

THE
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PROJECT

DOLCE MUSCIA DELLA MORTE



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Chapter 1

The Boy from Laztcoia

“Malfus the musician,” whispered Malfus to himself, “Malfus, the singer, Malfus the composer, the harpsichord virtuoso – Oh, Malfus the anything! I don’t care which so long as it involves music.”

Like most young men starting out in life, Malfus had his dream. But sadly, he lacked the talent to fulfil it. Music was his passion, its beauty transporting him always. But his voice was flat, he could never think of an original tune, his fingers and brain would not converse at the keyboard and, in any case, his father insisted he join the family business. Malfus at seventeen felt thwarted by the unfairness of life and the stupidity of his elders.

“I spent my life making this business,” his father said when he confided his ambitions to him one reckless day. “I had nothing, now I am the richest merchant this side of the Carpathians. Why did I do it?”

“For the family, father,” replied Malfus, meekly.

“For *you*. My only son. Music is noise, distraction for those unable to face reality. Business is reality. Of course you will come into business with me. The matter is closed.”

But Malfus dreamed on. Strolling one day by the river near his home in the quiet town of Laztcoia and listening idly to the birds singing in the trees, he gazed into the waters and contemplated death. Not seriously of course, but in the romantic way approved of by the poets. Secretly he quite enjoyed working in the business, and he earned enough money to go to concerts whenever he liked. In addition Bucharest was nearby and a magnet for new talent. Then there was Lucie, a pretty girl he had known but scarcely rated for years, yet who suddenly seemed on his mind *all* the time. Perhaps she might like to go to a concert?

In the water instead of his own, he saw another face looking up at him.

Shocked, he spun round. No one there. He looked back into the river – sure enough another face looked out. Where was his own reflection? Why couldn’t he see it?

“Hello?” a voice said, a child’s voice, eager to please. The face in the water was smiling.

“Hello...” Malfus replied nervously.

Then it happened. The most beautiful music imaginable exploded in his mind. All original, better than ever heard before, all *his* creation! “It’s incredible,” he whispered.

“You like it?”

“Yes!”

“It is my gift to you,” the voice said softly.

Somehow Malfus knew there would be a price for this wonderful gift. A dull nagging doubt soured the notes in his head. He could hardly breathe. “What do you want?” he gasped.

The face smiled. He could see it clearly now, more fully formed than before.

“It *is* my reflection!” Malfus thought with a shock. Yet, it wasn’t. It was like him but younger, more innocent, more handsome. More, truth be told, how he would like to look!

The child in the water said, "I want a partnership. Music shall make us one. You shall have your dream and I shall have life..."

The beautiful music soared again in Malfus's head. Resistance was unthinkable. "Of course. A musical partnership. I – I agree."

The face floated upwards, a body now could be seen. In a moment it stepped on to the bank, water dripping down, yet it looked dry. A child, a boy. Dressed in a simple outfit typical of the type Malfus recalled from his youth. Then he started at the cut and colour of it. The boy smiled. "Yes, it is yours. Or rather, I copied it from your memory. If it looks wrong you can supply me with something else. I am corporeal now so there will be no trouble."

"You modelled your appearance on me too," said Malfus with sudden understanding.

"Am I not splendid?" the boy laughed. "I removed the imperfections. You always sing so well in your mind. It sounds like this?"

He began to sing, the sweetest sound and real now, not in Malfus's head, but outside all around the wood, filling his ears and blocking out the birdsong, so drab by comparison. What had begun as a string of notes played idly in his imagination, now soared round him in a symphony. The pitch rose higher and sweeter, the leaves on the trees trembling under their resonance. Malfus clapped his hands to his ears yet the music was as much inside his head as without. Pouring from his mind through this divine child and becoming real.

"Surely," whispered Malfus, "you are an angel sent by God,"

The singing stopped and the boy inclined his head coyly. "Take me to our home. We have a lot to plan, my brother."

"If music be the food of love, play on," said the Doctor.

Hannah looked across the TARDIS console in surprise. No music was playing and the Doctor's mood was far from being like someone in love. In fact he glared at the booklet he was holding with suppressed rage. "Come again?"

"Shakespeare!" The Doctor threw the booklet down. "These are selections of comments I made for him, pointing out where he's going wrong. I just found them in an old coat pocket. He must have slipped them there instead of reading them. How is he going to progress with that attitude?"

She looked at the jacket and tried not to laugh. "Doctor, that's a shell suit! Did you ever wear it?"

"A *what*?" said the Doctor in surprise.

Hannah took it from him and held it up against her. "Stylish?"

"No. How odd, *I* look wonderful in it. I suppose I have innate style." He regarded the tailored dark jacket he was now wearing with approval. "This is Louis XV."

Hannah laughed, "I love a man who names his jackets."

Sighing, the Doctor picked up the shell suit from the floor and retrieved the booklet." I mean the style."

"I know. Joke."

"Do you know," the Doctor continued, "Shakespeare can't tap in time to a recorder? He shouldn't be writing about music at all. He's got a tin ear,"

"Why are you getting so wound up about it now?"

"Now? All times are now, Hannah, to time travellers. As for that quote, people only remember the first line. They think it means 'give me lots of music so I fall more and more in love'. But it means the opposite. The next line asks for an excess of music so he grows sick of it and won't be in love any more. People always get the wrong end of the stick with Shakespeare."

"And you tried to put him right."

"To introduce a bit more clarity, yes. But he's too pig-headed and stubborn to listen. I mean, how do you deal with someone like that?"

"Never managed it myself."

The column in the centre of the console sank gently to a stop. The Doctor ran over to it and checked the settings. "We've arrived," he said.

"Where?"

"A music recital of course. Why would I be talking about music if I wasn't planning to listen to some."

"I thought because you found the notebook in an old coat!"

"And why was I looking through old coats?" he asked encouragingly.

Hannah shrugged. It seemed easier.

"Because I remembered this!"

The Doctor waved a leaflet at her. It looked new but it was of an old fashioned type, printed by hand probably as it said 1737 as the date.

"Malfus presents the wonder of the age," Hannah read. "The famed boy treble. A musical angel in human form." She pulled a face. "They should fire their PR guy."

"Come on, I want to hear him for myself." He jabbed the door control.

"Why the sudden urge?"

"Questions, questions never answers," the Doctor muttered. "I have my reasons."

The little town was proud to be the latest venue on the grand tour of the renowned 'Boy Angel'. Some wondered why he did not move on to the large cities. No doubt waiting for the best offer, they thought. Meanwhile, why not enjoy the peripheral benefits of tourists spending money, and money spent by the boy himself. Or, rather, by his guardian.

The shop assistant held the mirror up and Malfus shuddered at his own reflection. 'I look older,' he thought. 'Well, no wonder. Eight months moving from one town to another, building up our reputation. Never time to sleep. Yet *he*...' his thoughts trailed off. "Take it away, the clothes are fine."

The assistant bowed and scuttled out. The manager of the costumiers moved forward eagerly. "Fine clothes for an up and coming gentleman, sir. And the protégé, will he be attending a fitting? We have this perfect suit for him, just as you described but a personal fitting adds so much more."

"No," snapped Malfus, "Here is the money, I shall take the suit as it is. It will fit, I am sure."

"Perhaps, but..."

"It will fit! The protégé is adaptable. And he sees no one. Good day to you."

The costumier watched him go and shook his head sadly. "How quickly they get arrogant. As soon as fame taps them on the shoulder – what the...?" he turned quickly as someone tapped his shoulder.

"Good day," said the Doctor. "As you can see, my companion is appallingly dressed. "Her mini skirt –"

"Jeans, actually," Hannah corrected with a friendly smile.

"And purple blouse are totally at odds with the splendid fashions of your age."

"It's a shirt. He means you sell lovely things."

The Doctor frowned at her. "The point is, we are going to the concert tonight and I do not want her to embarrass me. This is the concert?" he waved the hand bill in the costumier's face.

The costumier glared at him. Obviously the pair were country dwellers, totally unrefined and ignorant of polite society. Sadly, the concert attracted riff-raff as well as nobility. Then the date on the hand bill caught his eye. "Just a moment – that is over a year away! Are they advertising so soon? The arrogance!"

"But there is a concert here too?" asked the Doctor anxiously.

"Tonight, yes. You better hurry if you want tickets. He's a phenomenon, the boy. Voice of an angel."

The Doctor turned to Hannah. "Tickets. Have you any money?"

Hannah gave him a sweet smile and leaned back against the doorframe as if she had all the time in the world. "Appallingly dressed? Me?"

“Ah... once again my haste to precipitate a conversation with use of an irrelevancy has resulted in a sentence given a weight it does not deserve.” The Doctor smiled in what he hoped was a winning manner.

“Say the word.”

The Doctor sighed. “Sorry.”

She smiled. “If I ever look upset Doctor, use that word. It’ll nearly always be the right one. And yes, I remembered money.” She pulled some coins from her pocket. “I found these in the box. There was no time to get the TARDIS to make copies. Do you think it’s enough? They’ve all got ‘fives’ on them.”

The costumier gaped as at a princely sum.

The Doctor nodded approvingly. “He seems happy.”

The little man came to life. Riff-raff or not, they could more than pay. “Dress? You say the young lady requires a dress? Of course, I am sure I can create for the lady one of my sensations!”

“You keep your sensations to yourself,” said Hannah. “Come on Doctor, let’s get those tickets.”

As he followed her the Doctor laid a hand on the costumier’s sleeve. “Although I clearly have a sartorial elegance that surpasses fashion, my friend has a rough and ready look which it takes skill to appreciate. Perhaps something, er, off the peg?”

“Off the peg? This is a respectable fashion house!”

“Then I am sure anything you can find me will be respectable. Chop chop.”

Not waiting for the Doctor, Hannah made her way to the town centre where a number of posters directed her to a clearing near the venue for the concert. Ticket sellers shouted in competition and urged customers to buy quickly as only a handful of places remained.

“Two please,” she said to the nearest one, and held out a coin.

The man whipped it from her hand with a grin but then paused suspiciously. “This is real, ain’t it?”

“Does it look real?”

The man thought for a moment, turning it round in his hand. “Yes.”

“Well then.”

Deciding to risk it, he thrust two tickets into her hand and turned away quickly.

