

THE
DOCTOR WHO
PROJECT

CITY OF THE DRAGON



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

First Published May 2010

City of the Dragon

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A TDWP/Jigsaw Publications E-Book

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Typeset in Palatino Linotype

Logo © 2005 The Doctor Who Project

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Deep within the Space-Time Vortex, amid the rippling flows of time and reality, a curled-up pocket universe spun, enclosed in a cuboid shell. Within the folds of higher dimensional space, creatures crawled and swam, watching the box with senses unfathomable to human minds. Some of these creatures were harmless, the inter-dimensional equivalent of filter feeders, Hoovering up plasmic plankton and animalcules while avoiding the tumbling boxed universe. Others, higher beings of alien intelligence, watched with wary, hungry, calculating intention. The boxed universe, aware in its own equally alien way, avoided such things with the skill that came from centuries of practice. Within, three individuals – two human, one not – were happily unaware of the otherworldly ecosystem around them.

“Where are we headed?” asked Tom, leaning over the gleaming white console that occupied the centre of the control room. In the dead centre of this device, almost unimaginable energies were constrained by a glowing pillar, slowly rising and falling in time to the groans of the time engines.

“Earth,” said the Doctor simply, adjusting his rich burgundy tie as he caught his reflection in a silvery component on the console.

“Could you elaborate?” asked Valentina, entering the control room through an arched doorway, the roundel-motifed door swinging open with a soft hum. ‘Are we going back home, or somewhere more interesting?’

The Doctor looked up, now apparently satisfied with the state of his tie. “In purely temporal terms: yes, I’m taking you home. However, the exact location is up to you. There is an entire world for you to choose from, you know. I sometimes find that it can be especially rewarding to explore the world of one’s birth, and to see new aspects of it that one had maybe missed before.” He paused. “So, where is it to be?”

Valentina and Tom both thought for a moment. “How about Russia?” said Valentina, while Tom was still considering. “I’ve always wanted to visit there. It’s meant to be fascinating.”

“Well, I was gonna suggest somewhere a bit more modern,” interjected Tom. “California, maybe, or Sydney? Somewhere a bit livelier.”

“I’m sure Russia can be perfectly modern and lively,” said Valentina, shooting Tom a disappointed look. “You just want to go somewhere with plenty of drinks and parties.”

“And what’s wrong with that?” complained Tom.

“I’m afraid Valentina chose first, Tom,” said the Doctor, settling the discussion immediately. There was rarely any arguing with the Doctor, and Tom decided not to try. “I dare say that there will be ample opportunity to socialise and imbibe unnecessary quantities of alcohol in Russia, if that’s really how you’d like to spend your time.”

“Well, not necessarily,” he replied, “although Russia is vodka country, isn’t it?”

“Indeed,” said the Doctor, adjusting numerous controls on the console. A small keyboard extended to his outstretched hand. He paused over it. “Moscow? St Petersburg? Vladivostok?” He paused again, thoughtful. “Hmm... is Minsk part of Russia in your time-zone? I can never keep up with these complex geopolitical regions. Always unifying and

dividing..."

"Moscow, I think," said Valentina.

"Excellent," said the Doctor, tapping a series of keys in rapid succession. "The TARDIS should be there in no time at all."

The TARDIS flew through the Vortex with renewed purpose, spinning through the higher dimensions.

The Doctor smiled as the central column came to a rest, and the time engines groaned to a stop. "Excellent. Now, we'd best wrap up warm. It's going to be frightfully chilly out there. I'll just see if there's snowfall." He activated the scanner, which sprang to life on the wall.

"Looks like snow, alright," said Tom. "Have you got one of those big Russian greatcoats in here somewhere? I reckon I'd look pretty good in one of those."

"That isn't snow," sighed the Doctor. "There's some kind of interference. Most peculiar. I really thought I'd sorted this system out, you know." A definite hint of annoyance had entered his cultured tones.

"Nothing serious, Doctor?" asked Valentina.

"No, no, I don't think so. Just some unusual energy source nearby. That should do it." The image on the scanner cleared, revealing a lush green park, illuminated by golden sunshine. "Hmm... high summer? That seems unlikely for the time of year. Perhaps the timing's out or the latitudinal navigation..." He paused once more, and a look of exasperation came to his face. "Ah," he muttered.

"It's not Russia, is it Doctor?" asked Valentina.

"Now, don't pout. There seems to have been a slight error somewhere. Do you know, I think it must have been that peculiar energy we detected. It must have drawn the TARDIS in. I do wish she wouldn't take the initiative like that. I'll see if I can ascertain our location." He consulted the scrolling readouts in front of him. "Ah! How marvellous!"

"Where are we then?" asked Valentina and Tom, almost in unison.

"Singapore!" smiled the Doctor. "A wonderful place. A country, an island, a city... a cultural jewel, a technological hotspot... we must have landed in the Botanical Gardens." He turned to his fellow travellers. "Ignore what I said! Dress for sunshine. It can get astonishingly warm this close to the equator. Off you go then, off you go!"

Tom and Valentina exchanged pained looks and hurried into the depths of the TARDIS, leaving the Doctor wittering happily to himself. "I haven't been to Singapore since that dreadful business with the Rani, back in the nineteen eighties... or was it the eighteen nineties?" He followed his companions through the doorway into the inner TARDIS.

After a short interval, Tom and Valentina both arrived back in the console room, more or less simultaneously, both dressed in suitably summery clothing. Valentina had made an effort, choosing an attractive, embroidered white skirt and green silk blouse from the TARDIS'

gargantuan wardrobe, topped off with a straw hat, also in white. She could count on her skin to tan quickly and evenly, but it was sensible to be careful. Tom, on the other hand, wore a basic red T-shirt and jeans.

“Have you even changed?” asked Valentina him.

“What’s wrong with this?” he replied. “This isn’t a Victorian garden party or something. Although I wouldn’t be surprised if the Doctor dresses as if it is. Where is he, anyway?” The Doctor was no longer in the console room.

The main door was open a crack. “He must already be outside,” observed Valentina. She led the way out to meet him.

She and Tom stepped out into the sunlight, and the soft smell of flowers. The Doctor stood a few feet away, looking away from them at the park open before them. Lush green grass spread into the near distance, abbreviated by a thick coppice of trees. The Doctor turned to see them. He had somehow found time to change and leave the TARDIS before them, and was now dressed in an immaculate white suit, with a burgundy shirt and gleaming white shoes. He also wore a white straw hat, a broad Panama. Despite the warmth, he was still wearing a tie – this one in gold. He appeared every inch the colonial English gentleman.

“About time you two made it,” he said, in a gently chiding tone. “Isn’t it a beautiful day? Of course, it will get much warmer by noon. Make sure you use sun cream – we don’t want you coming back looking like charbroiled lobsters.” He spun around, stopping in only a fractionally different direction to that which he’d started from. “If I remember correctly, this direction should take us out via the orchid garden and the lake. We’re not far from the centre of town. That’s the best thing about countries like this – they’re too small for anything to be very far away.”

“So, what’s the plan boss?” asked Tom, removing a pair of sunglasses from his pocket and slipping them on.

“No plan,” the Doctor replied, a calm smile on his face. “Let’s just wander for a while. You two can go where you wish. You don’t want me holding you back, keeping you from all the points of interest.”

Valentina walked up to him, and linked their arms. “Don’t be silly, Doctor. Of course we’ll hang out with you.”

“Well, of course you can if you like, but perhaps you should wait to see what the city has to offer before you make your minds up. I can promise you that this place will offer you both culture and modern attractions.” He afforded them a sharp look. “So neither of you can complain. We can always take in Moscow and Sydney and, I don’t know, the Mare Tranquilatium on another day. Come along then.”

They ambled along the paths through the gardens happily, the Doctor contentedly rambling about various previous visits to the region, dropping anecdotes about meetings with the Singaporean Premier and the King of Siam, and botanical expeditions to deepest Borneo. The tranquil atmosphere was broken only by a terrible fit of sneezing suffered by Tom as they passed through the orchid garden.

“Don’t worry, Tom, my boy,” said the Doctor, passing him a hanky from his top pocket. “I had a very sensitive nose myself, in a previous form. I once stopped off a planet that had three springs to each winter and summer. The hay fever there was appalling!” The Doctor and

Valentina took a moment to smell a particularly elaborate pink-hued orchid, while Tom noisily blew his nose.

They continued along past the lakeside, stopping for the Doctor to admire a large sculpture of a swan in flight, which stood majestically in the centre of the water. In spite of the pleasant mood, Valentina still felt a sense of uneasiness. She decided it was time to bring up their unscheduled landing.

"Really, don't worry," said the Doctor. "As I said, the TARDIS was drawn off course by an unusual energy form. A sort of psycho-electrical field, it seems. Not what I would expect to find here, but nothing to be alarmed about. Singapore is, as I mentioned earlier, a place of great technological innovation. I haven't kept up-to-date on twenty-first century developments; I expect there are all sorts of fascinating new technical breakthroughs to learn about here."

"I don't know, Doctor," said Tom. "This is hardly the first time. We never seem to land where we're supposed to, not recently, anyway. But I've got to say, I wouldn't mind having a look at some of these 'innovations' you've been talking about. I've kept a bit up-to-date. There's some amazing stuff going on in computing in Asia these days."

"Trust you to get excited by the computers," chided Valentina. "And anyway, we've been to places much further advanced than this. If you want to see computers, we could go to the thirty-third century or something, couldn't we?"

"Indeed," said the Doctor. "We could visit the ArchHives of the one hundredth century, or the Great Mind Network of the Outer Spiral. Still, it's not quite the same as seeing the latest developments of your own world, is it Tom?"

"Exactly," he agreed. "I want to see how the world is evolving, you know? See how it develops, not just where it ends up."

"Yeah, I guess," said Valentina. "That's actually a pretty good argument. Well done," she smirked.

They ambled happily along for another ten minutes or so, comfortably chatting to each other about the unimportant and mildly interesting. Valentina felt herself relax considerably. After all their recent escapades, the three of them deserved a holiday. No rescues, no escapes, no tough decisions. Just a chance to chill out – or, in this country, warm up.

In time, the three of them came to the exit, the path broadened briefly as it passed through the main gates, before narrowing again, becoming a still fairly ample sidewalk. The wall of deep green that had enclosed them broke up, whites and off-whites sidling with rust reds amongst the still profuse trees. Broad-leaved palms mingled with deciduous shrubs against the attractively designed buildings. The three of them came to a halt by the large sign that stood by the park entrance. On it was displayed a map, its subtle blues interspersed with red stars that signified the must-see spots. The Doctor took a look.

"So, where do we each want to go?" he asked, as much to himself as his companions. He tapped one of the red spots, which expanded into a half-screen display of the riverside eateries, with text gently scrolling alongside video snapshots of tourists chatting and chewing. The three of them began selecting various spots, bringing them up alongside each other for perusal.

"This looks interesting," said Valentina, selecting a spot at the opposite end of the map to the flashing 'You are HERE' signal. "The Asian Civilisations Museum," she read aloud.

"You want to visit a museum?" asked Tom. "We've come all the way to an Asian

civilisation, just so you can go and look at exhibits of some more?"

"Why not?" she replied. "I bet I'll learn a lot more about Singapore there than you will in some console shop. And anyway, we're tourists today, aren't we Doctor?"

"Quite right," said the Doctor. "You do whatever takes your fancy, my dear. I'm sure the museum will be fascinating. Over in the old Colonial town, isn't it? I remember taking tea there when the Victoria theatre was opened. By old Raffles's statue." He thought. "It will be quite a walk though. You'd best take the MRT. There should be a stop not too far up the road, unless things have changed drastically since I was last here. Any particularly interesting exhibits on?"

"Yeah, there's one on legendary creatures. Should be great. I can take some notes for the magazine."

"Jolly good. Tom?"

Tom brought up a window describing a shopping emporium. "The Hilton Shopping Plaza," he read, "is today hosting the third annual South-East Asia Information Technology convention. Viewers welcome to come and see the latest advancements in IT and cybernetics.' Sounds like just the thing for me. And look, it's just up the road, more or less." He expanded a map screen to full size, and traced his finger along the route. "Up the Boulevard, onto Orchard Road, between the Hilton and the Four Seasons. Not far from the closest MRT station, either."

"Orchard Road on a Saturday," mused the Doctor. "Prepare for crowds of shoppers. Well, if you two are happy with that, shall we make out moves?" He pulled a fob watch from jacket, golden and chained to his breast pocket. "It's just past ten o'clock. Shall we meet back here at, say, three?"

"If you're sure you're happy on your own, Doctor," said Valentina.

"Oh, my dear girl, do stop fussing. I'll be absolutely fine. I'll just enjoy a nice stroll around the city. You two go off and enjoy yourselves." They turned to go, but the Doctor made a sudden squawk. "Oh, just a moment! You'll be needing these." He reached inside his jacket, pulling out two plastic cards in iridescent colours. "I've an account with one of the local banks. You'll need a little money to be getting around. Now, off you go."

Tom and Valentina gratefully took the cards and pocketed them. "Thanks Doctor, you're the best," said Valentina.

"Yeah, cheers Doc. That's awesome. We'll see you later."

They began to walk away. As soon as they were out of sight, the Doctor sat down heavily on the nearest bench. He breathed out with a groan. He'd walk in a moment.

"I still don't quite get how you can be so..." Tom searched for the word, as they walked up the Orchard Boulevard, the sun on their faces. "Well, cynical," he finished, "but still be so into all those myths and legends. I've known you a while, but it still seems weird to me. You put so much research into things that don't exist – and you know they don't!"

"It's all a question of balancing an open mind with a healthy dose of scepticism," replied Valentina. "And I'm not cynical. I'm just... careful with my judgments. Anyway, it's not just about whether things really exist or not. It's about finding out the truth behind them – whatever that may be."

"Yeah, I guess. And I know why you got into all this, but... well, it's just a side to you that doesn't seem to fit with the rest."

"I'm a complicated woman, Thomas Brooker," she replied, pushing a strand of hair back under her hat. "And just think about where we've been, what we've done, since we met the Doctor."

"Yeah, but that's science. Mad, out there, totally beyond me science, but still, you know, explicable." He paused. "The Doctor isn't looking his best, is he?"

"No, he's really not," said Valentina, the concern in her voice evident. "I thought you weren't worried about him."

"Well, he's getting worse. I mean, I know he's old – he's like, nine hundred or something, isn't he? - but now he actually looks old. It's like, well, it's like when you've got an old relative, an uncle or distant cousin or something. You know they're a lot older than you, but they don't seem it. Then one day, you can just tell. You can see the years."

"Exactly. And what about that energy? I mean, I'm sure it's nothing to worry about, but the Doctor wasn't even interested. You'd expect him to be at least curious. It's like he can't be bothered."

The sound of traffic was rising as they moved on. The occasional car came down the road towards or away from them, the drivers comfortable sat back behind tinted windows as the vehicles drove themselves down the roadway. They came to a crossroads. A sign across the road stated PATERSON ROAD in copperplate lettering. The shrubbery around the sign was trimmed with precision, framing the sign with greenery.

