

THE
DOCTOR WHO
PROJECT

THE DARKEST DAY



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Published by Jigsaw Publications/The Doctor Who Project
Vancouver, BC, Canada

First Printing July 2000
Second Printing June 2006
Third Printing November 2010

The Darkest Day
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A TDWP/Jigsaw Publications E-Book

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Typeset in Palatino Linotype

Logo © 2005 by Jack Drewell
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One

Spots of colour danced before his eyes.

He screamed, his lips creasing into a full, rictus snarl as he shrank back into the chair, throwing his arms up high to cover his eyes, to blot out the burning light engulfing him from all around.

The white-coated man watched impassively, observing with the detached, passionless calm that one would expect from a fully qualified doctor. His gnarled fingers were wound tightly around a plastic clipboard, on which there was a thick sheaf of paper; scribbled notes scrawled in a spidery handwriting covered ever inch of it. As the subject writhed and thrashed wildly the man pushed his glasses back onto his nose and spun on his heel, grunting with disdain before turning to leave the room.

Almost as an afterthought, he reached for the light switch and flicked it, extinguishing the tiny lamp set high in the corner of the cell and shrouding the room in thick, black darkness.

As the door clicked shut behind him, the man stepped out into the long, gray corridor, and turned to face his similarly cold-looking aide. Pursing his lips, he offered out the clipboard; the aide's beady eyes ran over the notes and he let out a long sigh. Still looking glum, the man nodded. "The subject showed resistance to only the most minute of measures."

"Then we still aren't getting anywhere?"

"No." The man thought to himself for a moment, running a wrinkled finger around his thin, pale lips. "This subject is useless now: we have learnt all we can from him--except for one vital thing, of course. Increase the *lumen* at regular intervals until you observe total loss of consciousness. Record the findings, then meet me in my office. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," replied the aide, stooping low to look back at his instruments. He took one last glance through the one-way screen that granted him a view of the plainly furnished interior, then reached out for the long lever and pulled it.

Inside, the screams began again, only this time they were much, *much* louder.

* * * * *

This was somewhere deep in the middle of a forest, where the final remnants of the long lost, battered paths were blanketed by layers and layers of thick, trailing foliage. Tall trees loomed

above the soft turf; slants of light streamed down through dotted chinks in the high green canopy.

A pair of green eyes open wide in innocence, watched as a butterfly glided smoothly from the lower branches and hovered above the clusters of bright flowers that lined the paths, a blissful smile creeping over the handsome face of their owner. "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

Beside the innocuous-looking man stood a tall, brown-haired woman, whose dark skin gleamed in the bright sunlight. She smiled at him indulgently, in the manner that a mother might at a particularly naive child. Her own green eyes flashed down to the insects scabbling along the patches of grass below her; trying to avoid them, she stepped over to her friend.

A nod. "Yes . . ." Then, a patient sigh. "You never got around to explaining just why we're here."

The man frowned as he grasped the woman's outstretched arm and hauled himself to his feet. "I didn't?"

She shook her head, dusting down her dark-blue jeans.

"Tamara! I'm *so sorry!*"

She held up a hand. "Really, Doctor, it's okay."

"Oh well, there's no time like the present, I suppose!" Grinning at her inanely as he stood there in his grey trousers, white shirt and midnight-blue waistcoat, he *did* look very much like a little boy, dressed as though about to narrate the local nativity. She handed him back his red trenchcoat, which he hung over his shoulder.

"This," he continued, swinging his arms out majestically wide, his sweeping gesture managing to take in the clusters of tulips and primroses, the tall majestic pines and the deep blue, cloudless sky all at once, "is Minaki."

"Naturally."

"Quite." He delved deep into his capacious breast pocket and snatched a pair of jet-black sunglasses, which he proceeded to swing by the handle around his little finger. "We're in Canada, Tamara, just a few miles from—"

"The Ontario/Manitoba border, yes."

He met Tamara's level grin with an almost hurt expression. "Of course."

The incessant chirping of the wild insects buzzed at her from the dense clusters of towering oaks and birches as she followed him with long, quick strides, tapping him on the arm when at last she caught up with him. "I'm sorry, Doctor."

He sighed, spun on his heel to face her, then continued. "I just thought you might appreciate a chance to look around here, that's all!" He beamed at her happily. "We shouldn't find too many monsters here.'

As the Doctor marched off into the forest, Tamara found her eyebrows rising surreptitiously.

* * * * *

As the two figures marched along, many clicks and whirrs emanated from the thick undergrowth: ticks and grasshoppers chittering as they boosted themselves around the entwined weeds and the flowers.

There also came a stiff, mechanical creak. Any observer would have called such a sound--deep in the middle of a Canadian forest, anyway--strange to say the least.

The pole of the camera swiveled around as the figures passed. The electronics, which had not been used for some years, crackled as the lens on the front whirled into life. Short,

sharp snaps sounded as many, many pictures were taken in quick succession. Data was relayed down the long, winding cable, the green and brown casing of which merged in perfectly with the twisting undergrowth.

On the other end of the line, spindly fingers stabbed down hard onto the keys of a small computer, their owner's thin lips creasing as the decoded images flashed up onscreen.

Then, for now, the lights on the camera dimmed and the device lay still and inert.

* * * * *

A grin split the Doctor's face as Tamara and he stumbled onto the large, spherical clearing. "The Minaki Lodge," he said proudly, stepping aside to allow Tamara to take the lead.

She smiled charmingly back at him. "So this is why you brought me here?"

"Indeed! A very pleasant little place, this; perfect for a little holiday . . ."

Nodding at the sound of his voice, Tamara, standing tall with her hands in her pockets, allowed her gaze to drift around the scene: tall, wooden huts, into which stretched long low buildings of grey concrete and tall towers bordered by metal railways; the terrain was soft and flat, covered in short, cropped grass. The huts, complete with sloping, slated roofs and tiny glass windows, were identical to those in most holiday lodges, but the stone extensions were slightly out of place. Her eyes narrowed: the chain link fence, topped by sharp, barbed wire looked particularly conspicuous.

". . . Fishing, hunting, tennis--I *suspect*--bowls, swimming, cycling, shooting . . ."

And was that a door in the side of the concrete? It was, she realized, as it slid smartly open.

I've never felt so relaxed in ages!"

Scores of uniformed soldiers flooded out from the building, each one gripping a long, black rifle, barrels leveled menacingly towards the two of them.

Seconds later, they were surrounded.

* * * * *

"And that was *Bad Moon Rising* by—"

The irate receptionist flicked a switch and let the radio-announcer trail off as two strangers were prodded into the waiting room by a young soldier. She peered at the intruders over her round glasses: a haughty looking coloured girl, a black jacket pulled defensively around her body, and a strange man wearing the oddest of waistcoats, midnight-blue with zebra-stripes of silver stars.

Pushing them into the small chamber with the end of his gun, the soldier turned to face them, his eyes narrowing and his lips creasing into what Tamara thought was meant to be a scowl.

"Stay here," he said, as forcefully as he could in his squeaky voice, before slamming shut the door, spinning on his brightly polished boot and marching stiffly away.

"Hmm . . ." muttered the Doctor, looking around the room in disdain. It was small and uncluttered, furnished by a single desk in one of the corners and a long table drawn across one wall. There were two seats, one padded with a cushion, the other bare. A plastic window was set next to the door, affording them a glimpse of the reception area; the languid receptionist looked at them through the screen, tutted and picked up her mug of coffee. Grimacing when

she found it empty, she flashed them one last piercing glance, struggled out of her seat, then strode off down one of the many white corridors.

"A resort? Looks more like some sort of hospital."

He turned to Tamara apologetically. "Yes . . . Never mind, though: I've got out of far, *far* worse places!" Beaming, he began to fiddle inside his pockets.

"So have I . . ." muttered Tamara, turning to the door and stooping down by the lock. Not exactly one of the latest models, she reflected. Frowning, she reached into her breast-pocket, pulled out a long, thin stiletto-like blade, pushed it into the square hole by the door handle, drew it back sharply, then tucked the device back away.

"Ah ha! My sonic—" The Doctor's mouth dropped open as he saw Tamara gently nudge the door. It swung invitingly on its hinges.

* * * * *

Fifteen minutes later, as they were creeping stealthily down one of the corridors that neighbored the reception, bodies drawn tightly against the wall; he consented to speak to her again.

"Obviously," he said quickly, sounding ashamed, "I made a slight error of judgment . . ."

"Really?"

"Yes. I don't think this is the Minaki holiday lodge, myself."

"No?"

"No. I've been to a fair few in my lifetimes and I'm not normally assailed by gun-totting soldiers. Well," he admitted guiltily, "there was Shangri-La . . ."

"What do you suppose this place is, then?" The corridor split into two at a narrow T-junction; the paths seemed to be darkening, now--the strip-lights strung along the ceiling were growing dimmer and less artificial. And after the moderately plush reception-area, the rooms they passed were becoming barer and barer. Oddly, the floors under their feet were fully carpeted, and brush and watercolor paintings lay hanging strung to the walls. It gave Tamara the impression that someone was trying to create a softer, relaxed atmosphere . . .

"As I said, it looks to be a hospital of some sort." He spun to the right and began to march in long strides. "I haven't seen any patients yet, though. And is it me, or is it getting darker?" His lips twitched; the guards' confiscation of his sunglasses had left him feeling rather sour. "We need to find some sort of . . . of *office*, perhaps."

"Doctor"

He spun around, alert. Tamara was standing some meters behind him, gazing into a small square room, furnished similarly to the one in which they had been locked save for the tall metal filing cabinets.

"Something like this you mean?"

He tried to fume at her, but her smile was just too charming.

Seconds later, she had the door unlocked and the pair of them were inside the room, pulling open the metal drawers and taking out the thick sheaves of paper, laying them haphazardly over the metal table.

"Hey, look at this." Her forehead creasing, Tamara reached over to the alcove behind the cabinet. Inside sat rows of glass jars, stopped by rubber bungs, home to a wide variety of gruesome-looking objects. One in particular caught her eye: inside sat a large, grey, rounded mushroom.

"Now that *is* interesting . . ." he muttered, snatching the jar from her hands. "It looks poisonous . . ." He held the jar up to the light, a circle of gently glowing yellow set high into the ceiling, squinting at it through narrowed eyes. He stared hard at the base, on which was stamped a minute sticker speckled with black writing. "Ah . . . an item number?"

"Could be."

"L-392"

"Got it." Bent almost double, she stooped over the table and rifled through the papers. There *did* seem to be some sort of method to the filing; the numbers printed along the margins referred directly to the archived objects behind the cabinet. "Right," she said triumphantly, showing the right page to the Doctor, "L-392."

His eyes ran quickly over the paper. At the top, in a bold, black typeface, was the word "Luna"; at the sight of this, his eyes widened in concern. Below this, to the left, sat an enlarged illustration of the mushroom; beside it was a detailed written piece, stapled to a shorter cataloguing-description by the same author.

Faint tapping throbbed from the corridor.

He shook his head slowly. "I might just know what's happening here."

His voice was cut off sharply by a loud cry from the doorway. They both spun around. Standing there, hands on hips and flanked by two armed guards, stood a small, balding, inofficious looking man, sporting a white lab coat.

"In this establishment, we prosecute burglars."

* * * * *

"Look," said the Doctor sharply, waving his arms at the man as he was pushed back down the corridor, "we only came here for a holiday!"

Tamara rolled her eyes as she heard someone behind her snigger. Her curt tut somehow managed to shut him up. She spun quickly on her heel, ignoring the long rifle that was leveled across her path, fixing the first soldier--a lanky young man dressed in a plain gray uniform, simple but tarnished by not a single crease--with what she hoped was a fiery, penetrating glare.

"Where are you taking us?"

He prodded her sharply with the butt of his gun; she winced and turned away, resuming her march, the Doctor looking to her with what liked reproach. "We don't like break-ins," said the guard with a slight smile. "You'll have to be questioned by Security. How you got into this place is anyone's guess." He shrugged as though indifferent, and his calm face broke with the first ripple of a smile. "Now, though, you're off to see Doctor Carson."

