

THE  
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PROJECT

# THE THRONE OF PELADON



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## **Dedication**

*For Dan Tessier, Richard Hoover, and Scott D. Harris, whose counsel made this book possible;  
James T. Jeans, whose story, "Cost of Cure", this replaced and I hope is released someday;  
Bob Furnell, for reaching out to me and supporting this monster every step of the way;  
Richard Peevers and Nick Krohn, for being so kind in answering my call for help;  
my wonderful, loving grandmother, who is the most supportive person I know;  
and Brian Hayles, father of Peladon, Alpha Centauri, and the Ice Warriors.*



# **EPISODE ONE**





## Prologue

### *The Way to Peladon*

The egg-shaped craft cut through the inky blackness between the stars with consummate ease. A top-of-the-line vehicle designed for quick travel into deep space, it was the perfect choice for the mission. The surrounding stars glittered like jewels in the ether outside, but Clivix paid them no mind. Tucked safely away in her cabin, the elderly reptile's attention was focused on the holo-screen emitting from the desk. Her husband's wide eyes stared back at her, puckish-looking mouth curved into a grin.

"You look radiant, beloved," Garvotte crooned.

"You always say that," she replied, blushing slightly.

"Because it's always true." A chuckle greeted this. This was what had caused her to fall in love; Garvotte's easy, matter-of-fact compliments.

"How I wish I could be with you now instead of heading to Peladon," she sighed.

"It'll all be over soon, then you'll be home with me again."

"It can't come quick enough. I know this is important, but the man is dying." Her gnarled, meaty neck stiffened in irritation, as if trying to retract into a shell that had long since been cast off. "Why crowd around him? I know it's their custom, but it still bothers me."

"It does seem disrespectful," Garvotte agreed. "But not every culture can be as enlightened as ours. Just, ah... what's the phrase the humans use?"

"Grin and bear it." The old Sea Devil had never liked the saying, seeing as she couldn't actually *grin* due to her sizable beak.

"That's it. If you can manage to do that, it ought to be smooth sailing."

"Yes. Earth maintains its position as the crown jewel of the Solar System and our bellies remain full."

"I hear Sentreal is sending a representative," her husband mentioned, leaning down to grab something off the floor.

The old reptile stiffened. A memory of her mother herding her and her clutchmates into the next room while their father swore up a storm came to mind. That had been the night the news had revealed both the Guardian of the Solar System, Mavic Chen, and Chief Karlton of the

Space Security Service to be traitors. The pair of them had been in cahoots with the Daleks and their evil alliance, which had contained a Sentrealian representative.

Clivix couldn't have been more than three years old then. Karlton's trial for high treason had lasted until she was at least five, if she recalled right. Her father had watched with interest. Her mother hadn't, and had tried to shield all of her young from it. But Clivix had been spellbound by the ramifications of the men's actions both on Earth and in the Solar System itself. It was what inspired her to become a diplomat in the first place. While she may not have approved of certain aspects of other cultures, ensuring that everything went smoothly between them and Earth was, in her opinion, an incredibly noble cause.

"I can't imagine why," she said at last, her voice tight.

"Wants to make amends, apparently. The Federation is willing to listen." Garvotte sat back up, brandishing the pen triumphantly. He caught Clivix's severe expression and shrugged sympathetically. "They're entitled to change, dearest."

Clivix sighed. "Of course they are, love. And really, I'm glad they're trying to. I am. But... is this really the time and place to do this?" She huffed out a breath through her nostrils. "No sense of decorum in these other species, I swear. I didn't know when I was well off. At least the Martians know how to do things properly..." She paused again, a small smirk gracing her face. "Well, I suppose it could be worse. If nothing else, he'll be dressed in black."

They shared a laugh until a firm, webbed hand clamped onto her shoulder. She turned to see her son, Shlastro, a broad Sea Devil-Silurian hybrid clad in traditional ceremonial armor.

"The captain wants to see you, mother," he grunted, tilting his head towards the door.

"We'll talk later," Garvotte said. "Take care and call me when you get there. I love you both."

Shlastro nodded and walked into the hall as Clivix said her goodbyes. In short order, they were on the bridge of the craft, though that was a politeness they extended. It was really more of a mildly exaggerated cockpit. Levers and switches bunched in tight on sleek white panels, pulsing buttons interspersed between them like precious gems. The pilot, a squat, porcine-looking man, grinned at them as he gestured to the viewscreen.

"There you are, my dears," he declared, "Peladon!"

Clivix had difficulty discerning what he said through the rhotacism and thick West Country accent, but the intent was clear.

"Yes, thank you, Mister Greel," Clivix replied as the craft passed the largest Pel moon. Aggepel, if she remembered the dossier correctly. Some thought had been given to establishing a colony there if and when the Pel population grew large enough to merit it. She supposed she could imagine a small city spiraling out from the Gravitron installation on the planet-facing side.

"It's beautiful," Shlastro murmured as they drew closer.

"Aye, that it is, my lad!" Greel said.

He began landing procedures, working an impenetrable amount of switches, buttons, and levers. The craft began to slow down as they entered the atmosphere, plunging past a layer of thick clouds. After a moment, they could see the mountain range that contained Mount Megeshra in the distance.

"Didn't always look like this," Greel continued, gesturing to the forest surrounding the landing pad. "Back when I started this run with my mate Barry, Peladon was a right dump I tell ya. Then they installed that Gravitron up on the moon, and now it isn't storming every bloomin' minute. That were ooh, heck, forty... fifty years back now?"

Before either reptile could respond, Greel's headset bleeped.

"Just a minute."

Clivix and Shlastro glanced to each other as Greel spoke to the person on the other end of the line. It didn't sound good. He ended the call and turned to face them.

"We're clear to land, but..." He trailed off, his face grim. "Nothin' good from the boys at ground control, I'm afraid. The King's taken a turn for the worse. You'll have precious little time to pay your respects."

Clivix sighed, shaking her head. "The death of such a great man is a shame... I can only hope the next one can grow out of King Pelleas's long shadow."

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Hannah yawned as she made her way down the hall. The low, rhythmic humming of the TARDIS's engines threatened to lull her to sleep sometimes. It was so peaceful back here, as if she was the only person in the entire universe. Well, aside from the Doctor, of course.

Ah, the Doctor. Her caustic, peripatetic companion. She'd not been traveling with him for that long — only a month or two — but even in that short time, she'd seen so many interesting things. Sword-swallowers from the fourth dimension, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the first artificial superintelligence to *not* wipe out its creators within ten minutes, even the darkest depths of the ice caves of Shabadabadon.

The traveling life suited her well, she found, even if it wasn't always a land of milk and honey.

'Now,' Hannah thought, 'if I could just find the console room...'

The TARDIS wasn't always agreeable in terms of layout. While the Doctor assured her time and time again that the immediate six miles around the console room was fixed, he also mentioned the ship was alive and occasionally capricious. Hannah was convinced that the time-space machine liked to play games with her.

Thankfully, the first door she tried today opened onto the console room, and she sighed with relief.

"Lost again?" the Doctor asked, his face lit by the pale glow of a screen.

"No, the TARDIS decided to be nice today," Hannah retorted. "Also, why are the lights down?"

"Still working past last night's celebratory ginger beer," he muttered ruefully.

They'd liberated a planet of wickerwork people, the Gulkonara, from an ugly fungus the Doctor called "the Animus." Apparently, the Doctor had faced it before on the planet Vortis, where it had been bothering some butterfly people. Hannah hadn't been amused when it had tried to take over her mind, and had a few choice words about how she was going to cut it up and serve it on a pizza "like any mushroom worth its cap!"

They had prevailed, of course, and evidently the Doctor's celebratory drink afterward had expanded into a little something more.

"Well, if you're not up to driving, I can give it a whirl," Hannah offered cheekily.

The Doctor snorted dismissively. "Certainly not. I am the picture of health, Hannah. Now, I had been considering taking us to the planet Diadem. I've never been there, and to the best of my knowledge it's completely uninhabited. Not as relaxing as the Eye of Orion, but the Eye's lousy with tourists this millennium ever since they added it to the Galactic Heritage."

Hannah shook her head. "That sounds kinda boring, honestly. I want some excitement. I want..." She tapped her chin in thought as the Doctor arched an expectant brow at her. "I want to visit the Middle Ages."

“Hmm...” The Doctor considered this. “The Middle Ages. Interesting in their way, but in increasingly small doses.”

“Well, I’ve never been.”

“Clearly, unless you’ve been moonlighting with another time traveler behind my back.”

“What’s the likelihood of that?” she chuckled.

“It’s happened before.” He turned and began to prime the ship for dematerialization, then looked back at her suddenly, his face alight. “I know just the place! Peladon!”

“Peladon?” Hannah echoed. “Where’s that?”

“Near the edge of the Milky Way and Galaxy Three,” the Doctor explained, moving around the console. His hangover had apparently dissipated at the thought of this Peladon place. “All the fun of the Middle Ages, but with aliens and more interesting weather.”

Hannah considered this for a moment before nodding. “Alright, let’s go.”

“I’m glad you’re willing, since we’ll be arriving shortly.” The Doctor flashed her a half-smile. She chuckled at his eagerness.

‘This ought to be a fun trip,’ she thought.

## Chapter One

### *Suspicious Minds*

“When are we going to tell everyone?”

Prince Pelenat abruptly stopped and looked up from the crook of the muscular neck his face had been buried in. The hickey he’d been quite eagerly making could wait.

“What do you mean, ‘tell everyone?’” he inquired warily, not quite meeting his boyfriend’s eyes.

Lorvis frowned, and Pelenat’s heart sank. “You know what I mean, Natty.”

The larger man rolled off to the other side of the enormous bed, sitting at the edge and sighing.

The young prince sat up, discomfited by the removal of Lorvis’s reassuringly warm bulk. He moved over, wrapping his arms around the other man and kissing his stubbly cheek.

“You know that we can’t be public,” he murmured. “At least, not right now.”

“I know that,” Lorvis grumbled, “but you’re going to be king, love. You’ll be able to change things.”

“Lorvis, it’s not that simple—” Pelenat began, only to be cut off.

“But you can *start* something!” his paramour cried, shrugging out of the prince’s embrace and standing. He moved across to room to gather his clothes. “You can set an example!”

Pelenat shushed him, glancing around nervously as he moved to gather his own garments. “Lower your voice. Someone might hear!”

“That’s what I mean!” Lorvis continued, his voice lowered to an irritated growl that was arguably worse than the shouting. He shoved his legs into his trousers and yanked them up. “I’m tired of sneaking around, making excuses, hiding this. If we’re going to do this, then I want to do it like everyone else. Not hiding in the shadows like the wild Aggedor of old.”

“I know, I know,” Pelenat tried to calm him.

“Do you? Do you really? Because in the end, you have nothing to lose,” Lorvis pointed out. “But me? I have *everything* to lose. If we’re found out, I lose my job as a guard *and* my family will get disenfranchised by the ministers below you. That doesn’t just go away, Natty. Not even if you’re king.”

Pelenat looked flustered as he put on his shirt, not saying a word. Lorvis did the same, huffing out an irritated sigh. After another few moments of tense silence, Lorvis pulled Pelenat into a tight hug. The prince didn't resist, but he didn't hug back, either.

"I'm sorry," the guard murmured, kissing Pelenat's head. "I don't mean to stress you, I really don't. I love you more than the moons and the stars. You know that. But... I just can't keep lying about who I am."

"I understand," Pelenat replied, hugging back and nodding. "But I cannot change the minds of the people in an instant. Even if I set an example by making what we have public, there could be consequences. The Federation may say that homosexuality is not a crime, nor a disease, nor a social ill, but they won't interfere in internal matters. They can condemn, but not act."

"They're being gutless."

"Be that as it may, it seems to have worked for the last several centuries."

Lorvis shook his head. "I can't stay and discuss this. I have to get back to work, then I have to set up a bed in the garrison. All these ambassadors coming in means I can't go home. After all," he paused, flashing Pelenat a smirk and flexing his arm suggestively, "they need all the able-bodied men they can get."

Pelenat shook his head, laughing. "You, my love, are ridiculous. Now go on. I'll send word for when we can next meet." They shared a kiss and Lorvis turned to leave when the door opened to reveal Pelenat's twin brother, Prince Thalaan. Lorvis's hand immediately went up to rub at his neck, covering the hickey.

"What are you doing in here?" Thalaan sneered.

"Prince Pelenat requested my presence, your highness," Lorvis replied, all business. "I was just leaving."

"I see. Then don't let me stop you. Get out." Thalaan gestured to the open door. Lorvis bowed deferentially before making a hasty exit. Pelenat's pounding heart slowly backed its way down out of his throat. He tried to moisten his dry, cottony mouth.

"Ah, brother, good to see you," he greeted, sitting back on the bed.

Thalaan said nothing, but crossed to his side of their bed chambers, looking into his vanity.

"How was your day?" Pelenat ventured.

"Standard."

"Is everything going well with the duchess you were seeing?"

"She found someone else."

"Oh. I'm sorry to hear that."

"I'm not. Good riddance."

Pelenat bristled. What had become of his twin brother? The one he'd shared a crib with, explored the foothills of Mount Megeshra with, sat on mother's knee with and listened to stories of far-flung places and times. In recent weeks, that man had vanished, replaced with a hostile, dismissive figure whose temper was remarkably short. Even though he and his brother were functionally identical save for a small mole on Thalaan's shoulder, Pelenat felt his brother had never been more of a stranger.

The medics had told Pelenat that something may have happened to his brain during his accident in the mines, but they couldn't be sure. Whatever the cause, it hadn't seemed to slow Thalaan down at all. But now his twin was dead set on being king himself, even though there was no way he could unless Pelenat died. But his brother would never harm him. Pelenat was sure of that above all else. Thalaan would come to his senses and all would be right with the world once more.

Still, it couldn't hurt to see if the incident was bothering his twin, could it?

"Brother, are you alright? You've changed so much since your accident," he began. "Is it because of that? Or perhaps because of father's condition?"

Thalaan fixed him with a look so venomous it could kill a bull Aggedor in rut.

"No, it isn't!" he snapped, standing up. "No, the accident showed me that *you* are unfit for the throne of Peladon!" He stalked across the stone floor, every step echoing sharply off the walls. "You are spineless, insipid, unintelligent, *deviant*—"

Pelenat stood, face turning the color of a koosha root. "*That is enough!*" he snapped. "I won't just sit here and take such abuse, much less from my own flesh and blood! If you have that many grievances about me becoming king, then why not leave? There are plenty of rim worlds that would tolerate you and your bad attitude!"

