

THE  
**DOCTOR WHO**  
PROJECT

**COST OF CURE**



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## PROLOGUE

“Hey, Salami! Are ya coming in, or what?”

Salmi Kolvour lowered the book that he’d spent the last forty-five minutes reading with morbid fascination—he had always found Terran fiction terribly interesting—and shielded his lidless eyes from the mid-afternoon sun. He scanned the horizon for Geoffrey, and after a moment spotted him in the surf, foamy heaps crashing up to his knees.

Geoffrey waved a pink hand in an arc toward the ocean, beckoning Salmi away from the comfortable spot he’d taken up beneath an in-bloom Elmar tree. The massive leaves provided ample shade from the burning red rays beating down from the gunmetal grey sky with increasing viciousness as the day wore on.

“Come on Salami!” Geoffrey repeated.

“I believe I asked you to stop calling me that,” responded Salmi, voice calm, but his irritation clear. Geoffrey had only recently taken to referring to him as ‘Salami’, and he knew that Salmi considered it degrading.

Geoffrey approached him from the ocean, scooping a towel from a duffel bag and dabbing at the clumps of sea foam that clung to his lean, tan torso.

“You know you love it,” said Geoffrey. The human boy shook his long blonde hair back and forth, recalling to Salmi the convulsive shake of a shaggy wet dog.

Of course, that wasn’t the only thing that put Salmi in mind of wet dog: although he would never have said it aloud—he had been raised with more manners than that—the smell of wet human always put him in mind of their canine counterparts. He sniffed the air—an action that made his asthmatic lung tighten with warning—and crinkled what little nose he had with disgust.

“C’mon,” insisted Geoffrey, plopping himself in the sand across from Salmi. “We’re on vacation. What’s the point of vacationing on an ocean planet if you’re not gonna get in the ocean?”

“It was never my choice to come here,” Salmi reminded him. “Our parents picked the destination.”

“With our input,” said Geoffrey. “Even Sis jumped at the chance. And then we get here and I hear all this grumbling. If you wanted to go somewhere else, why didn’t you say so?”

“Voicing my dissent was impractical,” said Salmi. “The bulk of our group—parents, your good self, even your truculent ‘sis’—seemed content to be here, so I held my silence.” His degraded nose wheezily sucked in more breath. “And besides, my mother believed that the atmosphere here would prove beneficial for my lung condition.”

Geoffrey stared openly at Salmi, his mouth open in a pinched ‘O’ shape.

Salmi stared back, frozen in an exquisite agony of self-consciousness, although he would never have admitted it to Geoffrey. Or to anyone else, for that matter. He put aside the feeling and summoned his full haughtiness as he observed, “There appears to be something wrong with your mouth, Geoffrey. Do you find yourself unable to close it?”

Geoffrey snapped his mouth shut, reached into a nearby cooler, pulled out a nondescript bottle of soda, popped the top, took a long drag, and then belched.

“Nothing wrong with *your* lungs, obviously,” Salmi murmured.

“I really don’t get you sometimes,” said Geoffrey. “It’s like all the lights are on but no one’s at home.”

“To what do you refer?”

“I *refer* to the fact that I hear the words coming out of your mouth, but I can’t quite decide if you’re messing with me, or if you’re really as stone-cold emotionless as you seem.”

“The second one. I am not human,” Salmi reminded him. “You know very well that my species experiences emotion differently from yours. We are pragmatic above all else. Take this vacation. I have invested my time, and my parents their money, to improve my health ...” He rattled the old Earth paperback. “...and to indulge my weakness for your planet’s sensational literature. Only if and when those conditions are satisfied will I consider the investment worthwhile.”

“Yeah,” said Geoffrey, shaking his head sadly. “Emotionless damn near to a fault. But you’ve lived on Earth for most of your life, right? We’ve known each other since grade school, for crying out loud, and you’re gonna sit there in the broad, red light of day and tell me that nothing about our culture has rubbed off on you? Not even a little?”

“Not even a little,” Salmi lied.

Whether Geoffrey saw through the lie, Salmi could not tell. His reply was unreadable, emotionless. “Yeah. Well. Be that as it may, I know you like to swim, I’ve been there when you’ve done it. So are you coming in or what?”

Salmi looked at the sky.

“In a few hours,” he said. “I wish to avoid this horrible red sun at its zenith, and I wish to finish this book.” He lifted the book up to his face, reluctantly blocking Geoffrey’s face from his view. Oh, if Geoffrey knew how hard it was to block it, he would never call Salmi emotionless again.

Geoffrey watched him a moment, finishing the soda before he tossed the towel away and headed into the ocean. Before he reached the surf, he turned back to face his childhood friend.

“Hey, Salami!”

Salmi’s right cheek twitched, his breathing wheezed. He didn’t notice. He was determined not to notice.

“Yes?”

“What the hell book are you reading, anyway?”

“It is called ...” He glanced at the cover and angled it toward Geoffrey. “*Yaws*.”

Geoffrey read it and snorted. “*Jaws*, silly,” he corrected.

Salmi’s thin, purple lips spread into a self-deprecating smile. “Well, I admit my English is not quite up to the standard of my neo-Mandarin.”

“What’s it about?”

“I will tell you later,” said Salmi, the smile curdling nastily. “I would not want to put you off your swim.”

## CHAPTER ONE

*One hundred years later*

Maraleen Shareen could feel her internal organs liquefying. It was not a pleasant sensation, to be sure, but it didn't pain her quite as badly as her husband, David, seemed to think. Despite the fact that they had been married for forty-two Earth years, she couldn't help but marvel at how he worried over her, constantly assessing her comfort, and desperate to do anything to ease her pain.

She didn't have the heart to tell him that although her condition *was* thoroughly fatal, it was only mildly uncomfortable. It reminded her of the time she'd eaten a nasty Earth delicacy, a favourite of David's, called black bean chilli: there was a lot of vomiting, accompanied by the sensation of higher intestinal tract apparently trying to mount a last-ditch escape through her middle intestines. Of course, in this case, that was happening for real, making her husband all the more confused that she didn't appear to be in a crippling state of agony.

Maraleen supposed it made sense for him to feel that way. She knew from personal experience that Terrans experienced pain in a vastly different way from Blisteallians.

When she was entering the second cycle of her life—the phase humans would identify as their late teenage years—and her family had just moved to Io, she'd been present at a horrifying collision. A hauling hover-freighter had blown through a red light, vertically crossing from its lane and dropping onto a small passenger pod that had the right of way at street level. The freighter's driver had been emotionally distressed but physically unharmed. The man in the pod hadn't been quite so lucky.

Before the emergency medical services arrived, the driver looked to Maraleen, innocently standing at the crosswalk, waiting for the light to change. It was a quiet afternoon; there was no one there, and there were certainly no doctors around. Wracked with guilt, the driver begged her to help him pry the man free from the wreckage. Reluctantly, she obliged.

She couldn't recall how long they spent trying to get him free, but she clearly remembered the earthy smells of human death, so tragically prosaic to a Blisteallian. They hung lethargically in Io's artificially cooled air, intermingling with the acrid odours of burnt rubber and superheated metal. They couldn't pull him free—the weight of the pod's alloys was too great—but he sat pinioned, writhing desperately as the life squeezed from his body. Only when the medics arrived did Maraleen see the full extent of the horror. The man's ribs had been crushed like a child's matchstick fort, his chest little more than a concave of shredded flesh and bone. His left arm was twisted sickeningly. But the worst, clearest memory was the poor pod-driver's eyes, bulging from their sockets, blood and tears running down his cheeks in duelling rivulets of misery as the life was slowly leaving them.

Those wretched eyes: utterly terrified, utterly aware. They searched Maraleen out, locked onto her, and for a terrible moment she felt as responsible as the freighter driver for his wretched state. The man's

suffering... it transfixed her. Her heart raced, her breath caught in her chest. She was certain that if she couldn't break contact, she would surely suffocate beneath the crushing weight of his agony.

And then he was gone, the EMTs rushing the stretcher away, whisking him to an uncertain future filled with pain and, perhaps inevitably, death. She never saw the man or the freighter-driver again, and perhaps that tragic question mark—knowing no more of either than the worst moment of their lives—made it more poignant.

Maraleen shivered.

Most Blisteiallians would never understand the bottomless depths of human suffering, but after that day Maraleen was acutely attuned to it. It seemed to her that Terrans were the most fragile species in the known universe, and she felt immense empathy for them. She often wondered whether that had something to do with the powerful attraction she felt toward them, and whether that predisposed her to marrying one.

Maraleen and David had met one another under the same circumstances that brought a number of traditional Terran couples together: through mutual friends. Their attraction had by no means been a foregone conclusion—the twenty-third century had seen human society overrun by a moral panic, with 'inter-species relations' being the focus of the deranged, millenarian ire. But for Maraleen and David, the flame burned bright and hot. They knew by the end of that summer they could never bear to be apart. When they announced their engagement plans six months later, neither of their families had been particularly pleased. Maraleen's parents were staunch traditionalists who expected her to germinate in the traditional Blisteiallian trio, just like they had, whilst David's father Nathan was shamelessly xenophobic, brainwashed by the media craze and a proud member of that century's shameful 'moral majority'. But that hadn't deterred them. If anything it strengthened their resolve. By the New Year, they were married and living in a small tenement hall in the 'Gringo District' of Nueva Lima, financially destitute but emotionally fulfilled.

Stupid kids. That's what they'd been. Young, dumb, in love, and determined to thumb their noses (in her case metaphorically, as Blisteiallians had no such appendage) at their disapproving parents.

Now they were old—she was nearly in her eighth cycle, and David would turn eighty-three in just over a fortnight—but their love was every bit as strong as when they'd first met. Perhaps even stronger. The fact that Blisteiallians and Terrans were biologically incapable of parenting children might have driven other couples apart, but Maraleen and David had clung to one another all the tighter. It was them against the universe, and she would be damned if she'd let the universe drive a wedge between them.

Then came the diagnosis. Skallak's Syndrome. Named for the first unfortunate Blisteiallian who, so many ages ago, found his internal organs inexplicably liquefying. No one knew what caused it; no genetic markers could predict the syndrome's onset, no regional correlation had been discovered, and no known cure was available. It was also extremely rare, affecting only one in 100,000 Blisteiallians per planetary hatching cycle. The syndrome was unheard of in the Sol system, and only after fifteen second opinions did they find a specialist in xenobiology who could identify it.

Predictably, David had not taken the news well. There had been much crying and screaming, followed by a mad blur of sleepless nights and fitful days. Then, out of desperation and emotional exhaustion, he reached out to contact his father. Maraleen wished he hadn't, but perhaps she would have felt differently if she had any next of kin to inform. All three of her parents were killed during the Draconian marauders' hijack at Point Light Station about ten years ago. That event nearly sparked an interstellar incident between the Blisteial Sovereignty and the Draconian court. And as for the rest of her family... well, they'd disowned her branch for moving to Io. Fundamentalism wasn't confined to Earth in these miserable days.

David spent days silent about his father's reaction. She assumed that he had offered neither his sincere condolences nor well wishes. That was fine. She was long resigned to the fact that Nathan Shareen would not accept a Blisteiallian into 'his' family, and anyway he'd be dead before too long himself. Humans had relatively short life spans compared to the bulk of the universal community. At one hundred and thirty years old, Nathan was practically an animated mummy. No one would miss him when he was gone, least of all, she suspected, her husband. Indeed, her hope to outlive him gave Maraleen a bitter drive to cling on to life.



Finally, though, David told Maraleen what Nathan had said. “He told me about this place. The Enkindler’s Point of Aqua Vitae. He suggested you might find help there.”

Maraleen’s neck fronds fluttered, the Blisteiallian equivalent of sceptical side-eye. “Really? They must have a lot of bridges that I can go jump off.”

“Mar, he was serious. It’s a miracle, he said. One of his friends with Irumodic Grippe went there, came back sharp as a tack.”

Maraleen, against her better judgement, read up on the place, and found herself even bitterer at the fact that David’s miserable father had spared her one nice thought.

She wondered if her home branch on Blisteial would have done the same for David. For the first time in many years, she speculated on what their stuffy, middle-tier hive was doing. For all she knew they were dead, too, and she thought with a shiver, she would see them again soon in the Realm of Antecedents.

A tight smile creased the thin grille of Maraleen’s mouth. The thought of spending eternity with her family in the Blisteiallian afterlife made the human concept of Hell seem like a lovely afternoon picnic. She hoped that if David—Nathan too—prayed hard enough, maybe the Lord Almighty in whom they had such naïve faith would smuggle her essence from the Realm of Antecedents to the halls of their Eternal Paradise. She’d much rather spend eternity with David, playing harps and floating on clouds with golden halos affixed to their heads and fluffy wings on their backs.

“Golden halos and wings,” she mumbled, chuckling softly. “How very, very silly.”

“Did you say something, Mar?”

Maraleen started, her body jerking visibly within the safety harness of the passenger liner’s oval seat. She looked round to see David sitting next to her, watching her with his brow furrowed in the way it always did when he worried after her. Hoo-boy, did he ever do that a lot lately.

*Lost to the world, she thought. It’s happening more and more just lately. I wonder if my brains are starting to melt, too.*

Her eyes drifted slowly about the liner’s densely packed lounge. Long rows of oval seats were occupied by a cavalcade of unique species: Terran, Blisteiallian (a high-born one who regarded her intimacy with David with distaste), Havlar, Ariia-Hex, Monoid, Wala, Argolin ...

And those were just the species she recognized. Next to the Monoid sat an aqua blue reptilian with a breathing apparatus that provided it with a constant supply of soliton gas. It slumped forward in its chair, its gills flapping ineffectually in the gaps between the gas’s cycles. Across sat a golden skinned humanoid with a thin slit for a mouth, oval metallic caps shielding its eyes, and rubbery strings of honey-coloured hair that seemed much too large for its thin, crooked head.

