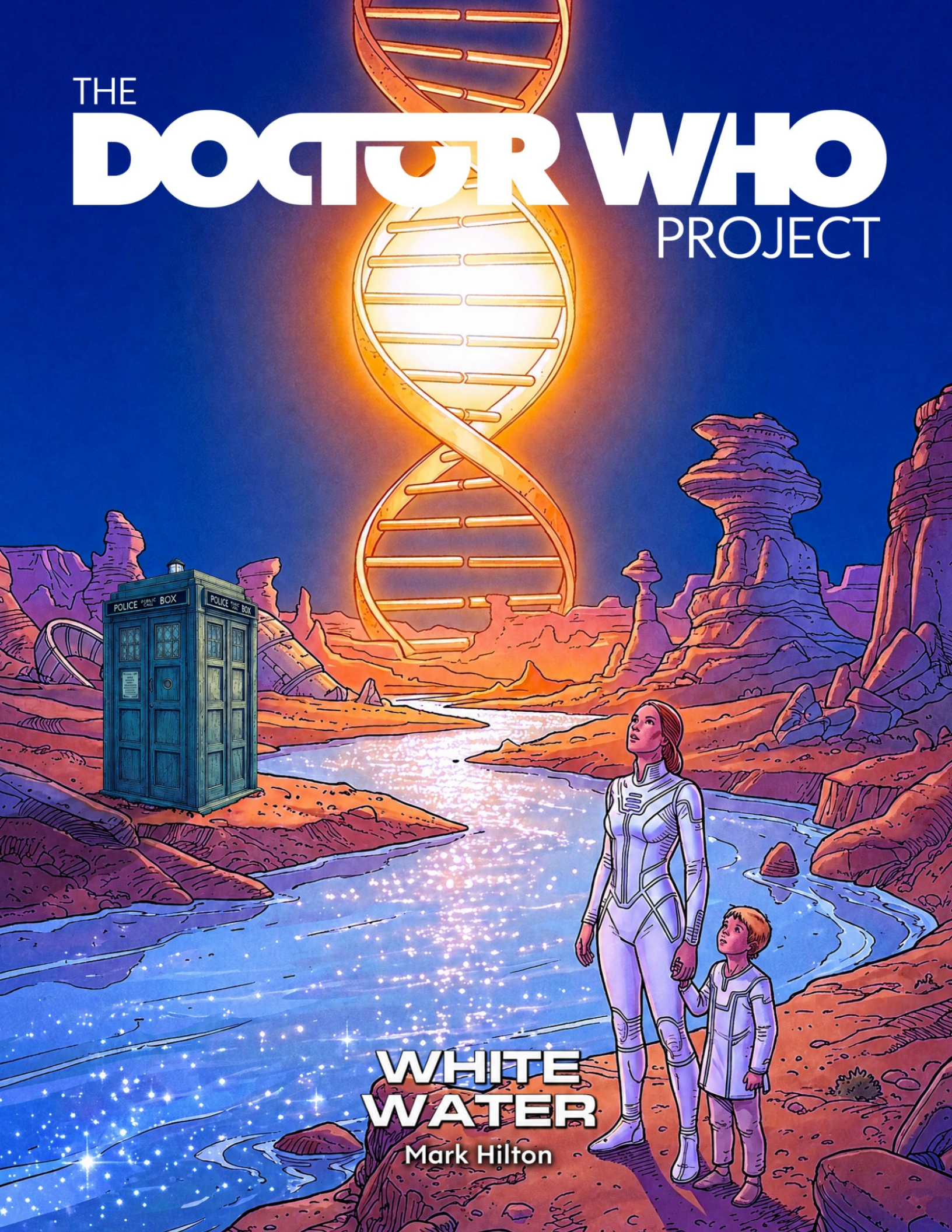
THE

DOCTOR WHO

PROJECT



WHITE WATER

Mark Hilton

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There was a warm breeze beneath a leaden sky. A narrow river cut through the evergreens to a clearing dotted with low-slung cottages on the far bank. A low-walled stone bridge spanned the river with three arches – the current folding around the two central pylons.

Children played at the riverside, a muddied bank reaching out from a carpet of lily pads – a sanctuary to an abundance of frogs chirping away in the afternoon air. The small boy had his trouser legs rolled up to his knees.

"How many have you got now, Gann?" the girl asked the boy.

"Still only three," he declared, checking the container.

"Five!" his friend gleefully announced. She placed a large stone pulled from the bank into the bottom of her container. "I'm building them a garden." At that moment a frog leaped onto her forearm and out. "Oh no, Hari's just escaped – I'm back down to four!"

"You're giving them names?" Gann asked, incredulous.

A distant whine cut through the air. The two children lidded their catches and held them tight to their chests as they watched the shuttle approach over the tops of the trees. Then they ran over the bridge toward the village.

The shuttle slowed as it came in to land in the wide-open clearing on this side of the river.

A woman in her early twenties, well-dressed in a light formal tunic with teal lapels, was among the first making her way over the bridge toward the vessel. She shepherded a young teenage boy, nearly as tall as her and with darker shortly cut hair. They both made their way from the village, the woman with purpose in her stride. The boy had to break into a brief run now and then just to keep pace with her.

"Do we have to go so fast, Larra?" he protested.

"It will be better for all the sooner we get you on the shuttle, Gann," the young woman replied. "And call me Grandmother, please!"

"Sorry, Grandmother."

Another woman in her early-to-mid forties gathered her long dress so she might hasten her pace. She was in hot pursuit of them both, slowed by the resistant flow of the disembarked making their way to the village. "Gann… Mother… please!"

"We've done all the talking, Epome," Larra called back without breaking her stride. "Gann wants this. I won't deny him."

"Please Mom," Gann called back, quickening his pace, "I promised I'll write!"

"Then why does this feel like I'll never see you again?" Epome lamented. "Merus took my mother, and now it wants to take my son!"

"You're being unfairly melodramatic, Epome." Larra asserted, turning to face her daughter at the foot of the shuttle. "These histrionics will only drive a wedge between you and Gann. If he must deal with this each time he visits, think how that might affect his choices!"

But her mother's words did not convince Epome. "Please, don't do this to me. Gann… Please!"

Gann looked at his mother, torn between pity and impatience. Finally, more coldly than he would have liked, he said, "Mom, I've got to go." He stood defiant beside his grandmother at the foot of the shuttle. "I told you—if I don't like it there, I'll be straight back. All this fuss will have been for nothing."

She didn't want to say goodbye this way, but looking from her mother to her son, Epome was gripped with grief. Her hand rose to her throat before dropping to her bosom. "She's promised you everything: Voice to give you what you want. How long before you tire of that?"

"Mom, Merus is a better place. It has everything I want. Anything I want!"

She turned again to Larra, feeling her age as the young woman looked back at her sullenly. "Mother – I've never asked much of you." She swallowed hard. "Look after him for me." She turned away, as if to join the flow toward the village. With her back to them she said, "I can't watch you go." Her voice broke. "I love you."

"I love you too, Mom," Gann said quietly.

Larra wrapped an arm around him and ushered him aboard.

"Are you both boarding?" asked the black-uniformed Protocol Guardian.

"My ID," said Larra, presenting a turquoise fob. "The boy's Anzorian and leaving his mother behind."

Gann glanced back to see his mother nearing the bridge, her shoulders shaking as she walked. He dropped his head, then turned to see the Guardian looming before him.

The man scanned him with a metallic wand. "You're not the only one leaving your mother, boy. Board now!" he said with an orderly indifference.

At the apex of the bridge, Gann saw Epome turn as the shuttle's ramp lifted and sealed, shutting out his old life.

"Mom?"

Gann sat bolt upright and swung his legs out of his bed.

"Good morning, Gann," Voice trilled through speakers embedded in the apartment walls. "Your sleep efficiency was eighty-three percent. Did you have another nightmare? Sometimes it can help to talk them through."

"No thank you, Voice." He rubbed his eyes and drew his hands down his face. His matted dark locks looked like they could benefit from a brush and a comb. Patchy stubble darkened his jaw – he needed a shave. "Voice? What are my activities for the day?"

*****

In a high-tech situation room deep in the heart of Merus, a wall of screens was positioned in front of the team of eighteen Surveillance Operators. The monochrome displays flickered eye-straining, sterile light around the room, each screen vying for the operators' attention. Before each operator was a hefty console, pulling colour feeds from the wall with a single tap. A dour man with short black hair in his early twenties worked his screen using a

multifunctional organic pad. For this man, Rylan, today was like every other day in this situation room. Rylan had checked and double-checked his data before daring to call his supervisor.

"Aria?" he called, turning from his screen. "What do you think of this?"

Aria's diminutive stature contrasted with her rank; she appeared only a few years older than Rylan. She would often feign frustration at being called from her other duties, while secretly enjoying the diversion. Aria felt more at home among the screens, remembering her own time spent in such engagements. The technology was not so adept in her day; they had to work to notice things. The high collar on her tunic hugged her tightened jawline as she leaned in to the pad to observe Rylan's work more closely. "What have you found, Rylan?"

"This one has been picked up by posture analysis – an eighty-five percent likelihood of being with child." Rylan ran his fingers over the organic pad's fleshy controls, as if conducting an exquisite symphony.

Aria felt a flicker of excitement. To each catch was attached a bonus. "Who is she?"

"Just pulling data from her ID …" Rylan said, his fingers skimming the pad. "An Elyen Driesech. Sector five resident, twenty-one years illusory, her real age forty-eight."

"Aside from the possible pregnancy, she's justifiably Merusian." Aria moved closer, almost threatening to push Rylan aside and take over the controls. But she resisted. She looked to the younger operator quizzically. "So, breakdown of the flag, Rylan?"

"Analysis from the line of her clothing - presumably that overlarge coat - and her walking gait alone gives a seventy-two percent likelihood she's well into pregnancy."

This piqued Aria's interest. This was almost personal. "How far gone?"

"Analysis shows eighteen weeks – well beyond embryonic phase!"

"I do know that Rylan," Aria chided. "She's been hiding indoors for some time, it would seem... Something must have driven her out."

"It still stuns me how they think they can get to birthing without being found out," a bemused Rylan added.

Aria needed no more convincing. "Bring her in for questioning."

Rylan enjoyed this part, issuing instructions to the police. His fingers moved lightly over the controls, almost tenderly.

*****

The plaza was bright and white – just searching for a splash of colour. Tall buildings hemmed it in – older constructions of intricately carved stone, each layer in a distinct style, assembled to appear enigmatic and important. Between those were much taller structures, chiselled from glass and metal, clawing at the sky.

The sky itself was peppered with vehicles moving in regimented patterns - private craft at a higher plane, larger haulage occupying a lower one. The precision of movement suggested computerised control – each level carefully choreographed, almost majestic in operation. Occasionally, a vehicle would drop through the levels in quantised steps until swallowed into whatever building was its destination.

Down on the ground, people hurried along with similarly regulated choregropahy, criss-crossing each other's paths with respectful precision, each driven by a single-minded purpose. To a casual observer, it would appear to be a bustling concourse of heightened

industry; but there was no obvious commerce. People were seemingly going from one place to another amidst the interminable drone of activity above.

Back at the plaza, a row of steps rose to a higher walkway with a much lower footfall. This quieter, secluded upper concourse was marked by the peculiar addition of a lone tree of great stature and advanced age. Its many branches sprawled out that would have kept much of this path in shade but only a few leaves were still held. Around the tree lay scattered leaf fall, the remnants of the previous season's canopy.

Some of the fallen leaves began to twitch as if trying to reawaken their former glory. Then they danced in tight circles; then frolicked in a much larger circular pattern. In the centre of this uncanny turbulence, the TARDIS materialised, to the tune of deep groans and twitters. The leaves settled as the police box stood proud alongside the tree trunk, cunningly disguised beside the only other singular object of its kind.

The door opened inward and the Doctor stepped out in eager anticipation of meeting something new. He drew a deep breath of the surprisingly fresh air. He looked to the sky, smiled, and then laughed out loud.

"Come along, you two, this will surprise you both!"

Maggie squeezed through the open door, Azrael tight behind. "Had to drag her away from the library, again," Maggie explained, then looking to where the Doctor's gaze was fixed. "Oh!" she cried excitedly, "They've got flying cars!"

"Not the Huxley Union type either," the Doctor scoffed, shaking off the unpleasant reminder of the syrupy stench emanating from the flying shuttle they'd encountered a while back[1].

Maggie instantly latched on to his drift and took the moment to apply her expanding otherworldly knowledge. "I guess, with that volume of traffic, they'd have to use a much cleaner energy source."

"Yes, from the lack of pollution I'd bet…"

Maggie held up her hand. "No, no, let me guess … solar? Hydrogen? Maybe nuclear?"

"Looks to me like sigmoid levitation – but a nice try, Maggie."

"Well, I'll know that one if there's an exam later," Maggie replied with a smirk. Her attention fell to the ground where she playfully kicked away a few of the multicoloured leaves, some of the longer tendrils looking more like rainbow-coloured seaweed. "Looks like we've arrived during Fall, though I have no idea what leaf you'd call these."

Looking around, the Doctor observed, "You'd think someone would sweep them up, considering how spotless everywhere else seems to be. Tree-less too, alas." He gave the lonely tree's hefty trunk a sad pat.

"Where are we, then?" Maggie probed gleefully.

"I don't know. That sigmoid levitation was never cracked by Terran engineers." He tapped his chin as he looked around, appraising their surroundings. The foliage was unfamiliar, the architecture and building materials unusual … even the way the city was planned indicated a different philosophy, one he did not recognise. It was thrilling to have so little to go on. "So, Earth-like but definitely not Earth, despite it feeling decidedly Autumnal," he mused. He had become accustomed to the TARDIS picking its own destination despite his careful coordinate calculation – well, maybe sometimes he got a bit sloppy – but no doubt, this was somewhere new, totally off their usual track.

[1] See *The Doctor Who Project* Season 46: *The Spaceship and the Witch*.

He turned to Azrael and noticed her quiet fascination of the advanced infrastructure. At least, he assumed that was what had her attention. Occasionally child-like though she was, her enigma carried a certain deeper ambiguity from time to time. Her voracious appetite for reading was barely satiated by the almost infinite volumes of facts and lore that added weight to the TARDIS library. What little he had learned about her—in particular her hybrid DNA and apparent biological connection to his one-time friend, turned greatest and most devious enemy, the Master himself[2]—combined with her almost-complete amnesia, inclined him to be suspicious, even distrustful, of her. Again, the Doctor upbraided himself for that distrust, constantly reminding himself not to become blinkered. In the absence of hard facts—looking at her, and her situation rationally, and taking his old enemy out of the equation—he had to take this sweet-natured young woman at face value, and to trust her.

"Ideas, Azrael?"

Again that doubt could not be suppressed! For a fleeting moment, he thought he saw his words had snapped her out of some private train of thought, and he had perhaps caught a glimpse of an underlying motive. Then her eyes widened and that ingenuous innocence shone through. "It's delightful," she said.

The Doctor stooped to pick a flower growing through a crack in the rubbery, almost organic pavement structure, and placed it on his tongue. Azrael picked what was left of the stalk, rolled it between her thumb and forefinger, and like a child imitating her parent, placed her forefinger gently into her mouth. Maggie watched them both with mild amusement. "It's bad enough when *he* chows down on any patch of lichen going, but do you have to do it too Azrael?"

Then she yelped as she became aware of a hovering spherical drone, almost perched on her shoulder, its single eye attentive and seemingly bovine in its intensity.

*****

The monitor zoomed in on the dark-skinned stranger's face as he frantically wiped his tongue. Aria and Rylan both studied his expression and his actions raptly: here was a handsome man, who could almost pass as a local if it wasn't for his anarchic dress sense. And yet he had such exotic wisdom burning in his eyes, mixed with that evident streak of exploratory curiosity and rebellion. But all those were suppositions from his external appearance. Any deeper conclusions—be they as simple as who or what he was—neither they nor their infallible technology could offer the faintest idea.

"Who is he?" Aria inquired, already knowing there would be no answer. Yet she stood firm, hardly believing her luck. Two in a single day, and this one seemingly a party of three!

"Unknown." Rylan worked the controls, frantically pulling data. "Not from here. No lineage. No data." Rylan turned to face Aria with a look of disbelief. "It's like they have no ID!"

Aria snapped bolt upright. "Why would anyone not have their ID with them?" Without it, they'd have no access to anywhere or anything. They'd have no rights. It was inconceivable. Again she leaned forward, and Rylan gripped his organic pad all the more tightly. Her tunic collar hugged her tightening jaw. "Real age?"

[2] See last week's story.

"I can't get a fix on the man. Real age is in excess of …" He watched the number spin through the three digits, then needing a fourth. "Over one thousand years!" He turned again to Aria as if in protest. "The sensors have maxed out."