And with that, he marched to the door and slammed it behind him, causing the adjacent tapestry to fall to the floor in a crumpled heap. Thalaan, unfazed, smirked triumphantly.

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Hannah was fairly sure that if the guard hadn't been on duty, he'd have punched the Doctor's lights out by now.

"Are you listening to me?" her companion asked. "I said, let us in."

"And *I* said that no one's allowed in without a prior invitation, *sir!*" the guard snarled back. "Now, unless you'd like to get one and come back—"

"Not allowed in? *Not allowed in!?*" the Doctor interrupted. "I'm allowed everywhere! I've been here more times than you've probably seen the king, and saved this planet at least five times over, might I add! I am a personal friend of the royal family. Now stand aside, or I shall—"

"Doctor!" Hannah cut in, putting a firm hand on his arm. "Maybe we should just head back to the TARDIS and try somewhere else? I'm sure plenty of other planets have had medieval periods that we could visit."

The Doctor shook his head defiantly, leveling a nasty glare at the guard. "No, Hannah. We're getting into this castle one way or another. With or without this man's permission."

"Sir, I've just about had it with you!"

"And I've long past had it with you!"

"Hey, look at that!" Hannah cried before the Doctor could continue.

She pointed to a carriage rumbling up the mountain-hugging path that led up to the castle. It was drawn by horse-like animals slightly larger than Clydesdales. Hannah guessed they were 20 hands tall at a minimum. They showed no fear on the narrow road, despite there being a sheer drop down the mountain on their left side.

The carriage slowed in front of the doors, the animals whinnying as the coachman brought it all to a halt. Four footmen hurried down the steps, two of them retrieving several oval-shaped containers from the trunk and hustling them inside. The others helped a strange, green-grey, hunchbacked creature out of the carriage.

The creature was clad in a yellow satin cape, underneath which a hard, chitinous shell protected its back. Its large, egg-like dome of a head sported a brown eye so large it had to be seen to be believed. Veins throbbed dully around it. Six tentacles, capped with clamshell-like graspers, hung from its torso, the top two hugging the cape around it to protect from the chilly wind.

"Thank you," it said to the footmen. It spoke in a high, squeaky, feminine voice, the origin of which was best left unknown.

“Alpha Centauri, my old friend!” the Doctor called, already halfway down the steps. He walked over and shook each of the free claspers in turn.

The enormous eye blinked and Alpha Centauri’s skin shifted to a shade of muted scarlet in embarrassment. “Have we met? You must excuse me, my years are catching up to me and my memory is not what it once was, to say nothing of my eye.”

“I don’t suppose you’d recognize this face, no,” the Doctor replied. “But you recall our first meeting here during Hepesh’s gambit with the Aggedor? Or that business with Axlaar and the princess? Maybe Eckersley’s whole plot to ruin the trisilicate mining? What about—”

“Doctor,” Alpha Centauri cut in, “you’ve made your point. Your appearance has changed once more.” Green returned to the ambassador’s skin, but in a darker shade. Noticing this, the old hexapod quickly lightened it back to normal. “I must apologize. To some extent, I envy your youth, Doctor.”

The Doctor snorted and waved a dismissive hand. “What youth? I’m almost thirteen hundred years old, you know. Come now, let me escort you inside.” He took one of Alpha Centauri’s claspers and walked back up to the guard, who sighed.

“Sir, you still can’t—”

“This man and his friend—” a tentacle waved at Hannah, who stared at it in bemusement before looking back to the guard, “—are my personal guests. The Doctor is a longtime friend of Peladon, and any friend of his is welcome here.”

The guard arched a brow, flashing a critical eye over the Doctor and Hannah before sighing. “As you say, ambassador. Welcome to the Royal Citadel of Peladon.”

He and his comrades stepped aside, and two broke off to escort them into the citadel. It was an imposing structure hewn out of the mountain itself, and its interior was made from the excess rock. Block upon block of unyielding stone was in abundant evidence all around.

They were led into an adjoining room with many cushy chairs and loveseats, plus a *méridienne* at the opposite end, which Hannah immediately laid herself on. The guards said something about looking into final preparations on the group’s rooms, apologizing for neither of the princes being available to greet them, then left.

The Doctor helped himself to the bowl of mixed nuts on the coffee table. “Lovely weather we’re having,” he commented, grabbing a handful. “Remarkably less inclement than most of my previous visits.” There was an awkward pause, the only noise being the sound of his chewing. He swallowed and cleared his throat. “Excuse the banal small talk, my dear fellow, but I *am* interested in this case.”

“Representatives from the Solar System gifted a Gravitron base to Peladon almost three decades ago,” the hexapod replied.

“Oh, yes, I’d forgotten about that!” the Doctor said. “I was there when it was installed. You remember, with Grae and Doctor Fischer? That was when... oh yes, that was right after Tamara’s...” He trailed off for a moment, eyes distant. “Taryn was simply furious with me... and Grae, too.” He shook his head before snapping back. “But you remember that, don’t you? With the Terrible Zodin?”

“I don’t recall if I was there or not,” Alpha Centauri squeaked. “What I recall and what I don’t comes and goes, I’m sorry to say.”

“Don’t worry about it, old friend,” the Doctor murmured. He tapped his chin. “Come to think of it, I don’t recall if you were there or not. Hmm.” With a shrug, he continued, “Still, with the Gravitron installed, the Pels can’t complain about the weather anymore. The British have their national pastime back.” He glanced over his shoulder at Hannah, a smirk playing on his lips. “I’m sure they’ll be thrilled.”



“Wait!” the hexapod exclaimed, their eye lighting up as their skin turned a sunny shade of yellow-orange. “I do recall that one of my last acts before retiring as ambassador was authorizing the Gravitron’s installation. I was indeed present.” They turned to the Doctor. “On that occasion, you were tall, with long hair, a goatee, and dark spectacles.”

The Doctor grinned, nodding. “That was me. Sunglasses fetish and all.” He looked over to Hannah as she walked up. “Ah, yes, you. How remiss of me. Hannah, this is an old friend of mine, Alpha Centauri. Alpha, this is my companion, Hannah Redfoot.”

Centauri held out a clasper, and Hannah took it. “A pleasure, Miss Redfoot. Are your feet really red?”

Hannah chuckled. “No, it’s just a name.”

“Ah, I see. A shame.” Alpha Centauri dropped Hannah’s hand.

“Er, I guess?” Hannah quirked a brow. “So, if you don’t mind me asking, why did you come out of retirement?”

“I know this planet almost as well as my own, you see,” the hexapod squeaked. “To that end, I am here on behalf of the Federation president as a foremost expert on Pel culture, and as an old friend of King Pelleas.”

“Ah, made it all the way to king, has he?” the Doctor cut in. “Good for him. Has he been well?”

Centauri’s monolithic cranium slumped, their skin turned a mournful shade of blue-grey, and the Doctor’s face fell.

“I wish I could say he has, but alas, the King is on his deathbed, Doctor. He shall be dead before the day is out, if reports are to be believed. This event is a pre-emptive wake, funeral, and coronation.”

Before Centauri had finished speaking, the Doctor’s countenance had calcified into a stony, unreadable mask. Hannah put a comforting hand on his arm, only for it to be rebuffed.

“I see,” he said quietly. “A shame.” Something flashed behind his eyes, but his expression remained static. When he spoke, it was barely above a whisper. “And the queen?”

“It came on suddenly several years ago. She wondered when you would—”

“That’s all I needed to hear.” The Doctor walked to wall, muttering something Hannah couldn’t make out. He glanced back to them, nostrils flared and face aflame with frustration. It quickly gave way to something neutral and he made his way over to the door, stopping short as it opened, readmitting the guards.

“Ambassador, your room is ready. If you’ll come with us, please?” the taller one said. Centauri nodded, bidding goodbye to the Doctor and Hannah. Then, with a swish of their cape, they swept out of the room in the guards’ wake.

Hannah came up behind the Doctor, putting a hand on his shoulder. “You alright?” she asked.

“I’ll be fine, Hannah, thank you,” the Doctor muttered. “I just meant to come back and see the queen before her death. I am... perhaps a bit ashamed of myself. She was a dear friend, and I should have been here.”

“Hey, don’t beat yourself up over it,” Hannah said. “If she was as dear a friend as you said, she’ll know that you wanted to be there.”

“You’re right.” The Doctor’s expression lightened a little. He didn’t seem to want to hop back in the TARDIS to see the queen, and so Hannah didn’t press the matter.

“By the way, what was that about a sunglasses fetish?”

He smiled. "Let's just say that I used to be a *very* different man, and that 'fetish' might be a bit strong of a word," he replied. "Hmm. When we have time, you ought to duck back to the TARDIS and find yourself a dress."

"Considering the next few days sound like they're going to be formal three times over, yeah, that might help," Hannah said, looking down at her Correspondents t-shirt, jeans, and black sneakers.

"Well, you have a key, so at your leisure... just ideally before anything important happens."

Before Hannah could respond, a guard entered. "The Doctor and..." He trailed off, realizing he'd not been told Hannah's name.

"Hannah Redfoot."

"The Doctor and Miss Redfoot," he said, nodding at her thankfully. "I'm Lorvis, the guard captain. I apologize for not having enough rooms for you. We were not informed you'd be coming. However, the ambassador from Xeros will, rather fortuitously, not be able to attend. That room should be enough for both of you, if you don't mind sharing a bed."

"That will be fine, thank you, Captain," the Doctor said. "Lead the way."

Lorvis nodded again and led them into the hall towards the stairs. As they crossed, a large alien with fiercely-glowing yellow eyes was escorted inside. It looked to Hannah like someone had thrown a Quaker Oats canister on top of a stack of doggie shame cones atop an oil drum, then spray-painted the whole shebang pitch black. It teetered along on a collection of thick, muscular roots.

"Where's that one from?" She asked the Doctor quietly. He didn't reply, and she saw he was frowning at the newcomer. "Doctor?"

"He's a Sentreal, from Sentrealia in Galaxy Five."

"Oh, alright. And why don't you look happy to see him?"

"Because his species was once allied with one of the most evil races in all of existence." They began to walk upstairs. "I'm not sure why he's been invited, but I don't have a good feeling about it at all."

## Chapter Two

### *Obsolete Ideologies*

Thalaan marched down the staircase into the front hall, extending a hand to meet the clamp-like claw of the fearsome reptile stood at the bottom. She was almost eight-and-a-half feet tall, not counting her painted dorsal crest. Her emerald body bulged in all the right ways with lean muscle and was clad in ceremonial armor and matching cloak. She didn't bother to hide the ceremonial sword sheathed at her right hip.

"Lady Efaxyr, so good of you to come," he greeted. "Welcome to Peladon. I am Prince Thalaan."

"On behalf of the New Martian Republic, I thank you, your highness," she replied. The atmosphere on Peladon was better for her race than Earth's, but their breathing was still somewhat hampered. Thus, Efaxyr's voice was a step above a wheezing croak and her breathing was slightly labored. "I was so sorry to hear of your father's condition. Never has Peladon had a more enlightened and honorable ruler."

"Yes, well, everything has its time and everything dies," Thalaan replied with a shrug.

Efaxyr cocked her head, taken aback by Thalaan's disinterest in his dying father. Her response was cut off when another Martian stepped up beside her. This one was more standard for its species. Nine feet tall, almost a half-ton of scaly, cold-loving reptile, all physically bonded to a thick, green armor. However, this warrior possessed formidably-broad shoulders with six long, ornamental spikes framing the head on either side. Thalaan was sure that if he laid down on the ground before the lumbering lizard, he still wouldn't be as tall as those shoulders were wide.

"Ah, there you are," Efaxyr said. She gestured to the newcomer. "Your highness, allow me to introduce my adjutant, Commandant H'skrr." The looming lizard nodded to Thalaan.

"Such a pleasure," Thalaan said, all smiles. He snapped his fingers and a guard came right over. "This man will show you to your room, Lady Efaxyr. They are air-conditioned as requested. However, I would like to have a word with the commandant, if I may?"

H'skrr regarded the prince with what seemed to be surprise, though it was hard to tell from the thick helmet he wore. Efaxyr had to be cocking her brow beneath her own helmet.

"That is highly irregular," she croaked. "May I ask why?"

“I wish to discuss the ships you have in orbit. He is in charge of those, is he not?”

Efaxyr froze before slowly nodding. The ships were clearly meant as insurance should anything go wrong, but were not made known to the Pels or the other ambassadors, Thalaan knew.

“How did you know about this?” H’skrr hissed.

“I have my ways, commandant,” Thalaan replied smugly. “I assure you, there’s no need for pause. I have no wishes to ask them to leave.”

The warrior looked to Efaxyr, who nodded. “Go with him. I expect a full report after.”

“Of course, my lady.” He turned to Thalaan as his leader was led upstairs. “Lead the way, your highness.”

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Over the next several hours, a panoply of ambassadors arrived from so many worlds that Pelenat, freshly bathed and clothed in his finest suit, could barely keep up.

A slender Voord with a jewel-draped head that seemed two sizes too big arrived from Seabreak, flouncing inside with a flourish of her ceremonial fish-scaled cape. Following her came an Arcturan trundling along in an outdated-looking travel machine, who was quickly ushered out to make way for two more from New Davius and Darvey. An ebony-skinned, platinum blonde Thal and a handsome, moustachioed Trion.

Lord Nabar of Draconia had known Pelenat since childhood, and nearly talked the prince’s ear off before being led away to his room. A Mentor came next, suspended in a tub of water held within an elaborate, canopied wickerwork sleigh. This was carried by four men rippling with oversized muscles. The umber-colored maggot offered Pelenat a squirming marsh minnow, which he politely declined before sending them on their way. Clivix of Earth was civil, but Pelenat could tell she didn’t relish her position as replacement for the usual Solar System ambassador, Luís Qwin.

The Centox and Mortrexly ambassadors argued incessantly, snarling and buzzing the whole way from their carriage, up the steps, while they greeted Pelenat, and long after they were led away. The Argolin and Foamasi ambassadors were much better behaved, despite their subtle enmity. The Terileptil ambassador was too much for words, and the Jacondan ambassador’s beady eyes seemed fit to bug out of his head with how fiercely he scrutinized every little thing.

