

THE
DOCTOR WHO
PROJECT

infection vector



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Incubation

“But we can’t just leave.”

“We must. We are charged with not interfering.”

“But they’re dying.”

“Travel far enough into the future and everyone is dead, Londragulthardan.”

“But these people are dying right here and now. It’s monstrous.”

“It’s history. That’s why we’re here. To record *history*. Now don’t sulk. It’s unbecoming of a Time Lord. Come along, come along.”

“We could help them.”

“Where did we park our time capsule? What were you saying?”

“I said we could help them, sir.”

“Help them?”

“With Gallifrey’s advances, with its science, we could cure this disease in a day.”

“You want to change time? The course of events? There could be no greater abuse of our power.”

“But—”

“We observe, Londragulthardan. We observe the course of events. We record the moments that make up eternity. We do not... sully our hands by getting involved. Now come along. There’s our ride. That trash receptacle. Not exactly dignified. I’ll have to talk to the engineers about that when we get back to Gallif—”

“No.”

“Eh? What was that?”

“I said no.”

“I beg your pardon.”

“I’m not going back. I can help these people.”

“Absolutely not. Do you know what the high council would do to you? Not to mention *my* academic reputation. Now, enough of this. Get on board and we’ll be off.”

* * * * *

Wind swept down the street, scattering leaves turned the colour of rust with the fall. A pair of

coyotes—or what could best be considered coyotes given that their coats were an olive green and they sported an extra pair of ears, oriented backwards, on their heads—padded along the cracked and crumbling asphalt of the road. Large metal domes lined the edges of the street. These buildings, made of a blue-grey metal and with a thin layer of dust and grime coating them, stood like silent sentinels watching over what had once been a bustling city. Nobody ventured in or out of them for, in truth, they had no apparent entrances nor windows, though some of the older looking ones showed welding patterns, like ugly blemishes, where the edges of doors may once have been.

The coyotes trotted along, sniffing at the occasional purple trunked tree or pausing to lap rainwater from a collected pool. It was only just past dusk, and the last traces of violet from the setting sun were leaving the sky. Once, long ago, streetlamps would be turning on. There was no need for them now. In the darkness, a wash of stars shone bright overhead. It was a spectacular view. What a pity there was no one around to see it.

A shrill rumble caused the coyotes to pause. Their heads rose. Their ears swiveled forward. The groaning, wheezing sound grew and a new wind swirled at the end of the road, kicking up little dust devils. A blue shape, battered and box-like, with a sign proclaiming “Police Public Call Box”—which was completely lost on the coyotes as they scattered—appeared in the gloaming. After a moment, hinges squeaked at the opening of one wood door and two figures stepped from within.

Hannah Redfoot yawned as she settled a jean jacket about her shoulders. “So, Doctor, what was so important you had to wake me? I was having this really great dream about me and David Boreanaz.”

“Humans.” The Doctor shook his head but smiled to take the sting from his words. “How quickly the novelty of visiting strange new worlds wears off for you.”

“Well, excuse me.” Hannah stretched and looked around the street. “Some of us are still young enough to benefit from beauty sleep. Where are we? Looks a bit of a dump, doesn’t it?”

When the Doctor didn’t answer right away, Hannah peered closer at him. For all her ribbing, the Doctor actually did look quite youthful. Keen, green eyes peered out from above high cheekbones. A mop of brown hair, ruffled by the wind, framed his round face. As she watched, Hannah saw one of his cheeks twitch.

“Doctor?”

“Hello, yes?”

“Are you OK?” Hannah reached tentatively for the Doctor’s sleeve.

Before she could touch him, the Doctor spun on his heel, the tails of his coat flaring behind him. “It’s an empty place, isn’t it?” he said. “Curious sort of buildings. No doors. Avians, perhaps?”

Hannah sighed, “Like I said. A dump. Seriously now, Doctor, what’s wrong?”

“That’s what I’d like to know,” the Doctor replied as he moved towards a weed sprouting from cracks in the asphalt of the street. He knelt to study it closer.

Hannah hastened after him. “Come again?”

“The TARDIS picked up a distress call,” the Doctor said over his shoulder as Hannah caught up to him.

“What, like an SOS?”

“Exactly like.” The Doctor nodded. “Except it was sent in old Gallifreyan Morse.”

“Gallifreyan? One of your people?” Hannah looked around half-expecting another Time Lord to appear before them. “Well, I sure don’t see anybody. You didn’t get the time wrong by any chance?”

The Doctor's back stiffened. "I won't even deign to acknowledge such a question," he said. Then, almost too himself, "This place feels wrong. Like it's... like it's... I don't know."

Hannah shook her head and started along the street, leaving the Doctor to ponder whatever he was pondering about the weeds. It was certainly a desolate destination the Doctor had brought them too. Hannah shivered and tried to convince herself it was the wind.

A buzzing—faint but growing louder—caught Hannah's attention. She gazed into the sky, shielding her eyes with her hand from the final rays of the sun.

High up, drifting between the tops of the buildings, a mechanical drone appeared. It floated along on six rotors set into its base, three to a side. Mounted between the lines of blades was what looked to be a packing crate. With the automated craft so high up and not next to anything that would give it a sense of scale, Hannah had no idea how big it was.

It's a drone, though, she considered. How big could it be?

The drone buzzed by overhead and Hannah turned to track it with her eyes.

"Doctor?" Hannah called. Her gaze hadn't left the drone. Now it did and as it fell to street level again a jolt of panic surged through her chest.

She'd wandered some distance from the Doctor, who was still kneeling in crouched fascination over the large weeds that had found purchase in the street. It wasn't the weeds that had caught Hannah's attention, but rather the bipedal forms that had seemingly materialized from nowhere and were standing a short distance beyond the Doctor.

There were six of them. Humanoid, though the tallest was easily a head shorter than Hannah. They had wide, round eyes set into squat faces. Male and female, they were naked except for a few filthy tatters of cloth. A short fur covered their bodies. Their patterning was distinct from one to another, with faint mauve on some to chocolate brown on others. They moved in an odd staccato fashion, almost as if they were stop motion figures in a Ray Harryhausen film.

They were creeping up on the kneeling Doctor.

"Doctor!" Hannah shouted.

"Yes, yes," The Doctor said as he stood up and brushed dust from his hands, his backs to the approaching creatures. "What is—"

"Doctor, behind you!"

The Doctor turned and found himself confronted by the creatures. With a surprised utterance, he fell back a pace and spun towards Hannah.

"Run!" the two friends said simultaneously.

Hannah turned and raced along the street as fast as her legs could carry her. Reaching an intersection, she paused to check on the Doctor's progress. He was a few steps behind her. Seeing her staring at him, he shooed her forward with his hands.

Past the Doctor, Hannah caught a glimpse of their pursuers. Their odd, jerking motions weren't slowing them down. They'd closed much of the gap between them and the Doctor.

As the Doctor raced by, he grabbed Hannah's hand, jerking her around. The two turned at the intersection and pelted off. Their new course took them to the remains of what had once been an open-air cafe. Metal tables and chairs were still arranged about the place, some welded together by rust, some tipped over by ages of neglect. Hannah had learned through long experience not to look behind her when running away from some ravenous monster. Even so, she almost broke with her training when she heard a clatter and a crash. The creatures were evidently barging their way through the outdoor furniture, trying to get to her and the Doctor.

Hannah looked around, desperate for a place to hide. The city planners had been less than accommodating. No doors or windows presented themselves, no convenient garbage dumpsters or

phone booths. Nothing.

Hannah and the Doctor turned at another corner and found themselves running down an alley. An alley that ended in a brick wall placed between two neighbouring domed buildings.

“Well, that’s not supposed to be there,” the Doctor said as he and Hannah drew to a halt.

“Where’s it supposed to be?” Hannah panted as she turned to see their pursuers just reaching the mouth of the alley.

“Between us and them would suit me for preference,” the Doctor said.

“You got any tricks up your sleeve?” Hannah asked as she retreated from the advancing creatures. Her back fetched up against the brick wall.

“No,” the Doctor replied. “Do you?”

The wall behind the pair started trembling. A deep rumble rose. Hannah couldn’t see into the street from where she stood, but a large, misshapen shadow, stretched by the setting sun, fell across the half dozen pursuers. They paused, their ears swivelling atop their heads. A couple of them turned towards the mouth of the alley to see—

BARROOOM!!!

The sound of the explosion was deafening. The shockwave shoved Hannah against the wall, driving the breath from her. She squinted her eyes against the blast of heated air that hammered her.

Silence descended, save for the rumble from the street. The blast had landed square in the midst of the alien creatures that had been chasing Hannah and the Doctor. Hannah swallowed hard as she looked at the remains of the beings. A couple were prostrate on the ground, rocking slightly and possessing fewer limbs than they had mere moments before. The other four, if they could even be counted as four anymore, were in a worse state.

“Nice trick,” the Doctor said.

“I didn’t—”

“I know.”

A voice, slightly mechanized as if being projected over a speaker, called to them from the street, “Are you well? Please, step into the open. We mean you no harm.”

Hannah and the Doctor looked at each other, looked at the remains of their pursuers, looked at each other again.

“You must hurry,” the voice was insistent. “The disturbance will have alerted more of the Stricken. We must get you to safety.”

“All right,” the Doctor called. “We’re coming out.”

Hannah and the Doctor edged towards the opening of the alley. Leaning forward, they peered around the corner to see a large tank on tractor treads waiting for them. The design was unfamiliar, being broad and domed like the buildings, but the cannon on the front clearly meant business.

A circular hatch on the side irised open.

“Quickly. Get inside,” called the voice from the tank, this time without the aid of a speaker.

The Doctor hurried forward and Hannah followed. She was just passing one of the—what had the voice called them?—the Stricken that was still somewhat intact, when it stirred. Its remaining eye flew open and stared up at Hannah. The creature somehow managed a hoarse growl and clamped a clawed hand around Hannah’s leg, tripping her hard to the ground.

“Doc—” Hannah’s call wasn’t even out of her mouth when the chattering of a rifle cut the air.

Dirt mixed with the blood of the ravaged Stricken sprayed across Hannah as the bullets

chewed along the street. Whatever the weapon was, it was vicious, tearing the Stricken holding Hannah apart. The clawed hand fell away and Hannah was left staring at the gruesome remains. She was vaguely aware of the Doctor taking her arm on one side and someone else her arm on the other and pulling her towards the tank.

The inside of the vehicle was warm. Almost immediately Hannah felt sweat gathering on her upper lip. The Doctor stepped into her line of sight.

“Hannah?” he asked. “Hannah, are you all right?”

Hannah took a deep breath and nodded. “I’m fine.” Seeing the look of concern on the Doctor’s face she continued, “I’m fine, Doctor. Really.”

“We have a cleansing station at the back,” a different voice said. It was the one that had called them to the tank.

Hannah looked past the Doctor to find an alien who, save for his sharp military uniform and the sealed helmet that covered his head, looked remarkably like the Stricken outside. His coat of fur, what Hannah could see of it through his transparent plastic face mask, was tawny and more lustrous than that of the pursuers.

“My apologies,” the officer said. “When the Stricken latch on... Well, let’s just say it’s best not to let them do that. You should get yourselves cleaned up. Excuse me. I need to return us to the commorancy. And let the second talon know you’re all right.”

The short alien pressed his fists together and bowed slightly. Hannah guessed it was some sort of salute. He wandered off to the front of the craft and settled himself in a broad seat before an array of controls.

The Doctor tugged Hannah towards the rear of the craft. A couple of separated stalls were arranged there, each containing what were clearly sinks and soap dispensers.

“What do you think, Doctor?” Hannah murmured as they each entered an alcove and set to tidying themselves.

“A military response with no warning that leaves six not only dead but dismembered?” the Doctor said rhetorically. “Whatever I’m thinking, it’s not good.”