"Explain."

He prodded the glitching readout, which was now just flashing random meaningless numbers. "It's hit the three nines and just spewing nonsense, now. It's not possible. It just doesn't make any sense!"

"Check the equipment!" Aria chided, hovering menacingly over Rylan. He hadn't yet learnt the flaws in relying solely on technology; the solution was there to be found, but it needed a keen investigative eye. "Check and double-check. How about the two women?"

Rylan studied the readings from the woman with paler skin and long, dark, curly hair. "I'm getting clearer readings, here. I've got a real age read of forty-two and an illusory read of…" He baulked. "Forty-two. She must be Anzorean, but how did she get to Merus?"

"Interesting. What about the other woman?"

Rylan zoomed in on Azrael's freckled complexion and untamed sandy hair. The data from her confused him even more than the man.

"Well, Rylan?" Aria pressed. "Don't tell me *she's* a thousand years old too?"

He shrugged, hoping what he was about to say would make more sense if spoken aloud. "No reading at all from this one… nothing. Zero. All the biometric signs are blanks … it's as though she doesn't exist!"

"Nonsense," barked a frustrated Aria, reaching for the controls. "She clearly wasn't born yesterday… what's this?" She peered hard into the screen. Yet Rylan's readings were, apparently, correct. "Real zero? Illusory zero?"

Rylan was feeling the pressure of the situation. "Perhaps the drone is faulty. I can log it for recall?"

"Log it? We need this drone operational now!" Aria turned toward the other operators. "Does anyone have a drone operating near sector seven?"

Her request was met with deathly silence. As surely as she knew these outsiders would flummox their systems, she already knew the answer to that one before she asked. Merus is a big place, they would remind her. The city itself takes up many square miles. Taking a drone from one sector would compromise the whole surveillance system.

"Can we get a fix on how they got here? Where they came from?" Rylan's fingers moved fast as he tried every programming trick he knew, scrounging every back door he could for any source for data. Yet the timestamps were no more helpful than any of their other surveillance equipment. Scans from the fixed surveillance in Merus' central-transport terminal showed no sign of their arrival, but here they stood.

"It's crazy. There's just no match. It's as if they just appeared out of nowhere!"

Aria steeled herself as the drone returned to the male stranger, this man the other two had called 'Doctor'. Presently his thumbs were in his ears, and he was flapping his hands up and down as he stuck his tongue in and out.

"Bring them in."

*****

The Doctor broke away from pulling faces at the drone. "I'm pretty sure someone will be on the way." He looked around. "In the meantime, maybe we can find out something about this place by asking some of the natives."

They descended into the plaza with intent to walk the streets. These people's eccentric view of architecture was even more evident in this busier part of the city. It seemed that old and new structures alternated without exception: old grown from carefully worked stone reaching up to four stories, and then the newer glass towers tall and thin, some reaching out over and above the older structures below, in a top-heavy design that appeared to defy gravity. The streets were all pedestrianised – vehicles required to access parking bays hidden inside the buildings themselves.

The Doctor smiled at the inclination to keep left, whichever mode of travel. These people were regimented, though it would seem not one of them had thought to invent the bicycle – never mind the Segway! Streets would fan outward from the plaza every triad of grouped buildings. The way the crowds moved around them made plain enough that these strangers were unwelcome. The main trait that *was* familiar from other parts of the universe was that, like so many downtrodden and beleaguered citizens, these locals were all markedly unfriendly.

"It's good to see the melanin gene is active around here," the Doctor noted as he observed some pedestrians' skin colour compared well to his own. "So, I'm guessing this avoidance isn't skin-deep." He smoothed the lapel of his dark blue balmacaan. "I suppose it could be that they don't like my tailor."

Maggie decided to tackle the issue head on. Seeing a pedestrian heading their way, she jumped in front. "Excuse me! We're lost. Can you tell me…" The citizen brushed her off – head-down and on their way. "Well, thank you," she called after sarcastically.

"Come on, people!" the Doctor chided, "show some sense of camaraderie, per-lease!" He turned to find Azrael in deep conversation with another citizen at a busy intersection. She broke away as the Doctor approached. "Well done, Azrael. You got somewhere! What did they say?"

"The name of this place is Merus, and you two are both too old?" Azrael conveyed, apparently confused.

"I don't take too kindly to being branded 'too old'," Maggie bristled.

The Doctor too was taken aback, and a moment later snapped his fingers and blurted out in delight, "Of course! Of course! Hidden in plain sight! We've been wandering around for nearly twenty minutes and seen quite a few people, and they all look the same age."

Maggie whirled around and studied the downturned faces all hurrying past.

"See what I mean, Maggie? Just look at everyone and ask yourself: where are all the old people?"

"A fair observation!" Azrael agreed, "and equally – where are all the children?"

The realisation cut to the quick. The three companions began looking more closely into the faces of the passersby.

"They could all be in school?"

"Toddlers and newborns, Maggie?" the Doctor scoffed.

"Maybe they have a good daycare system," Maggie rebutted. "Or … I don't know … they pack 'em all off to boarding schools like in England?" But neither of these explanations really convinced her; they all fell readily under the heading of young adult most, seemingly, being

in their twenties. “I’m suddenly getting serious *Logan’s Run* vibes,” she said, “and it’s making me feel a whole lot less secure about being here.”

Azrael cocked her head. “What is a Logan’s Run? Some kind of athletic event?”

“Perhaps we’ll do a movie night another time, Azrael,” said the Doctor. “But for now, it might be prudent to head back to the TARDIS.” They followed the winding lane back to the plaza, but before they caught sight of that proud lone tree, they were confronted by three helmeted officials, tall and menacing. “I always did think Michael York and Liza Minnelli did their parts well… oh wait, I’m thinking of the wrong movie.” The Doctor smiled, raising his hands. “Seems we’ve found ourselves some sandmen, though… I don’t suppose any of you gentlemen are cinephiles?”

*****

Architecture took a pass on spectacle and toward functionality when they built this official facility – in the centre of one of those glass columns, here, all the natural light was shut out by plain walls and a door. The interrogation room was familiar from any number of grim police interrogation rooms throughout the universe: functional to the point of sterility with its bare off-white walls, a single harsh light-giving ceiling panel, a table, and three angular chairs. Two were occupied. Aria sat opposite the Doctor, with the table between. She introduced herself by name; not unattractive, her short black hair bobbed and draped either side hugging the line of her jaw. Her long thin nose whistled slightly as she breathed. Her face was a practised mask of neutrality.

“This would go a whole lot better if my two friends were here with me,” the Doctor said casually, sitting lap-legged, turned edge-on, and tapping a sharp steady rhythm on the tabletop with his fingernails. “Failing that… tea and biscuits would do nicely.”

Aria’s piercing hazel eyes flicked over him, sharp, unimpressed.

“It’s been one of those days,” the Doctor continued, leaning back slightly and momentarily tucking both hands behind his head, “and I still have the taste of one of your flowers in my mouth.” He fluttered a hand over his mouth as he grimaced melodramatically.

Her lower lip twitched, barely perceptibly. “Doctor,” she said, her tone precise, “your real age – over a thousand years – marks you as clearly Merusian.”

The Doctor filed this information away. Not only were individuals marking their second millennium possible on this planet, it was also possible they could do so and look outwardly youthful.

“Yet,” Aria continued, “you have no record here, and no ID. Such a great age would make you one of Merus’ Founding Fathers… and they are all accounted for.” She pinched at her temples, glancing down at the table for a moment. “Why did you eat the flower?”

“Oh, just for information,” the Doctor replied, leaning forward, fingers loosely interlaced. “Chemical composition, likely solar system, pollutants… the date.” He tilted his head, observing her. “You run a very clean ecosystem here, Aria.”

“We couldn’t fix your illusory age,” she said carefully. “By appearance, you seem similar to your companions — late thirties, early forties — Anzorean, with no apparent exposure to Celltron. And yet… here you are, an anomaly in Merus. Explain.”

“My mouth’s a bit dry — I did mention how welcome a cup of tea would be, didn’t I? I’m assuming you do tea around here? Maybe you don’t … dear, dear, there’s a ghastly thought.” All his chatter was met by an icy stare. “Oh, very well,” he murmured, rubbing at his

throat. “I rather like your term ‘illusory age.’ Almost endearing. Do you hear that word often, Aria?”

Her expression remained unreadable.

“So let me see if I have it right,” the Doctor continued. “Two ages per person: real, the actual length of life lived; and illusory, how old they appear? Puts paid to the notion that age is just a number. I’d say you watch both numbers very carefully, yes?”

“You feign ignorance to our ways and customs, Doctor,” she said, voice flat but dangerous. Her fingers tapped slowly on the table, measuring, calculating.

“Oh, it’s entirely un-feigned, I assure you. You wouldn’t catch me nibbling on flowers if I landed in Trafalgar Square, for instance.”

“Where are you from, Doctor? If not Anzorea, is there another colony we should know of? This …” She sounded out the reference carefully. “… Traf-fall-gar Square, possibly?”

“We’re just passing through. You should pass through Trafalgar Square sometime, Aria. Best not when it’s overrun by Daleks or Cybermen, though,” the Doctor answered, studying her demeanour for a reaction... then added, “I’m somewhat smitten by this illusory versus real age dichotomy, tell me…”

“Doctor, we’re not here to waste time with tittle tattle over things we both know…”

“Humour me. I take it illusory is not merely outward appearance, but… deeper. Organs, perhaps? All bio systems? Fascinating.”

Her eyes narrowed further. “Your real age exceeds a thousand years. You should know these systems better than anyone else, Merusian or Anzorean, Doctor.”

The faint hum of the ventilation panel filled the room for a moment. The Doctor’s fingers walked the table’s edge. “You don’t think I’m a spy or something, do you?” His fingers dropped from the edge.

“Now there’s a word I haven’t heard in a very long time!” Aria laughed – the first show she had a sense of humour. “What would a spy want from Merus, Doctor?”

“An explanation of what is meant by illusory age would be a good start.”

“Illusory age is indistinguishable from someone of similar real age unchecked by Celltron.”

“I’m sorry… Celltron?”

“Celltron, Doctor. Our current age-suppressant drug… You’re supposed to be answering my questions, Doctor. I don’t like your…”

A sharp hiss accompanied the sliding door, and an equally surly dark-haired subordinate stepped inside, urgency in his stride. Aria recomposed herself. “What is it, Rylan?” she scowled curtly.

“Sorry to interrupt, Aria, but we have another deviant on surveillance.”

Her mood lifted. “Three in one day—”

The Doctor nodded in understanding. “Seems your busy day just got busier, Aria.”

“I’m beginning to think some kind of ‘invasion’,” Aria muttered, turning to the Doctor. “You’d better come too, Doctor. I don’t think you’re someone who should be left unsupervised.”

The Doctor grinned, shoulders straightening, and rose, brushing an imaginary speck from his sleeve. “Well then, lead the way, Aria. Lead the way.”

*****

Azrael sat down the corridor, in another interrogation room. A single ceiling panel flickered intermittently. Her inquisitor was a less seasoned and more highly strung individual than Aria, hovering between sitting and standing – quivering on the edge of the uncomfortable chair, always ready to bounce up like a jack-in-a-box.

"…neither you nor your companions were carrying ID - explain that to me!"

His voice cracked across the room like a whip. The inquisitor leaned forward over the narrow table, palms flat, as though he might force the truth out of her by pressure alone.

Azrael did not flinch.

Her hands rested loosely in her lap, her posture composed, almost statuesque. The harsh overhead light cast clean shadows of her hair across her eyes, but her expression remained unreadable… calm to the point of indifference. If she felt the weight of the accusation, she gave no sign of it.

"What ID should I have been carrying?" she asked simply, sounding out the letters as though she had never heard them before in her life. "I.D., eye-dee, eye-yee-yee-deee…"

The inquisitor reached into his pocket and produced a small rectangular fob, no larger than his palm. Its surface caught the light with a dull turquoise sheen, faint circuitry pulsing beneath its casing like a heartbeat.

He slapped it down onto the table between them.

"Everyone in Merus carries identification. Everyone. You cannot move, you cannot eat, you cannot *exist* here without it. Where is yours?" He leaned closer, lowering his voice. "It is an offence not to carry. A serious one. How can you not be aware of that?"

Azrael's gaze drifted to the fob. Not hurried. Not curious in any obvious way. Just… noting it.

"May I look at it?" she asked, slowly reaching toward the object under discussion.

For a fraction of a second, the inquisitor hesitated… then his hand darted forward and snatched it back, clutching it tight.

"Of course you can't look at it," he said sharply. "It's my personal ID. Do you take me for a fool?" He sat back as his pocket reclaimed the device, but his eyes remained fixed on her. "How have you managed? How have you moved through Merus without one?"

"I've only just arrived," Azrael replied. She shifted slightly in her chair, a small, almost imperceptible adjustment, and then straightened – too straight. "Me and my companions."

The light flickered as if to cue her voice to crack, dipping into a deeper register.

"I don't know why you're asking me all these questions. I don't know anything about your city or its rules. I… I…"

She faltered.

Her brow creased, just slightly at first, as though something had slipped out of alignment. Her gaze lost focus – not entirely, but enough to unsettle.

The inquisitor narrowed his eyes.

"Yes?" he pressed. "You did *what*?"

Azrael didn't answer – seemingly puzzled by the question.

Her hand rose slowly to her temple. She drew in a shallow breath, then another, as if the room's oxygen was in short supply.

"I… can't…" she murmured.

The inquisitor didn't move. He watched her carefully now. Not with concern, not yet. With suspicion.

A performance?

"Don't play the uneasy routine with me," he said coldly. "Confusion. Disorientation. It won't help you. Sit up!"

Azrael tried.

Her body obeyed halfway, then failed her. She leaned forward too far, catching herself on the table edge with a weak hand. The movement lacked precision – lacked control.

That gave him pause.

A flicker of uncertainty crossed his face.

"Look at me," he said, sharper now – but less certain.

She didn't.

Her head dipped. Her breathing grew uneven, a faint tremor running through her shoulders as though something deeper was misfiring.

Then she slipped.

Not dramatically. Not theatrically.

Just… enough.

The inquisitor moved before he'd decided.

He caught her under the arm as she slid sideways, his grip firm, almost irritated… as though annoyed to find himself in this position at all.

"Easy now," he muttered. "Don't… just… stay still and breathe."

For a moment, he held her there, suspended between suspicion and something else he wasn't ready to name.

Azrael's weight rested against him, slight but real.

"I'm… sorry…" she said, her voice thin, distant. "I'm not right… I need to be with the Doctor… and Maggie."

The inquisitor exhaled sharply through his nose.

This wasn't procedure.

But then again, what did procedure tell them about a person with no illusory age nor real age, and no ID?

"Can you stand?" he asked, once more shifting to support her.

She made a faint attempt to straighten, then faltered again. She flopped uneasily, her interrogator's grip shifting in an attempt to maintain purchase.

"No," Azrael gasped.

The inquisitor took a quick look around for anything that might help. There was nothing.

Then, quieter:

"Can I… please have some water?"

The inquisitor hesitated long enough to show the decision being made. "Yes… Fine."

He eased her back into the chair, more carefully this time, though he tried not to make it obvious. "Stay there," he said. "Don't move."

He lingered a second longer, watching, weighing the likelihood of this being some trick. Then he turned and left, the door sealing behind him with a soft hiss.

Silence settled.

For a heartbeat, Azrael remained slumped.

Then… like a curtain lifting – she straightened.

The weakness vanished.

Her eyes sharpened, focus returning with unsettling clarity. She rolled her shoulders once, as though resetting something internally, then let her hand fall casually into her lap.

Between her fingers, she twirled the inquisitor's turquoise rectangular fob.

She studied it, turning it slowly, feeling its weight, its edges, the faint vibration beneath its surface. A flicker of something from somewhere she couldn't name passed across her face… recognition, perhaps.

Then, with practised ease, she slipped it into her pocket.

And smiled.

*****

The surveillance centre was as active as ever, all in a flurry to keep Merus safe and Merusians in their place. The Doctor could see the function of this room: compliance executed with grim efficiency, maintaining order. Occasionally they found a discrepancy that required further investigation. There had been much of that today.

"Here she is." Rylan kept his eyes on the monitor as he punched commands into his console. "Larra Summers, real age four hundred and seventy-three, thirty years illusory."

"The milestone none of us want to see," Aria mused. "Good spot, Rylan. You'd better bring her in, too." She turned to the Doctor with a wry smile. "It's been a busy day! Looks like you and your friends will have company on your exile to Anzorea."

"I'm sensing you really like your job, Aria," the Doctor said with a shake of his head. "Must be intoxicating, deciding who belongs and who doesn't." He looked left and then right. "Where are my friends, by the way? Maggie and Azrael? It would be nice to see them."