Thankfully, in spite of the slime trail she left in her wake, the head of the Federation delegates was the picture of professionalism. The Gastropod entered with her head held high, greeted Pelenat humbly, thanked him and expressed her condolences, then shuffled away to her room. Two attendants followed, scrubbing away the sticky slime.

As soon as she was out of sight, the prince flopped into a nearby armchair. Lorvis walked over and, after making sure no one was looking, put a soothing hand on Pelenat’s shoulder. He began to knead gently and the prince slumped further with a contented sigh.

“Tired?” Lorvis asked.

“Exhausted,” Pelenat grunted. “These people are madder than an equinna in heat.”

The other man chortled. “Now that’s saying something.”

“I’m almost ready to just say ‘to hell with it’ and have you sleep with me tonight. Cuddle right up and bury my face in your neck.”

“As much as I would adore that, let’s wait until *after* your coronation, Natty,” Lorvis replied. Pelenat nodded, standing.

“Once more unto the breach, as the humans say...” he muttered. “Say, do you know where Thalaan went?”

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The travelers’ room was on the larger side, but it still only had a single queen-sized bed. Hannah looked uncomfortable at the thought of sharing a bed with the Doctor, and it hadn’t gone unnoticed. He leaned up from his position sprawled across the bedspread, propping himself up on his elbows.

“You know, Hannah, I *could* simply stay awake for the next few days. It’s no trouble,” he offered. Hannah shook her head immediately.

“I won’t make you do that,” she replied. “You deserve to sleep, too. As long as we don’t wake up spooning, I’ll live.”

The Doctor shrugged. “Suit yourself.” He shimmied himself off the bed and hung his tawny overcoat on a bedpost.

His outfit was appropriately disheveled. A burgundy sweater covered an untucked pale blue dress shirt. A red and white paisley-patterned tie hung loosely around the neck, the unbuttoned top buttons not allowing it any real purchase. Tan khakis and black sneakers completed the ensemble.

“So,” he began, walking to the door, “shall we explore?”

Hannah joined him with a grin. “Thought you’d never ask.”

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“So it’s settled then,” Thalaan said, shaking H’skrr’s claw.

“You are welcome to however many you need,” H’skrr rasped.

“Most kind of you,” Thalaan replied.

The pair of them looked up as Efaxyr entered the small meeting room. She inspected the scene, then turned to the prince. “Forgive the interruption, but I’d like to request my adjutant back. There’s much to discuss.”

“Indeed there is,” H’skrr agreed. “Come in, my liege.”

Efaxyr’s eyes narrowed behind her helmet.

“What have you done now?” she asked, her tone suggesting that it wasn’t unusual for her adjutant to leave her out of certain decisions.

“Nothing you won’t approve of, I assure you,” Thalaan assured her, leaning back in his chair.

“Lady Efaxyr, the prince has shown me something that you must see,” H’skrr said. “Come and look at this.”

Efaxyr crossed over to the two men. Her eyes widened as she inspected what they had to show her. And when their plan was laid bare to her, she understood. The proper consent was easily given. Thalaan smiled. It had been far too easy.

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“Y’know, Doctor, you’ve got a real weird definition of ‘explore,’” Hannah remarked as the travelers hunkered down outside Sentreal’s door. “What’s the big deal with the doggy cones of death in there, anyway? Even if he *was* allied with bad guys before, he seems fine now.”

The Doctor shushed her, producing a stethoscope from his pocket. He put it on and set the diaphragm to the door's polished wood, tuning it delicately. Any sounds that came from inside were muffled and faint. The Time Lord silently cursed his luck to not have more appropriate spying gear on-hand.

"It's funny," his companion chuckled. "That's the single most 'doctorish' thing I've seen you do."

She was shushed again and slumped back against the wall in irritation. The Doctor strained his ears, trying to make out what he could. It came in fits and starts, all in the same processed rumble.

"...important mission... vital to the continuance of our great race..."

"Uh, Doctor?"

"Shh!"

"...must prove we are no longer allied with the Daleks... imperatives must be followed... failure is not an option..."

"Doctor, seriously, you might—"

"Hush!"

"Can you... how about now...? Fifteen million light-years from home and no Wi-Fi..."

Hannah tugged on the Doctor's sleeve urgently. "Hey!"

"What!?" he snapped, clearly irritated with his focus being disrupted. Behind him, someone cleared their throat. He turned to see a very unamused guard. The stethoscope fell out of the Doctor's ears.

"Sir, might I ask what you think you're doing?" the guard asked.

The door opened and Sentreal teetered forward. Hannah groaned into her palm, glancing up at the towering alien through her fingers. He peered down upon the scene with piercing eyes. The Doctor looked between the guard and Sentreal, then back again. After a moment, he seemed to find his nigh-unflappable façade once more.

"Would you believe that I'm checking for termites?" he asked, clearly trying to wriggle out of the awkward predicament he found himself in.

"No," the guard stated flatly. "Come on, get up. You too, miss. I'll escort you both back to your room."

The travelers rose to their feet and Sentreal shuddered in the doorway.

"I want you both to stay well away from me, thank you," he told them.

"I'll make sure of that, sir," the guard informed him.

"Much appreciated."

"We'll keep our distance," Hannah assured Sentreal. "I'm so sorry. We both are, aren't we, Doctor?"

The Doctor said nothing at first, but quickly agreed that he was very sorry when Hannah elbowed him in the ribs. As the guard led them away, he frowned.

"I suppose I was wrong," he admitted, looking uncharacteristically abashed. "Sentreal really has changed."

## Chapter Three

### *The Beginner's Guide to Political Animals*

Later that evening, around sundown, there was a reception in the Great Hall. All the ambassadors gathered under ornate chandeliers and tapestries emblazoned with the Royal Crest of Peladon. Memories of the soon-to-be-departed King Pelleas passed everyone's lips (or equivalent organs). Cliques soon formed, with representatives from tried and tested alliances sticking together, leaving the relative newcomers, such as the Jacondans, Epsilites, and Trions, to mingle amongst themselves.

"I always remember his wisdom and insight," Thebec was saying to Veritat. The Jacondan nodded shakily. "He once told me... oh, what was it he said? Something profound enough that I really ought to remember it!"

"Do not worry," warbled Spica's voice synthesizer. "You are being adversely affected by grief. It is understandable to forget."

"I disagree," Veritat sniped. "You do yourself and New Davius a disservice with your poor memory." He gave them both a curt nod, then shuffled away to join the Thoros Betan ambassador.

"How rude!" Thebec sniffed. "It boggles my mind to think that *he* was deemed the Jacondan representative with that awful attitude."

"Some planets are just strange," Spica mused.

"Never a truer word said," Thebec chuckled, sipping her cocktail. "When did you first meet the King?"

"It was some time ago now, not long after his union with—" Spica was cut off by the arrival of a squat Pel woman. "Yes?"

"If you have any desire to see the King, you may go up now," she said. "The current visitor will be done quite soon."

"Thank you, but no," Spica replied. "It is unforgivably rude to bother someone on their deathbed."

The squat woman nodded politely, and turned to Thebec, who gulped down the last of her drink.

"I would like to say my goodbyes, yes," the Thal confirmed. "Please, lead the way."

Spica stared as the squat woman led Thebec out of the hall. "Savagery..."

"Different strokes for different folks, ambassador," a tall man in disheveled clothing said as he passed. He was carrying a plate piled high with *hors d'œuvres* and bright fuchsia crisps

made from koosha roots. One of Centauri's strange guests, by the look of him. The other one was looking very confused as she spoke with the Foamasi ambassador.

A rapidfire series of clicks, chirps, and warbles assaulted Hannah's ears as a strange chameleon creature made very animated conversation. It stopped, and the mercifully short *click-beep-chip-kip* that followed as clearly something along the lines of "can you understand me?" Hannah shook her head, frowning politely. The ambassador put a talon to a puny, beak-like protrusion at the tip of its snout.

*Beeeeeeep-clickity-peep-chirp-wrrb-chip!* The creature reached into a satchel at its side and produced a red pyramidal jewel about the size of a Cocoa-Puff. Hannah stared at it, nonplussed.

"Um... it's a ruby," Hannah said. "I do have a geology degree, if that helps?"

The creature shook its head, and slotted the jewel into its tiny beak.

"That's not what I was saying," the chameleon creature clarified. It now spoke in a crisp female voice that sounded like it had years of elocution lessons from expensive private tutors. "I was apologizing for not remembering to put in my vocal synthesizer."

"Oh!" Hannah exclaimed. "Well, apology accepted. No harm done. But I completely missed what you said earlier."

"Obviously," said the alien good-naturedly. "No matter. Allow me to reintroduce myself. I am the Foamasi ambassador, Jadescales. And you're Hannah, yes?"

"Hannah Redfoot, that's me."

"Nice to meet you properly!" Jadescales enthused. "Now, you mentioned you had a degree in geology. Please, tell me more. I've always fancied myself an amateur geologist, but never had the attention span to do research papers."

Hannah laughed. "Neither did half my graduating class."

"Oh dear!" Jadescales chuckled.

Hannah was quickly becoming fond of this strange woman, and privately marveled at how, well, *human* she was. What was that old *Twilight Zone* episode again? "People are Alike All Over" or something like that. It seemed fitting. Though the Martians here were very different, and Roddy McDowall was nowhere to be found.

"Jadescales!" came a voice. Hannah turned to see a tall, shapely man with green skin, a bush instead of hair, and a goat's tuft of leaves on his chin striding over. He waved a golden-gloved arm over to them. Jadescales stiffened almost imperceptibly.

"What is it, Dusen? Is something wrong?" the Foamasi asked.

"Lord Nabar wished to speak with you at once."

Jadescales sighed. "Sending an Argolin to do a Draconian's job, eh?"

Dusen wasn't amused. "Just come on."

"Alright, alright." She grasped Hannah's hands and focused her turreted eyes on the girl's face. "So nice meeting you, Hannah. Let's talk more later. I'll show you my wedding pendant. I'm sure you'll love it!"

"Sounds good," Hannah said, smiling.

Dusen led Jadescales away across the room. Hannah could see a screw-like horn adorned with indigo berries jutting from the back of Dusen's head. Hannah wondered if Argolin like Dusen were plants or animals, but was interrupted by the Doctor offering her a crisp. She inspected it for a moment, then popped it into her mouth. Not a bad taste, really. Somewhere between a pickled beet and a sour cream and onion potato chip.

"I thought you were getting us drinks?" she asked.



“They’re restocking right now,” the Doctor replied, eyes focused on the doors. “The Delphon ambassador’s just arrived — fashionably late, which has raised some eyebrows. Mostly his own. Don’t bother talking to him.”

“Why?”

“Because Delphon is a language of precise eyebrow movements and you’d just make a fool of yourself,” he explained. “I certainly did. My brows aren’t as thick or as mobile as they used to be. Shame, really.” He rubbed them somewhat regretfully.

“If you say so...” Hannah murmured, arching a brow. The Doctor caught the expression and smirked at her.

“You know, Hannah, it’s considered rude to look at people in that tone of voice,” he teased.

Hannah chuckled. She looked around the room, catching sight of a towering creature that looked like a leatherback sea turtle. Well, if said turtle had slipped out of its shell and traded it for a flowing white gown. She tugged on the Doctor’s sleeve and discreetly gestured to it.

“What is *that*?” she asked. The Doctor looked unimpressed and returned to his *hors d’œuvres*.

“Your race calls them the Sea Devils,” he replied, popping a mini-quiche into his mouth. His voice was a bit muffled as he continued. “Bit racist if you ask me, but all species are to an extent. Anyway, they’re very closely allied with the Silurians.”

“That fits,” Hannah replied. “So, wait, they’re native to Earth?”

The Doctor nodded, swallowing and continuing to pick at his plate. “A remarkable example of convergent evolution. You’d never think that they weren’t turtles.”

“What are they then?”

“Highly-derived placodonts. Fits with the Silurians being specialized rhynchocephalians, I suppose.”

“You’re talking a bit out of my field there, Doctor. What’s a rhynchocephalian?”

“A group of reptiles that includes tuataras. And if I’m talking ‘out of your field’, then why not head over and introduce yourself? Don’t just stand here and *listen* to their natural history,” her friend said, “be a part of it, Hannah! Go on, off you trot.” He waved her away, popping a couple crisps into his mouth.

“I’d better stay put, actually. Here comes Alpha,” Hannah said, gesturing to the doors. The hexapod shuffled into the hall, escorted by two attendants. Catching sight of the travelers and making their way over, Alpha Centauri nodded as they approached.

“They have informed me that the King will be ready to see you shortly,” they trilled.

The Doctor and Hannah shared a look. Hannah smiled apologetically and shrugged.

“I don’t really know the guy,” she said. “So, if you want to go up yourself, I’ll stay here and keep Alpha company. Maybe go and save Jadescales from conehead over there.”

Jadescales was glancing back at them across the hall as Lord Nabar droned on. Hannah waved and the Doctor nodded politely. Jadescales twitched and focused an eye back on Nabar.

“If you’re sure. I’ll return within the next half hour.” The Doctor set his plate down, grabbing a pair of *vol-au-vents* as he did so, then ambled over to the attendants and exited the hall.

Hannah turned to Alpha Centauri. “Wanna go help me save Jadescales?”

Centauri looked dubious. “Perhaps. So long as it doesn’t disrupt anything...”

“Sometimes disrupting things is just what we have to do. Come on!” Hannah walked off towards her quarry. Centauri bunched up their shoulders nervously, glanced around, then shuffled off after Hannah.

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King Pelleas had never looked worse. It was as if the once hale and hearty Pel had had the fluids sucked out of him, leaving him little more than a shriveled husk. His hair was scraggly, and the distinctive midline Titian streak had almost entirely faded away. Unable to keep warm by the faint torchlight, he clutched weakly at the covers, trying to pull them closer — so close as to be a second skin. His mostly inert form was a stark contrast to the energetic shadows dancing on the walls.

The Doctor's hearts sank as he took in the scene. He approached the bedside, and its occupant blinked myopically, jerking his head around to find the source of the noise.

"Who's there?" he demanded, his voice a whisper.

"The Doctor," came the reply.

"I thought you said there was nothing more..." He stopped to lay back, hacking furiously. He continued, somewhat dazed. "Nothing more you could do for me."

"No, *the* Doctor," his guest intoned. "You remember?"

Pelleas sucked in a breath, coughing a bit. "It couldn't be. You would have to be..."

"Much older, yes."

"And what's happened to your voice?"

