



THE
DOCTOR WHO
PROJECT

**WHERE BEST FRIENDS
ARE MADE**

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When he was young, he had an imaginary friend. A great friend. Smart, powerful, everything you could want in a confidant. It told him he was special. It told him he was loved. It told him great things awaited him. If he waited. If he worked. The day would come and together they would greet a brave future. And he would lead the world into a new dawn.

His teachers made fun of him, sent him to the principal for talking in class. But he was only talking with his imaginary friend. He was beginning to realize his friend wasn't all that imaginary; his friend was real. And his teachers – the really annoying ones – had accidents. His mother sent him to psychiatrists, but none of them understood. His father had a simpler solution; he tried to beat it out of him. But that didn't work either. And when he was old enough, when he was smart enough and powerful enough – not as smart and powerful as his friend – he took a stand. He listened to that soothing voice in his head and he did what it said. And his parents never bothered him again.

He still remembers watching their bodies burn, the house erupting in flames. Faulty wiring, the firemen and police later said. A tragedy, the neighbors said. But he was of age, the money was his. And somewhere he heard his friend laughing, deep and guttural and long. And he smiled.

He took jobs that his friend told him to take. He made friends when he was told, ate when he was told, slept when he was told. He knew his friend loved him. And then one day, his friend sent him an image. A picture of a building where toys were built and sold to children around the world. And his friend said, "You must work there. You must be in control there."

"Is this it?" he asked his friend. "Is this really the time? The brave future? The new dawn?"

"Oh yes," said his friend. "This is the time. It is there that you will open the door and bring me to your world. Together we will rule. Forever."

And he smiled. Finally! Everything he ever dreamed was about to come true.

With his best friend by his side.

* * * * *

18 July 2011: Cardiff

“Are we all ready for the tone meeting?”

Judy Hinton groaned. She pushed a loose strand of blond hair out of her eyes and smoothed out her herringbone-patterned skirt. Then she stood and left the confines of her glass-walled office.

“Not another one. Didn’t we just do this?”

“We did it a month ago,” said Paul Corley. He was wearing his usual crisp white shirt and black tie, but somehow he always managed to look disheveled. Judy was impressed at how he managed to look neat and messy at the same time. Maybe it that was the jaw line that always seemed frozen at two minutes to five-o’clock shadow. Or his shaved head, a desperate attempt to conceal the early hair loss that really hid nothing at all. He was so easy to read.

“Thirty days is never long enough,” Judy growled and joined Paul in the solemn march down the hall. As they walked, several others emerged from offices and cubicles, all with the same defeated look on their haggard faces. Another tone meeting. Another three or four hours spent at the feet of the all-knowing King of Toys.

Wasn’t this supposed to be a *fun* job?

“The customers have fun playing with our toys,” Paul whispered, knowing very well what Judy was thinking. “We suffer.”

As the sullen group approached the huge silver double doors, the receptionist out front smiled sweetly.

“He’s ready for you!”

“Great,” said Judy and closed her hand around one of the polished gold doorknobs. Pausing a moment, she wrenched it open and they all filed inside. And there he was at his desk. On a raised dais. The King of Toys. The head of Hinton Playomatics. The Big Man himself.

Roland T. Dunwich.

“And here you all are! Hooray! Brilliant!” Dunwich stepped from behind his ornate wood-and-brass workstation and strode to the huge onyx meeting table at the other end of his palatial office. The others were already taking their seats as he grasped the back of his chair – it was higher-backed than the others, a bit more plush – and spun it around. He sat down facing

away from them and then spun back to face the table with a wide grin on his face. He adjusted his glasses and placed both palms on the table's glossy surface.

"Tone meeting!"

Judy drifted off almost immediately. As Roland spewed sales figures and Grand New Ideas™ that were sure to catapult the company to the top of the toy market, she thought about how much more enjoyable it was when her grandfather still ran the place. Dad was never interested in toys – he always said it was silly to waste an adult's time thinking about playthings for children – and when Granddad needed to find a successor, there was Roland. Judy was always close to her grandfather, but unfortunately he had old-fashioned ideas about who should lead his company, and no matter how much love he had for Judy, he never saw her as CEO material. But Roland, everyone's least favorite "yes" man?

The man was full of ideas, sure. But he was always more interested in the big picture than the details, which doesn't mean there weren't a number of big-selling toys during the last five years of his tenure. In fact, besides his somewhat chaotic way of approaching a project, the worst you could say about him was he had a limited imagination when it came to design. The Bunny Budds, the Morph-O-Machines, the Rockians, and always bloody grey in color. Always.

But that was RTD and his grey agenda for you.

"...and the most important thing is to keep that energy up! Keep setting the bar higher..."

Judy faded back in on the end of Roland's last sentence and tried to brighten up with a smile, hoping he wouldn't notice she had been drifting. Everyone else seemed to have the same bland expression of approval plastered on their faces. All their pads and pens lay in front of them, but no one was taking notes. She sometimes wondered why people bother bringing pads and pens to meetings anyway. Nothing important ever happens at one of these meetings.

"But now I want to introduce you to something special. Something more important than the tone meeting and the usual sales folderol." Roland stood. "The real future of Playomatics, and the subject of our company's new slogan, launching today: 'Where Best Friends are Made.'"

Judy looked up along with everyone else. New slogan?

"Ladies in gentlemen, I give you...the Meti!"

Roland swept his hand to the double doors, which opened to reveal three techs from the R&D department. And in front of them, waddling into the room, were a dozen little furry dolls each about a foot tall. They were different colors – black and brown and auburn and grey (of course) – with little glowing eyes. They were cute, Judy thought, but there was something odd about them too. Something a bit...creepy. They stopped at once and stood in a line. The R&D guys picked them up and brought them over to the table, where they obediently sat down at regular intervals to give everyone a close look at them.

"The Meti are about to become everyone's favorite toy," said Roland with a wide smile, "but more than that, they're about to become every child's best friend! And even better, the children will get to make one of their very own at our new chain of Make-A-Meti stores opening in malls and shopping centers all around the world in the next two weeks!"

"Two weeks?" Judy stood and Roland looked at her, eyes wide and innocent. "You launched an entirely new toy line *and* retail plan without telling the rest of the executive staff?"

“Judy, please,” said Roland, and left his place at the head of the table to join her. He placed his hands on her shoulders, but when she flinched – she tried to hide it, but she couldn’t – he agreeably dropped his hands and clasped them together instead.

“This all came together very quickly,” he said, first to her and then to the rest of the staff. “But I assure you I have an incredible feeling about this project. It couldn’t wait, it just all kind of...happened! As we speak, you are all receiving the specs and details in your e-mail, and the R&D folks are here to give you a full rundown on the Metis, their functionality, and the whole Make-A-Meti process.”

Roland returned to his place and smiled at everyone.

“I ask everyone here to trust me. This is big. Bigger than big! It’s brilliant! I promise you, with a conviction I have never felt before, that we will dominate the market within the year!”

Judy sat down, shaking her head. The others all looked at each other and at the Metis, which stared back with their big glowing eyes.

Roland clapped his hands and the R&D team moved to activate a projector and screen built into the nearest wall. As Roland joined them and clapped them all on the back, the others swiveled to watch the presentation. Paul leaned over to Judy as the lights dimmed.

“I think he’s finally lost it,” he whispered. “Five years in and his ideas are getting crazier and crazier. Maybe it’s time he moved on.”

Judy didn’t answer as the Metis appeared on the screen, marching out of a cartoon toy factory and across a map of the world.

Make-A-Meti, Where Best Friends are Made!” said the cheery narration. It was Roland’s own voice. “Metis in every country! Metis in every home! Hooray!”

Judy shivered. Roland’s office was always set at a perfectly comfortably temperature, but she couldn’t help feeling a chill.

“And remember,” Roland boomed over the advert on the screen. “The tone word is...’everywhere!’”

* * * * *

The Vortex: The TARDIS

The Doctor dreamt. Again. This was happening quite a lot lately, he thought as the dream world encased his mind.

“Something is coming,” said a voice. It was young and bright, a female voice. He recognized it. The Clockmaker’s daughter.

The Doctor walked through an endless corridor, a tunnel swathed in fog. Comic book pages flew past his face, and up ahead the City of the Dragon gleamed and beckoned. Glossy black walls, ceiling and floor stretched into infinity, but his pace never flagged. Somewhere far, far in the distance the city vanished into a pinpoint of light. And there were shadows, shapes. Beastly with glowing eyes that pierced the darkness and melted back into it again and again.

“Someone is after you.” This time a male voice, older, more seasoned. It sounded sad. The Doctor quickened his pace, but the light grew no closer.

“Through the darkness! The terrible, terrible darkness! Crawling and slashing and writhing and curling through space and time, everywhere and everywhen! Something is coming!”

The last voice was indistinguishable as either male or female, but the shrill pitch and extreme volume made the Doctor recoil. The ebon corridor began to spin, and then the laughing began. From all around him, a nightmarish cackle that echoed off the mirror-finish surfaces and pounded into his head until he had to stop walking and kneel on the floor. Or the wall. Or the ceiling. He couldn’t tell which way was up anymore.