The Doctor stopped dead. "Oh please, *no!*"

* * * * *

The man looked as though he may have been handsome once; but now age and the pressures of work had scratched deep lines into his round face, his forehead a gorge of worry and indignation. Patches of gray hair clustered around his balding skull, pale white skin gleaming under the harsh lamplight. Scratching at his bushy white beard, he leant forward to peer through the small microscope, placed delicately over a specimen slide on the rickety table in front of him, his brown eyes burning with a fierce intelligence.

"Uh, Carson?"

He moaned and wheeled around sharply, his instruments dropping to the hard metal floor. "What is it?" He gripped the lapels of his trailing white lab coat and stared at his elderly assistant over the cluttered laboratory. She shrunk back, looking around to the tall cabinets filled with vials and test-tubes, the large unit housed in one corner that looked just big enough to hold the average human--anywhere but *him* and his mad gaze.

"I'm sorry." He gave a gentle sigh and reached up to straighten his tie, his lips pursing. "It's just that I'm very *busy* right now . . ." His face took on a fevered sheen. "They're still *dying* . . ." Suddenly he brightened, a smile splitting his brazen features. "What was it you wanted?"

"There's been another break-in . . ."

He growled irascibly. "*Another?* I will have to have words with Sec--"

"The man seems to know you . . . He seems to call 'himself the Doctor.'"

Carson's arms dropped to hang limp by his side. "Well, well, well..."

* * * * *

"You've heard of the CIA, I presume."

Tamara sighed and looked away. The soldiers were marching them down another long corner, which--she presumed--led deeper into the facility. It was getting gradually warmer--she felt layers of sweat begin to creep onto her skin--and the lights were growing dimmer still, subtly, leaving long shadows that trailed across the darkened walls. "Yes, Doctor. I have."

"Oh good!" he replied, flashing her that bright, cheery smile that made her want to both hug and strangle him. "Mec-cull-tra?"

Her soft voice turned vague and distant. "MKULTRA? Yeah . . . some time ago, wasn't it? I can tell you're dying to enlighten me."

"Oh well," he chipped in, giving a modest shrug, "I wouldn't say that exactly." His eyes narrowed in an instant; his tone grew dark. "It happened in the fifties, I believe. The CIA conducted some quite terrible experiments in behavior modification, supposedly to combat chemical and shock warfare." He shook his head sadly, his eyes shining with anger and regret.

"The way they treated their patients was unforgivable, the men running it totally immoral, hiding under lies of long-term benefits. I stopped them in the end, uncovered their little *project* for the world to see."

She nudged him gently with her elbow; he spun around and stared through wide, innocent eyes. "And this Carson?"

"Oh, a brilliant researcher; one of the best physicians I've ever had the pleasure of meeting. He was the man in charge of the experiments."

* * * * *

An elderly couple sat drinking tea in a room home to tongues of darkness, flickering drunkenly around the paneled walls and ceiling as they sprouted from the long-boarded window and the door, locked shut.

The man sighed contentedly, placed his cup down onto the round china saucer and snuggled back into his armchair, reaching for his pipe and twirling it in one hand as he lit it. His wife, though, was looking at her watch, squinting through two beady eyes shrunk unnaturally into thinning sockets at the dimly lit display. He faced her, his bony parchment forehead wrinkling into a gnarled frown. "What is it, dear?"

Fear fluttered across her papery face. "It's almost time."

He smiled, showing rows of false teeth, his grin that of a hound hungering over its prey. "Good. Our doctor is such a *nice* man."

"I--I don't think I can go through it again . . ."

"Nonsense, my dear. Think of all the good it's doing you! Soon we'll be happy . . ." He wrung his hands together and let them sit across his lap. "Yes, soon . . ." His mind flashed quickly back to when it had first happened, so long ago now. A lost, youthful part of him smiled wryly; a letter from his father had been out on the table. He hadn't been able to read any more of it, of course, but it must have held something important: the old man had died from the festering tumors just days later. Des wanted nothing more than to be able to take that letter out now and read the final paragraphs; so much had been left unsaid, so many good-byes had been lost to the daily night. His doctor would have done it for him, in the light; but this was too personal to let outsiders pry. It was the only link he had.

". . . And I've heard stories."

"Sorry, dear? I . . . slipped away."

"That Harry Ashford!"

"Yes . . ." His frown burrowed deeper. His arm was itching badly; it became harder and harder to hang onto a single thought as each day passed.

"Where is he now, then? Answer me *that*." The woman crossed her arms defiantly. "I haven't seen hide nor hair of him for the past week! He's gone, I tell you. People are leaving."

"I . . ." There had been a Harry, hadn't there? "Perhaps he's been cured . . ."

"Without telling us?"

"Perhaps . . ."

"The Trent's, then?"

He spat angrily onto the wooden table, droplets slipping to stain the woolen carpet stretched across the oak floor. "There never were no Trent's..."

"Oh, Des! You were speaking to them little more than two weeks ago!"

"No I wasn't . . ."

"They've gone I tell you!"

'No--you're just getting faces confused again. I suppose a few may have left; perhaps this condition isn't as bad as it seems.'" He scratched at his arm, gritting his teeth as pain shot along its length.

She shook her head sadly. "Sometimes, if I strain my ears, I can hear screams coming from down the corridor." *Ghosts? No--no ghost would ever sound so terrified.*

"Oh shut up will you!" His head dropped sulkily to the floor. "Don't go if you don't want to . . . The treatment is for the best!" His eyes flicked shut and he muttered curses under his breath. "Just hang on in there, dear; everything's going to be just *fine*." He looked to her with a slight grin on his face, reaching out to take her trembling hand in his own. "Isn't that what Mr. Carson keeps telling us?"

* * * * *

The shapes under the microscope, majestic swirls that had once seemed clear and distinct, swan worryingly; light rippled over them, and they shrank back from its gentle touch, thinning to single slivers.

Carson's reddening eyes were narrowed to thin slits, but still he could not focus. His squint observed the swirls fading into black puffs then dying altogether, retching out one sudden cloud of smoke before evaporating. He swore loudly, looking down ashamed as he

heard his assistant jump with a start behind him. "I don't mean to be quite so tetchy, you know."

She gave a sad smile. "I know. You should stop this."

"It's not that easy . . ." He straightened and reached up for his tight-fitting glasses, removing them just long enough to rub at his bleary eyes. "They're *dying*, still."

"And?"

He turned away, offering only a sharp tut, then added to himself, in a quiet, bitter hiss: "And I'm still no closer to understanding this *Luna*."

A loud knock on the tall plexi-glass doors that hung across the far wall broke him from his thoughts. He reached up to straighten his tie and brush back his collar as the doors slid open with an electric hiss, admitting the posse of guards into the laboratory. They stepped down the clinical white steps, onto the floor of the spacious laboratory where Carson was working, boots tapping against the hard slabs, filing out to reveal the man that he least wanted to see.

"Doctor . . ."

A taller, lithe woman pushed in front of the man and greeted Carson with a cold stare. "And this would be one of those friends that you were telling me about, last time we me."

Tamara stepped forward lightly. The physician was taken aback by the formality of her smile, charming and serene both at once. He muttered under his breath; she seemed immediately to be the more dangerous of the two intruders. "Now," he said, his eyes flashing with fire, "What do you think I should do with you two?"

The Doctor shrugged modestly, stepping briskly away from the soldiers and allowing his gaze to wander over the many tables and the menagerie of equipment. He noted another of those mushrooms, sitting in a stoppered conical flask in a darkened corner, wrapped in shadow. "You could start by explaining your plan, or by telling me how you've been such a genius and come up with another hair-brained scheme. Isn't that how this usually works? You might also want to stir in the numbers of men that are dying to make it all possible."

Carson's icy grin cut into the Doctor's hearts. The man chuckled to himself as he slunk back into the shadows around the operating table. "You don't think very highly of me, do you?"

"No."

"Perhaps," The physician continued, muttering, "Your opinions are justified." He now seemed, of all things, rather chagrined. "But I urge you to take a quick look around." His arm swept out across the room. "This is a *hospital*."

The Doctor tutted quickly. "It may well be--but I know you, and you're hardly one to let slip an opportunity for profit."

The man shrugged. "Your opinion hardly matters." His heart sank inside. Profit? No, it's gone beyond profit . . . His aide flashed him a glance of concern; he straightened himself before the Doctor could notice his discomposure. "Doctor . . ." Suddenly, the man seemed almost hurt.

"Allow me to offer you a tour of the facilities here." He allowed a smug smile to creep onto his weathered face. "I think that that may convince you of my good intentions."

"I'm sure . . ." The Doctor now seemed more relaxed, though his voice still carried that hint of suspicion. Tamara's features carried no hint to her feelings whatsoever, glazed over with a passionless calm--but perhaps a faint trace of hostility lay under those fierce eyes . . .

Carson quickly composed himself. "Excellent." He wrung his hands together and nodded to one of his white-coated assistants. "Mr. Adams? If you could please give these two the tour?"

The surly man replied with an artificial smile as he gestured for the couple to move out ahead of him. Grinning pleasantly, the Doctor took the lead. He flashed Tamara a mischievous

glance, revealing his sunglasses. "A little sleight-of-hand. Besides, what use would they be to our guard friend?"

Once they had gone, Carson let out a long sigh, running a hand through his thinning gray hair. His assistant strode over, all worry. "Are you sure that you're okay, Mr. Carson?" *Nothing seems to have changed since the day we first met . . . Odd. I suppose nothing ever changes for him--nothing.*

"Yes," he cut in sharply. "I'm fine!" His hands, their dexterity belying the shrouds of heavy wrinkles, moved across the bench to pick up more of the powdery black material. It fell into place under the microscope; on top of it, the physician poured a different substance, clear and thin. As the light from his lamp played over the concoction in ghostly waves, the powder hissed and shriveled into a single dry lump, before fading to mist and dissolving altogether.

Carson sniffed, shaking his head rapidly, pinching his nose. Then he turned away in disgust.

The Doctor will help me . . . once he knows more of my work . . . He must . . .

Not even he himself noticed the first glint of a tear as it shone in his pale eyes.

* * * * *

The pain was all that she could remember. Not short stabs, either, as she had associated with treatment before all this, but one single red burst that drove out everything else, flung all pleasure and comfort from her mind. Total pain, coming in from all angles, pushing out all the good she had felt, hammering in misery and fear. The skin around her wrists burnt, as though on fire and had been doing so for days--there was enough suffering in her new life already. It hardly needed another visit to Carson.

Des was too naïve--bless him!--to think that there would be anymore to this. He bore the pain, shouldered it with brave smiles, not thinking that there might be things deeper than he could see. She *knew* it though: years and years of living in darkness had bred suspicion in her veins.

Her friends disappearing, one by one, fading to whatever lay outside, had not helped. The assurances of her doctor became worth less and less each time. Sometimes the cries at night rang on until morning light pierced the dense blinds to lick at the walls of their room.

It will be all right . . . Do you want out?

She nodded. Something inside her smirked. Her arm tingled.

You can do anything. Just focus on what you want. We can do anything.

Margaret pulled free from her escort of guards and screamed.

* * * * *

"What's that?" Suddenly the Doctor was alert, his eyes spinning quickly over every inch of the long, wide corridor. Nothing seemed out of order.

The guide's features split with fear. Tamara pushed past him, stepping lightly into the centre, her eyes narrowed. The Doctor strode in front, holding out a hand behind him to shush his companion as he sped away, his footsteps not making even the slightest of sounds against the patterned carpet. Only dim light, flickering down from the ceiling, marked the way. She was still amazed by how quick the transformation was; the end of the hallway was bathed in pitch-blackness.

The wooden floorboards around the next corner were creaking stiffly. Faster and faster the sounds came, until a strong, frenzied puffing mingled in with it. The heavy footsteps pounded down harder and harder. Tamara found her breath catching in her throat.

