

THE
DOCTOR WHO
PROJECT

The HOPE OF midwinter's EYE



Nick Krohn

Published by Jigsaw Publications
Vancouver, BC, Canada

www.thedoctorwhoproject.com

First Published December 2018

The Hope of Midwinter's Eve
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Cover designed by Robert Carpenter
Layout & Design by Bob Furnell

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From orbit above the human homeworld, it is possible to see the star around which circles C801, the third planet to join the Nine Worlds Confederation, some six hundred years ago. The name itself has connotations. A millennium ago, when mankind's zeal for expansion finally matched its technological and economic determination to spread beyond its home, they gave their newly-colonized worlds fanciful names from its ancient past. Icarus, Churchill, Bowie, and others all bear names of nearly-forgotten figures from mankind's past, but once the novelty of expansion evaporated, they turned toward more pragmatic names for their worlds. The people of 801, as it's called locally, are a very pragmatic breed and take no notice of their planet's bland name. At this moment in their long, proud history, there are much bigger problems for them to worry about.

In the Nine Worlds, 801 is the industrial manufacturing powerhouse of their economy. Six centuries ago, that meant building and operating the enormous derricks and machinery required for interplanetary mining. Five centuries passed, and the natural resources and manufactured goods that flowed from 801 flooded the coffers of the Nine Worlds. The other worlds found other crafts and trades to specialise in. Art and music flourished, and this sector, once regarded as nothing more than a frontier outpost, became the centre of a cultural and economic Renaissance. With that prosperity came competition and jealousy from the other sectors of space.

One hundred years ago, when it became economically unfeasible to send human mining fleets into space, 801's ecosystem was already in freefall. As sometimes happens in the affairs of men, in the midst of this ecological and economic crisis, a glimmer of hope appeared. An eight-year-old prodigy came forward with an interstellar communications device so fast and so devoid of signal lag that converting the mining fleet to be operated remotely by drones was accomplished nearly overnight. Two years later, at age ten, Eileen Hastings received her first PhD. Her dissertation was a plan to build enormous atmospheric filtering and conversion devices to clean 801's ravaged atmosphere.

Now, more than a century later, Dr. Eileen Hastings' achievements are legendary. She has achieved startling advances in nearly every field of scientific endeavour. Her biotechnology expertise has provided mankind with its most effective means to slow aging to a crawl. As the surface became uninhabitable, Hastings found a way to move the entire population underground, into a vast system of man-made caverns comprising the largest subterranean structure ever

imagined. She has solved no fewer than three impending food shortages, and her tireless efforts have produced seven vaccines for various maladies afflicting a people increasingly beset by disease as the ecosystem continued its slowed but inevitable decline.

Throughout her lifetime, her engineering prowess has provided 801 with a solution to so many crises, she is called the Living Hope of the Nine Worlds. The planet she has dedicated her life to saving is finally beyond even her matchless genius. The towering atmospheric condensers, whose exhaust once altered weather patterns across the entire surface of the planet are now nearly inoperative. First, the exhaust slowed, then stopped. The machines had not malfunctioned; the atmosphere had been recycled so many times that now the only atmosphere left was now in the artificial habitats underground. Bereft of air to purify, many of the condensers were disassembled before the month-long decommissioning process had even completed. One of Hastings' greatest triumphs had been stripped for parts to build her final, desperate attempt to save her people.

Below ground, hundreds of people were queued up, faces obscured by their personal rebreathers. These were the last remnants of the population of 801. Some of their countrymen had been aboard the Evacuation Fleet for more than a month. In spite of their dreadful situation, their hearts were full of hope. It was Midwinter's Eve, a time of miracles since ancient times, and the people of 801 were believers this year. Hastings, the Living Hope, was going to deliver them a brand-new planet.

Two light years away, planet D036 spun its lazy way through its long orbit—fully one hundred days longer than Earth standard. The atmosphere was a gritty, swirling, planet-wide storm of carbon dioxide sulphur so pressurised that human lungs wouldn't survive long enough to choke to death on the poison fumes. No life had evolved here, not even the most primitive of amino acids had ever formed on its surface. The conditions for life simply were not right in any respect—except two. It was the only unsettled planet in the territory of the Nine Worlds that was both the correct distance from the sun and had the correct gravity to support human life.

When Eileen Hastings first laid eyes on D036 three years ago, she knew it would be the only chance for her people. So she had a structure built on the surface so stocky and squat that it seemed deceptively small from above. In fact, the facility took up several square kilometres and a further two kilometres down. Most of it was occupied by vast tanks of chemicals. Several were lead lined to insulate against radioactivity, and a few were enveloped by stasis fields, and they were all interconnected by tubes and conduits in an arrangement that only Hastings truly understood.

The small living quarters were a buzz of activity as Hastings' scientific and engineering teams were preparing their final departure from the facility. Though she was well over a century old, her hair had only begun to acquire the steel gray hue she recalled from memories of her grandmother. Her face had only the faintest touch of crow's feet, and her compact frame spoke of her many energetic years spent in service of her people. She wore her light brunette hair back in a tight ponytail, a hairstyle she adopted at eight years old after her hair had fallen in her eyes one too many times at a microscope.

She might look and feel young, but she was only too aware of the many years that had passed as she went about her work. Her teams on D036 were all staffed entirely by her grandchildren and great-grandchildren. There were twenty-three children in residence here. They all called her Gran. The Council had looked askance at her insistence that the facility would house

children, but she had always had a sentimental outlook on humanity, especially for a scientist. The Council had never guessed that Hastings considered having nothing but her own family in the facility eliminated any chance of sabotage. A small herd of shrieking, excited children rumbled past the door of her private quarters bringing a smile to her face as she packed the last of her diaries into a small wooden chest. Barely two hands long, but the data here represented everything she had worked on for her century-long career. Not just the successes, but the failures as well, and even things she had designed but never built. Her whole life's work in a little box.