“Something is coming for you and them and everyone, everywhere and everywhen! Something is coming, out of the darkness, into the light, into the night, it might, it might, it might...”

The corridor was spinning out of control and the Doctor screamed, fingernails raking the walls and sending jagged shavings of black flying back and forth until the light, so small in the first place, was now totally obscured in a cloud of shadow. Underneath the black surfaces, white marble peeked through. The last thing he saw was a burnt-out sphere, lashed to the TARDIS console, its energy suffusing the ship, directing it, sending it back to Earth...

“It!”

“Is!”

“Here!”

The Doctor awoke and gasped, sweat on his brow. He leapt to his feet and immediately regretted it, feeling his knees ache and nearly give way. Sitting back down with a defeated sigh, he brought his hand to his head and saw the lacerations on his arm as his sleeve shifted.

He wasn't ready for what was coming. It was too soon. He was still so weak.

And he was so old.

The hum of the temporal engines, inescapable in any of the ship's infinite chambers and halls, shifted almost imperceptibly and he knew. They had landed. Wherever this 'it' was...

...the TARDIS was there now too. And so was he.

It was time.

* * * * *

16 November 2011: Cardiff

“Well at least security didn’t escort me out like a criminal!”

Judy was carrying a box stuffed with desk knick-knacks as she left the building for the last time. Paul was at her side, smirking.

“No, I volunteered for the job myself. I figured you’d want a friend at a time like this.”

“A friend that still has his job.” She said it with more edge than she intended and smiled to soften it. Paul smiled back.

“No, no, I know. But it wasn’t a surprise.”

“Even to Roland?”

“He just pouted for a second and then went to another tone meeting. Oh and thank you, this meant I got to avoid that one.” Paul bowed theatrically as they reached Judy’s car. She unlocked the doors and threw the box in the back seat. Then she turned to Paul and fought back a tear.

“I just...I couldn’t do it anymore.”

“I know, here.” Paul gave her a hug and she accepted gratefully.

“Granddad’s place...” And she started sobbing.

“Judy, you can’t think of it like that. It stopped being his a long time ago. You have to think of yourself.”

“He’s twisted it!” She snarled, wiping her eyes and nose on her sleeve. “This whole Make-A-Meti thing, it’s just...”

“Hey that’s why I need to keep my job. We can’t have all the heroes on the outside looking in, can we?”

“And what do you think you can do at this point?” She straightened her suit and shut the back door. “We’re days from the big giveaway, the damn things are all around the world. It’s not like company policy is going to change now. He was right. It worked.”

“So what are you going to do?”

Judy sniffed and looked off into the distance. The trees around the company campus were swaying in the breeze, and she heard birds somewhere nearby. It was so beautiful. It looked like it did years ago. But inside it was different.

"Start again. Find a job, hopefully nothing to do with toys. And I have...some other ideas."

"Well that's good then," Paul said and put his hands on her upper arms. "Think positive. After all, one day the whole world will end and no one will care about any of this anyway, right?"

"Yeah, way to think positive Paul." She smiled and tried to get into the car but Paul held her.

"And about...the other thing," he said. "Do you think maybe..."

He leaned in, hesitantly, but she put her hands up and rested them on his arms.

"Paul."

"Can't we try?"

"Paul, I told you a long time ago. I'm not interested. Nothing to do with you, remember." And she tweaked his nose. "You've been a good friend."

"I think I should win a medal for that," he said ruefully.

"I'd give you one." She climbed into the front seat and started the car. Paul moved to close the front door.

"Thanks for everything."

"Oh I didn't do everything," Paul said. "Take care." And he shut the door.

Paul stood and watched as Judy drove away. He let the wind tussle his hair for a minute, then turned his face to the sky, closed his eyes and breathed in deeply. Then he went back inside.

* * * * *

Her plan had been to head straight home but instead Judy had driven around for hours. She fished her digital audio recorder out of her purse and rambled for a long time, talking about Granddad and the dreams he'd had, the things Dunwich had done to the company, and then everything she'd heard or discovered about Make-A-Meti in the last several months. It was hard to fight back more tears, but her anger kept them mostly in check.

"Of course this morning was the breaking point," she said into the recorder as she turned another corner. She was letting her subconscious handle the driving as she poured everything out into the microphone.

"I saw the 'Strategic Report.' I couldn't even understand most of it, but the parts I did get...it just scared me. We're always worried about loss of privacy on the Internet or the next corporation that will come along and mine all our identities, but this..."

Without realizing it, she turned again and saw Lagreste's up ahead. She smiled, but it faded quickly.

"I think this thing is so much bigger than a toy line. There's something going on here, but I can't do anything more from inside. I need help. And that's why I'm recording all that I've seen in the last few months. With that and the copy I made of the report, I'm hoping someone can make better sense of it than I can. Or at least tell me I'm crazy and let me get on with my life. I couldn't even tell Paul what I had planned. He'd think I was nuts. Maybe I am."

She switched off the recorder and stuffed it in her bag right next to the folded photocopies. She pulled into the parking lot of Lagreste's just as the sun was going down. Maybe a drink or two would help put it all into perspective. And if she met someone there too, well then at least she wouldn't end the day alone like she did most days.

Judy appreciated the blast of cool air and the smell of beer that greeted her as she walked in. Marie grinned from behind the bar.

"Hi babe," she said. "The usual?"

"Yeah, four of them. In one glass."

"That kind of day huh," Marie said and poured. Judy passed by and collected her drink on the way to the back of the room. It wasn't that busy yet but there were a few couples at some of the tables and two other singles at the bar. She eyed a young lady at the far corner and headed in that direction.

"Yup." She nodded at Marie and stopped at the table in the corner. The woman sitting there was casually dressed, jeans and jacket. Her close-cropped hair had one streak of deep artificial red. She was staring into her drink.

"So I'm not the only one that had a terrible day?" Judy said. She tried to put on her best seductive tone, but she was a little out of practice. The young woman still smiled back, but weakly.

"No actually, it's been a great day," she said and looked around. Her eyes were red-rimmed; she'd been crying. *I know the feeling*, Judy thought. "I just didn't think I'd be spending the night alone."

"Well I'm here to fix that!" Judy sat down and introduced herself. "And you are..."

"Raine. Raine Tarrant. Nice to meet you. I might not be good company though."

"And why's that?"

"I just got a promotion at work. It's very exciting."

"Hmph, things changed for me professionally too." Judy took a sip. "But that's great! So why all down in the dumps?"

"Couldn't get a single friend to come out and celebrate with me," Raine said. "Everyone is busy or...involved. Tough being single and...well, single around here."

"It can be," Judy nodded. "But this is a nice place and sometimes you get lucky and meet the right person. Like tonight maybe." Judy smiled and put her hand on Raine's. Raine smiled back.

"Well I appreciate the moral support," she said with a laugh.

The next few hours passed pleasantly as Judy and Raine chatted and had a few more drinks. There were a few times when Judy was hoping to steer things back to her place, but it just didn't happen, and Raine seemed a bit too vulnerable about being left alone by her friends. Maybe this wasn't the night for that. Eventually Judy gave Raine a peck on the cheek and said goodnight.

"It was really nice to meet you, maybe we'll do it again sometime." Judy stood and grabbed her purse from the floor by her side.

"I'd like that," said Raine. "Thanks for filling in as my friend for the night." She laughed.

"You're very welcome. Congratulations on the big promotion!"

"Good luck to you too! Be careful getting home."

"Just around the corner, really. Night now!"

As Judy walked away, Raine watched her go then glanced at the floor. A little silver electronic gizmo and a few sheets of paper were laying near Judy's chair.

"Hey Judy!" Raine grabbed the papers and gadget – it was an audio recorder – and headed for the door, but Judy's car was already pulling away. Raine was about to turn them over to Marie at the bar for the lost and found, but then she glimpsed the words at the top of one of the folded pages.

'Strategic Report.'

Hear that enough at work, Raine thought. She read further. She frowned.

* * * * *

Judy pulled in to her garage and gingerly stepped out of the car and into her house through the side entrance. She threw the purse on the nearest table and sighed as it slumped and then fell onto the floor. Tomorrow, that report and the recorder is getting delivered...somewhere. She'd figure it out after a good night's rest. Let it stay there right now.

The doorbell rang and Judy wiped her face with one hand and tried a little harder. Maybe she should have invited her home.

Maybe it's her at the door!

Judy laughed at herself, knowing there was no way Raine could know where she lived. But she could dream.

She opened the door and smiled.

"Oh!"

Then she looked down. And screamed.

* * * * *

23 November 2011: London

"...And here are the minutes of the last assembly meeting," said Corporal Tarrant as she slid the next stack of papers under the old man's hands. He smiled weakly and sighed. "And these," she said, retrieving another ream from under her arm, "are the routine surveillance reports from our offices here and in the US and Russia. No unusual energy signatures, spaceship sightings or bio-scans corresponding to any of the known catalogue of extraterrestrial entities. And..."

Tarrant paused and looked at her boots.

"What is it ...Corporal now, is it?" He leant back in his leather chair and loosened his tie.

"Yes, General!" She beamed. "Only last week, and if I may say sir, very happy to be assigned to your office! But..."

"Corporal, if we were facing a Dalek army right now, we'd both be exterminated before you could finish your sentence."

