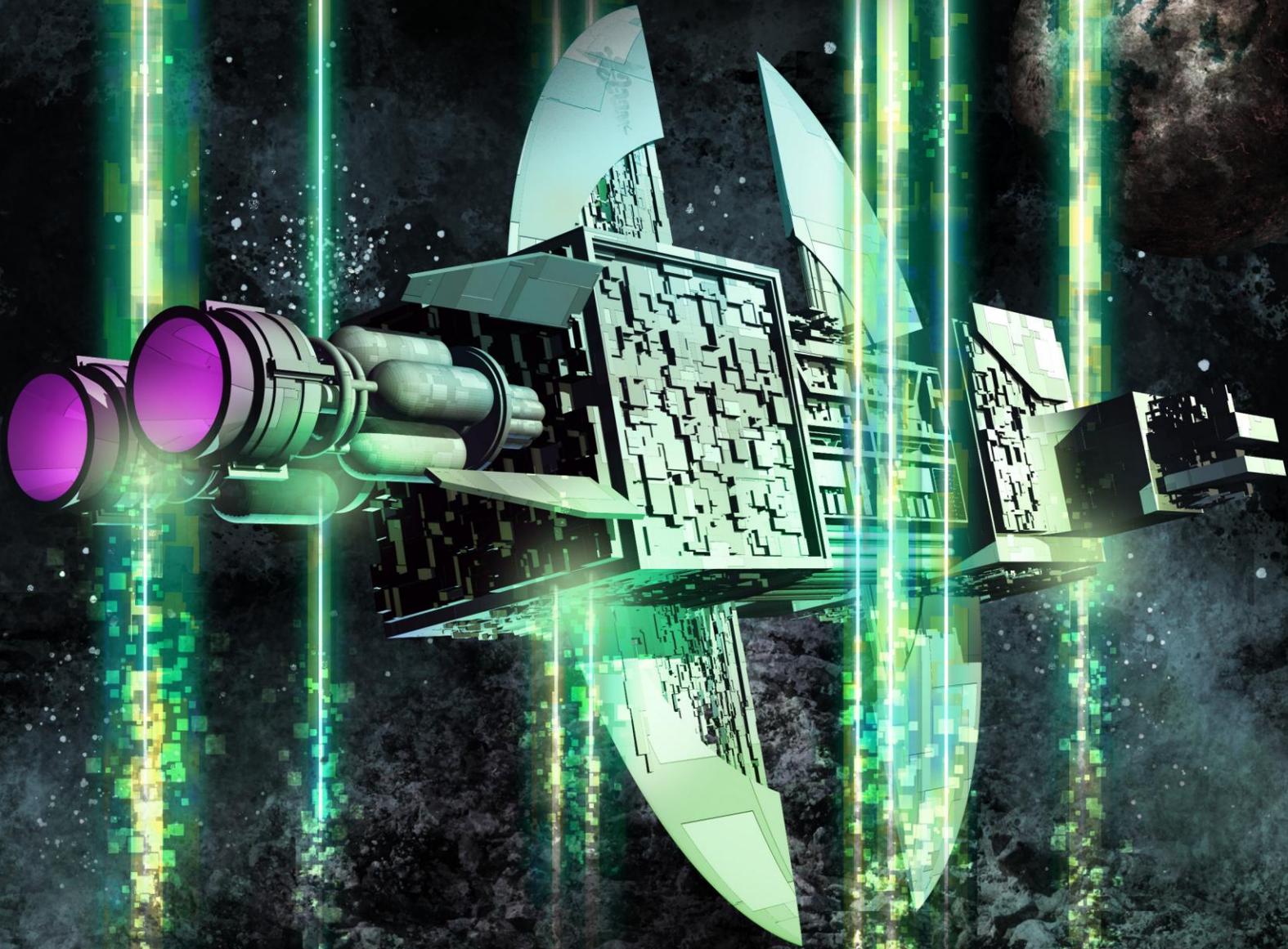
THE

1999 - 2014

DOCTOR WHO 15

PROJECT

Ghost Ship



Krista Wilson & Matthew James



GHOST SHIP

KRISTA WILSON & MATTHEW JAMES

Copyright © Jigsaw Publications 2014
Published by Jigsaw Publications

Doctor Who, TARDIS © 1963, 2014 by BBC Worldwide
The Doctor Who Project © 2014 by Jigsaw Publications

First Printing December 2014

Edited by Bob Furnell, Robert Mammone & Jez Strickley

Ghost Ship
© 2014 Krista Wilson & Matthew James
Based on an original story outline by Krista Wilson

All stories reprinted by permission. The moral right of the authors have been asserted.

A TDWP/Jigsaw Publications Book

All rights reserved. The use of any part of this publication reproduced, transmitted in any form of by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, or stored in a retrieval system, without prior written consent of the publisher is an infringement of the copyright law.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to any real persons, living or dead is purely co-incidental.

Typeset in Calibri

Cover design by John G Swogger
Book design and layout by Bob Furnell

Jigsaw Publications
Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

The last remnants of sunlight trailed delicate amber fingers across the leaves of a nearby oak. Slender branches reached towards the sky and stretched wide in adoration of the heavens. A breeze stirred in the canopy, a soft sound that whispered soothing words.

Such beauty should inspire and enliven the spirit, Val thought. She sighed and let her eyes travel back down the tree to its lower limbs. Thick and gnarled with untold age, these arced towards the ground, bowed and burdened by the weight of the world. And beneath those leafy boughs, nestled among the growing shadows, stood the TARDIS.

Val stared at the door. The Doctor had disappeared through it only moments earlier and a warm light glowed from behind the opaque windows. She almost took a step towards the waiting time capsule. Standing out here, she felt so – *outside*.

Val forced her attention away from the TARDIS and glanced unobtrusively at the man at her side. Tom also stared at the TARDIS, his face pensive. Val wondered what he was thinking but knew better than to ask. Something about his posture told her that he needed a little more time. They had been through a tremendous ordeal and a moment of silence after a harrowing escapade had become part of their routine. She would wait – as long as it took.

For long moments, Tom watched the closed door, lost in his own thoughts. Eventually he turned to Val, drawing his attention back to the present world.

“Walk with me?”

“But the Doctor...”

“Is probably watching us on the scanners right now,” Tom said with a bemused smile. Val caught a piece of that smile and reflected it back at him. She nodded and hooked her arm through his.

They walked in silence, very deliberately avoiding the cemetery. Minutes passed and Val glanced at Tom from the corner of her eye again. He seemed to be studying each of his footsteps carefully. Val knew that Tom wanted to talk. Like their contemplative silences, comparing notes afterward had become something of a tradition. They filled in the gaps in their stories, laughed about gaffes that had offended alien cultures, grieved their losses and complained about the Doctor. They had been doing a fair bit of that last one recently, so why wasn't Tom saying anything?

Tom had told Val he had made a decision but until then, she hadn't really given it much thought. Both of them had become frustrated with the Doctor's recklessness. Val assumed that Tom had decided to give the Doctor a piece of his mind – again. Perhaps he would lay down

some ground rules this time, although Tom must surely know that it would have no impact. The Doctor was the Doctor. His curiosity was an itch that needed to be scratched. And sometimes that curiosity nearly got them all killed.

Something flopped over in the pit of Val's stomach. What if Tom had decided that he had been through enough?

Val pulled up short, forcing Tom to stop.

"You said you'd made a decision," she prompted, and her lips pressed into a thin line. Val needed to know the truth. If Tom were planning to leave the TARDIS then she would have him say it. She couldn't begin convincing him to stay until it was out in the open.

Tom took a deep breath and turned to face Val, gently extracting his arm from hers. He licked his lips.

"We've been through some bonkers stuff," Tom began, and he shifted awkwardly. "Killer cyborgs, psychopaths, Daleks..." Tom paused and raked one hand through his hair. "Blimey. So many Daleks..."

Val closed her eyes and the memories of their recent enslavement flashed behind her eyelids. When she opened them, Tom was looking at her solemnly.

"What I'm trying to say is... sometimes it takes something really extreme to make a person realise what's important, you know?"

Val bit the inside of her lip and swallowed. She began formulating her arguments, stringing together a host of reasons as to why Tom should stay. Adventure, travel, whole new worlds. Tom would never be able to go back to a nine-to-five after this...

"Life is short Val and –"

"Tom, no," she said, reaching out and placing one hand in the middle of his chest to stall him. "You can't... I mean, you can, but maybe you should think a little more about this. What if you're making a mistake? You can't change your mind. Once it's out there, it's out. No going back."

Tom pulled back, his lips parting in surprise. A small crease appeared in between his eyebrows and his face fell. If Val didn't know better, she would say he looked hurt. Suddenly he shook his head, his face shifting from uncertainty to determination.

"No, Val," he started again but Val jumped in again.

"You can't leave!" she protested. Tears stung her eyes and she blinked them back. "The Doctor drives me mad. He does. But –"

"Leave?" Tom interrupted. "I'm not leaving. That's not what I'm saying. I'm not... Val, calm down."

Val scrubbed one arm across her face, embarrassed by her outburst. She looked up at Tom, fixing him with a glare. "Then what..."

