



SERENDIPITY
by Deborah Latham

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Chapter 1

"They don't remember..."

Peter Addison was running. Running for his life.

He had no hope that he was going to make it, but the will to live is very strong, and the instinct for self-preservation isn't easily overridden, even when you already know beyond any doubt what the outcome is going to be.

So he went on running, with his fair hair flying into his eyes and making it hard to see, stumbling through the grass and heather in the semi-darkness of the late summer evening towards the woods and the twinkling lights below.

He couldn't hear any pursuit, but then, the one hunting him wouldn't need to physically pursue him in order to find him. As long as he hadn't been located, he was still – and a brief burst of hysterical laughter that could just as easily pass for a sob escaped him at the use of the word – safe.

But once he'd been pinpointed, all hope would be gone.

And that wasn't just hope for himself. It would be gone for millions and millions of others, going about their lives, unsuspecting, innocent, completely unaware of the danger that would soon be launched against them.

But even if he succeeded in escaping now, who was going to believe him?

And suddenly he knew he hadn't succeeded. He felt the mental tug in his head that told him he'd been found.

He stumbled to a halt and stood, swaying, clasp his head between his hands, staring into the gloom with wide, terrified blue eyes.

“No!” he yelled, with all his might. “This is WRONG! What you’re doing is WRONG! It’s EVIL! You’ve got to STOP!” His words were wasted. The feeling in his head, in his brain, intensified, and he knew he only had moments left. “No!” he yelled again. “No! NO...!”

He got no further. His protests suddenly became a wail of pain and terror, but there was no-one to hear it. And then, apart from the whisper of the breeze through the grass, there was silence.

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“I just don’t know. I can’t account for it at all,” said Gaerwyn Price, in some despair.

Finn, sitting beside him on the hill overlooking Cwm Seren, looked at him with concern. This didn’t sound like the eternal optimist she was used to.

“How long has it been going on?” she asked.

Gaerwyn continued to stare down at the village below them, nestling in its bowl-shaped valley. It looked exceptionally picturesque in the soft evening sunlight.

“According to old Peter Madoc – he was the doctor here before me – it started maybe as much as fifteen years ago, or more. Just a slight rise in numbers, above the average you’d expect in any population. But then it gradually got worse. And lately, in the last – I don’t know, about two or three years, at the most – it’s just gone through the roof! An *explosion* of mental illnesses related to memory loss. And all in this one area!”

He ran his hands through his hair, clearly showing his frustration. “There’s no new social factor at play. It’s nothing in the water, it’s nothing in the soil, it’s nothing in the air, it’s nothing environmental at all – I’ve had it all tested, time and time again. Nothing! And it’s not age-related, not any form of dementia, or any of the usual suspects. There’s as many young as old being affected. Brain scans don’t seem to show up anything that could be causing it. I just don’t know what to do. I’m their doctor! I’m supposed to look after their health! And I just haven’t got a clue. I’m completely out of ideas.”

Finn put a sympathetic hand on his sleeve.

“No wonder Carys is worried about you! I bet you’re fun to live with at the moment – I know what you’re like when you’re faced with an unresolved problem.”

“Carys,” said Gaerwyn with emphasis, “is a complete and absolute angel, and I don’t know how she’s been putting up with me, I really don’t.”

“Well, the man she married was this bright, cheerful, happy chap who was always up for a challenge. Do you know, I distinctly remember seeing him at the wedding? I wondered what became of him! But seriously, Gaerwyn, I’m sorry this is getting you down so badly. Maybe that’s why Carys asked me to come – maybe she thought I’d cheer you up, somehow. But I don’t seem to be doing very well on that front...”

Gaerwyn gave her nearest hand a brief squeeze.

“It’s always good to see you, Finn, no matter what.” He took one last, long look at the village below, then clambered to his feet. “But we ought to be getting back. I’ve got to be back at work tomorrow, and Carys’ll probably have the dinner on by now.”

He put a hand down to help her to her feet, and they set off down the hillside.

As they got to the outskirts of the village, they encountered Mrs Williams, whom Finn had met on her last visit to Cwm Seren. They’d had a long conversation, Finn remembered, about her two boys and how well they were doing at the local primary school and her husband’s job at the nearby electronics factory and all the retraining and upskilling he’d had to do to get it and how proud she was of him and...

Well, if truth be told, it hadn’t been so much a conversation as a monologue, and only after she’d told Finn virtually everything about herself and her family had she turned to asking Finn about herself, at which point Finn had been able to wedge an occasional word into the flow. Not that she’d minded; Mrs Williams was the friendliest soul imaginable. Just a bit garrulous, that’s all.

Now here she was again, waving at them and then crossing the street to speak to them.

“Hello, Doctor Price,” she said merrily. “How’s your lovely wife today?”

“She’s well, thank you, Mrs Williams,” said Gaerwyn cautiously, thinking of Carys and the imminent evening meal, and unwilling to trigger the full flow. “She’s probably got our dinner ready by now – that’s where we’re off to.”

“Of course! I mustn’t hold you up.” She beamed brilliantly at Finn. “Though, who’s this young lady? You must introduce us before you go.”

Finn was startled.

“But we met last time I was here, Mrs Williams,” she blurted out. “Last year. Don’t you remember?”

Gaerwyn shot her a look, and shook his head slightly but resignedly.

Mrs Williams frowned, and looked uncertain.

“Did we?” she asked.

“Yes. I remember you remarked on my name – Fionnula – because you thought it was a pretty name.”

“And so it is,” said Mrs Williams warmly. “How silly of me! Fancy me forgetting that. It’s an Irish name, isn’t it? Are you Irish?”

This was *exactly* the way the conversation had gone last time. And while one couldn’t expect people to remember everything, it was certainly strange that a woman such as Mrs Williams – who couldn’t be a day over thirty-five, and was so evidently outgoing and interested in other people, and a dedicated conversationalist – should entirely forget they’d ever met. People like her just *didn’t* forget – not one detail of anything you’d ever told them!

“No, I’m English – it’s just that my parents thought it was a pretty name, too, so that’s why they chose it,” she explained, using exactly the same words as she had on the previous occasion.

“And – I’m so sorry, I’m sure you’ll have told me this, but – how did you meet Doctor Price?”

“We were at the same college, before I decided to go on to university and study medicine,” said Gaerwyn. “Look, I’m awfully sorry, Mrs Williams, but we really mustn’t upset Carys by being late for dinner.”

“Of course not,” agreed Mrs Williams cheerfully. “My Gwyn’ll be complaining at *me* if I don’t have his supper ready for him, so I do understand! Lovely to see you both. Bye!”

With a friendly wave she headed off along the street.

Gaerwyn and Finn looked at each other in momentary silence.

“See what I mean?” said Gaerwyn. “They don’t remember. And it keeps getting worse.”

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“What’ll you do with yourself all day while I’m slaving away over a hot surgery?” he asked later, over dinner. “Now that Carys has got to be out as well.”

“I’m ever so sorry about that, Finn,” said Carys. “I was planning all sorts of things for us to do, and now I’ve got to go to Cardiff, and stay overnight, for a training course they’ve had to switch dates on. I’ll be back Tuesday night, but probably not until late. I hope it hasn’t ruined your holiday.”

“Not a bit of it – we’ll have the entire rest of the week, after all,” said Finn cheerfully. “Actually, I thought I might go for a bit of a hike. Up Mynydd y Seren.”

“Oh,” said Gaerwyn.

Something in his tone caught her attention.

“Is that a problem?” she asked.

He shrugged. “Not really. You just have to be a bit careful if you end up anywhere near Cunningham’s land. He’s become a bit heavy-handed if he thinks people are trying to trespass.”

“Cunningham?” said Finn, looking blank.

“Jason Cunningham,” said Carys. Finn looked astonished.

“What – *the* Jason Cunningham? The IT billionaire? The ‘Knowledge is Power’ bloke?”

“That’s the one,” confirmed Carys.

“Does he live somewhere round here, then?”

“Oh, yes,” said Gaerwyn. “I didn’t know about it until we came here, but apparently he owns a very large chunk of that mountain – most of it, in fact. Has done for years. It’s a bit remote, but apparently he likes it that way. Quite a number of

years ago he got permission to put up this huge communications mast. For 'working from home', I suppose you'd call it. Being such a big shot businessman, I expect he put in a word in the right places to get that past the planning authorities. And probably put in one or two other things, I shouldn't wonder!" he added, cynically. "But I don't think too many of us *little* people trouble him these days. His private army of strong-arm boys have given the place a bit of a reputation for being somewhere to avoid. Even the most determined hillwalkers tend to steer clear of it now. 'Trespassers Will Be Shot' – that's the impression he gives, anyway. Doesn't endear him to us, I can tell you."

"In my experience, people in ICT can be good at the Information and the Technology bits, but they're generally pretty hopeless at the Communication bit," said Finn, with a humorous lift of her eyebrows. "So I'll be very careful where I go, I promise!"

Just then, the phone rang. Carys rolled her eyes as she got up from the table and headed out into the hall.

"Always when we're eating," she said over her shoulder. "Never fail, do they?"

Gaerwyn grinned at Finn.

"One of the downsides of being a doctor," he said in a stage whisper. "You don't always get to finish your dinner!"

Carys was gesturing at him from the hallway.

"It's Rhod," she said, "for you."

Gaerwyn looked surprised, and went to take the receiver from her.

"Hello, Rhod," he said. "What's up?"

"Need you, Gaerwyn," said the voice in his ear, grimly. "Right away..."

"Who's Rhod?" asked Finn, as Carys sat down again.

"Rhodri Williams. The sum and total of our local police force," said Carys. "Officially he's attached to the main station, which is about fifteen miles away, but because he lives here, he often deals with things from his own house, a kind of unofficial base. Well, I say 'his own house', but he still lives at home with his mam, really. Still, she doesn't seem to mind her sitting room being used as his office from time to time! Actually, between you and me, I think she likes it – makes for a bit of excitement now and again!"

Finn laughed at her mischievous expression, then both of them looked up as Gaerwyn came back in. His face was serious.

"Sorry, love, but I've got to go over to Rhod's," he said. "Someone's been found wandering in the woods and he needs me to take a look at them."

Carys sighed.

"Oh, well," she said, resignedly. "At least I didn't do a hot pudding... Tell you what, why don't you take Finn with you? She can meet Rhod and his mam, that way."

Gaerwyn hesitated, but then nodded.

"I don't see why not," he said – but he sounded as if his thoughts were on something else entirely. Something very unpleasant.

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As it turned out, Finn didn't get to meet Rhod's mother, because she was out. Rhod was a bit surprised to see an unknown girl accompanying Gaerwyn, but after she'd been introduced, he made no protest at her presence. He was a young man, in his early twenties, and the blue uniform somehow managed to accentuate both his youth and the physical angularity of his slight frame. Finn got the impression he had more worrying things on his mind than an unexpected additional visitor.

"He's in here," he said, ushering Gaerwyn into the sitting room. Finn followed, instinctively feeling it wise to keep a low profile. There was something serious going on here.

It was a comfortable, homely room, and should have felt cosy and welcoming, but the jarring note in the atmosphere was immediately obvious – the figure sitting bolt upright on the sofa. It was a man in his mid thirties, fair haired and blue eyed, his clothes rumpled and soiled with grass stains in places. There was a strained rigidity about his body, and the eyes were wide and staring – staring at nothing. Finn couldn't suppress her instinctive shiver.

Gaerwyn dropped to his knees in front of the man, who didn't seem to register his presence in any way.

"Can you hear me?" he said to the unblinking blue eyes. "Can you understand me?"

There was no response of any kind.

Gaerwyn checked the man's pulse and heartbeat, examined the staring eyes with an ophthalmoscope, and made one or two other tests. He paused for a moment or two and stared at his patient with a troubled expression. Then, slowly, he put up a hand to the side of the jaw and gently applied sideways pressure. The man's head turned in reaction to the pressure, but his eyes remained blank and unseeing. Gaerwyn gently pushed on the other side of the jaw – same result.

Finn, watching, saw that though the body moved and breathed, there was not a single sign of conscious intelligence. It was as if the man's mind had been completely obliterated, that the only functions left were those of physical reflex actions.

Gaerwyn sat back on his heels, then looked up at Rhod.

"He was found like this?" he asked.

"Sylvie Parry, walking her dog in the woods at the foot of Mynydd y Seren," said Rhod. "Found him walking around – well, more like staggering, really – and called me. I don't know what to make of him! He's got no identification on him. He'll walk, he'll sit down, he'll stand up – but you've got to physically prompt him to do any of it. Otherwise he doesn't react to anything. What's wrong with him? Some kind of reaction to trauma?"

Gaerwyn looked back at the man's blank eyes and was silent for what seemed a long time.

"I don't know," he admitted softly, at last. Finn could see how disturbed he was. "I've never seen anything quite like this. I'll have to call an ambulance and get him into the hospital. This is beyond my skills."

He and Rhod looked at each other, grimly, and said nothing more.

Finn shivered again.

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The ambulance had been and gone, accompanied by Rhod, who would need the resources of the main police station for further attempts at establishing the man's identity. Gaerwyn and Finn drove back home more or less in silence, until Gaerwyn suddenly spoke.

"I don't know if it's such a good idea, you going up Mynydd y Seren tomorrow," he said.

Finn was surprised.

"Whatever not? Whatever happened to that man, it won't have been caused by a mountain!"

Gaerwyn remained serious.

"Maybe not, but – well, I just have a bad feeling about it."

"I hope you're not going all mystical Celt on me, Gaerwyn," she chided him. "And you a man of science!"

He smiled faintly.

"All right," he conceded. "You'll do what you want – I know that! But I wish you'd reconsider..."



Chapter 2

“How do you do? I’m the Doctor.”

It was a beautiful morning. Cwm Seren was long out of sight below her, and the urbanized lower slopes of Mynydd y Seren had given way to close-cropped turf with outcrops of rock shouldering through it, and quite a number of plantations of firs. The rising sun was probably still close to the eastern horizon, though from here any sight of it was blocked out by the bulk of the mountain, but the air was warm and there was just enough of a breeze to be refreshing.

Finn stopped to unsling her haversack and retrieve a bottle of water from it. Having drunk, she looked up the slope to survey the next stretch of terrain, absently shrugging the haversack back onto her shoulders.

Now, should she go to the left, up the west side of the mountain, where it was more wooded, or to the right, where it looked as if the mountain slopes were clear of trees? Gaerwyn had warned her that Jason Cunningham’s land lay on the eastern side. Perhaps she should stick to the west slope – although, something in her subconscious reminded her, that was where the unidentified man had been found wandering...

Suddenly, her attention was caught by a strange sound in the distance. It was fairly faint, but very distinctive. A sort of wheezing, groaning, cyclical sound, that clearly wasn’t natural, but conversely didn’t resemble any artificially generated noise she’d ever heard. It was hard to distinguish with the breeze blowing past her ears, and even as she tried to concentrate on it, it faded completely, but she’d formed the definite impression that it was coming from the east side of the plantation.

She frowned, and hesitated, but curiosity won. Instead of heading to her left, to the west, she began to walk in the general direction from where it had seemed to come, to the east.

A couple of minutes later, she stopped, abruptly. A really strange feeling was sweeping over her, as if a huge pulse of mist had flooded through her brain.

She shut her eyes, and put her fingertips to her temples, instinctively trying to give her brain a physical reference point to focus on. She felt unpleasantly dizzy for a few seconds, but then the sensation stopped, just as suddenly as it had begun.

She cautiously opened her eyes, found the world in focus again, and frowned. What could possibly have caused that? This was more than odd; it was positively inciting investigation.

She went on, scanning the landscape for potential causes.

On her left the woodland swept up the slopes of the mountain, mostly composed of firs and spruces of varying sizes, the smaller ones carpeting the ground around the taller ones and growing so thickly together they looked almost like a solid green hedge. The path, even though very faint now, bore round to the left as it rose up the mountain, following the edge of the wood. Ahead and to the right, moorland with tussocks of long grass and clumps of heather stretched out in each direction.

Two or three miles away, jutting out from the shoulder of the mountain, rose the huge white communications mast, bright against the clear blue sky. Finn kept glancing at it as she walked on, following the path. She couldn’t help it; even

though she was now walking parallel to it, it still dominated the sky, intruding on her peripheral vision, making her keep wanting to look at it directly, as if she needed to constantly check it for some innominate potential threat.

A little way on, one of those glances registered a shape alien to the natural landscape, over to her right, in the direction of the mast. From this distance, it looked like just a heap of brown cloth of some sort, but the shape... Was that someone lying out on the moor? If so, there was something not right about the way they were doing it. The shape was too limp, too disorganized. Were they all right, whoever they were?

Finn hesitated again, but despite her instinct for caution, she knew she couldn't just walk away and leave someone possibly in trouble up here, where hardly anybody ever came. She left the path and struck out across the moor.

She approached the heap of cloth warily. As she had suspected, it wasn't just cloth – it was a coat, a long brown coat, and it was being worn by someone.

A dark-haired man, very slim, who looked to be in his mid-thirties or so and was probably quite tall when he was standing. Which, admittedly, he wasn't at the moment. He was lying on his side, and he was breathing, all right, but it wasn't the breathing of someone naturally asleep, any more than was the position of those sprawled arms and legs.

Finn looked him over without attempting to touch him, thinking that a blue lounge suit was rather eccentric wear to find halfway up a mountain, especially in combination with a pair of red daps. What could be wrong with him? A superficial visual scan didn't reveal any obvious wounds or bruises that would account for his state.

Puzzled, she crouched down to try to get a better view of his face. It was strange... She knew she hadn't met this man – and yet something in her head was silently screaming at her that she *did* know him, that she ought to recognize him. She shook her head uneasily, as if she was being bothered by a persistent, buzzing fly. Why did she have such a strong feeling that she ought to know who he was?

She bit her lip, wondering what to do. Then, a few seconds later, his eyelids began to tremble and flicker open. The brown eyes thus revealed took a few moments to focus, but then became alert and aware. He got as far as a sitting position before clutching at his head with both hands, his eyes screwed shut in discomfort.

“Ooooh! What was *that*?” he said.

“What was what?” asked Finn. “What's the matter?”

“I don't know,” the man admitted, opening his eyes again. He looked slightly abstracted, as if he was running some sort of internal check on his state of being. Then he seemed to click back into normality. “I don't quite know what happened.” He seemed a little embarrassed to have to admit this.

“Can you stand?” Finn enquired. “Do you need help?”

“Let's find out,” he said.

As he got to his feet, something dropped from the folds of his coat and came to rest against the side of her shoe. Instinctively she bent down to pick it up. As she straightened, she got a proper look at it, and stiffened.

It was a slim, pale cylinder, about six or seven inches long, a black cap at one end and what looked as if it would be a blue light at the other if it was switched on.

She stared at it, then looked at him with suddenly widened eyes. Recollection hit her like a train. Now she knew why he'd seemed so familiar. How could she have forgotten about *him*, after all she'd been told?

“Sorry about that,” he began brightly. “My name's John Smith, and I –”

“It is *not*!” she contradicted vigorously. “You're the Doctor!”

Prevarication was clearly going to be useless.

“Well, yes, I am,” he agreed, with a puzzled frown. “But how did you know that? Have we met? I don't generally forget people I've met. Well, not often. Well, hardly ever. Well, just about never. Do I know you?”

“No,” she said slowly, coming to terms with something so totally unexpected. She extended the device in her hand toward him. “We've never met. But this is your sonic screwdriver, I suppose?”

“Yes, it is, actually. Thanks.” The Doctor took it and tucked it into his inside breast pocket, frowning at her even more intently. “So – sorry to add another question when you haven't even answered the first one yet, but – how did you know what it was?”

“I don’t mean to sound like a music hall act, but it’s to do with the fact that I’m a friend of a very good friend of yours. And I’m sure you’ll find it a fascinating story when we’ve got time for it. But just at the moment, I think there’s another question that takes priority over all the others.”

“What’s that?”

“What happened? As in, how did you come to be sprawling unconscious halfway up a Welsh mountain?”

“Yeah, that comes quite high on my list, too,” he admitted. Then his gaze focused on something in the distance. “Although, right now I can think of an even better question.”

She looked enquiringly at him.

“Who are they?” he asked, indicating with arched eyebrows something beyond her left shoulder.

She turned to see, something over two hundred yards away in the direction of the mast, half a dozen men in police-like black one-piece outfits, faces obscured by black sunglasses, the automatic rifles they carried jerking from side to side as they ran toward her and the Doctor.

“They always wear black, these people – had you noticed?” said the Doctor, disapprovingly. “No imagination whatsoever.”

“Tragic,” she agreed. “But personally, *my* imagination is showing me a picture of us starting to run – is yours?”

“You are so right,” he agreed, and spun on his heel. “Allons-y!”

She raced after him as he sprinted away in the direction of the fir plantation. For a man so recently unconscious, he evidently had remarkable powers of recovery. ‘Blimey, this bloke can move!’ she thought to herself as he quickly drew away from her.

The sudden, terrifying reports of shots and the thud of a couple of bullets into the turf nearby shocked her into moving up a few gears, herself.

She thrust between the trees at the point where the branches were still shaking from his entry ahead of her, but to her dismay, he had completely vanished. She thought she could hear the thump of feet ahead and off to her left, so she headed that way, but clearly nobody had been managing this particular stand of woodland for some time and the trees had been allowed to grow so closely together that she couldn’t see a single trace of him.

Panting, she stopped beside a particularly thick clump of young firs and bent double, hands on knees, struggling to catch her breath. After a few moments she straightened up again and looked around for any sign of him.

With shocking unexpectedness, a hand reached out and yanked her into the clump. It then proceeded to dump her unceremoniously onto the ground.

She flared her eyes at the Doctor ferociously, but immediately heeded the finger he held to his lips, nodding in instant comprehension, and shuffled herself into a more comfortable position next to where he lay full-length on the carpet of fir needles.

She fought to control her breathing, trying to bring its volume down to nil; it seemed rather unfair to her that he didn’t seem to be out of breath at all. But she’d more or less managed it by the time they heard the sounds of people pushing between the trees and felt, where their bodies were in contact with the surface of the ground, the subtle vibration of distant booted feet on the move.

They lay motionless and silent for a long time. The fir branches grew close to the ground, leaving about eighteen inches or so of clear vertical space in which they could lie, completely masked by the interwoven foliage. The Doctor had his eyes shut, obviously concentrating on detecting sounds, while Finn had no intention of making the classic mistake of moving or speaking too soon, only to find the pursuers had unexpectedly doubled back.

Not least because she needed time to recover after her first ever experience of being shot at – one she hoped not to repeat any time soon. The sensations caused by that much adrenalin for the wrong reason were ones she could do without.

But then, hiding for her life in a bunch of Christmas trees wasn’t exactly the way she’d expected the day to turn out.

After some time the Doctor, still with his eyes closed, suddenly raised a warning finger, and, listening hard, she caught the sounds of the men retracing their steps.

“No sign of them, sir,” one of them said, some way off, but perfectly audible.

“Okay, let it go. If they’ve got any sense, they won’t be back – but everyone, stay on the alert!” ordered an authoritative voice. “Orders are to keep everyone out of the vicinity today, no matter who they are!”

A faint chorus of “Yes, sir” in various tones and pitches was followed by the receding sounds of their withdrawal.

Finn looked at the Doctor and found he’d rolled onto his side to look at her, leaning on one elbow, his head resting on the palm of his hand. He looked for all the world like someone lounging on a sun-drenched beach instead of a man who’d just been pursued by a horde of mysterious men with guns.

“Right,” he said cheerfully. “Now they’re gone, this seems like a good moment for formal introductions, wouldn’t you say?”

“Oh, *well* – if it’s going to be formal, I’d better stand up first,” she said, and did so, getting to her feet and pushing uncomfortably out through the spiked branches. The Doctor followed, brushing pine needles off his coat.

“How do you do,” he said, with a gleaming grin, putting out his hand to shake hers. “I’m the Doctor. But apparently you know that already.”

She found herself responding with a grin of her own.

“How do *you* do, Doctor,” she said with equal ceremony and a twinkle in her eye. “I’m Fionnula Thornton – Finn to my friends. A club of which you’re now most definitely a member,” she added.

“Deeply honoured!” he said, with a flourish. “So who else is on your list of friends – specifically, the one who’s also a friend of mine?”

