

THE DOCTOR WHO PROJECT

DIVERSIFY OR DIE



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-1-

Breakfast

Sandra boiled Ted's egg just the way he liked it, then stood staring out of the kitchen window across the grey, rain-splattered roofs of the terraced street. The skyline was dominated by the skeletal husk of Ironthorpe's abandoned colliery. Sandra's view was dominated by this, and she looked out at it opaquely. Did she feel nostalgia for the town's vanishing past? Or, on this miserable day, did she identify with its look of bleak, run-down exhaustion? Whatever Sandra felt in that moment, she kept to herself. Her blank expression switched to a wide smile as Ted thundered down the stairs, his tie half-knotted.

Tallish, thin, and topped with a good head of blonde hair, Ted looked at Sandra looking at him. As soon as he saw her, Ted's mania left him. Ted had noted early on in their relationship that Sandra seemed to itemize his features every time she saw him, as if she always saw him for the first time. His eyes—sometimes blue and sometimes grey depending on the light—twinkled now as he locked on to hers. She had recently bobbed her dark hair in a retro style currently favoured. It was strange to Ted, who considered his own sense of fashion tragic, that Sandra was always so up-to-the-minute, so stylish and cool. She glowed in the dim morning sunlight, as fresh and shiny as a new penny—how did she do it? Ted hated mornings. He swigged some overly strong and sweet tea and said, "Late, today of all days. See you, love." His earthly concerns returning, Ted gave Sandra a quick peck on the cheek and ran out.

Sandra called, "Slow down, and drive carefully. And try not to be late tonight."

That sounded ominous. Had Sandra invited some friends over? Was Sandra springing a visit from her in-laws? Whatever it was, Ted couldn't afford to think about it. The boss had big news for them all and Ted didn't want to be late.

* * * * *

Ted arrived at work, parked his battered Austin Allegra, and drew a deep breath. Somehow the factory managed to look gloomier and more derelict than the colliery he looked sadly over every morning in the shower. As if wanting to disprove him, the factory belched a cloud of grey smoke, but Ted still felt a dead hand on his shoulder as he trudged inside. What on earth was this important

thing his boss wanted to talk to him about? Could it be that Ted would get the research grant he begged for? He hardly dared hope.

He looked skyward and whispered, "Please let it be the grant." It wasn't praying, it wasn't hoping; it was ... contemplating, he told himself. The firm had so much potential untapped, but it preferred to churn out tat which belonged in the sixties rather than embrace the exciting merchandising possibilities of the eighties! He'd come to this firm with a science degree and the promise of a five-year development project. He even had his name in the *Sheffield Independent* as one of 'Britain's Brightest Teenagers' for goodness' sake. Yet, two years in, his job amounted to finding ways to make existing products, whose designs were laid down before he was even born, cheaper.

Ted felt sure that was why Sandra was so distant lately. He had let her down. "Our own house with a garden and a little kiddie running round. This time next year," he promised when they married. Two years had come and gone, and they were still renting a grotty two-up-two-down with that charming view of Ironthorpe Colliery. Worse to Ted, they probably couldn't afford a child even if they'd been blessed ... which, to Sandra's constant but unspoken sorrow, they had not. Ted sighed; that was why he dared not pray for something so trivial as his career prospects. He dreamed and he prayed for one thing: a proper family. An only child himself and orphaned young, his life had been care homes and foster homes. No one had been unkind, to be sure. His childhood wasn't grim, far from it. In fact, it seemed a bit of a blank: a fog of achievements and milestones, ticked off and carried out without leaving any kind of impression. Even the 'Britain's Brightest Teenagers' amounted to blurry memories of handshakes and stuttering speeches and a novelty cheque. Meeting Sandra aside, he often felt he was merely rehearsing his life and the performance would happen the next day. Ted knew when he had a family of his own, that emptiness would go away. He would feel alive—properly alive.

"Look at this fella. Interviewing for a new job?"

Ted whirled around and found Craig Sallis, patting him on the shoulder and indicating his tie.

"Er, no, Craig."

Craig leaned toward him, his eyes narrowed. "If I were you, matey, I would. Mood's gloomy. According to Mason, some suits were spied in the office with Bailey earlier this week." He tapped his nose significantly. "Smell that?"

Ted could only smell the factory's usual synthetic cocktail. He shook his head in confusion, and so Craig continued, "Absorption is in the air. Hostile takeover, you know. And you know what that means. I think we're all about to lose our jobs."

Ted looked around. The office was indeed lifeless, with everyone frozen in a comic tableau of their daily task, only to spring to action when a co-worker's eyes locked with theirs.

Now dubious about his meeting, Ted left Craig to his routine praise of Margaret Thatcher ("Not to worry, plenty more places looking for bright young workers thanks to Mrs. Thatcher") and climbed the stairs to Bailey's office. Ted knocked lightly on the door and waited. Mr. Bailey was moody, and he did not want to blunder in until told to.

"Come in, Ted."

Encouraged, Ted entered. Bailey leaned back in his chair, a crocodile-wide smile lazily stretching his features. "Sit down, Ted." He waved a letter at him. "Today's the day, Ted. Long time in the pipe, but it all pays off now. The Americans are coming. They want to buy me out. Turn this place into a research establishment. I've put in a word for you. I know how you want to dabble in new ideas. The Yanks are just the chaps to let you."

Ted's mouth fell open. Craig was right. This was a disaster. The Americans would have their own people. They wouldn't want him. And there sat Bailey, as smug as butter! No wonder he never encouraged Ted. He'd strung him along. No doubt, Ted was instrumental in the sale, Bailey crowing to the Americans that he had a "scientist" on the firm. He must have been working on this deal for months—years even! Maybe that was why he was hired in the first place: a convenient prop to increase the tender value of the company!

This horrendous tragicomedy finished, Ted left the office without speaking and stomped down to his workshop. He flung his tie across the narrow space and sat staring at the clutter of plastic souvenirs and picnic plates painted in gaudy orange and white swirls, in homage to Clarice Cliff. Ted laughed bitterly, considering how Stoke-on-Trent's most illustrious potter would regard him. Were she still alive, the sight of this shoddy work would kill her. He should ring Sandra, but he couldn't face it.

His phone rang. "Hello?" he trilled expectantly, hoping to hear Sandra's soothing voice on the other end.

"Ted—Jack. I can't help feeling that we had a little misunderstanding now."

"Did we indeed?" Ted kept his tone measured. Bailey sounded honestly conciliatory.

"It wouldn't do for me to race out after you. Come up to the office and meet the new owner. I think you'll like what he's got to say." The phone went dead, probably before Ted could tell 'Jack' (Bailey never called himself that to Ted) where to get off.

Ted sighed, stealing another skyward glance. This time he wasn't contemplating; he *was* hoping and praying. There was no way the Americans would see any interest in his esoteric research, but if he were lucky, on a whim they just might keep him on—if they decided to continue manufacturing plastic gnomes as a sideline.

He trudged back up the stairs, pausing to catch sight of Craig again. Now his co-worker gestured at his open collar.

"No tie? It's true, then, isn't it?"

Ted didn't have the heart to nod, but his blank stare told Craig all he needed to know.

The man who greeted Ted in Bailey's office was urbane and friendly. Dark haired with a neat beard, he reminded Ted of that Russian tsar, the last one. They did that film about him... But his accent was far from Russian. A heavy American drawl. His suit glistened with a machine-woven lacquer, and his handshake felt dry and firm.

Bailey grinned. "This is Ted Kenworthy, my Head of Research and Development. Ted, meet Mr. McNess, Managing Director of Twenty-First Century Synthetics."

McNess smiled, his mouth spreading wide. "Sam R. T. McNess. The initials make me sound more important, I find." He loosed a perfunctory chuckle, and then self-importantly boomed: "Twenty-First Century Synthetics, Ted. Sound ahead of our time, don't we? We are. Forget about this rustic old set-up, Ted. No offence, Jack."

"None taken!" Bailey gleefully replied.

McNess clapped Ted on the back and spread his arms, conjuring with his words the factory of the future. "I bet you can just picture it, Ted. Your very own space, as big as you like, to work on that development project mean old Jack didn't have time for."

"None taken!" Bailey interrupted, as if stuck in a groove.

McNess ignored him and continued his pitch. "Our methods are the future. And there's only one guy we've had our eye on to usher in that new future. 'Britain's Brightest Teenager', anyone? You're the type of guy I want, Ted. How about it? Will you stay on? Head up *my* R 'n' D in the UK?"

“Head up?”

“We know your little pet project hasn’t gone very far. We’d like you to have all the time and resources you need. Commit yourself fully to it. We see a whole world of potential in it.”

Ted couldn’t believe his luck. “You bet, sir. I’m hoping to create something of real worth here. Something that lasts forever.”

“This surely will, son,” said McNess, “This surely will.”

Bailey said, “Always full of new ideas, is Ted. I say so, all the time.” He gave Ted a sharp look as if to say, “See? I’m on your side and always have been.”

Indeed, for a moment Ted thought of his co-workers, Craig and Mason and Jenny and all the rest. For some reason, Bailey had saved him, and him alone, from this purge. Oh well, he thought. Craig could get a job any time with the Tories, and maybe everyone else would land on their feet as well. In the meantime, he had to think of his interests. That was what it would be all about in the future, he suddenly saw. There was just him and Sandra, and that family they might one day be blessed with. Anything he could do to make them happy and comfortable was worth the sacrifice.

McNess clapped his shoulder again, bringing Ted back to the present. “Well Ted, I’m staying until the deal is finalised next month. But even when I head back to the States, I’ll be a sympathetic voice in your ear. Let’s talk some more tomorrow.” He held out his hand again. “Deep down inside, Ted, I’m a plastic man. And I think you will be too.”

* * * * *

When Ted got home, everything was as it had been in the morning. Even his boiled egg still sat in its eggcup on the table. He stared at it in surprise. Wherever he went today, it felt like the *Mary Celeste*. Sandra came through from the hall and seeing his look said, laughing, “Silly me, what am I like? It’s OK, darling. I’m not going to make you eat it.” She cleared it away, annoyed with herself for the oversight.

“Never mind that. I’ve got fabulous news.”

Ted looked outside. The prospect of never seeing this rainy terrace and that miserable old colliery made him smile, more genuinely and more radiantly than he had in some time. He told Sandra about the strange day and McNess and his unaccountably generous offer. Sandra listened intently, her face registering increasing pleasure as he went on.

“More money, security. They’re going to set me up in my own facility. I can set the hours and name the salary. Maybe...”

She took his hand and for a moment he looked puzzled. With a twinge he remembered those ominous plans from earlier. Were her parents just about to come by?

Then she said, “All this is just as well, Ted. Because I’ve got some news too. We are going to have a baby!”

Breathless with joy, he took her in his arms and held her close, like she had not let him do for a long time; now he knew why. Hormones. And she must have been terrified of being wrong about the baby. “You’re sure?”

“Positive.”

He laughed. “What a day! The best ever. No wonder you forgot about the boiled egg!”

-2-

A Place in the Country

Out beyond space, the TARDIS drifted. Inside, its walls shuddered with an old vessel's mournful groans. Hannah had long since accepted that the ship was alive and had a mind of its own, but these sounds were more unpleasantly organic than usual. She felt she was inside an upset stomach rather than a semi-sentient time machine. It had certainly put her off the bagel she was munching on.

Peering into the open inspection roundel in the wall, where millions of tiny fibres pulsed energy, the Doctor cringed at another belch from beneath. "Don't moan at me, you're the one overheating."

Hannah frowned at the mass of wires, which now seemed to quiver in time with the groans. "Are you still messing about?"

"Hannah, we cannot proceed while the TARDIS is playing up. Every time I try and set a course, she overheats. Never seen anything like it."

Hannah touched the console gingerly. "Feels OK to me."

The Doctor sighed. "Not literally overheating. I mean temporally. I can't account for it. Overcome with entropy in the vortex perhaps? Of course, it had to be when we were in flight that this happens. The consequences are so much more dire."

"How much more dire?" Hannah asked.

She was not reassured when the Doctor shrugged in response. "Keep going this way and it'll crumble to nothing."

"Is that possible?" The floor suddenly felt a little wobbly.

The Doctor stuffed the quivering mass of fibres inside the roundel and shut it. "Yes. Let's try again. Gently, or we might ... spagetthify."

