

THE
DOCTOR WHO
PROJECT

MOAB



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PROLOGUE

INVASION ON A THURSDAY AFTERNOON

If chaos and energy ever got together to plan to flatten the universe to so much rubble, then they would probably meet up on rain-swept Thursday afternoons in October. If they could create ideal minions to carry out the indiscriminate destruction, they would probably devise creatures like the Varanost: seven feet tall, with bodies of almost granite-textured purple scales, their space-tolerant armour adorned with the furs of dead animals or limbs of the vanquished. The Varanost would be imposing enough to make the average Terran lose bowel control on sight and lose consciousness with fear soon after. However, since their mouths are full of needle-sharp teeth, and their four arms each tend to wave sharp swords above their heads, their victims tend not to have time for even those reactions. Twenty thousand of them pouring out of invasion ships landed in the middle of a small northern English cathedral town is not a sight anyone wants to wake up to.

For the people of Durham, this Thursday afternoon in October is not going to be their best day ever...

Carl was woken up by the grating bark of the neighbour's pit-bull, Donald. He wondered if the wretched beast had finally achieved his long-held ambition of executing the cat from across the way.

"Someone ought to shoot the bloody thing," he grumbled to himself as he tried to get back to sleep. It was never easy to work a night shift, and he knew the noises of the day in this congested part of town would never allow him a full eight hours of sleep. One day it was Donald menacing the mailmen, the next it was car alarms going off, another

time neighbours' domestic disputes, or police sirens ... Carl wished he could move somewhere quieter, but the night shift barely allowed him to pay the rent on this place, never mind move.

Suddenly Donald stopped barking. Carl doubted he could have killed the charmless pit-bull by the power of thought alone, and reasoned it was more likely that it had retreated somewhere. Was he scared? What could have frightened him? If Donald could stand the sight of his owner—a biker named Sid—it was hard to imagine what could cause fear in the carnivorous pit-bull. Carl decided not to waste any more time speculating and just enjoy the gift of peace and quiet.

“Thank God.”

Sleep came easily, and Carl drifted into an involved REM reverie of himself at the wheel of a Maserati, living in a secluded castle, with no noise except the musical rumble of its engine and the joyous laughter of himself and his new best friend, Durham Palatinates head coach Lee Davie.

Then this vision was shattered by a loud thunderclap terrifyingly close. It was a far louder, more violent noise than Carl had ever heard, even in this horrible street. It was an explosion.

The staccato burst caused him to jump out of bed in blind panic. He rubbed the part of his forehead that had banged against the wooden floor, and groggily untangled himself from the bedclothes.

“What the hell is going on?”

His poky bedroom seemed unchanged, but there was a sound, or perhaps a feeling. Carl puzzled over it, before guessing it was some kind of rhythmic thump. A heavy, militaristic march. He opened the bedroom curtain a fraction and looked outside. On the street below, he saw aliens.

They stood a head higher than the tallest human frantically fleeing down the side alley to avoid them. They were a riot of colour against the grey Durham skies and the greyer Durham buildings and streets: purple skin, glistening silver teeth, a rainbow of colours draped on their shoulders that looked like severed limbs.

Aliens, Carl reasoned. No doubt about it, though he wished there were. What kind of a world did he live in where aliens could land, but his modest dream of living in the countryside and being best friends with Durham's finest women's basketball coach lay beyond his reach?

Carl supposed it served him right for laughing at those people who talked about strange things in the skies and little green men. It didn't help that they tended to be from London, and in his experience people from London were always complaining about something. “Why would London, out of all the cities in the world, be a special target for alien invasion?” he had repeatedly pondered. “If aliens had any taste they'd land in Costa Rica or Rio.”

The purple-skinned barbarians were proving this infallible argument wrong by shooting everything that moved.

"Bloody hell," he said numbly.

He drew the curtain shut, hoping it all might go away, but the merciless marching and the horrific slicing and shrill blasting sounds of weaponry continued. He picked up the telephone to call Brenda. She would be at work by now. However there was no dial tone and Carl put it back down in despair. He tried his mobile but there was no signal—but he couldn't blame that on extra-terrestrial interference. His house being in a dip, he usually had to go up the bank to the end of the street to get a strong enough signal, but he wasn't going outside now.

The sound of the front door being kicked in set his heart racing. Quickly he pulled on the nearest pair of trousers, shoes, and a work shirt and jumper of dubious cleanliness, before crossing to the back bedroom. Becky was standing outside, chewing her lip, while Freddy remained on the other side of the door.

"What's going on Daddy?" Becky asked, still half asleep and clutching her teddy bear in her hand. Like her father, Carl realised with grim humour, she hoped it was all a dream.

"We have to go to Uncle Charlie's house," Carl explained as he shut their bedroom door and crossed to the window. "I'll lift you outside."

The window opened onto the kitchen extension below. Without Carl telling her, Becky realised they could climb out onto the extension, and from there use the back streets to get to the path that led up the hill to Red Hills. Once there, Carl would wake his mate Charlie up, and they could use his car to get to somewhere safe.

Becky was very light and Carl lifted her out easily.

"There's somebody downstairs," Freddy said quietly. "Is it the coppers again?"

"No." Carl replied. "Now climb out there and help your younger sister get down to the patio." Once his son was outside, Carl too climbed out and crawled as quietly as he could along the roof of the extension until he reached the end. He dropped down and managed to catch Becky as Freddy lost a hold of her hand. Quickly he put his hand over her mouth, but she didn't scream. Then he helped his son climb down. "OK, both of you hold my hands, we've got to be quick and don't make a noise if you can help it."

"What's going on?" Becky asked.

"It's the coppers isn't it? You're not going away again, are you?"

Becky held on to Daddy's leg tightly. "Don't go away again Daddy."

"I'm not going anywhere, but we all have to leave now."

The streets were mercifully still; the purple-skinned aliens had all carried on down the dip in the road. Nevertheless, Carl moved silently and furtively, and his children thankfully followed his example. They ran as quietly as they could. The distance to the footpath was about two hundred metres but they made it. There was a thick hedge of bushes and weeds that hid the path from casual sight and as they ran up it Carl was glad

that the kids couldn't see the fire pouring from what had been their home. At least Becky still had her teddy bear.

Worried he would see a purple face loom out the window, Carl picked up his pace. He was clear across the street when he remembered he'd left the mobile in the bedroom.

He'd have to phone Brenda from Charlie's house.

Two hundred metres down; a few blocks to go. Somehow, even making it to Charlie's house seemed a long shot.

Squadron Leader Gaalvix surveyed the Varanost Land Brigade's mayhem with satisfaction. Whether they were Canede huts or the apartment blocks of the urban investor farms of Spirosix Maxima, the personal touch was always the most effective way to pacify a population. Gaalvix looked up at the row of shabby houses, the spreading fire exposing their shoddy foundations. This planet clearly had low standards of workmanship. A few dozen of the shrivelled, shabby local creatures fled here and there, but the Varanost seemed to have picked an hour when most people were out of their homes. There had been a handful of deaths, but not nearly enough for Gaalvix. The Squadron Leader didn't even have a pelt from these Terrans to add to his armour.

Gaalvix's eager lance corporal emerged from the flaming house and saluted. "Nothing on this street."

"Very good, Lance Corporal."

The underlings shifted. Gaalvix didn't hold with this recent fad for talking through morale with the common grunts, but at certain moments he had to. Sensing such a moment, he asked, "What's on your mind, Officers?"

"Squadron Leader, are these tactics really effective? Surely our target ..."

"Our target ... is out there, Officers. Continue your scans." Gaalvix's lips widened, and his teeth chattered in the crude Varanost expression of delight. "And it will be a pleasure running the target to ground."

CHAPTER ONE

DETOUR IN LAURASIA

Forty million years earlier, this shabby quarter of Durham was exactly the sort of tropical holiday spot Carl longed to visit: overgrown with lush vegetation, air dewy and thick with humidity, a riot of verdant colour, and with dozens of gargantuan exotic species wheeling and spinning in its sky. So lively was this morning that the animals' routine was not disturbed by the trumpeting sound of the TARDIS grinding into solidity.

Maggie Weitz emerged, quickly shaking off the zip-up hooded parka she had donned and throwing it back through the doorway. "I thought you said it was October?"

The Doctor reeled from the jacket, which had caught him squarely in the face. He somewhat indignantly hung it on the hatstand and joined her outside. "Hmm, right month but wrong year. Off by a few million."

"No way this is England."

"*Au contraire* Maggie ... it's England all right, but the only people who would call it aren't exactly chatty at the moment; they haven't even lost their tails yet. We might catch a few swinging from the tops of those trees there."

Maggie followed her friend's indication. The massive fronds of the tropical foliage, and the golden sunlight beating down, were welcome sights. She shrunk back when she saw, instead of primates on the trees or birds overhead, pterodactyls swooping past. Suddenly the environment seemed a bit threatening.

The Doctor, oblivious to any danger or to Maggie's discomfort, had already trudged into the swampy scrubland. His sturdy boots soaked up the mud. Maggie tentatively followed him and asked him more about the precise time of their arrival. She heard little of his answer, her thoughts still dominated by their recent farewell to Kaylaar.

She was sure he was happily ruling now on Koilara, bringing his people together ... only he wasn't. Kaylaar's civilization had flourished billions of years ago; even now in Earth's prehistory, he had been long dead. This lent their farewell even greater grimness for Maggie; the three of them had been so close during their travels. The Doctor had been almost indecently brusque about it, and since they left Koilara had consumed himself with repairs to the TARDIS. This left Maggie to wander the corridors, swim a few laps in the pool, and peruse the shelves in the library before seeking distraction in the pages of an oft-read *Joyce Mannix Mystery*. The infinite space of the ship seemed empty and sad; right now she would even take a conversation with that creepy computer from the Lifeship *Miracle*, whose religious zeal had so unnerved everyone and caused it to be locked away in a glorified padded cell. It left with Kaylaar—no doubt it was supplying him with spiritual guidance. The thought briefly amused her, before she reflected on that Frenazzi face and that low-key, charming nature of his. She didn't love him; she doubted she would love anyone again after Ollie. But his friendship had been special to her, so instrumental in helping her finally step beyond her grief. Maggie wondered whether she too wanted to leave the Doctor, return to real life. One day she would have to, she supposed.

She was pulled from this rabbit hole of reflection by the Doctor's frantic waving. "Maggie, no doubt you think I was talking for my own benefit rather than yours."

She wondered if this irritable streak was his own, alien way of dealing with their friend's departure. She wished he'd knock it off, and felt like a surly teen as she responded, "Sometimes I do."

He harrumphed. "Perhaps sometimes ..." A smile crept up his lips. "But I was in fact alerting you to a hunting party. Quick, take cover."

Azaxia hated hunting. But when Mevab had suggested it this morning, she willingly accepted. It kept her mind off the voice in her dreams.

She did not tell the others of the voice. The Council was already jittery about the planet, and more of that invasion paranoia would revive talk that they should retreat into underground shelters. Azaxia did not believe such hysteria. She knew what was behind it. Yes, probes had found life on their nearest neighbouring planet, but there was no sign that it still flourished. And yet some hawks on the Council used it, just as she knew they would, to advocate attack or evacuation, or hibernation. If there was one fault the young and old alike shared these days, it was that tendency to overreact.

That was why Azaxia was chiding herself for overreacting. The problem was this voice from afar was one of two possibilities: exactly the kind of world-conquering invader Elstob and the other paranoiacs feared, or else some psychic delusion of hers, which would disqualify her from sitting on the Council. And as the only one with a level head,

she would be damned if she let herself stand down while these hibernation-fanatics remained to share their fantasies of Ice Warrior forces amassing.

And the voice she had heard was no Ice Warrior. It represented a people called the Varanost. Perhaps they catered to Azaxia's disillusionment with her own government and the daily procedures. Somehow the communion of their minds allowed her to share those feelings with this Varanost. Embarrassingly, he had flattered her and told her how he wished someone of her calibre could command their forces.

Then, last night, the Varanost contact was short and terrifying.

We are coming. At last, we have found a way to you, Azaxia. You can take your place as our empress.

The words still chilled her, riding on this crisp morning with sight of a few straggling apes getting away.

Then there was a brilliant flash, and she saw an alien before her in the clearing. It was not the Varanost and it was not one of the apes they were hunting. It had paler skin and no fur—in fact, it wore strange fibres instead of fur. It was looking around in astonishment, and quickly turned on its heel and began running at the sight of their hunting party.

"Sacre!" it cried as it ran. *"Mon dieu! Aidez-moi!"*

The strange cries shocked Azaxia's beast, and this, combined with her distracted thoughts, left her a step behind as the animal reared up and threw her.

She saw the rest of the party, miles away thanks to their more cooperative animals. It was just her and this alien simian, eyeing each other up.

Maggie and the Doctor crouched in a hollow, perfectly concealed by some leafy fronds. She watched in awe as a party of small bipedal dinosaurs about the size of rabbits raced past. Remembering seeing *Jurassic Park* at the Roxy two summers ago, Maggie was surprised at the colourful feathers adorning their leathery skins. When she got her breath back, she made a mental note: *You were close, Spielberg, but no cigar.* These were the real thing, and next to them even the most sophisticated special effects looked like stop-motion puppets from a beloved Ray Harryhausen movie.

A few moments later some bipedal carnivores—Allosaurs, Maggie thought, though it had been a long time since she had identified dinosaurs—imperiously followed them, on their scent. Awed by this sight, Maggie was astounded to see harnesses around the creatures' necks, and upright three-eyed lizard people tugging to keep them on their course. It was utterly incredible to watch; a saurian version of a fox hunt, Maggie reckoned. She wished she could stand up and get a closer look at the scene, but she quickly ducked lower when one Allosaur looked her way and seemed on the verge of

exploring the hollow. Thankfully, its rider roughly pulled at its harness to pull it back the other way.

Once they were out of earshot and Maggie's breath returned, she asked, "Didn't the dinosaurs go extinct sixty-five million years ago?"

"Yes. A few were kept in hibernation as pets by our chums there. They had a remarkably advanced civilization."

