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SPIRITS



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Spirits
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PLEASE NOTE

The following story was originally published in 1999 and therefore may not reflect the quality of subsequent stories published by The Doctor Who Project in later seasons.

Please bear this in mind while reading this story.

“It disappeared! I couldn’t find the damn thing anywhere!” Kate didn’t even pause to draw breath between finishing talking and taking a swig of her coffee.

“I know the feeling,” said Susannah. “It’s just your memory playing tricks on you. Where did you put it after you finished using it last?”

Before Kate’s answer had finished forming on her lips, she noticed the man sitting alone three tables away staring at her. She wasn’t quite sure how, since he was wearing sunglasses, but she knew his full attention wasn’t on the newspaper he was holding. The feeling passed when he turned the page.

“What’s the matter?” As soon as Susannah had finished her question, she started to turn around.

“Don’t!”

“What is it? Why are you whispering?”

“That man over there, wearing the sunglasses. He was staring at us.”

Susannah did turn around at that, to see the man in question sigh heavily, spread his newspaper out flat on the white plastic tabletop and cradle his chin in his hands then shifting his elbows back when he realised they were obscuring the bottom of the pages. “Well he seems to have lost interest in us now. Can’t say I blame him. A conversation about a missing hairbrush probably isn’t very interesting to eavesdroppers.”

Kate thought she saw the ghost of a smile on his face at that last bit, but it was probably just one of those ludicrous stories that you found in the middle pages of every paper. “Anyway, as I was saying, I think I left it...” She did a textbook cartoon doubletake. “Didn’t I just knock my coffee over?”

Susannah’s had widened considerably in the few seconds since Kate had last seen them. “Yes, you did,” she said, her voice tinged with panic. “I saw it fall and then - well - it was back on the table.”

Kate automatically wiped at the spilled coffee with a napkin while she struggled to take that fact in. The background chatter had risen in intensity, making thinking all the harder. Then she noticed the even more horrified look on Susannah’s face. “What?”

Susannah nodded at a point behind Kate. “Why are they leaving?”

Kate turned and noticed that a young couple was leaving. The woman was leaving, at any rate, although her companion seemed determined to wave and smile at Kate and Susannah before he followed. The other man, the one with the sunglasses and the waistcoat with a starfield in the shape of Mickey Mouse, yawned loudly, stretched, and left some money on the table with his now-folded newspaper and walked away, stuffing his hands in his pockets and whistling.

“I think it’s sad that some people have lost the capacity to be amazed,” said Kate.

Karen dragged Jade along the corridor and up the stairs by the sleeve of his black leather jacket. Honestly, she thought, why did he have to goof off whenever he summoned the Spirits?

“Hey! You’re tearing my jacket!”

“Good!” snapped Karen. She spun around to face him, throwing his sleeve down. “Do you mind telling me, if you even know the answer yourself, why you had to go and do that?”

“Do what?” he asked, fiddling with his sleeve.

“You know what I mean. A spilled cup of coffee is hardly worth causing a scene about!”

“Who’s causing a scene? You worry too much. No one figured out what was going on.”

She tilted her head in the direction of the man who’d followed them from the cafe, making a point of running her hand through her long, golden blonde hair to disguise the gesture. She was relieved that, for once, Jade managed to catch on to what she was doing quickly and responded with a degree of subtlety.

“I said,” then he slowed down his speech, pronouncing every syllable of every word, “that you worry too much. He’s just window shopping.”

“Which is quite a coincidence, really,” she retorted, “because windows happen to be reflective surfaces. He’s watching us and trying to look like he isn’t.”

Jade still looked totally unconvinced. “Even if he is, what’s he gonna do?”

“I dunno. Let’s go.” She turned back to see the man from the cafe start whistling cheerily as he walked away from the bakery, brushing crumbs from his waistcoat with the spiral star pattern and his light goatee beard. The last thing she saw as she walked away was the man’s grin when he found himself standing in front of a rack of sunglasses.

Jade was striding along the mall without a care in the world, being a barger by nature, the sort of person who walks through crowds and lets the other people get out of his way. Karen, on the other hand, was a compulsive dodger, one of the people who did the getting out of the way. As a result they got separated a little during the course of the trip to the exit.

She saw him first; the man who she’d been sure was following them. He stepped right out in front of her and smiled, producing a cup of coffee seemingly out of nowhere. Someone bumped his arm, sending the coffee flying towards her face. She heard Jade shout and felt the ripple of a Spirit flying in front of her, catching the coffee. The Spirit squealed, the sudden piercing noise shattering the crystal chandelier over the mall, spraying glass shards down onto the crowd. None of the shards hit anyone, thanks to the Spirit surging around faster than human eyes could see, faster than even Karen could take in... and she knew exactly what to look for.

In moments, the crowd was sprawling on the floor of the mall. The man from the cafe was staggering dazedly, having turned into a blur when the Spirit intercepted his attempt to dive at Karen to push her out of the way of the falling glass. The Spirit was gone, and Jade was running for his life, staring in horror at the man from the cafe and tripping over people as he ran.

The man from the cafe made a half-hearted attempt at stopping him, then gave up and jogged over to help Karen.

“Hello,” the man said. “I’m the Doctor. I’d like to know more about your insubstantial friend if you wouldn’t mind. You look like you could use some coffee.”

“No, thank you.”

“Ah. Tea then. Excellent choice. One lump or two?” He examined the top of her head carefully. “None. Glad to hear it. Come along.” And with that, he led her away.

