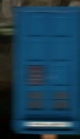


THE

DOCTOR WHO

PROJECT



EXPIRATION DATE

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Chapter 1: "Bruce"

I always did get nervous public speaking and the fact this internet radio show would be broadcast out to thousands, later put out as a podcast, and then archived somewhere for posterity, only made things worse. Worse still, any time I tried to explain what happened to me, it always played out the same way, despite the fact I wrote down what I had to say. I would end up losing my train of thought or getting talked over. Their patience ended and their soothing paternalism took over. I listened to *Kotto's Kreepies* live stream and podcast from time to time where the host, Cecil Kotto (Coat-Oh as I often explained) would spew all manner of conspiracy theories about mind control, alien abductions, and libertarian screeds on returning to the gold standard. This show was the belle of the ball in college for the stoner liberal arts crowd as well as a drinking game for freshmen. He was supposed to be an actual Sheriff in some hayseed county in New York state, but we were all fairly sure it was an Andy Kaufman type character. Always figured the good Sheriff was either an amusing crackpot or didn't actually believe the black helicopter nonsense but would sure monetize it. But now, in sheer desperation; I figured he may be the only one who can explain to me what the hell was going on! I heard his current rant was wrapping up, and the click as Sherriff Kotto's voice ring out on my cell and my computer with a bit of a lag, followed by high pitched feedback.

"...and that is why Hillary didn't kill Epstein—it was the Order of the Night Moose. Now let's go to the phone lines and see what fresh hell we find tonight. Hello, citizen, you are on the air. Please turn off your live stream so we can hear you and spin your tale or weave us a picture of the world behind the curtain," Cecil Kotto stated, his pacing practiced to perfection.

"Yeah, sorry. Something happened to me, no one can explain...my wife and child are missing, and no one is doing a damn thing about it!" I fumbled, feeling utterly exposed.

"Let's tap the brakes, loyal listener. Take a deep breath and slow down. First things first: what is your name?"

I took a breath. "I... don't want to use my name," I managed. "Is that OK?"

“We have to call you something, dear listener. I’m betting you don’t want me to pick. I think I’m funny and it won’t turn out well for ya,” the Sheriff quipped, the dead air followed by the sound of a cigarette igniting.

Agonizing seconds ticked by- I felt the pressure of all the listeners waiting for me to speak. I was doing it again. I was screwing it all up. My mouth was getting dry, and I looked around the room to my coffee table, trying not to fixate on the empty Klonopin bottle the shrink gave me. Next to it was the *Evil Dead* Blu-Ray.

“Bruce, I guess,” I finally managed.

“Fine Bruce, now that you’ve asked us to dance how about you lead? Take your time. The devil is in the details; sometimes literally in some Sumerian texts.”

I began. For some reason, the longer I spoke, the more this felt like a confessional. The pressure of all the listeners faded and I finally, honestly told the story of what happened that night so long ago. I had to slow down and explain this right; it was the only way he could help me understand what the hell was going on. That night was the key somehow.

“The first thing to know about this whole mess is that I had finally accepted the fact I was kind of a loser...”

Throughout high school and college, I had always known I was smart. I loved to read and was fairly funny and even kind of athletic. Funny thing about the ego is that it doesn’t show you a mirror; it shows you how you feel. Feel good, mirror shows you a smile and the mental air brush chases the flaws away. Feel bad, you look like Gollum under halogen lights. The widow’s peak and blackheads might as well be pointed out with markers. And I felt really good throughout my twenties.

Somehow this undeserved confidence was worn down by years of short-term, not entirely impressive jobs, where I would silently look down my nose at coworkers and bosses because I knew I was destined for greater things. I was just waiting on everyone else to realize it. So, I moved to Dallas and the hell away from Windthorst, figuring I would land where I was supposed to be, and it was best to leave this little town of little people in the rearview. This is about the time the bad lighting switched on above my mirror and the doubt crept in as my twenties reached an abrupt end.

My hairline ran screaming from my brow forcing a Bruce Willis haircut I didn’t have the skull or ears for. I gained thirty pounds seemingly overnight; but actually, easily explained by countless hours of *SkyRim* or whatever Xbox games were on sale at GameStop, and endless fast food. After striking out in my third semester of an English major and happily signing up for endless student loans, I crashed back down to Windthorst into an uncle’s rent house and crawled back to my old job after ten years with my tail between my legs.

Apathy had settled in, which is why I went to a party with my high school buddy from work out in the cabin by Lake Arrowhead. I simply couldn’t stand another night at home with basic cable and myself. When we arrived, truck lights barely outlining a sea of old trucks and cars, I felt a twinge of my old self. After all, weed and self-importance are the bread and butter of any former English major.

“Bruce, while I’m trying to follow your story here; any chance you don’t have to start quite so far back? Less backstory and more event would be peachy. This isn’t the Serial podcast,” Kotto blurted.

“What!? Damn it, no...it’s all connected! You just said the devil was...”

“That was before you went full *Goodfellas* on me with your backstory. Maybe explain how this has something to do with my particular brand of knowledge?” the Sherriff mumbled around a cigarette, and the sound of a Zippo lighter flicking open again.

“I don’t want to leave anything out. I think my headspace had a lot to do with what happened next. Please bear with me,” I said, half lost in memories of the night so long ago. I didn’t know if I would get another chance to explain. Rattled, I lit my own generic cigarette with a cheap Dale Earnhardt commemorative lighter as I continued. “Now where was I...”

Reality quickly returned when I saw how young the rest of the partiers were. They looked around at each other when I opened the cabin door until they saw my buddy, let’s call him...Dale, a well-known small-time dealer. I had become the too-old guy at a party that we used to laugh at when I was a kid; taking some kid’s Natural Light and making pop culture jokes they had no frame of reference for.

The party raged on as I stewed on my life choices; within the hour I was leaning against an old stove in the kitchen drinking my third IPA while regularly checking my phone for messages I knew wouldn’t be there. The only conversation was a too-drunk girl who slurred about what an asshole “Brant” was until her friends dragged her away, shooting me looks like I was trying to pull her into a panel van filled with duct tape just for listening to her heartache. Right about then was when I wanted to leave.

Dale appeared, shaking his head sadly at me like a kindly old wizard in a Tolkien novel, pulling forth a joint with some dank credentials by the smell alone. His eyes were a deep bloodshot red from his dip into the intense strain of marijuana, and across his face crept a manic grin of intentionally misfiring neurons.

“Hydroponic huh...I’m not out of place enough without adding paranoia and its dear friend the existential crisis?” I offered.

“Nope, this is different. Take my word for it. This takes hold pretty quick and lets you step just a bit out of focus without spinning out,” he said with obvious first-hand experience.

“Where did you get it?” I said, curious while swigging my IPA for courage.

“Injun Joe’s brother. Supposed to be for some tribal ceremony but he trades me a bit to pay for truck parts.” He laughed while fishing someone else’s beer out of the ’70s yellow refrigerator.

“And how are we getting home if we are both higher than eagle nips?” I asked.

“Just got off the phone with a buddy of mine who works for police dispatch, if we headed home at this point there is no way the Hi-Po won’t get us. Like it or not, we are here till morning. Might as well set sail and make tonight be more than it is now...” he said cracking open a stolen beer.