"Gran?" squeaked a small voice in her doorway. "What are you doing?" The voice was attached to a small, twelve-year-old blonde girl. Helena, her most curious grandchild. Hastings had high hopes indeed for Helena.

"Helena, do you know the very first words you ever spoke was that question. 'What are you doing?' from your high chair right in the middle of breakfast."

"Yeah, Gran, but what are you doing?"

"I'm packing the last of my things, dear."

Helena's eyes shone with delight. "You're coming with us! You can get my Midwinter's present now!"

"No, Helena, I still have to stay here. Just until tomorrow, but I want your father to take some things for me. Just in case."

"Just in case what?"

Helena's father Owen appeared in the doorway. "There you are, Helena. I found your giraffe on the floor in my quarters. If you don't pack her, she can't come with us, so don't you think you'd better get moving young lady? You can bother Gran tomorrow when she has time for you."

Helena mumbled something that may have been something close to "Yes, Papa," as she shuffled out of the room, head hanging in the kind of despair only twelve-year-olds can muster.

Owen looked at his great-grandmother-in-law, and even though nothing had changed in her outward appearance, she finally looked like her long run had caught up to her. "I wish you wouldn't lie to my daughter, and I wish you hadn't talked me into lying to her as well."

"You understand the stakes as well as I, Owen."

"Yes, and I will let you do this, but you cannot expect me to approve. For Cosmos' sake, Gran. It's Midwinter."

She handed him the box containing her diaries. "The historians will want these. Hide them from the historians. If Bledsoe's mob come sniffing around, burn this box before you let those fools have my work."

"Of course, Gran."

She placed a smaller box atop the diaries. "These are correspondence. Letters to friends who deserve an explanation. Don't transmit them until it's all over."

"I'm doing it as soon as we arrive on the orbiter," Owen said. "I won't want to tomorrow."

She fixed him with a steely gaze. "Fine. I suppose that's fine. Try not to make it look important. None of this can look important to the rest of them. And don't let on, not even to your wife."

"Who will probably divorce me when she finds out I knew and said nothing?"

"No, she won't."

"No, probably not."

"She'd never let me off that easy."

"I imagine she wouldn't."

Twenty years later, and some three hundred light years from D036, Communications Hub Hob0 13 orbited a feeble white dwarf star. It was several hundred kilometres long, each segment of its massive cylindrical form spinning at different speeds, providing its own level of gravity. Every species needed its own gravity, for its general health. “Work in their gravity; sleep in your gravity” went the old saw passed on to each new resident. Inside the walls of the structure, people lived and worked in nearly perfect harmony, as in any civilized mega-city. In a nondescript alley, the TARDIS sent up a cloud of dust as it wheezed and groaned into existence.

The door swung open, and the Doctor stepped out, his serviceable brown jacket and green corduroy trousers giving him the look of a college professor reluctantly on his way to a casual dinner party. His head gave a quick glance to each side, and he stepped out, satisfied with another smooth landing. “It’ll only be a few minutes, Miss Redfoot, and then we can be on our way.”

Hannah stepped out of the TARDIS, still in the act of pulling her long black hair up. “We’re really just here to pick up your mail?” she said around the hair tie in her mouth. “Can’t you just get it sent to the TARDIS somehow?”

“Yes, but that’s mostly for bad news.” The Doctor pulled the TARDIS door shut, locked the door with a deft twist of the key that spoke of long practice. “I keep several... I suppose you’d call them post office boxes throughout the universe where my friends may send correspondence. I try to make sure they’re sent to boring places like this to avoid interception.”

They emerged from the alley, and the Doctor made a decisive left turn. Hannah smirked and gave him a sideways glance. “You have friends?”

“Very funny, Miss Redfoot.”

The Doctor’s description of the space station was very accurate, in Hannah’s opinion. Thousands of years in the future, and everything still felt mostly practical and mundane. Apart from the aliens with strange numbers of legs, and the fact that you could look up, and instead of sky there were more buildings hanging down, like stalactites in a cavern. On second thought, maybe travelling with the Doctor had just broadened her horizons. They passed a small kiosk, and Hannah was amazed to find an enormous bird selling newspapers. “Doctor, they still have newspapers?”

He stopped long enough to appraise the bird and its wares. “Told you this place was boring.”

In the post office, the Doctor opened his mailbox and letters came spilling out. “You don’t check your mail very often, do you?” Hannah said.

“Well, to be honest, I don’t. It’s not as if I don’t think of these people, I just often forget that I remember them,” he said as Hannah squatted down with him to help collect his letters. “Now here is a person I have not heard from in a long time.” He stood up and dropped his pile of letters back on the floor except for the one that had attracted his notice. He fished in his pocket for something that could substitute as a letter opener.

“Don’t worry, Doctor, I got this,” Hannah grumbled, still collecting his mail as the discarded envelope fluttered down to become part of the mound of paper. Finally, five minutes later, she had collected the mail into a neat stack that could be carried with ease. She stood up and opened her mouth to prod the Doctor back to the TARDIS, but the words died in her mouth.

The Doctor still held the letter up, but his eyes were a million miles away. His mouth had drawn into a tight line. Something in that letter had made the Doctor very angry.

The Evacuation Fleet was finally underway, and Duncan Bledsoe was on the bridge of the Corsair, his assigned ship. He was no space mariner and was not apparently in command, but being a Delegate to the Council of Nine Worlds had its privileges, and Bledsoe had never had any qualms about enjoying them. His clothes were skilfully tailored; each crease was crisp, and each brass button shone as if he had just finished polishing them. His clothing was uniformly black, save for a lapel pin, which was blood red. Its shape was the double helix of Earth DNA. It identified him as a member of the 801 First Party.

In fact, he was the First Party's founder and president; its guiding light. He did not approve of evacuation. How could a mighty nation simply leave its home? Why couldn't that infernal woman have come up with some other solution to this problem? In his speeches against the referendum on evacuation, he had called evacuation "cultural genocide at taxpayer expense." He had meant every word. His primary advantage as a politician had always been his genuine belief in his own agenda.