“Great,” Hannah replied. She surveyed herself in a mirror above the sink as she cleaned the mess from her hands and arms. “Ew, ew.”

“What is it?” the Doctor stood on tiptoe to peer over the barrier between the cleaning stations.

“Bleah,” Hannah said spitting into the sink. “I got some of that mess in my mouth. Gross.”

The Doctor sighed. “I thought it was something serious.”

“When would it be serious, Doctor?” Hannah glared at her friend. “When it’s your mouth?”

The Doctor grinned. “Yes. Then it would be very serious.”

Hannah splashed a handful of water at the Doctor.

* * * * *

“Research recording, twenty-third of Grint, 1426,” Minder Londra said as she massaged the back of her neck and stifled a yawn. She promised herself no more sleepless nights as she’d done countless times over many years. It was a promise she’d never been particularly good at keeping. There’d been one summer, once, where she’d managed to get to bed at a reasonable hour—well, reasonable for her—a whole three weeks in a row. Those were the days.

The minder looked over at her latest pair of test subjects. One stared back with eyes full of worry, pain, and just the slightest touch of hope. They always had hope. It had been the only way

to cope after all this time. The other gave the minder a slow blink then licked herself.

The minder reached for her coffee cup—detailed with the phrase “World’s Greatest Minder” and a picture of a brain next to it—found she’d drained it over half an hour ago and set it aside with a dissatisfied grunt before returning to her recording.

“Test run forty-two is ready to commence,” the minder directed her words towards the microphone pickup of her computer.

She was seated in a pristine, clean laboratory. The auto wash had made it so, not more than two hours ago. She’d once toyed with turning the auto wash off or, at least, reduce it from its typical eight cycles a day in order to give her more research time. She’d decided against it in the end, as it was good to have enforced breaks to stretch the legs and clear the cobwebs from the brain.

Gleaming white plastic and silver metal surfaces surrounded her. A bank of disinfectant proof displays lined one wall. Lab benches mounted on wheels for easy reconfiguration of the space were scattered about the large room. Lighting was emitted from and diffused by plastic panels in the ceiling giving a gentle, warm glow. Londra longed for the days when she could feel the sun on her face. Those days were so far gone that none of her patients now even knew what that was like.

Will they ever know? she wondered before banishing the fatalistic thought from her mind.

Her thoughts had wandered, a sure sign that she hadn’t been getting enough sleep lately. The microphone was patiently waiting to record whatever brilliant words she had for posterity.

“I’m out of coffee. Again,” the minder said. She took a deep breath before continuing, “However, the experiment is ready.” Had she already said that? She had, hadn’t she?

The minder worked at the computer controls before her, speaking almost absently as she did.

“Starting transference induction. Accelerating renewal delta factor to thirty PTUs. Host integration is in the green. Slightly heightened in dermal discoloration.”

With the transference process set in motion, there was little for the minder to do except watch and wait.

Across the room rested two medical beds, stretched out horizontally. Clear, airtight plexite covers were shut over the tops. The distortion caused by the lids magnified the size of the test subjects. The receiver subject looked to be in some discomfort as the automated injection needle of his alcove pierced the skin of his arm. The source subject would have been bouncing off the walls of her enclosure at the pricking of her multiple needles had it not been for the sedation gas being pumped in.

The minder reflected that the whole process was rather banal. There were no flashing lights, no mechanical alarms sounding, just the steady, almost imperceptible, thrum of the mechanical injectors. And even that fell silent once the needles were set in place.

The minder spun her chair back to the computer displays. The results report scrolled across the screen. She’d seen so many of them over the long years that she almost didn’t bother reading the words. She grunted in dark humour. To think it was only a matter of months ago that she’d had her first real breakthrough. It had been modest but then, as now, the results had reported a life saved. At the time, her spirits had been so low that she would have missed the good news had she not had the foresight to colour code the results. The receiver subject’s system was reported as clean. The minder ran the screening test again and then once more to be sure. One hundred percent clean.

Hesitantly, she let her eyes track to the stats for the source subject. In particular, she hunted

out the numbers detailing ambient excess energy. Point one percent.

“Damn it,” Londra hissed under her breath.

When she’d had her first success she’d had to use three source subjects. She’d refined the process in the weeks that followed to the point where she could get a life for a life but no more than that. She’d tried over and over but she knew in her hearts of hearts that she’d hit a barrier. That’s why she’d sent the distress call. With a cure so tantalizingly close she needed help. The pamas needed help.

Rising from her chair and stretching her back, Londra tried to look on the bright side. At least she’d cured another pama. *He* would surely appreciate that as would his family.

The minder crossed to the pama’s medical bed and looked down through the transparent cover. He peered up at her with wide, clear eyes. The thin layer of fur on his body was already showing signs of improvement, refreshing from grey to a pale mauve.

“How do you feel?” the minder asked, speaking into a microphone that would transfer her words into the hermetically sealed chamber.

“I feel, I feel amazing!” replied the test subject.

“Good, that’s good,” the minder allowed herself a small smile. “You’ll be pleased to know that your body is completely free of the virus.”

“You cured me?” The pama’s eyes grew even wider, if that were possible. “Oh, thank you, minder, thank you!”

“My attendants will take care of you from here,” the minder said, trying to remain clinically detached. “Then you’ll be reintegrated into your commorancy.”

Tears welled in the eyes of the test subject. “I get... I get to go home.” His features clouded over almost immediately. “But my life unit. I don’t want to be responsible for infecting them.”

“And you won’t be,” the minder said. “You are completely safe now.”

The pama began thanking the minder again. She nodded her acceptance of his words even as she worked the controls that would take his sealed medical bed through the sterilization pipes and out of the room. As the cured pama—the minder realized she didn’t even know his name—was taken from the room, the minder herself turned to her other test subject.

Cats were of course immune to the virus, as was the minder. Even so, she double-checked the contagion readings on the cat’s medical pod before popping it open. It was a breach of protocol to open any pod in the research lab. She should know, she was the one who authored the protocols. However, this was important. A life for a life.

The minder stroked the cat’s midnight-blue fur. There was no response, nor would there ever be again.

“Thank you, my friend,” Londra said as she fondled the cat’s ears. “Thank you.”

Shutting the pod again, she set its controls to sterilize. As the cat’s body was incinerated and the ashes disposed of by the automated process, the minder returned to her desk and lowered herself into her chair.

Exhaustion tugged at her. She tried to push it away, to consider her next steps. She was led back to the same dread conclusion she always was. She needed one of her own kind to see things through. If she could just get a little help... well, what she hoped was a *little* help.

Her reverie was interrupted by the buzz of the door chime. During any experimental run, the entrance to the medical bay was sealed and could only be opened from the inside. The minder operated the controls on her computer terminal to unlock the door. The latches popped free with a mechanical hiss and her assistant, Truf, pushed the door open and popped her head in.

Londra was instantly alert. What the minder could see of Truf’s beautiful black and brown

fur above her high-collared, white uniform and, through the slight shimmer of the personal sterifield, was standing on end with excitement. It had taken the minder a long time to learn to read the cues of the pamas' fur, but it was a useful skill to have developed.

“Truf, what is it?” the minder asked.

“You need to come quickly,” Truf said, her voice squeaking ever so slightly. “One of the delivery drones spotted beings outside the commorancies.”

“Beings?” the minder frowned. “You’re not talking about the Stricken, I take it?”

“No, Minder Londra,” Truf replied as she tried to quiet her fur. “Beings... that look just like you.”

Prodromal

“I don’t know,” the tawny furred soldier was saying to his companion. “For aliens I expected them to be more... alien.”

“How do you mean?” the second soldier, dressed in the same russet uniform and with the same sealed helmet, replied.

“After everything the Minder’s told us about other species since the start of the space program, well, I was hoping the first alien I’d meet would be something more... exotic.”

The two soldiers were standing on a raised platform in a vehicle bay that the tank had driven into. It was a large space, fitting four of the tanks side by side. Curved ribs arched overhead, supporting the ceiling. The massive semispherical door at the bay’s entrance was just now rumbling shut. Beyond it had been the short underground tunnel that the driver had taken to guide the tank off the street and into one of the domed buildings.

Now the Doctor and Hannah were huddled below, just outside of the tank, waiting to see what would happen next. The soldier had mentioned that his superior officer was en route and then had promptly gone to chat with his friend above. The two furred beings kept a healthy distance apart, requiring them to speak loudly enough that the Doctor could overhear their words.

“You get the feeling we don’t measure up?” Hannah said from the Doctor’s side.

“Intriguing, isn’t it?” The Doctor replied. “From the sounds of it, we’re the first aliens they’ve encountered and yet they’re treating it as a run-of-the-mill occurrence.”

“Maybe not quite the first,” Hannah said. “They did mention this Minder person. Whoever she is?”

“Yes, well spotted.”

“So,” Hannah said with a smirk, “my turn to introduce us to the aliens, yes?”

“Your turn?” the Doctor drew his gaze from the soldiers above to focus on Hannah. “It was your turn last time.”

“No. We had that stopover on Pletromue Station.”

“Oh, please,” the Doctor folded his arms across his chest. “You can’t count that. We were only there for all of twenty minutes.” Seeing Hannah’s look, the Doctor sighed and fished around in his pockets for a thin wooden disk. “All right, we’ll flip for it.”

He tossed the disk into the air where Hannah promptly caught it.

“Oh, no,” Hannah said. “I’m not letting you use that double-headed Aridian wooden nickel again.”

Hannah produced a shiny silver quarter and showed the Doctor both sides.

“Call it.” She flipped the coin into the air.

“Heads.”

Hannah caught the coin and showed it to the Doctor with a laugh. “Tails. I get first crack at the aliens.”

“Yes, yes, fine.”

Above, one of the peculiar round doors the aliens seemed to favour ground open. In stepped a new specimen of their kind. Taller than the soldiers though still half a head shorter than the Doctor. The newcomer moved with a regal bearing and the other two offered their double-fisted salute to her.

The new arrival was dressed in a military outfit similar to the two soldiers, though with more ribbons, medals, and braid. At this distance, all of the military personnel appeared slightly blurry. Now that the Doctor had a chance to observe things, he could see they were each shrouded in a form tight energy field. The woman exchanged a few words with the other soldiers before making her way down a ramp towards the Doctor and Hannah.

Close up, the Doctor could see the officer’s fur was a rich brown. Encircling one eye and stretching over the top of her head was a patch of midnight black. Emerald green eyes returned the Doctor’s appraising stare. The Doctor nudged Hannah with his elbow.

“I’d say take us to your leader,” Hannah said as she stepped forward, “but you look to be the grand poohbah yourself.”

The officer raised an eyebrow. When she spoke her voice was low and almost musical. “There’s only the two of you?”

Hannah looked at the Doctor. He shrugged and said, “You won the flip.”

“You’re a lot of help,” Hannah replied. To the alien, she said, “Yes, there’s just the two of us.”

“When the Minder convinced us to contact her people, somehow I was expecting more.” She looked past Hannah and the Doctor as a buzzing sound filled the air. “And in a conveyance more substantial than that.”

The Doctor and Hannah turned towards the corner of the room that the officer indicated. A cylindrical chute entered there through the roof above. The chute had a number of circular windows through which the Doctor could see a mechanical drone, flat like a flying pancake, descending. Clamped to its underside was a familiar blue shape.

“The TARDIS,” the Doctor said. “How kind of you to retrieve it. I’m the Doctor by the way and this is—”

“Hannah,” Hannah said, sending the Doctor a scolding look. To the officer, she asked, “And you are?”

The officer’s gaze went back and forth between the Doctor and Hannah a couple of times. She stood rigidly at attention as if ready to pounce at any moment. She deigned to smile, exposing the tips of two pointed fangs, though there was little warmth in it. She said to Hannah, “Second Talon Reesha. And while I lead here,” she pointed about the tank bay, “I have First Talon Libre to report to. Now you tell me. Which of *you* is in charge?”

