

THE
DOCTOR WHO
PROJECT

EVIL

POLICE PUBLIC CALL BOX

POLICE TELEPHONE
FREE
FOR USE OF PUBLIC
ADVICE & ASSISTANCE
OBTAINABLE
IMMEDIATELY
OFFICERS & CARS
RESPOND TO
URGENT CALLS
PULL TO OPEN

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Published by Jigsaw Publications

Doctor Who, TARDIS © 1963, 2023 by BBC Worldwide
The Doctor Who Project © 2023 by Jigsaw Publications

First Printing October 2023

Cover design by Robert Carpenter
Interior design and layout by Bob Furnell

Jigsaw Publications
Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

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A TDWP/Jigsaw Publications Book

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Typeset in Calibri & Times Roman New

September 2022

Goodness, but Mars was red that night.

Was it Mars, though? It might have been Mars. Alycia Moran didn't really know. Could just as easily have been the taillight of a plane. But it was red, and it was in the sky, and if she said it was Mars then that meant it was Mars. Anyone who disagreed risked getting a smack in the mouth.

This train of thought was one of at least a dozen that Alycia had pondered that night, and although physically she was spent – exhausted might have been a better word – mentally, she could scarcely have been more alert. Alert, and *one hundred percent* sober. Honestly, officer! Sober as a judge and twice as serious.

Strictly between Alycia and herself, though, she had to admit she was a world away from sober. She was drunk; so very drunk.

And why not? She was eighteen and in her prime, and three days into Freshmen week at the University of East Essex, and if she wanted to be so very drunk, then she would jolly well *get* so very drunk. Anyone who challenged her, or questioned her decision to get so very drunk, risked getting a smack in the mouth.

Alas, one such smack had already been issued that night. Some tart in the Stallion nightclub, back in the city centre. Fully deserved, in principle – the tart was hitting on a lad that *she'd* seen first – but she did feel a trifle guilty that *she'd* drawn blood. Hadn't meant to do that; hadn't meant to hit quite that hard. And she supposed, if she was being entirely fair, the decision taken by the security staff to throw her out of the club was justified. And things could have been a whole lot worse: if the tart hadn't declined to press charges (good tart), then Alycia might well have been sitting in the back of a police van about now.

Her head was thundering, her throat painfully parched. She'd drunk plenty of fluid that night, but unfortunately most of it was alcohol. She hadn't had a glass of cool, crisp water for well over six hours and longed desperately for one now. She checked her

phone. 3:19 in the morning. Definitely past bedtime. She longed for sleep, but feared it too; sleep, she knew, would hasten the arrival of the morning (the *actual* morning, the light one) and she had an idea that it would entail a truly spectacular hangover that she was in no hurry to endure.

She tripped on thin air and staggered forwards, giggling, only just managing to remain upright. The campus was dead; her fellow students were either long since tucked up in bed (losers), or else still out on the town, partying the night away. She resented that she was no longer among them, but the door staff at the Stallion had more or less forced her into a taxi and told the driver to take her straight home, no matter what she might say to the contrary.

Yet despite her grievances, there was no denying that the university campus was strangely alluring at night. By day it was chocker-block (and that *was* an expression, anyone who said it wasn't risked getting a smack in the mouth), with students and staff rushing this way and that in a frenzied scrum of activity. By night, it slept soundly, peacefully, its slumber punctuated only by the occasional drunken student headed to or from their halls of residence, the buildings all around ghostly quiet and imposing in the gloom. The stars overhead were glorious, not a single cloud obscuring the view.

She came at last to the door of her hall; at least she *hoped* it was her hall. There were three identical, bare-brick blocks stacked side by side behind a little arcade of takeaways, and in her state it was essentially a lucky guess. Playing the odds. But she was reasonably optimistic that she had the right one.

Did she still have her passkey? Good question. Hopefully. She rummaged around in her handbag and found it not. She tried the pockets of her smart, slightly vomit-stained leather mini-jacket and found it nestled right at the bottom of one of them. She swiped the scanner beside the glass door, immensely grateful to hear it go "*beep*", confirming that she was free – though perhaps not entirely welcome – to enter. Water and bed were both moments away.

She stepped into the bright, forensic lights of the entrance hall, a poky little corridor with a noticeboard beside the door and a lift across the way. There were stairs to the upper floors, but being on the fourth, Alycia always took the lift. There were sanctimonious notices in the lift outlining how many calories taking the stairs would burn, and how much electricity was required to operate the lift, but she paid those no heed. Nobody – but nobody – told her how to live her life now that she was an adult. Anyone who tried risked...you know how it goes.

She passed the noticeboard, her gaze flickering briefly across the drinking sessions, clubs and societies, the stern notices regarding noise and hygiene, the reminders that tenants trashing their temporary homes risked a fine, and the instructions (as if they were morons) of what to do if the fire alarm went off. Leave the premises, was the long and short of it. Sound advice, but hardly advice that spelling out like that.

The notices on the board were written in Latin.

She stopped. She stared. She spoke not a word of Latin, but recognized the language when she saw it. Every single notice, poster and warning on the board was written in Latin, where English ought to have been – where English *had* been, she was sure, when she'd passed by on her way out earlier that night.

A prank, then? A jolly good one at that, and one she heartily applauded. For the student – or students – responsible had gone to great pains to ensure that the geography of the noticeboard remained unchanged, the Latin fire safety poster and crumpled notes all copied on identical paper and stuck precisely where the English originals had been.

“Brilliant,” she chortled, giggling as she skipped to the lift, jabbing her thumb once, twice, three times on the call button.

The lift was up on the fourth floor according to the display above the dull, beige double doors. She tapped her high-heeled, rather painful foot impatiently as she waited for it to descend, her skimpy black dress plastered to her skin with sweat. September had been unseasonably warm thus far, and the ventilation in the halls of residence was poor. One of several reasons the places were, frankly, a rip-off. Paper thin walls, stifling in the heat and (allegedly) dank in the cold, the en-suites little better than cupboards and the water pressure usually dismal.

She watched the display above the dull beige lift doors. Third floor...second floor...first...

Ground.

“Doors Opening,” it said smoothly, the doors parting with a metallic screech.

“Good evening.”

Alycia started, her heart lurching.

Her immediate thought was that it was simply another student, possibly potted like she was, a hardened night owl who had perhaps just finished on pre-drinks and was only now heading out to catch the witching hours of the nightlife. Or perhaps it was someone who had struck lucky, someone who had seduced his fellow student and gained access to their bedroom, and who was departing now, sheepishly, his face pink yet his heart aglow, from what might well have been his first time.

But once the shock of his presence had worn off, Alycia saw that the man in the lift was not that person. For one thing, he was middle-aged, not young. His black hair was flecked with strands of white, slicked back with copious amounts of oil so that it glistened beneath the overhead lights inside the lift. He had a silly pencil-thin moustache and wore a striped suit of the deepest, funereal black over an immaculate white shirt and midnight blue tie. On his feet were smart, pointy black leather shoes, so squeaky-clean that Alycia saw her own, drunken face in them when she glanced down.

There was a middle-aged man in the lift of the student halls, at 3:20 in the morning. A man with no business being there. Unless of course he was campus security, but he surely wasn't, dressed like that. His presence – so unexpected, so inexplicable – alarmed

her at first. But then she looked into his baby blue eyes and found comfort there. She returned his friendly smile.

"Hey," she said, fighting to curtail the slur in her voice. "Who are you?"

"Desmond Berry."

"Nice name," she said chirpily. "Unusual, but yeah...cool!"

"Well, thank you for saying so," he said smoothly, his gentle smile widening. "And what should I call you?"

"Alycia Moran."

"Moran, you say? Irish, am I right?"

"Oh," she said airily, waving a hand. "Down the line, yeah. My *-hiccup!*- great-grandparents were from Belfast."

He raised an eyebrow and chuckled softly. "And how much have you had to drink this evening, Miss. Moran?"

At that, Alycia became defiant. "I've had enough. Anyway...what are you doing *-hiccup!*- here? You aren't a student?"

He hung his head in mock shame. "No? What if I swore to be eighteen, and mature for my age?"

"I'd call you a bull...a liar."

He chuckled again. "Yes, and you would be right to do so. I'm a parent, just dropped off my lad. We were delayed. The traffic was ghastly."

"Oh right," Alycia said, a small, sober part of her relieved that there was a rational explanation for Desmond Berry's presence. "What's he studying?"

"Why, law," he replied. "And I'd be lying if I said I wasn't just the slightest bit boastful about that. And yourself?"

"Politics."

"Ah! Am I standing before our future Prime Minister?"

For a moment Alycia wondered whether to explain to Desmond Berry that her actual interest in politics ranged from scant to none. That she decided to enrol at university purely so that she could live the gloriously depraved life of a student for three years and get a better paid job at the end of it. That she selected Politics purely because, of all the subjects available at the University of East Essex, she thought it might be among the more tolerable, between the bouts of drinking and fun that were her primary reason for being there. She decided that she couldn't be bothered, so settled with, "I bloody hope not."

They laughed together for a few seconds before the merriment tailed off into an uncomfortable silence.

"Aren't you...getting out, then?" she asked him.

"Well, which floor do you want?"

"Fourth."

“Fourth. Well, forgive me, but I’d quite like to see you to your door. You do seem awfully tipsy, Miss. Moran.”

“I’m fine!” she insisted. “Trust me.”

“I don’t,” he said simply. “No, I’ll see you safely through your door, and after that you’re on your own. My good deed for the year. Jump in.”

There is something worth remembering about Alycia Moran: in spite of her temper, her apathy towards her studies, and her distinctly unhealthy relationship with alcohol, she was not a stupid girl. Far from it. She was clever and savvy and street smart, and had she been sober that night, be in no doubt, she would never have gotten into the lift with Desmond Berry. Even if his account of himself were true, he had no responsibility towards her, no reason to care whether she made it to her flat or passed out in the corridor (she was unlikely to come to harm in either case), and no reason in the world not to get out of the lift, bid her goodnight, and go on his way.

Had Alycia been sober that night, she would have insisted that he get out first and would have turned on her heel and marched straight to the security office if he had refused. But Alycia was not sober.

Alycia got into the lift with Desmond Berry, and the doors slid shut behind her.

We will not discuss what happened in that lift, in the final forty-three seconds of her short life.

But we will discuss, at length, everything that followed.

Truth be told, James Gallagher wasn’t enjoying himself that much.

He liked a drink as much as the next eighteen-year-old but given the choice between a raucous night of depravity or a cup of hot chocolate in bed, with a movie or boxset streaming in the background, he would always opt for the latter.

The trouble with student accommodation was how pathetically thin the walls were, how noise from any part of the building spread to all four corners, so that one’s bedtime was utterly dependent upon the activities of his fellow students. On the first night, James and his flatmates had thrown a party. Great fun. He got merrily drunk, made a fool of himself, came close (he thought) to kissing a girl before settling with an exchange of numbers, and spent the following morning hunched over the toilet bowl, vomiting his guts up. A thoroughly standard and satisfactory initiation to student life.

He’d planned to have an early night the next night, to catch up on the sleep he’d lost. He couldn’t: the flat downstairs had a party, and he barely slept a wink on account of the racket. Annoying, but so be it; it just meant he’d sleep well – *very* well – the third night. Right?

Wrong. The flat next door hosted a rave, which lasted until dawn.

On the fourth night he was so exhausted that he *did* sleep, despite the noise of at least one party elsewhere in the block, and rose feeling mightily relieved yet still terribly groggy, and more than a little aggrieved when he checked his phone and saw it was only six-thirty in the morning; he'd have liked a lie in, but he was never someone who could drift back off once he'd woken up.

He rose, showered, ate a healthy breakfast of muesli and strong, black coffee, and sat in the communal kitchen which he shared with his four flatmates, enjoying the rare silence that hung over the halls. After breakfast he put on his tracksuit and running shoes, deciding on a whim that he would take advantage of the early-morning hush to go for a jog. He examined himself in the mirror before he set off and had to confess that he liked what he saw. Dark-haired, well-built, his features sharp and genial. Oh yes, he was likely to get a girl here. Hopefully the one from yesterday, but if not her, then surely another. Whomever it was, he hoped that the first time, when it came, would be meaningful, that the connection he formed would be serious and long-lasting, not some base one-night stand with a girl he would never talk to again.

He left the flat and took the hallway at a jog, jabbing the button for the lift with his thumb and bobbing on the spot, loosening his muscles and joints as he waited for it to arrive, the gears groaning as the car clattered up from the ground floor. Really, he ought to have taken the stairs. He decided to add five minutes onto his jog and take the stairs upon his return to compensate.

"Third floor," the lift said smoothly. *"Doors opening."*

The doors rattled open.

And James Gallagher could only scream.

He screamed until he was out of breath, at which point he took a big gulp of air and screamed some more. He screamed like a girl, which many of the hungover lads whom he roused likely assumed that he was. Possibly that was why so many rushed so quickly to his aid, each convinced there was a damsel in distress in the hall, each keen to be the one to help her, each wanting to be the handsome hero to whom she would be eternally grateful. Doubtless they were disappointed to find James there instead, slumped down against the wall opposite the lift, pale and shaking, a quivering finger pointing at the lift.

The doors, by then, had closed automatically, and so one of the would-be heroes, his heart thumping, tentatively pressed the button to reopen them. And this time, James was the only person in the hall not to scream; he sobbed uncontrollably whilst all the lads around him wailed like banshees, and yet more students came crowding, horrified, into the hall.

The walls inside the lift were crimson, not only with splattered blood, but whole, seeping wads of dark red flesh like cutlets of rancid brazing steak. The mirror on the back wall was barely visible, human offal clinging to the glass in thick lumps. There was a hideous stench of iron and raw meat, wafting out of the open lift like foul breath.

But the blood and gore weren't the worst of it. They were surely bad enough, but they weren't enough to require some of the students – James Gallagher among them – to be carted off to the local hospital in shock, as the police and forensics swarmed in and sealed the block.

It was the skeleton that did that. The small, blood-soaked skeleton wearing a skimpy black dress and a killer pair of heels, with a little leather jacket that came up to its breast. The skeleton's eyes were still in their sockets, pretty blue eyes that stared straight ahead without seeing as it grinned its endless, deathly grin. It was huddled in the corner of the lift car, pathetic and shrunken, its skull resting against the wall as it grinned out into the corridor at the students who had, just hours before, been its friends and peers.

Deep Space

“A message!” the Doctor exclaimed, frowning thoughtfully at the console screen. “Hmm...must admit, I don’t typically welcome mail.”

“Good shout,” Maggie said, peering over his shoulder to look. “What is it? Bill, parking fine or scam?”

“Could be another court summons,” he pondered, jabbing his index finger on the blue letter icon which had flashed up, its intermittent beeping cut short as the message opened.

Followed by a bizarre smattering of Time Lord hieroglyphics that made Maggie’s head spin, a message in English flashed up.

The University of East Essex. Big trouble. Help needed. Come at once.

Kaylaar looked over the Doctor’s other shoulder and shuddered. “That doesn’t sound great.”

“Not the best,” the Doctor agreed. “Cor blimey, though...messaging the TARDIS direct, in mid-flight no less! That takes some serious doing. But look at it. No signature, no addressee, just a cry for help. I think this is a generic distress call, we just happened to pick it up.”

“The University of East Essex,” Maggie read back. “Where’s that?”

“Hmm? Oh. Earth. The United Kingdom. A few miles outside of London. April 2023, judging by the coordinates.”

She and Kaylaar exchanged a look over the Doctor’s back. There was a time when they might have suggested letting somebody else answer the plea. Why should it be their problem? It was none of their business. But those days – days that shamed Maggie to think back on – were long gone. She’d been with the Doctor long enough to know that wasn’t how he rolled. It wasn’t how anyone should roll. They were going, no question about it. And more to the point, though it filled her with trepidation, she *wanted* to help. Being with the Doctor had improved her like that. Her and Kaylaar both.

"This likely to be a bumpy ride?" he asked the Doctor, who had already started priming the engines.

"Yes, very much," the Doctor said happily, prancing around the console, flicking this switch and that, yanking levers and pressing buttons, the engines making metallic wheezes beneath their feet. "We'll have to pass through the Uszior Cluster to reach Earth. You both ready?"

"Suppose so," Kaylaar grunted, wincing as the Doctor's hand hovered over the master switch.

"Good man. Magglesworth?"

"Yup."

He was on the verge of pressing the master switch when another letter icon flashed up on the screen. Rolling his eyes, he jabbed his thumb against the screen and the message opened.

Stay away from the man in the suit!

September 2022

“How this works is very simple,” Jess Klebitz said, though not in English. She wasn’t *saying* the words at all, in fact. “I sign. Mike here translates. You’ll hear his voice, but the words will be mine, unless specified otherwise. Any queries you might have, Mike will translate into sign. I will then answer through him. Make sense? Any questions?”

Nobody had any. Good. Jess nodded and loaded up the presentation on her laptop, which projected onto a canvas twenty feet high at the front of the magnificent lecture hall. The hall stretched thirty rows back, each row stacked a little higher until the back row towered high above the stage. The walls were deep purple and there were no windows; lamps conveyed a dull light, giving the room the aura of a cinema. But Jess and her PowerPoint were the only entertainment here and describing a law lecture – even criminal law – as entertainment was a stretch. Watching her were two hundred fresh-faced students, most facing forwards expectantly, laptops open or pens hovering over notepads.

