



THE
DOCTOR WHO
PROJECT

THE SPACESHIP AND THE WITCH

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CHAPTER 1

“She just appeared. Nobody in the village had ever clapped eyes on her.”

Springyyt’s father seemed to be speaking more to himself than to the boy. But he welcomed the recap, since it was worth summarising how strange was this visitor’s sudden arrival in Edgvyll, their small, out-of-the-way corner of Orbis.

“Then suddenly ...” his father continued, “she starts coming in for a loaf of bread each day. *Every* day, mind you. Mid-morning, every morning. A small loaf of black bread. Never more. Never less. I don’t think she’s failed to show up once over the past year.”

Of course, a year to a boy of eight (that year being 1996t.x., as it went) felt like an eternity. Springyyt could scarcely remember a time before the strange woman started making her daily visits.

“But where *could* she come from?” Springyyt pressed.

“Where indeed?” his father said. He was a big man (not that there was any other kind to little Springyyt), with a great gut that strained constantly at his tunic. He had a shaggy ginger beard, and his hands were forever coated in the flour that was his livelihood. He smelled of dough and yeast and sweat, smells none too pleasant in themselves, but which combined into an appealing aroma that Springyyt associated with safety; with the love, kindness, and affection his father had always shown him.

“Where indeed?” he repeated. “That’s the salient question, m’boy. Edgvyll is the only settlement this side of the Haeroen mountains for...ooh...eighteen miles? Now, I’m not saying it’s *impossible* that the girl is hiking up from Daemonhyme for a loaf of bread once a day. But it is implausible. For one thing, the walk would take about three hours. For another thing, Daemonhyme is a big city. There are countless bakeries there, which any right-minded citizen would turn to before making the six-hour round trip to our own humble establishment. For a third thing, the girl’s been seen arriving not from the north, but rather from the mountains to the *south*. Nobody could pass through those mountains on foot.”

This much, Springyyt had little difficulty accepting. The Haeroen mountain range was, according to his schoolmaster, the largest in all of Orbis, boasting the sheerest faces and the highest summits, pressed so close together that the roads snaking between were notoriously narrow and

dangerously steep, and prone to frequent rockslides and avalanches. From Edgvyll, nestled at the edge of the foothills, their full glory was hard to appreciate. But even from that distance, their summits were glorious. Towering high into the sky, rows upon rows stacked like the teeth of some planet-sized beast, capped white with snow, their faces a smooth obsidian. Mount Olabor, nestled right in the middle of the range, stood far above its companions, its snow-free lower regions sparkling gold under the twin suns like the beacon of a lighthouse. By day, those mountains were set against a backdrop of brilliant, royal-blue sky, and by night those skies turned the deepest, velvet purple, four moons hanging low and swollen against more stars than anyone could count.

“There are no settlements in the mountains, are there?” Springyyt pressed.

“None,” his father said confidently. “Oh, one could doubtless find somewhere up there to lay a habitable camp – which, presumably, is what she and her people have done. But why anyone *would* do that, I could not answer.”

“Then what are we to make of her?”

His father beamed down at him and ruffled his hair. “Hah. That curiosity will do you a mischief someday, lad, mark my words.”

Springyyt chuckled inwardly at his father’s effrontery. He hadn’t even thought about the strange woman until his father had started speculating about her. What was *that* if not curiosity?

Nevertheless, his father continued blithely, “We aren’t to make anything of her. She is not ours to decipher. Her business is not our business. She comes and she pays and though she’s rather quiet, she never fails to treat us with courtesy and respect. Ours is to be curious, certainly. Ponder away, boy, to your heart’s content.”

Perhaps, Springyyt reflected, his father was now justifying the limits of his curiosity more to himself than to his son.

“But ours is not to pry. You mind me on that, little man – do not bother her with any questions about her or where she comes from.”

“I promise I won’t,” Springyyt said dutifully.

“There’s a lamb,” his father said, ruffling his hair again. “Now, how about you help me get the rolls out of the oven? They’re nearly done.”

Springyyt was as good as his word.

For roughly a week.

But then of course, if a year is an eternity to a boy of eight, then by that same logic a week is a good century or so. Long enough for Springyyt not to feel *too* guilty about breaking his promise.

On the first day of every fortnight, his father travelled north to Daemonthyme to fetch supplies and attempt to shift some of their produce in bulk. Travelling by Bobjack and cart, he left shortly before dawn (and so, as a baker, enjoyed something of a lie-in those mornings) and came back at dusk; their old Bobjack, S’tit, exhausted from pulling the cart but ever grateful for the brush, pat down and affectionate fuss that Springyyt always gave him. The boy took pride in smoothing down his golden feathers, rubbing his beak, and scrubbing the dirt and grime from his talons.

Whilst his father was gone, Springyyt and his mother looked after the shop. But on that particular day, his mother was too unwell to get out of bed, let alone bake. A bout of pneumonia as a child had left her with weak lungs that functioned well enough for perhaps two-thirds of the

year, but which for the other third left her exhausted, breathless, lying helplessly abed and wheezing, staring helplessly at the rafters.

“Just rest,” Springyyt’s father whispered, stroking her auburn hair with his bear-sized paws, which looked altogether too cumbersome to handle anything with such softness. “Springy will be all right for the morning. The loaves are already in the oven.”

“He can’t handle the oven on his own,” his mother gasped, coughing and mopping her streaming brow. The day was liable to be a hot one. Too hot; his parents’ room above the bakery was already sweltering, and even Springyyt’s relatively cool room downstairs would be infernal by mid-morning from the added heat of the oven, and sure to exhaust him.

“He can,” his father said proudly. “I know he can. He’s a big boy. He’s a good boy.” He turned to his son and waved one of his pudgy fingers in warning. “But you listen to me, Springy. You will *not* try and get out several trays at once, like you’ve seen me do. One at a time. No more. I don’t care how busy it gets. The customers will have to wait. It’s as simple as that. If any of them give you a hard time, they’ll have me to answer to.”

“I’ll be fine,” Springyyt said, delighted and proud to be trusted with such responsibility. And his father *was* right. He knew what he was doing. And he knew none of the villagers would give him grief if service was slow. It was not that they were scared of his father, whose great girth and gruff demeanour concealed the gentlest man. It was that they were decent, hard-working folk, largely farm labourers, who treated their neighbours with courtesy and respect. With Edgvyll so isolated, sandwiched between those awe-inspiring cliffs to the south and eighteen miles of empty wildland to the north, one could scarcely afford bad relations with the neighbours. Sure enough, they each greeted him by name, asking after his parents and passing on their best when he informed them that his mother was not well. One or two even paid above the odds for their bread, telling him that the extra was a tip for him.

“Just don’t think to use it on beer,” the landlord of the alehouse said, laughing as Springyyt counted those few extra pennies. “I assure you – I will *not* serve you. There’ll be plenty of time for all that when you’re a man grown.”

All were friendly. More than that, all were chatty.

All except...

Mid-morning. Right on cue. In walked the strange woman, clad in her strange clothes. The long coat she wore was an inoffensive beige, crafted of a material that Springyyt couldn’t name. He was fairly sure it wasn’t wool or fur, and seemed too sleek and soft to be leather. Her hair was brown and cut short, and she wore smart black shoes with matching black trousers, legs poking out beneath the hem of her coat.

“Hello,” she said shyly, smiling briefly at him before dropping her gaze.

“Hi,” Springyyt said, brightly as ever. “The usual?”

“Please.”

Springyyt busied himself with her order, selecting the largest black bread loaf from the neat rows behind the counter. Then the notion took him; he’d likely never get a moment alone with her again. “What’s your name?” His heart hammered at the flagrant breach of his father’s orders.

The woman’s eyebrows flew up into her hairline and she glanced around the store. Satisfying herself that she was alone, she stared at him wide-eyed, as though anyone taking an interest in her was both laughable and terrifying.

“Me?” she gasped. Springyyt saw sweat beading on her forehead. Her face was turning grey.

“Yeah,” he whispered, her reaction giving him instant cause for regret.

She looked over her shoulder, then quietly said, “Why do you want to know?”

“I was just curious ... Are you from Daemonthyme?”

“Daemonthyme?” she repeated, reaching for her loaf with a shaking hand. Springyyt didn’t understand; she was sounding out the name as if she had never heard it before.

“The nearest city,” he said weakly.

“Oh. N-no. I don’t know it...”

Springyyt frowned. “Do you live in the mountains?”

She took the loaf in one quavering hand and made to deposit two coppers into Springyyt’s waiting palm with the other. Such was her fear that they fell from her grip and clattered noisily off the counter.

“I surely didn’t mean to upset you,” Springyyt said, retrieving them. “Please...you won’t tell my father, will you?”

“I won’t,” she said, regaining her composure. “I-I’m sorry...you were only being polite.”

Springyyt nodded earnestly. “Just that. I didn’t mean to be rude.”

She smiled briefly and lowered her voice. “I know. It’s Susan. My name is Susan.”

“Susan,” Springyyt repeated. “I don’t know that name...”

“It’s from a place very far away. But listen... as we are talking...perhaps you could tell me something. Has anyone been asking about me lately?”

“Like who?” Frankly, a better question would have been who *hadn’t* been asking about her. The village was rife with speculation as to her identity, her bizarre comings and goings a hot topic among the children of Edgvyll’s schoolhouse, and oftentimes on the agenda at the alehouse, according to his father.

“Like...” She chose her words carefully. “Like a stranger. Have there been any other newcomers in town?”

Springyyt shook his head confidently; gossip spread like wildfire in Edgvyll, and the presence of another unknown would have surely reached his ears.

“Nobody?” she pressed. “You’re sure? You’re perfectly sure?”

“Yes, miss.”

“Okay.” She held out her hand again, and this time produced a single copper as a tip for Springyyt. “And if anyone strange does turn up in town and talks to you—”

“I know.” Springyyt beamed, shutting and opening both eyes in an attempt at a wink. “I don’t know who you are. I’ve never spoken to you.”

She shook her head. “No. That’s not what I was going to say. It’s worse than that. If you do see anyone new... and if that person approaches you, if that person starts to ask questions about me...”

“Yes?” Springyyt whispered.

“Run,” she said. “Just run. Whatever they may tell you, whatever they say they want...if they want to know anything about me, then for goodness’ sake run.”

CHAPTER 2

“Wrong!” the Doctor exclaimed, stepping out of the TARDIS. “Wrong, wrong, wrong. Very wrong!”

“I’ll say!” Maggie exclaimed stepping out after him and shivering, clutching herself around her midriff. It was not that the planet was cold per se. It was simply too cold for the outfit she had selected, for what she was told was going to be a tropical planet. Unlike the Doctor in his signature Aran sweater and flowing wine-coloured duster, for whom heat nor cold seemed to make no matter, she had on only a sleeveless summer dress and sandals, ill-suited indeed for the distinctly autumnal weather on this strange world. Following her out of the TARDIS, Xaul wore a light grey tunic over her usual black trousers and boots. Opening her collar was the only adjustment she’d made for the anticipated heat.

“Where’s the sea?” she barked. “The palm trees?”

“I’m afraid we’ve been a trifle waylaid,” the Doctor admitted.

“Where are we, then?” Maggie asked.

“Orbis. Better known as X02 Inter-Universal Spaceport. The year...4029t.x.”

“Hmm,” Xaul sniffed. “Four light years and fifteen years from home. Closer than I’m comfortable with, if I’m honest.”

“Quite,” the Doctor said. He turned to Xaul. “But our location isn’t all that’s wrong.”

“Indeed not,” Xaul said bluntly.

“I don’t follow,” Maggie said. To be sure, though too cool for comfort and flagrantly not where they’d intended to end up, the planet Orbis seemed...acceptable. The grass underfoot was greener than on Earth, each blade a glittering emerald dewy with moisture, whilst the skies above were a deep, royal blue and boasted twin suns sparkling overhead, conveying plenty of light but disappointingly little heat. Far across the verdant, sprawling plains lay a magnificent range of mountains, endless rows of jutting summits, some lost in clouds thicker than cotton candy, the tallest sparkling brilliant gold.

“This is X02 Inter-Universal Spaceport,” he repeated. “The largest spaceport in this part of the universe.”

“*Second* largest,” Xaul corrected. “Don’t forget X01.”

Maggie scoffed. “Who’d have thought?”

“And so...” the Doctor said. “Well, smell the air. Look at the skies. Tell me, Magster, what *you* think is wrong.”

She complied. The air smelled faintly of mint.

“Yes,” she said after a pause. “Yes, I see it. It’s too fresh.”

“Just so,” the Doctor exclaimed. “A spaceport this size? The whole planet should stink! The air should be choked with the fumes of a thousand million fuel types. And look up! We ought to be seeing smog, yellow, dense, and heavy. Not *sky*. Our eyes should be watering and our lungs burning simply by standing here.”

He licked a finger and held it in the air. “As I thought. The spaceways are failing...I can feel their gravitational force, and it’s all off kilter. And there’s something else...some sort of...pull. Some influence...and...” He turned on the spot and faced the mountains, his eyes narrowing. “It seems...familiar...”

“Spaceways?” Maggie repeated, struggling to keep up.

“Tunnels,” Xaul explained. “Gravity tunnels in space. Take your bog-standard star-skiff. At top speed, it would take it a fortnight to cover ten light years. But put that same ship, carrying the exact same weight, into a spaceway and it’ll cover ten light years in twenty minutes. They’re vital. Absolutely vital. Food, medicine and goods pass through here to all four corners of the universe.”

“And they’re all collapsing,” the Doctor exclaimed. “Look at this place! There hasn’t been any significant space traffic here for months...”

He clutched his lapels, then examined his hands curiously and let them go again. “Huh...old habit.” There was something about the gesture that unsettled him, as he seemed thrown and vague as he continued talking. “Anyway, I suggest that we find the nearest terminal and get some answers. It’s about five miles south across the plains. TARDIS or walk, ladies? I vote walk.”

“Walk,” Maggie agreed. “Just let me go and change first. It’s too cold. Unless Xaul...?”

“What?” the old woman growled. “Unless I’d rather not walk, given my age? Don’t you fuss about me, madam, I’ll be quite all right! Go on, go and change! Chop chop!”

Exchanging a smirk with the Doctor, Maggie spun on her heel and made to enter the TARDIS. Her hand was on the door when the Doctor’s voice stopped her in her tracks.

“There’s a ship approaching.”

And so there was. Though the suns made it hard to focus, a small, dark shape coming from the mountains was growing larger all the time.

“It’s coming straight for us,” the Doctor said. “Maybe to offer us a lift?”

Now it was Maggie and Xaul’s turn to exchange glances. In the older woman’s eye, Maggie saw that she, too, had a creeping sense of foreboding. She couldn’t put her finger on why...it just seemed to coming at them *too* fast. Flying aggressively.

Despite his initial optimism, the Doctor felt the same. “I think perhaps I’d prefer to go in the TARDIS after all. Magster?”

“Seconded.”

“Xaul?”

“Probably.”

But no sooner had Maggie reached for the handle again, the voice rang out. It was like no voice she had ever heard. Loud and booming with an electronic edge like a loudspeaker, the countryside trembled and the decibels shook Maggie to her bones.

“We-e-ll, howdy ‘dere partners!” it screamed. “New blood! Fresh meat! Stay right there, ladies and gentle-lez-mens! Stay *right* where yo’ at!”

And the ship was as bizarre as this voice from within. Before Maggie could properly see it, she smelled it. Blue exhausts from its underside were pumping out a sickly stench like nothing Maggie had ever smelled, and it made her stomach heave. It was the smell of hot sugar, the concentrated aroma of a dessert parlour selling cakes and crepes and ice creams, hot fudge and molten caramel, popcorn and bubbling chocolate fountains. All luscious to behold ... except amplified a thousandfold, to such an extreme that the very air felt dense and cloying, and Maggie panicked, feeling unable to breathe.

And the ship itself, bobbing thirty feet overhead, was so surreal a sight that Maggie half-wondered if the saccharine smell was making her hallucinate. It was an imperfect rectangle, about twice the height and length of a coach back at home. Its dirty brown hull was painted with off-yellow stripes, making it resemble some monstrously oversized hornet, some sugar-obsessed pest drunk on its own fumes. Its bodywork was a mess of nuts and bolts and rivets, with several cooling vents spewing yet more of that sickening, sugary stench.

