



THE
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PROJECT

WEB OF INSANITY

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Prologue

“Sisters...”

“Whispers...”

“Twisters...”

“Sisters, the time of change is soon to come.”

“Unravel the threads, old world undone.”

“A new order we all shall weave.”

“Then from our prison we shall leave.”

“But stop, what’s this we see?”

“A man cloaked in time, in mystery.”

“A Lord of Time, a vaunted prize.”

“A chance to tear him, gauge his eyes.”

“For what he did to our Great One.”

“We’ll see him dead, regenerations none.”

“Let us pull the strings, tight and strong.”

“Victory is ours, it won’t be long.”

Chapter 1

“Now, Miss Redfoot, where do you see yourself in a year’s time?”

Hannah flinched inwardly at the Doctor’s question. She had heard it countless times as an undergrad looking for work to pay her student loans; where do you see yourself going? What goals do you have for this year? Are they achievable? What steps are you taking to reach them? She shrugged at the Doctor, her mahogany hair bouncing.

“I don’t know,” she replied. “We’re in a time machine; we can be anywhere...*anywhen* we want. Why limit ourselves to a year?”

The Time Lord sighed at her literal interpretation. “No, no, I mean: what are your aspirations in life?”

The Doctor had set himself up in the high-backed chair in the library section adjacent to the TARDIS console area. Since he had sloped off somewhere mid-flight, Hannah had decided to browse through the books. She was just about to pick up an ancient, dusty tome when the Doctor materialised out of a secret passage behind a large bookcase to her right. This caused her to drop the book, toppling a nearby stack that had preciously stood at waist height. It was after a quick tidy-up, that the Time Lord decided to begin an impromptu interview, much to Hannah’s annoyance. For what reason, she had yet to discover.

“You know what I want to be,” she said, fidgeting with her hair, a nervous habit. “A geologist.”

“*Just* a geologist?” The Doctor arched a thin eyebrow. “Any particular field?”

“I was thinking... igneous?” Hannah replied sarcastically. “Look, Doctor, what’re you getting at? Why the sudden interrogation?”

The Doctor didn’t reply for a few moments; Hannah could practically see his mind working behind his impassive features. If only she knew what he was working towards, she’d be happy.

“I have had... *many* companions in my lifetimes,” he began delicately, not meeting her eyes. “And, in retrospect, I don’t believe that I’ve helped them as much as I could have. I have decided to change that with you.”

“I’m flattered, Doctor, and thank you,” Hannah said, genuinely touched by the gesture. “But I think I can –”

“Indulge me,” the Doctor cut across her, his green eyes intense.

Hannah bristled, but she focused on the fact that the alien was taking an interest in her, rather than treating her as a blow-through or unwanted baggage in his wonderful ship. She thought for a minute before speaking.

“Well, I think that if I knew where geology was going in the *future*, I’d have a better chance on making a significant impact when I leave –”

The Doctor looked up, slightly startled. Hannah quickly amended her sentence.

“– *if* I decide to leave. It would be nice to have a clue about where I can make the most difference.”

The Doctor settled back down and steepled his fingers. He sat in deep thought for several moments before suddenly jumping from his seat, his untamed hair bouncing excitedly. He walked briskly to the console and began typing on a keyboard that Hannah hadn't seen before. It seemed to have flipped up out of one of the six console panels along with a small computer screen.

"That was a... good idea," the Doctor admitted, his eyes not leaving the display in front of him.

"Please, please," Hannah replied dryly, holding up her hands. "Hold your applause."

The Doctor turned his head to shoot her a familiar look, the one that said; *you are here at my invite, don't push it*. She replied with a cheeky smile and held onto the safety rail that ran halfway around the console space as the Time Lord pulled a lever and spun a mass of dials without a word. She was used to the Doctor's impulsive urges by now; she had TARDIS take-off prep down to a science. The entire room tilted slightly as they made their way through time streams with as much subtlety as a sneezing elephant.

"So, where are we going?"

"The planet Pearl," the Doctor replied, easily staying upright despite the TARDIS' familiar swaying. Hannah still had to hold onto the nearest and heaviest objects when she moved. "A rather singular –"

Fa-voomph!

The Doctor was cut off as there was a sudden implosion of air and the TARDIS bucked suddenly, sparks spitting from the console. The ship abruptly tilted one hundred and eighty degrees and Hannah watched as the Time Lord was catapulted back into the library, disappearing under an avalanche of books.

"Doctor!"

The TARDIS shuddered, and Hannah swallowed hard before looking around for her backpack, the one that held her abseiling equipment. She could use it to make her way across the room, which was pitching violently from side to side like a ship in a storm, but she was quickly distracted by a living nightmare. At first, she thought that it was smoke from the console, but the mist was too dark, too solid, to be from a fire. The black cloud swirled, alive, and suddenly, a pair of shining eyes appeared in the middle of the vortex; blue, piercing and angry. The smoke creature stretched out multiple legs and roared:

"Child of Gallifrey! Our prey!"

Hannah screamed and ducked down, covering her head with her hands, as the cloud's legs thrust outwards. They stretched from one side of the console room to the other, burrowing holes in the walls. The noise was so loud, Hannah thought she had been permanently deafened. Her very bones vibrated as the TARDIS shook again, and Hannah genuinely believed that the ship would split open, throwing her and the Doctor into the Time Vortex like confetti.

"Tear it apart, stop your hearts!"

As an ominous wind sprung up from nowhere, Hannah shivered as she felt a cold sweat broke over her as the reality of the situation sunk in; she might die here. What about her family? She'd just left them back in her own time with no warning about where she was going or when she would be back. If she died now, they'd never know what had happened. No closure, always hoping she'd walk in the door.

How could I have just...?

"Miss Redfoot! Hannah!"

She looked over to see the Doctor above her, hanging onto a hat stand that steadfastly refused to budge from its place on the ceiling. Hannah let a hysterical laugh bubble up out of her mouth as she realised that the TARDIS was at such an angle now that everything was almost upside down. The cloud's eyes swivelled to glare at the Time Lord, but he kept eye contact with her.

"The blue button!" he yelled over the screaming wind, pointing at the console. "In the centre of the circle of green!"

The cloud roared and made to swipe at the Doctor as Hannah quickly found what he wanted; a small, dark blue button nestled in a circle of emerald green switches.

"Found it!" she crowed, immediately regretting her display.

Their smoky enemy stabbed a leg out at her and Hannah held up a hand in reaction, no matter how ineffective it would be. Just as the black appendage was about to reach her, it ricocheted off of

something. Hannah had a fleeting glimpse of a figure standing protectively in front of her, deflecting the attack. It had the shape of a man, but the form was indistinct, blurry.

“Who are – ?”

The ship dipped another twenty degrees, bringing Hannah back to the crisis at hand. Turning her head, she stretched a hand out before slamming her palm down hard on the desired button. When she looked back, the figure was gone.

The TARDIS walls began to glow an eerie blue, and the cloud creature screamed in obvious agony. Its long legs retracted and vanished into wisps as the smoke swirled around the room, looking for escape, but blue lightning penned it in the console area. Throwing one last malevolent glare at Hannah, the smoke shrunk quickly into itself before vanishing out of existence. The TARDIS groaned as the room resumed its correct position before shaking one final time and becoming deathly still. It was several moments before Hannah found her voice.

“W-what was *that*?!” she asked, trying to stand on weak, shaking legs.

“What else, Miss Redfoot?” The Doctor replied brusquely, jumping to the console’s side to adjust several dials. He briskly brushed dust off of his shoulders.

“We’ve landed.”

Chapter 2

The planet Pearl's fourth dwarf sun was about to begin its third rotation of the northern hemisphere when a large blue police telephone box appeared unexpectedly in its upper atmosphere. It careered wildly from side to side through the lavender clouds as a maelstrom of colours began to form around the craft before trailing ahead to the surface of the planet. The box skittered along the rainbow path for several minutes before depositing itself with considerable force on the ground.

One of the doors opened shortly after impact and the Doctor stepped out of the TARDIS onto a flat plain of blue grass. Shrugging his long navy overcoat onto his shoulders, he admired the surroundings as he waited for Hannah to join him. Despite Pearl's proximity to four suns, orange dots against the moss green sky, there was a definite coolness in the air. The Doctor watched as creatures that looked like manta rays flew overhead and spotted a large circular complex situated roughly three minute's walk away from them. It was surrounded by a barrier of clean, cream walls, indicating that it had been built recently, and the Doctor eyed the gigantic satellite antennae on top of a small cylindrical tower on the far side of the complex.

"Now, I wonder what that is for?"

"Talking to yourself again, Doctor?"

Hannah had appeared next to him wearing a dark green fleece with a bright pink t-shirt underneath. This was coupled with loose-fitting khaki pants and hiking boots, and a familiar rucksack hung off one shoulder. She had a pair of sunglasses in her hand, but she put these away despite the amount of suns in the sky; the light was just above Earth-normal, so it was tolerable.

"We are going to the first geology conference of the Eight Galaxies," the Doctor sighed, a hint of irritation in his voice. "And you are dressed for a mining expedition." He pulled the TARDIS door closed and locked it with the key chained around his neck.

"I like to change my clothes, unlike *some* people," Hannah replied, giving the Doctor a once-over. He had chosen to stay in his checked cream shirt and dark trousers. "I couldn't decide on smart casual student or semi-formal scholar, so I went for what's comfortable. Just tell me where we are, how did we survive all that and what *was* all that?"

The Doctor rolled his eyes and held up three fingers, lowering them when he had finished his points.

"We are currently on the planet Pearl, a rather interesting planet with an intense psychic field surrounding it. I believe the creature that breached the TARDIS defences was psychic in nature, but capable of physical attack. Since we were already so close to Pearl, the TARDIS used its seldom-used emergency solar pathway, a manipulation of both water and light in a planet's atmosphere, to guide us into land. As to what that all was... well, frankly, I don't know."

"And what about that guy I saw? The one who saved me?"

The Doctor's nostrils flared, and Hannah recognised this now as his 'not happy' face.

"Yes, that 'guy'," the Time Lord sniffed. "Yet another thing that I don't know. How irritating."

“Will the TARDIS be okay?” Hannah asked, taking in the small impact crater they found themselves in. The soil underneath was dark and grainy, the surrounding rocks were a pleasant lilac and the main vegetation seemed to be a mustard-coloured moss that grew in sporadic clumps.

“Of course she will,” the Doctor said brusquely, giving the blue wood an affectionate pat. “She will need time to recover, but she’s as tough as old boots, my TARDIS. She should be fine in a few hours. Or twelve.”

“So... you *really* don’t know what’s going on?” Hannah asked, her voice betraying her evident delight.

“Not yet,” the Doctor replied darkly. “A psychic battle that leaked into the TARDIS, perhaps?”

“That doesn’t explain how they knew where you were from,” Hannah interjected.

“Hmm,” the Doctor murmured, crossing his arms. “I’m hoping that there might be some explanation at this Conference of the – ”

“Eight Galaxies, yeah, yeah.”

Out of danger for the moment, Hannah’s attention was diverted by a crystal structure a few feet away from the TARDIS. A small cluster of tall crystal cylinders sprouted from the ground, pointing in different directions. Easily ten feet in length, they were all a mixture of milky white and clear crystal, and there were several groups of them within view.

“Obvious metamorphic evidence, but how did they get to the surface like this?” Hannah wondered aloud. “There’s no sign of major seismic activity.”

“The crystals of Pearl are said to have various psychotropic properties,” the Doctor said, running his eye over the crystal with the help of a magnifying glass that he had produced from his many pockets.

“In English?”

“As I have said, the entire planet exists within a natural psychic field, so the stones themselves are imbued with psychosomatic energy. A global cognitive hotspot.”

Hannah stood up, running her eye over the surrounding area before turning to the Doctor.

“So people mine this psychic rock to sell it?”

“No, no,” the Doctor wagged a condescending finger at her. “The energy within the crystals is latent, locked within. Pearl is a mystery in a manner of ways, and its minerals are no different.”

“Then why is there a massive drill platform right behind you?”

The Doctor’s eyes widened and he spun on his heel to follow Hannah’s pointing finger to a small valley half a mile away. An impressive industrial behemoth sat inside the basin with an absurdly long vertical shaft rising high in its centre.

“Mercury Mining Corporation,” the Doctor read the logo on the side of the massive platform. “Earth’s premiere interstellar mining company, if I remember correctly.”

“Earth’s run out of resources by now?”

The Doctor’s eyes twinkled, not giving much away. “You would be surprised how resourceful humanity is in the twenty-sixth century.”

“T-twenty-sixth?” Hannah stuttered, looking around, a new amazement in her voice. “We’re that far ahead?”

“I chose to give you a long-range forecast on your field,” the Doctor replied, and Hannah could have sworn she saw a small, superior smirk flit across his face. “We are several centuries in your future, many lightyears away from Earth. In addition, I have always wanted to come here, to investigate.”

“Investiga –?”

