

THE DOCTOR WHO PROJECT



COFFEE, CROISSANTS AND COSMIC CHAOS
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This story is inspired by the Arsène Lupin series by Maurice Leblanc, originally published between 1905 and 1939.
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PROLOGUE

Rome, 53 B.C.E.

Julius Caesar was happy to withdraw from Lutetia. It was one territory among many, and the Roman Empire could not sustain these occupations. Try though they might, there were more barbarians than there were Romans, and it was better to fortify from home than stretch themselves thinner and thinner. He knew the withdrawal reeked of surrender in the eyes of his men, but he was satisfied with the wider strategy that he could risk a few doubts among obsequious underling who would end up agreeing with him in the long run. He knew a thing or two about strategy.

And the lucky thing was, Caesar would never have to recount what he saw on the cold and desolate night before he departed again for Rome. The shape that had a voice ... the inhuman sensation, ceaseless and boring into his very soul ... and the glimpses of future chaos it gave him ...

He dared not say them aloud. They were the ravings of a lunatic, to be denied and repressed. He was not even comfortable admitting them to himself. Were he to declare them to another ... well, even the sycophants would not stand by him.

But then, several weeks later, when he was back in Rome, far away from those wild people and the strange powers that held sway in their remote and forsaken lands, that he knew he could not deny the truth of what happened forever.

The centurion entered his quarters and saluted stiffly. "My liege, a stranger demands to see you."

"A stranger?"

"Indeed. Not a Roman." The centurion's sharp nostrils quivered with distaste. "A Nubian, by the look of him. Claims to be a scholar, and a scientist."

Caesar nodded. "He may enter."

His heart skipped a beat when he saw the arrival. He wore a long-sleeved, shambling garment, and a heavy knitted tunic beneath it. "So you are a Nubian now ... Doctor."

The Doctor nodded. "Good to see you again, Julie. There's a spot of bother ..."

"It's about Lutetia, isn't it? What I saw there?"

The Doctor's brow furrowed in confusion. "Oh yes, of course. Lutetia. Only they call it Paris."

CHAPTER ONE: A THEFT IS ANNOUNCED

It was a summer's morning in the early twentieth century, and Paris had been promised a crime.

It was printed plainly in the morning editions, nestled between the obituary for Nobel laureate Henri Becquerel and an advertisement for restorative tonic:

Arsène Lupin will relieve the Louvre of a certain modest object this Thursday evening at precisely eleven minutes past eight. The police are warmly invited to attend.

The signature beneath the announcement was an elegant, looping flourish.

The city responded exactly as Lupin would have hoped.

By noon, café debates were in full bloom. By two o'clock, three different police prefectures were arguing jurisdiction. By dusk, the Louvre had doubled its guard, and by seven the guard had doubled its confusion. Eight in the evening was usually a quiet time to visit the Musée de Louvre. But not tonight. All Paris seemed to have swarmed within its walls, and the Louvre officials were loath to turn them away. Secretly, even they were curious, even pruriently fascinated, to see whether something could be stolen.

Paris adored Arsène Lupin.

Paris despised Arsène Lupin.

Paris would not, under any circumstances, ignore Arsène Lupin.

The same evening, a blue police box materialised in a narrow side street near the Seine with the soft wheeze of displaced air and faint temporal indignation.

It did not belong.

The streetlamp flickered as if embarrassed by the sudden architectural addition—especially one so obviously British.

Inside the box, in an unfathomably futuristic alien control room, a man in a weather-worn cream cable-knit sweater, its sleeves rolled up, leaned over a six-sided console that resembled a brass orchestra arguing with itself. Splayed open across the panel responsible for atmospheric regulation was a newspaper so old a loud sneeze would have reduced it to confetti.

Behind him stood Maggie Weitz. She had never grown used to the way arrival felt like stepping off a cliff that had politely decided not to exist. She braced herself against the console until the motion stopped, then exhaled.

“Paris,” the Doctor said with a heady smile, looking from the paper to adjust a dial with two fingers. “It’s been ages since I dropped in.”

“What’s the date? The Renaissance? Or maybe the *Belle Époque*?” Maggie asked.

“That’s the one. Almost the end of it,” the Doctor sighed. “Early twentieth century. Smells like coal smoke and revolution.”

“Why are we here?” she asked. “Suddenly I feel in the mood for coffee and croissants ...” She looked across to her friend, his handsome and refined features set in a pensive stare, tilting his head, listening. He was not listening to the usual whirs and hums of the innards of his time vessel; he seemed to hear something beyond ... and from it his whole manner changed.

“To prevent a theft,” he said.

“That’s new. Usually we arrive after the theft. Once or twice we’ve been *blamed* for the theft.”

“Yes, well. Call it professional growth.” He tapped a glass column where a thin filament shimmered like trapped lightning. “The old girl picked up some odd vibrations. Something in the Louvre is humming. Very faint. Very old. Very not from around here.”

“Define ‘not from around here’.”

“Not from Earth by a long chalk. Perhaps ... judging by the readings that drew the TARDIS here, not even from this dimension.”

Maggie folded her arms. “And this something is in the Louvre ... on display?”

“Well, you know the French. They find art and beauty in everything. They almost certainly don’t know its true function.”

Maggie nodded. “And this beautiful something ... is about to be stolen.”

“Oh yes,” the Doctor said brightly. “Very publicly. Which is considerate.” He indicated the newspaper, and Maggie leaned over his shoulder to read. It was an edition of *Le Figaro* that looked decades old. “Once we were diverted here, I remembered reading about this audacious theft, the chap announced it in the paper himself. What style.” He straightened, pocketed the newspaper, vaulted across the console room to retrieve his trusty dark-blue greatcoat and toque from the hatstand, and then bounded toward the TARDIS entrance like a puppy, pausing to look back at her with an expression that was almost sheepish. “I do hope he’s as good as they say.”

“He?” questioned Maggie

The Doctor’s smile widened. “Arsène Lupin.”

The Louvre that evening resembled a theatre.

Police officers in stiff serge uniforms and pillbox hats attempted dignity while tripping over each other’s authority. Journalists hovered like enthusiastic pigeons. A well-dressed crowd gathered behind velvet barriers, determined to witness history if history insisted on occurring.

Barely noticed amid the throngs was a gentleman entering through the main doors. He looked no different than several other important people who happened to be there that night. He wore evening dress impeccable enough to silence conversation. He had a black tailcoat, a white tie and waistcoat, and a silk top hat, which he did not remove. His kid gloves were pearl grey. His expression was mild.

He did not hurry.
 He did not sneak.
 He did not conceal himself.
 He nodded politely to the nearest officer, casting a beady eye across every new entrance.
 “Good evening,” the gentleman said pleasantly.
 The officer blinked—or rather winked. The beady eye seemed to remain open the whole time. “I beg your pardon?”
 “Do keep your eyes open,” the gentleman advised kindly. “You would not wish to miss it.”
 He continued walking.
 By the time the officer’s brain caught up with his ears, the gentleman had vanished. Not run. Not ducked. Vanished.

Across the hall, the Doctor lowered his opera glasses.
 “Oh, very good,” he murmured.
 Maggie stared at him in faint disbelief. “You’re enjoying this.”
 “I adore panache.”
 “You’re supposed to stop him. Or are you? I’m a little unclear on this.”
 “Yes, yes, eventually.” He strolled into the Denon Gallery, bustling with art lovers and Lupin lovers. Maggie, confused, raced after him.
 “Shouldn’t we tell the police we’ve spotted him? We can end this whole thing now.”
 “Well ... we *could*,” he admitted with audible disappointment. “But come on Maggie, the chap’s put all this effort into planning it. Don’t you want to see him at least pull it off? I thought after all this time I might have taught you to root for the underdog.”
 “Yeah ...” She looked at the various perspiring officials, both museum staff and police. “I’m just not sure who *is* the underdog in this situation.”
 “*Pardon, Monsieur, Madame,*” a uniformed policeman rudely said as he jostled past them. He stopped in his tracks and looked the Doctor up and down. Maggie felt sorry, and felt a pang of embarrassment on behalf of the whole human race. She could see at once the self-important official was seeing nothing but the Doctor’s skin colour and jumping to some narrow-minded suspicion on account of it.
 For his part, the Time Lord beamed at the portly officer, pocketed the opera glasses, and raised his arms. “Scout’s honour I haven’t stolen anything, *mon vieux*.” He slapped the sides of his billowing blue coat. “You can search me if you like. You won’t find anything more interesting than jelly babies and an etheric beam locator.”
 Maggie smiled, as his tone seemed to mollify the policeman, who shrank from the suggestion and touched the brim of his pillbox hat. “No, no, *Monsieur* ... forgive me, we are all a bit jumpy this evening.”
 “Good hunting,” Maggie said.
 The stout policeman brushed through the dense crowd of Lupin-spotters, then stopped and turned again, indignantly having to perform the same awkward shimmy back to the time travellers. “When first I saw you, I thought you might be a visitor from the Congo, or Gabon. But you are no mere visitor ... you sound English, am I right?”
 “Right,” the Doctor confirmed with a nod. “I do *sound* English.”
 “I’m Canadian, if it helps,” Maggie chimed in. “He’s the Doctor, I’m Maggie Weitz.”

“*Enchante, Mademoiselle,*” the officer said with a bow. “My name is Marcel Dubois. Forgive me, but your clothing ... it compels me to ask, are you here in an ... official capacity?”

“In a way.”

He smiled. “I had a feeling. You have the look of a gentleman detective. Tell me, Doctor ...” Since the Doctor did not provide a name, the officer blazed on regardless. “Do you think he is here, among us? Have we prepared enough? The Louvre, the Prefecture, all of Paris could not stand the humiliation of such a theft.” He removed his hat and clutched it to his breast.

“Oh, I don’t know, Officer Dubois,” Maggie said, indicating the crowd bustling past, all of them staring distractedly at the walls of beautiful art and sculpture, but all keeping one eye on each other to catch a glimpse of the master-thief at work. “Paris looks to be cheering him on.”

“Don’t I know it,” Dubois agreed with a sour nod. “It is all very well to cheer on Robin Hood, stealing from the rich and giving to the poor, when you are a little boy. But when you are grown, and you realise one sad morning that you are employed by the Sheriff of Nottingham, it is a different story, is it not?”

He bade them a good evening and returned to his observation.

Maggie turned back to admire an exquisite and oddly moving portrait of Napoleon Bonaparte astride a caramel-coloured horse, marching across a moody grey landscape with bodies outstretched before him and officers riding alongside. As she studied it, she wondered about his awkward pose, looking back as the horse marched apparently on its own, waving to those behind with one hand and offering a basket to a poor man running alongside with his other. The pose was unintentionally comic, and it was easy to imagine someone doing all that would fall from the horse a moment later.

She looked to the Doctor, who was also lost in regarding the artwork. “Old Boney ... I must say they did a good job capturing those chubby cheeks.”

The seething crowd kept the travellers from lingering too long, and Maggie took in some fabulous portraits and landscapes. There was, of course, none of the security from her time, and it was tantalising to know she could reach out and touch any painting if she wanted. It was privilege enough to be able to stand closer to the canvas, to hover her nose less than an inch in front of it.

Shortly after they had arrived, the Doctor had checked in on the Denon Room, where the Mona Lisa stood. Maggie had never found the painting as incredible as its reputation, but it was moving to see the Doctor regard it with the wide eyes of a true, un-cynical art lover. “Always nice to see her there,” he said to Maggie. “I’ve seen it a hundred times ...”

“And no doubt met her too?”

“Oh yes. Dreadful woman, wouldn’t sit still. Leonardo was tearing his whiskers out by the end of the first day. But it all pays off in the end ... do you know, Maggie, the first time I saw this, I really understood what Earth was all about. Nothing like this back home.” He shuddered.

“So, what does Lupin like? I’m seeing lots of beauties, but all of it very definitely French. Very from around here. Where’s our target?”

“Lower down, I think ... you have to remember, Maggie, the foundations of the Louvre date back to Philip II. He was worried about those Norman kings getting ideas, fortified the whole city. The Louvre back then was quite a sight, very different, a massive castle that dominated the entire western edge of Paris.” He nodded to himself. “Yes, it’s all becoming clearer ...” He sifted through the crowds, and Maggie pushed her way past the tweedy men and crinoline-clad women, their tongues wagging with gossip and eager speculation about the man of the hour. Though she was feeling a little queasy about the theft, doubly so after their conversation with Officer Marcel

Dubois, she had to admit to a slight satisfaction from possessing one piece of knowledge no one else in the whole city did.

They stood before a modest hexagonal glass display case containing a small crystal pendant mounted on velvet. It did not glitter ostentatiously. It did not boast diamonds. It hummed.

This corner of the Louvre was more dimly lit than elsewhere, and nobody was in here. Now that they were closer, Maggie understood why people avoided it. She did not just hear the humming; she felt it, even in her teeth. A couple more seconds and she was sure a filling or two might shake loose.

“Is that it?” she whispered.

“Yes,” said the Doctor softly.

The pendant shimmered faintly, as if reacting to being observed.

Behind them, a voice spoke. “You are studying it as though it might blink.”

The Doctor turned.

The handsome, long-faced gentleman in evening dress stood a polite distance away, hands clasped behind his back. His eyes were bright. Curious. Amused. He stood a little taller than the Doctor, and his face was pale, with a half-smirk that in some light looked insouciant, in others cruel.

Now that the man himself had arrived, Maggie felt, absurdly, as though she had been invited to tea by a hurricane.

“Arsène Lupin, I presume,” the Doctor said, with mild admiration.

“At your service,” Lupin replied with a slight bow.

“Should you really admit your name to a complete stranger, Monsieur Lupin?” Maggie teased.

“I recognise a kindred intellect,” the man suavely replied. “And you are...?”

The Doctor considered his answer, and finally said simply, “A tourist.”

Lupin’s gaze sharpened. “Ah. Not just any tourist. A connoisseur, perhaps?”

“Of unusual objects.”

Lupin straightened his immaculate white bow tie and crossed the room, stopping to glance at the pendant. “Yes,” he said thoughtfully. “It is unusual.” In that moment his eyes betrayed a deep emotion that the earlier wit had suppressed. It reminded Maggie of the Doctor standing before the Mona Lisa; there was something highly sweet about the earnestness, but she knew he would never reveal it willingly. For him, it was all about the sophisticated pose.

A few moments passed.

The museum lights flickered slightly.

Lupin noticed.

The Doctor noticed that Lupin noticed.

Maggie noticed both of them noticing.

“How curious,” Lupin said lightly. “It hums.”

“Does it?” said the Doctor. “You feel it too.”

“I feel many things. Mostly indigestion, especially before I undertake my trade.” Lupin smiled. “You are not police.”

“No.”

“You are not a collector.”

“No.”

“You are not French. Although ... I can see you *are* French, philosophically.”

“That’s sweet of you to say.” The Doctor tilted his head. “That obvious? You listen differently.”

“And how do I listen?” Lupin inquired.

“As though the room might answer back.” The Doctor’s eyes flicked briefly to the ceiling. The hum deepened. Just a fraction.

Lupin’s expression shifted — barely. A flicker of calculation. “You expected me,” Lupin said quietly.

“All of Paris expected you.”

“But you expected me here, of all places? Most avoid it. Most feel only the tingling. They could not see, let alone comprehend, its value or its beauty ... you and the beautiful lady are rare connoisseurs indeed.”

“And you are not here to stop me?” Lupin asked the Doctor.

“Not precisely.”

Lupin’s roguish smile widened. “How refreshing.”

Behind them, a shout echoed down the corridor. Boots pounded marble. The Louvre guards had realised something was happening, though not what.

