

Doctor Who

THE TROAKE INCURSION

A Third Doctor short story
by
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"I ought to warn you, Sergeant," said Jo Grant, a dubious expression on her face, "he's not in a very good mood."

Benton glanced at the door of the Doctor's laboratory in UNIT HQ; Jo had just closed it behind her as he'd approached.

"What's the problem?" he enquired.

Jo pulled a face. "He's still not getting anywhere trying to get that wretched dematerialization circuit to work," she said. "You know what he's like – frustration just makes him grumpy. And he's got nothing else to distract him."

"Well, we can't be battling alien invasions *every* week," Benton observed philosophically.

"Sez you!" Jo retorted. "I could almost wish we *were*, at the moment. At least that might stop him behaving like a snapping turtle every time I speak to him!"

"Well, I might be able to do something about that," Benton said with studied casualness.

Jo looked at him hopefully. "Really? What?"

He grinned at her expression. "I'm going on leave tomorrow, and I was hoping I could persuade the Doc to come with me for a day or two. I've got a friend who says there's something odd going on where he works. Doctor-type odd, I mean," he added, knowing she'd know what he meant by that.

"Sounds just the thing!" said Jo enthusiastically. She glanced at the laboratory door, which somehow managed to look as if it was sulking just as much as the man behind it, and her enthusiasm abated slightly for a moment. "If he'll go for it, that is..." she added dolefully. Then she turned back to Benton with a wry look. "Well, it's worth a try, I suppose. Shall we take our lives in our hands?"

They exchanged smiles; then Jo took a deep breath, and opened the door.

The Doctor, seated at his workbench, looked up with an expression of exasperated impatience on his face. He opened his mouth as if he was about to castigate Jo for her reappearance, but then realized she wasn't alone, and hastily adjusted whatever it was he had been about to say.

"Oh, hello, Sergeant," he said, making a valiant attempt to moderate his tone to 'welcoming' but achieving something in which more than a hint of snappiness could still be detected.

"Something I can do for you?"

"Hope so, Doc," said Benton, determinedly cheerful. "I need a favour."

The Doctor raised his eyebrows. "Really? What kind of favour?"

"It's a bit of a story..." Benton said carefully.

The Doctor made a visible effort to abandon his ill temper, and sat back in his chair, his arms folded. "Well, I'm not getting very far here, so I suppose it won't do me any harm to take a break from what I'm doing. Or trying to do, anyway," he added, with an acid glance at the offending dematerialization circuit. "All right, Sergeant – what's this all about?"

Benton, nobly suppressing the urge to exchange a triumphant glance with Jo, relaxed slightly.

"I've got a friend – ex-Army – works at this big place down in Devon," he began. "It's on the edge of Dartmoor – one of those old houses with lots of grounds. He says there's something funny going on in the house. I'm going down there tomorrow – I've got a few days' leave – and I was hoping you might come down with me and find out what it is."

"Funny?" The Doctor's eyebrows had elevated again. "Would you care to define what kind of 'funny'?"

Benton opened his mouth, then hesitated. Clearly he suspected what the Doctor's reaction was going to be. But he went for it, all the same.

"Ghosts," he said.

"Ghosts?" The Doctor's eyebrows repositioned themselves into a scornful frown.

"That's what he says," Benton confirmed, standing his ground both literally and metaphorically. "He's seen them himself. He's a reliable witness, Doctor," he added robustly, seeing the expression on the Doctor's face. "He must have seen *something*. He wouldn't make it up. He's not that kind of bloke."

"Perhaps not," said the Doctor stiffly. "But – *ghosts*!"

"Well, why *not* ghosts?" Jo challenged, her eyes sparkling with interest.

The Doctor threw her a look of disdain. "Oh, *really*, Jo! There's absolutely no reliable, independently verifiable scientific evidence of the existence of ghosts."

"Well, it all depends what you mean by a 'ghost', doesn't it?" she retorted, and looked at Benton. "What is it your friend's seen?"

"He didn't say, exactly," Benton admitted. "He's like you, Doctor – doesn't believe in ghosts. But he's definitely seen something odd. And his wife's seen it, too, whatever it is. Look, I know Jenny," he went on earnestly. "She's as level-headed as they come, believe me, but she's scared to death. She wants to leave. Terry doesn't want either of them to lose their jobs, but he's worried, all the same. He wants to know whether there really is something to be scared about."

"And what about you, Sergeant?" the Doctor challenged. "Where do you stand on the subject of ghosts?"

"I'm with you on that one, Doctor. But I've seen enough strange things since I got to know you that I'm not going to label a good mate as loony just because he's seen something he can't explain any other way," Benton said flatly.

"Hmm..." The Doctor's eyes narrowed, and he tugged thoughtfully at his earlobe. "Well, whatever it is, at least we're agreed it won't be ghosts."

"Why not?" Jo demanded. "You're always telling me nothing's impossible. What if it *is* ghosts?"

"Absolute nonsense," the Doctor asserted, rather tetchily. "I've already told you, there are no such things."

"Of course not," Benton agreed soothingly. "But they need someone to prove it. Find out what's really going on. And you're the only person I can think of who could do that, Doc."

"Of course you are," Jo said quickly. "If whatever Benton's friends have seen aren't ghosts, I bet you'll be able to find out what it is they *have* seen. *And* in no time flat!" she concluded triumphantly.

The Doctor, it had to be said, wasn't above the occasional bit of flattery. "Perhaps you're right," he said thoughtfully. "If these friends of yours are as reliable as you say, Sergeant, then it would be interesting to find out what it is that's making them so convinced that what they're seeing *are* ghosts." He thought for a moment, then straightened up; he'd evidently made up his mind. "All right, then," he said decisively. "Bessie could do with a decent outing, so a run down to Devon would do very well." He looked at Jo. "I suppose you want to come, too?"

"Of course," said Jo robustly. "You can't expect me to stay behind if you two are going off ghost-hunting!"

"Just don't tell the Brigadier what we're doing," Benton advised, with a grin. "He'd have the lot of us confined to barracks for being off our rockers."

"I'd like to see him try!" the Doctor snorted.

Jenny Darch plumped up the pillows on the bed in the third guest room, then stepped back to survey her handiwork with satisfaction. Whichever one of their visitors occupied this room, they'd find nothing to complain of in their accommodation. Not of the things she had any control over, anyway. But how would they feel if they woke up in the middle of the night and saw... No, she wouldn't think about it! She shuddered slightly, and shook her head to dismiss that line of thought.

She strode briskly to the dark, heavy wooden door, intending to go down and start preparations for the dinner Sir Aldwyn had commissioned for later, but found herself hesitating a few steps away from it. She'd deliberately left it open, as she had taken to doing with all the first-floor doors in this wing, so she could get out of the room quickly if – well, if necessary... But she didn't want to just walk out and find – the thing...

She took a deep breath and slowly put her head forward so she could see along the corridor in both directions before she stepped out into it.

To her left, toward the main hall, nothing. To the right –

She couldn't help her instinctive reaction; she cried out in terror, and ran toward the hall.

"Terry! *Terry!*" she screamed as she emerged into the huge two-storey space, hurtling along the walkway toward the stairs.

Her husband appeared in the hallway below, and hurried up the stairs to meet her halfway, putting his arms out to embrace her.

"Again?" he asked, needlessly; Jenny choked out an affirmative. He looked up at the top of the stairway. "Did it follow you?"

"I don't think so," she gulped, her face pressed against his shoulder. "Terry, I can't take much more of this. What are we going to *do*?" The last word was almost a wail.

"Wait for JB and his friends to get here," said Terry Darch grimly. "And hope they really can find out what's going on."

When Bessie pulled up in front of the ornately crenellated and pillared porch that protected the heavy wooden front door of Troake House, Terry was waiting to greet them. Walking with a slight but detectable limp, he hurried toward them, the wide grin on his face mirrored on Benton's, as the latter leaped out of the little car to greet his old friend with a fervent handshake.

"Hello, Terror," said Benton warmly. "Good to see you. How's things?"

"Fine, JB, just fine. Good to see you, too. Been too long." He gave Benton a mischievous look. "Long time since I saw you in civvies, too."

"You be quiet, or I'll show everyone a photo of the moustache you used to have," Benton riposted. "Jo, this is Terry. Terror, this is Jo Grant."

Terry, shaking hands with her, divined the reason for her slightly puzzled glance at Benton, and said, with a grin, "Terror's what he called me when we trained together, and it stuck. I settled on 'JB' for him, but I'd better not tell you what I *really* used to call him!"

