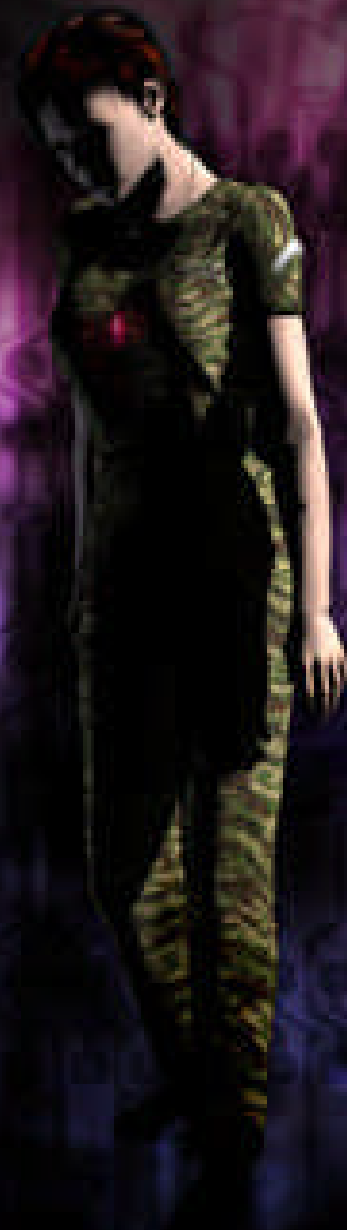


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DOES IT MATTER?



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Does It Matter?

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The floor came up to meet him as he fell. He tried to scramble away, strong, rough hands pulling him back towards the door. The stone floor left grime under his fingernails. This was the oldest part of the Facility; dark stone and red brick, the few windows heavily barred. His breathing came in ragged gasps, his struggles weakening. He was exhausted.

The wardens lifted his tall, slim frame easily and hefted him onto the waiting gurney. His throat hurt from screaming; now all he could do was whimper. And that, like his struggles, would do no good at all.

The room was dark; it always was. There was no natural light – only shapes in the gloom. One of the shapes resolved itself into a man standing over him.

“Lie still, one eight nine. The more you fight, the more this will hurt. You should know that by now.”

He whimpered as the man started attaching electrodes to his head and chest. One of the wardens tightened the straps holding him still, preventing him from moving. From hurting himself. From damaging the machinery. He could hear the whine of power building up, blue sparks beginning to arc through the darkness. No, not again. No. No.

The first jolt caught him, tied him in knots and scraped against his nerves, pure bright pain coursing through his body. He pulled involuntarily against the straps. The second jolt was weaker as it always was – the power hadn’t had as much time to build. But he was already sliding into unconsciousness as his body sought refuge from the pain. He didn’t even feel the third jolt.

* * *

The girl ran through the maelstrom like a panther; fluid, bounding motion, completely unfazed by her surroundings. Colour whipped around her, sparks and streaks of impossible light. She spun around to face him; her hair was long, flowing and dark, a streak of vivid scarlet echoing the swirling blood-red colour surrounding her. Her face was made up very pale, eyes dark in contrast. Her tangled layers of black clothes and her pale face gave her the look of a vulture in the strange, red light.

“Hurry up, Doctor! The simulation’s dying!” She seemed to be talking to him. Around her neck hung a smooth red half-moon gemstone, almost glowing in the weird light. It seemed to sparkle, as though made up of many smaller crystals rather than one smooth piece of stone. Through it ran streaks of gold that seemed more like filaments or wires than natural colour variations in the stone. Within the dream he reached up, and was unsurprised to find a similar one hanging around his own neck, tiny wires protruding from the cool, polished surface. It felt as though the two stones should almost fit together somehow...

He woke in a cold sweat, back in his cell. Every muscle ached, but the pain in his head was worse. He was still having dreams. Strange, inexplicable dreams about strange women in strange places. He curled up on his side, staring into the darkness, blinking back tears. Wondering what it meant. Wondering who he was.

* * *

Four months earlier...

The Doctor moved calmly through the cubicles, with the coolly confident air of a man who knows what he’s doing. He didn’t look like an intruder. Silver slipped through the office in his wake, fondling the red gemstone. It was gorgeous. Beautiful. Big and solid, with an

intricacy in its design that led you further and further in, until you were lost in its crimson depths. She wondered if he'd let her keep it when all this was over.

