

THE
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PROJECT

THE WANDERER



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The Wanderer

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“C’mon, Brooksy! If we don’t get back, Old Man Higgins is gonna go nuts!”

Tom Brooker sighed, wanting to ignore Danny Carson’s strident voice but knowing his fellow tech-head was right. Their boss could be a real jerk, and most of the others at the consulting firm where Tom worked thoroughly believed the man had a stopwatch for a heart and a time clock for a brain. The man lived and died by a schedule.

Tom paid for his coffee – too expensive, but then what else was new? – and turned toward the exit of the overcrowded Starbucks. He could just see Danny’s curly fair hair standing out over the people waiting in line for their double latte’s and mochachino’s and what have you.

“There you are,” Danny said, as Tom got closer. “Get a move on!”

“Geez, keep your shirt on,” Tom snorted. “We just need to cross the street – “

“Yeah, like trying to cross a river on a leaking raft,” Danny retorted.

With those parting words, Danny forded the stream of pedestrians toward the crosswalk. Tom followed, not really wanting to go back but knowing he didn’t dare lose his job. Working a cubicle was a bore – even if the actual computer stuff was fairly interesting – and it wasn’t something he looked forward to. But it was better than going to prison, and if he didn’t want to end up breaking the terms of his probation he needed to stay in a steady job.

He was so distracted he didn’t see the woman until he’d dumped his drink all over her.

Tom swore as he realized he’d got mochachino all down the woman’s dress. “I’m sorry,” he groaned, trying to wipe the coffee off with his hand.

“Watch where you’re going next time,” the woman replied, backing off from Tom’s attempt to help her.

Tom glanced up from the mess, and got a good look at her. And thought his heart was going to stop.

She was the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen; brown hair, nice cheekbones, perfect lips, and the most vivid green eyes. He didn’t want to stop looking at her, but when she started to look puzzled he knew that staring was a very bad thing indeed.

“Sorry,” he apologized again. “Let me buy you a coffee to make up for it. I’ll even pay to get your dress cleaned.”

“That’s not necessary – “

“It is, really. I was the one who bumped into you.” In the back of Tom’s mind he realized that all he *really* wanted was to get her name and number, because he *really* wanted to see her again. Those intense eyes regarded him closely, and Tom felt like he was being examined under some sort of microscope. He wanted to fidget, but told himself to stop being a teenager. He couldn’t help but wonder if his curly hair was even more ruffled than usual, though, and seriously fought the urge to pat it down.

“Well...all right,” she finally relented. She rummaged around in her bag, which had managed to escape the mochachino disaster. “Here’s my card. My mobile is there, it’s the number I usually answer.”

Tom took the card like it was some sort of precious offering. “I’m Tom, by the way....Tom Brooker. And you are...” he glanced at the card... “Anna Cross.”

The woman nodded. “Just give me a ring later, and we’ll talk about the dry cleaning. But I could really use the coffee now, if you don’t mind.”

Tom was late getting back to work, but even as Higgins was raking him over the coals for it, all he could think about were those green eyes.

The Doctor knew there was something off the moment he stepped out of the TARDIS.

He'd been to Sparana Prime several times in the past, and liked to think that he was fairly familiar with the rhythms of the planet. It was actually one of his favorite fishing holes, and had spent quite a few peaceful afternoons there just lazing in the sun, with nothing but his pole for company. But this...it was different. He would have sensed it, even if he hadn't got that message from his old friend, Chancellor Aquires.

And here he'd thought – just for a second, mind – that he was being invited back for another fishing trip.

He'd landed in a quiet corner of the royal palace, in the exact same place he always did when visiting. It was in a small storeroom off the main kitchens, and it had been the landing place of choice ever since that last visit, so long ago. The Doctor remembered all the fuss when an under-cook had come in and found the strange box, and what had ensued...but the misunderstandings had been cleared up, and he'd remained friends with Aquires ever since.

And so, he found himself back in the royal palace, walking through the kitchens toward the Chancellor's office. The usual bustle of castle life was gone, replaced by empty corridors and dead silences.

This wasn't right, not be any stretch of the imagination.

The Doctor found his footsteps hurrying faster than they normally would have, not liking the wrongness of what was – or wasn't – going on around him. Something had happened, something that had caused Aquires to summon him across time and space...and not for a fishing holiday.

The office he was searching for was on one of the upper floors, and it was no time at all before the Doctor stood in front of it, his hand on the knob, a part of him not really wanting to know what had occurred, because it would be bad.

He opened the door.

The Chancellor of Sparana Prime had a well-appointed office, with tall shelves stuffed with books and comfortable chairs scattered about the large space. A desk built of red wood sat in front of a large picture window, and it was there that the man who'd summoned the Doctor sat.

Aquires had aged. Badly. The Sparanans were a long-lived race, and the Chancellor was really only somewhere in middle age. But he looked so much older, almost ancient, his brilliant blue eyes shadowed and his brown hair streaked with gray.

The man favored the Doctor with a smile when he looked up and realized who was at the door. "You came!" he exclaimed.

"Of course I did." This was going to be bad, he could tell. He took a seat in a chair opposite the desk. "What's going on? I don't think you've invited me here for a vacation."

"I am sorry, but no." Aquires sighed. "The news is bad, I'm afraid...there was an accident."

The Doctor took a seat. He didn't say anything, but the silence in the palace was suddenly explained. His hearts sank.

The Chancellor didn't speak for a moment, then rubbed his eyes with his hand. "They're dead, Doctor...the entire royal family." His voice sounded hollow, filled with pain.

No, this wasn't good at all. The Sparanan royal family had ruled the planet for hundreds of years, and he had to wonder just who was in charge. "Has this sort of thing been planned for?"

"I notice you didn't ask how it happened." The Sparanan was trying to sound flippant, but it didn't work.

"I was more concerned with the political ramifications."

"Well, that's the reason I asked you to come. I need your help."

The Doctor motioned him to continue.

"It was a flitter accident. The family was going to an affair with one of the barons, and there was a crash. No one survived the explosion." Aqaires rested his head in his hands. "As for the political ramifications...Gods, that's a mess. There's no clear line of succession among the nobility, so I've spent most of my time fighting off claims that are spurious at best. But all that's done is distract everyone from the real threat...the military."

The Doctor barely managed to contain his snort. Yes, it was always the military, wasn't it?

"There's a rather ambitious general by the name of Jaracas who feels it's time for Sparana Prime to take its place as a power amongst the stars...I'm sure you're familiar with the type."

The Doctor nodded, indicating for Aqaires to continue.

"He's been making alliances among the barons and other military leaders, and I can't stop him, he's become too powerful."

"I don't see how I can help you."

The Chancellor sighed. "Not with that, although I wish you could. No...there's a little mission I'd like to ask you to take on, if you will."

The Doctor quirked an eyebrow. Despite himself, he was becoming a little intrigued. "What sort of mission?"

"There's someone who can take the throne, and there would be no doubt as to their authenticity."

"I thought you said the entire royal family was killed."

"The royal family...on Sparana Prime."

The Doctor's lips curled up in a smile. "So, you're saying there's another member of the royal family off world somewhere."

"Yes. The youngest daughter, Laryssia...you met her when she was just a child. She left home over ten years ago claiming it was the pressure of being royalty in the letter she'd gone, and that she wanted to see the rest of the galaxy before she was too old to appreciate it. It was a case of someone truly living up to their name, I suppose."

The Doctor barely controlled his eye rolling. Name the child the Old Sparanan word for "wanderer" and it shouldn't be a surprise when she takes it to heart. "And, so you think I can somehow track her down and bring her home? Aqaires, the Universe is a really big place."

You're going to have to give me something to work with, because there really isn't any way to find her with just her name and the fact that she's a Sparanan."

"I have something you can use to trace her."

"I see. And you couldn't get someone else to use it to find her?"

"You're the only person I trust, Doctor." The man was sounding desperate. "Besides, you've got that TARDIS of yours. You can go anywhere in a heartbeat! Please, you have to find her and bring her home!"

"Let me ask you this...does this general know about her as well?"

Aquires looked as if he didn't want to answer, but he did. "Yes, he does. I'm certain he'll be searching for her too. He knows that any other claim to the throne will make his own impossible."

The Doctor leant back in his chair, considering the Chancellor and his story. There was just some small part of him that really didn't want to get involved, he really hated politics and this situation just reeked of intrigue. Yet, at the same time...if Jaracas was after this long-lost princess, and if he found her...well, the Time Lord was well aware of what would happen to the girl if she fell into the wrong hands. It all came down to protecting someone who might not be able to protect themselves.

"All right," he answered. "I'll try to find her. But I can't guarantee anything –"

The look of relief on Aquires' face stopped the rest he was going to say. "That's all I ask, that you try. Thank you, Doctor! I knew you were the one I could turn to!"

"Just hold onto the grateful words until I can actually give you something to be grateful for. Now, you said there was something I could use to trace her...?"

Valentina Rossi sighed, using the touch screen on her computer to move the layout around into a design that she actually could tolerate. The article itself – on werewolves, no less – was beginning to get on her nerves, only because the writer didn't seem to be able to figure out a simple spell-check program. And then there were the pictures, which were too grainy to be digital, and who used a film camera anymore?

Val sighed again, tucking a lock of auburn hair that had escaped its ponytail behind her ear. She did love her job, but sometimes it managed to completely irritate her...like today. Working as editor for the paranormal journal *Mysterious Times* could actually be rewarding, even though most people she mentioned the magazine to pretty much dismissed it out of hand; it was that close-minded attitude that really bothered her, because there was so much out there, so much that no one knew about.

She went back to her layout, not happy with the way the photo lined up with the text. She was about to do a little cropping when she heard the door slam. "Val?" came the familiar voice of her lodger – and friend, she admitted – Tom Brooker.

"In here," she called out, bringing up the photo editing software.

