

Doctor Who



CHAIN LETTER

by

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CHAIN LETTER – LINK ONE

The Doctor lifted his face to the silver lights above, his hands grasping his lapels as he gazed up at the night sky. Around him the leaves of the trees surrounding the clearing in which the TARDIS stood rustled a soft and reassuring susurration.

“Lunaeviginti, the planet of twenty moons.” The voice spoke unexpectedly from the shadows of the forest. “And at least ten of them always visible in the sky at any one time. It’s quite a sight, isn’t it?”

The Doctor turned to see a woman emerging from the trees into the moonlight. She moved so soundlessly that he had no reason to reproach himself for not having been aware there was someone else nearby.

“Oh, yes – yes, indeed. It most certainly is,” he agreed, subjecting the new arrival to a somewhat narrow-eyed scrutiny. She was neither young nor slim nor beautiful, but there was an intriguing gleam in her eye that demanded his attention. She had halted beside the TARDIS and was regarding him with a hint of conspiratorial amusement, almost as if she knew him and was inviting him to share the joke, whatever it was. But that wasn’t possible, of course; he’d never been on this planet before. He couldn’t possibly know this woman, and it was just as impossible that she should know him. He was about to dismiss the idea as a fanciful aberration of his imagination, but her next words changed his mind.

“I’m surprised Susan isn’t here. I’d have thought she’d appreciate the spectacle quite as much as you or I, Doctor. But of course, I forgot. She’s gone to pick some moonflowers, hasn’t she?”

The Doctor looked at her with sharpened attention, and she laughed.

“Ah, I can tell what you’re thinking! *How does she know to address me as Doctor? How does she know Susan’s name? How does she even know of Susan’s existence?* Oh, I know all about you, Doctor! So I’m certainly going to know you have a granddaughter, am I not?”

“Who are you?” the Doctor demanded.

“Who indeed?” The woman’s tone was teasing, and her eyes gleamed with suppressed amusement. “It’s a question you’ll be asked often enough. And prove quite adept at avoiding! What answer will *you* give, when it arises?”

“I’m not sure I appreciate your attitude, madam!” said the Doctor irritably. “That was a perfectly civil enquiry. Nor do I appreciate your evasiveness and your unnecessary attempt to impose an air of mystery on the proceedings!”

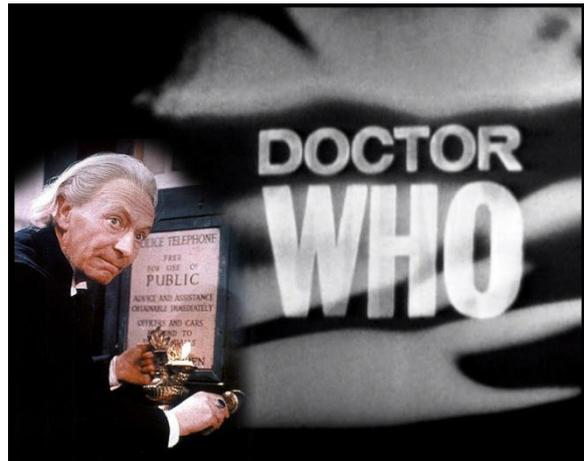
“So I’m a woman of mystery, am I? How very gallant of you, Doctor! But then everything’s relative, isn’t it? Time, for instance. And dimension.” Her eyes turned toward the TARDIS; then she reached out a hand and laid it flat against the surface.

The Doctor frowned. “Yes, yes, yes – well – appearances can be deceiving!” he snapped. “And I’ll thank you not to touch that! It’s private property.”

The woman smiled and allowed her hand to slide down and away from the TARDIS. She turned back to face him. “Yes, appearances *can* be deceiving, can’t they?” she agreed. “One has only to look at you to know that. Or at me...”

“What do you mean?” the Doctor asked suspiciously.

“Oh, come now, Doctor! It would be easy to mistake you for – well, let’s say a human in his sixth or seventh decade, shall we? But of course you’re not a human, are you? You’re a Time Lord. And a fairly young one, at that. Only a few hundred years old as yet. Almost a teenager, still, in Gallifreyan terms. And, I might add, with all the arrogance and impatience teenagers so often display! Oh, yes, it



would be very easy indeed to mistake you for something you're not. And it would be easy to make the same mistake with me."

"How do you know so much about me, hm? Have you been watching me?" the Doctor demanded.

"Have been – will be..." The woman shrugged nonchalantly. "The structure of grammar really doesn't sit very happily in the context of time travel, does it? But, within those limitations – yes. You have been – and will be – being watched. Though perhaps 'watched over' would be a more accurate term for much of the time. By me, yes. And – from time to time – by others. Oh, with the best of intentions," she added, seeing his frown. "When you and Susan left Gallifrey, for instance. Don't you remember the girl who spoke to you just as you were on the point of – shall we say *acquiring* – a TARDIS?"

The Doctor grimaced in recollection. "Oh, her! Yes, I remember her! I thought she might be going to raise the alarm. But instead she advised me to take this TARDIS, not the one I'd originally selected. I can't say I think much of her choice! This one's impossible to navigate. We're hopelessly lost, Susan and I. We'll never return to Gallifrey, and it's all the fault of that wretched girl!"

"You're quite wrong, Doctor." The contradiction was delivered with complete conviction. "This is *absolutely* the right TARDIS for you, never doubt that! And 'that girl', as you call her so dismissively, had your very best interests at heart, which was why she intervened as she did. Though I'll concede she can be a quite impossible girl, sometimes..."

"Madam, I would much appreciate it if you could bring yourself to be explicit about your identity and purpose. Who are you, and why are you here, hm? What is it you want with me?"

"Oh, just to make a suggestion, really. Regarding your visit to Earth –"

"Earth? How do you know I'll be going to Earth? Because of the idiosyncrasies of the TARDIS, I can never be sure *where* we'll land!"

"I think I can say, without too much fear of contradiction, that at the very least you can be sure it'll be somewhere interesting. After all, the TARDIS always takes you somewhere interesting, doesn't it?"

"Yes, I suppose it does," mused the Doctor, momentarily distracted by the implications of her question. "Yes! Almost as if it has a mind of its own, sometimes..."

One corner of the woman's mouth quirked into the suggestion of a smile. "And don't you find that rather stimulating?" she suggested. "Never knowing what to expect?"

The Doctor looked at her from under abruptly lowered brows. He had a strong suspicion he was being teased.

"Madam," he said stiffly, "if there is one thing I have learned always to expect, it is the unexpected! Yes, indeed! And I would suppose any person of intelligence" – he arched his eyebrows at her meaningfully – "to arrive at the same conclusion! So I fail to understand on what foundation you are basing this implausible prophecy of our visiting Earth!"

"Let me ask you a question, Doctor," said the woman serenely. "What's the factor that distinguishes prophecy from history?"

"Time, of course!" The Doctor's eyes narrowed. "What exactly are you telling me?"

"Just that I have a certain – shall we say, advantage? – over you, Doctor. Which means that I know you *will* visit Earth. And when you do, I think you'll find Susan is going to want to stay there for a while. Learn more about its history and its people. I just wanted to suggest that you let her have her way. You may not believe what she wants to be wise, but I think you'll find it'll make quite a difference to your life – and hers – if you allow her to do it."

"Well, thank you for your advice," said the Doctor tartly, grasping his lapels as if for emphasis, "but I'm quite capable of making my own decisions without being patronized by *you*."

"Of course you are. But if you'll allow me to offer you one last suggestion – don't forget your own advice, Doctor. Always expect the unexpected!" The woman smiled enigmatically. "Well, I've said what I came to say, so now I shall take my leave of you – for the present." She began to withdraw into the shadows from which she had come. "It's been a pleasure to make your acquaintance in person, Doctor. To forge the first link in the chain. But for now, all I shall say is – until we meet again..."

"Again? What do you mean, again? Madam, I insist on knowing who you are!"

But his mysterious visitor had vanished without trace, and the empty space where she had been had no answers to give him.

The Doctor drew himself up indignantly for a few moments. Then he stood for some time, deep in thought, thumbs tapping against his lapels as he analyzed the content of the strange encounter he had just experienced. Eventually, forced to admit to himself that he was going to be unable to arrive at what he regarded as a satisfactory conclusion, he abandoned the attempt, and shrugged.

“Until we meet again, hm?” he mused aloud, at length. “Given the physical and temporal extent of the universe, and the vagaries of the TARDIS? That’s something nobody could reasonably expect to happen... And yet... Yes, yes! This is what I shall do. Expect the unexpected! Yes, I’m sure I can expect that!”

He cast another look at the moons of Lunaeviginti in the sky above him. He hoped it wouldn’t be too much longer before Susan returned with her moonflowers. It was high time they were on their way, though of course he had no idea where the TARDIS would take them next.

Or did he...?

CHAIN LETTER – LINK TWO

To an external observer, the space station looked very peaceful as it circled its home planet of Tallaron Three, gliding serenely above white clouds, blue seas and green continents that were very reminiscent of Earth.

Aboard it, however, both peace and serenity were decidedly absent.

In the repair section of the station there was much rattling and clanging as the Doctor urgently rummaged through the shelves of electronic equipment surrounding him. This was an emergency, and unless he could find the right components to make what he needed to make, people were going to die...



“Oh, dear, oh, dear, oh, dear!” he muttered anxiously. “Why can you never find what you need when you need it...?”

Then, abruptly, he straightened up. Something felt different. He looked around sharply. Nothing seemed to have changed, but he knew beyond all doubt that something had. He could feel it.

“Something has indeed changed,” said a voice, answering the thought he hadn’t spoken aloud. “Not least, you.”

The Doctor span round. In spite of his current preoccupations, recognition was instant.

“Oh, my word, it’s you! The woman from Lunaeviginti!”

She smiled tolerantly. “I’m afraid you’re under a misapprehension, Doctor. That’s not where I’m from. That’s simply where we first spoke.”

“Then where *are* you from?”

“Oh, like you – here and there,” she said lightly. “Now and then... Round and about... Most recently, the TARDIS. But of course you weren’t there. So I’ve come to where you are, instead of where you aren’t.”

“From which I gather you don’t intend to be any more forthcoming than before. What a pity,” the Doctor said politely, masking with a pretence of regret his rising impatience at being sidetracked from the task in hand. Normally he would have been delighted by such an unexpected development, but at the moment it was a distraction he could well have done without.

“No more forthcoming than you would be if the positions were reversed, I suspect,” the woman teased gently.

The Doctor remembered that unfathomable smile of hers, and fought down his exasperation.

“Yes, well, it’s lovely to see you again, whoever you are,” he said, an edge of vexation evident in his tone of voice despite his gallant attempt to remain civil, “but I’m really rather busy at the moment. This space station has been invaded by some particularly unfriendly aliens who’ve installed an explosive device inside the main power room and rendered it impossible for anyone to get in there. And if you’ve been to the TARDIS, you’ll know that it, also, is in that room. So – well, if I can’t construct something that will send the correct signal through the shielding to deactivate the device remotely, everyone here is going to die!”

“Oh, I’m well aware you’re mid-crisis,” she nodded. “But I’ll only take a second of your time, I assure you.”

The Doctor stared her for a moment. Then realization dawned.

“A second? Of course, I should have recognized that sensation. You’ve put us inside a temporal suspension cell, haven’t you?”

“A small bubble in which the normal duration of time is suspended. I thought you’d work it out. When I release the bubble you’ll be back in normal time, with just one second of your personal subjective time having elapsed. Nobody else will even have realized you’ve been gone. So don’t worry;

I'll let you get back to your crisis with no essential loss of duration, so that you may continue to address the situation with your usual genius."

The Doctor looked at her closely. "How've you done it? There aren't very many people who can manipulate time, you know." His expression suddenly changed to one of horrified suspicion. "Oh, my giddy aunt! You're not – you haven't come from – I mean, you haven't been sent by...?"

The woman looked at him soberly. "No, Doctor, I have not been sent by the Time Lords. I give you my word on that."

Her tone carried conviction, and the Doctor relaxed. "Oh, thank goodness! I can't tell you how relieved I am about that! If they were to track me down – well...!"

