

BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

SHADOW AT THE HEART



POLICE TELEPHONE
MAY 50
FOR USE OF
PUBLIC
Myesa, wake up
-this is WHO/4
PULL TO OPEN



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Nyssa took her father's hand to lead him to the dinner table, before instead embracing him. The loss of Kassia had hit them both hard, but him most of all. Yet the events of the past few weeks had, she felt, brought them even closer. Tonight represented a great step forward for them both. Nyssa had recently begun classes at a scientific academy specializing in bioelectronics research, and Tremas had finally assented to being set up on a date.

The woman, Grinian, was an instructor at the academy, and Nyssa was certain that her father and the woman would be an ideal match. Tremas, however, wasn't so sure.

"I'm not sure I'm ready," he had said the day before. "Not this soon after Kassia's death."

"Father, you mustn't think that way. It's been two months, after all. I wouldn't do this if you hadn't agreed in the first place - and you *did* agree," Nyssa had reminded him gently. Tremas had frowned, remembering his words all too clearly. "And it would be rude to cancel after plans have been made." At that, her father had finally agreed, albeit begrudgingly.

As they entered the front room, Grinian met them, having let herself in. There was no need for locked doors in the Traken Union, after all. Trakenites were naturally trustworthy and honest to a fault. The plump older woman beamed at them, her greying golden curls bouncing a little.

"Why hello there!" she greeted. "Oh, you must be Tremas. So wonderful to finally meet you after all Nyssa's told me!" Grinian extended a hand, and Tremas took it.

"The feeling is mutual," he replied a bit shakily. "Nyssa's... not told me much about you at all, but that you and I would be a wonderful match."

Grinian laughed. "Well, we'll have to put her matchmaking skills to the test, now won't we?" she replied, a mischievous twinkle in her eye. For the first time that evening, Tremas's face bore a genuine smile.

"I suppose we shall," he agreed. Nyssa kissed her father's cheek and stepped back.

"Enjoy yourselves," she said. "I'll just be on the grounds with my telescope." With that, she ducked outside, collecting the lightweight brass telescope and small stool stowed by the back door. Night fell quickly as she came to the edge of the estate, stopping occasionally to itch a small lump on her leg. By the time she came to the clearing in the woods, the only light

guiding her was that of the stars. She set up the telescope and plonked down the stool, and began to gaze into the vast night sky.

Stargazing had always been a favorite activity of Nyssa's, even as a child. Seeing the panoply of stars lighting the sky always made her wonder if someone like her was on a similar planet, looking up at their sky and wondering the same thing. She hoped so - it was a comforting thought, that despite immense distance, people could share common interests. But this evening Nyssa was by no means comforted. As she gazed into the heavens, the heavens fled. Before her very eyes, the stars were going out.

* * * * *

The Doctor's ears were ringing, his head shuddering violently as he pushed up from the floor. Unsteady on just his hands, he sat back, clutching his head. He was reminded of the time a particularly rowdy woman had dropped a pot on his head, banged on it, and made off with his sonic screwdriver. Of course, since the Terileptil incident, he was lacking that as well.

The dimensioning forces this deep in the TARDIS were wont to do their worst on any interlopers - but not usually the pilots. Whatever had infested the ship was clearly keen to keep him out. He dragged himself to his feet, staggering as gravitational eddies buffeted his body.

"Must get to Nyssa," he grunted, bracing himself on the wall. Steeling himself, the Time Lord walked deeper into the TARDIS. "Can't fail her. Not now...."

* * * * *

Luvic had adjusted well to the role of Keeper, but for the life of her, Nyssa couldn't recall how he had attained the position. Nevertheless, Nyssa thought she could see some concern on his face. That wasn't typical of a Keeper, as far as she knew. The previous Keeper had been ancient and serene, filled with the wisdom of ages. Luvic was automatically different due to the fact he hadn't been in the position for over a millennium. He often called sessions with the consuls to discuss the state of affairs in and around the Union.