Mounted in plastic on the front of the ship, nestled below the dirty, blacked-out windows of the cockpit, was a face cast in plastic. It was the yellow of a *Simpsons* character, with two big black dots for eyes and an upturned crescent for a mouth. It might have been hilarious, but for the venom Maggie heard in that voice, and indeed the monstrosity attached to the roof. On a long extendable arm, visibly dextrous on account of the many pistons, pipes, gears, and telescopic shafts, was a claw the size of a large car. It had five razor sharp teeth on top and five on the bottom, each capped with some hardened black alloy. As the trio looked on in horror, the jaws opened with a metallic shriek, a gaping black maw briefly revealed before snapping shut with a sound like a bomb going off. Gears hissed as the arm raised, the claw towering high overhead.

“How ya doin’?” the booming voice cried. “V-SOL14 at your service! Now, if I ain’t much mistaken, ladies’n’gents, that little lot right there is a TARDIS! I’m right, ain’t I? Say that I am!”

The Doctor grimaced. “It might be that you are. It might be that you aren’t. What of it?”

“Ha! I’ll be fetching me a pretty penny on the black market. And I may not kill you if you stand aside and surrender it now.”

Its claw descended with that same shriek of grinding gears and the jaws opened, inching towards the TARDIS. Far from standing back, the Doctor brushed Maggie and Xaul aside to safety and stood at the door.

“You’re a looter, then? A scrap trader? Let me guess – the claw aside, you don’t have any weapons built in? I’m guessing ships like yours float around wreckage and asteroid fields in the depths of space, seizing what plunder you will, whilst working under the protection of armed escort ships. That claw – I’ll wager that it’s powerful enough to tear a hole in a reinforced duralinium hull. But you’ve no lasers to boast? No missiles?” He tutted, hoping to get the pilot’s goat.

The pilot within howled with laughter. “But shields enough to resist any small arms you might be packing.”

“Oh, I wasn’t thinking of us,” the Doctor said genially. “No, we don’t have any weapons at all. I’m thinking of the Minnows behind you”.

Maggie glanced past V-SOL’s grubby hull and saw three ships, jet-black with sleek double-bladed wings and nose cones ending in points. With frightening clarity, she realised they were about to fire on V-SOL, and at the Doctor’s hand on her back she found herself face down on the grass with her hands over her head, burying her face in the luscious blades as the sounds of battle erupted: laser fire screeching and V-SOL laughing, no trace of fear, the smell of sugar intensifying as he hit the thrusters and soared away, and –

“Ow!” she yelped, and heard the Doctor and Xaul issue similar cries, not exactly of pain but more of surprise. Out of nowhere, her feet had grown so hot that she might have had scalding water poured over them. But it only lasted a second. There was no lingering burning, and when she dared struggle up from her prone position, she saw that there was mercifully no blistering. What had happened, however, was that both her sandals were gone. She stared around, wondering if they had somehow flown off in her haste to hit the deck, but they were nowhere in sight.

But the loss of her footwear was a minor inconvenience indeed compared to Xaul’s plight. For where her bionic arm should have been, only a stump remained, ending in a curved club at the elbow. She said something incredibly upsetting, and flailed around on the grass, her age and newfound affliction rendering her helpless until the Doctor and Maggie raised her gently to her feet. As for the Doctor...

“It’s a look,” Maggie told him, biting her lip. His maroon coat was intact—that thing seemed to be indestructible after all these centuries. But his fishing sweater was gone. His torso was bare, dark skin pulled tight and firm over a breast as solid as iron and a broad six-pack that Maggie might have found attractive but for it being the Doctor’s. As much as she loved him, she could never contemplate him that way.

“Did *he* do that?” Xaul demanded.

“That he did,” said a strange voice behind them. They all jumped a foot in the air and spun around.

“You fool!” Xaul said, clutching her chest with her remaining hand. “You don’t sneak up on someone my age.”

He raised his hands in apology. Handsome man, Maggie thought: silver-haired, about forty in Earth years, and wearing a blue one-piece flight suit. The black shadows of the ships – Minnows, the Doctor had called them – were descending gently overhead.

“I beamed myself down,” he said, jerking a thumb towards one of the Minnows. “Grair is the name. Commanding Officer of Terminal Two-Thousand and Fifty-Three. I’m afraid your shirt, your shoes, your arm, my lady...you are unlikely to see those things again. V-SOL-class salvage ships can teleport small items on board within a twenty-metre radius. Things too small for the claw to pick up. My guess is that he wanted to humiliate you. And count your lucky stars that’s all he wanted – had he preferred, he could have ripped your eyes from their sockets, your hearts from their cavities, your livers clean away...”

“V-SOL...” the Doctor muttered thoughtfully. “That’s sugar, isn’t it?”

“A sugar-based fuel,” Grair agreed. “Hence the smell, which I’m confident you would have noticed. Sugar’s as common as grass where they come from.”

“What’s happening here, Grair?” the Doctor demanded. “What’s become of X02?”

He scoffed and held his hands up helplessly. “Pfft. I wish I could tell you, sir. About three months ago, the spaceways began falling apart. The magnetic and gravitational forces that held the tunnels in place simply began to fail one morning. So did the shielding around the planet. There’s been a contamination. Central Command scanned the entire spaceport and detected a heightened level of temporal energy. There’s a source at work somewhere on this planet, and it’s slowly eating away at the systems, wearing them down long before their time. Random pockets of chronons, in some places accelerating natural decay, in others randomly reversing the flow of cause to effect. The systems can’t handle the disruption, as you can imagine. Corrupting the circuit boards, destabilizing the data banks. We’re doing all we can to find the source. In the meantime, there’s not an insurance company in the cosmos that will let a ship land here. They’re all gone. We’re a ghost town.”

“Apart from our friend with the claw,” Xaul said darkly, her useless stump-arm hanging lifeless from her shoulder. In its absence, she seemed unsteady on her feet, unbalanced at the sudden loss of weight on that side of her body.

“A madman,” Grair said. “He took advantage of the failing shields to slip into the atmosphere, and he’s been pillaging from the smaller unguarded terminals and abandoned ships across the planet ever since. Nobody’s ever seen him in the flesh. There’s a rumour that he’s deformed, somehow, mangled in some dreadful accident that cost him his skin and his sanity both. All we know is that he is hungry for scrap to sell and that he will cheerfully kill in order to get it. He has downed several Minnows.”

In an instance of perfect timing, the three Minnows chose that exact moment to touch down. And to be sure, they put V-SOL14 to shame. Far more elegant in design, they were sleek and almost triangular, laser cannons hanging below the wings and the nose cones ending in needle-sharp points, not a scratch or a smudge of dirt on any of them. They were about half V-SOL’s size, and there was no stink of burning sugar, nor petrol, nor any other type of fuel. In place of combustion engines and exhausts, the underside of each minnow had a translucent compartment with a mesh of interconnected cogs.

“That’s never clockwork?” the Doctor gasped, childlike in his enthusiasm as he studied them.

“But of course,” Grair said cheerfully. “Clockwork-propelled Minnows, the cutting edge of space travel. No fuel, no fumes, no pollution at all. They barely need any maintenance. Just a clean and a light dose of oil every month to keep the gears from grinding together. This is mine,” he said, tapping the hull of the one the Doctor was examining. From the other two, pilots wearing the same blue flight suit as their commander emerged.

“Come on,” Grair said. “We’re taking you back to the terminal. Each Minnow has space for two passengers, divide yourselves up as you will. The blue box can fly behind mine – I’ve got a gravity harness to pull it along.”

“So it is,” the Doctor said, still marvelling at the clockwork engine of Grair’s ship. But then suddenly he rose with such speed and suddenness that Maggie started. He gripped Grair’s arm tight and his brow creased.

“Rewinding...” he muttered. “Just a few seconds...what did you say?”

Looking none too comfortable, Grair glanced at Maggie and Xaul in the hope of support or explanation, before turning back to the Doctor. “No fumes...?”

“No, no, before that. You were telling us what was causing the problems here. An unknown source of what, did you say?”

“Temporal energy, as far as our instruments can detect such phenomena ...” Grair said, wincing at the Doctor’s grip. “Sir, you are hurting my arm.”

“Sorry,” the Doctor said thoughtlessly. His gaze was fixed on the mountains to the north and his frown intensified. “Sorry...it’s just that...I *know* those hills from somewhere...”

CHAPTER 3

Springyyt didn't pay Susan much mind for the next few weeks. Her visits continued, and though there was a touch more warmth and familiarity in the brief smiles they exchanged, not a further word passed between them. The odd bit of gossip disguised as speculation would every so often circulate—some saying they had seen another stranger, about whom no two could agree on a description, asking questions about minerals and technical processes more familiar in Daemonthyme or the other big cities, but disappearing before anyone could press him.

Springyyt said no more, and barely listened to such talk. He was happy that his curiosity had been satiated. On top of that, he had no desire to know any more about the phantom that stalked her, so terrifying had her warning been.

Everything changed on a random day several weeks after their sole conversation, the suns bearing down, but a cooling breeze taking the edge off the oppressive, stagnant heat.

The exact choreography of the events of that day – the mistake, the decision and the fluke of luck – fell into place so perfectly; a series of events that in later years Springyyt would consider glorious and terrible in equal measure. If even one of those factors had been out of place that fateful day, his horizons – and the scope of what he knew to be possible – would be drastically reduced, which surely could only be a terrible thing. And yet those events, terrifying for even a man grown, would haunt his dreams and terrorise him for all his life.

It began with Susan's routine bread run, and there is little need to remark upon all but its closing moments. She smiled at Springyyt, paid her two coppers, and left with her bread. Springyyt and his father failed to immediately notice that Susan's purse had fallen from her pocket. Instead, the baker was taken with her beige coat, and how strange it was to wear in weather so balmy.

"She's a strange sort," Springyyt said in reply.

"She is at that, son," his father said. "She is at that." He deposited a copper into Springyyt's hand. "Be a good lad and head down to the dairy. We need a litre of milk."

"Yes, sir," Springyyt said dutifully, his spirits lifting at the thought of getting out of the overwarm bakery for an hour or so. The dairy was a short walk up the northern road, a small homestead run by an affable farmer named Landyll, who often waived payment from Springyyt in exchange for a free roll the next time he was in town.

It was while anticipating this trip that Springyyt stepped out from behind the counter and noticed the brown leather purse on the grimy tile floor. Picking it up and jingling it, he heard no less than seven coppers inside.

“It’s got to belong to that girl,” his father said gruffly. “Give it here, I’ll keep it safe behind the counter.”

“She just left,” Springyyt pointed out. “Shouldn’t I try and catch her up?”

His father shrugged. “If you’d like. Just don’t stray too far. Spend a penny of her money, and I’ll wallop you.”

They exchanged a smile; Springyyt’s father knew that the lad would never do such a thing, just as Springyyt knew that his father would never raise a hand to him even if he did.

Springyyt may not have taken from the purse, but beshrew him, he did look inside. It was as he clutched it in his palm and carried it from the store that he felt an irregular shape, too long and thin to be any sort of coin. Curiosity overcoming him, he undid the clasp and discovered a key. It was long and thin and made of a silver metal, bizarrely warm to the touch.

Having covered the mistake, and Springyyt’s offer to return Susan’s purse, last came the luck: Springyyt happened to catch sight of Susan on the elevated northern path leading into the foothills of the Haeroen mountains. Such was the steep gradient that once somebody had walked two hundred yards up it, with the curved, grassy verge of a foothill to their left and the sheer drop of a granite cliff-face to their right, they would find themselves visible above the tops of the thatched roofs of the village to anyone who happened to glance that way.

He set off at a sprint, darting across the dirt track and slipping between the tannery and the poulterers opposite the bakery. Emerging into the village square, bidding a brief hello to townsfolk standing wide-eyed as he raced past, he ducked into a small alleyway between the alehouse and a mysterious, red-curtained establishment that his father had steadfastly refused to talk about whenever Springyyt asked. Flashing a pretty woman slouching against one of the windows a brief smile, he soon found himself beyond the schoolhouse and gazing up at the northern road; a small boy made smaller by the gigantic mountains. What was he to them but an insect? He imagined the spirit of Mount Olabor, glittering gold, staring down with benign curiosity as he himself might marvel at a strange and colourful summer bug crawling at his feet.

Springyyt was not purely a victim of chance that day. The stars aligned to enable him to look up into the cliffs and see Susan retreating to ever-higher altitudes. The rest was all him, and the wretched curiosity his father had awakened with his idle speculation about the stranger, which he warned would be his unmaking.

A boy of eight, faced with so great a climb, might have been expected to shrug and pocket the purse, proceeding to the dairy, and telling his father he hadn’t been able to catch Susan after all, and that they should keep the money safe behind the counter for whenever she returned.

He never would *quite* know what possessed him. All he knew was that the curiosity that he had thought satisfied came roaring back, and in a few seconds, more questions came tumbling into his head. He knew Susan’s name. But what of it? What did that *really* tell him? Who *was* she? And more to the point, who was hunting her, and terrifying her so? For all he had been horrified by her warning, a fast and decisive battle between fear and curiosity was fought in his head, with the latter winning out.

All of this to say that Springyyt did *not* shrug and turn away.
Springyyt followed...

The rugged foothills were as alien to Springyyt as the four moons, for never had his father permitted him to set foot there, less still alone. High up among the clouds, he gazed down the sheer drop to his right with a mixture of awe and dismay, the granite face of the cliff at a near ninety-degree angle and pocked with lumps and bumps and cracks, and all manner of cavities that would tear apart his flesh long before he reached the bottom. To his left the gradient was scarcely any better, though the grassy terrain there would have likely invited a less gruesome, though likely still fatal, fall. Head spinning, it was all Springyyt could do to stick as close as possible to the centre of the uneven footpath, rising higher all the time. Far ahead of him, little more than a speck, was Susan.

He eventually came to a peculiar slab of rock shaped just like a face. It was a coarse job, as if the sculptor had been drunk or deranged and had only a blunt chisel, and but for the fact that it sparkled gold Springyyt might have suspected it was a freak of nature as opposed to a mediocre work of art. But that glittering rock looked as though it came from Mount Olabor, hauled down for display. Whether to welcome people to the mountains or ward them off, or simply for artistic decoration, he couldn't say. If it was a warning to turn back, he ignored it and pressed on.

The track curved round to the left and came to a fork. Cursing, Springyyt hurriedly looked left and right and caught sight of Susan on the left-hand pathway, moments before she whipped around an outcrop to the right. He hurried after her, his throat tight as the path narrowed. He pressed against the cliff face, his toes less than a meter from the drop, wincing as he came up against the outcrop and was pushed towards the edge. He didn't breathe until he cleared it and swung around to the right as he'd seen Susan do.

Before him was a large lake that shone purple in the sunlight, the two great orbs reflecting off the water's clear surface. Of course, the water itself was not purple; the rocks of the lakebed gave it its colour. The water was crisp and clear, and stooping to drink some and splash it onto his face, Springyyt found it wonderfully cool and deliciously fresh, purified by those strange purple rocks below.

The path snaked around the water in both directions. The clockwise path was inaccessible, pressed up against the bottom of a cliff, whilst the anticlockwise route led further into the mountains. But that was not where Springyyt was going, for halfway round was a small black opening in a separate cliff. As he watched, Susan ducked through the entrance and vanished into the gloom.

It was enough.

His curiosity had brought him this far and that was bad enough, but it was nowhere near enough to compel him to follow her into whatever awaited him in there. Exhausted from his efforts and shamed that he had taken things too far already, he turned on his heel and made to retreat, walking slap bang into the midriff of the old man behind him.

"I say!" he cried, seizing Springyyt by the shoulder. "What are you doing out here, my boy? *Hmm?* Speak up!"

Springyyt stared up at him. He was an old man – older than any man he'd ever seen. He could think of no man who lived long enough for his hair to turn entirely white. It had retreated a ways from his creased, weathered forehead and hung down at his neck in a rigid bob. He had a prominent nose and a pursed mouth, and light brown eyes which sparkled with a fierce intelligence. He had on a black coat and ornate silk necktie, and a matching cap of curled fleece, his crème striped waistcoat hanging loose over his lean frame. He had a monocle around his neck and checked brown trousers with smart leather shoes. On his ring finger, a gorgeous sapphire shone. He held in his hands a block-shaped mechanism that was so roughly hewn, and abundant with wild

springs, intricate metallic wiring, and other incomprehensible details, that Springyyt reasoned he must have constructed it himself.

“I asked you a question, my child. What are you doing out here? Eh?”

Springyyt tried to speak, but to his shame felt tears of fright welling in his eyes. Some power radiated from this man, as tangible as heat. His anger caused Springyyt physical discomfort, and he could scarcely imagine meeting the old man’s eye.

“Were you spying on her?”