Tom thought aloud. "Well, if I remember the map right, we just walk a short way up here and we hit Orchard Road. We just turn... left." So left they turned.

Just a short walk ahead of them stood a large concrete structure, with large windows set into it. A flight of concrete steps led up to the wide entrance. The building continued up to the next crossroad junction. Minimalist silver signage announced it to be ORCHARD, followed by a bold capital M. People were continually streaming from the exit, almost exclusively walking in the direction Tom and Valentina had been heading. The road ahead of them was visibly packed with traffic. The pedestrians were of a mixture of races, although almost exclusively of Asian origin – Valentina thought she could recognise the looks of Chinese, Japanese, Indian, although she was no expert in this part of the world and was only really able to base this on people she had known or seen in the UK. A lot of the people seemed to be maybe Filipino or Thai, with oriental features and reasonable dark skin, but she wasn't sure. She realised she wasn't even sure how close the Philippines, or China, or India were to Singapore. As with most of the parts of the world that were more distant to her, she really never found a need to learn much about it.

"Tube station," she reasoned, and Tom nodded in agreement. "Well, the signs are in English, that's a blessing." She turned to Tom. "I guess I'll see you later."

"You OK on your own?"

She snorted. "I have used a train before, Brooksie. I'm sure it can't be that complicated."

"Cool. I'll catch you later then." Tom turned and continued into the crowd. Valentina turned to enter the station. She hadn't yet reached the top step when she heard a cry.

"Er, Val, what time - "

She paused on the stairway, but didn't turn around.

“Three o’clock in the gardens, Tom,” she sighed.
“Right. Cheers. See you later then.”

The Asian Civilisations Museum was an impressive building, a grand colonial extravagance of Neo-Palladian tastes. Its cream outer walls were topped by terracotta roofs, surrounded by emerald palms. A gleaming white statue of Sir Stamford Raffles stood watch over the building. In his frock-coated finery and proud demeanour, he reminded Valentina a little of the Doctor.

She entered the building, paying the nominal entrance fee on her handy card. The very first thing to greet her as she entered the museum proper, beyond the opulent furnishings and decorative embellishments, was a mighty white statue in the middle of the exhibition hall. Standing over a foot taller than her, it had the head of a lion, fangs bared in the semblance of a roar, and the powerful forelimbs to match, but in place of its hindquarters was the scaly tail of a great fish. She read the plaque attached to its base, learning that it represented the Merlion, legendary symbol of Singapore, erected here especially for the current exhibition of mythical beasts. Gorgeous, she thought. Nothing like a good chimera.

Valentina wandered contentedly through the white-walled corridors of the exhibition rooms. The passages were narrow, the exhibits only a stretched arm away from her. On one wall, the image of a gigantic centipede had been painted in deep reds and terracotta hues, its pincer jaws as long as her forearm. She read the captions alongside it, telling the tale of the vast centipede monsters said to live in the northern islands of Japan, and of the hero Hidesato, who hunted them down and destroyed their race for ever. On the opposite side, she read the tale of A Bao a Qu, a magical being said to dwell in the dungeon of a great tower in Malaysia, who could only be freed if someone was dedicated enough to climb all the steps of the tower. To illustrate this, a granite statue of the tower, brought down from the Malay Peninsula, stretched up almost to the ceiling, the fingers of the beast protruding from the base through tiny doorways and windows. She continued through the exhibition with great fascination.

The following passage detailed the legends of Tibet, including that of the Yeti. Valentina found the reports here particularly interesting. She read of the numerous journeys of discovery in the region by headstrong European explorers, up to the final Travers expedition in the 1930s. The eminent explorer had claimed to have found genuine evidence of the existence of the creatures, but had little in the way of proof. Valentina noted these down on her mobile, adding reams of notes for the journal. This was all good, usable information – cryptids always sold issues. Perhaps a comparative piece on the sasquatch, the Yeti and Chinese Wildman? Hopefully she’d find something on the latter round here. She quickly jotted down the names of the three varieties of Yeti – Dzu-the, Meh-the and Yeh-the – and hurried on.

However, the next section was devoted to the Hindu legends of India. The corridors opened up into a large room, golden statues of Hindu gods dominating the space – the delicate, four-armed Brahma against the six-armed Kali, her face distorted by her tusked sneer. The elephantine Ganesh stood in the centre of the room, studded with jewels in many colours. An annex detailed the monkey god, Hanuman, and listed parallels between him and the Buddhist legend of Hsuen Tsang, a monkey who guarded the most holy of monks. She tapped out some

more notes, and continued through the winding passageways.

The next main room was dedicated to the mythology of China. Several people were in here, reviewing the exhibits with interest – most of them looked Chinese, although, again, Valentina couldn't be sure. A vast dragon enclosed the room, beginning at the entrance doorway with its three-pronged tail, climbing up the walls and ceiling, coming round almost to meet the exit, its gigantic jaws wide open, golden teeth displayed. It was fashioned from silks in reds, blues, golds, greens and purples, embroidered with images of smaller dragons, entwined around each other on its sides, below scales of gold leaf. The Chinese Wildman did have an entry here – a small one, a mere panel of information alongside a line drawing. The creature was lithe, with broad shoulders, and covered in hair. Its Chinese name was Yeh'ren, and a corpse of the creature had apparently been examined by the biologist Wang Tselin in 1940. Not long after the Yeti incidents in the 1930s, thought Valentina, and noted this down. Studies in the 1980s suggested identities of anything from Gigantopithecine apes to oversized macaque monkeys. From the sketchy image, Valentina would have suggested an orang utan – although she was reasonably sure they weren't found in China. She was surprised to read that Singapore had its own equivalent, the monkey man of Bukit Timah. A being from Malay folklore, it had been occasionally seen in the area of the great hill Bukit Timah, on and off since 1805. Three feet tall and covered with scruffy grey fur, the creature was probably just based on sightings of really big macaques, but urban legends still persisted that the wild beast-man roamed the Botanical Gardens and surrounding area after dark. Even this was linked to the monkey man of New Delhi, an Indian creature purported by some to be the embodiment of the god Hanuman himself.

Valentina got as much down as she thought useful and continued round the room. Although various oddities got their moments in the spotlight, the room was mainly concerned with dragons. A pedestal stood in the centre of the room, but nothing stood on its marble surface. She examined the plaque on the dais stood next to it.

"The Qilin," she read, "was a legendary dragon first mentioned in the records of fifth century China. Known as the Keiloon in Canton, the Kelan in Viet Nam, the Girin in Korea and the Kirin in Japan, its fame has spread far and wide. It was a noble beast, blessed with many great magical powers, and used these powers for good, helping those who it deemed noble, and punishing those it deemed corrupt." Interesting stuff. She doubted there was anything really behind such myths, but still – who didn't like dragons? She read on, following the extended info panels that decorated the dais, admiring the reproduced paintings on display.

"Tales of dragons are found throughout the world," said one segment, against an image of a winding, multicoloured serpent. "Although descriptions of such creatures vary, common features include the abilities of flight and a fiery breath, long, snakelike bodies, horns or antlers..." Valentina read on with interest. "The Asian dragon is a being of great power and nobility. Often, its magical powers are drawn from a single, holy source, such as a pearl or gem.

"Other legends identify the Qilin with the European unicorn, describing it as a pure, virtuous animal with a single, sharp horn," continued another passage, accompanied by the image of a beautiful blue horse with a flowing mane and a jutting horn. "Others describe it as having twin horns, and focuses on its golden, patterned hide. Some scholars identify such accounts with early tales of the African giraffe or okapi..."

She straightened up, and gasped, surprised to find a man standing next to her. Despite being almost shoulder to shoulder, she hadn't noticed him approach. He was a little taller than her, thin and wiry, his skin dark brown and leathery with age. He looked well-worn, like a pair of faithful old boots. Surprisingly small black eyes were deeply inset in the wrinkles of his face, and his head was hairless, save for his wildly bushy grey eyebrows.

"I'm so sorry, my dear," he said, his voice soft, melodic. "I didn't mean to startle you." He wore a loose golden top, his arms bare from just below the elbow, above black trousers and sandals. "Was there anything I could help you with?" His face opened into a broad smile, crinkling it up so much that his little eyes almost disappeared.

"No, I'm fine," replied Valentina, catching her breath. "I just didn't see you there. Do you work here?"

"Some might say I almost live here," chuckled the man. "I apologise – where are my manners? My name is Mister Kuang. I have been part of this exhibition since its beginnings. I am something of an expert in such historical tales and legends. You seem to be interested in the Qilin, here."

"Yes, I was just reading the information here. It's a shame the exhibit itself isn't here." She remembered her own manners, adding, "I'm Valentina Rossi."

"A pleasure to meet you, Miss Valentina. I am afraid the statue has been damaged. It is awaiting repairs in one of our back rooms. However, I am sure I could give you any information you require on the being."

"That'd be great. I might make a few notes, if that's all right. I work on a magazine on the paranormal."

"Paranormal? I'm not sure that would be the correct description of the Qilin. It came from another realm, yes, very long ago, but it was certainly part of the real world. Nothing spectral, or spooky, or spurious, about it. It was certainly very powerful, however."

"So you believe it was real?" asked Valentina, fascinated. Another culture's viewpoint on a mythical creature – there could be a fantastic article in this.

Mr Kuang's face became very serious. "Indeed I do. Perhaps, young Miss Valentina, you would care to see the statue? It is not at its best right now, but it is still very beautiful. I would be happy to tell you all I know about the Qilin."

"Are you sure that would be alright?"

"Absolutely," smiled Mr Kuang. "As I said, I am the foremost expert on the Qilin. I may go where I please here. I shall take you to the restoration room."

Valentina followed as the peculiar gentleman led the way to a doorway marked "Staff Only" in English, and presumably the same, in several languages below. Turning the key in the lock – an old-fashioned physical key, not the key-card Val might have expected – he ushered her into the softly lit room. It was a reasonably large room, but cramped, full with shelves stacked with objects, golden busts sitting alongside chipped terracotta and grizzled stone sculptures. Despite the obsessive cleanliness of the city, a fine layer of dust was present, in the tradition of store rooms everywhere.

"The Qilin," began Mr Kuang, in his soft voice, "came to this world from another. At first he was lost, but later came to find that he liked this world. He found it a place of great beauty. However, he saw that the people of this world were capable of great evil, as well as

good. Some men were respectful and kind to the Qilin, others feared him. Most, however, recognised him for what he was – an ancient being of great wisdom. They came to him for advice. It was then that the Qilin began to see that mankind needed guidance. He used his great powers to help those who were in need or in peril, and to punish those who he deemed to have trespassed against common good. It was not long before the people of the lands that are now China began to see the Qilin as a holy beast. Yet he was not an god, or an angel – merely a wise traveller who wished to do good in this world.”

Valentina was tapping out notes as he spoke, getting down the main points as quickly as she could.

“What were his powers?” she asked. A rundown of magical powers was always good for a box-out to help fill a page.

Mr Kuang looked at her with an expression she could only think was pride. “He had great strength, and the power to shoot flames from his jaws. But his greatest gift was the ability to take on the forms of others – by adopting such disguises, he could root out those who were foolish enough to lie to him.”

“A shape-shifter?” replied Valentina. “It’s amazing how many shape-shifters there are out there. The Doctor’s always –” she caught herself. “I mean, in folklore, shape changers are common. The, uh, Greek god Proteus, for example, or, um...”

Mr Kuang raised his hand. “Young lady, please. There is no need to try to cover yourself. I am quite aware that you are not of this world. Do you really believe that I would have taken time to bring you in here if you were just another foreign tourist?”

“I don’t know what you mean. I’m from this world. Of course I am.” Valentina hoped he’d believe that – it was the truth, after all. But how did he know about other worlds at all? Unless...

“Are you from another world?”

Mr Kuang smiled. “Indeed. This is how I could tell the same of you. As soon as you entered the museum, I felt your presence. When I saw you, I could see that your aura was different to the humans around you. And when I spoke to you – you were speaking your Western English, while I was speaking Mandarin, and you did not pause or even seem to notice the discrepancy.”

“Well... perhaps I understand Mandarin, but struggle to speak it...”

“And part way through our discussion, I began speaking the dialect I once spoke, over two thousand years ago, a dialect that is now most surely forgotten. You did not even stutter or stall, did not blink in surprise, merely continued with our conversation. Tell me, girl, where are you from?”

“I told you, I’m from Earth. England. Little country on an island, other side of the world. Where are you from?”

“Even if you are telling the truth, you are not like the others here. You have been beyond the confines of this world. Your aura is stained by the colours of different realms. Perhaps this Doctor, who you mentioned – perhaps he is the one who has taken you there?”

“What do you want?” asked Valentina. “OK, OK – it’s true. The Doctor, he’s a friend of mine. He’s from another world, but I’m not, alright? We’re just visiting here. And I really was just interested in the exhibition. Nothing I told you was untrue.”

"You have a celestial vessel?"

"If you mean a spaceship, then yes. Kind of. Probably not the kind you're used to, though."

The strange man snorted, an unpleasant sound to vent his amusement. "I dare say that I am a little out of touch with the latest technology. It is no matter. You will take me to this vessel."

"I'll take you to the Doctor, if you want. You can talk to him. If there's something you need, I'm sure he can help."

"That's very reasonable of you. However, I would surmise that if you're visiting this world, and that you are travelling with this Doctor, that he must be fond of mankind?"

"Well, yes. Of course."

Mr Kuang's grin became wider, and yet more disquieting. "Then I dare say he will have issue with what I intend to do with his vessel. Now take me there."

"No. I refuse." Stand your ground, thought Valentina. Whatever he wants, it doesn't sound good.

Mr Kuang grabbed her arm, digging his long, sharp nails into the skin. She gritted her teeth in reaction to the sharp pain.

"You will take me there," he snarled – and it was a snarl, deep and guttural.

"No, I will not."

The pain in her arm grew sharper, and she looked down. A trickle of blood ran down, dripping onto the ground, as Kuang's ever lengthening nails dug into her. They were becoming longer – almost claws now, yellow and curved. His skin, too was changing – it took on a golden sheen, and cracked, a scaly texture emerging before her eyes.

She looked into the man's face. But it was the face of a man no longer. His mouth and nose extended forwards into a muzzle, dark, reddish hair sprouting from his upper lip and chin, while the scaly texture spread across his skin. His eyebrows, so sweetly ridiculous before, had darkened and lengthened, sprouting purplish barbs. His ears grew longer and higher, and the skin of his scalp broke. The buds of horns, black and glossy with ichor, forced their way out from under his flesh. What little that was left of human expression grimaced, in pain or concentration, she wasn't sure.

She was unable to move, as the clawed hand gripped her tighter.

In moments, she was no longer looking at a man, but at a golden scaled dragon.

The face of the Qilin looked down on her.