"Sorry, sir. I just...I feel I let you down."

"Let me down? Corporal, you may have saved the entire world! Bringing this to our attention was not only your job, it was the right thing to do."

"But it wasn't..."

"Enough of that, Corporal," he said more forcefully, leaning forward. "No recriminations. When you're in UNIT, your personal life and your professional life are bound to collide more than once."

"I never really got to know her at all, and now..."

"The only thing you can do for her now is see to it that the people – or things – that killed her get what's coming to them. That's what we're here for."

"Yes, sir." She sighed heavily and shook her head as if to dispel her thoughts. "Oh, and this one." She pulled a smaller slip of paper from her pocket and handed it over. "That was your special request. No reports of blue boxes matching your description in the London metropolitan area or any of the home counties. They're widening the search but nothing yet."

"Very well," the General sighed. He eyed her for a long moment as she snapped her pocket shut and prepared to leave. "If I may be pardoned, the clumsy manners of an old man, but how old are you Corporal?"

"27, sir."

"You know," he said, pushing his chair back and standing to circle his desk, hands clasped behind him. At 70 years old he still towered over most of the personnel in the building. "I was that age and a Corporal just like you when I first joined UNIT."

"I can only hope to live up to your example, sir," Tarrant breathed and saluted smartly.

General John Benton, most definitely not Retired, offered a more casual reply, tipping his fingers to his forehead and smiling, this time more warmly.

"I'm sure you'll do just fine, Corporal. And remember, you did the right thing. Direct all that youthful enthusiasm to the job ahead. That's when you'll need all your energy and all your wits about you."

"Looking forward to it sir!" she said and then gulped when Benton raised an eyebrow. "Well I mean, I'm not looking forward to an invasion, of course, I just meant..."

"I know what you meant," he said, barely suppressing a chuckle. But that wouldn't be proper. "Thank you again for the reports, and keep me posted if there's any more news on the search." He ushered her to the door as politely as possible. She saluted again and disappeared down the hall as fast as her legs could carry her.

Benton closed the door and sighed. Was he ever like that when Lethbridge-Stewart gave him a plum assignment, or when he screwed it up? Did he and Yates ever seem like over-excited rabbits hopping about HQ waiting to prove their mettle? Maybe so. But that was a long time ago.

Benton returned to his desk and began to shuffle papers. Not one of his favorite parts of the job, but no matter how much he tried to stay in the thick of things, they had done their damndest to consign him to more of a ceremonial, administrative position. At his age, he couldn't be expected to run around in the field and set up the anti-tank rockets. He sure as hell wanted to try, though. But never mind, even if all he could do was sit here and coordinate UNIT's operations, at least he still had his finger on the pulse. And he wasn't about to let go.

When Tarrant brought in that digital recording and documents, all the hallmarks of a good old-fashioned alien invasion were there. And if they were right, this was the day. There were only hours left, but nothing solid to act on. So much bureaucracy these days. A familiar story...to Benton anyway. But he'd been to the toy stores. He'd seen them. He knew. Not that anyone was listening.

One man would listen. One man would understand. So where was he? Why wasn't he here yet? There were only days left!

Benton seemed to recall that Lethbridge-Stewart had a way of contacting him from wherever he was in that magical machine of his, but times were different. Most of the people in the UNIT organization didn't even fully acknowledge the truth of UNIT's own history. All Benton's friends and colleagues from the old days were dead or old or disappeared. Today's crop of crusaders were like Corporal Tarrant, eager and capable soldiers but woefully ill-prepared. And time was running out.

Perhaps it already had.

The phone rang, startling Benton and making him laugh ruefully at himself. Nice work, old man, off in another world. If only.

"Benton here," he said.

“Sir, it’s Pendergrath! Down in Project Blue Box?”

Benton had actually set up the project a long time before the current crisis, but had never officially assigned any name to the effort. Pendergrath had taken it upon himself to call it Project Blue Box. At some point he even printed a little sign with a picture on it and hung it up on his door with sticky tape. That’s initiative for you. This week, his efforts kicked into overdrive.

“Yes, Pendergrath, what is it?”

“Oh I think you better just come down here, sir,” said Pendergrath. “You’re going to have to see this for yourself.”

On the lift down to the sublevels, Benton contemplated how often subordinates in UNIT reported to their superiors by telling them they ‘had to see this for themselves.’ Wasn’t that dangerous? Valuable minutes were lost walking corridors and taking lifts when the entire world could be burning from alien laser fire. All because one person felt it was more dramatic to withhold vital information for some strange reason. As his hand closed on Pendergrath’s office door knob, Benton resolved to draft a new regulation prohibiting that behavior in the future.

“Oh General, there you are!” Pendergrath rushed over after stating the obvious and shook Benton’s hand.

“I take it there’s news?”

“Maybe sir, maybe!” Pendergrath ran back to the other side of his closet-sized room, filled from floor to ceiling with electrical equipment wired and cross-wired to each other with such complexity that Benton feared the entire place would catch fire any moment. But these days, finding anyone that would throw themselves wholeheartedly into this side project was a miracle in itself, so Pendergrath was given enormous leeway.

“See, ever since you asked, I researched all the old files...and you know, there aren’t many at all, at least not detailed ones.” Pendergrath ran to one end of the desk where a tall pile of papers and folders threatened to topple over. He steadied them and went back to the controls of a large computer bank on one wall. “Most of the detailed technical info seems to have vanished.”

“I doubt we ever had much to begin with,” said Benton. “But...the point?”

“Oh! Well, I borrowed some scanning software from the boys in Alien Intel, modified it to focus on temporal rather than spatial distortion, which we don’t do that often even though we...”

“Pendergrath.” Benton laid his hands on the skittish sergeant’s shoulders. “While we’re young.”

Pendergrath pointed at a small screen with an old-fashioned radar beam sweeping a London map every few seconds.

“It’s here.”

Benton sighed heavily. Thank God.

“Where?”

“Where. Oh!” Pendergrath tuned the monitor, talked to himself as Benton sighed again, and jotted some numbers down on a pad. Then he rushed to another wall papered with maps. He ran his fingers down and across, and then stopped.

"There, sir. On the Barnet Bypass. And it's odd you know, because one of the last real ones used to stand there, in fact right there, back in oh, 1980, 1981."

Benton looked at the map where Pendergrath was pointing. He wanted to smile, but he could only manage a grimace. As happy as Benton was that he was here, the old man knew very well what it meant. It really was today. It had to be.

"Anyway, it's there now. The Doctor's TARDIS." Pendergrath grinned. "Shall we lay on transport, sir?"

Benton nodded. It was time.

* * * * *

"Well?"

The Doctor had flagged down a passing car on the bypass and asked the bewildered driver if he could use their mobile. The prim woman with the puppy in the back seat was so confused, she simply handed it over and let the strange man make his call. The Doctor had dialed a number and spoken three words:

"Priority Omega Three."

He then thanked the woman and she motored away to share the story with the rest of her bridge club. The Doctor then leant against the TARDIS as Tom voiced his monosyllabic question.

It was the waiting for an answer that always annoyed Tom the most. The Doctor would go off on one of his mental tangents, leaving Tom and Val to play catch-up. Tom sighed, ran his hands through his curls and brushed a mote of dust from his t-shirt. Then he stuffed his hands in his jeans and joined the Doctor in leaning on the police box.

"Well what, Tom?"

The nerve! The Doctor had burst into the TARDIS library, where Val and Tom had just discovered yet another treasure trove of ancient lore...well to be fair, Val had been looking up a volume called *The Mysteries of the Wolfmen of Markis Nine*, and Tom had been rifling through some more of the Doctor's comic book collection. Then the Doctor announced they were heading to Earth "forthwith" to face a great "calamity." He had decided to let the TARDIS do what it had been doing best lately and carry him to where he was needed. Five minutes later they were in the control room, two more minutes after that they were on a highway.

TARDIS life.

"Well, you think they're going to answer you this time?"

"We'll see, won't we? Maybe London HQ will pay attention to me."

Val stepped out of the TARDIS in a black leather jacket and black jeans. A short fuzzy scarf was wrapped around her neck. She tossed Tom a khaki jacket that he gratefully pulled on.

"Thanks. Chilly."

"It's probably October or November," said the Doctor absently. "Ah!"

A lorry pulled up with a UNIT logo on its door, wings on either side of a wire frame globe. Another twenty minutes and they had pulled through a gate in front of a stately mansion. A sign out front read:

UNIT HEADQUARTERS

TOP SECRET

NO UNAUTHORISED ADMITTANCE

"You've got to be kidding," said Val. "All those years I read UNIT stories at the magazine. All that real 'Men in Black' stuff. And they have a big *sign* out front?"

"Please," said the Doctor, head in hand. "Don't get me started."

At the front desk, the Doctor flashed credentials and the duty officer picked up the phone.

"Just a moment, Doctor sir."

The doors at the end of the foyer opened and Benton came out flanked by two other officers. The Doctor adopted a look of mock annoyance, but Benton wasn't fooled.

"So we finally get to meet the famous top secret UNIT," said Tom, hands on hips.

"Yeah," said Val, joining him in smirking at Benton and the others. "Dab hands at keeping themselves under wraps, but not so good at answering phones."