I took it without further convincing. It's not like I was risking some fabulous career or relationship. Have to take happiness when you can get it, even if it was chemical. My apathy overrode my common sense back then. I took a few hits by the back window before snuffing it out. And then I waited, checked my Facebook app a few times and smoked a cigarette on the back porch staring into the forest. The silence helped.

As I walked back in, it hit me in a subtle way. It was the curtains. I remember they were laid across the kitchen window like an accordion, but I couldn't tell if they were inside or outside the window. Wouldn't make sense for them to be outside but they seemed to pass through the glass effortlessly as the breeze struck them. The more I stared, the less sense it made, until I found myself moving towards the dining room, feet seeming to reverberate on the pier-and-beam flooring of the old cabin as the music faded into the background. I didn't even hate it anymore. It was what it needed to be.

The small groups of kids gathered like sarcastic tumors, still living in the world promised to them before life dulled its gleam. Cheap beer and red cups dotted the long dining room landscape. Quarters bounced off the cheap folding table and cheers rose as pitchers of foamy generic swill was passed around the losing team.

Across the room, a girl caught my eye. Actually, that is an understatement. She pulled my full attention immediately and completely. I had been in bad relationships of all kinds and even a few good ones, but I never imagined just...loving someone by simply seeing them. To be fair, I figured it was the drugs. But there she was. It's seared in my mind like it was yesterday. She was custom designed for me.

She was a caramel blonde with that planned casual look of a vintage 'Faith No More' t-shirt and red plaid skirt with perfect make-up and lipstick a little on the dark side. She had perfect dark eyes with a subtle, sexy little nose ring and when she laughed at something funny her friend said; her smile made me weak. I was a child with a crush again. Or, more dangerously, I was a grown man with an obsession. Then she looked right at me, and I think my heart stopped. She looked right at me and mouthed the word "hey" and gave a small wave with her hand that held my favorite Season Limited IPA.

I panicked. Of course, I would be deep in the spirit realm of the chronic when I met the woman of my dreams. I had become used to forging terrible relationships with other broken people, so I never felt vulnerable. But here I was, exposed in the light of almighty fear. She laughed kindly at my obvious discomfort and waved me over to come and sit with her. This was happening. The drug was still in subtle effect as she seemed to exhale smoke before even igniting her Marlboro Light with wooden matches as her stunning eyes tracked my path to her from across the room.

I could still smell the sulphur when I sat down next to her. Everything else seemed to dim; time seemed to dilate as the music receded. Somehow, I felt that I had entered a spotlight on a stage play, with the actors around us frozen and the only voices in the theater ours. She scooted towards me a bit since I sat at the far end of the rough textured, floral-patterned sofa and I tried to seem normal in a way that only a very high person tries to.

"Want to know why I know we are destined to be together?" she said in such an easy, down-to-earth way that I immediately relaxed.

"More than anything," I said honestly while trying not to stare at her legs.

“You are drinking an Easy Peasy IPA and not the liquid sewage these bros like to offer a gal,” she said, laughing.

“Youth these days...” I immediately regretted saying it as it pointed out my age. “Want to hear a joke?”

“You are funny too? Doesn’t seem fair to be cute and funny...” she said, laughing while touching my arm. I was screaming inside. Her touch invoked cult-like devotion.

“What is an orphan’s favorite beer?” I managed, confidence building.

“I don’t know...?” she said, anticipating.

“Fosters,” I finished.

Her laugh was genuine and loud with a tiny snort at the end that made her a tiny bit self-conscious, which was even more endearing. She took a drag on her smoke and raised an eyebrow at me after she finished laughing. “Got anything stronger than a Marlboro to smoke?”

“As it so happens...”

“Want to smoke a joint out back?” she said in a hushed mock conspiratorial tone with her hand on my leg. I would have agreed with any and all requests at that point.

I nodded my agreement, and then we seemed to flow like liquid back through the kitchen. The tiny flaws in the matrix of reality the drugs betrayed nodded at me but didn’t overwhelm. Took me a second to notice the difference that I wasn’t just living; I was alive. This vision of a girl smiled at me while pulling me through the crowd by the hand towards to the door to the back porch past the kitchen.

She sparked the joint with another wooden match, the pungent smell of sulphur wafting along with the sweet, dank odor of the marijuana pluming into the forest evening. The stars were sparkling and constantly shifting with the influence of the drugs. We spoke easily for what seemed like hours. She passed the roach to me while standing so very close, desire and... love swept over me.

“I have to ask a serious question, Bruce. Are you ready to spend your life with me? Tell me you love me...” She kissed me gently. “Tell me you want this,” she said standing on her toes with her arms wrapped around my neck. I could taste a hint of sulphur for some reason.

“Yes. I do. I do love you. I don’t understand this, I’ve never felt like this, but nothing makes more sense to me than you.” My heart was pounding, and my senses were completely tuned into the moment. I have a feeling it would have been the same-stone cold sober as well.

She paused and seemed troubled for a moment. Then that winning smile appeared as she flicked the joint away and kissed me powerfully. There was a terrible pain in my chest for an instant, which was lost in the tide of joy and euphoria. I was in love, I was alive, and she made warm light wash over all my mistakes in life, since they had brought me here to this place—right now.

Everything after seemed like a blur; perfect but hazy. We moved in together after a few weeks and I got a job writing freelance editorials and reviews for the Associated Press. She was an amazing cook and snored a little when she slept.

I took her to the same cabin on our two-year anniversary. When I proposed to her she wept, and I felt the same way as when I first saw her across the room in that silly little cabin. I was

destined for something: her. I was the one chosen, in all of creation, to love her. She stood in our kitchen exactly a year later and showed me the results. We were pregnant.

We named our daughter Joy who grew to be fiercely intelligent and beautiful like her mother. When she left for college, she showed grit and determination that I never had and she graduated Magna Cum Laude, and again the top of her class at Dartmouth for her Master's degree. She fell in love, as the cycle of life tends to go and I danced with Joy at her wedding on her 24th birthday.

The reception was at that same cabin, where my whole world changed. I walked with my wife to the back porch. It was late, and the reception was winding down in the cabin behind us and in the tents beyond. I knew our golden years were next and there was no fear of age—not with her. She broke off her kiss suddenly and turned away from me suddenly in a panic. She looked around in anger, frantic.

“No...” she snarled to herself.

I felt a stabbing pain in my chest again. My legs were weak. What was happening? My wife, my gorgeous wife placed her hands on my face, kissed me quickly and with furious passion, and then broke off, looking at me with tears at the edges of her dark eyes.

“Goodbye Bruce and thank you.”

The pain in my chest was searing. I couldn't breathe and the panic, the sheer animal fear swept over me. A primal part of me wanted to flee into the forest. I couldn't remember hitting the ground. A man seemed to appear at my side with a startlingly serious look on his face. He had a knit cap and a long coat for some reason and looked, like me, too old for this party—by more than a few decades.

He stared into the woods beyond where my wife ran as he ran a buzzing pen with a blue light on the tip over my forehead and eyes; thermometer maybe? “Hello son, try to hold still. I'm the Doctor, don't move and let's have a quick look at you...”

“I can't ruin Joy's wedding! Help me up, I need to find my wife...”

This Doctor looked at the blue thermometer gizmo for a moment, then at me with a heavy sadness, before darting back towards the woods...then...I guess I passed out from exhaustion.