“N-no, sir...” Springyyt managed to stammer.

“Then what,” he said, his bony finger wagging threateningly in Springyyt’s downcast sightline, “Is in your hand?”

Springyyt glanced down and remembered the incriminating purse he was clutching. Had he been a chess player (had, indeed, chess existed on the planet Orbis in 1996t.x.,) then he may well have thought of the word “checkmate”.

“Do you know her?” was all Springyyt could think to say.

“Know her? Know her, young man?” He sneered. “I suspect you know the answer to that. The woman to whom that purse belongs is my granddaughter.”

“Oh,” Springyyt said, looking at his feet as tears spilled from his eyes and down his nose. When he eventually dared to look up, he saw the old man gazing down, clutching the lapels of his coat, as though sizing him up, trying to work out what threat so small a child could pose.

He must have (rightly) concluded none at all, for his taut posture relaxed and his gaze softened, and when he spoke there seemed genuine contrition in his voice, that he should have scared a child so.

“You’ve seen the cave. You know how to find us. Dear, dear, *dear!* What are we to do with you? You’ve already seen too much! But having seen too much already, I fancy there is little to lose in having you see more. What is more, you look as if the climb has tired you. Not a mountain goat, like my Susan, eh my boy? Heh heh! You need a good sit down, I fancy. No, no, I couldn’t think of leaving you to go all the way back down in your state. Come – I’ll, er, put this little contraption away ...” He weighed the wired block in his hand meditatively. “And after that, we shall feed and rest you before sending you on your way.”

“Well, nice to meet you properly,” Susan said, shaking Springyyt’s hand with a note of laughter in her voice, gratefully accepting her purse. “I hadn’t even realized I’d lost it.”

“You’re absent-minded, my dear,” the Doctor said, cuffing her affectionately around the ear with zero force. He tutted inarticulately for a moment. “You really must pay attention to your surroundings, Susan. Now more than ever.” Again that bony finger struck at the air in Springyyt’s direction. “That this young lad could have followed you without your knowing bodes ill...for if *he* can do it...”

The Doctor trailed off (he’d told Springyyt his title before leading him into the cave) and left the last part of the remark unspoken. But Springyyt understood his meaning just the same. If he could follow Susan undetected, then who else could? The stranger of whom Susan had spoken? Presumably. Questions flooded Springyyt’s mind, but before he could voice any of them, the Doctor sat him at a little wooden table with a flower-patterned cloth, asking Susan to prepare lunch. The cavern was about the size of the bakery with the aforementioned table on the left and a few shelves on the right, a chintz upholstered chair along the far wall facing the cave entrance, a tunnel

of about ten meters in length. The ceiling hung so low that the Doctor's head brushed it in places. Springyyt was at a loss to explain how any of the furniture had been brought here, especially past that outcrop.

But the most curious attraction was the statue on the left. It was a carving that put the big face further down the path to shame, a sculpture of the most beautiful woman Springyyt had ever seen. Her features cast in pearly marble, whiter even than the Doctor's hair, she had flowing locks and large eyes, her nose and mouth small and dainty and her ears lost beneath the endless sprawl of her hair. She was gazing at the floor to her right, her left arm draped over her chest and shoulder, clutching the robe that was the only thing she wore. Her right arm was wrapped around her waist, and her bare legs and feet were slightly splayed, the right foot in front of the left.

"Who is she?" Springyyt asked, awestruck.

"Her name is TARDIS," the Doctor replied.

"Why is she hidden away?" he demanded. It seemed a crime that so gorgeous a work of art should be squirrelled away in a damp little cell. She belonged in some glorious stately garden, gold and green and rainbow-coloured with flowers of every shape and size, possibly flanked by fountains. Admired, revered, even loved, by the friends and families in their thousands who visited every day.

"She's safe," the Doctor replied. "We wouldn't want anyone to learn her ... secrets, shall we say. She's, er, rather precious to us both. We're protecting her. That little box of tricks you saw in my hand is something I'm working on to mend her."

He exchanged a glance with Susan, busy cutting Springyyt's father's black bread and spreading a strange, thick paste on each slice.

"I should have known..." the old man said. "I should have...I, uh...I..." Lost in a momentary stammer that made him seem much younger and less sure of himself, the Doctor eventually cleared his thoughts and forcefully said, "I should have seen it coming! They were never going to let us go."

"Who?" Springyyt said.

"Our people," Susan replied. "Grandfather and I took the TARDIS, as we ran. There were certain events ... we had to leave suddenly ... We didn't steal her. We borrowed her. This statue, Springyyt..."

"Careful, Susan," the Doctor warned. He had grown increasingly uncomfortable, pacing on the spot.

"We can go anywhere with her. And everywhere. All of time and space."

The Doctor sighed, ashen to have let this strange secret go.

Springyyt would under other circumstances have not believed so fantastic a tale. But such was Susan's conviction, and her grandfather's secrecy, that he accepted it wholeheartedly. He gaped at her and back at the statue. "She's magical?"

"Well, in your terms," the Doctor said evenly. Now that the secret was out, he looked upon it with pride, happy to boast to the young boy. "Yes. Yes, quite so. Magical indeed. Hmm. But the, uh ... the creature that our people set on us – nearly caught us." He paused, searching for the right words to explain the problem. "Made us fly too fast, shall we say. We had to use up all of TARDIS's magic. And it as good as killed her. So we brought her here. No – she brought us here. We had just enough power left for one trip. One trip. She took us somewhere safe...somewhere hidden. And I've been working ever since. I'm afraid, my child, that your world is unfortunately scarce in the kind of materials or technology I need to get the Ship back in working order. Perhaps

that makeshift conceptual geometer I've cobbled together might just do the trick ... but at the same time, I must confess I'm worried to move her."

"I understand," Springyyt offered, even though the old man's words soared way above his head.

"All that to say, I've so far been unable to...to bring her to life. To bring the magic back..."

He seemed relieved to share this burden with another, but by the end of his explanation, he trailed off in a fluster of sadness. So miserable did he sound that Susan set down the bread and stood behind him, hugging him around his shoulders.

"You'll think of something, Grandfather," she told him. "You always do."

He smiled sadly and patted her hand. "I daresay that uh...in the passage of time...hmm...yes, quite so. Your confidence fills me with pride every day, my child. As does your courage. Your patience. You've been stuck with your old Grandfather for so long now... you deserve far better. You wanted to see the stars, and I wanted so badly to give you them. Instead, here we languish..."

Springyyt allowed them their moment, and only when Susan had returned to preparing the food did the boy pipe up with the most pertinent question of all.

"Who is the creature? The one that's been chasing you? The one that killed TARDIS?"

The Doctor's mouth set in a frown, and he fixed him with a steely glare. "We cannot tell you."

"But..."

"We *cannot*," he repeated, clutching his lapels, "tell you."

This tension over, they spoke of plenty else during the meal. The bread was as good a loaf as Springyyt's father had ever baked, and the strange paste tasted exactly like bacon and eggs. One bite and Springyyt tasted the bacon, the other and he got the egg...remarkable stuff, whatever it was.

They spoke of other people and places, other adventures they had experienced. It was clear they were very close, and they both shared a love of danger. Whoever Susan's parents were and whatever happened to them, Springyyt could see the Doctor was as loving and caring a guardian as anyone could hope for; as gruff as his own father perhaps, but just as soft underneath. Only reluctantly and airily did the Doctor relate the circumstances leading to them fleeing their home, borrowing the TARDIS and setting off among the stars, their destination unknown and their ambition undecided. From what little Springyyt understood, their home sounded like a wonderful place.

"And yet you were unhappy there?" he had to ask.

"Unhappy, my boy?" the Doctor said, considering the question. "No, no. No, I ah...I wouldn't say...unhappy, as such. A better word may have been bored. Hmm. Very bored."

"And being bored is bad enough to be worth living on the run? Being chased down?"

The Doctor and Susan exchanged a glance that suggested to Springyyt that there was far more to their departure than they were letting on. But a small voice in his head warned him not to press them for details; not only was he confident that he wouldn't get them, but he also thought some questions ought never to be answered, some secrets were too precious to tell. So he held his tongue and allowed the conversation to drift in his own direction, of home and his parents and his friends, and what he might like to do when he became a man.

Eventually it was time to leave, and despite offering to help with the dishes (something his parents had long ago drilled into him) the pair wouldn't hear of it. He wondered where they would wash up—perhaps that, along with the unusual furniture, was something TARDIS could do for

them, another part of her magic. Before Springyyt left, the Doctor took him to one side and spoke sternly to him.

“You will continue to see Susan every day. But you will not see me again, my child. And I warn you not to search for me. You would be putting yourself in very grave danger. Yes! Very grave danger indeed. For the party pursuing us has not given up. So we must keep a low profile; we cannot afford friends. Do you understand me?”

Springyyt promised that he did. Having sat with this strange and wonderful pair and heard the tale they had to tell, albeit redacted, he was confident of one thing more than anything else: he was dabbling in affairs that were not his ken. He had strayed into business beyond the comprehension of mortal man, and fascinating though it was, it was also scary and overwhelming, and more than slightly sad. But he would dream of them often, he thought. He would dream of the Doctor and Susan and their adventures in time and space and thought that such a story was surely the greatest ever told.

Springyyt decided he was like Susan. He believed and trusted in the Doctor’s wisdom. Someday soon, the Doctor would finish his repairs. Someday soon, he would not see Susan at mid-morning for her loaf of bread. When that bittersweet day finally came, he would know something no one else in Edgvyll knew, and that knowledge would give him the happiness that would temper the sadness of never seeing either stranger again.

Springyyt’s imagination was positively bubbling as he carefully made his way back down the mountain path home and replayed everything he had seen and heard that afternoon. His feet guided him around the lake and past the outcrop, down the southern road past the big face, grinning all the while. His merry mood was tempered only moderately by the certainty that his mother and father would be very worried indeed by now, for he had been gone more than twice—nearly thrice!—as long as he ought to have been. How he would account for his failure to bring back any milk, let alone his extended absence, he couldn’t possibly think. But such grounded, commonplace worries were below him.

He was perhaps twenty yards past the big face, trying his best not to walk too fast along the sheer section of the mountainside, when the temperature dropped.

He shivered in the sudden chill and pulled his jerkin tighter about him, that being precious little use given that it was thin and patchy, and only worn on summer days. He looked up. The afternoon suns were disappearing behind a plume of low, white cloud that seemed to threaten snow. He glanced about, fearful, and was sure he saw suddenly a face in the swirling mists above. A sudden fog rolled up the hill and engulfed him, obscuring everything from view, beyond five or so metres in front.

Spinning around, terrified of proceeding lest he mistake the path for thin air and go tumbling down the sheer face to his left or the grass verge to his right, he hyperventilated, tears in his eyes. In the mist, he heard voices. They were speaking a language he didn’t recognise, but whispered the words with such poison he felt sure they were muttered threats. Accompanying the voices were women weeping, children wailing in anguish and fright, and the shrieks and warbles of livestock in distress. Like a jelly, he stood rooted to the spot and wobbled, clutching himself around the midsection.

Strolling up through the mists towards him was a tall figure in white. A woman. An exceptionally beautiful woman at that.

No.

This woman *would have* been beautiful, but for the frightful amount of makeup that caked her face, the skin on her cheeks the very texture of a painter's palette and powdered a thick, blossom pink. Her eyes were enormous, as dark and unreadable as the night sky. She had long lashes dusted with black powder, and her lips were scarlet. She had drawn a thin blood-red line up each cheek with that paste, making it look almost as though she were smiling, an ear-to-ear smile that made Springyyt shudder. Her blonde bob of hair looked to be a wig. Over it she wore a wide-rimmed black hat and a peculiar gambeson with a tall collar, chequered black and white. She wore a skirt with tights and high-heeled leather boots.

"Hi Springyyt," she said.

The cold, the clouds, her sudden inexplicable presence, all paled in comparison. That this terrifying stranger should have known his name—perhaps, somehow, known *him*—rattled Springyyt to his core.

"And if I know that," she said softly, as if she had read his thoughts. "I know also how to find you. Who your parents are...where you live..."

"Who are you?" he whispered.

"I'm the Countess," she purred in reply, her smile widening. "Do you like sweeties, young man?" She stretched out a gloved hand, revealing a single candied plum.

"Take it," she said, her tone as sickly sweet as the confection she held. "Take it, honey bear..."

Springyyt didn't take it. Tears streaming down his face, he silently urged his legs to start functioning. Even if he sprinted clear over the side of the mountain, it would be better than being trapped here with this spectre. His legs failed him; barely strong enough to keep him upright, he could no more flee from this woman than climb Mount Olabor.

"There will be plenty more where this came from," she cooed, taking a step towards him. "All I need in return is one little favour. One teeny-tiny little favour from my favourite little honey bear...and he knows what I'm talking about, doesn't he? He knows *whom*. All *I* need to know is *where*."

"I d-d-d-don't k-kn ..." Springyyt stammered, through thick sobs.

"D-d-d-don't you?" she replied with unkind mockery. "Come on, sweetie, I think you do ...*think*. Think, young sweetie-pie. And tell me..."

But something snapped in Springyyt. There had only been one occasion in his life where his father was really, sincerely angry with him, about two years ago, when he had struck one of the girls from the schoolhouse in a sudden fit of rage, a girl who had been "*pinging*" him every time he came within reach, flicking his arm between thumb and forefinger for no other reason than sadistic fun.

"If another boy gives you nonsense, Springyyt, then you do whatever you need to do. If you can't earn his respect through affection, then earn it through mettle. That's fair. But no matter how much they annoy you, no matter how much they tease, no son of mine raises his hand to a girl in anger. He only does it, *only* does it, in self-defence, and even then, only to protect himself."

With that lesson ringing in his ears – and with the need to defend himself painfully and frightfully obvious now – Springyyt managed to lash out with his left foot, the toe of his boot striking the Countess's knee. She cried out, more shocked than hurt, but that was all Springyyt needed. He pushed her hard out of his way and positively tore away to safety, free of the fog and cascading like a stray boulder down from the foothills.

“Filthy little brat!” he heard her cry, the earlier saccharine tones replaced by the venom he knew had lurked underneath. “I know where to find you! I know where you live! I’ll kill you! I’ll kill every last *stinking* peasant there!”

Onwards he ran, miraculously only missing his footing once or twice and both times able to recover. He did not stop until he reached Edgvyll, his heart thumping and his lungs burning, throwing himself through the bakery door and collapsing onto the tiles, racked with uncontrollable sobs as his father, any anger instantly vanquished, scooped him into his arms and held him tight until, at great length, he was able to calm himself down...

CHAPTER 4

“Stupid looting git,” Xaul grumbled as she leveraged herself awkwardly into one of the three Minnows, the pilot a snub-nosed man heading towards his senior years. Despite herself, even the jaded Justiciar had to share the Doctor’s amazement at the clockwork engine at the vehicle’s rear. She studied it as she ducked low through the pressurised hatch on the side of the vessel and staggered into her seat, her burden all the more awkward by her absent arm. The interior was stuffy and far too small for her liking, the natural height of a Hux making it an inevitable squeeze, its ceiling less than an inch from her head and her legs barely fitting into the footwell. Maggie’s seat was beside, less than a foot apart, with the cockpit in front and a small space for storage behind. The seats were upholstered with old, frayed leather, and as Maggie climbed in she winced at the sticky, filthy rubber carpet against her feet.

“All aboard,” the pilot said cheerfully, tapping an array of buttons on his control panel, a three-sided contraption with an abundance of green flashing lights, maps and radar, and an endless selection of anonymous controls.

Seeing the Doctor hovering at the hatch, Xaul asked hopefully, “We couldn’t just fly the TARDIS there?”

“I think,” the Doctor said slowly, “that although these gentlemen have saved our lives and been gracious to a fault, it may not be as simple as that. Am I right, Mister...”

“*Captain* Dryce, sir,” the pilot said tartly. “And you are. You are not under arrest – currently. But the fact remains we found you out of bounds without any paperwork or credentials. Per procedure, we need to run a few questions past you, and we really can’t really allow you to fly off unsupervised, you understand.”

“I do,” the Doctor said evenly. “Fair winds, ladies. See you soon.”

With a smirk, he stepped back as the hatch sealed shut with a hydraulic hiss, leaving Xaul and Maggie temporarily in darkness, before the screens masking the windshield opened, the blissful chill of air conditioning accompanying the natural light.

“Belt up, if you will,” Dryce called back. Maggie slipped her own belt on with ease, before helping the now one-armed Xaul with hers—much to the older lady’s chagrin.