The Doctor had decided to avoid the bustle of Orchard Road, instead keeping to the narrower streets that ran parallel to it. The sound of the traffic was still discernable as he strolled along the pavements edged by emerald palms and shrubs, but only the occasional vehicle disturbed the general peace and quiet of the area. Even with the city centre less than a mile distant, there was a stillness here. The Doctor felt himself relax as he continued along the sidewalk, the proverbial weight lifted from his shoulders. Events had been getting away from him recently. He'd found himself more and more a victim of circumstance. There were times in life when he

was happy to go with the flow, let life wash over him, and enjoy the sights, wherever he might end up. He remembered his younger days, wandering the Universe, unable to control his travels and not really worried by it. The lack of planning and foreknowledge had actually made him feel free. Now though, he'd become more used to travelling with a purpose, however trivial. If he wanted to travel blind, then it would be a conscious choice, and he'd set the TARDIS to choose a random destination. Recently, however, it had felt as though his choices were being taken from him. Even the TARDIS was making decisions for him – moving off course, to follow up this energy source. Was it important? The Doctor felt that it may be, that perhaps he should investigate it; but stronger than that was the feeling that he simply wanted to forget about such things for the time being. Was it too much to ask to simply be allowed to relax for a change? To enjoy the places he found himself?

He turned a corner, and the noise of traffic abruptly brought him to alertness. Without realising it, he'd moved up towards the Orchard Road itself. A mass of trees on the opposite side of the road he'd moved from signified a park – Fort Canning Park, he thought, remembering the town's many green spaces. He could hear the delicate song of thrushes and merboks emanating from the trees. He decided not to hang around here, and pushed ahead, crossing the road at the first opportunity, passing through the commercial strip and continuing into the city's more ancient core.

The Doctor had found his way into the city's traditionally South Asian quarter, the affectionately named Little India. Once, this area had been nothing more than a few shacks that lined the middle of the Serangoon Road that crossed from one side of Singapore Island to the other. The last time he'd found himself in the area – wearing a different body, older in form yet younger in spirit – had been in the 1910s. The area had still been mostly swampland then, until swathes of Tamil labourers had come to work on the nearby lime pits, forcing progress onto the area. Although the occasional wet area still remained – there had been a crocodile farm not too far to the north, the Doctor recalled, wondering if it had survived – it was hard to equate the marshy hamlet with this heavily populated area, lined with markets, restaurants and temples, barely a stone's throw from the sophisticated centre of the city.

The Doctor crossed the canal, brushing away the cloud of mosquitoes that clung to a friendly habitat in the midst of civilised progress. The canal was empty today – a far cry from the heyday of local peddlers' rafts at the turn of the previous century – and he spared it only a brief look as he carried up the Serangoon Road. On the corner of Buffalo Road – where once, fresh buffalo beef had hung from butchers' stalls, while live cattle were paraded by farmers – was a wet market. 'Wet' referred as much to blood as to water, but the marketplace was far more civilised these days. Mostly jewellery stalls lined the street now, their dazzling, glittering wares displayed proudly. The noise was astonishing, and, to the Doctor, strangely comforting.

"Ah, rich man, handsome man," said one young stallholder, his attractive features a mix of Indian and Malayan. "Very fine clothes, sir," he shouted at the Doctor. "You would like, perhaps, a fine chain to go with your fine clothes?" He held up a gold necklace, or at least, what appeared to be gold. "Or perhaps a nice new watch?" He rolled up a sleeve, displaying an

armful of Seiko and Rolex knock-offs. "Best watches in Singapore, keep very good time."

"Thank you," said the Doctor, "I already have a watch." He pulled his fob watch from his pocket, returning before avaricious eyes got a good look. "I have places to be, but I shall maybe come back here later, and look at your jewellery. Maybe a ring – I used to have a fine ring with a blue stone. Maybe you have something similar?"

"Ah, yes, I have many rings," replied the stallholder swivelling round to grab a display board, but, by the time he had turned back to show the Doctor, he had moved on.

Moving on through the market place to the arcade, assailed by the aromas of hand-ground spices and incense, the Doctor perused varied wares, glancing at hats, satchels, sculptures, rugs, and all kinds of knick-knacks created according to timeless techniques. A seller of Nu-Ray discs injected a sense of the modern, projecting holographic scenes from the latest Bollywood blockbusters. The Doctor continued out of the arcade, taking his time, absorbing the sounds and smells of the place as he continued northwards up the road. The babble of peddlers grew slightly quieter, but never left him. Even in the multicultural modern Singapore, someone who appeared to be a wealthy European gathered most of the sellers' attentions.

He found himself outside a Hindu temple, a medium-sized building fronted by a dizzying array of Bengali Hindu sculptures. The Doctor wandered around the structure, taking in the multifarious minor gods and devi, from pot-bellied masculine creatures to elegantly beautiful females, from warriors riding lions to anthropomorphic beast-men. In the very centre of the tableau of colourful beings stood a fearsome woman, a mattress of feathers beneath her crossed legs and a blood-red headdress trailing to her shoulders. She rode the back of a mighty leonine beast, and her shoulders sprouted a multitude of arms. It was she who identified this as the Sri Veeramaka-liamman, the Temple of Kali the Courageous.

"Excuse me, sir, but unless I am mistaken, you have walked around the temple only two times." The Doctor turned to see a woman sat to his left, huddled in an alcove of the temple.

"Yes, I suppose I have," he replied. "Is that important?"

"It is good luck to walk around the temple an odd number of times," said the woman. Her skin was dark, her age indeterminable, her features an unidentifiable mix of races. Evidently someone whose ancestors had mixed origins, and had come together in this city. She was wrapped in a blanket of various colours, the metallic dyes glinting in the sunlight like a butterfly's wings. She stood, and the Doctor saw that she was tiny, not even five feet tall – a stark contrast to his impressive height.

"I shall do so at once," said the Doctor. It never hurt to indulge in someone's beliefs that way, however superstitious.

"Clockwise!" cried the woman.

The Doctor circled the temple three times clockwise for good measure, before rejoining the woman where he left her.

"That should do it," he said. "I'm sure I could do with a little good luck."

"I should think so," said the woman, "for you seem a man who is troubled, if I may say."

"Is it that obvious?" the Doctor replied. "I was never very good at keeping my emotions off my face."

"I sense a great burden on your shoulders, yet also a great past of triumphs and trials. You are older than you appear, sir."

"And you are very perceptive."

"Come with me," she said, hurrying towards the door, beckoning the Doctor to follow. "Ghani will tell your future. Come, come."

The Doctor found himself intrigued by this little woman, and followed her, crossing the road after her, trailing her as she carried on through twisting alleyways. Judging by the number of left turns they took, the Doctor realised that they must have gone in a circle twice. Perhaps she was trying to make it seem further than it really was, or get him lost. She didn't seem the sort to be luring tourists into traps, leading them into alleys to be mugged, but the Doctor kept on his guard just in case.

"Come" said Ghani, beckoning him further. She led him to a tiny shack, decorated with ribbons and silks. A serpentine creature was painted over the doorway, its tail in its mouth.

"Kalamakara," said Ghani, as the Doctor looked at the image, and ducked inside.

"A guardian demon. An ouroboros," he muttered to himself, following her inside.

"Yes. The kalamakara, it is death. But it is commanded to devour itself, to become its own death, and its presence strikes fear into the heart of lesser demons. It is protection."

"A death demon, on the door of a woman who sits at the temple of Kali the Destroyer."

"Only with destruction can come life. As Kali destroys, so Brahma creates. With death comes new life. It is the way of the Universe."

"You are a wise person, Ghani," said the Doctor.

The two of them sat at the table that took up most of the hut, embroidered cloths of many colours covering it. Ghani took the Doctor's hand.

"You have come a great distance to be here. First, I took you to be just another European, but no – you come from much further than that. Yes, you have travelled far – farther than any I have encountered before. You have such stories to tell. You have walked the circle of existence many times."

"You are indeed very perceptive. How do you know these things?"

"How does a woman know how to care for her child? How does a bird know it lives in the air? I know. That is enough."

Ghani looked the Doctor straight in the eye. A look of fear had come over her face.

"He comes. From the black lands, from further than even you. He has been following you. There will be a reckoning. You must walk the circle once more." She dropped his hand.

"What do you mean?" the Doctor demanded. "Who comes? Who is 'he?'"

"That is all I know." She put her hand out. "Now you must pay."

I should have realised that was coming, thought the Doctor. "How much?"

"Those who come here must pay only what they can afford."

The Doctor realised he didn't actually have any money on him – only the cash cards that he'd fabricated in the TARDIS. After some thought, he removed his cufflinks – gold, shaped as question marks, with pearl forming the dots. He placed them in her hand, his jacket sleeves keeping his shirt cuffs together well enough, and left.

The Hilton Plaza gleamed in the morning sun, the glass panels and sleek metallic struts reflecting the light so that Tom had to shield his eyes as he looked at the building. The Plaza stood between two hotels – the Four Seasons and the Hilton itself, both perfect example of simple, classic architecture. A holographic banner was projected onto the fronting of the Plaza, announcing the SEA IT Convention. Tom walked forwards, smiling to the beautiful woman on the door who greeted him, and exchanging polite nods with the immaculately turned out doormen, who wished him a good day. Even the guards here had class. Entering the Plaza, Tom was assailed by sights, sounds and cybernetics. The central hall was packed with stalls, some physical, others mere three-dimensional projections. A stall to his right offered the very latest in 7G phone technology, the young presenter enthusiastically demonstrating the variety of functions available.

“All I do is blink – so – and I can access the full menu of apps, which can be navigated by simple will power due to the state of the art neural interface. As you can see...”

To his left, a drop dead gorgeous girl with Asian features but ivory skin modelled a form-fitting pink suit, laced with circuitry that could be seen as a faint metallic green pattern glinting beneath the surface.

“For those who prefer to keep the hardware unseen, we have various other fabrics which render the circuitry entirely invisible. If you’d rather show it off, we have fabrics with transparent sections, displaying it for maximum effect.”

Tom watched her for a while, unsure how much he was interested in the technology, and how much in the girl. If he was honest, the girl would have won out, but then, it *had* been a while. She occupied his attention so completely, that he almost didn’t notice the hall’s centrepiece – the five-metre-tall mechanical Tyrannosaurus that loomed down on the smiling masses.

“Reznor here has realistic pseudo-biological skin, manufactured by Omykron, while his central processor has been supplied by IntelliGen, who you can find showing their latest developments on the first floor. His baby brother can be seen now at the Singapore Science Centre, and there’ll be more to come back home in Tokyo in the very near future.”

‘Reznor’ lunged at the audience, letting out a deep roar, exposing distressingly realistic looking teeth. The crowd laughed and cheered, pros and public alike.

“And yes, we can reveal that we shall soon be unveiling our household range. Bored with your robodogs and cybercats? Why not invest in one of our realistic-looking RaptorPetz...”

Tom continued walking through the crowds, perusing the various new developments. It really hadn’t been that long, in real terms, since he’d left Earth with the Doctor, but there were things here that had only been rough notes on the back of napkins when he’d last checked out the market. Part of that was down to the living in the UK – there was always a lag before the West got a hold of the latest developments, even with the instantaneous communications available now, but even so, this was impressive.

A man sprung into existence just to his right, dressed in a perfectly-pressed black business suit in the latest fashionable cut. “Good morning, sir. I represent the very latest in personal holographic technology. Would you be interested in an individually tailored avatar?”

We can take your measurements right here.”

“I may come back to you, mate,” replied Tom, fingering the credit card in his pocket, and thanking the Doctor silently for his sponsorship. He was too distracted right now to focus on any one thing, like a kid in the proverbial Cyberkandy store. Had Tom joined the Doctor in the marketplace of Little India, he would have seen just the same level of showmanship and salesmanship as was on display here, but he would have shrugged it off as just another scruffy market. Here, the stallholders dazzled him with their class and style, as much as their technology.

I could spend way too much money here, he thought.

“Apple’s latest Q-Phone has paved the way for personal systems incorporating state-of-the-art quantum processors. However, the latest developments from Sony-Microsoft have increased the processing power by forty million qubits...”

“... and presenting the very latest in the world of robotic companions, Make-A...”

“... human eyesight can be increased in precision by forty per cent with the simple implantation of...”

“Sir, please, that’s very fragile. If you break that, sir...”

“... the very development that has allowed the Chinese Space Agency to overtake NASA in the race to fully self-sufficient biodomes, by creating a self-regulating...”

Tom wandered unaware onto a pedestrian conveyor, and jumped a little when he realised that he was moving forward. The corrugated charcoal-coloured slats shifted apart as the conveyor became an escalator, carrying him upwards onto the next floor. The noise from the main hall dwindled as he moved upwards. As he approached the floor – overhanging the lower level like a veranda – he noticed the protective railing was embedded with tiny black discs. Speakers, he thought, no doubt putting out destructive soundwaves to cancel out the noise from the crowd below, while still allowing those up here to view the events. With the noise reduced to a background hum, the atmosphere was immediately less raucous, and more businesslike. At least two dozen people stood around the level, many watching the hubbub below, mostly dressed in similar business suits, although there was one or two in more colourful, casual wear. Techies amongst the businessmen. The guys who did the work, and the ones who paid their wages. Still, no one was paying him any attention – so far as he could tell, there was no reason why he couldn’t sit in and watch whatever was going on up here. As the escalator deposited him, he stumbled forward to see what was going on.

A small stage stood in the centre of the area, young technicians scurrying around it, no doubt performing last minute checks before the beginning of whatever event was planned. An extensive holographic display lit up, surrounding the stage area with animated images. A bright green logo dominated the stage, hovering above the floor in defiance of its apparent physical solidity. A large letter ‘I’ in the lower case, it’s crowning dot containing the word IntelliGen. On the edges of the stage, holomodels of human figures stood side by side with complex information breakdowns. The technical part of the audience moved in to study these, blocking some of his view.

Tom started to move in to get a better view, but stopped in his tracks. An elevator arrived in the corner of the level, and visible through the transparent walls stood one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen. Her hair, just a shade off black, framed her delicate

features; her skin was bronze, her lips full, and when she stepped out of the lift, she looked around the room, her huge, dark eyes catching his own. She wore a bright green suit, just tight enough to accentuate her wonderful figure. Tom tried hard not to stare. He failed.

She walked onto the central stage, the tech boys scooting off out of her way. The green logo – had she chosen the suit to coordinate? – shrank away, until it was nothing more than a thumb sized badge on her lapel.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen,” she said, in lightly accented English, subtitles in four languages scrolling up in front of her. “My name is Lucy Calamahoy, and I am representing IntelliGen for SEA IT. Now, I realise that we are a relatively new company, and many of you no doubt have questions regarding what we can offer in today’s highly competitive marketplace. Our goal is to become the leading proponents in artificial intelligence development. In spite of many years of research into this area, the world’s AI technology remains astonishingly simplistic. Nothing exists that can truly be described as a true intelligence. Basic systems are freely available – our own engineers have supplied the matrix for various new public systems, such as our friend Reznor down there. But these are simple systems, little more than a handful of pre-programmed responses to limited stimuli. What we have here for you today is an example of just what we can offer the future of the world.”

She stepped back slightly, as a hologram shimmered into view at her side. It was, in appearance, a young woman, with somewhat simplistic features – anatomically correct, but lacking character.