After Seron and Kassia's deaths and Luvic's ascension, three positions were open on the Consulate. Tremas and Katura were still the most senior members, but now had to contend with less knowledgeable newcomers. Cadir, a pugnacious young man with a head for arithmetic, often disagreed with Tremas and Katura, and indeed, everyone else. He often got into squabbles with Entga. She was a loudmouthed woman who Nyssa felt was often in the right, even if she often only agreed with the others to make Cadir irritated. Rounding out the new blood was the towering Odroct. A bit of an overbearing personality, he seemed to want to be *de facto* leader of the Consulate. Tremas and Katura were often won over by his sparkling wit and prodigious knowledge on the wider universe. Cadir and Entga couldn't stand him. As nice as Traken was, politics could be as nasty here as elsewhere - they were just better at hiding it and saving face.

It was Odroct who was addressing the room now, as Nyssa watched from the sidelines. He was orating in a way that would make Mark Antony proud... Whoever that was. Nyssa could have sworn she'd met him. When had that been? And where? The lump in her leg pulsed and she absently reached down to rub it. It had been fine when it was small, but as it had swollen

larger, she'd become somewhat concerned. When she looked back up, Odroct was still thundering on importantly in his deep bass.

"I'd like to bring to our attention something that may affect the future of our Union," he boomed. "While we live our lives of peace and ordered calm-" Cadir snorted, but the taller man ignored him. "-we may be on the cusp of facing the most dangerous crisis in our long history."

Katura coughed politely, and Odroct nodded towards her, his chestnut curls bouncing. "What exactly is this crisis, Consul Odroct?"

"Keeper, my fellow consuls..." Odroct paused for dramatic effect before facing the room with his grimmest expression. "The stars are going out. I, and many like me in the Union, fear that this may be the end. At least for the wider universe..."

"And on what evidence do you base this claim?" Entga asked, unimpressed by what she clearly saw as baseless scaremongering.

"Yes, I've not noticed anything!" Cadir chipped in. Tremas frowned, and looked to Nyssa. She nodded back, and returned the gesture.

"My daughter has seen this for herself," Tremas announced, and suddenly every gaze in the room was on Nyssa. It was a little daunting, being the center of attention, but Nyssa rallied her courage and stepped forward to address the Consulate.

"Last night, I was in the glen behind my home," Nyssa began. "And through my telescope, I saw the stars twinkling out. I have taken pictures of this, and can present them for your review."

"Keeper? Is Nyssa telling the truth?" Entga's voice was colored with unease. The other consuls and Nyssa turned to face Luvic behind his glass partition.

Luvic slouched uneasily in his chair, as if he wished to just shrink down until he was too small for their scrutinizing gazes. "I... er..." He took a deep breath, then sighed. "There are reports from the wider universe that stellar disruption is increasing. But it's nothing to be concerned with. Some of these are just the light of long dead stars petering out. Others... we cannot be sure of."

The Consulate was suddenly awash in conversation, arguing what they should do. Tremas sat back and looked to Nyssa, somewhat helplessly. Sympathetic looks could only do so much good, despite their intent.

"Quiet. *Quiet!*" Luvic called. The consuls didn't listen, continuing to debate. With a sigh, Luvic tapped into each of their minds, forcing their silence and attention. He hated doing it, but when needs must... "Now, here's what we're going to do. We will continue as normal, and any concerns will be addressed as already dead stars' light no longer reaching the Union."

"But this isn't a normal pattern!" Odroct protested. "The sheer scale of it all can even be seen by a layman! Keeper, I beseech you-"

"*Enough!* Beseech me not, Consul Odroct," Luvic boomed, trying to sound important. "I have spoken, and you will follow my words to the letter. Is that understood?"

There was a brief pause before the Consulate agreed. Though Odroct and Entga only did so begrudgingly, Luvic seemed satisfied.

"Now, is there any further business to attend to?" There wasn't. "Then we are adjourned. Peace and long life to you all."

