

Doctor Who

## CLOSED CIRCLE

A Fifth Doctor short story  
by  
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It was the first case I ever worked. The first, and the strangest. Because it involved the strangest man I ever met.

That meeting lay in the future, but of course I'd had no inkling of that when, proud of my newly conferred status as Investigator in the Law and Detection Directorate of Callisanalor, I'd received my first solo assignment from Primary Investigator Vallan. Naturally, I'd expected it to be a minor one, appropriate to a raw recruit making the transition from training academy theory to reality on the ground. And so had she.

Instead I now found myself facing an horrific multiple murder involving a politically controversial ex-planetary ruler, and I'd just been listening to the frankly incredible account offered by my main – in fact, my only – suspect.

With my back turned to the others in the room, I stood at the window that covered one entire side of the spacious lounge of the ultra-luxurious residence in which we were gathered. Ostensibly I was studying the same exotically beautiful scenery that had met my eyes when I'd first entered the enviropod. It was undeniably an impressive sight. The sky dome overhead was in 'day' mode, the artificial sun blazing down from an equally artificial bluish-mauve sky. Underneath it was a landscape of hundreds of hectares, sloping down from the edges of the dome, covered in a riot of exotic, multi-coloured plants, trees and shrubs, clearings of yellowish-green grass, and streams tumbling down in silver cascades toward a large central lake.

Mega-riches definitely got you mega-beautiful surroundings in the Astrosanctum.

But though my eyes gazed unseeingly at what lay beyond the glass, in reality my mind was busily assessing the story we'd been offered.

Piero Adrokann, a brusque man in his fifties and Chief Custodian of the Astrosanctum, shared my reservations, but was rather less subtle about showing them; his suspicions were written all over his face, and he'd clearly dismissed that story out of hand. Yaniru Hanasha, one of his deputies and some twenty years or so younger than him, had hardly spoken, her dark eyes darting from me to Adrokann to the suspect, but the very impassivity of her face conveyed her disbelief.

"A blue box that mysteriously appears and then disappears? Do you seriously expect us to believe such a pack of nonsense?" Adrokann barked.

I turned away from the window and looked at the suspect – a middle-aged woman – trying not to stare, as I had when I'd first seen her, after Velsix, one of my two tecnoids, had located her,

crouched and trembling, inside a wardrobe in one of the bedrooms. It was hard not to. Never before had I encountered anyone who had such startling eyes – startling because while one iris was a piercing ice-pale blue, the other was an almost glowing green. Eyes that were now fastened on my face with urgency, intensity and anxiety.

I studied her closely. I wasn't yet sharing my thoughts with Adrokann – at first sight of me, by his expression alone he'd made it abundantly clear that in his opinion my relative youth and inexperience rendered me unfit to have been assigned to this case. But looking into those mismatched eyes, what I saw was sincerity. However incredible her tale, she utterly believed that what she was telling us was the truth.

She shrank back as Adrokann whirled around to once again subject her to his accusing gaze.

"She's lying! She's the only one here, so she's the only one who could have done it!" he insisted, with a vehemence that betrayed how unsettled he was by the implications of what we had discovered as soon as we'd entered the building. "Look at her, sitting there, pretending to be the scared innocent! It's all an act."

The soft, luxurious armchair in which the woman sat had obviously been designed to encourage maximum relaxation. But she wasn't relaxed. Not with Velsix and his fellow tecnoide, Emmaten, flanking her, and Adrokann's hostility an almost palpable sensation. Unlike him, I knew the suspect wasn't acting. Emmaten had confirmed, via the transceiver implant under the skin behind my right ear that linked me with both tecnoids, that her bio-scan readings indicated genuine fear, distress – and confusion.

"You say that when you entered the house, the blue box was standing out in the entrance hall, Madam Thane?" I said neutrally.

"Yes!" she said instantly and emphatically. "On the other side of that wall." She pointed at the wall that separated the nearest end of the lounge from the hallway beyond.

"Would you show me exactly where, please?"

Adrokann and Hanasha followed us as, escorted by Emmaten and Velsix, she preceded me out of the lounge and into the spacious entrance hall. This split into two arms from the main door, which was still standing ajar, as we had found it when we arrived. With one's back to that door, one arm became a corridor, which I now knew led to the staff quarters, bearing away to the right; the other, the one in which we were now standing, led straight ahead, running alongside the full length of the lounge. The interior walls were pure white marble that subliminally hinted at the luxuriousness of the entire structure; the exterior wall that ran from the door to the far end of the hall consisted of vast glass panels that maximized visual access to the stunningly gorgeous grounds outside.

Heldan Thane averted her eyes from what lay on the floor of the hallway with a shudder, and pointed.

"There!" she said. "Next to that." She indicated a slim, featureless black rectangular pillar, which I took to be some kind of esoteric artwork, standing against the wall.

I opened my mouth to begin my next question, but Velsix cut across me.

“Alert.” The smooth face remained as dispassionate as the voice; tecnoids always spoke calmly, no matter what the emergency. “Unidentified power source detected. Intensity increasing.”

I frowned at him in surprise. “What do you mean – ?” I began, but broke off as a sound began to be detectable. It seemed to be coming from the very place at which Thane had pointed.

“Alert. Recommend retreat by a minimum of three metres from the location of the power source,” said Velsix, but his advice was superfluous. Survival instinct had kicked in, and I – along with everyone else, including the tecnoids – had already taken several paces backward from the strange wheezing, groaning noise, swiftly increasing in volume. Adrokann and Hanasha had both unholstered the stunners they carried and were holding them at the ready, trained on where the sound was coming from. Then, to my astonishment, a shape began to become visible, materializing out of nothing to fill the place Thane had indicated. A rectangular shape that resolved itself into a tall blue box with opaque grey windows set into each of its sides and a panel with some kind of notice on it situated on the left of its front side. As it finally solidified, the strange noise died away.

Except for the tecnoids, who were incapable of feeling any such emotion, we all stared at it, dumbfounded, waiting for something to happen. But nothing did. The blue box just stood there, silent and utterly impossible.

After a few seconds, I swallowed. I was in charge here, so I knew it was up to me to act. The problem was, I had no idea what to do. There’d been nothing in the training manual about how to react when solid objects materialized out of empty air onto a crime scene.

Hoping no-one else had detected my nervousness – and only too aware that Adrokann was watching like a hawk for me to make the slightest error of judgement – I indicated they should all stay back. Then I stepped forward and cautiously touched the door, proving to myself that it was real, and there, and solid.

Still nothing.

I looked at the notice; the final instruction was ‘Pull To Open’. Tentatively, I reached out, gripped the handle, and pulled.

It didn’t move.

I stepped back again, and released my pent-up breath.

Then I almost jumped out of my skin as the door opened – inwards, I couldn’t help noticing, with a flash of rather irrational irritation – and three people stepped out.

The first was a youngish man – in his early thirties, perhaps? – with an open, pleasant countenance, blue eyes, and blond hair that grew long enough to touch his collar. His clothes were not of any style I’d ever seen on Callisanalor; a light brown mid-length coat and pink-and-cream striped trousers. Rather more curious were the facts that, one, there was a question mark embroidered on each lapel of the collar of his shirt, and two, he had a sprig of some kind of vegetation pinned to the left lapel of the coat.

There was another man, too, and a woman, both of whom I would have put in their early twenties. He retained something of the angularity of a teenager and had distinctive copper-red

hair and striking grey eyes; she wore her brown hair fairly short, and, judging from the expression in her dark eyes, perhaps her temper might be, too.

There was a brief pause, while lightning assessments took place on both sides.

Then the blond man smiled winningly and said, "Hello. I'm dreadfully sorry – have we interrupted something?"

The copper-haired young man had obviously taken in more of the scene than his colleague. "I'd say the answer to that is 'yes', wouldn't you?" he said with a hint of sarcasm.

The girl was rolling her eyes in exasperation. "*Doctor!*" she hissed, tugging at his sleeve. He followed the direction of her pointing finger, and his eyes widened as he finally took in the fact that there were eleven dead bodies strewn on the floor all around us, every one of them with blank black orbs instead of normal eyes. Also, that two weapons were unwaveringly trained on him and his companions.

"Ah," he said slowly. "Yes... I see what you mean..."

Before I could respond, Thane had taken a step forward, her spectacular eyes wide.

"That's the box! That's the box I saw earlier!" she exclaimed, her finger pointing almost accusingly at it. "I told you it was there! It was there, and then it wasn't! That's the box!"

"What are you talking about, '*earlier*'?" the girl challenged her. "We've never been here before, and we've only just arrived. There's no way you could've seen the TARDIS *earlier*."

Thane turned to me, almost desperate in her desire to convince me. "I'm telling the truth, Investigator! You *must* believe me! That's the box I saw earlier, right in that very spot!"

"I know it *looks* like a box, but actually it's a rather sophisticated travel machine," the blond man interposed politely. "And Tegan *is* telling the truth, you know. We really have only just arrived." He'd obviously deduced the fact that my position in front of the others indicated seniority of role, because he singled me out for his next words. "Er – I'm sure you know you've got a lot of dead people on the floor, don't you?" he enquired ingenuously, as if this was a detail I might somehow have overlooked.

