

THE
DOCTOR WHO

PROJECT



EITHER/OR

Hamish Crawford with Matt Tovey

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Foreword

It had fully been our intention, as editors of *The Doctor Who Project*, to put the series on hold following the publication of “The Last Doctor” in May 2024. It not only marked twenty-five years—and nineteen ‘seasons’—of this remarkable *Doctor Who* fan-fiction endeavour, but it seemed a pretty perfect end point to the Doctor’s extra-canonical time travels, culminating as it did with the redoubtable Time Lord saving the universe aided by past and future selves alongside a coterie of his friends and most formidable foes, before bidding Maggie Weitz farewell and heading off on a mysterious mission with an unknown woman he recognized from his childhood.

However, earlier this year we received startling new accounts of further adventures in space and time undertaken by the good Doctor. We hope readers will have already checked out “The Christmas Adventure” by Bob Furnell, “Santa Claus is Coming to Betruvia Major” by Hamish Crawford, and the Brief Encounter “Jack of All Trades” by Hamish Crawford. Now we unveil a whole new season, beginning with this tale.

When you read it, you will see why it is so vitally important that these stories be published. Due to the on-going machinations of the Time Lords and other omnipotent ne’er-do-wells, reality and the causal flow of time itself are fractured. Only through your effort—reading this story and guiding the narrative, choosing which direction it goes at critical points—can the damage to the continuum be undone!

Do not let your critical task as a reader deter you unduly. You may reach a few dead ends, but trust in your choices and see where they take you. And due to the timeless power of reading, should you be unhappy with where you end up, you can always go back and try again ... in fact we encourage it!

So let us start with your first decision. If you would like to begin on Gallifrey, go to Section 1. If you would like to begin in Maggie’s hometown of Revelstoke, British Columbia, go to Section 2. If you want to pick up the tale across the universe at the Huxley Union, go to Section 7.

Good luck!

Bob Furnell, Hamish Crawford, and Matt Tovey—The Hegelian ArchIve, Galaxy M97, 2025

1

If there was one thing Time Lords really resented, it was a crisis. For one thing, their position in cosmic affairs meant that any calamities that faced them tended to be universe- or even multiverse-spanning. For another, the urgency of taking decisive action offended their deeply held commitment to doing as little as possible.

The after-effects of the most recent peril to face their planet were still being felt. Thanks to some malign extra-dimensional beings, all of space and time had nearly compressed into one moment; and the Doctor in all eleven of his incarnations (and countless others across parallel universes and related tie-in media) into one cloned imposter. In an example of Time Lords' idea

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of good judgement, they had actually considered forging an alliance with these extra-dimensional beings, known as the Preservers¹.

Reality continued; the Doctor lived on. And the Time Lords were very unhappy with how close things had all come to oblivion. A young high-ranking member of their elite, who went by the title of 'the Waiter' (due to his preference to wait before making decisions), had advised them on many of their worst courses of action. So now, in the wake of their displeasure, it was the Waiter who was facing the consequences.

A tribunal found the Waiter guilty of several violations of Time Lord law. In their sentencing notes, the tribunal expostulated at length his poor decisions and the rash unfulfilled promises he had made. Not only was the Doctor at liberty, but only recently another renegade—from the Waiter's own chapter—was out there travelling without their approval as well. Her name was the Oracle. The Waiter mounted a spirited defence, but was still found guilty. He was stripped of his rank and titles in the High Council, transferred to the temporal monitoring bureau, and sentenced to forcible regeneration—his second. His stint in temporal monitoring would last the natural length of his new incarnation.

It was one *douce* morning in Argestes, which long ago was the Gallifreyan harvest season. Taking a break from his mind-numbing duties, feeling more depressed than usual, the Waiter locked himself in the renowned Zero Room under the Junior Senate Block. Time had no meaning in the sealed-off space; but what difference did that make, he wondered bitterly. It had no meaning outside either. Under the terms of his sentence, he could spend as long as he wanted away from his new job, since he had a whole lifetime to finish it. Since they had eternity to get things done, Time Lords could afford to be lax about deadlines.

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The Waiter was glad of the sensory deprivation of the Zero Room. Even looking in the mirror made him angry these days. He missed his old face, that pale skin and the wispy blond moustache he had grown. In its place, this third incarnation had a permanent five o'clock shadow even when he shaved twice a day. Worse, he was far too tall and old. Indeed, ever since he'd sat up in this new body, his knees ached with rheumatism. He was certain that pathetic quorum of antiquated fossils had done that to him on purpose.

¹ See *The Doctor Who Project: The Last Doctor* Parts One and Two.

He missed his old lifestyle too; being able to jump in a TARDIS at a moment's notice. Not that he particularly enjoyed the wider universe; it was so primitive and filled with bad smells. But still the freedom intrigued and invigorated him ... how irritating, he considered. That was a trait he had in common with the Doctor.

The Doctor. It was all that old reprobate's fault that this had happened to the Waiter. He should be Lord President by now, not facing centuries of logging every piddling Vardan time experiment and its effects on causality.

His bitter internal reverie was broken by two voices. He could not make them out because he had dialed down all the Zero Room's sensory inputs to nil, making the entire space agreeably dark and void-like. But their conversation intrigued him.

"Oh, I've had my fill of the outside universe. When are we going to elect a High Council that goes back to non-interference? No good ever comes of sticking our noses out there!"

The other, a woman, tutted. "Don't shoot the messenger, dear."

"I know, dear, I'm sorry. What are these lot called?"

"Lifeships, apparently. Some kind of ark project. One of 'em took a whole lot of Koilarans away from their home planet—ended up in a massive time paradox²."

The man tutted this time. "Very untidy. What about them?"

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"Well, they've detected another one."

The man yawned, perhaps feeling the effect of the bombardment of positive ions. "So?"

The woman harrumphed. "So it's remarkable because we were never able to find their planet of origin. Even old clever-clogs didn't get to the bottom of that one."

"The Doctor?"

"Who else?" the woman retorted wearily. "How he managed to get elected Lord President—twice! With his qualifications ... old Lord Pandak must be howling with shame ..."

"Wasn't he the one who pardoned Morbius?"

"No, no," the woman tutted. "That was Pandak the Second. Pandak the Third, remember—nine hundred years he lasted in office. Now there was a statesman ..."

"Well, who'd go into politics these days anyway?"

There was a pause, and then the woman suggested sardonically, "Oh, good Rassilon, I can just see the Doctor coming back for a third time to run Gallifrey into the ground. Next to him, even Borusa wasn't that bad ..."

The Waiter, who had contained himself the first time that hated title was mentioned, let out an involuntary groan. Even when he tried to get his mind off things, that infernal renegade popped up. The woman, who had moved on to comparing Borusa with her beloved Lord President Pandak, bristled at the interruption.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she said. "I hope you don't mind sharing—I was only planning on being here for a quick century or so."

"It's quite all right," the Waiter replied tersely, as he breast-stroked from his perch in the rafters of the Zero Room down through the lightless air to its doorway. "My time's about up."

² See *The Doctor Who Project: The 108 Year Hitch*.

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It wasn't much to go on, but the Waiter tracked down the information. It was just as the pair had said: another of the massive Lifeships, point of origin unknown, on a course to Galaxy M97. He was all set to write it up, when a thought occurred to him; a rebellious thought. The TARDIS protocols were easy enough to trip. He wouldn't get the exact capsule he had used before, but one Ship was much the same as another in his experience. That whole business of the symbiotic link was surely overstated.

So that night, the Waiter sent out several dummy reports, scheduled to go out at irregular intervals, that would suggest to his probation officer that he was still hard at work. Meanwhile, he went down to the TARDIS bays. He wasn't surprised how lax the security was; after all, he didn't rate the Oracle's intelligence any higher than the Doctor's, and yet she too had stolen a capsule with ease.

"Hang about!" a guard called across the bay. "You're not supposed to be down here."

"Er ... yes I am ..." the Waiter stammered.

"'Ere, I know that beard."

The Waiter stroked his stubbly chin in agitation.

"You're that bloomin' Waiter, aren't you? You're a bloomin' criminal!"

Panicking, the Waiter hopped sideways into the ajar door of a Type 73 TARDIS. If the guard had simply got on with arresting him or calling for assistance, the Waiter would have been back in custody in minutes. But thanks to the dithering, the Waiter was able to dematerialise and get through Gallifrey's transduction barriers.

The shimmering, spherical crystalline time rotor spun around the pentagonal control console of the time vessel. The journey was rougher than the Waiter was used to; but he'd obviously picked a capsule that kicked back. If he'd had more time ...

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It didn't matter. The Waiter had the coordinates laid in, and soon he would rendezvous with the Lifeship. He was already envisaging the hero's welcome he would receive on his return to Gallifrey!

To follow this strand of the story, turn to Section 3. To see where the Lifeship came from and who its pilots are, turn to Section 4. To see what's happening on Earth, turn to Section 2, and to see what's happening in the Huxley Union, go to Section 7.

2

It was June 1999 in Revelstoke, and Maggie Weitz was taken aback by how odd it was to have an ordinary day at the office.

For Maggie, an ordinary day involved working at Mr. Lee's hardware store on Main Street. Only a month earlier, the Doctor had dropped her off to carry out one of those mysterious errands that increasingly occupied him lately. Though he didn't talk about it, she was certain that whatever task he had spent unspecified years (lifetimes by her standards) on wasn't over, and indeed was continuing to vex him.

She knew it was hard for a Time Lord to open up, as even after all the years she had travelled with him she possessed no frame of reference for the kinds of issues he regularly

grappled with. In some ways, not talking about it with her was the kind of therapy he needed; giving him other things to fixate on, other relationships to grow. Sometimes being a friend meant you didn't talk about things. Maggie hoped that was what the Doctor needed just now.

Today, she got on with stocking the shelves and tried to keep her mind on the present. Since she had left, Mr. Lee had installed a comic book rack, and two teenagers were listlessly poring over the contents while discussing some TV series finale from the previous night.

2“‘You know, it's so bogus. I mean they call it a series finale but as long as they can make some more money out of it, the franchise goes on, right?’”

“‘Did you see it? It was classic! Sisko and Dukak had a final battle, the Dominion War was ended—’”

“‘So what? Deep Space Nine ... Dork Space Nine, more like.’ Disappointed his burn got no reaction, the boy continued: “‘Star Trek ran out of steam years ago. Did you see that last movie? Insurrection? Big-time yawn. The good money's on those Star Wars prequels. They're going to be massive.’”

“‘Says you,’ his friend sniped.

They suddenly stopped talking. Maggie realised, self-consciously, that they were looking at her.

“‘Hey, quit eavesdropping!’” the taller boy snapped.

Maggie felt a bit hurt, and even more so that she couldn't contribute anything to their debate. She dropped off midway through the one with Patrick Stewart. And now that she had seen the real thing—not just the real twenty-fourth century, but centuries beyond—the fictional version felt distinctly silly.

Mr. Lee happened to round the corner at this point, and clipped the rude taller boy around the neck. Modern helicopter parents tended to dislike strangers rough-housing their kids, but Mr. Lee managed to get away with it; he was a cantankerous uncle to the whole town.

“‘Hey!’” Lee berated. “‘You two! No harassing my employees! And if you're not going to buy those comics, quit bending them out of shape.’” He snatched one such issue out of the boy's hand and waved it in his face. “‘This isn't a library!’”

The pair scowled at him and shuffled out the door, clearly deciding the latest escapades of Superman were no more deserving of their time than Sisko and the other Starfleet officers.

2

“‘Star Trek and comic books,’” Lee chuckled with a roll of his eyes as he replaced the magazine on the rack. “‘What a time to be alive, when that's all young people have to worry about. Guess that means Clinton and Chretien aren't doing such a bad job.’”

She nodded. “‘I should know better, though. I don't know why I got so involved.’”

Mr. Lee shrugged. “‘Listening in on people can be fun. Though I prefer gossip about real people to ... Klingons and Mr. Spock. Take those two friends of yours, Rebekah and Simon. How on earth did they ever get together?’”

Mr. Lee carried on talking about the mismatched couple, but Maggie found herself lingering on the boys' conversation. It must have struck a chord because it chimed with her own experiences. Somehow this strangest chapter of her life always seemed over; and yet the police box reappeared, and another adventure lay beyond the horizon. Would it always? Would there

³ See *The Doctor Who Project Season 45: The Christmas Adventure*.

come a time when she really did move on with her life? Maggie was as afraid that she wouldn't as that she would.

"Uh-oh." Now Lee had trailed off from his theories on matchmaking, and was staring at her, as intently as the two boys had.

