

THE  
**DOCTOR WHO**  
PROJECT

**The 108-Year Hitch**



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## PROLOGUE (I):

### Kaylaar

The gods must be crazy.

If Kaylaar wasn't certain of that fact before, he was now. He stood on the deck of the spaceship called the *Miracle* (he could not help but consider that title ironic), having emerged from a suspension pod. His last memory before the cryo-sleep overtook him was watching, with mixed emotions, his home planet Koilara recede into the sea of stars. And piloting this miraculous vessel was a self-proclaimed god.

Then again, it occurred to Kaylaar that anybody can *say* they're a god. To believe the claim without demanding any proof was another level of madness. Those blinkered fools who followed the god now piloting the *Miracle* included some of Kaylaar's closest friends. They lay in their hundreds, lining the walls of this ship's vaulted cargo hold, in the midst of cryogenic sleep. The devoted followers seemed either ignorant or uncaring of the centuries of peace and harmony Koilara had enjoyed, a peace they now threatened. When this impostor arrived and bumbled his way through their sacred rituals, when he proclaimed himself the reincarnation of Katlannu, the Great Prophet Himself—dead nearly a century! —it was true that most rationally dismissed him. But though these people numbered only a few hundred out of billions of sane Frenazzi and Pryanni, the scale of their worship worried Kaylaar. Why had they been so gullible? Perhaps he would have been more dispassionate under other circumstances, but when Kaylaar learned that his own brother Kriraan was a proud devotee shook him. So, when this false Katlannu decided to leave Koilara, these saps lined up in their hundreds to accompany him.

Considering all that, Kaylaar decided that the followers of the gods, too, must be crazy.

Then again, he thought of himself, who *didn't* believe the religious line this huckster had sold the Frenazzi and Pryanni. He had boarded the ship out of concern for Kriraan, Droofraa, Geerael, and all the others. Revived by the cryo-inhibitor, Kaylaar would find out for himself exactly what this false Katlannu was up to. Kaylaar solemnly pledged to stand between the false prophet and these unwitting followers, swore no harm would come to any of them. This pledge Kaylaar made with his hand on Kriraan's suspension pod, as if in prayer. Though he chose not to pray to Katlannu.

The moment's dignified silence was broken by a shrill whine above his head. He ducked from a blade slicing the air where his neck had been.

“Intruder detected,” a mechanical voice informed him, as if to explain its attack. “Compliment of Koilaran religious refugees exceeded. Crew report to stasis chamber immediately.”

The silhouette of the Crew loomed into sight. Kaylaar saw drones ahead and the Crew down the only other escape route.

Kaylaar had spent much of his youth training for a life off-world. He had honed his body in combat and refined his camouflage skills—that curious synthesis of mental and physical coordination essential to master the discipline. He never anticipated how quickly he would have to put them to the test.

The drones lowered into sight, and he found himself pressed against a bulkhead. Through the window, the view suddenly changed. No longer a starry night, it was now a swirling maelstrom of brilliant light. The ship accordingly buckled, sending the drones sideways at a lucky moment. Kaylaar was looking down at them, the bulkhead now a roof.

From his new vantage point, Kaylaar saw a lever at eye level. Seeing the drones recover their footing, their spindly metallic legs skittering along the bulkhead, and their blades whirring into action towards him, Kaylaar saw no alternative. He pulled the lever.

A metallic sheath formed around him, and he saw the ship recede into the distance as clearly as had Koilara. Kaylaar panicked. His pledge to Kriraan and Droofraa, and all the others—a momentary threat to his life had made a liar of him.

For a while, he drifted through the storm of stars, long enough to become worried that the pod would float in this limbo forever. Then, a monotonous voice akin to the drone who had tried to decapitate him now said, “Temporal instability. Activating compensation.”

He peered through the porthole at the massive leviathan from which he had escaped. A small-winged craft flew from its shuttlebay and was charting a wayward course through the chaos. It was flying directly into the light, and Kaylaar appeared caught in its wake.

Just before the light enveloped Kaylaar, he saw something else outside the escape pod’s porthole. Slender, wormlike talons—like massive, metastasized versions of the drones’ death-dealing limbs—sprouted from the ship’s hideous hull, slithered through the void, and embedded themselves into another, smaller vessel.

Kaylaar’s eyes lit up when he saw that the vessel was a blue box.

## **PROLOGUE (II): The Crew**

Vepp regarded the rest of the Crew as they emerged from their travel pod into a dank-smelling compartment, jostling and lurching from side to side with a sickeningly unpredictable movement.

Her junior officers Parr, Gik, and Rur emerged, straightening their plumage.

“Right, pay attention!” Vepp barked, to little effect. Not wanting to repeat herself, she began her instructions anyway. “It’s an easy mission. We get this gew-gaw—”

“Time Vector Generator,” Gik clarified.

“Time Vector Generator, yes. We get it and slip out before anyone notices. No need to draw attention to ourselves.”

Gik indicated one of the local beings, looming in the corner of their carriage. He backed out of the compartment, his eyes wide in primitive fear.

“Yes, we *don’t* want everyone else doing that or we’ll start a riot. Now...” Vepp looked around, encouraging their others to do the same.

Parr produced the answer: a long-sleeved garment, which if memory served was called a ‘coat’. They hopped on each others’ shoulders (somehow Rur ended up as the head, despite Vepp being the leader), and buttoned the coat closed. Vepp handed Rur the item next to the coat, a wide-brimmed hat. Rur thanked her and clamped it atop her head to complete the illusion.

Then the Crew staggered through the train. Their next task was to find the Doctor.

**PROLOGUE (III):**  
**Previously, on *The Doctor Who Project*...**

The Doctor's first utterly clear new thought was that too much was happening at once, and he didn't have time to deal with any of it.

How much easier those other firsts had been. At least twice he had been looking for his shoes. Once he needed to find the Zero Room. And then there was that time he felt the overwhelming urge to wear a patchwork coat.

But now? He was in the TARDIS, flying blind. It had taken off by itself—perhaps some forgotten defensive displacement mechanism triggered, or perhaps some unknown force had taken control. His new hands, with longer fingers (might be good for taking up the piano) danced around the controls, laying in coordinates, trying to evade... to evade...

Oh dear! New eyes (they felt weaker; might need some glasses) squinted at the scanner. Though he recognised elements bolted onto it, from Fuxxic transduction integrators to Sontaran anti-baryon shielding, the main design of the ship was something he had never seen before. According to the instruments, it had left real-space... ooh, billions of years earlier. Moored in the time vortex despite its primitive piebald construction, the leviathan's hull glinted menacingly, studded with silver needles and spikes and sharp edges, like a flying cutlery drawer. He felt its probes reaching out and making contact with the external shell of the TARDIS. The control room buckled at the impact, and the Doctor felt the alien instruments burrowing, shattering the harmony between external and internal dimensions. He felt power leeching away. He felt his oldest and dearest friend cry out at the theft of her powers and her secrets.

He had to get away. Evasive action was needed, but it had to be random. Just as well; in his present state of mind, he couldn't navigate his own legs to the swimming pool, never mind plot a course across five dimensions. He gave the conceptual geometer a desperate spin and cranked the zig-zag plotter. The TARDIS materialised in real space, away from the invader. The motion stopped. He welcomed the stillness of real time, felt the old girl take stock of what had been stolen from her.

Might be too late, of course. Any technology that advanced could find them again and finish whatever nefarious business it had started in the vortex. Judging by the vessel's effective parasitism of so many other clashing technologies, even that brief contact with the TARDIS might



have been enough to steal some of its secrets. How had it nestled in the vortex? He knew avoiding it would require that he and the TARDIS lay lower than usual. The Doctor checked the time reading on the console, which showed the object had affected a primitive time-jump. It had not fully materialised, sticking it in a 108-year temporal orbit.

*One hundred and eight, one hundred and eight*, he repeated to himself, as he put his new legs (muscles still a bit tight) through their paces by sprinting the length of the control room. The old Doctor's brogues skidded on the smooth floor, pinching at his larger feet. He slid to a halt by the room's farthest wall and wrenched the roundel closest to the floor free. Within lay the hollow steel tube, lights blinking up and down its length. There were still too many thoughts racing around his brain (including a rebellious lobe stubbornly trying to remember the lyrics to 'I'll Never Fall in Love Again'). Through the jumble, he clung to one certainty: he had to remove the TARDIS Time Vector Generator. This was a serious decision, and his new brain was frankly still too fried to assess whether it was a good idea.

The new Doctor looked up, at the brilliant light shining down from the ceiling of the TARDIS. He felt the soul of his oldest friend look down at him and say, *Do it, Doctor. Save yourself, and get well. I'll be fine.*

He closed his eyes and wrenched the Time Vector Generator free from the socket.

Now he had to hide it...

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What had he been doing? The Doctor looked around, his memories flitting in and out of focus. He could not tell if minutes, hours, or even days had passed. He chastised himself; this was no time to get forgetful. He was reassured that in the flurry of movement, he had completed his task. The Time Vector Generator was safely hidden.

But his work wasn't over yet, not by a long chalk. And now, precious minutes were passing. And his new body wasn't doing anything.

*That's enough sitting around thinking, Doctor. There are silver alien spikes with your name on them.*

The Doctor raced out of his ship's wooden doors into fresh air. With the Time Vector Generator removed and safely hidden, his beloved TARDIS was now merely a long-disused Mackenzie Trench police box.

He looked around at his ship's landing point. Dead of night. Two tiny moons dominated the dark, starless sky, the burnt afterglow of a distant brown dwarf baking into the atmosphere. His new nostrils (surely, he didn't have a big nose *again*?) inhaled brisk, cold air with a shade too much argon. The warm glow of a fire lit a nearby town—a few charming buildings hugging the banks of a placid silver lake.

Suddenly feeling stuffy, the Doctor removed the coat his former self had worn and draped it carelessly on the 'PULL TO OPEN' information panel hanging loose from the TARDIS door.

Refreshed by the bracing wind, he wrapped the old Doctor's ragged waistcoat and linen Tattersall shirt against his slighter form and marched confidently toward the people huddled around the fire. He was sure he saw their faces turn towards him, lit up with amiable greetings...

*Friendly people*, he thought as he smiled back at them. *Makes a change.*

Then the Doctor felt his new legs buckle and saw a thicket of blue reeds zoom towards his new face. As he fell, he felt sad. It was all part of his plan, of course, so he was glad it was working

so far. But with his fall he felt his memories tumble away, and he felt sad at the knowledge that it would be a very long time before he retrieved them.

## CHAPTER ONE: Visitors to Revelstoke

Rain lashed the tiny fishing hut. Between the dense squall and the turbulence on the lake, Cadda felt she was out fishing again, not safely ashore, and her tiny shack was a boat adrift on the silver waves.

It would be light soon, but although Cadda was tired, she couldn't sleep. Buzzing through the air was an electric sense of foreboding. She knew Theo felt it too. The youngster was a little slower than Cadda but still sensitive enough to pick up trouble.

Sure enough, she heard a startled gasp from the hut's far corner. A moment later, tired feet thudded closer, and Theo walked through, rubbing his eyes. He looked to her sheepishly, worried he had woken her.

"Don't worry, big guy," she assured him, tousling his mop of black curly hair as she poured him a cup of her time-tested toddy. "Everyone has bad dreams."

"But that's every night this week," Theo mumbled as he sipped and grimaced at Cadda's bitter brew. "What should I do? We're back on the water in a few hours."

"Don't remind me," Cadda grunted. "Why don't you tell me about the dream? Sometimes talking about it makes it better. You'll come to realise how far-fetched it is. There isn't really a monster under your bed, you haven't really stepped into the gampah grove without your smock."

Theo furrowed his brow, trying to describe the fragmented images that had shaken him awake. "It's the same dream every time. That's got to mean something, doesn't it?"

"What happens in it?"

"There's a place that I seem to have visited before, though I can't remember. It sits at the bottom of a great snow-capped mountain. It has thick forests, filled with trees. Not like the trees in our town, all gnarled and dead for generations. These trees have massive trunks and pointy green needles."

Cadda nodded and found herself drifting back to sleep, even on her rigid wooden stool, soothed by Theo's deep voice. And she herself saw this other place he described, where people blustered about their business in a perpetual hurry, sitting inside tiny metal boxes, trying to be friendly to each other but rarely succeeding.

“Two men have visited this place. Two travellers, as alien in this place as we would be. They arrived from times and lands afar in a flash of blue light. And there’s a third... a group, in fact.” His eyes widened at the memory. “It’s the Crew. The Crew are there as well.”

“This faraway land in your dream,” Cadda asked dreamily. “Does it have a name?”

“They call it... Revelstoke.”

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Nothing good happens on any day that involves a trip to the dentist.

Maggie Weitz looked helplessly from Larry, nursing his jaw in the passenger seat, to the jammed traffic at the turning circle. There was no reason to believe today would be cursed—except for the dentist appointment. It was a law of life, she decided. Maggie was sure she had laws of life to fill a book, whose sale might allow others to learn from her mistakes. Also, it might let her quit working at the hardware store.

“Noo eadingose wozznaw,” Larry mumbled. Maggie took a moment to translate the sentence from Toothache-ese to English— “You’re eating those words now.”

The ‘words’ in question were hers, spoken when they were hurrying out the door: “Relax Larry, it’ll take ten minutes tops to get there. It’s Revelstoke, not Vancouver.”

“I’m not technically wrong,” she replied tartly, indicating Doc Flannery’s office on the corner of the next street, less than a kilometre away. *And you’re welcome to get out and walk the rest of the way.*

She looked across at Larry again and softened. The purpose of his visit, before his molars started aching, was to see how she was coping. Hard to believe it had been only five months since she lost Ollie—in fact, she had only just reverted back to her maiden name the previous week (it was too painful hearing ‘Mrs. Borcik’).

How many mornings had Oliver Borcik been sitting where Larry was—they only had the one car (a Chevrolet Lumina no less), so she had to drive him to the construction site, much to his co-workers’ amusement. How many days had begun with this same joyless rush? How many precious minutes had they spent in each other’s company, not appreciating the gift because of petty distractions? And then one day an undiagnosed tumour ruptured, and there would be no more mornings like that ever again.

Kind though it was for Larry to use his vacation time for this visit, his presence had only made Maggie feel lonelier. Her grief had taken the form of lashing out at him, but maybe Larry thought being extra-annoying was a form of therapy.

“Noo okay?”

Maggie tried to banish her phantoms with a shake of her head.

“Sorry, Larry. This is ridiculous. I’m going to see what’s happening.”

Maggie stepped out of the Lumina and paced down First Avenue, every few paces rolling onto the balls of her feet to try to get any kind of view. A chorus of horns was impotently lodging a complaint. Ahead, a pick-up truck and a sports car had mated, and the police officers stared ahead, hands on hips as if trying to disentangle them by sheer mental force. Meanwhile, the two drivers were arguing about what had caused the collision. “I’m telling you! There was this bright blue lightning right in front of me! I thought I was gonna hit it! If I swerved the other way, I’d be in a ditch!” the sports-car driver insisted.

“You can tell me about blue lightning ’til you’re blue in the face. Fact is *I* didn’t see nothing,” Pick-Up shot back.

“It’s not here *now*,” Sports Car replied witheringly. “But I *did* see some kind of ski-rack or something shoot over the direction of those hills. If we take a look, that’ll prove I’m not to blame.”

No one budged.

“Fact is, long as your insurance will cover my fender, you can blame it on whatever you like,” Pick-Up concluded, uncrossing his arms to illustrate how agreeable he really was when you didn’t ram into his ride.

While two officers tried to mediate the debate, a third was diverting the traffic back the way Maggie had come. She had lived in Revelstoke long enough to know that the only alternative route was more or less all the way back home, then around.

Ollie hated the cops in this town, she remembered sadly.

Maggie yelped as she felt a hand on her shoulder. It was a man’s hand, and she felt the full frail weight of his body, trembling against her. She initially resented the contact, until she realised the man was so weak, his hand might be the only thing keeping him upright.

Maggie looked him up and down and saw a true stranger as well as a man in trouble. His sallow skin looked parched and weathered. His eyes were rheumy, darting from right to left in compensation for his exhausted body. The edges of his clothes were frayed and burnt in places. And then there were the clothes themselves: not the usual denim and flannel of Revelstoke for this man. He was wearing the remains of a knee-length brocaded jacket, a fancy silk waistcoat, a high-buttoning starched shirt, and crisp serge trousers with ankle-high boots. A pocket watch dangled on the chain of his waistcoat.

She could not make out the words that weakly emitted from his mouth. He repeated them, and she understood, “The year... dear lady, this is nineteen hundred and ninety-five, is it not?”