Hannah didn’t have time to finish her sentence before a short, slim man in a light blue business suit stepped out from behind a large crystal cylinder, brandishing a small handgun. He looked about Hannah’s age, with a young, round face, and his long brown hair was sleeked back and wrapped in a ponytail. Hannah immediately shot her hands skyward, high above her head. The Doctor also raised his hands, but only as far as his shoulders.

“What are you two doing here?” he asked, his eyes – and gun – flitting from side to side. He was visibly sweating, and even Hannah could see that he wasn’t holding the gun correctly.

“We are here for the conference,” the Doctor replied, giving the young man a hard look. “Obviously.”

“Then why didn’t you arrive with the others at the main entrance?” the man asked accusingly, but they could see a ray of hope in his eyes. Maybe he wouldn’t have to shoot them?

“Our ship was damaged by an unforeseen meteor storm,” Hannah replied, trying to calm the high pitch of her voice. “Had to emergency land.”

“In this... capsule? Most of our guests stayed in orbit and transmatted down.”

The Doctor bristled as the man threw a disparaging glance at the TARDIS. He took a step towards it, then remembered himself and produced a clipboard from his shoulder bag while still keeping his gun aloft. Hannah groaned.

“They still use pens and clipboards in the twenty-sixth century?” she quietly asked the Doctor. She dreaded people with clipboards, even handsome ones. It always meant unnecessary questions and the hushed yet persistent sound of scribbling.

“Some humans see it as honouring their origins when they go ‘retro’,” the Doctor replied, rolling his eyes.

“Names?” The man asked, finally turning away from the TARDIS.

“Doctor John Smith and Miss Hannah Redfoot,” the Time Lord said, lowering his hands as the young man examined his list. Hannah shot the Doctor a look – when in doubt, act like you know what you’re doing.

“Will this take long?” she asked, marching up to the guy with new bravado. She placed a hand on his arm and looked into his eyes, trying to act sincere. “Doctor Smith hates it when things don’t go smoothly.”

“Really, Miss Redfoot,” the Doctor snapped convincingly. “Stop bothering the man so he can give us our passes and be on his way.”

The young man, slightly red-faced, ran his eye over the sheet again. “Well, first we have to – oh, wait; here you are.”

“Where?” Hannah asked, surprised, craning her neck to see, and the Doctor maintained a casual air, but shivered as a cool breeze chilled him. His temples were suddenly itchy.

“I – I thought all the conference guests had arrived, I do apologise,” the man said, slipping both gun and clipboard back into his bag before thrusting his hand out to Hannah.

“Percy Philips, ma’am,” he babbled, nearly shaking Hannah’s shoulder from its socket. “With all that’s been going on, and Dame Jackson’s insistence of paper only, I’m near the end of my tether. I was taking a minute out here to centre myself and found you two.”

“And what *exactly* has been going on, Mister Philips?” The Doctor asked, taking on the air of a disapproving parent. “My ship was attacked by some kind of psychic entity and there is a massive drill primed to break the crust on a planet that has no concrete data about what lies beneath its crust. Centuries of scans and probes have yielded no conclusive results as far as this point in time. For all you know, we could be standing on a super volcano, ready to destroy us all in a tsunami of lava.”

Hannah noted the Doctor’s millisecond of hysteria at the end of his sentence and, not for the first time, wondered what he had seen in his long life. You couldn’t live for centuries without seeing both the best and worst the universe had to offer. Percy scratched his temple, then shook his head, as if to clear it.

“I thought you said your ship was hit by a meteor?” he asked, his face wary again.

“A *psychic* meteor, then,” the Doctor snapped, losing his patience. “Tell me what has been going on!”

“What Doctor Smith is *trying* to say,” Hannah intervened, placing a placating hand on the Doctor’s shoulder. “Is that we were assured everything would be sorted out by the time we got here. Isn’t that *right*, Doctor?”

The Doctor threw his hands in the air in frustration, but managed to cool himself down. Hannah smiled at Percy, hopeful that her act was convincing.

“You’re not with the protestors, are you?” Percy asked.

“We’re not, but what protestors are you talking about, Percy?” Hannah shook her head and hooked her arm in his and began to guide him towards the complex.

The Doctor tutted quietly as Percy’s face grew pink due to Hannah’s proximity, but the young man didn’t have to explain himself. No sooner were the trio a few meters away from the main complex entrance when a small group of people brandishing placards with various slogans came into view. They were humanoid, but they were all under five feet tall and had a beige, occasionally amber, colour to their skin. A small encampment had been set up a stone’s throw away from the main gates.

“Are those costumes?” Hannah asked. “All those feathers and bits of bird are a bit much for protestors, right?”

“Those are their *own* feathers and beaks, Miss Redfoot,” the Doctor hissed. “The Keer, the native life on Pearl, have avian origins.”

“Sorry, I’m sure,” Hannah replied, her face warming up. “Sue me for my ignorance.”

Percy had watched this exchange with some mild bemusement, but he smiled easily at Hannah and made to guide them to the complex gates. Drawing closer, Hannah saw that the crowd were indeed like evolved birds; they stood erect, had three-fingered hands at the end of their wings and their beaks had visible teeth as they opened them. They all wore shoes, so Hannah didn’t know if they still had talons. The Keer were adorned in necklaces and bracelets of semi-precious stones that click-clacked as they waved their various banners around.

“Please don’t kill our planet’,” the Doctor read off one placard. “Well, at least they have manners.”

“Nothing wrong with having manners,” a female Keer said as she made her way towards them. Her plumage was an opaque white, like an opal, which Hannah took as a sign of age. Her voice was slightly screechy but had a cultured, mature tone to it. She crossed her arms, placing a hand on each shoulder, in greeting. A large milky crystal hung around her neck, fastened with a metal chain.

“Merry Sladick, head of this – ahem – ‘merry’ band.”

“Doctor John Smith,” the Doctor replied as he and Hannah mimicked the gesture. “What are you exactly protesting *against*, Miss Sladick? I have not had the good fortune to come across a decent source of information as of yet.”

The Doctor didn’t look at Percy directly, but the young man sagged regardless. Hannah squeezed his arm and glared at the back of the Doctor’s head.

“Mrs,” Merry corrected him quickly. “And we are here, Doctor Smith, to appeal to the better nature – though I fear it does not exist – of Anthony Trunk, CEO of MMC, to stop drilling on our delicate planet.”

The surrounding Keer briefly joined in with a cry of: “Stop drilling our delicate planet!”

“We saw one of his big drills over thataway,” Hannah pointed. “Is he here? I thought CEOs kept any personal appearances to do with company business at arm’s length.”

“Anthony Trunk is co-funder of this Conference,” Percy said, fidgeting awkwardly, obviously wary of his future career prospects if found interacting with the protestors. “He’ll be giving us a speech sometime later today.”

“Percy, how *lovely* to see you,” Merry said casually, but her voice had a hint of malice. “Seen any apparitions today, Master of Ceremonies?”

“None so far, Mrs Sladick,” Percy replied, his face reddening again.

“Master of Ceremonies?” Hannah asked, looking between the two.

“Percy here has been hired to play head puppet for the corporate leeches who pay his hotel bill,” Merry replied. “I advised him against it as soon as he landed but –”

“Apparitions?” The Doctor pressed, his irritated curiosity barely contained. He still had not been given any straight answers, and Hannah was pretty sure a blood vessel would burst in his brain if he didn’t get some right away.

“Ever since MMC began drilling here,” Merry began, and Hannah could see her revving up for a good lecture. “Pearl has been experiencing unnatural phenomena; freak storms without a hint of cloud, earthquakes where there weren’t any fault lines recorded before, and as for the Shades...”

“None of which can be substantiated,” Percy cut across her hotly, fumbling in his bag. Hannah thought he was going to produce his gun again, but he pulled out a small green card and made his way towards the complex gates. “The incidents seem to be tied to certain areas, and are not planet-wide. They also do not have anything to do with MMC and what they are doing here. Now if you will excuse us...”

“I may talk to you later, Mrs Sladick,” Hannah heard the Doctor say to the protest leader. “But first I must escort my travelling companion into the conference.”

“Anytime, Doctor, anytime.”

“Is what Merry said true, Percy?” Hannah asked as they watched the protestor re-join her group.

“Unfortunately, yes,” Percy said as he placed the green card in a slot in the wall. “Since MMC started drilling, the planet’s gone a little crazy, but like I said, we can’t find any firm evidence. The apparitions are there one minute, gone the next.”

“But the storms, earthquakes?” the Doctor pressed impatiently.

“All too real,” Percy replied, keying in his code. “As well as the body count.”

“Hmm...” The Doctor murmured again, rubbing his chin.

“Percy Philips,” the young MC stated clearly to the card slot. “Please allow us entry and print out conference cards for Doctor John Smith and Miss Hannah Redfoot.”

Percy’s card was promptly returned to him and a compartment next to the keyboard opened to reveal a small printer and a box of lanyards.

“Call me Hannah, please,” she said softly to Percy as she looped her still-warm card around her neck with a band that had MMC shamelessly emblazoned around it. The Doctor placed his card into his jacket pocket as the gate beeped and opened.

The inner courtyard was a kaleidoscope of stone and crystal set up in various rockeries and mosaic spirals. Even though everything was natural and looked freshly made, the whole area had a clinical air about it, as if the crystals were polished every hour and the rocks minutely cleaned with a toothbrush.

“What is that antennae for?” The Doctor asked, pointing at the tall tower situated separately from the main complex.

“That’s our communications mast,” Percy replied, trying to keep his face from pinking up again under the Doctor’s scrutiny. “It’s how we contact off-world and orbiting ships.”

The Doctor nodded silently and waved for Percy to move on. Looking back, Hannah saw that the protestors made no attempt to follow them through the closing gates.

Is that a good sign or a bad one?

Chapter 3

“It looks like you were a really last minute addition,” Percy said as they made their way across the small inner courtyard. He looked at Hannah, his left eyebrow lifting imperceptively. “Are you two travelling... together?”

“Miss Redfoot is my student,” the Doctor interjected from behind, picking up on the young man’s tone. Hannah rolled her eyes at Percy and winked.

“Such a pleasure, as always, Doctor Smith,” she sighed dramatically.

Allowing their cards to be scanned once more, the trio finally gained entry to the main complex. It felt just as sterile inside, which Hannah found at odds at a conference where people made a living in dust and earth. The foyer was small and plain, with various paper signs showing where and when the facilities and lectures were held.

“Yes, well,” Percy coughed awkwardly, holding a hand out to a set of mauve double doors. “Shall I show you inside?”

“Yeah, thanks,” Hannah replied excitedly. “Can’t wait to see what’s going on in the field of astro-geology!”

As Percy opened the doors and led them inside, Hannah slowly moved back to speak to the Doctor.

“How did our names get on perfect Percy’s list?”

The Doctor wrinkled his nose in irritation. “I ... I –”

“Don’t know?” Hannah suggested quietly, trying to calm his growing frustration.

“No!” The Doctor almost exploded, but he kept his voice low. “I could have easily forged our names on that list, had I been given the opportunity. Any questions after that would have been taken care of with simple redirection.”

“Where were you when I needed a doctor’s note to avoid Mr. Levitt’s maths exams, oh great Time Lord?” Hannah asked condescendingly.

“Probably saving humanity from another one of its ill-conceived ideas, Miss Redfoot.”

Hannah was about to return the insult, but Percy opened the double doors, and what lay within the main hall took her breath away. The conference hall was so impossibly long, she almost couldn’t see the end of it. The walls were all glass, allowing Pearl’s generous sunlight to illuminate the entire hall. Booths and small stands made the place an indoor Calcutta, with people rushing to and fro, carrying everything from large crystal geodes to steaming hotdogs. Sitting in the middle was a large stage area with an obscene amount of seats in front of it.

“So sorry, must dash, I’m late!” Percy squeaked as he glanced at his watch. He quickly shook Hannah’s hand, then the Doctor’s – who felt a slight static shock as their hands connected. Percy then took off at top speed, almost knocking over several ferret-like aliens bent over a particularly mossy bright pink rock.

“What a disorganised little human he is,” the Doctor mused as he watched Percy slip through the crowd towards the stage. He rubbed his palm where the tingle of the shock still lingered, before thrusting both hands back into his pockets.

“I think he’s the kind of guy who thinks he has something to prove,” Hannah said quietly.

“Speaking from personal experience, Miss Redfoot?”

Hannah chose to ignore his question as Percy reached the stage and pressed a button on his lapel, causing his voice to carry across the full length of the hall.

“Females, gentlebeings and genderless guests!” Percy announced, his voice suddenly confident and cheery. “May I have your attention, please?”

“As your generation would say, Miss Redfoot,” the Doctor said, nodding approvingly. “Very PC.”

“I am proud to present one of the two most significant benefactors of this conference: Dame Patricia Jackson!”