She wrinkled her nose self-consciously. "What?"

"It's that look. Spaced-out. You're up there with Mr. Spock. I think you need some lunch, Maggie."

Maggie patted her stomach and nodded. "You're quite right. I think I brought in some leftovers—"

"Nope. It's a beautiful day, let's get some fresh air and treat ourselves. Although you're buying," Mr. Lee joked.

2

As he locked up, the phone rang from inside the shop. Maggie had the irresistible feeling she should answer it. She looked at her boss, who shook his head. "No way. It's already ten after. You answer that phone, we miss the fresh tortillas!"

Time for you to decide: If Maggie insists on going back into the store and answering the phone, go to Section 5. If she ignores her misgivings and has lunch with Mr. Lee, go to Section 6.

3

The Waiter stepped out of his TARDIS. It had landed on its side, and its chameleon circuit had stubbornly adopted the shape of a squat auxiliary power generator; so the doorway was a small and had a stunted groove in the side, against which the Time Lord banged his head as he clambered out.

Rubbing at the bump on his scalp, the Waiter took in his surroundings. The scene was entirely cheerless. The corridors were dark, steam spraying from split pipes and distant lights blinking on and off unhelpfully. There was also an airless feeling to the space that added with the low ceilings to create a distinct feeling of claustrophobia. The Waiter had swapped his Time Lord robes for a paddock jacket and heavy tartan kilt in a rustic style from Earth's early twentieth century. From the kilt's sporran he produced a pencil light. He cast its narrow beam down the corridor, certain that every corner outside its sweep was teeming with some threat or other.

A distant sound of movement rumbled. He strained to see, and his breathing grew heavier.

He chastised himself. Really, Waiter, where had that innate Time Lord sense of superiority gone? Fear is most unbecoming.

"Hello?" he called out, immediately regretting it as he heard his thin, reedy voice carry down the corridor, distorted and dropping an octave as its echo reverberated down the warping alloy.

3

Not liking the sound, he gave the thin artificial air a superior sniff and continued talking. “So this is a Lifeship, eh? Well, when you’ve seen one rusty space-bucket, you’ve seen them all I suppose.”

He trudged down the corridor, announcing his presence with typical Time Lordly pomp: “Greetings, anyone who’s there. I’m the Waiter.”

The corridor had terminated at an open diamond-shaped junction, adorned with arcane instrument panels. The Waiter cast his eye over the screens, but the technology was too antiquated for him to discern. One screen showed a display of, presumably, the Lifeship’s course. It was easy enough that even the Waiter could make out the readings, and recognise the world.

“Ah, the Huxley Union ...” The Waiter gave his upper lip a stroke, still disconcerted not to find the clipped moustache. “Judging by the system’s population density, must be in the middle of its Imperial era ... what would a Lifeship want with such a planet?”

Then the Waiter felt the unmistakable sensation, like a rock slamming through his skull directly into his brain, of a psychic assault.

What does a Time Lord want to know about that?

The words scratched their way roughly into the Waiter’s consciousness. He did not hear them, but he felt them; and felt the mind behind them rooting around his memories. He was powerless against the intrusion.

Ah, the presence said menacingly. The Doctor ...

“Unbelievable. You’ve heard of him too? The man is a damned celebrity,” the Waiter muttered. He strained against the psychic assault as long as he could, before another blast rendered him—mercifully—unconscious.

Two crude figures hulked into the Lifeship’s junction. They looked like an upended buffalo, with an angular head resembling a hammerhead shark.

3

Take this Time Lord to one of our stasis booths, the presence commanded them. “Yes, Savried,” they replied in unison, roughly picking up the tall and slender humanoid and lugging him down the corridor.

Already Savried was formulating a plan. It was a plan to avenge their comrade, the Pilot of the Lifeship Miracle, against that interfering Doctor. And it was a plan that would give their race new life, and a new purpose.

You have the option of jumping back to see the Lifeship’s launch in Section 4, going to Revelstoke and check in with Maggie Weitz in Section 2, or alternatively you can go ahead to the Huxley Union with Savried’s plan well underway, in Section 7.

4

Savried, Chief of the Pilot Trinity of the great Lifeship Phenomenon, surveyed his vast vessel with pride. It was just as well he felt such pride, for the Phenomenon had been his home for longer than he cared to remember.

‘Longer than he cared to remember’. Savried had a momentary twinge of terror from that familiar phrase. Usually it was meant glibly; the remember-er could summon those memories if they really tried, but they didn’t care to, so the matter remained forgotten.

But Savried did sometimes try to remember. And he was worried that nothing came to mind. The planet the Lifeships had departed from, the faces of the people—the vast millions of them—he and his fellow Pilots were ferrying to their new homes ... this was not subsumed by his purpose.

4

Purpose? He kept repeating that word to himself, but Savried found it worryingly nebulous too.

Why was he here? Ultimately it was as simple as that. And even more ultimately, no matter how hard Savried thought about it, he couldn’t come up with a satisfactory answer.

This was ridiculous. When he thought back, Savried was sure he had some purpose; an important one too. He must have learned to pilot the Lifeship at some point. He must have been selected by the elders of his race with the sacred responsibility of ensuring their survival. He must have spent some time with his fellow Pilots, Toff-Ma and Binchall, learning the skills, discovering the challenges of life in deep space, becoming friends.

But he remembered none of that.

Worse, in his darkest moments, Savried didn’t even remember what his own face looked like.

It wasn’t hard to do. He just had to find a reflective surface on this ship. The place was shiny enough, with crystalline panels and various upgrades stolen from other ships and peoples it had passed along the way—over those vast galactic spans that separated the Lifeship from their home.

Savried roved the crystalline corridors, took in the primary-coloured mood lighting and the vast array of staterooms, control rooms, labs, escape pods, recreation areas, banquet halls ... yet when was the last time he and his people had shared a meal here? What did food even taste like?

He knew. He could look it up. The sum total of knowledge of galactic history, science, and other civilisations—both from home and from those ships they had assimilated en route—could be summoned at a moment’s notice.

It would be nice to talk to someone about all this. A few ages ago he had found an ability to reach out and touch the minds of a nearby star system. Three particular individuals disbelieved

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him, took him as an impersonator of a divine being from their ancient mythology. So Savried gave them some helpful hints to seize greater power. Within a generation those three families had subdued their homeworld. A little more knowledge, a few more unfair advantages, and they had established a whole star system at their fingertips.

This became the Huxley Union. When Savried needed to take his mind off his existential crisis, he would leave the confines of the Lifeship and see how they were getting on. Savried found these little excursions harmless, and the sensation of floating around such people—haunting them, he supposed they might call it—stimulating.

It seemed things were developing nicely in the Huxley Union. The descendants of those three lucky individuals had established themselves as Emperors, sharing power and ensuring total stability, loyalty, and obedience. As for the people, well, law and order were maintained thanks to a line of nobles bred to mete out justice. What was there to complain about?

And yet Savried sensed the other people in this system were unhappy. They felt the malign hand of his interference in their affairs. When would people learn that singular figures were needed to guide history, to aid progress? Give those important decisions to the majority and nothing would ever get done. Savried knew it wasn't popular to admit, but he said it, nonetheless. Democracy sounded good in theory, but in practice it was inefficient and prone to failure.

Naturally, even a being as wise as Savried had relinquished a little power over the years. The piloting duties could not, after all, be handled by one person, especially over so long. So Savried had allowed Toff-Ma to handle the Lifeship's progress for a time. Then there had been a briefer and unhappier period with Binchall at the helm. It was during Binchall's time that they really got lost ... though he was having increasing difficulty remembering their intended destination. Though Savried didn't remember talking to either Pilot about it, it seemed a matter of unanimous concurrence that he should take back control.

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Though really, if Savried was being truly honest, his skills as a Pilot were not much needed. For the Lifeship had become mired in a thick nebula, teeming with some kind of paralysing energy that had brought them to a standstill. That was no doubt the root of the memory loss. There was a troubling thought—until they got their memories back they would never know how to escape? How long would that trap them here? How long had they already been stuck in this astral quicksand, trapped like a fly in amber?

Again, more analogies, more metaphors. But Savried didn't know what they meant. He could not picture quicksand, could not look down at his legs to see how they would be trapped. And as for a fly ... he supposed it had wings? And amber was sticky, he guessed? But he had nothing to back that up.

He tried imagining the Hux and the other peoples they ruled in their nice, orderly Union. He had a clear picture of their faces from his brief out-of-body sojourns. They had pale, blue-tinged skin, with long rubbery hair of bright primary colours. They stood tall, and were uniformly lanky. They had four limbs, two arms and two legs, but the hands and feet had six digits. Some had tails, but they usually fell off after adolescence.

Did Savried look like that once upon a time? He hoped so. Because their blue-tinged faces and rubbery, primary-coloured hair were the only images of a living being he could bring to his mind.

Oh, there was also the cloned, mindless servants they grew in vats to handle the simple maintenance tasks on the Lifeship. They were bipedal, covered with thick brown matted fur, and had sightless heads that cleaved in two like a sharp blade. Savried was sure his head had eyes. He just couldn't see his face in any of the glowing reflective surfaces on the ship's bridge.

This was beginning to concern him. Somewhat desperately Savried trawled the logs of other Lifeships, remembered learning of that account of the Miracle, which had undergone some strange

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evolution in its computer and Pilot by passing through an unidentified energy cloud. They had met a different race, known as the Koilarans. And they had also met a vastly different kind of alien ... one who called himself the Doctor.

Enough was enough. If Savried lacked the knowledge to get himself out of this cloud, and if Toff-Ma and Binchall had no ideas either, he would have to outsource.

This too proved more difficult than it first appeared. After another spectral visit to his pets in the Huxley Union, Savried learned they were afraid to visit his nebula at all. Tales of its supernatural powers had gone into folklore, and any more concrete knowledge about the Pilots and their ship was staunchly suppressed by the Emperors. Even the Justiciars and Senate were forbidden from knowing. Why, Savried wondered? Why would their purpose cast doubt on the rule of three Emperors?

So Savried ventured farther afield. Knowing how drawn they were to mysteries like this, he duly lured another of the Doctor's race out to him. These Time Lords had greater powers, could give them more than all the peoples of the Great Huxley Union put together.

The Time Lord who finally arrived was called the Master. He hadn't been an ideal choice, but Savried had used the renegade Time Lord's weakness and vulnerability to undermine him. Savried had even briefly taken the form of the Master's archenemy, the Doctor. But the Master had evaded them, had got away on the verge of death. Still, it served a purpose. The Master's presence had alerted the Time Lords of the Lifeship's location. From what Savried knew, he and his people represented a gap in their knowledge; and ignorance was something the Time Lords jealously resented.

Before he had gone, the Master had used some kind of horrible shrinking weapon to reduce one of Savried's servants to minuscule size. He would duly grow another in the vat. It would be a matter of moments.

4

The other Time Lord had arrived. Savried would be there to greet him. As well as his selfish motives, he truly hoped the visitor would answer these lingering, uncertain questions that so preyed upon his mind.

If you have not been to Gallifrey yet, go to Section 1. Revelstoke can be found in Section 2. If you want to pick up the story in Huxley Union, go to Section 7.

5

Maggie went back inside and answered the phone. She could feel Mr. Lee staring daggers into her back—or more typically, rolling his eyes. No wonder he was so hard on those kids—he was really a bit of an overgrown cynical teenager himself. She was sure he would insist that nothing was important enough in Revelstoke to get in the way of a nice lunch.

“Good afternoon, Revelstoke Hardware and Supplies, Maggie speaking,” she recited by rote.

She was immediately disconcerted at the voice on the other end. The ambient noise was pervaded by scratching and hissing, as if she were listening to an ancient vinyl record. And the voice that spoke was high-pitched and off-putting too.

She knew it at once—it wasn't the same voice she remembered, but it was that insufferable Time Lord the Waiter, whom she had briefly seen during the Doctor's battle with the Preservers⁴. She knew at once he must have regenerated. Funny how she could tell, even though he sounded different. His arrogance shone through, and echoed down the receiver to her. She also knew at once if she was hearing his voice, something bad must be happening.

5

“This is a psychic message for Maggie Weitz,” the unpleasant voice rasped through the receiver. “This is the Waiter. You may remember we met in Camelot, at the crossroads in time. Oh well, all's well that ends well. You seem to have ended up all right.”

This sounded like a ‘weather fine, wish you were here’ postcard spoken aloud, Maggie thought. She felt an urge to talk back, but she knew the Waiter himself couldn't hear her. After a pause, perhaps the silly man collecting his thoughts, the message continued.