The Doctor's hands slid over the keypad so smoothly, it didn't look like a hack-job. The hacker-code scrambled the system's electronic locks and the pair strode confidently deeper into the building.

"So, Doctor?"

"Mmm?"

"When we switch this thing off, where will we be?"

"We'll still be here, this building will still be here and that particularly repugnant plastic aspidistra will still be here, more's the pity. But the way it will be perceived by the poor souls caught up in the simulation will be different. Ah, here we are."

The room was deserted, filled with the strong hum of sleeping computers and the tangy air of many electronics packed into a small space. It was cold, heavily air-conditioned for the benefit of the machinery. Silver pulled her shrug closer around her shoulders.

"So this is where it's all controlled from?"

"Yes. These computers are what D'Asquoin is using to control this whole reality."

"So we trash the place?"

The Doctor gave Silver a withering look. "My dear child, violence is not the answer to a subtle system like this." He removed a compact disc from his jacket pocket and held it up to the light. Silver could see that it was slightly thicker and not quite as wide as a normal CD; one of the Doctor's magic Gallifreyan discs that, despite being the wrong size, seemed to be compatible with anything and capable of doing anything.

"Observe." The Doctor pressed the button to open the CD drive on the mainframe. He placed his disc in with a flourish and pushed it gently shut.

Nothing happened.

Silver looked around as nothing continued to happen.

The Doctor checked his watch with a secret smile.

The lights went out and the room suddenly became very quiet as the aircon stopped abruptly and the background hum whined away. Silver ran to the door. It was shut. She waved at the motion detector perched above the doorway. The red light refused to respond.

"We're trapped!"

"Of course. The virus wiped out the power supply – there's no electricity to power the doors. Or the elevators. Or any of the infrastructure in this..." The Doctor was interrupted by banging from the other side of the door. They'd been found. Through the reinforced glass, Silver could see guards arriving, getting ready to take out the door.

"Hang on, how come they're still out there – aren't they a part of the simulation?"

"Of course not. They're real people who were caught up in it, just like us."

"So how come they don't realise it's over? Why are they still acting like D'Asquoin matters?"

"It's all they've ever known, my dear. Within the construct of the simulated reality..."

"Hey, can we have this discussion later? There's a dozen cops out there with big guns, and we're gonna run out of air in here soon."

"Your wish is my command, Mademoiselle Silverstein." The Doctor pressed the blue badge on his lapel, and the room filled with blue light and noise as the TARDIS arrived.

* * *

"There is an easier way to do all this."

He looked up at the warden standing in the doorway. He still ached all over, a dull, booming headache a reminder that the strange dreams had kept him awake most of the night. He was still curled up on his bunk, clutching the pillow tight. They seemed to let him lie in the day after Treatment.

“Easier?”

The warden plonked the tray of food down on the table. Breakfast, or maybe it was dinner. It was hard to tell some days.

“We’ve been trying to get your memory back, friend, but it’s not working at all, is it? These dreams can’t be memories unless you come from outer space, huh?” The warden helped him to stand, leading him gently over to the table. He wasn’t sure that he liked being called “friend”, but it was better than a number. Why couldn’t he remember his own name?

“Some of the people here, they don’t use that kind of Therapy.” He looked up from his porridge. “There’s a solution, an injection, something new from the labs. Basically, it wipes out everything in your head, and you start over again. Get educated again from scratch, become a functioning member of society.”

“No.”

“You sure? You know the other option is that this keeps happening.” The warden traced a finger over a bruise on the man’s temple from the session the night before.

“I don’t want to be someone else: I want to know who I already am!”

The warden shrugged, moved away. “Does it really matter who you are?”

The door slammed shut.

* * *

The field was slowly but methodically turning into a training camp. Rows of neat khaki tents stood stiffly along the western approach. A temporary fence lay on the ground, waiting for the last of the postholes to be dug before it was lifted into position.

A team of the youngest soldiers was digging holes down in the gully on the southern approach. Over the rise, a big, old building loomed in the distance.

“Hey, what’s that place over there?”

“Nothing you’d know about, doughnut.”

“Oh, that’s where they hid your deodorant?”

“No, that there’s a lunatic asylum. Where they put people who aren’t pulling their weight in society. Dead people who haven’t stopped breathing yet. Bludgers and no-hopers and doughnuts like you.”

