

THE
DOCTOR-WHO
PROJECT

the soul men



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*The Soul Men dwell between the hours dividing day and night
They cross the threshold of our world, consuming joy and light
They'll find you too and eat your soul if you are not devout
So join us now for just nine drell and keep those Soul Men out!*

-The Church of the Nucleonic Divinity

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Thomas Mekkal stepped through the ornate double doors. The lacquered wood and glinting gold trim shimmered as they swung open and caught the sunlight pouring through the wall-length window on the opposite end of the office. ‘Office’ was actually an inadequate term – it was a cathedral-like chamber with a central dais upon which was placed a carved desk adorned with a number of intricate figure studies. Scenes portraying various aspects of the Faith were arrayed about the desk, which appeared to be carved from a single block of marbled grey stone. The window behind the dais filled the space from floor to ceiling and from wall to wall, with the vast skyline of Pendryx Prime’s capital city visible beyond the plasteel panes. The ‘office’ was nothing less than a place of worship, which was all the more appropriate since it housed the High President of Pendryx Prime’s largest (87% of the population at the last census) and most profitable (estimated at 92.4 million drell annually) religion, The Church of the Nucleonic Divinity.

That very man, the High President himself, was seated in the black leather chair behind the desk, and he smiled warmly as Thomas entered the chamber. Thomas had never been summoned to the High President’s office before today, never seen its splendor in person – though he had seen a picture of it in a company newsletter – and was understandably dumbstruck

by the sights within. The tapestries, the statues, the altar on the far end of the office with the columnar canopy...

But when Thomas saw the High President himself sitting there, welcoming him in and beckoning to a single chair in front of the desk, he swallowed hard and stepped forward. The doors closed behind Thomas automatically, giving him a bit of a start even as he moved to the center of the chamber.

Thomas climbed the steps of the dais and faced the High President as the imposing leader offered his hand. Thomas dutifully kissed the High President's ring and then sat down. He had known this day was coming for a week – ever since he received the very surprising and ambiguous order from his supervising Bishop – and he could only imagine what incredible appointment would soon be his. His wife was even more certain than he was. After all that Thomas had done for the Faith behind the scenes, it was about time that he was noticed. That day had apparently come at last, and Thomas couldn't slow the racing of his heart.

The High President smiled again and clasped his hands. On the desk before him lay a single sheet of paper with Thomas' name on top, but Thomas couldn't make out the rest of the fine-printed text.

"Thank you so very much for agreeing to see me today, Vice-Minister Thomas Mekkal," the High President said with a voice so soft and smooth that it was like being wrapped in cotton. Thomas had heard this voice for years in recorded sermons, but never before had he heard the Voice of the Faith like this. It was...disconcerting.

"I...that is to say, I was honored to be asked, Your Worship," Thomas replied.

"Of course! As you are a devoted member of the Faith and one of our most valued employees, I am so glad to have this chance to speak with you face to face. It's beginning to look like a very, *very* good day."

Thomas managed a smile of recognition at the familiar catch-phrase – the High President began all of his sermons the same way.

"You know, too often this enormous operation of ours overwhelms even a man like myself," the High President continued. "I rarely if ever find the time to meet the many men and women – like your good self – who help to make The Church what it is. That is regrettable."

At that, Thomas swallowed again. It was difficult to figure out what to do with his hands, but he settled on folding them in his lap. The High President smiled and held up the sheet of paper, examining it as he stroked his silver beard and nodded to himself. He lowered the paper and fixed Thomas with a steely gaze.

'Who wrote the Revised Ten Articles of Faith for this company, Thomas?'

'Um...well my supervisor, Bishop Stantyn, sir, although I did...um...some editing and...'
Thomas shifted in his seat and coughed.

"Now, now, Thomas, you're not going to lie to your High President, now are you?"

The High President smiled again. This time it almost made Thomas shiver.

"Well..."

"That's all right, Thomas, I know." The High President rose and circled the desk, sitting on the edge and tapping Thomas on the knee.

"You wrote them for me, Thomas. Every word. Stantyn took the credit, but I know you were the mind behind our finest Revision yet."

"...Yes sir. But I didn't want to..."

"You didn't want to get your supervisor in trouble," the High President finished and placed a hand on Thomas' shoulder. "No worries, my boy. I've had my eye on you for some

time. I know how much writing you've done for the Faith, how many embarrassing inconsistencies in our Articles and Doctrines you've ironed out. I also know that when Stantyn's department was given the assignment to revise and update the very foundation of our Faith, Stantyn relied on you alone to shape the future of The Church. But he put his name on the document, didn't he?"

Thomas nodded reluctantly.

"Stantyn has his uses, but I know the man couldn't write a decent Commandment to save his soul. No, it took a man of vision, of clarity. It took you, Thomas. And I am indeed grateful. I thought it was time I let you know that, my boy."

Thomas hazarded a smile and received another one from the High President in return. So it was true then – his wife was right. This was the day he would finally be recognized for his talent. This was the day he would be promoted. Maybe to Bishop, or Prefect. His luck had finally come through.

"Thomas, The Church needs a man like you. A man who can see the big picture, a man who can truly inspire our congregation with deeds as well as words. You, Thomas, and you alone, have helped to shape the beliefs that make this company great. Soon the entire world will know that you are our Favorite Son...our Saviour."

Thomas beamed, all doubts erased. The High President gave Thomas an affectionate pat on the cheek and then returned to his chair. Looking at the paper one last time, the High President initialed the bottom and pressed a button under the edge of his desk. This was it, Thomas thought. Father Mekkal. *Deacon Mekkal. Bishop Mekkal!*

"And now you will perform another service for us, Thomas," continued the High President as two men entered the office and stood on either side of the dais. "One that will lift your name to the stratosphere and cement our position as the most powerful Faith in the entire galaxy."

"And what service is that, sir?" asked Thomas, wary of the two men. Neither of them blinked once. The High President's face was darkened by a feral grin.

"You're about to die for our sins, my boy."

* * * * *

The steady sound of metal striking wood filled the kitchen in the tiny apartment as Alydis Mekkal chopped braka root for dinner. She was smiling, but not because she was particularly fond of cooking - her usual idea of dinner was to order a ready-made meal from the Central Food Office, and besides, raw foodstuffs weren't cheap. But this *was* a very special dinner, and she was happy to make it.

Alydis scooped up the pieces of braka and dumped them in the pan, sprinkling them with seasoning as they started to sizzle. She couldn't wait for Tom to come home. After all, this was it. Today was the day. The "Big Meeting." They'd been talking about it for a week, ever since Bishop Stantyn informed him that due to his exemplary service to The Church, Thomas was to be honored by an audience with the High President Himself.

Tom and Aly knew what this meant, and the young couple could barely contain their excitement. A supervisory position - certainly. A new fancy office - of course. First in line for assignment to a larger single family home - almost positively. Unrestricted travel allowances, food vouchers - who knew what else?

Aly was still smiling as she checked the oven to see if the steaks were almost done. Imported Earth beef - talk about a delicacy. This was a special surprise for Tom, who once told her about the amazing "hamburgers" that a friend had brought back from an evangelical trip to the homeworld. Once she knew the "Big Meeting" was approaching, she spent a week's pay on the beef. Tom would love it.

She glanced at the clock - he would be home any minute. Her hand went to the pendant he gave her for their first anniversary only a month ago, her fingers tracing the chain across her neck and the small, delicate silver bird dangling from it. They would sit and eat their special dinner, and Tom would smile at her across the candlelit table and tell her all about the "Big Meeting" and the changes that were about to happen in their lives. She was wearing that scent he really liked. They would finish dinner, she would give him a big hug and kiss...

...And then the *real* celebrating would begin.

Aly smiled again and went to slip on some therma-mitts just as the front door to the apartment flew open. Tom raced in, hair disheveled, clothes rumpled and sweaty, face glowing red and wild-eyed.

Aly froze in place, staring at her husband as he began to grab things - a coat here, a suitcase in the closet there. He slammed the suitcase down on a nearby table and began throwing his hastily gathered items into it. His head darted around as he looked for something else to put in the case, and his eyes raked over Aly without a hint of recognition. Her heart raced - the special dinner was completely forgotten.

"Tom, what's happening? What's wrong?" Could this be because of the "Big Meeting?" Surely not, she thought - Tom was like a madman. What could they possibly have said to him or done to him that would send him into such a frenzy? Or had *he* had done something...? No, that was crazy.

"Tom! Tell me what's going on, you're scaring me!"

Tom looked up at Aly as if seeing her for the first time. He stopped moving, his mouth agape as he stared at his wife, sending a shiver of sheer terror down her spine. She had never seen him look so lost, so...primal. He took a few deep breaths, fastened the lid on the suitcase and ran to the kitchen to hold her. Aly hugged him tight, then held his face in her hands. He was clammy to the touch.

"Tommy, tell me what's wrong, please."

"A-a-aly," he finally stammered. "Get some things together right away. We have to go. We have to leave."

Aly couldn't believe she was hearing this from her husband. Go where? And why? Tom answered her before she could speak, lightly holding a hand to her mouth and then hugging her even tighter.

"Just do it, Aly, trust me. We have to leave now! There's no time. They want to kill me. They want to kill me!"

* * * * *

The TARDIS materialized in the middle of a large bazaar, taking up residence between two crowded stalls offering exotic fabrics on the one side and an array of baked goods on the other. No one stopped haggling for an instant as the grinding noise of the TARDIS engines rumbled to a halt and the police box solidified. Grae was the first to step outside, shielding her eyes as the harsh sunlight streamed down through the canopies over the myriad stalls arrayed in rows

throughout the bazaar. Adjusting to the brightness, she peered at the people milling around them. The noise level was almost deafening, with countless alien tongues shouting in a variety of dialects and waving paper and metal money at the equally loud vendors.

The Doctor emerged, locking the TARDIS door behind him and gazing into the sky as Grae began to browse noncommittally at a few stalls. Reaching into an inside coat pocket, the Doctor flicked his wrist and slipped on a pair of sleek metallic sunglasses that shifted in color as light hit the lenses. He smiled.

"What a beautiful day for some power shopping!" he said, clapping Grae on the shoulder as she smiled wanly.

"Wonderful," Grae replied, picking at some elaborate tapestries without much interest as the vendor behind them eyed her suspiciously. She hadn't gotten a lot of sleep in the last few days – strange dreams left her in the morning with only hazy, fragmented images and a general sense of dread – and she was only half-awake at the moment.

"Now what's the matter?" the Doctor asked, crestfallen. Sometimes he wondered why he traveled with any of these girls, Gallifreyan or no. It was always the same.

"I guess I'm just waiting for the *real* story to begin," and with that, Grae managed a grin. She was hefting a handsome piece of stone sculpture and examining the intricate carving as the seller hovered at her elbow, worried that she might drop his precious artifact. She handed it back to him and he replaced it on the table with exceptional care.

"And that would be?"

"Oh, come on Doctor," Grae said, turning to face him as his eyes widened innocently behind his glasses. "You know the drill - the TARDIS arrives somewhere nice, or not-so-nice, and before you know it we'll be accused of murdering the mayor, or you'll find an ancient artifact portending Evil from the Dawn of Time, or a group of revolutionaries will beg you to help them overthrow their malevolent oppressive regime. Then we'll split up, get captured, and reunite for a glorious triumph."

"You make it all sound so...predictable," the Doctor sighed.

"Well, the routine of two Time Lords traveling through the universe does often feel like clockwork," Grae said without a hint of irony. "I certainly don't mind the excitement. After all, we can handle ourselves without Tamara. Sometimes I just grow weary of the act."