There was an exception: a small gaggle of lads up on the back row, giggling and jesting and, judging by the stony faces of the surrounding students, being none too quiet in their private amusement.

She began to sign. “Gentleman at the back. I don’t hear very well, that’s perfectly true. But my eyesight is fine. Now, let me briefly explain how university works. In a nutshell, rather frighteningly I might add, you are now adults in the eyes of the law. As adults, you are free to make your own decisions in life. Therefore, you are under no obligation to be here. Please feel free to leave, either now, or at any point during the next two hours we are doomed to spend together. I won’t be offended. But if you stay, here’s the deal – when I’m up here waving my hands about like a lunatic, and Mike’s undoubtedly dreary tones are echoing about the place, that means you aren’t talking. Agreed?”

They nodded grudgingly and Jess suppressed a smirk, the rest of the class likewise trying hard to keep their faces blank. Without further ado, she began her first lecture at the University of East Essex, having been headhunted by the Dean with the prospect of better pay. She was good at what she did; there wasn't an awful lot she *was* good at, but teaching came naturally to her. She was good at...at making the complex not so complex. At making the incoherent, coherent. At putting such a tricky subject as law into words that others could understand. The students before her were already scribbling and typing with gusto as she introduced them to the basics of Criminal Law, her favourite module, and the one that she'd most excelled at when she was a student herself, sitting in a hall not dissimilar to this one, with Mike at her side translating.

Normally she thoroughly enjoyed delivering a lecture.

But not today.

It was all wrong here. It was all terribly, terribly wrong.

Reading about the death of that girl – the *murder* of that girl – in the halls last week had been bad enough. She wondered then what kind of place she was coming to. And setting foot on campus that morning, she'd been expecting a morose atmosphere, a frightened one. In a way, she was surprised they hadn't deferred the semester by a week or two as a mark of respect, or indeed simply to give the authorities time to investigate in peace.

And yet...

She struggled through the lecture on autopilot, and then decided, as the students were packing up, babbling cheerfully among themselves, to bring it up.

"Just before you go," she said. "What happened in the halls last week...I don't know if anybody in here personally knew the young lady in question, but even if not, the circumstances of her death are hideous beyond belief. I'd just like to echo the advice of the police. Stay alert. If you see anything that looks even slightly suspicious, speak up. Move in packs, especially at night. And beyond that, if you are struggling mentally, then don't sit on that. There's no shame in it. Talk to your parents, the chaplain, talk to any lecturer. Me included, I guess. Even if Mike's not around. I can lip-read reasonably well, and we could always type on our phones. So yes...that's all. On your way."

Up until then, she had been unnerved by the atmosphere on campus.

At that point she became genuinely frightened by it.

There was scarcely any reaction at all. A few grave faces. A few hung heads. Possibly, at a push, a few misty eyes. And that was it. And moments thereafter, they filed from the hall, chatting and laughing, a few of them nodding thanks to her as they passed, broad grins plastered to many a face. Two hundred students with barely a care or concern in the world.

A girl had been murdered – *butchered* – on campus a week before, and yet life was going on as normal.

Life went on, of course. It had to. That much was undeniably true. But for things to feel *so* normal, *so* quickly, in the wake of *such* horror...

"Does it strike you as odd at all?" she asked Mike, once the last student had gone.

"I suppose," he signed, his face blank. "But they'll catch the animal who did it, I'm sure. Guess the kids are keeping calm and carrying on. That's what you've got to do, sometimes."

And he changed the subject to football. Just like that. He was going to a match on Saturday, Arsenal (the Gunners) v Chelsea, the Gunners to win, curry and beer with the lads afterwards.

The gnawing pit of unease twisted tighter in her stomach, but she tried not to let it show. "Enjoy the game." She felt too sick to say more.

"I will," he said. "Are you staying late? Mind if I don't?"

"Might as well plan the next few lectures now. But you can head off."

"Cheers. Don't work too hard."

"Never."

And off he went. Though Jess didn't much care for the term, she supposed Mike was a "man's man", a "hard man", a tough guy through and through. He was heavysset, his dark hair shaved right down to stubble, and he invariably wore a distressed leather jacket and jeans through the autumn and into spring, only shedding it once the weather warmed up, revealing a horde of tattoos covering both arms. Football and beer, curry and lads' holidays: any deeper emotions were hidden beneath a thick shell of gruffness. He was intellectually bright – bright enough to learn and make a trade of British Sign Language – but emotionally rather straightforward, a man of simple pleasures. Insensitive, somewhat. But uncaring? Never. And now that she thought about it, his swanning off and leaving her alone at the scene of such a crime, with the killer still at large, was out of character in itself.

She sat at the front desk for forty minutes, her bleary eyes staring at the screen without properly seeing it. Finally, she conceded defeat and snapped it shut, and sat with her head in her hands, replaying the facts in her mind, trying to twist them this way and that, trying to make sense of them, trying to make them stack up in any credible way.

A grotesque murder, less than a week ago. A girl found mutilated, savaged, allegedly stripped right down to the bones. The culprit yet to be found.

A university functioning as ever it would. Staff, students, even Mike, going about their business, happy and jolly and carefree. There were still officers and forensics on site, the block in question remained cordoned off. But beyond that, you wouldn't know. You just wouldn't know. If you stepped onto the campus having not read the news, you'd be given no inkling that anything was wrong. The officers and police tape could just as easily have been there following a routine drugs raid.

All of this was bad. All of this was upsetting. But the question it posed, for her personally, was what terrified her the most.

Why, in the name of all things sane, could she alone detect something amiss?

She sat there, getting more and more worked up, before conceding defeat and shoving her laptop into its case. She was never going to get any work done tonight, and it would soon be dark. She rose, wincing on stiff limbs. Her weak left ankle sharply twinged as she rested her weight on it. Her joints, like her ears and lungs, were not so good; deafness often came as part of a package, and hers was probably attributable to her premature birth, six months along as opposed to the optimal nine. Yet while she didn't feel it – if she was limping on a bad day or puffing at her inhaler to ward off the latest asthma attack – she was a very beautiful woman. Her face was thin and sharp and framed by a thick mane of lush ginger hair that drew the envy of all her girlfriends. She was twenty-eight years of age (closer to thirty than she was comfortable with), yet looked a lot younger, to the extent that cautious cashiers often asked her for identification when she fancied a bottle of wine after a long day.

She donned her leather jacket and scooped up her handbag and laptop case, limping slightly for the first few steps as her ankle throbbed. She emerged into the corridor, its musty smell hitting her like a solid brick wall. The fuzzy grey carpet showed the stains of a thousand spilled drinks, the window behind her revealing the darkening courtyard outside the Thomas O'Leary Building, the campus's foremost structure. She glanced down at a few merry students, laughing and jesting, and winced at the sight of the accommodation building half-hidden behind the arcade of takeaways. She turned and made for the mess hall, turning left again into a short corridor where her office was situated, a poky little chamber with a window overlooking the cafeteria bins and an overgrown footpath leading down to a little bowling alley hidden in the remains of an industrial estate.

She stuffed what paperwork she wanted to take home into her laptop case, then shut off the light and locked the door, heading back to the mess hall to take advantage of the coffee machine before heading home. Her commute was a relatively easy thirty-minute drive to Farnbridge, where she rented a small flat; this convenience was another reason she'd taken the job, a decision she was already thoroughly regretting.

Not to point out the obvious, but she didn't hear anything behind her.

A hearing person would have heard the shuffle of feet on that grimy grey carpet and been alerted sooner. Jess had no such warning. But she sensed them: the awful feeling of being watched was more potent, perhaps, for the deaf, the creeping dread as stark as an unwanted tap on her shoulder.

She turned, expecting or hoping to see a student or colleague smiling at her, or possibly one of the cleaning staff, zombie-eyed and pallid from overwork, unlikely to leave until well after midnight, only for the students to trash the place anew the following day.

But at the end of the corridor, in front of the store cupboard, stood a sight so bizarre that Jess's first thought was that she was hallucinating. She blinked and rubbed her eyes hard, yet the apparitions did not disappear.

Stood down the corridor were two figures in black robes, tied at the waists with rope cords. Their feet were concealed below the hems and their arms were folded, hands tucked into the sleeves. Their hoods were up, their heads bowed.

She felt a chill. "Hello?" she said. She knew how to speak verbally, but seldom did so; her voice was thick and clumsy and hard for a hearing person to understand.

"Hello?" she repeated, hoping that time she was louder. It appeared so: the figures, as one, raised their heads to look at her.

Her stomach dropped. She began to shake all over.

Now that their heads were raised, she could see what it was that lay beneath those hoods. Or rather, what did not. For there *were* no faces, no features at all. Only nothingness, two empty black voids. She felt sick. Her head throbbed as she attempted to make sense of what her eyes were showing her. It was as though her mind lacked the parameters to fully process what she was looking at, that awful absence of anything, and she feared that to stare too hard into their depths for too long would be liable to damage her brain, even to kill her.

For a few moments, nothing happened. She looked at them...they looked at her. Despite the absence of any visible eyes, she felt their gaze keenly upon her. They were like two hunters measuring up their prey. Getting ready to...

The figures swiftly swept towards her. She cried out, dropped her laptop case, and sprinted towards the mess hall as fast as she could. It wasn't very fast. After a single pace, her joints throbbed. Her ankle seared. She let out a sob and tried her best to speed up, ignoring the hot, intense pain stretching all through her left foot and up to the knee, that leg turning to cement as the other turned to jelly, leaving her staggering like a drunkard, heart thumping, lungs and throat tightening, pace slackening...

She glanced over her shoulder. They were closing the gap. And beneath their hoods, identical faces now appeared where only darkness had been before. A man with a pencil-thin moustache. Empty sockets gawped where eyes ought to have been, the fangs of some savage animal bared, a sliver of drool running down his chin.

She looked away and tried her hardest to run yet seemed to have gotten nowhere. The corridor had impossibly, magically lengthened before her so that the mess hall grew ever further away, despite her efforts. She shut her eyes and waited for the chill grasp of cold fingers around her throat...

And went tumbling smack bang into a particularly fat caretaker, whose magnificent beer gut cushioned the impact. She bounced off him like a ragdoll and landed flat on her back, her head colliding painfully with the floor. One of her red converse trainers flew off, soaring comically into the air and landing a few feet away. She lay panting and broken for a moment, winded, before scrabbling to her feet and looking back

down the corridor. There was nobody there. There was only a corridor, with offices on either side and a store cupboard at the far end. Her laptop lay in its case halfway down.

The caretaker was standing over her, jabbering words like spitting bullets, too frenzied for her to make any sort of attempt at lip-reading. She could scarcely breathe, so she ignored him outright and hurriedly rummaged around in her handbag for her inhaler. She took two elongated puffs, resting a hand against the wall as she tried to regain her breath and composure. Only once she had restored a modicum of each did she turn to the caretaker, still ranting indignantly at her, no doubt wondering why she did not respond.

"I'm deaf," she told him, pointing at her ear. "Slow down."

Through a combination of lip-reading and context, she understood the gist of what he was saying – firstly, grudgingly, asking whether she was all right, and secondly, exactly what she thought she was playing at.

"There was..." she began, pointing down the corridor with a quavering finger. "Did you see...?"

He shrugged his shoulders and showed her his empty hands, a gesture she was often presented with when talking to someone verbally – "I can't understand".

"I was chased," she said, forcing the words out as carefully as she could, tears of frustration and fright leaking from the corners of her eyes. But her voice, so distorted at the best of times, was clearly beyond comprehension now. The caretaker likely heard nothing but a frenzied, unintelligible warble.

With a sneer and a grumbled word that looked awfully demeaning, he brushed past, retrieved her laptop, and tossed it to her in a lazy underarm throw that she only just managed to catch.

He said something else to her.

"Again," she insisted, pointing at her ear.

With the air of a man whose patience had snapped, he repeated himself and she caught it that time. "Sleep it off."

And he turned coldly away, leaving her rooted to the spot, not once looking back as he walked away. Gasping for breath, she scooped up her stray shoe and shoved it on and then fled from the building, down the stairs and out through the revolving doors, not stopping until she was off the campus, past the shops and takeaways and halls of residence, and safely across the road. In a daze, she started towards the car park down the street, where her little red Mini waited.

She didn't get far. After less than ten twenty yards, she collapsed against the wall of an Asian supermarket, hyperventilating and trembling, where she was rescued shortly thereafter by a sweet old lady who decided to call an ambulance straight away, then sat with her until it arrived, rubbing her back sporadically and ensuring she remained conscious and used her inhaler. The owner of the supermarket came out to join them bearing a bottle of chilled, crisp water and a blanket. Between them they watched her for

any signs of drowsiness or confusion, any signs to suggest that the lack of oxygen was starting to damage her brain.

She remembered only flashes of this encounter and was not fully lucid until the next day, when she woke aching and exhausted in the hospital, her parents and sister at her bedside.

And she was doing all right, at first. They were talking about discharging her that very night. And then she glanced at the news on her phone, and succumbed to such a severe panic attack that they were forced to sedate her, leaving her floating halfway between waking and sleep, the faceless creatures lurking like a foul smell over her twisted dreams.

Another one. The campus library. Tom Holloway, second year chemistry student, twenty years of age. Found dead up on the third floor, the silent zone, his head half a metre from the rest of his body, his entrails spread over a ten-yard radius on the floor, his laptop still open on the piece of coursework that was effectively, inadvertently, his last will and testament.

The next day, once his remains were cleared, and the carpet bleached, the University of East Essex reopened as normal.

April 2023

They lasted approximately two and a half minutes after stepping outside the TARDIS.

The golden letters emblazoned on the top of the big glass building were Gallifreyan.

It was impossible. Ridiculous. This was Earth, England, 2023. Not a place where the Gallifreyan language ever should, or ever could, be seen.

He blinked and looked again. The letters were in English. *The Thomas O'Leary Building*.

A magnificent structure it was too, a gargantuan glass block built over four floors, an enormous lecture theatre sagging swollen like a big metal capsule embedded in the structure, its front hanging like a muffin top over a set of revolving doors leading into an open plan reception, and a cafeteria beyond. Behind the TARDIS lay an arcade of takeaways with a row of student halls tucked away behind them. A snaking path led further into the campus, flanked by lawns of sparkling summer green, the campus's many buildings dotted along its route, all majestic, though none competing with the O'Leary Building. All around, carefree students made their way to and from their lectures.

But it was there. It was there! Hanging over everything, an invisible cloud which made the Doctor want to be sick. A darkness. An evil. The shadows cast by the students were not innocuous, but cold and dark and menacing, as if something wicked was lurking unseen in their gloomy depths. The northerly wind conveyed an air of malice, laced with a cruelty, a poison, a vicious, yearning, vile hatred, the likes of which the Doctor had scarcely felt in his life. He clapped a hand to the back of his neck, feeling the delicate hairs bristling there. The sensation of being watched was too visceral to overcome.

He turned to Maggie and Kaylaar and for a second saw enormous jester's grins on each of their faces, terrible leers, eyes gleaming with sadistic joy. He blinked again. No grins. They looked as distressed as he felt; probably more so.

“Go back inshide,” he slurred, his tongue thick and flabby like a strip of soggy cardboard. He was slurring like a drunkard; he felt like one too. Not that he drank that much (one too many voxnics in his sixth life had put paid to that habit), but alcohol had the same effect on Time Lords as on humans, and he knew as well as any human man what being drunk felt like. It was like this, although the accompanying warm, fuzzy feeling of good cheer was entirely missing now. He felt like crying. Oh. He *was*. He touched his cheek, and a tear came away on his fingertip.

“Go outside,” he said again, pointing at the TARDIS with a quavering finger. “I mean, inside...I mean...”

The TARDIS was bleeding. Thick, crimson blood was oozing from between the doors, seeping out of the “POLICE PUBLIC CALL BOX’ sign, which incidentally no longer said “POLICE PUBLIC CALL BOX’, but instead something too crude to repeat. He watched aghast as his home, his best friend, bled profusely into the concrete, blood running down its sides and pooling at its base, dribbling sluggishly from the lamp on top.

He hadn’t been physically sick in centuries, but he was going to be now. Spying a wastebin a few feet away he staggered towards it, clutching his knuckles to his mouth, peering down into the ripe-smelling concoction of old food, rotting polyester cups and cigarette butts which congealed in a bin-juice broth at the bottom of the black sack. He vomited loudly and profusely, adding to the noxious load, a passing student glancing at him and laughing and remarking. “Too much to drink, mate?”

Maggie wanted to go and help the Doctor, but truth be told, she couldn’t move.

Her head was killing her. As a general rule of thumb, she seldom suffered from migraines. But the one she was experiencing now was crippling, worse than anything she’d endured in her life. She stood rooted to the spot beside Kaylaar, paralysed by the shattering agony spreading from somewhere behind her left eye, all the way up the left side of her cranium, pain pulsing furiously against the side of her skull like a clenched fist hammering for its freedom. The swirl of motion and colour and noise in the courtyard outside the Thomas O’Leary Building served only to compound her suffering. She staggered backwards, resting a hand against the reassuring wooden frame of the TARDIS.