“I am,” the Doctor and Hannah both said.

Reesha narrowed her eyes. “I see. Well, I am duty-bound to welcome you to commorancy three fourteen. It is fortunate that my man,” she nodded to the tank operator above, “was able to

rescue you from the Stricken.”

“Your man rather destroyed those Stricken,” the Doctor said. “It seemed a touch excessive.”

The corner of the Second Talon’s mouth twitched in a small snarl. “As it must be,” she said. “The Stricken know neither fear, nor pain, nor death. Excessive measures are the only ones effective against them.”

“I can hardly take issue with their efficacy,” the Doctor said with a frown, “but I do object to the notion of *only*.”

“You’ll have to excuse him,” Hannah said, stepping in front of the Doctor. “He’s not very good at saying thank you when someone saves his life. Thank you, by the way.”

Again, the Second Talon’s gaze went between the Doctor and Hannah. “We could hardly allow the first envoys from the Minder’s people to be killed. Besides, it was the pamatarian thing to do.”

“Pamatarian?” Hannah asked, shaking her head in confusion.

The Second Talon placed a hand over her chest. “Ah. Pardon my oversight. It’s not every day I get to introduce my entire race. We are pamas. You, of course, are Gallifreyans.”

“He’s Gallifreyan,” Hannah said, pointing to the Doctor then to herself. “I’m human.”

“Forgive me,” Reesha said a frown creasing her features as she looked between the pair of friends. “Your forms are difficult to distinguish. And you both look, as far as I can judge, like the Minder.”

“You’ve been expecting us,” the Doctor said. “How? And why?”

“We sent a broadcast for you,” Reesha said, her face brightening. “Not specifically for the two of you but for your people.”

“Yes, yes, that’s obvious,” the Doctor said. “But how did you know to send for us, hmm? This Minder person of yours, I take it?”

“I can see you’re going to have many questions,” Reesha said the word *questions* as if it were the most onerous thing in the world. Perhaps for her military mind, it was. “The First Talon will no doubt have the same for you. He’s expecting you. We will go. Now.”

“And my questions?” the Doctor persisted.

“I will answer what I can on the way.”

“My, such hospitality.”

“Doctor.” Hannah poked the Doctor in the ribs. He lapsed into silence.

The pama led the way up the ramp. She gave an almost imperceptible nod to the two soldiers. The Doctor noted that they fell into step behind him and Hannah, though at a respectable distance. He also noted their hands drop to the tops of sidearms holstered at their hips.

“You wanted to know why we sent for you,” Reesha said as she exited the vehicle bay and proceeded along an arched hallway beyond. “It’s true, we did not include the specifics in the message we beamed into space. Our people suffer a great affliction.” At the end of the corridor, she stopped and gestured to a number of stalls along the wall. As on board the tank, these held sinks and cleaning supplies. “As you’ve no doubt seen, we take certain sanitary precautions. Wash please and my men will furnish you with sterifields.”

The Doctor and Hannah shared a look before entering the stalls and washing their exposed skin. When they stepped out, the two soldiers were waiting with wide leather belts that featured broad metal buckles. The buckles flipped open to expose fine controls. The Doctor and Hannah were instructed to hold their arms from their sides as the soldiers fastened the belts about their waists. The flick of a switch and the Doctor heard a brief whine before it ramped past the audible

range. His skin tingled faintly and he observed the same haze around himself and Hannah as the soldiers.

“Sterifields?” Hannah asked. She poked at one arm, watching the energy field around her finger flow and merge with the part of the field covering her bicep.

“A precaution against infection,” the Second Talon said. “Not as effective as a full containment suit, obviously, but providing far more dexterity.”

“You’re in the grip of some dreadful disease, I take it,” the Doctor said as he stepped next to the Second Talon. She hurriedly backed away from him, her fur rising.

“I would ask that you maintain a safe distance,” the Second Talon said. If there was any quaver in her voice the Doctor couldn’t hear it.

The officer stepped towards a number of doors at the end of the hall. She held her palm up in front of a security sensor. After a moment there was a click and the doors opened into a waiting room. An attendant was seated behind a counter encased in Plexiglas. Spotting his superior officer he saluted briefly before returning to whatever duties he was tending at the desk.

The Second Talon led the way past a handful of empty, widely spaced chairs to another set of doors. These didn’t require a palm scan and opened automatically at her presence.

The Doctor and Hannah passed outside into a massive, open space. On all sides, curved walls rose high above. The pair of time travelers had been brought inside one of the domed buildings, which was now revealed to be a complete sphere. Clearly half of the space was below ground.

Peering upwards, the Doctor could see bridges, balconies, and suspended thoroughfares at a variety of heights. The inside of the sphere was warm and humid enough that the Doctor felt himself perspiring. Rows of carefully cultivated bushes, trees, and flowers grew from long boxes of carefully tended soil, which served to divide the various walkways into multiple adjacent paths. Soft, warm light descended from far above, reflecting off mirrored surfaces throughout the sphere. All taken, the ambiance was as close to the natural light of a sunny day as it could be and still not.

Despite the enormity of the space—a full city block if it were an inch—few people were out taking advantage of it. Those who were kept their distance from the others, although here and there could be seen friendly greetings in passing.

“Where is everyone?” Hannah asked. “I mean, this can’t be it. Can it?”

“Most prefer seclusion,” Reesha said as she moved forward, gesturing the Doctor and Hannah to follow her. “It’s been four months since the last outbreak was reported. But it was only three commorancies away. It’s made people nervous.”

The eerie feeling the Doctor had from when he and Hannah had first arrived was back and more pronounced now. Not so much like someone walking over *his* grave as *him* walking over someone *else’s*. Something wasn’t right here but he couldn’t put his finger on it. And that worried him.

The little group had traveled the short distance from the tank base to the center of the sphere. Here they found a wide column that stretched all the way to the top of the building, dozens of stories above. The column was semitransparent and the circumference of its base was dotted by the circular, iris doorways the pamas preferred. Through the walls of the column, the Doctor could see lift platforms traveling up and down.

Second Talon Reesha spoke to a grill next to one of the portals. “Five to transit. Destination: office of the First Talon.”

The grill spoke back in a voice so modulated it had to be synthetic, “One moment, please.”

While the group waited for five lifts to descend to their level, the Doctor craned his head once more to study the space they were in. He was vaguely aware of Hannah talking to the Second

Talon.

“So what’s the deal with the Stricken? That’s what they’re called, right?”

Reesha stared at Hannah a beat longer than was comfortable for the Doctor. He worried the pama was imagining his friend as dinner. “An attempt to cure the penumbra virus.” A faint growl vibrated the fur of her throat. “A very costly, failed attempt. One that’s left us fighting a war on a second front, with only marginally more success than against the virus.”

“How d’you mean?”

“I’m a soldier, not a scientist,” Reesha replied. “I don’t pretend to understand what was done to them. Suffice to say, the Stricken have become a significant threat. It takes a lot to put one of them down and keep them down.” The Second Talon looked away. The Doctor saw a brief flash of sorrow cross her face. “Sometimes we are not... always successful. There have been losses.”

Reesha returned her unblinking stare to Hannah and continued, “I can well imagine several of the ones you ran into will be up and about again in a matter of days.”

“Your man there literally blew them apart,” Hannah gestured to the tank operator who looked a bit sheepish under the scrutiny.

Reesha shrugged. “Nevertheless, they’ll be back. Blow them into enough bits and it becomes too much for them to manage, but otherwise, they re-form. The Minder calls it temporal state locking.”

“She what now?” the Doctor demanded.

At that moment the lifts arrived and the Second Talon directed her charges into the lift pods flanking hers. Her two soldiers then took the next pods out on either side. Once inside, the lifts slid into motion, passing the various floors swiftly but not fast enough for the Doctor.

When the lifts came to a halt, two thirds of the way up the sphere, the Doctor hurried out and stepped close to the Second Talon, demanding, “What’s this about temporal state locking?”

“Step. Back,” Reesha spat.

“This is too important.”

“Step back,” Reesha repeated, “Or they will *make* you step back.” She nodded past the Doctor’s shoulder.

The Doctor spared a look behind him. The soldiers had their weapons drawn and leveled at his head. Fingers tightened on triggers.

* * * * *

Hannah swallowed against a scratching in the back of her throat. She looked between the soldiers, the Doctor, and the Second Talon.

Moving carefully so as not to startle anyone, Hannah raised her hands to shoulder height. She spoke slowly and clearly. “Hey, now. Let’s just all take a breath, yeah?”

Reesha glared at the Doctor. “You’re just like the Minder. Full of demands. Of unearned authority. Arrogant and condescending.”

“And you—” the Doctor started.

Hannah stepped in front of him and gazed into his eyes. Interrupting him she said, “—are our host.”

The Doctor looked at Hannah, looked at Reesha, then back at Hannah. She could see him grinding his teeth. At last he smiled and said. “Are our host.”

Hannah studied the Doctor’s face. There was a tightness there that she had seldom seen.

“What’s wrong?” Hannah asked quietly. She sniffled and rubbed her nose. “You’ve been

on edge since we got here.”

“Don’t you feel it?” the Doctor whispered back. “This place. It’s... off somehow.”

The Doctor looked over his shoulder and Hannah followed his gaze. At a gesture from Reesha her two soldiers had lowered their weapons. They hadn’t holstered them though.

“Come along,” Reesha said. “We’re going.”

Hannah could see the Doctor was about to insist to have his answer again. She shook her head and he subsided into silence. He studied her face, rolled his eyes, then nodded. Hannah gave him what she hoped was a winning smile.

The Second Talon was already stalking off along one of the stone walkways. Hannah hurried to catch up to her, almost stepping too close to the pama before remembering herself. She drew even with the officer, though several feet to one side. Reesha’s head turned slightly in her direction and she knew the officer had acknowledged her presence.

“So what was it you said had happened to the Stricken?” Hannah asked.

“Enough,” the Second Talon said. “I’m taking you to First Talon Libre. You can bring the matter up with him.” Reesha smiled, baring her fangs. “Although, he has even less patience for questions than I do.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Hannah said. She cast about for something else to say to the alien. The only thing that caught her attention was the walkway they were on. It was gritty like cement but had a green-blue cast to it. “This is a nice place you have here. I haven’t seen a construction material like this before.” She pointed to the walkway. “I expect it contains some form of chemically reduced iron, yes?”

Despite herself, Reesha came to a halt and turned to face the human woman. “What?”

“The walkway,” Hannah pointed again. “Only, I read a paper during my geology studies on how certain clays on my planet contain chemically reduced iron that serves as an antibacterial agent.” Seeing the odd look the pama gave her, Hannah added, “It was just a guess.”

Reesha shook her head and started on her way again.

Hannah glanced back at the Doctor.

“Clay?” he said.

Hannah shrugged. “It seemed like the type of weird thing you’d come up with.”

The Doctor looked about to argue the point then nodded and grinned. The grin died on his face when one of the soldiers made a clicking noise and gestured with his gun for the Doctor to get a move on.

As the Doctor and Hannah fell into step again the Doctor whispered, “Do me a favour, Hannah?”

“What favour?”

The Doctor leaned close to Hannah and whispered in her ear.

She frowned at him. “I thought you knew *everything* about time?” she said.

“But not *this* time,” the Doctor replied.

“All right,” Hannah said uncertainly. She drew close to Reesha again.

“Sooo, virus?” Hannah knew she didn’t sound nonchalant. “How long has that been going on? A few months you said?”

Reesha shot a sidelong look at Hannah. A ripple through the pama’s fur gave Hannah the impression Reesha thought she was being mocked.

The pama walked in silence for some moments and Hannah was beginning to think no answer would be forthcoming when the officer spoke, “We’ve been living with this virus for nearly a millennium.”

Hannah's draw dropped. She did her best to regain her composure. "How long?"

"For over nine hundred years," Reesha said.