I woke to the sight of young, intoxicated faces contorted in alarm standing over me in the dead of night; there was some sort of commotion inside as well. They spoke of calling an ambulance and were asking in heated tones where the hell I came from. My head fell to the side, where I saw a can of Easy Peasy IPA lying next to me, along with the smoldering remnant of a joint. An ambulance came eventually and took me to the hospital. I had suffered a heart attack and the police asked endless confusing questions. They wanted to know who I was and what happened. After a psychiatric consultation and fingerprinting, they were satisfied but stymied with my identity.

I stared in the mirror. A much older man stared back; the face I knew, the face I had gotten used to over more than thirty years with my true love and our daughter Joy. However, it was not the face that matched my driver's license or my badge at work. It was the face I had worn my wedding day, at my daughter's birth, and every promotion, anniversary, vacation, and routine day of the past decades. The overworked and cynical physicians figured it was amphetamines, despite my blood tests coming back clean. There is always a way for smart people to explain away the inexplicable. I was in my thirties with a face of an old man with a life well lived.

But here I was, discharged from psychiatric hospital a few days after I first met my wife, of twenty-seven years, now with wrinkles I shouldn't have. I scared what little family I had left and quickly learned I didn't really have any friends when I needed them. I requested my medical records, where I found my psychiatrist and therapist noted I "had a fixed delusional state likely resulting from substance abuse/dependence". No one would listen to me. No one could help me find my wife or daughter again. They had never existed, as far as anyone else was concerned; just phantoms of this substance abuse they had invented for me. Nothing makes sense. So, they gave me medicine and would nod kindly when I explained I wanted to go back home before my hour was up once again.

So here I am, standing in my uncle's rental house as if the last half of my life never happened.

The cigarette burned down to the filter and burned my pruned fingers, the smarting feeling from the burning pulling me from my story.

There was a heavy pause on the phone line. I could imagine the listeners laughing at me from every corner of the internet, although there was the comfort that at least a few would believe me. They had to, I told myself. My hands were trembling.

"So, what the hell is happening, and how do I get home? How do I get my life back?" I begged, my voice finally breaking.

"Bruce, I need you to answer something for me. Did you say he was *a* Doctor or *the* Doctor?"

"What? What does that matter?"

"Well, depends on the source. If you ask the UFO Reddit community, he is an extradimensional entity who intercedes to keep first contact quiet as he erodes our defenses before the invasion. If you ask the whistleblowers in the intelligence community, it's a title passed among lead science advisors of British paramilitary organizations, all with records of a number of encounters that wildly differ in description of 'The Doctor'. If you ask me, which clearly you have, I think he is a defense mechanism the western powers have constructed to combat threats to this world far more serious than Putin or old man Biden would have you believe. I'm not the only one apparently who thinks a good offense is the best defense against those who took the long way to north Texas."

I grasped on to this fig leaf of explanation desperately. The Doctor was responsible. "So he took my wife? *Why*? What did he do to me? HOW DO I GET HOME?!" My voice rose in panic.

"I'm sorry, Bruce. But you are home. *This* is your real life, buddy. The happy part, that was the forgery, the fantasy. The Doctor didn't do this- that was a Succubus. She fed on you. I've read about encounters, but never this clear or modern an account," the Sheriff said in a calm, measured tone. He was interested in the story at least—if you had told me years earlier Sheriff Kotto would be this interested in my life story I would have been flattered. Now that it was happening, though, I just felt bitter and sick about the whole thing, and I wanted to tell the Sheriff as much.

"I knew you were a damn crackpot; I don't know what I was thinking calling in! WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT? WHERE IS MY WIFE? WHERE IS MY DAUGHTER?" I screamed, desperation taking over.

Kotto remained calm on the end of the line. "Bruce. Think it over. Smell of sulphur, a woman who is everything you ever wanted down to the tiniest detail. Trust me, as someone with an ex-wife and a hundred ex-girlfriends...women don't come like that and certainly don't stay that way. Bruce, I'm sorry, but that was a Succubus. Hebrew and Native American lore have accounts as old as the written word. They feed on your life force; they consume you. You're a smart guy. Can't you put it together? Doesn't that sound like what happened to you?"

"She was my wife...I know everything. I remember every day I spent with her. The little things. She couldn't ever find her keys...she never could get a bottle the right temperature. She repainted rooms at least twice a year...It's NOT POSSIBLE that she never existed!" I said, clinging to the memories.

There was a pause.

"What was her name?" Sheriff Kotto said simply.

"What? What kind of question is that?"

"Your wife's *name*, what was it?" Kotto pressed.

I didn't *know*...everything disintegrated... my mind couldn't pick up the pieces as they fell. A million things I knew, her body, her laugh, her taste...but I had no idea what her name was. Not in well over thirty years.

"While you spoke of this perfect life, you never once mentioned her name. Something about the process requires your defenses to be down, all the better to make you a willing victim. It's a flood of powerful love and connection, but very light on proper nouns. Even your daughter's name was a description of how you felt. I'm sorry to tell you, the more you drill, the less you will find. Don't know how much solace that is, partner, but truth leads to healing better than a platitude or even more lies. Good luck, Bruce. Now, dear listeners remember- not everything that goes bump in the night feeds by tooth and claw. The IRS for example..."

Sheriff Kotto's voice faded into the background and the phone hit the floor. Turning to stare at nicotine yellowed mirror was an old man whose tear-streaked face bore the decades he never lived. A used-up old husk who loved people who had never existed. It wasn't even that they weren't real; it was worse than that. Something deep inside of him felt liberated by the knowledge; he exhaled with relief to finally hear aloud what on some level he already knew. With that the young man grew older still.

Chapter 2: The Doctor

Trudging through the trees and dense mesquite vegetation in the darkness, the Doctor could sense Maggie's unease. She was made of stern stuff, had grown so much and met every challenge in their travels together, but there was a part of her that was terrified at what lay around the next corner. It made no difference that their surroundings were Earthly and familiar; Maggie had to stay on her guard. Unfortunately for every unique experience of viewing a breathtaking sight like the needle array launch in the Tengor Shallows, once exactly every century, there was a serial killer using a storm to hide his grim work. For every picnic in the early mushroom forests on Earth, there was a Time Lord plot to poison the early British monarchy. To be the Doctor's friend carried risk at the cost of unique freedom and experiences. In moments like this, the old man felt the burden in centuries of guilt far heavier. Some companions never made it back home, and now finally getting used to Kaylaar's absence...the sound of distant music broke the Doctor's musings somewhere beyond the banks of the lake.

"Hear that Doc? Seems to me your alien chum likes music with its meal," Maggie quipped, a bit out of breath from the brisk hike in the red clay mud of the shore.

"The Toadies. *Away*. The album was *Rubberneck*, I think. Nineteen Ninety...four? Five? I saw them in Deep Ellum with Earl opening. I think Jamie was with me at the time. He drank some college students under the table then got in a fight because he didn't know what moshing was."

"Ah the '90s sound so ancient when you talk about it all past tense like that. That's home to some of us! Mind your manners, grandpa."

"Then do try to respect your elders and let's go over this again."

"Right you are, Sergeant!" Maggie threw a half salute, and recounted the story so far. "This creature woke up hungry and showed up on your blippy computer screen on the TARDIS and we are going to squirt it down with this ad hoc chemical you came up with like shooin' a cat. Should cause the ghoulie to get real sleepy and then we go for pancakes and bacon! And a gallon of coffee! You are buying of course!"

"It hunts using pheromones and hallucinogens. It can be disorienting, and will try to hide in plain sight. It will assume you are a local primitive..."