"Peace and long life to you, Keeper," the others chorused as they filed out of the room. Nyssa met Tremas as they exited, and wrapped her arm around his as they fell into step.

"Do you think the Keeper's doing the right thing, father?" Nyssa asked quietly. Tremas grimaced.

"For once, Nyssa, I'm not sure," he replied, the age settling ever more deeply on his features. Nyssa couldn't remember a time her father looked so tired... in fact, he almost looked dead. The two walked home, both unsettled, but for very different reasons.

* * * * *

A staircase came down the ceiling to the floor the wrong way around, and the Doctor frowned as he leaned against an equally wrong one on the wall. The TARDIS had apparently taken interior design tips from Castrovalva since he'd last been this deep in the ship.

"Still," he mused, "it's more interesting than last time I was down here. 'Abandoned hospital' is never a good design aesthetic."

The dimensioning forces were growing stronger still as he pushed on, hopping up onto the staircase going up along the ceiling. Thankfully, the same forces were able to shift gravity so that he didn't fall and crack his head open. He wasn't sure a regeneration would succeed in such a hostile environment.

The stairs were a struggle. It was all the Doctor could do to stay upright, much less lift his feet. But he had to do this. He couldn't fail now. But overexerting himself wouldn't do much good, and so he sat down, legs dangling over the side of the staircase. When he peered over the side, his eyes widened.

"Oh dear."

Below him was not the hallway he'd entered from, but a tangled mess of conflicting staircases spiralling out in every feasible direction and more besides. The Doctor gulped and leaned back, wondering how he was going to get out of this one.

"No more block transfer computation," he muttered, hand on his face.

The Doctor drew a deep breath and steeled himself for the next ascent.

"Better get on with it, before these distortions become any worse," he muttered to himself. Wrenching himself to his feet, the Doctor pressed on into the infinite stair matrix.

* * * * *

As Nyssa walked down the high street toward the Keeper's sanctum, she felt the shift in the air and saw it manifest on the street. People didn't stay out much anymore. Most were inside, trying to distract themselves from what was happening. Others huddled together on street corners and under awnings, muttering quietly amongst themselves. Nyssa couldn't pick up every word, but what she did hear didn't fill her with joy. Traken was at its most unsettled. It wasn't only the nobles and consuls who had noticed the distressing changes in the night sky.

Odroct had been quite correct when he had warned that even laymen would be able to tell. No one believed the "official explanation". Especially after the first refugee ship arrived from Dulkis. Then the dozens that followed from Krannon, then Tigella, Epsilus, the Sense-Sphere, and most recently Kalen.

Cadir stubbornly held to his belief that everything was fine, much to everyone's annoyance - especially that of the refugees. He couldn't be wrong - it might damage his pride.

If pride really did “goeth before a fall”, Nyssa had thought, Cadir was in for a nasty landing. As such, she was unsurprised when Tremas had mentioned Cadir had come in with a split lip and black eye last session. Entga claimed he’d been jumped by a particularly offended Mortrexly. One was eying Nyssa as she ascended the steps into the sanctum. The hulking monitor lizards hadn’t been ones to remain in the makeshift ghettos they’d been offered.

Entering the sanctum, Nyssa saw empty space on the pedestal behind the glass partition. She called out for Luvic, and he appeared not a moment after. Several of the lumps on Nyssa’s legs throbbed and itched, but she didn’t react, for fear of irritating them. Luvic, for his part, looked exhausted. Everyone did these days.

“What can I do for you, Nyssa?” he asked.

“I wanted to know... how bad is it?” Her head tilted in curiosity, despite the severity of her expression. “In the wider universe, that is. With all the refugees...”

Luvic started to speak, but faltered, biting his lower lip and looking down and away. When he finally collected his thoughts, his voice was small yet grave. “It’s bad. Bad enough that we’ve opened our borders permanently. The stars failing is only the most visible sign. Planetary orbits are decaying, ecosystems are collapsing. The worst creatures in the universe are taking advantage of the chaos. I have even attempted to contact the Time Lords of Gallifrey, but there is only silence from their system. Ships from Dido and Foamasius are due in the next several days, and more from the Constellation of Mieroz.”