The first solder put her head down and dug her next hole. She was thinking. She worked around until her back was to her colleagues, and sneaked her hand up to her chest. Underneath her fatigues, she wore a red half-moon gem, shot through with gold filaments. Maybe she’d find him there. Maybe he wasn’t dead. If he was anywhere, maybe he’d be there. Oh, please let him be there. Please let him still be alive.

“Silverstein! Stop trying to think and get that latrine dug or you’ll be on punishment detail until you’re a little old lady!”

Yeah, she thought, sure. Like life could get any worse.

* * *

The Chairman of the Board shuffled his papers. The rest of the Board sat back: there was an unwritten rule that 189’s treatment was at the Chairman’s discretion.

“So, even after everything we’ve put him through, there’s still memories leaking back in?”

“Yes, sir.”

The warden stood to attention. He didn’t address the Facility’s Board of Governors very often, only when they wanted an update on 189. The chairman stroked his neatly trimmed beard, deep in thought. At last he spoke.

“The subject is starting to remember his, how shall we term it, “terrorist activities” despite our best efforts to remove his memory. He’s obviously a good deal tougher than he looks.” The Chairman leaned forward across the mahogany desk.

“This is a very dangerous man, but potentially a very useful one. I don’t want him damaged. Yet. Since physical erasure hasn’t worked, time for something subtler.”

“Sir?”

“Give 189 a place on one of the outdoor work teams. My people will look after the rest.”

* * *

It was nice to stroll around in the sunshine. The work was surprisingly easy, apparently nothing more than wandering around a patch of wasteland beside the Facility in loose formation, picking up rubbish and putting it in a bag.

“Enjoy it while you can, ladies and gentlemen. When you’re through with the garbage, you get to start on the rocks!”

He turned his attention back to the weedy grass in front of him. He didn’t trust the guard, warden, soldier, whatever he was, who was watching over them. He treated his charges with the slightly manic bonhomie of a confirmed sadist with complete power, and the black mongrel dog by his side looked like its teeth weren’t just there for chewing kibble.

Wedge against the fence in one corner was a piece of newspaper that the rest of the work team seemed to have missed. He wandered over and retrieved it, eyed closely by the dog. He went to shove it in his bag, then paused. He gently uncurled the paper, watching the dog out of the corner of his eye.

It was him.

His own photo looked back at him out of the paper.

His train of thought was interrupted by the guard blowing his whistle.

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the end of the shift. Please disembark using the forward cabin door and make it snappy, ‘cause Barker here’s feeling peckish. Move it!”

He tucked the crumbled paper down the front of his shirt and scrambled through the long grass back towards the Facility. He felt better than he had for... how long? Longer than he could remember. Now he might find some answers.

* * *

Get in a truck. Drive three hours to some godforsaken piece of wasteland halfway between nowhere and nowhere else. Put up a tent and sleep in it. Dig a hole and pee in it. Take down the tent. Fill in the hole. Get back on the truck and go home. Repeat until a war starts, then do the same thing on another piece of wasteland that happens to be in a combat zone.

Silverstein was filling in holes. This particular exercise was over, with nothing to show for it but a few new bruises and a bit of churned-up ground. This time tomorrow she’d be back at base, marching around. Polishing her boots. This wasn’t her, this wasn’t her life.

This was all a horrible mistake. But, she reflected, this was the best of a series of unattractive options since the Doctor disappeared. She looked over towards the place whatsisname had called a lunatic asylum for the thousandth time in the last few days. As if. As if he was still alive. As if he was there. As if she'd happen to catch a glimpse of him strolling by. As if he'd recognise her with her hair all cut off and wearing army greens, and sweep in on a magic blue chariot and rescue her from this god-awful mess. As if, as if, as if.

Hang on, wait. Was that...

"Silverstein, the company isn't going to wait for you if you'd rather lean on your shovel than do an honest day's work!"

Silver attacked the hole with renewed vigour. It was him. She'd seen him, she was sure. That lanky frame was unmistakable. He was alive. She was so happy that she didn't even mind the smell.

* * *

Back in his cell, he eagerly spread out the bit of paper. The only light came from the gathering dusk outside the barred window. He gently smoothed out the creases and stared, trying to make out the words. There was a strange moment of transition, as through the print had been in one language a moment ago, but subtly changed in the space of a blink and turned into something that he could read. He skimmed through it quickly, trying to find the information he wanted. Trying to find out who he was.