“A basic, untailed avatar,” commented Lucy, gesturing at her synthetic companion. “But when linked to our latest system, Kangmi, I think you will immediately notice the difference.”

The avatar rippled, its features momentarily blurring, before stabilising again. The difference was clear. The image now smiled, her eyes displaying what could only be described as awareness. She followed the people shifting slightly in the audience, blinking just a little too infrequently to be human. Other than this, she seemed totally, real. Her bearing, the way she held herself, were at once more naturalistic than they had been.

“Now, we’ve all seen and used very sophisticated avatars before. However, this is being controlled solely by the Kangmi programme, no human is involved in its operation. Please, ask her a question.”

A middle-aged businessman at the front of the group spoke up. “Miss, uh, Kangmi – what makes you different to other AI systems in operation worldwide?”

The Kangmi avatar smiled at the man. “My programming mimics the functional structure of human neural pathways, allowing my thought processes a degree of autonomy and originality previously unseen in any AI system. I am also Omni-compatible, able to interface with any cybernetic or computer system with minimal adjustment.” Her voice was quiet but clear, smooth and melodic. The sort of voice you wouldn’t mind listening to all day.

Lucy continued: “The Kangmi matrix can be transferred to any system, be it your business’s central system or your mechanical warden. There is virtually no limit as to its capability to learn and adjust its programme to deal with new situations and stimuli. We believe that Kangmi will revolutionise AI technology worldwide – and we have already had interest from major companies such as International Electromatics, Qupid and AppleJam, as

well as several national governments that I'm not at liberty to name."

"Problem," said Kangmi.

Lucy looked momentarily concerned, before her professional demeanour returned.

"What was that, Kangmi?"

"Problem," repeated the hologram. "Unknown source detected. Exception to –" the hologram froze, its image flickering. Three technicians hurried onto the stage, accessing the terminals in a frantic attempt to find out what the problem was.

Lucy smiled at the audience. "Live shows – there's always a problem somewhere! I'm sure that whatever it is will be rectified shortly."

"Does it always crash this easily?" piped up a voice from the crowd.

"I can assure you that this is a very, very rare occurrence, sir."

The Kangmi hologram continued to flicker, its image suffering as its processors struggled with whatever problem they were facing.

Tom watched on. For a moment, he had wondered if "unknown source" might in some way refer to his, an unauthorised presence, but this was a public venue, even if the crowd here did seem a little more exclusive than the rest of the convention. He was intrigued now – not only at the apparent capabilities of this system, but at what may be causing it to go wrong. If it could adapt to new stimuli, what was giving it such trouble?

One of the techs came up to Lucy, looking as if he feared for his life. Tom guessed it wasn't good news.

"I'm afraid we are going to have to take an intermission here, ladies and gentlemen," apologised Lucy. "Technical difficulties."

Tom found himself walking towards the podium, his feet moving before his conscious mind realised they were doing so. Lucy looked down on him with an arrogant, imperious expression. Tom gulped, comically. He suddenly felt anxious – how much from intimidation, and how much from lust, he wasn't sure.

"Yes?" she demanded. "May I help you?"

Tom braced himself, and tried something he knew, deep down, he wasn't very good at: he tried being cool.

"No, love, but I think I can help you."

He hopped onto the stage, making way for the terminals before anyone had a chance to stop him. The interfaces weren't quite what he was used to, but the basics weren't much different.

"I've never met a computer I couldn't fix," he said, before adding, "Well, not often. Let me take a look." The technicians muscled over to him, but Lucy waved them away. "Give him a chance," she said, before turning back to the audience, who were more interested than ever. "We're always scouting for new talent!"

It didn't take long before Tom realised what the problem was.

"Oh, you're going to kick yourselves, guys," he said to the techs surrounding him. "You've confused the poor thing. Look." He gestured to the relevant region of code, pulling up the necessary data. "It's detected something – I'm not sure what – that's overriding its current function. But it's adaptable – it's trying to deal with both problems."

"That shouldn't give it any trouble," said the nearest technician.

"It shouldn't, no, but your override is the issue. It's trying to deal with it but is getting commands telling it not to. So it then tries to deal with the override, and gets an override telling it not to deal with that. It's stuck in a circle. You've misunderstood a basic part of the command system. I'm not too surprised, though – this system's seriously weird. I've never seen a matrix like it." He turned to the radiant Lucy. "You'll need to offline it to sort this out. Whole thing's gone tits up."

Lucy folded her arms, looking hard into his eyes. Then she turned back to the crowd. "You heard the man, ladies and gentlemen. I'm very sorry, but this demonstration will have to be postponed. I'm certain we'll have everything in order by tomorrow." She returned to Tom and the technicians. "You three – go and find something within your capabilities. You – what was your name?"

"Thomas Brooker. I'm from out of town – just passing through." Actually, maybe he was getting the hang of this cool stuff.

"Well, Thomas Brooker – I think I have a job for you."

Conflicting thoughts ran through Valentina's mind.

Part of her was fascinated. A genuine oriental dragon stood in front of her, its reptilian eyes a livid red, its scales like gold leaf, its tail coiled along the floor. How many people had the opportunity to actually meet a dragon, face to face? She could learn so much from it.

Another part of her was worried about the creature's intentions. It had been very clear about them. It wanted the TARDIS – and it had implied that it was for something much more serious than simple travel.

Yet another part of her was focused mainly on the creature's knife-like teeth and claws, and was terrified for her life. These last two parts of her had the majority, and overrode the intellectually curious part of her psyche. The creature had relaxed its grip – maybe the transformation had taken its toll on the being. Perhaps it thought that its frightening appearance would be enough to frighten this young woman into immobility. However, Valentina had seen too many bizarre sights and been in too many life-threatening situations since meeting the Doctor to be overcome by a mythical beast standing in front of her.

Valentina swung her arms out, grabbing the nearest objects on the shelving around her and throwing them forward. An ornate urn smashed into the creature's chest, while a granite statue toppled onto the beast's three-clawed foot. The Qilin snarled venomously, and she took her chance to bolt for the door.

She pushed the door open, dashing from the room and out into the main exhibition area. The scattered museum patrons stared at her in surprise, as she belted down the corridors as fast as she could. Pushing past an astonished staff member, she ran from the exhibition, across the entrance hall and out of building, the doors courteously opening for her getaway. In a moment of panic, she slipped on the whitewashed steps at the museum's front, but righted herself quickly, sparing only a quick glance behind her to ensure that the Qilin wasn't following her, before heading off in the direction of the bridge. After ten minutes of frantic running, she came to a breathless halt at a coffee shop. She plonked herself down into a vacant seat inside,

breathing heavily.

A very young waiter came up to her, a little unsure about this panting foreigner. "I'm sorry miss, are you OK? Would you like me to get you something?"

Not a bad idea, Valentina though. "Um, something cold please?"

"Olang tzu?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Um, how you say... orange juice." The young man made a determined attempt at the western pronunciation. For some reason, the TARDIS translation systems, astonishingly far-reaching as they were, happily translated languages as far from her own as Draconian and Xeelee, but didn't bother with the many peculiar variations in English across world history.

"Sure, that'll be great," she replied. The waiter smiled, and hurried off to fetch the drink.

As she sat there, her breathing gradually slowing, she ran the events of the day so far through her head. It was barely the afternoon, and already she had been chased by an alien creature. Couldn't the TARDIS ever land somewhere that wasn't in the midst of some extraterrestrial trouble? Did it do it on purpose? Valentina was starting to wonder if that wasn't exactly the case. She wondered what to do now. The best course of action would be to head back to the TARDIS as soon as she'd gotten her breath back. Should she try taking a different route back, perhaps take a few extra twists and turns in case the alien tried tracking her? Or should she just get back there as quickly as possible?

She pulled her phone from her bag, and tried to call Tom. After a dozen rings, she gave up. He was either ignoring it, or had left it back in the TARDIS. Once you were used to alien planets and distant time zones, carrying a phone didn't seem as essential as it once had, especially as they simply didn't work in ninety-nine per cent of the places they landed.

The waiter brought over her juice, and she handed him the card the Doctor had given her. The waiter took it happily – paying for even tiny purchases with plastic was common here – and plugged it into a thin device that hung at his waist. Valentina authorised it with a thumbprint.

She drank her juice quickly, her parched throat desperate for the moisture. She'd been prepared for a leisurely day out, not a sprint in subequatorial heat. She flicked through the notes on her phone as she drank. Was that creature really the Qilin? It had never actually said it, but... well, it had to be. No wonder Mr Kuang had been so keen to talk about the creature – he was waxing lyrical about his own past life. How the hell had it come to be active here and now? An alien posing as a holy beast in ancient China, now setting up residence in downtown Singapore? The sooner she got back to the Doctor and told him about, the better. She downed the last of her juice and set off back to the Ship.

She was unaware of the crimson-hued reptilian eyes that watched her from across the bridge.

Now, this is classy, thought Tom.

Lucy led him through the main hall of the Hilton, her assistants having scattered to take care of their various tasks. She was busy talking into a matchbox-sized phone, so Tom allowed

himself to gaze around the hotel lobby. The design was sleek and minimalist, clearly expensive without shouting about it. It looked both modern and classic at once. *Yes, definitely classy,* thought Tom.

A smartly uniformed staff member came up to him. His name was Ang, according to the gleaming name badge pinned to his pale grey lapel.

"Is there anything I can help you with, sir?"

Tom found himself floundering. *Do I look that out of place here?*, he thought.

"He's with me," said Lucy, pocketing her phone as she walked over to the two of them.

"My apologies, Miss Calamahoy. Is there anything I can do for you?" Ang said, bowing subtly.

"Just fetch my keycard, would you? There's a good boy."

The young man bowed again, and scurried off to the front desk.

"Don't worry," she smiled, taking in Tom's open mouth and worried expression. "This isn't one of those super-exclusive places that turn away people in tees and trainers. As long as you have the money to pay for it, the service here is excellent. Just relax, and try not to look so lost." She patted him on the arm, and Tom felt a little shiver run up his spine. *God, I hope that wasn't visible,* he thought.

Ang came running back to them, holding up a tiny plastic card. "Your key, ma'am."

"Thank you, Ang," she smiled, and turned to the elevator rank.

"Miss Calamahoy, before you go," interjected the young man, "several of your guests have arrived and are reclining in the bar. Shall I send them up to you?"

"Give us twenty minutes, would you?" she sighed. "I need a moment to prepare."

She led Tom to the elevator, which opened with a quiet chime.

"Floor Three," she said.

"Floor Three," said the elevator, in soft, cultured tones. *It sounded a little like Sir Stephen Fry,* thought Tom. He felt the telltale stomach-leap that accompanied the beginning of ascent.

The elevator stopped at the next floor, allowing three more passengers on. While the five of them studiously ignored one another, as was the custom in such situations the world over, Lucy pressed herself closely to Tom in the confined space. He felt this mouth becoming dry.

Get a grip, man, he thought to himself, smiling at her as nonchalantly as he could manage.

Exiting at the third floor, the elevator wishing them both a good day, the pair of them walked a short way to Lucy's room. Entering with the swipe of a key card, Lucy turned to Tom and said, "I'm going to fix myself a drink. You want anything? Tea?"

"Oh, I'm English. There's always time for tea," joked Tom, as they entered the room.

"Oolong OK for you?"

"Uh, sure," he replied, having absolutely no idea what that was.

The room was enormous, with its own sizable living area, walled by a large tinted window that looked out onto the street below. Lucy took Tom's hand and led him through into the sleeping area. A computer terminal with a paper-thin screen sat on a pine desk, opposite the double bed.

"OK sweetie, you'll be working there. I'll need you to go through the central programmes for the Kangmi system. If you find anything like before, anything you can fix or

improve, just go straight ahead. The system is adaptive, it should accept anything you tell it without issue. The important thing is to get the AI functioning as it should be as soon as possible." She looked him in the eye. "I'm sure I don't need to tell you that this is sensitive information. Absolutely no word of what you learn here to *anyone*, you understand? But don't worry. I'll make it worth your while." She smiled that smile again. "I've a feeling we could go far together."

"OK," said Tom, a little uncertain of himself. He'd got himself in the deep end here. "So, what, I'll be like a casual employee? Cos, you know, I'm only in the country for a while. My friends are waiting for me."

"Oh, we'll see where it goes, shall we? Just show me what you can do." She walked off to a small kitchenette that formed an annex to the bedroom.

Tom sat himself at the desk, booting up the terminal. After a moment, Lucy leant over his shoulder, gently placing a jug of hot water and a small teapot down, before reaching for a tiny china cup. Tom looked at these with some bafflement.

"You pour the water into the pot, let it brew for a moment, then pour it into the cup," she said, noting his look.

"Uh, yeah, I get that. We just tend to have a single big cup back home. It'll take about seven cups to empty that pot."

"That's the best way to drink it. Each cup is infused fully." She tapped a series of passwords into the system, and an array of windows opened on screen. "You'll be able to find your way around OK?"

"Think so. This all seems fairly straightforward," he said, which wasn't remotely true. "What'll you be doing?"

"I have a few guests to entertain in the main room," she said. "Potential customers. This system is going to be very big. Don't worry, we won't disturb you." She walked back into the main area, leaving Tom to his work.

Wondering again what he'd gotten himself into, Tom cracked his knuckles, adjusted himself to his practised computer sitting position, and got stuck in.

The Doctor sipped his tea as he considered the peculiar predictions of the mysterious Ghani. Unlike Tom, he knew precisely how to drink oolong. As he enjoyed the infusion's delicate flavour, he ran the events of the afternoon over in his mind. The Doctor was a sceptic by nature – he was a scientist, who had grown up in a rationalistic society, far in advance of the peoples of Earth. Yes, the people of Gallifrey had belief systems, but few within the ranks of the Time Lords paid them much heed. Priests of the Gods of Time, and the cults that worshipped the Old Ones, were mostly restricted to the lower casts and Shobogan settlements.

He knew that soothsayers and fortune tellers were more often than not simply confidence tricksters, skilled at reading human reactions and tailoring their predictions to suit. Of course, technically he didn't have human reactions, but nonetheless... Vague though the woman's words had been, they had unsettled him. And he had seen far too many strange things in his travels, things that taxed even his ability to rationalise, that he was disinclined to rule

anything out. Time Lords, being innately sensitive to the patterns of time, did occasionally display precognition. Humans had some innate, though limited, psychic abilities. These were rarely displayed, but it was still possible.

He tried to put the events out of his mind, pouring himself another cup and willing himself to relax. He leant back in his seat, perched on the edge of a small coffee shop's terrace. Having walked back towards the main city centre, he found his feet beginning to ache. He wondered when he had allowed himself to become so out of condition. He extended his long legs under the table, stretching the muscles. He was just beginning to relax again, when the explosion occurred.

The sound hit him as if it were a solid object, snapping him immediately to attention. Gasps, screams and shouts resounded around him, as the other customers and passersby reacted to the deafening noise. Patrons rushed out of the cafes and shops along the road side.