Lupin reached into his dinner jacket.

Maggie stiffened.

The Doctor did not move.

From his pocket, Lupin withdrew... a small silver mirror. He angled it toward the display case. The hum intensified. The crystal pendant glowed — faintly violet. Lupin’s eyebrows lifted. “Well,” he murmured. “That is not glass.”

“No,” said the Doctor softly. “It really isn’t.”

The display case cracked. Not shattered. Cracked. A hairline fracture spidered across its surface.

Guards burst into the hall. “Arsène Lupin!”

Lupin turned calmly. “Gentlemen,” he said pleasantly. “You are eleven minutes late.”

The lights went out. Total darkness swallowed this neglected wing of the Louvre. There were shouts. The clatter of boots. A whistle blown far too enthusiastically.

Maggie felt a hand take hers.

“Stay close,” the Doctor whispered.

In the dark, Lupin’s voice floated. “You see?” he said, amused. “Paris always applauds.”

Something brushed Maggie’s sleeve. A gloved hand. Then — impossibly — warmth.

The hum stopped. The lights snapped back on. The display case stood empty. The guards were all on top of each other, in a heap. A silk top hat—Lupin’s—had come to rest atop them.

The Doctor and Maggie stood exactly where they had been.

Maggie blinked.

Lupin was gone.

Maggie tried to work it out; by turning the lights out when he did, Lupin had counted on the guards’ nerves, knew that one of them would head to the door, and in the darkness another would think that was the master-thief, fleeing. Before long, the whole group were on top of each other like a rugby scrum. And when they were thus immobilised, Lupin, who must have surveyed and paced out this neglected wing of the grand gallery a hundred times to prepare, calmly took his leave.

On the velvet mount lay a calling card. The Doctor picked it up. On the back, in elegant script, were four words:

You were listening too.

The Doctor's smile was slow and delighted. "Oh," he breathed. "This is going to be fun." Maggie stared at the empty case. "You're not worried?"

"Oh, I'm very worried," he said cheerfully. "But I'm also intrigued. And when I'm intrigued, things tend to explode less."

"That's not reassuring," replied Maggie, clocking the word 'less'.

The Doctor tucked the card into his pocket and stepped over the struggling heap of guards. "Don't get up, gentlemen. Have no fear; my deputy and I are on the case. Come along, Maggie."

"Where?" she asked.

"To steal it back." The Doctor paused. "Or steal it first."

CHAPTER TWO: THE MAN WHO NOTICES TOO MUCH

Arsène Lupin did not run. Running suggested panic. Panic suggested mistakes. Lupin made neither a habit.

Lupin, sans his top hat, exited the Louvre through a service corridor, descended two flights of narrow stone stairs, and emerged into a courtyard where a delivery cart waited patiently beside a stack of wooden crates.

A policeman ran past the courtyard entrance.

Lupin removed his gloves. The crystal pendant lay warm in his palm. It hummed faintly, like a thought trying to remember itself.

“Extraordinary,” he murmured.

He slipped it into a velvet-lined pocket sewn discreetly into the inside of his coat. Then he picked up a crate lid, lifted it, and calmly placed it back down again. Footsteps approached.

Two officers burst into the courtyard. They saw a deliveryman. A very ordinary deliveryman in a brown coat and cap.

He blinked at them. “Messieurs?”

The officers hesitated. “Did you see anyone pass through here?” one demanded.

“Non,” said the deliveryman. “Only the usual ghosts.”

The officers stared. “Ghosts?”

The man shrugged. “It is Paris.”

The officers exchanged a look that suggested Paris might indeed be haunted and hurried away.

The deliveryman watched them go. Then he smiled.

By the time the officers noticed that deliverymen rarely wore pearl-grey gloves, Arsène Lupin was already halfway across the Seine.

Meanwhile, the Doctor had hailed a hansom cab, and they now sat at a street café on the corner of the Avenue Foch. They sat outside, breathing the brisk spring air while the Doctor stirred his coffee thoughtfully. It was nearly midnight, but the patron knew the Doctor and was happy to pour them

both a cup of strong, sweet coffee. To Maggie's delight, a couple of croissants were on offer too, and she ate ravenously as she processed what happened.

Maggie leaned across the table. "You let him take it."

"I didn't let him," said the Doctor mildly. "I observed him."

"That's the same thing."

"Not at all. You know, I could remind you that when I started my time travels, I tried to do nothing *but* observe. If you were a Time Lord, you'd be commending me right now."

"Well, I think we're both glad I'm *not* a Time Lord. But seriously, you could've stopped him. I thought we were *here* to stop him."

"Yes, and yes."

"And you didn't."

"No."

Maggie exhaled sharply. "You're enjoying this."

"A little." The Doctor tapped the café table lightly with one finger. "Think about it, Maggie. Lupin announced the crime in advance. Walked into the Louvre like a theatre critic, or an art lover, or any other aesthete. Used the lights to conceal the moment of theft. And he tested the object before taking it."

"And then there was that breaking of the glass ..." Maggie's eyes widened. "The object helped him, didn't it? It sensed us there; it wanted him to take it. He couldn't have got past those guards without *its* help!"

"Intriguing, eh? They'd all passed that room by; everyone expected him to take one of the biggies. No one would have considered that ... Lupin sees art and beauty everywhere." The Doctor shook his head in frank admiration. "A true Frenchman, to his core."

"You think he knows it's alien."

"I think he knows it's wrong. It must have intrigued him ... called to him ... how long has it been there? How many others ... and why?"

Maggie frowned. "What is it exactly?"

The Doctor leaned back in his chair, watching Paris drift past. The city was still vibrant despite the late hour, perhaps granted a second wind by the audacious theft. Lovers, likely tipsy, laughed and yelled in delight, while from another distant corner, lively music drifted through the air.

"Not a jewel," he said quietly.

"Then what?" inquired Maggie.

"I think ... it might be a key."

Maggie blinked. "A key to what?"

"That," said the Doctor, "is the worrying part."

Across the street from the café was an elegant structure in the 16th Arrondissement. Within this apartment overlooking the quiet boulevard of Rue Crevaux, Arsène Lupin examined the crystal under lamplight. The room was elegantly sparse. Books lined the walls. A violin rested on a chair. On the table before him lay:

- The crystal pendant
- A magnifying lens

- A notebook
- Three different lock picks

Lupin preferred thoroughness. There was nothing worse than an ill-prepared theft; he had learned that the hard way. He lifted the crystal with delicate fingers. Then again, as prepared as he was, even his most meticulous planning could not have ensured his escape.

“You aided me, *mon ami*,” he told the object. “I am grateful, but I am also puzzled.”

It hummed again.

“Curious,” he murmured.

Lupin brought the magnifying lens to his eye. Inside the crystal, something moved. Not visibly. But impossibly, he sensed it move.

Depth that should not exist inside a pendant seemed to ripple inward like a tunnel made of light. He sensed great age and the old peoples who lived here before Paris rose up and became the seat of all that was civilised and enlightened.

And yet it was a token of some civilisation itself, somewhere far distant and inconceivable to Lupin, in his comfortable and well-appointed parlour. Vast swathes of space and time unfolded before him, and yet he could not conceive their facets, just as he could not conceive the facets of this wondrous object, at once prize and co-conspirator.

Lupin lowered the lens slowly and digested what he had seen and perceived. “That,” he said softly, “is not French.” He leaned back in his chair, and then he smiled, because the crystal was not the most interesting part of the evening. The most interesting part had been the exotic man in the fisherman’s get-up and his dark-haired lady friend. The man who had watched Lupin steal the jewel...

...without stopping him.

Lupin opened his notebook. On the first page he wrote:

The Man at the Louvre

Observations:

- *Foreign accent (unidentified)*
- *Clothes inconsistent with Paris fashion (a man who has travelled far)*
- *Watches rooms like a surveyor*
- *Displays no surprise at abnormal phenomena*
- *Companion: Canadian, late 30s or early 40s (approx.)*
- *Both calm during power failure*

He paused. Then added:

- *Possibly an engineer*
- *Possibly a scientist*
- *Possibly a lunatic*

Lupin tapped the pen against the page. No, he decided. Not a lunatic. The man had been delighted. And people are only delighted by the impossible when they already understand it.

What the man understood was another matter.
Lupin leaned back in his chair. “Who are you?” he murmured.
Outside, a carriage rattled along the boulevard.
Inside the crystal, the faint hum deepened.
Lupin froze. The pendant glowed again. Very softly. Violet light spilled across the table.
Then a voice spoke. Not aloud. Not exactly. More like a whisper pressing against the edges of thought.
Lupin stood abruptly. “Well,” he said calmly. “That is certainly new.”

The Doctor stopped stirring his coffee. He tilted his head, his nostrils quivering as if he smelled something other than echoes of fine French cooking.
Maggie noticed immediately. “What?”
The Doctor sighed. “It’s woken up.”
“Lupin?” Maggie asked, already knowing the answer. “That’s bad, isn’t it?”
“Oh yes,” said the Doctor cheerfully. “Very bad.” He tossed a few coins onto the café table and stood. “Come on.”
“Where are we going?” Maggie asked.
“To meet Arsène Lupin properly.”
Maggie grabbed her coat, suddenly feeling on edge. “You know where he is?”
The Doctor smiled. “Just around the corner.”

Arsène Lupin stood by the window of his apartment. He stared thoughtfully at the crystal pendant. Then he looked down into the street. At the café on the corner. At this scientist or engineer who wore a fisherman’s coat and (he was fairly sure) was not a lunatic, looking straight up at him.
The Doctor lifted one hand in a cheerful wave.
Lupin laughed. “Of course,” he said softly.
The game had begun.

CHAPTER THREE: INVITATIONS AND SUSPICIONS

Arsène Lupin believed strongly in hospitality. It was a useful social weapon.

A man invited into one's home rarely noticed how much he revealed simply by sitting down.

Therefore, precisely twenty minutes after noticing the stranger in the café below, Lupin arranged his sitting room for guests. He lit another lamp. He opened a bottle of wine. He placed three glasses on the table. Then he removed the crystal pendant from his coat pocket and studied it once more. The violet glow had faded. The hum remained. Quiet. Persistent. Like a clock ticking somewhere inside the world.

Lupin considered this thoughtfully. "A key," he murmured. If it was a key, then it must open something. And if it opened something, someone must know what. Fortunately, someone had just waved at him from across the street. Lupin smiled to himself. Then he sat down and waited.

The Doctor crossed the street and approached Rue Crevaux with the unhurried stride of a man who had never been chased by the Parisian police. He approached the large brass knocker and reached for it.

Maggie, following close behind, regarded the naïve gesture quizzically. "You're just going to knock?"

"Yes."

"On the door of a man who stole a museum artefact an hour ago?"

"Why not? I'm not going to arrest him, if that's what you think."

Maggie shook her head, sensing some nebulous danger in the air. "You're enjoying this way too much," she cautioned.

"Possibly."

They reached the apartment building entrance. The Doctor examined the brass nameplate. "Ah," he said approvingly.

"What?" inquired Maggie.

“An alias. Jean Dupont, indeed. To any Parisian, that’d be as transparent as my old alias John Smith.”

Maggie folded her arms. “It *could* be some guy called Jean Dupont ...”

“Well, if so, let’s pop in and say *bonsoir*.”

The Doctor knocked.

Inside, footsteps approached immediately.

The door opened.

Arsène Lupin stood framed in lamplight. He had removed his jacket, tie, and collar, and now wore a comfortable plum velvet smoking jacket. He looked raffish and a little dangerous

For a moment, the three of them simply looked at one another. Then Lupin smiled warmly. “Ah,” he said. “My audience.”

The Doctor returned the smile.

“Your critics. Ten out of ten for conception, but let’s face it, a few deductions for cheating.”

“Cheating is essentially my job description,” Lupin protested. “Anyway, in what way would you say I cheated?”

“You didn’t do it entirely unaided.”

Lupin’s serene expression went sour for a moment. He stepped aside. “Please come in. I dislike shouting mysteries through doorways.”

The apartment smelled faintly of tobacco and polished wood. Books lined the walls in elegant disorder.

Maggie noticed the violin first. Then the maps. Then the locks.

Three different door locks rested disassembled on a nearby desk. She leaned toward the Doctor. “Normal apartment?” she whispered.

“Completely normal,” he whispered back as he slung his greatcoat over a nearby *chaise*. “Everyone must have a hobby.”

Lupin poured the wine. “For the lady,” he said, offering Maggie the first glass. She accepted cautiously. “A happy vintage, I hope you’ll agree. And for the gentleman who knows far too much about my evening.”

The Doctor took the second glass gratefully. “Occupational hazard,” he conceded.

Lupin raised an eyebrow. “And what occupation would that be?”

The Doctor considered the question. “Curiosity.”

“Forgive me for being vulgar, but does that earn you many francs?” Lupin laughed softly. The Doctor, to whom money was more alien than the most arcane customs of the Xenobulans, merely stared back at him blankly. “Well, you seem to be doing all right. I congratulate you, to be a curious gentleman can be a ... dangerous profession.”

“I’ve noticed.”

They sat. The crystal pendant rested on the table between them.

None of them mentioned it. For nearly thirty seconds. Finally Maggie, having rubbed at her jaw at the unceasing and unpleasant sensation, pointed at it. “So... are we going to pretend that’s not humming?”

Lupin leaned back in his chair. “You hear it as well?”

“Oh yes,” said the Doctor. “Very musical. Bit off-key. A shame or it’d be a perfect A-flat.”

“You know what it is?” Lupin asked.

“I have theories,” the Doctor indicated.

“Share one,” requested Lupin.

The Doctor sipped his wine thoughtfully. “Not a jewel,” he said.

Lupin’s smile widened. “Excellent. I dislike jewels. They are too honest.”

Maggie blinked. “Jewels are honest?”

“They sparkle,” Lupin said simply. “Which is terribly vulgar.”

The Doctor nodded solemnly. “Agreed.”

Maggie looked between them and drank deeply from her wine glass. “I think this is going to be one of those days.”

“Give it a chance, Maggie, it’s not even two in the morning yet.”

Lupin lifted the crystal pendant. The faint violet glow returned instantly. “Earlier this evening,” he said conversationally, “this object spoke. Not aloud. Inside the mind. Like a whisper through a keyhole. I have heard this conversation before, my friends. It called me, it summoned me as the best gentleman thief in all France, in all the world ... for the first time an object has *compelled* me to release it from its captivity.”

The Doctor rubbed the back of his neck. “That’s new.”

“You did not expect it?” asked Lupin.

“I expected it later.”

Lupin turned the crystal slowly between his fingers. “I find this situation fascinating.” He set the crystal down again. “You knew something about this object was the moment you saw it.”

The Doctor shrugged. “Educated guess.”

“You allowed me to steal it.”

“Ah-ah,” Maggie corrected. “He *observed* you.” She flashed him a cheeky grin.

“It was the only way to know what you’d do with it ... ” He gave Maggie a wry glance. “And what it would do with you.”

For a second she wondered if this master-criminal faced any danger holding this object; a danger even beyond the threat of permanent toothache.

He rolled the stem of his wine glass between his hands as he further retraced their steps that night. “Then, having finished your observations, you followed me here.”

“Yes. And now here we are sitting in your apartment drinking your wine.” The Doctor buried his nose in the glass and inhaled approvingly. “Very good wine, by the way. A nice Chateau Petrus, if I’m not mistaken. So few are left from the turn of the century ... well, by the time I tend to show up anyway.”

Lupin leaned forward, and Maggie glimpsed a dangerous edge to the man. If he did not like what he heard, was he liable to get violent. “Why?”