Hannah laughed. "Is *that* a thing?"

"Actually, yes." The Doctor smiled. The TARDIS gurgled again, reminding him that any educational chats about the dangers of loitering near supermassive black holes would have to wait until after this present crisis. He raced over to the console, jabbed at the top row of buttons, and cranked a lever with monastic solemnity. For a moment, the entire room seemed static. Then, as

smooth as silk, the column rose, fell, rose, fell, and settled. “Perfect landing,” the Doctor said in mild surprise.

Hannah smiled. “At last. Where have we landed so perfectly? Paris, summer, 1792 perhaps? Or shall I get my woolly hat and wellies?”

“Such faith,” the Doctor admonished with a grin. He jabbed at the instrument panels and sighed. “Although I don’t have the faintest idea. Let’s find out.” He operated the scanner. “Ah.”

Hannah sighed, unsurprised. “A muddy field in the rain. I’ll get my boots.”

The Doctor scratched at his scalp, peering from the inconclusive scanner to the uncooperative console. He had never felt more isolated from his ship. “Why here, old girl? Is it your choice or have we been persuaded?”

The TARDIS did nothing. She didn’t need to. After all that gurgling, the sudden silence told the Doctor to expect the worst.

* * * * *

“Dear me, sir, I have gotten us lost.”

Major Arlington Grimes regarded his sergeant, Frampton, witheringly. He was a lanky young lad of Jamaican extraction and had absolutely too much energy for this time of morning. It had been two hours into their drive, and the sun was only now beginning to rise. Grimes hadn’t woken so early since his last tour, and he hadn’t responded well to it.

Sergeant Frampton was tracing his bony finger up the ragged route. “A-ha!” he cried joyously, as if they were on their way to the wonderful land of Oz, rather than some benighted farm in darkest Lincolnshire.

Frampton remained frustratingly silent, so Grimes prompted him, “Found where we went wrong, Sergeant?”

“Yes, sir. We should have turned off the M1 onto the A156. Or is it the A46?” Frampton smiled. “One of the ‘A’s should get us there. Have faith, sir!”

He restarted the engine and heaved the massive transport back on to the motorway. Grimes took a sip of now-lukewarm coffee.

Looking down at the cup and his superior’s grimace, Frampton suggested, “We can stop for another coffee, sir?”

“No no,” Grimes answered. “With any luck, they’ll offer us a decent brew when we get there. One thing about the north, they are supposed to understand the art of hot beverages.”

“Any idea what we’re about to see?”

Grimes rolled his eyes. This, not the sergeant’s chipper manner, was why he was so irked. Why did he have to be the one on this wild goose chase? Why did he have to jump through Whitehall’s hoops? You didn’t see Sir James Sudbury or General Faraday up early with a backache and chills on this spring morning. They were probably still in bed, even now. And this was certainly a day to stay in bed: the skies were oppressively grey and cloudy. Grimes’ father had been a Navy man, and to the end of his days retained a superstition about travelling under such a sky. Today, for some reason, Grimes finally understood why.

He banished the eerie recollection and returned to the present, where Frampton still awaited an answer to his question.

“What we’re about to see?” Grimes repeated. He absently played with the glossy brochure in his hand, and one ominous phrase stuck out: ‘SOLDIERS OF THE FUTURE’.

“Must be something big, I reckon,” Sergeant Frampton chuckled. “Literally big, for us to need this troop transport with no troops in it.” With another laugh, he added, “Sounds like a riddle, sir. A troop transport with no troops!”

Surprisingly, this spurred Frampton into a lengthy recollection of the duck pond near his aunt’s house, which never got any ducks. Grimes didn’t even need to answer his question, giving him all the more time to unpleasantly ponder it himself. What cargo did Her Majesty’s Armed Forces want all the way up here?

* * * * *

Mrs. Flannigan cursed when she saw that stray sheep. It hadn’t even had to jump the fence. The rickety slat of wood had cracked in two, worn away by rot and rain, giving the animal the perfect chance to seize its freedom. “Get back here!” she exhorted, hoping just once it might understand her and obey.

Instead, it trotted away, eager to explore the untamed pastures that lay beyond the Flannigan pen.

Mrs. Flannigan ran after the sheep, wondering where Frisky had gone. For a moment she worried, but then she heard the lazy dog’s happy barks from near the road.

Oh well. She was just on the outskirts of the property. They couldn’t see her or her sheep from here. She would collect it, get it back over to her side of the fence, and no one would be any the wiser.

The Georgian edifice glinted grimly in the morning light. Its high windows resembled malevolent eyes narrowed angrily at her. Mrs. Flannigan blocked it from her vision, focussing instead on that bolting white fluff-ball.

If she were to think of that couple ... of that strange man and that poor haunted girl who lived in there ...

“Bloody hell, get back here! I’m warning you!” she shrieked. The sheep heard the fear in her voice and dashed farther away.

The sheep was as surprised as Mrs. Flannigan to bump headlong into a blue wooden shed. “Police box?” she muttered to herself.

* * * * *

“We’ll head for those buildings over there,” the Doctor pointed. The rain was heavy enough for him to augment his Tattersall-checked shirt and brocade waistcoat with a purple Chesterfield topcoat. While not as practical as Hannah’s yellow poncho and wellies, it did seem to be repelling the rain effectively.

Hannah could see a large barn and some smaller ones. “Call that a farmhouse?” she gasped. “Looks more like a mini-mansion.”

“I didn’t call it a farmhouse. Properly speaking it’s a Georgian squire’s residence, I should say. And that barn is a workshop of some kind. Do you hear that?”

Even from this distance, the hum of a generator was audible. Hannah saw thick wires running along the barn; to be visible from this range, they must be enormous. “A lot of power. I wonder what year this is,” Hannah said, forcing her foot out from squelching mud.

The Doctor grunted. “The generator doesn’t help date us. Could have been there for years or be brand new.”

“England, by the look of it? There’s that familiar ... what do they call it? Rising damp?” Hannah had long since grown used to the country as the Doctor’s favoured port of call on Earth. On days like this, where the sky was a low strip of slate pelting soft rain, Hannah found his affection for it utterly mystifying. “Would it kill you to land in Cancun once in a while?”

“There’s a reason the TARDIS landed here,” he said softly. “I wonder what they’re up to in there.”

Hannah looked from the distant barn back to the TARDIS. The police box had subsided into the field, its little windows uncharacteristically flat and its stacked roof seeming to sag. “If I didn’t know better,” she gestured to the Doctor. “I’d say your old ship was sulking. Maybe it doesn’t like getting drenched either?”

They both heard a rustling sound through the grass. The Doctor tensed. “Coming this way,” he hissed, pressing himself and Hannah against the door. Something was approaching the TARDIS fast ...

There was a light thud, and then a “Baa” of surprise.

The Doctor grabbed the police box’s post and poked his head around. He beckoned Hannah. They both chuckled at the disoriented sheep. Hannah tousled its woollen head and said, “You don’t think Shaun here dragged us off course?”

“I’m so sorry!” a voice, middle-aged and Irish, called out. They both looked to see an overweight, iron-haired woman in hardy oilskins running towards them. She was out of breath and coughed out some of the chill English air.

“Not at all,” the Doctor replied, patting the back panels of the TARDIS. “No harm done. I’m the Doctor, and this is Hannah Redfoot.”

“Moira Flannigan,” she replied with an awkward curtsy. “Doctor is it? Is it about the young lady?”

Hannah noticed she shuddered as she said it. Even as she gestured, Mrs. Flannigan wouldn’t look at the barn or this Georgian squire’s place. There was something furtive about her whole manner. She guessed they weren’t exactly good neighbours.

“No, we’ve actually had a bit of trouble. We got lost and hoped someone might have a few spare parts to get the engine going.”

“Ah, broken down?” Mrs. Flannigan nodded. She indicated the TARDIS and said, “Well, you’d be better ringing up the police than trying the Kenworthy house.”

“Oh?”

“Doctor ... Miss Redfoot ... you won’t tell them? That I trespassed? It was only that ... well, this one got away.” She patted the sheep a little roughly; the oblivious animal ignored the censure and continued chewing the Kenworthys’ grass.

“You bet we won’t.” Hannah was even more troubled.

“American, are you?” she asked Hannah. The young woman’s nod seemed to trouble Mrs. Flannigan further, to Hannah’s chagrin. “There have been a few Americans come this way. No doubt it’s all especially important and we’ll be grateful the Kenworthy’s moved here. But as for me, well ... I just hope all this business will be over soon.”

Mrs. Flannigan seemed to suppress quakes of fear. Hannah had questions, as did the Doctor, but the stoic lady had become taciturn. She bade them a polite farewell and dragged her errant sheep away.

The Doctor shrugged. “Oh, Mrs. Flannigan? Would you mind telling me what the date is?”

“Seventh of March,” she called back.

“And the year?” Knowing that typical and tedious human reaction, he added, “It’s the crash. I may have suffered a concussion.”

“Nineteen eighty-one.”

“Charming, Mrs. Flannigan! Good for Royal Weddings, bad for radio telescopes, if I remember rightly.”

She nodded impatiently and turned away. Hannah saw her sprint again. “Poor woman.”

“I know,” the Doctor agreed. A second later he rubbed his hands together and said, “Let’s meet those neighbours then.”

* * * * *

The walk took about twenty minutes. As they drew closer to a bend in the path, a tall, slender man came hurrying from the house, heading for the barn. His blond hair was windswept and unkempt, and the flesh around his blue-grey eyes burnt red from lack of sleep. The Doctor hoped he could observe the man for a few moments longer, but the purple of his raincoat stood out against the muted English countryside. Strangely, the man stopped dead when he saw them. His frozen expression looked to Hannah like startled prey: a mixture of fear to be found, and anger that he hadn’t evaded them. This distant house, she considered, was to this man a refuge, and he had mistaken her and the Doctor for people he wanted to avoid.

They were close enough now to speak, so the Doctor adopted his hit-and-miss charm offensive. He called in a cheery tone, “Good day. My transport broke down and we are looking for a garage. I don’t suppose you can help?”

“You are trespassing. This is private land.”

“We don’t want to be here,” Hannah said shortly, irritated by his rudeness. “We can’t help where we break down.”

“Really?” the man glared. “Not exactly near anywhere else, this place. That’s what I like about it.”

The Doctor smiled. “Not by road. We were... passing overhead.”

“I didn’t hear a plane.”

“It’s a glider,” said Hannah.

“And a quick tow from your tractor will get us airborne and out of your hair in no time,” smiled the Doctor.

Hannah wondered how the Doctor would explain the TARDIS’s lack of a towing hitch, but it didn’t seem it would be a problem. The man glowered at them, considering helping them about as seriously as a trip to the moon.

The silence was broken by a woman’s tiny head poking from the front door of the house, calling across, “Is everything OK, Ted?”

Ted glared at the Doctor and called back, “Oh yes, love, don’t worry.” He leaned in closer, his voice dropping to an irate hiss. “Now see that you don’t upset Sandra or else you really will be in trouble. I’ve got your game. McNess sent you, didn’t he? I told him, I work on this alone. It’s bad enough him phoning me for updates every day. I knew he’d send someone; I *knew* it.”

The woman was now outside, near them. Her silent approach shocked Hannah slightly, but she relaxed as the lady took Ted’s arm gently, and soothingly said, “It’s OK, Ted. You get back to work. I’ll sort it out.”

Ted stared at her for a moment, flashed a smile of ghostly intimacy, then abruptly swung round and marched into the smaller barn. The woman smiled broadly and held out her hand. The

Doctor shook it, as did Hannah. The atmosphere lightened. “My name’s Sandra Kenworthy. Ted doesn’t mean to be rude, but he’s under a lot of stress. You’ll understand, of course, being from Twenty-First Century.”

“How did you know that?” Hannah asked, startled. She felt foolish when the Doctor indicated a banner fluttering from the barn, with a stylized red and white ‘21’ above the legend TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY SYNTHETICS. Not wanting to give the wrong impression, Hannah was about to repeat that she and the Doctor had not been sent by Mr. McNess, whoever he was, and didn’t work for this ominous-sounding company.