"Do you know them?"

"I've met a few over the years."

"Why don't we say hello?"

The Doctor looked her up and down sheepishly. "They have some prejudices about humanity. The only examples they've known are your primate ancestors. The more enlightened look on them as pets, but the rest have distinctly carnivorous tendencies. And, as you can see, they have some antisocial hobbies."

"I see, I don't fancy ending up on a spit."

The Doctor's nostrils flared. "Hang on a second. There was a change in the temporal wash for a moment. Some rogue element knocked back through time."

A great roar sounded, followed by a mighty crash. Despite her fear, Maggie's head pivoted to the source of the sound. In a clearing, the Allosaur lay on its side, limbs frantically scrabbling to right itself. Its thrown rider lay a few yards ahead, a slender tree snapped in two at the impact. The sight behind the tree was the oddest in the succession of oddities Maggie had seen on their brief visit. It was a man—strikingly handsome, with long-hair and dark olive skin, dressed in eighteenth-century finery of a flowing frilled shirt and white cravat, riding boots, and a sequined waistcoat.

"What's Mr. Darcy doing running from reptile people?" Maggie asked.

"Good question. He's almost as out of date as we are."

"And I'd bet any money he got that time-displacement ride you just sensed, eh?"

"Bingo, Maggie. Let's say *bonjour*." The Doctor bounded across the brush and called a greeting to the pair.

The lizard person's third eye glowed bright yellow. The man convulsed in agony.

"Stop that!" the Doctor commanded, and the lizard person obeyed.

"Attack imminent ... coming for me ... don't know why ..." The lizard person croaked a few incoherent words, repeating one—"Varanost"—over again.

Maggie finally summoned the courage to approach. She jumped out of the way of the Allosaur, still on one side, but whose head and teeth loomed threateningly close. The Doctor was pressing his hands up and down the green scaly body of the rider.

"She's in a bad way, I'm afraid," he said to Maggie. "You're all right, aren't you?" he called to 'Mr. Darcy'.

"Yes ..." the man hesitantly replied in a French accent.

"Well, give us a hand. I expect you'd like a lift out of here anyway."

Somehow, Carl and his children had made it. The purple lot seemed to have moved on to the next street. More to the point, Charlie's street had escaped destruction.

Typical, thought Carl. *Charlie always was a lucky git.*

Carl hammered on the door with his fist. "Come on Charlie boy, wake up."

Becky tugged on Daddy's trouser leg. "I'm cold Daddy." She hugged Freddy for some warmth.

"Here, wear my jumper." Freddy pulled the itchy jersey garment off. "I'll hold your bear while you put it on."

Becky handed over her favourite teddy bear, just as the front door opened. "Hello Uncle Charlie." She rushed past the lanky Scot into the warmth.

"What's going on?" Charlie asked as Freddy slid by him into the living room.

"I'll tell you after you've had a stiff drink," Carl said to his mate.

"Not even nine yet, pal. Are you sure?"

"You'd better bloody believe I'm sure. You won't believe me, I don't believe me, and I saw it."

Maggie could hardly complain the TARDIS was sad or empty anymore. Something like two days had passed with the Doctor engrossed in study, and their two visitors getting at each other's throats. After his initial, half-bothered introduction to the ship and a cursory explanation of dimensional transcendentalism, the Doctor took some scans of Simon (the Frenchman) and Azaxia (the Silurian) and after the Silurian's injuries healed, he was happy to leave them to their own devices in his ship. Maggie was hardly in the mood to make new friends, and every interaction with the pair made her pine for Kaylaar's company. She remembered their similar sense of humour and could imagine the Frenazzi sharing a laugh with her about Simon's high-handed attitude and Azaxia's near-murderous moodiness. After spending as much of the morning as she could alone in her cabin, and with the ship apparently still in motion, Maggie conquered her introvert tendencies and entered the TARDIS galley at the timeless space's equivalent of midday. As she predicted and slightly feared, the pair were there—Simon trying to ignore the boring stares of Azaxia. Maggie stood between the pair looking daggers at each other, desperately waiting for the kettle to boil.

Finally, her curiosity got the better of her. "What is it?"

"I don't suppose you ape-creatures respect such a thing as communal behaviour? I tried telling *this* one—" Azaxia stabbed the air with her three-fingered claw.

"I tuned out," Simon replied honestly. "It was boring, and all one-way. All 'do as I say, not as I do' stuff. What is the point of it all, if you are not going to be doing it also?"

"It ate my lunch." Azaxia did her best to ignore the teenage ramblings of the young thief thrust into her company. "I have a restricted diet, and also a temper when I'm hungry."

Simon sighed, seeing Azaxia's temper flare and knowing when to admit defeat. He removed a silver tray from one of the TARDIS kitchen's food drawers, containing pungent wedges of cheese that seemed to have been plucked directly from the Frenchman's imagination. "Big deal, you can have *my* cheeses. Delicious Roquefort, the softest Camembert and the tastiest Rocroi that I have ever eaten."

Azaxia and Maggie took a step back from the ripe aroma.

Simon took a long and luxurious sniff. "With a glass of red wine it's quite exquisite."

"I noticed the locks on the TARDIS vineyard had been picked," Maggie mused aloud. "Now I suppose I know why the Doctor locked them in the first place. I have to side with Azaxia on this one. You're too young for wine anyway." She cringed, realizing as she lectured him that she had even put her hands on her hips.

Simon reacted with the teenager's timeless eye-roll. "You can't eat cheese without red wine. It's sacrilege." Simon felt it was a crucial point to make. People could say what they wanted about a lot of subjects, but this was the hill he'd die on.

"Whether that's true or not," Azaxia replied, her teeth angrily gritted, "that's not the point I was trying to make. You shouldn't just help yourself to other people's things." She clawed at his waistcoat by way of illustration. "How would you like it if I stole your skins to keep warm in this frigid spacecraft? Not thrilled, I'm sure."

"Maybe not, but it's not like this Doctor doesn't have a fully stocked pantry." With more surly teenaged authority, Simon pulled open drawers down the length and breadth of the vast kitchen and pulled out the items within. "We've got tons of beans and lentils and rice." He read more unfamiliar labels uncertainly. "Tandoori paste, jelly babies, Necrosian *herbabaculum vitae* ... this pantry has tins of everything." He read the label on the tube he had pulled at random. "Even graphite in liquid helium for some reason. There's any amount of food for you to eat."

"I won't eat that filthy monkey food," Azaxia snarled with a reptilian hiss, as she cursed Simon's lineage. In truth he was more like a chimpanzee, but she'd never tell him that she thought that highly of him. Mammals were so vain, it was good to remind them of their origins - as nocturnal tree-dwelling primates. "That bowl of crushed beetles was even cooked in pelican blood. I didn't get a chance to have it during my hunt." She rattled around the satchel from her hunting belt, which, Maggie inferred with some disgust, Simon must have sampled.

"Crushed beetles? It tasted like chicken."

Azaxia used the power of her third eye to focus her thoughts into Simon's tiny mammalian mind. He saw visions of her growing the beetles from hatching, feeding them

succulent fungus until they were big and fat, putting them in a pestle, and finally crushing them into a fine wine-coloured syrup.

“Arrêt!” Simon shouted at Azaxia, to stop her beaming messages into his mind with her weird telepathic power. Their interactions these last few days had been punctuated by these attacks.

“Azaxia!” scolded Maggie. *“That’s enough.”*

To her surprise, Azaxia obeyed. Maybe Maggie could see why so many mums put their hands on their hips.

“Je suis désolé,” Simon grumbled. *“It was in this cold box here, so I took it. You should have written your name on it if you wanted to keep it.”*

Maggie felt privileged to have witnessed the genesis of those workplace arguments that result in labelled Tupperware containers. The thought of Azaxia writing her name and ‘DO NOT EAT’ raised a smile.

Azaxia jammed the nearly empty satchel into the nearest refrigerator door. *“Life was so much easier when we just ate annoying rodents as a snack. What else have we here?”* She pulled a cylindrical pastry and read its label. *“Pork pie? That sounds more like your kind of sustenance, Simon.”*

Simon shuddered. *“Crushed beetles are one thing, but I’d rather die than have filthy English cooking.”*

Maggie laughed.

“Any idea how long we’re to be kept here with nothing to do but take long baths, eat fine reptilian cuisine, and drink your Doctor’s excellent cellar?”

Maggie barely opened her mouth when the Doctor swept into the galley. *“Excellent question, Simon.”* Azaxia scowled as he slapped the pair of them on the back. *“Everyone getting along famously?”* He smirked as their shared sidelong glances answered his question perfectly. *“Well, you’re in luck. The temporal flicker, which I believe was the same one that dropped you in the middle of Azaxia and her Silurian hunting party, has turned up again, in early twenty-first century Durham.”*

It had been nine hours since hell descended on Durham. The town’s ancient cobbles still seemed to echo with the crushing tread of metallic alien boots. The bridges around the peninsula still seemed wobbly, on the verge of crumbling from the fatal harmonics of their talons. Citizens had awoken to sounds of death and destruction, to thousands of car alarms and sirens, and the shrieks of frightened pets and children. The few unfortunate enough to lay eyes on their invaders quickly lost bowel control with fright and lost consciousness soon after. The Varanost had enough of a code of honour to merely step over these unconscious citizens and carry on marching.

But that was all nine hours ago. Now, there were only these echoes: no sounds, no marching, no movement of any kind. All that was left was a frozen desolation. No humans or Varanost were around, the fires the invaders had started had been put out. And there was certainly no one to notice the dimension-ripping fanfare of the strange blue box grinding into existence on the brow of a steep side street opposite the post office. Even though it was on a main road, it would have been too early for traffic even on a normal day. And today, with hell on Durham's doorstep, any thoughts of traffic disturbance were far from the terrified locals' minds.

Maggie got a blast of northern English air as she stepped onto the street. "It's cold, I want my coat."

The Doctor already had her trusty zip-up hooded parka in his hand. "It is chilly for the time of year."

"And what year is that?" Maggie pressed.

"I'm not exactly sure, but it's some time in the second quarter of the twenty-first century. October ... give or take."

Azaxia followed her out. Maggie could see her scales shrivelling against the breeze. "You're cold?"

"Simon," the Doctor called back inside, "would you be a dear and grab another winter coat?" His formidable nose wrinkled as he looked up to admire the slate-coloured sky. "Ah, you only get skies that grim in merry old England." He slipped on his ribbed woollen toque and set off down the slight incline. "Come on then, don't dawdle. Keep our other guests close by, eh?"

By now Simon was outside, helping Azaxia into the coat—she did not appreciate his gallantry. Maggie looked left and right, and paused for a moment to take in the complete stillness. The distant sounds echoing from afar had a vague hint of menace, but she couldn't distinguish them. "Is it always this quiet? It makes Revelstoke seem like New York City."

It did not escape her attention that the Doctor had avoided answering this question. "I know just the place for a nice cup of tea. That'll warm you up inside." He looked past Maggie at Simon. "And never fear Simon, there will be a fast-food joint for you to ruin your appetite."

"Fast food," the Frenchman marvelled. "At the orphanage in R union, that usually meant yesterday's porridge."

Maggie patted his shoulder, but this only made her feel more like a stodgy mother to the young man. He ignored the contact and kept looking at the cobbled street, and she looked for another subject to discuss. "So what's the story with Durham, anyway?" she asked. "It's in the north of England, correct?"

The Doctor gestured to the lopsided medieval buildings dotting the squat skyline. An unpleasant smell of burning rubber drifted downwind, rendering the stillness disturbing. "It's been many things over the centuries: a site of religious worship, a market

town, they even have a castle, but they let students live in it these days. If you're lucky we may have time to look at the statues. Neptune is a favourite of mine, he's the Roman god of the oceans."

Azaxia looked up and down, astounded to see her world so changed. "We're near the sea?"

"Not quite ... about 20 miles away from the coast."

"So why do they have a sea god if they're not near the sea?" the reptile woman pressed.

The Doctor opened his mouth to reply, but found himself at a loss. "Do you know, I've always meant to ask someone about that? The Venerable Bede might know. Of course, we should have visited during the Roman times. *Then* we'd see them when they're brand-new—" The Doctor frowned, expecting a car to come barrelling down the road and finding himself more unnerved by the unremitting stillness. He crossed the empty road. "Hurry up, and look both ways before you cross."

Maggie performed the pantomime, though the street at the bottom of the hill was no livelier than the one in which they had landed. As she walked across she cringed at the low rumble from her stomach. "Boy, I didn't realise how hungry I was."

"Me also," Azaxia added. "I never got a chance to try that 'pork-pie'."

"I'm sure we can find you some meat," Simon mused, adding nastily: "There's never a cat around when you want one."

"That's horrible!" Maggie scolded.

Simon shrugged. "I am a dog person. The orphanage was crawling with clawed furballs. They left me with bad associations."

"I do not eat domesticated pets," Azaxia interrupted. "That is why I have spared you." She looked sideways and read a nearby sign. "What sort of animal is a kebab anyway?"

"You really don't want to know," Maggie said.

The Doctor gave a distracted laugh, but Maggie could see her friend was on his alert. His eyes seemed especially large, ready to pop from their sockets, a sure sign that trouble was afoot. They inquiringly roved around the unassuming streets and down into each cobble, evidently dissatisfied that an enemy didn't spring out at each corner. "Hmmm, perhaps we should go back to the TARDIS?"

Not sensing his discomfort, their new friends balked. "I'm hungry," Azaxia carped, "I need sustenance."

"I'm hungry too," Simon added. "I need snacks that will ruin my appetite. What about this fast food you promised me?"

The Doctor spotted two youths looting the contents of an electronics store. The movement, the first Maggie had seen since they landed, was startling. She was further on edge when she saw them sharing criminal laughter, boxes unsteadily stacked in their

arms. The hatchback into which they were stuffing them looked like it had been stolen too, if the flashing indicator lights were anything to go by.