She trailed off at the gentle expression on Tom's face. Tiny lines ran through the skin around his green eyes and Val wondered why she had never noticed them before. A faint five o'clock shadow spread along his jaw line and her eyes moved down to his lips, noticing for the first time that the bottom one was slightly fuller than the top. Val only realised that she was staring when Tom leaned down towards her. Tom's lips met Val's, soft and hesitant.

Warmth flowed through Val and all her thoughts evaporated. She reached up, her fingertips brushing Tom's cheek as she pushed them into the hair curled softly at the nape of his neck. Stepping into Tom's arms, she kissed him back.

After long moments, Tom gently drew himself away. Val smiled awkwardly but Tom leaned in again, this time pressing his forehead to hers.

“You know I love you, don't you?”

Val searched his eyes, looking for the truth in his words.

“Tell me,” she whispered with a playful grin, but Tom wasn't smiling. He held her gaze, finally allowing Val to truly see him – his vulnerability laid bare.

“I love you.”

Val felt her own smile fade away as she too let the façade drop.

“I love you too.”

This time, when Val drew Tom down to her, she felt the growing confidence in Tom's kiss. And this time, instead of her thoughts vanishing into thin air, everything clicked into place. This felt right. Right and...

“We have to leave,” Val said, pulling away from Tom. “We have to leave the TARDIS.”

“But you said...”

“I know, but that was before...” Val sighed and tried again. “I thought you were going to say you'd had enough. And I didn't want you to go because I didn't want you to leave *me*.” She gestured between the two of them. “This changes things, Tom.”

Tom sighed and pressed his knuckles into his lips to think.

“Are you saying you're ready to leave all this behind?” he asked eventually.

Val grimaced. “I'm not sure I'll ever be ready,” she admitted. “But I can't stand the thought of something... bad... happening to you. How can we ever hope to build a life together, living like this?”

Tom smiled at that, his eyes sparkling. Val gave him a shy grin. She stepped into Tom's arms again, resting both hands on his chest.

“It will take some getting used to,” Val said lightly. “I'll have to find a job.”

Tom nodded, his expression becoming serious.

“It's not just the travel we'd be leaving behind, Val. Not just the adventure or even the TARDIS...”

Val looked up at Tom and their eyes met.

“I know,” she said quietly. “We have to leave the Doctor.”

* * * * *

“I have something for you,” the Doctor announced before Tom had even had the chance to close the TARDIS door behind him.

Val moved to the Doctor's side.

“Doctor...”

“Watch,” the Doctor said, and he punched some coordinates into one of the keypads on the console.

Tom joined Val at the console. He gripped her hand and gave it an encouraging squeeze.

“Doctor...” he tried.

“Listen,” the Doctor interrupted. He turned to face his companions. “I know things haven't been very – pleasant, lately,” he said. “That's why I just set the TARDIS on a course for Seacyde in the Pheezel Galaxy. It's the ultimate seaside experience. 93% water, 100% fun! At

least, that's what the brochure says." He slapped a glossy pamphlet down on the console triumphantly.

Tom turned to Val, his eyes full of questions. He gave her an almost imperceptible shrug. Val shifted so that the Doctor couldn't see her face and stared at Tom, trying to shake her head furiously without actually moving it. Tom held up one finger and Val scowled, her face shifting from frustration to resignation. Shielding her hand with her body, Val held up one finger.

Tom turned to the Doctor. "Okay, then. Let's go," he said, but the Doctor was already powering up the atom accelerator.

Val picked up the brochure from the console and turned it over to look at the back.

"Tourbots are dressed in British 1950s attire to provide guests with an authentic seaside experience," she read. "Doctor, does that mean I need to find myself a vintage dress?"

The Doctor pulled down on a lever and the TARDIS gave a gentle shudder as it dematerialised. He pushed the space/time throttle into its full position.

"I have some waistcoats that might fit Tom but you'll have to search around if you're looking for a dress. I've no idea what's in... what?"

"In where?" Val asked, confused.

The Doctor ignored Val, holding up one hand to stall her. Tom shrugged at Val and together they stepped back, watching the Doctor study the scanners. The Doctor flicked a switch and bent down to stare at a small light blinking on the console. After a moment, he straightened and moved back to the keypad.

"Doctor, what is it?" Tom asked, giving the keypad a suspicious glance.

"A distress signal," the Doctor answered, and he began tapping away at the keypad. "There's a signal coming from a ship in the Kedler system."

Val shook her head. "Oh, no. Definitely not," she said, looking to Tom for help. "We're going to this Seacyde place. 100% fun, you said!"

Tom took up the cause. "Come on, Doctor. It could be a system fault. Knowing your luck, it's a trap. You don't have to answer every call that comes your way, you know."

The Doctor glared at Tom over his shoulder.

"It's not a telephone, Mr Brooker. I can't just ignore it because I think it might be a telemarketer. It's a *distress* signal!"

"Someone else can..." Tom stopped at the incredulous expression on the Doctor's face.

Val stepped up behind the Doctor.

"Doctor, there's something we really need to..."

The Doctor nudged Val out of the way, his eyebrows furrowing in concentration as he moved back around to the other side of the console.

"It stopped," he said quietly, staring at the small, clear light bulb. It was no longer blinking.

"Well there you go," Tom said, clapping his hands together. "Nothing to worry about. Seacyde here we come"

The Doctor turned to his companions. "Au contraire," he said, smoothing his hands down over his slacks and cracking his knuckles. "Now there's more to be concerned about."

Val threw her hands up in the air.

“What if pirates have seized a ship and forced its occupants to turn off the signal?” he opined. “What if the ship's distress beacon is malfunctioning and there are people who need our help?”

“What if it's malfunctioning and there is no emergency?” Val retorted.

“What if you're just obsessed with solving every little puzzle that comes your way?” Tom added sullenly.

The Doctor scowled. “We're going,” he stated flatly. “We'll check and make sure that everything is fine, and then we'll continue on to Seacyde. I promise.”

Tom opened his mouth to argue but a buzzing rang out through the TARDIS, interrupting him.

The Doctor spun back to the console, pushing past Val again as he leapt towards the scanners. His fingers flew over the keypad.

“See! The signal is coming again,” the Doctor shouted over the noise. “Coordinates are being sent directly to the TARDIS. Hmm...”

The Doctor pushed the lever to materialise the TARDIS and the sound stopped. “And look. Here we are. Simple. We'll just take a look, sort this thing out and then we can be on our way.”

Checking the scanners, the Doctor nodded to himself and released the locking mechanism on the doors.

“You can stay if you like,” the Doctor continued, heading for the exit. “All looks quiet. I won't take long.”

Tom and Val looked at one another. Tom shrugged. Val rolled her eyes. They both turned and followed the Doctor.

* * * * *

The Doctor stepped out of the TARDIS and onto the deck of a dimly lit transmat room. Large capsules almost twice as tall as the Doctor lined either side of the elongated chamber. He counted them off in his head – five on either side.

Any spacecraft worth its salt should be able to evacuate all personnel within twenty minutes. With ten transporter capsules available, five minutes response time and allowing for a standard three minutes for each person to complete a trip, this ship would be able to evacuate up to fifty people within the allocated timeframe.

“A bit quiet, isn't it?” Tom asked from behind him.

The Doctor nodded without turning around. “I was just thinking the same thing myself, Mr Brooker.”

“Maybe everyone has already left?” Val said hopefully. “This is obviously some kind of transport room. If there was trouble here then everyone has probably been evacuated already.”

“She's right, Doctor. We're wasting our time.”

“Incorrect. We have traversed space, not time. We received the distress signal only minutes ago, far too soon to evacuate the number of people who would be aboard a ship equipped with ten transmat capsules.”

The Doctor approached the nearest capsule, flicking the sonic screwdriver as he drew it from his pocket.

“This transmat is not functional. It can’t have been used recently,” he said, giving Tom a significant look. He moved to the next capsule. “In fact, someone has taken all of these transmats offline and that can only be done from the main computer.”

He strode towards the door at the end of the room and pressed his face against the round window.

“The corridor is clear –”

“Of course it is,” Val interjected. “There's no one here.”

“– and so I think we should make our way to the flight deck. If someone has shut down the transmats then I believe we will find that person there,” the Doctor finished. He pushed down on the handle and leaned into the door. It didn't budge. With an apologetic shrug, he put his sonic screwdriver to the lock. It clicked open obediently.

Dim lights ran along the base of the corridor. They reminded Tom of the emergency lights in a plane. The dull lighting, together with their footsteps echoing into the silence gave the ship an entirely unused feel. The trio passed another branching corridor and movement in the corner of his eye caught Tom's attention. He stopped abruptly.

“Doctor!” he called before dropping Val's hand and jogging up the branching corridor. He reached the T-intersection at the end and looked around the corner. It was empty.

Val and the Doctor reached him a few moments later.

“What are you doing, Brooker?” the Doctor asked.

“I thought I saw someone,” Tom replied as he glanced up and down the new, and much narrower, corridor to either side of him. Val took a few steps down the left hand hallway, peering into the darkness. Tom hooked his arm through hers, drawing her back slightly.

