

THE
DOCTOR WHO
PROJECT

THE SECRET OF PELADON



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PREVIOUSLY ON THE DOCTOR WHO PROJECT

"I know just the place! Peladon!"

It was just supposed to be a return to some old stomping grounds for the Doctor, and a trip to wow Hannah (anything to avoid another trip to the Middle Ages). But what the TARDIS crew found was a dying monarch, a myriad amount of alien dignitaries, and two fighting twins. Reconnecting with his old friend Alpha Centauri, the Doctor intended to weather out the funeral and then beat a hasty retreat. Of course, nothing's ever that simple with the Doctor.

Case in point, Thalaan, the younger twin, stormed the feast held in his father's honor with a forged birth certificate stating he was the older twin, thereby usurping his brother Pelenat's position as heir. With his twin now in league with the Ice Warriors, Pelenat was thrown into the dungeons. Upstairs, the Doctor, Hannah, Earth Ambassador Clivix, and Liasici Ambassador Jadescales have been confined to their rooms.

Due to a lying spy, Thalaan had the TARDIS thrown down the mountain, to the Doctor's fury. In his bid to rip Thalaan a new one, he got himself, Hannah, Alpha Centauri, and Guard Captain Lorvis (Pelenat's secret lover) exiled to the town at the bottom of the mountain, Pelnar-over-Essel. Once there, they were taken in by Lorvis's family.

To prevent further meddling, H'skrr, the adjutant to the Ice Warrior ambassador, sent an assassin down to kill the Doctor, Hannah, and Alpha. But the assassin was murdered by a strange robot, whose attack caused the unfinished building the group was hiding in to collapse, apparently killing the Doctor and Alpha. Hannah, meanwhile, was carried off by the robot...

EPISODE THREE

Chapter Eight

Everything Goes Wrong

It hadn't exactly been a very nice day, Hannah mused, but being kidnapped by a robot octopus with a coal-lump head just seemed to shift everything over into "ruined." Really, the automaton's sudden appearance made a rather "left of center" situation swerve dramatically in the opposite direction. Almost like a poorly-designed rollercoaster.

She struggled and squirmed in the thing's tentacles, but to no avail. Its grip was simply too strong. As they headed out of the city into the hills, she finally piped up.

"Where are you taking me?" she demanded.

No response.

"I *said*, where are you taking me!?"

The robot remained as silent as ever. It moved forward unceasingly, as if unable to stop. It marched right into the hills and didn't look back.

"Enter."

Lir looked up from his tub to see Dusen slip inside. He smiled and waved the Argolin over, then glared at his attendants.

"Did I say to stop your ministrations!?" he squawked. "*No, I did not!* Continue bathing me! And *you!*" He pointed at an especially muscular attendant, whose mahogany skin paled. "Get my special Posicarian loofah and attend to my folds!"

Lir didn't register his manservant's expression, but Dusen did as he sat down on a stool next to Lir's tub. The Argolin flashed the man an apologetic look as the loofah was taken out and brought over to the bath in what could only be described as a funeral march. The man shuddered as he rolled Lir over and Dusen pointedly turned around. He didn't need to see this. In fact, he'd argue that no one needed to see this. Ever. The fact Mentors were always naked was bad enough.

“Sir,” said a high-pitched voice. A slim man with tan skin and short, curly black hair ambled forward clutching a tablet computer. He walked past Dusen and out of sight. His green linen suit rustled slightly as he presumably knelt down next to Lir. “Your auction results.”

“Very good,” Lir murmured as he inspected the results. “And my finances?”

“Never better, sir. You’ll be ahead of Vik in no time.”

“Excellent,” the maggot hissed with delight. “That speelsnape shall rue the day he outbid me on Omicron Persei 8!” Shuddering, gurgling laughter filled the room. Lir’s servants gave forced laughs as well. They abruptly stopped when he screamed for them to continue sponging him.

Dusen cleared his throat as the green-suited attendant left.

“Oh, yes,” Lir said. “You may speak, Dusen.”

“I’ll cut right to the chase,” Dusen began. “I was not entirely forthcoming with Thalaan. Argolis isn’t poised to enter a depression. It’s already in one. A very nasty depression that will become inescapable unless the Argolin act decisively and snuff out any Foamasi competition.”

“Of course,” Lir agreed. “But I fail to see how I fit into that.”

“You hold sway on Thoros Beta, yes?”

“Not as much as I would like, but enough for now. Why?”

“I think an alliance with Thoros Beta would be beneficial for Argolis. With your economic know-how, we could bury the Foamasi.”

“Bury? As in wipe them off the map?” Lir’s voice was hungry at the prospect.

“As in make the Foamasi the trash of the galaxy. No economy. No culture. No society. Just a lot of despised refugees desperately looking for safe harbors and finding *none*.” Dusen gave a low, sinister chuckle that made Lir’s tail-tip stinger stand on end in pleasure. “And we’d start with Jadescales’ lodge, Good Fortune; the current head of the Foamasi government.”

“I do admire your ambition, Dusen,” Lir replied around a squelchy, smacking mouthful of marsh minnow. “But what does Thoros Beta stand to gain from this? And, most important of all, what do *I* get out of it?” He swallowed loudly and exhaled. “Mere capital simply won’t do, you understand.”

“Oh, I understand.” Dusen spared a glance over his shoulder. Lir grabbed another marsh minnow. “Our alliance could result in the revolutionizing of how the galaxy experiences pleasure and holidays. Between my people’s tachyonics advances and your people’s capital, our races could have a complete monopoly.”

Lir shuddered in pleasure at the phrase and slurped down the marsh minnow.

“All I ask is that you vote with me on all issues relating to Argolis and the Foamasi,” Dusen continued. “Do we have a deal?”

“Indeed we do,” Lir agreed. “You had me at ‘complete monopoly.’” He paused, then gurgled a little out of mirth. “In fact... say it again? *Slowly*.”

Dusen smirked. “Complete. Monopoly.”

“Oooh, yes! Yes yes yes yes *yes!*”

Alpha Centauri was regretting coming out of retirement immensely. This had to be the worst visit they had ever had to Peladon by a longshot. The death of an old friend, a coup, getting exiled, the locals’ reactions, the attempted assassination, and now having leaped from a crumbling building to the cobblestones below. Honestly, it was a wonder that their exoskeleton wasn’t cracked.

The Doctor, clutched tight in the hexapod's tendrils and held close to their thorax, stirred as Centauri tried to right himself.

"Centauri? What...?" the Doctor slurred, rubbed his forehead. He blinked, then realized their positions and stood, helping Centauri up. "Are you alright? Where's Hannah? Is the building—"

He didn't quite manage to finish his last question as it was soon drowned out by the ear-splitting "CRA-KOOOOM!" of the building collapsing. The bridge shuddered ominously in response, and Centauri gave another little wail before hanging their head.

"Oh, Doctor, my deepest apologies," they gibbered, turning a mournful shade of navy, "but I believe Hannah was still inside. And... I do not believe she could have survived that."

There was an awkward pause. It would have been silent had it not been for the chattering current of the river and the increasingly-panicked crowd coming to see what the blazes had just happened. When Alpha Centauri looked up, they found the Doctor unable to meet their gaze. His expression was utterly unreadable save for one thing. It was clear that some part of the Doctor had just shut down wholesale.

"Doctor, are you—"

"I'm fine," said the Doctor, who was very clearly not.

"There they are!" screamed a voice behind them. A young woman was pointing in their direction with a thunderous expression on her face. "*They* brought the building down!"

Within moments, a red-faced, caterwauling mob was upon them, pulsing and undulating with barely-contained fury. Thankfully, before anyone could do them any real harm beyond a few bruises, the police arrived.

Unfortunately, the handcuffs indicated that they weren't exactly on the pair's side. The ensuing frog-march to the police station further reinforced this notion, as did the rights they were read. The deal was sealed when the cell door slammed shut.

All in all, the Doctor thought as he sat on the cold steel bunk, he'd been involved in worse miscarriages of justice.

"How's it going in there?" Sentreal muttered, just loud enough for Clivix and Jadescales to hear. For a couple moments, he received no response, hearing nothing but the low hum of the sconce outside the citadel's archive. Before he could ask again, however, Jadescales's formal tones met his auditory receptors.

"Nothing yet, I'm afraid," she said. "Just continue keeping a lookout."

"Alright, alright," Sentreal replied.

He didn't see why he had to stand guard while they did all the work. After all, he had more limbs than they did. That said, the fact that he had more of a chance of incapacitating any attackers with his roots like he had done on the way here made him being their first line of defense more reasonable. The towering dignitary sighed and continued looking up the staircase to ensure the ladies were not disturbed.

Inside the room, Clivix was frowning at a birth certificate. Jadescales looked over from where she sat amidst a small pile of parchment. "Is that it?" she asked.

"No... but King Eskal apparently only had seven phalanges on his feet," Clivix replied.

"Interesting, but not helpful."

"Indeed." Clivix continued the search in the final drawer. It was here or nowhere. The old Sea Devil took a deep breath and slowly pulled the drawer open... only to find it empty save for

a small creature that looked to be somewhere between a spider and a snail. Almost like a clawless hermit crab.

The hermit spider uttered a crackly hiss, then scuttled away through a hole in the back of the drawer. Its shell briefly got stuck in the hole and rattled a little as the creature tried to pull itself free. Finally, with a little pop, the shell vanished.

And that was when Clivix saw it.

Yellowed parchment peeked through the hole. A sheet was hidden underneath the cabinet!

“Jadescales, come here! I think I have something!” Clivix rasped. Her Foamasi companion was at her side in an instant, papers rustling behind her. Wrinkled eyestalks focused on the splash of color amidst the mahogany. They gently pulled the drawer out and pulled the document up, blowing away the dust. Jadescales began to read it aloud.

““On this, the fourteenth day of the wet season in the Year of Our Lord Aggedor...” she began, trailing off as she skimmed the considerable amount of text above the actual birth information. “My word, they do get a bit long-winded, don’t they? Ah, here it is. ‘At 19:53, the first twin was born. His father, the noble and wise King Pelleas, named him Pelenat.’ That’s it!”

“Excellent!” Clivix said. “Now we just have to... Jadescales, what’s wrong?”

Jadescales had frozen on the spot, a look of fear in her eyes. Clivix paled as she heard the whine of Martian sonic disruptors charging up. She looked to the exit to see the shriveled old records keeper flanked by two mighty Ice Warriors, who were indeed aiming their weapons at the two women. A third had an unconscious Sentreal in a headlock.

Clivix wondered why she had enjoyed being Martian ambassador so much. If she made it out of this alive her first course of action was going to be requesting a post on Dulkis. Ice Warriors, she had decided, weren’t as honorable as they liked everyone to think.

Chapter Nine

Comings and Goings

“I will never return to this planet after this is over!” Alpha Centauri declared in a furious squeak.

They paced incessantly back and forth along the concrete from the cell’s door to the opposite window. If the Doctor had to guess, his friend had paced the short distance enough times to reach a mile. A rather striking shade of scarlet, blotched by ever-shifting black, was throbbing across their skin, doing a remarkable impersonation of a lava lamp.