Maggie would have sooner crossed the street to avoid them—even aside from their obviously suspect activities, their pasty skin and shaved heads gave them an unpleasantly Neo-Nazi appearance. Now the Doctor was the oblivious one, striding up to them with all the Boy Scout bravado of Superman himself.

“Hey, I say. You boys, do you own those products?”

“Piss off, mate.” One of the youths lobbed a box of CD-ROM discs at the travellers.

The Doctor effortlessly sidestepped the assault and the box crashed onto the street. He took one step nearer to the men, his serene amusement unnerving them. Maggie could see why; he looked like a tiger toying with some hapless prey.

“Sparkling though it is, I don’t have time to carry on this conversation. Why is it so quiet around here? Looks like you two stout fellows are the only people left in Durham.”

“Might be.”

“What’s going on?”

“Dunno, bruv,” the other youth chipped in irritably. “Now why don’t you let us get on?”

“Why should I?” the Doctor challenged.

“Ooh, mate. Might be nasty if you don’t.” They had placed their ill-gotten gains into the boot, and were now clenching their fists menacingly.

The Doctor blew a raspberry in their faces. At the same moment, Azaxia glared at the large box sticking out of the car boot. Her third eye glowed vividly. Though her mental power was hampered by the chilly weather she was able to cause it to catch fire and explode. They ran off into the street.

“That will teach them a valuable lesson.” She smiled at the Doctor, who seemed angry with her.

“You could stand to learn a few valuable lessons yourself. ‘Violence only begets violence’ for instance. Or ‘pick on someone your own size, who doesn’t have a third eye’.”

“Hmph,” Azaxia sulked. “You try to spoil everyone’s fun.”

Simon picked up a hand-held computer game system and a couple of games. “Not mine he won’t,” he muttered conspiratorially to Maggie. He stuffed the system into a handy shopping bag and the cartridges into his waistcoat pocket before the Doctor could say anything. It made Maggie wonder if this new friend wasn’t a three-hundred-years-earlier version of the two louts they’d just met.

As the Doctor peered up and down the street, into the empty shops and around the corners, trying to figure out where everyone had gone, Simon flashed Azaxia and Maggie a glimpse of his ill-gotten gains. As he saw the Silurian glance warmly at him, for the first time Simon considered they might be friends. Perhaps it was a sign of his

misspent youth, but he looked at her and Maggie as a pair of big sisters; and they were even worse than carnivorous reptile women from the time of the dinosaurs.

His musings were interrupted when the Doctor backed out of an alley, a towering purple alien looming over him. The calm of the Time Lord's backwards stroll belied the obvious danger posed by the advancing creature. Whereas Azaxia had an earthly quality reminiscent of Terran reptiles that endeared her to Maggie and Simon despite her prickliness, this purple monstrosity was clearly something entirely otherworldly. It combined piscine and insectoid features in a wholly disconcerting way, stood two feet taller than the travellers, and had four arms and purple skin. In each arm it held a sharp bladed weapon, which combined with the malicious gleam of its needle-pointed teeth, suggested it was decidedly eager to kill anybody in its path.

Maggie felt a deep lurch of terror in the pit of her stomach, and felt grateful she hadn't eaten. Simon meanwhile was feeling the ample cheese and red wine he had consumed earlier coming up.

"What is it?" Simon asked the Doctor.

"For once I don't know Simon." A reckless smile crossed the Doctor's lips. "That's rather fun."

Maggie did not share his enthusiasm. "What do you mean you don't know? You know everything."

Azaxia's side-slanting eyes widened with fear. "Varanost ... here?"

The Doctor's head snapped back to the Silurian. "You recognise them?"

She stepped forward to address the creature. "Your leader reached out across space for me ... he called to me ... but if you are here then they must be ... it must be my fault ..."

"The saviour?" the purple-skinned alien asked in return. "And I have found you..."

The prospect of this encounter caused Azaxia's reptilian eyes to widen in outright fear. She staggered backwards and bolted down the end of the next street.

"*Mon dieu, nous allons mourir sont nous pas!*" Simon's whole body trembled in the wake of the looming soldier.

The Doctor wanted to follow the Silurian and get some answers, but could hardly leave his two human friends defenceless and at the mercy of this warrior.

"We come in peace," the Doctor announced. "I wish you no harm. I'm...a passing traveller. Some call me the Doctor." He frowned as the Varanost renewed its threatening waving of its weapons in his face. "Others sort of scream and run away."

The needle-point teeth retracted into the mouth. Something like apprehension filled the creature's face and it charged off into the distance.

The Doctor smiled to his friends, thumbing the emerald green lapels of his balmacaan coat. "Always handy when my reputation precedes me."

"I don't think it was *you* who scared the alien, Doc." Maggie pointed to a truck screeching to a halt on the cramped Durham road. Camouflage-clad grunts carrying

heavy-duty weaponry leapt from its side and ran after it in pursuit. Two more went the other way, perhaps to catch up with the two hooligans. The rest of the soldiers formed a tight circle around the Doctor and friends.

To Maggie's surprise, the Doctor smiled in delighted recognition. He appeared to recognise the winged crest on their berets. "I knew Alistair's boys would get here eventually. At ease, gentlemen."

"What are you talking about?" Simon asked.

"The United Nations Intelligence Taskforce, designed to protect Earth from threats beyond the traditional sphere of domestic influence. Funny, I thought they'd become JADE by now¹." The Doctor shook his head: the long-term future of UNIT was a bit of a gap in his knowledge. "Anyway, before all that I used to work as their scientific advisor for a decade or two."

"Used to?" Maggie repeated. "What, did you have a salary dispute?"

"No salary to dispute. I didn't have the use of the TARDIS at the time, so it was a bit of a marriage of convenience, but we parted on amicable terms." The Doctor glanced sideways at the nearest gun barrel. "As far as I remember."

Maggie noticed the armaments were not lowering.

"They can be jolly useful in a tight corner." The Doctor's smile faded as a deep, rumbling blast sounded behind them, and the fleeing Varanost collapsed. Though it had wanted to kill them, Maggie still felt sorry for it.

The Doctor, meanwhile, gritted his teeth in anger. "The fools, will they never learn? Don't you know it's wrong to kill?"

One soldier fired a second blast into the prone Varanost, which caused the Doctor to lurch toward him. Simon had to hold the Doctor back. "Steady on Doctor. They're here to get us out of this situation."

"Shaddap, will yer?" a nasal Cockney voice drawled. A stocky balding man in military serge marched up to the Doctor, mopping the perspiration from his forehead with his UNIT beret. Despite standing a head shorter than the Doctor, his bulky build made him an imposing presence, as did his East End bluntness. "Don't talk to me 'bout ethics. D'you think Johnny over there's an intergalactic barber? Reckon he wanted to use all those fearsome cuttin' tools to give you lot a shave and a haircut?" He looked the Time Lord up and down. "Reckon you must be that Doctor Smith busybody we 'ave so many files on." His stubby fingers prodded at the bright red cable-knit fishing sweater. "Cor, they weren't kiddin' 'bout that dress sense of yours."

The Doctor peered down at the officer, not able to conceal his distaste. "And you might be?"

¹ Justice And Defence of Earth, as seen in *The Doctor Who Project: Lokahi* and *The Shadow Emperor*.

“Keltin, matey, Major Timbo Keltin.” The major nodded cursorily at the Varanost, who was now being ferried on a stretcher into the back of the truck. “For your information, Smithie, Johnny ‘ere ain’t dead. More’s the pity.” He handed the Doctor the heavy-looking artillery they had been firing at the Varanost. “See that? Brand-new particle beams we filched from a Lithiark invasion of the Antarctic six years back. Doesn’t put this lot out longer than two hours.”

The other two soldiers returned, dragging the electronic-stealing slapheads. “They’re the last two, sir. Area secured.”

Keltin looked at the two with a glimmer of guilt, but they looked blankly back at him. “Just ... see they get looked after, eh?”

The Doctor slapped the weapon back into the smaller man’s arms with distaste. “Yes, very impressive. So, what’s the status, Major? Don’t tell me *you’re* in command here. Where’s Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart?” At Keltin’s lack of response, the Doctor pressed, “Bambera? Crichton? Compton? Zbrigniev?”

“You ‘ave been out of circulation, Smithie. That lot’s as old as disco. My CO’s a three-star American general: Serena Hoffman.”

“*Americans* running UNIT?” The Doctor rubbed the bridge of his nose and sighed. “Good grief, today keeps getting better. Oh well, better take me to General Hoffman and we’ll see how I can help.”

Keltin grinned wickedly. “Sorry to break this to you, but no ‘elp needed. You can toddle off to your time-travelling Portaloo now, mate. We managed to save the day without you.”

CHAPTER TWO

MILITARY INTELLIGENCE

Carl had spent hours pacing the tiny confines of Charlie's flat, his ear numb from having his mobile clasped to it. Brenda never answered. Carl was close to the breaking point. His wife was missing and he was scared she was dead, but he had to remain strong for the sake of the kids. Perhaps her building had been evacuated and she was desperately trying to telephone the house? Carl hung to the desperate hope that she was still alive, he had to believe...he had to. Slowly he sipped his third brandy, but it was starting to burn his throat, so he put the glass down.

"We have to take the kids somewhere safe, before they come this way. I won't let them hurt my bairns."

Charlie nodded. "Aye man, we can gan to me sister's like."

"Your sister lives in Jesmond, it's a forty-minute drive up the motorway at the best of times."

"It's a canny drive alright, but its far enough away from here I reckon."

Becky ran into the room. The kids had been unusually calm throughout—almost as if they sensed their dad was nearly at breaking point. Becky jumped up onto the sofa and hugged Carl. "Mummy is OK, isn't she?"

"I'm sure she is. Silly Daddy just forgot his mobile so I can't get in touch with her." He didn't have the heart to tell them that he'd tried calling her with Charlie's phone and there had been no answer. He would have to search for her himself, somehow, and hope to heaven he was able to find her. All this doubt was racing furiously in his mind and he only hoped his children did not hear it in his voice when he insisted, "Mummy will be fine, I promise."

“Freddy is playing computer games with Stuart, and Chloe doesn’t want to even play dolls with me.”

Charlie looked at Carl’s five-year-old. “Well Chloe is eleven, perhaps she can teach you a more grown-up game, Becky?”

“That might be fun.” Becky jumped off the sofa and ran upstairs to find Chloe.

“I can’t let anything happen to them.”

“And you won’t. ‘Cos I’ll be here watching yer back.”

Carl stood up. He looked out the window. “It does look quieter out there.”

“Aye. I still haven’t seen any of these purple beasties ye told me about. For all I know you’ve been on that sauce all day.”

“Wish I were, Charlie.” He moved away from the window. “You’re right. We’ll get some things together and go to your sister’s house.”

“I’ll get the car out the garage, you stick some stuff in a carrier bag.” Charlie picked up his car keys and went outside to unlock the garage door.

Azaxia wove through the dreary grey grid that her world had become. The odd sad-looking sprig of greenery was very different from her lush and vivid home. It was as synthetic and drab as an alien world—even the air smelled of fire and toxins. Did these simians really enjoy living like this, packed tight into these charmless cubes like dehydrated food rations? How had her people allowed such barbarians to overrun the planet?

She took shelter in the branches of an older tree to catch her breath and try to get more perspective on her surroundings. She felt a sting of cowardice to have abandoned the Doctor, Maggie, and Simon, but she sensed that the Varanost were coming after her. Their people had been warned they were coming.

Hearing movement, Azaxia froze in the tree. Though tree-climbing was hardly suitable for a Silurian of her dignity and rank, she sometimes had to uproot some of the primates when they were making a nuisance of themselves, so had gotten rather good at ascending the branches.

She turned her attention to the creatures below. It was not the sleek, purposeful swathe cut by the Varanost; it was the lumbering gait of a large human and two small ones, moving from one of their shelters into one of their transport modules. She cursed the Doctor for leaving her in this spot; before she had spent two days conversing with Maggie and Simon, she wouldn’t have thought twice about attacking and eating the lot of them. But now, she couldn’t help feeling a twinge similar to that cowardice, now empathizing with them.

She cursed the Doctor again.

The UNIT command post was little more than a handful of Jeeps parked on the lawn in a courtyard of Claypool Library, around a hastily erected half-tent with a simple wooden desk and chair. Though Keltin had made it clear the Doctor could leave at any time, he had begrudgingly put in a call to Geneva headquarters and decided he may as well wait with the Doctor until the call went through.

Major Keltin sat at the makeshift desk, looking over the laptop computer, situation reports handed to him by his adjutants, and some printed latest satellite surveillance images. Maggie smirked; it looked like the UNIT soldiers were setting up a bake sale.

The Doctor sidled up to the simple command area, as unimpressed as Maggie. "Bit Spartan, isn't it? I don't suppose they had time to set up the usual luxuries? Bessie isn't around anywhere?"

"This is a combat zone, Doctor, we're a lean mean fighting machine. Nothing here that can't be packed up or left in less than a minute."

The Doctor held his hand out expectantly, and Keltin chided himself for handing the satellite surveillance images over without protest. Despite himself, he found the alien's natural authority difficult to resist.

"Any sign of other invaders, Siddig? Or other looters?" Keltin asked the sergeant.

"The one we caught seems to be the last moving about, sir, but they're able to jam our scanners. The invaders, that is, not the looters."

The Doctor gave Siddig's nervous quip an indulgent chuckle. "According to Azaxia, they're called the Varanost."

Keltin looked up at the Doctor. "And you've never heard of 'em before, Smithie?"

"No," he replied, audibly bristling at the unwillingly applied nickname. "Azaxia, had though."

"Who's Azaxia? Another one of your freaky friends?"

"A Silurian aristocrat Maggie and I bumped into a few million years back. The Varanost seemed to have made some telepathic contact with her when we met her. So we need to find her ... and *not* shoot her, though I know your officers sometimes have that problem. Especially when they find someone with green skin and a third eye."

"Get on that, Siddig. And mind that you don't shoot 'er."

"For your sake as much as hers," the Doctor added. Siddig hopped to it and the Doctor turned back to Keltin, currently pondering the prone Varanost. "Hmmm, there's a lot of them, isn't there?"