Before she could say anything, the Doctor nodded and adopted his most unctuous tones. “We understand, Mrs. Kenworthy. Working too hard I dare say. Targets to meet. His big project, his baby. Which makes me think ... someone to fetch and carry, change a light bulb, mend a fuse... we would be happy to make his burden that tiny bit lighter.”

“I thought we just wanted to get our glider back in the air,” Hannah reminded him archly.

“It’s only decent,” the Doctor shot back, “to offer a bit of a hand in exchange? And as I say, I’m sure Ted could use the help. Looks like it’s been a while since he had a decent night’s sleep.”

Sandra smiled and nodded. “I’d be ever so glad if you would.” She patted her stomach. “He’s worrying about me too.”

“What about you?” the Doctor asked, oblivious to the gesture.

“Your first?” asked Hannah.

“First what?” the Doctor interjected.

“Yes. It’s been a long time coming.”

Finally grasping the significance, the Doctor leaned towards Sandra’s stomach and frowned. Hannah tensed, worried for a second he would run his sonic screwdriver along the poor lady’s stomach, but instead, he said, “A human pregnancy should be approximately forty weeks. How long has yours been?”

Hannah laughed. “The Doctor can be very literal.”

Sandra looked at him curiously. “I meant we’ve been hoping for a baby, but it didn’t happen. One of those things. Life can be cruel, but it can also be blessed. But now?” She smiled again happily. “And Ted gets this marvellous job. Things couldn’t be better. I keep pinching myself, these last ... oh, however many months have been like a dream. After two years in dingy Ironthorpe, it’s been a little oasis of calm.”

Hannah now worried that the Doctor was going to offer some tips on how the couple could have produced a baby more efficiently, but he was too interested in hearing about Ted’s marvellous job. “I’ll tell you all about it over a brew,” Sandra suggested, turning and gestured for them to follow her into the house.

As they walked inside, Hannah punched the Doctor’s arm and whispered, “You realise as soon as his boss phones for an update we’ll be rumbled.”

“I only said we could help, not that we had been sent to.”

“Same difference.”

“Poppycock.”

* * * * *

Sandra led Hannah and the Doctor through the doorway into a grand foyer. On a sunny day, the lavender-panelled walls would no doubt reflect light from the large windows and bathe the inner

space in glowing sun. Today's overcast sky gave the walls a murkier cast, but the high ceilings and modern fittings still gleamed, and Sandra seemed proud to show off the space, spinning to get the Doctor and Hannah's reactions.

"What a lovely house, Sandra," the Doctor said with a nod.

"Yes, of course we only use a few of the rooms. Used to belong to a famous sculptor. Sir Eustace something."

Hannah could only assume the Doctor, traditionalist that he was, was being unusually polite, or sarcastic, when he called the house lovely. The inside gave no hint of Georgian elegance. This foyer had a clinical décor and was barely decorated, its pastel shades screaming the 1980s in the worst possible way.

The Doctor peered over a display case by the staircase. "What do we have here?" he asked. Hannah saw this as more feigned interest. The pieces of crockery on the glass shelves were rather banal examples of good taste.

"Oh, Ted's full of admiration for ... what's her name ..."

"Clarice Cliff?" the Doctor finished. Sandra nodded.

"Who's Clarice Cliff when she's at home?" Hannah asked.

"A very talented ceramic artist from the early twentieth century." The Doctor prised open the display case and held one of the pots in his hand. He replaced it, crestfallen. "Oh. Not the genuine article, eh?"

"Better, Doctor!" Sandra insisted. "And Ted's improved since then. This will be so big for both of us. Anyway, why don't you follow me in here and take a seat?"

As they walked away, Hannah whispered, "Pottery, Doctor? What next? Are you going to admit you're a fan of flock wallpaper?"

He gave a self-deprecating chuckle. "What can I say, Miss Redfoot? To me, home decoration is exotic. Call it a quirk of being homeless."

They were now standing in the sitting room—a vast and spotless space, like a stuffy aircraft hangar. Its large Georgian window had been re-lined with a strange, cheap-looking synthetic frame. The curtains were drawn, giving a full view of Ted's barns. It conjured to Hannah a forlorn image of Sandra looking out, wondering when her husband would finish his work for the day.

The sitting room had been lacquered with the same synthetic substance as the window frame. None of its Georgian features had survived, and instead it was a rounded unbroken unit from floor to ceiling. It had been decorated with only a single couch pressed against a far wall, about a yard away from the only other furniture, a spotless chrome coffee table. Hannah had seen showrooms with more personality. She was sure there was a simple explanation. Perhaps they had only recently moved in, or it was too much trouble to get furniture or books, but there wasn't even a paper or a magazine on the coffee table.

A worrying thought struck Hannah as she surveyed the mizzling English countryside and the gravel road past the barns. "Isn't this place very out of the way? Is there a hospital near here?"

Sandra's face clouded in confusion. "Hospital? You're not ill?"

"I mean for when the baby comes."

Sandra laughed. "I see, of course. I have a special nurse, paid for by the company. Ted's only got to phone her, and she comes in a snap. Sometimes she comes without the phone call. She doesn't always pick the best times, but it's nice she's so dedicated."

Before Hannah could reply, the Doctor gave her a warning frown and shook his head. "I love companies that care about employees. One of those big multinationals, I suppose?"

Ted's head popped through the serving hatch like a querulous Jack-in-the-box. Hannah smirked at the thought that this couple must have had some kind of ninja training, so silently did they sneak about the place. "Don't pretend you don't know. Twenty-First Century have branches in Japan and the United States and are expanding into Europe." He proudly patted his chest. "They value me, my ideas."

"As do I, Ted," the Doctor nodded. "I thought I recognised the smell. Plastic." He slapped the wall next to the serving hatch, which squeaked to confirm his hypothesis.

Ted recoiled, but then puffed himself up again. "You can't smell plastic."

The Doctor sniffed. "Really?" Even more oddly, he pressed his nose against the wall and took in a big lungful of air. With a smile, he added, "Ah, but not just plastic, eh Ted? You've put something else in the mix too. One of your ideas, I presume."

Ted had withdrawn from the serving hatch and entered the sitting room. His build was too slight to threaten the Doctor in the way he hoped. "Leave here now. This is confidential. I don't care if McNess sent you. I was promised absolute autonomy, and I'm going to have it."

The Doctor studied him closely, then smiled. "Be careful what you wish for. But I assure you I'm not here to interfere. Hannah and I will sit in here, enjoying that tea your wife promised, as good as gold. If you want us, just shout."

Ted glowered. "I won't."

The Doctor nodded and led the puzzled Hannah from the sitting room into the kitchen. Sandra looked relieved that things seemed settled.

"So, what's the real plan?" demanded Hannah quickly before Sandra caught up.

"That is the plan. Don't you ever think, Miss Redfoot, that in our hectic lives there are so few opportunities to sit back and smell the ... plastic house-fittings?"

"Something like that," she smirked. "It beats spaghettifying, I suppose."

"Exactly. Here's a golden opportunity to take it easy for a change. Maybe we can have a nice cup of tea while we wait. If we've time."

"Time?" She was thoroughly confused.

The Doctor nodded, entering the kitchen and pulling out a gleaming chrome barstool. The kitchen too was showroom-clinical, and Hannah now felt that she could also smell plastic, all around. The Doctor had settled into the odd space, slapping the counter and humming a medley of Puccini arias and Charlie Parker riffs in self-satisfaction. "Confidentially, I suspect it won't be many minutes before Ted is begging for my help. They'll have a job convincing him that I'm of benefit to him. Maybe they'll take the path of least resistance and fill his head with the idea that I need to be clapped in irons and strapped to some device of death. I wonder which ..."

Hannah sighed. No doubt all would be revealed soon. The Doctor loved to be mysterious.

Sandra entered the kitchen. "I tried to twist his arm, but Ted won't be joining us. You know, he has to get on with all the work. His loss, I say. We hardly ever have anyone 'round for tea." She filled the kettle and switched on the gas. "Won't be a minute," she said.

The Doctor smiled urbanely while Sandra stood staring at the kettle until it boiled.

* * * * *

Ted felt dizzy as he left their house, and only re-entering the soothing darkness of his barn calmed him. This space had been a second home to him. Now he felt threatened, wondered what these two intruders were hoping to find out about him.

"Don't worry," a musical voice called to him through the darkness.

He had learned before now not to question the voice. It helped him along. It didn't want him thinking about it. And it was rather more practical in its conversation than Sandra. The last thought struck him guiltily. The more time he spent in here, the more distant he felt from her. Yet he didn't really think she noticed. In his darker days, of course, he was sure that she did. Before they moved out here, she was such a modern woman, and now he had doomed her to a solitary existence in the middle of nowhere. Perhaps she missed that little two-up-two-down, living in that grim factory town. Perhaps she had settled into a quiet, unspoken disdain, waiting for the child to fill the void of their relationship. It had been a while since he had felt they were properly on the same page in their relationship, and when he wasn't occupied with this, the attrition bothered him.

"Don't worry," the voice repeated in the darkness.

For a second, Ted thought the voice was about to offer him marriage counselling.

"Don't worry about the Doctor and his friend."

This made more sense, Ted realised. "Don't worry about them?"

"The Doctor and his companion were expected. You are reading a note from Mister McNess. It explains everything..."

Ted looked down at his empty hand. As he listened, he saw the letter before him. It was the stiff cream paper with 'TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY SYNTHETICS' embossed in its top-right corner. The flourishing signature at the bottom, 'Sam R.T. McNess' furthered its official credibility. The words formed in his head, explaining the Doctor's presence, and Ted accepted them gratefully. This made sense. He liked it when things made sense.

* * * * *

Twelve-and-a-half minutes later, Sandra passed the Doctor and Hannah a mug of tea. Before she could tell them to help themselves to milk and sugar, the Doctor drank it down neat in three gulps. He grimaced, as if he'd just polished off a bottle of whisky. "Teabags. Horrendous invention. Originally used to transport the leaves, a container." He tapped the teapot. "A container within a container. The boil-in-the-bag principle. Then again, what should I expect? We are in the decade that gave civilisation the Pot Noodle."

Hannah was embarrassed at his rudeness. "Everyone uses teabags, Doctor. It's progress." She shrugged at Sandra. "Sorry—not used to company."

Sandra regarded her for a moment and then with a smile, flung the wet teabags into the sink, fetched a new bag, tore the edge off and tipped the leaves into the pot. With a violent crank, she re-lit the stove. "As you wish, Doctor. I'll get it right next time. Tea won't be long," she said, and walked out through the kitchen door.

"Thank you!" the Doctor trilled as she left.

Hannah gasped. "Well that's told you!"

The Doctor didn't reply. He went over to the kettle, which was hissing and spitting alarmingly, and took it off the gas. "She didn't refill it." He added water and placed it back on the heat. "I would say Sandra isn't designed to withstand close scrutiny. Good enough for Ted, but of limited use outside the home."

"Even for 1981 that is the most chauvinist thing—" she stopped. This is the Doctor, she reminded herself. "So, you mean—who or what is Sandra?"

The Doctor smiled at her. "Good question, Miss Redfoot. You remember when she shook our hands. Dry, weren't they? Smooth..."

“I suppose. Now you mention it, they felt cold or rather... not warm.” Lifeless? She shuddered at the thought, which struck her more terribly with the pregnancy.

The Doctor nodded. “Maybe Ted was married to a girl called Sandra once, a human whose only crime was making terrible tea. But this isn’t her. This ‘Sandra’ is made of plastic. And as for what she is carrying inside her? I dread to think.”

Hannah shuddered. “Made of plastic?” Then she realised the worst bit. “What happened to the real Sandra?”

The Doctor ignored the question. “Plastic animated by an alien intelligence. I have encountered them before. Chronologically speaking, they probably just finished their second attempt to conquer Earth a few years ago.”

“What’s going on here?” persisted Hannah.

The Doctor shrugged. “I don’t know. But we are part of the plan. The TARDIS was forced here. I was wrong to blame her. No wonder the old girl’s sulking out in that field. She tried to tell me. I ought to have realised the overheating was an attempt to fight the attack. It wasn’t vortex entropy, it was a deliberate assault. I only hope she’s far enough away to be safe.”

Hannah blew out her cheeks. Honestly, the Doctor and his TARDIS. Sometimes! “So, what’s their next move? Do you think Ted’s the type to whip up a torture device in his barn?”