It was all I could do not to burst out laughing at the incongruity of this remark, though fortunately a brief vision of Adrokann's reaction if I did helped me to suppress the urge.

"That fact hadn't escaped me," I agreed, as neutrally as I could, but I think he saw the flicker of humour in my eyes, because I saw it echoed in his.

It had taken until now for Adrokann to travel from shock to belligerence, but he'd finally completed the transit, because at this point he broke in abruptly.

"Who the devil are you, and how did you get in here?" he demanded.

"Oh, I'm the Doctor," said the blond man affably. "This is Tegan, and this is Turlough." He indicated the girl and the young man in turn; the latter was eyeing the two weapons still being aimed at them with a distinctly unsettled expression. "And I would tell you how we 'got in here', but I'm afraid you probably wouldn't understand it even if I were to try to explain," he concluded with a slightly apologetic but friendly smile.

He said it perfectly courteously, but Adrokann immediately began to swell up with indignation, and his grip on his stunner visibly tightened.

“Emmaten, database search,” I intervened firmly, before he could say anything, with a sharp movement of my hand to indicate he was not to fire. “Can you confirm the identity of ‘the Doctor?’”

There was a momentary pause as Emmaten scanned him and consulted the plethora of databases to which she had access.

“Unable to confirm,” she said calmly. “Subject does not appear either in image records or identification listings.”

I wasn’t prepared for that response, but schooled my expression to convey merely polite interest rather than the surprise I was actually feeling.

“Are you able to confirm the identity of ‘Tegan’ or ‘Turlough?’” I persisted.

“Tegan Jovanka, thank you, if you’re going to do it properly,” said the girl tartly. “And he’s Vislor Turlough,” she added, with a jerk of her thumb at the young man.

Emmaten repeated the scanning process – which appeared to make the young man called Turlough slightly nervous, though Tegan never lost her slightly antagonistic expression – and once again, said, “Unable to confirm. Subjects do not appear either in image records or identification listings.”

There was a pause before I observed, carefully, “Well, that’s – unusual. Emmaten has access to every planetary database in this galaxy, and yet none of you are on record.”

“Ah, well, probably haven’t been to this one before,” said the Doctor cheerfully. “There are a lot of galaxies in the universe, you know. Even I can’t be expected to have visited every one of them yet.”

I studied him through narrowed eyes, trying to gauge the tenor of his response. It seemed to me that he wasn’t dissembling or being facetious, as Adrokann all too clearly assumed he was. No, my conclusion was that he was simply stating what to him was a self-evident truth. I dearly wanted to pursue the matter, but I could see Adrokann’s impatience was heading towards boiling point, so I decided to defer my curiosity for the time being, and concentrate on the matter in hand.

The Doctor obviously concurred with me. “Well, for the moment, might I suggest we move on to the next point? Which is that I’d be very interested to know who all of *you* are.” His eyes went to the motionless bodies sprawling all around us. “And exactly what it is that’s happened here.” He glanced at Adrokann and Hanasha. “And could you suggest to your colleagues that they really don’t need to keep pointing those things at us? We’re perfectly peaceful, you know.”

I folded my arms and studied him silently. Despite my relative youth, Primary Investigator Vallan had always expressed a high regard for the reliability of my instincts. “*Always trust your instincts, Dayn,*” she’d repeatedly told me. “*A good investigator always does, even if the evidence sometimes seems to be pointing in a different direction. And you are a good investigator. And one day you’ll be a better one. Because your instincts are sound. Not something I can say about everyone who takes up this career...*”

I looked at the man called the Doctor and consulted my instincts. Did I, completely without any evidence for doing so, trust this complete stranger, or didn't I? It only took me a few seconds to arrive at my decision.

"Very well." I looked at Adrokann and Hanasha. "I agree with the Doctor. I don't think weapons are going to be needed here, and even if they are, Velsix has quite a few available to him that aren't visible to the rest of us."

They looked at each other, while I waited patiently. After a few seconds Adrokann gave a small shrug, and reluctantly holstered his stunner. Hanasha followed his example. But both of them remained on alert, ready to wield them again at a moment's notice. I gave them a nod of acknowledgement for their cooperation.

"As to who we are, I'm Investigator Dayn Chlorian of the Law and Detection Directorate of Callisanalor," I said, and continued, pointing to each in turn, "This is Chief Custodian of the Astrosanctum, Piero Adrokann – Deputy Custodian Yaniru Hanasha – and" – I gestured at the suspect – "Heldan Thane, Chief Historian of Callisanalor's largest university."

"And what are those things?" Tegan demanded brusquely, looking at Emmaten and Velsix with evident misgivings.

"Manners, Tegan," said the Doctor reprovingly. She sniffed, and ignored him.

"These," I said, suppressing a momentary irritation with her manner, "are my tecnoids, Infotec MA-Zero-One-Zero and Securitec VL-Zero-Zero-Six – Emmaten and Velsix for short."

"Artificial life forms, I take it?" the Doctor asked, studying the pair with interest.

"Yes. Emmaten's an infotec; as I said, she can access any database in this galaxy." I didn't enlarge on the fact that as a tecnoid she wasn't, technically, a 'she' at all, any more than Velsix was a 'he', but I've always anthropomorphized the tecnoids I work with, which was why I'd rendered their official designations into personal names. "She's also responsible for evidence recording. She's been making a full real-time audio-visual record ever since we got here. So has Velsix. He's a securitec. Locates, apprehends and, where necessary, restrains suspects."

"Just as well you dress them differently," said Tegan. "You'd never be able to tell them apart otherwise."

I wondered if she gave the time of day with the same acidity, but she did have a point; were it not for the differing colour caps and coveralls they wore – his maroon, hers mauve – there was little to distinguish between the two of them, with their smooth, androgynous, flesh-toned faces and calm, level voices.

At this point Adrokann could contain himself no longer.

"Chlorian! Have you gone mad?" he protested furiously. "You know nothing about this man! He might be involved in all this!"

"Chief Custodian, I'm the official representative of the Law and Detection Directorate here," I reminded him crisply, allowing just a hint of the frustration the man aroused in me into my voice. All right, I was young, and this was my first solo case, but my role gave me the authority to conduct the investigation in any way I saw fit, and it was time he remembered it. "If Madam Thane's account

is to be believed, yes, the Doctor may well be involved. If he is, nothing I'm about to tell him will be news to him. If he's not, then in the circumstances an explanation would be the least courtesy we could extend to a stranger who's stumbled into a situation about which he knows nothing."

"We aren't involved in *anything*," said Tegan with emphasis, directing her words at Adrokann. "I keep telling you, we've never been here before. Whatever's going on, it's nothing to do with us!" I saw the daggers-drawn looks they were exchanging. If they kept that up, they were likely to generate quite a few sparks between them. Which could be interesting, and possibly quite revealing, I decided.

"It's all right, Tegan," said the Doctor soothingly. "I'm sure everything will become clear before long." He turned back to me. "Please continue, Investigator Chlorian. What *is* this situation in which I 'may well be involved'? Though, could I put a question of my own first? Where *is* this, exactly?"

The look I gave him was of incredulity; that of Adrokann, an utter scepticism echoed in Hanasha's watchful eyes.

"Are you seriously claiming that you don't know where you are?" I asked, carefully.

"Not a clue," said the Doctor cheerfully.

"He's rubbish at steering, that's why," said Tegan sourly.

"Beside the point, Tegan," said the Doctor, slightly uncomfortably. He looked back at me. "But I'm telling you the truth. I really don't know where we are."

Adrokann snorted his disbelief, but to me – I couldn't have said why – the Doctor's tone carried conviction.

"This is the Astrosanctum," I said.

"And what's that, when it's at home?" Tegan demanded.

"It's a vast vehicle that orbits Callisanalor many thousands of kilometres out into space. It hosts hundreds of enviropods like the one we're in now. Every one of them houses luxury dwellings and exotic gardens, the private preserves of the mega-rich who require a degree of privacy and sanctuary that can't, according to them, be found on the surface of any mere planet."

For a brief moment I found myself envisioning the impressive spectacle offered by the Astrosanctum as the emergency speedshuttle in which I'd travelled had closed in on the enormous structure. The long, white, blunt-ended cylinder of the central stem, rotating slowly on its own axis, a stem that I now knew was honeycombed with storage and resource areas and hundreds of sterile white corridors such as the one we were now in. Extending from the cylinder, mounted on deceptively fragile-looking access tubes, hundreds of pods, each with a protective dome arching over the environments within. From a distance, the Astrosanctum looked like a huge, exotic flower stem covered with circular florets. Most of the domes had been in 'night' mode, their transparent plastiglass allowing the residents a magnificent view of the vast galactic sky; the rest had been in 'day' mode, their interiors obscured by the blue-tinged white panels onto which, I'd been told, internal projectors displayed images of whatever suns or skies pleased the individual tastes of the occupants.

With a little shake of my head, I dismissed the image from my brain and refocused on my explanation.