It was as Dryce was priming the engines for take-off that he suddenly turned to look at Xaul, eyes narrowing. “Do I *know* you?”

“I doubt it,” Xaul said uncomfortably, painfully aware that a man of this age, in this time and location, might well recognise her face...

“Hmm. You seem familiar, ma’am. Can’t quite...put my finger on it.”

“Jolly good,” Xaul said, dropping her gaze and focusing on the nails of her remaining hand. “Captain Dryce, I think your engines are at capacity.”

With a final frown, he returned to his controls and engaged the thrusters. The sound from outside was not of combustion engines wheezing and roaring into life. Instead, the steady tick-tock of the clockwork engines grew louder, faster, giving the illusion that they were passing through time as well as space, as the ground beneath the Minnow retreated and they climbed to cruising altitude.

“ETA?” Maggie asked.

“Twenty zens,” Dryce said. “I’ll do it in ten.” He stared at Xaul again, troubled. “Do I *really* not know you?”

She shook her head shortly, and with a shrug Dryce turned again to his controls and laughed as Maggie and Xaul were shoved back in their seats by the G-force, the clouds becoming fleeting blurs as he soared south towards the terminal.

“All airborne,” he called back, tapping a radar which indicated two blips flying close alongside.

The flight lasted all of five minutes before disaster struck.

“Contact,” Dryce said, tapping the radar again. Xaul swore softly under her breath; a fourth blip had appeared on the fringes of the radar, heading towards the centre at speed.

“V-SOL?” she said through gritted teeth.

“Who else?” Dryce said, scanning the view before him. “I can’t see him. Ladies – forgive me for this. We need to be able to see!”

He tapped a few controls, and all at once the Minnow was gone. Xaul swore again and a brief scream escaped from Maggie, before she clapped a hand to her mouth. The three of them squatted in a sitting position in mid-air, thousands of feet above the ground. Behind them, flying in tight formation, were the two other Minnows, the TARDIS flying close behind Grair’s.

“Cloaking,” he explained. “Bit of an unauthorised modification on my part. Grair will likely wipe the floor with me once we’re back. But needs must.” He looked around in confusion. “Really and truly, it should only work on the exterior, not for us inside. It’s a work in progress.”

With vision on all sides, the three scanned the skies for V-SOL, and it was Maggie who spotted him tearing towards them from the west, his claw raised, jaws snapping.

Through an intercom that was no longer visible, Grair’s voice appeared. “Fire at will.”

Xaul’s stomach dropped as Dryce sharply veered west at a near-ninety-degree angle so that they faced V-SOL. Despite the cloaking, he seemed to know where the controls were by instinct. With an electronic squeal, ruby laser beams erupted from invisible cannons, and V-SOL14 howled with laughter, dropping altitude slightly and flying below the Minnows. Xaul cricked her neck looking over her shoulder and saw him gain height, veering around for another pass. The other two Minnows, neither with Dryce’s secret invisibility mods, veered east and engaged him, their lasers passing close but failing to find their mark.

Having found her stomach again, Xaul heaved as it was snatched away once more, thanks to Dryce executing a full, nauseating loop to get them facing east. His shots accompanied his comrades’, but V-SOL14, laughing all the while, ducked and dived between all of them, the outstretched, snapping claw passing so close to the Minnow bearing the TARDIS that Grair missed

death (and the TARDIS, abduction) by inches. V-SOL's laughter, ear-splitting even over the clockwork engines, didn't let up for an instant.

"Dryce," came another voice over the intercom: the Doctor's.

"You're a passenger here, sir!" demanded the pilot of the third craft. "Get off the intercom at once."

"Dryce," the Doctor continued blithely. "You've got to go. Now! He can't see you. Get Maggie and Xaul to safety."

"I ain't going anywhere," he spat. "We're in this together."

"Do as he says, Dryce!" Grair said sharply. "That's an order!"

Dryce swore roughly, and despite Maggie and Xaul's protests, disengaged.

But not before they saw it.

There was the frightful scream of metal on metal behind them, and wheeling around in their seats, the women watched in horror as the jaws of V-SOL14 carved an enormous gash in the side of the Minnow carrying the Doctor, sparks and wires flying, cogs exploding in a firework display of clockwork as the engine's housing shattered.

They didn't stand a chance. Like a stone, the Minnow lost altitude, dropping silent and deathly, an endless cloud of smoke and debris following.

Then –

"Damn it!" Xaul screamed, a sudden burst of heat at her wrist telling her that her bracelet – the bracelet her son had given her for her fiftieth birthday, oh so long ago – had been taken.

"My tooth!" Dryce said, clutching his mouth and spitting blood. "He ripped out my gold tooth!"

But Xaul barely heard him. She looked at Maggie, seated on her left, and cold panic took over. Maggie drew a ragged breath, and her sickly groan became a cry of pain. No; not pain. Agony. She thrashed against her seat and her cries turned into screams, tears welling up in her large, frightened eyes as she began to gasp for air, lost in the throes of torture.

And Xaul knew at once what had happened. A gold tooth and a bracelet, however sentimental, did not compare. Nor even did a bionic arm. For he had taken more from Maggie, much more. *Flesh*. Though outwardly she was perfectly intact, fingers and toes all accounted for, the way her hand clutched desperately at her abdomen told Xaul all she needed to know.

"He's taken an organ," she told Dryce.

"Which?" he asked stupidly.

"I don't know which!" she said hotly. "Just go! Fly! Fast!"

And so he did, soaring so fast through the air that Xaul and Maggie were buffeted about, every motion compounding Maggie's torment. Xaul looked into her pleading eyes, filled with pain and terror and desperation, and at once her skin crawled and visions flashed before her mind's eye...for she had seen that expression before. Many times and in many eyes. Life, draining. Pleas for mercy, unspoken. For the Chief Justiciar had arrived in the torture chamber, and those eyes knew, they always knew, that all hope was surely lost...

So many times had she seen those eyes and those expressions, that Xaul had long since grown desensitised to them. And yet when her eyes met Maggie, this time, something else happened. For all hope did *not* drain from them. That hope, that expectation, that desire for closeness and comfort, remained. It looked into Xaul...and Xaul looked into it.

Slowly, she found herself reaching for the younger woman's hand and squeezing it tight.

"I've got you," she said gruffly, her tenderness alien and intrusive and frightening to her. "Focus on me...take slow, deep breaths."

Maggie managed to nod, before screwing her eyes up tight as a fresh wave of agony seized her. Her skin was going from grey to white. She was bleeding out.

“Faster!” Xaul screamed at Dryce.

Terminal Two-Thousand and Fifty-Three was a fortress. They flew past a crackling blue ion pulse forcefield that encircled the facility: harmless to all craft registered on the terminal’s systems, yet able to atomise any intruders in a split-second.

The thing that struck Xaul most, aside from the terminal having become an eerie ghost town, was its utter sterile banality. Though each of its countless hangars was enormous, none boasted any aesthetic flair, no style, no features to distinguish them. Each building was a gargantuan grey rectangle, devoid of windows and made of steel. Flying invisible above, Xaul saw flat roof after flat roof, an endless sprawling steel jungle, broken up only by the odd launch pad or landing bay. Built by robots, she supposed, whose only instruction was to build an efficient terminal, and who set about that task without a single creative thought.

The only exception was the structure in the very centre of the web, a tower that looked to comprise hundreds of floors. It was tall and thin, save for a ring a couple of floors from its domed roof, which Xaul took to be the control centre. As they drew closer, heading towards a point halfway up the structure, Xaul noticed landing bays, the double-doors of one splitting apart to admit them. Dryce soared into a bay as cold and drab as the terminal outside, and with a thump set them down, the ship materialising around them as the clockwork engines wound down, the ticking slowing, before quieting and stopping. With a hiss, the hatch on the side slid open.

“The Doctor,” Maggie whispered, briefly coming to life. “He fell...”

“Either he’s alive or he’s not. Focus on yourself.”

Dryce climbed out and screamed for help. It came rushing forth at once, men clad in identical blue uniforms, who at once anaesthetised Maggie before lifting her out of the Minnow. Even with the anaesthetic, being moved was so painful that she thrashed and lashed out with her nails, until they were forced to sedate her entirely, lifting her limp and floppy from the ship and depositing her on a gurney, rolling her from the landing bay at speed.

“See that she lives!” Xaul called after them, struggling one-armed from the Minnow with Dryce’s help.

The tone of voice was a reflex, like holding up a hand to shield one’s eyes. Even though she had travelled to different times and places, she could never fully shake her former authority, make herself humbler. Lately she had felt she was changing, her mind expanding, the limits of her former personality and its attendant repulsiveness fading away. Perhaps being back here, so close to her home, brought her natural behaviour back to the fore. Whatever, as soon as the words escaped her mouth, she regretted them.

As she straightened, her eyes met Dryce’s. And as they did, the captain released her hand as though it were something unpleasant and poisonous, his mouth curling into a snarl. “*That’s where I know you from.*”

“Eh?” Xaul said, feigning ignorance.

He snorted derisively. “You should be dead. Morally speaking, of course, long ago, but literally too. We were told you were dead. The rebels broadcast an image of your severed head for the whole star system to see. Hah. Smoke and mirrors. I guess you cut a deal. Vacated office and fled into exile like the coward you are.”

“I’m quite sure you must be mad or mistaken,” Xaul said, the enormity of what she’d just heard making her sick to her stomach. She suddenly found herself rubbing her neck subconsciously and quickly put her hand down. “I’m nobody. Just a grumpy old bag with one arm...”

And then to her chagrin, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a plasma pistol. He disengaged the safety and aimed at her belly.

“I should kill you. Right here and now. I should pull the trigger, be damned the consequences. I’d be doing the cosmos a favour. How many suffered and died under your regime?”

“The *Emperors’* regime,” she retorted, reflexively, before she could stop herself.

“A confession!” Dryce said dramatically. “So you admit it. You know what you did for them. Those scum. Tell me, how many do you think you killed? I’ve long believed the official estimates are too low.” He took a step back and planted his feet, moving his aim from her gut to her chest. “I don’t think...there’s much else to be said.”

And anything could have happened then, were it not for a loud voice across the bay making them jump out of their skin. It was a wonder Dryce didn’t pull the trigger by accident.

“Ship incoming!”

They both exchanged a final glare and then looked out of the bay doors to the royal-blue skies, thinking of V-SOL. No; that was silly. V-SOL would never get through the ion pulse forcefield. To her relief, she saw that it was Grair, the TARDIS in tow, soaring towards the open bay. He, at least, had escaped. Though not unscathed. As he came to land, a large, straight gash was revealed on the left side of the craft.

“I took a glancing blow,” he said, waving away the subordinates rushing to his aid. “I’m fine.”

“The others?” Xaul demanded. “Did you see them go down? Any response from them?”

“None,” Grair answered grimly. “And I’ll tell you this, I don’t rate their chances. V-SOL chased me all the way to the forcefield’s edge, but he’ll be heading back to the crash site now, for salvage. If by some freak of luck either of them survived the crash, there’s nothing we can do...” His attention moved from her to Dryce, his eyes dropping to Dryce’s weapon. “What are you doing?”

With a final, furious glare at Xaul, Dryce re-engaged the safety and pocketed the plasma pistol.

“It was my fault,” Xaul interjected breezily. “I wanted him to demonstrate your facility’s security overrides.”

“I see,” Grair said, clearly not fully convinced. He returned to the captain. “Well. That invisibility trick? Big trouble. Ingenious work, I’ll give you that, but you do *not* modify the Minnows without going through the formal channels and having me sign off on the work. You’ll be disciplined for this, Dryce, mark my words. But there may be mitigation given the circumstances ...”

He realised Maggie was absent, and Xaul hurriedly explained what had happened.

Grair swore. “Right. I’ll go to the medical wing and get an update. Dryce, take her to the guest quarters.”

And off he went, leaving Xaul fearful that the plasma gun would appear again in Dryce’s hand. It didn’t.

“I can’t,” he spat. “I want to. I *really* want to. But I can’t. I’ve got these things called morals, Chief Justiciar. Something you never had. You stand before me, aged, one-armed, and without a weapon. I can’t shoot you down. You know what you are; you know what you did. Let age and sickness do the job, which soon they must.”

With that he whistled for a comrade. “I’ll be damned if I’m walking you to the quarters.” A junior wandered over, and with that Dryce stalked off, throwing her a final snarl.

She realised she was clutching her neck again. What he’d told her in that exchange, so callously and gleefully, made her weak at the knees. When she first met the Doctor, he had shown her the beginnings of the regime change, but she had not paid too much attention to the details. She had been so happy to hear that her son had fled the system and was safe that she had not considered the details of the changes to come. And here she saw how drastic they were. At some point in the fifteen years between leaving with the Doctor and arriving on Orbis today, the Hux regime had been overthrown, and she had been (seemingly) beheaded.

She caught her breath, remembering that they did arrive here via time travel.

I might have gone into exile, she told herself. It might actually have happened just as he said it did. Right now, I could be on some tropical spa planet, enjoying retirement...

Except...she didn’t believe it for a second.

One day, the Doctor would return her home. She had never expected to be with him forever, nor even for very long. She merely wanted a glimpse of the wider universe, the vistas that had been closed to her in the hateful business of her career. She had not intended to escape for good. One day soon she’d go back. And be it a month, a year, a decade after...her appointment with the chopping block would beckon.

CHAPTER 5

The Doctor hovered between two worlds. Both were painful.

In one world he was lying in an excruciating position, knees bent as he faced the ground, held in place by straps that he could neither account for, nor hope to release.

Everything hurt: his head, his arms, his legs, even his innards! He was dimly aware that he wore no jumper and could not recall how this had come to pass.

In the second world he was his old self—his oldest self. He was clutching his granddaughter in a futile effort to comfort her. There was no pain here, only the anguish and terror of capture looming. The walls and the ceiling of the cave—their makeshift home for quite a while in those days, when the TARDIS had been put out of action—bore down, horribly close on all sides.

“...You may arrest me and take me to Gallifrey; you may shoot me down here and now. I submit...”

“...The TARDIS is dead....”

“...Our own deaths would be trivial...”

And then a wheezing groan from far away brought him floating back into the first world. He managed to force his eyes open a slit and tried to make sense of his surroundings. In the momentary glance that was all he could bear to take, he saw severed, sparking wires and corrugated steel bars bent hopelessly out of shape. He saw broken clockwork cogs and vicious shards of glass hidden between blades of grass, ready to ravage the soles of anyone fool enough to stand on them barefoot. Oh goodness...the woman. She'd lost her shoes hadn't she? He strained to remember her name. He'd have to warn her!

Except, said a voice in his head. *She – Maggie – isn't here. Just you.*

Neither was the other one. There were two these days.

Of course. Maggie and Xaul! He pictured Maggie's face in his mind's eye and drew strength enough to raise a hand (the arm mercifully unbroken) and fumble for the clasp still strapping him to the upturned seat. Finding it, he released it and fell unceremoniously to the grass. He lay perfectly still for a long while, his strength already expended by that little effort.

And then he heard it again – the groaning wheeze from far away. North, he thought. Somewhere in the mountains.

Magic! Time energy! Mountains!

He *knew* that sound!

He finally moved, staggering shakily to his feet and surveying the crash site with horror, every fibre of his being searing with pain. They had landed in a small valley between two hills, the wreckage of the Minnow covering the immediate area in a fifty-meter radius. The Doctor examined himself from head to toe and although he was battered, bruised, cut and burnt on various parts of his body, none of the wounds looked fatal. His coarse rope trousers and his faithful duster were hanging in strips around his body, beyond repair. So much for indestructible. His mistake for not lining it with chronodyne like his old balmacaan.

The pilot!

Without a care for his own safety, the Doctor dived back into the wreckage and found the pilot, a young man whose name he hadn't a chance to ask, in a state utterly incompatible with life. He didn't need to bother checking for vitals. The poor man could not be extracted from his resting place in one piece, tangled in a mesh of steel and electronic spaghetti.

"I'm sorry," he told him, vowing to find out his name later. Hanging his head, he walked silently from the wreckage and cast his eyes skyward to the twin suns. Establishing which direction was south—the direction of the terminal and (he hoped) Xaul, Maggie and the TARDIS—he began to hobble that way.

He'd barely taken ten steps when he heard that wheezing groan again, ghost-like and far away. The sound he loved more than anything else in the world. It was coming from the mountains, due north.

Fire...cave...magic...