“Help me,” she whispered, sobbing as the pain intensified. It was like being knifed through the eye, as if a red-hot blade were being twisted sadistically around in the socket. She shrieked as she heard the sharp *pop* of her optic nerve and felt the soup of her burst eyeball flowing out...

No. That *had not* happened. She rubbed furiously at her throbbing eye, finding it intact, and when she drew her hand away she had vision in both.

"Help me," she said again, turning to Kaylaar and tugging at his arm like a child at the grocery store, bullying her parents to buy sweets.

"Kaylock," she begged. "I mean, Kaylaar...please..."

He heard her. He wanted to help. But he couldn't. He could scarcely move himself.

Besides which way...all his attention was drawn to Katlanuu, who stood a few feet away, smiling gently at Kaylaar.

"It's time," he said gently.

"I don't want to..." Kaylaar whispered.

"Yes you do," the Great Prophet said. "You know it; I know it. So let us move past that. Come home, my son. He'll take you. You have only to ask. It *will* be hard. But do not mistake his sadness for anger, nor his grief for contempt. Come home."

Kaylaar shook off Maggie's tugging hand and took a shaky step towards Katlanuu, his white robes with their gold trim fluttering in the chill breeze, his snowy hair rendered unkempt by it.

"I don't know how to stop," Kaylaar admitted. "The more I want to go home, the farther I want to run. Is this addiction? Please. Help me. Have you any comfort to speak to me, wise one?"

"I might," Katlanuu replied gently. "But for now, it will have to wait. Because there's something here, Kaylaar. You all felt it, the moment you stepped outside. Something dreadful. Something foul. And I'm truly sorry, my son – but it wants to speak to you. It has something it would like you to hear."

Kaylaar felt his blood curdle. "Oh?"

"Its name is Desmond Berry, Des to his friends, though unfortunately you do not count among those. He strongly advises you to leave. To run. Back in the box and far away, for to stay will mean suffering beyond all comprehension. He asks whether this is clear enough for you? Whether the message is getting through? What should I tell him?"

Katlanuu's ocean blue eyes were two gaping sockets. When he smiled, a thick glob of black, tar-like fluid dribbled out over his chin. It smelled foul, sickening, emitting the stench of rotting flesh and gangrene and pus-filled open wounds. It slopped over Katlanuu's gorgeous white robes and turned them a rancid black.

"He is your worst nightmare," the thing that was no longer Katlanuu warbled, its voice a gravelly hiss. "Fly away, fly away, fly away high! Run, run, run, as fast as you can! You can't catch me! I'm the gingerbread man! Go now, pathetic child, or lie bleeding and broken and begging for death at his feet."

The creature's skin was sloughing off, leaving red-raw flesh and muscle exposed. It reached out with skeletal fingers and lunged towards Kaylaar, who shrieked and staggered back towards the TARDIS.

He fell hard into the Doctor's waiting arms. With a difficulty, the Doctor held his friend upright and shook him clumsily by the shoulders.

"Into the TARDIS," he said. "Now."

Every step was like wading through treacle, his limbs sluggish and unresponsive, to the extent that it took him several attempts to insert the key into the lock and open the doors. By the time they creaked open, both Maggie and Kaylaar were on the ground at his feet, Maggie weeping and clutching her head in her hands, whimpering in the throes of a pain beyond all endurance. Kaylaar's eyes were lifeless. He gaped up at the cloudless blue sky, his features gaunt and pallid in the sunlight.

Drawing on the last of his strength, he shoved Maggie and Kaylaar through the doors and then collapsed face-forwards through them, landing on their feebly stirring bodies, kicking the doors shut with the heels of his shoes.

Maggie was first to recover. With much grumbling, she wriggled free of the Doctor and Kaylaar and rose shakily to her feet, her face ashen and her lower lip trembling. The Doctor rose and pulled her into a tight embrace and rested his chin on the top of her head, shushing her gently. Kaylaar staggered up and swore angrily, grappling his way along the wall to one of the chairs beside the console, sitting down heavily and swearing again for good measure.

"What was that?" Maggie gasped, pulling away from the Doctor and perching beside Kaylaar.

"I would think," the Doctor said shakily. "That was the "big trouble" the message alluded to. What did the two of you see?"

"Nothing I care to relive," Maggie said.

"Kaylaar?"

"Katlannu," he snapped. "At first, anyway. And then it wasn't. It was...something else. It spoke to me. Told us to run, threatened us if we didn't."

The Doctor nodded. "I see. Right. The two of you are staying here. You know all times I tell you that, and you follow me anyway? Just this once, please, don't. I mean that."

"You aren't going back out there?" Maggie exclaimed, hiccupping as her tears finally subsided.

"I'm afraid I am," the Doctor said, grimacing. "Whatever that is out there, it had the jump on us. The element of surprise. But I'm a Time Lord. And this time I'll be ready for it. I'll be able to resist, for a short time."

"Do you know what it is?" Kaylaar said.

"Not in the slightest."

"Then how do you know you'll be able to resist? For any amount of time?"

"Did I say I *will* be able to resist? Sorry. I guess what I meant to say was...hope."

"Oh, great."

"I'm not happy about it," the Doctor assured them. "But I've got to do it. I want to know what's happening here. I'll be back within ten minutes, twenty at a push. And again, please – do not follow me. I'll have some resistance, you'll have none."

"You *might* have some resistance," Kaylaar reminded him.

"Yes, all right," the Doctor said, more tersely than he'd have liked. "There's a lot to be said for optimism, Kay."

"Not if it gets you killed!" Maggie exclaimed.

He took a deep breath. "There is that. But it is what it is. Wish me luck."

He kept his mind blank, forced one foot in front of the other, and marched towards the Thomas O'Leary Building with a single purpose, a sole objective, shutting out any distractions, shutting out the creeping entrails of the monstrous force that had so successfully crippled him before. They were trying to worm their way in again, tightening their rotten grip and wearing him down incrementally, slowly but firmly prising open the defences he had built around his mind. He had no more than ten minutes, before he was hallucinating and vomiting and helpless once again.

"Excuse me," he said, collaring a passing student, a gangly youth with a shock of oily hair and a generous smattering of acne. "Where might I find someone in charge? The Dean, perhaps?"

"Don't rightly know," the student said vaguely, waving an arm towards the revolving doors of the Thomas O'Leary Building. "In there, somewhere."

There was something wrong with his eyes. They were lifeless and gaunt, his features slack. Now that the Doctor had a proper look at the milling students, he saw that they all looked the same. Be they pretty and jolly or slouching alone and looking glum, every single one had the same dead eyes. Doing without doing, seeing without truly seeing, acting out their roles like bored extras on a film set. A university of ghouls.

It took him precious time he could seldom afford to waste, yet at last he pieced his way through the halls and corridors with the aid of more sleepwalking passers-by, and found himself standing outside the office of one John Springett, Dean of the University of East Essex, in an overwarm corridor on the third floor, the hot sun flooding through the glass wall, sweat beading on his forehead, the soft wool of his fishing sweater chafing against his skin. He rapped his knuckles on the polished surface of the door and a man's

voice invited him through. The door creaked magnificently open, to reveal a short and stout man with a shiny bald head and a fantastic handlebar moustache of iron grey.

"Dean Springett?" the Doctor said, as warmly as he could.

"I am he. And you are?"

"My name is Smith. Detective Inspector John Smith, with Scotland Yard."

"Scotland Yard?" Springett repeated, eyes widening. "Goodness gracious me. And what brings you to my humble little workplace, Detective Inspector?"

"I received a message," the Doctor said. "I was notified of trouble here. I was asked to investigate."

Springett's response, so immediate, and so horribly, inappropriately chirpy, made the Doctor's skin crawl. "Oh yes! You must be talking about the murders. Yes, indeed. Thank you for coming. Please, have a seat."

The Doctor sat on a stiff wooden armchair opposite the Dean. The desk between them was unreasonably large for such a small office, made of polished mahogany and occupying at least a quarter of the room. There was nothing resembling work on its surface, only a paperback romance novel which Springett – seeing the Doctor glance at it – hurriedly snatched away, turning faintly pink. Along the walls were shelves laden with mammoth tomes and textbooks, all conspicuously coated in dust.

One of them had a strange title. A big black paving slab of a book, whose title, printed in golden block capitals on the spine, read, *The Life and (Gruesome) Death of Margaret Weitz*, by Desmond Berry. The Doctor gasped in spite of himself, but when he looked again the spine read, *A History of Essex*, by Ian Chartow.

It was taking control. The moment he sat, the moment he wasn't distracting himself by talking, he felt its claws tighten and winced at a sharp spasm of nausea. He took a deep breath and clutched his stomach, and in a feeble voice said, "Tell me everything. How many murders? How often? Any leads on the culprit?"

Springett raised a hand and counted the answers off on his fingers. "Distressingly many. Distressingly often. Distressingly no."

His attitude was sick. His demeanour was all wrong, and it wasn't his fault. He knew without knowing. He was trapped in the snare of the same force that was hobbling the senses of his students. He spoke of the murders as though talking of some distant tragedy halfway around the world, as opposed to something happening on his own doorstep.

"How long has it been happening? The Doctor demanded.

"Oh," Springett shrugged, leaning back in his seat. "It's the silliest thing, but...I can't quite remember. A while. Or longer."

The Doctor nodded. He had never been any great shakes at hypnosis or mind games, the likes of which were child's play to many of his fellow Time Lords. But he tried; he tried hard. He looked Springett right in the eye and tried to wrestle him free of the force that held him, tried to bring him under his own, far more benevolent, influence.

"The last twelve months," he insisted gently. "Give me the last twelve months."

"The last twelve months, you say..." Springett said thoughtfully. "Well, the semester is essentially over by April or May – we've only got three weeks left of this one, incidentally – and then we're more or less a ghost town till the following September. So, I'll start from last September. A young woman was found dead in her halls. Body badly mutilated. Ooh, what was her name? I can't remember. Isn't that terrible? It's on the tip of my tongue...but anyway, she was followed in short order by a poor lad in the library, also found in a pretty nasty state. And in the months since? Four or five deaths. Most recently Lauren Bowman, found dead in her room. The door was locked from the inside, make of that what you will. How is that possible, Detective Inspector? Have you ever seen anything like that?"

"I've seen things that would surprise you," the Doctor admitted. "But in all of these cases...no arrests? No leads? Nothing."

Springett shook his head, rocking gently back and forth in his chair. "Nothing."

The Doctor was on the verge of asking his next question, but the words died in his throat. His hearts raced. There was a hand on his shoulder, fingers of ice digging into his flesh. He looked at Springett, but the Dean only gazed benignly back. Whatever was behind the Doctor, he wasn't seeing it. Or at least...wasn't acknowledging it.

Slowly, unwillingly, the Doctor turned his head to examine his shoulder. In his peripheral vision he could see the outline of the hand on his shoulder, but when he looked directly the sensation vanished and he saw nothing there. He shivered. His stomach was churning afresh, and he was feeling desperately tired.

"Of course," Springett said. "Those are only the *confirmed* deaths. There have been a handful of disappearances too, six or seven I think. Eight, in fact, counting the law lecturer. That was unusual in itself, because it's normally just the students who are targeted. Perhaps she saw something, discovered too much. I don't know. I'd only just hired her, which makes it a particular shame."

The Doctor couldn't fight any longer. He had to go. He had just one more question for Dean Springett.

"You say you can't remember how long this has been happening?"

"Afraid not."

"Then if I can ask you the question another way – since you've been here, in whatever capacity, do you ever recall a time when it *wasn't* happening?"

"I..." Springett's mouth opened and closed again. For a moment, emotion flitted past his gormless eyes, and his face twisted into something faintly resembling horror. Just for a moment. And then it was gone. He smiled sadly. "Do you want the truth? I can't even recall how long *I've* been here. Long enough."

The Doctor rose shakily to his feet. "Thank you for your time," he mumbled. He turned and lurched clumsily at the door. He twisted the handle and gave it a push. It

wouldn't budge. Overcome immediately by uncharacteristic rage, he slammed himself bodily against it, yanking furiously at the handle.

"Why won't the blasted thing move?" he barked, tugging harder.

Behind him, in a quiet voice, Dean Springett said, "Try pulling, Detective Inspector."

Of course. The Doctor fumbled it open and staggered into the corridor careering off the wall and feeling his way towards the stairs, passing one of the entrances to the enormous central lecture theatre en route.

How he made it back to the TARDIS, he'd never know. He would never have managed the lock. Were it not for Kaylaar opening the doors as he approached and hauling him inside, he might well have succumbed to ... what? Would he have fallen under the same spell as the Dean and those soulless students, dancing like a puppet in this hellish campus?

He walked shakily to the anteroom beside the console and collapsed into the padded club chair, exhaling and shutting his eyes. "Piece of cake. Kaylaar, you've seen me prep the engines before. Reckon you could do it now? I'll take over in a minute."

"We're not leaving?" Maggie exclaimed. "Surely we aren't giving up?"

"Certainly not," the Doctor said. "We'll be back. But there's something we'll be needing first."

September 2022

It took all Jess's courage to go back.

In hospital, after reading about the second death, she had been resolute. No. No, she would never again set foot upon the grounds of the University of East Essex. Not for anything.

And then dawn came and the sedation wore off, and the return of rational thought led swiftly to ugly conclusions. If she resigned outright, she would lose her job and her home. Those were the facts. She had little by way of savings, and getting another job having summarily quit her previous one after a single day would prove a tall order. The money would run dry within a month, and her landlord was not a kindly sort. She rented under an Assured Shorthold Tenancy, which meant her residence could be terminated without cause. All it took was a simple Section 21 notice, and she'd have two months to get out. She'd end up back at her parents' house, and the mere thought of that was enough to drive her mad. There was even a chance the university might sue her for breach of contract, ensuring she had not a penny to her name for the foreseeable future.

No; she would not – could not – up and quit. She was contracted for one semester with the option to renew for a second depending on performance. She would see it out, decline the renewal (if offered), and look for another job in the meantime. And ensure, between now and then, that she was never, under any circumstances, in any part of the university alone.

The long and short of it was that a week after her collapse, she found herself walking up to the Thomas O'Leary Building, her heart in her throat and gooseflesh erupting on her arms in spite of the unseasonable heat, a dark shadow falling over her mind as she felt the presence looming over the campus, that grotesqueness that for whatever reason hadn't hold on her like it had everyone else. She slipped past a gang of babbling students and met Mike outside her office. He gave her a wan smile. "You all right?" he signed.

"Yeah," she lied. "Much better."

"Good. The asthma, was it?"

"What else?" she said. Aside from the caretaker she'd bumped into that night, nobody had any inkling that her episode had been any stranger – or more sinister – than a particularly severe asthma attack that had beset her as she was heading home after a hard day's work.

But Mike was not convinced. She saw it in his eyes. This was no surprise to her. They may not have been particularly close friends, but he'd been her interpreter for over ten years. He could read her like nobody else could, not even her mother. He could learn an awful lot just by her body language, could pick up on the slightest expression on her face, and even with the force of...whatever it was...hanging over him, could detect immediately that no matter what she said, she was a long way indeed from all right.

He took her to one side after she'd struggled through the three lectures she was obliged to give that day, leaning on the desk with his arms folded while she sat before her laptop, the students filing out of the hall.

"All right, let's have the truth," he signed. "What's wrong?"

She knew lying would be pointless. "I was chased," she admitted. "By two men dressed in black robes. That least that's what I thought they were. At first."

Mike frowned. "Did you say robes?"

"Robes," she affirmed. "With hoods, and everything."

"Students?" Mike suggested. "Sounds like some stupid bloody prank. Blimey, Jess, why haven't you reported it? The little twerps could have killed you! They should bloody well be held accountable. Come on, we're going to Springett. Get your stuff."

"No," she said.

"Why not?"

"Because they weren't students, Mike. I saw beneath the hoods and there was nothing there. Just empty space. No faces. Not at first. But then, when I looked again, there was this...this guy. Under both hoods."

Mike's frown hardened. "Wait a moment...are you saying you were attacked by...by what, exactly?"

"Something inhuman. And I know that sounds crazy and I know you won't believe me. But I'm sure of it. And I'm sure of something else – whatever it was, it's responsible for killing the students. And I don't know why, Mike, or how, but it's got everyone else turning the other cheek. You included. It's like the campus is sleepwalking. Just think about what's been happening here. Please. Think hard. Try to see it as I see it."

But it was hopeless. Mike's frown relaxed and he signed, "Could I make a suggestion? Only a suggestion, mind you. Is it not possible – and quite understandable, in the circumstances – that the incident did not occur as you honestly remember it? I've seen you have asthma attacks before, Jess, I know how badly they can hit you. Is it not possible that through a combination of fear, shock, and lack of oxygen to the brain, you

were hallucinating? Yes, you probably were chased; perhaps the gimps were indeed wearing costumes, wanting to give someone a good scare. And the rest...perhaps you dreamed that up while you were unconscious. Perhaps you've been left with an honest but inaccurate recollection of that night, half-real and half-imagined. I'm not saying that's definitely what happened! But it's possible, isn't it? And surely you can see that it's more likely than...well...*actual* monsters chasing you down."