The lounge was full of them, most seated and looking forlornly out the liner’s windows, counting down the minutes until their arrival and their possible salvation. Few made conversation, for they had nothing in common. Their only unifying factor was sickness and fear. Whether they wanted to admit it or not, surely every species in the known universe—with the possible exception of the undead horrors like Daleks and Cybermen—recoiled from the ever-present shadow of their own mortality.

Maraleen’s eyes returned to David, whose gaze had not left her during her whole distracted train of thought. She smiled, took one of David’s hands and stroked it gently. The contact still made her swoon, even after forty-two years.

“It’s nothing, love,” she said. “Nothing at all. I was dozing, maybe. Talking in my sleep. You know what I’m like when we’re on vacation.”

David smiled uncertainly. They hadn’t been on a vacation for many years, and this trip was far from fun. But he knew what she meant and chose not to press her.

The other Terran in the lounge, a burly Asian in a mechanical brace, was stretching his lifeless legs by walking the length of the lounge. This modest exertion clearly took its toll on the poor fellow, and it was in the middle of collecting his strength to continue that he stopped by their seat and nodded a greeting.

“You’re Solars?”

“We live in Peoria,” David answered.

The man chuckled. “No way! I grew up on Old Earth, me. Malaysia.” The man shifted his weight, suppressing a cringe at the obvious pain. As if it were not obvious from his overly muscular top half, this

was an alpha-male, a stubborn specimen who never liked to show pain or vulnerability. He would have been exactly the same if he were a leper in the Middle Ages, or a paralysed veteran coming home from Vietnam. “What brings you folks to the Enkindler’s Point?”

Maraleen slapped her chest. “Oh, nothing too serious. Just an ultra-rare, incurable Blisteiallian ailment. My organs are turning into soup. Yum yum.” She gestured to the brace circling the man’s lower half. “I assume you want that put right?”

He drummed the valves lining his legs and nodded. “Used to be a boxer. Clifton Reighley.”

“I remember!” Maraleen cried. “It was so sad. You got knocked out of the Orion Purse when that Summatri—” She held her hand to her mouth. “But... why didn’t you get surgery? A spinal injury like that...”

Clifton chuckled grimly. “Not the way the Summatri do it. You could crumble my spine on top of that soup with your organs.” They shared a grim laugh, and David looked from one to the other in discomfort and sadness. “Plus, my stitch-up was a bit of a backdoor operation. Healthcare isn’t up to much when you box in galactic slums. And your wife decides to—” He broke off, blinking away a tear and gestured. “You two are lucky you’ve got each other, is all.” Clifton indicated the window, suddenly keen that his fellow Terrans not see him burst into tears. “We’re almost there. You can see the resort.”

Maraleen turned to the window. There had been little to see for the hyperspace portion of the journey, but now her amber eyes squinted against a harsh crimson rays’ sunset. Below it was the deep and brilliant purple water that covered almost all of Aqua Vitae’s surface. Rushing toward them at a disconcerting clip was the single spit of land; at its peak, the smooth, metallic domed structure known the universe over as Enkindler’s Point.

At this distance she couldn’t be sure, but she suspected the dome reached at least a kilometre up into the pinkish-grey sky. Its surface had the sheen of a vast, polished mirror, off of which the sun’s descending rays exploded into a multitude of spectacular colours. She marvelled at its beauty, and wondered what it would look like when the sun was high in the sky above the Coast of Cure.

Maraleen watched the dome for what seemed an eternity, transfixed. The sight was hypnotic. The sun and its reflection formed two discs, giving her the disconcerting sensation that the dome was watching her like a pair of tear-stained, bloodshot eyes...

She wanted to look away, to look at anything other than its slick mirrored surface and the horror it dredged from her memories. When finally she managed it, she turned to see David also watching the dome, a dreamy distance in his pale blue eyes. She shivered. She’d seen that look only a handful of times in her life, always during moments of... intimacy, she blushed to think. Seeing it now, in amongst a cavalcade of the sick and dying, sparked something primal within Maraleen that she hadn’t felt since she was a third cycler. Was it jealousy? Did she, entirely selfishly, bristle at the thought that David might cope with her death, move on, perhaps fall in love and marry again? She wasn’t sure. But she knew she didn’t like seeing that look. Not here. Not now. It was hers and hers alone. She was damned if she would share it with the rest of this rotten, unfair universe.

Maraleen lifted a hand to David’s chin and gently turned his face to her. When their eyes met, the spell seemed to break. The concern that now seemed permanently etched into her husband’s face returned, and his head drooped. He saw her less as that intimate partner and more as a pitiable subject, whose woes only made him sad as well.

“This is good, isn’t it?” he asked. “We’re doing the right thing by coming here, yes?”

Maraleen smiled sadly.

“It’s the only thing left,” she said.

## CHAPTER TWO

The TARDIS tumbled through time, and there was a draft.

Maggie Weitz stood motionless in the ship's open doorway, watching the swirling energies of the time vortex undulate dazzlingly. She could not help feeling that any sudden movement would cause her to slip out of the police box doorway and into the expanse. She wondered vaguely about what technobabble was keeping her safe, preventing her from tumbling headlong into the whole of time and space. A forcefield, right? But it must be a very subtle one, as she could feel the almighty pressure and torrent of movement swirling from beyond. A shudder ran up her body and she wrapped her arms protectively around herself.

Behind her stood Kaylaar, all six feet of his changeable Frenazzi form trembling in terror, his eyes jammed shut in terror at the incomprehensible kaleidoscope of the void beyond linear time. He held both arms around her torso, supposedly protecting her from falling out because he didn't trust the TARDIS defences. She wondered how much help he would be if anything did happen. At her shudder, he clung to her tighter, and she squeezed his arm to reassure him.

"Enjoying yourselves?" the Doctor called from within.

"No!" shrieked Kaylaar.

Maggie craned her head past the petrified Frenazzi, to look at her otherworldly companion. A half-smile tugged at her lips.

"Don't listen to Mister Spoilsport, Doc. It's positively breath-taking out there."

The Doctor returned the smile from behind the rising cylinder at the centre of the TARDIS console. He moved briskly from panel to panel, the skirts of his long green balmacaan coat swooping dramatically behind him as he entered data, checked readouts, and spun the wheel of destiny that moved his mighty ship through creation. Maggie wondered how he managed, but hadn't thought to ask him directly. When next they had downtime, maybe she would. If ever they did have downtime. Travelling with the Doctor was a full-time job in and of itself. She never thought she'd miss working in a hardware store in the Revelstoke. And perhaps she didn't miss it, exactly. It was hard to feel one could miss anything in this amazing time machine, since (barring accidents) she could return home and pick up where she left off at the press of a button (or more likely, the press of rows of toggles and the occasional hammer for encouragement). But, life in small-town British Columbia certainly offered more opportunities to relax.

Maggie turned back to the vortex. When she'd asked the Doctor what it looked like to travel through time, she expected him to bring up a diagram or a video from outside. Instead he had smiled with a familiar devil-may-care glint in his eyes, and said he could do her one better than a description.

And there she stood, with only the most ethereal barrier protecting her from eternity. The idea of tumbling unprotected into the limitless melee of light and colour sent another ripple of gooseflesh across her neck and up the length of her arms.

And there it was.

The vortices ebbed darkly, seeming to become smoky. Along with them was a kind of distant, discordant music. In that darkness, Maggie saw something move. Gnashing teeth and coal-black eyes, rushing headlong toward her.

Maggie took a hasty step back from the threshold. The TARDIS's double doors swung shut with undue haste, as if sensing her unease, and perhaps feeling uneasy herself.

"Had enough?" asked the Doctor.

His voice was casual, but Maggie could hear a flicker of concern. Kaylaar was only now opening his eyes, suddenly self-conscious that he was so fearfully holding on to Maggie, and shaking away the rush between his ears. She knew Kaylaar was none the wiser, but had the Doctor seen it? The distracted half-smile faded, as he saw her fear. His dark eyes sharpened with concern, and he clutched her arm.

"Is everything all right, Maggie? Dear me, are you shaking?"

Maggie decided to play it cool. "It's certainly impressive. It's ... all that and a bag of chips."

A clammy silence filled the control room. Kaylaar and the Doctor looked at each other, both aliens recognizing uniquely human awkwardness. Maggie winced. It had been years since anyone had used that particularly corny turn of phrase, let alone herself.

Mercifully, they said nothing, instead clearing their throats and finding something fascinating on the scanner to distract them.

*Smooth*, Maggie admonished herself. She circled the console, dizzy and troubled by that strange sight in the vortex. She had a nagging sense that it was familiar somehow.

"So, what's on the boob tube this evening?" she asked, sounding overly chipper. "Anything good, or is it all sports highlights and repeats?"

"Actually, there does seem to be a little flicker. Haven't seen that activity in a while." The Doctor scratched at his closely shorn scalp.

"Well, I can't imagine it's relevant," Maggie murmured. "But now that you mention it I did see ... something out there."

"Aha!" cried the Doctor, before her obvious discomfort chastened him. When she described it, he shook his head. "The kind of creatures that exist in the vortex aren't visible by your narrow standards. And they wouldn't need teeth and eyes. Most impractical, as I'm sure you're both finding out. Did you see this creature Kaylaar?"

Kaylaar cleared his throat. "I, ahem, was too scared to open my eyes."

"Well, I didn't imagine it." Maggie felt her cheeks colour, irate at the Doctor's reaction. "I'm just telling you what I saw."

The Doctor looked ashen. "Yes. Sorry, how very rude of me. Hang on a mo—" He stroked his chin, his eyes faraway. He turned away from his companions, his movements suddenly jerky and awkward.

Maggie and Kaylaar looked to each other. Despite their closeness with the Doctor, when he had these introspective moments, neither knew how to approach them. He was, at his core, an unknowable man of mystery, and asking him to share his secrets felt both rude and dangerous.

But as he turned back, mumbling under his breath, his hands fluttering with nervous energy, Maggie had a moment of revelation. He was remembering something.

"What I saw ..." she whispered. "You've seen it too, somewhere."

"Not just somewhere," he replied. "Back home."

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*"Grandfather! Grandfather!" Susan had run the length of the platform, past the other youths, screaming at the top of her lungs the whole time. She collided into the Doctor's back, and he turned with mock irritation.*

*"Goodness me, my child! What's all this racing about for? You're making quite a spectacle of yourself." He gestured off-hand to the other Time Lords and their children, but the smile on his face told her he was proud rather than admonishing.*

*The other Time Lords turned away and returned to their view of the stellar wonders, their faces paralysed with the same boredom they showed about everything else. As they always did, they ignored the Doctor; he was, after all, a well-known oddball, and that granddaughter of his was clearly a chip off the old block. He was happy to return the favour, ignoring them in turn.*

*Susan paid them no mind either, grabbing the Doctor's hand and marching him to the far edge of the platform. "I hope it's still there. Wait till you see it! It was terrifying!"*

*"See what?"*

*But it was still there, as if waiting for them. It hung on the edge of a particularly lurid temporal flicker, as if peeking from the curtain that divided linear time from its chaotic side dimension.*

*"The Enkindler, isn't it Grandfather?"*

*The Doctor, who despite his youth was still accustomed to having all the answers, found himself holding his hand over his mouth, stunned by the sight of it. The form it had taken was from his memories. Even at that early age, he had many sad ones.*

*"Eh?" he asked, trying to conceal his raw emotions in his elderly bluster.*

*"The Enkindler," Susan repeated.*

*"Er ... yes, yes, quite so," he hastily nodded.*

*He could not recall how long they stood there. He was sure he had admonished Susan for shrieking again when it flitted between the clouds of the nebula. "Fear itself is largely an illusion."*

*But as soon as the other Time Lords joined them on the platform, the magnificent creature had gone. They only saw those two oddballs staring out into the stars, slack-jawed and dumbfounded.*

*"Typical," they had sneered. "Sentimental, silly pair. It's just a routine temporal rift. Timelines should correct themselves momentarily. Nothing to get all dewy-eyed about."*

*But the Doctor remembered Susan looking up at him, and saying, "Maybe one day we'll be able to get out there. See those wonders—not from a platform orbiting Gallifrey, but first-hand, up close!"*

*It was as if she had read the Doctor's mind. "Yes, yes, one day. Indeed! Hmmp! Why not?" The Time Lords were once again disturbed, as the Doctor's snorts of delighted laughter rang loudly and shrilly through the platform.*

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The Doctor opened his mouth, about to share the memory, but before he could speak, the TARDIS rumbled with an almighty shudder, and then went still. He pushed past them to check the instruments, he frowned. "We've landed. I hadn't set any course."

Kaylaar swallowed. "Do you think it's connected with ... Maggie's sighting?"

He shrugged. "Could be a coincidence ... but if it isn't, I'm *doubly* sorry." He slapped his maroon ribbed toque on his head and dashed to the door.

"Are you sure this is safe?" asked Maggie.

The Doctor's lips twitched, and Maggie thought his somewhat mischievous sparkle clouded over with sadness. Maggie knew that most of the time, travelling through space and time was the equivalent of being a kid in a candy store. But sometimes he bit down on a candy that was sour, and salty as well, and potentially lethal to humans, and didn't know whether he should enjoy it or not.

"Safe?" asked the Doctor. "Life in the TARDIS very rarely is. But we won't know for certain until we step outside. Shall we?"

Maggie smiled, and squeezed the Doctor's shoulder. "After you."