"Never mind that," said Benton with a haste that made Jo smile. "And this is the Doctor. He's going to see if he can't work out what's going on here."

"That makes you more than welcome, Doctor," said Terry fervently, turning to shake hands with him. "We're at our wits' end here, Jen and me. I hope you really *can* help."

"I'll certainly do my best, Mr Darch," the Doctor said politely.

"Well, let's get you inside, then," said Terry. "Bet you could do with a cuppa by now, couldn't you?"

"Here you are, Doctor," said Jenny, setting a cup of tea down on the red and white chequered tablecloth on the large kitchen table around which they were all sitting.

"Thank you, Mrs Darch," said the Doctor, taking an appreciative sip. "An excellent brew."

"Oh, just call me Jenny," she smiled, and collecting her own cup, sat down beside her husband. She was being the perfect hostess, but when the Doctor looked at her closely he could see the lines at the corners of her eyes and the slight stiffness in the muscles of her face that betrayed a very real underlying strain.

"Well, now," he said, turning to address Terry with an air of getting down to business. "Sergeant Benton tells me you maintain the grounds and the house, and Jenny is the housekeeper."

"That's right. We got the jobs after I was invalided out of the army, about seven years ago. We've got our own part of the house here as a live-in flat."

"Well, you're obviously a really good gardener," said Jo enthusiastically. "The gardens are beautiful!" She remembered the long drive flanked on either side by immaculately kept expanses of grass punctuated by groups of trees, shrubs and aggregations of flowering plants. Her first sight

of Troake House, nestling in a tree-encircled combe beyond which the first heather- and bracken-covered slopes of Dartmoor rose to meet the sky, had made her conclude that it was profoundly misnamed. It looked more like a small castle than a house. The original building, which had obviously had extra bits built on to it over the years in more or less matching style, was clearly many centuries old; certainly ancient enough to have acquired a ghost or two over time. She'd decided not to say so to the Doctor, though.

"Thanks," said Terry, with the slightly uncomfortable, self-deprecating smile of the British male trying to cope with a compliment.

"Are there any other staff here?" the Doctor asked.

"No, just us. Sir Aldwyn likes as much solitude as possible so he can concentrate on his work."

"And what *is* his work?"

"He made his money in electronics, but when he retired and handed his business over to his son he had one of the cellars converted into a laboratory, and now he spends all his time in it – doing research, he says. Fiddling with gadgets, *I* call it."

The Doctor smiled at Terry's pithy layman's definition. "Any idea what kind of research?"

"Not a clue," said Terry frankly. "You'll have to ask him."

"I see," the Doctor nodded. "Is he a good employer?"

"Oh, yes," said Jenny warmly. "We couldn't have been happier." Then her expression changed. "Until all of this started, that is..."

The Doctor subjected both Darches to a rather unsettlingly penetrating regard. "Yes, about that... What exactly is it you've been seeing?"

They exchanged a glance; Terry took a deep breath.

"Look, Doctor, I don't believe in ghosts, right? I'm – I *was* – a soldier. The dead stay dead." He looked bleak for a moment, then went on, "But there's something here that I don't know what else to call it. Jen saw it first." He reached out and took his wife's hand in his, giving it a reassuring squeeze. "Tell him what you saw, love."

"It was about six months ago," said Jenny flatly. "I was on the first floor landing, doing the dusting. I suddenly shivered all over, for no apparent reason. I looked round – and there was this – *thing* – standing at the other end of the landing, right by the window."

The Doctor leaned forward. "What sort of thing?"

"I couldn't see it clearly. I felt as if I ought to have been able to, but it was as if it was – blurred, somehow. It was just a shape, bulky, about as tall as me, but it wasn't solid. I could see the window and the wall *through* it, if you know what I mean." She shuddered at the recollection.

"You'd never seen anything like it before?"

"Never," she said emphatically.

"And did you go to investigate?"

"No, I did not!" Her remembered fright was clear to see. "Terry was out in the grounds somewhere, so I ran downstairs and told Sir Aldwyn."

"And by the time he got there, the apparition had disappeared, of course," the Doctor deduced. "What did he say?"

"That I must have suffered some sort of temporary optical illusion caused by the way the light was coming in through the window. Quite understandable, and so on," said Jenny tartly. She looked the Doctor straight in the eye. "Except I didn't. I saw exactly what I've described. It was there, and then it was gone. But I saw it."

"Hmmm," said the Doctor thoughtfully. Jo could see he was impressed by Jenny Darch's forthright manner. "And you've seen this phenomenon more than once, Benton says?"

"We both have," Terry interposed. "Jen saw this thing, whatever it is, several more times when she was on her own, and I'll be honest – I didn't know what to make of her story to start with. But then it happened when I was working near the house, so she got me in, and I saw it, too."

"In the same place?"

"Not exactly – it was at the top of the stairs the first time I saw it. So I went down to get Sir Aldwyn, just like Jen'd tried to do, but it was the same thing – by the time he'd come up from the laboratory, the thing had vanished." Terry exchanged another glance with his wife. "He didn't try to explain it away the way he did with Jen, but he was still pretty sceptical."

"You can see his point," Jenny said fairly. "Without the evidence of his own eyes, it's a pretty tall story." She turned to the Doctor again. "But it *has* happened, and it keeps happening."

"Too often," Terry said tersely. "She saw it again, only this morning. Up on the landing."

"I'm frightened, Doctor!" Jenny's eyes were wide and intense. "Please help us!"

"Well, I'm afraid I can't really do anything much until one of these apparitions puts in another appearance," said the Doctor. "If you don't mind our staying for a few days, perhaps one will oblige us. I'd certainly like a chat with Sir Aldwyn, if he's available. I take it he knows you've invited us here?"

"Of course," Terry confirmed. "And he said you could use the guest rooms for as long as you need to. The only thing is..." He hesitated.

The Doctor smiled. "Let me guess. They're situated on the first floor landing, aren't they?"

Jenny nodded rather uncertainly. "You don't mind?"

"It sounds to me like the best possible place from which to conduct my investigation," said the Doctor happily.

Benton and Jo looked at each other and then at the Doctor, without speaking. Oblivious to their expressions, he took another sip of tea.

"This really is excellent," he said, with relish. "But now I think we ought to take a look at this landing of yours, don't you?"

The door from the Darches' flat that gave access to the main house emerged into the vast front hall from underneath a wide, balustraded stone staircase, the right-hand one of two mirroring staircases that each led at right angles from the centre of the hall up to first floor level. From there they turned to become landings, supported by pillars reaching up from the hall floor. Both walkways

followed the walls until they reached the rear of the hall, where they turned back toward each other, meeting at a central archway. This led into a spacious corridor lined on either side with several doors before reaching the window at the end that Jenny had described.

“So, a complete cul-de-sac,” said the Doctor, surveying the corridor thoughtfully. He studied the two doors nearest them, the tip of his right thumb absently stroking the left side of his jaw in a gesture he often used when thinking deeply. “Is it all right if I take a look in all these rooms?”

“Of course,” said Jenny. She, Terry, Jo and Benton waited as the Doctor progressed along the corridor, opening the door of each room in turn and examining their interiors. Within a few minutes he’d completed his survey and rejoined them.

“Well, Doctor?” Jo prompted.

“Interesting,” he said cryptically. His eyes were slightly unfocused; he was obviously thinking very intensely about what he’d seen. “Very interesting,” he repeated, but didn’t seem disposed to explain.

In the few seconds’ silence that followed, Jo saw Benton looking around, frowning slightly.

“What’s the matter?” she asked him.

“I dunno – it’s... Can I hear some kind of humming, or buzzing?” he said, looking at Terry and Jenny.

“Oh, that,” Terry nodded casually. “Yeah. That’s the noise Sir Aldwyn’s machine makes when it’s running. His lab’s down in the cellar, but you can still hear it up here when it’s quiet enough. You get used to it, tune it out. We hardly notice it most of the time.”

Just as he finished speaking, the faint hum ceased.

“Oh, he’s shut it down,” said Jenny. “I’ll take the chance to go and tell him you’ve arrived.”

“Ah, good,” said the Doctor, abruptly emerging from his abstraction. “I’m very much looking forward to meeting him.”