* * * * *

Carson wiped his eyes, his vision misted by a shower of tears as he sobbed and shrank back against the wall. His choked sniffing was the only noise, now that his aide had gone.

The water ran freely down his cheeks, staining his spotless suit. He drew himself up hard, clutching his knees. Meters away, splinters of glass from his broken slides, hurled across the room in rage, glinted at him.

One hand reached up to grasp his forehead. He felt so alone--like a little boy again. He looked down at the viscous liquid staining his trousers and wondered what his mother would say when he finally got back home.

* * * * *

Everything happened in an instant.

A frail old woman growled as she flung herself around the corner, throwing the guide aside with a low snarl creasing her lips. A heavy crack sounded as he slid down the wall. Tamara stepped back slightly as the woman turned to face her, her eyes narrow, black pools.

"Hmmm . . . It looks like one of the patient."

She roared, charging towards the Doctor. At the last moment, he ducked back, crouching low. Tamara froze, watching as the woman turned, the wrinkled features clouded by fear--or shock. Just when she thought the woman would renew her attack on her companion, she turned, and--not pausing for a second--threw her body at the wall

Tamara braced herself for the sudden snap of the woman's bones. Seconds fled as everything hissed out of focus. The air around them crackled, rippling, distorting out of perspective. Suddenly, the woodwork and the paintings were gone, and beyond the space, in amidst a swelling haze, she could make the faint shapes of trees and hanging foliage, cackling plants and undergrowth.

"Oh my . . ." the Doctor was on his feet again before Tamara could say a word, dusting down his trousers, looking out through the mist where the wall once stood, concentrating on the woman as she melted into the horizon.

Though it struck her what he was about to do, she barely had the time to hold out an arm; he pushed it aside as he leaped through the currents of undulation, into the forest, sprinting with his arms wheeling out wildly.

"Give my regards to Doctor Carson!"

Then there was a *pop*. A sudden gust of wind brushed her long, tousled hair as it danced down the corridor, then vanished. In front of her was a once-again perfect wall.

Two

Searchlights flickered across the Doctor's path like a wild phoenix as he chased the escaped patient on foot. The blood pulsing in his ears and heartbeats in his chest drowned out the cries of guards, screeching sirens and barking dogs at his back. He ducked his head as he passed through a gaping hole--its edges blurred and wavering--left in the perimeter fence.

Every few seconds, the searchlights picked out the elderly woman, a ghostly figure against the backdrop of shadows and forest. Regardless of her age and frail form, the woman was giving the Time Lord, with his heightened agility, a run for his money.

As the searchlights made another pass, the Doctor caught sight of the woman darting into the forest and he followed suit. Under the cover of evergreens engulfed in nightfall, impenetrable to the searchlights, the Time Lord extracted a pair of glasses from his coat pocket. While making his way swiftly over ridges of roots and rocky terrain, he flicked a switch on the rim of the glasses, instantly bathing his face in a crimson glow. The forest then came alive around him infrared heat spots--rodents, owls and several deer--flickering among the cover of trees.

A human-sized heat spot zigzagged between tree trunks several yards ahead to the right; the Doctor changed course accordingly.

Drooping branches of pine needles whipped his face and channeled away beads of cold sweat. His body tensed up when his target suddenly disappeared from view.

"Dear me," he muttered between breaths . . . and then the world collapsed beneath his feet. The Time Lord hit the ground with a *thud* and tumbled down the steep decline in the forest floor like a rag-doll, over rocks and fallen tree branches. His body came to a halt beside a creek at the base of the recessed clearing. Trickle of blood ran down the Doctor's forehead and diluted into the stream of water.

* * * * *

A frail, withered claw stroked the face of the limp Time Lord.

"Are you all right, my dear? You took quite a nasty tumble."

The Doctor returned to life with a painful groan and a deep gasp of breath. The old woman helped turn him over on his back. "Thank you kindly."

"Why did you follow me, you poor thing?" She sat down on a fallen log nearby.

"Instinct, I guess. Whatever are they prescribing to you at that hospital? You were running as if *possessed!*"

The woman pulled her shawl tighter over the thin hospital gown as a cold breeze filled the clearing. Her small, frail form was silhouetted against the moonlight. "I'm tired," she whispered.

"I would think so!" the Doctor said with a chuckle, followed by a bruised-rib-induced groan.

"No, I meant I'm tired of the treatments, the tests, the dark."

"How long has Doctor Carson been treating you, Miss . . .?"

"Call me Margaret." She stared at him with fatigued, hollow eyes. "Days, months, years-- they all mean nothing to me now; it's been so *long* . . ."

"What about family, Margaret?"

"Family? Yes, but they stopped coming." She looked away, taking in her surroundings.

"They couldn't stand a little gloom in their lives to brighten my own with a visit. And no doubt they were paid off to forget about me and the cause of my maladies."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Not to worry; I've put that all behind me now." Her eyes caught his compassionate glance. "Do you ever watch the sun rise?"

"When I have the time. Binary star sunrises are especially attractive," the Doctor replied. His remark went unnoticed.

"My husband and I would watch them together every morning, but now they burn my eyes. The day and night are one for me under the moonlight."

The Doctor recalled the strange fungus from Carson's lab. "Did you take *Luna*, Margaret?"

"The end of depression,' the ad said. And for a few months it was right: I got over my sorrow for my son and returned to my nursing job refreshed, eager to work and help others." A smile took root on her pale, withered face.

"How long ago was that?" the Doctor cut in.

"Nineteen sixty or sixty-one, I believe. I looked quite good and healthy for my age then, but look at what living the nocturnal life has done to me . . ."

He reached for her hand and gripped it affectionately. Her smile took full blossom, but the Doctor yelped as a thousand needles pierced his palm--or so it seemed. He jolted his hand from Margaret's grasp and a puff of smoke dissipated around her outstretched hand.

"I'm sorry," she whispered and rotated her arm to reveal grey, bulbous spores dotting the underside and extending to her palm.

He quickly glanced at his aching hand to see a large blister forming on his own palm.

"What have you *done?*" he cried in disgust.

"They want to hear your thoughts, to understand you." Her face was void of compassion.

"Who are 'they,' Margaret?" His entire body tensed as a prickling sensation spread up his arm, his chest, his spine and eventually to his brain. His mental efforts to combat the spreading entity resulted only in an agonizing headache.

"Don't fight it, my dear. They don't wish to harm you." She walked slowly towards him.

"St-stay back!" he cried, his head throbbing. He held up a hand to prevent her approach, but his limbs went numb. The Doctor knelt down on the forest floor and gave up his mental resistance. The headache ceased immediately.

YOU ARE NOT HUMAN. The deep booming voice echoed in his mind.

No I'm not, and you have no manners invading my mind like this, he thought in reply.

ACUTE MENTAL CAPACITY, BI-CARDIOVASCULAR, EVIDENCE OF PHYSICAL AND MENTAL REGENERATION--

Thank you for reminding me. What kind of sick experiment are you conducting on the humans?

BASED ON PHYSICAL EVIDENCE, YOU ARE NOT FROM THIS GALACTIC QUADRANT. WHERE IS YOUR PLANET OF ORIGIN? WHO ARE YOU?

I am the Doctor, he thought. The Time Lord was losing patience with the parasite. He made another mental attempt to regain control, which was met with sharp, throbbing in his forehead.

DO NOT RESIST US, DOCTOR. PROVOKING THE SPORE WILL LEAD TO MENTAL COLLAPSE AND DEATH.

Splendid. What do you want with me?

WHERE ARE YOU FROM?

You said yourself: not Earth. Why don't you tell me where you're from; let's turn this into a conversation, shall we, instead of an interrogation.

WHERE ARE YOU FROM?

Now you're repeating yourself. Look, if you won't explain yourself, I don't see why I should reveal my favorite colour to you, let alone my home planet. The Doctor awaited a reply, but his mind was silent save his own thoughts.

Margaret broke the silence: "Take my hand, Doctor."

"Sorry, I'm not falling for *that* one again. Let's get you back to the hospital; I'd like to have a closer look at those spore on your arm."

The woman held out her hand. "They want to see us in person, Doctor, but you must take my hand first." She cautiously approached him. "The spores will have no effect now that you've been exposed to them."

The Time Lord backed away. "I'm sorry Margaret, but I don't care for blind dates--especially with psychic fungi aliens." Suddenly, footfalls and barking dogs echoed around them.

"The guards have arrived. I'm afraid your excursion from the hospital has come to an end."

"It is time to leave, Doctor. They are sorry for this."

"For wh--" The Doctor convulsed violently as throbbing surges of energy swept through his mind. Margaret seized his hand and the world disappeared in an explosion of the colour spectrum.

* * * * *

Tamara sighed ruefully, her dark lips pursed. She stared blankly down at the low wooden table, slumped into a rickety chair, lacing her fingers together as her elbows rested on the polished work-surface.

It was two hours since he had gone, yet still there was no sign of him. The extensive search of the dense woodland had turned up nothing--not even the faintest trace of the woman he had been pursuing.

And look where that left her: stuck in a backwater hospital with all hell breaking loose around her, cut off from the slightest hope of assistance, without a clue as to what was really going on.

This means--she thought with a tight grin, clambering to her feet--business as usual.

She gently prodded the paneled wooden door, wincing as it creaked stiffly on rusting hinges. Everything outside was still enveloped in tendrils of gloom, hanging over the walls and groping down from the ceiling to the floor, but the atmosphere felt more oppressed. Guards now filed along the passageways, beady eyes flashing warily, stationed on most of the major junctions, hands hovering mere inches away from the guns holstered at their sides. They paid her little attention, though, as she wandered from the room; they either had more important things to worry about, or were simply past caring.

Spots of blood sprinkling down a wall marked the site of the Doctor's disappearance, but the guide's body had been removed. Her sense of direction honed by the years spent as an agent, Tamara found that navigating the building came as second nature. In five minutes, she was back before the large laboratory that she had been led to earlier--where she could hopefully find some answers.

Her footsteps took her over to the long, low bench. Here the lighting was all harsh and bright, a clinical white; it made her feel slightly sick. She tried not to look up to the lamps strung along the flat ceiling as she leant over and perused the contents of the tabletop.

A battered leather diary, diagonally across from some slides and a rack containing several cracked test-tubes, caught her eye. She reached forward slowly, taking it by the edges, the dark cover dull against her skin, opening it carefully, fearful of it dropping to pieces in her hands. The pages inside were lost under a sea of spidery handwriting, the black ink fading; Tamara had to squint to make out each word.

"1944: The end of the Second World War leaves millions dead and entire cities in ruin, blasted down by technology never before dreamt of. As fears run wild that the same technology will soon bring about total destruction of mankind, depression and paranoia sweep the nations of the world, threatening to bring about a new level of conflict."

Her thumb flicked over the page.

"1959: Mecca Drugs Ltd.--parent company to the dying MKULTRA scheme--develops a revolutionary anti-depressant in response to growing fears of a never-ending Cold War. Trekkers into the Amazon rainforest disclose details of the local tribes employing the powers of a new breed of fungi in their ceremonies, believed to be extra-terrestrial in origin, which subsequent raiding parties bring back to form the body of the substance. The substance is tested originally on ten patients, suffering from chronic depression since their losses in the war, then introduced months later onto the shelves. Details of the drug have long since been lost, which

researches believe explains our present condition, but it is rapidly placed under scrutiny by watchdogs—“

Tamara found her words met by a gravelly echo: “--after a unique condition, *Luna*, a fatally high intolerance to sunlight, develops in the victims . . .” Frowning, her gaze fluttered from the book to the corner of the table. The voice continued. “Half of the first batch of patients are found dead on the streets; similar cases are reported all over North America. Two years after its initial release, the product is pulled from the market; tens of people already find themselves forced to live in semi-darkness. Unique chemical reactions observed in the bodies of the afflicted attribute the blame to the mixing of the drug with other depressants; Mecca claims that such a warning was printed on the box.”