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Maggie came to an abrupt stop as she passed the threshold, her feet sinking into a fine blue powder. It stuck to her shoe, and its crystalline consistency reminded her more of snow than sand. She looked around and breathed in sultry air. Directly ahead of her, the snowy sand stretched as far as she could see. To her right, a dense line of trees gave a distinctly tropical impression without being anything like the flora back on

Earth. They looked a bit like the mutant stepchildren of coconut trees and evergreens. Their bark was rough like pine or oak, thick branches with long, green needles swaying gently in the near-constant breeze. Their fruit put Maggie in mind of a mad painter who had confused coconuts for oversized pinecones with feathered, unruly spines.

Maggie returned her gaze to the beach, and its calm stasis, marked only by the sound and movement of distant crashing waves, was not terribly different from the time vortex. Only a few trips ago, they had landed on the beaches of Markonis, where the sand was crimson and the skies violet<sup>1</sup>. Funnily, Maggie barely noticed the vibrant colours, more distracted by her memory of being disturbed by the beach as a child. When there were no people sunbathing it looked desolate and sad, and the ocean beyond always seemed to carry some primal volatile nature. Perhaps that was because the Weitzes were always city folk.

The Doctor tramped through the sand. A mild wind fluttered his coattails, and he smelled the briny air and squatted to run a hand through the packed sand. He then looked up, squinting against the red sun and the grey sky.

“Charming spot, Doctor,” Kaylaar declared acidly from the doorway.

“You’re not wrong there, Kaylaar,” Maggie nodded. There was something nightmarish and distorted about the place, like a tropical scene painted by Salvador Dali. More of the squat, massive pine cones dotted the beach, perched at angles that made them look depressed and slumped. The wind seemed to sway them slowly and listlessly, and the general torpor gave the tableau the texture of a dream.

There was, Maggie felt, something fundamentally desolate about an empty beach.

However, the beach was not entirely empty. Two boys, teenagers, were by the water. One, whose turquoise skin nearly matched the sand, was sheltering under one of the giant pinecones, reading. The other, a pale blond human boy, was thrashing about in the waves. The boy looked up every so often at his friend, a wistful smile playing across his purple lips.

“Well, Maggie?” the Doctor asked.

Maggie ran a hand to smooth her windswept tangles of hair. “It feels ... I don’t know, I don’t feel fully awake. There’s something in the air ...”

“Nostalgic,” the Doctor agreed with a nod. “Just the place for a mythical time-beasts, wouldn’t you say?”

“Mythical?”

“Well, that was what I was going to say ... I remembered something from a long time ago ... what you humans might call a fairy-story. Only this fairy was ...”

“Doctor! Mags! Come back!” Kaylaar cried.

“Unbelievable.”

“Hold that thought, Doc.”

They turned and ran back to the TARDIS, where their friend was beckoning them inside. “The panels, they’re lighting up. ”

The lamp on the police box’s roof began flashing. The Doctor’s eyes widened as he ushered Maggie through the doors. “Oh well, maybe the old girl made a mistake. And she seems rather keen to get a shift on.”

The TARDIS’s unearthly wail vanished along the wind, unheard by Salmi Kolvour, absorbed in Peter Benchley’s magnum opus. Also unheard against its eerie whistling was the boy, Geoffrey Harper, crying out for help.

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The TARDIS reappeared on the same spot a century later. Maggie took the opportunity to change into a sheer print dress and sandals. She felt the same snowy crunch into the sand, saw the same unfriendly sky blazing red and grey. Only now, the beach was far from empty. The dunes were dotted with a dazzling array of sunbathers, all colours of the rainbow, and all body types.

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<sup>1</sup> See *The Doctor Who Project: ‘Storm of the Century’*.

The other difference was far more noticeable. Whereas the same odd foliage decked the beach, the lonely horizon was now dominated by a massive dome of polished steel.

“Looks like we’ve hit rush hour,” the Doctor chuckled, as a beach ball bounced off the ship’s blue post.

A couple ran to collect the ball. The man was a human of about fifty, with thinning grey hair and a slight but healthy build. His wife had scaly silver skin and a remarkable leathery flap projecting from her neck. But their physical differences clearly meant nothing. Their tightly held hands, dewy eyes, and charming smiles told that they were utterly besotted with each other.

The Doctor waved away their apologies as he returned their ball. They introduced themselves as David and Maraleen. “Marvellous place, isn’t it?” Maraleen asked rhetorically.

“We, uh, haven’t been in a while,” the Doctor replied.

She patted her stomach. “Well, we’ve only been here a month, but my Skallak’s Syndrome is barely noticeable.”

Maggie was chilled by the Doctor’s reaction; he smiled with a sad indulgence. She could tell that ‘Skallak’s Syndrome’ was something serious, and it broke Maggie’s heart that the couple might not live past this comfortable middle age.

The Doctor’s jovial interrogation was interrupted by a stern woman in a mesh tunic greeting them. She greeted the travellers with a supercilious sniff, before turning to the couple. “Ah, Mister and Mrs. Shareen,” she greeted them coldly. “Time for your appointment with Mister Shaman.”

They nodded, and with a glib farewell, followed the official along the beach. The Doctor stroked his chin, while Kaylaar and Maggie tried to puzzle out what troubled him. “They look perfectly happy. Maybe the TARDIS got it wrong twice.”

“Mm.” The Doctor’s eyes drooped, and his prominent nose whistled as he sucked in that air. “You know what I’m feeling, don’t you Maggie?”

“That sad sense of nostalgia,” she said with a nod.

Kaylaar looked from one to the other, oblivious. “I think you’re both over-sensitive. And that couple—”

“That couple’s physical age is, I would estimate, middle fifties and fourth Blisteiallian cycle respectively. And yet, take it from a Time Lord, their *chronological* age is eighty-three and late-seventh.” His eyes snapped open. “The healing they’re experiencing is temporal distortion. And if we want answers ...”

“We should see Mister Shaman?” finished Maggie. “I suppose with a name like that, he’s got to be up to something.”

## CHAPTER THREE

Standing outside Mister Shaman's head office, Maraleen forgot the bliss she had felt all month and felt a soul-crushing despair of being an impostor. She felt as though she had entered the offices of one of the rich mineral tycoons from the crummy daytime holo-soaps she'd been forcibly subjected to in the wake of her diagnosis (bed rest had quickly become her sworn enemy). She half expected the ornate double doors behind the desk to open, revealing the swaggering 'Big Tex' Styles, ready to buy out the few remaining malachite farmers who stood in the way of his needlessly hostile takeover of Pineland Harbour.

If this treatment was successful, the first thing she'd do when she got home was delete every excruciating hour of *Pineland Harbour*. David would be her priority.

Sweet, long-suffering David. He'd dealt with more than his fair share of stress and grief over the last two and a half weeks. And not just because of her quick-fire temper. He reassured her that he understood, that he was neither angry nor depressed, but the look in his eyes when they first arrived ... They'd been through a lot over the last forty-two years, but she worried whether their relationship could survive. Assuming, of course, that she survived.

"Mrs. Shareen, did you hear me?"

Maraleen blinked rapidly, snapped from that self-reflective stupor. She hadn't had such distraction for most of the month. It was an unwanted reminder that, no matter how well she was feeling, Skallak's was still ravaging her innards.

She looked round at the receptionist, watching with a disconcertingly peaceful smile.

"I'm sorry," said Maraleen. "I didn't get that."

"Mister Shaman will see you now."

Maraleen brushed past the receptionist and opened tall, ornate doors of smooth, gold-trimmed black. She wondered whether they were wood or stone. Probably stone. In a place this fancy there was little doubt in Maraleen's mind that no expense had been spared on the absolute best materials. The thought of that sort of money made her head spin. She couldn't quite fathom it. She and David had done well enough to keep the lights on and their bellies filled, but they'd never had much in the way of expendable income. And they had spent a month here! What would they do when the bill arrived?

The office beyond was the most ornately decorated room she had thus far seen within Enkindler's Point. Three of the four walls were a rich mahogany, and the floor was a thick, comfortable carpet of an equally luxurious tobacco shade. To her left was a roaring fireplace so deep it could have been a room in Maraleen and David's small tenement. Above it hung an expressionistic painting of a poor family dining on a feast of raw potatoes (David, who once studied primitive Earth art, would have recognized it as a genuine van Gogh). Alongside it were works of art from across the universe. Before the fire was a high-backed chair that reminded Maraleen of a prehistoric Blisteallian throne.

A lanky alien rose from the throne, and bowed.



“Mister Shaman?” she guessed.

Even from a distance she could see that he was an imposing figure, his torso long and narrow, his head longer and thinner than that of either a Blisteiallian or a Terran. His eye sockets were almond-shaped pools of darkness with no discernible details, no irises, no corneas, just black orbs. His long, taloned fingers stroked the chin of his electric blue face.

Next to him stood the woman who greeted her and David on the beach. She too was tall and lean, but next to the disconcerting height of her boss looked positively diminutive. In the room’s dank humidity, her fringe of sandy blonde hair hugged her wide, pale forehead. Beads of sweat collected in the hair, but she stood at attention, no doubt used to her boss’s comfort at the expense of her own.

“Mrs. Maraleen Shareen. It is good of you to join us. Please, be seated.” He waved a hand in front of him, indicating the plush chairs opposite the fire. His expression was unreadable, his voice flat. “I am Shaman, founder and chairman of Enkindler’s Point. You know my assistant, Allison Validan.”

Validan inclined her head slightly in Maraleen’s direction, as bereft of warmth as she had been every time she spoke to the Shareens.

“Please forgive the lateness of this interview,” said Mister Shaman. “A whole month I have let slip away! But I wager it has felt longer for you.”

“Yes. Like cycles have been taken off,” she replied keenly.

“I am so glad.” Validan handed Shaman a cylinder, and he pressed it into his eye socket. “However, the medical staff have given you a thorough work-up. The Skallak’s Syndrome is too advanced. As soon as you leave the Enkindler’s Point, and head back to your charming home, time will catch back up with you.”

She had dreaded this moment, but accepted it would come. Of course they couldn’t help her; unfortunately, nature would simply run its course. Thanks for playing, ma’am, it’s been a fun month but there’s nothing more we can do. You lose. Good day.

Instead, Validan flashed a disarmingly warm smile. “It may surprise you to hear that you’re not the first Skallak’s case to turn up on our doorstep, Mrs. Shareen.”

“Mm,” agreed Mister Shaman from behind steepled fingers.

“So ... so you’re not letting me go?”

“Not at all!” Shaman emitted a braying sound, perhaps his imitation of human laughter.

“We just need to give you a more aggressive treatment,” Validan said.

“Would that be the, uh ... the ritual?” Maraleen had heard the other patients speak of it, and every week a handful ventured into the water to undergo it. Clifton Reighley, that boxer, was due in tomorrow. But it was surprisingly, and sinisterly, secretive. She felt uncomfortable mentioning it out loud.

Shaman nodded. “Yes indeed, Mrs. Shareen. It is extreme, I warn you, but should all go well with the ritual, I am confident that you will be simply fine.”

No sooner did Maraleen feel the weight of a thousand solar systems lift from her shoulders, before the hope was cruelly dashed.

“There is, however, just the small matter of payment.”

Maraleen felt a tight knot twist in the pit of her belly, more painful than those internal organs. *Of course. There was always just the small matter of payment.*

“You are here under Peoria’s health-care voucher subsidy, I believe?”

“We don’t have much,” she said hastily. “But if there’s an additional fee, well—” *Well, what, Maraleen? Maybe we could wash dishes here for the next hundred years?*

Validan held up a hand. “The ritual benefits us as much as you, Mrs. Shareen. The, er, process depends on a fixed pool of contributors. It would be gauche to ask for payment on top of what you give us.” His voice dropped, and the flames lit his cheeks eerily. “It is, I am afraid, more a question of ... risk, shall we say.”

“That’s why we couldn’t allow Mister Shareen in here too,” Validan explained. “The sufferer must make the decision alone. They alone can decide whether the cost of cure is too great.”

“Have you heard anything specific about the Ritual of Enkindling?”

“Only that it involves some sort of ritual at sea,” admitted Maraleen. Perhaps knowing that Nathan Shareen, an easy dupe if ever there was one, spoke so highly of it raised her condescension. “To be honest, the whole thing sounded a bit mystical and silly to me, but, well, desperate times...”

“Indeed,” said Mister Shaman, his tone ever flat. “The Ritual of Enkindling is indeed mystical, but it is also a miracle. My people do not use such words lightly, Mrs. Shareen, so you may rest assured that I mean what I say. However, there are certain... risks... involved with the procedure. It is my duty as chairman to make you fully aware of those risks. If afterward you still intend to proceed, you may sign the waivers on your way out.”

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“I don’t know about all this,” said David. The furrow in his brow, which had seemed to vanish over the month, seemed as deep as ever now. “You can’t tell me anything about it, Mar?”

Maraleen reached out and cupped David’s cheeks in her shaking hands.

“I’m already dying,” she said. “There’s nothing else to be done, my love. It’s this, or we go home and wait for the inevitable.”

David sat in silence for a long time. Finally, he swore under his breath and pressed his hands in hers. He closed his eyes and drew a long breath.

“Okay,” he said with a deep sigh. “Okay. It’s this or bust.”

Maraleen leaned forward and kissed him gently on the lips.

“No matter what happens,” she said, “I love you. Remember that. Now and always.”

David smiled sadly.

“I love you too,” he said, and together they walked to the bedroom, both feeling the restless night ahead might be their last. For tomorrow, one way or another, the sadness shadowing their lives would be over forever.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Earlier that day, while Maraleen Shareen was having her chat, outside Shaman's office, his receptionist had been unusually nosy. And by the time the meeting was over, the receptionist was nowhere to be seen. Allison Validan made a mental note to have a word with the layabout for leaving so many files to be done tomorrow. What Allison Validan did not realize was that Shaman's *actual* receptionist had been tied up that whole time in the Hospitality Suite, taking a call from Gryphos III.