“The Spirits only come when we summon them to help.” Karen wondered why the Doctor was being so stubbornly sceptical, since he’d accepted the idea of Spirits being around to summon without difficulty.

He rested his chin on his hands. “Spirits which leave an unusual temporal scent behind.”

“What are you talking about? Temporal? As in time? How can time have a scent?”

The Doctor raised one eyebrow at her. “What are you like at maths?”

“Useless.”

“Oh. Biology?”

“Not much better.”

“Ah, it’d probably take far too long to explain then.” He raised a hand before she had a chance to get the words out. “And explaining why it would take so long to explain would take even longer.”

She felt a familiar tingle in the air and tensed slightly. To her surprise, the Doctor became alert immediately. “There’s a Spirit not far away.”

“Can you see anyone from your group who might have summoned it?”

“No. It feels different from when we summon one more... I don’t know, free than they usually feel. It’s difficult to explain.”

“I know what you mean. Where is it?”

“Very close now.”

The Doctor felt as though he were running through wet tar, something laughing malevolently in his head as he went. Whatever it was, it was stretching his temporal field, making his head feel fuzzy the way temporal anomalies always did. Just as it reached him, he thought he saw it, just briefly. He hoped Karen wouldn’t ask him what it looked like, because he wasn’t sure his maths and biology were up to the task of describing it.

His immediate problem, however, was to get it to release its strangle hold on some of his higher-dimensional extremities. The pain had reached a point where he might have to start to admit to it, and the thought of admitting pain to an unknown assailant seemed a bit undignified.

“Doctor? What happened to you?” Karen had picked herself up off the floor. The Spirit had gone; its presence lasting only a second. The Doctor, however, was gasping as though he’d been in tremendous pain for several hours.

“I’m okay,” he said, waving the assembled onlookers in the cafeteria away as he stood up. He grinned as they all drifted away back to their tables. “Bad day at work, that’s all,” he assured the stragglers.

“What was all that about?” Karen hissed.

“No need to whisper so harshly. That Spirit you felt attacked me. What made it stop, I wonder?”

“Maybe it spat you out because it doesn’t like the taste of sunglasses.”

The Doctor looked as if he were about to make a major reply to that statement, but obviously thought better of it and closed his mouth. Instead, he stuffed his hands in his pockets and started walking away.

“Where are we going?” Karen asked, catching up with him.

“I think we need some Spiritual advice - and I was rather hoping you’d lead us to it.”

Karen was relieved that her initial suspicion - that the Doctor was going to walk with her to the House in the dark with his sunglasses still on - had proved to be false. He’d had a pained expression as he’d taken them off, though, as though he didn’t feel quite himself when he wasn’t wearing them. Without them she could finally see his eyes, steel grey and full of determination and compassion and optimism and sadness and contradictions. The sort of eyes which even the Spirits probably hoped were looking at them in a positive light.

The Doctor noticed her looking at him and grinned at her. The rest of the way back to the House, they talked about the Spirits and the people who summoned them.

The Doctor stopped Karen as she started to head for the front door.

“What?”

He gave her a serious look. “Centuries of experience have taught me that if you have two people entering the same building for information, the best way to maximise the information you gain is for one to enter through the front door and the other to sneak in the back way.”

It took Karen a moment to figure out what to say to such an absurd suggestion. She decided to ignore the first bit and concentrate on the immediate concern. “You’re mad. Why sneak around?”

“Instinct, experience and it’s more fun.” He set off grinning like a school kid racing home to play with a new toy.

“The Sensible-and-Insane technique,” Karen muttered to herself. “And I get to be Sensible.” She thought about that as she hung up her coat and went to see if Jade had arrived yet. She wasn’t sure whether to feel honoured or insulted.

Behind the big old house, one of the downstairs windows had been left open. The Doctor was pleased - he didn’t have to break anything to get in. The down side was that the window was over the kitchen, and as he climbed in he slipped, sticking his right foot up to the ankle in cold, slimy dishwater.

After finding a towel and drying his foot enough to prevent leaving any tracks through the house, the Doctor listened for voices. He could hear Karen talking to her friend from the shopping centre, so he went the opposite way.

“Don’t give me that! You know what I’m talking about!” But Karen had to admit to herself that she was starting to suspect that Jade really didn’t. She was still stumped as to why he wouldn’t, though, so she used that to keep the niggling doubts at bay.

“No I don’t, Karen. If there was another Spirit that attacked somebody, and I’m not saying there wasn’t, it wasn’t there because of anything I did. And it can’t have been there because you summoned it, or you wouldn’t be asking. So either someone else summoned it or it was something other than a Spirit. Simple logic.”

She wondered briefly whether she should have told Jade that the someone the Spirit had attacked was the Doctor, but she doubted it would make any difference to him. Besides, she’d just had a much more worrying thought one that made her voice involuntarily waver slightly when she vocalised it. “What if it wasn’t summoned? What if it just turned up because it felt like it?”

Jade's face seemed to be unable to make up its mind whether it wanted to wear an expression of amazement and horror. It took him a moment to form the words to reply. "That's impossible."

Try as she might, Karen couldn't quite manage to rid herself of any trace of doubt. She also couldn't rid herself of any trace of doubt that Jade was having just as much trouble with the idea as she was.

