THE

DOCTOR WHO

PROJECT



AZRAEL

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Chapter One

A nighttime glow had settled over the rabbit's warren of coiling corridors that led deeper within the TARDIS. Of course, there was no real passage of time in the infinite internal dimension of the ship, nor was there any finite space. But for the ease of her crew, the old girl tended to crank down the wattage of the wall roundels, and the volume of the internal hums and whirs was quieter too. Ordinarily it was restful, but tonight it unsettled the Doctor. He was sure this, too, was intentional; the TARDIS herself likely knew his latest hobby horse and disapproved of it, as surely as Maggie did.

He had heard Maggie and Azrael in the pool some hours earlier, while he was calculating coordinates, using the few traces of time/space data to get a sense of where this woman had been before they ran into her. But truthfully, that work was easily done and the TARDIS was already en route. He was spending longer doing simple tasks, so that he would seem perennially occupied and thus could avoid talking to this new passenger. He wanted to wait until he knew more about her, so he did not form any snap judgements. But, keeping his distance in this way was inclining him to make those judgements anyway. He was suitably ashamed of himself, and had to keep reminding himself to judge Azrael by how she was acting: a confused, uncertain woman with no memories. How often had he been in her position, and how often had those around him trusted him in spite of his seemingly suspicious gaps of memory or motivation?

Azrael had told him she wanted to be dropped off wherever convenient. Perhaps the Doctor could do as she asked, let her go off into the sunset and not concern himself over her origins. Of course, he couldn't do that. Partly because her amnesia made him wonder who was out there waiting for her; but also, less admirably, partly because he himself had never conquered that selfish greed to find answers and solve mysteries wherever they presented themselves.

The Doctor crept along the cool stone floor of the pool, the lapping water adding a blue tint to the space. He crouched down at the sight, relieved that this sneaky task wouldn't take him long. There, atop a sodden towel on a rattan chaise, was a long and straight hair. Azrael's.

The Doctor popped the hair inside a blank, perfectly white cube, and dashed back to the console room. He had already inserted his telepathic instructions to whichever transduction technician received the cube: supply any bio-data connections to this unknown

individual. Perhaps that way, he could at least start from home, and find out whether Azrael was a fellow Gallifreyan.

The Doctor pressed his index fingers to his temple, and as he thought it, the cube vanished from sight. He felt suddenly tired; part of his distrust had led him to keep an almost constant vigil in the console room ever since they had first taken Azrael aboard. Funny how a Time Lord could sometimes go months without sleep, and then one lonely night 'Mr. Sandman' could overwhelm one's senses. Not wanting to leave the console room until the TARDIS materialised, the Doctor curled up in his trusty armchair and closed his eyes.

*****

What passed for the following morning in the timeless space, Maggie Weitz sat at one of the long wooden benches that furnished the TARDIS galley, feeling tongue-tied. She was presently alone, tucking into a nutritious but unexciting breakfast of a boiled egg and toast, cut into vertical strips, 'soldiers', like her father used to do when she was a girl. The long, low-ceilinged room had the appearance of a Victorian scullery combined with the spotless white kitchens of old Hollywood movies—an impression further enhanced by the counters and cupboards that lined the stark walls, stocked with every conceivable foodstuff or beverage (particularly teas, jams, pastries, and other distinctly British comestibles). To her surprise, coffee was hard to find and only after an unwise expedition to some of the higher shelves did she find a tin of sealed beans from Sumatra. Craving a dash of sweetness from the brew, she remembered an addition of her aunt's second husband, a very down-to-earth *Habitant*: nothing less than a spoonful of maple syrup. A jar of this was lurking at the back of the walk-in fridge. After this activity, she breakfasted in apprehensive silence.

There were two reasons for Maggie's apprehension, and perhaps she had been fussing over her coffee to distract from them. The first was that the TARDIS had been unusually slow to land; by her reckoning (hard though such things were to reckon in the infinite, timeless, windowless, sunless space) this was the third day they had spent drifting in the space/time vortex, that mysterious region between and beyond the linear universe. The second, greater reason was that any moment Azrael would walk through the door, and Maggie felt increasingly wretched about stringing the poor woman along.

The Doctor had recovered this stranger from a rupture in time that took the form of a centuries-long haunting in England's Tamworth Castle[1]. Azrael had understandably spent the first day feeling a little peaky, recovering in the TARDIS infirmary. The second day, with no landing in sight, Maggie had shown her around the swimming pool, the art gallery, and the Zero Room. Their last port of call was the Vault of Memories—that morbid space whose only decorations were carved statues of the Doctor's ten previous faces. Maggie didn't like going in there—the fact that the previous Doctors' words occasionally echoed from there made it one of the spookier corners of this ship—but she thought seeing the different incarnations being might remind her where she came from. But even though she spent nearly two hours absorbed by the different likenesses he had once worn (and listening to the disembodied echoes of their voices that bounced, ghost-like, off the Vault's walls), Azrael did not light up with any particular familiarity.

[1] See *The Stone Tape Theory*

At the end of that day, Maggie had cooked a pasta Bolognese recipe Ollie used to do, only to find Azrael found the texture and shape of the noodles unusually disturbing—almost as a child would. With due apology, she grabbed one of those unappetising burrito-like foil-wrapped cylinders the TARDIS food machine dispensed (this one, apparently, shepherd's pie-flavoured—yet more British food in this alien vessel). Today, she planned to show Azrael the library, the Cloister Room, the long saloon, the greenhouse, the music room, and finally the Limbo—a chamber consisting of nothing more than a simple wrought-iron railing with a (simulated) open-air view of the entire universe beyond. Hopefully, the mysterious woman would find them interesting. To be fair, she found almost everything interesting, whether it was jumping into water fully clothed, and then throwing off those wet clothes to float in the Zero Room's total sensory deprivation *au naturel* (Maggie had to admit she blushed, and sounded like her own mother when she called up, "Come down from there! And put some clothes on!").

In conversation, too, Maggie found her warm and friendly, eager to learn every detail about life on Earth, and her years of travel with the Doctor. They talked for hours, frequently laughing and interrupting each other. In the time she had known the Doctor, they had recruited and said goodbye to a few fellow travellers (or 'companions', as the Doctor archaically called them): the Frenazzi shape-shifter Kaylaar, the deluded computer of the Lifeship *Miracle*, the young urchin from eighteenth-century Réunion, Simon Denon, and most recently, the Huxley Union's Chief Justiciar Xaul Gertjaars. Of all this ragtag gang from different times and planets, though she had liked most of them (OK, aside from Xaul), Maggie hadn't so thoroughly enjoyed a fellow traveller's company since Kaylaar.

So why, then, did she feel so wretched, as she took a bite from her boiled egg and munched on the toasted soldiers, finding even the strawberry jam making the meal flavourless? Why did she feel she was stringing Azrael along rather than enjoying the time she spent with her?

The answer was simple. As soon as she had left the infirmary, Azrael had told the Doctor she wished to be dropped off at the next place the TARDIS landed. And here they still were. Sure, the Ship did sometimes drift for long periods of time, but never when someone had specifically asked to be let off. That felt quite simply rude.

But then, the larger issue was the Doctor had specifically tasked her with keeping Azrael occupied. Right after they left Tamworth and she had been unconscious in the infirmary for a few hours, he had run a thorough scan on her to see how she had survived the agonies of existing as a ghost, trapped in a time-rift for as long as she had. The answer seemed as obvious to Maggie as it was disturbing to the Doctor: she was some kind of Time Lord. As he explained to her, she was a hybrid of Gallifreyan, Terran, and sundry other races' DNA.

"And what's wrong with that?"

"Several things," he answered simply. "Starting with the fact that we *don't* go out and reproduce with any old species who gives us the glad eye. So, it raises a great deal of other questions, and I want to know more about her before I consider them. At the very least I'd like to pinpoint the nature of the time experiment that brought her into this universe."

Maggie could already imagine the Doctor hunched over the console, nearing a fugue state as he cross-referenced and calculated, and bounced the TARDIS's hard facts off his own vast and more amorphous memory. "So," she concluded, "while you're busy, Azrael and I have time to kill."

"Precisely. I'd like you to keep her busy … and out of the console room."

"For how long?"

He had smiled evasively. "A while."