"And I wish I could believe that," Jess said. "I *want* you to be right. And if that night were taken in isolation, I'd have probably agreed with you. But it doesn't explain everything else. The murders. The fact nobody cares a fig, not even you. There's something here slaughtering the students at will and compelling everyone to look the other way. Everyone but me. And I don't know why that should be, and goodness knows I wouldn't have wanted it so. And I'm no hero, that's for sure. But I've not been *allowed* to look the other way, and I don't think I can pretend to either..."

"You're your own boss," he told her. "But please, take a day or two to think it over. We don't have lectures tomorrow, do we? No? Then work from home. Don't come in. Rest up, recuperate properly. And everything will seem better afterwards. You'll see."

"I don't think it will," she said. "But fine. I'll take your advice and see what comes of it."

After sitting through a faculty meeting, she bade Mike goodnight and headed to the cafeteria for a bite of dinner. Though not keen on lingering on campus, the cafeteria was busy enough that she felt safe, and in any case, she hadn't any food at the flat, nor the energy to traipse round a supermarket to buy some. She helped herself to a portion of lukewarm chicken nuggets and soggy fries, dolloping a generous helping of ketchup on the plate. She paid at the till and received a strange look from the serving woman when she murmured a word of thanks. She sat alone by the window, overlooking the ragged remains of the industrial estate behind the campus, and ate her meal without enthusiasm. Truly revolting, it was.

She hadn't thought anything of the funny look the woman on the till had given her. It was a common occurrence whenever she spoke verbally. Her voice had been described over the years as thick, clumsy, stilted, warped and garbled. Yet the truth was she had no idea what any of those meant or sounded like. She would never know exactly what made her voice so different from that of a hearing person. In any case, it was unusual enough to make most folks double-take whenever she spoke. But twenty-eight years of that had enabled her to build a hide of iron. They could gawp, they could gape. The worst of them could snigger. So be it. All water off a duck's back.

The point being, Jess barely even registered the woman on the till and her funny glance and was consequently surprised to see that same woman approaching her table

shortly afterwards, staring at her as though she couldn't quite figure her out. She was an older woman, sixties or seventies, with a tight grey bun beneath a hairnet and a well-worn black shirt beneath a food-stained burgundy apron.

She said something, but Jess didn't catch a word. She pointed at her ear. "I'm deaf."

The woman nodded, as though expecting it. She spoke again, slowly and clearly, but not in that awful, exaggerated manner that some people believed to be helpful to a deaf person, their ludicrous gaping mouths and gymnastic jaws serving only to make lip-reading, difficult at the best of times, nigh on impossible. She maintained eye contact with Jess and spoke at a good speed, gesturing to aid her comprehension, and in no time at all managed to convey a question to Jess – whether she was indeed the lecturer who collapsed the other day?

"Yes," Jess said uncertainly. "Why?"

The woman pointed at herself and then across the room towards the till. "I finish," she said. "In ten minutes." She tapped her watch and then showed Jess ten fingers. "We," she pointed between Jess and herself. "Should talk."

"Why?"

"Ten minutes," the woman said, turning on her heel and marching back to her place. Jess watched from across the room as she immediately put a little "CLOSED" sign on the counter and covered the remaining food in clingfilm, walking back and forth to the kitchen with the various, uniformly unappetising dishes. Finally, she gave the coffee machine a quick wipe down (rather *too* quick) and cashed up, hung a "CLOSED" sign over the till, and returned to Jess, whose chicken nuggets and chips sat mostly untouched and even colder than when she'd purchased them, the ketchup congealing on the side of the plate, and the whole, sorry meal giving off a musty, greasy smell. She pushed the plate away and gestured to the seat on the opposite side of the table, indicating that the woman should join her. She sat down and immediately took her phone from her pocket and began to type furiously before handing it over to Jess.

She had the notepad up on the screen, and a message read, "*You don't want to be here! Why on earth did you come back?*"

Jess stared at the woman, and hurriedly typed, "*You know what's going on?*" before handed it back across.

"*We're alike in that regard,*" read her reply. "*My name is Caroline. I was born a hearing person. No longer.*"

She turned her head left and then right, allowing Jess to see the hearing aids inserted in both ear canals. "*My left ear is okay, but my right ear is pretty much gone. I am partially deaf. You are profoundly deaf. I do not think this is a coincidence. I think it's highly significant. I think it explains why we can see what others cannot. I've worked here for twenty years, but I only started to see things as they truly were after I began losing my hearing.*"

"I don't understand," Jess replied verbally, reading the message and handing the phone back to Caroline.

"I like to compare it to Jenga. You know how Jenga works? You pull out one wooden piece and the whole tower comes tumbling down. So it is, here. The illusion of normality only works if all senses are present and accounted for – sight, sound, smell, taste, touch. Remove just one of those – sound, in our case – and down comes the tower. And so only people like us – the broken – know this place for what it truly is."

"Two students have died," Jess typed, "And nobody cares. Not really. And the other night, I was attacked. Two figures in robes. Demons. My nan would have called them dybbuks. Jewish theology. Disembodied spirits, capable of possessing the minds of mortals."

"Interesting. But demons or dybbuks plural? No. Incorrect. There's only one demon here. One entity. Desmond Berry. You saw two figures because that's what he wanted you to see, but it's always him behind the shapes. I've come face to face with him myself, more than once. But I'm too old to pose any threat, and at any rate, the young are his preferred victims. I think he likes to make me watch as he kills the children. But it's nearly over. Six months from now and I'll be retired. But you are another matter entirely. Young. Intelligent. And immune. Potentially a threat. He's already singled you out. You simply cannot remain here."

"Nor can I quit outright, for the same reason as you, I suspect. Money."

Caroline gave her a hard look, and did not accept the phone until Jess relented, and added, *"Okay. Perhaps I'm kidding myself. Perhaps the money excuse is precisely that – an excuse. Perhaps the truth is that I want to stay. For now. My whole life, I've been taught to stand my ground. My whole life, I've been a target for bullies. From the earliest age, it was hammered into me that I need to take no nonsense, to fight back where I can."*

"And you think you can fight back? Against this?"

"I don't know. Primarily, I'm going to make sure I'm never alone on campus. But if I had the opportunity...then yes. I would try and fight. Put an end to it."

"Then I think you must be mad," Caroline replied. "Uncommonly brave, but quite mad. And stupid, I'm afraid. Intelligent, highly educated, very pretty too, but mad, and stupid just the same. However. It is not within my power to tell you your business, as long as you understand that my advice is that you are mistaken and that you should leave and take the financial hit on the chin."

"I understand." Jess assured her verbally.

"All right," Caroline replied. "Well, hurry up and eat your dinner. I'm going to see you safely off campus tonight, at the very least."

"I'm not hungry, after all," Jess said, getting to her feet. "I'm ready now."

Caroline nodded. *"Don't worry. I wouldn't eat it either."*

April 2023

"I don't claim to understand what we're up against," the Doctor said, as they materialised on a street corner just outside the grounds of the University of East Essex, after a brief visit to the Eye of Orion. He handed Maggie and Kaylaar a makeshift necklace each, made of coarse string with lumps of what looked like simple granite dangling off the ends, putting a third one around his own neck. They looked, and felt, more than a little ridiculous wearing lumps of rock.

"However," he went on, "On a very basic level, a being like this – capable of influencing the senses of those around it, able to take on physical form and kill when it chooses – can only exist in the vicinity of a power source. A strong one, at that, allowing it to reach out from another dimension into ours. This source has got to be somewhere on site. I don't know what it'll look like, but I'm confident we'll know it when we see it. So, here's what I think – we split up and cover every inch of the place. We find the source of power. We destroy it."

"Hold on," Kaylaar said, looking at him as if he were mad. "Is splitting up wise?"

"Almost certainly not," the Doctor said. "You two will be staying together, I'll go alone. These necklaces we're wearing will help. The Eye of Orion is the most tranquil place in the universe. Every plant, every blade of grass, every rock, is bombarded with positive ions." He tapped at the granite-like pebble. "This rock sample got hit with one of those seasonal thunder showers, so it's supercharged with that concentrated tranquillity. With these on, the effects of whatever is out there will be reduced. Understand that clearly, *reduced*. Not negated. It'll still be unpleasant, make no mistake. But we should be able to maintain our self-control, be able to put one foot in front of the other without being crippled. We'll search, and then we'll rendezvous back here in three hours' time. If things become *too* unpleasant, however, don't wait three hours. Get off the campus right away. It can't follow you beyond the boundaries...I think."

"Reassuring," Maggie said darkly.

“Best I can do, Maggleston,” the Doctor said. “Just keep your minds focused. Hold your surroundings at arm’s length. Above all, remember why you are there. It *will* affect us. It *will* try and drag us under. But we’re better equipped to hold it off, now.”

“Fine,” Maggie said. “But I still don’t like the idea of you going off on your own.”

“Nor do I,” the Doctor said. “But I hate it less than the idea of either of you two going alone.”

They stood in a semi-circle by the TARDIS doors for a long moment, staring at each other, all hoping that someone might find something else to say, some reason to delay, if only for a while longer.

Nobody spoke. The Doctor sighed deeply and shut his eyes, and yanked open the TARDIS door before he could think the better of it, stepping out into the bright spring sunshine with Maggie and Kaylaar in his wake, the sun sparkling off the enormous glass body of the Thomas O’Leary Building across the road.

Maggie and Kaylaar, grimacing, headed off down the path that snaked up the lawn, deeper into the campus, staggering slightly as they went. The Doctor watched them go, hoping that nothing would happen, that they’d be able to ward off the entity and come back to him. Truth be told, the stones around their necks would only protect them so much; even then, their biology was considerably less resistant than his.

He turned away and found himself walking on autopilot towards the Thomas O’Leary Building. He was heading to the library, and he wasn’t entirely sure why. Possibly because a library was a source of comfort to him, a place to which he would always be drawn. He loved to sit among books, among knowledge, to devour the thoughts and facts and fictions of a thousand great minds, losing himself in the worlds of others so that he might – from time to time – have a little respite from the frenzied realities of his own. And in any case, it seemed as good a place as any to start his search. He strolled that way, through the revolving doors and off to the right, feeling drunk and downcast and groggy, the entrails of the entity seeping into his mind, slowly, very slowly, with far greater difficulty than before, but trying just the same. Working on him, wearing him down. He tried to recite the alphabet in his head, and got lost after H. He tried to count backwards from a hundred and was distracted before he hit fifty.

The university library was barred by four turnstiles with keycard scanners, students tapping ID badges to let themselves in and out. Off to the side on a security desk sat a surly woman, scowling at any student passing too close.

Did he carry a sonic screwdriver these days? His memories were a shade fuzzier in this incarnation, even without concentrated evil bearing down on them. He was sure he’d whirred it in front of a lock or two not that long ago. But no; he checked his pockets and found his yo-yo, a toy helicopter, and a seldom-useful android detector, but

eventually concluded he wasn't carrying a sonic screwdriver. Shame. It would have taken care of the turnstiles, for he surely didn't feel like approaching that woman. Still, needs must. He painted on his widest smile and headed to the desk. She looked up at him with raised eyebrows and did not grace him with a smile of her own.

"May I help you?" she grunted, with the air of somebody who would rather do anything but.

"I hope so," the Doctor said. "Might you let me through? I'm staff."

"Use your card, then."

"Ah, well that's just it. I left it in my office."

"Go and get it then."

"Ah, well that's just it. I don't really have one. That was a lie."

"Then you aren't staff."

"No, I'm former staff. John Smith's the name. Pleasure to meet you."

"Former staff? Then like I said, not staff. The university library is not open to the public."

"No, indeed," he said bracingly. "But all I need is thirty minutes. An hour, tops. I'm sure the powers that be wouldn't begrudge me that. Look, if you must know, I'm thinking of reapplying to work here, and I'd like to brush up on my knowledge, in case they select me for interview."

"Oh yeah?" she said without enthusiasm. She sighed. "Right. Hour tops. And you aren't borrowing any books."

"Thank you," the Doctor said sardonically, though the significance of her flippant approach to security was not lost on him. Without asking to see any credentials at all, she admitted him into the library when his intentions could, for all she knew, be far from innocent. But that was the way things were here. Nothing mattered much. Everything was fair game.

In any case, it worked to his advantage. She thrust a temporary permit at him and he used it to pass through the turnstiles into the lobby. It was open plan, with a help desk directly in front of him and computer desks on either side of the room, borrowing machines dotting the walls, which were painted unusual shades of beige and orange. The carpet underfoot was a rich burgundy, and along the far wall were meeting rooms partitioned by glass walls, where students could speak and revise in peace, or perhaps rehearse whatever presentations they might have coming up. On sofas and armchairs all around sprawled students, reading or typing, or conversing in hushed tones.

He looked up. The library was set over four floors, but there was a wide square gap in the centre of each, above the helpdesk. From where the Doctor was standing, he could see the roof of the fourth floor high above, turning the place into one vast, open chamber. Along the perimeter of that gap, he saw bookshelves on each of the floors, laden with tomes, bursting with knowledge. Oh, what a wonderful place. Another time, another life, and he'd have loved to spend a day here.

He nodded briefly to the middle-aged, bespectacled man on the helpdesk and headed for the stairwell off to the right of the room. He'd begin his search for the source up on the fourth floor and work his way down, and –

"Doctor, Doctor, Doctor!" sang a voice from behind him.

He froze, his left foot resting on the edge of the first stair, his skin crawling.

"Doctor, over here! A word if you'll indulge me. Be a pal!"

He thought at first that he would ignore it. He would deny it the privilege of his attention. But he couldn't help himself; the same autopilot that carried him to the library forced him to turn around. He looked across the lobby and saw a man in a black suit at the helpdesk, beside the chap with the glasses, his arm draped over his shoulders. His hair was slicked back with oil (a barrel of crude by the look of it), his moustache was pencil thin, his black striped suit devoid of even the slightest hint of wear or dishevelment. He wore a midnight blue tie, and a shirt so white that it almost hurt to look at it. And nobody – not the students lounging on the sofas, not the rude lady outside the turnstiles, not even the man whom he had in a one-armed embrace – paid the slightest mind to him, or the noise he was making.

"Hallo!" he exclaimed. *"Desmond Berry's the name, Des to my friends. Welcome, welcome! What brings you to these here parts, good sir? Here to brawl, is it? Well. I take my hat off to you! Or I would, if I happened to possess a hat. Tremendously brave of you! Hip hip!* But a word of caution – the brave don't do very well here, in my experience. They don't tend to *last*, if you see what I mean. So let me give you fair warning. Fair notice, from one reasonable, well-dressed gent to another. Leave town. Leave town and take your little friends with you. They're struggling, you know. They aren't doing well. Save them. Save yourself. And leave things as you found them. I'll give you this one afternoon to clear off in peace. Assemble the cavalry, such as it is, and march them away. Over the hills, and far away. Hah. How does that sound? Is that reasonable? Do we have a deal? Say yes indeed, good sir, and let us part ways as chums. What do you say?"

The Doctor gritted his teeth and waited for silence. *"You know me?"*

"In a manner of speaking."

"I see," the Doctor said. *"I can't claim to know you. But time is relative, so perhaps that's a displeasure yet to come for me. In any case, my answer must be no. Perhaps I could make a similar offer straight back at you, Mr. Berry? If you know me half as well as you seem to think, then you'll know that I only take life when there is no other way. So, end it on your own terms, effective immediately. No more killing. Agree to that and stick to it, and you won't be harmed. There will be no vengeance, though goodness knows you'd be deserving of it. What do *you* say? Deal?"*

"What do I say?" Desmond Berry boomed. *"I say that the big bad Time Lord is in way over his head. I say that the tough nut, the rebel, the risk-taker, is out of his depth and should walk away while he can. There are some corners of the universe beyond the reach of your people and your knowledge, there are powers and forces that could smash*

this paltry universe, this stinking sliver of reality, into bone and dust. I could do it, Doctor. I am that. Your very existence is mine to play with, so tell me, how best would you like to die? I could take you apart digit by digit, limb by limb, organ by organ, then mulch what's left into gristle and pulp and offal. I could introduce you to extremes of pain that shatter all your preconceptions of the limits of suffering. You believe me, don't you? I *could* do it; I *would* do it. And – *say* – look at this fine young man at my side.”

The Doctor looked. The man on the helpdesk had changed. He was younger now, darker haired, so suddenly different that he might have regenerated.

He looked up at the Doctor and said, “Thomas Morris. Eighteen years old. Found dead in the bathroom.”

Desmond Berry cackled and leapt onto the helpdesk, gesturing frantically over the Doctor's shoulder towards the turnstiles. “Look! Magic!”

The turnstiles were all spinning of their own accord, and beyond them, the rude woman on security was gone; a younger woman sat in her place.

“Anne Woloszczuk,” she said. “Twenty. Found strangled to death in her room.”

“*There! There! There!*” Desmond Berry shrieked, writhing and twisting on top of the desk, practically dancing as he pointed every which way, tapping his feet, cackling all the while. The lights in the library were flickering, and everyone had changed. Everyone was someone else, someone dead; someone murdered. Their chants blistered the Doctor's ears.