“And after that? When does it end?”

Luvic’s tone could have killed a bull elephant. “It doesn’t, Nyssa. We are the last bastion of stability in a universe on the brink. But how long we remain that way depends on how far the Union is willing to extend its hospitality.” He paused. “Already, less... desirable elements have started to appear on our world.”

“I did notice the Mortrexly outside,” Nyssa murmured. Luvic shook his head.

“There are far worse things in the universe than some self-important reptilians. What I’m referring to are quickly petrified as Melkur, but we have no way of knowing how many of these entities the goodness of Traken can withstand.”

Nyssa wasn’t sure herself. Much as she knew how good Traken could be, in recent weeks, things began to seem less certain. As if the universe had seen how comfortable she was and decided that it hated her for it. Its apparent campaign to rock her world was succeeding...

In the end, all Nyssa could say in reply was, “I have hope.”

“I pray that is enough,” Luvic intoned. An awkward pause hung between them. “Peace and long life, Nyssa.”

“Peace and... long life,” she finished to the empty pedestal. Feeling no better than when she had entered, Nyssa turned and left. The Mortrexly at the foot of the steps smirked at her as she passed, and she pointedly ignored it. Head down to obscure the stars, Nyssa hurried home to hide in her room. As she went, the lumps on her legs began to itch even more.

* * * * *

Several dozen staircases in, the Doctor was almost knocked down as a blindingly bright shape darted past him, shimmering with all different colors. The Doctor couldn’t look directly at it without blinding himself, such was its intensity. He racked his brain for what it could be, but all

indicators came back to one thought. A shudder passed over him, and his face set further into a frown.

"Well, I have my work cut out for me this time," he muttered with a sigh.

The Doctor pressed on, forging ahead into the very depths of the TARDIS. Having clambered up what had seemed to be an endless series of twisting staircases, he had finally made it to stable ground. Relatively speaking, at least. The space in which he found himself was vast and featureless. He turned; the same void was there behind him. There was no evidence of the gruelling climb he had just endured. There was nothing behind him but grey nothingness, punctuated by the occasional lost roundel, floating in the void. He was reminded of tombs of the great Egyptian pharaohs, which sealed themselves behind prospective grave robbers, locking them in forever. At least when he'd stumbled into one, he'd had the TARDIS to get him out. This time, his usual mode of escape was the trap itself.

"Very interesting," he said to himself. "Discontinuity of structure throughout this section of the TARDIS. I had better be moving in the right direction, because it doesn't look like there's any going back." He looked ahead into the nothingness. "Or going forward, it seems."

The Doctor took a few experimental steps forward, then back, and to the side. There was barely even any sensation of movement.

"Well, they're doing their level best to keep me out, aren't they?" he remarked.

Tapping his chin, the Doctor rummaged in his coat pocket, quickly extracting a red cricket ball. He threw it forward, one part experimentation and two parts frustration... which quickly increased to three as the ball bounced back and smacked him square in the nose.

The Time Lord dropped to his knees, gasping in pain. His hands clutched his nose, which miraculously wasn't broken. After a moment to gather himself, he rose to his feet. He gently placed his right hand over his nose, just in case this next move really did break it, closed his eyes and charged forward.

The Doctor burst through the doorway that had stood between him and the next chamber, invisible from the other side. He gave a low growl of frustration, running a hand over his face.

"This is becoming thoroughly tedious."

* * * * *

"Why am I not surprised Cadir actually said that?" Nyssa replied, shaking her head. Tremas sighed and pushed his food around with his fork.

"The boy refuses to think that anything's wrong, overwhelming evidence be damned," her father replied. "When he gets an opinion into his head, there's no dislodging it. It's really very infuriating."