Percy led the applause and Hannah craned her neck over the crowd to see. Dame Jackson was a portly woman in her mid-seventies, but her face had a healthy vitality and a kindly air, but this was coupled with a steely eye that said, *abandon hope of winning any argument with me*. Hannah immediately liked her. She wore a Victorian period purple dress, bustle and all, and strode to the centre of the stage like said Queen herself. She swung a violet parasol as she walked which caused her silver hair, ordered into an updo hairstyle, to bob from side to side. She shooed Percy to the side before addressing the crowd.

“Distinguished, honored guests,” she began grandly, waving a theatrical hand in the air. “I welcome you all to this, the first geological conference of the Eight United Galaxies!”

Another polite round of applause followed this, as Dame Jackson smiled demurely.

“It is I who should be applauding you for coming to this conference despite recent... events,” she said vaguely, then waved a sharp hand as if to banish the whole affair. “But no more of that. It was my late husband, dear Duke Franklin Jackson, who had the deepest wish that geology continue beyond our home planet, Earth, and I like to think that I’ve done him proud by co-funding this marvellous conference. Now, I wish you all to share your knowledge and soon, Anthony Trunk may grace us with his presence. I hope.”

The last words were said with a hint of sarcasm, but Hannah had already switched her attention to the various booths. Grabbing the Doctor’s arm, she readily dragged him to the nearest stand, which housed a machine that looked like a coffee dispenser and a morbidly obese, six foot frog.

“Hello!” Hannah said cheerily, already regretting her choice due to the smell coming off of the amphibian dealer. “What have ya got there?”

“Turns carbon into diamonds, sweet’art,” came the reply. The bulbous eyes were fixed on her, and Hannah felt like a fly about to be eaten, but she cocked her head to the side, curious.

“Prove it,” she replied, crossing her arms. She heard the Doctor chuckle softly next to her.

“Buying is believing,” the vender retorted, showing small, sharp teeth as he smiled.

“Come along, Miss Redfoot,” the Doctor said. “I spy an opening in this Babylon marketplace.”

A door had been opened in the glass framework a few meters away from them, and Hannah saw that it led out to a small excavation site around a clump of crystal cylinders. However, the cloudy consistency was being overshadowed by a vein of dark blue that originated from the ground and ran halfway up each cylinder at various points. A group of three human women and one child-sized orange lizard were examining the cylinders with so much scientific equipment that Hannah couldn’t see how they’d find out anything other than how much new batteries cost. She turned her attention to the nearest crystal that wasn’t under any immediate inspection.

“Rocks only gain crystalline properties through great heat or pressure,” Hannah said to the Doctor. “Looking at this, the blue seems to be growing organically, like a plant. How can crystal do that?”

“It can’t,” the Doctor replied quietly. “Not natural crystal, at any rate.”

Chapter 4

Anthony Trunk knew something was wrong. Was it his tie? No, it matched his burgundy suit and was kept in place with a clip his mother had given him on his fortieth birthday. His speech? That was all prepared and available on data file and in a neat blue binder on his desk. Maybe it was the fact that he was sitting cross-legged on a ritual praying mat in his very expensive CEO suite talking telepathically with a group of enormous ephemeral arachnids. Yes, that had to be it.

“You delay, Trunk,” whispered the spiders, who he had come to know as the Eight Legs. “Would you see our plan sunk?”

Anthony knew he was in trouble every time he spoke to the Eight Legs, because it was the only time that he could remember what they had made him do in the past year and a half. It was only in recent weeks that they had manifested as a dark, insubstantial cloud. Before this, it was just as insistent voices in his head.

“I can’t abandon the Conference,” he replied, his mind foggy. “Everything is going according to—”

“Plans are changing, rearranging,” sang his masters. “We need the drill to take our fill, before we have the power to kill.”

Anthony had always been curious about crystals, ever since he had been given a mysterious cracked blue gem when he was ten years old. He had built a profitable life surrounding this passion, and he had risen to CEO of MMC before he reached the age of thirty-five and his hair started to recede. As soon as he had landed on Pearl, the blue gem he kept on a necklace had burned like a fire. That was when he first heard the voices of the Eight Legs.

“B-but you *have* killed,” Anthony said, and he felt a foreign emotion well up in him; guilt. He’d never felt that before. “The tornados, that earthquake three days ago...”

“Not enough, all a bluff,” came the reply. “Finding power is so fickle, draining the dam trickle by trickle. We need our fill; go to the drill.”

The Eight Legs had promised him riches beyond his wildest dreams, if only he’d help them. They told him they had been subtly leading him to this point all his life, using the cracked gem. They showed him visions of his future, surrounded by adoring public, in awe of his discovery on Pearl, the planet of crystal mystery. He had agreed to help, and... his memories became foggy after that. The Eight Legs had asked him to do terrible things. Things he couldn’t – *didn’t* – want to remember. But this was too much; what the spiders were asking now was too much. How could he possibly condone what they were asking?

How can I split a planet in half?

“N-no.”

There was deathly silence following Anthony’s denial. He felt a cold sweat break out on his forehead as he felt the air in the room begin to vibrate with energy. Before his eyes, four tall, dark forms swirled into existence around him. They were humanoid but featureless, like three dimensional shadows.

“Who... *what* are these things?”

Without another word, the four figures raised their hands and he was instantly wrapped in shadowy chains, binding his arms. His brain burned like his blood had turned to acid. The whole world seemed to vibrate as the Eight Legs screamed their command:

“*The drill!*”

“Alright!” he yelled, and the pain eased slightly. “But Philips will be looking for me; I’m giving a speech in a few minutes.”

“Then we must distract,” hushed the voices. “To conceal our acts.”

“What?” Anthony knew from experience that this wasn’t a good thing.

“By count of three, you will see,” tittered the Eight Legs. “One...”

“But I –”

“Two.”

“Look, why can’t –”

“Three!”

Anthony’s next words were drowned out by a deep rumble as the floor began to shake underneath him.

“S-stop this!” he yelled as he was forced up off the mat. “Stop this right now!”

“Suddenly so brave, little slave?” snickered the shadows, relishing the screams coming from outside the suite. “Break the crust – that we must!”

“But only on *my* terms!” Trunk yelled, but another piercing pain shot through his head, like a spike of ice. This had happened so many times before...

“Sold your soul, we have you whole...”

The corridor was deserted as Anthony was forcibly escorted out of his suite. The building shook around him as the tremors continued, then suddenly stopped. His pass card floated in front of him and unlocked the main exit door and out into the open. The protestors saw him coming and began chanting even louder.

“Planet before profit!”

“Environmental health first!”

“Go away, Trunk!”

“Wait!”

Anthony saw that Merry Sladick had hushed the crowd with a raised hand, suddenly noticing what was accompanying Trunk.

“Mister Trunk?” she asked tentatively. “What’s going on here?”

The CEO couldn’t reply as a smoky tentacle wrapped around his mouth, gagging him. Two of his shadowy entourage struck out with elongated arms, swatting the protestors like flies. They sprawled to the ground around him, unconscious.

“The drill...”

“What the –” Hannah gasped as the Doctor suddenly stopped explaining the fundamentals of what he called richtersempra syndrome, a common malady among geologists in the current century. A familiar tingle ran through her feet as the earth began to tremble and vibrate and a cold fear swept through her.

“Earthquake!” she yelled, and quickly made for a clear, open space far away from the main building. Looking back, she saw that the Doctor hadn’t moved, unlike the four scientists they had barged in on, who were cowering under their fold-out tables, expensive equipment forgotten. The Time Lord was looking around, oblivious to the frightened people around him, holding a finger to his temple and frowning.

“Doctor!” Hannah yelled, trying to keep her balance. “We need to find cover and –”

Suddenly, no sooner had the tremor started, then it was over. Hannah bent over and placed her hands on her knees to gather herself. It had been a while since she had experienced an earthquake, and they didn’t get any easier.

“I want a full spectrum analysis of that earthquake!” The Doctor ordered, already checking various readouts. The four scientists followed his orders without questions, obviously still shaken. Hannah noticed a feverish, almost panicked, expression in the Time Lord’s eyes as he kept touching his head.

“Doctor? Is everything okay?”

The Doctor ignored her.

“Pulling up the data now,” wheezed the lizard, whose name Hannah learned from the women was Janx. His eyes narrowed as he stared at the screen. “Impossible...”

“Oh, I do so *hate* that word,” the Doctor said as he shoved Janx and his chair aside to examine the screen for himself. “Why does every – oh. My, my, you’re right; that is quite impossible.”

“What’s impossible?” Hannah asked, coming up next to the Time Lord to examine the screen. It was unintelligible to her, but the Doctor was lapping it up, she could see.

“The equipment didn’t register any seismic activity at all,” he said, turning various dials and typing code on the screen.

“No activity at all?” Hannah muttered. “How can that –”

“How sensitive are these sensors?” The Doctor asked Janx, turning to him. “What are you doing over there? I...”

It was then that Hannah realised that the Doctor was talking to himself, and not her. She sighed and turned to the three women: Hetty, Glam and Brie, identical blond triplets.

Wonderful names for high-profile geologists, she thought.

“Can I see the findings on a separate screen?” she asked. “I’d really like to be a fresh set of eyes on this.”

“Yeah, of course,” chirped Hetty, pulling over three computer tablets.

“I’ll get a coffee from our new fave stand,” simpered Glam as she cantered away.

“Low fat this time, sis!” called Brie, checking her hair in her phone camera as her computer rebooted.

Glam was soon back with the low fat double whipped creamy frappachinos and the conversation descended into what Hannah could only describe as girlish hashtags and technical gobbledegook. She caught familiar words like ‘geological’ and ‘seismic’, but then it was followed by terms she couldn’t even begin to decipher. She realised with a grimace that there were obviously investigative geological processes created after her time that were now so commonly used that she had no clue what they were. She must seem like a cavewoman to these experts. The three women obviously noticed this and slowly turned to one of their examination trays, phasing her out. Hannah shoved her hands into her pockets and tried re-joining the Doctor, who was still dictating to Janx.

“Doctor, I’m going to...”

Hannah trailed off; the Doctor was already elbow deep in a large computer bank, muttering to himself about diagnostics and environmental circumferences. Janx stood nearby – out of fear or admiration, she couldn’t tell.

He doesn’t need me, she thought sadly as she left the lecture hall. Then an idea popped into her head.

But maybe someone else does.

Chapter 5

Anthony Trunk had given up resisting the Eight Legs' control. He allowed the shadow guards to propel him across the rocky plain towards the small valley in which he had the platform constructed. He had gone over hundreds of potential sites for his masters, and it was here that the crust was thinnest. He laughed; Pearl's crust and mantle were proving to be the densest he had ever come across, and progress was slow.

Inside the drilling platform, everything and everyone operated efficiently. It had only been three days since the Eight Legs had ordered Anthony to gift his platform workers 'special' Pearl jewelry, but productivity was already up 234%. Staff having their mental strings pulled by psychic spiders focused on a single goal produces such results.

Anthony now stood in the main control deck overlooking the drilling area, checking the various reports and updates. The main drill bit sat within a special fiberglass tube, spinning away. The shadow guards had loosened their grip, but still stood to attention in a circle around him. His hands played across a keyboard, unbidden, as the Eight Legs whispered:

"Must be fast, can't be last. Increase the speed, serve our need!"

He vaguely thought of various reasons why he should not to do as he was told, but a brief flash of ice behind his eyes soon scared away any doubts.

"Increasing speed," he replied monotonously.

The main doors and complex gates were wide open as Hannah exited the main building, but the peculiarity was soon forgotten when she saw the Keer lying in heaps on the ground just outside. Every single placard had been torn into confetti, but the avian aliens didn't have any signs of violence on their bodies. Moving closer, Hannah kept her head in the game and eyes wide open in case of any surprises. The camp looked like a tornado had blown through it, with tents ripped from poles and various personal items strewn across the ground. She reached Merry as she raised herself into a sitting position.

"What happened?" Hannah asked as she helped the Keer to her feet.

"A... creature," the protest leader started, but then she saw her fellow protestors lying around her. "We have to –"

Merry's knees buckled and she collapsed to the ground again, dragging Hannah down with her. The other Keer were beginning to wake up, their faces fearful. They chattered excitedly, and Hannah felt like she had fallen into a chicken coop after a fox attack.

"Big, blue eyes in the centre of a shadow..."

"Legs twenty feet long..."

"Screeching cries..."

"Sounds like the thing that attacked me and the Doctor when we were on our way here," Hannah thought aloud.

“Did your Doctor stop it?”

Hannah flinched inwardly at Merry’s assumption; who’s to say that *she* wasn’t the smarter one of the TARDIS crew? Then she thought of how the Doctor acted and looked. He could blow into any room in the universe and instantly be recognised as the smartest person.

Yeah, I don’t stand a chance...

“Our ship has a defence... thing,” Hannah answered at last, ashamed of her stupidity. She hadn’t even asked what the TARDIS’ blue button had activated or if it was portable. She was trying to come up with a sensible way of putting this when a young Keer with rich amber plumage spoke up, louder than the rest.