Hannah looked over her shoulder towards the Doctor. The time frame was staggering. The Doctor wasn't looking at her though. She could see the wheels in his head turning. The answer clearly hadn't been surprising to him.

"Doctor?" Hannah called.

Almost absently the Doctor said, "I need to meet this Minder."

"And you will, Doctor," Second Talon Reesha said. "But only once it's been cleared by the First Talon. Soon you'll be his problem. Then I can get back to... Oh, no."

Hannah turned her attention to the front of their little pack. A little farther along the walkway, but rapidly approaching, was another pama woman. She wore white robes with clearly well-tailored lines. A white mobcap sat atop her head. Her fur markings were a gorgeous striped brown and black, similar in hue to Second Talon Reesha's.

"Ah, good," the new arrival said. "You've collected our visitors. I see you've made a mistake in where they should be taken though, Reesha."

"I've made no mistake, Truf," Reesha said drawing herself up haughtily. "My orders are to—"

"Yes, yes," the new arrival, Truf, said. She waved her hand as if waving away the orders. "Security and all that nonsense. But this is more important. This pertains to the cure. You *are* interested in seeing a cure developed, aren't you?"

"Of course, but—"

"And you wouldn't want to interfere in its development, would you?"

"No, I—"

"Then we're agreed." Truf smiled and clapped her hands once. She stepped as close to Hannah's side as any pama would permit themselves to do and gestured along the way Hannah had come towards the elevator column at the heart of the sphere. "So pleased to meet you. My name is Truf. And you are?"

"Er, Hannah," Hannah replied, a bit taken aback by the rapid turn of events.

"Splendid to meet you, Hannah."

"Oh, and that's the Doctor." Hannah pointed.

"A doctor?" Truf smiled pleasantly, keeping her fangs hidden. "How splendid. We always welcome more medical knowledge."

"Sorry, not *a* Doctor," Hannah said. "*The* Doctor. He gets a little... persnickety about proper article usage."

"I don't get persnickety," the Doctor said as he joined Hannah. "Finicky? Maybe. Fastidious? Perhaps. But *not* persnickety. I'm the Doctor. How do you do?"

"Splendid, splendid," Truf said never missing a beat.

"You can't take them," Reesha said drawing closer.

"If you'd just come with me," Truf said. "The Minder is most anxious to meet you."

"They're not going anywhere."

"She's very excited about this day. We all are."

"You stop right there."

"I mean, it's not every day that you have a chance to save an entire race, is it?" Truf beamed.

Hannah and the Doctor exchanged a look, trying not to laugh. Hannah coughed to cover her amusement.

“Truf!” Reesha practically screamed the name. “Stop. Right. There. These beings are going to the First Talon’s office and that’s that.”

“This is a medical matter.” For the first time, Truf’s composure seemed to be shaken. Her breezy attitude was replaced by an icy glare at the military officer. “In medical matters, there is no higher authority than the Minder. You of all people should respect that.”

“Respect the Minder? After what she’s done to us?”

Truf’s fur stood on end. She glanced at the Doctor and Hannah, licked her lips nervously, and smoothed her fur back with one hand.

“Reesha, please. This is import—”

An alarm blared throughout the sphere of the commorancy, cutting Truf off mid-sentence. A moment later a voice crackled over loudspeakers on every floor. “Emergency alert! Emergency alert! The Stricken are attacking the perimeter. All military personnel report to your duty stations immediately. All civilians are advised to remain indoors. This is not a drill. Repeat. This is not a drill.”

Instinctively, Reesha looked up to the loudspeaker mounted on a light standard above her. As her gaze left her charges, the Doctor slipped a hand into his coat. Hannah didn’t get a clear look at the device he produced, but when he dashed it into the floor a thick cloud of blue smoke rose around the two of them and the pama Truf as well.

Hannah felt the Doctor grab her hand and pull her away towards a path intersecting the one they were on, smoke swirling in their wake.

In the distance, Hannah heard Reesha yowl.

* * * * *

The Doctor raced along the walkway. Between the smoke and the alarm and the general confusion, he hoped to have at least a bit of a headstart on Reesha and her goons.

Trailing behind him like the tails on a kite were Hannah and Truf. After dropping the smoke bomb, he’d seized both their hands and pulled them after him. Hannah had found her footing, but Truf was squirming and writhing as they ran. The Doctor kept his hold firm.

In the distance was what looked to be a small shed—its walls made of the same greenish-blue cement as the walkways. The Doctor angled in that direction and hauled his charges around to the far side. Only then did he drop their hands.

“Since when,” Hannah panted, “do *you* carry explosives?”

“Oh, please,” the Doctor said. “It’s not like I dropped a can of nitro nine.” he peeked around the edge of the shed for any signs of pursuit. There were none. Either the soldiers hadn’t seen which direction he’d gone or they were off to deal with the threat of the Stricken at the gates. “And if you ask me, it’s far better to go with the person who’s secure enough in herself not to need a gun than with the Second Talon’s bullyboys.”

Hannah crossed her arms. “I didn’t ask you. A little warning would have been nice.”

“Sorry,” the Doctor said. “There wasn’t time for a coin flip.”

“Fair enough,” Hannah said, then sneezed.

“Gesundheit,” the Doctor replied.

“Next time can you use a less acrid smoke?” Hannah sniffled.

“Noted.”

It finally registered on the Doctor that the gregarious Truf hadn’t said a word through the entire exchange. He looked to where she was standing. She was trembling, her fur visibly shaking.

She was holding one hand in front of herself staring at it as if it were some sort of monster.

“Whatever is the matter?” the Doctor asked.

“Stay back.” Truf nearly tripped over herself as she backed away. “Stay back!”

The Doctor hissed through his teeth. “She’s going to alert the others as to where we are.”

Hannah stepped forward. “Hey. Hey, Truf? That was your name, right? Truf? Truf? Truf, look at me.”

Still holding her hand in front of her, Truf’s face slowly swivelled in Hannah’s direction. Her eyes were wide, the black pupils expanded so that was all Hannah could see.

“Calmly does it, Truf,” Hannah said holding her hands up in what the Doctor hoped the pama would take as a placating manner. “We’re not going to hurt you. It’s all right.”

“He, he touched me,” Truf said, her gaze darting to the Doctor.

“He got us away from the military,” Hannah said calmly.

“But he touched me.”

“Truf? You were going to take us to meet the Minder, yeah?”

“Minder?”

“Why don’t you take us to see the Minder?”

The pama seemed to get a hold of herself. She produced a bottle of lotion from a pocket of her robes and squirted some into her hand. As she worked it in through her sterifield, she turned and headed off saying, “The Minder. We’ll go see the Minder.”

The Doctor joined Hannah as the two followed in the pama’s wake. He couldn’t help but chuckle.

“What’s so funny?” Hannah asked.

“I was just thinking back,” the Doctor said, “to when you and I first met. At the time, you were rather... self-absorbed, I believe the word is.”

“Me?”

“See, there you go again?” the Doctor said. Hannah half laughed, half snorted.

“You’ve changed,” the Doctor continued. “Back then, oh, so long ago, you cared only for your own interests. Heh. You even joined me in the TARDIS without knowing what fate had befallen your family. Now look at you. Out here. On an alien world, light-years from your home and putting these beings,” he gestured at Truf, “at their ease, Hannah.”

“You’re one to talk about change,” Hannah said.

“What do you mean?”

“Just that I remember a certain snooty Time Lord grudgingly welcoming me aboard the TARDIS,” Hannah grinned. “Remind me again, how long was it before you stopped calling me Miss Redfoot and started using my actual name?”

“That wasn’t snootiness, that was professionalism.” The Doctor held a straight face for all of a second, then both he and Hannah laughed. He’d been uncertain of the woman accompanying him back then. Now it was hard to imagine he ever had any reservations.

Hannah took a breath and sobered. “Doctor?”

“Mm?”

“What’s really going on here?” Hannah gestured about her as if to take in not just the sphere but the whole planet. “Seriously, now. Reesha said this virus thing has been around for nearly a thousand years.”

“She did that.”

“You weren’t surprised.”

“Not especially,” the Doctor confirmed. “Look around. Their whole society—the

buildings, the pathways, the dress, the sanitation stations, all of it—it's all geared towards keeping them isolated. Towards preventing the spread of infectious disease. Even their social mores. Don't get too close. Don't touch one another. Wash your hands. Eat your carrots."

"If they've been living with this virus so long, wouldn't they have to alter their society?"

"Ah," the Doctor said. "But did they alter it or was it altered for them?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I'm hoping that's what we'll find out when we meet the Minder."

Ahead of them Truf drew to a halt in front of a bank of lifts. At this level at least, there were more of the vertical conveyances than just the ones in the central column. Truf appeared to still be somewhat flustered.

Hannah peered at the Doctor, then canted her head towards the pama.

The Doctor gritted his teeth and took a step forward. He cleared his throat and said, "My apologies. I violated your personal space. It was a flagrant breach of protocol."

"Thank you," Truf's response was muted. "Your... actions took me by surprise. It's easy to forget that you do not have my society's common background. The Minder warned me that would be the case. But come. She's waiting."

Truf summoned a trio of lifts and directed them to the Minder's office. The Doctor noticed she took the pod farthest from his own. The lifts slid into motion ascending the curved side of the sphere. Built-in stabilizers kept the lift pod itself level even as it swung further across the open space that was the heart of the sphere. It soon became evident that the lift was heading for the very apex of the dome.

Tanks at the bottom and medics at the top, the Doctor thought. Was it coincidence or did it mean something more?

The lifts converged at a docking station at the top of the sphere. The faint whir of gears could be heard, and there was the slightest bump as the lifts changed their arced trajectory to a purely vertical one up through a shaft in the ceiling with enclosed sides. The Doctor could tell his pod was slowly rotating. When it emerged from the shaft, it was facing outwards into a round room. The door slid open of its own accord and he stepped out with Hannah and Truf to his right.

The trio had entered the admissions room of the medical facility. It was circular with the lift doors in the center. Immaculately clean, the room sported a dozen or so chairs—plastic for easy cleaning, the Doctor noted—that were spaced well apart and separated by beige partitions. Sanitation stalls were mounted at evenly spaced intervals along the walls of the round room. Truf immediately headed for one of the stalls to wash her hands.

At last, satisfied that she was free of the Doctor's cooties, she returned, keeping her distance from the Doctor.

"This way, please," Truf said and guided them towards a circular doorway across from where they had entered. She held her palm before a scanner mounted on the doorframe. After a moment, the scanner beeped and the door irised open.

The corridor beyond was arched and curved off in a clockwise direction. Truf hurried along, passing several doors. At last, she arrived at the end of the hall. Another door waited there, this one with a panel sporting a microphone.

Truf spoke into the mic: "Minder? It's Truf. I've returned with our visitors."

Almost before the pama had finished speaking, the door slid open, whisper-quiet. Evidently, the Minder was just as eager to meet the Doctor and Hannah as he was to meet her.

Truf gestured the Doctor and Hannah through the door. The pair entered into a sizable room that was a cross between an office and a laboratory with a great deal of equipment and instruments

mounted on wheeled tables. Set to one side of the room was a desk covered with stacks of plasticized paper. From behind it rose a tall woman with auburn curls and an aristocratic bearing.

“Welcome,” the woman said with a rich voice. “I’ve been so looking forward to this. I am the Minder.”

Illness

The Minder was a well-spoken woman to Hannah's way of thinking. Of course, that might have been because she'd done most of the talking since the Doctor and Hannah had arrived.

She enthused over the Doctor and Hannah's presence, welcoming them as if they were old friends. Unlike the pamas, the Time Lady clearly wasn't afraid of being in a confined space with strangers. She'd escorted them to her desk, clearing away several stacks of papers while they seated themselves. She'd even got them something that almost tasted exactly unlike coffee from a dispenser on the far side of the room. After a round of quick introductions, she'd gotten right down to business.