The Doctor placed his hands on his hips and faced her defiantly. Around them, the hustle of the bazaar never flagged, and several furry visitors scuttled past their legs to reach the nearest stall as other more humanoid shoppers brushed past them rather roughly.

"And what act is that?"

"You just did it! You stepped out, all wide-eyed and optimistic, as if this was just going to be a lazy day of shopping and local color. When do we *ever* get any time to breathe? You know as well as I do that the clock is ticking, Doctor." She poked him in the shoulder. "It's only a matter of time before we're off and running." And then she smirked. The Doctor decided not to prolong the debate and smiled too.

"That's the price of travel in the TARDIS," he said simply. "If you want to expand your horizons, learn about the universe and explore amazing alien cultures, you have to accept the downside to being 'Time's Tourists.'" The Doctor thumbed through a nearby box of pamphlets sitting on another of the nearby stalls.

"'Time's Tourists?'" Grae said, joining him as he browsed. "Where did *that* come from?"

"Just the role we play in the cosmic scheme," the Doctor murmured, no longer entirely focused on the conversation as he looked more intently at the pamphlets. "What else would you call us?"

"I don't know," Grae said, glancing at some purple rugs and a flowing dress of blue and silver. "Maybe something a bit more grand, like... 'Time's Champions!'"

The Doctor looked up briefly, glaring at her over the top of his glasses. Then he resumed looking at the pamphlets, pulling one out and examining it closely.

"Too pretentious," he replied. "Look at this."

"What is it?"

"A missionary leaflet of some sort, soliciting enrollment for the Grand Congregation of the Unified Energies." The Doctor thumbed through a few more pamphlets as the hirsute vendor, seemingly uninterested in making a sale or informative small talk, lounged in a fabric chair under the canopy and chatted up a bird-like creature in the next stall. "And this one," he paused to drop his glasses to the tip of his nose, "an advertisement for the Blue Star Revelation of the Goddess. And there are dozens more, all different. The Order of the Beatific Tachyonic Field, The Church of the Nucleonic Divinity – actually, there are more of that last one than any other it seems..."

"Religious collectibles gathered from different worlds and times. A cornucopia of evangelical ephemera," Grae concluded with a grin. The Doctor did not smile in return.

"Yes, except for one thing," he said, replacing his glasses and stuffing the pamphlets back into the box. "They all date from the current year, and all the organizations are based here in Pendropolis. Every one of them. That's a lot of concentrated evangelizing for one city, don't you think?"

"Weren't there several hundred religions operating simultaneously back on 20th century Earth?"

"I take your point," the Doctor said, turning to survey the rest of the bazaar. "Still, it seems odd...and unsettling. Wherever there are a lot of gung-ho religious leaders in one place, there's the potential for a rather large explosion of hatred and death. Come on, let's explore, shall we?"

The Doctor headed off down the aisle as Grae glanced at the pamphlets and sprinted to keep up with the elder Time Lord.

"Gung-ho?" she murmured to herself.

* * * * *

Tom and Aly were already halfway down one of the main thoroughfares, lost in the midday crowd heading to and from the social center of the city – the Pendropolis marketplace – when Tom flinched and glanced behind them. In the crowd of offworlders and natives pressing in from all directions, he thought he spotted a Church Usher, but no...it was just a local city Peacekeeper. Still, the last thing he wanted to do was answer any prying questions. Tom grabbed at Aly's sleeve as his other hand balanced the heavy suitcase, and the two cut sideways through the crowd and paused in an alcove just off the slow-moving autoWalk.

"Tom, where are we going to go? They may not have found us yet, but there's no place we can hide from The Church!"

"Aly, listen to me," Tom said, setting the suitcase down and taking his wife's face in his hands. The touch was a comforting one, but her heart was still racing. "We will *not* be caught!"

Tom glanced around as the endless parade of people and vehicles flowed past the narrow opening between the two office buildings where Tom and Aly now hid. The city had grown so much over the last ten years that there was precious little space to breathe, particularly in the city center and bazaar. Many buildings had “grown” into each other, creating a vast interconnected network of plasteel and people that almost never ceased. ‘The Business of Belief is a Tireless Task,’ or so said one of the many marketing slogans of The Church, which after all had financed most of the city’s growth. While many other religions still competed for market share here and in other urban centers on Pendryx Prime, no one gave them any credence. This was a Church town on a Church world, and those that *did* choose to sign up with another Faith at the five-year renewal often found themselves in less than desirable living conditions either physically or financially. The Church tolerated competition only inasmuch as they had someone to blame for all the ills of the world. ‘Heretical non-Faiths,’ they were called...and Tom had written some of the Doctrine that condemned those lesser belief systems.

Thomas regretted it now of course, and many other things besides. But there was no time to dwell on that; it was time to act, if only for Aly’s sake.

“Come on!” Tom spied a Church Usher gesturing in their direction from the far end of the autoWalk and bolted, gripping Aly’s hand and dragging her from the alleyway. They left the suitcase and disappeared into the crowd, heading for the bazaar, the Usher right behind them.

* * * * *

In a tiny, nondescript office in an equally tiny, nondescript cathedral on the outskirts of the city, an old man with a bowed back and bushy grey eyebrows shuffled around a weathered wooden desk and lit a candle nestled in an iron sconce on the wall. He took the candle from the room and entered a larger but no less cramped worship hall, where he cautiously climbed the stairs to the podium and placed the candle in an identical sconce near the platform. Reaching into his robes for his spectacles, he slipped them on a gnarled nose and began to page through the afternoon’s sermon. The room was as silent as a grave...which was more or less appropriate, since the back of the hall doubled as a mausoleum.

Father Brindan, High Priest and Director of the Followers of the Blessed Light, finished reviewing his sermon and peered out into the gloom. If he was lucky, perhaps a handful of people might show up today to hear him speak of the corruption in the world and the need for clarity and a return to simpler values. More than likely, he would be murmuring the sermon to himself. In a world dominated by ‘*The Church*,’ there just wasn’t room any more for an earnest but unprofitable small organization like Brindan’s.

“What we need is a Saviour,” Brindan whispered wryly to the dusty air. “But who in the world would that be?”

* * * * *

The Doctor was impressed. Even by his standards, the Pendropolis bazaar was an enormous affair. He and Grae still didn’t see an end to the myriad stalls and shoppers, and they had been walking for quite some time. To pass the time, the Doctor expounded on the human tendency to align oneself with an organized religion either by choice or through birth. Grae was perplexed.

"I suppose it's something I just don't understand," Grae said.

"It's not that hard to understand really," said the Doctor as they walked past another stall in the bazaar where two old men were arguing loudly about the relative merits of their prayer cloths. "Most sentient beings spend a good portion of their lives trying to sort out a meaning for it all. When the answers elude them, they create answers of their own. Sometimes it's the only thing that can keep them going one day after another. It's either that or go insane."

"So they look for answers externally. They lie to themselves," said Grae. She felt an inexplicable chill and hugged herself instinctively. Like something cold and clammy winding itself around her...

"You could say that," the Doctor agreed, neatly sidestepping a grumbling old woman who was fingering a long string of beads and muttering to herself.

"And what if even the lies aren't enough?"

"Then, Grae, they might have to face the truth that they are merely adrift in a cold and unforgiving cosmos, and that's too much for most people to comprehend. Some try, of course. Mental institutions are filled with people who couldn't accept the truth."

"Sounds awful any way you look at it."

"Yes, it is rather, isn't it?" the Doctor said. "That's why I just try to have some fun - save the universe, meet interesting people. Otherwise it's all very depressing."

"I guess we're both fortunate then. It seems to me that if you need to find that sort of reassurance, you just need to look within."

"Indeed," the Doctor said. "Ah!" Up ahead – finally – the Time Lords spotted a large wrought iron gate signaling the end of the bazaar and the beginning of an even larger urban center. Rolling pathways carried thousands of citizens to and from the bazaar and within a tangled network of skyscrapers, Church offices, and roads. As their gaze craned up from the gate to the wall of city facing them, they noticed that they were not in fact outside; the entire bazaar was housed in a gargantuan dome that filtered sunlight down to the stalls via a series of solar panels.

"That's what I call urban engineering," said the Doctor. Grae nodded.

"It's not bad."

"Not bad?! It's stupendous! Come on, I want to get a closer look at this city." The Doctor removed his sunglasses and tried to insert himself into the unstoppable flow of pedestrians moving into and out of the marketplace. Grae was jostled about as the density of the crowd increased, but soon they were almost at the gate itself. The Doctor wrapped his hand around one of the gate's twisted bars, using the grip to draw himself closer to the exit even as a press of would-be shoppers forced him back inside. Just as he came to the opening in the gate, he was shoved to the ground and landed at Grae's feet. Grae dragged the Doctor out of harm's way as the flood of shoppers threatened to trample him under foot. As he dusted himself off, he heard a panicked voice begging forgiveness.

"I'm so sorry, sir, I didn't see..."

"Tom, we don't have time to apologize! He's right behind us!" This was a female voice, equally agitated and clearly frightened out of her wits. The Doctor looked up and saw a reasonably attractive young human couple. They were sweating and shaking all over. They were clearly on the run and out of their minds with terror.

Well, thought the Doctor, Grae was right.

"Looks like we're off and running," the Doctor said as Grae smirked and helped him up.

* * * * *

“I used to worry about my future,” the smiling man said, eyes squinting under the bright noonday sun. He was clad in crisp workclothes but he was lounging on the grass outside his home with a small child who was absorbed in manipulating some sort of wood-and-plastic contraption. The child figured out how to move a tiny colored bauble through a hole and giggled in triumph. The smiling man smiled some more and patted the child on the head.

“I used to be afraid of so many things – my health, my job, my co-workers, even my friends and family,” the smiling man continued.

He was joined by a smiling woman wearing a neatly pressed outfit that looked more appropriate for a fancy dress party. She brought the smiling man and the child ice-filled drinks on a tray as three other small children ran after her and gathered around them. They were all smiling. The man hugged as many of them at a time as possible.

“And the Soul Men,” the woman intoned ominously, then resumed smiling.

“Yes, especially the Soul Men. I was a victim of *all* my fears.” The smiling man hugged more of his family and took a sip of his chilled drink. “But not anymore!”

Suddenly, another smiling man clad in a Church Bishop’s robes appeared in front of them, staring into the distance as the smiling family collapsed in a pile of hugs and spilled drinks.

“Yes, that’s right, he’s not afraid anymore,” said the Bishop. “That’s because he and his family decided to sign with The Church of the Nucleonic Divinity for their five-year renewal. Now they’re under the divine protection of the One and Only, whose words are relayed to us by our glorious High President, the ‘Voice of the Faith.’” A small picture of the High President – beaming smile, silvery beard and all – appeared above the Bishop’s right shoulder then faded away. “They have no *reason* to fear any longer. And you can be as carefree and spiritually cleansed as this happy family,” and at that the Bishop looked back at the family, still tumbling all over the grass, and chuckled to himself, “if you sign with us...now.”

A scroll of tiny words ran by underneath the Bishop’s waist, listing such things as fees and contract renewal deadlines and legal obligations, but they ran by too fast to be read easily.

“Remember,” the Bishop added, “sign today during your five-year renewal period and be saved tomorrow! And keep those Soul Men out!” And he grinned again, baring a wall of bright white teeth.

The High President pressed a switch and the grinning Bishop vanished from his display console. A nervous young man in an ill-fitting suit shuffled his feet before the High President’s desk and hazarded a question.

“Shall we...begin transmission then?” Deacon Brukner, Marketing Associate Executive, brushed errant strands of blond hair out of his eyes and back up on top of his sweating scalp. They fell back down almost immediately.