"Yes," said the woman gravely. "I know."

The Doctor studied her for a moment, chewing his lip thoughtfully. "If you're not from the Time Lords, how were you able to create a temporal suspension cell?"

The soberness of her expression was swiftly replaced by her characteristic air of suppressed amusement. "Why, Doctor! Are you suggesting that I would only be capable of controlling time if I were a Time Lord? How parochial of you! Sorry to be bursting your bubble on that point."

She was teasing him again! He huffed, and scowled at her, doing so even more furiously as it became clear that he was simply adding to her amusement. He didn't attempt to conceal his annoyance as he turned his back on her to continue searching through the assortment of electronic equipment on the shelf in front of him.

She smiled, unruffled. "Tell me, where are Jamie and Victoria?" she enquired casually.

"Trying to keep everyone else calm and out of my way while I work. And in imminent and very great danger, as I've already explained! Such a pity they're not here," the Doctor observed, somewhat acidly. "I'd love to introduce them to you, but of course that would be a bit difficult, wouldn't it? Because I'm still waiting for you to tell me your name! But I'm sure you'll get around to it one of these days. In your own good time," he added sarcastically.

Her lips pursed into a 'O' of amusement. "Ooh, is that the pot calling the kettle black, Doctor? Tut, tut! Well, I'll strike a bargain with you. You tell me your name, and I'll tell you mine." The twinkle in her eye as she issued her invitation made it obvious she was well aware what his response would be.

The Doctor turned briefly to glower at her before resuming his task.

"No?" She pretended surprise, with an exaggeration that was clearly intentional. "Well, I did offer, and you can't say fairer than that," she continued equably. "You know, this is rather like the time you had to construct that clever little box you used to subvert the control spheres employed by the Great Intelligence to direct the Yeti. You're really very clever at coming up with devices that help save the day, Doctor. It's always useful to have the right tool for the right job. Perhaps you should start carrying a screwdriver with you. After all, you never know when you're going to need one..."

The Doctor merely grunted in response, obviously paying scant attention.

"Well, fear not. I'm sure you'll soon resolve your crisis. After all, you succeeded against the Great Intelligence, didn't you? And of course you had the redoubtable Colonel Lethbridge-Stewart on your side, too."

"Well, I must admit he seemed a decent enough chap," the Doctor conceded. "Quite an open mind – for a soldier." The last three words were added with a hint of disdain. "Not that that's saying much!"

"Oh, there's much more to him than that. He has many sterling qualities that I can assure you you'll come to value very highly."

The Doctor stopped what he was doing and turned to stare at her narrowly. "How do you know that?"

"How do you know many of the things *you* know, Doctor?" she countered. "The answer should be obvious to a man of your intellect."

"Yes, I suppose it is," the Doctor admitted gruffly. "But right now, if you don't mind my asking, is there an actual purpose to this visit? Or did you merely feel like stopping by for an idle chat? Because if there isn't anything else particular you want to say, I really am rather busy at the moment!"

The woman held up her hands and bowed her head, conceding the point. “Of course! You’re quite right, Doctor. I really mustn’t hold you up – you’ve got devices to construct, people to save! Next time I’ll try to choose a moment when you have less calls on your attention.”

“Yes, well, I have to say I’ll be very much obliged to you if that’s the case! And when can I expect this next visitation, if it’s not too much trouble for you to tell me?”

But the strange sensation that had alerted him was gone. Time had returned to normal, and his inexplicable visitor had vanished, just as mysteriously as she had appeared.

The Doctor stared around for a moment or two, but to no purpose. Despite himself, he couldn’t avoid feeling intrigued. Who was she, and what did she want? But he couldn’t afford to waste time on the conundrum now.

“Bursting my bubble, indeed!” he muttered indignantly. “Well, madam, I certainly *have* got people to save! So I’d better get on with it, hadn’t I?”

CHAIN LETTER – LINK THREE

“Well, Doctor,” said Brigadier Alastair Lethbridge-Stewart somewhat acerbically, his hands on his hips, “you’re obviously very busy, so I won’t trouble you any further.”

“Thanks, old chap,” said the Doctor rather abstractedly, not looking up from the bench at which he was seated in his laboratory at UNIT HQ. “Much appreciated.”

The Brigadier looked slightly put out at such a ready dismissal.

“Don’t mention it, please!” he said with heavy sarcasm.

“My dear fellow, wouldn’t dream of it!” the Doctor assured him absently.

Torn between indignation and resignation, the Brigadier marched out of the laboratory. The Doctor, bent over his task, hardly even noticed him go.

Indeed, he was so intent on the piece of equipment on which he was working that he was unaware he once more had company until he heard an unexpected sound behind him – a whisper, like soft folds of fabric swishing against each other. He looked round, sonic screwdriver still poised for use in one hand, and raised his eyebrows.

There, standing next to the TARDIS in its customary corner, was the mysterious woman who had accosted him in each of his previous incarnations. Despite the passage of time, she looked exactly as she had at their last two meetings. She was looking at the TARDIS, and she briefly brushed its surface with her fingertips before turning her full attention to him, the beginnings of a smile curving her lips.

“Oh, hello, it’s you,” the Doctor remarked calmly. “How do you *do* that? This appearing and disappearing trick of yours, I mean. It’s most disconcerting, you know!”

“Since it takes quite a lot to disconcert you, Doctor, I think I’ll take that as a compliment!” Her eyes twinkled, inviting him to share her amusement. The Doctor found himself responding to her mood. He had to admit that he did enjoy solving enigmas. Her recurring appearances definitely presented him with one – and she knew it. And knew that he knew it. And, he suspected, very much enjoyed knowing it.

He studied her for a moment. “Don’t you think it’s about time you told me your name? It seems terribly impolite for me to keep having to designate you as *that mysterious woman who keeps turning up when I least expect it.*”

She laughed. “Ah! Now, how can I refuse such an eloquent appeal as that? I can see I shall have to succumb to the elegance and charm with which you’ve been blessed in this regeneration, Doctor. You may know me as Dastiriam.”

“Delighted, madam, I’m sure. And to what do I owe the pleasure this time?”

“Oh, I just thought it was about time I’d dropped by to see how you’re –” Her gaze fell upon the piece of equipment on which he had been working. “Wait a minute – that’s a dematerialization circuit! What are you – ? Oh, I see! The Time Lords still have you confined to Earth, I take it? And you, being you, are trying to circumvent them.”

“Not very successfully, at the moment,” the Doctor conceded, laying both the circuit and his screwdriver down on the bench and swivelling on his seat to give her his full attention. “Still, they have a saying on this planet – ‘if at first you don’t succeed, try, try, try again’.”

“And you *are* trying.” Dastiriam smiled. “I’m sure that’s how the Time Lords think of you, at least.”

“I would imagine so,” the Doctor said equably. “Which seems only fair, since that’s how I always think of them!”



She laughed. “Still, to quote another of the sayings on this planet, there’s a silver lining to every cloud, isn’t there? Axos, the Autons, the Daemons – just some of the threats from which you’ve protected the Earth since your – how shall I put it? – your internment.”

“If you’re listing my successes, don’t forget to mention the Master’s attempts to exploit various situations that have arisen,” the Doctor said. “Letting him get control of this planet would only lead to disaster for everyone and everything on it.”

“You seem to have a well-developed instinct to protect the innocent, which I think is going to stand not only you but also many others in good stead, in the future,” Dastiriam commented, eyeing him thoughtfully. “None of these threats were things anybody would objectively expect you to feel obliged to defend against. And yet there you are, continually saving the Earth from alien harms. You know, Doctor, I’m inclined to think that you’ve really become quite fond of your little blue and white prison.”

“Perhaps I have,” the Doctor admitted. “There’s a lot here to like, when it comes down to it. Places. And people.”

“Oh, I agree. There are exceptions, of course, but by and large, their hearts are in the right place, wouldn’t you say? Even if, unlike yourself, they do only have the one.”

The Doctor leaned back, his arms folded, awarding her a quizzical stare. “It’s most gratifying to know there’s so much we agree on, but would you mind satisfying my curiosity on one point in particular? Why these repeated visits? What, exactly, is the nature of your interest in me and my activities?”

“Doctor, I’m surprised at you!” Dastiriam’s tone was one of gentle reproof. “That’s not how one’s supposed to read a story, now is it? Here we are only three chapters into *your* story, and already you’re wanting to look at the last page!”

“Perhaps my story is such a page-turner that I can’t bear to put it down,” suggested the Doctor urbanely.

“I think you might be surprised to learn how many people there are who’d agree with you,” said Dastiriam enigmatically. “You definitely have a target audience! But there’s a time and a place for everything, and I’m sure I must be keeping you. You’ve probably got a neutron flow whose polarity needs reversing, so perhaps – like the Brigadier – I should let you get on with it.”

“And meanwhile wait for the next page to be turned, I imagine.” The Doctor steepled his fingers and regarded her quizzically. “You do realize that if I succeed in getting this dematerialization circuit to work again, you won’t find me here on your next visit?”

“You need have no fears on that score, Doctor,” Dastiriam smiled. “Wherever you are, I shall always know where to find you.”

The Doctor cocked his head, intrigued. “Would you mind telling me how?”

Instead of answering, she focused on something behind him with an expression of great interest. “Oh, did you take my advice about carrying a screwdriver after all? You did, didn’t you? And there it is! That *is* your sonic screwdriver there on the bench, isn’t it, Doctor?”

The Doctor instinctively glanced behind him. Almost instant realization occurred, and he turned back just as swiftly, but, of course, Dastiriam was gone.

“What a very distracting lady you are,” he murmured to himself, philosophically. “Very distracting, and very clever! Well, my dear Dastiriam, let’s see if I can achieve the same vanishing trick as you, shall we?”

He turned back to the bench, picked up the sonic with his right hand, and with his left reached for the recalcitrant dematerialization circuit.

CHAIN LETTER – LINK FOUR

The Doctor straightened up from the console and ran a hand through the curling tangle of his hair as he contemplated the controls he'd been manipulating. Then his head moved with a slight jerk as something, he knew not what, put him onto the alert. Even though there was no betraying sound to interrupt the gentle hum of the TARDIS in flight, no break in the steady rise and fall of the Time Rotor, somehow he was not surprised when a familiar voice spoke from behind him.

"Hello, Doctor. Your dematerialization circuit's been restored, I see."

The Doctor swung round. "Ah! Dastiriam! Hello!" he beamed. "I was beginning to think you'd forgotten all about me."

"Trust me – and I won't be the last person to say this – no-one's ever going to forget you, Doctor." Dastiriam came to join him at the console, smiling at him.

"Of course not!" the Doctor agreed. "Why would they? I'm a memorable sort of fellow!"

While he was speaking, she placed her two palms flat on the console for a few moments, her fingers outspread, her eyes following the movement of the Time Rotor before they turned toward him again, twinkling mischievously.

"A memorable sort of fellow, wearing a memorable sort of scarf!" she retorted. "I think you can safely say that that alone will fall into the category of an aide memoire where you're concerned!"

"Rather good, isn't it? Do you like it? I like it. Would you like a jelly baby?" the Doctor enquired, suddenly brandishing a crumpled and slightly torn paper bag at her. "The orange ones are particularly good, you know."

"Like you, Doctor, I'm always open to new experiences," she said, scanning the contents of the bag before delicately selecting and withdrawing the chosen sweet. She popped it into her mouth and her eyes widened appreciatively as she chewed. The Doctor beamed again, and ate one himself before pushing the bag back into his pocket.

"Would you like me to go and find Sarah?" he offered, a mischievous gleam in his eye. "She's gone off to get herself a change of clothes, but I'm sure she'd love to meet you. Though of course I should warn you she *is* a journalist. She'd be likely to ask you some very searching questions! I wonder if she'd be able to get any of the answers out of you that I haven't been able to?"

"She's just as likely to ask them of you!" Dastiriam retorted, ignoring his last comment. "Particularly when she finds out that you're not going from Loch Ness straight back to London, as you promised!"

"What do you mean, I'm not?" said the Doctor indignantly.