Aria looked to the door as the Doctor continued, "I'm sure you've interrogated them enough to learn they're quite harmless and no threat to your… systems." He waited for her attention. "I know Azrael's a bit of a puzzle, but Maggie's real and illusory ages must tally in your pointless little calculators, so surely you can let her go free. Give her some time to sample what passes for hospitality around here?"

"There is still the matter of her lack of ID. That goes for all three of you."

The Doctor nodded, his expression sullen. "Ah yes, I discussed this with Rylan. Couldn't we just pay a fine and go on our way?"

"You intrigue me, Doctor. It will be such a shame to lose the opportunity to study you further."

The Doctor ran a quick, very high-frequency sweep with his sonic screwdriver. "Oh, no, you won't get rid of me. I'm the original bad penny," he announced confidently, repocketing the tool. "Ah! Azrael." He sighed in relief as the bubbly young woman entered the surveillance room, shepherded by her inquisitor. "And Maggie?"

"She's safe. You will all be leaving here on our terms, Doctor." Aria offered a forced smile, like splintered glass, and snidely added, "on a one-way ticket to Anzorea!"

"Anzorea," the Doctor noted, "…and tell me, Aria… is Anzorea likely to have such a thing as children?"

Aria stared with a flat smile. Rylan stopped punching commands into his console and looked up.

The Doctor turned and caught her subordinate's eye. "Tell me, Rylan. When was it you last saw someone born?"

Rylan threw back a blank stare, then glanced down before returning to his console.

"You run a very tight cohort here, Aria. Time is a bit of a special subject for Azrael and me, and I'd guess aged twenty to thirty… illusory? Am I close?"

"Come, Doctor." Aria beckoned him and Azrael to step forward. "It's fifteen to thirty illusory, by the way. Nice try. Let me reunite you with Maggie. I'm sure you'll have much to talk about."

*****

The shuttle's engines hummed as it flew over the lush canopy of evergreens. They had passed the outer city and the landscape beyond was pleasantly wild and untamed.

The external beauty was hidden from the passengers as the shuttle had no windows, only a narrow band of dimmed panels running along the ceiling, their light softened to something approaching comfort, though never quite achieving it. The air smelled faintly sterile… filtered, processed – not unlike that within the official buildings of Merus, even in transit. The shuttle's low vibrations stirred the flesh firmly against the bones.

The Doctor sat forward slightly, elbows on knees, as though resisting the urge to pace. Maggie sat close beside, her arms folded tighter than she realised. On his other side, Azrael was very still and upright – not rigid, but *attuned*, her head angled as though listening to something no one else could hear.

The passengers sitting opposite all avoided eye contact as adeptly as the citizens out on Merusian streets. It was the practised way of people who knew that noticing things carried consequences.

Azrael's gaze settled on a young woman seated further along. One hand rested protectively over a bump in her belly. Not obvious. Not announced. But there. Their eyes met. A flicker – something like recognition or perhaps self-pity – crossed the woman's face before she quickly looked away, folding in on herself as though the moment had been a mistake.

Azrael watched her a fraction longer, the instant for a smile already gone. She turned her attention back to the subtle shifts in air pressure.

"No in-flight movie?" piped the Doctor suddenly, glancing up at the blank ceiling panels. "Not even a trolley dolly. Doesn't say much for the service round here, does it?"

The words landed… and stayed there. No response. A few passengers shifted. One man stared harder at the floor. The Doctor rocked back slightly. "Tough crowd," he murmured. "Is it my delivery?"

A repressed sound – almost a laugh – escaped from across the aisle. The pregnant woman. Brief. Instinctive. Gone again before it could be fully noticed.

Maggie leaned closer. "Doctor… I'm worried." Her voice was low, careful. "Look, I'll come out and say it. How the hell are we supposed to get back to the TARDIS, when we're zooming away to some far corner of a planet you've never heard of, further and further away by the second?"

"Relax," he urged her, his eyes fixed elsewhere – scanning, noting. "Just accept this little sojourn."

"A sojourn?" Maggie's whisper sharpened. "We've been exiled. We might never be allowed back. The goons who run this place don't seem to be the type who give you any time off for good behaviour."

"I have this," said Azrael, surreptitiously slipping a turquoise rectangular fob into view. "It should help us when we return to Merus."

"Good work, Azrael," chirped the Doctor, producing a similar fob. "Mine came courtesy of Rylan. Hopefully, their absence goes unnoticed for the duration of this journey… Best keep them out of sight, though." He tucked it back into his pocket. Azrael followed his example.

"Our trajectory is known, Maggie," Azrael said quietly, without looking at either of them.

Maggie frowned. "What does that mean?"

"It means you don't need to worry," Azrael answered.

Maggie looked to the Doctor who raised his eyebrows in support of Azrael being Azrael.

Across from them, an older woman, about thirty, had been watching and listening. "It's none of my business," she said after a moment, her voice carrying the careful politeness of someone used to choosing words wisely, "but do you have relatives in Anzorea?"

The Doctor's attention snapped to her instantly. "We're just visitors," he said lightly. Then, softer and more certain: "It's Larra, isn't it, Larra Summers?"

Taken aback, she nodded once. "You know me?"

"I watched them detain you… from the surveillance room," the Doctor said.

"You're called 'Doctor'. I heard the three of you talking," Larra replied. She shifted slightly in her seat, one hand resting loosely in her lap, the other tapping out an elusive beat on the armrest with her fingertip—an absent, habitual motion. "Were you working on Celltron?"

The Doctor gave a small, non-committal smile. "Nothing gets past you, does it, Larra? What do you know about Celltron?"

A faint breath of amusement escaped her. "I remember when it changed from Vitacord, all in one go. You people said it would be safer?" Her gaze drifted – not to anyone in particular, instead seemingly reflected inward. "Vitacord… that was harsher. You felt it. Like your body was being… persuaded." She flexed her fingers slightly against her midriff, as if recalling the sensation. "Celltron…" She shook her head once. "Quieter. Smaller doses. You barely notice it working. One day you suddenly realise you've stayed the same for years."

Maggie glanced between them. "That sounds like a good thing."

Larra gave a small, humourless smile. "Oh, it is. Until it isn't."

She looked back at the Doctor now, more directly.

"You guys don't get enough praise. We get used to it. Everyone does. You stop thinking about time passing. Stop measuring it the way people used to."

Her voice softened.

"I switched from Vitacord nearly a hundred years ago. One of the first! I didn't have to think twice about it."

Another pause, longer this time, as Larra's thoughts tipped to regret.

"Doesn't make much difference to me now, of course. Now my illusory age has tipped past thirty."

She drew in a slow breath, steadying herself.

"But tell me…" A flicker of something returned: curiosity, perhaps, or hope. "There're rumours. Are you about to replace it? Something even better?"

"We've been doing the best we can," the Doctor replied evasively. "Have *you* got family in Anzorea, Larra?"

"Just my daughter, Epome. It's hard to stay in touch. I've made a few visits, but Merus doesn't exactly encourage communications. My grandson, Gann, lives in Merus. I've seen

more of him than I have my own daughter," she admitted, her tone glib to mask some deeper family rift. "He's doing very well. Merusian society suits him."

Maggie felt this was hardly a compliment, judging from her experiences of Merus. "Your daughter, Epome, must miss him terribly. When did he leave Anzorea?"

"A while ago, now, when Gann was just fifteen. Well over twenty years ago, I think? To be honest, we Merusians are pretty poor at tracking time."

Azrael laughed at this particular understatement.

Maggie leaned in. "I hope you don't mind me saying so, but you don't look a day over thirty yourself. It's hard to believe you have a grandson!"

"Thank you. Celltron does its job well and Vitacord before that. Laughably, I'm now exiled because the system shows I do look over thirty… just!" Larra drew a deep breath. "If you don't mind me asking, how did you come to be in Merus? Do you work with the Doctor?"

Maggie smiled — not quite the compliment she'd been fishing for, but Larra meant well enough. "I'm a visitor too. The Doctor, Azrael and me — the three of us travel together. You could say we work together, too?"

We've arrived!" Azrael announced with misplaced enthusiasm. The Doctor too seemed excited at this destination, rubbing his hands gleefully as they all began to feel the craft lose altitude.

The touchdown was featherlight, the engines just thrumming their gentle song. A calming hiss sounded as the far wall dropped away to make a ramp.

"You are no longer party to Merus, its laws and its services," the Protocol Guardian barked as he ushered the travellers from the shuttle.

"Charmed, I'm sure!" Maggie scowled.

*****

At the foot of the ramp lay a settlement in stark contrast to officious Merus.

Long grasses pushed up through the clearing, unchecked, dappled by tiny blue flowers and delicate golden bowls. The forest pressed close on all sides, broken only by a river, spanned by a three-arched bridge, winding past a cluster of low-slung cottages. Each was faced with some loosely stitched, straw-like material, yet somehow looking sturdy rather than flimsy. They were dotted around the landscape, in stark contrast to the regimented alternating pattern of buildings they'd seen in Merus. Nothing here looked measured or regulated. This place was alive around the chaos it embraced.

People watched from doorways and riverbanks. Their clothes were worn but serviceable - patched, repaired, kept going. No turquoise sashes. No lapels cut to regulation.

And there were the children. They played by the riverbank, laughing as frogs leapt between the lilies, splashing without care. Their noise carried freely across the water.

Maggie noticed it first. "They're allowed to be loud."

"They had to be somewhere," the Doctor added.

The older villagers stood nearby, faces lined by years of work and laughter – anxiously keeping a watchful eye over the strong current whisking by the subdued enclave in which the children would play – knowing they had done the same when they were young.

Missing was the young adults, fifteen to thirty year-olds, as if their entire age group had been surgically removed from their society. And, of course, it had.

The shuttle party became the focus of attention, plunging the ambience into a watchful silence. Conversations faltered. Children paused mid-play. Eyes searched the newcomers' faces – hopeful, cautious, looking for recognition that rarely came. No long-lost mothers. No returning sons or daughters. Not this time. Too many seduced by the Merusian promise of long life and prosperity.

Azrael removed a finger from her mouth. "Same ecosystem," she announced calmly. "We're between one hundred and eighty, and two hundred miles from Merus."

The Doctor shaded his eyes, scanning the river, the cottages, the watching faces. "Definitely walkable, then, at a pinch …" he mused. "Yet no Anzorean appears to bother the Merusian border. I wonder why."

"Gert? … Gert!", a woman suddenly cried, clearly in a hurry.

One of the children playing by the river stepped out with muddied feet, tall and indignant. "Mom, I don't want to."

"We've already talked about this. If you don't come now, I'll have to leave without you. Neither of us wants that, now, do we?"

"But I'm having fun with Jenna and Piri," the boy complained.

"Come along. You'll make lots of new friends in Merus. Say your goodbyes and come along, quickly now!"

Gert's head hung as he murmured a few words toward his friends. He turned to follow his mother as they made their way toward the shuttle – his reluctance plain to see in every step.

They approached the shuttle together. The Protocol Guardian scanned them both. "You're cutting it a bit fine, aren't you?"

"My illusory age is still twenty-nine and my son has just turned fifteen." They were both waved aboard without further hesitation. The ramp rose, sealing the hull into a perfectly seamless curve. The craft rose with eerie grace, then skimmed the tall evergreens as it hummed out of view.

Maggie watched him go. "What was all that about?"

"Two-way traffic between our communities!" Larra proffered. "All those who boarded will now serve Merus – and Merus will serve them," she added unequivocally.

"So, children *are* admitted to Merus?"

"Not to live as a child, now, though. He will be made to grow up fast so that he can be as productive for Merus as possible. It's the end of a childhood and the beginning of a new contract."

"What are they going to do to him?" Maggie asked, concern growing in her mind.

"He will be fine, Maggie. My grandson, Gann, has been through the same process and he is committed to the Merusian way more than anyone else I know." She smiled. "Come, meet my daughter, Epome. She is unlikely to be pleased to see me, but she'll be glad of word about her son, Gann." Larra strode toward the bridge spanning the river.

"Shipping kids off to be 'productive'," Maggie muttered darkly. "These kids need education, not conscription."

The Doctor's eyebrow lifted, but his expression had darkened. Azrael beckoned Maggie to follow. Maggie cut ahead. She looked up in delight at a whole grove full of the same type of brightly-coloured tree they landed under in the square. "I'm liking the proper trees!" she said.

*****

Larra lifted the latch on the cottage door and pushed awkwardly past the heavy curtain covering the doorway. Inside lay one large room – clearly functioning as a kitchen with pots and pans hanging from various hooks and pegs along one wall. The limed walls had an oddly rectangular brush pattern, like disordered brickwork on multiple levels and various sized bricks. The low-slung ceiling was made from tightly interwoven grass mats pinned to wooden rafters.

Much of the other walls were festooned with bunches of dried herbs and other botanicals. Their scent mingled with the smoke wafting from an open hearth in the middle of the floor; its flue suspended several feet above. A large kettle was perched over the naked flames. The lid rattled gently – close to the boil.

A trim elderly lady sat in a wooden chair in front of the fire, knitting. She raised her eyes without missing a stitch. "Mother."

"Hello, Epome. I hope you are well?" Larra asked with stilted confidence.

"I am, thank you. I didn't expect to see you again so soon… it was about three years ago, wasn't it?"

"I thought four. You might be right, though. You usually are more reliable than me when it comes to time."

"Why differentiate?" she said curtly, returning her focus to her knitting.

Maggie looked across to Azrael, cringing. Larra had not exaggerated—the atmosphere in this house was distinctly frigid.

"Have you brought me news of Gann?" Epome asked, still not looking up.

"Gann is very well. He sends his love and says he writes often but receives no reply… I don't really know if he does."

Epome choked out a strained laugh. "No. We can never be too sure what's going on between communities, can we."

The Doctor cleared his throat expectantly.

"Oh, sorry. This is the Doctor… a friend," Larra gestured awkwardly, "…and his travelling companions, Maggie and Azrael."

This gave Epome reason to look up. "Travelling, eh? Travelling where?"

"Well, at the moment, we're rather restricted to the cook's tour of Anzorea," said the Doctor, cautiously. "It's nice to meet you, Epome. Larra's spoken a great deal about you. Very highly, too."

This did not impress Epome. "Has she, now. What's she been saying about me? Tell me and I can tell you if any of it's true."

"I'd love to." The Doctor pointed eagerly to the large kettle. "Is that tea you have there?"

"No. It's hot water," Epome answered briskly, setting down her knitting. "I can make tea."

*****

Pastelled light filtered through a ceiling grid mingling with the iridescent motifs painted on the walls giving a sense of calm. The room hummed with quiet automation. Gann opened his eyes to Voice.

"Good morning, Gann. You achieved a ninety-six percent sleep efficiency. Your fertilisation itinerary begins in five hours and forty-six minutes. Merus celebrates your continued excellence."

Gann readied himself for a new day. The mirror smiled back at his clean-shaven visage.

"Your illusory age is steady at twenty-two point three years. You remain an excellent contributor to civic health," Voice continued with bright efficiency.

Gann stood before the dispenser as he had every morning, his palm stretched out to receive… nothing.

"Daily age-suppressant is currently withheld. Policy update pending. Thank you for your patience," Voice announced.

This wasn't normal, so Gann tried again. The same abrupt yet courteous rebuttal from Voice. System: *verified*.

Gann liked to cycle. The soft breeze against his exposed skin made him feel free and at one with his world. He was never sure what route he would take when he headed out and would often make up a new circular route as he went along.

It was always quiet. Just him on a bicycle, geared to take any gradient with ease. Just a mild exertion – enough to feel the weight of the air he drew into his lungs. He felt at one with his bike.

His tranquillity was rudely broken by Voice, who told him in a laudatory tone: "You are responsible for another successful pregnancy. The life-fertility index continues to rise. Your contribution matters."

"Voice, thank you," he snapped, "but not while I'm cycling. You know I don't like interruptions when I'm cycling!" His frustration was allayed quickly as he cogitated over the news… another successful pregnancy. That was good for his quotas and affirmed his position as a valued resource to the system.

So why no Celltron today? It still bothered him. He wondered if Voice knew this, and was paying him such insincere compliments to calm his nerves.

"Voice, sim off."

He removed his VR goggles, stepped away from his cycle and considered his situation as the fan whirred to a gentle stop. If Voice could be believed, his fertility was good, so that was a big positive – rarely in doubt, but always nice to have it reaffirmed.

Gann treated his assigned pairing partners with respect and expected the same in return — he knew not everyone did. Since entering the conception programme at fifteen, he had tried to approach it with a sense of responsibility rather than the casual bravado some of his peers affected. The process had become routine for many of them. Gann had never entirely allowed it to.

He knocked gently on the door.