He was cut short by a raw scraping sound. Looking out to the grounds, they saw a roughly man-shaped figure dragging its stone feet towards them. It was an object that should never have been able to move, and yet it forced itself forward, coming to a halt at the window. It stared balefully in at them.

"How can he not see that there's something wrong?" Nyssa exclaimed, exasperated. "Not only are there Melkur lining the streets, but now they're moving! Melkur are supposed to be petrified, unable to move an inch!"

"This is, indeed, troubling," replied Tremas, with a mastery of understatement.

The Melkur came no further, however. It stayed at the window, beady red eyes boring holes into their skulls. Tremas looked away first, and Nyssa turned with him. While it wasn't coming in, the Melkur seemed intent to provoke them by merely staring. Evil intentions underlying its inaction. It was as if it was waiting for something.

"I'm going to go for help," Nyssa whispered. "Stay here."

"No, I should be the one to go," Tremas insisted, but Nyssa shook her head.

"You're too weak, father. The past several weeks have taken so much out of you."

It was true. Tremas had seemingly become frailer by the day, as if he was the walking dead. Nyssa watched her father's deterioration from a venerated elder statesman to a shriveled old man who couldn't hold his own amongst the Consulate. Part of Nyssa was distraught at this, and knew it was wrong. But another part of her, a part she tried to ignore, told her that this was entirely correct. That her father was already as good as dead.

Tremas heaved a sigh, sitting back down at the table. His food sat on his plate, mocking his lack of appetite.

"You're right," he grunted. "Go on then, but please be careful."

"I will," Nyssa assured him. She embraced him, kissing his cheek before crossing to the door. A Melkur's demonic stare greeted her from the other side. She shrieked, and slammed the door in its face.

"What's happened!?" Tremas called.

"There's a Melkur at the door, too!"

"*What!?*"

Nyssa darted back into the dining area to her father. "I'm going to try the back door."

Another Melkur greeted her, its gnarled stone form blocking any possible exit.

"Why are you doing this?!" Nyssa screamed in frustration, but the Melkur gave no reply. It simply stood stock still, red eyes smoldering under a heavy brow. Nyssa shut the door, pressing her back against it and slumping helplessly to the floor.

* * * * *

Nyssa didn't remember falling asleep, and hoped she had gotten to her bed instead of passing out against the door. She looked around, and saw a blonde man in a strange beige outfit wandering a hazy corridor. It was as if she was watching him on a screen, yet was right there with him. She called out to him, but received no reply. Frustrated, she leaned against a circular fixture in the wall, which lit up under her touch. The blonde man took notice and walked over.

"What's this then, old girl? A hint?" he inquired, voice haggard and raspy. "Whatever it is, I'll take it." He walked right through Nyssa, who clasped her abdomen as he did. Then everything seemed to fall into place. It was the Doctor.

"Doctor!" she called out, and he turned, eyes wide as he sought out the source of the voice.

"Nyssa! Is that you? I can't see you!" he cried.

"I'm over here," she called back, "by the roundel!"

The Doctor turned back and looked down at, to his perspective, the empty space in front of the roundel. "Nyssa, if that's you, I need you to listen to me. Whatever you've been

experiencing, it's *false!* That's not to say it isn't real, but it's not *right*, do you understand? You're host to a parasite called a Timewright. It's weaving a new timeline from your hopes, dreams, and fears so that it can feed on the temporal energy."

The more questioning, logical part of Nyssa's brain lit up at this, and everything seemed to make sense. But the emotional part of her mind proved stronger, and shoved it aside. The Doctor couldn't be right, it insisted.

"No!" Nyssa retorted. "You're wrong. I'm... fine! Just fine!" Her mind raced and argued with itself. How could she know who the Doctor was if she'd never left home? It didn't make any sense. Neither did the fact she knew of Marc Antony and elephants and that adage about pride.