“This lighting isn't the best. Probably just shadows,” the Doctor said, turning back.

“Maybe we should try searching this way,” Val suggested, still squinting up the corridor.

“Narrow hallways don't lead to flight decks,” the Doctor told her certainly. “They lead to the galleys or sleeping quarters.”

He turned and headed back the way they had come.

“Wait!” Val hissed. “I saw something.”

The Doctor spun and armed with the evidence of two sightings, ran past his companions in the direction that Val was pointing. The sound of a door opening and closing told Tom that someone was indeed ahead of them. The Doctor skidded to a stop in front of the door.

He threw it open.

In the middle of the galley – it was a galley after all – two men faced one another. One shimmered with an opaque glow. The other, a man dressed in what might have been military garb, turned to look at the new arrivals. His eyes, wide in horror, took on a desperate look.

“Help me,” he begged.

“It's okay. I'm not going to hurt you. I'm the Doc–”

A light shot from the eyes of the opaque man, hitting the soldier directly in the chest. The soldier glowed brilliantly, his entire form encased in light. And when the light dissipated, the soldier was gone.

The Doctor glared at the hologram - yes, it was definitely a hologram – and tried to make sense of what had just happened. The hologram turned and began gliding towards him.

“Doctor!”

The Doctor spun towards the sound of Val's voice. Already halfway up the corridor, Val pulled against Tom.

“For God's sake, run!” she yelled, and let Tom drag her away, back the way they had come.

The Doctor ran after them, shooting glances over his shoulder. The hologram followed, drifting a hand span above the ground as it gathered speed. It flickered, its opaqueness becoming more transparent with each pulse.

“Wait!” the Doctor called, and stopped in his tracks.

The hologram turned suddenly, heading away from the Doctor. It raced towards a computer terminal fitted into the wall and like a wisp of smoke, evaporated into the screen. A moment later, the screen shattered.

“What on earth was that?” Tom asked, appearing behind the Doctor.

The Doctor shook his head.

“A hologram. Other than that...”

Val frowned. “Well, at least we know why someone sent the distress signal. Maybe that thing destroyed the engines as it did that computer. And if it has been attacking people...”

“Then anyone left is in serious trouble,” the Doctor said, resisting the temptation to point out that Val was the one who had insisted the distress signal meant nothing.

The Doctor jerked back, suddenly struck with a thought. “That hologram may have used the transmat system to gain access to the ship.”

“It would explain why someone has shut it down,” Tom agreed but the Doctor was already running back towards the transmat room.

“I must check!”

Tom arrived on the Doctor's heels, almost slamming into him when the Doctor skidded to an abrupt halt.

The TARDIS was gone.

“What..?” Tom couldn't finish.

They had lost the TARDIS before. Tom and Val were no strangers to peril. Together they had experienced the wonders of the universe – and suffered through unimaginable horrors. But Tom had told Val that he loved her. And by some miracle, Val felt the same. Until they returned home, Tom would never feel safe. He should never have agreed to this trip.

Val appeared at this side and held onto his arm. She looked up at him and smiled ruefully. Tom's own expression fell short of even that little warmth. He bared his teeth. It was the best he could do.

“You didn't want to come. I should have listened,” he whispered.

Val shook her head slightly and threw an aggrieved look at the Doctor. She slid her arm from Tom's and stomped towards the Doctor.

“What now?” Val asked, her voice laden with annoyance and a sizeable portion of concern.

The Doctor didn't respond. Instead, he stood staring at the empty place where the TARDIS had been.

Val spun on her heel and threw her hands into the air. Tom pulled Val into his chest, wrapping his arms around her protectively. After a few moments of silence, the Doctor raked a hand through his hair and turned to face Tom and Val.

"This changes nothing," he said after a moment, and Val pressed her face harder into Tom's chest, groaning in frustration.

"We still need to find out if there is anyone on-board," he continued. "They might be able to tell us more about what is happening here. They could shed some light on where the TARDIS is."

"What makes you think that anyone *is* here, Doctor?"

Val sounded as though she were struggling to restrain her anger. "That – that hologram thing has taken the TARDIS and probably everyone on this ship."

"We don't know that," the Doctor said quietly. His brows drew down. "But you may be right about one thing, Miss Rossi. It would go much better for us if the hologram was taking people to another location instead of killing them."

Tom rubbed Val's back soothingly but determination furrowed his features.

"I need to find a computer terminal," Tom said, gently shifting Val out of his arms. "We need to find out more."

"At last, some sense. Well done, Mr Brooker."

Val shot the Doctor a grim look.

"It is likely that there are survivors on the flight deck. The main computers are there and someone has shut down the transmat. It stands to reason that if there is anyone left on-board, we will find them there."

"What about the hologram?" Val asked. "It might not be the only one."

"No, you're right. There could be more," the Doctor admitted. "But any others will have arrived before the transmat signal was shut down. I don't believe there is any other way on-board. With luck, that was the last one."

"But it disappeared into the computer system. It might be travelling through the ship, ready to pop up anywhere!" Tom argued.

"No, I don't believe so. I think it is searching for an open signal – perhaps to report back somewhere, maybe to bring in reinforcements. Either way, I don't think it survived. The hologram's energy destroyed that terminal and it was already fading before it tried to escape. No, it is gone."

The Doctor stepped around Tom and Val, heading for the door.

"Tom's idea is the best one we have for now," he continued. "We need to find the main computer terminal. If I can trace back the signal then I might be able to find out where my TARDIS has been transported."

"And the people," Val said pointedly.

"Yes, and the people," the Doctor agreed, but he was already heading back out of the transmat room.

The Doctor walked quickly up the corridor, his stride confident. Tom knew better. The Doctor's head swivelled from side to side as though expecting the TARDIS to appear in one of the many walkways that branched off from this one. Tom reached back for Val's hand as they hurried after the Doctor to find the flight deck.

* * * * *

Val could not see that the corridors gave any indication of direction but the Doctor seemed content with his plan of keeping to the widest of them. She knew he had a sixth sense about these sorts of things. Or seventh or eighth sense maybe? How many senses does a Time Lord have?

'I'm losing the plot,' she thought wryly .

Tom gripped her hand reassuringly. "When we are old and grey with a dozen kids we'll look back on this and laugh!"

"Don't get ahead of yourself, Brooker."

They crashed into the Doctor who had stopped dead, a hand raised imperiously.

"What's wrong?" said Tom.

"Look," the Doctor commanded.

A hologram shimmered, blocking their way. "It looks different," Val whispered.

"Yes, the Doctor agreed. "The inner light is steadier but fainter. If its power is low I would have expected greater fluctuation of light, not less. I think it is on stand-by. But for what?"

"Victims?"

"Don't be melodramatic, Mr Brooker. Besides, if that were the case, why haven't we activated it? We are close enough."

Tom edged closer but the hologram remained unconcerned. He moved forward a few paces more. Val reached out to pull him back but the Doctor stopped her.

"He's all right. We need to test its field of perception. It may not activate until he is right up close."

"He could get killed!" Val said angrily.

The Doctor looked at her in mild surprise. "I would hardly let him do this if I thought there was any danger."

"But we know nothing about these things?"

"That's not strictly true. For one thing..."

But Val did not want a lecture. "Tom, come back."

Tom paused. He was inches from the hologram, which still did not react. He turned. "Nothing to worry about. The thing is dead."

No longer cautious, he began walking back when suddenly the hologram flared and began pulsating with a much stronger light than the other one they had seen. It began moving towards them. Running, Tom reached the Doctor and Val and was going to continue running, but the Doctor stopped him.

"Either your sudden movement activated it, or it took a while to assimilate the new data before coming to a decision. Let's see which."

With a leap in the air, the Doctor raced towards and then past the hologram. It reacted quickly, spinning round to face him but did not pursue.

"Aha," said the Doctor. "Data gathering. My speed did not tempt it, only signal it a need to reassess."

Before Tom or Val could comment on this shaky conclusion, the Doctor did something else to surprise them. With a cry like a madman he ran again, straight at the hologram as if to smash it down. Instead he passed through it.

"Doctor, it will kill you!" Val cried in horror.

"No, no. Quite obviously, the people aboard this ship are being transported. That's what they did to the TARDIS and that's what they have done to the crew."

"So you wanted to get transported?"

"Of course. How else am I to recover the TARDIS? Intelligent reasoning."

Val shot him a look of despair.

Tom was watching the hologram. "Question seems to me, why did it just stand there doing nothing?"

They both turned to look. The hologram flickered slightly. The Doctor addressed it. "This is a question for whoever is giving you instructions. You are in contact with a central command, aren't you?"

To their astonishment, Val and Tom heard a flat robotic voice respond to the Doctor's question. "You are not on our manifest. Clear the area for your own safety."

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"Your DNA types are not part of the dossier for this identification program."

"So... you are looking for a certain species. Why?"

The hologram flickered but said no more.

"The species aboard this ship, obviously.' He looked shrewdly at the hologram. 'Humanoid but not human. What is so special about them?"

The hologram began moving rapidly forward and the TARDIS crew jumped back instinctively.

"And why take the TARDIS?" the Doctor persisted.