“Yes,” said the High President, resting back in his chair. “Looks good enough. Very warm, very spiritual.” The functionary smiled – he was one of the producers of the new Church commercial. “Full of solid Pendryxian family values, eh, Brukner?”

Brukner nodded happily, but his smile soured as the High President held his gaze a moment too long. He searched for somewhere else to look, then stammered out a reply.

“Y-yes indeed, that was of course your directive. I’ll get it on straight away, shall I?”

“Yes yes, you may go.” Brukner sped out of the office. The High President shook his head and mumbled “Bumbling fool.” Pressing another control, he reclined once more as the

office doors opened and an Usher entered. He was red-faced and still dabbing perspiration from his brow, and he approached the dais with a hesitancy that Brukner would have appreciated.

“Let me see if I understood your hasty communication, Usher Janir,” the High President said smoothly, flashing Janir a grin that was clearly bereft of humor. The Usher grimaced and stopped midway up the steps to the dais. The High President left his chair and circled the desk like an animal stalking its prey.

“All you and your moronic Ministerial Guards were to do was escort Thomas Mekkal, just one man mind you, from my office to the holding area below, there to await his glorious Ascendance as the Saviour of our Church and people. That was all you had to do. And you failed miserably, am I right?”

“Well...” Janir was planning to offer a clever explanation – he had come up with at least three on the way to the High President’s chamber – but once he met the High President’s piercing gaze and felt those eyes slice into him like lasers, he thought better of it. “Yes, High President, I failed.”

“Good, good,” the High President said, looking nonchalantly at his shoes as he neared Janir. He put a hand on Janir’s shoulder and walked around behind him, still baring his teeth. “Honesty Paves the Road to Salvation. That’s our Fifth Article of Faith, isn’t it?” And he laughed, again without a hint of genuine joy. Janir hazarded a nervous chuckle.

“Yes, that’s true, High President. It is.” He tried to smile as the High President patted his back and smiled back.

“Well then, enjoy the trip.” Janir never heard the sickening crunch of bone as the High President snapped his neck and let him drop to the floor. The body rolled down the steps of the dais and settled like a rag doll at the foot of the stairs. With a heavy sigh, the High President returned to his seat and switched on the intercom.

“Would you be so kind as to summon the Sanitation team? There’s a bit of a mess in here.”

“At once, High President,” his secretary replied.

“Oh and if you have Usher Janir’s initial statement about the escape handy, where did he say the fugitive Saviour was last seen?”

After a moment’s pause, the secretary replied “The bazaar, High President.”

“Ah yes.” Swiveling in his chair, the High President activated the video display, which descended from the vaulted ceiling and stopped a few feet above and away from his right shoulder. As he operated the controls, two burly men in jumpsuits entered without a word, gathered up Janir’s body, and left.

Scarcely acknowledging the activity, the High President tuned the display to access the feed from the many camera-bots scuttling around the skies over the marketplace – almost all areas of the City were monitored by Church camera-bots, which made Mekkal’s escape all the more perplexing. When he spied a blue box nestled between two stalls, his eyes widened. He switched off the display, thumbed a button on his console, leaned back in his chair and steeped his fingers as his secretary walked in.

“Yes, High President?”

“I want you to put out a press release,” the High President said quietly, then looked up as he began dictating in a staccato rhythm. “Thomas Mekkal, late of The Church of Nucleonic Divinity and true author of our Ten Articles of Faith – brackets more to come end brackets – has been taken up as an Emissary to the Gods by a Divine Messenger from the Great Lords. The Divine Messenger’s unique conveyance, a Magic Box that descended from the Heavens to

bestow this great honor upon our worthy Thomas, will be available tomorrow for public worship.’ Embellish that with the usual bits and send it out on the transwire immediately. Then have a detachment sent to the bazaar to secure a tall blue box and prepare a suitable viewing area around it. They will find it in aisle 1121, section X.”

“Yes sir,” the secretary replied. “Will that be all?”

“No,” the High President said, and straightened in his chair. “Summon Deacon Brukner back here. I have an idea for a new campaign and I want it on the transwire as soon as possible. He has a lot of work to do.”

“Understood,” the secretary said, and turned on her heel to leave.

“Oh and one more thing,” the High President said, his soothing voice turning a shade raspier. “Have Stantyn executed as a heretic.”

“It will be done,” she said, and left the room, closing the doors behind her. The High President turned the camera feed back on and eyed the blue box.

“Even better than I had originally planned,” he whispered to himself. “Timing *is* everything.”

* * * * *

“This way!” The Doctor dragged Tom and Aly by their arms with Grae bringing up the rear. Behind them an Usher had acquired several Ministerial Guards. They had drawn their Pacifiers and were effortlessly slicing through the crowd – no one wanted to get in *their* way – as the Doctor led his party back into the bazaar.

“Doctor, what are we doing?” Grae was rushing to keep up as the Doctor wound his way around one stall after another, Tom and Aly flailing behind him like rag dolls.

“We’re rescuing the morally upright, persecuted underdogs who are no doubt the victims of some brutal totalitarian state bent on causing them harm,” the Doctor shouted back.

“How can you be so sure?”

“It’s Tuesday, isn’t it? Ah, here we are!” Stopping at one of the many identical booths, the Doctor flashed a handful of coins at the magnificently plumed Archetryxoid inside and began pulling at swaths of brightly embroidered fabrics. He made short work of the other three, clothing them in a fair approximation of native garb and then yelling in some incomprehensible dialect. Grae acknowledged the strategy and began shouting as well, gesturing madly at the Doctor as the two engaged in a mock negotiation. Tom and Aly were nonplussed but too tired and frightened to do anything but watch. A moment later, the Usher and his Guards ran right past them and into the teeming throng of shoppers.

“Now then, down to business,” the Doctor said simply, pushing the hood of his makeshift cloak back onto his shoulders as Grae smiled and did the same. He turned to Tom and Aly and clasped his hands together as if eager to begin some elaborate project. “Your names please, the names of your pursuers, and how can we be of service?” And he grinned.

* * * * *

*The Soul Men walk when faith is lost and loving grace is spent
Traversing ancient boundaries through which their force is sent
They feed on loss, despair and fear, and crush the faithless few
So join us now for just nine drell and they won't bother you!*

-The Church of the Nucleonic Divinity

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Ander Selwyn trudged along a side street in the heart of the Pendryx metroplex, his heartbeat providing a heavy counterpoint to the sound of his footfalls on the pavement. He stopped to regard a large sign overhead that proclaimed the Salvation of The Church. A bitter smirk crossing his face, he scoffed at the sign, and spit on the ground.

Salvation, he thought. Yeah, they saved me all right. That's why I have no home, no family, and can barely find enough food to live another day.

Selwyn stopped walking when he reached a dingy corner formed by the convergence of two large ultra-office complexes. Resting against the wall, he slid down and collapsed in a heap on the ground, paying no mind as a rodent scuttled by, regarded him quizzically, and then resumed its own travels. Selwyn's eyes fluttered closed, and he dreamed.

Janna was there, beckoning him home. His house – that beautiful little cottage on Mizar 3, the one he bought just for the two of them – still stood before him. Janna was as beautiful as ever. And then the sound of laughter from behind. Selwyn turned to see Benn running toward him. Scooping his son up in his arms, Selwyn laughed out loud, Janna running to join them. The suns shone on the family as they clasped hands and walked to their front door. It was perfect.

And then the suns darkened. Selwyn looked overhead and saw the Pendryxian ships arriving, the news of the annexation ringing in the air, broadcast on every channel and public speaker. The dream fragmented, sped up, became a jumble of images – the forced enrollment in The Church, the fights with Janna, Benn crying. His home, his family – his life – disintegrating before his eyes. The Church had promised Salvation, but it condemned Selwyn to Hell.

Now he was marching on the Pendryxian governor's house with other protestors, carrying signs that read "The Path of the Church Leads to Ruin" and "Blind Faith Cannot See the Truth." Then the Ministerial Guards, the Pacifiers, the deportation ships. Selwyn and thousands like him processed at the home world, incarcerated, and then released into a society that has no place for them. Wandering, an outcast, shunned...and hunted.

Selwyn bolted upright, sensing someone's presence in the alleyway. *Even in my dreams I cannot find peace*, he thought, but his lament ended when he spied the shadowy figures standing at the entrance to the alley. They'd finally found him. A man without a Church, without Belief; a man consumed by fear and regret; a man who embodied everything that The Church simply could not acknowledge as Truth. They were here to remove this anomaly, to erase Selwyn's existence. To make him pay for his lack of Faith.

The Soul Men had arrived.

Selwyn screamed as the Soul Men set to work. And if anyone walking by the dark alleyway heard anything, they pretended that it was just the whine of an aircar passing overhead.

* * * * *

“I-I-I don’t know how I managed it actually,” Tom said as the Doctor and Grae led their newfound friends through the bazaar. “They were leading me to the lower levels of the building. I’d never been there before...”

“Who was leading you, Tom?”

“Ministerial Guards, Doctor,” Tom said, and Aly cringed, wiping tears from her eyes. Tom gave her a half-hearted hug. Grae was craning to find the TARDIS in all the turmoil, but she had no luck. The marketplace was teeming with patrons and it was all they could do to keep moving without being knocked over. Occasionally they had to shout back and forth to one another, but as the rest of the crowd was so intent on doing business, nobody cared at all what they were talking about. And there were no Church officials or Guards in sight.

“Then we rounded a corner and passed one of the basement loading docks, where they bring in supplies. At least I always thought it was for supplies. What they were doing...I don’t know...”

Tom started shaking again, and Grae motioned for the Doctor to lead them to a small kiosk with a few benches and several video screens mounted on the support poles. A point of respite for bazaar patrons, the kiosk also bombarded anyone who dared to sit down with a never-ending barrage of Church commercials. The sound from the monitors even drowned out some of the din from the crowd, but the Doctor reached in a pocket and flicked on his sonic screwdriver.

“Thanks to The Church,” said an immaculately groomed man with a wall of white teeth and an equally perfect wife in one arm, “our lives are full and happy! No bad dreams, no money problems. We gave ourselves to the One and Only, and He looks after us!”

An elderly man with a silver beard – the High President – stepped behind them and put his arms around both as the music swelled and the Church logo faded into view.

“Enroll now, or renew your affiliation, and keep those Soul...” The sound sputtered and died as the Doctor made short work of the audio circuits. The High President continued to speak on the screens, but at least they couldn’t hear the pitch anymore.

“Much better,” the Doctor grinned and put the sonic screwdriver away. “So what did you see at the loading dock?”

“There were...” Tom was having trouble facing the memory, but Aly touched his hair and then put her head on his shoulder. The contact seemed to bolster his resolve. “There were Guards there, but not like any guards I’d seen before. We were in the corridor and they were all the way down at the other end so I couldn’t see them clearly, but they seemed to be carrying crates filled with...I don’t know, some kind of bluish rocks.”

The Doctor frowned and glanced at Grae, who echoed his puzzled expression.

“And then?”

“One of these...people...dropped one of the boxes. It sounded like glass shattering, but so loud...” Tom held his head in one hand as Aly held him tighter. “The rocks scattered everywhere, and the Guards were distracted. I was simply able to...get away...and I ran for an exit, to try to get home and get Aly before...” Tom looked at Aly, touched her face and almost started to sob again.

“Well you’re all right now,” the Doctor said. But he wasn’t sure he believed it himself.

* * * * *

*The Soul Men are a mystery, their origins obscured
Who knows from whence they nightly come, from where they are procured?*

*They shamble through the shadows and with outstretched hands they clutch
So join us now for just nine drell, escape their darksome touch!*

-The Church of the Nucleonic Divinity

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Padar Hoytt stood in the doorway of his small home and looked at the stars. Inside, his wife was putting dinner on the table, and his two daughters were sitting quietly and waiting to begin the meal.