"The penumbra virus," the Minder said as she sipped her coffee. "It's my nemesis and the bane of pama existence."

"But what is it exactly?" Hannah asked, surprised and more than a little worried to find the Doctor sitting back in his chair remaining quiet. She knew her friend well enough to know that wasn't a good sign. It meant he was thinking thoughts. Thoughts not to his liking.

"My apologies," the Minder said. "Of course, you two wouldn't know. The penumbra virus, well, family of viruses really, was first caused by a shift in the activity of the planet's sun. Something about the radiation caused certain protein chains to form that are highly infectious for the pamas. And also highly lethal. Over time the virus has continued to mutate becoming ever more potent. I suspect the pamas have developed some resistance to it by this point, but it's not enough."

"And you haven't been infected by it?" Hannah asked.

The Minder looked a little guilty. "No. I haven't. The recuperative powers of Gallifreyan biology appear to have made me immune."

"But you've been working to cure the virus," Hannah said.

"I have."

Finally, the Doctor stirred. "And you attempted temporal-state locking?"

"The virus takes hold of a host body very quickly," the Minder replied, clearly reluctant to speak on the topic but evidently knowing the Doctor would make her do so. "I once speculated that it could be stopped by suspending the viral proteins in time. Temporal-state locking, as you say. With no delta time in which to operate, it seemed logical that, even if the virus entered a body,

it wouldn't be able to cause any sort of true infection."

"What happened?" Hannah leaned forward, resting her elbows on the Minder's desk. She rubbed her arms. Even through her jacket, she felt the chill of the laboratory.

The Minder sighed. She turned her chair to a computer desk behind her. A boxy monitor that looked like a reject from the 1990s was mounted on an articulated metal arm. The arm squeaked as the Minder swung it over. She pulled over a computer keyboard from the desk and placed it in her lap. Typing a few commands into it, the monitor lit and displayed a black and white image that was clearly security footage. It depicted the outside of the great sphere and showed a crowd of the Stricken charging at what looked like the ramp leading to the tank bay. To either side of the ramp were arranged artillery turrets. Even with no sound, Hannah could tell they were chattering away, sending shredding bullets into the assailants.

"The Stricken?" Hannah asked, unsure of how they connected to things.

"Temporal state locking requires a high degree of precision," the Minder explained. "It needed to be targeted to the virus and only the virus. I thought I could achieve that with the equipment available to me. I was wrong."

The Minder finished her coffee and set the empty mug aside. "Not only did I temporal lock the virus, I temporal locked the cells of those poor wretches." She nodded to the video display. "Of course, it didn't happen all at once. The temporal sequencing needed to be administered in multiple treatments. Aberrations showed themselves early on but... I dismissed them. In my arrogance, I thought they were simple reporting errors from the equipment."

The Minder fell silent for a moment as she watched the grisly display on the monitor. Her voice was quiet when she spoke again, "Now those poor people exist in a state where they perceive the moment where they became locked in time alongside the present. Two time periods of existence in a race that had not evolved to handle such a condition. It... drove them mad."

"Not only that, but now their cells temporally gravitate towards one another," the Doctor interjected. "So when a massacre like that happens it doesn't kill them. Or rather, it does, but then they simply reset."

The Minder nodded. "And worse, they're carriers of the penumbra virus. They can't be killed by it, but they can spread it. As their madness deepened, their violence grew. Eventually, we had to drive them from the commorancies into the wild. There they have persisted."

"For how long?" the Doctor asked. "Years? Decades? Centuries?"

The Minder regarded the Doctor for a moment. "Your words refer to the Stricken, but I rather sense you're asking me something else, Doctor."

"This whole society. It's been arranged to minimize the threat of the virus."

"Minimize but not eliminate it, yes."

"And it's advanced enough to beam signals into space, to provide you equipment for temporal state locking, to have the architectural principles for buildings like the commorancies. And all of it built while a virus supposedly ravages the population?"

"The answer to your question is yes," the Minder said looking very much annoyed.

"Wait. What question?" Hannah asked.

"Your Doctor wants to know if I've been helping the pamas. Yes. I have."

"That's why this place feels wrong," the Doctor said. "It's been nagging at me since we arrived. You," he pointed a finger at the Minder. "You've been meddling in their timeline for centuries. Why?"

The Minder regarded the Doctor for a moment. She started softly, "I first came here when I was in my final year at the Academy." The Minder swiveled her chair to stare across the room at

her medical equipment, although Hannah suspected she was looking beyond that. “I was an acceptable, though hardly distinguished, student. And one lacking in field experience. I was interned to Professor Wynthrallhydravorp. Old Windy we called him. Perhaps you know him?”

The Doctor frowned and shook his head. “The name’s unfamiliar to me.”

“It doesn’t matter,” the Minder sighed. “His field is xenanthropology. And despite him being able to talk all four legs off an Arcturan Megadonkey, he actually did know his material.”

The Minder shook her head, as if dispelling memories of more pleasant times. “He agreed to take me on, and we came here for an extended study of the resident population. A whole year local time. Well, it’s the only way to see a society in its full cycle. At least, it would have been under normal circumstances.”

“But then the virus happened,” the Doctor said.

The Minder nodded. “The pamas were an agrarian society but noble and honourable. They deserved better than extinction.”

“You decided to intervene,” the Doctor said. “I’m surprised your Professor Windy allowed you to get involved in that way. The Academy didn’t have any teachers that liberal in their thinking in my day.”

“Old Windy wasn’t,” the Minder whispered almost to herself. She raised her head and Hannah could see a fire in her eyes. “He left. Returned to Gallifrey while I stayed behind to fight the penumbra virus. He was a coward who ran away while the people here were dying all about him.”

“And you’ve been here since then?” Hannah asked.

“Yes,” the Minder confirmed. “When Old Windy departed and took his time capsule with him, I was left with few supplies. Only a few devices for our anthropological study. Those machines ran down before I could defeat the virus. I knew that it would not be bested easily or in short fashion.”

The Minder leaned forward staring down both Hannah and the Doctor as if willing them to understand her position. “I knew that I had to look to the future if I were to stop this thing. I began guiding the pamas. Doling out enough information for their technology to advance without, I hope, skipping the time needed for them to gain the wisdom to use that technology responsibly.”

“And yet,” the Doctor said. “They have a well-organized military that quite enjoys using their own people, excuse me, their former people as target practice.” He glanced at the monitor with the Stricken

“That... became necessary,” the Minder sighed. “Because of my mistake.”

“And now you’ve sent a distress call to the Time Lords to, what, fix that mistake? Change the timeline for these people more than you’ve already done?”

“I was furious at the Time Lords when Old Windy abandoned me,” the Minder said, folding her arms across her chest. After a moment, she relaxed and her shoulders stooped. “By the time I realized how serious the situation was, my equipment had failed and I had no way to contact them. Now, with the pamas space program in its infancy, I do. But not to change time. That’s impossible. My hope is that a Time Lord, a Time Lord like you, will help me to finally cure this virus.”

“You’ve been battling it for nigh on a thousand years,” the Doctor said. “What makes you think I’ll have a solution you don’t?”

“Oh, I have the solution,” the Minder answered. “I just need the necessary energy to make it work.”

“Ah,” the Doctor smiled and nodded as if he’d just solved a magician’s trick. “I was wondering why you’d had my TARDIS brought up here.”

“What?” Hannah asked. She looked at the Doctor in surprise. He nodded over her shoulder to a darkened corner of the room.

There it stood. The TARDIS. It had been crammed into the room behind a number of whiteboards and various electronic consoles. Hannah had missed it when they’d first arrived and sitting in her chair with her back to it there had been no opportunity for her to spot it afterwards.

The Minder was also looking at the TARDIS, but she shook her head. “No. I have no use for your time capsule,” she said. “No. What I need is something more personal.”

“Oh, yes?” the Doctor looked amused. “And what is that exactly?”

“I need one of your regenerations.”

* * * * *

“What do you mean, you need one of his regenerations?” Hannah demanded.

The Doctor rubbed at his lower lip. He had an inkling of what the Minder was driving at. He’d of course told Hannah about the regenerative process of Time Lords. The Doctor had to admit he didn’t exactly lead the safest of lifestyles and it would have been terribly unfair to his friend to spring the little nugget that he could come back from death by changing every cell in his body if the need arose.

“I underwent my second cellular regeneration nearly a year ago,” the Minder explained to Hannah. “My old body was wearing a little thin. I had grown old and frail. Such individuals are rare among the pamas. Most succumb to the virus before they reach an advanced age. I wondered, not for the first time, why I had never been infected. *That’s* when it occurred to me that our people’s regenerative abilities must, in some way, be keeping me safe.

“I drew a blood sample,” she continued. “Immediately in the wake of my regeneration. I tested it against the most virulent strain of the virus I have in storage. The blood sample proved resistant. Even so, and even *increasing* the rate of pama technological development, sufficient gene manipulation technology to take advantage of the complex Gallifreyan cellular structure is still years away. I couldn’t risk conducting further trials on myself. Certainly, there are other researchers, pama researchers, but...”

“They don’t have the benefit of your advanced knowledge,” the Doctor supplied.

“It sounds immodest, I know,” the Minder went on. “But I have been almost solely responsible for keeping pama society from extinction. If my experiments proved... fatal to myself it would take away the last line of defense the pamas had.”

“Fatal?” Hannah asked, rising from her chair. “I think I see where you’re going with this. You want to experiment on the Doctor. No way. That is off the table.”

“Hannah, please,” the Doctor said softly. “I rather suspect there’s more to the tale.”

Hannah looked uncertainly at the Doctor. She wiped her brow and lowered herself into her chair.

“Since I couldn’t responsibly test on myself,” the Minder continued as though Hannah’s outburst had never happened, “I went to the next best thing. Cats.”

“Cats?” Hannah looked startled. Even the Doctor was surprised.

“I had a couple as pets when I came here,” the Minder explained. “They, ahem, got friendly with the native species. Their offspring became most invasive. I doubt there’s a single pureblood native cat left on this planet.”

“What do cats have to do with this?” Hannah asked.

“And where did you get them from?” the Doctor added.

“From Gallifrey, of course.”

The Doctor arched an eyebrow and leaned closer to the Minder to gauge her sincerity. “Gallifrey doesn’t have any cats.”

“Gallifrey had plenty of cats when I was at the Academy,” the Minder said. “If anything, they were becoming something of a pest. There was even some group suggesting they all be rounded up and driven off-planet.”

“Cats?” the Doctor said almost to himself. “When you were at the Academy, who was the president of the high council?”

“President Maskcalumsinn,” seeing that the Doctor didn’t recognize the name, the Minder added, “The forty-second president?”

“Forty-second? Forty-second?!” The Doctor rose from his chair and began pacing the laboratory his mind whizzing away.

“Why? What president are you up to now?”

“Somewhere in the four hundreds,” the Doctor said absently as he continued to circle the lab. He came to a sudden stop and spun on his heel to face the Minder. “Oh, I am so thick. Do you know who you are?”

“Um, yes?”

“No, of course you don’t. You wouldn’t. Couldn’t,” the Doctor spoke to himself again.

“Give him a moment,” the Doctor heard Hannah say. He sometimes forgets people are present. He should be coming back to us in three, two...”

The Doctor pointed across the laboratory towards the Minder. “You’re the Wayward Watcher.”

“Excuse me?” the Minder said.

“I always thought you were a fairytale,” the Doctor enthused. “The Wayward Watcher. The Time Lady who defied Gallifrey when she chose to join the natives of Innominate – the unnamed planet. The Time Lady who turned her back on all of Gallifreyan society to watch the universe tick by. The Time Lady whose very name was expunged from the Great Roster.”

“Londra,” the Minder said.

“I beg you pardon,” the Doctor frowned, having his train of thought derailed.

“My name,” the Minder supplied. “Londragulthardan. Although I prefer Londra. It’s less wear and tear on the tongue.”