Tom poked his head around the door to Val's office. "You're home early, aren't you? Isn't this usually your late night?"

Val shrugged. "Decided to bring my work home with me today. Seemed like a good idea at the time..." She got a better look at him; his green eyes were sparkling. "And why do you look like you've just got the best Christmas gift ever?"

Tom grinned. "Oh...I just met the woman of my dreams today, that's all."

She quirked an eyebrow at him. "Oh, really? And how did that happen?"

As Tom explained, Val's skepticism grew. "Even if love at first sight happened, I doubt it would be because you spilt coffee on someone."

"You just have no soul, Val."

She rolled her eyes. "Please, I'm just being sensible."

"Love isn't sensible, you know."

"I'm glad it isn't, if you're gonna be so cynical." He turned to leave.

She was a bit stung by his words. "Where are you going?"

Tom looked back at her. "I'm going to find out more about my new lady friend."

"Well, don't go hacking into things you shouldn't," she warned. The last thing she needed was the police showing up on her doorstep.

Tom just shrugged, then left her alone to do her work.

The Doctor moved around the TARDIS's console, casually flipping switches as he moved, watching as the tracking device Aquires had given him meshed with the controls. He glanced at the coordinates, and shook his head. Of course, it had to be Earth. It seemed the planet was a target for any sort of alien, and if the Doctor didn't already know what Earth's future held he'd despair of the world ever surviving long enough to reach the stars.

He turned away from the console for just a second...and the unmistakable sound of dematerialization sounded through the room. The Doctor's brows drew down in confusion. He couldn't be anywhere near his destination as yet...

When he checked the coordinates, they'd changed.

"What?" he said aloud, not realizing he had. He checked the tracker; it was functioning, but the coordinates were totally wrong. He ran a quick fault locator program, but it came up negative. How did the coordinates change?

There was only one person in the TARDIS; only one person who could have reset the coordinates.

But he didn't remember doing it. And that was worrying.

Shaking his head, the Doctor quickly reset everything, checking the tracker to make sure everything had been connected properly. It had; the coordinates quickly changed themselves back to the way they'd been before...to Earth.

The TARDIS dematerialized, heading toward its original destination, leaving its pilot disturbed and confused.

Tom fidgeted slightly, as he looked up at the building of flats. He'd found Anna Cross's address easily enough online, but he'd decided he was going to do this the right way and call her first, instead of just showing up on her doorstep like some sort of crazy stalker.

And so, he stood nervously on the sidewalk, wondering why he felt like this was a first date, instead of just a simple laundry pick up. After all, he'd offered to get her suit cleaned, and that was what he intended to do.

Taking a deep breath, Tom entered the building, taking the lift up to the fourth floor. He glanced at the paper in his hand; her flat was 4B, which he found easily enough. He hesitated for a brief second, then rapped on the door. He took a breath as the sound of a lock disengaging reached his ears.

Anna was just as beautiful as he remembered...although, to be fair, he'd only met her yesterday. There hadn't been much time for the memory to fade.

She smiled. "Hello, Tom. Won't you come in?"

Tom accepted the invitation, taking a look around. The living room of Anna's flat wasn't cluttered, but it certainly looked lived in. A comfortable-looking sofa and chair took up space around a nice plasma TV, which – judging from the shelf below – was hooked up to a primo entertainment system. Another shelf held DVD's and CD's, and a third was stuffed full of books and magazines.

"Let me get my suit," she went on, "I'll be back in a sec." Anna disappeared down a short hallway that must have led to the bedroom, leaving Tom on his own.

He ambled over to the bookshelf, curious to know what the lady of his dreams was interested in reading. There was quite an eclectic collection, but what really struck him were the two shelves of paranormal books, with another shelf stuffed with magazines and journals based on the same subject.

"My ex-roommate," said Anna from behind him.

He spun; Anna was standing there, holding a hangar with a very familiar suit on it.

"What?" he blurted, feeling a little odd having been caught ogling her shelves.

"My ex-roommate. She was into all that paranormal stuff. She got me interested in it too, it was like she wanted me to share her obsession or something. But, now I keep up with it, because some of it makes sense. Not a lot of course, but some. And, when she moved out, she left me all her books."

"It's a coincidence," Tom answered, "but my roommate edits *Mysterious Times*." He'd noticed several copies in the magazine pile.

Anna laughed. "It's one of the better journals, although some of the articles look like they're written by ten-year-olds."

Tom joined in her laughter. "That's what Val says. It frustrates her...a lot."

"I can imagine. Would you like something to drink?"

Tom wasn't about to turn that down. He wanted to stay as long as possible.

“Hey, Val?”

Val grimaced at the overexcited tone; it was Jack Peters, one of her junior editors.

“What’s up?” she asked, trying to keep the irritation out of her voice. Just another interruption, and she really had to get the next issue put to bed.

“Got a report over the police band,” Jack answered, in his usual hyper way, “there’s been a UFO sighting down by the river. Lots of people are reporting it!”

Okay, maybe this was something to get excited about. “Any other details?”

“Nothing yet, it’s all pretty sketchy.”

Val stood up to get her coat. “Give me directions, I’m going down there.”

The TARDIS materialized with its usual grinding sound.

The Doctor stepped out. Yes, he’d actually made it to the correct coordinates this time; London, in the year 2031. He really did wish that humanoid aliens would find somewhere else to hide. Oh well. Best get on with it.

The Doctor pulled out the detector; it was a small black box that seemed to be content to flash at him as he moved it around to get a bearing. The flash got faster in one direction, toward a block of flats that looked as if they’d been built in the previous century. He started to walk forward, turning onto the sidewalk.

And saw the Hestian bounty hunter lumbering down the same street, toward the same row of flats.

The hunter wasn’t difficult to miss. Standing at over seven feet tall, the Hestian was best described as a Velociraptor on Miracle-Gro. Claws, teeth, and tail...all wrapped up in full body armor that wouldn’t budge for an Earth rocket launcher.

And others were definitely noticing. After all, it was really hard to hide a sentient dinosaur.

People were panicking, trying to avoid the Hestian as it made its surprisingly graceful way down that London street. The Doctor followed, knowing of course that the bounty hunter was after the same thing he was: Laryssia. The last thing the Doctor wanted was a head-on confrontation with the being.

He sighed. Well, he’d just have to cross that bridge when he got to it.

Following the directions that had been downloaded to her PDA, Val drove toward the source of the UFO report. As she turned into a residential area, she began to notice people out on the sidewalks, standing in groups and looking very nervous. Val parked and got out of the vehicle, moving to stand close to one of the gatherings, knowing whatever it was they were discussing had to be about the sighting.

And it was. Apparently the UFO had landed somewhere several streets over, and it had made a horrible noise while doing so. But, for Val, the news that there was some sort of alien roaming the neighborhood was like all of her best dreams coming true.

It doesn't take her long to spot it, either. In fact, it was bloody hard *not* to spot, looking like something out of an old movie she'd once seen about this island filled with dinosaurs; Tom would have remembered what it had been called, but Val couldn't bring it to mind.

Not that that mattered, really. What mattered was that she was seeing an honest-to-God alien.

Or – and this thought drained all the excitement from her at once – it was someone's idea of an early Halloween joke.

Val rolled her eyes. That would actually make more sense than an alien traipsing around, wouldn't it? Come on...why would an alien show itself in a residential neighborhood, for everyone to see? She snorted, a bit angry at herself. It had to be a hoax. There was no other logical explanation.

Tom was finding Anna very pleasant company, which bode well for his intentions of marrying her some day.

He sat across from her on the sofa, drinking some very wonderful tea and listening to her describe her job, which was at a bank just down the street from where Tom worked. Another omen, in his opinion...not that he believed in omens, but he wanted to, in her case. A little voice in the back of his head – it sounded very much like Val's, and when did she become his conscience? – was telling him he was smitten. Tom didn't quite like that word. He felt it didn't quite describe what he was feeling.

He was just getting up the courage to ask her out on a date when there was a loud banging at the door.

Anna jumped about a foot off her chair's cushion; Tom didn't do any better at the sound. It came again, and Tom was off the sofa, his tea forgot. Anna had gone white, and Tom found himself standing in front of her, his hand reaching for his mobile.

On the third bang, the door flew off its hinges. And Tom found himself facing something he'd never in his wildest dreams ever considered seeing.

The Doctor followed the Hestian into the building, staying just far enough behind it to not draw attention to himself.

The bounty hunter seemed to know where it was going; it moved toward a door which turned out to be the stairs. The Doctor hung back, not wishing to be caught in a confined space if the Hestian decided to check if it was being followed and spotted him. He wasn't so sure this was the smartest thing to do, but at the same time he'd given his word to Aquires about finding Laryssia. The problem was, the Hestian was pretty obviously between him and the princess, and unless he got very lucky the Doctor didn't have a clue as to how to get to her first.

He began creeping up the stairs. He'd just reached the second floor when a loud crash sounded from above him.

Saying a particularly nasty word in a language that hadn't been created yet, the Doctor began taking the stairs two at a time, following the tracker as it began beeping somewhat more wildly than before. He'd known he would be too late, but that didn't stop him from rushing into an attempted rescue. Not that there wasn't a lot he could do against a Hestian, but he had to try.

More noises were coming from just past the door to the fourth floor, alerting the Doctor that this was his destination. He heard shouting and struggling as he burst through the door and into the hallway.

The Hestian was wrestling with a young, brown-haired man, and a pretty woman who had to be Princess Laryssia.

The hunter was dragging them from one of the flats. The man seemed to giving the Hestian more trouble, fighting as best he could against the alien's inhuman strength. The princess was more subdued, yet it was the look of terror in her face that made the Doctor step forward.

"Stop!" he called out, hoping to be able to reason with the Hestian, but knowing in his hearts it wouldn't work.

And it didn't.

