

THE
DOCTOR WHO
PROJECT

Doctor Who 60 Years 1963 - 2023

**A MILD CURIOSITY
IN A JUNK YARD**

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a blue patterned coat over a white ruffled collar and a dark skirt, walks alongside a man in a British police uniform. The man is wearing a dark uniform with a peaked cap and a white shirt with a tie. They are walking on a cobblestone street at night. In the background, there is a brick building, a street lamp, and a public call box. The call box is a wooden structure with a glass door and the words "POLICE PUBLIC CALL BOX" on top. To the left of the call box, there is a sign that says "M.FOR Scrap 76, TOTTE". The scene is lit by the street lamp, creating a warm, yellow glow.

Reg Cranfield & Hamish Crawford

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Foreword

By Hamish Crawford,
Assistant Editor to *The Doctor Who Project*

It is a point of pride for *The Doctor Who Project* that we accept submissions from anyone. And only through such an open submission policy would we have received the remarkable account of Reginald 'Reg' Cranfield, who sixty years ago worked as a constable in the London Metropolitan Police.

Constable Cranfield's story came my way through our Range Editors, Bob Furnell and Richard Peevers, who in the middle of November 2023 forwarded me a most peculiar email from someone called Natasha Lalonde:

ATTN: Editors of 'The Doctor Who Project'
RE: 'DR. WHO'

I stumbled upon your website, and wondered if you were going to celebrate the 60th anniversary of 'Dr. Who'. If so, I hope you will acknowledge some of the other brave but ordinary people who played a part in the good Doctor's continued success. You may be interested to hear about my grandfather, Reg Cranfield.

My grandfather worked in the Met for 33 years. I know he was disappointed at the end, and I thought it was because he had been passed over for promotion so many times. But he was never like that. He appreciated what he had, never regretted what he missed. He was a very 'Zen' person, which not many of his colleagues were, I can tell you!

A few years before he died, enough time had passed since his retirement that I felt comfortable asking. I still felt a little awkward about it, but I had to know.

He quickly answered that it had nothing to do with his career. "No regrets, I have no regrets!" he would roar any time it came

up (in his later years he was a little deaf, which only made him louder and more insistent when he was making a point).

"It's something that happened back in '63, that no one's ever asked me about." He looked apprehensive, a little fearful, all of a sudden. "Probably because nobody knew to ask me. Who would even know it happened?"

"What happened?" I asked. Now I know what you think, when an old man starts talking about things that only he knows happened ... but Grandad was sharp as a tack, right up to the end.

He looked around again, and sighed. "Really want to tell someone ... they probably won't mind. And I deserve a bit of glory, don't I?"

"Course you do, Grandad." I was a little wary as he said it: in his later years of retirement, whenever he'd talk about his time in the Met he was prone to descending into tirades against the incompetence of the last Commissioner he'd served under.

Instead, though, he told me the most amazing tale. Every word of it is as true as it is utterly unbelievable. Even more remarkably, he had written it up as a manuscript. I always felt funny about sending it to anyone while he was alive, but he passed away late last year—gently, in his sleep. I considered sending it to the BBC, but I didn't think it quite fit in with their plans. So I hope you at 'The Doctor Who Project' might be able to make something of it.

Let me know if you need any further information from me.

Best,

N

Attached to this email was a PDF file. I opened it and found a typewritten document about fifty pages long, scanned onto a computer (by Natasha, I presume).

I hereby present this document, only altering some sections for clarity and correcting those inevitable 'gremlins' that are as likely to appear on a word processor as a typewriter.

Bob never doubted its provenance, but I'm sorry to say I am by nature a more suspicious person. I began reading with eyebrows raised, only too eager to detect some falsehood or forgery about it, but I came to believe it was as true, and as unbelievable, as Natasha said.

The Narrative of Constable Reg Cranfield (Ret.)

I: Strangers in the Fog

I suppose I got mixed up in this whole business because of my beat. I was recently transferred and got this section of Shoreditch, because the Sergeant liked to put the new bugs through the wringer. Not that the beat was a challenge, but the shifts were. “Got to be ready to respond any time, laddie,” the Sergeant would tell me (I’ve forgotten his name all these years later, but I remember his voice—harsh East End fellow).

Anyway, there I was walking this beat in Shoreditch, and I’d only just done the switch, so I was dog-tired and it was only half-five. Called in from my usual box at the corner of Minton and Pitfield Street, and stopped inside the box to make myself a cup of tea. I’d not been in London long, but I couldn’t believe how foggy these November nights were, and I was frozen right through. Whoever you are reading this, you might not know, but police boxes used to have a little table and chair and a kettle inside, and as I was a bit groggy as well as cold, I thought I’d revive myself with a cup.

I was a bit embarrassed when I was woken up, hand in my face, by this young lady. She was standing over me—which was quite a shock, as if you’ve ever seen inside those call boxes, there isn’t a lot of room! She had poured the water into the mug, and there I was, handprint on my face and a crick in my neck!

She apologised, but said I’d left the door open and she heard the kettle boiling. I was too groggy to mind, and I appreciated the tea. So we sat and chatted while I drank, and she told me she’d been promoted to assistant headmaster at this secondary school down the road. I didn’t think anything of how she said that, but when I thought back she seemed a little sad, like she’d known the headmaster and missed the chap. But she didn’t dwell on it. If I ever needed a break from my beat, she says, I was to come in there and put my feet up for a while. I thanked her—really I was grateful, sometimes that stretch of Shoreditch felt like it was uninhabited—and said I’d bear that in mind.

So I get back up and do my rounds, and Shoreditch goes back to being uninhabited. She only got a few yards away from me before I lost her totally in the fog. And after she goes, all I think about is my new friend the assistant head—I didn’t even catch her name, and I think I know what secondary school she’s talking about, but I didn’t ask its name either. Stupid Cranfield, I said to myself, you’re always so lonely and then someone comes up and

talks to you and you forget to ask her name. I'm thinking about her and so it takes me a while to cotton that there's a car parked in this alley—not a bad model, Vauxhall or something. And I can hear some talking—raised voices, not exactly angry but not friendly either. But I can't make out what they're saying, because there's something between the voices and me.

So I go down the alley—I'd been down it earlier I thought, because I notice these two big blue gates. I can't remember the name on them all these years later, but it's a scrapyard, and the voices are coming from inside.

For a moment I sort of stood there—some of these merchants were prickly characters to say the least, and I didn't really want to get into a barney with Old Man Steptoe. And what business was it of mine whether Old Man Steptoe is having some kind of disagreement anyway? I never was the type of copper who gets too into people's business. I suppose that's why my commissioner, many years later, never gave me much credit. "No imagination, Cranfield," he told me.

Bear that in mind as this story goes on.

So I get back to the end of the lane, and I hear this almighty racket. At first I thought it was the car going, but it's still there, and it sounds more like some bloody explosion or thunder coming up from the ground. And I get to those blue gates, and I steel myself up, and I open them.

I wrench them open and I go in, and there's nothing there. But—there's a funny feeling in the air, like ... well, I still can't describe it all these years later. The closest I got to it was years later flying to see my grandchildren in Canada the first time. It was this pressure, lifting from the air. But that thunder I'd heard from outside stayed in my mind, because I also felt like I'd been standing beside a great big rumbling cloud, like some incredibly powerful explosion had gone off nearby. But the yard was quiet and empty—well, filled with the usual rubbish you get in a scrapyard, old mirrors and sheeting and God knows what. But nothing ... unusual. There was definitely no space for a rocket.

I was late calling in and the Sergeant gave me the gears. I felt a right pillock. It was only later that I thought: whose voices did I hear? And where had *they* gone?

The rest of that week was routine. I hoped I'd bump into my assistant headmaster friend, but I never did. I heard two chaps down at the station mentioning they'd had to tow a car—that car from the other night. They made a note of the name, someone said they'd follow up. I felt a bit guilty. Should I have looked around more? What if the driver had been kidnapped or something? But I thought it was a daft notion, and seeing as the Sergeant was already on my case, I didn't mention anything.

Of course, that was Tuesday the 19th of November, and I don't need to tell you what happened on Friday the 22nd. All weekend and into the following week, everyone was on about President Kennedy's assassination. None of us thought America was such a violent place, and why anyone would want to shoot the President—especially one so young and handsome and full of promise and optimism as Kennedy—was beyond us. If it could happen there, it could happen anywhere. It was so terribly sad, it made all that business on the Tuesday night seem pretty trivial.

The following Tuesday came and went and I was still on my own. I lingered for a while at the corner of Minton and Pitfield—loitering, I'd probably have called it if I'd seen one of

them teen-agers at it. I was a bit disappointed to be honest, but I tried to ignore it. She'd only be depressed about President Kennedy like everyone else.

I lived alone then, you see, and it's funny how hearing everyone talk about the same thing, and express the same endless grief, could chip away at you. Nothing was going on in Shoreditch, and I suppose that loneliness was getting at me again (moving to London, I felt lonely often in those days). I remember looking out into Shoreditch Park—not a soul about, and the place covered in bloody fog as usual—and I thought to myself: if only something—anything—could happen to take my mind off it!

I wanted that to be my friend, the assistant headmaster, running in from the fog, of course. I'd make her the tea this time. But what I saw was certainly not that, and I'd never thought before how true it was to be careful what you wish for!

As I mentioned, the fog was swirling around, which made the shape difficult to make out. But I saw it clear enough, and heard it after. It was a horse, with a man riding it. Decidedly against the law, I thought. But then as it got closer I made out the flat top of the man's head; and then, out of the fog, rides a knight!

But he didn't look like any knight I'd ever seen (well, seen in Robert Taylor pictures like *Knights of the Round Table* or *Quentin Durward*). His armour was all piebald, leather mixed with chainmail mixed with these blocky bits. And much as I wanted to think it was just some clown playing dress-up, it wasn't—he was properly *old*. You could just feel it, like when you're at the zoo and a big gorilla looks at you and you see in his eyes that you and he are the same, just separated by millions of years of evolution. With this bloke and me, it was only a few thousand years, but it may as well have been longer.