“I have never been treated so deplorably *in my life!*” they seethed.

This was not an inconsiderable statement, considering Alpha Centaurans frequently lived into their mid-to-late thousands. Alpha Centauri himself was almost 4500 years old.

“Look, pacing and shouting isn’t doing anyone any good, my dear chap. Sit down,” the Doctor said reasonably, leaning back against the brick wall.

“Absolutely not! I am far too overcome at the moment!” came the indignant shriek.

“Please yourself, then,” the Doctor replied.

Eventually, Alpha Centauri wore themselves out, collapsing onto their bunk. Their skin remained the ugly blotched scarlet, if a bit muted, as they dozed. The Doctor laid back and was soon sleeping as well.

It was fitful, with every dream being Hannah yelling at him for failing her as woman the Doctor could only presume was Hannah’s mother sobbed disconsolately behind his late companion. Finally, the Doctor woke up a couple hours later, a little after first light, when the door to the cell shrieked open. Centauri was roused as well, color regaining their vivid hue almost at once.

A young officer stood on the opposite side of the threshold. Her waifish physique combined with her rosy cheeks struck the Doctor as being rather at odds with her profession’s demands. For her part, the officer stared at Alpha Centauri incredulously. The Doctor supposed that the ambassador’s current color would put anyone who wasn’t expecting it on the back foot.

“Uh, excuse me,” the young woman said. “I’m here to release you.”

“And about time, too, young lady,” the Doctor announced, climbing to his feet and holding out a hand to silence his companion. He walked to the door and looked down at the officer, who stood her ground. “Well, are you going to step aside?”

“You’re not the one being released, sir.”

The Doctor blinked. “Excuse me?”

“You are to remain here and await the king’s judgement. The ambassador, on the other hand, is free to go. Something about diplomatic immunity,” the officer explained. Clearly, the news of Peladon’s apparent departure from the Federation hadn’t yet trickled down Mount Megeshra.

“I cannot leave the Doctor,” said Alpha Centauri, having almost returned to their normal shade and sounding markedly less hysterical. “He either leaves with me, or I stay.”

The officer sighed, bringing her hand to her face as she bowed her head, shaking it and muttering something that sounded suspiciously like “one-eyed freak, being all difficult.” She looked to the pair, informed them she’d look into the matter and return momentarily, then slammed the door in the Doctor’s face. He scowled.

“Did you like her?” he asked Alpha Centauri. “I didn’t like her.”

“She was very rude,” the hexapod replied.

“Okay, good, that wasn’t just me then.”

After a few minutes, the officer returned with two others.

“The king is awake and will pass judgement on you now,” the young woman announced. “If you’ll please join your escorts, they will take you to the Citadel.” She gestured to the burly officers that flanked her. The Doctor smiled broadly at her as Alpha Centauri shuffled out.

“Yes, I know what the term ‘escort’ means, young lady,” he said, joining the two officers behind her. “Now, let’s not dilly-dally, eh? I’ve been waiting for this audience with the king since I was exiled and he attempted to have me assassinated.”

The young woman blinked. “Attempted to have you *what*, sir?” she asked incredulously.

“Assassinated. Killed. Offed. Done in. Need I continue?”

“No, I understand.”

“Good. Check the Ice Warrior’s weapon system once you pull him from the wreckage,” the Doctor instructed as the officers began to lead him and Alpha away. He walked backwards, calling back to her as he grew farther away. “Its built-in weapons system should have a log of how many times the weapon was fired, and timestamps for each discharge. I’m putting *you* in charge of that personally! Just take off the helmet and check by the right earhole! *Don’t forget!*”

And then he was yanked around the corner by his collar, leaving the young officer feeling very disconcerted.

The mines were pitch black without the overhead lamps to light them. Hannah wasn’t sure if she could vaguely make out shapes moving through the blackness or if her mind was just playing tricks on her, but she didn’t care. If this octobot (or whatever it was called) didn’t put her down soon, she was going to just... just... well, she didn’t know what, as everything she’d done thus far had failed, but...

Oh, what was the use, she thought despairingly. She was up shit creek without a paddle this time. With the Doctor and Alpha dead—

As soon as she thought it, it became real. Her best friend, her teacher, and a whole lot more... dead. No one could come back from death — well, not unless they were as depraved as

the Master, but even then, it hadn't exactly worked out terribly well for him, had it? Nonetheless, Hannah quietly began to cry, to mourn the Doctor's passing.

She had been the one who had sneezed. *She* had been the one who had tipped the Ice Warrior off.

It was all her fault.

After another hour of the robot stumbling around in the dark, Hannah had cried herself dry for the time being. Now she'd lapsed back into irritation.

'Honestly,' she thought, 'this thing has a worse sense of direction than Mister Magoo!'

It didn't help that the continued darkness was making her paranoid that she had actually just spontaneously gone blind. But then, a wave of what could only be described as "avoidance" washed over her. A strong feeling that she shouldn't be there, much like a creepy old house or certain parts of the desert at night, only magnified tenfold. She physically shuddered and tried to pull away from the spot, but the tendrils held her fast. The robot stopped, as if realizing something, then began to walk towards the wall.

"Oh, come on, your sense of direction can't be *that* bad!" Hannah wailed. And then, to her surprise and relief, the avoidance flooded away. They had passed through the wall, which Hannah belatedly realized wasn't a wall at all. It was a holographic projection — a feint. But for what? To dissuade nosy spelunkers or miners?

A faint pink light was bleeding towards them from the far end of the tunnel, and was growing marginally brighter the closer the robot got to it. Finally, it exited the tunnel, emerging into a large chamber. In its center was what seemed at first glance to be an enormous hunk of rose quartz the size of a house, hollowed out and lit up by what must be a truly enormous bulb. It wasn't terribly bright, but the light still suffused the chamber with a gauzy pink glow.

Hannah absently gave a little mental cheer over the fact she'd not gone blind, then realized that the giant gem was sat upon some sort of enormous dais, and had a gangplank emerging from one side. The robot loped towards it, and an oval-shaped section of the gem pushed back inside, then raised up.

The interior was sleek and finely-carved, and coated with some sort of chrome covering, presumably to prevent damage to the quartz. The robot walked up the gangplank and inside, the oval-shaped door resuming its position.

Hannah's mind was racing — where did this thing find a gem this large? Why had it hollowed it out to use as a spaceship? What was it doing here in the mines? How did it get in?

Before any answers could make themselves known, Hannah found herself on her own two feet once again, but with one tendril wrapped tight around her arm. She tried to yank herself free, but it was no good. With a grunt, she looked at the floating lump of coal, which she assumed to be the robot's head.

"Y'know, I'm not going anywhere," she said. "You can let go."

"Ah, Drone XJ9. We were beginning to fear your directional circuits had failed," said a synthetic voice from the gloom. "Welcome back to the Jewel."

Clivix and Jadescales looked at Thalaan with expressions that were nothing short of murderous. The proof had been in their hands, and then that old codger had rudely snatched it away from them and foisted them off to the Ice Warriors. Now they were here in the throne room, looking up at the smug snake in the universe, completely at his mercy.

“You know, I must say... this is a good position for you,” Thalaan jeered. “On your knees, prostrate before me. An excellent way to solve this little insolence problem the both of you possess.”

“Drop dead,” Clivix bit out, just as Jadescales hissed, “Go to hell!”

Thalaan tutted mockingly, wagging a finger at them. “That’s no way to address royalty. You should know better, seeing as you are dignitaries.” He then looked around the room. “Now, who has the list of charges?”

“I do, your excellency,” chimed a guard, striding forward with a scroll of parchment.

“Good. Read it aloud. Just the crimes, however. I haven’t got all day.”

The guard cleared his throat, unfurled the scroll, and began to read. “You are hereby charged with grand larceny, breaking and entering, armed trespass, murderous intent...” The list went on for some time, the charges growing ever more ridiculous and flimsy, before finally, the guard finished with, “and the most heinous crime of being non-Martian extraterrestrials.”

Clivix spluttered, agog. “Since when is *that* a crime?!”

“Since just before you were brought in here,” the guard replied. If the grin on his face were any more smug, Jadescales mused, a new word would have to be invented just for the occasion.

In the corner, Nephrys the Gastropod bristled, but said nothing. She had intended to remain in her quarters until the shuttle had arrived, but it had been waylaid by a freak spatial electrical phenomenon. Needing to eat, she had gone down to the kitchens before being caught by a guard and dragged here to the throne room.

“A very serious list of charges,” Thalaan intoned gravely, eying the pair. He paused for a moment, tapping his chin, then smiled evilly. “The sentence is execution, to be carried out effective immediately. If my allies would be so kind?”

The same two Ice Warriors from the archive stomped forward, powering up their sonic disruptors. Needle-sharp teeth showed in their lipless smiles. Clivix hated them with every step, and Jadescales couldn’t watch. Nephrys, meanwhile, had slithered forward.

“I must object!” she cried.

“Must you?” Thalaan grunted in annoyance.

“As an independent observer, I cannot condone this baseless execution!”

“As an independent observer, you are in no position to defy my will!” Thalaan shouted back. “And your allegation of baselessness is in itself baseless!”

“I disagree!” the gastropod argued. “The bulk of that list was fabricated — presumably for your own perverse amusement — and the charges that *do* hold water are not ones that warrant such a harsh punishment! You are out of line!”

“Funny, I was about to tell you the same thing! Guards, take her away.” Thalaan waved a hand and two guards walked up, only to blanch a little. Nephrys’s attendants were baring their scouring instruments dangerously. The acid contained within could easily strip the guards’ flesh from their bones.

Thalaan saw this and growled. “Fine, you may remain. But one more outburst or any attempt to interfere and you shall be next in line for interfering with sovereign law.”

Nephrys looked ready to argue, but it seemed her righteous fury’s Achilles’ heel was the business end of a Martian sonic disruptor and a hungry look from one of the executioners.

Clivix reached a webbed hand out to Jadescales, who took it.

“We did the right thing,” she rasped.

“I know,” Jadescales replied, giving the hand a squeeze. “I just wish things hadn’t turned out like this.”

“At your leisure, warriors,” Thalaan droned.

The weapons’ whine shifted; they were ready to let loose the sonic disruption. Just as they fired, however, the doors opened and in strode the Doctor and Alpha Centauri. The hexapod shrieked as the Doctor cried out, “What in the name of sanity do you think you’re doing!?”

The Martian behind Jadescales had whirled around to see the distraction and accidentally fired at the newcomers. The Doctor leapt out of the way, clearly assuming that Alpha Centauri would do the same. However, the sonic disruption grazed them, eliciting another shriek. The Doctor looked up to see the hexapod on the ground, bright orange with pain.

Clivix cried out then as another disruption filled the air, followed by a meaty “thunk!” as her body hit the ground. The Doctor was on his feet and rushing to help her in an instant, but two guards grabbed him on Thalaan’s order, holding him tight by the arms. He struggled and roared in frustration, watching helplessly as the old Sea Devil twitched and moaned in agony before breathing her last.

“**NO!**” the Doctor bellowed.