For a second he conjectured that there was indeed another Time Lord up there, some rogue element, his old friend the Master perhaps, using his TARDIS to flood the atmosphere with time energy. He had been in this neck of the woods recently, after all, and this set-up would be just his style. Disrupting the forces that held the spaceways in place, allowing for (and perhaps colluding with) V-SOL14 in his reign of terror, curtailing the passage of food and medicine across the cosmos, setting the stage for his own usual plans of conquest...

How the Doctor would have liked to believe it. A good old, deadly scrap with his chum, from which he would inevitably emerge victorious.

But no. It was worse than that. So much worse.

He examined the mountains, the sunlight winking off the summit of the big golden one in the middle of the range. It truly was an impressive sight. He thought it now, just like he'd thought it then.

That other time. Before... long before ...

"...Our battle is over..."

He groaned and staggered, shocked senseless by the intensity of the vision. Giving the south a final glance over his shoulder, he began to march north instead, north towards the mountain range. It was important that he was there. And he very nearly remembered why...

"Hello, m'man! Remember meeee?"

He breathed in a cloying stench of molten sugar. His hearts sank. Descending was a wasp-like object with an emoji—of all things! – mounted on its front. On its roof, those terrible jaws snapped open and shut with a shriek of metal on metal.

He had nowhere to run. He had nothing to fight with. But he'd be damned if he would make it easy for V-SOL. He set off at a clumsy, wounded canter, but a piece of debris caught his ankle and sent him sprawling to the grass. He rolled over, eyes wide with fright, as V-SOL hovered a

few feet above the ground, reaching out towards him with the claw, those terrible teeth filling his vision, the gaping black mouth stinking of rusty iron and sugar oil.

“Were you going somewhere, nipple-boy?” V-SOL howled. “Maybe I could give you a lift!”

With a hastily suppressed cry, the Doctor was swallowed whole, the steel jaws clamping shut around him and leaving him in a stinking, pitch-dark space about the size of a two-man tent. Cut off entirely from the outside world, hyperventilating in the hot, airless space, he felt V-SOL rise into the air and fly away at speed, and sat helpless in his metal cell as he was taken to what he could only assume would be a dire, grisly fate...

CHAPTER 6

“You know who you remind me of?” Xaul said, inviting herself into Maggie’s room on the medical bay. “My great aunt.”

“Oh?” Maggie said weakly. She lay pale and shivering on the bed, the anaesthetic leaving her numb and detached, as though she were interacting with the outside world from inside a thick, viscous bubble. “Is that a compliment?”

“No. I only ever saw her once, on her deathbed.”

“Oh.” Maggie bit her lip, afraid to ask her next question. “Then am I on mine?”

“No, no,” Xaul said flippantly. “You’ll live. It was a relatively minor operation, I’m told. Just a little internal bleeding to sort out. Well... a lot, really. But perfectly doable.”

“And dare I ask what...?”

“Was taken? Something non-vital called the appendix. I don’t know what it does, my kind don’t have it.”

“Frankly, I don’t know either,” Maggie said, managing a ghost of a laugh. She watched Xaul as she dragged a chair across the floor with an ear-splitting scrape and deposited it at her bedside. She was even more afraid to ask her next question. “The Doctor?”

“Good news and bad. Which do you want first?”

Maggie smiled, satisfied from Xaul’s remark that he was, at least, alive. “Before either, I want to say thank you.”

“What for?”

“You really saved me.”

Xaul squirmed. “No, I don’t think so. The surgeons did that, you see.”

“No. You kept me calm. Without that, I don’t know if I’d have made it. I might have bled out. My heart might have packed in. I’m nearer fifty than forty, you know. I’m not young enough to shrug off things like this. Without you, I think there’s every chance I’d have died in that Minnow. So thanks.”

“Don’t mention it. Now, in terms of my news...the good news is that he’s alive and remarkably intact.”

“Excellent,” Maggie said briskly. “And the bad?”

“Easier to show you, I think. Come on.”

Shod in a spare pair of boots that one of the soldiers had given her, Maggie rose shakily to her feet and her legs trembled uncontrollably, numb under the anaesthetic. She was almost tempted by Xaul's offer of a wheelchair, but after ten minutes found that she was able to move by leaning against the wall, ambling slowly along with Xaul marching lopsided by her side. They made slow progress, through endless grey corridors, up an elevator, and finally to the top of the tower.

Terminal Two Thousand and Fifty-Three's circular control room reminded Maggie of pictures she'd seen of the control rooms at Chernobyl, rows of functional switches and dials laid out on several rather intimidating panels. Unlike Chernobyl, the room had no walls. Contained in thick, reinforced glass, the outside world was on display at all angles. Taking in the view, Maggie saw endless green plains to the south, east and west, and the distant summits of the mountains to the north. Crew dressed in blue uniforms bustled about, some sat at control panels, others on their feet, some carrying out maintenance work on the various appliances. Amidst the activity, Admiral Grair and Captain Dryce stood side by side, transfixed on a screen built into one of the consoles.

"Where is he?" Maggie gasped, gratefully collapsing into the seat Grair offered her. "Where's the Doctor?"

"He's not here," Xaul said. "Grair, can you...?"

"Yes." Grair tapped a nearby technician. "Cast the image."

The picture on the screen was magnified a hundredfold, floating on the glass wall before them.

And a terrible picture it was too...

"How do! Just returning some lost property!"

The Doctor was thrust about like a rag doll as the claw spun horizontal onto its side and opened. For a terrible moment, the Doctor was sure V-SOL planned to drop him, but in fact the claw opened only minutely, revealing a drop of thousands of feet through the narrow slit. An identical gap opened above, and the Doctor was able to wriggle his head and torso free, taking in great lungfuls of air, only to gag immediately at the strong stench of sugar.

They were hovering outside the terminal, a few meters from the crackling blue dome of the ion pulse forcefield. Floating before the forcefield was a holographic image. A control room full of men in blue, and in their midst the Doctor spied Maggie and Xaul.

"Ladies!" he exclaimed. "Can you hear me? I...Maggie, what's wrong?" His friend was slumped in a chair, her pretty face wan and drained.

"I'm fine," she lied. "We're both fine."

"What did you do to her?" he hissed to V-SOL14 through gritted teeth.

"Diet plan," V-SOL replied, laughing at his own joke. "She weighs less now. Hah! I crack myself up. Now. To business. I'm prepared, ladies 'n' gents, to return this little morsel, this li'l man right here, very nearly unharmed ... if the price is right."

"That price being?" Grair said.

"The little blue box. If I sell that thing on the black market, I'll make millions!"

"Millions?" Grair replied. "Is that so? Tell me, what will you spend those millions on? When was the last time you left your ship? What happened to you? Be a man and show yourself. Come out of that rust bucket, pick up a weapon, and fight."

"You mean...?"

“A duel, plain and simple. Orbital law allows such things. If I win and you die, we’ll throw a party that will last the whole damn night. If you win and I die, you get the blue box. Sounds fair? You agree with that, Doctor?”

“Frankly, no!” the Doctor exclaimed.

“Well, sir, Admiral, sir!” V-SOL14 barked. “I ain’t never wishing to be a killjoy, trust me on that. Trouble is, Old McV-SOL...he ain’t never been much of a fighter. No suh. No, as much as your little proposal amuses me, an’ as much as I would get one hell of a kick out of givin’ you a wallop, I gotta play the cards I’m dealt. So with regret, I think I’ll have to decline. And I’m gonna make it...*real* simple for you. Send out a Minnow bearing the goods. *Now*. Or watch the little Doctor man drop. What noise do we think little Doctor men make when they hit the ground from this altitude? Does anyone wanna guess? Anyone wanna find out?”

The claw gave a frightful lurch, and V-SOL cackled hysterically. “I’m gonna make it...*real* simple again. You got ten seconds. *Nine*.”

“Don’t hand over the TARDIS,” the Doctor told the horrified audience. “He’ll just kill me anyway. And any pilot you send too.”

“*Eight. Seven.*”

There was just one chance. Although it was nothing but hopeful speculation on his part, his inner space engineer told him that the teleportation module, responsible for the theft of one of his favourite sweaters, Xaul’s arm, Maggie’s shoes, and goodness knew what else, may be housed within the claw. There was something that resembled a fuse box at the base, an array of pipes and cables trailing and snaking down its length...if he was right, it was surely in there. And it was just...*just*...within reach. If he were right, he’d be able to beam himself into V-SOL and seize control from the wretch in the cockpit.

“*Six! Five!*”

On the holographic image, he saw Maggie and Xaul arguing furiously with Grair and Dryce.

“*Four! Three!*”

One chance.

He stretched with all his might, fighting through the blinding pain, and yanked open the fuse box. In less than a nanosecond he seizes what he took (and hoped) to be the teleportation module before he heard V-SOL’s howl of fury. A second later he found himself airborne. Oh, not falling; not yet anyway. For V-SOL14 hadn’t so much as dropped him as positively *flung* him, the arm sweeping left to right and the claw releasing him, so that he soared like a cannonball through the air, tumbling head over heels in a hopeless death spiral.

Cursing his recklessness, he tried to blot out his imperilled state and examine the small object in his hand ... a tall order indeed given the circumstances...he had only moments ... the ground was rushing closer...the module resembled a large computer chip with a flashing green light on the top, but where was the manual control? Button...button...*button!* There was a small red button on the bottom, and he hurriedly pressed it, breathing a sigh of relief as his flesh prickled with static and he was beamed into...

The interior of V-SOL14 was hot and smoky and stank of molten sugar. Filth and layers of dust coated every surface from the walls to the tabletops. It was crammed full of furniture and stolen wares, a long, thin compartment with an unkempt bed in the corner and something like a kitchen unit off to the right. There was a medical station filled to bursting with gauze and bandages and antiseptic. And ahead of him at the controls was...

‘No!’ the figure cried. It was V-SOL’s voice, but quieter, rasping, guttural. He turned around and in the brief second before he hid his face behind a soiled blanket from his lap, the Doctor glimpsed features as mottled with burns and scars as any he’d seen. Bloodshot eyes bulged out of sunken sockets, two holes gaped where a nose ought to have been, and the mouth was lost below layers of charred flesh. He was bald, the skin stretched so tight over his scalp that the skull showed in places. He had a feeding tube in his neck and his right arm ended in a stump.

“Don’t!” he cried. “Don’t look at me! Get out! *Get out!* I said *get out!*”

The Doctor was too slow to realise that staring dumbstruck at the man at the controls had cost him dearly. The pilot slammed one of the controls and the teleport was rejected, beaming the Doctor back out of the ship without coordinates ...he just had time to realise that he would at best be deposited in midair to await his death—at worst atomised altogether. He felt the static prickling his flesh again and then everything faded away...

CHAPTER 7

Small, isolated villages like Edgvyll are often dismissed as weak and vulnerable, but those very attributes – the isolation and need for constant cooperation – that lend them strength.

Springyyt relayed his encounter with the Countess to his father, who in turn passed it on to the town's Reeve not thirty minutes thereafter. The Reeve (an ageing, ferocious man with a detective's wit and the sword arm of one much younger) in turn reported straight to the landlord of the alehouse, who relayed it to the alewife and punters. Before long, the blacksmith and tanner were discussing it, and the washerwomen were nattering as they beat their dirty clothes and blankets. The butcher debriefed the schoolmaster, who in turn relayed it to Springyyt's peers, for their own safety. Soon enough, there wasn't a soul in Edgvyll that didn't know. That is not to say that every one of them had an accurate picture of what Springyyt had endured – a tale told multiple times often mutates unpredictably and outlandishly – but the salient points were understood by all. The baker's boy had been up in the hills, where a witch had confronted him and threatened to murder them all with her blood magic.

Before the night was out, several of the townsfolk walked the foothills with torches and pitchforks, all keen to find and slay the monstrous witch. Some of the men roaming the hills that night were looking for a beautiful blond woman in a chequered gambeson, just as he had described. In some accounts, her hair had changed to dark, and it was a brunette head that they scanned the wilds for. One or two, far from seeking a young woman of outward beauty, were searching for a hunchbacked crone with a bald head and a nose the length of her forearm. But all were united in their purpose to find this creature, and Springyyt lay awake the whole night in the arms of his mother and father, waiting for news and hoping beyond hope that she would be caught.

Of the Doctor and Susan, despite the Reeve's insistence, he had said nothing at all. Whether this was the right decision, he didn't know; but he felt as if involving them might leave them vulnerable, if some villagers decided that the best way of protecting themselves and Edgvyll was by handing over the strange girl and her mysterious grandfather...

"Well?" his father urged as the Reeve let himself into the bakery at dawn.

"Nothing," he said glumly. "We searched all through the night. She must have retreated to the higher plains."

“Then what now?” his mother demanded, squeezing Springyyt around the shoulders. He felt sick. That witch was still out there, at large. And he knew – *knew* – that the threats she made were not empty ones.

The Reeve sighed and shrugged, mopping his sweaty, iron-grey hair. “We’re all tired. I’ll mount a fresh search, of course, but there’s only so long we can keep on this. We have jobs to go to. Mouths to feed. The village won’t run itself.”

“I’ll come,” Springyyt’s father said. “I’ll join the next shift. Just fetch me when it’s time.”

“So it is,” the Reeve said. He looked down at Springyyt, sandwiched between his mother and father, and winked at him. “Cheer up, laddie. You know what my grandmother always told me? A witch’s power is frightening and powerful and make no mistake, she is a serious threat. But for all her cunning and magic, she’s just a woman. One, you see. We are many, and she is but one. That’s our advantage.”

“Okay,” Springyyt said hollowly, fearful that those odds were not enough to deter her.

The Reeve let himself out, and Springyyt’s father uncurled himself from his wife and son and got to his feet.

“I need to get the oven going,” he said. “Do you feel able to help me, Spring? It might take your mind off things.”

“Yes,” Springyyt said. Quite what he’d say to Susan when he saw her, he didn’t know. But she *had* to know. And how long would it be before the Reeve or any of the other villagers spied her heading to or from the bakery and formulated their own suspicions? If he could catch her alone, he could warn her and mayhaps slip her a few extra loaves so that she could stay out of town for a few days...

Kissing his mother (who had been having one of her bad spells of late, exhausting herself staying awake all night), he helped her into bed and tucked the covers over her, before heading downstairs to help his father with the ovens. Even this early, he could tell the day was shaping up to be another hot one. He wiped sweat from his brow every few minutes, and served the customers through gritted teeth, all sharing well-meant enquiries as to his health and safety, along with hollow assurances that the witch would be brought to justice.

“She’s not a witch,” he told his father after the seventh such customer had shared their faux wisdom. “She’s much worse than that.”

He frowned. “Then what is she, lad? What else could she possibly be?”

For a moment he was tempted to explain that she was a creature from another world – a world of magic and wonder, the likes of which he hadn’t known to be a possibility a mere twenty-five zentillia before. But deciding the better of it, he merely shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“Nor do I, Springy,” his father said gently. “These witches and warlocks were ever a dissembling sort. But don’t worry. *We’re* not worried. Have you seen a single villager unwilling to join the search, for fear of encountering her? No. It’s just like the Reeve said. Strength in numbers. We’ll bring her to justice. We’ll make her rue the day she came for you. But I do wish you’d tell me - what *were* you doing out there? I’m not even angry about it. Do I sound angry? No. I just want to help.”

“I don’t know why I did it,” Springyyt lied. “I just...I saw the hills and I thought if I had a little walk then it wouldn’t matter, and nobody would ever find out.”

“Hmm.” His father said, disbelief and disappointment evident in his tone. “Well. I suppose it doesn’t matter much now. It happened.” He picked up a seeded bun from the counter and gave it to Springyyt. “Your mother hasn’t eaten since yesterday morning. Take her that, will you? And sit with her for a bit. If you won’t tell me the truth, then please tell her. Lying to your father isn’t

good, Spring. But lying to your mother is worse. Swear her to secrecy if you must. I'll honour that. I'll never pry. If she could tell me that she knows the full story and is satisfied, then that would be enough."

Tears coming to his eyes, Springyyt took the bread and clambered up the stairs, knocking gently on the door and swinging it open when he heard his mother's weak voice.

His first thought upon entering the room was that dehydration, panic, and a near sleepless night had compounded to make him hallucinate. But when he saw his mother looking down at him from the ceiling, saw the sheer panic and terror in her eyes, he knew it was for real.

It was magic.

The entire room was upside down. Springyyt was standing on the plaster ceiling between the rafters, whilst the bed, wardrobe, and bedside table hung from the floor above. Nothing fell. His mother hung secure, still nestled in thin summer bedsheets.

Doing the only thing that made any sense, he screamed and dropped the roll, which fell up and landed on the lofty floorboards with a clatter. Dashing down the stairs, the world was mercifully restored to rights.