The apparition ignored him. Surging past, it disappeared into a monitor, sputtering out like a candle exposed to a blast of cold air.

"Get down," said Tom as the monitor exploded. He coughed at the fumes. "This is a mad house."

* * * * *

They continued to the flight deck in silence. Val felt anger at the Doctor for taking a stupid risk rushing the hologram. He might suspect that the passengers were being transported, but he could not know. What if it killed him? What if it killed Tom? She looked at him, striding beside the Doctor as she lagged a few paces behind. He was looking left and right, taking it all in, analysing.

'Don't let anything happen to Tom,' she thought.

"More broken monitors," Tom gestured at a bank nearby. "Must have been a lot of these holograms. So they're controlled by someone, do you think?"

"Yes. But by whom?' the Doctor said. Maybe they are acting on old orders. They don't seem to know who they are looking for, abducting people one by one. Think about it, the kidnap of an entire species!"

Tom gestured at the broken terminals. "No hope of hacking into any. Does each one represent a dead hologram, Doctor?"

"Presumably. Except a hologram doesn't die," he added pedantically.

Tom let it go. The Doctor was very worried about the TARDIS and he could see his point. Not only had they no way of getting to it, but why had it been taken? How had these things, or whoever was in charge of them, known that the TARDIS was a prize worth taking?

Val came up behind him and tugged his sleeve. "This terminal is okay," she said quietly. "Do your stuff."

Tom inspected it. "Yeah, not bad. I think I could patch into this, Doctor."

The Doctor inclined his head. "Do 'your stuff'."

Val glanced at him. Did he guess? Was he annoyed they hadn't told him. They were going to when all this started. Why did things always go wrong?

"The sooner we find the TARDIS the better," she said.

"Absolutely, Val. Then we can get on with our lives, hmm?"

"Doctor..."

"Yes, Val?"

Tom slapped his hand on top of the terminal gleefully, causing them both to turn to look at him.

"Progress?"

"I've got a "terms and conditions" spiel. Sort of. A load of text about authorised personnel - which I can get round, no trouble. Got a name for you though. Ever heard of a planet called Edaris, Doctor?"

The Doctor frowned. "Yes... nothing special. A planet in the Kedler system. If the date the TARDIS landed is the right one, then Edaris has been in decline for at least 300 years. In fact by now, probably civil collapse. I can't imagine why they are attracting so much attention."

"Well I've never heard of it," said Val wearily.

Tom had succeeded in accessing part of the mainframe but the higher code was more formidable. "They call it a lottery ship, whatever that means. If I can get up to the next data level I'll get some passenger information."

The Doctor digested this. "I seem to recall a scheme to resettle some of the population on a planet in the neighbouring solar system. Trouble is, Edaris couldn't support all of them, so to keep the peace the government set up a lottery system. Whenever it was felt the new world could take on some more people, a lottery was held so everyone had an equal chance of going."

If he expected Val to be impressed by such fairness he was wrong.

"That must be PR. It's madness to let the old or criminally minded or the unskilled burden a new world, while leaving behind builders, technicians, the young, the strong. People should be sent based on the contribution they can make."

The Doctor smiled. "You would make a fine dictator, Miss Rossi."

Val reddened. "That's not fair! I'm being logical. I don't mean to sound..."

The Doctor held up his hand. "I know. And you are quite right, it is PR. But I'm afraid it is the rich and powerful who jump the queue. As always. The biggest drain of all for a developing world. They bribe their way aboard. And such people have enemies."

"Enemies with holograms?"

"Indeed."

Tom gave a chuckle. He had been oblivious to everything except his code breaking, thought Val irritably. "Found the comedy channel?" she asked caustically.

He looked round in bewilderment and she wanted to kick herself. But he was too full of his discovery to take offence. "Passenger numbers, including crew. Originally fifty-three, but I'm getting life signs. Of that fifty-three, there are seven registering. Take away us and that leaves four people somewhere out there."

Before they could comment on this, a loud bleeping came from the console.

"It's the communications system. Someone is trying to contact us."

The Doctor darted across to the terminal and fiddled with the sound controls but the system went down and the terminal screen blacked out.

"Dead," said the Doctor angrily.

To give Tom his due, he did not pick the Doctor up on his use of the word.

"Was the signal from one of the four survivors or the kidnappers?" Val wondered.

The Doctor shook his head. "Impossible to say. Let's continue to the flight deck. We may find someone there. Or another terminal. We can be grateful for one thing, the mainframe is operational. We have something to work with."

* * * * *

Eventually they came against a security door. The Doctor pondered how best to trip the lock when it swung open. Val smiled. "Power is down."

"No," said the Doctor, "the transmat room was locked, remember? The doors have a built in back up. It may be a trap - come along."

No sooner had they stepped through, the door slammed shut behind them. Tom was last to enter and spun round expecting to see a hologram. What he saw was worse. A man stood menacingly in front of the closed door, his eyes glinting dangerously. Tom backed away slowly, reaching behind for Val's hand.

She started too, but at the sight in front of her. Two more men approached from the shadows and one had a gun.

"Good morning or evening, gentlemen," the Doctor said calmly.

Tom turned his head quickly and saw the other men. "I'll watch this one Doctor, you go for those two."

"Go for them? Hardly fair, one is armed. He hasn't got both hands free. I'd win easily in a Venusian Akaido roll."

"What?!"

Val found and clasped Tom's arm. Not for comfort, but to warn him to shut up. She squeezed it hard until he got the message. He should know by now - let the Doctor do *his* stuff.

The man with the gun lurched forward and tried to aim, but he was weak and his hand wavered. "We've got them at last! Kill them - help me Elar. What's wrong with you?"

Elar, the man beside him, hesitated. "They are not the ones."

"They must be!" The gunman stumbled forward again, hands outstretched.

Elar pushed him easily aside and the gun fell to the floor. "They aren't holograms, Prestau. And they do not look like the things on the monitor."

"You have seen living beings as well as holograms?" the Doctor asked, intrigued.

"Only on the monitor," Elar repeated, "just before the holograms came. I couldn't understand what they said. It was only brief, then the monitor blew. After that, it was only the holograms that came."

"Must have been the first time they tried to send one through," said Tom, "and it blew straight away."

Val tried to make sense of it. "So the holograms were sent by these other creatures you saw? Have they taken everyone?"

The man at the door had remained calm until now, almost as if he had forgotten them. Suddenly he came to life, his voice twisted in rage. "What are you waiting for? Kill them before they kill us!"

Lurching wildly he tried to reach the gun on the floor but the Doctor kicked it to one side. Snarling, the man turned and lunged at Tom, who neatly side-stepped, sending him tumbling into a desk. With strength born of desperation, he wrenched the desk above his head. Before he could throw it, Elar and the other man, Prestau, grabbed him.

"Easy, Cralo. They are not part of it." Both men eased the desk to the ground. Prestau, taller and thinner than Elar, had an air of menace about him that made Cralo cower back.

"Sorry, Prestau," he whispered.

"Thank you," said Tom.

Prestau glared at him, then turned back to Cralo. "Not yet, eh? Answers first, kill them later." He laughed.

Elar pulled him away from Cralo. "Don't set him off again."

"I won't – but how *do* we know they are nothing to do with it? We can't be sure."

The Doctor decided some explanations were overdue. "Listen, we know nothing about this. My friends and I responded to a distress call. We are here to help. I think you need help, don't you?"

"The distress call issued automatically when the engines shut down," said Elar.

Prestau rounded on him. "Why didn't you cancel the signal?"

"I did. Then a minute later, a second signal went out. I don't know why. It cut out almost at once so I didn't worry about it."

"And that is the signal we heard," mused the Doctor. "Interesting. I wonder how it managed to send the right coordinates? Now then, Elar. You seem the most rational. How do you do?"

"How does he do?" Prestau asked in disbelief. "We are the only three left, waiting to be picked off the same as the others. I don't trust you. In my opinion the 'rational' thing is to shoot now and worry about it later!"

Elar gestured at the third man, now sitting quietly on the desk. "And you've met Cralo."

His quiet, dry response to Prestau's outburst as if it were no more than a childish tantrum made Val reappraise him. He certainly was the level-headed one, the Doctor spotted it straight away, but his acceptance of their story so readily made her wonder if he knew more about events than he was saying. She gave him a friendly smile. "Now we are all friends, I'd like to know why you would shut down a distress signal."

"Those things got aboard via the transmat system. For all we know they can use any signal, including the automatic distress. I shut down every signal on the ship."

"Interesting," said the Doctor. "Well, someone wanted us on board, but whom and why can wait. The fact is we are here and want to help."

"And get the TARDIS back," muttered Tom.

The Doctor had not forgotten that but wanted to encourage cooperation from the survivors. "Tell us what happened from the beginning."

"There isn't time," said Prestau. "We should keep moving!"

The Doctor shook his head. "If they want us they will find us. If they can, with so many monitors down. We must fight back, and to do that I need to know how this all started."

"All right," Elar agreed.

Elar told them about the first disappearances and the fear that one of their own was the killer. Then inevitably, the holograms were seen, first in the transmat bay then later anywhere there was a monitor channel. Then the ships engines disengaged leaving them stranded, despite their harried efforts to restart them.