The Doctor chuckled quietly. "Age, elocution lessons that some would allege went awry, and worse," he replied.

"Where is your companion?" the King asked.

"Downstairs, with your guests."

The King rolled over, trying to maintain his meager warmth, but face the Doctor despite his blinding cataracts. He tried and failed to shuffle closer, stifling another cough.

"Is she well?"

"I don't travel with the same young woman anymore," the Doctor replied. "But both of them are well. I should hope that all my companions, past and present, are doing well. But how are you, Pelleas?"

"Old and frail," the King murmured. "I wish I wasn't. I wish it so desperately, Doctor." He was quiet for a time, save for his occasional coughs. "How is my wife?"

The Doctor's hearts sank even further. The King didn't remember. "She's... she's just fine. I'm due to see her shortly, actually."

"Good, good," the old man said. "She's missed you. Always hoped you'd visit sooner."

"I know," the Doctor murmured. "I'm about as good at making time to visit my old friends as I am at saying goodbyes, but..."

The door opened then, and one of the princes stepped across the threshold. The Doctor looked up and nodded in greeting. "Your Highness."

Pelleas managed only a dry bark. The prince tried to maintain his composure.

"The Doctor, isn't it?" the young man asked. "My mother told me stories of you."

"Pelenat," the King rasped, somehow able to discern which son it was by voice alone, "where is your mother? Why... why has she not come to see me?"

Pelenat's composure crumpled and the color drained from his face. He looked like someone had kicked him in the gut with a spiked cleat.

"One moment, father." He looked to the Doctor. "I'm sorry, but I must ask you to leave. I wish to be alone with my father."

“Of course, your highness,” the Doctor replied with a nod. He grabbed Pelleas’s hand and squeezed it gently before he went. “It was good to see you, old friend. Take care on your journey to the undiscovered country, won’t you?”

“Journey? What journey?”

“Forget I said anything. Goodbye.”

“Please tell everyone that there will be no more visitations,” Pelenat said hurriedly. “And if you see my twin, tell him to get here posthaste. I fear that our father might not have much longer.”

The Doctor nodded and walked to the door. As he closed it, he could hear Pelleas’s small, raspy voice from the bed. A frail insult to a once-powerful ruler.

“Pelenat, you haven’t answered my question. Where is your mother?”

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Jadescales excused herself from her conversation with Hannah and Alpha Centauri. Not that she didn’t enjoy it, but this matter was a bit more important. The reptilian made her way over to the mottled grey form of Nephrys, the Gastropod in charge of the Federation ambassadors. The two women’s eyes met, turrets mirroring eyestalks, and they nodded politely.

“You are the ambassador from Foamasius, correct?” Nephrys asked.

“Actually, that’s what I came over to discuss,” Jadescales replied.

“Is that so? Er, you’ll have to clarify what you mean,” the Gastropod gurgled.

“We’ve recently renamed our homeworld to Liasici,” explained the reptilian. “And yet, as you’ve just said, I’m here under the old name. Why has there been a delay on that front?”

Nephrys handed her plate and glass to one of her attendants, both of whom were pointedly finding far more interesting things to look at.

“I apologize for the delay and any inconvenience this has caused you,” Nephrys replied, putting on her best diplomatic face. “But this took us all by surprise, and the paperwork finalizing your request fell by the wayside. It’ll be at the forefront of my agenda once I return to Hergon IX. The next time we meet after this function, it will be Liasici.”

Jadescales looked dubious. She knew how bureaucracy worked, and didn’t really trust Nephrys’s assurances. Still, she knew better than to start something here.

“Thank you, ambassador,” she muttered. “I’ll inform my superiors this evening.”

A gong sounded, and everyone turned to the doors to see the squat woman.

“Dinner is served!”

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The dining hall reminded Hannah of the Harry Potter films, sans floating candles. It had the same chandeliers and ornate tapestries as the Great Hall, but a series of portraits of former kings and queens of Peladon lined the left wall. The right had floor-to-ceiling windows that offered a stunning view of the river valley carved between Mount Megeshra and the neighboring Mount Asobra. The only thing breaking the consistency of the windows was a large fireplace, crackling nicely. The Martian ambassador and her adjutant took their seats well away from it.

The squat woman had announced all the visiting dignitaries before they took their seats. She made her way through the varied species, excepting Lord Nabar, and finally got to the end of the list. The only one absent from the gathering in the Great Hall.

“And finally,” the woman proclaimed, “the ambassador from Terileptus, His Royal Gorgeousness V!”

In stumbled a truly hideous Terileptil. A considerable portion of his scales looked as if they’d been torn or simply plucked off. His left eye was blackened and swollen. A ponderous gut preceded him, held up by an attached... well, the only fitting term was ‘neon-colored belly wheel.’ In lieu of an actual limb, the ambassador’s right leg was a jewel-encrusted gold pegleg.

His Royal Gorgeousness (a title he’d almost certainly made up, Hannah decided) stifled a belch and gave a woozy, half-hearted wave. A gaudy android steadied him as he teetered over to his seat. It struck Hannah that the bloated fish-lizard looked for all the world like one of her aunts at around half past eight on Christmas. Belly wheel excepted, of course.

“Hey,” Hannah whispered, “I thought you said Peladon didn’t allow alcohol.”

“It doesn’t,” the Doctor replied with a ‘what can you do’ shrug. “But clearly he smuggled something in. As I recall, Terileptil absinthe is powerful stuff — even a single shot can affect Time Lords. Learned that the hard way. Ben and Polly never let me live it down...”

As soon as the android had placed the ambassador in his chair, the Terileptil chuckled, gurgling out something about liquor being quicker. Several of the ambassadors tutted and muttered amongst themselves, while the majority, including the Doctor, silently agreed to ignore their drunken colleague. Hannah stared for a moment until a gentle tapping of silver on crystal came from the head of the table. Prince Pelenat stood before them, looking far better than he had in his father’s bedchamber.

“Friends, allies, and... ah...” He paused, looking at the drunk Terileptil and calling upon all of his tact for the right phrase. “*Diminished* guests, shall we say.” A few ambassadors gave a polite chuckle and the prince smiled, somewhat more at ease. “I welcome you again to Peladon, and I would like to extend my sincere thanks to all of you for being here during this trying time. It means a great deal to my family, Peladon, and me personally. I apologize for my twin brother’s absence, but assure you that he will join us before the meal is over. I hope you all enjoy the food, and please don’t hesitate to ask the serving staff if you need anything. *Bon appétit!*”

A small army of servants emerged from the adjoining kitchen, bringing with them enough food to feed an entire county fair. Despite looking rather strange, the food was actually very good. Apparently the Pels had no qualms about eating their horses, which tasted more like a cross between venison and pot roast. Hannah couldn’t remember the proper name, but whatever they were, they were excellent when roasted with root vegetables and an herbaceous marinade.

The ambassadors were a lively bunch at mealtimes, too, it seemed. Though several only ate behind blacked-out partitions with their servants speaking on their behalf. The recently-arrived Mogarian ambassador sat awkwardly next to Vvvux, the Centox representative, who spat digestive juices onto her food before eating. Lord Nabar wasn’t present at all.

The Doctor explained that it was due to some very old Draconian custom that mealtimes were for quiet, personal reflection. Hannah supposed she could understand the reasoning — after all, how many breakups had she spent on a couch with a tub of Neapolitan ice cream, wondering where it had all gone wrong? — but ultimately thought it was a bit silly.

She looked to her left. A balding, fair-haired gentleman with a lantern jaw and a pencil moustache was picking at his vegetables, leaving the meat alone.

“Vegetarian?” Hannah asked. He blinked at her.

“No,” he replied slowly. “I just forgot to mention that I don’t like the marinade the chefs use. Ruins the natural flavor of the meat, if you ask me.”

“Oh, alright. I really like it, actually. Reminds me of one my Uncle Rob used to use when he made venison.” There was a slightly awkward pause, and Hannah could tell the man wasn’t sure why she was talking to him. “So, what’s your name?”

“Hollen,” the man replied. “And yours?”

“Hannah Redfoot, nice to meet you.”

“A very pretty name.” Hollen pushed his plate away, but looked to Hannah askance. “Would you like my portion of roast?”

“Oh, if you’re offering, please!” she chirped. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.” He plopped the meat onto her plate.

“So,” Hannah continued, “what’s the weather on Earth like this time of year?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Hollen sniffed. “I’m from Darvey.”

“Uh... is that a human colony?”

“*Trion* colony. I’m a Trion.” He looked at her incredulously. “Can’t you tell?”

“Oh. No.” Hannah flushed red with embarrassment. “Sorry, I thought... sorry.” She turned back to the Doctor. “Am I the only human in this entire room?”

“Yes,” he replied. “I thought you knew.”

“No!” she hissed. “Warn a girl!”

Before the Doctor could reply, the doors burst open and two guards marched in, Prince Thalaan between them. The smugness on his face was unmistakable. Everyone looked up, and one ambassador’s partition fell over. Pelenat stood up from his seat at the head of the table.

“Brother,” Pelenat greeted, “good of you to join us at last.”

“Save your pleasantries for someone who cares!” Thalaan barked. “I come with news for you all!”

Immediately, the noise level rose as the ambassadors began to chatter amongst themselves. They had a sneaking suspicion of what he meant... Then the guards beat their pikes onto the ground.

“Quiet! *Quiet!*” Thalaan ordered, casting a vicious glare over the hall. “I am not finished yet!” All fell silent, every eye in the room trained on him. The smirk made a triumphant return.

“As you all know, King Pelleas is on his deathbed. Some have expressed regret for this southerly turn in my father’s health, and not without good reason.” He paused, glancing over his captive audience once more. “I, however, did not. At least, once I saw the truth.”

Pelenat looked ready to speak, but Thalaan gave him a look that said it all: “I dare you. I bloody dare you.” Pelenat fell into a mulish silence like a child in time-out.

“The truth is that Pelenat would not be an effective heir in any way, shape, or form for many reasons that shall not be enumerated just now.”

“What, pray tell, are you getting at with all this?” Taxati, the Mortrexly ambassador, hissed from beside Pelenat.

“Yes, I’d rather like to know myself,” said Usbrek, the Voord representative, as she glowered over her shoulder at Thalaan.

“Isn’t it obvious?” the Doctor asked them with a sigh. Hannah thought he looked more like the Man Who Knew Too Much than anyone should, and she worried she had something more than an inkling herself...

Before anyone could continue to chime in, a shriveled, hunched little man in flowing robes hobbled through the doors, supported by a walking stick. A piece of faded yellow parchment wrapped in a silken purple ribbon was clutched in one of his gnarled hands. This was, presumably, the citadel’s record keeper.

“Your Majesty,” he wheezed, inclining his head to Thalaan and handing the document to him. Thalaan took it, but offered no thanks or recognition. The guards then escorted him away. Thalaan’s smirk blossomed into a broad grin as he unfurled the parchment and slammed it onto the table.

“The King is dead, and *I* am the rightful heir!” he boomed, spreading his arms grandly. “And if anyone takes issue with that, I encourage you to take it up with my allies!”

To everyone’s horror, a platoon of 30 Ice Warriors marched into the room, sonic disruptors trained on each delegate. Alpha Centauri let loose a shrill cry of alarm, turning a delicate shade of lilac and fainting on the spot. Sentreal’s cones collapsed downwards with a clatter and he glanced around fearfully. Hannah could hear the Martians wheezing behind herself, Hollen, and the Doctor, their weapons whining lowly. She gulped and grabbed the Doctor’s hand. He squeezed it reassuringly before nodding to where Thalaan stood. Commandant H’skrr had joined the prince at the head of the room, a smile etched onto his face.

“What is the meaning of this!?” Pelenat cried, nervously glancing at the quartet of Ice Warriors surrounding him. “Thalaan, don’t do this. If you’re so insistent about being king, then we can rule together! There’s no need for—”

“Warriors,” Thalaan interrupted, “arrest Prince Pelenat and take him to the dungeons! He can await execution there! If he resists or in any way attempts to sway you from your duties, don’t hesitate to take matters into your own hands!”







# **EPISODE TWO**



## Chapter Four

### *The Truth and Other Precious Commodities*

The Doctor glowered at Lady Efaxyr over the table, his pale green eyes flashing dangerously. The two of them, several other ambassadors, and Thalaan had all entered an antechamber off the Great Hall. The room was some sort of small study and bookcases hewn from dark wood lined the walls. A globe showing the four continents of Peladon sat on the windowsill.

“It is a counterfeit!” the Time Lord declared, slamming his fist onto the table. “A sham! A well-made one, I’ll grant you, but still a forgery!”

“Doctor!” Efaxyr cut in. “That is enough!”

“Hardly!” snorted Clivix from behind the Doctor. At her side, Jadescales nodded in agreement.

Efaxyr was undeterred, and continued to speak. “I believe in the accuracy of the certificate the King has provided, and *that* is what matters now,” she announced in an impassioned rasp. “As far as I, and by extension the New Martian Republic, am concerned, King Thalaan is the rightful ruler of Peladon. My warriors have acted on behalf of an allied state, and while Thalaan’s actions may have been overzealous, I am willing to give him the benefit of the doubt.”

The Doctor’s nostrils flared as he looked the Martian square in the eye. “Then, forgive me, madam, but you are an utter halfwit!” he declared. “This boy is leading you down the proverbial garden path! There is no possible way that Thalaan—”

“*King* Thalaan.”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake! Put a sock in it, Ice Queen!” Jadescales cried. “There’s a fine line between brown-nosing and ass-kissing, you know!”

“As I was saying,” the Doctor continued, “Thalaan could not have been born first. The records do not show that. I’m certain!”

Efaxyr opened her mouth to speak, but the Doctor thundered on.

“And please don’t bother to tell me that this record shows it, as I have made it abundantly clear that I believe it to be a phony document,” he cried. “And another thing!”

“Where exactly *is* this proof, Doctor?” Lir cut in.

The slimy Mentor was now sat in a water-filled basin perched atop a mobile pedestal. Nephrys was leaning away from it, trying to not get splashed by his sloshing bath. She had said nothing thus far, seemingly content to observe so as not to be claimed by either side.

“Yes, where is it?” Dusen agreed from his perch on the arm of a high-backed chair. “You talk or, rather, *shout* a big game, but can you back it up?”

The Doctor smiled coolly. “Of course I can,” he replied, looking to Thalaan. “So long as I am allowed access to the citadel’s archives. Speaking of, where has that little chap with the cane gone off to?”