The horse reared up at the sight of me. I was terrified—he was a big bruiser anyway, and his horse seemed likely to trample me as soon as look at me. His great powerful voice called out, "Whoah!" And then he was on his way. I ran through the park looking for him, no doubt shouting after him and reading the riot act too, for all the good it did. But I didn't see where he could have gone. But of course, he had. I mean, I hate to keep going on about this fog, but it really was two feet of vision on all sides. But I knew it was more than that. He'd vanished back into thin air. Yes, that's right, back—because I was sure he'd appeared out of thin air too.

I was unfortunate enough that this 'hallucination' got found out—P.C. Leadworth was wrapping up his beat and he bumped into me running around Shoreditch Park. Of course, the way Leadworth tells it my eyes were wide and I was screaming blue murder. And I didn't want to tell people why—goes without saying Leadworth hadn't seen any knights in odd armour riding around the glen or anything. So I had to keep quiet, otherwise I thought they might think I was cracking under pressure. But the Sergeant had his eye on me anyway, and now he's really got me in his sights. I could forget any time off over Christmas now; he puts up the duty roster and there I am, shifts up and down.

So a week into December, with it getting even colder outside, I'm feeling pretty sorry for myself. I was walking up and down the streets—as empty as ever in the biting cold. And in those days when I felt sorry for myself, I'd go back to my childhood a bit. One of the things I used to love was bowling in cricket. Nice and soothing. So when things were getting me down I'd look at a target off in the distance and lob something vaguely ball-shaped at it.

Today I picked up some snow and packed it into a ball. There was enough on the ground that I could. I had it nice and firm, and I hurled it down the street, hoping no children would see me. After all, you didn't want people imitating you and throwing a bunch of rubbish at distant targets.

It didn't hit the target, though—this little fellow came out of nowhere and, as if he planned it, intercepted the snowball. He was holding a broly and he smashed the snowball, using the broly as if it were a cricket bat!

"Howzat!" he called over to me in a Scots accent.

I rushed over to him and tipped my helmet in apology. "Just amusing myself you understand."

I looked him up and down. He looked about fifty, wearing a baggy brown jacket and plaid trousers, and two-tone shoes. A thin silk Paisley scarf was around his neck, and a Fair Isle pullover under the jacket, but it didn't look particularly warm. And on his head was a straw hat! The oddest part of the clobber was the umbrella though—it had this fancy red handle that looked like a big question mark.

"No harm done," he said. "Impressive fast bowl. I used to bowl quite fast myself a few centuries ago, Constable ...?"

"Cranfield, sir, Reg Cranfield." I extended my arm. "Look here, chum, are you sure you should be out on a night like tonight?"

He nodded, not taking my arm, and I noticed he was looking past me rather than in my eye. "I don't have far to go. Good evening, Constable." He stuck his broly into the snow and walked past me. I felt he was a bit stand-offish, so I decided not to press the point. I shrugged and walked straight on.

"Left!" he called behind me.

"Eh?" I turned and saw him pointing with his umbrella.

"You'll want to go left, I think, Constable."

"Will I?" I asked bullishly. The little fellow's amiable manner seemed a dodge, somehow.

"It's up to you of course," he conceded. "I just want to make sure you get where you ought to go, Constable. Goodnight!" He doffed his straw hat and carried on.

It was all very peculiar, but I didn't have anywhere else to go, so I decided to follow his advice. And what should I see but the sign: COAL HILL SECONDARY SCHOOL.

I didn't dare hope—but then I saw the lady herself walking out, pulling a coat tightly around her!

That was odd, I thought, but frankly I didn't think much more about the little Scotsman when I saw her. I waved at her, but she didn't respond how I thought she would. She looked preoccupied, worried. She ran across the street, though, and grabbed me urgently.

"I'm so glad to see you!"

"Me too," I replied dumbly.

"I haven't got anywhere and I ..." She breaks down into this gabbling, and I pat her on the shoulders. Of course I've wanted to see her for three weeks, but now she's here in front of me and I wasn't expecting this, so I just stand there like a lemon.

She looked back at the school, and asked me, "Can we talk inside? It's so horrible out here."

“Well, I can spare a few minutes.” I was mindful of getting across to Minton and Pittfield to make that call, but I seemed to remember another police box on a closer street. I was cursing that sergeant as I followed her inside—I finally get a chance to meet her and thanks to him, all I can think about is bloody police boxes!

As she led me through the empty halls, I came to see that this Coal Hill was a peculiar place. The place looked like a war zone. A trophy cabinet was a heap of shattered glass and chipped wood. An entire Chemistry lab had all its windows smashed, and when I looked outside at the playground, I saw giant scorch-marks!

“I realised when we said goodbye that I hadn’t caught your name,” she said.

“Oh yes, I’d noticed that,” I replied as nonchalantly as I could. The Scottish fellow popped into my head again—I hadn’t got *his* name either. I really must get these details down in my line of work, I thought. “Constable Cranfield. Reg.”

“Laura Clifford,” she said back. She awkwardly offered me her hand, and I shook it. Luckily, we had arrived at the teachers’ lounge, and she led me through. I took a seat, stealing a glance at my watch and cursing the sergeant once again.

Laura took her seat and leaned forward, like this terrible weight was pressing on her. “It’s like this, Reg.” I was glad she’d chosen to use my first name, after my clumsy introduction. “You know that Tuesday I met you? Well, the day after, two teachers didn’t come in. One of the students was missing too.”

“Who were they?”

Laura had been rummaging through the drawers, and pulled out a folder. She slid it across the table, and I examined photos of a ruggedly handsome man, a stern but attractive woman with elaborately lacquered hair, and a class photo of a row of fifteen-year-olds—I guessed immediately the dark-haired and exotic girl with a faraway look in her eyes had been the one to go missing. “The student was called Susan Foreman, and the history teacher, Miss Wright, and the science master Mr. Chesterton.”

“*Ian* Chesterton?” I asked, remembering the name of the car I’d seen in that lane on Tuesday. She nodded, surprised. I explained about the car, explained what I’d heard. It felt good to get it off my chest, because I’d felt such a failure for not following up. But this made the failure more acute: they’d gone missing right under my nose. “Have you reported them missing? Assuming their friends or family haven’t already?”

“The new headmistress said she’d handle it, but Reg ...” She leaned in and whispered, “I don’t think she did a damn thing about it. I don’t trust her.”

I laughed, and then felt unkind. “Why ever not?”

“You know how I mentioned I’d been made assistant head? Well, the last headmaster, Mr. Bronson ... died suddenly. Very strange, the whole thing. He started acting oddly, locked off the cellar and stayed after hours setting things up and taking them down. We never saw what he was up to and during the school day he became distracted and vacant. And all this damage to the school happened around that time. You saw the mess in the chemistry lab and out in the playground. What does that? One of the caretakers said there’d been a bomb scare, brought in some special R.A.F. task force. That was right when he died.”

“Died? The headmaster, you mean?”

She nodded. "Poor Mr. Bronson," she repeated. "Found in a graveyard. Seemed healthy enough. I couldn't help thinking of him in those last few days. It was almost as if something snapped in his mind."

"You don't die of that."

"I know that." She crossed her arms, impatient with me. I felt hurt, after all this time, that so much depended on the success or failure of this conversation. And frankly, the more I heard, the more I doubted Laura Clifford's sense. She continued, "But then this new headmistress swans in and the more she says there's nothing to worry about, the more I don't trust her."

"What's her story?"

"I don't know. Her name's Bridget Campbell."

"Doesn't sound like any relation to the Kray twins, but you never know."

Laura let loose another impatient groan.

"Sorry, I make stupid comments when I'm ..." I was going to say 'nervous', but I didn't want her to think she made me nervous. "...confused."

As if I hadn't spoken, Laura went on about Bridget Campbell: "Assigned from another school, decent references ..."

"So where's the mystery in that?"

"Well, aside from sweeping all this under the carpet, she's not done much of anything for the school." Laura adjusted a stray hair and leaned forward again. "Has this far-away look in her eye whenever I ask about it, and says, 'Time will tell; it always does.' I mean, what on earth is that supposed to mean? What should I do, Reg? I just feel there's something wrong about all this, but I'm the only one who's noticed it."

"Well, I can check down at the station. Teachers do run off together. The student might have disappeared coincidentally. And all this unpleasantness with the R.A.F. and the headmaster is making it seem sinister."

"Hmm. Thanks Reg." She didn't believe my theory at all.

She clasped my hands and squeezed them. I desperately wanted to tell her about that strange ghostly knight I'd seen in the park the previous night, but something held me back. I felt she'd think I was cracking up like the boys at the station did. And other than that general oddity, there didn't seem much connection between these teachers, whatever tragedy had befallen the headmaster, and inexplicable apparitions on my beat. I squeezed her hands back and told her not to worry and I'd do whatever I could to help her. I could tell Laura Clifford appreciated me listening, but didn't really think I'd come up with anything.

I wished I hadn't been such a lonely fool that inside of two short conversations, I had fallen so hopelessly in love with Laura Clifford.

I slept on all she had told me, but the more I thought over that bizarre confection, the more outlandish the whole business was. In the cold light of the following day, away from that eerie empty school and Laura's beautiful pale face looking at me insistently, I felt even more of a loony for giving it so much thought. Who would believe any of it? I considered my own infatuation, and I wondered if that was the answer: that she made the whole thing up to have an excuse to talk to me. But I knew at once I was flattering myself there. I remembered her

reaction to seeing me. It was all about the story; she'd have been just as keen to tell it to my sergeant or to Leadworth.

The only thing loonier than her story, I thought on my way to the station, was mine. Who meets a complete stranger a couple of times and starts to hear wedding bells?

Well, Reg, I decided, the only case you've conclusively solved was 'The Mystery of Constable Lonelyhearts'. You're not going to figure it out, so you'd best put it out of your head. Oh, I'd make a few inquiries and see if anything had been filed, but I wasn't going to stick my neck out on wild hunches. If nothing else, most of the other coppers were still paralytic with laughter at Leadworth's impression of me running around Shoreditch Park in the fog, so this little tale would hardly distinguish me.

It was something of a relief to have this decided when I got in that morning. I was off the beat for a few days anyway, so I'd have plenty on my plates manning the 'phones. It was nice to be inside—the fog had turned to brutal cold as Christmas came nearer. And things were quiet enough that a few hours turned out to be busy work—putting up the sad bit of tinsel and holly over the doors that amounted to our festive decorations.