Jo hung the last of the clothes she’d travelled in on one of the hangers in the obviously antique wardrobe, then stood for a moment, studying the room as a whole. The drapes of the enormous four-poster bed were made of beautiful, thick velvet, and the magnificent eiderdown was evidently hand-embroidered; she wondered how old it was. The huge full-length mirror in which she could see herself and the long frock she had chosen to wear for dinner stood in a most ornate gilt frame. All the furnishings were very – well, ‘grand’ was the word that kept occurring to her. It felt like staying in a huge, first class hotel.

Except that it wasn’t. It was an old house that harboured at least one ghost, if not more – or things that were being mistaken for ghosts, at any rate – and it was possible that one might appear at any moment...

For a moment she bit her lip, thinking about that possibility. Then she shook her head in self-reproof.

“Come on, Jo,” she told herself severely. “No such thing as ghosts, remember?”

She marched out into the corridor, closing the door behind her, and stood there for a moment, listening; there was the faint hum that Terry had said was the noise made by Sir Aldwyn's machine. She shrugged, but then, as she began to move toward the archway that led out to the stairs, she thought she caught something moving in her peripheral vision, at the very end of the corridor. She turned sharply and stared, but all was still. Taking a deep breath, she began to walk slowly along the corridor, eyes darting in every direction, but she saw only closed doors, and all was now quiet; the faint hum had ceased. Obviously Sir Aldwyn had stopped work in order to get ready for dinner.

Time she went down. When she reached the archway she glanced back once more, but nothing moved. Dismissing what she'd thought she'd seen as a figment of her imagination, she went on down the stairs.

Sir Aldwyn Troake was a tall, wiry man in his late sixties, with a long-jawed face distinguished by determinedly black eyebrows contrasting with a head of grey-white hair. He had a genial air, but there were still hints of the force of character that had helped him to found and develop a successful and expanding business. On being introduced to the visitors earlier, he'd announced how much he was looking forward to all of them joining him for dinner – an 'all' that included the Darches.

"Goodness me, we don't stand on ceremony here," he'd declared. "I often eat with Terry and Jenny in their kitchen – don't I, Jenny? It'll make a nice change for them to join me in the dining room for once."

So now here they were, host, employees and guests all clustered at one end of the long, dark dining table at which you could easily have seated twenty-six rather than just six, having just enjoyed a delicious meal upon which they had all complimented Jenny with appreciation.

"So, Doctor," said Sir Aldwyn, leaning back in his chair and taking a sip of port from his glass, "what are you a doctor of? What do you specialize in?"

"Oh, I specialize in many things, Sir Aldwyn," said the Doctor, with one of his more charming smiles. Registering his host's eyebrows, politely raised in implicit invitation to enlarge on that statement, he went on, "Including electronics. I understand that's always been your particular interest?"

"Indeed, yes," agreed Sir Aldwyn enthusiastically. "It's a field in which there are so many practical applications to be made, so many ways in which life can be improved and enhanced. When I was young I used to so enjoy doing research, but I had to scale down my activities in that area when the business started expanding, and become an administrator instead. It rather went against the grain to have to merely give directions to my researchers, rather than being able to continue doing it myself. That's the one good thing about having had to retire. Now I can return to my first love, pure research."

"And what is it you're researching at present?" the Doctor enquired.

An enthusiastic gleam kindled in Sir Aldwyn's eyes. "Ah! Well! I'm very interested in the educational potential of holograms, d'you see? Holography is still at a fairly early stage of development, but I'm convinced that it could be very fruitfully used in training techniques."

"Something rather more sophisticated than your basic Pepper's Ghost, then," observed the Doctor blandly.

Jo looked puzzled. "What is Pepper's Ghost?" she asked. "Something to do with the theatre, isn't it? I've heard the name, but I don't know what it is or how it works."

"Oh, it's very simple," said the Doctor. "John Pepper thought so once I'd shown him the basic principle, anyway," he added casually.

"Namedropper," Jo chided him. She could see Sir Aldwyn looking from one to the other of them with the expression of a man who suspects someone has just made a joke the meaning of which has escaped him, and hoping someone will be kind enough to explain it to him, but of course the Doctor entirely failed to notice it, and continued to address Jo.

"It's been used extensively for theatre productions as a way of creating the illusion that something that's off-stage is actually on-stage," he explained. "You have two areas, the stage which the audience can see, and an adjoining area alongside that they can't, with a completely dark background. You position a large piece of glass at an angle between the object to be projected and the audience, making sure the presence of the glass can't be detected by any stray light reflecting off it, and so on. The object or person to be projected is in the area the audience can't see. When a bright light is trained on it – or them – the glass catches the reflection and to the audience the object or person appears to be on the main stage as some type of ghostly apparition. Turn down the light level in the hidden room from bright to off, and as far as the audience is concerned they fade out of existence. Or, alternatively, just vanish. Quite simple, really," he concluded, with a shrug.

"A sort of optical illusion," Benton summarized.

"Indeed it is, but the Doctor's quite right," said Sir Aldwyn, steering the conversation back to its original subject. "I *am* doing something rather more sophisticated than that. You see, even now we're using optical holography to reproduce the external appearance and dimensions of a target object. My goal is to be able to produce holograms in which you can peel off the layers, so to speak, so you can see not just the outside but the inside as well. Imagine being able to show engineering students not just the exterior of a complex component, but to be able to take away the outside casing and show them what lies inside it, and how either selected elements, or else all of them, work with each other to produce the desired effect. Or to show medical students not just the exterior of the body, but to peel away the skin to show the muscles, or organs, or nerves, in any combination, and all in a 3-D recreation that they can walk around and study from all angles. Just think of the possibilities!"

It was impossible not to be infected by his obvious zeal, and Jo found herself instinctively reacting to it. "That sounds really useful!" she enthused.

"So you could make a hologram of a bomb, say, and you could use it for training people on how to defuse the real thing?" suggested Terry.

"Once a soldier, always a soldier," Jenny murmured, with a tolerant smile at her husband.

"Well, that's one possible example," Sir Aldwyn agreed. "It would certainly be the working principle, anyway, whatever field of activity you applied it to."

"A very interesting idea," the Doctor commented. "And how are you recording your interference patterns, Sir Aldwyn? Lasers, I presume?"

"Yes, but I'm working on a type of laser that operates a little differently from those currently in use." Sir Aldwyn saw Jo's uncomprehending look. "Basically, my dear, a hologram is the result of splitting a beam of light so that part of it – what we call the 'object beam' – shines directly into the recording medium, and the other part of it – the 'reference beam' – doesn't come in contact with the scene being recorded but travels directly into the recording medium. When the two beams reach that, their light waves intersect and interfere with each other – hence the Doctor's use of the term 'interference pattern'. When you shine an identical laser onto the recording medium, it diffracts the hologram's surface pattern and produces a light field identical to the one originally produced by the object you recorded, and there's your holographic reproduction of it."

"I see," said Jo, rather uncertainly, though it was fairly evident that she didn't, entirely.

The Doctor bestowed a glance of fond amusement on her, then turned back to Sir Aldwyn.

"Well, I'd certainly like to see your apparatus, if that's permissible," he said.

"My dear chap, it'll be my pleasure," said Sir Aldwyn warmly. "I have to confess I've hit one or two snags, but I think I'm on the right track now. Hopefully a couple of little tweaks should sort them. I think I might do that for the remainder of this evening, actually, so you can come down and have a look at my Heath Robinson lash-up in a few minutes' time, if you'd like."

"Indeed I would," the Doctor confirmed appreciatively. "Thank you, Sir Aldwyn – I can hardly wait."

Sir Aldwyn smiled and nodded. Then his expression changed, and he treated the Doctor to an unexpectedly penetrating look. "Now, tell me, Doctor," he said, in a more serious tone than any he had used before, "whatever it is that Jenny and Terry seem to have been seeing – do *you* think it's a ghost?" Just for a moment there was a glimpse of the more forceful side of the character that underlay his surface affability.

"If by 'ghost' you mean a physical manifestation of the personality and appearance of a person who's died but is subsequently supposed to continue to exist in some other place, then no," said the Doctor flatly. "But if you're using the term as shorthand for an as yet unexplained visual or physical phenomenon to which a scientific investigation can be applied, then I'll tolerate the use of the word 'ghost' for that – but only until a more accurate description can be substituted," he concluded, somewhat severely.

"Ah, then we think alike on that subject," said Sir Aldwyn with satisfaction.