The hunter slung Laryssia over one shoulder, pinning her there easily even as it reached for the rather large gun at its hip.

The Doctor dove into the stairwell as the Hestian fired, stumbling into someone who'd managed to come up behind him. They tumbled to the ground together, the Doctor managing to twist himself just enough so he wouldn't fall completely onto the unfortunate person.

Val saw the strangely dressed man, and wondered just who he was. He didn't seem at all fazed by the so-called alien going into the building, and in fact looked as if he was following. Her curiosity piqued, Val went along for the ride, so to speak.

By the time she entered the building, both the walking lizard and the man were nowhere to be seen. Val stood there, chewing her lip in thought. Why on Earth would those two come here, unless...perhaps this was where they lived? That would make sense, she guessed.

Then there was a click. Val turned in the direction of the noise, but all she saw was a nondescript door...and she realized quite quickly that it had to have been the door closing that she'd heard.

That made her snooping much easier.

Val started up the steps as fast as she could go, not wanting to lose them if they decided to leave the stairway. She needed to know what was really going on, to expose whatever it was to the light of day. Her heart was pounding, and it wasn't just from the climb.

She heard the crash as she was rounding the third floor landing.

Putting on a fresh burst of speed, Val bounded upward. She could see the door to the fourth floor hallway was open, and she sprung into the gap just behind the strange man.

She managed to glimpse Tom, fighting with that lizard-thing, before the stranger tumbled into her, and she fell to the floor in a heap with him.

But Val was almost blinded by a white flash of light from the hallway, even as she struggled to rise from under the man pinning her to the concrete.

“Get off!” she cried, pushing the man away.

The stranger obliged, standing to his feet. He turned back to the hallway, not even bothering to help Val to her feet. Irritated and more than a little worried, Val stood up on her own, following him onto the fourth floor.

Tom and the lizard were nowhere to be seen. They’d seemingly vanished into thin air.

The man was heading into one of the flats, and Val followed, needing some answers. She had no idea what had happened, but it had to do with Tom. He was her friend, and she had to know what he’d got involved in.

“What the hell is going on?” she demanded hotly, stepping over the shattered threshold.

The man was poking around the flat, which had been pretty well trashed. The sofa had been overturned, and books and papers scattered all over. The rather large plasma screen TV was still on the wall, but the screen had a fine web of cracks running through it.

“Hm?” the man answered absently, examining what was left on the bookshelves.

“You heard me.” Val barely managed to keep from stamping her foot in frustration.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.” He seemed to find one of the books very interesting, waving a weird looking device over it. There was a light on it that flashed somewhat regularly.

Was he deliberately trying to piss her off? “I think you know exactly what I mean,” she accused. “I saw you following that...thing, and now you’re snooping around in here like you’re some sort of detective, looking for clues!”

He put the book down, looking at her. There was something about his eyes...Val couldn’t look away. “I think it would be safest if you left this alone.”

“Left it alone?” Val laughed harshly. “Whatever that thing was – “

“A Hestian bounty hunter.”

“ – it took my friend,” she went on as if he hadn’t interrupted. “I think it’s a little late for me to leave this alone, don’t you?”

An eyebrow went up. “Your friend?”

“Yes...my friend, Tom. He was grabbed, and now that lizard-thing – “

“The Hestian bounty hunter.”

“ – fine, the Hestian bounty hunter!” She threw up her hands. “It appears to have vanished from the building and taken Tom with him! Now, unless they’ve ducked into another flat – which I doubt, by the way – then they had to have gone somewhere else, and I think you know where! And I’m not even going into the fact that that bounty hunter thing looked like something from a science fiction movie!”

The man stuck that strange instrument into a pocket, striding from the flat like a man on a mission. Val was surprised, and hesitated for a second before following him. “Wait!”

He didn’t. “Places to go,” he called over his shoulder as he headed toward the stairwell. “No time to chat!”

She dashed forward, to grab him by the sleeve. “I want an explanation, damnit!”

He hit her with those eyes again. They looked so much older than he did, and it was nearly impossible to look into them. “Do you?” he asked. “Do you really?”

"It's my friend. You expect me to just sit back and not want one?"

Then he smiled. "You are the most demanding person I've met in a long time. I'm the Doctor, by the way. And if you want to know what's going on, you should keep up." He shrugged out of her grasp, heading down toward the ground level.

Val went with him. Not that she had a choice; even if it wasn't Tom somehow vanishing she'd have to. "I'm Val," she called out in the direction of his retreating back. "Val Rossi!"

"I'd say it was nice to meet you, Val Rossi...but not under these circumstances." He was moving quickly, and Val had to practically run to keep up. "Your friend –"

"Tom."

"Your friend Tom has got himself involved in something he really shouldn't have. I'd really be interested in knowing how he knew Laryssia."

"Who?"

They left the building, and there were several bystanders hanging around outside; chances were, they'd seen that creature go inside and were waiting to see what would happen next. The distinct sound of sirens were in the distance, getting closer.

"The woman that Hestian had as well?"

Val hadn't noticed that part, she'd been too worried about Tom. "What about her?" she played along, catching up and keeping stride with the Doctor...whoever he was.

"The Hestian was after her. Your friend got in the way."

"But who is she?" Val was getting a little short of breath.

"Laryssia. Last surviving member of the royal family of Sparana Prime."

"Where's that? Somewhere in Europe?"

The Doctor chuckled. "Not hardly." He went serious. "It's another planet."

"Another –" Val swallowed, but she didn't stop like she wanted to, in shock. But then, there was that lizard thing...the Hestian. And the fact that Tom had disappeared without a trace. She then put what she'd been told together with Tom's plans for the day. "Anna Cross!"

The Doctor didn't ask her who Anna Cross was. "Her alias, most likely. Your friend met the wrong person, I'm afraid."

"What'll happen to him?" Val's heart clenched in worry.

"I have no idea, although I reckon he'll be taken back to Sparana Prime with Laryssia. Probably used to keep her in line."

"In line with what?"

"With whatever they have planned for her."

The Doctor suddenly stopped, and Val had been so focused on him that she didn't realize what it was they'd stopped in front of. It was a strange blue box, claiming to be some sort of Police Public Call Box...whatever that was. He had a key in the door, and was pushing it open. "What are you doing?" she demanded, grabbing his sleeve once more.

"I'm going after them." The way he said it...just like going to another planet was no big deal to him.

"How can you do that?" she asked.

"In my ship, of course." Now he was looking down at her, like she was a bit thick.

Val ground her teeth in frustration. "And what does this box have to do with anything?"

Now he was rolling his eyes at her. "It's my ship, of course."

"This is your spaceship?" She knew then that he was completely mental, he had to be.

"Don't look at me like I'm mental," he scolded.

Val suddenly felt like she had the time her grandfather had caught her with her hands in his old humidor, dumping out the rather expensive pipe tobacco he'd kept in it because she'd heard that smoking could kill him, and she'd wanted to keep him around forever. "Sorry," she found herself apologizing.

The Doctor smiled. "Don't worry about it. Now, goodbye." He made to step into the weird box.

"I'm going with you." Val didn't know when she'd made the decision, but there it was.

He turned back to stare at her. "Certainly not!"

"It's my friend! I want to help him!" She would plead if she needed to.

He was looking at her; *really* looking. It was as if he was trying to see just how determined she was to see it through, and if was worth arguing with her about it.

Then he shook his head. "Come on, then." And he stepped inside the box.

Val had no choice but to follow him. And she had to wonder just what rabbit hole she'd found herself down.

Tom's head hurt. And it wasn't that good hurt after you've been out to the pub with your mates, watching a match and getting hammered when your team won. It was the kind of hurt that came from knowing you'd screwed up at some point in the night and had got clobbered for your efforts.

On that note, he opened his eyes.

No, definitely not a night out.

The room he found himself in was basically metal walls, metal door, and quite possibly metal bed, judging from how uncomfortable it was. He tried to sit up, and found himself completely unable to until a hand helped him, by leaning him against even more metal...which turned out to be another wall.

The hand though, belonged to Anna. And she didn't look happy. "Are you all right?" she asked quietly, sitting next to him.

"What happened?" he asked, just as quietly, not wanting to aggravate his head.

"We were kidnapped," she answered. "Whatever it was knocked you out when you tried to get away."

Okay, Tom did remember that part. Grabbed by a creature looking like something from *Jurassic Park* – one of his favorite classic films of all time, he never missed it when it was on late night TV, even though he had it on three different types of film medium – and carried off despite his best efforts. He did remember someone coming into the hallway outside of Anna's flat, and he thought he'd seen Val too, but couldn't be sure. There'd been some sort of light...but after that, there was nothing. "You okay?"

Anna nodded. "It didn't hurt me. You have any idea what's going on?"

"No clue, sorry."

"So you wouldn't know what that...thing was, either."

"Wish I did. It'd sure make my life a lot easier to deal with right about now."

Tom clambered off the hard bed, and began to prowling the room. Not that he expected to find anything; it was really for something to do, to keep his mind off the very idea that he and Anna were somewhere they shouldn't be...wherever the hell that was. The only thing of interest he found was some sort of metal box next to the door, and when he prodded it, it didn't do anything but make his finger hurt when he stabbed at it too hard.

He had no idea how long they were left alone, but finally the door opened and that dinosaur thing appeared, standing in what looked like a hallway. It was heavily armored and armed, and Tom took a really good look at it as it loomed menacingly at them. Yes, it was pretty much like one of the Velociraptors from *Jurassic Park* although of course with all the science these days those were now seriously dated. It didn't stop Tom's actual appreciation of whoever'd done this crack-up costume job, because that was what this had to be, right? Some sort of prank played by one of his mates.

"Okay," he said, "you've had your fun, now let's just stop playing silly buggers and the drinks are on me."

The Velociraptor growled, and seconds later a voice that seemed to come from somewhere around the creature's chest began to speak. "Be silent, mammal," it spat, sounding almost tinny. "You are only here because you are the Princess' companion."