The wannabe-king looked up from the globe. He’d been scrutinizing it, as if seeing it for the first time. Matching the Doctor’s joyless smile, he began to walk over. His steps were slow and deliberate across the ornate rug.

“Out of the question,” he stated simply, ignoring the Doctor’s inquiry.

“And why is that?” Jadescales demanded. “It sounds like you have something to hide!”

“Indeed,” Clivix intoned, fixing Thalaan with a piercing glare. “What harm could it do?”

“None!” Thalaan said. “But I am not about to let any common or garden *foreigner* who waltzes into my citadel free reign of the archives, unaccompanied or not!”

“Well, then all we have to go on is the document here,” the Doctor said, gesturing to the parchment on the table.

“And since you’ve barred us from touching, scanning, or in any way examining it, our hands are tied,” Clivix sighed.

The Doctor exhaled and spread his hands, palms out. “Look, just admit that you’ve forged the record and allow Pelenat to rightfully take the throne. It’ll be much easier for you in the long run, trust me.”

Thalaan’s face turned black as thunder and he jabbed a finger into the Doctor’s face.

“One more aspersion about the veracity of my birth certificate from *any* of you,” he snarled, “and I will—”

“What? Throw me in the Pit of Aggedor?” the Doctor chuckled humorlessly, smacking Thalaan’s hand away. “I’ve escaped that before.”

“Do not interrupt the King when he speaks!” Thalaan growled.

“Oh, please! You’re no more a king than I am!”

“Any further insubordination and I will confine you to your room!”

“Just like naughty children, hm? Tell me, *your majesty*, is that a threat?” the Doctor asked.

“No! A promise!”

“Alright then,” the Doctor said, spreading his arms wide, “confine me, you little tin-pot tyrant! I *will* prove you’re a fraud, one way or another. Four walls and a wooden door won’t be blips on my radar, much less obstacles, believe you me.”

“I stand with the Doctor,” Clivix rasped.

“Yes!” Jadescales concurred. “We’ll put an end to your little game!”

Thalaan visibly seethed. Before the Doctor could make a crack about how bad grinding one’s teeth was, the prince stormed to the door. Flinging it open, he pointed to the Doctor, Jadescales, and Clivix.

“They are to be confined to their rooms indefinitely!” he barked. “And get the Doctor’s wench as well! She can suffer alongside him!”

“Wench!?” the Doctor spluttered. “How dare you call Hannah that!”

The guards did as they were told. In short order, the dissenters were being frog-marched out the door, their arms held tight behind their backs.

“Nephrys!” Clivix called. “Nephrys, you must do something!”

The Gastropod remained just as silent as she had throughout the argument, and refused to look at them as they were led away. It was clear she would be no ally of theirs.

“Coward!” Jadescales cried. “You dirty coward!”

Before anyone could reply, they were gone.

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The royal dungeons weren’t as bad as Pelenat had imagined them. In fact, they were much worse. Dank, poorly-lit, and possessing a faintly sour odor that filled the nostrils and hung there like smog. The stone was moldy, the ground little more than soggy loam. The omnipresent chilly draft was just the awful icing on the horrid cake.

Pelenat sniffled a little and tried to hold back tears.

“He was my brother. My twin!” he murmured to himself. “How could he do this to me?”

For a long while — what felt like days but was probably only a couple hours — Pelenat sat in his cell under the watchful gaze of two enormous Ice Warriors. The wet dirt made Pelenat’s backside uncomfortably damp and cold, which only furthered his sorry state of mind.

Then, a familiar voice echoed out of the gloom.

“Hello?” Lorvis called. The Martians aimed their forearm-mounted sonic disruptors at the stairwell.

“Who goes there?” one of them hissed.

When Lorvis came into view, his hands were raised in surrender, as were the two guards with him. “Whoa there. Friends, not foes.”

The lizards lowered their weapons and stood before the guard captain, peering down at him through red-lensed eyepieces. “What is your business here?”

“I am the guard captain of the citadel,” Lorvis replied. “My lieutenants and I have come to relieve you. Go take a half-hour break, both of you.”

The Ice Warriors looked suspicious for a moment, but shrugged. At least, he thought they shrugged — it was hard to tell with their armor. Regardless, they lumbered off upstairs without complaint.

Lorvis’s lieutenants, who Pelenat recognized as his two closest friends amongst the guard, kept a lookout while the lovers met at the cell bars, kissing through them.

“Are you alright?” Lorvis asked, running a hand over Pelenat’s hair.

“Better for seeing you,” the prince replied, smiling broadly. “What’s going on up there?”

Lorvis sighed. “The ambassadors have begun to take sides. Nephrys is staying neutral, as are Nabar, the Epsilites, and the Terileptil — though I think the latter’s just too drunk to realize what’s going on. Lir, Dusen, the Delphon fellow, and of course the Martians have sided with that brother of yours.” Lorvis spat at the mention of him.

“Meanwhile, all your proponents have been locked in their rooms for challenging the authenticity of Thalaan’s fake birth certificate. The Doctor was absolutely vicious, from what my men told me. He *almost* knocked Thalaan down a peg. Even called him a ‘tin-pot tyrant’!”

Pelenat laughed. “Just like how my mother described him.”

They stood for a moment, just enjoying their closeness, before Pelenat looked Lorvis dead in the eye. “Please, promise me you’ll be careful, love.”

“I will, Natty, I promise,” Lorvis assured him.

“That goes for all your men, too.”

"Of course." Lorvis turned back to his lieutenants. "Head back upstairs. We'll be fine for a little while. Just be back before those Ice Warriors return."

"Aren't you going with them?" the prince asked as they left. Lorvis shook his head.

"No," he replied, sitting down. He entwined his fingers with Pelenat's as they sat side-by-side. "My loyalty belongs to the rightful King of Peladon."

"I love you so much. Thank you."

The conditions may not have been ideal, but being together was enough. Pelenat didn't feel sorry for himself anymore.

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Hannah was furious. No, more than that. She was *apoplectic*!

She had been tending to Alpha Centauri in Clivix's room with Shlastro when the guards had stormed in and all-but kidnapped her. She had kicked and screamed, struggling in the guard's grasp to no avail. Then she'd been unceremoniously thrown into her room like a soon-to-be-replaced kid's toy. The Doctor had informed her of what transpired with Thalaan, and now his companion was pacing from wall to wall at a furious speed.

"Who the hell does he think he is!?" she shouted.

"I've gathered he's under the mistaken impression that he's the rightful king," the Doctor remarked from the adjoining bathroom. He was having no luck finding a secret exit.

"Gee, thanks, Doctor Obvious!" Hannah snapped. "Ugh! We've been here not even twelve hours and already we're locked up!"

"We've been in worse cells," he pointed out as he exited the bathroom. "At least we've got a bed and an *en suite* bathroom."

"You're not taking this seriously! A disgruntled royal — really just a power-hungry idiot with delusions of grandeur — has just usurped the throne in a military coup co-organized by Martians! Plus he's got half the ambassadors convinced it's all legit just because he's waved a forged birth certificate around!"

The Doctor looked up from where he was experimentally tapping the floor. He opened his mouth then closed it again and rubbed his chin. "Actually," he said after a moment, "that just about covers it. Well, save for the fact he has no idea how to effectively govern an unruly puppy, much less a whole nation. Hmm. Why does that sound vaguely familiar?"

Hannah was quiet for a couple moments, then she nodded. More to herself than anyone else.

"We need a trump card," she decided. "Something that'll shut Thalaan down once and for all and prove Pelenat's birthright beyond a shadow of a doubt."

"I agree," the Doctor replied, crawling underneath the bed. "But unless you happen to have one lying around, I think we might be hard up for them."

"Can't we just make a rope from the sheets and covers, rappel down to the TARDIS, and, I dunno, go back in time and film the queen giving birth?" Hannah suggested. "I mean, you said she traveled with you, so she no doubt had weirder stuff asked of her plenty of times!"

"Out of the question!" the Doctor said sharply, his head popping out from below the bed. "That would be recklessly meddling with time, and I am not about to go down that route unless it is an absolute last-ditch resort! Next suggestion, please."

"But, Doctor!"

The Doctor's voice was low and unyielding. "*No, Hannah.*"

Hannah spun on her heel, arms crossed and shoulders bunched. She growled in frustration and squeezed the bridge of her nose with thumb and forefinger. After a moment she looked up at the painting of King Peladon on the wall and shuddered.

"I'm sorry. It's just so frustrating!" She pointed to the painting. "Plus, I feel like the eyes in that painting are watching me! It's super creepy!"

When she turned to face the Doctor, who was now standing, the spy inside the wall drew away from the painting's hidden peepholes. He discreetly slid the real eyes back into place, then backed down the hidden passageway to the secret entrance in the Great Hall.

By the time the Doctor and Hannah eventually found the peepholes, the hiding spot was long since empty.

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Thalaan's face blackened once more as he was told the news. It was embellished, of course. The short, weaselly-faced spy wanted to make it sound as if the Doctor really did intend to go back in time and get the proof. He was a past master at that, though. You didn't get far in his profession without a command of language to bail you out if stealth failed.

Thalaan considered the news for a moment before speaking.

"Thank you," he told the spy. "You are a loyal subject."

"You're most welcome, majesty!" the spy simpered.

"I will now thank you to leave us."

"Of course, my liege." The spy bowed before ducking out of the throne room. Thalaan watched him go, hearing him muttering about maybe picking up a new coat, and then addressed his guards.

"Find the Doctor's TARDIS. If my mother's stories were correct, it should be a large blue box with a lamp on top, etched with strange script," he informed them.

"And what shall we do when we find it, my king?" one of the guards asked.

Thalaan gave a small, cruel smile. "Dispose of it."

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It had been an hour since the travelers had been confined to their room. Hannah had given up on pacing, and the Doctor hadn't discovered any way out. At least, not one that wouldn't fail immediately. The bedclothes had proven too delicate to string into a safe rappelling rope, and there was no way to enter the secret passageway in the wall without blasting their way in. An admittedly-foolhardy plan to unlock the door with the sonic screwdriver and knock the no doubt surprised guards out was scuppered by the Doctor realizing he'd left the screwdriver in his other coat.

'So much for the four walls and wooden door being blips on the radar,' the Doctor had mused as he'd laid down on the bed. He dozed off into a trance-like state briefly before Hannah roused him.

"Doctor, you might want to come and see this!" she called from the window. The Doctor sat up on the bed, looking over at her disinterestedly.

"What is it now?" he sighed.

"Some of those badger-haired guards are dragging the TARDIS to the cliff!" she said.

"*They're what!?*" The Doctor was off to bed and at her side in an instant, gazing in horror as four burly men pulled on ropes lashed around his beloved ship. A fifth was holding a torch to

combat the dimming light. He could faintly make out their calls of “heave-ho” and his outrage only increased. “*Stop! Stop that at once!*”

“*Leave it alone!*” Hannah shrieked.

Their cries went either unnoticed or unheeded — they couldn’t be sure. The men stopped pulling on the ropes and got behind the TARDIS, still ignoring the travelers’ cries. They shoved it, and to the Doctor and Hannah’s horror, the TARDIS went tumbling down the side of the mountain. The sickening noise of the lamp shattering hung in their ears as it toppled into the valley below and vanished from sight.



## Chapter Five

### *Internal Matters*

If Shlastro was perturbed by Thalaan's actions, he didn't show it. No, that would be improper. His role was to be the stolid, taciturn protector, not the fretful worrywart. Still, it pained him to see his mother's pride wounded in such a manner. In all her years of diplomacy, never once had she been treated like this.

Checking that Alpha Centauri was still alright on the bed, the hybrid walked over to where his mother sat at the desk. He put what he hoped was a comforting hand on her shoulder. Some tension bled away, but she didn't look back when she addressed him.

"Do you remember," she began, "when you were a hatchling and we went to the beach? How excited you were to see the ocean for the first time?"

"I do," he replied, not sure where she was going with this.

"I remember, after we'd played all day in the surf, I sat down with you in my lap and we watched the sunset. And you asked me, 'Mommy, does the ocean go on forever?'" The old Sea Devil chuckled at the memory. "I told you it didn't and you said—"

"Oh. That's dumb. I'm gonna pretend it does," Shlastro finished. His mother nodded.

"I sometimes wish things could have stayed like that forever."

"We both know they couldn't."

"Of course," she agreed. "Though I can't help but wish things were simple like that again. Just from time to time..." She trailed off before looking back to him. "I think that the humans' sentimentality has rubbed off on me."

Shlastro cracked a smile. "There are worse traits to pick up."

"Ooohhh, dear..." Centauri warbled as they came to. The hexapod sat up, groaning. "I had the most dreadful dream that the Martian delegates assisted Prince Thalaan in a coup."

"Sadly, it wasn't a dream," Shlastro informed them. "The Doctor, his companion, Jadescales, mother, and myself have all been confined to quarters."

Centauri took the news in, remaining uncharacteristically mute. Their giant eyelid sagged briefly and a sigh escaped them. After a moment, they hopped off the bed and shuffled to the

door. "I shall go at once to speak to Thalaan, then, and make an impassioned appeal to any reason he possesses."

"Ambassador, I don't think that's wise," Shlastro warned.

"Nor do I," Centauri agreed, "but gumption is the only recourse that remains, so I shall have to use it."

"And here I was under the impression you were a coward," Clivix remarked.

"Make no mistake, Ambassador Clivix, I *am* a coward. But with the Doctor imprisoned, it seems I shall have to 'step up to the plate' as the humans say. Furthermore, I am here as an honored guest. It is a grievous insult to slight me or my guests in such a manner. I will not stand for it!"

Clivix and Shlastro shared a surprised look as the hexapod tugged on the door handle, found it locked, then hammered on the wood. The guards opened it and stared at the ambassador.

"What is it?" one asked.

"I have not been confined to quarters and wish to leave," Centauri informed them. "Please stand aside."

The guards looked at each other, shrugged, and let Centauri pass. The door slammed shut immediately after and was locked tight once more. Clivix and Shlastro stared.

"Do you know," Clivix said, "I think that bump Centauri took to the head might have done more damage than we first thought."

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The staircase was a little ways from Clivix's room, but right near the Doctor and Hannah's. As Alpha Centauri approached, they could hear banging and shouting from inside as the door rattled furiously, threatening to fly off its hinges. The guards banged back, shouting that if the Doctor and Hannah didn't pipe down, the guards would make them. Centauri shuffled forward.

"Excuse me!" they trilled. "What do you think you're doing?"