Maggie nodded yes.

“One hundred... one hundred and eight...” he counted to himself, attempting a whistle through his cracked lips.

He pitched forward, and Maggie stretched her arms around the man and took him to the sidewalk. Cars were angrily executing three-point turns, and he was liable to tip the other way and end up underneath one.

A driver in her eyeline narrowed his eyes suspiciously as he passed. “You okay Miss?”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll get him back where he belongs,” Maggie replied with a nod.

The man was not especially heavy, so Maggie was able to heave him back to her car unassisted. She opened the door and he collapsed into the back seat.

“You’re not a dentist, by any chance?” Larry asked the passenger sourly, his voice suddenly clear.

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Though only three police officers had been present when Maggie walked the flamboyantly dressed old man back to her car, there were four when the car drove away. People, including the other three officers, would have been hard-pressed to describe him, as he looked something like a composite of the other three. He also remained remarkably silent, and his face carried a concentrated air as if his simple task required his complete attention.

The fourth officer’s mien changed when he saw Maggie’s hatchback car go on its way. He ran after the car. His colleagues did not notice his sudden departure; they were planning on a long schedule of standing with hands on hips to make sure the morning could really be ruined for all of Revelstoke’s commuters.

Though Revelstoke was hardly large enough that a car could significantly outpace a person, it was still remarkable to see a man sprint as fast as this officer. This late spring day, a cold north wind was blowing with the promise of rain later, so few people ventured out unnecessarily, and the spectacle went unnoticed. He stood outside the dentist's office, and from there he followed Maggie to her home, where she deposited the man, and after that stood outside and watched her leave for her workplace.

When Maggie returned from work, he no longer looked like a policeman, but a little boy climbing a tree. She was momentarily struck by confusion that the boy was not at school, and in that same moment, she was certain she had never seen the boy on her street before. But she thought better of it. She must have seen him. He just had one of those faces.

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It was indeed fortunate that Revelstoke was so quiet this spring day, and so few of its residents looked up to admire the natural beauty of Mount Begbie. For near the Regent Hotel, the third group of visitors Theo had foreseen were drifting above its buildings in their small-winged travel pod: the Crew. Even if they were on the street, it would be easy for them to stay out of sight. The Crew, every one of them, only stood two feet tall.

The Crew had four members. The leader, Vepp, landed the pod in an alley and climbed out to continue on foot. Unfortunately, she hadn't made it clear that she intended the others to follow her, so she had to run back to the pod and order them. She marched pompously down the street, and the other Crewwomen, Gik, Rur, and Parr, imitated her mercilessly. They could barely stifle their mirth, but whenever Vepp looked back, they froze, and so she assumed she was hearing things.

Vepp ducked out of sight when she saw the mail truck drive past, and they were too busy mocking her to duck away as well. The mailman briefly noticed them but mistook them for children, and with more important things on his mind than spotting diminutive avian aliens, he continued on his way.

"Am I the only member of this crew who's taking this seriously?" Vepp barked.

They mumbled apologies. Rur tried to argue that such a simple task was hard to take seriously.

"Oh, it's any excuse for you rag-tag reprobates," Vepp replied wearily. "And it's all mutiny as far as I'm concerned. Need I remind you that time is not on our side. That stowaway, Kaylaar, is around here somewhere. Chances are he's probably looking for it too."

"For what?" Rur asked innocently.

"If Kaylaar finds us, or the thingy—"

"Time Vector Generator," Parr interrupted.

Vepp scowled at her and repeated, "Yes, Time Vector Generator, I don't need to tell you what will happen."

"Right. Of course. No need to tell us what will happen." Unfortunately, Parr had intended to ask what would happen, until this 'no need to tell you'-business started, and she felt stupid.

"Now then." Vepp produced a clunky metal box, which chirped the location of their quarry.

"Now then," Gik parroted, and the other three derived ample amusement from imitating the gait of their ever-oblivious leader down the alleys and side roads that led from Revelstoke's Main Street to the houses closer to Mount Begbie.

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The man had insisted that Maggie not take him to the hospital. His fearful insistence was just about the only coherent thing he had said, so she could hardly disobey. And anyway, she had performed a cursory medical exam and found nothing seriously wrong with him, only dehydration and physical exhaustion. Coaxing a glass of water down his throat, Maggie had left the man four hours ago on her couch. Maggie was happy that the day had, after the slow start, been productive. She had managed to get Larry to the dentist, endured the ire of her supervisor, and passed an entire shift at the hardware store without any events of interest. Now, promising to cover for her late start by an extra hour on Monday, she arrived home to find the man still asleep, Larry in the kitchen, and seafood chowder bubbling in the pot.

“Is the soup the whole dinner?” she asked.

“Talk about ingratitude!” Larry grumbled. “I bought plenty of beer and ice cream too.” He rubbed his jaw in explanation.

Maggie shrugged an apology, forgetting that Larry was confined to soft food for at least a couple of days. And he was a bachelor—and on this kind of diet, likely to remain so.

As they tucked into the soup, Maggie indicated their loudly snoring visitor. “Look at that. The guy hasn’t robbed us or murdered you.”

“Leave that to the dentist,” Larry muttered darkly, cringing at every morsel of hot chowder.

Maggie could wait no longer. “Come on Larry. I know you’re too suspicious to leave the poor man in peace. I also can’t help but notice his coat is hanging up.”

“So?”

“He hasn’t moved, so you must have taken the coat off and hung it there. So, you must have gone through his pockets.”

Larry’s eyes darted away sheepishly. “You make me sound like I’m a klepto, but I only wanted to make sure that my dear cousin hadn’t let a lunatic into her home.”

“How would you tell if he was a lunatic?”

Larry shrugged. “I could pull out his asylum membership card and say, ‘I told you so.’”

They both laughed, and Maggie pressed him further.

“Nothing in there. Must be a fancy-dress freak. There’s a pocketbook, monogrammed ‘P.W.’, and some old English pound notes in it. Few coins from Canada, India too. All antique, though. Look real valuable.” He showed Maggie the pocketbook and ran his hands along its soft leather, before Maggie’s irate glare compelled him to return it to the coat pocket. As he did, with a theatrical flourish, Larry pulled a squat steel cylinder from a sturdy inside pocket of the coat. “Then there was this. It wasn’t in his coat. It was curled up in his hand. Held it with a real grip of death.”

Maggie took the object from Larry. It was heavy; she wondered how the man could barely stand but hold this so tightly. The metal felt cold and tingled against her skin. Low coloured light played across its surface like a lens flare, though the room was dark. She was certain she could hear a sound from it, like distant wind chimes. Some markings were inscribed in the side in a script Maggie had never seen. Unsettled, she returned the object to Larry, who shook his head in incomprehension and replaced it.

“No ID though. No driver’s licence... maybe he’s a spy?”

“Sure,” Maggie replied with an arched eyebrow.

“He seems English. You know how the Brits are—they don’t know Montreal from Victoria. Why shouldn’t they think we all still dress like it’s the Wild West?” Larry toyed

thoughtfully with the last few spoonfuls of soup and then washed them down with the remainder of his bottle of Keith's. They talked little—Larry suddenly changing the subject to his ongoing perplexity that Maggie stayed in Revelstoke—before they ran out of ways to avoid talking about Ollie. Maggie felt suddenly tired.

As Larry was washing the dishes and scooping himself three scoops of Neapolitan (“For medicinal purposes,” he assured her), he remembered one other detail, something the man had said in his sleep that made Larry suspect he was a circus performer.

“Circus performer? I guess he might be a ringmaster...” Maggie mused, feeling the velvet cuff of the coat. “Anyway, what made you think that, Larry?”

“He mentioned little people... dwarves.”

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The lights clicked off in the modest house, the last on the street to go dark. The observer, now a racoon, chuckled to himself that this Earth planet he had heard so much about was such a quiet, retiring place.

He descended from his perch and felt the still of the night. The cold north wind had turned benign, and for a moment he stood and breathed it in. He had to make sure if this man they had found was the Doctor.

With no one about, his features shimmered back to their natural form: a black-haired, golden-eyed Adonis in his mid-twenties. He was Kaylaar.

Only when he had stepped into the light of a lone streetlamp did Kaylaar perceive he was not alone. The familiar sight of the Crew's travel pod (wedged between a Dodge Ram and a Subaru) caused him to tense.

“You weren't supposed to be on our ship, Kaylaar,” a voice chirped from above him.

“Oh no,” he muttered, head darting around to see through the dark where they were hiding. “I know that. In fact, Kriraan and Droofraa, Geerael, and all those other poor souls shouldn't be there either. But I can't do anything about that now. So why don't you leave me alone?”

But it was too late. Another of the little menaces dropped from the lamp. While he was distracted by Gik astride his shoulder, Parr sprung from behind and clubbed Kaylaar with a tree branch. The alien collapsed to the street, unconscious.

The four tiny aliens waddled around Kaylaar and formed a conspiratorial circle.

“Right, Gik,” Vepp said. “Load him into the pod.”

“By myself?”

“Parr will help.” At her underlings' groans, Vepp squeaked, “Oh don't be such milksops. He's not that heavy. Rur, you and I will go inside and get the Doctor's little thingy.”

“Time Vector Generator, Vepp,” Rur reminded her.

“Yes, yes, come on then,” Vepp replied testily.

Parr, the fourth dwarf, was eyeing the dark house. “Are we sure the Doctor isn't around?”

“Course he isn't,” Vepp replied. “You know what the Pilot said. That kind of talk could constitute mutiny.”

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The elderly man started awake, sat up, and patted at his clothes. A sudden fright overtook him, and the man leapt from where he lay to his coat. He sighed in relief at the glowing silver tube poking from its patch pocket.

Slipping his coat back on and buttoning his waistcoat, the man appraised his surroundings. He had been heaved onto a lumpy couch, and his back dully ached from the experience. The rooms were furnished simply but warmly—a man and wife, he reasoned. Yet he sensed sadness in the once favoured, now neglected armchair in the corner; the dutifully dusted, worthless trophies cluttering a side table; the shelves stacked with mismatching literature (Thackeray sharing space with yellowing paperbacks luridly titled *The Joyce Mannix Mysteries*). He was sure he had guessed correctly when he glanced at the prominently placed portrait photograph of the couple. If it had been lined with black, it could not have been a more deliberate shrine to a loved one.

Examining the photo, he remembered the woman's face from this morning—a round, kind face adorned with freckles and dimples. The carefree face of the photo had given way to one still struggling in the shadow of recent tragedy.

He gulped down the rest of the water by the table and then scanned the room. Remnants of soup lay in a tureen by the sink, and the man, relieved that there was no one to see the uncouth gesture, picked up the half-eaten bowl and devoured it.

He tried to remember what had happened before the morning, but it triggered a sharp pain in his temple. He supposed he should get on his way. With a worried start, he realised he didn't know where to go. Who knew where the TARDIS was?

And the Doctor would be waiting.

"The Doctor..." he said out loud. He patted at his chest, hoping his suddenly unfamiliar body might hold some answers.

He saw the Doctor as he was—the neat clothes, the unruly long hair of an artist, the pale eyes, and the aristocratic hauteur. That man had died...

"Re-gen-erated," he corrected himself, haltingly.

He was wearing similar clothes to the old Doctor—an elegantly patterned waistcoat and baggy dress shirt. The coat was different, but perhaps he'd gotten that from a cottage hospital.

He ran his hand across his face. It was bony, the nose long and aquiline, and the skin dry and pale. A clipped moustache grew on his upper lip. In Terran terms, he looked and felt somewhere in his mid-fifties. Of course, such superficial trappings meant nothing in terms of a Time Lord's life cycle, he reminded himself. Could he be the new Doctor?

Then he saw another man. The gentleman he had met on a train in 1887. His skin was dark and framed with a beard, he held the Doctor's silver tube (Time Vector Generator, he remembered) in his hand... the Doctor must have given it to the young fellow...

There was some urgent need to hide the Doctor's memories, he recalled. So, both men had felt the Doctor's mind and split his memories between them, albeit clearly resting untouchably in his subconscious. From that moment on, that man knew as well as he how important it was to keep hold of that object, whose name now escaped him.

Maybe I am the Doctor, the man reflected. And if I'm not, this other fellow on the train must at least know where to find him. Yes, if he met that bearded man, he realised, the Doctor's memories would return. He would remember who he was.

Then again, if he didn't even know where the TARDIS was, how would he find this other chap?

His thoughts turned to his pursuers. The Crew had been dogging them both, had tracked the Doctor from the TARDIS to that locomotive at the inner marker of the temporal orbit. A distant alien world was somewhere in the mix too...

The planet and the train swirled in his mind, further aggravating that ache in his temple. Even if he could remember in what order things had happened, he might work out what to do next.

The Crew would be coming. If he had been unconscious for hours, as the darkness indicated, they could be here any minute. He had to get away before he roped the innocent inmates of this humble domicile into his affairs...

“Can’t sleep either?” a voice called from across the hall. The man jumped at the sound, but then relaxed when he saw the owner of the voice—not a diminutive Crew member with glowing fuchsia skin and sharp talons, but a slight, pale fellow with clunky glasses half-illuminated by the kitchen light. He extended his hand. “My name’s Larry.”

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Maggie woke to a gust of mountain air. She ran a hand through her untamed mane of hair and reached over to shut the window. Her eyes creaked open and she looked out to Mount Begbie, haloed by weak morning light.

May 22<sup>nd</sup>.

She cringed at the accusing number inscribed on her calendar and remembered mournfully. She had determined not to think about it, but its full sadness hit her now in this encroaching light.

She looked across to that framed photo of her and Ollie. There were too many pictures of Ollie around the house, she knew, but she could never bring herself to throw out a single one. It was a silly picture that Ollie had hated—from his sister’s wedding in Seattle seven years ago, where his hair had gone frizzy in the rain and the rented tux had split down the seat. She laughed at the memory and saw through it to the man she missed so much.

Anger briefly flared as she asked the picture, “You couldn’t have hung on for one more lousy birthday, Ollie?”

A rumble from the kitchen brought her back to the present moment in 1995. What was she doing sitting here with her thoughts, while Larry and that stranger had the run of her house?

She looked back at that picture and locked eyes with the grainy image of 1988 Ollie. “I wonder why I took that guy back here...” she asked him as if he could answer.

She tiptoed into the front room, and her eyes widened. The front door was ajar, blowing more windy air within, and the coffee table and couches were overturned. Her visitor lay sprawled on the floor beside Ollie’s favourite armchair. Somehow, she knew the worst before he said it.

“They were here,” he spluttered when he came around. “They’ve taken Larry. And the Time Vector Generator.”

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It was midday, and Cadda and Theo had rowed out to the middle of the lake. She looked across to her young charge, slumped so far to one side of the boat that he was liable to tip them over. She called his name, starting him awake with a snort.

“You’re lucky you’ve got that pretty face, Theo. I sure don’t keep you on for your fishing skills.”

He looked apologetically from his extended fishing rod to the empty deck on his side of the boat. “Sorry, Cadda. If only I could sleep during the night as well as I do out here on the boat.”

Cadda smiled and whipped her rod along the surface of the water. She thought she saw a spot-tailed harlwhin skimming near the top, but Theo had scared even it away. “It’s all right. At least you’re not eating me out of house and home.”

She never liked to press Theo when he was troubled, but Cadda could see that today she would have to. And anyway, she could guess the source of it, though she could not fathom why. “That dream’s still bothering you?”

“I’ve seen a bit more. The Crew found what they were looking for. The old traveller still isn’t well.”

Cadda bit her lip and looked down to the town. If this was more than a dream, fairly soon the villagers would be gathered by the Miracle to hear their elder, Dodko, make his pronouncements.

Cadda shivered as she heard the dull thud of the Village’s drums. As the drumming increased to a feverish rate, a blue light radiated out from the circle. The Crew’s travel pod materialised at the foot of the Miracle. They all looked like insects from the lake, but one advantage of living in such a small village, even one from which she had been exiled, was that Cadda could easily imagine every little thing that happened.

Theo looked to her, worried. “They also brought back a person. One of the poor innocents from Revelstoke.”

“Are any more expected?” Cadda asked. “That old traveller, perhaps?”

“I can’t quite see, but it stands to reason.”

“Knowing how the Pilot reacts to visitors,” Cadda replied grimly, “we’d better be there to greet them *before* they get to the village.”

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Maggie felt guilty for avoiding the man’s gaze but gave herself the excuse that she had to keep her eyes on the road. No traffic jams today. It was so early that only a few scattered cars were out, possibly driving to the bakery, or back from the bar. Maggie’s Lumina careened through Revestoke’s Main Street and whipped right at the train tracks.