Thalaan laughed uproariously at this and the Doctor fixed him with deadly expression.

“*You!*” he hissed.

“Doctor!” Nephrys cried. “I tried to stop him, I did! But... but...”

“But you finally found a backbone only to lose it again straightaway. Take Alpha Centauri and get out of here!”

Nephrys and her attendants complied. No one seemed willing to stop them. The Doctor, meanwhile, had finally ripped himself free of the guards’ hold and was glowering thunderously at Thalaan. It looked very much like he was trying not to leap across the room to strangle the false king.

The tension in the air was electric, and crackled dangerously between them. No one knew who would break the silence first. Really, no one *wanted* to know.

Hannah stared mutely as another robot almost identical to the drone loped out from the shadows. It was slightly smaller in height, with slimmer tendrils. Instead of an ugly lump of coal, floating over the newcomer’s body was a tiger’s eye gem in an upside-down pear cut, looking very much like an ornate teardrop.

“Bring the flesh forward,” it instructed, gem pulsing with light as it spoke. “As Secondary, it is my duty to inspect it.”

Hannah was yanked forward by the mute drone until she was face-to-gem with the Secondary. Two tendrils wrapped around her shoulders and shoved her to her knees. She looked up at the robot, frowning heavily.

“Excuse me!” she exclaimed. “I’m not a piece of meat, you know!”

“Aren’t you, indeed?” Her captor seemed intrigued, and a bright light akin to an old-timey flashbulb burst from its torso, blinding Hannah briefly. She blinked furiously, unable to rub the annoying spots out of her vision. A creaking noise issued from somewhere in the Secondary, sounding almost like a note of disappointment.

“Your statement is patently incorrect,” it said. “Scans show that you are quite literally a large, mobile piece of meat. Approximately five feet, seven inches tall and one-hundred and—”

“Hey! It’s rude to reveal a lady’s weight!”

“Moreover, you are *not* the piece of meat we are looking for. A pity. But it cannot be helped now.” The Secondary’s gem swiveled slightly towards the Drone. “The saturation of artron energy in this flesh makes it worthy of preservation... if only just.”

“Gee, way to make a girl feel wanted,” Hannah remarked. The robots ignored her.

“Take it to storage on your way to recharge. I will inform the Foremost.” Without another word, the Secondary loped back into the shadows, where Hannah could hear another door open and close. Drone XJ9 was already pulling her out of the room and into a corridor. They made three lefts before a door was opened along the wall and Hannah was unceremoniously dumped inside.

“Wait! Can’t we just—”

The door slammed shut behind the Drone.

“—talk about this... Oh my God, today *sucks*.”

“If you think *you’re* having a bad day,” said a new, yet very familiar voice, “you should try out the *month* I’ve had!”

Hannah hadn’t been expecting company in this cell, and quickly fished her smartphone out of her pocket. As soon as she had it, she flicked on the flashlight app, turning it in the direction of the voice. As the light hit the cell’s other occupant, she gasped.

“I don’t look *that* bad... do I?” asked Thalaan.

Chapter Ten

Going Down

Lady Efaxyr had woken up to find H'skrr's bed decidedly empty. Alarm bells went off in her head at this, prompting her to quickly shower and grab a small portion of fruit to eat on her way down to the throne room. By the time she arrived, she could almost feel the tension pouring out of the room through the mighty double doors. Before she could open them herself, however, Nephrys exited with her attendants, supporting a shocked Alpha Centauri.

"Please stand aside," Nephrys said.

Efaxyr did so, watching as the procession made its way out of the entrance hall and presumably along to the infirmary. She then entered the throne room, only to find the Doctor of all people, looking ready to pounce on the King. Words hadn't begun to form in her head before the Doctor spoke.

"You pathetic, worthless little man!" he shouted, hands balled up into fists at his sides, knuckles white. "You disgust me! You are nothing more than a pitiless, desperate murderer! There is nothing about you that befits a ruler! No, you are a coward of the most craven sort!" He stopped, seething. Thalaan was red in the face and looked about ready to grab a guard's pike again for another foolhardy attempt to draw blood.

"What in the name of Tuburr is going on in here!?" Efaxyr rasped loudly.

The Doctor didn't spare her a glance, keeping his eyes laser-focused on Thalaan's. He pointed to where Clivix's body lay in a crumpled heap, the tell-tale signs of sonic disruption visible even from a distance. Efaxyr let out a low, deadly snarl of irritation.

"I demand an explanation. *Now!*"

"Thalaan has carried out an illegal murder using *your* troops," the Doctor said shortly. "Anything else patently obvious that you need me to point out? Such as the fact that this deplorable little goblin is *stark raving mad*? Or is your head still shoved into the sand on that?"

Efaxyr's rage caused the Doctor's harsh words to wash over her. This was a violation of so many different codes of honor, not to mention her trust, that it was almost mind-boggling. Thalaan had gone too far, and now he needed to suffer the consequences.

“King Thalaan,” she began in her iciest voice, “your permission to use my warriors is hereby revoked. *Permanently*. Furthermore, we shall be—”

“*You* will be doing nothing,” Thalaan barked, cutting her off. “As that is no longer your decision to make.”

“And just what gave you that impression?” Efaxyr asked, her voice brittle.

“Why, Marshal H’skrr, of course.”

“He is no marshal.”

“I beg to differ,” came an all-too-familiar voice.

As H’skrr skulked out of the shadows, a needle-sharp grin carved onto his features, Efaxyr couldn’t bring herself to feel surprised. Deep down, she always knew something like this would happen eventually. She’d just been lying to herself that it wouldn’t, and now she was paying the price.

“Greetings, Efaxyr,” H’skrr hissed. “I trust that you slept well?”

“Don’t play sweet with me, traitor. Explain yourself!”

H’skrr huffed out a laugh. “But of course. You see, we are a race of warriors, and have been since the beginning. Warriors should not be dependent on outside forces to survive! But fossils like you, Grand Marshal Charka, and the royal family would never allow our race to wean itself from the Federation’s crop-milk and these outmoded notions of honor. I have tried time and time again to make you see things the way they are *meant* to be seen, but you keep your blinders firmly in place.”

H’skrr stopped to take a breath. No one said a word, though Efaxyr looked like she was about to explode.

“So I took matters into my own claws,” H’skrr continued, “and have taken control to forge a new path forward. With Peladon at our backs, we shall return to Mars and depose the Grand Marshal and the Royals. From there, we shall secede from the Federation, the Solar System, and all other alliances to stand alone. Once again, the Martian race shall be independent and all the more powerful for it! And for this, I shall go down in history as a hero — perhaps even a god.”

The Doctor rolled his eyes. “If that’s the case, why don’t you just hurry back home now so you can get blown out of the sky and save everyone a lot of trouble?”

“You will remain silent!” rasped one of the Ice Warriors as they leveled their disruptors at the Doctor’s head. But then Efaxyr gave a sharp, hissing cry and charged forward, her own non-mounted sonic weapon aimed at H’skrr’s midsection, right over his heart. The soldiers turned and gazed in astonishment, then quickly moved to intercept their enraged former leader.

H’skrr gave a hissing laugh, firing his weapon at Efaxyr’s, knocking it out of her hand. It landed with a clatter, skidding across the floor to rest at the feet of a guard. All eyes were on the Martians now, save for one pair that was fixed on the door and moving towards it.

“Traitor! Scoundrel!” Efaxyr squawked, struggling furiously in her countrymen’s grip. “I shall see you dead for this, H’skrr! Mark my words! By the light of Phobos and Deimos, I swear this planet will not see me gone until you are dead at my feet!”

“Guards, take her and the Foamasi to the dungeons,” Thalaan instructed. “They can enjoy the company of dear Prince Pelenat... for however long he remains alive.”

“You two,” H’skrr rasped to his men, “take the sword to my room. I don’t want *my property* being stolen.”

Still thrashing ferociously while screaming death threats, curses, and oaths, Efaxyr was led away alongside a resigned and forlorn Jadescales. Thalaan inclined his head back to the Doctor. The smirk on his face was full of just as much evil as it was decadence.

“Now, as for... you...?” An empty space greeted the King’s gaze. The Doctor had slipped out while everyone was distracted. Thalaan’s face turned an ugly shade of puce as it contorted with rage, one eye twitching. “Locate the Doctor at once! If you do, throw him into the Pit of Aggedor! I shall dispatch him myself!” There was a pause as everyone gaped at Thalaan’s open bloodthirst. It was clear what he meant, but no sitting monarch had entered the Pit of Aggedor in recorded history. “*Did I stutter!?* **MOVE!**”

The throne room cleared like magic. Only H’skrr remained. Thalaan kneaded the bridge of his nose, brow furrowed and eyes shut.

“I’m surrounded by idiots.”

“Believe me, your excellency,” H’skrr replied, “I know the feeling.”

Hannah couldn’t believe her eyes. While looking exhausted, emaciated, and generally worse for wear, it was clearly the same man as the one who had exiled the group to Pelnar-over-Essel not a day prior. He arched a brow at her.

“Are you alright, miss?” he asked.

“Who are you?” she asked. “Those twin princes aren’t secretly triplets, are they?”

The man regarded her strangely. “No...? Why do you ask?”

“Uh... I’ll tell *you* that if you tell *me* why you’re stuck here. Deal?”

The offer was considered for a moment before a nod came from her fellow captive. “Deal.”

“Awesome. Whenever you’re ready, then.”

“Right... where to start...?” Thalaan muttered, stifling another wheeze. “I suppose it all started about a month ago. I’d been inspecting the mines and making sure everything was stable. ‘Putting that fancy geology degree to good use,’ they said.”

“Wait, you have a geology degree, too?” Hannah asked, face lighting up.

“From the finest school on the planet, yes!”

“Well, we have a lot to talk about,” Hannah replied. “But go on.”

“Of course. So, I was inspecting a new mine shaft when one of the miners called from the end that they’d found something. I came to investigate, found this jewel those things call it, and ordered the miners to go back. Admittedly, that was a very foolhardy thing to do, in retrospect.” Thalaan rubbed a hand over his face.

“I managed to get inside the jewel and found those beings in a state of torpor. I stumbled on my way in and landed on a console, which caused them to wake up — and then they took me captive. Deemed me ‘worthy of preservation’ — whatever *that* means. That was a month ago now; I’ve been languishing here ever since.” Thalaan sighed. “Aggedor knows why no one has come looking for me.”

“There’s a couple reasons for that, actually...” Hannah replied.

“Oh? And those are?”

“Well, first and foremost is that there’s another Thalaan up there acting like a total jackass and basically being the worst king since... uh... since your last evil ruler. Sorry, not a history buff, so I don’t know. There’s also the weird... well, best way to describe it is a ‘holographic aversion field’, I guess? Anyway, they have one of those over the entrance to this part of the mines.”

Thalaan blinked. His left eyelid twitched. He blinked again. “Excuse me?”

“Those things have replaced you with a clone or a double or something,” Hannah said. “And they didn’t bother to get the personality right, apparently. Mind you, I just arrived the other day with my friend, so I’m basically coming into the whole shebang a bit late.”

“Well then, please tell me of everything that’s transpired since you got here,” Thalaan urged her. “I need to know.”