"Well, the thing I've never been able to swallow when it comes to the reported behaviour of ghosts," the Doctor continued, "is that they seem to be uniformly two-dimensional in their approach to matter. They're perfectly happy to pass horizontally through solid objects – walking through walls, that sort of thing – but they're always constrained vertically. They don't sink down through

floors or fly up through ceilings; it seems they have to walk along floors or climb stairs just like the rest of us. If they can move freely on one axis, why not the other? That's never made sense to me."

Sir Aldwyn nodded. "That's a very interesting observation, Doctor," he said thoughtfully. "I hadn't thought of it myself, but you're right. Why should the non-corporeal obey some of the laws that govern the corporeal but not others? Fascinating – quite fascinating! A concept ripe with possibilities for speculation."

"Well, for speculation based on *facts*, anyway," said the Doctor. "Hopefully before long we'll amass some more of those to work with. In the meantime, can I just say that this really is an exceptional port, Sir Aldwyn..."

Dinner over, the party began to disperse. Jo was allowed to help Jenny clear the plates away into the kitchen, but then, on the grounds that she was a guest, got chased out to join the Doctor down in Sir Aldwyn's laboratory. She went back out into the main hall to find the front door open and Terry and Benton standing just outside, evidently talking about the extent of the grounds.

"Terry, how do I get to the laboratory?" she called out.

"The door under the stairs on the other side of the hall, the twin of the one into our flat," he told her. "Only it goes down into what used to be a cellar, before it got turned into a lab. Mind yourself on the steps – they're centuries old, and some of them've worn pretty smooth."

"Thanks for the warning!" Jo smiled, and he returned it before resuming his conversation with Benton.

Jo went to the door in question. As Terry had told her, it opened onto a flight of ancient stone steps leading downward to another door, which stood ajar, with light streaming out to augment the dim illumination provided by the single bulb hanging from the ceiling halfway down the stairwell. She could hear the Doctor and Sir Aldwyn conversing, and made her way down the steps in search of them.

At the bottom of the flight she hesitated in the open doorway, unsure whether she should interrupt; the two men were standing with their backs to her, deep in conversation. Jo took the opportunity to study the layout of the laboratory. It was a square, spacious area, totally windowless. The doorway in which she stood was positioned snugly in what she decided to call Corner 1 of the room; sturdy wood-topped benches lined every wall, their surfaces strewn with all sorts of bits and pieces of electronic equipment and machines whose purposes were totally obscure to her. On a separate, freestanding bench a few feet out from what logic dictated had to be called Corner 4, directly ahead of her, stood a large and complicated-looking piece of apparatus; it was this that the Doctor and Sir Aldwyn were discussing. Then the Doctor turned and caught sight of her, and broke off in the middle of what he was saying.

"Hello, Jo," he said. "Come to see Sir Aldwyn's hologenerator, have you?"

"Oh – is that what it's called?" Jo enquired brightly, hoping she didn't look too mystified.

Sir Aldwyn smiled. "Well, that's what I call it. It needs some further tweaking, of course; I'm still having one or two teething problems with it. The Doctor's been making some very helpful suggestions."

"I was just suggesting that Sir Aldwyn try reversing the polarity," the Doctor said, grinning at Jo with an air of conspiratorial mischief. "I told him that usually works for me..."

Jo chuckled. "Yes, it does, doesn't it?"

"I have to confess it's an approach that hadn't occurred to me," Sir Aldwyn observed genially. "I'm not even sure I'd know how to go about it! But if I can find a way, perhaps I'll give it a try. However, I have to confess this brainchild of mine can be a bit temperamental, you know," he added, gesturing at the hologenerator. "I never leave it on unattended. Don't like to risk it. A couple of times it's unexpectedly treated me to a shower of sparks, and I shouldn't like to find the whole thing had burst into flames while I wasn't looking, eh?" He smiled happily, evidently choosing to treat his machine's occasional malfunction as a challenge rather than a failure.

"Very wise," the Doctor approved. "I must say I'm looking forward to a full demonstration. You're certainly using some very interesting frequencies. If you don't mind my asking, what are you using as your recording medium...?"

Whereupon the two plunged into a technical conversation that had Jo lost after only the first few words. After about a minute she decided enough was enough.

"Excuse me," she interrupted as soon as she could get a word in edgeways, "but if you don't mind, I think I'll go to bed now. It's been quite a long day."

"And you made a long journey to get here," Sir Aldwyn said. "Of course, my dear. I hope you'll have a comfortable night. Sleep well."

"I'm sure I shall," Jo smiled. "Good night, Doctor."

"Good night, Jo," he smiled back.

Jo left them to their discussion and went back up the steps, wondering how many feet had descended and ascended them over the centuries to have worn such smooth hollows into the granite from which they were made. As she went, a hum started up, the same one Benton had heard earlier. Sir Aldwyn had evidently turned the hologenerator on in order to demonstrate its workings to the Doctor.

Back in the hall she paused, glancing out through the open front door. Benton and Terry were now standing out on the drive; Terry was making a sweeping gesture, obviously indicating something in the distance, and Benton was nodding as he listened to his friend. Jo thought about going to say goodnight, but decided against it. Instead she turned and made her way up the main staircase, but just as she approached the door of her room she caught a movement in her peripheral vision from further along the corridor, just as she had earlier.

"Jenny, is that you?" she called out, but there was no answer. That was odd. She'd definitely seen something moving, and she knew where the Doctor, Sir Aldwyn, Terry and Benton were, so it could only have been Jenny. But if it was, why wasn't she answering? Her curiosity piqued, Jo walked along the corridor.

Here was something else that was odd. The movement she'd seen had been from the corridor into the last room on the right, she'd swear to that. But the door of that room, like all the others, was closed, just as it had been earlier, and she hadn't heard it being shut, which she definitely ought to have done. She hesitated outside it, then tapped politely.

"Jenny? Jenny, are you in there?" she called out.

Still nothing but silence greeted her. Frowning, she opened the door and looked in. The dusk had deepened, and the curtains were drawn; the room was crowded with black shapes and shadows. She reached for the light switch. As she turned it on, she suddenly saw the blurred shape only inches in front of her. She had no time to avoid it as it came right at her...

Everyone froze as a high-pitched scream penetrated everywhere – into the Darches' kitchen, outside onto the driveway, and down into the laboratory, where it reverberated even above the hum of Sir Aldwyn's machine.

"Good grief! That's Jo!" exclaimed the Doctor in some astonishment. No matter what the danger, in his experience Jo very rarely, if ever, screamed – but something was making her do it now. He spun round and raced for the door. Sir Aldwyn delayed only just long enough to switch off the hologenerator before following him. Jenny was already in the hall, wide-eyed, as her husband and Benton hurtled in through the front door. All of them followed in the Doctor's wake as he raced up the stairs and into the corridor. At the far end they could see Jo's recumbent form on the floor, halfway out of the room furthest on the right.

The first to reach her, the Doctor dropped on one knee and lifted her into a half-sitting position against him. With relief he saw her closed eyelids begin to flutter.

"What's the matter with her, Doctor?" Benton asked anxiously. "Is she all right?"

"I think so, but she's obviously had a severe shock," said the Doctor, scanning Jo's face with concern.

"But what could have happened to her?" asked Sir Aldwyn, at a complete loss. "There's nothing and no-one here."

The look Terry and Jenny exchanged with each other wasn't lost on the Doctor. He wondered if their suspicions were justified, and looked down at Jo again. She was obviously back to more or less full consciousness; her eyes fastened onto his.

"Hello, old girl," he said with cheerful matter-of-factness. "Back with us, then?"

"Doctor..." she said muzzily. "What happened?"

"Well, we were rather hoping *you* were going to tell *us*. You've certainly got a decent set of lungs, haven't you?" he teased, deliberately keeping his tone light. "I shouldn't wonder if everyone in a ten-mile radius isn't wondering what just happened!"

"What *did* happen, Jo?" Benton asked urgently.

Jo visibly tried to remember; it was just as visible when she succeeded, because she suddenly shot bolt upright and then scrambled to her feet, as if preparing to flee. Her eyes, wide and overbright, locked onto the Doctor's.

"The ghost!" she exclaimed. "Doctor, I saw it! The ghost!"

"Steady on, Jo," the Doctor cautioned her, putting a supporting arm around her shoulders.

"Take it slowly, and tell us exactly what happened, and what you saw."