“I am presently with the Doctor on a Lifeship in a nebula near the Huxley Union, Galaxy M97.”

It was flattering, Maggie thought, that he mentioned this as if she might be familiar with it.

“We've encountered some unexpected danger. It's imperative you use the Doctor's homing signal to summon the TARDIS. He is depending on you ...”

There was a final shower of static on the line, and then the phone went dead.

Maggie knew enough from travelling with the Doctor to know that when other people spoke on his behalf, they rarely had his best interests at heart. Nevertheless, if the TARDIS was with her, at least she would be closer to him, and better able to deal with whatever trouble was afoot.

“How long does it take to tell someone you're closed for lunch?”

She jumped at the interruption from Mr. Lee. “Oh God, I'm sorry, I ... I have to take a raincheck on lunch. I got some bad news ... it's an emergency!”

She ran past Mr. Lee, and he looked up to the sky. He had something important he had wanted to tell Maggie. But as usual with that most mercurial of his employees, it would have to wait.

Maggie ran across town, bursting through the door of her home. She raced upstairs to her bedroom and yanked open the dresser drawer. Tucked in to the drawer, sharing space with a surprisingly intimate collection of her bras and underwear, was the small police-box-shaped ornament the Doctor had given her.

5

She pocketed it. She had given this some thought. There was no sense leaving the TARDIS out in the open where the Waiter, or any other malign presence, could take it for themselves. She would wait until she saw her friend's face, got confirmation from him, to summon it.

⁴ See *The Doctor Who Project: The Last Doctor*.

A flicker of doubt crossed Maggie's mind. What if the Doctor was depending on the arrival of the TARDIS in Revelstoke? What if he had become trapped, and she would never hear from him due to this supposedly clever decision of hers?

To her relief, she had little time to ponder these habitual second-guesses that came up in the Doctor's escapades. For the late afternoon air had turned cool, even with the sunlight bathing it, and the yard outside—the spot where the police box usually pitched up—was now filled with an elm tree that had not been present before.

Another TARDIS, clearly—one with a working chameleon circuit. As relieved as she was to see it, Maggie also knew this made matters less theoretical, and potentially more dangerous.

Maggie crept downstairs, waiting to face the new arrivals and hoping the Doctor was with them.

To follow Maggie outside, go to Section 14. To find out where the call is coming from, go to Section 1 or Section 12.

6

“That was better, wasn't it?” Mr. Lee declared as he took a last bite of his burrito, mopping up the stray crumbs of ground beef that escaped from its tortilla embrace in the swelteringly spicy salsa. “Trust me Mags, nothing is happening in Revelstoke important enough to get in the way of a good lunch out.

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Maggie nodded. “I can't argue with you there.” As another hour progressed and Mr. Lee ordered a cappuccino, she half-listened to his none-too-interesting account of his niece's gymnastics tournament in Vancouver. He seemed unusually relaxed, not as eager to get back to work as he tended to be. He was getting older, Maggie supposed. They both were.

But all the while, she was thinking of that missed call. While her boss was right, it was a call outside Revelstoke she was more interested in. It had only been a month, she reminded herself. How much trouble could the Doctor get into?

She felt relieved to get back outside—her worries and the heat of the day absorbed into the old brickwork of the restaurant had given her a mild headache. How odd that living her 'normal' life gave her the headaches, while trudging through alien swamps or fleeing from energy weapons she was perfectly level-headed, in the moment.

She ought to tell the Doctor that when he got back, she thought sardonically. In her humble opinion, she had become the perfect companion.

Maggie shook her head, appalled to realise she had been totally ignoring what Mr. Lee was saying. “I'm—I'm sorry?” she stammered.

“Really Maggie, go for a hike or something. You're even more out of it than usual. I was just saying ...” Lee's voice dropped to a more sincere confessional tone. “You know, I turned sixty yesterday.”

Did Maggie know that? Birthdays and TV show finales—it was hard to keep track of fixed events in time when every year and date were at your fingertips. Sometimes she lost track of how old she was, and certainly could barely keep track of how much time had passed out there, in her career as the Doctor's perfect companion. She had more or less worked it out: nearly five years by the calendar, but it felt she had packed in exponentially more life in that time.

She started muttering congratulatory wishes, but he waved them off.

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“Don’t worry, I never tell anyone, never do anything. Just another day of the year for me. Just ate too many dumplings with the wife and fell asleep watching Top Hat.” He sighed. “The thing is ... it’s just that ... this year I think ... I might retire. About time I got out and saw things.” He half-smiled. “You kind of inspired me.”

Though she had never told Lee the full story of her travels, he knew enough. Maggie flushed.

“So,” Mr. Lee continued, “I know it’s not much to give anyone but nobody in my family wants anything to do with a hardware store, and I’ve come to think of you as ... I don’t know, maybe a niece or something? Second cousin, once removed, if we Lees ever got lucky with a Jewish woman?” Now he blushed. “Getting off track here. Maggie, what I want to say is ... would you think about taking over the hardware store?”

“Oh.”

“Just think about it!” Lee blurted.

Maggie instantly felt bad; he had interpreted her surprise as disinterest. “No, no, that would be ... I’m honoured. I ... well, I will have to give it some thought. Just because of one thing and another—”

He held out his hands in placation. “I get you, Maggie. Just wanted to put it out there.”

“I suppose this explains the wining and dining.”

He laughed bashfully. “Well, it doesn’t hurt. Although you may regret it when you get your hands on my books.”

She took his hand in hers and squeezed it. “I’m really happy for you. Whatever happens, that’s a great plan. I know you’ll enjoy your travelling.”

“I hope so. I can’t stand planes.” With a laugh, they both walked back to the hardware store.

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Feeling one last twinge of curiosity, Maggie discreetly checked the shop’s caller ID. It predictably said, ‘UNKNOWN NUMBER’. Nor had they left a message. “Thanks for nothing,” she muttered to it.

By the end of the year, Maggie had still not heard from the Doctor. In his absence, one day she had impulsively accepted Mr. Lee’s offer to manage the store.

It was about this time—when Revelstoke was getting its first dustings of snow, and its streetlights twinkled festively at night—that Hank Grenville moved into town. Maggie thought even less about the Doctor when she started seeing him. He was no Ollie, and he knew it. But she realised, to her surprise, that she was ready—ready to jump into a new chapter of her life, and ready to live that life on her own, without the Doctor. She resolved, sadly, that if he ever came back, she would have to turn him down.

It wasn't even a year into their courtship when Hank proposed. She hadn't imagined saying yes to another man, but the moment was so perfect that Maggie knew it was the right answer. Maggie and Hank were married on May 12, 2001, in a small ceremony attended by the Weitz family, Larry, her many cousins, aunts, and uncles, a few of the townspeople (including Mr. Lee, naturally, as well as the new kid she had helping her at the hardware store) and all her high school friends (even Tracy managed to make it, though she had moved to Mexico).

It was a beautiful sun-drenched day in the shadow of Mount Begbie, but for one brief moment she felt a twinge of sadness that a familiar blue box didn't materialise on the lawn. Even sadder, she was relieved.

She had committed to this life, firmly.

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More years went by, and the longer that went by the less Maggie had occasion to think of the Doctor. He crept into her mind in odd ways—when she saw a blue work tent out of the corner of her eye, any time she heard of advances in robotics or space travel, she would wonder whether this was some step toward those futures she had seen. They were all as real as each new year, so Maggie knew better than to doubt whether she had imagined it all.

As the 2010s gave way to the 2020s, she thought in passing about the University of East Essex, that institution swallowed up by evil forces; those fake mediums in that small American town⁵. More decades happily rolled past. She remembered visiting an English village in the late 2040s with the Doctor, Simon Denon, and a stowaway Silurian⁶, so when she reached it for real she thought of that younger self, who thought she was so old. Now that Maggie was nearing ninety, she knew what 'old' really meant. It was amusing to think that the Doctor, that youthful and vibrant man, had already lived 108 years in his present body when she first met him, and goodness knows how many thousand before that.

Here in Revelstoke, it was easy to detach oneself from that outside world. The life she lived, the dangers she faced, seemed as distant a planet as any she had visited in the TARDIS. They were out there now, happening—even though they had happened long ago as far as she was subjectively concerned. After a while, thinking about it made Maggie dizzy, and so she eventually she thought of such things less and less.

She had long ago handed over the reins of the hardware store to a young girl who had settled in Revelstoke after some gut-wrenching break-up; a young girl like herself, Maggie realised. Mr. Lee had travelled the world, retired, and died long ago. Maggie on the other hand, never again left Revelstoke. She had seen enough out there to last a lifetime, so she didn't mind. She had already

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decided she was the perfect companion, so she didn't have anything to prove. There was also the sad fact that around 2015 the world had gotten crazier, more frightening. She didn't feel inclined

⁵ See *The Doctor Who Project* Season 44: *Evil* and *Sensed Presence* respectively.

⁶ See *The Doctor Who Project* Season 44 *M.O.A.B.*

to see much of it; she only hoped sanity would return. Maggie wondered where the Doctor was, and why he wouldn't sort it out. Still, it was probably humanity's own fault. He couldn't be expected to solve all our problems, particularly when we were making such stupid decisions.

Hank was still alive and healthy, and so even though she couldn't climb the stairs in their house there was no talk of her going to a home. This too prompted memories of the Doctor, and Christmas of 1998, when that alien had thought he was Santa Claus—and nearly convinced her too⁷.

Had she ever actually told Hank about the Doctor? It was funny to think of Simon and Rebekah, Mr. Lee, and Fiona Stornaway all coming to learn about him. Somehow it seemed less urgent to share that period of her life with Hank. Somehow also, without the Time Lord here to explain himself, it all felt ridiculous. How to say that a mysterious alien had whisked her away to meet Henry VIII, to see Mars, and to distant galaxies and alternate timelines? She would have felt like those two kids that summer day in 1999, earnestly arguing about escapist nonsense over the comic book rack.

Oddly, more than once Maggie thought about that phone call she missed. It just popped into her head on occasion when she had nothing else on her mind. There was no reason to; after all, her father often said about such phantom calls, "If they really meant to talk to you they'd call you back". But something tingled within her, and she had learned from her years with the Doctor never to

underestimate that inexplicable tingling that warned of trouble or spied unlikely connections between coincidences.

And then on an ordinary day in March of 2049, when she was pottering around in her kitchen, Maggie heard the sound she had once longed to hear. And she was sorry to feel the flipside

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of what she felt on her second wedding day in 2001. Just as then she felt relieved that the Doctor didn't need her anymore and she could live her own independent life, so now when it was too late she worried that it would start all over again.

Perhaps she really was imagining this, she initially told herself. But no; within moments the alien trumpeting sound blared at full blast, and in a shower of blue-bathed light the police box solidified in her yard. Right in the spot it always landed.

The door batted open so fast it seemed it would fly off its hinges, and there he was. Time had changed him little; it never dared to. His hair was still that closely cropped black stubble, his face still smooth and young. The fishing sweater showed a little wear and tear, but his favourite long green duster coat—the one he had lined, if she remembered, with chronodyne to prevent the Preservers from attacking him—was as brilliantly vivid as ever.

He dashed into her back door, not realising that she had seen him approach the whole way. Only when he saw her did his eyes, which had been so bright with happiness to be here, sadden at the sight of her.

"What do you expect?" she asked, trying not to sound bitter. "You took your time."

"I ... I didn't mean to," he answered softly. He grabbed her and held her in his arms. "Oh Maggie, I wouldn't want you for a moment to think I forgot about you."

⁷See *The Doctor Who Project: The Christmas Adventure*.

“I’m sure you didn’t,” she answered. The bitterness was creeping in, try though she might to keep it out. Why? Why, when she had everything she wanted, did his presence make her feel something was lacking? What more could she possibly want? Was it just the small human feeling of being neglected, of not feeling important to someone you once cared about? Did that make her, after all these years, a bad person?

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“You’re looking positively robust, Mags, radiant even!” he said with a wide and loving smile, clutching her shoulders paternally. “But you don’t understand ... the temporal flux ... it must have thrown me off course ... more than a few of your years.”

“You don’t say! A lifetime for little old me.” She flashed him a tired, withering smile. “And you still don’t have the decency to show your age.”

The Doctor smiled back. “Believe me, I feel every millennium when I get out of bed! Now come along, we’d better figure out what went wrong.” He whirled, his coattails flapping and brushing her stack of dishes. He took two steps toward her back door when he said, in a lower and sadder voice: “You’re not coming.”