The broader one rounded on Centauri. "Move along! There's nothing to see here!" she bellowed. It was about that time that she noticed who she was talking to and went pale. "O-Oh. Ambassador! Please excuse me!"

Her partner had turned his attentions to Centauri as well, and the pair of them bowed.

"You will release my guests at once," the hexapod warbled.

"Uh, my apologies, ambassador, but we can't do that," the other guard mumbled. "King's orders."

Centauri's massive eye narrowed and their skin turned an ugly shade of puce. "Tell me, have you heard of the Alpha Centauran Battle Fleets?" The guards replied that they hadn't, citing the species' well-known distaste for violence. "A distaste for violence and an inability to commit it are two separate concepts! Now, if you do not release my companions from their imprisonment forthwith, this planet will feel the wrath of the only undefeated battle fleet in the Nine Galaxies."

"I'm not sure that's true..."

"You may not believe me, but can you risk it?" Centauri asked. "We are more than capable of incinerating this planet from a distance of three light-years!"

The guards, not being terribly smart, were fooled by the bluff, and the Doctor and Hannah were released from their room in short order. The trio made their way down the hall to the staircase, the Doctor shaking Centauri's clasps.

"My dear fellow, I can't thank you enough!" he said. "A bit sloppy, but overall well-played!"

“What he said!” Hannah chimed in. “You’re great, Alpha. Thank you.”

“Your thanks is unnecessary,” the hexapod insisted. “One does grow tired of ruffians constantly threatening this planet. I simply am too old to put up with it like I used to.”

“I’m sure,” the Doctor agreed with a nod. “But we have more pressing matters. Thalaan has had the TARDIS thrown down the mountain.”

Centaury’s skin turned red. “How dare they! Wanton damage of property is conduct unbecoming a Federation member!”

“Thalaan doesn’t seem to care about that, or anything that doesn’t help him, really,” Hannah said.

“Come with me, the both of you,” Centaury told them. “I am headed to the throne room as we speak to try and appeal to Thalaan’s better judgement. Though I fear now that he may possess none whatsoever...”

“Well, if you’re offering,” the Doctor replied, his expression darkening with determination, “I can’t think of anywhere I’d rather be.”

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Thalaan sat on the throne, looking out over the room filled with ambassadors. Nephrys, who had previously been loitering on the outskirts of the room, inspecting the tapestries and mounted shields and swords, had yet to return from wherever she had slithered off to. Sentreal had gone to follow her, but apparently changed his mind when Lir arrived with his attendants. He watched the scene quietly.

The Mentor had discarded his mobile pedestal for the time being. Behind his procession trailed Dusen, and the lot of them were flanked by two Ice Warriors. Off to the side, he saw H’skrrr smirk proudly. Efaxyr, on the other hand, didn’t.

“Your majesty,” Lir simpered, “it is my pleasure to say that the Mentors of Thoros Beta are committed to assisting your regime in any way we can.”

Dusen nodded. “We of the Leisure Hive, and indeed all of Argolis, feel much the same.” There was a pregnant pause and Thalaan arched a shapely brow. The ensuing ‘however’ was palpable.

“However,” Lir began. There it was, Thalaan thought. “We wish to have some... *assurances* that you will be willing to ‘pluck our back scales’ as we are plucking yours.”

“Must you use that revolting idiom?” Dusen hissed, suppressing a shudder.

“Gentlemen,” Thalaan said, voice tight and clipped, “I am willing to hear your demands, but please make it quick.”

“Of course, your excellency!” Dusen’s grin was avarice incarnate — surprising, given his position next to a Mentor, of all races. “My request is simple. Argolis needs a partner in proposing sanctions against Foamasi goods. There is a growing fear on our world that they are attempting to utilize their economic bounty to obliterate any strides we’ve made in the last several thousand years. We wish to head that off at the pass.”

Thalaan considered this for a moment before giving Dusen an affirmative nod. The Argolin smiled. “My thanks, and that of Argolis, is unending, your highness. You truly are an enlightened—”

“Ambassador Lir, if you will?” Thalaan interrupted, already growing bored. The Mentor smirked at his cohort, then began to speak.

“King Thalaan, my request is simple,” the maggoty mogul purred. “To compensate for my recent failed bid for exclusive mass media rights on planet Omicron Persei 8, I wish to find

another source of income. Would you be willing to part with a small percentage of your trisilicate—”

“*Absolutely not!*” Thalaan roared, his face red with anger. Everyone stared. Lir looked so frightened by the outburst that he may very well have soiled his fluid bath. The King blinked and cleared his throat. “My apologies, but trisilicate is a precious natural resource. The backbone of the Pel economy. I cannot part with any portion of it. I am willing to hear other offers, though.”

Lir was visibly nonplussed, but fell back on his businessman instincts and began once more. “Aggedor domestication.”

“What?”

“I would like to invest in Aggedor domestication,” he explained. “With exclusive rights to sell the resulting breeds to pet stores across the Nine Galaxies! I could make oodles and oodles of glorious money!” Lir began to giggle like a giddy child, bouncing eagerly in his bath and splashing his manservants. Thalaan could see the men die a little inside and realized Lir really had soiled his bath. Dusen wisely sidestepped away from the display, regarding it with revulsion. At Thalaan’s agreement, Lir seemed ready to bounce harder, but was thankfully stopped by the return of Nephrys.

The Gastropod slithered across the floor, her attendants dutifully scouring away her slime trail. It was hard to tell, but Thalaan didn’t think she looked very pleased. She nodded in greeting.

“I will cut right to the chase,” she announced. “I have received word from the Federation Council.”

“And what have they said?” Efaxyr inquired.

“Their official stance is that this is an internal matter,” Nephrys declared. “The alleged birth certificate provided by Thalaan will not be officially recognized, and the means by which he has come to power has been labeled a coup. The Federation unequivocally does *not* condone such actions, from either Peladon or Mars.”

One of her eyestalks turned to shoot Efaxyr and H’skrr a pointed look. Some people in the room began to balk.

“Slander!”

“I always knew the Council was a bunch of old fools!”

“Are they blind!?”

“In light of this,” Nephrys continued, ignoring the peanut gallery and Thalaan’s darkening expression, “all Federation involvement with Peladon will cease at this time. All ambassadors are welcome to remain if their governments so desire — the Federation has never had laws precluding alliances outside its jurisdiction — but it strongly advises against this as the new regime is, quote, ‘comprised of dangerous radicals that are hereby considered antithetical to civilized relations.’ End quote.”

“I couldn’t have put it better myself!” came a voice from the other end of the room. Both Ice Warriors aimed their disruptors at the newcomers. The Doctor and his friends stood proud... well, he did at least; Hannah and Alpha Centauri hung back uneasily.

Lorvis entered then, flanked by his lieutenants, and glared at the Ice Warriors.

“Aren’t you supposed to be guarding Prince Pelenat?” he asked them. “Who gave you permission to leave your post?”

“You did!” they protested.

“I most certainly did not!” Lorvis sniffed. His lieutenants backed him up, to the Martians’ loudly hissed displeasure. H’skrr glared.

"The pair of you will return to the dungeons at once," the commandant ordered, "or you will be charged with dereliction of duty and executed!"

At that, the two lumbered off quite quickly. The Doctor smiled coldly at them as they went, before turning to Thalaan.

"Playing King of the Castle, I see," the Time Lord remarked innocently. "Have you sung the rhyme yet? *'I'm the king of the castle, you're the dirty rascal!'*" He gave a humorless chuckle and affixed Thalaan with a pointed look. "Funny, I find that you fit far better as the dirty rascal."

Thalaan scowled. "How did you escape your room?"

"Who cares!?" Lir squawked, waving a dismissive hand at Thalaan. "I want this overgrown escargot platter to get me a direct line to the Council! This is outrageous!"

"Here, here!" Dusen agreed, stepping forward as he and Lir closed in around Nephrys. The Gastropod stood stock still, not giving an inch. Dusen looked to the Martians. "Will you not join us?"

"I will not challenge the Federation's will on this matter," Efaxyr stated resolutely. "They have made it clear that we can establish independent relations with Peladon should we so desire. That is enough for me."

"And me," H'skrr agreed. He seemed to be going along with Efaxyr, but Hannah noticed a suspicious glint in his eye. "Mars and Peladon have been friends for centuries. There is no reason to terminate such a strong alliance now."

Lir spit at them. "Still bound by your precious 'honor', I see!"

H'skrr's nod was not as convincing as Efaxyr's, but no one was paying that much attention to him. Nephrys shoved past Dusen and shuffled away.

"And just where do you think *you're* going?" he demanded.

"To the peace and quiet of my quarters, where I will await my shuttle," she replied. "I apologize that the Council's ruling has displeased you both, but my hands are tied. Good day."

Lir and Dusen watched the Gastropod and her attendants leave, visibly fuming. The Doctor looked on in amusement.

"Which one do you think will pop a blood vessel first?" Hannah asked quietly.

"I'd wager Dusen," he replied.

"Mine money's on Lir. What's the prize if I win?"

"Hmm. How about a trip to New Orleans?"

"You're on."

The Mentor was the first to break the silence with an infuriated shriek. Hannah grinned broadly at the Doctor and elbowed him gently. Her eyes said it all. Once they were done here, they were going to New Orleans.

"I will complain about this to the highest authority! The Board of Directors will hear about this, as will the CEO!" he called after Nephrys, who hadn't quite made it out of the room yet. "I advise any of you who wish to remain on good terms with Thoros Beta, LLC to follow my example! It would be in the best interests of your governments *and* your economies!" The little maggot glared at everyone present, then smacked one of his attendants upside the head. "You lot! Take me to my room this instant! I demand a sponge bath!"

Dusen, meanwhile, stalked after Nephrys. Noticing this, Lorvis nodded to one of his lieutenants, who nodded back and followed the Argolin out to ensure he didn't do anything he would regret. Lir and his entourage followed as the other ambassadors began to talk amongst themselves, debating whether or not they should follow Lir's example.

Alpha Centauri paled in fear. "Oh dear!" they trilled. "I fear this may fracture the entire Federation! I am unsure that my circulatory system could handle such an upset!"

The Doctor patted Centauri's back. "There's the Alpha Centauri I remember," he remarked. "Never fear, I'll ensure it doesn't." With that, he rounded on Thalaan. "Now listen to me, you self-important, badger-haired neophyte!"

The Time Lord's righteous roar had killed all other conversation, and everyone was now focused on him. Even Hannah had jumped a little at the venom in his voice. But she supposed she could understand. They'd gone after the TARDIS – the Doctor's oldest friend, companion, and his home. The kid gloves were off now. The Doctor was playing for keeps.

"I've had it with you!" he thundered. "Here is what you are going to do — and it is *non-negotiable*! You will cease this pathetic little power grab, free your brother from the dungeons and beg his forgiveness, retrieve my TARDIS from the bottom of the mountain, and then never again darken a doorway on this planet for as long as you live! Have I made myself *perfectly* clear? And you lot, mind those pikes, would you? They'll put someone's eye out!"

The ring of armed guards that had surrounded the Doctor and Hannah didn't heed his words, and Thalaan hadn't exactly done much in the way of doing what he was told, either. The Doctor was unphased. He turned to Hannah, who was currently flush against his right side to avoid being jabbed by the guards' pikes. Alpha Centauri was much the same way on his left. Several ambassadors made themselves scarce to avoid any possible bloodshed.

"You recorded that, didn't you?" the Doctor asked Hannah.

"I didn't know I was supposed to," she said, eying the spearheads nervously. In her peripheral vision, she could just make out Taxati, the Mortrexy ambassador, licking her lipless chops hungrily.

The Doctor sighed. "More's the pity. I rather liked it." He shrugged and looked to Thalaan. "Now, are you going to do as I say, or am I going to have to bring this all down around your ears? We both know I can and will."

The King's shoulders were hunched in anger, his face practically radiated heat, and if his nostrils flared any further one might fear they would tear in two. He took a deep breath, rising from the throne. Once he'd stalked down the steps into the throng of guards and gotten into the Doctor's face, the Doctor realized that the man's face *was* radiating heat. In spite of this, the Time Lord remained as unflappable as ever.

"*Well?*" he intoned expectantly.

In lieu of an answer, Thalaan sneered. "I was informed of your little plot," he snarled. "The one to go back in time."

The Doctor sighed as if this was as obvious as the fact water was wet. "No doubt you had a spy in that little hideaway looking into our room. But he clearly left out the part where I told my companion that I *wouldn't do that!*"

"You can't lie your way out of this, Doctor," the other man hissed. "Your box will languish in the foothills of Mount Megeshra long after I have your head mounted on a spike."

"Excuse me?" Efaxyr asked, her hackles raised.

Thalaan ignored her, turning to the nearest guard and holding out his hands. The guard's dubious look lasted a second too long, however, and Thalaan ripped the pike out of his hands, shoving the head up to the Doctor's throat. Alpha Centauri screamed as the assembled ambassadors all held their breath.

"I'm going to enjoy this," he sneered.

"Stop this at once!" Efaxyr shouted. Thalaan ignored her.

"You leave the Doctor alone!" Hannah cried, lunging forward to try and snatch the pike from Thalaan's hands. He growled in frustration and kicked her hard in the stomach, sending her

sprawling back with a shriek. She clutched her midsection with one arm then sucked in a sharp breath, removing it from the no-doubt tender area.

H'skrr took aim at the Doctor with his disruptor until Efaxyr knocked his hand down with a snarl. She charged into the crowd as the Doctor moved to grab the weapon as well. However, the Time Lord lurched back as Thalaan jabbed it at him. By now, Efaxyr had shoved her way through the guards and grabbed the pike in her clamp-like claws. She snapped it in two as easily as if it had been constructed from papier-mâché, letting the remains clatter to the floor. The enormous reptile rounded on Thalaan, jabbing a claw into his face, causing him to stumble back, wincing in pain as a pike stuck his backside. He shot her a murderous look.

"Why you miserable who—"

"*King Thalaan!*" the Ice Lady sibilated. "Heed my words! If *anyone* is killed needlessly by your hand or decree, I will pull my troops from Peladon so fast your head will spin! And that goes for you as well, commandant!"

Thalaan stopped. The room went silent save for H'skrr's snarl of displeasure. All of the other ambassadors were staring at Thalaan, as they had been throughout his murderous turn.

"I... I..." he stammered, then faltered.

The Doctor helped Hannah to her feet. "Are you alright?"