* * *

He sat back on the bunk, leaning against the wall. Forgotten, the paper fluttered to the floor in a stray breeze. The man in the photo was a wanted man. A terrorist. It was a security camera shot of a man who had destroyed the computer system controlling a building that housed six government offices, a library and a child care center. He racked his brains, trying to remember. He couldn't. The bit about the government offices didn't bother him greatly, but this man targeted civilians, and that didn't sit well with his conscience. Neither did random acts of destruction.

He came back to life, unfolded himself from the bed and strode over to the jug of water resting on the table beside the remains of his last meal. He peered in, trying to find his reflection. Maybe that wasn't him at all, maybe he was so keen to be somebody that he was superimposing his face onto random strangers. He tipped a bit of water out onto the metal plate, angled it towards the fading light.

It *was* him. Give or take a shave and a few good meals, he was the man in the photo.

The terrorist.

Was that who he was? Who he *wanted* to be?

"There's a solution, an injection, something new from the labs. Basically, it wipes out everything in your head, and you start over again..."

He laid down, but not to sleep. To think.

* * *

Silverstein was already awake when the first klaxon rang out across the complex. She'd been lying, pretending to sleep, because if she wasn't asleep she should have been up, "volunteering" to sweep the courtyard or peel the spuds or blanco some webbing or something. She rolled out of bed and hauled her greens on. It crossed her mind that once

she would have felt self conscious changing in public, in a dorm full of other soldiers of both sexes.

But everyone else was like her, too focused on staying conscious and getting clothed to worry about sizing up their roommates. Her new T-shirts were smaller than the ones that she'd been issued when she'd first signed up, but Silver didn't feel as though she had lost weight. She just didn't feel like her anymore. It wasn't just her hair, sacrificed on the barber's floor. She knew that she must have lost fat, gained muscle; she was coping better with the long marches and heavier weights, so she must be fitter. But she didn't feel like *her* anymore.

The next klaxon sounded while she was still deep in thought. She pulled on her jacket and joined the end of the line as her company filed out of the dorm. Outside, other groups were sorting themselves out into line, filing through the big stone archway that separated the sleeping quarters from the parade ground. Silver was too far back to hear the order, so she just started marching when the person in front of her did.

Down at the archway, what Silver privately referred to as the "Mexican Wave" was starting. As the first soldiers in line reached the arch and filed through, they raised their left arm. If you looked closely, the faint bulge of the microchip was just visible beneath the skin. The reader was bolted to the original stone arch, about seven feet from the ground. The right height to read the chip as the soldiers raised their arm. From Silver's perspective it was not unlike a centipede's undulating legs rippling towards her, as the line progressed through the arch into the parade grounds. She lifted her own arm, feeling the now-familiar electronic tingle as her chip was read. Apparently it saved time on roll call.

* * *

"Right, now here's a great opportunity, men. Advanced training camp. Mainly operational stuff, a chance to improve what we should all be doing well." Silver looked straight ahead and made eye contact with no-one, particularly not the Sergeant who was probably giving her a pointed look. He didn't like her. Ever since that incident with the boot polish...

"They're looking for thirty men for a full week back on Tavistock Hill – green company knows all about it, they've just been there..."

Silver's mind clicked into gear. She was green patrol – that bit of wasteland beside the loony bin was Tavistock Hill. This was too good an opportunity to miss. Even if it meant digging more latrines.

Silverstein's hand was the first to go up. Then a few keen young things with shiny shoes and straight creases.

"Right. That's twenty-two. We need thirty, and we're going to stand here till we get thirty!"

Slowly a few reluctant hands went up. Another chip-reader skimmed across the parade grounds on a flywire, recording the volunteers' numbers.

* * *

They'd finished the last of the rubbish yesterday, and now the work team was pulling up weeds, shifting rocks, and generally bringing a bare-earth policy to bear on the block of land. The ground was hard and dry, and pulling out weeds was tough going. By lunchtime, his hands were bleeding.

"The offer still stands, friend."

He turned around to find his warden, the one who'd offered the memory-erasing drug, standing behind him.

"I'm not interested." He turned back to his work.

"No?"

"No." But the warden could taste the indecision in his voice.

* * *

Silver peered through a patch of scrubby undergrowth near the fence. There he was. The Doctor. Her brow furrowed in concern; he wasn't looking well. Thinner. Neglected. He was talking to some bloke in uniform with a shady look. She turned around; back to piling rocks in a heap. And she thought army work was pointless. As the shady bloke left, she slithered over to fence.