She took several, tentative steps along to the end of the low bench. The quiet murmur drifted around the corner. “1964: After many deaths and the beginnings of a public outcry, the CIA is brought in to deal with the matter; the Minaki Holiday Lodge is purchased from the Canadian government in return for secrecy over the *Luna* incident. CIA forces move quickly into the area and establish a tightly guarded hospital for the treatment of the thirty remaining *Luna* patients. All surviving sources of the fungi are now missing; to save face, the CIA is forced to stop research into the cause of the disease and to treat the patients, giving them the greatest possible quality of life.”

Slowly, Tamara swung her body around the corner, shaking her head sadly at the sight before her.

Carson sat hunched against one wall, his knees drawn up tightly to his chest and his tie and jacket crumpled, stained by the tears that slid down from his black-ringed eyes, across his haggard face. He sniffed as he felt her gaze wandering over him

“A thousand times I must have read that page . . . A thousand times . . .”

Tamara shrugged as she set herself down beside him, the harshness gone from her voice, now cool and soft. “And?”

“. . . to help myself understand what went wrong. When I was moved on from MKULTRA, to this, everyone laughed . . . I'd fail again, they all told me . . . But *no*: this was my dream opportunity . . . A chance to change; a chance to do some good--to atone for my earlier crimes . . .”

She touched his shoulder. “And what went wrong?”

A lump rose in his throat, his whole body shaking. “I don't know . . . I really don't know . . .”

* * * * *

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

A steady rhythm of colour splashes smeared the opaque canvas. Roughly cut time. Several bars later, the sensation of dripping water accompanied the beat. Flickers of crimson light backlit the canvas as the Doctor's eyelids flickered open.

High overhead was a miserable grey sky weeping tears of rain over him and his surroundings. Beads of water dripped on his forehead from the leafy shrub above. Beneath his fingers he felt thick, wet grass; he shivered as a cold breeze blew over his damp clothes.

The smell of a pasture after a heavy rainfall filled his nostrils and he inhaled contentedly inhaled.

It's like Earth after a thunderstorm.

"Same cause and . . ." The Doctor sat up and took in his surroundings: a lush meadow stretching to the hills in the horizon, with rows of poplars creeping over the grass like garden snakes. A gentle tingling sensation filled the air and soothed his aching limbs and mild headache. He sighed pleasantly; it definitely put his sonic shower to shame.

"I think he's recovering." The voice emanated from the young man with ginger hair crouching beside him.

So much concern in those bright blue eyes. "I've never felt better, Turlough--at least not in *this* life."

"Let's take you back to the TARDIS just in case." He helped the Time Lord to his feet; a pretty brunette wearing a peppery fur coat helped shoulder his weight.

"Thank you, Tegan. I'm quite all right now." They passed under a stone archway; the TARDIS stood obediently nearby. A blue monolith against a background of rolling green hills. The Doctor struggled free of his companions' grasp and pointed to the distant mounds: "Over those hills are the ruins of the Orion Kingdom; let's head for there first." But after only a few steps, his knees buckled and he grabbed Turlough's arm for support. "Or maybe not."

"You've had quite a shock to the system, Doctor." Tegan helped him unlock the TARDIS.

"It looked as though you were having a heart attack."

Funny, only his head and limbs ached, not his chest. "I think I need to sit down and regain my strength."

They entered the console room and the Time Lord darted for the mahogany Edwardian chair in one corner. Turlough depressed a lever and the interior doors closed shut with a gentle hum. "Where to now?"

A blur of Tegans hung up their fur coats on the decorative hat stand while a whirlpool of blinking lights enveloped the console.

"He's losing consciousness again, Tegan." The deep voice groaned like a buckling ship's hull. The Doctor shielded his face from the flames engulfing Turlough's head. A dizzying mosaic of coloured squares soon filled his vision.

"Let's get him into the Zero Room!"

The floor of the console room lurched nauseatingly as his companions again helped him to his feet. They passed through a doorway into a twisting hallway dotted with glowing roundels; a mouse passing through the belly of a porous snake likely had a similar view.

"Hold on, Doctor!" The shrill, grating voice filled his mind with an unsettling echo. He covered his face with his hands to block out the swarm of staring eyes that swam through his subconscious.

His body shivered and he longed to curl up in a ball on the floor, to block out all his senses. "Please, make it stop . . ." he moaned.

His companions came to a halt and the distraught Time Lord peered through his fingers. They stood before a menacingly large doorway overshadowed by a stone archway; vines of ivy wrapped around its fluted columns, threatening to lash out at him. To his dismay, his companions pushed him closer to the doorway; before he could protest, the door opened inward and the Doctor was bathed in a rosy glow.

Instinct led him through the doorway. Standing in the centre of the room, he leaned back to an impossible angle. Just as gravity would have sent him crashing to the floor, he raised his legs and hovered weightlessly in midair.

As he desired, all his sensations were blocked out save the overwhelming feeling of full inner tranquility.

* * * * *

Carson got up with a start, sharply straightening his body. "It's beginning," he muttered; now Tamara noticed the beads of sweat glistening on his cheeks under the brilliant light. "We have to leave."

She jumped to her feet, her heart racing from the sudden shock of his movement. "What do you mean?"

A roar rumbled down the corridor outside. The metal clanged. She heard wood crack and splinter.

"The woman who left before the Doctor--she was the sixth case."

"The *sixth*?"

He nodded swiftly. "Yes. It began a week ago, shortly . . . after the others started dying." He turned away from her incredulous stare. "First, an old man just vanishes; his warder swears he ran through the walls and disappeared. Three days later, the same--this time a young gentleman. The next day, another"--he snapped his fingers--"just *gone*--and the day after that, *two more*."

Tamara tutted as she pulled his long sleeve, forcing him up the steps, away from the table and the racks. "The frequency is increasing."

"Indeed." A sob wracked his body. "I still don't know enough about *Luna* to change anything . . . No matter how hard I try . . ."

Her eyebrows flashed skyward. "You might want to explain a few things before we continue, just so I know where we stand."

Carson stopped suddenly, letting his head hang low; he sniffed and wiped his nose with his dangling sleeve. "I've been a bad man . . ."

Tamara took hold of his lapels, gritting her teeth, forcing him round so her own eyes bore fiercely into his. She had the look of an interrogator about her as she pushed him forward. "You haven't just been trying to cure these people, have you?" Her gaze darted back to the lines of tubes and vials scattered across the work surface. The cultures of the fungi that she had seen earlier had not meant much and neither had the vast array of chemicals placed out alongside them--but now, after what had happened, they spoke volumes. She shook her head in disgust, clenching her fists.

“At first, it was just an interest, a pass-time, you know?” His voice broke as a tear glimmered in his eyes. “I just used the samples provided to try and find out as much as I could about the disease, about *Luna* . . . But it didn't work like that. I'm a scientist, you see?” He nodded quickly as though that one point justified everything. “It isn't enough, just to *know*. I had to *understand*. I promised myself that the first time would be the last. One of the patients was near death; I thought she wouldn't be missed. I tested a new drug on her, to cure the *Luna*. It accelerated the process, shriveled her to dust, even under the shadows of the blackest night. But I needed to know why all this was happening, under what conditions it would work most and least effectively, how the introduction of new factors would affect the process . . .”

“Hence all the deaths here?”

“Yes . . . I *had* to understand. Maybe the Doctor was right; maybe some people cannot change.”

Tamara sighed, letting him drop to the floor. He pulled himself onto his knees, uncreasing the long folds in his lab-coat, his bedraggled hair caught behind his ears. “It's inter-dimensional,” he muttered under his breath, looking hopefully up at her. “It doesn't just exist in the normal three. It sees more than we do; everyday obstacles don't prevent a barrier. I discovered that a couple of days ago.”

She narrowed her eyes, the contempt evident in her glare. “As soon as people started vanishing you began introducing new tests, just to find out *why*? And even that only to sate your own curiosity . . . Didn't it ever occur to you to try and stop it?”

His voice was a hoarse croak, barely audible over the steady whine of the fan high above. “No . . . I didn't want to . . . The longer it goes on, the more time I have.” He struggled to his feet, dusting down his trousers. “But it explains why they keep disappearing through the walls. The virus is driving them mad; the patients just lash out, anyway they can.”

She managed a dry, humorless chuckle. “The virus? Don't you think it might be your tests that are causing the breakdowns?”

He shook his head quickly, refusing to accept this. “No . . .” In a flash, he spun on his heel to the door. “We have to get out of here . . .” There was a sudden crash outside; Tamara heard a snap as something shuddered; the walls shook awkwardly, swaggering and swaying. She nodded. “Agreed.”

* * * * *

A whiff of rotting cabbage—more like a field of rotting vegetables—awoke the Doctor from his serene state. He opened his eyes and the definition of a floor, vaulted ceiling and walls appeared in the dim rosy glow of the Zero Room.

He willed himself down from his hovering state, lowered his feet and stood facing the immense doorway. With his fingers, he traced along the large roundel—one of many dotting the walls in a honeycomb pattern.

They wish to see us, to hear our thoughts.

Startled, the Doctor turned towards the whisper's origin. A figure affixed to the adjacent wall disappeared with a blink. “Who's there?” he whispered, staying put at the doorway. The room dimmed further in response.

He was startled again by a knock at the door. "How are you feeling, Doctor?"

"Turlough? I-I'm fine. Yes, the Zero Room's taken years off my life; you should try it yourself some time."

"May I come in?"

The Time Lord felt along the surface of the roundel. "It must open from the outside."

They apologize for this. That voice again; his eyes darted to the back wall, but he was alone.

"Try the handle, Doctor," Turlough said, his voice muffled by the doorway.

"What han—" A decorative brass latch had appeared at the centre of the roundel. A TARDIS silent of thoughts, whispering ghosts, magical door handles—this was very disconcerting indeed! "All right, I'm coming out now."

A gush of warm, moist air greeted him as he pulled the door open. He winced at the acrid stench of fermentation that hung over the empty hallway. The only movement the Doctor could make out through the darkness was streams of condensation trickling down the walls.

"Turlough?" His cry echoed down the hall and dissipated among the shadows.

"We're in the console room, Doctor," Tegan replied, her voice a faint echo.

He reached into his coat pockets, finding only a Minaki Lodge brochure; his glasses must have fallen out during his tumble in the forest. "Just my luck," he muttered, removing his trenchcoat and fanning himself with the brochure. "The climate controls stuck on humidify and I'm stuck in a horror film without a torch." He proceeded cautiously down the hallway. "Cue the hideous beast around the corner."

* * * * *

Tamara's arms dropped to hang limp by her side as she careered out into the corridor. Or, rather, what was left of it.

The entire right-hand wall had vanished—it simply wasn't there any more. The edges were shimmering slightly as moonlight from outside shone through in shafts, the walls bubbling and shifting as their fabric distorted. She could see the woodland looming high above, tall, stunted trees bearing down on them, hooked branches groping out and sweeping everything in shadow. Vegetation was beginning to creep in; tufts of grass stretched over into the corridor and pockets of flowers ringed every meter. All around them, things were growling, out of sight but certainly not out of mind.

Carson shook his head. "It's starting: the dimensional collapse of this place." He looked up at her with fascination. "I never imagined it would happen so quickly." He pulled off his glasses and ran a hand across his eyes. "Such unforeseen consequences are a rarity in my field."

The walls crackled. A sudden whorl of light gusted down the corridor, golden tentacles splaying out in fury and melting what they touched. A second later, it had gone.

Tamara took a firm grip on his arm, spinning to march down the corridor, aware of eyes playing over her from afar. "We need to hurry."

* * * * *

The overshadowed, foreboding stretch of hallway aside, the walk to the console room was taking an unusually long time. The Time Lord's hearts beat quickly and the muggy climate wasn't helping his breathing. He heard nothing up ahead save his echoing footfalls.

Since leaving the Zero Room, his goatee had become uncomfortably itchy; no amount of scratching would relieve it. "Would either of you care to open the console room door and shed some light down here?"