“Just like the old legends!” she cried stridently. “Pearl lore has spoken of these things before!”

“That’s Chesha,” Merry said as she opened her rucksack. She began handing out bottles of water to those nearby. “She’s... enthusiastic, but a little misguided.”

“What’s she preaching about up there on her soapbox?”

Merry didn’t seem to understand Hannah’s reference, but she explained:

“Pearl has always been a place of legends and wonders. Down through the centuries, we’ve passed on stories of creatures who have come to our planet looking to steal her power, but we, the Keer, have always been able to fend them off by imploring to Mother Pearl for aid.”

Merry laughed at Hannah’s bemused expression.

“Fanciful, I know, but we are an oral society, and words mean a lot more than they do on other planets.”

“I hear that,” Hannah replied. “There’s a bunch of people back where I come from who are just empty words and hot air.”

She gladly took the offered water and tuned into the last few words of Chesha’s speech.

“Let us talk to our Mother!” The young Keer was saying. “Let us commune with our provider and let her know that she is not alone!”

With that, Chesha and a small band of young Keer broke away from the group and began to make their way out into the rocky wilderness.

“Where are they going?” Hannah asked Merry, who sighed.

“Our sacred caves are in that direction,” she said. “We use them only for ceremonial purposes these days, but Chesha has recently been spending a lot of time there. She’s been investigating the rocks, trying to find lost, forgotten lore.”

“You don’t mind if I follow them to these caves?” Hannah said, taking a hesitant step forward. “Outsiders welcome, no public executions for trespassers?”

Merry smiled and Hannah was pleased to see colour return to her face. “Everyone is free to enter the caves.” She paused. “Just don’t take anything?”

Hannah rolled her eyes and smiled sarcastically.

“Damn, you’ve seen through my clever plot.”

The Keer laughed at the joke, but her eyes saddened before she put a hand on Hannah’s shoulder.

“Look out for Chesha, won’t you?”

“Can’t stop a girl like me from meddling,” Hannah replied as she began to follow the group of youngsters.

“Don’t mind me tagging along?” she asked as she fell into step next to Chesha, who shrugged.

“Please yourself.”

The group made their way across the plain to an outcrop of large purple rocks. There was no visible crystal nearby, and Hannah wondered what exactly she was getting herself into. They soon reached the small ridge and Hannah looked to the Keer for direction.

“Down here,” Chesha said, pointing to a small hole situated between two particularly massive rocks. It looked old and well-worn and led down into complete darkness. The Keer began making their way underground in single file, leaving Chesha and Hannah alone topside.

“Are you sure you should be doing this?” Hannah asked. “Merry was concerned about what you lot might be doing out here.”

“Merry is a tired old feather head with a beak too long for her own good,” Chesha huffed, crossing her arms over her chest. “We’re doing something positive for – *with* – the planet right now!”

“Okay, okay,” Hannah said, holding up her hands in surrender. “Lead the way.”

She followed Chesha underground, squeezing herself down a narrow tunnel carved through navy rock.

“Got to get a gym membership when this is all done,” Hannah muttered as she shimmied through a particularly narrow section.

She soon found herself in a circular cave, possibly only nine feet in diameter. The ceiling was low, barely six feet high, but her eyes were focused on the giant crystal column that was the centrepiece of the entire space. The milky mineral burst up from the floor and straight up through the ceiling.

The floor was littered with various tools: hammers, brushes and trowels. Ancient paintings dotted the walls, as well as alien script. Maybe the Keer had only recently begun examining the ritual site, prying back the layers of rock and history? The squiggles swam in front of Hannah’s eyes and she shut them to calm herself. She felt a knot form in her stomach and the hairs on the back of her neck rose, but she didn’t know why. What was bothering her so much ever since she had got here?

“What other choice is there?” Chesha was saying as the half a dozen Keer began making themselves comfortable around the crystal. “Our planet is under threat; we need to contact Pearl herself!”

“I see no sign of infection,” one of the male Keer said as he finished his third lap around the column.

They had gathered around in a circle, and the realisation hit Hannah of why she felt so uneasy with the Keer; they reminded her of her family. The Mother Earth – or in this case, Mother Pearl – belief, the simple jewellery made from the land, the feathers. It all reminded her of life on the reservation when she was younger, before she had gotten away from it all.

Not that her childhood had been bad; she’d loved having family living so close and the blood ties she had with all her friends, but she had wanted more than that. She needed adventure, she wanted freedom. She had craved to learn about more than the Great Spirit and how it had shaped all around her. She had wanted to learn about how the Earth had *really* formed and became the home she knew, and she couldn’t do that suffocated by her family.

So she had left, and not on the best of terms. Her brothers and sisters had cried bitterly, desperately trying to get her to stay. Her father hadn’t said much, but his eyes had been dark and sad the last time she had seen him, just before leaving for university. She’d made time to visit her mom, and had gotten no solid sign that she wanted her daughter to stay. So, Hannah had gone on her way.

“Joining us, human?” Chesha asked as she joined the circle, holding hands with her fellow Keer. Hannah’s throat seemed to shrink and she took several steps back until she was near to the wall.

“I-I’ll just watch,” she managed to rasp out. “If that’s okay?”

Chesha nodded and turned back around to her friends, who began to chatter and ululate like magpies, but Hannah was distracted by a niggling memory, one that came back to life unbidden in front of her.

Chapter 6

Sundance, Wyoming: 2 Years Ago

Hannah felt a cold breeze blow on the back of her legs even as the campfire cooked her knees. She'd accepted Jonah Black's offer of coming to the big bonfire to celebrate... well, to celebrate *life*, as Jonah saw it. There were twenty of them in total on top of the highest peak overlooking the reservation, the fire carrying ashes into the air like black confetti.

Hannah sighed as she watched the various instruments and booze being unloaded from the few cars and trucks they'd used to get up to the peak. Jonah had said something about a ritual, but he'd said nothing about seven kegs of the finest beer. She clasped the water bottle she had brought with her to her chest as she watched Jonah saunter towards her.

Jonah Black was handsome, it had to be said. He was over six feet tall, with broad shoulders and strong legs from years of working on the land. He was only a handful of years older than Hannah, but he seemed so sophisticated and worldly, despite neither of them having left the reservation. He knew how to work hard, but he also played hard, or so her gossiping cousins would have her believe.

"Enjoying my festivities, Little Beaver?" he asked, smiling that cocky smile of his.

Hannah sniffed at the nickname; she'd had large buck teeth when she was younger and the childhood teasing was never truly forgotten. She smelled alcohol on the air and knew it was coming off Jonah's breath.

"I'm too mature for baby names, Black," she said, trying to stop herself eying his torso. Jonah always wore tight-fitting shirts and jeans, much to his father's chagrin.

"You'll bust them pants bending down one day," the old man had said. "And then where will you be?"

"Hopefully in front of some lucky lady!" Jonah had replied.

Hannah tried to distract herself by looking up at the star-filled sky, wondering how many dead ancestors were looking down on them all on the peak now, shaking their heads in ghostly disapproval.

"Penny for those expensive thoughts, Redfoot?"

"You couldn't afford 'em if you worked every day of your life," Hannah replied as she turned away from him, holding her hands out to the fire. Jonah produced a cigarette carton from his pocket and offered it to her, a strange smell wafting out of the packet.

"What's that?" she eyed him, hopefully imitating her father's death glare.

"Pot," Jonah smirked. "To help us speed-dial the Great Spirit."

"I don't think our fore-fathers had a chat with the higher-ups baked out of their minds, Jonah," Hannah said, pushing the offered cigarette away.

"Oh come on," Jonah snapped impatiently, his breath heavy with drink. "Everyone knows all those old men were up to their eyeballs in it when they talked to the 'spirits'."

"I said *no*, Jonah. Don't make me say it again."

Jonah laughed patronisingly and offered the pot again.

“Maybe if you had a little something and calmed the hell down, you could get some of the higher-ups to help your mom,” he said, his voice slurring.

Hannah felt a cold rage flare in her heart and she slapped Jonah hard across the face before he could say another word. The hard smack was heard all around, and the surrounding teenagers spun around to stare. Jonah fell flat on his back, holding a hand over his reddening cheek.

“Don’t you ever... *ever* talk about my mom like that again,” Hannah spat, warm tears familiar on her face. “And you can keep your damn woowoo sticks and healing energy BS away from me too!”

Her friend Shaya had seen the whole thing and immediately offered Hannah a ride back home. They both heard what had happened after they had left the peak the following morning: Jonah had gotten so wasted that he decided to pour vodka on the fire to make a brighter signal for the spirits. Instead, he caused the flames to blaze out of control and his clothes had ignited. By the time his fellow revellers noticed and had been able to put him out, Jonah was left with third degree burns on most of his upper body.

“Stupid damn fool,” Hannah’s mom, Diana, had said as she stood outside Jonah’s room in her hospital gown. She looked into the burn ward with her daughter as the Black family surrounded Jonah’s bed. Her hand clenched the pole on her portable drip as she turned to Hannah.

“You did good by leaving when you did.”

A nurse materialised next to them with a wheelchair and Hannah thanked their excellent health system; her mother had lost what little colour she had just standing there. Diana Redfoot was wheeled away and Hannah took one last glance at Jonah’s family before following her mother back to her own ward.

Pearl: Present Day

Hannah wiped her face with her sleeve; she wasn’t going to think about her past. She was living in the future – literally! But her mother’s face swam in front of her eyes, momentarily distracting her from what was going on. It was only when she felt a familiar wind blow around her that she realised something was wrong.

The air had chilled considerably, just like it had in the TARDIS. The Keer were still chattering and warbling, and they’d failed to notice that a line of blue had grown in the crystal column in the few minutes they’d been in the cave. It slashed across the mineral like a lightning bolt, and Hannah could have sworn that she could see the blue spreading even as she watched.

“Chesha!” she yelled, making to grab the Keer’s shoulders, but an invisible force pushed her back.

“Not now!” Chesha replied, her eyes wide in wonder, oblivious to what was happening. “Can’t you see her? Pearl!”

“All of you, look!” Hannah pointed at the column. “Your crystal’s infected, you have to break the link!”

The breeze turned into a gale, sending the ancient dust swirling around, rendering Hannah nearly blind. She could still see the column because it had begun to glow as the mineral succumbed. The blue vein seemed to pulse mockingly and harsh laughter filled the small cave.

“Too late, too late! Now you’re trapped, you took the bait!”

Just like before, a black cloud formed from nowhere, bursting into existence. Hannah retreated to the far side of the cave, but the Keer stayed still. Blue electricity was spouting from the crystal column, bathing the youngsters in light. Their hands were still joined, and lightning danced around them all like a Keer circuit breaker.

“What the hell are you?” Hannah surprised herself with her courage.

“We are the Eight Legs, little thing,” cackled the cloud. “We are all, you are nothing.”

The Keer teenagers stood up, and Hannah vaguely hoped that they would break the circle, but they stayed connected. They spun around, hands still linked, crossing their arms over their chests. Hannah grimaced as they reminded her of old Sioux drawings. The black cloud continued to darken and become more solid as the Keer began to chant and dance.

“Psychic blood flow all around, food for us beneath the ground...”

The Keer’s puppet masters seemed to have forgotten her in their winner’s dance, so Hannah took off her fleece to use as a face mask, but not before a cloud of dust entered her nose.

“Dig and dig we told Trunk so, to get to the treasure far below...”

Hannah knew she had to escape and tried to hold her breath to stop a sneeze, but it was no use.

“Ah...”

“Crystals change to purpose anew, from Pearl white to Metebelis blue...”

I have to warn Merry! Hannah tried to keep the thought in her head as the cave sang with energy. Her nose tickled again.

“Spin a web –”

“*Wa-shooo!*”

Hannah’s sneeze cut through the chanting, stopping it completely. The dust hung suspended in mid-air as the Keer turned to look at her, eyes blazing blue.

“Let them go,” she said, squaring her shoulders. She could really do with a weapon right now. “I’m warning you; let them go right now, or else.”

“Poor little Redfoot, all alone,” chanted the Eight Legs, whatever they were. “Lost little girl, crush her bones!”

Hannah felt a shiver across her body as she ducked below the cloud throwing out its reaching legs. The rock wall shatter behind her as the cloud made contact. Rolling forward, Hannah was suddenly met by a familiar figure; the man from the TARDIS. He seemed just as insubstantial, but somehow she knew it was the same man. His face was like a faded photograph, whitened into anonymity. He raised a hand and pointed at something on the ground nearby.

Hannah dodged another smoky attack, grabbing the indicated object; a large, mean-looking mallet. Desperate in the enclosed space, she swung it around her head twice before letting it fly over the Keer. The metallic head hit the crystal column dead-centre and shattered it in half. The smoke creature shuddered and the Keer staggered back.

“First thing you learn when you become a geologist!” Hannah yelled triumphantly. “How to smash a rock!”