“Any change?” Hannah called, but he was gone.

The Doctor joined her. “All done? Good. I’m looking forward to this.” He held out a hastily tied package.

“I didn’t know you were so into this kind of music. Or any music.”

“Music?” the Doctor’s looked surprised. “The music is incidental. I am here to see the alien!”

“What alien!”

The Doctor looked smug. “I put two and two together faster than that idiot, Croit.”

Hannah could barely contain her frustration. “Who is Croit? Doctor, I wish you would start at the beginning.”

“A time traveller rarely starts at the beginning. As I travel around, Hannah, I hear things. Bits of information which make no sense until you link them up, stories of mutilated corpses, savage tooth marks too big for any known creature. Then I came across an account of these killings by a government investigator called Croit, and I put things together. He thinks a supernatural monster is to blame, but I am certain it is an alien.”

“And we are going to catch it?” asked Hannah nervously. “Are you sure this is a good idea?”

“What else can we do? There is a creature roaming the streets at night in towns like this one, and always when the famous boy soprano arrives to give one of his recitals. By 1737 other people are making the connection. We are a little earlier than I planned, but no matter. We’ll investigate this period now we are here.”

“The boy is an alien monster?”

“Or his master, this Malfus on the posters. Or both of them. Or neither. But an alien is here and I shall find it. Supernatural monsters indeed!”

“Where do we start?”

“At the recital obviously. Once you’ve put this on.” He held up a dress, an over long but pretty mix of folds and colour, light blues and darker turquoise. “It was on the display mannequin so I snapped it up. It may not look as good on you though.”

She gave him a long hard stare. The Doctor thought for a moment. “Sorry?”

She grinned. “Actually, it’s rather good. I’m not wearing it though. Come on, let’s go.”

Chapter 2

The Devil has the Best Tunes

The boy sat quietly on a stool. His new suit hung nearby. Malfus, looking even more drained than ever, slouched by the window but saw only his blurred reflection on the glass. "You are sad, Malfus?" the boy asked in his gentle voice.

"Yes."

"But why? All your dreams have come true."

Malfus sighed. "A dream, yes, it is all unreal, I don't understand. My father..."

"Had to die. They all had to, to give me life. That is our bargain. Do not try to remember."

An image of his father shouting at the boy came to his mind for a moment, then was gone. His mother, sisters. What had happened? He could not think clearly. His mind struggled to grab the memories but they were slippery and fell into blackness. "I never meant – why am I so tired." He covered his face with his hands.

"I tire you, I know. I try not to, but it is unavoidable. Tonight there will be many people and I shall gain strength from them. You shall be able to rest again."

"My family..."

"Hush. We left them at peace. They grew too old to live but it brought me life. Is that wrong? And did I not sing the most beautiful song as they died?"

Malfus smiled at the memory, the sounds washing away the fears in his mind. "Yes. My first composition... notes I picked out on the harpsichord when I was five years old... I ran to my father and begged him to listen..."

"And he said it was no good. But I took it from your memory and made it good, did I not? I made you happy, so happy?"

"Yes. I owe you everything. You are my life!"

The boy smiled. "Help me, my dearest friend. I must put on the beautiful suit you brought, and you must eat."

The meeting hall where the recital would take place had never seen such crowds. Normally it contained farmers on market day arguing over the price of pigs. But it was ready for its moment of glory. The main façade topped by a simple raking cornice of wood had been draped with coloured cloth giving a festive appearance. A semicircular lunette located in the centre of the front facing wall was cunningly designed to direct light straight on to the stage. The fact most concerts took place at night apparently not occurring to the architect.

As they moved among the people converging on the hall the Doctor and Hannah became aware of a nervousness, a rumour running through the crowd that the songs the boy sung brought bad luck. The Doctor decided to question those nearest him as the surge narrowed into a queue.

"I nearly didn't come," he said to a woman better dressed than most and clearly thinking she ought to be waved through.

"I was assured there are reserved seats if one purchased early!"

Another woman laughed. "You were had, love. Sales pitch. It's first in gets a seat."

"But I have a ticket!"

"Hundreds do. And you know how many the hall holds? A Hundred and ten, that's all."

"That's outrageous," said Hannah. "No wonder everyone is upset." She winked at the Doctor, who took his cue.

"Indeed. Considering the marvellous things I've heard of this boy wonder, a lot of people are deciding to leave. The front of house arrangements really are appalling."

"That's not just the crush," a man near the front of the queue which they were now reaching. "That's the plague."

"Plague!" the Doctor exclaimed. "You mean the monster, surely."

Everyone within earshot went quiet. Several stared at the Doctor in horror.

"There's a monster too?" said the man. "Hey – did you hear? It's not only plague, there's a monster too!"

"Well done," Hannah whispered as chaos erupted. "Now I think we know how *that* story started."

"But they can't be confusing death by plague with being savaged by a monster," the Doctor insisted.

Hannah shrugged. "Maybe there's a plague and a monster."

The Doctor did not believe it. "No, no. No plague, I'm sure of it. Curious."

Despite some leaving through fear of sickness, and now monsters too, most people stayed, and if they could not get into the hall, pressed as close to it as they could to try and catch the song. The consensus being the rumours were a publicity stunt gone wrong.

Inside, the Doctor and Hannah fought their way as near as possible to the stage. "Can't we get closer?" moaned Hannah. "We won't hear much."

"Of course we will once this rabble shut up. A professional singer will be pure and clear and reach the back of the hall."

A flutter of movement on stage silenced the room and a figure stepped out.

Malfus raised his hand and smiled. A ripple of applause broke out. "Friends, thank you for your patience. So many of you here is testimony to the reputation of my young protégé, Il Senza Nome Uno. A reputation forged simply by travelling from town to town and singing_ to those who wish to hear."

"And those who can pay!" shouted one of the crowd.

"You oaf," the Doctor shouted back loudly.

Malfus ignored them. "But God bestows such a beautiful voice for only a short time. Hear it now. Tell your children so that they may tell theirs. Once upon a time, you heard the sweetest music of your life!"

Moving to one side and into the shadows, Malfus gave way to a slight figure, smart in a new suit, with golden hair and shining, pale face. The boy smiled and a palpable surge of affection flooded the room.

Hannah's heart melted. "He is so sweet!"

"For goodness sake," the Doctor snapped, "He hasn't sung a note yet. Do you really see a human child up there?"

She stared at him in surprise. "Don't you?"

"He's not what he seems at any rate," replied the Doctor, frowning.

The boy sang. No accompaniment, no technical tricks, just simple, blissful melody.

Everyone listened in awe. Even the Doctor looked stunned. One song gave way to another and another. Some sad, some happy, some you couldn't listen to without joining in. But all hypnotic in their beauty.

As soon as the concert ended, ignoring the cheers of the crowd, the Doctor grabbed Hannah's hand and pulled her towards the door. "What's the hurry?"

"That poor, poor boy," he muttered, "how dare that man? To use such innocence to make money. It is criminal."

Bemused, Hannah allowed herself to be led. Already Malfus had taken the boy from the stage, probably to avoid being mobbed. The Doctor's aim was to get to the stage door and head off any swift departure. Hannah was surprised no one else was doing the same. Surely a stage door is always knee deep in autograph hunters, but this audience appeared content to stay inside and cheer the empty hall.

Malfus felt alive again, his eyes shone and he paced the room excitedly. "It went well! A triumph! That tune, my tune, you made it perfect. Exactly how I hear it in my head! Why can I never write it like that?" He continued to pace, not expecting an answer.

In the corner the boy stood stock still, a faint aura framing him. For a moment his image flickered within the aura as a candle gutters in a draft. Then the glow faded and he stepped forward. The boy laughed.

Malfus came to a halt and looked at him. "Is it finished?"

"Yes."

"How long have we got?"

"A few hours, no more."

"Hours? It was days last time!"

"The time will grow shorter. We should leave immediately."

Malfus nodded, hurrying to a cupboard where he had stored their things. "Everything is ready. I have arranged a coach."

"Thank you. I am lost without you, my dearest Malfus."

Somebody knocked hard at the door. Malfus hurried to open it. "Take the baggage to the coach, we need to be on our way," his voice trailed away as he realised he was addressing a stranger. "Who are you?"

The Doctor gave a little bow. "I am the Doctor. My friend Hannah and I are music lovers." He turned towards the boy. "Ah, the protégé! Quite a talent you have, young man."

"You are amazing," said Hannah, moving in beside him, forcing Malfus to take a backward step as she did so. "I mean I have never heard anything so good."

The boy looked at her and for a second his eyes hardened, like two smooth pebbles. She felt an urge to scream or run away, but it was only a second and then all she could see was pure blue brightness and shining innocence. "Thank you, lady. Malfus, is it time to go?"

Malfus reacted at once, pushing past the interlopers he grabbed a cloak, draping it round the boy and pushed him towards the door. "The coach will be there, wait inside for me. I will bring our things."

"Just a moment," the Doctor began, but the boy was gone. Malfus barred his way.

"We are in a hurry. Thank you for your appreciation. You must excuse me now."

Hannah expected the Doctor to protest but, to her surprise, he only smiled a sad smile and nodded. "You should be careful, Mr Malfus. No doubt you think you have struck gold, parading this creature before the masses for huge sums. But you cannot keep a butterfly captive. *I won't let you.*"

Without a word, Malfus picked up the bags and walked out.

"What is that all about?" Hannah gasped.

"All what?"

"The not so veiled threat!"

The Doctor did not reply at first. He went to the tiny window and peered out. A coach shot past as the driver struck the horses to a gallop. Then he leaned against the wall. "I'm so tired."

"Are you OK? You look terrible. Sit down." Hannah dragged the stool to where the Doctor stood and he lowered himself into it gratefully.

"Not sure what came over me there. What was I saying? Oh, yes. That man is exploiting the child. It is alien, vulnerable. It needs protecting."

Hannah was about to agree but then she remembered the eyes. "I'm not sure... I am not sure it's as vulnerable as you think."

"Nonsense. Where is the next venue?"

"I don't know."

"Where's that handbill. Yes... over a year away but I know this concert took place, it is the last on record. We'll miss the intervening ones and catch up with them there, Hannah. Come on."