The Master Summoner was whistling cheerily to himself and jangling his keys as he walked up the stairs to his room. He smiled at his reflection in the oval mirror at the top of the stairs. At least he didn't look like the sort of weirdo the media liked to claim was at the head of every religious cult. Some had claimed that his smile had been stolen straight from the Devil himself, but that was a bit different. He regarded it as a sort of compliment. Especially considering that it came from someone who desperately wanted to make him sound like a menace to society. If that was the best they could come up with.

His self-appraisal was interrupted by the sound of shattering terracotta. He turned to deliver a tension-breaking smile and witty comment to the Student Summoner who had knocked over the plant stand. Instead of the expected Student, however, the sight of a grinning stranger standing over the fallen plant stand greeted him.

"Sometimes it's a pity that things come in threes," the stranger said, gesturing towards the three broken flower pots on the floor. "I'm the Doctor."

The man was up the stairs and had his hand outstretched in the Master Summoner's direction before the Master Summoner had managed to collect his thoughts. "Mike McIntyre. Er, pleased to meet you, er, Doctor...?" His questioning tone was ignored, so he pressed on as best he could. "Er, yes. And what brings you here, Doctor?"

"Curiosity," the Doctor replied, looking around as if to emphasise the trait. "I was wondering what your group is all about, and I thought the best way to find out would be to hear it direct from you. If you can spare the time, that is."

Mike wondered who this 'Doctor' had stolen his smile from, but only briefly. "Oh, of course, of course. I was just on my way to my study now as a matter of fact." He gestured toward the door of the study, indicating for the Doctor to precede him.

The Doctor returned the gesture, although Mike was pretty sure he detected a hint of mockery in the movement. "No no, after you."

Against his better judgement, Mike led the way into his study. He had never trusted people with trustworthy smiles. Ever.

Karen slammed the door of the refrigerator. Jade tried, without much conviction, to make fun of her perfectly reasonable fear. The Spirit who attacked the Doctor hadn't been summoned by just anyone. It was just going around doing precisely as it liked, but it was who'd probably eaten the last of the chocolate chip cookies. Which bothered her even more, because she found it considerably easier to think about big problems when she was snacking.

It was at that point that she noticed the mess on the kitchen floor. She wondered how it could possibly have taken her a whole second to realise that the mess must be the physical

evidence of the Doctor's arrival. There was no trail through the house, though, so the Doctor must have kept his word about being careful. Somehow that didn't strike her as being his style, though. So she went looking for other messes. Anywhere there was disruption in the Master Summoner's nice, orderly routine was bound to be where the Doctor was. At least that was one thing she could be certain of, if nothing else.

The shouting convinced Karen that she was on the right track, and the broken plant pots confirmed her suspicions. But neither prepared her for the sight that greeted her when she opened the door of the Master Summoner's study.

The Doctor was levitating, surrounded in a thick mist, which she could feel somehow, rather than see. Despite being unable to see it, though, she could tell its colour, a sort of five year old purple.

She started when the Master Summoner grabbed her arm.

"Do you know this man?" he barked.

"Sort of."

The Master Summoner grabbed her other arm in a similarly painful grip and shook her. "Did you help him get in here?"

"No!"

"You expect me to believe that he got himself in here?"

Before Karen had a chance to answer that question, a voice the same colour as the fog surrounding the Doctor's inert form, only older, spoke from a source which her senses completely failed to describe the location of. From the way he was frantically whirling around, she could tell that Mike was having the same problem. "We wanted him here. We wanted to speak to him."

"Who are you? What do want?" Mike demanded.

The voice laughed, a hundred year old electric blue laugh, which smelled faintly of roses. "It always amazes and amuses us that those who are the most practised at summoning us are invariably the last to accept that they are talking to us."

"You're one of the Spirits?" Karen swallowed after she said it. She hadn't summoned this Spirit and clearly Mike hadn't either, so that meant...

"Yes, we can communicate without being summoned. We rarely do so because we don't wish to alarm you." The voice made the word 'alarm' sound bright green and very recent. "And, of course, we rarely need to. However, this one," the voice somehow managed to gesture in the Doctor's direction with the word 'this', "has piqued our interest. He is not like any of you that we have met before. Do you know him?"

"Well, yes," Karen replied, hesitantly.

"You misunderstand. Do you know him?"

"Oh. Not really, we've only just met really and ..."

"Thank you. We shall ask him ourselves. Do not blame yourself, you have done well. Perhaps one day we shall talk again."

Karen could feel, though she wasn't sure how, that the Spirit had gone back from whence it came to talk to the Doctor. She was more worried by its parting comment. It had known that she was blaming herself, but even she didn't know what for. That part of its comment had been recent, though. So recent that...

The voices were talking at the Doctor, not to him, from everywhere at once. “We didn’t do it,” they cried. “It wasn’t us.” And the Doctor could tell from the panic in the voices that they were telling the truth.

“Who are you all?” the Doctor asked the voices. “Are you the ones these people call Spirits?”

“What an interesting way to word it,” replied dozens of female voices at once. “You make it sound as if you think we are something other than Spirits. And what could we be besides Spirits?”

“It’s a little difficult to tell, since I can think of at least three races off the top of my head who could stretch my temporal extremities the way you are. Two of them wouldn’t realise that’s what they were doing, of course, but you’re too good at it to be either of those. And I don’t recognise what I can see of you, which isn’t much judging by the way you’re distorting some of the higher dimensions, so you must be a race I haven’t encountered before but which knows a bit about time.”

“Nearly. You have met us before Doctor, though you wouldn’t remember it. You were younger then.”

“Well, that doesn’t necessarily mean...”