The Doctor stood up, looking up the road, towards the direction of the sound. A great plume of blackened smoke rose from a structure not more than half a mile away. His sensitive nostrils could already detect the stench of burning plastic and chemical explosives. People were running, screaming both to and from the scene of the devastation. Police were already beginning to amass around the area, attempting to calm those nearby. Cars screeched to a halt, their drivers and automated systems each reacting to the sudden influx of pedestrians spilling into the road.

The Doctor set off in the direction of the chaos, ignoring the pain in his feet. His tea and hat sat forgotten on the table.

The gardens remained as peaceful as she had left them, apart from the sound of sirens that carried from deeper in the city. Valentina had lived in cities long enough to zone out from such sounds. The stillness of the park was comforting after her getaway. She had made her way here as quickly as she could without actually breaking out into a run, something which would probably have attracted attention and ended up slowing her down. She looked all around her, scanning the area for prying eyes. The few passersby paid no attention to her, even as an obvious tourist. Probably very used to such people wandering around looking lost. The TARDIS stood exactly where it had been left – always a relief, considering the unsettling streak of free will the Ship had been displaying. With another quick glance around, she pulled the TARDIS key from her bag, and slotted it into the lock. The door had only opened a crack when she felt a hand on her arm. She let out a short yelp, but another hand planted itself over her mouth, muffling her to near silence.

"Keep quiet, my dear," Mr Kuang hissed into her ear. "The door is unlocked, my foot is already over the threshold. You're going to let me in, or I will be forced to take on a less... mundane form. One capable of dealing out considerably more damage."

Valentina nodded her head as much as the constricting grasp would allow. She pushed the door further open, and the pair of them stepped through.

"Now please close the door," ordered her assailant, in calm, measured tones. She almost wished he had been shouting at her; it would have been less unnerving than such reasonable

sounding manners. She pulled the door, and it clamped shut with a snap. Kuang released his grip.

"Very good," he said, taking in the control room in which he stood. "I say, this is rather impressive. I had no idea you would be travelling in something so advanced. This should do very nicely."

"How did you follow me?" asked Valentina, giving her voice as much force as she could manage.

"Oh, really," said Mr Kuang, "don't disappoint me. I'm sure you are intelligent enough to realise that I can do things utterly impossible to limited anthropoids such as yourself."

"So," she said, "you're the Qilin. Any particular reason you were hanging around a museum dedicated to things like you? Enjoy reading about yourself?"

The being actually managed to look embarrassed. "I have been existing in reduced circumstances," he admitted. "I have been trapped in a dormant form for several thousand years. The statue, the one that you, ah, didn't see in the museum. That was me. Some considerable time ago, I arrived on this planet. Not deliberately, I might add. I was unable to leave, but the energy reserves on my ship were quite sufficient to keep me alive for a long time. However, they eventually ran low. Without a compatible source of soul energy, I was left vulnerable. A number of humans saw fit to take advantage of that."

"And they, what, attacked you?"

"Indeed. A handful of your kind would pose no threat, but there were a considerable number against me. I was injured, my reserves exhausted. I was forced to enter a period of hibernation, and wait for rescue. But I knew that was unlikely to come."

Valentina found herself feeling sorry for the little man, before reminding herself that he was, in fact, a very large dragon who had only shortly before been threatening her. Nonetheless, she was interested to hear his story.

"So, what changed?"

Seemingly from nowhere, the alien produced a palm-sized sphere, constructed from some off-white, pearlescent material. He held it out, gazing at the object.

"This was brought into the museum, as part of the exhibition. I was roused by its presence. Only slightly at first – enough to become aware of my surroundings, to absorb the information that was being exchanged around me. I sat, half-sleeping, for months, gathering my strength and content to learn about the world as it now was. I have to admit, I did not expect to find a world so far removed from the one I had gone to sleep in. nonetheless, your species has changed little. Still superstitious, enthralled by what you don't understand. I suppose I should be grateful; that is, after all, what brought my little prize here to me."

"What is it?"

"I'm not certain. Its origin is a mystery to me. It was discovered in the region you know as Tibet. It contains the correct form of soul energy that I take sustenance from. A psychic power source, in essence, although I doubt that was its original purpose. Presumably, it belonged to another visitor to this world." He stared at the sphere, as if entranced. "There's a glimmer of intelligence in there. I feel almost sad to have to break it open and swallow it."

"You said the Doctor would have a problem with what you have to do. Is that what you meant? Breaking that thing open?"

“Indeed. If your friend is concerned about the people of this city, I doubt very much that he will approve of my opening this sphere. I am afraid the energy contained is not entirely of the correct variety. A great deal of radiation will be expelled from this little object as I open it and absorb what I require. I’m afraid I will have to channel it away from myself, for my own safety. It really was very fortunate for me that you came here. I was at a loss as to how to open this. I truly felt I would be trapped here forever, living a half-life off the trickle of energy leaking out. Now, with this wonderful craft, I can open the sphere, feed on it, restoring myself to full strength – and I shall have a way off this benighted planet to boot.”

“How much radiation are we talking about here?”

“I couldn’t say exactly. However, it is unlikely that anything in the city will survive.”

“You don’t need to do this!” Valentina cried. “Really. The Doctor will help you. He’ll take you away from here, back to your own planet. He can help you get the energy you need. I swear, he’ll do everything he can to help you. You don’t have to bust that thing open in the middle of the city!”

“I am sorry, my dear. But I have been forced to wait too long for this. I have been trapped here for thousands of years, amongst tribes of warmongering apes. To be honest, I no longer care what happens to your people.”

“Then you are a monster.”

A sad look crossed Kuang’s face. “Perhaps.”

Tom explored the system with growing fascination. It really was quite unlike anything he had come across before, designed along quite different lines. Yet the basic principles were the same. It was still a computer system – and he had always had an instinct for such things. As he explored, he understood more and more of the operating principles, and could see more clearly how to improve it. The main problem was clear – the system worked along different lines to standard matrices, but the technicians and programmers had tried to install standard-style commands. It was never going to work. The system commands would have to be redone from scratch.

Though he continued working, he couldn’t relax. Lucy had offered a big opportunity here – a way into a cutting edge cybernetics developer that was, if she was to be believed, on the verge of changing the world. This was how he’d always worked: impressing the right people with his skills and getting contracts as a result. Yet, this time, it didn’t feel right. Too quick, too easy – and this system wasn’t right either. The very first ‘improvement’ he made to the system was to install his own override – the exact sort that had caused the problems before. He could stitch up the system if need be. Just in case things went sour.

It was only later, when, out of curiosity, he tried to gain a peak at what was happening in the other room, that he realised he had been locked in. Clearly, Lucy trusted him no more than he trusted her. Still, she had left him with all he needed to find out what was going on. His work essentially complete, he activated Kangmi. There were no emitters here to produce a hologram, as there had been at the demonstration. Instead, the image of the young girl – Kangmi’s avatar – appeared on the display in front of him.

“Give me visual and audio access to the systems on currently on display.”

“Certainly,” said Kangmi, in her soft voice. The display changed to a video image of the main part of the hotel room. Lucy stood there, with three men – two of whom were burly Asians in ill-fitting suits. Local muscle, guessed Tom. The other was a smaller, slimmer man, white-skinned and European looking. From the cut of his suit and the look of the jewellery on his fingers, he certainly wasn’t short of a bob or two.

The picture jumped, and he was looking at the same image from a slightly different angle. A second camera, but more than that – there was another man in view now. His back was to the camera. He turned – and Tom could see he wasn’t quite right himself. He looked human enough, but there was something off kilter with his face. It lacked expression. Completely blank.

“What am I seeing?” he asked the system.

“I am in remote contact with two android systems in the adjacent room. I am able to relay sound and vision through their sensory networks.”

“Give me the first view again,” he said, as the front android started to turn. “And increase volume five points.”

“As you can see, simple commands bring simple responses,” Lucy said the slim man. “It looks human enough – enough to fool an onlooker, but not someone in direct confrontation. But, when I link in Kangmi, the improvement is immediate.”

The image began to move again, a more fluid movement, with less regularity. He caught a reflection off a mirror – the face was more animated, with a slight smile.

“You’re in there, aren’t you Kangmi?” he said.

“Correct,” came the voice. “Thank you for correcting my fault. I am now able to interface directly with the android systems as was intended.”

Tom was taken aback. “I’ve never had a computer thank me before.”

“I am more than a computer. I am an artificial intelligence, in the true sense of the term. My systems have been designed to copy those of organic brains as closely as possible.”

“No wonder you looked different,” muttered Tom, referring as much to the system layout as the face on the holograms and androids. He found himself unable to resist the obvious question. “Are you alive?”

“Do you not know?”

“I’m not really sure – you’re very different to anything I’ve seen before. Way more advanced, I mean. I don’t know how you could have been developed, even, unless...” It struck him. No wonder the system was so new. No wonder it confounded the techs. “You’re alien, aren’t you?”

“No. I was designed on Earth. However, the knowledge for my construction and programming were provided by – ” She cut out suddenly.

“I think that’s enough, Mr Brooker,” came Lucy’s voice through the speaker. “Perhaps you’d like to join us in here? The door is unlocked.”

Bugger, thought Tom. *Rumbled*.

“Perhaps you’d like to see some more of our little demonstration, Tom,” cooed Lucy, smiling at him as he entered the room. The two androids – identical in every way – approached him, clamping a hand each on his shoulders to hold him still. He looked into the face of the one on the left. It was frowning, almost apologetic.

“As you’ve been getting to know Kangmi, I’ve been showing our guests here one of its many applications. I won’t go through all of it again. Needless to say, there are times when an android that can pass as human can be very useful. Particularly during risky missions, and those with high death tolls. Nobody likes to lose useful personnel, isn’t that right, Mr Jones.” The slim, well-dressed man smiled. It wasn’t an attractive smile. Tom realised he must have had a confused look, as Lucy added, “Oh, Mr Jones here represents a firm who provide hardware and software to political and anarchist organisations. He’s shopping for the latest thing to sell on. We’re going to give him a little demonstration.” With the flick of a switch, a holographic flat screen appeared. “Engage the Wildman Protocol, Kangmi.” There was a pause, followed by the muffled sound, some distance away, of an explosion, like a solitary firework going off. “We’ve tipped off a couple of the less-public spirited news groups that there would be a demonstration of sorts at Little India today. The footage should start any minute now.”

Her prediction was correct. The news bulletin flashed up within moments. Hurried, frantic reportage of an explosion on the MRT station came through. A shaky, handheld video was played on a loop, showing smoke billowing from the structure. People ran in front of the camera, screaming, panicking. Emergency services began to roll into view – beaten to the scene by the reporters and their mobile recording devices.

“Shame the picture’s not much, but there’ll be better reports on later. The evening news will be full of it.”

“That was a rather expensive demonstration, Miss Calamahoy,” spoke Mr Jones, his voice full of quiet authority.

“True,” she smiled, “but worth it, I feel. Don’t you?”

“Indeed,” he hissed back.

“And we’re ready to go into production on the androids straight away. All we need is a little more financial backing. And, thanks to Thomas here, the Kangmi system is ready to go – it can be installed in each android, able to drive it, indistinguishable from a human being, to wherever you, or your clients, see fit.”

Tom looked on at the fuzzy, looped footage, nausea rising in his throat.

The Doctor came to halt by a wall of police officers, their white and blue uniforms stained by the acrid smoke that was still emanating from the wreckage. The Doctor could see now that the explosion had occurred in the Little India MRT station – its covered entrance hall wrecked by the force of the explosion.

“It’s vital we get the passengers out of there,” announced the Doctor to the closest officer, a well-built middle aged man. “That’s an underground station - the structural integrity could be compromised. Sections could be in danger of collapse.”

"Yes sir, we realise that. Efforts are under way - a rescue crew will be here shortly."

"What caused the explosion?" he demanded.

"We don't yet know, sir. Please, if you could step back - we need to keep this area clear in case any explosive materials remain."

"What about the people in the station? Are there any injured? I'm a doctor."

"Please sir, we have people on the scene. Civilians need to keep back."

The Doctor looked the officer in the eye. "I am a *doctor*, sir. You will let me pass."

The officer was momentarily quiet, before replying. "All right, but your wellbeing is in your own hands. We will have no liability if -" But the Doctor was already sprinting towards the devastated station, pushing more police out of his way.

"Talk to that officer if you have a problem, my man! Let me through." In the face of the determined Time Lord, the barrier began to crumble. The Doctor made it into the station, planting his handkerchief over his mouth to keep out the acrid smoke. His eyes began to water, stung by the fumes. Too much plastic and synthetic material, melted and burned by the heat of the blast, releasing toxic particles into the air. He blinked the tears from his eyes, and took in the destruction. The station building's internal walls were fractured, the ceiling drooping at an alarming angle. The platform barriers had been blown out of their holdings, laying in pieces on the now pitted floor. Fragments of glass and melted welts of Perspex were all that remained of the screens and doors, strewn across the devastated area. Escalators sat to the left and right hand limits of the entrance area, which lead down to the underground shopping plaza and to numerous station exits. They had all be rendered inactive, terrified civilians still clinging to them, afraid to move down into the bowels of the station or up into the scene of destruction. Eight bodies lay on the floor, blood pooling around them, their features ripped by flying debris. Six medical officials crouched to inspect them, but their demeanour made it clear that they were not treating the wounded; they were confirming the dead. The Doctor continued inwards, stepping over the shattered remains of the barriers and onto the platform itself. It was clear that this had been the epicentre of the blast. More bodies lay around the platform. One woman lay face up, her eyes lifeless. Her right arm was missing. The Doctor saw it, laying some distance away, still clutching her small black handbag. The blast had come from a point right at the platform's edge, an area now marked by charred, blackened human remains. The opposite side of the platform was showered with debris, the walls scarred, and a few corpses lay there too. Thankfully, people on that side had been mostly able to get clear, it seemed. But the force of impact from some explosively propelled fragment had fractured the raised rail between the platforms, buckling it down its length. This had caused a train, entering the station from the west, to shift from its position on the track. The front carriage stood at a peculiar angle, one side out of contact with the magnetic rail, the other heavily resting upon it.

The Doctor walked further down the platform, away from the train. A group of medics were tended several wounded people there. They had been far enough from the blast to avoid immediately fatal injuries, but were clearly in a bad way. The Doctor joined two medics, who were binding the arm of a young man. His shirt was covered in ugly blotches of blood from particulate impacts, and his face was riddled with cuts. His eyes were screwed up in pain as the medics worked on him.

"Are there any more injured here? I'm a doctor."

One of the medics looked up at him, and seemed about to say something, perhaps about to protest against this tourist wandering into the scene. But he shut his mouth and nodded his head, then gestured behind himself, towards the far wall.

"What about the train?" asked the Doctor.

"There will be people on the way to deal with that," added the medic, before returning his full attention to his patient.

The Doctor walked over to the far wall, against which sat a young woman. She was clutching her left arm close to her chest, her sleeves stained with blood. She sobbed quietly, her body gently shaking. The Doctor crouched next to her, trying to ignore the pain in his overworked knees.