Another figure in black approached. It was Stefan Walton, his right-hand man. "Mr. Bledsoe, final preparations are complete. We are ready."

"The device is ready?"

"As ready as we can make it, sir."

Bledsoe checked his watch. "Very well. Wait five minutes and then instruct the captain to break from the fleet."

Hastings strolled along the ductwork that led to the empty vat where the first steps of chemical reactions would begin. Her steps echoed off the floor and bounced across the maze of polished plasteel that had been the sole focus of the last years of her life. She stopped for a moment, glancing at one of the readouts. The whole world was so silent without the children; the void filled only by the ticking of the clocks. She had resurrected the ancient art of analogue clock making just for this project. She was sure people were going to ask questions about that detail of the project, but only Owen seemed to notice. As long as the Living Hope said it was necessary, everyone assumed she must have good reasons for what she did.

She walked the final mile of catwalks to the master control room thinking of her great-grandchildren, and all the years they had before them, beneath the sun of a world that they could call their home. In two years, she had never dreaded this day, though she knew it must lay in her future. In these final hours, she was content in the knowledge she was doing the right thing.

She opened the door and stopped dead. A young woman leaned against the wall in the far corner, looking with amusement on the mass of uncontrollable hair that sat with his back to the room at Hastings' control console as if he owned the place. "How did you get in here? What is the meaning of this?"

"My question exactly" came an angry voice from her chair. The Doctor spun around, a sheet of paper in his hand. A look of horror froze on Hastings' face. "Got your letter," he growled. "Suicide?" He crushed the paper into a ball and tossed it aside. "No, Hastings. Not today, not ever."

"How did you get the letter so quickly?" she sputtered.

The Doctor rose and in three strides stood before his old friend. “I got it twenty years from now. I told you before I have a time machine.” A long moment passed, as the Doctor’s unblinking stare bored into Hastings’ eyes. “I’m still waiting for an answer, Dr. Hastings. What is the meaning of this? What can possibly be the meaning of this?”

“I’m Hannah,” said the girl from her spot in the corner. She gave a little wave.

Hastings gave Hannah a brief nod. “It’s absolutely necessary, Doctor. It’s this, or my people have no home and become scattered through the remaining eight planets of the Confederation.”

“Not good enough,” he snapped. “If you have built a machine that works only if you die operating it, you have not built a machine that works. I would like you to show me your work, Dr. Hastings, so that I may show you where you went wrong.”

Hastings gave the Doctor a severely annoyed look but said nothing. She brushed past him and gave Hannah a welcoming smile. After the usual pleasantries, she said, “I only wish we could have met under better circumstances.” She sighed with regret. “In any case, I wish you a Happy Midwinter.”

She swept from the room, the Doctor hot on her heels, and Hannah pulling up the rear. “Doctor,” Hannah said, “what’s Midwinter?”

“In your time, the holiday was called Christmas.”

“She’s going to kill herself on Christmas?”

“No, Miss Redfoot, she *was* going to kill herself on Christmas. Now we’re here.”

Captain Ronson was a member of the First Party and so took little convincing. In fact, he barely asked any questions at all when told to change course to C223, the third of the Nine Worlds. Lucky for him, since Walton had orders to execute him the second time the Captain refused. Instead, the Captain retained control of his ship, and now they were cruising at half light speed away from the fleet. Transmissions from the other ships were ignored. Despite their threats, none of them gave chase. This day was going exactly as planned, which gave Bledsoe a sense of deep satisfaction. He was always willing and able to do things the hard way, but in his heart of hearts, he preferred the easy way. For him, the easy way was for everyone to do as Duncan Bledsoe told them to do.

Bledsoe travelled quickly through the pristine, clean corridors of the ship at his usual brisk pace. Behind him, Walton tried his best to keep up while also reading Bledsoe reports on the status of the ship and its inhabitants. During the months-long process of embarkation, the other ships had all confronted the consequences of packing the rabble in cheek by jowl and then leaving them to their own devices. Not on this ship. Bledsoe imposed strict discipline, despite the relatively small number of First Party members on board.

Once the results of the referendum were made public, Bledsoe immediately demanded that one of the ships be reserved for First Party members only. He said this was because he feared harassment and mistreatment of Party members. Of course, the Senate of 801 swiftly rejected his demand. Each ship would hold an equal number of people from each political party, they said.

This caused much more trouble than Bledsoe’s plan would have, but that was part of the point: making his political opponents look disorganised and inept. Of course, the real reason there could be no equitable distribution was that political parties were not all the same size, but it made little difference in the eyes of the people. In the end, they settled for just putting an equal number of First Party members on each ship. Bledsoe protested this, but not too much. After all, what he

really wanted was a small cadre of loyal Party members on each and every ship when the fleet was at last underway.

The Doctor frowned at the image on the viewer, a screen that occupied an entire wall of the Research Department. “Well, I see now why this place has no windows. What’s the atmospheric pressure? Is this sulphur content reading accurate?”

Hastings touched a button on the console, and several charts and graphs appeared in a corner of the screen. “The atmosphere is at a pressure roughly one hundred-and-six-times Earth standard, extremely turbulent, and is mostly sulphur and carbon dioxide.”

“That’s like Venus, isn’t it?” Hannah said.

“Indeed it is, Miss Redfoot,” said the Doctor with a proud gleam in his eye. “Well-spotted.”

In the storms, there were periodic flashes of light. Hastings said, “Those glimmers you see are particles of silica dust reacting with trace elements in the atmosphere. Gives off a tiny charge now and then.”

The Doctor folded his arms and turned to Hastings. “All right, Hastings, I can appreciate that converting this atmosphere into something breathable is a big job. In fact, I’m dying to know how you plan to do it, but I still don’t understand why this requires your life.”

Hastings switched the screen to show several complex mathematical formulas. “It took a great deal of work to solve this puzzle, Doctor, and I was working under a strict deadline. Two years to get this done.”

