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**PEACE OF mind**



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The forest was almost silent, quiet as only such a truly natural environment could be, devoid of human influence. The only sounds were the chirps of insects, the subtle creak and rustle of the trees as the breeze gently bent their flexible upper branches. Occasionally, a bird or reptile let out a screech or squawk, momentarily breaking the calm, yet these natural sounds did not disrupt the peace. Had anyone been in the forest to appreciate it, they would have felt as if they were the only person in the world. They would have experienced something of a shock then, as a deafening roar tore through the air without warning, a grinding, wailing cacophony that betrayed its artificial origins as it ripped through the tranquility of the forest environment.

The winds rose to powerful force as the noise grew louder, reaching an agonizing crescendo and finally ceasing with a resounding thud. At that moment, in a small clearing within the wooded environs, an object appeared, an object with no right to be in this place, arriving instantaneously, without even the decency to travel from its origin in good time like any natural entity. It was tall, cuboid and bright blue. It sat in the clearing, emitting a soft, resonant hum. After some little time, one of its faces cracked open, a door opening inwards as a man, tall and dark, strode out purposefully.

"No, this isn't right," he muttered. "This isn't where we're supposed to be at all."

He turned on his heel, whipping off the darkly coloured striped scarf that hung around his neck, and lobbed it, dismissively, back into the TARDIS.

"Hey!" cried a man's voice from within. "Watch it!"

Thomas Brooker stepped out of the door, bringing his gangly personage face-to-face with the scarf thrower.

"OK, Doctor," he said, "where are we supposed to be and where are we actually?"

The Doctor sighed deeply, clearly expressing his irritation - although whether it was irritation with his situation or with Tom wasn't clear. "We're supposed to be on Albireo Five," he replied, eventually, his deep voice cultured, arrogant and with a francophone hint. "A rather pleasant little planetoid, with crisp autumnal weather. Just the sort of place I felt like visiting. Somewhere fresh, invigorating! Instead," he looked around the heavily wooded surroundings, the foliage letting in only a deep, greenish light, "instead I get a jungle planet! Precisely the opposite of what I was looking for! Warm, moist and -" he slapped his palm down hard on his neck, suddenly - "full of biting insects"

"A jungle planet?" came a third, female voice. Valentina Rossi stepped out from the TARDIS. "Or just a planet with a jungle?"

"Well, yes, that is an important distinction," conceded the Doctor. "Is it one of those interesting planets, like the Earth, somewhere with a variety of environments and ecosystems? Or is it one of those planets with a single, homogenous environment that gets boring tremendously quickly and leaves me in a terribly bad mood all day?"

"Is there any chance, either way, that you won't be in a bad mood?" asked Valentina, sweetly.

A slight smile flickered briefly across the Doctor's face. "Perhaps just a slim chance," he smiled. Patting his pockets, he removed a selection of keys, small gizmos and excessively futuristic-looking tools from his coat, stuffing them into his trouser pockets, which were soon displaying unsightly bulges. He whipped off his coat, slinging it into the TARDIS to join his scarf, leaving him wearing a dark, long-sleeved shirt. He looked at his companions. Valentina was lightly dressed in a blue blouse and cotton pants, while Tom sported a reasonably thick jumper and jeans.

"You might want to change your clothing," the Doctor advised him. "We're going to be here a while and it's only going to get hotter."

Tom removed the jumper and looped it around his waist, tying the arms together. "That'll do it."

"Fine," said the Doctor, snapping the TARDIS doors shut. "Here's the situation: we shouldn't be here. Something's pulled us off course."

"Again," interjected Tom.

"Yes, again!" snapped the Doctor. "There was some kind of guiding energy wave emanating from whatever planet this is, disrupting the fabric of local space. Confused the TARDIS. I suspect its part of some kind of transportation system - a transmat or teleporter - and it's clearly discharging far more energy than it needs to. I could try to get the TARDIS to fly through it, but it's going to be a bumpy, uncomfortable ride, and I'd much rather find whatever's causing it and sort it out at the source."

"What if whoever built it doesn't want you fiddling with their teleporter?" asked Valentina.

"I'm sure that, once I've explained the situation, they'll be happy to accept the offer of my clearly superior technical knowledge and let me sort out what's clearly a massive botch job. Honestly, no transmat should be putting out that much graviton energy, it's ridiculous, it's inefficient and it's a ruddy hazard."

The Doctor looked around the overgrown surroundings, taking in the thick lianas and emerald leaves that were entwined around the trees. "Well, we can't be that far from civilization. Mr. Brooker, you're young and full of vigor, no doubt just bursting with youthful energy."

"I do know sarcasm when I hear it, Doctor," replied Tom.

"That's nice for you. Now, climb up one of these trees and see if you can see over the canopy."

"Oh, for -" began Tom, before sighing in defeat. "Alright, give us a leg-up."

Much clambering, scrabbling and swearing later, Tom was out of sight amongst the dense canopy of leaves.

"Can you see anything?" shouted Valentina, peering into the green gloom for a sign of her friend.

With a triumphant gasp, Tom pushed his head through the top layer of vegetation. Turning his head and upper body as much as he could without losing his pretty precarious footing, he surveyed the seemingly endless sea of greenery.

"Wow..." he gasped. "This is amazing!" He shouted down to the others. "It goes on for miles!"

"No sign of civilization at all?" came the Doctor's voice.

"Uh... Yes, yes there is. There's some kind of structure sticking out from the trees, I guess its a few miles away. Like a tower, or something. And I can just about see some buildings in the distance. Looks like a city or a large town, I think." A sudden snap came from the area around his feet, and he shifted, very carefully, closer to the bulk of the branches. Once he managed to speak, and was sure his heart was still beating, he said, as loud as he could, "Can I come down please? Now?"

After further scrabbling, sliding and what Tom considered to be near-death experiences (but were in fact small slips and tumbles), he stood back in the enclosed clearing with his fellows.

"I am never doing that again," he said, panting.

"Well, hopefully you won't have to," said the Doctor, slapping him on the shoulder. "Get your breath back, and we'll head off towards that structure. Sounds like it could be a transmission tower of some kind. Was the settlement in the same direction?"

"Yes," said Tom, nodding. "But it's a seriously long way away. Maybe days, I reckon."

"Hopefully it won't be necessary to go that far. With a bit of luck, the tower will be able to give us some answers. Not too surprising we put down near to it - it was probably what sent the signal that dragged us off course." The Doctor looked at his companions' rather less than enthusiastic faces. "What's wrong with you two now?"

"I guess we weren't really banking on having to trek for miles through a jungle today," said Valentina, slapping her hand against her thigh, "full of biting things!"

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about them," said the Doctor. "I doubt they'd find you very palatable. Alien planet, different biology. Probably just trying us out to see how we taste. It's unlikely that they'll actually take any blood, or transmit anything nasty that could actually affect us. Anyway, what's wrong with a little jungle trek? A bit of vigorous exercise, a pleasantly warm climate..."

"That you were just whingeing about," noted Tom, still breathing a little heavily.

"Whingeing?" said the Doctor. "I *never* whinge."

"You complain enough, though," added Valentina.

"Prerogative of a Time Lord, Miss Rossi. As is the right to change my mind without notice. Now, unless you two want to stay in this jungle for the foreseeable future, I suggest you follow my lead and get moving." With this, the Doctor plunged into the dense foliage, noisily crunching his way forward.

"Come on," said Valentina. "We'd better get after him before we lose him altogether."

Tom was still panting slightly. "Just one minute, please?"

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"Hey! Wake yourself, young lady, or I'll larrup you!"

Dea woke with a start, pages clinging to her face as she straightened up in her seat.

"You wouldn't dare," she mumbled groggily.

"Oh, don't you tempt me," growled Charren, but he couldn't hide the laughter in his voice. "Honestly, Dea, what's getting into you? That's the third time in under a fortnight that you've fallen asleep on the job!"

"Yes, yes, I'm sorry," she replied, tidying the papers that she'd disrupted with her sleeping head.

"I mean, I know Records isn't the most exciting job in the world, but if we all slept as much as you, we'd never get anything done!"

Dea looked up at Charren, the senior's barrel-shaped bulk and ruddy, bearded face belying his mild, studious nature. The man had probably never raised a hand in his life, let alone against an employee. She smiled

"I know, I know. I like working here, you know I do. And before you start, I'm very grateful for the chance, as I'm sure I tell you every day. I just haven't been sleeping well. That's all. Nothing serious, nothing life threatening, before you start to worry. Just a little mild insomnia."

"Now, this wouldn't be down to some affair of the heart, would it?" chuckled the senior, straightening his spectacles. "I know that young fellow in the communications department has been chatting you up!"

Dea sighed theatrically. "Oh, you know me so well Char! I'm always gallivanting off with young men for nights of wild passion!"

"Now, now. I have it on good authority that sarcasm is the very lowest form of wit. I'm certain that's recorded here somewhere."

"I'm not interested in what's-his-name from communications, or anyone else for that matter, as well you know."

"Ah, so you still haven't comes to terms with your deep, fiery love for me then?"

"If you don't shut up, I swear I'll tell your wife you said that," she laughed.

"Ooh, now you're playing dirty!" He put a hand on her shoulder. "Why don't you go get us both some tea. Might help wake you up, eh?"

"Good idea," said Dea, stifling a yawn. "I really need to get out of this habit." She rose from her chair, heading out into the main hall towards the canteen.

She shook her head, the age-old and futile gesture of one trying to clear their mind. Maybe she should have been honest with Charren. It just sounded so ridiculous, being woken up every night by bad dreams. They just wouldn't stop, though. The man in the dungeon, bound in chains, squatting in the darkness in his filthy clothes. Every night she'd be there, in the room, somehow able to see him through the pitch darkness. Every night, a sense of terrifying foreboding, and of desperation, and, most unnerving of all, of recognition She'd stand there and watch him, in complete silence, until he opened his eyes, looking directly at her. And then she would wake up.



*I'm cracking up*, she thought, and tried to put it out of her mind as she approached the canteen counter. But he was still there, in the back of her mind. Just sitting. Waiting. The man in chains.

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Pax raised his hands to his face, rubbing his sore, grainy eyes. His shoulders felt as if they were made from knots of heavy-duty haulers rope, his spine as though it were a steel rod forged by the miners in Trell. His muscles ached and his feet complained, and his head pounded in time to his heart, although that last symptom was nobody's fault but his own. Too many shots of trappers' moonshine would do that to you. It had been worth it though, he thought to himself, as he lay back on his bunk, his heavy eyelids closing. Today was his last day in this frozen dung heap, tonight his last chance to get happily slammed with the boys.

He was going to miss those fellas. Well, maybe not Shad, he allowed, as the man himself let out an almighty trump from the bunk above. But he'd miss Qel, and Rammel, and especially Penn, the wonderful little idiot, the only guy on their duty who was even worse at the heavy stuff than Pax was.

He felt an uncomfortable pressure on his left buttock. Shifting on his mattress, he reached into his back pocket and removed the offending item. Penn's music pod. He held up the pod, taking in the smooth grey circular box in the half-light. He'd forgotten to give it back to him in all the unruliness of the inn session. No matter - he'd see him tomorrow. Pax smiled to himself. If Penn hadn't blown a month's wages on the cut-price pod offered by that Janxian trader, if the pod hadn't burnt out within a week, if Penn hadn't let him take a look at it, thinking it was totally useless now, then he'd never had gotten to leave this place.

He placed the pod carefully under his pillow. Couldn't be sure in the dorms, even after this long. It was a valuable piece of tech, and there wasn't a man here who couldn't do with a little extra coin. Even the foreman, although Pax owed him a little too. He'd fixed up the foreman's comms system, which had led, through word of mouth, to his reprogramming of the Mayor's daughter's picture box. He hadn't had much of an opportunity to get to know her, more was the pity, but that had led to a few odd jobs for the Mayor himself, and his aides. Then, when the recruitment team had come along, a little word in the right ear had brought his name to the top of the list.

Pax was no fool. He knew that the men from Myriad were mainly looking for brute labour. Rumour had it that the Masters were working on something big, something that would make life better for everyone in the world. No one knew what it was, of course, but that didn't stop everyone being excited about it. Something wonderful was going on out in the wider world. Something always was, it seemed. Nobody ever knew quite what, but everyone heard the mutterings and knew that the future was going to be good.

He looked at his hands, briefly, before the lights went out. Not real worker's hands, although stronger than they'd been a few months back. He'd never been a big man, fairly tall, but lacking in the muscles that you needed for work round here. Unless you were lucky enough to be noble born, but he had to admit, compared to the stories of life in Myriad, even the Mayoral family had it rough. Pax had been lucky to get a pretty easy job in the mills. Operating

the grinders wasn't too physical, and even he could barrow a few bags of flour around. He could never have been a trapper, although he'd always got on well with the big, burly brutes in the inns. He could never have worked in the mines up in Trell or the coal pits in the downlands. No, thought Pax as he drifted off to sleep, I'm not made for a life in Vridi. Thank the Masters that they needed a few tech heads over in Myriad. Maybe he could finally make something of himself.

Everything was going to be better in Myriad.

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The trek was becoming laborious. Valentina, in particular, was struggling; the stifling heat and humidity of the jungled environment becoming oppressive. Her blouse and slacks clung to her flesh, her hair was plastered to her face, and her leg muscles were beginning to ache. Still, she soldiered on, determined to tolerate biting winged things and blistered toes.

"Damn it!" came a yell from behind her, followed by a succession of crunching, whipping and snapping noises. Val sighed. Clearly Tom wasn't keeping his cool as well as she was.

"Problem, Mister Brooker?" asked the Doctor, striding purposefully in the lead.

"Bloody plants everywhere, that's the problem!" came the angry reply.

"Well, it is a jungle," responded Val. "What exactly did you expect?"

"To not be in a jungle!" snapped Tom in reply. "That's what I expected!"

"Please be quiet, Brooker," chided the Doctor, coming to an abrupt halt. "We need to tread carefully here."

Val and Tom came to a halt beside the Doctor. His boots were mere inches from the edge of a wide pool of fetid-looking water, blackened with sediment to near opacity. There was just enough translucency in the fluid to make out black commas and wriggling worms swimming through its murk. Valentina looked at the putrid pool, wrinkling her nose at the rank smell that emanated from its contents. Her eye caught a white mass on the far edge of the pool, maybe six feet away. She gave a sharp squeak of shock.

"That's a skeleton," she pointed out, subsequently feeling a little foolish for stating the obvious.

"Looks human enough," said Tom.

"Indeed," agreed the Doctor. "Humanoid, at any rate. That's a good sign; the intelligence on this planet is either human or similar enough so that we should be able to communicate with it."

"But what killed him?" said Val, voicing precisely what they were all thinking.

As they looked at the corpse, its skull and shoulder blade just breaking the surface of the stagnant water, a thick, black segmented worm squeezed its pulsating body through one eye socket. It slid down the cheekbone, landing in the water with a soft plop.

"Oh god," muttered Val, all resolve failing in the face of such a revolting form of life.

"Carnivorous leeches," said the Doctor. "Interesting. Unpleasant, but interesting. Of course, this poor fellow could have been killed by something else, and then stripped by the invertebrates, but I think we should try very hard to avoid stepping in that, don't you?"