"Doctor!"

He didn't respond.

"Doctor!" She flicked a pebble through the chain-link fence. Her aim was good; it landed almost in his hands as he reached out for another stone. "Doctor!"

He looked up. A soldier, a girl soldier, was lurking on the other side of the fence. She was frantically trying to get somebody's attention. He looked around, but nobody else had noticed. He inched closer to the fence, pointed at himself and raised an eyebrow. *Me?*

She nodded, smiling warmly. "Doctor, it's me. Silver."

"I'm not a doctor. I'm a patient here."

"No, you're *the* Doctor. Never mind all that crap, Doc, it's me – Silver."

"I don't know you."

"Don't do this to me, Doc. I've had it up to here with playing bloody mind games. Listen. I'm AWOL, and if I get caught they'll probably shoot me. Now come on!"

"Listen, young lady. I don't know you. And if you're something to do with the... things... I'm supposed to have been involved with, I'm not sure I want to."

She reached into the front of her fatigues, and dragged out an amulet, a gemstone, so smoothly polished it had a slick, oily sheen. Traces of gold laced through the red.

"Very nice. Now go away."

He turned his back and walked away.

* * *

Silver slid down into the bushes. She was confident that no-one would find her for the time being. She wouldn't be missed until this evening; then it would be on for young and old. She could hide – she could hide well; it was the only useful thing that she'd learnt in the army. But she couldn't hide forever. She'd be found. They'd shoot her for desertion. And the Doctor didn't remember her.

She laid down in the bushes, curled into a ball, and started to cry.

* * *

He pressed a button pinned to the lapel of the jacket that he was wearing, and the cold, sterile room was filled with a husky grinding noise and eerie blue light. A police box appeared, standing askew in a corner as though it didn't recognise the walls' authority. He had a key; he unlocked the box and went inside, followed by the strange outlandish girl. Within the box was larger than without, but within the dream it didn't bother him unduly.

“So D’Asquoin’s dusted now, is he?”

“Hopefully so, my dear. After a nice cup of tea, I shall persuade the old girl to perform a good, thorough scan of the surrounding area, to make sure that there aren’t any sleeper servers the virus could have missed.” He patted the console comfortingly. Silver hefted the red gemstone.

“So can I chuck this thing now? Red doesn’t resonate real well with me, and these wires sticking out keep catching on my top. Look, I’ve got a big ladder right down to my...”

He shooshed her silent. “That THING, young lady, is one of D’Asquoin’s remote data backups.” He gently stroked his own, a fat blood-red swirl of glassy bioplastic housing the building blocks of the false reality that they’d just unravelled. “His whole empire could be rebuilt from either of these little trinkets. You could recreate a working portion of the matrix from either one of these. I’ll store them away somewhere, safely.”

* * *

The Doctor woke in a cold sweat. Oh God, what had he done? Silver. His friend. His companion. He’d abandoned her. She’d tracked him down, risked her life to find him, and he’d abandoned her. The dream had been the final chink in the wall holding back his memories. D’Asquoin.

The false reality, a localised cognition-bending computer matrix designed to produce a more efficient, effective society. Prosperous. For D’Asquoin at least. He remembered the TARDIS stalling, just before they had time to get that cup of tea, ancient systems screaming as it was caught and paralysed by one of those sleepers he hadn’t scanned for yet. An emergency crash-landing, only a few feet and a few minutes from where they’d left. With the TARDIS paralysed, it had been helpless as D’Asquoin’s goons dragged him and Silver out. His amulet had been taken; he vaguely remembered a blow to the head.

The last thing he’d seen before he passed out was Silver punching a guard in the stomach, kneeing the other in the groin and running for her life.

* * *

Why was it so hard to act naturally when it *was* an act? The Doctor wandered out into the yard for another work shift. He tried to mimic the vague, slightly lost expressions of the other inmates. Most of the rocks were gone now, and they were leveling the hilly site. By hand. With shovels. It was going to be a big job, but then they had plenty of time. The Doctor collected his shovel and found a lumpy spot near the fence. Where he’d met Silver the day before. Hoping she would come back. Hoping she was still around, that she hadn’t run for her life, or been found. Or been shot. Between shovelfuls, he looked intently into the undergrowth on the other side of the fence. Was that a movement in the bushes? *Silver?* No, it was just a bird.

The guard with the dog was making a slow circuit around the site. He gave the Doctor a beady-eyed look.