The black cloud screamed, but didn’t dissipate this time. Hannah ducked as the possessed Keer broke the circle to dive for her, and she managed to make it to the cave exit before she was grabbed. With one last look, Hannah saw that her mystery man had vanished once again. Her attackers moved awkwardly, like the alien minds were still getting used to the Keer bodies.

The four sided sunlight felt good on her skin as finally reached topside and ran back to the complex as fast as she could. Merry and her remaining band of protestor were still there repairing the camp when she arrived, red-faced and breathless.

“Hannah, what’s wrong?” the elder Keer asked, offering her some water in a cup. “You –”

“No time,” Hannah said in bursts as she downed the water, drowning her top in the process. “Chesha did thing. *Evil* cloud. Took them over. Broke your big ritual crystal. Sorry.”

“Slow down and tell me exactly what happened,” Merry said calmly. “I can’t underst – oh, *there* you are! Can you tell me what has Hannah all...”

Merry trailed off as Hannah turned to see who she was talking to; Chesha and her band of Keer were coming towards them. They were flapping their arms as if trying to take off, but evolution had sadly robbed them of this ability. Hannah felt a stab of pity for them. She put out an arm to stop Merry going near them, but the female Keer could already see something was wrong. Even as they watched them approach, blue energy spiked off the six youngsters, forming a dark shape between them.

“What’s wrong with them?” Merry asked, her feathers rising from her body as she whirled to face Hannah. “What happened in that cave?”

“Something that’s come to your planet to mine something,” Hannah replied. “Don’t ask me what; they keep speaking in rhyme.”

“What is ‘rhyme’?” Merry asked, and Hannah turned to look at her, eyebrows raised.

“You don’t know...? Rhyme, like,” Hannah faltered. “Um, things that sound alike? You know, stitch in time saves nine?”

Merry looked at her as if she were the one possessed. Hannah sighed.

“Never mind, we –”

Hannah didn’t have time to finish her sentence before she noticed the young Keer raising their arms. Blue electricity shot out of their hands, striking the ground around Hannah and the remaining protestors. Ducking for cover behind a large boulder with Merry, Hannah tried to focus through the blinding flashes. Flapping about in a panic, the protestors Keer were quickly struck down by the blue lightning. Hannah’s eyes widened when she noticed something and turned to look at Merry.

“Do Chesha and her friends wear different jewellery to you?” she asked.

“No,” Merry replied. “Why?”

Hannah pointed, and Merry’s beak fell open when she saw the younger Keers’ bracelets and necklaces adorned with burning blue stones.

“There are no such crystals like that on Pearl,” she said, holding her own cloudy bracelet like a talisman. “What is happening?!”

There was no time for Hannah to reply before Chesha came around from the other side of the rock, her eyes blazing sapphires. She smiled malevolently when she saw Hannah, but she grabbed Merry by the throat, holding her fast.

“No escape, too much at stake,” she tittered. “Drilling now, no time to wait!”

“Child, no!”

Hannah jumped to her friend’s aid and a struggle ensued. Merry’s large necklace came undone, and her scrabbling hands caught it and brought it crashing onto Chesha’s forehead. The younger Keer screamed as blue energy flowed from her eyes and ears, dissipating like smoke in the open air. All three women fell to the ground, panting.

“Chesha?” Merry was at the young Keer’s side, holding her head in her hands. Chesha rolled over, eyes squeezed shut.

“M’fine, stop shouting,” she mumbled. “Five more minutes...”

Looking around, Hannah saw the other five possessed Keer give a shudder. They turned in their direction, the black form between them flickering slightly, and something clicked in Hannah’s mind.

“How old is that crystal?” she asked, pointing at Merry’s necklace.

“My mother gave it to me,” the elder Keer replied, holding the talisman in front of her face. “And her mother before that, passed down from mother to hatchling.”

“It’s from Pearl, and it’s really old,” Hannah mused aloud. “It’s been out of the ground for so long, but still planet-side, so it hasn’t been infected by those Eight Leg things.”

Merry looked down at her various bangles and bracelets, all covered in cloudy Pearl crystal. She took off a handful of jewellery, handing it to Hannah.

“This will free the chicks?” she asked, her eyes hopeful.

“Better hope so,” Hannah said as she led the charge out of the shadow of the rock, towards the young Keer.

If you could see me now, Doctor....

Chapter 7

Anthony Trunk shook himself awake; how long had he been out? He'd been experiencing blackouts ever since he had given the Eight Legs free reign of his mind and body. Looking out through the control window, he saw that the workers were placing glowing blue crystals around the drilling cylinder. He suddenly noticed the smoky form swirling next to him.

"Is everything going according to plan?" he asked timidly.

"Deeper, deeper, our power grows, as we tunnel far below."

The blue eyes in the middle of the shadow twinkled.

"We're playing with a little fly, though escape she's quick to try," they snickered. "Without her friend she's oh-so-lost, never seeing all she's cost."

"Spare me the lullaby rhymes," Anthony snapped. "Are you in danger?"

"An apple a day keeps the Doctor away..."

The spiders descended into uncontrollable laughter, even as the blue gems began to glow even brighter.

"Doctor?"

The Time Lord waved a dismissive hand behind him, hoping the interruption would go away. His mind was racing in too many directions and his fears were making it all that harder to concentrate. He suppressed a shudder; he was above such things, surely? A man of his intellect and experience could see fear as a tool to improve oneself. However, despite his superior Gallifreyan intellect, his headache had only gotten worse and his mood hadn't improved with it. He was almost finished cross-referencing various pockets of data when his swivel chair was unceremoniously spun around, bringing him face to bosom with Dame Patricia Jackson.

"Doctor," she said, pointing her parasol imperiously at him. "Various parties have let me know that you are the man to fix my current predicament. Just before they teleported back to their orbiting ships. Quite readily, I might add."

The Doctor looked around absently, noticing that most the stalls were either gone or being folded up by their tenants. The academics had disappeared altogether, even Janx.

"Why did they leave?" he asked, crossing his arms. Maybe if he played along with this woman, he could get her to leave that much faster.

"Oh, just the simple matter of the sky falling," Dame Jackson replied, glaring at him.

The Doctor stood up and jogged to the glass side of the complex. The sky was lined with dark streaks, almost like the bars of a prison cell.

"That is not the sky falling," he said pointedly, turning back to the Dame. "I've seen skies falling; that is *not* a falling sky."

"Then what is it, pray tell?"

“Something far, far worse,” the Doctor replied, feeling the pain in his head reach a new level. He had thought that coming to a psychic planet would be beneficial for the mind, but the direct opposite seemed to be true. He didn’t like being wrong, and someone was going to pay. If it turned out to be the same people who were causing unidentifiable earthquakes, so much the better.

Percy Philips appeared next to Dame Jackson, looking both worried and relieved. He had his trusted clipboard and shoulder bag in hand.

“Everything’s ready for you to go,” he said to her. “Let’s get moving.”

“We are not going *anywhere*, Percy,” Dame Jackson commanded. “Until we find out who or what has disrupted my dear Franklin’s conference.”

“I intended to do so,” the Doctor said shortly, trying to get back to his work. “But *someone* is impeding my –”

“Might I suggest that we interview Anthony Trunk?” she cut across him, and the Doctor felt his nerves tingle. “He’s been acting very strange recently, and I want a second opinion on him.”

“Is that the royal ‘we’, or does that mean both you and me?” the Doctor asked, to which the Dame raised a delicate eyebrow.

“I am a Dame, dear Doctor,” she replied demurely. “I take it as a requirement as such to have the best people for the job at my disposal.”

At this, Dame Jackson once again pointed her umbrella at the Time Lord.

“That would be you.”

“Now see here, I really can’t –”

“Oh stop dawdling man, and come along!” the Dame, pulling the Doctor away with surprising strength. “Percy, you stay here and have the transmat tunnel ready at a moment’s notice.”

She proceeded to pull the speechless Time Lord across the lecture hall and through a small door that led further into the complex. The Doctor finally managed to yank himself from her firm grip in time to notice something was missing.

“Where’s Hannah?”

“I have no idea who that is, nor do I care,” the Dame replied. “Ah, the CEO suite, how wonderful!”

The Doctor was unceremoniously grabbed again and hauled into the suite. The room was in complete disarray, with chairs and bedsheets overturned, as if a storm had blown through. A cerulean folder lay untouched on the desk.

“Is Mister Trunk known for raucous parties?” the Doctor asked.

“We didn’t speak much before organising the conference,” Dame Jackson had remained at the door, letting the Doctor do the investigating. “But based on our first meeting, no.”

“Obviously there’s been some kind of psychotropic intrusion into this plane of reality,” the Doctor said as he looked around the office.

“How could you possibly know that?” the Dame sniffed. The Doctor held up the object in his hand.

“Psychic magnifying glass,” he replied quietly. “There’s also a rather large ritual mat just behind this desk.”

Turning the mat over, the Doctor felt his two hearts skip separate beats and a cold fear crept up his back, unbidden. Memories from several lives before flooded into his mind.

A tear, Sarah-Jane?

Suddenly, Hannah crashed through the door, looking wildly around her. Dame Jackson pointed her parasol at her like a sword.

“Miss Redfoot!” the Doctor scolded, standing up from the mat, readily shoving the disturbing memories aside. “Where have you been?”

“Your... friend, is she, Doctor?” Dame Jackson asked haughtily, still holding the young woman an umbrella-point. Hannah was covered in various colours of dust from head to toe and obviously exhausted, but she had enough energy to throw the Dame a black look.

“Save it, Queenie,” she wheezed, trying to calm her frizzy hair. “I’ve had just about enough –”

“Where have you been?” the Doctor cut across her, less curtly this time. He saw that she had several small cuts on her arms which looked like talon marks.

“I’ve been doing some investigating of my own,” Hannah replied, holding her hands behind her head to catch her breath. “Not that *you’d* have noticed.”

The Doctor noted his companion’s accusing stare and decided to let the slight pass. He signalled for her to go on. She quickly explained the situation, but when she said the name ‘Eight Legs’, he couldn’t suppress a visible shudder. As Hannah continued, his body felt weak, just like it had when –

Please, don’t die...

“No!” The Doctor shouted, his hand cutting across the air in front of him, trying to banish the scene from his mind. Hannah stopped, her eyes wide from the force of his outburst.

“Who are these Eight Legs, Doctor?” Dame Jackson asked quietly.

“A race of psychic spiders,” he replied, putting his magnifying glass away. “But I thought they’d been wiped out. Last time I met them, I...”

The Doctor stopped, trying not to think about it. Hannah looked at him, concerned.

“Doctor?”

“What?” the Time Lord snapped, waving his hands again in a vain effort to blow away troubling thoughts. He felt a firm hand on his shoulder and Hannah’s eyes were looking directly into his own.

“Doctor, take a few deep breaths,” she said calmly.

“Miss Redfoot, I don’t – ”

“In, and out,” Hannah went on, ignoring him. “In...”

The Doctor inhaled, filling his body, feeling the tension everywhere. He closed his eyes, trying to focus.

“Out.”

The Doctor exhaled, feeling his body relax. He did three more under Hannah’s instruction before opening his eyes.

“Better?” Hannah asked, smiling encouragingly at him.

“I am... yes, thank you,” he replied, amazed at how different he felt. Hannah had once again proven she could be relied on when he needed to count on her. As he focused his mind once again, he realized how annoying it was to have such a need. His body straightened, and he forced himself to present the best air of arrogant magniloquence he could manage, before he continued. “You said the Eight Legs kept talking about the drill?”

“Yeah, something about psychic power being under the surface, I think.”

“It would explain a great deal,” the Doctor mused. “If the Eight Legs want to increase their powers, a planet with a psychic core would be the Holy Grail to them!”

“How can a planet’s core be composed of psychic energy?” Dame Jackson asked. “The whole thing sounds impossible.”

“I perform at least six impossible things before breakfast every day,” the Doctor replied quietly. “Now come along, we must go to the Mercury Mining drill!”

With that, he flung open the door, only to be confronted by a small platoon of shadow creatures, their eyes candles of blue flame.

“Ah, hello gentlemen, how lovely to see you!”

The Doctor quickly slammed the door shut, but the varnished wood quickly splintered under a powerful blow.

“Were their hands made of... apples?!” The Dame asked, holding her head, as if trying to keep her sanity from leaking out. Another thunderous punch almost blew the door in half.

“Prey, prey, won’t get away!”

The door collapsed inward, and the Doctor pushed Hannah and the Dame behind him. However, faster than any woman her age had a right to move at, Dame Jackson stabbed the shadows in the chest with her umbrella, forcing them to fall back out into the hall.

“Back! Back I say!” she shrieked. “You shall not bar our path!”

The Dame continued to jab at the shadows, using a fencing-like lunge, until they collapsed into a pile of writhing shadow tentacles, screeching plaintively.

“How did you do that?” Hannah asked, her eyes wide.

“With dignity,” Dame Jackson replied, smiling slightly. “One cultivates it in later life. I hold out hope that you will too, my dear.”

Hannah looked to the Doctor for a better explanation, who shrugged his shoulders.