“Enough of this idle chatter, Doctor. You have questions you wish to ask us, and we have many questions we would like to ask you. What made you come and seek us out?”

“I was attacked by a being very similar to you a few hours ago.”

“We assure you it wasn’t one of us.”

“Yes, well, no disrespect, but that’s what they all say.” The Doctor took his hands out of his pockets and folded his arms in front of him. Better to be safe than sorry, after all. The world seemed to take on a slightly darker, angrier tone around him. He would have assumed that he had angered the voices a little by questioning their integrity in such a manner if it weren’t for the slight edge of fear, which quickly followed.

“You doubt that we are benevolent?”

“Let’s just say that I’m determined to find the truth.” The feeling of anger abated slightly, although the fear didn’t.

“You should be careful what you seek, Doctor. People are often surprised by how often they find the truth and how little they want it afterwards.”

The Doctor drew himself up to his full height and stroked his beard. “Perhaps. But most people are less careful to wish for what they truly want rather than what they think they want.” A tinge of admiration changed the smell of the world to something, which reminded the Doctor of begonias.

“You are wiser than many, Doctor. But is there much wisdom in wisdom? The wise is never quite as happy as the fools.”

“Perhaps. I’ve been called a fool often enough. What are you doing here?” As he had hoped, the sudden change of subject caught the voices off guard a little. Good. That gave them less time to prepare a cover story. If they needed one.

“We are here to help the people of Earth. We don’t make our presence felt unless we are specifically invited to.”

“Via the summoning rituals, of course. Your tone implies that this is merely something you chose to do, rather than something you have to do. So it is possible that one of your number could have turned up uninvited to attack me?” That gave the voices pause for thought, and they did not reply for several seconds.

“It is possible,” they eventually conceded, “but we have no reason to attack you. Especially since you are protecting this planet’s interests just as we are.”

“Probably for longer, though,” the Doctor muttered under his breath.

“Don’t be so sure.”

The voices felt a little smug at that. “How long have you been here?”

“A very long time.”

Oh well, the Doctor shrugged inwardly, it was worth a try. “So if it wasn’t one of you who attacked me, who or what did? One of another group of Spirits?” That positively offended them, and the Doctor could taste the bristling of the Spirits surrounding him.

“There are no other Spirits.”

“Are you sure?”

The spirits made a bizarre sing-song noise like the sound of two of the higher dimensions rubbing together before they answered. “Yes.”

So that narrowed the field down to... none. The Doctor decided that he had to find another way to figure out what was going on. And he knew just what it was.

Before he had a chance to try it, however, the edges of the world started folding in on themselves, to the accompaniment of the voices screaming in a thousand different combinations of sound, smell and taste. The strongest taste was of blood.

“The enemy has come!”

The fog surrounding the Doctor’s body turned an ancient black colour, radiating an air of malice. Karen instinctively moved to drag him out, but Mike held her back.

“Be careful,” he told her, “we don’t know what would happen if we touched it.”

“It’s touching the Doctor, isn’t it?” she snapped.

“Yes. And look what’s happening to him.”

Karen forced herself to admit that he did have a point, although not what she considered to be an especially good one. So she knew that she had to come up with a better one. Quickly.

“Who is the enemy? You said there weren’t any other Spirits like yourselves!” the Doctor shouted.

“We choose to help other races - some of our number has no interest in anyone but themselves,” the voices eventually admitted.

“Just like the humans. Of course!” The Doctor slapped his forehead. “You don’t exist in the higher dimensions at all, do you? You live in the same ones as the rest of us - just at a higher speed. That’s why I can’t see this battle going on, even though you sped me up enough to talk to you - they’re moving even faster so they can attack!”

Before he had a chance to start using this new-found information to his advantage, the Doctor felt something prodding him in the ribs.

“Don’t leave!” the voices cried in a despairing deep purple wail.

“I wasn’t aware that I was.”

She'd done it. Karen allowed herself a brief moment - after she'd checked that the Doctor was all right - to congratulate herself on thinking of a solution. Throwing that plant pot at the Doctor and knocking him out of the malicious fog had done the trick.

"Well done," the Doctor gasped between breaths, "But next time you do some lateral thinking, could you possibly try to come up with a solution which is a little bit less uncomfortable?" He rubbed his ribs and winced slightly.

Karen had already apologised profusely and had her efforts waved away. So what was with the bad attitude?

"I think you're being a bit hard on Karen, Doctor," Mike chided.

"Shut up," Karen replied before the Doctor had even had a chance to speak. She wasn't entirely sure what that look on his face was supposed to mean, either.

"Anyway, it seems we have a far greater problem on our hands," the Doctor announced. "Your 'Spirits' are at war with a rival faction which is considerably less friendly."

"And they can appear without being summoned, can't they?"

"Of course they can't, Karen. I've never heard such..."

"Truth?" The Doctor raised his right eyebrow at Mike. "Because I'm very much afraid that's exactly what it is. Your 'Spirits' restrict themselves to appearing only when summoned as a courtesy, not because they have to. So you won't have that to protect you."

"So what do we have to protect ourselves?"

The Doctor looked at Karen with an expression which was full of sadness, but which didn't seem to rule out all hope. "I don't know. Yet. But I'll try to find a way."

"So what do we do in the meantime?" asked Mike.

"We think, Mike. We think very hard very quickly."

Karen couldn't bring herself to believe that she'd let the Doctor talk her into what she was doing. "You know this is completely insane, don't you?"