“One Sarah Jane Smith, of whom you might just have some passing recollection,” she said, quirking an eyebrow at him.

“Ah – right,” he managed, obviously a little taken aback.

“And who has,” she went on, “to coin a phrase, told me so much about you!”

The Doctor momentarily wore the slightly anxious ‘Has she?’ sort of expression that that remark has been known to produce, and looked hastily around.

“Tell you what,” he said. “Let’s get back to the TARDIS before you tell me the rest. I think we’d be a bit safer in there, don’t you? It’s not far away – just over that way somewhere. Oh” – he paused, uncertainly – “I suppose you do know what the TARDIS is...?”

“Oh, yes!” Finn assured him. “And feeling a bit safer is definitely the best offer I’ve had all day, so far!”

Chapter 3 ***A Sarah Jane Adventure***

The Doctor opened the TARDIS door and ushered Finn in ahead of him so he could close it behind them. Then, as she stepped slowly up the ramp, staring about her, he overtook her and tossed his coat carelessly into the fork of the nearest pillar.

He turned to look at her, expecting the customary “it’s-bigger-on-the-inside” reaction.

Forewarned is forearmed, however. She didn’t say it. (Sarah Jane had probably told her everyone did.)

What she did say, looking round with a nevertheless gratifyingly awed expression, was, “Phew! Knowing it intellectually isn’t quite the same as actually seeing it, is it?”

That’s a new one, thought the Doctor, intrigued.

“Well, you seem to be taking it nicely in your stride,” he approved. “Most people just do the gobsmacked stare thing. But then, most people haven’t been talking to Sarah Jane Smith! How did that come about, then?”

“Uh – do you mind if I sit down somewhere first?” she asked. “You may be used to being shot at. I’m not! I’m still feeling a bit shaky.”

“Oh! Right! Sorry! Yes! Make yourself at home.” He gestured in the direction of the pilot’s seat, and once she had taken her place, leaned back against the console to face her, his arms folded, his face expectant.

“Are you sitting comfortably?” he cued her.

“Then I’ll begin...” she responded with a smile. “Well, I suppose you could say I was just an innocent bystander who got dragged into events purely by accident. One of those ‘in the wrong place at the wrong time’ things. I happened to be

visiting some friends in London. But at the moment when Sarah Jane was having what by all accounts seems to be one of her regular altercations with the Slitheen. Boy, can that family hold a grudge!" She shook her head in wonderment.

"I won't bore you with the details. The resolution involved a lot of vinegar and was very messy... But the point is, I had to completely rearrange my ideas of what is and isn't possible, and what does and doesn't happen on this planet, and got presented with a whole headful of new concepts I had to come to terms with. Sarah Jane could see I needed some help. So we ended up talking – a lot. And we got to be pretty good friends."

She paused. "I think," she went on thoughtfully, "perhaps she ended up telling me more than she originally meant to. But then I don't think she'd ever had a *girl* friend she could talk to in that way, about that side of her life. All the other friends who know, are men." She smiled wryly. "And it does make a difference, sometimes. So I was a useful outlet for her, and she – she opened my mind up to so many new concepts, so many fantastic things!"

Her face lit up at the memory.

"I felt – still do feel – very honoured by the fact she decided to trust me with it all. After all, she didn't have to do that. I intend to be worthy of that trust." She paused, looking pretty determined about it.

"And so she told you about me," the Doctor prompted.

"Yes, she did. Rather extensively, in fact. If you don't mind my saying so, you seem to have left quite a hole in her life," she said, looking up at him. "She's got Luke now, but in the intervening years I could tell things were" – she searched for the right word, coming up with what the Doctor suspected was something of an understatement – "*difficult* for her... I think she found it quite therapeutic, being able to talk about you to someone outside it all, as it were."

"Well, as you say, she's got Luke now," he shrugged, with a transparent attempt to sidestep the implications. "And Clyde and Rani. And she certainly keeps herself busy. Well, that is, the aliens keep her busy," he corrected himself.

"Oh, yes," Finn agreed. "She decided it'd be better if I generally kept my distance – 'better' being code for 'safer for me', I suspect – but once I'd learned about... well, you know! So many *fantastic* things. It's frightening, but it's exciting, too, isn't it?"

The Doctor nodded, understandingly.

"Once you know," she continued, "you can't just let it drop, and you can't pretend it never happened, either. She understands that. We still keep in touch regularly, keep up to date. So I can confirm you're right about being kept busy."

"Oh, I'm right on most things, me," he said, with a winning smile. "So she goes on defending the Earth from her London suburb. Brilliant, isn't it?"

"Tell you what – she let me spend a lot of time with Mr Smith, which was pretty brilliant, too," she said. "Talk about further education! He told me a lot about you."

"Oh, well – I am a bit of a legend, you know," the Doctor said, with an elaborately casual shrug.

"Even so, I never expected to actually meet you," she observed. "What were the odds against that? After all, you've got the whole of space and time to be in, somewhere. Statistically, you could be anywhere, anywhen, at any given moment! And yet here we are. I mean, I know the word 'coincidence' exists because the condition does, but, even so...!"

She looked at him consideringly. "Which, I suppose, returns us to an earlier question. Out of all the gin joints in all the world, how come I stumbled over you lying unconscious in the middle of this particular nowhere?"

"Oh, well, I was just mooching about in the general vicinity – of this solar system, that is – but I started picking up some faint but rather strange transmissions. Not the sort I'd expect to find coming from Earth. So I homed in on them, and came to take a look around. Barely got out of the door. Next thing, out for the count. Next thing after that, there you were looking at me enquiringly. So I don't actually know 'how come'. But I intend to find out."

"Of course you do! That much I do know about you! Look, Doctor, do you mind if I tag along? I really want to know what's going on. I'm not the bravest person in the world, but – hell's bells! I was shot at today, on public land where I had a perfect right to be, and I'm sorry, but that's just not normal in this country, no matter how much someone wants to protect their privacy."

She looked indignant at the very idea, but then twinkled at him impishly.

"And, besides, if half the things Sarah Jane told me are true, you might need someone on hand to scream at appropriate moments."

The Doctor looked her up and down.

“Somehow you don’t strike me as the screaming sort,” he said. Then he grinned. “But you’re welcome to come along and see if you’re in good voice, if you like.”

*

“So where are you planning to start?” Finn asked, as the Doctor shut the TARDIS door behind them and began to stride out through the trees.

“That mast,” said the Doctor. He paused at the edge of the wood, scanning the moor for any sign of the security guards. There was nobody in sight. “It rather takes the eye, doesn’t it? Any idea what it’s for?”

He set out towards it, Finn having to extend herself to match the length of his stride.

“Not really. I’m just visiting, so I don’t really know the area all that well. My friend Gaerwyn says it’s a communications mast.”

“Well, that could mean *anything!*” said the Doctor, rather dismissively. “Who owns it, do you know?”

“A man called Jason Cunningham. You know who he is, I expect? I only know the usual ‘billionaire businessman who made his money in information technology’ bit. After Gaerwyn told me he lived here, I looked him up on the internet last night. Apparently he’s got a particular interest in thought-controlled communication – moving computer cursors by brainwaves, that sort of thing.”

“BMI and BCI,” interjected the Doctor.

“Come again?”

“Brain-Machine Interfaces and Brain-Computer Interfaces.”

“Oh. Right. Anyway, he’s funded a lot of research on it, apparently. It seems to be something he’s been interested in all his life. Sounds as if it inspired his business motto – ‘Knowledge is Power’. But Gaerwyn says he’s not exactly the village’s favourite neighbour. He sounds a bit possessive about the land he owns here. A very ‘Keep Out’ attitude. Those were probably his employees chasing us into the bushes.”

The Doctor frowned.

“Automatic rifles certainly seem a bit sledgehammer-and-nut just to keep your standard member of the public off the property,” he observed. “As is that...”

They’d crested a shoulder of the mountainside, and in the dip below them rose a very formidable fence, ‘Danger – Keep Out’ and ‘This fence is electrified’ signs with huge, attention-getting lightning flash symbols alternating at regular intervals along its length.

“You’re right. Visitors definitely not welcome,” said the Doctor, surveying it. He grinned mischievously at Finn. “Still, we’re not visitors, are we? We’re investigators!” He took off down the slope.

“Oh, well – that makes it all right, then,” observed Finn, raising her eyebrows, as she followed. Then she remembered something she wanted to check.

“Doctor, hold on a minute. I’ve got to ask you something. I heard this odd noise earlier. Hard to describe, exactly – but I’ve never heard anything like it. Would that have been the TARDIS materializing?”

“Yup, probably,” said the Doctor.

“And did you come straight out after you’d landed, and head toward the mast?”

“Yes.” The Doctor stopped and faced her, sensing there was a serious point to her questions.

“So it would only have been a couple of minutes later that you passed out?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Because something odd happened to me at about the same time. A really strange feeling of disorientation, like my head had suddenly gone into a fog bank, or something. But it didn’t last long, and then I felt all right again. But it was a really strange sensation. I thought I’d mention it because I had a funny feeling the timing was going to match your blackout.”

“That *is* interesting,” said the Doctor thoughtfully. “Something that disorients you, but knocks me completely out. Hmm.”

“But there’s more to it than that. Or there might be. I don’t know if it’s relevant, but – my friend Gaerwyn, that I mentioned. He’s the local GP. He was telling me yesterday that there’s been an epidemic of mental illnesses in Cwm Seren – that’s the village here – that all involve progressive memory loss. There’s been a growing problem for about fifteen years, but he said a couple of years ago it suddenly started to go off the scale, and he can’t find any reason for it.”

She looked at him quizzically. “The thing is, I ought to have known who you were. When I found you, I mean. Mr Smith not only told me about you, he showed me photos, the works. I ought to have recognized you right away. I mean – *you*, of all people! But I didn’t. Because *I didn’t remember*. How likely is it that, knowing what I know about you, I’d just forget it all? Especially with you lying there right in front of me? But that’s what happened. And that’s just a few minutes after this odd feeling that just came and went within the space of a few moments. That can’t be coincidence, can it?”

“You’re right. After all, who’s going to forget *me*?” agreed the Doctor. “Unless someone or something was making it happen.”

“So do you think it’s got a bearing on whatever’s going on?”

“No idea,” said the Doctor cheerfully, resuming his course toward the fence. “Yet. But it’s a promising line of enquiry. And all effects are the result of causes. The trick is, identifying the cause. Now, then...”

He’d reached the fence and stood surveying it. Finn watched him, wondering what he’d do. It looked pretty impregnable to her – what looked like a single fence from a distance was actually three lines of fencing, the nearest made up of multiple strands of savagely barbed wire, the other two a mix of razor and electrified wires, and spaced vertically so that every possible gap was covered by a strand of wire in at least one of the layers.

The Doctor was giving his attention to the bottom of the fence.

“This looks promising,” he said. “No electrified wires in the bottom eighteen inches. That means...” He fished in his breast pocket for a moment and produced the sonic screwdriver, then crouched down.

Finn watched with fascination as he played it along each strand of barbed wire; wherever the light travelled, the wire simply vanished. The result was a gap big enough for someone to crawl through on their stomach – provided they were very, very careful.

“There you are,” said the Doctor, tucking the sonic screwdriver away again. “A quick bit of molecular dispersion and Bob’s your uncle. Ladies first?”

“Thanks,” said Finn with heavy irony, and shoved her haversack ahead of her through the hole before ultra-cautiously negotiating it herself, making especially sure the hood of her jacket didn’t snag on any loose ends. The Doctor snaked through after her.

“Just out of interest, what are we going to say if someone comes along and asks us what we’re doing here?” Finn asked as they resumed their course toward the mast.

“Oh, we’re just doing a bit of walking,” said the Doctor airily. “Found a gap in the fence. Couldn’t resist the challenge!”

“Hmm. I have a feeling that isn’t going to cut much ice with those guards, if they catch us in here,” said Finn sceptically. “Still, I expect you’ve had a lot of practice at this, so I’ll bow to your superior experience.”

In the next fold of the mountainside, their path was obstructed by quite a sizeable stream tumbling down from above. The Doctor looked uphill.

“Hullo,” he said. “He’s got his own hydroelectric generator. A pretty big one, too.” He pointed at a large, squat, dull green coloured building stationed beside a dam built along the edge of a sizeable corrie, but Finn was looking down the other way.

“That’s not all,” she said. The Doctor followed her gaze and saw about half a dozen wind turbines set out on a long flat ridge stretching away southwards from the mountain. Around and among the turbines were set a large number of huge solar panels. His eyebrows drew together.

“Very eco-friendly... He must need a lot of power for something,” he muttered. “I wonder what?”

Chapter 4

"There's something strange about that mast..."

They crossed the stream and headed towards the next rise. When they topped it they found they could now see the whole mast, from base to apex, rising at least eight hundred feet or so skywards from its huge concrete foundation.

A number of massive cables ran from the mast down to anchors in the ground, of sufficient thickness to support the structure against any force high winds could exert on it. A narrow ladder ran up the south side, presumably for maintenance purposes. At the top a red light blinked, warning any low-flying aircraft of its presence, and some fifteen feet below that was a strange structure of multiple spikes, each joined tip to tip to as many of its neighbours as possible by thin wires, like some sort of mad cat's cradle. A group of what looked like radar dishes clustered about a couple of hundred yards from the base.

"There's something strange about that mast," said the Doctor, shading his eyes as he surveyed the full height of it. "Can't quite put my finger on it, but..."

"If you were to put your finger on that funny spiky array towards the top, would you be able to tell me what it's for?" Finn enquired.

The Doctor focused on it.

"No," he admitted. "I've never seen anything quite like that. Which is a bit worrying. Because it's unusual for me not to know something like that."

"Great," she said dryly. "I feel really reassured now you've told me that."

She looked up at the mast again.

"It's huge, isn't it?" she observed. "Not the sort of thing you'd usually expect to be allowed in a place as beautiful as this. Gaerwyn thinks the fix was put in to get it built."

"Humans have a limitless potential to achieve great things, but sometimes it's a sad truth about this planet that if the right amount of money is directed to the right person, principle bites the dust," observed the Doctor with some distaste.

Finn glanced at him, and noticed his expression as he studied the mast.

"Doctor, why are you looking as if you've just eaten half a dozen lemons without sugar?"

"I haven't had particularly good experiences with communication masts," said the Doctor with a distinct lack of enthusiasm. "In fact, I've had some very bad ones. Excruciatingly painful ones. They came off my list of favourite structures some time ago."

"Oh," said Finn, uncertain how to react. "So – now what?"

"Perhaps we ought to go on with our walk," said the Doctor, still squinting at the mast. "We might find somebody to ask."

A movement in the corner of her eye made Finn look to her right, and she couldn't quite control the rush of nervousness she felt. But she managed to keep her voice level as she observed, "You could try *them*... The men in black are back."

"Oh, I love that film! They got a few of the fine details wrong, but generally – spot on," said the Doctor airily, as he too looked at the squad of security guards bearing down on them.

Finn blinked, but decided not to pass comment. He might be just teasing her – but then again, he might not...

"Well, start practising your cover story," she advised. "I think you're going to need to sound very convincing – and very quickly."

"Don't worry," said the Doctor, grinning at her. "You're right – I've had years of practice at this. Centuries, in fact."

Finn could only shake her head, at a loss for a suitable rejoinder, while thinking that this man's habit of coming out with such abnormal responses to perfectly ordinary remarks made what might be regarded as *normal* conversation with him extremely unlikely, if not impossible.

"Right, you two, you're under arrest!" barked the squad leader, coming to a halt about twenty feet away. His was the same authoritative voice they'd heard earlier in the wood. His men fanned out either side of him. Finn couldn't help swallowing nervously at the sight of six gun barrels trained on them.

"Arrest?" said the Doctor, feigning incredulity. "We're just out for a walk. What have we done?"

“Trespassed on private property, that’s what,” the man retorted. “You’re coming with us. Mr Cunningham’ll want to see you.”

“Good! Excellent!” approved the Doctor. “Funnily enough, I want to see him, too. That’s a bit of luck, isn’t it?”

*

The egocentrically named Cunningham House was only about forty years old, but had been styled to look like a grand mansion from at least two centuries earlier. It was built of a beautiful grey stone, with huge windows and numerous chimneys. The portico roof over the heavily carved wooden doors was supported by two Corinthian pillars, approached by a flight of steps, and many years’ growth of ivy covered the walls. Beautiful gardens extended to the front and either side. It was all in stark contrast to the aggregation of white-painted modern single-storey buildings built a couple of hundred yards behind it, looking more like a laboratory complex than the outbuildings that would normally come with such a house.

The Doctor surveyed the layout as they came down the hillside, sauntering along with his hands in his pockets as if he had nothing more pressing on his mind than a pleasant and relaxing stroll, and certainly not the men and guns surrounding him.

“Nice place,” he observed cheerfully. “Positively screams ‘money’ at you, doesn’t it?”

Finn wasn’t able to feel quite so nonchalant, but did her best.

“Personally, I’m trying not to think about screaming, despite what I said earlier,” she said.

“Shut up, both of you!” ordered the squad leader, with a threatening gesture of his rifle.

“Oi! Arrested or no, there’s no law against us talking to each other!” snapped the Doctor, looking at him challengingly. Something in the quality of his look gave the man pause; he pursed his lips, but didn’t try to take it further.

“Round the back – that way,” he ordered, pointing to a path that led round to the side of the house.

“Not the servants’ entrance, I hope,” said the Doctor. “Don’t you know who I am?”

“You can tell Mr Cunningham who you are,” said the squad leader. “And how you got onto his property.” He smiled unpleasantly. “I do hope you’ve got a very good explanation ready.”

“Sorry, but – who are you, exactly?” the Doctor enquired.

“Robert Harkness, Mr Cunningham’s chief of security,” was the reply, delivered with a degree of pride.

“Obviously no relation,” said the Doctor, as if to himself. Finn looked at him, wondering who he was talking about.

“Look, stop wasting time!” Harkness snapped, reverting to his former military-style brusqueness.

The Doctor looked at him steadily. Even though the dark glasses masked the man’s eyes, it was easy to see he found the Doctor’s regard slightly unsettling.

“Come on! Get a move on!” he barked, harshly.

“Well, since you ask so nicely...” said the Doctor, and marched on, his nose in the air.

Even in the circumstances, Finn could hardly keep herself from breaking out into a smile. Everything Sarah Jane had said about the Doctor was so true! No wonder she’d missed him so much. Never a dull moment – not ever!

They were marched into the house and emerged from a series of stairwells and passageways into a large hall with marble tiled floors and opulent crimson and gold flock wallpaper, and vast festooned chandeliers looming overhead. Marble pillars along the walls alternated with expensive looking works of art, both punctuated in a few places by gleaming dark wood doors whose handles looked as if they might be plated with genuine gold.

“Makes you wonder what he keeps in the safe, doesn’t it?” the Doctor murmured.

Harkness, just in front of him, abruptly flung out his left arm, so suddenly that the Doctor couldn’t avoid running into it – an experience that looked to Finn not unlike being brought up short by an iron bar.

“So sorry,” the Doctor apologized charmingly. “Didn’t see the hand signal in time.”

The man rounded on him, snatching off his dark glasses, to reveal a face hardened into a furious scowl.

“I’ll give you a hand signal you’ll never forget if you don’t –” he began savagely, then broke off, ignoring the Doctor’s innocently raised eyebrows. “Keep them here!” he barked at his men. “And make sure they’ve got nothing on them they

shouldn't have!" He stalked off toward one of the doors. He knocked on it, and a faint murmur was heard in response. He opened the door, went in, and closed it behind him with a swift movement.

In complete silence, two of the guards conducted a swift search of their pockets and Finn's haversack.

The Doctor had an astonishing quantity of miscellaneous items in his coat pockets – bits of string, pencils, a two-inch candle stub, a china egg cup, an ornate metallic object that looked like an ear-ring but which Finn suspected was actually an alien artefact of some kind, a handkerchief with a knot tied in the corner ("Wonder what that was to remind me of?" the Doctor muttered when he saw it), a fir cone, a crumpled photograph of Mahatma Gandhi, and other similar and equally mystifying bits and bobs – all of which the guards examined with obvious perplexity, but apparently did not regard as any form of threat, and restored to their owner.

The Doctor, it seemed, didn't carry a mobile phone, but Finn did: they confiscated it in spite of her protests, but let her have her haversack back. In one of the Doctor's jacket pockets the guard came across a leather wallet with an apparently blank piece of paper inside it; after giving it a careless glance, he then ignored it.

One thing Finn couldn't help noticing was that at no point in this procedure did the sonic screwdriver turn up. She looked at the Doctor, her eyebrows raised; he just winked at her. Their search concluded, the guards stepped back and resumed their place in the circle surrounding them.

Finn looked uneasily round at the anonymous faces, all masked by their black helmets and glasses. The Doctor, on the other hand, stuck his hands in his pockets and bounced up and down on the balls of his feet, whistling tunelessly and casually surveying his surroundings.

"How can you be bouncing like a beachball, with half a dozen guns trained on you?" she asked incredulously.

"Ooh, bouncing is good," he declared, grinning round at the guards. "Keeps your spirits up. This lot ought to try it. They look positively grim, don't they? Don't look as if they get much joy out of their job."

Any reply Finn might have been contemplating was prevented by the opening of the door and the re-emergence of the security chief. He pointed at them.

"Right, bring them in! Mr Cunningham'll see them now."

A general shifting and realigning of the rifles around them prompted the Doctor and Finn to move towards the door.

"All right," Harkness said to his men. "Back on patrol. Find out where these two got through the fence. I'll take care of them." He jabbed his thumb at the doorway. "In!" he snapped to the Doctor and Finn.

The room into which they were escorted was even larger and more opulent than the hall. Here the flock wallpaper was patterned moss green together with the inevitable gold, the curtains draped around the room-height windows were a matching green, and so were the various easy chairs and sofas. All the furniture looked to be genuinely antique and frantically expensive, and there were huge gilt-framed paintings hanging on the walls, except where a vast mirror hung above the huge marble fireplace.

Despite all this magnificence, it was the man standing in front of the fireplace who instantly commanded their attention.

From her recent research, Finn knew he was in his mid-seventies, but he looked much younger, with a full head of ash-grey hair and blue eyes hooded by the slope of his eyelids. It was a face of immense character, plausibly that of a man who had built a vast business empire, and currently – at first glance, anyway – wearing a benevolent and welcoming expression. He wore a maroon velvet smoking jacket and matching cravat, and held a half-drunk glass of what looked to be whisky in one hand, which he put down on an expensive-looking coffee table as they came in.

"Your – *visitors*, Mr Cunningham," said the security chief.

"Thank you, Mr Harkness," said Jason Cunningham. "You've been commendably efficient, as always." He turned his attention to Finn and the Doctor. Though his expression remained outwardly affable, at closer range Finn had the definite impression that the blue eyes were concealing a degree of annoyance, if not anger.

"How do you do," he said urbanely. "I'm Jason Cunningham. May I ask who you are?"

"I'm John Smith," said the Doctor brightly, "and this is my friend Finn Thornton. Sorry if we're imposing, but I'm really pleased to meet you. The man behind the 'Knowledge is Power' thing, and all that." He grinned boyishly. "Increasing knowledge is an enthusiasm of mine, too."

“Is it, indeed?” Cunningham looked at him intently, as if sensing a potentially kindred spirit. “In what particular field?”

“Ooh, everything,” said the Doctor. “I’m interested in absolutely everything. Like your research into brain-computer interfaces, for instance. Brilliant!”

“Your approval is very gratifying,” said Cunningham, with an underlying hint of sarcasm. “I think, though, that the area of knowledge I’d currently like increased concerns how you got onto my property. Between Mr Harkness and his men and the perimeter fence, it’s really quite unheard of. How did you manage it?”

“Well, there was this gap in the fence,” shrugged the Doctor, neglecting to mention that he’d been responsible for it. “I’m just naturally curious, me – especially when I see so many ‘Keep Out’ signs. I’m a bit contra-suggestible about things like that. Aren’t you?”

Cunningham regarded him expressionlessly for a few moments.

“I do believe I might have to invite you to stay here for a little while,” he said. “I think this breach of security warrants some further investigation. Do, please, make yourselves comfortable while I’m gone. Mr Harkness, accompany me, if you will.”

At the door, he turned. “I apologize, but I’m sure you understand I’ll have to make sure you don’t wander anywhere else in the meanwhile. So please don’t try to open this door in my absence. It will be locked.”