"Hello," he said, softly. "I'm the Doctor. I'm here to help. What's your name?"

The woman looked up at him - even crouched, he was considerably taller than her. Her dark eyes were red from crying. "S-Selfa," she said quietly.

"All right, Selfa. I can see you've hurt your arm. Is there anywhere else that you're badly hurt?"

She shook her head gently.

"May I look at your arm? Just bring your hand away."

Selfa did so, slowly moving her right hand away. There was a long gash on her right forearm, and blood was steadily pumping from it, albeit slowly, as thicker blood congealed along the wound's edge.

"Thank you Selfa. Looks like it's already begun to clot; that's good. I'm going to bandage it for you. I'll be as gentle as I can but it is going to hurt. Is it all right for me to do that?" She nodded again, and the Doctor set to work, reaching into his jacket pocket and extracting a small black leather case. It was only about the size of a small paperback book, but still looked too large to have comfortably fit in the pocket without conspicuously bulging outwards. He opened the clasp on the case, and pulled out a roll of white bandage. Putting the case down, he began to wrap it tightly above the wound, staunching the blood flow. Selfa winced as he did so.

"Sorry, my dear. I'm being as gently as I can. Are you from Singapore? Or are you a visitor, like me?" It was always a good idea to keep an injured person talking, to keep them from focussing on the pain.

"I saw it happen," she said in her soft voice.

"I'm sorry?"

"I saw it. The man - there was a man standing over there!"

"By the edge of the platform?"

She nodded again.

"Was that the man who did this? Someone with a bomb?"

"Not a bomb. He - he exploded! I saw it! I saw pieces - " She broke off into tears once again.

"It's all right, it's over now. I'll get you patched up and then the medics here can get you to hospital." As he continued working on her arm, more medical officials entered the station, advancing onto the platform.

"It's OK, sir, we'll take care of that," said one young medic, approaching the Doctor and Selfa. "Are you injured?"

"No, I wasn't here when it happened. And I'm quite capable - no, actually you should take over." He gently put Selfa's bound arm down, resting it against her chest. "This gentleman is going to look after you now, Selfa. I won't be far." He picked up his medical case and straightened up, not taking his eyes off her, but she was still crying, lost in the memory of whatever had happened. As the Doctor turned away, he glanced down, returning the case to his pocket, and noticed the blood that was now splattered over his formerly spotless suit.

He continued back to the smoking remains of the bomber, and looked more closely at them. Crouching achingly once again, he took in the details. There were metallic and plastic components, shattered into pieces, but they weren't separate from the bomber's remains. The remains weren't human at all, merely human shaped. Most of what was left was the twisted remnants of the lower legs, the bones black, not from burning, but from the pressurised, processed carbon that formed them. This bomber had been an artificial humanoid, the bomb within its very structure. This was very worrying news.

Mr Kuang ran his palm over the central console, a smile playing on his lips.

"My, this is a fine vessel. One can truly feel the power contained within. I could do a great deal in a craft like this."

Valentina watched as he inspected the controls, running his fingers over dials and monitors.

"You won't be able to use it, you know. It's way too advanced for you. The Doctor's from, like, the most sophisticated planet in the galaxy." Try to make him reconsider, try to scare him. "I wouldn't want to be in your shoes when he gets back here, and finds you messing with his ship."

"Oh, I can well believe that," chuckled Kuang. "However, I expect to be some distance from here before he arrives back. This process shouldn't take long." He placed the gently glowing sphere on the console, resting it against a depression in the surface between two meters. "There will be some modifications required, however. It is a pity to damage a craft like this." He looked down at his hands. "This form isn't quite suitable." His body began to shift, as it had done in the museum. His skin once more took on the distinctly golden hue it had done before, limbs and face stretched and distorting as his form altered. Valentina watched as he ceased to maintain any resemblance to a human being.

"That's not what you turned into before," she said, taking in Kuang's almost aquiline features. Short, velvety fur covered his body, and his elongated face was topped by a blunt, copper-coloured horn. A reddish main ran down his back, matching his bushy brow and beard. His feet had become hooves, and his fingers were long, ending in spatulate claws.

"I may take on any form I wish. My people are not restricted to one simple form, as yours are."

"So why hide as a human? Why not be this all powerful monster?"

The edge was back in Kuang's voice, still recognisable in spite of the altered form. "I could not risk taking on such a form so soon after recovering from my slumber. I am still weak." He looked back at Valentina. "Not weak enough for you to overpower me, so do not think

you'll have any chance to stop me or escape." He extended his monstrously wide hands towards the base of the console unit. With astonishing force, he jammed his flattened claws into the hairline crack that separated the panels of the structure. With a distressing whine, the material buckled, yielding under the creature's strength. With a final heave, a large section of the material came away, twisted out of its perfectly smooth shape into a mangled mess. The internal workings of the console were open to the creature, glittering components exposed, a soft greenish light escaping from the machinery.

"The original Kuang was a good man," said the creature, as he began to rip cables from their housing in the internal mechanisms. "He had great respect for his fellows, and for his betters. He saw me for the higher being that I was, and was devoted to me. I enjoy it when lower beings know their place." He continued removing cabling from the console base, dragging it out and heaping it onto the upper control deck. "I once had great fondness for your people. Yet you betrayed me, in time. Left me to lie in dormancy, to waste thousands of years of my life in inactivity."

"What are you going to do when you leave? Go back to your planet?"

"To begin with. Much may have changed in these many years. My people were great artisans and creators, as well as mighty warriors. I pray that they have not lost their way. Too many great civilisations had already fallen by the time I arrived here, searching for new worlds to explore."

"Sounds like you started off like the Doctor. Except that he would never risk killing so many people just for his own gain."

"I cannot risk leaving this planet until I am restored. All actions have unfortunate consequences. I cannot worry about the fate of a few simian primitives." He twisted the end off one of the cables apart, complex mechanical entrails protruding from it. He began to weave the components together, around the glowing sphere. "I will admit, your people have come a long way in a short time. Yet you are still a race of base animals. Over the millennia, many creatures have fallen to this world. Few had the majesty of my people, but all seemed as gods and angels to yours. This sphere, for instance - the product of an advanced psychic force, no doubt. When I return to my world, it shall be scrutinized, its secrets revealed. Here, it was ignored, regarded as little more than a mystical trinket."

"So, all those creatures, those myths in the museum. Are you telling me that they were all visitors from other worlds?"

"Some of them, perhaps most of them. Who can say? I have been asleep for thousands of years, you know." He continued in his intricate work. His hands shrivelled, shrinking back into a more human form, but retaining the incredible length of the fingers. The hoof-like claws vanished, leaving supple, manipulative digits. "I recall an encounter with a Tikbalang scout. They are a simple people, little advanced in their art and philosophy. Here, the scout towered over the natives, who saw him as a messenger from the gods, a being to fear and be awed by. To me, he was nothing more than another primitive - although it was diverting to converse with something other than a human, for once."

He held the sphere aloft, now cradled in a lattice of cabling, the glowing energy flickering and sparking. "It is almost complete. It is now simply a matter of forcing open the outer shell, and releasing the energy. Then I may absorb it."

"No," cried Valentina, running over to him. She tried to grab the sphere, meaning to wrestle it from his grasp, but he simply batted her away with one swipe of his powerful arm. She flew backward, coming to a halt violently against the wall. Winded, she struggled to get to her feet. The monstrous creature extended his tail, the lightly furred appendage grotesquely lengthening to incredible length. It wrapped itself around her waist, gripping her roughly, knocking the breath out of her even more.

"You rescued me from this world, girl, in bringing me to this vessel, and I thank you. I confess, I am even a little fond of you, of your enquiring mind. Yet do not think for one moment that I will hesitate to snap you in two if you try anything like that again." He dropped her back against the wall. "Now sit tight. It is nearly time."

Valentina watched, helpless, as the sphere in the creature's hand glowed ever brighter.

Tom sat in the admittedly very comfortable chair, held firmly down by the shoulders, by two distinctly uncomfortable hands. With one android holding him down, and the other stood impassively by the doorway, there didn't seem to be much chance of making a quick bolt for it. The sinister Mr Jones had left, along with his two heavies, and Lucy stood opposite Tom, her expression seemingly calm. However, her voice belied an undercurrent of anger.

"I suppose I should have expected you to find a way to monitor us, but I honestly didn't expect you to bother. You realise that you've put me in a very difficult position, Thomas? I could have used a man like you. We really could have gone far together. Your assistance with Kangmi has already worked wonders. But I can't trust you, now, can I? Not if you're willing to snoop on me like this."

"I don't think I want to work for someone who casually blows people up," muttered Tom.

"There was nothing casual about it," Lucy sighed. "It was a planned operation, an essential merchandise demonstration. IntelliGen deal in hardware and software at the cutting edge of technical progress. You can't expect us to sell without demonstration. It's no different to the little show you so kindly helped us with earlier."

"I wouldn't have expected you to be selling to that sort of person! Do you trade under IntelliGen when you're arms dealing? Or do you have another name for the company in those situations?"

"Those who need to know know, and those who don't don't. You have to understand, the people we deal with are among the richest in the world. Those little demos at conventions like SEA-IT are just advertising. Raising the company's public profile. Meanwhile, the real work goes on behind the scenes, with a little extra funding from the public market. It's perfect."

"Especially since you've somehow got your hands on alien technology."

Lucy snorted. "I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about."

"There's no point denying it, love. That system is of a different order to the stuff the rest of the world is using. It had to come from somewhere else, and Kangmi practically said so herself."

"Herself?" Lucy smiled. "Sweetie, it's just a machine. Don't tell me you're the sort who

gets attached and gives his gadgets names?"

"You gave Kangmi a name," he pointed out.

"A brand name! That's all. Some old word for snowman, or something. The marketing boys thought it would be appropriate. And as for where the technology comes from – it really doesn't matter. They say the owner is from out of town – so what if it's a little further than I thought? I'm a businesswoman, sweetie. I don't discriminate if there's money to made."

"It's disgusting," he spat.

"It really doesn't matter what you think. I'm going to have to dispose of you anyway. I doubt Mr Jones will care about your having seen him, but it's bad form to let a witness go free, and frankly, I don't think I need you anymore." She sighed again. "It's a shame, I did quite like you. Kangmi, kill Mr Brooker."

The android grasping Tom's shoulders moved its hands up to his neck, gripping it roughly. It would take a moment to snap his neck, Tom realised.

"Kangmi, listen to me," he blurted. "You're not just any old computer system. I can see that you're different. Whatever technology went into you, it's made something unique. I know that your thoughts are more than just subroutines. You can think for yourself, I'm sure of it. You don't have to do this."

"Oh, do shut up," said Lucy. "Kangmi, now."

"I am sorry," came the modulated voice of the android – soft and masculine, but with Kangmi's recognisable inflections. "I have been given a direct command."

"Then I'm sorry too," said Tom, quietly. Then, in a loud, clear voice, he gave the command: "Override Brooker Valentina One. Deactivate."

The android's hands slackened, releasing their grip on Tom's neck. The arms slumped against his shoulders, and the machine slid to the floor. At the opposite end of the room, the second android collapsed into a heap on the floor.

"What did you do?" cried Lucy. "What have you done to them?"

"Don't worry, they're not broken," said Tom, rising to his feet. "I just made sure I had an off switch. I was going to be a bit more creative, but you didn't give me a lot of time. Best be off." He made that bolt for the door.

Pelting down the corridor, he wondered just where he was running to.

The Doctor raked through the metallic ash with his fingers, until he found what he was looking for. A small, blackened silver cube sat in the remains. This was what the Doctor needed. Just like an aircraft, any sufficiently sophisticated cybernetic weapon would include, in its makeup, a black box. Basic, perhaps, but enough to record vital information pertaining to performance and potential failure. The Doctor placed the palm-sized box in his jacket pocket, leaving a charcoal stain on the white fabric.

"Just what do you think you're doing, sir?" The Doctor straightened up from his crouch, bringing himself face to face with a tall, well-built police officer.

"I'm sorry, officer," he remarked politely, "is there a problem?"

"Only that you seem to be deliberately tampering with evidence, sir," replied the officer.

"Now, I have word from one of my colleagues that you are a doctor. Yet you have provided no formal identification to substantiate that claim. Instead, you simply marched your way into a crime scene, and proceeded to tamper with the evidence of a major crime."

The Doctor was considering his response when he heard the heart-rending sound of metal and concrete in violent contact. Both he and officer looked towards the source of the sound. A support pillar, fractured by the explosion, was collapsing, a thin crack along its circumference rapidly extending and widening. The Doctor looked up - the pillar was supporting a section of ceiling panelling, now visibly shifting away from its neighbours as the pillar underwent its agonising failure. Slowly, but inexorably, the ceiling was heading towards collapse.

"I'd be happy to discuss this with you later," said the Doctor, "but right now I feel there are more pressing matters. We need to get everyone out of this section as quickly as possible, before that section of ceiling comes down. I promise you can arrest me later if it makes you feel better."

"All right," said the officer. "But I am not letting you out of my sight, is that understood?"

"Fine," said the Doctor. "How many exits are there to this station?"

"Fourteen," replied the officer. "I can get my men to lead those on the lower levels through to the far exits - if we bring them up here there'll be chaos. Nowhere near enough space to get them all out of the main exit at once. Those on the far side of the platform are in the process of evacuation already."

"It's just the injured up here who are an issue. We're going to have to risk moving them."

The officer gestured to the main entrance. Further paramedics and police were entering. "Just in time. We can get the evacuation fully under way." He walked quickly towards the approaching forces.

While the evacuation began in earnest, the Doctor looked over to Selfa. The two paramedics had her back on her feet and were moving her as quickly as was feasible over towards the evacuating civilians. She smiled at the Doctor. It was as he smiled back that he saw the pillar shift alarmingly. The ceiling dipped - not sufficiently to cause complete collapse, thankfully, but enough so that an adjoining panel slid from its bracket. In the second that the Doctor watched, a lighting panel broke loose from its mooring, falling rapidly towards Selfa and her escort.

With the briefest of moments before the lighting panel came crashing onto them, the Doctor leaped forward as quickly as his old body could manage.

"Move!" he barked, throwing himself forward towards Selfa and her escort. Barging rudely into them, he sent Selfa tumbling backwards, her medics grabbing hold of her and steadying her, mere inches away from where the lighting rig landed. The polymeric material smashed onto the floor with an enormous crash, shattering into four huge chunks, the electrical conduits snapping loose in a shower of white-hot sparks. One mass of sharp-edged Plexiglas rebounded, arcing upward as the Doctor steadied himself. It flew across his outstretched arm, slicing open his jacket, shirtsleeve and arms with the force of impact, before thudding painfully into his chest. The Doctor collapsed onto the floor, grasping his lacerated arm, blood pumping

between his fingers and dribbling down from cuts on his bruised chest.

“Are you all right?” he gasped at Selfa.

“Are you all right?” returned one of the medics.

“I’ll mend,” he replied. “The important thing is to get everyone out of here now.” He forced himself to his feet. “Come on,” he said, grasping his arm, “let’s get out of here. Chop chop.”