For a moment.

"Father, father," he sobbed. "Come quick! It's mother, she..."

But the world was upside down again, and his father gazed down at him with a curious expression. "What's wrong, lad?"

"I..." Springyyt went weak at the knees and staggered into the wall, which he clutched tight for support. It was too much to bear; all the worse for a boy of only eight. "I..."

"Ah..." his father said. "Yes. I'm getting it wrong, aren't I?"

"Father..." Springyyt pleaded, his throat dry. He gasped as his father smiled, the grin stretching from ear to ear.

"Yes... a pity. I was doing quite well. It all looked good. Was it the same upstairs? Is that why you came rushing down? It's gone a bit topsy-turvy, hasn't it? But rest assured, if it's any comfort...and I don't suppose it is... your home and your charming parents are fine. It is you, honey bunch, who are upside down."

Springyyt's father raised two hands to his face. With a disgusting slurp and dragging strands of thick, fleshy moisture, the skin came off and revealed the powder-caked face of the Countess. She dropped his father's bulky frame like a loose robe and stepped out of it, fully clothed and without a speck of blood or dirt on her person. Shaking herself and adjusting the blonde wig, she grinned up at him and snapped her fingers. "Wake up!"

And she was right. He *was* upside down. Hanging by a rope from his ankles. They were in a cave, a lot more spacious than the Doctor and Susan's, a large space below an outcrop of rock, the entire north-facing wall absent and revealing a sparkling night sky.

The Countess removed her cold fingers from his temples and stood facing him, upside down, her hands on her hips.

"Oh child," she purred. "Sweet, sweet child. Did you honestly think that a kick to the shin would see you safely away? You drew blood with that kick, little sweetie. Back home, the children know better than to attack someone of my rank. Oh, little man...sweet little boy... false endings and dreams! And you were a loyal little boy. Whatever face I wore, however much I pressed, you wouldn't tell the truth about what you saw today. You wouldn't give them away. Not even for your old, loving father."

She smiled, and playfully prodded him so that he spun helplessly around. Only when he came to a stop, nauseous, blood pounding in his head, did she speak again.

“I want to show you something else,” she purred. “It’ll be different this time; you’ll be lucid, you know you’ll be dreaming. But I want to make you a pinkie-promise...if you don’t stop this nightmare before its end, then it *will* come true. Of course, you can stop it anytime you like. You know what I want. You know where they are. You can take me to them.”

Wetting his mouth, he replied, “S-Susan’s b-been walking to the v-v-v-village every D-day. How haven’t you f-found her?”

“You know,” she soothed. “You’ve seen it.”

He thought. “The magic statue? TARDIS?”

“TARDIS,” she repeated. “Protecting them. Masking them from me. Shielding them from any who’d do them harm. Unless I am led directly there, I could walk these hills forevermore and never find them. That is where you come in. Take me to the Doctor; the spell shall break.”

“And then?” Springyyt whimpered.

“And then...you just leave us be. You return to your village unharmed, safe in the knowledge that none of this – what you are about to see – will ever come true...”

With that, she pressed her freezing fingertips to his temples and everything was gone.

He was back in the village – though as the Countess had promised, no longer under any illusions as to the reality of his situation. Everything around him was fiction. He was still hanging in her cave like a trapped animal, and if he concentrated, he could remove himself from the visions and feel himself there.

As to those visions, why, it was the day. *That* day. The day he feared more than anything else in the entire world, the day that gave him greater terror than the Countess ever could. The day that scared him more than the prospect of his own death.

“She can hear us,” his father said through streaming tears, his voice choked and his face blotchy. “That’s what the physician says. Tell her, son. Tell her what you need her to know.”

They sat at his mother’s bedside, where she lay swathed in multiple sheets to ward off the cold that only she could feel. Her lips were blue with creeping asphyxiation, and her face was jaundiced and swollen on account of the various elixirs and potions the apothecary had prescribed. Though she slept now, her rattling breaths were ragged and sharp, and it sounded to Springyyt like she was suffering even in sleep.

“No,” he said. “This isn’t real.”

“Son,” his father said, dabbing his eyes. “She *knows* that you love her more than anything else in the world. But all the same, it would do her good to hear it one last time. After all – it’s you that killed her.”

“No!”

“These shadows are of events to come,” he said. “Echoes of things yet to pass, but which must. Only one thing could change them, but you will not do it. So please tell her! Tell your mother what she means to you.”

Springyyt wept and clutched his mother’s skeletal hand in both of his, his head bowed as his father patted his back. Gently at first, but then harder.

“We’ll manage without her,” he said. “What else is there to do? Do you want to see where that takes us?”

“No more,” he said, shaking his father’s hand off and turning to face him. He had on a thick layer of makeup and his lips were painted an oozing red. “You can’t make these things come true.”

“Oh? You tell me, you *dare* to tell the Countess that she cannot?”

The thing that wasn’t his father raised his hand and belted him, and Springyyt went tumbling out of his seat, out of the bedroom entirely, and down the stairs, coming to rest on the grimy tiles of the bakery floor. He scrambled up and dusted himself down. Night had fallen. The counter was empty. The oven was dark and lifeless.

There was love here, once. Springyyt thought. And laughter. Long ago. But all of its gone now...

He climbed slowly up the stairs, his heart thudding, and somehow knew what he was going to see. Pushing the door open, he saw the bed pushed to one side of the room, and a familiar shape swinging from the rafters, creaking as it swung gently back and forth, suspended two feet from the ground by a taut rope.

He couldn’t do it. He couldn’t live without her. Not even for his son...

Springyyt staggered from the room and down the stairs, pushing his way numbly through the front door and standing in the dirt road. The village was lifeless, quiet as the grave. A mist rolled down from the hills, and the biting winter wind carried a threat of sleet. The suns were invisible behind endless white cloud, making everything dull.

“The death of the baker’s wife affected everyone,” the Countess said, standing by his side. She clasped his hand and stroked the top with her thumb, in a sick gesture of mocking comfort. “The village was a lot quieter for the days that followed. But then, for all besides the poor baker and his heartbroken boy, life should have returned to normal.

“No. The baker could not be roused from his bed for many a week. Nothing was baked.

“No. The baker took to alcohol, nesting in a corner of the alehouse and draining it dry, whilst people succoured on rancid meat and sour milk, sharing out what little corn they could grow.

“No. The baker tied a rope around his neck and swung. Ere long, hungry, the blacksmith went to find fortune in the big city. That’s where they all go in the end, isn’t it? The physician went next. And the butcher. The tanner, the tailor, the candlestick maker...until only the little boy was left behind, weeping into the night, with nobody left to hear...”

She dabbed a tear from her eye and smiled down at him. “Springyyt. My beautiful, brave little boy...it doesn’t have to end like this! The future is as open to me as the past, but this is just one future of many. It is a future I can help you avoid. The people you met, the people I seek...are they worth it? Would they do that for you? Ask yourself that. You have seen enough. I will not force you to see more. I think it’s time we woke up. Don’t you? We’ve got a walk ahead of us.”

“Springyyt!” the Doctor exclaimed, as he skulked miserably into the cave. “Springyyt, my boy? What are you doing back here at this hour? Did I not make myself plain? Hmm! I told you it was dangerous. We cannot afford to make friends! Did I not plainly state that of all the stupid and reckless things...”

“Grandfather,” Susan interjected. “Grandfather, enough. Can’t you see the poor child is upset?”

“Upset? Upset, my girl?” He clutched his lapels and glowered down at Springyyt. “Whatever are you upset for, hmm? Speak up?”

But Springyyt couldn't speak. He couldn't look the Doctor in the eye, for the shame. "What," the Doctor repeated, the anger in his voice giving way to concern. "Are you upset about?"

"I'm sorry," he managed to whisper, his voice a strained rasp.

"Oh, good gracious me," he exclaimed. "You've seen her, haven't you? Is she here?"

"I..."

"Springyyt," Susan said, her attempt at a softer tone warped by sheer terror. "Is she here?" He swallowed. "Out...outside...she m-made me...I'm sorry."

He spun on his heel and made to flee the cave, wanting nothing more than to sprint back to the village and fall, weeping, into his mother's waiting arms. But the Countess appeared at the mouth of the cave, a grin splitting her face as she blocked his path.

"I think," she whispered. "My friends...that another future emerges. One with no loose ends..."

The Doctor seized Springyyt roughly by the shoulders and forced him behind, where Susan scooped him up into a tight, rigid hug. He felt her entire body trembling with fear. For his part, he was numb. Sick. The events unfolding around him were simply too traumatising for an eight-year-old brain to bear. He watched them like a spectator from afar, too broken to fear any more.

"You shall not harm the boy," the Doctor told the Countess, her grin widening. "He has done nothing to you! I shall give myself willingly. Arrest me and take me back home if you must; or you may shoot me down here and now. I submit. Do you understand? Eh? I submit! Our battle is over. All I ask is that the children go free. Let the boy go. Let Susan go. My crimes are not her crimes; none of what happened was her fault."

The Countess's grotesque smile morphed into a snarl, and she took a single step into the cave. "Do you recognize this face?"

"I do not."

"You killed me. The former me. Earlier in our little dance across the stars, do you remember? Does little Susie-pie there know what you did? You left me to die. It is fitting that I should make you suffer for that. You fear capture only slightly, and your own death not at all. But her death? The boy's? The three of you will die together. Watch them burn, Doctor. Watch their flesh peel from their bones, and know. *You* did it."

She raised her fingers to her lips and blew a kiss at them. A kiss was formed of fire. Flickering tongues of flame danced through the tunnel and into the cave, engulfing the table in a blaze of orange. The smell hit Springyyt immediately, acrid woodsmoke irritating his airways and scorching his lungs.

The Doctor gripped Susan tightly, who in turn held Springyyt. "Susan, dear...I..."

"We've got to try," she told him, rising panic in her voice. "We've *got to* try."

"TARDIS?" Springyyt gasped.

"She needs to fly again," the Doctor murmured. "But I don't have the expertise. You must understand, both of you, that together we are venturing into the unknown and the trip shall likely be fatal! The TARDIS has no power...and I'm not sure how to restore her..."

But it was at that precise moment that Susan's trembling ceased, and her body went taut. Springyyt glanced up at her in alarm and saw her eyes glowing orange with firelight, for she was staring directly into the flames dancing off the table's surface, spreading and inexplicably burning stone as surely as they did wood.

"Susan, dear. Focus, my child. I need you with me. I..."

“Hush,” she told him, not a trace of fear in her voice. Quite the contrary, and despite the increasing heat and suffocating smoke now engulfing the little cave, she was smiling.

“Oh, Grandfather,” she whispered. “We *can* make her fly!”

Springyyt stared into the flames, squinting against the heat, and tried to see what she saw. But there was nothing besides incessant, flickering serpent tongues of fire.

“Susan is very gifted at telepathy,” the Doctor told him. “Always a trifle too nuanced for me...what do you see, my child? *Whom* do you see?”

She pulled her gaze away from the fire and positively beamed at him. “The greatest man I’ve ever known. And he promises – we can power her up. We can escape!”

“Then without further ado!” the Doctor exclaimed. “Come, come! Hurry up, both of you!”

He seized the two of them and frogmarched them to the statue, resplendent in marble in her corner of the blackening cave. Despite the tremendous dust and ash thrown up by the smoke, Springyyt noticed she was still perfectly white, as clean as clean could be.

But nothing – *nothing* – could have prepared him for what happened next...

CHAPTER 8

They were flying low to the ground in Dryce's ship, Grair having commandeered it for its camouflage abilities in the hope of avoiding V-SOL. Still...as Maggie sat hunched in the seat she couldn't see, the memory of what he'd done to her, its sensation still lingering in her abdomen, set her teeth on edge. Consequently, in her peripheral vision she was constantly thinking she saw him approaching, her head snapping this way and that as she fervently scanned the skies.

"I'll know if he's coming," Grair assured her from the cockpit, sensing her discomfort. "The radar will pick him up long before he comes into range. Just try and relax."

Maggie obliged and held her silence. There was a throbbing tug at the site of her wound that wasn't quite pain yet, but she could also feel the anaesthetic fast wearing off. The painkillers she had been prescribed were, she was warned, highly addictive. She was advised to wait until the pain was nearly intolerable before taking any.

"I'm picking up a double-heartbeat."

Maggie and Xaul exchanged an elated glance.

Their elation dropped when they saw the admiral frown. "But it's weak. He's hurt. He should be dead, by all rights..."

Oh, Maggie was under no illusions; having watched him soar like a ragdoll through the air, released from V-SOL's claw with the force of a bullet, she had volunteered immediately for the rescue mission, knowing there was every possibility it wouldn't be – couldn't be – any such thing. They were quite possibly looking for a body. And yet...

"He'll need urgent medical attention," Grair was saying, focusing on the readings. "But still...all the instruments are telling me that he's not only alive – he's moved."

"He must have shattered every bone in his body," Xaul said. "How could he have moved?"

"I suggest we find out," Grair said. "He's going north. The mountains..."

Maggie stared due north towards those imposing cliffs, onyx black and snowcapped, with that magnificent, crowning jewel of the mountain in their centre glowing golden in the sunlight.

"How did he get that far?" Xaul exclaimed.

Grair engaged the thrusters and they sped up, the clockwork engines working overtime as they soared towards the cliffs, perhaps fifty feet from the ground at any given time. It made Maggie uncomfortable; the terrain was rugged and uneven, and Grair was constantly gaining and dropping

altitude to keep them invisible to the naked eye and undetectable by V-SOL's radar. They cleared more than a mile in thirty seconds flat, and it was then that Xaul called them to a screeching halt and pointed directly below.

"You see it?" she demanded.

"Yes. Yes, I see it," Grair said.

There was blood. Copious amounts of it. It pooled thick and glistening and stained the grass in a five-foot radius. But there was no body to go with it. Instead, droplets formed a trail, snaking away to the north.

"He landed here," Xaul gasped. "If landed is the right word...by all the stars, he *has* moved. Look at it! He's bloody well stood up and walked away!" The double meaning of 'bloody' seemed to have escaped Xaul, as she spoke in deadly earnest.

"It's impossible," Grair agreed. "When we track him down, I'm getting a blood sample. If we could understand that physiology...we could make clone soldiers capable of withstanding anything...clone workers capable of back-breaking work for hours at a time..."

Maggie frowned. "He wouldn't like that." This seemed enough to disabuse Grair of these sinister musings. But then another idea hit Maggie. And it wasn't a pleasant idea.

She was ashamed that it hadn't occurred to her already, and attributed this to the addling effects of the cocktail of drugs she'd been given. For she *did* know, after all, how the Doctor might have survived. She knew, because she'd seen it before. She had met the Doctor's seventh self, the short man with the Scots accent and the excitable manner¹. And there was the Waiter! He had been a pale, callow blond man with a wispy moustache on their first encounter, and then become a stockier, older, and hairier by the next time².

Regeneration. The ability to cheat death, shrugging off a dying body and settling into another.

And if so...if that *had* happened...

Bittersweet tears pricked her eyes, and she realised that the man they were rescuing may, in fact, be someone else...

"You're afraid," the Doctor muttered. "Terrified, alone and in pain...it's driven you mad...looting to pay for palliatives, tormenting others to distract yourself...without a care in a world whether you live or die...and I have nothing but pity for you...let me help you..."

For the second time that day, the Doctor came painfully to his senses and found himself lying on his front on the sweeping, verdant plains. He stood up on shaking limbs, all the things he would have liked to say to V-SOL14 fading to the back of his mind. The teleport must have defaulted him to this particular location at random, a handy failsafe when the alternative would have surely been death. All the same, teleportation without either a capsule or coordinates was a horrid experience. Everything ached, and there was a sharp, burning pain on his back that he took to be absent flesh; it seemed the teleport hadn't quite beamed *all* of him to safety. But where exactly, he wondered, had he been randomly set down? More to the point, could V-SOL14 track him down? These were questions he couldn't yet answer. Trembling with pain and weakness, he surveyed his surroundings and noted he was significantly closer to the mountains now.

¹ See *The Doctor Who Project Season 45: The Last Doctor*.

² See *The Doctor Who Project Season 46: Either/Or*.

And he *knew* those mountains...

He looked himself up and down and thought that he looked as wild as any man could. Bedraggled, dirty and missing a top—and his remaining clothes hanging in strips around him—he imagined that he looked nothing short of insane.

And that's what *he'd* thought, wasn't it? That other time. Before.

"Yes..." he whispered under his breath. He looked up at the mountains and grinned. He *had* been here before...and this is how he'd appeared. He was due.