Maybe I did feel my heart skip a beat when the door opened and some local came in; I was half-hoping to see Laura Clifford again, but dreading what new chapter in her tale I'd get mixed up in. Somewhere in the mix, I might have hoped someone would tell me they'd seen a green knight on horseback, so I'd know I wasn't hallucinating. Hell, even if someone told me they'd seen the goofy little Scotsman, I'd have been happy. But a couple of days went by—weekdays I think, it was getting hard to tell one from another with all the grey skies and freezing cold. Christmas fell on a Monday that year, and I was lucky enough to have a late shift, so I could go up north to see my family and be back. This was doubly important as my father hadn't been awfully well when I left, though he never liked to say anything. I was coming to think this whole transfer had been a mistake; when I thought to myself I could be in my village, surrounded by friends and family. Still, at least there was Christmas to look forward to. The thought of being away from London, away from the emptiness of a city with millions of strangers, was more and more welcome.

It was three or four days later, when I was on my way out the door, that I saw Laura Clifford again. I had been feeling that overwhelming drowsing that comes over me on cold days, like I'm only half-awake the whole time. But as soon as I saw her, it was as if someone had splashed cold water on my face. I was alert but afraid at the same time.

We met right in the doorway of the station, and some joker (Leadworth!) had hung mistletoe. She didn't even notice it, thankfully, but I looked up, blushed, and looked at my shoes.

"I've not seen you out!" she said, as if I'd personally inconvenienced her.

"Been in here the last few days," I mumbled.

"Never mind, you're here now." She pulled at my arm, and I resisted at first. "What's the matter? This is important!"

"Miss Clifford, really, I've been thinking about all this, and I don't know if I can help you really."

She looked so crestfallen I instantly wanted to swallow my tongue. But after a moment that turned to a kind of deliberate stoicism. "No, no, you're probably right. Shall I just go in there and make a report?"

She made to go past me, and I repeated, "Report?"

"Yes. I just saw ... something."

“What?”

“Well, can you help me or can’t you?”

“Tell me and I’ll see!” I was getting a little impatient with this game.

“Oh, Reg, don’t be childish! Are you with me or not?”

“Fine, yes! I’m with you!” I’d shouted this, whined it really, just as Westmoreland was popping out the door. He asked me if everything was all right, his right eyebrow raised as high as Roger Moore. “Fine, goodnight,” was my clipped reply. He pulled a face of mock hurt, and went on his way, bloody eyebrow still cocked. I suppose this would make another hilarious story.

I wondered if Laura had read anything into the exchange. It was perfectly clear that I was about the lowest in the station’s pecking order, and if I were her I might have wondered whether another plod would handle her case as easily. But she didn’t even look Westmoreland’s way, and now he was gone, she was down the steps and crossing the street. I had to race to catch up with her, my boots slick on the icy street. I was slipping all over the place, and practically cannoned into her, but she had stayed level the whole time. Even the weather was going out of its way to make me look a fool.

“I was at school late, doing some marking, when I looked out the window and saw ... this shape. It was racing by. Like someone wearing a helmet, and moving so fast it was like they were riding a bike. So I ran out into the street, quick as I could, and then ... well, they vanished. Like I say, one second there was this shape, and the next, it was thin air. It was like a ghost or something.”

“A ghost?”

“I turned the corner and saw your station at the end of the street.”

“It didn’t look like a knight, did it?”

“You’ve seen something too?” Her eyes widened in delight.

“I don’t know,” I lied. I’d never seen anything more clearly than that horse in the fog, rearing up, but I didn’t want to say it. How cowardly was that!

I was about to lie some more, but fate intervened. Standing at the corner of the street was a very tall and slender person in a bright balaclava, with a long scarf looped around several times. It was amazing what a riot of colour he was—all that bright (almost glowing) green against white snow and the grey streets.

“Hold it right there!” I called, immediately wishing I hadn’t. By then I had got close enough to him to see that bright green wasn’t clothing; it was skin. He didn’t have a balaclava over his face; that was his face. And the scarf? Not a scarf, but tentacles.

‘He’ then pitched forward, crawling on the tentacles like a giant insect. As terrified as I was, I was also impressed with a kind of grace to the creature, pitching and bobbing from one horrible tentacle to the other.

The December winds whipped up to further weaken my resolve, and I stood protecting Laura quaking in my boots for two reasons. We turned back the way we came, but the squat creature—the thing she had seen—marched stiffly into view. It had a beautiful face carved in an Art Deco style out of a kind of ebony porcelain; its clothing was similarly elegant. In one sense we were astounded and fearful to note it was a robot, but in another sense it was entirely expected.

I didn’t even have my truncheon—I’d left that at the station with my uniform—so I balled up my hands in fists and hoped I looked less petrified than I felt. The bright green chap bent its horrid spine backward, two tentacles waving forward in some kind of attack posture.

“Am I imagining this? Blob in front, robot behind?”

Laura shook her head tightly.

Then I saw, a few yards away at an odd angle, a police box. It was standing at an odd 45-degree angle to the street, and was less than fifty yards from my station. But it was the nearest and safest refuge to hand, so as fast as I could, I sprinted toward it, Laura’s hand tightly gripped in mine.

I reached for my key, but the door was hanging open—it opened inward, oddly, whereas every box I’d ever used opened out. And past the door I saw blackness—a darker and emptier black void than I’d ever seen in my life.

I didn’t care. It was better than being murdered outside my station by flying saucer-men.

Laura and I ran inside.

The first thing I noticed was the sound. It was low and soothing, not exactly mechanical but not natural either. It seemed to ebb and flow with the golden light.

I was standing inside somewhere incredibly large, incredibly bright, and incredibly unlike the police box I was in front of. I had fallen flat on my face, and I felt Laura’s arm helping me up. I pitched sideways when I was on my feet, and fell not against a wall but a large circular indentation. There were dozens of them staggered up and down the walls, and they were throbbing with the golden light in time with the humming sound. I wished it would quiet down a bit; it was so loud the room was buzzing, felt like it was right inside my skull.

A few feet away someone stood with his back to us. In front of him was a six-sided table, every row of which was lined with switches, levers, and screens. A massive crystalline cylinder glowed and rotated in the middle.

A whinnying sound broke the ‘silence’ of the humming, and I saw a few feet away a remarkably well-behaved horse. And the man at the table was the green knight I saw earlier. He turned to us and, in a low musical voice tinged with a Welsh accent, said, “You’ve made it at last. You don’t happen to know where Merlin is, do you?”

“M-Merlin?” Laura stammered.

The bearded knight in green touched a chainmail glove to his forehead and clicked his tongue. “Forgive me. You might know him better as ... the Doctor?”

II: Green Knights and Green Aliens

Laura and I had many questions, and we were still taking in the enormity of this strange place to which we had been spirited from that police box. But any thought she and I had to asking these questions—or to answering the knight’s bizarre one about this doctor who might be Merlin—was interrupted by the arrival through the room’s two massive doors of the very green alien and robot we had fled from in terror.

The knight, far from being concerned, gave them a familiar smile, before flicking at a switch that swung the massive double-doors shut. Instinctively, we backed to the wall.

There was the bright green, tentacled creature I’d mistaken for a man in a scarf outside. It righted its upper torso again and said to us through a vibrating grille on its otherwise blank face, “I am sorry if you were startled by my appearance.” A tentacle thrust forward. “Neither D84 nor I mean you any harm.”

Speech failed me. I could barely get past my fear of the inhuman beast, and yet it was apologising to me. I extended my hand and shook the proffered tentacle to show my agreement.

“We don’t know any doctor,” Laura admitted. “Where are we?”

“You are inside the work of his magic,” the knight answered. “Many times it aided us in the court of Arthur. He calls it the TARDIS. It is a vessel to traverse time and space.” He patted his chest grandly and raised himself to his full height—a good foot and a half taller than me. “I am Sir Gawain, knight of the Round Table.”

The green creature had a haughty air as it introduced itself. “You may identify me as Daplax Mo, a *dan* master of Venusian aikido. The Doctor was one of my finest humanoid students.”

“And I am D84, a Super Voc-class servitor from Kaldor City,” the robot declared primly.

“I’m Miss Clifford, and this is Police Constable Cranfield,” Laura replied slowly. Our humble Earthly names sounded as odd in the sterile alien air of this machine as any of theirs.

“We all found ourselves here on your planet in this inhospitable climate,” Daplax Mo continued, “and saw the TARDIS, so we fled here in refuge, hoping to find our friend within.”

“But there was no sign of the Doctor.”

“Doctor?” Laura clicked her fingers. “It’s probably nothing, but my student Susan Foreman had a grandfather who was a doctor. Your doctor friend, he isn’t called Doctor Foreman by any chance is he?”

“Doctor Merlin Foreman?” I asked with a chuckle, before a thought struck me. I remembered those junkyard gates, with the legend ‘I.M. FOREMAN’ written on them. I remembered the voices I heard that night too. Any hope that things might tie together was dashed when none of our bizarre friends showed a flicker of recognition.

Gawain finally shrugged. “He goes by many names. ‘Fore-man’ fits him as well as Merlin, does it not?”

“Do either of you know the workings of the TARDIS?” the Venusian asked.

“How the hell would we?” I blurted.

The trio looked from each other to me, as if the answer was obvious. “It is a police box. You are a police officer, are you not?”

“Look, mate, this is no police box!”

Any further conversation was promptly ended when a deep and terrifying roar sounded from beneath us. In time with it, the glowing cylinder shone even more brightly, and moved up and down.

“The sound!” I shouted to Laura over the cacophony. “I’ve heard it before! At the junkyard!”

It was even accompanied by the same whirl of confusion, as if we were taking off. If we were, then the ship had set itself moving.

I grabbed Laura’s hand, not realising how frightened I was until she pulled away in discomfort at the grip. “It’ll be all right,” she assured me. I wished I could believe her, almost as much as I wished I could go back to before I had seen any of this.

With the ship in flight and nobody able to answer where we were going or how long it would take—beyond their vague assurances that if they found this doctor, everything would be all right—I decided to go for a walk. Luckily, that was pretty easy. Outside this ‘cockpit’, there were enough curving and winding corridors that in no time at all I totally lost my bearings. I don’t know how long I ambled around, hoping my head would stop spinning.