“No.”

“I understand.”

“I don’t know if you do, Doctor.”

He turned around and gave her one of those distracted smiles; the ones that had a deep hollow of sorrow beneath them. “Of course I do. I’m glad you’re happy, Maggie. In this universe it’s less likely than it deserves to be.”

A moment later, the TARDIS vanished. She was distracted enough that when Hank returned, she didn’t immediately answer.

“Oh Maggie, don’t scare me like that.” He pressed her against himself.

She felt self-conscious. Would he know? Could he sense that the Doctor had been here, held her almost that exact same way?

“Is everything all right?”

“Yes,” she said quickly. “And better yet, it always has been.”

We must end Maggie’s story there. But as the Doctor noted, the temporal flux may yet change things. To see what would have happened if Maggie had answered the phone, go back to Section 5. Or

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if you wish to join one of the other strands of the story, you can go to Section 1 (on Gallifrey) or Section 7 (in the Huxley Union).

7

In the whole of the Huxley Union, there were few women more powerful—or more miserable—than Chief Justiciar Xaul Gertjaars. As her title implied, it was Justiciar Gertjaars’ job to oversee and enforce the Three Emperors’ Justice throughout the planets in the Union—which spanned three star systems, far across the universe from the Milky Way. Forty years she had held this position. That meant forty years of unpleasant space travel through the dangerous nebulae

between the Union's systems. It meant forty years of meting out harsh and brutal judgements for crimes as specious as insufficient contribution to the Union's coffers or uprisings among local ethnic groups. It meant, in all likelihood, that Xaul would never fulfil her life's other ambitions, achieve her dreams beyond her career, live for herself rather than the accursed Union.

As she crossed from the spaceport to Frontier City's Hall of Justice—to hear a case of murder of one of the Prime Planet's Gendarmes, with some anti-Union contraband smuggling charges tacked on—Xaul considered her fate while her subordinate, Parajustice Veral, provided the sort of breezy advice people who don't understand a person's woes often give.

"I don't understand why you put up with all this," Veral sighed. "Forty years is a long time. Why not step aside and let your son take over?"

"My son." Xaul thought of the young fellow on the Prime Planet, entertaining his dreams of a different career. He had even spoken of leaving the Union altogether, hopping on one of the dangerous refugee runs beyond the frontier. Such people were rarely heard from again, and

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certainly never returned to Huxley. As much as it would break Xaul's heart never to see or hear from that inspiring young man again, she hoped he would have the bravery to do it. It was the bravery she lacked. "You're a bright young legal mind. Tell me Veral, if my son didn't take up the position, what would happen?"

Veral sucked air through her lips in admission of defeat. "I'm afraid I have no idea. It hasn't happened since the Imperial feuds, nearly five centuries ago."

"Well, I've read up on that particular chapter of our history. It nearly caused civil war, and resulted in even more power being shored up in the Emperors' hands." Xaul didn't say aloud that any more power in the emperors' hands these days would be decidedly harmful to the Union.

As if sympathetically, she felt a twinge below her wrist. She cringed at the pain, and all the joints in her hand stiffened. Embarrassingly, all six of the hand's fingers had splayed.

Veral could not have failed to notice. "You're in pain, Chief Justiciar. Let me have a look."

Xaul shoved the hand in her coat pocket. "No! Please. It's ... just a touch of joint pain, in the bones. Nothing to worry about."

"I know an old remedy, if I could just have a look—"

"Please, Veral," Xaul insisted firmly. "Don't fuss. When you get to my age, you'll understand that there's nothing more humiliating than being coddled. Let's get on with our duties here. It would be nice to return to the homeworld by the end of the week."

"Very good, Chief Justiciar." Veral knew it was unwise to arouse the ire of her superior, and even trying to seem helpful would be no salvation if her favour turned away. So she bowed and sat at one of the judicial consoles, assimilating all the data in the case. Xaul found a quiet corner of the Hall of Justice, and looked around. Satisfied she would not be disturbed, she clicked shut the heavy marble door and examined that pesky hand more closely.

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She pulled away the casing and looked at the rusting circuitry beneath. A cable slipped loose and, with her left hand (the organic one, which actually did have achy joints), she frantically tried to plug the twisting cable back into place.

As the stiff circuitry flopped around like a listless fish, Xaul tried to remember the last time the limb had been repaired. Was that shady black market cybernetics expert still around? Or had one of her parajustices put the old reprobate out of business permanently?

She froze at the sound of a throat clearing behind her.

“Ahem.”

She stuffed her hand back into her coat pocket, whirled around and assumed her full imperious posture. Had this man—this intruder who had entered restricted chambers without even being announced—really cleared his throat and then said the word ‘Ahem’?

Xaul narrowed her eyes to appraise this intruder. He stood a little below the average height for a Hux, with a smooth and young face. His dark skin had a faint glow against the light of the afternoon suns. He wore strange garb unlike the neat tunics and coarse fabrics common on this world, or the more refined looks of the Hub World: a vivid purple coat of soft and luxurious material that reached his ankles, a round-necked maroon sweater whose ribbed collar was stretched and fraying, a watchcap of the same colour clinging to his scalp, and scuffed hard-wearing grey corduroy trousers and sturdy olive-green lace-up boots. More troubling than these off-world garments was his casual, indifferent posture: not standing to attention, hands jammed in his pockets, eyes roving around the space with no deference to her and with insolent curiosity.

Xaul couldn’t think of anything to say. She stood there glowering at the intruder.

He flashed an infuriating smile. “Cat got your tongue?”

“How dare you—”

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“Oh, fairly easily,” he interrupted. “I take it I’m addressing the Chief Justiciar of the Huxley Union?”

She nodded, and added, “Xaul Gertjaars, sir. And you are?”

He retrieved his hand from the frogmouth pocket of the trousers and reached out in some unfamiliar greeting. “The Doctor.”

Without thinking, Xaul reached out and gripped the extended hand, and was further disconcerted when this young upstart ran his long fingers along the knuckles and palm. “Very good workmanship. You must have gone out of the system to get this done.”

She snatched her hand back. “What do you know about it?”

“I know that cybernetic implants were banned in the Decrees of the Two-Hundredth Imperiad, even for parajustices. Some fear of robotic uprising, wasn’t it?” He gave the limb a studied glance. “Rather harsh, really, as I’m sure you wouldn’t have got this little job unless you suffered a great deal.”

“I did. A counter-revolutionary cut my hand off when I was held hostage during the Punitive Wars.” Xaul looked to the floor. “At the time all I could think of was the pain. I didn’t agree with the Emperors’ revenge.”

“You haven’t agreed with a lot of the Emperors’ ruling, have you?”

She flinched automatically, then remained silent and stony-faced. For a second she was terrified Veral would come in and interpret this conversation as plotting. But she could quite easily have arrested him, surely? Unless this was some kind of test, and Veral and this young stranger were both working to catch her out?

“What is the underground saying?” the Doctor continued. “Your successes are their successes, their failures are your failures?”

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Xaul's eyes widened. She considered this casual sedition, and the numerous other offences the man was committing in his little chat, but she was intrigued enough to want more information before summarily sentencing him. "What do you want?"

"Well, a favour actually. I was wondering if you might be able to declare a mistrial in this little case you're prosecuting this afternoon."

"A mistrial?" She sneered. "Why would I possibly do such a thing? It's open and shut."

"Well then, why not open and shut it again?"

Xaul found herself boiling with rage at the simple suggestion; even more enraging was the fact that she often wondered why she didn't use her position to declare more mistrials, draw attention to more of the Huxley Union's slide into feudal despotism. For this stranger to so glibly question her own thought processes infuriated her.

"Do you have any compelling reasons why I should, Doctor?"

"Certainly!" He grinned, remaining oblivious to her rising temper. "I have reason to believe the poor rebel you have in custody has been falsely accused. The guards, as far as I can tell, were ordered to pin the blame on him so the poor chap couldn't make public what he'd discovered."

Another involuntary flinch escaped Xaul's face. How could he know their investigations? How could he know her part in them? For a moment she thought he might be that computer hacker she had tried to track, the one connected with this very trial. Whatever the case, if she knew the lengths she had gone to, he might try to use that knowledge to blackmail her. Truly, it would be as good for her as the Gendarmes if a guilty verdict were reached. She calmed herself again, and pressed the stranger for more information. "And what had he discovered, then?"

"Well, I've not had much luck finding out, but I thought with the Chief Justiciar's assistance?" He grinned wickedly. "What do you say, Xaul? How about a little adventure with a stranger?"

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"I'm seventy-two," Xaul replied wearily. "I'm too old for adventures."

"I thought the same thing when I was seven hundred and seventy-two, and I don't want to tell you how many centuries ago that was. Now come on!" He whirled on the spot and opened the door, holding it open for her. "You know there's some mystery, something wrong at the heart of your mighty Huxley Union." Before she could open her mouth to object, he continued, "Don't deny knowledge, Justiciar. You've suspected it for some time. The Emperors know something but they won't share it with you ... the people who find anything out conveniently disappear or get sentenced to death or hard labour ... and the system keeps grinding on."

"What is, is," she reasoned.

"What is ... is wrong," the Doctor countered emphatically.

She toyed with her communicator-link. Veral and two guards could have been there in an instant, and she could have another trial, and a clear-cut guilty verdict, on her record. One week later, she would be back home, maybe to find her son gone already, maybe to find another unjust case demanding immediate prosecution on her desk ...

"Doctor ... what did you say your name was?" she asked archly.

"I didn't. Now are you going to make your mind up or not?"

What do you think? If Xaul gives in to her suspicions and trusts the Doctor, go to Section 8. If she obeys her calling and calls the guards, go to Section 9.

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Veral looked up, and frowned. Her superior was walking away with an oddly dressed man. Slightly disconcertingly, the parajustice had no idea how this man had got into Xaul's chambers; even more disconcertingly, the Justiciar seemed curiously blasé.

"Chief Justiciar Gertjaars," Veral said slowly. "Is everything all right?"

"New evidence has come to light," Xaul replied primly. "I am going with this gentleman to look into it. In the meantime, I wish you to act in my stead and declare a mistrial."

"A mistrial? But that hasn't been declared in ..." Veral trailed off and puffed her cheeks in frustration. "I can't even think of the last time off the top of my head."

"Well declare it now, then," Xaul said angrily. "You know better than to contradict me, I think. And this may be important."

The mysterious man flashed an insouciant smile at Veral as he dashed out of the Hall of Justice. She shook her head and began inscribing the declaration microforms. She had a feeling this would be a long day ...

Xaul couldn't help smirking as the bartender gracelessly slammed down a cracked earthenware jug and three grimy flasks, filled to the brim with a bog-coloured liquid. She looked over at the Doctor, and in his face caught her first glimpse of this stranger's background. For he looked from the jug to the humourless publican, arched an eyebrow, and asked squeamishly, "So you definitely don't have any tea then?"

"Root-hooch," the man gruffly replied before loping away to attend to some violent noises from the gaming tables.

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The Doctor shrugged. "Oh well. I'll be mother then, shall I?" He poured the muddy alcohol into the three goblets. To add insult to injury the bartender had not sufficiently stirred it, causing some sediment lumps to tumble out and splash in with the liquid. The sediment and the drink coagulated to give the effluent-coloured beverage a rusty grey head of foam. Thin trails of fermented steam sizzled off the top. The Doctor took one last sniff of it. His face lost its colour slightly.

"I might have guessed," Xaul chuckled.

"What?"

"Well, you may be an adventurer or an explorer or something, but you come from a refined background. Not used to dirty dives and noxious alcoholic beverages."

His nostrils flared. "I'll have you know I drank LSD-laced tea with Janis Joplin once."

"Yes, but you come from luxury. An aristocrat by nature. It's obvious." To prove her point, Xaul palpated the soft fabric of the Doctor's coat in the thumb and forefinger of her cybernetic hand. She nodded. Suitably luxurious, she thought. "You can't hide it ... no matter how much you wish to."

The Doctor regarded her stonily, but did not reply. Xaul knew she was right and raised her glass cheerily. The root-hooch burned on the way down—just like she remembered.

The scrawny frontiersman who was the third member of their party looked from the Doctor to Xaul with bewilderment. This was the accused man, Frinx. The Doctor registered his puzzlement, and raised his goblet. “Oh I do beg your pardon. Let’s toast your mistrial, then, shall we?”

He touched the glass to his lips, but then thought better of it. “Don’t see why I should drink with a rotten Justiciar.”

“You should consider yourself lucky you got away with your life,” Xaul replied haughtily.