Having delivered this parting assurance with a rather sinister emphasis, he looked at them both for a few more moments, then went out, followed by Harkness. There was a strange quality to the click of the lock.

The Doctor bounded to the door and put his ear to it. He could hear the murmur of the two men’s voices as they went away. Then he gave his attention to the door lock – or where it would have been, had one been visible.

“How’s he locked it?” asked Finn, coming up behind him. “There’s no keyhole.”

“Hm. Not your standard lock, by a long way. An electronically operated sliding bar system, I’d say. More chance of putting your fist through the door than breaking that. He must have had this place built like a fortress.”

“So you need the right tool for the job, then,” said Finn, promptly. “Oh, if only we had a sonic screwdriver! Wouldn’t that be nice? Oh, but I forgot. We do!” She cocked an eyebrow at him, as much as to say ‘So what are you waiting for?’, and folded her arms, light-heartedly replicating the attitude of someone tapping their foot at the same time.

“Patience is a virtue,” the Doctor reproved her, in the same spirit. He shook his left sleeve, and the sonic screwdriver slid out of it into his hand.

“No wonder they didn’t find it,” said Finn, impressed. “You are clever, aren’t you?”

“Oh, yes!” agreed the Doctor, with a grin. “Now, then...”

A few moments later he was cautiously peering out into the hall. It was silent and deserted. He beckoned Finn out after him, then relocked the door behind them.

“That should puzzle him,” he said with satisfaction, putting the sonic screwdriver away again. “Right. Let’s get going.”

“Where to?”

“Those outbuildings. I want to know what’s in them. Come on!”



Chapter 5

The 'Unofficial' Tour

In his private study, Jason Cunningham seated himself behind the leather-topped mahogany desk, and swivelled his chair to face the rather more modern-looking computer screen stationed at right angles to it.

“Now, then, let’s see who you really are...” he murmured to himself. “Miss Thornton, first, I think. Are you who you claim to be?”

First, he opened a software program that offered him a close-up photograph of her face, taken by one of the external security cameras that monitored his property. This he dragged into a specialized section of a search facility designed specifically for his own purposes – no ordinary computer user would have recognized it – and added her name. The software scanned the photograph, then sprang into action.

A few moments later he was scrutinizing the page of information that was displayed. The identifying photograph on the personal record shown definitely matched his own of the young woman in question.

There would have been nothing apparently remarkable about her, no unusual circumstances in her personal history, except – there was an amber alert flag in the ‘Known Associates’ section of the page. Cunningham looked more closely, then smiled.

“Ah!” he breathed, with great satisfaction. Then his expression became more intent. “Now, then, Mr John Smith. Who are *you*, exactly...?”

*

With unerring accuracy the Doctor retraced their route through the maze of passages by which they’d come in, Finn close behind him. They didn’t meet anyone on the way, nor as they exited from the main house and ran across to the first of the white buildings. However, as they peered cautiously round the corner, Finn tugged at the Doctor’s sleeve.

“CCTV,” she said in a low voice, pointing up at the inimical-looking black shape affixed to the wall, slowly swivelling as it scanned the approach to the complex – fortunately, not pointing in their direction at that moment.

“Ah, well – that’s about to suffer a sad fate,” observed the Doctor, changing the setting on his sonic screwdriver. He briefly aimed it at the camera.

“There,” he said happily. “The whole system’s just come down with a bad case of static. And I don’t know how many security staff he’s got here, but I bet between the ones that are out guarding the perimeter, and the ones here that’ll be trying to fix that, there won’t be that many left over. That should give us enough time for a quick *un*-guided tour. Now, what about that one, first?”

He indicated a windowless building that gave the impression of having unusually thick walls. The reinforced metal doors were certainly extremely solid and heavy, including the smaller, single-person sized one built into the right-hand door. Another burst of sonic screwdriver dealt with the electronic lock on that, and they slipped inside.

“Woh!” exclaimed Finn. “It’s a flipping arsenal! What on earth would he want this lot for?”

The Doctor said nothing as he walked forward, surveying the rows of rifles, handguns, grenades, mines, mortars, and even explosives, with some very high-tech electronic detonation devices.

“I don’t know,” he said at last, sombrely. “But bullets have never recommended themselves to me as a form of brain-machine interface... Let’s hope we don’t find out the hard way. Come on – we may not have much time.” He spun on his heel and headed for the door.

*

“John – Smith,” said Cunningham, saying aloud the name he was now typing into his search. “Which John Smith, I wonder?”

A few keystrokes later he was staring at the screen with an expression of elation.

“At last!” he exclaimed. “Oh, how wonderful! I think another conversation is definitely in order, Mr – John – Smith...”

He stood up and headed purposefully for the door.

*

“Doctor,” said Finn, as the Doctor tackled the door of the next building, “what’s that humming noise?”

“Turbines, I’d say,” said the Doctor, pocketing the sonic screwdriver and easing the door open. “Let’s see.”

He looked inside cautiously, then pulled his head back sharply and hastily pulled the door almost closed.

“What is it?” hissed Finn anxiously.

“There’s someone in there,” explained the Doctor. “One quick look!”

He pushed the door partially open again for a moment, long enough for Finn to take in the huge turbines and the technician standing with his back to them, monitoring the bank of dials and controls. He wore ear defenders, so there was no way he could have heard them, but Finn realized that the streak of daylight from even so small an opening of the door could easily alert him to their presence if he caught sight of it. The Doctor closed the door again.

“That’s where all that hydroelectric and wind and solar power is being funnelled to,” said the Doctor. “But it’d be interesting to know where it’s going on to from here. Come on! Let’s try next door.”

The next building had a central corridor, with four doors lining it, two on each side, each one with a head-height viewing window. The corridor led towards a set of blank double doors at the end. The Doctor glanced in through one or two of the windows as they made their way toward them.

“Now this looks like some sort of electronics lab,” he observed. “Working on what, I wonder?”

“Ask me one I can answer,” Finn suggested, keeping her voice low. “Look, there must be more people about than just that one bloke in the powerhouse. Where is everyone?”

“Ask me one *I* can answer,” the Doctor retorted, as they reached the double doors. “Anyway – not complaining, are you?”

She rolled her eyes at him, but didn’t bother to reply.

The double doors also had a complex electronic lock, which the Doctor dealt with in short order, and they slipped inside.

The windowless room was not overly large, but virtually the whole left hand wall was covered by an enormous console or control panel of some kind, crammed with buttons, switches, displays, monitors, lights, and every other kind of component imaginable.

There seemed to be two operator stations equidistant along its length, complete with office-style swivelling chairs, and on the flat desk-like area in front of each chair lay a complex looking headset, connected to the vertical part of the panel.

Just above the connection of the right-hand station, a monitor showed a triangular wave pattern, monotonously pulsing its way across the screen.

At the far end of the room, the left-hand half was apparently a blank wall, and the right-hand half was a smaller, secondary room with a half-glassed frontage, which Finn briefly explored. Once she'd found the light switch, it was revealed to be an office of some kind, containing general office paraphernalia – a desk, chair, desktop computer, telephone, and so on, with a row of filing cabinets lined against the glass wall on either side of the door and facing inward toward the desk, masking it from general view.

She turned the light off again and came back out of the tiny room.

The Doctor barely gave it a glance. His attention was monopolized by the control panel, at which he stared intently.

"I hope this isn't a terminally stupid question," began Finn, "but what's that?" She indicated the monitor where the lines were marching almost mesmerizingly from one side to the other.

"It's a carrier wave." The Doctor focused his attention on it, and frowned.

"And what does it do? Is it measuring something, or what?"

"No. It's an electromagnetic wave. A carrier wave transmits information – sounds, images, anything you want – depends on how you modulate the frequency, or the amplitude, or the phase..." His voice died away into momentary silence. Finn watched the play of expression on his face with interest.

"Triangle wave," he muttered to himself at last. "With some very odd harmonics indeed..."

"What are harmonics?" Finn asked.

"A harmonic is a component frequency of the signal that's an integer multiple of the fundamental frequency," explained the Doctor absently.

"Oh, I'm so glad we got that cleared up," said Finn, giving him an old-fashioned look that he entirely failed to register. "And the harmonics aren't normal in this case?"

"Not one bit... The question is, what's it *for*?" the Doctor demanded, whipping on a pair of black-rimmed glasses and squinting ferociously at the various controls.

"How should I know?" Finn retorted. "I'm not a mind reader!"

"Probably a good thing," said the Doctor. "Although..." He suddenly narrowed his eyes, and took an even closer look. "Although," he repeated slowly, "maybe, just maybe, this thing is. Look at this." He gestured with a sweep of his hand at a particular group of controls.

"I'm looking," said Finn patiently.

"Oh, sorry. What I mean is, this part of the panel is for one of those brain-computer interfaces I was telling you about. But it's not like any BCI I've ever seen before. Some of this is technology I don't even recognize. What's going on here...?"

The Doctor took off his glasses, pulled on the nearest headset and listened. There was a repetitive electronic sound coming through the earphones, matching the pulses of the carrier wave pattern displaying on the monitor in front of him.

"Now, that – is – an interesting sound," he commented.

"What sound?" asked Finn.

"This one," he said, tapping one of the earphones, intent on the dials in front of him. "Like I said – unusual harmonics..."

Finn put the other headset on, curious to find out what he was talking about. As she did so, the Doctor, too focused on the instruments in front of him to notice what she'd done, began to experiment with some of the controls.

There was a loud and sudden crackle and a retina-imprinting burst of white light. The Doctor felt a strange wrenching sensation in his head, and he hurriedly snatched the headset off.

He caught a similar movement in his peripheral vision and turned quickly to look at Finn. She was standing unnaturally still, the other headset in one hand.

"Finn!" he said, sharply. "What's happened?"

Slowly, like a sleepwalker, she turned to look at him. Her eyes were dazed and unfocused. Clearly something was wrong.

"Uh, Doctor..." she said uncertainly. "I seem to have rather a lot of your head – in my head..."

Then her eyelids fluttered and she abruptly dropped to the floor like a discarded coat.

The Doctor leaped forward in alarm, and fell to his knees beside her. Though she lay there with wide, staring eyes, the pupils hugely dilated, she was completely unconscious.

Whatever had happened during that short-out, it had brutally assaulted her brain in some way – or had it done something else? What had she meant by having his head in her head?

But there was no time to contemplate the answers to these questions. Footsteps were coming along the corridor towards the double doors – just one person, by the sound of it. Whoever they were, they'd be opening the doors any second.

The Doctor looked round wildly. Where could he hide himself and the unconscious girl on the floor? And how could he possibly do it in time?

A few moments later, the doors opened.

*

Jason Cunningham, accompanied once more by Harkness, was on his way back to the room where his two unexpected guests were ensconced. He walked quickly; he was eager to re-interview the man calling himself John Smith.

“Be so good as to wait here, Mr Harkness,” he said, as he unlocked the door.

“Of course, sir,” Harkness nodded, and shifted the strap of his rifle on his shoulder. Cunningham smiled silent acknowledgement, and went in.

He stood stock still in momentary disbelief. Despite the locked door, the room was completely unoccupied.

“Mr Harkness,” he said over his shoulder; quietly, but there was something in his voice that had Harkness in the room with him almost instantly.

“Our guests seem to have left us,” said Cunningham. “Can you see any obvious way in which they could have done so?”

Harkness went straight to the windows, and looked down the vertical two-storey drop to the ground below, but the windows themselves were secure, and there was no sign that any exit had been effected that way. And there was no other way. Only the door.

“Sorry, sir, but I can't see how they could have got out,” he admitted, masking his professional embarrassment. Inside, he was seething. That smart Alec, whoever he was, had made him look like a complete fool. Well, he wasn't going to get away with it. When Harkness caught him, he was going to wish he'd never been born...

But outwardly Harkness's face remained impassive, hiding his rage.

“Your men did search them?” Cunningham asked, as if posing a point in slightly questionable taste.

“Thoroughly, sir,” said Harkness firmly. “The girl had a mobile, which we removed for reasons of security. Otherwise they had nothing suspicious on them at all.”

“Hmm,” mused Cunningham. “I believe your men may have been in some error on that point. But if what I suspect is true, I can't blame them. They were dealing with an extremely intelligent and resourceful man, little short of a genius. In fact, I rather think he does rate that title.”

“Do you know who he is, then, sir?” asked Harkness, curiously.

“I believe I do, Mr Harkness,” said Cunningham, wearing that look of satisfaction again. “I believe I do. But since he and the young lady are no longer here where we left them, perhaps you and your colleagues would be so kind as to ascertain their current location for me?”

Chapter 6

A Strange, Strange Creature

The doors opened, and a man came in. He was a nondescript sort of person, perhaps in his early forties, and wearing a white laboratory technician's coat. He went over to the control panel and began looking it over.

A momentary frown of puzzlement furrowed his forehead as he found one of the headsets hanging from its lead over the edge of the flat shelf by the left hand chair, but he restored it to its proper position with a shrug, and went on checking the displays on the console, completely unconscious of the brown eyes fastened on his every move.

Crouched on the floor of the darkened office, Finn lying motionless beside him, the Doctor peered out through one of the narrow gaps between the filing cabinets backed up against the half-glassed wall.

The technician operated the occasional switch, and checked the various readings offered by the console, but had seemed to notice nothing out of place so far. Whatever had caused the short-out, fortunately it didn't appear to have overtly affected the operation of the machine. He could only hope that the man didn't need to come into the office for anything while he was running his check.

He didn't. But when he came to the part of the console where the Doctor had been fiddling with the controls, his brow creased again, and he looked at the switches with increased attention.

"That's odd..." the Doctor heard him say to himself.

He stared at the controls for a few more moments, then went over to the telephone handset which the Doctor noticed for the first time attached to the wall beside the left-hand door. He lifted the handset and pressed one of the buttons, but there was evidently no-one at the other end to answer. He replaced it, looked back at the console for a moment, then, with a decisive air, turned and left.

Under normal circumstances, this would have been a good time for them to leave, too, but clearly Finn was nowhere near being able to do that.

The Doctor found the light switch, then squatted down beside her again. Her eyelids had begun to tremble, indicating the start of a return to consciousness. He waited, watching her face, and marked the precise moment when the look in her eyes changed and she was herself again.

She registered his presence, and her new location, and carefully hauled herself into a sitting position against the nearest cabinet.

"Hullo," she said, lamely. "Did something exciting happen while I was gone?"

"Slightly," said the Doctor. "A technician chap came in and ran a check on the control panel out there."

She looked alarmed.

"He didn't find anything wrong, did he?" she asked anxiously.

"I'm afraid he did," said the Doctor, with a shrug. "I suspect he's gone off to ask some searching questions of his colleagues. I think it's quite likely he'll be back at any moment."

"Then we ought to get out of here –" Finn began, but when she tried to stand a wave of dizziness swept over her, and she slumped back, her eyes closing in obvious discomfort.

"Oh, gosh," she muttered. "I can't stand up quite yet. My brain's still fizzing. Sorry, Doctor."

"Don't worry," he reassured her. "He still might not think of looking in here – people are very talented at overlooking the obvious, sometimes. And even if he does..."

He suddenly reared up and struck a listening pose.

"Someone's coming," he said urgently. "And I don't think they're alone." He put a completely superfluous finger to his lips, hurriedly turned the light off again, and resumed his station behind the filing cabinets.

Fighting her dizziness, Finn managed to get onto her knees and to turn round, holding onto the cabinet for support, so she could look through the neighbouring gap.

What they saw when the door opened startled both of them.

It was not the sight of the technician, the one the Doctor had already seen. It was his companion whose appearance was so disconcerting. For it was clearly – almost spectacularly – not human.

Its head topped that of the man beside it by a clear ten or twelve inches; the skull of that head was approximately human in shape, but the brain casing was disproportionately large even given the creature's extra size. The smooth skin was apparently hairless and was pure chalk white in colour. There was a single external organ positioned approximately where the nose and mouth would be on a human face, a vertical slit lined on either side with tiny white tentacles or feelers, like those of an anemone.

The whole head rested on a thick neck that apparently did not allow it to turn by itself; very nearly the whole creature must have to turn in order to look in a new direction.

But it was the eyes that were so alien: there were admittedly the familiar count of two in that snow-white face, but they were spaced unsettlingly widely apart on the skull, probably allowing a vastly increased range of peripheral vision – perhaps to counteract the immobility of the head and neck – and appeared to be able to swivel in all directions, like a chameleon's. The most disturbing thing about them was that the eyeballs were silver, like polished ball bearings, but with a vertical white pupil shaped like that of a reptile's. This gave them an unsettlingly sinister look, offering no hint of expression that could be interpreted in human terms.

And the hands! At the end of each of the two arms – which appeared to have no joints in them, as would a human arm – were not hands in the normal sense, but a group of fantastically flexible tentacles, again like those of an anemone, some larger and thicker, some smaller and more delicate.

It wore a long dark robe, that did not quite reach the floor, and revealed that it apparently did not have legs or feet, just a wide circular base of much thicker skin, textured like that of an elephant, the underside of which must be travelling over the floor by some mechanism similar to the way a slug or a snail moves, only much faster. It was as if the whole bottom surface of the creature was one huge, flat-surfaced foot.

Finn's mouth was open with astonishment, and even the Doctor was somewhat surprised. This was no race he'd ever encountered, and he'd covered a lot of ground in his time.

And yet the technician's manner gave no hint that he was conversing with anyone other than a normal companion.

"You see?" he was saying, gesturing at the control panel. "Those settings've been changed. Not by much, but they're not as I left 'em. Someone's been in 'ere, foolin' about, because I know it wasn't me left 'em like that! And it can't've been too long ago, either, or the test wouldn't have run earlier. And it can't be Addison, because he ain't turned up for work today. I over'heard Mr 'Arkness talking about it. Seems like no-one knows where he is." He had a marked East-End-of-London accent, but that didn't alter the fact that he was clearly an observant and intelligent man.

The creature bent forward and surveyed the switches.

"You are correct, Mr Preston," it said. The voice was quiet and lacked apparent emotion, and it had a strange reverberating quality to it, as if it was coming out of a hollow space. Every sentence it spoke ended with a strange click. The Doctor wondered how both the speech and the click were produced; the creature was unlikely to have the same physical components as a human throat and mouth.

"Someone has indeed been tampering with the settings," it continued. "I think you should confirm with your colleagues in Security whether the cameras have recorded anyone entering this building since the test. Have you checked the Accumulator room?"

Preston looked surprised.

"No, I never did," he admitted. "No-one else but us three and Mr Cunningham knows how to get in there, do they? And it ain't gonna be one of us that's done this, is it?"

"You reason logically," the creature admitted. "Nevertheless, I think confirmation might be wise. I will do that while you contact Security."

As Preston went back to the wall telephone, the creature moved towards the near end of the control panel.

The Doctor tried to see what it did, but though it reached its arm out, presumably to touch one of the switches, he couldn't see which one – the gap between the filing cabinets was too narrow – and then the creature exited his field of vision completely. Blanking out the sound of Preston's voice on the other side of the room, he detected a very faint sliding sound that was repeated after a few seconds, but that was all.

Preston completed his conversation and hung up the telephone receiver, then returned to studying the console for a while. Then he sat down on one of the chairs and waited. It was at least twenty minutes – which seemed like forever, and an extremely anxious forever, from Finn's point of view – before the sliding sound was repeated, and the creature reappeared.

Preston got to his feet and looked at it enquiringly.

"The Accumulator room has not been entered," it reported. "However, there is clearly cause for concern. Perhaps we should consult with Mr Cunningham."

“Righto,” agreed Preston. “The Security chaps say the cameras are down at the moment, and they can’t work out why.” In the semi-darkness of the office, the Doctor smiled in a rather smug manner. “But until that ’appened – which was something over ’alf an hour ago, they tell me – no-one other than us’d been in ’ere today.”

“Let us report to Mr Cunningham, then,” said the creature. He and Preston left the room together.

The Doctor and Finn both slid into a sitting position against their respective filing cabinets, and looked at each other.

“Wow,” she said, quietly. “Who is *that*?”

“Yeah,” agreed the Doctor, thoughtfully. “That’s a new species on me. Wonder what part of the universe he’s from? If it is a ‘he’, of course. And how he – or she – or it – found their way here? And, most especially, why? What’s he – or she – or it – doing here?”

“Tell you what – let’s assume for the purposes of general conversation it’s a ‘he’,” suggested Finn. “It’ll save time... And he’s obviously involved in some way in whatever Cunningham is doing here with all this computer setup.”

“Yes, well,” said the Doctor, “there’s obviously one bit of the setup we haven’t seen yet. The Ac-cu-mu-la-tor room.” He pronounced the syllables in an exaggerated fashion, and looked at Finn. “And it evidently takes a bit of a while to get there. Are you up for a further bit of exploring?”

“Let me just see if ‘up’ is a concept my brain will cope with yet,” she said, and cautiously got to her feet. Having run a quick internal scan on the resulting sensations, she smiled. “Apparently, yes. I now do ‘up’ as well as ‘down’.”

“Good,” approved the Doctor. “Let’s see how you cope with ‘put-one-foot-in-front-of-the-other’...”

He led the way out of the office and made for the end of the control panel nearest the blank corner wall.

“There’s obviously a door in this wall, and something on this panel operates it,” he announced. “But what?” He looked over the switches without inspiration and muttered in frustration.

As Finn followed him, she nearly tripped, and, looking down, found that the laces of her left shoe had come untied. “Hang on, my shoelace has come undone,” she said, dropping to one knee beside him to retie it.

As her head came back up past the underside of the control panel shelf, she saw something, and froze like a pointer. Her eyes still fixed on it, she put out a hand and tugged at the Doctor’s coat, like a small child trying to attract its father’s attention.

Surprised, he looked down, saw that she was staring at something, and dropped onto his haunches to look at where her gaze was directed. A small, flat pressure panel affixed into the under-surface of the shelf. He beamed at her.

“Well, well, well! Isn’t serendipity a wonderful thing? Brownie points for you!” he commended.

Her face took on a momentarily absent expression.

“Serendipity,” she murmured. “Where ‘you dig for worms and strike gold’...” She looked puzzled. “Who said that? I can’t remember...”

“I think you’ll find you’re quoting Robert Heinlein there,” said the Doctor offhandedly.

“Who?” she said.

“Twentieth century American author of science fiction,” the Doctor said. “That’s how he defined serendipity in one of his novels.”

“But I’ve never read –” She broke off and frowned.

“No? Oh, you should – he was very good,” said the Doctor, not really paying much attention. “Anyway –” and he pressed the panel.

Instantly, accompanied by that faint hiss of sound, a door slid open in the blank wall. Without hesitation, the Doctor strode through it. Stopping only to take a deep breath and then blow her cheeks out, Finn followed him, and the door promptly closed behind them.

They found themselves in what was evidently a lift. The Doctor looked at the control panel – there were only two options, down or up. And since they were in a single storey building, there was only one logical choice.

“Going down,” he intoned, and pressed the button.

After what seemed to Finn an interminably long time, the lift came to rest. When the door opened, only a concrete floor bounded by a waist-high, whitewashed wall was visible at first.

The Doctor didn’t move straight away; his lips moved soundlessly as he did some quick calculations.

“Now, then – I’d say that was approximately six and a half minutes at about, oooh, something like six point six feet per second – so we’re at least half a mile underground,” he commented. “Something obviously needs to be kept well out of sight. Let’s see what it is.”

He stepped out, and Finn followed him to the wall to look over it.

“Double wow,” she said slowly.

They were standing on a small platform that acted as the head of a long ramp, bounded by a continuation of the wall against which they were leaning, that led down on the right hand side of an enormous cavern, lit by what must have been acres of strip lighting suspended from the ceiling of raw rock.

The whole place was a vast server farm, laid out in precise rows, bank after bank of computer units marching away into the distance. Finn had never seen so many computers in one place. There must have been hundreds, if not thousands, of the things, humming away quietly below them.

“Well, now we know what he needs all that power for,” observed the Doctor, squinting down thoughtfully. “He couldn’t run this lot off the National Grid and not get noticed. You could fit the whole GCHQ system into one corner of this!”

Finn looked at him, startled.

“You’ve been inside the GCHQ computer rooms?” she blurted in astonishment.

“Oh, yeah,” said the Doctor, tossing the question aside casually. “But, of course, if I told you why, I’d have to kill you,” he added with a perfectly straight face.