"Yeah, it was horrible. They landed and set fire to every building, started rounding up everyone in the area ... but they did it systematically, street by street. Like they were looking for something, and torching everything when they didn't find it. Pure sadism, if you ask me."

And yet, the Doctor considered, they were looking for Azaxia all the while. What was this devastation, some kind of calling card? And why had they arrived millions of years later—in time with the TARDIS landing? He could not yet share any of these unanswered questions with Keltin, so he returned to the Varanost. “And you’ve captured all these Varanost? All in less than a day?”

“Nine hours, thirty-six minutes, matey,” Keltin noted with pride. He was no more forthcoming about how UNIT—especially this ramshackle bunch under his command—had accomplished this quick suppression. “Don’t imagine you set any records like that in your day. Things are in a bit of an ‘olding pattern at present while we await their next move. We expect they’ll send more down in due course, but there’s been no movement from orbit yet. Still, the latest report from General Hoffman shows that their mothership is firmly in our sights.” Keltin waved the relevant memorandum proudly.

The Doctor glared at the piece of paper. “They won’t be for long. First things first, let’s have a look at the Varanost up close. I want to see what I’m dealing with ... not to mention make sure they’ve not been mistreated.”

Ignoring the reproach, Keltin led the Doctor and Maggie to the library, whose lobby had been converted into a massive triage and treatment centre. Maggie again didn’t know who she should feel sorrier for—the rows of Varanost lying prone on the hospital-style beds, or the townspeople, who wandered up and down, UNIT soldiers holding their hands, all of them fixed with blank, vacant expressions.

The medic was following their progress, unconcerned. “Not to worry. Just a side effect of the weapon. It has mild hallucinogenic properties.”

“You’d better check them out when you get a chance too, Doc,” Maggie advised. They kept moving to the bed, on which lay the sleeping Varanost soldier. Maggie again felt a sickening lurch in the pit of her stomach, but this second glimpse was allowing her to become more accustomed to the sight of the fearsome aliens. The Doctor performed a cursory medical examination.

“They seem to be all right—though without a baseline for this race, I can’t say what a healthy one would be like.” As the Doctor studied the medical charts, some understanding dawned on him. “Looks like they are a long way from home ... these cellular patterns are consistent with the M33 galaxy.”

“You never visited eh?”

“Well, I’ve popped that way once or twice, but it’s unusually hazardous for spatio-temporal navigation. Vast tracts of its are constantly swirling with black holes, brown dwarf stars, dimensional rifts, collapsed supernovae ... still, it’s always possible I just haven’t picked the right time of year ...” He grinned.

“Clearly that should be our next holiday spot. I can imagine the kind of welcome we’d get from these boys.”

He shook his head violently. “It doesn’t make sense, Mags!”

“Which part exactly?”

"Judging by their technology and appetite for carnage, the Varanost can't be much more advanced than Earth. A race like this crossing whole galaxies to Earth's system, without dimension-warp capability? Too many questions ... who brought them here, and why?" He looked around. "And where'd Simon get to?"

Simon was nosing around the UNIT encampment, trying to stay out of the soldiers' way, but generally he had a look at anything the Doctor might be interested in. Simon liked the guy; sure, he had been bossy and high-handed in the short period they had known each other (for instance, when he locked the vineyard in the TARDIS), but he was likeable enough. He wasn't too strict like the nurses at the orphanage. And liking him, Simon was worried on the fellow's behalf; there were a lot of soldiers around and the Doctor looked ready to get on their bad side at any moment.

"Hey, leave that stuff alone," Lance Corporal Klinghoffer said to the youngster, who was currently weighing some heavy steel discs in his hands. "Those are claymore mines. They're not toys."

"What do they do?" Simon asked.

"They explode," Klinghoffer replied.

"Most things you have do that."

"They're state of the art. They pop up to waist height and fire out hundreds of pieces of shrapnel at high speeds. They can cut a person in two."

Simon thought back to the bayonets and the guillotine of his own time, which seemed barbaric enough. "Why do you need weapons like that?"

"They're a defensive measure, in case the enemy tries to overrun a key location."

"The Doctor does not like things like this. He says that all problems can be resolved by talking. I want to believe that, rather than this." Simon tossed the weapon aside in disgust.

Klinghoffer was unmoved. "I'm sure he does. However what are you going to do with an enemy that refuses to talk and is trying to kill your family?"

"I wouldn't know about that, I don't have any," Simon replied. At the corporal's incomprehension, he clarified, "I am an orphan. I was moved around orphanages all my life before I was adopted by the *Viscomte de Non*."

"I'm sorry," Klinghoffer said slowly and awkwardly. "I didn't mean to offend."

"*Pas de tout*. It was a long time ago. I never knew them. My, er, real *maman* and *papa*."

Klinghoffer stiffened and gestured to the library's lobby. "You still shouldn't be around here. We don't want any accidents."

"Will these protect us from so many aliens?" Simon asked.

"Honestly? I don't think we have enough. Keltin wants the General to fly us in some reinforcements. Once the purple meanies recover from the shock of our assault, they'll come after us big style. We don't know what they're capable of. Not to mention the lot in orbit."

"Then we should not be here when they arrive?"

"Exactly why we have these, they'll think we've retreated, they come in to secure the area and get their own lot back, and bang, we take out as much of them as we can."

Simon felt a little of the Doctor's righteous anger. Using the excuse of protecting people and their families, Keltin and these men would use their prisoners as bait to commit mass murder. Furthermore, it didn't even seem likely to work.

Thinking of the latter possibility, Simon asked, "Will that action not anger them more?"

"Maybe, but UNIT has over three million troops worldwide. We're mobilising a third of our forces to engage the enemy if necessary. We will do whatever it takes to keep our planet free from aliens."

"In the France of my time, it was people like I who were aliens," Simon mused. The lance corporal shook his head irritably. "What if the Doctor can find another way?"

"I'm not a diplomat," Klinghoffer explained, "I'm a soldier. I get paid to put my life in harm's way for the security of the planet. Anything else is up to my superiors. If they can find another way, I'm sure it'll be considered." He sounded fairly unconvinced.

"You are a very strange man." Simon smiled. "I admire you. I should go, I have many things to look at. The Doctor would like to know as much as he can."

"We've all been briefed on his files, I must say it's different meeting this Doctor in person. Still, he seems much the same as the others."

"Others?"

"The Doctor has worked for UNIT in many appearances—short, tall, old, young, Scottish. When you can do all that, changing your skin colour is a doddle."

"Indeed." Simon thought of his own dark skin and the problems it caused in his own time. To change it at will ... it made him feel both closer to the Doctor and more distant from him.

"I don't think anyone but the original CO knows how he does it. It's another reason the new admin don't entirely trust him. Another thing the blokes all have in common is they almost always cause mayhem and chaos wherever they go."

Simon laughed. "That must be why I like him so much. I've seen everything I came for here, I don't suppose you'd make me a nice plate of ... what does the Doctor call it? ... 'fast food'?"

"I hate Aunt Penny," Chloe complained. "She smokes too much, and she drinks."

“She’s still your aunt and she loves you,” Charlie admonished his eldest. He did wonder, though; if ever there was a day when Penny would break out the Scotch, it was today. “Now be a good girl and look after Becky for your Uncle Carl.”

Carl ruffled his son’s hair. “Will you and Stuart be OK?”

“We’ve going to link our Gameboy Advances up and play Pokémon,” Freddy replied.

Once they were in the van, Charlie pulled out of the drive. Almost immediately, he slammed on the brakes, nearly jumping out of his skin at the sight of a six-foot-tall person in a fur-lined parka jumping from the ficus tree beside his house. Carl ran toward them, puzzled over why the person was wearing a grotesque green mask of some kind of lizard. Perhaps it was some kind of disguise to keep the aliens away?

“Stop, humans,” the tree-jumper commanded. “I need to ask you for directions.” The voice had a feminine lightness to it, but with a strange dissonant grating.

“Carl!” Charlie screamed. “It’s one of them! They’re here! They’re in the trees!”

Carl ran over to her, extending his hand to help her up. He was alarmed when a three-fingered claw took the hand. When she had stood to her full height—a few inches taller than Carl—she splayed the claws in a gesture of peace.

He swallowed. The green mask was actually her face. She may not have been a Varanost, but she was just as alien.

“You don’t need to fear me. I am not a Varanost. Believe me when I say I care as deeply about this world as you. I am Azaxia. I can help you.”

Carl’s head swam with the details, but locked on to the one ray of hope Azaxia offered: the prospect of help. He gabbled his sob story. “You can? My wife is missing. I have to send my kids away with my mate Charlie, but my wife is working an early shift. I’ve tried over and over, but I can’t ring her.”

“I am lost,” Azaxia said calmly. “Can you give me directions?”

“Help me find my wife and I’ll guide you wherever you want to go. She might be in terrible danger ...”

Azaxia found this particularly simian outburst of sorrow nauseating, and interrupted before he could go on in this vein. “I will accompany your friend and the children. I can help protect you. I know how to exploit the weaknesses of the enemy, and as your young are dependent upon their adults for protection, I am better equipped to lead them to safety.” Though this tedious obligation was more in Simon’s line—being closer in age and species to them—there were bright sides. She could study their primitive interaction as an experiment. Learning about how the ape-kind had evolved might allow Azaxia to understand their ancestors from her time better. As she entered their transport contraption, Azaxia immediately felt she deserved an award for being forced to share a confined space with so many smelly lower life forms. She shuddered as she got in the car. “I am to look after you...people. My name is Azaxia.”

"Whatever," Chloe pouted, barely noticing the reptilian face of their new visitor. "Can we go now? I *so* want to see my aunt get drunk and fall over again."

"All right, bunch up then." Carl squeezed past the children to sit in the van's back seat, while Becky moved over so that Azaxia could sit next to her.

"Hello," Becky said to the strange-looking woman. "Do you want to play dolls with me?"

Azaxia mischievously wondered how angry the Doctor would be if she ate one of the humans as a snack.

"Lovely though it is to meet a legacy member of UNIT, Doctor, I'm happy to tell you your valued humanitarian services are not required."

General Serena Hoffman had a soothing Californian drawl and a penchant for euphemistic speech, which only served to underline her arrogance. Between her and Major Keltin (currently sitting on half of the only chair in the tent, the Doctor having to make do with the other half), the Time Lord considered himself relieved he didn't work for this shoddy paramilitary organisation anymore. No doubt they were as much the victims of the downfall of the military industrial complex of this time period as anyone. But he was dismayed that the lessons he had spent so long trying to teach Lethbridge-Stewart and the rest had been washed away barely decades later.

Hoffman was suavely listing off all the toys at her disposal. "R.A.F. Leeming has Tornado Mark Threes with some modified tactical armaments pointed at the Varanost ship."

"Hmph! You'll need more than matchsticks to fight a dragon," the Doctor cautioned. "Listen to me, you seem to have quelled their assault force, so from this position of relative strength, you should use diplomacy and direct them to leave your planet in peace."

"Out of the question," Keltin declared, his grandstanding undercut by his precarious balance on half the chair. "We do not bow to invaders, Doctor. We can and will eliminate them."

"We don't understand how and why they got here."

"We?" repeated Hoffman archly.

"All right, I don't understand it." He ignored the shared smirk that appeared on Hoffman and Keltin's faces as he admitted his shortcomings. "Without knowing that, you're making a big mistake."

"The simplest option is to take out their mothership first," Keltin had made his mind up.

Hoffman nodded. "We have MOAB approval from Geneva, Major."

The Doctor looked grimly between the soldiers. Whatever ‘MOAB approval’ was, it didn’t sound good. But there was still the matter of the weapon they had used to pacify the Varanost advance force, and General Hoffman was no more forthcoming than Major Keltin on that subject. Her voice turned saccharine as she insisted, “Aww, I’m so sorry, Doctor, but that information is classified. As you’re no longer a member of UNIT I can’t share any operational data with you. Sorry to say you’re already a security risk as it is, bucko.”

“Bucko?” the Doctor echoed indignantly. And he thought ‘Smithie’ was a bad nickname. “I might have thought saving your planet from destruction a few dozen times without obligation would *assuage* any risk you might perceive from me, but if that’s how you feel, I’ll say goodbye.” He rose from the chair, causing Keltin to topple sideways at the change in weight.

Possessing even less security clearance than the Doctor, Maggie had decided to retreat to a canteen erected behind the UNIT trucks. She was digging into a fried egg sandwich and some hearty chips when Simon entered her field of vision, accompanied by a beady-eyed corporal.

“Keep ‘im out of trouble, won’t you?” the corporal asked her as he joined her at the bench with a burger and chips.

“I wish I knew how,” Maggie replied ruefully.

Simon ate greedily, not minding the stray spots of mustard landing on his white shirt.

“I have to say I admire your bravery. All these guns and burly soldiers give me the creeps.”

Simon flashed a roguish smile. “Just stupid, I guess. Though I agree with you there. R union was a very violent place. Though clearly the world has only gotten more violent in the intervening centuries. What country are you from Maggie? Is it violent there?”

“Canada—it’s in North America.”

Simon nodded. “*Oui oui*, France was helping the American colonies get their independence in my time.”

“By the time I was born the most violent thing about the country is hockey. A game played on ice with sticks.”

Simon laughed at the image. “Well my country has many more perils than ice games. There actually was slight difference between running from the soldiers in my village and running from lizard women in that jungle—or purple space barbarians here and now. Sometimes I think I will always be running.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Lance Corporal Klinghoffer said that as well. There is no need for you all to be sorry.” Simon shrugged. Maggie could see her sympathy was honestly meaningless to him. Maggie found this casual complaisance both impressive and mildly disturbing. This was the clearest hint yet of the sociopath lurking in his coolly detached charm. In this dangerous setting, she wouldn’t want him to be the only person around here she could count on.

The Doctor approached, eyes cast downward, slouching forward with his hands in the pockets of his coarse jute trousers, kicking the floor with his wide steps. It was not hard to read his mood. He slumped at their bench and took a handful of Simon’s chips. “Not bad, these. A pity UNIT can’t play to their strengths and branch out into catering.”