"Absolutely," the Doctor replied. "The last thing anybody expects you to do is the completely insane. So when you do, you catch them off guard. Which invariably gives you an advantage you wouldn't otherwise have had."

Part of her desperately wanted to believe that. Another part was frantically telling her that she should have taken the Doctor up on his offer to manage by himself so she could stay with the others - looking out for places where the Spirits' enemies were causing trouble and summoning the Spirits to stop them. Yet another part of her was saying that doing that was very much a case of putting a Band-Aid over a wound which required multiple stitches - and Doctors needed someone to help them, even with simple things like putting in stitches.

"And you're absolutely certain that getting ourselves captured by the Spirits" - she caught the look the Doctor gave her and quickly corrected herself - "Or aliens or whatever they are enemies is the best chance we've got of sorting all of this out?"

The Doctor gave her the first serious look she'd ever seen on his face. Well, the bit that was visible over his sunglasses. She didn't even want to think about how he could see with them on at night. "I wouldn't have even suggested doing this if I weren't sure that it's the only way to sort all of this out."

Karen believed him. She just hoped for all she was worth that they were both right.

Damage control, Jade thought. We're holding the place together while Karen and the Doctor do all the interesting, glamorous bits of saving the world. Which makes us just as important. That thought cheered him up no end.

Of course, it would have cheered him up more if his jacket and trousers weren't stapled to a pin-up board in one of the more remote parts of the larger stores in the mall. The fact that he was still wearing them compounded the problem even further. Still, he had to give the Spirit's enemies a few marks for their sense of humour. Not to mention being grateful that they hadn't given him a wedgie while they were at it.

"I know you're there," he called to the Spirits. "There's at least one of them somewhere nearby."

"Er, who are you talking to, sir?"

Great. Pinned up right near the Manager's office. Not some low-level flunky that he could fob off relatively easily. The Manager. He laughed. That always threw them off. "My friends. Some of them have a strange sense of humour. The others are looking for them. Do you mind?" He gestured towards his predicament, and was relieved that the Manager helped him without making too big a deal out of it.

"Please find your friends and convince them to have their fun somewhere else."

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure, Ma'am."

The manager wasn't even fully through the door back into her office before the floor was suddenly covered in blood. Human blood mixed with some strange other type, which seemed ageless and too red to be properly visualised by the human mind. Things were getting nasty. So Jade did what the Doctor had advised him to do if things got out of hand. He ran like mad.

"So how do we go about getting captured then?" Karen asked.

"I don't know."

"What? What do you mean, you don't know?" After all, Karen thought, if they couldn't get themselves captured, their best chance of sorting everything out was straight down the tubes.

"I haven't thought of anything yet." The Doctor shook his head, as though he was trying to get an idea to rattle into place. "I had hoped that something would have suggested itself by the time we got here, but it hasn't happened."

Karen sighed. Hard. And glared at him. Harder. She tapped her foot at least eight times before the Doctor finally gave in.

"All right, I admit it. I have thought of something. You'd best check that no one's around to hear us, though."

If someone had asked Karen at that point if finding out what the Doctor had in mind worried her more than what would happen if the rebel faction of Spirits weren't stopped, she'd have found it impossible to answer. "Er, why?"

The Doctor grimaced at her. "Because if anyone were to hear us, they'd investigate, and I'm afraid we'd both be very embarrassed if anyone saw us."

No. It couldn't be. She did check and make sure that no one was around, but she was slightly disappointed to find that no one was. No. No way. No way on Earth.

“It’s just that I haven’t done anything like this for several hundred years,” the Doctor continued, oblivious to Karen’s blushing. “Well, apart from that business in my last incarnation... but that was an emergency and I most certainly didn’t enjoy it.”

Oh no. No way. Absolutely no way on Earth.

The Doctor, still in blissful ignorance of Karen’s reaction, starting rifling through his pockets. “I’m sure I had one somewhere,” he muttered.

He’d already told her he was an alien, which made it even worse. No way. Absolutely no way.

“There!” the Doctor shouted, brandishing his discovery and grinning triumphantly. “Found it!”

Karen finally remembered to breathe, just in time to gasp, “Chalk?”

The Doctor gave her a puzzled frown over the top of his sunglasses. “Yes. Chalk. Brilliant stuff for magic done on a small scale. Apparently. Of course, I have to admit to being a bit of a believer in Clarke’s Law - are you all right?”

“Oh yes, never felt better. Thank you.” She wasn’t sure he’d believe that, especially since she’d rushed the words out a bit, but there wasn’t much she could do about it, either.

“If we weren’t already outside, I’d suggest you get some fresh air. Anyway...” With that, he started drawing bizarre symbols on the ground with the chalk.

Not one of the symbols meant anything to her (with the possible exception of one which looked like a stick figure person holding a quill), she didn’t recognise the tune he was humming as he worked and - and this was the bit which really bugged her - she didn’t have the faintest idea what a few symbols in chalk on the ground were supposed to prove. And she said so.

The Doctor looked slightly pained. “Well, these symbols supposedly invert whatever one does over them. So if you summon the Spirits standing in the centre of these symbols –“

“It’ll summon one of their enemies. Uh huh. Excuse me for being a little slow, but if the Spirits don’t actually need to be summoned to appear, the actual summoning ritual must be meaningless. Besides which, given that we know for a fact that their enemies can and will come and go exactly as they please, what precisely is it that, assuming a few lines of chalk scrawled on the ground could invert the summoning ritual, an inverted summoning ritual is actually going to do?”