"I think I'm going to be sick," groaned Val.

"No time for that," said the Doctor, grabbing hold of the branches of shrubs growing around the pool. "Follow me, tread carefully and hold onto the vegetation." He started to step cautiously around the edge of the pool. The soft mud yielded worryingly under the sole of his boots.

First Val, then Tom, followed on with baby steps, eyes trained on the squirming surface of the mere. Valentina willed her stomach to settle, as it churned seemingly in time with pool's own motions. It took a little under three minutes to edge around the pool, but if you'd asked her, she would have said it was no less than thirty.

"Now, that wasn't so bad, was it?" smiled the Doctor, heading off again into the depths of the forest.

Val swallowed back the bile that was making its way up her throat. "I really hate him sometimes," she grumbled.

The journey continued. Valentina began, very slowly, to relax in her environment, and Tom's complaints became less and less frequent. Before long, the three travelers were ploughing ahead in intent silence.

There was a noise. A crash, the crushing of vegetation somewhere in the jungle around them.

"What was that?" said Val, stopping where she stood.

"More importantly, which direction did it come from?" said the Doctor. A further succession of noises came from the dense foliage, including a very distressing, clearly animal noise - a throaty, snarling, frighteningly *predatory* noise. The profuse plant matter to the travelers' immediate left trembled in time with the sounds.

"You two," said the Doctor, "back up slowly, don't make too much -"

With a crescendo of cracks and crashes, and a terrifying howl, the forest parted, torn apart by the claws of a nightmare creature. Tearing its way out into the relative openness of the track way the three were following, the great beast erupted into full view. Sinuous and serpentine, its greenish scaled skin parting at various points by the protrusion of ochre spines, the beast stood on four legs, with a further two at its front tipped with vicious-looking talons. One glance at them made it clear that they would be equally adept at shredding flesh as they were at sundering vegetation.

The monstrosity stopped, perhaps momentarily thrown by the presence of three alien interlopers in its hunting grounds. It swung its crocodilian head from side to side, taking in the three of them with its slit-pupil red eyes. For one long, heart-stopping moment, all was still - then, without warning, the beast lunged for Val.

"Valentina, down!" cried the Doctor, but there was insufficient time to react. A scream half-escaped from her throat, as she made an attempt to dive out of lunging creature's path. One of the creature's razor-sharp foreclaws slashed across her arms, tearing fabric and flesh with ease. She collapsed to the forest floor, lying in the moist leaf litter.

A deafening bang, an explosion that ranged through the forest. The beast collapsed to the ground beside Val, its flank oozing viscous, black ichor.

"Val!" Tom fell to his knees beside her prone body, ignoring the felled beast, the possibility that it may still be alive barely flitting through his head. Her eyes were closed. He put a hand to her throat, and was relieved to feel a strong, rapid pulse.

"Tom, I'm not dead!" she exclaimed, opening her eyes. She put her arms to the ground, attempting to push herself to her feet, but she immediately collapsed back down again. Tom held her gently by the shoulders.

"Don't try to move," he said.

"You've been injured," said the Doctor. "It's very important that you stay still for now."

"Who are those guys?" said Val in a casual, dreamy tone of voice, before slumping back again, her eyes closing once more.

The Doctor and Tom turned. Three well-built men, dressed in a mix khaki fatigues and leathers, cured from what appeared to be snake or alligator skins, were breaking through the undergrowth towards them. Each of them carried a large, bulbous-ended firearm; enormous trumpet-headed weapons of the elephant gun school, clearly designed for inflicting maximum damage on large animals. Tom's vision strayed to the scaled carcass at his feet, taking in the raw, wide wound in its side. The flesh had been ripped open, leaving a bloody mess of minced meat. Not a nice weapon to be on the wrong side of.

"Got the brute!" cried the closest hunter, leading their trail. "I told you it wouldn't stand up to a blast from a Shenkley Twelve-B!"

The Doctor held out his hand, a broad smile on his face.

"Thank you, sir," he said, addressing the wielder of the smoking Shenkley. "Looks as though you may very well have saved our lives"

The man took his hand. "Reckon I probably did, at that."

"Now, it's vital we get my friend here some medical attention. That's a particularly nasty looking laceration she has there, and it'll need to be dressed and cleaned quickly. I can do a quick patch-up here but we'll need to get her to cover and clean water." The Doctor wasn't wrong. The flesh of Val's upper arm looked as though it had been almost cleaved in two.

"Doctor, her arm's half off!" cried Tom. "We can't patch that up!"

The Doctor knelt down beside him, looking carefully at the wound. "Don't worry, Mr. Brooker. It's not nearly as bad as it looks." He turned back to the hunters. "Aren't any of you carrying medical kits?" he demanded. "This young woman needs immediate attention!"

The lead hunter turned to his fellows, who were cautiously hanging behind him. "Best help him out, boys. Get your kits out, and help get her bandaged. Let no one say we don't help a lady in distress."

The two hunters did as they were ordered, one of them opening up the leather satchel that hung from his shoulder, removing bandages and a bottle of medicinal spirit. Between the two of them, he and the Doctor soon had Valentina's arm tightly bandaged, while Tom helped clean up the blood and continually checked to make sure that she was still breathing and her eyes hadn't opened. The final hunter examined the body of the jungle beast, using the primary diagnostic method of kicking it gently with his boot.

"Dorlan," grunted the hunter who'd become designated as chief medic, clearly addressing the leader who turned to answer him. "Take a look at this. She's got a bad case of

the Mortasheen." He pointed Valentina's injured arm. Green-black streaks had appeared, shot through the pale flesh.

"Never seen it spread that quickly before," said the hunter.

"Me neither," agreed Dorlan.

"What is it?" asked the Doctor. "What's wrong with her?"

"Sharrix has got a nasty habit of injecting this sort of venom into its prey, through its claws. Knocks 'em down and stops 'em struggling. It's highly poisonous, and spreads through the body pretty damned quickly. Never seen it as quick as this though. Your girl's in some serious trouble if we don't get her to the city fast."

"What do you want us to do with the sharrix?" asked the third hunter, still eyeing up the body.

"We're not carrying that thing back to camp. Hack off its claws and bring them along. We can take 'em with us to the city. The hospital can use them for anti-venom - otherwise you're going to have to pay pretty highly for what they've already made up," he said, addressing this last bit to the Doctor. "Bit of luck, we'll make a bit of profit out of it. Not many people come back with sharrix venom. They say it's got all kinds of uses." He slapped the Doctor on the back, his brute strength almost knocking the Doctor over. "Could be our lucky day, eh?"

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"You know, I've always envied you," said Penn, as he took the music pod from Pax in the back of the snow cart.

"Why's that?" replied Pax, too fixated on the approaching destination to focus on anything his friend was saying. Penn opened his mouth to reply, but a jolt to the cart almost caused him to drop his pod. He stuffed the pod into the pocket of his thick, woolen jacket, its bulk virtually swallowing his scrawny frame.

"For being a tech head," he said. "Where'd you even get that from, anyway?"

"I don't know," mumbled Pax. "My parents, maybe."

"I suppose. I mean, you hadn't even seen a pod before this one, yet you opened it up, took one look at it, poked it around and it all worked fine."

"Well, it wasn't quite as simple as that. It just... it just makes sense to me, that's all. Like how Belz can play the horn and Rammel can draw those pictures of us with just a bit of old charwood. I could never do that, but I can see what's come loose in a pod, or what needs sorting in a comms programme. Like I said, I probably get it from my parents."

They sat in silence for a few moments, before Penn spoke again. "Do you think your life would have been better, if you'd known them?"

"I don't know. I guess." Pax didn't much like these sorts of conversations. They made him uncomfortable. He had no memory whatsoever of his parents, and even trying to remember his childhood made him feel uneasy. Penn wasn't doing it deliberately, though. He genuinely seemed to think that talking about it might help.

"You know I don't remember much about anything before I came to Vridi," he said.

"Yes, but even so, there must be something there? What about after your parents died, but before you came over the mountains? What did you do? Are you sure you weren't working on tech then?"

"How could I have been? There's even less access to tech over the mountains, you know that. Honestly, Penn, do you really think that if I remembered anything worth saying that I wouldn't have said during these last few months?"

"No, I suppose not. At least you're getting out of here now."

The cart buffeted again, the oroks pulling it ahead at ever greater speeds over the snow. The sounds of their snorting and farting competed with the noise of the snow cart's sleds for dominance.

"Yes, I am getting out of here. You've been a good friend, Penn, don't think you haven't, but you know I don't belong here. Whoever my parents were, they weren't snow folk, I'm sure of that. They were from Myriad, or Centurius, or maybe one of the old cities in the far south."

"If you were from that far south, you'd be a different colour," observed Penn.

"OK, but from Myriad or somewhere then. Proper civilization. You can't tell me you're happy here, where the most excitement we ever get is a wandering merchant peddling tech that the other folk have thrown out as obsolete."

"I'm happy here. Of course I am I'm not saying it's perfect, but it's a good life. Everyone's happy enough in the village. Except you, apparently."

"Apparently so. I'm sorry, Penn... Thanks for coming with me, anyway."

"Well, what else is there to do on a day off work? How's your head, by the way?"

Pax groaned. "Complete bloody agony. I won't miss that moonshine."

Penn laughed. "Yes you will!"

Pax laughed. "Yes, I really will," he conceded. "I wonder what they've got to drink in Myriad?"

"Maybe they just drink tea out of little china cups"

"Damn, I hope not! They've got to give us something to make the work worthwhile."

"What are they working on, anyway? Have they even told you yet?"

Pax shook his head, then wished he hadn't, as the throbbing headache started up again.

"Qel reckons it's something to do with the transport points. I hope not, because I doubt I'll get anywhere with those. I honestly haven't the foggiest idea how they work."

Penn laughed. "I don't think anyone has. Except the Masters."

"Mmm," grunted Pax, trying to will his headache away. "Except the Masters."

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The tea had helped. All four cups. There was certainly a truth to Charren's oft-stated view that Records ran on tea and biscuits. In fact, the whole Institute was very much in the thrall of hot beverages. It was probably much the same at such institutions the world over.

*"Tea and biscuits is one of the few culinary constants throughout the many civilizations of the Universe."*

The sentence popped into Dea's head, unbidden. She had no idea where it had come from. A fragment of fiction, most probably, not that she ever read much. Of course, she'd no

doubt absorbed enormous amounts of information during her time here, much of it filed away uselessly in the vaults of her subconscious. It was an odd fragment, though. "*Civilizations of the Universe*." What a strangely authoritative statement. Of course, Dea had heard the old stories about beings from other worlds arriving here in times past, but there was generally agreed to be no reliable evidence of it. Still, such concepts did fire the imagination.

She rifled through her papers, attempting to focus her mind back onto her work. There was centuries' worth of physical records in the Institute's archives. It was the job of the staff at the Hall of Records to analyze, sort, file and transcribe them. It was an arduous, ongoing task, but one that she enjoyed. Something in her nature allowed her to sift through everything from ancient parchments to modern judicial documents with a keen eye and a sharp mind. Everything she read here felt new to her. Most of the staff in Records soon grew discontented with the constant deluge of old information. Charren, in particular, had the air of someone who had seen it all before. Despite his good humour, he held troubled memories of earlier times when Myriad was polluted by crime and civil unrest. An ancient, proud city state, it had descended to, at some times, a realm of chaos. While the populace struggled, preying on one another, fighting to survive, the government focused its attention of ongoing conflicts with other states such as Centurius and Archeon, conflicts that had often broken into full-scale warfare. The plains between the city states were scarred by decades of warfare, ever more deadly weaponry being used by waves of armed forces, moving on from walled enclave to another in their attempts to gain new ground. Most such attacks were quickly repelled, only to be repeated as the victim became the aggressor for a time. The cycle had continued on an on, for year after year, the once great civilizations falling closer and closer to anarchy.

Such troubled days seemed a lifetime ago, now. Even old hands like Charren felt as if years had passed since the Masters had taken control of civilization. In truth, it hadn't been all that long; not even a full year. Yet the influence of the Masters had brought peace and order back to Myriad, and all indications were that this was true of the other states as well. Indeed, the handful of otherlanders who had occasionally come to the city to make their way had steadily increased. The trickle had become an unending flow.

Dea sifted through the latest wad of documents that had been assigned to her; a densely written account of the earthquake that had so terribly damaged Centurius twelve years ago. Refugees had poured out of that city and into Myriad. Despite their traditional enmity, the government of Myriad had allowed a number of the homeless wanderers to stay in the city. Predictably, they had become the target of discrimination by some of the citizens of Myriad; several of those in young adulthood had been arrested on crimes of espionage, terrorism, or lesser crimes such as robbery. They were a useful outlet for the city, somewhere to exercise their distrust without resorting to all-out conflict with a neighboring nation. The problems had died down, of course, replaced by other, more concrete issues, and the distrust had turned back to its usual targets: the states around Myriad, and the unwanted lower classes within.

Dea concentrated on the material in front of her, page after page of statistics and analyses. Information to be recorded, copied, filed. Preserved so that future generations could see how far their society had once fallen, and how lucky they were to live in a better world.

It was only after some considerable time that she eventually reached the section that listed individual refugees' status. Each person would have to be cross-referenced with the

existing database, all details filed correctly to build up an accurate record of the existing populace. Strictly speaking, that wasn't part of her job, but she had developed something of a personal interest in the matter.

However, after three hours of meticulous studying, not one reference to a Dea Palluri had been found.

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The camp was little more than a cluster of wooden shacks, constructed in a rough circle. It occupied a clearing in the jungle, the foliage sparse enough to allow a reasonably clear view of the deep blue sky above. The sand-coloured structure that Tom, Val and the Doctor has been heading to was mere yards away. Had the sharrix creature not attacked, thought Tom, then they would have come into contact with these hunters in any case. It didn't make sense though - the tower-like structure was incongruous amongst these makeshift dwellings, protruding rudely from the jungle, seemingly with no call to be there.

"How do you intend to get us to the city from here?" asked the Doctor. "I don't see any vehicles. Just how far is this city, anyway?"

"Couldn't tell you," said Dorlan. "We just come here through the transport point and go back the same way. There's a local settlement a few miles east from here. They're the only reason the transport point was built out here. Primitives never use it, though. Wouldn't be welcome in the city if they did."

"Transport point?" replied the Doctor. "As in a teleporter? Excellent! I'd hoped for something along those lines. I presume that this is just one of many such devices, all linked into a large network that spread across the planet?"

"That's right," said Dorlan, a look of confusion, perhaps suspicion, spreading across his face. "How can you not know about that? How'd you even get out here if you didn't know about that?"

"We had an alternative means of transport. It's no longer of use. Not with a network of teleporters disrupting the local graviton field. No wonder we got pulled off course."

"So it's a teleporter," said Tom. "Great. Fantastic. So let's get to this city and get Val to a hospital."

"Well, now," sneered Dorlan, looking to his two associates. "I suppose you boys don't know how to use this thing?"

"I'm sure I could work it out," said the Doctor.

"Maybe in time. But I'll sure have a head start, especially with my comrades here to watch my back."

"Dorlan, whatever you're thinking about, forget it," said the Doctor. "You can have the venom and any of its profits to yourself once Miss Rossi is recovered. We really don't care. We just want to see her safe and well."