No reply. Splendid.

B-bump.

B-bump.

B-bump.

The surrounding walls pulsed rhythmically, sending droplets of water to the floor and resonating deeply in his chest.

B-bump.

B-bump.

B-bump.

Faint whispers drifted to him from around the upcoming corner, causing the hairs on his neck to stand on end. Composing himself, the Doctor quickened his pace to prevent his knees from trembling. Rounding the corner, he stood at the end of a short, empty corridor, the console room door lying at the other. To his dismay, the door stood slightly ajar with only the faint glow of the time rotor visible within.

The door opened further, stopping him in his tracks. Blood pulsed in his ears, in time with the omnipresent pulsing from the walls.

He took a deep breath before marching into the room. The limp, frail body of an old woman affixed to the TARDIS' outer doors caught the Time Lord's eye, her bare feet dangling above the floor. Sprouted from the walls, a crown of fungoid tentacles held her limbs and torso in place. The woman's drowsy head, held against the door by another tentacle, nodded gently; fibrous strands had woven themselves into a throbbing mesh over her nose and mouth.

Was she the elusive figure in the Zero Room? The dim light emanating from the console highlighted her deeply lined face. The woman in the moonlight . . . Margaret. He shuddered as realization set in.

"Margaret, who or what is responsible for this?" he whispered gently. His words had no effect on her laconic state. "Let's get you down from there." He crouched below her and seized the tentacle around her legs. Before he could get a firm grip, he was jerked forcefully to his feet.

He turned on his heels and yelped in surprise.

The withered corpses of Tegan and Turlough stood before him; their white eyes, sunk deep in their sockets, gleaming blue in the light of the time rotor. Their tarnished, threadbare clothing hung loosely on their bony frames.

Avoiding their morbid, eerie glare, the Doctor's chest heaved as he took quick, sharp breaths. "Enough!" he yelled into the air. "Stop this charade and show yourself." The pulsing from the walls resonated even deeper in his ears, but he returned to Margaret and resumed his effort to free her.

A bony claw grabbed his shoulder, but the Doctor seized his oppressor's arm and flipped the figure over his shoulder. Turlough's corpse slammed into the wall and shattered

within his crumpled suit. The Time Lord turned his eyes away in shame from the broken body and seized one of the tentacles around Margaret's legs with both hands. Tugging forcefully, the fungoid mass ripped from the wall, oozing heavily. Before seizing another tentacle, he glanced over his shoulder, but Tegan was gone.

He snapped his head around only to catch a fist's impact full on to his face. The blow knocked him off his feet and he hit the floor shoulder first. Shaking the stars from his head, the Doctor crawled away from the approaching deathly form.

"This is all an hallucination! Tegan, Turlough, the Zero Room, the TARDIS—none of this is real. Stop subjecting my mind to these creepy illusions and show yourself at once!" He backed into a corner as Tegan closed in on him, her feet dragging heavily.

The Doctor raised an arm to shield himself from another strike, but his companion's corpse stretched and contorted under some unseen force; in seconds he was showered in chips of bone and leathery skin.

Rippling like gelatin, the console room walls distorted to the limits of perception and reality; the result seemed like a collaboration between Escher and Dali. The pale grey walls blurred and faded, coarse cavern walls taking their place. The porous, rocky surface was lined with alternating crimson and black stripes—iron and carbon strata. Stalactites several feet in length poked out from the darkness overhead. The humid climate and deep pulsing remained.

The Time Lord attempted to scratch his goatee only to realize he was unable to move his arm. To his dismay, he could move neither his limbs nor his head. He peered down and noticed a sticky, fibrous mesh covering his nose and mouth; it irritated his chin to no end. Talk about an itch you can't scratch!

Straining his eyes to peer further down, the Doctor caught a glimpse of the fungoid tentacles holding him against the damp cavern wall. "Free me at once!" he cried out through the mesh. He struggled with what little movement his bounds afforded him.

A bulbous fungoid mass crept into his field of vision on a bed of tentacles. "The humanoid has arisen," it hissed. Tiny spores on its "head" inflated and deflated while it spoke.

The creature was soon joined by a second, larger fungoid mass.

"Release him," it hissed as it came to a halt beside its companion. In response, the tentacles holding the Time Lord released their grip and he dropped to the floor; his legs tingled with pins and needles as normal circulation returned.

"You're too kind," he muttered and reached to pull the sticky fibers off his face.

"Do not remove the filter, Doctor; your olfactory senses and respiratory system would be harmed by the Lair's atmosphere."

The stench of rotting vegetation reaching his nostrils was foul enough, so he took their advice and let the filter be. "Nice of you to finally show yourselves; do you have a name?"

"Ongimpcha."

He glanced at the smaller being. "And you?"

"We are Ongimpcha."

"I see." He glanced around; a maze of cavern walls and stalactites extended in every direction before fading into darkness. Phosphorescence likely provided the dim, green light.

"Where are we exactly? Below the Earth's surface? Another galaxy perhaps?"

"You are in the Lair," the larger mass missed.

"I gathered that." He ran his fingers through his damp hair. "But where in the galaxy, or the universe for that matter, are we?"

"Universe?"

"Yes, on what planet, near what star—"

"The Void," the smaller being hissed.

"Yes, I suppose." Planets, stars and nebulas only filled a small fraction of the universe's vacuum after all.

"The Lair exists outside of the Void," the larger being hissed.

"Within the space-time vortex?"

"The Lair exists outside of time."

Fascinating . . . but he was digressing from serious matters. "Where is Margaret—the human female who brought me here?"

"We are clearing her mind of Confusion."

Confusion? No doubt some sort of brainwashing. "Please take me to her."

The beings were silent a moment, their fungoid skin pulsing gently. Both then crept away around a corner and the Doctor followed cautiously.

* * * * *

Wilmore was thinking that the situation could not get much worse. He'd seen the movies; he knew that this was a very bad sign. But even so, his estimation of life at that moment was not particularly high.

He shivered. Even after five years with Mecca, living in this establishment, he still found the thick gloom unnerving. The paintings hanging from the walls and the plush carpet across the floor made things seem ever more abstract. Tapping one foot against the wooden floorboards was the only distraction he had to get him through each shift.

The patients were inside their *restaurant* now, eating their meals by soft, flickering candlelight, mumbling softly to each other. The dull drone of conversation made his spine tingle. Every day, he chided himself for this: they were only cripples, trapped in a life of darkness. But somehow, knowing what they were, he was terrified of them.

He stopped breathing as a sudden clatter of plates tore the strangled atmosphere in two. His heart pounding, he closed his eyes, straining his ears. Something metal dropped to the floor with a loud bang, followed by the crash of broken crockery.

Slowly, his trembling hand reached out for the door handle. He pulled it down, turning it, letting the door creak sharply as it opened. A faint gurgle emanated from within.

His jaw worked to form words, as it swung open in ghoulish fascination. Low moans and louder cries of pain sounded in the blackness. Narrowing his eyes, squinting desperately ahead as Chairs, tables and cutlery were strewn across the floor, the faint shapes cracked and split. A seething mass of flesh and loose limbs rolled over them, slowly advancing, swallowing any obstacles whole through wide, gaping orifices that clawed out from the fungoid ooze. He could see tattered strips of clothing wrapped around the monstrosity, bits of jewelry clinging on in places. Beside it, standing hunched with long, crooked limbs, human figures shambled past, tufts of grey, wispy hair whistling in the cold breeze that blew in from the

shattered windows. Some were still screaming as their clothes burst open and thrashing tendrils split through the skin, glazed and sunken eyes wide open; others moaned as they marched on, arms flailing at nothing, their faces wrapped in a thin growth of dotted fungi growing down onto their chests, bubbling as it consumed what it touched.

Wilmore fumbled for the gun at his belt as he stepped slowly backwards.

* * * * *

Carson looked to the floor as a dying scream rang through the corridors. "Things are starting to fall apart . . ."

Tamara took him by the shoulders and pulled his face close to hers. "Now, listen to me. There must be something we can do."

He shook his head solemnly, tears staining his face. "I don't know . . ."

"People are dying, here!"

"I know, I know . . ." He pulled away from her, dusting down his jacket, turning to look up and down the corridor as it shuddered violently. "We were briefed on this, long ago."

"Good." She began to march away from him, down the corridor, towards the screams, her heart pounding as the shadows deepened around her. "Tell me about it."

He followed uncertainly. "We have to radio the National Guard. If these people are exposed to a wide area, if they get out into Canada . . ."

"You'd have a fair few questions to answer, hmm?"

He crossed his arms defiantly. "Tens of thousands of people would die."

She raised an eyebrow. "Is this thing contagious, then?"

"No . . . But I haven't yet had the chance to discover what happens when it reaches maturity."

The sound of the last scream echoed about in her head. "Oh . . ."

"Exactly."

She quickened her pace, aware of the darkness drawing thicker and the high moon streaming slivers of light through the cracks in the wall, tracing silver lines across the corridor. "How do we contact the Guard?"

"We need to reach the communications room. I know exactly where to go; it isn't far." He shivered. "I could try dialing through from the lab, but the power is all out, and I very much doubt many more of my staff are alive."

"Then we'll have to cross the base?"

"Yes . . ."

* * * * *

Margaret appeared as in the Time Lord's hallucination: pinned to the cavern wall by a half dozen fungoid tentacles—all intact—with her nose and mouth covered by a filter like himself. He turned to the Ongimpcha pair.

"Now, if you would be so kind as to release her, we'll be on our way." He hoped to take full advantage of their unusual compliance.

"Her mind is not yet clear of Confusion," said the larger being.

"More mind control?"

"No. The Confusion was caused by human physicians —"

"Carson?"

"Yes, and others in her past. The chemicals they prescribed her have confused the Feeding."

"What about the fatigue," the Doctor asked, "the loss of memory, the intolerance for light—are they part of the Feeding?"

"These side-effects are minimal during the Feeding, but the prescribed chemicals have amplified them. This one," the larger entity approached Margaret, "we attempted to heal remotely after physicians initially halter her prescription. However, the physician Carson conducted further, more harmful tests. We had no choice but to bring her here."

"Did your spores pester her for information, too?"

"The Seeds are intended to relay information and initiate the Feeding; they are not meant to harm."

But they deliver one hell of a headache¼ But perhaps the Time Lord had been quick to judge his hosts. "If you exist outside of time and space, I suppose your spores—your 'Seeds' — are inter-dimensional, your connection to the Void?"

"Correct," said the smaller entity. "The Seeds fill the Void."

"But what about the Seeds covering Margaret's arm?" He glanced at the old woman, but the patch of spores was gone. The spore on his palm was gone as well.

"Another side-effect of the prescribed chemicals," said the larger entity. "The others we are healing showed similar signs."

"The Healing has prevented the Seeds from enveloping them and altering their physiology," concluded the other.

The Doctor shot the Ongimpcha a worried glance. "Alter to what extreme?"

"By our observations, Carson's treatments have caused the Seeds to fully envelop the remaining patients and revert them to a primitive state, guided only by the instinct to feed on the living."

"Zombies?" The Time Lord shuddered. "But Tamara's still there; can't you stop them?"

"Not without harming the other Seeds," hissed the smaller entity.

"Many people will *die!*"

"The altered humans will be stopped by sunlight."

"And what if they find shelter in darkness? What if they infect others?"

"We will deal with the situation."

"Not good enough!" the Doctor snapped. "What happens to spores beyond the influence of the Lair?"

"They remain inactive until sentient life is detected," replied the smaller entity.

"And do they remain inactive if you ignore them?"

"Yes." The fungoid mass began to shiver.

"Then leave Earth! Home in on Seeds elsewhere in the Void; Earth is but one of the billion planets in this galaxy alone. When the Seeds become inactive, the altered patients can be dealt with *humanely.*"

"We cannot."

"You must!"

"We cannot." The small Ongimpcha shivered violently, blue slime oozing from unseen pores.