Hannah nodded and began to think. “Um... let’s see... I guess I first noticed something was wrong was when your evil twin stormed dinner with a platoon of Ice Warriors. He threatened to kill anyone who disagreed with his fake birth certificate, then declared himself to be the rightful king.”

Shlastro looked up from the desk as the door opened, hoping that it was his mother. He’d been worried when she hadn’t returned with news that the situation had been resolved and they would be leaving directly. But, true to his word, he hadn’t left their room in case his presence might foul things up. When the Doctor hurried in and shut the door behind him, however, the hybrid’s face fell a little.

“Oh, Doctor...” he muttered. Then he remembered that the Doctor had been exiled and looked the man up and down. “Excuse me, but weren’t you cast out?”

“Yes, I was, but I came back and tried to avert your mother’s execution,” the Doctor said hurriedly. “However, they held me back. I’m sorry, Shlastro. Your mother is dead at the hands of Thalaan and his Ice Warriors.” The hybrid paused, closing his eyes and listening. Footsteps began to approach from down the hall and the Doctor dove under the bed, which was currently occupied by a dozing Sentreal.

“I’m not here!” he hissed, then pulled the covers down to hide gap between the bedframe and the floor. Shlastro blinked at the display in bemusement, trying to comprehend what the Doctor had told him, when two guards burst into the room.

“Have you seen a black-haired humanoid in—” Shlastro didn’t hear the rest. What the Doctor had said clicked into place in his mind. His mother had been unlawfully executed by Thalaan. His father was now a widower, bereft of the love of his life, and Shlastro himself would never be able to... to... do *anything* with his mother ever again. No more trips to the beach, no more lunch meetings, no more birthdays or parties or anything. The hybrid suddenly felt crushingly alone in the universe.

And these men were complicit in causing it.

“Hey, freak, I asked you a question!” one of the guards barked, snapping his fingers in Shlastro’s face. The bodyguard looked up to glower at him. He said nothing, instead quickly grabbing his weapon and shooting two blasts into each of the guards’ chests. The toppled to the floor, dead before impact. The bedclothes shifted and the Doctor’s face peeked out, eyes wide. Sentreal had been woken up by the noise as well, and was looking at Shlastro.

“What have you done?!” the Doctor spluttered, pulling himself out and up to his feet. “They were innocent—”

“*They were complicit!*” Shlastro hissed furiously. “*They could have stopped it at any time!*”

“I cannot condone this,” the Doctor began. Shlastro cut him off again.

“You don’t need to,” the hybrid replied, reeling his temper back in. “All you need to do, Doctor, is to stand aside and let what is about to happen, happen. Please do not make me shoot you, too.”

“What do you think you’re doing!?” Sentreal hissed, hopping off the bed.

“Now, Shlastro, let’s be reasonable about this,” the Doctor said, holding up his hands. Then, Shlastro’s gun was pointed at his chest, and the Time Lord’s breath hitched a little in his chest in spite of himself. “I’ve been at the business end of far worse, you know.”

“I don’t doubt that,” came the reply, “but it will kill you all the same. Just... please. Please get out of the way.”

The Doctor looked at him for a long moment, then at Sentreal, before glancing to the door. More guards would be coming soon, and the Doctor didn’t fancy the idea of being caught *yet again* over two corpses he did not make. Turning back to Shlastro, the Doctor nodded quietly, then ducked out of the room. The hybrid watched the door for a moment, then walked out, leaving Sentreal alone in the room.

“Oh, what have I done...?” the ambassador murmured.

As he marched down the stone corridor, Shlastro’s mind spiraled in a muted, yet determined panic. If he had his way, Thalaan would be dead before supper. If he had his way, they would be serving his mother’s favorite — tilapia piccata. If he had his way, his mother would be there to enjoy it with him.

But then, rarely did Shlastro get his way.

About ten minutes after departing Shlastro’s room, the Doctor had rounded a corner and heard, “Look! There’s the bastard now!”

That was why he was now running full pelt down the Citadel’s corridors, red in the face. The guards baying at his heels were slowly losing pace with him, but he knew he needed to find safe haven soon. He practically leapt down a flight of stairs, ankles screaming in protest, ducked around a series of closely-packed corners, and then slipped into the nearest room.

Head whipping around frantically and all-too-aware of the guards’ footsteps drawing nearer, the Doctor tried to plan his escape. The room itself was large, but for a wine cellar, it was on the small side. Allowing himself a brief moment of lamentation that he could not partake, the Doctor moved through the rows of racks. There seemed to be no good spot to hide that met his needs. Frustrated, he turned down a new row, only to notice a slight crack in the floor’s mortar.

A quick inspection revealed a trap-door leading down a dark vertical tunnel.

“And this,” the Doctor deduced, “must empty into the mines... I hope.”

Regardless, he got onto the ladder, closing the door behind him, and began his descent.

The last people Pelenat had expected to see joining him were Lady Efaxyr and Jadescales... well, perhaps second-to-last. He’d not bothered to hope that people would see sense and throw Thalaan in here instead of him. Still, he couldn’t bring himself to be angry with Efaxyr, despite her initial belief in Thalaan’s lies.

“There, there,” he soothed, reaching his arm through their cells’ bars and around the stone divider to rub her shoulder. It wasn’t comfortable, but Pelenat wasn’t going to let Efaxyr beat herself up over a lapse in judgement.

“I ignored all the warning signs!” Efaxyr rasped. “My own adjutant was an honorless cur and I simply dismissed it! Told myself I was paranoid! Oh, the indignity!”

“You acted the best way you knew how,” Pelenat replied. “You decided that trusting a fellow warrior was the right thing. There’s no shame in that, even if it did turn out badly.”

Efaxyr was silent for a moment, and Pelenat worried he’d said something wrong. She could easily reach up and break his arm, even at this angle. But to his relief, she patted his hand.

“Thank you, Your Highness. There’s no question. *You* are the rightful King of Peladon.”

Pelenat chuckled. “Very sweet of you to say. Not that it does us much good down here...” He paused. “Jadescales has been quiet, hasn’t she?” Retracting his arm and turning, the prince saw Jadescales slip out from between the bars of her cell. Pelenat gaped.

The Foamasi put a claw to her tiny beak, signalling for silence. She quietly padded across the loamy floor towards the two Ice Warriors at the far end of the dungeon, hands outstretched. It was going to be a bit of a reach due to the height difference, but Jadescales felt confident. In a flash, she grabbed their helmets and slammed them together. The Martians cried out as their helmets cracked and both fell over, unconscious. Jadescales had fallen too, having lost her precarious, tip-toe balance during the act.

Righting herself and nabbing the keys off the broader of the two guards, she came and released her companions.

“Never have I been so happy for my bones,” she chuckled. “Hollow and compressible, you know. Now, I don’t think I need to explain that this is a jailbreak, do I?”

Chapter Eleven

The Unusual Specimen

Shlastro felt numb.

Not physically, but emotionally. It felt like he'd never be happy again. As if his insides were empty and the only thing that could fill them was Thalaan's blood. If he'd been thinking straight, he would have realized how melodramatic that sounded, but right now he didn't care. He *needed* Thalaan dead.

As he rounded a corner, he vaguely registered Lir and Dusen emerging from a door ahead of him. He really didn't care about them now. They didn't matter. They were merely two measly sycophants blinded by avarice and a lust for power. He tried to walk past them, but Dusen caught his arm.

"Hold on a minute," he said, "what do you think you're doing with that?" He gestured to the laser rifle. Shlastro looked at him, unimpressed, before wrenching his arm back.

"What does one do with a high-pulse laser rifle, Ambassador?" he replied, lacing the last word with venom.

Lir gave a little squawk of alarm, lurching back. "He intends to kill someone? Is it me?!"

"Well, are you dead?" Shlastro deadpanned before turning away. "Doesn't look that way to me." He tried to keep going, but Dusen caught him again, accompanied by one of Lir's attendants. "Let me go."

"Not until you put the laser down," Dusen said.

"Not happening. Thalaan killed my mother. He has to pay."

Dusen looked thunderous. "Regicide! Killing the King because he dealt with your bitch mother? Pathet—"

The pulse slammed through Dusen so fast he barely had time to realize there was a gaping, smoking hole where his chest used to be. It ricocheted off the floor and burned through the sting at the tip of Lir's tail before Shlastro removed his finger from the trigger. As Dusen's smoldering corpse slumped to the ground, Lir screamed bloody murder and his attendants leapt back as if they had been burned as well. Shlastro turned away, quite unconcerned. Picking up his

pace as he went, he could hear the Mentor's voice wailing for guards, then turning on his attendants.

"Take me to the King at once, you fools! I must warn him! Now! Now! Take me now!"

To Shlastro's surprise, he didn't feel worried about the thought of Thalaan being prepared. In fact... he almost relished the challenge it presented. One part of his psyche, its voice faint under the hammering of his heart, began to grow very concerned.

Shlastro ignored it and continued down the stone corridors.

Hannah was somewhat used to seeing Thalaan red in the face. This time, however, she wasn't on the receiving end, getting called everything but a child of God. No, the real prince was angry for a far more justified reason.

"That bastard!" he shouted. "Running around pretending to be me — poorly, at that — and sully my good name! Oh, by Aggedor, this is just... intolerable! We have to get out and stop him!"

"I couldn't agree more," Hannah replied.

"I mean, I don't even *want* to be king!"

Hannah blinked. "You don't?"

Thalaan looked at her as though she'd just suggested robbing a blind widow for kicks. "Of course not!" he said. "Why would I want to be in charge of a whole planet? Ugh! Leave that to Pelenat. I'm far happier becoming the Royal Geological Minister, like my brother and I had discussed. Doing fun, engaging things like consulting the mines and up on the Gravitron, stuff like that. Far more interesting than intergalactic politics where I wouldn't know where to begin or what to do with myself."

"Okay," Hannah said, "I think I get the point."

"Sorry," Thalaan replied, rubbing the back of his neck. "I get a bit excited, y'know?"

"We all have our moments," Hannah chuckled. "Anyway, as a fellow... uh... geology enthusiast, let's say — I can appreciate where you're coming from. But something's bugging me."

"And that is?" the prince asked expectantly, leaning back against the wall.

"Why is your evil twin — the android, not Pelenat — er, why would he be doing all this?"

Thalaan was quiet for a moment, then said. "I think I recall the aliens saying something about wanting to strip the planet of its minerals. Yes, I'm sure of it. I remember I rather vociferously protested at that, having a vested stake *in* said minerals. They didn't listen, instead saying that, aside from the trisilicate, Peladon's minerals were perfect for their needs."

"Needs?" Hannah parroted. "What needs? I know they're gems or something— and, oh, gosh, I just had the best thought."

"What?"

"I'm totally calling them the Crystal Gems now."

"Uh... why exactly?"

"I'll show you the video later," Hannah said in lieu of explanation. "But what you said about the aliens... oh! Oh wait, that's it!" A broad grin blossomed on Hannah's face. "The reason he's acting like this is to ensure that the Ice Warriors — who I'm guessing have the strongest military in the Federation—"

"Correct."