Maggie reached forward and gave his hand a sympathetic squeeze. “Why don’t you talk about it?”

He looked up and his expression softened. “The people in charge are behaving more stupidly than usual, I’m *still* no nearer to figuring out what kind of weapon they used on these Varanost, and I don’t know what they have planned, but my instinct tells me it’s nothing good. I need to find out what Keltin’s hiding ...”

“Would this help, do you think?” Simon asked rhetorically, pulling a lanyard with a laminated ID tag attached.

“Lance Corporal Klinghoffer ...” read Maggie, a note of disapproval sneaking into her voice.

“Well, he didn’t seem to have much use for it,” Simon continued. “Or for the keys to one of those—how do you call them? ‘Jeeps’?—outside.”

The Doctor grinned as Simon dropped the keys into his hand. “Good work, *mon vieux*,” he said to Simon. “Now let’s get on the road, eh?”

Azaxia was fascinated by the complexity of the relationships between the primate parent and the offspring. The parent attempted to assert his dominance by using transparently empty threats to coerce the young into doing as he told them. The eldest offspring, a dark-haired female, resented having to do anything, but acquiesced out of some vestigial respect for the parent’s seniority. The two younger males were busy playing games. They were quiet most of the time, unless put upon by the smallest, a virtually newly hatched female who wanted to play different games involving social interaction rather than strategy or combat training. The game of tea party was most intriguing, requiring imagination to visualise the equipment. The ritual involved pretending to participate in a simple meal, eating something called a cake, which I imagined to be something like a leg of meat and drink cups of tea. I myself imagined I was drinking the fresh blood of a slain food animal, a refreshing beverage more suited to my biology.

Azaxia picked up the toy animal. “What is the purpose of this thing?”

"That's Miss Dolly. She's for hugging of course. Are you silly?"

"Hugging? You think I'm silly because I don't 'hug' inanimate objects?"

"Yes."

"Well, that shows what you know. I am a highly advanced life form. Our young are encouraged to mature at an early age. Then they undergo the trial of separation. For my own trial I was taken to a remote desert, and I had to return back to the cave to be considered capable of being able to cope with anything."

"That sounds bad, didn't your Mummy and Daddy love you?"

"Very much, which is why they trained me well. Were it not for their training I would not have survived. I owe them a great deal."

"Did you have any sisters or brothers?"

"Yes, I was the youngest of my birth clutch. Some of my kin survived their trials but some did not."

"I'm not going to be the youngest for much longer. Mummy has a new baby in her tummy."

It occurred to Azaxia that she had never taken much interest in livestock in her own time, so she wasn't exactly sure how mammals reproduced: they seemed to just multiply and there was never any sign of eggshells.

"Oi, lizard lady!" the parent called to her, wrenching the wheel of his transport device. "Sorry to interrupt yer tea party, but could I get some advice on which way to go?"

Azaxia looked up at the roads. "No Varanost anywhere, I can sense it." She thought of the chilling impression they had beamed across space; the desperate flight they had taken to avoid them. She should have told the Doctor. "Your path is unimpeded. I will tell you when you should change direction." She turned to her new human friend, thankful that the young mind could take her off her self-doubt. "Your parents need to learn to relax."

The young girl agreed.

Azaxia was appreciating the connection she had made with this youth; it would have been a mistake to eat her. Thus the parent's next interruption irritated her; even more so when she saw a dark green transport capsule like the one the Doctor had identified as UNIT.

CHAPTER THREE

A DRIVE IN THE COUNTRY

Simon punched the air with joy as they drove away from the soldiers in one of their own vehicles. The Doctor was having some difficulty getting to grips with the large vehicle's steering, and as a result the hefty Land Rover took a few wobbles onto the grass verge, but before long they were nearing Durham's town centre once more.

"Yes, well, don't make a habit of stealing, borrowing is fine however."

"Where are we going?" Maggie asked. "I hope you don't plan to do something foolish."

"It wouldn't be the first time, in fact it wouldn't be the millionth time." The Doctor flung a road map into Maggie's hand. "I'll just have to sort this out myself. They'll have marked their Special Ordnance sites on here somewhere. It can't be that far away if Keltin authorised it before setting up his glorified tuck shop in the library."

Maggie scanned the map, feeling slightly dizzy at the Doctor's erratic driving and the strain of trying to focus on its grainy detail. However, she lit up when she found two black circles. "There are two marked here, Doc. One is in Catterick, and the other is in Otterburn."

"Aha!" the Doctor cried. "Catterick it is—just a stone's throw away from R.A.F. Leeming, which Keltin mentioned."

She traced the route along the snaking and branching red lines that signified the A167 and A684 motorways. "I suppose you know this is very unwise. Turn left up ahead."

A large vehicle—a minivan, Maggie supposed—was barrelling up the road the other way. A harried-looking man's face was visible through the windscreen, and the

other seats looked cramped with passengers of assorted sizes. The man leaned out the window and waved them to stop. The Doctor grudgingly agreed, slamming on the brakes recklessly.

Another man emerged from the rear of the minivan and introduced himself as Carl. "I'm trying to get away with the kids and find my wife. Our, uh, friend here said you might be able to help."

Azaxia emerged from the van and nodded a tight-lipped greeting to the trio.

After some discussion, the vehicles swapped passengers—Maggie agreed to ferry Charlie and the children to the Claypool library, while the Doctor pressed on with Azaxia, Simon, and Carl to the UNIT launch site. They were all touched by the sight of the Silurian bidding an evidently fond farewell to the littlest girl in the entourage, who waved with her doll's hand as well.

When she turned back to the Doctor, her face turned stony. "Promise me you'll never leave me alone like that again. Their demands were relentless."

He smirked, seeing her harsh words masked a twinge of affection. "You have my word. Now on we go. And I need some answers from you about the Varanost."

"Stay out of trouble!" Maggie called as the Doctor waved goodbye.

He remembered those words when a military barricade appeared on the brow of the green hill.

"The road is blocked." Simon looked ahead, straining to see over the imposing barrier of green canvas and armed troops. "Can we drive around?"

"We'll have to go the long way around," The Doctor replied. "Let's call it the scenic route." With another wrench of the steering wheel, the Land Rover had gone off the road and driven through the grassland. A few moments later, with another jolt that tossed the four of them out of their seats and then roughly back, they were on a smaller dirt road. "I'm fairly sure I know where this leads ... Simon, could you take over from Maggie on the map?"

Simon fought what his descendants would one day call 'carsickness' to read the map.

Keltin watched as the dumpy civilian people-carrier drove into UNIT's secure area in the library courtyard. He looked disdainfully at the Doctor's friend Maggie, leading a chubby Scotsman and four children out.

"Just couldn't stay away, could you? Where'd Smithie get off to? Bearing in mind you lot could be in big trouble if you don't tell me."

“Look, before we get into that, can you help these people? They’ve spent all day avoiding the Varanost.”

Even Keltin seemed to lose his harsh cocoon when he saw Carl’s two children alongside Charlie’s, though the four little ones were as unflappable as they had been all day.

“The Doctor tells me you might be able to help, like,” the Scot sheepishly began. “My mate Carl’s wife, Brenda, left for work early this morning, you see. Those Cascadian rhythms or whatever ye call ‘em, have been shot to hell with these two jobs. And well, we have to have two jobs because of these kids.” He tousled the mops of the two kids in question; their recoil was their first sign that anything was fazing them. “Freddie goes through shoes like I dinna ken what and the little ‘un always has her nose in the catalogue, asking for this and that.”

By the time he had finished, Charlie was speaking at a considerable speed, which thickened his Glaswegian accent. Keltin only comprehended his meaning, and that he had even stopped speaking, a moment after it had happened.

“We’re securing the immediate area sir. If you could leave your friend’s wife’s particulars with one of my NCOs, I’ll inform her that you’re safe. Now if you’ll go to the safe area with the trucks, we’ll begin the evacuation.”

“Carl was hoping we could make our way up to Jarrow. I don’t suppose ye squaddies are making stops along the way?”

“We’ve decided on Catterick, but Otterburn is an acceptable alternative.” Keltin saw a flicker of a ‘tell’ as Maggie’s eyes widened in recognition. As he knew the Canadian would be unfamiliar with Northern England’s points of interest, this was a clear indication of the Doctor’s destination. But he decided to keep this deduction to himself. He kept looking at her as he asked Charlie, “I ... suppose your friend Carl has gone with Smithie—er, the Doctor—on this dangerous, unsanctioned trip?”

“Ye could say that.”

“Well, it would have been nice if he could have stayed here and advised me. Heaven knows I ‘ave precious little advice to go ‘round. Our early warning satellites have detected another wave of Varanost on the edge of the solar system. General Hoffman’s preparing to draft in regular army on this one. They’re not conditioned to accept the reality of alien species, of course.”

“We’re gonna get rid of them though, right?” Carl asked.

“Of course, that’s what UNIT does best.”

Maggie nodded, sharing the Doctor’s dismay at the methods they would use to do what they did best.

The drive along the motorway was strange. Simon did not trust these trucks. They were very big and they went much faster than any transport he was used to. There was no restraint and nothing to hold onto but the other passengers if there was an accident. "What sort of place is this R.A.F. Leeming?"

"Oh it's a military facility," the Doctor explained with audible distaste. "The Royal Air Force use it from time to time."

"Air ...craft? They take off and land in there?" Simon wondered if he would have a chance to fly one of those fantastical craft.

"They bomb the land for target practice."

Carl looked out on this wasted countryside, only to see a dark cloud above it. "Doctor, what's that?"

The Doctor pulled an antique brass telescope out of his coat pocket and peered through it at the cloud. "This is what I feared. The aliens have mobilised themselves for retribution. We're running out of time." He tapped the lens of the telescope thoughtfully before putting it away.

The gate loomed ahead. Carl felt a twist in the pit of his stomach, the fear of blustering through a military installation insignificant next to the building dread that any stop might be where they finally find his dear wife Brenda dead.

Simon handed the Doctor the UNIT pass.

"I hope this little ruse works," the Doctor muttered as the Land Rover inched toward the gate.

While Simon had been agreeably chatting away with the Doctor, and Azaxia nodding, only half-listening amid her own thoughts, for Carl this idle chatter had been considerably different. This entire day had been a whirlwind of terror and incomprehension, spinning around that gut-wrenching question mark surrounding Brenda, and so Carl had to hang on every mad word the Doctor said, even if he did find it as dizzying as the bumpy drive.

"I still can't get over the fact that you're not human," Carl said. "You look like one of us."

"My species is older, so you look like me." The Doctor winked. "Don't tell anyone though, it's just our little secret."

To everyone's surprise, the sentry barely glanced at the Doctor's proffered ID badge before saluting and waving the vehicle in with ill-deserved enthusiasm. "Sergeant Siddig is already on site, he'll be delighted to see you."

Alas, this prediction was disproved when the sergeant waved them down by the work huts on the edge of the airbase. The UNIT officer was reminded of a clown car, as he saw first the Doctor, then his friend Simon, then a dazed-looking civilian, and finally a shapely reptilian woman, all emerging from the Jeep.

"You can call off your search, Sergeant. We ran into Azaxia on the way over."

Siddig nodded impatiently. "How the hell did you lot get in here?"

"Perhaps your sentry has bad eyesight?" the Doctor suggested.

"It's worse than that, Doctor. The whole staff is acting oddly." Siddig's voice dropped, looking around anxiously. "Between you and me, sir, I think it's that ray we used ... and I'm worried ... word from Geneva is more ships are detected and there's an energy build-up in their orbiting craft."

Azaxia glanced at that distant but widening spot in the sky. "Suggesting either another strike force about to land, or a weapon?"

"Sadly likely, Azaxia."

"You mean they're going to drop a nuke on us?" Carl asked forlornly.

"Far worse than that, my friend. Sergeant, perhaps you'd better show us this weapon Keltin used."

Siddig bit his lip, but the sight of a whole line of troops hopping convinced him. "Right you are. This way."

Maggie recalled telling the Doctor and Simon that it was a bad idea to follow the map to the R.A.F. base. With that in mind, she wondered how she would characterise her current brainstorm, crouching out of sight in the padded passenger section in the UNIT executive chopper, at whose front sat Major Keltin and an earnest young soldier. All too often the Doctor gave her a false feeling of security and invincibility, and she ignored the sensible course of action in favour of these reckless impulses.

She knew Charlie had thought she was mad when she hurriedly explained it to him as they were being guided to the evacuation truck. "I can see there's no changing yer mind. That Doctor of yours ... well ... thanks for all ye've done Maggie. Mind how ye go."

Getting in had been surprisingly—not to say suspiciously—easy. She had noticed an odd, glazed expression in the soldiers' eyes. She had first seen it hours ago, when they had been cornered by Keltin's men with the looters out in the streets of Durham, but thought it was her imagination. However, now, when she darted into the side door in full view of a rifle-toting non-commissioned officer, she was inclined to be suspicious.

She cocked an ear to listen in on Keltin and his subordinate's conversation.

Keltin looked out the helicopter window. The expanding pink cloud filled almost half the sky, and made him wonder if travelling by air was wise. "I don't think we'll be able to D-notice this one, Corporal."

Corporal Zhukov nodded. “*Nyet*, Major. We are mobilising too many troops to go unnoticed by our peoples. Geneva may not be able to create a suitable cover story this time. If one can be found though, they will find it.”

“Your accent, Zhukov ... Georgian?”

She raised her eyebrow, impressed. “*Da*, sir. You have an extremely sensitive ear.”

When Keltin began his basic training and aliens were something he saw in the movies, the Cold War was in its last years and the thought of working with a soldier from any part of the Soviet Union would have made him laugh. The only thing that would have made him laugh more was the idea that his training would be used to deal with real live aliens. However, given the truth about these external threats to Earth, he now realised that the whole planet had to work together to solve problems that affected the whole planet.

“Has Geneva given permission for the use of the MOABs, Major?”