“Careful, Doctor.”

“Correction, it will not know you are aware of its true nature. Likely try to seduce you.”

“So if I see Tom Cruise oiling up then squirt him with the mega soaker here?”

“Top marks, Ms. Weitz. It won’t be Tom Cruise of course. We will tackle the Progeny of Xenu some other time.”

“The prodigy of what now? Is that another ’90s band I was too old for?”

The Doctor smirked at her despite the situation and pretended to chamber a round into his squirt gun. As they cleared the final stinging growth, the music was radiating from the cabin and the high school and early university students were deep into their youth and rebellion, as well as the beer apparently, given the sounds of indulgent regret one was making on the side of the cabin.

“Intoxication and the pheromones of youth; seems like a good buffet option for our objective.”

“Some good news at least!” Maggie smiled. “I’m already suspicious of flirty men my age; zero chance one of these kids will make advances on someone their mother’s age without it being our target. Narrows it down a bit.”

The Doctor approached and then started to jog, his expression shifting into concern as his pace quickened, losing Maggie as he reached a full sprint. The Time Lord watched as if in slow motion a girl kissing a young man and his hair and skin aging years for each moment in the extraction; the victim’s legs started to buckle—there were only moments left.

“Maggie! Go round the front and clear this lot out without a panic—I’ll meet you at the TARDIS! It’s feeding! We may be too late!” The Doctor ran with all his fury, arms pumping and long Raglan coat trailing behind.

The chemical camouflage of the creature had its limits, leaving a vague shape of a young female quickly realizing the danger and abandoning the meal to flee into the brush line beyond the cabin. Its prey collapsed on the ground. The Doctor made a snap decision and slid to the victim’s side. By a bit of grace the poor man was still breathing. He had been artificially aged to at least sixty, still wearing a young man’s clothes.

“Hello son, try to hold still. I’m the Doctor, don’t move and let’s have a quick look at you...” The sonic screwdriver scanned basic vitals and harvested layers of data for later analysis, casting the area behind the cabin in its blue light.

The readings were a guess at best, but the mind was probably intact. There had likely been a cardiac event, but he seemed to have stabilized for now. Hair was falling in tufts from his freshly wrinkled scalp, and the victim moaned something about his delusions. Nothing to be done about it. A day late and a shilling short again, Doctor. The Time Lord’s face hardened from sadness to determination; this would be the last victim. With that he sprinted into the wood line in pursuit of the predator as the youths in earshot gathered to check on the commotion.

Mesquite branches lashed in the Doctor’s face, while mud slogged his cuffed pants and boots as he ran. The predator could not have gone far, and the path was clear enough even by the moonlight. A clearing was ahead and the faint sound of distant flight had stopped moments before, perhaps signifying an ambush or where the creature hibernated? The Doctor slowed and crept the last yards, light-headed from the run. He saw the figure of an old woman standing facing away and the prone body of a creature lying in the wet grass not far from an opening in a mound

beneath the tree. Did this woman stumble upon the creature? A trick? Regardless, the squirt gun was leveled at the old woman.

“Good evening,” he greeted her suavely. “I am the Doctor; I mean you no harm but I need you to step away from the creature.”

The woman’s shoulders tensed for a moment as she slowly turned with the look of shock upon her face. Then her tears began to flow, almost forcing the Doctor to miss the tubular field staser in her hand. Red and silver. Gallifreyan Chancellery Guard, standard issue. Stunned, the Doctor forced himself back to reason and to focus on the details. A nearby grey column in the forest was the default setting for a more modern TARDIS. Despite the darkness, he could see that the woman was quite advanced into her present incarnation; given the danger of her apparent assignment, most would have regenerated at this point. The Doctor kept the sonic screwdriver up his coat sleeve, in case he needed to disable the staser. One thing at a time.

“Madam, I must ask you to drop that staser. You can slowly holster it if that suits you, but it will help us talk.”

The old Time Lord let it slip from her fingers into her holster and held her hands open at waist level as the Doctor lowered the squirt gun and stepped out further into the clearing to see the visitor.

“Grandfather?” the woman said through her tears.

“Susan?” The Doctor nearly fell to a knee and had to brace himself on a nearby tree a moment. She had aged immensely since last he left her; abandoned her, he told himself in his weakest moments. But it was her, the same incarnation even. Her hair was bright white and longer, tied back. She wore boots and a staser holster with a well-worn jacket with a sprig of celery pinned to the collar. But the eyes were unmistakable. Bright and kind. Witty and mischievous, downplaying her astonishing intellect. But more there now. Decades or centuries more, but perhaps wearing a bit thin now. His grandchild standing right there. The last link to the life before he was known only as The Doctor.

“I had nearly given up hope, grandfather. Recent rumors were that you had died on Skaro. Another said you had been Cyber-converted. But here you are. I remembered your enchantment with this planet so I took every job I could on Earth in the hopes I would find you again.”

“Celestial...” The Doctor’s voice wavered a moment with emotion. “Celestial Intervention Agency? You became an operator? You inject yourself in the web of time on their bidding?”

“Family business, I suppose. The work isn’t why I do it. Best chance to find you in the vast chasm of space/time. And it worked; here you are!” Her smile was kind and patient. “None of that matters anymore. We can be together again. We can be a family. It’s time to stop running, Grandfather”.

“I wondered. Racked my brain trying to figure out what you would use that would lower my defenses.” As the Doctor spoke, he saw the expression on Susan’s face turn brittle

“Who would it be?” he continued. “Who would you choose to dig the knife into my soul, eh? Hannah, Jamie and Zoe perhaps? Mmm? How about Romana, Tamara, or Ms. Rossi? What would you use as an emotional hammer? Of course, it was Susan. Ever since the Enkindler, she has haunted my thoughts. It very nearly worked because I want to believe it more than anything. My own subconscious weaponized against me. Part of me still wants to risk it all in the slight chance its true.” Despite the reasoning, tears gathered at the Doctor’s eyes.

“Grandfather, I don’t understand. Its me! It’s been so long. I’ve searched the length and breadth of time and this galaxy for you. Always a step behind. Just missing you every time...”

The Doctor glared in the moonlight and the face of his granddaughter shifted from distraught to amused in a blink of an eye. As the spell shattered the illusion and false TARDIS faded into the night leaving only the impostor before him.

“Be very, very careful,” the Doctor growled. “I do not often truly anger, but finding yourself at odds with me is a dangerous place, you may find.”

The predator smirked, despite the warning. “Oh well. Worth a shot. Lucky for you I already ate, so I can control myself. I am quite familiar with both you and your species, however. If you are here, then a TARDIS is nearby and I remember well enough how to pilot them. I will just take your key instead of your life.”

“Without your façade, you may find that task difficult.”

“Oh it wasn’t all manipulation. This staser, in fact, is quite real. I got it from the last Time Lord I tangled with.” Before the Doctor could react it cleared the holster and fired. The Doctor fired nearly simultaneously and heard the shriek as the chemicals went to work on the parasite. The shot was off the mark, however. A graze against his skin. Weakened but not incapacitated. These were the last thoughts of the Doctor as the second shot of the staser blasted him from consciousness.