“*Eighteen!*”

“*Beheaded!*”

“*Johnny Collins!*”

“*Drowned in the bath!*”

“*Dragged into the path of an oncoming truck!*”

On and on it went, louder and louder it got, until the library was full of the wails of the dead, people taken far before their time and in all the worst ways, all staring daggers at the Doctor as he stood rooted to the spot. Desmond Berry twirled and jived on top of the desk, pencil in hand like a conductor leading his orchestra. His eyes were starting to glow red.

It was enough. The Doctor backed towards the turnstiles and could not help crying out in alarm as Desmond jumped down from the table and took a menacing step towards him.

“*Get out!*” he screamed, eyes blazing scarlet, face flushed puce with rage. “*Get out now! Get out of here and never come back!*”

The Doctor sprinted for the turnstiles, sliding clear over the top of them. He continued on past the security desk, throwing the visitor's pass at the dead young woman who sat there, coming to a halt down the corridor. Panting, he turned back around and saw perfect quiet and calm in the library. The rude woman was back in her place, the

man with glasses was back at his desk, the students loitering and studying on the sofas had all returned to normal.

"But you're still there, aren't you?" the Doctor muttered, battling to keep the quiver out of his voice. "You're still listening. Then hear me now: I am going to root you out and destroy you. I don't know how, not yet, I never do. And I always win, just the same. So take stock of what you've done here over the years, and as you wait – because I *am* coming for you – take the time to reflect upon how much better the cosmos will be without you."

"How do you feel?" Maggie asked Kaylaar.

"Sick," he replied gruffly.

"Snap," she said. She was shivering all over in spite of the eerie autumn warmth and was slurring her words badly. Her head was thundering. "Where are we going again?"

"Humanities," Kaylaar answered faintly, nursing his stomach.

"Humanities?" Maggie repeated uncertainly. "Didn't we agree on the Science department?"

"I thought we said Humanities."

"But I think Humanities is that way," she said, wobbling on the spot as she turned around and pointed vaguely in the direction whence they came. "We're going to Science, I'm sure..."

"Oh."

They walked on, staggering down the path through the lawns behind the Thomas O'Leary Building. Sapling trees were planted sporadically upon the grass, stick-thin and stunted, though with the early blooming hints of majesty yet to come. Ahead were seven plastic and glass-clad buildings of various shapes and sizes, all modern and aesthetically pleasing, glittering like oversized diamonds in the sun. All around, students milled about and chatted merrily, basking in the heat.

"Where's Science, then?" Kaylaar murmured. "Which building?"

He sounded exactly how she felt, vague and sleepy and unsteady on her feet. It really wasn't dissimilar to being drunk, though far less pleasant. She touched the hunk of stone around her neck for reassurance, twirled the string between her fingers, and took several steadying breaths to try and regain some composure. She squeezed the simmering pebble, hoping some of those ions might clear her head. It was no use; even with the stone around her neck, she felt as though she were sitting in a cinema, watching herself on the screen.

"Must be one of them," she said, trying to sound confident. Her mind was starting to wander. She found that she was paying attention to small, trivial details, like the

clothes worn by the surrounding students, the bicycles that flashed by, the pint-sized mobile phones cradled in many a passing palm. 2023 seemed a world away from the 1990s. Some of the words and phrases she heard as they brushed past – ‘YouTube’ and ‘Reddit’, ‘Discord’ and ‘Netflix’, ‘TikTok’ – meant nothing to her. By the time some of these young people were her own age, where would the world have gone? What new words would be in the dictionary by then, what shows would be all the rage, and on what media would they be viewed? What would people wear and eat and drive? Would man be back on the moon by then? Further, even? Perhaps the existence of aliens would at last become common knowledge. She’d seen enough evidence on her travels that such a time was rapidly approaching. And what of the scientists, and their warnings of impending doom? A climate run wild, half the world underwater as the other half burned, mass extinctions, once in a lifetime weather events every other week...would it truly come to pass? Or could it be stopped, altered, mitigated, perhaps even reversed? Would the same ingenuity that caused all these problems also extend to resolving them? Was humanity *not* doomed, after all? Was the Doctor, in fact, correct to love Earth and the people who inhabited her, as opposed to – as so often seemed the case – terribly mistaken in his trust? She took the Doctor’s very optimism as a sign that it *had* to be the truth. He had seen the future after all. But the lack of clarity to these questions, and her own conclusions about human nature, made her doubtful.

Kaylaar’s voice slowly worked her out of her stupor; she realised he’d been talking to her for quite some time, but it was only when he began tugging on her sleeve that she registered it.

“I don’t know where we’re going,” he said bluntly. “Where do we start?”

“Science...”

“But where is it?”

“I...” Maggie looked up and ground to a halt. The whole landscape ahead had changed. The geography of the campus was different, the buildings swapped about, the path beneath their feet gravel now, where she’d been certain it was concrete before. It seemed to veer off slightly to the right, where she’d been certain it had been edging off to the left.

“Uh, excuse me,” she said, collaring a raven-haired girl walking past, dressed in a denim jacket and black leggings, with ugly, candy-pink Converse sneakers on her feet. “Where’s the Science department?”

The girl – pretty thing, dazzling smile – pointed on down the path and cheerfully said, “You’re going to die here, Maggie.”

The hairs on the back of her neck stood erect. “I beg your pardon?” she stammered.

“I said just keep going straight,” the girl said, tossing her long blonde hair out of her face and adjusting her bright blue anorak. “Second building on the left.”

"Thank you," Maggie whispered, glancing down by chance at the floor. The girl was wearing a pair of open-toed sandals, nails painted in an intricate bumblebee pattern of yellow and black.

"No problem," the girl said. Her face was framed by a short bob of ginger hair. Her smile was too wide to be genial, her eyes too dark to be sincere.

Maggie stumbled on the spot, and Kaylaar's hand lashed out to hold her upright.

"See you round," said the young man with the brown hair and the black hoodie, stuffing his hands in his pockets and continuing on his way.

"Did you see..." Maggie whimpered, clutching Kaylaar as though he were a life buoy.

"See what?"

"That student..."

He looked confused. "What student?"

Maggie pressed a hand to her throbbing forehead, and it came away soaked with sweat. She had gone way past drunkenness now, and felt like a junkie addled by a particularly bad batch.

It was enough. "I think we should leave," she said, struggling to form the words.

"But..." Kaylaar began.

"No," she said firmly, legs wobbling beneath her, threatening to fold. "The necklaces have worn off, if they were ever helping to start with. We aren't in control. We've got to go, now."

She seized him and started back the way they came, but stopped dead in her tracks when she saw what awaited them.

Standing down the path, totally ignored by the passing students, who simply swerved around them as though they were minor obstacles, were dogs the likes of which Maggie could not have conjured up in her worst nightmares. Not dogs, even, but wolves. Three of them. They stood together in a tight-knit pack, so close that they looked like some sort of unspeakable single organism, some monstrous arachnid with twelve legs and six eyes and three drooling, snapping, ravenous mouths. They were staring intently at Maggie and Kaylaar as slobber ran freely from their jaws and pooled thick and sickening on the concrete below, sizzling under the sun. Ears flickered and tails twitched, the powerful bodies taut and alert and rearing to attack. Their greasy black coats bristled as they twitched, and even from a distance away, Maggie could smell their dank, soggy reek and the meaty, rotten stench of their breath. Their wet noses wobbled as they took in the scent of her and Kaylaar.

"Back away," Kaylaar whispered in her ear. "Very slowly."

They inched backwards towards the nearest of the buildings and the wolves padded after them, matching their pace. The flash of their teeth made Maggie's stomach turn.

"I could try changing shape," he suggested. "Make myself into something frightful, something that might scare them off."

"Bit optimistic," Maggie said, staring wide-eyed as a student passed within an inch of the wolf on the left, so close that it turned its head and gave her hand a quick sniff. She paid neither it, nor Maggie and Kaylaar, the slightest mind as she carried on down the path.

Kaylaar glanced over his shoulder. "There's a door. About fifty feet away."

"Is it open?" she rasped. Her throat was parched. She had visions of them making it to the door only to find it locked, of being pinned helpless while the wolves set upon them as one, tearing and shredding their way into the deepest recesses of flesh and muscle, stripping them both right down to the bone.

"It's shut," Kaylaar said. "But hopefully not locked...hopefully not. If we keep backing up slowly, then maybe --"

It was a nice idea, but it wasn't to be. No sooner had he said the words, then the wolves sprang forwards at full pelt, charging towards them in a raucous frenzy of snarling and howling.

It wasn't that Kaylaar didn't value the good times; he treasured them. Ninety percent of his life with the Doctor and Maggie, he treasured as gold.

It was the other ten percent – days like this – which made him doubt. Days like this, when a foe that meant to kill him was in hot pursuit, and his own longevity was dictated by nothing greater than sheer, dumb luck. If that door was unlocked, he might live. If it was locked, he would die. Here and now and horribly. It was that simple.

But the good times made up for the bad, didn't they? Yes, so he had once thought. Lately though, he'd been wondering to what extent he truly believed that.

He and Maggie sprinted hand in hand to the door with the snarling, snapping wolves hot on their heels, the stench of their matted black fur and hot breath growing more overpowering the closer they came. They were faster; they were diminishing his and Maggie's lead by the second. Another ten seconds and they'd be upon them, but he and Maggie didn't need another ten. They were so close. The door had to be unlocked, it *had* to be...and yet it might not be. And he might be moments away from a terrible end.

He slammed his palm against the large silver button with a wheelchair icon on the front and could have sobbed as the door slid briskly open to admit them. He and Maggie tumbled through the threshold, and it slid gently shut behind them, hopefully before the wolves had a chance to follow.

He looked outside. There *were* no wolves. Perhaps there never had been. He and Maggie lay tangled on the floor, panting, tears stinging both of their eyes.

"You okay?" he managed to ask.

“No,” she replied, shaking all over. They lay in each other’s arms, cradling each other, each trying to calm themselves down as much as the other. “You?”

“No. No, I’m not okay.”

He got to his feet and helped Maggie to hers. They were in some dreary sort of waiting area, the carpet ugly grey plastic and the walls a forensic, solid white. At the far end of the room were assorted chairs, and beyond them a set of double doors with the letters “AG1” emblazoned above. The “AG” Building, Lecture Hall One, he supposed. Beyond those doors they could hear the low rumble of speech; a lecture was in progress.

“You know what you were saying?” Kaylaar said. “About getting out of here? I’ve decided that I quite like that idea, after all. I’m not keen on going back outside, but...”

Maggie, however, wasn’t listening to him. She held up a finger for silence and tried to make out the words coming from the lecture hall, padding closer, straining with concentration. Kaylaar tried to hear too, but his hearing didn’t *quite* match hers; another subtle difference between his people, the Frenazzi, and humans, for all their outward similarities.

Maggie’s face had turned almost as white as the walls. Ignoring Kaylaar’s protests, she crept right up to the lecture hall door and pressed her ear to the wood.

“Power,” said a female voice dramatically. “What do we think of, when we use that word?”

A separate voice. “Electric power?”

The first voice chuckled. “A good guess, but not what I’m thinking of. Anyone else?”

“Political power?”

“Closer, but not quite,” the first voice said. “What I’m thinking of in this context is...potential. Capacity. Capability, if you will. The ability to set goals and achieve them. *That* is power. You are all, as individuals, powerful. You have your dreams, your ambitions, your desires for both career and life, and your presence here at the university demonstrates your ability – your intention – to make those desires come true. That is your power.

“*However,*” she said sadly. “Whilst all men are created equal, all ambitions are not. Some ambitions must take precedence over others. I’ll give you an example. Mr. Smith wants a car. Mr. Smith also wants a job. Which of those goals should be prioritise first? The job, of course. For how will he fulfil his ambition to get a car, without the money to pay for it?”

There was a murmur of understanding, but not the dull, dreary murmur that Maggie might have expected. The class sounded alive and alert, hanging off the lecturer’s every word.

“There are also times,” she continued, “Where a man must prioritise *someone else’s* ambitions over his own. And so it is, at this university. You know what is asked of you; you know what is expected. Most of you will complete your studies here. Most of you will graduate after third year with the qualifications you came for. But we must not overlook the minority who will not. We must honour their sacrifice, and we must accept, all of us, that we *might* be called upon to join them, and must go willingly and readily if we are. For that minority’s power is deployed elsewhere, deployed to fulfil another’s ambitions, and the scale of those ambitions make their sacrifice a worthy one, however painful. The ambitions of that other are infinite. He has the capacity to bring about great change, to influence the world to his own, majestic designs. His name is Mr. Desmond Berry, but Des to his friends, and every single one of you count among his friends. So, if you see Des around the campus, which you might from time to time, don’t be shy. Be sure to stop him, to say hello, how do, and to go readily and happily should he ask you to accompany him.

“He would also like you to be wary, for the next couple of days at least. Because things have taken a turn. Some bad people have arrived. People who don’t understand, people who want to upset the balance of things and ruin everything that we work for here. Two of them are with us right now, in fact. They’re standing just outside the door!”

There was no time to react, barely enough time to register the words. The double doors to the lecture hall smacked open inwards with frightful force, crashing against the walls like grenades going off, exposing a lecture hall the size of a small cinema screen, with a dais at the front where the lecturer stood, and rows of seats stacked, stretching right back to the far wall. The students in those seats were wide-eyed and drooling, their necks cracking as they snapped their heads as one to glare at Maggie and Kaylaar.

Maggie blinked, and the lecturer – a woman with short brown hair and an ill-fitting dress – was gone. Two faceless figures in black robes stood in her place and walked swiftly towards the door with their arms folded, chasms of deepest black peeping from below their hoods. Kaylaar yanked Maggie’s hand and pulled her away, and they fled the building with the figures close behind. Maggie was terrified that the wolves awaited them outside, but thankfully they were nowhere to be seen. They ran down the path, back towards the Thomas O’Leary Building. The brain fog, swept clean away by the terror of coming face to face with those wolves, was returning with a vengeance. Maggie felt shaky and delirious, and her run was reduced to a stagger, and...

And she stopped dead in her tracks, overcome by a visceral sense of having been slapped hard on the back of her neck.

There was no pain per se, just a hot soreness to the skin, as though left over by the strike of an open palm. She clapped her own hand over it and stared wildly around, dumbstruck, rooted to the spot. It was as though there were an electric current coursing through her from the floor, fizzing through her aching body and burrowing into her brain. The fog that clouded her thoughts was swept away, and her surroundings took on

clarity and colour she had never experienced before, the sight and smells and noises of the scene bursting out, the colours gleaming in outrageously lurid shades, the grass sparkling emerald green and the sky sapphire blue, the buildings twinkling diamonds, and the sun a fantastic golden gemstone, scorching in the sky.

She blinked, and for a moment, against the darkness of her eyelids, she saw something. A small woman, marching at speed up the path and into the building on their right...

She opened her eyes and turned to face that building. Above the automatic doors, emblazoned on the glass, it read, "*The Shaw Building*".

"This way," she breathed, taking Kaylaar leading him towards the automatic doors, which glided open smoothly to admit them. They were standing in a long corridor which ran parallel to the path outside, a closed coffee kiosk situated beside them, and a row of classrooms along the right stretching off to the other end of the building, where another set of automatic doors stood beside a large lecture hall.

Maggie closed her eyes and tried to glimpse the figure again, but she was gone. So too was the surreal visceral sensation. Uncertainly, Maggie looked back outside. Was the spot where she had been standing specifically what seized her so? Half of her wanted to go back and test the theory, the other half was nervous. In any case...she had a hunch. A gut feeling that the woman she'd seen – if she even existed, outside of her own mind – had not walked down the corridor, but rather straight ahead into the stairwell. Maggie led Kaylaar that way, past some toilets and into the stairwell, the staircase leading to the lecture rooms above and a pair of lifts off to the left, beside a fire exit.

And there – standing in plain sight, open view, nestled between the left lift and the wall – she saw it.

Her mouth dropped open. She raised a slender finger. "There."

Kaylaar followed her finger and then turned to her blankly. "What? Where?"

She stared at him. "You don't see it?"

He looked. He saw nothing. Just a beige plaster wall in the corner of the stairwell, next to the lift. Maggie's demeanour was starting to scare him, and he wondered if Desmond Berry hadn't finally succeeded in possessing her fully, taking her all the way under. He backed a step away.

"Mags, you're worrying me. What is it? What do you see?"

"Look away and look again," she insisted.

Nonplussed, he shut his eyes and counted to five. He gently opened them and looked again at the wall, the wall that was *just* a wall, the wall which hadn't changed in the slightest...

The wall that...

And then, quite suddenly, it was there. Invisible yet visible, hidden yet unhidden. Unnoticeable, unless one *really* looked...a tiny wooden door.

“Let’s get the Doctor,” Maggie breathed.

Us - October 2022 & April 2023

Not a lot happened after Jess's discussion with Caroline.

For a few weeks, at any rate.

And then everything happened all at once.

Jess did a great deal of research in the interim, spending hours in the city library, poring through the local history looking for anything specific to the university, anything that might have given her a lead, a clue, anything that could expose any sort of vulnerability, any chink in the armour of the creature who haunted it.

Alas, she found nothing like that, but she discovered quickly enough that there was indeed a Desmond Berry, an architect who had been instrumental in the construction of the original university campus, some two hundred and fifty years previous. The details of his life were scant, aside from one particularly interesting nugget of information.