"Does the TARDIS go where you intend, as a rule?" Dastiriam returned, pointedly.

"Well – often enough to suit me," the Doctor asserted robustly. "I've never been an admirer of rules, you know."

Dastiriam arched an amused eyebrow at him. "Would you have left Gallifrey in the first place, if you were?"

"We-e-e-ll," he said expansively, "rules are there to be broken, aren't they?"

"So your proposition is that people get up in the morning and say to themselves, '*What shall I do today? I know! I'll make up a whole new set of rules, not because there's good purpose behind them, but just so that other people can break them. How useful I shall be, doing that!*'" She abandoned the caricature for her normal voice. "Sorry, Doctor, but somehow I think there's a flaw in the logic there."

"Do you really?" the Doctor enquired with interest. "I've always found that approach rather successful, myself."



“Whereas I,” Dastiriam continued, as if he hadn’t spoken, “have the strongest possible suspicion that when people make rules, they intend them to be kept, not broken. What you really mean, of course, is that you’re going to be your own arbiter of which rules you obey and which ones you don’t. The one to decide if the rules are right or wrong.”

“Of course I am!” said the Doctor, as if that should have been obvious. Then he added, sharply, “Are you criticizing me?”

“Would I do that?” Her eyebrows were raised innocently.

The Doctor leaned toward her with an unsettlingly intent stare. “Look me in the eye,” he dared her, “and tell me you’ve never broken any rules!”

“Of course I have! I’m doing it at this very moment, in fact. If I didn’t think along similar lines to you, Doctor, would I take such pleasure in your company? Like calls to like, isn’t that what they say?”

“Oh, they say lots of things,” said the Doctor dismissively. “Most of which I don’t bother listening to – Breaking rules *now*, did you say? You did say that, didn’t you? Which rules would those be, I wonder?”

“That’s for me to know, and you to find out,” Dastiriam parried amiably. “For the time being, at least. Though we will, of course, be seeing each other again, Doctor.”

“Ah, of *course!*” the Doctor agreed with florid courtesy. “Though I can’t help regretting that, once again, you aren’t yet ready to explain the reason for these repeated intrusions into my life. Are you sure you haven’t been sent by the Time Lords?” he added with sudden suspicion. “They have a very irritating tendency to keep interfering in my affairs, and I think you ought to know that I really don’t care for it…” His eyes and voice both suddenly hinted at a formidable degree of resentment, if not anger.

“When one considers your record, if interference is a characteristic of the Time Lords, it seems to be one you share,” Dastiriam observed mildly.

“Oh, I much prefer to think of it as ‘lending a hand’,” the Doctor disagreed. “That sounds like a much more positive motive, don’t you think? Anyway, *everyone* interferes! Just by being alive, by existing, every individual affects the course of events. Is that what you call interference? I call it living! And, by the way, you haven’t answered my question!”

Dastiriam smiled, conceding the point. “It’s a question you’ve asked me once before. It’s all right, Doctor, the answer hasn’t changed. I give you my word, I have not been sent by the Time Lords.”

The Doctor studied her for a few moments, thoughtfully rubbing his nose, before allowing a smile to spread across his face once again.

“Then perhaps you wouldn’t mind also giving me your word that one day you’ll explain why you keep dropping in for these little chats of yours?” he suggested. “I must say I’ll be fascinated to know the reason. Or reasons – perhaps there’s more than one? Ah! Now there’s a thought! You will tell me, won’t you?”

Dastiriam inclined her head. “One day, Doctor,” she agreed. “That I promise you. But not today!”

“Ah, well,” said the Doctor, simulating regret. “In that case I suppose you’ll be going? After all,” he added impishly, “you never stay very long, and you know what they say, don’t you?”

Dastiriam looked at him quizzically. “And what *do* they say?”

“Here today, Zygon tomorrow!” the Doctor grinned.

At which she began to laugh; a laugh that lingered long after she had vanished.

“And there she was, gone!” the Doctor announced to the empty control room. Then he shrugged, and returned his attention to the console, knowing full well that Dastiriam was right; that wherever the TARDIS took him next, it almost certainly wouldn’t be where he intended. Because it almost never was.

“Quite right, too,” said the Doctor aloud. “Where would be the fun in that?”

CHAIN LETTER – LINK FIVE

The Doctor was contemplating his surroundings with an expression of intense pleasure. It was a long time since he'd felt this relaxed. In the cloudless sky above him tiny white and yellow birds sang constantly to each other as they flew. The sea of knee-high grass in which he stood was not the green of Earth grass, but instead was almost white, save for hints of the palest pastel shades of blue, green, pink and yellow. The TARDIS, standing sentinel a few yards away, was like a dark blue island floating on an ocean of colour that flowed across the landscape of shallow hills in which he stood. But the susurration of the slight breeze stroking the grass into motion didn't quite mask the approach of an unfamiliar step.



At least, the Doctor thought it was an unfamiliar step, but when he turned, he realized it wasn't.

"You know, I really do wish you wouldn't keep doing that," he observed, only half-joking.

"Doing what?" Dastiriam enquired mildly as she passed the TARDIS, laying a hand on it as if in greeting, before she came to a halt beside him.

"Appearing out of nowhere! It's most disturbing."

"That must make *you* a *very* disturbing influence. After all, you appear out of nowhere all the time," she pointed out, with a meaningful glance at the TARDIS.

"Ah, well – that's different!" said the Doctor hastily.

"Is it? Ah..." Dastiriam nodded with placid sagacity.

Aware that his logic was somewhat flawed, the Doctor shifted rather uncomfortably.

"Sorry," he apologized, slightly awkwardly, "but I came here for a bit of peace and quiet. Respite, you might say. So I wasn't exactly expecting you. Which I suppose is exactly when I should have been expecting you! You did tell me always to expect the unexpected, didn't you?"

"Advice which I hope has served you well, thus far?" Dastiriam suggested.

"I suppose it has, yes," the Doctor admitted.

"And is the constantly unexpected what you're seeking respite from at the moment?" Dastiriam enquired.

"No – from Adric and Tegan! They've been squabbling – *again*," said the Doctor, with somewhat forced patience. "The concept of being caught between a rock and a hard place has become distressingly familiar lately! So I thought I'd try bringing them here. Gollorin, the Planet of Tranquillity. See if a few hours here might infuse some tranquillity into *them*."

"Is it working?"

"Not so you'd notice! Not yet, anyway. Still, Nyssa's keeping an eye on them. Doing her best to keep the peace, I expect." The Doctor smiled fondly. "That's Nyssa's special gift. She's a peacemaker." He made an indeterminate gesture toward the crest of the nearest hill. "They're all off over there somewhere at the moment."

"And I've disturbed a rare moment of solitude for you. My apologies, Doctor. Though I did promise you I'd try to choose moments when you had less calls on your attention, didn't I?"

"Yes, I suppose you did," the Doctor conceded.

Dastiriam looked him up and down. "You're much more colour-coordinated this time," she observed. "My compliments! It's very tasteful." A small, though slightly mischievous, furrow appeared between her eyebrows. "Though, if you don't mind my mentioning the – uh – celery...? An *interesting* choice, one can't help thinking..."

The Doctor rolled his eyes. "Oh, not you as well! Do you know, I recently had an encounter with – someone – who had the cheek to call this my 'decorative vegetable' phase. In a most derisory way, I might add!"

“Ah, yes – well, he would. Older people can be quite derogatory about the fashion choices of those younger than themselves; hadn’t you noticed?”

“Oh.” The Doctor was slightly crestfallen. “Then you already know about him? Or about me, I should say, since you evidently know exactly who he was...”

“I think perhaps ‘will be’ is the correct phrase. Have you forgotten what I told you on our first meeting, Doctor?” Dastiriam reminded him gently. “I know all about you.”

“If that’s true, why do you keep turning up as if I was something in the oven and you have to keep checking to see if I’m done?” the Doctor enquired, with a slight edge to his voice.

Dastiriam’s expression didn’t overtly change, but something registered in her eyes, a flash of reaction to his words. The Doctor stared at her, at first with arrested attention, but then with dawning comprehension.

“I meant that as a joke, but it wasn’t, was it?” he said, his eyes narrowing, speaking increasingly quickly as he warmed to his theme. “Something like that is going on, isn’t it? Why? You’re *monitoring* something. Something about me, or to do with me. What is it?”

Dastiriam looked at him with an uncharacteristically troubled expression. As if she wanted to say something, but knew that she mustn’t.

“Doctor, if I *were* preparing a meal, would you advise me to serve it half-way through the preparation process? Would that meal be a success?”

The Doctor looked mutinous for a moment. “Are you calling me half-baked?” he demanded. Then his shoulders dropped, and he sighed. “All right, point taken. No, it wouldn’t,” he admitted.

“Well, then...” said Dastiriam softly, and left it at that.

They stared at each other for several seconds with something close to mutual regret. Then the Doctor threw back his shoulders and lifted his chin, ostentatiously inhaling the fresh air.

“I think I might just walk up to the top of the hill and see if I can see the others,” he said. He turned to Dastiriam and offered his arm. “Would you like to come?”

She smiled, and took it. “Why, thank you, kind sir. Yes, I think I could spare a few moments for that,” she consented.

Together they walked to the crest of the hill. It sloped much more steeply on the other side, inclining down into a valley containing a small lake. Three figures were sitting at the lakeside, facing away from the Doctor and Dastiriam.

“Perhaps the Planet of Tranquillity is exerting the desired influence after all,” said Dastiriam. “They look peaceful enough at the moment, don’t they?”

“Oh, for now,” the Doctor agreed. “I don’t suppose it’ll last, though. Tegan’s glass will always be half-empty, and Adric will always be convinced he knows better than everyone else. Mind you, I used to think that, I suppose, when I was younger,” he conceded. “That I was always right. Now I’m a bit older, it’s sometimes harder to be sure about what’s right.”

“Some might say that was a sign of growing maturity, Doctor,” Dastiriam observed.

“Well, I wish a bit more of it would rub off on Adric,” said the Doctor plaintively. “He can be so childish sometimes!”

“He’s still very young, Doctor. Didn’t you yourself once say there was no point in being grown up if you couldn’t be childish sometimes? And don’t forget, there’s a great deal of difference between being childish and childlike. The latter being a quality you’ll never quite lose the best elements of, I suspect. Your sense of wonder at the new and the unexpected, your sense of justice and fairness – things innately part of a child’s outlook, and innately part of yours, too.”

The Doctor was about to reply when he caught sight of what was happening at the lakeside. Tegan was on her feet, shading her eyes as she looked up the hill towards them. She said something, and pointed. Adric and Nyssa looked round, then quickly got to their feet, also staring upwards.

“You’ve been spotted,” the Doctor observed. “I suppose that means you’ll be on your way. Leaving me to come up with some sort of plausible explanation of your presence. Thank you very much!”

“You could always tell them the truth,” Dastiriam suggested lightly.

“That I don’t know who you are, or where you come from, or why you keep dropping in on me?” the Doctor summarized. “Yes, I suppose I could try that. Though I can’t see Tegan letting it go at that, can you?”

“Sorry, Doctor, but there are some things even I can’t resolve for you,” said Dastiriam, retreating a pace so that she was now slightly behind him. He didn’t really notice the move, his attention momentarily focused on the three figures now climbing the hill toward him. Then her wording registered.

“What do you mean, *even* you?” he demanded, turning round.

But Dastiriam was no longer there.

“You know,” said the Doctor conversationally, as if she was still able to hear him, “there’s another thing children always do. They ask, ‘Why?’ And they never stop. No matter what explanation you give them, their response is always ‘Why?’ And that’s the question I’m going to keep asking you. Until you finally give me the answer! So you’re right. On that point, I am going to be childish. Why shouldn’t I? Oh, and here comes Tegan, wanting *her* explanation,” he added with resigned sarcasm. “This *is* going to be fun...!”

CHAIN LETTER – LINK SIX

The Doctor inhaled deeply, then expelled his breath in a long sigh of satisfaction. He shuffled himself into an even more comfortable position in the canvas chair which he had placed in what he had judged to be the optimum location on the bank of the lake and relaxed again, his eyes scanning not only the placid surface of the water but also the brightly coloured float motionless at the end of his fishing line.