“We’re ready Padar,” Lidella called to him. “Shut the door before you let more heat out. Gods, you pay for heating the house and then you let half of it escape into the streets.”

Her voice was lighter than her chiding suggested; it was an old and mostly good-natured argument. But Padar was preoccupied and came to the table with a frown.

“And what Gods would those be?” he asked as he draped a cloth napkin across his lap. His eyes flicked toward the two girls, but they were too happy with the prospect of eating to notice his mood. Still, his wife was concerned and eyed them as well.

“Padar,” she began quietly, ladling out a steaming bowl of vegetable soup for each girl in turn. “Don’t start that again, not in front of the girls. We’ll talk later.”

“All I’m saying is that if we don’t enroll again soon, they’re going to...”

“They’re not going to do anything,” Lidella said firmly, and served Padar his soup as the girls started to slurp and giggle at each other. Lidella gave them a stern look and they stopped slurping...but the giggling continued.

“We simply don’t have the money to re-enroll right now. It’s been difficult, through no fault of our own I might add,” and with that she took a bowl for herself and then sat down. “I hardly think they’re going to revoke our citizenship because we’re unaffiliated for a few months.”

“But the taxes, the penalties...”

“We’ll deal with them as they come,” Lidella said. She placed a hand on Padar’s arm and he looked into her eyes. “We always do. Things will get better and we’ll sign up soon enough. After all, what’s the worst that can happen? A few extra payments...”

The sound of an unseen visitor pounding on the front door gave them both a jolt, but the girls kept eating. Padar looked at Lidella with a mixture of confusion and fear, but he rose from his seat and went to peek through the viewer. Padar’s fearful shriek – a cry that came from the child within that remembered the ancient verses and the images they conjured – was quickly drowned out by the sound of shattering wood and glass.

The authorities would later tell the neighbors of the Hoytts that there must have been a malfunction in the family’s heating system. But although that might explain the charred remains of the couple and their two children, it did not explain their withered state or the expressions of sheer terror still etched upon their flame-scarred faces.

* * * * *

“Hmm,” the Doctor stroked his beard and peered at their dimly lit surroundings as Tom and Aly huddled nearby. Grae was looking at some of the literature strewn about the worship hall and

frowned as she read a passage. Father Brindan came up behind her and nearly jolted Grae out of her skin.

“My apologies, my dear,” the old man said, laying his hand on her shoulder. She was still trembling. “It’s just been so long since I’ve had much of a congregation. Although Thomas and dear Alyson have always been devoted.”

“It’s all right, Father,” Grae said, replacing a pamphlet in the display rack nearby and forcing a smile. She moved to rejoin the Doctor on the other side of the worship hall. He was laying flat along one of the pews, one hand tucked under his head while the other continued to play with his goatee.

The Doctor had originally planned to lead Tom and Aly back to the TARDIS, but when another party of Ministerial Guards appeared in the bazaar crowd, Tom suggested an alternative means of escape. Rushing to one of the bazaar’s many entrance/exitways, Tom led the harried group to a small but charming little cathedral nestled in the wooded environs beyond the city perimeter. The sign outside dubbed it the worship hall for the Followers of the Blessed Light.

“Light is just what I need to shed on this situation,” the Doctor observed at the time. And now, after a few hours of rest and some contemplation, he was still waiting for a divine spark of inspiration. Grae rubbed her temples and sat down next to Tom and Aly.

“You belong to this...organization?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Tom replied. He held Aly close as she drifted in and out of sleep. It had been a very tiring day to say the least. “Father Brindan was once a Bishop at my company, but he...”

“There was a bit of a falling out, I’m afraid,” Brindan interjected, smiling warmly as he joined the others. “No, it’s all right Thomas, those days are behind me. You see, my dear, I was more concerned with faith and righteousness, in bringing the light of reason to the people, than I was in tallying profits and balancing columns. So I was made redundant. And then I came here.”

“There were many of us in the company, young people just starting out like I was, who had always appreciated Father Brindan’s view. But when he was let go, we were forbidden from any further contact. And by company policy, we have to worship where we work anyway. So...”

“So we found Father Brindan and joined his congregation in secret,” Aly said, wiping her eyes and stretching. “Here we found hope and a better way of living.”

“So you say, dear Alyson,” Father Brindan laughed, “but there were precious few brave enough to come here, and now there are practically none. The Soul Men have driven the rest away, but they don’t frighten me. Too old for that sort of thing.”

“Soul Men?” Grae looked puzzled. She was caught open-mouthed, about to say those very words, when the question came from behind them. The Doctor leapt up and walked briskly from the back of the hall to where the rest of the party were seated.

“I would very much like to hear more about these Soul Men,” the Doctor said.

* * * * *

*There is no greater evil than for souls to lose their way
For empty hearts to cry in pain, for troubled minds to stray
The Soul Men wait to claim these spirits wand’ring curs-ed routes
So join us now for just nine drell, dispel your worldly doubts!
-The Church of the Nucleonic Divinity
(Pendryxian children’s verse. Copyright The Church of the Nucleonic Divinity.)*

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Quent Onnivar whistled happily to himself as he lined his shelves with the latest releases. As the “Number One Follower” of The Church and The Voice of the Faith, Onnivar was naturally also a devoted subscriber to The Church’s direct mail ‘Statues of Faith’ series. A new shipment had just arrived, and Onnivar was happily unpacking the ‘Heroes of the Foundation’ subset, including a very accurate silver finish likeness of Father Tagetrin, the very first man to bring The Church to Pendryx Prime from Earth. Onnivar spent a half hour arranging the statues carefully so as not to block any of the previous releases. He wanted to be able to see them all from his seat in front of the transwire display. When The Church services were broadcast, he could admire the statues from his place of contemplation and draw inspiration from their gleaming features.

Onnivar sighed with pride and checked his watch. The local newsfeed reporter was due to arrive to interview him about the newest announcements from The Church. Onnivar had been on the news 47 times, first as a boy when he was the youngest enrollee to sign up by himself and denounce his parents as heretics. Dubbed ‘The First Son of The Church,’ Onnivar became the head of the High President’s largest fan club and his collection of Church artifacts swelled along with his fame...and ego.

Onnivar double-checked to be sure that his collector plates were polished and his hair was neatly combed. He was always fastidious about his appearance on the news, sinful or not.

Pride is only a sin if it is unwarranted or unearned, he reminded himself. It had been one of his favorite quotes from the High President’s many speeches, all of which he had recorded and memorized.

There was a knock at the door, and Onnivar tapped one last statue into place and then went to open the door. The sight of the Soul Men made him gasp in shock and flatten against the opposite wall, jostling his display of facsimile priestly Seals of Office.

“You...can’t be...the...the...”

“We are the Soul Men,” rasped the closest figure as the five shadowy forms moved as one into Onnivar’s home. The small portly man quivered and fell to his hands and knees, crawling back into the living area. He knocked over a miniature replica of the High President’s corporate office building and tried to straighten it again.

"But...but why? I've always been loyal to the One and Only! I've proclaimed the virtues of the Faith, celebrated all the designated Holidays! I've even sold five hundred Official Church Prayer Cloth Swatches and earned my own Limited Edition Gold-Plated Statue of the High President himself! It's...it's #00001!"

Onnivar crawled over and fumbled for the statue on the mantle and held it up to the dark apparitions advancing on him with a slow, deliberate swaying motion.

"You have been a most worthy devotee of The Church," rasped the leader. His hand reached out toward Onnivar, fingers outstretched. Onnivar dropped the statue and cowered near his shelves of precious Church memorabilia.

"Then...why?" he cried.

"The time has come for all to pay the ultimate price for the Faith. Time for unbelievers and believers both to give of their inmost selves and fall before the Soul Men."

The Soul Men surrounded Onnivar and laid their hands upon him. His shrill cries were soon overcome by a high-pitched whine of energy and the sound of sizzling flesh.

* * * * *

“So they’re Church-sanctioned thugs with a death touch,” said Grae.

“I suppose you could say that,” Father Brindan said, returning from lighting the last of the candles around the worship hall. Night had fallen, and the dingy stained glass windows had grown dark. “No one knows who or what they are, but they’ve been the dark specters of The Church for as long as anyone can remember. They were legends from the Old Time, evil beings who would drain the souls of anyone who lost their Faith, but more recently, there have been many reports of the Soul Men actually showing up in the dark hours of the night, attacking the unfaithful and leaving them dry husks. It’s most terrifying.”

“And it’s certainly boosted enrollment,” Tom added with no small amount of bitterness.

“Boogeymen,” the Doctor nodded, and at Grae’s questioning look added, “Never mind. Father Brindan, these Soul Men, do they only work for The Church?”

“Well, I don’t know, they were supposed to be just mythical creatures that kept children from doing naughty things. You know, ‘Behave and believe, and the Soul Men can’t touch you.’ But now...”

“The High President has often invoked the Soul Men in his sermons,” Tom added.

“I see,” the Doctor said. “You know, I think I’d rather like to meet one!”

Father Brindan stared in mute shock, circling his heart three times with an index finger and touching it to his eyes. Tom and Aly did the same.

“Well I only meant...”

Before the Doctor could explain, an unholy moan wafted in from the darkness outside. The Doctor motioned for the others to remain while he walked right to the double doors and flung them open. Just beyond the entranceway were five shadowy figures. They were clad all in black, their faces featureless, their bodies uniform in height and weight. A slightly iridescent quality to their – skin? – made them shimmer almost imperceptibly. The moaning grew as the Doctor thrust his hands in his pockets and smiled.

“Now that’s what I call service!”

“We are the Soul Men,” rasped one of the figures as each took one step closer to the Doctor. The Time Lord for his part moved not a centimeter.

“Yes, I gathered that. Come to eat our souls then? We’re not devout enough for you? Or did we just let our membership dues lapse? I’m sorry to tell you, we’re not even in the Brotherhood, you might call us free agents.”

Behind the Doctor, Grae stepped out as the rest peeked out from inside the worship hall.

“So these are the...”

“Soul Men, yes. Grae, the Soul Men,” he said in mock introduction. “Um...I didn’t catch any individual names?”

“We are the Soul Men,” rasped the same figure once more, and again the apparitions collectively took one step forward.

“How very methodical of you.” The Doctor stepped forward, and Father Brindan gasped. Tom steeled himself and joined the Doctor and Grae as Aly reached out to stop him.

“Doctor, they’re here to kill us all! They’ll...”

“What, Tom, eat our souls? I doubt that.”

“You are not a Believer,” said the one creature, a gnarled finger pointing at the Doctor. “You do not follow the teachings of The Church.”

“Well, that’s true,” the Doctor replied, playfully stepping closer to the Soul Men. He moved up and to one side, forcing the figures to turn to face him.

“Check!”

“You...are not human,” the figure continued.

“Right again!” the Doctor said, turning to Grae and the others. “You know he’s pretty good at this.”

“Your physiology is not compatible,” the voice rasped as the other four Soul Men stepped forward. One of them moved toward Grae and stopped.

“This one is also not human,” it said.

“Their life essences cannot be harvested for his purposes,” the first figure replied. “Drain the others.”

“Harvested? Now I thought you Soul Men *ate* the souls of sinners. You know, this is starting to sound a lot less supernatural, don’t you think?”

Grae nodded but took a step back as three of the Soul Men advanced on the entranceway, heading for Father Brindan, Tom and Aly.

“What will we do?” Brindan moaned as the young couple bundled him inside and shut the doors at a nod from the Doctor.