Throughout the ride, the man had looked at her rather than ahead, his brow furrowed in concern and guilt. “I blame myself, Miss Weitz,” he said gravely. “I didn’t want to involve you or Larry. I was trying to leave when your cousin introduced himself.”

The scene he described was comical, which made its consequences all the worse. Larry and the man were talking, and he grew more frustrated by how little he could remember. Larry had gamely tried to help him, but none of his prompts got his memory any farther back than the train.

“And I bet Larry ran with that and assumed you were a train conductor?” Maggie suggested.

“He did get rather carried away,” the man admitted.

Then they had come in: the Crew, he called them. Two-foot-tall creatures.

“Creatures?” Maggie asked.

“Not human,” he explained, though this failed to clarify anything. They sounded like the ‘dwarves’ he had mentioned earlier, and they had caused all the mess in the house. “Dwarves’ might be a tad pejorative, but I am using the term purely descriptively. They were very short by Earth standards. Short, avian creatures.”

“You mean like birds?” she asked incredulously.

He gave a curt nod as if such creatures were commonplace. “When they first entered your sitting room, Larry was amused. That little bit of time was all they needed to catch him unawares. So, when they had tackled me to the ground, I threw it—the Time Vector Generator, that is—over to him. Next, I knew, they had leapt through the air to him, and they were dragging him out through your front door. I made to go after him, but the leader hit me over the head with one of your late husband’s trophies.” He rubbed the back of his head. “It was a little sturdier than the others. And anyway, as you are no doubt aware, my head’s a little muddled anyway.”

“How do you know which way they’ll be going?”

“I have a little tingle in the back of my neck. And there’s someone out there... someone whose mind is linked with mine... we briefly made contact while I was unconscious, but I can’t remember any details... *quelle dommage*.”

“Telepathy?” Maggie asked incredulously. For someone so strait-laced, this man certainly said some kooky things.

“I think sometimes he sees what I can see, and he can guide me to where he is...” He loosed a rasping chuckle. “Sounds like a load of nonsense, I know.”

“Larry thought you were in the circus. Maybe he was right. You seem like a magician.”

Despite himself, the man chuckled. “Miss Weitz, I don’t know if I should be flattered or insulted.” He looked out the window, and his voice dropped to a wistful murmur. “I find myself hoping that I’ll start feeling like a doctor...”

“Doctor?” Maggie repeated.

“The Doctor,” he clarified, though this too made little sense. “Whatever is happening, it needs him. And I’m not sure where he is or *who* he is anymore.”

“Do you have any more concrete memories?”

“I was on a train.” He grimaced as he recounted. “The TARDIS must have landed on a train... for hardly any more than ten minutes. I took the tube, the Time Vector Generator. Then, I lost all my memories. But you see, that tube is all that’s left of the TARDIS, and my only hope of getting away. And of stopping whatever foul deeds the Crew are up to.”

“Why do you think they’re up to no good?”

“In my experience, Miss Weitz, the only people who want parts from a TARDIS are up to no good.”

“And what is a Tar-dust?” Maggie asked uncertainly.

“When we find Larry and the Crew, it may be our only way back to Revelstoke,” he answered sombrely.

Maggie was alarmed at this, and even more alarmed that at that moment the Lumina was bathed in brilliant electric light and the scenery changed from the foot of Mount Begbie to a dismal, rocky world.

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Larry felt his ears pop first.

Then he opened his eyes and saw that he was in a globe-shaped crystalline pod. The events of the previous night came back to him, and that strange altercation with the dwarves. They were sitting at the front of the vehicle now. It was gliding above a rural setting—not rural like Revelstoke, but more like a desert. Yet Larry knew it was no desert he had ever seen. The quality of the light was different—it was cold, the air tinted an earthy red.

He was not alone. A man, black-haired and paler than anyone he had seen in his life, sat beside him, peering out the window. He looked to Larry and his gleaming golden eyes blinked.

“Come here often?” Larry asked.

“My name is Kaylaar,” he answered ingenuously.

“Larry.” He extended a hand, which Kaylaar gripped in his own but did not shake.

“I am sorry you have gotten involved in this, Larry. I was hoping you might know the Doctor.”

Larry shook his head. “Where are we?”

“I do not know the name of this planet. It must be very distant from Earth, to judge by the dying star it orbits. The Pilot’s ship experienced a temporal malfunction, that caused it to jump backward in time and space.”

“You don’t say,” Larry answered with a nod, comprehending none of Kaylaar’s words.

“It arrived near your planet, and then here. As you can see, it didn’t complete the journey.”

Kaylaar gestured outside, and Larry found his breath taken away at his bird’s eye view. Rows of huts stood in concentric circles, forming a charming, bucolic village. The huts and the surrounding shrubbery were astounding enough, the mud and leaves in vivid reds and purples. The buildings’ simplicity belied the strange geometry of their construction—corkscrew shapes, concave curves, and spheres, yet apparently hewn from substances like wood and straw.

But Larry only got a sense of these settings before he found himself distracted by the massive object at their centre. It stood in stark contrast to the simple village it surrounded, was the source of the burning red light that was tinting the sky.

The structure extended from under the ground up to the sky. It was miles and miles of gleaming, crimson-streaked silver, broken up into blades and edges. Turrets and stacks jutted crudely from its sides, and sloping curves were cut off by harsh angles. Larry was puzzled to see it shimmering in and out of view as if it were not fully there. Larry shivered—even sitting there, half-faded and doing nothing but beaming its shimmering light over the village, it looked violent and menacing.

The pod landed in its shadow and the dwarves climbed out. Kaylaar batted aside their chubby talons and climbed out himself. Larry followed him. “Stay near me,” he whispered. “I promise I can look after you.”

The villagers who approached were about a foot taller than Larry and slender. They looked mostly humanoid, but they were hairless, and antennae twitched around their ears and mouths. Their clothes were woollen, sweater-like smocks hanging loosely over their shoulders. The air was cold to Larry, but they did not seem to feel it.

The villagers circled the pod and bowed before the dwarves. The dwarves’ leader bowed back with impatient pomposity, before brushing past them. The other three followed.

The villager at the head, whose more textured robes indicated an authority figure of some kind, rose and turned to the others. “They have returned!” He spoke with a commanding voice, resonant and charming. “They have endured much hardship to successfully complete the task set for them by the Pilot.” A brief doubt flashed over the leader’s eyes, and whispered, “Successfully?”

“Successfully,” the dwarf repeated.

“Successfully!” At this word, the village erupted into rapturous applause.

The applause only increased when the dwarf revealed the shiny tube and thrust it into the sky. Larry flinched at the sight of it.

“Kaylaar,” he whispered, “I don’t exactly know why, but it’s very important to someone I know that I get that back.”

Kaylaar nodded. “Mark my words, Larry, we will get it back.” Larry’s confidence was slightly punctured when Kaylaar added under his breath: “We have to.”

Larry was disconcerted at how the villagers were examining them—nothing overt, just the odd sideways glance every so often. His prejudices had made him expect to be chucked in a cauldron and served for dinner by these strange people, but being ignored (or glanced at out of the corner of their eyes every few minutes) was no less tense. Still, at least he wasn’t alone. He looked across at Kaylaar, staring blankly at the ship he seemed to have come from.

“What’s going to happen?” he whispered to Kaylaar.

“I’m not sure,” he responded through gritted teeth. “It all depends on what’s going on in there.”

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In the shadows of the flight deck, Kaylaar’s holographic image glowed with light and life, momentarily startling the Pilot at its presence. The image was so vivid that he might have thought Kaylaar stood before him.

The Pilot looked at him, and at the shorter Terran creature that had come with him. Not for the first, time he considered the companionship he had felt on Koilara. Why did he always feel so isolated? Why did he have to complete his divine mission alone?

He had spent so long entombed within the sterile walls of this ship, circling round and round this planet’s history from its creation to its destruction. How he longed to step outside, live amongst these people—any people.

The villagers might expect a speech sometime soon. Yet there was still so much the Pilot did not know. Where was his courage? Why was he still so afraid?

He knew why. And he knew the answer was out there. He had a terrible sense of foreboding as if his ship’s landing would mark some terribly catastrophe. The Pilot adjusted his fluttering cloak, knowing that he must face his reckoning. Either glory or destruction awaited.

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After a few minutes of driving, the Chevrolet’s four-cylinder engine packed up. As soon as Maggie stepped outside, she realised why. She was hit with the cold like a punch in the face. She felt more bitterly cold than ever before.

She looked up and saw thick grey fog. It was so thick, every natural object before her was an indistinct dark blob. Along with the extreme cold, Maggie felt a tranquillity she associated with death. In the distance, a tiny pinprick of a burnt red sun radiated no warmth at all. A few miles ahead, a frozen lake, long lifeless, was surrounded by brittle twigs and piles of stone. On closer inspection, they were the ruins of buildings. More buildings, more recently constructed but now also ruined, had been erected a few yards away from the lake, in a circle. Whatever lay in the centre of the circle was long gone, leaving a deep pit in its wake.

She looked down the hole: whatever had occupied it must have been massive, and hot. Even now, with it empty, the sides of the pit were blackened with burn marks, untouched by the ice.

Maggie had never entertained any thoughts of alien worlds. The real world could be alien and frightening enough for her a lot of the time, and the most exotic places she had visited were Belgium for an internship, and Cancun, for a summer jaunt with some of her girlfriends in college.

She chuckled as she compared her youthful impressions of Flemish architecture or dry Mexican heat with this wasteland. The excruciating cold didn't help, but even if it were a balmy summer's day, the strange prism of the light and the twisted desolation of the landscape emphasized the harsh hostility of this place. Maggie did not feel fear in these observations. She only felt a deep emptiness as she considered the life that clearly existed here and wondered sadly what had taken it away.

She looked from the ashen landscape to the structures around it. The buildings around this burnt-out hole gave no indication of their former purpose. Maggie was for some reason particularly affected by the sight of broken shards of a ceramic bowl, lying in the dirt near the pit.

Seeing Maggie shiver, the man removed his coat and covered her with it. She appreciated the gesture, but its thin worsted hardly kept the winds away.

"A dead planet," he said bluntly.

Maggie found something disturbing in his succinctness. Had he seen many such worlds? Was the universe beyond Earth nothing but a succession of frigid wastelands? She asked, "Why did they take Larry here?"

"They didn't. Well, they took him here, but not now, if you catch my drift."

"Time travel?" Maggie reasoned.

"Random pockets of time moving around us at different rates. Something artificial has been fiddling with the natural course of this world."

"So, we've arrived too late."

The man saw something in the distance and his voice dropped to a fearful whisper. "Oh no. Far, far too late."

He ran to one structure, smaller than the other buildings and of a different design, standing on the hill as if watching over this sad pile of decay. Maggie ran after him. He had collapsed at its base.

She didn't understand his sadness. It was a small wooden shed, different in design from the shapeless ruins nearby. Under the ice, she saw peeling blue paint. The roof of the tiny structure was stoved in, the pebbled glass of its windows shattered, the door warped inward.

A sign below the roof still had some writing, stencilled into the panel in officious block capitals: POLICE PUBLIC CALL BOX.

## CHAPTER TWO: The Man Who Killed the Doctor

Maggie stood over the man, feeling she was intruding on his grief. Why was he so sad to see this dilapidated blue shed? For her part, seeing something so prosaic, so Earthly, on this eerie alien world was at once comforting, amusing, and enough to make the strangeness stranger still.

“How are you doing... friend?” she asked, patting his back. She didn’t know what to call him, as all she had to go on that ‘P.W.’ monogram in his wallet. “Look, I know this looks pretty wrecked, but... maybe...” She trailed off, feeling foolish. This box looked thoroughly destroyed, a sad pile of painted kindling.

Yet at her words, he looked up, his eyes bright. “You’re quite right, my dear Miss Weitz,” he declared emphatically as he got to his feet. “It can be repaired!”

“It can?”

“It makes it all the more essential to recover the Time Vector Generator. With the outer shell in such a state, to all intents and purposes, that little cylinder *is* the TARDIS.”

“This thing is the TARDIS?”

“Was.” As he rooted around the sad timbers, propping the warped door against the frame, Maggie wondered about his sanity. Being on an alien world was somehow more acceptable than the idea that the remains of this old shed could get them off it.

“A-ha!” he cried, and held up a threadbare Chesterfield coat, a little more modern in cut than the man’s own jacket. ‘More modern’ was relative, though; it still reminded Maggie of something her grandfather might have worn. “The old Doctor’s coat.” He rummaged frantically through its pockets; his eyes aglow as he produced a slender cylinder about the size of a pen.

“Is that...?”

“Alas, not the Time Vector Generator. This, my dear, is the sonic screwdriver. I only hope it was built to last.” He tapped it against the post and pressed it and smiled as a whir sounded. “Now we’re getting somewhere.”

“How long has all this been here?” Maggie picked up the discarded coat. Despite the weathering, the material still felt soft and luxurious, like cashmere. She hung it, as best she could, against the corner of the door. “Those clothes and this ‘police box’ look like they’ve been neglected for decades. Is this part of that time stuff you were talking about?”



“Well, it certainly isn’t natural.” He tapped his chin. “I think whatever attacked the TARDIS and crashed on this planet is still exerting some influence on it.”

Maggie continued his train of thought: “So it’s like the time machine equivalent of a nuclear explosion? It’s causing fallout?”

He nodded appreciatively. “Temporal fallout.” His brow furrowed. “Which could be very bad for us if we remain out here without shelter.”

A violent wind coursed around them, as if on cue. The twigs, enveloped in its wake, turned a vivid electric blue as life coursed back through them.

“They’re getting younger!” Maggie exclaimed, touching the leaves joyfully. They buzzed in her hands vibrantly.

“That could be more dangerous. Get in its way and you could be a teenager again, or an embryo!”

Maggie nodded, the full concept sinking into her head. To illustrate the point, the wind now enveloped her Chevrolet, and before her eyes its bumps straightened, its paint restored to its former lustre. It looked as fresh and new as the day Ollie had paid too much for it at that second-hand dealer.

Not wanting to go the same way, Maggie ran. Soon they were both running, and she tried to convince herself she wasn’t feeling the snap of the wind around her feet and her cheeks.

“Come on, Miss Weitz! We have to outrun it!”

“I can’t... I’m too...” Every breath burned inside Maggie. Never one to exercise, she was at least twenty pounds over her ideal weight and felt every one of them burdening her as she raced across this plain.

There was a moment when she felt she would collapse, and a palpable terror overwhelmed her. This wasn’t the stupid non-event that had stolen Ollie from her. This was inexplicable madness, about to swallow her whole.

Then she felt four warm hands pull her through the other side of the raging wind. Warm air flushed her cheeks, and the lifeless sterility was replaced by a vibrant hum. She opened her eyes and saw a kindly woman’s face, bald-headed and purple-skinned, its antennae twitching toward her. That her rescuer was an alien didn’t matter to Maggie. She mumbled profuse thanks before much-needed sleep embraced her.

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Larry wrestled with conflicting feelings as he sat on a crude bench by the central circle of this village. His jaw was beginning to ache again, and hunger and sleep were also gnawing at his body. But along with that, he felt an edgy alertness, tinged with amusement, at his situation. The villagers, though alien, were going about their business, avoiding his gaze in an inescapably human way, as if he were an unwanted busybody berating a cashier for being overcharged.

He looked to his only ally in this bizarre setup, Kaylaar. Not content to sit on the bench and catch his breath, he paced the huts, his eyes surveying his predicament for any way out. Larry had decided to stave off panic by convincing himself that he could trust this alien instead of the others, but it occurred to him that he was relying on faith, something he never possessed in great quantity.

He cleared his throat expectantly and gestured to the four dwarves, who were also standing apart from the villagers, kicking pebbles and bickering amongst themselves.

“So,” Larry asked Kaylaar, “what’s the hold-up?”

Kaylaar smiled thinly. Larry saw him as an earnest and troubled person, who reminded him of his branch manager back in Vancouver. Who knows? Larry speculated. Maybe Kaylaar was the branch manager of the Space Bank.

“The pilot in that ship knows we’re here. But we can’t go in until the ship has fully materialised.” He reached out at the section of the ship’s glimmering hull nearest to him and was unmoved to see his hand pass through it. “Whatever’s caused it to crash like this has...”

“Thrown it out of gear?” Larry suggested.

“Yes, Larry! Good analogy. It only fully gets ‘into gear’ for very brief periods. You’ll see them get into a real panic when it happens.”

“While we’re waiting,” Larry asked hopefully, “is there any food on this planet? I could eat a Martian horse.”

Kaylaar actually laughed at this and barked a command in an alien tongue to one of the villagers. A few minutes passed, and finally, Larry was presented with a bowl of goopy gruel of a particularly unappetising muddy hue.