“Now now, Xaul,” the Doctor snapped. “The poor chap’s right. The charges were trumped up, and the legal process in this whole corrupt star system is downright medieval.”

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“Doctor, mind your words—even this far out the Huxley Union can prosecute you for such sentiments.”

“Then perhaps you’d prefer we drank to the health of the Emperors?” His mouth curled in satisfaction as he saw Xaul’s glum expression. “Ah, I suspected there was a trace of bitterness there. I’m glad it’s enough that you might be curious to uncover the truth.”

“The dreams,” Frinx blurted.

The Doctor beamed. “Yes, Frinx, what do you know about them?”

He took a hesitant sip of the root-hooch. It was clear that the very memory was painful. “I’d rather not say ... especially with a homeworlder here.” Another poisonous glance darted toward Xaul.

“I think you may find she has more in common with you than you think. Let’s try to put this animosity behind us, eh?” The Doctor raised his own glass. “Down the hatch!”

All three drank—Frix to ease his uncertainty, Xaul to stimulate herself, and the Doctor with the hesitance of a foreign dignitary who wonders if he’s about to be poisoned.

Xaul and Frinx both studied his reaction. For a few moments he sat stock-still, as if the strong and possibly poisonous alcohol had paralysed him. Then his eyes widened, and his nostrils flared from the beverage’s rough spices. He coughed and wheezed, and then most indignant of all he let out a massive involuntary belch.

They looked at each other. The bartender looked their way as well and cried out to the rest of the drinkers: “An off-worlder’s had his first taste of root-hooch!”

As one the entire bar burst into laughter. Xaul and Frinx looked at each other and joined along. She marvelled at the man; through his acting out, whether deliberately or not, he had managed to get them to share a moment.

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“Well,” the Doctor said hoarsely, his face still a little red. “Now that I’ve agreeably made a jackass of myself, why don’t we carry on with your account, Frinx?”

Frix’s face lost its good humour, and suddenly his eyes widened in recognition. “I’ve met your kind before, haven’t I?”

“Very possibly. I came here because of temporal distortions.”

“And you think they relate to these dreams?” Xaul interrupted.

“So you know of them too?” the Doctor asked.

“Well, it’s common knowledge. Especially out in the frontier. Our scientists say it’s probably a side effect of that nebula.” She sniffed. “I don’t condescend to consider such fairy tales.”

The Doctor ignored her, returning to Frinx. “But what’s inside the nebula, eh?” he pressed. “You know, don’t you Frinx? And they don’t want you saying anything.”

Frix took another, larger swig of the root-hooch. “The dreams ... the person calling for help ... the other one, your friend, he was after it too.” Frinx scowled in the direction of Xaul. “For the record, he was the one who killed the Gendarme and gave me all those illegal credits.”

“Why did he want to go out there?” Xaul asked.

“So he could get away with it.”

The Doctor leaned forward, his interest piqued. “With what? This person you met, my ‘friend’ ... did he call himself ‘the Master’?”

“He did.”

“Typical. And he was looking for what was buried in that nebula too?”

“Yes. I barely got away. I figured if I did stay, he’d happily leave me to die.”⁸

“Very astute, Frinx. Yes, that’s his style.”

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“Why didn’t you mention this ‘Master’ when you turned yourself in?” Xaul asked. “You might have got some leniency.”

“I gladly took the rap for his crimes! I would have been happy to rot in prison.” He shuddered. “Anything but go back out into that nebula.”

The Doctor swallowed. “But the Master didn’t find what he was looking for?” “No I don’t think so. Unless he did while I was rotting in jail.”

The Doctor shook his head. “The distortion’s still live. Whatever’s in there is still active. And I’ll wager it’s there deliberately. A trap most likely.”

Xaul bristled. “A trap?”

“Oh yes. When you’ve been trapped as many times as I have you get a sixth sense for them. Or maybe a seventh ...”

“But why walk into the trap?” Xaul asked urgently.

The Doctor blinked, like a child being asked why he stole a cookie. “Well, what else can I do?”

“There’s a saying in our union, Doctor. ‘Curiosity killed the crelk’.”

“How original.” The Doctor took another, more tentative sip of the root-hooch. “So, what say we finish our drinks and see about chartering a shuttle out to the nebula? If we set off straightaway we’ll get there in two days.”

“Why not use my official Justiciar’s star-skiff?”

The Doctor slapped his forehead. “Ah, yes, quite! Better still. That’ll get us there in half the time. It really does pay to have friends in high places. Well, what do you say Frinx? Ready to go?”

⁸ See *Brief Encounters: Jack of All Trades*.

Frinx regarded the traveller with unconcealed contempt. “Back to that cursed nebula? Haven’t you listened to a damned word I’ve been saying? Back to the place that nearly drove me out of my mind ...”

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The Doctor nodded. “I understand, Frinx. But there’s something about this place ... the truth must be uncovered. For your sake, and for all your people’s.”

Frinx poured out the particularly putrid dregs of the root-hooch and frowned. “Well ... maybe after another jug.”

Xaul and Frinx laughed once again at the Doctor’s ashen expression.

The star-skiff launched from the Frontier Spaceport a mere two cycles later. The Doctor immediately staggered into one of the modest cabins and collapsed into a recuperative sleep. He hadn’t felt this wretched since that time he accidentally took magic mushrooms during his tussle in Aztec times with Quetzalcoatl ... that should have taught him about dabbling with local hallucinogens. But he had always believed that if you stop making mistakes, you stop having adventures.

He awoke feeling a little more settled. Donning his fisherman’s sweater and his greatcoat, he strolled out to the flight deck. In one corner, Frinx lay in a hastily erected camp-bed, sleeping off his last couple of root-hooches. In the cockpit’s centre, Xaul and her trusted navigator Perniz sat at the controls. He had to admire her tenacity. Ahead of them on the ship’s viewscreen, the eerily lifeless sector of space scrolled by at twice the speed of light.

Xaul nodded to him, and couldn’t help flashing him a smirk. “Feeling better, Doctor? You still look a little peaky.”

“Yes, yes,” he replied tetchily. “To be honest, I don’t even blame the alcohol.”

“Oh? What, then?”

“It’s this sector of space ... I haven’t travelled much to this corner of the universe. Rather ... haunted. I can understand why your people have these troubling dreams.”

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Perniz glanced at the stranger with a flicker of suspicion. Xaul wondered how far the pilot’s discretion would extend. The Justiciar couldn’t even trust Veral with her worries, and perhaps Perniz would be the same. Ultimately one couldn’t trust anyone in the Huxley Union—if one had any kind of important position. It made Xaul all the more baffled that she had so thoroughly trusted this scruffy, mysterious stranger. She hoped she would not regret this trust. While she was pondering this, she thought she might as well settle another point of curiosity. “Tell me Doctor, you presumably visited Huxley in a ship of your own? One of considerable power, to arrive undetected and from such a distance.”

“Yes, she is rather.”

“So why not take it? Why not explore this nebula yourself? Why rope poor Frinx, myself, and my navigator into your little quest?”

“Because it’s a trap.”

“Yes, you said that earlier ...” Her stare hardened. “Are we bait then?”

“No. Despite the sweater, I’m not much of a fisherman. If I took my ship, then they’d know it was me ... I’m worried they, whoever they are, want my ship. It can go ... well let’s say it can go farther than any vessel you’re familiar with. And thus it can do a great deal more damage in the wrong hands. No, it’s better I stay under the radar, as it were.” He glanced down from the viewer to her. “Satisfied?”

“Not particularly.”

“I don’t blame you. But you have my word that I’ll keep you safe. All of you.”

“At my age, Doctor, you tend to need more certain assurances than words.”

“Well, if it’s money you’re after, I’ll have to disappoint ...”

“No, not money. Something I can believe in ...”

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To Xaul’s irritation, Perniz interrupted their conversation to inform them that they had detected something in the nebula. After some scanning, the results came through. “Good Emperor, Frinx was right.”

“Did you doubt him?”

“Well yes, frankly. I thought he was half-stupid from his life of crime, and you were a naïve dupe to believe him. Be fair, how could I have believed this?” She flung her cybernetic arm at the instrument panel. “A ship of that size, and our explorers never detected it?”

Perniz glowered. “I’ve heard tales in my time on the space-lanes ... that they did know about it. That those lost ships and crashed space-darts were to cover up the real story.”

The Doctor rubbed his hands together. “That’s what I thought.”

Xaul stared at the navigator with wide eyes. She was growing tired of saying how stupid she believed people who set store in these tales were. Perniz was different than this silly stranger or that half-witted criminal; Xaul respected her, and genuinely wanted to know why she would not mention such a thing. “If you’ve heard these stories, why not make them public?”

The question sounded laughably naïve aloud, and Perniz merely cleared her throat and returned to the controls.

“A nice, perfectly repressed little autocracy you have there, Xaul,” the Doctor said quietly. “For now anyway. By my reckoning it’ll slip into anarchy in three generations unless you or some other authority figure shakes it up a bit.”

As hateful as she found the system, such talk still rattled Xaul, and she glared at the Doctor. He merely shrugged and turned back to her pilot.

“Well, take us as close as you can, Perniz.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Hop aboard.”

8

“Are you serious?” Xaul cried.

“You got me here, so you don’t have to come along. I’ll have a quick word with Frinx before I go, but I’d appreciate if you waited for me.”

Once again, Xaul didn’t believe she was doing it, but she rose from the star-skiff’s opulent seat and declared, “I’m going with you, Doctor.” She raised her hands to silence his objections, and

those of Perniz. “Quiet down, the pair of you. I’ve come this far. What would be the point of dumping you in the nebula and going back home to answer a lot of embarrassing questions about my mistrial and this unauthorised flight?”

Xaul duly donned a pressure suit and waited in the airlock as the shuttle linked up with the craft. It was hard to fully see, hidden as it was by the twisting space-dust and shimmering clouds of the nebula. But it was larger than any spacecraft Xaul had ever seen; and rather than alloys and corrugated metals, it appeared to be carved from shining, glowing glass—which made it catch the light from the nebula in unsettling ways. The jagged turrets and pods stuck inelegantly onto the side gave it a worryingly violent look. The glow at the ship’s heart was a sickly amber—the colour of Hux blood.

Frix refused to accompany them. His sleep had not been good, and he was plagued with the same nightmares. “What did they say?” the Doctor asked.

“Something about an old friend, waiting ... I’m sure ‘waiting’ was repeated.”

“I wonder ...”

“... if that means anything?” Xaul concluded.

“It just might be some clue ...” The Doctor clapped his hands and stepped into the airlock. Xaul looked him up and down. “What is it? It may not be the most stylish coat, but it’s got plenty of pockets.”

8

“No, not that, aren’t you going to wear a suit?”

“Oh no, the atmosphere will be perfectly fine. They’re expecting me after all.”

He strode off through the airlock. Once again she wondered why she was following this fool. But she had come this far. Xaul swallowed and moved to follow him, only to feel the pressure of Perniz’s hand on hers. “My lady, I beg you. Let’s just turn around. This man is dangerous, I can feel it.”

“I agree,” Frinx said.

“I’ve made my decision,” Xaul said firmly. “And for better or for worse, a Justiciar’s decision is always final.”

They paced through the dim, honeycomb-like corridors of the hulking ship. They too glowed, but with more of the rancid yellow light that put Xaul instinctively on edge.

She was startled by a distant humming. “What was that? Are we moving?”

“No,” the Doctor replied airily. “Your star-skiff’s leaving.”

“What?” Xaul dashed back to the end of the corridor, to the airlock through which they had come. Her knees ached from the exertion. There were no windows, and she longed to look outside and see the familiar, elegant dart-shaped vessel interlocking with this one. But instead, her horror was confirmed when she saw the great glass door sealed shut, and only the starless purple clouds of the nebula beyond.

She returned to the Doctor, who was blithely examining a dormant instrument panel. “What the—?”

“Oh Xaul, use your head! Perniz was loyal to you, but Frinx was itching to get out of here. He said himself he’d rather spend life in prison than return here. But I couldn’t leave him alone.” The Doctor looked at the floor guiltily, before adding, “I still didn’t fully appreciate what effect the voices

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had on him. I had to get to the truth and I wouldn’t listen. Those nightmares have made the poor fellow half-crazed ...”

“But Perniz...” She felt the twisting knife of betrayal; that young pilot had been with Xaul for years, and she would have trusted her with anything.

“You must know that by now,” the Doctor said airily. “Loyalty is no substitute for friendship. I’m sure she’ll feel badly about it all the way back home.”

“But what about us?”