“Allow me to test a little theory of mine,” the Doctor said, and drew his sonic screwdriver out of an inside coat pocket. Adjusting the base, he held it at arm’s length and depressed a control, sending an inaudible frequency directly toward one of the Soul Men. As it advanced, it shuddered as if struck by something.

“Just as I thought.”

“Then...they’re not dangerous?”

“Of course they are, Tom, they’re here to kill us all,” the Doctor said. “But not to worry.”

Grae stood in front of the cowering humans as three of the Soul Men drew closer to the cathedral doors. They paused and fell silent, no longer moaning in synch with each other.

“That *is* odd,” Grae said, then winced and doubled over, gasping as she pressed her hand to her forehead.

“Grae? What is it?” The Doctor raced to her side. Behind him, the other two Soul Men moved closer.

“They are interrupting the harvesting process,” said the first figure. “We cannot act upon them. Their physiology is proscribed. But we can remove them from our path with physical force.”

“Oh no you can’t.” The Doctor held up the sonic screwdriver once more as the others helped Grae inside. One of the Soul Men lunged forward and grasped at Grae’s arm, trying to push her out of the way and clear a path to the others. Grae doubled over again and shrieked in pain, clutching at the creature’s chest. Something small and faceted fell across her palm, and she instinctively closed her hand around it, pulling it free. The figure stopped struggling instantly and fell backward. The other Soul Men paused again, and the Doctor smiled.

“Get Grae inside, this might get messy,” the Doctor said, and activated the sonic screwdriver again. This time the frequency was higher, audible, and it lanced outward, striking each of the Soul Men in the chest. Bursts of energy erupted from the figures as shards of crystal flew in every direction. The Doctor dropped and shielded his eyes as the smoking creatures fell flat on the ground.

“Deactivated,” the Doctor observed.

He knelt to examine the crystal shards near the body of one of the Soul Men. They were a deep blue - almost black - and charred from the explosion. The Doctor stroked his beard for a moment, then rose to re-enter the cathedral. Inside, the Doctor knelt again at Grae's side as she rested in the nearest pew. Tom and Aly eyed her with concern while Brindan had withdrawn to the altar to collect himself.

"How are you feeling?"

"I'll survive," Grae said ruefully, still cradling her head. "When those automatons came near me, it felt like I was being...attacked on a psionic level. Pierced right into my mind."

"Interesting," the Doctor said, laying a hand on Grae's head and then helping her to her feet. "I don't think that was part of their modus operandi, to be honest. Something about those fragments...didn't you grab one of those crystals?"

Grae looked down, her fist still tightly balled around the crystal. She opened her hand as if it were a distant image of a limb and not her own. The Doctor took the crystal, noticing that the pressure of her grip had left a faceted impression in her palm. The crystal was tiny, chipped as if removed from a larger stone with a sharp tool. It was brilliant blue. The Doctor's eyes widened.

"We've got to get back to the TARDIS. Now."

"What is it?"

"Time to go, Tom, Aly," the Doctor said, glancing outside and noting the first signs of daybreak. "Father Brindan!"

Brindan turned absent-mindedly, still shaking, and shuffled over to the others.

"Where are we going?" Brindan asked.

"I'm taking us all back to my TARDIS. I have a nasty suspicion I know what's happening here. Our primary concern right now is to make sure that all of you are safe," he said, clapping a hand on Tom's back and sending him outside, with Aly and Brindan close behind. The Doctor moved to follow, but Grae blocked his way.

"Can I...are you done with that crystal?" she asked.

"Well...yes, I suppose I am."

"Then I can have it back?"

The Doctor looked at her quizzically. She was strangely determined about it, but he saw no real harm. He dropped the crystal into her open hand.

"Just keep it safe, will you?" the Doctor said, and smiled.

Grae curled her fingers around the tiny fragment and followed the Doctor outside.

"I will," she said.

* * * * *

"What...is...this?"

The Doctor could scarcely believe his eyes, but there before him stood the TARDIS, no longer sheltered in shadow between two of the stalls. Instead, the surrounding structures had been moved back and the TARDIS was now flooded with light. Around a wide perimeter, a series of velvet ropes had been set up, linked by brushed brass poles. A Church Usher stood by the door of the TARDIS collecting tickets from the throng of people who were queued up all around the ship, staring in awe at its dilapidated exterior and reaching out for a quick touch before being brushed back by the Ministerial Guards. Above the TARDIS, two camera-bots were jury-rigged with a banner that hung between them. It read: "Conveyance of the Divine Messenger. Tickets are just 2 drell each, 1 drell for children. No non-Church ND Allowed."

But that was just part of the bizarre scene they had encountered. Every stall near the velvet-roped circle had been emptied of all its pamphlets and Church memorabilia and was now stocked with a number of very familiar objects. The Doctor walked over to one of the stalls as Grae and the others looked on, still dumbstruck. He picked up one of the objects and turned it over in his hands, his anger growing by the minute. The stall owner grinned, hoping to make a sale. Grae joined the Doctor and he showed her the item. It was a tiny replica of the TARDIS, a police box molded in some kind of stone. The work was very intricate.

“It’s laser-etched Machonite! Very limited edition of 500, each one numbered on the bottom!” The heavy-set stall owner in the tattered robes beamed as the Doctor turned the mini-TARDIS over. It was number 463.

The Doctor looked around at the other stalls, and everywhere he turned he saw TARDISes. Small ones, big ones, TARDISes made of plastic, TARDISes made of metal. Some were just representational models while some appeared to have been molded from ceramic and made to function as money banks. There were TARDISes with flashing lights on top, and some that came disassembled in a bag with instructions on how to build your own. And *all* of them were selling like mad as crowds of people milled about, either with tickets in hand or having just left the queue, and snatched up every little TARDIS they could get their hands on.

“When...”

“Oh we got our batch first thing,” the vendor said, crossing his arms and trying to sound very authoritative. The Doctor had the distinct impression that this man wasn’t much of a market leader, but intended to sound that way nevertheless. “After the press release hit the transwire last night, all the souvenir factories kicked into overdrive. We were ready for the crowd as soon as the queue started this morning. Brisk business, this is,” he laid a finger aside his nose. “Divine Messenger and all, The Church is looking more and more like the only choice. And there’s all this talk of the...Soul Men...rounding up the unfaithful. Could be the apocalypse, you know! It’s my renewal period, and I’m re-upping as soon as I close up shop, wouldn’t dream of leaving the One and Only!”

“But...how could they arrange all this so quickly?” Grae asked.

“You know what they say,” the vendor beamed. “Faith Travels Fast!”

The Doctor fumed, nodding more to himself than the stall owner and, with a heavy-lidded expression, left the display of tiny TARDISes to head toward the real thing. As Grae collected Tom, Aly and Father Brindan, the stall man shouted after them.

“Aren’t you even going to buy one of these dinky little metal ones? Just 1 drell a piece!”

The Doctor and his party drew nearer to the circle, but the crowd grew thicker and more hysterical the closer they came. The Usher spied them as they approached, and the Doctor froze for a moment, realizing they were likely to be set upon by the Ministerial Guards. As he tried to come up with a plan, the official crooked his head toward the small commUnit strapped on his shoulder, nodded to an inaudible voice that only he heard amid the crushing din of people yelling and pushing and praising the One and Only, and raised his arms. At once, the mob fell silent. Even the Doctor was impressed.

“My friends,” the Usher began, “we are truly blessed by the Great Lords today. Not only have they left the Divine Messenger’s conveyance here for us to view and worship...for a nominal fee that will go directly to The Church Fund...but here, at this very moment, we have been joined by the Divine Messenger himself!”

The Doctor's eyes widened as the Usher smiled beatifically and pointed directly at him. The crowd followed the gesture and gasped as one.

"All hail the Divine Messenger! All hail the Emissary of our People, Thomas Mekkal, who has joined the Messenger and his friends!"

The Doctor smiled half-heartedly, shrugging in embarrassment as he started moving forward. Grae, a bit perplexed but somewhat amused as well, moved by his side. Behind them, the young couple and the priest huddled together and followed closely. The Church followers that surrounded them had fallen to their knees and were softly chanting praises, but the combined sound filled the bazaar with an eerie music. The Usher shook his head in awe as the Doctor approached. One of the Guards moved forward, but the Usher waved him off with a dark glare and a quick chop of his hand.

"We wish to enter my...conveyance," the Doctor said in clipped tones. "If that's all right with your Church and your High President."

"We wouldn't dream of obstructing you, Divine Messenger," said the Usher, who stepped to one side and indicated the TARDIS doors.

"I wouldn't try to barge in on us if I were you," the Doctor added as he inserted the key in the lock.

"We will not invade the sanctity of your conveyance, Divine Messenger," the Usher replied. The Doctor eyed him warily and waved the others inside. As Thomas passed the Official, the Usher leaned in and said "Welcome back, Thomas." Thomas cringed and the Doctor laid a hand on his shoulder and gently pushed him inside.

"I'll be back shortly," the Doctor said.

"We'll *all* be here," the Usher said, and smiled.

The Doctor slammed the door shut, his mind racing. As a cheer from the crowd surged through the exterior of the TARDIS, echoing faintly in the console room, the Doctor took a deep breath and resigned himself to the situation.

Quite the calling card, he thought to himself. But next time, I'll be calling on you, High President.

* * * * *

Once inside the TARDIS, the Doctor moved fast, checking the controls to be sure everything was secure. Turning to Grae, he began to spout orders as usual, but noticed that the poor girl wasn't quite herself.

"I have a plan, but I want you to take everyone to the...Grae, are you all right?"

Grae had fallen against the console as soon as the exterior doors were shut. Father Brindan was holding her shoulders, but she was grimacing in what seemed like pain.

"It's that...feeling again," Grae rasped. "Like something...I don't know...around me...tighter..." Grae fingered the crystal in her pocket and leaned further forward. "It's like an intense headache I suppose, but deeper, winding round..."

"Perhaps she should rest, Doctor, she had a very trying time," Father Brindan said.

"Absolutely," the Doctor replied. "Grae, have a seat here," and brought over a cushioned chair from the far corner of the console room. Grae happily slid into it and pressed her palm to her forehead. The crystal was still in her hand.

"The rest of you...come with me."

The Doctor headed for the interior door with the other three in tow.

"Where are you taking them?" Grae managed to ask.

"Somewhere safe," the Doctor said simply. "You rest for a bit, and when I come back we'll go over what comes next."

Grae nodded as the Doctor took the party through the interior door and shut it behind them. She started to drift away, still pressing the crystal to her forehead. Strange visions assailed her mind as she floated in a miasma of pain and confusion. And everywhere she looked, a sickly blue light enveloped her...

* * * * *

"It's a worship hall, but like none I've ever seen!"

Father Brindan stepped into the Zero Room and ran his hand reverently along one cushioned wall, his sandaled feet sinking almost imperceptibly into the pillowed floor as he gazed up at the distant ceiling. The air was intoxicating, soothing - a strong aroma of vanilla, or perhaps of freshly baked bread. It was so restful, he wanted to lie down and sleep for hours. Thomas followed quietly, drinking in the serenity of the room as the Doctor put a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

"Not quite a worship hall," said the Doctor, stuffing his hands in his pockets and joining Father Brindan and Thomas in looking about as if he had never seen the Zero Room before. "But it is a place where you can get a lot of thinking done. And rest as well. You'll both be safe here from the Soul Men - and whatever else - no matter what happens."

Father Brindan's wistful smile was replaced by a puzzled frown. He clutched at the Doctor's sleeve as the Time Lord moved toward the doorway.

"But...where are you going? What happens next?"

"For you, Father, nothing. Just rest and contemplation and time to heal. And look after Tom and Aly, of course. This has all been my fault, after a fashion, and it's time I put things right. Now please listen to me and stay here. As long as the doors of the Zero Room are closed, nothing can reach you. You'll be fine."