Chapter 3: Maggie Weitz

Of all Maggie's adventures with the Doctor, this was one of the least glamorous. Maggie mused a number of thoughts to herself while trudging through a muddy Texas lakeshore in search of a ghoulie doing something nefarious. On the bright side, Texas was far more familiar than space casinos and castle chamber pots. There was a far greater galaxy beyond Revelstoke, most of it apparently both beautiful and insanely dangerous if recent experience was any measure. The galactic tour guide was tense about this one though. He was worried again- you could always tell as he started to repeat himself and babble about his past in ways in which she had no frame of reference. It was a good thing he didn't travel alone; he isn't great company for himself. It's difficult to imagine sometimes everything he had been through over the centuries. Four short decades of family drama and heartbreak and working at a hardware store was enough to try to sort, never sure how well it was even being sorted. Was this all a distraction, however bizarre? If I just keep running, Maggie pondered, do I never have to be in that hellishly silent room again? Maybe the Doctor isn't so hard to understand...was that music?

"Hear that, Doc? Seems to me your alien chum likes music with its meal," Maggie quipped, a bit out of breath from the brisk hike in red clay mud of the shore.

"The Toadies. *Away*. The album was *Rubberneck*, I think. Nineteen ninety...four? Five? I saw them in Deep Ellum with Earl opening. I think Jamie was with me at the time. He drank some college students under the table then got in a fight because he didn't know what moshing was."

Maggie laughed to herself. She knew poking the old man and making him smile or tell her a story made him feel better; worry less. "Ah the '90s sound so ancient when you talk about it all past tense like that. That's home to some of us! Mind your manners, grandpa."

"Then do try to respect your elders and let's go over this again."

It was good to see him smile despite the situation. That smile was a stunner too. Imagine how many people walked past this handsome but subdued man and had no clue who he really was? Spend enough time with the Doctor and you start to see behind these faces he wears and see an old soul trying to do a bit of good. Like visiting with some D-day veteran: tough as nails, but kind and humble about what bloody heroes they were.

“Right you are, Sergeant!” Maggie threw a half salute, and recounted the story so far—as she understood it. “This creature woke up hungry and showed up on your blippy computer screen on the TARDIS and we are going to squirt it down with this ad hoc chemical you came up with like shooping a cat. Should cause the ghoulie to get real sleepy and then we go for pancakes and bacon! And a gallon of coffee! You are buying of course!”

“It hunts using pheromones and hallucinogens. It can be disorienting and will try to hide in plain sight. It will assume you are a local primitive...”

Maggie bristled a moment. Did he just call me a primitive? Is that how he sees me? Just a cavewoman along to gawk and golly gee whiz? Maggie dismissed this thought immediately as it sprouted. He always treated her with great care and over the past years had really trusted her with his life.

“Careful, Doctor,” Maggie shot playfully. Still she couldn’t let him get away with it completely.

He shrugged. “Correction, it will not know you are aware of its true nature. Likely try to seduce you.”

“So if I see Tom Cruise oiling up then squirt him with the mega soaker here?”

“Top marks, Ms. Weitz. It won’t be Tom Cruise of course. We will tackle the Progeny of Xenu some other time.”

“The prodigy of what now? Is that another ’90s band I was too old for?” Maggie rolled her eyes, more words with no frame of reference.

The Doctor smirked at her despite the situation and pretended to cock his squirt gun. As they cleared the final stinging growth, the music was radiating from the cabin and the high school and early university students were deep into their youth and rebellion, as well as the beer apparently, given the sounds of retching one poor soul from the side of the cabin. Maggie realized suddenly she was the only one without real camouflage. At least the Doctor looked vaguely like a hip graduate student. Oh well. Maybe she could be a professor who snagged an invite.

“Intoxication and the pheromones of youth; seems like a good buffet option for our objective.”

“Some good news at least!” Maggie smiled, “I’m already suspicious of flirty men my age; zero chance one of these kids will make advances on someone their mother’s age without it being our target. Narrows it down a bit.”

Something startled the Doctor about the back of the cabin and he jogged towards a bunch of teens and college kids out behind the cabin ahead. When he ran there was no chance of catching him, but she would not be far behind.

“Maggie! Go round the front and clear this lot out *without* a panic—I’ll meet you at the TARDIS! It’s feeding! We may be too late!” the Doctor hollered as he sprinted to the scene.

These moments of sheer panic were getting easier with repetition. Can someone be so used to crisis to the point it becomes mundane? Then the real panic set in. Wait, Maggie pondered. How do I clear out a house of kids without causing a panic? Whose cabin was this? Was this monster supposed to start lashing everyone with tentacles and laser eyes, or was this to limit witnesses? Coming around the side of the cabin were kids with Garth Brooks t-shirts and flannels, badly hiding marijuana and malt liquor while scuttling off from her prying adult eyes. As Maggie climbed the stairs, she froze at the top. What could I possibly say that clears out a bunch of kids without causing a stampede?

The cabin was large, with a half wraparound porch and a storage building around the back. It was isolated enough that the noise was probably not going to bring much notice and there were a few cars parked haphazardly in the clearing nearby, with a smaller gathering of tailgaters preferring their debauchery under the blanket of stars.

The front door creaked open and opened into a large living room with an adjoining dining room where red cups and ping-pong held the attention of some of the revelers. The kitchen lay beyond a series of bedrooms off the hall to the right; perhaps a study could be found along the opposite wall of the massive cabin. People looked up and noticed Maggie standing in the doorway. Confusion crossed the expressions of most as to why this woman was standing nervously with a large squirt gun. Some started to laugh and mock to their friends in harsh little whispers.

“Lady, do you need something? You lost?” an older voice asked from the dining area. The games stopped and more people began to stare.

“I...I uh.” Maggie was frozen. This was already an eternity and the Doctor needed her to be clever and brave. Lives depended on this, and she was drawing a blank.

“Hey, someone, better come get your mom!” a voice rang out. Laughter followed.

For some reason anger broke the spell. Freaking little ungrateful punks. OK. Time to instill terror that only teenagers can feel. I’m someone’s mom? OK. Fine then. You got it.

“Right. Which one of you touched my daughter? Huh? Who was it? She is only fourteen and I’m just willing to bet he was at least eighteen! I have a description and I’m going to report this! Think a little statutory charge might ruin your final exams? Huh? Who was it? Was it you? I bet it was you, you little ginger rat!”

Just like that, the spirit of the party had been dashed and the revelers started to depart the sinking ship. A lot of teenagers shrank into the shadows and suddenly seemed to be aware that it was very late, while others made their way to their cars out the side and front doors, as Maggie carried her message throughout the house. And it spread throughout the remainder of the cabin with alarming speed. Maggie watched her work with pride for a moment before glancing out the kitchen window to see an old man on the ground surrounded by concerned partygoers whom the news of vengeful mom had not reached. There was no sign of the Doctor when she arrived at the scene and an ambulance was on the way. Waiting out on the front porch for the EMTs, Maggie allowed herself a few swigs of a cold beer with the super soaker slung on her shoulder; victorious. Bet ya the Brigadier couldn’t have done that, huh Doc?

Before long, the poor man was loaded on a stretcher and the last of the headlights faded away on the gravel road as Maggie with a recently liberated flashlight headed back to the TARDIS, somewhat worried about the Doctor. He seems to have spotted the fiend and good luck pulling one over on that salty fella when he is ready for it. Still there was that feeling of worry. It’s harder walking in the darkness after knowing what actually lurks in it is far worse than she ever knew. The TARDIS was in a small grove a stone’s throw from an abandoned trailer. It was just odd enough that people would not pay it any mind, even if someone stumbled on it (which was unlikely at this time of night). Seeing a flashlight ahead in the grove Maggie switched hers off. The hairs on the back of her neck stood at attention as she approached as quietly as she could imagine. Probably just the Doc wondering what took me so long but still...