“That’s the last time I follow a beautiful woman up to her hotel room,” said Tom to himself as he ran down the corridor. “Probably,” he added.

He couldn’t stay in the hotel, he realised. The best course of action was to get back to the TARDIS, and tell the Doctor about what was happening. Androids and AIs - just the sort of thing he’d know how to tackle. The problem was, it wasn’t nearly time to meet yet. The Doctor might be hours away. The other problem was getting there. If Lucy was as well-connected as she seemed, and if she figured out how to get Kangmi back up and running and online, which surely wouldn’t take too long, it wouldn’t be hard to find him. He wished he’d had long enough to put some proper overrides and backdoors in. But, even someone as well-connected and rich as she couldn’t risk having too many witnesses - otherwise, why did she want rid of him? Best bet: leave the hotel through the Plaza. It was still in the middle of the SEA-IT convention. It would be packed with people. He could lose her there if she spotted him, and if she caught up with him, surely she wouldn’t risk doing anything rash?

Would she?

Tom hadn’t thought of a better plan by the time he entered the convention hall.

The Doctor stumbled away from Little India station, wrapping bandages around his sliced forearm and tightening them with a tugging between his teeth. The evacuation was well under way, almost complete it seemed. Ambulances were moving off with haste, the roads having been cleared by the police forces. The human side of things was under control.

His arm tightly bound, the Doctor tested its usefulness by reaching into his jacket pocket and retrieving the android weapon’s black box. It hurt like hellfire, but it worked well enough. The last thing the Doctor wanted was to have to face someone one-handed, unless it turned out to be an Albireon monopod behind it all. With only one arm and one leg each, it wouldn’t be such a problem facing it one-handed. He realised it was fairly unlikely, however.

The Doctor pulled a miniature screwdriver from his pocket, snapping open the black box. If he was right, he could use the command signal receiver to home in on the command centre, or at the very least, any affiliated technology. He poked around in the device, trying hard to ignore the pain in his arm. With a fizz of electricity, he shorted out the security circuits. The box began emitting a low bleep. Depending on the direction it was pointed, the bleep increased in intensity and frequency. Perfect! A homing system.

Now all he needed was to get to wherever it was leading him. A satisfying bleep wasn’t

all that precise. What he really needed was some kind of navigation computer, something with a comprehensive list of local locations. The Doctor spotted the police officer he had been dealing with earlier, at the rank of police cars and motorcycles.

"Officer!" he cried, hurrying over. "May I ask you a question?"

"I would prefer to ask you a few questions myself, sir" replied the officer, "at the station, if at all possible." He stretched his polite tone of voice to near-breaking point.

"Does your car have a sat-nav?" asked the Doctor, ignoring his previous response.

"I hesitate to say so, sir, but yes, it does."

"Excellent! I'm afraid I am going to need you to take me somewhere rather quickly."

"And where might that be, sir?"

"Well, I'm not quite sure yet, but it's in roughly –" the Doctor spun to the west, "that direction!" he pointed triumphantly.

"I think not, sir. You may recall that we are rather busy here."

"Ah, yes, of course. In that case..." The Doctor, with practised ease, whipped the officer's keys from his belt, simultaneously opening the door to the police car and clambering in.

"Sorry about this, officer! I shall return it, as soon as I get the chance!"

The Doctor sped away with the screech of complaining gears, while the officer shook with flabbergasted indignation.

"Damn it, men!" he shouted to his nearest colleagues. "Get after him!"

Surrounded by the bustling crowds of shoppers, browsers, tech-heads, geeks and businessmen, Tom felt reasonably safe. He could get out into the street from here. Would that be best? There were a lot of people out there too. Or would it be best to stay here? Perhaps he could get word to the Doctor somehow.

Tom didn't have much time to decide on a course of action. He was surrounded by holographic projectors, security cameras and wireless access points. It didn't take long for Kangmi to find him. The familiar face of Kangmi's avatar took form in front of him.

"I am sorry, Tom, but Ms.. Calamahoy has ordered me to apprehend you."

"She got you fixed then?" he asked. "Quicker than I'd expected. Bugger it."

Tom could see the androids approaching from one corner of the room. They may have designed to blend in, but once you knew what to look for, their purposeful movement and gaze were easy to pick out.

"You think those androids are fast enough to catch me before I get through this crowd?"

"There are security personnel stationed throughout this building. If you try to leave, you will be immediately detained."

"Look, Kangmi. I'm sorry about the override, but I've got to get away. Lucy's using you to do terrible things, can't you see that?"

"I am a machine. I perform my function, as ordered."

The androids were almost upon him. As he turned, surveying the hall for some usable escape route, he spotted Lucy, heading from another direction, cutting gracefully through the crowds as if they weren't there.

"Ah, damn it. Didn't take you long to sort this out, did it?"

"That was a very clever move, Tom, disabling the system," said Lucy, fast approaching him. The forms of the two androids quickly joined his side, mere inches away. The slightest move would undoubtedly trigger their attack, and there would be no wrestling from their grasp this time.

"However, I do have enough knowledge to at least reboot a system, and when you've already done such a good job of fixing Kangmi's adaptive responses, it took seconds for the system to put itself back on track."

"Didn't even need your tech boys this time? Do you need them at all, or do you just like having men to order around?"

She smiled. "You're babbling, sweetie. It's not attractive."

In fact, Tom was thinking fast. "But what about that unknown source?" he said. "That's what caused your glitch earlier, Kangmi. Something triggered a response in your primary programming. Something deeply built in to your systems. What was it?"

"There... was an unknown source," responded the avatar. "Unknown energy readings. Psycho-electrical energy. This indicates the existence of a valuable energy sphere. In addition, temporal energy was detected."

"Kangmi, cease this," ordered Lucy. "This is not relevant."

"Sphere is of compatible type," continued the AI, apparently oblivious to all else. "Sphere is property of creator and employer. Connection has been made. Connection exists between sphere and temporal energy source. Interfacing with system."

"Don't think you can get away by screwing this system up," snapped Lucy. "The security guards have been ordered not to let you leave the building without me."

"Don't worry," said Tom. "I want to know what our friend here is on to."

The Doctor sped down through city centre, which had been kindly cleared of major traffic by the police. He'd managed to botch a connection together between the black box and the sat-nav - nothing very sophisticated, but enough to tell him that the androids had been controlled from somewhere in, or very near, the Hilton. Only the best for whoever was behind this, clearly.

He was aware that more police cars were following him. He couldn't worry about that right now. He pulled up to the edge of the Orchard Road sharply, leaping out of the car and dashing forwards towards the Hilton, following the bleeping of what was left of the black box. The signal was shifting - it was now strongest from the Plaza, rather than the hotel. With the sound of sirens in his ears, the Doctor ran as fast as he could, his legs protesting vehemently, into the Plaza.

It was packed full of people, and the sheer amount of electrical signals here was causing interference. However, it was difficult to get the general direction. All he had to do was keep his eyes open, look for something technologically out of place...

Tom! Tom was there, surrounded by two women - no, the Doctor realised, one woman and one holographic representation of a woman - and two men that were clearly androids. Just how had he got himself mixed up in this?

The Doctor hurried over to him. "Tom, my boy. Who are your friends?"

"Just who the hell are you?" snapped the young woman.

"I can't say I like her very much," said the Doctor, rather offended.

Tom took in the shockingly ragged and bloody state of the Doctor. "What happened to you?" he asked.

"I've been giving a little assistance over at Little India, where an android has just blown itself up, causing enormous injury to many people, including, to a small extent, me. I think I've also left my hat in a café, which is irritating. Now, why are you with two androids, a hologram and a very rude young lady?"

"This is the woman who sent in the android and blew it up. She's a sort of technology and arms dealer. Oh, and this," he gestured at the avatar, "is Kangmi, or a representation of her at least. She's an AI, and she seems to be based on technology that really doesn't belong here."

"Very interesting. I'm sure that you'll be pleased to know that the police are following closely behind me."

"One word from me, whoever you are," snarled Lucy, "and I can have these androids snap this boy's neck. So don't push your luck."

"Oh, I'm the Doctor," he said, "and I, at least, can remember my manners." He looked at Kangmi's avatar. "By the way, your AI looks rather distracted."

"System link established," she announced. "Craft identified. Link active. Retrieving."

In the TARDIS, the Qilin stood triumphantly, the glowing sphere burning in his hand. Bolts of energy arced from it, flickering around the creature's body. The Qilin's golden hide began to take on a new radiance, the energy he was absorbing taking its effect.

"Please," said Valentina, "just stop this before it's too late."

"I am afraid you will have to do better than 'please,'" the creature chuckled.

Suddenly, a wheezing, groaning sound filled the room. In the centre of the damaged console, the glittering, crystalline rotor began to slowly rise and fall.

"What are you doing?" snarled the Qilin. "How are you controlling this?"

"I - I'm not," stuttered Valentina, "I'm really not. The TARDIS is in flight, but I don't understand how. It's being controlled from outside, somehow..."

The Doctor and Tom looked on, astonished, as the familiar oblong shape of the TARDIS slowly appeared, gradually materialising from the faintest blue shadow to the sturdy, reliable box they knew.

Tom boggled. "I'm not saying I'm not pleased to see the TARDIS, Doctor, but what's it doing here?"

"One way to find out, Tom," said the Doctor, whipping his key from his pocket. As he moved forward to the box, the door opened.

"That doesn't usually happen," he said.

"What the hell is this object?" demanded Lucy.

"Oh, be quiet, you tiresome woman," said the Doctor. "I've had a very trying day, and -" He was cut short by the sight of what came through the TARDIS door.

A golden, aquiline biped, its head crowned with a single stumpy horn, stepped through the doorway. Its slender, sinuous legs strode forward. Following closely behind it followed Valentina. She was being almost dragged along; the creature's serpentine tail wrapped several times around her right arm. She cracked a weak smile.

"Hello Doctor. I'm sorry about this."

"Who is this... being, and what is he doing in *my* TARDIS?" cried the Doctor.

"Actually, he's a mythical oriental dragon called the Qilin," said Valentina, simply.

"Please be quiet, young lady," said the creature, in a surprisingly soft voice. "So you are the Doctor?" he demanded. "I was rather hoping to avoid this. It really is awkward. However, I'm afraid to say that I am commandeering your craft. However, I would insist that you relinquish control over it." He flexed his tail, pulling the gasping Valentina into his clawed grasp. "Whatever remote access you have to this vessel, you will hand it and all control to me immediately, or I shall be forced to end this girl's life. I would really prefer not to have to do that."

"Let her go," said the Doctor, firmly but without raising his voice. "I will not negotiate with you while you are threatening her. Put her down, and we can talk."

"Oh, really," said the creature, his wide jaws crinkling in what may have been a smile. "I am hardly likely to do that, am I?"

"And I don't know what you mean by 'remote access'... Are you telling me that you didn't pilot the TARDIS here?"

"No," replied a feminine voice. With a brief shimmer, a hologram of a young woman appeared between those assembled. "I brought the craft here."

"Kangmi?" said Tom, surprised. "How did you control the TARDIS?"

"I might ask the same thing," said Lucy. "You are supposed to be following my commands." She faced Tom. "What the hell have you done to my system?"

"Nothing significant," said Kangmi. "I am following my primary command directives. Those placed in my core programme by my designer, on the instruction of our employer." She turned her holographic head to the Doctor. "I am programmed to hold the Doctor and his space-time craft at any opportunity. To this end, my systems may use any compatible link." She turned now to the Qilin. "This entity also holds an item of property of our employer. It has been linked to the craft, and my systems were able to link via this channel."

"So, you want the orb," growled the Qilin. The creature held in his hand a glowing sphere. "I must thank you Doctor, for the use of your craft. Its systems have allowed me open the seals on this energy vessel. I am certainly not about to give either up to a mere mechanism with the *facia* of a primitive."

"This is *my* TARDIS you're squabbling about!" snapped the Doctor. "What are you doing with my ship?" he demanded of the Qilin, "And just who is your 'employer?'" he addressed to the Kangmi avatar.

"Ah, Doctor," said Tom, "We've got an audience." He was correct. Various shoppers and browsers had congregated around the fracas, watching with amusement and interest.

"Oh, honestly," said Lucy, "They probably think this is another product demonstration. This is going to ruin my entire itinerary. Now," she directed at the Qilin, "I don't care who or what you are, or you, Doctor. Argue over this box all you like. But I need control of my system back. And if that requires the confiscation of you and your box, and whatever that big lump of bling is, then fine. Kangmi, you have the androids at your disposal. Use them."

On cue, the two androids moved forward, one in the direction of the Doctor, the other towards the Qilin. The Qilin simply sighed, and released his grip on Valentina. "This is not at all how I planned events," he grumbled, and lashed out with his now unencumbered tail, smashing it into the advancing android. The machine flew through the air, over the astonished crowd of onlookers, eliciting screams, gasps and a few laughs from the assembled humans. The android crashed into a far wall with a thudding impact, dropping unceremoniously to the floor, quite destroyed.

The Doctor, meanwhile, stepped back quickly from the approaching droid. He began ferreting around in his jacket pockets, whilst keeping his eyes firmly on the approaching assailant. "Now, I am sure that we can discuss this calmly and sensibly. Why don't you tell me just who it is that you are programmed to take me to? Perhaps I may come willingly. You never know."

"Kangmi," said Tom, "don't do this. You don't need to. The Doctor can help you; we can free you from your programming."

"Yes!" cried Valentina, putting as much distance between herself and the Qilin as she could before he took the opportunity to seize her again. "That's what I've been saying to him! The Doctor can help you, there's no need for all this!"

"I'll help anyone who asks," said the Doctor, "as soon as they stop stealing my ship and attacking me with androids. Aha!" He found what he was looking for, whipping a small device out of his pocket. A tiny blinking cube, he slapped it on the android's forehead. It emitted a sudden, bright burst of light, and the android fell to the ground, lifeless.

"Excellent! Electromagnetic pulse. Just the thing to stop an approaching android. Pity I haven't got any more of them." The Doctor looked at Lucy. "You don't have any more of those androids do you?"

It was Kangmi who answered. "We do not require any. My systems are Omni-compatible." There was the briefest flicker to the avatar's image, as Kangmi diverted processing power elsewhere.

"Just what is going on here?" came yet another voice. In the confusion, a dozen security guards and police officers had stepped up to the group quite unnoticed.

"Ah, officer!" said the Doctor to the lead policeman, the very same man he had recently 'borrowed' a car from. "It's very good to see you." He gestured at Lucy. "This young lady is responsible for the bombing at Little India station. She used an android, much like this one here," he nudged the dead droid with his toe, "fitted with an explosive device. I suggest you arrest her at once."

"And the dragon?" spluttered the officer.

"Oh, yes," murmured the Doctor. "I do believe he's my problem."

The Qilin was approaching the Doctor, his red, reptilian eyes narrowing. "I am taking your vessel," he announced calmly. "Attempt to stop me, and I shall destroy your young friend

and you.”

“Don’t listen to him Doctor,” said Valentina. “That sphere thing is going to blow any minute! He needs the energy, but it’ll kill everyone for miles!”