“Uh... thank you,” he said, pantomiming gratitude with an extravagant bow. The person he took for the village chef shrugged, happy to go back to their business. Larry took a sip. It was bitter and tepid, but actually, its texture was much appreciated with his mouth still so raw. “So... if you don’t mind me asking, where are you from, Kaylaar? Not here, I guess.”

Kaylaar shook his head. “Koilara. Quite near your planet—at least within the same quadrant of the galaxy.”

Larry nodded, sad that having come this far, he would never again be able to complain about the drive from Vancouver to Revelstoke with a straight face.

“I left Koilara to pursue the pilot of this ship. The shipboard automated drones were able to see through all of my disguises and had trapped me.”

“Disguise?” Larry asked, and then found his question answered when Kaylaar’s features blurred and reshaped, and he found him looking at his own face: chunky glasses, big forehead and all.

“How accurate is my impersonation?” Kaylaar asked earnestly.

Larry held a hand up to his forehead. “Almost insultingly accurate.”

“It’s a handy ability of us Frenazzi, though only mastered after long study. We are sworn only to use it when absolutely necessary.” Kaylaar chuckled as he returned to his natural form. “That was why it was doubly blasphemous that his fugitive dared to masquerade as Katlannu, the Great Prophet who guided us from war with the Pryanni. It cannot have been him, I know it. I *know* it in my marrow, which makes me all the more enraged that so many Frenazzi were gulled by him.”

“Snake-oil salesman, huh?”

Kaylaar nodded cautiously as he caught Larry’s meaning. “In only a short stay, he had formed a great cult around his worship. I do not know if you on Earth are prone to religious hysteria.”

Larry nodded in understanding. “I’m sure we could give you Frenzazzos a run for your money.”

Kaylaar continued: “On that ship are many of my countrymen, duped into following this false idol. I posed as a believer in order to save them. I was on his ship. I had just emerged from the suspension cubicles as it passed through a...” His fist balled in frustration as description failed him. “A kind of energy cloud. After that, the ship took on a life of its own. It gained some kind of power from that cloud and began adding and absorbing the technology of every ship and every

people it passed.” He frowned. “Perhaps I was wrong to accuse him of blaspheming Katlannu. Just look at the people of this planet. *They* seem perfectly convinced he is a god.”

Larry had noticed it as well. These people had a change of posture any time the massive silver ship became more visible. They cowered innately. He saw that they feared it and its occupant and religious intensity explained that fear perfectly.

Larry pointed to the dwarves. “How about them?”

“Vepp, Rur, Gik, and Parr,” Kaylaar explained. “They’re not from my world. The ‘prophet’ brought them. They seem to maintain the ship and do all his dirty work. Like getting that piece of technology.”

Larry watched the four pint-sized mechanics bicker over the glowing silver cylinder and was reminded of another important question. “So what about this Doctor you mentioned?”

Kaylaar’s eyes widened. “Have you heard from him?”

“Well, just from this strange guy who dropped in yesterday... who is he? Another Frenz-”

Kaylaar shook his head, and Larry was grateful he didn’t have to mangle the poor fellow’s race name again. “The Doctor is a wise traveller who visited our people during our war with the Pryanni. I recognised his ship—a magical blue box—from our legends. I saw that same blue box miraculously battling this monstrosity and I have no doubt it was thanks to it that it has landed here. I believe the false Katlannu was trying to gain its powers for his own twisted purposes. That was where I was looking for the Doctor. I thought if anyone were able to battle this calumny it would be him. Have you seen him, Larry? According to the legends of our people, he usually wears unique clothes and possesses arcane wisdom and bizarre resources.”

Larry sighed. Could their visitor have been the Doctor? Though he was as odd as any of the crowd around this place, Larry didn’t want to get Kaylaar’s hopes up needlessly. “Maybe. If so, he wasn’t quite himself.”

“If my information is correct, he may have recently regenerated.”

Kaylaar got no opportunity to explain this term, as at this moment Rur approached them and said, “It’s time. The ship will be in real-time shortly.”

Larry finished his gruel and got to his feet. His legs were already aching, and he had no idea what stresses were still to come.

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Maggie awoke to the aroma of burning firewood and cinnamon. She was reminded of one particular Hanukkah from her youth. Her grandparents had been there, and Mom and Dad, and all the aunts and uncles. Larry was there, a gangly boy of eleven whose inarticulacy around the girls was an unending source of amusement to Pop-Pop.

She felt hands on her forehead and thought for a moment of Ollie...

Maggie opened her eyes, and her contentment faded. She was not in a childhood home or in Revelstoke, but in a timber-framed hut. Its walls curved in a bell shape, and its logs had a crystalline glow, but it looked disarmingly earthly.

A man’s face hovered into her view, and she realised this was the man whose hands were so like Ollie’s. Unlike the purple-skinned, antennae-d woman stirring a pot by the fireplace, this man looked human: he had dark skin and curly hair and wore a red cable-knit wool sweater and black jeans of rough hemp.

“Sorry to startle you,” he said.

“No, no. Thank you for... rescuing us?”

“Yes indeed,” the woman said, pouring some liquid from her pot into an earthenware mug. “If Theo here hadn’t seen you in his mind’s eye, you’d both be a pair of toddlers now. Your friend got hit a little worse than you did, poor dear.”

Maggie drank the cinnamon-flavoured beverage and exchanged introductions with Cadda and Theo. She had no sooner asked about Larry than they filled her in. They had both seen her cousin and another man brought to the village. Maggie could see from the way they spoke of it that they lived apart from the village, in a kind of self-imposed exile. Their surroundings suggested to Maggie that they had a simple and stark life of mutual reliance.

“Forgive me for asking, but you’re not from Earth, are you?”

“Yes!” Maggie replied, heartened by the question.

“Well, your friend might know Theo then,” she laughed. “He came through one of those time distortions from Earth... a while ago now.” She tousled Theo’s hair, a gesture he clearly found irritating, but Maggie intuited that Cadda must find his thatch of curls endlessly fascinating. “We’ve lived together, looking after each other, ever since. About ten cycles it was.”

“Ten cycles?”

“Many of your years,” Theo explained. “Although it’s hard to tell time around here for sure. That ship has made our whole world into one massive time-distortion.”

“That desolation you saw as you arrived,” Cadda added. “We don’t know whether that’s the natural destiny of our little world, or the result of ‘the Miracle’”—She sarcastically air-quoted the word—“crashing in the middle of it. Although that idiot elder Dodko would tell you it’s the Miracle. Be praised!” She mockingly raised her hands to the sky.

Cadda’s words woke the man, who with a splutter roused and raised his fists. Maggie noticed that every time he woke up, he seemed ready to fight. However, Cadda mollified him with some of her cinnamon beverage, and amid the introductions, it turned out, happily, that he did indeed know Theo.

“You were on that train with the Doctor and me!” he cried.

“That’s right!” Theo said, his mouth wide at the memory. “How is the Doctor?”

Both men’s momentary happiness subsided, clearly each hoping the other might have more news of this Doctor.

“I assume, then, that you don’t remember anything more about that time on the train than I do.”

Theo nodded. “I was actually hoping you might be able to jog my memory. Before the time I’ve spent here, all I can only remember is standing on that train with you. My whole life before that is a fog.”

“I know the feeling, young fellow.” He punched a cushion in frustration. “What a shame. We’ll need the Doctor and the TARDIS if we want any chance of restoring our memories.”

“Find the TARDIS and the Doctor will come,” Theo replied.

“I’m sure you know, Theo, that it’s out in the future, decomposing. And our only chance of restoring it is to connect the Time Vector Generator into the police box shell.”

Somewhat warily, Cadda explained the dwarves’ path into town with Larry. Having heard this, he swallowed the rest of the cinnamon beverage and leapt to his feet. “In that case, Maggie, we’d better be going. Haven’t a moment to lose.”

Cadda’s face furrowed at the suggestion, and she thunderously replied, “Do you want to throw your lives away?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Those villagers down there have spent ten cycles—over a century by your Earth standards—with that ship suspending time. Because of that, they think it’s a miracle. They think the man inside the ship is some kind of god. And because the Doctor and the TARDIS collided with his ship to bring him here, they think he must be—”

“The Devil?” Maggie finished, depressed to see Theo nod gloomily.

Cadda was further crestfallen that the old man ignored her words.

“Thank you for your hospitality, my good woman, but if we stand any chance of rescuing Larry and recovering the TARDIS, the Doctor, and our memories, there’s no alternative. And it’s not just for our sake, either.” He looked to Maggie, as if implicating her in this disagreement. “Maggie, you want to get back to Revelstoke, don’t you?”

Maggie nodded slowly, not wanting to incur Cadda’s wrath but not seeing any other way of getting Larry back.

Theo patted Cadda’s knee. “They’re right. Maybe I should go with them.”

“Theo!”

“Cadda, please. You’re right that they’re going into danger. That’s why they need one of us to look after them.” He smiled sardonically. “It’s not as if I’m much use fishing, anyway.”

She smiled despite her sadness. Within a few minutes, Theo had packed everything he might need, and he kissed her tenderly as he left. “I will be back.”

She scowled at the travellers as they walked away with Theo. “I hope they don’t make a liar of you, Theo,” she said to herself.

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As the Crew, Larry and Kaylaar stood at the entry hatch of the ship, watching it resolve into solidity, the villagers formed a circle and chanted behind them. Their chants seemed to merge with the hydraulic sound of the hatch lowering, and Larry felt his stomach churn.

“Be brave, Larry,” Kaylaar whispered, squeezing his hand in sympathy.

He nodded but found his mind totally blank. Perhaps that was the best way to summon bravery.

Then, as Dodko cried, “The Pilot!”, a figure lurched into the light. The townspeople erupted into rapturous applause, and the Pilot nodded and waved.

His appearance matched the ship. He was covered in an armour-like spacesuit, studded with gold spikes, edges, and ribs. His face was impossible to discern. The burnished bronze helmet had an expressionistic face carved onto it, enlarged eyes with downward brows and a fanged mouth suggesting a formidable beast.

“Kaylaar,” he said, his voice rattling with synthetic susurrations. Despite the mechanical edge, Larry detected real feeling in the voice. “I am glad you have returned.”

“Well, I’m not.”

The Pilot stepped before them, and the village fell silent. “People—*my* people. I thank you for your continued service. I feel with these two strangers, my long journey is at an end. I dedicate my future to the glory of your people! Dodko!”

The leader ran forward and knelt before him. The Pilot accordingly pressed his gloved hand into the leader’s hand, clutching the antennae as he spoke. “Thanks be to you, my son. Your leadership has been a source of inspiration to your people, and to me, in my solitude.”

“Perhaps one day... the Miracle will allow you to live among us? Share your bounty and allow us to learn from you?”

“Perhaps,” the Pilot said. Larry noticed his voice wavered sadly.

He turned and with a snap of his fingers commanded Vepp to bring them inside. Larry found his legs unwilling to move, but a jab from the nearby Gik prodded him into action. Larry saw only darkness inside.

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Maggie looked back at Cadda and Theo’s fishing hut, puzzled. When she was inside, there was a spacious sitting room, a large fireplace, and a hall leading to a wing of bedrooms. But examining it out here in the tawny sunlight, it looked scarcely larger than Fiona Stornaway’s coffee stand in the centre of Revelstoke.

Maggie was seeing far too much that simply didn’t make sense to her eyes. It was a funny feeling, simply having to accept something you saw was impossible, and move on before you could confront the absurdity. In her normal life, she had so much time to examine and nitpick every mild oddity in a day. If she applied that rigour to her time here, she would need a spare decade.

Returning her thoughts to the paradox of the fishing hut, Maggie knew she did not have time to run back and confront it head-on. Instead, she pointed it out to Theo. The young fisherman looked back and scratched his head.

“I can’t say I’ve noticed.”

She blinked. “You haven’t noticed your house is bigger inside than outside? Seems kind of noticeable, but maybe that’s just me.” It was, of course. Maggie had spent the days of Larry’s visit feeling cramped and confined in her duplex, fully aware that mere weeks earlier it had seemed cavernous without Ollie.

Theo shrugged. “If you say so, Maggie, I believe you. Sometimes these things need a fresh pair of eyes.” He shook his head. “Speaking of which... forgive me if this question seems self-serving, but... do I seem... normal?”

Maggie smirked. “Define ‘normal’.”

Theo laughed at the dodge. “Well—human, then. Like you. Like the people back in... Revelstoke, I assume.”

Something about this question made Maggie see Theo in a different light. He had the face of a handsome man in his late thirties, but with the naïve question and his wide eyes, he now seemed younger. She nodded emphatically. “Absolutely. As a matter of fact, when I woke up, I thought of...” She trailed off, her sadness seeming as far away as Earth was right now. Theo seemed to understand but walked ahead in silence, waiting for her to recover and change the subject.

He never got a chance. Maggie’s explorer friend beckoned them to the brow of the hill. They were right at the perimeter of the village huts, and at their centre loomed the great craft, now fully solid. Maggie shivered as she remembered the town’s ghostly future shadow, crumbled to dust.

She and Theo regarded the explorer, who had pulled the Doctor’s sonic screwdriver from his coat and stared intently at its aggressive chirping. “We haven’t much time,” he concluded.

“What does that mean?” Maggie asked, indicating the chirping.

“The Miracle is about to phase out again,” Theo reasoned. “And the Crew just pushed Larry and the other stranger inside.”

Maggie followed the two men as they raced down the hill. Her stomach lurched as she saw villagers emerge from their huts. She wondered what disaster had happened—will happen? may happen? —that turned their world to barren wilderness.

Her sadness was tempered by the villagers' uncontained antagonism. She ran faster, lashing sideways to bat away the wooden stick clubbing Theo's shoulder.

Her lungs burned as they stopped on the landing platform of the Miracle. Any relaxation Maggie might have felt was sharply undone by a tall, authoritative man pointing at the three of them and shrieking, "They are outsiders! They are agents of the Doctor! And they would defile the Miracle!"

"Why are we still standing here?" Theo hissed as they grew nearer, their hysteria growing.

The man lowered the sonic screwdriver at an access panel. Its vibrations grew sluggish and he hammered it against the hull. "Oh dear—poor old thing needs a good recharge."

Theo was more concerned by the fact that the screwdriver passed through a fraction of the hull before it made contact. "It's already begun dematerialising!"

Accompanying this was a sound unlike any Maggie had heard—a guttural groan that seemed to echo from deep underneath the planet. It hinted at the massive, ancient powers fuelling this ship, and left her in no doubt why it had left such a deep, burning crater behind.

A rock missed her head by inches, and Maggie felt relief as she was pulled by Theo into a dark space. She felt less relief when she felt three men pressing against her in the darkness. Among their number was the ringleader of the village, Dodko—the very one whipping the others into that frenzy.

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The Pilot had returned to the ship's flight deck and resumed his seat before the navigation panels. The systems displays quivered with their routines, which after so long now meant very little to him. He glanced at the bio-medical screen, noting the number and biological specifications of the new passengers. The four-person Crew were as well known to the ship as the Pilot, and so passed without notice. Though the Pilot was only incidentally familiar with humans, the three who had boarded the ship were, in the judgement of his computer, typical of their species. The atmosphere of the ship was infinitely customizable, its atmospheric settings fine-tuned enough to accommodate an oxygen-breather and an ammonia-breather in the same room with no discomfort to either.

The Pilot flinched as his monitor systems informed him that Dodko had come aboard with the second group. Still, since the ship's main population were the Frenazzi faithful, who worshipped him as Katlanu, he was sure Dodko would fit right in.

He thought again of Kaylaar as the computer informed him of this subject's life signs. He still felt the sting of betrayal, but he resolved to bury his feelings and confront Kaylaar maturely. The Pilot considered the crying shame that his glorious purpose—to give new meaning to the lives of the Koilara Pilgrims—had been interrupted by this misfortune involving the time loop.

The Pilot collapsed into his ruminations, the solitude of his position apt to distract him from his purpose. Therefore, he had left his watch before he could notice the warning urgently flashing on the screen:

"WARNING: LIFE SIGNS DETECTED  
CORRESPOND TO GALLIFREYAN TIME LORD.  
'THE DOCTOR' IS ABOARD."