Before she could say anything more, the Doctor was through the door not doubting she would be right behind him. But Hannah hesitated a moment and gazed slowly around the room. In her head the notes of the last song still reverberated and she could almost see the boy in front of her, singing them. She shivered and hurried after the Doctor.

Few people left when the concert ended. They preferred to sit awhile, catch their breath. It had been a stunning night. Something to tell the grandchildren for sure.

"I will never forget it," murmured one man. But, in truth, he forgot at once. He was so old. They all were. A room of old people getting older by the minute. Old, tired, dying.

In the morning officials forced the doors open against a weight of rotten corpses. It was as though the dead had lain there for years.

Those who did leave the concert were found dead in their homes. All old before their time. And in the back allies, even more death. Bodies ripped open and left to bleed.

People recalled the eccentric stranger and his talk of a monster. Soon word reached them from other villages of similar happenings.

"There is only one explanation which makes sense," said the man sent by ministry to investigate the matter.

"What is that, Herr Croit?"

"That this is the Devil's work."

In the coach the boy sat bolt upright, a fever of excitement. "If I had not been full from the concert Malfus, I should have feasted on the Doctor! So much life, he is bursting with it! I had to come away or I should have revealed my nature to him. I need to prepare for the Doctor. And when I have, I shall be invincible!"

Malfus scarcely listened, he had sunk back into lethargy. His head lolled but sleep would not come. His hands lay folded on his lap. The flesh hung on them a little looser than before, the faint blemishes of age could be seen waiting to darken. Tears pricked at his eyes, mercifully blurring the image.

Chapter 3

An Interlude and Bitter Coffee

The Doctor checked the console as Hannah set about duplicating the remaining coins. "This machine is a counterfeiter's dream," she giggled.

"I dare say. Good, the TARDIS has the right time and place. This is the last recorded performance of 'Il Senza Nome Uno' and I want to know why."

"So are we looking for a monster now you've decided 'star boy' is innocent?"

"Croit writes of mutilations, victims ripped apart. But the villagers talk about plague."

"Maybe his book was fiction after all," surmised Hannah.

"Or... there is another alien out there."

"Two different types of alien knocking about?" she didn't sound convinced.

The Doctor shrugged. "I'm an alien, and I am 'knocking about'."

"Not the same thing. I don't trust that boy."

"I *do*. Malfus is using him. How much money have you got now?"

She wasn't letting him change the subject. "The boy is an alien, you admit that. So he *could* turn into a monster, killing people?"

The Doctor sighed. "Anything's possible I suppose. Now, how much money?"

"A bag full of fives, that's all there is to copy."

"Well, don't get mugged." He operated the door mechanism and they stepped into the town square.

This time the mood was different; no shouting ticket sellers, no bustling crowds. "Have we missed it?" asked Hannah.

The Doctor picked something up. It was a handbill. "Snap, 1737, same as ours." He waved at an old man passing by. "Excuse me."

Obdè looked at him warily. "Yes?"

"Are we too late?"

"No, you've still got time to get out. It's not till tonight."

"Get out?" exclaimed Hannah. "We are here for the concert."

"The last one I believe," the Doctor added.

Obdè sneered cynically. "Yeah. Say his voice is breaking. Likely story. Scared stiff, I reckon. I blame that Malfus."

The Doctor grabbed his shoulder. "Malfus is to blame, you think!"

Obdè nodded. "Bad influence. A kid like that ought to be working at a proper job, not swanning round the capitals of Europe singing to line the pockets of a man like him."

"This is getting us nowhere," Hannah said. "Why are people leaving?"

"The deaths. Everywhere he sings a monster follows him, killing people. It's well known."

A new voice interrupted scornfully. "Nonsense."

They looked round at the newcomer. A well-dressed gent with a supercilious air. A pretty young lady hung on his arm. She looked at Hannah and sniffed disapprovingly.

Hannah opened her mouth to tell the girl that the dress she had on was new, and if she didn't like how she looked she could jump in the river. But the Doctor did not give her a chance. "Nonsense, eh?" he beamed, "that's a relief. We heard him sing last year and no harm came to us,"

"Of course not," said the gent eagerly. "Rumours put about by jealous rivals. Just because he is not top drawer they try to put him down. Malfus was in trade, I believe. I know that is nothing to boast about, but we aren't living in the twenties. The one thing I hate is a snob. Times change."

"And the monster?" asked Hannah.

"Rips peoples guts out!" said Obdè

"The 'monster' if it exists is some wild beast which the authorities are hunting down," the gent continued condescendingly. "No need for anyone to be in danger if they keep out of the alleys at night, and quite frankly, what sort of respectable person visits alleys at night?"

"I do," snapped Obdè

The girl gave another of her sniffs.

"I rest my case." said the posh gent.

"I live there! I hope you all get horribly mutilated – especially her." He stormed off.

Hannah offered the girl a tissue. "For your snuffle."

The girl looked at it, astounded. "It's made of *paper*!"

Preferring his own voice to anyone else's, the gent continued loudly. "I for one will be there with a select party of music lovers. This, sir, will be something to tell our grandchildren. Good day."

"Do you know what I think?" said Hannah.

The Doctor smiled. "Something rational, sensible and down to earth?"

"Is that a compliment?"

"It is actually. I lose perspective sometimes. As a member of this planet, how do *you* interpret the stories?"

"Oh, I agree it's aliens, but that boy gives me the creeps. Forget Malfus, forget monsters, he's the one to watch."

"Preposterous."

"Why?"

"Well, it's obvious. I don't know why it is, but it is. Let's go to the concert and find out."

Obdè scurried home along the alleyway, muttering under his breath about the stupidity of the upper classes and how they should all boil in their own brandy. "Shan't catch me out tonight. Cut-throats and robbers or monsters from hell, it's all the same. Anyone with sense stays in when folk are being ripped apart. Go out just to listen to some child warble? I should be so daft." Suddenly he stopped. "Who's there? I heard you. Come out."

Whoever hid in the shadows blocked the way to his door. 'Probably a beggar or drunkard, I'll push him out the way.' But still he hesitated. 'Or could be a cut-throat. So many strangers in town.'

"I have no money, I am a poor man. Would I live here otherwise?" Cautiously moving forward he spied a shape, an odd shape. Not like a man, more like... "No! It can't be!"

The next thing Obdè saw was the shape moving forward, monstrous, looming over him. The last thing he saw was the monster's claw as it swung across his face. The force knocked him into a wall and he fell to the ground screaming in agony.

The monster stood for a moment considering what to do. Obdè started shouting for help, so the monster swung its claw again to silence him. It was late afternoon, normally it stayed hidden until darkness – too many people about. Scooping up the body, the monster made its way back to the shadows. When it got darker, it would rip the body into chunks and use them as substance. Human flesh revolted it, but it was the only suitable material available – with the advantage of being plentiful.

The Doctor and Hannah sat watching the concert venue opposite and the various comings and goings. Hannah yawned. "It's almost a year and a half since we saw him last. Do you think his voice is breaking like the old guy said?"

"You know as well as I do he is an alien."

"Must be some reason this is his last concert."

"Yes! Because I stop him - that young idiot Malfus - parading his captive up and down Europe to make money. I should have stopped it straight away and I will stop it now!"

Hannah was worried. Although the Doctor could get impassioned about injustice she had never seen him this worked up. They were having a coffee – she called it coffee though it didn't taste like it, bitter and sweet at the same time – and the Doctor had gone on and on about how he should have acted before and how heartless humans could be. While he was speaking his words moved her too, she wanted to pull the child away from his evil master and protect him. Yet when the Doctor paused, she remembered the boy's pebble-like eyes and the same feeling of fear crept over her.

"This isn't coffee," the Doctor said suddenly, banging the cup down.

Hannah agreed. "I didn't like to say. I thought you were enjoying it?"

"Never judge by appearances. Has coffee even been discovered yet? Waitress."

The waitress was already there. "You have cracked the cup, sir."

"What? Ah. I am sorry but this is not coffee. The girl assured me this is coffee."

"I told you. And it *is*."

She picked up both cups and the Doctor's split in half, making a mess on the table. Hannah was all apology. "Have some money, I am sure it will cover the damage. And inconvenience."

The Doctor was on his feet. He looked across the Square at the theatre where the concert would be in a couple of hours. He looked back at the café and raised his eyes to the upper rooms. Then he regarded the waitress who now stared in happy disbelief at the coins in her hands. The Doctor looked at them too. He caught Hannah's arm.

"Come along, time to go. Keep the change and the coffee. In fact, change the coffee. Go instant."

Hannah almost stumbled in his haste to pull her away. "What is wrong with you today?"

Before he could answer her there was a scream. An old woman staggered into the Square waving her arms in distress. Then she collapsed to the floor. The Doctor was at her side in a moment. "Take it easy, you will be alright, just breathe slow, even breaths."

"The monster is here. I saw it dragging some poor soul to hell!"

"Look after her."

Before Hannah could reply, the Doctor raced down the alley looking this way and that. No living thing could be seen but a trail of blood led to a sink-hole, primitive drains that let effluence tipped from windows above, or washed there by rain, eventually tumble into underground conduits to the river. The Doctor bent down to study the hole, noticing a thin remnant of slime. Pulling a linen handkerchief from his pocket, he cautiously mopped a little of the slime up and sniffed it. "And that," he said softly, "explains the coffee."

"We are being watched, Malfus."

"What do you mean? Who is watching us?"

"Don't be alarmed. You become alarmed so quickly these days. I grow weary of continually reassuring you."

"I'm sorry. Forgive me. It's just..."

"You find it hard to remember things."

"Yes."

“Don’t try. You have forgotten them for a good reason.” The boy laughed, like a hundred tiny silver bells.

Malfus smiled, exhaustion etched on his face. “How do you put up with me?”

The boy ignored him, frowning. “Yes, watched. We must be careful tonight. My enemy is growing stronger.

“Who is this enemy?”

“They want to use me, Malfus. As a weapon to kill. But you won’t let them, will you? You will protect me?”

Enormous love flooded over Malfus. “How can people be so cruel? To harm a child! I will always protect you. You have made my life worth living.”

“And I shall sing the songs in your head and bring you fame and fortune, dear brother. Be strong for me. I may have need of your protection tonight.”