A shadow darkened the duck-egg kitchen wall, and the Doctor turned expectantly. “Ah, Ted, speak of the devil—” He clamped his mouth shut in disappointment when he saw it was Sandra again. The earlier slight over teabags totally forgotten, she was beaming a broad smile.

“Good news, Doctor. Someone’s arrived to collect you. Must have spotted the glider.”

“Me? They asked for me by name?”

Sandra nodded. “Unless there’s another doctor here.” She laughed. “They must have sent a search party.”

The Doctor said grimly, “You may be right.” He got up and went out into the hall.

“We can finish the tea,” said Sandra, continuing with the task. “Perhaps you could catch me up on current events, Hannah.”

“Oh, you know ... Reagan and Thatcher and ... Indiana Jones?” Hannah racked her brain for anything else that might be plausibly contemporary. A boyfriend had been passionate about Van Halen, but Hannah doubted their sound had gotten to this timeless corner of the world.

Sandra reached across the counter and clasped Hannah’s hand. Hannah tried to feel something human in the flesh, but the grip didn’t last long enough for her to commit. “It’s so nice to have company. The nurse is a bit stern.”

Hannah looked her up and down and wondered if the Doctor was wrong. Sandra might just be dippy. Stuck miles out in the country and expecting your first baby must be horrible, nurse or not. Hannah thought of that airless sitting room, and a vision Sandra sitting on its solitary couch, blankly waiting for Ted to finish his work, without even a book to pass the time, filled her with sadness. Ted hardly seemed supportive, looking as though he spent most nights slumped asleep in his barn. “Sometimes it’s all you can think about ... the big day ... seeing its little face. Of course, all I ever wanted to do *before* was look after Ted. So now I’ll have two little humans to look after.”

Hannah was a little dismayed to consider that this woman was so tethered to her obligations as wife and mother. That problem had nothing to do with aliens, she mused. Hannah thought of her own mother, and all that Sioux heritage that had so alienated her as a young girl. Hannah felt so suffocated by Mom’s obsession with their people and their past, and that sad and slow degeneration from leukaemia made her feel so guilty about her childish, impulsive rejection of all

that. Sandra was nothing like her mother, but Hannah saw that same desperate striving for connection. She hoped that Sandra's child would be more appreciative.

Sandra pumped her hand again. "You all right, dear?"

Hannah shook her head, somewhat embarrassed by the tear hanging in the corner of her eye. It hadn't been that long since the Piper had bombarded her with memories of her mother's last days, so she was a little more tender than usual. "Sorry. I ... parenthood, you know. Brings up some emotional stuff for me. A few regrets with my mom."

Sandra nodded. "Don't worry, Hannah. I'm sure you'll meet the right bloke one day."

"No, that isn't quite what I ... oh, never mind." Annoyed by this misinterpretation, Hannah decided to change the subject and find out more about Sandra's little bundle of joy. "When is it due?"

"Next Tuesday, six days to go."

"You are very precise," smiled Hannah. "Boy or girl? Or don't you want to know?"

As soon as she said it, she realised that, in 1981, finding out the sex of an unborn baby might not be possible. But Sandra answered immediately and certainly.

"We decided on a boy."

Hannah grinned awkwardly. "Positive thinking, way to go."

"Help yourself to milk and sugar. And tell me more about Indiana Jones."

* * * * *

The only person waiting for the Doctor outside the house was Ted. The skinny man raised his hands, but his face remained sullenly defiant. "All right, I suppose I have no choice. If McNess says you should look, then come in and look. But remember, I'm in charge. My name will be on the sign-off, so it's my responsibility, right?"

The Doctor nodded emphatically.

They entered the smaller of the two barns. It was a dark space, but like the Georgian house felt clammy and close rather than spacious and rustic. It was shrouded in darkness, which Ted either didn't notice or enjoyed watching his visitor stumble through. The Doctor was certain he heard a cruel chuckle as he tripped over a wooden bench. A familiar synthetic smell confirmed the oddity: for some reason, like the house, the timbers had been coated in plastic. Half-eaten meals cluttered the sideboards, and a few identical denim work coats and overalls were strewn about the dirty floor and the uncomfortable-looking moulded chairs. Yet the Doctor wasn't here to pass judgement on interior decoration. Curiosity burned within him, and he felt it about to be satisfied when Ted angrily rounded on him. "Why did you lie? I knew you were sent by the company! Your colleague's even American, and the only Yanks who turn up in this part of the country are Twenty-First Century goons."

"I didn't lie," the Doctor insisted. "We broke down. My old steam-powered turbo-prop is notoriously unreliable. Jolly hard to keep a kettle on the boil in mid-air ..."

Ted laughed scornfully. "I'd be willing to bet that your little breakdown was engineered."

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. "If you say so, Ted, then I suppose it must have been. Who told you that?"

"I read about the whole thing in the letter from McNess. You had it in your coat all the time."

"What letter?"

Ted's fingers played with the frayed denim breast pocket of his work coat. He patted pocket after pocket, but only produced tufts of lint of varying sizes. "Well, it's not important. I've read the letter, from McNess himself. Why didn't you come out with it?"

"Quite a feat of legerdemain to get the letter out of my pocket without me even noticing," the Doctor said thoughtfully. Obviously, Ted believed he had read such a thing. It was a prosaic illusion to implant in the man's head, but perhaps that was what made it so effective. There was certainly nothing to be gained from denying it. The Doctor continued, "Now, let's concentrate on what *is* important. Your work. There's no good hiding your light under a bushel, my dear fellow. Mister McGruber, or whoever, has got us all abuzz. That letter you clearly just read says as much, doesn't it? So why don't you tell me all about it? Please?"

At this overcooked flattery, Ted's suspicions took a backseat. He could not resist boasting about his achievements. He was immensely proud of his progress. He turned away from the Doctor and indicated a large flat table at the back of the barn, with several shrouded human shapes lying on it. It was too dark to make anything out, but there was a low hum that reminded the Doctor of indistinct chatter.

"This will revolutionise warfare," Ted declared. "No one need die in battle anymore." Ted clicked on a lamp and pulled the shroud away. Lying on the table, glowing beneath the halogen, were three soldiers. Not real, the Doctor noticed with worry, but dummies. The Doctor approached them warily and touched the perfectly round, featureless heads. The heads swivelled in unison to look at him. He flinched, annoyed to be caught off his guard.

"Plastic," the Doctor said gravely.

Ted shook his head with a pitying condescension. "No ordinary plastic, Doctor. A special, more malleable formula of mine which can be energised to create movement, fluid movement, and conditioned with pre-set actions worked out on a computer!" At this, the dummies sat up, and began flexing their arms and legs. The childish gesture, in so familiar a foe, chilled the Doctor.

"You think these are computer-controlled?"

"That part McNess helped out with. The Americans are years ahead of us with computing."

"*Computing?*" the Doctor repeated, suddenly understanding why Hannah found 'spaghetti-fy' so peculiar.

"Yes, computing," Ted repeated ingenuously. "But the formula, the application is all mine. British!"

The Doctor patted the green serge the mannequin wore. "And this is a British soldier. Rule Britannia indeed. In due course, I presume, there will be American ones. But you've got that pesky Cold War raging, haven't you? Do you anticipate the Soviets getting in on the game? Plastic soldiers fighting plastic soldiers?"

Ted shook his head impatiently. "Of course not, they won't fight each other, they will unite to fight the enemy. The weapons are in-built. Blow 'em up, and the limbs keep firing for up to eight hours! If we go to war—heaven forbid—then not a single human life need be lost." His eyes flickered malevolently grey in the light. "Not on our side anyway."

The Doctor laughed contemptuously. "No thought for those poor humans the plastic soldiers shoot? They will die, Ted. Be sure of that. The 'enemy' will die, mowed down by a remorseless unstoppable foe."

Suddenly haunted by this image, Ted looked down at his soldiers, a bony hand stroking tenderly at the dummy's chest. "No—no, they won't fight back. They would surely see reason and stand down before any significant casualties. That's the point. There will be no more wars."

“The ultimate deterrent, you mean?”

“This is better than the bomb!”

“Is it? No one wants to use the bomb. Both sides lose too much. It is a last resort. Oh, the cant of mutually assured destruction isn’t comforting, but at least it forces leaders to make the calculation, no matter how bellicose the lot of them are in this decade. You’ve subtracted accountability from the equation, Ted. With these things, only the enemy lose. You aren’t preventing wars. Your innovation may have paved the way for the biggest slaughter your blood-soaked planet has ever known.”

Ted stared wildly at him as if he were mad. The Doctor stared back, unfazed. He waved a hand in front of the poor fellow and nodded.

“As I suspected. You’ve been conditioned not to see. Perhaps that was why they picked you. An easy target already blinkered by your ambition to succeed. You didn’t even stop to think beyond your own personal fulfilment.” In confirmation, the light caught a framed copy of Page A11 of a *Sheffield Independent* dated 23 January 1971. Its headline, ‘BRITAIN’S BRIGHTEST TEENAGERS’, was accompanied by a photo of several clean-cut youths including a pint-sized Ted Kenworthy. His vanity had left him an easy target for many years, the Doctor could see.

The Doctor felt suddenly saddened. There was no one so petty as a single-minded human, and there was nothing that disappointed him more than seeing a specimen of his favourite species forsake their potential to betray their kith and kin.

Ted stated, as if he had learned it by rote: “Mr. McNess is behind my work. One hundred percent.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

“Why he sent you, I can’t imagine. You’re not the first, of course. All down the line, every Twenty-First Century stooge has been slow to see my genius. Just as well McNess keeps you all under his thumb, you pitiful sceptics swimming against the tide of progress. Who are you to say I’m wrong, Doctor? The British Army, the Americans—they all think I’m right. McNess has made overtures, and he tells me they all want this. This is a good thing. Animated plastic warriors. Automatons that will die so we don’t have to!”

The Doctor looked sadly at him. Ted spouted the words, and the misshapen ideology that had kept him imprisoned in this barn, not only to convince the Doctor. Deep down Ted was trying to convince himself too. His subconscious mind may have been fighting the conditioning, but it was losing.

“Oh, I’ve heard enough Ted. These automated plastic warriors are nothing good or ingenious. You are describing Autons, and they are nothing new. You are being used. The plastic augmentation you’ve developed has caught their interest. Why, I wonder? And what happens now that you’ve finished ‘your’ creation?”

“The unveiling, of course! Just McNess, some Twenty-First Century board members, and some army major at first, but when—not if, but *when*—that goes swimmingly he’s to bring it down to London for a larger demonstration for the higher-ups and the government.”

The Doctor sighed. “Naturally. Yet there must be more to it than that...”

The squeal of tires outside the barn convinced the Doctor that he was about to find out what more there was very shortly.

* * * * *

Mrs. Flannigan tutted in disapproval as she heard a gleaming Jaguar roar down the narrow lane. If any of her sheep had gotten loose, they would have been dead in an instant.

The flashy Jag was heading towards the Kenworthy house, of course. A few such vehicles had popped in over the months, always in a rush. Usually Ted's yelling echoed down the valley within ten minutes of their arrival, and they squealed back on their way inside an hour. But it was so disruptive, Mrs. Flannigan thought. Not to mention a bloody cheek. She or Barry or their animals weren't allowed to tread a toe into that field, but they could have all manner of equipment trucks and official vehicles blaring past at all hours of the night and that was perfectly fine.

It wasn't even the times that Ted had snapped at her or Barry for an accidental incursion that most upset Mrs. Flannigan. One time, she had been tending the sheep and saw Ted's wife wandering the fields. It had been a while back—the bump on the frail young thing's belly was starting to show. Her walk was stiff and jerky, her steps even despite the terrain. She wore a pale maternity frock and sandals. Her expression was vacant, with what Mrs. Flannigan saw was a trace of fear. Mrs. Flannigan had called over to her that day, and when their eyes met ... Mrs. Flannigan didn't like to think of it. She spent an extra while in church that Sunday praying for the poor young lady. She was certain that Mr. Kenworthy was doing something horrible there. Barry convinced her to leave it alone. "It'll be over soon enough, Moira," he assured her.

Every time she looked at that house, she saw those cold eyes, something beyond vacancy in them ... something angry, looking down at her.