Nothing. He wasn't early, so he knocked again - a little louder… Still nothing. Oh well. He decided to try and scan his ID. He removed the turquoise rectangle from his pocket and ran it over the scan pad. Nothing. Very strange. He tried to peer through the window but saw only his own reflection. She'd clearly silvered her windows, as many do, to keep out prying eyes. He felt completely shut out – enough to get his hackles up. This messed up his itinerary and blew away the positivity he felt that morning. He now had time to kill before the next entry on today's roster.

Back at home, he queried Voice. “Can you check if Alyssia is okay and find out why she was not available for today’s engagement?”

Silence.

“Voice, did you hear me? Check that Alyssia is okay and find…”

“Please don’t concern yourself about Alyssia. System update in operation. Further details will be relayed as soon as possible. Consider your programme for today cancelled until further notice. A system update is in operation.”

Gann stood in silence and considered his options. This day was not sitting well anymore. He looked to Visio – maybe explanations would be forthcoming there. No, he wasn’t bothered enough to sit through that.

Gann was crestfallen. He sat down to a rustic mug of Anzorean steamed coffee, with a cheese scone—the kind of comfort snack he remembered from his childhood, which now seemed particularly far off.

Gann’s gaze softened. He spoke quietly.

“Voice? Compile... a word to my mom, Epome Summers!”

“Go ahead, Gann,” Voice invited.

“Mom… I still miss you. I expect Grandma's with you, now, and I know there's no route back for her. I’ll miss her, too.” Without the fertility schedule, his separation from family and lack of purpose stared him in the face, starkly and emptily. “I hope you and Larra can patch up your differences and get along okay.”

Gann continued, hopefully. “Just a short note on how you are keeping would be fine... nothing big. Much love, Gann...” His voice hardened. “Voice? Send.”

Voice said nothing, but the screen displayed the correspondence as ‘SENT’.

*****

System: Message personal – routed as sterile data.

System: Flashing red icon.

System: Recipient Unavailable.

Connection Refused.

System: Delete.

*****

“...and he said, ‘No, you too as in you *as well*!’... and then added quickly… ‘but you’re not, are you?’”

They all laughed out loud, even Azrael seeming to enjoy the frivolity of the moment despite not entirely following the anecdote. They were all sitting around the hearth. The Doctor was flanked on either side by Maggie and Azrael. Larra and Epome sat opposite. They each cradled their cups of tea as Larra shared her stories about Gann. The laughter subsided in hope of yet another tale.

But none was forthcoming; the Doctor fell serious. “Ahem… I feel we should address the elephant in the room.” Larra and Epome regarded him quizzically. “Oh! A big grey beast with floppy ears and a very long mobile trunk…” He mimed the movement of it for a moment, but shrugged. “Oh, never mind about that. You, Epome, appear very much older than your mother. Does this bother you?”

Epome tightened her jaw as she took a deep breath and spoke directly to Larra. "It was around the period when I overtook Larra's … what do you call it?... *illusory* age …" Contempt at the Merusian euphemism dripped off Epome's voice. "It was then that the mother-daughter *feel* began to wane a little. If I were honest, there was always a level of resentment from being abandoned at such a young…"

"You weren't abandoned!" Larra interjected. "I had Henri and Gael take care of you. I've told you a hundred times if I'd stayed to bring you of age, I would never have been able to return to Merus, myself." Larra squared her shoulders. "And, by now, I'd be long dead… I've made frequent visits, haven't I?"

"Not even once a year, Mother. How infrequent was that?"

"So, you both had the same apparent… *illusory* age, around your early to mid-twenties?" Maggie asked Epome, hoping to dispel some of the inherent awkwardness.

"Just *age* for me, Maggie," Epome insisted. "There's nothing illusory about my life."

"That must have felt very strange to you both," Maggie pressed.

"If I'm honest," Larra brooded, "I think we both felt something shift at age-swap. Some say that wisdom comes with age… which age?"

"You don't think your real age supersedes your illusory age, then?" the Doctor inquired.

"I was four hundred and eight real, twenty-three illusory, when I became pregnant with Epome." Larra laughed. "I was young and foolish enough at heart, even then, to think it would provide something I was missing. It didn't."

"Oh, how wanted that makes me feel," Epome chuntered, biliously.

"Merus and Anzorea are so different… Why?" Azrael pondered to a wall of silence.

The Doctor drained his cup. "Mmmm, nice!... It would seem from the bundles of herbs hanging around here, Epome, you're not just a great tea maker, but also something of a healer in this community, yes?"

"I fell into it, really. I serve the many different communities throughout Anzorea – they mostly come to me. I'm often called on to deliver new life into the world. Extend the life of others when life-threatening ailments take hold. My service is known widely, and I'm occasionally tasked to pass my skills to others eager to learn."

"Oh wow!" Maggie enthused. "You must be very proud of your daughter, Larra? To be such a pillar of the community."

"I am*, very* proud," Larra smiled, "especially with her contribution to Merus. The babies she has brought into this world become the young teens that are the lifeblood of a continued Merusian society."

"It would seem this world runs a symbiotic partnership where Merus gets all the gain while Anzorea takes most of the pain," the Doctor pondered. "A certain imbalance in the partnership, I feel."

"I don't know," Maggie shot back. "It would seem Merus has to deal with teenagers!"

Larra corrected, "Young adults… In both communities you must grow up fast."

"My teenage years were spent learning my craft," Epome declared. "I delivered my first child when I was fifteen!"

"While I was fifteen, I had made over twenty contributions to the Vitacord program, later to be replaced by Celltron."

"What contributions?" Maggie asked.

"You know," Larra declared guardedly, "biologicals."

"What do you mean, 'biologicals'?" she said, then screwed up her face. "Do you mean your, uh … periods?"

"Not quite," laughed Larra. "That would be a bit of a waste!"

"I don't get it!", Maggie protested, "are you saying it's the eggs they're after?"

"Fertilised, Maggie," Larra offered, quietly.

"You fertilise them or are they already fertilised?" said a concerned Maggie.

"They farm out their embryos, Maggie," Epome stated.

The Doctor dropped his head. Azrael's eyes darted between Larra and Maggie.

Maggie sat very still. "You do what?"

*****

The thrum of electrical energy dissipated through the rhythmic gurgle of the tank's oxygenator. The lab felt industrialised, biting with cleanliness, its silvered walls pulsing faintly under the soft overhead lights.

The centrepiece dominated the room: a large, semi-opaque cylindrical tank, six feet in diameter and twelve feet high, filled with an off-pink sludge that churned continuously, aerated and stirred by hidden mechanisms. This was where the serious work happened, and Uza Fanemun stood at the helm like a conductor would to his orchestra. His dark hair and wild forelock made him fit the rockstar persona he inhabited. His hands were atop the organic console – bio-receptive through recessed gloves offering a bioelectrical interface. Inside the tank, carefully separated stem-cells tumbled and twisted, animated in their miniature dance.

"There's a whole community of people out there depending on what we do here, today," Fanemun barked, his voice sharp. The staff around him moved in a silent, practiced rhythm. The hum of the machinery rose from a low, fixed note that steadily climbed in pitch. The stem-cells spun faster, reacting almost as if to music.

"Start ultrasonics at fifty kilo cycles and let's dance!" The tightening in his voice betrayed both his anticipation and anxiety. He sank his hands deep into the organic console, merging with it, sensing its feedback. "That's it. That's it!"

The tension in the room thickened as a team of scientists and technicians were poised to act on his every command. All eyes flicked between the readouts and the tank's swirling pink mass, seemingly corralling energy.

"We're at fifty kilo cycles, Uza, and holding,"

Fanemun's eyes rolled back as the neural link reached full depth. "I see it. I can see it all," His body stiffened, limbs twitching with the rhythm of the machines. A tremor ran along his arms, subtle but visible.

"Uza? The flux linkage is drifting," cautioned another.

Fanemun continued to convulse at the controls, jerking to the machine's pulse. "Hold… hold!" His voice was strangled, urgent, as though wrestling the weight of a giant living thing. He tore himself from the console abruptly, chest heaving. "Raise to seventy-five kilo cycles." A brief look around, a glance at the churning mass, and his hands slid back into the organic interface. "Correction. Hold at seventy!" Fanemun felt and saw a kaleidoscope of fields and input vectors, able to shape their interactions and effects.

Fanemun noted both the Pi and gamma waves were stable. His connection to the data streams was sensual, almost romantic. The whole process itself became deeply seductive –

inducing a reluctance to disconnect. Then, almost violently, he tore himself free. "It's good… hold everything!" he was keeping a close watch on that Pi wave – the troublemaker!

This could be it – the lives spared by this production. "Bye-bye Celltron – Hello Quasitron," he hailed. All those earlier failures were just laying the pathway to this moment. A warning light flickered on the central monitor as a sharp buzzer sounded.

"No… no,,, NO!" Fanemun bellowed as he quickly reconnected with the console.

"I have a four-degree rotation in the Pi wave," a technician warned.

"I see it, I see it…" Fanemun echoed, his body leaning to one side as if to counter what he saw in the data. "What is it you want from me?" he hissed, his eyes rolling back as he fell back into the depths of the connection. "What is it you *need*?"

He stripped away failing parameters, hunting for stability beneath the noise.

The tank churned faster. Fanemun's body vibrated as his fusion with the console intensified, a faint hum resonating through the room, matching the slurry's frantic motion.

"No… no…NO! It's too much," he gasped, his hand deeply embedded in the interface.

An urgent series of beeps rang out. "Hold… Hold… HOLD!"

The increased ultrasonics whistled through the air. "Too fast, too FAST!"

His neck muscles tightened as the weight of all his expectations, and those around, settled on him. All the attention in the laboratory was directed his way. "Can someone help me hold the rotation on the Pi wave?"

A few furtive glances between the scientists and technicians but no one able to answer favourably. His hands trembled within the interface as he began to lose control of the data streams. His head dropped as he ground his teeth and with one desperate tug, he tore himself free of the console. The room seemed to close in around him as the tank's sludge continued to churn, as if to mock him. It didn't feel like music anymore, and the sludge didn't look like it was dancing. If he'd swallowed his pride, hid his ambition, this could have been a successful Celltron run saving many lives.

Fanemun collapsed into a chair, chest heaving, elbows on knees. His fingers dug into his slicked-back hair as he tried to regain control of himself. All those lives depending on him and what had he achieved? He took a long, shuddering breath, staring at the flashing central monitor. A look to his team saw them each avoid his gaze – sorrow and disappointment, embedded with something like shame. "Turn it off," he said. "Turn it all off." Then, in a voice almost lost to the hum of the lab, he admitted: "It's dead."

*****

Through the milky haze of a cloud-filtered Anzorean sun, a mild breeze nibbled at the dust as Maggie stood, arms folded, absently kicking dust into small ridges, then flattening them again, deep in thought. She couldn't shake the hurt they witnessed between Larra and Epome. Maggie knew all about internalised pain in all its colours through her loss of Ollie. Now, Maggie felt the additional pain of coming to terms with the revelation about Larra's age suppression. She was irked by the apparent lack of understanding from either of her companions.

The Doctor was seated on a large log, running his sonic screwdriver over the turquoise fob.

"Why don't you just use them as they are?" Maggie asked. "It'll surely get you in many places in Merus, no?"

"We don't want to get into many places, Maggie," the Doctor rebuffed. "We want to gain access to *any* place that might help us get answers."

Suddenly the fob sparked and a wisp of smoke lifted from its body.

"Oops!" The Doctor flinched, jerking the sonic screwdriver back. "Ah - not important!" He turned on Maggie politely. "Please Maggie, let me continue with this very delicate work uninterrupted."

Maggie tightened her folded arms as her chin dropped. She turned away.

"The signatures currently stored within these IDs have been compromised, Maggie." Azrael spoke as one with skin in the game. "The original owners will have noticed they are gone by now. Their surveillance systems will likely be on the lookout for them." Azrael squared up. "Also, mine is set for the profile of a male – the Doctor plans to change that at least!"

"Sorry I asked," shot back a wounded Maggie.

"Think nothing of it … aha! There we go!" said the Doctor. "That should grant us access to most, if not all, places and give you the authority to challenge most of their staff. Mine's done, too! Not bad in a day's work!" he said, handing out the fob for Azrael to collect.

"Thank you, Doctor." She then looked concerned. "This looks damaged!"

"Yes… sorry about that. A slight overload. Keep your thumb over it. No one will notice!"

"And will it still work?"

"Should do!" The Doctor rubbed his hands together then slapped his thighs as he pushed up to stand.

"And what places are you expecting to gain access to?" Maggie pried.

"Wherever we can find out what these people are prepared to do to stay young."

"I understand the desire to look young, Doctor, I really do, but..."

"Not look young – stay young. There's a difference. And the price people all throughout time have been willing to pay for that superficial victory is often all too high." He looked Maggie in the eye and furrowed his brow. "Something about this point in history in this culture … I can feel something amiss, and yet I can see how delicate the fabric of time is here."

"Which means?"

"The fact is, Maggie, I'm forbidden by Time Lord law to intervene – very strict rules."

Azrael gave him a look of affirmation and then continued to scratch away at the scorch mark on her ID fob with her thumbnail. "But we're going to intervene, anyway?"

"Just observe for now, Azrael. See what they're actually doing. I'm hoping there are things we can do to make things better for Epome and Larra." He looked Maggie straight in the eyes. "And there's this young Gann in the middle of it all."

"How does this suddenly become about Epome, Larra and Gann? Gann, we haven't even met!"

"You were there, Maggie. I'm sure you felt it too. That wasn't an argument between family members. It was a loss, like a bereavement. Decades of bitterness and resentment—no wonder the society as a whole is so closed-off, so lacking in community and harmony. From what I can make of it, their systems have driven a wedge between them all and I don't doubt there are many similar tales from both communities."

Somehow, he had found a way to resonate with her own thoughts. "I know loss, Doctor," Maggie reminded him curtly. "What are you planning to do, then? If it's to stop them killing more babies, I'm in!"

"That's quite a judgement to make, Maggie," Azrael primly reproached her. "And they're not technically babies when in embryonic form."

"You could say no child is a doctor. It doesn't mean they can't become one! And don't throw Doogie Howser at me!"

The Doctor threw out a conciliatory smile. "We have to tread lightly."

Azrael blew the dust from her ID fob. "What is Doogie Howser?" she asked.

"I don't see why you're being so passive about this. You said you thought something was wrong here … for goodness' sake, how many enemies have you attacked and brought down—"

"The timelines, Maggie," he interrupted. "This is an unfamiliar nexus of time. I'm flying blind into it. This is complex, Maggie, and complex things are never simple," the Doctor quipped.

"I'm serious, Doctor," she said, cautiously, arms folded and kicking at the dust on the ground, "None of it feels right."

"The Doctor agrees with you there, Maggie," Azrael said.

"But you're going to take a closer look at it anyway."

"Yes, I can promise you that."

"But—?"

"But given the variables, it has to be by Merusian choice – not my doctrine."

"Well, if it's not evil it's damn well close," Maggie flustered. "Why can't they just grow old gracefully, and learn to live with it?"

Azrael breathed lightly on the ID fob and buffed it up with her sleeve. She pocketed the item, satisfied.

"You've hit on the issue exactly, Maggie. Time Lords forged their own way to cheat death through regeneration. The life force energy they're playing with here is similar." The Doctor checked his feet. "Until I know how similar, I can't make any rash decisions."

"How many lives were sacrificed to build your world?"

The Doctor glowered at her. Where could he even begin to answer such a question with Gallifrey? The shadows of the Dark Times, the ancient wars, the rotting decadence of self-satisfaction into which they foundered in his youth? The scores of megalomaniacs and universal tyrants from his personal enemies to such metastasised blights as Morbius, Lon Bramahl, and Omega?

Maggie studied this dark expression. Was this a nerve she wanted to tease? "Nothing to be proud of, then?"

Azrael suggested, diplomatically, "Many great civilisations have foundations soaked in blood and are vaulted by unspeakable acts."

"And I'd never stand up and call Gallifrey a great civilisation anyway," the Doctor said.

"Maybe I picked a bad example. Here and now, talking about Merus, it just feels wrong," Maggie fumed. "I know what it's done to Epome and Larra… and Gann, too – but there's no better word for it… It's wrong!"

Azrael put a sympathetic hand on Maggie's shoulder. Maggie instantly shrugged it off.

*****

Fanemun sat in his office above the laboratory, head in his hands. Parchments were scattered all around his desk in overlapping heaps. If a work environment reflected its occupant's mindset, the profound stress gripping Fanemun was piled up in heaps for all to see.

There was a click, and his door slid open. Council Leader Rael Dante glided through, her long flowing red locks almost golden in this subterranean light. She arrived uninvited, a purpose to her stride. "I think you've got some explaining to do, Uza. I need to hear the truth, Uza. No cover ups… Now!"

"Truth?" he barked. "Everything I do here is governed by a truth that offers me no favours. Not here. Not in this place."