Well, he hadn't been expecting that. "What are you on about?"

There was that growling again, followed by, "The Princess of Sparana. I have been hired to retrieve her."

There was only one woman in the room. Tom cast a look back at Anna; she was pale, staring at the dinosaur in shock. "I...I don't know w-what you're talking about," she stammered, her eyes meeting Tom's.

"Your Highness is required home," the thing went on. "I was hired to bring you back."

"Look," Tom answered, "you have the wrong girl. She's no princess."

"I have a tracker that allowed me to trace her."

"Trace her? How?"

The dinosaur didn't answer. Instead, it said, "We shall be at Sparana Prime within three standard days. You will stay here until we arrive."

"This joke's gone on long enough," Tom sighed. "Let's just forget about it, okay?"

He moved toward the so-called creature, but the thing was too quick. It grabbed Tom by the arm, twisting it painfully then pulling him forward and out of the room. "This is no joke, mammal," it growled. "See..."

It slammed him against what appeared to be some sort of window. Tom found his face pressed against very cold glass.

Beyond it...stars.

And a small, blue-green planet that they were moving away from.

Wait...was that Africa?

When the Doctor had said they were going to another world, the last thing Val had imagined was that her first glimpse would be of the inside of a storeroom.

Shelves lined the walls, and those shelves were neatly filled with various types of foodstuffs...at least Val assumed it was all food. Some of it looked familiar to her; she thought there were potatoes in one bin, and carrots in another. Others though...completely strange. Although she thought the purple seeds resembled rice.

The Doctor didn't give her a chance to look around anymore. He led her out of the storeroom, and into a short hallway that led to what appeared to be a large kitchen that wouldn't have been out of place in a five-star restaurant. There were only two people within the huge space; they looked startled when the Doctor and Val entered, but he ignored them, and Val smiled sickly at them as she passed. She was a little disappointed that they looked human; only their eyes were a little different, a little off...but she couldn't say why. They just seemed brighter and a bit larger than normal, and it struck her that she was, indeed, looking at an alien race.

It really put everything the Doctor had told her into some sort of perspective.

That the box she'd stepped into had been a time/space machine that would have been hard to accept if she hadn't seen just how much room had been inside that blue police box. That had been her first major shock, and after that one everything else just seemed easier to believe. But actually setting foot on an alien world had sealed the deal, so to speak.

The trip hadn't really been long enough for Val to really think about what she was doing. All she wanted to do was to try and get Tom back, and the Doctor had assured her that the bounty hunter would be bringing him to Sparana Prime. He'd also explained how Tom, the alien, and the girl had vanished, calling it some sort of transmat beam back to the Hestian's waiting spacecraft. It would take them days to get there, whereas the TARDIS – what the Doctor had called his amazing ship – would get there much faster. Of course it would. After all, he'd made a point in saying that it could travel in time as well as space.

Of course, she'd asked about going back in time and stopping the Hestian from ever grabbing Tom and this princess, but the Doctor had muttered something about the Laws of Time and had pretty much ignored her. Val didn't particularly care about being ignored, but no amount of badgering on her part could get him to answer.

They left the fancy kitchen behind, and despite Val's worry about Tom she couldn't help but rubberneck like a tourist. The palace – the Doctor had said that was where they were going to land at – was huge, built of a sandy colored stone that had little crystals in it, and they caught the light coming in from the windows so that they twinkled like stars. They passed several people on their way who would turn and look at them as they went by, but they were never accosted or questioned as to why they were there. That, above anything that the Doctor had said, convinced Val that they were allowed to be there, and it went a long way to make her slightly more comfortable about being so far from her home.

In her time as editor for the *Mysterious Times*, she'd never once thought she'd ever see anything supernatural, alien and/or paranormal. Hell, half the stuff they printed she hadn't really believed in. But some of it...past the stories and half-blurred pictures of Bigfoot and mermaids and ball lightning and strange lights over super secret government bases, there were some stories that just screamed at being real.

Now she found herself in her own paranormal story. Damn, the times she'd have *paid* for an exclusive like this!

Val was dragged from her thoughts as the Doctor ushered her into what would have looked like an office anywhere, and in ways reminded her of the one in her own home. Desk, shelves, computer...it all was very familiar to her, except for the alien who'd stood at their entrance.

The man behind the desk had begun to grin as he saw them, but that expression faded as he got a good look at her. In that moment Val realized he must have thought she was this princess the Doctor had been sent to bring back, and it was hitting him that she wasn't. Disappointment flashed in his blue eyes, and Val's heart went out to him.

The alien must have seen something in her expression, because his smile went very sad. "It's not your fault," he said, his voice soft. "I was expecting..."

"I'm sorry, Aqaires," the Doctor answered. "A Hestian got there first."

The man called Aqaires shuddered. "A Hestian..." then he sighed. "Thank you for trying, Doctor."

"I think he's bringing Laryssia here," the Doctor went on.

"That means Jaracas will have her." Aqaires looked up. "There has to be a way to rescue her."

"And my friend," Val put in, before the conversation could go any further without her.

Aqaires turned his blue eyes on her. "Your friend?" Then he glanced at the Doctor once more. "An innocent has been dragged into this?"

"Technically two...if you count Val here," the Doctor admitted.

"I am sorry," the alien murmured, "but this is becoming more of a nightmare by the minute. Can't you locate them? You have the scanner I gave you!"

Val looked at the Doctor, wondering why this was the first time she was hearing about some sort of scanner. Her mind flashed on that strange box he'd had, and knew that had to have been it.

"First thing I tried," the Time Lord replied. "But the Hestian must have the princess under some sort of shielding. The scanner won't work until she's out from under it." He slumped down into a chair. "We can try to pick up her location once she reaches Sparanan orbit, but that's the best we can do. After that...we'll have to come up with some sort of plan to rescue her and Val's friend. Until then...we wait."

"Look," Anna protested, "I don't have any idea what that...thing is talking about. I'm not some princess. I work in a bank, for God's sake!"

Tom could understand why Anna sounded panicked. They'd been stuck in the same cell for...well, he thought at least a couple of days, judging from the meals their captor kept giving them. In those days, the Velociraptor had kept calling her "Your Highness" despite Anna's claims of just being a normal person. They'd just gone through another round of it, and quite honestly it was getting on his nerves as much as it was hers.

But at least he'd put some of his time to good use.

Tom had managed to pry that strange box off the wall with the penknife he'd always kept in his pocket. He was a little surprised that the alien guy hadn't taken it away, but maybe it didn't think it was much of a threat. Tom didn't know, nor did he care...he just wanted to get the two of them out of there safely. Even though he'd just met Anna, he was feeling very overprotective, and Tom figured it was because, even after being in the same room with her for days, that he was still somewhat smitten with her. Not at all how he'd imagined a date with her would go, but she was actually pleasant company. And Tom had been a perfect gentleman, which made him feel inordinately pleased with himself.

In between chatting with Anna and sleeping, Tom had found himself messing with the tiny computer he'd found behind that metal box.

He'd decided it must have been the door control, but the small six-key pad and screen completely bamboozled him. Tom was a natural-born hacker; his needing to get into other peoples' computers had got him in trouble with the law, a story he actually hadn't minded sharing with Anna during one particular boring stretch between feedings. Sure, he'd had fun playing around with Heathrow's traffic control programs, and really he wouldn't have crashed anything, he'd known better...but he'd still got caught, which was how he'd ended up in that boring, dead-end job in the first place, as part of his probation. But then, if he hadn't been working there, he would never have met Anna.

Of course, if he'd never met Anna, he wouldn't have ended up on a spaceship heading to God knew where.

"If we get out of this room," she asked quietly, watching him work, "then what?"

"Maybe I can do something with the ship's computer system," he answered absently, prodding the keypad gently. "I'm sure it must have one."

"Then what?"

"Then...maybe I can find some way to get us back home. I'm sure Val's going spare about now." He tried not to think about his friend. "And then...maybe we can give her an exclusive about being kidnapped by aliens or something."

"Bet she'd love that," his girlfriend – Tom had no qualms about thinking of her that way – chuckled.

"Oh, you have no idea. She's been dying for something like this for years!" Tom grinned as the tiny screen suddenly lit up. "I think I might be getting somewhere..."

He could feel Anna leaning over his shoulder, and he liked the slight contact. "That hasn't done that before," she said admiringly.

Tom grunted, fingers ghosting over the keypad. "You have any idea why that thing out there thinks you're some sort of princess? I mean, it's never said..."

"No, I don't," Anna confessed. "I wish I did, because then maybe I could convince it to let us go."

It was a puzzle, and usually Tom loved puzzles. But this was just plain strange. "There must be something about you, something that makes it believe you're this princess person."

"I'm sorry, Tom. I just don't know. And I'm sorry you're involved in this."

"Hey...it's not your fault. How were you supposed to know some weirdo was going to take a case of mistaken identity this far?" The keypad suddenly beeped at him. "Well, that's promising."

Anna's hand rested on his shoulder. Tom tried not to let it distract him too much. "You're really good at this computer stuff."

"If I was *that* good, I'd never have got caught before..." But he preened a bit at the compliment.

She laughed. "About the only thing I know how to do is program my mobile and my iPod."

"I'm sure I could teach you...if you wanted me to, that is." Now he was feeling a bit shy. What was it about Anna that did this to him?

"Sounds nice. But let's get out of here before we start thinking about stuff like that, yeah?"

"Okay." He went back to his prodding, thinking he might be finally figuring out just how to work this door.

The thing was, Tom was more of a programming guy. He could make computer code beg for mercy, or play it like a fine musical instrument. He could read lines of code like most people read the newspaper, and probably get more information out of it. But what he was doing here was mechanical, trying to figure out just how to by-pass the door lock and get them out of the cell. To say it was more difficult than what he usually could do was like saying a hurricane was just a really strong wind.