Ignoring the searing pain, he began his march north. Such was the kaleidoscope of memories now flooding back, he scarcely noticed the trail of blood he was leaving behind.

The small hatch at the rear of the statue was so placed that Springyyt's childlike humour (which one is compelled to forgive him for, his being a child) got the better of him, so despite the gravity of their situation he giggled. Without cracking a smile, the Doctor hauled it open and then inexplicably disappeared down the back, *into* the statue.

It made no sense. It was, of course, possible that TARDIS had some dark and cramped vault concealed within, some secret compartment where treasure could be stored. But although the Doctor was a fairly slight man, it was still the case that it was far too small to admit him. And when Susan clambered in too, Springyyt could only shake his head in disbelief and follow their lead, his heart thumping in anticipation of whatever magic could make such a thing possible.

Through the hatch. Into darkness.

And into the light.

Sprawling before him was no squashed little cubby-hole or vault. It was a huge space, more gorgeous and wonderful than anything he could have imagined. The chamber was dazzling white, so bright that his eyes stung and he had to squint while they adjusted. Everything seemed to shift around him, making it impossible to get his bearings and comprehend the exact shape and geography of the place. One set of walls shone brilliant white, with glowing circular recesses; the opposite set of walls were a shimmering matte, their circular indentations glowing white. There was a separate wall behind a glass partition, buzzing with lights of every colour. Double doors studded with more roundels led off to chambers unknown, whilst in the middle of the room a peculiar contraption took pride of place. Glancing over his shoulder, alerted by a buzzing, Springyyt saw that the entrance had become two large double doors sealing shut of their own volition.

The Doctor and Susan were bustling around the thing in the middle, and Springyyt moved in for a better look. It had a glass cylinder on the top, and the several faces bore an array of instruments entirely alien to him. Like the wall behind the glass partition, there were various lights and dials that meant nothing to him, and – based on how he stood gingerly over the instruments, as though scared of them – not an awful lot to the Doctor either.

"Our life in your hands, my child," he told Susan. "Dear, dear, *dear*...are you sure about this? One wrong move...one mistake..."

"What choice do we have?" Springyyt said. "Will that fire burn TARDIS as well?"

"Most certainly, my boy," the Doctor said bluntly. He turned back to the controls, his fingers fluttering in the air. "But believe me when I say... the wrong mistake in here, the wrong button at the wrong time...our own deaths would be trivial, compared to the damage we could do..."

“I *am* sure, Grandfather,” Susan assured him. “You will be too. We’re going to travel...over two-thousand years into the future...you have to start by putting the TARDIS in safe mode.”

“Safe mode? *Safe mode*, my child?” the Doctor exclaimed. “What *is* that? Eh? Hmm? The TARDIS has no safe mode...”

“It does,” Susan promised him. “I know what to do...just listen closely...”

The trail of blood dried up after a while, but Grair was able to trace him by his heartbeats.

“He’s still on the move,” Grair said. “Making good progress. For a broken man.”

“Bodes rather well, doesn’t it?” Xaul said dryly.

It did bode well, and it didn’t. Maggie alternated every few seconds between wanting to laugh and wanting to weep, her heart in her throat at the prospect of meeting the man she was now convinced she would no longer recognise.

At length, they found themselves at the foot of the mountains.

“This is ridiculous,” Grair said. “He’s traversed them.”

“He can’t have done,” Xaul said flatly.

“Explain to me then,” Grair replied. “How I’m still picking up a *healthy* twin heartbeat, somewhere on the other side of the mountain range?”

“I can’t,” she admitted. “You don’t think V-SOL got him? It’s not some sort of trap?”

“No, I’d detect him,” Grair said confidently. “Besides, we’d smell the stink of his exhaust fumes. No, the Doctor crossed these hills under his own power. I can’t believe it.”

“I can,” Maggie said, her confidence in his fate now sufficient that she was happy to explain. “There’s this...process. In a sense, the Doctor didn’t survive. He did die. And then he came back.”

She drew a breath and smiled sadly. “*But...*”

With the friction of his coat rubbing as he walked, the wound on his back was soon pulsing with agony and sapping his strength. By the time he arrived at a familiar slab of rock shaped like a face – with a sheer drop to his right and a grassy, rolling verge to his left – he could barely stay on his feet. Indeed, by the time he carefully manoeuvred around an outcrop of rock and came upon the familiar purple lake, he had resorted to crawling on all fours. A few shuffles after that, he was practically on his belly, dragging himself a few inches at a time. He ducked into the lake and slurped greedily, the minerals which gave it its colour making it fresh and welcome to the tastebuds.

The clockwise path around the lake went nowhere, ending at the foot of one of the many mountains in the Haeroen range...oh. He knew their name! Of course he did...

He spied in the face of another cliff a small unremarkable black opening, the sight instantly making his head spin as shadows came flooding back.

“*Will that fire burn the TARDIS as well?*”

Of course, lad, whatever your name was...for he hadn’t told the boy that it was not fire at all. It was time energy, pure and unadulterated, from the vortex itself and bent to the will of the Time Lady who wielded it...

And she had looked into it, hadn't she? Susan had looked into the flames and seen, and they'd all ended up in the TARDIS. And then...oh, but then...

He managed to lift himself to his hands and knees, before collapsing again. His bare torso was grazed and cut, and fatigue he hadn't known for centuries threatened to overwhelm him. He may well have been face down on coarse, hard stone, but when he shut his eyes he felt as though he were in a soft feather bed, the sheets pulled up to his neck, a big mug of hot chocolate in his belly and several hot water bottles keeping the cold at bay...so sleepy...so content...

No!

He looked up through desperate, bleary eyes. The cave was only a few paces away. So close...so...so...

There was a ticking noise nearby. His alarm clock, perhaps. Oh, but he hadn't needed to set it. No, he had no commitments tomorrow; he was due a lie in. Let it tick. Let it tock. He would be woken for no man this night...he...

"Doctor," said a euphoric female voice.

"Not just now," he muttered, but all that came out was an incoherent slur.

"Doctor," the same voice again, more urgent.

"Sleepy times..." he muttered.

"Lazy bugger," said another female voice, brusque and gravelly and inches from his ear. "Get up, you slothful article."

He yelped as the toe of a boot caught him on the side and rolled him onto his back, gritting his teeth as fresh agony shot through his wound. Squinting against the bright sky, he saw three faces leering down at him.

"You're you!" Maggie gasped.

"I expect so," the Doctor slurred, sleep creeping up again. This time, he resisted and forced himself to remain in the here and now. "Teleported before I hit the ground. Long story. Guess you saw me thrown and assumed the worst. You found me then?"

"Aye," Grair said. His Minnow was floating in standby behind him, roughly ten feet from the ground. "You gave your lady friends quite the scare, let me tell you."

Ignoring him, the Doctor said, "There was a village near here. Once. I sent Susan for bread...she was always less conspicuous than me."

"As you say, sir," Grair said. "Now listen, can you stand with my support? We're leaving."

"Leaving?" the Doctor said, flummoxed. "I think not. I'm exactly where I need to be... I've been here before, you know."

"Rambling," Xaul barked derisively. "You got anything we can give him?"

"I'm not going anywhere," the Doctor insisted, propping himself up on one elbow. "I need to get into that cave. Can you help me?"

"Come on, you're covered in blood," Grair snapped. "You need medical attention."

"It's a flesh wound," the Doctor replied hotly. "Just give me something for the pain, we can treat it properly later."

Grair and Xaul exchanged a glance that screamed sedative rather than palliative, but Maggie crouched down at his side and took her hand in his.

"You aren't making sense to us," she told him quietly. "Start again. Help us understand."

He looked into her eyes, her features pinched with pain she was clearly trying to hide. "You're hurt."

"I'm fine."

"Don't lie."

“I’ll tell you later.”

“You’ll tell me right now. What happened?”

“V-SOL injured me,” she said shortly. “Not fatally. Took out my appendix. I’ll be fine.”

Unsatisfied, but with Grair inching closer, he feared, to forcing him into the Minnow, the Doctor hurriedly explained in terms he hoped they would understand.

“The time leak comes from here. That cave. I told you I’d been here before, and I meant it. Back then, something happened. Something I never really remembered, until now. I lived half a story back then, and the other half is happening right here, right now! If you get me into that cave, I can put an end to it. The spaceways will heal. X02 will reopen. Everything will be as it was before. Please – trust me.”

Grair shook his head apologetically. “We met only today sir...what I do not know, I do not trust.”

“But I do,” Maggie said. She and the Doctor both looked at Xaul.

“I don’t trust anyone,” she growled. “Ever. For any reason. I’ve learned not to. But I will say this – if ever I did become an idiot and *start*, the Doctor is a person I’d consider.”

Outnumbered, Grair threw his hands in the air. “Fine. Fine! Let’s get him to the cave. If you die in the process, sir, that’s your lookout. If you fail to deliver on your promise, it’ll be *my* lookout. I may have quite a lot to pin on you—enough to be forced to administer capital punishment.”

Despite the threat, which he knew was not entirely serious, the Doctor grinned. “Twice.”

“What?”

“You’ll have to do it twice. Because pretty soon, we shall be having visitors.”

The look of optimism on Susan’s face was fading as the seconds dripped by. Several times the Doctor threw his hands up in despair and declared it hopeless, to which Susan brusquely reminded him to continue following her instructions.

“This is madness!” the Doctor exclaimed. “The ship is not designed for actual flight!”

“Grandfather, please...”

More seconds, more minutes, more muttering...

And then...oh, but then...

Springyyt felt the magic before he heard it, a tingling sensation from the floor coursing through his feet and not stopping until it reached his head. With a low hum, like the buzz of a patterjack bee, the array of lights on the far wall blinked off.

“The fault locator, Grandfather,” Susan beamed. “It’s empty. You’ve done it!”

The Doctor gave nothing away. Moving like a far younger man, he danced around the console, his lips pursed in concentration. Suddenly something shifted. Springyyt lurched from side to side, nearly toppling over.

“What was that?” he demanded.

“See for yourself, my child,” the Doctor cried. “Yes! See for yourself.”

On a strange contraption hanging from the wall, a picture appeared by magic. It took Springyyt a moment to understand what he was looking at: the cave outside. Then the picture began to change. It was moving! The angle was rising ...

“Are we...flying?”

“It would appear, despite my doubts, that we are! We can fly!” the Doctor erupted into a fit of muffled giggling. “Quite so! And now...”

Maggie and Xaul exchanged a bemused glance, and Maggie recalled with amusement how many such glances she’d shared with various and sundry over the years, invariably when the Doctor was doing something bizarre.

Dosed up on the same pain relief that Maggie had been prescribed, he’d lit a fire in the centre of the cave using a few stray twigs that he’d collected on “his travels” as he put it, meaning his race to the mountains. Grair had produced a lighter (Maggie didn’t know whether to laugh or cry that smoking was not a habit exclusive to humanity) and they stood back while he sat cross-legged before the flames, his hands on his knees and his eyes closed.

“Listen to me,” he said. “You can hear me. The planet is flooded with time energy, the walls of space and time are thin. A fire on this spot, way back then...a fire on this spot, right now. Two identical events in the same place, where time is at its weakest. We’re connected. You and I. Don’t talk. Just listen. It would be too dangerous to materialise here in the normal way, so he’ll have to open a wormhole and fly through. And this is how it’s done...”

Through the bizarre window that couldn’t possibly be a window, Springyyt, the Doctor and Susan watched as something appeared in the mouth of the cave. It started off small, a little speck of light, but grew and blossomed into what first resembled the vicious and fearful twisters that sporadically plagued the countryside around Edgyll. Then it flowered wider and brighter.

“You don’t need to steer,” Susan told the Doctor. “It’s pulling is in. Just keep the thermo-symbiotic suspension gears level.”

The Doctor chuckled with his mouth closed, the laughter muffled and infectious. “My dear Susan, where are you getting this information?”

“You’re going to find out very soon,” she beamed. “He’s waiting on the other end of the wormhole.”

“I see, I see. Hmm. Well, I should be delighted to meet him...yes, he got us out of squeaky fix there.”

The TARDIS drifted ever closer to the wormhole, finally pulled into a marvellous display of swirling lights and colours that made Springyyt’s head spin. It was as though those shapes were looking back at him. As though there were alive.

“Grandmother would have been proud of you,” Susan told the Doctor, so quietly that Springyyt only just caught it.

“Of *you*, my child,” he corrected, drawing her into a one-armed hug and planting a kiss on her forehead. “She loved you more than you could ever know. And so do I.”

They were getting faster. The swirling shapes were now racing by. Springyyt’s heart quickened, numb with euphoria. Faster, faster, *fastest*...

“Probably the moment to run,” the Doctor said. With Grair supporting him, the four of them tumbled out of the cave with seconds to spare. A blazing bright wormhole appeared, bursting vermillion and onyx and ruby red, emerald and sapphire, all the colours and shapes and swirls of time itself. There was a smell, too. Xaul inhaled. It was the smell of...everything. Straining her ears, she could *hear* the universe as well. Every conversation ever held, happy, sad, and tender. Every good day. Every bad day. She looked into time itself and felt it drawing her in...

“They’re tiny,” she whispered under her breath. “The Emperors? The entire glorious history of the Huxley Union? What are they...what am I...compared to all this?” She moved closer. She wanted to learn more. To feel more. She took another step towards it...

Which might have been her undoing, when a statue came soaring out and passed over her head by less than ten inches, coming to land in the shallow banks of the purple lake.

CHAPTER 9

“Sorry about that,” the Doctor said sheepishly as Xaul clutched her heart. “He’s not the best pilot. Took him a couple of lifetimes to get the hang of the controls.”

“Who?” she demanded.

The Doctor beamed, swaying on his feet with exhaustion, making Maggie fearful he was about pass out again. “*Me!*”

From the back of the statue, three people emerged. An old, white-haired man grumbling under his breath as he stepped into the water, a young black-haired girl wincing at the cold of the water, and a young boy who avoided getting his feet wet altogether by leaping impressively clear of the lake and landing on the shingle.

“Ah,” the old man said, staring from Maggie to Xaul to Grair, his brown eyes finally settling on the Doctor. “Is it really you?”

The Doctor bowed his head to his younger self. “Doctor.”

The old man clutched his lapels and raised his nose in the air. “Doctor. Hmm. Well, I must say I had hoped for better...handsome enough, I suppose, but what is this apparel? Dressed in blood-soaked rags. Hmm? Are you quite mad, sir? No clean collar, no necktie? Have I grown sloppy in my old age?”

The Doctor looked down at his threadbare clothes. “I don’t make a habit of it. Had a rather trying day. There’ll be more than a few of them ahead.”

“Who are you?” Xaul demanded.

“More to the point, where is the rest of you?” the old man shot straight back, pointing at her arm. “Are you quite all right? A robotic arm belongs there, I fancy. Have you misplaced it?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Xaul said brusquely. “Back to my question....”

A part of Maggie already knew. She recognised him. This new man, this stranger, spoke and behaved vastly differently from the Doctor she knew and loved, but despite everything that was different, his essence was unchanged. Just as she had when she met his seventh self, she could see the core of the man was exactly the same. He had the same warm glow in his eyes, the same comfortable air of authority, the same glint of anarchy, the same power emanating like a tangible force.

“As it happens,” he said. “I am the Doctor. The original—”

“*Some* might say,” the Doctor finished, sounding bored. “Yes. This gentleman is...well, he’s me. An older me. And also the youngest. The very first face and form. At least I think he is...”

“Hmm,” the First Doctor said. “Yes. Kind words, young fellow. In other contexts, they might be considered self-serving, though, eh? Ha ha! Well, uh...the situation is completely unsafe, of course! Two of us here, in the same time and place. We could cause untold damage! Yes! *Untold!*”

“Grandfather,” the girl said quietly. The Doctor turned and threw his arms wide, and she leapt into them with such force that he would have toppled over were it not for Grair’s steadying hand in the small of his back.

“I’ve missed you,” he told her tenderly. He looked at Maggie over her shoulder. “This is...”

“Susan.” Maggie nodded. “Your granddaughter. He’s spoken about you often.”

“Well, I must say,” the First Doctor said, addressing Maggie. “My confidence doesn’t grow. Hmm! There I stand in rags. There that charming lady stands, minus her arm. And you, my girl! Just look at your boots! You cannot run in those! Far too large. And you look decidedly peaky!” Ignoring Admiral Grair, he took a step back to take them all in. “What a ragtag rabble! Yes, it’s most distressing. Most distressing.”