"So do I, so do I. Only I think I'd rather have her to myself. I'm sure she'd be grateful when she finds out how you two abandoned her and I came to her rescue. Real grateful."

"Put her down," said Tom, putting as much steel into his voice as he could.



"Take care of them for me, boys," said the hunter. Slinging Val over his shoulder, he slammed his free hand onto a panel on the base section of the transport tower, vanishing with a soft pop.

"The bastard!" swore Tom. "Come on, Doctor, get this thing working. We've got to get after them."

"I don't think so," snarled the uglier of Dorlan's two henchmen, whipping his gun from his holster.

"I suggest you put that down immediately," said the Doctor.

"Or what?" laughed the second of the hunters.

The Doctor moved with incredible speed, whipping his right leg out towards the gun-toting hunter. His boot connected with the man's knee with a crack, the hunter crashing down with a yelp of pain.

"Tom, the gun!" cried the Doctor, as he slammed his palm up into the thug's face. Tom leapt forward, grabbing the firearm with both hands. As he wrenched it out of the hunter's grip, the Doctor spun the other way, coming face to face with the second hunter, his gun already primed and aimed. Dropping to the floor, the Doctor kicked out once again, at the very moment the would-be killer chose to pull the trigger. As the Doctor kicked the hunter's feet out from under him, moving to grab his weapon, the sound of tearing metal and burning parts registered in the Doctor's mind. The transport point was right behind him.

"Please tell me that wasn't the teleporter going up in smoke," he pleaded.

Tom sighed. "It was."

"You damned idiot!" yelled the first of the attackers to his associate. "You've done it now! How're we going to get out of this place and back to the city with that in pieces?"

"You're not," said the Doctor, pointing his appropriated gun at the assailant. Tom did the same to his ally. "I suggest the pair of you get out of here now, before someone shows up to find out what's happened to their transporter. Any more of you lot in the forest at the moment?"

The hunters shook their heads.

"Then you'd better look out for yourselves Nobody's going to come to your rescue. Now get out of here!"

The two disarmed huntsmen turned on their heels and fled into the jungle.

"Put that thing down, Mister Brooker," admonished the Doctor, dropping his own gun carefully to the floor. "I hope you weren't actually planning to use that." He looked at the transport point, its fronting torn up by the buckshot. The machine sparked worryingly. "I'd better take a look at that."

"What if someone does come looking to see who damaged it?"

"Honestly, Brooker, you're as bad as those two. How is anyone going to get here in a hurry? With this down, we're isolated."

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Vriddian weather was notoriously unpleasant throughout the world. However, it was a common misconception that there was nothing more than a never-ending blizzard that raged

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throughout the year. Now it was summer, and the snow had finally died back. The rains had started.

Pax carefully slid from his seat onto the glassy surface beneath, taking the characteristic waddle of one who knew how painful it could be to fall onto their backside on the ice. The rains melted the snow, mixing with the filthy boots of workers and travelers into a filthy grey slush, a vast sloppy ashtray. Then the night came, the rains subsided, and the slush froze over. Fields of ice were the result, followed inevitably by broken limbs and bruised buttocks.

Penn plopped to the ground behind him. Together, they took in the scene they were presented with. Cautiously baby-stepping across the ice were people in their dozens; well over a hundred had gathered here. It was one of the largest assembled workforces that Pax had ever seen. Shaggily-bearded mountain men stood side by side with young, fresh-faced villagers like Pax himself. All were gathered around the single man-made structure in this vast plain of snow and ice. The solitary tower, the transport point that promised to take Pax, and all these hardy snowbound folk, to a better life in Myriad. Transport points such as these had linked nations throughout the world under the Masters' aegis, allowing a flow of technology to the less advanced civilizations. Still, in such remote, unsophisticated countries such as Vridi, the system was seldom used, and what technology came to the locals was usually little more than trinkets carried by merchants. Yet now the city state of Myriad had called out for workers for their great endeavour, granting the hardy frostbitten souls of Vridi a chance to move to a nation of sophistication, high technology and reliable hot running water. The pale sandy colour of the tower was obstructed by the snow that had settled on its surface and embedded into the grooves and indentations of its finer structure. Two of the tallest locals had been drafted in to clear it, prodding the pallid deposits with wooden poles in an attempt to dislodge them. It was curious to see such dismally primitive attempts to render this great endeavour of technology operable.

"Goodbye, Penn," he said, clasping his friend's hands within his. A brief embrace and he turned to join the throng of men waiting to be sent to the city.

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The Doctor sat cross-legged; up to his armpits in slender insulated cabling. He held two such cables in his hands, trying his best to persuade a head to dock with an entirely incompatible socket. His hair was plastered to his forehead with sweat, his cheeks flushed and his expression sour, verging on murderous. After some thought, Tom risked enquiring as to his progress.

"It's ridiculous! This system makes no sense!" The great, ever-knowledgeable Time Lord threw the mismatched leads to the dusty ground. "Who the hell designed this?"

"Um... aliens?"

"Well, of course aliens! That's not the point!" He wiped his brow with his sleeve. "I can rewire anything. Absolutely anything electronic created by any civilized culture. Except this. It's simple nonsense. Claptrap. It's as though someone saw how the technology worked once and then reproduced it from memory, and a poor memory at that. The basic concepts are clear. It's a transmat, a few quirks in design here and there, but not much difference to the sort of

thing you'd find on twenty-first century Earth. It's the hardware that doesn't make sense - it simply doesn't correlate."

Tom had to ask. "Twenty-first century Earth?"

The Doctor breathed out heavily. "*Late* twenty-first century Earth. Very late. Possibly parallel. I forget."

"Do you want me to take a look at it?" suggested Tom, with a sensible touch of nervousness.

"What would be the point? This is leagues ahead of anything you're used to, and like I said, the theory's sound. You're a programmer, not an engineer. You'd be completely out of your depth. Worse than useless."

"Thanks so much," snorted Tom in reply. "It looks like you're worse than useless yourself!"

"If you had any idea of the complexity of this operation -"

"Val is still out there somewhere! With that bloody thug of a hunter! We don't have any time to lose, and you're quite happy to sit there twiddling with wires and blaming your failure on everyone else!"

The Doctor shot to his feet, fire in his eyes. "If you think for one minute that I'm happy about this situation, you arrogant little ape, you've -"

"You're calling *me* arrogant?" interjected Tom, refusing to allow the Doctor to get a sentence in. "Pot-bloody-kettle mate!"

"I am doing everything I can to get Valentina back, and if you have any better ideas then you're welcome to try them!"

The two men were virtually nose-to-nose, so close that droplets of sweat shaken from one landed wetly on the other. Tom breathed in deeply, then out again. In, out. Calm.

"You called her Valentina, at least. It's usually Miss Rossi."

"Yes, Mister Brooker, it is, usually." He sat down in front of the open panel again.

Tom decided to back down. This wasn't going to get them anywhere, certainly not to Val.

"I know you're doing what you can. I'm just worried about her."

"I know," replied the Doctor. "So am I."

Tom plonked himself down a short distance from the Doctor.

"I've read a little quantum physics. I was always under the impression that matter transmission was impossible."

"Well," said the Doctor, as he busied himself once again with the electronic entrails, "it is. In a sense. The laws of the universe don't really allow it. The trick is fooling the universe into allowing it without realizing it. You have to pull the wool over its eyes, so to speak. That's the biggest part of it - making the impossible a quantum possibility."

"Okaaay," drawled Tom. "I guess you're right - way out of my depth."

"Oh, this is just rewiring. Come on, take a look. I suppose a fresh pair of eyes can't hurt."

Tom scrabbled over, taking a good look at the variously coloured leads that snaked around the Doctor. Looking at it from the perspective of someone with experience of highly

complex circuitry, a little hardware design knowledge and even a dash of work with androids, he had to admit that he had absolutely no clue.

"Well, I hate to say I told you so..." said the Doctor.

"You love to say I told you so," replied Tom. "Still, thinking about what you were saying... if it's all a matter of doing the impossible..."

"Hmmm?" murmured the Doctor, absently, his mind fixed on the gadgetry in his hands.

"Well, could that be it? Maybe it shouldn't make sense as you'd think of it. Maybe it's a case of creating something, well, something impossible."

"I appreciate your help, Mister Brooker, but that is frankly the most unhelpful advice that I've ever..." He trailed off, and sat silently for a short time. Tom was just about to speak, when the Doctor slapped himself violently on his slick forehead.

"That's it! That's absolutely it! No wonder it doesn't make sense! Thank you Mister Brooker. That could be just the insight we've been looking for!"

As the Doctor dived into his work with renewed vigour, Tom couldn't help feeling just a little smug. It wasn't long, however, before that slipped away and the worry took over again.

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Pax was used to work. What he wasn't used to was working in the sun.

This wasn't harsh sunlight, he was told. It wasn't even a hot day. He believed that. It was still a damn sight hotter than Vriddian weather.

Foolishly, he'd expected work here to be rather more specialized. A little more technically-based. Sure, there had been plenty of cabling and circuitry going in, but so far, he'd mostly been responsible for carrying the stuff. There were still mutterings that the overseers were looking out for those who had more technical skills, but he hadn't seen much evidence of it.

As he dragged the front end of a vast data cable towards the tower, three fellow workers taking positions along the cord's length, he wondered just what could warrant engineering on such a vast scale. Was that the idea? He had to work this out, prove that he understood what the system was for?

He gazed up at the tower, squinting against the sunlight. It trailed data cables the thickness of his arm, power cabling like tree trunks, leading into vast relay stations or embedded in the concrete that supported paved the city ground. There were circuit webs in there capable of handling more data than all the computers in this city combined, he was sure.

Why would a transport tower need to be so powerful? What were they planning to transport? You could send an army of men through that thing, all at once, he realized.

As his eyes adjusted, he noticed the faint red sheen of the Rust Moon, making its presence known even in the blue sky of the daytime.

*My life*, he thought. With this sort of power you could send an army there. You could cross worlds.

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"Now that," said the Doctor, slamming the hatch shut and bolting it locked, "should just about do it."

The Doctor's work had taken him the better part of an hour, which Tom supposed was pretty impressive when it came to repairing an entirely alien piece of technology. Nonetheless, it had felt like an age. All the time they were sat there, Val had been in untold danger. They couldn't even be sure that they'd be able to find her now that the transport system was repaired. Tom forced himself to put these concerns at the back of his mind. He had to focus on finding her. Had to believe that they would.

"So," he said to the satisfied looking Time Lord, "you've actually fixed it? It's actually safe to use it?"

"Absolutely!" said the Doctor. "Well, more or less. It's not going to be a hundred per cent accurate, I'm afraid. Still, it shouldn't be too bad - it's now a fairly simple matter to get it to repeat its last set of actions. We may be a little off, but we won't be far from where Miss Rossi landed. So we're sure to find her soon."

"What if she transported again after that?" asked Tom, unable to suppress the worry any longer.

"Then we find out where that one took her and follow on again. Trust me, Mister Brooker, we will find her, even if it takes months." He saw the look on Tom's face. "Don't worry, I'm sure it won't. She's a resourceful woman; she'll be alright till we find her. Chin up." The Doctor looked at the now rather trashed transport tower. "Let me see... we place our hands here, like so..." he put his left palm to the rounded panel part way up the structure's base section. Tom did the same. Another frightening thought struck him.

"Is it safe for us to use the same part at the same time? Only, I've seen *'The Fly'*, I know what can happen with these things."

"Mister Brooker," sighed the Doctor. "I think I know a little more about these systems than someone who once watched a horror film about a monstrous mutant insect." He added, after a moment of consideration, "Did you watch the original, or the eighties version with Jeff Goldblum?"

"The eighties one. I saw the one they made in 2015 too, but it wasn't half as good."

"Oh, I haven't caught that one. Never mind that. Stop distracting me. Now, the controls are fairly simple, I'm sure it's a simple matter of an alphanumeric code to repeat the previous destination settings. Brace yourself, Mister Brooker. This may be a little bumpy."

The Doctor activated the system.

The world dissolved into whiteness.

Then ...

...nothing.

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They didn't have buildings this big back in Esh.

He didn't know why, but, from the outside, the gargantuan structures that lined Myriad's streets didn't bother him. They were vast, impressive, beautiful - in fact, just how he

had imagined them to be. Inside, though, that was another matter. He'd never thought to try imagining how they'd be inside.

The main hall of the Institute was a single colossal space, a trunk that branched off through the many arched doorways that lined its walls. Staircases, great skeletons of metal, spiraled up through circular gaps that had been left in the ceiling, staff undertaking vertiginous vertical treks to upper floors. Dozens of people filled the space, all moving with hast and purpose, appearing in one door and vanishing through another, the panorama constantly changing. Even above the constant murmur of a hundred people going about their business, Pax's heavy workman's shoes squeaked conspicuously on the highly polished marble floor. He felt suddenly, immediately, out of his depth.

"Can I help you at all?"

He snapped to his left with a start. So entranced had he been by the swarming of the people here, he had completely failed to notice that one of them had come right up to his side. The girl - no, the woman - was professionally dressed and had the air of someone comfortable in her surroundings. Clearly, she worked here, and that instantly rendered Pax even more nervous than before. After all, he wasn't really supposed to be here, and he felt as though that was stamped across his forehead. 'Out of place' must radiate from him. Yet the woman was smiling, politely waiting for him to speak. Still waiting, in fact.

"Oh, um, yes. Sorry, I'm looking for... I'm not completely sure. The library, I suppose."

"All right," she replied, still smiling. Pax noticed that she was clutching a stack of files. "I'll show you the way."

"Would, um, would you like some help with that?" He'd not quite anticipated this. He knew there'd be women working here, this was the big, equal-rights city, but he'd assumed that they'd be stern, middle-aged, scholarly types. Distinctly unattractive types. Not like this girl. She was beautiful. Pax's self-consciousness levels rose up another three notches. He felt as though some kind of alarm would go off.

"Yes, I'm going to Records. You could give me a hand with them if you like," she replied, passing them across to him. "The library is attached to my department. I'll show you it on the way."

He followed alongside her, trying to keep up as she effortlessly swerved and dodged through the throng of people, all of whom seemed to be heading in the opposite direction to them.

"There's a department of records?" he asked. Conversation, that was important when you met girls, wasn't it?

"First time here?" she smiled. "Don't worry. A lot of people never come here even though they've grown up here."

"How did you know - ?"

"That you're not from the city? Just a feeling. Where are you from?"

"Esh, in Vriddi. It's up north in the snows."

"Yes, I know where it is. Geographical records are a lot more reliable these days. Plenty of exchange between countries. Not like before, when hardly anyone knew what was happening beyond the state boundary."

"To be honest, I didn't really know much until I got here. Sometimes traders would come from Janx with stories of the places they'd travelled to, but not many people leave Vriddi. It's a pretty closed sort of community in the villages." He fumbled for another line of conversation. "So, have you always lived here?"

"No, I'm... well, it's a little hard to explain easily. Maybe some other time. We're here now."

"Oh... right, well. Thanks." He bundled the files back to her, and watched her as she turned and walked down the corridor.