The Doctor had spent the following days in the control room, alone. Only when Azrael grabbed her few hours of fitful asleep, at the end of (what Maggie tended to think of as) the second day, did that familiar face pop around the corner of her room. He asked her if she had let anything slip. Maggie simply told him she hadn't. Now, though, she felt disloyal to this honest, sweet-natured mystery woman to have such conversations behind her back in the first place.

To be sure, she was a bit wary considering they first saw her as a full-fledged ghost in Tamworth Castle's spooky dark halls. But she hadn't been the malign one—that had been the Woman in Black, whose real identity (along with the appearance of the Warrior Queen Æthelflæd, the Lady of the Mercians, who had imprisoned the witches there in the first place) remained a mystery. And certainly in person, Azrael belied her unsettling introduction, and was proving to be a thoroughly pleasant individual—too pleasant, Maggie was convinced, to harbour dark secrets. The Doctor could distrust her if he liked, but she wasn't buying it. If he wasn't prepared to even talk with her, that made him the closed-minded one. And the Doctor had some nerve, frankly, putting her in this position.

"Maggie?"

She jolted at the sight of the tall, beautiful young woman dipping into her field of view. Chalk-white when they first met her, now that she was restored to health Azrael's skin had assumed a rosy glow, and her wild mane of sandy hair protruded from her skull as if she started every morning by sticking her finger in an electrical socket. Though beautiful, she had a marvellous lack of care about her appearance. She had been found wearing a strange trans-dimensional diving suit, and had quickly discarded that (after a fun couple of hours in the TARDIS wardrobe) in favour of a long shapeless kaftan in a hideous muddy hue, and a pair of clunky plastic shoes that would have made any other woman's feet look big. Since that garment had been soaked through in the pool, this morning she picked out a smart high-buttoning trouser-suit in royal purple velvet, with a chunky leather belt and pirate-like knee-length boots, topped with a strange floppy hat, which she threw onto the kitchen counter. She did a circle to show off the new outfit, and promised half-jokingly, "And no taking it off without warning you, right?" She took a seat and drank Maggie's coffee straight from the mug. "Mm, sweet."

"Maple syrup."

"That's a Canadian delicacy."

Maggie smiled. "Don't tell me you did some reading up on my country?"

Azrael nodded like an over-eager student. "By the way, I thought you'd want to know… I had some more dreams last night."

Maggie had learned that unlike in her ordinary life where dreams tended to be pretty obvious manifestations of anxieties or desires, when one travelled in time they frequently held weird clues, buried memories, or forewarnings. Therefore, she had advised Azrael to remember her dreams as much as she could. It was a tall ask, seeing as Maggie could never hold on to hers after she woke up, but she thought it was worth trying.

"I'm afraid it was just the same one I told you about yesterday. I was flying again. I could see more of the landscape this time … it was scarred, barren. Anything significant in that?"

Maggie frowned. “Nah, I’ve had dreams like that too. Plus, you’ve had all that time in the castle. Maybe it felt like you were flying, being above those people? Having said that, maybe that landscape is home?”

“Does that sound like this ‘Gallifrey’ place?”

“I’m not sure. I’ve never been. The Doctor doesn’t like his home much.”

“So I’ve gathered … I wondered if that might be why he hasn’t been …”

“Friendly?” Maggie finished.

“Yes. I hope it isn’t rude of me to say.”

“No. No, he has been a bit of a jerk. I’m sorry Azrael, he just…”

“You don’t have to be sorry. It’s his problem.” She then asked, abruptly, “What were you thinking about so intensely when I walked in? It was something to do with me, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” Maggie admitted simply, feeling Azrael would detect any lie she tried to tell. “Well, how could I not? You’re the only occupation I’ve had the last two days. I have to say, I wish the Doctor would land, and we could show you some sights.” She remembered Azrael’s request, and then finished lamely, “Or … you know, you could get where you’re going, happily.”

“I hope this business … who I am and so forth … isn’t a burden to you.”

“No, no.” She wondered if Azrael was on to the Doctor’s suspicions. “What’s more fun than a mystery?”

Azrael shrugged, suddenly looking forlorn. “Hmm. I wouldn’t know.”

“Well, we’ll put that right. I was thinking about what to do today, and I love reading a good mystery. There are books from the whole universe in the TARDIS library. That might do wonders for jogging your memory.”

“Yes …” Azrael reached out and grabbed Maggie by the hand, her expression so abruptly earnest that Maggie felt she was being broken up with. “I have so enjoyed our time, Maggie, but really … I am wondering, if it’s not impertinent, if we *could* ask the Doctor to hurry up landing? Or at least see if he’s any closer to finding out where I might come from? Perhaps I can help …”

“But you don’t know where you come from,” Maggie replied, a little harshly. She couldn’t believe it; after all her soul-searching, she felt she *was* being dumped. She felt hurt at Azrael’s bluntness.

“I know. Even after all we’ve discussed, where I came from, what happened before and how I ended up in that castle … it’s all still a blank. I know the history, I can see every face of every human who went through that place, so I know if I could unlock the memories from before it would all be so clear …” She banged a fist on the bench in frustration. “I keep hoping something will jog it, but then when I do sleep, all I see is that silly flying …” She trailed off, balling her clenched fist at the air as if trying to clutch the elusive information.

“I get you. I hope you don’t think I’ve been … unsympathetic.”

“Oh, no, no, not at all!” She gave Maggie’s hand another squeeze. “I just … I hope you don’t think I’m being rude. Maybe I should have asked the Doctor himself, but he’s been so hard to get hold of. I haven’t even seen him.”

Maggie coloured at this; from their conspiratorial conversation two days earlier, she was convinced he was avoiding Azrael altogether. “I know. He’s just been busy. Trying to give you some good news, I’m sure.” And as she said that, Maggie felt some kind of resolution in her mind. Decisively swallowing the last runny spoonful of egg yolk, she declared, “But you know something, Azrael? Enough is enough. He promised to drop you off, and I bet you it’s

not as hard as he's making out. Sometimes he needs a good kick up his …" Azrael laughed at the unfinished thought, and Maggie nodded firmly. "So, let's go and talk to him."

"Sounds good," Azrael said through a mouthful of Maggie's toasted soldier. "Though if I can make a request, I … hope you'd consider staying with me where we land."

Maggie blinked. This seemed rather extreme. "Stay? You mean … leave the Doctor?"

"Oh no, nothing that permanent! Just don't go right away, wait around with me until I get some familiar bearings."

"Oh. I hadn't thought of that. Yes … yes, of course we can stay. After all, this is a time machine. It isn't like we've got to rush off to anything important."

Azrael smiled broadly. "Or if you *did* … you could take as long as you like and still get there on time!"

She laughed at the thought, and Maggie found herself laughing at it too. "If not *before!* That's the theory anyway … I wouldn't bet on the Doctor managing it, though …" she added snarkily.

No sooner had they left the kitchen than it occurred to Maggie that eerily-timed coincidences were playing their usual role in their lives (an even bigger role than dreams, in her experience). For they had scarcely taken two steps into the corridor than the all-encompassing, barely perceptible hum of the TARDIS engines time abruptly stopped.

"We've landed," Maggie concluded. "Maybe he's got that good news for you after all."

From the expression on her face, Maggie suspected Azrael already knew. At such moments—when she betrayed some unexpected knowledge—despite herself, Maggie was forced to reckon with how little they truly knew about this woman. It was possible, even in spite of her earlier resolve, that the Doctor's suspicions could have some merit.

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The console room was farther away than usual—perhaps the TARDIS shared her pilot's distrust for her new occupant. When they finally reached it, the Doctor seemed surprised to see them. It was an unusual sight; his long green coat, the latest of his rotating collection of fishing sweaters (this one a lilac crew-neck model), and even his work boots and black hemp jeans, lay draped over the nearby armchair. He stood in the corner of the room in a long-sleeved white T-shirt and cotton boxer shorts, slipping into a quilted one-piece garment that looked to Maggie like a homemade spacesuit.

"Doctor!" Azrael called out. "Put some clothes on!" She gave Maggie a wink, and both women laughed at the good-natured mockery.

He looked between the two in confusion as he zipped his spacesuit shut. "Good morning to you as well! I hope that little landing didn't startle you."

"Well, no … but as it happens, Doc, Azrael was—"

"Getting impatient, eh?"

"No, no …"

"Well, yes I was, Maggie," Azrael interjected, unhelpfully.