"We soon made the link with the monitors blowing and guessed the holograms were using the signal same as they did with the transmat. That's why I shut down the mayday. Complete communications blackout is our only chance."

"Haven't you been able to find out anything?" asked Val in dismay. "No clues at all to who's doing this?"

"Or why," said Tom. "It's crazy."

Prestau sneered. "Clues? How do we get them? We can't use the database, we can't communicate with anyone. All we can do is hide and hope they go away!"

The Doctor looked at the crewmen thoughtfully. "You both *seem* genuine. Cralo is too mentally unstable to look guilty, but looks can deceive. For instance, you two look very shifty but that is no guarantee of guilt. Rest assured, whoever they are after, we will know it soon enough. For we are dealing with the Kual, gentlemen, I'm sure of it."

"Kual?" asked Prestau.

"They are bounty hunters who won't rest until their holograms send back the guilty. My money is on the fourth survivor. You know, the one you haven't mentioned?" He smiled coldly. "Why are you hiding him?"

Prestau stared. "Hiding who? What are you talking about? There's no one else!"

Again, thought the Doctor, an honest response. Elar on the other hand did not meet his eye and took a step backwards. "You know who I mean, don't you," the Doctor asked,

"I don't know what you're talking about. We told you, it is us three and you!"

Tom gestured to a blown terminal. "You are wrong. A few of these are not so damaged and I patched in long enough to count the life readings. Seven. You, me, the Doctor..."

"I can count!" Elar snarled. "There is no one else aboard." He had a sudden thought. "Unless it is one of these Kual."

No," said the Doctor quietly. "They use holograms. You wouldn't find a Kual getting its claws dirty."

"This is getting us nowhere," said Val. "We need to get off this ship and find the TARDIS. And the longer we stay here the greater the chance those things will catch us." "She's right," said Prestau. "Let's get out of here. We can use your ship. Now!"

"My ship is what I call the TARDIS. They have taken it."

Prestau stared at the Doctor for a moment, then he turned to Elar. "They are wasting our time! We came here to get the engines working, let's get on with it."

"Then you need us," replied the Doctor crisply. "Tom, you assist with getting the power back on."

"That means a trip to the engine room," said Elar. "They've done something to the systems down there. We found that much out."

"Splendid. Val, you go with them."

Val caught the Doctor's look. He did not trust either man and did not want Tom on his own with Elar. She nodded. "Will do. Come on, let's go."

Elar nodded and the three of them hurried out.

The Doctor placed a friendly arm round Prestau's shoulders, causing the man to pull away and glower. The Doctor smiled. "You don't make friends easily do you? Why don't we have a go at getting a communication channel open?"

"Keep away from it. You'll bring those things back!"

"I'm safe, as was Tom. And Val. The holograms are programmed to go after people matching a certain DNA profile. A species type. You can let me sort out the computer without endangering you or Cralo. How is he by the way?"

"Never mind him, he's quiet. How do you know we'll be safe? It's too risky."

"Doing nothing is worse. Even if they get they manage to power up the engines the Kual will still pursue us. Almost certainly, the hidden crewmember is who they are looking for. We must find him."

"And hand him over?"

"Possibly."

This appealed to Prestau but he still hesitated. "The computer could've miscounted. Or you could be making it up just to save your own skin!"

The Doctor ground his teeth in silent frustration. He swallowed an angry retort then an idea struck him. "Of course, the gun."

Before Prestau could move, the Doctor snatched up the gun from where Cralo had dropped it during the struggle. "Here, take this."

Incredulous, Prestau took it."

"Now, you keep that thing pointing at me while I get on and repair the terminal. You will feel a lot happier. I forget how insecure humans are."

Turning his back, the Doctor got to work.

* * * * *

As Elar led the way, Val lagged behind, keeping Tom in view but also checking for pursuit. If the Kual were on their trail, the last thing he would want was for the computers to come back on line and the engines restarted. (He? Tom? Please clarify.)

"Val, look out!" Tom shouted.

A hologram appeared in a burst of light and rushed at t Val , forcing her to side step it. Moving noiselessly by, it glided down the corridor, ignoring Tom and Elar. It paused for a moment, then disappeared into a side room. Val set off in pursuit.

"What are you doing?" Tom shouted after her.

"It's following a trail. The missing crewmember? You go with Elar, I'll see what happens." Immediately, Tom went after her, shrugging off Elar's attempts to hold him back. At the door, he turned to Elar.

"You go down to the engine room. We'll meet you there."

"We should stick together!"

"We are sticking together. Val and me. That's how it is. You'll be all right. I'll be back."

Watching Tom disappear, Elar hesitated a moment. If they carried on the route they were going... he couldn't let them go there. He set off in pursuit.

The hologram passed through a sealed door. Val stopped. There was a plexiglass inspection hatch in the door. Peering through, Val's hand reached for her throat.

"My God..."

Tom reached her and looked into the room. Elar came up slowly behind them.

"Are – are they all dead?" asked Val softly.

Elar shivered and looked away quickly. "It - it wasn't my fault. The Kual, switching off the power... it's a stasis chamber, they wouldn't have lasted more than a minute."

The hologram had vanished. Tom pushed at the door and it opened.

"Don't go in. Please. It – it wasn't my fault."

"Really?" Val rounded on him. "You are very keen to convince us!"

"The power loss killed them."

"Why are they here in the first place?" demanded Tom. "Stasis capsules? The ship isn't designed for that!"

"They would have been all right. Look, they wanted to get away. They were desperate. They paid me to get them on to a lottery ship."

"They could be who the Kual are after," said Tom.

"More likely they're after him," said Val. "He's a crook!"

Elar begged her to understand. "How else could I save enough money to get away? Lottery ship? It's a joke. The rich bribe their way aboard, there are no places left for ordinary people. I'm as desperate as they were."

"Why don't you smuggle yourself then?" asked Val contemptuously.

Elar laughed. "I wish it were that simple. You know nothing about me."

Tom closed the door with a shudder. "That hologram went through the chamber. Why didn't it take them?"

"Because they're dead?"

"Even dead it would have to be able to identify its target. Maybe it can't read DNA from outside the stasis capsule."

"So it will keep looking forever," muttered Val with a shiver.

Elar shook his head. "Not forever. The Kual are coming. The holograms are an advance guard. If they send back the right person, fine. But all the time the Kual ship is getting closer. When they arrive, they'll kill us all! We have to get the engines working!"

* * * * *

On the flight deck the Doctor was working on the computer system. Prestau's communicator beeped and he nearly dropped it in surprise.

"That's working then," said the Doctor.

"It always did. We agreed not to use them. Hello? Elar?"

"It's Tom. Problem with the engine. Put the Doctor on please."

"You are lying. All the engines need is power. Put Elar on!"

There was a pause, then Tom said "Elar is gone. A hologram took him."

"Elar is taken?"

The Doctor came over and took the communicator. He adjusted the volume so Prestau could not hear and pressed it to his ear. "Speak freely. What's wrong? How did it happen?"

"Elar is fine. I don't want Prestau talking to him. Listen, there are dozens of dead bodies here, all trapped in stasis capsules. Elar smuggled them in for money. The lottery is a sham, just like you thought. Only the rich get to paradise."

"I see... all right Tom." He raised his voice for Prestau's benefit. "Stay where you are and work on the engines. I've got to speak to the Kual. It's time for answers."

He handed the communicator back to a suspicious looking Prestau. "What's wrong with the engines? All they need is power. We have to bypass the alien block."

"It's just a technical hitch. Please let me get on."

Prestau sneered. "Elar is gone, so if the holograms are still searching, it must be for one of you three. I know it is not me. Cralo I trust. Why don't you admit it? Or better still, why don't I just hand you over to the holograms and find out?"

"Don't forget the fourth crew member, the hidden man."

"If he exists."

The Doctor sat at the computer terminal. "Let's find out. Time to speak to the organ grinders. I've had enough of holograms."

"I don't trust you!"

"And I don't trust you, Prestau. But the Kual have taken my TARDIS and eventually they'll take you. I want to remedy both situations. Once I get my TARDIS back I'll take you and Cralo to safety. You see? It's win-win!"

* * * * *

Once the Kual were the greatest civilisation in their galaxy. They conquered worlds, created empires and spread their code of honour wherever they trod. In time, they became settled and content, reaping the rewards of their benign rule. Sometimes a smaller world, on the fringes of the galaxy, would ask to join the Kual Empire, its fairness and high standards offering peace and protection.

Then it ended, ripped apart by the Dalek wars that swept through the galaxy without pause, destroying everything in its path. All that remained to the Kual was a battered homeworld and their honour. They clothed themselves in their honour, a symbol of what they had been and dreamed to be again.

So they took their reputation and sold it, became law enforcers to anyone who wanted them, unimpeachable, unstoppable, ruthless.

The present mission was standard: apprehend five fugitives enroute to a colony world from Edaris.. The holograms had been dispatched and four fugitives, all part of the same people trafficking gang, were in custody. The fifth criminal, wanted for a different crime, eluded them.