“That’s a *da*, Zhukov. We have our green light. Authorization code: ‘Blast front’.” Here, with this soldier he barely knew, Keltin felt his bravado melt away. “We forbade the US from using them in Iraq, now they tell me it’s necessary.” He looked out the window, but found that pink-tainted skyline oppressing his thoughts, hemming him in with doubt expanding to conquer his mind. “Oh, Smithie, why’d you have to leave me to deal with all this?”

Zhukov shifted in her seat. “At least they are not thermonuclear devices, sir.”

“That’s a small comfort Corporal. These things are almost as bad.”

“*Da*, but at least they are not so dirty.”

“Dirty.” He thought of the weapon they had deployed earlier that day to immobilise the Varanost. His doubts solidified into bitterness. Perhaps the Doctor was having an effect on him after all. Keltin sighed. “If this all goes well, Geneva will have my resignation, if it doesn’t then there will be no one left to send it to.”

Carl did his best to suppress his natural curiosity as he followed the Doctor, his two strange friends, and the soldier through the corrugated cavern of the aircraft hangar. At any moment, he was positive, some goon would say he had seen too much and shoot him in the back. “This place gives me the creeps, Doctor. I just don’t trust these guys. I mean not all of them are British.”

“Oh Carl,” the Doctor tutted. “UNIT has connections around the globe. By necessity they recruit from every nation of your world. After all, who better to look after the interests of all nations than a group representing all nations? One of the better decisions humanity has made, I think. Unlike other military structures, UNIT soldiers are given a mandate to go anywhere and do whatever’s necessary to protect the security of the planet.”

He could have been reading from a prospectus. He wondered how these well-meaning principles squared with the blunt management style of General Hoffman and the scorched-earth tactical prowess of Major Keltin.

Carl could see his line of thought. "You don't sound convinced."

The Doctor smiled sardonically. "You're very perceptive, Carl. That's the UNIT I know, the UNIT I did my best to improve. This bunch only knows my name from classified files from fifty-odd years ago. And they've put an American in charge."

Carl nodded sadly, sharing the Doctor's concern.

"I try to be optimistic that humans will do the right thing. However, let's just say I've been disappointed several times too many in the past."

One notable absence from the hangar was any kind of aircraft. Instead, crates were piled high, and tables and work-benches were cluttered with detritus. Again, Carl tried his best not to pay it any attention, but the furtive glimpses out of the corner of his eye, in the dim overhead pot-lights, only unnerved him further. The Doctor identified a silver hydraulic arm (whose three fingers jerked to life as they approached) as belonging to a Cyberman, a puckered heap of bright orange tendrils in a formaldehyde jar as a Zeron weft-drive interface. Death rays, hideous circuitry, and other devices and limbs were not just heaped, but combined and lashed together in grisly ways. The gloomy space was as much a surgery, even an abattoir, as a laboratory.

"UNIT must have put this place together after my time," the Doctor mused. "I would never have allowed them to fiddle about with all this technology."

Azaxia grabbed at one stone-like device. "This is from my people, is it not?" She glared at the Doctor. "You never told me humanity had dealings with my people." She did not need to ask why, when she saw the Time Lord's face cloud with another wave of regret.

The mushroom-shaped cluster, piled with messy cables, Sergeant Siddig had stopped beside seemed the greatest disappointment yet to the Doctor. "Tell me this isn't ..."

"I'm afraid it is," the UNIT soldier confessed.

"So this is the weapon?" Simon asked. "Looks more harmless than those mortars and grenades in their mobile headquarters." One of the cables thrashed in his direction to disprove him. "Is it alive?"

"Not exactly, but it has a crude kind of consciousness, from being partly organic." The Doctor peered coldly at Siddig. "Why don't you tell Carl about the top-secret research being done into crashed space vehicles? Retrofitting them to the space shuttle, what were you thinking of? Haakol technology is incompatible with Zygon bio-engineering. But *that* was what you unleashed onto Durham earlier today, wasn't it?"

"That information is on a need-to-know basis," Siddig blustered.

The Doctor looked at the UNIT officer. “The biggest danger facing Durham isn’t the Varanost, formidable though they are. It’s this weapon General Hoffman and Major Keltin blithely used.”

This bombshell hung in the vast, draughty air of the hangar.

Outside the base, a still greater bombshell was just dropping, signalled by a shimmering yellow light. A teleport beam had landed a menacing squadron of Varanost right in the bosom of Earth’s last defence.

CHAPTER FOUR

M.O.A.B.

It had been early on that grey Thursday morning—thirteen endless hours ago—that UNIT, having received word of the Varanost ship’s entry into orbit, mobilised their response. Just as the Doctor had reasoned, a space shuttle stood ready to launch, but before that Major ‘Timbo’ Keltin and his scientific advisors Paxton and Bohr had an earthbound weapon to repel the invaders.

Keltin liked Paxton and Bohr. They were the kind of scientists an army man could trust: Fulbright scholars to Harvard and Princeton respectively, their tuition paid by shadowy American interests. Rather than a peacenik Time Lord who’d always dig in his heels over ethical matters and offer some know-it-all cosmic perspective, these two came to UNIT fully aware of its mandate to keep Earth safe, at any cost. Thus, a great deal of their work involved adapting reclaimed alien technology for tactical purposes. Thanks to them, the squaddies had meson guns and particle beam dispersers with variable phrase discrimination, where their predecessors had made do with rifles and bullets, which tended to be as effective as BB guns against outer-space invaders. But Paxton and Bohr’s current plan was their most audacious yet: combining three different alien technologies to repel the Varanost.

It was not without risk, so obvious even Keltin balked at it. “So you’re sayin’ we can fire this death-ray at Durham, and nobody’ll be hurt?”

“It’s not a death-ray, sir.”

“And the M.O. has assured us there are no side effects on humans.”

Keltin felt assured by that.

“And after all ...”

“... as soon as Geneva approves it ...”

“We have the MOAB ready to launch from Devesham at a moment’s notice...”

“...if anything goes wrong ...”

“...which it won’t.”

They had an eerie way of finishing each other’s sentences, but Keltin admired the scientists’ thoroughness. And rather than thinking outside the box like the Doctor might have done in that situation, Paxton and Bohr thought of multiple boxes, all of which had handy red buttons Keltin could press in the nick of time.

Keltin honestly had second thoughts when they counted down to activation of their lash-up. But at this stage, reports were coming in of entire streets in Durham decimated, buildings burnt to the ground, people fleeing in terror. It was surprisingly petty and brutal for a space-faring race, which indicated to Keltin that they enjoyed it. And the prospect of sick aliens getting kicks out of flattening charming Northern market towns made Keltin angry enough to give the order with extreme prejudice.

Did Keltin have any indication that the plan, and the weapon, might not be as simple and effective as his scientific advisors let on? It was true he hadn’t expected it to knock out the inhabitants of Durham and send them into a comatose stupor. But they, and the M.O., maintained it was a short-term side effect and before long, everyone would be back to normal.

The big indication was when Paxton and Bohr tore off their lab coats and ran into town, breaking car windows, stealing CDs, and kicking anybody they passed (especially the unconscious and helpless Durhamites).

“Keltin’s *scientific advisors* were the two looters we met outside that electronics store?” The Doctor hoped it would make more sense when he said it out loud.

“And you didn’t think that was suspicious?” Simon asked.

“Of course I thought it was suspicious!” Siddig snapped. “But Major Keltin didn’t—”

“Because *he’d* ordered them to fire the blasted thing, no doubt under pressure from Hoffman,” the Doctor concluded. “And not content with that blunt instrument, UNIT thinks it can outgun the Varanost in orbit with this ludicrous MOAB plan.” He gave a breathless, mirthless laugh. “Do you have any idea how exhausting it is saving you from yourselves?”

Siddig, Simon, and Carl roved their eyes around the hangar, trying to avoid the Doctor’s angry alien glare. He clapped his hands together, and rounded on Azaxia. “Well, an unpleasant solution though it may be, at least we can close the file on that one. Now we have the second unresolved question: what do the Varanost want with you, Azaxia?”

“Why not ask us yourself, Doctor?” the harsh reptilian voice rasped from across the hangar.

They all spun around, to see two Varanost robed in even more elaborate bones and limbs from conquered prey. The leader stepped forward and bowed with overdone obsequy. "I am Sector Commander Koodos. I understand, Doctor, that you have caused our strike on this planet a great deal of hardship. It is only fitting that the Varanost exact their retribution against you personally."

Keltin and Zhukov were climbing out of the chopper when they saw the aliens marching the Doctor, Sergeant Siddig, and his three friends out of the hangar.

"Right, you scaly sods," cried the Major, "stop right there or I'll give you a bellyful." To illustrate his threat, he indicated Zhukov's Lianthan phase pistol.

Koodos nodded. "You are admirable scavengers of your betters, human. Though our own phase discriminators have a wider bandwidth than the Lianthan type. I'd advise you to pillage from better sources."

"I can't wait to pillage from your little flying saucer, sunshine." He clicked the safety catch off the Lianthan sidearm and gestured at the Doctor and his friends. "Hand 'em over. This is me askin' real nicely."

"You know I cannot. Azaxia ..." The Varanost's eyes almost fluttered in joy as he looked at her. "She must accompany us, as must the Time Lord. I will keep the anachronistic human as well." Koodos nodded to his subordinate, who roughly pushed Carl forward. "This human serves no purpose. So I exchange him ... for you."

"Don't go, sir!" Zhukov cried, but Keltin spied an advantage and stepped forward. There was a grim kind of honour in the alien's actions and the Major thought it important to recognise that. Funnily, he felt a closer kinship with this barbarian than the Doctor.

"Doctor?" Carl called uncertainly, as he was pushed past the no-man's land to the chopper.

"Find your wife, Carl," the Doctor replied serenely. "You must put your family first. I've lost family myself, I truly hope you are spared that pain."

Koodos and his prisoners were enveloped in the pink glow and projected up to the ship. The other Varanost pointed his weapon at Zhukov. "You human scum will take me to the Varanost strike force and revive them at once."

Maggie tried to assure herself there was nothing she could do, but she still felt sickened as she stood behind the UNIT soldiers, watching obliviously as the Doctor and the others were teleported away.

The other Varanost was waving frantically at Zhukov, who had lowered the exotic alien firearm and obeyed the alien's command. The other personnel at the R.A.F. base were nowhere to be seen. There was a peculiar atmosphere in the whole place.

As the two turned away, Maggie could scarcely believe her eyes. The Varanost were looming over Zhukov and preparing to murder him, and he was looking drowsy and listless.

Again, she thought of sensible actions, but with the Doctor on the wrong end of a teleport beam and people about to die, Maggie didn't have many sensible options open to her. Luckily, Zhukov had tossed his alien rifle within her reach. She grabbed it and aimed it at the giant purple invader. Her stomach again lurched uncomfortably as it looked her up and down and grinned sadistically.

There were six Varanost in Maggie's sights, and she randomly flicked a switch on the side of the weapon. "I don't know how this thing works, but I'll start pressing all the buttons at the same time if you bums don't come along quietly."

The Varanost at the front looked even more delighted to hear this. "I admire your bravery, human. After I ritually decapitate you, I will be sure to wear your head in pride of place over my left shoulder."

"Gee, thanks." Maggie closed her eyes and squeezed the trigger. A green blast ripped in front of her, blowing back all six Varanost.

The sight seemed to shake Zhukov out of his funk, and he stood up and looked admiringly at Maggie's handiwork. "Perhaps there might be a job for you at UNIT, Miss Weitz."

"Don't tell the Doctor I did that?" She tapped the foot of her unconscious challenger with the rifle. "Not that these barbarians don't deserve it, but ... will they be all right?"

"I think so. These weapons seem to do nothing worse to the Varanost than a heavy stun setting."

"And what about you? You looked a little stunned yourself. Just throwing your weapon down and letting them kill you?"

Zhukov pressed his forehead wearily. "I hope it was nothing ..." He knew what had happened to Bohr and Paxton though, and realised he would need to keep his concentration.

The Doctor rummaged around in the pockets of his coat distractedly, and then shot Simon and Azaxia a forlorn look. "It's at times like this I wish I still carried a musical instrument."

"Of all the things to look for ..." the Silurian growled.

“Sometimes a jaunty tune on the old recorder is just the thing to take your mind off your troubles. And in the absence of my sonic screwdriver there’s always the off-chance I could find the right pitch to disable the force field.”

This prompted an ingenuous laugh from Azaxia.

They had been transported to a large, anonymous grey-walled holding area. A force field glowed on one extreme end, and three dull metallic walls penned them in on the others.

Sector Commander Koodos narrowed his kohl-black eyes throughout their conversation and balled up his four fists, and Azaxia for one wondered how the warrior would have reacted to a musical interlude. The thought of the Varanost covering its ears in horror was a further source of amusement.

Major Keltin had tried to discuss matters with the Sector Commander, but the Varanost ignored him. As a result, the UNIT major was occupying himself by testing the solidity of the cell walls and grumbling inarticulately to himself.

The Doctor rapped on the force field and asked, “What do you want with us then, Koodos?”

“You will see when the Commodore speaks to you,” Koodos replied. With a peeved tone that would have been amusing in other circumstances, he continued, “He tells me to capture the scientist dressed in the rustic woollen mariner’s robes, and I have done so.”

The Doctor straightened the shawl collar of his fishing sweater. “A butcher and a fashion critic? You Varanost get more and more likeable.”

“Your companion is to ensure that you do not try to escape. If you try to do so he will be put to death.”

“I’ve done nothing to you,” the Doctor complained.

“Your futile resistance to our incursion has killed many good warriors.”

“We had nothing to do with that,” Simon shouted. “The Doctor is a good man. He has saved many lives. He does not kill people.”

Koodos nodded. “Good. Had you admitted to it I would have killed you at once. The Varanost believe that men of science do not kill.”

“Then I may fall short of your morality, Koodos. I have more deaths on my conscience than I care to admit. I’m sorry you have to hear this Simon, but I don’t deserve your faith.”

Simon shook his head. “I have not known you long, but I know that you are a good man. You are the sort of man I would wish to be my father.”

Koodos turned away from the two prisoners, seeing no purpose in any further communication.