“The Chief Custodian declared a security incident. It had come to his attention that something was wrong in this enviropod, and he intended to enter it to investigate. Under the terms of the contract between Callisanalor and the Astrosanctum an LDD representative has to be present in such circumstances. Hence my presence.”

Another memory flashed through my mind. Primary Investigator Vallan, when awarding me the assignment, saying, *“The Astrosanctum’s already overloaded with security measures, and the occupants generally insisted on their right to privacy with a fervour that comes close to ferocity. It’s unusual – very unusual – for any of them to contact the LDD. So it may be something, it may be nothing. Nothing more than someone’s over-privileged sense of paranoia, that is.”* She’d shrugged. *“But whatever it turns out to be, there’s one thing you may find it useful to remember, Dayn”* – she’d suddenly descended into the informality she used when treating me as her protégé – *“possession of, and power over, a disproportionate amount of wealth tends to give its possessors an equally disproportionate sense of their own importance. You may have to deploy tact and diplomacy to match.”* She’d arched a meaningful eyebrow at me.

Of the two alternatives she’d offered, it had certainly turned out to be ‘something’, I reflected.

“So, what was the problem?” Turlough enquired.

“The occupant of this enviropod is Mahna Fehn Soorali, once the ruler of Korannon Nine. To give you a flavour of the popular view, one of the descriptions Emmaten unearthed for my briefing for this assignment was something along the lines of *‘the former dictator and oppressor of Korannon Nine, who fled with all the wealth he had milked from that unfortunate planet before the rebelling inhabitants could bring him to justice.’* Presumably it was with some of that wealth that he acquired himself a sanctuary here on the Astrosanctum, but inevitably his past made him a target. I believe Deputy Custodian Hanasha can tell you about that better than I can.” I arched my eyebrows in a silent invitation to her to take up the story. She nodded.

“There have been a number of attempts to” – she paused, selecting the euphemism carefully – “gain unauthorized access to Resident Soorali since he took refuge on the Astrosanctum.” Her voice was quiet but clear, hinting at the professionalism she brought to her role despite her slight build and aura of detached objectivity.

The Doctor studied her with interest. “Attempts by whom?”

“Various Korannonese with deadly intent.” The brevity of the phrase nevertheless eloquently summarized the situation. “I joined the Astrosanctum’s staff seven years ago, and I’ve been a Deputy Custodian for three. Prior to that time there were numerous attempts to either kidnap or assassinate Resident Soorali, and a further thirteen attempts since then. All of which have been foiled thanks to the high standard of security employed by the Astrosanctum.”

“What kind of attempts?” Turlough enquired.

Hanasha looked at him coolly. “Of the thirteen I mentioned, one to infiltrate his staff when a replacement was required. Three attempts to gain personal entrance, and a further one when a



repair to the equipment that operates the change from day to night mode was required. Another two to smuggle explosive devices into the pod when food and other supplies were being delivered. One to introduce poisoned food into the supply process. Plus five attempts by spacecraft to destroy the pod by missile attack.”

“None of which succeeded, of course,” said Adrokann proudly. “Our procedures foiled the internal attempts, and we’ve got armed craft permanently on patrol. If any vehicle attempts to enter the prohibited area around the Astrosanctum, they receive three warnings. After that, if they don’t withdraw, they don’t get a fourth. They’re destroyed.”

Turlough blinked a bit at the flatness of that statement.

“Despite the high standards of security we ensure,” Hanasha continued, “Resident Soorali became increasingly paranoid about his safety. Two years ago he forbade everyone – absolutely *everyone* – other than his own staff admittance to this enviropod. So no-one else, including ourselves” – she indicated Adrokann and herself – “and the other Deputy Custodians, has entered this pod since that time.”

The Doctor frowned slightly. “Presumably not absolutely everyone,” he suggested, looking at Heldan Thane. “Or this lady couldn’t be here, could she? She must have been an exception to that rule.”

“Indeed,” I agreed, and turned to Heldan Thane. “Perhaps you’d care to tell the Doctor what you told us, Madam Thane?”

She looked uncertainly from me to the Doctor. A flicker of pity briefly stirred inside me. A clearer case of an academic floundering with the troubling realities of the outside world it would be hard to imagine. But something in the Doctor’s frank, open countenance must have reassured her, because she nodded and, after clearing her throat, began to recount her story.

“My university made an approach to Soorali requesting permission for me to interview him in person and obtain his account of his actions on Korannon Nine. There had been previous similar requests, of course, but he was always extremely wary of what he viewed as potential misrepresentation.”

“Which begs the question,” said Turlough, “what made him change his mind this time.”

Thane hesitated. I guessed why, and said smoothly, “I suspect it was Chief Historian Heldan Thane’s unimpeachable reputation for complete impartiality which influenced him into agreeing to put his side of things on record.”

“He was extremely guarded about it, of course, but I do enjoy a certain standing in that regard,” she admitted, reluctant – as I had suspected – to express self-acclamation. “So, eventually, he agreed.”

The Doctor nodded, unsurprised. “The urge for self-justification often prevails over other factors in the mindset of a despot.”

“Met a lot of despots, have you?” Adrokann enquired snidely.

“Sadly, yes. More than I care to count,” said the Doctor levelly. Despite my brief acquaintance with him, I suspected it was fairly uncharacteristic that the blue of his eyes should become so ice-

like, no matter how briefly, as he directed them at Adrokann. “And a distressing number of people with closed minds, who make them up before they know all the facts. They’re even more common – I come across them everywhere.” Having delivered what one only realized was a put-down because of the slight but meaningful emphasis on the final word, he returned his attention to Thane.

I had to work very hard not to allow my enjoyment of Adrokann’s discomfiture to show on my face.

“Do go on, Madam Thane,” I said.

“I visited Mahna Fehn Soorali here for the first time the day before yesterday.” Helda Thane’s eyes, now directed at the Doctor, were still anxious, but she was keeping her voice carefully level and her account concise. “I was contracted to come for four hours every day. I was taken through the outer security door by both the Chief Custodian and Deputy Custodian Hanasha. From there Deputy Custodian Hanasha alone escorted me along the tube and through the inner security door.”

“Having not long been through it myself, I can assure you that’s quite a process, Doctor,” I interposed. “Each enviropod is accessed via an access tube with an airlock at each end. At the outer end – the one that opens to and from the main shaft – it involves pressing the correct sequence of keys on each of three different keypads, each with a different character set, and palm print scans of the both the Custodian’s and Deputy’s right hands. Same at the inner end – the one into the pod itself – with different sets of characters again, and another palm print. The character sets are changed regularly, and the palm scans will only admit the Chief Custodian and his three deputies.”

“Because of the privacy requirements of our clientele, we have the most stringent security measures possible,” Adrokann declared, with some pride. “Without either myself or one of my deputies, no-one could have passed through either of the security doors. It would be impossible.”

“‘Impossible’?” the Doctor repeated, raising his eyebrows. “You know, it’s been my experience that absolutes like ‘impossible’ really do need to be used very carefully. They so often turn out to have been misapplied.”

“What are you implying – ?” Adrokann began, instantly firing up, but with a sharp gesture of my hand, I cut him off.

“Let’s concentrate on letting Madam Thane finish her story, shall we?” I said with a slight edge to my voice, and returned my attention to her. “Please continue, Madam Thane,” I said politely.

“Once I was inside and had been handed over to Soorali’s chatelaine, he left, and she conducted me into Soorali’s presence. That is she...” Thane pointed to the body of the woman Emmaten had identified as Fullana Sook Heljara nearby, the folds of her dark grey robe sprawling untidily around her, those disturbing black orbs staring blindly at nothing. “I saw some of the others of his household on my way to and from the room in which the interview was conducted, but I didn’t speak, and I wasn’t introduced, to any of them. When the allotted time was concluded, it was Chatelaine Heljara who returned me to the inner doorway. Deputy Custodian Hanasha met me there, and escorted me back to the outer doorway and then to the temporary accommodation I’ve been assigned here.”

She paused, searching the Doctor's face. He smiled at her encouragingly. Reassured, she continued.

"Yesterday was my second visit, and it began as it had the day before, except that when Deputy Custodian Hanasha took me as far as the inner door she then left me there, because we'd agreed the previous day that as long as she let me through the outer door, Chatelaine Heljara would admit me through the inner door at the other end, at the appointed time. Which she did, a few minutes after Deputy Custodian Hanasha had left. But I could see straight away that something was wrong. Her manner was very disturbed. She said she didn't know if Soorali would meet with me or not, because something strange had happened. When I asked her what it was, she said something had appeared in the house that hadn't been there the previous day, and no-one knew how it had got there. What she described was *that*."

I could tell that Tegan and Turlough, at least, had expected her to say it was the blue box – the TARDIS, had they called it? – but what Thane was pointing was the black pillar.

I'd already heard all this, so I was concentrating on the Doctor's reactions to Thane's account. He was studying her with the same intensity with which I was studying him.