The mission commander smiled grimly through the great observation window at the panorama of space. The Edaris craft, a barely visible speck, was visible. It would not be long now. The only way for a guilty person to escape the Kual was death.

"Commander. A communication from the alien space vessel."

"Put it through."

A voice crackled around the command deck. "This is the Doctor. Your systems will have scanned me and you know I am not a compatible gene type to the criminal you seek. May we parley?"

The commander reviewed the DNA flashing across his screen. A most interesting pattern.

"I am listening, Doctor. What have you to say?"

"Excellent. We make progress. First, I should like to know your mission. You hunt criminals. Are all the crew suspects? Why have you taken everybody?"

"The holograms are unable to as be as precise as a direct link from our ship, such as the one you have allowed us by opening the communications channel. Their data is limited to identifying anyone of the same species. Once we have all five criminals we shall return the innocent."

"As I surmised. How many have you apprehended?"

"Four. One more is aboard. Give him up and you can go free."

Quiet for so long, Cralo began to stir at the sound of the Kual voice. Terror gripped him and he leapt to his feet, swaying unsteadily, eyes wide with fear. "They'll kill us! Leave me alone!" Grabbing a chair Cralo flung it at the monitor.

Before anyone could react a hologram materialised around him. With a silent scream Cralo disappeared.

"Cut the link!" shouted Prestau.

"No!" the Doctor pushed him back. Terrified, Prestau waited for the hologram to take him. But it did not. It drifted towards the monitor and hovered, waiting.

"If it returned the way it came, the monitor would blow," said the Doctor. He addressed the screen. "So, you still want to talk? Why the hologram? We had a truce."

"We are an honourable people. The truce was broken by that man. We defend ourselves."

The Doctor grunted. "Or take advantage of the situation. So, is Cralo the fifth fugitive?"

There was a pause. "He is not," replied the commander.

The Doctor looked at Prestau and raised an enquiring eyebrow. "We are running out of suspects."

"It's not me! I'm not a criminal!" Prestau backed away from the hologram which made no move towards him.

"Take it easy. The truce will be respected, provided neither of us does anything rash.

He addressed the Kual again. "If I find the missing man, will you agree to return the crew?"

"We will. We do not hold the innocent. But neither can we release them to help a wanted criminal. Hand him to us and the innocent go free."

"Do you believe that thing?" said Prestau.

"The commander is no more a thing than you are. Or me for that matter. And they are ruled by honour. You can take his word for it. If we find the man they want, this ship and its crew can be on its way."

"So you agree?" asked the commander levelly.

"What about my TARDIS? Why take that? Outside your remit surely? Blue boxes, standing around minding their own business, doing no harm to anyone. Why did you take that? As the transmit is down you must have got inside. How? And how did you manage to program it?"

"Still your prattling, Doctor. We have your blue box. It is yours on completion of our arrangement. I will say we did not take it. It appeared here of its own accord."

"What? How?"

"If you do not know, how would we? Do we have agreement, Doctor?"

"Yes. Leave the matter to me. We will speak soon."

Prestau watched in surprise as the hologram shot into the monitor, which exploded in flames. The Doctor grinned. "Reversed the polarity, it never knew what hit it. We can manage alone now. Come along, we've work to do."

"Where are we going?"

"The transmat room."

"That's where those things first got on board. We sealed it up!"

"Exactly, and I unsealed it when I arrived. But it got me thinking, what better place for your missing crewman to hide?"

He switched on the internal communicator, quite sure the Kual understood what he was really planning and would not take advantage. Prestau, who fortunately did not know what the Doctor was planning, kept looking about nervously.

"Hello?" the Doctor shook the communicator impatiently.

"Where are you? Are you all right?"

"Hello, Val. I'm on my way to the transmat room. It seems the Kual have found four of the criminals and are after a fifth. It's not Cralo and I don't think it is Prestau."

"So it could be –"

The Doctor interrupted. "The missing man, yes. I want you and Tom, well, *all* of you if you know what I mean, *all* of you to join me there."

Val got the message. The Doctor wanted Elar but still did not want Prestau to know Elar was aboard. She chose her words carefully. "Tom says he's nearly got the engines started. And as for 'all of us', I'm not sure 'all of us' will be cooperative."

The Doctor smiled at Prestau who looked totally bemused.

"Never mind the engines. I am about to drag our mysterious crewmate into the harsh light of day. He's the one the Kual are after. I'm going to hand him over. Tell Tom that, if you get my meaning. I'm sure it will do the trick."

* * * * *

Listening, Elar would have snatched the communicator from Val but she switched it off. "You can speak to him in person. Come on, we're going to the transmat room."

"You must stop him. The missing crew member, he isn't the one, he isn't I swear."

He was sobbing.

"So it's you?" said Tom. "They want you for smuggling those people, must be."

Elar looked genuinely surprised, then frightened.. "Me? No, it can't be me... they wouldn't know... how could they..."

"It must be one of you." Tom tried to sound dispassionate but in truth the idea of handing Elar over was difficult to accept. Maybe he was guilty of a terrible crime, but right now he was a frightened, lonely man. The sort Tom tried to help, the sort of man the Doctor always stood up for. "If it is not you, it must be the missing man. The Doctor will wrinkle him out and we can be on our way."

Elar shook his head. "You are wrong. You mustn't give him to them!"

Val was tiring of this. The only reason that she could see for Elar to protect the criminal must be they were both involved in the crime. "If he is not guilty the Kual will let him go. All they want is the guilty man. Why you are so keen to keep him hidden is beyond me."

Elar broke down in tears. "He's my son!"

They stared at him in amazement.

"Your son?" said Val.

Elar nodded. "He's fourteen! He's not a criminal! Please, please don't let them hurt him."

Val couldn't believe it. "Why did you bring your son with you? Forget the Kual, what if you had been caught by the Edaris authorities?"

"This was the last trip. I have enough money to make a start on the new world. We – we only have each other. I had to take the risk. I never dreamed this could happen!"

"I think we better get him," said Tom gently, "he'll be safer with us."

Elar shook his head.

"He will," said Val.

"Safer? No. Who do the Kual really want?" demanded Elar. A terrible realisation dawned on him and he started to back away. "It must be one of you, you or the Doctor. That's the truth of it!"

* * * * *

Outside the transmat room, a nervous Prestau at his side, the Doctor looked up as Tom and Val approached. "Where is Elar?"

"He didn't want to come," Tom said. Before he could go on, Prestau interrupted him.

"You said he was taken! More lies? Who's side are you on, Doctor?"

"Nobody's side," the Doctor explained calmly. "This place is our one hope. From here I can lock onto the TARDIS – the communications setting let me isolate the position of the Kual ship – and beam it back. Then we can deal with the Kual on our own terms, rescue those innocent people and reveal the guilty."

Out of the shadows, Elar appeared. Standing at his side, nervous yet with a spark of excitement in his eyes, was a young boy. He looked up at his father and then across at Prestau. Tom smiled at them reassuringly. "This is Voln, Elar's son. We managed to convince Elar to trust us. After all, we were not on the ship when the Kual first arrived."

Elar glared at Prestau. "It is you, admit it!"

"I swear I haven't done anything wrong. Doctor, tell them!"

"The Kual did not seem interested in him," the Doctor agreed. "With the communication link open they had the opportunity to scan him as they did me." He paused thoughtfully. "Although we did have a truce at the time, and they are beings of honour... There is one way to be sure."

He reached for the transmat room door switch and pressed it. "Come on, let's get my ship and get some answers."

Hesitantly Prestau, Elar and Voln followed the Doctor. Val and Tom were about to follow when the Doctor did a smart about turn, rushing back out again and dragging Voln with him. He pushed them aside, locking the door shut. Val caught a glimpse of a hologram as he did so.

"Dad!" shouted Voln desperately. Wrenching himself free of the Doctor, he began hitting him tearfully. "You tricked us. You *are* working for them!"

The Doctor stepped back and Val pulled Voln away as gently as he could. "What the hell is going on, Doctor?" she asked.

"I'm afraid you are right," said the Doctor sadly. "I am working for the Kual."

* * * * *

The Doctor set off briskly for the flight deck, forcing everyone to follow. He ignored their insistent questions.

Val didn't believe the Doctor could betray them, but his motives were obscure. So, what was going on? Did he believe Elar was innocent and would not be harmed? There was doubt in her voice when they reached the flight deck and the Doctor settled himself in front of the console.

"So the Kual think you are working with them? But you are going to get Elar back?"

The Doctor slammed his hands down on the console. "Why haven't they started the engines? They are an honourable people. Now they have all the fugitives they should let us go."

"You really did do a deal?" said Tom in amazement.

"Of course," shouted Voln, "what's the matter with you? He gave them my dad!"

The Doctor regarded him with surprise, almost as though he had forgotten Voln existed. "Now I understand."

Val stood directly in front of him, blocking his view of the boy. "Then explain it to us."

The Doctor began to pace back and forth. "Yes, yes. You see, the Kual did not take the TARDIS, so they cannot send it back. And I cannot get to it unless the engines are restarted. I sent you down to have a look so I could chat to the Kual in peace. I knew you had no hope."