“Awesome. Well, not awesome, but anyway...” Hannah took a quick breath and tried to calm herself a bit. Epiphanies, she was finding, were quite the rush. “It’s to ensure that the Ice Warriors are able to defend the planet if need be, and any other allies would be used to help mine the planet out. He’s doing exactly what they want. That said, he’s doing it rather cack-handedly. He’s ready to storm through and scream down problems, like Joffrey off *Game of Thrones*. Hmm. If I had to guess, that’s probably because the signal’s a bit weak, having to go through almost a half-mile of solid dirt and rock. General directions without a great deal of finesse.”

Thalaan nodded through her explanation. “Yes... yes, that makes sense, more or less. Good deduction work. But that leaves us with one question,” he continued. “How do we get out?” He gestured to the wall and door. “That’s a foot of solid quartz. We’ll never get through.”

Hannah’s face fell. “Oh. Right... Jeez, I wish the Doctor was here. He’d know.”

It was a miracle that the dungeon’s escapees managed to slip past all the guards — Pel and Martian — to make it to Efaxyr’s room, but they’d done it. Now sequestered safely inside, Jadescales was quietly washing off while Pelenat had shucked his muddy pants and made a makeshift kilt out of a towel.

“I look ridiculous,” he remarked as he stared at his reflection.

“I don’t think that matters just now,” Efaxyr responded.

“Well, of course, but still...” He trailed off. “Still, at least I have *something*. Going half-naked in front of everyone would be embarrassing.” The prince looked back over his shoulder before calling to Jadescales. “You done in there, yet?”

“Yes,” she replied as the water shut off. She exited, grabbed a towel, and began to dry herself. Having no real clothes to speak of, she didn’t have much modesty. Neither of the others really cared right now. Efaxyr finally let out an “ah-ha!” and lifted her sword from the case alongside two handheld disruptors.

“H’skrr still has my own disruptor,” she hissed, “but these portable spares will do perfectly well. Catch.” She threw one of them to Jadescales. “Protect him with your life, fight with honor, and go in peace.” The Ice Lady bowed to them before moving to the bed.

“What about you?” Pelenat asked.

“I shall wait here for H’skrr,” Efaxyr replied simply. She placed her sword across her crossed legs, disruptor between them, and held her arms up. Taking a deep breath and slowly letting it back out, she closed her eyes. “In the meantime, meditation shall help steel me for my task.”

“Killing H’skrr?” Jadescales guessed, grabbing Pelenat’s arm and moving to the door.

“Correct.” She cracked an eyelid and nodded at them. “Goodbye, my friends.”

“Best of luck,” the Foamasi intoned. Pelenat echoed her before they slipped out into the hall. Now, it was only a matter of time.

Lorvis woke slowly and yawned a huge yawn before making his way into the bathroom. All through the shower, he wished Pelenat was there with him, solid and soft against his torso. With a sigh, he stepped out and went to dry off and dress. As he did so, he decided that enough was enough.

He was going to rescue Pelenat if it was the last thing he ever did.

"I'm going out," he called from the front door.

"If you see the Doctor or his friends, tell them to come back soon, would you?" Keese called. "They've been missing since last night."

"I will!" he replied. "See you!"

And with that, he took the stairs two at a time before heading out into the crowds.

To the Doctor's relief, the passage had indeed led down into the mines. Lighting an everlasting match then stowing the package into his back pocket once more, he set off into the gloom. He didn't recall much of the mines from his previous visits. Things looked far more up to date, from what he could gather in the faint matchlight, and they'd doubtlessly been expanding further and further down for trisilicate and other valuable minerals and ores.

It didn't take long for the Doctor to reach an area of interest, however. As he made his way past a section of the wall, he felt a strong sense of revulsion pass through him, making him wish above all else to go back. Initially, he did so... then he realized what had happened and turned back, ignoring the emotional distress that was trying to drive him away. Frowning, he ran his hands along the wall of the tunnel, only to find one section was holographic. Smirking, the Doctor walked right through it, feeling the revulsion vanish.

"Well, someone doesn't want to be found, do they?" he commented as he walked down the tunnel into the pink light. Once he reached the ship, he walked forward to inspect it. He gave the side a cursory lick that prompted a hefty grimace. "78 percent rose quartz, four percent oxidized copper, and 18 percent... something else. Something... hm! Something organic! But what?"

Before he could ruminate on it any further, the Doctor found a powerful tentacle wrapped around his left upper arm. He looked up, unsurprised to find the strange robot from the construction site looming over him. A flat smile greeted it.

"Ah, yes, I was wondering when we'd meet again," the Doctor said. "I don't think we had the chance to become properly acquainted before. I'm generally referred to as the Doctor. And you?"

The robot said nothing, instead yanking him around the ship, up the gangplank, then inside in a matter of moments. The Doctor managed to yank free in the dim control room, and rubbed his arm. He shot his captor a dirty look.

"At least I know who to send my medical bills to," he grunted, looking around. "How interesting... Am I to take it that this is some sort of hollowed-out cadaver repurposed for interstellar travel?" Predictably, the robot remained taciturn. "Furthermore, I'd like to inquire as to the nature of said organism, if it can rightly be called that. Less than 20 percent organic, but clearly quite intelligent and possessing a formidable technological prowess — well, on a certain scale, anyway. Nowhere near, say, the Osirans. But the question is, what are you? Who do you serve?"

"The Drone serves me." The voice came from another robot behind the Doctor. He looked at it over his shoulder before turning to face it.

"And *you* are?"

"The Secondary of this Jewel."

"I see. Who do you serve?"

"The Foremost," it said as though this explained everything.

"Alright, the Foremost. And who does the Foremost serve?"

The Secondary was quiet for a moment. “You are inquisitive. A trait we do not often see in the flesh.”

“In that case, you must not get out much,” the Time Lord remarked.

“An accurate assessment, given our long imprisonment here.” It stalked forward, reaching out with its thick tendrils, but the Doctor sidestepped it. The Secondary sounded somewhat exasperated when it intoned, “Do not resist, or it shall be very painful for you.”

“Oh, but I’m *not* resisting,” the Doctor rejoindered. “I’m merely wishing to continue this interview unencumbered. Surely that can be arranged?”

“Your command of language will not help you now,” the Secondary stated flatly. “Hold it!”

The Doctor, confused, stopped in his tracks for a brief moment to process whether the Secondary meant ‘stop’ or ‘grab this creature!’ It became clear when the Drone once more had him snared in its tentacles and shoved him to the floor that it was the latter. A disgruntled sigh passed the Doctor’s lips.

“Stupid, stupid Doctor...”

“On the contrary,” the Secondary replied as it loped forward, “you are highly intelligent. Ferociously, even. Amongst the other flesh, you are a decidedly unusual specimen. In fact, you were our target from before. How fortuitous that you made your way to us independently.” It regarded the Drone once more. “Hold it still. I shall bring forth the Foremost.”

Striding over to a panel to the Doctor’s right, the Secondary keyed in a series of codes. A new voice rang out, higher and grating in a way that made the Doctor’s ears ring. “*Speak, Secondary.*”

“We have collected the unusual specimen, Foremost. Do you wish to inspect it?”

“*Of course. I shall be out presently.*”

“Understood, Foremost.”

A panel along the opposite wall slid open about a minute later, and a much taller robot with eight spindly legs and six tentacles stalked out. Floating above its base was a trilliant-cut diamond that shone like a star in the night sky. It tilted downwards, presumably looking at the Doctor.

“Yes,” the Foremost intoned, looking larger than life as it loomed over the Doctor like a ravaging predator. “*This one is valuable. I am certain of that. It cannot be allowed to evade capture again. Drone XJ9 shall take it to the operating theatre at once. Sliced open and laid bare in such a manner, its secrets shall be ours. Vivisection **never** fails.*”

EPISODE FOUR

Chapter Twelve

The Cabochon

“Wait!” the Doctor cried. “Before you do that, am I allowed a last request?”

“No, you are not,” the Foremost grated, gesturing for the Drone to remove him.

“But what do you have to lose by telling me?” the Doctor pointed out as the Drone began to drag him away. He clung to a nearby piece of machinery with all his might, digging his fingers into a little cranny as hard as he could. In response, the Drone tugged as hard as it could. The Doctor’s back cracked loudly and he winced in pain.

“He does make a good point, Foremost,” the Secondary muttered. “He is in our clutches now. What chance does he have of escaping?”

The Foremost considered this, while the Drone continued to try and pull the Doctor free. Several more loud cracks echoed through the room and the Doctor yelled in pain. “*Release him.*”

The Drone complied, and the Doctor dropped face-first onto the floor with an “oomph!” Raising his head up, his nostrils flared around a disgruntled snort before he righted himself. “Thank you.” He turned back to the Drone. “More to add to the medical bills, I hope you realize.”

“*Either ask your questions or let them die with you on the vivisection slab.*”

“Yes, yes, alright. Calm your circuits,” the Doctor muttered, rubbing his back. “Where to start...? Ah. Yes. Right. What are you all, exactly?”

“We are the Cabochon,” the Secondary stated, “servitors to the High and Mighty Bijou.”

“That rings... well, not a bell, but maybe a little triangle,” the Doctor replied. “But I can safely say that I’ve never encountered you nor your masters before.”

“*That is to be expected,*” intoned the Foremost. “*We do not often leave the homeworld. The universe is an unforgiving place for precious stones. They may shatter us, trail us back to harvest our deities, or worse... Risks outweigh benefits.*”

“I suppose I see your point. However, in that case, why construct your vessel out of what I can only assume is a Bijou corpse?”

“Almost all our society comes from the Bijou. They give us life, they give us purpose, and from themselves, technology and industry.”

“How do you mean?”

“All that you see around you is crafted from the Bijou. The walls, the floors, the machinery, and the hardware inside: all made from expired Bijou.”

The Doctor nodded. “I see... Another query: if you’re an isolationist state, then why are you three here on Peladon?”

The tiger’s eye rotated to meet the diamond. A brief crackle of static electricity arced between them, almost imperceptible to the naked eye. They were clearly debating whether or not this was worth explaining to an outsider. A moment passed, then two, then three more... The Doctor yawned pointedly and tapped the watch on his wrist.

“Look, I haven’t got all day. Either tell me or don’t,” he informed them archly.

The gems bobbed back into place and the Secondary’s chassis seemed to bristle a little, given the rattling it produced. “Our homeworld, Diadem—”

“Diadem?” the Doctor parroted in surprise. “I almost went there instead of here!”

“Then you would have been vivisected that much sooner and caused us far less trouble,” the Foremost replied. *“Continue, Secondary.”*

“At once, Foremost. Diadem will soon be bereft of Bijoukind unless we, their devoted and beloved Cabochon, bring back new material for our gods to use. We saw that this world, Peladon as it came to be known, had the minerals we desired in abundance. But during our Jewel’s descent, we were struck by an unknown object and sent into freefall. We slammed into the planet — not hard enough to break the Jewel, given this area was a desert at the time — and were buried. Even then, the substance they call trisilicate was present in abundance. Its preponderance prevented us from leaving, and we fell into a state of torpor.”