“This is very interesting,” he said. “I can see why you needed so much space for this building.” He had his face very close to the screen, and it looked to Hannah as if he was jumping from line to line of the text seemingly at random. “Yes, and there is where you can get your nitrogen and even a good amount of liquid water. Very clever, that. Wait, what’s this? This element doesn’t exist. You created an artificial element?”

“Seven of them, in fact.”

“How do you keep them from decaying?”

“We’re holding them in stasis.”

“You don’t have that technology.”

“We didn’t have it. Now we do. When I was a little girl, I remember being trapped in a room with an extremely confident man who told me ‘What we do not have, we must make, Miss Hastings.’”

The Doctor unnecessarily adjusted his jacket. “Sound advice.”

“I’ve always thought so.”

The Doctor shook his head in frustration, unwilling to be distracted. “Very well, Dr. Hastings, I am suitably impressed. Now show me why you have to die to make this happen.”

Hastings sighed and scrolled through some more pages. “Here we are, Doctor. This is the sequence in which the reactants must be combined.”

“At last, let’s see why you have deluded yourself into this mad plan of yours.” The Doctor stopped dead a few lines into his examination. His face fell. “I see. Here it is. Your artificial elements are extremely reactive.”

“Which they would have to be, of course, but in that first chain of reactions, the last one produces—”

“A rather large EMP,” the Doctor finished.

Hannah held up a hand, “Question for the geniuses,” she said, “what’s an EMP?”

“Electromagnetic pulse,” said Hastings.

“Many chemical reactions produce electricity, usually in small amounts,” said the Doctor. “Alkaline batteries are a good example. This is far beyond that. Partly due to the massive amounts involved and partly due to the exotic elements being used, this amount of electricity will actually generate an electromagnetic pulse not unlike when certain primitive nuclear weapons are detonated. Within the range of the pulse, for a short time, no electrical devices will work.”

“So I designed this facility so that after a certain point a single person could complete the process entirely by manual control,” said Hastings.

“That explains why all these pipes look so tangled,” said Hannah.

“And when the process is fully underway and in the atmosphere, one of the things it will do is drastically reduce the air pressure. This planet will go from the atmospheric pressure of Venus to the atmospheric pressure of Earth in less than one minute.”

Hannah was baffled. “So what?”

“Miss Redfoot, this building has been engineered to withstand the pressure of the atmosphere pushing in on it. We are not under that much pressure because of very advanced building techniques, but still, in order to withstand that much pressure, the walls must push out with equal pressure. When that pressure is suddenly taken away...”

“The building explodes?”

“I’m afraid so, Miss Redfoot. And anyone inside this facility will have no chance of survival.” He turned to Hastings. “Why didn’t you anticipate this when you built this place?”

She gave him a wistful smile. “Doctor, I did. But there is a nationalist movement on 801. They were dead set against evacuation, so when my view carried in the referendum, they wanted some sort of petty revenge. They managed to pressure the Planetary Senate to cut off my funding. I couldn’t get any more money, and there was no way to squeeze more time out of the planet’s atmosphere. It must seem like I can make miracles out of thin air, but I couldn’t revolutionise architecture and terraforming at the same time. I had to choose. So I chose.”

The Doctor stared at the screen, trying to find some loophole in the mathematics, some clever way out of this dilemma. Finally, he turned to Hastings and said, “My friend, I am sorry.”

“You will have to knock me over the head and drag me back to your little box to get me out of here, and I promise it will not be easy for you.”

“I’m certain I would if I could bear to sacrifice an entire planet’s worth of people for you. But I think you know I couldn’t do that.”

“I hoped you wouldn’t.” Hastings smiled at her old friend. “I never quite know what you will do.”

“That makes two of us” Hannah chimed in, striding across the room to face the Doctor. “You can’t just let her kill herself.”

The Doctor took a moment to collect himself. “Imagine, for a moment, Miss Redfoot, the Earth on the brink of destruction. Through a mass evacuation to other habitable planets, most will survive, but your culture will be slowly destroyed as it is naturally dissolved and assimilated by the local culture in which each splinter of your people is isolated. In the process, their political power will also be taken away. Or, if you sacrifice yourself, your culture is not chopped up and scattered to the winds. Instead it is transplanted whole and relatively undamaged. What would you do?”

“I don’t know, Doctor.”

“Nor do I know what you would do, Miss Redfoot, but I would honour your choice, even if I disagreed.”

“It doesn’t sound right,” Hannah said.

“What other choice have I?” Hastings pleaded.

“In this case, I accept that you have no choice,” the Doctor said, his voice grim. “However, there is one thing I may do for you if you’ll allow it. I can take you forward in time, so at least you can see the new world you are buying with your life.”

Hastings’ eyes narrowed. “You’re sure this isn’t some clever plan of yours to spirit me away or talk me out of this?”

Hannah crossed her arms and glowered.

“On my word of honour,” the Doctor said. “In fact, we’ll have to be very careful to interfere as little as possible. We’ll go perhaps ten years in the future? One quick look, perhaps a stroll around the block, and then right back here.” Hastings gave him an appraising look. “I promise.”

“I don’t promise anything,” said Hannah. “I’m going to try to talk you out of this. The Doctor picks the worst moments to give up too easily.”

“I’m afraid Miss Redfoot knows her own mind, Hastings.”

“When she sees what the future holds, I am confident she will change her mind, Doctor.”

On the lowest levels of the cruiser, Bledsoe deactivated the magnetic seal on Cargo Hold J, and the doors slid aside. The evacuation fleet consisted entirely of naval vessels refitted for passenger travel, which were themselves refitted from the old days when people were needed to mine the asteroids and moons that had made the fortunes of the Nine Worlds. On each ship, there was a hold like this one, made for transporting highly radioactive or volatile substances. These holds hadn’t been used in so long and were so relatively small that they had been forgotten. They were the only holds designed to instantly dump their cargo into space in an emergency, which was just what Bledsoe had needed.