Laura had stayed with the jolly trio in the control room. There was an alcove with an overstuffed club chair and ottoman, and she stretched out on it, kicking off her shoes saying as she did she didn’t fancy walking around any more.

I said, as diplomatically as I could, “Don’t you think ... you know ... we should stay together?”

I hadn’t said it as under my breath as I would have liked, as that D84 piped up behind me, “Neither of you have any reason to fear for your safety.”

“Even if we wanted to harm you, the dimensional properties of the TARDIS forbid any violent action,” Daplox added.

As far as I was concerned, I didn’t trust them and that last assurance only sounded more sinister, but I wasn’t going to insist.

“You heard them, Reg. Have a little faith,” Laura suggested.

“Have it your way,” I said as I left.

My irritation with Laura made my stroll a little more purposeful. She seemed to be taking it far more in her stride than I was. And anyway I didn't want to take anything in my stride. I picked up the pace, hoping these featureless, identical hallways would lead me somewhere with a touch of normality or humanity. Instead there was that jarring sense of movement underfoot, the theoretically soothing hum of the ship's flight, and those identical honeycomb-like circular indentations in the walls, stretching as far as the eye could see. No windows, I supposed, because assuming we *were* moving through time, there wouldn't be much of a view outside.

I noticed a spool of fraying wool discarded on the otherwise spotless floor. I picked it up and followed its trail to a room apparently set up like a cricket pavilion. The wool was the remains of a sadly unravelling scarf of maroon and purple, and I found a sweater and stumps discarded next to a sporty shirt with red stitching on its collar. Examining it more closely, I saw the stitching was a question mark. I remembered that little fellow's umbrella—and was I imagining things, or was his jumper decorated with question marks too?

I poked my head around the next few doors set into the walls. Mercifully, there were no sinister labs or storerooms of ray guns. In fact, everything I found seemed reassuringly commonplace, only punctuated with some twist of oddity—like stitching a giant question mark on an otherwise sober white shirt. Maybe those little twists unnerved me more than the labs or the ray guns. There was a giant ballroom with a single pair of Wellington boots in front of the solitary *chaise longue*. Another room was the crumbling quadrangle of a cloister, overgrown with pointy branches, snaking vines, and a bewildering array of plant life, all of which quivered when I opened the door. In another room, a piano played a Chopin concert by itself, while a pair of patent-leather shoes danced a waltz unaided. I opened one door and found nothing but blustering winds howling in my face—no walls or floor even, just a scene out of *The Wizard of Oz*.

In every room, I saw more junk. A pair of sunglasses, a recorder ... an old yellow joke car was crammed in the corner of one massive storeroom beside a jukebox.

And each time, the corridors stretched ahead, seemingly the same as the way I had just left. Only when I tried turning back the way I came, and found myself opening the door to what last time had been the swimming pool, only to now find a wood-panelled study, did I start to worry. If this doctor had unwanted passengers in his ship, and if his ship was so large and maze-like, what was to stop me from getting lost and spending the rest of my life in here? How would a crew of four locate one stray police constable?

I stepped into the study, feeling like Laura, in need of a chair. There was only a stiff-backed parson's chair in here, and as I looked around the dark mahogany, I saw it wasn't a study at all—it had another six-sided table in the middle, and a shutter at the back was open and showing a galactic vista, stars wreathed in multi-coloured mist swirling past at a dizzying speed.

This was another cockpit, another control room.

I stepped up onto the dais where the table stood and flipped open its wooden drawers. Beneath were more buttons and levers. Strangely, one side had its lid flipped open.

I heard footsteps from the corridor behind me.

In a blind panic, I rushed out of the study and looked up and down the corridor. Either way seemed to lead in an unfamiliar direction. I hadn't imagined it—after all this, I was wishing I had a more active imagination to blame all this on. And whoever it was, it was

someone with a lighter footstep than any of the characters we'd met so far. It sounded like a petite lady.

I didn't suppose this doctor was a woman. It wasn't chauvinism, mind you; it was just based on what the others had said.

It wasn't Laura either, as I found out when I turned round to find her right behind me.

"Good grief!" I blurted.

"I didn't mean to frighten you," she replied. "Not still mad at me, are you?"

"I *wasn't* mad at you before."

"Don't do undercover work, Constable. You're not made to be a liar."

I gave her a good-natured scowl, feeling sorry for my earlier coldness. "Did you see anyone?"

"Don't tell me this place is haunted?"

At that, a groaning emanated from beneath us—doubly strange as I hadn't seen any sign this ship had multiple levels. I could only imagine how lost I would get if I went up or down anywhere.

"Our ... hah, 'pilots' think we're coming in to land shortly. They don't know how, it just seemed to decide itself."

I thought of the open panel in the wooden room. Had that woman landed the ship from there? How? And who was she?

"Well, if you can find your way back to the main room, I'll eat my hat ..."

We turned the corner and found ourselves exactly there. I looked at the ceiling, feeling for all its size that I was being mocked by some mischievous imp hiding out of sight somewhere.

The six of us—Laura, myself, flanked by these three oddballs and the horse—stepped out onto an endless expanse of sand, gravel with a curious powdery texture, and jagged dunes. I should mention that the bizarre sensation of stepping inside the box was no less bizarre in reverse. As the last out, I closed the flimsy wooden door and found the object as mundane and unassuming as the ones I saw every day dotted on London street corners.

"Reg, can you believe it?" Laura asked rhetorically, her eyes wide. We were all equally struck by the landscape about us. The indigo tint to the sky told us it was alien, and the eerie emptiness made me suddenly sad. We could see for miles around and there was not a soul about; certainly no doctors. All that connected us with that grey and dreary December metropolis we had just left was that police box. I looked back at the closed door and the box, getting smaller and lower on the horizon as we walked away from it and I fought an urge to retreat back inside. Then I decided I would do nothing of the kind. Don't be such a spoilsport, Cranfield, I said to myself! Who else was ever blessed with this opportunity? Suddenly, standing out here, breathing in the unmistakably exotic air, invigorated me and stoked my desire to know and understand more.

"We're not going to just wander around this desert until we see anything suspicious?" I asked.

D84's head jerked quizzically. "I am detecting energy signatures. This way." The robot stiffly descended the dune we had parked atop, and we all followed uneasily—aside from

Daplax, whose low centre of gravity and many tentacles enabled him to navigate the terrain with ease.

“This isn’t Venus, by any chance?”

“No, no,” the creature replied heartily, warbling in an approximation of laughter. “You would find the temperature lethal and the atmosphere poisonous.”

“A cheery thought ...” I muttered ruefully as I tripped across the gravel pathway after them, feeling every bit an unwilling companion on this journey.

D84’s instincts proved correct, and as we got to lower ground we saw the top of a gently inclining pyramidal building sticking up from the sand. By the look of it, like its Earthly counterpart in Egypt, more of the structure lay buried under the sand that blew constantly around us.

The only other features of this flat part of the expanse were irregular pitted craters. There were about a dozen of them, about a yard across, but after the first one, they passed us by unnoticed. We were so uniformly awestruck that these marks seemed unimportant. What a grave misjudgement that was!

When we got to flat terrain, Sir Gawain had allowed Laura and me to ride with him on his majestic horse. It was fairly obvious we were the frailest members of this party, though as we carried on, I felt only I deserved that designation. Neither the knight nor his steed showed the slightest bit of weariness about this trek, and as I saw the robot and the green Venusian happily shuffle across the plains (the one in a curious stiff-legged gait, the other like a lifelike mould of jelly), Laura casting her fetching wide eyes around her with wonder, I felt like the lone voice of doubt about all this. As the pyramid grew larger in our sights, all I could muster was a feeling of deep apprehension.

“No pleasing me, is there?” I asked nobody in particular.

“What’s that, Reg?” Laura asked in reply.

“I was afraid when the desert was empty and now I’m afraid when there’s a sign of life.” I gave the horse’s flank an appreciative pat. “Even Tinsel here has a stronger constitution than me.”

To further twist the apprehension curdling my stomach, I heard the sound of sudden movement. It was faint under the wind, but it sounded like scraping, as if a body was moving up through the sand. I decided to ask aloud, “Did anyone else hear anything?”

“Come along, let’s keep moving,” Gawain insisted. “It’s your imagination.”

I wished I was correct, but D84 had cocked his head to one side. “The constable is correct. I am detecting underground tremors.” Were he a human, I would have guessed there was some disquiet as D84 craned his head back and forth. “I am picking up some movement ahead—”

We all jumped, and Gawain’s horse reared in terror. Two horrific iron gauntlets— with three claw-like fingers and ribbed with crude lengths of tubing—juttied suddenly from the sand and pulled the helpless robot underneath. That carved ebony face did not even look shocked, nor did the body attempt to struggle, against his attacker. He even remained tragically silent as he was dragged out of sight.

Gawain jumped off his horse and unsheathed his sword, racing toward the arms. But they were gone. Elsewhere, however, others juttied out. In the distance, a whole creature had

pulled itself to the surface—the shape of a man but riddled with pipes and carrying some kind of clunky box on its chest. I could not make out its face, as I could only see its dreadful shadow in silhouette against the violet sky. Two grotesque handles were clamped to the side of its head. Its silver claws were outstretched, and it advanced toward us.

Then another figure, and another, appeared on the desert skyline. Only now that these horrifying silver zombies were climbing out of them did I notice how many craters lay between us and the police box.

Now Gawain found himself held by a set of steel arms, and his sword uselessly clanged against them. He thrust and parried, but each blow bounced off the oblivious attacker. Another of the statue-like figures grabbed at his torso, and a horrifying inarticulate buzz filled the air. In a moment he was pulled under the sand as well.

Two more of the creatures reached to grab Daplax Mo in the same manner, but the Venusian was able to writhe free of their grip, squeezing out over their arms and then rolling expertly down the sand.

Were Gawain and D84 dead? Where had they been taken? None of us could say. But I could only heed the advice of Daplax Mo, who cried out, “To the tomb! We have no choice!”

“Tomb?” I repeated to myself.

Before waiting for our answer, he had already shuffled along the dunes and neared its great door. Laura looked in dread, and I shared it. But even Gawain’s horse would not be able to ride back the way we came without hitting one of the craters at some point, and I had never even handled a beast like this horse before, never mind being able to steer with any aptitude.