“You know, most humans would have been too stunned at having their world view drastically changed in such a short time to use any sort of deduction as a weapon against me.” He obviously decided that her crossed arms and tapping foot weren’t something he could safely ignore, so he continued. “All right then, it’s just one of those things which just seems to work - even though I’ve never met anyone who ever understood why, including me. But it does work. And if you have a better idea, I’m all ears.”

She had to admit to herself that he had her there. No doubt he knew it, too, but she wasn’t about to let him know that. “All right then, we’ll try it.” She followed his gesture into the centre of the circle. “Would you mind not staring at me while I do this? It’s putting me off.” She ignored what looked like a hurt look on his face and started to summon the Spirits.

The Spirit world (if that’s where it was) wasn’t much like Karen expected. Then again, she didn’t really have any idea what she expected it to be like. It just wasn’t the sort of thing it occurred to her to ever think about. She liked it, though. In some ways. It seemed to radiate confidence and

purpose. Then again, it also felt determined - to an extent, which was, more than a little bit frightening when she thought about it.

The Doctor seemed oddly out of place here, she thought, which was odd because he struck her as someone who could fit into any situation quite comfortably. Then she realised why - the new world she found herself in felt unfair. It told her that it would get what it wanted no matter what the effect on anyone else. It told her it didn't care. She could almost feel the Doctor's disapproval hurting it where it enfolded him. She hoped that, in her own small way, she was having the same effect.

"Who are you?" A chorus of male voices asked their voices a bright, middle aged turquoise.

"I am the Doctor, and this is Karen."

She felt the voices look in her direction before they spoke again. "She follows our enemies. She reeks of their sound."

"She'll listen to your side of the story," the Doctor told the voices. "As will I."

"Very well, we shall tell you. But be warned, it is very different from the story our enemies tell."

Mike was out of breath. Not only that, but his arm hurt. Since Jade had held it in a cast iron grip and literally dragged him - running - most of the way back to the house, he knew there must be a reason for it and didn't argue. Neither did the rest of the group following them.

When they reached the house, and Jade showed no signs of offering anything approaching an explanation, he became a little impatient.

"So what was all that about?" Mike asked.

"Things got nasty. Someone got killed, so did one of the enemy."

"And the reason you dragged us all back here rather than staying to help stop anyone else from getting killed was why precisely?"

"Because now the two Spirit factions are well and truly fighting each other- and attacking us. Which means the Spirits, our Spirits, are going to try to protect us, and they can do that better if we're all here in the house together. It also means that the fighting will be drawn to this open area rather than a very crowded one."

Mike wasn't much of a fan of logic, but he had to admit that Jade had beaten him on that front. "Ha, so it was a brilliant tactical move to save everyone else's lives rather than a cowardly attempt to cover your own backside?"

Jade glanced at the floor. "Er, yeah."

"Oh well, that's very commendable then."

Mike decided he wasn't meant to hear Jade's additional mumble of 'Mostly.'

I'm doing the right thing, Karen told herself. These enemy Spirits (or whatever they really were) were out to destroy the Spirits she followed, who hadn't done anything to harm anyone. That couldn't be a good thing. Besides, the Doctor would definitely approve of an all-out assault on the unfairness of this place. When he got over the fact that she'd broken his promise that they

would both listen to the other side of the renegade Spirits' story? He'd do the same thing in her position. Wouldn't he?

She could feel the world recoiling in pain where she walked through it, and had learned after a few minutes practise that if she concentrated in just the right way she could amplify the effect. Unfairness wincing at a blow from Justice. She knew what it felt like to be truly alive at last.

Just as she felt that she was making progress, something in the atmosphere changed and the world turned an even darker shade of Unfairness. To her considerable embarrassment, she'd been caught.

The darkness almost instantaneously (so it seemed, at any rate) spat Karen out on the floor by the Doctor's feet. She returned his puzzled look with the sort of grin she usually reserved for when someone looked at her as though she were utterly mad. Or they were utterly mad at her. Which it seemed like these enemy Spirits were.

That bit she was glad about. The frown the Doctor was giving her since she'd been spat out of the darkness worried her, though. More than anything, that was because he looked so worried himself. It took her longer than it should have to make the connection between the ominous magenta rumbling and the Doctor's worried look. Before she had a chance to say anything, she doubled over in pain.

Parts of the world were dying; soundless blood-red screams filled the world. The Doctor only just managed to gasp, "The other faction are attacking!" before the world split open beneath Karen's feet, unceremoniously dumping her back in her own world. In a way. She felt as if she'd suddenly been confined in a small space.

The Doctor, rather than seeming disoriented as she did, looked angry. When she finally recovered enough from the surprise and pain to take in her surroundings, she felt pretty angry too.

They were in a modern, sterile corridor, complete with bright fluorescent tubes at regular intervals along the ceiling, all working perfectly. That on its own was tolerable. The bit that Karen did not like at all was the fact that she hadn't the faintest idea where she was. Before she had a chance to start fuming about that, though, she realised the implications of what she'd seen/heard/smelt/felt/whatever-sense-it-was before being unceremoniously dumped into the corridor. The other faction were attacking. The Spirits which she'd been quite happily summoning up to help people out for the last few months. Attacking. As in striking back in revenge for that other lot's first strike. Assuming it was them that struck first, of course. The Spirits, which she'd, wandered off trying to find a way to destroy the enemies of.