It was their only chance, though. Tom was pretty well convinced he could figure out the spaceship's computer. More worrying though was getting past Big Scary Dinosaur Dude, and really he hadn't figured that one out yet. It was the big loophole in his plan, and he sincerely hoped he'd come up with something once they were free.

He prodded the keyboard once more, and the tiny screen made a weird strobing...and the door slid open.

"Color me impressed," Anna murmured in his ear. Tom hadn't realized she'd moved that close.

"Magic fingers," he grinned, although secretly he was a bit surprised at himself. "Maybe I'll demonstrate them to you again sometime." And then he blushed slightly, realizing just how that could be taken.

There was a pause, then Anna said, "Let's get out of here."

"Right behind you," Tom agreed.

The corridor outside their cell was clear. Tom reached back and took her hand, and Anna didn't seem to object.

He headed in the opposite direction that the alien usually took when it came to feed them, not really wanting to run into it. "Look for anything that even vaguely resembles a computer," he whispered back toward her.

Tom took the opportunity to look out the window he'd seen the Earth out of, how many days ago. There was space out there...and it was a bit mind-boggling, to be honest. Sure, he'd had those dreams of being an astronaut as a kid, but this was so far beyond childhood fantasy it was surreal. He wondered vaguely what Val would have thought, to be standing where he was at the moment.

Hell...probably wondering how she could write it all up for her journal. And make it sound like she hadn't taken some really good drugs.

Craning his neck a bit, Tom could just make out a planet in the distance, and it was getting closer. Wow...an alien world, it had to be. It was green, which was all he could really make out, but it certainly wasn't Earth. He glanced at Anna; she seemed to be in shock. Trying to comfort her, Tom squeezed her hand. She returned the gesture.

The corridor he and Anna followed was fairly short. There was some sort of hatch at the end, which was – luckily for them – open. The room beyond looked almost like some sort of cabin, with a bed that looked very much like the one back in the room they'd been held in. Here there was a desk, though...and where there was a desk, there was a computer.

At least, Tom thought it must be a computer. It had a screen, and a keyboard; but Tom couldn't read the keys on the board at all, and there was no mouse to wake up the dark screen. This was going to be a lot harder than he'd thought.

Not that he didn't get a chance to actually try anything.

There was a roar from the doorway. Tom's head shot up from his examination of the weird keyboard, seeing the dinosaur standing there and looking mighty irate, if the baring of razor-sharp teeth in Tom's direction was any indication. And of course, he'd been caught thinking about hacking into the alien's computer system. Never a good thing, really, and Tom hated the feeling of being caught at anything.

The creature pulled its weapon, aiming it at Tom and Anna. There was that growling that always came, just before what Tom knew had to be some sort of translator made it possible to understand what the Velociraptor was saying. "Stop what you are doing."

Tom raised his hands. "Wasn't doing anything," he denied, hoping it didn't hear the unsaid "yet" at the end of that statement.

It made a jerking motion with the gun, and they interpreted that to mean to move away from the desk. Tom did so, followed by Anna. Having that pointed at him was making Tom's heart do things he didn't like, and he only hoped he didn't have some sort of coronary before everything was said and done.

The dinosaur shoved them back out into the corridor, then to their cell. It glanced at the damage Tom had done to the door controller, and if the sudden exhalation of breath was any indication, it had just sighed in frustration.

This time, when it left, both Tom and Anna had been put into what felt like some sort of handcuffs, and the door jammed closed.

Val was becoming more and more irritated the longer she was one Sparana Prime.

It was mainly because they weren't doing *anything* to get Tom back. They were hanging around, twiddling their thumbs, and what was worse the Doctor seemed just fine with that. Sure, he'd pointed out that the Hestian would have to bring Tom to Sparana Prime, if just because it would have to bring this princess there as well. There would be the matter of payment, and the fact that this General Jaracas would want to gloat over his prize. Probably would want to deal with her himself, in whatever manner the general would see fit.

Val hadn't liked that last part. Not one bit.

But it did give her time to think. And she began to realize that this Doctor wasn't completely unknown to her.

There had been rumors in the paranormal community for years, about a mysterious traveler known only as the Doctor. Those rumors told of an alien who could move through space and time, and to whom trouble was second nature. She'd heard that there were actually more than one man who held the name, but she also heard he was the same person every time, and that he'd just been able to change his appearance. He was often at the crux of some sort of perceived alien invasion, or some such. The stories were varied and many of them completely unbelievable.

Yet here she was...with a man claiming to be this Doctor person, on an alien planet waiting for another alien to arrive so they could rescue Tom and yet *another* alien. Val was seriously rethinking those stories she'd heard, considering that they might not have been the nonsense she'd thought. In fact, she'd rejected at least two different 'Doctor' stories for her journal, believing them to be far too ridiculous for publication.

Also, from what she could see, things were getting more and more unsettled on Sparana Prime, even though she didn't have much to judge it by, except for what the Chancellor said. Apparently there was a faction in the military that wanted to take over, and the only thing keeping them from doing so was the fact that there was this princess out there. Plus there were some pretty complicated succession laws that would have to have been circumvented, and even this general wouldn't do it if it meant alienating – and she couldn't believe she'd thought that word, not in these circumstances – the common man. Jaracas had to be seen doing the right thing, although that didn't mean his people couldn't stir up trouble along the way. The times she'd been out in the city beyond the castle, the atmosphere had been decidedly tense. Luckily for her, she closely resembled a Sparanan enough not to get any second looks; however, even if she'd had tentacles or had looked like a walking starfish – and she'd seen one of them, in the market, and had about laughed herself silly – no one would have accosted her. There was a fairly busy spaceport beyond the city, and traders from other worlds came to this world to show off their wares.

The city of Sparana itself was very metropolitan, and in many ways actually reminded Val of London...although without the aliens and high-tech accoutrements that seemed to be all over the place. There were view screens on pretty much every corner, with news programs playing on them constantly. The vehicles she saw closely resembled cars from her own planet, but there were subtle differences that just screamed 'alien!' and Val's hands actually itched to drive one.

The Sparanans were basically a friendly lot, and they were the ones whom Val got most of the rumors from. Nothing could stop a good gossip, and Val only had to ask how things were to get some sort of news about what was going on. She dutifully reported these stories back to the Doctor, who seemed to take them all in stride, saying that it was a highly political situation and that always bred unrest.

She saw the riot on the second day. It was from a distance and Val kept it that way, although she heard what it was all about from the overly friendly woman in the small café that she'd decided had some of the best coffee she'd ever drank. One of the army units had got a bit

unruly, and it had taken most of the city's police forces to quell what could have been an absolute disaster.

That was the first time that Val thought this planet was a bit more dangerous than she was exactly comfortable with.

It made her feel really guilty that she'd actually thought about going to the Doctor and trying to talk him into leaving. That idea hadn't lasted long, because there was no way she was going to let Tom face whatever would happen alone. Val's logical mind decided it was more of that old 'fight or flight' response pushing her into the 'flight' corner, and she didn't like one bit. More 'fight' was definitely in order.

"Ah...there you are."

Val looked up from her coffee. The Doctor stood there, smiling slightly. "How did you find me?"

He shrugged. "What better way to get the best rumors than in a coffee shop? They're all the same throughout the Universe, you know." He pulled out the chair opposite, taking the seat. "The only better places are laundries and hairdressers'. You don't need to have clean clothes since the TARDIS takes care of that, and I wouldn't think you'd be getting your hair done. So it was simply a matter of time before I found the correct café."

Val raised his cup to him. "Very well thought out."

"I try."

"Was there a reason you were looking for me?"

"Yes." The Doctor pulled something from his pocket; it was that strange device he'd had on Earth, the one that flashed. "This started flashing again, which means Laryssia is no longer shielded and is getting very close."

"What's the range on that thing?"

"Without being directly linked to the TARDIS? I should say high orbit. Up to staking out the spaceport?"

"Are you kidding?" Val stood up. "I've been going nuts not doing anything."

The Time Lord favored her with a large grin. "Then I think it's time we did a bit of rescuing."

Val was more than happy to follow the Doctor through the city to the spaceport. She'd seen it on her first foray out of the castle; her first thought had been that it didn't look a thing like Mos Eisley, which was sad in a way because she'd always thought that a spaceport should always look like a "wretched hive of scum and villainy." Instead, the Sparana City spaceport was gleaming metal and stone, and it reminded her forcibly of some sort of high-tech airport...which she supposed that was what spaceports were, really. Still, another illusion shattered, although not in the worst way.

"Let us wait out here for a little while," Doctor cautioned, the little scanner he held never leaving his sight. The light on it was practically strobing now, and Val asked him what that meant. "The ship they were on has to have landed," he answered absently. "The princess is very close."

"Why can't we go in and find them?" Val was suddenly antsy to get things going.

"Because there's no way the two of us can face a Hestian," the Time Lord pointed out. "If it didn't shoot us, it has these very nasty claws..."

"Okay, I get the point." She sighed. "So...what *is* the plan?"

"Well...I don't really have one."

"You don't...?" Disbelief made her voice squeak.

"I like to improvise."

Val simply rolled her eyes at that. "So...what sort of improvisation do you have in mind?"

The Doctor opened his mouth to answer, but the tracker decided at that moment to make an odd beeping noise. Both of them stared at it; the flashing light flared, and suddenly was blinking at a lower rate than before.

"What happened?" Val demanded.

"I should think the princess has been moved..." He turned on his heel, spinning in place. As he did so, the light began to speed up once more. "Ah...there she is."

"How did she move that quick?"

"I'd think the transmat the Hestian used to get the Laryssia and Tom back to his ship. You saw...they vanished from the hallway."

"But," she asked, "then why didn't the Hestian use it when it was trying to track the princess in London? It would've saved it from getting a lot of attention."