Mrs. Flannigan forced herself back to the present, to this grey March afternoon. Jaguar, she wondered. City folk. She thought back to her encounter with that Doctor and his American friend Miss Redfoot in the morning. Oh, they seemed like nice enough folk, but she wondered where they had come from and where they were going when they crashed near that police box.

She shook her head, banished her increasingly unreasonable suspicions, and carried on with her day. The sky was still dark, but the rain had stopped. The sheep were back in their pen, and even Frisky had turned up, albeit covered in some unholy grime. Mrs. Flannigan tousled the dog's mud-matted fur.

"Who knows, Frisky?" she asked rhetorically. "Maybe today Barry'll be proved right?" How she hoped that these visitors signalled an end to all this business at the Kenworthys'.

* * * * *

The large black saloon car swung into the yard of the manor house. A chauffeur hurried round to open the back door. Mr. McNess got out and looked around.

McNess listened to his three accountants and executives, prattling inanely about this looming demonstration.

"All seems a bit sudden," the thin one grumbled.

"Shouldn't we have more private demonstrations for ourselves before bringing in the big guns?" his stocky friend asked.

"If you ask me," Thin shot back, "Kenworthy hasn't justified your faith, Mister McNess."

"How could he?" their quiet friend chimed in. McNess liked him best because he was so reserved, but somehow his few gnomic statements triggered more babbling from his colleagues.

"He's right you know," Stocky began. "Getting one man to do all this work alone. It flies in the face of our business model, sir."

This got Thin, Stocky, and even Quiet going, and they chattered volubly about Kenworthy's shortcomings and McNess' rashness in granting him so much independence. They

were all so suspicious of Kenworthy, seeing none of his potential behind his mediocre accomplishments in the company.

McNess saw so much more.

He raised his hands, and the three went silent. “Thank you, gentlemen. And I thought you agreed *I* would be allowed to manage Twenty-First Century the way I saw fit?”

“Of course, Mister McNess,” Stocky mumbled obsequiously.

“Very well. You either do so *silently* and *obediently*, or I leave the project. Something neither you nor our principals would find agreeable, I’m sure you’ll agree.”

Mention of the ‘principals’ caused the three men to frown. Dark memories resurfaced, memories of trauma and horrors. The three executives happily banished them to listen to more of McNess’ pabulum.

“I don’t know why we ever doubt you, Mister McNess,” Thin concluded as they resumed their course to the barn.

“Neither do I,” McNess re-joined with a smile. “It will be the death of you.”

* * * * *

Hannah saw the car pull up outside the barn. It was a black Jaguar—a brand-new 1980s model. She never got over the dislocation of seeing old things when they were new. Such details were legion when travelling with the Doctor, so much so that they often became hard to focus on, but whenever she had a free moment she would make a little mental note of the novelty. There was an extra frisson in being so close to her own lifetime. She thought of this strange couple—Ted and Sandra could still be alive in her time, and their little child would be about ten years older than her. Hannah hoped they were.

She shook her anxieties away and continued observing the visitors outside. A man stepped from the car, wearing a vulgarly shiny pinstriped power suit with wide lapels and shoulder pads. He had accessorized it with a bright red tie. Three other men in similar suits followed him outside. They looked like off-the-peg WASPs, one thin, one chubby, and one tall. Their own suits and ties were echoes of their Armani-wannabe boss, and they gambolled at his heels like loyal lapdogs. The group looked so dully conservative, Hannah reasoned they just had to be human.

“You two are getting a few visitors today—” she began, but as she turned, she noticed that Sandra had left the room, without saying anything, again. Hannah called after her, pacing through the rooms of the vast home. She passed from the kitchen to the sitting room, to a dining hall, through a study. All were eerily empty. It was funny how creepy it could be despite its bright pastel-hued paint scheme and open, airy spaces. There were no shadows for monsters to skulk in; everything was in plain sight. So why did Hannah still feel an ominous eye observing her?

Hannah padded down the corridor, its end not even illuminated by the grey sunlight. She reached for a light switch, but the light that came on was weak and sickly. This must be the area beyond those ‘few rooms’ Ted and Sandra occupied.

A door hung ajar, looking out into a disused room. It had been made over in line with the rest of the house, but ghostly dust sheets covered its furnishings. Some of the shapes looked almost human, and Hannah squirmed as the breeze from her opening the door seemed to animate them. One flew clear away. Beneath it was a case of figurines. Hannah peered closer at them. They looked like gnomes of some kind. Their faces were screwed tight in a grotesque frown. The detail was incredible. Indeed, there was a kind of movement in the likeness, as if it were an actual three-inch troll struggling to hold an expression. Hannah moved to pick one up, but suddenly found them

just a little too creepy to want to handle. She grabbed the sheet and moved to fling it over the case. It was ice cold, and seemed slick with a cold, clammy film. She always thought these old English houses were cloth and china, but this was upholstered in tacky figurines and vinyl? Hannah let go of the sheet and retreated back to the front room.

Hannah was relieved to find Sandra sitting on the couch, looking out at the barn. Her hands rested protectively on her stomach. Hannah sat next to her. There was a sudden coldness that made Hannah feel uncomfortable to sit so close, but it felt more natural than standing by the door. Again, Hannah thought of the Doctor's words. Despite Sandra's distant demeanour, her movements and her demeanour felt true. In the silence, Hannah realised Sandra might be concerned by having a visitor scrutinise her like that. "You must be very excited," she said, purely for something to say.

Sandra smiled. "It's good you're here. It makes things easier."

Hannah felt genuine sympathy. It was such a human sentiment; one woman seeking solace in another. That settled it. Obviously, she wasn't made of plastic. The Doctor had got things muddled, she was sure. "It is a lonely place. You must miss your family and friends."

Sandra laughed. "I never had any. I think that's what made Ted and I get along so well. You know he was an orphan, poor lamb? I mean it's good because the Doctor is here. I can have my baby *now*."

Hannah felt a wave of unease. No, she thought to herself, Sandra is simply confused. "He's not really that sort of doctor. Trust me, you're better off with your nurse."

Sandra stood up suddenly and marched stiffly to the kitchen. Perhaps, Hannah hoped, she was simply about to invite those people in the car inside. She opened the back door. For a moment she waited, gazing into the middle distance expectantly, then turned to face Hannah. "The birth has been brought forward. It will be in three hours' time."

"What?" Hannah began backing away. She backed out of the kitchen through the foyer, hands fumbling for the front door. The Doctor needed to know this. Then she stopped as a figure entered the kitchen. A woman wearing a type of box hat, a cape... an old-fashioned English District Nurse. Any hope Hannah might have had that the newcomer might help vanished instantly when she saw the cold, impassive face. The Nurse's high, pale cheekbones looked angular, razor-edged even. Her eyes were narrowed to a cruel, diamond-shaped squint. Now, *this* lady, Hannah could believe was made of plastic.

The nurse announced, "You're not needed, my dear. Only the Doctor."

The Nurse raised her arm aloft, her hand splayed and outstretched to Hannah. Then, as though on a hinge, its fingers neatly dropped away to reveal the unmistakable barrel of a gun.

-3-

A Familiar Face

Ted was on edge. Having this strange Doctor snooping around his shelter, his sanctum, was immediately uncomfortable, and the longer he stayed, the more intolerable it was becoming.

How many months had Ted spent alone in this space? When Twenty-First Century moved him out to this remote point, Ted had romantic visions of long walks, picnics, and canoodling in the long grass. Oh, he missed Craig and everyone else, he missed Ironthorpe too in a way, but such visions made him think the isolation was worth it. As his schedule grew more urgent, he realised all that happiness would have to wait until after the baby arrived. In its place, there was the perpetual dark and stillness of this sanctum. Ironically, the country now conjured to Ted a darker and more confined setting than his old office.

Sandra never entered; perhaps she thought the fumes were bad for the baby. Again, Ted suppressed a pang of guilt, because it was probably a good thing; her presence would likely have slowed him down. He was, if not happy, then at least absorbed in these barns. There was always something to do, some part of his engineering to perfect. And of course, he had the company of that voice. Hadn't McNess said, all those months ago, that his voice would be in Ted's ear all the time? And sure enough, this voice sounded to Ted like Mr. McNess, a soothing patrician, like the father he always imagined.

Today, though, he was confronted with the truth: he had spent a long time alone, cooped up in the dark. It had seemed one unending work day—the countryside a split-second blur between the house and the barn, endless hours hunched over his bench, quick and flavourless meals, snatched conversations with Sandra, then finally surrendering for a few hours of dreamless sleep before waking and doing it all over again.

His eyes narrowed in fury as the Doctor prodded at the plastic soldiers. The flutter of his shoulder-length hair gave him the look of an out-of-control bird trying to take over Ted's familiar nest. Ted looked across as the barn door flung open and three suited executives stood framed against the grey afternoon sky. He smiled grimly. He didn't remember their names, but if they were half as unpleasant to the Doctor as they were to him, he'd be picking straw and mud out of that fancy overcoat before long.

The Doctor did not look as he heard the synchronous tread behind him. “Come on in, McNess,” he beckoned, still not turning from the plastic soldier whose limbs he was idly punching. “I’m sure you’re dying to see your star employee’s handiwork.”

“Keep away from it. Tell him to keep away from it,” Ted ordered the trio ineffectually as the Doctor prodded the plastic soldier. The longer its arms and legs thrust back and forth, the more pathetic it looked.

“What are you doing?” a baritone American voice asked without interest.

“Having a look, that’s all. Very life-like. Any chance I could see it move about a bit more?”

“No,” Ted insisted.

“You do know how to make it move?” the Doctor challenged.

It even looked as if the man’s tongue was in his cheek. Ted looked about to explode. “Obviously. I created it.”

“Of course, of course,” the Doctor said apologetically. “When is the official unveiling?”

“Immediately,” an official voice behind the Doctor declared crisply.

“As soon as that?” The Doctor turned around to see three baggy-suited executives. They were the picture of clean-limbed American health, and their identical wardrobe and manner gave them the look of brothers, or triplets even. The shorter and chubbier middle executive was bookended by two lanky men. “Which of you fellows is Mister McNess?”

“He is examining the other facility,” the tall one replied.

“Is he now?” The Doctor flashed Ted an infuriating grin. “You’ve been holding out on me, Ted. Which way is that?”

The Doctor found his way barred by the men. They were human all right, but their minds were the same putty as Ted’s. It was always the eyes that gave it away—the hint of pleading behind that zombified placidity.

“Why don’t you stay here and make yourself useful?” the stocky one suggested condescendingly.

“Why don’t you sweep the yard?” said Ted sarcastically. “That would be helpful.”

“Forgive me for sounding conceited, but I’m sure McNess and his illustrious Twenty-First Century board members didn’t drag me twenty thousand parsecs off course because of a dirty yard.” The Doctor glanced at the computer bank—a standard 1980s rig—and the generator leads. Big canisters of chemicals stretched the length of one wall, their components all plastic. Whatever Ted’s secret ingredient was, it could be in one of those canisters. The fact that there was a mix gave the Doctor a faint hope that fiddling with the ingredients might yet prevent this new generation of Autons from rising. “But yes, Ted, I did promise your charming wife I would help out around here. Have you met her, gentlemen? Such an obliging host, such a doting wife to Ted here. It’s remarkably rare to find a lady of her substance in this life, eh Ted?”

“I’m sorry?”

The Doctor ignored Ted’s confusion and suggested to the executives, “I’m sure she’d love to give you a cup of hot, brown-tinted grit.”

They frowned in unison.

“Ah, but you’re Americans. I don’t suppose you particularly appreciate the virtues of a well-made cup of tea. Anyway, before I get to this yard, go on, give me a demo. Just a quick one. Wouldn’t you like to see it in action as well?”

“Of course, we would,” the stocky one replied, his mid-American accent so devoid of affect, he may as well be an Auton. “We’re counting on it to boost Q2 earnings. Even more growth is expected for the ‘81/82 fiscal year.”

“If Kenworthy here hasn’t screwed it up,” his thin colleague chimed.

“We don’t know what McNess sees in him,” the third suit, a soft-spoken tall man, explained to the Doctor. “Twenty-First Century should be expanding, but he’s holding off production while we wait for Kenworthy’s brainchild to bear fruit.”