He turned his attention back to the thousands of servers below, and his eyes narrowed.

“I wonder, I really do wonder, what he wants all these for? And what that machine upstairs feeds into them?”

Chapter 7

Two Minds with but a Single Thought

“If we go and look at one, will it tell us?” asked Finn, peering down at the nearest server. “Or you, rather – I don’t suppose I’d understand, even if you hit me over the head with it.”

“No, I don’t think so. Now, if I understood that machine upstairs – that way I might work out what’s going on,” said the Doctor. “I need to understand what’s wrong with those harmonics.”

There was no immediate response. After a few seconds the Doctor realized it, and looked at Finn enquiringly.

She was standing very still indeed. He was instantly reminded of the way she’d looked earlier, after she’d snatched the headset off, but now her face was wearing a distinctly unsettled look.

Abruptly, she leaned back against the wall for support, and put her fingers to her temples, as if she had a sudden headache.

“What?” he asked, sharply.

For long moments she didn’t reply, but her eyes wore the slightly unfocused look of someone concentrating on an internal vision, not the external world. Eventually she spoke.

“Harmonics,” she said softly, as if to herself. Then she looked at him.

“Doctor,” she said carefully. “Do you remember what you said earlier, when I asked you what a harmonic was? ‘A harmonic is a component frequency of the signal that’s an integer multiple of the fundamental frequency.’”

“Yes, that’s right,” agreed the Doctor, puzzled. “So?”

“At the time, I hadn’t got a clue what you were talking about,” said Finn. “You could have been talking Judoon, as far as I was concerned. But now I do. I understand it completely. I understand why those readings aren’t making sense to you. I know a triangle carrier wave shouldn’t have harmonics like that.”

She paused, and her eyes wore that unfocused look again for a few moments.

“And that’s made me realize there are other things. Knowledge. Memories.”

She looked at him directly again.

“But it’s not *my* knowledge – and they’re not *my* memories.”

The Doctor looked at her, his eyebrows drawn together in extreme puzzlement. “But what –?” he began, and then the implications sank in, and his eyes widened. He suddenly smacked his forehead violently.

“Of course! Stupid, stupid, stupid! Why didn’t I remember?” he exclaimed. “Before you blacked out! You said you had my head in your head! Well,” he amended, “a *lot* of my head in your head.”

He looked at her sharply.

“Hold on – you started to say you’d never read Robert Heinlein, didn’t you? But I have! That’s how you knew that quote. That short-out – it’s somehow transferred information from my brain into yours. But that’s –!” He broke off.

“Dangerous?” she picked up on the unspoken word. “For me? It would’ve been, if enough’d come across. But it’s not like when Donna had the lot, and you had to take it all away from her. Obviously *that* memory’s one of yours! And it’s a very strong one... But it doesn’t feel like that. I don’t think I got more than I could handle – not in that short burst. See for yourself.”

She moved to stand in front of him, and took both his hands. Without hesitation, as if it was something she did every day, she pulled them upwards and laid them flat, one against each side of her head, closing her eyes; the Doctor instinctively did the same.

After a little while, his eyes opened again, and he let his hands drop. They looked at each other intently.

“You’re right,” he said, cautiously, but with obvious reservations. “No problem – apparently. I wonder how much of me you’ve got in there?”

“I don’t know. It’s strange... I know it’s in there – I can sort of feel it – but I don’t know what it is. Not unless it gets triggered by something, I suppose – like when you said ‘harmonics’. That brought that particular thing right up to the surface. And now the telepathy – that’s brought up a memory of –” She broke off, as if about to commit an indiscretion.

“What?” demanded the Doctor sharply.

“Reinette... Madame de Pompadour,” she said slowly. “You looked into her mind like this.” She looked at him anxiously. “Doctor, I’m sure you could take this all away again if you wanted to – like you had to with Donna. But – please don’t. It might be so useful, one day. Maybe today, even! It would be such” – she searched for the right word – “such a *privilege* to keep it... And if I find I’ve got anything in here that’s really personal and private – it’ll stay that way, I promise you.”

He looked at her without expression for a few moments, searching her eyes.

Then he smiled.

“I know it will,” he said. “And, do you know, somehow I don’t think it could be in better hands. Or perhaps I should say in a better head!”

He turned abruptly and strode back to the lift.

“Well, come on, then!” he said briskly, with two quick handclaps. “We can’t hang around here all day. There’ll be people up there looking for us, you know! Chop, chop!”

She looked relieved.

“Yes, sir! Whatever you say, sir!” she said, with a smart salute.

“Oh, not the salute,” he said, with an impatient toss of his head. “I get enough grief from the UNIT lot over that!” Finn nearly said, “I know” – but then thought better of it.

*

As they waited for the lift to make its way upward, the Doctor began to review aloud what they’d learned.

“So – a huge amount of power, to run a gargantuan server farm, which is connected to a machine that in some way transfers knowledge from one brain into another. And a massive communications mast. And an alien scientist. Now, what does all that add up to?”

Finn’s thoughts were running on a slightly different track.

“He must have spent a fantastic amount of money building all this – Cunningham, I mean. The cavern, the computers, that machine – whatever it is – the dam, the solar panels, the wind turbines, the mast. That has to be one phenomenal expenditure. I wonder how much it all cost?”

“Dunno. But he’s got it to spare, he’s a bill-ion-aire,” the Doctor rhymed, and pulled a face. “Oh, that’s a seriously ugly word! Awarded to people who’ve been lucky, or successful, at one of the most pointless activities in the universe, if you ask me. The human race has such incredible potential, and what do you waste it on? This obsession with making money! And when you’ve got it, what do you do with it? Make some more! What does that achieve? It’s just become an end in itself. *Why?* With a whole universe out there, why aren’t you doing important and exciting and useful stuff instead? Don’t understand it – never have, never will,” said the Doctor, shaking his head in mystification.

“Though he seems to be using his for a very specific purpose, and it doesn’t seem to have anything to do with increasing his wealth,” Finn pointed out, concealing her amusement at his rant – which, she conceded, had a large element of truth in it. “But, if that idea upsets you so much, let’s think about something else. Like that man Preston. He said they’d run a test of some kind earlier. I bet that’s what bowled you over and caused my memory lapse.”

The Doctor looked at her sharply, and took up the theme.

“Yeah, and I wonder how long he’s been testing,” he said, thoughtfully. “Those memory loss problems your friend told you about. About fifteen years, you said? But much worse in the last couple of years?”

Finn looked at him with a perplexed expression.

“But why? Why would he be doing that to people?”

“Oh, I don’t think he is,” said the Doctor. “Not on purpose. I think it’s a by-product of whatever it is he’s really doing. And I need to find out what that is. Because it’s obviously not healthy for other people.”

“Not even for you, apparently,” said Finn. “Even you seem to be forgetting things! But why would the same test, broadcast, whatever it was, knock you completely out, but not me? Is that because your brain’s different in some way?”

“Dunno,” said the Doctor abstractedly. “Although clearly it is, not being a human brain. I’ll have to give that one some more thought...”

Finn realized there was something else she needed to tell him.

“Doctor – yesterday,” she said. He looked at her alertly. “The local policeman called Gaerwyn in to look at someone who’d been found in the woods near the village. I was there too, and I saw him. He was alive, but – it was as if he had no mind, at all, as if he’d been completely blanked, wiped.”

The Doctor pursed his lips.

“The most extreme form of memory loss possible, then,” he said. “Whatever happened to me and you and the local population, taken to the ultimate degree...”

He broke off as the lift came to rest, and put his ear to the door for a moment. Then, with a lift of the eyebrows obviously intended to convey that he couldn’t hear anyone on the other side, he opened the door.

“Now what do we do?” asked Finn, hurrying to keep pace with him as he went straight to the double doors and opened them. “Didn’t you say you needed to work out what that machine’s doing?” She flung a hurried glance at it as they strode past.

“Oh, I’ve decided it’ll save time if we ask our questions at source,” said the Doctor. “I’m sure by now Mr Cunningham is wondering where we’ve got to. Let’s put our host out of his misery, shall we?”

“I don’t think he’s the sort of man I’d want to be around if he was really miserable, actually,” Finn muttered, as she followed the flapping brown coat tails along the corridor.

*

One man who was definitely feeling miserable at that moment was Robert Harkness – murderously miserable.

He had only a limited number of men at his disposal, and two of them were out patrolling the perimeter fence. The ones he had left were spread pretty thin, so it was taking quite a while to conduct the search for the two missing ‘guests’. They hadn’t been found in the main house, so the net had now widened out to the complex, but so far without result.

And this was on top of the mysterious disappearance of Peter Addison, one of the technicians, only yesterday. He was nowhere in the complex, he wasn’t in his living quarters; in fact, he didn’t seem to be in any of the places where he should have been. Which left the worrying possibility that he was somewhere else entirely, outside the Cunningham estate. But how? And why? And if he’d left somehow, why hadn’t anybody detected his going?

Harkness didn't like mysteries; they were untidy, and they complicated things. He liked things clear and simple. It didn't go towards improving his current mood.

He halted in the middle of one of the courtyard areas that were enclosed by the various buildings, and treated one of the malfunctioning CCTV units to a hard glare, wondering if John Smith – still the only name he knew the 'smart Alec' by – had had anything to do with its broken state. Hard to see how he could have, without equipment; yet, somehow, Harkness was convinced that he was responsible. Another item to add to the list of things about him that really, really irritated Harkness.

Two of his men emerged from the nearest building and looked over at him, shaking their heads. But before he could issue his next orders, he saw their faces change and their guns come up to the ready, pointing at something behind him.

He pivoted on his heel and saw the two figures walking calmly out from behind one of the buildings about fifty yards away.

"Yoo-hoo! Woo-ee! We're over here!" called the Doctor, waving enthusiastically. "Did you miss us?"

*

Cunningham was once again stationed in front of the fireplace when Harkness and his men returned them to the room in which they had first met him. Finn was now minus her haversack, taken by the guards at Harkness's direction. Cunningham smiled at them as they came in, and turned to his head of security.

"Thank you, Mr Harkness," he said. "I wonder if you and your men would mind remaining in the hall while we conduct our conversation?"

"Sir – don't you think I should stay in here?" Harkness protested. "For your safety?"

"Oh, I shall be quite safe," Cunningham assured him. "Mr Smith here is not a man of violence."

"I won't lay a finger on him, Mr Harkness," the Doctor promised, with huge, innocent eyes. "Scout's honour!" He waggled his right hand with three fingers raised in the traditional salute.

Harkness's expression as he looked at the Doctor spoke volumes, but he remained silent, and followed his men out into the hallway. The door, fortunately, withstood the vehemence with which it was closed.

"Dear me," murmured Cunningham. "I don't think Mr Harkness likes you very much, Mr – Smith."

"Oh, it's absolutely mutual," the Doctor assured him, flopping into the nearest chair. "I've never got on well with the military mindset. And you can obviously drop the 'Mr Smith'."

Finn looked at him, surprised.

"Oh, Mr Cunningham here now knows exactly who I am," said the Doctor. "He's looked me up since we were last here, haven't you, Mr Cunningham?"

"Indeed I have, Doctor," agreed Cunningham. "And I'm delighted to meet you at last. Not least because I want to offer you my sincere thanks."

Chapter 8

Knowledge is Power

"Really? I mean, very nice of you, and all that, but for what?" the Doctor enquired.

"For your protection of this planet," said Cunningham. He looked at Finn. "Please, Miss Thornton, do take a seat. This conversation may last for some while, and you've been on your feet for quite a number of hours. In fact, may I offer you some form of refreshment?"

Finn looked at the Doctor for guidance, wondering if it was safe to accept; he nodded.

"A glass of water, thank you," she said. Cunningham poured it himself, and handed it to her; the Doctor declined with a wave of his hand. Cunningham resumed his station before the fireplace.

“Now, where were we? Ah, yes – protecting the Earth,” he went on. “You’ve saved mankind from many and many an alien threat – particularly during your time working with UNIT back in the 1970s, but on countless other occasions too, of course. More recently from the Sycorax, for instance.”

“I didn’t save mankind from the Sycorax,” said the Doctor bleakly. “What I failed to do was save the Sycorax from mankind.”

“Well, that’s an alternative viewpoint,” Cunningham allowed. “Though not one I subscribe to personally. But there were the Slitheen, and the Racnoss. And the dual threat of the Cybermen and the Daleks fighting each other here on Earth. The Sontarans poisoning the entire planet. Of course, let’s not forget the overthrow of Mr Harold Saxon, as he chose to be known! Then perhaps your greatest achievement so far – returning the Earth to its proper position in the universe, after its ‘abduction’ to the Medusa Cascade.”

Finn’s brow grew more and more furrowed as the list of events increased. The Doctor guessed that more of his memories were stirring as Cunningham named each episode. Cunningham, too, noticed her expression.

“And even Miss Thornton here has had her small part to play in averting an alien threat – isn’t that so, Miss Thornton?” he addressed her. “That’s earned you a ‘mention in dispatches’ on my database.” She looked at him, surprised.

“Come, come!” he chided her gently. “Don’t overlook the part you played in foiling the latest attempt of the Slitheen to revenge themselves on Earth, when you so ably assisted Miss Sarah Jane Smith during the most recent – shall we say, disagreement?”

“You know a sight too much!” Finn exclaimed.

“Ah, but that’s where you’re quite wrong, my dear,” said Cunningham. “I know nothing like enough. None of us do. There is so much more we need to know!”

“You do seem to know quite a bit already, though, don’t you?” the Doctor said. “A lot of it – in fact, most of it – isn’t exactly in the public domain. Not in the detail you know.”

“There is very little that one cannot find out,” said Cunningham, “if one has sufficient motivation to do so.” His voice had hardened, and so had his expression.

“And what’s your motivation?” enquired the Doctor.

Cunningham abruptly strode to the far end of the window and stood there for a while, his hands clasped behind his back. The Doctor made a ‘wonder-what’s-up-with-him’ face at Finn. She shrugged and raised her eyebrows slightly.

Eventually, Cunningham spoke. Without turning round, he said, “My wife was a wonderful woman, you know. Loyal and supportive, while I was struggling to build my business. And remained so, even in the face of personal tragedy. Forty years ago, our daughter was born. Severely disabled. Almost completely paralyzed. Her eyes were the only thing she could move. And yet she was aware, and intelligent. She was trapped inside her own body, barely able to communicate.”

He swung round and strode back to the fireplace, almost glaring at them. “Can you comprehend the horror of that imprisonment, Doctor? I’m sure you can. That was what started my research into the field of mind and computer interfaces. Oh, progress was so painfully slow, to start with! But gradually we did make progress. Eventually we were able to give her mobility, in a chair she could operate purely with her mind. And a voice. She could put together letters into words, and instruct the computer to speak them to us, using only her thoughts, the electrical impulses of her brain, to do so. In such ways, she began to emerge from her prison.”

“What happened?” asked the Doctor, softly.

“The Racnoss,” said Cunningham, equally softly. “The Christmas Star. Lashing London with its deadly lightning. Oh, yes, it was destroyed. But not before one of its bolts had hit both my wife and my daughter. Just two of countless hundreds innocently going about their Christmas shopping, out on the streets of London.” He fell silent.

“I’m sorry,” said the Doctor. “I’m so sorry.”

“But that was not my only loss – our only loss,” Cunningham corrected himself. “We had already lost a child to an alien threat. Our son – he was born in the first year of our marriage, and he was a son to be proud of – our son chose a military career. Like you, Doctor, not a life choice I would have recommended, but the one he made, nevertheless. He joined UNIT, and initially even served under a good friend of yours – Brigadier Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart, just before his retirement. An able and dedicated man. But my son’s career was tragically brief.” He paused to take a deep breath.

Finn and the Doctor both watched him with a degree of sympathy. Clearly his life had contained much personal grief, and it was resurrecting painful emotions as he recounted it to them.

“A lone Sontaran landed here on Earth,” Cunningham continued, staring down at the priceless carpet under his feet. “I was never able to find out what his purpose here was – perhaps UNIT themselves never knew. But there was a battle. One Sontaran against a whole UNIT regiment. He killed fifty-seven of them before he himself was killed. One of those fifty-seven was my son. He was just eighteen years old.”

He raised his head, and his eyes were burning.

“One Sontaran,” he repeated. “Just one. And it cost fifty-seven lives to stop him alone. And the loss of each one of those fifty-seven was a tragedy for how many other people, how many other families? As the years passed, and it became clear that we continued to be imperilled and exposed to forces we were ill-prepared and ill-equipped to combat, I began to realize we had to do something more. Something more than sit here on this vulnerable planet, waiting to see what aggressor would turn up next, and finding ourselves helpless against them when they did. Something more than just wait for alien technology to fall out of the sky, as was the policy of the late lamented Torchwood, with no more than an even chance that we might find out how to use it effectively to protect ourselves. Something more than such a passive approach to our own defence.”

“Such as?” the Doctor prompted.

“My son, during his brief tenure as a member of UNIT, had learned much of you and your achievements, Doctor, which he passed on to me,” Cunningham said, apparently at a tangent. “Through the sources of information I could subsequently access, I studied what you had done, each solution you had applied to the various threats that we as a planet had unknowingly faced.”

He studied the Doctor’s face.

“What I learned alerted me to the need to access more and deeper levels of information. I began to design software and systems that would enable me to do this, and I succeeded in doing so. To the extent that there is now no – *no*” – he repeated the word for emphasis – “terrestrial organization from which I cannot obtain information from when I need it.”

“Is this where your thing about ‘Knowledge is Power’ came from?” Finn asked. “You used it as a business tagline, but really, this is what you meant? Knowledge to give *us* power?”

Cunningham looked at her and nodded.

“Indeed. You said earlier that I knew too much, Miss Thornton. I persist in my disagreement with that statement. You see, every time the Doctor saved us from potential disaster, it was because he had knowledge that we did not. Knowledge that was not available to any human trapped on this planet due to the primitive stage of our technological development. We couldn’t travel to other planets, learn from other civilizations and beings as he could, gain that breadth and depth of knowledge that he has amassed over so much time – the knowledge that enabled him to save us so many times.”

He looked at her sternly.

“So I – we – do *not* know too much. We know pitifully, fatally, little, and it is only thanks to him that on so many occasions catastrophe has been averted. And invaluable though he has been to us, he is not always here.”

“Harriet Jones said that to me once,” the Doctor said, musingly. He had slid down in his chair with his long legs stretched out in front of him, his hands clasped behind his head, gazing at the ceiling.

“Harriet Jones?” Cunningham raised his eyebrows. “Yes – I know who she was.”

“Yes – *was*... Until she said that very same thing to me,” the Doctor said, almost dreamily.

Cunningham looked at him sharply.

“Whether you want to admit it or not, Doctor, she was expressing a very fundamental truth.”

The Doctor’s gaze dropped from the ceiling and the two men locked eyes. Finn, watching them both, almost felt the hairs on the back of her neck rising.

“Do you always so wantonly destroy those who speak the truth to you?” Cunningham continued. “In the end, she gave her life for the defence of this planet. Do you value that sacrifice so little?”

“I value all life, everywhere,” said the Doctor, suddenly bolt upright. “Every single life, every form of life, on every planet, in every environment and in every universe. That’s why I object to it being gratuitously taken when there’s any other possible alternative. I will never approve people who regard it as the first option, not the last resort.”

“Such objectivity is admirable, and to be expected from a man who can go everywhere and anywhere he chooses. But an animal in a trap cannot exercise the same choice.” Cunningham’s voice rose a little. “Either it has to fight to escape, or there has to be some other cost – chewing off its own trapped leg, perhaps, in order to preserve its life.”

The Doctor leaned forward, intent.

“So – assuming we’re not talking about your own – whose leg are you proposing to chew off, Mr Cunningham?” he enquired grimly.

Cunningham strode over again to the window and stood for some moments, looking out. Finn got the impression he was using the time to control his rising emotions.

After a short pause he turned and crossed the room to where a classic nineteen-twenties style white and gold telephone stood on a table. He lifted the receiver and dialled a single number on the circular gold dial.

“Ah, Mr Veralashtar,” he said. “I wonder if you might join me for a few moments? I would much appreciate your input into a conversation I’m currently having with some visitors... Thank you so much.” He replaced the receiver.

“You are correct in inferring that I have formulated a strategy, Doctor,” he said, his equanimity apparently restored, as he returned to his customary station before the fireplace. “You’re an extremely intelligent man with formidable powers of reasoning. Have you deduced any part of my plan?”

“Well, now,” said the Doctor, leaning back again and re-clasping his hands behind his head. “Your biggest beef seems to be that mankind hasn’t got a sufficient range of knowledge about extra-terrestrials. And being Earthbound, can’t go out and get it. Therefore” – he paused dramatically, cocking an eyebrow in Cunningham’s direction – “I think you’re working on a way to make the knowledge come to you.”

Cunningham raised his hands and applauded.

“Bravo, Doctor,” he smiled. “That is precisely what I am intending.”

“But how, exactly?” the Doctor enquired. “I’m presuming it’s something to do with that inordinately large communications mast you’ve got out there. You’d never need something that size for your own private purposes, no matter how big a business empire you run. So it’s for something else. What? For broadcasting, or receiving?”

Cunningham smiled.

“For both, eventually, Doctor,” he confirmed graciously. “We are very close now to completing the means by which it will fulfil my purpose. It has taken years of work and some very special help, but we are on the brink of achieving safety for the human race. Do you know the English translation of the name of this mountain, Doctor?” he suddenly added, apparently apropos of nothing.

“Star Mountain,” said the Doctor promptly.

“Mynydd y Seren,” confirmed Cunningham. “And Cwm Seren – Star Valley. Do you know why they are called that? Because thousands of years ago a small rock penetrated our atmosphere and survived long enough to blast a crater in the crust of our planet – the valley in which the village now lies. At the time, it would have seemed as if a star had fallen from the sky. A thing of beauty, but a thing of destruction, too. I have always felt it very appropriate that it will be from this location that we launch a means of protecting ourselves against destruction from beyond the skies.”

“And you’ve been testing this system of yours, whatever it is, for about the last fifteen years or so, haven’t you?” said the Doctor. “And you’ve stepped up the pace of testing in the two years or so since your wife and daughter died.”

“Quite so,” said Cunningham, looking at him keenly. “How did you know that?”

“Because even though your mast points skywards, you haven’t been able to avoid some side effects in the population of Cwm Seren, have you? A rash of memory loss problems, that’s beginning to really get noticed,” said the Doctor.

“A slight and unavoidable consequence,” Cunningham admitted. “Nothing really serious, however. Certainly not serious enough to weigh against the outcome of the whole project.”

“You said you had special help,” said Finn, suddenly breaking her silence. “Special how? And who’s ‘we’, as opposed to just you?”

“You are a most perceptive young lady,” Cunningham complimented her. “Special in a way that will shortly, I’m sure, astonish you, when you meet my very remarkable associate and colleague. Mine has been the vision – he has been the one who has realized it for me, directing the men who work for me so as to accomplish something we would never have been able to do without him.”

He broke off as there was a knock at the door. “And here he is. Come!” He raised his voice on the last word.

The door opened and Harkness put his head round.

“Mr Veralashtar says you asked to see him, sir,” he said.

“Indeed I did,” agreed Cunningham. “Please show him in.”

Harkness stood back, inviting the unseen colleague into the room.

Chapter 9

Veralashtar

Without particular surprise, the Doctor and Finn recognized the creature they had seen earlier as it glided into the room.

Out of the corner of her eye, Finn saw Cunningham watching them, and sensed his disappointment and puzzlement at their lack of reaction. He was a man, she suspected, who didn’t like his punchlines being anticipated. She had no doubt the Doctor had observed that, too.

It was also noticeable that Harkness, like Preston before him, reacted as if there was nothing remarkable about the creature’s presence. Whereas even the Doctor, used as he was to a plethora of lifeforms, registered its alienness. And if she’d noticed that difference of reaction, so, she was sure, had he.

“Veralashtar,” said Cunningham, swallowing his dissatisfaction, “this is the Doctor, of whom you have heard me speak many times, and his friend, Miss Thornton. Doctor, allow me to introduce you to Veralashtar, who has been of such invaluable help to me over the last fifteen years or so.”

The Doctor correlated that statement with Finn’s earlier information regarding the timespan of the memory-related mental illnesses her friend had told her about. He stood up to face the newcomer.