"I have to say it is nice to see that UNIT will still occasionally show up when you call them," said the Doctor tersely.

"Actually we were already on our way to get you, but what's that supposed to mean, Doctor?" Benton put his hands on his hips, but looked at Tom and lowered them again.

"Long story. Canada, Autons? Maybe UNIT just isn't what it used to be." The Doctor smiled though. Benton grinned and came forward, clasping the Doctor's hand in both of his.

"Who is? You're not exactly standing around in your lab tinkering with a dematerialization circuit either, Doctor," said Benton. "Times change."

"Indeed they do."

"Besides, we did mop up that Victoria lot in the end."

The Doctor gave Benton a sidelong glance.

"Weren't you supposed to be selling used cars somewhere?"

"You're the clever one," laughed Benton and led the Doctor to a conference room. "That was just a cover story for a top secret operation. Not even old Alistair was supposed to know."

"Well, he didn't. And it is very good to see you."

"So what are we dealing with?"

"You tell me! You didn't just answer me quickly, you were waiting for me to arrive. So what's the situation? Besides 'terrible.'"

* * * * *

"They're called 'Make-A-Meti' and they're massive," said Pendergrath, handing the Doctor a brightly-printed flier in one of the building's computer labs. "Since the brand debuted this summer they've gone worldwide and have stores in every major country. The charity angle alone has given them more market penetration than any other toy in the last twenty-five years."

The Doctor eyed the paper and the line-drawn image of a cuddly, furry doll with soft, glowing eyes. The text was large and friendly:

Hinton Playomatics, parent company of Make-A-Meti, and its many partners are proud sponsors of the Make-A-Meti Foundation, whose goal is to supply a personal prized Make-A-Meti to every child of need, ensuring that their lives are enriched

through love and kindness and providing them with the foundation they will need to grow into productive adults. Make-A-Meti is not just concerned with making toys – we're building a new future the likes of which no one has ever seen before. Join us and help support the Make-A-Meti Foundation by donating generously through special gift vouchers found at every Make-A-Meti retail location. And it's all building up to our big giveaway at 9pm on November 23, 2011!

"There's a lot more on their website. I'll bring it up for you." Pendergrath sat in front of the computer and tapped on the keyboard. The Doctor looked over his shoulder. Benton looked for another seat and sat down heavily. He'd seen it all already anyway, and all the tension was wearing him down.

Tom edged closer to another officer. She was young and pretty, just his type.

Nothing ventured, he thought. Not that I ever seem to have much luck.

"So, working in UNIT long? What's your name?"

Tarrant smiled.

"Raine, Raine Tarrant," she said. "Look, you seem like a nice guy, but really, don't waste your time."

Tom nodded and stepped away. Val shook her head and patted his shoulder as she walked by to join the Doctor.

"Smooth, my friend."

"Oh yeah," he said and sat down in a corner. "I've still got it."

"What drew UNIT's attention to this company in the first place?" the Doctor asked, oblivious to the others.

"Judy Hinton," said Benton. "Grand-daughter of the company's founder. She's been suspecting all sorts of things due to the dodgy behavior of the CEO, Roland T. Dunwich. Could have just been sour grapes, but she took some rather alarming documentation out of the company when she quit a week ago. Our own Corporal Tarrant recovered it and then Hinton herself later turned up dead, murdered in her flat. We were monitoring local law enforcement and investigated."

Benton handed the Doctor crime scene photos and a report.

"And how did Corporal Tarrant manage the recovery exactly?" said the Doctor.

"I met her the night before she was killed, Doctor," Tarrant said. "There was...a connection. I felt I owed it to her to find out what happened."

"Unorthodox," said the Doctor and looked at Benton, who shrugged.

"That's the U, you know."

"Here, Make-A-Meti's site." Pendergrath navigated through a few web pages. "Their 'about us' page, the bit about the 'Life Spheres.' Here's a bit their FAQ:"

MAKE-A-METI – OUR MISSION: At Make-A-Meti, our mission is to bring a glorious new creature to life. The Meti is an emerging icon that will conjure warm thoughts in your children's hearts and minds and teach them everything they need to know as they grow into productive adults. At Make-A-Meti we're not just concerned with making toys; we're building a new future the likes of which no one has ever seen before.

OUR LEADER: Roland T. Dunwich has a long history in the toy industry. He knows what

makes us happy. He has a keen business sense, and he has the intimate knowledge of what lies beyond our own imagination and how to bring that out of the darkness and into the light.

OUR MASCOT: Our oh-so-cuddly Meti first came to life this summer in Cardiff. When Mr. Dunwich realized the potential of an army of identical Meti marching happily throughout the world, there was no alternative but to bring this vision to everyone through our Make-A-Meti retail locations.

PARTNERSHIPS AND FRANCHISING: In our first year of operation, Make-A-Meti has built exciting and lucrative partnerships with several worldwide organizations and countries all around the globe as we expand the brand into every culture, every city, and every child's heart. Our network is complex, deeply interwoven, and growing.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS: For more on how to build your very own Make-A-Meti as well as the secret behind those glowing silver Life Spheres™ and how they will transform every Meti into a powerful part of our Network of J.O.Y.™.

"What nonsense," said the Doctor, but what's this about 'Life Spheres?'

"Oh well you see, that's part of the fun of it all," said Pendergrath, twirling his hands as he talked. "You go to any of the Make-A-Meti stores and you...I mean, a child...can build your own Meti doll. You pick out the color fur, you take it to the stuffing station, and they fill it up, put in the glowing eyes. And then you pick out a Life Sphere, which is this little silver ball that's like the soul of your own personal Meti, and you put it in yourself!"

"Charming. And the 'Network of J.O.Y.'?"

"Don't know exactly, but it's probably about one of their major marketing hooks, the online angle."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, wireless, whatever." Pendergrath pointed to a cartoonish image of a Meti on the screen with lightning bolts radiating outward to equally cartoonish pictures of houses, radio towers, laptops and cell phones. "Every Meti is enabled with technology sort of like Bluetooth, but proprietary. You take your Meti to any wi-fi hotspot and it goes online, connects to the company's website and gives you updates about the health of your Meti and the time left until the big giveaway. I suppose it's embedded in the spheres."

"Big giveaway?"

"At nine tonight," said Benton, who rose and joined them. "They've been advertising it for weeks. Everyone is supposed to take their Meti to a hotspot at nine and they're giving something away to all the kids."

"Hmm," said the Doctor.

"Yeah, it's what Lethbridge-Stewart used to call an 'a-one red flag,' isn't it Doctor?"

"Indeed. You see it too, don't you Tom?"

Tom nodded, running his fingers through his curly brown hair. It was a nervous habit, and since he started traveling with the Doctor, he did it a lot.

"Every one of these... 'Life Spheres' is a node, connecting all the Meti in a global network, just like the Internet itself. A net. Thrown across the entire planet Earth."

"Oh," said the Doctor. "Well, yes, but that wasn't what I was thinking exactly."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, what else do you call the Internet, Tom?"

"What, the 'web?'" said Val.

"Precisely!" The Doctor tweaked her nose. "A web stretched wide around the world. A web...of fear."

Everyone looked silently at the Doctor.

"I still like mine better," Tom said.

* * * * *

"The Abominable Snowmen," said the Doctor. "Val, if you would."

"You bet, let the former editor of the *Mysterious Times* have her moment!"

Val grinned and sat the keyboard as Tarrant stepped away. She quickly typed in a few search terms. The others gathered around her. Several websites popped up, and she navigated through them as she spoke.

"The Abominable Snowman, or the Yeti. Sometimes referred to as 'Yeh-the,' 'Dzu-the,' and 'Meh-the' or 'Meti,' although that's a Tibetan term for the indigenous brown bear. In America, it's often called Sasquatch." She smirked, recalling all those half-blurred pictures of 'Bigfoot.'

"Not the Bigfoot that Steve Austin used to fight in the old TV show though," said Tom.

"Stop reading my mind, freak." Val clicked and a quick flash of a loping black shape, one arm dangling at its side as it glared back at the camera, came up on the screen as she paged through some Wikipedia entries.

"Anyway, all sorts of cultures have legends about a missing link, a man-ape that bridges the gap between prehistoric man and his modern form. Some of them are supposedly sighted from time to time, in the mountains, or the Himalayas, or wherever."

"And I've seen them up close more than once," said the Doctor as he straightened and the group stepped back from the computer screen. Val spun on the chair and looked up at him.

"Actual Yeti? Of course, the Travers expedition, wasn't it? I only just read about that!"

"Yes, not the real Yeti of course, but robotic versions constructed by an alien power, a 'Great Intelligence,' to dominate the Earth."

"What, dominate the Earth with teddy bears?"

"They were bigger last time," said the Doctor testily, and Benton nodded in agreement.

"That's right," said Benton. "I could fit inside one of their hides with room to spare."

"These aren't men in fur suits, General," said the Doctor sternly.

"I know that, Doctor. But dolls, eh? The more things change..."

"...the worse they get," the Doctor said. "And anyway I don't think these stuffed toys are necessarily part of the final plan. They're a delivery system, and I suspect a deliberate clue for me to notice. It's been tightening its grip for a very long time, and now I think it's laughing at me."