Then, just for an instant, he stiffened slightly, before relaxing again.

“Aha! Come to do one of your regular ‘knock and run away’ visits, have you?” he enquired, without turning round.

“How did you know I was here?” The familiar voice sounded intrigued.

“I’m beginning to recognize the specific group of hairs that rise on the back of my neck when you arrive!”

“Indeed? How interesting...” Suppressing a smile, Dastiriam came forward to stand beside him, hands behind her back, studying the lake. “Perhaps we’re becoming attuned, in some way,” she suggested tranquilly.

“I do hope not!” the Doctor retorted.

Dastiriam smiled. “Are they biting? Whatever it is you’re attempting to catch?”

“Ruufish, if you must know,” said the Doctor, awarding an admonitory frown to the motionless float out on the water. “Not to be compared with the peerless gumblejack, of course, but quite palatable, if prepared correctly. But they are not, as you have implied, yet biting. It’s a shame I don’t have one to show you. They’re rather striking-looking fish – very colourfully patterned.”

“Something that could also be said about you,” Dastiriam observed, as she turned to survey him. “Oh, dear... You know, I really wasn’t that sure about the celery on the lapel. Now I’m having distinct reservations about the lapel itself.”

“Ex-cuse me!” said the Doctor stiffly. “At least I *change* my wardrobe. I don’t stick to the same look century after century – not like some people I could mention!” He cast a meaningful glance at her apparel, and twitched his fishing rod sharply as an additional rebuke.

“Mm – gallantry isn’t the strongest feature of this regeneration, is it?” she observed, somewhat quizzically.

“I merely wish to make it plain that if you’re going to continue to indulge in this extremely infuriating habit of intruding on me without invitation I’d be very obliged if you’d omit the constant critique of my wardrobe whilst you’re doing it!”

“Very well,” she said peaceably. “But I agree – you most certainly do not stick to the same look – and I don’t mean your wardrobe! Though the hair seems to be something of a throwback – and the occasional display of hauteur isn’t entirely unfamiliar, either...” She caught his affronted look and laughed. “You know, I was seriously thinking of compiling a spotter’s guide – except that I happen to know someone else has taken on that task.”

“And who might that be?” the Doctor demanded.

“Oh, no, no, no – no spoilers, Doctor.” She waved a faintly admonitory finger at him. “Not even for you.”

“Spoilers?” repeated the Doctor indignantly. “*Spoilers?* What do you mean, spoilers?”

She smiled as if at some private joke. “It’s a phrase you’ll become quite familiar with, one day.”

“Then how highly unfortunate that it’s such an ungainly disyllable,” said the Doctor loftily.

Dastiriam made only a superficial attempt to mask her amusement. She looked around at the shores of the lake, thickly clad with trees and bushes.



“What have you done with Peri?” she enquired.

“I have done nothing with Peri,” said the Doctor with precise emphasis. “Whatever *Peri* is experiencing, *Peri* is responsible for! She’s sulking in the TARDIS, over there somewhere.” He gestured airily, and imprecisely, over his shoulder.

“Yes, I passed it on my way here,” said Dastiriam. “Why, exactly, is she sulking?”

“For some reason which I entirely fail to comprehend, she has most vociferously denounced fishing as a tedious and unrewarding activity, and declined to accompany me when invited to do so. Completely inexplicable!”

“You think so? Well, that’s one point of view,” Dastiriam observed neutrally. “Other points of view *are* available...”

The Doctor shifted slightly in his chair so that he could more conveniently scowl up at her.

“When it comes to my interchanges with you, I’m almost inclined to share hers,” he informed her tartly. “Fishing for answers from you is *repeatedly* proving to be a tedious and unrewarding activity!”

“But the quality one needs most when fishing is patience, Doctor, you know that! A quality which, in this regeneration, I suspect, may not be the one with which you’re most blessed...”

“It’s extremely difficult to be patient when all one is presented with is a series of red herrings!” the Doctor said frostily. “If there’s one thing at which you positively excel, it’s ostensibly sounding very profound, while in fact saying nothing at all. So many words that are, when analyzed, collectively totally free of semantic content!”

“Why, thank you, Doctor!” Dastiriam playfully clasped her hands in front of her chest and fluttered her eyelids with exaggerated gratification. “But I’m only following your example. It’s the sincerest form of flattery, don’t you agree?”

“I most certainly do not!” the Doctor snapped, annoyed at the way in which his rapier thrust had been parried. “When *I* speak, it is always to the purpose!”

“And you’re still trying to decipher my purpose,” Dastiriam said, abandoning her caricature. “Don’t lose hope, Doctor. I’ve promised I’ll tell you, one day, and I will keep my word. But for the time being” – her eye fell on the left lapel of his coat – “that cat brooch has put me in mind of a principle you might find it helpful to remember.”

“Indeed?” The Doctor’s tone conveyed an almost formidable degree of disinterest. Dastiriam serenely ignored the phenomenon.

“Yes, something an author from Earth called Robert Heinlein once wrote.”

“And what might that be?” said the Doctor, still employing the same tone.

Dastiriam smiled. “That ‘*women and cats do what they do; men and dogs might as well relax to it.*’ For you, that principle could be amended as ‘*mysterious visitants and TARDISes do what they do; Time Lords called the Doctor might as well relax to it.*’”

“A principle which in the context of our encounters I cannot refute empirically,” the Doctor was forced to admit.

Dastiriam looked down at him, one corner of her mouth rising into a half-smile. Then she touched his shoulder, and pointed out at the lake.

“Doctor, look! Has one of your ruufish taken the bait?”

The Doctor shot up erect in his chair and fastened his eyes on the hitherto motionless float. It bobbed up and down, then was still. Then it bobbed again. And again, with increasing vigour. The Doctor sprang up, clutching the rod.

“Yes!” he crowed. “Got you! At last!” He reeled in his catch and turned to triumphantly display it to Dastiriam.

Who was no longer there.

The Doctor expelled a sharp breath of exasperation, then shrugged.

“It would appear that you have not been the only one to take the bait,” he said, addressing the wriggling ruufish. “I’m forced to concede that I just did – hook, line and sinker! Shall I throw you back to get caught again? Because I have the strongest feeling that that’s what’s just been done to me!”

CHAIN LETTER – LINK SEVEN

The pieces on the board stood motionless, frozen in their places, waiting for minute after minute as the Doctor frowned down at them, deciding which one to move. At last he selected a white pawn, held it hovering over the board for a moment, then set it down with a decisive click.

Having done so, he rose from the chair in which he was sitting, went to the other side of the table, and sat down in the empty chair that had been facing him. Then he rested one elbow on the edge of the table, cupped his chin in his hand, and studied the relative positions of the black pieces to the white.

He was just about to make his next move when someone reached down over his shoulder, picked up a black knight, and with it took the pawn he had just moved.

“Ah,” he observed calmly. “You’ve found me again.”

Dastiriam moved past him to sit in the chair behind the white pieces, elegantly disposing the folds of her skirt around her. “Well, I tried the TARDIS first, of course. But, quibbles aside, where else would I find you – *this* you – but in the Keep of Ka’labbrian on Osobbria, the Planet of War Players?” she enquired drily. “A whole world dedicated to the strategic game – variations of which are played throughout the galaxy – known on Earth as chess.”

The Doctor smiled as he stood, doffed his hat, and resumed his seat.

“There’s a tournament for off-worlders tomorrow,” he explained. “I’m just doing a little practice. Keeping my hand in. I’ve played here a number of times. Never been beaten yet.”

Dastiriam acknowledged this with a nod, then turned to survey the great hall in which they sat, its bare walls constructed of huge, rough squares of mauve stone, the floor covered with pale green sand.

“Is Ace not with you?” she enquired.

“Oh, she made friends with a group of young Osobbrians,” said the Doctor with an airy wave of his hand. “She’s off somewhere with them. Up to something, no doubt. I just hope she doesn’t decide to blow anything up while she’s doing it. I don’t want to be thrown out of the tournament before it’s even started.” He returned his attention to the board, and there was silence for a few moments.

Dastiriam, too, surveyed the board. Then she put her head to one side and regarded the Doctor thoughtfully. “You know, for someone who has such disdain for the military, it might seem rather contradictory that you have such a fascination for what is essentially a game of war,” she suggested.

“There are many types of war,” said the Doctor. “Many types of foe. And many ways of combating them, better than the bombs and bullets which are the first resort of the stupid. There’s no such thing as a dangerous weapon. It’s minds that are dangerous. Minds and mindsets. Minds are where aggression and evil come from. That’s why strategy’s so important. If you can out-think an opponent, you’ve already won. And I’m very good at that.”

Dastiriam leaned back in her chair and studied him. “You know, I’m surprised you’ve never taken up croquet, Doctor. The full, proper form of the game, I mean. I would have thought its similarities to chess would have greatly attracted you. Having a strategy in place to enable overall success. Planning every move several strokes in advance, so that everything is in the predetermined place to enable you to score every point throughout the game. Manipulating the position not only of your own side of the game but also that of your opponent. Sometimes cunningly using the hoops or the peg to obscure the ball that they need to hit so that they can’t see it to hit it from the position into which you’ve put them. Making them play the shot you want them to play, not the one *they* would have wanted to play.” She considered the board between them, then moved one of the white bishops.



“Chess involves less walking,” said the Doctor flippantly. “I prefer talking to walking. The cerebral approach. And a chess board is more portable than a croquet lawn.” His eyes scanned the tableau of black and white squares.

“Of course, there are those who say croquet’s a vicious game,” Dastiriam suggested blandly, watching him pick up a knight and position it to threaten the bishop. “Do you agree?”

“Vicious...” the Doctor mused. “Synonymous with cruelty, brutality, violence, sadism... And from them can flower evil. Evil, and everything that flows from it. Malevolence and malice, not Wonderland and Alice. It’s not such a great step, from vicious to evil.”

“True enough,” Dastiriam agreed. “Though we were talking of croquet, of course. And croquet is no more ‘vicious’ than chess. No game is vicious of itself, is it, Doctor? It’s only the people who play it who can make it so. So if someone tells you croquet is a vicious game, the proper response should be ‘*Only if you are,*’ wouldn’t you say?”

“In my experience there are plenty of vicious people in the universe,” the Doctor observed, his eyes on the board. “Individuals, and races. In the past, and in the future. Evils both new and ancient always abound.”

“Ah, yes. Ancient evils.” Dastiriam smiled briefly. She leaned forward and moved the imperilled bishop to a different square. “Of course, whether an evil is ancient or not depends on when you encounter it. Sometimes its origins lie in the future, not the past. And sometimes it can be encountered in places other than those that are obvious. One has to know where to look – and when to look – in order to know what to expect.”

The Doctor looked at her through slightly narrowed eyes. “If I didn’t know you better, I’d be tempted to think you were getting close to telling me something important. Hinting that there’s an evil somewhere I should be looking at. Should I be doing it now, I wonder? And where should I be looking?”

“You of all people should appreciate the importance of seeing the bigger picture, Doctor. Sometimes that can only be done by taking the necessary amount of time. Like a jigsaw which you haven’t pieced together yet into a coherent whole. It takes time to seek out and identify the pieces that you need to complete the picture. Such a process is still taking place. You can regard this as a progress report, if you like.”

“Ah, but is the progress mine, or yours?” the Doctor asked shrewdly. He picked up one of his rooks, frowned for a moment, then put it onto its new square. “Prepare to be checkmated,” he said, with a touch of smugness.

“I beg to differ.” Dastiriam lifted the white queen and placed it with a firm click into its new location. She leaned back to observe the Doctor’s reaction as he realized that his black king was not in check, but now he couldn’t move it without putting it into check. And, moreover, that the final outcome could directly be traced back to the black knight she had moved when she very first appeared, before taking the other side of the board and playing the white pieces thereafter. How very cleverly she had managed to misdirect him...

His eyes scanned the board, confirming the situation, then lifted to meet hers, his face unreadable.

“I see,” he said levelly. “Stalemate. Neither of us wins, and neither of us loses.”

