

NINE DAYS

Written by: Duncan Johnson
Season 35 ▪ Story 10S
Reviewed by Jez Strickley

Duncan Johnson certainly likes dipping into history. Season 33 saw his alien-free Renaissance riddle *The Conspirators*, whilst Season 34 presented a time travelling thief with an eye for antiquities in *The Librarian of Serapea*. On this occasion, Johnson gives us a keenly crafted drama which draws upon a prime historical backdrop: sixteenth-century England, and the murky dealings which brought the tragic Lady Jane Dudley, née Grey, to the English throne for just nine days.

An enticing opening, in which a young Lady Jane Dudley is made King Edward VI's successor, is smartly followed by a brief look at Jane's life three years earlier, when she first encounters an Earthbound Doctor and finds herself with a brand new tutor. Time then fast forwards back to the conclusion of the opening scene and Jane's obvious lack of trust in her parents-in-law, who have artfully manipulated events so as to make their son's wife England's new sovereign.

Capturing the court intrigues which abound shortly before Jane's coronation is no mean feat, and as with his earlier historical efforts Johnson pulls off a praiseworthy job. The statecraft of the Duke of Northumberland – Jane's father-in-law – is patent from the first, and his power hungry mentality makes him a dangerous man to cross. Interestingly, Northumberland's machinations oscillate between quiet aggression and apologetic sycophancy as he does his best to manoeuvre his son onto the English throne. His job is made all the more difficult, however, due to the vulnerability of Jane's claim to the throne in relation to Mary Tudor's, Henry VIII's eldest child. Thus, Northumberland must set out a political strategy of serious proportions, and one which risks not only his own life but also that of Jane's, if his scheming comes to naught.

The Tudor period is wonderfully brought to life through Johnson's excellent prose. Descriptions and dialogue are immaculate throughout, and the pace is shrewdly measured, giving the reader a slow burning fuse which finally ignites in the closing pages. However, what gives *Nine Days* a bite over and above the usual historical adventure is the clever twist which it delivers: established human history may well declare that Lady Jane Dudley reigned for just nine days and was later executed, but what if the



Descriptions and dialogue are immaculate throughout, and the pace is shrewdly measured, giving the reader a slow burning fuse which finally ignites in the closing pages.

Doctor were to change that outcome? The deliberations of the emotionally agonised Time Lord make for gripping reading, and his comment "... what's the point of having this power if I can't save just one girl?" must rank amongst Johnson's finest, if not to say most poignant lines. Still further, it is refreshing to witness Silver playing the seasoned time traveller, and defending the importance of not tampering with time, especially after more than one occasion in which she fervently took the opposing position (see, for example, Jeff Taylor's *Genevieve*).

As the Doctor is finally forced to choose between aiding the doomed Jane and returning to the TARDIS with Silver,

it is the former path which he chooses, leaving a troubled Silver to conclude that perhaps her bond with the Doctor is not quite so special to the maverick Time Lord. This apparent wound to their friendship is not the first (see Mark Simpson's *The Shadow Emperor*), but, considering how close Silver is to taking her leave of the TARDIS and the developments which arose earlier in the season (see *Moonlight Part One* and *Moonlight Part Two* by Jack Rees), it is an interesting point to note.

Johnson's characterisations of the Doctor and Silver are excellent. In particular, the brief exchange in which the Doctor is accused of speaking technobabble is a good in-joke which should raise a smile or two; and the Doctor's point regarding the ethics of hunting, not to mention the aesthetics of animal rights, is fairly raised and should give the reader some useful food for thought. The Duke of Northumberland is well portrayed as a master-schemer whose plans get away from him, and his son, Guildford Dudley, gets the chance to show his plain and simple desire to be King. More, Guildford's lack of understanding with his increasingly estranged wife does not make him entirely unsympathetic – pathetic maybe, but not a monster by any means. Also, the cameos played by the Earl of Arundel and the Earl of Pembroke, members of the Privy Council, are well set out and give us a pair of typical fair weather politicians, who are quite happy to throw in their lot with whomever is in charge.

Nine Days echoes Johnson's earlier work *The Conspirators*

in that we know what is going to happen: Jane is doomed from the very start, and the Doctor and Silver cannot – or rather should not – lift a finger to save her. Where the author chooses to take a somewhat different line, however, is in how the Doctor approaches the burden of non-interference. His tutoring of Jane for some six months, whilst awaiting a rendezvous with his errant TARDIS, forged a rapport between the two which proves hard for the Time Lord to cast aside when faced with his former pupil's imminent fall from power and subsequent execution. It is a topic which is seldom far from our minds whilst following a *Doctor Who* adventure, and this makes its delivery all the more tricky: tired time travelling conundrums tend to be ten a penny amongst some fan-based efforts. It is, therefore, to Johnson's credit that he presents an ending which reveals the bravery and fortitude of a single individual, and in the process he doesn't leave a dry eye in the house.

Following in the wake of a troupe of top notch tales, *Nine Days* more than deserves its place in a season which is shaping up to be one of *TDWP*'s best efforts. A well executed historical narrative, with an intriguing subplot involving a patriotic poisoner, gives us a praiseworthy instalment indeed. And not to forget, for those history buffs amongst us Johnson provides a very useful set of biographical sketches at the close of his story, setting out what became of those individuals involved in Lady Jane Dudley's tragic rise and fall. **9/10**