"Enough," its companion interrupted with a piercing hiss. "We cannot relocate with ease, Doctor. As you have experienced, the Seeds occupy the minds of sentient life. We feed off the resulting chemical reactions."

"Then why not find a planet of docile, nocturnal creatures?" cut in the Doctor.

"Strength of the chemical reaction varies with the complexity of nervous tissue. Humans are barely sufficient hosts for the Feeding."

Although the Time Lord stood outside time and space, he couldn't shake the feeling Tamara was in imminent danger, along with the rest of the hospital. Worse still, noting the harm to the patients caused by the minutest source of sunlight, he had no intention of allowing them to be caught—zombies or not—in the fatal corona of a sunrise.

"What's wrong with your friend?" he asked the larger entity; the other still shivered violently.

"We are dying. Our numbers decrease steadily, impeding our search of the Void for a more suitable host."

Time catches up with the timeless. "Hence your interest in myself and my home world?"

"Yes," hissed the entity. "Your brain is far more active and convoluted than those of humans. We brought you to the Lair for further study—"

"And tried to probe my mind while inducing a serene, subconscious state."

"Correct, but you were eventually able to resist the Feeding. An impressive feat."

"Perhaps." The Doctor frowned. "But with nightmarish results." He turned his attention to Margaret, still in a comatose state. "As small as the side-effects may be, is it your intention to subject all humans to the Feeding?" If not to conquer Earth, he added to himself.

"You forget, Doctor, I can read your thoughts; we have no intention of conquering Earth."

A small grin upset the Doctor's look of concern. "I hear that all too often: the Silurians, the Urbankans, the Daleks, the Nazis—"

"I am unfamiliar with those species. Your resentment of us, Doctor, is clear," hissed the entity. "The Ongimpcha require only a small fraction of the human population to survive. And relative to their feeding habits, we are far more 'humane': we do not domesticate, we do not butcher, we do not hunt to extinction, we do not destroy ecosystems to harvest crops and raise livestock."

The Doctor glanced at his feet. "You make a good point," he muttered.

"The Ongimpcha are a pacifist species, Doctor, the Feeding our only intention. Hosts are kept to an optimal minimum like our own population. Greed and gluttony are not in our nature."

With a final spasm and a burst of blue ooze, the smaller Ongimpcha lay still.

"I am the only Watcher left now," hissed the lone entity.

"Where are the other Ongimpcha?"

“They sleep; if a superior host species is not found soon, they will also die. I do not have the strength to create a fellow Watcher.”

The Time Lord closed his eyes, his mind racing to formulate a plan.

“Will you help us, Doctor?”

He opened one eye. “Although they can be quite closed-minded, my people could similarly resist the Feeding in time.”

Three

The door to the eating-area lay slightly ajar. Tamara came to a halt, peering cautiously through the gap, sniffing at the stale, musty scent prevalent in the warm air.

Carson stopped behind her, grimacing. He extended a shaking figure and, following it, Tamara could make out a corpse sprawled over the floorboards, lying amongst a shower of broken glass and splinters of wood, one hand clutching a bloodstained chest. She held out an arm to shush him as she crept forward, painfully aware of the boards creaking and lurching beneath her feet. Her forehead narrowed to a frown as she heard throaty, ragged breaths.

The door collapsed into splinters as a gnarled fist pounded through it. Tamara gasped, jumping backwards, blinking rapidly to adjust to the gloom. Three shapes flung themselves at her as she rolled to one side, springing up to grasp Carson's arm and pull him away. Backing away warily, she took in the sight of the zombies as they shuffled closer, arms outstretched and jagged teeth bared in a feral snarl. The corridor shimmered before flashing violently in a sudden burst of white.

"Oh Lord . . ." Carson was shaking uncontrollably. The three figures were still recognizably human--that was the worst thing--but their flesh was nearly invisible under the heavy fungoid growth. Brittle bones were visible under pale, pallid skin, flecked with rings of gray; their skin looked so thin that a mere prick could tear it.

"Come on," muttered Tamara, trying to pull her gaze away from the shapes as they made each slow step, six torn boots thudding into the ground as one dull monotony. "You must have accelerated the process . . ."

"I didn't *mean* to . . ."

"No . . ." Tamara dragged him away from the creatures as they hissed and spat. "Come on! We must get to the radio!"

* * * * *

The faint whine that had been ever-present as background noise hummed its last and then died with a strangled protest, as the two fugitives ran into the large, square reception hall, stairs in the far corner leading up to an overlooking balcony, each wall housing rows of arched

doorways leading deep into the complex. The tiny ceiling-lights flickered before fading altogether.

The receptionist had gone, Tamara noted as she careered to a halt, but her desk lay under a scatter of pens and papers, as though she had left in a hurry, and one of the vases had split in two, showering earth across the floor. She glanced over at the round wooden table and the plush, cushioned chairs--one of them was dotted with blood.

Carson stumbled, collapsing against a desk, only Tamara's tight grip stopping him from falling flat on his face. "We have to keep moving!"

He clutched his heaving chest, his face red. "No good . . . Those things can see in the dark. I don't know where to go now!"

She took a deep breath. "Please, Carson. I can't get out of here without your help."

"Just go . . . leave me. I--I don't deserve to survive this."

"A pity it took you this long to realize that . . ." She hauled him roughly to his feet, glancing back down the corridor, the slow drumming of footsteps getting closer. She could feel faint vibrations running through the tiled floor. "There's a chance, Carson, for both of us--if you help me."

In an instant, the air became far denser, as though a shockwave of sound was rushing up to collide, flooding through the room like treacle.

A sudden implosion of light threw them to the floor. When Tamara looked up, groaning and rubbing her sore eyes to clear the golden dots that bobbed there, half the room had gone. She found herself lying in thick, dry mud, patched by tall grass; beside her stood a long, wooden wall, identical to its earlier state, but the ceiling had just dissolved, leaving everything open to a dull gray sky, long low clouds shrouding the pale moonlight, the walls that had adjoined it shimmering and rippling like a liquid. A muddy haze surrounded the left wall as it crackled and swirled in a smudge of colour, bright and vivid against the encroaching shadow. Branches flailed wildly out into the room, swaying as their leaves shifted and rustled in the unnatural breeze. The tiles in front of her hissed then popped out of existence as more turf crawled in to replace them; the surviving walls were fizzing in and out of perspective.

"Come on!" She tightened her fist around his bony hand, aware of the forest creeping in from all sides, walls and ceiling melting to nothing. A tree materialized meters ahead of her, a looming oak leaning over, lines of shining flowers popping up in perfect rows, seconds before the entire room faded from view, leaving the two of them in a dense, bordered clearing.

"It's too late . . . Please, just leave me here . . ." Carson sobbed, unable to pull himself away.

"No!" Tamara flashed him her most piercing glare, breathing quickly as she felt the ground shake. "I'm going to make sure we both get out of here." She tugged hard on his arm, forcing him on, throwing the two of them in amongst the foliage, driving their bodies against the thick walls of plants.

She could see the remains of another building rear up ahead. She brushed back an oval leaf, squinting, the muzzy shape consumed by wreaths of fog. The front walls had gone, as had the ceiling, leaving only the battered shell of a hut; but she could see half a corridor leading away from it, sloping down into the ground, and behind that, a long, thin tower clawed up

through the distortion, the scanners on top rotating drunkenly in the mist as they clicked and beeped.

"Is that it?" Tamara had to shout to make herself heard over the roar of the maelstrom and the feral snarls of their pursuers, getting louder from all angles.

"Yes! The communications tower, just past the guards' rest-room. Just pray that the radios are still working . . ."

She nodded grimly as she charged for the remains of the hut, her sprint kicking up clouds of dust. Carson's puffing remained right behind her, his breaths quick and wheezy.

The creatures ripped and tore at the vegetation, flinging aside the trailing vines as they pursued. Darker clouds jostled for space high above, the light thinning to dappled shafts as gloom unrolled, the parts of the horizon not shrouded in unearthly mist drenched under rising plumes of grayness. Fog billowed out from the ruined walls of the hut, thick shrouds roiling as they swamped across the clearing, slicing the darkness in two along the seams.

When at last they reached the building, their hearts pounding against their chests, their ears ringing with the torrential din of the creatures, hissing and snarling, all they could do was slump their bodies back against the tattered wall and draw in huge gulps of air. Carson noticed the fierce vibrations first, the feeling of collapse as the wood *bent*; he dived to one side, wrapping one arm around Tamara and pulling her to the floor, seconds before the wood melted into thick scrubs and bush, leaving just a ceiling hanging high above, shimmering. Her eyes opened wide as she braced herself for its break, but all it did was shiver in and out of focus. The sudden echo of rage, forcing itself through the haze as the creatures shambled after, afforded her little time to wonder. "Come on!" she growled as she leapt to her feet, not looking back for Carson, trying to stay on her feet as she was buffeted from all sides by loose branches and the ghostly winds. Tamara struggled not to lose herself in the confusion, the stench of fungus so strong that the source could only be right on her heels.

Finally, the ceiling lowered, the wooden floorboards making way for hard concrete as the tunnel rose from the ground. She supposed there was a lift up to the communications tower from underground; desperate, she charged on, noticing Carson panting as he ran along beside her, into the sanctuary of the tunnel. She heard him mutter a fevered prayer.

Downwards they ran, the dull metal ringing, the thunderous roars louder still. Tamara didn't know what made her decide, but the second door on the left--bland, metallic-gray and featureless save for the handle--looked as good as any. She yelled as she threw herself at it, forcing down the handle, thrusting her body through and reaching back to drag Carson after her.

"This is one of the blast-shelters . . ."

The words fluttered through her mind rather than sinking in. She slammed the door shut, depressing the lock, thanking the first deity that came to mind for making the door so thick and heavy. She doubted it could be penetrated--for a while.

Her breaths came in long, grateful gulps.

* * * * *

Her weary gaze finally allowed itself to play around the room, her thinned eyes only now able to take anything in. It was sparser than any other in the hospital, the only furnishings a chair, a hard bed, complete with mattress and a small square table, all metal. The air smelt clinically stale, as though recycled.

Blast-shelter . . .

Suddenly she noticed the instrument panel, protruding from the opposite wall, so innocuous and unassuming.

"I could destroy half of Canada from any one of these rooms."

Her chest tightened. She turned slowly around. Carson's wide smile was hardly comforting.

"They were designed to withstand anything. *Anything.*"

She nodded slowly. "That's good."

"Sometimes it is necessary to bury the past, in order to make way for the future, in order to wipe the slate clean. If the problem becomes too extreme, Mecca simply erases it."

"And . . . you think you can do that?"

"I don't know. It might be interesting to try."

"People don't forget, Carson."

He chuckled wryly. "In my experience, they do. Why else am I still a free man?"

"You've done too much."

"Other men have committed worse crimes than myself." His forehead knotted. "Why should they be able to get away with it and not I?"

"This isn't a game. You're not playing around with chemicals in the back garden any more, Carson."

"Of course. But I'm ruined. It isn't fair, but that's life."

"You have a chance—"

"Yes, I know." One hand reached for his coat pocket. "If I wipe out these creatures and destroy the complex, no one ever needs know what happened here. No remains, you see; that's what a nuclear device of this scale *does*. Hiroshima?" The ghost of a smile touched his lips. "That was just a firework."

"You'll—"

"Mecca will concoct their own tale for the press. I will be forgotten."

"Is that what you want?"

"There's no hope of me dying a hero, my dear; I'll settle for the next best thing." His hand emerged, pale white fingers gripping a stubby gun. Tamara noticed he was shaking.

She took a deep breath. "Are you going to shoot me?"

He glared at her, his milky white eyes widening slowly. "Would you rather *burn*?"

"I'd rather you put the gun down and help me get out of here. That was what we were doing, remember?"

He shook his head. "No; I'm sorry." Beads of sweat dripped from his fingers as he stepped back tentatively. "It isn't going to work any other way."

"Both of us can get through this alive, Carson."