Cargo Hold J was now packed with vats of chemicals and tubing contained in a spherical shape by a powerful force field that would stand the heat of planetary re-entry. Bledsoe liked to think that Hastings would have been disappointed to know the ease with which he had acquired the plans for her device. Once she left for D036, Bledsoe had spent three months trying to pick the bureaucratic locks protecting Hastings’ work to no avail. Then, a low-level clerk named Stafford had simply brought him the plans. Bledsoe had never asked Stafford to leak classified information; indeed, until that day he had never even heard of Ben Stafford. When Bledsoe asked why anyone would do such a thing, Stafford had given some idealistic nonsense about it simply being “the right thing to do, because information should be free.” Bledsoe barely choked down his laughter. And now, all these months later, here it was: a small-scale version of a machine that could remake a planet. It had taken great effort to convince the Leader’s Council of the First Party the device on D036 would not work. Sabotaging the device itself was even more difficult, but the real work of building this weapon from Hastings’ original plans in secret seemed impossible when he had ordered work to begin. Like everything, though, it was his destiny to do what must be done.

Walton shifted his weight nervously. He seemed to dislike being around the machine. “Are you sure this is the right thing to do, sir?”

Bledsoe turned to face Walton. “We know the machine on D036 will fail,” he said, the lie now easily told from long practice. “There are no right answers anymore, only survival. We must be strong enough to endure this, Walton. Do you falter now?”

Walton rallied admirably. “No, sir. It’s an unpleasant duty, but a duty nonetheless.”

The Doctor popped his head out the TARDIS door before finally walking all the way out into the sickly yellow sunlight. “Hastings, you’d better have a look at this. Something is not right here.”

She walked out, shading her eyes and looked upon a barren wasteland. The atmosphere was still, but nothing grew here, and there was certainly no thriving human population.

Hannah brought up the rear, as baffled as everyone else. “What happened here?”

The Doctor still surveyed the landscape, his back to the others. “You mean what did not happen here. It looks like the fleet never landed. There does seem to be the debris of the lab everywhere, so something most likely caused it to explode. Did something go wrong? No sulphur in the air, even if it does taste funny.” Behind him, Hannah and Hastings fell to the ground, unconscious.

Hannah blinked back into consciousness, wondering where she was. She had a massive headache that seemed to be trying to escape her skull. Hastings was kneeling over her, offering a glass of water. It was one of the Doctor’s odd rectangular glasses, so she could only assume she was in the TARDIS. She dragged herself to her feet, leaning against the console.

“What happened?” she said.

“The atmosphere on D036 was non-toxic, but there was too much nitrogen, and not enough oxygen,” Hastings said. “We passed out, and the Doctor brought us back here. Once he was sure I was recovering, he flicked some switches, there was a noise, and then he left me to watch you while he ran out.”

“He moved the TARDIS. We could be anywhere.”

The doors whirred open, and the Doctor strode in, looking grim. “Something has happened.”

It was a bright, beautiful day in a thriving colonial city. The buildings were laid out in a grid, the entire metropolis planned from the very beginning to be neat and orderly. Around the corner from the TARDIS, Hannah looked down the avenue and saw a tall building topped with domes and spires, a traditional human capital.

“This looks like Grant City on G206,” said Hastings.

The Doctor nodded gravely. “Yes, this is the capital city of the Nine Worlds, or it was. Ten years ago, the name was changed to the Seven Worlds.”

Hastings did not believe the Doctor at first, but the flags that bordered the plaza surrounding the capital told the truth. Where once there had been nine golden stars on an olive-green field, now there were only seven. “What happened, Doctor?” she asked.

“I’m not sure,” he replied. “I was hoping you would know who to ask.”

It was a long walk to the building that housed the Bureau of Technological Research and Development, a perfectly cubic structure occupying an entire city block. Security precautions were conspicuous in their absence. Hannah was used to at least a few locked doors or keen-eyed guards in such places. Even Hastings seemed shocked as they strolled through the lobby unobstructed.

“The last time I was here, it took me half the morning just to get through the door,” she said. “What has happened here?”

“I feel like this is a trap,” said Hannah. “Is this a trap?”

“If it is, Miss Redfoot, let’s not do anything that might prematurely spring it, shall we?”

“No, the Doctor just moved ten years forward. Exactly ten years forward; of course nobody’s here, it’s Midwinter’s Eve. And planetary security happens mostly at ports of entry. There isn’t much interplanetary travel allowed.”

The Doctor found an automated directory on a wall next to a bay of elevators. “That is a very silly way to run a planet, but it is a fairly non-violent period in history. Where do you think we should start the search, Hastings?”

Hastings scrolled through the directory, which only gave floor numbers, department names and last names of staff. “Structural Engineering.”

The Doctor seemed surprised. “Any particular reason for that department?”

“My work on D036 was classified as ‘structural Engineering’ because the government could find no other place to put it that made any sense.”

Hannah smiled over Hastings’ shoulder. “And someone on staff in that department just happens to have the last name Hastings.”

“That complicates things, I’m afraid,” the Doctor said. “Miss Redfoot and I will need to go in alone first and make sure it’s safe.”

“And what is that supposed to mean?” Hastings bridled.

“It means there are things in the universe more dangerous than letting you die ten years ago,” the Doctor snapped.

Hannah moved to intervene before the Doctor made the situation more tense. “What the Doctor means is that there are certain things time travellers can’t do.”

“I’m no time traveller.”

Hannah tried to give her most comforting smile. “You are now. And one thing time travellers really should not do is meet themselves. We have no proof you died in that explosion on D036. How do we know that person on the fourth floor isn’t you?”

Hastings hesitated, and the Doctor said, “What Miss Redfoot says is true, and is only the beginning of the disastrous things that could happen. Please, just wait in the hallway and let us make sure we’re not doing more harm than good.”