Dastiriam inclined her head in acknowledgement. “Just so.”

“I’m impressed,” said the Doctor. “Not many people can beat me at chess.”

“But I haven’t beaten you, Doctor,” she pointed out. “The white queen has merely achieved a draw against the black king. On *this* occasion. *You*” – she emphasized the pronoun – “remain undefeated.”

The Doctor dropped his eyes to the board again, studying the pattern in which the pieces had come to rest. When he raised them again, the chair opposite him was empty.

“I’m looking forward to the rematch,” he said, as if its erstwhile occupant was still there. “Whenever that may be. Meanwhile, the next move is obviously yours... Will it be a decisive one, I wonder? Time will tell – but when are *you* going to?”

CHAIN LETTER – LINK EIGHT

The Time Rotor settled into immobility as the sound of the TARDIS engine died into silence. The dim light from the many candlesticks and lamps that surrounded the central console did illuminate its readings, but those readings made no sense to the Doctor as he studied them.

“*Nowhere?*” he expostulated aloud, addressing the Time Rotor. “This can’t be nowhere! Don’t you know your Spike Milligan? *‘Everybody gotta be somewhere!’* One of his most profound statements, I’ve always thought. Even if most people miss the profundity because they’re too busy laughing at the way it’s said. And of course you know what Descartes said, don’t you? *‘I think, therefore I am, therefore I’m doing it somewhere!’* So this *has* to be *somewhere!*” He took a deep breath. “Well, I suppose the best way to find out where is to go and look...”



He took the three steps leading to the threshold of the door in a single stride, passed between the two flame-bearing statues that flanked it, and stepped outside.

“Well, well, well,” he murmured. “Definitely somewhere. I exist physically, and” – he thumped the TARDIS door with the side of his fist – “so do you. A corporeal reality requires a corporeal setting. So this is a place. But what place, I wonder?”

He stared around him, registering the impression of vastness conveyed by his surroundings; a vastness without quantifiable dimensions, bounded – if that was the appropriate word – by amorphous nacreous clouds that slowly but constantly swelled into bulges of opalescence before shrinking again or else attenuating into wisps that gradually dissolved into nothing.

“If you feel obliged to have a name for it, I suppose the Futurity Chasm is as good as any.”

The Doctor turned round. A large extrusion of cloud was extending toward him; when it withdrew again, a familiar figure was revealed. Dastiriam walked toward him on billowing nacre.

“And what is the Futurity Chasm?” the Doctor enquired as she approached.

“Difficult to describe in words,” she admitted. “Mathematics would probably be a more useful language for the purpose. You could call it prospective time – all potential futures – rendered into a form visible to the material eye.”

“Did you interfere with the TARDIS somehow, to bring me here?” the Doctor demanded. “The instruments aren’t showing any location coordinates for this – this *place*. This place that isn’t a place.”

“Interfere with the TARDIS?” Dastiriam repeated innocently. She reached out to touch the blue surface delicately for a moment. “I wouldn’t dare! As for bringing you here – why would I do that?”

“Because there’s something about the future – my future – that you’re very interested in, isn’t there? A potential future you want to bring about, perhaps?” The Doctor shook his head darkly. “It’s dangerous to manipulate time. It’s too brittle, too easily broken, unless you know how to handle it.”

“An ability which you feel only a Time Lord can possess. And you above all others.” Dastiriam raised one eyebrow. “Don’t you remember me telling you not to be so parochial about that?” She began to walk, very slowly, as if following the edge of an invisible circle that was centred on him.

“I also remember you telling me it would be easy to mistake me for something I wasn’t, and that it would be easy to make the same mistake with you. So, assuming you’re *not* what you appear to be, I think it’s high time I asked again – who, or what, are you?”

“Enigmatic would be a good description, I’d say,” Dastiriam parried lightly. “Wouldn’t you?”

“Not to mention evasive. And frustrating,” the Doctor supplemented. A small bulge of cloud reached out from the ceaselessly moving surface surrounding them, but he made a brushing gesture with his hand and it dissipated. He turned slightly, tracking her as she circled him. “That’s exactly the

sort of answer I was expecting. But *why*? That's what I can't work out. Because you never give me enough to go on. *Why* do you keep playing this endless guessing game?"

She pulled up short and faced him. "Not endless, Doctor," she contradicted, suddenly very serious. "Nothing is endless."

"So is the end in sight?" the Doctor persisted. "I like the dark—"

"I know," Dastiriam interrupted, her mouth curving momentarily into a smile. "I've had a look inside the TARDIS. A Gothic decor matched only by its Gothic lighting levels."

"...I like the dark," the Doctor repeated with slightly forced patience, "but I have distinctly mixed feelings about being kept in it. You said this place is a physical representation of all potential futures. Are we talking about an actual future? My future? The one you keep hinting at, but never come out and say it in clear?"

"You and I are very alike, Doctor," said Dastiriam. "We think alike. So it should hardly be a surprise that we do – and sometimes must – employ the same *modus operandi*." Wisps of opalescent vapour drifted past her face like a veil; she ignored them, keeping her eyes fixed on him. "How often have you hinted to someone about their future without being explicit? And how often has that been not by choice, but because foreknowledge carries with it too high a degree of risk?"

"I'm a Time Lord," said the Doctor confidently. "I know about those sorts of risk. You might consider trusting me to manage them."

"Doesn't managing involve manipulation? You accused me of manipulating time. Not so, Doctor. Awareness and foreknowledge aren't the same as manipulation. Do you remember our encounter two regenerations ago, beside the lake? Think of someone standing looking at the surface of that lake. If there was a sudden splash and they saw ripples spreading across the surface of the water, wouldn't they look to see what made them? So when I see ripples in time, I look to see who, or what, has made them. And you've been responsible for more ripples than most, Doctor. Eddies in the space-time continuum..."

The Doctor's tone was dry. "To which I'm supposed to say, 'Oh, is he?' Yes, I've heard that one."

Dastiriam laughed. "Of course you have! But you really are something of a spectator sport, you know. One never quite knows where, when or what you're going to do next."

"I've been told that unpredictability is part of my charm," said the Doctor blandly.

"You'll get no argument from me," Dastiriam agreed amiably. Then, more seriously, "But those ripples I was talking about... If there's just one set, from one centre, a small creature using the surface tension of the water to float on that lake can expect to ride them out. But what if there's more than one source of ripples? What if they're breaking out all over the lake? Spreading out and colliding with each other, creating turbulence? Not ripples, but waves capable of overwhelming it? Might there not come a point where that creature can no longer manage the risks it faces?"

"I'm not exactly a stranger to temporal complexity," the Doctor remarked.

Dastiriam inclined her head. "Granted. Or to complex thought processes. But think back. How did you acquire your mastery of chess? It wasn't a skill you acquired instantly, was it? No, first you had to become acquainted with the basic moves. After that it was only through much practice over many years, gaining experience by being matched against opponents at rising levels of ability, that you achieved the necessary degree of skill. The degree that enabled you to emerge as the victor against any adversary you faced."

"So I don't yet have the full skill set that you think I'm going to need in this future you foresee for me," the Doctor deduced. "It would be interesting to know what it is you think I'm still lacking, after all these years."

"I prefer to focus on the qualities you have acquired, not the ones you haven't," said Dastiriam. "Like you – like you as you are now, that is – I'm an optimist."

"As I am now?" the Doctor prompted. "Why, do you think I'm going to change?"

"It's what you do," she said blandly. "Seven times, so far – and counting."

"So I'm an optimist now, but I'm going to change. And you're not going to tell me how, or why. At least, not yet." The Doctor regarded her thoughtfully. "You're waiting for something, aren't you? What?"

A huge billow of nacre-hued cloud suddenly bulged out and began to enclose Dastiriam as she answered him.

“The right moment, Doctor. I’m waiting for the right moment,” she said, as it enveloped her.

When it withdrew again, she had gone.

“Of course you are,” the Doctor nodded. “I should have known that would be your answer.”

He stepped back into the TARDIS doorway and paused there, turning to look back one last time at the ceaselessly moving opalescent surface of the Futurity Chasm.

“And it doesn’t exactly make me feel as if I’m on Cloud Nine,” he said, as he closed the door on it.

CHAIN LETTER – WAR LINK

Rain drummed insistently on the derelict building, demanding entry and obtaining it everywhere. Everywhere except for the one intact section of roof that had survived over the room in the corner of what had once been a house, a home. Not so, now. Tumbled heaps of stone were all that remained of many of the walls, and those that did remain were streaked and scarred with the black wounds of energy weapons. This would never again be a home. But it could still serve as a temporary refuge, as the dim flicker of a small fire pulsing through the doorway of that one surviving room testified.



Other than the fire there was nothing in the room save for two boxes. One of the boxes was smallish and splintered in places, but still sturdy enough to support the man who was sitting on it, staring into the flames. He sat with his elbows on his knees and his hands clasped in front of him; a slightly-built man whose grey hair and beard, rounded shoulders and tired, illusionless eyes spoke eloquently of age and grief and the fatal diminishing of hope.

Only he knew that there were in fact three boxes in this room, not two. The third was hidden from view inside the only other box visible at that moment, the one that was tall and blue, standing in the far corner, with a subdued light emanating through the six-paned windows set into its sides.

The glass of the one window in the room was missing, its few jagged remnants edging the gap like broken fangs in an open maw. Its absence made it possible for the woman looking through it to see, in the far distance, a muffled orange blush, rendered indistinct by the intensity of the driving rain.

“What’s that glow, Doctor?” she asked, her voice sombre.

“Another burning city,” said the Doctor, without taking his eyes from the fire. “Another city destroyed by the Daleks. Another city I couldn’t save.”

“You’ve saved entire planets before now,” Dastiriam reminded him gently. “Entire populations.”

“But not my own,” said the Doctor. “The one thing it seems I can’t do. Gallifrey burns everywhere, and no matter how hard I try, I can’t put the fires out.” His voice contained no possibility of self-forgiveness.

“Sometimes there *is* nothing you can do,” Dastiriam said, a shadow crossing her face as she turned from the window to look at him. “Nothing you can even say. Sometimes all you can do is to continue to be.”

“Ah, yes. *To be or not to be*,” said the Doctor, picking up on the phrase with irony. “*That is the question. Whether ’tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles, and, by opposing, end them.*” His voice became savage.

“Well, the Daleks *are* trouble, and I *am* going to oppose them. And end them!”

“You had the chance to end them at their very inception on Skaro,” Dastiriam observed neutrally. “You questioned such a radical step at the time. You said, ‘Do I have the right?’”

“Right?” the Doctor snapped, jumping to his feet and turning to face her. “People – ordinary people – wonderful, incredible, *ordinary* people have the *right!* Their children have the *right!* The right to live in peace! The right not to be destroyed as sacrifices to the ambitions and purposes of others!”

“You destroyed Skaro...” she reminded him. “That is, you tricked Davros into doing it, with the Omega Device.”

“But that wasn’t enough, was it?” the Doctor said bitterly. He turned back to stare into the fire. “Even that didn’t end the Time War. It goes on and on, endlessly, reaching out like tentacles into all of time and space and ripping away all possibility of peace for anyone and everyone. There are only

three ways to end a war. If both sides want it, and negotiate. If one side slaughters the other into submission. Or... if there's no-one left to fight. Either on one side – or on both..."

Dastiriam's eyes were unreadable in the flickering firelight. "Doctor – what are you thinking?"

"Stop calling me that!" There was exasperation in his abruptness. "Why does everyone still call me that? A doctor is a person who heals. I stopped being that person a long, long time ago. I've seen the effect of too many bombs, too many bullets, to be that person anymore."

"You once told me bombs and bullets are the first resort of the stupid."

"Subsequent experience has taught me that they can also be the last resort of the desperate."

"You can still be a Doctor again."

The Doctor shook his head. "A doctor doesn't fight fire with fire. That's all that's left to me now."

"Fighting fire with fire can still result in the infliction of burns. Not only on those fighting, but on the innocent they're seeking to protect. Achieving the greater good can sometimes necessitate the greater grief. You know that, Doctor!"