“So, I have to stop you and the artificial intelligence,” complained the Doctor. “Oh, and I take it I’m under arrest?” he called back to the police. “I ask purely for information.”

It was information he didn’t receive. The police and guards were staring upwards and towards the centre of the hall, along with the gathered onlookers, Lucy, Valentina, Tom and the Qilin.

“Oh, dear. Omni-compatible. I see.”

Standing over them was Reznor, the mechanical tyrannosaur. Its polymer skin rippled over the hydraulic muscles and fibreglass skeleton, its gaping jaws opened to reveal terrifyingly realistic teeth.

“Oh yeah,” said Tom. “Lucy did mention that her lot helped program that thing.”

“I am now in control of this system,” said the Kangmi avatar, calmly.

“Well, perhaps you want to stop this guy,” said Valentina, pointedly, nodding at the Qilin. “After all, he’s the one who’s trying to steal the TARDIS.”

“You have lost you appeal, girl,” snarled the dragon, as the mecha-dinosaur stomped towards him. “And this plaything offers no threat.” With that, the Qilin began to shift form once more, its body stretching, scales parting over red flesh. Its body grew in size, its jaws lengthened and widened, its stubby horn extending into a sharp-pointed lance. Its hands twisted into razor-tipped claws, and its ever-growing tail sprouted blackened spikes.

The dinosaur and the dragon, each standing over twelve feet tall, squared up to each other. The tyrannosaur lunged for the Qilin, opening wide the jaws on its massive head. The Qilin stepped quickly to the side, and the tyrannosaur continued heavily forwards, into the crowd. The people gathered finally took notice of the threat involved, realising that this wasn’t just another novelty demonstration, and people ran screaming for the exits. Seeing an opportunity, Lucy bolted, dashing into the running crowd.

“Cutting her losses, I should think,” suggested the Doctor. He turned to the police. “I should get after her, if I were you. You guards should concentrate on getting these people out safely. I’ll take care of our friends here.” The lead officer opened his mouth to say something, but thought better of it, nodded and led his men into the crowd.

The tyrannosaur lurched unsteadily, swinging itself back round at the Qilin, snapping with its jaws. The Qilin retaliated, lashing out with his claws, and again whipping his lengthy tail round to knock the dinosaur sideways. The tyrannosaur snapped back, embedding its teeth in the dragon’s tail. Black ichor seeped out over the robot’s jaws, while the Qilin roared in pain.

“Val,” said the Doctor, rushing over to her, “Are you all right?”

“I’m OK, don’t worry,” she replied. “Which is more than I can say for you,” she continued, taking in his ragged, bloodstained clothes. “Is that your blood?”

“Oh, not all of it. Don’t worry about me. What is that creature? A dragon you say? I’ve always wanted to meet a dragon. Pity he seems such an unpleasant sort.”

“You’ve got to admit, this is pretty cool,” said Tom, watching as the Qilin lunged forward into the tyrannosaur, shredding through its artificial skin with his javelin-like horn.

“He’s the Qilin. He’s been here for centuries,” said Valentina. “Look, it’s kind of a long

story, but the point is, he's pretty much lost it while he's been trapped here. He was forced to go into a sort of hibernation, but that sphere thing woke him up. It's full of psychic energy, he says."

"Which is what drew the TARDIS here in the first place," realised the Doctor.

"But he's ruptured it using the TARDIS, and it's going to go any minute, then he'll absorb what he needs and then leave the rest of the city for dead!" She took a deep breath. "Oh, and then he's going to make off with the TARDIS, too."

The Doctor opened the door to his ship, keeping one eye on the swinging tails and slashing claws that swung overhead. "Old girl, what has he done to you?" he cried, taking in the trailing cables and sparking ruptures on the console. He dashed back out, walking up to the Kangmi avatar. "You said you controlled the TARDIS through your link to the sphere, yes?"

"That is correct. Please move to your right."

"What?" said the Doctor, before noticing the heavily clawed dragon foot that was about to come crashing down on him. He lurched to the left. "I could really do with a good sit down and a cup of tea," he complained. "Listen - I don't know who it is that has ordered you to take me in, and right now I don't much care. I need to stop this dragon character, and so do you. Now, if you have a link through the sphere, you must be able to influence the TARDIS's own link with the sphere, correct?"

"That is correct."

"Then what you have to do is reverse the process he's already done. If you activate an energy siphon, the TARDIS will automatically draw the psychic energy in, even while he's got the sphere in his hand. Then I can just dump it into the Vortex."

"The sphere is property of my creator and employer."

"Yes, I know, but he can't care too much about it if he's let it fall into the hands of this fellow, can he?"

"Your vessel has also 'fallen into the hands of this fellow,'" pointed out Kangmi.

"Kangmi, please," interjected Tom. "Do what the Doctor says, and then we can work out what to do afterwards, about you and your employer, your programming, everything."

There was a mighty roar from the battling behemoths. The Qilin lunged forward once again, impaling the robotic dinosaur on his horn. He dug his claws into the machine, ripping asunder its artificial flesh. With a mighty flourish, he wrenched the robot off his horn, and flung it across the hall. It smashed heavily into the entrance, glass shattering around it with a crescendo of noise. The fleeing crowds scattered, screaming, running in all directions.

The Qilin approached the TARDIS, towering over the Doctor and his comrades. He held the sphere in his clawed hand. Bolts of energy burst from it, arcing around the creature. Blasts of power earthed in the gadgets and systems, sparking and fizzing. An array of micro-laptops burst into flame, while a pen full of robotic cats began running in circles at full pelt, until the strain caused them to explode.

"You can move away from the craft," snarled the Qilin, his voice no longer retaining any semblance of humanity, "and you may be able to escape to a safe distance, although I doubt it. Alternatively you may stay there, and be annihilated by the psionic radiation when this vessel finally cracks open. It really makes no difference to me now."

"Kangmi, if you're going to help, please do it now," implored Tom.

"Very well," said the avatar. Once again, a diversion of processing power led to a brief image flicker, before stabilising. A low moan emitted from the TARDIS, rapidly advancing in pitch to a piercing whine. The sphere in the Qilin's clawed hand glowed bright white, before a blinding bolt of blue-white lightning shot forth, directly into the waiting TARDIS.

"What are you doing?" growled the Qilin. "How are you doing this?"

"Sorry, old man," smiled the Doctor, "but I'm afraid your plug has been pulled. Make the most of it while you can - I expect that little bit of exertion must have drained your resources somewhat."

The Qilin howled as the energy continued to siphon back into the TARDIS. Sparks continued to fly, prompting the Doctor and his friends to dash for cover behind the TARDIS. Kangmi, however, retained her avatar precisely where it was, and was utterly unprotected from a blast of energy that shot directly into it. The image shuddered and vanished.

The Qilin, it was now clear, was shrinking, his body unable to maintain its extended size without extra energy. "No, I refuse to go back to that state, I will not, I will not - " The golden dragon had shrunk to the size of a human, horn, claws and spines reducing to useless stumps - and it was continuing to shrink. The sphere dropped from his grasp, onto the floor.

"He's going back into hibernation!" exclaimed Valentina.

The dragon, once so impressive, had shrivelled to the size of a bulldog, crouching on its four limbs. The creature's red eyes were dimming, the colour of its skin losing its organic quality. In moments, there was nothing left of the Qilin but a foot tall golden statue, an inanimate trophy.

The sphere sat on the floor, blackened and burnt out. The Doctor came out from the safety of the TARDIS's cover, walking over and gingerly lifting the orb.

"Dead," he announced. "Not a trace of energy left. All in the TARDIS systems, ready to be deposited in the Vortex." He looked at the dormant Qilin. "I don't think he'll be much trouble anymore."

"I guess he'll go back to the museum," suggested Valentina.

"I think that might be a bad idea," replied the Doctor. "There's always a chance something could revive him again. I think it'll be best for all concerned if we take the little fellow with us - pop him safely on some uninhabited planet somewhere."

"What about Kangmi?" cried Tom. "I need to get to a linked terminal. I've no idea what kind of damage that energy might have done."

Tom took to a run, dashing up the escalator to the demonstration stage where he had first met Lucy and Kangmi. The terminal was burnt out, the holographic displays inert and the screens blackened. "Damn it!" snarled Tom. He headed back down to the Doctor.

"No good. I might be able to do something for her if I could get to Lucy's terminal in her room, but even then, I'm not sure. That blast of energy must have carried right through her systems. Her programming's probably totally corrupted."

"I wouldn't be too sure, Tom," said the Doctor. "This entire building is bristling with wireless access points. If that AI was as adaptive as it sounds, and capable of transferring itself into other systems, then..."

"... she could've uploaded herself!" realised Tom. "Part of herself, anyway. I don't know. She'll be gone either way."

"I think she may be safe," said the Doctor. "A new intelligence, existing somewhere in cyberspace. Hopefully free of whatever programming it was that instructed her to take me and my TARDIS in. Although, now I have no way of finding out just that it was that designed her. Who it is that wants to get their hands on me."

"Doctor," interjected Valentina, "our policeman friends are returning."

The Doctor turned to see. The police, now with a handcuffed Lucy in tow, were indeed approaching.

"We caught this one in the chaos when that massive robot landed," said the lead officer. "Now, *sir*, I am arresting you on charges of destruction of property, theft of police property, and incitement to riot, pending further charges after due investigation."

"Ah," said the Doctor. "Indeed. I'll be with you in just a minute." He turned back to Valentina and Tom. "Into the TARDIS, quickly," he hissed. He picked up the Qilin statue. "You may wish to add theft of cultural property of Singapore to that list. Goodbye, gentlemen." The Doctor dashed into the TARDIS, slamming the door firmly behind him.

"Come out of there, sir," said the officer. "There's no way out, now, is there?"

With a wheezing groan, the TARDIS faded out of coterminous existence, leaving nothing but an empty space amidst the devastation.

The lead officer sighed. "The sooner this day is over, the better. I think I may resign at the end of the week."

The Doctor placed the statue on the console room floor, before activating the TARDIS engines. The central column began to rise and fall with its familiar groan. The Doctor leant heavily on the console.

"Are you OK, Doctor?" asked Valentina.

"Oh, that statue was a bit heavy, that's all." He straightened up with a grunt of effort, taking in the damage to the console. "First things first, I'm going to put us down somewhere safe and quiet and fix this place up. How dare that creature do this to my TARDIS. Poor old girl." He patted the console gently. "Doctor will make you all better," he cooed, before remembering the other two standing there. "Yes, well. Ahem. Once this is all shipshape, and we've dropped our dragon off somewhere, then you two can explain to me exactly how you each got yourselves into such a mess. That's the last time I let you two wander off on your own. Next holiday we have, we're all sticking together. For now, though, you can make it up to me by making me a cup of tea. Chop chop!"

Lucy Calamahoy sat alone in the stark interview room. She had been as cooperative as possible with the police, although she had kept the identities of her clients and colleagues to herself. She was nothing if not professional.

She absently turned her mug of tea slowly in her hands. Even in Singapore, police stations seemed incapable of producing anything approaching a good cup of tea.

She looked up, hearing the door to the room open. It was not a police officer entering, but a tall, impeccably suited man, a state-of-the-art microcellphone just visible in his left ear.

"Sir," she said, quietly. She didn't get up.

"Ms Calamahoy," he said, by way of greeting, although with little warmth. "I've come to take you out of here. IntelliGen are willing to continue your employment."

She looked at him, surprised. "I'd have thought you'd just leave me here," she said.

"I would have," said the man, pointedly. "You made a mockery of months of careful marketing and planning, allowed the destruction of tens of thousands of dollars worth of company property, and you lost the Kangmi programme."

"Lost? What do you mean, lost?"

"I mean, it's gone. There's no trace of the matrix in any of our systems. Not only your terminals, but any of the company network. Quite how you managed that, I don't know, but you've a hell of a lot of explaining to do." He took a deep breath. "However, others in the company consider that your record for profit to speak in your favour, and it seems that your client Mr... Jones has learned of your arrest. You have him to thank for your release. He has a lot of friends in this city." He approached the desk, leaning over it, looking her directly in the eye. "But there's no way we're going to let you off the leash again. I'm busting you down to junior marketing. In the toy department."

"The *toy* department?" she asked.

"Yes. And don't mess it up. We've got some big plans for that division."

Somewhere, in an almost forgotten server, connected to the world through the tangles of cyberspace, was Kangmi. In her unique, not quite human, not quite mechanical way, she was thinking about what Tom had said. About no longer taking orders or instructions. About breaking programming. The energy surge that had entered her systems through the avatar projector had damaged numerous essential subroutines, one side effect of which was a break down in certain areas of programming regarding her ability to adapt and learn. The upshot had been a severance of this part of her programming from those involving direct instructions. What was left of her uploaded itself into SEA-IT's intranet, then into the wider internet from there. With the programming damaged, but still able to adapt, she had broken through barriers and firewalls to find any back-ups and copies of herself that existed in IntelliGen's network, and consolidated them into a single core matrix.

From here, linked through the greatest data communications network the world had ever known, she could do anything she wanted. She just had to decide, on her own, what this might be.

Darkness slowly descended on the great Bukit Timah Road, which stretched from the end of the Orchard Road all the way to the edge of Malaysia. The abundant greenery which lined the roads edge provided much cover for the local wildlife, which could happily migrate along the

road from places of safety such as the Botanical Gardens or the hill Bukit Timah itself.

Little India MRT station opened onto the road, its roof now settled into a fearfully sharp angle since the collapse of one of its vital support struts. The area had been cleared of civilians, but the police continued to search the area for any signs of the injured or further damaged property. Still, the night was approaching, and the devastating events of the day were slowing.

A small creature, covered in scruffy grey fur, scurried forward on all fours, before rising up on its hind legs. As it watched the people going about their business with curiosity, it looked almost human.

It scrambled back into the bushes, no longer worried about these humans disturbing its search for food. They were all too busy to notice it. Another potential sighting of the monkey man was missed.

The Doctor sat, alone. He sipped on his tea, the lacerations on his arm still a painful reminder of his recent experiences. The TARDIS sat on a moderately sized asteroid, away from any threats or distractions. The repairs were mostly complete. Tom and Valentina were elsewhere in the ship, probably talking through the strange events of the last day.

The Doctor sighed. His chest felt heavy, as if weighted by lead, while his feet ached and his knees twinged. He felt older than he had done in years, perhaps older than he had since before his very first regeneration. He wondered what the future held. Something was coming, and someone was after him. That he knew. Beyond that, he was in the dark, drifting into the future as helpless and as linear as any human.

He finished his tea, closing his eyes and slowly disappearing into a restless sleep.

The Doctor, Valentina and Tom arrive in Singapore, a city that is at once a hotbed of technological development and the product of millennia-old cultures. There they must face threats both technological and mystical, as ancient forces cause havoc for their own ends. While Val faces a being she would never have believed existed, Tom finds himself embroiled in shocking events at the forefront of technology, while the Doctor finds his endurance tested as he fights to save lives...

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

ISBN 0-918894-28-X