A figure was fumbling with the lock of the TARDIS. It was difficult to make out at first, but it was clearly not the Doctor. "That doesn't belong to you, so I suggest you turn around slowly and explain how you got that key."

The figure turned slowly and stepped carefully into the moonlight. "Hey Mags, just me. I surrender..." with hands raised like a mock stick-up game.

Maggie didn't notice herself stumble or take a seat on a stump nearby when she saw him. It was a wonder that she kept her red solo beer cup without spilling but the squirt gun fell from her trembling hands.

"Ollie..."

Standing in the moonlight was her husband. He had a TARDIS key in one hand and a bouquet of daisies, what he thought was her favorite, in the other. They weren't her favorite, but she never had the heart to tell him because he was always so proud of himself when he grabbed her some from the market. He wore pressed jeans and a collared shirt with rather nice shoes, now slathered with mud. Ollie had a few days growth of hair on his face, ten o'clock shadow he used to say, that she did in fact rather like. The problem was he was dead. Her husband that she buried and cried over until she felt hollowed out was standing a few feet away.

"I'm sorry to say, love- I may have bungled the surprise. That Doctor fellow came to me and explained that we could go away together for a while. Celebrate our anniversary and all."

"Ollie...did he tell you...what do you know about..." Maggie's emotional scar tissue had been torn apart. She barely kept the most flimsy lid on her breakdown.

"Yeah babe. Said my ticket gets punched soon. Nothing to be done about it. Thought he was a nutter, but you know how convincing he can be. But he offered a miracle. One last adventure for Oliver and Margaret Borcik. Anywhere and any-when, he said. Then I go back to work and meet eternity. Doesn't sound too bad a way to go all in all. Who else gets a chance like that, yeah?"

"I don't...where is the Doctor now?" Maggie stared at Ollie and wiped tears away, only for more to arrive.

"I was supposed to surprise you both when you got back, but you took a long time and I started to worry, then I got lost and got mud all over my shoes. I hope it didn't ruin it. You know I'm not good at this kinda stuff but...I love you Maggie. I'm sorry I left you so young. Maybe we can just be together. Make our best memories? What are you all the way over there for? I promise I don't bite." Ollie was a very masculine, reserved kind of fellow, so the tears were a rare sight to Maggie.

Maggie smiled slightly. She turned back towards the house in the distance, seeing no sign of the Doctor. The lake lapped the muddy shore while insects and birds sang their songs in the wind near the blue police box, moonlight bouncing off its blue frame. The husband that she buried was going to whisk her away on an adventure of a lifetime, to be held again, kissed...to say goodbye. It was possible that she had simply gone mad, of course. It was more likely she was drooling in an asylum dayroom than her time traveling immortal friend pulled her dead husband from history to swan off on a sweeping tale of romance in the middle of a hunt for an alien psychic parasite. She would be far less angry if that were true.

Maggie stepped closer and looked her dead husband in the eye. "I wondered if it were just some animal instincts or something. No one blames the alligator when he eats the guy in Florida. It was just doing what it was made to do. That this thing was just an unconscious defense,

like an octopus blending into the sea floor or something. But that isn't true at all, is it? I don't know if you are psychic or something, but you tore from me the deepest want I had, and you wear it like a mask. You speak words that are nearly perfect and offer a beautiful lie and worse—you enjoy it. It helped me discover something about myself too. A rage I didn't know was there. That I was even capable of. On the other side of that rage is a stillness. It should scare me but it doesn't. I feel like that part of me is built to handle garbage like you. I bet there were a few cavemen that used to batter things like you with rocks. They may not have understood you but they sure could handle you."

Ollie's face turned harsh in the wake of Maggie's abuse. "You are a lot sharper than you look, *Mags*. You are right though. I do enjoy it. Enhances the flavor. A willing feast is far more nourishing but not required by any means. The only consolation is that you will enjoy it too, even if you know it's a lie. A couple of things you may not have noticed: that Time Lord isn't here to save you and you dropped your little squirt gun. No way to get it before I have you. Very clever by the way. Overdose of the hibernation enzyme. Clearly, he was the brains of the operation."

"Wrong. You have it exactly backwards..." Maggie's voice was low and still.

"Ah, enlighten me then. I fed well but you are sweet enough for a treat." The Ollie-faced predator was standing right in front of Maggie, now sneering at her with such a kind face.

"The Doctor isn't here to save *you*. I'm not trapped with you. You are trapped here with me."

The predator smiled at the small woman and her little red beer cup. Still. She wasn't afraid. It was...unsettling. Maggie tossed the contents of the drink directly in the face of the invader who startled for a moment before a nervous laugh.

"Really? A beer? I applaud your bravery I suppose."

Maggie's expressed never flinched, eyes fixed. "No. Sleep ignition for your kind, I was told. But that is not the question you should be asking."

The predator's guise fell away along with its legs beneath, then down on a single arm supporting. The hibernation cycle was hijacked and pulling it down into a century of sleep at least. "What question..." it managed.

"If I let you ever wake up again," she said as the creature's world fell away.

The Doctor ran to the cabin, head throbbing from the staser blast. Nothing but panic and worry to be found. The old man in a young body sprinted through the night to the TARDIS, terrified that he would see an old woman dead on the shoreline wearing Maggie's clothes.

When he did see Maggie, she sat on a tree stump with a large rock in her hand smoking a cigarette liberated from the party earlier. The invasive species lay prone at her feet in the mud. The creature breathed infrequently, deep in hibernation. Its grey iridescent skin was pocked with hallucinatory spores and pheromone emitters. The eyes were segmented and reflective with layers of lids, all closed in slumber. The Doctor studied his friend's expression in the dawning morning light. There was a look in her eyes around the tobacco smoke that seemed deeply troubled...and something else. The Time Lord approached slowly.

"Maggie. Are you OK? Were you able to knock it out? That is astonishing." The Time Lord spoke quietly and ensured his approach wasn't sudden.

Maggie blinked, returning from a place deep inside, and flicked the cigarette into the mud nearby. “No. I used the knockout juice but used a cup. It underestimated me, of course.” She looked at the rock and weighed it in her hand. “I tell myself the rock was to defend myself if it woke...but if I’m honest I’m not so sure. Its skull doesn’t look especially tough to me.”

The Doctor had never heard Maggie sound so hateful, so full of vengeance. He had a fair idea the creature had brought these sentiments out of her.

“That isn’t you, Maggie. I know what you feel. No one would know. Maybe even justice for its victims. This one is clear enough. The next one of course would be a bit more murky but probably had it coming. The third you might make a mistake but it’s for the greater good. The fourth was a necessary evil. It never ends but certainly becomes less clear. We have a time machine. No shortage of those who have it coming. This century alone...”

“Shut it, Doc. You are a dear friend but also a pompous ass sometimes. This filth mocked me with my dead...Ollie’s face.” Her anger flowed along with tears. She slumped forward, slipping from the tree stump into the Doctor’s arms.