Around the same time as construction was nearing completion, the man vanished without a trace. Gone. Reported missing but never found, the case buried deep in the public archives of the local constabulary. Reading the report, straining her eyes to decipher the untidy scrawls of some long dead local magistrate or official, she ascertained that he'd had a wife who reported him missing, and resided in the city itself, within walking distance of the campus.

But what was the connection? What possible connection *could* there be, between a man who – one way or the other – must have died decades ago, and the entity, the *dybbuk* if that's what it was, now bearing his name? It was a puzzle that plagued her, kept her up late into the night, her mind fizzing with ever more bizarre and ludicrous theories. Perhaps it wasn't a *dybbuk* at all, perhaps it was his ghost. Did some sort of billing dispute arise in relation to his work, did he argue with a former Dean? Did that former Dean, perhaps, kill him and hide his body and get away with the crime? Was killing the students some sick, twisted act of revenge? But since when did ghosts kill? Since when did they mutilate? Zombies, yes. Zombie flicks were something of a guilty pleasure of hers. But

ghosts? No. They lurked, they spooked, they jumped out and said boo. They didn't do this. The creature responsible for this was flesh and blood, capable of killing and hurting and butchering at will...and capable, therefore, of dying in turn? For surely whatever killed, could die. Whatsoever could touch the world and be touched in turn, whatever could kill, was surely in turn capable of *being* killed.

And so it might have been, had she seen hide or hair of Desmond Berry over the course of the next three weeks. But there was not a peep out of him. She never wandered off alone on campus, made Mike accompany her wherever she went, and saw not a trace of anything supernatural in that time. Nor, mercifully, were there any further deaths. She almost came to believe that she'd spooked him. Scared him off. That simply by standing her ground and taking the time to know her enemy, she had somehow cowed him into submission. Like all bullies, he was a coward. Nothing but a pathetic, lonely coward.

Through a combination of crass over-optimism and desperate, yearning hope, she almost came to believe it was over.

She could not have been less prepared for what was to come.

When the end did come, it came without warning, without reason, without any trigger that she could recognize. The day started off as a normal one, insofar as any day was normal at the university. She arrived on campus and met Mike in the lobby of the Thomas O'Leary Building, shaking off her umbrella and cowering into her sodden coat and scarf. It was the first rainy day for some time, and the first genuinely cold one since the previous March. They made their way to her office where she dumped coat, scarf and gloves, before heading to the lecture hall where she booted up her laptop and loaded her presentation onto the projector. Today's lecture – an introduction to offences against the person.

The first of the students arrived shortly after, settling in the front row. There was a clear correlation between when the students arrived and where they sat. The same old faces always showed up early and took up seats in the front row, whilst the same old faces always showed up late and invariably took seats right at the back. At the previous university she'd taught at, she and Mike sometimes put bets on which of the early birds would be first to arrive and which latecomer would be last. Alas, her time at the University of East Essex hadn't been conducive to that sort of fun, though the pattern still remained. She sat with Mike at the front and waited for the clock to strike the hour. She would begin on time, come what may; it wasn't her practice to give the latecomers any leniency.

But nor, normally, did she ever challenge them on their tardiness. It was their own success they risked chucking away, none of her business whatsoever. She would simply carry on signing as they slouched to their seats at the back and lounged there, the hangover all too visible on their greasy features.

But the last student to arrive on that particular day had been another matter entirely.

For a start, he kicked the door open. It burst open inwardly at speed and crashed hard into the wall. She didn't hear the impact of course, but felt it keenly through the floor, the vibrations coursing through the soles of her feet and all the way up her body. She stared at him. He returned her gaze, his lip curling up in a sneer.

"One day," she told him, as Mike signed at her side, looking angry, "you might have a job of some description. I'll be perfectly honest, I wouldn't bet my savings – such as they are - on that, but it's not entirely beyond the realms of possibility. With a job, alas, comes a boss. If he or she weren't to sack you for showing up late, they would surely sack you for hurting the door like that. Take a seat."

But the student – a burly youth of eighteen or nineteen with a messy shock of greasy brown hair and an oily face full of acne – did not sit down. He stood in the doorway and he glared at her, and he said something in response.

She didn't need to turn to Mike to know it was offensive – she saw as much from his body language, and from what little she managed to read from his lips. But when Mike – looking livid – confirmed just *how* offensive it was, Jess could not immediately hide her shock. For a long moment she simply stared at the student in disbelief, her skin prickling as she felt the eyes of the whole class upon her. She quickly regained her composure, and forced herself to sneer back at him.

"Very good," she said, ignoring the quickening pace of her heartbeat. "And on that note, you can head off. I'm going to assume you are drunk, high or stoned, possibly a combination of all three, and that you'll sober up soon enough and feel mortified about this once you do. You can come to me and apologise, and we'll say no more about it. If not, I'm afraid I'll have to raise it with the module leader. Good day."

Still, the student did not move. He simply stood, watching her, his cruel smile widening.

"I'll get security," she said simply. "Don't imagine I wouldn't."

"Won't be necessary, Jess," Mike said, speaking and signing at once. "Clear off, you sickly little twerp, or I'll escort you out myself. How's that?"

The student laughed. Jess stared at him. Now that she looked hard...there was something wrong with his eyes. And it wasn't anything to do with drugs.

"I wasn't joking," Mike said simply, stepping off the platform and towards the student, flexing his knuckles as he approached.

"Mike..." she said verbally, reaching out to stop him. He shook her off and bore down on the student. Despite Mike's being twice his size and weight, the student did not cower. He stood to attention, arms held out peculiarly wide to his sides, his fists clenched, a foul smile stretched out on his greasy face. And she'd seen that smile before. Just once. Recently. That frightful leer with the tongue hanging out. When she'd been chased by those creatures, and briefly glimpsed Desmond Berry's face instead of the darkness below the hoods. He'd been pulling exactly that face.

Jess didn't see what happened next, didn't fully register it until it was far too late. Mike lunged at the student, readying to eject him none too gently from the room, when the student bizarrely stepped into his arms and stood there as though they were locked in an embrace. There was no violence. Mike did not seize him and ram him into the wall face first before dragging him out by the collar of his soiled t-shirt, as it had looked like he'd wanted to. For a few seconds, they just stood. When they did draw apart, Mike stepped away and turned to Jess, looking thoroughly confused. She met his gaze and frowned at him.

And then her eyes travelled down to his torso.

There was a red stain upon his green shirt spreading out like a growing tumour. He put a hand to the wound and examined his palm, as though surprised to see it glistening red. He collapsed to his knees. Behind him, the student clutched a jagged blade, coated crimson.

Only then did Jess understand what she'd witnessed, and only then did she begin to scream. Her first instinct was to go for Mike, but he looked up and mouthed the word, "run". Even then she would have tried to save him, were it not for the other students. As one, the two hundred strong class rose to its feet. All of them were looking at her. All of them were wearing that same, dead-eyed expression as the student with the blade.

Mike pitched forwards onto his front. There was nothing she could do. Spinning on her heel she rushed towards the exit on the right-hand side of the platform. In her peripheral vision she saw the students clamouring to block her way, crawling over one another like bees in a hive as they tried to throw themselves between her and safety. She rammed open the door with her shoulder and felt a cold hand close around her throat, many hands lunging at her, trying to get a grip of her. Her adrenaline afforded her strength enough to wriggle free, though she had to dig her nails hard into one hand to get it off her shoulder. And then she was free, she was out, and she sprinted hard towards the staircase leading down to the lobby, feeling the thudding footfalls of her class as they gave chase.

She took the stairs two at a time, her weak ankle searing and her lungs burning for oxygen, her throat threatening to close up. For a horrid moment she feared that she'd left her inhaler upstairs but felt its reassuring little outline in the pocket of her jeans, pressed against her thigh.

She made it down to the lobby. The cafeteria was off to her left, the library straight ahead, just past the revolving doors of the entrance...but in each case, her way was blocked. There was nowhere to go. She'd expected this in the back of her mind, but it was still a shock to see. For every single student and every member of staff had stopped where they were: in the cafeteria eating some lunch, marching to or from a lecture or the library, perhaps skiving off and heading home for the day...whomever they were, whatever they'd been doing, they now stood rigid and statue-like, staring at her, the cruel jester's grins plastered to their faces failing to light up their cold, lifeless eyes.

At the cafeteria, on the counter beside the till, was the severed head of an older woman, her iron-grey hair still tucked under a net. Caroline. Standing behind the till, a man in white chef's overalls, spattered red.

She glanced behind her. The student with the knife was there, his classmates gathered on the staircase behind. Through the glass walls of the building, she saw more students peering through, watching her, none of them moving a muscle.

She was having an asthma attack. Her throat and windpipe were sore and tight, her lungs yearning for breath she couldn't draw. For a moment, instinctively, she reached for her inhaler. Then she stopped. What would be the point? It was game, set and match. Checkmate. There was no getting out of this. Stupid, stubborn woman! She swore verbally and cursed her own pig-headedness. However could she have come back here? How the hell could she have thought she could fight back? She'd gotten Mike killed, and Caroline. Now herself.

There was nothing left but to go down fighting, such as she could.

She took an elongated gasp of air, allowing a pathetic amount to reach her lungs. She coughed, her dry gullet sore and tender. And then she turned around to face the student with the knife, preparing herself for his attack.

It didn't come. Instead came a thought in her head, a thought that wasn't hers. It seared her mind like a red-hot poker slowly inserted into the deepest tissue of her brain.

"Come. Come to us. Come to us or be taken by force."

The students in the lobby parted, forming a pathway towards the revolving doors. Their clenched fists unfurled and their arms raised, and they each raised a sole finger, pointing her towards the exit.

With little choice but to obey, she stepped out into the rain and faced the waiting mob, barely blinking as they were drenched by the elements. Boys and girls, men and women, students and staff, people of every size and race, all of them wearing the Desmond smile, all of them pointing her down the pathway through the grounds.

Jess didn't move at once. She took out her inhaler and took two puffs and stood still while her windpipe slowly eased open, and she could breathe freely again. She shivered; her coat was up in her office, and her blouse afforded her no warmth. It was white, and becoming see-through the wetter it got, a fact that would have mortified her in other circumstances. Her Converse were freely allowing water to bleed through to her feet, soaking her socks. Her jeans clung to her legs like an extra layer of skin. Her hair was growing lank, plastered to her head like a drenched towel.

"I think," she said verbally, doubtless making an incoherent hash of the words, "I would be happier going the other way. Off campus."

"You will not leave. You will not escape. You will not see daylight again. Come to us or be dragged. The choice is yours."

There *was* no choice. She walked down the path like a condemned woman on her way to the gallows. She was flanked every step of the way by yet more students, standing

on the sodden lawns either side and pointing her ahead. The mob was following her, shadowing her, her freedom getting further away with every passing step. Up ahead, the back entrance to the campus was blocked by even more students.

She reached the Shaw Building, and a thousand extended fingers pointed her inside.

As she passed through the sliding doors, she raised her head for one last look at the sky, squinting into the rain, enjoying one last burst of fresh air on her face. Only when it was gone, replaced by the cold and inhospitable plaster ceiling overhead, did she begin to panic. She took another puff of her inhaler and supported herself on the wall for a moment. She was guided down the corridor towards the other side of the building, and into a stairwell with two lifts off to the left of the staircase.

Nestled in the corner was a ludicrous sight. A door made of coarse oak, with a grilled window and a round iron latch. A door that belonged to some old medieval castle, and which looked utterly absurd in a modern university building, stood right beside the automatic metal doors of the two lifts, and built into a wall made not of rough stone, but dull, modern beige plaster.

It was laughable. Ludicrous. And it was where he lived. Through the grilled window, a tangible force wafted out like foul breath, pure, concentrated airborne hatred seeping out, its slithering tendrils reaching out to her in a python's lethal embrace.

Again, for argument's sake, she weighed up her options. None. If she didn't enter of her own volition, the mob would simply carry her. All that remained was to die fighting.

She reached out with a steady hand and yanked open the door.

He reached out with a steady hand and yanked open the door.

It opened with a ghastly, squealing creak, revealing a chasm beyond. A short, narrow corridor led to a staircase, which descended into the crushing blackness of depths unknown. The Doctor stood on his toes and peered down, yet could not see any hint of anything even resembling a bottom.

"This is it," he breathed. "Oh yes. This is it. You say you were led here, Mags? My guess is that you walked directly above the source. It's somewhere down there."

"But why should it do that?" Kaylaar asked. "Draw us towards it so?"

"Why, indeed?" the Doctor said darkly. "But remember – we were summoned here. We were brought, and we still don't know by whom. I wonder if the source is somehow corrupted. Sending out mixed signals. I don't know...all I *do* know is that I'm certain it's down there and I'm certain we have to destroy it."

He extracted a small cylindrical torch from his pocket, which threw a far wider and brighter beam than one would have expected from looking at it. He shone it down

the stairs and illuminated the way by a further few meters. Even with the powerful arc of light, no bottom could be seen; only a coarse, treacherous set of corroded steps, with a low hanging ceiling of rock, and walls so close together that it was fortunate none of them were of a larger build.

The Doctor stepped through first, followed by Maggie and then Kaylaar, who left the door a few inches ajar behind them. They stood alone at the top of the staircase, pressed awkwardly close together in the confined space. The Doctor could smell Maggie's perfume, and whatever lotion or aftershave Kaylaar had pilfered from the TARDIS's bathroom that day.

"All right," he sighed heavily. "Let's do it."

The Deep: October 2022 & April 2023

It was a long time before Jess reached the bottom. She had been descending slowly in total darkness, feeling the way forward with her feet, only taking a step down when she was sure it was safe, and that she wouldn't go skidding from the weathered surface of the next stair and tumbling into the depths. Down she shuffled, deeper and deeper, further away from the surface with every step, stopping twice to use her inhaler, terrified all the while that Desmond Berry would suddenly lurch up at her from the gloom and drag her down.

It might have taken her ten minutes to descend; it could have been as many hours. All she knew was that it felt like an age. Yet the bottom came eventually, like everything did, for better or for worse. And Jess saw it approaching long before she arrived, on account of the light. A flickering orange light, shining faintly up at her from below, a light which grew larger the closer she got, finally emitting a welcome degree of limited heat in the otherwise chill dankness. She emerged into a wide, square-bore tunnel held up by wooden support beams that looked unnervingly rotten, the surrounding walls made of packed brown dirt held in by more beams. Along those walls were sconces in which bunting torches burned, tongues of flame licking uncomfortably close to the wooden beams, though in truth the place was far too damp for a fire to break out. At her feet ran rusted rails, two strips of broken and twisted brown iron, the sleepers that supported them reduced to so much stinking wood-mulch by years of decay.

The torches – clearly lit for her benefit – guided her way, and she pressed on further into the tunnel.

“Where are we?” Kaylaar exclaimed as they finally reached the bottom of the stairs and huddled in a close, mouldy tunnel, the only light coming from the Doctor's torch, flitting

from place to place so that they caught several individual snapshots of their surroundings instead of one full picture.

"Mine," the Doctor said unhelpfully. "Blimey...I highly doubt this is supposed to be here. Imagine building a whopping great building over a place as worn out as this...what were they thinking? The whole lot could come crashing down at any moment!"

Kaylaar stared at his silhouette. "Is that, uh...likely?"

"I should say not," the Doctor said. "As in, there is no reason to suppose it should collapse today in particular, as opposed to tomorrow, or yesterday, or sometime next week, or perhaps in a few years' time."

"Great," Maggie's shape said sardonically. "How about we crack on, then?"

"Yes, indeed," the Doctor said. He paused. "So, you were...let me see...due south of our current position when you experienced whatever it was, Magster. Meaning that from here, we want to find a shaft bearing right."

The path ahead went black, the lit torches veering off into a small tunnel branching off to the right. Some way down, it began to slant notably. Jess nearly tripped on the rails several times, and the palms of her hands were coated in rank filth from grabbing the wall to stop herself tumbling. Her lungs were burning constantly now, and her inhaler was not affording her much relief. Her clothes felt grimy already, the white soles of her soggy Converse trainers turning an ugly shade of brown.

The fear of getting lost was suffocating, and Maggie had far less faith in the Doctor's sense of direction than he seemed to. They had found their tunnel bearing right, but it was leading them deeper into the bowels of the earth, and they must have walked far past the spot above where she'd had her – for want of a better word – experience. Unless they were going to go back on themselves further below the surface, they couldn't possibly be going the right way. As they traversed the sloping shaft, Maggie's hips and knees faintly throbbed. She was getting too old for this sort of thing. The Doctor and Kaylaar were both sprightly and managing fine, and she tried hard to make it look as though she was too. Even with Kaylaar being under the weather of late, his stamina still seemed greater than hers. The pair of them could run a mile and recover in minutes. She could still run a mile, to be sure, but the sad reality was that the days where she could simply shrug it off had long passed.

The pressure was getting intense. Her ears were popping, and the temperature, so cold and clammy in the shafts above, began to rise as the loose dirt walls gave way to

thick, insulating stone. Soon enough it was stifling, and she was mopping her brow constantly, sweat plastering her clothes to her body, the feeling of being trapped building as the ceiling began to sag low and pregnant, and the walls began to close in on either side...