The Doctor met his gaze. “Because,” he said gently, “if anyone in Paris was going to steal that object tonight... I preferred it to be you. And it felt the same way, clearly.”

Lupin tapped the crystal lightly. “Let us suppose,” he said, “that this is *not* a jewel. Let us further suppose it is not even from this world.” He blinked at Maggie. “Far-fetched, to be certain, *Madame*, but it really is the only solution that makes sense.”

Maggie blinked. “Well, of course.”

Lupin continued: “And let us suppose *you* both know this, and are able to stay all these steps ahead of even I, because you are either the greatest scientist of our age... or something considerably stranger.”

The Doctor did not answer. Indeed, the line of inquiry had taken the *joie de vivre* from his face. The silence stretched.

Lupin sat back in his armchair and smiled again. “Yes,” he said softly. “I thought so. This *bibelot* and you are one and the same, eh? Both from the stars? Such romances are childish, yes, but on this magical night they are also true. How grand.”

Maggie leaned toward the Doctor. “He thinks you’re an alien.”

“It’s Paris. People think all sorts of things.”

The crystal suddenly pulsed. All three of them looked down. The violet light intensified. Lines appeared inside the crystal — thin threads of glowing geometry folding outward like impossible architecture. The hum deepened into a low harmonic vibration.

Maggie backed away slightly, the wine slightly dulling her reactions and putting her on edge.

The Doctor and Lupin regarded the object calmly. Then, Lupin stood. “Well,” he said calmly. “If the universe insists on joining our dinner conversation, we should at least listen.”

The light flared. Arcane symbols appeared in the air above the table. Floating. Rotating. Impossible. The master-thief studied them, his jaw hanging slack with admiration.

Maggie stared. “What language is that?”

The Doctor leaned forward. Now he was firmly no longer amused, or playful. Focused. Unsettled. “Oh,” he whispered. “That’s bad.”

Lupin glanced at him. “You recognise it.”

“Yes.”

“Explain.”

The Doctor hesitated. He clearly did not want to. Then he sighed. “It’s not a key.”

“What is it then?” asked Lupin.

The Doctor looked at the crystal again. Then at Lupin. Then at Maggie. “It’s a lock.”

The room went very quiet.

Lupin folded his arms. “A lock for what?”

The Doctor met his eyes. “Something that absolutely should not be opened in the middle of Paris.”

Maggie swallowed. “Please tell me no one’s about to open it.”

The crystal pulsed again. The symbols rearranged themselves.

Across the city, somewhere deep above the streets of Paris... Something heard.

The Doctor closed his eyes. “Too late. It’s unlocking itself ... of its own volition.”

Maggie understood none of this, but did not like the idea of a malign not-quite-jewel making decisions for itself. She looked across to the aristocratic features of their host. Lupin’s smile returned — sharper now, and a shade madder. “Good. I was hoping this business would become interesting.”

CHAPTER FOUR: FACT-FINDING

Paris was full of secrets. It hid them politely beneath cafés, cathedrals, bookshops, and boulevards. Tourists admired the architecture while, far below their shoes, tunnels stretched through the earth like the memory of another city entirely. For this was the city that was born two centuries before the birth of Christ, the home of the Parisii tribe, then briefly occupied by the Romans, and then the Franks. All that history, some of it buried amid Gothic vaults and some in plain sight, gave the dark texture to that oft-quoted epithet of Paris, the ‘City of Love’.

The Doctor stood at the large window of Lupin’s apartment, staring thoughtfully at the darkened streets. Behind him, the crystal lock floated above the table, projecting thin ribbons of violet symbols that drifted slowly through the air. More symbols flashed in the air, but he had read them already. He didn’t like what they portended.

Maggie sidled up to him. Right now he seemed distant, as far from her and the human plane as a Time Lord could be. Whatever these symbols represented, it was something that unsettled him to his core. She further inferred that he had not expected this—he had thought Lupin would get away with the object and it would be no more trouble. What, then, was the object up to? What did its release mean for them, and for Paris?

“So let me get this straight,” she said. “That dingus that persuaded Monsieur Lupin here to steal it isn’t a jewel.”

“No.”

“It isn’t a key.”

The Doctor looked a shade regretful as he confirmed, “No.”

“It’s a lock.”

“Yes.”

“And the lock is opening. Opening *itself*.”

“Yes.”

Maggie stopped pacing. Lupin leaned against the fireplace, arms folded, watching the crystal with lively curiosity. “Whatever it locks ... you think it lies beneath Paris?” he guessed.

“Yes,” the Doctor replied dreamily. “I have some memory from one of my previous trips back ... the architecture of the *Ile de la Cité* was to protect, to fortify. I remember that word from Philip II.”

“Yeah,” Maggie nodded. “But protecting from the Normans, not from aliens or intelligent baubles!”

“I never questioned it, but perhaps they did know something that had escaped me ...” The Doctor tutted. “There are old peoples here, dating back many distant centuries. The Parisii, the Franks ... fancy me missing something so obvious.”

Lupin nodded thoughtfully. “Well, it seems a small excursion is in order.”

The Doctor sighed. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

Maggie pointed at him. “You were hoping the *thief* would volunteer to help?”

“Who better than the man the crystal itself selected?” replied the Doctor as he looked directly at Lupin. “And anyway, he’s lived in Paris his whole life ... I haven’t been back in centuries. He knows the streets better than I do. And the by-ways.”

“And supposing I let this lock do what it desires? Perhaps I think Paris deserves its fate.”

The Doctor studied him carefully. “Of course you won’t let that happen.”

“Why not?”

“Because if Paris explodes, you’ll never hear the end of it. Sucked into oblivion the night after Lupin makes his theft?”

“And worse,” Maggie added. “You’ll be *upstaged*.”

Lupin’s eyes and nostrils flared in indignation. “An excellent argument.”

The Doctor interpreted the symbols flashing from the crystal and concluded they had a solid day before things became critical. He suggested they use that time to find something out about it. Thus, he disappeared to the TARDIS, and tasked Maggie with finding out what the Louvre knew. As for Lupin, he made no bones about the fact that after his night’s exertion, he intended to sleep till at least noon. They left him to his slumber as the sun rose on the metropolis.

Maggie sidled into the Louvre as soon as it opened, another bag of croissants in her hand. She glanced over the morning papers. To her amusement, the air of anticipation had evaporated into an embarrassed *diminuendo*. Paris had expected the theft of a sculpture, an Old Master, perhaps even the Venus de Milo or the Mona Lisa. One or two claimed nothing had been stolen at all, while others reported that a theft had been made, but officials would not comment. All in all, the conclusion was clear: the city felt let down, and staggered along in palpable disappointment with their dark hero. Maggie was amused at the fury this disappointment might arouse in the self-important criminal.

She proceeded into the official wing of the Louvre, rattling the paper bag to a bleary-eyed Dubois, who accepted one and nodded a greeting. “How, Mademoiselle, how did we let this happen?”

She nodded disingenuously. It felt a little treacherous to be here as, at best, a double agent, since the Doctor had firmly thrown his lot in with Lupin. However, this guilt was useful, as it suppressed the nerves Maggie might otherwise have felt about barging in on officials. “May I see the director? My, uh, deputy and I—” She smiled inwardly at giving the Doctor this demotion— “think it would be helpful to find out more about the piece that was stolen.”

“But of course, what an intriguing tack to take. Most of the people around here, they do not say it, but ...” Dubois leaned in. “I think they are inwardly glad the cursed bibelot is gone.”

Maggie nodded.

Inside the grand stateroom, which may have been occupied by some courtier or sycophant during the time of Napoleon III, a shattered man slumped over an ornate desk. Rubbing his shoulders was a statuesque, dark-haired lady. Sitting opposite were several men, whose dark suits, bowler hats, and moustaches all identified them as Parisian policemen. Two on either side sucked on pipes rhythmically.

The lady looked up and regarded Maggie autocratically. “May we help you, Madame?”

Maggie bristled, sensing the woman’s icy demeanour. “I’m, uh, myself and another detective were here last night.”

Dubois nodded. “I can vouch for the lady, *Messieurs*.”

“Come, come,” the police detective assented impatiently, even rising to give Maggie his chair. “You are the English detectives, correct? Your partner was, uh ...” He gestured at the face.

“Black, yes.”

“And you appear Jewish,” the director’s wife noted.

“Wow, you are a noticing person,” Maggie replied acidly. “People like you made quite certain Dreyfus was accused, *wrongly*, of spying. When it was one of those patriotic Gentile French army officers who was the wretched traitor.”

The policemen laughed at Maggie’s audacity, and the woman backed away from the man at the desk, who had not even looked up since she arrived. With another drag of his pipe, he introduced himself as Laurentian, and his colleagues Jubert and Hugue. “And this poor soul is the director of the Louvre, Bertrand Poirier.”

“Maggie Weitz.” She offered her bag of croissants around.

The defeated director looked up, but did not raise himself to his full height, regarding Maggie with bloodshot eyes. “Excuse my ... manners, dear Mademoiselle Weitz. Bertrand Poirer, and this is my wife, Sophie.”

“So!” Laurentian cried through a mouthful of flaky pastry. “What have you to report, Weitz? Have you English spied some clue we missed. Your *noir* deputy, this unnamed *médecin qui*, he did not study under Sherlock Holmes by chance?”

“His surname, it is not Watson, by any chance?” his colleague added.

All, except the Poiriers, chuckled. Maggie flashed them all a polite, schoolmarm-ish smile. I’m waiting for you to settle, the smile told them. So after a moment they did settle, waiting for her to continue.

“Well, the Doctor wanted to know a bit more about the object that was stolen.”

“Ah ... we would too.” Laurentian turned his fleshy, neckless head back to the director, who remained silent and defeated.

“Honestly,” Maggie confessed to the director, “you don’t need to feel bad about the theft. I read the papers and they all agreed Lupin was a big flop.”

“No wonder!” Poirier agreed. “Of all the junk to steal ...”

“Perhaps you should thank Lupin,” Sophie suggested. Something in her tone made Maggie think she was one of his admirers. She was certain that the gentleman thief had many female admirers, and she suspected poor Bertrand knew how highly she held him in esteem.

“Yes! Why not!” the director snapped pettishly. “Thank you for ruining my reputation, making me a laughing stock for these policemen, for this English detective ...”

Maggie forestalled the marital bickering by asking: “Where did you get that particular piece? How did you get it?”

This subject seemed to mollify Poirier, and Maggie could see some of the curatorial enthusiasm that must have inspired the man to work at the Louvre, and that made him rise through the ranks so adeptly. “It is an interesting tale, Mademoiselle. It is all to do with the catacombs.”

“Oh dear,” Sophie sighed, her nose wrinkling. “There has never been a man more interested in morbid skulls and crumbling bones than poor, misguided Bertrand.”

He scowled, and rose from his desk. “Let us discuss this in private, Mademoiselle Weitz. Away from the philistines.”

They strolled down to the foundations. One period of history ceded to another, and so they passed the early twentieth-century modernity of the director’s offices, then the chintzy elegance of the Second Empire apartments, and on down to the medieval solidity that extended underground.

Maggie did not particularly like being below ground, but she put her feelings to one side to take in the awesome sight.

“Perhaps you in England are not aware how new our sewer system is. It was a massive city-wide project undertaken in 1786. Before then, the skulls and bones had been inelegantly heaped in a cemetery in Les Halles. For fifteen months, operating at night, workers moved those towering piles of the dead and stored them down below, out of sight and out of mind. What a remarkable project. What brave men, to surround themselves with the dead in such quantities.” His eyes twinkled, his present misfortune lost in his reverie over the past. “But down here ... and down deeper ... this is the real Paris. Sophie, pah! She would not understand. Her ancestors are from Brittany, from Corsica ... to a real Frenchman, like myself, this is where we see the direct line back to those who first made this great city their home.”

Reluctantly, Maggie prodded him to return to the point. “And this ... what do you call it ... bibelot?”

“Oh yes, but of course!” Poirier slapped his forehead. “Later, at the dawn of the Second Empire, Napoleon III assigned Baron Haussmann to redesign the city. Another massive project. It turned up in their excavations. It had been believed buried in the catacombs with the dead. Whoever found it wanted rid of it.”

“I can imagine why,” Maggie blurted.

Poirier looked at her cautiously, before nodding. “Ah, but you saw it in that small display room the night of this disgraceful theft. Unsettling, is it not?”

Relieved, she answered, “Very.”

“It was rumoured a select few had passed it amongst each other, but they had lost it amid the great projects that reshaped our city into its modern majesty.”

“Who were those people?”

He waved his hand. “Pagans, they say. Descendants of the Parisii themselves, and *le bon Dieu* himself knows who those people worshipped. Jewellers, scientists, they all tried to study it, cut into it, subject it to analysis. They all walked away with only an unpleasant rattling in their jaws.” He rubbed his own jaw. “So we kept it. Perhaps we hoped someone might explain it to us. But where would such a person gain that knowledge? Nowhere good, Mademoiselle, surely.”

“Indeed.” She nodded, trying to suppress the thought that, as they spoke (relatively speaking), the Doctor had travelled back one thousand, nine hundred, sixty-one years to discover exactly that ...

The Doctor stepped from the TARDIS, breathing in deeply. The aromas of coal smoke and revolution, wine and fine food, were supplanted by the heady, fresh spices of the Mediterranean: classic ancient Rome. So many bouquets, all so distinct, yet all so undeniably redolent of Earth. No wonder this was his favourite planet.

The tip of a spear hovered into his view. Behind it a burly centurion glowered. Inwardly, the Doctor reminded himself to take the rough with the smooth. As graciously as he could, he informed the soldier of his wish to see Julius Caesar. He listened at the archway to their conversation:

“My liege, a stranger demands to see you.”

“A stranger?”

“Indeed. Not a Roman. A Nubian, by the look of him.”

The Doctor cringed as he rubbed his jaw. Humans—always so foolishly judgmental of appearances. He hopes Julius would be broader minded. He also couldn’t remember what he’d actually looked like when they last met—was he wearing his scarf, or the straw hat, or that barista’s outfit?

“Claims to be a scholar, and a scientist,” the soldier continued, each word sounding more dubious.

He heard Caesar putting it all together. He was an intimidating fellow with all his military bluster, but Julius did have a first-rate mind in many ways. He was a bit like Lethbridge-Stewart in that regard. “He may enter.”

The Doctor entered and gave him a dignified bow.

“So you are a Nubian now ... Doctor.”

He nodded. “Good to see you again, Julie. There’s a spot of bother ...”

“It’s about Lutetia, isn’t it? What I saw there?”

The Doctor’s brow furrowed in confusion. “Oh yes, of course. Lutetia. Only they call it Paris.”

Over a goblet of wine and some olives, Caesar recounted his tale. It was unusual to hear him so flustered; but then the last time they had met, if the Doctor remembered rightly, the worst they had to worry about was those pirates; child’s play to a man of his stature.

“I did not like the place, Doctor. It was muddy and low, the people violent and barbarous and almost impossible to understand.”

“Bit harsh. They love a good party.”

Caesar ignored the flippant remark, absorbed and chilled by his recollection. “As you know Doctor, I have been to many places, on many campaigns. One corner of this world is little different than another.” A nasty half-smile crossed his lips. “All inferior to Rome, of course.”

“Yes, yes,” the Doctor replied impatiently. “I always forget about that nasty megalomania of yours, Julie.”

“But this place ... I felt a chill deep within me as soon as I set foot upon it. The fools I had governing, they did not sense anything amiss. I tried to get it from the pagans roaming the land, those Parisii savages, but they would say nothing. I thought they concealed treasure, riches ... something I could bring back for the glory of Rome.”