Rael tried to seem supportive. "What is it that you need? I've given you more staff, higher quotas, better equipment… Where am I failing you, Uza?"

Fanemun flicked at papers on his desk. "I know, I know. And you don't need to tell me where *I'm* failing *you*." He pushed back in his chair.

"Quasitron," she prompted, bluntly.

"We're so close but keep falling at the last hurdle… It works on the smaller scale – I don't know why it fails on scaleup… well, I do. It's because I can't get past this damned Pi-wave drift," he growled in frustration.

"You need to talk to me in a language I can understand, Uza. How we are suddenly in a position where we cannot supply our people with the Celltron dose we've been able to meet for decades?"

"You know the reason. It requires more Celltron to hold back an advancing age. Many of our people now have over six hundred real years to hold back, and their illusory age of mid-twenties takes a lot of holding."

"Answer me this," she pressed, trying hard to understand. "A citizen with a real age of six hundred needs how much more Celltron than a citizen with a real age of one hundred – assuming they both keep the same illusory age of, say, twenty-five?"

"I have the dosing charts here," he said, riffling through deep paper trails. At last, a relevant one came to hand. "You can see from this graph – the dosing requirements are exponential with increasing real age. A single dose at real age of twenty is still effective past real age fifty." His finger followed a rising spike. "A real age of one hundred would need a double dose to hold an illusory age of twenty-five. Over six hundred years, they need just over one *hundred* doses. Seven hundred – and we have some there already – they need well over *two* hundred. It's untenable!"

Rael lowered herself slowly into the chair opposite. "I had no idea. What do you propose we do?"

"We need to exile on the basis of real rather than illusory age. We cannot sustain these ultra-high doses. It's not the only way, but it's the clearest way forward with our situation as it is now."

"That's not possible," she uttered, aghast. "There'd be civil unrest, barely containable… You said it wasn't the only way – what's our alternative?"

"Quasitron… It's over a hundred times more potent than Celltron – unformulated. If it behaves like Celltron through formulation, we can expect over two hundred times more effective. But I can't produce it at scale… it becomes too unstable and collapses the whole system."

"Let's just say 'it doesn't work'… but that's at scale. So, can't we just run a lot of small-scale productions?"

"It would take years to build the necessary infrastructure. The logistics of distributing the raw materials would be unfathomable. We'd have to harvest stem-cells at a rate that would consume people's lives. At that point we'd have to ask ourselves what exactly are we trying to preserve?"

"Yes… okay. Enough of the details… I need solutions, Uza… I need something I can sell."

"Short term – we need to offload those in excess of three hundred real."

"You mean exile." Her lips pursed as her face tightened. "That's me gone, then… and I'd guess you, too, Uza?"

"It would amount to about a quarter of our population."

"Think of the sheer size of societal restructuring," Rael gasped. "And who'd want to oversee such an operation? Almost certainly someone least suited to it! Think of the skill deficit. And a quarter of the population sentenced to an abrupt end through exile."

"It's not something I have much data on," Fanemun confessed, "Just hearsay. A few reports out of Anzorea suggesting that the ageing process for some is very rapid. Others not so much, but still more rapid than their Anzorean equivalents. It's like uncorking a bottle of fizz after a good shake!"

"What a mess. Were we always heading here?"

"I guess so. That's why I've pushed so hard on Quasitron. It was our get-out clause… Our *only* get-out clause." Fanemun shifted slightly in his chair. "There's another thing. The greater the real age, the fewer viable gametes they produce."

"Meaning?" This was almost rhetorical; Rael knew full well, but just needed to hear Fanemum say it.

"Meaning they draw more from the well as they contribute less. As I said… it's unsustainable."

"Have you spoken to anyone else about this?"

"I've spoken with my colleagues… not joining all the dots, but… well, they're quite capable of doing that for themselves."

"You have to keep this under wraps, Uza, until I can formulate some kind of political solution."

"Yes, good luck with that!"

"Do we have stocks of Celltron?"

"No, what we make we use… it's been like that for a while now."

"I wish you'd come to me sooner and put me in the picture."

"Are you a scientist, Rael?"

"Of course not."

"Of course not – you'd be as much use to me in the lab as I would be to you on the political stage."

Rael regarded Fanemun with pity laced with contempt. "How much Celltron do you have in production at present?"

"Not enough."

"What percentage of the total needed to service the existing population?"

"About twenty," he threw out with almost hopeless uncertainty.

The room seemed suddenly smaller. Rael lifted her flowing locks high above her head, then let them fall. "That's near the quarter you say that are over the three hundred real." She anchored her resolve. "Make sure the older cohort get their doses first."

"It doesn't work like that, Rael! The top one percent of the real age population takes ninety percent of the available doses. Whichever way you cut it, we're going to have citizens of Merus ageing quite rapidly."

The light flickered.

Rael regarded Fanemun coldly as he tossed his graph to one of the piles on his desk.

*****

The fire had burned low. No flames now, only embers splitting and settling into a deep, patient red. The heat was still enough to keep the kettle-lid trembling at the edges.

Epome sat on a low stool, the back legs covered by the drape of her shawl. She stirred the embers with a charred stick, her face lit by the dull glow.

A rustle at the doorway curtain.

"Epome…?"

She didn't turn. "Mother."

Larra hesitated beneath the hanging covering. "May I come in?"

"You're practically in already."

Larra slipped inside and wrestled the layered fabric closed behind her. "I'll never get used to these."

"You're going to have to, now."

"I wanted to thank you for being civil with the Doctor, Azrael, and Maggie. I know it must have been hard for you."

"Not at all. They all seem like very nice people. I'm not sure why they're with you, though."

A soft collapse of ash filled the space between glowing embers.

"I'm leaving tomorrow – taking the first shuttle out. I'm going back to Merus with the Doctor."

Epome prodded the embers. "I thought you'd all been exiled. What makes you think there's a way back, now?"

"It's something the Doctor needs to do. It might be dangerous."

"Then why go?" Her tone was even. "You lived a charmed life in Merus. What do you offer this expedition?"

Larra absorbed that. "I thought you might not be pleased."

"You don't need my permission, Mother."

"I wish you wouldn't call me 'Mother' like that."

Silence. The embers shifted.

"I came hoping we might heal something between us," Larra said more quietly.

Epome's jaw tightened. "You took Gann from me."

"Epome…"

"You sold him on Merus. Sold him the promise of endless life and perpetual contentment." Her voice did not rise; it made it worse. "You stole my son."

"He's lived there over the past twenty years or so. That was his choice."

"Thirty years," Epome corrected. "He used to write every week. Then every month. Then once a year." A small breath. "Now not at all."

The fire cracked softly.

"Is he still estranged from Friss?" Epome asked.

Larra blinked. “Friss walked away before Gann was born. I doubt he even knows Gann exists.”

“Were you ever paired with him?”

“Friss?... No!”

“You’re certain.”

“Yes. Merus is large. I’ve seen him once or twice. Nothing more.”

“But Gann never comes here.” Epome finally looked at her. Not angry – searching. “He never chooses me.”

“They don’t make it easy,” Larra said. “They only let you visit if they think you’re still worth bringing back. With that comes a huge risk.”

Epome turned back to the fire. “How did it feel? When they said you were too old?”

“I knew it was coming.”

“And now?”

“I’ve been offered a dwelling in a nearby camp.”

A faint, humourless exhalation. “So you’ve made your choice, eh?”

“I wondered if I might stay with you while I decide.”

A flicker at Epome’s mouth. “I can’t deny my own mother. Not after accusing her of denying me.”

The embers flared, then settled.

A silence hung between them, fragile as the ash rustling in the basin of Epome’s hearth.

“I’m not looking for sympathy, Epome,” Larra said. “I’m just hoping for a fresh start between us. Henri and Gael are the ones who raised you. They will always be your parents in every way that matters.”

“When you wouldn’t.”

“When I couldn’t,” Larra said. “It was the hardest decision of my life.”

“Stealer of my parents,” Epome murmured. “Stealer of my son.”

Larra did not defend herself.

“When we return from Merus,” she said instead, “after the Doctor’s done whatever he feels needs to be done—I’d like us to be kinder to each other.”

Though not a full peace, a less brittle silence settled.

“I always loved you,” Larra said at last. “Even after the year of our age-swap. Even when everything altered between us. I never stopped…”

Epome’s hand stilled over the embers.

“I can’t undo what I did,” Larra said. “We have only what stands between us now. I would like it to be something good.”

The kettle rattled softly.

“Is that for tea?” Larra asked.

Epome nudged the embers together. A faint flame struggled up between them.

“Yes,” Epome said. “I can make tea.”

*****

Rael Dante stood alone on a raised dais, her red hair perfectly coiffed, fingers interlocking as her hands rested lightly on the lectern, facing a holocam. The ornate chamber felt cavernous

- empty seats echoing her isolation. The council had been dismissed. The burden now rested on her alone. Rael took a breath, then addressed her people with grave sincerity.

"People of Merus..." She let the silence sit. "You will be aware of the challenging times that have befallen us of late. I'm of course speaking of the withheld doses of Celltron over the past few days. This unfortunately stems from our reliance on the system that created Celltron, and on the continuing work to enhance its effectiveness."

She shifted uneasily; the only feedback conjured from her own head.

"Our society has prospered through science. The demand for better, stronger, more effective age suppressants drives this forward. Science has delivered remarkable progress – the greatest leap being the transition from Vitacord to Celltron nearly ten decades ago.

"I am informed that our scientists are on the verge of another huge step forward. Despite this, their most recent efforts have faltered. It is the nature of science that such things can happen and lead to a shortfall in our needs. This is what happened to our supply of Celltron. Many of you have already experienced the deprivation. Many will want to know how this will affect you as you depart to Anzorea, as the harsh but necessary strictures of our laws demand."

Rael Dante sought the embodiment of competence and resolve.

"For the immediate future, the illusory age limit for exile will be raised from thirty to thirty-one. This is thought to buy our scientists the necessary time to deliver a sustainable procurement of Celltron. And within the programme still lies the promise of something even better – though we must accept that the process will sometimes lead to our supply being compromised."

She summoned the sincerity that got her elected. "I need to ask something of each and every one of you, proud and prosperous citizens of Merus."

A muscle in her jaw tightened as her blue eyes narrowed. "I need your cooperation if we are to succeed. This will take time. Stay calm. Trust that we are working to minimise the impact on you, the good people of Merus." She leaned forward slightly, earnest in her delivery. "This means compliance with the emergency programme. I know how invasive this will feel — how personally violating it may seem. Until now, everything has been given freely as part of the contract between Merus and its people."

Rael sensed resistance already forming beneath the silence.

"Trust me. This will take time, and it will require sacrifices — sacrifices all who are able must make. Voice will instruct you when to report to your nearest clinic. Your bodies will temporarily become the property of Merus for the duration of this process. Please do not resist."

She paused – long and hard, as if the words themselves bore too much weight in her throat. "None of this is easy to convey, and I know it will be difficult for some to comply. But nothing of any real value comes without effort and sometimes sacrifice. We Merusians are strong and have wisdom born of our true real age."

Her eyes glistened as her voice resonated with passion. "There are many wild rumours circulating at present and I cannot counter them all here. Be assured that we are all in this together, and by supporting one another we will come through this stronger than ever."

She grasped one hand with the other to steady the shaking, hoping it passed unnoticed.

"People of Merus: be brave. Be hopeful. And be compliant."

She held the gaze of the camera as it drew back from her, bringing her whole body in frame. Her hands trembled once - then stilled. “We *will* get through this.” She concluded with resolute defiance.

The feed cut. She remained on the platform a moment longer, shoulders slumped as the strain finally showed itself.

*****

The Merus central transport terminal stood wide and cavernous like a cathedral to the commuter. Boarding platforms spiralled from a central hub like spokes on a wheel. Official posts dotted the terminal, staffed by black-uniformed clerks marked by teal sashes denoting authority. Passengers flowed steadily toward them to be scanned and processed.

The Doctor and Azrael stepped from the shuttle with a young woman between them. Maggie and Larra followed sheepishly behind. Maggie kept her head down and face shielded from any cameras.

“No need for that, Maggie. I deleted our metrics from the monitoring system while chatting with Rylan.” The Doctor reached into the depths of his coat and drew out the turquoise fob. “Another opportunity to test my handiwork.” He turned to the lady standing between him and Azrael. “Follow me, Ansha.”

The Doctor approached a uniformed clerk, a reassuring hand resting on the lady’s shoulder, and held out his ID. “Hello, there. I suggest you scan me… I don’t normally like to pull rank, but when needs must.”

The clerk ran a scan of the Doctor’s ID. Suddenly his stern visage turned to servility. “Sir, I’m sorry… how can I help you?”

The Doctor gently worked Ansha’s shoulder. “This is Ansha. She’s returning to Merus having just had her baby in Anzorea. I think she warrants your very best attention, don’t you? These three are with me.”

Obsequious to the point of absurdity, the clerk grovelled, “Ah! Of course, sir. I thank you for the opportunity!” He turned his attention to Ansha. “Welcome back to Merus... Ansha? I'm pretty sure we can find you the very best...”

With the Doctor and Azrael leading, the team quickly passed the heavily engaged official, melding into the constant flow of commuters.

“I can’t see how any of this is going to help you, Larra,” Maggie whispered. “I’ve been arrested once already, and I don’t fancy the same experience again!”

“I’m nervous, too,” Larra replied. “Are you sure the Doctor knows what he’s doing?”

Maggie thought. “No.”

From the main concourse, they stepped into the bustling metropolis of Merus. “No problem with the ID, then,” the Doctor noted. “I might have upped the ranking a bit too much but never mind.”

Larra and Maggie scurried behind, nervously watching for the emergence of a surveillance drone or uniformed official. The Doctor turned to Larra.

“You see that large, important-looking building over there? Barely anyone’s going in or out. That’s always suspicious.”

“You mean the Aludinum? Yes.” Larra nodded.

The Doctor grinned broadly. “Come along then!”

Larra pushed past Azrael, pursuing the Doctor and cautioning him vehemently. “Doctor... This is the policy hub for all thresholds and allocations. Hardly anyone gets in. Not even most council representatives.”

“Worth a look, then,” the Doctor countered.

The towering glass doors of the Aludinum were clearly set to intimidate and impose authority.

“Azrael? Try your ID here. Let’s see how persuasive my adjustments were.”

Azrael obliged. The door swung open and the Doctor caught Larra’s eye and winked. They all spilled through.

An open atrium was surrounded by climbing staircases. A set of rocky steps led down to a shadowed basement level. They approached a floating desk whose two clerks worked through seemingly endless scans and filings.

The Doctor flashed his ID, which the clerk quickly scanned. A momentary glance at the screen and she was all a-quiver with servitude.

“I'm the Doctor and these are my three associates, Azrael, Larra and Maggie… I hope we're not too early!”

“Your credentials are... beyond reproach. How may we serve you?”

“Oh, just a minor inspection,” the Doctor bloviated. “Policy review. Threshold metrics, Celltron balance sheets. Just point me in the right direction and leave the rest to me.”

The clerk nodded hastily, clearly out of her depth. “I'll notify Deputy Administrator Nemet to escort you personally.”

“Better not. We wouldn't want to create a stir over something so routine. This is just a quiet look at your archives and then we'll be on our way. No disruptions necessary.” He gave the clerk a conspiratorial wink.

*****

“People of Merus: be brave. Be hopeful. And be compliant.”

Rael Dante stood before her dais, resplendent, as the Merusian anthem swelled. “We *will* get through this,” she concluded with resolute defiance. The anthem roared as a banner bearing “Together as One” rippled crossways, youthful faces smiling out from either side.

“Voice?” Gann asked. “Visio off.” He tapped his thighs with the flats of his hands, rocked forward and pushed up to standing from his knees. He blinked hard a couple of times as if to reset his line of thought.

Disengage mind. Comply.

He looked out across the white wood of his kitchen table. The sky wore red beneath a covering of cloud as the sun dipped below the horizon. It was a pleasant sight. Away from the busy metropolis, Gann felt something life-enhancing about suburban tranquillity.

“*We will come through this stronger than ever.*” Rael Dante’s voice played over in his mind.

“Voice – coffee!” Gann commanded, his irritation rising. He walked to collect his cup. He took a sip – tasted perfect, as it always did.

“I’m way off exile,” he thought.

“*Be brave. Be hopeful. And be compliant*.” Dante’s platitudes repeated over in his mind.

“Voice – pancake with syrup and cream,” he commanded. Always good to have a bit of comfort food.

He'd heard that the ageing process picked up quite a pace once the Celltron doses were withdrawn. Not instantaneous, though, like some would have you believe: it takes time for the body to realise it no longer has the age-suppressant. And then… well… then?

"*…Be compliant.*" Gann cut into his pancake.