Malfus nodded eagerly. “Of course. It is a full house, standing room only.”

“All those lovely people.”

“Yes. They adore you. Adore my music!”

“And they shall hear it as they die.”

The Doctor and Hannah reunited at the far end of the town square, opposite the theatre. The Doctor told her what he had seen.

“So the old woman is right? There’s a monster on the loose?”

“A killer is, doesn’t have to be a monster for goodness sake. But it *is* alien.”

Hannah said, “I knew it. That boy, it must be.”

“No,” said the Doctor patiently, “because the boy has nothing to do with the bad coffee.”

“*What?*”

He rubbed his hands gleefully. “Oh yes, two aliens alright. One has been projecting tullus energy towards the theatre, scanning the rooms telepathically for the second one – our boy.”

“The other alien is looking for the boy-alien using telepathy?” Hannah said. “And it soured the coffee.”

“Well done, you *are* keeping up.”

“Don’t confuse repeating what you say as understanding you. I’m borderline losing it.”

The Doctor tried again. “The second alien is using a mental tool, probably an augmentation of some kind, powered by tullus energy – very common power source for this type of thing – to track the boy. The energy’s radiation can affect microbes enough to make coffee taste bitter. I’m sure those cups were crawling with bacteria and they reacted with it.”

Hannah grimaced. “Terrific. I still think it’s a bit of a coincidence, two aliens landing in the same country, following each other around, one killing people while the other sings songs!”

“Exactly. It is not coincidence. Where is she, then?”

“Who?”

“The old lady you were looking after.”

“Oh, her. She went home. Had to get ready for tonight.” The meaning of the words hit her. “After what she saw she is still coming to the concert!”

The Doctor smiled. “And it’s only when you say it out loud you realise how odd it is. Malfus can’t realise what he’s got himself into.” He made off across the square rapidly.

“Now where are we going?”

“Monster hunting.”

Herr Croit stepped back from the edge of the bog and clasped the cloth he held tighter to his face. Two constables watched with him as a workman heaved on a hooked pole at something in the slime. “Help him then,” said Croit. “It’ll drag him in with it if he’s not careful.”

Reluctantly the constables descended into the mire up to their ankles and between the three of them a body was finally pulled free and deposited on the verge. Croit peered down at it. “Not like the others. Almost intact. I wonder why.”

“Perhaps it got disturbed,” one of the constables muttered.

“Perhaps.” replied the investigator, “or maybe it didn’t like *this*.” He picked something free of the body and shoved it into the man’s hands. “His leg.”

The constable dropped it in horror. Croit laughed. “Don’t be squeamish – it’s tin.”

The others laughed too, in relief. “A bit tough for our monster then, sir.”

“It appears so. Luckily our friend had the money for tin,” said Croit. “A wooden one would have splintered to bits and we would not have these.” He pointed to dents along the surface. “Teeth marks. Proof at last of what I’m up against. We go back to the town, I’m sealing it up, no one in or out. I’ll raise the militia. Tonight is that creature’s last in this world.”

Chapter 4

'Il Senza Nome Uno'

The queue moved slowly towards the theatre entrance. Hannah sighed. "Another concert, another line. I hate standing in line."

"Life is no more than one long queue toward death. And we are all in it," said the Doctor cryptically.

She pulled a face. "Thanks. That's cheered me up."

Suddenly the Doctor's mood changed and he gave a grin. "Chin up, there may be popcorn at the end of this one. Everyone is buzzing, aren't they? Despite earlier apathy they've turned out in force. Just like the old woman you helped, all oblivious to danger. Quite a draw, this boy."

She took another look at the shuffling mass in front of them. "Not like you to obey rules. Standing in line – that's not the Time Lord way."

"Actually, it is. They love rules. Heavens to Betsy, I'm behaving like one of them! Hannah, you are right. Make way please. My companion is very ill."

Taking her hand he dragged her to the theatre door amid loud protests from the crowd. He tapped the man guarding the door on the shoulder. "Excuse me. My friend needs a doctor urgently, let us in please."

The man sneered at him. "There's no doctors in here."

"No? Well, *I* am a doctor, so when you let me in, there will be, won't there? And I can treat her, can't I?"

Hannah gave a sickly smile. "Please let me in, I'm about to vomit."

"Vomit?"

"Everywhere."

Seeing his uncertainty, she collapsed against him with a retching noise. Quickly the Doctor pushed forward and got them both through the door. Before anyone inside could react, they concealed themselves in a nearby alcove. "Well done, Ms. Redfoot."

"Thank you. I should be on that stage. Now what?"

"We wait."

"No charging behind the scenes to confront the alien."

"I don't intend to confront it. I intend to save it."

Malfus dozed in his chair. The boy sat on a stool nearby, as motionless as a statue. Suddenly he came alive. "The Doctor is here."

Malfus tried to focus his befuddled mind. "Is that good?"

"Of course it is, all that life! I must have him, Malfus. Bring him to me."

“He is dangerous, too clever. We must be careful.”
 “You are right, as always. I get carried away. You always put me first. I shall make you proud tonight.”
 “You always do.”
 “The Doctor must be played on a long line. But I shall hook him with it, for I have the perfect bait.”
 “What?”
 The boy smiled. “Me.”

The alcove where the Doctor and Hannah had concealed themselves did not remain private very long. A large man, the worse for drink, squeezed himself in beside them. “Apparently some idiot has ordered out the militia.” He tapped his nose confidentially. “So I took the chance to sneak in the back way. Never paid for a ticket in my life.”

“The militia?” asked Hannah. “That’s soldiers isn’t it? Why?”

“Monster about apparently,” he laughed uproariously. “No one took any notice though. Always some official coming down and telling us what to do. Start listening to them and they’ll have us fighting a war somewhere before you take your hat off.”

“So where is this official now?” said the Doctor.

“Running round town. With luck, whatever he’s hunting will catch him. Eyes up, something’s happening.”

Through the window opposite a group of men ran past, shouting excitedly. They had weapons. “Look like soldiers to me,” said the Doctor grimly.

The man remained dismissive. “A few out of towners. The locals don’t want to know. Monsters indeed.”

The Doctor frowned. “Annoying I can’t be in two places at once, but I’m sure the real explanation is here.”

The main doors were pulled open and the queue surged forward. Quickly the drunken man merged into them. The Doctor and Hannah followed his example and were carried into the hall by the press of movement.

“Curtain up in ten minutes!” someone shouted.

People pushed their way to the best vantage point.

“Let’s stay near the back,” the Doctor whispered. “No musicians.”

“He sings unaccompanied, remember?”

“He did last time,” the Doctor agreed, “but that could have been financial reasons. Should be able to afford them now. Artistic choice or damage limitation.”

“Oh – looks like it’s show time.”

An old man walked slowly into the centre of the stage and raised a hand to silence the expectant applause. Probably the owner, Hannah thought, “I hope he’s not going to cancel.”

The Doctor shook his head. “I doubt a few soldiers outside are enough to make him give people their money back.”

They returned their attention to the stage and caught the final quavery words of the old man. “So many of you here is testimony to the reputation of my young protégé, Il Senza Nome Uno. A reputation forged simply by travelling from town to town and singing_ to those who wish to hear.”

Hannah and the Doctor looked at each other in amazement. “That’s Malfus,” she hissed.

The old man gestured to his left and onto the stage stepped the nameless one. As young and radiant as ever. As the applause died away, he opened his mouth and began to sing. But the Doctor and Hannah’s eyes were fixed on Malfus. Less than two years ago he had been a young man of twenty something. Now he looked seventy.

From outside, a terrified scream shattered the beauty of the song’s final notes.

“I’ve been so wrong,” said the Doctor. “And now it’s too late!”

In the back room of the local mortuary, the girl grabbed the glass offered her and drank greedily. She held it out again and Croit refilled it but held it back. “Well?”

“It was a monster, sir.”

The physician standing next to them regarded her like a specimen in a jar. “She is not fit to tell us anything. Such creatures as she, they live in the gutter and know nothing better. Her brain is stewed in alcohol. She was drunk before *you* gave her liquor.”

Croit ignored his tone, saying calmly, “She was not. Now tell us girl, what did this monster look like and where did it go?”

“My drink sir, I need it. My hands – see? They shake so.”

Croit handed her the glass and she drained it as quickly as before.

“You will regret that,” said the physician. “It won’t be monsters she’ll be seeing, it will be bats crawling up the walls and insects gnawing at her eyes. I know you, Arenie Sarg, don’t I?” he said to the girl.

“I saw it!” she insisted. “It disappeared down the sink. Three eyes it had, and huge claws. They’d rip a body to shreds. And the teeth, like spikes of iron, filed sharp.”

“A girl like her couldn’t imagine such things,” said Croit.

For the first time the physician sounded worried. “Well, maybe she did see something. But not a monster! Some reptile perhaps? Got itself into the sink from the river?”

Croit gave a thin smile. “You’re forgetting the marks in the false leg. Sharp iron-like teeth could make them alright. I have tracked this creature from village to village. But never has it been so clearly seen as tonight. It is growing careless, or sickens. I shall find it this time.” He turned to a constable. “Are people still at the concert?”

“Yes, Herr Croit. A few came out at her screams, but then went back in again.”

“Just as well. Better they stay in there, where they’ll be safe.”

As the last song came to an end, the Doctor motioned for Hannah to follow him. They made their way backstage via a corridor circling round off the foyer. The Doctor noticed Hannah’s movement seemed sluggish. “Are you alright, Hannah?”

“I’m tired. Let me sit here and remember the music.”

The Doctor let her rest. The music was affecting him too, making it hard to concentrate. But he knew he could fight it and that it would get worse close to the boy. “Stay here then, I’ll be back soon. Don’t wander off.”

Hannah smiled dreamily and began humming the last song.

The Doctor did not need to knock at the dressing room door, it opened at his approach. Grimly, he walked in. Malfus sat on a stool by a small table laid out with two glasses, one full, some bread and cheese on a pewter plate, and a jug of wine. He gestured towards the empty glass. “Some wine?”

The Doctor shook his head. “No thank you. You expected me? Assuming the boy does not drink.”

Malfus bowed his head in agreement. “Of course he does not.”

“Of course not.”

“And we did expect you. You have a great force around you, clearly you are not from my world. Another visitor from the stars.”