Father Brindan released the Doctor and nodded, turning once more to drink in the atmosphere of the Zero Room as the Doctor shut the large doors behind him and headed back to the console room. Just before the doors sealed completely, the Doctor heard Father Brindan talking to Tom.

"Remarkable. The man *is* like a god."

"I'm afraid you have it backwards, Father," said the Doctor sadly under his breath as he hurried back to the console room.

* * * * *

Sliding...winding...darkness...inside...a place...crystalline prison...can't...get...out!

Grae awoke with a start as the Doctor rested a hand on her shoulder. She couldn't remember her dreams but she felt unsettled and definitely not at all rested. For some reason, she felt guilty about holding the crystal, and she pocketed it quickly.

"Grae, how are you doing?"

"Fine, Doctor," Grae tucked her hair behind one ear and stood, pretending to be more refreshed than she was. "Are they in the Zero Room?"

“Yes,” the Doctor said, eyeing her for a moment longer then turning to flip a few switches on the console. “Now it’s time for the really tricky bit.”

“Which is?”

“I convince you to remain here, keep an eye on our three ‘heretics’ and get the TARDIS ready for a short hop while I go and beard the lion in his den.”

“Speaking in a language I can understand might help at this stage.”

The Doctor smirked. “It’s very simple. You get ready to bring everybody to me when the time is right, and I’ll go and walk into a very elaborate and melodramatically conceived trap.”

Grae was about to protest, thought better of it and instead nodded matter-of-factly.

“Right then, off you go.”

“Well that was easy!” The Doctor smiled, gave Grae a hug and operated the door control. He was about to step outside when Grae caught him at his elbow.

“But how will I know when to bring the TARDIS... wherever it is that I’m going to bring it?”

The Doctor stared into her eyes, making Grae almost flinch.

“I suspect you’ll know. Just be ready. No more sleeping.”

The Doctor walked outside then stuck his head back inside.

“Especially no more sleeping, understand?”

Grae nodded again, and the Doctor was gone. Outside, the Usher and Guards acknowledged him reverently, and the crowd gasped in awe.

“Oh please,” the Doctor groaned, and started to make his way past the throng. One little girl came up to him and tugged on his trouser leg. The Doctor knelt by her side as the crowd gaped.

“Where are you going?” the little girl asked.

“To have a few words with the Voice of the Faith,” the Doctor said, patted her on the head, and left. The girl gaped as the Doctor walked off. Within minutes the crowd had surrounded the TARDIS completely and queued up yet again for another round of worship and laying on of hands. The Usher collected fees and tickets for the rest of the afternoon, and souvenir sales were very brisk indeed.

* * * * *

“No, I don’t have an appointment, but I feel quite sure that with all the effort he’s put into trying to capture me and my friends, the High President should be delighted to see me.”

The Secretary seated in the antechamber of the High President’s office smiled at the Doctor and pressed a button near the edge of the desk. A flashing indicator light appeared on the commUnit, and the Secretary nodded as if receiving instructions. Through it all, she managed to maintain a predictable air of charm and composure. It wasn’t every day that a man named by the High President as the Divine Messenger of the One and Only strides right in and demands an audience with the Voice of the Faith Himself. But then she was specifically told this would happen, so it was no surprise at all.

The Doctor stood quietly, listening to the faint sounds of an audio newsfeed piped in through hidden speakers – something about increased reports of the Soul Men punishing the unfaithful.

He’s making his move, he thought. Just once I’d like to arrive before the last minute.

"Doctor," she finally replied, standing to leave the antechamber as he gestured toward the waiting area behind the Doctor. "If you would be so kind as to have a seat, I'm sure the High President will be only too happy to see you in a few moments."

"Thank you," the Doctor said, and found a seat in one corner of the room as the Secretary withdrew.

Odd way to treat an enemy, he thought. But then bureaucrats usually have a hard time thinking out of the box. Procedure is God.

The Doctor thumbed through several magazines strewn about the low table in front of him - *Organized Religion Today, Bible Buzz, Divine Cooking* - and came upon a small two-color pamphlet: *Your Soul and You*. Raising an eyebrow, he opened the tri-fold paper and read the contents...

Today's modern human being has no time left for spiritual contemplation, much less the kind of rigorous maintenance that is required to insure a smooth and glorious transition to the Afterlife. Only with the guidance and support of an organized system of worship can today's go-getting citizen on the move get on with the business of living, secure in the knowledge that their Ultimate Salvation has been prepared for with grace and style.

The Doctor's eyes fell past the rest of the text about the One and Only and the True Faith, including a gaudy line drawing of a nondescript deity touching the head of a smiling man with an outstretched finger. His gaze lit upon the last two lines:

Join Today and Be Saved Tomorrow: It's the Right Thing to Do...and It's *the Law!*

"The High President will see you now," the Secretary said, leaving the waiting room again as quickly as she had returned. The Doctor reached for the handles of the large double doors, but they opened of their own accord. Stuffing his hands in his pockets, he strolled inside. The setting sun – or at least the simulation that passed for the sun – was still visible behind the Pendropolis skyline as the Doctor entered the office and climbed the steps of the dais. On the other side of the platform, the High President was standing and watching the sunset with his hands clasped behind him. The Doctor sat in the single visitor's chair facing the desk and leaned back, resting his head on his hands.

"Well then, 'High President,' isn't it about time for the gloating to begin? Or did I just spoil your usual dramatic revelation...Master?"

The Master turned. He seemed much older than before, more haggard. His silver hair, normally swept back from his aristocratic brow, was slightly disheveled and dull. His once neatly trimmed silver beard was scraggly and uneven. His saturnine features betrayed an intense weariness that fought with his natural inclination to leap at the Doctor and tear out his throat. He blinked several times, trying to clear his clouded yellow cat's eyes as he sat down and simply stared at the Doctor. He looked almost sad.

"What happened? All those years of hard living finally catching up?"

"It seems that no matter how many times we meet, my dear Doctor," the Master rasped at last, "I never get used to your insufferable predilection for inanity. But here, at the end, with my

life – all my lives – ebbing away in this disease-ridden body, I will at last snatch some small measure of victory from the jaws of oblivion.”

“Looks to me like you can barely stand.”

“There are good days and there are bad days, Doctor,” said the Master, “but now that you are here, now that my plans can finally achieve fruition...”

The Master leaned forward, a fanged grin splitting his features.

“...it’s beginning to look like a very, *very* good day.”

* * * * *

Grae fought back a wave of drowsiness and tried to concentrate on the TARDIS controls instead, hoping to feel some sort of mental cue that would signal the time was right to act. Her hands were pressed flat on one of the few unadorned surfaces of the console, and they were bearing far more of her weight than they normally would. She felt so confused, so tired...so very tired...

“Where is the Doctor?” Father Brindan had entered the console room while Grae was drifting, and she only realized he was present when he was at her elbow.

Well done, Grae, she thought. *If that was an enemy sneaking up on you, you’d be finished. Why can’t I clear my mind?*

Grae’s fingers sought the small blue crystal resting in her pocket. She turned to face Father Brindan, who looked expectantly at her, his hands clasped together. His knuckles were white.

“The Doctor is taking care of some important business, but I’ll take us to meet him when the time is right.” Grae attempted a smile, but her mind was too cloudy. She only managed an unconvincing smirk.

“And when will the time be right, my dear?”

Grae turned from Father Brindan and looked down at the console. The blinking lights and gleaming levers twirled and twisted into a rainbow of color and shape, mocking her. The multihued blob slithered in front of her eyes as the blood pounded in her ears.

“Soon, Father. We’ll be leaving soon.”

I hope...

* * * * *

“So how have you managed to disguise your true nature from your unfortunate congregation?”

The Doctor had risen and perched himself on the edge of the Master’s desk, as nonchalant as if he were visiting an old friend. Of course, in a way...

“The simplest of tricks, Doctor...or have you forgotten?” The Master stood up straight and a disconcerting ripple effect distorted his features as if he were an ancient video signal that had been disrupted. The image of a healthier but still recognizable Master now greeted the Doctor. Vibrant, combed hair; piercing, unclouded eyes; a smile with no fangs. This was an old but vital man that now stood before the Doctor.

“Nothing but a parlor trick,” the Doctor said. “And how telling that with an image projector capable of generating any body type, you choose to project a healthy but otherwise accurate version of yourself. Pure wish fulfillment, treating the surface and not the decayed, corrupted soul within. Just like your Church! Now who’s desperate to believe in something that isn’t there – your followers, or *you*?”

The Master chuckled, and this time the Doctor suppressed a chill. There was something...different about the Master now.

“You’ve lived so very long, my dear Doctor, and still you fail to grasp the obvious. Could I have lasted this long, built all of this, if I were still the feeble, dying shell of a man you saw before you moments ago? Could I have fought the Cheetah disease in my body, rallied a worldwide congregation, and made my Church the most profitable on the planet if I were nothing but a wizened wretch? Could I have done...this!”

And with that, the Master leapt at the Doctor, a steely hand grasping the Time Lord’s throat and lifting him into the air. The Doctor struggled but still managed to notice that although the Master still looked healthy, his eyes and fangs had resumed their usual appearance. The Master laughed, a blood-curdling sound that echoed across the office chamber.

“How...”

“Ever the inquisitive scientist, Doctor?” The Master hurled the Doctor across the room, sending him crashing into a bookcase that toppled over and showered the Doctor with Church texts. The Master advanced on his foe even as the Doctor climbed out of the pile of books and regained his bearings.

“Does it seem like I have the strength of a thousand men, Doctor? Or ten thousand? Perhaps more than that?”

The Master lifted the Doctor from the ground once again and threw him back toward the dais, where he landed on the steps and slumped to the base of the platform. The Master chuckled and strolled over to join him.

“Are you beginning to piece it together, Doctor? Do you understand now what the Soul Men are?”

“They’re...just robots,” the Doctor said, choking and trying to get to his feet. “Mindless automatons.”

“Oh, they’re much more than that, Doctor. They’re conduits, collecting and redirecting power. They are my salvation. My *true* Saviours!”

The Doctor looked up at the Master, who now stood there smiling. *Good*, thought the Doctor. *He’s in gloating mode. A chance to rest, to think...*

And then he noticed the Master’s eyes. They were blue again, but not the blue of the High President’s eyes. They were a deeper blue, glowing with energy. And the glow was increasing.

The Doctor heard a rumbling, grating noise and looked up as the ceiling of the office slid back above the dais. As a massive cerulean crystalline structure descended from the aperture, the desk shimmered as the Master himself had before, and in its place stood a six-sided control console with a matching crystalline central column. As the larger crystal form reached its lowest point, the two structures began to exchange arcs of energy...and the Master’s eyes grew brighter still.

“Of course, why didn’t I guess? Yet another attempt to modify your TARDIS to harness some alien and presumably dangerous power for your own ends. The tune never changes, does it?”

“Oh, I can assure you, this one is symphonic in its ingenuity,” the Master replied, and surprised the Doctor by helping him up and into the nearby chair. “You will see soon enough. And then you will die.”

The Master worked the controls of the console and the office chamber shuddered momentarily as the TARDIS dematerialized from within The Church’s corporate headquarters.

The Doctor started to readjust his rumpled clothing – the waistcoat was torn on one side – but gave up and instead examined the crystalline forms more closely. The Master had clearly built energetic minerals into his TARDIS control systems, just like the ‘rocks’ Tom mentioned and the fragments built into the Soul Men. But this was far more than an ordinary upgrade. Somehow, these crystals were not only augmenting his TARDIS but the Master himself as well. Blue crystals...