“But instead?”

“It came upon me at the dead of night. I had visited and declared myself impressed with the state of the place. Little did they know we would shortly be withdrawing. I went to my bed that night unsettled, restless. Whenever I shut my eye, I heard a voice whispering to me through the dark. I felt scratching down my back. Finally, I opened my eyes, and outside I saw it. The guards were entranced, senseless to help. The whole countryside, right from hill to hill, was bathed in light the colour of imperial purple. And symbols drifted through the air. I recognised them as words, but words whose meaning I could not fathom. And then I beheld ... it.

“It was entirely flat, Doctor, it had not the depth of a mortal being. It was like the sketch of a face pressed against paper, and that is what I understood it to be. A sketch of some being too large and too deep to fit in our realm. I felt puny, insignificant beside it. As you can imagine, a most unwelcome sensation for me.

“Who are you? What mean you by this intrusion?” I asked it.

“We are here to protect the membrane.’ That was the word it used, Doctor, ‘membrane’. As we spoke I realised it was making itself clear to me using thought. Putting its own mind directly inside mine. I saw ... terrible things. Not beings at all. A realm I could not begin to fathom. A realm of depthless horrors, the chasm of madness which, but for the right footing, I could tumble into at any moment ...” Caesar regarded the Doctor pitifully, his eyes shot with haunting. “Can you explain it Doctor? I know you have seen so much. Do you know of this realm?”

The Doctor tried to suppress his own disquiet at what the Roman was describing. “It sounds ... it sounds like the chaotic state of matter that gave rise to our own. The universe that preceded the Big Bang.”

“And the daemon that touched my mind, that nearly broke it? I remember it called itself ... a guardian.”

“Guarding Paris from some vulnerability?” the Doctor speculated. “That might explain ... yes, perhaps even Scaroth was drawn there because of the residue of some gateway opened aeons before. Though he couldn’t have known it.”

If Caesar had any doubts that this man could be the Doctor despite the difference in age, height, and skin colour, the man’s habit of lapsing into bewildering monologues confirmed just who he was. Hoping he might catch up or at least get a straight answer, the Roman asked, “Scaroth, you say?”

“Oh, never mind about him. Just the last of the Jagaroth. I bumped into him in Paris, you see. Florence too, as a matter of fact ... but that’s all sorted. Unlike this.” In the Doctor’s mind, more facts were beginning to connect: that business he and Maggie had recently sorted out in East London, with Xyosis and a sect of the Thirteen trying to tap that buried energy¹ ... could those events too have some connection? He felt a certain echo of them in the current situation.

The Doctor clapped Caesar on the shoulders. “Forget this. Your life lies here in Rome. I’ll sort this lot out.” He drained his wine and dashed back through the archway to the waiting TARDIS.

“I do not doubt it, Doctor. But go carefully. I hope your comrades are well armed and as prudent as you.”

He thought of Maggie and Lupin, waiting for him nearly two thousand years hence. “One definitely is, and the other ... well, I’ll just have to hope for the best.”

Caesar rose, straightening his jerkin and reaching for his sword. “You wish me to accompany you? Do not interpret my fear as timidity to face this daemon again.”

¹ See *The Doctor Who Project* Season 46: *The Disciples of Xyosis*.

“I don’t, believe me old chap. But Rome, and history, needs you here. And I’ll just work to make sure the future is as secure as your present, eh? Good talk!”

Caesar bowed as the Time Lord dashed out of the apartment and headlong to his date with fate.

CHAPTER FIVE: BENEATH PARIS

The TARDIS rematerialised at the corner of the Rue de Rivoli, just as Maggie was stepping out of the Louvre. She had briefly wondered if that roguish Laurentian was going to follow her out; he had been giving her sly winks the whole morning. Thankfully, though, the streets were empty and she had one croissant left.

The wooden door swung open and the Doctor duly snatched it from the bag. “Delicious!”

“How was Julius Caesar?”

“Oh, he’s been better. Didn’t think much of Paris, I must say. How about the director of the Louvre?”

“He’s been better too.”

They walked and talked, comparing their respective notes. Maggie could see that these vague, apocalyptic visions Julius Caesar had described to him meant something to the Time Lord. Then he mentioned their recent trip to East London, 1978—the trip they had spent the last few weeks recuperating from. Frankly, the prospect of something as horrible as that faceless, evil energy Xyosis cropping up again did not fill Maggie with delight.

“Grim though it is,” the Doctor said, “it is nice for things to fit together.”

“Fit together? How? This still seems to me like a thousand-piece puzzle of a blue sky.”

“The entity Caesar saw mentioned a ‘membrane’. I think there’s some kind of dimensional rift, opened at some point in the distant past ... and that object was put in place by some gatekeeper as a way to keep things secure.”

“And it would have stayed that way if it weren’t for Lupin?”

“Oh no, Maggie. It called out to Caesar, and it seems like it was calling out to the poor souls who had guarded it up until they lost it when the catacombs were put together. It wanted to be free. It wants the rift to open again. And by Jove, to use a Caesarean expression, we’d better make sure it doesn’t.”

An elderly bookseller was keeping pace with them. Maggie looked his way, worried their outlandish conversation might arouse too much attention. He chuckled and waved an old paperback in the air. She shook her head and returned to her friend. “It does seem a little rich that we’re doing all this legwork while Mister Fancy-Pants spends the morning in bed ...”

“I am wounded, Madame.”

She whirled around to see the bookseller peeling the white whiskers from his cheeks.

“Ah, good to see you again, Lupin,” the Doctor said, unfazed.

“And you, Doctor. Thank you *both* for all your legwork. A most interesting tale.”

“How’s the bibelot doing?” Maggie asked.

“Still at rest in my quarters.”

The Doctor pulled a pocket-watch from his pocket and tapped it. “Yes, that figures. We can wait until after midnight to go about our business.”

“Excellent!” Lupin clapped. “I happen to have a lot of petty cash. What do you two say to a slap-up lunch?”

It was a beautiful summer’s day, and the three spent it in glorious idleness, Lupin taking Maggie and the Doctor in tow to show them around his home. Only as the sun went down did Maggie remember the purpose that dogged their presence here. A few hours of rest later, they stepped out into the Paris night.

Lupin had changed into a Chesterfield coat. The crystal lock rested inside a leather satchel slung casually over his shoulder. Also in the satchel was a lantern and the neatly stowed tools of his trade.

The Doctor sauntered behind him with leisurely eagerness, hands in his trouser pockets.

Maggie followed, still trying to process the fact that she was apparently exploring underground alien mysteries with a gentleman burglar. “Where are we going?”

Lupin gestured ahead. “To the bones of Paris.”

“You know, you and that Louvre director, Poirier, would get on well,” she replied.

Lupin looked down at his satchel. “Somehow I doubt that. Anyway, onward to the catacombs.”

Maggie stopped in her tracks. “The *catacombs*? As in, full of skeletons?”

“Yes.”

“I knew, I knew when I was down in the Louvre foundations this morning, that it did not bode well. But I got through it, and I thought the rest of my time I’d be safely above ground.”

The Doctor shrugged.

Infuriated by his blasé attitude, Maggie demanded: “Why are the dangerous things always near skeletons?”

For a second, the Doctor thought about that. With a shrug, he suggested, “Atmosphere.”

Lupin hailed another cab, and they alighted at Avenue du Colonel Henri Rol-Tanguy. The coachman took off in a hurry, and Maggie knew how he felt. They went past the front door and slipped down a narrow side street. Lupin stopped at an iron gate and produced a key.

Maggie stared. “You carry keys to the Paris catacombs?”

“Of course.” Lupin replied.

“Why?”

“One never knows when one might need them.” Lupin unlocked the gate.

The three of them descended into darkness.

Unwisely, the three had made no effort to conceal their movements. And such was their focus on the task ahead of them that they did not notice Inspector Laurentian following at a discreet distance. Laurentian was perhaps not Paris's most inspired detective, but he did nevertheless attend to his duties with a certain dogged aplomb. From the reports of the Louvre theft, it had been easy to narrow down the radius the great Arsène Lupin could have reasonably travelled. By comparing this with some of the great cracksman's past thefts, he was able to narrow down nearby boltholes. When he saw one particular address on Rue Crevaux whose owner went by the handle of 'Jean Dupont', Laurentian considered it advisable to keep a weather eye on the handsome front door to see who would emerge.

He had to admit he was mildly stung to see the English detectives in the cad's company. Were they confederates or rivals, only posing as detectives? That would take some brass neck. Had Lupin turned them to his side with promises of wealth and fame? Or were they something entirely different?

Laurentian was willing to give the pair, Weitz and this dark-skinned doctor friend of hers, the benefit of the doubt for the time being. He hoped they were double agents, and would recover the jewel and return it to the Louvre so all could walk away happily. If Maggie had been turned by the suave criminal, it would confirm all Laurentian's suspicions about having women in the police force.

Laurentian followed them in another cab, and stood around the corner of Avenue du Colonel Henri Rol-Tanguy to watch them descend.

"Well?" his uniformed subordinate asked as they neared the gate. "What now?" He smacked his fists together with the enthusiasm of someone eager to blunder in and make an arrest.

Laurentian stopped him with a subtle tap of the shoulder. "No, no, not the obvious way."

"We could nab them all and go home to bed."

"Or ... we could see what further crime he, or they, intend to commit and catch them as they emerge. Call back to the Prefect of Police and get every available man to cover the exits from the catacombs." He took a thoughtful drag of his pipe, its orange cinders illuminating his jowls grimly. "Wherever they emerge, they shall emerge into the embrace of the Paris police."

The tunnels were cool and silent. Stone walls pressed close around them. Their footsteps echoed softly along passages lined with carefully stacked bones that formed pale walls stretching into shadow.

Maggie held the lantern Lupin had brought. "Okay," she muttered. "This is officially the creepiest place I've been with you." She pointed down at an unpleasant brown, furry shape scuttling and squealing as it went past. "There's rats everywhere. Every time we turn a corner you can see them scurrying out of the way."

The Doctor glanced around the rat-infested corridor and addressed Maggie. "Really? You should have been with me when Leela and I visited Victorian London. We were on our way to the theatre and we ended up in a sewer full of rats – one in particular was gigantic."

Lupin chimed in: "I've heard of such things in Sumatra. Then again ... from what I hear of London, I am hardly surprised."

Maggie looked down at some of the rats and shuddered. “Bigger than these guys? They look like beavers.”

“Poor Leela was almost breakfast for one particular rat. Nasty business, that. A terrible abuse of psionic amplification fields.”

Maggie wasn’t sure how to respond to that. Instead she turned to catch up with Lupin. Ahead of them, the suave criminal walked confidently through the maze of tunnels.

“You navigate this place well, *mon vieux*,” the Doctor observed.

“Not I, Doctor,” Lupin nodded toward the satchel. “Somehow through its vibrations, I sense which way to go ... it plants the image in my mind as clearly as I see you in front of me ...” He shook his head and straightened his bow tie. “It is most disconcerting. How you two manage with all this magic about you I cannot comprehend.”

“How do you know it’s not leading us into a trap?” Maggie asked.

“It is of no consequence. I make a habit of knowing exits. And anyway ...” He withdrew a silver-topped cane from his satchel, extending it and tapping the damp stone ceiling some feet above their heads. “Do you not hear the tread of the Paris constabulary?”

The Doctor smiled faintly. “Ah yes. I thought I saw a chubby chap with a pipe following us to this gate.”

“You mean they have us surrounded?” Maggie spluttered.

“Most definitely, Madame,” Lupin answered blandly.

“Don’t worry about it Maggie.”

“Don’t worry, he says. And when we get arrested ...”

“No prison can hold me, Mags. I thought you knew that by now.”

The satchel began to hum again. All three of them heard it.

Lupin stopped. “Well,” he said calmly. “It appears our guide has opinions. It does not wish us to dally here.”

The crystal lock glowed through the leather. Violet light spilled faintly out, dappling the dark stone. Somehow, the illumination rendered the surroundings grimmer, darker.

The Doctor crouched and pressed his hand against the floor. He closed his eyes. Listening. Maggie watched him carefully. “You do that a lot,” she said.

“Everything talks.”

“What does this say?”

The Doctor opened his eyes slowly. “Something down here has been waiting a very long time.”

Lupin’s interest sharpened immediately. “How long?”

The Doctor stood. “Longer than Paris. I see the oldest peoples, the Parisii themselves ... the Romans were oblivious to its power, though it made contact with Caesar ... it drew the Romans away, played some part in their departure ... and all the while they kept it secret ... how fascinating.”

They continued deeper into the tunnels. The hum grew stronger. Soon it was no longer a faint vibration but a steady harmony echoing through the underground passages.

Lupin stopped again. “There,” he said.

Ahead of them, the tunnel widened into a circular chamber. The walls were older here — rougher stone, worn by centuries. And in the centre of the chamber stood something that did not belong to the nineteenth century. A smooth metal structure rose from the floor like a sealed pillar. No hinges. No seams. No markings that could be read by a human, a Martian ... or even a Dalek, Maggie noted. Just a narrow indentation shaped exactly like the crystal pendant. There was

nothing specific about the design, but something about its blank, smooth texture stood out as utterly alien.

Maggie exhaled slowly and with fear. “Oh.”

Lupin nodded appreciatively. “Now that is interesting.”

The Doctor approached cautiously. “Yes, yes it is.”

The satchel began vibrating.

Lupin opened it.

The crystal lock floated upward, glowing bright violet. It drifted across the chamber and slid perfectly into the indentation.

For a moment nothing happened. Then the pillar opened. Not outward ... inward. The metal folded like liquid geometry, revealing a chamber filled with dim blue light.

Maggie whispered: “Doctor...?”

He stepped closer. Inside the pillar rested a device the size of a small suitcase. Cold. Ancient. And very much not human.

The Doctor’s face darkened slightly. “Oh,” he said. “However did that get here? That’s really bad.”

Lupin looked delighted. “Another lock?”

The Doctor shook his head. He looked at the machine. Then at the crystal. Then at Lupin. For a moment it seemed he was struggling to put it into words, and then finally he said, “It’s a signal.”

Maggie felt a chill. “A signal to what ... or who?”

The Doctor answered quietly. “To whoever left this here.”

Inside the pillar, a beam of pale blue light shot upward through the ceiling of the catacombs. Through the stone. Through the streets of Paris. Into the sky.

Far from Earth ... something noticed.

CHAPTER SIX: THE SIGNAL

Inspector Jubert and his two men, standing watch and hoping for once to get an advantage on that plodder Laurentian, were unfortunate enough to be exactly over the heads of Arsène Lupin and his two accomplices, the apparently sweet Maggie Weitz, who posed as a detective, and her doctor deputy. The three men stood poised, ready to apprehend the dangerous trio. Instead, to their profound shock, a searing jolt of blue light shot up from street level into the heavens. They frantically covered their eyes and blinked rapidly, certain that the brilliant and inexplicable light beam had blinded them.

Then the darkness of night returned, and after a few blinks, mercifully, their vision returned also.

When Jubert recovered from his shock, he cursed the name of Laurentian and left his two subordinates standing at this corner. It seemed they were heading west, so he could at least track their progress and be ready at the next manhole, should they decide to emerge then.

Reflecting on his foul mood, the constables agreed they hoped he stood a little closer to the next beam of light shooting from the ground.

The beam of blue light vanished as abruptly as it had appeared. Silence returned to the chamber beneath Paris. While it was glowing, they could see straight up to the sky—straight into space. Now that it had darkened, there was only the oppressive roof of the catacombs.