“Oh we’ll be fine. See?” He was patting an unremarkable section of the bulkhead, with a narrow hatchway.

“What is that?”

“Believe it or not, it’s our way out of here. A Model-Seventy-Three TARDIS.”

Xaul looked at the lumpy outcropping of metal, indistinguishable from the surrounding ironwork. “It’s just some part of the ship! There’s even a vent sticking out of the side.”

“It just looks like that ...” He walked around the bulkhead, marvelling. Xaul couldn’t for the life of her see what he was seeing. “I can see they’ve upgraded the plasmic shell with added distortion-proofing. You might call this the GT version.”

“Another reference that means nothing to me,” Xaul said with a scowl.

“Sorry, I guess I’ve picked up a few too many Earth expressions over the years.” He ran his hand up and down a rusty patch as though it were some luxurious fabric. “Not a patch on mine of course, but one has to admire it on a dimensional-engineering level ...”

She swallowed. This man was downright infuriating, and she couldn’t even write him off as a madman because he had been right so far. She wished she had walked out of his life when she had the chance. “Well, how do you get inside?”

8

“I might be able to ...” He ran his index finger around the hatchway, but stopped and shook his head. “Another improvement—enhanced isometrics. We’ll need the key or the ship’s rightful owner to get past them. Let’s just hope the fellow who landed this here is still aboard.” His nostrils quivered. “But unless my senses deceive me, he is.” His features momentarily clouded over at this thought. But then he shook his head and smiled at her, irritatingly oblivious to her panic and fury at being stranded. “Oh well. Best foot forward then, eh Xaul?”

Xaul lost track of time, the only indicator being the ache in her knee growing more pronounced and the edge in her mind growing sharper. Finally, she insisted that they stop. They stepped

inside some kind of long-abandoned stateroom, and she took a seat on a large, ornate throne. It felt unpleasantly stiff and crunchy against her.

“You don’t have to wait with me,” she said.

“I think I do,” the Doctor replied softly. “I got you into this after all. If anything happened to you, my name would be mud with the Hux back home, wouldn’t it?” He paced on the spot for a moment, taking in the nebular view through a large arched porthole. “I wonder if your people’s narrow perspective comes from this view. Even outside the nebula it’s a fairly starless sky, isn’t it?”

“So what?”

“No stars, no empty night sky to look up and wonder. Only clouds, opacity, darkness ...” He shrugged. “Would have been nice to have Perniz here, though, eh? We could have heard more of her ghost stories.” He flashed an angry glance back at her. “It’s a terrible thing to suppress knowledge.”

She couldn’t help but snap back, “You call that knowledge? Of course there are superstitions, Doctor, but we’re trying to progress.”

8

“Not from what I’ve seen. Your society hasn’t advanced an inch. It’s downright inhibited at this stage. Rolling back, farther and farther, its people more afraid, miserable, and worse, full of hate for each other the longer you and your fellow authorities hold them back.”

“Even if I were to take that point—which I don’t!” She snapped the index finger of her cybernetic hand to attention to underline her objection. “That isn’t my fault.”

“Oh come on, Justiciar! Stand up for your achievements! Traitors punished. Dissidence suppressed. Order maintained. What more can one ask of a career like yours?”

She knew he was goading her. But somehow Xaul felt a rush of pleasure in screaming in response: “You think that’s how I want to be remembered? I’ve lived and worked my whole life to see the system get worse and worse, Well, this may be news for you Doctor, but ...” She couldn’t believe she was saying it, but the words flowed out of her almost of their own volition: “I hate the system. I hate the emperors!”

The treacherous statement echoed, even extending outside the room and down the spacecraft’s dark hall. She leaned back in the uncomfortable chair and sighed. She felt an icy chill.

“Are you sure?” the Doctor asked quietly.

She looked around; even all this distance away she expected some goons to burst out of the wall and arrest her. But there was only silence, and so after a moment she said, to her immense surprise: “Yes. Yes dammit. I feel surer of it than anything in my whole life.”

“Feels good to say that, doesn’t it?” the Doctor asked.

“You’ve no idea. Look at me Doctor. You see a woman whose life has slipped away enforcing meaningless laws. Suppressing the innocent for speaking the truth while allowing lies and liars to rule. Reinforcing corruption, greed, and yes, stifling progress.” She waved her mechanical fist in his face. “By my own laws I’d have been in one of the labour camps years ago for this rusty piece of hardware. How could I possibly endorse it? And yet I have. Over and over again, I’ve stood up and

8

been counted, preserved the heinous state of affairs and ignored my duty. But you have to understand ... what can one person do, even if she's as highly placed as me?" She sighed, running the hydraulic digits through her rubbery scalp. "That's what I've really learned. To give up. To get on with my miserable life so that my son might escape."

The Doctor looked around the empty room, suddenly uncomfortable.

"Well, Doctor? Nothing to say? Well, you did ask." With some effort, she caught his gaze. "What about your home, Doctor? Is it a fair and democratic society? We've heard of a few, but they have little contact with the Hux."

"Fair and democratic ... far from it," he admitted. "It's probably even more insufferable—" He suddenly reeled, falling backward. Xaul leapt from the chair and grabbed him before he collided head-first with a sharp sculpture jutting from a corner of the room.

"What was that?"

"Didn't you feel it?"

"What? If it's the overwhelming dread ..."

"No, something more than that. More ... what's the word?" He smiled thinly. "Personal. Perhaps you're not sensitive enough to pick it up."

"What?"

"I'm sensing alternatives. Time in flux. I'm getting glimpses of alternative actions, roads not taken, choices in the past and the future that are different." He closed his eyes. "Affecting you, me, even Maggie ..."

"Who?"

The Doctor ignored her, eyes still closed in the midst of this vision. "I see an alternative where you didn't join me. Where we aren't here right now. It ended very differently for both of us ..."

8

"That sounds sinister." Xaul backed toward the door, keeping the Doctor leaning on her shoulder. "Well, we should probably press on then."

When they arrived at the room at the end of the corridor, Xaul wondered if it might have been the reason for the Doctor's funny turn.

It contained rows of glass-fronted sarcophagi. It was hard to see through the glass, but most of them appeared to be empty, aside from one. When Xaul pointed it out to the Doctor, the mysterious man's eyes narrowed in what she immediately saw was recognition. He knew whoever was inside.

She looked down at the placid, sleeping face, a pallid, middle-aged man with a shadow of beard stubble on his stern, un-handsome face. His fussy, patterned clothing resembled the Doctor's, and marked him out as a fellow alien. "Is he dead?"

"No. He's been put into suspended animation. The crew here, those ghosts getting into our heads ... they wanted me to find him."

"Why are the other pods empty?"

“Good question. I wish I knew more about the civilisation that launched these blasted Lifeships. Somehow they came and went without getting into my people’s records. How was that possible?”

Xaul indicated the man in the sarcophagus. “It looks like you recognised him. Is this man the friend of yours you mentioned? The ... Master?”

“No. The Master’s a washed-out old renegade like me. This chap, on the other hand ... he’s one of the new brood.” The Doctor’s lips curled in bald-faced revulsion. “He’s a real rising young star back home. He called himself the Waiter.”

8

She looked again at the chubby, pale face with its tufts of dark, thin hair. It was odd to see the Doctor, who even by Hux standards looked objectively young and handsome, consider himself old compared to this unremarkable-looking, aging individual.

A mild frown etched on the Doctor’s forehead as he studied the man. “He’s regenerated since I last saw him, but there’s no mistaking that arrogant aura. You see, that was what Frinx was warning me about with ‘waiting’. Huh.” He squatted next to the control panel. “Oh well, may as well defrost him. He’s our best way out of here.”

As he manipulated the crystalline rods uncertainly, Xaul sensed movement from a dark, red-bathed corner of the chamber. “Doctor, I heard something.”

“Just a sec, Xaul. Be with you tout de suite.” His fingers danced along the keys, cranked at the levers, but nothing seemed to be happening.

Xaul knew she should stay, but she felt an irresistible urge to find the source of the distant sounds.

If Xaul goes to investigate the sounds, go to Section 10. If she stays with the Doctor, go to Section 11.

9

Veral looked up, and frowned as her superior appeared on the communicator-link.

“Chief Justiciar Gertjaars,” Veral said slowly. “Is everything all right?”

9

“No, it isn’t! There’s an intruder loose in the building! Seal all the exits and make sure he doesn’t get out!”

Veral moved to obey, but the perimeter scans showed no additional people on the site. She flatly indicated this to the Justiciar. A moment later Xaul emerged, hovering over her desk balling her arthritic fists. Veral noticed she was claspings the right one in the left, but thought nothing of it.

“He escaped. Alert all the Sector Security.”

She did so, but nothing came of it. Worse, the Doctor had tripped the cell blocks, freeing the accused man. The same technical wizardry he had used to evade their scans had come in handy when freeing Frinx.

With no trial to conduct, Xaul and Veral sadly had no choice but to return to the homeworld and report on their failure.

It was only decades later that the whole truth of the situation in the Huxley Union was revealed to its people. It took the Doctor a little longer without Xaul Gertjaars on his side, but he started the ball rolling. By the end of the century, the planets that made up the Huxley Union were suing for separation and establishing their own governments. The three emperors had long since died and the central administration had collapsed amid corruption and strife.

However, Xaul had passed away many years before these revelations were made public and this change effected. Only when she was buried was her shameful secret—that cybernetic hand—revealed to the duly shocked next of kin. That did not include her son, however; one of her last acts had been to delete his identity from the United Database. He had long since fled for a new life.

The position of Chief Justiciar passed along to a great-nephew—though barely ten years old, by custom he had to begin his work straight away. He was the last to hold the post in the handful of remaining planets of the Holy Huxley Union—as it had restyled itself in a last-ditch attempt to find

9

favour with its people through religious purity. It was only a few scant years before even these hold-out planets finally collapsed into revolution and painful rebirth as disparate, democratic states.

This is one end to Xaul's story. Perhaps you would like to see what happened if she went along with the Doctor; in which case turn to Section 8. Or you can go back to Gallifrey (in Section 1) or Revelstoke (Section 2), or the Lifeship (Section 4).

10

As he pressed the last button, the Doctor looked across proudly. “How'd you like that Xaul? A fairly simple bit of dynaspheric—” He cut himself off mid-stream; to his irritation, there was nobody there to hear his explanation. Xaul had left to investigate the sounds coming from just outside the suspension chamber.

Every step the Justiciar took felt mechanical and lifeless. She didn't feel in control of her own movement; it was as if she was being pulled along on a string. She only hoped when she reached the destination, some self-will would return and this odd, possessed feeling would leave her.

She froze in terror as she saw the two crude lumps of furry flesh, with their angular, hammer-shaped heads, standing head and shoulders above her. Their bodies were grotesque enough, but she was also taken aback by the shock of the seemingly empty and ghostly ship apparently inhabited by such substantial entities.

10

The two shambling figures lunged at Xaul, and finally she had the presence of mind to dart back the way she came.

But it was too late, and her run was too slow. Around her ankle she felt the vise-like grip of a bovine arm. Xaul struggled, but the other figure loomed over her.

Worse than the clutches of these two creatures was the insistent voice, burrowing into her mind.

Take us to the Doctor, it demanded, repeating that command over and over.

“Why?”

You must be on our side. We’ve shaped your entire culture from this prison. Free us from our confinement, end our suffering.

Xaul knew that the voice was disingenuous, yet she remembered the Doctor’s words. It filled her with anger to think of her life, and her son’s life, and the mistakes she had made obeying the futile system of the Huxley Union, had all stemmed from these disembodied voices trapped inside this ship.

She resolved to disobey them—or even more emphatically, to reject their influence, to never give in to their demands. She wriggled toward a large lever on a nearby wall.

She felt the alarm in the disembodied intelligence, saw the mindless creatures desperately clawing after her. No! Don’t do it Xaul!

But she pulled the lever, and her last sight was tumbling into the cold majesty of the nebula, the furry creatures writhing, struggling uselessly in space. As sad as she was to find her life end in this way, Xaul felt some relief that whatever malign presence inhabited the Lifeship would not hurt her people or her son again.

Xaul’s noble action ends this story here. Why not go to Section 11 and see if it turned out any better if she had stayed near the Doctor?

11

As he pressed the last button, the Doctor looked across proudly. “How’d you like that, Xaul? A fairly simple bit of dynaspheric chrono-stasis.”

For her part, the Justiciar had felt itchy and uncomfortable standing on the spot, but suppressed her instinct to investigate the distant sounds. She felt remote and detached, as if out of her body, and stood still with that numb feeling, watching the Doctor open the glass case and help

his stocky countryman out of it. He looked from her to him, and blinked. What he said, groggily as he regained his senses, was not what Xaul expected.