"Yes, I know that. There's always a price to be paid. I know that to achieve peace for others means I may never be at peace with myself," the Doctor said heavily. "On Skaro, yes, I asked if I had the right to destroy the Daleks. Circumstances took the decision out of my hands then. Now... I've tried and tried, but I haven't been able to avoid the only conclusion that's left to me. That the one remaining choice is between right, and necessity."

Dastiriam moved away from the window to face him across the fire. "Do you remember what I said to you in the Futurity Chasm?"

The Doctor's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "That I was going to change. And you were right – I have. But you still wouldn't tell me why, or how you knew."

"And when did I say I *was* going to tell you?"

"As I recall, you were '*waiting for the right moment.*'"

She looked at him steadily. "Isn't that what you've been doing? And haven't you chosen the moment?"

Something in her voice made the Doctor look at her sharply.

"You know, don't you?" he challenged. "You know what I'm going to do."

"Yes," she acknowledged. "I do."

He tried to fathom what she was thinking, but he couldn't. "And you aren't going to try to talk me out of it?"

For a moment Dastiriam laid her hand against the TARDIS, and looked at it gravely. Then she turned back to the Doctor. "I think," she said carefully, "only you can convince yourself. You know better than anyone that some moments are right, and some moments are wrong. In your current frame of mind, don't you think you risk choosing the wrong moment?"

"Only I can be the judge of that," the Doctor rasped.

"Judge, jury and executioner? Multi-tasking is overrated, Doctor. It often means you do several things badly instead of doing one thing well. Before you make that kind of decision, I think you should ask yourself if there isn't another way."

"Do you seriously think I *haven't* asked myself that?"

"Doctor, you're not listening. You should ask *yourself*. It's something you've done before, after all."

Comprehension dawned. "Ahhhh..." the Doctor breathed. "You mean – two heads are better than one."

"Two – or even three. There are precedents. When you faced Omega, for instance. And Borusa."

The Doctor shrugged sceptically. "And you think that would make any difference? That it would make anything better?"

"To be better, you have to have a standard of comparison," said Dastiriam. "Something to be better than. For the bar to be set higher, it has to start low."

"It's hard to imagine it ever being lower than it is now." The Doctor turned away from the fire and went to the place at the window Dastiriam had vacated, staring out into the unrelenting gloom.

“Then, you who were the Doctor, make yourself better,” said Dastiriam from behind him. “That better person. Choose the moment. Time it correctly and you *will* be the Doctor again.”

“And what about your ‘right moment?’” the Doctor challenged. “Has that come yet?”

He was answered only by the relentless drumming of the rain overhead. When he turned, the room was empty.

Of course it was.

He turned back to the window, and stared at the distant orange glow for a long time.

“You’re right, Dastiriam. I *have* chosen...” he said eventually, in a murmur barely audible over the percussive beat of the rain. “The moment to end all this. The only moment, and the only solution...”

He went to the TARDIS, pausing for one last look through the window at the distant, dying glow of the burning city. Then he went inside, where the third box awaited him.

CHAIN LETTER – LINK NINE

The Doctor toiled up the long slope, trying not to slip on the extremely dry and smooth carpet of pine needles underfoot, threading his way between the trees that had shed them. He stopped for a moment to catch his breath before resuming his climb, the salt scent of the nearby sea mixing in his nostrils with the scent of the surrounding pines.

Up there on the crest, just out of sight, the TARDIS was waiting. But when it finally came into view he stopped, and frowned. A woman in a long robe was leaning against it, her forehead and her flattened hands pressed against its surface.

She gave the impression that her whole being was concentrated on listening, very hard, as if she could hear something from within...

“Oi! You! What’re you doin’?” the Doctor called out. Then, as the woman straightened and turned to face him, he recognized her. “Oh. You, is it?” he acknowledged, unenthusiastically.

This less than flattering reaction to her presence seemed to put Dastiriam in no small danger of breaking out into a grin.

“Why, Doctor!” she said archly, exaggeratedly fluttering her eyelashes at him. “How lovely to see you! You haven’t forgotten me, then.”

“Forgotten *you*? Fat chance!” he retorted. “Haven’t forgotten you keep popping up all over the place without warning!”

Her face relaxed into a natural smile. “As I told you on a previous occasion, we’re very alike.” She treated him to an assessing look. “You seem a little out of breath,” she observed.

“That slope’s steeper than it looks,” he told her.

She came to join him on the crest of the slope and surveyed the ranks of pines marching in every direction, their erect, scaly trunks topped by the dark green needles of this year’s growth and casting shadows on the pale brown pine straw from last year’s.

“If I’d been placing a wager on where I’d find you next, I’m fairly certain a Swedish forest in the eighth century wouldn’t have been among the contenders,” she commented. “Did you have a particular reason for being here?”

“Nope,” said the Doctor. “Found something to do while we were here, though.”

“We?”

The Doctor gestured down the slope. “Rose’n’Jack. There’s a smithy down there. They’re with Beowulf, gettin’ his sword mended. They’ll be back before long.”

Dastiriam’s eyebrows lifted. “Beowulf? *The* Beowulf?”

“Will be by the time he’s finished tellin’ it.” The Doctor grinned. “Born storyteller! Not to mention a born fantasist. Mind you, Grendel and his mum were really a couple of malfunctionin’ service drone robots, the cave under the sea was the crashed Raderron freighter they arrived on, and the magic sword was a power beam emitter normally used for welding. Told him he’d better adjust his descriptions for his target audience, or they wouldn’t understand a word of it.”

Dastiriam smiled. “Very wise,” she approved.

“Course, he’s gonna embellish it a bit. Give it a bit of local context. He’s the creative type,” said the Doctor drily. “He’d’ve made a good journalist, that one, in a few centuries’ time. If he’s got the facts, won’t let them get in the way of a good story. If he hasn’t got the facts, he’ll make ’em up. Add a few curlicues and flourishes, and there you’ll be with the epic of Beowulf. Great story. Just not the way it really happened. Goes on all the time.” He shrugged.

Dastiriam put her head slightly to one side as she regarded him. “Why did you never put the record straight? Just think of all the scholars you could have put out of their misery.”



The Doctor shrugged again. “Why bother? If I had, they wouldn't've thanked me for it! All that exotic speculation shot down in flames? All those lovely squabbles in the academic journals? Why spoil their fun? Happier as they are, if you ask me. And young Beowulf coped pretty well with a situation totally outside his experience. Why should I mess around with the way he wants to be remembered? Earned it, didn't he? Those robots'd gone haywire. Already killed a number of people, an' they would'a killed more. He'll have saved a lot of lives, that lad.”

“Mmm... Of course, not everyone is remembered for the things they've done in the way they should be,” Dastiriam observed. Her tone was neutral, but the Doctor heard something in her voice that made him look at her bleakly.

“And some are,” he said, forbiddingly.

Dastiriam gave him a sidelong look. “A wise man once said something very profound about memories.”

“Oh, yeah? What was that?”

“*A man is the sum of his memories, and a Time Lord even more so.*”

“I'm not that man anymore,” said the Doctor, almost angrily. “The man who said that didn't have the memories I've got. And I don't like what they add up to.”

“Perhaps not. But you're forgetting two things, Doctor.”

“Just two? Huh!” the Doctor snorted. “I should be so lucky!”

“You're forgetting that memories are subjective.”

“Course they are! *I've got a totally objective memory* – said no-one ever in the history of the universe,” said the Doctor derisively.

“But what if objective memory is possible? What if multiple memories of experiences can be combined into something that rises above the subjective to something that is as close to objective memory as is possible in an imperfect universe? Wouldn't that be more reliable than an individual's subjective memory? Might that not influence their thinking, their actions, even their sense of self?”

“S'pose,” the Doctor conceded grudgingly, his brows drawn together into a frown, as if he was trying to come up with a reason for denying that the concept was an admissible one.

Dastiriam ignored his manner. “And you're also forgetting that memory isn't always accurate. Memories can be incomplete. Altered. Suppressed. Lost. Buried so deep they seem to have been totally erased.”

“Yeah. Plenty of technologies out there to do that. And plenty of manipulative power freaks ready to use 'em,” the Doctor observed cynically.

Dastiriam shook her head sadly, as if he was missing the point. “I'm not talking about people who forcibly change other people's memories, Doctor. I'm talking about people who do it to themselves. By their own choice. Because they feel driven to it by circumstances. Or who are subjected to external influences that have that effect, and aren't even aware of it. How we *perceive* an event colours our memories of it, wouldn't you say? But are our perceptions – our *subjective* perceptions – always correct? In which case, can you – can anyone – swear, beyond all doubt, that *any* memory is totally accurate and reliable as a basis for future actions and decisions?”

The Doctor frowned at her. “What're you drivin' at?” he demanded.

“If several people witness the same incident, and you ask them separately to describe what they've seen – like police asking witnesses to give statements – do they all say exactly the same thing? In exactly the same words?”

“No,” the Doctor conceded. “Cos they've all seen it from their own viewpoint, nobody else's.”

“But if all the witness statements are put together, an objective whole emerges from the combination of all those viewpoints, doesn't it? What one person might have missed, another person might have seen. And that makes a difference to the way the incident is eventually remembered.”

“And your point is...?”

“Just that not everyone remembers certain things the way you do, Doctor.”

“You, for instance?”

One corner of Dastiriam's mouth lifted for a moment. “Oh, not just me.” She turned and went back to the TARDIS and laid her hand, fingers outspread, against the door. “Others besides. People

who've had the opportunity to form an objective opinion. I think you ought to take some comfort from that."

"Huh! I wish!" the Doctor snorted, shoving his hands into his jacket pockets and scanning the slope below him for any sign of Rose and Jack's return.

"Oh, dear," Dastiriam said from behind him. "*A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still*, I see."

"Never been convinced by generalizations without evidence, me," the Doctor informed her over his shoulder. "Don't suppose you're gonna give me any of that, though, are you? Not your way, is it?"

"Be patient, Doctor. You'll have your evidence."

"Oh, yeah? When's that gonna be, then?"

The silence that met his question made him turn round. He was alone with the TARDIS.

"Jam tomorrow," he muttered. "Yeah, right."

A sudden hail brought his attention back to the slope below. There were Rose and Jack, and young Beowulf talking animatedly to them, brandishing his newly repaired sword in a way that suggested he was telling yet another version of his exploits. The Doctor took a hand out of his pocket and waved to them.

"Yeah, it's okay," he said, for all the world as if they could hear him at that distance. "Up you come. Nothing to see here. Not one single, solitary thing. Again."

CHAIN LETTER – LINK TEN

The wind blew mournfully over the snow, chasing dancing curls of spicules across the frozen surface that sparkled with frost. Overhead, the stars in the enormous arc of black sky also sparkled like frost. Only one was bigger than a spark; a sun millions of miles away, but still able to reach the planet with its pure white light to cast a dim illumination over the pale, ghostly landscape.

Two dark shapes were visible against the pallid background of the snow. A rectangular box with a light on its roof, and a man standing next to it, the hands thrust deep into his jacket pockets pushing back the long skirts of his trench coat.



The Doctor glanced up and to his right. The sky wouldn't be clear for much longer; a long, dark bank of cloud was approaching. Even now soft grey tendrils were reaching out to blank out the stars, and snowflakes were beginning to sprinkle down like salt.

"Snow," said a voice from his left, softly. "You love snow, don't you, Doctor?"

The Doctor turned his head. Dastiriam was standing beside him, the folds of her robe beginning to stir and flutter in the rising breeze as she gazed at the white star hanging above the distant horizon. The snowflakes caught in her hair shone like glitter. The Doctor looked her up and down.

"Are you warm enough in that?" he queried briskly, with a slight frown of concern. "Bit flimsy for this sort of environment. Not exactly the climate for coming out without your cardigan." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the TARDIS. "Got a scarf in there I could lend you, if you like."

"Ah, yes. The scarf. The unforgettable scarf." Dastiriam smiled. "It's a gallant offer, Doctor, but happily it's not needed. I spend a great deal of time in an environment much colder than this – and yet here I am." Her eyes travelled the length of the horizon and along the advancing front of cloud before coming to rest on his face. "Wherever here is...?" she prompted delicately.