She wasn't quite sure what she should be feeling at that point, but what she did feel, initially at least, was that if the Spirits – her Spirits - were being helpful to everybody purely in case they needed help themselves in their war, that it was only external interference which had prevented her from unleashing a sizeable potential threat on the world.

"That external interference was me, I'm afraid."

Karen stared back at the Doctor in amazement. "What? How did you –"

"You were thinking aloud. It's not your fault. You were doing what you thought was right the best way you could - how many people can honestly say that?" He gave her a consoling pat on the shoulder.

"But... you... how...?"

The Doctor looked a bit confused at that. "Well, to make a guess at what you're asking; the higher dimensions - which is where we were, by the way - accentuate telepathic ability. So

you were emitting enough of a trace for me to figure out where you were, and I had just enough power to move you and be able to listen to the other side of the ‘Spirit’ argument at the same time. Since I knew where you were, and could feel you starting to get somewhere with your attack - which is quite an impressive feat for a human, especially one with absolutely no experience of the higher dimensions - and I used a quick Block Transfer Computation to move things about so that you ended up back where you started. Which is no mean feat for a Time Lord who skipped three quarters of his Quantum Mathematics lectures at the Academy and only just scraped in with a supplementary exam at the end.” He adjusted his sunglasses and reached out as though to prevent her from falling over. “You look more confused now than you did when I started explaining.”

“I’ll let you know when I’ve figured out whether I am more confused or not,” she said, with more than a hint of sarcasm.

The Doctor’s eyebrows twitched in a bizarre fashion and then he started walking away down the corridor. “Well, the bit, which confuses both of us, I think, is where exactly we are. I know that this is where the other alien faction’s human representatives are based –“

“How do you know that?”

The Doctor grimaced. “Er, because that’s where I opened the tunnel we escaped through - although I wasn’t sure where that was exactly.”

“So you deliberately dumped us in enemy –“ She just stopped herself in time. “Forget it. Let’s go.”

She couldn’t be absolutely certain, but she was pretty sure she felt the Doctor smiling at her as she walked off down the corridor ahead of him.

“Ease back on the power.”

“What the hell?” a second white-coated figure asked, his head snapping up in surprise. “If we drop the power, heaps of them will get killed!”

The first white-coated figure, a woman who looked to be in her early thirties, sighed heavily, as though she were about to attempt to explain something simple to an obtuse student. “They don’t want them to get out of the battle too lightly.”

“Of course they don’t.” The Doctor had gently pushed Karen towards the door and gestured for her to follow him before casually strolling in to confront the two technicians.

“And who are you?” the second figure, a man in his early twenties, asked.

“I’m the Doctor and this is Karen. They sent us to see what was going on.”

Karen wasn’t quite sure what she should do in response to the looks the woman and the man gave her, so she settled for smiling and giving them a sociable nod. And as for the bit about being sent...

“Er, yes, well - I’m Teresa and this is Ross,” the woman replied, seemingly gathering her wits for an unexpected inspection as she spoke. “As you can see, we’ve kept the power down to the absolute minimum necessary for the Cklwaha to win the battle –“

“Without them getting out with too many of their troops intact, of course,” Karen added, hoping she sounded knowledgeable enough.

“Yes, but why do they want us to keep the power down?” asked Ross. “They want to use the aliens for their own armies after the war is over after all.”

“Yes,” the Doctor and Teresa replied simultaneously. Each gave the other a questioning look before Teresa gestured for the Doctor to continue. “But they’re a double edged sword. Think about it - what makes them so valuable as troops?”

Karen was about to answer that one, but stopped herself just in time. Better strategy to let Ross answer the questions and see what other useful information might slip out.

“Well, obviously because they move so fast that they’re invisible. Due to their massively accelerated metabolism compared to ours.”

The Doctor nodded. “Yes, but that’s only part of it. Think of the consequences of having such a fast metabolism.”

Ross scratched his head before mumbling, “Well, it means their lifespan is very short... Of course! Their short lifespan makes them more determined in battle. They’ve got nothing to lose if they get killed!”

“Your ‘life savings’ doesn’t amount to much if you only live a couple of years,” Teresa added.

“Exactly. And if they’ve got nothing to lose by dying... how do you control them?”

“Well, you can’t really. Oh I see. An entire army of invisible troops with no way to control them –“

“Most people would consider that too big a risk,” said Karen. Teresa glared at her, until Ross agreed - at which point she redirected her glare at him.

“I imagine they aren’t worried about the risk,” said the Doctor, “After all, if they don’t renege on their treaty with the Cklwaha, they have no reason to turn against them, do they?”

“But surely cutting back on the power they promised to help with the war counts as renegeing on the deal?” said Ross, his voice rising slightly in panic.

“Not if it was just a couple of rogue technicians doing it against their orders. Where’s your communications equipment, we’d better report in.”

Teresa had pointed them in the direction of the communications room and started trying to pacify Ross, leaving the Doctor and Karen to slip away. Before the technicians had a chance to realise the implications of what the Doctor had said.

“So how do we stop the war?” Karen asked.

The Doctor grinned at her. “That’s the spirit. Someone wise once told me: There are only three ways to end a war - by annihilation, by diplomacy and by submission. I think it’s time a deal was struck.” He handed her a strangely shaped object, which looked like a cube except that it had something extra to it that cubes normally didn’t have. Something she couldn’t quite visualise. “That should tell you everything you need to know when you go to negotiate with the Cklwaha.”

“What? Why am I going to negotiate with them - what will you be doing?”

“I’ll be negotiating with the Spirits.”