"It had to find her, first. It's hard to teleport somewhere if you don't know where you're going."

That made sense, but she silently cursed herself; the Doctor had mentioned it before, however Val hadn't pressed for details during the events that occurred after. "But where did they go, then?"

The Doctor grinned. "Shall we find out?"

Val shook her head, following the Doctor once more into the city. She wasn't sure if the man was a genius, or some sort of crazy. But if he was crazy, then it was the good kind.

It was obvious to both Tom and Anna when the spaceship they were on landed.

It wasn't that it was rough; far from it. There was simply a *settling*, as if the vessel was somehow being cradled, and then a noise that neither of them had really noticed before stopped. They glanced at each other, and Tom couldn't help but see the flash of fear in Anna's eyes. "It's gonna be okay," he tried to comfort her.

"Oh? How do you think that?" Okay, so the comfort wasn't working.

"Well, when they realize you're not who they think you are – "

"They might just kill us?"

"Now, I think you're just panicking unduly."

"I don't think so!" She scooted a little closer; the pair were seated on the shelf that passed for a bed, waiting to see what would happen next. "Why would they waste sending us home?"

"I dunno..." Tom answered uncertainly. "Because it's the nice thing to do?"

That made Anna laugh. "I suppose you might be right...after all, if you go to the trouble to kidnap the wrong person, why not admit your mistake and send them back where they came from?"

"Look on the bright side – "

"There's a bright side?"

"We're going to get to see an alien planet!"

Anna laughed even harder. "You're a glass half-full kinda guy, aren't you?"

"Ever the optimist, me."

She shook her head. "Some times optimism just doesn't work, Tom."

He was saved from answering by the door sliding open. The dinosaur guy stood there, waving a gun at them. "Get up."

They did as it bid, not being in the position to argue much. Their captor stepped into the cabin with them, keeping them covered with the gun, but fiddling with something on its belt.

Tom was confused. Why come into the room with them, when they'd obviously landed and chances were they'd be leaving the ship? It was so hard for him not to ask, but he really didn't want to risk getting shot over it.

And then they were being grabbed, roughly.

"Oi!" Tom shouted, struggling despite the fact that he really, *really* didn't want to get himself or Anna shot. There was just something about being manhandled that made him want to fight back.

Not that it really worked. The Velociraptor was too strong.

There was a strange, prickling feeling along his skin, a familiar feeling from when he and Anna had been kidnapped from her flat. The room faded out...

To be replaced by another room entirely.

Tom had expected the change in scenery, because of what had happened before. The thing was though, he hadn't expected this place to look pretty...well, *normal*. There were books and tables and shelves and knick knacks and a large desk, with what looked like a flatscreen monitor and a cup full of various pencils and pens. Comfortable looking chairs were next to the desk, with a table between them. It was all too cozy and Tom almost, for a brief second, completely forgot that he was on an alien world.

Then it hit him...he was on a freaking alien world!

Yes, he was a *captive* on an alien world, and the room *really* resembled his dad's study, but hey...it wasn't Earth.

Anna, though, looked like she needed to panic.

Tom instinctively put his arm around her, trying to comfort her by his presence. He could understand why she was so upset, because he knew she was the reason they were where they were, through a case of mistaken identity. "It's going to be okay."

She laughed harshly. "Mr. Glass-Half-Full?"

"That's my name, don't wear it out."

Their captor was making that growling noise behind them, having released them both once they didn't look like they were going to pull a runner. Tom wished it would go away, so he could enjoy the fact that he wasn't on Earth anymore, and that he had his arm around a beautiful woman.

"Welcome to my home."

The voice came out of nowhere. Tom turned, to see an older man standing at the open door behind them. He looked about as normal as the room; but Tom noticed something about his eyes, and how bright they were. There was something about him that screamed 'alien' even though he looked almost like one of the coppers who'd arrested him after his bit of fun with Heathrow. He had that bearing, like he just oozed authority and that he was used to getting what he wanted. His hair was dark, with streaks of gray, and cut in what would have passed for a military cut back on Earth. That also had to have been a uniform he was wearing, the plain brown jumpsuit didn't have anything like an insignia on it, but Tom could just tell it had to be one.

"It would mean more if we weren't here against our will," Tom snorted, gently pushing Anna a bit behind him, to shield her.

"I do apologize," the man said; however, he didn't sound sorry at all. "The Hestians have a tendency to play a little rough. However, it was the only way to get the Princess Laryssia back home." He smiled, and it wasn't very sincere.

"Well, you got the wrong person," Tom asserted. "This isn't the princess you're looking for."

"He's right," Anna piped up, sounding very scared. "I'm just someone who works in a bank. I'm not the person you think I am!"

The man shook his head. "Please, Laryssia. I know it's you."

"But it's not!" she was almost frantic now, and Tom reached back to take her hand. "I'm not her!"

"Let's not make this any harder than it has to be," the man went on, moving around them to take a seat at the desk. He looked up at them, his intense dark eyes sending a shiver down Tom's spine. "You should quit lying and tell the truth."

"I'm not lying!" Tom could feel her shallow breathing on his neck.

"She's not, you know," Tom put in. "You've made a mistake."

The man's eyes narrowed, and he was beginning to look irritated. He made a motioning gesture, and the dinosaur – the Hestian, Tom corrected himself – handed the man something that looked like one of those tricorders from *Star Trek*. The man slid his thumb over the side, and the device made a little beeping noise. "This," he waved it slightly in their direction, "is a scanner that tells me differently. You see, Laryssia was given a very special piece of jewelry when she was a child...something that only she would wear. It was a specialized form of signaler, and this handy piece of equipment detects the signal it gives off." He aimed it right at Anna, and it made a loud squeal. "So you see...you're the princess. This points to you."

That answered Tom's question of how the Hestian had located Anna. "What sort of jewelry?" he asked curiously, wanting to look back over his shoulder at her but didn't.

"It was a pendant," the man answered. "It was a gift given to all the royal children, as a way to always find them if something happened."

"You mean this?"

Now Tom did turn, in time to see her slip a chain from out of her blouse. On it hung a stone that looked like an opal, set in a silver pendant. He glanced at her, surprised.

Their 'host' grinned. "Exactly, my dear. Welcome home Laryssia."

Anna actually laughed. "Sorry...but this was a gift, from my ex-roommate. She saw me admiring it, and gave it to me for my birthday just before she moved out. She told me it'd been a gift from her folks, but that she'd had some sort of falling out with them and really didn't want a reminder of them around."

Of course. It didn't take Tom long to put two and two together. "Your roommate must have been this princess."

"Oh geez," the girl sighed. "If I ever get home, I'm going to find her and kill her. She's left me in a right mess."

Tom couldn't disagree.

Her announcement didn't seem to go down well with the man. His eyes narrowed again, and he flushed slightly. "You're saying that someone *gave* you that?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying," she answered. "I can't believe she did this to me..."

"I doubt she thought she'd be hunted down and dragged back home," Tom soothed. "For whatever reason this guy thinks is a good one."

Or maybe not so good, judging from the look on the alien's face. He looked positively livid. Tom got the feeling that there was a lot more going on here than just a simple kidnapping.

The Doctor insisted on waiting until darkness to put his plan into action. Although, to be honest Val was a bit surprised that he actually had one.

They'd managed to track the princess – and Tom, of course – to a rather large house in the merchant sector of the city. It was gated, and heavily guarded, and Val had made the comment that all that security had to mean the occupant was up to no good. The Doctor agreed with her completely.

They'd made their way back to the palace once they realized the signal wasn't going to be moving any time in the near future. The Chancellor, Aquires, had been suitably excited about the news that the princess had arrived, and had begged the Doctor to save her. Val could almost interpret the Doctor's eye roll to mean something along the lines of "No, that never occurred to me" with lots and lots of sarcasm.

"So, what is the plan then?" she asked, as she followed him through the palace toward where they'd left the TARDIS.

He didn't answer. Instead, his long strides carried him through the kitchens and back to the storage room where the time/space ship had materialized. Val still couldn't quite grasp the idea that this was an advanced form of alien vessel, even with her one previous experience in traveling in it. It just didn't look...right.

He let them both in, heading toward the console with purpose. Val stood back, letting him work, chewing her lip thoughtfully as she went over everything that Aquires had said after they'd returned; that General Jaracas was calling for Laryssia to be produced, or to have someone declared ruler. Of course, his backers were all clamoring for Jaracas to be selected...big surprise. Something would have to be done, and quickly.

The Doctor produced the tracker from his pocket, setting it down on the console and opening up a small panel for easy access within. Val watched, completely lost. "You going to tell me what you're up to?" she asked again.

"If you insist," he answered absently, pulling out a couple of wires. "I'm going to hook this back up to the TARDIS systems and use it to get into that house and close to the princess."

That made sense, and it was the kind of plan that made Val happy although she wasn't sure why.

"Problem is," he went on as he worked, "the TARDIS isn't all that good with short hops. We could end up anywhere if we're not careful."

"So...this might be a crap plan, then."

He favored her with a smirk. "You could say that. Although, I have complete faith in it. Well, almost complete faith..."

He didn't look too sure.

"We have to try something," Val pointed out, "if we want to save Tom and the princess."

"True. Which is why this is the best plan we have at the moment." He stepped back, looking at his handiwork. It didn't look all that impressive to Val, but as long as it worked she wasn't going to complain.

The Doctor began working around the console in a seemingly random way, but in moments the central tower thing began to move like it did when they were traveling. Val let out a breath she didn't even know she was holding.

To say she was scared would be an understatement. Honestly, this entire adventure had been insane, and charging to the rescue of two people just seemed like the icing on a bizarre cake. Val thought it might actually take a bit of time to process the thing, maybe after everything was said and done. Right now, she had to focus on getting Tom back. Then, perhaps she could go quietly mad.