For several seconds, no one moved. The Doctor stared at the open pillar, hands on his hips, transfixed. His expression was pensive, in the dark way that suggested several galaxies' worth of unpleasant possibilities. "Yes," he said finally. "That's about the size of it."

Lupin circled the device slowly. It sat inside the pillar like a sleeping animal—smooth, metallic, and utterly alien in its design. No visible switches. No seams. No obvious mechanism. "How curious."

"Dangerous," the Doctor corrected.

Lupin crouched beside it. "You said it is a signal. I assume that rather gaudy light show was the means by which it has been sent. To whom?"

The Doctor rubbed his face. “That,” he said, “is the question that tends to ruin evenings.”
Maggie folded her arms. “Doctor.”

“Yes?”

“Please tell me Paris isn’t about to get invaded?”

He considered that carefully. “No ... nothing so straightforward.”

Maggie and Lupin exchanged foreboding glances. “Doctor,” the cracksman said with an edge of panic. “Despite my sophisticated façade, I’m a simple man. This time travel and alien totem business ... pray, tell me simply, what does it all mean?”

“A dimensional disturbance from long ago, and if your little bauble gets its way, it’s going to suck Paris into it.”

The device inside the pillar emitted a soft click.

All three of them froze.

A faint mechanical hum began. Panels shifted along the machine’s surface. Lights blinked into existence.

The Doctor muttered something under his breath that Maggie suspected was not flattering in any language.

The machine projected a faint holographic pattern into the air. Not symbols like the crystal had produced.

This was a map. A map of Paris as it was, then it expanded outward to show the whole of the planet Earth. Then from this point, lines of light spread outward beyond the solar system. Other distant planets linked up in unison.

Lupin tilted his head. “Other vaults?” he guessed.

“Exactly.” The Doctor stood. “Other parts of the universe where the dividing membrane is weak.”

“Like the place you left Xyosis!” Maggie realised. “There’s some connection there, isn’t there?”

“Oh yes, Eosis. Yes, very probably. I’d noticed that too.” He remembered Caesar’s recollection, and gave voice to the disquieting theory he had been turning over in his head. “Something ... some beings ... must have predated Event One, the Big Bang as you call it, and survived into the creation of our universe. And I thought Fenric was the only remnant of that primal chaos. I can imagine them floating through the new matter, their influence diminishing as new laws of physics and new limitations on their physical forms took hold ... whoever they are, they want to bring things back to the way they used to be.” He looked at them, eyes wide with hope that they might confirm his increasingly mad speculations. “Only because of our glowing chum in Lupin’s satchel helping us on our way do we stand a chance of stopping them.”

Maggie and Lupin merely nodded.

“And how did things used to be?” Lupin asked.

“It’s a matter of intense speculation but no hard answers. No time. No matter. Nothing ... so few frames of reference. Caesar could only interpret it as infinite chaos, what humans might perceive as ...” He shrugged. “Hell.”

“Worse than that horrible English city, Birmingham?” Lupin asked with palpable dread in his voice. “And I have released this perdition upon Paris?”

“It was looking for someone for ages. Perhaps the descendants of the high priests of the Parisii had some understanding of the danger and kept it hidden, and only the city’s extensive renovations lost it, only to land it in the hands of the Louvre officials.”

The Doctor looked at the machine. “Against someone like me finding them.”

Maggie blinked. “Wait—what?”

The Doctor stepped closer to the device. “And now that this has sent out its signal, we must assume that signal has been received, and its recipient may act upon it.”

For the first time since they’d met him, Arsène Lupin looked genuinely serious. “Then we must close it. For good and all.”

The Doctor glanced at him. Considering the power of such a being, the age, and the wanton destruction it would unthinkingly wreak, he was inclined to expect the worst. Not wanting to further alarm his companions, he said with carefully considered understatement: “That might not be possible.”

“Pah! Everything is possible,” Lupin said calmly. “You have been able to interpret these arcane writings, and reduce the hidden voice of the universe to a mere puzzle. By doing so, we already have the possibility of solving that. That is worth everything.”

The Doctor smiled faintly. “You’re dangerously optimistic for a criminal.”

“And you’re dangerously pessimistic for a magician.”

Maggie looked between them. “Okay, you two need to stop flirting with the apocalypse and figure something out.”

The Doctor examined the machine again. “It’s a system. There’s a logic behind it. It may be unfathomably ancient and not bound by the physical laws of our reality, but it can be understood with time.”

Suddenly the violet crystal floated free from the pillar again. It hovered in the air between them. The violet glow intensified.

The crystal rotated slowly. Then it projected a second set of symbols into the air. These were sharper. More complex.

Lupin stepped closer. “What does it say?”

The Doctor stared at the symbols. Then he laughed softly. “I think I’m beginning to understand.”

“What?” Lupin asked.

“It’s providing instructions.”

Maggie stared. “For what?”

The Doctor looked at Lupin. “For stealing it.”

Lupin’s grin widened slowly. “Well,” he said. “That seems appropriate.”

Above them, far beyond the catacombs, beyond the clouds and the dark of space...

Something ancient slowly changed its course. Many had charted the massive rock-like body as it listlessly gamboled through deep space. Some charted its progress and from its presence intuited great disasters or good fortune. Others speculated it was some long-defunct spacecraft, despite having no internal workings nor any method of propulsion.

It had been so inert—almost since the misty dawn of creation itself—that no one could have guessed its true nature.

This massive structure, which looked from afar like a dense but somehow malign collection of solid rock with one particularly angry promontory at its peak, was no structure at all. It had once been a being. And in the centre of that density, a mind still lurked, though the wisdom it held was from another age, another dimension, another reality entirely.

For so long it had drifted, purposeless, barely alive. Now it remembered why it was here. It would fulfil its great objective. It would render order—*real* order, the order it remembered from its real life—to this chaos of modern existence.

Now it was heading toward Earth.

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE PERFECT CRIME

The crystal hovered in midair, glowing a steady violet, casting long, trembling shadows along the catacomb walls. Its lattice of alien symbols rotated slowly, as if savoring the attention it had drawn.

The Doctor frowned, hands tucked behind his back, staring at the projections.

“Oh,” he murmured, “this is clever. Really clever.”

Lupin circled the crystal like a predator admiring a new puzzle, his expression calm, composed, faintly amused.

“You understand it?” he asked.

“Bits of it,” the Doctor admitted. “And that makes it both predictable—and dangerous.”

Lupin tilted his head. “Predictable?”

“Yes. The system is designed with a hierarchy of responses. The moment it detects unauthorised access, it sends instructions—almost like a puzzle box with built-in consequences.”

“Instructions?” Lupin raised an eyebrow. “For whom?”

“Whoever holds the lock,” the Doctor said. “That would be... you, my friend.”

Lupin’s grin widened. “Excellent. Then I suppose I should feel flattered.”

Maggie scowled. “You two are gleefully ignoring the fact that some alien signal just went airborne and could call something down on Paris.”

The Doctor sighed. “Not immediately dangerous. But potentially catastrophic if the network finishes its sequence.”

“And exactly how long do we have before this catastrophe?” Maggie asked, arms crossed tightly.

“Six years,” said the Doctor, watching the crystal’s pulsing light.

Lupin clapped his hands together lightly. “Oh, to have six years to pull off the perfect heist. A most immodest window, ideal for the perfect crime.”

Maggie’s eyes went wide. “*The perfect crime?* Are you serious?!”

“Quite,” said Lupin. “Stealing a signal from the stars? Charming, really.”

The Doctor gestured at the floating crystal. “The network assumes the vault was accessed legitimately. Once it’s engaged, the system begins a countdown to activation.”

“Countdown to...?” Maggie prompted.

“To whatever the designers intended this signal to trigger,” said the Doctor. “The original owners, presumably.” His eyes widened as he considered. “To think, they could still be out there ... infinitely old, having survived from the transition from one whole universe to another ... a people I’ve not met, a people so old they make the Time Lords look like ... a bunch of toddlers.”

“And if it reaches them? These ‘original owners’?” Maggie pressed.

The Doctor’s face darkened slightly. “Then we have a problem big enough to ruin Paris at least—probably Earth, if they’re not careful.”

Lupin’s eyes sparkled. “Which, naturally, means we must intercept it.”

Maggie’s jaw dropped. “Intercept it?! Are you both insane?”

“Not insane,” the Doctor corrected. “Clever.”

“And morally flexible,” Lupin added with a sly smile.

Maggie groaned. “Great. So I’m surrounded by lunatics.”

“No, no,” corrected Lupin. “I thought the Doctor might be a lunatic, but I dismissed the possibility.”

The Doctor studied the symbols hovering in mid-air before them, dancing across the crystal. “These projections aren’t just ornamental—they’re instructions for transferring the signal back into the lock itself.”

“Ah,” said Lupin, stepping closer, “so it *teaches* us how to steal it.”

“Exactly,” the Doctor said, a glint of admiration in his eyes. “A vault that tells you how to rob it. Ingenious.”

“And risky,” Maggie added, frowning. “Because if we screw it up...”

The Doctor shrugged. “We’re running a risk. But someone has to do it.”

Lupin gestured toward the crystal with a graceful hand. “Then it is agreed. We will execute a theft the stars themselves may remember.”

Maggie folded her arms. “Or die trying.”

“Oh, come now,” Lupin said lightly, “I do enjoy the dramatic flair.”

The Doctor shook his head, half-exasperated, half-amused. “If anyone can do this, it’s him,” he said, seizing Lupin in an impromptu hug which the Frenchman was only too glad to accept. “He’s audacious, brilliant, and absolutely fearless.”

Maggie shot him a look. “I’m not so sure ‘fearless’ is a good thing right now.”

Lupin smiled at her. “Fear is for the cautious. We’re in Paris. And tonight, we steal the stars.”

The crystal pulsed again, brighter, almost impatiently.

“Right,” said the Doctor. “Let’s see if we can get this signal back before someone—or something—arrives to collect it.”

As they had gone deeper, Maggie had to admit that twinge of fear rose up in her chest. She still had not made it back to Revelstoke to check out that little heart murmur. Would it fail her at a critical moment as they descended deeper? It was like all medical terrors—you ignored it, and you thought it might have ‘gone away on its own’, and then there it was, rearing its head at the worst possible moment. And in all that time, she still hadn’t told the Doctor! And now, it seemed foolish to have gone so far, survived so much, only to bow out!

She looked up to the sky. She could walk away, she could let the Doctor handle this on his own ...

But she remembered those other times she had gone back to her life. The worry that consumed her; the fear that he would be out there, and would face something he needed her help on, and that she wouldn’t be there ...

But how long could she go on? Was she committed to the Doctor until *she* died?

“Maggie?” he asked, snapping his fingers. “Something on your mind?”

Maggie sighed and muttered, “I’m too old for this.”

“Not a bit of it, my dear. Call me in nine hundred years.”

Lupin shook his head, extending a hand to Maggie. “Not true, Madame. There’s no age for adventure. Only opportunity.”

Maggie hesitated. Then reluctantly took it. “Fine. But if we die, I’m holding both of you responsible.”

The Doctor grinned. “Noted.”

The three of them moved deeper to the heart of the catacombs. Maggie remembered Poirier’s lecture, and could only imagine how creepy it was for the workmen to have delivered these quantities of bones to this depth. As lonely as it was in this pit, she did feel the spirits of the dead among them, irrational though it was. Shadows danced on the walls, and the violet hum grew louder, like the station itself was watching them carefully.

“Remember,” the Doctor said as they approached the first checkpoint, “the network responds to intent as much as action. It’s almost like a dance. Precision is everything.”

Lupin tapped his fingers against his chin. “Precision and flair. The perfect combination for a heist.”

Maggie muttered, “Somehow, I have this sinking feeling we’re about to become cosmic burglars.”

“Surely you remember that Stardust Shower affair on Stellaria? Back when I was newly regenerated?² Don’t kid yourself, Mags—you’re one of the best burglars in the cosmos.”

“At least then I knew what I was stealing.”

“Don’t sell yourself short. It’s all the same skillset.” He glanced over at Lupin. “You could learn a thing or two from her.”

“That . . . I do not doubt for a moment. Ladies always make the best thieves, particularly when they are toying with a man’s affection.”

The crystal pulsed again, brighter than ever.

And the most dangerous and most delightful game of wits in all of Paris—was about to begin in earnest.

² See *The Doctor Who Project* Season 43: *The Stardust Shower Affair*.

CHAPTER EIGHT: A THIEF'S STRATEGY

The tunnel stretched ahead like a mouth waiting to swallow them, but for once, Maggie felt less fear than exasperation. She adjusted her lantern to illuminate the alien symbols projected by the crystal.

“This challenge is worthy indeed,” Lupin said, glancing at the pulsating crystal.

The Doctor crouched over the crystal, studying the new symbols. “These instructions are surprisingly... polite.”

“Polite?” Maggie repeated, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes,” the Doctor said. “It’s been so good about helping us. It must really not want its creators to show up any more than we do.”

“Then why did it summon them?” Maggie snapped.

The Doctor looked down at the violet lit with pity. “Well, that is its function. It is an artificial construct. Look at what it’s doing now. It doesn’t bark orders. It suggests solutions. Step by step.”

Lupin leaned closer, inspecting the pattern with seasoned curiosity. “A puzzle. Very well. Then let us see which parts of the puzzle I might solve... and which parts your particular genius requires.”

Maggie groaned. “Please tell me there’s a part of the puzzle that doesn’t involve us accidentally signalling something horrible to the sky.”

“Remember Maggie, we already *did* signal something horrible,” the Doctor said sadly. “All we can do now is solve this puzzle and hopefully send it back on its way.”

Lupin was busy solving the pattern of the symbols. He had taken to it with eerie precision, and now moved to the far side of the chamber and crouched, tracing an imaginary line along the pattern the crystal projected. “First, we need to convince the network we are authorities. That is my forte, I think you’ll agree.”

The Doctor’s eyebrows went up.

Lupin smiled faintly. “How many times have I strolled into the grandest places and emerged with their prized possessions? What has granted me that permission? What has given me that authority? Audacity. Confidence. And a certain elegance in one’s theft. The network responds to cleverness more than credentials.”

Maggie pinched the bridge of her nose. “So basically, you want us to *act like geniuses* while stealing an alien signal. Easy.”

They moved closer to the first checkpoint indicated by the crystal. Thin threads of violet light stretched along the walls, forming a path through the catacombs.

Lupin examined the threads. “They respond to thought,” he said. “To intent.”

The Doctor frowned. “The network is sensitive. It can detect hesitation, uncertainty, even curiosity if it’s... misaligned.”

Maggie muttered under her breath, “Perfect. So if I’m nervous or accidentally trip over a skeleton, we all die.”

“Exactly,” Lupin said cheerfully.

The Doctor tugged at the collar of his sweater. “Precision, flair, audacity... yes, this will work. We’re lucky we have the great Arsène Lupin at our side. Who else could override the ancient workings of a dimensional rift purely through strength of personality?”

Maggie groaned. “Somehow, I don’t feel reassured.”

Lupin’s eyes sparkled. “Oh, Madame, consider yourself fortunate to be present for so *exquisite* an opportunity. To witness the great Arsène Lupin testing all of his gifts. A theft of this magnitude, after all, must have beauty in its execution.”

The violet light narrowed into a straight line. The trio saw that this was guiding them, to a lower level: the level where this test whose components Maggie could not begin to comprehend would become apparent.

The Doctor moved closer to the projected path. “The network is adaptive. If it senses our intent is off, it will reroute. Which means we must act in perfect harmony. One wrong move ...”