“And where is he?”

“Resting.”

The Doctor looked round the small room. “Where?”

“At our lodgings. He found tonight very tiring.”

“Well,” said the Doctor moving closer, “none of us are getting any younger.”

Malfus flinched, as if at an insult. But he replied civilly. “Indeed. I give my energies gladly so that he will prosper.”

“Why? Travelling around singing to the masses, it makes no sense.”

“He does it for me. My life’s ambition is to hear my music performed and extolled. A truncated life maybe, but truly fulfilled.”

“Or is it you keeping *him* prisoner? Making him perform like a puppet?”

Malfus, stooped with age, grey and tired, merely stared back at him and the Doctor nodded sadly.

“No...” said the Doctor slowly. “I see now. You are the captive here and I am wrong.”

“I am his willing protector, not captive!”

“You are his stooge. Tell me Malfus, where is he really?”

“He is here.”

The Doctor spun round at the sound of a new voice. The boy stood at the same door he had entered by, a golden glow suffusing him. “I took a final curtain call. Final for them, anyway.” He smiled gently. “Dearest Doctor, I am so sorry – hasn’t Malfus offered you wine? Please drink with him.”

Every instinct screamed danger but the Doctor could not react. The moment the boy entered, the Doctor’s mind clouded. Like trying to walk knee deep in water when each step is an effort, so it was with each thought. He knew something dreadful had happened to the audience, he remembered Hannah nearby. She could be in trouble! But all he could think was how beautiful the song had sounded and how innocent and defenceless the boy looked, and how tired he himself felt suddenly.

Malfus got up from the stool and helped the Doctor sit down. “Are you feeding from him now?” he asked the boy.

“A little, but I have fed tonight.” He walked across to the Doctor and leaned forward, whispering in his ear. “I must go now, my friend, I have an enemy nearby. Yes, incredible to contemplate, is it not? That any should wish to harm *me*. But I am strong enough after tonight’s feast to flee again. Always I am running. But soon, the flight will end, and I shall turn and fight. Next time we meet, you will give me the strength I crave.”

Gathering up their things, Malfus opened the outer door and the two disappeared into the darkness.

The Doctor sat dazed for several minutes before snapping back to life. “Hannah!”

He ran down the corridor but could not find her. He ran on into the auditorium. Bodies lay slumped in their seats or collapsed on the floor. All old, some even decaying. The Doctor looked round in desperation. “Hannah, where are you?”

The coach rattled haphazardly along the road from the town before slowing to a halt. The horse whinnied in alarm. Then she spied grass and instinct took over and she began grazing. Inside the coach the boy sat entranced, eyes white and shining.

“Is our enemy watching?” asked Malfus.

“It always watches, Malfus. Like me however, it was weakened at the landing. And like me it feeds as best it can.”

“The monster...”

“As they call it. Imagine if they saw me in my true form. What would they call me?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you think?”

“Wonderful, always. Whatever your form.”

“Ah, the minds you creatures have. So easy to control. Unlike the Doctor. My control over him grows so slowly. I dare not feed from him until it is complete, for I am vulnerable when I feed. If my influence over him weakened when in transition...”

The lack of motion dawned on Malfus. “Why have we stopped? We should leave this town far behind.”

“Yes. Where is the coachman? I do not sense his presence.”

Angrily, Malfus opened the door and looked up at the driver’s seat. “He is there. What is the delay?”

The coachman’s body slumped down and fell to the ground. Malfus sighed at the sight of it. “He has aged to death.”

The boy sighed. “Another one. How tiresome. It is because *you* are so near to death that in trying to shield you, I am draining others too quickly. Are you fit to drive?”

“I think so.”

“Poor Malfus. You look eighty years old. Steel yourself my brother, the next town will be the last. There I shall take the Doctor, defeat my enemy, and transcend.”

Chapter 5

The Monster

It saw the parasite and the old man who guarded it hurry from the theatre and drive away. It slunk back into shadow. Soon it would be able to attack, but not yet, not with so many people hunting it. Once more it would follow the parasite. But this time would be different, the injuries sustained in the crash were almost healed, it was able to act. The parasite would not get to the next town, not have another opportunity to feed, the Isologrib would recapture it and leave this rotten planet of mud and water.

It hated ingesting meat, but it was the only compatible binding material it could access. The Isologrib manoeuvred its heavy body one hundred and eighty degrees and began shuffling along the alley. It would not take the coach road but use the paths near the river. It would intercept the coach.

Suddenly it stopped. A human just ahead stood gazing at it. A female and, unlike other humans, not frightened.

"Hello," she said. "You must be the monster. Don't be afraid. My name is Hannah."

The Isologrib recognised the dull glow of the parasite's mesmerising song lingering over her, but that alone did not explain her calmness. This woman was not like the others. She had knowledge, understanding. Gathering itself, the Isologrib moved towards her.

Failing to find Hannah inside, the Doctor burst out of the theatre and calling her name as he ran into the square. And he was answered.

"Doctor."

The Doctor skidded to a halt. "Hannah?"

"Over here."

Her voice came from the alleyway alongside the theatre. The Doctor ran down it quickly. Hannah stood no more than a metre away from some large shape he could barely make out, lurking in the shadows.

"I'm not afraid," she said.

She was talking to the creature, not the Doctor. He came to stand beside her, able to see better now. The creature, the size of a small elephant, scaly, sharp claws along two right hands and one along the left. Another right hand and another two left hands were more like a human's, with long, tapering fingers.

"Hello," said the Doctor cheerily. "I'm afraid you missed the concert. Or are you hanging around for autographs?"

"You are alien," the creature hissed.

"Yes," the Doctor agreed.

"I am alien."

“I see.”

“And so is the parasite.”

“That’s interesting. Why parasite?”

“You do not know?”

“I think I know but I thought I’d ask.”

The creature considered this. “It absorbs life. It can drain a world.”

The Doctor sighed. “I was afraid of that. So, we are on the same side. The boy, or the thing pretending to be a boy, must be stopped.”

“It is the perfect weapon in our war,” the monster continued.

“Oh, dear. We are *not* on the same side.”

Hannah tugged his sleeve. “The Isologrib was taking the parasite to the war when his ship crashed. The parasite escaped and the Isologrib was wounded.”

“You know an awful lot about it, Ms Redpath.”

She smiled. “Not just you that has the knack of monster chatting. We’ve been getting on fine, haven’t we?”

The Isologrib ignored her. “While evidently not of this time period, she is of this planet so I won her trust to be sure of catching you. You must have a ship.”

Hannah glared at it. “You are a piece of work, you know that?”

“The important thing now,” the Doctor said, “is to find the parasite before anyone else dies. And for you to stop killing people.”

“I have to consume energy. Humans are the only animals with enough nutrients in their flesh to sustain me. You understand my need, Doctor. Their level is so low I must consume much of them to be complete.”

The Doctor considered this. “What do you eat, I mean consume, on your own world?”

“Casagonipe. We carry supplies to battle but mine are lost in the crash.”

The Doctor clapped his hands excitedly. “Protein enriched, nutrient stuffed, delicious in breadcrumbs, best in batter, flab-fish!”

“You talk nonsense,” the Isologrib hissed angrily.

“No – those fish are the richest source of Casagonipe I know. Pretty exclusive just now, but one day all the best restaurants will stock them, trust me.”

“You waste time!”

“Nonsense. I can get you synthesized Casagonipe in an instant. With extra protein. So there will be no more killing. Agreed?”

“Where shall you get this? Your ship?”

“Never mind where. Do you agree?”

“Agreed.”

“Hannah. Key to the you-know-what. Go to the food machine and dial up five bars of Attenene flab-fish on the food machine.”

“OK. Will it be enough? He’s pretty big.”

“Five is plenty. The food from the machine is designed to expand once eaten to match the needs of the consumer. Haven’t you noticed how it is always just enough?”

“And I thought it’s my will power. OK. Don’t run away you two.”

“And the parasite?” the creature asked.

“I can’t let you use him as a weapon. Whatever he does, he does it to live.”

“Hah! You are under his spell. You are a weak fool.”

The Doctor ignored the insult. “Once you have the protein you won’t need to kill people. If you agree to leave, I will take you home. The same deal for the boy. I will take him somewhere he can draw the energy he needs without harming others. It may take longer, not be as much, but he’ll survive.”

The Isologrib made a hissing sound. “Once I am strong enough nothing will stop me.”

Half way to the next town Malfus needed to rest. Dawn was an hour away and the coach parked unseen in the darkness beneath a copse beside the road. Malfus dozed inside the coach while the boy stood beside the door gazing at the stars. His face beaming and his eyes sparkling. Moonlight made him look paler than ever.

Malfus moaned in his sleep and the boy frowned slightly. He took a few paces from the coach and Malfus relaxed back into slumber. Poor Malfus, he could not last much longer.

Hearing a cry above, he saw bats flying in and out of the trees and held up his hand until one of them flew down and perched on his finger. He smiled, admiring its leathery wings and the twitching curiosity in its face. But in seconds it shrivelled up and died, dust in his hand. He brushed it away and leaned against the coach, not too close but close enough should Malfus wake and worry where he was.

“People are becoming suspicious. There were soldiers...” Malfus was awake.

The boy smiled. “People are toys.”

“I think I – I – “

“Think what, Malfus?” the boy asked, gently teasing.

“I... I am so *tired!*”

The boy nodded. “You will die soon I think,” he said matter-of-factly. “But you have enough strength for this journey.”

“Yes...”

“Don’t worry dear Malfus, soon the Doctor will return.”

“He is dangerous. The risk is too great...”

“Risk?” the boy laughed. “His mind is no more free than yours. He just thinks it is.”

“He sees the truth,” Malfus persisted.

“What truth?”

“The truth – that you...” Try as he might, Malfus could not put into words what he meant. “I don’t know!” he gasped.

Crossly, the boy walked towards the door studied him. “No, you don’t. And who cares about the Doctor when he has lost his heart to *me*. He will be my brother after you. Now get up and let’s be going. I hope the horse is not far away.”

Malfus staggered out and headed into the copse. The horse had to be kept away from the boy or it would age and die. The boy could control this influence to some extent, especially when recently fed, but slowly or quickly, he soaked up life like the sun soaks up water from a puddle.