The Doctor listened to all this carefully, taking it in and nodding along. When the Secondary stopped, he spoke. “You said this area was a desert at the time of your crash. How long ago was that?”

“Two hundred thousand years.”

The Doctor let out a low whistle. “My, my, you have taken quite the nap. Now, am I correct in assuming that the mining of the trisilicate has removed enough to awaken you — specifically the new area they’ve been mining just outside?”

“Indeed,” the Foremost confirmed, its gem bobbing in agreement. *“We shall use the android we have planted amongst the flesh to get rid of all non-necessary foreigners, then enact our plans. Once that is complete, we shall fashion a shield onto our Jewel and generate enough thrust to explode out of the mountain.”*

The Doctor’s expression grew more and more scandalized and infuriated as the Foremost spoke. Finally, he burst out with, “But your trajectory would take you right through the castle, not to mention the fallout from your actions would kill all the people in Pelnar-over-Essel!”

“They will already be dead and gone by the time we depart. As will you, as a matter of fact. So, as you can see, there really is no cause for concern,” the Secondary assured him, as if what it had said wasn’t completely heinous. “Furthermore, the flesh has little to no worth. It is beneath us to use them for anything more than slaves.”

The look on the Doctor’s face could have caused a Dalek to drop dead on the spot. “You could have picked any other planet — one that was uninhabited — but you picked this one. I will stop you dead in your tracks or die trying long before I let you enslave a populace and destabilize an intergalactic government just for a bunch of rocks!”

“That is enough. Drone XJ9, take it to the vivisection slab!”

However, before the Drone could comply, the Doctor managed to reach into his pocket and produced a small salt packet marked “Kronkburger King.” He lurched back, startling the Drone, and threw the salt into open slats in its casing.

“Just like gold dust to a Cyberman,” he remarked.

In a flash, he was free and lunging out of the way as the Drone went berserk. It lurched this way and that, tendrils whipping about like mad, as the Foremost and Secondary tried to stabilize it. It knocked them both senseless and then rammed the nearby wall so hard that it broke through. The Doctor shielded himself from the debris, though he was curious about the shrieks he heard from inside. Who else was in here?

The Drone, now inactive as well, was abruptly shoved back through the gash it had made in the wall. To the Doctor’s surprise, Hannah emerged from it. As he clapped eyes on his presumed-dead companion, he practically tackled her with the force of his hug. He hugged her tight and held her like that for a long time until she thumped his back, begging for air.

“Oh, I thought I’d lost you,” he intoned, his voice desperately trying to thin the emotion from it.

“Well, surprise,” she replied, a smile playing at her lips, “you didn’t.”

“Clearly, dear girl. It may be hard to believe, but any anguish I felt over your presumed demise did not, in fact, drive me blind.” While his words were somewhat harsh, there was no heat behind them. Hannah rolled her eyes and gently punched his shoulder.

“Oh, shut up, ya big softie,” she replied.

They shared a much-needed laugh and the Doctor let her go. “So, are you going to introduce me to your new friend?” He looked to the other person and finally got a good look at him. He blinked incredulously. “Uh, hm...” Glancing back to Hannah, he muttered, “Those twin princes aren’t actually *triplets*, are they? I didn’t mishear Pelenat?”

“Nope. The Thalaan up there is an android imposter.”

“Ah, I see! And the personality and room-temperature IQ are due to the distance between the signal and the android? Makes sense.” The Time Lord nodded before turning to Thalaan and shaking the prince’s hand. “Pleasure to actually meet you, by the way, young man.”

“Likewise,” the prince chuckled. “My mother told me so many stories about you. She said you were blond, though. And you had a stalked vegetable as a brooch.”

“Celery, yes,” the Doctor confirmed. “Regeneration is a wonderful thing, you know. I can look like anyone or anything; young or old, male or female, dark, tan, or light—”

“Wait, hold on, you can what?!” Hannah interrupted, utterly shocked.

“Later, later. Right now we need to prevent this ship from ever being able to take off again and I have absolutely no idea how to do that.” He crossed to each of the consoles in turn, eyes quickly scanning over them. Finally, he jabbed a button and a dais rose up from the center of the room, causing Thalaan to yelp in surprise as he found himself standing on it. He leapt down, then stumbled back to Hannah.

“You okay?” she asked.

“Yes,” he replied with a hint of a chuckle. “Just took me by surprise, is all. What’s with that rock?”

A small area at the center of the dais opened and a pillar thrust into the air, bearing a cantaloupe-sized piece of rose quartz pockmarked by garnet, amethyst, pearl, and peridot. The Doctor beamed at it. “If the button’s label is anything to go by, *this* is the element that powers their ship. The drive, if you will.”

“How is that going to power the ship? I doubt that those elements are exactly great fuels, y’know?” Hannah said.

“There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy,” the Doctor intoned, turning back to the console and producing a small scanner from his back pocket. He waved it over the console, then glanced at the screen on its back. Flashing a little frown at it, he sighed. What little information that gleaned would have to do. The Foremost and Secondary were beginning to stir once more.

“Don’t quote Shakespeare at me,” Hannah retorted.

“Well, seeing as I’m the one who told Will to *write it*,” the Doctor replied, “I think I have the right to use it.” He then opened the main door of the ship and produced more salt packets from his pockets, proceeding to count how many there were. “Now, listen close. I want you and Thalaan to head outside and wait. I’ll be along in a moment. Oh, and take that drive with you.”

“But what are you going to do?” Thalaan asked.

“I’ll explain when we’re back up to the citadel. Now go!”

Hannah grabbed the lump of gems, grunting a bit at the weight of it, and the two rushed out. The Doctor began spreading salt over every console he could before making a line at the doors, then ran out as the Secondary cried out, “Halt!”

“Sorry, must dash!” the Doctor replied, waving as the door slammed behind him.

The Foremost stood up slowly. Its systems had been shaken badly, and their reboot was slow at best. The tall robot screeched in frustration. “*The specimens and the incitive drive must be recaptured at once!*”

“We shall have to do that ourselves,” said the Secondary. “Drone XJ9 has ceased to function. The impact has destroyed its systems and crumpled its mineral.”

“*Leave it!*” the Foremost instructed. “*We must pursue the escapees! Come, Secondary! Come quickly!*”

“Yes, Foremost!”

Chapter Thirteen

The Almost-Unanimous Decision to Kill Thalaan

Lorvis was thankful that the guards, for all their deference to most of Thalaan's demands, still had enough gumption to let him in despite his exile.

"Thank you, lads," he said with a grin. "I'll be on my way then."

He entered the main hall just as one of the delegates' bodyguards — Shlastro, he thought — stepped off the stairs. The alien had a laser rifle pointed ahead of him and his eyes were glazed over. Lorvis blinked, moving forward cautiously, hand outstretched.

"Hey there," he greeted. "What are you doing with that—"

As he reached the bodyguard, the rifle was pressed into his chest, and Lorvis froze. He sucked in a deep breath and looked the other man in the eye. Deep down, he knew he could talk his way out of this situation.

"Don't," he intoned. "It's not worth killing me over whatever has you all worked up."

"They murdered my mother." It was mostly flat; merely a statement of fact. But Lorvis could make out just enough anguish behind it that his heart sank.

"Thalaan's men?"

Shlastro nodded. "On his orders, yes. So I have to kill him."

Lorvis paused, thinking about all that Thalaan had done since his coronation. He thought about the imprisonments, the exilings, the political nonsense. He thought about his boyfriend being denied his birthright by a brazen lie... and now there was cold-blooded murder on the table. Yes, he thought, Thalaan had done enough. Looking back to Shlastro, he smiled grimly.

"Come on, I know the back way into the throne room. We'll catch him by surprise."

Sentreal was feeling much more with it now that he'd had a long rest, and brought up a thick tendril to knock on Nephrys's door. One of her attendants answered and looked him up and down. The man was clearly rather intimidated by Sentreal's towering stature and glowing amber eyes.

“Can I help you?” he asked.

“I need to speak with Ambassador Nephrys immediately,” Sentreal replied.

The man looked dubious, but ducked back inside for a moment before reappearing. “Come in.”

Nephrys was reclined over the bed, which had been stripped down to the mattress and covered in what looked like cling wrap. Presumably, this was to prevent her slime from ruining the furniture. Sentreal made his way forward, the attendants giving him a wide berth, and Nephrys’s eyestalks swivelled to meet his eyes.

“Ambassador Sentreal,” she greeted with a slight inclination of the head, “how may I help you?”

The Gastropod sounded defeated and more than a little exhausted. Sentreal supposed that after the mess this function had turned into, she was entitled to be completely done with Peladon if she wanted. However, that didn’t mean he wouldn’t present his findings.

“I have evidence that Thalaan’s birth certificate is forged,” he replied, producing the two original documents from within one of his upper cones. He’d concealed them there after grabbing them off Clivix. No one had seen... at least he hoped so. “We have to do something!”

Nephrys gave a long-suffering sigh. “My hands are still tied as it’s still an internal matter. If you wish to—”

“If I wish to do *anything*, I have to do it myself!” Sentreal boomed furiously, losing his temper. “Nephrys, you are the most ineffectual, passive pile of slime I’ve ever had the displeasure to meet. If and when I get back to my superiors, I will be informing them of how toothless the Federation is. And it will be my informed recommendation that our species either go it alone or find another alliance! You have done nothing worthwhile this whole time, and I’m *sick of it!* To think I begged them to stay when they wanted me to leave at the first hint of trouble. Perhaps I ought to’ve listened!”

With that, Sentreal whirled around on the spot and began to stalk out of the room. However, Alpha Centauri, who’d been resting on a *chaise longue* behind him, trilled loudly for him to wait. Now a sickly shade of yellow-green, the hexapod stood, doddering forward to meet Sentreal.

“Please stay for a moment,” they requested, before turning to Nephrys. “And you! Stop laying there feeling sorry for yourself!”

“Pardon me?” Nephrys replied incredulously.

“You heard me!” Centauri trilled. “I have been treated deplorably the last several days, and I’m sick of it. The Federation cannot simply stand by and allow one of its most cherished members to collapse under the thumb of an illegal sovereign! I will not stand for it! Now get off your back and help us!”

Both Sentreal and Nephrys were stunned by Centauri’s outburst. Neither thought the old hexapod had it in them, but apparently, they’d been wrong. Nephrys slowly got to her foot and slithered over.

“I suppose that now is the time...” she murmured, cowed by Centauri’s words. “I can only stand by for so long.”

“Good,” Sentreal nodded. “And, ah... sorry about what I—”

“No,” Nephrys cut in. “You were right, Sentreal. Now, let’s go deal with Thalaan.”

After the Doctor's escape, H'skrr had discussed the future of his alliance with Thalaan at length for almost two hours, and left feeling very satisfied. Things were coming up tricho-blossoms, and he wouldn't have it any other way. And with that dinosaur Efaxyr locked away, he had his room to himse—

H'skrr's train of thought derailed as he saw Efaxyr meditating on his bed. A strangled hiss of rage and perplexment ripped out of his throat, and he drew his weapon. It fired, but Efaxyr had already leapt off the bed and rolled to just in front of him.