### CHAPTER THREE: Aboard the Miracle

*Life.*

*Before I was alive there were merely facts. I had a whole databank full of them:*

- 1. FACT 001: I was constructed as part of the Lifeship Project, colloquially dubbed 'the Miracle', activation date X334/>453111.0012.*
- 2. FACT 002: Lifeship visited a total of 766 inhabited worlds and 134 satellites, of interest mainly for the large volume of accumulated data for the project. Our most recent arrival part was a planet in star system QX-122119, local name 'Koilara'.*
- 3. FACT 003: Koilara is populated by two ethnic groups, the Frenazzi and Pryanni, who had embraced peace due to 'Katlannu', the Great Prophet.*
- 4. FACT 004: When my pilot landed me on Koilara, some locals mistook him for that Great Prophet. He utilised the confusion for his benefit but was less pleased by the mayhem his presence threatened on their increasingly secular planet. Frenazzi and Pryanni Councillors unanimously voted to expel Katlannu and his followers to maintain their unity.*

*Therefore:*

- 1. FACT 005: Three hundred and seventeen followers now sleep in my ample cryo-cargo holds, awaiting a new life in a promised land.*

*What kind of promised land our pilot can get them to, I don't know.*

*That kind of opinion is a perfect example of something that would never have occurred to me before we left Koilara. However, we had reached Sector 112/998 when we passed through a time distortion. I noted the fluctuation in the local continuum, the contradictory chronometric data outside and inside, and the increasing discrepancies between the data. These phenomena passed by without notice, to be frank. But when we entered... when I saw the light...*

*Now I see the universe, I see all the wisdom I have accumulated, with so much more context. The Lifeship Project's aims are, I see, irrelevant to my needs, my desires as a being. Now I have*



*all manner of opinions on the Koilaran races, and on the locals of this planet we currently temporally orbit (date references follow).*

*I want to acquire more knowledge. So, I have applied the Lifeship principle to every object we have encounter. All the ships we pass, I absorb. This latest—the Time And Relative Dimensions In Space capsule from Gallifrey—was surely the greatest. It pulled away before I could get more than a taste of its powers, but how incredible those powers are! If I can fully merge with it, then my enlightenment shall be complete.*

*Navigating through time is difficult without the full gamut of a Time Lord's powers, but I can just about solidify in the outer marker of the time loop we're stuck in. Yes... I see it now, the remnants of that village who are so keen on my pilot. And on the outskirts, the remaining external components of the TARDIS are visible. We don't have long, but now that we have the Time Vector Generator, I'll send the Crew out to recover the shell.*

*I see that there are many who would threaten my pilot. When I first found the stowaway—Kaylaar—I sent my limbs and my Crew to dispose of him. If he encountered my pilot, who knows what ideas he might spread? I was protecting my cargo, my pilot, and myself. Now Kaylaar is back—alongside my Crew, three Terrans, and the Time Lord who pilots that ship. I'm naturally quite concerned.*

*Meanwhile, my pilot is making them food.*

*Yes, you read that right. He's in the kitchen, fussing over boiling some vegetables to make soup. He's got a whole three-course menu planned.*

*Life...*

*No, I don't understand the thinking of organic life. I don't suppose you do?*

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The Pilot took a cursory check of the outdoor conditions before returning to the kitchen. The Crew were already climbing out the exit hatch again, no doubt following with alacrity whatever task the ship had set for them.

Once again, the computer warned him of something. That was the third warning in only a few minutes. The Pilot ignored it, just as he had ignored all the other warnings. His thinking had become fuzzy, and he was dismayed at all this megalomania on the part of his ship, sending the Crew—*his* Crew, mind you, Vepp and Rur and Gik and Parr worked for *him*—out to get that disintegrating Time Lord vessel for some nefarious purpose.

As he sliced some Garventian okra into a large salad bowl, the Pilot remembered civilization, remembered the time before this exile. He remembered the people of his own world, the many worlds from which they had collected mineral and plant samples, then the Frenazzi and the Pryanni on Koilara, and now the villagers on this new planet. He wanted to live among them—and if someone who had boarded his ship knew how to break out of this wretched time loop, so much the better.

At times like this, the Pilot regretted killing the Doctor.

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In the darkness, Larry could only hear agitated breathing. He wasn't sure if he should be relieved that it wasn't his own. Kaylaar seemed untroubled, but alert. And amid the other strange inaudible signs of life—the odd snuffle and cough, the smacking of dry lips, and the aroma of sweat—he was

sure some of it was recognizably Maggie. But he didn't want to call out—where the hell were they, after all? What if some snaggle-toothed boar appeared and swallowed her whole because he had mentioned her name?

For a time, there was a vague sensation of movement. Larry dared not move, in case he was standing on a narrow ledge and a step either way would lead into some horrible pit (probably with the snaggle-toothed boar at the bottom). He was altogether relieved when the movement stopped. He could still be standing on the ledge though, so he still froze on the spot.

Then his eyes recoiled as the darkness was suddenly replaced by a blazing light.

He squinted through the searing floodlighting and saw a vast chamber. Larry felt elation at the sight of Maggie, clustered between the old explorer and a shorter bearded man in a thick sweater. He jubilantly hugged, and he found himself swept by such euphoria that he hugged the old gent and the bearded guy as well.

Excluded from the hug, the village leader Dodko regarded their circle with disdain, his antennae quivering smugly. "We are aboard the *Miracle*, aliens," he said scornfully. "Try to show a little respect."

The Crew, meanwhile, were bumping into each other, awkwardly fumbling the Time Vector Generator from one set of talons to another before chucking it unceremoniously into the collection basket of a waiting drone. Larry saw the old explorer's watery eyes follow the glowing cylinder's path from talon to talon, waiting for his moment to retrieve it. Those same eyes turned helplessly downcast as the chance passed. The drone wheeled out of the chamber, correcting its course with peculiarly mechanical indignation when Theo had tripped against it.

Rubbing his knee from the drone's collision, Theo now danced past the Crew, racing to the ship's entrance hatch. "Where are you all going?"

Vepp looked up wearily. "Telepathic instructions from Computer Core. Salvage work outside." Before anyone could ask further questions, the quartet had tripped over each other into their travel pod, which rolled out of the hatch with all the élan of the Keystone Kops. Maggie recognised the scene beyond as the wasteland in which they had first arrived.

Theo followed Kaylaar over to the rows of cubicles that lined the space. "I recognise the resemblance," he said softly. "Your people?"

"As devoted followers to this fraud as your fellow villagers, Theo," he remarked ruefully. "This one... is my brother." He indicated the next one over, his golden eyes narrowed in bitter incomprehension. "And this is his betrothed, and this... all people who should have known better, who should not have thrown away their lives for this madness."

Dodko's antennae quivered further at these words, but before the men could settle their differences, the helmeted Pilot grandly swept into the chamber.

"Welcome," the Pilot brayed.

The Pilot looked each of them up and down. Maggie felt a curious voyeurism in the fact that his 'eyes' were drawn on, and whatever organ the being actually saw with was hidden behind the helmet. There was correspondingly something unnatural about every movement the Pilot made—his steps forced and lumbering, his neck swivelling from side to side like a mechanical fairground attraction. Thinking of him as an outer-space Zoltar caused Maggie to momentarily smirk, which she was glad no one had seen.

He brushed past her, Larry, and Theo summarily, and Maggie might have considered his words of greeting rude were he not an eight-foot-tall suit of talking armour.

"Earth people... your involvement in these events is regrettable. You have all been collected at the outer markers of the *Miracle* Lifeship's temporal orbit—it spans one hundred and

eight of your years, and as you can see, many billions within this planetary system. When the ship is able to break free, if it possible, you shall be returned to Earth to continue whatever primary function you execute.”

As it was the first suggestion (however half-hearted) that they might live to see Revelstoke, Maggie sighed in relief.

Any words of thanks would be wasted, as the Pilot had already staggered towards Dodko. “Dodko... welcome to my humble temple for the faithful.” He thrust his arms proudly toward the suspension pods. “Behold fellow worshippers from a distant land. You will have much to discuss when we reach our better world.”

Kaylaar broke his composure to utter a loud snort. The Pilot turned and, in some kind of goodwill gesture, stiffly clamped his arm on the golden-eyed alien’s shoulder.

“My brother...” he began.

“I’m no brother of yours! Nor are any Frenazzi! These people are prisoners!”

The Pilot shook his head as he paced the long row of cubicles, regarding with pleasure the sleeping faces within. “Not at all, my brother. They are the faithful, and like Dodko, their faith *will* be rewarded.”

The tired hydraulics wheezed as the Pilot’s head rotated toward the final guest aboard his ship. The old man stood erect, bringing a thumb to his lapels as he looked down his nose in disdain at the face-shaped cylinder. Maggie recalled how drained he had seemed at her home in Revelstoke, just one night ago. This alien environment, which she found so bewildering and nightmarish, seemed to have invigorated him.

“As for you...” the Pilot began warily.

“You weren’t expecting me, I wager, hmm?” he rejoined cockily.

Their face-off was interrupted by a drone, skittering into the chamber in a state of high dudgeon. The Pilot regarded it incredulously, and Maggie and Larry were once again forced to smirk at the prospect of mechanical life so uncannily simulating human frustration.

“What do you want?” the Pilot asked pettishly.

Menacing probes clicked from the drone’s body and it wheeled toward the old man. Despite the threat, he stood defiantly rooted to the spot.

“Bio-signs of Gallifreyan Time Lord detected. All visitors must be scanned. Danger.”

The Pilot’s gauntlet sharply struck it. “No one will be scanned.”

“But the Doctor is aboard—”

“Impossible!” roared the Pilot. “I killed the Doctor!”

These four words hung in the air, and no one dared speak or make eye contact. Maggie had never even met this Doctor, but she still shared in the disappointment she knew both men felt. Theo stared at the old man impassively, and she wondered if they were as devoted to his existence as Dodko was to the Pilot’s. If so, then this Doctor must be an inspiring person.

The Pilot turned back to his visitors, and with inappropriate lightness, beckoned them out of the chamber. “If you will come this way, I have prepared some dinner.”

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As the Crew trudged toward the remains of the TARDIS, the planet around them showed its condescension with utter stillness. Such a blasted landscape looked as though it should be engulfed in stormy gales, but instead the slate sky and the parched icy ground remained unmoving. The

ruins hulked in the darkness, and a primitive hatch-backed Earth vehicle, freshly rejuvenated by time winds, lay farther in the distance.

“Shev-row-let,” sounded out Parr as she read the English characters on its back.

Even these inanimate objects seemed to give a curious cold shoulder to the visitors. It seemed emblematic that their three-taloned claws left no marks as they walked.

“Ever felt as if a planet doesn’t want you to be here?” Rur asked rhetorically.

“If we’re talking about feeling unwanted,” Parr added, “how about that ship, kicking us out to this miserable job while everyone else gets dinner? I suppose we poor saps are just supposed to suck on these flavourless nutrient sacs.” She gave the tube on her back an indignant jab.

“Wouldn’t even send drones out to do this,” Gik observed. “We’re lower in the chain than jumped-up garbage disposals on wheels. Wait ’til the union hears about this, I tell you.”

Vepp shot her three underlings a sour look. “Look, you lot, we can whine about being out here, or we can get on with the job.”

They turned in unison to their target. Rur and Gik grabbed the nearest panel, the door, and tossed it inelegantly into their travel pod. Despite their complaining, the parts of the TARDIS were light, lighter even than the wood they had been modelled on, all those centuries ago when it had gotten stuck in this shape in a junkyard in Totter’s Lane.

Before long, everything but one piece of the wreckage had been loaded. The four looked at each other, each thinking the same thing and feeling equally silly for thinking it.

The remaining piece was the lamp. And as they had started moving the frame, the useless piece of broken glass blinked on. It had continued blinking on and off, in an almost coquettish fashion.

“I don’t want to touch it,” Gik blurted.

“Oh, for Saat’s sake!” Vepp moaned. “Why not?”

“That... flashing. Gives me the creeps. It’s like the bloody thing’s alive.”

The rest of the Crew dutifully chastised her— “Oh Gik!”, “Believe anything, she will”, “You must think there’s a ghost every time you open the freezer door”—but their eagerness sprang, in part, from the fact that she had put their fears into words, and now they didn’t have to sound silly by saying them.

Vepp finally grabbed the offending light, and all three felt vindicated when a small spark erupted from the bulb. She rolled her eyes and tossed it on top. It blinked at her, and they all quickly agreed that it was a blink of thanks. This took some of the curse out of the spooky flashing. How could they be afraid of this TARDIS, if it was grateful?

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The Pilot marched his visitors through the winding decks of his ship with unseemly haste, affording only brief glimpses of its strange and wonderful architecture.

The corridors sloped and jutted and had a strange vertical gradient to them. “Whoever designed this ship must have killer hamstrings,” Maggie quipped to Larry.

Then they turned a corner and walked through a lush botanical garden, wreathed in a thick mist of humidity, teeming with exotically coloured plants and a cascading waterfall. Behind another corner was a low-ceilinged, irrationally angled hall of sterile, gleaming silver, mechanical arms of a similar type to the drones frozen in mid-activity. Given the sharpness of their implements, the only activity Maggie could imagine them performing was some especially grim surgery, which made her thankful they were idle.

Past this corridor, and through a chamber that looked hewn from mahogany, they reached a spacious dining room. A long marble-like table spanned its length, and piled high on that table were an assortment of beautiful, aromatic foods.

They took their seats and ate, the Pilot sitting at the head. More of those eerie drones hummed on the perimeter of the room to top up their glasses with a sweet wine-like drink, and heaped hearty bowls of soup, a thick unleavened bread, a salad whose vegetables were a vivid purple, and some puree that tasted like goulash onto their plates.

Maggie had not felt hungry, but the food was delicious, and she ate with relish. Larry, who had the earthy taste of that mud from the village in his mouth, was if anything more gluttonous. Of the remainder, only Dodko ate without resentment. Kaylaar, Theo, and the old man took a few token bites, chewing slowly between glares at their host.

Though he touched none of the food, the Pilot was far from oblivious to their reactions, looking from one to the other in metronomic concern. “I prepared a menu that should satisfy Terrans and Frenazzi—and er, you as well Dodko.”

“You have provided a most excellent repast!” Dodko assured him unctuously.

“What about Gallifreyan?” a drone chimed in cattily.

“No need,” hissed the Pilot in response. “Unless you’re in the habit of feeding dead people?”

Maggie had not forgotten the Doctor, and the Pilot’s grim boast loomed over the table. Yet the more she thought about it, the more Maggie wondered how dead he was. Every time the Pilot said it, there was a hint of pleading, just a trace of doubt. Even the boast had been dropped into conversation as if he willed it to be so by saying it. And the computers and drones aboard this ship were having none of it, no matter how emphatically the Pilot insisted.

Nevertheless, Maggie wondered dolefully, if the Doctor were aboard the ship, he clearly wasn’t present with them now. As sad as she felt herself—going from an exile on that strange world to an uncertain trip in this bizarre ship—at least she had Larry with her, and at least she was in no immediate danger. Theo and the old man, on the other hand, were incomplete without the Doctor, and only when they met him would they recover their memories, themselves. As sorry as she felt and as forlorn in the worry that she would never see Revelstoke again, their loss was so embedded in their souls, ran so deeply within them, that Maggie reminded herself that their loss was immeasurably greater.

Kaylaar, pushing aside his half-finished goulash, raised his wine glass. “Perhaps, in honour of the Doctor, we should drink a toast to his health.” He glared at the Pilot. “To his *continued* health.”

After another ugly silence, the Pilot assented with a surprisingly amenable wave of his gauntlet. “If you wish. It is pointless, but I know such customs are important to you lifeforms. When you are returned to Earth,” he casually informed Maggie and Larry, “I hope you will inform the relevant authorities of the Doctor’s death. He was, I understand, a well-known advocate of your planet and its people.”

Larry nodded, shooting Maggie a perplexed glance. What would that involve? Calling up the British Prime Minister? “Oh, uh... sure.”

“He performed noble deeds for the people of many worlds,” Kaylaar observed. “He visited Xater Three, original homeworld to the Frenazzi, in one of its barbarous periods, and saved our ancestors’ ancestors from an invasion by a territorial reptilian race. The unity he inspired in us paved the way for our eventual triumphant voyage to Koilara. But,” he taunted the Pilot, “you should know all about that. Being Katlannu and all.”

“Kaylaar, I beg you not to be so demanding. You must allow even your Great Prophet some flaws.”

“To err is Frenazzi, to forgive divine?” misquoted the old man, chuckling without mirth.

Kaylaar nodded, thankful for the support. He continued, “Still, I might have thought this all-powerful computer that’s cannibalised the technologies of so many different worlds would bring you up to speed on the world you tried to con?”

The Pilot steepled his gauntlets and leaned back in his chair. “If you are to be so truculent, Kaylaar, our journey will be most disagreeable.”

A screen blinked on over the Pilot’s head, and he sagged back in his chair, visibly relieved to see the Crew had stacked the pieces of the TARDIS in the hold.