Narrower it grew, until finally Jess's head was brushing against the ceiling, granules of stone scraping away in her hair, her terror rising as the walls grew closer on either side, which coupled with her asthma, left her with the distinct sensation that she was suffocating. The temperature was close to unbearable, not helped by the flames of the burning torches, which drew ever nearer as the walls compressed, flickering orange tongues searing her skin and making her eyes water.

And then, after a sharp turn which seemed to set her going back on herself in a neighbouring tunnel, the walls and the ceiling opened up and she found herself standing in a cavern the size of a football stadium. Some sort of natural fluorescence illuminated the scene, as though light were seeping out of the walls themselves, revealing natural springs glittering in pools and stalagmites twice her height jutting up from the ground in sporadic clusters. Craning her neck to look up, she saw stalactites bearing down overhead, water dripping from the tips.

Such was the vastness of the place that Jess momentarily forgot herself. She stood agape at the entrance, staring with her eyes wide. The sheer magnificence was like nothing she'd ever beheld, the cave so fantastically large that it was impossible to take it all in. Something resembling a smile began tugging at her lips. Such was the beauty, that for a moment – one glorious moment – the gravity of her dire situation was almost forgotten.

"Feeling emotional?" the voice in her head sneered. *"Keep going. Join us!"*

She winced at a sharp pain in her temple, staggering slightly and clutching her head. Briefly, she wondered where exactly she was supposed to go. But then she saw it. Very distantly, all the way across on the other side of the cavern – a good three to four minutes' walk – a tiny door.

"Door," the Doctor said, popping a finger under the chins of Maggie and Kaylaar to close their gaping mouths. Still, his companions' eyes were like four beacons as they stared at the cavern sprawling so suddenly before them. It was very pretty, of course. Somewhere deep inside him, the Doctor was sad that he couldn't muster up the same awe at the sight of it. An age thing, he supposed. He'd seen far more impressive sights in his long, long life, and gone was the innocent boy of two hundred, who bounced from spectacle to

spectacle with the same wide eyes as Maggie and Kaylaar. Alas, something had to be *off-the-scale* impressive to impress him these days. And he was starting to forget what the scale even was, where his yardsticks began or ended. If he were alone, he would no doubt have trudged right past the spectacular sight in grim pursuit of his purpose. Quite a depressing place to be, really. At least Maggie and Kaylaar's presence reminded him that he was not totally numb, if he stopped to think about it for a moment.

He led them across the cavern towards the door, walking amidst towering stalagmites and rained upon constantly by viciously sharp stalactites dripping overhead. Natural springs dotted their way, and he heard the rush of a nearby underground river.

"I was thinking..." Maggie suddenly said.

"Oh dear," the Doctor said, smirking as she glared at him. "What about?"

"We're...fine."

"For now," the Doctor agreed.

"Yes, but in terms of ourselves. I feel like...like me."

"She's right," Kaylaar said.

"So she is," the Doctor agreed, conscious that the overbearing sensation of Desmond Berry had indeed vanished, had been gone for some time now that he thought about it; possibly from the moment they'd stepped through the door and into the tunnels.

"How interesting," he said. "I wonder...you know when you get a burn? Hurts, right?"

"Nothing worse," Maggie agreed.

"Indeed, but the very worst burns are often painless. D'you know why? The nerves are destroyed. The pain receptors themselves are melted. Perhaps it's the same sort of thing down here. Perhaps now we're so close to the source of power, the damage it's doing is so severe we can't even feel it."

Maggie and Kaylaar stared at him in disgust.

"Just a theory," he assured them. "Could be there's another explanation ... um, anyway, I'll stop talking. Let's just walk."

They continued in silence, their feet echoing around the chamber as they approached the little door, at last finding themselves standing right outside. It was very similar to the one leading into the shafts, but in the place of the grilled window was some sort of iron tablet, with six crude symbols arranged into a pyramid. At the bottom, three wolves. In the middle, two robed figures. At the top, the figure of a man. They were chiselled roughly into the metal with no enormous skill, as though the artist had been working in a hurry.

"Very interesting," the Doctor said, tracing them with his finger. "A pyramid. Beast. Biped. Person. Three, two, one. There's a lot of power in a pyramid, guys."

"We saw the wolves," Maggie said quietly. "And the figures in robes."

"Quite," the Doctor said. "And I had the pleasure of meeting the man. I wonder what this is. A warning, perhaps? Or a lock of some sort, ensuring that these forms are

the only ones the creature can take outside of its lair? And if that's the case, I wonder what it will look like on its own turf? If there are no limits to the forms it can take? It could be unstoppable."

"Doctor," Kaylaar said.

"Yeah?"

"Would it kill you, just sometimes, not to think aloud?"

"Sorry," he said sheepishly. He winced. "Well. We're here. Anyone want to back out?"

"Very much," Kaylaar said. "Just open it. Quick. Before I bail."

"Ditto," Maggie said.

The Doctor looked at them and fought to maintain his composure. "Whatever happens beyond this door," he told them. "I want you both to know that...well...you're both amazing. And uh...yeah, and that's about it, really."

Feeling clammy and awkward, he turned back to the door...

Jess touched one of the hooded figures on the stone tablet with the tip of her finger, shuddering as the image evoked in lurid detail the events of that night, how scared she'd been, how utterly helpless. And it was that torment which drove her. That torment which sapped her fear away and replaced it with anger. Anger like she'd never felt before. The thing that lived beyond this door had killed students beyond counting. Killed Mike. Caroline. Tried to kill her. And she would die fighting it. Any hurt she might inflict on it before she died, however trivial, would count as a victory.

She reached out for the latch.

She twisted. She pushed the door open.

He reached out for the latch.

He twisted. He pushed the door open.

The Lair: October 2022 & April 2023

Stepping through that door was like stepping into the mouth of some gargantuan monster. Whereas the stalagmites and stalactites in the cavern outside were grouped in little clusters, in here there was no respite. Every spare inch of the vast, domed ceiling was covered by stalactites, jutting down like monstrous misshapen teeth of various shapes and sizes. The same was true of the cavern floor, stalagmites protruding up at various angles, their tips glinting in that mysterious natural light which illuminated the place. A pathway snaked down from the raised platform on which Jess stood, snaking through the basin of stalagmites, coming to an end in the centre of the cavern, where an open space nestled. In that open space, she spied a strange artefact.

Ignoring the pang of asthma in her hoarse throat and the scream of her weak ankle, she walked down the path towards the centre, the stalagmites towering high over her head on either side, the stalactites above casting enormous, pointed shadows. The whole place was like some sort of giddy optical illusion, and her head spun simply from being there.

She didn't need to reach the centre before encountering something dreadful.

She smelled them before she saw them. Bodies. Bodies in various stages of decay, some skeletal and long dead, others with dry flesh hanging off the bones in rotten clumps, one or two – the most rancid – still with a hint of, for want of a better word, *juice* about them, glistening flesh seeping pus into soiled garments. They wore an assortment of clothes; the skeletons wore outfits from decades long ago, tweed and knee-length skirts and smart black shoes, one with a pair of wire-rim spectacles still, somehow, clinging to his polished white skull. The more recently deceased wore jeans and trainers, apparel that was disturbingly familiar to Jess. But whatever the outfit these wretches had on, and whatever the condition of their remains, they all had one thing in common. The chains. The chains around their ankles, shackling them to the stalagmites.

She counted ten bodies before deciding that she wanted to count no higher. She clapped a filthy hand over her mouth and nose and walked gingerly through their midst, retching at their stink, fighting down the overwhelming urge to vomit. Alas, her already strained lungs could not get enough air with her mouth and nose restricted, and eventually she was forced to pull her hand away and take a big, involuntary gasp of breath, receiving a thick mouthful of the stench. She could *taste* it, clinging to the roof of her mouth. And the urge to vomit could no longer be held back. She pressed her palms against a stalagmite and bowed her head, and remained that way until everything she had eaten that day was spattered on the stone at her feet, followed by a copious amount of bitter yellow bile.

But however much her torment up until that point, nothing could have prepared her for the terror she felt when she passed the last of the dead bodies, and saw the empty chain tied to a stalagmite. It took her a second to process it, to work out what it meant, and the fear hit her like a punch to the stomach. She gasped and immediately tried to flee, away from the waiting chain and her fate.

She got no further than a few yards before the voice in her head spoke again.

"The consequence of defiance is life."

She couldn't move. She was no longer in control of her body. She could only watch in horror, bursting into tears, as her legs turned her around of their own volition and began walking her back towards the chain.

"No!" she cried, sobbing uncontrollably. She screamed, flailed about like a drowning woman, all courage and dignity forgotten. She tried to stop, but her legs wouldn't obey. They walked of their own accord, the power of Desmond Berry amplified a hundredfold in his own territory, taking physical control despite her previous immunity to his power.

"Please," she begged, warbling the words verbally. "Please don't. Just kill me! Please...kill me..."

"We feed off you...you feed off us. The record is twelve years. Could you beat it, Jessica Klebitz? Could you last? You could survive for decades down here. Imagine that."

It was too much to bear. She could only watch as her fists unfurled and reached for the chain, the metal cold and harsh and heavy in her palms. One end was tied around a stalagmite, and on the other end was a padlock; there was no key in sight.

She could only scream as those hands of hers began to wrap the chain tight around her right ankle...

Quite how Kaylaar avoided throwing up, he didn't know. It was true that he hadn't been eating much of late, which probably helped enormously. Not for the first time since travelling with the Doctor, his superior sense of smell was proving a curse. However bad

the stench of the bodies was for the Doctor and Maggie – and from the green tinge to Maggie’s face, it *was* bad – it was so much worse for him.

“You’re all right,” Maggie said, resting a gentle hand on his forearm and leading him through the corpses.

“Wouldn’t go that far,” he said. “Don’t talk to me, I’m feeling...”

He retched again and clapped his hand tight over his mouth.

“I think these people were fed,” the Doctor murmured faintly, gingerly inspecting one of the fresher bodies. “I think they were brought here and kept here, kept alive for as long as they could be. But to what end? Why not just kill them? Punishment? Necessity? Sustenance, perhaps? I don’t know, but...oh, I say. Look.”

Just past the last of the bodies, he picked up an empty chain which lay trailing along the path, one end shackled to a stalagmite.

“I wonder who was supposed to go here?”

“*You cannot fight.*”

“*I will fight.*”

And she could. She *could* fight! And she would.

The chains dropped from her limp hands. Though it was like moving her leg through a pool of cement, she was able to disentangle her foot from the chain and rise slowly, moving like a woman thrice her age. She stood trembling on the spot, her head thumping fit to burst, her every nerve afire, hot, bubbling, boiling agony searing through her brain, coursing down her spine, settling in all her extremities. It felt as though she were being burned alive. Blood spurted from both her nostrils, dribbling down her face, leaving an iron tang in her mouth to compliment the aftertaste of bile. Her eyes popped in their sockets, her useless eardrums popped, her very joints popped and her spine cracked. She was being crushed. Burned and crushed at the same time. She was in a pressure cooker, a microwave, being fried from the inside out.

Except she wasn’t.

The pain, the torment, it was all in her head. She touched her face. No blood. It was him. He wanted to cripple her; he wanted her to believe she was dying.

Anger coursed through her veins, and she took a heavy step forward, away from the chains. She was not heading for the exit any longer, oh no. She was going towards the centre. Towards the object which was there.

“*Stop this!*”

“*Why did you bring me here? To prove that I underestimated you? Ever stop to think that perhaps you underestimated me?*”

She was smiling. She was laughing! And she was running! A slow, lumbering jog as opposed to a full-on sprint, but gaining momentum all the time. The voice in her head

was screaming, frantic, but she blotted it out. It wasn't relevant. She was immune! If she truly believed in it, *truly* believed, then she had power over it.

Reaching the centre of the cavern at last, she found herself standing in a clearing amidst the stalagmites, like a glade in a forest of stone, coarse grey granite in the place of wood and leaf and life. And there it was, in the very centre of the very centre of the cavern. A pyramid the size of small car, roughly the size of her little Mini. It was constructed of several individual spheres, each of them identical, each roughly the size of a football. They were a silvery-grey in colour and glowed faintly, emitting a slight heat.

She didn't know what they were, but she knew they were important. Not only important, but vital. She felt the fear of the creature that had brought her here. This wasn't *supposed* to happen. She was supposed to be chained up and helpless with the corpses, she was never meant to get this close!

"Die," she told it, and with a final surge of effort, launched herself at the pyramid of spheres with her hands outstretched...

"I might have known," the Doctor breathed.

Whereas the Doctor seemed far more interested in the pyramid of strange, glowing spheres in the centre of the cave, Maggie's attention was drawn instead to the dishevelled figure who stood over it, one bony hand clasped tight over the topmost sphere.

She was small and gaunt and painfully thin, with a voluminous mane of ginger hair that would have been gorgeous had it been washed anytime recently. As it was, it hung lank and greasy over her bony features, snaking all the way down to the small of her back. The ends were split and twisted, the many matted layers glistening in the light of the spheres. Her face was caked in grime, and filth clung to her clothes in a brown-grey sheen, spoiling the white of her blouse. Her eyes were wide open, staring off into space without seeing. The Doctor, Maggie and Kaylaar padded closer. She looked to be no older than thirty and smelled about as rough as she looked.

"Who is she?" Maggie breathed.

Without taking his eyes off the pyramid, the Doctor pressed two fingers against her neck. "She's alive. I would think this is the young lady who brought us here. Probably the lady who drew you down here, Mags. Reaching out, calling for help. Hijacking the power of the Intelligence to bring about its end, while at the same time sustaining herself off its life force. See her hand? Look closely. It's fused to that sphere. She's become one with it. Stupid, brilliant, amazing girl. Destroy that pyramid, and in the best-case scenario, she'll lose her hand. Worst-case scenario, the feedback will kill her.'

"But what is it?" Kaylaar said. "You recognize it?"

"I do," the Doctor said gravely. "These spheres give life and corporal existence to a parasite. A disembodied intelligence, striving for physical form. It refers to itself as the Great Intelligence, and-

"-Doctor!" exclaimed a booming voice from nowhere in particular, making the three friends leap a foot in the air, staring around the cavern as they searched for its source. "Oh, Doctor, I am flattered, but I would be remiss to accept the credit you bestow on me. I, the Great Intelligence? Hah. The Great Intelligence is an idea. A theory. A storybook if you will. Yes! Think of it as the plot to a jolly good novel. I am but a subplot in that novel. Or a chapter, if that's easier to envisage. An offshoot, one of many, but surely ranking as among the more successful. For I have at last gained physical form, at least within the vicinity of this chamber. Feeding off the flesh of the young to sustain my physical being, while feeding on their minds to sustain my true self. Brilliant, supple, creative young minds. Intelligent, imaginative pliable minds. The more I absorb, the stronger I get. And I will never stop. I must grow! I want...everybody. The confines of the campus will not hold me forever."

The Doctor nodded. "I see. You realise of course, that this is no longer going to happen? Not now I'm here."

"Touch the pyramid, kill the girl," the voice laughed, its cackle leaving Maggie with the sensation of being plunged into an ice bath. "Touch the pyramid and watch her crumble to dust! You wouldn't do it; you *couldn't* do it."

"Is that a fact?" the Doctor growled, and Maggie shivered and took a subconscious little step away from him. Her jovial friend became another creature altogether when he was angry, and it was only during those times where she realised that he was, after all, an alien. Shocking, seething anger radiated from him in tangible rays which made her skin crawl. The fact that none were directed at her did little to lessen her fear. "Who is she, anyway? How did she overpower you? Because that's what happened, isn't it? You brought her here, and she got the better of you! You can't shake her off. You're the computer, she's the virus. Eating at you from within. And I'm guessing you dare not take physical form in here to remove her, the feedback would be terrible. Meaning you dare not take it to challenge us, either."

He stepped towards the pyramid and cracked his knuckles. "And guess what? She brought us here knowing what your destruction would mean for her. What you know, she knows. What you see, she sees. And she brought us here just the same. She's worth a million of you. And what I do now, I do in her honour."

He started towards the pyramid...and stopped.

The voice laughed. "Oh, Doctor. As ever, you misunderstand me. When I said you couldn't do it, I *meant* couldn't."

The Doctor collapsed to his knees. Maggie and Kaylaar rushed forwards to try and help him, but Maggie stopped as she felt something – an invisible force, as strong as a chain – close around her throat, dragging her down onto her back, her head colliding

painfully with the stone. Staring up, she saw stars fluttering among the stalactites. She may have blacked out for a second, because the next she knew Kaylaar and the Doctor were both lying at her side, writhing around beside her, retching, scrabbling to free the pressure from their throats. Maggie gasped for air as her face drained of blood, her eyes popping and her cheeks taking on that hideous vacuum-like feeling as she gasped and spluttered for breath she couldn't draw.

"I had thought to keep you down here with the rest," the voice said. "But honestly? You three are far too much trouble. Goodbye, Doctor. Goodbye, Margaret Weitz. Goodbye, Kaylaar. Looks as if you won't be going home after all."

Jess saw everything. She saw herself standing motionless over the pyramid of spheres, where she'd been paralysed for the past six months. Six miserable months, watching as her body grew thinner and her face grew gaunter with every passing day. Right now, she watched from above, as though she were a stalactite. Other times, when the fancy took her, she would watch from elsewhere. From the eyes of Desmond Berry, from the eyes of the students, from the eyes of the people who were once, briefly, her colleagues. She was everywhere. And she was nowhere. Floating and trapped and alone.