Without speaking, we both nodded and saw our best bet lay in this forbidding, half-buried pyramid. I tugged at the reins and the horse, sensing our dread and probably worried for its master, cantered sombrely toward its dark, open doorway.

III: Underground

The contrast from the sultry and sand-choked air outside to the dry cold inside the pyramid was, to be honest, refreshing. We left Gawain's poor horse outside, and the animal again seemed to be taking everything far more calmly than I was. Laura was hard to read—I kept glancing across at her to gauge my own panic in relation, and came away frustrated at her unreadable expression. Was she so blank because she was truly taking this calmly, or because it was affecting her more than she wanted to let on? I had the wind up from both possibilities—either this woman, to whom I was hopelessly devoted though I barely knew her, was an unflappable psychopath or else she was on the verge of a total nervous breakdown. Getting no joy from trying to fathom Laura's thought process, I decided, reluctantly, to instead focus on our surroundings, even though she and her well-being were the only concrete concepts I could presently hold on to.

I pulled my overcoat tighter around myself as I followed Laura deeper into the darkness. The door showed a stylised face—two circles representing eyes and a flat rectangle for a mouth—with those same two pipes jutting out. It didn't take much guessing to conclude that it was a likeness of the creatures that had attacked us outside. I laughed nervously at the sight.

"It's like a ... logo," I said to explain my reaction.

Laura laughed too, but wearily, as if to indulge me.

"Hang about!" she cried, clutching my sleeve. "Where's Daplox Mo?"

I looked around in disbelief. He had snuck away without us seeing! "What should we do, wait for him?"

"He wasn't captured, we can take some comfort in that ... we can't wait around here. I feel like something's going to grab us the moment we take a breather. I guess we'll have to see if we bump into him. Maybe he's gone to rescue Sir Gawain and D84. Maybe he knows how to, more than we do."

"That wouldn't be hard," she pointed out sardonically.

We turned back to our examination of the room. The cold was wafting from a large hatch set into the far end of this entrance. The only light in the room—aside from the

hypnotic rhythm of the flashing lights on the control bank—came from this lower level. There was no sound or movement at all. Feeling that sense of approaching attack, I decided to go to the hatch and look inside. I strained to see, but I quickly realised I would have to go inside. I didn't relish the thought of going underground, but in the moment it felt the safer choice than waiting up in that entrance.

When I climbed down, I realised why it was so silent and still.

I looked up and down to take in the vast tiers of coffins. The dark outlines of the silver machine men were visible through the transparent barriers. They looked dead.

"Some kind of tomb?" Laura whispered. We both dropped our voices in their presence—almost as if we could sense the truth about these creatures. For if they were not really alive as we were, how could they be dead and buried in here anyway?

This dreadful suspicion was confirmed when we saw several rows of the coffins empty.

Laura drew dangerously near one empty pallet, then counted up the rows and suggested what I was thinking. "If these empty spaces were occupied by the ones outside ..."

"Then the rest of them aren't dead, just sleeping," I finished. I reached to pull Laura away, but she was fired with curiosity, stepping nearer to another of the creatures. I didn't want her to get seized and dragged away like the others.

Its head bobbed up and down, and thankfully these slight movements were enough to do what I had failed, and to pull Laura back.

Our nerves already brittle, we both exhaled in fright at the stentorian voice calling from behind the tomb, as crisp and frigid as the refrigerated air: "What are you doing here?"

Wherever this new arrival had come from, he now stood before us with a look of petulant resentment at our presence. He was slightly shorter and younger than myself, with thin straw-coloured hair and a matching moustache. His upper-class English accent and his donnish clothing of oatmeal tweed Ulster and jodhpurs were another moment of perverse and parochial dislocation in this gleaming, high-tech alien environment.

"It's very dangerous down here, you know!" the man barked. "These Cybermen could wake up any moment."

"You think we don't know that?" Laura irritably shot back. "Some of them already *have* woken up."

"Eh?"

"We were attacked outside. We're in here to find our friends."

"One of them's a Venusian," I added unhelpfully. "Difficult to miss."

"That is worrying to hear." Now he was putting on a pair of gold-rimmed *pince-nez*, and as if his manner could get no more affected, putting his hands on his hips as he looked us up and down like lab specimens. "Tell me more about yourselves. How the blazes did you get here? To this planet, I mean? You're from the Earth planet, aren't you?"

"You aren't Doctor ..." I began, before realising I had no clue about the infernal doctor's name, let alone his appearance.

"Oh, you're friends of *his*," the blond man replied haughtily. Before we could correct him, he muttered disapprovingly, "That explains it. Always picking up stray Earthlings. No, I'm not the Doctor. Think of me as ... a colleague. The Waiter."

"Oh, that's good. We could both do with a drink," I quipped out of reflex.

I was pleased that Laura laughed, and almost as pleased that the Waiter rolled his eyes.

"I mean it's my job to wait," he clarified, "*in situ* until ... my superiors, shall we say, make a decision. As a matter of fact, the matter concerns the Doctor. As far as we can tell, the dozy old buffer has got himself into some fairly deep trouble."

"But he is here?" Laura asked hopefully.

"Oh yes ..."

She and I both felt a profound shared relief at this off-hand admission.

"And what are Cyber-men?" I asked.

"Parasitic cyborg race—machine-men, you would call them—with desires to aggressively colonise organic life. This is Telos ... their tomb. But they're not the only danger you have to worry about ..."

His glee at telling us this fact seemed deeply unsavoury, and the thought we might get away was only slightly tempered by the fact that this difficult pedant happened to be standing between ourselves and our escape.

The Waiter was stammering his way through more explanations when we heard swift footsteps on the far side of the tomb. "Daplax!" I whirled around to see not the Venusian, but a woman's leg vanish from view down a tunnel. At the same time, one of the transparent barriers sliced open and a giant mechanical man staggered out.

It surveyed us pitilessly, and face to face—if its sightless metal helmet could be called a face—I saw the horrible blank parody of features I had seen on that logo above: two slate circles for eyes and a rectangular panel at its mouth. The mouth panel slid sideways. An inarticulate buzzing eventually resolved into, "*We are Cybermen. This is the tomb of the Cybermen. You are our prisoners. You will come with us.*"

"You've woken the rest of them up!" the Waiter shrieked.

"How?" I asked incredulously.

Laura had more sense than we did, and wasted no time running to the ladder, but before she could reach it, with a swift clunk, the hatch at the top swung shut. The tomb around us seemed to grow several degrees colder, and the air closer, the moment it happened.

"*Take them to the others.*"

"Run, Laura! Anywhere, just get away!" I cried at the top of my lungs. I felt the vicious swipe of a metal claw brush my hair as I ducked from the reach of the nearest Cyberman.

All this while the Waiter had stood rooted to the spot, his hands fluttering ineffectually. Two other Cybermen were marching toward him. A blast of energy fizzed from a circular lamp affixed to its iron skull; the crackling sound seemed to galvanise him into action, causing him to fling his spindly form over the railing. Landing painfully against the icy floor and sliding some distance, he went for the same doorway through which he had come. Laura was at least safely behind him.

I, however, found myself firmly pinioned between two of the monsters.

"*Why do you resist?*" one asked wearily.

"*We do not wish you to suffer,*" the other added with equal disinterest.

They unclipped weapons from a holder in the accordion-like assembly on their chest and pointed them my way. "*Come willingly.*"

"Where will you take me?"

"*You will be like us.*"

I felt faint as I heard the crackle of brilliant electricity and the equally brilliant light bathe the room. The two Cybermen collapsed to the floor lifelessly—if they were ever alive to begin with.

Behind them, holding a larger version of the pistols the Cybermen held, was a plainly dressed woman in her mid-seventies with black curled hair. I felt, oddly, that I had seen her somewhere before.

“Who are you?” I could not help the trace of a whine in the inquiry. “You were in the Doctor’s spaceship, weren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“You landed us here, didn’t you?” I continued, trying to restrain my bitterness.

“Right again. But I’ve no time to explain all that.”

She was right. Around us on this gantry, other Cybermen were thrashing about in their pallets. She jumped athletically over the railing, and I more gingerly followed. I had done adequately in my physical training, and make no mistake, I was able to overpower the occasional lone looter or ne’er-do-well, but this was pushing my physical stamina to its limit. I envied this older woman’s effortless command of the situation. So pleased was I to be out of danger that I didn’t stop to think that we were going deeper into it, headed down these tunnels. And that shifty blond fellow had taken Laura down an entirely different path.

As I raced for my life down the smooth glassy ice of these passages, my shoes sliding on the path and painfully cold air entering my lungs too fast, this separation from Laura made me feel no joy at still being alive. I had landed less than an hour ago, and I was entirely alone. And this older woman beside me—so calm in the face of this madness, that I doubted she was any more human than that foppish Waiter who had run off with dear Laura Clifford—pulling me into the unknown made me feel that loneliness more, not less.

After what felt like miles of this running, she pulled a narrow tube from her pocket and pressed it against the wall. A heavy metal door slammed shut.

She indicated an outcropping in the rock. “Catch your breath. You humans aren’t used to these temperatures.”

“More aliens,” I muttered as I accepted her offer. “But what about ...”

“Well, catch your breath as quickly as you can,” she replied tersely. “And we should be able to find our friends, and Gra—” She broke off. “And the Doctor as well.”

“Who the blazes are you? How did you get into that flying police box?”

“It used to be my home,” she replied wistfully.

I realised where I had seen her before, and why I had not recognised her. It was in that school photo Laura showed me. She was about sixty years younger. I felt dizzy putting the pieces together. It was a time machine, this doctor we were looking for had a granddaughter named Susan Foreman ... I reeled to consider it, but it clicked in my mind, despite how incredible it was to even contemplate. “You’re her, aren’t you? Susan, a few decades later ... travelled back in time to the year you left in the TARDIS.” I felt breathless as I spat it out, the details spinning in my mind. She merely nodded at its end. “But if you’ll pardon me ... if he’s your grandfather ... and I say this with all due respect, ma’am, but won’t he be a little old?”

“He used to be, but he got younger as the centuries went by.” She gave me a feline smile. “Our people are a little hardier than you humans.”