"I am so sorry," the Doctor replied primly. "You may find more reliable service on the intergalactic commuter routes."

Maggie stared at him open-mouthed, shocked at his rudeness. For her part, Azrael replied blandly: "And I'm happy to take my chances on those routes, if you'd let me off. This

is my third day aboard, and I simply expressed to Maggie that I thought we weren't getting anywhere."

Maggie felt a new round of hurt; had Azrael regarded this whole time as merely a waste of time?

"Anyone would think you were kept prisoner."

"Am I?"

"Stop it, you two!" Maggie cried out.

The Doctor nodded to her. "Quite right, Maggie. I may have some good news for you, Azrael. Take a look where we've landed—well, not landed. *Materialised* is more precise. We're floating in space, as it happens." He flung a gloved hand at the wall-mounted scanner screen gleefully. Maggie and Azrael saw a view of space, the only object in the vast emptiness a large chunk of icy rock trailed by a silvery halo of stardust. Beyond was only a purplish, starless hue. "I've been looking for anything giving off similar energy to the type you had all over you, Azrael. And, after diligent combing through aeons of time and space, the TARDIS has found this comet, adrift in the Sigma Quadrant of Sector G35." He arched an eyebrow. "Ring any bells?"

"How can a grid of space ring bells, Doctor?" Azrael asked, with a sudden snarl in her voice.

He grunted in response. Maggie was astounded—distrust was bad enough, but he barely seemed able to contain outright hostility for the poor woman. What had he found out about her? What was he not telling Maggie? How could she be less worthy of his sympathy and good manners than *Xaul*?

He returned to his preparations, sheathing his eyes in protective goggles, and then clamping an oblong, fishbowl-shaped helmet into the collar of the suit. The TARDIS's double doors whirred open at his approach. Maggie and Azrael moved to find two more spacesuits, but he held a cautioning hand up. "I'd prefer you to stay here, ladies. First of all, it's nice to have someone near the controls when we're floating like this."

"You're going to hop down?"

"It's largely composed of gas and ice, mostly safe for a nice starlight stroll."

"Mostly?" Maggie repeated.

"Well that's the other reason it would be safer all round for you to stay here. Though mostly a common-or-garden comet, the scans show bits of it keep fading in and out of the space-time continuum altogether."

"Doctor, that really doesn't sound safe," Azrael cautioned.

He clucked his tongue to dismiss her warning, gesturing to the harness he clipped around his shoulders. "Recognise this? That deep ocean fishing rig we used last time to nab you out of your inter-dimensional ether. Thought it might come in handy again."

Maggie pointed to the claw sticking from the back. "Don't you have it on backwards?"

"Yes. This time I'll use the Saturnyian pressure claw to keep myself attached."

"So, you're the worm," Azrael pointed out.

Despite himself, the Doctor smiled at the observation. "Yes, I suppose I am. Maggie?"

She hooked the Saturnyian pressure claw onto the railing, and then stepped toward the doorway's threshold with him. Beyond, to her terror, she saw the TARDIS was floating several hundred feet above the comet, with empty space all around. Its sparkling trail was the only dim light for what looked like light-years all around. Beside her, the Doctor stood transfixed with childlike wonder—in fact, very like how Azrael looked when she was

impressed. Maggie wondered what he would think of that comparison—whether he was more likely to be disturbed than charmed, to think it was part of whatever trap Azrael represented to him.

Maggie was impressed too, but a little dizzy, and swallowed as she kept a firm grip on the handle of the telephone hatch. "Got enough cable?" she asked, masking her concern with a nonchalant tone.

The Doctor returned his usual madman's grin. "Don't worry, Maggie. It's just the same as the Limbo in the TARDIS."

"Except that has a railing. A very *sturdy* railing, which I hold onto, and never let go of, when I go in there."

He clipped a few of his usual clunky tracking boxes and antennae-sprouting meters to the Batman-style utility belt around the spacesuit.

"Doc, are you crazy?" She ran back to his green duster and rummaged around its pockets, running back brandishing a familiar silver cylinder. "Leaving the TARDIS without the sonic screwdriver?"

He laughed as he clipped it into place on the belt, tutting in self-admonishment. More seriously, she began to ask, "Doctor, are you sure—"

"Oh, quite," he said carelessly, looking across to Azrael standing by the console. "Azrael, do you think you can follow the comet's topography? Tell me where to step, when I'm about to hit a pothole, that sort of thing?"

She found the appropriate monitor, and gave him a confident smile. "Yes, yes, I see it here. I think I can handle that."

"I thought you might," he said with more of that mustard. Then his voice dipped, and he leaned toward Maggie. "As for you, my friend … I sent a little message off to Gallifrey, and they may respond with information while I'm gone. Whatever you do, *don't* share that information with your new chum, eh?"

She nodded.

"You may be right about my attitude," he admitted in the same whisper.

"Or *you* may be right," she replied. "And I'd be a fool not to listen when you of all people are doubtful."

"And knowing you and what an astute judge of character you are, I'd be as big a fool not to listen to you. So, thank you for your trust." He gave her a tight smile and looked back over the edge. "Well, I see a nice icy bit coming up. So, to coin a phrase … mind the gap!"

And with that, he jumped headlong down. Maggie looked after him, poking her head over the edge of the police box's shell, holding her breath while the cable—which suddenly didn't seem sturdy enough—ran and he floated in the freefall of space, getting smaller and smaller as he fell and fell. She knew enough about the craft by now that it extended some kind of protective barrier when it hovered in space like this, so she did not fear for herself. Instead, she felt trepidation as her dear friend took this leap into the cold unknown. Was this worth the risk? And what would he find out about Azrael all the way out here?

Despite herself, despite their newfound friendship, for the Doctor's sake Maggie suddenly felt her anxiety rising, and twisting against their passenger. She did not inhale or back into the safety of the Ship's internal dimensions until she saw him, now a tiny and distant speck, safely touch down on the rocky surface of the comet.

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The Doctor was happy to feel the crunch of icy rock under his boots, and after giving the harness a testing tug, he activated his boots' gravity clamps and took a few tentative steps forward. "Maggie, Azrael," he called into the speaker in the helmet, "do you read me?"

"Yes, Doctor," came their passenger's placid voice.

"Don't forget to say 'over' at the end," Maggie chipped in.

"You must forgive Maggie, she's a bit of a stickler for, what would you call it? Walkie-talkie etiquette?" He did a slow circle to take in the flat, silvery plateau inching and tumbling through space. The entire horizon had a low, flat effect due to the comet's diameter. To the south, the beautiful halo of its tail glittered and glowed in the gloom. He cast a glance skyward at the TARDIS, reassured to see the distant box's lamp flashing on and off—the old girl's signal that she hadn't *quite* landed, and wasn't happy about it. Its doors were still ajar, and Maggie's black mane was bobbing as she strained against vertigo to get a better look at him. This too he found touching. Having those two utterly trustworthy ladies—that sweet-natured but pragmatic Earthwoman, and his all-powerful and constantly miraculous time vessel—on his side made him a little less apprehensive about dealing with Azrael.

'Dealing with'. He chided himself. You don't know she's a problem yet, Doctor … you must learn to trust people. Where did you leave that unconditional trust? Was it all the way back on Androzani Major?

"There's an opening about a hundred yards in front of you," Azrael informed him*. "Looks like it leads to a hollow network that goes underground about two hundred metres. The path looks clear if you keep on your present course, but there are some patches that have dematerialised."*

"Roger that, Azrael. Over."

"Oh yes, 'over'! Oops … over."

He chuckled at the poor young woman's naïveté. She seemed wholly sweet, and he was letting suspicions that had nothing to do with her as a person override his common sense … but the Doctor didn't have time to ruminate about that business, instead tramping ahead enthusiastically. This was the way to combat the malaise of paranoia: good old-fashioned exploration, just him and the great unknown. He tried to remember how long it had been since he had taken a stroll like this, without the basic amenities of gravity and an atmosphere. As far as he remembered, he hadn't visited a comet since the famous Stromboli's Comet in the thirty-first century[2].

As if resonating with his rising good cheer, his various tracking devices beeped agreeably with all sorts of intriguing readings. Their sing-song trills were the only sound on the lonely comet for a few minutes, while he ambled along the rocky, icy path, careful to check his footing and pausing to take in the marvels and occasionally check his trackers.