In the corner of the cell, Siddig took Keltin aside in a mildly insubordinate manner. Talking with the Doctor had confirmed some of his doubts about his superior, and he

asked in a low voice so the Doctor would not hear, "Sir, will they go ahead with the MOAB?" in the hope those doubts would be dispelled.

"That's up to General Hoffman. But I see no reason why not," Keltin replied matter-of-factly. Siddig felt a great deal worse to hear this, and still worse when he realised it was exactly what he expected to hear.

Maggie was sure that the military people were hiding something. She did not trust them at all. They spoke with fear and hate, not strength and vitriol. They spoke of death as casually as they might discuss the weather.

General Hoffman turned out to be the most formidable of the lot, even more starkly bloodthirsty than Major Keltin. She had arrived at the scene, and allowed Maggie, as the sole representative of the Doctor's point of view, to sit in on their briefing.

As she listened to the details of their newest attack plan, Maggie wished she had the Doctor's understanding and perspective. Instead she could only rely on her feelings: a sickening wrench in her gut that washed over her in greater waves of repulsion at the escalating wrongness of their strategy.

"We are going to propose a prisoner exchange. Once they fall for the bait and drop their ships' defensive shielding, we will use the MOABs to annihilate them." General Hoffman saw Maggie's glare, and it affected her enough that she had to add, "Make no mistake, Miss Weitz, we are doing this only to defend our planet."

"What is this MOAB?" Maggie asked.

"Mother of all Bombs," Hoffman explained. "They're almost as powerful as an atomic bomb but without the radioactive fallout."

"You're going to fire this at their spacecraft? And steal the technology?"

"The people at Porton Down wouldn't mind a look at one, but I'm sure the bulk will go to Skunkworks in the US."

"Why not simply use a neutron bomb?" Maggie cajoled the UNIT officer. "Clean, efficient, no one left to ask any awkward questions, on either side."

"That would be overkill, Maggie," Hoffman replied. "We have a job to do and when it's over, maybe the Doctor will do us the courtesy of looking over all the technology. What with Paxton and Bohr being out of commission, we'll need some expert eyes. I'm sure with his insights he'll help us crack the technology in weeks rather than years."

Maggie rounded on the general. The other officers had become increasingly quiet as the two women's raised voices dominated the meeting. "You know what the Doctor would advise? Defend the world, weigh the consequences of your action. And if you see no other way than this butchery, don't expect him to make you feel good about your atrocities and wash the blood off your hands afterwards." Her anger spent, Maggie sat

back down and looked down at her hands. Maggie normally hated confrontation, and found her entire body quivering. But she knew what the Doctor would think — she knew what *she* thought — and she had to make her feelings known.

Hoffman blinked, her expression infuriatingly blank throughout the exchange. A bland smile now crept up her lips. “Thank you for your contribution, Maggie. I’m sure the victims of this invasion would be intrigued to know that a bunch of wanderers drifted in and tried to tie our hands against their murderers. Because you get to leave with the Doctor — I’m sure Earth feels to you more like a hotel than a home as you go on your merry way in that blue box. I ran a check on you — your native time is the 1990s, isn’t it? Do you honestly think if some crisis emerged in your time, you’d pay particular attention to the views of someone from the 1940s? All this is as abstract to you as the moon. But *we* have to deal with the aftermath. We’ll have to sift through rubble and rebuild. So sue me, Miss Weitz, for wanting that rebuilding to be as painless, and to involve as few human casualties, as possible.”

Hoffman’s tone remained measured throughout this diatribe, which made it hit harder. Maggie took the point but equally wanted Hoffman to take hers.

“Doing the right thing isn’t some trend that comes and goes in different times, General. And if there are Vara-nuts casualties?” Maggie really wished she could remember alien names; it would make her feel a tad more authoritative.

“They’re nothing to us. Even the Doctor, according to my men, hadn’t heard of them. So why should we spare them and their barbaric foot-soldiers any further thought?”

“I’m just worried that, given the last method you used in this invasion and its unintended consequences, whether you all will have as much to clean up from your own handiwork as the aliens’.”

Koodos was finally ordered to send Azaxia and the Doctor to meet the Commodore.

“About time,” the Doctor sniffed. “Very impolite to keep his prize victims waiting. What if *we’re* not ready to see him?”

“Get going,” the Varanost commanded, prodding the Time Lord in the back with his lower two arms.

“As Earth’s military representative, shouldn’t I get to go too?” Major Keltin barked.

“Azaxia is the only strategist from your planet the Commodore has any wish to see,” Koodos replied cuttingly.

The Sector Commander led them through a maze of gunmetal tunnels and out into a large, simple command centre. The Doctor looked at each computer terminal and

technical display, hoping to get some glimmer of how these Varanost had come so far and jumped through time.

"I don't understand it," he confessed to Azaxia. "Nothing about them adds up. Their technology is barely more than three centuries advanced than the humanity's. And their warrior castes, and all this childish trophy-collecting ... it's downright feudal. Nowhere near your people's level."

"We never left our planet," Azaxia noted.

"Don't be so modest, Azaxia. You managed to completely harness your psychic powers and shape the planet to your needs, and what's more you did it without polluting and industrializing like your successors. No, someone or something else has pushed the Varanost to Earth, put them in contact with you. But why?"

Their conversation was cut short when the Commodore, a taller and more battle-scarred Varanost, swept into the room. His armour was augmented with the greatest array of trophies yet: a full skull from some long-dead piscine foe bobbed with morbid comedy between his upper and lower two arms.

"Greetings Doctor, Lady Azaxia." He dipped his head to the Silurian with overdone gallantry. "I am Supreme Coordinating Commodore Dangoor. Welcome to our imperial flagship."

The Doctor rubbed at his wrists, where Koodos had held him roughly. "So this is the Varanost command centre? I've seen better, chum." He dragged his long index finger down one computer screen and tutted at the dust it produced. "Have you considered *Changing Lairs*? No? Never mind. I'm sure you know what you're doing. So, now that we're here, will you be so good as to tell us what you want with us?"

Dangoor's two right arms brushed the Doctor aside, and took hold of Azaxia in a strange embrace. "It is Azaxia who brought us here. We made psychic connection from across the galaxies. We were compelled to take this planet in order to claim her."

"Claim' me?" Azaxia repeated. "By what right? For what purpose?"

"Only out of the utmost respect, my lady." Koodos and Dangoor's four arms locked together in a double 'X' shape, and they sank to their knees. "We need you to lead us to greatness. A new dynasty must lead us from the tired old ways, bring us into the future, if we are to succeed in our glory. The Varanost have lost our purpose and you—only you—can restore it to us."

Having made her points, Maggie was barely surprised when General Hoffman 'suggested' she be driven back to the makeshift headquarters. "You can check on your civilian friends," she said soothingly. "And I promise I am taking your opinions fully into account."

Though she didn't believe Hoffman, Maggie thanked her anyway. Though she wished the General would take a measured tone, she understood how tempting it must be to take the quickest solution. And if she had not travelled in the TARDIS and seen stranger aliens than the Varanost as a matter of course, Maggie wondered whether she would find the Doctor's even-handedness in the face of brutality against ordinary human civilians as frustrating and impractical as Hoffman did.

The strange behaviour Maggie noticed at the R.A.F. base was even more pronounced among the other UNIT soldiers. She wandered around the grounds outside the Claypool Library and the uniformed people around barely noticed her. Some were leaping over their rifles as if playing a children's game; others lay in the grass staring up at the sky. Perhaps the madness of this MOAB plan was reflected in their carefree abandon, but she doubted it.

She looked inside the heavily guarded marquee holding the unconscious Varanost squads. Aside from the occasional flicker of a tongue or flail of an arm, they were still as placid and peaceful as ever.

Returning to the library, she found Carl, but her gladness to see him was immediately tempered by the sadness on his face at the prone figure by his side.

Maggie gave him a tight, sad smile and looked down at the sleeping woman.

"Brenda?"

He nodded.

Brenda was about forty, with emphatically straight hair and a placid face, the pale skin blotched with red spots due to the day's stress. Her grey eyes stared sightlessly up at the ceiling and her chest rose and fell rhythmically; she looked as though she would sit up at any moment. Maggie could see she was a good match for Carl: even in this state, she had a humming sense of strength and resolve.

"Least I found her," he whispered. "The kids—" He broke off into choking tears.

Maggie stood with him and held his hand sympathetically.

General Hoffman paced up and down the hangar, looking at the first consignment of MOABs as they filed past on their way to the waiting space shuttle. "They are so beautiful, I should give them all names."

"Are you feeling all right, ma'am?" Corporal Zhukov asked.

"Of course, Corporal," she answered matter-of-factly. "Now you name the girls and I'll name the boys."

"Ma'am, I have other duties. The Ministry want your report uploaded at the earliest opportunity. Devesham needs one last OK from the United Nations Secretary General. This isn't the kind of thing you can undo."

"I should hope not. The last thing I would want is to undo this." Hoffman waved him away impatiently. "Oh very well, but don't say I didn't offer to share the fun with you."

"No ma'am," Zhukov replied.

"It is fun isn't it? Saving the buttercups from alien invaders?"

As Zhukov saluted and departed, he remembered his own dizzy spell, nearly letting the Varanost kill him. He had a sinking feeling, and he turned back to be sure this had all really happened. General Hoffman stroked the shell of the nearest MOAB, sighing dreamily.

The Doctor stood back and soaked in as much as he could about the surroundings and the situation. The biggest unknown here was Azaxia. He didn't know her well enough to truly guess her reaction to the adoration of the Varanost.

Dangoor had brought in some more of his finest soldiers, who were bowing and scraping as they showed the Silurian some of their previous conquests. Azaxia nodded respectfully, the trace of a twinkle in her eye. The Doctor hoped she was as unimpressed as he was. But Silurians did have a martial tendency, and there were all too many beings who grasped power enthusiastically.

Azaxia broke off Dangoor's recollection of one of their campaigns to ask: "Why don't you tell me about your world? Is it big? Is it small? Is it purple?"

"Var is the jewel of a vast empire."

The Doctor snorted, involuntarily. The Varanost turned as one, murderous gleams in their eyes.

"Now Doctor, don't be rude," Azaxia chided. "A vast empire counts for something whether it's here or in the M33 galaxy. So how vast would you say it is, Commodore? What did you do, conquer all those who can't defend themselves?" Her tone became brittle. "The weak do that, Dangoor, the weak. The strong protect their neighbours. My planet has neighbours, strong neighbours."

"You are lying. For some reason we have arrived on this 'Earth' untold ages after the glory days of your people, Azaxia. We thought you had opened the gateway that led us here."

"No, I did not. I felt your presence in my mind, but I didn't know you would come here."

"Well, now that we are here, this planet will be ours within a day."

"How many warriors have you lost? Is the death toll worth it?" Azaxia considered the strange people she had met that day and how those brief interactions had changed her perspective on the race. She still thought them uncivilised, but she could not say they were animals. "The apes will destroy themselves and the world along with them, rather

than be slaves." She thought of the competitive nature of those two offspring of Carl's. "It's in their nature to destroy things rather than let others have them."

Dangoor looked at the Doctor with a hint of desperation. "You know more of this planet. What do you say? What can we do to make our point of view heard?"

"Azaxia is very perceptive. The ancestors of the humans below poisoned the wells of their villages if forced to give them up. Now they have bombs that can shatter planets."

"You lie, they have very primitive weapons. This planet will fall. From what we know of Time Lords, you should care little for its fate."

The Doctor sighed. "You couldn't be more wrong there, my friend. I love this world and I hold an abiding loyalty to it, as great as if I were born here."

"I find this loyalty to an alien planet intriguing ... tell us of your home, Doctor. We have heard something of your civilisation but are eager to know more."

"So you can ransack it when Azaxia here agrees to lead you?" The Doctor smiled sadly. "You might succeed, at that. My world ... isn't worth talking about. I myself am an alien here, just like you. Unlike you, I study the planets I visit and respect their inhabitants. That might not mean much to you, but it is vital to understand if you are to make progress, *true* progress rather than simply working out how to more efficiently pummel victims into submission."

There was the briefest glimmer of comprehension in Dangoor's eyes. If he did not understand the worth of this concept directly, he nevertheless appreciated it was worth attempting to wrap his head around. "Go on."

"I try to help them when I can and protect them from harm."

"You will not stop us. Especially with Azaxia to lead us, and to guide us to further jewels." A desperate, lovestruck note entered Dangoor's voice as he said this.

"Stop you? My dear fellow, if I've learnt nothing else today, I've learnt this: the people of this planet no longer need my protection. I was about to leave when you captured me. Every step of the way today, I've had one or another uniformed lackey telling me they aren't going to listen to me. The lessons I taught have been forgotten. The humans can now look after themselves all too well it seems." He cast an anxious eye at the graphic of that beautiful blue-green world on the Varanost's tactical screen. "I simply didn't want to see their fall from grace."

A Varanost sentry had returned to check up on Simon, Siddig, and Keltin in their cell.

"Have the Doctor and Azaxia defeated your commodore yet?"

The sentry flashed its purple teeth malevolently. "Why do you not fear us, boy? Do you not feel the fear we inspire in your fellow humans? We are far superior in every way to all other life forms we have encountered."

“Well, it seems to me if the Doctor hasn’t heard of you, you Varanost must not get out much.”

As the four arms waved and rattled the force field barrier impotently, Simon pondered why the alien was so talkative. “Are you massively insecure? You feel the need to boast to your prisoners to feel good about yourself?”

“This has been a stressful campaign. Many of my bondsmen are held prisoner below. We expected a simple and bloodthirsty conquest and instead we are grinding out this conflict with a race we hold beneath contempt.”

“I’m so not interested.” Simon replied. “All you have said is meaningless to me. The only way you could impress me is to release me and say it was all a big mistake.”

“If only things were that simple. Tell me of your friend.”

Simon shrugged. “The Doctor is going to defeat you.”

“No, not the Doctor. Tell me of Azaxia. What planet does she come from?”

“This one, Earth.”