“Well, this ragtag rabble seem to have saved your neck,” she replied tartly.

At a loss for a good comeback, the First Doctor clutched his lapels again and stammered inarticulately.

And then...

“Ah ha! Tommy Topless lives! And look at all his new friends! What’cha doing? Can I play too?”

Maggie’s blood curdled, the pain in her gut seeming to increase in response to his presence. A shadow fell over the group, something above blocking out one of the suns. They looked up as one, and there he was. Hornet livery, ludicrous yellow face, claw mounted on the roof.

“And a TARDIS too! Another one... or no, the same? I’m getting some funny ol’ readings, but I’ll be having it just the same.”

The stench of molten sugar made everyone gag. Little Springyyt, who had stood in frightened silence until then, looked up at V-SOL, eyes wide with sheer horror.

“What *is* it?” he gaped between splutters. The Doctor, memories of the little boy flooding back, could appreciate how he was feeling. For all that, the landscape remained the same, young Springyyt could not have failed to notice the fumes in the air, albeit faint. He may even have noticed the slight erosion in the rocks, the additional layer of warmth in the air that came with industry. But how could you explain an object like V-SOL to a lad from so bucolic a time? He had no point of reference, nothing to compare...and was surely all the more terrified.

“Enough,” the Doctor spat, glowering up at the approaching shape. Maggie’s fate at V-SOL’s hands had sapped any pity he may have entertained. “I’ve got a plan to get rid of him...but it’s mad. Bordering on suicidal, and yet it would be suicide not to ...”

“Whatever it is,” Xaul growled, “count me in.”

“Right. Grair, take Susan, the boy and Xaul in the Minnow. Doctor – Maggie – are you both with me?”

“Always,” said Maggie.

“I think,” the First Doctor said, “that I have walked into the middle of something...yes, indeed! But to not be with you, under the circumstances, would be a decided moment of self-doubt, I’d say!” With another amused splutter, he asked, “Where do you want me?”

“By my side,” the Doctor said, smiling.

“Hang on,” Grair interrupted. “What are we doing?”

“We’re going upstairs,” the Doctor answered with a wicked grin. “Into the spaceways.”

Based on what she’d heard about the condition of the spaceways, Maggie had questions about that plan, all sorts of questions...but before she had the opportunity to ask them, there was a shrill screaming from behind. They watched, open-mouthed, as a woman dressed as a chess board glided out of the wormhole, hurled high into the air by the winds of time, where – rather than toppling unceremoniously to her death – she was drawn as though by magnetic force to the roof of V-SOL14.

“Friend or foe?” V-SOL barked.

“Neither. Both. Whatever,” was her reply, her features contorted with rage. “But that old man is mine! And his wretched granddaughter too!”

“Ooh, feisty! Me think me likes! *Ha ha!* Saddle up, purty!”

“Now I’ll have yer!” V-SOL14 cackled as the invisible Minnow soared high into the air, with the First Doctor’s TARDIS following suit. Whatever counted for Xaul’s maternal nature had kicked in, and the two children were secured in the seats behind the cockpit, while she sat facing backwards in the tiny storage compartment behind. Flying near-vertically, she watched as the land retreated below, the flying statue of some gorgeous airhead hot on their heels. V-SOL gave chase with the stranger anchored by her ankle to his roof. She had produced a laser pistol and was taking potshots at the statue, all of them wildly off mark. She seemed to enjoy firing the weapon more than caring about where she was aiming.

“All right?” Grair called back. Susan muttered yes in a tone that suggested anything but, whilst the little boy – whose clothes rather implied he did *not* come from the era of space travel – was sobbing hysterically with fright.

Except that he wasn’t...

“Boy?” Xaul demanded.

He turned to face her, with tears in his eyes. But his cheeks were not red and blotchy, and his mouth was beaming with innocent euphoria. “This is amazing!”

Xaul’s smiled in spite of herself, the unfamiliar expression causing her cheeks to ache.

They were gaining speed, the invisible clockwork engines whirring and pounding as they left Orbis’s atmosphere, the skies around them dimming from royal blue to midnight blue, then black, and a blanket of stars erupted all around.

“Enter the slip,” the Doctor said, his voice crackling over the intercom.

“Are you sure about this?” Grair said.

“He can’t control himself,” the Doctor said darkly. “We can *use* that. Trust me and go!”

In their own way, the spaceways were beautiful. The way the electro-magnetic forcefield sparkled and fizzed, the way the stars whipped by either side, too fast to see, the occasional junctions where separate tunnels branched off in various directions, with checkpoints and toll booths and traffic galore, spaceships of all colours and creeds going about their business...Xaul had seen many a spaceway in her time but still appreciated their beauty. Except this time, as they entered the slip and went into warp drive, the blue forcefield was visibly breaking apart, the outer walls of the tunnel fraying with spreading, gaping gaps exposing them to the dangerous gravitational forces of the empty space beyond.

Xaul saw the TARDIS follow them in, with V-SOL and the madwoman a few seconds after. She was enraged, shooting at the TARDIS like a creature possessed, whilst V-SOL's claw extended towards it, jaws snapping as the telescopic arm extended dangerously close to the statue... "They've got to go faster," she demanded. "Tell them to speed up!"

Grair relayed it, not taking his eyes off the crumbling spaceway in front of him. Onwards they soared, faster all the time, V-SOL's booming laugh ringing incessantly in their ears. How vulnerable the TARDIS looked, how small compared to the monstrosity reaching out for it. Coming to an empty, fraying junction, Grair selected a tunnel at random and shot off, the clockwork engines grinding fit to burst, the TARDIS rotating as it whisked along in their wake.

"Nearly got you!" V-SOL cried. "Tick tock says the clock! Ha!"

The tunnel veered sharply to the right, and upon seeing what lay ahead Grair swore, while the little boy let out an audible gasp. Turning with great difficulty, Xaul saw that the electromagnetic wall was so badly compromised ahead that it resembled a spider's web, stretched veins of energy barely holding their integrity.

"We've a fifty-fifty chance of passing through safe," Grair said. "... or falling into the spaceway. At best hurled into the ether and lost forever...at worst we'll break apart. I'll have to fly us through slowly... keep us level..."

Nobody breathed. There was no sound, save the ticking growing quieter, less insistent, as the Minnow slowed to a crawl. With great care, face white and lips bleeding from biting too hard, Grair coaxed them through. They were buffeted on all sides; the competing gravitational forces above and below tugged at them, threatened to pull them of course. But they stayed level. They passed through. And some way past the disintegrating patch, the forcefield regained its integrity.

They were through!

Nobody relaxed, for the TARDIS had to do the same. Before Xaul's eyes the forcefield was dying, its surviving strands of energy fading into nothingness...the TARDIS approached, and Xaul's every muscle went rigid.

Into the web. She watched through gritted teeth as it was tossed about briefly, up and down, left and right, shaken here and there...but then they were through, soaring after the Minnow as the jubilant cries of all three on board erupted over the intercom.

"Well done, Doctors!" Grair exclaimed, as the children cheered and Xaul, for the second time in a day, endured the ache of cracking a smile.

"Now this," Xaul said, "I must surely see."

V-SOL14 whipped round the corner and upon seeing the ruined area of the spaceways, slammed on his brakes hard. The blue glow of his exhausts died away, and the woman on the roof went sprawling, her gun flying from her hand and whisked into the spaceway.

His brakes were good. Powerful. Capable of slowing a vessel of considerable size and speed to a stop in seconds.

But V-SOL-14 didn't have seconds.

It was far, far too late.

The great, wasp-like craft toppled face-first out of the tunnel, sucked through the disintegrating forcefield and exposed to the forces beyond. To her disappointment, he was not pulled apart. Rather, he and the woman began to speed up, a grotesque spiral of a thousand light years an hour hurling them into the endless abyss of time and space.

And in the case of V-SOL14? Laughing all the while.

CHAPTER 10

“Superb metalwork! Years of maintenance!” Xaul grumbled, glowering at all present as they laughed. They were in the entry foyer of the terminal. “Gone! Wasted. That arm was state of the art!”

“I seem to recall, madam,” the First Doctor said. “That yours was amongst the loudest cheer when that monstrosity received his just deserts.”

“I forgot he had my arm on board, the git.”

“Hey, those were a pretty pair of shoes I had,” Maggie said. “And the Doctor’s sweater was...well, I know it meant a lot to him!”

He leaned towards his younger self. “Knitted by someone even dearer to me than Madame Nostradamus, you know.” The lined face of the First Doctor wrinkled at the shared memory.

“Hmph.” Xaul said. “Well. I suppose it’s a small sacrifice to be rid of him.”

“Exactly the attitude,” the Doctor said. He turned to Grair. “I’ve closed the wormhole. The time energy will fade now. The exposure, as you can see, has left me feeling like a new man.” He twirled in a circle, showing off the damage to his body, and even his clothes, miraculously reversed. His lucky orange sweater was gone, it was true, but he had nipped into the TARDIS to fetch another of that wise fisherwoman Cadda’s items of knitwear that had been given to him at the beginning of his eleventh life—this one a luxurious cream colour. “That’s the thing about time travel, Grair...” he continued. “It’s unpredictable. The effects of the wormhole took hold shortly *before* it appeared. You know how people get prickling skin and standing-up hair the seconds before they’re struck by lightning? Same sort of thing.”

Grair exhaled. “Wow. I think we owe you one.”

“Yes,” the Doctor agreed. “And in fact, there is something you could do to repay me.”

“Go on.”

He gestured out of the viewport. The spectacular view of Orbis’s countryside stretched out in all directions. “This planet is beautiful. Look at it. When the spaceways heal and business returns to X02, don’t let it be like it was before. All fumes and pollution and industrial smog. Such things are inevitable, to some extent, and I understand that you must reopen. There are hungry mouths across the cosmos depending on it. But just...do what you can to minimise it. Tax the spaceships

running on dirty fuel, offer incentives for space carriers to switch to clockwork or clean fuel. Let Orbis breathe a little easier.”

Grair nodded. “Reckon we can do that. Frankly, it’s probably overdue...X01 has already introduced such measures.”

The Doctor nodded and shook his hand, before turning to Susan who stood apart from everyone else. He opened his arms and she fell into them, and he felt the sting of tears in his eyes as he held her.

“I’ve noticed, Grandfather,” she told him. “Wherever you are now...I’m not with you.”

“No,” he conceded, clutching her tight and talking with his chin resting on the top of her head. “No, you aren’t. But you’re safe. You’re happy. We see each other all the time.”

“I don’t think so,” Susan said softly. “You’re crying.”

He nodded and brushed away his tears. The last time they had parted, the Doctor remembered painfully, the older Susan had told him she could no longer live the life that he had committed to³. He respected her decision, but it still hurt to have that divide between them.

They held each other for a long time, only breaking away as his former self bustled over.

“Jolly good show!” he exclaimed. “It is good to know that my future is in safe – albeit poorly dressed – hands.”

“Indeed,” the Doctor said, shaking his hand, and marvelling at the strength in his first self’s grip. Still, he was young. He turned to Springyyt. “Good to see you again, my lad.”

“I’ll never forget this,” he said, shaking the Eleventh Doctor’s hand vigorously. “Never ever.”

“I expect you won’t,” the Doctor laughed. “Now, I’ve programmed Mr. Grumpy’s TARDIS to take you back home. Between you and me, he normally can’t control it. It takes him hundreds of years to work out how.”

“*Mr. Grumpy?*” the First Doctor spluttered. “I will have you know, young man, that I may be your junior in years, but everything you are you owe to me! Hmm! I will not tolerate this kind of disrespect, and as for the rest, not only is it flagrant disrespect, it’s wrong to boot! I could fly the TARDIS with my eyes closed! Yes, indeed! What is more, I...”

“Grandfather,” Susan cut in, laughing. “That’ll do. Come on, let’s get going.”

The First Doctor clutched his lapels and gave his future self a parting glare, before retreating back to his TARDIS, muttering unintelligibly under his breath. Susan winked and followed, with Springyyt tagging along in their wake. All present stood and watched as – with much wheezing and groaning – the statue faded from view.

“I actually programmed it twice,” the Doctor admitted. “After they drop the boy off, it’ll take them to Earth. 1963.”

“Would that be to a certain junkyard?” Maggie asked.

“It might just be. Although if memory serves, even then the old girl led us on more than a few detours ... Anyway, enough about him. That’s been one heck of a blast from the past. Onwards, ladies?”

“No,” Xaul said abruptly.

The Doctor and Maggie stopped in their tracks, turning to stare at her. While they were not entirely disbelieving, it was still a surprise to hear her say so now. “You aren’t coming?” Maggie said.

³ See *The Doctor Who Project* Season 44: *A Mild Curiosity in a Junkyard* and Season 45: *The Sawbones and the Grey Fox*.

“No, no. You can drop me off at home, if you please.” She turned to the Doctor. “We didn’t come here by accident, did we?”

“I was aiming for the beach ...” the Doctor said evasively.

Xaul hadn’t known him long, but she knew well enough to recognise when he was bending the truth. “You weren’t. You were aiming for somewhere relatively close to the Huxley Union, at a time soon after my death. And I thank you for it. I have seen what I needed to see. The pilot – Dryce – told me I was slain. Beheaded in a revolution.”

“And you want to go back?” Maggie exclaimed. “To your death?”

“I don’t accept it,” she replied. “I don’t accept it is the only future left open to me. I still have a choice in the matter. You would not have brought me here if I were beyond any hope of reprieve.”

The Doctor nodded. “I cannot guarantee it, Xaul...history *can* be changed, but I cannot promise what those changes might bring...”

“That’s my risk to take,” she said simply. “It’s not my own death that stung the most; it’s the hatred. The legacy I left behind. I won’t have it. I will go home, and I will make it right. I can embrace the new way of things and be part of a better society, the one you showed me formed in the wake of the Union. I may be stuck in my ways, but I see at last it is possible to adapt to a different world. Be part of the good, rather than perpetuating the bad.”

“Sounds a risky business,” Maggie said.

“Oh,” Xaul said with a twisted smile. “Those in power are lazy. They grew complacent with too much control. From the Emperors on down, they relinquished control of the state to me long ago, and now, at last, I intend to use my power to do good for my people. I can see how it can be done.” She put her good arm on the Doctor’s shoulder. “It is just possible, my young friend, that what you’ve shown me in these little travels has helped me see what is possible in my own society.”

The Doctor beamed with pleasure. “I’m proud of you.”

“I know. Now, enough with the sappy stuff.” She straightened and looked her travelling companions up and down. Her mouth was pursed and tart, as if wanting to break into a third smile but deciding three times might be too risky for one lifetime. Finally, she said, “It’s been a tolerable experience. You are acceptable people. Thank you. Goodbye.”

“Good lad,” Springyyt’s father said as he came bustling back into the bakery clutching the milk he’d been sent to fetch, what felt like a lifetime ago. As one last favour, the Doctor had dropped him off near the dairy, a few short minutes after he’d first set out.

“One litre of milk,” Springyyt said dutifully. He was beaming like a lunatic; he couldn’t stop.

“You’re very cheerful,” his father chuckled, ruffling his hair. “How come?”

Springyyt shook his head. “I don’t think you’d believe me.”

“Ah,” his father said. He reached for the lapels of his overcoat and clutched them. There was a mischievous twinkle in his eye. “Try me.”

NEXT WEEK ON
THE DOCTOR WHO PROJECT

IN STEEL WE TRUST



Edgyvll is a tiny village nestled alone at the foot of a huge mountain range. It is a kind place, a warm place, and a place where everyone knows everyone. A good place to live. So when a strange young woman begins visiting the bakery on a daily basis, she is the talk of the town. And there are few more fascinated by the mystery than young Springyyt, the baker's son. Following her through the mountains one day, he is confronted by an elderly man who introduces himself as her grandfather, and is taken to the cave where they are guarding a powerful artefact from an enemy so terrible they refuse to speak her name...

Thousands of years later, the Doctor, Maggie and Xaul arrive at the X02 Spaceport to find it abandoned and lifeless, and under siege from a looter named V-SOL14, who resides in a salvage ship with a vicious, mounted claw. They are rescued by port security and taken to safety, where Xaul is recognized – and a terrifying future revealed to her...

Back in the mountains, Springyyt meets a strange woman who pushes him for the whereabouts of the cave...he defies her at a terrible cost. As past and present collide, the Doctor needs to work out what connects these events and reopen the spaceport before the furthest reaches of the universe starve. Xaul, meanwhile, faces a far more personal reckoning. Can the future be changed? And can a life, so badly lived, at last be made right?

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



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