The pleasant relaxation was rudely broken when, on his left, he saw those instabilities the TARDIS detected before his eyes: a whole solid shelf of rock a hundred feet high blinked into existence. He wondered with a shudder how cleanly it would have split him in two if one foot had been on the unstable part. He slowed his pace. Definitely worth taking it easy out here…

"Doctor, this isn't a normal comet, is it?" Maggie inquired over the radio. *"I mean, it's clearly not orbiting a star for one thing. Over."*

[2] See *The Doctor Who Project* 2011 Christmas Special: *Stromboli's Comet*.

"Certainly not, Maggie! Good observation. No, this seems to be orbiting a different kind of gravity well. Something similar to the event horizon of a black hole. Only it doesn't have any physical presence in our dimension. It's outside the range of even the TARDIS scanners." He picked up one of his trusty tracking devices and swept it around. "I'm hoping, among other things, to get a closer reading."

"'Among other things', you say? What's the main thing you're hoping?"

"Why, to find the person underground. Not only did I detect a corresponding signal to the one embedded in dear old Azrael's compression suit—a kind of temporal S.O.S.—I detected a person with similar life signs. Faint, possibly in a kind of stasis, but there. Coupled with those dimensional instabilities, I think the comet and the event horizon came from wherever *she* came from. In fact, I think it may be orbiting whatever *caused* that rupture in time she was stuck in. Interesting, eh ladies?"

There was silence on the line, and the Doctor imagined his old friend and this new interloper staring at each other. He wondered what expression would be on Azrael's face.

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Maggie wondered, a little bitterly, what expression was on the Doctor's face as he dropped that nasty little bombshell so *faux*-casually. A Time Lordly smirk, perhaps? Or was his mouth set in a grimmer, more self-satisfied straight line?

Whatever it was, she hoped he was happy. All this was making her feel worse by the minute. Knowing Azrael's apparently trusting and gentle nature, she was likely to take this as an honest attempt to get some answers, fill in the blanks of her memory. But she knew from his tone that his suspicions governed his curiosity, and he would use those answers to determine whether he trusted her.

She turned back to the console, and saw Azrael staring into some middle space as if rooted to the spot in horror. Not knowing what to make of this, Maggie took a step nearer. "The Doctor just wants to help you remember who you are—"

"No, you don't understand!" She hunched over the speaker grille on the console and bellowed into it: "Doctor, I think you should come back. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have pressured you into finding this. Please, let's go."

"Now why would I want to do that?" he asked back, his voice infuriatingly lackadaisical. *"Look, I'm at the mouth of the underground passage. I can see a box of some kind at the end of the tunnel … I think this is what the comet's structure formed around, millions of years ago …"*

"Azrael?" Maggie asked quietly. "Does that sound familiar?"

She didn't answer, instead leaning closer to the grille. "Doctor, please leave it alone! Let's get out of here."

Maggie saw the fear growing in Azrael's eyes, and knew her apprehension would only egg him on. He was being stupid, and she didn't want him to get hurt, or worse, because of this infantile antagonism. "Doctor, you're being an idiot," she informed him. "Listen to Azrael! Get back up here, right now, or else I'm coming down there after you, and I don't care how dangerous that is."

Then the speaker grilled emitted a shower of static.

"Doctor?" Maggie cried into it. "*Doctor!*"

They both looked askance as they heard a sound of winding cord from the TARDIS doorway. The long length of cable, and the harness contraption attached to it, had wound back to the hook stuck into the floor. The Doctor was, needless to say, no longer wearing it.

Chapter Two

Back when the Doctor was still open and trusting, he had said "Curiosity's always been my downfall." Certainly, as he lay on his aching back after feeling himself fall about a hundred feet through the suddenly hollow innards of the comet, he gave ample consideration to that self-assessment.

He was lying, in some pain, on a small shelf, with the passage he had been creeping through now a rocky roof over his head. The ground must have phased out of existence at a critical moment, dropping him into this cavity. He inched his way up a narrow and cramped rock wall. Eventually, he was back at the top, with the honey-pot in sight: the passage leading to the very core of the comet, and a capsule—an ungainly wedge-shaped construction that looked like an atomic age Earth rocket with sleek power couplings and crude fusion boosters heaped willy-nilly all over its hull. It came to a point, like a gigantic pencil, and in that point was a glass panel. Radiating from it, he was even more pleased to detect a whole load of energy-waves identical to what Azrael had humming over her. The sight of it had distracted him enough that he hadn't noticed the ground disappear under him. Maggie would no doubt think he was letting his emotions get the better of him … and the infuriating thing is, she was right.

He scrabbled down the passage, boots slipping against the smooth ice that had encrusted the low-hanging tunnel. There were markings on the side of the capsule, with the same 'derived dialect' that was on Azrael's suit!

"Ladies, I've got something good here." He tapped the helmet, which was making a dismaying fizzing sound. "Hello? Hello?"

He looked back down the passage, only now noticing that his fall had cost him the fishing harness. He should turn back, he knew. But he turned to the glass window and saw a cockpit, and on the nearest seat to the window, lying recumbent, as if sleeping, or in state, was a figure. The face was concealed by a heavy, visored helmet, and a trail of cables plugged the figure into the seat, which in turn had more cables that plugged deeper into its workings. It was starting to look a tad unpleasantly cybernetic … or perhaps they were going for the pilot/craft symbiosis more elegantly perfected by his people …

He thought again of the DNA scans the TARDIS had performed on Azrael when she was still recovering, whose findings had put him in so bad a frame of mind. It wasn't just Time Lord bio-data in her bloodstream… it was *familiar* Time Lord bio-data… familiar enough for the Doctor to go on that late night expedition to the pool to get a sample of hair, so could send

it back to Gallifrey to ask for a match. That was not a request he made lightly. Could a Time Lord have designed this for them? And what did Azrael know about all this?

If he were determined to give Azrael the benefit of the doubt, believe in her amnesia, the person inside here could very well answer these questions and so many others … and how easy that would be …

But life, the Doctor discovered anew almost every time he stepped out the door in the morning, was seldom easy.

He had dawdled too long crouched against the window of that pod. Such was his eagerness to get to the truth—and yes, to satisfy that greedy curiosity of his—that for the second time, he did not properly examine his surroundings or the coffin-like pod. Perhaps if he had, he would have noticed that his chronon sweeper indicated an energy build-up, which rose with his every step nearer. And so, when he reached for the glass partition that he took as an entry hatch, there was a blinding, searing cacophony of light and noise, an explosion of space-time energy. He was thrown back …

And when he got to his feet, he noticed that the interior of the comet was bathed in a mauve light. And the capsule had vanished. In its place, spindly creatures with multiple quivering limbs and long leathery bat-like wings were stirring from their business to notice him—with either curiosity or hunger in their minds. Which one, precisely, was hard to guess, because their faces had no eyes … in fact, the only visible opening at the bottom of the snouts were their bared wide mouths, lined with needle-like teeth.

*****

Maggie roved around the TARDIS console, jabbing at the odd button and smacking the non-functional levers. Since their communication link had broken, the scanner had gone dead and Azrael's monitor was also blank. And the double doors had swung shut, and even the door switch didn't seem to work to open them.

Azrael stared ahead in stunned silence. "I told him …" she repeated in a soft voice.

At first Maggie ignored it. But on her second circle of the console, with all the controls still non-responsive and Azrael standing there non-responsive herself, Maggie finally demanded of her, "Did you know what was going to happen?"

"I told him …"

"Azrael." She grabbed her, taking a breath because she didn't want to overreact and make the terrified young woman any worse. "Azrael, listen to me. Did you know what—"

"No. No, of course I didn't," she insisted.

Maggie believed her, and again wondered if she should trust her so fully. "But you knew *something* was going to happen," she pressed. "You warned the Doctor. Did you—"

"Not this. Just … a feeling. Maggie, I didn't want to hurt you or the Doctor. But …"

"But what?"

"How can I know? I have no memories beyond Tamworth Castle and the last three days in here with you. I *know* things … I have a lot of stored knowledge, learned somewhere, that I can recite at the drop of a hat, but I don't know the first thing about myself. When you're walking around like that, knowing that you have untested abilities and powers, wouldn't you be worried about the nice people you've fallen in with?"