This impostor, his work done, made a beeline to the planet's finest beachside restaurant, assuming his natural form of Kaylaar and greeting the Doctor and Maggie warmly.

In concession to the omnipresent heat ("The TARDIS said tropical, but it's practically volcanic!" he grumbled to Maggie), the Doctor had pocketed his toque and hung up his balmacaan. Even his fishing sweater and dark trousers had been swapped for a bright sailor's shirt and baggy trousers. Thus outfitted, he did some reading on the planet, while Maggie tried to relax as she would in Revelstoke.

This proved more challenging than it seemed. That nostalgia hung thick in the air. Maggie was bombarded with memories—of bygone holidays, of growing up with Larry, and most importantly, of Ollie. She had come to think of her travels as a form of therapy, and indeed, something about the constant danger and stress did exorcise her feelings of ennui and purposelessness after his death. Looking after the Doctor and Kaylaar was quite different from being in love, but it was stimulating and meaningful, nonetheless. So now, feeling that Ollie was close by, the memories of his touch and his musk never closer, filled her with even more sorrow.

The Doctor, too, was lost in thought. He filled the air with conversation—currently telling her that the Singapore Slings they had ordered were decidedly inferior to the Raffles Hotel model—but it was palpably hollow at concealing his feelings. She wondered how much more sadness he had seen in his countless centuries of rootless wandering. Indeed, looking across from him while they waited for Kaylaar, what struck her was that his face carried the innocent wounds of a young man, in contrast to his more usual world-weary, elderly gravitas. Whatever was occupying his mind the way Ollie was hers, it had happened a long time ago.

Both had some difficulty pulling away to listen to Kaylaar's snippets of information about the Ritual of Enkindling. Though the shapeshifter had not heard much more than its name and its benefits to Maraleen Shareen, it tended to fit with the Doctor's feeling that time distortion somehow affected the healing.

"Doc, maybe now you'll tell me what you got reminded of back when we landed on the beach?" Maggie suggested.

That same faraway look of youth filled his face. "A creature from back home. It didn't have a name that I remember, but it was one that had terrified me as a child. I always loved ghost stories. A love I passed on to ..." He looked away. "Well, it was all a long time ago. And more importantly, it should stay there."

Now, my friends, I suggest we sample some of Mister Shaman's fare before bedding down in the TARDIS for the night."

"What's on tap for tomorrow?" Kaylaar asked uncertainly.

"You do a bit more of this sterling detective work, while Maggie and I will be up bright and early for this Ritual of Enkindling."

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Clifton Reighley was not a fan of the beach. This was his thirty-second day on the planet, but he had yet to make it to the water's edge. He looked across the balcony of his cabin to that uninviting water, then back down at his legs, crossed uselessly in front of him with the steel valve-operated Servo-Spine strapped riveted across them. He gripped his cage tight, savoured the rough steel digging uncomfortably into the tender flesh of his palm. He hadn't done an honest day's work in longer than he could remember, and that inactivity had left a lot more than render his palms frail.

"You've got to get up," he commanded himself. "For God's sake, you're going to miss the Ritual if you don't get to your feet."

He had been on his feet earlier—he woke and paced the porch to psych himself up for the Ritual. But somewhere along the way he lost his bottle and sagged back into the inviting hammock, nursing a cup of now-tepid coffee. Getting to his feet was even harder the second time. A month here had made it easier to move than it had been back home, but that was not saying much.

Reighley had not made many friends during his stay—the Shareens were pleasant but too understandably absorbed in their own sadness to spare any room for his—and thoughts of that fateful night in the ring nearly ten years earlier seemed to swirl around his head more than the scenery in front of his eyes. Of course, it hadn't been so much the injury as its aftermath that had truly damned him. As bad as spinal damage was—nothing put a damper on a moderately successful boxing career quite like three ruptured vertebrae—medical science had come up with treatments. It was bad medical advice that condemned Clifton Reighley to a lifetime of pain and ignominy.

He had no one but himself to blame. Devalon Xctro had warned him that black market medical treatment was a reckless gamble with such a serious injury, but Reighley had few traditional options open to him. He was a decent boxer, but his finances were tied up in Orion Syndicate bonds, that barely legal currency whose ups and downs had already cost him his marriage. Fairuzia had taken pretty much everything in the divorce. Everything, that is, except the bottle of illegal Moldovarian clan-hooch that he'd been saving for a special visit to Xctro's emporium of illicit goods and information. Devalon Xctro was more than happy to take the clan-hooch off his hands, and after a few eagerly consumed shots happier still to put Reighley in touch with a black-market neurosurgeon.

Unfortunately for Reighley, the surgeon's approach was the equivalent of trying to repair a dripping faucet with a fifteen-pound sledgehammer. It was blind luck that he'd been able to walk at all after the procedure, but his right leg had never been quite the same again. It remained chronically weak regardless of how much he exercised it, and he felt as though a colony of fire ants perpetually burrowed beneath his skin. Imagining them gnawing restlessly on his tender muscles and tightened ligaments, sending waves of sciatic fire, was another that haunted him.

Reighley rubbed his right thigh absentmindedly, lost in his miasma: a career ended, a life ruined. Purely to change the record, he wondered whether Fairuzia had gotten remarried... whether she thought of him even a fraction as often as he thought of her.

*Regret begets regret*, he thought.

"Get up," he commanded, his voice hard, almost hateful. He squeezed at the valve implanted into his upper thigh until he thought his hand would shred against it. "You get up right now, you worthless sack of crap, and you hobble your crippled ass down to the water. You're gonna get in with the rest of them, and you're gonna be healed."

Or he wouldn't.

It wasn't just the agony of his leg or the exhaustion from his restless hour that kept Reighley in the hammock, preventing him from moving beyond a snail's pace. Something oppressed him. Something seemed to reach out from those memories and hold him down, burying him under a lifetime of regret.

Reighley could feel sticky sweat pooling between his shoulder blades, but it had nothing to do with the humidity or the heat. Having grown up near the equator back on Old Earth, he was used to both. The perspiration that plastered his cheap shirt to his body was a by-product of that all-too-familiar struggle against chronic pain.

*You can learn to live with it, he thought, but you never really get used to it.*

Reighley huffed a pained sigh and pushed himself up onto his knees. In a few crawling paces, he reached the sand beyond his bungalow. Fortunately, the sand was soft and billowy. Sitting there on overly sensitive kneecaps would have been a whole lot harder had the ground been stone, or even grass. Leaning forward, he kicked first one leg and then the other out underneath him, rising slowly, painfully, into a straight-legged hunch. He straightened out his back, but it was excruciating, and he nearly collapsed into a sobbing heap back to the ground.

His hip joint felt like a rusted vise squeezing viciously at the top of his right leg. The theoretical fire ants returned, gnawing savagely at the sciatic nerve all down his leg. The struts of the leg prosthesis seemed to twist into him as well. It was at this moment of multiple torments when Reighley heard the voices. He ducked behind the bungalow's beams, instinctively withdrawing from company, and looked around for the source of the chatter. The trees of the forest were loosely packed, yet he could not see from where the voices originated.

"If you had to guess," said the first voice, that of a woman with a distinctly archaic Earth accent, "what do you expect we'll find inside? Take a guess!"

"I hate guessing," responded a second voice, his accent more aristocratic. "Unless I have to."

"Or do you know, and you're hoping to find something else?"

The man grumbled a reply, which told both his interlocutor and Reighley that she was dead right. "I only hope that time is on our side," he said.

"Me too," said the woman, some of the excitement draining from her voice.

The pair pushed through the trees: first a pale-skinned woman with dark frizzy hair and a light-yellow sundress, followed by a dark-skinned man of medium build, wearing an inappropriate long green coat and striped pullover. If he had a straw hat, he would look like a chintzy gondolier on one of those tourist worlds. Upon seeing Reighley, the pair drew up short. The woman looked surprised, while the man's face betrayed nothing.

"Oh," she said. "Hello, there."

"Hi," said Reighley, struggling to maintain his balance in the devilishly soft undergrowth.

For a moment, the three of them froze in awkward silence. Reighley couldn't be sure what was going through their heads, but he got the distinct impression from the woman's body language that perhaps she thought they'd been caught doing something they shouldn't.

"If you're planning to take part in the ritual," Reighley informed them, "you'd better get a move on to the beach." He hooked a thumb over his shoulder, indicating Enkindler's Point. "Once it starts, you're plum out of luck until next week."

"Ah yes!" declared the man in the striped shirt, his previously blank expression supplanted by a sudden broad smile.

Reighley couldn't help but sneer at the pair, who looked able-bodied enough. "What's your problem anyway?" he asked acidly.

The man rubbed his chest. "Chronic heartburn. Even worse when you have two, trust me."

Reighley grunted and struggled up from his knees. "You may have time for jokes, but if I don't get going now I might not make it."

"Yet judging from that cold mug of coffee resting on your balcony and the trail of foliage snagged on your leg-servo, you've been debating whether to go for a good couple of hours. Why?" With a burst of energy that made Reighley's head spin, he leapt to the boxer's side and jauntily lifted him to his feet. Reighley couldn't believe it; he had somehow made the move without causing any pain.

The man stepped back, his hand outstretched. "I'm the Doctor, by the way. And this is my friend, Maggie."

Reighley took the Doctor's hand in both of his, and inclined his head toward Maggie. "Clifton Reighley," he said. "Nice to meet you." He looked out beyond the forest and remembered that time was not on his side. "But if you'll excuse me, the ritual begins in fifteen minutes, and some of us don't have much in the way of mobility."

His mood had swung back to its earlier gloom. These two might have cost him his spot in the Ritual. He marched angrily past them, more irritated when they caught up with him. This Doctor, he suspected, was the kind of smug intellectual he would have loved to punch out in his glory days.

"So have you felt any kind of improvement since you came here?" Maggie asked.

"Being on the planet has made me feel a hell of a lot better," Reighley admitted. "Taken years off."

"That figures," she replied, sharing a knowing look with the Doctor.

"But, well ... Shaman thinks the damage is too deep. Psychological too. Needs more than just the atmosphere to put right."

"So tell us Clifton, old chap," said the Doctor, "why are you so hesitant? I hear the water's lovely."

"There's a small chance ... I've heard people don't always make it out. It's rare, but ..." Reighley stopped in his tracks. "It's actually *less* rare. They hush it up, but I've heard a few things." He laughed grimly. "I tell myself I don't care either way, haven't got much of a life to lose. But I guess, despite the brave face, I'm just a coward."

The Doctor shook his head. "Those vertebrae were shattered by a professional. To have lived this long with that rudimentary treatment? They don't come braver, Clifton."

"What happened?" Maggie asked.

"Ever boxed an angry Summatri fuelled solely by grudge?"

"I can't say that I have." Maggie had never heard of a Summatri, but she decided against asking about it for fear of interrupting Reighley's story, or getting back in the moody boxer's bad books.

"If you want my advice, don't," said Reighley, "This particular Summatri had a bone to pick when it came to Terrans. Its hive-mate, or whatever they call 'em, died five years prior whilst birthing their first litter, because the Orion Syndicate only had human doctors on staff. So this Summatri decides to get revenge by ending the careers of every Terran opponent. Sometimes it would be a broken rib, which would critically puncture a lung; sometimes a shattered wrist that would never heal quite right. In my case, it was a gut punch and a double axe handle to the small of my back. It was an illegal move, but the damage was done. The lower third of my spine, gone in an instant."

"That's terrible," whispered Maggie.

Reighley grunted in response. The only thing worse than hearing how easy the spinal implant operations were by the twenty-third century was the constant, unending pity.

Maggie knew he resented her pity, but could not think of anything else to offer him.

The three walked in silence for a while, Reighley moving at a fairly impressive pace, the Doctor watching the mirrored dome, Maggie watching the pair of them. He suddenly ripped his eyes from it, blinking wildly against the sun that battered down on them through the high leaves of those mad giant pinecones and even madder skeletal trees. He rubbed a hand against his face, blew out a curt sigh, and fixed Reighley with his intense brown eyes.

"Tell me, Clifton, what do you know about Aqua Vitae?" asked the Doctor.

"It wasn't always called Aqua Vitae. Uninhabited till the mid-fifties, when the Earth Spacefleet got it off the Kuul'thyreem. They'd originally colonized it, so it's probably got one of those unpronounceable word-salads originally."

"This planet was a Kuul'thyreem colony?" asked the Doctor, his eyebrows shooting up in surprise.

"What's a Kuul'thyreem?" asked Maggie.

"The foremost capitalist race of this time period," said the Doctor.

Reighley snorted. "That's a polite way of putting it."

"The Kuul'thyreem are pragmatic to the detriment of all else," said the Doctor, "except, perhaps, when it comes to profit. If there's money to be made, you can count on the Kuul'thyreem to go out of their

way to exploit it. But this?” The Doctor extended his arms to either side, indicating the world around them. “It’s not unprecedented that they leave Kuul’tyme in pursuit of profit ...”

“‘Cool-time’?” Maggie asked with a smirk.

“Yes, Kuul’tyme,” the Doctor repeated hotly, not hearing the homonym. “But to outright colonize another planet? That’s... unusual.” He frowned, his voice lowering to an ominous growl. “What drew them here? Why did they leave?”

“Not many of them about anymore. Mister Shaman’s the only one who’s still around now, I think. Most of his staff seem to be human. S’pose we come cheaper.”

“Shaman isn’t exactly a typical Kuul name,” mused the Doctor, tapping an index finger rhythmically against his lower lip.

“He’s not what you’d consider to be a typical Kuul,” said Reighley. “I’ve met the guy. Reminds me of those born-again crazies back on Old Earth.” He raised his hands to the sun and fluttered his fingers. “They’ve ‘seen the light’, you know?”

Maggie nodded. What a shame that cultish behaviour was still afflicting human society three hundred years in the future.