The fourth floor of the Bureau of Technological Research and Development was very much like the rest of the building in that it seemed to be devoid of security, and very different in that there was a notable presence of Midwinter’s decorations. Tinsel, holly, and even the occasional sprig of Mistletoe adorned the bulletin boards and doorways. Hannah and the Doctor left a still-reluctant Hastings outside as they entered room 413.

There was only one scientist still at work over the holiday, and Hannah had an intuition why. “Doctor Hastings?” she asked, and a young, alert face framed by a blonde bob swung in Hannah’s direction.

A long moment passed while the younger Hastings stared through Hannah. Finally, the Doctor said, “We were friends of your grandmother, Eileen Hastings, and we have a few questions for you if you don’t mind.”

She shifted her gaze to the Doctor for a moment, then abruptly began gathering her things, shoving them into her backpack without rhyme or reason. “I’m afraid I do mind. I have important work to see to elsewhere, so I’m sorry, but I have no time for any questions now. Thank you.”

“It really would be better if we left, then,” the Doctor said. “No need for you to interrupt your work.” It was too late. She had already walked to the door and swung it open, impatient to be away from the two strangers who had invaded her space.

Hastings stood outside the door. “Helena?”

Helena’s backpack dropped to the floor with a smack. “Gran?” She grabbed Hastings in a hug ten years in the making.

Hannah couldn’t help herself. She elbowed the Doctor and mouthed “Christmas miracle!”

The Doctor murmured “Or a Christmas disaster.”

It took a few minutes to drag Helena and Hastings back into Helena’s office and get down to business. Hannah noticed that the Doctor, despite his nearly visible impatience, was trying to be respectful of the family reunion he had accidentally created, even making tea for everyone while things settled down. It wasn’t often Hannah got to see a more sentimental side from the Doctor.

Finally, Helena asked the question that gave the Doctor the opening he had been looking for. “How did you survive the explosion?”

“In all likelihood, she didn’t,” said the Doctor. “I’m called the Doctor, this is my friend Miss Hannah Redfoot, and we are time travellers. We brought Hastings forward in time from the moment just before she activated the terraforming device on D036 so that she could have a brief glimpse at the better world she was making.”

“Only, we’re pretty sure this is not what she had in mind,” said Hannah.

“I can assure you it is not. What happened, Helena?”

Helena sipped her tea, playing for time. “Well, your device didn’t work,” she said slowly, considering her words. “People seem convinced it was a combination of your stasis field technology not working as advertised and your analogue clocks not keeping time well enough for the reactions to be started in such a way as to cause the atmosphere to be transformed properly.”

“That doesn’t sound like Hastings,” the Doctor said.

“I’m human too, Doctor,” Hastings snapped. “What did the investigation into the incident say exactly?”

“There was no investigation. All we really know is that after the reactions were over in the atmosphere of D036, there was a much greater concentration of nitrogen, and only about seven percent oxygen.”

“No investigation of a disaster of that magnitude?” Hastings said, scandalised.

“It’s worse than you think,” Helena said. “After your experiment failed, we got distress calls from all over the sector. Duncan Bledsoe had gotten a hold of the plans for your machine and built a smaller one aboard his evacuation ship. He somehow took control, had the captain fly to C223, and then activated the smaller device and dropped it into C223’s atmosphere.”

“Sweet Cosmos,” Hastings said, her voice trembling.

“Of course, C223 had the wrong mix of gasses, so the device just rendered most of the atmosphere into inert solids. Everyone on C223 was dead in minutes. All three billion of them.”

Hannah was aghast. “Why would he do that?”

“It’s presumed he intended it to be the opening move in a coup d’etat. He thought once he had demonstrated his ability and willingness to wipe out an entire planet, the Council of the Nine Worlds would have to surrender.”

“Yes, but I’m willing to bet they didn’t,” the Doctor grimaced.

“No, they did not. It was a three-day war. Bledsoe died, along with eight million citizens of 801. Bledsoe thought he would have the entire evacuation fleet in his hands. In the end, only one other ship was successfully taken over by the First Party, or it could have been billions of 801’s former population dead.”

“Who would give him those plans?” asked Hastings.

“Did you file them with the government?” the Doctor quipped. Hastings didn’t answer, and the Doctor laughed sardonically. “Then the answer is: ‘nearly anyone may have.’”

Helena turned to her grandmother. “The one thing I’ve wanted to ask you for ten years is where did this go wrong? I have your files, and I’ve been studying them since before I could understand what they say. I can’t find anything.”

The Doctor folded his arms, deep in thought. “That’s a very interesting question, Helena, because I didn’t find anything that would cause an overproduction of nitrogen. I don’t suppose you have access to those files here?”

It took several hours of looking over the formulas on the wall of Helena’s office, but eventually, the Hastings, the Doctor and Helena all had to confess they were stumped.

“Are you sure none of these figures were altered after the fact?” the Doctor asked.

“I have the only copies. My father gave them to me when I went to University,” said Helena.

“And I gave them to Owen, and I can see nothing surprising in these figures.”

Hannah had been sipping the dregs of her tea for almost an hour. After giving up hope the Doctor would brew up another pot, she had begun wondering why nobody had thought of the obvious solution to the problem. Finally, she decided she’d have to ask it herself. “What if all the math is right? What if there’s no error at all?”

“That would suggest sabotage,” the Doctor said.

“All the personnel in my facility were my family. Surely you don’t think one of my own family sabotaged the project?”

“That’s ridiculous,” Helena said.

“Where was everything constructed?” the Doctor demanded. “Who actually built the valves, the vats? Where did the chemicals come from? I’m relatively certain your family isn’t that large.”

Hastings, never one to deny the truth then it was before her, came to a decision immediately. “Doctor, take me back to my time. I need to inspect the equipment and find out how a nitrogen imbalance could be created. I can’t do that from here.”

The Doctor shut down the viewer screen. “There are other priorities to be considered. First, we stop this Bledsoe person from committing genocide. I have a feeling once we have accomplished this, he will be able to tell us what was done on D036.”

“And if he doesn’t? Or can’t?” said Hastings.