The Doctor smiled. Funny to see a little spark of cattiness had survived the mind control. The slight made Ted keen to show off what he believed to be his own genius. The Doctor, knowing Autons possessed a small amount of consciousness drawn from the Nestene entity, realised everything was being transmitted and shared by the collective mind. Behind those soldiers’ sightless plastic skulls were relays sending his likeness for consideration by the controlling intellect. No doubt McNess, whoever or whatever he really was, was absorbing this entire conversation and deciding what action to take now that the Doctor was where they wanted him. If Ted gave the Autons full motive power, would they play along? Or would they reveal their true colours now they had the Doctor where they wanted him?

“Well, Kenworthy?” the tall suit sneered. “What do you say?”

After a pause, Ted shrugged. “OK, why not?” He went over to the computer console and typed in a program command. His typing was awkward and unschooled, but the screen quickly reeled off several lines of DOS before ending in a question mark prompt. No doubt Hannah would smirk at the antique computer interface, but the Doctor had a hard time differentiating between a mobile phone and an abacus.

Ted’s fingers plodded about the keys, indicating the expectant question mark on the screen. “Right, this is the clever part. Watch this, it will walk forward.” Ted typed “Y” and pressed Return.

For a moment, the soldier did not stir, but then it hopped to its feet and took a few jerky steps. The Doctor moved back hurriedly; aware it could decide to shoot him, for old time’s sake, at any moment. But the arms stayed at their sides. The soldier stamped the length of the barn, concluding its drill by coming to attention. It even finished with a halting salute.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” said Ted proudly.

The three executives nodded and exchanged thumbs-up gestures only mildly patronising. They even approached Ted, mumbled words of congratulation through gritted teeth, and patted him on the back. Strangely, now that they had granted him their approval, Ted was ignoring them, focussing only on the Doctor’s reaction.

“Indeed yes, Ted.” It was cruel to poke at a mind-controlled person, but he couldn’t resist prodding the young fellow further. Perhaps the Doctor might insult Ted enough that he would regain his willpower. “I, uh, suppose you can make it move faster, of course.”

“When in battle mode. But Mr. McNess is holding on to that program for obvious reasons.” He tapped the shoulder affectionately. “When the top brass come, we’ll really put Tommy through his paces.”

The Doctor wandered over to the door. “And you do the actual moulding in the larger barn over there? Where our estimable Mr. McNess is currently skulking?” Spying a chance to make a break, the Doctor headed through the connecting door. Ted and the executives ran after him, a flannel of official objections echoing in the air, but the Doctor was already inside.

The otherwise empty space contained a bay rather like a swimming pool. The bay had indented divisions, like massive ice trays. There were dozens of these compartments, each filled with gently bubbling plastic. The synthetic smell was overpowering in here, and it gave off an unnatural heat and light. On a plinth behind it rested a large, translucent sphere of plastic. The Doctor rapped on it gently and nodded in grim confirmation; it wasn’t just plastic but the clammy,

sickly, *living* plastic of the Nestenes. This was the central Nestene energy unit, the Doctor realised, a central font just waiting to imbue its twisted synthetic life into all these lifeless polymer chains.

Ted pushed him away. “Don’t touch that.”

For once, Ted was right. The Doctor withdrew his fingers. “Wouldn’t dream of it, Ted, old chap.”

Ted readied himself to strong-arm the Doctor from the barn. He had put up with far too much nonsense for one day, and it would certainly allow him an outlet for his building aggression and frustrations. At this moment, all his instincts urged him to do so. It almost felt like a voice in his head. And yet he stayed still and did nothing. The urge faded. The Doctor was doing nothing more threatening than scraping off flecks of mud from his linen trousers and brogues. He looked up suddenly and smiled.

“Must look my best to meet our honoured guests.” He craned his neck and yelled at the darkness, “Don’t mooch around back there in the dark, McNess! It’s me! The Doctor! Don’t you want to pop out and say hello? After all the trouble you took to bring me here?”

McNess stepped from behind the sphere, a little bashfully. His face was shrouded in darkness, silhouetted against the blazing light from the sphere. “Doctor, your arrival was not just expected, it was keenly anticipated. You wouldn’t believe the state of the Nestene consciousness now that you’ve arrived.”

The American accent vanished, replaced by a nightmarish singsong. “The Doctor should be restrained now!”

Another voice sounded from McNess’ mouth, lower but still jarringly musical. “He must remain free until we are manifest. As a prisoner he will close his mind and be useless. All the time we are sucking knowledge from him. He must not suspect.”

“It is awfully rude to talk about someone as if they aren’t here,” the Doctor interjected.

The Doctor was downright infuriated that the two pitches of Nestene consciousness continued to ignore him and talk among themselves. “He is plotting, all the time. The girl’s mind is full of examples of his deviousness.”

“We know this. Do nothing yet and keep the girl secure. The time is so close. I will be with you in hours.”

“The girl should die.”

The Doctor tensed at this. It had been amusing listening to the splinters of formless energy bicker amongst themselves, but now he remembered the real danger he had left Hannah in.

“Stupid. She is a lever. Keep her for now. Let her witness the rebirth!”

“Yes. Rebirth!” In unison, the sphere and the vat quivered with a strange approximation of glee.

McNess’ American accent returned. “Forgive me for that little interruption. In a way I’ve been talking to myself.”

“Mm,” nodded the Doctor. “That explains why the conversation was so dull.”

“*But*,” McNess continued with a hint of petulance, “It is in fact far more complex, more like mulling over different thoughts held within a different mood. One vast mind of gestalt knowledge is apt to contradict itself on occasion. Frames of mind, if you will.”

“Look, do you mind stepping forward so I can get a look at you? Most of my enemies have the decency to threaten me face to face.”

“Of course, Doctor. Where are my manners?” McNess stepped forward and the Doctor saw his face properly. It made him more confused than ever. A grey-flecked pointed beard, and a high lined forehead framed by black hair. Dark eyes blazed with intelligence and hatred.

“The Master?” Not just the Master, but his older self - the incarnation with whom the Doctor had tangled so often alongside UNIT and Jo Grant.

“Oh, my dear Doctor,” he replied with a silky laugh. “You have been naïve.”

* * * * *

There were times Hannah wondered if she was gaining a sixth sense from the combination of frequent time travel and deadly danger. However, she wished it might pop into her head a little sooner than a split-second before a death ray was about to incinerate her. At the same second the Nurse’s wrist-gun activated, Hannah threw herself to the floor.

Baby-blue wall panels erupted into searing flame above her. Hannah barrel-rolled desperately, the smooth floor carrying her to the end of the hallway. With bolts of fire thudding all around, millimetres from her head, Hannah tumbled to her feet and raced to the front door.

She tensed as she saw the path before the door littered with those gnome figurines in the case. Taking a horrified breath, Hannah realised her eyes were not deceiving her: they were crawling across the floor towards her at surprising speed. With dozens of them barring her way out, and the Nurse and Sandra lurching from the kitchen, Hannah sprinted upstairs.

She found herself at the far end, another disused corner of the house. There were hints here and there of the original Georgian elegance: some of the plastic hadn’t quite spread, leaving panels of mottled wood exposed. Now knowing that the mere presence of plastic was enough to signal danger, Hannah was just hoping one room in the place—a closet, even—wasn’t upholstered in the nasty stuff.

She paused, hearing Sandra and the Nurse speak.

“What are you doing?” the Nurse snapped.

“I just ... do we have to eliminate Hannah?” she asked petulantly.

“You know as well as I do, only the Doctor is necessary. His associates are just as cunning as he, another source to sabotage our plans.”

Sandra’s voice grew colder at this assessment. “Of course. There are no degrees of necessity. But I see the Nestene Consciousness is debating the matter within itself.” Then it softened again. “I just ... it’s been so lonely ... and we have messed with Ted so much, I hardly get to see him.”

Sandra did sound like a pregnant, hormonal woman. Perhaps there was still hope for her, in spite of this control. However, right now Hannah had no time to explore that issue. She heard the Nurse brush angrily past, and a second later the hollow click of her sensible shoes mounting the stairs. Hannah moved farther into the darkness at the end of the upper landing.

Hannah crept through an open door and found a completely preserved Georgian room. Its vivid green paint had flaked away from the wall, and a rocking horse forlornly sat in the corner. How reassuring, Hannah thought to herself, to end up in something so familiar as a creepy disused nursery.

Hannah crouched in the shadow of a large chest of drawers and held her breath. It was not the best hiding place, but it did allow her to bolt for it if spotted. The Nurse walked slowly round the room, her arm still extended, her hand hanging down, the gun exposed.

There was a tentative quality to the Nurse’s movements, and Hannah wondered if the plastic coating around the rest of the structure aided her movements. She looked furtive and dizzy as she lumbered into the nursery.

The Nurse backed out of the room. Hannah pumped her fist.

“What happened?” Sandra asked.

There was a squeak of indistinct communication between the two ladies, and they separated down the corridor.

With them gone, Hannah raced to the far corner of the empty room. There was a large bay window. She looked outside and down, and her heart sank: it was a drop of about ten feet, and all around the house was paved with unforgiving concrete. She looked outside, but didn't see any stonework or drainpipes, and even if she did, her Wellington boots would hardly have the best grip.

Still, it was better to take the plunge and risk a broken leg than stay here and get blasted. She grabbed the window.

The window didn't move. She yanked it again. It yielded under her hands, but she realised its soft tacky texture was not making it any easier to manipulate. If anything, the frame seemed to stretch around the glass, keeping it shut tighter than a wrought-iron latch. Plastic, she realised glumly; the same cold, sweaty-textured material as that dust sheet. Not enough to make the room dangerous, but enough to keep her trapped.

She looked around the room for something to heave through the window, but she jumped at the sight of three little shapes cluttering the top of the drawer she had hid behind. They were those odd plastic gnomes in the display case. Their faces were screwed up, and they looked angry.

She heard the tentative tap of the Nurse's shoes against the wooden floor and backed through a connecting door. She was now inside a large closet and sighed with relief as she spied a second door leading to the hall. Through the thin wall, she heard the Nurse's voice: “We've received conflicting orders over how necessary it is to keep you alive,” she explained apologetically.

“I hope you don't expect me to feel sorry for you,” Hannah replied. “What did you end up deciding?”

“You are necessary. You will not be harmed, but you must be contained.”

“Well, whoop-de-doo,” Hannah retorted.

“Show yourself.”

“Fat chance!” she called back.

Hannah could hear the beat of her heart so loud; surely the nurse could hear it too. She must breathe... then she realised the Nurse could also hear her heart. Its sound filled the room, magnified by some alien means. Looking down, Hannah saw one of the ugly trolls clinging to her top. She batted the hideous tchotchke aside. As the nurse entered the closet, Hannah raced for the other door. Again, she slid across the plastic floor, falling headfirst down the landing, and turned the clumsy move into a barrel roll down the stairs.

Sandra blocked her way, but Hannah collided with her, knocking her sideways. This bought valuable time as the Nurse stopped to help Sandra to her feet. Not for a moment did Hannah believe in the baby now—her movements were as lithe as an athlete's—but something grew inside Sandra, and it was precious to them, making Hannah more unsettled than ever.

“Don't you see, Hannah?” Sandra asked, as sweetly as if none of this violent pursuit had happened. “You're going to stay alive. You should be happy. I know I am. I didn't want you to be killed, not really.”

“You are the biggest bunch of nut-cakes I've ever met. Where's the Doctor?”

The Nurse smiled. “How limited the human is. Never to see the whole picture, only the tiny fragment visible to a single mind. To operate all the time with one narrow perspective, one

point of view. To reject what it can't understand, to fail to grapple with the full majestic enormity. You do not understand what is happening? I find such failing contemptible."

"Yeah, well, this house is a real dump."

The Nurse came forward and grabbed her. Hannah's muscles ached from the tension, from the manic running around the large space, and it was almost a relief to surrender.

* * * * *

McNess dismissed his three subordinates, who were now waiting by the Jaguar, chatting in a crude facsimile of human conversation. Mention of the local golf courses and a wine club wafted across the country air. The Doctor imagined, in their minds, they had made sense of it in their limited professional capacity: they had seen a business demonstration. Perhaps, if they could shake the control loose, they would comprehend its full horror, but for now they were clockwork people, sadly parroting meaningless phrases at each other to keep the nightmare of their waking lives comprehensible.