“Hello!” he said cheerfully. “I’d love to know – which part of the universe do you hail from? Don’t think I’ve met anyone of your species before.”

“My home planet is a small world deep inside the Vardesti Nebula,” said Veralashtar. “My people are known as the Haruna.”

Finn found herself anticipating the click with which each sentence was concluded whenever he spoke. It reminded her of something, but she couldn’t remember what.

“The Vardesti Nebula!” said the Doctor, raising his eyebrows. “Goodness, you are a long way from home. That’s about as far away from Earth as it’s possible to get. Even I’ve hardly been there – just swung by for a quick visit a couple of times. Keep meaning to get back there some day for a proper look. So, what are you doing here?”

“I am assisting Mr Cunningham in the realization of his vision,” said Veralashtar.

“Ah, yes – his vision,” said the Doctor. “We were just discussing that. Apparently you’re going to explain to us exactly what it is, yes?”

*

Waiting outside the door, Harkness turned as one of his men approached along the hallway. His name was Hilliard, and it was he who had relieved Finn of her mobile phone. He now had it in his hand as he came to a halt in front of Harkness.

“Miss Thornton’s mobile, sir,” he said. “Someone’s tried to ring her a couple of times, and now they’ve sent a text. What do you want us to do, sir?”

“Give it here,” said Harkness, holding out his hand. Hilliard handed it over, and Harkness scanned the calls and text. All from someone called Gaerwyn.

“I’ve done a bit of checking, sir,” said Hilliard. “The local doctor in Cwm Seren is called Gaerwyn Price. She’s a friend of his; she’s staying with him.”

“Good work, Hilliard,” Harkness approved. He considered for a moment. It wouldn’t do to have Doctor Price raising the alarm in other quarters. How best to head him off without arousing suspicion?

“Something else, sir,” said Hilliard. “May and Driver found the point in the perimeter fence where those two must have got in.”

He frowned slightly.

“It was strange, sir. The three bottom strands of wire – well, they hadn’t been cut. There were about two feet or so of each just – missing. They searched for the missing bits, but they just weren’t there. And apparently the wires weren’t severed, in the normal way – Driver said the ends looked more as if they’d been *fused*. Bit odd, sir.”

Harkness thought back, and remembered Mr Cunningham had implied that the Doctor might have had something, some kind of unusual equipment, on him, despite having been searched. As soon as he came out of that room, Harkness decided, he was going to be searched again – by Harkness himself.

“Get the wires replaced, as a priority,” he ordered. “Let me know as soon as it’s been done. Good job, Hilliard.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Hilliard smartly, and left.

Harkness looked back at the phone in his hand, then operated it to return Doctor Price’s last call.

“Hello – is that Doctor Price?” he asked.

“Yes – who’s this?” came Gaerwyn’s slightly startled voice. Of course, he’d been expecting to hear Finn, and instead here was a strange man calling him with her phone.

“My name is Robert Harkness. I work for Mr Jason Cunningham,” Harkness said smoothly. “I just thought you ought to know your friend Miss Thornton had a little bit of a mishap during her walk. Nothing serious, but a bit of a tumble. I’m afraid she’s sprained her ankle. We found her and we’re taking care of it. She’s resting now, but she asked me to call you and make sure you weren’t worrying about her.”

“Can you bring her home?” Gaerwyn asked. “I can take care of her here.”

“Unfortunately I can’t spare anyone to drive her back until at least tomorrow,” Harkness said. “But she’ll be perfectly comfortable here overnight. I’ll detail one of my staff to deliver her back to you tomorrow morning.”

“Can I speak to her, please?” Gaerwyn asked.

“Well, as I said, she’s resting at the moment,” Harkness repeated. “I’m sure she’ll be in touch as soon as she feels better. I’ll be back to you in the morning to arrange a suitable time for her return, all right, Doctor Price? Thank you so much.” And he rang off before Gaerwyn could get another word in.

He thought for a moment or two, putting the phone into his breast pocket. He wasn’t sure how successful he’d been in allaying Doctor Price’s concerns. He’d better brief the staff as to how to respond if he – or, indeed, anyone else – tried to get in touch with the girl again. But at least he, Harkness, had now bought a few hours more in which to find out how Mr Cunningham wanted to deal with the situation.

And his next task would be that second search of the Doctor. He smiled to himself, and waited.

*

“You’ll see, Doctor, what can be achieved with knowledge beyond that of our world,” Cunningham said, gesturing at his alien collaborator. “Without Veralashtar’s help, my plans would have remained unrealized. But with the science and technology of his culture, I will be able to do even more than I at first dreamed.”

“What made you accept his help, Mr Cunningham?” Finn asked. “You sounded as if you suspected every alien encounter of being a danger to us. What convinced you otherwise in his case?”

“Ah, Miss Thornton, you mistake me,” Cunningham said, wagging a reproving finger at her. “Not all alien races are hostile, any more than all human beings are hostile. Here on our own planet we have many wars going on, but by far the majority of people want peace. The same is, I am quite sure, true for the many races throughout the universe. The

majority of them will be peaceable. It is the ones who are aggressive that we must guard against. Veralashtar, being of a peace-loving race himself, is in complete sympathy with my aims.”

“So – sorry to bang on about this, but – what exactly is it you’re doing?” the Doctor interposed.

Cunningham gestured at Veralashtar, inviting him to speak.

“Mr Cunningham came to the conclusion that, lacking other means by which to accumulate the necessary knowledge, it would have to be achieved through the power of the human mind. My people are profound students of the abilities of intelligent minds. They have established, through means of measurement that your race has not discovered –”

“Not my race,” the Doctor contradicted indignantly, *sotto voce*. Finn permitted herself a brief silent laugh at his reaction, then turned her attention back to Veralashtar, who continued to speak over the interruption.

“– that thought operates at speeds far in excess of the limits placed upon physical matter and energy. A pulse of normal energy emitted from this planet would take millions of your years to travel across the universe. However, a pulse of thought travels immeasurably faster, and especially if a path has been prepared for it.”

“A path?” the Doctor repeated.

“Does not water flow more quickly if a channel has already been dug to guide it?” Veralashtar asked.

“Imagine, Doctor, a single source point, with countless channels emanating out from it in all directions,” said Cunningham, taking up the narrative. “Extended far enough, each of those channels reaches every quadrant of the universe. For quite a number of years Veralashtar has been creating those channels, an invisible multipointed star of pathways along which mind, thought, can travel. Those pathways are now in place. We are on the brink of sending out the mind that will traverse them.”

“Whose mind, exactly?” said the Doctor, sternly.

“Mine,” said Cunningham, triumphantly. “It has been my vision, my purpose to protect the Earth. It will be my mind that will be the means of doing so. With the help of Veralashtar.”

“How?” asked Finn. “What are you going to do?”

“My mind will be sent throughout the universe,” he replied. “I will encounter every intelligence, everywhere – countless billions of them. I will be able to scan every thought, every source of knowledge, and harvest from them all the information they harbour. Every item will be returned along those channels back here to Earth, where it will be accumulated and stored for analysis and interpretation. And from it, we will construct a database of all possible knowledge that we may need in order to protect ourselves from every conceivable future alien threat to our race and our planet.”

His eyes flashed with fanatical fervour – it was almost as if he wasn’t seeing them at all, so full was his mind of the visualization of his purpose.

The Doctor’s expression was correspondingly grim. He addressed Veralashtar.

“And exactly what kind of energy are you using to create these channels of yours?” he challenged him.

“It will probably mean nothing to you,” said Veralashtar, dismissively. “An energy that is currently dormant, but will become activated when Mr Cunningham’s mind travels along the pathways across all the universe. I doubt you will have heard of it. Merotronic energy.”

But only too clearly the Doctor had. He looked aghast.

“Merotronic energy?” he yelled, leaping to his feet, Finn following his example. “Are you mad? It’ll kill, or damage, billions of minds!” He rounded on Cunningham. “Is this your grand vision for protection of the Earth? Slaughtering countless billions of innocent beings on millions of other planets, in the name of protecting this one? What about them? Who’s going to protect them from *you*? You’ll be the very thing you’re trying to shield humans from!”

Cunningham looked momentarily uncomfortable.

“Come, come, Doctor, you exaggerate,” he protested. “Of course we have discussed the possible side effects on those whose minds we contact, but Veralashtar has assured me the risk is minimal.”

“Then he’s lying,” the Doctor snapped. “If you knew anything about merotronic energy, you’d realize just how much! If you do this, Jason Cunningham, you’ll kill across the universe on a scale even the Daleks couldn’t aspire to. Is that what you want your legacy to be? Survival at all costs? Darwinism taken to its ultimate outcome – oh, yes! Won’t you be proud of yourself? The Saviour of the Earth – and the Slayer of the Universe!” he concluded scathingly.

Cunningham looked somewhat taken aback by the virulence of the Doctor's attack. He glanced uncertainly at Veralashtar, who displayed no reaction. Apparently reassured by this, Cunningham resumed his normal manner.

"Even if what you say is true, Doctor – and I beg leave to doubt it, since you are obviously so hostile to the whole concept of the project – it is often the case that a minority must be sacrificed for the greater good of the majority. And" – he held up a hand to forestall the Doctor's next outburst – "no matter what you say, I am determined to do whatever is necessary to stop other families losing their loved ones to the peril of alien invasion, as I have lost mine."

"And you?" the Doctor challenged Veralashtar. "You apparently really do know what you're doing. You condone this, do you?"

"I believe Mr Cunningham to be sincerely motivated in his purpose," said the Harunan. The tiny tentacles either side of his mouth undulated calmly up and down. "I am willing to do everything in my power to further the outcome he desires."

The Doctor opened his mouth to try again, but Cunningham overrode whatever he'd been about to say.

"I see no point in continuing this discussion," he said abruptly. "Clearly you are not in sympathy with my aims. I had hoped, Doctor, to persuade you to play an active part in the outcome of this project. However, you have made it powerfully evident that you cannot be persuaded. Therefore, as I cannot risk your interference at this late stage, I'm afraid you must be prevented from any such attempt."

He strode to the door and opened it. "Mr Harkness, would you join us, please?"

The Doctor moved to stand beside Finn, and put a hand on her shoulder, fumbling for a moment before giving the nape of her neck a reassuring squeeze. She looked at him with anxious eyes. He smiled at her, and gave her shoulder a little shake. Slightly heartened, she watched Harkness come into the room.

"Mr Harkness, it will be necessary to offer Miss Thornton and the Doctor our hospitality overnight. *Secure* hospitality," he emphasized. "They may remain together, but please be sure that wherever you put them, they remain *there*."

Harkness nodded, pleased.

"Yes, sir!" he acknowledged swiftly, and looked at the Doctor and Finn. "Right, you two – out!" he ordered.

The Doctor gave Finn's shoulder another little shake, ending in a gentle push, so she led the way toward the door. Harkness hardly looked at her; his eyes were fastened on the Doctor as they walked past him.

The Doctor had almost reached the door when he suddenly halted and spun on his heel.

"Oh – one last question, Mr Cunningham," he said. Cunningham, who had been about to confer with Veralashtar, looked at him sharply.

"You know all about me," said the Doctor. "Well, almost all about me. Well, a great deal about me. Well, a fair bit about me. You've obviously been studying me for years. You almost leapt on me when you realized who I was. The thing is, if you know me that well – how is it you had to look me up to recognize me?"

He raised his eyebrows pointedly at Cunningham, who looked confused. His mouth dropped open, but he said nothing; clearly he didn't have an answer to offer.

"Someone as important as me?" the Doctor went on with a hint of a drawl. "With all your information gathering systems, you must have – ooh, probably hundreds of pictures of me as I am now. And yet you didn't know who I was. Wonder why not?"

He looked at Cunningham significantly.

"It's a question that keeps getting asked round here, I've noticed – 'Why didn't I remember?' So why didn't you remember, Mr Cunningham? Makes you wonder whether there's anything else you aren't remembering, doesn't it? Interesting line of enquiry, don't you think?"

He studied the look on Cunningham's face for a second, then turned around and went on past Harkness, out of the room.

As he did so, he had the distinct feeling he'd got Veralashtar's undivided attention for some reason. The Harunan's indecipherable alien gaze followed him intently as he left – he could virtually feel it like a pressure spot on the back of his head.



Chapter 10

The Mystery of The Disappearing Sonic Screwdriver

Harkness followed him out, and shut the door. Hilliard was waiting in the hallway.

“Right, hold it there!” snapped Harkness. “Hilliard, keep them covered. If either of them so much as twitches, shoot – but not to kill! I’m going to search them again. You can get that coat off, for a start,” he addressed the Doctor. “And your jacket. I don’t trust you, Doctor.”

“Oh, but I trust you, Mr Harkness,” said the Doctor unexpectedly, as he took off his coat and dropped it to the floor, followed by his jacket. He stood there in his shirt sleeves, looking at Harkness with a very enigmatic expression.

Harkness stared back at him for a second, puzzled. Then he shrugged dismissively and conducted a thorough body search of the Doctor, carefully checking arms, legs, and flanks, followed by an equally painstaking examination of the jacket and coat and trouser pockets, producing all the same innocuous paraphernalia his men had found earlier. This time, the sight of the leather wallet provoked one of the Doctor’s memories in Finn’s mind, and she recognized the psychic paper.

Thinking of the sonic screwdriver, which must surely surface at some point under such a meticulous examination, she watched with a sinking feeling.

Yet, once again – no sonic screwdriver.

The Doctor looked across at her, obviously divining her thoughts. His left eyelid closed in the briefest of winks. She fought to keep her face impassive, despite her astonishment – and, despite everything, her amusement. How on earth did he do it?

Eventually Harkness gave up. He’d been so sure he’d find something his men had missed, but both the Doctor and his clothes were innocent of any device he could classify as even the vaguest potential threat.

“Can I put my jacket back on now?” the Doctor enquired brightly.

“Hilliard, if he so much as twitches in the wrong direction as he does it, you know what to do,” Harkness snarled, unable to think of a reason to refuse.

“You know, I’ve got a friend called Harkness,” said the Doctor conversationally. He caught sight of Finn’s expression; the phrase ‘friend called Harkness’ had obviously fired up another of his memories, and her face was a picture of astonishment. She opened her mouth to speak, but he held up a finger to cut her off. “Yes, it’s true – he can’t – he really can’t... Look, I’ll explain the ‘not able to die’ thing later, all right?”

He turned back to Harkness, who was clearly baffled by this exchange. “The thing is, I’ve come to the conclusion that my friend can’t be related to you. Because *he* knows how to crack a smile.”

Harkness ignored him, and turned to Finn.

“Now you,” he ordered. His search of her was impersonal but thorough – and, as she has known it would, it revealed nothing. While it was being done, the Doctor shrugged back into his jacket and coat, under Hilliard’s watchful eye.

Satisfied at last, Harkness stepped back.

“Right,” he said. “Now we put you somewhere safe.”

He noticed Finn’s look of apprehension, and spoke in a slightly less severe tone of voice. “Relax, Miss Thornton. We’re not complete savages, no matter what you might think. Mr Cunningham wants you confined, not dead. Hilliard, bring up the rear. You two – follow me.” He gestured with his automatic rifle. “This way. Now.”

*

Veralashtar watched Cunningham with careful attention. The man had clearly been unsettled by the Doctor’s last question.

“This Doctor,” he said, diverting Cunningham’s thoughts. “He might be a serious threat to our plans. He is dangerous. Perhaps he would be better – removed.”

Cunningham balked at that suggestion.

“No!” he protested. “We owe him too much. He has saved us countless times in the past, and I’m sure will do so again. He is too valuable to us as a race to be destroyed. But you’re right that he is a threat to our project. That is why I’ve ordered Mr Harkness to secure him. We’re so close now – just a day, perhaps two, away from our mindlaunch. We only need to confine him until then. Once it’s over, there’s nothing he can do. No, the Doctor lives, Veralashtar,” he concluded firmly.

He looked keenly at Veralashtar to gauge his reaction, but, as ever, it was completely impossible to deduce what was going on in the brain behind those alien features.

“You are a merciful man,” said Veralashtar in that almost totally expressionless voice. “I hope you are also a wise one in this regard. I will return to my work now. There is much I must do if we are to be ready.”

His whole body rotated on that strange foot of his, and glided to, and through, the door.

*

“Right, you’re in here,” directed Harkness.

He and Hilliard had escorted Finn and the Doctor to a building in the complex that seemed to be a row of living quarters. A quick survey showed the one they were now in to be just two rooms – a combined bedsitting room and kitchen, and a small bathroom. Three of the walls were blank brick; there was just the one door, and two windows – one for the main room, one for the bathroom.

“Basic – but I’ve been in worse,” said the Doctor, with a shrug.

“Hilliard’ll bring you some food,” said Harkness. “Then you get locked in, and there’ll be someone outside at all times, right? And if you try to leave, they’ll have orders to stop you in any way necessary.”

He was about to go, but Finn stopped him.

“Mr Harkness, can I ask you a question?”

He looked at her impassively.

“Something I overheard earlier today,” she said. “About someone who works here being missing, is that right?”

His expression became more alert.

“Addison, was that the name?” she persisted.

“Not that it’s any business of yours,” he said brusquely, “but, yes. Why?”

“Is he in his mid-thirties, blue eyes, fair hair, about five foot eight?”

Now he was looking at her with concentrated attention.

“Yes,” he said. “Peter Addison. What do you know about him? He failed to report for work this morning, and we haven’t been able to locate him. Do you know where he is?”

“I think I do,” she said. “I think it was him I saw yesterday evening. He was found wandering in the woods near the village. They had to take him to hospital.”

“Hospital?” Harkness exclaimed. “Why?”

The Doctor watched Harkness's body language with interest. His automatic rifle, which had been raised before, now hung almost disregarded at his side, and he had begun interacting with Finn not as a captor with a prisoner, but as a policeman might interview a witness.

Under all that military bluster, the Doctor conceded to himself, there was a professional, simply intent on doing the best job of which he was capable.

"Because his mind was completely gone," Finn said bluntly. "His body was intact – he could stand, sit, walk. But only if someone else physically moved him to start him doing it. He had no intelligence left at all – you could see it when you looked in his eyes."

She couldn't suppress an involuntary shiver at the memory; Harkness noted it, and believed her.

"But the thing is, Mr Harkness," she went on, "what happened to make him like that? He was all right the day before, was he?"

"Yes," he said slowly. "He was here as normal. I saw him myself."

"And I'm guessing that if you knew of anything that could have done that to him, you wouldn't be hiding it?"

Harkness drew himself upright, affronted.

"Of course not!" he snapped.

She held up a placatory hand.

"But someone must know," she suggested. "If he was here, and only here, whatever happened to him, must have happened here, mustn't it?"

Harkness stared at her, thinking hard. She was right, he realized. She was obviously telling him the truth, so something profoundly damaging had happened to Addison, and it could only have happened here, on the Cunningham estate.

But what? And who? And why hadn't they said anything? His own men would have reported to him instantly if they knew of anything amiss. Which left Mr Cunningham – unthinkable! – or Mr Veralashtar and his staff.

He focused on Finn again.

"You've given me useful information, Miss Thornton," he said. "I'll see what I can do with it. In the meantime, Mr Cunningham's orders stand. You stay here – both of you" – he glanced briefly but meaningfully at the Doctor – "and don't give us any trouble."

"I don't like trouble, Mr Harkness," Finn assured him. "I never cause it intentionally, I promise!"

"Maybe so. It's the trouble you might cause unintentionally that worries me," said Harkness dryly, with an unexpected flash of humour. "Right – Hilliard'll bring you some food shortly."

He looked from her to the Doctor, his face impassive, then turned and went out. After a few seconds, a key turned in the door lock with a click. Outside, they heard him speaking to Hilliard.

"I'll stay here until you get back. Get them some food – the kitchen staff'll have something you can pick up. And get back here as soon as you can. I've got something I need to see to."

"Yes, sir!" they heard Hilliard reply, and then the sound of his footsteps fading away.

The Doctor plumped down on the edge of the bed. Finn looked at him quizzically.

"Well, *you* were uncharacteristically quiet during all of that," she observed. "What came over you?"

"Oh, you didn't need me," he said cheerfully. "You were doing beautifully all by yourself. If I'd chipped in, I'd've probably just got his hackles up again."

"You do seem to have that effect on him," she agreed, sitting down next to him.

"Well, it's that 'military mindset' thing," said the Doctor, by way of excuse. "It always brings out the worst in me. But – and this is something you won't hear me say very often! – I might have been wrong."

Finn assumed a suitably exaggerated expression of astonishment. The Doctor pulled a face at her, and went on, "About Harkness. In a way. Perhaps. Actually," he admitted, "I think he might be quite susceptible to reason."

"Oh, yeah? What reason?"

"I have the feeling he has no idea what Cunningham's really up to. I can't help wondering what he'd say, and do, if he did. Although, I think the one who's really up to something is Veralashtar. I'm pretty certain he's got his own agenda, and

I somehow doubt it's an altruistic wish to see the human race protected. I have this nasty feeling there's more going on here than Cunningham realizes. Veralashtar certainly hasn't told him the truth about merotronic energy."

"Merotronic," repeated Finn. "That's not triggering anything of yours in here." She tapped her forehead. "What is it? What makes it so dangerous?"

"Something the Shadow Proclamation banned from use millennia ago," said the Doctor.

The words 'Shadow Proclamation' did stir one of the Doctor's memories in Finn's mind, and she nodded to indicate her comprehension.

"It's a form of energy that affects mental processes," continued the Doctor. "Sometimes it occurs naturally, sometimes it can be artificially generated. What makes it so dangerous is that when it becomes active, it damages or destroys any mind that comes into contact with it." He suddenly jumped to his feet and strode up and down the small room. It was, Finn felt, not unlike sharing a broom cupboard with a tornado.

"It'll be like a tsunami!" he burst out. "All that power released to roll out across the whole universe – with his mind surfing on the edge of the wave in all directions, absorbing all the knowledge of all the intelligences it encounters! That's a potential disaster on an incredible scale! And doesn't he realize his brain'll never be able to cope with that scale of input? Even mine wouldn't! And that's saying something."

Finn looked as if she was biting down hard on a facetious reply to that last remark.

"Looks like you need a plan, then," she said, instead. "You're the genius in the room – do you think it'll take long?"

He stopped short, and with one of those mercurial mood changes of his, treated her to a wide, self-satisfied grin.

"Actually, no, it won't. Already done it."

"Thought so," she said. "Let's all share and enjoy, then."

"Well, we'll wait until after our supper's been delivered. In fact, we'd probably better wait until the wee small hours of the morning. Then we'll have to get out of here, for a start," said the Doctor.

"And that would be how, exactly?" Finn enquired. "I suppose you're going to produce the sonic screwdriver out of thin air this time?"

The Doctor grinned smugly.

"Not quite," he said, and leaned over her.

To her astonishment, she felt his hand moving around inside the hood of her jacket – somewhere Harkness had not examined when he searched her – and then enlightenment dawned. She remembered the way the Doctor's hand had felt as if it had been fumbling at the back of her neck when they were in Cunningham's drawing room.

"Oh, you are *disgustingly* clever, aren't you?" she said admiringly, as he straightened up.

"Oh, yes," he agreed with a huge, silly smile, dextrously flipping the sonic screwdriver and catching it again with a flourish.

Chapter 11

Playing When Misled

It wasn't very long before they heard Hilliard approaching. He and Harkness exchanged a few words, then the key turned in the lock. Hilliard came in, carrying a tray with some sandwiches, fruit, and a couple of bottles of water, which he put down on the small table in the kitchen area of the room.

Harkness stood at the door, silently observing.

Finn suddenly thought of something.

"Mr Harkness," she said. "Look – you do realize I'm going to be missed? I'm staying with friends in Cwm Seren. They'll be expecting me to come back this evening."

"Not now they won't," said Harkness. "They think you've had a bit of an accident, and we're looking after you and'll be taking you back tomorrow."

“Oh,” said Finn. Clearly that was a dead end. Although in one way she’d hoped Gaerwyn wasn’t worrying, in another, she’d hoped he was. That way, someone might have started investigating what was going on here. But what Harkness had done would prevent that.

As Harkness stepped aside to allow Hilliard back out through the door, the Doctor suddenly spoke.

“Mr Harkness,” he said, very politely. “A very quick question...”

“What?” said Harkness, shortly.

“What do you make of Mr Veralashtar?” the Doctor enquired.