"Charming."

"Tom," warned Val.

"The one thing the Kual have is their honour, it is what unites them, motivates them in what they do. We are no part of their mission and it is certain they will restart the engines as soon as their mission is complete. Prestau is not the fifth fugitive, so I thought Elar *must* be."

"It was for me," Voln interrupted angrily, "to get us away from Edaris, to have a proper life. He helped people who deserved a chance!"

"Oh yes, your father is a criminal certainly, but the Kual are not judge and jury. They are pursuers, enforcers. The Kual are not interested in him until he is convicted. I was wrong,

wasn't I? The sudden need to get away, hiding you... obvious really. *You* are the fifth fugitive, aren't you Voln? Just like we originally thought."

Voln did not answer but he looked very scared.

The Doctor continued more gently. "I plan to help Elar, you know. I am not going to abandon him. And I will help you too. The holograms will be searching the ship again. It's time to stop running. We will go to the Kual together."

Tom put his arm round Voln's thin shoulders. "Don't worry mate, the Doctor is a good guy really – promise."

The Doctor ignored him, rummaging around in a locker. "A blood sample is in order, I think. Must be a medical kit in here."

"I wonder what he's done? He's just a child," whispered Val.

Tom took her aside, trying to hide his concern from Voln.

"The Doctor won't let them hurt him, Tom."

"Until he's got that bloody TARDIS back I think the rest of the universe comes poor second. He's been pretty ruthless so far."

She did not reply. A vague sense of disappointment nagged at her. But was it in the Doctor or Tom?

The Doctor extracted a small sample of Voln's blood, which he then smeared across a glass slide. Taking his sonic screwdriver from his pocket, he carefully adjusted its settings. "Excellent... not too much and not too little..."

The screwdriver hummed over the sample for a few moments then the Doctor switched it off with an air of triumph.

"You've altered the DNA?" asked Val.

"Well deduced, Miss Rossi!"

"How is that going to help!" said Tom.

The Doctor readjusted the sonic screwdriver and holding it aloft gave another quick burst. "I've sent out a signal telling them that the DNA type they are after is here. Just to speed things up. Like giving a scent to a tracker dog. Best get ready."

"You are handing him over!"

"Mr Brooker, you are very impatient. This sample of blood has given me the DNA coding. All I need is to keep broadcasting it on a low level to mask my own. The holograms – not very bright – will take me as well as Voln."

Before either companion could object or point out the danger, five holograms swept into the room. The Doctor put a protective arm around Voln as they converged. A moment later, Val and Tom stood alone apart from the holograms, powering down, not even trying to find a terminal to get home. They had served their purpose.

The ship shuddered as the engines re-engaged.

Tom and Val looked at each other. "Now what are we supposed to do?"

"Wait for the crew to come back. Then wait some more..."

* * * * *

The Doctor and Voln found themselves in a metal cell. No windows, no door, a dim light shining from a recess in the ceiling. Voln whispered nervously, "Now what?"

"We wait," said the Doctor. "And while we do, this is your chance to come clean."

"I don't understand."

"Why are the Kual hunting you? What have you done?"

"Nothing, I swear," the boy cried. "My dad said we were going to start a new life and I had to hide in that stasis place."

"So you were in stasis like the other people your father smuggled aboard. I see. How did you survive, I wonder?"

"Dad came and got me when the disappearances began. He said it wasn't safe where I was."

"So... maybe Elar knows more than he has said. Well, don't worry. If my suspicions are correct we are all going to walk out of here safe and sound, and with the TARDIS."

At that a hologram appeared. It moved slowly towards them and all three faded away, to reappear on the command deck in front of the Kual commander.

The Doctor watched him closely. Not one to give much away, he thought, not even what they look like. Tall, even when seated, the figure wore armour, its visored helmet concealing its features. The Doctor gave his best smile.

"Here we are then, all your runaways rounded up for you. I'll take my TARDIS off your hands and be out of your hair before you can say Perigosto stick."

The commander scowled beneath his visor. "Pero..?" he faltered.

"You see? Now, where is she?"

The commander stood. Even the Doctor took a step back. He pointed at Voln. "This is not the one we seek. We have now identified the fifth fugitive by name."

"And the name is?" The Doctor tried to keep the surprise from his voice. This was an unexpected development.

"Doctor."

"Me? That's ridiculous. You want Voln."

"You are the fugitive. Your DNA matches the record."

"No, that's a trick I played to get here. I mixed up my DNA with Voln and..."

"You are a Time Lord known as the Doctor. The DNA does not lie. I do not know how you confused our data tracker for so long but the result is clear."

A screen lit up behind the commander and symbols flashed across it. The Doctor recognised his DNA. Somehow, the Kual database believed he was the fifth man. How, he could not imagine. But it let Voln off the hook.

"So Voln, you can go and find your father. Get back to the ship. That's right, isn't it commander?"

"Innocent parties will be released."

"Where are they?"

"In the waiting area."

"Well, no need to wait anymore. I assume you will transport them all back to their ship straight away?"

"Their ship is on course to rendezvous with ours. Your friends think they will rescue you," the commander replied, adding in the same monotonous tone, "it is amusing to me."

"Forgive me if I don't laugh."

Voln was escorted from the room to join his father and the other innocent crew members.

"So what about me? The waiting area?"

"Put him with the other criminals," ordered the commander.

The Doctor was aghast. "You can't put me in with them. I could be a very bad influence, stirring them up, hatching escape plans, all sorts of things. I should be put in solitary confinement."

"Silence! Put him in the holding cell."

Two hefty Kual guards dragged the Doctor from the room and the commander sat back in his chair. "You sound afraid, Doctor," he mused, eyes fixed on the closed door, "but you are not afraid. You are dangerous..."

Someone moved from the shadows to stand by the commander's chair and said quietly, "Thank you for your cooperation."

* * * * *

Ten minutes later...

Val watched Tom as he finished re-programming the navigator and came towards her. She opened her arms and he slipped into them, closing his around her.

"Alone at last," he grinned.

"I feel guilty being happy."

"Why? The Doctor will be all right, he always is. We get the TARDIS back, rescue Elar and Voln and everyone lives happily ever after. More or less."

She looked at him. He was trying to be light-hearted, but he knew as well as she that nothing was ever certain. And if things did work out, would they next time? "Perhaps it's time to leave the Doctor, Tom."

"Maybe."

"Would you mind? I know you said you wouldn't, but...?"

"Would you?"

"That's not fair."

He kissed her. "We would miss the Doctor and the excitement, but think what we would exchange it for. Us. A life together."

"Little Toms and little Vals!"

"Don't get ahead of yourself, Rossi." They both laughed. And both wanted it to come true more than anything.

"A life together."

Almost as though it was planned, a wheezing, groaning ripped through the air and the TARDIS materialised in front of them. They leapt apart, then determinedly came together again and held hands. The TARDIS door opened.

Elar and Voln came out cautiously. Seeing Tom and Val they laughed with relief. "He brought us back," said Elar. He held his son close. "I am so sorry for what I did."

The Doctor emerged. He looked less happy, even stern. "You do not deserve to escape punishment, Elar. But Voln does and he needs you."

"He didn't mean any harm," Voln interrupted sharply. "My dad wanted to get us away so we could be safe."

The Doctor softened slightly. "I know, I know. Now, let's blow this ship up as quickly as we can."

"Blow it up?"

"Yes, my dear Val. Otherwise the Kual will continue hunting Voln for all eternity. But if they think he is dead, their code of honour will be satisfied."

"Hunting Voln?"

The Doctor glared at Tom. "Love seems to have made both of you incapable of speaking without asking a pointless question."

Tom looked at Val nervously. "Love?"

"Later, Mr Brooker for heaven's sake. Get this ship on self-destruct. The Kual will be watching. Ten second countdown is enough. In the TARDIS the rest of you."

Tom did as the Doctor bid. The Doctor shepherded Voln and his father back into the TARDIS. Val waited next to Tom.

"That's it," he said stepping back. He grinned ruefully. "Come on Miss Rossi, let's go and face the music."

She nodded. "And get some answers! Trying to fool the Doctor - a right pair of idiots we are."

They ran into the TARDIS and as they did so the Doctor ran back out. "Won't be a second."

Setting his sonic screwdriver to transmit Voln's DNA, he propped it against the console and sighed. "Terrible waste of a good screwdriver, but needs must."

Hurrying back inside the TARDIS, he slammed the door shut..

* * * * *

The commander watched the wreckage of the ship drifting in space. Then he looked up at the Doctor who, through some trick of time, seemed to be in two places at once. In the holding cell – and standing here. "You came to me from your own future and asked me to condemn you in your past... Your mind is like the underlating sands of Delinos, one can see only a few paces ahead yet a city might be but one step away."

"Your use of imagery is refreshing in a mercenary, commander," the Doctor smiled.

"My sole motivation is pursuit of justice! I have played your game, now you will fulfil your side of the bargain."

The Doctor pointed to the readout screen. The commander studied them then nodded. "Doctor, I am satisfied. The DNA traces are registering in the detritus. Faint, even for the remains of a child, but..."

The Doctor smiled blandly. "But you are satisfied."