The Doctor ignored the Master for the moment, leaning against the wall surveying Ted, who had gone strangely quiet. "I wonder why you are so important," the Doctor mused. "You have some cachet in being a verifiable expert in modern plastic hybrid technology. Your work is genuinely advanced for the time period. A dead-end when renewable technology gets going, but far-sighted stuff in 1981."

Ted remained motionless. The Doctor could see his eyes straining with exhaustion.

He continued, "But I suppose it's your credentials that appeal to the Master and the Nestene Consciousness. After their two earlier attempts, they don't want to precipitate a battle with humans too early. The longer they can work within the confines of earthly business, the safer they are. So, you work away, the cogs of business turn. The authorities will check all that and be happy. These Twenty-First Century goons will report back to their shareholders, and they'll report to whatever Department C19 pen-pusher gave them this defence contract. The Ted Kenworthy name has opened doors so far. I'm sure they're all satisfied that, with American know-how, you might possibly have come up with this appealing scheme for churning out plastic soldiers all by yourself. But why keep the real you, I wonder? Why not substitute an Auton?"

The Master stepped forward, curiously obliging. "Believe it or not, Doctor, the Nestene are moving out of the plastics business and into good old-fashioned flesh and blood. And Kenworthy's synthesis holds the key to this evolution." He smiled and tapped Ted lightly on the shoulder and the man came to with a start.

"You're here, Mister McNess," his employee said brightly. "I'll tell Sandra to put the kettle on."

"Splendid!" said the Master, re-adopting that dreadful American accent. "Let's go into the main house, shall we?"

The two Time Lords walked to the house side by side. The Doctor glanced at his old foe, trying to feel their kinship. It felt distant and dampened. He whispered, "Most peculiar, our meeting out of sequence like this. Downright disruptive to one's sense of continuity."

The Master sniffed. "It is all part of the Nestene's plan."

"Yes, but it must grind your gears a bit, eh? Knowing that you won't be rid of me for about, ooh, six more regenerations? A few more centuries of these little clashes?" The Doctor leaned in conspiratorially. "Knowing you can't possibly have that long?"

The Master bristled.

“Is that why you’re doing this? Are you looking for a way to counteract the sins of your youth? I always did wonder how you raced through so many bodies so fast. It was that Tissue Compressor, wasn’t it? I bet you polished off a couple of regenerations just leaving the blasted thing switched on. That would never happen with a sonic screwdriver.”

The Doctor smiled at the puzzle. Surely the Master wouldn’t let these jibes stand, yet he was nodding with confused complaisance. The communion with the Nestene Consciousness held the answer. Perhaps the Master had been linked up, and perhaps the process had robbed him of some of that snide, implacable malevolence. Perhaps, the Doctor chuckled to himself, he was as under its control as those Twenty-First Century yuppies outside.

He lowered his voice. “Look, why don’t you level with me? It’s me, the Doctor, your best enemy. Why have you gotten back together with these intergalactic hucksters? Now the Sea Devils, there was an alliance that had possibilities ...” Again, not a flicker of reaction. He tried to break the conditioning, reach the Time Lord within. “What do they want with me? What do they want with you? Tell me and I might be able to help us both get out of here.”

They stood by the Georgian house’s grand front door and the Master turned on his heel. “Doctor, there is no need to be so suspicious. The answers to your questions are simple. The Nestenes’ synthetic form was insufficiently malleable. They are too easily defeated because of this cumbersome incubation process. So, they looked to me for the answer. Part of it lay in Kenworthy’s chemical hybrid work, which was far in advance of his miserable planet. Part of it lay in the natural properties with which we Time Lords are imbued. Having allied with me before, I was a logical choice to bring this scheme forward. The Nestenes have solved the riddle shared between business and evolution. They must diversify, or die.”

-4-

(C2H4)n

Hannah sat on a chair in the corner of the bedroom. She had been draped with a draw sheet from a cot, presumably for the new arrival.

“I may be afraid for my life, but you two should know that I still feel utterly ridiculous sitting here with a baby sheet over me.”

She wriggled her arms. Not even tied up. They were amateurs. She brushed the sheet aside, but the breeze seemed to land it back against her.

Sandra lay on the bed. Though she had adopted the prone posture and bent knees of a mother about to give birth, her gaze was locked on Hannah. With the Nurse gone, Hannah desperately wondered if some trace of the real Sandra was in there and could help her get free.

“I’m so glad you’re here for me, Hannah,” Sandra trilled. “It was good we didn’t kill her, wasn’t it Nurse?”

Hannah cursed as the harridan primly swept into the room. “Yes, it was,” she replied curtly. “Now just you focus on pushing, my dear.”

This little conversation reminded Hannah that she probably couldn’t count on Sandra’s help. She looked around the bedroom. It was more plastic-plated ’80s chintz. Floor and walls were one fluid unit, smooth and rounded like the sitting room and the kitchen downstairs. Up here, the curves combined with the low lighting and the bed lent the space the look of a padded asylum cell. Nevertheless, the door was open, so Hannah didn’t see any reason to delay her escape. Hannah moved to stand but felt the plastic tug at her arms. That damned baby sheet seemed to be stuck under the chair. She tried to loosen it, but it tugged the other way. The truth dawned on her, and in a moment the sheet sprung to life, its waxy plastic stretching tight across Hannah’s body. She struggled, but the sheet grew tighter.

She scrabbled frantically, her breath getting shorter. Then she relaxed her muscles, and the sheet loosened.

“That’s better,” the Nurse simpered. “Why don’t you just relax, my dear?”

Sandra had watched the spectacle emotionlessly. “You’re very calm,” Hannah observed. “Considering you are giving birth soon. Apparently.”

Sandra blinked. “Calm?”

“Yes. I’d be having kittens.”

“Really? You’d prefer to give birth to a feline?”

“Well, you know what I mean. No... you obviously don’t.”

“I should be emotional?” Sandra clarified.

“I’d have thought.”

“There is no need. Ted isn’t here to see. I do everything for Ted. I only exist to keep him working, keep him from questioning himself.”

Hannah sighed. Whether that was an Auton sentiment or just a 1980s housewife one, it grated on her. “Psst. Hey, Sandra, here’s an idea. Why not take this sheet off me?”

Sandra frowned. “Why?”

Feeling the plastic quiver, Hannah suggested: “The baby will need it.”

Sandra considered. Her conditioning constantly pushed her to react as a real human mother-to-be, a real 1980s housewife, and as Ted would expect. She gave one of her wide, empty smiles. “That would only be for Ted’s benefit. And Ted isn’t here to see.”

Before Hannah could respond the bedroom door flew open and the Doctor strode in, a cup of tea in his hand. “Hannah, how good to see you. I know what you’re thinking. ‘Do these plastic draw-sheets have any practical application besides use as a device of death’? I’m afraid the answer is no.”

Behind the Doctor, that suited man with the beard entered the room, holding a cup of tea but not touching it. Despite her fear, Hannah smirked. “I *was* thinking, ‘Is this a rescue?’ but it obviously isn’t.”

He gestured to the new arrivals. “Miss Hannah Redfoot, this is the Master, a Time Lord consumed with incurable megalomania and dedicated to either conquering or destroying the universe. Currently running those plucky American plastic merchants Twenty-First Century Synthetics and adopting a rather corny alias and accent to match. Sandra’s nurse, I haven’t had the pleasure to meet, but I suppose you know.”

“Yeah, she’s been looking after me,” Hannah grumbled.

Behind the Doctor, the Master and the Nurse turned to Sandra.

The Doctor studied the plastic sheet. It sensed his presence and immediately began tightening. Hannah winced and the Doctor took a step back quickly. He leaned against the window frame instead. “You know, I still have a few questions about this master plan of yours. Unleash this plastic army? Take over Earth? Kill and replace a few world leaders? And you’ve managed to fit in a group baby. Ten out of ten for packing a lot in, but minus twenty-and-a-half for the rest. I’ve never heard such a convoluted load of nonsense.”

The Master maintained his watch on Sandra.

“So,” the Doctor continued, his gaze out the bedroom window to Mrs. Flannigan’s land beyond. “I don’t think that is the plan. Is it?”

The Master turned to him now. “It is part of the plan. The Nestene will absorb this world with its new, organic components designed by Ted Kenworthy. And from there, the universe will once again tremble at their might!”

The Doctor shook his head. “Then why am I here?”

The Master’s voice resumed the sing-song timbre of the Nestenes. “Why do we delay? Why let him ask these questions? Let us absorb him now! He is dangerous.”

“We follow the plan,” the Master insisted to himself.

The Doctor nodded thoughtfully. “Absorb me, eh? Knock off a no-name-brand Time Lord out of plastic!” He tapped the Master’s dome forehead impishly. It gave a hollow plastic rattle. “Just like you!”

The false Master’s teeth gritted. “Doctor, I am just as real as—”

“The average G.I. Joe? No, no, no. That’s why it’s you, particularly this version of you. The Nestenes must have copied you into their gene pool the last time you tangled with them. When they cooked up this hare-brained scheme, they thought a synthetic Time Lord might have enough of the properties of the genuine article to enhance their powers. But you didn’t, did you? So ... next step, me!” He turned to Hannah. “Don’t get me wrong, the real Master is a prize dullard, but he’s more fun than this dummy.”

The Nurse said, “Organic life is the future.”

The Doctor sighed. “The Nestenes moving out of plastics and back to flesh, yes... so he said.” He crossed to the prone Sandra and stared at her swelling belly. “But what is growing inside Sandra *is* more plastic, with a huge chunk of Nestene consciousness inside, granted. But how did it get here? Before you and the Master fell out, you used a radio telescope as a bridgehead. This time, what?”

“Oh Doctor, be quiet,” said the Master with almost human exasperation. “You understand nothing.”

Out of the corner of his eye the Doctor saw a military troop transport vehicle backing into the yard. The three Auton soldiers marched out, as if to greet it, with twenty more emerging from the larger barn and marching behind the prototypes.

The Master explained the scene to the shaken Doctor. “The Major is here for the demonstration. They’re ready to fan out. One platoon for the British Army base, one for the American airbase. The Army will be so happy. And my purpose will have been fulfilled!”

* * * * *

Mrs. Flannigan rolled her eyes as she saw the chunky military vehicle blunder through the thin country road. “You know something?” she called to Barry. “I’ve a right mind to call the police about all this ruckus!”

Barry poked his head out of the upstairs window. He was still in his pyjamas. “How? I still haven’t mended the phone.”

“There’s a police box in the Kenworthys’ field. Says ‘Public’ on it.”

“Funny place for a police box, isn’t it Moira?” Barry asked. She couldn’t disagree, so shrugged impatiently.

* * * * *

“You twit!” the Doctor snapped at the Master. “There is no demonstration. They’ll use their plastic parts to merge with humans. These hybrid organic Autons will run rampant across the whole planet in no time. Ted, you have to see that your work has been grotesquely perverted—”

Ted, however, stood quietly beside the Master, silently watching the Nurse minister to Sandra.

“Now,” the Nurse said. “One big push, Sandra.”

-5-

‘Congratulations, It’s a Monster’

Major Grimes climbed from his Land Rover and gazed out at the Georgian house. It had been a long drive, and Sergeant Frampton had gotten no less chatty the rest of the way. Indeed, he seemed to know everything about this part of the country and even the local squire who built the house.

Lines of troops marched from the barn and halted in front of him. The sight of them gave him a start. Grimes saw them as a civilian might: distant and dangerous. Still, he remembered, whatever was happening wouldn’t be dangerous.

“Ah, Major. Welcome to our little demonstration. So glad you could make it.” Three suited executives from this Twenty-First Century Corporation gave him identical warm, dry handshakes.

“Ready to meet the soldiers of the future? They never get tired, never get injured,” his shorter colleague asked.

“Sounds like Frampton here! Don’t know what the lad has in his coffee but he hasn’t flagged all morning,” Grimes quipped. Frampton gave a good-natured chuckle as well, but the three executives stayed stony.

Grimes didn’t care for their manner, and without even asking him if he wanted a bevy or a toilet break, they launched into their rehearsed sales pitch. They shared one long platitude between them. When one stopped, the other picked up. It was like hearing a Three Stooges routine without any jokes.

Grimes held up his hand sharply. “Listen, I’m sure this is probably terribly interesting. But where is Mister Ted Kenworthy?”