"I was going to my room," she said, frowning as she tried to remember the precise sequence of events. "I saw a movement at this end of the corridor. I assumed it was Jenny." She glanced into the room and then away again quickly, and none of them missed her instinctive shudder. "I thought she'd gone in there, but when I called out, there was no reply, and when I got here, the door was shut, and there hadn't been any sound of it shutting. So I opened it and turned on the light, and... there it was..." Her voice trailed off and her eyes glazed slightly as she relived the experience.

"All right, Jo," said the Doctor soothingly. "Take your time. Can you tell us what you saw?"

Jo swallowed. "It was just – a shape," she said, rather hoarsely. "About as tall as me. Like a person wearing a huge cloak, except – there didn't seem to be any shape of a head. It was just a sort of – moving mound..."

"What colour was it?" Jenny asked.

Jo thought about it. "I don't know. It was just – dark. But it was like you said when you saw it – I couldn't see it *properly*. It was all – fuzzy – blurred... And I could see the furniture behind it, *through* it."

"What did it do?" Benton demanded.

"It came right at me!" Her panic level elevated again at the memory. "I couldn't get out of the way!"

"You mean it *struck* you?" said Sir Aldwyn, aghast.

"No!... Yes...!" She broke off, aware of her own incoherence.

"Well, which?" the Doctor asked, reasonably. His tone seemed to calm her again.

"I don't know, exactly," she said apologetically. "It – well, it didn't so much strike me, as go *through* me."

"Past you, you mean?"

"No – *through* me," she repeated vehemently. "Through the same space where I was. I *felt* it. It was so weird! A horrid crawling sensation. It was *horrible*! Horrible – and cold – and *wrong*! All wrong – unnatural." She shuddered at the recollection. "I hope I never feel anything like that ever again!"

"And what happened then, my dear?" Sir Aldwyn asked. Any tendency he might have had to be sceptical about the situation had obviously been completely banished by her transparent genuineness.

"I don't know," she said simply. "It was such a – a *horrible* sensation that I think I fainted because of it. Doctor" – she turned her gaze back onto him urgently – "did you see it?"

"Afraid not, Jo," he said regretfully. "It was gone by the time we reached you. Still, whatever it was, at least it doesn't seem to have done you any lasting harm." He tightened the arm he still had around her shoulders, and gave her a reassuring little shake, then released her. "I think perhaps the best thing now would be to get you to bed so you can sleep off the shock."

"Sleep?" Jo exclaimed, panic resurfacing in her voice. "How can I sleep? What if it comes back?"

The Doctor met her eyes with a comforting smile. "Look, you needn't worry, Jo. I have the strongest possible feeling that it won't be back again tonight. And Benton and I'll be in the rooms either side of you, so we won't be far away if anything does happen. But I really don't think it will."

Jo looked at him uncertainly, but looking at the expression in his eyes, she had the feeling he wasn't just saying it to reassure her. He had a reason for saying it, even if he wasn't yet revealing what it was. She smiled faintly.

"All right, Doctor," she said. "I trust you."

"Quite right, too," said the Doctor approvingly. He turned to Jenny. "Do you think some sort of calming hot drink might be rustled up?" he enquired.

"Of course," said Jenny instantly.

"Make her one of your special cocoas," Terry suggested, with a meaningful nod at his wife. "They always work on me, if I can't sleep," he said to Jo.

Jenny nodded back at him, and turned to Jo. "Come on," she said. "Come and sit in the kitchen while I make it for you."

She ushered Jo away with her, and Terry gave the Doctor a wry smile. "Sometimes some of the things I saw when I was on active service resurface," he said. "When they keep me awake, Jen makes me a cocoa with a sleeping tablet dissolved into it. That generally does the trick."

"Then I'm sure it will for Jo, too," said the Doctor. "And now, gentlemen, I think we should all get a good night's sleep. Including you, Sir Aldwyn," he added. "I'd like to suggest that you do those tweaks of yours tomorrow morning rather than tonight. I've brought a bit of kit with me that I'd like to set up myself, if that's all right with you, and we'll see how the two work together then, shall we?"

"Yes, I suppose you're right. It is getting rather late," Sir Aldwyn conceded. "Well, then, goodnight, everyone."

"Goodnight, Doctor. Night, JB," said Terry with a wink at Benton. "Jenny'll see Jo off to bed as soon as she's drunk her cocoa." On that reassurance he followed Sir Aldwyn along the corridor and back down into the hall.

"Goodnight, Terror," Benton called after him, then turned to the Doctor. "Is everything really going to be all right tonight, Doc?"

"Worried about a nocturnal visitation, Sergeant?" the Doctor teased gently.

"Of course not," said Benton matter-of-factly. "But you seem very sure about it. You've got an idea about what's going on here, haven't you?" he went on, shrewdly.

"I think I'm beginning to," agreed the Doctor. "But we'll see in the morning, shall we? Well, good night, Sergeant. Don't let the ghost keep you awake, will you?"

"Not a chance," said Benton emphatically. "And if it does turn up, I'll give it strict orders not to let the bedbugs bite."

When Jo came down the next morning, she found the Doctor directing operations as Benton and Terry carried in a couple of obviously heavy pieces of technical equipment and set them down on a table positioned in the centre of the hall halfway between the front door and the two staircases. A separate box already stood on the floor beside the table, in which Jo could see what looked like several small scanner devices sitting on a nest of multicoloured leads.

"Thank you, gentlemen," the Doctor said cheerfully, immediately setting about connecting one of the pieces of apparatus to the other with some of the leads. "Ah, good morning, Jo! Did you sleep well?"

"Much better than I expected, thank you," she said.

"Jenny's special cocoa. Does the trick, every time," Terry said cheerfully. Jo wondered why he exchanged a brief smile with the Doctor. "She's got some breakfast waiting for you, if you feel up to it," he added, turning back to her.

"I could certainly do with a coffee," Jo assented. She looked at the equipment on the table. "Is that the 'bit of kit' you mentioned last night, Doctor? How did you get it here? It looks much too big to fit into Bessie's boot."

"Ah, well," said the Doctor innocently, "perhaps Bessie's boot is bigger on the inside than the outside?"

Jo pulled a face at him, and headed for the kitchen.

"All that stuff about Pepper's ghost last night," Terry said when she'd gone. "Do you think that's going something to do with what's going on?"

"Yes, well, I wondered at first whether that might have been used to create the appearances," the Doctor admitted. "But there was nothing in any of the rooms upstairs that would have accounted for that being the reason for what Jenny and Jo have both seen up there. No, that isn't the explanation, but I have every intention of finding out what is."

Benton was studying the numerous dials and gauges of the larger of the two machines. "What does this thing do, Doctor?" he enquired.

"Once I've finished connecting everything up, it'll detect electrical – and other – types of field, that sort of thing," said the Doctor, lifting the small scanners out of the box and starting to connect them to the second, smaller machine, arranging them so that they covered all directions. He suddenly paused and looked about him in a slightly distracted fashion. "By the way, is there an electric socket in here somewhere, so I can turn this thing on when I've finished?"

"Yes, just over there," said Terry, pointing.

"Ah, thank you," said the Doctor, handing a power lead to Benton. "Be a good chap and plug that in for me, will you, Sergeant? Thank you so much," he added, as Benton obeyed.

"You said *'that sort of thing'*," Terry said warily, awarding the equipment a mystified look. "What sort of thing?"

"Well – for instance – I want to see what it registers if our mysterious visitor from last night decides to put in another appearance," said the Doctor, continuing to connect up the scanning devices.

"Oh," said Terry lightly. "*That* sort of thing..."

Benton grinned. "All sorts, I shouldn't wonder. Don't worry about it, Terror," he advised. "Knowing the Doctor, I'll bet you anything you like that setup'll detect everything Sir Aldwyn could possibly imagine, and probably quite a few things he couldn't!"

"A very perspicacious observation, Sergeant," the Doctor approved, flashing him a brief smile. He made one last connection, and straightened up. Then he switched on and studied the various displays and dials. "Yes, that should do it," he confirmed. "Now all we need is for Jo's little friend to pay us another call."

Terry looked gloomy. "How long do you think we'll have to wait for that?" he asked. "Sometimes we go for days without anything happening."

The Doctor was saved from having to provide an answer by the unexpected appearance of Sir Aldwyn in the doorway leading up from the laboratory.

"Good morning, gentlemen," he greeted them cheerfully. His eye fell on the apparatus on the table, and he hastened forward to examine it. "I say! Most intriguing! I take it this is your work, Doctor?"

"Yes, it is," said the Doctor. "It's a detector, of sorts."