"I am satisfied justice will be served. Our code is honoured."

The Doctor nodded. He went over to his TARDIS and unlocked the door. "Thank you, commander. Justice has been satisfied I promise you. Goodbye."

The commander watched the blue box fade away. Yes, a dangerous man this Doctor. And clever too.

* * * * *

On their TARDIS scanner they also watched the dying explosion until the Doctor touched a switch. It appeared his plan, to go forward into his own future and do a deal with the Kual commander had worked. Or would work. The scanner went blank. "Don't want the Kual to detect us. They might start asking questions. I'll get us away from here."

His fingers played over the controls.

"Will you answer our questions now?" asked Val.

"Elar will explain."

Drawing a huge breath Elar began his story, shame-faced and haltingly in parts, but determined to tell the truth and not excuse his actions.

"I told you I wanted to escape from Edaris, to get to the settlement, but there was no way I could earn enough money to bribe a place for me and Voln. I managed to get myself on the crew. My plan was to smuggle Voln aboard then jump ship when we got to the settlement. Then I got found out. Four crewmen – the ones the Kual were after – were on the run. They were criminals who had smuggled people out in stasis chambers. I stumbled across it when I was finding a place for Voln to hide."

"They made Dad help them. He didn't want to! They would have killed me otherwise!"

Elar shook his head. "That's what I told you, son. The truth is when I was going to hand them in, they told me this was their last run because the authorities were closing in on them. I was tempted. They gave me money, too. I took it because... because I wanted to give us a good start in the settlement... and because I didn't want the authorities investigating and stopping us. I know how dangerous stasis is, even if there hadn't been the power-off, some of them wouldn't have made it. That's why I got you out so quickly, not because of the Kual. They came later."

"Of course the power was on when you got me out," Voln said, "I'm stupid, I didn't realise..."

Elar looked round the control room pleadingly. "It was our one chance to get away. Voln would be on the wanted lists. We would be arrested if we went back to Edaris."

Puzzled, Tom asked, "I understand why you would be arrested for trying to smuggle yourselves out, but why would Voln be on the wanted list?"

"For a different crime." Tears glinting on his cheeks, Elar explained. "Edaris is overcrowded. There are two ways the administration deal with that. You either get a ship to the settlement world, or you might be selected for the culling. Both are lotteries and both are fixed by the rich!"

"Culling?" Val was horrified. She looked across at the boy.

"I was to be culled on my birthday. A few weeks ago."

"It's barbaric!"

"They call it Enlightenment," Elar continued, "your mind is freed from your body to become part of a huge super-mind that guides our world. A lie based on an old religious belief. Some people believe it, or at least pretend they do. But I've seen the chosen ones as they are stunned and slung into the furnace!"

"I feel sick. Doctor, we have to do something!"

The Doctor stepped forward and awkwardly patted Val's shoulder. Tom looked across at her morosely. Perhaps she wasn't ready to give up the fight and settle after all.

"The trouble is," the Doctor said, "the cull is legal, that is why the Kual included Voln on their list of fugitives. No doubt Elar will be on their next list, so good job they think he is dead too. They won't come looking. Which begs the question, where will you go? Can't go to the settlement world now."

Elar shrugged helplessly. "But I did wrong. Those people..."

"Yes, you did wrong. But the Kual knew they would die when the power went off - they were on the list too, you see. Trying to escape. That left five still registering. I think your wrongdoing is balanced by theirs. And you saved your son."

He went back to the console.

"The Kual will take the remaining crew to the colony world. They'll regard doing so as fulfilling their duty.. I'll find *you* a nice planet somewhere else, not too hot or too cold, not too wet or too dry. Not too crowded, or too lonely either. Ideal for settling down."

With a jolt, Tom saw the Doctor was looking straight at him. Instinctively he glanced at Val.

The Doctor's gaze shifted back to Elar and Voln. "Sound a good idea?" he said.

Elar nodded. "Thank you, Doctor. I shall work hard and honestly, I promise. Voln will have a future!"

The Doctor smiled. "Yes, quite right. Future times, fresh pages, untrodden snow. Nice illusion, but rubbish of course. All times are past to a Time Lord." For a moment he looked sad, then his face cleared and he smiled again. "Forgive me, you are not Time Lords. You have the future to make your own. Stand by."

Throwing the final lever, the Doctor set the TARDIS speeding on her way.

* * * * *

Epilogue: Ten minutes earlier

As the Kual guards dragged the Doctor off to the holding cell his aim had been to find – who? He still wasn't sure, but looking back over all the things that had happened, the distress signal, the luring of the TARDIS to the ship and subsequent disappearance, added up to calculated interference. And whoever was behind it must surely make themselves known soon. The Doctor, alone in the holding cell, would be their ideal opportunity to make contact.

As the cell door banged shut the Doctor turned. "Ah...." he breathed. "Everything becomes clear."

He stepped up to the TARDIS and ran one hand across the door's smooth surface, so familiar beneath his fingers it gave him some measure of comfort – if only a little.

The Doctor paused, his ears catching the sound of someone's approach, their footsteps padding lightly upon the metal floor of the holding cell.

"Fortunately the directives of *The Code* still stand," a voice said from behind him. "As soon as the DNA muddle was sorted out, they let me bring the TARDIS here to wait for you."

The Doctor let out a slow breath. He could not claim surprise, but still...

"Yes, the muddle," he replied, studying the dust that had collected along the edge of the windows. "I suppose when I masked my DNA with Voln's their computer disentangled it, cross-referenced it and updated it, making Voln and I both register as fugitives."

"Of course, the same fugitive I suppose. But that's automation for you. No imagination." A pause. "I thought it could be sorted out - but things change. One can never be certain of the outcome of events."

The Doctor reached into his pocket but did not turn around.

"You know the outcome of *some* things," he replied, his tone hard. His fingers curled around the TARDIS key and he gripped it tight, feeling its edges bite into his skin. "But to cross our own timeline... That's too much."

The man behind him cleared his throat but said nothing.

"You sent the second signal," the Doctor continued. It was not a question.

"Yes."

"You fed the coordinates directly into the TARDIS –"

"– and transported her here once you left the transmat room, yes," the voice finished for him. "Otherwise, the TARDIS would have remained on-board."

"And I would have evacuated everybody," the Doctor said in a low voice, comprehension blossoming. "And the Kual would have hounded me to the end of time."

Silence.

"What happened?"

The Doctor immediately wished he could take back the question. He admonished himself silently.

It took a while for the man behind him to respond. The Doctor understood that he was choosing his words carefully, as well he might.

"I'm not here to tell you about future possibilities," he said eventually. "Only to assuage your concern that someone other than yourself might be able to gain control of the TARDIS."

"I already guessed that I may have crossed my own timeline," the Doctor said defensively. "Who else but me could program the TARDIS like that?"

"You suspected," the man replied evenly. "But you still worried, until now."

"Yes, I suspected," the Doctor admitted grudgingly. He rubbed at the back of his neck with his free hand. "Miss Rossi and Mr Brooker..." he trailed off.

"Are safe and well, waiting for you on the ship," the man said and the Doctor noted how tired he sounded. "Elar and Voln are inside."

"What? If I take them with me..."

The Doctor turned and looked himself in the eye. The other Doctor held up his hand. He was holding his sonic screwdriver. It looked slightly different. "I mislaid the other somehow."

"Of course... I see."

Both temporal versions of the Doctor sighed. Then one went into the TARDIS and the other went back to the flight deck to conclude his bargain with the commander.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

KRISTA WILSON

Krista Wilson is a fiction and freelance writer from Melbourne, Australia. With a particular interest in fantasy and science-fiction, Krista is excited to be writing her second story for *The Doctor Who Project*, the first being *Evolution*. She has also been published in *Whotopia Magazine*. Krista is currently studying professional screenwriting at RMIT and is working hard not to include Doctor Who references in everything she writes. Krista writes for a number of online and print publications, primarily on the subject of spirituality and justice issues. She is inspired by the mystery of the universe and of our place within it - themes that inform so much of her writing.

MATTHEW JAMES

Matthew James has technically been a *Doctor Who* fan since episode three of *The Sensorites*, having been born the day after episode two, *The Unwilling Warriors*. It took many years before he was able to buy the video to catch up on what he missed. Writing many things for any genre that will take them his first love remains with *Doctor Who* and he has had two short stories published by Big Finish in their anthology *How the Doctor Changed My Life* and *Indefinable Magic*. He lives in England near the town of Maidenhead and works in London for the government civil service. When not in the corridors of power or writing elaborate manuscripts, he might be found performing in amateur dramatics, or walking his dog, Henry.



A distress call, abruptly cut off, leads the Doctor, Val and Tom to ship where only a handful of people remain. Ghostly shapes prowl the corridors picking them off the survivors one by one.

The Doctor discovers that the crew did not send the distress call and suspect him of being responsible for the disappearances. Then the TARDIS is taken. The Doctor is forced into desperate measures to track down the alien force behind the ghostly apparitions, find out who sent the distress call and explain the fact that although five people are supposed to be aboard, six life signs are registering...

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

ISBN 0-918894-28-X