“Well, regardless,” the Doctor tried to recapture where he was going. “She—that is to say, you—left our homeworld. All for the love of a people other than her, your own.”

“The high council turned me into a children’s fable?” Londra’s face twisted in distaste.

“A cautionary tale about leaving our planet and interfering in the development of others.”

Londra turned towards her computer monitor, although the Doctor suspected she wasn’t really watching it. She said softly, “A fairytale. All this time I wondered why no one ever came here. They chose to forget me.”

“And in so doing, granted you a form of immortality,” the Doctor said gently as he returned to his seat.

“Do you think that’s what I want?” Londra glared at the Doctor. “No. I want to save the people here. Because, after all this time, if I can’t then what has it all been for?”

The Doctor didn’t have an answer. He said instead, “So. Cats?”

The Minder took a steadying breath. “Yes. Cats. There’s that old pama saying that cats have seven lives.”

“Nine,” Hannah interjected.

“Excuse me?”

“Nine lives,” Hannah supplied. “Cats have nine lives. At least, that’s what we humans say.”

“Well, the pamas say seven and there’s more than just figurative truth to that,” Londra replied, her cool demeanour restored to her. “Cats, Gallifreyan cats, have similar, though lesser, regenerative powers to our own. My two passed some of that genetic makeup onto the cats here. That bioelectric energy for renewal can be harnessed to combat the penumbra virus.”

“It’s a cure?” the Doctor asked.

“If a cat with a pure enough Gallifreyan bloodline can be found, yes,” Londra confirmed. “It’s a cure. For a single person.”

“Just one?”

“Just one. There’s a cat breeder a few commorancies over. I’ve ordered in some cats for this purpose, but ones whose genetics are Gallifreyan enough are hard to come by, even for a breeder. It’s not enough.”

“For what?” the Doctor asked.

“For a total, global cure.”

“Ah,” the Doctor said. “And that’s why you sent your distress signal. You were hoping some Gallifreyan would come along and forfeit their lives to you.”

“Our lives are so long already and when our bodies wear out we just renew,” the Minder explained. “I’ve done the calculations. I believe it would take one, perhaps two regenerations to make all pamas immune to the virus. The bioelectricity is in us to give. What’s a couple of incarnations to us, more or less, compared to a full, disease-free life to the people here.”

The Doctor was dubious. “You *believe*?”

The Minder faced the Doctor without flinching. “It’s an experimental, untried procedure. Untried on anything other than cats. I can offer no guarantees. Hence why I couldn’t risk running it on myself.”

“Well, now you can,” Hannah said. “The Doctor can carry out the procedure, or operate the controls, or throw the lever, or whatever it is that needs to be done.”

“And if something goes wrong?” Londra asked. “Your Doctor’s life would be much safer in my hands than mine in his.”

“You don’t know the Doctor.”

“And he doesn’t know the penumbra virus.”

“It doesn’t matter, anyway,” the Doctor said. “I can’t do it.”

“You can’t, or you won’t?” The Minder didn’t ask in a demanding way. She sounded genuinely interested in the distinction.

“You’re asking me to alter the course of development of an entire population,” the Doctor said with a shrug. “There can’t be a greater crime against the timeline than that. Well, I suppose altering the development of two planets would be greater. And three. And so on. But my point stands.”

“I see.” Londra rubbed her chin and pointed at the Doctor. “Then what must you think of *me*? Altering the course of these people has been my life’s work.”

“You made your choice.”

“Ah, but did I?”

“What do you mean?”

“I may not have graduated and I may not have been a particularly distinguished student, but I was always drawn to temporal philosophy,” Londra said. “Surely you must know that choice is an illusion presented by the subjective passing of one’s personal timeline. But within a higher-

level objective view, every moment in time can be seen as the past from any successive moment in time. And as a past action it, by its very nature, must be predestined. And viewing any choice from any relative moment, past or future, does not change that objective predestined quality.”

Hannah and the Doctor were silent.

Out of the corner of her mouth, Hannah said to the Doctor, “She’s worse than you are.”

“So, what?” the Doctor asked the Minder. “Are you suggesting that any action we do take, we *must* take and that it makes no difference in the grand scheme of things?”

“Perhaps not in the grand scheme of things,” the Minder confirmed. “But here and now it would help these people.” She looked over at the police telephone box shape of the TARDIS. “Are you telling me you’ve never intervened in your self-evidently colourful travels?”

“I’ve saved a person here or there,” the Doctor said guardedly, shifting in his seat. “But this is completely different.”

Londra slapped a hand on the table. “No. No different. Whether it’s one, or one hundred, or one billion, the effect is the same. You are a part of the timeline and as such you have your part to play. You have a role in life. Anything else? Anything else is unworthy of that life. Here and now. You have the chance to do something good. All you need is the courage to try.”

The Doctor shared a look with Hannah. She gave him a small smile and nodded.

The Doctor said, “Well. I’ve never been accused of lacking in courage.”

* * * * *

Second Talon Reesha was tired. She was tired of fighting the Stricken. She was tired of fighting the penumbra virus. She was tired of fighting with her littermate Truf.

Standing here and now, before the First Talon, she struggled to keep that tiredness from her voice and demeanour. “I offer no excuse, First Talon. The aliens escaped while under my supervision. I accept full responsibility.”

First Talon Libre was an elderly pama, rare given the high mortality rate from the penumbra virus. He eschewed the sterifield most pamas wore, preferring the bulky, heavy, old fashioned, and fully contained environmental suits. His one concession to the safety of the suit was to have a single hand exposed, and even that was covered by a tight-fitting silken glove *and* a sterifield. Aged though he was, he was still a magnificent specimen. Through the glass cover of his helmet Reesha saw his golden fur, only now going to a silver-white around his muzzle and ears.

The old pama had contracted the penumbra virus in his youth. With a scant survival rate of twelve percent, he had been one of the lucky ones, although the virus had ravaged his voice. Now he could speak only in a hoarse whisper, and even that had to be amplified by the speakers of his suit. Despite such inconveniences, he spoke with the authority of command and a will of iron.

“If you had the situation to do over, what would you change?” the First Talon rasped.

Reesha had expected this. The First Talon was a demanding pama but not an unkind one.

“I underestimated them,” Reesha said. “Furless, I considered them stunted. And I thought them weak in the emotional ways in which the Minder is weak. I should have had them x-rayed for concealed items and confiscated anything of a suspicious or unknown nature. As well, I should have separated them to discourage either one of them from attempting to flee for fear of recriminations against the other.”

The First Talon nodded. “Lessons learned. So the encounter, though its result was undesirable, was not a complete waste.”

First Talon Libre rose with dignity from his chair behind his plastic desk. He crossed to the

window of his small but well-kept office. The view overlooked the central communal space of the commorancy. He surveyed it, his back to Reesha and his hands clasped behind him.

“When we stop learning,” he intoned, “is when we truly lose.”

He turned to face Reesha as if expecting something from her.

“My sister had come to take the strangers to the Minder,” Reesha ventured, now less sure of herself. “I suspect they may have gone to the Minder’s office.”

After a moment of quiet stoicism, the First Talon nodded. “It is a good suspicion,” he said. Reesha felt as if she’d passed a test she hadn’t known she was taking. “Summon your men. Armed, naturally. I think it’s time we paid a little visit to the Minder.”

Decline

Londra had been so relieved when the Doctor agreed to help. She hadn't realized until that moment just how much she'd been pinning her hopes on this. A tingle of anticipation was in the air.

The Doctor's friend Hannah wanted to know just how safe the procedure was of course. Londra had launched into a talk on the genetics of Gallifreyan biology and her process for siphoning off and storing regenerative energy for proper cure distribution. It was clear she'd lost Hannah by the end of the second sentence. Even the Doctor looked a little perplexed but he'd followed enough of her explanation to nod in agreement and, most importantly, to not change his mind.

The Doctor and Londra were now working at her computer to prepare the procedure. Well, she was working. The Doctor was hovering over her shoulder second-guessing everything she'd done. Hannah was huddled at the desk, her hands tucked under her armpits despite the warmth of the lab.

As Londra typed, the Doctor asked. "So do you believe what you said? About all our actions being predetermined, I mean?"

"From an objective standpoint, yes. Though not subjectively by any means. Otherwise, what would be the point?"

"And how does your philosophy handle paradoxes?"

"There are no such things," the Minder said flatly.

"Yes, but what about the classic grandfather paradox?"

"That you could go back in time and kill your grandfather and thus prevent your own birth?"

"Precisely."

"Not possible," the Minder shook her head. "The simple fact that you exist means that if you were to try to go back and kill your own grandfather something would happen to cause you to fail because objectively from a future vantage point that moment has already passed, is written, and therefore is immutable."

The Doctor rubbed his lower lip. "I never was good at temporal philosophy."

Londra worked in silence for a few more moments, triple-checking all the settings. After one thousand years of fighting the disease and coaxing along pama society, she had learned

patience. And the importance of triple-checking.

“I want to thank you,” she said softly. “I truly believe this will work. And when it does, the people of Banas will be able to take their place among the stars. Free of contagion. Productive members of the—”

“What did you say?” the Doctor demanded as he fell back a step.

“What do you mean?” Londra stopped typing. She looked at the Doctor in concern. “The pamas have started their space program now. With a little more development they’ll be able to—”

“That’s not what you called them,” the Doctor whispered. “Not what you called this planet.”

“Doctor, what’s wrong?” Hannah asked from where she sat.

“This planet,” the Doctor said. “She called it the planet Banas.”

“So what?” Hannah said, rising from where she sat. “Wait. Banas. Wasn’t there that bird scientist dude that one time who—”

“Who wanted to destroy the Banasi with a temporal weapon before they could ever evolve and get out into space because they destroyed his people?”

“Uh, yeah, that’d be the one,” Hannah confirmed.

“There was indeed. These people, they go on to become a threat to the entire galaxy.”

“But these are pamas,” Hannah said. “Aren’t they?”

“They are,” the Doctor nodded. “But they’re also the Banasi.”

“How does that work?”

“In the same way that you’re a human,” the Doctor said. “That’s what you call yourselves. But it would be fair to say terran, of solaran, or even earthers. And this place. The planet Banas. Out there,” he gestured towards the ceiling as if to indicate outer space, “they would be known as the Banasi.”

The Minder folded her arms across her chest and glared at the Doctor. “These people need your help, Doctor.”

“These people go on to become conquerors,” the Doctor planted his fists on his hips. “Conquerors who commit genocide against other races.”

“I don’t believe it,” Londra said, shaking her head.

“It’s the truth,” Hannah said. “We met—”

“I don’t care who you met,” Londra interrupted the other woman. “These people have known the pain of loss for generations. I cannot accept that they’d inflict that on others.”

“Then let me show you,” the Doctor said softly. He gestured towards his time machine with both hands. “The TARDIS databanks are sure to have information on it.”

Londra bit her lip and looked between the Doctor and his craft. She glanced down and saw her hand was shaking. She hid it quickly behind her back.

“You’re a scientist,” Hannah added to the Doctor’s words. “Surely you’re open to new evidence.”

The Minder straightened her back and tried to look at the pair with a confidence she didn’t feel. “Show me then.”

The Doctor nodded and led the way through the assorted tables and whiteboards to his TARDIS. A faint hum emanated from it, a sound more felt than heard, which Londra hadn’t experienced in a millennium. The Doctor drew forth a small key and unlocked the door. He pushed it open and stepped back to allow Londra to enter first.

The Minder stepped over the threshold. The interior of the TARDIS was cooler than her lab and the air smelled different. Not bad or foul. Just different.

The console room was large, larger than the exterior. Round circles lined the walls and a gentle glow seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere at once. The time rotor sat patiently, immobile, in the center of the main console. Various appointments—an old-fashioned coat rack, a sofa, bookshelves with books and archaeological knick-knacks—were scattered about the room. Someone had left a sandwich sitting on one of the TARDIS control panels.