"Indeed," acknowledged Sir Aldwyn, with a twinkle in his eye. He'd obviously realized that the Doctor was being deliberately vague. "Sorts of what, I wonder? No, don't worry to answer that. No doubt you'll share any relevant results. In the meantime, I trust you've no objection if I go back to my own little project? You've only to call me if you need me."

"Thank you, Sir Aldwyn, I will," the Doctor smiled.

As the tall figure of their host disappeared down the stairs to the laboratory, Jo emerged from the kitchen and joined them, looking at the Doctor's apparatus curiously. Terry grinned.

"Don't ask," he advised. "I've already tried. It's a machine for detecting *things*, is all I've got out of it."

"Things like ghosts, you mean," said Jo shrewdly. The Doctor awarded her an amused look of approval.

"That's exactly right, Jo," he confirmed. "Things like ghosts."

"And if you can detect one, will you be able to tell what it really is?"

"Hopefully," said the Doctor. "Any readings this machine records should be capable of analysis, so it ought to give me sufficient information to work out what we're dealing with."

"Let's hope it works, then," she said brightly, though with a slight shudder as she recollected her encounter of the night before. She caught the familiar hum in the laboratory below starting up, and added, "Though if a ghost does put in an appearance, poor Sir Aldwyn'll miss it again. He's never seen one yet, has he? He's always down there working on his machine when they appear. What about your machine, Doctor? Have you got a theory about what you might be going to detect?"

"Two possible theories at the moment," said the Doctor. "The first one –"

He didn't get to finish his sentence. Suddenly Benton's arm shot out, pointing at the landing above.

"Doctor, look!" he exclaimed. "There it is! It's here!"

Everyone turned to look. Up on the landing, just to the right of the archway, was a squat, bulky shape, dark and semi-transparent, and disquietingly blurred, as if it had some quality that somehow eluded the eye. It stood quite motionless. But then there was movement, though not from the creature they were staring at. Jo gasped and pointed at the archway.

"There's another one!" she exclaimed. And there it was, emerging from the corridor.

"Two of them?" Terry's surprise was obvious. "We've only ever seen one, before!"

"No life form comes into being in complete isolation," said the Doctor rather abstractedly, staring at the phenomenon above them. "The existence of one generally implies the existence of others."

The second creature stopped, and for a moment both were motionless. Then, despite the indistinctness of its form, it was clear that the first one they had seen was turning to face them, just as the second one already was. It was as if they were conferring...

"Doctor, they can see us!" Jo said urgently.

The Doctor nodded, his eyes narrowed as he studied the two creatures. "Yes, I think they can," he agreed. "They certainly seem to be reacting to our presence."

"But why?" Terry asked, his eyes fixed on the two shapes. "It" – he corrected himself – "*they* – never have, before."

The Doctor didn't get the chance to answer. Jo clutched at his arm, and pointed again. "Doctor, look! They're moving! They're coming this way!"

And they were. The two blurred figures were moving, slowly sliding along the walkway to the right until they were at the top of the flight of stairs.

Then, a step at a time, the one in the lead began to descend.

"Jo, get back!" the Doctor barked. He thrust her at Benton, who took her by the shoulders and propelled her toward Terry.

"Terror, get that front door open!" he directed. "We might need a line of retreat. And look after Jo!"

"But – !" Jo began to protest.

"Benton's right, Jo," the Doctor said. "Do as he says, and be ready to run, if we need to. I've got to see what these readings say..."

The leading creature was only two steps away from reaching the hall floor. Benton kept his eyes fixed on it while the Doctor assessed what his equipment was telling him.

"But, Doctor" – Jo was still protesting – "what about Jenny, and Sir Aldwyn?"

Terry, who was holding her by her upper arm, ready to prevent her moving back toward the Doctor again, looked at her in horror, realizing she was right. Neither Jenny nor Sir Aldwyn yet knew of the creatures' presence in the hall. What if one of them walked in – ?

At that very moment, that was exactly what Jenny did. Just as the creature reached the bottom of the flight, she emerged from her kitchen and appeared from behind the balustrade, only a few feet away from the fuzzy, wavering apparition of whose presence she was completely unaware.

What happened next took only a few seconds.

"Jen!" Terry yelled and, releasing his hold on Jo, started toward his wife. Her surprise turned to terror as she realized her proximity to the creature, and she opened her mouth to scream. The creature turned, and its outline began to change as it extended a shapeless extrusion toward her; she seemed spellbound, frozen to the spot by horror. Jo tried to follow Terry, but the Doctor grabbed her and prevented her from doing so. Fast as he was moving, Terry was too far away; he wasn't going to get to Jenny before the creature touched her.

But there was someone who could.

Benton leaped forward, past the extending arm – if that was what it was – and thrust at Jenny with all his strength, sending her staggering backwards, out of reach of the creature. But in doing so, he brushed against it. There was a crack of sound, a briefly blinding light, and he was launched into the air with such force that he was sent sliding across the smooth marble floor, coming to rest at Jenny's feet.

Jenny screamed; Jo shouted "Sergeant!" at the same moment that Terry yelled, "JB!"

A second later, without warning, the two creatures vanished.

In the momentary silence that ensued – a silence enhanced by the absence of the hologenerator's background hum – Sir Aldwyn could be heard hurrying up the stairs from his laboratory. He emerged, and halted, taking in the scene.

"Whatever is going on?" he gasped.

Nobody answered him. Terry had run forward to embrace his wife, while Jo and the Doctor were on their knees by Benton's sprawled body.

"He's – he's not dead, is he?" Jo choked, almost pleading with the Doctor. He was conducting a swift examination, and after only a few seconds he was able to look at her with a smile.

"Of course not," he said reassuringly. "He's made of tough stuff, our Sergeant Benton. He's taken something of a jolt, but no real harm. I should think he'll regain consciousness quite shortly." He got to his feet and turned to Sir Aldwyn. "We had a visitor," he said. "Two of them, in fact."

Sir Aldwyn gaped. "Two?"

"Yes, and not only could we see them," said the Doctor, "but evidently they could see us, too."

"Oh, *why* can I never see these creatures for myself?" Sir Aldwyn burst out, venting his frustration. "They always vanish before I get to see them!"

"Yes, they do, don't they?" said the Doctor, eyes narrowed as he mulled that thought over. "I wonder why? And I wonder what their purpose is?"

"They were coming to attack us!" Terry growled.

"We don't know that," said the Doctor swiftly. "They may simply have been as curious about us as we are about them, and were just coming to investigate."

"That doesn't look like 'just investigating' to me," Terry argued, pointing at his friend still unconscious on the floor; Jenny had gone to fetch a cushion from an ornately carved wooden chair in one corner of the hall, and was now slipping it under Benton's head.

"What happened to him?" Sir Aldwyn pressed.

"He accidentally touched one of the creatures," said the Doctor. "Physical contact seemed to trigger some sort of energy discharge. But don't worry. I'm fairly certain he'll be back with us before long."

In vindication of this prediction, Benton began to stir. When he opened his eyes, it was to find Jo bending over him.

"Hello, Sergeant," she said, relief combining with a lingering concern. "How are you feeling?"

Benton put a hand to his head, wincing. "Like I've been arguing with a brick wall," he mumbled.

"Actually, it was a marble floor, old chap," the Doctor chuckled.

Terry wasn't able to smile about it. "One of those things touched you," he grated, "and it was like there was some sort of explosion. Threw you right across the floor."

"That feels about right," Benton agreed, as with rather laboured movements he managed to get to his feet, assisted by Jo and the Doctor. He looked round. "Have they gone?"

"Yes," said the Doctor thoughtfully. "For the moment, anyway."

"And did your box of tricks come up with any answers?"

"Let's see," said the Doctor, and went back to his detector. He surveyed the dials again, then pressed a button. The machine responded with a subdued chattering noise as it ejected a printout from a small slot; when it stopped, the Doctor tore off the strip of paper it had produced and studied it.

"Well, I'd come up with two possibilities for what's happening, and this has definitely ruled out one of them," he said, with satisfaction.

"What were they?" Jo asked.

"My first thought was that something had created a temporal connection between the Troake House of today and some time either in its past or its future," said the Doctor. "But this readout makes it plain that that's not what's happening."

Sir Aldwyn gaped. "You mean – you are seriously asserting that those creatures could exist in a different time, and that that machine can analyze and detect such an event?"

"Yes, of course" said the Doctor offhandedly. "But, as I say, that's not the answer."