“Judging by the sky, mental influence is spreading across the immediate area,” he said. “Force of will is key, and if anyone has a will of iron –”

“Obviously,” preened the Dame.

Hannah was about to shoot an acidic reply to this throwback to the 1800s, before the Doctor grabbed her arm and pointed ahead.

“Not now. We need to get to that platform!” He turned to the Dame. “I believe we can take this from here, thank you.”

Hannah smiled back at the old woman as she and the Doctor ran on, out through the main doors and out the complex gates. She was so happy to see Merry and her band back together, attending to the younger Keer, who looked shaken but spider-free.

“Can’t stop!” she yelled as they passed. “Off to save the planet!”

The Doctor pulled her onwards, leaving clouds of dust in their wake. Hannah felt her heart rise; this was it. The Doctor would sort everything out and –

Beep-beep!

“What in the world?” The Doctor spun around in time to see what looked like a large golf buggy pull up beside them.

“Going our way, Doctor?” Percy grinned from the driver’s seat. Dame Jackson was in the backseat, a blanket thrown over her legs as if out on a Sunday drive.

“I don’t take being left behind very well, young man,” the Dame scolded.

“I am at least ten times older than you,” the Doctor said as he and Hannah clambered aboard.

“What he *means* to say,” Hannah said as she joined Percy up front, amazed and impressed at Dame Jackson’s style. “Is thanks very much, we’ll take what we can get!”

Before they had properly taken their seats, the Dame waved her parasol in the direction of the drill platform and shouted:

“Onward!”

Chapter 8

The entire crew of the MMC excavation team stood next to the drill with Anthony Trunk, who felt like his skin was on fire. They had all been ordered to gather around the wall of psychic rock they had erected around the cylinder, which appeared to be absorbing and discharging blue electricity at a phenomenal pace. The gems couldn't be looked at directly anymore – they shone so brightly, all other light was eclipsed. The amount of psychic energy flowing from the drill hole was immense, and they'd barely broken the crust. The mantle itself was still several miles down, but the Eight Legs were revelling in this tiny spring. Their cloudy forms were looking more spider-like, and they scuttled around, rather than floated.

“Summon the flow, let it go,” they muttered around him. “Bring it up from down below.”

Anthony watched as one of his workers stepped towards the gem wall. Without a sound, the worker disintegrated before his eyes, her particles absorbed by the psychic maelstrom. Unaffected by this, all of his thirty-one workers continued to march forward, dispersing into clouds of atoms that were absorbed by the wall, and the drill in turn. The walls around him shuddered as the air rippled.

“Open the door, let us through; bring about a world anew!”

“What are you doing?!” he yelled. “They did nothing but help you!”

“Living minds needed to bridge the gap, dying minds needed to bring *Her* back!”

The air seemed to burn as a tear in reality appeared in front of Anthony. A shining window revealed more Eight Legs, a countless multitude. The shadow spiders around him seemed to become more substantial, less wispy. Suddenly, a massive form appeared in the window, a gigantic spider looming over them all. It had to be over twenty feet tall and twice as long.

“My children, sisters...”

A victorious chorus went up from the spiders, reverberating around the room.

“Great One...”

Anthony summoned up his courage and finally found his tongue.

“Hey, look,” he said, trying to keep his voice even. “Your Great One is here. How about you let me go and you can go about your business?”

The spiders looked at him, from the drill floor and through the portal, and Trunk felt his stomach drop below the floor. Everything he had ever and would ever strive for shrivelled away as he looked upon his own mortality.

“Dearest Trunk, greatest fool,” the Eight Legs whispered. “Weak-willed man, now useless tool.”

Anthony felt his left foot move forward and he screamed. His skin felt like water, shifting wildly. His right foot followed suit, and the front of his designer shoes disintegrated two feet away from the gem wall.

“You promised me the world!” he yelled, trying with all his will to stop his legs.

“We promised that you would be *part* of our world,” the Great One laughed. “We did not say how that plan unfurled!”

“I had such plans!” Anthony Trunk yelled. “Such pl –”

His words became dust as his body shattered into atoms and carried him up and away into Pearl's atmosphere, part of a crystal at last.

Merry's group soon disappeared as Percy accelerated, the buggy kicking up a small tornado of dust. They rocketed across moss and rock, bouncing easily over both. Hannah watched as the platform took shape as they drew nearer. It was built like an oil rig, with very long pillars on all sides and thick, heavy platforms in between. The drill, located in the dead centre, was the usual corkscrew type, but it had a strange, glittery sheen to it. She turned her head to look at the Doctor.

"Why haven't the Eight Legs made more of an effort to stop us?" she asked. "I've gotten used to expecting loads of minions to attack us."

What she wasn't expecting was the man from the TARDIS to appear in their path, which he did, quite suddenly. Percy hit the breaks, sharply turning to avoid the figure, just before the buggy hit an invisible wall several meters from the platform. With a bone-juddering smash, the buggy upended and they were all thrown unceremoniously onto the ground. Hannah ended up several feet away from the rest of them, holding her shoulder. Cool, precise hands held her upper arm as she was helped up into a sitting position.

"Doctor?"

"You haven't dislocated it," his calm voice cut through the pain, helping her focus. "A sprain at most."

"Is – ow – is everyone okay?" Hannah asked as the Time Lord gently helped her to stand, giving her one last look over before turning to the other two.

"I'm... fine," Dame Jackson said shakily as she rose to her feet. Her bustle was dusty and her hair askew, but all this was forgotten when she saw Percy lying, unmoving, on the ground.

"Percy!" she screeched, throwing herself down next to the young man. She turned his head towards her, a cry issuing from her mouth when she saw the blood on his face. "Doctor Smith!"

The Doctor gently handed the Dame over to Hannah and moved to examine Percy. He calmly reached down, and a light static spark between them woke Percy.

"Sorry," he muttered, his eyes opening wide. "Must have fallen asleep."

"My darling boy," Dame Jackson said, sweeping down to cradle Percy's head in her arms. "I thought –"

"Can't get rid of me that easily," the young man replied. "Got a thick skull, just like my old man."

"Nice to know she cares," Hannah said quietly to the Doctor, whose face was impassive.

"What mother wouldn't be concerned for her son?" the Doctor shrugged.

Dame Jackson narrowed her eyes at the Doctor. To others, she might have seemed like a dusty old lady, but holding her son's hand, she looked pretty fierce to Hannah.

"What a shrewd man you are, Doctor Smith," she said, helping Percy to his feet. "Might I enquire as to how you know this?"

The Doctor waved a dismissive hand. "Human hereditary traits are old hat. You both share long earlobes and a smattering of hazel in the blue of your irises."

"So why don't you have the same surnames?" Hannah asked. Percy smiled sheepishly.

"I wanted to see how I'd get on in the universe without my family's name behind me," he said. "I've made quite a career for myself being an MC and event organiser. It was sheer coincidence that I got booked for this conference."

"Coincidence?" Hannah eyed the Dame, who blushed slightly. Percy rolled his eyes, crossing his arms as he confronted his mother.

"Mum?"

"You never call me enough!" the Dame replied, losing all poise and grandeur as she deflated under her son's glare. "I just wanted to see you in your natural environment."

She held out a hand, which her son took.

"I'm very proud of you, Percy, darling."

"The things humans go through to prove themselves..." the Doctor muttered, but Hannah smiled winningly at Percy.

"Does this mean you're rich as well as handsome?" she mocked, nudging the young man in the ribs. He winced and held his side, but he smiled.

"Not that I tell every girl this, but... yeah, I guess I am."

"Good thing stuff like money doesn't sway my affections," Hannah replied, but a bent parasol was quickly placed between them.

"I do believe we have an invisible barrier to get through, don't we, children?" Dame Jackson said, brokering no argument.

"Yeah, what hit us?" Hannah asked. She wanted to mention the man in their path, and how his presence may have been what saved them from an even greater accident, but the Doctor was shifting into planning mode. She knew there would be no interrupting him now.

"Things have come to a head," the Doctor said, pressing his hands against what looked like empty air. "The Eight Legs have mined enough energy to maintain a constant mental barrier, rather than brief phenomena."

"Where is that laser I insisted you have, Percy?" Dame Jackson was back on form, and her son withered under her hard stare.

"I left it at the complex," he replied meekly. "In the rush, I –"

"Silly boy!" The Dame snapped, but she drew her arm around her child protectively. "Doctor, what can *you* do?"

"I believe Miss Redfoot is holding the key to our problem," the Time Lord replied, pointing at his companion.

Hannah lifted her arm and Merry's bracelets jingled helpfully. After a coordinated protestor group rugby tackle and jewellery face-pressing session with the possessed Keer, she had completely forgotten about the bangles. She readily handed them over to the Doctor.

"How did they work with Merry before?" Hannah asked. "I thought the psychic stuff inside the crystal was useless?"

"The drill and the Eight Legs are changing all that," the Doctor said as he examined the bracelets. He pulled a pointed piece out of one and held his magnifying glass up to it.

"You saw it before, with Dame Jackson and those shadows. With each bit of crust penetrated, the psychic potential is leaking through, ready to be utilised. This planet is drowning in psychic energy, and the risk is that reality is really becoming a question of mind over matter."

To Hannah, it was as if the Doctor was performing an impromptu mime; he pressed a hand against the air and began to draw the outline of a door in front of him, bending down to touch the crystal to the ground on either side. A rectangular hole burned into life before them. Hannah smiled at the uneven lines.

"When you have a mind such as mine..." the Doctor left the statement open, pocketing the crystal.

"I don't suppose you're going to try and convince us to stay outside, Doctor?" Dame Jackson asked as they approached the door.

"In my vast experience, you humans tend to do whatever you want, without my consent," the Doctor replied, resigned. "Why should now be any different?"

With that, the Doctor stepped through the door and began to jog towards one of the platform's legs. Percy stole one last glance at the felled buggy before hopping through.

"What an infuriating man," the Dame said as she and Hannah passed through. Inside the field, Hannah could feel her hair standing on end, reacting to the charged atmosphere. They soon reached the foot of a platform leg, but the thick metal door failed to open, despite the Doctor's efforts. Hannah suddenly smiled as a thought entered her head.

“Can I try?” she asked, and the Doctor’s eyebrows almost disappeared into his shaggy hairline. She ignored him and pressed a palm to the keyhole, thinking really hard about the sound of a door unlocking.

“Open sesame!”

Hannah almost jumped in the air in triumph as the door clicked, then opened. She turned back around to the Doctor, whose mouth was slightly agape in shock.

“Mind over matter,” she said smugly as she pulled the door open. “And I’ll –”

Then the world went white.

Chapter 9

The Doctor held his hands up to his face; the light was so blinding, it was like standing next to an exploding sun. Everyone and everything was blasted out of existence before him, and his brilliant mind suddenly ground to a frozen halt as one thought dominated all:

Am I dead? Again?

He was surrounded by a blank whiteness. It hadn't been like this before. Had it? Maybe it had been, and he couldn't remember?

"Doctor?"

The world slowly faded back into being, and he looked around, trying to find his companions. A blurry figure stood next to him.

"Hannah?"

"It's Percy," came the reply, then an awkward cough. "Sorry."

The Doctor sighed, rubbing his temples. His head was sore from the psychic strain, but he gasped when he focused on where they were currently standing. This wasn't right. This wasn't right at all....

"Where the hell are we?" Percy asked, looking around. "I've been to the drilling platform once, but I didn't see a room like this."

"You won't have, Mister Philips," the Doctor replied. "Because you are in my TARDIS."

Hannah yelled as the world was obliterated into whiteness around her. She couldn't see her hands, feel her breath.

Oh God, I've set off a bomb! Doctor, I'm sorry!

After a few seconds of frightening oblivion, the whiteness trickled away, leaving her in a cream hallway. Dame Jackson was a few feet away, slumped on the floor. Hannah took a deep, shuddering breath before helping the older woman to her feet.

"You okay, there, your maj?" she asked, trying to lighten the mood. The Dame wasn't impressed. She looked around her.

"Where's Percy?"

"And the Doctor?" Hannah said, looking around. "I can't think..."

She trailed off, rendered speechless by the scene in front of her; she was in a hospital corridor. A very familiar corridor, one that she'd spent weeks sitting, sleeping, crying in.

"No," she said, hearing her voice crack. "No, I can't be here. Not again."

The Doctor looked around him; it was his TARDIS all right, but his ship of old, when he had Susan and those two annoying teachers. The white round things on the walls pulsed with light as Percy looked around him in wonder.

“This is what was inside that blue box?” he boggled. “How does it all fit?”

“We don’t have time for this,” the Doctor snapped. He looked around for inconsistencies, tells. If they were where he thought they were...

“Hey, when did your clothes change?” Percy asked.

The Doctor looked down; he was wearing a yellow tweed waistcoat over a white shirt and tartan pants. He was about to reply, but he suddenly felt his energy draining out of him, as if he was...

Aging?