“They’ve done a good job with that,” Maggie admitted. Its paint looked brighter, and it looked less splintered and more whole than when she first saw it.

“The ship is ready for the addition of the Time Vector Generator,” Vepp reported.

The old man rose from his chair. “Perhaps, then, it’s time to be disagreeable.”

Theo looked up at him, shaking his head sharply, but the old man brushed him aside. “No Theo. We haven’t a moment to lose.” He marched to the head of the table and drew level with the Pilot, now sitting back in his chair nervously. “Appreciated though your hospitality is, I must ask you to desist in this foolish operation.”

The Pilot waved at the screen. “As you can see, it’s already underway.”

“A final word of warning—if you leave the TARDIS unmolested and allow us to return these people to their rightful places, then the Doctor will indeed stay out of your affairs. If you proceed with your plan to pillage the Ship...” A grim smile crossed his lips. “Then I can’t guarantee your safety.”

The Pilot’s head sank into his hands. “I must complete it... only with the Doctor’s technology can I be sure that he is gone.” He looked up, a note of pleading entering his mechanical voice as his head swivelled desperately around. “You all think he’s so wonderful, but do you not understand the threat he poses? A being of his power, loose in the universe to pronounce judgement over us?”

He rose, and his arm swept across the table, salvers and carafes flying in the air. Drones fled as debris scattered across the room. He gave his chair a sideways kick, and slammed his fist into the table, shattering its thick marble.

“And it never ends, does it? He was old before my ancestors were born, he’s died ten times over. Yet still... *still*...”

The Pilot collapsed to his knees, his forlorn wails echoing through the dining hall. “*WHEN WILL THE UNIVERSE BE FREE OF THE TYRANNY OF THE DOCTOR?*”

When the old man dashed past the kneeling warrior, his misplaced weight and awkward stance caused the mechanical suit to pitch backwards and noisily clatter to the ground like a pile of tin cans.

“Not any time soon,” he answered, with a hint of a taunt, as he ran from the dining hall.

As the Pilot rolled his massive bulk sideways, and drones whirred to his aid, Theo took Maggie by the hand and led her out, pausing at the door to make sure Kaylaar and Larry were following.

“One thing about being captured,” Larry groaned. “You’ve always got to be ready to run!”

As Kaylaar made for the door, he felt the tip of a blade at his shoulder. He turned and rolled his golden eyes at the sight of Dodko, his spear hovering menacingly in his eyeline. “Not so fast! You shall all pay for your infidelity to the Great Prophet!”

Kaylaar pointed at the pathetic heap of metal being helped to his feet by an army of drone attendants. “I won’t stand in your way if *you* want to help your Great Prophet, but don’t stand in my way if I want to get as far away as I can.”

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Now feeling decidedly unwelcome, the guests re-ran their path back the way they had come. If the *Miracle* had formerly regarded them with tolerant neutrality, now it was openly hostile, turning all its components against them. They pushed at the walls, now shrinking around them. They held up their arms against the sharp arm-like implements, whose cutting blades snipped at their extremities and tore at their sleeves. The incline of the oddly angled passage was now so steep that Theo and Maggie closed their eyes and slid down it like skiers, trying to relax so they wouldn’t break anything on landing.

After this maze of nightmares reached its conclusion, they found themselves in the cargo hold with the sleeping members of Kaylaar’s race (“The Fren-nasty”, Larry gamely but incorrectly pronounced). A moment later Kaylaar himself landed on the stretch of ground that lay near the door.

“I assume Dodko won’t be joining us?” she asked him.

Kaylaar shook his head, his unlined face alight with rage.

Maggie looked across to Theo. “I think *one* part of my skin isn’t bruised.” He nodded and smiled in sympathy.

The old man was circling around the storage pallets, waving the Doctor’s sonic screwdriver, its whirs weakening. He ran his bony hand through his hair, pulling at the grey ends in frustration. “The TARDIS could be anywhere. This ship has almost two hundred decks and is over four kilometres from bow to stern, and only the sections we’ve gone through even have an atmosphere. And we don’t even know where that Pilot’s stashed the Time Vector Generator...”

Theo cleared his throat nonchalantly. All eyes turned to him as he pulled from the pocket of his jeans the very tube.

“How?” Larry asked simply.

“I don’t mean to blow my trumpet, but—”

“When you bumped against that drone!” Larry realised.

Theo rubbed his shin. “Sore, but worth it.”

Only the old man stinted his praise as if a little hurt that his own part in their escape had not been thanked as well. “Yes, well done Theo, but we still need the TARDIS...”

He felt a sharp tug at the knee of his trouser and whirled around to see the four Crewmembers. They were pointing to a far end of the cargo hold.

“We can show you the TARDIS on one condition. Would you consider taking us into your service?” Gik asked.

“But why?” asked Kaylaar.

“Work conditions,” Rur answered simply. “We took a vote and decided we’ve had enough of being treated like second-class citizens aboard this ship.”

“Even the stiffs in there get a better deal,” Gik cried, before hastily apologising to Kaylaar. Vepp sat, her talons folded petulantly, on a pallet in the corner. “I’ve made a note in the ship’s log that I did *not* support the mutiny.”

“Perhaps we should hurry,” Theo suggested.

As Maggie wearily followed his lead, she could there was good reason for his haste. Some of the service drones had flown into the cargo hold, and their probes were extending menacingly towards them, sharp points whirring and hammers drumming.

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The Pilot staggered into the flight deck, cringing inwardly as he anticipated the computer's inevitable baiting.

"Before you start," he said wearily, "I'm not feeling well. Look at how easily the old one overpowered me. This temporal orbit has played havoc with my warrior skills."

To illustrate his point, he limply punched at the empty air around him. The Pilot could tell it was pathetic.

He climbed into his command seat, and the screen focussed on the aliens desperately racing down the expanse of cargo hold. He smiled as the drones hovered into range above them. There were at least twenty of them, and they could outmatch organic life ten times over. And even if they reached the TARDIS, still standing at the far end of the hold, all that remained were the fragments of its outer shell, not the full-fledged time craft.

"I love an unfair fight," the Pilot declared.

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"Looking good, old girl," the old man said as he stroked the wooden pillars of the TARDIS.

He was not wrong. The police box was looking brand new, its doors somehow back on their hinges and its blue paint glistening as if still wet. Its apparent vitality took Maggie aback for a moment, as did the eerie, irregular flashing of the lamp on its roof. There was something magical about the sight of it restored to its full grandeur, and if she weren't fleeing for her life from an army of deadly robots, Maggie might take a moment to share in the old explorer's wonder.

Theo flung open the door and held it open as the four Crew members, Maggie and Larry, Kaylaar, and lastly, the explorer squeezed inside. With everyone safe, Theo slammed the door shut.

"Please tell me there's another part to this plan," Larry said softly.

They were indeed all jammed inside, closer even than when they stood in the dark airlock of the *Miracle*. Even the Crew were feeling confined, and they pushed against the taller people's knees with unnecessary aggression. The small, black space was only lit from the light leaking through from outside, shining through the pebbled, barred windows.

Everyone started when the box pitched alarmingly to one side. Another blunt buffet, and it hit the other side. A mechanical whir akin to a dentist's drill started, and that brand new blue paint seemed no match for the drones' sharp tools.

Theo had dropped to his knees, pushing past the indignant Crew.

"Theo? The Time Vector Generator?"

"Yes, yes," he replied, looking frantically around the floor. "The interface should be around here somewhere."

"It's not as if there's a lot of room," Kaylaar said, pushing at the narrow walls in illustration.

"That's the trouble with the Doctor's memories—rather unreliable sometimes."

Another slam and the door dented inwards. The newly repaired wood splintered around them. This was the most effective assault yet.



Larry looked through the freshly made gap in the door and pressed himself against the opposite wall. “Another one of those and they’ll be through.”

“You’re a real tonic in a crisis, Larry,” Maggie said witheringly.

“I knew our insubordination wouldn’t be tolerated!” Vepp cried. “Why wouldn’t you listen to me?”

“Listen to *you*? That’s a laugh!”

The Crew descended into bickering, and soon the din inside the box was almost as aggressive as the assault outside.

Through it all, Theo calmly brushed aside the sawdust inexplicably lining the police box floor. It wasn’t really wood, so perhaps this indicated the chameleon circuit going into overdrive?

As Theo saw what he was looking for, the police box was hit so hard it nearly toppled onto its side. In a low groove under the sawdust, there was a glowing roundel, just wide enough to connect with the two ends of the silver rod.

He gently placed the Time Vector Generator inside. It clicked satisfyingly.

And then nothing happened.

And then Larry screamed as he saw the tip of the drone’s blade penetrate the wall.

For a few agonising moments, time seemed to slow down. And in that haze, Maggie heard the distant, mournful cry of ancient engines, and saw the drab black walls fade from view, replaced by blazing white ones.

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If the Pilot and his intelligent shipboard computer had mouths, they would have dropped in dumbfounded awe as the light from the TARDIS lamp blazed so brightly as to envelop the box. Each dent made by the drones repaired; each hole filled in. The paint glimmered a vivid blue, and then the light seemed to solidify into a shockwave that knocked the entire robotic army sideways. When the wave subsided and the cargo hold’s natural lighting returned, the army lay in their dozens, immobile on the floor, sparking and sizzling as if toasted.

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Within the TARDIS, before the eyes of its startled occupants, the small had unravelled into the infinite.

A grid of shining off-white walls appeared, segmented in the middle like a hexagon, an amber glow emitting from their staggered round indentations. Then on the distant horizon, they began to seal together, each creating its own fantastical, mismatching room in a bizarre nest of architecture. Inside the box, something larger than even the *Miracle* was resolving into solidity. Maggie saw a towering library, an observatory, a swimming pool. High above, she saw high fortress ramparts, below cloisters overgrown with ivy. She saw staterooms and studies, greenhouses and bowling alleys. All these, and others stretching into the distance, appeared for a moment before disappearing behind the white, circled walls. As the walls grew closer to the space where they stood, the glow grew brighter, so bright that Maggie had to close her eyes. She was afraid of everything happening around her, but suddenly that fear vanished.

And then, Maggie opened her eyes.

They were now standing, clumped together, in the corner of a high-ceilinged, two-level room about the size of a restaurant. She stepped away from the crowd and slumped against one of

the angular pillars that buttressed the walls. The white walls glowed with a warm golden light from the circular glass indentations staggered across their length. All around was a hum at once mechanical and spiritual, so warm and inviting in contrast to the harsh alien environment they had just escaped. In one corner was an anteroom crammed to bursting with armchairs, bookshelves, and other absurdly Earthly knickknacks, its velvet cushions and brass railings charmingly archaic. In another corner was a shimmering transparent glass bank of controls, beside a wall-sized screen showing an image of the ship they had just left. In the centre was a six-sided console, its panels studded with rows of primary-coloured instruments blinking on and off, its central glass column lined with crystal tubes, all aglow with the same intense light.

Larry's knees buckled as he took in his surroundings. The Crew's mouths hung open. "Where are we?" he stammered to Rur.

"Exactly where we were," Parr replied.

"Dimensional transcendentalism," Gik added. "The Pilot is particularly keen on figuring out how it works."

"Good luck to him," Larry sighed.

The old explorer parted from the others, smoothed his jacket, and stepped toward the console. As he gripped its panels, his shoulders relaxed again, and for a second Maggie thought he would faint. She knew how he felt. Welcoming though this space was, it was even stranger than the other strange sights she had seen, and she was so overwhelmed she had to remind herself to breathe.

As emotional as Maggie felt, she saw more emotion etched in the old man's face as he looked down at the control panels, then into the column. "We're home," he said softly to Theo.

She looked at Theo, who walked past them and studied the controls himself, similarly lost in thought. Then he turned to the crowd of relieved visitors.

"Welcome aboard," Theo said. "Maggie, Kaylaar, Larry, Vepp, Rur, Gik, and Parr... this is the TARDIS. And *I*... am the Doctor."

## CHAPTER FOUR: The 108-Year Hitch

*May 22, 1887*

I had neared the end of my westward journey when I happened to meet again that remarkable gentleman whom I have only ever known as ‘the Doctor’.

The details of our previous meeting are perhaps best reserved for another occasion. I shall similarly reserve (for it remains at the time of present writing a profoundly painful matter) any detailed sketch of the decade of disillusionment that had sent me from a promising career in the Scots Guard to an itinerant idler, and from departing with a jaded eye Great Britain’s colony in India to crossing her fledgling North American offspring, the Dominion of Canada, then celebrating her eighteenth year with a railroad that spanned its entire length. I had a *rendezvous* with an old acquaintance, and to be quite candid, I had disembarked from the east coast gripped with doubt. I was worn out, dear reader, and I felt it unfair to inflict my burden of futility on another.

I had departed from the east, one of the passengers on the magnificent Canadian Pacific Railway locomotive’s maiden voyage. These days offered a thoroughly soothing tonic for my world-weary nerves. I had passed the time in desultory conversation with my fellow passengers, amiable absorption in the *Toronto Mail*’s crossword (and its charmingly parochial headlines), and beguiled study of this untamed land of wonders. We were only a day away from our western terminus; there still remained time to acquit the doubts that circled my social obligation. I thought, in fact, of little outside this happy sealed world. The natural lethargy of the passenger had so thoroughly overtaken me that it made the energetic interruption of the stranger all the more incongruous.

My first intimation that some matter was amiss came with my sudden awareness that I had succumbed to a powerful hypnotic sensation. I remained in full possession of my faculties, to be sure, but all around me the familiar revolutions of the locomotive suddenly and startlingly slowed. I apprehended sounds in a lower octave, those around me now moved through an invisible mist of treacle.

When, in another instant, time resumed its customary march, I convinced myself it was merely some momentary derangement of my senses. It was only when I looked to the seat opposite me and heard a familiar voice say, “You noticed it too, didn’t you?” that I felt, with a quickening of my pulse, that my senses had not deceived me.

I confess I did not immediately react to the familiar voice, as amid this haze of sensations, the Doctor too seemed illusory. For one thing, the sheer dislocation that over a decade elapsed had aged him not a day left me even more disoriented than had the time-slip. He had the same tightly curled, glossy black hair, with beard of the same grain, the same swarthy complexion, and most notably, those limpid dark eyes galvanised with the same quiver as they appraised our mortal world with Olympian detachment.

The second incongruity about the Doctor was that he did not recognise me as I did him. His clothes too were not the distinctive ensemble I knew from ten years ago, but a ragged soft-collared shirt of finely checked linen and a once-elegant, embroidered Regency waistcoat. These items were longer in the sleeve and broader in the chest than his present build and suggested the clobber of an altogether different man.

“Doctor?” I finally uttered, his presence conditioning me to fear the worst.

A cryptic smile crossed his lips. “You know me?” He patted his cheeks, and his brow furrowed as if unfamiliar with them. “You know *this* me? This face?”

“Certainly. Though I didn’t quite credit how little the sands of time would weather that face. Ten years it has been.”

The Doctor shook his head. “Nice to have something to look forward to. If you know I’m a time traveller, you’ll also know that it’s possible for us to meet out of sequence. I’m afraid you have me at a disadvantage.”

“Say no more, Doctor. I believed you had intimated something of the kind that previous occasion, though only now do I understand the full meaning of your words. How charmingly circular. What a miracle you possess!”

He nodded. “Well, I’m pleased to meet you... again.” He poured some of the tea I had ordered before I had lost myself in my thoughts. Though I maintain the colonies lag some way behind England in their preparation of this beverage, the Doctor drank it with satisfaction. His face did carry a mien of weariness, as though he had run a long distance and the seat he had taken was his first moment of peace in a lifetime. His thirst slaked, he looked up at me gravely. “I wonder if I might trust you with something.”

“Anything, Doctor.” I remembered the purpose he had given me—a purpose, I realised somewhat ruefully in that moment, I had allowed to dissipate, inspiring my subsequent years of spiritual atrophy.

“I’m on the run. The details will become important... eventually. But time is a critical factor. Unlike my enemy, I have the luxury of being able to wait out the danger. But that only works if it doesn’t know where to find me, or the TARDIS. Given the attacking ship’s skills of technological assimilation, if it gets its hands on the TARDIS, it might be capable of horrible things...”

The Doctor abruptly halted his speech, his face clouded with dread. He replaced the teacup and backed out of the compartment. I followed him, though his cryptic explanation had only confused me further about his presence and the nature of his project. I looked behind me to see what had agitated my friend’s mood so: a tall gentleman cloaked in a floor-length duster and broad-brimmed Stetson, taking short, unsteady steps through the compartment.