"Think, Azrael. Maybe if you can think of something, we can do … something productive … I don't know …"

She could see Azrael's eyes darting about, her head incrementally shaking as if willing some fact or memory to come forth. But she merely dropped her gaze, angry with herself and—at least it seemed to Maggie—ashamed.

They fell into silence.

"Azrael, you have to understand that I have older friends than the Doctor, but none closer. After all we've been through together, I owe him so much and if I lose him—"

She broke off, feeling a tear in the corner of her eye and not even able to maintain eye contact. Though Maggie didn't want to take out her feelings of aggression or shortcoming on the undeserving woman, at the same time her mind could not stop racing at the possibility. Was Azrael simply concerned over endangering her new friends? Or did she know, even if she couldn't articulate it? Her façade was such a constant, unchanging blank, how could Maggie know if she did know …. or didn't …

"Oh, what I wouldn't give for a good old-fashioned mind meld."

As she knew she would, Azrael merely looked confused. Maggie crossed back over to the doors, trying to grip the circular indentations to pull them open herself. Perhaps she could go down to the comet … perhaps—

Bang.

She started back. She turned to Azrael. "Did you hear that?"

Azrael nodded dumbly.

Bang, bang.

The echoing thuds from outside were not aggressive, however. It was so absurd, Maggie had to say it aloud to make sure. "Is someone knocking on the TARDIS door?"

"I guess so. Who could be out there?"

"Try opening it."

Azrael shook her head. "Maggie, please—"

"I'm serious. You're here, you can't do me any harm. If it's trouble, maybe you can help me get out of it."

Azrael tentatively pulled the large lever, just as Maggie had done.

Nothing happened. Azrael pulled it again, and a third time. Still nothing.

Bang, bang, bang.

"Uh, listen!" Maggie called. "We can't open the door!" Under her breath, she added, "And we know you can't hear us out there."

Then, to her total surprise, the familiar whirring kicked in. Maggie jumped back as the massive doors swung inward to open.

Standing on the other side was a slender figure, female, about a foot taller than Maggie. At first it seemed like a large grasshopper, due to the black visor that obscured the face and the limb-like straps and cables trailing from its shoulders. But she was wearing a compression suit, just like Azrael's—even boasting the same alien script on the breast-plate. Maggie momentarily thrilled at what this mean: here, standing in front of her, was some member of Azrael's crew, who could fill in those tantalising blanks about the mysterious woman's past.

These details, however, faded into insignificance when she saw the prone, unconscious figure in the woman's arms: the Doctor, his eyes closed.

"Is he—" Maggie asked, feeling no breath enter her lungs.

The figure gave a forceful shake of her helmeted head. "Unconscious, but stable." The voice under the helmet was distorted through a speaker, but she appeared humanoid enough. "There was an energy release. He was unprepared."

"Please, uh … come in." Maggie stood aside, and the figure brushed past.

Azrael turned to lead her and the Doctor out of the console room. "Let's get him to the infirmary. I know the way."

Maggie watched them leave. It didn't look like any recognition flickered in Azrael's eyes. Whoever this person was—and Maggie was certain Azrael must have once known her—Azrael's present amnesia was so absolute that they were a stranger to her too.

Maggie made to follow them, but then the TARDIS console blinked back to life; the scanner reactivated and the column gave a chipper whir. "Thanks for nothing," Maggie wearily said.

The monitor chirped, pulling Maggie's attention. She saw some Gallifreyan text scroll by on the screen. "Any chance I can have this in English?" she asked impatiently.

The screen blinked off and on again, and her wish was granted. This was that important message the Doctor had sent about Azrael's DNA, she mused:

PRIORITY TRANSMISSION FROM GALLIFREY RECORDS DEPT. RE: BIODATA SAMPLE
POSITIVE IDENTIFICATION
BIODATA MATCH CONFIRMED … IMAGE OF MOST RECENT REGENERATION FOLLOWS…

The monitor flickered, and then a face appeared on the screen. Maggie knew the man. He was middle-aged, with a head of wavy black hair and a chin-hugging black beard that made his chin look pointed. His face was pale and aristocratic, approaching handsomeness, yet held back by the rictus sneer.

She had first met this man on a copy of Earth, where he was Prime Minister of Britain[3]. He was the Doctor's old friend turned sworn arch-enemy, the Master.

And if this transmission was correct, Azrael was related to him.

[3] See *The Doctor Who Project* Season 45: *The Last Doctor,* Part Two.

Chapter Three

In the mauve-accented core of the comet, as the winged and faceless insectoid creatures (predators around here?) crept toward him, the Doctor took a step back.

"Uh, good afternoon," he began, holding both hands up to show his friendliness. "I assume I'm not really here, any more than you really are on this comet. We seem to be flitting in and out of this rupture, caught like all the matter in this gravity well between two dimensions." He gave his chest a slap. "As I thought. Didn't feel that at all. Therefore, I assume my body is still on the other side of this little rift?"

They didn't answer; not that he expected them to. Instead, they lowered themselves onto their rubbery limbs and skittered nearer to him. One of them nuzzled the Doctor's flattened palm with its snout. He took a chance that they couldn't, or merely wouldn't, harm him.

"I don't suppose you can communicate? Or tell me anything about the unfortunate person who was at the centre of this comet?"

They emitted a low chatter sound to each other.

"As a guess," the Doctor said, talking more to pass the time than because he thought anyone could hear (or, better yet, understand), "you must be feeding off the expanding anomaly in the wake of that time-craft that got beached inside this comet. If only I could have examined it … but then, touching it … though it's hard to be sure, it certainly seems to feed off the natural vortex energies we Gallifreyans acquire from zipping about the cosmos so much." He reached out again, and one of their snouts buried itself deeply and keenly into his palm. It was unsettling that this too felt like nothing: was the creature really causing him pain that he couldn't feel? "Yes, I'm an all-you-can-eat buffet to you types. Yet you're suspicious of me …"

With his other hand, he tapped his chin as he pondered what happened to him before he ended up here, as he drew nearer to the embedded capsule. Undeterred by his movements—they probably could not fully perceive him, given their eye-less faces and the likely hugely different nature of light and vision in this liminal state—the creatures continued to nuzzle him, oddly like they were sniffing him out. He remained still; he still wasn't going to take so bold a chance as trusting their benign nature.

"And perhaps that craft, and its occupant, was actually *drawing* you in … like it drew in the TARDIS … which, given the nature of its energy-leeching, leads me to draw some worrying inferences …"

*****

Maggie took off her shoes so she could tiptoe through the TARDIS corridors silently. Two potential enemies were aboard now, and the Doctor was unconscious and at their mercy. Against them and whatever they might try to do, there stood only her … and the semi-sentient ship herself.

"I hope I can count on you to back me up," she whispered up at the ceiling.

Azrael shares DNA with the Master, she thought. Did that make Azrael his daughter … his granddaughter perhaps? The Doctor mentioned a family occasionally, particularly a granddaughter called Susan, who had travelled with him when he first left Gallifrey, and got back in touch for a brief period while she was in Revelstoke[4]. Not that he had said much about those people. It was all very mysterious, and certainly none of the Time Lords she'd met seemed like family-oriented people—the Master the least of all. As human as they looked, for all she knew, they hatched out of eggs, or their society was structured like a beehive. The Doctor was clearly troubled by all the different species mixed together in Azrael's DNA.

And leaving aside the concept … for it to be *that* Time Lord of all of them! The Doctor must have suspected; he must have seen something familiar in that 'biodata' (with thirteen faces to choose from, it was harder to spot if one of them might have their parents' eyes, for instance). No wonder he had been so reckless, so difficult to communicate with. Maggie regretted being so hard on him.

And now *she* couldn't afford to be anything other than clear-headed. She idly entertained a thought that the TARDIS could offer her some weaponry; halfway down the corridor, sure enough, a door creaked open showing an armoury of some kind. But, as she suspected, it was the kind of armoury the Doctor would have: the weapons were all museum pieces—flintlock rifles, crossbows, a Chinese fowling piece, and ceremonial epees—and there was nothing so violent or destructive as a bullet or gunpowder to be found. The more advanced weapons piled on the shelves—a disconnected Dalek blaster, or a chunky laser pistol whose caption identified it as belonging to the 'MORDEE EXPEDITION C.101ST CENTURY (EARTH CALENDAR)'—had no power, so when she pulled their triggers, nothing happened. She could easily imagine him confiscating and analysing such devices of death to look for some way to overpower and outwit their owners; but he would never use them offensively. "Oh Doc," she bemoaned, shaking her head. "Do you have to be *such* a pacifist?"