Croit ducked out of site as Hannah came running from the alley and disappeared across the square. “Should we go after her?” the constable asked nervously.

“Of course not. The creature is down there. We have it cornered. How she escaped I don’t know.”

“Probably when that man went down. She got away when it was eating him.”

“Where are those soldiers? We must attack it. We may never get a better chance.”

On cue, a ragbag of a dozen local militia hurriedly pressed into service appeared from the gloom. The rest, it seemed, those at the concert, had paid the price with their lives.

“The alley is a dead end,” said Croit. “We charge at it, corner it. Those with guns, don’t fire until you are as close as you can get. Those with swords or knives, you get in after the firing and hack it to pieces. Understand?”

They mumbled ascent reluctantly.

“For heaven’s sake men, this is to protect your families and home! We can’t have this creature roaming free!”

At that moment, Hannah blundered into them, dropping the bag she held.

“You stupid girl, why have you come back?”

“Please let me through, I’m meeting my friend.”

“Friend!” Croit picked up the bag and looked inside. “What’s all this?”

“Er, a snack. We went to the concert. Always hungry after a concert. Aren’t you?”

Croit sneered. “You were at the concert? And the monster let you go. And now you’ve come back. Well, well. You have some explaining to do, young lady.”

Hannah changed tack. “Please, I must get to my friend. The monster is holding him prisoner.”

With uncharacteristic adroitness, Croit said, “I’ll wager this is monster food! Am I right?”

Hannah’s face said it all.

“You are helping it?”

The physician asked eagerly, “It is your pet, yes? Escaped from its cage?”

Hannah became desperate. “Please, you don’t understand. I must get past. This is a snack for me and my friend, that’s all.”

“Eat some then,” said the physician.

She shrugged, it couldn’t hurt. “OK…”

“What will that prove?” interrupted Croit. “We are wasting time. Keep out of the way, girl.”

Hannah watched in horror as the ragged army massed their limited numbers for attack. “The Doctor is down there. Let me get him first.”

She was pushed aside.

Shouting as they ran, the men came to a sudden stop. No trace of a monster, only a figure huddled on the floor. “Is this your friend?” asked Croit.

Hannah shook her head. “I don’t know who this is. Doctor, where are you?”

Croit stood up from examining the body and said with grim satisfaction, “This is the monster’s work alright. And proof your doctor friend is helping it, or he’d be dead too.”

“Let me go,” Hannah pleaded. “I must find him.”

“No, no, dear lady. You have something invaluable.”

“What?”

Croit snatched the bag of Casagonipe from her. “Monster food. Bait, to bring this fiend into the open where I shall vanquish it.”

A few moments earlier, aware of the men gathering at the end of the ally to attack, the Doctor looked with concern at the Isologrib. "What now?" he asked. "You're cornered. I don't see you killing all of them before one gets a bullet or sword into you."

The Isologrib did not reply. In one sleek oozy movement it poured itself into the sink, disgorging a partially consumed human as it did so. The Doctor, powerless to prevent its escape, could only await the approaching soldiers. He stared down at the body. "Enough," he whispered, and moved back into shadow.

Hannah soon spotted the Doctor but held her tongue. Croit must see him soon though. A distraction? Yes, they could both escape then.

The distraction was magnificent but it did not come from her. As the men examined the body and Croit knelt to peer into the hole, the Isologrib burst forth, snarling angrily and towering over them like a Goliath. Before they could think, it snatched up the physician and shook him like a bottle of pop. He exploded as his neck snapped and his head lolled to one side, blood spurting from the hundred cuts of the creatures sharp claws. But it was the bag the physician held that the Isologrib wanted: the food bag taken from Hannah. A few pounds of Casagonipe, not much to look at, but a massive power boost for the creature.

As everyone ran screaming, Hannah darted into the shadows and grabbed the Doctor's hand. "Run!" she shouted.

They got as far as the square when the Doctor made her stop. "Watch."

The Isologrib, now alone at the end of the narrow alley, tore at the food bag greedily. Finishing, it caught sight of them and manoeuvred itself round. "You have made me strong, now you will give me your ship or more people will die!"

Hannah pulled at the Doctor but he stood firm. "It's alright. Watch."

Suddenly the monster howled in pain. It began lurching, hitting the wall on one side and falling back against the other. Then it fell, its bulk hitting the ground heavily. It groaned some more then was still. Cautiously the Doctor moved forward. "I'm afraid the flab-fish may not be the nutritious Casagonipe substitute I led it to believe. What a shame."

"You've killed it?"

"Hannah, I don't kill. At least, not by choice." He looked at the physician's shattered body. "That poor man. I never meant anyone to be in danger except me."

With a roar of anger, the Isologrib reared again, preparing to throw its entire weight at them. But it did not have the strength. The roar turned to a whimper and it seemed to dissolve into black sludge, which oozed down the sink and out of sight.

"It will take a while to recover," the Doctor said. "Before it does, we have to rescue the boy, get him off the planet. Then we come back and tidy up here."

Hannah said quietly, "Rescue the boy?"

The Doctor glared. "The Isologrib wants to use him as a weapon. Have some sympathy for the boy, Hannah. He is only following his nature to survive. Once I get him away he will find energy in other ways. I will teach him that he doesn't need to kill."

Chapter 6

Death of an Innocent

"Step aside." Malfus glared angrily at the owner of the theatre.

The owner was not to be cowed. "I am sorry," he said stiffly, "but the performances are cancelled. I have heard disturbing reports, I have letters from Lublin, sent to me by associates in the music world. I..."

Malfus interrupted brutally. "Music world? It is bad enough to find the theatre you promised us is no more than a squalid village meeting house for third rate fiddlers on their second rate fiddles, without the insult to my intelligence by implying it is anything else! We have come a long way."

"You should have stayed where you were then, or better still, go on to Pinsk. There will be no recital here."

"Step aside."

"You are not listening, sir," the owner bristled.

Indeed, Malfus was not listening. His thoughts could only process the desperate need of the parasite for more energy. "The protégé needs to rest before the performance."

The owner was beside himself now. "There is no recital! People have heard the stories and will not come." He delved into his pocket and pulled out some coins. "Here is some money to cover your expenses, I will pay nothing more. I suggest you and the protégé rest at the inn and tomorrow be on your way."

"The insult!" Malfus could hardly speak. He clutched at his throat to loosen his collar. Breath came hard. "What stories?" He managed to croak the words.

"Death follows you! Whole towns laid waste."

"The plague, you have not heard of it? It spreads over the land."

"Or you bring it."

A new voice, light and shrill broke across his words. "If we carried it we should be dead by now."

The owner shoved past Malfus, who slumped against the wall in exhaustion. "The prodigy!" Despite his earlier protests he felt a sudden huge affection for the child. Of course he must sing! "Please – forgive me. I didn't understand."

The boy smiled, moving forward timidly. "You upset my beloved Malfus, caused him pain in his last hours. So I am sorry, sir, but I cannot do as you ask."

The man was puzzled. "You won't sing tonight?"

The boy stopped his approach, inches from the owner, his shining blue eyes dazzling. "I mean I can't forgive you. Die for me." The bright blue light burned, ate away at the poor man's soul like acid.

Trying to scream but unable to do even that, the theatre owner collapsed to the ground. In moments his body was nothing but rotting bones. Instantly the boy went to Malfus. "You are recovering?"

Malfus could not answer. He looked ancient, a husk. His eyes moved though, sluggishly. Enough to fix one last look upon his radiant master.

Meeting his gaze the boy said gently, "It is time. Give up your last strength. Let me take what is left as I have taken all that there was. Die in peace for me, my brother."

Willingly Malfus let his last breath slip away, with glorious music soaring round him. The boy singing to him one last time, an aria so beautiful it hurt. His own melody, composed long ago beside the river, thinking of the endless days ahead, the sun on his face, the birds in the trees, his mother laughing and... and... and..."

The parasite stood up. It no longer resembled a boy, it did not look human at all. By dying, Malfus broke the mental template. But it was so much stronger now, it could recreate the shape unaided. It just needed a little time. Floating serenely, it disappeared into the darkness of the unlit hall.

They made their way to the venue in silence, Hannah not willing to challenge the Doctor, and he not willing to justify his obsession with rescuing the boy. But as they stood on the threshold with no sign of activity she felt compelled to speak. "There's no one here. Maybe they cancelled."

"More likely the stories have caught up with the source and people are staying away."

"You mean they know the boy is a killer?"

The Doctor shot her a look and stepped into the lobby. "They know he brings bad luck. Remember, we've already heard his last performance – according to the records, this is where it ends."

"Because you stop him?" she said boldly.

The Doctor did not reply.

"We do stop him, right?"

He nodded slowly. "Yes... he must be stopped. I must get him away."

"And the Isologrib? Are you getting *it* away too?"

"Of course. But the Isologrib must wait, it's too weak to cause more harm. But the boy – the parasite – is very strong now. I can feel his mind."

She shuddered. Let the Doctor call it a rescue so long as he got rid of it.

The Doctor gestured round them. "A less salubrious hall. Maybe you should wait here."

"No way. We stick together."

"It will be dangerous. He will try to control your mind."

Determinedly she took walked up to the open doorway. "We look out for each other. Come on. Let's do this."

Across the lobby a corridor led back stage. They could both sense the power close by. Stopping in front of a door, the Doctor held up his hand warningly. "I'll go first."

He pushed the door open slowly.

"Come in, Doctor. I am alone."

The Doctor let the door close behind him. "Where is Malfus?"

"Alas, he has performed his last service for me."

The door swung open again and Hannah placed herself in front of the protesting Doctor. "You've killed him," she said accusingly to the parasite. "He was only a few years older than you!"

"I am countless years old."

"You know what I mean," she snapped back.

"All life has a term. It is how you fill it that matters. His life was rich and fulfilled. All the beautiful music he dreamed of I made reality. His sacrifice for his art was to have a shorter life."

"You are evil," Hannah said, her voice shaking.

The parasite turned its childlike face to the Doctor with a puzzled frown. "This girl is so beneath us in intellectual cognisance it is exhausting to talk to her. She must wait outside while we make our plans."

“What plans? What does he mean?” snapped Hannah.