Harkness looked a bit nonplussed.

“I don’t have much to do with him,” he said. “Why do you want to know?”

“Oh, I was just wondering where he came from,” said the Doctor. “He’s a bit of an unusual character, wouldn’t you say?”

“He seems perfectly normal to me,” Harkness contradicted. “I know Mr Cunningham’s always very pleased with his work. And – not that I have to tell you anything! – he came to us from Kerala.”

“Kerala?” repeated the Doctor, unable to keep his surprise out of his expression. “Kerala, India? You think he’s from India?”

“Unlike you, I’m not in the habit of repeating myself,” said Harkness acidly, and shut the door.

The Doctor looked at Finn. She clearly shared his astonishment.

“What –?” she began, blankly.

The Doctor, mind racing, suddenly held up a finger, cutting her off.

“Of course!” he exclaimed. “I should have thought of it earlier. He said his race were profound students of the mind, remember? The abilities of intelligent minds. If they’ve studied the subject in that depth, they’ll have found a method of perception manipulation – bound to! Like a perception filter, but generated by mind alone, not by technology. That’s why nobody but Cunningham knows who he really is. They aren’t seeing or hearing him as he really is. They’re seeing and hearing exactly, and only, what he wants them to.”

“So why didn’t you and I see him that way?”

“Oh, perception filters don’t work on anyone who’s got telepathic ability,” said the Doctor.

“But I haven’t –!” she denied, but then broke off as realization dawned. “Oh! Have I, now? From you?”

“Yup,” the Doctor confirmed.

“Oh,” she said, uncertainly, then changed the subject. “That click that follows every sentence he speaks. It keeps reminding me of something, but – oh, here’s that awful phrase again! – I can’t remember what.” She looked frustrated.

“It’s a sort of sonar click,” said the Doctor. “Like a whale. Or a hippopotamus. Except this one operates through the air. Bit unusual, that. I really must take that trip to the Vardesti Nebula one of these days, find out how the natives communicate...”

He stood lost in thought for a moment, then snapped back to the matter in hand.

“Anyway, he’s obviously managing to make everyone think he’s a normal human being. An Indian scientist, from Kerala. Probably makes his name sound plausibly foreign.”

“Except Cunningham,” said Finn. “He obviously knows who he really is. But doesn’t that mean that this perception manipulation can be applied selectively? I mean, Cunningham’s not got telepathic abilities, has he? So Veralashtar is choosing to allow him to see him as he really is. How can Cunningham trust Veralashtar not to manipulate *him*, without his realizing it?”

“He can’t,” said the Doctor, wandering over to the tray and picking up a banana. “Though he doesn’t seem to realize it.” He tapped the banana thoughtfully against his chin. “It could be going to make things rather complicated...”

“So what exactly is it you’re planning to do?” Finn asked.

“We’re going to get back into the lab and take another look at that machine,” said the Doctor, brandishing the banana emphatically. “Now I’ve got a better idea of what it does, I’ll be able to work out how to sabotage it. Whatever happens, we’ve got to stop that network of merotronic energy from being activated. And we’ve got to find out what Veralashtar wants out of all this. I have a feeling there’s something even more sinister going on than we already know about.”

Finn sighed.

“And to think all I planned to do today was take a nice quiet walk,” she said, resignedly.

“Another one of your ‘in the wrong place at the wrong time’ days,” said the Doctor, grinning at her widely. “You’re getting quite good at that, aren’t you? But look how useful they turn out to be.”

“Useful?” Finn queried, incredulous.

“Yeah – you end up helping to save the world,” said the Doctor cheerfully. “Or, in this case, the universe. Serendipity, eh?!”

Finn gave him a very old-fashioned look.

*

Preston looked up from his computer screen as Harkness came into his work room.

“Ullo, Mr ‘Arkness,” he said cheerfully. “What can I do for you? Found Peter yet?”

“He’s nowhere on the Cunningham estate,” said Harkness, accurately yet misleadingly. “I was wondering if you’d remembered anything else that might help us find out what’s happened to him.”

Preston leaned back in his chair.

“Sorry, not a thing,” he said. “I wish he’d flippin’ turn up again. Mr Veralashtar says we’re going for another test run tomorrow – a longer one, this time – and I could’ve done with an ‘and. There’s a lot to get ready. Don’t reckon I’m gonna get much sleep tonight.”

“Remind me – when did you last see him?” Harkness asked. “Addison, I mean.”

“Oh, I dunno – about nine o’clock or so in the evening, day before yesterday,” said Preston. “My shift’d started about eight, but he ‘adn’t gone – he was still working on something – dunno what. He did look pretty stressed up about something, though. Wouldn’t say what it was – I did ask him. Said it was nothing.”

“So the last time you saw him was in the control room?” said Harkness, gesturing vaguely in the direction of the end of the corridor. Even as head of security, he’d never personally been inside; Mr Cunningham was very adamant that only he himself, Veralashtar, Preston and Addison were allowed access.

“Well, yeah,” said Preston. “He suddenly sort of jumped out of his chair, and rushed out without saying anything. No idea where he went after that.”

Harkness pursed his lips, thinking hard. For some reason, the Doctor’s question about Veralashtar was niggling at him.

“Mr Veralashtar,” he said. “What’s he like to work with?”

“Oh, knows his stuff, that man does,” said Preston enthusiastically. “He’s flippin’ genius, he is. Comes out with stuff that’s completely brilliant. Dunno where it all comes from! But I’ll tell you what, Mr ‘Arkness,” he said, leaning forward, “because of him, we’ve made advances in science that’ll blow the socks off some people, once we publish. He says we’re nearly ready – just gotta do the final experiment. I tell you, I wouldn’t be surprised if there wasn’t a Nobel prize at the end of all this. He doesn’t seem to want publicity, Mr Veralashtar, but it’s only a matter of time before he gets worldwide recognition – you mark my words.”

Harkness was sometimes amused by the clichés Preston employed in his speech, but he was too preoccupied for that at the moment. Whatever else he said or did, Preston knew his subject and his science, and clearly had no fault to find with his colleague on that front.

Yet the Doctor obviously had a real concern about something to do with Veralashtar, and – even though on a personal basis the man managed to irritate him to an extreme degree – Harkness somehow felt that he, too, knew his subject and his science, and that if he thought there was some sort of problem – well, maybe there was.

He’d sometimes heard Mr Cunningham talk about the Doctor, and he knew he rated him very highly. Perhaps he’d better take his concerns direct to Mr Cunningham. But first, another word with the Doctor...

“Okay,” he said. “If you think of anything else, let me know.”

“Certainly will, Mr ‘Arkness,” said Preston jovially, and turned back to his work.

*

Despite the length of the summer evening, it had become dark enough for the external lights to come on. Hilliard looked up quickly as Harkness approached.

“Anything wrong, sir?” he asked quickly.

“No,” said Harkness. “I just want another word with Miss Thornton and the Doctor.”

“Right, sir,” Hilliard acknowledged, and fished the key out of his pocket.

Finn was lying on the bed, and the Doctor, his feet on the table, was tipping back in his chair. Both sets of shoes hit the floor at the same instant as they reacted to Harkness’s entry.

“Mr Harkness,” said the Doctor in welcome. “What can we do for you this time?”

Harkness spread his feet, cradled his automatic rifle, and looked the Doctor straight in the eye.

“Let’s get something clear, Doctor,” he said. “You irritate the hell out of me. You’re a right royal pain in the backside, and the sooner I never have to lay eyes on you again, the better I’ll like it. But my professional judgement is telling me to listen to what you have to say. Miss Thornton says Peter Addison’s mind is gone, and that whatever caused it must have happened here. I’ll concede that. I’ve got a feeling you’ve got an idea about what happened to him. I’m listening.”

“It’s going to sound incredible,” the Doctor warned him. “The most incredible thing you’ve ever heard. Completely insane.”

“Please, Mr Harkness,” said Finn anxiously. “Listen to him. He really does know what he’s talking about, even if it sounds impossibly far-fetched.”

Harkness didn’t know why he trusted this girl’s judgement, but for some reason he did.

“All right, Miss Thornton,” he said. “I promise not to shoot him just for having bats in the belfry, whatever he says.”

She smiled at him gratefully, and he turned his attention back to the Doctor.

“All right, Doctor – what’s this incredible story, then?”

“Right!” said the Doctor, swivelling his chair so its back was towards Harkness, and straddling it, folding his arms across the back. “It goes something like this. Jason Cunningham wants to save the world. Good intention. Brilliant intention. He wants to do it by gathering information – quite literally, intelligence gathering – from other life forms throughout the universe. So this planet can use that information to protect itself from alien threats. And what luck! Veralashtar turns up to help. Does things no-one else can do.”

(Harkness remembered Preston’s comment – ‘Comes out with stuff that’s completely brilliant. Dunno where it all comes from.’)

“Helps Cunningham build something that’ll do the intelligence gathering. Cunningham thinks it’s just a case of sending out his signal, picking up what he needs, and bringing it back again. What I know, and what Veralashtar is apparently not telling him, is that the way it’s been set up won’t just take the information from all these billions of minds he’s going to contact. It’s going to take most of the minds, too. It’ll destroy those minds. Like Peter Addison’s. That’s what happened to him. He must have found out what’s really going to happen. So somebody destroyed his mind. So he couldn’t tell anyone. Not you, not Mr Cunningham, not anyone. And what Veralashtar also isn’t telling Mr Cunningham is that he’s as much at risk as all those other minds.”

The Doctor looked at Harkness intently.

“I think your employer is honest and sincere, but I also think he’s been lied to. Croquet players’ve got a term for it, you know – they call it ‘playing when misled’. And Veralashtar’s misled every person here. I think he’s up to something he’s not telling Mr Cunningham about, and I think that if he’s allowed to get away with it, it may just be one of the greatest disasters in history. Because, Mr Harkness, despite what he’s making you think, Veralashtar isn’t from this planet at all.”

Harkness’ face registered his instinctive rejection of that flat statement, but the Doctor ignored it.

“He’s making you see and hear what he wants you to see and hear, not what he really is. He told me himself, he comes from a planet clear across the universe from here. Whatever he really wants, it’s not likely to be the preservation of the human race. I think he’s just using Cunningham’s good intentions for reasons of his own. I wonder if you’d like those reasons? If you’d agree with them?”

The Doctor sank his chin down onto his forearms and stared darkly at Harkness, who found his gaze uncomfortably disconcerting.

“What you’ve got to decide, Mr Harkness, is whether I’m really telling you the truth. And you’ve got to decide, if you condone what’s going to happen, how you’ll feel if all this stuff I’ve been telling you is true. Whether you’re going to live the rest of your life thinking, ‘I could have stopped it’. And I don’t think you’ve got very long to make up your mind. Because it’s going to happen tomorrow.”

Harkness’s face was expressionless. He stared at the Doctor for several seconds, then looked at Finn. Her face was troubled and apprehensive, willing him to accept what he’d heard.

Without a word, Harkness turned on his heel and left.

Finn looked at the Doctor and bit her lip, wondering if Harkness had believed a word he’d said. The Doctor looked back at her, and, for once, said nothing.

Chapter 12

The Veralashtan Imperative

Jason Cunningham, installed in an armchair in front of the fireplace, raised his head at the sound of a knock on the door.

“Come,” he called.

The door opened and Harkness came in. He looked uncharacteristically perturbed about something. Cunningham put down the book he was reading, and looked at him carefully.

“Mr Harkness,” he said. “Is there a problem?”

“In a way... Sorry to trouble you at such an hour, but – well, that is – can I have a word, sir?”

Cunningham indicated the chair opposite, and Harkness sat down, ill at ease, on the edge of the seat.

“Now, what’s the difficulty?” Cunningham enquired.

“We’ve had news of Addison, sir,” said Harkness.

“Addison?” Cunningham exclaimed. “Have you found him?”

“Not exactly, sir, but I now know where he is. He’s in the local hospital.”

“Hospital? What on earth happened? How did he come to be there?”

“It was Miss Thornton who told me, sir. She said he’d been found wandering in the woods above Cwm Seren.”

“Well, we must get him back! I trust whatever has happened to him isn’t serious? We need his expertise, urgently.”

“Well, that’s the thing, sir. It does sound serious. According to Miss Thornton, his mind’s been completely blanked. Wiped. He’s alive, but – in a way, it sounds as if he’s not.”

Cunningham frowned.

“The thing is, sir,” went on Harkness, “the Doctor and Miss Thornton have been telling me the most fantastic story. But one of the things they said was... Well, whatever it is you’re going to do tomorrow – the Doctor said that what happened to Addison is going to happen” – he hesitated – “again. To others. And he doesn’t trust Mr Veralashtar. He said – well, I can’t quite believe what he said. But he seems to think Mr Veralashtar hasn’t been telling you the whole truth, and that you might be at some personal risk. And if he’s right, that comes within my sphere of responsibility, sir. Because I’m in charge of your security. Not just your property, sir. You, personally.”

Cunningham sank back in his chair, thinking furiously. The Doctor had obviously revealed information to Harkness that Cunningham would rather he had not. The man’s loyalty to and concern for him were obvious, but the Doctor must be – surely had to be! – mistaken. Veralashtar’s record of achievements over the last fifteen years couldn’t be dismissed so cavalierly! Yet...

Cunningham wavered.

The Doctor’s record also couldn’t be dismissed. He’d always had the best interests of mankind at heart, as he’d demonstrated time and time again. Not just as a group, but as individuals.

And Cunningham was still troubled by the Doctor’s jibe about not remembering him, having to look him up. Cunningham was aware of the side effects of the many years of testing on the local population, especially as a result of the

intensification in the schedule he himself had ordered in reaction to the death of his wife and daughter. Was it conceivable he himself had been affected?

He looked at Harkness.

“I appreciate your concern, Mr Harkness,” he said. “I still think the Doctor’s concerns are unfounded, but possibly further investigation might be prudent. Perhaps, despite the lateness of the hour, you’d be so good as to bring him and Miss Thornton to see me?”

“Yes, sir,” said Harkness, hiding the irrational surge of relief he felt at the decision. “Right away, sir.”

*

The Doctor and Finn looked at the door as the key turned in the lock once again. This time, it was Hilliard in the doorway, his rifle raised and pointed at them.

“Come with me,” he said. His voice sounded flat and mechanical.

The Doctor looked more closely at him. Hilliard’s eyes stared unblinkingly, but not directly at either of them.

“Come with me,” he repeated in the same flat tone.

“What –?” began Finn, but the Doctor waved her to silence.

“I think you’d better do as he says,” he advised, seriously. “Whoever ‘he’ is. Because that’s not really Hilliard talking.” She looked from his face to Hilliard’s, and comprehension began to dawn.

“Perception manipulation?” she asked.

“Yup,” said the Doctor. “And while I might trust Hilliard not to shoot us, I don’t feel the same about Veralashtar.”

Finn looked nervously at Hilliard, who jerked his weapon in a ‘come on’ gesture. She swallowed, and began to move towards the door, the Doctor on her heels. Hilliard stepped back to allow them out, then indicated a direction with his rifle.

“That way,” he instructed.

Finn and the Doctor began to walk, conscious of the inimical black maw of the barrel trained on their backs.

*

Harkness came round the corner of the building, and stopped dead. Hilliard was nowhere in sight, and the door of the apartment stood open, the exterior lights throwing its shadow over the opening.

He strode over and looked inside. The lights were on, but the Doctor and the Thornton girl were gone.

He looked at the gravel outside the door. It was undisturbed, and the interior of the apartment showed no sign of disturbance. So whoever had moved them had done so without any kind of struggle. But what had happened to Hilliard?

“What the hell is going on?” he demanded out loud.

*

With no particular surprise, the Doctor and Finn found themselves being directed by Hilliard to the Accumulator control room. As the double doors slid open, they saw Veralashtar waiting for them.

Hilliard, who had been behind them, walked round to stand beside Veralashtar, who reached out and took in his tentacled hand the pistol from the guard’s belt holster. He raised it and pointed it at Finn’s temple. She flinched, and the Doctor tensed.

“Doctor, you will allow Hilliard to put handcuffs on you, or I will shoot this female dead. Do you understand?” The very lack of emotion in the voice lent a chilling conviction to the statement.

The Doctor nodded and held out his wrists. Hilliard locked the bracelets into place. Then Veralashtar changed the aim of the pistol to point at the Doctor. This time he needed to say nothing. Finn followed the Doctor’s example. As Hilliard stepped back, Veralashtar lowered the pistol.

“You will return to your post,” he said to Hilliard. “If anyone questions you, the prisoners tricked you and broke out, and you have been searching for them, but have not been able to find them so far. You will suggest to your superior officer that they have escaped onto the moorland, and he should search for them there. You will remember nothing of what has happened in this room. Execute your instructions.”

Hilliard turned and walked stiffly out of the room. The doors slid to behind him, and Veralashtar operated a red button on the wall beside them.

“The doors are now locked,” he observed. “No-one can disturb us.” He touched a control on the panel, and suddenly they each found themselves standing in a shaft of light.

One of the Doctor’s memories surfaced in Finn’s mind – this was a forcefield, acting like a holding cell. He’d been in one of these before; she had a brief image of a blonde girl – the name ‘Rose’ came into her mind – confined within a similar column of light alongside him, and a wizened, distorted creature seated in some kind of mobile chairlike machine, whom his mind identified for her as Davros. Davros had used technology similar to this to confine him.

The memory dissolved as she focused again on what was happening here and now.

“You must be very frightened of me,” said the Doctor. “Handcuffs *and* a forcefield. I’m flattered.”

“It is my practice to take no unnecessary chances, no matter how slight the risk,” said Veralashtar.

“And you’ve decided I’m a risk, have you?” the Doctor enquired.

“You were beginning to direct Mr Cunningham’s attention too near to the truth,” said the Harunan. “I suggested your destruction, but he refused.”

“Well, good for him,” the Doctor approved.

“He felt your protection of this planet merited the continuation of your life,” Veralashtar continued. “I have no such scruples. I suspect you are a threat to my plans, Doctor. Therefore you must be removed.”

“I was right, then,” the Doctor nodded. “Plans within plans. You’re doing something Cunningham has no idea about, aren’t you? Ostensibly you’ve been building a machine that will do what he wants, but you’re using the situation to get something you want, too. You’ve been working for all these years, hiding your identity from the people around him using perception manipulation, so they think you’re just another human being.”

“Your deductions are correct,” said Veralashtar.

“So what’s behind it all?” the Doctor asked. “What is it you’re doing that he doesn’t know you’re doing?”

“Mr Cunningham believes I approve his project as the ultimate expression of philanthropy towards the human species. My true motivations are unknown to him. He believes I left my own planet voluntarily, and that my offer of help was an expression of the kind of altruism he himself believes in. But I did not leave my own planet voluntarily.”

While the voice remained impassive, the click at the end of each sentence became more forceful, conveying a rise of emotion. Frustration? Anger? Even hate?

“My world is not a well-known one. We have thus been able to pursue our scientific enquiries without attracting attention, or interference. The Haruna are students of the mind. Perhaps the greatest such students in the universe. And I am the greatest of them. I made discoveries and breakthroughs that should have placed me at the pinnacle of recognition for my achievements. But in my zeal I had taken my research of the abilities of the mind into areas of which my colleagues did not approve. Having discovered the capacity for perception manipulation, they forbade its use, even for purposes of research.”

Veralashtar made a gesture of negation.

“To me this was a fatal prohibition upon the freedom, the right to follow scientific enquiry no matter where it leads, an application of misguided ethics. When I persisted in following my own lines of research, they proscribed them. I was banished – exiled from my own planet – forbidden the recognition my discoveries merited. The punishment was published to, and endorsed by, the whole of my race. With their small minds, their failure of vision, they thought they had controlled me, prevented me from following the path of my destiny.”

“Oh, dear,” said the Doctor, resignedly. “I was afraid you were going to say something like that. Once someone like you starts talking about their destiny, reason and common sense have always left the building.”

“When I am done, Doctor, reason and common sense will have been obliterated from the entire universe.”

The Doctor frowned.

“Why? What exactly are you going to do?”

“When Mr Cunningham’s mind is sent throughout the universe, it will not be travelling alone. At the outset, mine will go with him – he believes I will be providing an initial thrust of mental energy.”

“Like a booster rocket?” interposed Finn, who had been following all this attentively, though obviously with great disquiet.

“As you say,” agreed Veralashtar. “What he does not know is that I will activate a signal, a wave of energy, that will travel with him after my mind has detached itself. This is something to which my continued research using perception manipulation led me. My greatest discovery!”

A hint of exultation conveyed itself in the normally impassive voice.

“A form – perhaps the ultimate form – of mind control. I have chosen to call it the Veralashtan Imperative. The subject is allowed to see, do, feel, think, only what I allow. It will be seeded into every mind with which he makes contact and which survives that contact. Eventually his mind, and the Veralashtan Imperative, will reach even the Vardesti Nebula. It will overtake all those who thought they could control me. Instead, I will control them. Along with all other intelligent life in the universe.”

“And what happens to Cunningham in all this? What happens when his mind comes back with all that knowledge, and he finds out what you’ve done?” asked the Doctor.

“But his mind will not come back,” said Veralashtar smoothly. “The knowledge he seeks – certainly, that will be sent back along the paths of merotronic energy, to be fed into the Accumulator. But his mind will not return. It will not be able to. It will continue onwards across the universe until his physical brain burns out. He will die.”

“And you’ve fixed it so he’ll never know how his scheme was perverted,” said Finn, unable to hide her disgust. “At least he’s trying to do something positive, even if he’s going about it the wrong way. But you! You don’t care how many people you lie to and kill, do you? You’re trying to hide behind the justification of the pursuit of pure science, but in reality you’re just plain evil.”

“Evil is not a word in my vocabulary,” said Veralashtar. “I do not admit its worth or its meaning. Ultimate power, ultimate control – these are the only attributes I recognize.”

“Deny what you like – it doesn’t change the truth about what you are,” said Finn, scorn overriding her other emotions – even her fear.

She caught the Doctor’s expression.

“Oh, come on, Doctor! Why shouldn’t I tell him what a monster he is? You know perfectly well he wouldn’t be telling us *any* of this if he expected us to be able ever to repeat it to anyone.”

“I was hoping you hadn’t realized that,” said the Doctor unhappily. “Though I suppose it was a bit obvious, really.” He looked at Veralashtar. “What are you going to do with us?”

“I shall take your minds,” said Veralashtar promptly.



Chapter 13

Two Heads are Better than One

“Is that what you did to Peter Addison?” Finn challenged him, trying to suppress her instinctive shudder of fear at what was effectively a death sentence. “Did he find out what you were doing? Did you take his mind, to hide your tracks?”

“That is correct,” Veralashtar confirmed. “He was, for one of your race, quite intelligent.”

“Not *my* race!” contradicted the Doctor again. Veralashtar ignored him.

“I have incorporated much Harunan technology into this machine,” Veralashtar went on, “which I believed was beyond the comprehension of the humans who assist me. Preston, for instance, has not been able to deduce the purpose of it; he simply has a blind belief that he is working for a genius whose abilities are beyond those he can aspire to, and is happy to suppose that reflected glory will fall upon him as one of my assistants.”

There was the slightest intimation of scorn in his voice.

“Addison, however, was too clever. He began to suspect. Eventually his suspicions hardened into conviction, though he could demonstrate no incontrovertible proof. He made the mistake of challenging me. I revealed my true self to him, whereupon he realized he was trying to oppose someone who could not be opposed. I allowed him to escape, to think he had nearly reached safety, that he would be able to tell those in authority on this world his story. Of course, they would not have believed him. But I allowed him that hope – and then, at the last moment, I took it away. Along with everything else that he was.”

“So, not just amoral, without compunction, and completely ruthless, but a sadistically cruel megalomaniac into the bargain,” said the Doctor with contempt. “Oh, do you know, Veralashtar, you’re such a stereotype! I’ve met so many like you, it’s positively tedious. Why couldn’t you have come up with something more original than ‘I want to rule the universe?’”

Veralashtar ignored the question.

“The female’s mind is probably worthless, but yours, Doctor – you will be a rich source of knowledge indeed. A foundation to which to add all the knowledge that the Accumulator will compile. The foundation of my power over those countless billions of lives.”

He considered them both, the tentacles on each side of his mouth moving in animated waves.