“Don’t rub it in,” I said, clutching my painful chest as I rose unsteadily. I hardly felt like going on but waiting around here was greater agony. I instantly regretted the time we had wasted when two squat, troll-like aliens in black armour leapt out in front of us.

“Stone the crows!” I cried. “What the blazes—?”

The troll stuck out its tongue at me, and in a low and cruel voice, declared, “You may have evaded the Cybermen, but you will find we Sontarans cannot be so easily overcome. Lower your weapon.” It and its colleague pulled stubby cigar-shaped weapons from their holsters.

Susan obliged, tossing the large laser rifle to the ground.

“Two human prisoners to add to our collection.”

“I’m no human,” Susan informed the troll snobbishly. “You may be interested to know who my grandfather is.”

“Ah, a prize indeed ...” A sadistic smile stretched across the tuber-coloured face. “You will be pleased to know that under Sontaran articles of war, you have no rights whatever.”

Then a streak of green propelled from a hidden corner of the ice. It was Daplax Mo! He stretched his entire rubbery body around one of the Sontarans, while his tentacle cracked like a whip to disarm the other.

“The back of the neck!” Susan cried, giving the warrior at her feet a crack in that spot with its own pistol.

Daplax and the Sontaran struggled, and with all my strength, I punched the small circular nodule on the other warrior. “The probic vent,” Susan explained.

“Handy to know.” She and Daplax confiscated the Sontarans’ weapons and grabbed the discarded Cyberman laser. “Does your grandfather know you’re so violent?” I asked her with my best constabulary disapproval.

“He’d be very disappointed, but life is a bit rough in the twenty-second century.”

Susan briskly carried on and the three of us reached a sudden, steep incline.

“We’re coming on the old Cryon cities, which the Cybermen built their tombs on top of,” she whispered. “There aren’t many Cryons or Cybermen left these days, but the ones that are left ...”

“You don’t have to tell me twice. That shifty chap, the Waiter, is he an alien like you?”

She nodded.

“And what about Daplax Mo and the others? Are they really friends of your grandfather?”

She looked at the Venusian and nodded again. “He gets around a lot. It’s how he got into this mess.” Her eyes narrowed furiously ahead. “They’ve assembled quite a welcome for Grandfather. Why don’t you see for yourself?”

About fifty feet of sheer ice below us, there was a strange jury-rigged lash-up. On a table lay Sir Gawain, unconscious and unwell—I felt the most rage to see, lying next to him, D84’s head wrenched from the padded body and carelessly stuck on a nearby table, cables from it plugged in to nearby computer consoles. Huddled around the helpless group was a line-up of nightmarish alien creatures: green-scaled armour-plated crocodilians, gigantic fish-like creatures grinning ghoulishly, bat-like monstrosities with four eyes. Floating in the air above them were scales of polished silver, crinkling in the cold underground air. They stood somewhat awkwardly among each other, clearly unaccustomed to being together.

An orange, baby-faced creature whose flesh was puckered with horrific barnacles balled one hand within another, enjoying the sound of his rasping whispering voice as much

as the torture. “To think, we Zygons have been party to a greater universal coup than even the Daleks could manage. Through these pitiful beings we will gain our way to ridding our scourge, the Doctor!”

“You alone could not have done it, Zygon ...” hissed the scaly green creature.

“I never said I could, Ice Warrior,” the Zygon retorted. “Despite your slovenly tactics, even you have your part to play ...”

“Enough bickering,” a red-eyed tree-like creature against a far wall rasped. “Why are we kept waiting while the Doctor is held elsewhere? I begin to doubt our hosts’ sincerity.”

Daplax instinctively moved forward, but Susan’s hand held it back.

“We must help,” the Venusian rasped.

“We must not,” she insisted.

“Are you mad?” I hissed. “Daplax is right. They’re killing those poor people! Looks like the robot’s already had it.”

She flashed another mysterious smile. “We have to trust them to fend for themselves. Gawain is no ordinary knight ...”

“And that poor robot’s head?”

“Can be reattached, and its removal bought critical time for us. While they’re keeping the rogues’ gallery occupied, we can move toward Grandfather.”

She crept cautiously along the shelf of solid ice. My boots slid as I followed, and each tentative step I prayed they wouldn’t squeak, or worse, slip, causing me to move and these nightmarish creatures to catch sight of me. Susan seemed to have a ballerina’s poise, and Daplax Mo, with that same eerie grace I had seen earlier that must come from martial arts training, pitched forward and shuffled along the ice.

She then stopped in her tracks, and Daplax dug its tentacles in. I wondered what was the matter. She appeared more unsettled by what she saw ahead than any of the oddities we had encountered thus far.

I couldn’t understand why. Two tall men had stepped from a low ice-hewn structure built into the face of the cavern. The man on the left had snowy hair and wore a velvet smoking jacket with a frilly shirt. The man on the right had dark curled hair and wore a dark maroon coat and a long scarf doubled over his neck—the same garment I saw unravelling inside the police box. Their curly hair and enormous noses suggested they might be relations—more Time Lords, I speculated.

Then the man on the left spoke, and I realised *which* Time Lord. “Susan ... surely it’s Susan.”

“It’s me, Susan,” his friend said in a low booming voice. He smiled, revealing teeth to match the nose. “You found me. Well done.”

Daplax shrugged and made to shuffle forward. “What is it, Susan? Surely you recognise your grandfather when you see him.”

Susan firmly outstretched her arm, barring our passage.

“Now, Susan,” the fancy-dressed man scolded. “Don’t let’s be childish about this. It’s me. Who else could it be?”

“Who else indeed?” she asked him rhetorically. “Follow you that way, I assume.” She gestured suspiciously down the dark side tunnel from which the pair emerged.

“That’s the idea,” the curly-haired man confirmed with a nod. “If you can’t trust us, Susan, who can you trust? Or should that be whom?”

“What about him?” she asked, pointing to Daplax and me. “If it’s really you, and you sent for these friends, you must know their names. Tell me who they are.”

“Be reasonable, Susan,” the older man said severely. “We don’t have time for parlour games.”

“We certainly don’t. So answer me, who are they?”

The older man lurched forward, and Susan pressed us all against the ledge of ice. He lost his footing and tumbled below. As his body cracked against the ice, the face fell off—revealing nothing but a porcelain-like mask, with wires and circuits and two now sightless eyes staring out.

“A robot,” the man with the scarf noted. “Manufactured by the Kraals, I shouldn’t wonder. Never could keep their heads on straight. They once made a rather fetching likeness of this face as well.”

“And so did you ... Meglos.”

And before my eyes the face sprouted horrific spines and the skin turned a vivid, sickly green. The horrible creature lunged toward us, before Susan kicked it backward into the darkness. When I next looked in, it had lost the remnants of the Doctor’s form, and was nothing but a shambling heap of obscene vegetable matter.

“As if I wouldn’t recognise my grandfather.”

“Which one—?”

“They both were.”

I raised my eyebrows at Daplax. “Ask a silly question.”

Susan did not wait for the mass to pull itself back together, instead pushing us along the ledge to surer footing.

It seemed like a long time passed before we saw a glowing hut that stood out against the landscape. We stepped inside, ever cautiously.

The only light was a square screen dead ahead, at the centre of another bizarre control panel. This one looked totally unlike the Cybermen’s work—cruder, uglier, and messier, like it had been crafted out of stone and ice. The frigid blue glowing within it seemed like some kind of enchantment. Behind this, a figure sat at a gnarled throne-like chair, stroking at his chin thoughtfully.

On the screen was a black-and-white image of a black-and-white man—drawn face framed by long white hair, attired in funereal black Victorian garb. Susan’s eyes widened, and I knew at once this was her grandfather.

The only sounds in the chamber were coming from the screen. A mechanical voice rasped malevolently, “*We are the masters of Earth ...*”

The old man chuckled contemptuously at the squat, domed creature issuing this melodramatic boast, his voice crackling as if the image was ancient. “Masters of Earth? You poor pathetic creature, in order to be the masters of Earth you would have to destroy all living matter ...”

Susan clicked a latch on top of the weapon in her hand and levelled it at the back of the throne. “Where is he? Why have you kidnapped him?”

The person who rose from the chair seemed the most normal person I’d seen since I left the police station in 1963. She looked about ten years older than Susan, with short-cropped grey hair and an elfin face whose smirk, under the circumstances, was untrustworthy. She wore a plain blue twinset.

“Your grandfather, eh?” she asked. “You must be Susan. How touching that you came for him, along with all his friends... but the purpose of my trap for the Doctor here was not to speak with you, but with his ...” Her face twisted in an unsettling smile. “...I should say, with *your* people.”

At that point I became horrifically aware that two others had entered this creepy sanctum, and I knew who they were. My mind raced the same way it had when I figured out Susan’s identity, and so I was utterly un-surprised to turn and see the Waiter, Laura standing beside him looking on in helpless horror.

The little woman bowed to the Waiter. “Thank you for gracing us with your presence, Time Lord. You understand what we Preservers are proposing?”

“What are Preservers?” I asked him. “And what *are* they proposing?”

My questioning must have been a tad harsh, because the Waiter took a step back indignantly. “There’s no need to take that tone with me, young man.” The Waiter’s pale moustache twitched in the darkness. “Let’s see the Doctor first.”

The lady in the twinset—this Preserver—grinned malevolently. Her eyes widened and she looked squarely at me, and I shrunk in the face of her gaze. “To answer your question, young man, our proposal is nothing sinister. We want to restore order to the universe,” she informed me, her voice maternal and warm. “And we’re quite adamant in our belief that everything would work a lot better without the Doctor.”

IV: A Cosmos without the Doctor...

“Without my grandfather?” Susan cried. “But, I suppose, with all those tyrants and butchers outside?”

“Call it a proof of concept,” the Preserver told her. “The Time Lords wouldn’t come unless a few of the Doctor’s enemies were here to confirm the validity of the trap.”

“It’s true,” the Waiter admitted. “Consider me ... intrigued.”

“How can you even think—?”

“With all due respect, Susan,” the Waiter sneered, “you lost the right to have an opinion when you and your grandfather renounced our society and our values.”