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The world reappeared, smothered in white. Tom materialized, his feet appearing on the surface of a snow drift. Unable to support this sudden, unexpected mass, the snow compacted beneath him, giving way to his weight. The brief illusion of solid ground gave way to the reality of a blanket of flakes of frozen water. Tom's feet gave way, and he fell backwards, landing heavily in the snow. At least it's a soft landing, he thought, sinking into its yielding mass.

His hands stung with the cold as he pushed himself to his feet. Hurriedly he patted the length of his body, brushing away snow whilst reassuring himself that he had come through the teleport with leaving any parts of himself behind.

"Doctor?" he said, looking round for the Time Lord. "Where are we? I thought we were headed for a city?" His question remained unanswered. He saw nothing around him but a vast expanse of white.

"Doctor!" he cried as loud as he could. "Are you here?" His voice dropped to a feeble whisper as the reality of the situation sank in. "Doctor?" He surveyed his surroundings again, turning a full three-sixty degrees. He was completely alone. "Bugger," he said.

\*\*\*\*\*

The Doctor landed awkwardly, losing his balance immediately upon materialization; the yielding surface on which he found himself unable to prevent him from toppling forward. Spreading his arms wide to catch himself, he received a vicious cut to his left hand as it came into contact with a sharp-edged rock. He cried out with the sudden, unexpected pain. Righting himself, he examined his hand, fishing into his pockets with his good hand and removing a plain white handkerchief with which to bind it and stem the flow of blood from his palm.

"Damn and blast!" he cursed, tightening the knot around his hand. He looked around himself, taking in his surroundings, and the distinct lack in company.

"Mr. Brooker?" he called out, knowing full well he shouldn't expect an answer. "Tom?" He sighed in irritation. "No good, Doctor," he chided himself, "You've lost him. You messed that one up good and proper. He could be anywhere on this planet now, as could you." He continued to scan his surroundings. Smooth, white sand beneath his feet, grey overcast sky above him. The little sunlight that penetrated the cracks in the clouds glinted off the sheer surfaces of the various agglomerations of rocks that surrounded him. There was no transport mast to be seen in the vicinity, although a low, thin mist obscured his view of the more distant

reaches of his new environment. There was little he could do now but explore his new environment, try to get his bearings and work out where he was. Only then could he hope to locate another transport point and have any hope of locating either of his travelling companions. Picking a direction at random, the Doctor strode into the mist.

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The tips of Pax's fingers were becoming numb; the effect of thumbing through books for longer than he knew. This was completely useless. There were books about Vriddi, but with titles such as *A Study of Northern Continental Snowfall Patterns*, *On the Life Cycle of the Vriddian Frost-gribbet* and *Huntsmen of the Tundra: An Anthropology*. Nothing anecdotal, nothing that had been written by anyone who had actually been there. No clues to who may once have travelled through its plains and left behind a young boy in the wilderness. Learning about Myriad garnered better results, but even then, there was the feeling that the material here wasn't telling the full story. There was the official story about the Masters stepping in to save the day - and nothing more. Life had been dangerous, crime-ridden and warlike before the Masters had shown up, and now it was ordered and peaceful. No other opinions, no arguments, no alternatives. Yet Pax couldn't even put his finger on why that was bothering him - if that was what had happened, why would there be any other stories? Why did he feel that something was missing?

Looking into the Masters' background was even less fruitful. There seemed to be no books on the subject whatsoever, merely snatches of information in various volumes on other subjects. If he brought up the subject with the sour-faced librarians, he was confronted by a distinctly unhelpful attitude.

"Why would you want books on the Masters?" he'd hear. "Isn't it enough, all they've done for us?" "Too much curiosity can get you in a lot of trouble, you know. I'd leave it." "We don't want any subversion here, young man!"

In the end, he gave up. There were dozens of books here - it would take him hours to go through them all. Noticing the ornate clock on the library wall, Pax realized that he had overrun on his break by almost an hour. Damn. He was going to be in some serious trouble. He made back for the site as fast as he could. He didn't want to lose his job on the third day. He didn't even know what would happen to him if he did. Would they send him back to Esh, or just leave him to fend for himself on the streets here?

As he sprinted back to site, attempting to concoct a reasonable excuse, he promised himself that he'd return tomorrow.

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The thought that was second in Tom's mind, as he trudged through the shin-deep snow, was this: *Thank Christ I kept my jumper on me, or I'd be screwed.*

The thought that was foremost in his mind, however, was this: *Oh my god, I'm freezing, I'm freezing, and I'm going to die...*

Tom had buried his hands as far down in his jeans pockets as he could without bursting through the lining, but his fingers were still numb from the cold. Walking with his hands



essentially glued to his legs wasn't helping him maintain his balance in the deep snow. He'd gone over more than once, the tiny crystals managing to cram into every crevice of his face, freezing the inside of his nostrils and the tops of his eyelids before they melted, trickling snottily down his skin. He couldn't see his fingers and toes, but he knew they were blue. They *felt* blue. While his nose, on the other hand, felt like a constantly dripping garden tap. Overpowering all of these sensations, greater than the stinging pain in his freezing ears, worse than the sharp splitting of his dry lips, more unpleasant than the mucus that was freezing solid on his upper lip, was the sheer agonizing cold that permeated his whole body, and the exhaustion that threatened to conquer him from the legs upwards.

He squinted through the tears in his wind-stung eyes. He was still on track. The lights were still ahead of him. Keep going, down the hill, past the frosted woods. There was a town, or a village. A dozen or so groups of lights, each one surely a house or small building. It didn't matter who was there, he needed to get somewhere warm.

He tripped again, his deadened legs unable to support him after a poor step. He landed face first again, the deathly cold biting into the skin of his face once more. He pulled his hands out of his pockets, painfully pushed himself into a kneeling position. Not quite enough energy to shift into standing all in one go. How far was that village? A mile? Two? Ten? He couldn't tell. But it was too far.

He looked to his left, towards the edge of the forest. That was closer... Was it worth changing direction, making his way there? The treetops sported dense layers of snow. Would they be enough to shelter him? He could feel the wind picking up. There was more snow in the air, too. Not just the odd flakes lifted from the carpet of snow around him, as it had been. Snow was falling. This was getting worse by the moment.

He thought back, tried to find something in his head that might help him in such a situation. Wasn't there some way to survive *under* the snow? He was sure he'd seen that on some TV show. You dug out a sort of igloo in the snow, covered yourself up so it kept the heat in. How did you do that without freezing? What sort of stupid idea was that?

He looked again at the woods. They were so close. A deep, pained moan rising from his throat, he forced his legs to work, pushing himself into a standing position. He pushed on, towards the trees, a path at right angles to the village. He didn't know if it was the right thing to do. It was closer. He had to get somewhere, get some kind of shelter. He pushed on, one tortured footstep after another, until, finally, he left the ever heavier snowfall behind him and entered the shelter of the treetops.

He crashed. Collapsing onto his numbed backside, his back slumping against a tree trunk, he finally allowed himself to rest. I'm not fit enough for this crap, he thought. If I'd have known that this sort of thing was going to be involved, I never would've got on board that damned TARDIS. He felt the rough surface of the tree through his all-too-thin jumper and shirt, rubbing his back against it. The prickliness on his skin gave a comforting illusion of warmth.

*Don't fall asleep. You mustn't fall asleep. I remember that. I'm sure that's important...*

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"Come back for more, have you?"

Pax almost dropped the book he was reading. Slamming the volume shut far too loudly, he spun round on the spot. Behind him stood the girl he had met the day before.

"Ah... yes. Yes, I have. I couldn't find what I was looking for yesterday, so... I came back." Very good, he thought. Good job sounding like an idiot.

The girl smiled. "I'm Dea," she said. They stood in silence for a moment. "You're supposed to tell me your name next," she laughed.

"Yes, sorry. I'm Pax."

"What is it you're looking for? Maybe I can help."

"Oh, yes. That'd be great. As long as that's alright. I don't want to keep you from your work."

"It's fine. I'm on a break now anyway."

"Well, I've been trying to find something about..." Pax looked around, nervously. "Look, don't overreact, don't shout out or anything... but I'm trying to find out about the Masters."

Dea didn't shout out. She didn't call for the librarians to have him thrown out. Instead, she looked interested, although she did lower her voice.

"The Masters? Really?"

"That's right. Although I haven't really found anything. You'd think they'd have something here about them, who they are, where they come from." He looked around at the others perusing the books. "This lot though, it's like they're scared to even talk about them."

"I know, it's strange, isn't it?" Dea replied. "I tried bringing it up before, to my overseer, but he told me not to question things. It's like everyone loves the Masters for what they've done for us, but no one actually *thinks* about them. Nobody actually comes out and says it, but they're, well..."

"Scared of them?" suggested Pax.

"Yes. That's right. The strangest thing is; nobody even seems sure what it is they've done. Just that they've made the world... better. I mean, they've stopped crime, ended the wars, I know all that, but... How did they do it?"

Pax felt a weight lift; a pressure he hadn't even realized was there. Just to know there was someone else actually thinking about these things... he suddenly became aware that every eye in the room was focused on the two of them.

Dea spoke first. "I don't think we should carry on with this conversation." She turned, began to move away. Pax put the book back amongst the volumes on the shelf, ready to leave, when she spoke again.

"Can you meet me here? Later?"

"Sure, I guess. I finish work at six bells."

"Perfect. Meet me outside the main entrance, alright?" She hurriedly left the library, and Pax watched her until she left his sight.

Even as he walked from room, aware of the scrutinizing eyes upon him, Pax couldn't help but smile. He was looking forward to tonight.

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Tom woke with a feeling of sudden, stomach-turning horror. He'd fallen asleep. How long had it been? He hadn't been buried under snow. That was a good sign. He struggled to his feet, his soaking jeans clinging to his skin, the ends frozen to crispness. God, I'm so *tired*, he thought. How did I even manage to wake up? Maybe I should just sit back down in the nice, comfy snow. Go back to sleep and let it just take me...

There came a howl, from within the forest. Beginning low and throaty, a snarl rising in pitch to an ear-splitting screech. A wolf? Something like it. And worst of all, it sounded horribly, terrifyingly close.

The stomach-churning sensation returned. At this precise moment, freezing to death sounded quite agreeable. The howl came again, closer this time, and the dull, muffled sound of footsteps in the snow.

Tom ran, or at least, staggered forwards at an appreciable speed. Back out of the shelter of the woods, into the snow that fell now in great droves, the air almost as white as the ground. The muted pounding of the beast's paws grew louder. He risked a look over his shoulder. Through the frozen fall he could see it. Hard to make out, camouflaged by its white coat, but visible; a huge, leonine shape, yet with the muzzle of a dog or wolf. Could he see the slavering jaws, those deadly, razor-like fangs? Or was that his imagination, his mind terrified beyond reason? It wouldn't matter. Soon enough, the thing would be upon him.

*Oh my god*, he thought. *This is it*. The beast slowed to a stroll, confident that its prey had nowhere to run to or hide. Its back arched, its body tensing as though to pounce...

A gunshot came from nowhere, followed by a belch of flame. The creature screamed, a sound of pure anger and malice, and through itself down onto its side. A plume of steam erupted with a hiss, as the flames that had caught its fur were extinguished in the snow. A reddish stain spread across the snow. It had been wounded - but not enough. It rose back to its feet. Even with the near-opacity of the air between them, Tom could see its malevolent red eyes, two blobs of blazing rage in a field of white. Yet they were no longer trained on him. Turning his head, he saw them. Two men, so well-covered as to be barely recognizable as such. One held up a long-barreled gun, the other some tubular device. The gun wielder slung it over his shoulder by its leather strap, pulling something from a pouch wrapped around his trouser.

The beast leaped, its claws outstretched in the direction of this first man. In a movement so quick as to be virtually invisible, his arm was at the beast's belly. With a guttural whimper, the beast fell back from him, landing on the ground. The man fell to his knees, as did his partner, who set down his device and pulled out his own weapon. In short order, the beast had been slit from groin to chest, its steaming innards spilling out. The two men held out their bloodied knives, wiping them in the snow until the worst of the crimson fluid had been removed. A last, agonized breath escaped the beast's jaws.

His two rescuers turned to him, and Tom opened his mouth to thank them - only to receive a heavily-gloved fist in the jaw.

He blacked out.

\*\*\*\*\*

The Doctor wondered whether there was anything more to his environment than sand and rocks. The mist made it impossible to see more than a few feet ahead of himself. He could be alone in this place, one man in a desert, or there could be a vast city within walking distance. There was no way to tell until he stumbled upon some evidence of civilization.

Squatting down by the jagged rocks, the Doctor cautiously ran the fingers of his good hand over the surfaces.

"Smooth as glass," he muttered. "Hmm..."

A quick scout around determined that all the rocks were, in fact, masses of glass, many smoothed by erosion, but some sporting fresh, sharp edges. It was, to the Doctor, all disturbingly familiar.

"Where have I seen this before?" he muttered. "Such a long time ago. My mind's getting too clogged up in its old age. Senility will set in, if I'm not careful. I'll be talking to myself before long."

A sharp pain on the skin of his temple broke his contemplation. He touched the spot with a couple of fingers, the skin sore to the touch. Another sting to the back of his neck, then another to his wrist. A moist, yet hot sensation.

"Acid," he voiced in realization. "That's not good at all..."

The Doctor darted into the mist as fast as he could, thankful that the foggy barrier proved to be nothing more than condensing water vapour. There was a strange ecosystem at work here, it was clear. In fact, he had an inkling that it was not entirely natural; and yet, it was still naggingly familiar. Somewhere he'd visited in his youth? He wondered, as he pulled his shirt up over his head. He cursed himself for discarding his coat earlier. He had to find shelter, and fast.

The acid rain continued to fall, at an ever increasing rate. Hoping against hope that a droplet wouldn't find his eyes, the Doctor swung his head round in all directions, looking for a hiding place. With a shout of triumph, he located an overhanging ridge of rock - or, more accurately, he corrected himself, glass. Taking cover, he watched as the acidic precipitation began to fall in earnest, the gentle thud of acid on sand becoming a steady susurrations.

"Acid..." the Time Lord repeated, under his breath, as the downpour continued. Somewhere in his mind, a long-buried memory was unearthed. "Oh, it couldn't be..."

The Doctor watched for some time as the downpour continued, before it finally petered out. The sunlight was now brighter, the cloud cover somewhat depleted, and even the mist had begun to break up. The glass 'rocks' shone brilliantly in the new light. Stepping out from his hidey-hole, the Doctor paced forward across the sand. A shoreline was visible now, and a short walk would confirm the Doctor's suspicions.

Approaching the edge of what he now suspected to be an island, the Doctor removed a pencil from one of his many trouser pockets. Stooping, he dipped the end into the gently lapping sea. The pencil frothed with a sizzling hiss. Pulling it back, the Doctor inspected the remaining stub of his HB, the majority of the pencil having dissolved into its component molecules.

"A sea of acid," he said to himself, straightening up "That settles it. This is Marinus."

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Fifteen minutes after six bells, Pax arrived, somewhat breathless, to find Dea standing at the steps to the great hall.

"I wasn't sure you were coming," she said.

"...sorry..." he panted, "...had to work a little... longer than... I thought... Ran most of it."

She smiled that smile again. "Don't worry. Catch your breath and we'll go and get a drink."