So, presumably, no more pairing with female partners for a while. They hadn't forbidden intimacy outright… not yet…

"*We will get through this*."

*****

The records room of the Aludinum was an amphitheatre of large translucent viewing screens suspended in midair, streaming holographic data. The data responded to intuitive hand gestures: listing, sharing, coalescing. Rows and columns of crystalline data nodes glowed, like a neon-bathed forest, as the Doctor and Azrael scanned page after page, never seeming to pause long enough to read any of it. Maggie selectively viewed the digitised documents at an easier pace whilst Larra nervously kept watch through a barely open doorway.

Pulses of light rippled across Maggie's face. "Doctor, this data. It's all reductionist quotas. Age indexes, organ metrics. It's treating people like livestock!"

"Not the first civilisation to treat its people so," said the Doctor tersely.

"Doctor," Larra hastened, as she pushed the door to. "Someone's coming!"

"Quickly, Larra," the Doctor cautioned. "Come over here and look busy."

Larra turned her back on her post and scurried over as the Doctor opened another node.

"What do I do?" Larra whispered, anxiously.

"Just scroll and flick," the Doctor assured.

The entrance door opened wide and a young man stepped through. "Oh, hello," he said, frowning slightly. "I don't recognise any of you. What are you doing in here?"

"A simple but in-depth audit, old chap," the Doctor authoritatively responded. "And you are?"

"Sednum, Albon Sednum."

"Good to meet you, Albon. I'm the Doctor. Best not disturb my colleagues while they're working."

"What kind of dress code is this?" Sednum queried. "It's not typically Merusian and even less officious!"

"Good spot, Albon," said the Doctor, tearing a stray thread from the cuff of his fishing sweater. "Quite a long story, too – one I won't bother you with. What brings you here?"

"Oh! I've just come to collect a blank ID… New colleague from Anzorea, you know?... Fast-tracked skillset. Have you met Ansha?"

"I think I have," the Doctor enthused. "Long dark hair? Recently given birth?" Sednum smiled affirmatively. The Doctor felt this was a good time to wave his own ID. "Awkward little things, don't you think? Anyways, best you get to it. I don't want to keep you, any more than you would want to slow us down, I'm sure."

"Of course," Sednum responded gauchely, and quickly scurried over to a dispenser watched carefully by the Doctor.

A screen popped up in front of Sednum. He stabbed at it with his finger; a few lines of drifting data washed across his face. The Doctor turned away so as not to make it obvious he was watching. A brand-new turquoise fob popped out, deftly caught by Sednum.

"Why they don't have a catch tray for these, I don't know," Sednum mused. "The number of times I've had to pick them up off of the floor – it's like they're gaming us!"

"I know," the Doctor commiserated, "or more like they're punishing us. Then again, perhaps it's all for the benefit of the Merus Eleven cricket team." As the official blinked in confusion, the Doctor waved a cheery goodbye. "Good to speak with you, Albon!"

Sednum left and the Doctor crossed to the ID dispenser. "Looks like I can make you and Maggie Merusian officials, too, now then Larra."

"These same names keep recurring, Doctor: Rael Dante and Uza Fanemun?"

"I've noticed them too, Azrael."

"Uza Fanemun is one of Merus' top scientists," answered Larra. "Rael Dante has been head of the Merusian Council for several years now. Anything bad and she's up on Visio explaining why!"

"Excuse me, Doctor. What're you doing?" It was Sednum, and at his return the four froze guiltily.

The Doctor clapped the official on the shoulder convivially. "Albon, my good man. You keep popping up! You collecting a fob for Ansha reminded me Azrael's ID is damaged. Show him, Azrael." Azrael approached Sednum awkwardly. "What brings you back here, then, Albon?"

"I just came to tell you we're having welcoming drinks for Ansha at three. If you're still around…"

"Poor timing, Albon. We're about done here. But give Ansha my regards."

Sednum looked at Azrael's ID with dismay. "Oh yes, so I see – how did that happen?"

"An accident," Azrael responded, curtly.

Thankfully, the repressive atmosphere of Merusian society inclined Sednum to avoid asking any follow-up questions. Instead, he said with embarrassed over-formality, "Well, sorry you can't make it, but I'll pass on your regards to Ansha." He turned, checked his step, then left.

The Doctor bent his knees as he swung a grin toward his companions. He drew the back of his hand across his forehead. "I think we've got what we need. Uza Fanemun and Rael Dante you say? Both worth a visit, methinks! But first …"

*****

They were on the step of one of the spindly tower blocks bolted atop an old downtown Merus building. "Are you sure you want to do this?" Larra asked the Doctor cautiously. "Gann's loyal to Merus… more than anyone I know. He won't be swayed!"

"I must believe people like Gann might be. For what I'm about to do, I need to know it's going to be all right… Besides, I owe it to both you and Epome… and probably Gann."

They knocked. Gann answered. To Larra he looked wan and withdrawn since she had said goodbye, while the time travellers saw a stoic young man with a burden on his shoulders. At the sight of Larra his eyes widened with delight and he threw open his arms. "Larra, I mean Grandmother!"

Larra hugged Gann fondly. He held her for a few moments longer than usual. “You know what I say. Anyone and everyone can call me Larra. But only you get to call me Grandmother.”

“I didn't expect to see you again… so soon… if ever! Grandmother… How?... how!... HOW!... Look at me - lost for words! Who are your friends?”

“This is the Doctor, Azrael, and Maggie,” Larra gestured as he welcomed them through. It was instructive to compare his manner with the hesitant avoidance of the Merusians they had met two days earlier. His eagerness to know them, given all they had learned, sent a clear message to the time travellers how perturbed he was.

Within his living apartment, the low jasmine light from the ceiling grid was warm and welcoming. The room hummed with quiet automation.

“I still don't get it. How are you here?” Gann’s face suddenly dipped into concern. “Is Mom all right?”

“Epome is fine… she asked a lot about you. She misses you very much.”

Gann’s concern lifted. “Anyone and everyone can call her Epome, but only I get to call her Mom!”

“Touché!” Larra smiled.

“She doesn't miss me enough for her to respond to my messages, though, eh?”

Larra thought back to their parting conversation, and how Epome had said that about him. It did all seem to indicate the trouble the Doctor and his friends were unravelling around them.

“Forgive me,” the lad said apologetically. “Perhaps that was unkind of me.”

“Oh, you mother’s said more cutting comments to me,” Larra noted.

“The fact is, your visit is even more welcome given … what’s been happening. I’ve had a… a… an awkward couple of days.”

“Why, what’s happened?”

“Oh, nothing too important – well, it’s quite important, but… It’s sort of been explained.” Gann trailed off, making clear how convincing he found those explanations.

“Well, we needed to talk to you anyway. There's a lot you don't know and…” She stopped herself, trying to organise her thoughts. “It's hard to know where to begin.”

“You have – four - guests.” Voice interrupted. “Would they each like beverages?”

The Doctor looked with concern at the grille from which the mechanical speaker emanated. He whipped out his sonic screwdriver. “May I?” he asked, not awaiting permissions to disable the device. His actions went unnoticed – hidden in plain sight.

“We’ve found out some troubling things about what’s really happening,” began Larra, “in Merus and Anzorea.”

As soon as she said it, she could see her grandson tense. As wracked as he was, he was still an obedient Merusian at heart. “Don’t sound too conspiratorial, Grandmother. It really doesn’t suit you.”

“Gann, this is serious. And it’s about what’s really happening in Merus…”

Gann's face hardened. He looked sceptical. “Merus is our salvation. That means everyone! We *all* benefit from its guidance.”

Larra spoke carefully. “Oh, Gann! Things are about to get a whole lot worse.”

Gann's scepticism turned into deep suspicion. He looked sideways at the visitors, and took in every detail of them, suddenly remembering his duty as a citizen. What would Rael Dante make of these strangers? He disliked their unusual clothes and their easy familiarity.

"Grandmother. Is this what your new friends are telling you?" He could feel all their eyes on him – their concern sitting on him like an accusation. "Remember, you were the one who sold me the Merusian way!"

Percolating in his mind, the recurring dream surfaced – witnessed more frequently of late – watching the shuttle door close on the last glance at his mother.

"I did, and that doesn't make this come any easier to me, Gann." Larra drew a deep breath. "I have seen what's coming with my own eyes!"

"I'm really pleased to see you… but please don't do this."

"Gann. We have things to tell you and some of it will be hard for you to accept..."

Gann heard Rael Dante's voice permeate his mind: *We will not be defeated by misfortune.*

"And I'm beginning to think none of you should really be here at all."

"Life in Anzorea is getting progressively harder and your term here is soon to grow shorter, Gann. You must have begun to suspect as much. Celltron production is down and demand is ever upward. You're a bright person - you should know where this goes!"

Gann remained fixed on Larra: *Be brave. Be hopeful*. He had to believe it, and if he didn't, perhaps if he *said* he did aloud, he would start to believe it. "The Council keeps us all safe," he declared, firmly.

"Gann, I love you as if you were my own son… remember all those years ago? I brought you here from Anzorea?"

"Of course I remember, Larra. It was the single most important day of my life!"

"I know, I know..." Larra sought support. "Doctor?"

The Doctor leaned in. "Gann. I have spent time with both your grandmother and your mother, and the one thing that shines through them both is that they're good honest people... and they both love you very much." The Doctor shifted slightly. "They want you to know the truth even though they know the truth is going to hurt you."

"Thank you, Doctor," Gann answered back with cold formality, "but I don't know you or your friends. You've just walked in here with Larra, and then you suggest things might not be as they seem."

"What if I were to show you some ID?" he pressed, flashing the familiar turquoise fob under the youth's nose. Predictably, his eyes widened at the sight and his manner became as unctuous and obsequious as the officials.

"Forgive me if I misspoke earlier …"

Maggie and Azrael both rolled their eyes. This whole encounter was filling Maggie with anxiety—here she was, seeing the personal face on this enforced and heartless state-run reproduction programme. Poor Gann was nothing but a stud in this system.

"Please, Gann," Larra pleaded from the heart. "Just listen to the Doctor..."

"Grandmother, it... it's... no. No, I can't." Rael Dante's voice echoed in his thoughts. *Be compliant*. "Voice? Police!" Gann's summons was desperate. He suddenly felt alone, exposed, confused. There was substance to some of his grandmother's words – he'd nursed similar doubts himself and was trying with all his might to suppress and silence them.

"That was foolish, Gann—as you can well see from this identification, *I* outrank the police."

"You can't fool me!"

"Well, perhaps I should try the personal approach, Gann?" The Doctor spoke gently. "We've come from Anzorea. Your mother hasn't been getting your messages, and I'd wager

you haven't been getting any of hers... so who do you think has been getting in the way of them?"

Gann felt a cold chill in the nape of his neck. The waters of doubt breaching the dam of compliance. What has she been saying to him? So much he's said to her is lost? What has she ever seen?

Gann's worldview teetered. "But... but... I can't believe this... What's going on!" He looked at the Doctor desperately, and blurted, "My Celltron's stopped until further notice and I can't even get a date now!" He broke down before them, clasped his head in his hands and pulled down on his face. Maggie looked down at him. How desperate this poor stud felt now that his use appeared to have run out.

We will get through this.

"I'm not getting any of this at all..."

"Gann, please," Larra gently pleaded. "It's an uncomfortable truth, I know, but you are not being looked after... you're being used!"

"Order built on secrets isn't safety," the Doctor declared. "It's control. Things are beginning to crumble, Gann. If you can't see that, it might already be too late."

A clock chimed the top of the hour. Gann's lips flattened. He looked away toward the fading daylight.

Larra spoke softly. "You're the link between what was, and what could be. We need you on side, Gann."

Gann buried his face in his hands. "Okay, I've listened, but you've got to get out of here... the police will be here imminently..."

The Doctor smiled warmly and flashed that turquoise badge again. "Excellent ... they'll be able to take us to our next appointment."

"Oh? And who are we seeing now?"

"Rael Dante and Uza Fanemun, respectively."

Larra's eyes widened. "They're both right at the top of the Merus ultra-elite, Doctor. You can't just drop in on them!"

"Of course you can, Larra. How else would you expect to get tea and biscuits around here?"

*****

The Government Administration Hall was a vast, hushed, array of vaulted walls reaching to the preposterously high ceiling. Banners hung proclaiming vigour and perpetuity, represented by youthful faces fixed in permanent smiles on either side. The style made Soviet propaganda art look coy and oblique.

Rael Dante sat at the head of a long curving table reviewing holographic data scrolls. She radiated sharpness and cool command. A ceremonial sash in deep teal crossed her tunic… Merusian authority in its purest style.

The Doctor sat opposite her, with Azrael, Maggie, and Larra on his right.

"Is the tea to your liking, Doctor?" Rael enquired, courteously.

The Doctor dropped the cup from his lips. "Sublime, thank you. I was thinking you didn't have the knack for a good brew in Merus. I'm glad to be proved wrong. Nice biscuits, too." The Doctor regarded the small plate of carefully selected comestibles enthusiastically.

"Are you sure I can't get the three of you anything?"

They all declined awkwardly.

Rael indicated the data scrolls. “All these documents are in order, Doctor. I see nothing wrong ... am I missing something?”

“It's the numbers, Rael. They don't add up!”

“I don't understand.”

“Of course... Vitacord sustained citizens to illusory age forty before exile. Celltron is a hundred times stronger than Vitacord, even more so with later formulations, yet now you can’t sustain your people to *illusory* age thirty.”

“We’re aware of that, Doctor! We're an ageing and expanding population. More people require ever-higher doses. Cuts were essential and accepted after a relatively short period of unrest.”

“And you feel ready for even more people to feel disenfranchised?”

Rael’s face tightened as she stood. “Who are you, Doctor? My recollection of your appointment is, at best, vague!” That was putting it mildly; she couldn’t remember seeing this impertinent vagabond, with his stringy sweater and bulky dark blue coat, before in her life – despite credentials that had somehow opened Merus’ highest doors to him!

“Me? I think I can help you. And when I make that kind of offer, people do well to take note. Tell me, Rael. When was the last time you visited Anzorea? Ten years ago?... A hundred?”

Rael baulked. “My duties lie with the wellbeing of Merus. I am fed snippets of information about Anzorea…”

“But you never thought to go see for yourself?”

“Anzorea is self-governing. I have no right nor desire to interfere in their affairs!”

“They live among the trees, Rael.” Larra glowered. “I thought it charming once. I don't, anymore."

“They are not oppressed. We feed Anzorea with fully developed citizens… take their teenagers and educate them. Only today, a returning exile called… Ansha, expressed her gratitude for the excellent service she received. However you cut it, Anzorea does well by us!” Rael continued.

Larra’s frustration boiled. “They do *not* do well. They live in hovels. Parents abandon their children to access the promise Merus offers!”

“I can’t believe you’re arguing about this and not the embryos!” Maggie asserted. “What do you think you’re doing, treating people like cattle!”

Rael Dante’s look of confusion provoked the Doctor to explain. “Lumbering animals – moo a lot… dear me, we have had trouble with our animal analogies since we arrived on this planet. Rael, the simple fact is I need to speak with your chief scientist, Uza Fanemun.”

*****

Uza Fanemun entered the elevated glass-walled cabin from his laboratory below with fresh resolve. It was a new day, and with it came another chance to get it right. This time he was going to neutralise the Pi wave shift by increasing the current on the Lonosa inverter. It was a desperate gambit, but it just might work. He was sure the solution lay in plain sight, by the simple shifting of existing variables. He would crack this; he was the great hope of Merus, after all. The column had been flushed, and now the last batch of stem-cells were prepped and ready for the process.

He could play it safe and just produce a batch of Celltron.

But where was the glory in that?

Anyway, he assured himself, there wouldn't be enough Celltron to meet any meaningful portion of demand. But if he produced Quasitron – they'd be able to make a huge dent in the current need.

Why not think big? Once formulated and given an appropriate vector, they'd meet all needs … and have some to spare!

Today was going to be a *good* day.

He checked his mail. That message marked urgent was demanding his immediate attention. He scrolled through a lot of the lesser messages – feeling good about himself that he was clearing up something of a backlog… *It does say urgent!* Despite the devil in him insisting he ignored it, the Merusian in him insisted on opening it.

A message from Rael Dante. *She is telling me she is going to visit today!* … Uza had to admit this unsettled him. *Why does she need to interfere? What good would another visit do? Who's this she's bringing with her? More people to interfere*. "A doctor? *The* Doctor." *If he couldn't even give a name, what merit did his views or input have?* Uza could imagine him now: *some pretentious clown who will know next to nothing about this process.*

Pah! He filed the message under 'Interference'. If anything, this heightened his resolve. *Better to have something to show them than a run of successive failures. Better get this fired up and running before they come along and put a stop to it.*

He stood proud outside his office and addressed his team. Scientists and technicians turned instinctively toward him: a *god* in the temple of science.