“Then we have time enough to do the job without his help.”

“Take me with you,” Helena pleaded. “You may need my help.”

“I’m afraid not,” said the Doctor, gently. “As Miss Redfoot told your grandmother, there are rules to time travel. If we are successful, there would be nowhere to return you to.” Helena’s

face fell. Even though she badly wanted to argue with the Doctor, an unflinching acceptance of the truth ran in her family.

The Doctor and Hannah waited in the hallway to give Hastings and Helena some privacy for their goodbyes. “How are we not breaking the rules of time travel by trying to fix this?” Hannah asked.

The Doctor thought for a moment, then said, “We are, Miss Redfoot. The truth is, we bend those rules ever so slightly everywhere we go. In this case, however, we are dealing with sabotage and genocide. If trying to prevent billions of deaths is interfering, then I am happy to bear the responsibility.”

“How do we know we are not creating this future by trying to stop it from happening? What if this is what happens no matter how hard we try?”

“We don’t know. Then again, one never knows for certain what will be the long-term effects of one’s actions. In this case, we have the advantage of knowing for certain what outcome we absolutely do not want, which hopefully counts for something.”

Hastings came into the hallway, her eyes swollen from crying. “I’m ready, Doctor.”

As Bledsoe’s cruiser entered orbit around C223, The Doctor, Hannah and Hastings emerged from an unused family quarters on Deck Theta. There were families milling around, but they seemed unaware of their situation and unconcerned at the appearance of three strangers.

“We should split up,” the Doctor said, “Miss Redfoot, you and Hastings make your way to the lower cargo hold where we believe the device to be and attempt to neutralize it. I will try to find Bledsoe and stop him.”

“Agreed,” said Hastings, “how do you intend to find Bledsoe?”

“He’ll be on the bridge, most likely. I fancy I can make my way there.”

Hannah fixed the Doctor with an admonishing stare. “Don’t you dare get yourself caught on purpose and beaten up again just to get in the room with the bad guy. Be safe, you’re my ride home.”

“Your concern moves me, Miss Redfoot. I’ll be as stealthy as possible, I assure you.” He turned and disappeared into the milling crowd.

“Again?” said Hastings.

“It’s a long story,” Hannah said, rolling her eyes. “I’ll tell you about it if we live long enough.”

The cruiser’s bridge had acquired a tense hush in the last hour, as the crew finally pieced together the true purpose of their detour to C223. They were loyal to their captain, and so there was no question of mutiny, but the weight of duty was especially heavy. Walton still shifted nervously behind Bledsoe as he looked down upon the world that would be condemned to save the culture of 801.

“Have the distress calls from D036 begun yet?” Bledsoe asked.

“No, sir,” Walton stammered.

“Well, we have no more time to wait.” Bledsoe flicked a switch on the console to his left, and a screen above the console began a countdown to final arming of the atmospheric conversion bomb.

“The crew are not entirely comfortable with the plan, Mr. Bledsoe. I think they feel they should have been told.”

“Why should they be comfortable? Are you comfortable, Walton?” Bledsoe spat in a whispered growl. “I am most certainly uncomfortable. There are more than a billion souls on that planet, and in moments, I will press the button condemning all of them to a swift and painful death in order to save the soul of our people. We are all unsettled at this state of affairs. We are not monsters, Walton. We are human beings called upon by necessity to do monstrous things.”

A ventilation grate tumbled to the floor a few metres behind Watson, and a man followed behind, wearing a blend of fabrics and colours that offended Bledsoe’s affinity for uniformity of dress almost as much as the man’s hair, which almost seemed to orbit the skull.

The man’s stare found its target quickly. “You must be Duncan Bledsoe.” The intruder found himself surrounded by several burly men in black. “And these must be friends of yours. I’m called the Doctor, and I bring a message from Eileen Hastings.”

The Doctor seemed unafraid and completely at ease being surrounded by Bledsoe’s personal guard. In spite of himself, Bledsoe was impressed. Whatever his outward appearance, the man had mental discipline. Such a man was not to be underestimated, and Bledsoe decided to remain in place beside the now-armed bomb’s release switch.

“Why could Dr. Hastings not reach me herself? I believe our communications systems are in order.”

“She is indisposed.”

“I’m quite certain that is so.” Bledsoe turned to Walton. “I think it would be best if you took a few of these officers and had a look at Cargo Hold J.” Walton left the bridge, three guards in his wake. “Tell me, what is this very important message she sends you stowing away on this ship and skulking through its ventilation system to deliver personally?”

“She would prefer if you did not deploy the device in your cargo hold which would destroy the entire population of the planet below. I must also add that I agree with her. Don’t release the device.”

“You have moral objections?” Bledsoe asked, the soul of innocent curiosity.

“Yes, but also I think you would be happier if you didn’t.”

“You think I would be happier seeing my people torn into small pieces and scattered across eight worlds? Watching all we have worked for slowly digested and excreted by the planets who have lived by the sweat of our brows?”

“Yes, I do. Besides, Hastings is providing you another home.”

“No, Doctor she is providing us another planet. Where we will have to start again as pioneers. We will be the backwater of the Nine Worlds, sneered at and viewed as a burden, not a guiding light. We must seize control of the Nine Worlds or be destroyed.”

“And it has not occurred to that you may be destroyed if you do this? The rest of the Confederation could rise up and crush you.”

“They are not people with the will to do what must be done.”

The intercom chimed, and Walton’s voice filled the bridge. “The device is untouched. We found two stowaways on the same floor.”

Bledsoe smiled, satisfied. “Very good, Walton, bring them here. Captain Ronson, please be so good as to deactivate the external views of C223.”

“Can’t stand to look on your own handiwork?” the Doctor quipped as the screens around the bridge went dark except for technical readouts.

Bledsoe fixed the Doctor with a hard look. “Except at my station, Captain. And let’s have Dr. Hastings’ friend join me.”