They looked to each other. “He’s had a small family emergency.”

* * * * *

Hannah found herself frozen in horrified anticipation. The entire room had dropped to a nervous hush. Even Sandra, on the bed, was pushing out her baby in placid silence. Her stomach exposed, a huge, smooth globe of pinkish white plastic. It began to crack like an egg.

“Now,” said the Nurse.

Sandra gave a cry, almost human, and the plastic globe shattered into a shower of particles. A writhing, tentacled creature slithered free. The Doctor was frequently moved by the beauty and infinite variety of universal life, but this debased parody of childbirth left him sickened. Part octopus, part crab, part abomination, the newborn crawled towards the Doctor.

McNess laughed triumphantly at the Doctor. “Submit, allow yourself to be absorbed, or Miss Redfoot dies.”

The sheet tightened around Hannah’s neck, to prove the point. Hannah assured herself the Doctor had a plan... or nearly had one... or was working on one. If he did, though, why did he stand there looking blank?

Ted, meanwhile, looked down at his apparent child with dead, hollow eyes. As far as Hannah could tell, becoming a father was the one thing that kept him sane through this endless project, and now that happy prospect had been casually and cruelly shattered before his eyes. She could see a pang of anticipation lurked behind his obsession, and this spectacle had quashed it utterly. “I ... I have to check on something.” He staggered out of the room, unnoticed by everyone save Hannah.

“Before I commit to anything,” the Doctor said finally, calmly sipping his tea as if barely aware of the squirming creature oozing towards him, “let me clarify. This merging was your original follow-up plan to your little plastic daffodil wheeze all along? If the Master—I beg your pardon, the *genuine* Master—had succeeded, you would have double-crossed him, as I pointed out at the time, and absorbed his knowledge to travel through time?”

“Let us not dwell on past failures, Time Lord,” the Nestene replied, its voice a halting discordant croak. “The plan can continue. We have taken his knowledge, but we need your Time Lord symbiosis, not just an approximation of it. With it we shall gain the ability to free the Nestene from the shackles of linear time, until we are the dominant life form.”

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. “Ambitious.”

As perhaps he hoped, the Nestene newborn felt a need to boast before absorbing him. The creature duly slowed in its advance.

“Think of it Doctor. You and your fellow Time Lord, transcending your physical limitations to join the next generation of Nestene. A new form of life: part-synthetic, part-organic, part-time-sensitive. Everlasting and with dominion over the forces of time and space. What a magnificent coalition.”

The Doctor looked back at Sandra, serenely untroubled by her newborn or her hollow, exposed plastic stomach. Then he looked down at the cup of tea still in his hand and sloshed it around. “You know Sandra, this may not be the right time but ... I really must tell you. You make the worst cup of tea I’ve ever drunk.”

He threw the cup behind him and slapped the one in the Master’s hand. Both splashed against Hannah’s sheet, which quivered at the liquid. Hannah wriggled free and ran from the room, the Doctor behind her.

She felt him drop away and looked back. To her horror, the tentacle of the newborn was wrapped around his leg. It pulled him back into the room, his nails scratching horribly against the plastic floor.

“Hannah! Get down to Ted’s barn!”

* * * * *

Major Grimes checked his watch. He'd been waiting for seven minutes. The Twenty-First Century executive pitch had ended, and they sprang to life every so often with odd, scripted bits of banter. It all seemed to be about local golf clubs and some wine bar they had just visited. To make matters worse, every so often he heard some strange sounds from the upstairs room.

Sergeant Frampton felt the same. "Major, should we not take a look?"

"Nothing to worry about, Major," the thin executive insisted. "We're on course for the demo."

The soldiers stayed motionless, but wavered slightly in the breeze.

Suddenly, a slender man with overlong blond hair dashed from the house to the barn. Grimes recognised him as Ted Kenworthy. He called over to the man but didn't get a response. Now, a young woman, olive-skinned and beautiful, raced after him, looking just as desperate.

Grimes and Frampton made to follow them, but felt the firm grip of plastic hands on their shoulders.

* * * * *

Hannah rushed into the barn, and found Ted hunched over his computer screen. Ted had to be able to help. She didn't know how, but at least he was human.

"We've got to help the Doctor!" she screamed at him.

Ted nodded, running through the rows of DOS text and nodding to himself. "I always had a feeling something like this would happen. No matter how well things were going, I kept this in my back pocket," he said. Hannah noticed his voice had lost its acerbic edge and was flat and dejected. "Of course, I thought it would be some Twenty-First Century flunky trying to cheat me out of my intellectual property, but nevertheless ..."

A question mark blinked expectantly on the keyboard. He turned to Hannah, and those red-rimmed eyes shone blue, and filled with tears. "Hannah, I just wanted to be a dad. I did all this to have a family, and now ..."

He crumpled into her arms. She held his hand and pressed it down on the key for him.

* * * * *

The tentacle of the newborn had wrapped itself around the Doctor and was now slithering up his chest. The McNess Master, too, was bearing down, as if trying to smother him. "Hugged to death," he said to no one in particular. "I suppose it's a first."

* * * * *

Over in the corner of the barn, the trays now produced a pink gelatinous substance. Hannah scooped it into a vial. "What does this do? Melt the plastic?"

"No, but it corrodes the chemical I've added to the process. Detaches the organic and synthetic components. Which is what makes them so special."

Hannah looked over at the large sphere. "They're all a linked hive, right?"

"That's the theory."

She took the vial and flung it at the sphere.

* * * * *

The Nestene Consciousness was beginning to probe his mind. The Doctor could feel its influence, as intrusive and slimy as its many tentacles, could feel himself slipping into something so vast, so malevolent, so empty ...

And then, there was a moment of blessed calm.

The Doctor opened his eyes and patted himself. The creature around him was motionless. He tapped its carapace and felt only a rigid plastic shell. The Nurse and Sandra were similarly frozen in waxwork poses of horror.

He kicked the creature aside, causing it to shatter into a fine powder, and looked down at the waxen face of McNess. A tiny spark of life still remained, and the jaw scraped open slowly and mechanically.

“You ... can’t ... win ... that ... easily ...” it rasped.

“And the real *you* would never lose that easily,” the Doctor retorted. He watched as the uncanny light left the eyes of his old foe and, with a trace of regret, departed the house.

* * * * *

Grimes felt the pressure lift and turned to see the arm had detached from the plastic soldier. Like a row of dominoes, the soldiers swayed and tumbled to the gravel, crumbling into powder at the impact. He looked to the executives for an explanation. They too swayed and crumpled to the ground. He looked down, and muttered to Frampton, “I don’t believe it. They’ve dropped off.”

Frampton felt their pulses, thready but stable. “Americans, eh? No stamina.”

Grimes and Frampton looked up to see the girl emerged from the barn. A wild-haired, sharp-featured man in a smart purple car coat ran from the house and joined her at the drive. They looked relieved at the heap of powder clad in green serge. “It worked,” she sighed in relief.

“Well done Miss Redfoot!” he cried. “A few seconds later and you’d have had to call me American Express.” He looked sadly at the three unconscious executives. “With a bit of counselling and a career change, they’ll pull through,” he concluded.

“I left Ted in the same state,” she mentioned.

“Right! The damage to him could be far worse. Let’s go.”

“Excuse me!” Grimes cried. The pair turned, introducing themselves as the Doctor and Hannah. “That’s all very well, Doctor and Hannah, but could someone tell me why we’ve been summoned three hours on urgent military business?”

The Doctor looked down the field. “Do you see that fence over there?” He pointed to a distant speck. “Mrs. Flannigan would be ever so grateful if you could repair it. Her sheep keep getting out.”

By the time Grimes looked back, the two had run back inside the barn.

Sergeant Frampton tapped him on the shoulder. “So? Shall we get started, sir?”

* * * * *

Ted lay huddled in a near-foetal position, surrounded by his workshop and his tools. The Doctor and Hannah walked over and took her gently by the elbow, leading her back from Ted.

“What’s the matter?” Hannah asked, though she suspected she knew the answer.

“The Nestene has been controlling him for years. Leading him to this moment. They didn’t want him for his scientific background, they wanted *him*. He is the bridgehead. A psychic link cultivated until strong enough, then they made their move.”

She looked from Ted to the vats, their molten plastic now cold and congealed. Half-formed shapes solidified forever. “Is it over? Are they all dead, or un-alive, or what?”

The Doctor shook his head. “These are, but unless we deal with Ted, the link will re-establish.”

Hannah regarded him anxiously. “How do you mean, deal with Ted?”

The Doctor arched his head so Ted’s eyes faced him. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Ted blinked. “Sandra ... she was never real, was she?”

“No. They seemed to have targeted you some time after you reached adulthood. I doubt they read the *Sheffield Independent*, but your loneliness and your brilliance somehow attracted them.”

“I’ve always felt that my life was the rehearsal ... not the real thing ...”

“*That’s* just common human ennui, I’m afraid. I’d wager their influence on your life began in earnest when Sandra moved in with you. You can’t remember how you first met, can you? No wedding photo next to that ‘Britain’s Brightest Teenagers’ article, I noticed. You never took her out to meet any of your friends, or ...”

Ted started silently weeping.

“You have to forget her, Ted. Only if you forget her and the hope you had for a family, will you be rid of the Nestene.”

Hannah looked pityingly at him. “Is there no way to help him?”

The Doctor grabbed Ted by his arms and hauled him upright. “He’ll be OK. Look Ted. The Nestene Consciousness link was severed along with that globe and the octopus. Its new genetic structure couldn’t function without that critical component. The component you engineered, Ted.”

“Good for me,” Ted muttered through his tears. “I nearly destroyed the world.”

The Doctor nodded. “And now, with a lot of TLC, you can put that right.”

-6-

Unfinished Business

Ted looked uncertainly at Hannah and said for the eleventh time, “I do look all right?”

Hannah sighed. “You look great. She will be bowled over.”

“Should I tell her I was voted one of Britain’s Brightest Teenagers?”

“No.”

For over a year Ted had been receiving special care at a UN Geneva clinic, arranged by the Doctor. The other surviving Twenty-First Century Synthetics employees had convalesced here as well, and in fact Ted had gotten quite friendly with a few of them. Now that he was back in England, he had gotten back in touch with Craig Sallis, and made some new friends. That life he was rehearsing ... maybe he was finally starting to live it. Popping back to check on his progress, the Doctor and Hannah discovered not only was he doing well but he had met a ‘lovely girl’ from Morecambe Bay, called Frankie. The Doctor offered to ask her out on Ted’s behalf.

“Would you?” Ted responded hopefully.

Quickly, Hannah suggested it might be nice if Ted asked her himself, and glowered at the Doctor, who gave her a wink. Now here they were, getting Ted ready, boosting his confidence and pushing him through the door.

“I’ll remember your advice, Doctor,” he said as it closed.

Hannah turned to the Doctor and demanded, “What advice?”

“Merely to ensure that, should things get to holding hands, he makes sure hers are clammy. That’s why I booked ‘Kello’s’ for him. Always hot in there, lots of sweat guaranteed.”

Hannah sighed. “How romantic.”

“I know, I amaze myself sometimes. Shall we go back to the TARDIS? It’s up to Ted now.”

* * * * *

Frankie liked this Ted fellow. She was sure he was one of those ‘Britain’s Brightest Teenagers’ but didn’t want to ask straight away. It was a bit odd the way he grabbed her hand when they first met and examined it. But he explained that he was interested in palmistry. Funny hobby for a scientist. But cute.



Ted Kenworthy knew he was destined for greatness. Named one of “Britain’s Brightest Teenagers” by the Sheffield Independent, he is now married to Sandra, the love of his life. The only trouble is he can’t get ahead at his factory job, his cutting-edge research is wasted, and he has a feeling that Sandra is drifting away.

Then Ted meets Sam R.T. McNess, a wealthy American executive. McNess sets him up in his own facility, and gives him all the time and resources he needs to carry out his work. Ted’s success won’t just benefit him—his ingenuity might bring an end to warfare! All that, and a baby on the way!

Everything is going so well for Ted. So why is he so full of anger and anxiety? Why does he worry about McNess and his American yes-men? And why, on the day he demonstrates his major breakthrough, have two strangers—the Doctor and Hannah Redfoot—arrived?

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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