A baseball bat and an umbrella with a bright red handle in the shape of a question mark were stashed in a stand by the door. The bat seemed the more useful object, so Maggie took that and continued on her way. As she ran her fingers up and down its handle, wondering if it would really do any good, Maggie remembered another of those pearls of trivia the Doctor occasionally let slip: that a property of the internal dimensions of the TARDIS made it impossible to commit any acts of violence inside it, or fire any weapons. By that logic, she supposed, neither Azrael nor the person in the compression suit could hurt the Doctor if they tried … and Maggie would be unable to defend him against them.

Hoping she wouldn't have to put this to the test, she continued her silent tiptoe into the infirmary, where the Doctor lay on the same bed Azrael had three days earlier. Now their roles were reversed; she was scanning him.

[4] Susan re-encountered the Doctor in *The Doctor Who Project* Season 44: *A Mild Curiosity in a Junkyard*.

The tall figure lay across from the Time Lord on a more primitive, wrought-iron bed. Now sans helmet, Maggie could see she was a hardy-looking, grizzled woman who appeared very old indeed—by human terms, over ninety. Seeing her in the chunky flight garb Azrael had worn made her look, amusingly, like a grandma who had joined a biker gang.

She was talking with Azrael, and neither woman had noticed Maggie's arrival. She kept her breathing light, as she strained to hear them. The conversation was distant and full of technical jargon, but she also noticed the newcomer's body language—never taking her eyes away from Azrael, studying her, clearly looking for a trace of recognition.

Maggie caught the word 'regeneration' in their chatter. Azrael was pointing to the diagnostic screens and the Doctor … he had nearly regenerated? Is that really what she said?

"Contact with that ship …" Azrael went on. "The *ship* was draining regeneration energy."

The old woman nodded matter-of-factly. "Didn't you know it would, Azrael? Isn't that why you brought that Time Lord and his vessel here?"

"The Doctor brought us here."

That parched face cracked into a sharp-toothed smile. "Did he? Well then, he's just as silly as we thought …" Her eyes lit up as she caught Maggie at the far end of the infirmary. Maggie felt her cheeks colour when she gave no effort to conceal what she had been talking about, merely nodding a casual greeting. "Please, you don't have to languish back there. Come in."

Keeping the baseball bat tucked behind her leg as she approached, Maggie pursed her lips. "I was just wondering what you were saying about the Doctor …"

"Never mind that for now … Azrael has told me you've been looking after her." She tilted her head in a stiff greeting. "My name is Atropos. And what an honour this is—I had no idea I would get a chance to meet the famous Maggie Weitz."

"Excuse me?" Maggie scoffed.

Atropos flashed Maggie a cold smirk. Despite her recumbent position on the bed, her body seemed charged up somehow, and Maggie's fingers played along the handle of the bat as the old woman spoke. Her words were slow and playful, as if she were toying with the pair before she pounced on them. "Don't be so modest. As you and your Doctor friend seem to be figuring out with my young crewmember Azrael here, where we come from, we're a bit mixed-up. But before we lived on the other side, so to speak, our distant ancestors lived on a planet you and the Doctor visited."

Maggie blinked, frankly stunned. "Really?" she asked dumbly.

Atropos nodded, amused at her shock. "So I really should thank you, as should Azrael, for helping us get where we are. Back home … nearly."

"What planet are you talking about?" Maggie asked sceptically, thinking back through their recent stops. She had no reason to believe Atropos would lie about such a thing—especially as she knew of the Doctor and her—but it made the connection with Azrael suddenly more worrying. Where the hell … "Oh my God." The answer came to her suddenly; it wasn't that hard. "Not … Betruvia Major? There were Time Lord cloning machines there … they'd used them to make up a synthetic woman, Thaisa Sidney, who thought she was a Time Lord … but I thought she died. The machinery was unstable, it all broke down[5]."

[5] See *The Doctor Who Project* Season 46, 2025 Christmas Special: *Santa Claus is Coming to Betruvia Major*.

"Well, that was all countless generations ago. A lot happened since. It took us a long time, but we're getting the hang of it. My ship got stranded here, but not before Azrael and the rest of the crew bailed out …"

Azrael shook her head, her eyes wide and blank, deeply disturbed at Atropos holding so much information about her.

"Is the amnesia really total?" Atropos asked, with the hint of a taunt.

"Seems to be …" Azrael smiled weakly. "After all, I can't remember." She reached out to Maggie. "Maggie, is there anything you can …"

"And the regeneration thing … that really is interesting, because it means you don't even remember that I can do *this*!"

And at that the slender old woman leapt off the bed, a terrifying ribbon of silvery-blue light rippling from her body like a halo. It surrounded Azrael, knocking her off her feet. She thudded to the floor of the infirmary like a rag doll. Maggie raced over, and was relieved to feel her breathing.

"We didn't realise that being stuck outside this universe for so long imbued us with heightened abilities, infected us with some of the abilities of, let's say, the predators of the region. Our genetic structure, as you know, is very malleable." She looked down at the unconscious Doctor. "Which is why it's extremely fortunate to have run into a genuine Time Lord. We … *I* will have his powers in no time. And this ship too … what a lucky day."

"You've already had a genuine Time Lord, though, surely?" Maggie asked. "The Master. The Doc and he are really close. We detected his 'bio … data'? Whatever that is, we detected it in Azrael."

She didn't answer, instead shaking off another bolt of this bluish-silver regeneration energy in Maggie's direction. She ducked, instinctively, but she felt it sizzle, hot and strangely calm as it shot past—like what she had seen of the time vortex, but bottled up in a person. She didn't need Atropos to tell her, gloatingly: "You've seen what an overdose can do even to those who are used to it, like the Doctor, and even who feed on it, like Azrael … imagine how a frail, vulnerable Earth-person like you would take it."

Maggie rolled under one of the beds. Atropos hadn't seen her move; so she must have some vulnerability herself when she expelled the energy. She saw the dark boots clunk by the bed, and held herself perfectly still until she walked past.

She heard the door click shut at the far end. No doubt, once her disorientation passed, this intruder would be fully rejuvenated and on her way to the console room … Maggie climbed out from under the bed and crossed over at the Doctor. She shook him a couple of times, but he merely flopped loosely in response.

Then she looked at his skin, and saw it was curiously off-colour, tinged with grey … and then she *felt* his skin and how rubbery it was. At first, she was seized with horror, thinking he was dead after all … but then, somehow it came to her …

"Whatever was down on that comet *copied* the Doctor … he's still down there!"

*****

The Doctor suddenly felt the pressure of reality. The light accordingly changed from the dusty-rose tint to the silvery gloom, and that slight pain in his lower back from his fall returned. As well as that, he felt the energy it had robbed from him—so much that it had

brought him close to a regeneration. It would take him a while to recover from that … hopefully he could get back to the TARDIS without getting into any more tight spots.

Along with that, the bat-like creatures were nowhere to be seen—presumably they couldn't cross the threshold in that form—and the empty space at the centre of the comet was once again filled with the wedge-shaped capsule. He felt the gravity pull on his boots wane, he was floating in the narrow space, knocking and scraping against the ice and rock every time the comet shifted or changed its course. Luckily, the spacesuit, though homemade, was proving sturdy enough in the harsh surroundings.

"Well, I'll be sure not to touch *you* this time," he said rhetorically to the pod. He noticed its window was now open, and the cockpit now empty. His little jolt may have fed straight into the figure he saw.

He sensed trouble; suddenly the sequence of events was clear. Whoever was in the capsule had got out and gone to the TARDIS … and if they were an ally of Azrael and she was showing her true colours …

He had to get back to Maggie!

With his spacesuit's gravity boots failing, he couldn't go back the way he came. Another idea presented itself. The Doctor eased himself into the pod, taking care to touch as little as possible. But he was willing to bet that without its pilot, the vehicle wouldn't sap any more energy of him. Anyway, even if it did, he hoped he would only need to be inside it for one short hop: into the TARDIS.