"We're going to do another Quasitron run. Let me explain how it will differ from those that preceded."

*****

The Clinic was a large, antiseptic space – panelled in white, a gentle hum pervading through its walls, orderlies processing mostly willing participants behind their smooth counters… Mostly.

Gann stood in line. His hands fidgeted. His eyes darted from place to place, never quite taking in the whole scene. Above him, a sign read: *Your contribution today secures our tomorrow.*

A bright holographic Advisor flickered to life before him, a cheerful smile awaiting engagement. Before it could speak, Gann's attention was pulled toward a man arguing loudly with an Orderly nearby.

"How can I be over?" the man protested. "Dante herself said the illusory threshold is advanced to thirty-one! If the doses I'd earned had been administered on time, I wouldn't be over, would I!"

Gann watched the man's face and felt something cold settle in his chest. He knew this story. He hoped it played out more kindly with his grandmother.

The Advisor drew Gann back with digitised patience. "Thank you… Gann. You will enter stasis for a period of ten days," it said. "Two enhanced Celltron doses will be administered during your stay in appreciation of your valued service. All work and living obligations will be rescheduled on your behalf. On discharge, you will receive an additional eighteen merit points."

Gann forced a nod. His face twitched. Inside his head was chaos.

An embryo drifted slowly along a transparent tube. He thought back to the chaotic visit of his dear grandmother and those three terrifying strangers. He remembered Maggie looking down at him, pitying. Before they left to see Dante, she took him aside and told him emphatically, *You're being used. They're stealing babies, and you're just the dupe playing a stud for them.* A blender whirred, producing something thick and red. The Doctor's voice cut through it all: *They've been lying to you, Gann. Whatever choice they might have had has been taken from them.*

An Orderly gestured him forward.

"Voice instructed me to come here," Gann said, his tone carefully measured. "I was to learn how Celltron doses will be deployed in the new system. I've missed two doses this past week - the auto-dispenser..."

"Yes, yes," the Orderly cut in, "it's something we're all coming to terms with. Just swipe your ID here and we'll prepare you for assimilation into the new allocation matrix."

Gann leaned over a digital tablet and studied text that had never been designed to be read — only skimmed through and passively accepted. He turned his ID awkwardly in his shaking hands, his mouth dry, his whole body beginning to tremble. *Yesterday, I knew my purpose. I wouldn't have questioned any of this,* he thought.

"I — I think I'd like to defer my treatment." He attempted a smile, thin and unconvincing. "I need to think about it. Maybe next time. My illusory years are still well below thirty… thirty-one, now!"

The words felt thick in his throat, barely making it out at all. The Orderly's polite veneer dropped.

"Regrettably, voluntary compliance is binding once initiated. The order comes directly from the Merusian Council — sanctioned by Rael Dante herself."

He thought of Larra and the strangers, talking with her now. He should have asked them to put in a good word for him. But didn't she have all Merusians in her mind? Wasn't that the point of that address he had so desperately tried to take to heart? "I know Rael Dante wouldn't... at least I don't think she'd—"

The Orderly rolled his eyes. "We're all on first-name terms with Rael Dante, aren't we!" he scoffed as he glanced over his shoulder. "Can I get some help over here, please? *Enforceable compliance.*" Then, calmly: "Security?"

Two officials were already occupied with another patient in mid-change of heart.

Images flooded Gann's mind in rapid succession — the Advisor's smile, its slogan looping cheerfully; Dante's rallying voice, *We're all in this together*; Maggie's furious insistence as they left, *it's inhuman, inhuman, inhuman*, fading like an echo; liquid Celltron threading into pale veins. In his mind he caught sight of a long navy-blue garment, loose and flowing, dark and dramatic, unlike the tight turquoise tunics that were the style of Merus. The coat swept past and beneath all the visions, Gann heard his own voice: No family. No one to notice. Even my friends will think this is normal.

Through a narrowing gap of glorious daylight he saw Epome turn away and throw him a laden "I love you". Her shoulders shook as the last remnant of home was squeezed out from the closing door. It was just himself and Larra's arm around him... keeping him safe... keeping him strong. Then he whispered — "Mom?"

He nodded. Tried to look calm — the way he always had before. The Orderly relaxed, just a fraction.

“I – I’m just thinking…” Then Gann spun on his heels, shoulder-checking the person behind him.

"Hey — watch it, man."

"Sorry!"

He ran. The entrance seemed to recede with every stride as he barrelled through queuing affectees and startled orderlies, shoving a gurney aside as a siren tore through the amphitheatre. He pushed past one last compliant customer answering the system's insistent call.

Then he was outside, swallowed by blinding light. He squinted against it and kept running, breath ragged, legs heavy, the busy curving streets of the metropolis pressing in around him. Their curves were no longer familiar and comforting; he longed for the open spaces of his childhood, of Anzorea. Panic and something like freedom, in equal measure.

They'll hunt me now, he heard himself think. *But at least I'll still be me.*

He merged with the crowd. Tears blurred his vision. He coughed to stifle a sob, breathed through gritted teeth – a single spark of defiance against something vast and insidious.

Gann was a fugitive.

*****

The lab hummed and gurgled with quiet power – more of a medical sanctuary than a research dungeon. Silvered walls. The organic console pulsated gently beside the large cylindrical tank.

Uza Fanemun stood before the vessel filled with semi-opaque, off-pink fluid. Inside, stem-cells tumbled, changing and swirling. Azrael seemed entranced as she put a hand on the vessel wall. She didn't speak, but her mouth opened, almost imperceptibly.

“Something the matter, Azrael?” the Doctor asked inquisitively.

“No, Doctor… it’s just that I feel so attracted to it… like it’s summoning me.”

This reaction intrigued him, but he didn’t want to test it. “Maybe you should keep away. Moths to a flame and all that.”

Azrael removed her hand from the vessel wall, but her gaze remained transfixed.

Uza Fanemun swept into the vast room. He had thought better of his dismissal of these visitors, and determined to wow them with his charismatic approach to research and development. “This is the prelude to our latest development to supersede Celltron – Quasitron! A hundred times as effective as Celltron at half the dose. Our biggest problem, Doctor, is its stability at the last stage of extraction.”

“I’ve looked over the figures, Uza,” the Doctor probed. “It would seem you’ve run quite a few of these ‘experiments’ of late. This has depleted resources for Celltron production, with little to no success.”

Fanemun took a step back, surprised that his sales pitch had been so rebuffed. “That’s not true, Doctor! We’ve had much success on the smaller scale. It’s scaling up that poses a problem.”

“And this is a scale up you’re preparing to run now?”

“Yes. This one will be different!” Fanemun insisted with confident bravado.

The Doctor regarded the process coolly. “And you base this supposition on what, exactly?”

"Our previous experiments, of course. My small-scale operations used a proportionately higher current through the Lonosa inverter. It could be the key to Pi wave stabilisation!"

"Did you use the same inverter for those smaller-scale experiments?"

"Of course not. We used smaller ones."

"Can I have a look at them?"

"What are you thinking, Doctor?" Fanemun asked, searching for approval in this visitor. He saw great wisdom within, and suddenly felt like a struggling amateur in the face of a sage. "Do you agree I'm onto something?"

"Doctor," Azrael cautioned. "Wouldn't this constitute interference?"

"Interference, did you say?" Uza parroted. "Is everything all right, Doctor?"

The Doctor glared at her and returned to Uza. "Oh, just a minor … bit of office red tape. You know how it is. Can't so much as nick a paperclip without getting permission in triplicate."

Uza nodded, content in the knowledge that administrative interference was recognised by others.

"But please, Uza, enough about my problems. May I see these inverters? …"

"Of course, Doctor. Come with me."

Azrael continued to gaze at the agitated cells in the column. She tried to resist the temptation to touch the vessel wall again but felt drawn towards it. She placed her hand on the glass and felt a sense of relief – warm, almost nourishing. She observed the particles gather beneath her hand, mirroring the shape of her palm and fingers. She did not understand it - but she observed it with childlike fascination. Time for her seemed to stand still. Flashes of the Doctor and Fanemun's chatter receded into the background, as she felt a deeper understanding, a connection of a kind, wash over her.

"And that's it, then… a strong enough electromagnet will stabilise the Pi wave? - That's what all those failed experiments were trying to tell me… It could work!"

Azrael tore her hand free of the vessel, unaware of the time passed. More than that; she felt stimulated, as though she drew sustenance from it. Guiltily, she returned to her friend. She felt exposed, as if he might see what she was feeling and disapprove. So she returned to the earlier topic: this issue of his ethical quandary. "Doctor," she admonished. "Are you sure you should be doing this?"

"We have a civilisation teetering on the edge, here, Azrael. Many will die – Larra, to name but one, will die horribly if we do not help. I know you've been studying the history and the doctrines of your relations on Gallifrey. They pontificate and puff themselves up a great deal. Nothing like me, obviously." He chuckled self-deprecatingly. "What you're unlikely to have read is that sometimes laws are meant to be broken." The Doctor turned back to Fanemun. "You were close, Uza. Close enough to claim the bragging rights. I merely helped you see it."

"Let's reset the programme," Fanemun ordered. "Keep the cell culture active. We'll need them when we return to the experiment."

The hum of the machinery softened – the agitation in the tank settled into a slow, steady drift.

The Doctor turned to Azrael. "We just saved another human resource. This is a big batch of precious raw material and it's getting increasingly hard to replenish, I wager. Maybe

now's the time to talk about organic synthesis, Uza. Have you read up on organic synthesis, Azrael?"

"No," she responded, sullenly, the plight of the Minyans suddenly ringing a faint and doomy bell from her study.

*****

Rael Dante looked down from the window of the research cabin. She saw the Doctor thoughtful, Azrael focussed and troubled, and Fanemun gesticulating anxiously.

Rael shook her head. "It's only been a few days, and we already have people surpassing the illusory age of thirty-one. We cannot exile these people when the fault lies with the system itself! We're going to see people ageing like never before, if we don't fix this soon."

"It doesn't have to be civil unrest, Rael. I remember the last time we reduced the illusory to thirty. It got bad, I don't deny, but we got through it. People understood a limit was essential to maintain the supply of Celltron."

"We had civil unrest, Larra, largely from the thirty- to forty-year-old illusories but not entirely. There were some forthright views in the younger cohort – maybe seeing into their own future. Drop it again and a revolt is all but assured!" Rael looked pensive. "A total societal collapse… with the scientists and decision makers taking the brunt of the blame."

"If you base your whole civilisation on treating potential life as expendable, maybe you shouldn't be surprised by an eventual collapse," Maggie said.

Larra lowered her gaze. Rael, however, only watched the activity below, as though the words had drifted past her – not one struck home.

"I won't pretend I'm following all of this," Rael admitted, still looking down toward the discussions below. "I just hope it's productive."

Maggie's expression tightened. "Am I even being heard?" She drew a sharp breath. "I'm trying to say – I'm not comfortable with embryos being destroyed." She frowned at herself. "That sounds worse than I meant it to."

"Not destroyed, Maggie," Rael chided. "Repurposed."

"But their lives…"

"They're not children, Maggie," Rael said, her tone measured. "They're just a clump of unthinking, unfeeling cells. The lifeforce they hold lives on in others."

"You yourself said you weren't following this. Can you be so sure about that?" Maggie's reaction was immediate, but less certain than before. "Think about it this way… if that's all they are, why does it still feel wrong to say it like that?" Her folded arms tightened. "Would you say the same if it were an infant? I know that's not the same thing, I just—" she broke off, frustrated. "Each embryo could become a visionary engineer, a doctor, even someone who changes everything for the better. You don't get to know which ones will matter — and even if you did, it wouldn't make it right."

Rael's posture shifted slightly, as if withdrawing into something more controlled. "We've had many decades to refine the system. Many of the people sustained by Celltron are *already* engineers, doctors, and indeed politicians. The system works, Maggie. There's no reason to fight it!"

"Until there is," Maggie sniped, but it came out quieter this time – less proclamation, more uncertainty.

"The poverty in Anzorea is reason enough to change the system, Rael!" said Larra, firmer now, as if to aid a flailing Maggie.

Maggie glanced down at Fanemun's frantic gesturing below, using it almost as an escape route from the intensity of the exchange. "If the Doctor and Azrael manage to stop whatever's going wrong… and I suspect they will… then you should at least try to see Anzoreans as equals. That's the only fair way forward, in my opinion."

Rael exhaled, searching for an exit from the conversation. "You don't know our history, Maggie. Anzorea is an extension of Merus. It owes its very existence to us."

"And yet it's treated like a dumping ground," Larra scolded quietly. "Cream off the young and leave what's left to stagnate."

Rael deflected again, more abruptly this time. "I wish I understood science better than I do… I can't quite follow what they're doing down there. Either real progress is happening, or Uza is simply very angry."

Maggie turned away. An uneasy silence crystallised around the three women. Then Fanemun, Azrael, and the Doctor entered the scientist's research cabin, walking into a stony silence. "You lot seem to be getting on just fine," the Doctor said with inappropriate merriment.

"Any advances?" Rael queried.

"The production run is on standby, Rael – the culture is preserved and will remain active," Fanemun assured her.

"We're not going to see history made here today then, Uza?"

"All in good time, Rael." The doubt that had pervaded his shop-talk with the Doctor was replaced by the more familiar self-hyping swagger. "Your Doctor and Azrael have been most helpful and listened to my scientific arguments." The Doctor caught Azrael's eye with a playful smirk. "I need more time to build a powerful electromagnet before I proceed with a large-scale prep of Quasitron."

"We need doses now, Uza," Rael complained. "Shouldn't you use what bio-actives you have left to produce Celltron?"

"Celltron is a sledgehammer. Quasitron is a tuning fork. It nudges rather than bludgeons," the scientist enthused.

"You'd have found this eventually. Azrael and I simply hastened the process." The Doctor caught a glimpse of a bewildered Azrael. "Don't look so uneasy about it, Azrael. You've been marvellous in your observations."

"I'm still not sure we're supposed to be this involved," Azrael cautioned. "It's those Minyans again. I can't overlook their misuse of acquired power and then just shrug it off!"

The reference momentarily threw the Doctor, before he said dismissively, "Ah! Time Lord history… take what you read with a pinch of salt, Azrael." The Doctor turned his attention to Fanemun. "This will greatly diminish your reliance on biological input, Uza, but rather than rest on your laurels I suggest you look toward synthesis."

"Yes, you've already mentioned synthesis, Doctor. That would end embryo dependency entirely… but the protein complexity…"

"Take a closer look at mitochondria, Uza, any mitochondria," the Doctor proposed. "With this comes a route to great power… be thoughtful, be kind."

Rael turned to her chief scientist. "How soon can we expect new doses, Uza?"

Fanemun shook his way out of deep thought. "Quasitron? Within a month… maybe two."

This news was not welcome to Rael. “Who’s to say what state any of us will be in, physically and mentally, after a couple of months have passed?”

“You might want to use Quasitron to hold back ageing in stages - not halt the process entirely... Else you will be right back in this position again just further down the line – unless you crack synthesis, of course. Whatever you decide – you need to manage product distribution better than you did with Celltron.” The Doctor turned to Rael with purpose. “In the interim, many are going to age fast – some might die. You’re going to have to deal with a frightened population, Rael. Build through empathy and trust, not fear.”

“As I am destined to grow old with them, Doctor.” Rael’s eyes widened as she considered the full implications of the upheaval all this would bring. The effect on her made the Doctor’s urging hit home; she saw what he was getting at, and why it was vital to build that trust. “There will be much instability.”

“We’ve got through it before,” Larra proposed, “we can get through it again.”

“It is your call, Rael. Just change the way you look at children. Don’t see them as an obstruction to a much-needed resource... They are a resource in themselves. Be mindful of the joy you might feel when a child gives you a glimpse into their world of wonders — as they articulate it in their own unique style… Be kinder… Be joyful…”

“I feel the pressure, Doctor.”

“There is a case for offering Quasitron to Anzorea,” Larra followed through.

“Ask them, Rael. You should not be too surprised, though, should they reject it... maybe some… not all. Don't be offended either way. Respect them. Basically,” he smiled, “accept them as people, not datapoints.”

“I am destined to age faster than my Anzorean counterparts.” Rael craned her neck, “That in itself is likely to provoke fear… not least of all in me.

“Larra? You have a perspective from your life in both Merus and Anzorea that few others have. I think you would make an excellent envoy between our two societies,” Rael proposed with the full authority she still possessed. “So much to do and I have little idea how much time I have left… that’s new!”

*****

Rael Dante stood amidst her council team – six members on either side. The holocam framed them all, each wearing a teal sash of office. The ornate chamber itself felt smaller than usual, likely because the thirteen officials filled the breadth of the stage. The holocam zoomed in on Rael Dante, her face drawn, perhaps even more lined than usual. She looked tired. The banner above read “Together Through Inclusion”, though there was no anthem played.