"I'll live," she replied, wincing a little. "Not comfortably, though."

"You'll be fine, Hannah. Now, Lady Efaxyr, I really must thank you."

"If you're so keen to get rid of the Doctor, why not exile him?" H'skrr suggested, striding over with apparently no other intent than to loom over the Doctor, Hannah, and Alpha. The hexapod shrunk back, causing the Martian to smile, rows of yellow needle-like teeth bared for all to see.

"Excuse me! No one asked you!" the Doctor exclaimed.

"Doctor, be quiet!" Efaxyr rasped. "And H'skrr, back down! I want you at my side." H'skrr complied and Efaxyr took a moment to collect herself, then nodded. "I am inclined to agree with my adjutant. Exiling them would be best."

"I really must protest!" the Doctor cried.

"You will shut your mouth before I come over there and shut it for you," H'skrr growled, and for once Efaxyr did nothing to temper him. She was clearly not fed up with the Doctor even if she didn't want him killed.

"Well, your highness?" she asked. "What is your decision?"

Thalaan clearly wasn't a fan of the idea, given the grimace it brought to his face, but after another pregnant pause he nodded and pointed to Lorvis. "You!"

Lorvis blinked. "Me?"

"You will take the Doctor, his wench, and Ambassador Alpha Centauri to Pelnar-over-Essel," the King declared. "And you will not return." It was clear from his tone that Lorvis's time as guard captain was over.

Lorvis spluttered. "I've been nothing but a faithful servant to the royal family! Why do this?"

"I have my reasons. I can make them known if you so desire," Thalaan replied, thinking himself cryptic. Lorvis knew exactly what he meant. It hung over his head like a guillotine's blade. One false move and it would plummet, beheading him.

"No, your highness, that won't be necessary," Lorvis muttered darkly, glowering at his lover's evil twin... which, when he actually thought it, sounded so ridiculous it almost made the situation funny. Almost.

“I thought not,” the king said. “As of now, you are formally relieved of your command and all other duties.”

“Might I remind you that I am an official guest of the Galactic Federation!” Alpha Centauri squealed. “You cannot treat me in this manner!”

Thalaan held up a hand. “I will hear no more on the subject. The four of you are all formally exiled! Now, get them out of my sight!”

The other guards looked to Lorvis uncertainly. He sighed ruefully, but nodded. “Do as he says.”

The guards came up to the trio, holding them tight. Hannah thrashed and struggled, trying desperately to break free.

“You can’t just this to us!” she protested.

“I’m sorry, but my hands are tied,” Lorvis sighed as he began to lead the procession out of the throne room.

The Doctor didn’t bother to struggle, but he did call out as he and his friends were led away. “You haven’t gotten rid of me this easily! One day, I shall come back!”

It seemed no one was listening, but then no one was looking at each other. H’skrr’s contemplative frown went unnoticed. Before he could act, however, Efaxyr all but pulled him from the throne room. They were going to have a serious talk, she assured him, one H’skrr was sure would intentionally go in one earhole and out the other.

As the other ambassadors filed out of the room, Taxati was muttering about not being able to see anyone get sliced. Then she remembered Thalaan being stuck by the pike. The hulking goanna turned to the King.

“Your highness,” she said, “forgive me for being invasive, but are you alright? That pike didn’t stab you too deeply, did it?”

Thalaan regarded her strangely. “No, it did not.”

“Oh, good, I thought not,” she replied with a nod. “That is to say, I didn’t smell any blood.”

The King stiffened. “Thank you for your concern, ambassador. You may leave now.”

The monitor lizard nodded again and tromped out, leaving Thalaan stock still in the throne room. A guard approached and asked if he needed medical assistance. Thalaan declined and quickly made for his bedchamber, covering his bottom the whole way. There was still no blood.



## Chapter Six

### *The Spirit of Rebellion*

The path to get to Pelnar-over-Essel swung out and around the actual city, not taking the direct route due to thick pine forest which was host to a logging project. Lorvis was, unfortunately, tired enough to accidentally turn them in the wrong direction at the crossroads, unwittingly leading them south to Hecetel down the river. As such, by the time they got turned around and into the city, it was nearly 10 o'clock.

Pelnar-over-Essel was a bustling burg that sat on both sides of the River Essel, which cleaved a path through the marshy valley between Mount Megeshra to the northeast and Mount Asobra to the southwest. The buildings were packed tightly together, so close that they seemed to be trying to lean down and watch the sea of pedestrians that trod upon the cobblestones. Even the stone-hewn bridges supported various buildings, from apartments to shops and event halls. Hannah marveled at it all as the group was led through the crowded streets by Lorvis. Her head whipped this way and that, never remaining fixed to one sight for very long. She wanted to take it all in.

"Careful," the Doctor said, "you might give yourself whiplash."

"I've had that before," she replied, focusing on him. "It sucked. But then, most car accidents suck."

"How did that happen?" he inquired.

"Some idiots who thought they had something to prove," Hannah explained. "But it's in the past. Literally *and* relatively." She began to glance around again. "This place is amazing!"

"Reminds me of the Fenghuang Ancient City in China," the Doctor commented. "Very old city along a river with many cultures co-existing peacefully. Lovely stuff."

"Fenghuang is Chinese for phoenix, right?" Hannah asked, rubbernecking as a striking woman strode past in elaborate, feathered, silk and satin finery.

"Correct. Well done."

"Thanks. Y'know, I'm surprised there are so many people out and about at this hour."

"The Festival of Aggedor is coming up in a few days," Lorvis explained, as he ducked past a tall gentleman carrying a large pot of liquor. "Pelnar takes it very seriously, and we like to

have everything in order beforehand, since, well, recovering from the festivities takes a day or two... or three."

Hannah grinned. "Sounds like my kind of festival. Can we stay for it, Doctor?"

"Depending on how quickly we sort things out, we may not have a choice in the matter," he remarked. "Hopefully it doesn't come to that."

Lorvis led them across the town square, through several alleys of market stalls. Vendors hawked their wares, hollering about special deals and once-in-a-lifetime offers, typically on allegedly-rare breeds of Aggedor. Clearly, Federation genetic technology had paid off in dividends for Pel animal husbandry and domestication. However, aside from a dark remark about commercializing holidays from the Doctor, the group paid the salespeople no heed.

People stared at Alpha Centauri, though. Fear and unease filled their eyes, and mothers pulled away curious children. A gaggle of young boys playing with a ball in a small park took one look at the hexapod and ran off screaming for their mothers. Centauri had turned a mournful shade of indigo, and the Doctor patted their back soothingly.

"Pay them no mind," he said. "They just don't understand."

Alpha Centauri didn't reply, hunching a little lower as they pressed on through the crowd.

At the bend in the River Essel was a fork in the road. Both paths led to a bridge, the one on the left covered with buildings and covering what appeared to be an entire apartment complex. This was the closest to Mount Megeshra, and many miners and their families resided inside. The other bridge wasn't entirely covered, but seemed to be heading that way, as a new extension was currently being built. Lorvis gestured to the left and the group followed him.

At the fork, two men dressed in dark green fatigues and matching, smart-looking caps stood underneath a streetlamp. Hannah guessed they were soldiers, but Lorvis corrected her: these men were police officers. In a crumpled heap before them was a scruffy hobo, dressed in ragged garments that might once have been something resembling proper clothing. He clutched an unmarked bottle in one hand that sloshed hollowly as he looked from one officer to another.

"I'm tellin' yers," the man slurred, "that I saw a... a... metal octosquid-thingummy!"

The officers exchanged a dubious look before hauling the man to his feet. The group walked right by as they hauled the man off, presumably to the local drunk tank. They eventually came to a stop several flights of stairs down off a bridge that had an underside filled with apartments. The best real estate was apparently nearer to the water, as Lorvis's family had a decently large two-storey apartment at the bottom. The former guard captain knocked on the door.

"Mum? Dad? I'm home," he called before adding under his breath, "maybe for good..."

After a moment, a short, stocky woman with generous curves opened the door. She gasped, then launched herself onto Lorvis with enough speed to make a Raston Warrior Robot look like a slug stuck in molasses. Had it not been for the guard rail, they would have plummeted into the river below. Lorvis hugged her tightly.

"My baby!" his mother exclaimed in a reedy voice. "Oh, I've missed you so much!"

"I missed you, too, mum." Lorvis smiled and set his mother down.

"Keese?" came a gruff voice from inside. "Who is it?"

"Gorn, come out here and say hello to Lorvis!"

A tall, burly man with the curly, badger-striped hair typical of Peladon's lower class was shaking his son's hand and pulling him into a one-armed hug in short order. He let go with a grin, putting two calloused paws on Lorvis's shoulders.

"Home for the festival?" he asked. "Thought they'd need you up at the castle, what with you being captain of the royal guard and all!"

Lorvis's face fell at that, and his parents noticed the others.

"What's happened?" Keese asked. "Who are these people?"

"Perhaps we should head inside first?" the Doctor suggested. "I'm happy to explain everything. I'm typically referred to as the Doctor, by the way."

Before Keese or Gorn could protest, the Doctor sauntered through the door into their sitting room and made himself comfortable on the settee. "A cup of tea would be marvelous, if I could trouble you for one," he called.

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"Out of the question. You need to leave," Sentreal's superior told him.

Sentreal's tower of cones crumpled as he showed how crestfallen he was. His superior was unrepentant. She wasn't about to lose one of her best diplomats to what she also felt was a strictly internal matter. And besides, the Wi-Fi was cooperating for once — when else would she have the chance to tell him?

"Ma'am, if I may ask to remain..." he began, only to be cut off; not by his superior, but a lack of her.

The holo-screen hissed and crackled with static and Sentreal's eyes narrowed as two new faces fizzled into existence. On the right side was Clivix, her bodyguard leaning over her shoulder. The left side bore Jadescales, who was gesticulating wildly. He couldn't make out what they were saying yet, much to his frustration. Then, before he'd even realized it, one of his larger roots had slithered up and given the holo-emitter a solid thump. The audio abruptly cut in.

"—ter that we'll swing in on the torn tapestries, swords out, right?" Jadescales was saying, breathless in her excitement. Clivix didn't share her companion's enthusiasm, staring at her cohort with barely-disguised look of disinterest. She noted Sentreal, who nodded to her.

"Jadescales."

"And once we've sliced and diced through all the guards—"

"Jadescales!"

"—we'll hold Thalaan hostage on the throne and I'll make a suit out of his—"

"Jadescales!"

"What?" Jadescales hissed, before noticing Sentreal as well. He nodded again.

"Pardon the intrusion," he said. "It appears some signals got crossed."

"Clearly," Clivix remarked dryly.

"So, let me guess, you're going to tell Thalaan all about our plan?" Jadescales asked, eying him suspiciously.

Sentreal cocked his head. "Whatever gave you that impression?"

"And seeing as we don't even *have* a plan..." Clivix began, only to be cut off as Jadescales glared daggers at her.

"I'm not going to tell anyone," Sentreal assured them. "I'm far too busy with my own problems, actually. I came here with one goal: prove that the people of Sentrealia should not be defined by the actions of a long-since-dead dictator. Now that Thalaan's fouled everything up, my superiors want me to return home."

"And I take it that you don't want to?" Clivix rasped.

"Indeed," Sentreal agreed. "I wish to remain and prove that my goodwill isn't just a lot of talk. Now, if you want to topple Thalaan, it seems to me that the best place to begin would be the castle archives."

"Yes, my thoughts exactly," the old Sea Devil said with a nod.

Jadescales wasn't as copacetic. "Wait just a moment! How, pray tell, are we supposed to do anything while we're locked in our quarters? I don't know about you two, but I didn't bring anything that can deal with the guards posted outside."

"Weren't you the one just detailing an elaborate swashbuckling adventure to depose Thalaan?" Sentreal replied.

"Well, what I meant to say was..."

"Jadescales, you're forgetting one thing," Clivix said, cutting in as she cottoned on to what Sentreal's plan was.

"What's that?"

"You two may be confined to your rooms, but *I'm* not," Sentreal pointed out. Jadescales blinked in surprise, then nodded. It seemed Sentreal was in now, as far as she was concerned. The skin around his eyes crinkled with determination. "Alright, ladies," he began, "listen close. Here's the plan..."

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"We need a plan!" Gorn decided, hopping up from his chair.

"Dad, sit down," Lorvis said, reaching out to try and guide his father back to his seat at the kitchen table. The older man batted his son's hands away, already pacing over the floorboards at a pace fit to chisel a rut in them. The Doctor looked on, quietly amused, and shook his head at Lorvis's look of 'please do something.'

Alpha Centauri, sat across the table next to Hannah near the doorway, was too irritated to pay much attention. They narrowed their eye in irritation at the family's pet Aggedor, Grun, who had set his head in Alpha's lap. The beast reminded Hannah of a Komondor but with the snout of a Great Dane and no tail. Grun looked through mop-like, corded hair to make moon eyes at the hexapod while his jowls slobbered all over Alpha's cape and carapace.

"Aww," Hannah cooed, "he loves you."

"The feeling is not mutual," Alpha grunted. They waved a clasper at the animal. "Shoo! Shoo, you filthy beast!"

Grun looked a little hurt and shuffled over to Hannah, promptly plopping his head in her lap. Hannah laughed and pet him. "I don't have anything for you, buddy." Grun snorted. He didn't seem to care much.

"Gorn, love, that's enough. You'll scuff the floor and I just swept. Come back to the table," Keese said. "You're not starting a one-man crusade against the royals."

"Just you bloody watch me!" Gorn shot back.

"Darling," Keese intoned, pouring herself another cup of tea and stirring in a bit of cream, "wouldn't it be more sensible to, oh, I don't know, sit down and help the rest of us with *our* plan?"

Gorn stopped and looked at Keese, who smiled at him as she passed the teapot and cream to the Doctor. He gave her a sheepish smile and came back to the table.

"We have a plan?" Hannah whispered to Alpha.

"Not to the best of my knowledge, no," the hexapod replied.

"We're going to *make* a plan," the Doctor told them.

"Oh, in that case... Gorn, you're a miner, right?" Hannah asked, grinning at him across the table.

"Yep! If it weren't for the lads and me, that trisilicate wouldn't come out half as fast!" He beamed with pride and Keese patted his shoulder affectionately.

“What would happen if it didn’t come out *at all*?” A smile that could only be described as downright devilish had spread across Hannah’s face. The Doctor’s brows bounced up in interest and a bit of pride. It seemed he knew exactly where she was going with this.