“And what are you finding so jolly interesting about that there fence today, my good man?”

“Nothing.”

“Then keep your eyes off it and on your work. Wouldn’t want it to look like you were plotting anything, would it?”

“I suppose not.”

“No – Barker might not like it.”

He pulled on the dog's lead and moved off to harass another worker.

* * *

Silver hadn't slept, but she had a heavy, muzzy feeling in her head like she'd just woken up at a strange time of day. She felt terrible. She was hungry and dehydrated and hadn't slept for two days, her nerves on edge from the constant hiding and scanning for danger. And the Doctor didn't know her. Or didn't want to know her. She froze at the sound of voices, but it was just the workers on the other side of the fence. Maybe he'd be there. Maybe he'd know her. Maybe he'd shop her if she showed herself again. But it was that or skulk in the undergrowth until she ran out of water.

"Doctor?"

Her voice was little more than a whisper, but he heard her. He moved closer to the fence, apparently attacking a lump of dirt that offended him deeply.

"Silver! Are you all right?"

"I'll keep. You?"

"I have been better."

"You ready to bust out, then?"

"Ah, now before you do anything rash, we'd best consider the gentleman with the large dog."

"Dog's dangerous?"

"Not as dangerous as the human, my dear. Shoosh!"

The Doctor scratched his pile of dirt flat and made much of stepping it down as Barker and his man returned.

"Working hard or hardly working?"

"The former, I like to believe." The Doctor cursed himself as soon as he opened his mouth. The guard just gave him a cool, hard stare.

"Watch yourself."

The Doctor shoveled for a hundred heartsbeats before daring to look up. The guard had moved on.

"Sssss," he hissed at Silver in the undergrowth.

"Ready?"

"What had you in mind? I'm not sure I'm in peak physical condition for fence-scaling."

"Don't worry." Silver wriggled up to the fence, starting to attack the wire with something. The Doctor looked surprised.

"Bolt cutters. Also good for opening beer bottles and cutting toenails. And they fold down small."

"You're well prepared."

"Join the army, see the world, get free hardware supplies. Here, will you fit through this?"

Silver had cut a hole through the fence almost big enough for the Doctor's slender frame. He leaned forward to inspect it, when he heard snuffling behind him. The dog.

"Quick! Now!"

He dived through the hole, almost made it. One arm got stuck and he pulled violently, leaving a deep, bleeding scratch as the raw wires dragged through his skin. Silver grabbed his hands and pulled, and the Doctor shot forward and into the bushes.

"Cover the hole with something!"

"Too late, the dog's seen us."

As the pair crawled deeper into the briars, they heard shouts and running footsteps behind them, and the wail of an alarm.

* * *

The Doctor and Silver huddled together in a natural depression in the ground, hidden deep within the scrub. Silver risked a peek through the leaves.

“We can’t stay here. They’ll have that dog after us by now.”

“How far does this vegetation extend?”

“Not far enough to be a decent cover for long. We’ve got to make a move. Have you still got your half of the backup widget?”

“Pardon?”

“Red stone thing, like this one. We nicked them from D’Asquoin. Short sleazy guy with a big ego.”

“No, it’s gone. It must have been taken...” The Doctor’s mind was ticking over. “The main building back at the Facility, the big brick place. It’s there.”

“Is that a certainty or a hunch, Doc?”

“No, I can remember, they took it there and...” He broke off, brow creasing. Silver realised he was in pain.

“Are you OK, Doctor?”

* * *

“The army? Best of a bad set of options, I guess.”

They were crawling through the bushes, the dog keeping pace, waiting for them to break cover. “Look, after they got you, they restarted part of that virtual reality. Just a little bit, these couple of miles or so. But if I took off, I’d never track you down. So I hung around. Couldn’t get a job – didn’t have a number. Couldn’t get a handout – there are none in this loopy place. It was learn to shoot or sell myself, so I took the option that came with a free bolt cutter.”

“You’re a very brave woman, Rachel Silverstein.”

Silver went quiet for a moment. She stopped.

“Yeah, well right now I’m a brave woman who’s run out of bushes to hide in. You ready to make a run for it?”

“Let’s go.”