"So...what if we run into some of that security?" she asked, not exactly sure she wanted to know.

"We'll deal with that if it happens."

"Don't you have any sort of weapons around here?"

That question apparently bothered the Doctor, judging from the dark look he gave her. Val took a step back, not liking that expression at all. "No. No guns. I don't like them."

"I...see." Val wasn't sure about going into a potentially dangerous situation unarmed, but there wasn't much she could do about it. It wasn't like she actually had any experience with guns, after all. The only sort of self-defense she'd had was when that woman from one of the security companies had come in and had taught them how to defend themselves in case they were ever mugged. She wasn't sure if that was going to be of any help, but she could take out a man's kneecaps with no problem.

The trip didn't last very long. The TARDIS came to a halt, the Doctor making a petting motion on the console as if he were comforting it for some weird reason. He caught Val's look of disbelief, and made a "hmp" noise deep in his throat. "Let's see what's out there, shall we?" He twisted a control, and a viewscreen came to life on the wall.

The room beyond the TARDIS was a well-appointed office. Soft light came from a lamp on the desk, where a man sat, staring at them...or rather, the sudden appearance of a strange blue box standing in his personal space. "I think that lets out sneaking in," Val snarked.

"I do believe sarcasm is the lowest form of humor," the Doctor answered back.

"So...do we go out there and introduce ourselves? Not like we have much of a choice unless you want to high-tail it back to the palace..."

The Doctor didn't deign that with a response. Instead, he activated the door control and walked out. Val had no choice but to go with him; she wasn't about to miss a thing, despite the obvious danger. So staying in the TARDIS wasn't an option. She just wished this plan had gone a bit more on track.

"Good evening, General," he was saying as Val exited the time machine. "I hope you don't mind us dropping by like this."

"I wouldn't," the Sparanan replied, "if I knew who you were."

"I'm called the Doctor. This is my friend, Val. I was wondering if you wouldn't mind if we spoke to Princess Laryssia and her companion. I know you have them here."

There was something in the general's expression that Val couldn't identify. But she knew immediately just how dangerous this man was, and hoped that the Doctor did as well. "And how do you know that?" Jaracas asked, softly.

"The same way you know she's the princess...I have a tracker. Now, I'm certain you've at least heard of me, from my association with the royal family. I'd like to see if she hasn't been injured in any way; plus the young man with her doesn't belong on this world. Do you think you can have them brought here?" He flashed a smile. "I'd like to at least take the boy off your hands."

Jaracas examined them both, and Val didn't appreciate his frank gaze. He was sizing them up, to see if they were a danger to him. She tried to smile as the Doctor had, but just couldn't pull it off. They were, after all, pretty much at the mercy of this alien. Val didn't like that feeling at all.

After what seemed too long, but was probably only about thirty seconds, Jaracas moved. He returned the Doctor's smile, only it wasn't as pleasant; then spoke into what had to have been some sort of intercom on the desk, asking for someone to bring his two 'guests' to his office. Then he leaned back in his chair. "You should know...the girl claims not to be Princess Laryssia. And I'm inclined to believe her. Apparently the real princess gave her her signal necklace, which is the cause of the error my Hestian made."

"And the human?" the Doctor pressed. "Did you need to have him brought here as well?"

"To be honest, I don't know why the Hestian took him as well. I was surprised he wasn't killed on the spot."

Val shivered at the cavalier attitude toward what could have been Tom's murder. Her hands clenched at her sides. What gave this bastard the right to decide who lived and who died?

"I'm glad he wasn't," the Doctor replied. "I don't think you would have liked what would have happened if he'd been killed."

"That sounds like a threat."

"I don't threaten." There was a coldness there, and it convinced Val that the Doctor was completely serious.

The two beings were staring each other down; Jaracas looked away first, clearing his throat. "You're interfering in something you don't have a right to be involved in." He was angry.

"I get involved when people act against the common good...and a greedy bid for power ranks up there for me. I'm not even going to get into threatening innocents." His voice had gone colder, and so much more deeper than before.

Val came to the conclusion that the Doctor was a hell of a lot more dangerous than this general person. She vowed not to get on his bad side.

There was a noise, and both Val and the Doctor turned. The door to the office had opened, revealing Tom and a young woman with green eyes and brown hair, both looking like they really wanted to be somewhere else. The Hestian stood behind them, imposing and dangerous.

Tom's eyes went wide when he saw Val. "How the hell did you get here?" he gasped in shock.

"Long story," she grinned. "I'm just glad to see you're all right."

"Sure...if you count getting grabbed by something out of prehistory..."

The Hestian pushed the pair into the room, shutting the door behind them. It stood guard, and Val knew there was no way any of them would get past.

"What is that?" Tom was pointing behind them.

Val glanced behind her, realizing that Tom meant the TARDIS. "Part of the long story. Oh, this is the Doctor..." she motioned toward her companion. "He gave me a ride here." She turned to the Doctor. "And Doctor, this is Tom. And his lady friend...?"

"I'm...Anna Cross," the woman answered. "This guy thinks I'm some sort of princess. I keep trying to tell him I'm not, but he won't listen." She glared at Jaracas.

"Yeah," Tom added. "She's not the princess. She can't be."

Val glanced at the woman. She had the brilliant eyes that the other Sparanans seem to have, but there was something just...well, *normal*...about her. She didn't put off the different vibes that the other Sparanans seem to have.

The woman – Anna – reached up and began to remove something from around her throat. It was a pendant, made from a stone that looked like an opal. "As I said before, my ex-roommate gave me this." She held it out to the man behind the desk. "You want it back? That's fine by me. I can't believe Lisa gave it to me anyway, since she must have known what it was. I just want to go home. Me and Tom. Please."

Jaracas took the pendant from her; Val wondered if this was the signaler that the general had mentioned. He stroked the stone, as if reassuring himself that it was what he thought it was.

"Yeah, we just want to go home," Tom replied.

It wasn't lost on Val that he was holding hands with her, and was reminded that he'd claimed she was the woman of his dreams.

"There's no need to hold them any longer," the Doctor added. "She's not the true princess, and I think you have the proof of that. It's not necessary to keep them here against their will. I'll be more than happy to take them home – "

"I don't think so." Jaracas stood, setting the pendant down on the desk. "This just means I have to adjust my plan, that's all." He reached into a drawer, pulling out a gun, then came around the desk.

Of course, there would be guns...

"What plan is that?" the Doctor asked warily.

"I can use a fake princess and still achieve my goal."

"Why do you even need her?" Anna spoke up. "You never said."

"It's because the entire royal family is dead," the Time Lord answered softly. "He wants to fill the power vacuum, and can't until she's out of the way."

Anna went pale. Very pale. Her free hand went to her mouth in shock, her eyes wide and glistening with unshed tears.

It hit Val, hit her hard, like a brick across the head...this really *was* the princess. She doubted that a stranger would react so violently to hear that someone was dead.

She glanced at the Doctor; he was looking at Anna closely. Did he understand what she did? That this woman, who'd managed to convince a would-be tyrant that he had the wrong person, was actually the one everyone was looking for?

Judging from the sympathy in his too-old eyes, Val thought he did.

Tom was another matter. He wasn't looking at Anna; his attention was on Jaracas, glaring at him as if daring the alien to use the gun. He wasn't seeing what Val and the Doctor were, that Anna's – Laryssia's – façade of deniability was cracking. That, with a simple release of emotion, she was giving herself away.

Maybe, if she'd been able to keep herself in check, they might have got out of this with Jaracas thinking he'd made a mistake. Or maybe not, if he'd already changed whatever plan he'd had for her in the first place.

However, it didn't seem that the general was paying that much attention to her, either. He was too busy arguing with Tom.

"All she has to do is act like the missing princess," Jaracas was saying.

"You think she'd be able to pull that off?" Tom demanded hotly. "She's not a native of your planet!"

"I'd only need her for short time, just long enough to convince my people that I had her. Then, once I have their complete loyalty, it wouldn't matter. I'd have the power and no one could stop me! All I have to do is convince her to go along with the plan...and I think that would be an easy thing, seeing as she appears to be...attached, to you."

"I'll do it."

They all looked at Anna then. She was visibly trembling, and any emotion now could be contributed to fear.

"Anna – "

"No, Tom. If going along with what this madman wants means you're safe, then I'll do it." She drew in a breath, then looked at Jaracas. "I'll do it, but I want your word that they all

go free. If anything happens to Tom or anyone else, I'll scream to anyone who listens that I'm a fake. Is it a deal?"

What Jaracas would have said was suddenly lost in a thunderous sound from outside. The window in the study blew inward, showering the furniture – and the people in the office – with glass. Val cried out as shards cut her, and she ducked into the Doctor's shoulder to protect her face.

"Everyone! Into the TARDIS!"

She went to follow the Doctor's order, looking back toward Tom and Laryssia. He was pulling the girl along, even though he must not have had a clue what the TARDIS was; he was being dragged along by the force of the Doctor's command.

But Jaracas wasn't done.

He shouted for them to stop. Val was just inside the TARDIS door, the Doctor outside motioning Tom and Laryssia toward them. She could just make out Jaracas through the open portal, his gun pointing at the Doctor.

Everything happened all at once.

There was a loud buzzing sound, and Val cried out when, in that second between Jaracas firing and the energy hitting its target, she knew someone was going to die.

She honestly thought it would be the Doctor.

But, at the last possible second, the Time Lord tumbled into the TARDIS, having been pushed roughly inside. A body fell with him, and Tom tripped on the jamb, also falling to the floor.

Val reached down, trying to pull her friend deeper into the TARDIS as the Doctor scrambled inside, along with the limp form of Laryssia. She managed to slam the door, blocking out Jaracas and his trained dinosaur.

"What the hell?" Tom gasped, getting his first look at the inside of the Doctor's police box.

"Help me!"