"I don't know if I want to any more . . . I told you that. My--my only aim through all of this has been to learn, to *discover* . . . Knowing that that one opportunity has been taken away from me . . . what is there left?"

She tutted, shrugging, her calm broken by a seething cloud of anger. "There are hundreds of men like you, Carson: tyrants, dictators, people for whom even the world is not enough. I've met most of them. At least they have ambition. What do you have?" She gave a little laugh. "Nothing. You're only doing this because things aren't going your way. Why should I take anything you say seriously?"

His fingers tightened around the gun. "I . . ."

"We can't all have everything. Sometimes things go wrong, Carson—sometimes it just happens. Face it; accept it; put it behind you. Move on. Learn from your mistakes. You *can* become a better person. People *do* change."

"I've *tried* . . ."

"Then just try a little harder next time. Put down the gun."

There was a heavy clang of metal as it dropped to the floor. Carson sunk to his knees. The tears rolling down his cheeks were as genuine as any Tamara had seen.

* * * * *

The Doctor's eyelids snapped open. "I have a solution to your problem, but first I need a promise."

"Proceed," hissed the Watcher.

"If I provide you with the home world of a species with greater sentience than humans, will you leave Earth immediately?"

"Where is the planet located?"

The Time Lord raised an eyebrow. "First let Margaret and the others go—if the Healing is complete."

"It is." The Watcher approached Margaret and willed the tentacles to release their grip.

The woman took a long, deep breath and her eyes flickered open. She eyed her surroundings uneasily; her face relaxed upon spotting the Doctor.

He gently gripped her arm as she attempted to remove the filter. "You'd best leave it on, Margaret; the air in here isn't exactly pleasant."

"I feel so relaxed, so full of life. Des, too—my husband. We had the most wonderful conversation while watching the sun rise from our front porch." She approached the Doctor, staring curiously at the fungoid mass before her.

"I'm glad the Ongimpcha afforded one of us a pleasant reverie. And yes, you definitely have a bounce in your step."

Several other bewildered seniors—two men and two women—along with a younger man rounded the corner and halted before the Watcher. The Doctor ushered them over, requesting that they keep on their filters. The gentle shivering of the entity caught his attention.

"Where is the planet, Doctor?"

"Just grant me one last request: are you still in contact with the other patients?"

"No," it hissed, "the Confusion is too great. The Seeds still feed, but we hear nothing."

"What was the last thing you heard?"

The Watcher gurgled and drops of blue slime oozed from its fungoid skin. "The altered patients were hunting the humans within the medical establishment."

"Tamara," whispered the Time Lord, his face drained of colour.

"Doctor, you must tell me the planet's location in the Void now—I am dying . . ."

Margaret shook the Doctor by the shoulder. "Just tell them what they need to know, my dear, so we can all go home."

"Yes," he said, his mind returning to matters at hand. He shot her an affectionate glance.

"Let's end all this suffering, shall we?" He approached the quivering Ongimpcha.

"There's a race of highly intelligent, nocturnal creatures that, without their leader, are docile burrowers. They have a nasty habit of infesting and destroying people's property; perhaps the Feeding's side-effects will keep them at bay."

"Wh-where are they located?" hissed the Watcher.

"The planet Frontios, in the Veruna system." He projected a mental image of the planet's location within the Milky Way galaxy.

"The Seeds have arrived . . . A colony of humans dwell on the surface . . . The Seeds have penetrated the planet's surface . . . Invertebrate lifeforms . . . Feeding has commenced . . . Immense, complex brains . . . Ability to manipulate gravity . . . The humans call them Tractators." The entity ceased to shiver and inflated slightly in size. "The Tractators are a prime host; we are grateful, Doctor."

"Least I could do for judging you so quickly." He breathed a sigh of relief. "In case you ever come across my people, you've never heard of me and you discovered Frontios yourself, agreed?"

"Agreed."

"Now, could you grant me one last favour and return us all to a safe distance from the hospital back on Earth?"

"It will be done."

"And once we're gone, you will ignore the Seeds on Earth for good?"

"Yes."

He gave the Watcher a wink and turned to the group of patients. "Our little excursion has come to an end, ladies and gentlemen." He put a hand on Margaret's shoulder and she shot him an affectionate glance. "Just click your heels together three times and we'll be on our way."

With that, reality did a somersault and faded to black.

* * * * *

"God!"

Tamara jerked upright as the metal of the thickset doors bulged under a thunderous crash. The grey doors buckled inwards and the hinges shuddered.

Carson shot to his feet, struggling to form words, rubbing at the tears blurring his vision.

"This--this isn't possible . . . That's titanium!"

The dull colours twisted and faded, melting and crackling as they coalesced with the plainness of the air. A gnarled fist pushed itself through, cracked fingers clenching as they groped for a victim.

"This room is collapsing," Carson spluttered, reaching out for the gun. He pointed it at the door, firing a random shot, his heart jumping as it recoiled in time with the wild scream of

the monster. Tamara pulled the gun away, throwing it across the room; she took the man's arms, hauling him over towards the far wall. "Is there any other way out of here?"

He shook his head. "I don't know!"

She had to shout to make herself heard above the assault on the door, which was now crumpling and folding inwards as the air around it hissed and popped. "There must be!"

His mouth was wide open as he struggled to form words, his face as pale as death. 'I don't know!'

She fumed as she spun away, her gaze running over the walls, the ceiling and the floor. Suddenly it hit her: the metal on the far wall was plain and blank, but one area was slightly grayer than the rest, not flushing in perfectly, as though placed there later. Quickly, she dashed over and gritted her teeth as she began to rip them away. "Help me!"

Carson hurried over. Tamara pulled a thin, stiletto-like blade from her belt, forcing it into the wall and prying at the odd patch. Sure enough, she was able to lever it away, revealing a dark and narrow service hatch, the edges sharp and rough. She took a deep breath as the hatch clanged noisily against the floor, before hauling herself up and crouching low to crawl into the passageway.

The blackness swallowed her whole as she made way for Carson. On her knees, she shuffled forwards, her clothes and skin scraping against the metal. She froze as a billowing cloud of air rushed up behind her, flinging her hair into her eyes and making the whole hatch shake. Looking back, she frowned as zombies sauntered into the room, the door falling and fading into swirls of green and brown.

"Quick!" She moved on as she felt Carson nudge her, his breathing so rapid that she thought he might pass out. His face was a sickly pale, a chalky white.

Suddenly, the path split into two, both sections winding on until fading into nothingness. "Which way?"

Carson thought for a moment. "Those things . . . I can't remember! I'm sorry, I just can't—"

"You have to, Carson."

He cried out. "Okay, okay." He sniffed, then looked back to her decisively. "Okay. It isn't far. We follow the path around, exit into the corridor and the lift up to the comm room should be just there."

"Good."

Wordlessly, they pressed on.

* * * * *

Tamara's eyes darted quickly around the clearing as the lift doors slid open with a dull whine, revealing a collapsed area of forest, trees hanging loosely across paths lost under overgrown bushes and plants, the tall comm tower suddenly just meters away. The atmosphere inside the small chamber had been suffocating, particularly with the flickering, sparking light jolting in and out of life.

Carson jumped as the doors clanged shut. He held one hand to his heart as he looked back up to the tower, wiping more tears from his face with the back of one sleeve. "Finally."

Tamara managed a tight smile. "We may be out of this." She broke into a gentle jog, hurrying over to the rounded entrance to the tower, which would once have been surrounded by the rest of the sprawling hospital. Now, the odd trace of metal poking up from the soil was the only testimony. "If we hurry."

They charged across the clearing, shadows whirling into coalescing strips and spluttering all around them. When they reached the inside of the tower (a tall, domed chamber, everything functional and metallic save for the expansive control consoles stretched along each wall and the central column channeling power that reached up to the ceiling) Carson headed straight for the nearest row of switches, situated up a staircase and along a thin gantry walled by iron railings, bordering the entire room.

His fingers immediately hovered over the various instruments, stabbing down onto keys and flicking switches, fighting to keep his mind free of fear and struggling to make the shapes clear in the dull light. Anxiety deepened Tamara's frown as she looked over his shoulder, constantly checking back to the entryway for monsters.

The speakers crackled into operation with a sudden burst of static. "*Come in . . . Min . . . ki . . .*"

Carson bellowed into the microphone. "This is Doctor Carson, Security Clearance 7AZ. Over."

A brief silence followed, before: "*. . . author . . . cleared . . . go . . . head . . . ver.*"

"The situation is critical. Repeat: *critical*. The project is out of control. We require urgent backup." He turned to Tamara and took a deep breath. There aren't many left alive. We are going to have to pull out. Repeat: this is over. The base needs to be . . . "--his bottom lip twitched—"to be destroyed. Over."

The reply could not have been more casual: "Will do, doctor. Over and out."

The radio clicked and fell silent. Tamara let out the breath she had been holding. "Now we wait?"

Carson nodded nervously, his face even paler than before. "Indeed."

* * * * *

Carson finally cracked as the roof fell inwards, blurring and vanishing before it could hit the floor. The grayness of the walls exploded in a sudden flash; when the disturbance rippled into clarity, all that could be seen was the forest, penetrating the room. He threw himself to the floor, wailing, his face quivering as tears streamed down it.

Tamara looked on in horror as zombies flooded down into the open room, skittering down the walls on all fours like grotesque spiders, a torrential sea of gnashing teeth and jagged, outstretched claws. Snarling, mouths twisting into hooked grins, they leapt one by one onto the ground, landing soundlessly, spreading out in loping gaits to form a large circle around Carson and herself.

She shrank back, slowly shifting her gaze, but there was no visible link in the rapidly tightening chain. The zombies slashed pointed nails at the air and hissed venomously as they inched ever closer.

* * * * *

“Humans have some pleasant qualities, but a well-seasoned time traveler like myself would make a far more satisfying meal.”

The creatures stopped in their tracks. The voice had drifted in with the darkness and cold breeze through the extensive gap in the chamber opposite Carson and Tamara; the gantry above buckled wildly against the adjoining concrete walls. With a commotion of grunts and snarls, the creatures turned away and disappeared through the gap like cats abandoning their prey for a lame, obese mouse squeaking in the night.

Tamara blinked: the zombies were gone. Only seconds earlier, she'd prayed for one of the creatures to choke to death on her collarbone.

But that was then. They had been saved by a voice from heaven; come to think of it, that sounded like the Doctor's voice. “Come on Carson, let's get out of here!”

“They'll be back—I know it! How do you know there isn't one waiting in the stairwell for us?” Carson whimpered pathetically.

She shook his huddled form. “Snap out of it!” She pointed to the gap in the chamber.

“Would you rather jump out of the tower?”

The physician shook his head, shivering.

“So let's go!”

“Yes . . . yes, let's get out of here.” He stood up and dusted off his lab coat. They fled through the open doorway and into the stairwell, keeping their senses on high alert.

“How long before the National Guard arrive?”

Carson glanced at his watch. “Ten minutes or so.”

“Let's hope they spot us immediately!” She came to a halt beside the tower's exit doors, pulling the physician beside her. Wiping the sweat from her brow, she pushed the door open a crack and peered out. “Oh no! What the hell's he doing?” she hissed.

“Who?”

She slapped a hand over the man's face and held a finger to his lips. “Care to become zombie chow?” she whispered.

Carson shook his head and Tamara removed her hand. They both jumped as the concrete staircase creaked and buckled. Block by block, the walls of the stairwell faded into shadows with wavering pine trees seeping through.

“Come on.” She grabbed the physician's arm, but he resisted.

“But they're outside!”

The entire stairwell began cracking under its own weight, it seemed, and showered them with pebbles of concrete. “You'd really prefer to stay in here?” She yanked him out the door, through the billowing fog, and they darted behind a nearby cluster of cedars. Carson's jaw dropped.

Under a spotlight of moonbeams, the Doctor waved his trenchcoat at his side, taunting the band of fearsome creatures like a matador. He dodged their lashing claws, slowly backing away from the hospital grounds—or what remained of them. Gone were the spacious, timber lodge and concrete extensions; in their place a glen of pines and cedars, the hospital's foundation barely visible between their roots.