"Then what *is* the answer?" Sir Aldwyn was clearly bracing himself for an equally outré explanation.

"That we're encountering an alternative branch of history," said the Doctor. "An alternate universe." Seeing the blank look on Terry and Jenny's faces, he broke off to enquire, "Have you never come across the concept of the multiverse?"

They shook their heads in unison.

"Oh," said the Doctor, as if such ignorance was surely impossible. However, clarification was evidently needed. "Well," he went on, "it's the proposition that since every situation has a number of different possible outcomes, every time a decision or action is carried out, an alternate universe is created in which those different outcomes become realities. Alternate universes without number, all existing side by side."

"Alternate universes?" said Sir Aldwyn sceptically. "Are you quite serious, Doctor?"

"Certainly," the Doctor confirmed sharply, a little indignant at being doubted. "I've *been* in one."

"You have?" Jo stared at him. "When?"

"Before your time," the Doctor told her. "I daresay Benton remembers, don't you, Sergeant?"

"The Inferno project," Benton confirmed. "Yes, I remember."

"What happened?" Jo asked, still battling her incredulity.

"Oh, get Benton to tell you later, there's a good girl," said the Doctor with a wave of his hand. "The point is this – in that alternate world were alternate versions of the same people that were here, in this one. The situation there – their whole history – had turned them into very different personalities, but they were physically virtually identical to their counterparts here. The Brigadier was there, and Liz Shaw, and the Sergeant here..."

He paused briefly and cast an enigmatic look at Benton, and Jo had the distinct feeling that things hadn't ended well for some of the people in that other place...

"In our current context," the Doctor went on, "the most important similarity is that in that alternate world, the geography and the infrastructure – the buildings – were exactly the same. *Exactly* the same. That's what I think is happening here."

"So," said Jo slowly, "you think that those creatures are in a different version of Earth, with a different history, and that in that world..."

"There's an exact duplicate of Troake House, yes," said the Doctor.

"Of course!" Sir Aldwyn exclaimed. "You said the problem you had with ghosts was that while they seemed able to pass through walls and so on, they still seemed to have to walk on floors and use stairs. But what you're describing would explain it, Doctor; even if there were minor structural differences, this house would more or less mirror the same layout there, and that's why they'd be using the stairs to get between the landing and the hall, just as we would. And if they did apparently walk through a wall, according to your theory that would simply mean that a wall which exists in our universe doesn't exist in the other one."

"Exactly," said the Doctor.

"But even if you're right about all these alternate worlds, what happened to make these creatures start appearing in the first place?" Terry asked.

"That's a very good question," said the Doctor, rubbing the back of his neck thoughtfully. "Under normal circumstances there's absolutely no contact between adjoining branches of the multiverse. Which is just as well, because crossover is extremely dangerous in all sorts of ways. But somehow something here has weakened the walls between parallel universes, and that's why not only can we see those creatures, but apparently now they can see us, too."

"See us and attack us!" Terry spat, his arm tightening around Jenny's shoulders.

"Now you listen to me!" said the Doctor abruptly. "We don't *know* that their intentions are hostile. What happened to Benton might have been purely accidental. They might have had no idea that coming into physical contact with us could cause harm."

"I don't see that it makes any difference what their intentions are," Terry argued. "Whatever their motive is, the plain fact is that we now know that if they touch someone here it *does* cause harm. And might cause more. It might even be potentially fatal next time. Somehow you've got to find a way to stop these creatures appearing, Doctor. For good and all. Before someone really gets hurt."

"But why?" Jenny asked. "I mean, that one Jo encountered last night passed right through her, but it didn't actually *hurt* her. Why should making contact now suddenly have such a different effect?"

"Yes, well, I don't know," the Doctor admitted, rubbing the side of his face with the back of his forefinger as he wrestled with the question.

There was a short silence. Then Sir Aldwyn said, "Doctor, I don't know if this is significant, but as far as I can see, the only thing that's different is that you've got this machine of yours switched on and operating. I've no idea how it's configured and what it outputs, but could that possibly have any bearing on matters? Not that I can comment. Since I never get to see these wretched creatures myself," he grumbled, evidently still nursing his grievance on that point.

The Doctor's eyes widened. "Of course! Why didn't I think of it before? Sir Aldwyn, you've done it! You've got the answer!"

Sir Aldwyn looked mystified. "I have?"

"Yes – in fact, you're the key to it," the Doctor said urgently. "One of the very first things Jenny and Terry told me was that you're 'always down in your laboratory', working on your hologenerator. The first time one of these apparitions appeared to Jenny, you were in the laboratory, and when you got to the scene the thing had gone. I've just realized there's been a pattern here all along. Every time the 'ghost' appeared, that's where you were, running your machine. And you told me last night that it was a bit temperamental and had erupted sparks a few times, and that's why you never leave it switched on and unattended. So every time there's been an appearance, you've always switched it off before coming to investigate."

Sir Aldwyn considered this, scratching the back of his head as he pondered. "Now I come to think about it, you're right," he conceded. "But what possible connection can there be between that and the appearances?"

"Look, I don't know the details," the Doctor admitted, "but that hologenerator of yours has been engineered in a completely novel alternative to the way most holograms are produced. Something about its output is evidently creating a weakness in the wall between the two universes."

"But something must have changed, Doctor," said Benton. "Terry and Jenny have been seeing those things for months without anything like what happened to me happening to them."

"And Jenny's right – even when that thing went through me last night, it was horrible, but there wasn't any energy discharge like the one that hit Benton," Jo supplemented. "Why didn't it jolt me like it did him?"

"Ah, well – I'm afraid Sir Aldwyn has a point, and I might be responsible for that," said the Doctor, looking slightly uncomfortable, rubbing the back of his neck again and casting a guilty glance at the detector on the table behind him.

Jo frowned, puzzled. "What, *your* machine, as well?"

"Here, I thought you said what that thing did was detect things," Terry said, rather accusingly.

"It does," the Doctor said, defending himself. "But I'm afraid it seems that the method it uses to do it might be interacting with the output from Sir Aldwyn's hologenerator."

"I don't see what that's got to do with anything," said Jo robustly.

"If you had a lump of potassium in one hand and a bowl of water in the other and kept them apart, nothing would happen, would it?" said the Doctor. "But if you put the two together – put the bowl of water on the floor and dropped the potassium into it – what would happen then?"

Jo thought about it, and enlightenment dawned. "There'd be an explosion!"

"So you think that the combination of the output of our two machines is having an entirely unforeseen effect," Sir Aldwyn summed up.

"I'm afraid that must be what's happening," said the Doctor. "When they're both operating, they're weakening the wall between universes to the extent that physical contact becomes possible, with the outcome that poor Sergeant Benton just experienced. But of course this is all just a theory," he qualified. "We need to test it, to be sure that really is what we're dealing with, and that it's not something else that's causing it."

"If it's going to mean some sort of alien incursion, we're going to have to tell the Brigadier," said Benton sombrely.

"I'm afraid that's correct, Sergeant. And that's why we've got to find out whether my theory's right or not. Once we've established that, then we'll have a basis for deciding what to do next."

"But won't that be dangerous?" Jenny asked nervously.

"A little," said the Doctor frankly. "But I think we can make it as safe as possible." He gave her a reassuring smile. "Now, listen to me. This is what I want you all to do..."

The Doctor looked around the hall and nodded. As he'd instructed, Terry, Jenny and Jo were grouped near the front door, which stood open, ready as an escape route. Benton stood at the top of the stairs to the laboratory; the doors at both the top and bottom of the stairway were also open wide. Sir Aldwyn was already in the laboratory, ready to switch on the hologenerator when directed to do so.

"Ready to run a sound check, Sergeant?" the Doctor suggested.

"Righto, Doctor," Benton acknowledged, and disappeared down the stairs. A few moments later his raised voice carried up into the hall. "Can you hear me all right?"

The Doctor raised his voice, too. "Perfectly, Sergeant. Can *you* hear *me*?"

"Loud and clear, Doc," came the confirmation.

"What about Sir Aldwyn?"

"Yes, I can hear you, too, Doctor." Sir Aldwyn's voice was fainter, but perfectly audible.

"Right, then," said the Doctor, still speaking loud enough to be heard down in the laboratory. "I think we're ready. I'm going to switch on my detector."

"Do be careful, Doctor," said Jo anxiously.

The Doctor smiled at her. "Just you be ready to run through that door if I tell you to, Jo. All of you."