The Doctor and Silver shot out of the bushes in different directions. The dog went for Silver, the smaller target. She swung around as it lunged for her, catching it in the stomach with her boot. The animal slumped backwards with a hollow sound and lay whimpering in the dust. Silver used the momentum of her kick to keep moving, back to face the guard. She could sense his indecision; he didn’t know whether to attack Silver or tend to his moaning Barker. In the second it took to choose, Silver took the initiative and gave him a punch to the jaw, followed by one to the stomach. He was down now, not out but not moving either. She looked up to see if the Doctor needed a hand.

With Silver distracting the dog, the Doctor made it halfway up the Facility drive before he was stopped. Now he had two wardens closing in on him. One had some sort of baton, the other was unarmed. The Doctor was backing away from the armed one, right into the arms of the other man. Silver was about to yell at him to be careful when she realised she’d seen this manoeuvre before.

The armed warden moved in, closer, ready to take the Doctor out with a blow to the head. At the last moment, the Time Lord ducked and twisted sideways, removing his head from the equation, and the kosh thumped down onto the other warden. The Doctor used the moment of confusion to break free and bolt for the door. Silver ran after him, giving the still-confused men a shove on the way past.

Three steps up. One two three. Big oak door, marble lobby, thick red plush on the floor. Nice nice, no time to linger. Reception area. Receptionist, young human female completely unprepared for lunatics bursting in. Leave her standing open-mouthed and keep going. Which door, which door? The big one, of course, the big fancy one.

The Doctor and Silver burst into the Chairman's office. The first thing Silver noticed was the amulet. It was lying in the center of a massive mahogany table. The golden wires that laced through its center were fully extended, reaching out from the bioplastic and meshing with various pieces of technology. Silver didn't have time to take them all in, but there was nothing too weird about it, nothing too "alien". Mainly just computer stuff, hard drives and cables and one of those laptops with a dinky little wireless internet antenna, like her Dad's. The Doctor barely spared the lash-up on the table a glance. He was more interested in the man sitting behind it.

The Chairman of the Facility's Board of Directors exuded power. He was calm in a way that told you that his mind was never still. He sat motionless, regarding the Doctor through dark, cunning eyes. The Doctor looked back. Slowly, the man raised an eyebrow, and broke into a hearty laugh.

"Good Lord, Doctor! Look at the state you're in."

"You're looking well too, D'Asquoin."

"I am well, Doctor. Very well. And when you and your pet girl come to your senses and hand over the second amulet you've been good enough to home deliver, I shall be even better."

The Doctor gave him a cold look. "Why on earth do you bother with all this tat, D'Asquoin?" The Chairman looked up, affronted, not used to being questioned.

"There are easier ways to make money, ways that don't involve recycling bits of alien technology and interfering with the free will of the surrounding population. You've made enough millions the old fashioned way; why start with all this nonsense now?"

D'Asquoin sighed, meeting the Doctor's gaze. His dark eyes were intense, deep and powerful.

"This is not about money, Doctor. This is a philanthropic gesture."

The Doctor looked at him as though he'd just slithered out from underneath a stone. "Don't give me that, Doctor. You know what people are like. What humans are like. Left to their own devices, what is the population of a dreary little place like Rochdale going to achieve? They'll work in jobs better done by machines; dragging coal out of the ground or digging furrows in the dirt to plant potatoes. They'll drink beer that's not fit to be tipped down the gutter, fight like children, go home to their battered wives and father another generation to do exactly the same."

The Doctor made to interrupt, but D'Asquoin held up a finger.

"Don't butt in, Doctor. I know what I'm talking about. Don't spin me some yarn about how each of those individual lives contains moments of joy and bliss and fluff like that. I know that life, Doctor. I've lived it. It's pointless. I'm giving these people an alternative. They can become part of my program, part of something bigger. Instead of squandering their lives, they can achieve something great. They can become immortal, by being part of something bigger and longer lasting than themselves."

"Your wallet."

“Precisely, my dear Doctor.”

“You, Sir, are an abhorrence.” The Doctor was furious. “You don’t seriously believe a place in a structured reality is better than a real life? Plugging people into your machine without any say or option isn’t giving them freedom. It’s slavery.” The Doctor grasped Silver by the wrist, turned it to show D’Asquoin the scar where her chip had been implanted.

“You call this philanthropy?”

Silver gave the Doctor a wink. She used his grasp on her arm as leverage to flip herself upwards, onto the table. She kicked aside cables and boxes and bits of random technology, until only the amulet remained. Before D’Asquoin could stop her, she lifted a boot and brought it down hard. The gem shattered, razor blades of sharp red bioplastic showering the desk, golden wires curling back in a futile act of self-defence.