"The bears?" said Kowalski.

"The Great Intelligence!" The Doctor glowered at Kowalski. "It's actually a being from

before the dawn of this universe, called Yog-Sothoth.”

“You mean like the Old Ones and the tentacles and the...”

“Yes Val, although Howard didn’t get everything exactly right. Very imaginative fellow though, but those night terrors...”

The Doctor grabbed the Meti doll and stormed toward the door. Benton followed.

“Where are you going now?”

“Where else,” said the Doctor, hefting the doll. “To a ‘hot spot.’ It’s almost nine and I wouldn’t want to miss the big giveaway.”

“Well, there are all sorts of Internet cafes around here, I can lay on some transport and...”

“No, no, not that kind of hot spot. I think we’ll just go right to where the action is. Tom, ever been to a toy factory?”

“No, but I saw both versions of Willy Wonka.”

“That’s candy, genius,” said Val.

“True enough,” said the Doctor. “And not a very accurate portrayal either.” The Doctor huffed and smoothed his lapels. “Mind you, the first one got the outfit just about right. Anyway, on we go! We have only a very few hours. General, ready your troops for the worst. Val, stay with them. Maybe one of those cafes would be a perfect temporary forward HQ. Pick one in the heart of the city and wait for all Hell to break loose. You know, the usual.”

“Right, and for you? Transport?” Benton asked.

“Again, the usual.”

The Doctor marched out with Tom on his heels. Val looked at Benton and shrugged. The old man smiled.

“He wasn’t any easier to understand in my day either, miss.”

Val sighed heavily.

* * * * *

It’s all coming together, my dear friend. At long last, destiny is at hand.

Just you and me, right? Best of friends?

Best of friends. The Doctor will die, the world will be ours, and no one will hurt you ever again.

Hooray!

* * * * *

“Here we are,” said the Doctor. “Journey’s end.”

Tom and the Doctor climbed from the antique car that had been waiting for them outside UNIT HQ. Tom spared a moment to look back at the relic that had just carried them from London to Cardiff in record-breaking time, occasionally leaving fire trails behind its narrow wheels. The Doctor had patted it affectionately and called it a name. ‘Betsy’ or something.

“Come along!”

Tom shook his head and looked up at the corporate headquarters of Hinton Playomatics. It was eerily deserted, but the Doctor said that he figured it would be. Still, the stillness made Tom shiver. Even the trees were silent, not a leaf rustling. There was no sign of security or personnel of any kind as they entered through the front door. The inside of the place didn't make Tom feel any better.

"Not much of a toy factory is it," Tom said as they crept down the white marble corridors. At regular intervals, unmarked white doors with brass handles were set into the walls, but otherwise the corridors went on and on. "It looks a lot more like a mausoleum to me."

"Boy!"

Tom jumped at the Doctor's sudden raspy exclamation.

"What?"

"Would you kindly be quiet? You're rather defeating the purpose of sneaking in, now aren't you?"

"There's nobody here!"

"We can't be sure of that."

"Doctor, what's that?"

"I told you..." The Doctor paused as he heard the same high-pitched whine. Tom stepped forward to peer around the corner at the next junction, but the Doctor waved him back. A moment later, a single silver sphere whizzed around the corner and plunged through the air toward them.

"Duck!"

They hit the ground but the sphere passed them and headed straight for a solid wall. A circular aperture the same size as the sphere appeared instantly, and the sphere flew through it. By the time Tom got up and ran to the wall, the surface was whole again.

"What the hell was that?"

"A sentry, perhaps? A little bigger than the Life Spheres, but the same basic idea I'm sure," said the Doctor, slowly getting to his feet and dusting himself off. "Hmph, so undignified. Still, needs must."

The Doctor joined Tom at the wall and ran his fingertips along the surface.

"Come along," he said, crooking a finger as he walked down another corridor.

"Do you hear that," said Tom as they neared another juncture.

"A low hum that makes the hairs on the back of your neck stand on end?" said the Doctor. "It's coming from...that door."

Every corridor and wall had been the same, but now they turned the corner and saw a long hall with one door at the end. Unlike the others, it was dark brown and had no discernible handle or knob. As they walked toward it, the hum intensified. When they were directly in front of the door, the Doctor peered up and down and gingerly touched it.

"So how do we get in? I assume we are going in, that is," said Tom.

"Reason would suggest there can only be great danger or terrifying secrets behind this door," said the Doctor. "Of course we're going in."

The Doctor withdrew his sonic screwdriver and it whirred energetically but failed to open the door. He stared at both the door and the screwdriver as if by sheer force of will he could make something happen.

"Allow me Doctor," said Tom, taking out his penknife and kneeling at the place where a lock would normally be. There was a small metal plate barely protruding where the edge of the door met the jamb, and he began to work at it.

"After hacking computer systems throughout the universe, I think I'm actually developing an appreciation for the low-tech approach."

There was a perceptible click and Tom smiled. He stood and stepped back as the Doctor flung the door open. Within the air was swirling like a storm, with wind whipping at their hair and clothes. In the center of the bright white chamber, a lone figure stood on a dais framed by steel columns. He was grinning.

"Just a test room," he said. "Experimenting with ways to rip open a gateway since before the Meti plan was initiated. But now this entire project is redundant. We're just going to open up a hole right over London."

"The Great Intelligence?"

"A humble servant," the man said. "And his best friend! But the Intelligence is present as well. It has been waiting so eagerly for you Doctor. So glad to see you're joining us, and just in time for the big giveaway! Or should I say, too late? Hooray!"

"Roland T. Dunwich, I presume," said the Doctor, hooking his fingers in his lapels. "The name was a giveaway in itself, you know."

The man laughed.

"Not very bright for a Time Lord, are you," he said with a smirk. He bowed.

"Paul Corley, at your service."

* * * * *

Val sat in the Café Talon, one of the Internet hotspots flagged by the UNIT team as a good place to set up a forward observation post. They cleared the entire café in minutes and began setting up all sorts of electronic equipment while Val just took a seat by the counter that lined the window facing the street. She withdrew a laptop from a backpack Tarrant had given her back at the base and plugged it in to the power strip built into the counter. Flipping the screen up, she hit the power button while tucking an errant auburn lock behind her ear.

"Anything?"

"I only just booted up," Val said, but she was already bringing up the Make-A-Meti website. Tarrant came by and offered Val a cup of coffee. She took a sip. Not as good as that stuff on Sparana Prime, but hey, it would do for now.

"Any luck? There's a storm kicking up outside, might interfere with your connection."

"Could do, sir," said Val. "Can't imagine it's not a part of what's going on too."

"I'm sure, miss, and please. Call me John." Benton sat next to her.

"You...your lot, UNIT. I used to read about you quite a bit. Rumors and suspicious stories mostly. Even a few times you and the Doctor worked together. It was hard to get to the truth, but it was out there if you looked hard enough."

"That's what we do, miss. We face the things no one else wants to face, and we try to keep it quiet when we do. But when the sky is filled with spaceships or Cybermen are marching down the steps of St. Paul's, don't ask me how we manage to bury those stories. The Doctor once told me he thinks people just prefer to forget. Makes life easier."

Val turned to look at Benton. His face was deeply lined, but he seemed so much younger now than when she first met him. And he was such a warm man, not the sort she ever expected to be a soldier.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Anything, miss."

"I have...had...will have had a brother. I think."

Benton laughed.

"So you're from the future then?"

"A little bit. He went missing."

Benton's face sobered immediately.

"I'm sorry, miss. And?"

"I was wondering if you...if UNIT could..."

Benton cocked an eyebrow.

"Miss, are you asking me to look into something that hasn't happened yet?"

Val looked away.

"Yes, I guess I am. I'm sorry, I know what the Doctor would say."

"So do I," said Benton, and he put a hand on her arm. "But maybe I'll keep an eye out all the same."

Val looked at him and fought back a tear. She hugged the old man until she thought he would break.

To Hell with Time, she thought. Maybe Tom being kidnapped wasn't the only reason I joined the Doctor.

Maybe I can fix something important too.

* * * * *

"So where is Mr. Dunwich?"

"Oh he's over there," said Corley. In the corner of the room, slumped on the floor with arms and legs sprawled like a marionette with its strings cut, was Dunwich. A ridiculous smile was plastered on his shiny face.

"My word," the Doctor said, genuinely surprised. "An Auton!"

"More plastic people?" said Tom.

"Yes," said Corley. "A life-size doll, perfect 'action figure-head' for a toy company. Picked it up from a friend in Vancouver, made to order. This has been a plan long in the making, Doctor, and you have been so very foolish."

"And the rest of the Playomatics team?"

"Oh they're all dead," said Corley with a wave of his hand. "Part of the incarnation process required a massive concentrated influx of bio-energy just before activation of our little Meti army. The building had always been designed for this eventuality and when the time came

earlier today...well, let's just say none of the employees had ever really looked at the fine print of our termination policy."

"So tell me, the 'Life Spheres.' Why do the children get to put them in themselves?"

"The Meti needed to be linked on a continuing basis to a steady flow of bio-energy for the network to keep functioning until it was time to open the rift."

"And the 'Network of J.O.Y.?' " asked Tom.