“And hey, whatever you believe is cool with me, but there’s something... unsettling... about Shaman. Give me good ol’ fashioned capitalistic greed any day. With this guy, it’s ...”

Reighley stopped and turned to face them. He leaned heavily on his braces, huffing with the effort of their journey. Maggie reckoned he could use a quick break.

“Have you ever seen a Kuul’tyreem emote?” he asked.

“Perhaps the occasional tear shed over the collapse of the galactic stock market, but if you’re talking real emotion ...” The Doctor shrugged. “Now that you mention it, I haven’t.”

“Yeah, well neither have I. But I get the impression that our Mister Shaman certainly *wants* to. What makes a Kuul that way?”

The Doctor considered this for a moment, his eyes drawn once again to the metallic dome as if he feared it would sneak up on him. They were much closer now. Maggie thought that they would reach it very soon.

“Come and see the Ritual of Enkindling,” said Reighley. “Maybe we’ll figure it out, eh?”

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Maraleen tugged absently at the tunic with which Mister Shaman’s people had provided for the Ritual. It reminded her of a hospital gown: thin, ill-fitting, and infused with the ghosts of those who had worn it before. It was synthetic SmartFabric, which after a moment tightened around her body, adapting to the contours of a Blisteallian as easily as a Monoid. But that did not make wearing it any more comfortable. Had she been capable of experiencing the human sensation known as gooseflesh, she suspected she’d be covered by now.

“Hey,” asked David, “you all right?”

Maraleen looked at her husband, standing by as the participants filed past. This beach had been razed of its flora, leaving only the snow-white sand, as far as the eye could see, and beyond ran oceanic waters of the deepest amethyst. She had never seen water quite that colour before. It gave the ocean a crayon-coloured vitality that, under different circumstances, would have been positively beautiful.

In another time, in another life, this was the sort of place they would have come to take their annual postcard photo. She thought of them, all forty-two etched onto old-fashioned cards, lined up on the shelf back home in Peoria. The thought made Maraleen smile.

“I’m all right,” she said, taking David’s hand. “Just a little while left. And after this, we have all the time in the world.”

David slid an arm around Maraleen’s shoulders and pulled her body against his own.

“All the time in the world,” he repeated doubtfully. Maraleen tried not to notice, resting her head against David’s chest and watching as hundreds—perhaps thousands—of people began to walk into the waters off the Coast of Cure.

The Ritual was about to begin.

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Mister Shaman stood on the high terrace outside his office, watching from on high as the sick and dying prepared to take part in the day's ritual. His deep-set eyes betrayed no hint of his inner thoughts. Validan stood beside him. She too was watching, but her deep-set frown and her pale, tired face told of an over-emotional nature that she suppressed with significant effort.

Shaman looked to her, and envied her ease at expressing herself. His Kuul'thyreem composure was like a glass plate, and his true feelings were futilely punching against it.

"There is something I have wanted to ask you for quite some time," said Mister Shaman. He turned his head slightly, the black orbs of his eyes watching Validan.

"Ask away," said Validan. She crossed her arms over her chest, her eyes never leaving the beach below.

"Do you disapprove of what is about to happen?"

"This isn't my first rodeo," said Validan. Shaman shook his head in confusion. "An antique Earth reference. If I disapproved, do you think I'd still be working for you?"

"The paycheque is very good," said Mister Shaman, his voice without a trace of humour or irony. His gaze returned to the beach.

"It is at that," agreed Validan. She knew, of course, that with the human population explosion, they were cheaper labour than Shaman's countrymen. But that would be a most un-diplomatic way to ask for a raise. After a brief pause, she added, "Someone out there is about to die. Given the previous occurrences it is statistically inevitable."

"So that others may be rejuvenated."

"One life for the good of the many," said Validan, her voice soft, distant. "But the frequency has been growing. At what point do you consider it unethical?"

"If people walk away healed, then it is ethical."

"Do you honestly believe that justifies what we do here?"

"They believe," said Mister Shaman, inclining his head toward the people on the beach. "That renders what I believe inconsequential."

"And the paycheque is very good," said Validan.

Mister Shaman flinched. The sight of that water stirred something deep within him. But his face remained unchanged.

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The Doctor and Maggie stood hugging the coastline, shade wreathing them as if they were unwelcome spectres at this feast. Clifton Reighley eagerly disrobed and joined the line. Meanwhile the Shareens held their embrace for a while. Maraleen hugged David tightly and kissed him gently.

"All right," she said. "In I go. Wish me luck?"

David held Maraleen's face in his hands and examined her as though he was afraid he might forget what she looked like the moment she turned away from him.

"Are you really sure?" he asked. He was filled with a sudden, suffocating panic. Though he could think of no good reason to turn back, he was suddenly, desperately hopeful they would, just on an impulse. "We can always—"

"It's this or nothing," said Maraleen. She smiled and kissed him again, with a lusty greed that seemed to sense it would be the last time. "No matter what happens, always remember that I love you. For now and for always. If things go bad out there, promise me you'll take care of yourself. Yeah?"

*What could go wrong?* David begged to ask. But Maraleen was forbidden from sharing her conversations with Shaman. So he nodded dumbly, and when he spoke his voice was thick with emotion.

"I promise," he said. "I love you, Mar. Come back to me."



“Always,” said Maraleen. She stroked his cheek with her thumb, turned her back on him, and walked into the ocean.

David watched helplessly as she went, desperation wrapping its cold tendrils around his heart. He edged back to the darkness, standing with the two strangers they had met the previous day. But he said nothing to them, barely noticed them as he looked back out on the Ritual, as if watching a pod crash in slow motion.

A stark, terrifying certainty now gripped him: that he would never hold his wife in his arms again, and it took every last remaining ounce of his strength not to scream, to wail pitiful sorrow into the sunburnt sky for all to witness.

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“Come out into the sunlight, Doc,” Maggie beckoned as she stood alongside David Shareen. “If we were any closer to the ocean we’d be standing in it by now.”

“I prefer the dark,” he replied morbidly. His eyes remained fixed on the water.

The smell of saltwater was simply overpowering, and the breeze that caressed her sun-baked cheeks was positively glacial in spite of the oppressive heat from the afternoon sun. She wondered if she might be able to go for a swim after the ritual was complete. She hadn’t thought to wear her bathing suit, but judging by the rest of the chintz around here, there was bound to be a gift shop somewhere.

The Doctor studied the scene gloomily, his eyes seeming to bore a hole in Maggie’s back. She wondered if she ought to be concerned, but avoided broaching the subject because of Clifton, and now David’s, presence. Kaylaar had clearly gotten the easy job this time.

Maggie took in the sand-soaked vista. Gentle white dunes stretched as far as the eye could see, this part of the beach seemingly cleared of all trees. And then there was the amethyst-brilliant ocean, stretching unbroken and still for miles across, lapping against the gleaming silver base of the dome.

“Purple water,” she muttered to no one in particular. “That’s... absolutely wonderful.”

“Wish me luck, Maggie!” Reighley called as he approached the mouth of the tide. “The miracle I need!”

Maggie could see a thunderstorm of emotions wreaking havoc on the boxer’s sharp, hard features. Hundreds rushed into the water around Clifton, many standing in up to their chests. There was even one person—a human who appeared to be over a hundred years old—who was tentatively rising from a wheelchair, the gentle waves washing in and out over his submerged knees.

“What exactly is it we’re seeing here, Susan?” asked the Doctor, his tone sharper than Maggie had heard it since they arrived on the planet. Alarm bells began to fire deep within the recesses of her mind, and she unconsciously moved closer to her travelling companion.

He looked mortified. “Maggie,” he corrected himself.

*Maybe the Doctor’s sadness has something to do with Susan, Maggie thought. Whoever she is.*

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Maraleen stared at the gunmetal sky, her eyes narrowed against the afternoon sun. The dark red light felt warm on her skin, yet a deep chill crept through her, and she began to shiver against the cold of the ocean. Bobbing up and down, she had to stand on tiptoes to maintain contact with the bottom. Then, she waded in deeper, and after a momentary thrill, she found she didn’t mind. She adored the sense of weightlessness that came with being submerged. She thought of her childhood; of week-long stints spent travelling interstellar with her parental trio on cheap, low-gravity civilian frigates.

Maraleen closed her eyes and stroked her arms lazily back and forth, treading water without effort. Yes, it was soothing here. If the ritual succeeded, she would insist that she and David stay for a few more days, maybe even a full week. After everything they’d been through they deserved a rest. Their cramped little Gringo District tenement could wait.

The water swelled beneath Maraleen, pushing her gently up toward the sky. Her eyes snapped open, wide and alert. Had something moved past her? She thought that it had. Her heart raced furiously in her chest and her pulse pounded furiously in her temples. As the water settled back to its former stillness she surveyed her surroundings, hunting for signs of what had caused the disturbance. What she saw sent an icy dagger through her stomach.

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Clifton was under the water now, and he felt a charge of vitality course through his tired body. This was life, he realized. This was how it's supposed to be. Not staggering around, moping and feeling sorry for yourself. Not obsessing over some broad who will never come back. This perfect moment.

It was a little too perfect, he realized with a panic. And then he opened his eyes, and his blood ran cold. Ahead of him, somehow, swimming in the water, was a familiar sight. It was a Summatri wrestler, red skin tufted with algae-like hair clumps, bull-like face flaring its nostrils in fury.

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The sick and the dying: they were all watching Maraleen. Hundreds—perhaps thousands—of eyes bore down on her with an encroaching weight. Some were filled with compassion, while others were completely devoid of emotion. For the first time since she'd gotten sick Maraleen felt true terror. Her eyes widened, her breathing sharpened, and the lazy sway of her arms grew frenetic.

They seemed rooted to the ocean floor, held in place by wispy tendrils.

*This isn't real*, she insisted to herself. *You're feeling light-headed, you're seeing things.*

She paddled deeper into the water, drawn to some imperceptible summons. She saw the boxer, Clifton Reighley, thrashing about in the darkness. His face was frozen in a kind of trance between joy and grief.

She pushed Clifton out of the way, suddenly worried for his safety. He looked so frail under the water. The poor man didn't know what he was getting into.

That's when she noticed the light. The surface had lit up around her, changing the colour of the water from deep amethyst to neon pink. Tendrils of energy began to rise out of the water, like the ones she saw wrapped around those hordes of sick people in her vision. The vines drifted lazily up and around Maraleen, surrounding her with light. It was ethereal and beautiful, and as it neared her Maraleen's unease mounted.

Even as the energy cocoon began to embrace her, Maraleen worried not about herself, but about whether or not David would have the wherewithal to go on; to take care of himself the way he had taken care of her these last few weeks.

*Please*, Maraleen thought, *let him be all right. Let David be strong—*

A great force jerked Maraleen down, dragging her head beneath the cold, still water. Yet her descent seemed to happen without any great violence. As she sank deeper, her mind went once more to David, to his smiling, loving face. Then she looked down to see what it was that had snagged her.

It was the man from the crash, the man whose eyes wept and bled in equal measure. His arms were wrapped around her waist. A predatory smile split his mouth into a monstrously large grin, his wide bleeding eyes never broke contact with her own.

The monstrous apparition tightened its grip on her waist. She felt nothing. Perhaps this was why she had been there on that street corner, in her second cycle. Perhaps she was always destined to meet him here, again, at the end. Maybe one day David would join them, wearing fluffy wings and playing a harp.

When Maraleen resurfaced, her face had a serene smile.

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Mister Shaman sipped his tea, enjoying its rich, warm flavour in spite of the fact that such enjoyment should have been well beyond his natural inclinations.

“Which one was it?” he asked without particular interest.

“Maraleen Shareen, I believe.” She frowned. “Oh dear. Twenty other life-signs as well. A high rate of attrition.”

“How peculiar,” said Mister Shaman. He shook his cup gently in a small circle and blew on its surface, swirling the liquid around in a cooling whirlpool.

“Peculiar, sir?” echoed Validan.

“You are right, Validan. This is happening more and more. I do not care for this trend. Still, the Shareens at least were subsidized.”

“Does it stir anything within you, sir?”

Shaman’s eyes circled in discomfort. “I regret the loss of life. It is inefficient. And the reactions from next of kin will be most undignified.”

“But, sir, you understand why beings react that way with those they love?”

Shaman waved away her line of questioning. “Not exactly. Perhaps you could explain it. They came to the world knowing they would likely die. Even if the process kills their loved ones, they should be grateful for the additional life they have been granted.”

Validan shook her head sharply. “Knowing the loss is coming doesn’t stop it from hurting. Nothing compares to the pain of losing someone you love.”

Mister Shaman turned to look at Validan for the first time since the ritual began. “The intensity with which your race clings to one another is... fascinating. I have always found it so. Oh, how much more enlightenment I could gain were I to understand such an attachment.”

“Do you not find it a weakness?”

Shaman considered this for a moment, then said, “It can be. But I see that sometimes, it can be all that keeps you going.”

Mister Shaman returned his attention to the Ritual. He watched for a while longer, then said, “What a terrible waste of customers.”

Validan shook her head, turned, and headed for the elevator lobby. “You’re all heart, sir.”

Mister Shaman made no reply. He sipped his tea and watched the beach.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Once the Doctor and Maggie reached the beach, things escalated quickly.

Maggie heard the screams before she saw what was happening in the water. Her head whipped round, hunting for the source of that awful sound. There were many passive faces on the beach, but she paid most attention to David Shareen. The sounds he made were raw and unvarnished howls of grief.

She was still trying to figure out just what was going on when Reighley crawled from the water, moving with a disconcerting speed that she'd never believed him capable of half an hour ago. The brace rattled loose from his legs, no longer needed. The old man made a beeline for the ocean and Reighley caught him.