“What in Rassilon’s name took you so long?” he barked, with sudden, vehement irritation.

“What?” snapped the Doctor equally hotly.

“They’ve been waiting for you.”

“Shame they weren’t waiting for you. It would make sense of that silly title you picked for yourself. Unless you’ve decided to do the universe a favour and get into the service industry.” He indicated Xaul. “I know my friend here could use a stiff glass of root-hooch.”

“You haven’t lost your talent for vulgar chit-chat, I see, Doctor.”

“Nor you for witless bluntness. So Waiter, what brings you here? On a mission for Gallifrey’s finest stuffed shirts? Or is this just a bit of sight-seeing?”

The Waiter smoothed out his paddock jacket and snorted. “I was heartily punished after our last little tussle, Doctor.” He ran a hand along his cheek. “Forced regeneration ... loss of my rank and privilege ... a life stuck in the cellar covering temporal monitoring.” So you stole a

TARDIS and came here? Surprisingly industrious of you, young fellow ...” The Doctor’s voice dropped as he admonished, “But also very foolish. We don’t know anything about the people who built these

11

Lifeships and from last time, I learned enough to know they’re not friendly.” He turned away from his fellow Time Lord and spread his arms. “Indeed, they trapped you here to get me. If you’d any sense you’d never have taken their bait ... isn’t that right, Pilots?”

Xaul jumped as she saw the two bovine forms, their heads as sharply angled as cleavers, standing behind them, shuffling from hoof to hoof. “These must have been the ... the things I heard.”

The Doctor glanced from one body to the other, with scientific curiosity. “Yes. But they’re harmless enough, eh Waiter?”

“I don’t know,” the younger Time Lord sniffed. “One of them laid me out cold, stuck me in that coffin to wait for you.”

The Doctor shook his head in professorial disdain at his younger colleague. “But you should know from observation. They’re mindless creatures, not much more than animated meat. Catspaws for the people running things.” He prodded the nearest body, which rocked back and forth at the impact. “Would your hosts like to say hello?”

It is a pleasure to meet you Doctor.

The voice was silent, and yet resonated through Xaul’s mind, as she could see it was through the Doctor’s. He cringed at its presence, whereas the other man—the Waiter—reacted with less surprise. He had evidently heard these pilots speak directly into his mind before.

The Doctor massaged his temples. “Well, that is an unpleasant mode of communication. And I’ve been to Tersurus. But beggars can’t be choosers. So you wanted me here, and here I am. What do you want?”

The Waiter broke into a run, but the Doctor anticipated the move and caught him in his arms. “Not so fast, you young fool.”

But you thought you could escape in the Waiter’s time craft, didn’t you Doctor? You did not bring your own, we perceive.

11

“Enough about me. Who am I addressing?”

Savried. I was the initial pilot on this mission. But I grew weary of our long path to new life, so I handed over the control to Toff-Ma, who in turn was succeeded by Binchall. But neither has the stamina to bring us to a new home, so I was forced to take control once again.

“Hmm ...” The Doctor’s face was buried in an instrument panel, and Xaul saw that now-familiar expression of haunted concern on his face, which he was submerging beneath his casual, chatty tone. “And I assume when you left your homeworld, you had bodies? Physical forms of some kind?”

We have them still! They are in the preservation chambers.

“The chambers are empty. Decomposed long ago. Not a design flaw as far as I can tell. The preservation process simply stopped somewhere along the line, due to excessive age. As your meaty servants here would have told you, if they had the will to do so.”

All three of them felt the flash of anger in Savried's consciousness as it assessed what the Doctor said.

No ... no, it cannot be.

The Doctor shook his head. "Yes, I'm afraid the systems on your ship simply weren't designed to keep you alive for the length of time you've been marooned here. The instruments and systems are largely intact, but you ... But you survived in another way."

"What way is that?" the Waiter asked.

"In the myth and folklore of the Hux. Haunting them, keeping a death grip on the Imperial Families, and stultifying their society. Once they'd advanced to space travel, you tried summoning poor souls to the wreck of this ship to try to help you ..." The Doctor looked sadly between Xaul and the Waiter. "Unfortunately, the society you created now fears your voice, knows your influence, and identifies it—correctly, I might add—as a malign one. They know rotters when they see them. The

11

Emperors suspect your death-grip over their every move, but they suppress all mention of it, and the poor souls who get out this far are summarily tried and sentenced before they can make public the rotten secret at the heart of the Huxley Union. Sorry to say, Savried, no one can help you."

What do you mean? thundered Savried's voice, with another painful flash of disbelieving anger.

"I think, deep down, you know. All that's left is your disembodied consciousness. Kept alive by a quirk of the spacecraft's systems. If you can call swirling around a dead ship or scaring the willies out of some poor Hux 'life', that is. The last Lifeship I encountered had a very chatty Pilot ... but that was a long time ago, by the chronology of your people. I regret to say you don't seem to have been so lucky."

You lie! Our people will be preserved! That is the purpose of the Lifeship!

"If so, then the purpose has failed," the Doctor coldly replied. "You've tried to revive a race that has been long extinct. How ironic, the ship has kept every function in order except its most vital one, preserving your race."

He looked downward, saddened at the revelation.

"I don't know if you can comprehend the enormity of your mission's failure. Even my people have no record of your kind. All you are doing is holding back the development of a viable civilisation. A people who should be left to evolve and develop in their own unique way, not carry the sins of your mistakes."

But we can still manifest ourselves ... our purpose might still be saved ...

"How's that?" the Doctor asked.

"Through me," the Waiter replied, as surprised as the Doctor to hit upon the revelation.

The Waiter had a sudden burst of energy, and sprinted out of the chamber. The Doctor wasted no time running after him, with Xaul following close behind.

11

If the Waiter reaches his TARDIS first, go to Section 12. If the Doctor and Xaul get there before him, go to Section 13.

12

The Waiter sighed in relief as he ran his hands along the familiar outer shell of his TARDIS. He patted down the pockets of his paddock jacket to find the key ...

He swallowed.

No sign of it.

He thought back to those early moments of regaining consciousness after the waking death of being in suspended animation. The Doctor had lifted him up. The old rogue must have pickpocketed him! There was no limit to his perfidy!

He did still have his communication-cube. And he had always known the next stage in his plan ... to contact someone who could both help him and persuade the Doctor to take a lenient view on him.

The Waiter knew just the person.

The Waiter inscribed his psychic message and sent it off. In an instant it would be halfway across the universe and thousands of years back in time ... to a commercial telephone number at a hardware store in Revelstoke.

The Waiter looked up to see the Doctor and his new friend rounding the corner.

The Waiter's message is going back in time. To see where it ends up, go to Section 2. To see what he does next, go to Section 13.

13

The Doctor sighed in relief as he ran his hands along the unfamiliar outer shell of the Waiter's TARDIS. He had pilfered the key from the younger Time Lord when he lifted him out of the suspension pod.

"Well, what now?" Xaul asked.

"Now, we get out of here." He jammed his key into the bulkhead and pushed himself and his new friend bodily into the craft. A moment later the Waiter ran up the corridor. From inside, on the advanced ship's wall-sized holographic scanner screen, the Doctor watched him send off a Time Lord signal. If his other deductions were correct, he knew who the little prig was getting in touch with.

Xaul, meanwhile, was taking in the long rectangular control room, running her cybernetic hand along the inset rows of hemispherical wall roundels, and finally circling the five-sided control console, surmounted with a glowing pink sphere that the Doctor identified as a more advanced time rotor. The Doctor sniffed in derision at its molded panels, which interfaced directly with the pilot's psyche. "Typical new model. No character, all gimmicks."

"You have a ship like this?"

"Although the old girl would be insulted by the comparison." The Doctor nodded. "I mean really! Take this psychic interface." He flapped a hand at the sleek panel. "I mean ... what happens if your attention wanders while you set coordinates?"

"What a Luddite attitude," the Waiter's nasal voice called from the doorway.

"What surprises me is why the Time Lords let you take this advanced piece of kit. They didn't let me—I snatched it from under their noses, just like you did all those ages ago."

13

The Doctor rolled his eyes. “Oh really Waiter! Wake up and smell the coffee! Do you really think they just happened to leave this lying around with the door open? Do you know how difficult it was for me to nick my TARDIS? It took considerably more ingenuity than you’re capable of.”

The Waiter thought back to his fortuitous step inside, to the slow response of that Chancellery Guard. “But why ...?”

“That’s what bothers me too.”

Xaul eyed the scanner, and saw in three unwelcome dimensions the approach of those two shambling, buffalo-like creatures with their sharply bifurcated heads. “What bothers me,” she said emphatically, “is how close those two are getting.”

“Well, Waiter?” The Doctor slapped the young man on the back with deliberately insincere camaraderie. “Why don’t you get this crate moving? I’ve a fair idea you know where you want to go.”

Bristling slightly at the unwanted contact, the Waiter pulled away from the Doctor’s grip and smugly slotted his hands into the molded gaps set into the console’s navigation panel. Within moments, the glowing pink sphere in the craft’s middle turned green, the walls were lit in a cerulean blue, and the room filled with the grinding sound of the TARDIS slicing through eternity. Xaul knew wherever they were headed, it was a long way from anywhere she had ever been before.

To see where the Waiter’s message ended up (if you have not already), go to Section 2 or 5. To see where they will take the TARDIS, go to Section 14.

14

There was only one chair in the control room: a charmless metal folding one. But Xaul fell into it with gratitude, rubbing her aching ankles, resting her head back against one of the glowing hemispheres, and closing her eyes for a moment. It had felt like hours had passed aboard that Lifeship, and she still felt the invasive presence of those disembodied voices in her mind. But then, as the Doctor had mentioned earlier, they had extended some malign influence even from the nebula, an influence that sickened and twisted the whole of the Huxley Union. She thought of every command she had thoughtlessly obeyed, every dubious case she had found in favour of the Emperors, for no better reason than the societal precedent, or to uphold what was laughingly called law and order. What sickened her most was that she could not blame every terrible decision she had made, every life she had ruined, on some ghosts hundreds of parsecs away. She had chosen this life, and she had to live with its terrible consequences.

The strange groaning engines started again, and the control room stilled. She opened her eyes, suddenly excited. The Doctor had spent the journey uncomfortably twitchy and prone to pacing—clearly he didn’t approve of the Waiter’s piloting. Now that they landed, he seemed unburdened. He looked across at Xaul, then over at the large double-doors whirring open. “Well? Don’t you want to see another time, another place?”

She felt rejuvenated, and bounded past him through those doors.

Outside was a marvellous bucolic setting. Charming dwellings lined the hilly street, with trees of a colour and size Xaul had never seen before. The TARDIS had changed its shape to match one of these trees. Ahead in the distance, a majestic mountain loomed. The sky was a

vivid summery blue, specked with grey clouds. The colours were more vibrant and charming—fresher, somehow—than the reds and purples she was used to on her homeworld.

14

The Doctor and the Waiter emerged from the small gap in the trunk of the tree. The older Time Lord had his hands thrust in the pockets of his grey corduroy trousers, and was studying the younger man. For his part, the Waiter was shiftier than ever, fidgeting and rubbing at his neck, looking up at the sky and around as if he expected a troop of Justiciars to descend on him at any moment. And Xaul realised that he did—but something more terrible than her own law enforcement. He had come here to flee the judgement of his own people.

“Well, Waiter?” asked the Doctor. “What’s next?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” he answered evasively.

“Yes you do. You’re sick, Waiter. The Time Lords will be along to collect you soon, so why not go quietly?”

“Sick?” Xaul repeated.

Before the Doctor could answer, a woman ran out from the nearby dwelling. She looked similar to a Hux, but her face was smaller and rounder, the skin was a pale colour rather than the amber of a Hux, and instead of the long rubbery hair Xaul had, she had a tightly curled dark mane. She was shorter and stockier than a Hux too, and Xaul could see these Time Lords—whether deliberately or not—bore a strong resemblance to these lifeforms. Or perhaps, given the race’s great age, the other way round? But then again, since this ‘Waiter’ had changed his appearance and the Doctor was not even surprised at the fact, who knew if these bodies were even their true forms?

The dark-haired woman lit up at the sight of the Doctor. “Doctor, it’s you! I’m so glad to see you!”

“Mags!” he exclaimed in reply, seizing her in an affectionate bear hug and spinning her on the spot. “You remember the Waiter, of course. He did regenerate since you last saw him.”