“I know. I’m so sorry. Academically I knew this could happen; but...this parasite did the same with me. It wasn’t until I felt it bait me with my dearest memories that I, for a moment, began to slip. I have seen flashes of what I could be if I allowed my anger to steer me. I choose the path of service not for others, certainly not to save this creature- but because I would also burn in my anger. To heal is to keep the predators out of our minds and let them suffer the full brunt of their decisions. Justice might not be swift but it will be inevitable.”

“You being right doesn’t change the satisfaction that I would feel if this thing gets the needle by whatever authorities pass judgement. This is Texas, after all. Plus, you owe me breakfast and coffee.” Maggie’s anger subsided somewhat, venting her thoughts. She dropped the rock in the mud and hugged the Doctor in a tight embrace and cried as dawn broke on the horizon.

Chapter 4

The Doctor, Maggie, and "Bruce"

It was summer in Texas, which typically feels as if it is located a few inches from the surface of the sun. The terrace of the Rio Verde assisted living center faced the lake next to the local university where the shaded overhang and insulated cup of ice water kept the worst of the heat at bay. Geese and ducks roamed near the surrounding jogging track waiting for bread and bugs to offer themselves. Malcolm Raab sat in a chair with his walker nearby, knowing he wasn't far from dying of natural causes—of old age no less—at the age of fifty. He would be damned if he would spend however long he had left in a room watching television between dialysis appointments and bingo night. He wished Joy would visit. That he would meet his grandkids. See his wife one more time.

"Mr. Raab! Just checking on you! They are about to watch *Star Wars* in the theater room. I know you love those so I thought I would tell you," the nurse gabbled, leaning out the glass door. "Your med band is purple so let's go back inside until its blue, huh?"

"I appreciate the concern, Chloe. It will turn white soon enough no matter what I do. Let's make what time I have left outdoors and witness the world in passing at least."

"Oh Mr. Raab. I bet you have a whole lot more days yet 'fore the good Lord calls you home. I will check back in a bit."

Malcolm stared at the jogging track again as time slipped by and the heat loosened its grip in early evening. A family walked around the lake dragged by a stubborn pair of Labradors. A man cursed at length after losing a fishing lure. A pair seemed to approach the opposite direction on the jogging path, sidestepping runners and geese alike. The old man was curious for a moment as they approached the terrace. The woman was probably in her forties with bright eyes and a ball cap and the man...was the same man. He wore a simple white t-shirt and jeans with pants cuffed at the ankle over a pair of worn work boots, a loose linen mariner's jacket, and a red beanie hat despite the blazing heat. As they approached, Raab steadied himself with a breath. Forced himself away from panic and to focus on the moment, like the therapist told him over the years. Fear is a just the body's reaction, no different than a sneeze. While they did not seem hostile, this

was no accident. The pair seemed to know who they were looking for and the man's face emanated calm courtesy despite not being a tick older than last Malcolm had seen it all those years ago at the cabin event. The woman spoke first with an accent that seemed perhaps Canadian, or maybe Wisconsin, to offset her companion's clearly British tones.

"Cheers Mr. Raab! I brought you a pint." The woman offered him a can of Easy Peasy IPA, so cold that flecks of ice dripped down its side. Malcolm Raab stared at the can a moment in disbelief, knowing this beer was discontinued a full decade ago.

"Hello Mr. Raab. I am the Doctor. I don't know how much you recall of our last meeting."

"Enough, I suppose." The old man reached for the can, cracking it open in one clean motion and taking a swig. It was just as delicious as he remembered from all those decades—but in fact only a few years—ago. "My good buddy Kotto told me some tales about you. So which is it, British Intelligence or alien incursion? Or is this another delusion like Kotto said? Give it to me straight, Doctor. What brings you here?"

"A friendly visit actually. I have worked with all those shadowy institutions from time to time, but I don't make a habit of it. Most of the time I'm an independent ... troubleshooter. You could consider this ... a house call. At heart I'm a friendly traveler if you will, who helps where I can."

"Annoyingly vague answer," Malcolm grumbled, feeling every decade that Succubus added on to his life span. He looked from the Doctor to the woman beside him. "And your kind friend with the cold beer?"

Maggie smiled. "My name's Maggie. I'm just like you I suppose. Regular gal from up north who sort of fell into a bit of a dangerous journey and chose to keep banging around with this stuffy old bear. He isn't always like this; he even relaxes every few months. Seen it myself."

Malcolm saw the truth in her eyes, but looked back to the old man and was confronted once again with his oddity, his alien-ness. "You haven't aged a day, Doctor. Whatever happened to me, whatever I lost, I have the feeling that you understand it far better. And whatever you are, whatever my wife was, is more than meets the eye. So, answer me a simple question: why the hell are you here? What could you possibly want?" Malcolm's voice strained with decades of resentment.

"Guilt," Maggie stated simply.

The Doctor turned to Maggie, somewhat annoyed, before breaking into a slight smile. "I would have said closure." The Doctor frowned. "Not sure for whom actually, now I've said it aloud."

"What I wouldn't have given to know these answers years ago." For a moment, Malcolm puzzled over the expression: what was years ago? How long ago had they first met? As when he talked with Kotto on the radio, he both wanted and didn't want to know how much of his life was real and how much this succubus-created fugue. "I don't even know where to start...what are you? Really? You can stick the friendly traveler bit in your ear." Malcolm's hands shook a bit with the weight of it all before a quick swig of the beer to steady himself.

"Fair play, Mr. Raab. I am a time and space traveler. And I've been at this quite a while. While I don't look out of place, I was once in fact a citizen of another, far-distant world. Earth has long been my adopted home and I love its people...I will not stand to have harm come to them if I can prevent it. And this is my apology for failing you. Those I have saved are little solace when I have failed so many in my span and it weighs on me...also it drives me, I suppose."

Maggie opened her own can and raised it in a notional toast. “I figure he doesn’t do well alone, so he picks up hitchhikers. One part friend, and another part tourist. Helps him see the universe by showing others. That or he has watched too many James Bond films and needs a sexy sidekick. Either way, horrible things do happen to good people through the will of predators or simply and suddenly, and due to no one’s fault. It’s easy to allow pain to be all we see, to let it become anger—then hatred.” Malcolm could see she was speaking from experience, that Maggie had felt some faint glimmer of what he had been through. “Then we hurt others, and on and on it goes. It only really stops when we do this. Talk. Take a moment to hear someone who has something to say.”

“So what happened? Was it a succubus like Sheriff Kotto said? She never existed? None of it ever actually happened, did it?”

“As good a name as any I suppose. The stories in a dozen cultures were probably ancestral warnings. They can slumber for decades, or even centuries, before needing to feed again. They are a nomadic predatory sentient species who, when feeding, extract a complex biochemical and temporal energy from their victims, making it appear they are advanced in age should the victim survive. The process goes much more smoothly when the victim is willing. These succubi can emit pheromones and hallucinogens that tap and mimic the unconscious tastes and desires of the victims. It’s an analgesic to keep the host from knowing it’s being consumed.”

Malcolm nodded bitterly, the confirmation he craved sitting ill within him. “So most of my life—the best parts, anyway—never happened. Now that I know, I nearly wish I didn’t. It may have been better to have slipped away into whatever comes next while still in the wonderful dream. I lie to the nursing staff sometimes that my daughter lives in Atlanta and living an amazing life.” Joy’s face flashed before Malcolm. “That my wife passed way many years ago not long after my daughter’s wedding.”

Malcolm Raab noticed Maggie holding his hand as the tears came; she shed some with him.