“Listen Hannah, it’s not what you think. Please wait outside. Let me do this.”

“Don’t patronise me. You agree, don’t you? I am too thick to understand!”

The Doctor shook his head. “No one said that...”

“You misunderstood,” the creature laughed at Hannah mockingly.

The Doctor turned on it with sudden anger. “On the contrary, she understands you. Better than anyone, and that’s what you don’t like. Please Hannah, wait outside the door. It’s safer.”

Reassured slightly by his defence of her, she agreed reluctantly. “Alright. But if he tries anything, shout. I’m just outside.”

Once the door closed, the parasite gestured to a chair and the Doctor sat down. The parasite took a seat nearby and smiled. “Silly girl.”

The Doctor ignored the jibe. “You look different,” he said. “Older.”

“I had to re-image myself when Malfus passed away. I appear a few years older, perhaps. I had to rely on my memories of him when we first met but they mixed with how he became later. But I am radiant still, am I not?”

“You know you are. Hypnotic, and trying to confuse me. Which is, of course, why Hannah is so free of your influence,” he said with an air of satisfaction at having worked it out. “You are concentrating all your power on me.”

“She is of no consequence,” replied the boy with a sigh. “Why do we talk of her?”

“She is of consequence to me,” The Doctor snapped back.

The boy smiled, but its voice hardened. “And so am I.”

“It matters to me that you leave here.”

“Sounds to me like we have an agreement then,” said the boy happily. “One last kill to give me the strength I need to leave this world?”

“No! No human life.”

“The Isologrib then? Kill two birds with one stone?”

“You know that’s not possible. The Isologrib’s death is no help to you.”

More laughter.

The Doctor struggled to keep focussed, he could sense the parasite gnawing at his will. “I shall take both of you away from here. For you, a world where the life is not sentient. There are such worlds...”

“Or... *I can take you*. Give your life to me Doctor, become part of my transcending. To travel the universe unfettered by flesh, a spirit of air. The Isologrib could not enslave me and I will not let you entomb me, to do no more than exist.”

It glided to the Doctor and stretched out its arms and laid its hands on his shoulders. The ice blue eyes drilled into the Doctor’s mind and he pushed desperately, shoving the parasite back. “Too late,” it whispered.

Hannah stared at the rotting bones of Malfus and the theatre manager, not that they were recognisably those of their owners. She shuddered. ‘What is the Doctor doing?’ She must get back to him, the creature would destroy him.

But she did not get the chance. Behind her, in the gloom of the corridor, something crept nearer. The Isologrib, weakened by the food the Doctor tricked it into eating, and in pain from a difficult journey through the under ways and crevices of the town, crawled on, desperate to survive. It headed to the theatre, sure it is where the Doctor would go. Now it hid in fear, the parasite was near and too strong to fight. How could it get to the Doctor? Then it smelt the girl, and she was alone.

It reached out to envelope her.

Hannah could not cry, she could hardly breathe. She felt like she was sinking into a vat of tar. She could hear the Isologrib thoughts and knew it could hear hers.

“Let me go.”
“You will come with me. The Doctor will search for you and then I shall have you both. I need him.”

“Why?”

“To escape this world.”

“He’ll take you anyway.” She said.

“On my terms, not his. He will restore my strength and I shall take the parasite and the Doctor’s craft and return triumphant to the battle.”

Hannah could not argue with the logic. The Doctor would come after her and he would bring the parasite with him because it could not be left on Earth. 'It's down to me,' she thought, 'there is only one solution. I have to escape. But how?'

With Hannah in its grip, the Isologrib barely had enough strength to roll itself into back into the crevice but it knew once it hit the underground stream running below, the water would carry Hannah and itself to safety in the marshes. The Doctor would know where to look. All he need do is follow the trail of slime. But to be sure, just before they vanished, it let Hannah give one good scream.

The parasite played with the Doctor like a cat with a mouse, releasing its grip and stepping back. "Slowly does it, recover your strength for me." The longer it took to kill the Doctor the more energy was replaced for it to leech from him. And each time the Doctor's will became weaker and easier to control.

"Tell me you plan," the parasite coaxed.

"Plan? To get you away. I told you."

"You sound tired. I cannot leave before my performance. You would not want the people to be disappointed."

"You will not sing again. You will come with me *now*. I will take you to –"

"To a rock far away, I know, I know. And the Isologrib? Where will you take him?"

"Back to..." the Doctor had trouble concentrating, "I don't know, away from here. Wherever it comes from."

Hannah's scream tore across the room. Instantly adrenalin kicked in and the Doctor raced to the door, free of the parasite for a moment. "Hannah? Where are you?"

Angrily, the parasite followed. It quickly deduced what had happened. "She is dead."

"You know she isn't, it's taken her."

"Then she will be dead very soon. I shall sing her a lament."

"You," the Doctor snapped, rounding on the boy, "will shut up! You have said enough. I am going to find Hannah and you are coming with me."

The parasite smiled its boyish smile. "Thank you. All I want to do is come with you. You will be my protector now Malfus has gone, won't you?"

Not listening, the Doctor hared down the corridor, the parasite gliding effortlessly over the ground in pursuit. The Doctor spotted the trail of slime and knelt down at the crevice through which it ran. "Where does this lead?"

"I am no architect," it said, coming to rest beside him.

"The river, it must be, I can hear running water."

"All rivers run to the marsh. If the Isologrib has not eaten her – and why would it not, as it is hungry – she will drown."

The Doctor was already running from the hall, racing across the street and out of the town, following his nose to the nearby Pripet marshes. The parasite materialised a little way ahead of him. "This way," it trilled encouragingly.

For a moment the Doctor thought it looked like a Will-o'-the-Wisp, that insubstantial sprite of legend leading travellers to their doom in bogs and mires. He halted, panting.

"You do not trust me, Doctor? I can sense her mind."

“Hannah!”

“Hannah,” the parasite mimicked. Then, in a superb copy of Hannah’s voice replied, “Help me Doctor, I’m drowning. Help! Help! Help!”

Angrily, the Doctor pushed the hovering creature aside. “Isologrib, where are you? You need my help, you have it. Give Hannah back safely and I will take you wherever you like.”

“Fool,” hissed the parasite, “to care for one little life.”

The Doctor turned back a moment and stared unflinching into the ice blue eyes of the mask like face. “Fool,” he mimicked, “to care only for your own.”

Floating in the viscous water of the Pripet marshes, Hannah struggled to remain conscious. She shook with cold and gagged at the water lapping at her lips. The Isologrib drew her closer but she could tell it was weakening. The effort of getting here had almost finished it. She forced her head clear of the reeds and tried to see through the gloom.

“He is coming,” the Isologrib gasped, “he will help me now.”

Hannah’s idea was still to escape, get to the Doctor and rescue him from the parasite; she was certain he would need rescuing. She made another effort to struggle free and as she did so the Doctor’s voice came from nearby.

“Hannah, you poor dear girl.”

“Doctor? I’m here.”

“What a nasty death,” the Doctor said, his voice very close now, “all the mud and filth filling your lungs. I shan’t forget you, Hannah. I shall put a plaque on the wall and lay sweet smelling flowers on a plinth in front of it every day.”

He started to laugh. Hannah couldn’t believe it. She forced herself finally from the Isologrib weakened grip. “You!”

The parasite smirked, reverting to its most childlike voice. “I *am* a wicked boy, but I couldn’t resist.”

“You are my prisoner,” the Isologrib snarled, pushing Hannah aside it raised itself from the marshes with a mighty effort.

The parasite staggered back as though terrified. “Help me,” it begged, “please don’t let the monster eat me!”

To Hannah’s astonishment the Doctor appeared, charging through the mud he pulled the parasite to safety. It nestled in his arms like a frightened child. Holding it tightly he shouted at the Isologrib. “Leave him alone. All he wants to do is live, he is not a weapon for you to use!”

Desperately Hannah tried to get through to him. “Doctor, listen to me. That thing is the parasite, it...”

“Not now, Hannah. This is important.”

About to protest she stopped at the sight of his face. Eyes glazed, features taut and white. She could feel the mental energy pouring from the boy cowering under his protective arm.

‘No, not a boy, a parasite! I’m falling for it myself. I must remember, I must.’

The Doctor shook his head as if trying to hear but not able to comprehend. He looked old. Panic stricken she tried again, “Doctor, you must fight, its throwing all its power at you!”

The parasite laughed. “And where is the power coming from, little girl? The Doctor’s life force. He grows weak and I grow strong. I have never tasted such strength! Even the Isologrib cannot control me now.”

Hannah squealed as the monster towered over her once more.

“Kill her,” commanded the parasite.

But controlling both the Doctor and the Isologrib was proving hard, and while it gave its orders, the Doctor started to fight back. His whole body twisting in agony, he flung the parasite from him. It fell into the mud with a shriek of rage.

“Hannah – run,” he gasped.

The parasite rose from the marshes, water dripping from the hem of its coat, all its attention focussed on the Doctor. “Peace, my brother. They upset you and you hurt me. *Me*. But I forgive you, I know you didn’t mean it.”

The Doctor smiled, his gaze fixed on the malevolent imp as if it were an angel. “Thank you,” he whispered.

The Isologrib attacked again, this time lashing at the parasite. But the Doctor saw, and grabbing the nearest object, oblivious to its weight, he hurled it at the monster. The Isologrib had no strength left and collapsed back into the marsh taking the object with it.

Unfortunately the ‘object’ the Doctor grabbed was Hannah, and she kicked desperately to fight her way free. It was so weak now she easily escaped the Isologrib, but the marshes had her, and the mud began sucking her down. She cried for help but the Doctor ignored her.

The parasite walked across the quicksand as if on glass and came to rest beside the Doctor. “You have given me more than a three centuries already, how much more is left to take?”

“I don’t know... who is she?” he pointed weakly at Hannah.

The parasite frowned. “She is making a lot of noise, isn’t she? Not good for your concentration. We don’t need distractions. Hurry up and drown, girl.”

The Doctor struggled to think clearly. Surely he knew the girl? And whoever she was, she was drowning. Shouldn’t he care? Hannah’s plight fought against the malevolent force of the parasite’s will.