Gorn looked surprised. “Er, well, depending on how long it went on, we could upset the economy pretty badly. And a large enough strike *would* get their attention...” He tapped his chin in thought, then nodded. “Let’s do it.”

Hannah’s grin turned triumphant. “Think we could start now?”

“Probably. With the festival coming, folks have been staying up later. We can try the complex for tonight, then go farther afield tomorrow.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Hannah said. With a few hurried goodbyes, they were out the door.

Grun sneezed and gave a disgruntled whine at his headrest having run off. He ambled over to the Doctor and resumed the position. The Doctor glanced down, smiled a little, and pet his head. Grun gave a contented sigh.

“I’m going after them,” Lorvis said. He got up, then yawned, leaning on the table.

“No.” Keese’s voice was firm, as was her grip on her son’s forearm. She shook her head. “You’re going to bed, mister. I can see the circles under your eyes. Besides, if we’re going to fight this, you need to be in tip-top shape. Go on. I’ve kept your room just how you left it.”

Lorvis looked ready to argue, but ultimately gave a fond shake of the head and kissed his mother on the cheek. “Okay, Mum,” he acquiesced. “G’night, everyone.”

A chorus of “goodnights” followed as Lorvis headed down the stairs, and Alpha excused herself to the sitting room to read. Keese smiled at the Doctor, getting up and grabbing a notepad and pencil from the cupboard near the pantry. She sat back down across from the Doctor.

“Alright, tell me *everything* you know,” she said. “If I’m going to start writing for the Federation News Service, I’m going to need something big. And this? This is *tremendous*.”

The Doctor scrutinized her for a long moment, sizing her up, before nodding. He liked Keese. She reminded him somewhat of his old friend Sarah Jane — ever the intrepid reporter, hungry for knowledge. “Alright, I’ll start at the beginning, then...”

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Efaxyr’s lecture about honorable conduct had lasted for almost an hour and, true to his unspoken word, H’skrr had let it wash over him like water in a stream. As soon as she had fallen asleep, he grabbed a large emerald cloak from their luggage and slipped out into the hall. The guard outside the door, Ssesh, nodded obediently as the commandant motioned for him to follow. They made their way to the front door in the entry hall and H’skrr came to stop. He faced Ssesh and smirked.

“I have a job for you,” he informed his subordinate.

“I live to serve,” Ssesh hissed, bowing slightly. “I await your orders.”

Ssesh’s face betrayed no emotion as H’skrr dictated what he wanted done. The warrior nodded mutely and left to head down the mountain as soon as H’skrr had given him the cloak and dismissed him. The commandant smiled his needle-toothed smile and trudged upstairs to Thalaan’s bedchamber.

“I’m expected,” Thalaan informed the guards outside.

“We weren’t informed of any meetings... especially at this hour.”

The door opened then, and Thalaan peeked out. H’skrr gave a pointed nod and Thalaan returned it, motioning for him to enter. The Martian walked right past the confused guards and into the bedchamber.

“What do you want?” Thalaan asked.

“Only to tell you that I have all but dealt with our biggest problem,” H’skrr hissed.

Thalaan sat on the edge of the bed, arms crossed and eyes narrowed. “And how have you managed that?”

“I have sent an assassin down the mountain after the Doctor and his fellow nuisances. They shall be executed before the night is out, and it will look like an accident. As you can see, I have kept your hands clean at great risk to myself *and* my warriors.” H’skrr smiled again, fixing Thalaan with a pointed look. “Now, your majesty, what will you do for me in return?”

## Chapter Seven

### *Unexpected Guests*

The guards never stood a chance. As Sentreal loomed over them, his thick, gnarled roots snaking back beneath his base, he felt a bit of pity for the unconscious heap of akimbo limbs and dented armor on the floor. But not much. Jadescales moved up the hall behind him and gave a little wave as Clivix strode forth over the guards. Shlastro moved to join her, but she held up a webbed hand. He stopped short and blinked in confusion.

“But someone will need to protect you, mother,” he protested.

“No, you need to remain safe,” Clivix stated. “Don’t worry about me. I have lived a long life. If I perish doing what is right, then I would go out no other way.”

Shlastro looked ready to argue, but Clivix gently shoved him back and shut the door. “Stay put,” she said before turning to her companions. “We’re making our way to the citadel’s archives, yes?”

“Correct,” Jadescales confirmed.

“I’ll lead the way,” Sentreal said, teetering around Clivix and the guard heap and heading for the staircase. The Sea Devil and Foamasi followed closely, keeping wary eyes out for any more guards.

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“Saboteurs!” cried Gorn and Hannah’s most recent prospective striker. Hannah nodded.

“That’s exactly who we’re trying to stop, yeah!” she enthused. But then the man shook his head, jabbing a finger at them.

“No, *you’re* the saboteurs!” he bellowed.

Gorn blinked. “I’m sorry? Lefest, mate, you can’t be serious!”

“Any king currently on the throne is the legitimate king,” Lefest declared. “And you two are trying to sabotage his strong and stable rule!”

Hannah stared at the man incredulously. After she and Gorn had just explained exactly what had happened and how Thalaan’s rule was illegitimate, this badger-haired moron was still

clinging to a patently-false delusion? She shut her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose in frustration.

“Thanks for your time, we’re gonna go,” she said. “Have a good night. C’mon, Gorn.”

Lefest wasn’t done, though. Even as Hannah tugged Gorn away from the door, he was still shrieking that they’d see how all saboteurs would be crushed.

“I’m surprised he’s smart enough to even *know* the word saboteur!” Hannah grouched as they tromped up the wooden stairs to the uppermost level. Gorn just sighed.

“Most of the lads are nice blokes, Hannah, but not all of them are really smart,” he said with a shrug. All Hannah could do was scowl before putting on a bright, happy face for the next house... which quickly fell again.

“Are you sure this won’t blow over in a month or two?” the man, Isipar, asked.

“Well, seeing as he plans to kill his own brother, who’s currently languishing in a dungeon...” Hannah replied, fixing the man with a pointed look.

“Hmm.” Isipar considered this, gently chewing on the nail of his right index finger. He shook his head. “Sorry, can’t risk it. They might do something to me, or worse, my family. Goodbye.” And the door was shut in their faces without further ceremony.

Hannah stood there for a moment, brows furrowed, a thin line where her mouth ought to have been. Her hands clenched at her sides. She took a deep breath and then let it out, unclenching her fists as she did so. Strikes, she decided, were not as easily-started as television had led her to believe. Really, she should have realized that, she mused, turning away to walk down the stairs. Gorn followed after.

In the end, they returned bereft of protesters, bereft of support, and almost bereft of hope.

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Some time after Gorn and Hannah returned, defeated and disheartened, a hand grabbed the top of Alpha Centauri’s book. It was pushed down and the Doctor peered at his friend, as if scrutinizing them. The hexapod shrunk back slightly, and he leaned back.

“What’s bothering you? Is it those people out in the streets?” Alpha turning a shade of pink in embarrassment said it all. “Look, I told you, don’t mind them.”

“I have never received such a... visceral reaction before,” the ambassador murmured. “It... makes me quite uncomfortable, even if I logically understand that I must pay it no heed.”

The Doctor patted Centauri’s shoulder sympathetically. “Why not go for a swim in the river to calm down?”

Before Centauri could respond, a toilet flushed in the next room and Gorn exited, shutting the door behind him. “I’d give it a minute to air out.” And he walked off quite unconcerned.

“It is contaminated,” Centauri said simply, their enormous eye narrowing in disgust. The Doctor nodded in mute understanding.

“In that case, why not join Hannah and I? We’re going to make a late-night snack run.” Centauri considered this. “I will join you. However, I will not eat. Now, shall we?”

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Rain had started to fall in the time it took the three to get ready. The Doctor collected a bright pink umbrella from the stand near the door and huddled himself and Hannah underneath it as they made their way through the streets. Alpha was quite content to stroll along in the rain,



calling it a welcome refreshment. As most of the crowds had cleared, their walk was mercifully brief and free of congestion.

They perched themselves on stools underneath the awning of a donut shop. It was a little ways down from the bridge that was under construction. Really, the shop was more of an open-air stall, but it suited the Doctor and Hannah just fine. Alpha Centauri stayed out in the rain, downwind from the smell of cinnamon sugar. The proprietor, an older gentleman named Arkatt, graciously gave them double the usual helping of donut holes.

"They'd just get thrown out anyway. You two are me last customers for the night," he explained, pulling down the shutters on either side, but leaving the front open for the Doctor and Hannah.

"Well, we're happy to help," the Doctor replied, popping two donut holes into his mouth. Hannah smiled in spite of her less-than-stellar mood.

"Thank you," she said with a nod. Their host returned it.

"I'll just be in the back room if you need anything," he said.

Once he was gone, the Doctor turned to Hannah. She glanced over to him, mouth full of donuts. "What?" she asked, some crumbs dropping onto her blouse.

The Doctor smiled. "I wanted to make sure you're alright, given recent events."

"Oh, I'm fine," Hannah assured him, swallowing. "A little worried, sure, but I don't doubt that we'll get things back to normal soon. This? This is just a minor setback. But a pretty delicious one." She chuckled and popped another donut hole into her mouth.

It was then that Alpha Centauri gave a hideous screech and the Doctor shoved Hannah to the ground. A sonic pulse screeched through the air and hit the donut shop full force. The supports buckled and creaked as the travelers crawled away. About twenty yards into their escape, the building collapsed and the deep-fryers exploded, taking half the block with them.

"Arkatt!" Hannah cried, but the Doctor and Alpha Centauri were already pulling her away towards the bridge as more sonic pulses flew at them. Hannah could see a cloaked Ice Warrior storming after them. It leveled its disruptor again, aiming for Hannah's head, but missed as they rounded a corner and fled into the construction site over the bridge. The trio tore up the rickety wooden steps, leaping over mislaid tools, weaving around heavy machinery, and narrowly avoiding sharp nails and screws.

"Where are we going?!" Hannah called.

"In here, and be as quiet as you possibly can!" the Doctor replied in a hushed tone as they whipped around a corner, crossed through the room, and ducked into a closet. As they went, Hannah noted that bits of the drywall hadn't been installed yet, and certain major supports were exposed. Then the door was quietly but quickly shut, cutting off her view of the room.

They waited with bated breath until they heard the Ice Warrior's lumbering footsteps approaching. Hannah could feel a sneeze coming on, and she couldn't remember how to cut it off. She knew she'd been told how once, but the threat of imminent death was really screwing with her memory.

The Ice Warrior's footsteps grew ever closer; its low, hissing breathing sounding for all the world like a snake about to strike. It clomped into the room outside, pausing as it presumably looked around. Hannah knew she'd be unable to stop her sneeze, and hoped the Ice Warrior left soon... which, miraculously, it began to. But then the sneeze came back.

"Ah... ah..."

"No, no, no!" the Doctor hissed as the Ice Warrior's footsteps stopped once more.

"CHOO!"

A sonic burst screamed through the air, hitting the closet door full-on, causing it to explode. Alpha Centauri's shrill cry almost deafened the others. The Doctor grabbed both of his companions and charged through the splintering timber, trying to duck around the Ice Warrior. Unfortunately, the lumbering lizard was too fast, and clotheslined the trio, who fell back beneath the windowsill in a heap. The Ice Warrior wheezed ominously, leveling its disruptor at them.

"Who shall be first?" it hissed. "The female? The male? The hermaphrodite?"

"Now... now see here!" the Doctor protested. "Killing us won't do you any favors! You've made such a pig's ear of this that it'll be the talk of every town along the river! This will get back to Efaxyr!"

"Efaxyr," the Martian sneered, "is a bleeding-heart liberal who can't stomach a proper execution! She shall be dealt with in due time."

"Funny, I thought of her more as a nitwit who couldn't accept the evidence of her eyes."

"What's the difference?" the Martian remarked. "I think I shall save you for last."

Before the Doctor could reply, Alpha Centauri gave another shriek. A strange robot had lurched out of the gloom. A black lump of coal levitated over a boxy torso, and one of its three thick tendrils came down hard over the Ice Warrior's head, cracking its helmet and its skull clean open with a sickening crunch. The Martian screamed bloody murder, firing its weapon wildly before succumbing to its injuries. It collapsed to the floor with a meaty thump.

Sonically-pulverized drywall and stone had flown everywhere and the structure was beginning to groan as if in pain. The trio got to their feet and the Doctor looked around, surveying the damage. The robot seemed to be doing the same, seemingly not comprehending what it had done. Fleeting, Hannah remembered the drunkard's slurred description of a "metal octosquid-thingummy." He had to have been referring to this robot, and his description hadn't been too far off.

The Doctor didn't seem to notice. He was too busy trying to move them out of the room. "The supports have been destroyed!" he cried. "We need to get out ri— *whoa!*"

The whole building lurched with a hideous, shuddering groan, pitching the three of them forward, narrowly managing to not faceplant on the floor. The robot, for its part, didn't seem to notice. It didn't even stumble, its center of gravity seemingly in tune with the moving building. The ceiling roared in agony, its supports having been disintegrated. After a moment of awful silence, it collapsed from the back towards the door in a shower of roof tiles and dried tar. Hannah cried out for the Doctor as he shoved her clear. Before she was able to turn back and grab him, something slammed into the back of her head.

In an instant, everything went silent and mercilessly black.

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The drone surveyed the scene. A mountain of rubble covered one side of the room, and the front of the female emerged from the front. That would do. It would return to the jewel with that. It loped forward, pulling its quarry free, dusting her off, and then securing her in its tendrils. This would do nicely.

In short order, it had slipped out of the construction site, the female in its arms, and headed for the hills. It had dealt with the problem, and was taking one of the rogue elements back for study. That was progress. That was a positive outcome for the mission.

If it had possessed any sort of feelings, the drone would have been very, very pleased with itself.

The story continues next week  
in  
The Secret of Peladon



## 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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The Doctor and Hannah arrive on Peladon in the year 4100. King Pelleas is on death's door, the throne is nearly vacant, and Prince Pelenat, the King's rightful successor, is trying to prepare himself for the enormity of his imminent new position.

However, his twin, Prince Thalaan, has recently taken a belligerent turn. He insists that the throne is his and is more than willing to fight dirty for it.

As Thalaan incites a coup, attending dignitaries from the Galactic Federation begin to take sides. The Doctor and Hannah are soon caught in a mess that could rip both Peladon and the Federation apart at the seams.

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