"As we approached the door," Thane continued, "I could hear a babble of voices inside the house. They sounded alarmed – terrified, even. When we got inside, all the staff were clustered here, in the hall, looking at the pillar. That was the point at which Soorali himself came to find out what was going on. At first he was just angry, but when he realized this thing had appeared inside his house without anyone being able to explain its presence, I could see he wasn't just furious. He was afraid, too. He demanded to know if the Chief Custodian had been notified."

"And had he been?" I asked.

"Of course I hadn't!" Adrokann snapped, with some irritation. "Do you think I'd have ignored it if I had?"

"Of course not," I agreed calmly. "I was merely trying to ascertain whether anyone in the pod *claimed* to have notified you."

Heldan Thane shook her head. "No-one had. Soorali was absolutely incensed about that. But I think..." She hesitated.

"What do you think, Madam Thane?" I prompted.

"It's not my role to judge," she said carefully. "But I would describe his general attitude in the interactions with his staff that I was personally witness to as authoritarian and autocratic. It was evident to me that he ruled his household by instilling fear of consequences rather than eliciting respect. Even in the circumstances, I think they were afraid of what he would say or do if they took such an action without gaining his approval first. The discovery of the pillar had been so recent that they hadn't had time to approach him for instructions."

"I see," I nodded. "And then...?"

"And then the second thing happened. The thing that elevated the crisis to another level."

She paused, and after a glance at me turned to hold the Doctor's eye before she spoke again. "What I need to make very clear is that the day before yesterday, that blue box *wasn't there*. Even

when Heljara brought me into the entrance hall that second time, it wasn't there. But suddenly there was a strange noise, getting louder and louder, and that box started to appear out of nowhere, as it did just now. If there'd been panic before, there was pandemonium now. But then..." She broke off.

"Then?" the Doctor prompted.

"A beam of light came from that" – Thane pointed at the pillar – "and hit Soorali in the eyes. He collapsed instantly."

She pointed at Soorali's body, and the Doctor bent down to take a closer look. Turlough stayed where he was, but Tegan copied the Doctor's example. The former despot of Korannon Nine lay sprawled with contorted limbs and blank black eyes just like the others, the thickening body indicating a life of extensive self-gratification and the frozen countenance, even in death, still displaying the hardness and cruelty of the tyrant he had been for so long.

"Well, there's a face that tells a story," she said with distaste.

"I'll thank you not to criticize your betters, young woman," Adrokann growled instantly.

Somehow I didn't see Tegan as someone who'd concede that she *had* any betters. And I was right.

"Oh, are you the kind of person who thinks other people are *your* betters? I thought only people with low self-esteem would think that," she retorted. "Not a problem I expected *you* to have, from what I've seen of you so far."

I'd been right about those sparks...

The Doctor straightened up and frowned at Tegan reprovingly before pointedly bringing the conversation back to the matter in hand by turning back to Thane.

"Was it the beams that turned their eyes black?" he enquired.

"It must have been," she said. "Their eyes were perfectly normal before."

"Interesting," said the Doctor thoughtfully. "And what happened next?"

"More beams," said Thane tightly. "One after another, so quickly there was no time for any of us to even move, let alone escape. Everyone else went down. All of them. Then there was a terrible pain in my head, and I lost consciousness; I don't know for how long. When I woke up, the box was gone, but the pillar was still there. And everyone else" – she looked at the scattered bodies all around us with anguished eyes – "everyone else was dead. I didn't know what to do."

"Well, the obvious thing was to call and let someone know what had happened," said Tegan.

Thane shook her head. "I couldn't."

"Why not?" Tegan's incredulity was clear.

"I had no means of communication," Thane said simply. "I wasn't allowed to bring any with me, because that's one of the security measures Soorali insisted on. Even the recorder I was using had to undergo the most rigorous checks before I was allowed to bring it into the pod."

"Couldn't you operate the internal communication system?" Turlough asked, with a touch of surprise. "There must be one."

“She wouldn’t have the clearance,” said Adrokann matter-of-factly. “An authorised retinal scan would have been required. Only Resident Soorali and his staff would have been able to provide that.”

“A system that wouldn’t have worked once their eyes had been blanked out,” the Doctor mused.

“In any case, they were all dead,” I observed succinctly. “So what did you do, Madam Thane?”

“Nothing,” she said simply. “All I could do was wait until someone came to find me.”

“But you weren’t just waiting, were you?” Adrokann said accusingly. “You were *hiding*. If you’re such an innocent in all this, why were you *hiding*?”

For the first time Thane looked at him with something more than the nervousness and anxiety that had characterized her reactions throughout this whole encounter, and I was pleased to see it, because it looked to me like contempt for his obtuseness.

“I was *hiding*,” she said with emphasis, “because I didn’t know if the person who was responsible for killing everyone else was somewhere here in the enviropod, and if they realized I was still alive, whether they might decide to remedy the situation.”

“An entirely understandable reaction,” I said smoothly, before Adrokann could resume his attack. I turned to him. “Chief Custodian, I see the light levels outside are beginning to fall. I take it this pod’s about to enter night mode?”

He frowned. “What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Just that Madam Thane has a valid point. Given that the security of this pod has indeed been breached in some way we don’t yet understand, we have to allow for the possibility that the person or persons responsible for that breach are still inside it, but somewhere outside this building. We’ll need to conduct a thorough search of the entire pod. It’d be helpful if day mode could be extended until that exercise has been completed. Could you issue the necessary instructions, please?” I sounded a little pompous, even to myself, but I hoped the ‘young-man-being-suitably-deferential-to-a-more-experienced-colleague’ strategy would be successful. It was.

“Very well,” Adrokann acquiesced, conceding the logic of my suggestion. “Hanasha, see to it, will you? Get Harron to extend day mode in this pod until further notice.”

“At once, sir. I’ll use the in-house communicator in the staff area.”

“Who’s Harron?” I enquired, as Hanasha left the hallway to turn into the other corridor.

“Another of my deputies,” said Adrokann. “Davidian Harron.”

“Ah, yes. And there’s a third, isn’t there?”

“Pellarol ista Pellarol. She’s on leave at the moment.”

“So she’s not here on the Astrosanctum?”

“And hasn’t been since she left for Callisanalor on the supply shuttle five days ago,” he said with a hint of triumph, as if drawing a perverse satisfaction from the fact that I couldn’t hope for any enlightenment on yesterday’s events from that quarter.

I merely nodded politely. “You know, I think things have got to the stage where I need additional resources for this investigation. I’d like to borrow your communicator to get in touch with

the LDD, please, Chief Custodian. We need enough operatives to be able to make that search of the pod, if nothing else.”

“Of course, Investigator. Along that hallway” – he gestured at the other corridor, the one Hanasha had taken – “and third room on the right.”

“Thank you.” I looked round at everyone else. “I’m sure I don’t need to ask you not to leave this area in my absence.”

“Like we *would*,” said Tegan sarcastically. “Pretty sure your *colleagues*” – she looked at Emmaten and Velsix as she emphasized the word – “would have something to say about it if we tried to, anyway.”

“Indeed they would,” I agreed. “Please excuse me, everyone. I won’t be long.”

I left them there and followed the directions Adrokann had given me. Hanasha was just concluding her conversation with her fellow deputy, but when she learned of my intention, handed the communicator over to me, and left, murmuring that she would return to the hall with the others.

I gave her my thanks, then had two conversations. The second was with Primary Investigator Vallan, updating her and requesting the necessary additional support.

The first was with Deputy Custodian Davidian Harron.

When I returned to the hallway, I found Tegan and Adrokann glaring at each other, and the Doctor with a soothing hand on Tegan’s shoulder. Clearly some more of those sparks I’d predicted had been flying between them.

“Is anything wrong?” I enquired peaceably.

“No, it’s all fine, Investigator,” said the Doctor quickly. “Tegan and the Chief Custodian have been having a rather... robust discussion on the implications of drawing incorrect conclusions, that’s all. Nothing to worry about.”

Judging from the way Turlough rolled his eyes it was clear this was a very euphemistic description of the exchange, but I merely said, “I’m glad to hear it. Now, where were we? Oh, yes. Madam Thane the only survivor, and hiding in case the perpetrator was still in the area. So, Doctor,” I resumed, “when it became clear something was wrong – Madam Thane had overstayed her allotted time, and no communication could be established with any of the residents of the enviropod – the Chief Custodian declared a security incident. As I’ve already explained, that required the presence of an authorized representative of the Law and Detection Directorate. When we got in, you can see what we found. Eleven dead, and Madam Thane the sole survivor. Which forces her into the position of main suspect, since no-one else could – supposedly – enter or leave the enviropod.”

“Ah, yes,” said the Doctor, almost cheerfully. “What Agatha Christie would have called a closed circle. One of her favourite plot devices.”

“Who’s Agatha Christie?” Adrokann enquired blankly.

“Oh, haven’t you heard of her? Really?” the Doctor said, his eyebrows lifting in surprise. “She’s one of the most successful authors of crime fiction in history. From twentieth century Earth. Like you, Tegan,” he added brightly.

“Before my time, thank you, Doctor,” said Tegan acidly.

I gave him a puzzled frown. “Twentieth century?”