“You little...” D’Asquoin didn’t have a chance to finish the sentiment before Silver kicked him in the head.

* * *

“You haven’t killed him, have you?” The Doctor’s attention was focused on the safe in the corner of D’Asquoin’s office.

“Nah, he’ll come round soon. What are we going to do with him?”

“Nothing. Once I’ve retrieved my accountments...” There was a satisfying click from the safe. “... I think that we should depart forthwith.”

“What, and just let that great ape get away with all this?”

The Doctor slipped the TARDIS key back into his pocket, and smiled as he gathered the blue recall button from within the safe.

“Now that the structured reality has been gently dealt with courtesy of your size nine army boot, I think that he’s going to have quite a bit of explaining to do, don’t you?”

The Doctor pressed the recall button, and gathered Silver into a warm hug as the room was filled with blue light and mechanical noise.

THE END

* * *

“That was nice, that really hit the spot.”

Silver yawned and lay back on the grass, cradling her wine glass. The Doctor was sitting on the picnic rug, flicking a few stray ants away. They were away from the crowds here, more or less alone under spreading bluegums, the band still audible in the background. The sun was warm, no longer the fierce heat of midday, but a gentle, afternoon warmth that wrapped the gardens in gold and made sleep inviting.

“Where to next, Milady?”

“Oh, wherever. I don’t mind. Just kicking back is nice for a change.” Silver blew a few strands of hair out of her eyes. “Hey, any chance of a refill?”

Silver fought to keep her hair under control as the Doctor poured her wine. “I feel like a giant pom pom. This hair’s not long enough to do anything with, but it’s long enough to be a damn nuisance.”

“It’s growing back beautifully: it’s already five inches long after only month.”

“Yeah, that Laker-whatsian hair oil’s great stuff, Doctor.” She sat back against a tree, soaking in the warmth of the afternoon. “So’s this wine, mind you. Where do you want to go?”

“I’m sorry?”

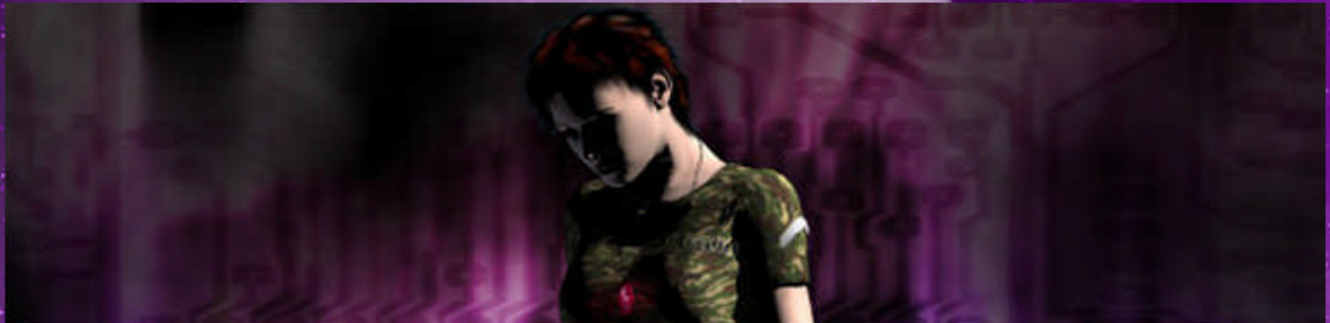
“You got any plans for where we go next?”

The Doctor sighed contentedly. “You’re right, Rachel. Sometimes it’s nice just to ‘kick back’ for a while.”

THE
DOCTOR WHO
PROJECT

DOES IT MATTER?

JODIE VAN DE WETERING



“Silver?”

He is trapped in a world of shadows, haunted by memories of things that never happened and dreams of a woman he doesn't know: a strange, wild young woman with fire in her eyes and a strange amulet around her neck.

She is lost and alone, forced to become a soldier to survive in a strange new world.

In this world, nothing is as it seems and people are little more than numbers - something, somewhere has gone badly wrong.

What has it all to do with the red, glowing amulet, quietly biding its time and waiting to be reunited with its owner?

And is the greater danger to the Doctor and Silver the immediate physical threat, or the tangled web of lies and deceit that hold this world together



This is another in a series of original fan authored
Doctor Who fiction published by The Doctor Who Project
featuring the ninth Doctor as played by Anton Robbins