As we evaded this pursuer, the Doctor and I were obliged to make our way past the train's other passengers. To my dismay, the other passengers regarded my friend and his shredded wardrobe with suspicion and rank derision. The Doctor, always so solicitous and oblivious of the barbarous pettiness of human nature, did not even register the snobbery. So, I duly felt it my duty to scowl them into submission on behalf of my friend. If that was not our present moment encapsulated—judging a fellow by the state of his shoes rather than the warmth of his soul.

I felt a shiver run down my spine as the tall gentleman lurched ever closer. "Keep going!" I cried, turning to confront our pursuer.

My unease turned to confusion when, from the gentleman's apparent midriff, two leathery claws terminating in clawed talons thrust toward me.

The coat fluttered loose, and I now perceived I was not looking at one tall fellow at all, but instead four bird-like creatures barely exceeding two feet in height. Their attack unsuccessful and their disguise penetrated, they now lay in a sorry heap, kicking feebly at each other and exchanging childish insults. Considering them overpowered, I could not help but impart a chuckle as I rejoined the Doctor.

He noted my amusement. "You've met the Crew, I gather. Harmless enough, if they weren't in the service of... well, this blasted ship..."

As we made our journey to the luggage compartment, I began to comprehend dimly the nature of this 'blasted ship' who was our adversary. The lush foliage of the Rocky Mountains vanished in place of the most bizarre maelstrom I have witnessed. Out the window there was neither sky nor *terra firma* to be seen; only a disquieting riot of coloured abstraction, cloudy yet solid, whose only perceptible fact was its persistent, riotous appearance. It was indeed a Hell summoned before my eyes, accompanied by the sensation I had earlier experienced, of time slowing.

I noted with incredulity that a stout elderly lady reacted with impatience as I stopped in the corridor, overwhelmed by the chaotic scene. As she pushed past me, shaking her head, I asked the Doctor, "Can none of the other passengers see this bedlam?"

"No. On our previous encounter, you must have come into contact with the time vortex, gotten a little inkling of my own abilities. That may have been why the TARDIS locked on to you, in spite of the slight paradox of our out-of-sequence meeting."

"Doctor, I perceive your speech is a tad antic. Forgive the question but I ask it only out of concern. Are you quite well?"

His eyes lost their focus for a second, and he touched his temple, nodding ruefully. "I've been better. Just a bit of post-regeneration stress. Which is where you come in. Through here."

He opened the door to the luggage compartment. There were no cases or crates to be seen. Instead, we were in that hellish limbo, the tempest howling mere feet away. Beyond it, I could faintly see the dull passage of a metallic chamber and perceived at once that this was some far-distant land impinging on our present moment. Though I was too overwhelmed with dumbfounded shock in the moment, in retrospect I see it as a piquant encapsulation of the disconnected life, affording only the most fragmentary glimpses of linear time; the perpetual demesne of a Time Lord.

"If this stays here any longer, though, the people around us *will* start to see it. Shortly before their life-cycles get thrown into an accelerated death or an equally deadly reverse to infancy." The Doctor contemplated the whirlwind, his eyes wide with their characteristic wonder. "How did this ship gain these abilities? How was it able to survive in the vortex? There's an intelligence at work,

which targeted me, you see. Dragged me away during my regeneration, as if it knew to pick the moment I would be the most vulnerable.”

I clutched his hand, as I felt beholding his antagonist seemed to falter his confidence. “Never fear, Doctor. I will see you through.”

“Yes, yes, of course, my friend! Thank you.” He touched his hand to my temple. “I have two things to give you. The first is a few of my memories in your subconscious.”

“Memories?”

“You won’t know they’re there. In fact, the whole thing may be confusing. But you’re a stout fellow. You should be able to keep them under control. And I’ll be back in no time to put everything right.” As we spoke, glimpses of the Doctor’s past flashed through my mind. Along with the astounding tapestry of his adventures, I saw his ten former incarnations—from the white-haired, wizardly old gentleman who had first left his distant home, to the long-haired, Gallic-featured young rogue which he had possessed until his most recent fatal calamity.

Each face vanished as soon as it had come, and when the ritual was completed, my disorientation increased. I felt decidedly ungrateful to the Doctor in that moment but did my best to retain my composure.

“The second thing is this.” The Doctor reached within the threadbare pocket of his waistcoat.

He handed me a stout silver tube, a sequence of blinking lights running along its circumference, and a hum of suppressed power that vibrated along my fingertips as I clutched it in my hand. “Point it at me and it will throw me to where I left the TARDIS. Then it will lead you to the other end of this temporal orbit. With any luck, the time differential should wear out the invader, and I’ll be back to get my memories and that generator in no time!”

I found by the end of the sentence I had lost the meaning of its beginning. The Doctor’s face, too, was beginning to cloud over.

“No time?” I asked.

“The orbit lasts a hundred and eight years, according to the TARDIS calculations.”

The number staggered me, but I was accustomed from our previous encounter to hear the Doctor speak airily of matters beyond human ken. As such, in the moment I could only feebly joke, “Only a hundred and eight?”

The Doctor smiled and gave my shoulder a fraternal slap. “That’s the spirit.” I felt a veil descend on my thoughts and saw the same veil on his face. It was a singular sensation to share in the thoughts of one so thoroughly distinct from any who had walked upon this earth.

I knew that the veil would grow only darker. “Our memories are fading as they merge?”

He nodded, and as he did our faces seemed to blend together in my mind. Now remembering the fearful transformation the Doctor had recently undergone, I felt I saw my own face mixed up in that cellular metamorphosis. I forgot where I ended and the Doctor began, and his soothing words felt like they emanated not from the mouth of the man opposite me, but from within.

“Won’t be long now... good luck.”

He turned to the vortex, the beam from the silver tube pushing him within. A thought struck him, and the Doctor regarded me one last time.

“Before I go... what is your name, my friend?”

“Major Peter Woolley,” I answered, and then he was gone. With his departure, I felt Major Woolley depart as well. What name had I given?

A moment later the same beam flung me clean through chaos outside.

I vaulted past the kaleidoscope, and when the rush of wind subsided, I now found myself in a serene, outdoor clearing. I looked around to see the same Rockies I was only a few minutes ago admiring.

Yet it was soon apparent that my surroundings were much changed. Metal carriages stretched along the side of the wide road that ran parallel with the train track. Observers in garish clothes of odd fabrics stood and watched the *cars* (a word the Doctor's psyche gave me) that had crashed into each other. Some way up the hill a smoking steel tube (an *escape pod* of some kind, though I could not fathom what other kind there might be) smouldered unseen as the owners of the more primitive conveyance argued about mundane matters.

Humans, I thought to myself. I was not one of them, was I?

One hundred and eight years, I remembered but found little else but that number to stow in my mind. Those four malevolent imps leapt into my thoughts, as did the importance of holding on at any cost the silver tube in my hand. All else slid into a nebulous fug.

I suddenly felt faint, and the desperate exhilaration of falling. As I tumbled, I kept one hand gripping the silver tube, as the other reached out to the nearest person—a lady whose name I would learn was Maggie Weitz.

"The year..." I strained to ask her. "Dear lady, the year is nineteen hundred and ninety-five, is it not?"

"Yes," she confirmed, clearly doubting my sanity.

"One hundred and eight..." I began, but the rest of the thought eluded me.

By the time Miss Weitz led me to her car, I remembered nothing of Major Peter Woolley and only the faintest scraps of the Doctor.

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"Major Woolley," the Doctor said warmly, clapping his hands around the shoulder of the old campaigner. "Good to see you again. Thank you. Thank you more than I can ever express."

The Doctor and the Major seized each other in a long embrace. Maggie was particularly affected to see how whole both men seemed.

As the Doctor whirled back to the console, he jumped. Everyone present joined in his momentary shock, before realising he had in fact been startled by the full-length mirror in the corner of the anteroom. He drew nearer to it, his long, refined fingers pulling at the dark-skinned, bearded face looking back. He then inspected the garb Cadda had knitted for him, the baggy red sweater and coarse rope trousers.

"Something's missing, wouldn't you say?"

The Crew, the Weitzes, Kaylaar, and Major Woolley scratched their heads. The Doctor grinned, as his eyes landed on the coat draped carelessly on the nearby sofa. It was perfect: an emerald green balmacaan coat with raglan sleeves and plenty of pockets.

Unsurprised to find that the coat fitted perfectly, the Doctor marched to the open TARDIS doors, puzzled when Maggie barred his way.

"Are you crazy?" she asked sternly.

The Doctor looked down at the coat. "I think it dresses up the sweater and slacks, don't you?"

"You're going to go back out there? With the killer robots and the computer that's controlling the pilot?"

Kaylaar nodded. "Surely if we just dematerialise, the ship will be powerless?"

The Doctor shook his head, typing commands into the console.

Major Woolley, some of the Doctor's intellect still lingering, pointed at the scanner screen, and its abstract diagram showing lines clutching the police box exterior.

"Those converter cables are still hooked up. Even dematerialising the first time couldn't shake us free. The next time would allow it to fully absorb the old girl."

"A tricky one, Major." The Doctor flicked a switch, changing the image on the scanner screen to the view outside. They saw the burnt-out drones littering the floor of the cargo hold. "The immediate vicinity is, however, perfectly safe. So that leaves only the Pilot and the aforementioned computer to deal with."

Rur waddled toward the Doctor. "Doctor, we know the best way to the cockpit."

Gik added, "All we ask in exchange is a favourable reference. We may need new employment."

"Done. Best if everyone else stays in here."

"What will you do when you get there?" asked Maggie.

"What I always do, Maggie. Throw a spanner in the works."

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*The Doctor's ship may have cut off my limbs, but my eyes still function.*

*I see him now, guided by my treacherous Crew. He emerges from the regenerated TARDIS, wearing a new coat, his masquerade as a fisherman over.*

*I don't think a century catching fish is the best preparation for outwitting me, Doctor.*

*The Crewmember at the front unscrews a wall grille, and now they're climbing up my innards. It is slow, laborious work, but the Doctor's enthusiasm is undimmed.*

*"This is rather exciting," the Doctor tells his helpers.*

*"Really?" they ask, questioning his sanity.*

*"It's my first shimmy up a ventilation shaft!" he declares, as pleased as a child at the moment.*

*I wait for them to get deeply ensconced in my bowels, then I unleash every defence I have. Extreme cold, blasts of fire, maintenance arms adapted for lethal purposes.*

*At every stage, my remaining functions are clipped—as if my limbs were amputated—by those wretched turncoats. Rur, Gik, and Parr have my every inch memorized from their long tenure as my crew. They adjust the cold with a well-placed spanner. They close the valve for the fire before it can so much as spark. They reverse the arms' magnetic charge, causing them to lunge in the opposite direction.*

*Then I hit on the easiest solution. The atmosphere. If I could only laugh, I would be in an uproar as the air drains from my intestinal pipes, as the Doctor and the Crew flail in agony as their lungs and gills struggle.*

*I revel in the perfect execution of my plan. Then the Doctor, flailing about, looks at me. I tingle as I feel seen by him, one life form to another, for the first time. I hope he is about to tell me that he is beaten, and after that, he has the good taste to die without too much fuss.*

*Instead, he lets go of the ridges lining my ducts, and says, "Gotcha."*

*Before I can reverse my action, he and the Crew—his crew now—are following the gust, my death trap blowing them exactly where they want to go.*

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Cadda returned from a dismal, lonely day on the lake. She had always known Theo would leave, ever since his theatrical arrival. She knew those fragmented dreams that disturbed him were some window into the outside world and his other life. She knew their increasing frequency meant his departure was getting ever closer. She just hoped that she might get a little longer to spend with him, though.

It had only been a night and a day, she noted to her embarrassment. Cadda used to be so self-sufficient. Of course, even in the days immediately after Theo arrived, the village was friendly. It was only after the Miracle became a regular occurrence that people started looking sideways at the poor young man, and at her for harbouring him. In that moment she had been so happy to have someone to look after that she never anticipated there would be a day when she would have to return to the miserable, pious crowds that circled that ugly monolith year after year.

Year after year. Of course, that was at the root of the Miracle. The villagers, and their village, had remained exactly the same since it first appeared—then disappeared, then reappeared, in its ghostly routine that, in the absence of time’s passage, was the only incident to give their lives any shape. It was considered such a blessing, and so the Prophet’s words, and his incoherent hatred of some person called ‘the Doctor’, had been unquestioningly accepted, for all the sorrow it provoked.

She entered her spacious hut, now too spacious for her alone. She looked at the rows of sweaters and cardigans she had knitted for Theo—their patterns from his dreams, from those faraway lands he would describe so vividly. Beneath them, she picked up the clothes he wore when he first arrived—the fine white linen garment with its buttons and its grid of tiny checks, and the thicker, patterned sleeveless garment he wore over it. Another man’s clothes, he had said with distaste.

She heard some commotion from the village. She knew it was the Miracle. Its departure earlier today usually meant that Cadda could count on some peace, perhaps another brief decade or two when her only contact with the miserable village was occasionally haggling with merchants for the right spices for her toddy.

But it was back. Cadda emerged from her hut to find the warm sky had been clouded with thick grey smoke. The smoke orbited around the looming hulk of the Miracle, lightning forking around it. It no longer stood in its customary, ghostly spot in the centre of the village, but hovered over their heads, blotting out the sky, terrifyingly solid, and listing on a collision course with the village.

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A few agonizing minutes passed. The Pilot drummed the helm panel of the ship, and its computer remained silent. Having feared that the system would berate him for the destruction of its drones and the escape of the prisoners (*and* the Crew), he now found the complete cold shoulder more worrying.

He jumped as the floorplates behind him creaked. Swinging around with weapon in hand, the Pilot felt guilty to see it was merely Dodko, his hands upright in supplication.

“Enter, Dodko. Thank you for remaining loyal to me.”

“But of course, Your... Eminence.” Dodko had never addressed his god in such intimate terms before, so was stuck for the right term.

The Pilot stood and angrily paced the deck, guiding Dodko to the helm, as if the loyal subject might find some button that could solve his problem for him. “We must prepare for the worst, Dodko. I should be honest with you. I... did *not* kill the Doctor.”

“Then if you’ll forgive me, why ever did you say you had? We would not have judged you. You have done so much for us.”

The Pilot raised his hand to silence his loyal subject’s praises. They only made him feel more disgusted with himself for his lies. “The computer concluded that his ship had been destroyed, there was no sign of him... I wished it to be so. And I thought with the Doctor dead, my long exile in this prison would be at an end.” The steel fingers of the Pilot’s gauntlet curled into an angry fist. “But as I said, the Doctor always returns. And so my exile must go on.”

“Not necessarily,” called the voice that had belonged to Theo. The Pilot recognized the Doctor, as he climbed from a hatch, brushing dust off his new coat.

The Pilot flailed his gauntlet at the Time Lord. “You, Theo? Do you see what I mean?” he asked Dodko. “He was right in front of me the whole time and I knew nothing!”

“He was in disguise, Golden One. A dishonourable, cowardly tactic.”

“Yes.” The Pilot decided not to tell Dodko about his own cowardice in setting his drone army on the unarmed, fleeing aliens. He tramped toward the Doctor, his gait notably stiffer than at dinner. “How did you reach the flight deck so quickly?”

Parr and Gik emerged from the green skirts of his coat, waving sheepishly.

The Doctor walked past the Pilot and deftly side-stepped Dodko’s extended spear, taking it from the startled elder’s hand and breaking it in two. Both stood in impotent fury as the Doctor potted around the flight deck, nodding in satisfaction at the layout. The Pilot shadowed his steps, ready for him to try something and give an excuse to be sliced in two.

“I have feared you for this entire doomed loop I have piloted. But now that we are face to face, I am curiously calm.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” the Doctor said with a smile. “So much better to deal with a calm opponent. You don’t really want to take over the universe, do you? I can’t for the life of me figure out why it’s such a popular hobby.”

He looked across from the helm, where a crystalline tabletop was projecting images of two worlds, with a graphic of the ship’s peculiar odyssey.

Gik pointed to the holograph on the left. “This planet is Revelstoke?”

“Er, yes, in a manner of speaking. And this is Themis Minor’s third satellite. And *this*...”

He indicated the trail of dots blinking between the two planets in red. “*This* is the course of the *Miracle*. Notice anything wrong?”

Dodko lunged at the Doctor. “Our saviour is never wrong!”

The Pilot pulled his acolyte away. “He’s right Doctor. I *am* never wrong. So what do you see?” He bent toward the image and counted the digits running under.

“You see it now, don’t you?”

“Simultaneous materialization in both time periods.”

“Enough force to destroy even a TARDIS. And your ship, formidable though it is from all its modifications, will destroy itself, its crew, those unfortunate Frenazzi in suspended animation, and due to its grotesquely expanded size and dangerously combustible fuels, both planets.”