“We didn’t make that decision lightly,” Susan replied, her voice choking with emotion. “Surely you know we had our reasons for leaving our home planet.”

“What I know or don’t know is irrelevant. We’ve long searched for a way to curb the Doctor’s interfering nature. Official Time Lord policy is to withdraw from galactic affairs. That lot outside, the Daleks, Catavolcus, the Guardians and the Eternals on the higher plains ... it’s a dangerous cosmos. And as much as the Doctor tells us he alone can combat those dangers, we have a responsibility to temporal stability to consider all options.”

“And we Preservers wish to simplify this conflict. We could be useful to each other, could we not?”

All this sounded like Swahili to me. I looked from one mad alien to the other, and all I knew was whatever was decided would have very little to do with my welfare, or the welfare of anyone like me. Never had I felt so powerless and insignificant, knowing that I was just another kind of alien and my planet and my thoughts probably amounted to less than those overgrown lizards and troll-people who were even now torturing my friends.

I didn’t know which of the pair to distrust the more, but the Waiter, with his apparently benevolent manner concealing that calculating look he gave everything around him, seemed worse in this light. He was some kind of colleague of the Doctor, and yet the poor Doctor couldn’t count on him lending any kind of help.

That left it up to me, I thought. If it weren’t so depressing a thought, I’d have laughed out loud.

“Why don’t you let me talk to the old chap?” the Waiter suggested. “Time Lord to Time Lord.”

“He’s *my* grandfather!” Susan cried.

“Let’s sort out the business end first, eh my dear?” he simpered.

“Very well. The Doctor can be found through here.” The Preserver beckoned him into another chamber.

Amid their lofty discussion, I more or less had the run of the place. I suppose it was like an ant crawling around while two exterminators discussed the best way to fumigate. If only I could see something ...

The Preserver and the Waiter stopped in their tracks. The room they entered had in its centre a medical-style pallet like the one Gawain and D84 were trapped inside. This one was more recessed and had various awful-looking tools hanging down from the ceiling. It was like a space-age dentist’s torture chamber, from where I stood.

But the pallet was empty. It was clearly where the Doctor had been trapped, I could tell from the confused and horrified glances they shot each other.

“Looking for someone?” a low honeyed voice growled, lacquered with a hint of mockery.

Predictably, they whirled on the spot, as did the rest of us. Across the room, standing by their control panel, was a tall man. He wore a vibrant green overcoat and a maroon turtleneck cable-knit sweater, thick and woollen. His hands were in the pockets of his dark trousers and he leaned causally against the jutting beam of ice. Did I see something that reminded me of the old man on the screen, or the two imposters we had tangled with a little while earlier, or that little Scotsman in the snow back in 1963? I feel like I did, but only when Susan crossed the room and flung her arms around the young man with a cry of, “Grandfather!” did I dare to put it together.

“*You’re* the Doctor?” I asked, once I had picked my jaw up off the floor.

“I’d recognise him anywhere,” Susan said. “Whatever face he wears.”

I pointed from him to her. “But you’re younger than she is! And you don’t look anything like that old man on the screen, or the two blokes outside ... not to mention you’re ... well, your skin ...”

The Doctor slapped his dark cheek, and then cheekily slapped mine. “What about my skin? It’s a big cosmos you know. You must learn to broaden your horizons, old chap. I happen to be a twenty-three-hundred-year-old Time Lord, you know, so I can look as young or as Black or as fit as I like!” He snapped his fingers. “Haven’t we met before? Constable Reg Cranfield, isn’t it? How nice to see you again!”

“Again?”

He shook my hand gregariously. “I owe you and your fellow teacher my thanks for gathering Susan and everyone else together. Ah, Susan, remember that first trip with those schoolteachers of yours?” As the Doctor smiled, I saw the glimmers of a much older—indeed possibly ageless—alien entity behind the earthly exterior.

“Teachers?” Laura, who had otherwise observed all this in horrified silence, stepped forward. “Miss Wright and Mister Chesterton? You abducted them?”

“No! Well, not exactly ... well, I suppose they were a bit unconvinced at first ...”

“That’s a bit of an understatement,” Susan interjected with a smirk.

“But I was a bit paranoid back then. I had my reasons.” The Doctor waved us both silent with a hint of elderly irritation, and crossed over to the Waiter and the Preserver.

“Largely to do with being a fugitive, on the run from my own people, and worried about them catching up with me at any moment. But you know all about that, don’t you?”

“Well, yes, but now isn’t the time to go into all that, is it Doctor?”

The Doctor looked between his fellow Time Lord and the diminutive lady. “As for you two ... you have some explaining to do.”

The woman straightened her twinset and drew level with the Doctor. “You’ll have to do better than that. All your greatest enemies are lined up outside that door, eager to see me undo your timeline. I don’t fancy your chances defeating them all at the same time.”

The Doctor tapped his chin. “I wonder if I didn’t anticipate your obvious little trap, Preserver. Perhaps give some of my allies the ability to rescue me and get me out of trouble when I needed it, eh?”

I jumped as three figures entered this chamber: the Doctor’s three friends from across history, Sir Gawain, and D84—his head reattached, but somewhat comically facing the wrong way. His oblivious calm rendered the sight both reassuring and faintly amusing.

“Just as you said, Doctor,” Gawain said confidently. “We had them right where we wanted them.”

“And all eyes, including the Waiter’s, were on these two humans from 1963,” Sir Gawain concluded, clapping his arm on my shoulder.

“As you expected, the Cybermen were only too eager to upload my memory banks into their central data core. My programming has corrupted them, Doctor,” D84 informed him calmly. “Their army will be unable to revive themselves. They are trapped in their tombs. The Cryons will be able to retake their home.”

The Doctor nodded with cold satisfaction.

“And none of them, not even the Vardans, were able to get through my modified armour,” Gawain said proudly, twirling his sabre proudly.

The Doctor rounded on the Waiter and the Preserver. “Which just leaves you two.”

The small woman splayed her bony fingers, and to my surprise and horror, a bolt of brilliant light poured from it right at me. I was racked by it, gripped with a strange kind of pain. It was physically painful, I suppose, but I didn’t feel it as strongly as some other injuries I’d sustained in my years as a copper. Instead, the worse part seemed to burrow into my psyche. I saw myself in a routine day, but there was a screen separating me from myself. I saw myself through her—through *its*—eyes, I imagined, and I never felt smaller or less significant. That loneliness that Laura Clifford had broken, that wearing down by my mundane days in London—I saw it for what it was.

I looked through the vision to focus on Laura. If I dropped now, I had no guarantee she would get away from here. And it was her grip I felt that brought me back to the reality of this strange underground standoff. She had somehow held back the Preserver’s psychic attack.

I got my breath back, the icy underground air refreshing after that suffocating dream world I had seen. I saw Laura’s brown eyes filling my sight. “Are you all right?”

The Doctor loomed over her head and helped us both to our feet. “All very touching.” He whirled back around, and the Preserver looked smaller and more troubled as he rounded on her. “Nice try, getting on my bad side by torturing me, then getting your ghoulish friends to have a go at Sir Gawain and D84, and then giving poor Cranfield here a shock. And you!” He pointed to the Waiter, who affected to be looking elsewhere. “Practicing your usual feckless creed of non-interference, I assume?”

“Doctor,” the Preserver said coldly. “Whether you wish to confront it or not, your discontinuous and disharmonious existence is a threat to the order of the universe as we see it.” She looked across at the Waiter. “Your people see it the same way.”

“Huh! Hardly surprising. My people would see a lifeboat coming from a sinking ship as threat to the natural process of death by drowning.” His nostrils flared at the Waiter. “You seem to be a prized example of the type. I’ve been exiled, and tried, and hunted by my people, and yet the universe *still* needs my help, so you’ll forgive me if I take your advice with a pinch of salt.”

“Perhaps we don’t want to give you a choice anymore!” The Waiter pulled a clunky spherical object from the pocket of his Ulster. The Doctor swiftly tripped him up, causing the sphere to spill from his hands and roll across the icy floor. His intense eyes followed its path over to me, then looked up at me, and I knew at once I had to get it.

The Preserver was at this point drifting in and out of her petite mundane form, revealing a faceless flickering creature, her transparent glassy skin backlit with sparking flashes of that eerie lightning. She was floating near to Laura. Laura had helped me; would I be able to do the same for her?

I held the sphere in my hand and looked around.

“You’re a cricketer, aren’t you? Fast bowler, if I remember ...” the Doctor asked.

“How did you—” Then I remembered the short Scotsman with the straw hat and the umbrella I’d met that horrible night in early December, and another ridiculous leap of my mind filled in a gap. *Another* Doctor! Counting the two impersonators, that made at least five ... how many other faces did the fellow have, I wondered? I shook my head and returned my focus to the present. “Where?”

He pointed furiously back at the control panel in the other room. It was a small spot, a good twenty yards away. I didn’t know how exact my bowling was, but I took a deep breath and tried not to over-think it!

The ball sailed through the air and hit the darkly glowing blue panels under the box. At first I thought I’d gone terribly wrong. Dark blue sparks spat from the stonework. As they sailed past I felt curiously immobile, but they were getting nearer and nearer. It was only when Laura lunged at me, pushing me over and causing us both to slide several yards down the icy path while a dark blue bolt streaked overhead that I was brought back into the present.

“That’s twice I’ve saved you, and only once you saved me,” she noted. “You owe me one.”

“You’re on.”

We looked up to see the blue gap widen. It was a solid wall of the brightest and yet darkest light I’d ever seen. It wrapped around the Preserver, and like a moth she flew to it. She was as helpless as I was, I realised, standing in front of that gap. What had I seen there? What had she? What drew us in, and what really lurked beyond?

Whatever it was, we wouldn’t find out. As the Preserver flew furiously through the gap, she wailed, “Continuity! Our glorious Project cannot end! Continuity must be preserved! This above all else ...”

The Doctor watched her depart, then looked down at the machinery thoughtfully for a few moments. Susan touched his arm. “What is it, Grandfather?”

“I wonder ... they may have got a little farther with this than it seems ... it could still threaten me in the future.” He clapped his hands together. “Still! I’ll have to deal with that as

it happens. One thing at a time—it seems to be a lesson I still find hard to learn. Come along then, I think we should have a chat with the Cryons and then head off.”