"Brilliant...idea."

They made their way to a quiet bar, although, truth be told, all bars in Myriad seemed quiet.

"Everyone's scared of their own shadow here," said Pax, as they settled down at a table that seemed far enough removed from the main body of clientele.

"I take it's not the same in Vriddi?" asked Dea.

"Not as bad, no. People don't like to make trouble, it's true, but who does? But we still have a few drinks at the end of a working week, raise our spirits. Things at least get lively." He looked around the bar. "I mean, when was the last time there was a brawl here?"

"Brawl?" Dea seemed shocked. "Like, a fight?"

"Yes, a fight. I mean, in the inns back home..." He stopped and thought. "Actually, I don't remember there ever having been an actual fight, but I've heard people talking about them. The older villagers. Now that I come to think of it, I can't think of the last time one actually happened."

"Before the Masters came?" suggested Dea.

"Hmm... I suppose it was." Pax frowned. His head began to swim, his thoughts suddenly heavy and unclear. "What were we saying?"

"It's hard to think about it, isn't it?" asked Dea. "About the old days. Sometimes, I'm not sure I even remember the days before."

"I know what you mean. Probably a few too many of these," laughed Pax, raising his glass.

"No, it's more than that. Like you said, no one seems to know anything about the Masters. Why not? Why is everyone so frightened to talk about them?"

"There's nothing in the library that I could find. Mind you, it's a huge place."

Dea shook her head. "Pax, it's *tiny*. Libraries should be vast, with thousands of books on all manner of subjects. I don't know why, but they should. I know they should. Most of the library has been hidden away and closed off."

"What about the records?" asked Pax. "There must be something in your department."

"You'd have thought so." Dea ran her hands through her hair, and Pax couldn't help watching her, watching the dark strands cascade around her face. "I've tried to find records on all sorts of things, but there's so little there from before. Everything's been filed away and forgotten about."

"So why are you keeping records? What's the point if they're just lost again?" Pax added, only half-serious: "Are you sure you're keeping records, or throwing them away?"

"I don't know... I don't have access to all that much. I've kept copies of a few things from the old days, but it's very little. Everything is pretty quickly filed away from public sight."

"So they're hiding the facts?"

"Yes, I suppose... in any case, I've found nothing on the Masters. There's a story about them, living in a mountain, on an island somewhere..."

"An island of glass?"

"That's right," said Dea, surprise in her voice. "You've heard the story too?"

"Mmm, not sure where though. I'm sure someone told me. I don't know, perhaps I dreamt it." Pax chuckled at his own, half-hearted humour, and downed his drink.

"Oh my... Pax, I think I did too."

"What? Dreamt it, you mean? Seriously?"

"Yes, I did! I remember! And in the middle of the tower, in a cell, sits in a prisoner, a man in chains..."

"... a raggedy man with a beard," added Pax, as memories crept into focus, "and just before you wake up..."

Dea grasped his hands, looked into his eyes. "Just before you wake up, he looks right at you, and you know, somehow..."

"...that you know him." Pax swallowed his mouth dry. "I've never told anyone about that dream."

"Neither have I," said Dea.

Pax sat back, eyes wide, unsure what to think, how to think. "I need another drink," he said.

\*\*\*\*\*

For the second time that day, Tom woke up to a sense of panic.

He was in some kind of wooden shack. Barely more than a room. The only light came from an oil lamp hanging from the ceiling. He sat up on the scratchy, straw-stuffed mattress, bringing him to eye level with the burly, bearded man who sat opposite him on a rickety wooden seat.

"Hunh, he's awake then." The man rose from his seat slightly, leaning forward. Tom suddenly noticed that a second man, still fully clothed, was asleep on another mattress next to his, sleeping with surprising peace and silence. The first man leaned down and bellowed in his comrade's ear. "I said, he's AWAKE!"

"What? Who's awake?" mumbled the second man, who was older, bigger and even hairier than the first. He sat up, looking over at Tom. "Oh, him. Ruddy good thing too. Saves me having to stay up and watch you."

"What the hell were you doing out here in your personals?" asked the first man, in a voice like a throatful of gravel and ash.

"My what?"

"You're understuff," said the second, rising from his mattress. In spite of his greater size, his voice was higher and softer than the first man's. He put his hand to the small of his back,

leaning back and arcing his spine, prompting a series of ear-splitting cracks and crunches. He let out a low, satisfied moan.

"Bloody miracle you didn't die out there," said the first. "Good thing we found you. Even if the crolt hadn't got you, you'd soon've frozen to death."

"Cold enough to freeze all four balls of a buck shug," said the second, "and then freeze 'em back on again!" He let out a wheezing noise which might have been a laugh, or possibly a respiratory problem.

"Thank you," said Tom. "Really, thank you. I thought I was finished out there,"

"Like I said," said big man number one, "you nearly were. You're ears got snow in 'em?"

"Yeah, um, so thanks. I'm Tom. Tom Brooker" He held out a hand.

The first man took it in both of his. "Gurmag Etch. The old boy's Crelf."

"What're you doing out here?" asked Tom.

"What're we doing out here? What'you think we're doing out here? Sunbathing? We're traps men, boy. Hunters. It's what you're doing out here that needs answerin'."

Tom wasn't sure how much these two would know about the jungle land he'd just beamed in from, but he decided he might as well be straight with them.

"We used a transport point. Me and a friend. Only he did something wrong. We were meant to go to some city, but I ended up out in the snow, and he - well, I don't know where he went. Maybe he got there, I dunno."

"Oh, I doubt that. If he was fiddling with one of them points without the proper know-how, he could be anywhere," said Gurmag.

"Wouldn't take one of them things if you paid me," said Crelf. "I know this fella, took one of them transport things, half of him went to Centurius, the other half stayed behind in thing."

"Thing?" queried Tom, out of a vague sense of politeness, while he tried to assimilate the worrying information that the Doctor might be as lost as he was.

"He means Vridi," said Gurmag. "That's where we are. Well, where we are now is the *country* of Vridi, see. The city of Vridi, that miles and miles off. S'about a thousand people there."

"A thousand, really," said Tom, trying his hardest to sound impressed. That was what stood for a city round here? "So what's that town I saw in the distance? I was kind of trying to get there."

"That's Esh," said Crelf. "That's where we live when we're not out here. Got our wives back there. Good to get away from them up here, sometimes, I tell you that for nothing."

"So, where'd you start out from?" asked Gurmag.

"Oh, it's... well, it's a long way from here. Hasn't really got a name." How lame did that sound? They were never going to buy that.

"Oh, one of them places," said Gurmag, knowingly. "Jungly sort of place, no doubt."

"Err, yeah, that's right."

"I've heard 'bout them No proper towns, just people livin' here and there and wherever. No wonder you weren't dressed for up here!" He and Crelf laughed heavily at this, as if it was

the funniest thing they'd heard in some time. Perhaps it was. "Bad luck ending up here though. I thought those things were meant to just send you from point to point?"

"An' you wonder why's I don't trust 'em," said Crelf, breaking wind loudly.

A sense of dread spread though Tom. "How... how far am I from the nearest one then? Is there one in Esh?"

"Esh? Good Father, no," laughed Gurmag. "Esh has barely got room for more than one inn. No, nearest transport is in Vriddi city."

"OK, that's not so bad, I guess. How long will it take to get there?" Wherever the Doctor had gone, he'd make for Myriad, and Val would still be there. He just hoped they could get to her quickly enough, before anything happened to her.

"Not long. Coupl'a days on a good motor carriage," said Gurmag.

"Course, you'll have to wait till summer," added Crelf.

"Oh yes, you'll have to wait till summer. Can't pass between the towns in the winter. Weather like this? Certain ruddy death."

"I know several fellas who tried it in the winter and came back dead," interjected the venerable Crelf.

"Oh god..." Tom buried his head in his hands. "How long is it till summer?"

"Oh, don't worry," said Gurmag, "T'ain't long now."

Tom let out a sigh of relief. "Oh, thank god."

"No, it's only 'bout six months now."

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"Pax, there's more I need to tell you," said Dea, as he returned with two more - much larger - drinks. "I haven't just been looking into the Masters. Mostly, I've been trying to find out about myself."

"What do you mean?" said Pax, sitting down.

"Well, I'm not originally from Myriad. I'm not sure where I'm from - probably one of the neighboring city states, Centurius maybe. I was found during an influx of refugees, years ago. That's what I've been told. What I remember being told. Only I don't really remember. Whatever happened to me, it must have affected my memory, because I can hardly remember my past - where I'm from, my parents, any of it.

"I've been looking into the records of the major incidents in Myriad's recent past, any disasters, wars and so on, that would have brought refugees in. There's still quite a lot of data, but it's fragmented, and I haven't found anything from the right period. Nothing about anyone who was found as a child. Even the orphanage where I stayed doesn't seem to be on the records, and it closed down a long time ago, so I can't go there to find out." She laughed. "The stupid thing is, I can't even remember where it was, so I couldn't go there anyway!"

Dea paused, looked at Pax, who had been silent through her account.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Dea... that's virtually the same as what happened to me."

"Seriously?"



Pax nodded as he drank some more. "I was found in the snows. Whoever I was with, I'd been separated from them. Probably hunters, or foreign traders, I've been told. Anyway, I was found, and brought to the village, where I was looked after. Stayed in the schoolhouse until I was old enough to work. Never remembered who I really was, where I was from. Nobody ever knew."

Dea got to her feet. She raised her glass, downed it in one smooth movement. "Drink up," she said. "We're going back to the hall of records. There's something else I need to show you."

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Valentina reached tentatively towards consciousness, waking bleary-eyed in a room of white and green. The first sound she could register was a background of electronic beeps and hums. The smell of disinfectant assailed her nose. Even before her vision had cleared, she knew she was in a hospital.

Blinking, she struggled to sit up. Sharp pain stung her arm. Turning her head, she saw that she had been bandaged. Vaguely, she recalled the attack in the jungle, the shock as the animal had sliced open her skin.

"Tom?" she muttered, disoriented.

"Your friends aren't here, girl," came a rough voice. "Just you and me."

Val sat up sharply, forcing herself into full awareness. She was in a small ward, alone, save for a rugged, unpleasant looking man whom she did not recognize.

"Who are you? Where are Tom and the Doctor?"

"Your friends are a long way away," said the man. "I'm Dorlan. Little hurt you don't remember me, seeing that I saved your life and all."

"You brought me here from the jungle?"

"That's right. Your two men decided not to come along. Still out there with my fellas. They entrusted me, as your savior and all, to bring you here to get yourself well."

"No way. They'd never send me off with someone they didn't know." Well, maybe the Doctor, she thought if he was busy or suitably distracted. But not Tom.

"Doesn't really matter if you believe me girl. I'm all you've got here. Told the hospital lot that you're my niece, who's been accompanying me on a mission of exploration in the southern lands. No questions asked. They were happy to take what I had - nice bit of sharrix venom, gets you sorted and gets me a tidy little profit. Not a bad day's work." He leaned in closely. "No girl, I guess you're going to have to stick with me for a while. And, well, if you find yourself feeling a little grateful to your new hero, I'm sure we can think of some fine ways for you to thank me, eh?" He planted one tanned, meaty hand on her blanket, grasping her thigh.

"Get off of me!" She pushed his hand away, only for him to raise both arms, grasping hers, pinning them down, pressing her to the bed

"Get off!" she struggled against him, but the hunter was strong, his fingers pressing viciously into her flesh. With effort, she pulled one arm free of his grip, slapping her palm against the bank of instruments beside her bed. Somewhere there had to be a panic button, if

this was anything like any hospital on Earth. A sharp, rattling buzz signified that she had made the desired contact.

Dorland grabbed her free arm, loosening his grip on the other as he did so. She lashed out, scratching at him, while he spat alien curse words at her.

With a loud slam, the door to the ward burst open. Then hunter released his grip immediately, but it was too late. As Val leapt from the bed in the direction of the door, two grey-clad security men seized Dorlan, holding him firm. A young woman in a white coat - surely a doctor - took Val to one side, while a man in a black uniform confronted the subdued hunter.

"It's all right," the medic reassured Val. "He's from the gendarmerie. Your... companion's story didn't check out. We were on our way here when you sounded the alarm."

"Thank you," gasped Val. "I need to get back to my friends. I think they're still in the jungle where I was hurt. It's important; I have to get back to them straight away."

"I'm sorry, but we still need to ascertain who you are. The only documentation we found on you was this." The medic reached into her coat and pulled out a small, pink card - Val's driving license. "We need to know where you're from. What does this script say? The alphabet is unknown. You need to explain your presence here - all foreign intruders must be fully documented."

"I'm sorry; I don't even know where I am."

"This is the city state of Myriad, and unless you can explain yourself, then I'm afraid that you too will be under arrest."

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"Look, here it is," said Dea, pulling a single densely-typed sheet from the folder. "Look at it - name unknown, but the description matches me perfectly."

"Yes, I suppose, but there are plenty of women who could be described as having long dark hair, olive skin and all that. It's not very specific. Without a picture we can't be sure it's you."

"Read about her injury. Severe scratch from animal claw across right forearm. I've got a scar on my right arm."

"Well, how long have you had it?"

"That's just the thing, I can't remember. It seems like a long time, but now that I think about it, I get the feeling it wasn't all that long ago that the wound was fresh. I assumed it happened a long time ago when I ended up in Myriad, but maybe it wasn't so long ago after all."

Pax was still skeptical. "Dea, this is dated to only six months ago. You said you've lived here for years."

"Pax, just think hard for a minute. Think back. How far back can actually remember? I mean, clearly?"

"I don't know. About... ten years, maybe? Around when I was found, I guess."

"But can you really remember that far back? When I think back, I can't really remember the events when I arrived here. It's vague, just general feelings... it's like the memory of a memory."

"You have amnesia. We both do. Amnesia brought on by a traumatic experience. Of course our memories of the event are cloudy."

"Pax, think *hard*. Concentrate. What is the earliest conversation you can remember having? Clearly? No vague recollections, actually remembering the course of a conversation."

"I... I don't know." Pax thought hard, as instructed, but the more he concentrated, the more confused he became. The memories slipped from his grasp like wriggling fish, swimming back into the depths of his mind.

"I think I can. I arrived here, at the hall. I came looking for a job. I don't even know why; it just seemed the right thing to do. The woman on the desk wasn't certain at first, but she suddenly seemed to remember my application. But I don't remember ever applying! I was taken to see Mister Douro, the head of the department. We talked about my background, and he said I'd have to start out as an assistant, under supervision. That was six months ago. Before that, even the morning before I reached the hall... the memories are hardly there. They're like shadows. All the time in the orphanage, the factory... it's just feelings. Suggestions of what might have happened."

"So, you're suggesting that you've only been here *six months*? That everything before that is like a dream or something?"

"I'm suggesting that we both have. Yet nobody seems to have noticed, not even us."

Pax looked at Dea. She was holding together a lot better than him, but he could still see fear in her eyes. Fear that he knew was clearly visible on his face, because this concept terrified him.

"Then... who are we? Where have we been for the last however many years?"

Dea's look became one of determination. "I think we should find out."