“Er – yes... Her crime novels are still read right across the universe, hundreds – even thousands – of years after her death,” said the Doctor hurriedly, as if he wanted to avoid further questions on that very strange remark. “Wherever the human race has spread, they’ve taken Agatha with them. I have, myself. I’ve got one of her paperbacks in the TARDIS, somewhere...” He glanced round at the blue box, as if contemplating going to look for it.

“Which one, Doctor?” Turlough asked, interested in spite of himself.

“*Death In The Clouds*,” said the Doctor. “Did you ever see a copy while you were on Earth? The one with the huge wasp on the front cover, attacking a plane.”

He was losing me. I shook my head, as if that was going to help clear it, and decided to focus on something else he’d said. “What did you mean by that phrase – ‘a closed circle’?” I pressed.

“In this context, a setting in which a group of people are isolated in a location from which no-one can get in or out, so the murderer can only be one of the group themselves,” the Doctor explained. “Except,” he added thoughtfully, “that, if this was one of Agatha’s stories, it would have been one victim and eleven suspects. Instead, you’ve got eleven victims and one suspect...”

“More than one, now,” Adrokann growled. “Because you’ve turned up, in your mysterious blue box. Which to my way of thinking makes you just as much of a suspect as she is!”

“Oh, why am I not surprised?” Tegan said with heavy sarcasm, rolling her eyes. “Just out of interest, what’s his motive supposed to be?”

“He could be an assassin,” Hanasha said coolly. “With you as his accomplices. Hired by some victim of Soorali on Korannon for revenge, because official procedures have failed to bring him to justice.”

Turlough immediately looked alarmed at the suggestion, but Tegan’s reaction was more forthright.

“Oh, come on!” she exploded, with utter disgust. “Does the Doctor *look* like a cold-blooded assassin? If that’s what you think, you’re in the wrong job, because you’ve clearly got no judgement when it comes to character!”

I confined my reaction to looking at her thoughtfully. She was wrong, as it happened. My mother was a brilliant and renowned psychologist, and living with her had given me an insight into people’s personalities beyond my years, which had eventually resulted in my obtaining the highest score in psychological assessment of anyone in my year at the LDD training college, along with the commendation of my superiors. Obviously I knew that looks could be deceiving, and despite the Doctor’s fresh-faced appearance, such an apparently open countenance could indeed mask the personality of a ruthless killer; it wouldn’t be the first time, and it wouldn’t be the last. But my

tutor for that course had shared Vallan's opinion of me – he, too, had told me my instincts were incredibly well developed for someone so young.

So, right now, what were my instincts telling me about Tegan?

That this woman was not a dissembler. Whatever she felt, it was right out there on the end of her skin. She might be abrasive and tactless, but she wasn't a liar. What she was telling me was the truth, plain and simple.

Not, I suspected, a conclusion with which either Adrokann or Hanasha seemed likely to agree.

The Doctor had been watching me, and after turning a thoughtful look on Hanasha, unexpectedly nodded briskly. "No, no, Tegan, she's quite right. From where she's standing, I *could* be an assassin. In disguise, of course!" He added that last with a brief touch of mischief. "And since Emmaten can't vouch for my identity, I've doubtless replaced Madam Thane as chief suspect. Therefore, I need to clear my name."

"And ours!" Turlough reminded him, with a sarcasm that was touched with unease. "I hope you haven't overlooked the fact that Tegan and I have just been accused of being your accomplices in a murder conspiracy."

"Oh, it's all just a load of rubbish!" Tegan exploded. "Complete fiction!"

"Like these crime novels of Agatha Christie that the Doctor was talking about, you mean?" I prodded gently, and smiled inwardly as she glowered at me. "Of course, a part of this story that you do need to resolve to my satisfaction, Doctor," I went on, returning my attention to him, "is the apparent paradox of maintaining that both you and Madam Thane are telling the truth about exactly when your – TARDIS, was it? – first arrived here. I'm looking forward to your explanation. After all, you can't both be right."

I was struck by the degree of amused mischief in the smile he gave me.

"Actually, we can," he said cheerfully, and was about to go on, but I held up my hand for silence just for a moment; Velsix was contacting me on the telepathic circuit of my transceiver.

*"Investigator Chlorian,"* he transmitted, *"if you are to follow normal procedure, both Chief Historian Thane and the Doctor should be arrested on suspicion of murder and conveyed to Callisanalor for interrogation."*

He was quite right, of course. Adrokann's suspicions and Hanasha's theory were both logically valid, and I couldn't offer any evidence otherwise. Yet I had a feeling that allowing this interchange to continue might reveal something – unexpected...

*"You're right, but hold that thought for now, Velsix,"* I responded. *"I think we may learn rather more if we hold back for now."* Then, aloud, I said, "Sorry – you were about to say, Doctor...?"

"Well, before we get to that – the paradox, I mean – I do have a theory about why Madam Thane was the only survivor of the attack," he said. "I'd like to ask Emmaten some questions. If that's all right with you, of course."

"Be my guest."

The Doctor whirled to face Emmaten, thrusting his hands into his trouser pockets. "That black pillar, Emmaten. Can you identify it?"



She scanned it. "Identified," she announced. "The object is a weapon called an Ocellus Disruptor, designed by the Falatrians, whose claim is to be the best weapons designers in the Thousand Galaxy Cluster. It is primarily intended to attack humans, though it is also effective on species with similarly constructed sight organs. It operates by locating the eyes of the target and releasing an energy beam which travels along the optic nerve and disrupts the cells of the brain."

Everyone blinked – and tensed – instinctively, but then she added, "The charge of this particular weapon has been expended. It is now harmless, and will remain so unless or until recharged."

We all relaxed again.

"And specifically how does an Ocellus Disruptor identify human eyes?" It was evident from his expression that the answer to this was integral to the Doctor's line of reasoning.

"By location, shape and iris colour," said Emmaten.

A broad smile spread across the Doctor's face. "I thought so!" he said triumphantly. "That's why Madam Thane survived when everyone else was killed."

"What was?" Turlough prompted.

"Heterochromia," said the Doctor, with the air of a man playing his trump card.

"Hetero-*what*?" Tegan demanded.

"She's heterochromatic. She has irises of different colours," the Doctor explained. "Unlike everyone else's here. One pale blue, one green. A very unusual condition in humans. The criteria the Disruptor's been programmed with evidently only includes matching irises. She failed to meet that particular criterion, so the intensity of the beam was diluted to non-lethal. If she'd had matching irises like the rest of us, she'd have been dead, too. Instead, she's the sole survivor." A thought seemed to strike him. "I wonder if that was intentional?"

"What do you mean?" Hanasha said quickly, her normally impassive face wearing a frown.

"He means," said Turlough dryly, "that whoever imported this weapon might have known that it wouldn't be fatal to her, therefore she'd be left as the sole suspect."

"So it might have been part of their plan?" I thought about it. "That seems plausible."

"Except that, if that *was* the plan, we've managed to upset it with our unexpected appearance," said the Doctor. "So the next logical move is for me to account for that paradox you mentioned. How I and Madam Thane can both be telling the truth."

"And exactly how are you going to do that?" Adrokann sneered.

"Oh, I think the best way is to show you exactly what *did* happen, don't you?" said the Doctor pleasantly. "Tegan, Turlough – back into the TARDIS, please. If you'd like to follow us, everyone...?"

Turlough, who was nearest to the door, pushed it open and disappeared inside. Tegan followed him, and then the Doctor, turning back in the doorway to smile at us in a way that she probably imagined to be invitingly, but actually smacked more of a challenge.

Although logic dictated that he couldn't vanish in a box that size – with two other people already in there with him, there'd hardly be room to move if the rest of us tried to get in – professional instinct overrode logic, and Adrokann and I almost blocked each other in our hurry to follow him in.

Moments later Hanasha and Thane had joined us, the latter still flanked by Velsix and Emmaten. The tecnoids were incapable of surprise, but the rest of us just stared.

We'd come through the door of a box that would apparently be pushed to contain any more than half a dozen people. Yet now we stood in a large, white-walled room inset with matching white roundels, and a hexagonal object in the middle which appeared to be some kind of control panel, a glass pillar positioned in its centre.

"Where – are we?" I managed.

"Inside the TARDIS," said Tegan, in a tone which implied she was enjoying our collective astonishment.

"Yes; you've doubtless noticed its exterior and interior exist in separate dimensions," said the Doctor briskly. "It's got quite a few interesting attributes, actually, but the ones we're most concerned with in this particular context are that it can travel not only in space but also in time."

"Travel – travel in – in *time*...?" Hanasha stammered. There was something about the quality of her consternation that made me look at her, though it was an entirely forgivable reaction in the circumstances, and I was far from immune myself. I hoped I didn't look as incredulous as Adrokann, or as dumbfounded as Thane.

"Oh, yes," the Doctor confirmed, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "That's what accounts for the paradox, and how I'll be able to prove it. As I said, I haven't been here before. Yet Madam Thane had already seen the TARDIS in this spot prior to my arrival. There's only one explanation that'll match both statements."

"And what's that?" Adrokann said, his belligerence noticeably abated.