The chambers were all empty, so Ice Warriors and Sontarans and Zygons and the rest must have run away while the going was good. We passed back up to the surface, where two more elfin creatures with long nails were tending to Sir Gawain’s unflappable horse.

“The visitors have gone?” the lead Cryon asked the Doctor.

He nodded. “And the Cybermen shouldn’t give you any more trouble. With any luck they’ll decompose naturally in their deactivated tomb. Try not to fiddle with it, though, eh? For the universe’s sake.”

He still had the Waiter by the scruff of his neck. The Time Lord twisted in his grip, and in a high-pitched wheedling voice, said, “Doctor, we had to investigate the possibility of solutions to universal disorder. I hope there are no hard feelings—”

The Doctor pulled the Waiter closer and gritted his teeth. “If you’re going back to Gallifrey, would you do me a favour?”

“Anything!”

“Tell them to leave me alone. There’s a good chap.”

He pushed the Waiter away into the sand and began walking back to the TARDIS with Susan by his side. The rest of us followed, a little shell-shocked and shaken.

It took a little while to get everyone back home. The Doctor had to screw D84’s head on the right way for a start, and Sir Gawain’s era in history was hard to get to—something about a ‘crossroads in time where one dimension meets the other’. I didn’t understand any of it, but I wrote it down in case anyone reading this might.

By the end of it, we were back in 1963. It looked to still be December. I wondered if I had missed any of those awful pre-Christmas shifts the Sergeant gave me. It was a different day than the close and foggy night we had left. A fresh festive blanket of snow covered the streets. In the distance the police station and to the east Coal Hill Secondary School could be seen.

I held Laura tightly as we stepped out of the police box for the last time.

“So Mr. Wright and Mr. Chesterton are all right?” Laura asked the Doctor.

He nodded emphatically. “They end up just fine.”

“And where are you off to next, Doctor?”

He looked off into the sky. “Well, I must get back to my friend Maggie in the 1990s ...” His head dropped and he flung his arm around Susan’s shoulder. It was still the weirdest concept to wrap my head around that this young fellow was centuries older than she was, than all of us were! He continued, “But first, I have some long-overdue family time to catch up on.”

He and Susan smiled at each other, and I could see they had been separated for a long time.

“Best of luck to you two!” Susan called out. They shut the door, and the streets were filled with that horrendous roaring sound. The police box faded into thin air, and nobody except Laura and I even noticed.

Strange as it may seem, after all this excitement I had a lot of mundane business to take care of. The next few days were all paperwork, and I'd only just put the pile in my 'out' tray when I had to catch my train to spend Christmas with my family. It took me some time to return to the moment, if you catch my meaning. At first I seemed to be watching myself from above, like I was still stuck behind that Preserver's barrier. Thankfully, it didn't last long. Even better, the visit seemed to do Dad the world of good.

When I came back to work, I was counting down the days until school got back. I had a lot to say to Laura Clifford.

On that first day, I stood by the gate, a bunch of flowers in my hand. The children filed past, a few giving me funny looks. I suppose it isn't every day you see a policeman holding flowers, fidgeting on the spot, and generally looking like a lovestruck teenager. The teachers went past as well, and I looked through them fastidiously but never saw the one I was after.

Then a young girl, apart from the rest, tapped me on the shoulder. "Are you Constable Cranfield?" she asked self-consciously, fairly confident of the answer. "The acting headmaster, Mrs. Campbell, wants to see you. It's about your friend."

I swallowed and ran past the girl into the school. It had the same empty hostility it possessed that day I walked around it with Laura. It really felt like going through a haunted house.

I entered the teachers' lounge, and saw a woman in an office, sitting with her back to me. I inferred it must be Mrs. Campbell, the headmistress. I wondered if there was one last surprise in store. There was—but I had no idea what until she swivelled to face me as I walked in.

It was Susan.

She smiled. "Hello again Reg! It's been a while ... for me anyway."

"More time travel?"

She gave a tight nod. "Why don't you take a seat?"

I stayed standing, looking self-consciously down at my flowers. "Is everything all right?"

"Laura didn't come back after the break. She's taken a teaching post at a finishing school overseas."

I nodded, feeling unsteady on my feet but not wanting to show it. At this point I decided to take that seat after all.

"She wanted to tell you face to face but ... not everyone's suited to ... that life we lead. She needed a total change. It was either that or a total breakdown."

I nodded.

"Don't take it too hard. I was like Laura myself. That's why I left Grandfather on his own. Sometimes I wondered if I let him down." She blinked, distracted, but shook away the speculation. "But anyway, back to Laura. She cared a lot about you, but she couldn't ... square things in this life with those experiences."

I understood it. I thought of my own dislocation, of that barrier between me and myself. It was more than just a trick of the Preserver, I realised—it was something real, something that can easily take you away from your life and self and make you a passenger standing off to the side when you should be up in the front, taking action. I supposed if Laura couldn't get past that, it would have been unbearable. But I still couldn't believe that after all she'd done—getting me roped into all this in the first place!—she left like this.

"She couldn't even say goodbye?" I asked bitterly.

"It's hard for the school too. Good teachers are hard to find."

"Why did you impersonate Bridget Campbell?"

"Ian and Barbara eventually return in 1965. In the meantime, I had to smooth over the cracks of their disappearance, so they still had jobs to return to and lives to take part in. It was difficult getting back here from the twenty-second century ..." She shook her head. "All that's a story for another time. Anyway, Grandfather wanted to thank you for the part you played in saving his life."

"What did I do anyway?" None of that meant anything anymore. Without Laura in my life, the mystery was hollow and pointless.

"If it weren't for that throw ..."

"Sure. What a hero I am."

"Look, Constable, I know this is hard."

"Hard! I don't want some alien congratulating me. I wanted ... well, she was the only reason I got mixed up in any of it."

"That's life, old chap!"

I froze at the familiar sound of the Doctor's deep voice. I turned and regarded the young man—still wearing that long green magician's coat but with a gaudy orange fisherman's sweater today—with undisguised hostility.

"Is that life?" I asked him. "What do you know about life anyway? You, who can be an old man when he's younger, then be Scottish one day, then change his skin colour the next, and look thirty when your granddaughter looks in her seventies ..." I broke down, not holding back the tears rolling down my cheeks. "I never had a chance, never got to tell her anything ..."

He pressed my shoulder. "I could tell you you'll be very happy in the end, Reg. Would that make you feel better?"

"No."

"Tough. Because you will, you know."

"Do I meet Laura again?"

"That would be telling, Reg. But before all that ..." He chuckled, self-deprecatingly. "If you have time, that is, I thought you deserved a little treat. January is so dismal in London. How about a trip to the future? No strings attached, no deadly monsters. To thank you for saving my life."

THE END

Closing Remarks By Hamish Crawford

I'm sure, gentle reader, like me you turned over that last page and said out loud, "The End?"

I put down the manuscript and stared out at the churning seas off the coast of Vancouver Island. I knew how they felt.

What would I tell Bob and Richard? This whole thing must have been a hoax of some kind! A mean-spirited joke! No doubt Natasha Lalonde was cackling away at having pulled out legs.

I reread this manuscript and opened up my email again. Nothing from Bob or Richard, but there was a new message from Natasha. The subject line was 'OPEN AFTER READING GRANDDAD'S STORY'. A little bitterly, I opened it up:

Here are some pictures taken last Christmas. I couldn't show them to you until you'd read it (and you'll appreciate Grandad now seeing the irony of how shocked he was at the Doctor looking so much younger than Susan!).

Cheers,

N

There were about ten .jpeg images attached. I opened them. There was a pretty, dark-haired woman in her sitting room—Natasha, I reasoned. Standing beside her was a young man—*younger than she was*—in a 1960s-era uniform of the London Metropolitan Police.

It had to be another hoax, I thought. I'd only seen those uniforms in old movies and TV shows. It would be easy enough to mock one up. A little ridiculous to go to all that trouble to pull a prank on an assistant editor of *The Doctor Who Project*, but nevertheless, there was no other logical explanation.

I studied the picture closely. There was something about the man that looked out of time, I had to admit. People in old pictures have old faces, and this man's face was like that—

a rugged, well-worn look of a man who was in his twenties in 1963, which looks considerably different than a man of twenty in 2023.

I stared at the face for a long time, blowing it up on my laptop to look for other clues. But I couldn't buy it. There were people who had those old faces—our fraudulent friend Natasha planned this little stunt to perfection.

I wasn't going to be fooled, I resolved. I planned to write Bob an email expressing my regret that we couldn't publish this story, and forget all about Reg Cranfield and Natasha Lalonde.

Then my email pinged again. The subject line this time was, infuriatingly, 'THIS SHOULD CONVINCEN YOU'.

Since Grandad knew you wouldn't be convinced, he had one last thing to tell you—or rather show you. It may sound crazy (as if the rest of this hasn't!). He told me you would be making your finishing touches to his manuscript on the 23rd of November, at around 5:15pm. So he told me to tell you to step out onto your balcony (no, I don't know why either!).

Let me know what you see!

Cheers,
N

I checked my watch. It had just turned 5:14. Gripped with an eerie feeling, I shut the lid of my laptop and stepped out onto my deck. Ahead of me, the Inner Harbour of Victoria was still churning away, but the overall day was sultry and muggy. A blanket of grey had descended unexpectedly on the summer skies.

I looked around, out to sea, and up at the sky, for some time, feeling I was the victim of one last prank. No doubt I would write back and Natasha would be laughing as she noted that he 'had a feeling' I might fall for it.

Nothing was going on outside. I couldn't believe I fell for it twice. As I was turning back inside, I saw an unusual sight out of the corner of my eye on Huron Street. My eye was drawn to a tall shape that was not usually there. Next to the Canada Post mailboxes, contrasting to their bright red with dark blue, there suddenly stood a police box, its lamp still flashing. It must have just materialised! I ran to the edge of the deck, straining over the side to get a closer look. I made out two men stepping out its door: a tall, dark-skinned man with closely cropped black hair and a long brilliant green greatcoat, and a younger, wide-eyed pale man in the uniform of a British police constable. It was the same man from the pictures with Natasha.

They waved at me.

Dizzy from the absurdity of the moment, I waved back, hoping they would see my wide, childish grin.

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