“You co-exist? Forgive me if I’m mistaken, but she is the only one of her kind on the surface of this world.”

“Right now, yes. I ended up back in her time, then the Doctor sent us forward here. He thought it was something to do with whatever sent you out to Earth.” Simon shook his head, feeling this explanation was getting needlessly convoluted. “I couldn’t explain it all to you, even if I wanted. I think there’s some bigger force that’s moving things around—moving me back into the path of the Silurians, putting your leader in touch with Azaxia, moving you all here. But how the hell do I know what all this movement means? Work it out for yourself, if you’re half as smart as you claim to be you’ll figure it out.”

“Azaxia is intelligent,” he qualified with a hint of self-deprecation. “We hope ...” The sentry blinked and looked to the floor. “We hope she will lead us and restore our purpose.”

“She’s smart, I’ll give you that. I prefer the term insufferably arrogant. She likes to think she’s the best person ever, but she’s not. She’s just as flawed as the rest of us, just in her own special way.”

“We need intelligence. The Varanost ... we are not as clever as we pretend.”

“Really?” Simon stifled a laugh. Nothing of the Varanost had made him think they were particularly clever. Even having a spaceship seemed a trifle beyond their capabilities. “I hadn’t worked that out already.”

“Our development has increasingly stagnated as we put more effort into our interstellar conquest. Our warriors use certain drugs to develop their bodies and minds. I tried to use them to enhance myself, to be like them. I have something of an allergy, so my mind is not as enhanced, to see all the possibilities of command.”

Despite himself, this concept intrigued Simon. “So you just act like a psycho soldier to fit it?”

"I just wanted to go to war alongside my brothers, fight to save our world and spread our glorious purpose, but I did too good a job and I kept getting promoted."

Simon shrugged, "I guess if it isn't broke, don't fix it?"

In the corner of the cell, Siddig fought his boredom by eavesdropping. "Are you getting a load of this?" he asked Major Keltin.

The Major was more of a worry than ever; his eyes were wide and an idiotic grin was plastered across his face. He only responded inarticulately, lost in thought.

"The Doctor was right about that weapon you used, wasn't he?"

"Mmm."

"You're going the way of Paxton and Bohr." He wondered what other UNIT officers had been exposed and what would happen to them.

"I've got to get better people under my command," Keltin said to himself. "The buttercups look so nice this time of year, must save the planet, save the buttercups, at all costs."

Corporal Zhukov tried convincing the medical officer that General Hoffman had gone insane. "She's naming the bombs sir."

The medic looked puzzled. "Tell me Corporal, have you been under great stress lately?"

"What? No, I've been a member of UNIT for ten years."

"How long have you thought you were a cat?"

"I am not a cat."

"Good, we're making progress at last. Now about this banana problem ..."

"As a UNIT operative, I am trained to deal with what's going on," Zhukov insisted. "As, I thought, were we all."

"What is going on? I'm talking to you about bananas and you're talking about aliens. Which one of us is mad do you think?"

"I am perfectly sane."

"Then it must be me. Don't let me detain you then Tiddles, I have these bananas to sort out. Tell you what, I'll put some cat food in a bowl for you later, along with a saucer of milk."

"Da." Zhukov cringed when he thought of his moment of weakness, surrendering to the Varanost. If Maggie had not been there, how ignominious would his death have been? He began to suspect that the madness was contagious. If so, he hoped he could keep it from resurfacing in himself.

“What does your heart tell you?” Simon asked the Varanost sentry, who was now sprawled across the floor of the guard post, tracing circles with his four arms.

“To just enjoy a life of peace and luxury.”

“Well then I think you have your answer.”

“If the others find out the truth about my laziness, they will kill both me to preserve the purity of our people.”

“Can you not retire? Say you are injured and return home?”

“Our warriors fight or die. If I return home they will kill me for being a coward.”

“Your death is assured.” His superior, Koodos spoke from the open doorway. “You have disgraced our people, you have perverted the nobility of our kinfolk. You are a disgrace to everything we hold dear.”

“I just want to find a nice place to settle down and live,” the sentry explained. “We could share the barren parts of this planet, make it ours. Peace can be ours.”

“Do not speak to me, betrayer.” Koodos advanced into the room.

“I’ll speak as I see fit.”

“Next you’ll be releasing the prisoners.”

“And why shouldn’t I?” The sentry batted at a switch and the force field dimmed.

“We’ll be going then.” Simon walked towards the doorway. Siddig made to follow, edging along the walls to keep out of the eyeline of the two very unstable and violent aliens in the centre of the room. Keltin, his arm locked in the sergeant’s, followed somewhat unwillingly.

“You are incapable of performing your duties. As is Dangoor. I am resolved to assume command of this invasion.”

“Why you?” the sentry retorted. “I am a better leader than you. I pity you Koodos, how pathetic you are. I am better than you at everything, I fight for a goal, a home, you fight for nothing but the fight itself.”

Once he was outside Simon and Siddig dragged a stray piece of bulkhead in front of the door to slow down the Varanost. The hall of the ship was crumbling. There was definitely something odd about this whole race and their invasion.

“Now how do we get off this ship?” Siddig grumbled.

“Not without the Doctor,” Simon answered.

Supreme Coordinating Commodore Dangoor circled Azaxia in the command centre. He had dismissed his senior staff, and apparently forgotten about the Doctor, as he was behaving as if he and his military paramour were alone. Much of what he had seen of the Varanost and their ways had been unintentionally amusing, and the Doctor had to remind himself more than once that one shouldn’t make fun of a deadly alien invader. But this strange little tableau irresistibly called to mind a spotty teenaged boy summoning

up the courage to ask the prom queen for a dance. And when Dangoor made his proposal, it was said with the same tongue-tripping over-formality.

"If we could get your agreement, Azaxia ... I wonder if you would ... merely as a show of faith ... allow us to hack a limb or two off this Time Lord. We're told he can't be killed in the conventional sense, but we would so like to see him in pain."

"I'm sorry, Dangoor. I can't allow that. In fact I don't have time for this." The bridge filled with the shrill wail of her third eye, and soon the purple alien was fast asleep. She turned to the Doctor and shrugged. "It seemed the kindest way to let him down."

"Well I hope you won't misjudge *me*, Azaxia, but I thought for a moment you might be tempted."

She laughed. "You're right Doctor. I have my standards also. These Varanost are sloppy, clumsy. They may not be of our glorious calibre, but ... they are not even of the apes'."

"My ears are burning!" Simon called as he entered the room, waving Varanost scimitars. Behind him, Sergeant Siddig and a curiously vacant Major Keltin stumbled into the room.

"Shouldn't we get away from here?" Simon asked, as he patted the Doctor's back gently.

The Doctor scanned the star charts, tracing their path. "Indeed. But perhaps before we go, Azaxia, could you give your first and last order as Galactic Admiral of the Varanost fleet?"

She followed the path of his finger. "Is that the wormhole they came through?"

"Yes, and I rather fancy we should get their ships back to the other side of it before UNIT launch their infernal MOAB."

Azaxia planted the telepathic command in the sleeping commodore's mind.

"Will the buttercups be safe, do you think Doctor?" Keltin chipped in.

Siddig looked sadly at his commander. "I agree Doctor."

"But aren't there still whole squadrons of Varanost in that library outside Durham?" Simon asked.

"Quite." Like a virtuoso pianist, the Doctor played across the Varanost keyboard. "There, I've punched through the exclusion zone from that UNIT weapon, and we can use their transmat to do what I believe is referred to as the 'old switcheroo'."

"They go up, we go down?" Azaxia guessed.

The Doctor beamed as he pressed the final activation sequence. "Earth, Wind, and Fire couldn't have put it better."

The mass teleport, followed a moment later by the Varanost fleet's high-speed withdrawal, was a matter for celebration. The only problem was Devesham Mission Control was still counting down to the shuttle launch with the MOABs aboard.

Corporal Zhukov needed a flag officer's approval to scrub the launch, and the only one nearby was talking to her silo of weapons.

General Hoffman had been busy; she had almost finished naming the bombs. "I'll call you Laura and you're Henry, you're Tanya and you're Rupert..."

"General Hoffman." Corporal Zhukov advanced hesitantly. There seemed to be some violence threatened beneath the general's seeming tranquillity. "The threat has disappeared. Since I haven't been able to find anyone to relieve you of command, I wonder if you might give the all-clear to Devesham?"

"Threat over? I've got so much work to do, Corporal." Hoffman cocked her ear to the nearest MOAB. "Tanya here is just aching to be deployed."

"Tell Tanya to wait," the imperious voice of the Doctor commanded. He rushed over to Zhukov. "Let's get to Mission Control and scrap that launch."

Zhukov looked hopefully at Major Keltin. "I don't suppose he's any more able to give the order?"

Siddig shook his head. "He's on about buttercups. I believe Geneva will allow the former scientific advisor to assume executive power?"

"Quite. *These* are orders I don't mind giving." The Doctor raced off to save the day.

Siddig and Zhukov guided the Major and the General out. "Off we toddle, sir. You are going to save buttercups, sir." This was the best way to preserve their dignity, until the effects of the strange radiation wore off and they could return to duty.

"Did we win? Is the planet safe?"

Maggie could hardly believe her eyes as the ugly pink stain of the Varanost teleport beam dispersed and a sliver of sunlight shot through the grey Durham sky. She ran across the field to give her friend a big hug.

"Yes, the Doctor saved the day," Simon answered. "We mopped up the survivors and sent them home."

"And we'll just pop over to that wormhole they fell through to make sure they don't trouble this corner of space again," the Doctor declared. "From what Simon tells me, their morale is quite low so I doubt the chain of command will hold up for much longer. Perhaps the people of Var might overthrow their military hierarchy and turn to more positive pastimes. Well, a chap can dream."

Carl ran out to join them himself, with Brenda looking a little dazed but conscious and happy. "Wait till I tell the kids. We made it through."

"Of course!" the Doctor cried. "The teleport beam and the fallout zone from that ghastly weapon of Keltin's were cancelling each other out and keeping everyone in that state!" He hugged Brenda, who was a little surprised at the contact from the stranger. "I'm glad you're awake. No ill effects?"

Brenda shrugged. "Hell of a headache, but otherwise fine."

Carl squeezed Maggie's hand. "Thanks Maggie. Thanks Doctor."

Brenda smiled and shook their hands. "Didn't have any idea this would turn out to be ... well, such a Thursday."

"It's Friday now, love."

"Thank God for that," she said with a weary chuckle. "I'm ready for the weekend." They made their goodbyes, and Maggie gave Carl another hug.

Siddig gladly drove the Doctor and his entourage back to Durham's city centre.

"I hope UNIT didn't do too badly, despite everything."

"You represented yourself very well, Siddig. If my recommendation counts for anything anymore, I'll be happy to provide you with a reference next time I'm in this neck of the woods."

"I'd like that Doctor. One day I hope I'll find a job where I'm not stuck with all the paperwork."

Siddig stood and offered the Doctor a salute as he stepped inside the police box. The Time Lord batted away the formality. The door closed, and Siddig stayed to watch it fade out of existence and listen to its wailing, alien engines. It was a welcome dose of magic after the difficult two days.

"Right then. First we'll make sure this wormhole is closed up and then we'll get you two to your rightful times and places." The Doctor threw his coat onto the railing, rolled up the sleeves of his sweater, and tapped in the coordinates.

"Oh very well," Azaxia replied. "I have a most fascinating report to write though. I can see why you find humans so fascinating. They are a most puzzling species. I almost find myself liking them at times. They are not very intelligent but they have a way of using it to their advantage. They have a lot of courage in the face of danger and they never give up."

"Well, perhaps you won't treat our ancestors so badly," Simon suggested.

The Doctor pulled a yo-yo from his pocket and tossed it to Azaxia. "You're absolutely right, my friend. Never give up. As are you, Simon. Let's all try to be kind."

"D'accord," Simon agreed.

Azaxia tried to make the yoyo work but all it did was defy her by refusing to work. "I think this device is defective Doctor." She put it on the table.

"Never give up Azaxia." The Doctor chuckled.

Maggie picked the yoyo up and performed some of the easier tricks. "It just takes patience." She handed it back to Azaxia. "I'll help you if you like. How about we grab a bite?"

The three companions left the console room, and with their departure the Doctor's face darkened with anxiety. A few minutes later he stopped at the coordinates of the wormhole. The space-time phenomenon had closed up, but there was a small object floating in the now clear region of space.

It was a white box; a Time Lord message cube.

The Doctor opened the TARDIS doors, and sure enough the little box flew right into his hand.

The handwritten message appeared in the air above him:

Nicely done Doctor. First you sorted out Count Wampyr, then you nobbled Desmond Berry, the Great Prophet², and now that time-displaced Frenchman and the Varanost. You're fantastic, me old son! See you in London 23/11/2963! Don't be late!

The Doctor frowned. He recognised the handwriting.

² See *The Doctor Who Project: The Horror of Count Wampyr, The Evil, and Homeward*.

The Doctor and Maggie return in
Timebase

The TARDIS arrives on Earth at the height of the Silurian civilisation—and the Doctor and Maggie find a Madagascan orphan from the eighteenth century, Simon Denon, has been shunted back in time and may soon be the target of the Silurians' hunting parties. In the confusion they are forced to take Simon's hunter, the formidable Silurian warrior princess Azaxia, along with them.

Jumping forward to Durham in the near future, the Doctor quickly discovers Azaxia's reputation precedes her. For a fleet of barbarians from space, the Varanost, have descended in search of her—and they have turned the place upside down and caused mayhem for the poor locals in the process.

It's a full-on invasion of Earth, but a new generation of UNIT are on the scene to fight fire with fire. The bullish Major Keltin has his own blunt solution to this problem, and is choosing to play his cards close to his chest.

It will take all the Doctor's wits to keep humanity from destroying themselves along with the Varanost this time. But wits seem to be in short supply—the longer the UNIT personnel are exposed to their weapons of mass destruction, the more their reason breaks down. Worse, the Doctor does not know whether he can count on Azaxia to rebuke the invaders' offer—or be tempted by it.

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