Aware of this, it positioned itself between them, blocking the Doctor’s view. “I shall sing a lament,” it said softly, “my voice is very soothing, it will stop you worrying about silly things. I sing it when humans die because I want everyone to die happy.”

“Doctor, please!” screamed Hannah.

“Hannah?”

“Yes!” she shouted back in desperation.

The Doctor waved at her as though in recognition and for a moment her heart soared. But his next words crushed it again. “Listen to the song, Hannah. It is so beautiful. Your screams blend into the melody perfectly.”

The parasite bowed to her. “Indeed. Please scream as much as you like, it is so refreshing not to sing alone.”

Suddenly the Doctor staggered, falling to his knees. His face was drawn and white, his hands, grasping at the damp earth, looked wrinkled and bony. “I – I think this body...” he gasped.

The parasite looked down with great interest. In a sorrowful voice tinged with amusement, it asked, “Are you nearly dead, Doctor?”

“I am going to regenerate...”

“No, I am afraid you *can’t* regenerate, for as soon as you do I shall absorb all that energy too. Then I transcend, back to the heavens.” Its voice rose to a crescendo.

But Hannah’s screams were pulling at the Doctor’s memory. Suddenly he didn’t hear the song anymore, only the screams. “She’s in trouble,” he yelled. “I’m coming.”

“No...” the parasite screamed. “It is time. I only need a little more of you, Doctor!”

But finally Hannah’s distress had penetrated the parasite’s control, and he could not ignore it. “I must,” he shouted.

Somehow he got to his feet, but the effort was so great he could do no more than stand and sway. He tried to concentrate, his mind clouding again. A child came towards him. The child was a boy, holding out his hands in supplication.

“Relax,” the little boy whispered soothingly, “do not fight me. Let her go, let her die.”

Eyes locked, the parasite and the Doctor stood on the edge of the marsh. Hannah’s shouts could no longer be heard by either of them, they are totally absorbed in each other.

Chapter 7

Intermezzo

Croit sat in a corner of the inn staring at his notebook. His only companion was a tired militia man, everyone else had disappeared, the villagers had gone to ground and the drunk, homeless or stupid had passed out on the floor.

“You know,” he said to the militia man who was nodding over his beer, “I’m beginning to think I’ll never catch this monster.”

The man gave him a bleary look. “You tried, sir. It’s on the run. It won’t be back.”

“You think not?” Croit did not feel sure. He looked at his notebook again. “I must write this up properly, make a proper record for the authorities. If the creature does come back, we must be ready. I only hope people believe me.”

The man nodded sagely. After a moment he said, “Shall we have another drink first?”

Croit sighed. “It must be dead, mustn’t it?”

“Of course. Probably.”

“I mean... it can’t live forever. Yes – we’ll have another drink.”

“I said, do not fight me,” implored the boy’s voice in the Doctor’s mind.

“I must.”

“Why?”

Such a simple question, the Doctor knew the answer should be obvious, but he could think of none. “Why? I don’t know...”

“Everyone has to die sometime, you will never have a nicer death than this. Surrender to the music.”

“Stop it! Shut up! I can’t concentrate.”

“Doctor, please – fight it,” Hannah gasped.

The parasite rounded on her angrily. “I have had enough of this distraction! Die, stupid girl.”

The bright blue eyes shone hard and bright, searing her body with pain. “No easy death for you,” it screamed, incandescent with fury.

“Help me!” she cried.

The Doctor did not hear her. He gazed at the parasite, tears on his cheeks. “I can’t kill you. You have a right to life. Please... don’t be sad... let me see you smile!”

Hannah struggled to breathe, she could no longer speak. She collapsed to her knees, the mud taking hold and sucking her in as surely as the parasite sucked out her life. In extremis, she let out a last, desperate sob of despair.

“Such a little life,” the parasite laughed, “so quickly over.”

"No!" the Doctor shouted.

The parasite broke its hold and turned quickly to him. "Peace, my friend. Her voice has no place in our song. Peace."

But Hannah's last cry had broken the spell. The creature's illusions could not hold against the terrible reality of her pain. "Not Hannah. I won't let you hurt Hannah!"

Frantically, the Doctor launched himself at the parasite. For a second it lay supine in his arms like a frightened child, and for that second the Doctor almost weakened and let it go, but then it exploded into a blazing column of light, power pouring from it, illuminating the Doctor and making him squirm in agony. The whole marsh lit up with eerie green light.

A massive surge of current threw Hannah from the marsh and flung her several feet in the air. She came crashing to the ground with a force that had the ground not been boggy, would have killed her. Dazed, she tried to see what was happening.

Hannah's fall further revitalized the Doctor, anger creating adrenalin to fight the parasite. Gathering all his strength and ignoring the pain, he reached into the burning column. As he suspected, it was a shield and not the creature's true form. It probably did not have one. But he could feel a shape inside, writhing in ever altering dimensions. "Enough," he hissed. "No more death."

"What of my death?" the parasite pleaded in its most pitiable voice. "Don't hurt me, my brother. I need you."

"And so does Hannah!" said the Doctor. Pulling the being from the light, he flung it as far as he could into the marshes. They boiled up round it and for a moment he thought he saw something else, the huge mound of the Isologrib rear up and envelope the now tiny frame. But then the marshes sucked everything from sight.

The green glow glittered on the water for a second before going out.

"Are you alright?" The Doctor knelt down and checked for signs of life. She groaned and her eyes flickered open. He grinned. "Tough as old boots. And a free mud bath. People pay a lot for that sort of treatment."

He was back, her Doctor, free of the parasite and full of concern for her. Half laughing, half crying, she gave him a push and he fell back into the mud with a splat. "Don't let me stop you then!"

He laughed as well. "You know, all that energy coming from the marsh has been just the tonic I need. I feel five hundred again. Well, almost. Give me a hand up."

They made their way back to the village on foot, cold, wet and aching in every joint, but happy. Both feeling a burden was lifted. "It is dead?" Hannah asked.

"No. The parasite is impossible to kill. But it has no power to animate itself."

"So what do we do? We can't leave it here!"

"On the contrary, it is the only place I can leave it. If I try to get the parasite out it will drain me in minutes. In the marsh it will feed off whatever life it can find, but that's not much. It will always be too weak to escape."

"And the Isologrib?"

He smiled. "Haven't you worked that out yet?"

Hannah realised something obvious had been nagging at her the whole time but she hadn't been able to fix on it. Now the Doctor's words got it nagging again. "Go on. Humiliate me."

He laughed. "Don't feel bad, the parasite's mental powers stopped either of us thinking clearly. But consider this, if the parasite can drain life from any living creature, how come the Isologrib is immune? It pursued the parasite doggedly without ageing a day. And it brought him here in the first place to use as a weapon."

She thought this over. "So... it's not alive?"

"Not in the conventional sense. It is a war machine first, organism second."

"But we spoke to it. It ate people."

"Eating flesh is not a safe definition of life. I know stones that exist purely by absorbing sunlight. They can't move but they love it if you roll them down a hill. Like going on holiday."

"You *are* back on form," she giggled. "So what did it want the bodies for?"

"It *consumed* the flesh for raw materials, ingesting the fibre to reinforce a malleable physical frame. But the Isologrib species exist in two dimensions. They use their physical shape like a vehicle. When attacked, it can 'pop out' mentally and let the body take the blows. Then back it comes and uses raw materials – ideally Casagonipe – to patch it up."

"So if the parasite tried to kill it, it leaves the body."

"Correct. A moment is all it needs. As soon as it vacates its body the life force goes with it."

"Like switching off the car engine." Hannah shivered, mud and water congealing together.

The Doctor grabbed her hand and set up a brisk pace back to the village. "Chop, chop. You'll catch your death standing here."

"So the intelligent brainy bit is trapped in the swamp?" she persisted. "It could escape, all it needs is organic matter to inhabit?"

"When the body part was fried to a crisp I dare say the 'brainy bit' zapped back to its own dimension. It only uses spaceships to transport other stuff."

"So it needed the TARDIS to transport the parasite, not to get itself off Earth."

"Top of the class, Hannah."

They walked on in silence until they reached the village and the TARDIS came into view. Hannah stopped and looked at the Doctor anxiously.

He groaned. "More questions?"

"The boy, the parasite. Will he be OK?"

The Doctor was thunder struck. "OK? You are the one who kept warning me how evil he is!"

"I know. And he is. It's just, I can't help thinking how awful it must be trapped forever in the marshes."

The Doctor smiled, putting an arm round her he opened the TARDIS and led the way inside. "Humans are full of surprises," he muttered admiringly, "I'll never understand you. He won't be trapped forever. A few thousand years is nothing to him and by the end of it he may have enough energy to seek a new host."

"But that's bad!"

"Hannah, Hannah. It is a worry for another day. Remember how bits of information led me here? Well, if it is for me to be part of any future dealings with the parasite, I shall know about it when the time is right. Why keep a dog and bark yourself?"

She laughed at yet another of his non sequitur. "What?"

"I mean, why keep a TARDIS and worry about continuity? The old girl has it in hand." He closed the doors. "What a pity."

"Hmm?"

"You've quite ruined that beautiful dress I bought you."

She looked down at the mud caked mess and grimaced. "One word, Doctor: sorry!"

About The Author

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*.

Matthew lives in England near the town of Maidenhead and works in London for the government. Alongside this he is developing a second career as a professional actor with several professional roles on his CV. Matthew also enjoys walks in the Berkshire countryside with his dog, Henry.



Europe, circa 1700. A beautiful treble voice sings a sad song. His voice is heavenly, like nothing heard by anyone before. People flock to hear him, thinking his voice is sure to break and not wanting to miss out before it does. But the boy never ages. The Doctor and Hannah arrive just as the singer's fame is spreading. They go to a recital but after hearing the alien music the Doctor realises the boy is not human.

In the meantime, people are reporting a creature prowling the streets at night. Hannah sees it herself. Sightings follow the singer from city to city. For a while it seems to us that the boy and the creature may be one and the same, but in fact the creature is an Islogrib and hunting him for its own purposes.

The Doctor must stop the Islogrib and the parasite. But even he finds it impossible to fight the parasite's hypnotic control. Hannah is beneath the parasite's radar, she can see it for what it is. Somehow she must find a way to destroy both creatures and free the Doctor.

This is another story 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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