“I get the idea, Doctor. There are times when one does not need to be reminded of the stakes.” Lupin leaned closer, lowering his voice. “Even so, it is better than attending a ballroom dance with the police.” He winked at Maggie. “*That* I happen to know from experience.”

CHAPTER NINE: LABYRINTH BENEATH THE CATACOMBS

At this depth, the tunnels beneath Paris seemed almost alive as the trio advanced. Maggie again thought of the words of Bertrand Poirier. She expected it to be cold, but it seemed instead to be getting hotter. And though it was empty, she did not feel alone. This far down, she felt what the Louvre director had said, the kinship with the ancient spirits that underpinned the gay metropolis they had walked about in above ground. Down here, shadows twisted around them, thrown by the violet glow of the crystal hovering in front of Lupin.

She hoped it was her imagination that the familiar stone appeared to be giving way to something muddier and more elemental. She mentioned this fear to the Doctor, wondering if this was the infernal landscape Julius Caesar had seen in his brief telepathic contact with whatever it was.

“Almost certainly,” he agreed. “And it’s equally certain that the barrier between our cosy little universe and that realm is growing thinner the longer this device is toying with us.”

The hum had grown louder, as if the alien device were holding its breath, waiting for them to act.

They reached a low archway crisscrossed with threads of violet light projected by the crystal. The Doctor crouched to study the intricate network pattern. It quivered as they stood watching it.

Maggie felt as if eyes were upon her, peering into her thoughts. She summoned calm, but still felt on the verge of losing her nerve. Again she looked up, now keenly aware that they seemed to have fallen far lower even than the catacombs—that maybe they were so far in the depths that they were no longer, in any real sense, even in Paris anymore.

“It’s judging every motion, every intent, every hesitation. If we falter, the signal reroutes. We have one shot.” The Doctor gestured toward the criss-crossing violet strands of light floating in their path. “You must move through the archway deliberately.”

Lupin shrugged. “Deliberate is my specialty. Flair is optional.” And with that he flipped through a narrowing gap between the violet strands, the tip of his shoes brushing dangerously against the beam.

The crystal shifted, projecting a faint holographic overlay of the tunnel around them. Lines of violet ran along the walls, floor, and ceiling. The Doctor traced a finger along one path.

“This thread corresponds to... thought patterns,” he murmured. “The network senses our decisions as if it can read our minds.”

Lupin arched an eyebrow as he looked at the path beyond. It was the narrowest of ledges, mere inches. It barely needed spelling out what lay in the inky depths on the other side of that ledge. “Perfect. A game of intellect then, as much as dexterity. I like it.”

He skipped across the ledge as if playing hopscotch. From the far side, he looked back at the Doctor and Maggie superciliously.

“Remember, thought is at the heart of your actions. Move with intention, move with purpose, and you will reach your destination.”

The Doctor skipped across the violet-illuminated ledge as well.

Maggie looked across the narrow ledge, and suddenly a serenity overcame her. She understood what the Doctor meant. Guilelessly, without thought, she jumped onto the path and with another hop, she had gotten to the other side. Her belief in that moment that she could do it had helped her to actually do it.

“That’s how it’s using our thought patterns as physical steps to getting through this, right? Not overthinking, just balancing the instinct with the action.”

The Doctor’s lips twitched in amusement. “Indeed. Balance is a crucial element in theft. And survival.”

Lupin stepped forward, the crystal leading the way. The threads on the far side pointed the way farther down, reacting instantly to the presence of both Lupin and the jewel he had stolen by brightening and pulsating in harmony.

Maggie noticed the Doctor’s sharp glance. “He’s not doing anything, and yet all this is chiming along with him, lighting the way for him. He’s making it easier for us. As if his presence is all it needs.”

“Not something—everything,” the Doctor said. “The network recognises his sangfroid, his willingness to play for keeps. Lupin’s naturally confident. He never shies away from a challenge. It is a kindred spirit. He’s... readable, but in the right way.”

Maggie muttered, “Well, as long as it stays user-friendly, I’m game.”

The Doctor looked at his two friends dubiously. “We can’t count on that, I’m afraid.”

Step by step, Lupin advanced along the violet thread, his movements precise, elegant, and perfectly timed with the crystal’s pulse. Each gesture projected confidence, and each step allowed the network to accept his intent as legitimate.

Maggie followed, keeping close, guiding her thoughts to appear neutral, neither anxious nor cautious. She thought so heavily of her breathing, she had not even thought of her heart for some time. In a certain truly perverse way, the constant tension was creating balance and harmony within her. The Doctor moved beside her, muttering calculations under his breath, occasionally touching the crystal with one finger to subtly adjust the projected instructions. His presence remained calming, and from time to time she reached out and squeezed his hand to give her that boost to keep on going.

“Stop,” the Doctor whispered suddenly.

Lupin froze mid-step. Maggie almost tripped over her own feet. The crystal glowed brighter, almost indignantly.

“What?” Lupin asked.

“There’s an adaptive countermeasure here,” the Doctor said. “The network is testing for improvisation. If you continue exactly as instructed, it will notice that the intent is artificially compliant. You must introduce a tiny deviation.”

Lupin's grin widened. "Ah, improvisation. My favourite part."

"Tiny," the Doctor emphasised. "Not *dramatic flair* tiny."

Lupin smirked. "Naturally."

He leaned slightly to the left, brushing the thread at just the right angle. The violet pulse blinked in recognition, then stabilised.

They reached the central chamber of the checkpoint, a wider space with a faint hum emanating from the walls. The crystal hovered at the centre, the threads radiating outward. The Doctor crouched and whispered to Maggie: "Now comes the tricky part. The transfer. If I understand it correctly, as we pass through this the network cannot detect our movement. It must believe the system is still humming away as usual."

"And if we fail?" Maggie asked.

"Then the recipient of that signal may drop by to do some unpleasant renovations on Paris," the Doctor said dryly.

Lupin stepped forward. "Permit me. It is all very clear to me, the movements I must undertake. As if they are pictures in my mind. Oh, to meet a safe that could yield to me so easily!" He drew a small, precise motion in the air with one hand. The threads pulsed and bent to match him. Violet lines converged on the crystal as if recognising its master. Maggie held her breath. The hum grew louder, almost musical now, like the station itself had leaned in to watch.

Lupin exhaled and bowed slightly, satisfied with himself. "I did it. Precision, flair, audacity. It guided me to harness those talents for myself."

Maggie was relieved. "I can't believe we made it this far."

The Doctor smiled. "Next comes the transfer. And it's going to be trickier."

The crystal pulsed again, as if impatient. Its glow filled the chamber once again with violet light, beckoning them onward.

The great entity who received the signal drifted nearer to Earth, its ancient intelligence piqued. It felt the progress of the beings, wise beyond their pitiful evolution, muddling their way through, taking care to preserve the barrier between the dimensions, between this state of reality and the one that had vanished in that wretched expansion. They had been fortunate so far, but it was getting closer all the time, and it longed to shatter the barrier. Soon, creation would restore to the natural order. Soon, it would return to its natural control.

CHAPTER TEN: THE ENEMY PLOTS

Through the depthless vacuum of space, a body drifted. It was so large it could bound from planet to planet as if jumping across hills. From a distance, this body would have looked more like a ship, but for the glow beaming out through its vast, oversized dome of a head.

The glow was violet.

It saw that three insignificant beings were aiming to imprison it in this senseless realm forever. This it could not abide. Worse still, the system it had put in place was *aiding* the thieves, allowing them to keep its defences intact. Why, if they reached the end of the maze at their present rate of progress, this being would never get another chance to restore the universal equilibrium to its former state, never live once again like a free being rather than imprisoned and caged in this reality!

It peered into the underground maze, saw the levels and the tricks its opponents were overcoming. Why, somehow the trio were managing it with ease!

No, the being reminded itself. Not a trio ... a quartet. That wretched, treacherous object in their possession was making it easy for them.

There was nothing else for it. The large body projected its own mind to this still-distant world. There was a kind of balance in the entity's mind ... though tipping the scales to ensure victory was unfair, but necessary.

The chamber beneath Paris seemed to hold its breath.

Maggie wiped sweat from her brow, leaning against the damp stone wall.

Lupin grinned, the crystal floating obediently in his satchel.

The Doctor tugged his Aran sweater back into place and crouched beside her, fingers tracing invisible lines in the air as if reading the network's intent. He was coming slowly to understand the workings of this system, even though they did appear contrary to every logical working he had ever encountered. Ruefully, he had to admit that Lupin was a perfect complement to their actions here: for that instinctive grasp of the rhythm, the timing, and the cracksman's natural penchant for the unexpected counted for a lot more than his usual intellectual approach.

When he explained as much, Lupin nodded. “It is almost like we are playing poker with the universe, eh?”

The violet threads of the crystal shifted, reacting to their movements. The network was watching, evaluating, predicting. Any hesitation would be punished.

“If so,” Maggie noted. “I have a feeling the universe is tipping the deck.”

The Doctor whispered, “The network responds to both action and perception. It detects intent and hesitates at uncertainty. That’s where we must be perfect.”

Lupin leaned closer to Maggie, his grin mischievous. “Madame, this is where you shine.”

“Me?!” Maggie squeaked.

“You are the anchor,” Lupin said smoothly. “You must keep us all calm and collected, and steer us from the outrageous.”

The Doctor’s expression didn’t deny it.

Maggie pinched the bridge of her nose. “Fantastic. All the while, I’m having kittens.”

The crystal pulsed faster, its threads quivering like a living thing. The Doctor leaned closer to the projection. They took one large step, moving in perfect synchrony.

Lupin’s movements were deliberate, precise, but with enough improvisation to satisfy the alien network’s pattern recognition. The Doctor had to copy those moves exactly, adjusting angles and pressure points in real time. Maggie paced after them, not thinking of her movements at all, instead singularly preoccupied with keeping her thoughts calm, projecting confidence.

She felt her heart hammering in her chest. Was this it? Would this be the moment she would bite off more than she could chew?

Relax, Maggie. She breathed in, counted to four, then breathed out.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: THE ESCAPE

The crystal pulsed quietly in Lupin's satchel as the trio navigated the twisting corridors beneath Paris. Every echo of their footsteps sounded louder than it should have, bouncing off the moldering stone like whispers from a hidden audience. Maggie was certain she smelled some burning smoke, just as when her eyes turned, she was certain the stonework around her was alight with licking flames. It had to be her imagination, didn't it?

Looking up and imagining the brilliant city in the small hours of the night that felt so far away, Maggie declared, "I swear, the moment we step into sunlight again, I'm buying a helmet. Something heavy. Maybe padded."

The Doctor ran his hands along the walls carefully. "You'll be able to buy that helmet sooner than you think. There's a subtle rhythm to these corridors. Pressure plates disguised as floor patterns, magnetic triggers along the side panels, motion detectors tuned to weight distribution... all very clever."

They emerged into a wider chamber, the faint moonlight from above filtering through cracks in the ancient stone. The Doctor pointed toward a narrow staircase spiralling upward.

"Final stage of the escape," he said, arm outstretched. "Past here, it's all gravy. Why don't you go first, Maggie?"

She tiptoed up the spiral steps, looking back to see the Doctor paces behind. At the top, she pushed on the narrow door ... and did not believe it.

The Doctor stepped out, and then Lupin, whose grin widened. "Rooftops! I love Paris at night." The thief pulled the turnip watch from his brocade waistcoat and checked the time. "Well, nearly morning I should say."

The cool Parisian night air hit their faces, and the city stretched out beneath them, quiet, unaware of the cosmic-scale threat, and the heist that had just averted it.

The violet threads and the unreadable arcane symbols had disappeared from the air around them. Inside Lupin's satchel, the object's queasy violet light had gone dim. It was not even humming anymore. It looked dull and ordinary, just as Paris reported it in their sniffing accounts of Lupin's master-theft.

"I don't believe it!" cried Maggie as she took in the city's panorama. "I *don't* believe it! I thought we were miles underground."

"The crystal at work again. You think you're confused," the Doctor replied, his eyes twinkling in the night. "Imagine being those poor fellows."

He pointed down to the street, where caped constables and Inspector Laurentian stood expectantly. For all the miles and Maggie's aching legs, they had ended up right where they began.

"That must be some dimensional jiggery-pokery, yes?"

"Top of the class, Maggie. From what little we have intuited, their whole notion of structure is fundamentally different from the guiding principles of our universe ... the odd dimensional fold is a doddle. I'd imagine it could have opened a doorway through the solid stone walls of the catacombs and let us walk across Paris if it had been so minded."

"So we could have skipped the rats?" Maggie made sure to shoot the pesky crystal a scowl.

"Doctor," Lupin said, "it occurs to me... we've worked together like this for a few hours, and yet I cannot tell if you are a genius or merely extraordinarily lucky."

The Doctor tilted his head, eyes twinkling. "A bit of both."

“Ha! A mystery! Delightful! And as for the delightful Maggie Weitz ...” Lupin bowed slightly to her. L

Maggie waved away the grandeur. “Get out of town! What did I do?”

“Pff! What did you do? Everything, Madame! Without your poise, without your reserve and your sangfroid, the network would have detected us instantly. Consider yourself the linchpin of tonight’s adventure.”

Maggie pinched the bridge of her nose. “I don’t *ever* want to be a linchpin again.”

The three of them disappeared into the shadows of the city, which had never felt more alive, more dangerous, or more deliciously, perfectly Parisian.

CHAPTER TWELVE: NOT OUT OF THE WOODS YET

The first light of dawn crept across the Paris rooftops, brushing the city in gold. Below them, the streets were quiet, the heist complete, and the crystal—still safely in Lupin’s satchel—rested like a sleeping jewel.

Police officers still stood watch over the various exits from the catacombs. Laurentian was yawning and rubbing his eyes as they crept along the alley.

Maggie looked at the poor policeman. “You know, I feel like a bit of a heel to leave him and those police there ... but I’d rather not go to jail.”

“Indeed, Madame. Let us continue on our way.”

Maggie felt a kink in her neck and rolled her head around to knead it out. “I feel like my bones are permanently crooked. And I think I need at least a week of normal breathing.”

Lupin grinned. “Nonsense. You will be back fighting fit in no time at all.”

“At my age?”

“At *any* age,” the cracksman answered with infuriating certainty. “One recovers quickly when one has survived the *perfect crime* in Paris.”

“I don’t care if it’s perfect,” Maggie muttered, “I want coffee. Or maybe a stiff drink.”

“I’m sure Lupin has some five-star Napoleon brandy knocking about ...” the Doctor chuckled, shaking his coat free from the dust of the catacombs. “I think coffee is the best idea.”

They made their way down to a quieter street, the city stirring around them. Carriages rattled, market stalls were being set up, and early risers crossed the bridges over the Seine. They paused at a small café, and the Doctor gestured toward the entrance. “Coffee. Now. You earned it.”

Maggie’s eyes lit up. “Finally, someone speaks my language. I need normalcy. For at least one hour.”

They took a quiet corner, the early patrons blustering and busy and frankly a little rude, all unaware of the debt they owed these three. Before long, three cups of the delicious aromatic brew were placed before them.

The Doctor pulled the crystal from Lupin’s satchel and weighed it in his hand. “I don’t suppose you’d let me take this back to the TARDIS to run some scans on? As far as I know even the Time Lords never collected any definite matter from before Event One.”

“Tch!” scoffed the master-criminal. “I’ve had many a partner try that fast one on me.”

“Shame. It might get me back in with my people. Publishing the odd paper in a peer-reviewed journal would make up for my reckless lifestyle ...” He paused, his eyes lost in its depths. Even though it was totally still and silent, the Doctor’s expression clouded with uncertainty.