The window sealed shut over his head, and he roved around the cockpit—unclasping the helmet and removing the goggles so as to take all the details in more clearly. In a curious parallel with the TARDIS, the space inside was deeper and lower than it appeared from outside. There were tubes and stumpy polyhedral control panels, like stumpy little consoles, beside the six seats, all facing inward. He could imagine six pilots, juggling their own controls … just like a TARDIS, as it was originally designed to be flown …

Then he looked down at the control surfaces set into the polyhedral stumps; primitive, but clearly based on Gallifreyan technology … just like that kit they found on Betruvia Major last Christmas …

His mind raced at a series of snap deductions: so Thaisa Sidney survived, and either she or some successor of hers paved the way for this disastrous experiment. And if this single excursion created so much damage, imagine if they developed it further …

"Now then Doctor," he scolded himself, "you can scare yourself silly later. For now, let's focus on this particular problem." He paced around the six throne-like seats, cables flailing like clusters of black spaghetti as he passed. The same derived-dialect script from Azrael's suit was flashing on the surfaces of the polyhedrons, and from them he was able to read the names of the six crewmembers. Sure enough, seat number five belonged to Azrael.

"One of the pilots was Azrael, the other was the person I saw in the window—who's presumably up there in the TARDIS—and two more I assume merged with my bat-like friends on the other side of the rift. Perhaps those ghosts, that Woman in Black and the one that looked like Æthelflæd, were either echoes of them, or of the creatures, or hybrids … yes, yes, I think that makes sense." He gave a jolly clap; no matter how grim the scenario, it was always satisfying to solve a little mystery. "So," he asked himself rhetorically, "that leaves two of these Time Lord *manques* unaccounted for somewhere and somewhen else … a comforting thought. But no! No scary stories, remember?" He peered down at the row of flickering instruments by Azrael's seat, quickly understanding the bright button on the end activated a

general 'abandon ship', a kind of temporal escape pod that had scattered the other five crewmembers.

With another clap, the Doctor set to work, reprogramming the sticky controls with the aid of his sonic screwdriver (and to think he'd almost left that in the TARDIS). "Maggie, I do owe you one for that." The instrument jarred slightly against the settings of the vessel—for all its similarities, it had been constructed in an entirely different dimension—but a bit of coaxing and noodling, and the odd bash of the screwdriver's head against the side, enabled him to redirect that particular escape pod to shoot in the general direction of his own ship …

The machinery was still grunting and burping in protest as he slapped his helmet back on and took Azrael's seat and re-engaged the eject sequence. Lately he had become morbidly preoccupied with ignominious deaths, and being shot like a cannonball against the side of his own TARDIS would probably be one of them …

The time ticked by, and for a second he saw the ship fade into the purplish tint of that shadow-realm, and imagined the creatures swarming through the cockpit were wishing him well in that instant he was fired off …

*****

Somehow, the amber glow emanating from the roundels in the TARDIS corridors seemed to have faded down several notches. Maggie hoped the Ship was doing her part to make this intruder's path more difficult; but in practice the longer shadows seemed to take the shape of the tall and slender woman in her black leathery flight suit, those cables dangling like black noodles behind her (had that been why Azrael was so freaked out when she cooked that pasta?). Every time she reached a junction, she thought she saw the silhouette, and poor Maggie's heart skipped a beat.

Yes, her heart. She had still not got that checked out, since she found it a bit fluttery on their adventure with Lord Byron[6]. The old ticker had remained surprisingly well-behaved since then, no matter how much stress or dread their journeys inflicted on them.

Come on, TARDIS, she said to the Ship, knowing it could hear her thoughts. *Just get me through this alive so I can go back to Revelstoke and get checked out, please?*

Then a hand grasped her wrist, and she nearly jumped out of her skin. She clutched the baseball bat tighter, only to find it was Azrael, wobbling from one foot to the other, still dazed from that hit of regeneration energy.

"You nearly gave me a heart attack," Maggie hissed.

"I'm sorry!" she blurted. "I'm sorry about all this—"

Maggie clamped a hand over her mouth, and she responded by lowering her voice to the same urgent whisper. "Maggie, I'll find her and I'll get her to take me with her. I can't be trusted with you and the Doctor …"

"My ears are burning."

Now Azrael and Maggie both cried out in fright, as the Doctor sprouted from a hatch in the floor. Only his torso appeared to be present, and he looked down in frank alarm to see a smooth white expanse of TARDIS floor where his lower half should be.

"But if you're here, who's in the infirmary—" Azrael began.

[6] See *The Doctor Who Project* Season 46: *Wolf on the Fold*.

"Doc, there's this woman called Atropos, who knows Azrael and she's up to no good…" Maggie talked over her friend.

"Ladies, please! Both of these things are terribly interesting, but for now, do you suppose you could grab an arm and pull? I really don't fancy having my lower half drift off with that comet." He raised his elbows to illustrate.

They obliged, and it took no small effort—"I think you've put on a few pounds," Maggie teased—to pull him inside the TARDIS.

He threw his helmet free and took in a happy lungful of dimensionally transcendental air. "It is nice to be back. Now, as to me being in the infirmary …"

"Yes, it's just …" Maggie found her heart rate tested once again as the double stood at the end of the corridor, mannequin-like, his bland expression the most obvious difference from the real, ever-animated Doctor.

He took a few paces nearer, to examine his *doppelganger.* "I met a few of your friends out on the comet, old chap."

The copy of his face nodded slowly in understanding.

"Well, as we're all here, let's go and meet our other new guest."

The Doctor raced down the corridor, with Maggie and Azrael racing after him and the duplicate-Doctor adopting a more sedate pace at the rear. Such was their urgency that they collided with him head-on as he turned back randomly, pointing to Maggie's baseball bat. "You weren't going to …"

"Bash the old lady's head in?" Maggie finished. "Well … if she threatened you …"

He smiled in rueful disapproval. "Quite the appetite for destruction. That bat's original owner would be proud of you, Mags. However, with any luck it shouldn't have to come to blows. Come along then!"

*****

They re-entered the control room to find the tall, exceedingly slender yet also robust pilot, Atropos, circling the console as if to the manner born. She was clearly studying its layout in recognition, bony fingers touching such panels as the master dematerialisation assembly, the conceptual geometer super-structure, the telepathic circuitry, and the sidereal stabilisers as if ticking off components familiar from her crude imitation-TARDIS lodged outside in that comet. She seemed so absorbed in her study that all were surprised when she called languidly across the room: "Welcome back, Doctor. That was clever of you to get back aboard."

"It was, rather. I, uh, thumbed a lift from your little rust-bucket down on the comet's surface."

Atropos flicked a row of switches, still not looking over at him. "What a pity. I was hoping to get away in this vessel with Azrael, and leave you stranded. That would have made things so much simpler."

"Yes, I was just reflecting earlier today how seldom life goes as simply as we would like." The Doctor took several measured steps nearer. Maggie noticed his double moved in unison, yet a step behind—like a lagging shadow of his every action. The other Doctor's blank eyes suddenly came alive when locked on Atropos.

She returned the expression with revulsion. "That's one of those boundary creatures, isn't it?"

The Doctor gave his mirror-image a smile, and nodded. Eerily, the double mirrored and reversed the gestures. "That's right. I saw a fair few of this handsome fellow's friends when I slipped into that 'boundary'. A boundary you created with your recklessness, hopping between dimensions like teenagers out joyriding."

"One of those joy-riders, might I remind you, was Azrael."

"Hmm."

"I tell you what," Atropos suggested, "why don't you let us go, so we can continue our mission, and we'll … what's the ancient expression? Call it even?"

The Doctor tilted his head as if pondering the offer, but when he spoke his answer was plain. "Except it would be far from even. Poor Azrael got marooned in a temporal eddy for centuries, as did a couple of this poor chap's chums—"

"*I* was stuck out here for millions of years!"

"Oh … hardly the same, Atropos. You were in stasis. Having a nice long snooze. Azrael was conscious for every moment of it, her nerves and her mind torn to shreds. It was surely that trauma that cost her those memories of her past, her whole life. Not to mention, in the process, she frightened the willies out of some poor Earth-people … and me too."

Atropos smirked. "She did, eh? How gratifying to hear."

"Oh, that's no great feat. I get scared easily. Isn't that right Maggie?"

With the feeling she had been called on to solve a maths problem, Maggie answered hastily, "Oh yes. A real fraidy-cat, the Doctor. He's particularly scared when he thinks there's something he can't explain. A question without an answer, a puzzle with no solution. Every time he sees a bigger Rubik's Cube, you can see him sweat a little."