The Doctor looked sympathetic and frustrated all at once. "Are you really?" he asked. "Tell me, how's your father? Is Traken doing well? Are there lumps somewhere on you? Ones that act up when things don't seem quite right?"

As if hearing their cue, the lumps on Nyssa's legs spasmed. It felt as if she'd been stabbed, and she fell to her knees with a wail.

"I'll take that as a yes," was the Doctor's grim reply. "That's the Timewright in its parasitic form. I saw one in traveling guise earlier. You must fight it, Nyssa! The timeline it's weaving from you is threatening all of existence - *and the TARDIS.*"

"I... I want my father!" Nyssa cried. "I want to be home, I want to have peaceful conversation, I want... I want..."

"Nyssa, listen to me carefully!" the Doctor shouted, losing his patience. "Your home is *gone*, destroyed by the Master! Who, might I remind you, murdered your father in cold blood and is wearing his corpse like a Halloween costume!"

The lumps were now a searing pain in her leg. Nyssa screamed, scratching at one until her leg began to bleed. Looking down, she could see a carapace of iridescent chitin shimmering underneath her skin. Her mind rallied itself, and she knew what she had to do.

"Nyssa? Are you still there?"

"Yes," she gasped through the pain. "I'm here. What do you need me to do, Doctor?"

"Can you lead me to the Heart of the TARDIS?" he asked. She considered this, and somehow, she knew the way. Pressing her hand to the wall, the roundels lit up in the right direction. "Thank you."

"Isn't the Heart under the console?" she asked.

"Time Lord engineering," the Doctor replied, smiling for the first time. "Two hearts." He became serious again. "Now, Nyssa, once I free you, you will lose that timeline forever. But I want you to just keep telling yourself-"

"It's necessary for the good of the universe," Nyssa replied.

"I was going to say you have a new home here in the TARDIS. You're always welcome here," was the Doctor's warm, earnest reply. Nyssa desperately wished she could hug him, but instead, she felt herself fading away.

"Doctor! I think I'm waking up!" she called out. "I'll do what I can! I'll-"

* * * * *

And then Nyssa was in her bed, cold sweat running down her face. The clock said that it was mid-morning, but no light came in through the windows. Just a red glow. The bedside lamp didn't work, nor did the overhead lights in the hall. It was as if Traken was blacked out. With a yelp of surprise, Nyssa realized that her legs were now covered in Timewright lumps. She was infested - not an inch of smooth skin anywhere.

She dashed into the front room, calling out for her father, only to be met with a sight that chilled her to the bone. An army of Melkur surrounded the house, their eyes casting the room in a blood-red glow. Row upon row stretched back into the woods and doubtlessly far beyond, making escape impossible. But worse than that was their shapes. Melkur versions of her father, Kassia, Luvic, and the Consulate glowered at her. More marched forward, and the Timewrights throbbed in her legs.

The regal Monarch with his Ministers of Enlightenment and Persuasion, a scorched Terileptil, and the jagged form a Dar Trader all marched into view. A stone Cyberman shoved a Xeraphin-shaped statue out of the way. It fell to the ground, shattering at the feet of the gnarled form of George Cranleigh, who drooled and twitched in spite of his stone construction. Every monster she'd ever faced, plus her family and friends, was assembled before her, hewn from mottled stone.

Her father's Melkur was shifting as it led the way into the house. Its beard and hair were chiseled back by unseen hands at the same time it smashed the back windows in. As it stomped forth to grab her, it finally looked just like the Master, who grinned at her devilishly. Nyssa turned to run, only to be clotheslined by a Melkur Grinian and fall flat on her rear. The Cyberman and Cranleigh statues closed in on either side, and Nyssa screamed as they leaned in to snatch her up.