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"Six months!" Tom couldn't believe that these two men, even as isolated and eccentric as they so obviously were, could fail to see the issue with this. "I can't stay here for six months! My friend -" he took a deep breath "- my friend is *dying*, she is dying right now in some hospital in some place called Myriad that I'd never heard of before today, if she even got there, which is doubtful because she's in the hands of some jungle bastard who wants in her pants and I can't believe I'm even having this conversation!" He realized that he was standing up and ranting at these two men who had, after all, helped him, saved his life and not, so far, tried to harm him or exploit him in any way. He took another, deeper breath and sat back on the bed. "Sorry. But I'm panicking a little here. I need to find her, and the Doctor, and get away from this place. I can't stay in this country, in your little village. There's got to be a way to get out of here."

"Not until summer, like I said," held Gurmag. "I'm sorry lad, but there's nothing you can do. There's no way you can get out of here while the snows are up like they are. The whole area's impassable. This is about as good as the weather gets, this time of year, and we're not likely to leave this hut till morning." He reached inside his hugely overstuffed fur-lined jacket,

pulling out a stubby flask. "Here," he said, holding it out to Tom. "Have a swig of this. It'll help calm you down. You don't want to be wasting your energy by getting all worked up."

Tom took the flask, and, after a moment of hesitation, unscrewed the top and threw back a draught. The liquor hit him like a flaming torch down the throat. He struggled for breath, speech and control over his own salivation.

"Packs a kick, don't it boy?" laughed Grelf.

"What," wheezed Tom, "the hell is that?"

"Don't reckon we ever came up with a name for it," chuckled Grelf. "Never really needed one." He looked Tom up and down. "You're a bit scrawny, but I reckon we could make use of you."

"What do you mean?" gasped Tom, his voice hoarse.

"Well, you're not going to survive six months on charity, boy. You come back to the village with us. I reckon we can find you a job."

Six months? The words reverberated around Tom's head. Six months. What else could he do?

"What sort of thing did you have in mind?"

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Dea left the hall, descending the front steps slowly. It had been a long day, dragging on as she sifted through reams of information, a task that now seemed pointless. The information would be hidden away where no one could see it, while she remained no wiser about her past than she had been before. Charren had stood over her all day, never more than an arm's breadth away, carefully appearing to not watch her. Barely a word had passed between them. It was apparent that her every move was being scrutinized. She wondered if it was simple paranoia, but somehow doubted it. Her thoughts were becoming clearer now. She could see things at last.

That sounded unhinged, even in her own mind. Maybe she was cracking up? Perhaps all this was in her head, a symptom of whatever had caused her amnesia all those years ago...

Pax was standing on the street opposite. She hurried over to him.

"I didn't think I'd see you again," she said to him.

"Neither did I," he admitted. "Since last night, though, things have become... clearer. Like a barrier's been removed. It's not that I can remember more, but I can see what I *can't* remember. And then, I was told not to see you again. The supervisor said I had to focus on my work and avoid the wrong sorts of people, or I'd be out of a job. I should have just done what I was ordered, but I couldn't. I have to try to find out what's going on, and... well; I wanted to see you again."

Dea smiled at this. "I'm glad. I wanted to see you too."

"So... what exactly do we now?"

"I suggest we check out the library. The real library. Find out what's behind that wall. There's still a way in - if we get in there, we can maybe find out about the Masters."

Pax nodded his agreement. "You're right. I'm sure, if we can just find out who they are, maybe even finding them..."

"...then perhaps we can find out what's going on here," finished Dea. "Come on. The answers are with the Masters. They must be."

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The Doctor pushed on across the glassy island, through the lingering remnants of the mist. The object of his search was finally in view, obscured by the haze; a tall structure, pyramidal in shape. He could begin to make out the stepped structure's finer details, no longer merely a shape in the fog.

Events on this planet were starting to become clear. The transportation system had been a clue, but it had all been so long ago, and he'd never had a chance, back then, to look at the system's finer workings. Once - he couldn't be sure just how long ago - a great scientist had lived on this island, hidden from its many dangers in the fortress that loomed ahead. Trudging forward, the Doctor scrabbled about in his memory, grasping for information that had, for him, been acquired over five centuries ago. His memory had never been his greatest asset, - or at least, I can't remember it being, he thought ruefully to himself. So much time had passed, experience piled upon experience like an ever growing stack of books, threatening to topple at any moment. His mind had become cluttered, and with each regeneration, a vast reorganization took place, ordering his more recent experiences, while burying his more distant past under more and more layers of sediment. He had become an archaeologist in his own mind. Finally, a name came to him - Arbitan. That had been the scientist's name. Arbitan, and his daughter... Sabetha? How long ago had that been for this world? He knew Arbitan had died during his own time on the planet; would Sabetha still be alive, or had she succumbed to old age centuries ago?

The Doctor suspected the latter. Arbitan's inventions had been small, wrist-worn devices, each capable of transporting one individual to a preprogrammed point on the planet's surface. He and his granddaughter, and those two meddlesome human teachers, had seen much of Marinus between them. Great cities, vast snowfields, jungles not unlike the one that he had just teleported from. The transportation towers were certainly developments of the same technology, harnessed for the use of the greater Marinian population. If only he'd had more time to examine them, perhaps he would have been able to make better use of them, and catch up with Valentina instead of landing himself on this forsaken island.

After some considerable walking, the Doctor finally approached the fortress, thankful to have a younger, fitter body this time round. Even so, his legs were feeling the strain. He made a mental note to engage in more exercise from this point on. Perhaps he could even get a few games of cricket in, at some point in the future.

The Doctor reached out, brushing his hands against the highly-polished stone surface of the fortress. He was sure he could remember there being an entrance hidden somewhere along its surface. As long ago as it had been, now that he had accessed some of those long-buried memories, others were tumbling out. The Conscience - that had been it, Arbitan's other great invention. What's-his-name, Chatterton, Chinterton - he had destroyed it. A machine that was capable of bending a population to its will, or the will of its operator. It had been within this fortress, along with its creator.

He fumbled along the surface of the wall, completing a full circuit of its length and continuing onto another, certain that the mechanism had to be here somewhere. Finally, he found it - a tiny discontinuity in the sheer surface, just enough for a fingertip to enter. With a click, the mechanism tripped - and the wall opened, revealing an almost pitch dark alcove. The Doctor entered, stepping into the darkness, hoping that it would continue into the passage he recalled, as the hidden doorway closed behind him.

Allowing his eyes a moment to adjust to the darkness, he started to inch forward, slowly resolving the walls of the passage around him. A faltering step in the gloom almost sent him tumbling into another opening - this time on the inner surface, further towards the centre of the structure. Looking down into the indentation, he could just make out a surface far below. Pulling a penny from his back pocket, then dropping it into the shadows, he listened out for the telltale plop. It came after a few seconds, followed by a distinctly worrying sizzle. More of the acid, flowing through catacombs beneath the stronghold, cutting through the island itself.

There was little else to do but push on further. The Doctor rooted around in his trouser pocket, pulling from it a small pen torch. He wasn't certain that this place would be abandoned, however empty it may look, but the risk of discovery by any supposed inhabitants was outweighed by the danger of plummeting to a terrible death in a pit of acid - and no amount of regeneration would allow a body to survive after complete dissolution.

With the light activated, the walls of the structure became clear, little different to those on the outside. Dark, grey and uninviting; this wasn't a place to call home, but a place in which to sit out a lifetime, hidden from the world. He pressed on, following the passage as it curved continually inward.

It wasn't long before he came to the entrance of a larger chamber. No doubt this was where Arbitan's great machinery would be, whatever of it still existed. Perhaps, with a chance to look at the original devices, he could deduce the method of properly programming the transport towers. With a lot of intelligence, and a little luck, he could find both Miss Rossi and Mister Brooker, and shut down, or at least adjust for, the gravitational guiding waves that had forced the TARDIS down onto this planet.

He ran his fingers along the edge of the doorway, hoping for another secret catch that would allow him entry. His attention focused on his task, he was only dimly aware of the shadowy figures that loomed over him from behind...

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Pax followed behind Dea as she entered back into the hall. The vast space was empty, the sounds of their footsteps reverberating around the room.

"We usually finish later than the other departments," stated Dea, as she led him through the corridors to the department of records. "There won't be many people around now. Charren's left already. We can get through to the back of the library through my department."

Weaving through the cabinets and computer terminals, they came to a heavily bolted doorway. Steel girders held it secure. Strenuous effort by the pair of them forced the girders outward enough for them to slide open the bolts, but the door still refused to budge.

A tiny digital interface was set into the frame.

"There's a computerized lock," said Pax. "Give me a little while. Keep your eyes open, alright? We don't want anyone finding us here."

Setting to work, Pax began inputting combinations, searching for patterns in the mechanism. In a few short minutes, the interface bleeped, and the sound of further mechanisms sliding open elicited a smile.

"We're in," he said.

"How did you do that?" asked Dea, astonished.

"It's a knack. Just something that I picked up somewhere."

"You don't remember?"

Pax shook his head. "Not at all. Just always been able to use those sorts of systems." He pushed the door open without difficulty. "I'll go first - just in case."

Entering, greeted by the flickering of automatic lights, they found themselves in a vast room, every wall lined with ancient, leather-bound volumes.

"Now, this is what a library is supposed to be like," whispered Dea.

"Are you sure we should be doing this?" asked Pax, suddenly cautious. "It feels... wrong."

"I know," said Dea. "Just being here. Like it's forbidden. "

"Well, it is forbidden!" said Pax, smiling, and laughed. A nervous laugh.

Dea took his hand. "Come on. We can do this."

They took a wall each, scouring the rows of books for the correct information. It took time, ploughing through the titles, absorbing any useful information and then moving onto the next. In the end, it was Pax who found it - the section on the history of the world, and within it, a volume entitled *Rulers of the Ancient World*.

"This is hopeless," sighed Dea, shoving another book back onto it shelf.

"No, wait a minute," responded Pax. "Take a look at this." He read from the book as Dea came over to him. "'In the fifth century of the Common Era, Arbitan the First created the Conscience, to be judge and jury to the entire world. Over time, the Conscience was improved upon, becoming more than a mere machine, until it was able to control the minds of the people and guide their actions. There was no longer crime, nor war, nor the capacity for it.' That's almost three thousand years ago." He skipped ahead, flicking over to the next page. "'The power of the Conscience was not total. After seven centuries, one of the Outsiders found within himself the strength to resist, and overcame the influence of the Conscience. He in turn taught others of his kind, and the days of the Arbitans and the Conscience were numbered' "

"Something that could control your thoughts?" said Dea. "Stop you from doing things?"

"Maybe change your memories?" suggested Pax. He read on. "Look at this part - 'The Outsiders stormed the citadel of Arbitan, in the centre of the Island of Glass.' It's real. Someone's been doing this from the island, and it's all real!"

"Who are these Outsiders?" asked Dea.

"I'm not sure. It's pretty vague about them. Some group from even further back in history. Maybe there's another book here somewhere about them..."

Dea took Pax's hand. "I think we should get out of here. It's nearly nine bells. It's getting late."

"You're right. It was risky staying here this long. Come on, we can take this with us. Make sure we leave the door secure like we found it. We don't want anyone coming looking for this."

His hand was still in Dea's. "Thank you for coming here with me. I don't know if I could have done it on my own."

"Well, you'd never have gotten the door open. But I know what you mean; I couldn't have come here on my own. It's so hard even being here, knowing we're not supposed to be... it almost hurts..."

"I know," said Dea. "Thank you." She reached up and kissed him, gently, on the lips.

"Let go of one another and hand me the book," came a voice from the door. Turning their attention towards the entrance, Pax and Dea took in the presence of an officious looking man, flanked, on either side, by a uniformed guard. The guards stepped forwards, grabbing Pax and Dea and holding their arms to their sides. The book dropped from Pax's grip, landing on the floor with a thud. The grey-suited man knelt down, picking the volume up,

"Bring them," he ordered his guards, as he turned and led them from the library. Pax and Dea were pushed after him, marched through the corridors of the Great Hall until they came to an office as grey and as ordered as their captor's appearance.

"It's Dea Palluri, isn't it?" said the grey-suited, grey-faced man, as he sat behind his desk

"That's right, sir," she replied, grimacing as the guard dug his gloved fingers into the flesh of her arm.

"I take it you remember me?" he asked, looking at her with ice-blue eyes.

"Mister Douro. Of course I remember you."

"I gave you this position, Miss Palluri. I would have expected some gratitude from you. Instead, I find you rifling through restricted materials with this reprobate."

"His name is Pax," she stated.

"It is of no matter what his name is," said Douro, bluntly. "Those materials are restricted for a reason. It would not do for the general populace to know of the Masters' methods."

"So you know?" interjected Pax.

Douro nodded at the guard who held Pax. In response, he administered a swift sideways punch to his gut. Pax doubled over, winded.

"I was not addressing you. Miss Palluri, the Masters have their methods of keeping order, and we are grateful to them. Some of us, it is true, are capable of a little more... leeway, shall we say, and it is our duty to help with the keeping of this order. I gave you this position because I believed it was the correct course of action. I listened to my Conscience. I attempted to allow you to integrate into our ordered society. It seems that I was wrong."

"What are you going to do to us?" asked Dea, trying to cover the mounting fear in her voice.

"I am going to do nothing to you. The Masters, on the other hand, I cannot speak for. You will be transported to their stronghold."

"The Masters?" she said, enticed by the possibility of discovering who they were, in spite of her rising panic.

"You clearly want to know more about them. Allow me to introduce you." With a simple press of a button, a doorway set into the rear wall of the office slid open, revealing a



shadowy figure. A figure all in black. It stepped forward, creaking as it went. A figure enveloped in thick, black rubber...

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"Well, I should've realized that you lot would be skulking around here," sighed the Doctor, as he was bodily dragged in by four rubber-clad figures. "I was actually trying to get in here, so you've really been quite helpful." The creatures dumped him unceremoniously on the grey metal floor. "Ouch," he said, pointedly. "This is a very uncomfortable floor. Would you mind if I got up?"

There was no protest as the Doctor rose to his feet, although the four figures kept their stubby silver sidearm trained on him the whole time. Their black, rubbery skins glistened in the bluish light of the chamber. Each sported, upon its misshapen head, a cumbersome antenna, each of a different design.

The Doctor cast his eyes around the chamber, taking in the vast bank of gleaming technological finesse that dominated the space. A bulbous sphere of glass, filled with blinking electronic components, throbbed with power. The Doctor felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. The Conscience? Not quite how he remembered it, but no doubt there had been some modifications if it had been rebuilt in the time since he'd last been here.

"Sooo... you're Voord then, am I correct? It's been a very long time since I've seen any of your lot. I've been here before, you know. Quite some time ago. At least my fashion sense has improved since then. I see that yours hasn't. Still, stops you getting any nasty shocks off that, I suspect. Good insulator, rubber." The Voord remained silent. Scrutinizing him, or simply waiting for something? The Doctor continued to take in details of the machinery, noting that it seemed built into the very structure of the building, plumbed through the rear wall and floors. Extended and expanded, perhaps.

"Of course, on Earth, there's a whole subculture of rubber-wearers. Not that we want to get into that; it's all a bit unsavory. Still, each to his own I say, who am I to judge? I mean, if this is just some dirty great rubber wear party, then I apologize for intruding, and I'll just be getting along." The Doctor turned on his heels, and each of the Voord raised its firearm to his head.