Fear overcame the Doctor like a wave as he watched his hands wrinkle and his long hair turn grey, then white. He fell to the floor and realised what was happening; he was reliving his first death! Percy dropped to his knees next to him, looking terrified.

“Doctor, you’re getting so... old.” He was too afraid to touch him. “What’s going on?!”

I must be calm, the Doctor thought, Hannah’s face swimming in his mind. *Deep breaths.*

“Mister Philips.” The Doctor’s mouth felt dry as he spoke. “Come closer, please, dear boy.”

The TARDIS interior was beginning to dim as Percy leaned down to the Doctor’s level, and the decrepit man breathed his last. The world shuddered and suddenly the Doctor found himself standing in front of three familiar-looking Time Lords.

“Oh deary me,” he said involuntarily, looking down at his old suit, which still looked baggy despite his greater height in his current incarnation. Percy was trying not to panic next to him.

“What’s going on?” he asked again.

“Stay with me, young man,” the Doctor said, gripping his wrinkled lapels. “Easy now. Soon be there.”

“There where?!”

“Doctor,” boomed the three magistrates. “We hereby exile you to Earth and...”

The rest of the decree was lost as the world spun around them, tumbling back and forth and inside out before dropping them in a science laboratory. The Doctor found himself on a floor, weaker than ever before, wearing his blue velvet jacket and frilly shirt.

“What the hell are those?” Percy yelled from nearby, pointing at the dozen giant spiders who had appeared around them. They remained perfectly still, as if watching a performance, but the Doctor could feel something different this time. He looked above to see the Great One observing from the ceiling, which stretched miles out and above.

“You weren’t here the last time!” he wheezed, his chest tight, no air left. “I was with Sarah and the Brigadier!”

Percy collapsed on the floor, having fainted dead away, and the Eight Legs laughed.

“Three down, six to go....”

“Again?” Dame Jackson asked, looking around. “Where are we? I’ve certainly never –”

“Shut up!” Hannah burst out. “Just shut up and stay there!”

She felt like her head was on fire as she ran to a familiar ward; was she thrown back in time? Who knew what that explosion had been? Maybe she was dead, and this was a kind of brain-death experience? But then what was Dame Jackson doing here?

Hannah reached it at last – fourth floor, Ward E, sixth bed, and there she was.

“Hannah? Hannah, is that you?”

“Yeah, Mom, it’s me.”

Diana Redfoot looked so thin; she’d always been plump and full of life, but cancer had taken all of that away. Well, everything but her smile. That shone through Hannah’s tears as she sat down on the

side of the hospital bed and her mother hugged her close. She was wearing her favourite perfume, just like before; sandalwood.

“Oh, Mom, I missed you so much.”

“Missed me?” her mother said, patting her back comfortingly. “I only saw you an hour ago.”

Hannah pulled back, making sure not to knock her mother’s head scarf off, and wiped her eyes on her sleeve before looking at herself. She was still wearing the same clothes as before, dirty and dusty as ever. But everything else was just like in the past; her mother was alive, the various machines beeped and whirred around her, and all the get well cards that had surrounded Diana’s bed were still there. Suddenly, Hannah felt a warm, kindly hand on her shoulder.

“What did your mother die of, my dear?” Dame Jackson asked from behind her.

“Leukaemia,” she replied after a pause. “It was too advanced by the time she was diagnosed. She barely made it six months.”

The Diana Redfoot in the bed vanished, leaving Hannah holding onto thin air. She looked around wildly, her eyes streaming.

“Where is she?” she wailed. “Where did she go?”

“I don’t think she was ever here, my dear,” the Dame said sadly, taking a seat next to the young woman on the bed. “I think this is all...a distraction.”

“A distraction?” Hannah couldn’t think straight.

Mom was right here...

“By those *dreadful* spider creatures,” Dame Jackson sniffed, rubbing her arms. “I think this is all a ruse, a trap shaped as some wonderful dream, to stop us from entering the platform and doing something about their scheme! But I think our subconscious is giving us clues on how to break free.”

Hannah sniffed; of course it was a trap. Why would the universe give her another chance to say goodbye to her mother? To say all of the things she’d wished she had said?

“Were you there when she passed?” The Dame asked, placing a comforting arm over Hannah’s shoulders. She leaned into the old woman as she nodded and began to cry again.

“Oh, dear girl, I know all about death,” she said sadly, patting the young woman’s head. “Look at me; all of my friends are either dead or bedridden, waiting for the release of oblivion. I’m so lucky that I’m in such good shape. Franklin wouldn’t have allowed otherwise. He’s not allowing me *now*.”

Hannah looked up at the Dame, who wiped a tear from her own eye. She pointed to the door of the ward where an exquisitely dressed man in his late sixties was standing. He had a top hat and an ivory cane, standing resolutely, as if on guard.

“I was tempted just as you left,” Dame Jackson said, not turning around. “But my Franklin knows best; I can’t live in the past. I have to go towards the future, for our son.”

Hannah watched as the old man nodded and smiled before vanishing in a stream of gold. In his place, Diana Redfoot stood, but she was different. She was whole: jolly, jiggly and full of life, like an overgrown toddler. She wore her favourite beaded suede jacket and had her hands in her front pockets, smiling away. Hannah patted the Dame’s hand as she jumped off the bed.

“Don’t worry; I know what to do.”

She crossed the ward and walked up to her mother. She inclined her head towards the door and Diana followed her out.

“I don’t care if you’re real or not,” Hannah began, keeping her hands in her pockets. “I’m going to talk, and you’re going to listen.” Her mother nodded, smiling bemusedly.

“First of all,” Hannah took a deep breath. “I love you. No, don’t reply; I’m still talking. I love you, and I always will. I know it wasn’t anyone’s fault you got cancer. I was wrong to be angry at people who just wanted to help even if—”

“Even if some of them sounded crazy?” Diana finished for her, a familiar chuckle issuing from her lips. Hannah found herself smiling too, but kept on going.

“Crazy, yeah. I’m glad I was there at the end, and I know everyone says this, but I wish I’d said more. But we made our peace, didn’t we?”

She looked at her mother, so whole and healthy, and she just knew it was all going to be okay. She began talking excitedly.

“So, I’m going to travel the stars and see new worlds, Mom. I’m going to places our fore-fathers never saw in their wildest dreamscapes and I’m going to bring back the shiniest piece of space rock you ever did see.”

Hannah felt her tears come back, but she stayed strong.

“No matter how far I go, you will always be in my heart.”

Diana Redfoot raised her arms tentatively and Hannah allowed her mother to hug her. Her mother began to dissolve into golden dust, her last words swirling away on a breeze.

“I love you, my sweet Hannah.”

Hannah stood there for several seconds before drawing herself up, wiping her face and marching back to the ward where Dame Jackson was helping herself to a few grapes from a carton on a side table. She shivered as a light chill came across her.

“I think it’s time to go,” Hannah said quietly.

“How do you know?”

Hannah didn’t have to say anything, she simply pointed. The man with the faded face had returned, this time gesturing to a small, inconspicuous door that had appeared behind him with a gigantic neon ‘EXIT’ sign over it.

“What happened to dreams being subtle?” the Dame asked as they opened the door. “And who was that man?”

The world shuddered and lurched and went black. The next thing Hannah knew, she was wrapped up in a giant web.

“Oh... great!”

Chapter 10

The Doctor looked down from a great height at two figures who had fallen to their deaths not moments before. Even the long ridiculous scarf hadn't saved them. But he hadn't died with himself...

"That's two times you've died from height," sniggered the Great One from her web on-high. "Will three falls make a right?"

"No!" The Doctor cried, his eyes wide. The Eight Legs around him scuttled forward, pushing him towards the edge.

"This isn't real!" yelled the Time Lord. "I deny this! I deny you!"

"I tire of this game!" The Great One said, waving her legs at her subjects. "Let us return to the waking plane!"

"The waking..?"

The Doctor barely had time to think before the world went black and he found himself in a large room, suspended in a gigantic web, surrounded by Eight Legs. The drill bit dominated the room, but even this was overshadowed by the glowing tear in the centre of the wall of Metebelis III crystals. The Doctor watched as more and more Eight Legs emerged from the hole, gaining more and more substance as they scuttled forward.

"Finally!" yelled a familiar voice from above him. "I thought you'd never wake up."

Hannah hung a few feet above him with Dame Jackson a little further to his right. Both women were wrapped up tight in thick, lustrous webbing, as was the Doctor himself. Percy hung next to him, still unconscious.

"Percy?" Dame Jackson called down to her son. "Doctor, why hasn't he woken up?"

The Doctor shook his head, trying to clear it. Something was missing, but he didn't know what. His head felt shaken empty, and his nerves were frayed. Reliving every single one of his deaths had been a torture he'd not soon forget. He knew that he lived on in the present, but the death of each single Doctor was a trauma in itself. It was a true death, despite his regeneration afterwards.

"This is real, isn't it, Doctor?" Hannah asked. "Not a dream trap like before?"

"You experienced that as well?" he asked, struggling in the webbing. "Why ever would the Eight Legs need to detain the two of you in a dream? What threat do you pose?"

"Quite a substantial one if I get out of this webbing, Doctor!" Dame Jackson fumed, shaking herself back and forth, but she stopped, red-faced, after several attempts. "Wriggling is so *undignified*."

"What's the deal here, Doctor?" Hannah asked, trying to placate the Dame with a smile. "What's with the big glowing portal over there?"

"A doorway to the astral plane," the Doctor replied. "A place of pure thought. Being psychic, I suppose it would be a natural environment for the Eight Legs to exist."

Another niggle sprang up in his cloudy mind, and the Doctor raged against his predicament; what wasn't he *seeing*?

"We will have silence!" hissed the Eight Legs. "For the Great One's audience!"

Hannah and Dame Jackson gasped as the Great One faded into being before them, larger than ever. She stretched to either side of the room and high above their heads. Her beady blue eyes looked at them all in turn, and the Doctor felt his skin crawl, remembering his weakness on the dream cliff. Suddenly, something caught his eye; a silver thread of light ran along the webbing between Percy and himself as the young man woke up. As the light reached him, the Time Lord felt like the last puzzle piece of a jigsaw, slotting everything into place.

“Oh,” he said, his mind suddenly blazing. “Oh, I am *very* clever...”

The drill’s glow became more intense and the ground trembled. The Metebelis gems began to shake and quiver, as if alive. The Eight Legs began to scurry around excitedly, sending off little shoot of electrical energy as they went.

“Doctor!” Hannah yelled, struggling in the webbing. “Do something!”

“Silence!” thundered the Great One, before turning to her subjects.

“We must seal the gate to recognise our fate,” she intoned, waving her legs at the drill.

Blue threads issued from the spiders nearest to the reality tear, sewing it back together. The glowing seam hung in the air for a few seconds before dwindling away. The tremor became worse and the Doctor suddenly shouted:

“Chameleon!”

The Doctor felt his aged body withering beneath him, but he managed to place his hands on either side of Percy’s temples. Using his will, he caused a small pocket of astral time to freeze between one second and the next.

“What’s happening?” Percy’s voice was slow and confused.

“Percy Philips, I need to ask a favour of you,” the Doctor said, his mind straining not to alert the Eight Legs. “I need to borrow your brain.”

“My what?!” Percy tried to pull away in panic, but the Doctor was stronger than any human, mentally.

“Your *mind*, then, fool,” he snapped. “I have a plan of how to beat these creatures, but I need *your* help to do it!”

“Really?” Percy’s feelings of inadequacy leaked through, but the Doctor persevered.

“Believe in yourself, Percy Philips. Will you allow me to use your mind? I need to cloak myself as you in order to do what needs to be done.”

“O-okay,” Percy agreed. “I’m still scared, though.”

“I’d call you a greater fool if you said anything otherwise.”

Contact...

And, with a spark of psychic energy, Darcy was born – a mixture of the Doctor and Percy’s psyches. They/he didn’t know where the ‘a’ had come from, but that was how they identified him on the astral plane. Darcy sat in Percy’s mind through the baggy Doctor’s sentencing and subtly freed himself from the Eight Leg audience with the dandy Doctor, causing Percy to faint.

Darcy lived with one purpose: to find out what had happened to the Eight Legs and implement the Doctor’s plan. Luckily he was on the astral plane, where mental influence could cause anything to happen.

Mind over matter.

“Even time travel,” Darcy smirked as he jumped back, concentrating on the Eight Legs’ first entry into astral space.

With little effort, he made himself invisible, even as he landed several centuries back. Being the amalgamation of a Time Lord and a human consciousness, he existed at a different mental frequency, allowing him to remain undetected by those was observing. He didn’t have any memories to distract him; he had one purpose to propel him forward, but he was still a new form, a child. Everything fascinated

him. He watched as the Eight Legs on Metebelis III made strides into astral travel, mapping the ley lines that ran through the universe and beyond.

And what lies beyond matter? Thought.

Darcy watched, horrified, as the Eight Legs used their human slaves as sacrifice to break the bonds between space and thought, creating a bridge to the astral plane. The Great One decreed a great crusade; to explore and map the astral plane for her. They left to great applause.