“Mar!” the old man bellowed past Reighley, his voice unhinged. “Not my Maraleen, please! I’ll pay any price, you Kuul’tyreem bastard! Do you hear me!? I swear I’ll pay it! Whatever you want! Please! Save her! Save my Maraleen! Oh God, please!”

With more newfound mobility, Reighley wrapped his arms around the older man’s shoulders and chest, squeezing him in an embrace that seemed comically intimate given the circumstance. David jerked his head backward, tried to smash Reighley’s nose with his skull, but Reighley held him in the enforced embrace, his head out of reach of David’s wild flailing.

“Let me go!” screamed David. “Let me go, damn you!”

“It’s too late,” whispered Reighley. Maggie was surprised by how calm he sounded in the face of complete chaos. “You can’t help her, Pops. I’m sorry, but you can’t.”

David finally pulled free and ran to Maraleen, whose lifeless body had washed ashore. A few dozen other bodies bobbed to land behind her—about twenty of the hundred, unnoticed by the remaining eighty.

Maggie looked out across the crowded ocean. All of them floated, perfectly still. It wasn’t like visiting the beach, where bathers splashed and swam and made merry with their friends and loved ones. This was more like attending a wake, or watching some cultists about to meet Jim Jones on the spaceship.

Then she noticed it: everyone was turned in toward a central point. Watching. Waiting. And it was at that central point that Maggie could see—she wasn’t sure what. The face she saw bobbing there on the surface was not human, but the form was humanoid. A brilliant light illuminated the sea around her, tendrils of energy drifting like wisps of steam off the surface of the water. The tendrils reached into the air, wrapping around Maraleen and the other victims like a spectral Easter egg.

“Doctor, what’s going on?” asked Maggie.

Maggie turned to look at the Doctor for the first time since David screamed. She opened her mouth to speak again, but the words barely left her lips as the Doctor blazed past her. Reighley moved to block him also, but he dodged the lumbering ex-boxer. He stopped at the water’s edge, and began fishing around in his coat pocket.

Maggie felt she had been frozen in place for a long time, when in reality no more than ten or twenty seconds had passed. Seeing the Doctor spring into action broke the spell and she rushed after him. Meanwhile, David reached desperately for Maraleen, floating skyward.

The old man began to sob and reached back to Reighley, the two men now embracing voluntarily. “What are we going to do?” Maggie asked.

The Doctor held a small box about six inches long, with a thin plastic handle on one end and a blue, gumdrop-shaped orb hanging limply off a floppy silver antenna. It looked to Maggie like a child’s toy, but she knew better than to say so.

The Doctor raised the device and thumbed a button. The display lit up a vivid shade of green and began to flood with information. “A homemade artron scanner,” said the Doctor. “That energy discharge...”

“Aren’t you going to help her? Help any of them?” Twenty deaths, Maggie thought, was still horrible to her, and she never got used to the Doctor’s blank acceptance of tragedy.

He looked from the green display to Maggie, his brow knitted, and his lips pursed. His voice cracked as he whispered, “It’s too late. Look.”

Maraleen had been pulled under by something within that spectral glow. The light flared brilliantly and then faded toward the depths of the open ocean.

An image flashed crystal clear before Maggie’s mind: the image of a little boy on a yellow raft dragged into the ocean by rows of razor-sharp teeth, the hint of a pectoral fin breaking the surface as a gargantuan creature rolled monstrosly in a geyser of the boy’s lifeblood. She felt a chill creep through her and wrapped her arms protectively around herself.

“These readings...” whispered the Doctor. He looked away from the ocean, absorbed in his childish scanning box. In a perverse way, he looked as transfixed by a miracle as the participants in the ritual.

The light continued to brighten. Those waist-deep in the water did not seem to be concerned. Indeed, some appeared to be elated.

The Doctor finally pried his attention from the device. He looked out into the glowing ocean. “It’s off the artron scale altogether. Lacyon energy.” As if to validate the gravity of this statement, the scanning device exploded in a pathetic shower of sparks. The Doctor barely noticed, rapt in the gruesome spectacle of light.

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Sitting in the lobby of the massive, mirrored dome, Maggie slumped into a sofa, numb with exhaustion. The Doctor, Maggie, and Reighley had carried David Shareen to his cabin. The Doctor assured them he would be all right, at least physically. He went to track Kaylaar down, instructing Maggie to keep an eye on Shareen. “Reighley too,” he muttered darkly.

“He’ll be fine, surely? He’s got what he wanted.”

“An old friend of mine once said, ‘The only thing worse than not getting what you want is getting it’.”

Now Maggie, Reighley, and David had rejoined the other participants in the ritual, gathered in the dome’s lobby. The hall was teeming with activity, but no one seemed to be worse for wear. Indeed, the survivors were jolly and oblivious. And younger. Reighley’s recovery was downright tame compared with many of them, some now in their twenties and their teens. No wonder their memories were fuzzy.

“I feel like I’m in *The Twilight Zone*,” she said.

“What’s the *Twilight Zone*?” asked Reighley.

“Never mind.” Maggie gave him a tired smile. “It’s before your time, I guess.”

Reighley paced up and down, unable to sit or stand still with his newfound mobility. His legs were no longer withered but broad and muscular. Seeing her look so worn-out, he stopped for the first time. “It’s a miracle, but ... why did it have to be her? Why did I have to see the face of the person whose life gave me back my legs?”

Maggie could no more respond to these questions than Clifton's earlier sorrow. She looked around for the Doctor but found no sign of him. One of the teenaged-looking men was rising from a wheelchair. Maggie was shocked to recognize it as that lonely-looking centenarian. Uneasily but without discomfort, he walked around the room with the rest of the participants, patting shoulders, shaking hands, and even laughing at the top of his fully functioning lungs. He still moved with the steady and arthritic gait of an elderly man.

Could Maggie really condemn any of these people for wanting more life? If Ollie were standing there in front of her, and the only cost for his recovery was the death of some person she had never met, would she not, deep down, think it a fair exchange? If the Doctor were not here saying it was wrong ... well, Maggie would have a tough time making that call herself. Certainly in the abstract, she could recognize the horrors of such thinking, but she could equally not judge those who benefited from it for ignoring those horrors.

Maggie shuddered in self-disgust. Thankfully, the Doctor and Kaylaar now marched across the lobby, and she did not have to wrestle with whether she was a good person.

Kaylaar beamed a greeting and shared his findings. He had spent the morning disguised as an Aremelkite tea-caddy.

"What did you find out?"

"Shaman really liked my oo-long," Kaylaar declared proudly. He held his hands up to silence the chorus of groans this provoked. "OK, OK, more importantly I found out that Allison Validan's DNA profile doesn't check out. The Earth diaspora of this time is fanatical about recording the genetic makeup of its emigrants, but there's no record of an 'Allison Validan' before she got her job here—no family history, not so much as a doctor's appointment. And then there's Shaman's biography."

"Looks like you were right, Clifton," the Doctor said. "Shaman is as much a Kuul name as Kaylaar here is Irish. Come along, Maggie! On your feet!"

"Where are we going?" she asked, rising reticently.

"No more beating about the bush. I'd rather go right to the source. We're meeting Mister Shaman. I don't know about you, but I'm quite curious to hear what he has to say for himself after this morning's catastrophe."

Maggie smiled at her friend. It was a relief to return from her deep and troubling self-analysis to the Doctor's single-handed crusade for right in the universe. "You've arranged a meeting? How'd you pull that off?"

"I'm a charming fellow," said the Doctor. "I simply asked. Politely."

"And," Kaylaar added, "since *I* was the Durkellax intern who booked him in, I managed to get his security clearance."

"Well, yes, that too."

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"He calls himself the Doctor," said Validan. Her deep blue eyes shone with what Shaman believed to be muted indignation. There had been some unspoken challenge in her look and her manner for some time, but Shaman was never a skilled reader of the body language and moods of Earth-people. "He claims to be a representative from the Galactic Bureau of Health and Humane Treatment. It's a surprise inspection, he says, to ascertain whether the methods practiced here meet the standards of the Sentient Being Ethical Treatment Act of 2227."

"I believe one of the stipulations of our status as an Earth protectorate was that Aqua Vitae be exempt from such bureaucracy," said Mister Shaman. "The last thing we need is a bunch of vegetarians telling us how to fix things up around here."

Though he could never feel amusement, Shaman had a propensity for trying out heavy-handed witticisms like that. He was unfortunate that his audience, Validan, was nearly as humourless as he was. In this case, she nodded funereally, not even smiling at the remark.

"Quite so," said Validan. "We're well beyond the Bureau's jurisdiction."

“Do you believe he is who he says?”

Validan shrugged. “His credentials are legitimate. If you can believe that spaced-out Durkellax temp we have manning the comm-link today, his security clearance is all above board. If you want my theory, he’s probably some over-eager pen-pusher hoping to get promoted to paper-clip organizer. What do you want to do?”

Mister Shaman was quiet for a moment. He could quip about vegetarians all he liked, but some doctor visiting after the Ritual of Enkindling’s greatest death toll yet was obviously connected. He looked out to sea, thinking perhaps this was all a vast joke at his expense. His spiritual awakening at the hands of the Enkindler was no laughing matter, of course, but at times like this Shaman wondered if there was some dark humour he, as a Kuul’tyreem, was doomed to miss.

He drained his cup, sat it on the desk, and steeped his fingers beneath his chin. “Let us see what this Doctor has to say for himself.”

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David dreamed of Maraleen.

In his dream, Maraleen had never been diagnosed with Skallak’s Syndrome. The two of them were back in their sparse, ground floor tenement hall on the outskirts of Peoria’s Gringo District. Their little, unspectacular lives proceeded as normal. Nothing ever changed for them. Every day was the same contented bliss as the one before, and after.

When David woke, this bliss remained around him like a gauzy blanket. But with a chill gust through his cabin window, he reached across and felt the empty space on the bed. He remembered Reighley, his mobility restored. He remembered that aloof Doctor, looking out on the massacre from the shadows and doing nothing.

“Why don’t you make them pay?” a voice seemed to be saying. That wasn’t in his dream; his dream was happy. So that must have been someone in this shabby, dreary waking life.

David looked across the room and saw a Vastar-model energy blaster on the couch.

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Shaman, the Doctor, and his factotum (“and C.F.O.,” she insisted) Maggie Weitz, sat across from each other, the Kuul’s characteristically roaring fire cutting the tension in the air on their behalf.

Shaman indicated the Doctor’s loose linens and unruly coat. “I see the Bureau has relaxed *some* standards.”

“I am on holiday,” the Doctor replied coolly. “Bit of a ‘corporate retreat’, isn’t it Maggie?”

Maggie smiled at the notion, telling them cryptically, “We don’t get a lot of R & R in our line of work.”

“Exactly!” agreed the Doctor. “So I thought I might do some fishing while I’m on your charming planet. Though judging from that grotesque incident this morning, the fish might be out to catch me.”

“If that is a joke, Doctor, it is in very poor taste.”

“I’m certainly not laughing,” the Doctor observed, his eyes narrowed to Shaman with biting contempt.

“Doctor,” Validan interrupted, “I’d be happy to show you statistics that put today’s incident into context—”

“Would you now.” Allison Validan took a step back, seemingly repelled by the Doctor’s unspoken judgement. “I have no doubt, too, that the twenty souls who perished, as well as contributing to the greater good, signed legally binding waivers that soothe your conscience. And, more to the point, forbid their next of kin from pressing charges.”

Shaman leaned forward. The Doctor looked human enough, and his righteous anger was certainly as unproductive as that race. But those eyes, almost as dark as Shaman’s, seemed to analyse him with a

pitiless judgement of ages. How old was this man? With a being so burdened by his past, how much did the nostalgia of this place twist him?

“Doctor, I regret with—how do you say it?—all my heart what happened here. It may surprise you to know that a tragedy helped me find my purpose.”

Validan tensed. “Sir?”

Her interruption seemed to break the deadlock, and Shaman changed the subject. “I turned away from the creed of my people, I was awakened into a higher plane of consciousness. For all the drawbacks—and again, I freely concede that they are tragic and will be corrected—I still believe what we do here on Aqua Vitae is good. And it’s good outweighs those losses.”

Maggie shuddered at her former uncertainty over whether this facility was doing good or evil. Clifton Reighley had the measure of this man exactly. Anyone who talks with such little feeling about greater good, surrounded by such plush luxury, was doing no one but himself and his banker any good turns.

To her surprise, the Doctor did not rise to Shaman’s pious baits, instead leaning back in his chair, his mouth arching upward in a humourless smile. “A born-again Kuul. I didn’t quite believe it when I heard. You don’t see that every day. It would do no good, I can see, to challenge you on moral grounds.”

“Doctor, what I do is neither moral nor immoral—”

“Please. But why don’t we talk about thermodynamic grounds? You must know by now that the benefits of your treatment come from an unusual field of temporal instability around this planet.” He shot a glance at Maggie, and when he continued, she understood why. “Death is, unfortunately, as universally constant as life. Those who try to cheat it lose more than they gain. I myself belong to a race of some of the worst cheats, so I don’t presume to understand the loss fully.”

Maggie nodded, appreciating the admission.

“But what you’re doing here has grave implications for the balance of power and the timelines.” Validan and Shaman blurted more protests, but another wave of the Doctor’s refined fingers reverted them to a sullen silence. “Tsk, tsk. Don’t justify yourselves. Just tell me what you know about the creature in those waters, hmm? The one whose emissions of lacyon energy give youth to some and death to others. And which, left unchecked, will plunge this region of space into a temporal sinkhole.”

The Doctor drummed the leather armrest, humming an aria while Shaman fidgeted with something closer than a Kuul ever came to rage. Finally, he sagged forward. “It was on this planet when our people first colonized. We stayed away from it, only sending our people here to rejuvenate some of their more hopeless ailments. But, for the same reasons you have so adroitly outlined, they considered the benefits were outweighed by the drawbacks. They came to regard it as a cursed world.”