"Well, clearly I did what I'm about to do now – maintain our position in space, but adjust it in time, and go back to when she entered this house yesterday."

"I just hope you can steer better than you usually do," Tegan muttered rather morosely.

"Oh, that won't be a problem," the Doctor assured her brightly. "Only time, not space, remember?"

Tegan didn't reply, but the scepticism in her expression remained in place. "Bet you overshoot," she muttered.

The Doctor pretended not to have heard her, and flicked us a quick, reassuring smile. "Now, let me see..." he said, and began to operate some of the controls on the central console. For a few seconds the glass column atop the console rose and fell, accompanied by the strange sound we'd heard when the TARDIS had first appeared. Then both movement and sound ceased.

"There we are!" said the Doctor with cheerful satisfaction. "Now, perhaps you'd like to see outside?"

He waved at a blank panel in one of the walls and touched another control. The panel slid upward, revealing a wide-angle view of the entrance hall of Soorali's residence. We were seeing, apparently from the TARDIS's roof, a live view of the hall just as Helda Thane had described it to us; the staff were gathered around, talking and gesticulating wildly, staring at the TARDIS. The top of the Ocellus Disruptor was just visible alongside it, on the left of the screen. Soorali was pushing past

his terrified minions, the admixture of fury and fear on his face emphasizing its hard, cruel lines as he demanded explanations that no-one could provide.

“And there you are, Madam Thane,” said the Doctor. “Right on time!” He shot a triumphant look at Tegan, who sniffed and said nothing.

Thane gazed, bewildered, at the image of herself and Chatelaine Heljara, now standing just inside the open door and staring in astonishment at the mêlée.

Then the Disruptor began emitting its deadly beams, just as Thane had described. Within moments, she was the only one still alive. Then she, too, collapsed.

After a few seconds, the Doctor broke the silence that followed.

“Proof, I think you’ll agree, that Madam Thane is not the killer,” he said, sadly – sad, I realized, not because of the statement itself, but for the loss of life we’d all just witnessed.

Adrokann looked stunned, but swiftly rallied. “How do we know what we’ve just seen is real? It could be a trick! Some sort of visual re-creation, played back on your screen.”

“Turlough, open the door for a moment, will you?” said the Doctor evenly. “I think the Chief Custodian needs to take a quick look outside. To establish the facts for himself.”

With a slight smile, as if he knew what was coming, Turlough leaned forward and operated one of the controls, and the double-leaved door behind us reopened. The Doctor gestured politely to Adrokann, inviting him to look outside. Adrokann hesitated, and gave him a hard stare, but then went to the doorway. I followed, and looked over his shoulder, vaguely aware that Hanasha was right behind me.

The Doctor had been telling us the truth. There, in front of us, were, not the eleven bodies that had been there when we entered the TARDIS, but also a twelfth. Helda Thane. Who was, I established with a swift glance over my shoulder, also there behind me in the TARDIS, still staring at the screen showing the scene we had just witnessed. The realization that she was in two places at once was disconcerting, to say the least.

The conclusion, however, was inescapable. Thane was *not* the assassin. And there was another conclusion that was inescapable, too, though I had to take a few seconds to try to encompass it.

We really had just travelled, not only in space, but in time.

Wow.

And as I was thinking about that, I realized there was a third conclusion that had been hovering in the back of my mind for some time and was now becoming equally inescapable...

I continued to stare at the scene outside the TARDIS door, but I wasn’t focusing on it. Instead, I was activating the telepathic circuit of my transceiver.

“*Emmaten.*”

“*Yes, Investigator?*”

“*Research, please. This is what I want you to find out...*” I gave her the list of information searches I needed, ending with “*...and report back on this circuit, not aloud. As soon as you can, please.*”

*"Of course, Investigator."* Her telepathic voice conveyed the same imperturbability as her spoken one, but I had the feeling that if the results of her research were what I suspect them to be, imperturbability was a quality that was going to be thin on the ground quite soon...

Meanwhile, Adrokann, too, had looked back to prove to himself that Thane was there, inside the TARDIS, as well as outside in the hallway. His shoulders drooped slightly, as he was forced to admit to himself that it was not a trick. But he still wouldn't abandon his theory. He drew himself upright again and turned back into the control room. Still thinking hard, I followed him. Turlough closed the doors behind us.

"All right," he rasped. "Not a hoax. But that doesn't alter the fact that even if it wasn't her, it could still be *you*. In fact, it *must* be you! You're the only other person it *could* be!"

"Oh? Why, exactly?" enquired the Doctor.

"Because of this – this *machine* of yours," said Adrokann. "Something that can take you anywhere. Easy enough to bypass security doors if you don't have to go through them, isn't it? Just pop up inside the enviropod, do your dirty work and then vanish again!"

"But I didn't," the Doctor pointed out. "If I had, we wouldn't be having this conversation, would we? Because you'd never have known I'd been here."

"And even if you're too thick to grasp the idea that we've moved *backward* in time to see this, the Doctor certainly wouldn't be stupid enough to pointlessly turn up again *after* the event, would he?" Tegan said robustly.

"Careful, Tegan," said Turlough, with a blandness that was obviously concealing the fact that his tongue was firmly in his cheek. "That comes close to paying the Doctor a compliment."

"No, it doesn't," Tegan promptly contradicted him. "Because there isn't *anyone* who'd be that stupid!"

"Criminals often return to the scene of the crime," Hanasha interjected. "For all sorts of reasons."

Adrokann seized on the observation triumphantly. "She's right. So, whatever the ins and outs of it, I still say you're the only one who could have done it."

"Am I?" said the Doctor calmly, raising his eyebrows as if Adrokann had just made some mildly interesting suggestion. He exchanged a look with me, and I knew he'd worked it out, just as I had. And he'd done it on far fewer facts than I had, because he didn't have Emmaten working for him. I, on the other hand, had just been listening to her reporting back on the information requests I'd made. Put together, the results confirmed my theory.

"I think you'll find it's not the Doctor, Chief Custodian," I said quietly.

Adrokann looked at me sharply, and with some astonishment. "What do you mean?" he demanded. "We've just seen for ourselves how he could do it! With this time travel machine, he's the only one who could possibly get into, or out of, this closed circle of his!"

"I'm afraid that's not quite true," I said, choosing my words carefully. "Is it, Doctor?"

"Well, no, actually, it isn't," he agreed.

"Would you be able to show us the proof?"

“Oh, I think so...” He started to reset the controls. Tegan frowned.

“Where are we going this time?”

“Patience is a virtue, Tegan,” said the Doctor lightly. Once more the central column rose and fell and the strange wheeze of the TARDIS engines briefly sounded in our ears. “Not something that comes readily to you, I know, but you won’t have to exercise it for long, this time.”

The TARDIS fell silent as the glass column ceased to move, and everyone looked at the screen again – everyone except me. I could see it in my peripheral vision all right, but I was concentrating somewhere else.

This time the entrance hall was shown at night, dim light and shadows confusing the scene. What was probably synthetic moonlight – part of the illusion offered by the night mode setting of the pod, no doubt – came through the exterior glass wall to illuminate half of the floor area, making the area that included the door across to the wall where the TARDIS stood darker by comparison. There was no movement. The hall was totally deserted. There were no bodies on the floor, and no black shape next to the TARDIS. All was quiet and still. The effect was somehow unsettlingly eerie.

“When is this?” Adrokann demanded.

“Last night,” said the Doctor. “The night between Madam Thane’s first and second visits.”

“Well, why are we here? There’s nothing and no-one there.”

“Exactly,” agreed the Doctor. “Nothing. And especially not the Ocellus Disruptor. Don’t you want to know how it gets here?”

Turlough looked at him narrowly. “You know what’s going on, don’t you?” he challenged. “You’ve worked it out somehow, haven’t you?”

“Oh, I think Investigator Chlorian beat me to it,” said the Doctor lightly. “Well, we’ll soon find out if I” – he corrected himself – “if *we’re* right.” He fixed his attention fixed on the screen. “If we just wait a bit...” Then he broke off, and pointed. “Ah, there we are.”

Now there was movement. The external door could be seen opening stealthily. After a pause, a shadowy figure entered the hall, carrying a black shape that could only be the Ocellus Disruptor. The figure paused again, then headed for the space beside the TARDIS and placed the Disruptor alongside it. They bent forward and opened a panel at the top of the pillar, and for a moment or two seemed to be making adjustments of some sort to whatever lay behind it. Then they closed the panel and stepped back to regard the Disruptor for a moment before returning to the doorway.

It was then that they turned back for one last look – and did it in the pool of moonlight coming through the glass. Still fairly dim, though not as dim as the shadows, but sufficient to show the face clearly. The face that I was already looking at, but not on the screen. The face of someone here, now, in the TARDIS.

Adrokann went pale. “No...” His protest emerged only as a whisper.

“I’m afraid so,” I said. “A circle that wasn’t quite closed, after all. You told us there were four people, other than the residents, who could enter this particular circle. Four people with security access to the enviropods. You told us that yourself. Hidden in plain sight. “You.” I paused, then added heavily, “And your three deputies. Including Yaniru Hanasha.”