“You know,” she told him, “I lost my husband in the most ordinary way. No warning. No time for goodbye. He never knew when his time came. Maybe that was a bit of mercy. An ordinary life carries the same pain, Malcolm. For everything that followed with the Doctor, everything we have done, I could not have survived these challenges if I had not endured that loss. This pain is not in spite of our lives—it’s part of it. Our experiences can give us the wisdom and strength for the next test. And if it all brought me here to have a beer with you, then that isn’t so bad.”

The Doctor leaned forward, removing his knit hat. “What is real is overrated, Mr. Raab. There are many things in life that are our favorites that never happened. Stories we hold dear. That we relive in our darkest hours. Books, movies, tales of faith that remain relevant through the centuries. In the oldest stories lies a truth that matters no matter how factual it may be.”

“This was a gamble for you Doctor, how do you know I won’t tell someone what you have told me? If Sheriff Kotto isn’t around, then someone like him? Kotto said there are stories of you deep in the internet, in the folklore of humanity. You’re as much a part of our mythology as that hellhound that took away my life. Why would you risk that secrecy for me?” Malcolm Raab struggled to voice.

“I am a time traveler, Mr. Raab...” The Doctor looked down at Malcolm’s wrist device as it began to glow white. “Maybe I knew ...”

“Ah. So a visit at the end, eh?” Malcolm looked at the lake where families and friends in the distance lived, just one of many moments they had left ahead of them. The sky began its first dip into the horizon. “Good a day as any, I suppose. I’ve lived without them now as long as I had with, so to speak. I just wish I could see them again. One more time. The last chapter in my story.”

Maggie had over time grown adept at reading the Time Lord’s expressions. At this moment he seemed worryingly conflicted. “Doctor? What is it?”

He shot a pained glance at her, then turned back to Malcolm. “Mr. Raab. I can...*lie* to you, if you like. I can help you see them again one more time. It would be your call. We will sit with you until ...however long you need company . You have my word you won’t be alone ... but if you would rather see them again, then I can arrange it.” The Doctor’s voice strained with emotion; tears threatened to flee from his eyes.

“I don’t suppose I should bother asking how,” the old man croaked, staring into the distance. His color had become pale and he squeezed Maggie’s hand so weakly that she knew how close the end was. “I don’t want to know. Maggie, you seem a good sort. And whoever had the honor to marry you lived a fortunate life, however short. Doctor, let me see them. Let’s call it reading a favorite story one more time, eh?”

“Of course, Mr. Raab. It was a pleasure to meet you. Let’s find the right page, shall we?” The Doctor placed his fingers at the old man’s temples. “Are you ready? Good. *Contact.*”

Maggie watched as the Doctor concentrated and Malcom Raab’s eyes closed for the final time.

Chapter 5

Mr. and Mrs. Malcom Raab & Joy

“Finally awake! I guess you think you can sleep your life away, eh Grandpa!” Mrs. Raab beamed down at her husband. All the years had not dimmed her radiance. The hair, long since grey, then silver, was both carefully braided and carelessly tossed over a shoulder. She wore a simple woven dress with perfectly mismatched jewelry one wears from a lifetime of gifts and love. An elegant gold chain, with a *namaste* charm dangling from it, was a gift from their travels. Next to it was a leather beaded bracelet a child would make on her wrist. She started wearing a nose ring again like when they’d met, despite her protests because she knew he liked it.

It took a moment for Malcom to get his bearings. A clean room with a retro décor but modern amenities hidden within. Hospice is a scary word, but he had been well taken care of here. The last chapter is every bit as important as the first, the therapist said. Malcolm’s life was not without its storms, but it was happy. To resent the gift he was given, all the days of his life, had seemed an insult to God or the universe that had been so generous. The Doctor knocked on the outside of the door frame, smiling kindly. Malcolm could never remember his name, so Doctor it was.

“Well Mr. Raab, after your wife refused to split the life insurance money with me—I regret to inform you that this will be a good day for you as your vitals are quite stable at the moment. Even better news is you have another visitor—enjoy your time. We will come back and check on you later.”

Malcolm laughed, “Thank you Doctor. I know yours is a thankless job but it’s important what you do. It means a lot to me, at the very least.”

“It’s my honor, Mr. Raab. It’s been a pleasure to know you. No matter how long I do this, I am always surprised at the unique people I get to meet. Enjoy your day.”

The final day of Malcolm Raab's life was a gift of perfect weather. A perfect day is often so understated you don't realize it until far after it's gone. He was wheeled to a table beneath a tree, and had all his favorite meals prepared in pot-luck fashion. His daughter sat with him and held his hand, with his wife never far away. His grandchildren squealed and played until they were red-faced in the sun. When night arrived, he said his goodbyes, and his daughter and children returned to their busy lives. Malcolm and his wife sat out on the back deck, him with one last Easy Peasy IPA beer, and his wife with her favorite wine, and they talked for hours about all their adventures together. As he relaxed in his bed at the end of the day, his eyes closed for the last time as his wife sang to him.

Maggie watched the old man's face as he mumbled and smiled in his dream, wayward tears at times, before his face relaxed and the Doctor removed his hand—gently laying Mr. Raab's head back against his chair. The Doctor's own face showed a complex display of grief and satisfaction. The pair walked away around the lake to the TARDIS as the nursing staff came to attend to what was once Mr. Malcolm Raab.

They remained silent on the short hop to Malcom's funeral the following week. Despite Mr. Raab's burden, despite the pieces he felt were stolen, he did make many friends who were in attendance, and it was by no means a small crowd who mourned.

Maggie said, rather out of nowhere when the pair returned to the TARDIS, in the quiet evening that followed that grief was a gift. That pain served as a reminder of how much the lost truly meant. That sting a gift honoring the intersection with your own life. The Doctor drank a much-needed cup of tea and smiled, as he certainly carried the weight of many intersections. The story, however sad, will always matter.

Afterword

This story is dedicated to my wife, who I'm fairly certain is real.

Hello all and thanks for reading "Expiration Date"! The Doctor Who Project, to me, is one of the best little gems on the internet brought to you by the dedicated work of so many every season with Bob and Hamish leading the charge. I wanted to bring your attention to the character of Sheriff Cecil Kotto, who is used by permission of Jonathan Raab and Muzzleland Press Publishing. Jonathan Raab is a combat veteran and talented author who edited my first book and has written absolute masterpieces in humor and action. More impressive is how clearly and accurately he portrays the difficulties of a combat veteran after the war is done.

Sheriff Kotto, like the Doctor, to me is one of the great characters in fiction and I was also blessed to be able to contribute to his adventures in *Freaky Tales from the Force: Season One*. I strongly urge you to check out Sheriff Kotto's adventures. Thank you so much for your twenty-five years of support of The Doctor Who Project!

The Hillbilly Moonshine Massacre
The Lesser Swamp Gods of Little Dixie
Freaky Tales from the Force: Season One

THE DOCTOR WHO PROJECT

A man going nowhere with no prospects attends a cabin party on a north Texas lake reflecting on his failures before meeting the love of his life. A perfect life together is shattered when his wife and daughter go missing! Desperately he turns to the outlandish Sheriff Cecil Kotto for answers, but first he must tell the story.

The Doctor and Maggie's past come back to haunt them, nearly to the tipping point where the monster becomes far less clear.

A tale that spans a lifetime begs the question: is the Doctor too late?

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This story features the Eleventh Doctor as played by Winston Adderly