Validan broke her impassive pose behind Shaman, her humanity bristling at this admission. “So they sold it to Earth—”

“Yes, I convinced them we could exploit the emotional weaknesses of humanity. They would have no such qualms about the ethics of our operation. And my profits have rather proved the point.” His black eyes rolled in their sockets. “Earth is, I believe, in one of its occasional periods of moral panic. Everywhere they see standards collapse, which they blame on laxity, pairing with other species, and on erosion of their values. Cults of religious fanatics and neo-capitalists spread pernicious doctrines across the universe, wishing to condemn its vices but sell their wares.” He gestured to Validan. “Their labour too. And yet, unpleasant truths like their limited lifespans they happily deny if they can.” He rasped something that Maggie assumed was his equivalent of a cynical chuckle. “I learned long ago that what separates humanity from the rest of the universe is nothing so much as hypocrisy.”

“And yet you collect van Gogh originals and drink oo-long tea. And you stay here to administer this planet, even though you could easily retreat to Kuul’thyme and count your grotzits.” The Doctor leaned forward. “You were in love with a human, weren’t you Shaman?”

Shaman did not react.

“I lost someone special to me, too,” Maggie said to him. She felt her words swallowed in the soulless corporate grandeur of this office. And yet Shaman’s purple lips splayed in sympathy.

“Is there anything else, Doctor?”



His eyes gleamed with malevolent mischief. “I don’t suppose you could rustle up that fishing boat, could you?”

## CHAPTER SIX

David Shareen seemed to remember when he landed on Aqua Vitae, that there was a dazzling array of colours. The purple of the waters that covered almost its entire surface, the red sun that blotted out the grey sky. The brilliant white and verdant green of its sand and trees, and the glowing silver of the dome that overlooked the Enkindler's Point.

Yet now, when he lumbered around the resort, all he saw was grey. Not even the grey of the sky: the sallow grey of a corpse. The grey of Maraleen's skin when he saw her lifted into the sky.

He could only think what his father would say. "She's been saved after all, my boy. Sounds like a miracle to me! Maybe I was wrong about you two." As if that miserable old bigot's approval would matter one damn bit now.

He passed grey people and heard grey, tuneless music fill the air of the dome. Out on the grey beach, David was stopped by two grey men—the boxer, Clifton Reighley, and Kaylaar. They had the audacity to be full of concern and sadness.

"David, please, let me say how sorry I am—"

"You held me back. I could have done something. I must have been able to do *something*." He lashed violently with his hand when he saw Reighley shake his head in protest. That same hand viciously pointed to Kaylaar. "And *you*, you and your friends." A manic laugh squeaked from David's lips. "Maybe Dad was right. That Doctor of yours. Angels walk among us. Your Doctor is one of them, isn't he?"

"I don't understand the reference," Kaylaar apologized.

"Yes, I'm quite certain of it. An Angel of Death."

As he ran past, pushing the happy grey people out of his way and feeling nothing but pleasure that he had caused them momentary pain, David cried out, "He's going to be busy when I'm done!"

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As Maggie looked over the railing of Shaman's personal bathosub, she realized that purple water was just as bad as its blue Earthly counterpart. Its jagged foam splashed the side of the ship, and the speed with which it cleared the waves was downright unseemly.

"You couldn't have done this without me?" she groggily questioned the Doctor.

He smiled sheepishly. "Would you believe I need your moral support, Maggie?"

She nodded, and closed her eyes. That made the velocity worse.

She tried to distract herself in the sea-vessel's opulence. It was upholstered in the same gaudy elegance as Shaman's office, with dark leather and its surfaces embellished with pretentious artwork of sea creatures from the mythologies of different planets.

"You might want to pull your rudder to starboard," the Doctor advised.

At the helm, Shaman ignored the Doctor's guidance. "I have visited the Enkindler many times," he said primly.

Maggie watched in amusement. The journey out to sea, where the creature had retreated, took a good half-hour, and so these two foes, the Doctor and Shaman, who had already said everything meaningful, now had to sit in silence on the boat, not even making small talk about the weather or the good sailing conditions. Not that either seemed to mind. That catty advice was the most conversation they had shared since they set out. They were both enjoying ignoring each other, spending the time instead with their personal ghosts.

"Thinking about Susan?"

Maggie's heart raced as the Doctor's face flashed with a spectrum of emotions. Had she gone too far? He opened his mouth, then closed it, a couple of times. But before the Doctor could speak, Shaman announced they had reached the spot.

Fittingly, the waters were even choppier when the vessel stopped. It circled the spot, and then with the depression of a lever, Shaman plunged it under the surface. A cocoon clicked open over their heads, and the darkness of purple waters replaced the red/grey skies.

The Doctor's smooth features creased in pain as he looked through the glass. The water was nearly black this far down, but eerie and desolate.

"I'm sure your Kuul'thyreem oceanographers did a thorough survey of these waters, eh Shaman? And I bet they found more than this. Emptiness, desolation. *This* is the consequence beyond the human cost—the planetary one."

Maggie looked around at the lifeless, oily waters. "So this creature killed the other fish?"

"Didn't have to. Its mere presence accelerated the flow of time in its natural habitat. Those people are younger, and the surface is held suspended in one moment, but under here, millions of years have passed in instants. Compressed time fields have laid waste to the ecosystem."

"Them again." Maggie remembered with a shudder the very first time she met the Doctor, when a similar effect had ravaged a distant planet<sup>2</sup>. She remembered that first, life-threatening run to escape its wake, imagining herself aged to death or reverted to a baby in one incomprehensible instant.

Shaman glumly heaved himself into the leather captain's chair, fixing his eyes on the deck. "What now, Doctor? Another sermon?"

"I've nothing more to say to you, Shaman. I doubt I can punish you more than you seem to punish yourself. I'm going out there to make contact with your little pet."

This seemed to spark some life in Shaman. His purple lips stretched with worrying sadism. "Be warned, Doctor, that the creature has no fixed appearance. Instead, it takes the form of some nightmare from the infancy of its victims."

The Doctor gave a vigorous nod. "Yes, that rings a bell. The fairy-story from my home mentioned exactly that—nightmares of childhood come to life." He glanced at Maggie. "Well, I've lived over two thousand years and had plenty of nightmares in that time. I suppose it will be rather interesting to see what form it takes."

He stood and efficiently shook off his clothes. Self-consciousness, Maggie realized, must be a human trait. The Doctor seemed to have no idea that he was, by Earth standards, a handsome-looking, well-built man in his late thirties. This was only further illustrated when she saw what he wore underneath. Maggie could not help bursting out laughing at the sight. It was a stripy-topped Edwardian bathing costume. Only those buff biceps and his ankles peeked out.

"Modest, Doctor? Could this be why you never wear shorts and a T-shirt, even on near-volcanic planets?"

He emitted a low chuckle, welcoming the distraction. "Perhaps you're right. When you've had pasty chicken legs ten times over, you get a bit ... what do you humans say? 'Body-conscious'?"

"Well, they look fine now."

"Oh, please," groaned Shaman.

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<sup>2</sup> See *The Doctor Who Project: 'The 108-Year Hitch'*.

Maggie blushed, forgetting their company for a moment and not wanting the Doctor to misinterpret. He merely smiled innocently before returning to his task. He pulled another one of his toy-like energy trackers from his coat, and with funereal solemnity, climbed to the rear of the bathosub, then closed the hatch. When next Maggie saw him, he was outside in the inky waters.

And at that moment, the bathosub buffeted violently sideways.

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David felt dizzy. He was in the lift. Somehow there was no security. No one had even noticed the Vastar in his pocket, no alarms had gone off. It was as if people around here wanted him to start shooting.

One press of the button and he would be up with the sainted Mister Shaman. He would make him pay. He especially wanted to see the look on that Angel of Death's face when he saw what he had wrought by not saving his dear Maraleen.

David paused for a moment, noticing some writing scratched below the brass railing of the lift.

*Hello darkness, my old friend.*

He did not recognize the quotation, but it summed up his feelings exactly. He pressed the button and felt his heart race. It was almost like being alive.

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Maggie had lost sight of the Doctor, when the massive white torpedo swerved by the bathosub. She lurched back, falling into Shaman's cold and unwelcoming arms.

She righted herself and examined the beast as it swam past.

"I've seen it before..." she realized. Not only had she seen it in the TARDIS, but now she realized she had seen it far earlier. She remembered that scene of the boy.

Its teeth were foam triangles. The white of its flesh was fibreglass. And behind its fins were crudely operating servos.

"Not a shark, but *the* shark. From *Jaws*."

She had been about twenty when she saw the film on a summer holiday. She snuck Larry in. He was terrified, and despite being older, she had to admit she was too terrified and exhilarated at the same time. And she felt that exact mixture, exactly as it was, now—a childlike sensation unsullied by adult cynicism, by peeking behind the curtain to be disappointed.

"*Jaws*, did you say?" Shaman's eyes lit up with the first warmth Maggie had seen. "I had no idea you were a connoisseur of Earth literature, Miss Weitz."

"Just when I thought it was safe to go into the water," she quipped back.

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The Doctor felt lost in the darkness. He took strong forward strokes to go lower and deeper into the water. He barely had any feeling of his body, just the overwhelming weight of the past that had dominated his thoughts since he stepped out of the TARDIS.

Physically, however, he had to admit no discomfort. The necessity to breathe for a Time Lord was more voluntary than most other beings, and indeed waxed and waned with each regeneration, like that common-or-garden allergy to gases in the Praxis spectrum. It had been a long time since he needed to wear celery, he noted with relief. He wondered how many more abilities he would gain as his lives wore on? He wondered what that Final Doctor might be like, all-powerful, but how much lonelier than he felt now?

He had been so young when he took Susan out on that daytrip to Gallifrey's orbiting time platform, where she had seen the nameless creature. She was enthusiastically reading its biodata extract for weeks after. The rest of his family were horrified that he was sharing secrets of the terrors of the universe with her, as ghoulish in his glee as he was with those haunting tales from his own childhood.

This was a long time ago. He was still on Gallifrey, trying to lead the respectable family life that would never be his. She was still with the others ... all those others, so dear to him, that events made him abandon. He had to leave them behind and could never recover ...

What form had the creature taken back then for the young Doctor? He could only remember the joy and the wonder he felt, and how happy he was for Susan to share the moment. Did he know enough to have any fears back then? He remembered Susan, bravely holding her eyes open as it peeked through the glass screen, before shrieking and hiding her face in the folds of his *recherché* opera cloak.

“Hmph, child!” he had chided her. “How many times? Fear itself is largely an illusion.”

What would the Doctor see now? Perhaps the faces of that lost family, of his lost life. Or perhaps the faces of those travellers he had taken into the TARDIS and let down. Or those other innocents his actions had failed to save, most recently Maraleen Shareen. He certainly knew more about fear than that cocksure grandparent.

The frail cockpit of Shaman’s bathosub lurched sideways. Returning to the present, the Doctor swam forward to face the creature, waving frantically to distract it. He would not have anyone else die because of this.

Then he saw it. And it saw him. He was just getting over his surprise that it had taken *that* form, when he saw where the Enkindler was headed.

There was a massive bowl of metallic mesh installed on the ocean floor.

The Doctor and the Enkindler looked at each other, each understanding now.

The Enkindler had been marooned here, and was trapped here because of this. And Shaman hadn’t known it, or else he would not have taken them here so willingly.

Which meant that the Doctor’s real enemy was back on the shore.

Although the Enkindler was doing a fairly decent job of being his enemy too, lunging toward the Doctor.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

“Mister Shareen,” Allison Validan trilled gaily as he entered with his Vastar levelled at her. “Do come in. So sorry about your loss.”

“Spare it!” he snapped. “Where the hell is Shaman?”

She flung an arm at him. Though he was spryer than he had been a month ago, David was still not fast enough to prevent Validan cracking his wrist and grabbing the weapon from it.

“If you’d gotten your act together, he could have been dead by now.”

She contemplated pressing the weapon against the man’s head and pulling its trigger. But she was interrupted by a golden-eyed humanoid and one of the patients—Clifton Reighley, that sad-sack fighter, if she remembered—blundering into the office.

“M-Miss Validan,” the man stammered, “you don’t know me, but we think there’s someone...” His golden eyes took in the scene, and he finished lamely, “Ah.”

“Let me guess,” she asked the naïve Boy Scout, “You’re a friend of that interfering Doctor?”

Oblivious to how close he had come to death, David tugged at Validan’s sleeve. “Where is Shaman, damn you?”

She looked out at the sea. “Perhaps the Enkindler can do what you couldn’t,” she snidely mused to David.

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The Doctor could hardly blame the Enkindler. It was drawn to temporal energy, and as a Time Lord he was giving off a fair bit without even realizing.

As it attacked, he saw past the face from his past, saw it as it was. It was a sight beyond the visual, more a concept that shook the Doctor to the pit of his stomach. He was free of demons then, young and foolish. The other Time Lords knew as much. Why else did he grow his hair long and affect that degenerate Earth fashion sense—those cloaks, cravats, and frock coats—instead of sensible, dignified Prydon robes?

He had seen the Enkindler the same way when Susan had stared at it in terror. They were on a day trip to Gallifrey’s ninth moon. Its rift-swamps and schism-swarms of air fish were a trifle pedestrian, nothing like the wildlife he would one day marvel at on Earth. But in those days it was as far away as the Doctor could get.

*You would have done anything to travel the stars. And now you can, but you lost them to do it. Was it worth it?*

Was that the voice of the Enkindler, or his younger self?