Val was at the Doctor's side in seconds. She grabbed Laryssia, pulling her off the Time Lord and onto her back. She gasped at what she saw.

The princess's shoulder was a bloody mess, where Jaracas' weapon had hit. She was unconscious, and Val automatically felt her neck for a pulse, hoping that she wasn't so alien that she didn't actually *have* one.

"Anna!" Tom cried, coming to his knees next to the alien woman.

The Doctor levered himself to his feet. "We need to get out of here," he snapped, running to the console and setting the vehicle into flight.

"She's still alive," Val whispered.

"We're going back to the palace," the Doctor said. "They have the facilities to care for her there."

Tom paced outside the medical rooms of the palace, chewing on his lip and trying to digest what had occurred in the last several hours.

It was too hard. He was too worried about Anna.

He'd really thought she'd been killed back on the Doctor's ship. She'd looked so pale, and there'd been so much blood. But the moment Val had declared her to be alive, it was as if a large weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Now, it was just a waiting game, to see what the physicians could do to help her.

"Hey."

He glanced up. Val was standing in the doorway, smiling at him and holding a mug of something.

"Hey," he returned. He tried to smile as well, but the muscles of his face didn't seem to want to make the expression. "So...what's a girl like you doing on an alien world like this?"

His friend shrugged, passing him the mug. "Well, there's this idiot I know, got himself into a bit of trouble and I had to help him out."

Tom took a drink; it was almost like coffee, but not quite. And it was pretty good. "It's good he has someone to come looking for him."

"It helped that a friendly alien came around and offered me a lift."

"Offered?" he chuckled. "You probably bullied him into it."

"Who, me?"

"That innocent look stopped working on me ages ago."

Val sighed. "I'm glad you're all right."

"So am I." He took another sip of the coffee-like beverage. "She's really this princess, isn't she?"

"Yeah. Afraid so."

"Just like me...falling for the unattainable ones." He *had* fallen; fallen pretty hard. But then, he and Anna – no, he'd have to get used to calling her Laryssia – had been through a lot together. "So...you and this Doctor guy?"

She smirked. "Friendly alien. What can I say?"

"It must be like a wet dream for you or something."

"Oh yeah," she grinned like a maniac. "I mean, how many times have I bitched and moaned about the crap we publish? Now, to find out that it's so much better than anything I might've dreamed about, I'm not so sure I can just go home again."

He looked at her, but it wasn't really in surprise. He'd known her for a long time, after all. "There goes my chance of fame and fortune then. Guess someone else will have to interview me for the big story, then."

Val smirked. "Always the fame and fortune with you."

"Nah...just give me a really good computer system to hack and I'm happy."

She turned serious. "Honestly, Tom...you'd want to go home after this? Don't you want to know what else is out there?"

Actually, he did. He really did. He didn't want to go back to his dead-end job and no prospects. For him, hacking was all about the adventure, and the need to know. Traveling the stars would be practically the same thing. "Yeah, but how do you think we're going to be doing that? I may be able to make computers do my bidding, but I don't know how to fly a spaceship."

She opened her mouth to reply, but what Val was going to say was lost as the Doctor joined them. To Tom, he just looked like a normal bloke, albeit with some serious dress sense issues. But he was an honest-to-God alien, with an impossible spaceship. Tom's hands itched to get ahold of its operating systems.

"She's going to be fine," he said. "They've managed to repair most of the damage, but she'll be in pain for a while."

"Do you know if I can see her?" Tom asked anxiously.

"Not yet, but soon. Now, why don't the pair of you go out and explore a bit? I know Val's had a look around; but Tom, you haven't seen what Sparana Prime has to offer. Things are getting a bit calmer, now that Laryssia has been found and that Aquires has taken Jaracas into custody. He was the one who ordered the attack on the general's home, by the way. He did it as a distraction for us. Although I've had words with him about it. Putting everyone in danger like that...typical." He rubbed his hands together. "Go on, have some fun before you go home." He then made shooing motions, bustling the pair of them out.

Tom went, wanting to see this world even though he'd have preferred to wait to speak with Laryssia.

The Doctor stood at the foot of the bed, looking down at the cause of all the trouble in the last several days.

Laryssia was pale; far too pale. But her green eyes were bright as they met his gaze. "I've been expecting you, Doctor."

"I'm sure you have been. The last time I saw you, you were ten and running off into the city by yourself."

"I've made my life all about running off. I think my parents didn't get the whole 'power in names' thing that the priests were always going on about."

The Doctor chuckled. "Yes, I did try to tell them not to name you after the Old Sparanan word for Wanderer, but your mother liked the way it sounded."

Laryssia joined in his laugh, wincing as the movement jogged her injured shoulder. "I might not have wanted to come back, but truly I would not have allowed Tom to get hurt. I...care about him, Doctor."

"I know. I believe you."

"I was just hoping that, if I kept denying it Jaracas might actually let us go."

"It just changed his plan, unfortunately."

Laryssia sighed. "I know. I really should've got rid of that signaler a long time ago."

"Blaming it on the ex-roommate was a good idea though."

"There really was one. Her name was Lisa. She was big into the paranormal, and she dragged me into it. Also, it was a good way to keep track of any sort of spaceships that might come around Earth."

"Well, even if you'd got rid of the pendant, Aquires had another way of tracking you."

"Really? How?"

“He gave me a tracer, one that was attuned to your unique genetic make-up. It wasn’t really all that good over long distances, but I was able to compensate by hooking it up through my TARDIS’s navigational circuits. That’s how I was able to find you, although it was too late.”

“And you even have a time machine,” she teased.

He smirked. “Yes, I do.”

The next week was a blur for both Tom and Val.

With the return of Princess Laryssia, the entire planet seemed to go into party mode. After the inevitable checks to confirm her identity, Laryssia had been joyfully accepted as the new ruler of Sparana Prime.

Only those around her could see how much it all wore on her.

Tom could really see it, even though Laryssia denied it every time he brought up the subject. They managed to spend a bit of time together, between the meetings and press conferences and receptions that seemed to fill every hour of the day. He found himself wishing that he could take her away with him, but knowing that that was impossible. Laryssia was now a slave to her duty, and she hated it with a passion.

If only Tom had met her some other time, who knew what might have happened.

Val, in the meantime, took in all the sights she could, knowing that at some point after the coronation – which would be at the end of the Sparanan week – the Doctor would be taking them back to Earth. She’d tried to come up with various arguments to use on the Time Lord to get him to take the two of them with him on his travels, but nothing seemed convincing to her.

She really wanted to travel the stars. She and Tom both.

The coronation was a spectacular affair, and Val even got a new dress for it. Tom distinctly hated the suit he’d had to wear, but it made him presentable enough to dance with the new Queen of Sparana Prime. He’d treasure that dance for the rest of his life.

The next morning, the Doctor was knocking on their chamber doors, saying it was time to leave.

The TARDIS was still in the storeroom, tucked amid the remaining foodstuffs. The festivities had made inroads on the castle’s supplies, and the room was pretty empty. Only the large blue box filled the space now.

Aqaires and Laryssia were waiting for them.

The Queen didn’t look at all regal, content to wearing a simple dress and the sling that held her injured arm. She smiled at the trio. “You’re more than welcome to stay longer.”

“Hate to overstay anywhere too long,” the Doctor answered. “Besides, I need to get these two home.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” Aqaires offered his hand, which the Time Lord took.

“Just glad it’s worked out.” He drew out his key, sliding it into the TARDIS lock.

“Come along, don’t take too long.” He stepped inside.

“It was nice to meet you,” Val said, shaking hands with both Sparanans. It was really all she could say.

Once she was on board the TARDIS, that left Tom. He also shook hands with Aqaires, and then the Chancellor exited, leaving him alone with Laryssia.

"I wish you could come with us," he blurted.

"As do I," she answered. "But that's not to be."

"I'm glad, you know. Glad to have met you."

Laryssia smiled sadly. "I wish it could have been different though." She reached forward, pulling Tom into a hug.

He returned it. He didn't know how long he stood there, but eventually he pulled away.

"Take care, Your Majesty."

She rolled her eyes. "Please...never that from you. I expect better."

Tom laughed. "Fine, Laryssia. I'll be good."

"You better." She took several steps back, not breaking from eye contact. "Be careful, Tom. Be happy."

"You too."

With those words, Tom stepped into the TARDIS.

And apparently into the middle of an argument.

"- I'm just saying," Val was speaking fairly loudly, "that Tom and I don't have to go home right away. We'd rather like to travel with you."

"I'm not looking for companions right now - "

"Doesn't this ship get lonely? Come on, Doctor...you could use us around!"

"Val's right," Tom said, joining her at the console, where she was busily confronting the Doctor. "And we don't want to go home right now. We want to see other planets!"

"And other times!" Val's tone turned wheedling. "We won't be too much trouble!"

The Doctor smirked. "I sincerely doubt that!" He glanced between the two of them.

"Well...all right. But I reserve the right to take you both back to Earth if you don't do what I say."

"Of course, Doctor." Tom hoped the Time Lord didn't check behind him, to see his fingers crossed behind his back.

Val nodded as well.

"Then...where shall we go first?"

The planet Sparana Prime has always been ruled by their royal family,
until every member is killed in a terrible accident.
Chancellor Aqaires knows that there is a missing daughter,
and seeks the Doctor's help in trying to find her.
He agrees, knowing that he won't be the only
one hunting for the lost princess...

On Earth, the year is 2031.
Valentina Rossi is the editor of the *Mysterious Times*,
a paranormal journal: she gets a call of a UFO sighting
and goes to investigate. Her curiosity puts her in the path of an alien bounty hunter
and a stranger who insists his
blue box is a time/space machine...

And her friend, Tom Brooker, is in a boring dead-end job
and hoping for something more. He finds it...in the shape of Anna Cross, whom he
thinks is the woman of his dreams.
But that dream could turn into a nightmare...

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