Thane's eyes had widened, as had Turlough's. Tegan's mouth had fallen open. The Doctor's expression was simply very sad.

Hanasha had stiffened into rigidity as she looked at the screen and saw her own face clearly illuminated by the moonlight. For a moment her countenance seemed to melt under the intensity of all the eyes now turned on her. Then it hardened again. She stared into the mid-distance and deliberately blanked her eyes of all expression.

"Yaniru?" Adrokann whispered hoarsely, but she wouldn't look at him.

"Her?" Tegan sounded flabbergasted. She looked from me to the Doctor and back again. "How did you know?" The question was for both of us, but I spoke first.

"Once the Doctor helped me prove that Thane wasn't the perpetrator – and by doing so also proved it wasn't him, either – the question became, who else could have done it? Who, how, and why? With everyone inside dead, the 'who' had to be someone else, someone who had the ability to get into the enviropod. That couldn't be Madam Thane. By the Chief Custodian's own account, other than the residents of the pod there were only four other people who had access. Himself and his three deputies. So I asked Emmaten to do some checking. Pellarol ista Pellarol is, as we were told, on leave. She's confirmed, both by witnesses and public image recordings, to have been in her home town since arriving there five days ago. And Davidian Harron, at the time when the Ocellus Disruptor was introduced into this house, was dealing with a mediation between the residents of two neighbouring enviropods at the other end of the Astrosanctum. The parties concerned have a long-standing difference of opinion – yes, I can see you know who I mean, Chief Custodian! – so the likelihood that they're in collusion to provide an alibi for Deputy Custodian Harron is so small as to be beyond reasonable. That left only yourself, and Deputy Custodian Hanasha. The Doctor has just provided us with the evidence as to which one of you it was."

"But how?" Adrokann demanded. "How could she have done it? The security system requires both our palm prints simultaneously to allow access to the outer door!"

"Oh, I can't imagine it was too difficult to find some surface or other on which she'd seen you place your flattened hand at some point," said the Doctor. "All she'd have to do would be to put some transparent film on it and press it carefully to transfer the print of your whole hand onto its surface, then adhere that over one of the palm scanners in question, while she put her own hand on the other one."

Adrokann began to bluster, but his eyes were stricken. "But... our security system is the finest – the most..."

"Oh, I expect it is – for everyone else," Turlough interrupted him airily. "But I don't suppose the people who designed it expected to have to provide security against the security staff themselves, did they?"

"*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*" murmured the Doctor, as if to himself.

"What's that mean?" Tegan asked blankly.

"'Who shall guard the guards themselves?'" Turlough translated. "Or, more colloquially, perhaps, 'Who watches the watchmen?'"

“And how would *you* know that?”

“It’s Latin. I did go to a private school for boys, you know,” Turlough told her loftily.

Tegan was about to utter some withering retort or other, but caught the Doctor’s eye and subsided – for the time being, at least, though I judged from her expression that she’d merely tabled that particular exchange for a later time. The Doctor turned back to me and smiled that rather charming smile of his. “So sorry for the diversion, Investigator Chlorian. Do go on with your explanation. I’m sure we’re all finding it fascinating.” He shot another look at both Tegan and Turlough to reinforce the point.

“So,” I resumed, successfully masking my amusement and managing to sound appropriately businesslike, “we know the ‘who’, and we’ve explained the ‘how’, so we’re left with the ‘why’.”

“Yaniru?” Adrokann’s tone was almost one of pleading. He’d totally lost the self-satisfied, arrogant manner he’d displayed when dealing with me; his professional – and, I thought, to some degree his personal – world had been shattered by the revelations about his colleague. He’d pick up the pieces eventually, given time, but for now he was still completely out of his reckoning.

Hanasha’s lips tightened, but that was her only reaction.

I took up the narrative once more. “What got me thinking,” I said conversationally, “was something I happened to think to ask Deputy Custodian Harron when I was asking him to provide his alibi. It was how long Mahna Fehn Soorali had been resident on the Astrosanctum. The answer was fifteen years. Then I thought about what Hanasha had said about the number of attempts on Soorali’s life. Numerous, she said, prior to her becoming Deputy Custodian. But then another thirteen in the three years since that time. Which begged the question: why such a sharp rise in the number over that particular period?”

“Yes,” said the Doctor thoughtfully, exchanging a look with me. “It’s almost as if the assassins thought there was some reason why they’d have a better chance at succeeding from then on, isn’t it?”

“My very thought,” I agreed.

“What are you talking about?” Adrokann said stiffly, still desperate to deny the undeniable.

“As I say, it got me thinking,” I repeated. “So I asked Emmaten to do a bit of delving into the Astrosanctum personnel records, and particularly the planets of origin of yourself and your Deputy Custodians. All of which stood up to inspection. You and Harron both from Callisanalor, ista Pellarol from Hancol, Hanasha from Irrasarro. Except that when she compared that to the database from which that information was transferred to the Astrosanctum, she found discrepancies in the data from that original database. Discrepancies that indicated that one of those records had been amended. The surface data was fine, but buried deep in the backups was an interesting fact. Which is that just over seven years ago, the personnel record for Yaniru Hanasha was edited. Amended. Recovering the original data reveals that the person you thought was Yaniru Hanasha from Irrasarro is in fact Yaniru Hahn Imbara – from Korannon. Which is, for those of you who don’t know, in the same solar system as Irrasarro.”

Adrokann's jaw dropped. The corners of Hanasha's eyes tightened for a moment before her face resumed total impassivity.

"Korannon was colonized by Irrasarro approximately one thousand years ago," Thane said, her status as an historian enabling her to contribute this fact to the conversation. "There've been some slight divergences because of the division into two separate gene pools, but overall the physical characteristics of the two populations are of course quite similar. An inhabitant of Korannon could perfectly plausibly claim to be from Irrasarro, and vice versa."

"So she was planning ahead before she got the job here," said Tegan. "Planning to be a Trojan horse."

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand the reference," I said, "but if you mean she became a clandestine operative for the Korannonese, then yes. Working her way up in seniority through the Astrosanctum security team, she'd have been able, with her knowledge of the security systems, to advise on what means might prove the most successful. Which, no doubt thanks to her chief and her colleagues, all failed, one way or another. But she stayed patient, even after Soorali forbade entrance to everyone other than his own staff. And finally her chance came."

"Because I was going to be admitted to Soorali's pod," said Thane, nodding in understanding.

"But if she'd got hold of that Disruptor thing, and she could duplicate his palm print" – this with a nod at Adrokann – "she could have done what she did any time," Tegan protested. "Why wait so long?"

"Because she needed the right opportunity. One which involved someone from outside the Astrosanctum. That way she'd have a ready-made scapegoat," I shrugged. "Who chance decreed would turn out to be Madam Thane. Someone who'd automatically be seen as the only possible suspect. Otherwise awkward questions might be asked, and a much closer look taken at the security staff as the only ones with the ability to access the pod. That was an outcome Hanasha couldn't risk. Not until one of the attempts on Soorali's life had actually succeeded. As it was, she had an outsider ready to hand, who'd have all the focus on her, distracting the investigation from any other possibilities. Including the one that it was, in fact, she who assassinated Soorali."

"And it would have worked," Turlough nodded. "Except that we turned up."

"Yes," agreed the Doctor. "When Hanasha brought the Ocellus Disruptor into the house, the first step in this sequence, she had no way of knowing that the blue box in the hallway was something that wasn't normally there. So she put the Disruptor right next to it. With no idea that some time later the TARDIS would leave again, only to be present next morning in time to witness the second step in the sequence – the Disruptor doing its job, with Madam Thane alone left alive, and the only possible suspect as far as everyone else was concerned. It was all going rather well up until then, wasn't it?" He looked at Hanasha with something close to sympathy. "Until you returned to the scene of the crime with the Chief Custodian and the Investigator, to find the TARDIS had inexplicably vanished, but then see it materialize again before your very eyes. The third step, but the one that derailed your plan. The one factor you couldn't have anticipated. A third party turning up inside the closed circle you thought you'd created."



“And then there was the look on your face when you realized that the mysterious blue box could travel in time,” I supplemented. “We were all shocked at that, but you seemed more shocked than the rest of us. Because of course you knew that if it was true, everything you’d done could be discovered. As it was, thanks to the Doctor. Especially when I remembered that little speech you made when you accused Tegan and Turlough. The one about official procedures failing to bring Soorali to justice. Up until then you’d come across as a detached, objective professional – and you almost managed to keep it up – but there was something about the way you said that particular sentence that suggested you had personal feelings on the subject. If things hadn’t worked out as they have, I’d probably have forgotten about it. But, as it is...” I shrugged, and looked at Hanasha, still rigid and motionless. “So why not tell us about the ‘why’, Hanasha? Why you, in particular? What was your personal motive for being involved in all this?”

Adrokann was still staring at his colleague, appalled. “Yaniru...?” he prompted, yet again.

There was a long silence. Then, at last, she moved. Well, not moved, exactly, but the stiff rigidity with which she’d been holding herself visibly relaxed, the muscles of her face and body softening back to normal use. It was to Adrokann that she turned, and there was regret in her eyes for his distress.