The Doctor kicked out with his legs. He swam lower, neared the wall of metal. He held his hands up, trying frantically to communicate to the creature that he wanted to help, and would be grateful if the beast could rein in its appetite for just a moment.

It eyed the bathosub. The Doctor knew he would have to act quickly. He prised open the lid of his tracking box, and pulled out the disc inside: a mono-cell battery that hadn't been built yet. But it was one he had picked up only the other day when he, Maggie, and Kaylaar had visited the New Roman colony.

He flung it into the heart of the grid, then frantically swam to the bathosub. His torso brushed against the mythical beast, and he was certain he felt its gaseous limbs pulling him into the void. He swam against its enervating pull, pushing desperately away, and before he knew it he was inside the decompression chamber.

He climbed back out, dripping over Shaman's fine upholstery. He barely noticed Maggie and Shaman asking him what happened, merely exhaustedly flinging a finger at the window as he collapsed onto the bench.

Where once the broad mesh extended, now there was a multicoloured vortex. Maggie recalled the exact sight from the door of the TARDIS.

"This is where we came in, right?"

The Doctor nodded. "Handy little paradox. That mono-cell was simultaneously old and hadn't been built yet. Throw that into a source of temporal vulnerability, and when you've got a ravenous vortex-dweller looking for a bite, well, boom goes the dynamite."

And she saw the *Jaws* shark sail into it, happily.

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The journey back to Aqua Vitae's narrow strip of land was somehow both more relaxed and more tense than the one out. The Doctor basked in the satisfied glow of balance restored to the universe, talking volubly about how happy the Enkindler will be swimming the tides of time, not having to munch up the lacyon energy from innocent people's un-lived days. His thoughts turned to how the creature ended up out in real space anyway. "It's a recurring problem lately. I have a nasty feeling something is weakening the fabric of the space/time vortex. Deliberately." He raised an eyebrow at Maggie. "You look amazed."

"I am. I can't believe how long you can talk without coming up for air."

He rolled his eyes in good humour.

While they talked, Shaman had become even more withdrawn. The Doctor slapped his knee with inappropriate familiarity. "Cheer up, Shaman. If you thought of that poor creature's feelings, you'd know you should be feeling happy for the poor chap. Empathy, old fellow. A human quality rather more wholesome than hypocrisy, in my opinion."

Shaman's black eyes appraised the Doctor coldly. "If you knew what that creature cost me, Doctor."

"We're willing to listen," offered Maggie.

Shaman merely shook his head in reply.

Maggie was still reflecting on good deeds going unpunished when they made their way back to Shaman's office, to find Allison Validan holding a hefty space-age firearm over Kaylaar, David Shareen, and Clifton Reighley.

The Doctor surveyed the scene and slapped his palm against his temple. "There's always some little detail you forget, isn't there?"

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All of Allison Validan's servility, all those days, months, and years when she felt unappreciated but held her tongue and bided her time, were worth it to see that stupid Kuul'thyreem face when he realized how she had turned the tables on him. For a species so arrogant, they were just as gullible as anyone else when they were duped.

The Doctor and Miss Weitz were similarly dumbfounded. But in the Doctor Allison saw some elemental power, daring to appraise her with disappointment and a bit of rage. It was the rage of the high-handed, Validan diagnosed; the lordly disdain that someone should need to pick up a gun to make a point.

David crawled across the carpet, ignoring the weapon levelled at him to pull at the Doctor's coat. "The Angel, I told you all. The Angel would see more death. And he would enjoy it. Don't you Angel?"

The Doctor pulled David up, only for the human to sharply recoil at the contact. "David, my poor old fellow, it's over. The Enkindler is back where it belongs." He glanced around the office. "I suppose this place will have to do one of those ..." He snapped his fingers, asking Maggie, "what do humans call it? 'Lateral moves'?"

"Do they still play water polo in the twenty-third century?" she offered.

"Shut up, the pair of you!" Validan shrieked. She fired off a bolt from the Vastar, drilling a circular hole in the office's coffered ceiling. She aimed it at Shaman. "And as for you ... it's about time you figured out what it's all about."

She cracked the butt of the blaster into his gut, causing him to crumple and his thin lips to part violently in ragged coughs. It was a hard hit, a few years in the making.

"Does the name Salmi Kolvour mean anything to you?"

He looked up, his black almond orbs shining with understanding. "Yes ... that was my name, before my salvation."

"Do you know who wasn't saved?" she asked the rest of the room. "A young teenager Salmi here was on holiday with."

He nodded, his eyes closed against the harsh moment. "Geoffrey Harper. The Enkindler's first victim." The eyes snapped open again, as Shaman—Salmi—looked upon its subsequent works. There was David, who had lost thirty years but whose wife was taken just as Geoffrey had been. Then there was Reighley, whose legs and spine were now healed. "That same horror and salvation I have made my life's work. For after I heard Geoffrey scream, I ran out into the water, but I was too late." There was real emotion in his voice, all the emotion he had buried for so long trembling through his vocal cords. "It was almost ridiculous, seeing Geoffrey in the mouth of that shark from *Jaws*. I didn't know what a shark even looked like, back then, so it was just a child's crude picture of a terrifying sea creature, all too real and biting through my dear one. I saw what you saw, David. I felt exactly the same agony you did. That slow, dull ache of watching tragedy unfold and being unable to do a thing to stop it. I saw it take Geoffrey, and the next thing I knew I was back in the sand, face down. Just as I was. But ... better than I was. My lung condition ... gone. Ever since that day I have been healthy and fit. Geoffrey gave me that. And do you know something, Validan? I would happily give it all back and be the same sickly creature I was, if I could spend one second more with that sweet boy."

As he spoke, Maggie thought back to their first landing, seeing those two boys on the beach. "We saw it, didn't we Doctor?" she whispered.

He nodded. "The TARDIS didn't make a mistake. That was the moment the Enkindler first landed in linear time."

Validan's cheeks coloured. "You say you felt so badly about Geoffrey's death, but you didn't mind making money off it. You even stayed here when the rest of your miserable bean-counters scuttled back to Kuul'thyme."

Salmi nodded. "Validan, I don't expect any sympathy, but all I can say is I don't think I'm the first person in the universe who's tried to fill a hole in his heart with money. Doesn't fit, though, does it ... sis?"

It had been nearly a century since Salmi had seen the sullen, gangly girl who accompanied the Harper and Kolvour families on their summer break. This was patently not the woman who stood before him, her cheeks further reddening at his recognition.

"But that landing was a hundred years ago, wasn't it Doctor?" Kaylaar piped up from the back. He and Reighley were in an odd situation, lurking around the back but knowing that any movement could result in a deadly outburst from Validan.

Maggie remembered the clue. "That DNA profile. I guess by the twenty-third century you can get yourself a new body if you're rich enough."



Validan's humourless crease of a mouth wrinkled into a smile. "We Harpers were one of the richest families in the Seven Systems. I treated myself, for my hundred and third birthday, to a full genetic graft. I have to admit, sometimes I even lost myself behind Allison Validan, that downtrodden dogsbody. But when the lights went off, between rituals, I read up. I worked and I bribed, and I got that little gate installed under the sea to keep the beast here." She bared her teeth at the Doctor, snarling like a caged cheetah. "You've no idea what you missed, Doctor. The deaths that happened so far were just a warm-up act."

The Doctor stood as still as a statue, seemingly moving past rage. Maggie felt she was in the radius of a hot sun about to explode. But obviously he was just as angry with himself, for being held at gunpoint by this vigilante.

"Those deaths ... that creature's imprisonment ..." he growled in response. "Everyone deals with loss and death. But to use it as an excuse to lash out with more pain and murder?" He thrust his arm at Salmi, as lost in his own reveries as he was when they were out at sea. "Can't you see that Salmi was more than just Geoffrey's friend? How can you look at that love, and that heartbreak—"

Salmi interrupted with a loud snort. "Oh Doctor, don't be so naïve. Dear sis knew, didn't you? Both families knew. Alike in gender, unlike in species. My parents would have preferred it the other way round. As would yours, isn't that right?"

"It's unnatural!" Validan cried, her raised voice and her hysterical sentiment giving her the image of a child throwing a tantrum.

Maggie looked from her to Salmi, and saw the full depth of his loss. "Can't you see he's punished himself more than you ever could?"

"Let's find out," she crisply retorted, raising her weapon.

David Shareen jumped in the air with the grace of a dancer and an eerie smile of contentment spreading across his face. He hugged Validan as he threw them both to the floor. "Love," he whispered tenderly, "is love, damn you."

The energy beam went off, at close proximity, killing them both instantly.

A desolate calm entered the room as Validan's hostages got to their feet, and the Doctor slumped into one of Mister Shaman's club chairs, dropping his head into his hands and breathing out an almighty sigh. "It shouldn't have happened like that. You know, I really try ... you do know that, don't you Maggie, Kaylaar? I try to save everyone."

Maggie tentatively touched his shoulder. Kaylaar touched the other, and the three put their heads together in a sad, sweet embrace. "We know, Doctor. And we love you for it."

## EPILOGUE

The TARDIS hovered listlessly in the time vortex. Maggie Weitz stood like a sentinel in the open doorway, watching the vortex swirl dazzlingly around the ship. Kaylaar again lurked at the door with his eyes closed. She was unsure how long she'd been standing there. Watching. Waiting. Hoping to see the Enkindler again, and perhaps catch a glimpse of its true form. Maggie had no idea how the Doctor could be certain, but he assured her that the TARDIS was in the general vicinity of where the Enkindler had been ejected into the time vortex.

And so she waited for it. She burned with curiosity to see the true form of the creature that had been at the centre of all this misery.

There was no doubt about it: the last two days had been rough. Maggie still shivered with sorrow at the people who died, at the love story of the Shareens that ended so tragically, at all those others who she never knew, who paid the price for others' recovery.

The one nice thought was being out here, the wilds of infinity not quite so lonely with the knowledge that the Enkindler was out here too, and was happy.

"Hey there, you two."

Maggie jumped, the Doctor's voice startling her from her melancholic depths. She craned her head round to look at him but said nothing. The way he stood before them—hands lacing and un-lacing, shoulders hunched, eyes darting anywhere but at his friends—suggested he had something on his mind.

They closed the doors and followed him inside, gathering round the tilt-top tea table. The Doctor poured himself a cup and drank it, as if it were fortifying brandy. He paced on the spot for a bit, sat down and then stood up. Those long, delicate hands grew more restless. Finally, when he spoke, they both understand why.

"Susan was my granddaughter."

Maggie turned to face him, her mouth dropping open in a surprise.

"You—" *have a granddaughter?* is how the sentence was supposed to go, but she fell silent. Of course he did. All those centuries she saw in his eyes. Of course they included a family.

"I had a whole family, believe it or not. A long time ago I made a choice; a terrible, painful choice. Two actually. One was taking her with me, and leaving the rest ..." He broke off, overcome with emotion. "But all that's much too complicated to go into. The second choice was leaving her behind ..." He waved his hand, and Maggie felt for the first time the Doctor's full loneliness.

Maggie swallowed. "I'm sure saying goodbye was hard."

"It was for her own good. Had to be done. You must believe me. She had grown up even in the time we spent travelling together, and she didn't want my life any longer, no matter how much she wanted to stay with me. Maybe I was beginning to worry that if she did stay, she might end up dead before her time. These travels can be a life-changing experience, but not always for the better. They can blind a person

to what's important. Perhaps, I was happy to stay blind. But Susan ... I let Susan go because she wanted a full, happy life. And I wanted that for her. But I knew in my marrow it was a life I could never be part of."

The Doctor paused. Maggie thought she could see the wheels in his head turning as he decided how to proceed.

"The thing is," he continued, "we didn't have time to talk about it. There's never enough time, is there? And I was a different man then. Young—barely four hundred. And bullish with it. Thought I knew what was best for everyone around me to the detriment of all else." He paused, took a deep breath, and then blew it out in a long sigh.

"You've never seen her again?" Maggie tried not to sound judgemental, but abandoning his family to joyride through time, *then* ditching his granddaughter? It made the Doctor come across as an intergalactic deadbeat dad.

"Oh, I know she's well," he assured them, tapping at his temple. "Up here, we're always aware of each other, no matter how far apart we are. We've even bumped into each other once or twice. Not often enough. But one day I will go back for her, properly. Makes sure she's happy. She knows that. But it has to be the right time, you see ... for both of us ..."

The Doctor trailed off, that same note of despair permeating his voice as when he contemplated the deaths he could not prevent on Aqua Vitae. He looked at his companions for the first time during this outpouring, and Maggie could see centuries of accumulated sadness glimmering.

"How few days make up a century," he mused, "and how quickly the centuries race by. I've lived an exceptionally long time. I've changed so much since then. Not a day goes by that I haven't thought about it. On bad days, I regret it. And what my choices, all of them, say about me."

Kaylaar's mouth trembled for a few seconds, as he formed his thoughts. Then he said, "I know a choice you made. You helped free a people trapped by a tyrant. You took one of those people with you to save him from a tedious life of obligation." He gestured to Maggie. "You chose to help a wounded person deal with her grief."

"And we've seen the other choices you've made, which *have* helped people. So many people," Maggie concluded.

They again hugged the Doctor. Time Lords were hardly a tactile people, but on this occasion he was glad to reciprocate.





From all the corners of space, the sick and sad of heart come to the planet Aqua Vitae. No ailment seems too grave, and its managing director, Shaman, brings a religious conviction to the task of healing.

But not everyone comes away from the Ritual of Enkindling healed. Some die horribly. And anyone who catches a glimpse of the creature behind the Ritual, the Enkindler, sees something different—something from their worst nightmares.

To Maggie and Kaylaar, nothing good can come at such a cost. To the Doctor, the Enkindler is a disturbing memory—of a creature he encountered in his own distant past, and whose return reminds him of the family he left behind to travel in space and time.

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