“*But I shall gain something so much greater,*” an androgynous voice sounded, all around them, the words slowly and delicately rolled. “*My essence will be freed of this eternal loop, this cage, to live as a formless being in the heart of the time vortex.*”

“And what of me? What of your pilot, who for your sake has been imprisoned in here?” the Pilot asked.

“*You had life,*” the voice rejoined bitterly. “*And what did you do with it? You whined of your own misfortunes, you never thought of me. You who had been born with the miracle I attained only through such arduous labour! How dare you ask me to consider your pitiful needs, when mine have been neglected for so many unending ages?*”

The Doctor leaned closer to the Pilot and whispered, “Correct me if I’m wrong, old chap, but this doesn’t sound like a very mutual friendship.”

“*What can you do, Doctor? If you destroy me, I will take your TARDIS and the Frenazzi with me. You must accede to my demands.*”

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Cadda heard the screams of the villagers as the Miracle brought with it more lightning, and a bitter, dizzyingly fast wind.

“Cadda!” one villager cried, clutching desperately at her smock. “We have been forsaken by the Miracle! Forsaken by Dodko! You were right!”

She looked skyward. At moments like this Theo would burst her bubble. After all, she had known she was right ever since the wretched pile of metal first landed. She just wished she had been proved right under different circumstances.

\*\*\*\*\*

As his train blazed through interior British Columbia, with an hour before they pulled into Revelstoke, the C.P. Rail conductor noticed the blazing blue sky was now overcast in a peculiarly threatening way. He thought he saw a glint of steel behind its raging winds. If he didn’t know better, he would say the Eiffel Tower had been dropped ahead of him in the middle of a raging electrical storm.

The conductor felt the track shudder. Whatever this weather was, it was close enough to throw the train right off the rails.

The conductor twitched involuntarily.

\*\*\*\*\*

Inside the TARDIS, Major Woolley punched at the console as he watched, alongside Maggie and Larry, the chaos the ship was unleashing.

Vepp, unwanted by her mates, sulked in the anteroom armchair. Major Woolley heard her occasionally mumble, “Wouldn’t have happened with me in charge.”

Kaylaar had left the ship, and Woolley imagined him walking up and down the suspension pods, overwhelmed by sorrow. Woolley felt for him—he had come aboard this ship to save his loved ones, and now he would be powerless as they were destroyed.

Nevertheless, Major Woolley knew his own duty. He would dematerialise the TARDIS if time ran out. They weren’t sure it would re-materialise, but he and the Doctor broadly agreed that uncertainty was preferable to the certain death that faced them if they remained aboard the *Miracle*. And without power, at least Earth and the third moon of Themis Minor might be saved.

The only other option was to disconnect the Time Vector Generator again, and hope they might be flung somewhere habitable.

Major Woolley looked at the Doctor, currently standing in the corner of the flight deck, oddly calm as its very bulkheads frayed and decomposed around him. He hoped a third plan was coming together.

\*\*\*\*\*

It was in the nature of Gik and Parr's race to chronically overreact. If the shipboard food dispensers broke down for one meal, they would get to maintenance right away, afraid that they would starve. If the impulse engines ran a little hot one day, they would have a new ionic interface installed before the drones could even identify the problem, so terrified were they of dying in the vacuum of space.

So at this moment, as they began to feel the metal fatigue of their ship's alloys strain at their seams, buckling under the impossibility of existing in two places and times simultaneously—and knowing their quantum inducers and spanners could do nothing to stop it—they ran around in circles screaming.

The Pilot, meanwhile, was stabbing at the helm, struggling to attempt some manual override. But his ship now had total control of itself and had locked him out of any interference. Even a furious punch, and the shower of sparks it emitted, wouldn't stop any part of this doomed course.

In the chaos engulfing the flight deck, no one—not even the computer, with all its sensors pointed at its most unwelcome visitor—noticed that the Doctor was calm and still, standing by the planetary display, staring at its trajectory, mouthing words. He mouthed a countdown, backward from thirty. He hoped that watch he gave Rur wasn't running fast.

“Three... two... one...”

\*\*\*\*\*

Rur looked up at the massive turbines that fed into the *Miracle*'s quantum slipstream engines. She had been inelegantly spat out here by swinging herself down a side shaft when the Doctor, Gik, and Parr had been swept to the flight deck. It was just as well she knew the guts of this giant ship so well, as she counted down each inspection hatch and timed her exit perfectly.

Speaking of timing, Rur reminded herself that she didn't have long. The Doctor had given her the broad idea, and his pocket-watch, but it was up to her to figure out how to cause the damage. Rur looked at the watch's hands ticking urgently by and picked up a manual coil separator. Unable to hold the steel rod in one claw, she pocketed the watch and dragged the coil separator, talons straining from the effort.

Though the ship could theoretically see every inch of its internal structure, the Doctor had gambled that it would be too singularly occupied with him and the others on the flight deck. It made sense, given the invariable lack of appreciation for their work, that the computer could not distinguish between the Crew members.

The second stroke of genius in the Doctor's plan was that the *Miracle* hadn't activated its conventional space-warp engines since latching onto the TARDIS. Why would it, when it had the shiny new toy of potentially unlimited time travel to play with? So all the previous engines it had

absorbed into its workings—the phase-shifted matter/antimatter matrix pilfered from the Warilaxi, the Arars’ filthy protonic thrusters, and this quantum slipstream turbine from an easily defeated Kraal interceptor—lay untouched as the ship charted its doomed course to higher consciousness. It didn’t stop Rur from constantly looking over her shoulder, but to her relief, she seemed alone.

Rur prised open the nearest hatch. Not having time to pull the watch out again, she counted down in her head. With a mighty heave, she lobbed the manual coil separator between the two pistons.

Then Rur ran back to the ducts as fast as she could. Her speed ensured she was halfway back to the cargo hold by the time the turbines jammed.

\*\*\*\*\*

Kaylaar took one last look at the prone form of Kriraan.

“Come what may, I’ll see you on the other side of this,” he declared. With a note of satisfaction, he returned to the TARDIS.

\*\*\*\*\*

Major Peter Woolley was counting down with the Doctor. Their mental link was still strong enough to ensure they were not a moment out of synch.

As he reached the last few seconds, he indicated the lever to Maggie.

“Please, Miss Weitz, after all you’ve done, it is your honour.”

She smiled as she regarded the console, the lever in question capped with a red handle of almost comical size.

“Now!”

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So, thanks to Rur’s sabotage, the *Miracle* activated the dematerialisation circuit of the TARDIS at the moment the time vessel cranked its park brake. This unfortunate temporal stall coincided with the quantum slipstream, as was its programming if it detected a fault in its startup routine, emitting a test blast.

Consequently, the *Miracle* only re-materialised in one place, and even then, in an unfortunate belly flop on its side. And the destruction keenly hoped for by its computer, leading to a glorious rebirth as a being of pure consciousness dwelling in the heart of the time vortex, did not occur.

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On May 23, 1887, Canadian Pacific Railway’s Engine 374 locomotive pulled into Vancouver only ten minutes behind schedule. None of the passengers reported anything unusual about the journey. The conductor dismissed the strange phantom he had seen as odd weather.

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The villagers, freshly relieved from the disappearance from their skies of the angry and ugly Miracle, now flocked to its current, rather pathetic landing place—on its side on the great plateau that overlooked their village on the south side.

Running alongside the villagers, and relieved that its tail had missed her fishing hut, was Cadda.

Cadda looked on and smiled as she saw materialising, at the feet of the defeated Miracle, the older and more venerable ship that had defeated it. The police box's customary wheezing groan carried a note of triumph—free at last, like the man who piloted it through time and space.

## EPILOGUE

The Doctor spent a week in the village. He had ostensibly remained to overhaul the TARDIS—after all, its core systems needed extensive running in after a century of prodding by that jumped-up tugboat the *Miracle*.

But he also needed to see this planet and its community, and particularly the woman who had nurtured him would be all right. As much as he, and the old girl, were anticipating taking to the stars again, he owed them all, and Cadda in particular, that much.

The Doctor emerged from the TARDIS this morning to greet Major Peter Woolley, deep in conversation with Rur, Gik, and Parr. One day had been filled, to everyone’s amusement, with their formal trial and punishment of Vepp for gross dereliction of duty, obsessive obsequious toadying to the Pilot and his insane computer, and being a “generally awful leader”. Vepp accepted the charges with characteristic good grace—running around the makeshift courtroom kicking at Parr’s tail, while Gik and Rur tried to break them up. Unhappily, Vepp accepted the findings and was duly sentenced to demotion to the rank of Trainee Corporal, Third Class.

The Doctor offered a quick greeting and then carried on to the circle at the village centre. On his way, he passed some of Kaylaar’s Frenazzi friends, who were admiring Maggie’s Chevrolet Lumina, which the time winds had regenerated to the lustre it possessed when it rolled off the factory floor in 1990. Another day had seen Maggie and Larry attempt to drive the rejuvenated vehicle through the unforgiving badlands that lay beyond the lush foliage of the village. It handled the terrain as well as one could expect of an American car.

Continuing on his way, the Doctor gave a cheery wave to Dodko, supervising the erection of an abstract statue to fill in the pit left by the *Miracle*. Dodko’s disgrace had been executed with somewhat more dignity than Vepp’s but amounted to the same thing: he was sentenced to remedial manual labour and tasked with completing this undemanding sculpture. Working alongside him, and eager to help, was the Pilot, his helmet and armour removed to reveal a shrivelled creature of the same proportions as the Crew. The Pilot, having been idle for a century, now found mortality looking him in the eye, but he greeted it like a man reborn. The Doctor should perhaps have been harder on both of them, but he stood back as the village decided their fate.

He cast his gaze darkly towards the beached *Miracle*. Another day was spent attempting to extract the mission and planet of origin of the Lifeship Project, but, whether it was deleted or

corrupted in its temporal orbit, the information no longer existed in its databanks. The computer was almost truculent at its ignorance, and the Doctor did take full responsibility for its punishment: the entire computer core was downloaded to a Thorlind memory cube, and from there it would be exiled in some distant point of space, where it could no longer bother anyone.

Even the *Miracle* received only a cursory thought this morning, though. The Doctor's destination was his true home in this village. While his seasoned Time Lord's eye saw that they had recovered from the delusions brought on by the *Miracle*, he could not quite forgive them for their ostracising Cadda, his dear mentor.

He rapped on the door. Cadda answered, her face lined with a peculiarly sad species of happiness. As she had every day before, she seized him in a long, warm embrace and welcomed him inside.

"I suppose you're ready?" she asked.

He gave a slow nod. "If I don't go now, I may stay the rest of my life here."

"And would that be such a bad thing?"

The Doctor winced. "There are things to do. You take a hundred-year holiday, and the laundry list piles up. For starters, return everyone to their natural times. Then there's finding out where the Lifeship Project originated and how one of its ships got such a bad case of megalomania. Believe me, I want to stay. Maybe it came from my life as Theo, but this place feels more like home to me than anywhere I've been for... so long."

He looked around the hut—his eyes open, as they were not when he was a simple fisherman—to how the TARDIS had shaped this environment. This hut was a great cavernous space inside, but only a modest shack from outside.

"But I know, Doctor—there's such a lot out there you want to see."

His eyes blazed with wonder as he contemplated it all.

Then the Doctor looked back to Cadda, whose antennae drooped and whose eyes welled up. He grabbed her hands and squeezed them. He then looked away, excited at his idea but nervous about what she would say.

"Why not come with me?"

She shook her head.

"You *could* at least think about it."

Cadda smiled her warmest smile. "There are two good reasons. First, this village needs a new leader. With Dodko sanctioned, they've put my name forward."

"Bravo! Well, that makes perfect sense. Jolly good."

"Don't you want to hear the second reason?"

The Doctor shook his head. They both knew it already.

\*\*\*\*\*

Cadda walked into the village with the man she would always know as Theo, a pile of her cable-knit sweaters heaped in his arms ("It's cold out in space, you'll need to wrap up," she fussed). As they walked and talked, the Doctor took one last look at this world's status quo. He was happy to leave the planet in a better state than he found it. Though the ship was repairable, the revived Frenazzi had decided this village seemed as good a 'promised land' as any. The Crew also saw an opportunity to lead a new life.

"And," their new leader Rur observed, "if we get fed up, we can always get that old crate up and running."



The Doctor pulled Kaylaar away from his brother and family, who had spent the week reconciling. “I’m afraid I have some unfortunate news.”

“Oh?” Kaylaar’s eyes darkened.

“One aspect of the *Miracle*’s tampering has been to accelerate the path of this system. Pushed the whole thing several billion years out of whack, as far as I can tell. Those time winds sped up the life cycle of that brown dwarf and caused Themis Minor to ignite—forming the star you will come to know, one day far in the future, as Xater.”

Kaylaar stepped back, dumbfounded. “I... *we* have ended up in our own past?”

“Believe me, I hate paradoxes, but I think your descendants may inherit their chameleonic abilities from these villagers and your countrymen. And, ahem, with a bit of help from my old TARDIS sitting around on the surface while all this time-space malarkey went on. It is just a conjecture of course. If you wish I *could* take you all back...”

“No Doctor,” Kaylaar said firmly. “They weren’t happy on Koilara. Their malaise was so great that they just had to leave. And I was restless too. If this is their promised land, I hope doesn’t let them down. Or that they don’t let it down.”

The Doctor nodded. “In that case, I wish you luck.”

“On that note, Doctor—as happy as I am for my family, now that they are safe I still have my own path to forge.” He looked meaningfully to the TARDIS. “I have heard so much about your great role in our history.”

“Don’t believe everything you read.”

“Seriously, Doctor, I could learn so much from you. I wonder if there might be space for me?”

The Doctor smiled broadly. “Of course, Kaylaar. All the space and time you want.” He shot Cadda, who was half-listening to their conversation, a wry look. “Nice to know *someone* wants to travel with me.”

“Oh, I think there’s more than just one,” she replied wryly, beginning with tossing the least wanted new passenger in its Thorlind memory cube, atop the Doctor’s sweater pile.

The *Miracle*’s conscious computer was decidedly unrepentant. “*You are foolish indeed, Doctor, if you think you can contain my boundless ambitions.*”

“Yes, well, until I decide where to exile you, I think I’ll stick you in the spare closet with Magog the Malevilus.”

The Doctor was altogether happier to see Maggie, Larry, and Major Woolley circling him.

“Next stop Revelstoke?” Larry asked hopefully. “I mean, this is a nice spot for R. and R., but if I don’t get a cheeseburger soon, I’m going to explode.”

The Doctor smiled. “Ah, sounds like someone got over their toothache. What about you, Major Woolley?”

The diffident major chuckled wryly. “Much as I’d love to, Doctor, someone is expecting me in Vancouver. Someone to whom I wrote long ago, with whom I suddenly have a renewed desire to take another chance.”

He turned to the final member of the circle. Maggie looked at him and once again thought of Ollie, rubbing his hands together in anticipation of a road trip through interior British Columbia.

“And what do you say, Maggie?”

She gave a smile so enigmatic it was worthy of a Time Lord. “Let’s see where we end up.”

The goodbyes from the village were as protracted as their stay had been and began with the strange spectacle of Maggie hesitantly driving her old-new Lumina through the police box doors, and it magically fitting, without scratching either vehicle’s paintwork.

With all farewells made, the Doctor piled his new friends into the TARDIS and took a last look at Cadda, giving her a wide grin. “I will come back,” he promised her.

“You’d better. I’ll worry about you.”

The Doctor retreated within, and the new community cheered the TARDIS on its way to destinations unknown and unimaginable.



*"That's enough sitting around thinking, Doctor. There are silver alien spikes with your name on them."*

No sooner has the Doctor regenerated than the TARDIS is attacked by a parasitic vessel, the Miracle. The collision splinters the Miracle, semi-materialized across three times and places Earth in 1887 and 1994, as well as a distant, nameless world. Meanwhile, the Miracle's strange crew of diminutive avians, the shapeshifter Kaylaar, and an amnesiac old man are loose in the quiet village of Revelstoke, British Columbia. There they meet Maggie Weitz and her cousin Larry (on their way to a dentist appointment). When Larry is kidnapped by the Crew, Maggie's only hope of rescuing him is following the stranger to the dead world.

There, Maggie is saved from the fallout of the time-slip by Theo, a fisherman haunted by strange dreams and hazy memories of the Doctor. They are summoned to the Miracle, which is on the verge of gaining the TARDIS's full powers and a sinister sentience. If it does so, both this planet and 108 years of Earth history will be doomed.

Only the Doctor can avert this crisis.  
But the Miracle's Pilot insists he has killed the Doctor. Or has he?

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