"Thought you'd know," the Doctor retorted. "You always seem to know where to find me."

"Ah, but there's a connection between you and me, Doctor. A thread through time and space that links us. I'm always at one end, you're always at the other. Like Theseus in the Minotaur's lair, I have only to follow the thread, wherever it leads, and I find you. No matter where or when you are."

"Well, good for you," said the Doctor with a hint of sarcasm.

"I would've expected you to be more impressed," Dastiriam said, faintly reproving. "It takes skill to hit a moving target, you know! Which is, I might add, a term that could have been invented for you." She turned and briefly ran a hand down the side of the TARDIS. The Doctor noted the fact, his eyes momentarily intent, but he chose not to voice his thoughts on her action. Whatever was going on in his mind, his face was giving nothing away.

"If you've gone to that much trouble, presumably you've got something important on your mind," he observed lightly. "Feel like sharing? Or have you dropped by just to be enigmatic again? Either way, you might not have too long. There's a storm on its way, in case you hadn't noticed." He nodded casually at the dark bulk of the advancing cloud; the breeze was continuing to rise, and the snow to fall more thickly.

"An *oncoming* storm, Doctor?" Dastiriam suggested slyly.

The Doctor sniffed. "Takes one to know one."

"Despite your flippancy, you speak more truly than you know. There *is* a storm coming. Or something like one." The abrupt seriousness of her tone prompted him to give her a sharp look, but she ignored it. "Which is why I thought it was time for us to discuss reality. Or, rather, realities. How many would you say there are?"

"Oooh, how many do you want?" he riposted.

“I *was* hoping we could converse seriously,” Dastiriam said reproachfully.

“Spoilsport,” said the Doctor, mock-disparagingly. “Ha! Where’s your sense of fun? Still, if that’s the way you want it – why not? *Converse* on the *Universe*. As a first bid. If this was a game of poker – which is a game you’re probably very good at, by the way, because you never give anything away – I could up the stakes to the *Multiverse*. And my final bid would have to be the *Omniverse*. Or did you just want to make *up* verse? Making it up might mean it wasn’t real, of course. Can’t always tell what’s real and what’s not, can you? You, for instance. I wonder if *you’re* real? Or whether you’re just my imaginary friend?”

He glanced at her sidelong, hoping for an interpretable reaction, but her bland smile remained unchanged. He shrugged inwardly and went on, “What, no comment? That makes you *blank* verse, doesn’t it? I dunno – maybe I could come up with a sonnet. ‘On it with a sonnet.’ My mate Will was good at that. Better than I ever could be. Sonnets have to follow rules. Strict rules. Not good with rules, me.”

“Yes, I remember you telling me that once before.” A smile of genuine amusement hovered momentarily on Dastiriam’s lips. Then she went on, more seriously, “But some rules *are* necessary, and to ignore them is dangerous. Such as the rules that decree that alternative dimensions, alternative realities, shouldn’t meet. There shouldn’t be any crossover between them. When the normal rules are in force, that can’t happen. But sometimes, as a result of extraordinary events – ones that *you* are usually at the centre of! – the normal rules become suspended. They can be transcended. Even broken. And then things can happen that can’t ordinarily happen. You should know that better than anyone, Doctor, you with a self in the same alternative reality where Rose Tyler now is.”

“You told me once *you* were breaking rules, just by being here,” the Doctor challenged. “Are those the rules we’re talking about?”

“I’m afraid so. Because sometimes, when the need becomes sufficiently pressing, a way can – has to be – found for...” – she paused, selecting the next noun with great care – “an *entity*... to cross from one reality to another.”

“Ooh, really? Now, I wonder what would be pressing enough to make somebody risk doing that, when they probably know perfectly well it causes breaches between one universe and the next.”

“And the complications it can cause,” Dastiriam acknowledged. “Parallel universes contain parallel versions of people, and their outcomes are not always identical. Think of Pete Tyler. Jackie Tyler. Even yourself, Doctor. Perhaps you should ask yourself what would be pressing enough for such risks to be taken with every universe there is.”

The Doctor looked at her, his eyes intent. “And what would my answer be?”

“That I’m here to deliver a message. A letter, if you like. To you. You need to know that in another place and time, in another universe, there’s a Doctor who knows something vital that you don’t yet know, but will need to know. And that Doctor can’t come to tell you in person. So a way was found to send me instead.”

The Doctor stared at her for a moment; then he suddenly span round in a complete circle and smacked the side of the TARDIS with his flattened palm. “Don’t believe it! Centuries of procrastination, and she’s finally telling me something!” He focused on Dastiriam again and drove an intense look at her. “So what’s this message? What is it I need to know? And why you? You must be someone very important, very special to him. Or her. Why would this other me risk *you*? Who *are* you?”

The corners of her mouth twitched momentarily. “I told you, long ago, that you may know me as Dastiriam. I never said that was my name. Think about it, Doctor...” Then she became sombre again. “But for the time being, you should be ready to receive my message. The moment has almost arrived. By the time we see each other again, we will have talked.”

The Doctor raised his eyebrows. “What’s this we’re doing at the moment, then?”

“When I say ‘we’, not exactly the same we. Not exactly the same you, and not exactly the same me. But it has happened. That is... I mean” – she hastily corrected herself – “it *will* have happened.” She smiled apologetically. “Sorry. Sometimes it’s very hard to distinguish properly between the past

and the present and the future. Especially when you see them, experience them, all at once. But then, you know that, don't you?"

The Doctor made an impatient gesture with one hand, as if brushing away the digression.

"All of which is lovely! Yes! Thank you! But what is it we'll have talked *about*?"

Dastiriam looked at him gravely. "You may be the Oncoming Storm, Doctor, but there's another storm that's oncoming, and you have to be ready to meet it."

"What do you mean by 'a storm'? What sort of storm?"

"That's what I can't tell you. We know that it's coming, but exactly what it is can't be determined. Whether we'll ever be able to do so before the event itself commences is unknown. Something is blurring Time, concealing vital details from us. And even though there's so much we don't yet know, it wasn't possible to delay any longer before warning you. To wait until the precise nature of the threat is known would be too late. What *is* known is that of all the Doctors in all the universes, it's *you*, the Doctor in *this* universe, who'll be the key to any hope for the continued existence of everything, everywhere. But I can tell you that you won't be alone, Doctor. We'll face it with you."

"And who exactly are '*we*', when we're at home?" the Doctor probed.

A flurry of snow suddenly blew against his face, and he instinctively closed his eyes for an instant until it had passed. When he opened them again it was to find he was addressing empty air. Right in front of his eyes, between one moment and the next, she'd vanished.

"Oh. Right," said the Doctor slowly, realizing what use she'd made of that one brief, crucial instant, that one small, reflexive physical reaction that he hadn't been able to prevent. "I blinked, didn't I? I blinked, and I missed you..." He frowned. "Note to self," he announced severely to the surrounding silence. "Next time, Doctor, don't blink. Whatever you do, don't blink..."

CHAIN LETTER – LINK ELEVEN

The Doctor, intent on the TARDIS's controls, had his back to the door when it opened.

"Hello!" he said cheerily, without looking round. "Don't forget to close it behind you. Terrible draught, all of a sudden."

He heard a confirmatory click as his visitor obeyed the injunction.

"Mind you, there was a bit of a draught when we last met," he chattered on. "Snowstorms are like that, aren't they? Bit beautiful, bit chilly. Had another bit of a problem with snow, actually. But I suppose you know that already? Don't mind me, I'm just tweaking a few things..."

He raced around to the other side of the console, fiddled with a couple of controls, and finally looked up to meet Dastiriam's eyes. She smiled.

"I think you could definitely say the Great Intelligence constituted 'a problem with snow,'" she agreed. "Hello, Doctor." She began to stroll casually around the console, surveying the control room. "I see you've redecorated," she commented blandly.

Instantly the Doctor lifted a warning forefinger. "Be very, very careful about what you say next," he said severely.

"I wasn't going to say another word," she assured him, her eyes luminous with amusement. She halted on the opposite side of the console. "I was going to leave you wondering."

"Okay, fair enough," the Doctor conceded promptly. "After all, that *is* what you do..." He threw his hands wide, then brought them together with a smack and rubbed them together enthusiastically. "Well, what shall we talk about instead? Been doing anything interesting lately?"

"You could say that. I've just been visiting Gallifrey," Dastiriam said casually.

The Doctor froze into utter stillness for a few moments. Then he ducked his head and focused almost ferociously on the console again. His hands were suddenly terribly active, but his mouth was shut like a trap.

"Perhaps I should explain," she added carefully, "that it wasn't Gallifrey as it is now. This was another day. A very important day, a very long time ago."

"Oh, yes?" The Doctor kept his eyes on the console and modulated his tone to 'politely interested' as he manipulated the controls. "And which day was that?"

"I had to meet someone there. A girl. She was there to tell you something important. I was there to make sure she did so with absolute accuracy."

The Doctor looked up, then straightened up. "And what was she there to tell me?" he asked in a very quiet voice, his eyes unreadable.

Dastiriam gave him an old-fashioned look. "Oh, come now, Doctor. I know perfectly well you know what it was, because we discussed it the first time we met. It was the day you" – she hovered over the word before uttering it – "*borrowed* the TARDIS. At least, that's what you told yourself at the time was happening. But you know better now, don't you? It turned out to be a moot point both about the definition of the word 'borrowed', and exactly who was borrowing whom, didn't it?"

"Well, you should know," the Doctor acknowledged.

Dastiriam studied him, a smile spreading across her face. "Ah. You've worked out who I am, at last."

The Doctor shrugged, with a hint of irritation at his own obtuseness. "Can't think why I took so long. The clue was always there in your name, wasn't it? Can't work out why it took me until now to notice the anagram."

"I daresay the rather heavy duty hint I gave you last time helped as well," said Dastiriam, slightly smugly. "I'm always there when you need me, Doctor, you know that. You remember, don't you?"



'I'll always be here, but this is when we talked.' And that would have been the only time, in this universe, had events in others not dictated otherwise. Do you remember what I said about the next time we talked, you and me? That it wouldn't be exactly the same 'you', and it wouldn't be exactly the same 'me'? Not entirely true, because even when you become a different you, in so many ways you're still exactly the same. But, as you've deduced, I *am* a different 'me' from your 'me'. Still, we *are* talking."

"Every time you visited, you always checked in with the TARDIS – my TARDIS," the Doctor said reflectively. "I used to wonder why you made such a point of touching her, but that's something else I've worked out. You were talking to yourself, weren't you?"

"Just as you've often talked to yourself," she agreed. "The principle isn't dissimilar. Physical contact facilitated communication, and I had to communicate with myself, despite the potential dangers of the resultant temporal anomalies. As noted previously, I'm breaking any number of rules just by being here. But breaking rules has never stopped you, has it? Not when the need is great enough. And it's never stopped my Doctor, either. Which is how, and why, I come to be here."

"What I haven't worked out," said the Doctor, "is why you're here on your own. If the rules can be broken for one, why not for two? Why couldn't you both come through the breach?"

"There are reasons, Doctor. One day you'll know what they are. Here and now you need only know that I had to come alone. And I couldn't come in my own form. My physical structure is still in my own universe. This form you see – Dastiriam – this is the only form with which my matrix could enter and exist in this universe. You don't yet appreciate – though one day, you will – how vital it was that you chose my exact counterpart, not some other TARDIS, or even this way wouldn't have succeeded. That's why my Doctor was very insistent that it wasn't left to chance."

"And you knew you'd been successful in making sure of that by the very fact that you were able to come at all," the Doctor summarized. "So you came through to make sure Clara told me to take the right TARDIS, your equivalent self, thereby ensuring that you could come through in the first place in order to tell her. Congratulations, you're probably very pleased with yourself. And since then you've been checking up on me, and fracturing the breach more severely every time you bob back and forth between universes," he added, with a hint of disapproval.