She turned to the stocky, dark-haired man shifting on the spot. His eyes widened hopefully, and he smiled. But Xaul and Maggie alike saw something insincere, reptilian, in the friendly pose.

14

Maggie shook her head in wonder. “It’s amazing ... I can see he looks different, but I can tell he’s the same. I can see beneath his face ...”

“Yes, you’ve been hanging out with us Time Lords for far too long.”

“What happened?” she asked the Waiter. “What, uh, what killed you and made your regenerate?”

“I was sentenced to forcible regeneration thanks to you two—”

“Nothing to do with that alliance you forged that nearly destroyed the universe?” she shot back.

The Waiter pouted. “Oh really Maggie, I hoped you of all people might have a little understanding.”

Maggie rolled her eyes and turned from him to Xaul. The Doctor slapped his forehead and cried, “Oh and this is my new friend Xaul Gertjaars, Chief Justiciar of the Huxley Union! Xaul, this is my dear friend, Maggie Weitz.”

“Welcome to Earth,” Maggie said self-consciously, extending a hand.

Xaul took the hand, even more self-conscious to grip it with her cybernetic implant. “It’s a pleasure to be here.”

“Did you do what I asked?” the Waiter inquired sniffily.

“Summon the TARDIS? Yeah, right, Waiter. I wanted to wait to see what the Doctor said.”

“I am wounded by this lack of trust—“ the Waiter began, only to be silenced by a stern glance from the Doctor.

“Good thinking, Maggie,” he complimented.

The Waiter grimaced at her, the pain of his visible illness adding to his growing hostility.

“Why does he need your ship anyway?” Xaul asked. “What’s wrong with that one?” She indicated the elm tree.

14

“The Time Lords will have a trace on it in no time. Probably had one as soon as he left. And having found out what they wanted when they sent him here, they’ll want him back to serve out his sentence on Gallifrey.”

The Waiter cringed, shifting on the spot as the Doctor and his two friends stared him down. “What ... I didn’t find anything out ...”

“Oh but you did. And what’s more, by sending you there, the Time Lords have made the whole situation ten times as dangerous, but I suppose that’s par for the course.”

“How’s that?” Though Xaul asked the question, she had an unsettling feeling of already knowing the answer. The answer was in the air around them, she was sure.

“Weren’t you surprised how easily we got away from that Lifeship, Xaul?” The Doctor regarded the Waiter coldly. “Those pilots sent their mindless bodyguards to threaten us a little bit, but they didn’t impede our progress ... because they had kept the Waiter there to get me.”

“Why?”

“Oh, I tangled with one of their number a few centuries back, back when I’d freshly regenerated. As a matter of fact, that’s how Maggie and I met. And also because through me, they think they can start a new life, in a new section of space.” He took a step nearer. “Isn’t that right, Savried?”

As if retching, the Waiter spoke the words of Savried. “I have life ... I have a physical form!” He balled the Waiter’s hand into a fist, ran the other hand through the Waiter’s mane of dark, greasy hair. “I am no longer disembodied, no longer roaming the empty, dead corridors of that crumbling Lifeship.”

“And what?” the Doctor asked. “What’s next on the agenda? You think you can start again on Earth?”

14

“Why not?” Savried answered. He regarded Maggie cruelly. “These people are about the standard of the Hux. Perhaps a little lower. We can control them, rule them as easily as we did them, if not more. Only this time we can do so directly, not marooned in space.”

The Doctor sighed and shook his head. “But you know what the Time Lords discovered, via the Waiter?” He looked eyes with his colleague. “Think, man. What have you discovered about the timelines? Why was there no trace of the Lifeship?”

The possessed Waiter cringed, his eyes jamming shut. “No! It cannot be!”

“It is. Judging by the common technological development and evolutionary abnormalities, I’d be willing to guess your people sowed the seeds of other civilisations, from the Koilarans and the Hux, to the Urbankans, to the Gholons and Yelibrav. The paradox of your extinction gave life to these and perhaps dozens more races. But it means you can no longer exist ...” His voice dropped to a whisper as he concluded, “The universe goes on, but your people do not.”

“But my will! And Toff-Ma’s, and Binchall!”

“You’re ghosts, my friend. Creditable that you survived so long without a form, but it’s academic to your people’s survival, I’m afraid. The ship kept your consciousness alive, and that is a kind of life, I’ll grant you.”

“What kind of life? Like that computer we kept aboard the TARDIS?”

“Not even, Maggie. That computer broke out of its programming, achieved a kind of personality, albeit tinged with religious mania. Savried and the other pilots are just echoes of former glories, parodies of a people who once lived but are now long dead. It’s arguable whether they’re ‘really’ the Pilots, even, or just their symbiotic Lifeship’s best guess at those individuals. And believe me when I say, go in peace. Accept when your time is up. Only then can things move on, progress—”

14

“Only then can my people progress,” Xaul added.

“Never! I won’t give up this body, I won’t give up my plans. This world can be my new conquest, and from here ...”

The Doctor reached out and cradled the Waiter in his arms for a while. The Waiter (and Savried within) didn’t even feel the pressure of the burly Gallifreyan investigator grabbing his shoulder. As they administered an anaesthetic, the Waiter blinked and whispered weakly, “Can they ... can they help me?”

“You’ll be fine, old chap,” the Doctor assured him.

The Time Lords departed, without a word to the Doctor—now as much a renegade as ever he had been. The Waiter’s stolen TARDIS also dematerialised.

The Doctor turned to Maggie and Xaul. “Now then Mags! I believe you have a TARDIS signal to activate?”

⁹ The computer from the Lifeship *Miracle* travelled aboard the TARDIS from *The 108 Year Hitch* to *Homeward*, finally staying with Kaylaar to help him run his home planet.

She held the small police box up, and before long, its larger counterpart triumphantly flashed into reality. “I don’t suppose you’d care to join us?” he asked Maggie as he swung its door open.

“Us?” asked Xaul.

“Well, you don’t want to stay in Revelstoke, I assume,” the Doctor added hastily.

“I’m glad to see I haven’t been replaced in your affections,” she teased, looking at Xaul.

“Never, my dear.” He beckoned them both in. “Wait until you see my ship, Xaul—none of your modern conveniences, this is the real deal.”

She dashed through the door.

Go to the Epilogue.

Epilogue

The markets of Frontier City were seized by a new spirit of independence. Frinx felt it in the air. News had just reached them of the Emperors' resignation. It had all been curiously swift and quiet. No bloody revolution, no pitched battles. It was as if the three autocrats were relieved to relinquish their power, as if some malign grip on their souls were at last lifted. Perhaps Frinx felt it too—whatever he had encountered on his journey into that nebula had left for good. He was glad to see it gone. As were others. That same liberated feeling extended across all the planets in the Huxley Union and all its peoples. A spirit of independence was in the air, and perhaps along with it, fairness and equality.

Frinx looked across the market square and found his eyes widening. There, standing outside a blue wooden hut, was that Justiciar he had abandoned on that spooky spaceship. He had felt compelled to do it, and ever afterward he had regretted his cowardice. But he knew her pilot was seized by the same spirit. The same spirit that now felt lifted from everyone's souls.

He nodded to her and to that mysterious off-world stranger, who stood beside her. They nodded back. It was hard to believe there were no hard feelings, but with some relief Frinx chose to believe it.

“Well Xaul! All's well that ends well.”

“I wouldn't say that, Doctor,” Xaul replied witheringly. “It was a long era we endured. And I played my part in it.”

“But now you can play a new part,” Maggie observed.

“Quite!” the Doctor agreed. “But the Lifeship has disintegrated in the nebula, and there won't be any more disembodied survivors trying to manipulate you. Better times lie ahead, I promise you.”

“I wish I could believe you,” Xaul said under her breath.

The Doctor had seen many such people before. They were victims, in their own way, even in spite of their disgraceful actions. They were so blinded by the horror of their system that they could barely imagine another, better way. They could not imagine it of their people, or of themselves.

Therefore, he realised he should take another tack with her. “Also, I've tracked down your son. When he hadn't heard from you, he left on an outward-bound freighter. He's settled on a new independent planet outside the Union, Vlimax Six. You're welcome to pop in and see him.”

She nodded, but then a new impulse seized her. “Could I ... could I come with you?”

The Doctor and Maggie exchanged a surprised expression. “Are you sure?” she asked Xaul.

She tempered her earlier burst of enthusiasm and assumed a more expected icy, high-handed tone. “Certainly. I'm not in the habit of being unsure.” Her voice softened, and she added, seemingly to herself, “And what could be a better new chapter than seeing how much else was out there these long years I was a miserable, dictatorial bureaucrat?”

The Doctor's features suddenly turned grave. Xaul sensed the great age and some kind of mysticism beneath the pleasant, handsome exterior. “I will warn you Xaul, that I have certain ...

ethical positions. And I won't tolerate the kind of compromise or callousness you may be accustomed to."

Xaul nodded, hesitantly. "I have no doubt that you do, Doctor. I feel that may be the kind of thing we have to learn as we go along."

"There's a lot of that on this job," Maggie noted.

"But ... you have my word I will do my best to learn," Xaul said firmly.

The Doctor accepted this with a nod. "Fair enough then. All that being said ..." The Doctor banished his dark expression, beamed at her, and clapped his hand on her back. "Happy to have you aboard, Xaul!"

"Well, let's go then!" Xaul cried impatiently, brushing past them into the TARDIS. "Before you change your mind."

He looked at Maggie, who simply said, "I don't think she's a hugger."

It was a few hours later, and Maggie was dozing in her cabin. She awoke, suddenly. She had some vivid dreams, and she needed to ask the Doctor about them. Bad dreams often meant something more sinister, after all.

She poked her head around the door of Xaul's cabin, at the end of the corridor. The old lady was deep in slumber. That hand—so stunningly lifelike, Maggie thought it might come to life and crawl across the TARDIS floor like Cousin It in *The Addams Family*—rested, detached from her body, on a side table. Maggie wondered how this new friend would work out. She wondered about the Doctor's harsh words. Could they rely on Xaul in a moment of crisis? Maggie had to remain optimistic that they could.

The Doctor was circling the console, his long, elegant fingers fluttering in childlike delight. He took a moment to look around at his familiar haphazard array of furniture, decorations, and general oddments that filled his TARDIS. There was no comparison to that modern hairdryer the Waiter had used—this was a proper ship.

And yet his flurry of activity, as it so often did, seemed to conceal that centuries-heavy weight that habitually burdened a Time Lord.

He looked up at her, and without her saying anything, he knew what she wanted. "Bad dreams?" he asked.

"I ... I dreamt I missed that call from the Waiter ... and I never saw you again."

"There are a few paths not taken. A couple worked out quite badly for poor Xaul, I could see. I think it must be the temporal wake from the Lifeship. Probably lingering side effects of the damage to the continuum from the Preservers too. We may be in for some bumpy rides before space-time sorts itself out." He shook his head. "Just what I need, even more misgivings about making decisions. But with a bit of effort, I could go back along and change actions, change how things ended up ..."

"But it ... this time ... everything all ended for the best?"

He smiled widely and took her hand in his. "Undoubtedly."

Of course, he and she saw that other life; saw how happy and settled Maggie had been with Hank Grenville. There was a sacrifice in this choice, to be sure. But somehow, it made Maggie all the happier to make the choice.

"Right then! Off we go ... let's show our new friend Xaul what's out there, eh?"

The Doctor expertly tapped in a sequence of coordinates and the TARDIS raced off across time and space to their next adventure.

NEXT WEEK ON
THE DOCTOR WHO PROJECT

WOLF ON THE FOLD



The Time Lords have detected one of the mysterious Lifeships, adrift and apparently unoccupied in a nebula near the Huxley Union. One of their number, the youthful and impetuous Waiter, goes to investigate in the hope of getting revenge on the Doctor. Meanwhile, on one of the Union's frontier worlds, the Doctor is deep in the thick of things, teaming up with Chief Justiciar Xaul Gertjaars discover the truth behind the Union's corrupt totalitarian rule.

Meanwhile, in Revelstoke in 2000, Maggie Weitz is taking a break from her travels, but gets an unusual message from the Waiter ...

Or does she?

Time is in flux, causing alternative possibilities and outcomes. Unless one course of cause and effect follows, the connections between events in the present and the future will remain opaque; the Doctor and Maggie could end up separated forever; and justice will not come to Hux's three Emperors.

Only you, the reader, can choose the path of the adventure and help the Doctor. The universe depends on it ...

This is another in the adventures of the Eleventh Doctor
as played by Winston Adderly

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