Just as I suspected, the Doctor thought. The Master smiled at him from across the console.

“Working it all out in your Mind’s Eye, Doctor?” The Master chuckled.

* * * * *

Grae tried to concentrate on setting the controls for their impending departure, but her head was still pounding. Sounds...no voices...no, one voice. It was difficult to focus. Father Brindan laid a comforting hand on her shoulder.

“Are you all right, my dear?”

Suddenly, a feeling washed over Grae, flushing out the uncertainty and allowing her to retune her thoughts. It was time.

“Yes, thank you,” Grae said, smiling and moving to throw a switch on the other side of the console. “Go get Tom and Aly. We’re going.”

* * * * *

The Master was still smiling as he worked the console, satisfied with the operation of his modified TARDIS. He had all but forgotten the Doctor was even there, which struck the Doctor as odd considering he had tossed him around like a rag doll a while ago. But it did make a twisted kind of sense.

He thinks he’s already won, the Doctor thought as he sat quietly and watched the Master at work. *He assumes I’m utterly in his power and his to deal with as he sees fit. So whatever energy he’s feeding on has either made him crazier than he’s ever been before...*

...or he’s right.

“Would you mind terribly answering a few questions while I await my no doubt dramatic and elaborate execution?”

“As they say on Earth, Doctor, ‘fire away!’” The Master flipped a switch, set several other controls, and then retrieved his desk chair and placed it opposite the Doctor’s. He sat down and faced the Doctor like a conquering king.

“Those blue crystals, I presume you got them from Metebelis 3?”

The Master merely smiled.

“Manussa then. You will shout when I’m getting warm?”

The Master laughed.

“My dear Doctor, you have the most infuriating habit of amusing me even as I plan your destruction. It makes it all the more painful to face the prospect of an existence without your interference.”

“Well, there’s an easy way around that one,” the Doctor replied casually.

“Yes, but I’ll learn to deal with the disappointment.” The Master returned to the console and adjusted their course as he eyed the Doctor over the crystalline column.

“They are amazing, aren’t they? Possibly the most powerful psionic energy conduits in the known universe. Wherever they turn up, on countless worlds separated by light years of space and the inexorable march of time, these blue crystals all share the same basic ability to collect, focus, and redirect psionic energy, what some foolish mortals have dubbed the ‘soul.’”

“And your Soul Men are powered...”

“...by the blue crystals, yes Doctor. Each one of them has at its heart a dynamic energy converter wired to a blue crystal fragment. Not only does it power their systems, but it enables them to siphon psionic energy from anyone they come into contact with...which explains the reputation my automated energy collectors have acquired on this planet. They remind the native population of some insipid children’s verse, a folktale fashioned by the original corporate religions to instill fear and inspire enrollment.”

“Soul-eating boogeymen. How quaint.” The Doctor rose cautiously – still aching from the Master’s earlier assault – and tentatively joined the Master at the console.

“I must admit, you seem to have outdone yourself this time with the modifications to your TARDIS.”

“Thank you Doctor,” the Master replied with almost genuine gratification. “The Soul Men do much more than collect psionic energy individually. All of the blue crystal fragments are linked to the central structure above us, which then feeds directly into the TARDIS engines...and the telepathic circuits. Both my TARDIS and I are constantly feeding off the energies collected by my robots. It has rejuvenated me just long enough for the last part of my plan to fall into place.”

“The Soul Men have been collecting ‘souls’ for some time,” the Master chuckled, still adjusting settings on his console, “but recently I stepped up the process as I drew closer to the critical mass I needed to regenerate my body and infuse myself with power beyond anything Rassilon ever dreamed of.”

“But you needed a boost in psionic feedback, a larger outpouring of energy from the general population to tip the scales and send you hurtling to that final goal.”

“Precisely, Doctor,” the Master said. “I thought that choosing a Saviour and executing him before the entire population might spark an enormous surge in religious fervor, enabling the Soul Men to drain even more power from their individual victims as well as the surrounding population. The fool tried to escape, but then...”

“But then I showed up,” the Doctor sighed, his voice leaden with realization. “And you didn’t need Thomas anymore. You gave the people a Divine Messenger, and sold tickets, and merchandised toy TARDISES...”

“...Many of which were even equipped with blue crystal fragments to extend my network of energy absorption!” The Master grinned. “They were so...’inspired’ by you, Doctor, that they provided me with even more energy than I anticipated. Who needed a Saviour when I had the Doctor to save me?” The Master laughed.

The Doctor stared up at the crystal and shook his head. The Master caught the gesture of disapproval and his glowing eyes narrowed.

“Then it’s finally happened.”

“*What* has happened, Doctor?” The Master’s tone was insistent. With victory in his grasp, the Doctor still knew how to rattle him, engage his ego. It was one of the reasons why the Master still held such grudging respect for the meddling Time Lord.

“You’ve spent lifetimes reveling in destruction, metaphorically feeding on pain, misery, and death, and now at last, here you are. You sit in the center of your crystalline web, locked in a

mutated, diseased corpse of a body – no longer even a Time Lord – and you feed off the lives of others simply to sustain your own miserable existence. You’re just a vampire, sucking everyone dry to stave off the end of your own pathetic life. I’d be disgusted and enraged if I didn’t pity you so.”

The Master glowered, his hands curling into fists as he circled the console. The Doctor stuffed his hands in his pockets and managed a half-hearted smile.

“But at least now those fangs fit in well with your new lifestyle.”

The Master shook with hatred, and exploded in a bellow of rage, raising his fists above the Doctor’s head. The Time Lord remained calm and cocked his head. The message was clear, and the Master even thought he caught a telepathic echo of it in his mind.

If you’re going to kill me, get on with it. I’m not afraid of you. I’ve never been afraid of you.

The Master flinched, stepping back from the Doctor as if attacked. His mask of anger almost turned to fear, but the chime of the console drew his attention. Checking the instruments, the Master operated a lever and the vast window before them clarified and revealed their location. The TARDIS had evidently arrived in the middle of a canyon surrounded by enormous natural stone formations. It was a barren landscape punctuated by dusty clouds picked up by the wind and blown across the floor of the canyon.

“Fate has delayed your death, Doctor, but only for a short while,” the Master said. His voice was once more calm and cold. “You will merely be destroyed as I originally intended. It is time for all of this to end. Time for my Ascendance.”

The Master turned, his eyes flaring a deeper blue as he grinned, his fangs glistening.

“Time for me to become a god.”

* * * * *

Grae and the others had arrived only moments before, stepping from the TARDIS and taking in the enormity of the stone chasm in which they had arrived. In the center of a series of ancient, cracked columns was a slab-like altar. The air was filled with a musty smell – centuries of dust and decay. But the area around the altar looked cleaner, as if it had been kept in better repair than the rest of the vast hall. As Tom and Aly huddled near Grae, Father Brindan walked toward the altar, arms outstretched.

“Magnificent,” he whispered, and started when he heard a distant rumbling sound that grew louder and more grating with every passing second.

“Father, come back!” Brindan ignored Grae’s cry and stood transfixed. He was nearest to the Master’s TARDIS when it materialized alongside the altar, but Tom and Aly were equally awed by the inexplicable appearance of a tall fluted column. Grae wasn’t surprised by the method of its arrival, but she *was* perplexed as to whose TARDIS it was.

“It...appeared out of thin air!”

Grae stepped forward as Father Brindan reached for her sleeve, trying to stop her from approaching the column.

“It might be a harbinger of evil!”

“It’s a TARDIS,” Grae replied, politely removing Brindan’s hand and stepping up to the column. She ran her hand down the side of it.

“It’s not the Doctor’s. This one has a functioning chameleon circuit.” Grae winced again and held her head, stumbling back as the column split open. Her hand shot into her pocket and

her fingers curled tightly around the crystal as the Doctor stepped out with the Master close behind. The Master had a weapon leveled at the Doctor, but Grae noted that the Doctor didn't seem too concerned.

"You!" Father Brindan recognized the Master even as Aly hugged Tom, who edged away from the man who tried to have him terminated.

"Why, Father Brindan, what a lovely surprise! That laughable little shack in the woods, yes? And Thomas – you know, I couldn't have arranged this better if I tried!" The Master chuckled and waved the Doctor over to the others. Grae fought back another wave of nausea as she joined the Doctor.

"Who's the silver-haired lunatic?" she asked.

"The Master, who else? Just stay close."

Grae's eyes narrowed. "*That's* the Master?"

As the Doctor and Grae joined the others, the Master faced them with glowering eyes, his face burning with pride.

"You are all privileged to witness my Ascendance! I have been growing stronger these last few months as the Soul Men drained more and more of the populace of energy, feeding my crystalline generator. But as recent events have allowed me to accelerate that process substantially, my TARDIS now has enough energy to complete the process and bring me everlasting life!"

Grae yelped and doubled over in pain, groping for the ground as her legs gave way. The Master and the Doctor both looked puzzled, but only the Doctor moved to help her.

"Grae!"

"Oh dear," Father Brindan said, joining the Doctor as they helped Grae to sit on the steps leading to the altar. "Is she suffering some sort of ailment?"

"You might say that," the Doctor said. "Grae?"

"Move away from her!"

The Doctor turned on the Master, rage filling his voice.

"This game has gone on far too long!" He stood and came within a few feet of the Master, the black steel of the Tissue Compression Eliminator leveled right at his hearts. "Millennia of conflict, endless planets littered with the dead you leave behind, the shattered dreams you tread upon as you seek...what? Is it really Godhood you're after? And what will you do when the universe is your plaything? What will you possibly use to fill your time when I'm dead and the rest of creation bows to your every whim?"

The Doctor pushed the TCE out of the way and stepped closer. Even the Master was surprised by the presumption but did nothing to stop him.

"Or will you finally realize after all this time that there is nothing behind your boasting and bluster? That in that pit of a chest, your hearts are long since shriveled with neglect, and the only thing that truly keeps you alive is not alien energy or blue crystals, but fear. Fear and regret."

The Master's face was a mask, but the Doctor could sense the emotions roiling beneath. The Master almost looked to be on the verge of tears, but he fought them back and pressed the TCE to the Doctor's chest. The others gasped while Grae struggled to get to her feet.

"Nice try, Doctor," the Master said at last, stepping back and raising the TCE once more. He smiled, baring his fangs. The Doctor frowned – he was having trouble reading the Master now. Something was wrong.

“I do not suffer from fear and regret. That is the purview of lesser beings. As High President and the Voice of the Faith, it is my duty to instill in my flock a healthy regard for such feelings. It is a difficult task, I admit...”

The Master swung the TCE at Aly and fired. A bloodcurdling scream and the sound of discharging energy was followed by silent shock as Aly’s diminished form crumpled to the ground. Tom fell to his knees as the others stood by helplessly. Even the Doctor was rooted to the spot.

“...but I do so enjoy my work,” the Master said, and his grating chuckle filled the dusty air.

* * * * *

Not a sound escaped Tom’s lips as he sat limply near Aly’s body. He held Aly’s silver bird pendant in his hand – it had fallen from her neck and escaped the effect of the Master’s cruel weapon. Tears streamed down his face, but he didn’t utter a word as Father Brindan and Grae knelt on either side of him and tried to move him back toward the TARDIS. As they struggled, Grae looked up at the Doctor, who also stood silently, returning her gaze with what looked like a measure of guilt. Grae’s mouth was a line as she returned to the task of helping Brindan drag Tom to safety...or what might pass for safety, anyway. But the pounding in her head was getting worse...

“Where are the protests, the cries of outrage?” The Master laughed. “Shall I play your role for you then? Oh, very well. ’You fiendish monster! Murderer! Offender of Life and Time and Good Decent People everywhere!’” The Master’s cackling echoed across the chasm, but the Doctor just stared at him, his eyes aflame with anger.