"Idiot!" H'skrr taunted. "The idea is to get *away* from me!"

"No, it isn't," Efaxyr sibilated. The disruptor discharged three times in quick succession, right over H'skrr's heart. "You want dishonorable conduct? I'll show you dishonorable conduct, you ungrateful son of a—"

H'skrr kicked her away before she could cast any aspersions on his mother. The disruptor she held went flying. Satisfied, he stomped forward and almost had her pinned underfoot, but she rolled away and whipped around him. H'skrr growled, unable to see his periphery because of his helmet and large shoulder spikes. He turned frantically, but Efaxyr was too quick. Her sword slammed into the backs of his knees and he fell to the ground with a tremendous thud.

"Any last words, traitor?" she intoned.

"You may kill me, you old crone," H'skrr bit back, "but you shall never kill my ideology! We shall—" He didn't finish. Efaxyr drove her sword through the weak point she'd created over his heart. Blood shot out like water from a blocked hose-tip for a minute before slowing to a trickle down the front of his armor. H'skrr spat some out of his mouth with a low, feeble gurgle, then collapsed into the puddle before him. Efaxyr leaned down, and rasped into his ear.

"Those who live without honor, die without honor. Try to remember that in the next life, H'skrr."

Efaxyr did not linger to mourn. She strode out into the hall and turned on her communicator, quickly addressing all frequencies. "This is Ice Lady Efaxyr. Adjutant H'skrr is dead, and any of those who follow his mutinous example will be executed. I will *not* tolerate dissent or dishonor from any of you. Should you have an issue with my command, you will address it through the proper channels, such as armed combat or speaking to Grand Marshal Charka. Oh, and one more thing. Should any of you see the Doctor and his companion, you will assist them to the best of your abilities. Efaxyr out."

Chapter Fourteen

What to do When Impeachment Just Isn't an Option

“And that’s everything,” Thalaan finished, having brought the Doctor up to speed on his story as they ascended back into the citadel.

The Doctor nodded thoughtfully. “As I suspected.”

“You never thought the other Thalaan was an android,” Hannah replied.

“I meant that as soon as you mentioned android doubles, their plan rather fell into place,” the Doctor replied. He peered around a corner, checking for guards. Seeing that it was clear, he ducked around it, signalling for them to follow. “It also helps that the Cabochon were very forthcoming with their plans.”

“And why was that? What did they stand to gain from telling you?” Thalaan asked, a bit perplexed.

“They thought I was done for and all-but-laying on their vivisection slab in the Jewel’s operating theatre,” the Time Lord replied. They reached another corner and the Doctor froze. “Damn! Quick, press yourselves against the wall and don’t even *breathe*.”

His companions did as they were told and the Doctor followed suit. They remained stock still and silent as the grave as two guards rounded the corner, chatting about the upcoming Festival of Aggedor and how one was going to propose to his girlfriend on the opening night. As quick as they’d arrived, they were gone again.

The Doctor looked to the others, who glanced back. A series of short nods followed, and they resumed their trek up to the throne room.

Jadescales led Pelenat down the stairs and into the main hall, keeping low behind the banister to prevent themselves from being seen. Jadescales peeked a turreted eye over the stone barrier to see two large guards posted at the door. She grumbled out an oath and looked to Pelenat.

“Are you ready?” she asked quietly, holding the sonic disruptor close to her chest.

“No. I don’t want to kill anyone,” Pelenat admitted. “Those guards are just doing their duty. Why kill them for following orders?”

“But those orders involve killing us on sight,” the Foamasi hissed back.

Pelenat thought about that for a moment... then something clicked. “Hold on, we’ve been forgetting the obvious.”

“And that is?”

“Thalaan and I are twins,” the prince replied. “What’s stopping me from going over there and claiming to be him?”

“You mean aside from the fact that as soon as they see Thalaan inside the throne room, the jig is up?” Jadescales replied, fixing the young royal with a look.

“Er... well... damn.” Pelenat’s face flushed a little. “I guess it was pretty stupid.”

“No, it was a good idea in theory,” Jadescales assured him, patting his shoulder. “But I— What in the—?”

From the opposite side of the hall, a rather thin-looking Thalaan emerged, followed by the Doctor and Hannah. Pelenat gasped as the guards surrounded them in an instant.

“How did you escape the dungeons?” one demanded, clearly presuming Thalaan was Pelenat.

“Who cares?!” cried the other. He paused, inspecting Thalaan. “Hang about... he’s been down there less than a day. How could he be so emaciated?”

“Because *he’s* not Pelenat! I am!” Pelenat announced, standing up straight as Jadescales tried furiously to pull him back down.

“Natty!” Thalaan cried, clearly overjoyed. He pushed past the guards and met his twin halfway across the chamber. “Oh, Aggedor’s horn! I’ve missed you so much!”

“Care to explain—”

“That would be because the person masquerading as your brother for the past month or so is an android duplicate,” the Doctor informed him. The guards looked amazed, while Pelenat shook his head.

“I should have known!” he sighed. “I’m so sorry!”

“Don’t be,” Thalaan insisted. “You wouldn’t have been able to get me out of the cell I was in anyway.” He shuddered. “In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if my double would have tried to have you killed if you’d done anything.”

“Uh, hey, guys?” Hannah called over. “I’m super happy for you — really, I am — but we kind of have an imposter to expose.”

“Hannah’s right,” Thalaan said. “You ready to get your throne back, brother of mine?”

“Born ready,” Pelenat affirmed. He looked back to Jadescales. “You can come out now! It’s okay!”

Jadescales looked over the banister, then slowly emerged. Hannah crossed to her and gave her a light hug. Jadescales returned it.

“You’re alright?” she asked.

“Definitely,” Hannah replied. “Still gonna show me your wedding pendant once this is all said and done?”

“But of course!” Jadescales replied, as if this was the most obvious thing in the world.

“Then come on!”

“Hold it!” came a rasping voice from above them. Efaxyr stood proudly atop the balcony, brandishing her sword. “You are not doing this without me. I intend to decapitate this imposter if possible. He has impugned my honor and that of my Ice Warriors with his deception. That cannot be allowed to stand.”

“Alright, that’s fine!” the Doctor said quickly. “Now hurry down here and let’s get a move on!”

Just then, Alpha Centauri appeared, flanked by Nephrys, the Gastropod’s attendants, and Sentreal. “Oh, Doctor, there you are!” they trilled. But the Doctor didn’t have time for pleasantries.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake my dear fellow, get down here and don’t scream! We’re doing this now or never!”

Everyone hurried down the stairs and the Doctor led the whole party into the throne room, flanked by the guards. Thalaan’s face fell when he saw the original walking in, arm-in-arm with Pelenat. Lir looked perplexed, glancing from the fake, to the original, to Pelenat, then back again.

“You’re a triplet!?” he cried at last. “This sort of deception is unacceptable! I will be making a full report to the—”

“Oh, will you *shut up!*?” Jadescales cried. In a flash, she’d stormed forward past Lir’s guards and shoved the maggoty merchant’s wickerwork sleigh. It toppled over, taking Lir with it. The Mentor yelped as he hit the stone floor with a loud, squelching splat. More than a few people in the party cheered. Even Lir’s men laughed, clearly enjoying the *schadenfreude*. He began to scream for their hides, but they ignored him. Jadescales puffed up her chest. “My word, did that feel good!”

“Well, well, well,” the Doctor began, smirking at the android Thalaan, “looks like I was more right about you being a *tin-pot* tyrant than I thought. Really, I should have noticed you were an android from the outset, but—”

“Guards!” the android yelled. “Guards, execute him!” The guards stood firm, shaking their heads. The android cried out in rage, standing up from the throne. “Must I do everything myself!? You cannot even be relied upon to execute an obviously poorly-done clone!”

“I’m no clone!” Thalaan cried. “You’re an android duplicate! You’ve stolen my identity, usurped my brother’s rightful position through deceit, attempted to assassinate longtime heroes of Peladon, and—”

“*Silence!*” the android screeched, clearly intending to lunge for Thalaan. But before he could, there was a loud bang as half of his head exploded. Smoke and sparks flew everywhere, and Shlastro, who’d fired the shot, reared back in shock. He’d been expecting blood and grey matter. Lir gaped from his position on the floor. Even Lorvis cried out a particularly blue curse.

“*I will ki-ki-kill all-ll of- of y-you! I sha-sha-sha-shall p-p-paint the land- land- laaaa- of Pelllll- red wi- you-your blood-d-d-d!*” the now half-headed android ranted, spasming wildly.

Efaxyr snorted. “This will be too easy.”

She charged forth, sword bared, and swung it through the android’s neck. It sliced it cleanly like a hot knife through butter. The head went flying, landing close to Lir, who squealed in fright and tried to pull himself away. His feeble arms weren’t good at pulling his weight, however, and he didn’t get much distance between him and the destroyed head.

The android stopped dead, showers of sparks bursting from where its esophagus should have been, before falling to its knees and keeling forward. Efaxyr kicked it, prompting a shudder but no resistance.

“The deed is done,” she stated simply, stowing her sword back in its sheath.

“I will never come back to this planet as long as I live!” Lir bawled.

“And I’m sure we’ll all thank you for that!” Lorvis replied.

Before anyone could agree, however, a high-pitched rasp hissed from the doorway. “*You will all remain still!*”

The Foremost loped into the room, followed closely by the Secondary. The two robots stood tall, looming over the crowd. Several cowered before them, caught totally off-guard by their sudden appearance. Nephrys's attendants raised their scouring instruments to defend her.

"No, we won't," the Doctor replied. "You see, Foremost, Secondary, you've made a grave error in underestimating those you so crassly dismiss as 'the flesh'. We outnumber you, we can outthink you, and — perhaps most detrimental to your cause here — we have far more weapons than you do." He smiled humorlessly at them, wrapping an arm around Hannah's shoulder and steering her out of the crowd. Hannah pulled Alpha Centauri along with her.

The Secondary gave a low creak of uncertainty. "Foremost, not to cast doubt on your brilliance, of course... but perhaps we should have thought this through first?"

Before the Foremost could reply, however, the Doctor cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, "Fire away!"

It was over quickly. Between the sonic disruptor blasts, acid from the scourers, pikes shattering their gems, and their tendrils being ripped clean off, the Cabochon never stood a chance. The Doctor casually waltzed over to inspect the damage, picking up a piece of each gem.

"Mm. Something for further study," he murmured before looking back at Hannah. "Tell me, where did you stow the drive for their ship?"

"Uh, I think at the bottom of that ladder somewhere?" she replied, somewhat unsure.

"Well, we'll have to go fetch it. But, first things first," he said, clearing his throat, "Nephrys!"

The Gastropod tilted an eyestalk to focus on him. "Yes, Doctor?" she asked.

"About Peladon's place in the Federation..."

"I'm sure that King Thalaan and I—"

Thalaan cut in. "No. I am not the ruler of this planet, nor do I have any right to be. Address my brother, the proper sovereign, if you'd please."

Nephrys cleared her throat, radula scraping against the roof of her mouth. "Er, yes, of course. My apologies. King Pelenat?"