Corley looked at him with cold, dead eyes. "The journey of Yog-Sothoth." He looked back at the Doctor. "So far everything has gone according to plan. The destruction of the Playomatics employees was stage one, the Life Spheres were stage two."

"You're draining the children?" The Doctor stepped forward. "Killing them to allow the Intelligence to come here?"

"No, we're not killing them. Just the physical contact and their emotional connection to the Meti through the spheres is enough to generate the energy we need. Then the Intelligence will arrive."

Corley grinned.

"And *then* we'll kill them."

"I'm not really talking to Paul Corley at all, am I?"

Corley laughed.

"Not really," said the thing in the shape of Paul Corley. "He existed once, a pathetic hopeful little being living a tiny life. Devoid of meaning. And then I selected him, shaped his destiny, gave him the opportunity to serve me."

"Corrupted him and used him to hand his entire race over to you, you mean," said the Doctor, edging closer. Corley held up a hand and Tom was surprised when the Doctor obeyed and stopped moving.

"It's all a matter of perspective, isn't it." Corley sauntered over to them, ignoring the swirling wind. "But whatever you think of my plan, you must admit it has been well orchestrated, surgically precise, and now, ultimately, a great success. I was after all a military strategist long ago in another universe."

"You should have stayed there."

"You and your human pets will surely regret that I did not." Corley came face to face with the Doctor, who raised his chin and met the creature's gaze without blinking.

"Once I was like my brothers and sisters. I was the Outcast, the Wanderer, adrift in limbo for an eternity. I tried to force my way into this reality before, and you were always there to stop me. And now, as I prepare to take my rightful place as the guiding intelligence of this and every other world, I have brought you here for one last meeting."

The Doctor opened his mouth to speak, but Corley raised his eyebrows, lifted a finger, and looked at the watch on his other wrist.

"Oh look, five minutes to nine. Time for the big giveaway."

"What are you giving away?" said Tom. When Corley's eyes raked over him again, he suppressed a chill.

"We're not giving anything away, human. It's your race that's doing the giving. You're about to give away your freedom, your lives, your world. To me."

Corley grinned. His teeth were yellowed and his breath was foul.

"Play time."

Corley crumpled to the ground and before their eyes, his body just fell apart. In a moment, there was nothing but smoldering clothing and a pile of dust that carried away into the wind. The Doctor turned and left the room, Tom at his heels.

"What the hell?"

"The Great Intelligence had been controlling that body for a long time from far away, but now it's nearly here, and it didn't need Corley any more. And we need to get back to UNIT and Val and the others. The Great Intelligence has miscalculated."

"How's that?"

"In a game with stakes this high, I have no intention of losing."

Even if there's only one way to win, the Doctor thought.

A sacrifice play.

* * * * *

"Gen...John, look at the Make-A-Meti site," Val said. The screen was filled with a big animated countdown with numbers appearing in front of a glowing, blinking Make-A-Meti. 14...13...12...11...

"Oh this can't be good."

Benton was at her shoulder, watching the numbers.

"It never is, miss," he said, twirling a finger as he looked up to give the troops the signal.

"But how can we be ready for whatever it is if we don't know what to be ready for?"

"I've done this before, miss," Benton smiled. "We can only do the best we can."

"And the Doctor?"

"That's different," said Benton as he went to join the soldiers. "He *is* the best."

Val watched the old man stride into battle and then looked back at the screen.

...3...2...1.

"I hope the best is enough," she said and sipped her coffee. It was cold.

* * * * *

9:00 pm, London

The diminutive army marched silently down the streets of London, some splitting off into smaller groups as they passed humans running and screaming in all directions. The sound of rending cloth and flesh filled the air as the Meti grew in number, pouring from homes and stores everywhere and attacking everyone they encountered. Around the world, in every country, in every city, the Meti teemed into roads and highways and avenues until the landscape was covered with a carpet of grey and brown and black, eyes glowing and claws grasping.

Just a few blocks from the Café Talon, the Meti army stopped as two lead creatures paused. Before them was an entranceway to the London Underground. To the right, a route that would take them forward on the surface.

The two Meti looked at each other, glowing eyes staring soullessly. They looked again at the sign.

The Meti marched on, passing by the underground entrance.

Not this time.

* * * * *

9:30 pm, London

“OK, that was impossible!”

“Not for Bessie,” said the Doctor as he leapt from the driver’s seat. The sprightly yellow roadster had brought them back from Cardiff in a little more than a half an hour, but the Doctor assured Tom that the laws of physics has not strictly been broken.

“Bent,” he said.

As they ran down the street to the café, they saw UNIT troops deployed on every block. The soldiers were pouring bullets into an army of plush toys, and several of them fell over. But then one of the Meti horde shuffled forward, its thick fur rippling as if under pressure from within. It let out a massive roar for such a small object, lifted its arms and exploded in a shower of brown hair, sending a silver sphere flying outward from where its body once stood. Meti burst everywhere, and spheres looped and dove through the air as the Meti dispersed in every direction, roaring and splitting apart into clouds of fur and spheres. Even the fallen dolls shot by the soldiers burst apart and released spheres into the sky.

“Well that’s something you don’t see every day,” said Tom.

“Depends what your day is usually like,” said the Doctor.

The spheres began to sprout appendages. Some fired beams of energy, burning cars and buildings as the last stubborn civilians scattered. Others unfurled metallic tongues that lashed at walls and street surfaces, sending dusty debris flying in every direction.

As spheres and acrid smoke filled the skies above the city streets, the Doctor’s eyes narrowed.

“You know, there’s something familiar about all this...”

“Never mind that now, Doctor, we need to get to the café and fast!”

“Yes of course. Now where did I put that...ah!”

The Doctor rummaged in his pocket and withdrew a small red-and-silver horseshoe magnet. Holding it aloft, he aimed it at the nearest low-hanging sphere. It wobbled, then turned and hovered. As Tom watched in shock, the sphere extended two knife-like appendages and accelerated toward the Doctor.

“Come on! Forget the café right now, let’s get some cover!” Tom dove and bundled the Doctor to the ground as the sphere whipped past.

"But did you see?" the Doctor giggled. "Weak though this magnet is, it affected the sphere!"

Broken glass crunched under their feet as they climbed through a shattered store window and crouched behind a sales counter. Among the cameras and MP3 players and other electronics now smashed and strewn across the counter's surface, Tom saw smears of blood and looked away before he saw anything worse. At his side, the Doctor withdrew a small radio of some kind and flipped a switch.

"Greyhound to Trap One, do you read me, Benton?"

"'Greyhound' should be me, shouldn't it?" said the voice on the other end.

"I'm much older than you," said the Doctor. "Can you send a couple able-bodied fellows down the street to bring Tom and myself safely to the café? I have a plan."

* * * * *

"It can't be as simple as that," said Benton.

"Who said it was simple?" said the Doctor. Smoothing out the schematics hastily sketched on the back of a map, the Doctor leaned over his handiwork on one of the café tables as Benton, Tom, Val, Tarrant, Pendergrath and several other UNIT soldiers huddled around. Outside, the sound of gunfire was constant.

"Drawing it was simple," said the Doctor. "Building it and making it work, that's the tricky part. To say nothing of what might happen when we actually use it. But at least it should be possible to tinker this together with the stores we have here as well as a few things that I have in my pockets. And this."

The Doctor volunteered his sonic screwdriver.

"You're not serious," said Benton.

"All good things," said the Doctor. "Oh and we'll need to tune it all to this," and he withdrew something small and crystalline.

"Sir, US HQ on Line 3," said a petite officer. "Chicago and Los Angeles are completely paralyzed, and some say Orlando may be next."

"Thank you, Captain Riggs," said Benton.

Pendergrath leant over the schematics and scratched his head, not for the first time.

"What is it, Pendergrath?"

"I don't understand how the feedback loop will balance the electrical field when the...the..."

"Magnetron," said the Doctor. "It's as good a name as any."

"Magnetron," said Pendergrath, fitting his mouth around the syllables. "I'll be honest, Doctor, I don't even understand what the feedback loop is!"

"You don't have to understand it," said the Doctor, patting the young man on the shoulder as he slipped past. "Just build it. It will work."

The Doctor pointed the sonic screwdriver at the crystalline object then handed his precious device to Pendergrath as he pocketed the crystal.

"There, all set. Do as you will. With me, General." Benton raised an eyebrow but followed the Doctor. He leaned over conspiratorially.

"Will it work, Doctor? Really?"

"Heavens, how should I know? It's based on some very old principles developed by my people. And if it *does* work, it will literally push the Great Intelligence back out of this universe while sealing the rift behind it. It might even dissipate the Intelligence once and for all...but I wouldn't hope for that much."

Benton sighed.

"Well Doctor, we really have no choice, do we? It's your plan or we go nuclear and risk the survival of the entire human race."

The Doctor looked pointedly at Benton.

"What, the end of the universe too?"

"Maybe even the end of time itself," said the Doctor.

"It must be Tuesday," said Benton, and both men smiled.

"I'll need to be outside and in the grip of this thing," said the Doctor. The General felt like an awe-struck child. No change there then.

"I'll have Pendergrath get a move on. How much time?"