* * * * *

With a triumphant gasp, the Doctor burst into the room containing the Heart of the TARDIS. A vaulted ceiling stretched up into the infinite, and the towering energy pillar of the heart pulsed and shimmered. Suspended in the middle of the pillar were the Timewrights. They were in traveling guise, translucent and shimmering with all the colors of the rainbow. The beasts had monstrous faces resembling gargoyles, undulating, serpentine bodies like Chinese dragons, and impossibly vast hang-glider-esque wings. Twenty or more of them had clustered together to form a tight ball in the pillar. In the center of this hung the faint silhouette of Nyssa, her arms outstretched and head hanging limp as if waiting to be crucified.

The Doctor looked around, trying to find a control panel or something to help him restabilize the heart and purge the parasites. As he turned his head, he realized he was no longer in the Heart Chamber. Orange grass spread out before him, and silver leaves glimmered in a nearby tree. The Doctor's hearts stopped, caught in his throat. He whirled around, only to see his family waiting for him, beckoning him to follow them to the Capitol.

"Come on, grandfather!" Susan called, her parents beside her. "We'll be late for supper!"

"I... I, uh...." The Doctor faltered before finding his voice. "I'll be right there!"

A small step forward was cut short by two arms wrapping around his neck and a kiss pressing to his lips. Surprised, the Doctor saw a blonde, blue-eyed woman with ruby red lips smiling up at him. Instinctively, he smiled back.

"Ready to go home, Lord President?" she asked, emphasizing the title.

The Doctor took her hands in his and began to walk towards his ancestral home, across the grounds. The twin moons of Gallifrey were just visible in the amber sky. He felt a weight lift, more at peace than he had felt in years.

He squeezed his better half's hand, but someone stepped between them, forcing their hands apart and abruptly ruining the moment. She shook back her chestnut hair and looked him in the eye.

"Doctor," said Nyssa, "this isn't right. It's just as wrong as my life on Traken. The Timewrights are doing this! You need to come back! Back to the Heart of the TARDIS!"

"Never go home again," muttered the Doctor, grimly. He took one last, long look at his family, beckoning him to his home, then to the familiar blonde who was eyeing Nyssa venomously. "Why wouldn't I want to go home again?"

"Because this isn't real! This is an illusion! You know it is!" Nyssa insisted, and the Doctor blinked. The inviting visage of his family and home flickered, fading away alongside Nyssa. The real Nyssa still hung suspended in the ball of Timewrights. The Doctor shook his head and spotted a control panel.

The Timewrights keened and squealed, their illusion broken. One broke off from the ball, plunging out of the pillar towards the Doctor. Nyssa seemed to be roused by the one flying away, the power they had over her weakening as her mind fought their control. A desperate cry filled the air as the Doctor flung himself to the ground to avoid the scintillating demon. He wasn't sure if it was Nyssa or the Timewrights, but right now he didn't care.

Lurching for the console, the Doctor quickly input an override command. More Timewrights began to break off, swooping at him. He dodged them all and his finger hovered over the last button. The Timewrights held off, seemingly understanding what he was about to do and boggling that he would actually do it.

"I hope you enjoyed your meal!" he cried. "Because unfortunately, dinner service is over! Goodbye!" And with a flourish, he stabbed the button. Klaxons filled the air and the pillar began to rumble as it visibly began to sink into the floor, the suction generating a high-inescapable funnel. The Doctor held onto the console as the Timewrights roared in frustration, being sucked in as well. Nyssa cried out, now fully awake as the Timewrights' at last freed her.

"Doctor! Doctor, help!" she wailed.

"Nyssa, hold on!" he screamed back, letting go of the console and flying into the pillar. He could just make out Nyssa through the blinding light, and began to try and move up to her. Suddenly, one of the Timewrights grabbed his coat, claws tearing at the fabric. The Doctor scowled at it.

"You've done quite enough for one day, I think!" With a grunt, he kicked the Timewright hard in the snout. It shrieked in pain, letting go and falling down into the pulsating brightness below. The Doctor struggled to get back to Nyssa, who still had one Timewright desperately coiled around her legs. "Nyssa!"