But not helpless. It had taken her six months to project her thoughts far enough to bring help, but help had at last arrived. And her suffering was almost over.

Except...

That help was currently rolling around on the floor, dying. She could have cried. She was crying, in fact. She felt tears rolling down the cheeks of her physical body and longed to wipe them away. She couldn't, of course. Nor could she help them now. They would die, and that was on her, and if she ever brought anyone else here then the same fate would befall them too. She was doomed. She would spend eternity as a shadow, a cloud, a mind without a body. Worse than death. She would not die. Her body would rot to bones and dust in the end, of course. Such was the privilege of those truly alive, to one day truly die. But hers was a story that couldn't end now. And she...she wanted it to. She wanted it over...

"I know you can hear me, so listen."

A voice. Not Desmond Berry; he hadn't spoken to her in months. This voice was not his. It was too kindly, too gentle.

It was him. The Doctor.

"I can see you crying. You aren't gone! You aren't trapped or stranded, you and your body are still one. He's blocked the connection, but he hasn't severed it. And what's blocked can be unblocked. You have power over him; you are flesh and blood. You are alive! You can go anywhere, do anything. You are better than him. You are more than him! Believe it."

"I've tried," she said. "For months, I have tried..."

"Then I give you food for thought. The power lies in the pyramid, and how many sides have a pyramid? Three? No, four. Four, counting the base. Three beasts, two bipeds, one man...and you. You make him! You complete him! The final side. Take charge. Take control! And hurry!"

He couldn't go on. He couldn't project any longer. He could barely even think. Kaylaar and Maggie were limp beside him. He could last a lot longer than them without air, but not forever. His vision was fading, his wheezing growing duller, his hands weaker as they scrabbled uselessly to prise open his closed throat. The pain in his lungs was subsiding, replaced by a dreadful fatigue, threatening sleep from which he's never rise.

Unless of course...

"You save them," he told the man he was about to be. His skin was starting to tingle. His hearts were starting to race. "You save them, Doctor. You save them all."

He was almost gone...he wondered who would take his place...seconds left and then he'd find out...

And then he saw her.

With an ear-splitting scream, she tore her right hand off the top of the pyramid and staggered away. Except that wasn't quite what happened. When the Doctor looked more closely, he saw that her right hand remained on top of the pyramid; she'd torn herself away from her hand. It stayed right where it was for a few moments, before disintegrating promptly into dust. The woman looked on in horror, gazing from the remains of her hand to her stump and back again, eyes darting about the cavern in a fit of panic. There was no blood. The flesh around the stump was dead and lifeless and porcelain white. Wheezing, the Doctor rose to his feet and caught her as she fell, keeping her upright and examining the stump tenderly.

"Does it hurt?" he asked at once.

She only shrugged her shoulders, tears welling up in her eyes. "I'm deaf."

"Well, that's fine," the Doctor said in fluent British sign language. There was scarcely a language in the universe he didn't speak, after all. "Does it hurt?"

"No. It's dead."

"What's your name?"

"Jess Klebitz," she said. She nodded over his shoulder. "Your friends are waking up."

Sure enough, Maggie and Kaylaar were rising shakily to their feet, massaging their necks.

The Doctor bared his teeth and rubbed his hands together. He turned to the pyramid.

"Right. Shall we?"

Maggie stood beside him. "I think so."

"With pleasure," Kaylaar growled.

"Yes," Jess Klebitz said verbally, her voice stilted but set. "Let's."

She went first; it seemed only right. She took a shaky step towards the pyramid and planted her foot into the side facing them. The pyramid immediately collapsed, spheres clattering to the cavern floor and rolling away in every direction, exposing a skeleton hidden within. The Doctor had a pretty good idea to whom that skeleton belonged, but paramount in his thoughts just then were the spheres.

"Smash them," he said, signing at the same time. "Smash them all."

He destroyed four of them himself, crushing them under the heels of his shoes while Maggie, Kaylaar and Jess did the same, running around to catch up with them as they rolled sluggishly away, a shrill, agonising scream echoing throughout the cavern as they worked, growing ever weaker, ever fainter, until at last the Doctor picked up the final sphere and tossed it to Jess Klebitz, who kicked it headlong into a nearby stalagmite where it exploded into a thousand tiny shards and the screaming topped abruptly.

Only with the danger finally over did Jess get a sense of how weak, how wasted, she truly was. Her legs wobbled as she staggered backwards, supporting herself against a stalagmite. She was grimly aware that she stank. Her filthy blouse hung from scrawny shoulders, and her hair itched terribly, weighed down by copious amounts of grease. Her socks had the texture of sandpaper, and her jeans were stiff with grime. All of this paled in comparison, however, to the dismay that gripped her at the sight of the stump at the end of her right arm.

Biting back tears, she nodded towards the skeleton exposed by the destruction of the pyramid. It had collapsed onto its front and fallen apart, individual bones sprawled in a pile, the skull grinning up at the ceiling.

"Desmond Berry," she said. "The architect."

"Indeed," the Doctor signed. "He must have stumbled upon this place, long ago. Found the pyramid...woken it up. The poor chap. He's not the first to be used by the Great Intelligence in such a way. Nor, I suspect, will he be the last."

"But we've killed it," Jess protested. "Haven't we?"

"This branch of it, yes. But the tree goes on forever and cannot be killed. It's a part of the fabric of the universe, some necessary part of the natural order of things. But this segment could never thrive, and now thanks to you it is extinguished. Stamped out. It won't hurt anyone else. You beat it."

Jess didn't hear the rumble of shifting stone that made the Doctor and his friends start alarmingly, but she felt the vibrations through her soles. Beneath their feet, something was stirring. Something huge.

“I think,” the Doctor said. “That now would be an opportune moment to run. Possibly even to sprint.”

The earth was thundering like a waking dragon beneath their feet, and Jess would have liked earnestly to run, but her weak legs wouldn't allow it. The woman tried to support her to no avail, and in the end the Doctor was forced to scoop her up in a fireman's lift and carry her, urging his friends to run as he stumbled along the path bearing her weight.

They reached the door just in time; the ceiling caved in, stalactites clamping down over stalagmites, the mouth of the great beast snapping shut, stone dust flying everywhere, smothering the view. It was as if the foul place, out of some environmental guilt, was struggling to contain the evil it had allowed for too long. Jess felt her stomach lurch as the Doctor span around and leaned bodily against the door to slam it shut, but not before a puff of dust gusted out, searing her eyes and making her gag and splutter.

They made it through the cavern, avoiding the falling stalactites crashing down all around them, making their way back into the shafts. With the natural fluorescence gone and the torches that had guided her six months previously extinguished, they were forced to travel by the feeble light of the Doctor's torch. It was a harrowing journey through near total darkness, the packed dirt walls shaking loose, the support beams wobbling in their frames, rancid mud showering them from the steadily disintegrating ceiling.

Their final obstacle, those accursed stairs, seemed even longer going up. They were too narrow to permit the Doctor to carry her, and after a short and laughable attempt to share the burden with the other lad, she batted them away and scrambled up of her own volition, as fast as she possibly could.

It wasn't very fast.

But it was fast enough.

And nothing – not the state of her clothes, not the trauma of the past six months, nor even the loss of her hand – could stop her smiling, crying in fact, as she staggered into the stairwell of the Shaw Building, basking in the hot sunshine that flooded in through the windows, her eyes screwed tight against the brightness which she never again expected to see.

True joy, but short-lived. Judging by the serene atmosphere on campus, the earthquake hadn't been felt this far up yet. But it was about to be. The four of them hurriedly left the stairwell, and the younger man used his elbow to smash the glass on a fire alarm by the door. She didn't hear its wail, but she felt the vibrations and saw eyes widen among the passing students, who turned as one and flooded towards the exit.

As they were leaving, one student – a dark skinned lad with a magnificent afro and a friendly round face – looked down at Jess and frowned. “You okay?” she saw him ask.

The significance of his concern was not lost on her, but she hadn't the time to respond; the earth gave a sudden, violent shudder and the orderly exodus at once turned to a stampede, bodies buffeting each other hard as they crammed for the exit, mouths wide open in screams silent only to her.

"Keep going," the Doctor cried, as Maggie and Kaylaar were swept through the doors by the crushing mass of bodies. "Stay together and run!"

Jess Klebitz was small and very weak and entirely likely to be killed in such a scene of panic. The Doctor stood his ground, shoving students aside with roughness that in any other circumstance would have made him feel guilty. He spied her pressed in and buffeted, drowning under the pressure of countless larger, healthier people. He seized her remaining hand and yanked her so hard that he risked dislocating her shoulder. But there was no helping it; she wouldn't get out without him.

Outside, the paths were clogged with fleeing students and staff, all pretence at calm abandoned as the earth shook beneath them and the sound of rumbling grew ever more furious. There were screams ahead as the glass front of the Thomas O'Leary Building suddenly gave, shattering with a blistering crash, shards showering the students and staff unlucky enough to be nearby. The wind scooped papers and notebooks from the exposed interior, and they swirled in the air like a flock of frightened birds. There could be no doubt that injuries would result from the quake, possibly deaths as well. It was all the Doctor could do to hope not, or at least not too many.

Running hand in hand, he and Jess finally made it to the arcade between the Thomas O'Leary Building and the student halls. Frazzled marshals were screaming over the noise, attempting to get the crowd into some semblance of order, but it was a fool's effort; bodies by the thousands crammed into the arcade, just beyond the eye of the earthquake, as though everyone could sense, somehow, that beyond the campus was far enough. That what was about to happen was for the university itself, and the university alone. That it was *right*. That it *needed* to occur. That it was far, far overdue.

The Shaw Building went first. It shrank into the ground with an ear-splitting rumble and kicked up a solid cloud of noxious dust, swallowed whole as the earth beneath simply gave, the structure collapsing into the shafts that lay below, they in no doubt collapsing into the caves in turn. The screaming of the crowd did not mask the roar of twisting metal and crumbling stone as the other buildings began to follow suit in a bizarre domino effect, structure after structure falling apart, the grounds folding into a great crater, like a bullet hole in the skin of the earth. Finally, the Thomas O'Leary Building gave up and crumpled in on itself, its great, protruding lecture hall bursting its socket and thumping whole to the ground with an echoing bang, so loud that the Doctor could only hear ringing in the moments that followed. It pitched nose-forwards into the

dirt, sitting comically like a fallen space capsule. The air was thick with stifling smoke and debris. The University of East Essex was gone, replaced by a whopping great hole in the ground, spurting water pipes and crackling cables lining the socket, and the unwholesome whiff of exposed sewers wafting up and befouling the air. Already, in the distance, approaching sirens could be heard.

The Doctor waded through the sea of horror-struck onlookers and found Maggie and Kaylaar across the road beside the TARDIS. Nearby, the owners of an Asian supermarket were standing in the doorway, looking on in sheer disbelief.

"I always had a bad feeling about that bloody university," the owner muttered.

"Very perceptive," the Doctor replied.

He flagged down the first ambulance on the scene and had to snap his fingers under the noses of the paramedics to stop them gaping over his head at the crater.

"Focus," he told them, passing Jess over. No longer in danger, the adrenaline that carried her from the deep had dissipated. She was out of it. Not dead, but not conscious, and certainly not able to move under her own power. He lifted her bodily into the ambulance, where the paramedics set her down on the stretcher bed.

"What happened to her?" one gasped, noting the ragged state of her clothes, her pallor, and of course the stump where a right hand ought to have been.

"She's been through it," the Doctor said. "But you see that she lives. Just you see that she does. Oh, and don't be alarmed if she doesn't respond to verbal cues – she can't hear."

He stepped back and the ambulance doors were pulled shut. Flanked by Maggie and Kaylaar, he watched as it went speeding off down the road bearing its precious cargo, the lights flashing TARDIS blue and the sirens brusquely demanding all obstacles stand, swerve or leap aside.

"She *will* be fine?" Maggie asked.

The Doctor smiled darkly. "She took on the Great Intelligence and lived. Hacked into it. Became one with it. Oh, Magster, she'll never be the same again. But fine? In the end? I think so. I hope so."

"And what about us?" Kaylaar said. Just then, to the Doctor's unease, he looked about as rough as Jess, though seemed determined not to show it. "Are we done here?"

The Doctor turned around and surveyed the destruction. "Oh yes. Our work here is done."

She saw them go, those three strange people. She lay in the ambulance, unconscious, and *watched* as two men and a woman stepped inconsequentially through the crowd and out of sight. Three people for whom nobody had any eyes; three people who stopped for nothing. Three heroes, who never asked for thanks.

She would never see them again, of course.
Who *were* they, anyhow?

2063

I forgave myself, in time. For what happened to Mike, for the part I played in his death. For Caroline too. It took a long time, but I learned to live with myself. Even to be proud of what I did.

The University of East Essex never did reopen. The death of Desmond Berry opened the floodgates to the grief and the horror that in life he had so successfully subdued, rendering any talk of a rebuild untenable. I wonder what stands there today? I've never gone back, nor do I wish to, so I wouldn't know. I would like to think there's a lush green space, perhaps a park, a place for happy families to congregate on mild summer days (the hot ones are far too intense for that now) and bask in the sunlight, with children running merrily around, an ice cream van stationed where the student digs once were, a coffee kiosk situated on the same spot as the Shaw Building, a big, colourful playpark upon the foundations of the Thomas O'Leary Building, and trees standing proud all around, providing shade enough for a picnic blanket or two to be laid.

Knowing Britain as I do, probably not. More likely a mundane row of houses or a block of flats takes up the space instead. Maybe their owners never realise why they occasionally feel haunted by the trauma of nearly three centuries of gruesome death.

But why *am* I writing these words, I wonder, aside from the fact that I can? A fortunate thing I'm left-handed, in that respect. But why, and why now? I was young when these events unfolded, and I am no longer young. Never before has it occurred to me to put pen to paper and write about them. For whose benefit is it? If anyone else happened upon these words, they would disregard them as the ramblings of a mad old, one-handed deaf lady, living alone. They'd only be wrong about the "mad" part. Oh, I have not been alone my whole life. I have lived fully. There were boyfriends, a husband briefly; I have known what it is to love and to be loved in turn. My two sons contact me often. Mike and Russell, both living in London, both happily married and working jobs they can tolerate. I shouldn't think it will be long before my first grandchild is on the way.

I hope they'll bring them to see me. Frankly, I hope there is time for that. Perhaps that is why I'm writing now, perhaps there isn't. After everything I've been through – everything I've become – is it so unreasonable to suggest that I might be able to sense my own morality, to feel in my bones that my time draws near? Perhaps if not recorded now, these events will die with me. Perhaps that would be better. Perhaps these words will go straight into the hearth once I'm finished. We'll see.

There is just one thing left to mention.

The Doctor.

I saw him. In those moments where he connected his mind to mine and helped me free myself, we formed a link. I don't know whether that was inevitable; I don't know whether he intended it to happen. But in those brief moments, as he saw me, so I saw him in turn. And then I forgot. For a long time, I forgot.

And then the dreams began.

I don't always remember them when I wake, but often I will. He always looks different. He is timeless. I regret that the friends I saw him with that day – Maggie and Kaylaar – are not. *Were* not. I suspect they are no longer with him now, and that makes me sad. But he has had *so many* friends over the years; he won't be alone, I am sure.

I have no reason to suppose that any of these dreams are real, aside from this – I *know* that they are. They happened. The things I see when I sleep – the many faces, the many monsters, the many friends. They're all real. It's a privileged few who are party to his story. And I am more than content – and more than honoured – to have merely tasted it from afar.

For all the good that he does – not for glory, not for thanks, but simply because it's the right thing to do – I love him. It might sound stupid, but there it is. I met him in person only briefly, just the once, four decades ago, yet I have no doubt in my mind and no hesitation in saying it, without a care in the world for how silly it might sound. I love the Doctor. I love him with all my heart and I love everything that he stands for.

Don't you?

The Doctor, Maggie and Kaylaar
Return in
Homecoming

"There are powers and forces that could smash this paltry universe, this stinking sliver of reality, into bone and dust. I could do it, Doctor. I am that."

The University of East Essex. Affluent, modern, and well regarded. A great place to study. Except of course for the deaths. There are students who graduate. There are students who drop out. And then there are students who die. Horribly, frequently and in inexplicable circumstances. The only link? A strange man dressed in a smart black suit. Yet while blood flows freely all around them, those on campus go on as if all is right in the world...

September 2022: Jess Kiebitz is not fooled. She is not sucked in by the illusion of normality. She alone sees what others cannot. Profoundly deaf from the earliest age, Jess is resolute. She will not be cowed. She will not submit. She will stand her ground. And if – if – the opportunity arises... she will fight back.

April 2023: Arriving on campus, the Doctor, Maggie and Haylaar come under immediate attack from forces unknown. Battling through physical and emotional hardships that push them to their very limits, the trio must find a way to bring the age-old killing spree to a final end....

ISBN 0-918894-28-X



This is another story in a series of original fan authored
Doctor Who fiction published by The Doctor Who Project
featuring the Eleventh Doctor as played by Winston Adderley