"All right, all right," muttered the Doctor. "But I'm not content to be the only one making conversation here. You need to mingle, you know. No wonder nobody's come to this party."

"Who are you?" came a deep, sibilant voice from the shadows.

The Doctor swung back round. "I'm the Doctor," he replied. "I'm afraid I can't see you. Perhaps you could step out and say hello properly?"

A fifth Voord stepped out from the shadows, his black form perfectly hidden in the darkness. His bulbous skull had no antenna, setting him apart from his fellows. The leader of this troop, no doubt.

"The Doctor..." There was a curious, questioning tone to the Voord's voice. "Your appearance has... altered."

"Oh, you know me," said the Doctor, genuinely surprised. "Good grief, you're not... Yartek, was it?"

A sinister, sussurating chuckle. "Our Protector Yartek died many, many years ago, Doctor. I believe you were present, if not witness. Where are the others? The male and two females? Your... granddaughter?"

"I haven't travelled with them for some time," he replied. "So long, I can't quite remember how long!" He continued in a friendly tone. "How long has it been, Mister..?"

"Alphek," replied the Voord. "One hundred and ten Marinian years, Doctor.

"Yes, I'd forgotten that yours was a long-lived species. So, you were present when Yartek met his end?"

"Indeed. When Protector Yartek died, I, as the highest ranking survivor of the operation, downloaded his brain patterns. We never actually met, Doctor. You had already abandoned this place; by the time that I came to find the Protector's mangled body. I was fortunate to find him before he died. He did not survive the download."

"I see..." The Doctor processed what he'd learned. "Direct thought transference, by technological means... that explains those antennae. A quick and easy way of relaying orders to your subordinates. Very efficient. No wonder they're not terribly chatty. Everything's communicated directly by radio transmission."

"Indeed. It is pleasing to meet someone who understands such things, Doctor."

"Oh, I'm sure it must be. You must just be dying for a good chinwag. So, why don't you tell me what you're up to here? I'm sure it can't be anything good."

"On the contrary, Doctor, what I am striving for is for good of everyone in creation."

"Sounds a little optimistic to me, Alphek, but do carry on."

"We Voord have been on Marinus for a long time, Doctor. As you said, we are a long-lived people. My people came here millennia ago, as our world died, our sun cooling to a dim ember. We needed a new world, and we made our home here."

"So, what, you invaded? A colonizing force?"

"You do my people a disservice, Doctor. We settled on a small landmass. The people of Marinus were still primitive. We kept to ourselves; it was only later that we came into contact with them. Some of them feared us, but in the main, we managed to coexist. Yet this was a world in turmoil, until one man decided to make a difference."

"Arbitan," stated the Doctor.

"Yes, Doctor. He created the Conscience. A device to end war, to end suffering and violence. It worked, for a time, but the brains of the Voord are not the same as those of the Marinians. We are similar, but not identical. Yartek learned to resist the Conscience, and taught others to do the same."

"Yes, yes, I know all that," snapped the Doctor, becoming impatient. "Arbitan hid the micro keys around the planet, Yartek tried to use them to operate the machine, and blew himself to kingdom come in the process."

"With some 'assistance' from you and your companions," Alphek reminded him.

"So, is that it? You're going to take over Marinus with your new Conscience fix-up?"

"No, Doctor. Yartek was a great leader, but he was belligerent and ambitious for his own sake. I seek not to conquer this world, but to help it."

The Doctor was curious, despite his mistrust of the creature. "Go on," he said.

"This world is once again in turmoil. The many states fight each other. Wars are being waged between nations. Great civilizations are descending into anarchy. Crime, poverty, violence - all are sundering this world. The Empire of the Golden Dawn has collapsed; the noble, lawful city of Millennius has become a devastated state beset by crime. Even the distant villages on the Great Continent's frozen rim are fighting amongst themselves. I have grown old with this planet, Doctor, and seen it become ill. I wish to cure it."

He stepped over to the Conscience, the components inside glowing brighter, the hum of power increasing. "It took time, but the Conscience has been restored, and you are just in time to see me use it to cure this world of its ills."

The Doctor stepped forward. "Alphek, I understand what you're trying to do, but this isn't the way to go about it. You cannot crush these people's free will. It is not the way forward."

Alphek raised his voice to his fellow Voord. "Restrain him."

The four Voord grabbed the Doctor by the shoulders, pushing him to his knees and pinning him to the spot. The Doctor looked around, searching for a possible escape route, but more Voord were entering the room, blocking his chances of exit through the only doorway.

The sound from the Conscience increased ever further as the Doctor struggled to escape his captors' grip.

"Do not worry, Doctor," said Alphek, in a low, friendly voice. "Soon, you will be at peace. All of Marinus will be at peace. The entire universe."

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The guards pushed down on the heavy bar of the door, forcing it open. The light from the corridor illuminated a small cell, unfurnished, nothing more than a cuboid box. Somewhere to leave someone and forget about them. In the centre of the room, his clothes filthy, his hair and beard long and matted, his arms chained to the floor, sat a man, cross-legged. His head was hung low, facing the floor, but at the presence of the newcomers he looked up. He squinted in the sudden bright light.

Pax and Dea were violently pushed into the cell, virtually crashing onto the man sat on the floor. The door slammed behind them, extinguishing all but a feeble dribble of light that crept through the tiny crack between the door and its frame. Yet, even in the brief moment of illumination, the grimy prisoner's face was immediately recognizable. A handsome face, hidden behind the unkempt beard, sharp eyes burning with intelligence. The man from their dreams.

He stood up, wrapping his arms around them, the chains that bound him to the floor becoming taut with his sudden movement. In the half-light, a huge smile was visible on his face.

"You made it" he cried, his voice cracked and hoarse. "I knew you would! All it took was a little patience..."

Pax struggled away from this strange individual, backing away as far as the limited space would allow him, his back pressing against the door. Dea, though, felt strangely at ease, she found herself returning his embrace, placing her arms gently around him.

"What are you doing?" said Pax. "We don't know who this man is! Just because he looks like..." he trailed off.

"He's the man from our dreams, Pax," she replied. "You can see that. You must recognize him, if your dreams really were the same as mine. And anyway, it's more than that. It's like I know him. From a long time ago..."

The bedraggled prisoner finally let her go. "That's because you do know me," he said, before collapsing into a rasping cough. "Sorry," he croaked once it had abated. "I haven't really spoken much during these last six months. Being locked in a small room with nothing but a cess hole for company isn't terribly good for the body or the mind."

"Who are you?" demanded Pax. "I don't know you, whatever you might think."

"Oh, but you do," the prisoner replied. "You just don't remember." He sat back down on the floor heavily. "Oh, this really isn't good for my joints. Just when I was getting used to having healthy young bones again."

"Please," said Dea. She felt desperate to get some answers after all this. "Who are you?"

The prisoner looked her in the eye. "I'm the Doctor," he stated.

"The Doctor..." The name triggered something, another memory long buried. "I think... did I live with you? I can't quite remember, but it's there, I'm sure of it."

"Live with me? After a fashion, I suppose. We travelled together."

"I don't know what connection you two have, but I'm certain I never met you before today," insisted Pax.

"I wondered if you would be the more sensitive one, Miss Rossi," said the prisoner... the Doctor. He was addressing Dea. "It seems I was correct. Don't worry, Mister Brooker. The memories are there, merely suppressed. They will return in time."

"What did you call me?" demanded Pax.

"Brooker," repeated the Doctor. "Thomas Brooker. Of Newcastle, England, in the United Kingdom on the planet Earth." He sighed. "None of this ringing any bells?"

"I'm not sure..." mumbled Pax, feeling more confused than ever.

"And you called me 'Miss Rossi?'" asked Dea.

"That's right," said the Doctor, his long, grimy hair shaking as he nodded vigorously. "Valentina Rossi." He cleared his throat, seemingly getting ready for a good deal more speech. "I'm afraid that this will come as something of a shock, but neither of you is native to this planet. In fact, you've only been here for six months. The Voord - your 'Masters' - have been using a device to alter your memories."

"Why?" asked Dea, feeling unaccountably eager to trust this man who seemed so familiar.

"Well, it wasn't entirely deliberate, I don't think. You two represent an anomalous element to their plans. The Voord have recreated a machine called the Conscience, and have been using it to control the populace of this world. It suppresses rebellious instincts, subverting free will. It even blocks memories that might cause ... unwanted personality traits. In your cases, it had to block rather a lot of memories in order to keep you in line with the local population. You own minds dealt with this by taking on identities from your environment. At least, that's my theory. I've had little else to do but theorize, lately."

"Wait..." muttered Pax. "You... you were old. I remember... the Doctor, but he was old..." Pax shook his head, the conflicting information in his head becoming overwhelming.

"I wasn't so old!" said the Doctor. "However, yes, I was older. Perhaps we'd best not go into that in too much depth. I don't want to end up confusing matters." This prompted a burst of incredulous laughter from Pax.

Dea knelt by the Doctor on the ice cold floor.

"I don't really understand half of this, Doctor. How did you get into our dreams?"

"Ah, now, that's the clever bit I hoped that the two of you would uncover some discrepancies in your memories, and that maybe that would spur you on to discover what was happening here, but I couldn't rely on that. Fortunately, I have had plenty of time to myself here, during which I have gradually attuned my own thought waves to the frequency of the Conscience. I used its signals as a carrier. It took me a while, but I found you - your minds do stick out a little, being alien to this world - and managed to plant a few suggestions in your heads. Just hints, getting you to question the world around you. It was easiest when you were asleep, when I could access your subconscious mind most directly. So that I could speak to you, encourage you to remember the truth."

"I still don't understand - why weren't you changed by the Conscience?" asked Dea.

"Please, Doctor, we need to understand. This isn't easy for us."

"No, no, of course not. The Conscience didn't work on me. I can't be sure why. Perhaps my brain is simply too old, too sophisticated, to be fooled by its processes. I have an awful lot of memories to be buried, a great deal of intellect and willpower to subvert." He chuckled lightly. "On the other hand, I have also theorized that perhaps my brain is too much like a Voord's to be affected. After all, they ensured that they wouldn't be subsumed by the Conscience, perhaps that's why I wasn't either."

"So, you're telling me that this was all down to you?" said Pax. "Everything we did, me leaving Vriddi, Dea and me finding each other, looking into the Masters, all of it was put in our heads by you?"

"Not at all," replied the prisoner. "I tried to put little suggestions in your heads, but the ground work, that was all down to you."

"Why didn't you just use these amazing dream powers of yours to tell us who we were?"

"Well, it isn't quite as straightforward as that - and if I had, would you have believed me? You don't quite believe me, even now."

Dea stood up, put her arms around Pax's waist. "Give him a chance. I don't know what it is, but there's definitely something familiar about all this. And we know that our memories have been affected. We know about the Conscience - you read it out to me!"

"How do we know that those aren't the false memories? Why aren't our real lives the ones we remember? He could've just put all this in our heads!"

"Why would he do that?"

"I don't know. Doesn't mean it's not true, though." He stopped and thought. "There's something else that doesn't make sense - this can't be the only holding cell around here. Why'd they throw us in with you?"

"Well, I have been trying to escape, you know," said the Doctor. "I tried to get into the heads of the guards, but it didn't work so well. I certainly couldn't get them to let me out, or disobey orders directly, but I have managed to remind them to bring me food, and I did

manage to influence them enough so that they'd put you in with me when you arrived. Which I knew you would - eventually."

"And what if we hadn't?" questioned Pax.

"Well, I'd have died in here - and that would have taken a long time, believe me. You two would probably have carried on living your false lives, never quite certain what it was that was wrong with your world."

"And we'd never have met," said Dea.

"I suppose..." muttered Pax. "So, Doctor, what do we do now?"

"The Voord are going to want to know how you two managed to fight the Conscience off so well. They're getting ready to test a new improvement to the system. You'll no doubt be the first test subjects."

"Oh, that's wonderful! So I suppose we'll just forget all this all over again?"

"Good to know that you haven't lost your sarcastic streak, Mister Brooker. Yes, that's precisely what will happen. I should think that your memories of the last six months will be erased, and I doubt very much that you'll be placed back in the world together. That's assuming that they don't realize that you're aliens, and keep you in here forever."

"Or just kill us," added Pax.

"Possibly, although I doubt it - they're surprisingly peaceful. They really do seem to be trying to make the world a better place. Not just this world, either."

"What do you mean?" asked Dea. "Can they reach other worlds?" She was still struggling to deal with the idea that there were other worlds.

"What do you think that new transport system is all about? Once the Conscience is perfected - and you two will be of great help with that - they're planning on using it to send missions to nearby planets and set up Conscience systems there. Alphek, the leader of this group, has huge plans for the future. He's a very forward-thinking Voord, if a rather misguided one. The more worlds he reaches, the more technology he gets his hands on, the more dangerous he'll become. That machine needs to be destroyed. It's the only way to free this world and stop others from falling"

Pax sank to the floor. The limited space brought his feet up to those of the captive Doctor.

"I'm not sure I can deal with all this. I'm expected to believe that I'm not really me, but actually an alien with pretend memories?"

Dea knelt down by his side. She took his hands in hers. "Pax, I know how difficult this is for you. I'm feeling all this too, aren't I? But you've got to admit, what the Doctor is saying feels right. The more I think about it... the more this feels like the truth. And we swore we were going to find out the truth, didn't we?"

"I don't know. I don't know how to deal with this. I thought that I'd find out where I came from - not this. Not that I'm not even really *me*. How can I deal with not being me?"

"You're still you," said the Doctor. "Your personality remains intact behind the layers of false memories. You have a choice - you can let the Voord strip everything away from you, or you can fight them. You can regain your old life, and retain your memories of everything that has happened to you here."

"Pax" said Dea, "please. It's right, can't you feel it? It's why nothing makes sense, why we can't remember anything properly before six months ago."

"But... who will I be after this?"

Dea managed a smile. "We can find out."

"I don't want to lose you."

"You won't. This won't change anything."

"Doctor... if we go back... I mean, these other lives we had... what sort of relationship did we have?"

The Doctor was silent for a moment. "You were friends. Close friends."

"And that's it?"

"Well, I'm not always terribly good interpreting human relationships, but yes. I think so."

"So that's the end of that." Pax sighed. "What happens now?"

The Doctor replied. "We wait."

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Some time had passed. A tense atmosphere had resulted in almost total silence in the cell. The three prisoners were forced to sit almost on top of one another, causing Pax to stand for much of the time. Dea had tried to console him, but he seemed to have withdrawn into himself. For her part, fragments of memory had continued to break through the falling barriers in her mind. Valentina Rossi... it sounded familiar now. Not her own name, not yet, but not unknown, as it had seemed when first she had heard it.

She longed to talk to the Doctor, to learn more about herself and what had happened. It was no good, though. Any such talk caused Pax to become visibly uncomfortable. So she sat in silence between the two of them, the man she had come to know, and the man she half-recognized.

Without warning, Pax spoke, his voice coming as a shock in the stillness. "Someone's coming."