"Thirty minutes I suspect, maybe less. The network is complete, the spheres are all around the planet, and the energy is building. The Great Intelligence is coming through. There's no stopping it. We can only try to repel it once it's here, and this may be the last thing I ever do."

Benton tried not to show any emotion at that declaration, but he stiffened.

"Look after Tom and Val for me in any event."

Benton saluted the Doctor, who merely stared back.

"Thank you, General." And he stepped outside into the storm.

* * * * *

"Val, don't!"

Tom tried to stop her, but Val ran out after the Doctor, who turned to block her as the spheres swarmed in the sky.

"Doctor, you can't just give yourself over to that...thing!"

Val was in tears, standing in the ruined street as the Doctor looked right in her eyes.

"This is my responsibility," he said. "This is my role in things, in Time. We've felt this coming. We've known it. My people would probably have called it a 'temporal rendition.' And surrender is the only option if I'm to do what I need to do."

"I don't want to see you die!"

The Doctor stopped again and smiled.

"Child...I'm not that thrilled with the idea myself."

Val giggled in spite of herself. Here they were in the middle of apocalypse, and this crazy man made her laugh. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted a figure making his way through the wind. UNIT had cleared the area except for a few stragglers in nearby shops determined to watch, but this one looked accustomed to being on the streets. The man staggered toward them, grey hair and beard blowing in his face as he gestured wildly at the sky.

"It's the end!" he yelled over the screaming wind. "Doomsday!"

"Yes it is," said the Doctor. "Good weather for it, isn't it?"

The man boggled and waved dismissively at the Doctor. He made his way back down the street and disappeared into the maelstrom.

"So, not impressed then?" said Val.

"My dear girl," said the Doctor, "when you've been at the center of as many apocalypses as I have, it all starts to blur together."

"They used to say the world was going to end in 2012," Val smiled. "I even wrote an editorial on how wrong that was."

"Don't believe everything you read...or write."

"Yeah well I also read a lot about alien intelligences plotting to invade Earth. I used to reject a lot of articles like that. Now I'm in one of them."

"That tends to happen around me," the Doctor continued as he grabbed Val's hand. "Now then, go back inside and look after Tom. You know how that young man attracts trouble."

Val hugged the Doctor tightly and turned to see Tom watching them from inside the café. She took a step toward him but looked back as the Doctor strode into the center of the street.

"Not worried about hubris, are you?" she called out.

"Of course not," said the Doctor. "After all, what's the worst that could happen?"

* * * * *

The Doctor walked as far down the street as he could, dodging debris and stepping over the furry remains of thousands of Meti dolls. The spheres filled the sky so thickly that the Earth looked as if it was sealed inside a steel ball. They were everywhere, but they had stopped causing destruction. The panic was probably another catalyst for stirring up more bio-energy, but now they seemed intent on forming a perfectly ordered web around the planet. The air was electric. A hum reverberated through the sky and ground.

And then the sky tore in half and it was here. The Great Intelligence. Yog-Sothoth. From a darkness blacker than anything the Doctor had ever seen, a great maw surrounded by countless tentacles covered in sucking orifices extruded into the universe. Huge dark clouds like eyes formed the basis of a face above the maw, but the entire thing was hellish and beyond any definition. As the Doctor stared up into the monstrosity that loomed above, his hearts were consumed with fear.

A small detachment of spheres descended, surrounded the Doctor's body and lifted him up into the heavens to face his enemy. And it spoke.

"At last I have you, Time Lord!" The voice shook the nearby buildings and echoed down the street. Even in the wind and rain and lightning that raged throughout the city, the voice rose high above all other noises and enveloped the Doctor. "At last you are in the power of the Great Intelligence!"

“Fair to middling, not ‘great,’” said the Doctor. “After all, it wasn’t too hard to figure out who you were with all those Meti waddling around. Between that and your puppet Corley, all the revelations are blown by now, aren’t they?”

The face twisted into a snarl and the Doctor writhed in pain, fingers grasping at air as his outstretched arms and dangling legs flailed helplessly. The spheres gripped him around his torso, but even they shook and swayed in the wind that whipped around the tentacled terror reaching out across the world.

“I *wanted* you to know me, Doctor! This was the end game, after so long preparing you for your final humiliation. My mind has been threading through your life all this time! I used my multiform being to drive those creatures out of the silence to attack the terraforming colony. I aided the Clocktower in its escape. I enlisted the aid of my sister, the child of Shub-Niggurath which you call the Nestene Consciousness ...ah, that poor human girl. But then again, you’ve led so many to their deaths, haven’t you, ‘Champion?’”

The Doctor glared back into the empty black clouds that served as the eyes of the Great Intelligence’s ‘face’ but said nothing. He was tired, in pain, defeated.

He had nothing left to say.

“And still there were other traps in a myriad of shapes! A cube of reality, a fragile android servant, a sphere brought into the inner sanctum of your own TARDIS, and now at last, here we are! When I have assumed total control of this world, my consciousness will spread to every corner of Creation, Doctor,” it said, its voice shattering windows with its laughter. “I will devastate worlds, crush all lesser races, make all living things part of my mind! Humans, Draconians, Daleks, Chelonians, Gisb, Sápmi, Slitheen, even the Time Lords! Yes, even your pathetic race of librarians and senators will fall to my will, and I will keep you alive to witness it. When they have ceased to be what they were, when all life is part of the Great Intelligence, you will be the last of the Time Lords! A lonely God left to mourn the loss of everything you’ve loved. And then...you will die!”

“What will...” The Doctor coughed, struggling to get the words out. “What will the other Old Ones say about this? You’re subverting the order of things by just a smidge aren’t you?”

“Do you really think the others will be powerful enough to stop me now? Shub-Niggurath is a slave to my will! Cthulhu, Hastur, Nyarlathotep – they’re all impotent relics of a dead universe! Only *I* have the will to survive and conquer, only *I* can reach beyond the barriers and take what is rightfully mine. Why, after this universe is mine, the Great Intelligence shall reach even further beyond! All time and space, all realities, all universes – all will be mine! Nothing in this world, or any other, can stop me now! Least of all you, Time Lord!”

“That’s true,” choked the Doctor. Blood trickled from his nose, but he gathered himself and stared into the Intelligence’s endless eyes. “At least, not directly.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re so smart. You figure it out.”

* * * * *

“It’s done,” said Pendergrath, mopping sweat from his brow. “I think.”

It looked like a toaster with an old TV antenna strapped to its side. Bits of the sonic screwdriver looked like they were stuck haphazardly all over it, but Pendergrath had followed the plans exactly. It looked like a silly lash-up from an old sci-fi movie, but it almost seemed...alive.

"Then switch it on, there's no time." Benton stood there as Pendergrath powered up the device. Val stepped up to block him but Tom held her arm. She twisted out of his grip.

"If we activate the Magnetron now," she said, "if it *works*, what happens to the Doctor when those spheres fall?"

"I know Miss," said Benton. "I'm worried about the Doctor too. But do you think the Doctor would have us wait when the entire world is at risk? He knew what he was doing."

"But..."

"I'm sorry," Benton said, looking at Pendergrath, who nodded at the correct switch.

"That one sir, that's the last one."

Benton placed his hand on it and looked at Tom and Val.

"I know that man. And I know what he expects of me. I can't let him down. The decision was already made."

Benton pressed the switch.

* * * * *

Within seconds, the hum from the Magnetron was filling the street. The rhythmic thrumming was so deafening that a minute later, almost everyone in the cafe was collapsing from the pressure, rendered unconscious by the waves of force emanating from the machine. Benton kept on his feet as long as he could, searching the skies for the Doctor from the front window, but he was too old to manage it for long. The binoculars dropped from his hands as he passed out.

"Good luck, Doctor," he whispered just before everything went black.

Above them, the enormous face of the Great Intelligence shifted, clouds rippling and losing their cohesion as the spheres too wobbled in the air, their stability no longer a certainty. The Doctor's perch was becoming more precarious, but that didn't concern him. All that mattered was stopping this creature before it could get any further into this reality.

"What...a Magnetron?!" The Great Intelligence howled. "How could you give the secret of such ancient Time Lord technology to mere humans? How could you entrust the power of such a weapon...to microbes!"

"Not a very intelligent thing to do, is it," croaked the Doctor. The spheres holding him up had begun to fall, and the Great Intelligence was no longer able to control him. The Doctor did spare a glance at the ground below.

Too far. No way to survive that. So be it. Sacrifice play after all.

I can live with that, the Doctor thought. *Well, lived might not be the right word...*

"You foolish little animal! The Magnetron may destroy the humans, but it cannot affect me! There's no way that its puny power alone can expel me from your reality or seal this rift! All you will do is hurt the people you care so much about!"

"It can most definitely expel you if a concentrated beam of energy from the Magnetron was directed into the rift you've created here."

"The machine is down there on the surface, spilling lethal energy all over your precious little Earth. How is it going to affect me here, now?"

"Oh didn't I mention?" The Doctor struggled to bring one hand up and rummaged in his pockets. A yo-yo, some twine and a lump of jelly babies all fell out and plummeted to the ground.

"Meaningless keepsakes, sorry. Ah, there it is!"

He held up a small oval device with a metal band. The crystal embedded in one end flashed like a tiny star.