“Something’s... odd,” he murmured.

Lupin’s brow arched. “Ah. A challenge emerging from victory. Delightful! Victory without a hint of risk is hardly victory at all. A puzzle, Doctor?”

The Doctor rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Then he shook his head. “No, no, probably nothing. We’ll have to keep an eye out for that signal it sent, but I think the worst is over. You two enjoy yourselves.”

“That invitation you need not extend twice,” Lupin laughed as he rose, downing the dregs of his coffee and humming in satisfaction.

“I was hoping for breakfast and maybe a nap,” Maggie said wistfully.

It was now two hours later, and the Doctor had left his human friends asleep in the grand apartment on Rue Crevaux. Maggie was particularly out like a light, snoring so loudly he had to shut the guest room door. And even Lupin had succumbed to a few hours of shut-eye.

Now, alone, the Time Lord could fully interrogate his fears. He was content to leave the bibelot with Lupin. Not only did he admire the thief too much to double-cross him in such a sneaky manner, he wasn’t entirely sure the object’s presence on Earth was part of the universal equilibrium it was maintaining. He certainly wouldn’t like to pop off just now, only to return to find Paris sucked into the pits of pre-Big Bang pandemonium.

He had written them a quick note summarising his worries, and descended the back way out of Lupin’s building. This was wise, as a sideways glance confirmed that Inspector Laurentian, looking even more exhausted than Maggie, was approaching the front door of ‘Jean Dupont’. He was sure neither Maggie nor Lupin would even hear the dogged policeman’s knocks.

For a time the Doctor was content to stroll through the hubbub of Paris in its early twentieth-century splendour. It was so fragile, in hindsight ... it had hardly been any time since the upheavals of the Second Empire, and only a few short years until this present jolly stasis would be cruelly burst by the Great War, then worldwide Depression, and occupation by the Nazis ... the *esprit d’escalier* of Arsène Lupin felt a long way from that cold wind of the future.

He felt another cold wind, from beings of the past, beings who should never have survived into this universe. He rounded a corner and saw, right where he left it under that bridge on the banks of the Seine, the TARDIS.

“Do you feel it too, old girl?” he asked her as he turned the lock of its narrow blue door and stepped inside.

Inside the ship’s cavernous control room, the Doctor got his answer. And it filled him with terror.

One of the walls was bulging, as a vast face strained its roundels like it was squeezing cellophane. There was no likeness—it was more like looking at an intelligent mountain. Intelligent, because a glow emanated from within, looking out like a malevolent eye.

The glow was—what else?—a sickly violet. In its gaze, he felt more exposed, more pitiful, than he had for a long while.

The Doctor felt sickened at the sight. To have such a monstrosity peering in at him, through his home, felt like a breach, a violation. Even his innate scientific curiosity, though unquenchably eager to ponder the nature of this being and its experiences and knowledge, was outweighed by his fear. This was the granddaddy of all things eldritch, an impossibly distant ancestor beside whom even the most prehistoric nightmares he had faced—Scaroth, Light, Sutekh, Malak—would seem like children.

He did his best to do what he had exhorted Maggie throughout their recent excursion—to remain calm.

“What’s a nice pre-universal entity like you doing in a place like this?” he joked, weakly.

Maggie woke and stretched, satisfied from the pleasant depths of a deep sleep. She felt so much better than she had when looked down on the waking metropolis from that rooftop—but the odd details of the dream she had vaguely unsettled her. Maggie dreamt she was scaling a terrifying mountain, and it was laughing at her while her hands and feet slipped over its rocky outcroppings.

She looked outside to see a late afternoon in Paris. Sad though she was to miss the full glory of an Edwardian afternoon—perhaps to see a real-life *Pictures at an Exhibition*—a life of time travel and its (to put it mildly) odd hours had made her accustomed to seizing rest when she could, and enjoying evening and night as much as morning and afternoon. Every millisecond could count, in the Doctor’s company.

She rose and dressed, stepping out to find Arsène Lupin in the midst of beating eggs in the kitchen. Even performing this domestic task, he was dressed up—wearing a bright red bow tie and matching waistcoat; his only concession to practicality was wearing an apron over his costume. “I shall make you an omelette that will be an ode to breakfast!” he promised.

“I don’t doubt it. Say, where’s the Doctor?”

“He left a note. I was happy he did not pilfer my prize. I believe Laurentian and his plodders called while we were away, but even if they searched this place from top to bottom they would not find my hiding place. I’ll give you a hint ...”

Maggie listened to little of Lupin’s self-congratulatory monologue. As he continued whipping the eggs, she had read the Doctor’s note. Suddenly she thought of her dream ... a warning perhaps? Had life with the Doctor given her a sixth sense of danger?

She bolted out the door, and Lupin had to put down his delicious culinary creation, throw off his apron and grab his nearest coat, and run after her. There was no way he was missing out on any further twists this escapade would offer.

Maggie could hardly believe it as she raced down the steps to the riverbank. The TARDIS was gone.

She felt the soft, yet strong, hand of Lupin, on her shoulder.

“He was right ...” she whispered. “It wasn’t quite finished.”

“*Au contraire*,” the crowing voice of Inspector Laurentian cried as he snapped a pair of steel cuffs around Maggie and Lupin’s wrists, “it is over. You have both lost.”

Back in 53 B.C.E., Julius Caesar awoke from a bad dream whose details he could not remember. He was left with the horrible feeling that something indescribably dreadful was happening to his dear friend the Doctor.

“Wherever you are, Doctor, I hope you have friends who can do battle in your stead, for if you are in the hands of that which I beheld in Lutetia ...” He shuddered to himself, feeling a small and frail child in an angry world of storms and darkness.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: A TIME LORD FACES AN ETERNAL FOE

If a telescope were pointed to a spot north-northwest of Earth's present position, it would see a little police box with a rocky horror perched on its roof. The TARDIS was listing in a section of space around the middle of Earth's solar system, the ageless ship twisting in agony as its internal dimensions expanded to embrace its intruder. The Doctor's pain and discomfort at the sight of this being was nothing compared to what his venerable vessel felt. For to a machine whose entire purpose was to travel the tides of time, it was an affront and an agony to be face to face (though neither she nor the entity had faces in the proper sense) with something from outside and beyond all its infinite limits.

Within, more of the creature had entered. The console room had expanded to allow it, and the Doctor looked up at the wall of solid and dense and malevolent rock now inside his ship with a mixture of awe and dread. On top of that, it had bombarded his mind with racking agony. It had not been so long since he had his battle with Xyosis, and he now realised this was drawing on some of the same power. Some mysterious connection ... nice to know new mysteries were always out there, waiting to be discovered. He hoped he would live long enough to investigate this particular one. At the moment, he thought through the haze of his suffering, he hoped he would live long enough to have another cup of tea.

But—and this was his only real hope—he sensed from the communion of minds that this entity was weakened, decaying from its presence in this universe. It could not function, it was incompatible.

But, he was certain, it could still do an awful lot of damage if it had a mind to.

Gerard Laurentian had to admit, this victory was a tad anti-climactic.

He stood in the interrogation room, this imposter detective Weitz to his left and Lupin to his right. Lupin looked up at him with imperious condescension, as if his arrest were a terribly

vulgar and illegal move in the civilised game of chess he had been conducting. But Maggie ... she was desolate. She had expected to find something on the Seine, and was so consumed and so lost when it was not there, that she had not even noticed him sneaking up on her and arresting her. And she did not protest, accepting meekly the formalities of her name, taking her fingerprints, and being locked in the holding cell.

“We do, of course, obey the Napoleonic Code, Madame Weitz,” Laurentian informed her. “You are guilty until you are proven innocent. We have, as you know, sent a cable to Scotland Yard. They confirmed you and your doctor deputy as imposters.” He leaned in to her, his eyes pleading. “Why not give up the bibelot? Why not make this easier on yourself? Why throw your lot in with him?” He prodded the empty air between them with his pipe. He was tired of being the plodder. He was tired of fops like Lupin, or careerist opportunists like Jubert, always getting the better of him.

Maggie said nothing. He sighed.

“You are sad because your confederate has made off ... with the jewel?”

“No ...” she said in a near-whisper. “I’m sad because I think he may be in terrible danger, and I’m stuck here.”

Laurentian informed her calmly, “If he is in danger, why not tell us? We might be able to help him?”

She regarded him with cold cynicism. “I bet.”

“Well, I shall leave the pair of you here to cool your heels. When you have something to say, let the guard know, eh? I am a very approachable man, even to those who have betrayed me.”

She did not react, and he had to hope his words stung. He meant them to. She was his only hope of foiling this great theft, of giving the Paris police some scrap of dignity in the face of Lupin’s magnificence, and she sat there sullen.

“And you, Lupin? You know your reputation is a tad tarnished. Paris was not so taken with the bauble you pilfered.”

He shrugged. “Paris is not always right. And I regret to inform you I shall not be here for long.”

Laurentian chuckled as he clanged the door shut.

Inspector Laurentian returned to the desk sergeant, who informed him of the search of Lupin’s apartment. “We found his hiding place with ease ... there were a few items from his previous thefts we recovered. Not all though ...”

“We can deal with all of them later. What of the ... item in the Louvre? I am sure Poirier will be anxious to get it back. Surely you recovered it.”

The sergeant looked downcast. “We could not find it.”

He continued talking, but Laurentian was not listening. He remembered the thief’s well-cut black tailcoat with its yellow silk piping ... wondered why he would wear such a garment in the early afternoon, when it was more suited to the evening?

“You fool Laurentian!” he cried out to himself, pushing past the waiting room in vain as he strained to reach the holding cells.

Lupin desperately hoped Maggie might cheer up to see him open the hidden pocket of his tailcoat and produce from within, the bibelot.

“I think, my dear, we have a chance of solving this forever and rescuing your friend. This ...” He held the object against the cell wall. “... this is calling to me, showing me a way we can get out.”

Violet strands shot out, forming an ‘X’ shape in the cell. The colour solidified into a wall of light, and behind it the drab walls seemed to lift apart like a curtain, to reveal a welcoming street.

Maggie put her hand through the gap the violet light had made, and then her entire head. Sure enough, she felt the warm air of the outdoors, and smelled the petrol and smoke of the heart of the city. They could step through the portal this had made and leave the cell. “Talk about a rabbit out of a hat,” she said to herself in amazement.

It made sense, in a way. She remembered the disorienting tricks they had experienced underground, ending up right where they began, and she remembered the Doctor telling her ‘the odd dimensional fold is a doddle’. Therefore, it made sense—albeit as much sense as the arcane and irrational physics of another universe *could* make sense—that it could cut through distances and fold together separate points in a map. And that a barred cell would be no confinement to such a powerful object.

She looked from the gap the object had carved through the wall back to him, trying to smile. “Where will we go? How will we find the Doctor?”

“You are asking the wrong person, Maggie. Still, our predicament is better solved from outside this dismal cell than within? It must be worth the attempt, no?”

“Yes, of course. After you.”

They were able to walk through them, and the light shut off after they left.

The cell was quite empty as Laurentian returned. The sergeant caught up with him and did nothing to improve his mood by informing him, “Inspector Jubert and Monsieur and Madame Poirier are asking for you, Inspector.”

Laurentian peered through the window to see the Louvre director and wife, looking decidedly perkier than he had that morning, in earnest conversation with his rival. He swallowed and stepped outside.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: THREE AGAINST OBLIVION

Lupin and Maggie found themselves stepping from their cell out into an alley, the Arc de Triomphe visible around the corner. “Well, at least we’re a good half mile away from Laurentian and that police station,” Maggie noted.

Once again, the crystal was shooting strands of violet light. Maggie watched the master-criminal studying the patterns and straining to comprehend them. He had worked well in tandem with the Doctor (and herself, though she scarcely believed it) ... but could he work as well on his own? And not just playing for the same stakes, but with considerably *more* at stake?

The crystal had come to life, pulsing sharply and shooting violet threads outward, tracing intricate patterns across the café floor. Passers-by glanced around, confused, though none could see the subtle alien lights. They merely sensed something amiss, and no doubt any one of them would turn in Lupin the second they recognised them.

“Not good,” Lupin said. “I can sense the mind trying to access it, trying to break down this crystal’s defences.”

“And the Doctor? Do you sense him?”

Lupin gazed into the object, and through it he could see in his eye events taking place a world away. He saw his new friend in a grand high-tech chamber, struggling through horrors stabbing every inch of his body and his mind. “I sense ... deep pain,” he told Maggie. “The depth of it ... Pain beyond our understanding. What kind of barbarian would inflict such cruelty on someone so decent? It is ... uncivilised!”

“What is it doing?”

“It’s testing limits, trying to destabilise our previous manipulations.” Lupin turned away from the violet light, as if in pain. But he produced a franc coin from his pocket. With a wink to Maggie, he twirled the coin into the air and caught it deftly. “But we adapt. Improvise once more. Madame Weitz, let us engage.”

More and more of the creature was appearing inside the TARDIS, and all around she and the Doctor were howling for mercy. But the entity seemed deaf to the pleas of the Time Lord and his

machine. No ... the Doctor realised it knew full well the pain it was causing, and was delighting in it as petulantly and maliciously as a child turning a magnifying glass on an anthill.

“Try all you like, you still need this ant to fully materialise on Earth,” the Doctor informed it, not even sure if it could comprehend anything other than his suffering.

He strained to look across, and to his horror he saw the crystalline column at the centre of the console going up and down.

“Our next stop, I presume?”

The unseeing stone face seemed, if anything, to look upon him smugly.

They moved quickly inside a nearby warehouse, Lupin tracing the crystal’s threads with careful gestures while Maggie mirrored his movements, taking care to add subtle improvisations to mislead the entity trying to gain access to this network. Her heart pounded as she projected calm, steady thoughts, just as she had done the night before in the catacombs, providing the human variable that kept the system blind.

A pulse shot from the crystal, wrapping around them like ribbons of light. Maggie felt a shiver run down her spine.

“Careful,” Lupin murmured. “It’s adaptive. Any hesitation, any misaligned thought...”

“There are a few misaligned thoughts I wouldn’t mind flinging at this piece of shiny junk,” she declared flatly.

Lupin grinned, leaning closer. “A clever opponent.”

Maggie sighed. “I do not *ever* want to play clever opponent again.”

Lupin traced a precise arc along the crystal’s projection, as he had seen the Doctor do. “Maggie, you must follow my lead exactly.”

“And then what?”

“Then... we introduce a controlled improvisation. Our foe cannot anticipate *both* simultaneously. Ready?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

Lupin smirked. “Delightful. Then let us dance with light and logic, my dear, vivacious, brave friend.”

Maggie flashed the criminal a wry scowl—he always picked the wrong time to flirt. The violet threads twisted, bending around them like water. They were no longer in the empty warehouse, the matter around them was reshaping ... an inferno was replacing it, the chaos that preceded the Big Bang ... could they survive even a moment in that cacophony?

A pulse surged, stronger this time, testing the limits of their control. Maggie felt the energy brush against her thoughts like invisible fingers, probing.

Maggie exhaled slowly, projecting calm, letting her mind become a steady anchor. Lupin’s gestures flowed in perfect improvisation, audacious yet precise.

The pulse subsided. The threads stilled.

Maggie sighed in relief. “Well done, Arsène.”

Lupin’s grin widened. “What a pleasure that was. The perfect duel. And we are very nearly matched.”

Maggie groaned. “I’m matched against madness and genius, and I still get no say.”

They stepped out on to a rooftop overlooking the Seine.

Below, afternoon was yielding to Paris's favourite time, the night. In the later and lazier light, the city sparkled peacefully.