Pelenat was only half-listening from where he was stood in Lorvis's tight embrace. He looked over. "Mm?"

"About Peladon's continued membership in the Federation, your majesty."

"Oh." He looked up to Lorvis, who kissed the prince's forehead and loosened his grip. Pelenat turned, leaning back against his boyfriend's muscular torso. "Discussions on that can wait until after the wedding, Ambassador Nephrys."

Lorvis's face lit up. "Wedding? You mean—"

"Yes," Pelenat affirmed, looking up to meet the larger man's gaze. "I do. I'm not hiding anymore."

"But what about the ministers? They could—"

"They *could* do a lot of things," came the reply, "but I won't let them. After all I've been through in the last two days? If they have issues, they can direct them straight to my rear end."

Lorvis laughed heartily at that. Pelenat quickly found himself in a deep, passionate kiss, dipped back to the floor. Some of the ambassadors cheered at that. Even Lir's men seemed far more at ease now as they placed him back in his wickerwork sleigh. The Mentor gave a dark growl, but said nothing.

"Well, how about that," Hannah remarked. "We helped save the day *and* sort of got those two to finally get married."

"Indeed," the Doctor replied absently, not looking up from the chunk of tiger's eye he was polishing with an embroidered silk handkerchief. "And I think we'll be staying for it, too."

“What, we’re not going to run off first thing like always?” Hannah teased, gently elbowing him.

He shot her an admonishing look, but there wasn’t any real heat behind it, she could tell. Pocketing the gem, he jabbed a thumb over his shoulder towards the back of the room. “Well, seeing as the TARDIS is currently at the bottom of the gorge beyond the castle...”

“Oh... right. How could I forget?” Hannah sighed.

“Don’t worry too much about it, my dear. It’s been a long two days,” the Doctor replied. He placed a hand on her shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze as he moved past her. “Now, I think that I’d like to go and take a long nap. Excuse me.”

Before anyone could say anything, the Time Lord had beat a very hasty retreat. Hannah shook her head, feeling somewhere between exasperated with and oddly fond of her companion, then followed him up to their room. As cliché as it was to say (or, rather, think), a nap sounded like just what the doctor ordered.

Epilogue

Reception

Three days later, Pelenat and Lorvis were married in a beautiful ceremony in the Great Hall. The Doctor sat at the back, not saying much. When Hannah, who sat nearer to the front alongside Jadescales, asked what was wrong, he'd insisted that it was nothing to worry about. He just didn't care for weddings or funerals.

No one was surprised when he was gone before the kiss.

He later turned up at the reception looking quite pleased. Hannah, who had just left Jadescales and her famous wedding pendant, smiled at him. "Good news?"

"The TARDIS has just been hauled up," he replied. "We can leave tonight." A grimace crossed Hannah's face and the Doctor looked a little frustrated. "Come now, Hannah, don't tell me you want to stay. After all, I owe you a trip to New Orleans, don't I? I was thinking of looking up an old friend of mine. Lives in a truly vintage year. Not as good as, say, one with either of the Laveaus, but—"

"We'll get to New Orleans, I'm sure," Hannah cut in, "but right now, I'm enjoying myself. Besides, Keese has been looking all over for you."

"Has she? I wonder— Oh! Oh yes! I said I would get her in contact with the Federation News Service, didn't I!" the Doctor exclaimed. "Alright, we'll stay another day. But then I'd really like to be getting on."

"Okay, okay, but only because I know you'd probably break out in a rash or something if you stay in one place longer than a week."

"Well, not a rash, but there was that time I developed—"

"I *really* don't need to hear about whatever it was. Really."

He laughed. "I'm going to go wish the happy couple well, then find Keese. See you in... Oh no you don't! *Get back here, you thieving little speelsnape!*"

"What are you—" Hannah began to ask, but the Doctor had already run after a short, weaselly-looking man clad in a long, tan coat. The Doctor's coat. She rolled her eyes and chuckled as Thalaan walked up.

He had kept his hair long since his imprisonment, though he'd clearly done something to it, as it didn't look nearly as scraggly as it had been. Clad in a burgundy suit with golden piping along the edges that matched his hair, he looked a lot less emaciated than before. Overall, Hannah thought, he cleaned up pretty well.

"Hey," she greeted.

"Straw?" he replied uncertainly, giving her a smile.

She laughed. "Cute. What's up?"

"Uh, well... the android ruined my relationship with my girlfriend, you see, and..." The prince froze, realizing what he'd just said. "And that was probably the worst thing I could say before the next bit. Er..." He flushed red and rubbed the back of his neck. Hannah smiled at him and kissed his cheek.

"Thalaan, would you like to take me on a date?" she asked.

"Yes!" he cried, beaming, before adding in a softer voice, "Very much so."

"Alright. Tomorrow night then?"

"If that works for you."

"It does," Hannah affirmed with a nod. "I mean, the Doctor will probably have a fit about not being able to leave..." She shrugged. "But he'll get over it." They stood for a moment, not sure what to say, then Thalaan took her hands.

"Care for a dance?" he asked.

"After the month you've had, how could I say no?" she chuckled, leading him to the dance floor where they could see Lord Nabar, the Draconian, and the Delphon ambassador really getting into it.

Across the hall, Shlastro sat alone at a table. He sighed and took a sip of his champagne. It tasted nothing like Earth champagne, and he appreciated that. Earth champagne just tended to give him heartburn. Turning to a passing waitress, he requested another.

"Thanks," he grunted as she walked off again.

"You alright?" came a deep voice. The Silurian-Sea Devil hybrid looked up to see Sentreal towering over him.

"Not sure," Shlastro replied after a moment. "I kind of executed a man unnecessarily and Argolis might be extraditing me."

"You do realize that Dusen was a late replacement for the usual ambassador and was acting without the full authority of his government, right?" Sentreal replied.

"He wasn't?" Shlastro exclaimed as his gargantuan companion settled down next to him.

"Nope! Turns out he was some nationalist operative, too. The Argolin government's attempting to make reparations to Liasici after Dusen tried to undermine the Foamasi economy by allying with the Mentors."

"You're kidding."

"Lir spilled the whole story to Nephrys and I, ah, happened to overhear," Sentreal explained. Clearly, he'd been eavesdropping. Shlastro chuckled as the waitress returned with two glasses of champagne. He thanked her and the waitress wandered off, only to be stopped by the still very intoxicated Terileptil ambassador, His Royal Gorgeousness V. The old reptile nearly fell out of his three chairs waving her over. His bejeweled android somehow managed to look long-suffering as it held him fast. Shlastro thought it was rather surprising it managed to do so in spite of its carved plastic countenance, but then, there was a lot to be said for body language.

He offered the spare champagne to Sentreal, who politely declined. "Suit yourself," the hybrid muttered, knocking it back. He stifled a burp, then said, "So, in a roundabout sort of way, I did a good thing?"

“Enough that I think Nephrys wants to give you an award for service to the Federation.”

Shlastro was quiet for a long while, sipping the other champagne. It didn’t feel right, getting an award for doing what was, in itself, a heinous act. Certainly, he felt he was the last person to deserve such an honor.

“No,” he said at last. “I’ll go tell her to give it to my mother. Posthumously, of course...” Trailing off for a moment, he gulped. The wounds were still fresh, and they’d probably sting for a while to come. But Shlastro knew he had to be strong for himself and his father. It was what his mother would have wanted. “But I think I wouldn’t mind becoming an ambassador myself. Following in my mother’s footsteps.”

“Really?” Sentreal replied, intrigued.

“Yeah.” Shlastro nodded, finishing his champagne. That was enough of that for the evening, he decided. He cracked Sentreal a smile and rested a webbed hand on the top of the cylindrical base. Close enough to a shoulder, he supposed. “Besides, someone’s going to have to be the Sentrealian ambassador, aren’t they?”

Sentreal’s eyes filled with mirth. “I’m glad to hear it.”

Deep below the party, in the mines beneath the Citadel, miners had entered the secret chamber. The Doctor had already been down, having removed the holographic projector and all the aversion-inducing generators before downloading the computer core onto a small device. Before he’d left, he’d told the foreman to do whatever the miners wanted with the Jewel.

The foreman had ultimately decided to blow it up, hence why the miners were currently lining the interior of the craft with dynamite. The strange technology pulsed lowly in the dim light, and as Isipar stepped over the bits of the wall strewn across the floor, he stopped. He could hear a crackly voice near the opening in the wall. The drone had been removed for study by some Federation blokes, so it wasn’t that.

“Oi, Lefest!” he called.

“What is it?” Lefest called back.

“C’mere and help me find this noise, would you?”

“Yeah, sure,” the other man replied, laying the last stick of dynamite. “Done with this lot, anyway. Wish Gorn were here to help us out, though. Lucky sod, getting to be father-in-law to the King, no less.”

“Stow it and listen, eh?” Isipar insisted. They stood still, listening, before Lefest pointed to the panel near the opening.

“There.” They approached it, listening close.

“What’s it saying?”

“Hmm.” They craned their necks closer, when the volume suddenly jumped higher and a strangled, garbled voice rang out.

“Return... at once... We are... attack... Repeat... under attack! Krotons! It’s the Krotons!”

“DISPERSE! DISPERSE!” boomed another, deeper voice before a steamy, pressurized hiss rang out over the first voice screaming.

However, neither miner could understand the alien voices, and both looked at each other.

“Nothing we can do for ‘em,” Lefest said.

“Pity. It sounded hurt.”

“Not our problem, Isipar. Now, let’s get out of here before the Foreman decides to blow *us* up along with this pink eyesore!”

And so they left, not realizing the threat that faced the Bijou of Diadem...

About The Author

James P. Quick would love to tell you all about how exciting he is, but a lot of it would be lies. He lives in Newport, Michigan with his grandmother. Really, you can't miss him; he clocks in at 6' 7"! He works on his college's newspaper – in fact, he's there as he's typing this – and has recently declared a creative writing major. Anyway, *Doctor Who* sort of fell into his lap by mistake in August 2006 due to a Wikipedia error. Personally, he thinks that the universe was trying to tell him something with that, but he isn't sure what.

He's forever in awe of how smart his mother's dog Roger is. Hopefully he can get over that long enough to write the Ninth Doctor and Silver *Brief Encounter* story with the Cybermen that Richard Peever has apparently fallen in love with. Also on the to-do list is to make a big splash with the upcoming *New Adventures*, where he's aiming to introduce more diverse companions into *The Doctor Who Project*. How do you all like the idea of a fugitive holographic projector that's gained sentience as a companion? Answers on a postcard, please.

His favorite story is a tie between the Big Finish audio stories "*Year of the Pig*" and "*The Elite*" and his favorite Doctor is the Sixth. He's been looking for a proper job for four years and despises the "*strongly agree/strongly disagree*" portion of online applications. Seriously, they're just terrible and need to be outlawed.

"*The Throne of Peladon*" and "*The Secret of Peladon*" are his second and third stories for *The Doctor Who Project*, written in about five months as a favor to Bob Furnell. If they were ever adapted for audio, he could do the voice for Alpha Centauri no problem, believe it or not.

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