“I’ve never seen a design like this,” Londra breathed as the Doctor and Hannah stepped in behind her. “It’s so advanced.”

“There, you see,” the Doctor said to Hannah. “Advanced.”

“Then how come every other Time Lord we meet thinks it’s anything but?” Hannah asked. “I get the feeling she’s been out of touch with your people for a while now.”

The Doctor waved his hand at Hannah. “Details, details.” He crossed to the control console and started typing at a keyboard.

Londra moved to the console as well. There were so many more controls, so many more readouts on it than the time capsules of her era. She reached tentatively towards some of the controls but stopped with her fingers hovering above them.

“Ah, here we are,” the Doctor said. He stepped back from the panel at which he was operating to make room for Londra.

The Minder moved around the circumference of the control console. A monitor glowed with information that the Doctor had dredged from the TARDIS’s databanks.

As Londra read the articles the Doctor had found, her hearts dropped. The pamas, the Banasi, went into space all right. A cure was found for their disease. But the virus itself was never destroyed.

“They take it with them,” she breathed. “They weaponize it and take it with them.”

“And they use it to destroy other races they meet,” the Doctor said gently.

“These numbers,” Londra said as she studied the casualty rates. “These drive the fatalities on this planet into insignificance.”

“Are you still sure you believe in predestiny?” the Doctor asked. There was no malice in his voice.

“What have I done?” Londra stared at the Doctor. She felt a single tear track down her cheek.

“Nothing that can’t be stopped,” the Doctor said. “Come with us. Come with Hannah and me. We can leave now and... and let nature take its course.”

Londra bit her lip to keep it from trembling. In a flash, she saw the long years of her existence go by. She’d fought every day to try to save the pamas. To try to make for them a better fate than what *nature* had decreed. And there it was, on the TARDIS computer display. A fate worse than death for the billions and the trillions who would suffer if the pamas left their planet.

“The research must be destroyed,” she choked out the words. She was finding it difficult to breathe. “They must never be able to recreate what I’ve started.”

The Doctor nodded and started towards the door. Londra followed a moment later. She almost bumped into him unseeing when he fetched up short.

“Lessons learned, Second Talon,” a gravelly, whispered voice said. “*Never* trust someone who is not your own kind.”

Standing in the TARDIS doorway, flanked by Reesha and two armed soldiers, was First Talon Libre.

* * * * *

The Doctor backed towards the control console of the TARDIS. He wasn't exactly sure what his plan was, but he had at least three more steps to figure that out.

"First Talon Libre," Londra said addressing the newly arrived pama.

The pama wore a bulky environmental suit, covered in medals and braid. Clearly, this was the commanding officer Second Talon Reesha, also present, had promised/threatened to take the Doctor before.

The Doctor was now only a pace away from the TARDIS console. If he could just—

"That's quite far enough, Doctor," the First Talon growled in his hoarse voice. He aimed a pistol at the Doctor's stomach. "Step away from there, if you please. We wouldn't want any accidents, now, would we?"

"Oh, I had nothing accidental in mind," the Doctor replied, though he did move away from the console.

"I'm sure." The First Talon stepped farther into the control room, taking care not to obstruct the firing lines of his assembled troops. He spared a smile for the Doctor, revealing a single aged fang before moving to the console.

It was clear the controls were totally unfamiliar to the military leader. He was cautious though and refrained from touching anything. As he circled the perimeter, he stopped in front of one of the panels. The panel the Minder had been studying only moments before. The Doctor cursed himself for not clearing the data display.

The First Talon studied the databank readout, his eyes widening and a satisfied smile spreading over his face. At last, he looked up at Londra and the Doctor.

"So," Libre said, "It is the destiny of the Banasi to go on to rule. From barely clinging onto survival. Fitting. Very fitting."

"That's the future," the Doctor said. "It hasn't happened yet. It may never happen."

"Oh, but I think that it will," Libre said stepping closer—but not *too* close—to the Doctor. "I've had opportunity to debate with the Minder on more than one occasion. We may not always agree on the course for *my* people," he glared at Londra, "but I was rather taken by her philosophy that what is meant to be is *meant* to be."

"You spoke to him about temporal philosophy?" the Doctor demanded of Londra.

"She broadcasted a radio chat all about it to every commorancy out there." Libre smiled. "Now, shall we all proceed back to the Minder's lab and get the procedure underway?"

"I'll not conduct the procedure," Londra shook her head.

"Of course you will," Libre intoned. "This is what you've been working towards lo these many years. Can you truly tell me that in the moment of your greatest success you will step away? What is it you say? All you need is courage."

"I'll not force this man into the procedure," Londra said.

"And I'll not volunteer," the Doctor added.

"Oh, I think you'll both help," Libre said, dismissing the Time Lords' protests.

"Threatening me isn't going to help you," the Doctor said. "Believe you me, I've been threatened by the best."

"My dear, boy," Libre rasped. "Who said anything about threatening you? No, I just assumed you would want to help your friend."

"What?" The Doctor frowned. The meaning of Libre's words dawned on him. He looked to Hannah standing by the control console.

Hannah's brow was clearly moist with sweat and her eyes were unfocused. She wobbled

at the console. “Doctor?” Her voice was a hoarse croak. She wobbled once again and toppled to the floor.

“Hannah!” The Doctor raced to his friend’s side. He was vaguely aware of the pama soldiers training their weapons on him and of First Talon Libre waving them back.

The Doctor cradled Hannah in his arms. He placed a hand on her forehead. She was burning up. Her eyelids fluttered and she tried to focus on the Doctor.

“I don’t feel so good,” Hannah murmured.

“It’s the virus,” Libre said as he stepped behind the Doctor. “Extraordinary. I’ve never seen anyone succumb to it so fast.”

“She’s human,” Londra groaned in the background. “And she’s not been here for a thousand years. I knew the virus was getting more virulent. And she has no immunity.”

“Your friend is not long for this life,” Libre whispered to the Doctor. “Are you still so certain you won’t go through with the procedure?”

The Doctor looked down at Hannah in his arms. She seemed so frail. He was afraid to let her go and afraid to hold her too tightly lest she shatter like glass.

“D... Do...” Hannah wheezed.

“Hush,” the Doctor whispered. “It will be all right. I’m here.”

Hannah shook her head feebly. She mustered the strength to say. “Don’t help them.” Her eyes rolled back into her head, her lids fluttering. The Doctor could feel his hearts breaking.

“Well, Doctor?” Libre asked. Are you prepared to respect her wishes? Are you prepared to let her die?”

* * * * *

The Doctor turned his head to stare through the clear cover of the medical bed he was in. In the next bed over he could see Hannah lying unconscious. Londra had administered a sedative to her. Even so, the Doctor could see her face was twisted in discomfort. Her chest struggled to rise and fall. He could hear the wheeze of her laboured breathing carried by the speakers on her own medical bed.

After the Doctor had made his decision events happened quickly. He had helped Hannah from the TARDIS back to the lab. Neither Londra nor any of the pamas had offered to help. Not that he would have accepted it if they had. Hannah had tried to speak to him some more, but the effort was too much for her. He’d helped her out of her jacket, feeling her shivering despite the warmth of the lab. Then with the utmost care, he’d laid her out on the medical bed.

Londra had said something about how the beds should really have been loaded with the Doctor and Hannah in sterile antechambers, but neither the Doctor nor First Talon Libre were willing to wait for that. Hannah’s condition was deteriorating rapidly. The Doctor had shucked his own jacket and dress shirt and clambered into the other waiting medical bed.

Now, as he waited for the procedure to begin, the sound of his hearts was loud in his ears. *Thump-thump-thump-thump. Thump-thump-thump-thump.*

A shadow passed over him and he looked up through the glass cover on his medical bed. The Minder was hovering over him making some final adjustments to unseen controls on the side of his bed.

“Promise me this is going to save, Hannah,” the Doctor said.

“It will save her,” the Minder confirmed. She glanced at Libre, then spoke in a low voice only for the Doctor’s ears. “Once your friend is cured, I’ll terminate the procedure. First Talon

Libre will be... displeased. Be ready to get yourself and Hannah to your TARDIS.”

“What about you?” the Doctor asked.

Londra smiled sadly. “Don’t wait for me.”

“Won’t the First Talon be displeased with *you*?”

“Most assuredly.” Londra nodded and adjusted another control on the Doctor’s bed. “But what can he do to me? As displeased as he is, he’ll still need me to devise another cure. A process that I can see to it will take a long time. Perhaps by then the Banasi will have learned responsibility.”

“Minder?” First Talon Libre called. “Are you ready?”

“Yes.” Londra straightened and nodded her ascent to the pama. “I was just making a few final adjustments.” She returned her gaze to the Doctor. “I had intended for you to be sedated during the procedure. Understand that for, for technical reasons,” she nodded almost imperceptibly towards Hannah, “I can’t do that now. In order to harvest your bioelectricity I’ll need to bring you to the point of regeneration. It... will probably be unpleasant.”

The Doctor swallowed. “I understand. Let’s get started.”

Londra drew a deep breath. The Doctor watched her as she crossed to her computer console. He noted that in order for her to work the controls she had to have her back to him. *I wonder if she can bear to face her patients after all this time.*

“Initiating stage one of the procedure,” the Minder announced. She tapped a few commands into her keyboard.

The faint sound of whirring servo motors came to the Doctor’s ears. A metal pad emerged from the side of the medical bed. He shivered as the cold surface pressed against his upper arm. Little ports opened on the face of the panel. A pneumatic hiss accompanied the stabbing press of a dozen needles into his skin. He grimaced and stifled a grunt of discomfort.

Looking over to Hannah’s bed, he saw a single needle slide into her arm.

“Commencing stage two,” the Minder said, her voice carried to the Doctor over the medical bed’s speakers. “Doctor, brace yourself.”

The Doctor had the merest second to wonder how one would do that in such a confined space when he felt something enter his body from one of the needles. It felt like liquid fire pouring through his veins. His hearts beat faster. He struggled to catch a breath. His skin tingled like an army of ants was crawling over it. His vision swam, threatening to render him unconscious. He bit down hard on his lip, the pain helping to focus him. Regeneration had never been like this. He could feel it. Every cell in his body wanted to change, wanted to explode, but he was being kept right at the brink.

The Doctor turned his head and tried to focus on Hannah as he panted against the waves of fire wracking his form. He couldn’t tell if the procedure was having any effect on Hannah or not.

* * * * *

“Is the procedure working?” First Talon Libre asked. The military officer must have been really eager to hear the results; he’d taken several steps closer to Londra than polite pama society dictated.

“It’s really quite amazing,” Londra said as she studied the readings she was getting. Despite herself, she was enthralled to see the experiment working even better than she’d hoped. “I’m only drawing the merest fraction of his regenerative bioelectricity, and even that is greater than any of the cats I tested with. If these levels remain stable, we’d be able to inoculate the entire population

and not even trip him over the edge of regeneration.”

Londra rose from her workstation and crossed to the bio bed containing Hannah. She had all the readings from the bed piped to her computer but some things you just wanted to check for yourself.

Hannah was unconscious within the cylindrical enclosure about her. Through the glass cover, the Minder was able to study her recumbent form. The pain that had creased her face even while sedated was nowhere in evidence and the human’s breathing was free and unencumbered. Temperature monitors showed that Hannah’s fever had broken as well.

“She’s well on her way to recovery,” Londra confirmed, allowing herself a satisfied smile.

Libre drew nearer—but not too near—to examine the human woman himself.

Londra returned to her computer and tripped the button to activate her mic.

“Doctor?” Londra spoke into the audio pickup, “Doctor, it’s working. All signs indicate that the virus has been eradicated from your friend’s system. She’s resting peacefully now.” She licked her lips and glanced at the First Talon whose back was towards her. She’d been rehearsing in her mind what to say at this point. It still sounded contrived to her, but it was all she could think of. “The results are encouraging. However, I’ll be ending the process now until the data can be reviewed in detail.”