Mere months later, the astral astronauts felt the mind of their Great One touch them briefly on the astral plane. They knew her plan to create a Great Web of Metebelis crystals had succeeded and saw the man who had helped her to complete it: the Doctor. The Time Lord weakened in her mere presence, and the Eight Legs laughed at the sight communicated from their Great One's mind. But oh so quickly, it all went wrong.

The Great One died, sending a cataclysmic psychic scream through her link with her subjects. Darcy watched as the threads of her Great Web disintegrated, sending mental backlash throughout the cosmos. The astralnavts' minds broke, scattering them to the mental winds. They lay there for centuries, babbling incoherencies and thinking of nothing but screaming. Eventually, they managed to pool together enough of their power to repair themselves... almost.

Then they decided to return to Metebelis III, but the path was lost to them. They found solace in contacting weak minds through imperfect Metebelis crystals. Minds like Anthony Trunk; minds they could manipulate to make sure they returned to their rightful plane of existence and kill the man who had destroyed their Great One. The Doctor.

All the while, dancing through the mental timelines, Darcy was whispering unseen in the Eight Legs' minds, planting seeds, making plans, waiting until just the right moment to make things happen. He helped ensure Hannah's safety when the Eight Legs' started their attack, and brought the TARDIS to a safe landing on Pearl; forged the Doctor and Hannah's names on Percy's guest list; offered Hannah a weapon to protect her in the cave; ensured the carriage slowed before reaching the Eight Legs' psychic barrier; and, finally, offered Hannah an exit from the astral plane. At each instance, Darcy felt an unknown affection for Hannah, and a fierce need to protect her.

“Chameleon?”

Hannah was still, stunned; all of the Eight Legs had stopped at the Doctor's word. The Great One was looking around in fury.

“What have you done?!” she shrieked at the Doctor, who shrugged in his webbing.

“I've been very, very clever,” he replied.

Hannah felt the earth shudder and tried to remain calm. Then, a visible ripple swept through the air and the strangest sensation passed through her. It was like her brain was being tickled; everything seemed so crisp, clear and... funny. She began to laugh.

“Cease that noise!” thundered the Great One. “We will have silence!”

“You don't even realise what you've done, do you?” The Doctor sighed, smiling slightly.

“We have won,” the Great One replied. “The first true pocket of psychic energy has been breached; soon we will lay waste to reality. We —”

“You've stopped rhyming, Great Spider, whatever you are!” Hannah yelled, suddenly realising why she was laughing – she was tuned into the Doctor's triumph!

“I had a friend wander down your psychic timeline,” the Doctor explained. “Planted a few subliminal messages along the way, just for this moment in physical time.”

Hannah felt herself slip down slightly, and looked up to see that her web was dissolving. She warned the Dame with a look before all four of them dropped several feet to the floor. Luckily, Percy broke his mother's fall.

“Ow!”

“Sorry, dear.”

“Reality is exerting its influence, restoring order,” the Doctor said, shrugging off the remaining webs like paper. “A reality in which you are no longer alive.”

Hannah’s heart dropped as she read the Doctor’s regret.

“You only exist because you wish it,” the Time Lord continued sadly. “The astral plane sustained your minds even as your bodies rotted...”

Hannah couldn’t take the onslaught of emotions that she was feeling from the Doctor. A deep sadness seemed to have overcome him.

“But now you’ve crossed over and closed the link,” she said sadly.

“And that psychic eruption has shaken up your mental atoms,” the Doctor continued, his eyes directed down. “Without that link, you will –”

“Dissipate?” Dame Jackson asked.

“Like webs on assault from an autumn storm,” the Doctor concluded

Even as he said it, Hannah could see the smaller Eight Legs beginning to fade. They became see-through, then vanished altogether. The Great One still looked pretty solid as she turned to face her tormentor.

“I will live on, Doctor!”

“Ah, but do you remember the last time we met, all those years ago on Metebelis III?” The Doctor asked, bitterness in his voice. “As my life drained out of me, I watched as you completed your Great Web of Metebelis crystals. Do you remember what happened next?”

The Great One shuddered even as Hannah felt a wave of fear wash over her. But she knew it wasn’t her own; she was still picking up on the Doctor’s emotions. Two images suddenly blossomed in mid-air; one showed a young woman bending over a man in a velvet suit with bouffant hair. She was crying as Hannah watched the life ebb from the man’s body. The second image showed the Great One turning into a ball of white-hot light in a large crystal web. The giant Eight-Leg in front of them began to flicker.

“No!” she screeched. “I... I deny it! I refuse to –”

The scene of the dying man was brought into stark clarity as the Doctor roared:

“*You* died! *I* died! Your mind expanded across the universe and it was too much for you. Your body burned up and you were gone!”

The giant spider was almost gone now, but she struck out with a leg. It passed harmlessly through the Doctor, who looked up at her with pitying eyes. He pointed an imperious finger at the Great One.

“You only existed because your subjects wished it, driven insane by millennia in astral space. Now they are dust and so are you! Begone!” His voice echoed physically and mentally around the room and Hannah could feel the power behind it. The Great One screamed one last time before dissipating into a grey cloud, then nothing.

The blue gems sparked and crackled around them, but they soon faded like the Eight Legs, leaving normal, cloudy crystal behind. There was no evidence the spiders have ever been there. The Doctor watched as the seam of the astral tear slowly vanished into nonexistence.

“Ashes to ashes,” he said, “Dust to dust.”

The platform shook violently underneath them, and Hannah shook the Time Lord from his reverie.

“The drill’s still spinning, idiot!”

The Doctor looked stunned for a moment, as if remembering something. Then he shook his head and shepherded the three humans out of the platform area and down the long winding steps of one of the platform legs.

“How come we don’t remember coming up this way?” Hannah asked.

“As soon as we crossed the threshold of the platform,” the Doctor explained as he hurried her along. “We entered into a dream state, one that the Eight Legs kept us trapped in as they guided our bodies to their web room.”

“Ugh, I’ll need to shower for a week after this,” Hannah replied. “And what about the drill? We can’t save the universe from spider domination and then die on a planet split in half!”

“We won’t, Miss Redfoot,” the Doctor soothed as they made it outside. “Percy, do you have a satellite link to the antennae back at the complex?”

“Uh, yeah, I do,” Percy replied, both he and Hannah amazed at the Doctor’s use of his first name. He produced a small black bracelet from his pocket. The Time Lord took it off him without thanks and looked up into the green sky as he spoke into the armband.

“Hello, am I speaking to the twenty-third battalion of the Wrath of Histemos?”

A small crackle came through the communicator before a high-pitched, squeaky voice replied:

“Yes, we are the bringers of wrath and destruction to all who can pay for it.”

“This is the Doctor.”

There was a pause.

“One moment.”

The Doctor dramatically rolled his eyes as cheesy music tinkled through the armband. Within seconds, a second, even higher voice answered:

“Doctor? *The* Doctor? Second Admiral Sconch speaking.”

“The one, the only,” the Time Lord replied. “Admiral Sconch, I would like you to blow something up for me. You can’t miss it...”

Within two minutes, Hannah, the Doctor, Percy and Dame Jackson were treated to the most organised explosion they had ever seen. The Histemos brought the entire valley down on the platform, which dutifully collapsed in on itself.

“Will that stop the psychic leak?” Percy asked.

“I’m hoping that most of the drill’s progress was because of the Eight Legs’ influence,” the Doctor mused as he watched the immense cloud of dust rise from the platform. “With them gone and the drill destroyed, I’m hopeful the planet will soon return to normal.”

“So, even the antennae was your idea?” Hannah gaped.

“Darcy’s actually,” the Doctor replied. He smiled at Hannah’s confused expression. “I always do my best work when I have plenty of time to plan.”

Epilogue

The Doctor kept an eye on Pearl's seismic activity for several hours after the platform had been destroyed, and he was pleased to announce just as the second sun was setting that all was well. Orbiting scans from several friendly ships confirmed no major psychic or seismic activity.

"So, how long am I going to be Mistress Zelda for?" Hannah asked as she watched Percy dismantle the antennae in the conference complex with just the right tool; a laser gun. With one expert shot, the stand was cut in half and the dish crashed to the ground a few meters away.

"Oh, the rest of your natural life," the Doctor replied as he smiled and clapped at Percy's handiwork.

"What?!" Hannah yelled, stopping the Doctor with a vice-like grip on his arm.

"Doctor!"

Dame Jackson was making her way across the complex towards them. She had already changed into an impeccable pea-green dress and matching parasol. Percy parked a new buggy next to them, looking filthier than ever, but smiling like a child at his birthday party. The Doctor had removed most of the evidence of Darcy from the young man's mind, and the young MC was grateful for the erasure of several centuries of arachnid manipulation.

"Less teeth, Percy dear," Dame Jackson said quietly. "Why I didn't fire that orthodontist..."

"You were coming over to tell us, madam?" The Doctor said mildly, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes, yes," she said absently. "It turns out that MMC were on Anthony Trunk's tail for months; several cases of covering up suspicious employee disappearances, forging mining permits and money laundering to boot!"

"Glad I don't have to sort out that mess," Percy said. "I'm too busy trying to organise a second First Conference of the Eight Galaxies!"

"As am I," the Doctor smiled slightly. He shook Percy's hand, pleased not to be greeted by a shock. The Doctor coughed awkwardly. "I suppose I should thank –"

"Never mind thanking them!" Hannah cried hysterically. "Seriously, am I gonna be all sixth-sense forever?"

"Just kidding," the Time Lord replied, his amusement evident even without psychic abilities. Hannah shot him a killing look.

"You'll pay for that one, buddy," she said dangerously. "Just wait until I squirrel out some of those embarrassing childhood memories from that dark head of yours."

"I would very much like to see you *try*, Miss Redfoot," the Doctor replied, and Hannah could actually feel him creating a barrier in his mind against her. She shrugged, smiling again.

"Nah, I think I'll just keep reading that 500 year diary I found lying around the TARDIS a week ago," she said as she winked at Percy.

Without another word, Hannah hopped into the waiting buggy and pressed her foot down hard on the accelerator, sending the vehicle speeding away, leaving a cloud of dust behind her. The Doctor stood with his mouth slightly open, looking at nothing, before his eyes grew wide and he began to give chase.

“Miss Redfoot? Miss Redfoot, come back here!”

His long coat billowing out behind him, the Time Lord left Dame Jackson and her son standing awkwardly in a cloud of dust. She sighed wearily, looking at the fresh layer of dust on her bodice before hooking her arm with her son’s.

“Tell me we know how to bill him, Percy,” the Dame said. “Tell me do…”

“Hannah!”

About The Authors

Ian Manning lives in Cork city, in the south of Ireland. He works in retail, curbing the urge to murder customers by spitting out new fantasy universes and planning their trajectories. He couldn't express his fictional side through drawing no matter how many crayons he sacrificed, so he went for writing instead. *The Web of Insanity* is his first story for *The Doctor Who Project*, so please be nice.

J.E. Remy has worked as a writer, editor and educator for many years, but has been a *Doctor Who* fan his entire life. Growing up in a constantly mobile home, the one element of childhood stability was a mostly-broken, black-and-white television broadcasting the local PBS station that, without fail, greeted him with *Doctor Who*. He spent many years with reruns, Virgin novels, Big Finish and a desire to create the types of stories that made life just a little better. Since then, J.E. Remy has worked as an Editor-in-Chief on three literary magazines, published fiction in the literary journal *Riverrun* and alongside Joss Whedon in the anthology *Nothing But Red*. He currently lives with his wife in Colorado Springs, where he is completing a master's thesis on female representations and gendered power structures in *Doctor Who*.



The Doctor is determined to help Hannah consider her aspirations of being a geologist in her future, and chooses to do so by bringing her to the future of geology. They arrive at the first geology conference of the Eight Galaxies, on the 26th century Pearl. The crystals of Pearl have psychotropic properties, which has drawn the attention of the Mercury Mining Company. Unfortunately for the indigenous species of Pearl—the avian Keer—who have experienced storms and earthquakes since the mining started, not to mention the Shades....

Hannah and the Doctor soon have the opportunity to see one of the blue crystals of Pearl... crystals that look suspiciously familiar to the Doctor. While the Doctor investigates the mining operations on the planet, Hannah joins the natives in a shamanistic ritual. She is nearly possessed by the shade of an eight-legged creature. The Eight-Legs have returned, and Pearl offers them the opportunity to return to physical realm.

The Doctor must face his fear, in order to prevent the ghost of the Great One from overtaking the physical plane. With Hannah's help, he may be able to overcome his fears, but it will take more than their combined efforts to stop the Eight-Legs' plan. It will require manipulating the timeline in a way the Doctor never expected. The last time they battled, it cost him his life. Will he have to lose his life again, if he is to defeat them once more?

This is another story in a series of original fan authored Doctor Who fiction published by The Doctor Who Project featuring the Tenth Doctor as played by Laurent Meyer

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