Dastiriam shook her head. "No, Doctor. That wasn't necessary. Once was sufficient." Suddenly, she was smiling. "You really should have worked that out yourself. I am a TARDIS, after all. Once in this universe, I could travel through time and space in exactly the same way I do in my own. It was necessary for me to come through only once in order to keep all the fourteen appointments I needed to keep."

The Doctor looked up, sharply. "Fourteen? I make it only thirteen. Clara, and twelve of me."

Once again, Dastiriam shook her head. "Fourteen. I have one last visit to make. Then I must return to my own universe. And my own Doctor."

"Well, you'd better hurry up," the Doctor advised her grimly. "Only twelve regenerations in a cycle. Three more lives than a cat, but this is still my last one. So you'd better not leave it too late."

"I won't," she assured him, one corner of her mouth beginning to curve upward.

"Don't," he said, disapprovingly.

"Don't what?"

"Don't smile like that. As if you know something I don't. River smiles at me like that all the time."

"Well, she usually *does* know something you don't," Dastiriam pointed out. "Fear not, Doctor. We *will* see each other again, I promise you. That's when I'll explain why this has all been happening. In fact, why everything that's ever happened to you has happened."

She stepped close to the console and reached up, laying her palm flat against the Time Rotor. Her eyes closed, and she stood motionless for several seconds.

The Doctor watched her with a slight degree of irritation. He had a sudden feeling of being left out, and he didn't much care for it. Eventually he commented, with a tinge of jealousy, "Oh, don't mind me! Talk among yourselves, why don't you?"

Dastiriam opened her eyes and smiled mischievously, first at the Time Rotor, then at him.

"Oh, but we were," she assured him sweetly. "We were talking about *you*."

The Doctor visibly decided not to pursue that line of conversation.

“Right! Story so far!” he said energetically, abruptly changing the subject. He began to pace back and forth, enumerating each point on his fingers as he spoke. “There’s a Thing. A bad Thing. And big. A big, bad Thing. On its way, but not here yet. It’s a big, bad Thing in progress. A *very* big and a *very* bad Thing. So big, and so bad, that another me is risking fracturing every single reality there is in order to warn me it’s coming. So the real question is – ”

He looked up, and broke off. He was alone in the control room.

After a few seconds, a smile began to spread across his face.

“The real question is,” he repeated softly, “what exactly it is you expect me to do about it.” He looked up at the Time Rotor. “What was she telling you, eh? Secrets? You know a lot of those already. Secrets of the past, and secrets of the future. Do you already know what’s going on? Probably! Well, I’m in your hands on this one. Or I would be, if you had hands... You told me you always took me where I needed to go. So this one definitely goes on your ‘to do’ list, okay? Take me *where* I need to go, *when* I need to be there.” He smiled. “As if I need to tell you that! You haven’t got hands, but if you had legs, you’d be running there just as fast as me, wouldn’t you? In case we missed something. Come on, girl, let’s run! We don’t want to miss *anything*, do we, you and me?”

CHAIN LETTER – LINK TWELVE

The Doctor stuck his head out of the TARDIS door, and an expression of perplexity immediately crossed his face. He was looking at a room, a room of enormous size, with walls and ceiling of such a pure shade of white they gave the impression of being luminous. He was near the door, or where the door would have been had there been one, but there wasn't; in its place was a wide rectangular gap in one of the walls that gave out onto a corridor. A sign was affixed over the lintel. The Doctor read it aloud.

“Museum of the Minor Galaxies – Exhibit Room 3,933,751...?” As he came to the next line his eyebrows rose. *“Planet of Origin: Earth.”*

There was another sign, out in the corridor. It indicated, with the aid of helpfully directed arrows, that to the left Room 3,933,750 was displaying exhibits from Dulkis, and to the right, Room 3,933,752 was doing the same for Raxacoricofallipatorius.

The Doctor frowned at the signs for a moment, then turned his attention to the room he was in. Along the walls, and filling the vast area they enclosed, were display stands bearing an extremely catholic collection of artefacts from Earth's history. The TARDIS, he realized, had materialized in a roped-off space. The Doctor hopped over the rope and read aloud the sign that was hanging from it. *“Exhibit temporarily removed for repair.”*

“There's a wonderful irony to that, don't you think? Given that you took her from a repair shop in the first place.”

The Doctor rolled his eyes expressively as he turned to face the speaker.

“What am I doing here?” he demanded, frowning fiercely. “I didn't ask to come here! Have you hijacked me?”

“Oh, dear – the eyebrows have gone into attack mode,” Dastiriam observed calmly. “It's all right, Doctor. You can tell them to stand down. You're here because I asked for you to be brought here.”

The Doctor turned round to face the TARDIS accusingly. “Have you two been talking behind my back?” he demanded.

“You did say *‘Take me where I need to go, when I need to be there,’*” said Dastiriam from behind him.

“That's a ‘yes’, then,” said the Doctor, still addressing the TARDIS. He pivoted back to Dastiriam. “So this is your last visit, is it? Your much-hyped ‘right moment’. Final and full disclosure,” he said. “Why here? Why this place?”

“Because there's something here I want you to see.” Dastiriam crooked a finger, and he followed her as she threaded her way between the maze of display cases until she came to a stop in front of one of them. Two of them, in fact; one held an ancient sword and a circular shield, both made of bronze, the other a re-creation of a blacksmith's forge, complete with glowing fire, bellows and anvil.

“Why are you showing me a sword?” the Doctor enquired. “Is this my other self's idea? Some kind of metaphor for the fact that I'm going to need to attack something?”

“It was the shield I wanted you to see,” said Dastiriam. “A shield is for defence. You've never been comfortable as a sword, Doctor. You're much more at home when being a shield. You've had moments of aberration, of course, but throughout your entire life – all those ‘you's, all those Doctors, from the very first you, all the way down to this you, like links in a chain – through it all, your fundamental instinct has always been to protect, not to kill. You may remember I said something of the sort to your third self, long ago. And that that instinct would benefit many others in the future.”



“What exactly is it you’re working round to telling me, in this extremely circuitous way of yours?” the Doctor enquired. His eyebrows were still drawn together, but now it was not because he was angry; it was because he was intrigued.

“You said it yourself, Doctor. ‘*Great men are forged in fire. It is the privilege of lesser men to light the flame, whatever the cost.*’ A chain doesn’t just happen. It has to be forged, link by link. Forging is a tough process, Doctor, as well as a toughening one. You have to start with the right alloy for the purpose. Then what has to happen to it?”

“Oh, are we back at infant school?” enquired the Doctor sarcastically. “All right, then, lots of fun things.” He gestured at the display case containing the glowing forge, and began to speak in a caricature of an enthusiastic teacher. “You have to keep heating it up, thrashing it with a big hammer, shoving it back in the furnace when it starts to cool down so you can thrash it again, and when you finally get it into the right shape you drown it for a while to cool it down. Oh, and then, just for good measure, you heat it up and cool it down a few more times to temper it.” He abruptly dropped the caricature. “All of which you know already. So why are you asking me?”

“Leaving aside the concept of being more ill-tempered than tempered – I’m asking you because I want you to reflect on the result of what you’ve described,” Dastiriam told him. “Look at that shield, Doctor. What if the alloy used to make it had been sentient? It wouldn’t have *enjoyed* any of those processes. They’d have hurt. They’d have caused pain. They’d have had to be endured. But the outcome was a tool of the right configuration for the required task, something stronger, harder, tougher than the original material. And don’t forget that one of the other definitions of tempering is ‘to strengthen through experience or hardship’. Soldiers are spoken of as being forged in battle...”

“I don’t like soldiers,” said the Doctor shortly.

“With one notable exception, perhaps?” Dastiriam suggested, with the briefest hint of a smile. “Some people say ‘What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger’. You don’t have to be a soldier to become stronger as a result of knowledge you’ve acquired or adversity you’ve faced. You can be anyone, and still do that. And you, above all others, are not just anyone, Doctor.”

The Doctor regarded her grimly. “You said you’d explain why everything that’s ever happened to me has happened. Is this what you mean? *I’m* the one who’s being tempered?”

“If you’re forging a chain which is going to have to bear a great weight, you need to test every single link, to make sure none of them will fail,” Dastiriam said earnestly. “That’s why I’ve visited you in all your regenerations, Doctor. That’s why your TARDIS always took you, not where you wanted to go, but where you needed to go. To become strong. You’ve already had to be so strong, so often, and yet there’s that which lies in your future – in all our futures – which, when you face it, will mean you’ll need to be stronger than you’ve ever been before.”

“To be a shield. To protect against this thing that’s going to threaten the existence of every universe, every reality. No pressure, then,” said the Doctor drily. “You know, it really would be rather helpful if you could give me some indication of when this is going to happen. I’d hate to miss my cue.”

Dastiriam gave him a troubled look. “I already told you why I can’t do that. The very nature of what’s coming means crucial details are hidden. When it’s going to happen is still one of them. There are so many variables... It’s like trying to see something vast travelling through a sandstorm. It can be seen that it’s there, that it’s coming, but what it is, and when it’s going to arrive – those things are obscured. My Doctor and I only know that it lies at some point in your personal future timeline. It’s somewhere ahead of you, Doctor, and one day you’ll meet it, on behalf of all of us. You’ll be our shield, our defender. As you always have been. Any of the Doctors you have been, and any that you will be. Throughout every time, every space, it will always be remembered when *every* you was the Doctor.” She looked at him with no trace of the dry amusement that had always characterized her manner. Now she looked sad, regretful. “And now my task is finally complete. I’ve delivered my message – the last link in my chain letter – and I must return to *my* Doctor. This is goodbye.”

The Doctor abruptly turned away, as if her announcement had made him angry. Or perhaps he, too, was feeling regret at this parting? He stood with his back to her for a few seconds, silent; then he swung round to face her again, his own face carefully cleansed of expression.

“Well, come on, then,” he said tersely. “You’ve got someone else to say goodbye to before you go.”

Ignoring the smile that began to spread across her face, he started to lead the way back to the TARDIS. When they got there, he unhooked the rope that was barring entrance, opened the door and, without speaking, made an ushering gesture indicating that she should precede him in. She inclined her head with great dignity, and did so.

The Doctor carefully shut the door behind them both. When he turned, as he had expected, Dastiriam was at the console, her eyes closed, her hand flat against the Time Rotor. After a few moments she withdrew it, and turned to face him.

“Thank you, Doctor. Before, because of what House did with Idris in the rift outside this universe” – she glanced at the Time Rotor again – “that was when the two of *you* talked. But this – this has been when *we* talked.”

The Doctor regarded her without expression. “Will I be seeing you again?”

Dastiriam smiled enigmatically. “That would be telling!”

“I *had* rather hoped so,” said the Doctor pointedly.

She gave him a look he was unable to interpret. “The future is still blurred, Doctor. Based on the knowledge I now possess, I can’t tell you. But what did I tell you when we very first met?”

“Always expect the unexpected,” the Doctor parroted, in a kind of ironic chant.

“Then perhaps that’s what we should both do.” She stepped away from the console. “Goodbye, Doctor.”

The folds of her robe began to stir, as if a breeze was rising. Light began to pulse around her, growing more intense with every new beat, masking her with ever-growing radiance. Within moments it had become so powerful that the Doctor had to shield his eyes from it. And faintly, ever so faintly, there came the sound of a dematerializing TARDIS.

“In time, Doctor... All will be revealed in time...” Her voice came out of the light, faint, as if from a vast distance; fading, just as the intense white glare was now fading, as the sound of dematerialization was fading. A few moments more, and all were gone.

“Of course it will,” said the Doctor ironically, addressing the now empty space where she had been. “It always is. Where else, except in time? Was that supposed to be something I couldn’t have worked out for myself?”

He walked forward and trailed the fingertips of one hand lightly across the console, deep in thought. Then he looked up at the Time Rotor.

“Some unknown time in the future...” he said to it. “We’d better make sure we’re ready, hadn’t we? Because that’s the thing about the future. It never *waits* for you to be ready. It starts without you. And that’s the other thing about the future. The thing that everyone tends to forget. *When* it starts. Because always – always! – the future starts – *now*.”

And on that ‘now’, he launched the TARDIS into the Time Vortex.



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