“People of Merus, and those of our sister communities in Anzorea able to see this on your hastily erected Visio at the Shuttle Interchange...” She paused, collecting her thoughts. “I am Rael Dante, Council Leader of the Merusian High Council. I need to talk to you about the future, our future, and I hope to allay some of the fears that naturally follow sudden change.

“Most Merusians will be aware of, and concerned about, the loss of Celltron doses over the past few days. These will remain unavailable for a few more weeks and, understandably, this will give rise to some concerns. There is too little solid data on what will actually happen as a result of this. Many of us have lived so long with the blessings of holding back ageing that the full implications of living without it are … at best opaque, and quite honestly a little bit frightening. It is likely you will see some accelerated ageing effects. We are already hearing

reports of aching joints, loosening teeth, and greying hair among other things. The rate of change appears to be proportional to 'real' age. I too am in the upper real age cohort, so believe me when I tell you I am acutely aware of how uneasy this uncertainty feels.

"Our scientists are working tirelessly to provide us with the next generation of age-suppressant drugs. I'm assured that this will be vastly superior to Celltron. It has been given the exciting new name of Quasitron." She paused, feeling the emptiness of the reveal.

"Once formulated and in production, there will be plenty for all. It will only require those who can, to participate in managed procreation. That includes our Anzorean brothers and sisters who wish to share in this modern miracle. Participation will be voluntary and conducted under managed medical supervision. We welcome all Anzoreans capable of child baring." Rael took a sip of water as though the very words had stuck in her throat.

"Excuse me." She paused. Her stoic façade showed signs of weathering. "I speak now, specifically to my fellow Merusians …

"There will be a minimum of three weeks while production fires up and safety checks are made on the new formulation of Quasitron. I stress a minimum, but I am assured it is unlikely to exceed eight weeks. Over this time, your local clinic will be available to attend to any immediate medical needs or concerns you have. A simple instruction to Voice will put you on track to receive the care you need. Trust the system. It exists to support and serve you." She took a short breath – enough to let the words fall where they may. "Exiles to Anzorea have been abolished – everyone is able to access Merusian care.

"And it is to Anzoreans that I turn my attention now. Historically, Anzorea emerged out of Merus and that has led to practices we, quite frankly, should be ashamed of. We look forward to welcoming those of you who wish to come into our community. I know, for many of you, that will be a return – we hope to make it a happy one for you. Gone are the days of separating you from your children – they will be welcome here, too.

"We are committed to the improvement and development of infrastructure. We will consult with local leaders in an effort to make Anzorea a better place to live. Anzorea should be elevated to an equal community and recognised as such. Many of you will be happy with your ways, and we will be sensitive to that. This major development will be fully funded by Merus. Maybe that will incline you to welcome Merusians, as you always have been, who need and wish to live among you.

"I have never been more hopeful for our two peoples. A wise man recently told me that investment in people always pays a return, and with dividends. We do have a lot of people. Today, we have planted seeds. Let us see what grows."

*****

Even though it was just past midday, the streets of Gann's neighbourhood were remarkably quiet. Maybe all the residents were at work in the metropolis, or maybe they'd been assimilated.

Diffuse light from a clouded Merusian sky cast insipid shadows across the suburban landscape as Larra Summers led the Doctor, Azrael, and Maggie to Gann's door. A firmer knock followed the earlier gentle tap, just in case he hadn't heard.

"It would seem he's not home," said Larra, incredulously. "Should we just let ourselves in and wait for him? My old ID would've let me in, but I doubt this new one will work…"

Click. The door opened.

"Will this let me in anywhere?" Larra asked the Doctor, astonished.

"Pretty much," the Doctor said a touch sheepishly. "Maybe I should reduce it a little before you're accused of anything dastardly! Can't expect Merusian society to change *that* much …"

"Gann!" yelped Larra, catching sight of him peering around an alcove. "What are you doing hiding in your own home?"

Gann stepped out, then ran at Larra, throwing his arms around her and sobbing. "I-I've been so scared, Grandmother. I'm so glad… s-so glad it's you."

Larra stroked his back, comforting him. "Look at you, you're shaking. What's happened, Gann?"

"I-It's been horrible… I-I thought you were the police!"

"What have you done, Gann? Voice, five steamed Anzorean coffees, quickly!"

"I disabled Voice," Gann confessed, "and Visio." Larra noticed the smashed panel and torn cables – everything that could connect him to the authorities. "I ran… all the way home… I-I couldn't trust the transport system. Yesterday… I came straight home. They wanted to put me in a coma for t-ten days while they harvested my reproductive cells! I was the only one who knew what I'd done… I-It's me. I know it's me!"

"My God!" said Maggie. "Rael didn't mention any of this!"

"She didn't on V-Visio… but she alluded to it. Voice started asking if I was alright. 'Comply,' she said… Are you s-saying you've discussed this with her?"

"We've just come from a meeting with her," said the Doctor. "And I can assure you - you're safe now. I won't let anything bad happen."

"I-I'm sorry, Doctor. I feel such a fool for not believing everything you said the other night. It's all come true… I'm sorry … especially to you, Grandmother. I should have believed you all from the start… they just want our bodies… Voice wanted to rebook my clinic appointment." He laughed bitterly. "That's when I lost it… They don't care about us as people at all!" Gann rocked to and fro. "This is all my fault… What have I done?"

"Don't keep blaming yourself, Gann. This is not the way things are supposed to happen," said Larra quietly. "But you should know I believe everything you say – we all do!"

"Gann?" asked the Doctor. "I don't doubt you, but I must check: are you sure you didn't mishear what they planned?"

"There were other people complaining. I was lucky - they were ahead of me. If they hadn't engaged security first, I wouldn't have got away. So many people… corralled into a trap for biological exploitation. It was inhuman. This is my fault… I've dragged you all into this!"

"You see," said Maggie, vexed. "It was always heading this way."

"When was this, Gann? Today? Yesterday?"

"Yesterday… After that I just… sat. No light. No sound. Just me and the dark and the question of what happens next." His voice dropped. "I didn't like the answers I was coming up with."

"Oh, Gann," said Larra, consoling him. "What you must've been through… I'm so sorry."

"We can only guess that Gann is the tip of the iceberg…" As another of his analogies passed misunderstood, he looked skyward. "Oh — a large white floaty thing. Never mind. The point is, there must be many others going through the same thing." The Doctor rose from his chair. "I think we need to pay Rael Dante another visit, don't you?"

*****

"No tea this time, thank you, Rael."

The council leader was seated at the head of a large wooden table, an electronic Visboard before her, flanked by shelves laden with books and ledgers. The Doctor, Maggie, Azrael, Larra, and Gann all sat across from her. Gann was decidedly uncomfortable and benefiting from having the Doctor and his grandmother so close. "We've asked for this meeting with you because you really don't know what's going on at ground level or, more sinisterly, you systematically misled us in our earlier meetings."

"That's quite a serious charge to be making either way, Doctor." Rael leaned back in her chair. "Such accusations can cost people their liberty. Need I remind you who has the ultimate say in what goes on around here?"

"You emphasise my point, Rael. Whichever way you cut it, you don't come out of this looking particularly good." Of course, to 'look good' fronting a society with such levels of oppression was not how the Doctor read Rael Dante. She seemed more astute in her concern for the people she sought to protect. More importantly, she still had an ear for the Doctor's views.

"What is it you think I have done, then, Doctor?"

"Are you aware that citizens are being forced into ten-day induced comas, while their bodies are ravaged for reproductive cells?"

Rael pursed her lips, rocked back in the chair, taking care to choose her words. Finally, she said in the practiced soothing tones of a lifelong politician: "We have a shortfall of viable reproductive cells with people at risk of dying horribly if we don't reverse the situation quickly. I am all too aware… harsh measures are being taken to allay a potential catastrophe… you know this too, Doctor."

The Doctor bristled. "I do?"

"You have seen the figures, and you are aware of the situation with the science."

"Rael – people forced into an induced coma? Do you not hear yourself!"

"Doctor, the process needs to be invasive. Conception, till now, has been induced naturally. We are in different circumstances. Draconian measures are called for to help us secure everyone's future. If there was any other way, I'd gladly take it. I'm assured that an induced coma means there will be much less suffering from the livest… I mean, patients."

"When are you scheduled for *your* induced coma, then, Rael?"

"Your tone is somewhat impertinent, Doctor."

"Easy to defend sacrifice when yours is already behind you…"

"I have produced all I can, Doctor. Given freely to the point of exhaustion."

The Doctor's bravado faltered as the injustice of his remark struck home. "I've shown you the way forward for Quasitron production. Is that a choice I'm going to forever regret?" He flashed a sidelong glance at his companions, remembering only too personally the heated conversations Azrael and Maggie had engaged with him in the few days they had been here.

"I would hope not, Doctor. Uza is confident he was already on the right path. You said it yourself; you just gave him a little nudge in the right direction." Rael leaned forward on the table; her fingers interlocked. "We are grateful for your input, Doctor, we truly are. But this is our society, our systems, our way of living… People have a choice of living with us or living in Anzorea. A choice, Doctor.

"We have committed ourselves to helping Anzorea rebuild their infrastructure – enhancing their quality of life. We might even consider having them on the Quasitron

programme themselves; the choice is theirs. Once the programme is running again, there'll be no need for an induced coma.

"People will be encouraged to have children naturally again. By your guidance, Doctor, we will permit people to go to full term and birth children into the Merusian culture. These are seismic changes, Doctor. The short-term solutions are unpalatable, I agree. But I beg you, don't judge us so harshly."

"Gann here was scared out of his wits by your system, Rael," the Doctor pressed. "He asked to postpone his inclusion into the programme but was given no choice but to comply. He ran and saved himself from forced compliance. If he hadn't run, he would undoubtedly now be in an induced coma."

"Treated like a lab rat!" Maggie interjected.

"And would have been out in ten days, unharmed, and having made his contribution to our society and to the benefit of all within it."

"How many have answered your call, thus far, Rael?"

"Twenty-two thousand were on the first bat… allocation, Doctor. It was the maximum we could logistically handle. Those called were chosen at random."

"I-I just think it would be better i-if we were allowed to refuse… have a choice i-in the matter," Gann haltingly said.

"Things need to happen now, Gann. Let's say ten days down the line," said Rael, brushing aside the suggestion. Gann dropped his head. "Government must act now, Gann. We are responsible to all Merusians."

"You're okay with all of this, aren't you?" said Maggie with all her contempt.

"Very much so, Maggie," Rael answered with her flattest affect, her calm demeanour infuriating Maggie further. "This is a society that lives well and very, very long lives because its systems work. As I promised the Doctor, changes will be made to bring willing Anzoreans into the fold. Exiles have ended. Reparations will be made. These are not small changes, and they owe their place in no small way, to those here in this room. Despite apparent misgivings, you will remain welcome in Merus and, of course, Anzorea… Now if you will forgive me, I must attend to other matters."

"Before you go, can I have your assurance that both Gann and Larra are free to move between Merus and Anzorea?"

Rael was ready to leave. She leaned forward – hands on the table. "You have my assurance, Doctor. I have already stated that I have plans for Larra… maybe Gann can fit into that as well, if he's able and willing." She looked to Gann, whose eyes remained purposefully downward. "We are changing, Doctor. Now please let me focus on my duties so that we change the right way." Rael Dante gathered up her Visboard, turned, and left the room by its only door.

"You can't stop this, can you, Doctor," Maggie said.

"It seems I can't – but more to the point, Maggie, maybe I shouldn't try." The Doctor rose to his feet and dropped his head. "Quasitron only postpones the reckoning. It doesn't prevent it." He turned to Maggie looking her directly in the eye. "All I can do is hope they're kinder when that reckoning comes."

"I can't help thinking you interfered more than you should have, Doctor," Azrael suggested.

"And *I* can't help thinking you didn't interfere enough!" Maggie countered.

The Doctor felt a distance grow between himself and his companions, and sadly Maggie and Azrael's distance between each other growing too. Azrael's gaze was fixed on him, Maggie looked away. Larra was looking toward a dejected Gann.

"Gann needs cheering up, Doctor," said an attentive Larra. "Do you know, I think I know just the thing!"

*****

Long blades of grass began to twitch as if a stiff breeze blew in from over the treetops. Then they began to dance in tight circles, each orbiting a larger one - a slow precession of vortices. In amongst the welcoming lush, the deep blue of the TARDIS contrasted starkly as it materialised to the tune of deep groans and twitters. Out stepped the Doctor, Maggie, Azrael, and Larra, accompanying a tentative Gann. The clouded sky sucked up the remnants of the early evening's fading light. Scattered prefabricated shelters rose from machine-levelled earth. A shuttle was busy offloading supplies and construction equipment – there was to be a steady stream of them. Even so, the laughter of children permeated the air, owning it above the clanking of Merusian technicians and engineers.

"I still can't believe how much bigger it is on the inside," Larra gasped.

"Me neither. Oh!" Gann was suddenly distracted by the view outside. "I vaguely remember this place." His attention was drawn to the river. "I lie … I remember it well … in such detail."

"Sometimes the childhood memories linger the longest," his grandmother observed.

He crouched down low as if seeing from this height opened a whole new world. "I used to roll my trouser legs up and catch frogs from the lily pads over there. See, where those three bare trees hug the line of the riverbank." He felt the joy of those days wash over him.

Larra gently directed his gaze toward Epome, instructing a lady collecting herbs and pulses. "Go say hello, Gann. I'll come with you if you want…"

"No… no… thank you, Grandmother. This is something I need to do by myself."

Gann felt his heart pump in his chest, the blood whoosh in his ears. He swallowed hard as he approached with steely determination. He bowed slightly, but politely, to Epome and the other lady. He tried to smile but it was coming out all wrong. He opened his arms and widened his eyes apologetically. "It's been a long while. I barely remember… I don't know how to say this." He swallowed again. "You are my mother."

The woman's face was one of astonishment. This handsome young man claims to be her son? Impossible! "But I don't have a son!"

Epome had not really noticed this young man approach and make his way between them. He did so politely, but now what was he saying. She looked to her right and saw Larra with her hand partially covering her open mouth, standing alongside the watchful Doctor. The truth crystallised hard in her mind. She reached out tentatively, almost afraid to touch in case she broke the spell. "Gann?" she gasped.

Gann anticipated a level of awkwardness but had not prepared himself for outright rejection. Then, this weaker voice was saying his name behind him. What a fool he'd been assuming his mother had not aged these past thirty years.

Gann turned from the younger woman and regarded the lined face of Epome. A look of pity and apology spilled from his face as realisation struck them both like an arrow to the heart. "Mom?"

Tears welled up in their eyes as their hands locked together, Gann holding hers as though afraid she might slip away forever. Epome regarded the young man who stood before her with pride. Gone was the teenager she parted with decades past. Here stood the tall, strong man Larra had described for years.

"Gann, you're so… big!"

"And you're so… old!"

A laugh broke out between them, Epome with a sparkle in her tear-filled eyes.

"I'm so sorry – I don't know what I'm saying… I get like this sometimes. You must think me a fool. An arrogant loudmouthed…"

"Not at all… it… it's just… so lovely to see you."

"I forget how long it's been. I wrote to you a thousand times…"

"Me too… What have they done to us?"

"We have time to put it right, Mom… we have time."

Larra wiped her eyes and turned to the Doctor. "I think we're going to be all right. Thank you – all of you."

"You're welcome to come along if you seek adventure…"

"Thank you, Doctor, but I think a major adventure is unfolding right here. It needs me, and I need to see it unfurl."

"Say goodbye to Epome and Gann for me. There's a chance we will return to see how things have worked out… Give you some time to settle."

A smile passed between them all. Maggie turned to enter the TARDIS, relieved to see the reunion, but in her heart not sorry to leave the errant dysfunction of Anzorea and Merus behind. It was a timely reminder that sometimes their actions could not solve every society's problems. She used her extended forefingers to dab beneath each lower eyelid - just lessen their weight and avoid a telltale run of her eyeliner. The Doctor raised a hand toward Epome, but she remained engaged in a long-lost hug.

The Doctor leaned close to Azrael and whispered, "Sometimes, Azrael, the rules forget what they're for."

It is said that still waters run deep. But as the path widens the depth decreases and obstacles break up the smoothness of flow. It is also said that blood is thicker than water, yet a bloodline might be spread so thin that it's barely connected.

The Doctor, Maggie and Azrael chance upon a community seemingly immune to the ravages of time. Its people are kept eternally young and seemingly want for nothing. Perfect harmony? The Doctor investigates, uncovering a system that is not running as smoothly as those charged with overseeing it might like.
And as the water's surface turns, the resultant instability reaches far and wide.

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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