“You disappoint me, Doctor,” the Master finally said, the TCE still leveled at the Doctor’s chest. “Surely you wouldn’t rob me of one last witty bit of repartee before I erase you from existence? I’d hate to think that our centuries of conflict would end with such an uninspiring final confrontation.”

“You *are* a monster,” the Doctor said, his voice raspy and barely audible. “I think that’s all you ever were. You were never a colleague, never a friend. You were a monster that lurks in the shadows, leaping out to frighten children, to steal away their innocence. You’re a nightmare brought to life.”

The Master smiled.

“But you’re just a ghoulish apparition now, a caricature of the Master I once knew. A sad shadow of what was once a man.”

The Master’s smile became a frown, and his face became a mask of barely concealed rage. The Doctor did not hesitate, but the others shrank from the Master’s growing anger as if physically assaulted.

“Kill me – kill all of us – if that’s what you want to do. But know this. We will die with dignity, with faith that what we are is what we were. We need no false prophets or false gods to believe in ourselves. I know who I am. I am a Time Lord of Gallifrey. I am the Doctor.” The Doctor stared at the Master, his gaze piercing the Master’s bravado. “What are you?”

The Doctor looked at the Master a moment longer, shook his head, and turned his back on his foe as he walked over to the others gathered around Aly’s body. The Master’s body trembled, and his ragged voice echoed across the chamber.

“You will *not* turn your back on me, Doctor! You will not ignore me! I know who I am! I know what *you* are!” The Master threw his TCE to the ground and removed a small control box from another pocket. From all around the chamber, dozens of Soul Men emerged from the shadows, from behind every column and rocky outcropping, and silently converged with a steady, swaying gait until they stood around the altar, the Master and his TARDIS. The Master stepped up to the top of the dais and the Soul Men clasped hands, drawing even closer together.

“And I know what we *will* be, my old friend,” the Master spat the last word with a laugh, his thumb hovering over a glowing button. “You will be a mote of dust, adrift for all eternity, and I? I will be a *god!*”

The Master pressed the button and the Soul Men stood rigid, their bodies locked in position. An eerie electronic hum rose in pitch and volume throughout the chamber as the crystals within each of the Soul Men began to glow brighter until the light burst from inside their artificial forms. Soon the Master’s TARDIS was glowing as well, and then the Master himself, blue eyes flaring into a star-like intensity as the hum and light grew more powerful with every passing second. The small party at the other end of the chamber huddled together, but Grae broke from the group and stepped toward the Master’s circle of energy. Her hand was in her pocket.

“Grae, no!”

Grae shrugged away the Doctor’s grasping hand. She looked back at him and paused. She felt her hand withdraw the crystal and show it to the Doctor. Grimacing, he nodded to her, and Grae stepped closer to the circle. She was hearing something beyond the hum – a distant voice – and she knew what to do.

Grae sat on the cold stone floor, crossed her legs, and raised the crystal to her forehead, her fingers balancing the shard between them. Her eyes were tightly shut, her mouth moving silently.

“She’ll be killed, Doctor!”

“We’ll *all* be killed, Father Brindan, and many more will die after that,” the Doctor replied. “I think we should let Grae do what she has to do. She *is* the answer.”

Grae’s crystal fragment pulsed softly at first, but soon its brilliance surpassed even that of the Master’s makeshift energy lattice. Grae heard the voice – inside, within, encircling her and the Master, the Soul Men, the Doctor, everyone. She spoke aloud in a language she did not know, but her words were lost as the sound of the energy lattice increased.

The Master was oblivious to her actions, enveloped in energy and basking in the glow as the power began to penetrate his ravaged cells and renew his body. Grae’s crystal fragment now burned bright white against her forehead as her body lifted from the surface of the chamber floor and rose up above the Master’s circle. As the Doctor held the others back, the Master saw Grae rising above him and tried to scream, but he was transfixed by a sudden burst of light from Grae’s crystal. The Soul Men around him shuddered and staggered back, breaking the circle and sending lightning arcs of blue energy careening around the chamber.

Grae’s eyes flew open – blue jewels shining down on the Master with something like pure unadulterated hatred. And something else – fear? Jealousy? Grae spoke two syllables in the unknown language again and again. Her crystalline light overwhelmed the Master’s until the sound of her voice and the intensity of her light threatened to blot out the entire chamber. The Master screamed at last, and the Doctor led the others to cover behind one of the larger columns.

And then everything exploded.

* * * * *

The dust settled within minutes. Emerging from the devastation heaped upon the altar, the Doctor found Grae's limp form at the base of the steps and dragged her to her feet. She was choking and caked with soot. The crystal in her hand was a blackened lump. It was over.

"Loathe as I am to resort to clichés, you're fine now Grae," the Doctor said as he helped her over to a clearing on the steps where she could sit down. "Everything's fine now. You did it."

"It really wasn't me, Doctor," Grae panted, trying to catch her breath. "There was something...a place...dark...it didn't want the Master to ascend. It...used me..."

The Doctor frowned, then offered Grae a cheerful smile and a comforting hand around her shoulder.

"Well, whatever it was, it must've been on our side. Try not to worry." *A mystery for another time*, the Doctor thought.

On the other side of the altar, Tom helped Father Brindan to his feet. Brindan dusted himself off and looked at the ruin around him. The Master's crumpled body was buried under stone, lifeless.

"Not such a good day after all," Brindan said.

* * * * *

The Doctor ferried everyone back to the city via the Master's TARDIS and spent several days dismantling the crystalline energy convertor and engines with Grae's assistance. She continued to complain of headaches and nightmares, but the Doctor assured her it was all due to the massive psionic feedback she experienced during the final moments of the failed Ascension.

But he *was* worried about her.

On a particularly bright morning, Tom and Father Brindan joined the Doctor and Grae at the TARDIS, now parked near Brindan's small cathedral. At first, the Doctor expected there to be some difficulty in extricating the TARDIS from the throng that presumably still gathered around it. But surprisingly, there was a very small crowd. TARDIS souvenirs were strewn on the ground, some shattered from within, while others were simply discarded.

Ah well, 'All is ephemeral, fame and the famous as well,' the Doctor had thought.

As they gathered to say goodbye, Tom was the first to speak.

"Thank you, Doctor, for ridding us of this false prophet. You've made it possible for us to find our True Faith again. And I will...for Aly's sake." A tear fell from Tom's eye as he hugged the Doctor, who seemed a bit startled at first but returned the gesture.

"She'd be very proud of you, Tom," the Doctor said. "Or should I say, Father Mekkal?"

Tom – Father Mekkal – attempted a smile but only managed a tight-lipped nod; the pain was still too new. His new collar shone brilliant white, and the silver bird pendant hanging below it caught the sunlight.

"And you, Doctor?" Father Brindan asked. "Do you have faith?"

"Oh yes indeed," the Doctor said. "But I prefer to base my faith on something a little closer to home than some distant omnipotent deity. Too many turn out to be rather unworthy of the trust we put in them. I should know, I've met a few. No, I find faith is most rewarded when it's vested in simpler things like the warmth of a welcoming household, the love of family..."

The Doctor put an arm around Grae. She smiled.

"...or the unfathomable bond of friendship. That's what faith is about. Not vengeful gods, pedagogical litanies or balance sheets. I think that's something you should try to teach the rest of your people. They'll be looking for answers again now with The Church in disarray. Now more than ever. Maybe you can help them find their way."

"We will, Doctor," Father Mekkal said.

The Doctor unlocked the TARDIS door as Grae also bid farewell to Father Mekkal and Father Brindan, the spiritual leaders of Pendryx Prime's newest institution – the Free Cathedral of Universal Worship. The Time Lords withdrew into the inky darkness of the police box interior, and a scant few seconds later, the rumbling of the engines heralded the ship's departure for other times and places. Father Mekkal looked up to the sky as Father Brindan reached out a hand to feel the air where the TARDIS had stood.

"My God!" he said.

* * * * *

The Soul Men lay in ruins, their twisted remains charred beyond recognition. A few moments later, there was a sudden shift in temperature as the cold stone began to emanate a steady warmth. The Master's body, still half-buried by the rubble and lying at the base of the altar, was glowing, sending waves of visible energy cascading outward, reflecting off the walls of the canyon and superheating the surrounding atmosphere. Already in shambles, the altar and nearby columns threatened to crumble entirely under this new onslaught, but then, just as suddenly as it began, the process stopped. The temperature normalized, dust settled on ancient mantle and broken step, and the Master's body ceased its fiery glow.

But it was no longer the same body.

The Master groaned and sat up slowly, pushing aside debris and lifting himself with one hand while the other rubbed at his eyes. They adjusted to the dim light shining down from outside, and he grunted - more from habit than actual discomfort - as he scrambled to his feet. Making his way to the largest remaining piece of the altar slab, he leaned heavily upon the polished stone, his slender, unlined hands grasped the cold edges. Brushing dust from the surface, he caught a glimpse of his reflection in the mirror-like finish and marveled at his features.

Remarkable. Despite the interference of that wretched Grae, he had absorbed enough psionic power to trigger a regeneration that transcended Gallifreyan biology and its frustrating limitations. This was not his original Time Lord body - not the decaying mass of flesh in which he was imprisoned so long ago - nor was it that fool Tremas' body, warped and corrupted to suit his needs but then ravaged by the Cheetah virus and left a withered shell. This was something else entirely – a body constructed out of pure life force, shaped by his own indomitable will from the energies that filled the canyon in those fateful final moments. He may not have become a God, that was true...but he *was* renewed.

"A new body...at last."

Ignoring the high-pitched whine of an aircar, the Master admired his new look. He was tall and thin, with pointed aristocratic features as he had in his youth. The swept-back hair, the goatee, the harsh mouth and the fiery eyes were all much the same, but he was so *young*. Strangely familiar too. Finding his TCE in the dust, he deposited it in an inside pocket of his tattered suit. Behind him, three Ministerial Guards marched in, led by a Church Usher. The Usher paused, trying to determine where he had seen the strange individual at the altar before.

They registered the explosion no doubt, the Master thought. Sent out an investigative party. Dolts.

“You’re that...Doctor? The Divine Messenger?”

The Master turned slowly, slipping on a pair of black gloves from another pocket as he smiled at the Usher.

“Terribly sorry, but no. The Doctor left a short while ago.”

“But you look just like...”

“An intriguing byproduct of the renewal process,” said the Master, knowing the Usher was blissfully unaware of what he was talking about. “Unconsciously patterned the coalescing energy on a compatible body print, I suppose. Unusual, I’ll admit, but the possibilities are endless!”

“Who...who are you?”

“I am usually referred to as the Master,” he said simply, one hand reaching inside his jacket to retrieve his TCE. He pressed a switch and the sphere split open, revealing the weapon’s glowing emitter. He set the device to a wide beam and aimed it at all four men.

“The Master?”

“Universally,” the Master replied, and fired. It was beginning to look like a very, *very* good day.



On Pendryx Prime, religion is big business,
and the Church of the Nucleonic Divinity is the most powerful corporation on the planet.
But now the High President has hit upon an idea to push the Church's profits
into the stratosphere, and all it will take is the sacrifice of
a minor functionary named Thomas Mekkal.

Thomas isn't up for the role of martyr though; lucky for him
the Doctor and Grae have shown up to offer him sanctuary.
But can even they protect him...or themselves...from the Soul Men?
When belief in the One and Only means big bucks and everyone is scrambling for
their share in the Glorious Spirit, can Salvation be far behind?

Now that the Doctor's arrived, it's just around the corner...

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