“However, since the female has been so vociferous in her disapproval of my actions, I shall accord her the privilege of being the first to have her mind obliterated.”

This time, the click at the end of his words conveyed a sinister sense of satisfaction.

*

Harkness stood by the door of the armoury, wondering where to look next. Before he searched anywhere else, he'd better report to Mr Cunningham – he ought to be told why his instruction hadn't been carried out.

Harkness let himself into the armoury to use the wall phone inside the door. He dialled and heard Cunningham's voice saying, "Yes?"

"It's me, sir," he said. "I don't know how, but the Doctor and Miss Thornton are gone, and so's the man I left to guard them."

There was a pause. "I see," said Cunningham quietly.

"I'm looking for them now," said Harkness. "I'll let you know as soon as I've got anything to report, sir."

"Thank you, Mr Harkness," said Cunningham. "I'm sure, knowing you, that will be very soon." There was a click as he hung up.

Hoping he was right, Harkness replaced the receiver and went back outside. He had just relocked the door when he caught a sudden movement in the gloom. Hilliard had appeared, walking slowly and with a strange, stiff gait back toward the living quarters.

"Hilliard!" Harkness bellowed. "Where have you been? What's happened to the Doctor and Miss Thornton?"

There was an odd pause before Hilliard replied. His body retained that strange stiffness, though in the gloom of the external lights his face was hard to see, half in shadow.

"Sorry, sir – they tricked me," he said. "They broke out. I've been looking for them. I think they got away over the moor. I think we ought to search that way, sir."

"Broke out?" Harkness exclaimed. He felt a spurt of anger. He'd trusted that Thornton girl, fool that he was! And he'd begun to believe the Doctor was sincere, too. He felt betrayed.

"So what happened?" he demanded. "How did they get past you?"

"They tricked me, sir," Hilliard repeated.

"How, exactly?" Harkness insisted.

There was another pause.

"They tricked me, sir," Hilliard repeated yet again.

Harkness opened his mouth to unleash a verbal blast at him – and then stopped.

There was something strange going on here. Hilliard's voice was flat and mechanical, not his usual voice at all. Harkness was suddenly remembering something the Doctor had said about Veralashtar. 'He's making you see and hear what he wants you to see and hear.'

He stared at Hilliard, an inchoate suspicion of the truth beginning to coalesce in his mind.

He also remembered something Miss Thornton had said – and he'd believed her when she said it: 'I don't like trouble, Mr Harkness. I never cause it intentionally, I promise!'

If she'd really broken out, as Hilliard claimed, he suspected it would only be for a very good reason indeed.

He looked closely at Hilliard.

"I think I'll take another look around here first," he said.

"No, sir," said Hilliard. "We've got to search the moor, sir."

Harkness thought fast. This insistence had the flavour of an attempt to deliberately mislead. Good strategy – misinform your opponent, make him concentrate elsewhere, so he didn't give attention to your real location or purpose. Was Hilliard disloyal? Or did that strange vocal delivery, that stiff, unnatural way he held himself, mean something else? That what he was doing was beyond his own control, as the Doctor had hinted?

"One more look around here, first," he repeated, to see how Hilliard would react.

"We *must* search the moor, sir," Hilliard insisted. "Now!"

Harkness half turned, as if he was going to walk away. Instantly Hilliard raised his gun. But before he could pull the trigger, Harkness's own rifle butt had made abrupt contact with the side of his head, and he folded to the ground.

"Sorry, son," Harkness muttered. "But I really, really don't feel like searching the moor, okay?"

He looked around for a brief moment, then hurried away, in the direction from which Hilliard had come.

Already there was a hint of luminosity spreading from the eastern horizon upward into the night sky – it wouldn't be that long before the first pale glow of dawn would be visible.

He might not have too much time.

*

Still trapped in his forcefield, the Doctor watched with increasing concern as Veralashtar strapped Finn into one of the chairs in front of the control panel.

He'd released her forcefield, but her feet were now tied not only together but also to the column of the chair leg, while a broad strap had been passed around her torso to bind her into the chair itself, which at the moment was turned toward the Doctor.

Veralashtar was now lifting the headset by the right hand operator station.

"You've got to stop this, Veralashtar!" the Doctor shouted. "Let her go! She can't harm you! It's me you should be worrying about!"

"You are mistaken, Doctor," said Veralashtar, not even turning to face him. "I have not 'got' to stop this. I do not have to do anything I do not wish to do. Certainly nothing that you tell me to do. I am free of all control by others. I *will* be free of all control by others." This time there was clearly an expression of emotion in his voice. "It is *I* who will control!"

Finn looked over at the Doctor, her face pale. She was very afraid, he could see, and yet – suddenly she managed to smile at him. He felt both his hearts swelling with pride for her. Humans! What they were capable of, even at moments like this! He just had to smile back.

And then – she winked at him.

His mouth dropped open as he suddenly comprehended what she was conveying to him.

His face froze for a moment as he realized he'd overlooked the obvious in fairly spectacular style.

Though, he excused himself swiftly, perhaps it was the operation of the machine that was playing havoc with his mind – after all, it wouldn't be the first time somebody had forgotten something crucial during the last few hours! Including himself...

Then his expression metamorphosed into the biggest grin of which he was capable.

But Finn was forced to turn her head away, as Veralashtar put the headset onto her. He carelessly swivelled the chair so that she was sideways on both to the control panel and the Doctor. Veralashtar, on the other hand, had his back turned to the Doctor and therefore couldn't see what he was now doing so urgently. Oblivious, the Harunan reached forward and operated controls with his multi-tentacular hands.

Then he closed the final switch.

Finn expelled a sharp exclamation of agony, and her face contorted, eyes screwed shut, as she tried to deal with the sudden onslaught against her mind. It felt as if countless blades were being thrust into her brain, trying to pierce her psyche and sever the links of her intelligence.

Her breath came in short, painful gasps, and her body tried to bend forward in an instinctive reaction to the violation she was experiencing, though she was unable to, because the strap held her upright. Her fingers convulsed into claw-like rigidity, then clenched into white-knuckled fists.

It was surely inevitable that she was going to give way. No human mind could resist such a pitch of attack.

Yet, incredibly, she wasn't succumbing. Something was enabling her to resist what Veralashtar's machine was doing to her.

The Harunan had clearly been expecting an instant result, and his body language – despite the alienness of said body! – indicated extreme perplexity.

"This is incorrect," he said. "You are a human female. Your mind should not be capable of this resistance."

The Doctor knew why it was happening, though.

Even as his hands worked frantically to access the inner breast pocket of his jacket – a task agonizingly hindered by the handcuffs – he closed his eyes and sent his own mind flowing towards Finn, making contact with that part of his mind – a Time Lord's mind – that was in hers, giving her the ability to endure what she was experiencing.

'Come on, come *on!*' he screamed at himself, inside his own head, as he fought awkwardly to get the sonic screwdriver out of the pocket.

There!

A brief burst of light and the handcuff on his right wrist unlocked. He instantly switched the device from his left hand into his right, changed the setting, and fired it off. The column of light trapping him vanished.

The Doctor thumbed the sonic screwdriver to another setting and pointed it at the other headset, even as he leaped toward the machine. He grabbed the headset with a swift movement, and before Veralashtar could react to his presence, jammed it over the Harunan's head.

Instantly the creature jerked upright, arms and tentacles rigid, the entire body vibrating and trembling.

Ignoring the immobilized alien, the Doctor sprang over to Finn's chair and snatched her headset off.

She slumped, her eyes closed and her breath coming unevenly, but she was at least semi-conscious. The Doctor freed her feet, then the strap holding her body into the chair, and caught her in his arms as she sagged forward.

"Okay, okay, I've got you," he assured her, pushing her back into the chair. "Come on, Finn, come back to me! Come on!"

Her eyelids fluttered open, and her eyes focused on his face. For a moment she looked totally blank. Then she smiled weakly.

"Took your time, didn't you?" she whispered.

"Well, I had to work out what to do," he said, with a grin. "After all, I was in two minds. Mine – and yours."

"Personally," she said, her voice gaining strength, "I've got half a mind to tell you to remember from now on which of us had the sonic screwdriver last – and that'll be the half a mind that's yours!"

She pulled a face at him. "Does having your head in mine mean I'll be making puns on a regular basis from now on?"

"I wouldn't put it past me," admitted the Doctor. "But right now we need to get out of here. He won't stay like that for long. Can you stand?" He had the sonic screwdriver out, freeing her from the handcuffs.

Finn slid out of the chair and nodded. She looked anxiously at the quivering Harunan.

"What have you done to him?" she asked, putting an uncertain hand to the side of her head.

"A sort of repeating sonic boom," said the Doctor. "It's not called a sonic screwdriver for nothing, you know," he added, brandishing the item in question happily. "Anyone whose physiology produces a sonar-type click like he does was bound to be ultra-susceptible to a bit of sound scrambling. At the moment it's blanking out all his motor functions. But it'll weaken soon. So we need to move – now! Come on!"

He grabbed her hand and virtually dragged her toward the double doors.

At that exact moment, someone on the other side starting banging on them.

The Doctor skidded to a halt and hesitated. Then he heard the voice on the other side.

"Open up!" it demanded loudly. "If there's anyone in there, open up! Now!"

"Ah, the dulcet tones of Mr Harkness," said the Doctor happily. He opened the doors.

The first thing Harkness registered was the girl's white and stressed face, then the fact that the Doctor was holding her wrist, evidently intent on getting her out of the room as fast as possible.

Harkness opened his mouth to speak, but then he caught sight of Veralashtar. He stared in astonishment.

"What the hell is *that*?" he demanded.

"Oh, that's your Mr Veralashtar, that is," said the Doctor airily. "Only he's not in a state right now to operate the perception manipulation he's been using on all of you to keep you thinking he was someone he wasn't. So now you can see him as he really is. That's what he's been lying to you about, Mr Harkness. Well, one of the things. And as soon as he gets his senses back he'll be trying to stop us."

"Stop us from what?" Harkness asked, still staring at the Harunan.

"From stopping him," said the Doctor. "And while I think you'll be free of his spell now you've seen him in his proper form, I somehow don't think the same'll be true of your colleagues. I have the feeling the first thing he'll do is get them all back here to help him. So I really think we ought to do one of the things I do best."

"What's that?" Harkness demanded.

“Run!” said the Doctor over his shoulder as he began to sprint along the corridor, still hanging on to Finn’s wrist as she went with him.

Shaking his head in confusion, Harkness turned and followed.

Chapter 14

Emergency Measures

Alone in the control room, Veralashtar’s body continued to quiver, but gradually the tremors began to subside.

When his abused nerves were at last quiescent, he removed the headset and remained immobile for a few moments, taking stock of the situation. Then he turned toward the control panel, and replaced the headset on his head.

A small tentacle operated one of the controls on the panel, and he began to broadcast his instructions.

And all over the Cunningham estate, people suddenly stopped what they were doing. The ones who had been asleep, woke. Security guards, house staff, technicians, wherever they were, stood immobile for several seconds.

Then they all began to walk, with that same slightly unnatural, stiff gait that Hilliard had displayed, to the control room building where Veralashtar waited for them.

*

Cautiously, the Doctor poked his head round the corner of the armoury building, and breathed a sigh of relief. Veralashtar was undoubtedly marshalling his troops, but he hadn’t yet got anyone guarding this particular door.

“Quick!” he snapped, and ran towards it, already brandishing the sonic screwdriver. He threw the door open and ushered the other two inside, then leaped inside himself and locked it behind them.

The first thing Harkness did was try the phone, but then he held the receiver out toward them.

“Dead,” he said. “Veralashtar must have disabled the system. I can’t warn Mr Cunningham.”

“What are we doing here, Doctor?” Finn asked. “I thought you didn’t like guns.”

“I don’t,” said the Doctor promptly. “Sometimes, though, I rather like blowing things up. Big bangs and flashes – very spectacular!”

He made for the section where the electronic detonators were, swept one off a shelf and brandished it in her face.

“Now – think carefully,” he said. “Cos most of the stuff you got from me’s been stuff I’ve been thinking about recently. So – bearing in mind we were in here only a few hours ago – here comes a trigger phrase. Do you know what I know about setting detonators in plastic explosives?”

Harkness watched in mystification, not understanding the tenor of the question, as she closed her eyes and thought.

Then, from slow beginnings, her eyes still closed, a huge smile began to spread across her face.

He felt as if he could almost see the mental connection between her and the Doctor as she opened her eyes and they grinned at each other.

“Oh, you’re brilliant!” declared the Doctor.

“Only because you are,” she retorted.

The Doctor swung round to face Harkness.

“Right, Mr Harkness, we need every detonator and every bit of plastic explosive we can carry!”

“Hold on! What exactly is it you’re planning to do?” Harkness wanted to know.

“Veralashtar knows I’ll be trying to stop him,” said the Doctor rapidly. “He’ll have everyone now either looking for us or else guarding key points – like the control room, the power house, and so on. And here, of course. Obviously he’s not going to let us get anywhere near Cunningham, either – can’t have us telling him the truth, now, can he? So what can we possibly do to stop him?”

Harkness shifted his rifle suggestively. “We can fight our way through!”

“Ye-e-es, but that probably means innocent people will die, or at least get hurt,” demurred the Doctor. “Not terribly keen on that – sorry. So, what else is there?”

Finn stared hard at him, realization dawning on her face.

“Am I out of your *mind*?” she said incredulously. “More to the point, are *you*? Whichever one of us is thinking this, it’s mad!”

Harkness looked at her, blankly. “What *are* you talking about?”

“Let’s just say our minds are running along the same lines, shall we?” suggested the Doctor. “We aren’t left with a lot of options, are we?” he said to Finn.

“I hate the way you’re using *logic*,” she accused him.

“I know – it’s a really unfair way to argue, isn’t it?” he apologized lightly.

Finn turned to the bewildered Harkness.

“He’s talking about blowing up the mast,” she explained.

“If we can disable that mast,” said the Doctor, “it won’t matter what else Veralashtar does or doesn’t do. He won’t be able to transmit anything. He can’t send Cunningham’s mind out to eventual oblivion, he can’t activate the merotronic energy that’ll destroy all those billions of minds, and he can’t send his precious Veralashtan Imperative out to control the ones that survive.”

Harkness nodded to show he followed the reasoning.

“So – we need two things,” said the Doctor.

“Detonators and plastic explosives,” agreed Harkness.

“All right – three things, then,” said the Doctor, adjusting quickly.

“What’s the third?” asked Finn.

“Another way out of here,” said the Doctor. “If there isn’t somebody already on guard out there, there will be – or else they’ll be coming in here for extra weapons. So we have to get what we need and get out of here, fast. Mr Harkness? *Please* tell me you didn’t build this place with just one entrance.”

“Come on, Doctor,” said Harkness with brisk efficiency. “Let’s get the stuff together. Then, follow me.”

The Doctor sighed with relief, snatched up the biggest haversack he could find, and started scooping detonators into it.

“Why’ve you got such a big armoury, Mr Harkness?” he asked chattily as he worked. “Can’t be because you have to fight off all the rabbits trying to infiltrate the estate.”

“Mr Cunningham wants to be prepared for every possible eventuality,” said Harkness, handing him packs of plastic explosive.

“What, like aliens invading him here?” The Doctor shrugged, acknowledging the possibility, though as a unlikely one. “An alien invading *from* here doesn’t seem to have occurred to him, does it?”

“Perhaps not,” Harkness admitted. “But looks like his preplanning is going to help deal with that possibility too, doesn’t it?”

“You’re a very loyal man, Mr Harkness,” said the Doctor, for some reason picking up a coil of climbing rope to add to his load.

Within five minutes, laden with as many explosives and detonators as they could collectively carry, they were heading towards the back of the building, where Harkness stopped them by a large square area of clear floor space, outlined with metal edging, close to the wall.

“Don’t stand on that,” he directed, and reached toward a keypad on the wall, punching numbers into it.

Finn took a startled step backwards as the outlined area suddenly started to sink a few inches, then slide sideways, to reveal a metal stairway.

“Come on, Miss Thornton,” Harkness directed.

The Doctor followed Finn down the stairs.

His head was just level with the floor when there came a sound from the front of the armoury. He and Harkness both turned their heads at the same instant. Someone was opening the main door.

The Doctor threw his haversack down at Finn, who only just caught it, and abandoned the stair treads, sliding down with both hands and feet on the railings.

Harkness did much the same, elbowing him aside to get to the keypad below that closed the door again.

As soon as it had slid into place, the Doctor pointed his sonic screwdriver at the keypad. There was a spurt of flame and a shower of sparks.

“Nobody’ll be getting that open again in a hurry,” observed the Doctor. He peered along the dimly lit tunnel that stretched away from where they stood. “Right – where does this come out?”

“On the moor to the east of the house grounds,” said Harkness. “We’ll be about a mile and a half from the mast.”

“Come on, then,” said the Doctor, slinging his haversack on his back. Finn and Harkness did the same with theirs. “Ker-wick march!”

*

Jason Cunningham stood at the window, positioned so that he was looking toward the east and the rapidly lightening sky.

The sun rose so early at this time of year. Today it was rising on one of the most important days in the history of mankind. Now, in spite of the Doctor’s misgivings, he, Cunningham, would realize his dream for the means to protect the Earth from all potential future threats, no matter what the source.

It might have been interesting to have had one last conversation with the Doctor before implementing the project, but clearly that was not going to happen now, with him and Miss Thornton having vanished and resumed their status as fugitives. Cunningham was confident Harkness and his men would find them soon.

But in the meantime, he must ready himself for the task ahead.

A trio of photographs stood on a small table beside the window. Cunningham picked up the middle one of the three, and looked at it for long moments. His wife’s eyes smiled back at him.

“Soon,” he said to her. “Very soon. I’ll make sure no-one ever has to lose anyone again, the way I lost you. All of you.”

He put the photograph back between those of his son, resplendent in his UNIT uniform, and his daughter, passive in her wheelchair but with eyes that shone with life, and looked out of the window again.

He was ready.

*

Partially obscured by the gently waving grass, a large raised concrete rectangle was set into the turf of the mountain slope. It supported a heavy metal hatch cover, sprinkled with the detritus of moorland life – grass seeds, dead insects, shrivelled gorse blossoms and the like.

Suddenly there was a clanging sound from underneath and the cover slowly began to lift, scattering the debris as the angle of tilt increased.

Harkness emerged from the opening, pushing the cover above him until it tipped slightly backward and held there. He stepped out and offered a hand to assist Finn as she followed him.

Last, the Doctor popped out with all the energy of a cork from a champagne bottle, and scanned the surroundings as Harkness closed the hatch cover again.

More than a mile away, the mast loomed darkly against the dawn sky.

“I know how urgent this is, Doctor, but I’m not sure I can run for over a mile carrying this lot,” said Finn dismally, hefting the considerable weight of her haversack. “I don’t think I’d make much of a fist of it even if I wasn’t.”

“Okay – I’ll settle for a really, *really* brisk walk,” said the Doctor, conceding the truth of her statement. “Unless, of course, emergency measures need to be taken.” He flashed her a big grin. “Like actual running... Allons-y!”

He set off towards the mast at a rapid pace, Harkness and Finn in his wake.

*

Cunningham turned towards the ringing telephone, and picked up the receiver.

“Yes?” he enquired.

“Mr Cunningham, it is vital that we initiate the mindlaunch immediately,” came Veralashtar’s voice. “The Doctor has eluded us, and may try to interfere with the project. The sooner we start, the less chance he will have to make the attempt.”

“It’s difficult to see what he could do at this stage of the proceedings, but he can be very inventive,” Cunningham conceded. “Very well – I’m on my way to you now.”

He replaced the receiver and glanced once more at the group of photographs on the table. Then he turned and left the room with a purposeful stride.

*

Veralashtar stood in the control room, thinking. Every one of Cunningham’s staff were now deployed to cut off all access to the house and the various parts of the complex. The Doctor could not approach anywhere in the vicinity without being seen and stopped.

However, what if he, along with the female and Harkness, were not in the vicinity? It would be as well to determine where they actually were. Harkness was, in all likelihood, still with the Doctor. He could no longer control Harkness’s perception of him, but he could still follow the connection he had planted in his brain to locate him, as he had done with Addison.

He began to concentrate.

*

They had covered about half the distance to the mast when the Doctor, well out in front, suddenly heard Finn shriek, “Mr Harkness!”

He span round. Harkness was on his knees, holding his head, an expression of distress on his face.

“Doctor...” he panted. “I think he’s found us...”

The Doctor dropped to his knees in front of Harkness.

“Doctor, he must be trying to take his mind!” Finn exclaimed. “Like Addison’s!”

“Yup, okay – on it,” snapped the Doctor, and reached out to pull Harkness’s hands away from his temples and replace them with his own.

“Harkness – Harkness! Look at me! At me!” he shouted.

Harkness struggled to open his eyes. As soon as he did, the Doctor made telepathic contact, and he was fighting Veralashtar for Harkness’s mind.

Finn watched with intense anxiety as Harkness jerked spasmodically in reaction to the war being waged in the battleground of his mind, the Doctor’s face contorting in frowns and grimaces as he strove to protect that mind.

Suddenly they both relaxed, and the Doctor dropped his hands, blowing out his cheeks with relief.

“He’s given up,” he said, sounding slightly weary.

Harkness let out a long breath, sagging a little. Then he pulled himself erect again, and got laboriously to his feet, offering a hand to help the Doctor do the same, and gripping it in a handshake when he’d done so.

“Thank you, Doctor,” he said. “I think you just saved my life there. *Really* saved me – from a different kind of ‘fate worse than death!’”

“Well, you know what the staffing situation’s like these days,” said the Doctor lightly. “You need to look after the ones you’ve got, don’t you?”

They looked each other in the eye, satisfied with what they saw there.

Finn put out a hand and touched Harkness on the sleeve to indicate her relief. He nodded at her to acknowledge it, then turned back to the Doctor.

“Right – so he knows where we are now,” he said.

“And he won’t take long working out why we’re here and where we’re going,” agreed the Doctor. “So he’ll be sending someone to stop us. Sorry, Finn – time for that emergency measure!”

“Actual running,” she agreed. “Do my best!”

*

Veralashtar was indeed sending someone to stop them. He was urgently implanting instructions in the minds of all the armed security men.

“Go to the mast – quickly,” he ordered them. “Locate the Doctor, the Thornton female and Harkness, and kill them. Stop them at all costs! KILL THEM!”

He could feel the responses in the minds of the guards as, from their various locations, they moved to obey.

Just then the door of the control room opened, and Cunningham came in.

“Mr Cunningham,” said Veralashtar, assuming his customary impassivity. “Shall we begin?”

“Indeed we shall,” Cunningham agreed. “This is the greatest day of my life, Veralashtar. Let’s not delay a moment longer.”



Chapter 15

Lemons Without Sugar

The Doctor, predictably, was the first to reach the mast. He looked back. Harkness was not far behind him, Finn fifty yards or so away beyond him. As the Doctor scanned the moor behind her, he saw small dark dots moving in the distance.

“Come on!” he yelled. “They’re on their way! Finn – the cable anchors! All the ones on the south side first! Then west, then east. Harkness – the base of the mast! If you finish before she does, help her with the cables.”

“What about you?” Harkness demanded.

“I’m going up there,” said the Doctor, jerking his thumb upward over his shoulder at the mast.

As he spoke he quickly unslung his haversack, then tore off his coat and tossed it carelessly onto the ground.

“I want to make good and sure that array at the top, whatever it is, gets destroyed,” he went on, reslinging the haversack. “I think it’s absolutely key to the transmission of the Veralashtan Imperative. So I reckon a dollop of explosive all of its own would be just the thing, don’t you? Set the detonators for fifteen minutes from now.”

“That doesn’t leave you time to get up there and down again,” protested Harkness.

“Oh, I can be really quick when I need to be,” the Doctor assured him, as Finn came panting to a halt to join them.

“Doctor – do be careful,” she said, struggling to catch her breath. “You know what you told me about you and communication masts. No more lemons without sugar, promise me!”

“Well, the sooner we start, the sooner we’ll finish,” said the Doctor briskly. “Those friends of yours won’t take all day to get here, will they?” he added to Harkness, who indicated his agreement.

“Come on,” he said to Finn. “Let’s do as he says. We’ve got a lot of ground to cover.”

He unslung his haversack. With a worried glance at the Doctor, Finn began to run again, southwards, towards the nearest cable anchor.