He was right. The sound of footsteps became audible as someone approached the cell. The door swung open, the light that entered dazzling them. Two ordinary guards, and one of the black-clad Voord, grabbed Pax and Dea, pinning their arms to their sides as they manhandled them from the cell. As the door was slammed behind them, Pax glanced back to the Doctor. He was looking right back at him, not saying a word. Yet there was no doubting the meaning of his expression. It all rested on their shoulders now.

"Pax," cried Dea, as they were forced along the extensive corridors. "What do we do?"

"I think we know what we have to do."

In short order they were marched to a vast room, dominated by a great machine constructed from metal and glass. Intricate workings could be seen operating within it, and Pax felt curious in spite of himself. The Conscience that the Doctor had spoken of, no doubt. Several more Voord and their guards stood around it, attending to various instruments. A broad metal table stood immediately in front of the machine. It had the distinct look of an operating table.

Pax and Dea were forcibly pushed onto the table, lying on its broad surface side by side. They were strapped down to its surface, their limbs bound tightly. Pax reached out to Dea; he just about managed to brush his fingers against hers.

A Voord came up to the table. This one lacked an antenna, and despite its featureless mask, it seemed to be scrutinizing them.

"Do not be alarmed," said the creature. "I understand that this is distressing for you, but I promise that it will be over soon. We are about to begin an experimental procedure, using your minds to calibrate the machine that stands behind you. You may find this... uncomfortable, but rest assured that you shall retain no memory of these events. Please, just allow the process to affect you without resistance. It will be over quicker for you that way" He stepped away from them and his fellows began working in earnest around them.

The soft hum that emanated from the machine grew in volume and intensity. A soothing, soporific effect began to take hold. Pax felt it enter his mind; at once he felt calmer, more relaxed. The fear, anger and confusion that he had felt mere moments before were abating. Even physically, he felt more comfortable, as his muscles relaxed. A feeling of safety, of contentment washed over him.

"Pax," came a voice from his side. It was Dea - Dea, he'd almost forgotten she was there!

"Pax, we have to fight it," she whispered. "Remember what they're doing to us. Remember me. Don't let it take you..." her voice drifted away. He wasn't sure if she had stopped speaking, or if he had simply ceased to hear her.

Dea... he mustn't forget her...

The process continued. He didn't know for how long and the world faded from view.

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Dea regained consciousness slowly. She remained strapped to the cold, hard surface of the table. She shook her head, an attempt to shake away the thick fog that had enveloped it. It felt as though her brain was wrapped in wool. The 'face' of a Voord appeared over hers, and she struggled to bring it into focus.

She could still remember. No more than before, but the memories she had made over the recent months were still there. At least, they seemed to be. She remembered her name as Dea, remembered that Pax was by her side. She remembered how she had come here and what was being done to her. She struggled against her bonds, but it was no use. Turning her head as much as she could, she saw Pax. His face was blank, his eyes staring forward sightlessly. Whatever the Voord had done, it had worked on him.

"Only a partial success, it would seem," said the lead Voord. He approached, leaning over Dea's constrained form. "I told you not to resist. We will continue to adjust the Conscience's output until you are helpless to its effects. It's for your own benefit to cooperate."

A second Voord began to unstrap Pax, two guards attending ready to take him.

"It seems that this one is more vulnerable to the affects than you. Perhaps an in depth surgical analysis of his brain will yield some helpful data. It could assist us greatly in processing the truly disruptive elements such as you." It was a blatant threat to ensure Dea's cooperation,



and she knew it. Nonetheless, she couldn't help but react. She yelled out for them to stop, to leave him alone.

"You need to know something," she shouted to the Voord. "We're not from here, we're from another world. Our minds aren't the same as everyone else's!" She had no idea if this information would make things better or worse for them, but what else was there to do?

"Indeed?" replied the rubber-clad creature. "Interesting. Your physiology must be extremely similar to that of the Marinian natives or you would have been detected. Perhaps a surgical course would indeed be wise... after we have continued with the calibration of the Conscience. This data could be most useful in our future endeavors."

Dea screamed out, struggling as much as she could against her bonds. "Pax, please! You've got to remember who you are!"

The unbound Pax fell limply into the arms of the guards. Tears formed in Dea's eyes - how much damage had they done to him?

The guards gripped Pax loosely, his exhausted form hanging in their arms - yet with a sudden movement, he tensed, his own hands taking grip of the guards arms, pulling them down to the floor. His Voord keeper moved towards him. Pax reached up, grabbing the antenna that jutted out from the creature's head. Yanking it backwards, he punched the weak figure in the gut. The Voord fell, as more guards reacted to the confusion. Yet none of them raised a weapon

Pax struggled as the two felled guards at his feet went for him again, pinning him against the table.

"Pax!" shouted Dea. "Their guns! They won't use them in case they hit the machine!"

The Voord leader reacted to this, lunging towards Pax. It was too late. With his free arm, he grabbed the firearm holstered to the side of the guard on his left. It took only a simple squeeze of the trigger to send a bolt of energy into the guard's foot. Yelling in pain, the guard released his grip. Pax brought the weapon up against the head of the other guard with a heavy thud. Released, he took aim at the heart of the Conscience.

"Please!" hissed the Voord. "I shall release both of you. There's no need to cause any destruction!"

"We can both go?" asked Pax. "Go back to being who we were, no interference from you?" The additional guards were almost upon him. "Tell them all to back away, or I'll fire. There's no way they can get to me quickly enough to stop me if I pull this trigger."

"Do as he says!" commanded the Voord. "Yes, I give you my word. You may both go back to your lives."

"The word of a Voord," muttered Pax. "I don't think so." He pulled the trigger. A bolt of incandescent energy burst from the weapon, instantly impacting with the glowing mechanism of the Conscience. The machine exploded at the point of impact, the vast energies within released catastrophically. Flames issued forth from the belly of the machine.

The Voord screamed.

Around them, the guards collapsed. Pax and Dea looked at one another. There was a sensation of a weight being lifted, of bonds being freed. A moment of sudden, painful clarity.

Pax darted across to the other side of the table, ripping open the bonds that held Dea to its surface.

"I can still feel it in my head," said Dea.

"Me too. We've got to destroy it completely."

Pax ran over to the rear of the machine, to a point where vast cables rooted it to the very structure of the building. The cables throbbed with power. Pax stood back, took aim, and fired. With a belch of flame, the cabling burst from the back of the machine, leaving a gaping wound. The energies that burnt inside died down. Pax let loose a few bolts into the core of the mechanism for good measure.

"I think that's done it," he noted.

The guards were beginning to react around them. Struggling to their feet, looks of confusion on their faces. The Voord in the room, seemingly of one mind before, were now reacting in panic, fleeing from the room. Their leader crouched on the floor, collapsed, a discarded rubber sack.

"What's happening?" cried the nearest guard. "My head... I'm so confused..."

"Join the club," said Pax. "The man in the cell down there - go, get him out of there. Bring him here. We need him."

The guard nodded, taking the order without question. He staggered off into the corridor. The remaining guards acted according to their own panicky instincts. Some followed him, others remained dazed and confused in the Conscience room.

Pax held Dea close. "I think we're going to be OK now, Dea... Val."

She looked at him. "Your memories are coming back too, then?"

"Yeah... it's a bit strange. Kind of a relief, but confusing. But it feels right." He let her go. "Sorry for before. Couldn't let them know that I was fighting it."

"You're getting pretty good in a fight," joshed Val. She smiled, but she was blinking back tears. "I don't know how to feel about all this. I'm not even sure what I should be calling you!"

"Tom. Definitely Tom." He looked down at the prone form of the Voord leader. "You, what was your name, Alphhek?" Tom pointed his gun at the black-clad figure, as he looked up at him. He called out to the guards. "Could a couple of you fellas come over here and keep a hold of this one? You might be interested to know that all of this is his fault." There was no argument. Two guards gripped the Voord by his arms. He hung limply between them.

"There's nothing to him," one of them noted.

"There's not much of him left in there, I shouldn't wonder," came a voice from the corridor. The bedraggled, bearded face of the Doctor smiled at them. He approached Alphhek, looking the Voord in what passed for his eyes. "What happened to your people, before you came here?"

Alphhek hissed a reply, barely more than a whisper. "Our sun failed. We were dying. We repaired our bodies as best we could, adapted them for a long journey across space. We came to this world."

"And you just thought you'd take over?" demanded Tom. "Too weak to fight, so you used mind control instead?"

"No... it wasn't like that. I was trying to make things better. I had such plans..."

"You must have known it would never work," said the Doctor. "People were bound to fight against it eventually, just like Yartek did all those years ago when the Conscience was first

built. My friends and I hurried it up a little, of course. We don't have the luxury of waiting decades for some immunity to develop. Especially when you were planning on spreading your influence to other planets." He turned to Val and Tom, placing a hand on their shoulders. "Valentina, Thomas... you did extremely well in very difficult circumstances. You fought against some incredibly powerful mind control. I believe I owe you a little more respect than I have been granting you."

"Yes, you do," said Val.

"And an apology," added Tom.

"Yes, indeed. I did get you into this situation, after all. I... think an apology is indeed in order."

"I think that's probably the best we're going to get," sighed Val, smiling at Tom.

"No, hold on," said the Doctor. "There's something else..." He peered into the smoldering remains of the Conscience machine. "Strange... I'm sure I can still feel something... some residual telepathic field..."

"Doctor," said Tom, "the whole thing's bust. Look at it. How could there be any kind of effect anymore?"

"Can't you feel it? There's still something there." He examined the ruptured cabling that plumbed the machinery into the floor. "Where does this all lead, I wonder?" He grabbed Tom and Val by the hand. "Come on - there's something more to this."

Leading them out of the rear of the Conscience room, the Doctor continued talking to himself.

"I wish I'd had a chance to explore this place properly before. It could have been a much easier task with some more information."

"What are we looking for?" asked Val, running after the Doctor's accelerating figure.

"The Conscience is more than just what we can see up here. There must be something more. There's another room under there, I'm sure of it. Those guards are going to start asking a lot of questions soon - once their minds get used to independent thought again. I want to get to the bottom of this now."

They followed the Doctor, as he sped through corridors. Before long, the three of them were descending, travelling down a sloping walkway. Their footsteps echoed in the broad, empty passage. In short order, they came to a halt. Their way was blocked by a heavily built door.

"There's an electronic lock. Mister Brooker, would you do the honours?"

"That's a complex lock, Doctor. It'll take ages to crack the code, even if my head was straight."

"Actually, I was suggesting you shoot it open."

"Oh." Tom had almost forgotten that he still carried the energy weapon. Taking careful aim, he blasted the lock, which exploded into a shower of sparks. With a soft clunk, the physical element of the lock released. The Doctor dug his fingers into the slight gap between door and frame, putting all his strength behind the opening of the door. With some effort, it slid open.

The Doctor staggered back, clutching at his head.

"Oh my..."

"Doctor, what's wrong?" asked Val, worried.

"Psychic shock... don't worry, just a little overcome for a moment." He shook his head. "What's that sound?" wondered Val. It was soft, barely audible, but there. A deep, whispered moan.

The Doctor pressed on. "Come on."

The three of them entered the gloomy room. As their eyes adjusted to the light, they were confronted with a horrific vision.

"Oh my god..." murmured Val. "What are they?"

Standing in a circle, twelve pedestals, upon each of which stood a glass tank. Each tank was attached to a complex mass of wiring and circuitry, from which cables extended like thick grey tentacles upwards towards the ceiling, no doubt into the main body of the Conscience.

In each tank sat a brain. A human brain, or near-human at least, pallid grey mottled with pink-red flecks. From each brain extended two thick, maggot-like optic nerves, topped with white eyeballs.

Val felt bile rise in her throat at the revolting spectacle, as each pair of eyes swiveled and strained in their direction. The soft, whispered moaning became louder, becoming terrible groans of pain.

"The brains of Morpho," said the Doctor. "I can scarcely believe it."

"You know what these things are?" asked Tom.

"I'm afraid so. I've been to this planet before; you see, or rather, one of my predecessors. That was when I first met the Voord, and these beings. I met their kind in the city of Morphoton. I assumed they had all been killed. Obviously not."

The moaning was becoming louder, more agonized all the time.

"What have they done to them?" gasped Val.

"I should have realized that the Voord wouldn't have been able to repair the Conscience, not properly. While they seem to have developed impressive technology in the field of cybernetics and neural interfaces, a true telepathic system was beyond them. They must have used these poor creatures to plug the gaps in their knowledge, harnessing their natural hypnotic abilities."

"Doctor," said Val. "Listen to them. They're in such pain."

The moans were becoming screams now. The Doctor stepped forward into the central space, beneath the hub of cabling that connected the creatures to the machinery above. "It's a life-support system," he said, examining the connections. "They've become integral to the system, and the system is integral to their survival." The Doctor grasped the cables and tubes that were plugged into the two tanks closest to his companions. With grim-faced determination, he yanked the cabling free. As sparks flared and fluids spurted from the two tanks, the Doctor continued round the circle, ripping the flexes free from their systems. In moments it was done. The screaming died down to nothing, and the three travelers stood in the sudden silence.

"No man should be a slave to a machine," said the Doctor, with a quiet resolve. "No being." He wrinkled his nose at the stench of broiling white matter. "Come on. We're getting out of here."

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Deep in the fortress, the Doctor wrenched open one final door.

"At last!" he cried. "There you are old girl I've missed you." He walked up to the TARDIS, and placed a reassuring pat on its blue paintwork. "They didn't hurt you now, did they?"

"Oh, thank God," said Val, entering in after him. "I was worried we'd have to go back to that jungle for it."

"No, I knew they'd have found it by now. It has been six months. Couldn't get into it, of course, although I'm sure they tried. What's happened to Mister Brooker?"

"He's just finishing up."

As if on cue, Tom entered the room himself. "There you both are. I think that's done it, Doctor. I followed your instructions - the transport system is now offline."

"Well done, young man," smiled the Doctor. "We'll make a transmat engineer of you yet."

"Well, breaking it's easy enough. The central processor will be out for a while. So I guess that means we can leave?"

"It does indeed. And about time, too - I severely need a shower and a shave, and a dash of cologne."

"What's going to happen here, Doctor?" asked Val. "There are good people living on this world. They said it was plagued by violence and war before. Shouldn't we do something?"

"Such as?" The Doctor looked at Val with sympathy. "We can't solve a whole world's problems. Not with the flick of a switch. Crime and disorder, violence and suffering - they are the price we pay for our free will. The people here will solve their own problems, in time. I hope the Voord will, as well." He turned and entered the TARDIS.

Tom and Val stood there, in silence, for several moments.

"So..." said Val.

"So..." replied Tom.

"I, um, I guess we've got some things to talk about."

"I suppose so."

They stood for a while longer.

"Inside the TARDIS, perhaps?" suggested Val.

"Good idea," replied Tom. He gestured for her to go ahead. "After you, Dea."

She smiled at him, a small, sad smile, and entered the ship.

Tom followed, and slammed the door.

With a rumble, a wheeze and a groan, they left the world behind.





All Val wants is to get back to her friends.

All Tom wants is to find Val.

All the Doctor wants is to get his TARDIS functioning so he can get back on his travels. They don't know it yet, but life on this strange new world is going to be far more difficult, and when it's finished with them, things will never be the same again.

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