“Wouldn’t it make more sense –“

“It’d take too long to explain. Good luck.”

With that, the Doctor flicked a switch on the communications console he’d been fiddling with and the world flickered an ageless blood red. Other than that, and the absence of the Doctor, nothing seemed to have happened. Her throat tightened as she registered the consequences of that line of reasoning. Something had gone wrong. She was trapped.

She raced around the corridors looking for someone. Anyone. She raced back into the room where Teresa and Ross had been working. Both of them were still there, but were motionless. Which meant that the Doctor’s little transfer trick had worked enough to get her part way to the Cklwaha’s world, but not enough to get her all the way there. So the Doctor’s plan wasn’t going to work, even if he did manage to get the Spirits to agree to whatever this plan of his was.

It was at that point that the cube got annoyed. Karen wouldn't have been able to explain how she knew that - other than the fact that the thing started shaking in her hand - even if she hadn't been busy being shocked. Then it impatiently told her what the deal that she was supposed to be negotiating was. Although she could scarcely bring herself to believe it, she decided that since she couldn't think of anything better, she was obliged to go through with it.

The cube told her via some mechanism she couldn't quite fathom - it's all a matter of speed. They'll be here just as soon as you call for them.

"All right - no need to yell," the Cklwaha told her, before she'd even realised she had.

The negotiations began.

"So all you want me to do is summon a Spirit?" Mike said, fiddling with a biro he'd picked up from his desk.

"That's right," the Doctor assured him with a grin. "Don't worry, whatever happens you'll be perfectly safe."

Jade looked rather less than convinced. "Yeah, but what about Karen? What will happen to her if this deal of yours doesn't work?"

"The Spirits won't let the Cklwaha harm her. They're trying to be nice, remember. They're just being a bit too zealous about it."

Mike laughed. "It's odd that you should be the one to still have some faith in the Spirits, Doctor."

"Perhaps. Are you ready?"

Mike performed the ritual, while Jade hovered in the background, his face impassive. Within moments both of them were frozen. Once that point had been reached it was all a matter of speed, as the Doctor vaguely recalled saying before. He called out.

"We hear you, Doctor. We assume that you have come to negotiate some sort of treaty between us and the Cklwaha. What is it?"

The Doctor told them.

Karen was preparing herself for the jump back to normal speed as she walked through the doorway of Mike's office. It took all her willpower to keep herself from saying 'Making the jump from light speed!' Sci-fi movies had a lot to answer for, as far as she was concerned. The slowing down itself was an eminently sensible suggestion of the Doctor's, though. It kept both factions at the same disadvantage.

She could hear Jade pestering the Doctor, trying to get him to explain what exactly the bargain that had been struck was. "All right," the Doctor said, finally. "We're going to - ah, there you are, Karen."

She gave Jade a grin as she walked through the door, one that said "Sorry, am I interrupting something?" He smiled back.

"If your visitor would like to stand in the centre of the room..." The Cklwaha walking beside her stood opposite the Spirit. The hair on the back of Karen's neck stood on end, straightening even more as the two aliens moved closer together. "Good," the Doctor continued. "Then we can begin."

As soon as the Doctor finished his sentence, each of the two alien shapes opened a small aperture in the centre of its body, and the other disappeared through it. Karen knew that there was no way of Earth that she could possibly have visualised something as geometrically impossible as that. Even Escher would have been struggling to make such a phenomenon visible. But she saw it. Right in front of her.

The Doctor coughed, bringing her out of her disbelief. “Sorry about the non-Euclidean spectacle. I expect the nightmares will only last a couple of nights.”

“So what happened?” Jade demanded.

The Doctor beamed. “I set up an exchange program. One member of each faction spends one Earth year living with the other faction. Learning from them. All transfers will take place here, both sides stay on their home planet other than that, and your group,” he gestured to Mike, Karen and Jade, “Will oversee all exchanges and arbitrate any disputes that arise. Any questions? No? Good.” He started walking towards the door. “I hate goodbyes,” he said, as he walked out of the room.

Karen caught up with the Doctor as he walked out the front gate of the house. “Where are you going?”

The Doctor turned and smiled at her. It wasn’t his usual smile. More melancholy. “Leaving.”

“What do you mean, leaving? Where are you going?”

He threw his arms out wide, as if gesturing to the entire Universe. “Everywhere. Exploring time and space. Making new friends wherever I happen to end up.”

“And visiting old ones along the way?”

He smiled again. More like his usual smile. “Yes. Keep an eye on everything for me.”

“I will.”

“And tell Ambrosia I’ll be looking forward to meeting her,” he said with a wink, before he turned and walked over to a strange blue box.

I don’t know anyone called Ambrosia, Karen thought to herself. But it’s a name I was always going to give to my daughter... Wait a minute!

The door of the blue box closed, and the box disappeared in a wail of noise and several flashes of light. Karen knew her maths and biology weren’t up to explaining the disappearance, but when she thought about it, she knew that no explanation was necessary.



The Doctor arrives on present day Earth to find that ordinary inexplicable events are starting to turn nasty - what was once the odd missing or misplaced household object is starting to give way to random acts of destruction and violence. One religious cult and the benevolent "Spirits" which they summon to perform random acts of kindness seem to be at the centre of events - but do any of them know what's really happening? Once again the Doctor has to save the Earth with only a group of equally confused humans to help - or are these "Spirits" what they claim to be? His investigations lead him into a world, which he doesn't often visit, to meddle in a spiritual battle - literally.

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