But then, that tranquillity was broken, suddenly and horribly. A grotesque rending sound filled the air. Parisians at street level looked around, covering their ears at the disquiet. Nobody had ever heard anything like it before.

Beside Maggie, Lupin too was straining to comprehend the cacophony. But she was taking it all in.

She **knew** that sound. But she had not heard it like that before—twisted and straining.

It was the sound of the TARDIS materialising. And the distortion, and the grandiloquent scale, told her at once that whatever had abducted the Doctor, and whatever was against them in their quest, was about to land in Paris.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: THE FINAL GAMBIT

Adapting the TARDIS' infinite internal dimensions to itself, the entity that had for so many aeons drifted randomly through space had shrunk itself down to a more manageable size. As it took on solid form in the streets of Paris, it was no longer the size of a planet—just about the size of the Eiffel Tower.

Many Parisians reacted exactly the way one might expect, to see what amounted to an anthropomorphic mountain resolve into solidity in front of them. They ran every which way, many screaming as they fled. For its part, it looked down at them, and those who looked up saw in the violet glow of its vision the cosmic indifference of so many epochs alone, pining for a long-dead past.

Maggie stared across the rooftop at this intractable and incomprehensible opponent.

Inside the TARDIS, now that the presence of that cancerously malign entity was gone, the Doctor felt his head clear.

“I am sorry, old girl. You have had more than your fair share of ancient invaders.” He staggered across to the console. “After this I’m going to install that old twenty-one tumbler lock that Susan invented again. Keep that riff-raff out.”

He surveyed the scanner, now showing Paris with the ancient invader astride the banks of the Seine. It had used the Ship’s materialisation circuits to restructure itself and appear here in the city. He did not take long to guess where it was headed: wherever Maggie, Lupin, and that crystal happened to be.

The engines of the Ship wailed at the strain, but the Doctor threw every lever and switch he could. They could not delay for one second.

“I know, after all we’ve endured, this is painful for you, old girl,” he coaxed. “I’m rubbed raw too. But we have to try. You and I both know we have to be there to do whatever we can to defeat this...” He trailed off, looking into the central column knowingly. He didn’t know what to call it, exactly. Despite its presence in their thoughts, they had not learned something so simple as

the entity's name or species. And they never would ... it was a particularly agonising torture for the Doctor, who had to admit always yearned for knowledge, to know that he would probably never know, so remote and separate was this from any foe they had encountered before.

The secret to it lay in those symbols, and as he typed in coordinates, the Doctor, who had spent so many uninterrupted hours studying and interpreting the arcane characters the crystal emitted, now traced their patterns in the air. It was a dangerous gambit, and a vain hope ... but if he was right, their only hope now was to give the ancient entity what it wanted.

Lupin jumped in fright to hear that same wheezing, groaning noise. But Maggie recognised this as the more familiar, and more welcome, sound of the usual TARDIS materialisation. Sure enough, to her delight, she turned to see the police box resolve itself into solidity on the rooftop.

Its door swung opened, the creak of the *faux* wood of its chameleon circuit sounding even more rickety than usual. When the Doctor emerged, his coat was off, his fishing sweater hung loose on his gaunt and sickly frame, and his face looked lined with worry and pain.

"We'll need a long holiday after all this," he wheezed.

"We just had one," Maggie reminded him.

"Double it," he suggested.

A mighty trembling filled the air, combined with the scrape and creak of a shape that was not flesh or bone. It was obvious, looking at the still-gigantic but terrifyingly abstract entity, that it was struggling with the world around it. Gravity, the structure of the city, and the disproportion of size between it and the people below looking on in horror, palpably affected it. Its movements were halting and unsteady, and finally it seemed to tire of standing on terra firma altogether. So the jagged accretion of rock hovered over the Seine, silently and effortlessly bringing itself to rest so that its abstract, featureless face was level with the trio who had opposed it—the master-thief Lupin, Maggie, and the depleted Doctor.

Lupin twirled the ends of his upturned moustache, as if to summon some inward bravado as he stared down a creature as alien and enigmatic as a mountain face. There was no sign it even really registered them—other than the violet glow, which was now causing the object in Lupin's hands to blaze out brilliant light of the same hue. Whether nervously or to further bolster his poise, Lupin twirled the crystal in his hand, now apparently accustomed to its bizarre incessant humming and its projecting violet light.

He looked back at the Time Lord and saw in his fading eyes that he would have to act for both of them. He was only human, but he would not let that hold him back. He could scarcely imagine a *coup* that would top this particular theft. "Delightful."

The thin violet threads skittered from the crystal out across the rooftop. They wrapped briefly around Lupin's hand, then shot outward, brushing against invisible currents in the air.

The violet threads wriggled like living things, probing their projected positions.

Down on the street, this unwelcome presence blotting out the sky was making itself known. As night fell over the city, faint disturbances rippled through every corner of Paris: streetlights flickered, a distant clock tolled off rhythm, and a subtle hum—barely audible—seemed to emanate

from beneath the streets. The citizens whose plans and exciting lives had been interrupted by this intrusion now looked around as the city itself seemed to waver and bend in sympathy with it.

A few sharp-eyed souls looked up to the building and the three individuals whose attention seemed the only thing that prevented this nasty living mountain range from flattening their whole city. Paris had been disappointed by Lupin's small-scale crime only two nights ago. Now, the sight of him, staring down an opponent who was vast and unknowable, perhaps gave them a small measure of comfort.

Jubert, Laurentian, and a small army of the Paris constabulary were also at ground level looking up. Jubert suggested they could go to the rooftop themselves if they had a mind to it. "Feel free," Laurentian replied. "I will not throw away men's lives by asking them to open fire against three hundred meters of living rock.

A hansom cab had pulled to a stop in the jammed traffic, and Bertrand and Sophie Poirier—the latter dressed for an extravagant evening out—joined the policemen. In faint disbelief, the director asked, "All that ... from that tiny and worthless little bauble in the Louvre?"

"And our fate rests in the hands of Lupin and his ... questionable associates," Sophie haughtily noted.

Laurentian glared at her. "I have spent the last days wavering in my assessment of those visitors. Mademoiselle Weitz was in my custody hours ago, and there she stands. So there is *no one* I would rather trust the fate of Paris to than those two ..." He turned away with a snort, and added to Jubert, "even if they do keep the dubious company of that incurable mountebank, Arsène Lupin."

The two professional rivals softened in that moment and shared a conspiratorial chuckle.

Maggie looked back at the Doctor. "I don't suppose there's any reasoning with it?"

He blinked and shook his head, but the frailty in his posture remained. "This universe is a prison for it. It can barely function, let alone thrive. I don't even think there's enough basis to establish communication. Even as simple a concept as *matter* is unfamiliar to it."

She looked down at the violet crystal, now bathing the whole rooftop and much of the darkening sky in its brilliant light. "And that little chunk of glass can remake the universe?"

He levelled his gaze at her. "The simple fact of it is, Maggie ... I'm not sure. It doesn't half put one in his place ... as much as I know about this universe, there was a whole different one before it that I can only guess about. Talk about scientific curiosity."

"It wants the gem, Doctor ..." Lupin informed them thoughtfully. "... and I've half a mind to give it."

"It seems in synch with you, Arsène," the Doctor said haltingly. "There's a chance ... well, it's a gamble. I'm not entirely sure that thing's on our side. It may simply give the entity what it wants. But ..."

"But ... the human factor. What Maggie and I brought to this little dance. We have chaos on our side."

"Chaos against chaos?" Maggie reasoned, looking at the blank sheet of rock hovering in midair before them. "How can we ever defeat that? Chaos is home to it."

"Chaos theory with a hint of audacity," Lupin corrected.

The Doctor smiled feebly. "I like your phrasing."

“Well then ... *on-y-va!*” the thief cried, flinging the crystal into the air. Once again, the creature’s wicked distortion of the sound of the TARDIS engines filled the air. Maggie strained as the horrible possibility flashed through her head: the TARDIS itself could have been manipulated by this horror into helping it undo time, spin things back to that inciting chaos!

The Doctor cried out in pain as the noise grew louder, clutching at his chest and suddenly looking very aged and infirm. He collapsed onto the ground. Maggie and Lupin both went to his side, the thief’s all-important conquest forgotten as he feared for his friend.

“It didn’t work, Doctor,” Lupin said. “What moves have we left? What can we possibly do now? There’s only the three of us, against it ...”

The ghost of a smile spread across the Doctor’s lips, and his eyes flickered to the police box standing unobtrusively on the roof a few yards away. “Not three ... four ...” His voice barely above a whisper, he informed it: “All yours now ... old girl ...”

Within the empty console room, switches activated of their own volition. A golden glow from the heart of the TARDIS saturated the whole room, and there was an ambience of the ship’s mysterious intelligence to be felt. It felt the wavering strength of its oldest friend, and so the old girl knew what it could do.

The mountainous blank face faded from sight.

There was a moment, a horrible moment, when Maggie saw a terrifying vista flash into being before her eyes. It had no up, no down, no horizon, no light ... it was unending meaningless fury ...

And it was gone.

She looked around. The air felt lighter, the beautiful scents of Paris at night in the early twentieth century filled her grateful nostrils. Behind her, the TARDIS stood. And beside her, the Doctor leapt to his feet, slapping his chest and howling in happiness.

Maggie laughed. “You’re feeling chipper!”

“Oh, yes, Maggie!” He picked her up, lifted her off her feet, and whirled her around, still singing in inarticulate joy. “I feel like a sly lad of four hundred again! Ha ha!”

Lupin joined them, and for a time the three held each other in a silent, relieved, intimate group hug. “Never ... never have I felt so happy to lose a conquest.”

EPILOGUE

Another morning dawned. Paris basked in more of the brilliant sun of the *Belle Époque*, streets sparkling, cafés humming with life, and the faint scent of freshly baked bread drifting through the air. To any ordinary observer, nothing had happened.

Maggie stretched, shoulders still sore from the lingering tension of the last harrowing couple of days. “I never thought I could feel so happy to see ordinary breakfast crowds. Safe pastries, people talking too loudly... normal life. Now all I need is a week in a bath to get this knot out of my spine ...”

Lupin grinned, spinning a coin in his fingers. “Ah, but Mademoiselle Weitz, ordinary life is far less exhilarating than thefts from the Louvre and dangerous games of chance with bright colours.”

The Doctor had spent a few hours in the TARDIS in near-meditation. He blustered into the café, his earlier energy reclaimed with a vengeance. “The old girl’s confirmed it. It all went to plan.”

“We had a plan?” Maggie asked sardonically.

“Yes! And a brilliant one it was too, wasn’t it Monsieur Lupin?”

“Well, quite ...” the thief shook his head. “Now that it has left my side, I must admit the details of my knowledge ... how I knew what to do and what it was saying ... if I ever really understood what was going on before, now it seems like the details of a fuzzy dream.”

“As will that apparition above Paris, for everyone else,” the Doctor added. “But I’ll take you through it so you can truly appreciate how brilliant you were.” He winked at Maggie. “*We all* were, I should say. Thankfully, you had imbued the crystal with enough of your good nature for it and the TARDIS to team up and ... here’s the clever bit ...” He prodded the air with his long index finger for emphasis. “Instead of breaking down the barrier and throwing our universe back to a pre-Big Bang singularity, it moved the *entity* back through time, back to the other side of the dawn of infinity.” He beamed. “There, to live out the rest of its natural, as the Cockneys say.”

Maggie beamed to match him. “It got what it wanted?”

“Quite! A mutually beneficial resolution. And who’s to say it didn’t deserve it?”

“But it was horrible ... that thing tortured you and the poor TARDIS ...”

The Doctor shrugged. “After all, the horror and revulsion the old girl and I felt was only because it was so inimical to our universe, to the core fibres of our being. To a Time Lord, in particular, such a *timeless* intelligence felt like ... nails on a chalkboard, right deep down into my soul. But it’s not fair to judge it by our standards. And this way it can live in its own environment.”

“It did still want to *destroy* our environment.”

The Doctor tutted, holding firm on his point. “Well, that’s true ... but I’m not inclined to hold a grudge. I’m happy we can all walk away happy.”

Lupin looked a little downcast as he chewed thoughtfully on his croissant. “Not me. I lost my great theft, and worse ... Laurentian and the Poiriers sent me telegrams of congratulation. All is forgiven. They may not remember the details, but they apparently remember *me* as some kind of hero! I ask you!”

“Hero?” Maggie repeated. “That sounds pretty good ... take it from me, my best friend is a hero for a living.” She looked across at the Doctor and winked. He shot her back a smile.

But this happiness was not for Arsène Lupin. “Pah!” He thumped his breast with Gallic pride. “Today it is a commendation and niceties from the Louvre. But think, where would it end? The Legion of Honour? Running for office? *Quelle disgrace!* My renown comes from dwelling in the shadows. I am a rebel, I am a thief. The last thing I want to be is ...” He shuddered. “...*respectable.*”

“Well,” she said, clapping his hand. “You’ll always be disreputable to us, eh Doctor?”

“Oh, none more so!” the Time Lord agreed.

The Doctor and Maggie excused themselves and Lupin bade them farewell so he could slink off to his apartment. He wanted to say goodbye in private, as he was still unsure if he would be spotted on the street. Some new disguises were definitely in order after this adventure.

He left the strange pair walking toward their blue box. He caught their fascinating words on the air.

He heard Maggie saying, “I’ve been thinking Doc, and I’ve got a radical idea. Why don’t we just *plan* to go somewhere dangerous next? After all, every time we look for R and R, disaster strikes.”

“Can’t argue with the logic, Mags. So? What disaster should we head for?”

“I’m thinking maybe the *Titanic.*”

“Interesting idea ...” the Doctor responded earnestly. “How’s this for a counter-proposal? What do you say to some nice Roman scenery? *Ancient* Roman. Well, ancient to you, but brand-spanking new to old Julius Caesar.”

“Oh?”

“Well, I just wanted to pop back and assure old Julie I made it out unscathed. And anyway, we should try to pick some new jewel up to replace the one that’s, ahem, M.I.A. But since you mention the *Titanic*, let me tell what happened the time Mollie Brown and I landed on the promenade deck ...”

A moment later, the trumpeting roar of the mysterious object sounded, and Lupin turned to see the street corner, sadly, empty. Perhaps he should stop by the Louvre later—knowing the way these time travellers worked, the new jewel was likely already in place.

But first, he would meet some friends and plan some yet audacious capers. Invitations awaited, and he felt eager to meet the great and the good. He felt there were still many more prizes to seize.

And so, as her greatest thief was swallowed into its depths, Paris thrummed with life and the sun cast its warm glow over the rooftops. This adventure would stand as a memory to be savoured, a story to be told, and a reminder that intellect, audacity, and heart could turn even the most dangerous situation into a triumphant—if exhausting—game.

THE DOCTOR WHO PROJECT
RETURNS WITH SEASON 47

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In the glittering streets and shadowed rooftops of Paris, a subtle alien network threatens the city in ways no one can see. The Eleventh Doctor and his companion Maggie Weitz must navigate violet threads of energy, strange crystals, and a foe that learns faster than they can anticipate. Into this web steps a young Arsène Lupin, the audacious gentleman thief, whose charm and improvisation may be their greatest weapon—or their greatest risk.

As the stakes escalate, the trio engages in a high-stakes duel of wits, blending logic, intuition, and flair in a battle against time itself. Will their combined genius be enough to outsmart a calculating intelligence beyond the stars? Or will Paris pay the price for their audacious adventure?

This is another story in a series of original fan authored Doctor Who fiction published by The Doctor Who Project featuring the Eleventh Doctor as played by Winston Adderly



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