Hannah and Hastings were gently but firmly put into a service lift. Hannah stole a glance at Hastings, who tried to give a reassuring smile. Hannah was having none of it. “Is there any way this can turn out well for us?” she asked.

“For us? I really don’t think so,” Hastings replied. “unless the Doctor pulls off a miracle.”

Leaving his guard behind, Walton joined his captives in the lift and pressed the button labelled “Command Level.” In silence they rode up, Walton’s folded arms and blank face seemed to fill the room. Finally, somewhere near the command level, Walton reached out and pressed the Emergency Stop button.

A long moment passed before Walton said, “What is really going on here?”

“If you really wanted to do this, you would already have pushed the button,” the Doctor said.

“We are waiting for the first distress calls from D036,” Bledsoe snapped. “If Hastings survives or discovers what has been done to her machine, I must alter my plans.”

“Hastings knows something has been done. She is one of the stowaways your man Walton is bringing here. I think what is really happening is you are a man facing his first moral crisis. Unfortunately, you’re trying to talk yourself into doing the wrong thing. You don’t have to do this. Have you really forgotten the difference between being morally right and politically victorious?”

“Doctor, those who are not politically victorious cannot make society do what is morally right.”

“Don’t destroy yourself because of your own stupid pride and preconceived notions. Others have made that mistake, but you can still do better.”

The bridge doors slid open, and Walton, flanked by a dozen guards strode in. “In the name of the people of planet 801, I place Duncan Bledsoe under arrest.”

Bledsoe’s calm facade evaporated in an instant. He rose from his chair, his mouth twisted into a feral snarl. “What is the meaning of this, Walton?”

Walton ignored him. “All orders given by Duncan Bledsoe are hereby null and void. Captain Ronson, please restore external views and open a channel to C223 so we can communicate our peaceful intentions.” Walton’s guards quickly overpowered the few still surrounding Bledsoe.

Duncan Bledsoe was completely mad now. Seeing Bledsoe’s intentions, the Doctor grabbed him, pinning his arms to his sides. Bledsoe lashed out with his foot and activated the launch sequence for the bomb.

The escaping air from Cargo Hold J rocked the ship just as the viewers came back to life. A large mass of cylinders connected by tubes tumbled towards C223. As it contacted the atmosphere, the bomb’s force field was outlined in flames. There was no way to change the course of events now. The Doctor, roiling with grief and rage, looked over to see Bledsoe covering his eyes.

“Watch this,” the Doctor roared. “It took you two years to reach this moment, and you will watch it happen and know what you have done.”

Unable to resist the Doctor’s command, Bledsoe’s eyes opened, and tears streamed down his face. “Oh no,” he sobbed. “What have I done to those people? What have I done to my people?”

Suddenly, the device crumbled and dissolved in a mass of flames in the upper atmosphere. A comforting hand touched Bledsoe’s shoulder. He looked up and saw Eileen Hastings. “You have done nothing to anyone, Councillor Bledsoe,” she said. “In spite of your best efforts.”

“I thought you didn’t manage to sabotage the machine,” the Doctor said, stunned.

“She didn’t,” Hannah said, helping the Doctor to his feet. “She did manage to drain the power to the force field, though.”

The Doctor barked a laugh. “Of course! Hastings, you knew they’d check the device, so you made the force field weak enough to fail. Well done, my friend. Very well done, indeed.”

“And now, Councillor,” Hastings said. “I should very much like to know what you did to my device on D036.”

The Midwinter’s dinner had by the Hastings family in orbit around a blue, serene, perfectly habitable planet D036 was one that was spoken of in revered tones by the family for many generations. Their guests, two travellers who had arrived in a very strange vehicle brought the best gift of all: Grandmother Eileen, safe and sound and in time to carve the goose.

“Why didn’t you just tell her you could use the TARDIS structural field to protect her while she operated her machine?” Hannah said. “Why waste all that time?”

“Time Lords never waste time, Miss Redfoot,” said the Doctor as they made their way back to the TARDIS. “I wanted her to believe there was a future worth being alive to see. That part of my plan didn’t really work out, I must admit. Like so many others, I just assumed the Living Hope was going to achieve her goals.”

They turned a corner and found Hastings leaning against the TARDIS, waiting for them. “I would have sacrificed myself to create my version of the future,” she said, “but not that one.”

“You and Bledsoe both thought very much alike. It’s a human failing, believing the ends justify the means. They never do, as you should know,” the Doctor said.

A small blonde blur flew through the hallway, leaving echoes of elated laughter in her wake. “That was Helena!” Hannah said.

“I have high hopes for the woman she will become,” said Hastings, beaming. “You both must come for Midwinter again next year.”

Hannah gave the Doctor a pleading look. He sighed and opened the TARDIS door. “We will do our very best if you can promise to have another of those pies next year.”

“I can guarantee it,” Hastings said. “It’s an old family recipe.” He disappeared into the TARDIS and the sound of switches thrown and buttons pressed drifted through the door. Hastings turned to Hannah. “Make sure to drag him back here, will you? He’s very good at writing letters, but he never visits.”

“I’ll do my best,” Hannah shrugged, “but I can’t make any promises. On the other hand, if you’re ever in trouble, you can rely on him to find you.”

“I can but hope,” Hastings murmured as the TARDIS wheezed and groaned on its way to the next person who needed hope in the darkest moment of their life.



In the far future Eileen Hastings, a great scientist, prepares to sacrifice her life in the process of transforming the atmosphere of a planet from a poisonous soup into a breathable atmosphere in moments. If she fails, her people will have nowhere to live and her culture and heritage will slowly fade away. She considers her life to be a fair trade for her people

The Doctor and Hannah try to intervene, but Hastings cannot abandon her purpose. The Doctor takes her into the future only to find her dream of a paradise turned into a horrifying nightmare. Now the race is on to find out what happened on that fateful Midwinter's Eve, and how it can be stopped before it destroys countless lives.

This Midwinter, Eileen Hastings is the only hope of her people.
Her only hope is 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

ISBN 0-918894-28-X