She realised he was relying on her to keep chattering while he got into position to do something clever, and she now saw he had drawn up beside Atropos, while his double stood across, out of her eyeline. She kept her eyes solely fixed on the Time Lord, clearly regarding the 'boundary-creatures' with horrified disgust.

"Yes, and the simple fact is, Atropos, while your ship is on this side of the rupture, some remnant of the scar it created on space-time will remain also. So, I'm afraid you'll have to cut short your little expedition. It's the only way. Cauterise the wound, so to speak."

The pilot slapped her breast angrily. "Leaving me trapped, Doctor—trapped on the wrong side, with my people not knowing if we survived, never able to go back home."

"Trapped by your own foolishness. I told Thaisa to leave the discarded technology alone."

"She did. Others, in later ages, grew curious, felt it was misguided to abandon that work, when such power could be theirs, could open so many possibilities to them …"

"And so it did, but they paid the price. Betruvia Major, at some point after we visited, vanished altogether—stuck outside their natural universe, the successive generations of Betruvians tried to get back in, and perhaps to elevate themselves to Time Lords in the process." The Doctor shook his head and tutted. "Big mistake."

"Who are you to say where we belong and where we can go? Aren't you exploring space and time yourself? Just like the … the Master?"

The Doctor's eyes flared with brief rage, but then it was Azrael who spoke up next. "Something is coming back to me, Doctor. The picture of two timelines, two alternatives happening at once. The one where you saved the continuum at Tamworth Castle, and another where …"

"Causality unravelled, and the chaos of an inimical reality annihilated this one, as surely as matter and antimatter."

Azrael nodded dumbly. "Doctor … you have to let me go with her. You're only in danger because you were trying to find where I came from. If Atropos and I leave, we'll never come back, then you and Maggie and everyone else will be safe."

"Never come back? Of course we will! Think about it Azrael, we stand on the brink of godhood. Why would we not fulfil that destiny? We must reclaim this reality for ourselves. What do I care about some alternative time?"

"Come on, you silly woman!" Maggie snapped. "How are you going to live in this reality if it's unravelling behind you?"

"Exactly, Atropos," the Doctor said. "And the mere fact that you haven't considered such implications, or are blind to them, indicates exactly why you can't be allowed to continue your experiments. So …" He raised a hand and nodded to his double. "As to you, you handsome devil, your friends can start their engines. My dear lady, you may want to watch this on the scanner."

The view outside altered closer in on the comet. The shards of deep-space rock and ice hardened by aeons floating in the absolute zero slowly pulled apart and scattered free. The full structure of the wedge-shaped craft could be seen now, with even more ungainly pods and Bussard collectors and other greeblies attached to its hull. In the fractions of a second beyond her vision, Maggie was sure she could see dozens of wings beating, flapping away. These creatures were bearing the ship away back through the rift—and thus sealing it.

"No!" shrieked the pilot. "Azrael, we must get back to our ship at once!" She zipped herself up, sealed her helmet closed, and flicked a row of activation buttons down the shoulders of her compression suit. The octopus-like tendrils glowed dully. Seeing them snaking around her back as if alive, Maggie wondered—absurdly given the tension—if that shape was what Azrael was remembering when she reacted with such horror to the pasta noodles.

Atropos stood at the doors, which whirred open as if the TARDIS were only too glad to send her on her way. As the Doctor had earlier that day, Atropos stopped at the threshold and looked back, extending her hand to Azrael, who moved awkwardly toward her.

"Would I learn who I was?"

"Of course … as the Doctor says, the shock of the temporal dislocation, and the traumas you experienced halfway between the dimensions, must have taken their toll." Though her face was concealed by her visor, Maggie could just imagine her villainous sneer as she added, "I've learnt a lot from seeing this ship's controls. Next time we won't make the same mistakes."

Seized by an impulse, Maggie seized the naïve young woman's arm. "Think about it, Azrael. Don't go just because she wants you to. You've got to do what you want."

"Quite," agreed the Doctor. "And I promise you this, Azrael. Maggie and I will *both* be here to help you find everything out."

"I don't think you two are being quite candid with Azrael," Atropos interrupted haughtily. "She doesn't have a choice in this matter. The rest of our crew were scattered across time and space when we ran aground in this miserable spot. I need Azrael, whether she wants to come or not."

"I thought you might say something like that," the Doctor noted sadly. "Take it away, my friend!"

And with that, the Doctor's duplicate leapt on to the tall woman's back and they both sailed out from the open TARDIS doors into the void beyond. For the merest fraction of a second, the creature's true form could be seen flapping those massive wings. Then a great light shone in the darkness of this empty space, and Atropos and her ship, and the boundary-creatures were all gone. Even the comet had disintegrated, and now only a few fragments of dull icy rock were scattering from the epicentre. One of them bumped off the police box's outer door post, and Maggie pulled her head back inside before another one got too close.

The Doctor wriggled out of his spacesuit, and donned his lilac fishing sweater, selecting a new pair of wide-waled lovat green corduroy trousers and some smart brown Oxford shoes from the shelf in the anteroom, as he studied the TARDIS readings. A graph on the system monitor, which moments ago spiked angrily red, was now flat and placid. "What a relief they proved friendly." He grinned at Maggie. "And the rift, and the temporal discontinuity, have healed. Case closed, thankfully—and *no* thanks to me, sad to say." He shook his head and made a clownish sad face as he locked eyes with Maggie and Azrael. "My apologies to you both. I was having a bit of an off day."

"Oh, come on Doctor, you did brilliantly!"

"Yes," Azrael chipped in, "getting back to the TARDIS, figuring out what those creatures wanted, and how to get her—our—ship back …"

"Flattery will get you nowhere, ladies," he replied sadly, his head still drooping. "I was off my game because I was preoccupied with judgements. Judgements about you, Azrael." He closed his eyes and opened them again slowly. "Judgements that had nothing to do *with* you, I should add, and that were wholly wrong, and for which I apologise without reservation."

"No, Doctor. I should apologise to you. I still think I should have gone with Atropos. I don't want to cause you or Maggie any trouble …"

"I think such answers are better sought in the company of friends than captors."

Maggie nodded. "And you can count on us to be your friends."

"Both of us," assured the Doctor with his more customary friendly smile.

Azrael smiled back, but her face resumed a troubled aspect. "What about this 'Master' person? When she mentioned that person, I realised I, I think I knew that name … or rather that title …"

The Doctor looked to Maggie. "Did they confirm the news on Gallifrey?"

She nodded, and he gave a nod in return to tell Azrael. "He's another Time Lord, and he … is some kind of relation, a possible ancestor, of yours. Which raises many fascinating questions that *I'm* as keen to answer as you are. The Master as a family man takes some imagining for a start …"

Azrael's face lit up with intrigue at this description. "Really? What's he like?"

"Well … why don't we talk about him over some libation, to celebrate you joining our little band, eh?" The Doctor punched in some controls. "It's been much too dark out in this corner of the cosmos. And come to think of it, Tamworth was a bit on the gloomy side too. What say we take in a bit of sun and sand?"

"Sounds good to me!" Maggie agreed.

"What's sand?" Azrael asked.

"Easier to show you, on the singing beaches of the D'Jellipiozz Frontier. Here we come!"

The Doctor threw the lever, and the TARDIS vanished from the now-placid corner of Sector G35, Quadrant Sigma, and away to another adventure.

It has been a few days since the Doctor and Maggie discovered the mysterious Azrael. Despite their new friend's amiable nature, her strange genetic structure and complete amnesia are cause for concern. Trying to solve the mystery brings the Doctor to a comet phasing in and out of another dimension—the pocket reality he theorises Azrael calls home. Exploring it, he finds he is not alone. A dimension-crossing craft, has become beached on the comet's surface, with one survivor and some hungry creatures flying about it.

Back in the TARDIS, Maggie and Azrael rescue the apparent victim from the craft. It is quickly apparent that she is not what she seems, and that she aims to hijack the Doctor's ship and strand him on the perilous surface below.

Can the Doctor communicate with the strange beings who dwell in this hinterland and unlock the mysteries that abound here? Can Maggie overpower the intruder in the TARDIS? And with the situation worsening, can Azrael be trusted?

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