Gone were all of Carson's files, journals, test results, lab equipment, *Luna* samples—his life's work. Then again, gone was any evidence of his failed, fatal experiments. Not a witness left, save for the Doctor and Tamara . . .

Carson's eerie grin frightened the woman and she returned her attention to the Doctor. The horde of fungoid zombies was frighteningly close to her friend; she decided it was time to test the waters and cried out his name.

"Ah, Tamara! I'm so happy to see you!" He shot her a nervous smile. The piercing hisses and foul odor of the creatures were unsettling. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine; Carson's here, too." She pulled the man to her side from the cover of trees.

"Hello, Carson. Bet you're curious to know where it all went wrong, eh?"

"Doctor, look out behind you!" Tamara pointed out the remnants of the perimeter fence, contorted and torn apart by inter-dimensional fatigue. The Time Lord ducked through an opening in the fence, while the beasts tore the section apart in a fury of claws and teeth.

Tamara and Carson followed the beasts, keeping a prudent distance away. "Where were you, Doctor?" she yelled. "And why have our zombie pals suddenly lost interest in devouring us for dinner?"

"You're not smart enough—no offense," he cried back.

"Nice to see you, too!"

"I didn't mean it like that! These creatures are the hospital patients, but severely infected by that fungus we discovered." The Doctor narrowly missed tripping over a stray tree root.

"Besides their obvious carnivorous tastes—a very unfortunate side-effect—that fungus is naturally attracted to sentient beings with complex brain structures. And like it or not, human minds just don't measure up."

Carson's head jolted as if snapping out of a daydream. "It feeds on brain cells?"

"No, on the resulting chemical reaction when it enters the system of its host."

"Of course! That would explain—"

"This isn't exactly a good time for a scientific discussion!" The Doctor's hearts beat wildly as he struggled to catch his breath; he doubted he could divert the creatures for much longer.

"How do we stop them?" Tamara yelled.

"Hopefully you won't need to; I'm just awaiting a promise."

The clearing was suddenly filled with the deafening whir of a helicopter overhead. A spotlight lighted on Tamara and Carson, proceeding to trace a circular path ahead of them.

Momentarily distracted, the Doctor stifled a yell of pain when the closest of the creatures shredded his trenchcoat with one swipe and left a large gash on his forearm. He quickly backed up, cradling the wound, just as the spotlight picked him out along with the dozen altered patients on his trail. Horrible, deathly screams erupted from their bulbous, pulsing torsos.

"The light—they're killing them!" The Time Lord waved his arms wildly, urging the helicopter to leave the scene; instead it initiated a slow descent. The silhouettes of the creatures in the spotlight shivered violently, their screams almost deafening. Ignoring the biting pain of his arm, he waved the scraps of his trenchcoat and sprinted for the cover of the forest nearby.

As the creatures struggled to pursue him, he yelled to Tamara: "Tell those idiots to turn off the spotlight; they're killing the patients! Trust me on this one . . ." Tamara then lost sight of her companion under the veil of darkness and evergreens with the zombies following suit.

Several armed guards, sporting green camouflaged combat gear and service rifles, filed out of the helicopter, but Tamara barred their path and held up her badge, covering the registration date with her thumb. "Agent Tamara Scott, MI5. The situation is under control—halt at once!" She fixed her disheveled hair in vain with her other hand.

The commanding officer of the troop, a tall, brawny man with blue eyes overshadowed by thick eyebrows, approached her. "Captain McDonald. Stand aside immediately, ma'am; this is a matter of national sec—"

"Don't argue with me, soldier," she looked the commander straight in the eye and shot him a fiery glance. "That spotlight is killing those things—those *people*! Turn it off *now*!"

Captain McDonald hesitated a moment and then signaled the pilot to extinguish the spotlight.

* * * * *

Although the loss of the spotlight meant the Doctor could only see a few meters ahead, the grunts and hisses of the creatures allowed him to keep a safe distance apart. In future, he would be more specific in his demands to inter-dimensional psychic mushrooms.

"There you are, Doctor." Margaret and the other healed patients stood a short distance downhill in a small clearing, caught in the moonlight.

"Everyone get back!" He waved them away with his arms, tripped over a large rock in his path and fell flat on his face. "This hasn't exactly been my day," he mumbled with a mouthful of earth and pine needles. He shook the stars from his head, got to his knees, but was knocked down with a forceful blow to his back. With a deep groan, he rolled over to catch sight of the hissing, pulsating creatures gathering around him.

"Is *this* death?" His voice trailed off and he raised his arms to shelter himself from the inevitable attack . . .

* * * * *

Tamara sheltered her green eyes as two sets of high-beams and a monstrous roar of engines closed on her and the soldiers like a pair of rampaging dragons. Two camouflaged, canopied cargo trucks screeched to a halt before them, each unloading a dozen National Guards. The men lined up before Captain McDonald, standing rigid in salute.

"A half dozen of Doctor Carson's *patients* have fled into the forest." McDonald pointed out the area where the Doctor was last spotted. "These patients are extremely dangerous and propose a serious health risk to civilians. Secure the area and keep the patients at bay."

"But don't fire your rifles!" Tamara cut in.

McDonald gave her a stern glance. "Agreed. The patients are highly sensitive to light, so use your flashlights to detain them." Commotion arose from the soldiers. "Those are your orders, now carry them out!"

"Yes sir!" they shouted in unison and filed into the woods.

The captain returned his attention to Tamara. "You have a lot of faith in your friend if you think he can hold off those *things* alone—with a trenchcoat!"

"I trust him with my life."

"Terrific," Carson added, "then head into the forest—all of you!"

Tamara, McDonald and a remaining soldier turned round to discover the physician clenching the pilot's arm and pressing the nozzle of his handgun into the man's head. Immediately, the soldier leveled his rifle at Carson's chest; the physician cocked his gun in response.

"The only irrational one here is myself, so you'd best put down the rifle."

McDonald gave the soldier a nod and he set the rifle on the ground slowly.

"What the hell are you doing, Carson?" Tamara exclaimed.

"Making my escape, of course. The MKULTRA incident and ensuing trial nearly ruined my career." Sweat trickled down his forehead as he shivered with insanity. "The *Luna* experiments have left me a broken man, Tamara; life imprisonment will be the nail in my coffin!"

"Don't be a fool, Carson. I have authority; I can put in a good word—"

"Shut up! Into the forest, all of you—*now!*"

"All right, doctor." The captain encouraged the soldier to join his lead and back away.

"We're backing into the forest. Come on, Tamara." He was shocked to see her approach the deranged man.

"Stay back, or I'll fire!" Carson yelled. His hand twitched while keeping a firm grip on the gun. The pilot shut his eyes and clenched his teeth.

Tamara chuckled to herself. "Know anything about safety, Carson?"

"Wha—" The woman lunged at the physician and tackled him to the ground. He pulled the trigger instinctively but it only clicked. She smacked the gun from his hand and pinned him down.

"You had the safety on," she said before delivering him a right hook. Carson went limp.

McDonald, the soldier and the pilot stared in astonishment as she got up and darted for the forest. "Keep an eye on him!" she yelled back. "I'm off to help a friend."

* * * * *

The sound of crackling flesh and sorrowful moans led the Doctor to peer through his fingers. The fungoid skin of the creatures was shriveling, crackling and dropping off in chunks.

"It's about time," he mumbled and propped himself up.

"What's happening, Doctor?" Margaret asked, helping him to his feet.

"The Ongimpcha have moved on. Their Lair's influence is now out of range of the Seeds—the spores—so they're becoming inactive."

The creatures dropped to the ground; patches of the patients' natural skin were now visible.

"Are they dying?" The Time Lord felt the woman tremble.

"I honestly don't know."

The shriveled, fanged face of one of the creatures crumbled away, revealing the pale, withered features of a man.

"Des!" Margaret ran to her husband and kneeled beside him. Cradling his head in her lap, she lightly stroked his face. The man's eyes flickered open and, with much effort, he managed to form a smile. The first rays of dawn wandered towards them from the nearby clearing. The old woman hugged her love gently. "It's our sunrise, Des."

Like passing dreams, Des and the other infected patients began fading away. "Spore outbreak and inter-dimensional fatigue has taken a toll on their bodies," the Doctor whispered. Margaret quietly sobbed as her husband disappeared from her grip into morning air. A herd of footfalls erupted around them as many camouflaged soldiers emerged from the trees.

"Is everyone all right?" asked one of them.

"Yes, just a bit shook up," replied the Time Lord.

"Are these the diseased patients?" asked another, pointing to the others in the clearing.

"There are no 'diseased' patients here; Carson killed them all. Feel free to test Margaret here and the rest, but I assure you they are quite healthy." He helped the shivering woman to her feet. "Let's get them blankets, shall we? Some food and water would be nice, too."

"Right." The soldier turned to the others. "King, Laurier, Clarke—get these people back to the trucks; O'Neil, take a look at this man's wounds. The rest of us will continue securing the area."

* * * * *

As the majority of the soldiers dispersed back into the labyrinth of trees, a familiar face appeared. "Tamara!" The Doctor rushed to his companion and gave her a big hug. She opened her eyes wide in surprise but then returned the gesture.

"It's good to see you, too."

"Wait here a moment." He caught up with Margaret, being escorted to the cargo trucks by a young, freckle-faced soldier. The woman wore the young man's combat jacket and crossed her arms across her shivering chest. "I'm sorry for your loss, Margaret."

"Me, too, dear. But we did have one last sunrise together."

The Time Lord gripped her shoulder affectionately. "How does it feel to live in the light again?"

"A little like being scared of the dark, I suppose." She chuckled to herself. "I'll be able to read Des the letter from his late father now—I'm sure he'll be listening . . ."

"Me, too. Goodbye, my friend." She waved as he returned to Tamara's side.

"So what do you think they'll do to Carson? Lock him up?"

The Doctor inspected his bandaged arm. "I doubt it. He's likely destined for years and years of counseling. As for the hospital and the missing patients, the world loves a cover-up." His face lighted with a childish grin.

"Back to the TARDIS then, while the National Guard try to tie-up loose ends?"

He felt his pockets. "Mind if we make a small detour first?"

* * * * *

“So your companions’ corpses attacked you in the console room, or so you imagined?”

The Doctor lowered his cracked, jet-black sunglasses and gave Tamara an annoyed, jaded look. “Something like that.”

“Creepy! Like something out of *Night of the Living Dead*.” They reached the top of a hill and were greeted by a tall blue police box lit by the rays of sunshine that punctured the forest canopy. “Home sweet home.”

He dropped the sonic screwdriver into his vest pocket, reached under his collar and revealed a medallion-like key dangling on a chain.

“Next vacation, I pick the destination—agreed?” Tamara took his shredded trenchcoat.

“Agreed.” The Time Lord unlocked the TARDIS doors, which creaked open on their hinges. He backed away hesitantly. “After you.”

“Thanks a lot.” She fixed him with a sarcastic grin and proceeded inside. “No monsters in here—yet,” she called out. The Doctor disappeared inside the blue box and the doors creaked shut.

With a sound like a herd of elephants performing Beethoven’s ninth symphony, the TARDIS vanished, observed only by the chirping birds, buzzing crickets and the spirits of the forest.



Deep in the forests of Ontario, Canada's Sunset Country, the Doctor and Tamara come across a high security hospital. A short-lived vacation is the least of their troubles: mysterious experiments with alien fungi, residential rooms lit with moonlight by day and patients passing through walls like ghosts. Tamara is left to uncover the truth behind these strange events when the Doctor disappears off the face of the Earth.

Winner of the 2001 FANQ Award for "Best Doctor Who Story (General)"

This story was originally featured in the Season 28 Omnibus

This is another in a series of original fan authored Doctor Who fiction published by The Doctor Who Project featuring the eighth Doctor as played by Jeremy Banks-Walker

ISBN 0-918864-28-X