“You won’t be halting anything, Minder,” Libre whispered in her ear.

Londra turned to find the pama standing next to her. Right next to her. Within the mandated distancing space. She wanted to back away but her computer desk blocked her path.

“First Talon? We have to end the experiment.”

“Do you take me for a cub, Minder?” Libre said with quiet patience, “You and I both know that if you stop now, neither he nor you will participate again. This is the moment that every pama hopes for when they wake in the morning. It is the moment every pama prays for when they go to sleep at night. The cure. Generations in the making. You will not stop the procedure now.”

“This isn’t something simple, like removing a splinter,” Londra said as she scooted sideways from Libre’s presence. Toward her keyboard. “The data needs to be analysed. Further tests need to be conducted.”

“I am satisfied the procedure has been a success.”

“We’ve waited for this moment, as you say, for generations.” Subtly, Londra reached for her keyboard, hoping the First Talon wouldn’t notice. “We want no mistakes at this juncture. We want—” She whirled towards the keyboard and triggered the macro she’d keyed in earlier. It was a preprogrammed sequence to instantly abort the energy drain process, bypass the bio locks on the medical beds, and free the Doctor and Hannah.

Libre reacted quickly. He spun towards the medical beds gesturing his men towards the Doctor’s. “Take him alive!”

The lid of the Doctor’s bed was slowly rising on hydraulic hinges. As the two soldiers the First Talon had brought along surged forwards, the Doctor kicked the lid hard. It swung back, smashing into one of the soldiers, knocking him to the floor.

The Doctor practically flew from his medical bed and tackled the other soldier. His height and the inborn strength of a Gallifreyan gave him an advantage over the surprised soldier. Londra saw the Doctor deliver some manner of martial art blow to the pama, who promptly crumpled to the ground.

Second Talon Reesha was rushing forward to engage the Doctor. Overcoming the impulse of a thousand years to shy away from people, Londra threw herself at the Second Talon. The two tumbled across Londra’s desk. Reesha came out on top. Through her sterifield her hand clamped

about Londra's throat. The Minder could feel the pinpricks of Reesha's claws digging in.

Frantically, Londra flailed about. Her fingers brushed against her coffee cup. Seizing it, she swept it up into the temple of her attacker. There was a crunch as the cup shattered. A slice of the pottery traced a cut along the edge of the black fur patch around Reesha's eye. The pama fell away concussed and in a daze.

Across the room, the Doctor vaulted over the low table separating the two medical beds. Hannah hadn't stirred but the Doctor was at her side now. He swept her into his arms, changed course, and pelted for the TARDIS.

Indecision creeped into the consciousness of the Minder. With the soldiers down, for the moment, the path to the TARDIS was clear. She could leave with the Doctor. She could end this now.

Londra had taken one step towards the time machine when a heavy, gauntleted hand fell on her shoulder.

First Talon Libre spun her around like a top. The claws of his exposed hand were out. She stared down at them, then into his narrowed eyes.

"You need me," she said.

"No," the First Talon shook his head. He looked almost sad. "Not in the way you mean, anyway."

Pain shot from Londra's guts as the First Talon buried his claws into her abdomen. She coughed and tasted blood in her mouth.

As the pama wrestled her to the medical bed vacated by the Doctor, Londra heard the wheezing thrum of the TARDIS. She saw it dematerialize as she was slammed into the bed and the lid forced down over her.

She could feel the regeneration process taking hold even as she tried to keep her innards where they were supposed to be. Through the glass of the medical bed, she saw the First Talon cross to her computer. He began working the controls to restart the process. So that was why he'd been scrutinizing her movements so closely.

The needles of the bed penetrated her body. The pain threatened to overwhelm her. Just before she passed out, just before the regenerative energies could take hold, she realized she hadn't shown the First Talon how to stop the process before it drained the source subject dry.

Convalescence

Hannah's eyelids fluttered open. The white warmth of the TARDIS's lighting swam into her vision. The reassuring low hum and gentle vibration of the time machine's control room surrounded her.

She took a deep breath, bracing for the pain. There was none. She could breathe easily and the fatigue that had turned her limbs to leaden weights was gone. In fact, now that she reflected on it, she'd never felt better. It was like electricity was coursing through her veins. She felt stronger and sharper.

A grunt of pain from across the room broke into her thoughts.

The Doctor was working at the TARDIS console. His coat was gone—so was hers, now that she came to notice—and his shirt hung loose about him. Even with his back to her, Hannah could tell he wasn't all right. His knuckles were white where he held the edge of the console with a death grip. The man's head was bowed, and his shoulders heaved with laboured breathing.

Hannah yawned exaggeratedly, giving her friend a chance to recover himself.

The Doctor immediately straightened and turned to face her. He wore a smile on his face, but deep bags lined his eyes and his skin held a deathly pallor.

"It's about time you were awake," the Doctor said. Hannah saw him brace himself with the console. "I was beginning to think I'd have to douse you with a bucket of water. Mind you, I'd have to pop back a couple of hundred years or so to pick up a replacement Hudson's Bay blanket in that case."

Hannah took stock of herself. She was lying on the threadbare sofa with a Hudson's Bay blanket draped over her. Its tan fabric was accentuated by stripes of green, red, yellow, and indigo. She pushed it aside and swung her legs to the floor. The strength she felt in her frame was still there and she rose to her feet without a wobble.

"I'm feeling much better, thanks for asking," Hannah said with a bit of a laugh. The chuckle died on her lips as the Doctor winced, obviously in pain. "Hey. Are *you* all right?"

"Yes, yes," the Doctor said, waving her concern away and turning to the control console. "I'm fine."

"Bull." Hannah joined the Doctor. "You *look* as bad as I feel. Felt."

"Having the life force sucked from you to cure the population of an entire planet has that

effect.”

Hannah frowned. Events were coming back to her now. She swallowed against a lump in her throat. “You... you saved the Banasi then. You set them on a course to spread that disease into the galaxy.”

The Doctor looked at her with hunted eyes. “No. I didn’t save them. I couldn’t. They were never fated for that.”

Hannah tried to laugh again. “I thought you didn’t believe in fate.”

The Doctor stared at a readout on the control panel that was studiously not reporting anything interesting. He said, “Londra arranged for us to escape.”

“Where is she?” Hannah asked, looking about the console room as if that would conjure up the Minder.

“She... didn’t make it,” the Doctor said, his voice hollow. “First Talon Libre, well, he decided she wasn’t as important to his plans as she thought she was.”

Hannah was saved from responding as a barking cough wracked the Doctor’s frame.

“OK, seriously Doctor you do not look good.”

It was the Doctor’s turn to try to force a laugh. “I expect not. I expect I’m dying.”

“What?” Hannah couldn’t believe her ears. “No. No, no. You can’t die.”

“Everyone dies. Eventually.”

“But... you’re a Time Lord.” Hannah felt a hand squeezing her heart. “I mean, I mean you regenerate. That’s what this was all about. You regenerate. You told me. You—”

“Hannah. Hannah!” The Doctor raised a hand to stop her. “It’s all right.”

“No!” Hannah was furious. And when she was furious the tears came. And that just made her more furious. She palmed the salty water from her face. “No. You can’t die. You can’t.”

“I’ve gone through this before,” the Doctor said. “This time... feels different. Whatever Londra’s machine did... Well, it feels different. Now, don’t you worry. I’ve taken care of everything.”

“What do you mean?” For the first time, Hannah became aware the TARDIS was in motion. She glanced to the time rotor as it rose and fell, rose and fell, and failed to rise again.

“We’ve landed,” the Doctor said. Another wracking cough seized him. This time it didn’t let go. He collapsed to his knees and would have fallen farther if Hannah hadn’t caught him.

With her newfound strength, Hannah pulled the Doctor over to the sofa she’d recently vacated and settled him there. She drew the blanket up to his chin. He panted, struggling to catch his breath.

“Stay here, Doctor,” Hannah said. “I’m going to get help.”

She pushed herself to her feet, darted to the control console, and flicked the lever for the doors. She clipped her elbow on one as it opened in her race to get out of the control room. A warm, sandy breeze hit her in the face as she took in her surroundings, drawing her up short.

This place was so familiar to her. She was back in Wyoming, the upthrust rock of the Devils Tower looming in the distance. It seemed such a long time since she’d left here and yet, in the distance she could see traces of the smoke that had been wafting by when she’d taken that first step into a life with the Doctor. The dusty smell of rain that had passed was still in the air. Ash coated the ground. She heard the distant bellow of some escaped animal.

Memories threatened to overwhelm her. She shoved them resolutely from her mind. The Doctor needed her. There was a hospital not that far away if she could find a ride.

Hannah glanced over her shoulder at the open doors of the TARDIS. She whispered, “Hang on, Doctor. Hang on. I’m not going to let you die.”

* * * * *

The Doctor shivered with fever. He'd seldom felt so horrible in all his years of existence. He called out feebly for Hannah but she either didn't hear him or simply wasn't there.

So this is death, he thought. A pity. There were so many things he still wanted to do. So many places he still wanted to see.

Then it started.

That tingling sensation. Like a full-body itch, burrowing through his veins. He grimaced against the pain. Regeneration wasn't a comfortable process but ordinarily certain euphoric chemicals were produced to deaden the sensation.

Not this time.

This time the Doctor felt every excruciating moment. Bones ground against one another as they changed size. Muscles ripped and knitted as they twisted into new configurations. The pop of grey matter echoed through the Doctor's body as his brain reformed. Some memories were cut off as others were reforged. Some knowledge evaporated while the authority of other subjects flashed into being like lightning. He giggled.

The Doctor's body arched against the pain. The blanket pooled onto the floor. The Doctor tumbled after it.

Things were in a fog now. Impressions. What identity there was had gone. Who? Who? WHO?

Eyes opened that had never seen the light before. Not those eyes. They saw hands. New and unfamiliar. Everything was unfamiliar now. Everything was haunting. The light was too bright. The hum of the room was deafening. The very air itself rasped against new flesh. Thoughts and memories and feelings swirled, bringing disorienting vertigo.

Against the assault of everything, one vision broke through. The TARDIS console.

New energy suffused the Doctor, though the pain remained. One hand after another. One shuffling press of a foot in shoes that were no longer the right size. The Doctor crawled towards the console. Somehow the hexagonal object meant safety. Somehow it meant home.

* * * * *

Hannah hadn't taken more than ten steps from the TARDIS when a squeak and thunk drew her up short. She spun on her heel to see the TARDIS doors shut. The "Free for Use of Public" sign, which she'd never taken the time to fully read, faced her almost mockingly.

The light adorning the top of the police box-shaped time machine started flashing. A wheezing groan filled the air. The wind picked up, swirling dust and dirt about the blue box.

"No," Hannah whispered to herself. She ran towards the TARDIS crying, "No, no, no, no, no!"

She ran and ran. And ran through where the time machine had been.

Coming to a halt, she dropped to her knees, panting and staring at the red earth before her. Silent tears kicked up little puffs of dust and ash. It was some time before they stopped.

Hannah searched her pants pocket for her coin. It was gone, replaced by the double-headed wooden one the Doctor favoured. She stared at it for long moments before bringing it to her lips and kissing it gently.



For over a thousand years the Pama race has been indebted to a Time Lord who chose to help them. A Time Lord who stepped away from Gallifreyan society and was shunned in return. Young Londragulthardan started on her path to cure a virulent virus among the Pama people. But that idealistic endeavor has metamorphosed into tampering with every aspect of Pama society.

Now the Doctor and Hannah have arrived. Even the Doctor, no stranger to meddling of his own, is stunned by the lengths that Londra has gone to. When she entreats him to help finally find a cure for the dread disease will he agree or let nature and history take its course? And how can the Doctor make such a choice when Hannah's life hangs in the balance? For she too has contracted the Penumbra virus. A virus that leads inexorably... to death!

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