Nyssa looked down, but found she couldn't see. Everything was going white. Was it the Timewright? She couldn't be sure. But she found that she was too exhausted to care all of a sudden... She felt something grab her ankle, but she couldn't tell if it was a hand or a claw.

"Nyssa! Nyssa...!"

* * * * *

"Nyssa? Are you awake?"

"What?" Nyssa muttered, rubbing her head as she sat up. The console room greeted her, much to her surprise. "How did I end up here?"

"The TARDIS regained control and transported us here, I think," said the Doctor, kneeling beside her. Nyssa turned, surprised to see him, before wrapping him in a hug. He chuckled, hugging her back. "I'm glad you're alright, too."

"I just remember the pillar sinking into the floor..."

"I initiated a purge," the Doctor explained. "The Heart of the TARDIS was fed into the Eye of Harmony. The Timewrights couldn't withstand the process, and have been consumed. They underestimated the gravity of the situation."

Nyssa shook her head, ignoring his pun. "It felt like a dream. Like a truly awful dream."

The Doctor gestured to the hat rack, where his coat was hanging in tatters. "I can assure you it wasn't."

"But why me?" Nyssa asked as the Doctor helped her to her feet. They approached the console and the Doctor began to paw at the controls. He considered his words.

"Because you were the most vulnerable, and the most... appetizing."

"Appetizing?"

"Like I said, Timewrights weave timelines from their victims' hopes, dreams, and fears. They feed on the temporal energy that results, at the expense of the victim. You, I'm very sorry to say, Nyssa... well, your past was appealing to them. Your desire to return to a home that's long since gone, your wish to be with your father again... You were a smorgasbord. The alterations they needed to make, and the knock-on effects of those, would change the entire universe. It would result in enough temporal energy to make the entire flock of them fat and happy for eons."

"But why did it go so... horribly wrong in the end?" Nyssa asked.

"I would assume it's because you fought back. They couldn't keep you complacent, and so it all soured. But the ensuing nastiness seems to have been acceptable to them." The Doctor shrugged as he inspected the readings on one of the monitors. He glanced up again, meeting her gaze. "Honestly, I don't know. I wasn't there, so I can't be certain."

Nyssa nodded. "One more thing."

"Yes?" the Doctor smiled expectantly.

"How *did* I know how to direct you to the Heart?"

"Ah, yes, that." He walked around to her and patted the console. "The TARDIS must have been able to deposit some vital information in your mind so you could help me find my way. Self-preservation, after a fashion."

Nyssa sighed, defeated. "So there's really no hope of ever going home?"

"I'm afraid not," the Doctor replied apologetically. He brightened, however. "But, because of your sacrifice, there's still a whole universe out there! A universe that's still full of life and ready to explore. Where shall we go next? Your choice."

While the thought excited her, Nyssa didn't feel like going out. They'd inevitably end up running from monsters like they always did. She smiled up at the Time Lord.

"Maybe we could stay put for a while? I could do with some sleep," she admitted.

The Doctor beamed at her.

"That's the best idea I've heard in a long time."

BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

POLICE TELEPHONE
Nyssa
FOR USE OF
PUBLIC
Nyssa, wake up
This is wrong
PULL TO OPEN



They say that the atmosphere of Traken is so suffused with goodness that any evil that arrives there is sure to just shrivel up and die. They say it's a paradise, matched by few, exceeded by none. Is it any wonder that other beings look upon it enviously as their own civilizations crumble? As refugees from the wider galaxy arrive, life on Traken begins to change. But what is behind this influx of aliens?

Nyssa has never left Traken, but she explores the universe every night from the safety of her grounds. Yet what she sees through her telescope tonight frightens her. Even the Keeper seems afraid of what is coming. What is happening to the stars? What has disturbed the balance of the cosmos?

As the Doctor fights tooth and nail against his own ship, Nyssa faces her own demons. There will be hard choices to make for both of them.

For Nyssa, Traken is the most wonderful place in the universe, but soon it could be the only place left...

This story features the Fifth Doctor and Nyssa

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