"Focusing generator," said the Doctor. "Time-delayed relay from the Magnetron. Coming through any second now."

The Great Intelligence roared, but there was nothing left standing or intact to crumble or shatter.

"Gallifreyan worm! You will die!"

"Yes. But they won't. And you'll be sealed back into limbo. Perhaps even destroyed this time. But powerless no matter what."

The focusing generator buzzed and suddenly a powerful beam of brilliant energy surged from the point of the crystal and enveloped the Great Intelligence. It flailed and writhed and shrieked, but it was impossible to resist the force that slowly pushed it back through the rift. Inside all that light, the Doctor's face withered and aged.

"The game has been won," the Great Intelligence whispered, a rasp that reverberated through the rift as the rend in space-time began to seal. "But in winning, Time Lord, you have also lost."

"It's not whether you win or lose," said the Doctor. "It's how you play the game."

The rift closed forever. The wind dissipated, the spheres burst into white flame and disintegrated, and the sky returned to normal. As the last vestiges of the Great Intelligence vanished from the universe...

...the Doctor fell.

* * * * *

When they reached the Doctor's body, he was still conscious, but struggling to speak.

"The TARDIS..."

"It's here, Doctor," Benton said. "The men brought it down from the bypass."

"Get me...get me..." The Doctor fell back, panting.

Benton nodded.

"You men! Carry him into the TARDIS!"

"What, why?" Val yelled.

"Don't you worry, miss," Benton said and followed them to the police box. "He's had close calls before. From what he's told me in the past, it sometimes makes things go a bit smoother if he's in the TARDIS when it happens."

"When what...Ow!"

Val had reached for the Doctor's hand as the UNIT soldiers carried him inside, but dropped it and blew on her fingers. The Doctor lay on the console room floor as the soldiers withdrew. Tom and Val knelt next to him. Tom felt the Doctor's brow.

"He's burning up!"

The TARDIS doors slammed shut, but no one had even approached the controls. And then that familiar sound filled the room as the rotor rose and fell.

* * * * *

Benton's look of concern melted into a wistful smile.

"Off he goes," he said, staring at the space where the police box had stood moments ago. "I'm sure you'll take care of him, old girl. Maybe we'll see each other again one day."

"General, sir. The Magnetron..." Pendergrath was nearly out of breath.

"Well, what is it?"

"It's gone, sir! One of those thingamabobs in the circuitry that the Doctor told me to build in, couldn't figure out what it was for. It just...ate the rest of the machine when the Intelligence vanished. The whole thing just melted away! I'd never be able to duplicate its construction, sir, we've lost it."

Benton chuckled while Pendergrath boggled and shook his head, trudging back to the remains of the Magnetron.

"You're probably right, Doctor," Benton said to the sky. "We really can't be trusted."

He straightened and dusted off his jacket as he surveyed the street.

"We have a tendency to play with dangerous toys."

Now there was a lot more work to. So much to put right. The aftermath of another visit from the Doctor. He grinned.

"Oi! You lot, let's sort this mess out! Tarrant!"

"Yes sir?"

"You're in charge of mopping up here," said Benton. "And...well done."

Tarrant beamed and hurried off to coordinate the relief and repair efforts. Benton knew that desk was waiting for him back at HQ, but for now – for right now – it felt a million miles away. Blood pumping and mind as sharp as ever, General John Benton marched back into action.

* * * * *

In the TARDIS, Tom was searching the console for some sign of where they were headed, but Val yelped and ended his search. He came back to the prone Time Lord only to see something extraordinary.

Golden light was streaming from his body. It was strongest at his head, hands and feet, but slowly his entire form was engulfed by it like flames licking at firewood.

"It's all right," the Doctor whispered through the light. "There's really nothing to worry about. Just the parting of the ways."

"What's happening?" said Val.

"I'm regenerating," the Doctor said. "It's normal. Well, I say normal...oh, how odd."

"What?"

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I seem to be experiencing a psycho-temporal flux. Probably accentuated by exposure to all that energy in the space-time rift. My mind is sifting through all of my potential incarnations, past, present, future, roads not taken...it's fantastic!"

The glow grew outward as the Doctor's friends stepped back.

"Now don't bother me, hmm? It's all a perfectly natural progress...process. Once my mind reverses the polarity of the neural flow, it'll be 'zap' and then it's carrot juice for everybody!"

"What is he talking about?" said Tom. Val only shook her head and hugged herself tightly.

"Wait, wait, wait," said the Doctor, trying to sit up and reach toward them as the light burned brighter and hotter. They could barely see him, but inside the shifting light there were other bodies, other faces.

"It's all going to be fine," said the Doctor. "It's been prepared for...prepared for...time and tide...melt the abominable snowmen..."

"Can we help?" Tom asked.

"No," said the Doctor and fell back to the floor. "Oh my giddy aunt! What a strange one this is turning out to be. You know, if there's one thing I regret this time, it's not getting..."

The golden glow burst like fireworks into the air, blinding light filling the room as Tom and Val cowered from the heat. A second later, it was all gone. The room was cool, the light was normal, and the Doctor's body lay on the ground, his torn clothes now scorched and sending tendrils of smoke up into the air.

Val inched closer, then crouched by the Doctor. She reached for the lapel of his coat, to draw it back from his face, but he shot up without warning and sent her reeling back. She landed on her backside as the Doctor removed his coat and tossed it across the room.

But it wasn't the Doctor she knew.

"What are you young people doing inside my TARDIS?"

The strange face scowled at them.

"What...who are you?"

"My dear girl, I am the Doctor!"

"How did you..."

"If you people keep asking me tiresome questions, boy, we'll never get anything accomplished!" The Doctor reached for the console and propped himself up. "It's a Gallifreyan gift, of course. A way of cheating death. I died but I came back. Just as it should be."

"Came back...from where?"

The Doctor chuckled and eyed the console, flipping a switch. The TARDIS lurched and sent Tom and Val into the far wall as the Doctor fell back yet again. He laughed.

"Where best friends are made!"

The TARDIS shifted and Tom slammed into the other wall while Val directed herself to the console, falling near the Doctor. He was unconscious again. The TARDIS engines were grinding louder than ever before.

Wherever they were heading, they were getting there fast. The future hurtled toward them.

* * * * *

23 November 1989; London

Paul Corley had never seen anything so wonderful.

The toy store was three stories high, filled with every kind of plaything he could have imagined, and many that he never did. Action figures and construction sets and video games and plush dolls. It was just so much. It was amazing.

His parents had actually spent most of the day not arguing. The trip from Cardiff had been worth it if only to stop them from bickering for a few hours. He didn't want to think about where all that fighting was going to lead. His best friend Adam at school had just had his parents split up. He remembered them yelling at each other whenever he was visiting. They sounded the same.

"Can I?" Paul said, looking up at his dad. His father's eyes were tired but warm.

"Sure thing," he said, patting him on the shoulder. "But don't go too far. Your mother and I will be right over there."

He smiled and ran, not wanting to see if they might start another one while they were standing there. Apart from being in the car, they hadn't stood next to each other for more than a minute.

Paul passed other children and families eagerly making their way through every display, every aisle. He saw people stocking boxes and boxes of toys on the shelves, a man in a suit demonstrating a remote-controlled helicopter, animatronic dinosaurs roaring and scraping at yelping boys and girls that passed by, jumped back, and then rushed the prehistoric beast with grins on their faces.

What a cool job that would be, Paul thought. To work in a toy store! Or better yet, what about being one of the people that could make toys? That could actually design them and build them? Wasn't that the most important job in the world?

Ever since Adam moved away with his mother and her new boyfriend, Paul had been so lonely. And though he knew his parents both loved him, they couldn't even stay in the same room together. His toys had become his only friends. They never bickered or split up or ran away. They were always there for him. If he could make toys for other kids like him...

...it would be a dream come true.

Paul spun around but there was no one there. The voice was deep, resonant. It came from everywhere and nowhere.

It...was in his head?

Yes, but trust me, Paul, you're not going crazy. You're just a very special boy. And I'm here to tell you you're destined for great things. If you wait. If you work. The day will come and together we will greet a brave future. You will lead your people into a new dawn.

"This can't be real," Paul said. A passing adult looked down at the strange boy talking to himself and shook her head. Paul snuck behind a display of stuffed animals. He stood next to the teddy bears and picked one up like he was looking at it.

"You're not real."

Oh I am Paul, I'm real. There will be people who will tell you I'm not. But don't listen to them. I'll stay with you, guide you. We'll make sure no one gets in your way.

"And...you won't leave me?" He looked down at the fuzzy doll in his hand, the brown fur, the eyes that almost glowed with intelligence. For a moment it didn't look like a bear but something...else.

I'll never leave you, Paul. After all...

...we're best friends.

It's the end...and nothing has been prepared for.

A looming darkness stalks the Doctor,
heralding doom for his current incarnation and
perhaps the entire universe as well. A terrible, ancient force is ready to break
through into our reality at last.

On Earth, the Make-A-Meti stores are having a banner first year,
selling their furry friends to children around the world
while an old soldier readies himself for one last battle
and searches the stars for a battered blue box.

An era is coming to an end,
but what follows may be the beginning of a glorious new adventure...
or an eternal nightmare.
Hooray!

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