The two men scrambled up the steps that took them out onto the concrete platform in which the mast was rooted.

As they reached the base of the maintenance ladder, the Doctor suddenly stopped and looked at Harkness.

“If anything happens to me, look after her,” he said briefly, nodding in Finn’s direction.

“I will,” Harkness promised.

The Doctor nodded, then turned to the mast and began to climb the ladder.

As he began quickly and efficiently to attach the explosives and detonators around the base of the mast, Harkness glanced repeatedly upwards to check the Doctor’s progress. He was right; he *could* move quickly – fantastically quickly, in fact.

But Harkness, looking across the moor at the progress of his colleagues toward them, was still afraid that the Doctor was going to run out of time.

*

“Please, Mr Cunningham, take your position,” Veralashtar invited, as he continued to prepare the Accumulator for operation. “Everything will soon be ready.”

“How soon?” Cunningham asked, eagerly, as he moved to seat himself at the right hand operator station.

Veralashtar studied the control panel for a few moments, making his assessment.

“I estimate something in the order of ten minutes,” he said at last.

“Then the mindlaunch will be initiated, and I will at last be on my way to the stars!” crowed Cunningham in triumph.

*

The Doctor, climbing with great energy, was now about halfway up the mast. He paused to glance downwards briefly, and saw Harkness far below, giving him a thumbs-up. So the explosives were in place around the base of the mast. Finn had finished with the southern cables, and was on her way to the western ones.

The Doctor waved to Harkness, then pointed at the eastern anchors. Harkness gave him another thumbs-up, and set out towards them.

The Doctor took a look across the moor. The guards weren’t very far away now. He wasn’t going to have time to get as far as the array itself, but if he could just get a bit further up before attaching his explosives, that should still do the job. However, he had to move fast.

So he did.

All the time deliberately ignoring the fact that none of his calculations incorporated sufficient time for him to get down the mast again and to safety before the detonators activated.

*

Finn stumbled away from the second huge concrete slab on the south side of the mast – there were four cables altogether on that side, two attached to each of the massive slabs. All four had their explosives and detonators attached. Obeying the Doctor’s instructions, she was now making for the west side. She cast a quick look over her shoulder as she went, and saw Harkness heading to the east. She wanted desperately to know how close the guards were, but her view northwards was blocked by the alignment of the mast base and the nearby radar dishes. She could only hope they were going slower than she was.

She gritted her teeth, and made the best speed she could across the uneven surface.

Harkness, unlike Finn, had a clear view of the progress his colleagues were making, and they were closing quickly. He was barely going to have time to deal with the eastern anchors before they'd be in range. Both he and Finn were going to be sitting ducks if they opened fire.

And as for the Doctor...

Harkness glanced hastily up at the mast as he began to work on the nearest anchor. The Doctor, a tiny figure at that height, was about five hundred feet up. It looked as if he'd decided he couldn't get any nearer to the array in time, and was now attaching explosives to the mast where he was.

Harkness glanced at his watch. Only three minutes before the detonator deadline the Doctor had given. Time was running out. The Doctor was never going to get back down the mast to safety before the deadline he himself had set.

Not that it was going to be particularly safe down here shortly. The guards were almost in range, and Harkness was certain Veralashtar would have given them instructions to kill.

He jammed a detonator into the last piece of explosive he'd placed, and raced towards the other anchor slab with all the speed of which he was capable.

*

"We are ready," Veralashtar announced. He took his place at the left hand operator station, and picked up the headset. Cunningham did likewise. He paused, and turned to look at Veralashtar.

"I want to express my gratitude to you, Veralashtar," he said. "Without you, none of what is about to happen would have been possible. What you have helped me to do will never be forgotten! I wish I could give you some further reward for what you've done."

"Your success will bring me my reward," said Veralashtar ambivalently. "That will suffice for me. What you will accomplish is all the reward I seek."

Cunningham smiled, gratified.

Simultaneously, they put the headsets on, and Veralashtar reached toward a button on the panel.

"When you give the word, Mr Cunningham," he said, "I shall commence the mindlaunch."

"The word is given, Veralashtar," said Cunningham. "Do it now. Let us commence the journey!"

The extended tentacle reached further, and almost delicately, depressed the button.

The hum of the control machine deepened and began to rise in volume.

Jason Cunningham felt a thrill of exhilaration as he began to feel an extraordinary, almost indescribable sensation in his head – the feeling of his mind starting to leave the confines of his physical being, to spread out in every direction on its journey across the universe.

He'd never felt so happy in his life.

*

The Doctor, installing his last detonator, was suddenly aware of a strange crackling sound above him. He looked up sharply.

The array above him was beginning to glow with a shimmering miasma of green light. Emerald sparks began to shoot along each wire, travelling between the spikes in all directions – slowly at first, but even as the Doctor watched, gradually picking up speed.

The mindlaunch had begun. If it wasn't stopped, right now, the Veralashtar Imperative would be on its way across the universe within moments.

The Doctor pulled the coil of rope out of his haversack, looped it over his shoulder, and began to hurry down the ladder. He needed a safe distance between himself and that explosive, and the seconds were ticking by.

Then another sound reached his ears. The staccato bark of automatic rifle fire. The five security guards were in range at last.

The Doctor looked hastily to the east and west. Both Harkness and Finn had dropped to the ground and were crawling away from the anchor slabs as quickly as they could, so far avoiding the bullets thudding into the ground around them.

But three of the men were now approaching the base of the mast. One was raising his rifle in the Doctor's direction, the other two had seen the explosives Harkness had attached to the mast and were on their way to disarm them.

There was no more time.

As bullets began to fly around him – some ricocheting off the mast just inches away from him – the Doctor deftly secured one end of the rope around the ladder and tied the rest off, leaving a length of about ten feet or so, looping the free end around his wrist and forearm.

Then he swiftly pointed the sonic screwdriver first above his head, then down toward the base of the mast.

The two explosions, one above him, one below, sounded almost as one.

*

Finn, rifle bullets hitting the ground all around her, was terrified. But not for herself. It was almost as if the rifle fire was an irrelevance. She was terrified for the Doctor.

There was no way he was going to get clear of the mast. She realized now he must have known that from the beginning. And surely the guard firing at him wasn't going to keep missing forever.

"Doctor!" she exclaimed, agonized.

Then her eyes widened. She instantly realized the meaning of those swift arm movements up and down. He'd deliberately set off the detonators on the mast!

Two clouds of black smoke shot through with red and orange flame exploded from the mast, one above the clinging figure, the other, much larger one at the base.

Before either had had time to take full effect, she saw his arm sweep round in a circular motion out toward the cable anchor bases. As it moved around in a semi-circle, explosions followed in its wake.

She instinctively pressed her face into the protective cover of her arms, flat to the ground, as the two bases nearest to her exploded, but even before they'd finished doing so, she leaped to her feet, staring frantically at the mast.

For a few long moments, it seemed as if the explosions had had no effect. The mast seemed still to stand motionless, an ominously dark silhouette against the increasing pale blue of the early morning sky.

Then, ponderously, with a tortured shriek of straining metal, it began to fall, with that misleading impression of slow motion that large structures give when they collapse.

The remainder of the cables having been detached by the blasts, the strain on the intact ones on the north side of the mast became insupportable. With a rapid jerk, the foot of the mast seemed to jump towards the north by about fifty feet, almost as if the lower cables had suddenly pulled it in that direction. For a few moments the shattered base still teetered on the edge of the concrete plinth. Then the whole structure began to lean to the south. The top section of the mast, bearing the array, was already almost completely severed, and began to crumple downwards, the green sparks still racing along its wires.

The northern cables finally could sustain no more of the impossible tension they were being asked to bear. With almost ear-splitting detonations, they began to snap, the severed ends lashing like whips. Deprived of its last supports, the main part of the mast began to topple with increasing velocity.

Finn saw all these things, but only in her peripheral vision. Her eyes were fastened on that small, distant figure clinging to the ladder.

Inexorably the mast was coming down. Even at this distance she could see the moment when his feet, unable to maintain their traction, slid off the rungs; his hands were still gripping the ladder, but he was falling, just as the mast to which he clung was falling.

The velocity would be terminal. The Doctor was about to plunge to his death, and there was nothing she could do. Nothing but watch him, stay with him and be with him in the only way she could, until the inevitable final moment.

Blinded by tears, she could hardly see him in the last few seconds before the tip of the mast finally impacted on the ground, tearing his grip loose. The plummeting figure was little more than a smeared dark blot on the swimming salt film filling her eyes, a blot that abruptly merged with the tear-blurred horizon line of the moor.

“*Doctor!*” she screamed, and began to run.

Part of her mind registered the fact that the shooting had stopped; she was vaguely aware of five bodies lying sprawled near the base of the mast, but she was hardly conscious of the implications. She could only think of reaching the Doctor. In the distance she could see Harkness, also running toward where the Doctor had come down.

The mast had come to rest with its base still propped up on the concrete platform, so there was a clear space of maybe thirty feet between it and the ground. At least that meant he hadn’t been crushed beneath it.

But an impact at such speed – there was still no way he couldn’t be dead.

Where was he? She must be close now to where he’d fallen. The thought of him dead drew a choking sob out of her. And then she almost skidded in an instinctive reaction to come to a halt, her arms flailing to keep her balance, her mind rejecting what her eyes were telling her.

A few yards away, from close under the shadow of the huge metal cylinder, a slim figure was rising into view. Finn simply stood and stared, too shocked to react. It wasn’t possible! It couldn’t be possible!

“Still bouncing, see?” declared the Doctor gleefully, doing so up and down on the balls of his feet.

Then he had to open his arms to accept the incoming missile that was Finn, hitting him with one of the most fervent hugs he’d ever received in his life.

They clung to each other for long moments. Then, her face still buried in his chest, she suddenly thumped him soundly on the ribs.

“Ow!” he exclaimed. “What’s that for?”

“For frightening me so!” she said defiantly, pulling back to show him a face with tears rolling down the cheeks. “I thought you were dead for sure! It was the most awful moment of my life!”

“Dead? Me?” demanded the Doctor indignantly. “Never!”

“But how – ?” she began, but broke off as Harkness ran up behind the Doctor, his face a picture of delight.

“Did you see what he did?” he demanded of Finn, full of professional enthusiasm. She shook her head, numbly.

“I wondered back at the armoury why you took that rope,” Harkness said to the Doctor, who shrugged casually. “You *planned* to fall away from the mast, didn’t you?”

“I had to use the right length so I didn’t actually hit the ground myself when the mast did,” agreed the Doctor. “A primitive form of bungee jumping, really. Nearly jerked my arm out of its socket holding on, but when the rope extended at the moment of impact, it took the edge off the pace of the fall. All I had to do then was let go at the right moment, drop the rest of the way, and roll when I hit the ground. Easy!”

Then he pulled a face and rubbed his shoulder. “Well, fairly easy,” he added, flinching a little.

“You’re a brilliant strategist and a very brave man, Doctor,” Harkness said admiringly. “You’d make a good soldier!”

“Oh, no, I wouldn’t,” the Doctor contradicted firmly. “And it’s not over yet. We need to get back to the complex, and see what Veralashtar is doing now. Come on!”

They headed back past the concrete base of the mast, so the Doctor could retrieve his coat. The five guards lay scattered on the ground like so many discarded dolls.

“What’s happened to them?” Finn asked.

Harkness went over to one of them, and stood looking downwards for a few moments, wearing a bleak expression. Finn saw that the man he was looking at was Hilliard.

Harkness knelt down, and put two fingers on the exposed neck, seeking a pulse. After a couple of seconds he got up and went over to another of the men, did the same. Then he looked up at the Doctor, grimly.

“They’re dead,” he said.

The Doctor nodded sombrely.

“I was afraid of that,” he said.

“Why, what’s happened?” asked Finn incredulously. “How can they be dead? They weren’t hit by the mast. Was it the explosions?”

“I don’t think so,” said the Doctor. “I think it’s to do with Veralashtar. Come on – we need to know what’s going on back at the house.”

He pointed across the moor. As they followed the direction of his finger with their eyes, they realized flames and smoke were rising from the complex.

Something had gone very wrong with Veralashtar’s plans.



Chapter 16

“Unforgettable – That’s What You Are”

There was no need for urgency, though. Veralashtar wasn’t doing anything. No-one at the complex was doing anything.

Nor would they, ever again.

The pall of smoke from the blazing Accumulator control room building was gradually swelling in the still morning air. Around the complex, the scattered bodies of the staff lay on the ground.

The Doctor squatted down by the body of Preston, who they came across closest to the burning building, and felt for a pulse. There was none.

And there could be no hope of anyone being alive in the inferno beyond him.

“Destroying the mast must have caused a feedback that overloaded the machine, and it blew up in their faces. And when Veralashtar died, all the minds in his control must have died at the same moment,” he said sadly.

He stood up again, and looked at Harkness.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m so sorry. I wish we could have saved Jason Cunningham. What he was trying to do was a very noble thing. He was just – well – playing when misled.”

Harkness nodded sombrely.

“At least it must have been instantaneous,” he said, keeping his voice unemotional.

“Oh, it would have been,” the Doctor assured him.

“He was a good man,” Harkness said quietly. He was silent for a few moments, then jerked his shoulders back.

“Doesn’t look as if the fire’s going to reach any of the other buildings. No breeze to spread it. That’s lucky. But this is going to take some explaining,” he said in a matter-of-fact tone. “Nobody’s going to believe us.”

“Oh, I think I know someone who might,” said the Doctor. “Have you got a phone somewhere that still works?”

*

Harkness and Finn were sitting on the steps leading to the front door of Cunningham House when the first jeep rolled to a stop on the gravel drive.

A woman officer wearing a UNIT uniform got out and came towards them, as more jeeps and trucks arrived behind her. They got to their feet as she approached.

“Captain Erisa Magambo,” she introduced herself. “You must be Fionnula Thornton? And you’ll be Mr Harkness.”

As she shook their hands in turn, Captain Magambo noted that the girl in particular looked very despondent, though both of them wore understandably bleak expressions.

“We had a call from the Doctor,” she went on, trying to hide her eagerness. “May I ask where he is?”

Finn was silent. Harkness glanced at her, then back to the Captain.

“He’s gone,” he said.

Captain Magambo sighed.

“How very like him,” she said, feeling unreasonably disappointed. “I’d been hoping to meet him again.”

“He said you’d only start saluting him if he stayed,” said Finn quietly. A slight tinge of amusement momentarily infiltrated her obvious dejection.

The corner of Captain Magambo’s mouth twitched.

“I probably would,” she agreed. “He can never get used to the idea that if anyone ever deserved saluting, it’s him.” She took a deep breath, and changed the subject.

“He gave us an outline of what happened here, but he said you’d be able to give us more detail. How much of the infrastructure has survived?”

“The one building that’s been totally destroyed is the Accumulator control room,” said Harkness. “Superficial damage only to the rest.”

“But somewhere under the rubble there’s a lift shaft that goes down about half a mile,” supplemented Finn. “There’s a huge cavern at the bottom, full of servers. When he and I were down there, he joked that the GCHQ computers could be fitted into just a tiny corner of it. He told me to tell you someone somewhere might be able to find a use for this lot. He said you might even want to take on the estate so you could.”

“I shouldn’t be surprised if he weren’t right,” said Captain Magambo. “I’m sure we can think of something.”

She looked at Harkness.

“The Doctor pointed out to us that you’re now out of a job, Mr Harkness. He suggested that you might find your qualifications and experience fitted you for a career with UNIT.”

Harkness looked startled, then nodded thoughtfully.

“You don’t have to make an immediate decision, of course,” Captain Magambo said. “But anyone who comes with a recommendation from the Doctor would be very welcome in our ranks.”

“Thank you, Captain,” he said, still mulling over the novelty of the idea.

“Something else you ought to know,” said Finn. “In the house there’s a very sophisticated software system capable of hacking into every database on the planet. Not the sort of thing to be left lying around for just anyone to start playing with, he said.”

“Thank you, Miss Thornton,” said Captain Magambo briskly. “We’ll get somebody in to look at it.”

A sergeant approached and saluted.

“Orders, ma’am?” he asked.

“Mr Harkness, would you show Sergeant Weaver here the location of the control room, and help him make an assessment of what we’ll need to do to access the lift shaft?” Captain Magambo enquired. Harkness drew himself up and saluted her. He and Sergeant Weaver exchanged looks.

“Follow me, Sergeant,” he said. They set off together, but after only a few paces he suddenly halted, then came back, fishing in his breast pocket. From it he produced Finn’s mobile phone.

“I’d better let you have this back,” he said, with a half-smile. “You’ll be wanting to get in touch with your friend. Tell him I’ll be keeping my promise – I’ll be taking you back. When the Captain’s finished with us, of course.” He glanced at the Captain, who nodded.

Finn slowly put the mobile in her pocket, then drew herself erect and gave him a smart salute, just as if she’d been a professional colleague.

“It’s been an honour to serve with you, Mr Harkness,” she said, with a slightly tremulous smile.

“The honour was all mine, Miss Thornton,” he said, and turned away.

Captain Magambo took a step or two forward so that she was standing beside Finn, watching the two men disappear around the side of the house.

“Are you all right, Miss Thornton?” she asked quietly.

“I expect I will be,” said Finn.

“The Doctor is an incredible man,” said the Captain. “It’s hard to let him go, isn’t it?”

Finn’s eyes filled.

“Yes. Yes, it is,” she said, unable to keep a slight tremor out of her voice. She looked down at the ground, then up again, with what was meant to be a laugh but sounded more like a sob. “There was something he promised he was going to tell me, you know. But he never did.”

She fell silent again.

The Captain laid a hand momentarily on her shoulder. Then she turned away, toward the ranks of soldiers lined up and awaiting her orders.

Finn turned to the west, and looked at the shoulder of Mynydd y Seren, in the direction of the place on the moor where she’d first heard the TARDIS, first seen the Doctor lying in a tumbled heap of brown coat.

What an incredible man. How lucky she’d been even to meet him this once. She didn’t blame him for leaving the way he had – after all, things like this, with people like her, must happen to him all the time. This was nothing out of the ordinary, nothing special, to him. Just another episode in an ongoing sequence.

It wasn’t his fault that she was going to spend the rest of her life wishing she could have had the privilege of knowing him for just that little bit longer.

But she wondered if he realized how hard it was, to be left behind.

When she next saw Sarah Jane Smith, she was going to be better placed to understand her feelings than she had been before. After all, now she, Finn, was the one left behind.

*

The following Saturday, Gaerwyn drove into the railway station car park and pulled into a parking space. He turned off the engine, then looked at Finn.

“Look, I know you don’t want to talk yet about whatever it was that happened,” he said. “But if ever you do, I’m here for you, Finn. And so’s Carys.”

She smiled at him.

“I know you are,” she said. “And I know you must be wondering what it’s all about. But I’m not ready just yet. One day, though – I promise.” She hesitated. “One thing, Gaerwyn – there were some bits of it that weren’t good to go through, but I promise you I’m all right. Really all right, not just telling you that so you won’t worry. It’s the truth. Because for the bits that weren’t good, there were more bits that were – well, brilliant. So don’t worry, all right?”

He looked at her for a long moment, then smiled and nodded.

“All right,” he said. “And we’ll wait to hear from you.”

“I’ll be in touch as soon as I can,” she promised. “Thanks – thanks for everything.”

She retrieved her haversack and suitcase from the car, then went to the driver’s window. He opened it, and looked at her enquiringly.

“One last thing you’ll want to know,” she said. “Those memory problems everyone’s been having. I think you’ll find it’s not going to be such a problem from now on. ‘Bye!”

Before he could reply, she hurried away toward the station door. Once there, she turned and gave him a last wave, then went inside.

She bought a ticket, and made her way out onto the platform. There were only one or two other people there, but she didn’t feel like interacting with anyone else, so she made her way toward the end of the platform and sat down on the last bench, stacking her luggage on the seat beside her rather in the manner of someone building a defensive wall.

She sat motionless for quite a while, chin propped on one hand, staring abstractedly at the tarmac in front of her. She was so absorbed in her own thoughts that she was only subconsciously aware of it when someone approached along the platform.

Then, suddenly, whoever it was stopped right in front of her.

Still staring downwards, for a moment she didn't register what she was seeing.

Then it hit her.

Red daps, blue trousers, the hem of a long brown coat.

She sat bolt upright, startled eyes widening to take in the man looking down at her with an impossibly broad grin.

"TARDIS Taxi Service, miss?" offered the Doctor brightly.

Finn leaped to her feet.

"Doctor!" she gasped. "But – I thought you'd gone!"

"I had," he agreed. "I wasn't going to hang around while UNIT worked out how to tie their own bootlaces. They can do that sort of thing without any help from me. And, besides, there's the salute thing... Anyway, I thought you might want a day or two with your friends."

"And now?" she asked, brow furrowed. "Why – I mean, I'm delighted you have, but – why've you come back?"

"Well, for one thing, I promised I'd explain about why Captain Jack Harkness can't die, didn't I?"

"I thought you'd forgotten –" Finn began, then broke off and gurgled with laughter.

"You do know I'm never going to be able to use the words 'forget' or 'remember' without thinking of you, don't you?" she accused him happily.

"Good!" said the Doctor. "Cos people use those two words all the time, every day. That means you'll think about me very often."

"I'm never going to get you out of my head, am I? 'Unforgettable – that's what you are...'" Finn sang the phrase, then grinned wickedly. "Of course, I have *got* a mind of my own – but, let's face it, I've got quite a bit of yours, too!"

"Serendipity," said the Doctor happily. "Dig for worms, strike gold. Take a walk up a mountain, end up with some of the most brilliant brain in the universe! Mynydd y Seren-dipity!"

He grinned one of those face-splitting grins of his, obviously delighted with his own wit.

"Seren means star, remember? *You're* a star, Finn Thornton. Would you like to see some?"

"See some –?" she said blankly.

"Stars," he said, as if it ought to be obvious. "Out there." He gestured upwards. "I thought you might like a quick look. Only a quick one, mind! And just the one, no more! Before I drop you somewhere? Say, at Sarah Jane's?" He grinned wickedly. "I expect you're dying to tell her all about this, aren't you?"

"If you're serious – *really* serious – *of course I want a look!*" Finn had to drop to a stage whisper, to avoid screaming with excitement.

"Oh, I'm always serious, me," said the Doctor, assuming an injured air.

"Well, usually. Well, often. Well, sometimes," Finn teased him, using his own phrasing against him. They grinned at each other. Then she looked at him more solemnly.

"Doctor," she said. "What I got in that mind transfer... Don't think I didn't pick up on the loneliness thing."

He looked at her gravely.

"And I just want to say – it doesn't have to be like that," she went on. "Not if you don't want it to be. Because any time – the one man in the universe I can say that to and mean it literally – any time! – you can just drop by, have a chat, turn up and say nothing at all, whatever you want. Then go off and start saving the universe again. No commitment, no pressure. It's just something friends do for each other, you know? And you are my friend. If I can misquote: 'You have been, and always will be, my friend.' Except – I'll probably be able to tell you what you're thinking anyway," she concluded, with a twinkle in her eye.

"Oh, that could be spooky," said the Doctor, pretending to be alarmed at the prospect. "Very spooky! But I suppose, for you, 'out of sight, out of mind' won't true in my case."

"Nope," she confirmed, with satisfaction.

“Then I’ve got a *good mind* to take you up on that – but then, in the circumstances, so have you!” he grinned. “And you can always *re-mind* me! Provided you behave yourself, of course.”

“Or what?” she challenged him. “You’ll *give me a piece of your mind*? Already done that!”

They burst into simultaneous laughter.

“You’d better take me away from all this, Doctor, and quickly!” said Finn, joyously. “Or I’ll be using this new ability for wordplay I’ve obviously got from you – wait for it! – *for time out of mind*!”

Ignoring his humorously pained expression, she looked momentarily pensive.

“The thing is,” she said thoughtfully, “puns haven’t been one of my strong points, before. I expect other people are going to notice the change. I wonder how I should explain it to them?”

“Oh, that’s easy,” said the Doctor. “Tell them it was serendipity!”



Author’s note: “Serendipity” is the first of a story arc of seven stories about the Tenth Doctor and Finn Thornton. It was originally published by TheDoctorDeborah on the DoctorWho fan fiction website “A Teaspoon and an Open Mind” in May 2010 (see <http://www.whofic.com/viewuser.php?uid=12695>).

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