“It’s true, Piero,” she said quietly. “It’s all true. The Investigator and the Doctor are right. They’ve described everything perfectly. I’m sorry. My only regret is that I’ve had to deceive you for so long.”

“But – ”

She turned from him to me. “You want to know my motive, Investigator. I have two. I’m a citizen of Korannon. I grew up seeing the consequences of Soorali’s tyranny around me everywhere. The oppression, the exploitation, the violence. The inequality between the one who had everything – because he’d taken it all – and the ones who had nothing, because it was from them he’d taken it. All my life I’d witnessed nothing but injustice. And it made me *burn*.” Just for a moment, pure anger was clear in her voice, before she schooled it back to calmness again. “Not only for Korannon as a whole, but for myself, too. Because that was my second motive. Revenge. Not a very creditable one, perhaps, but one I couldn’t deny. Because not only had Soorali oppressed my entire people, my whole world, but he killed my family. All of them.” One single tear welled up in the corner of her eye and trickled down her cheek. “Wave after wave of killings of not only those who were brave enough to resist him, but of the innocent, too, whose only crime, often, was to be their relatives.”

“The Sooralian Purges,” Thane said, nodding sadly. “I don’t think anyone’s ever compiled a truly accurate total of the millions who died over the years in the Purges.”

“You mean your family were killed because of *you*?” Tegan asked, aghast.

“Ironically, no,” said the woman I still continued to think of as Yaniru Hanasha. “I wasn’t active in the resistance at that time. It was a cousin of mine. He was visiting my father, and the Sooralian Guard found him there. My father, my mother, my sister, my little brother – all automatically guilty by association, even though they were no part of the resistance and never had been. I only survived because I wasn’t there. If I had been...” She shrugged expressively. “That was the tipping point.

That was when I knew I had to see Soorali brought to justice. After he'd finally overreached himself and had fled Korannon, I was able to help track him down so that justice could finally be done." She looked at me, and her eyes hardened again. "Not law, Investigator, but justice. Law failed to administer retribution for Soorali's crimes. But justice was always going to be done eventually. However long it took. Out of all the people working toward that end, fate enabled me to be the one to do it. For everyone who'd suffered at his hands. I have no regrets. None. I was the one who was able to make it happen." She pulled herself triumphantly erect. "Justice for Soorali, and justice for the people of Korannon."

Some time later, I joined the Doctor at the window of the huge lounge, from where he was observing Tegan and Turlough as they explored the garden below it. I'd readily granted permission, because I wanted a private word with the Doctor.

He had his hands in his pockets – a stance he adopted quite often, I'd observed – and smiled a welcome. "Everything sorted?"

"As far as it can be at this stage. The operatives I asked for'll be here shortly for the clear-up. They won't have to do a full-scale search of the pod after all, but I'm sure the forensic team'll be able to put them to good use." I smiled. "If not, I can always tell them to enjoy the gardens for a bit. As your friends are doing now."

"What about Hanasha?"

"Velsix and Emmaten have put her into confinement for transport to Callisanalor."

"Ah, yes," said the Doctor. "Velsix and Emmaten. Valuable colleagues, both of them."

"Yes. You know," I went on, "sometimes I wonder if there's any truth in the theory that some of my LDD colleagues debate at times. That the abbreviation 'tec' was originally lifted from the historical term 'de-tec-tive', rather than just a contraction of 'techno-humanoid'. Still, there's no way for anyone to prove it conclusively after so many centuries." I sighed. "Do you know, out of everything that's happened, it's Adrokann I feel most sorry for."

"Really?" The Doctor looked at me with a touch of surprise. "I had the idea he didn't have a terribly good opinion of you."

"He didn't," I said frankly. "I'll be honest with you, Doctor. This was my first senior case. He thought somebody more experienced – more *important* – should have been assigned to it. He made that very clear, right from the outset. He was waiting to pounce on any mistake I might make the whole time."

"I know *exactly* what you mean," said the Doctor with feeling, his eyes on Tegan.

I smiled. "I rather thought you did."

"Then why are you feeling sorry for him?"

"Oh, because his world got rather blown apart, didn't it? His perception of what was important, and what was true. Hanasha had to deceive him, in order to do what she needed to do, but it'll take him quite a while to get over it, I think. Still, he'll do it eventually, I expect." I smiled again. "I'm sure normal service'll be resumed before too long."

“Perhaps one side benefit of all this will be if he learns not to underestimate people in future,” the Doctor suggested.

“Like callow young Investigators working their first case? One can hope... Doctor,” I said, with a sudden change of tone, watching Tegan bend down to inhale the scent of a huge multicoloured bloom, “can I ask you something?”

“About the celery, I suppose?” he suggested, with an air of resignation.

“No – although obviously I did wonder... No, about the TARDIS. You said – you proved! – that it travels in both space and time. Where did you get it? Where do you come from?”

“Oh, a planet called Gallifrey. A very long way from here,” he said. “I’m just a traveller, really. Always wondering what’s over the next hill, so to speak.”

“But you didn’t plan to come here? It just – happened?”

He looked slightly uncomfortable. “Well, yes, I suppose it did, rather. As you might have gathered, Tegan’s always criticizing my navigation skills, but what she overlooks is that I don’t usually have a particular destination in mind. I just set the controls and wait to see where we end up.”

“That must be such a strange kind of life,” I observed. “Never knowing where you’re going to arrive.”

“Well, this time, it was here.” He grinned at me. “Just in time to see you completely clear Helden Thane’s name and successfully conclude your first investigation. Well done!”

I gave him a look. “You know perfectly well I wouldn’t have had a chance of solving this if it hadn’t been for you, Doctor.”

“Oh, well, you know... Happy to help,” he said, self-deprecatingly. “But even without me, I’ve got the feeling you’re going to go on to have a very successful career. You’ve got good instincts.”

Vallan, my LDD tutor, and now the Doctor. I felt unreasonably pleased at hearing the same accolade come from him. “Right from the start, you instinctively knew I wasn’t here to assassinate Soorali, didn’t you?” he was saying.

“I suppose I did,” I conceded. “I also instinctively know I’ll never have to file a stranger case report than I will on this one. Travelling back in time to identify a murderer? There’re a lot of people who’re going to have trouble believing that! Some of them my superiors.”

“Well, Emmaten’s record of everything that happened should help,” said the Doctor comfortingly. “Plus Velsix’s to back it up. I think you’ll be all right on that front. Especially with Adrokann and Madam Thane being such manifestly reliable witnesses.”

The implication was clear, and I got it immediately. “But not you. You’re leaving, aren’t you? You won’t be here to give evidence. You and Tegan and Turlough.”

“Oh, you’ve got a convincing enough case without us,” he said cheerfully, waving to catch the attention of the two in the garden; when they looked up, he crooked his finger to summon them back. Tegan screwed up her face in protest, but Turlough said something to her, and they began heading back for the house. “Besides, if there’s one thing I hate,” the Doctor added confidentially, “it’s getting tangled up in someone else’s bureaucracy!”

"I suppose there is that," I sighed, reluctantly conceding the point as he led the way back into the hall.

"...Well, that was a lot better than those understudies for The Little Shop of Horrors we met on Stridulon Nine," Tegan was saying to Turlough, as they came back in through the door.

The Doctor saw my raised eyebrows. "The last planet we visited was populated by an intelligent species of plant life," he explained. "Unfortunately they turned out to be carnivorous, and highly aggressive, too. Things got a bit – well, exciting... for a while."

"Exciting?" Tegan expostulated. "We nearly got eaten alive!"

"Literally," Turlough agreed.

"Well, I got us out of it in the end, didn't I?" said the Doctor, slightly plaintively. "They do say it's a good thing to talk to your plants, don't they?"

"Especially if it involves negotiating for your life," Turlough muttered.

"Well, it nearly didn't work! And if you've had to run for your life from a homicidal wannabe triffid, you'll never look at runner beans the same way again, trust me," said Tegan emphatically.

"Anyway," said the Doctor with heavy emphasis on the first syllable, with the clear intention of changing the subject, "fascinating though all this is, I think it's high time we left Investigator Chlorian to complete his case in peace. Time to go, I'd say." He opened the TARDIS door and raised his eyebrows at Tegan and Turlough, clearly inviting them to say their goodbyes and go inside.

"Short of arresting you, I suppose I can't stop you," I said with a wry smile. "Goodbye, Tegan. Goodbye, Turlough. It's been – interesting..."

"You can say that again," said Tegan, very definitely, but awarding me a rather rueful smile as she went through the door. Turlough gave me an amiable nod, and followed her, leaving me and the Doctor facing each other.

"I wish I could have known you for longer, Doctor," I sighed regretfully, as we shook hands. "Still, you'll always have my thanks. And so will Agatha Christie," I added lightly.

The Doctor smiled that warm, charming smile of his one last time, as he vanished into the TARDIS. Moments later, it faded from sight.

Leaving me to reflect on the fact that the strangest man I would ever meet was indeed gone, and that while the strangest case I would ever handle was finally closed, the circle no longer was.



August 2023