"Don't worry, Doctor, we will," Terry assured him. He paused, then added, "Are you sure we really need to do this?"

"Yes, I am," said the Doctor firmly. "Whether these things are hostile or friendly, you're right – contact between us is evidently dangerous, and if we need additional help or resources to resolve things, we need to find that out as soon as possible."

Terry nodded, conceding the point.

"Well, then – here goes," said the Doctor, turning to his machine. "Turning on – now!" he trumpeted loudly, for the benefit of the two men down in the laboratory, and flicked the switch.

Jo's eyes swiftly scanned the hall, but of course nothing was visible, not yet. Not until Sir Aldwyn turned on his machine, too. The Doctor was busily surveying what the dials and gauges were telling him, and he nodded with satisfaction.

"All readings normal up here," he called down. "Are you ready, Sir Aldwyn?"

"Quite ready, Doctor."

"Very well, then – switch on!"

Sir Aldwyn exchanged a glance with Sergeant Benton, his finger hovering over the button that would turn the hologenerator on. Then he pressed it, and the familiar hum began to fill the laboratory.

Benton's gasp sounded at exactly the same moment as Jenny's scream and Jo's cry of "DOCTOR – LOOK OUT!"

Up in the hall, the Doctor started to turn toward Jo, only to realize that one of the creatures was right in front of him. Instantly he leaped backward, out of its reach.

Even as he was doing so, Jo was yelling.

"Doctor, there are *lots* of them! They're *everywhere*!"

The Doctor's gaze swept around the hall, and he realized she was right. Instead of the two creatures there had been before, there were now about twenty. There was one on each of the two stairways, two in front of the laboratory stairwell, the one now between him and his apparatus, and –

"Jo! Behind you!" he bellowed.

The three near the front door turned, and Jenny screamed again. Three of the creatures had appeared between them and the open door, blocking any chance of escape in that direction. In fact, there was a creature stationed in front of every door in the hallway – quite deliberately positioned, obviously. Others were scattered around the hall in a loose sort of circle, surrounding the Doctor and his friends on all sides.

“Doctor, they’ve got us trapped! We can’t get out!” Terry yelled, grabbing his wife and putting himself between her and the nearest creature.

“Benton! Sir Aldwyn! Turn the hologenerator off! Turn it off!” the Doctor roared.

“We can’t!” Benton’s voice came ringing up from the laboratory. “There are two of those things down here, Doctor, and they’re between us and the machine!”

“I can’t get to mine, either!” There were now two more of the creatures between him and it, moving to flank the first so there was no possible route by which he could reach the switch that would render any physical contact harmless, nor the electric socket into which the detector was plugged.

“Now there’s another one, blocking the door to the stairs!” Benton yelled. “We can’t get out!”

“Doctor! What are we going to – ?”

Jo’s question was cut off as Terry seized her arm and dragged both her and his wife into the middle of the circle of creatures, where the Doctor was. Immediately the creatures, moving with ominous slowness, began to close in on them.

“Doctor, what are they doing? What do they want?” Jo cried out, staring wildly around at the blurred, indistinct shapes steadily moving toward them.

“They must have recognized that the walls between the universes have been weakened, and they’re trying to get through!” The Doctor singled out one of the blurs and addressed it urgently. “Listen – can you hear me? Can you speak?”

There was no response, no break in the steady advance.

“Look, I’m going to have to get to that switch,” said the Doctor with decision, gauging the gap between the two creatures that blocked his way to his detector.

“Doctor, you mustn’t!” Jo gasped.

“I’ve got no choice, Jo!” he contradicted, and before she could say another word, flung himself at the narrowing gap.

He almost made it, but one of the creatures suddenly extruded a limb, and it caught him across the chest. There was a great flash of light, and he dropped to the floor and lay still.

“Doctor!” Jo shrieked, and made to go to him, but Terry grabbed her arm.

“Don’t! Or the same thing’ll happen to you!” he snapped, trying to ignore the fact that in a few moments, when the surrounding creatures got close enough, it was going to in any case...

“Doctor?” Benton’s voice came from the laboratory below. “What’s happening?”

“It’s no good, JB!” Terry shouted. “Those things have got him! We’re surrounded! We’ve only got seconds before they get us, too...!”

Down in the laboratory, Benton and Sir Aldwyn looked at each other in dismay.

“What are we going to do, Sergeant?” Sir Aldwyn said despairingly.

“If these creatures have taken the Doctor down, he can’t turn off his machine,” said Benton, thinking swiftly as he eyed the three shapeless blurs across the room. “So we’ve got to turn this one off, and quickly!”

“But how? We can’t get near it!”

Benton studied the layout of the laboratory, the benches around the walls, the door – currently blocked by one of the creatures – in the corner to their left. He and Sir Aldwyn were trapped in the corner diagonally opposite the one where the hologenerator stood quietly humming on its bench. The other two creatures had taken up positions in front of it. A frontal assault had no chance at all.

But there was a different direction that had every chance...

“Which button turns that thing off?” he demanded urgently.

“That one,” said Sir Aldwyn, pointing. “That yellow one, there.”

Benton located the button visually, and nodded. “Thank you, sir,” he said briskly. “That’s all I need to know.”

Taking Sir Aldwyn completely by surprise, he vaulted up onto the bench beside him and began to run along it, scattering equipment right and left as he went. Equally taken by surprise, the creatures began to turn, following his progress as he jumped across to the back wall and headed toward the far corner and the bench on which the hologenerator stood. The creature nearest began to extend a blunt limb into his path, but with an energetic leap he hurdled over it and continued along the back wall. Within a few seconds he’d traversed the whole distance and jumped down onto the floor behind the hologenerator’s bench, on the opposite side of it from the creatures.

The button was on the side of the machine facing away from him, so he had to lean forward across the bench and stretch his arm over the top of the machine to reach it.

But he couldn’t, not quite. It was only by an inch or two, but even on tiptoe, the button was just out of his reach. And all three creatures were moving toward the bench, extruding limbs toward his hand, its fingers stretching desperately toward the elusive button.

Suddenly one of them lunged at him, and instinctively he drew his arm back and dropped down behind the bench. But the creature was unable to react at the same speed, and its momentum carried it forward so that its limb made physical contact with the hologenerator.

The results were catastrophic, and the ancient fabric of Troake House quivered briefly as an explosion rocked the whole laboratory, filling it with smoke and flames.

Jo could hardly take it in. A moment ago, like Terry and Jenny, she’d been shrinking away from the advancing creatures, trying to avoid the unavoidable. But then there had come the sound of the explosion in the laboratory below, and the brief sensation of a pressure wave travelling through the air in the hall.

And instantly all the blurred, indistinct shapes surrounding them had completely vanished.

It took a second or two to fully absorb the fact. But it was true. The creatures were gone.

“But – what – what happened...?” Jenny stammered.

“Dunno, love, but they’re gone.” Terry gave his wife a heartfelt hug. “For good, I hope.”

Jo hardly heard him. She was on her knees next to the Doctor, terrified he was dead. But then her heart filled with joy as she saw he was coming back to consciousness. His eyes opened, and he looked at her blankly for a moment. Then he focused.

"Hello, Jo," he said, as if greeting her whilst lying on his back on the floor was completely normal behaviour. She smiled, remembering other occasions; sometimes, of course, it was.

"Hello, Doctor," she replied in the same manner.

The Doctor sat up and rubbed his chest, wincing. "Ouch," he said. "That stings. What happened?"

"One of those things touched you, of course. Just like they did Benton. But you're all right, aren't you?"

The Doctor put his hand flat on the left side of his chest, then on his right, and nodded. "Yes, both in full working order," he said approvingly, and clambered to his feet, surveying the hall as he did so. "Well, I see our visitors have decided to depart. What happened?"

"Your sergeant happened," said a voice from the stairway to the laboratory. Everyone swivelled to look in that direction. Billows of grey smoke were emerging from it, and framed in the doorway was Sir Aldwyn, supporting a rather dazed-looking Benton. Both of them were covered in dust and debris, and their faces almost unrecognizable under layers of grey streaks and black smudges.

"Sergeant! Are you all right?" Jo abandoned the Doctor and came hurrying over to him, her face filled with concern. Terry was on her heels, and he wordlessly he pulled a chair across, which Benton dropped into gratefully.

"I will be," he assured her, wincing slightly. "But I've wrecked Sir Aldwyn's lab for him."

"You certainly did, my dear chap. You even set it on fire," Sir Aldwyn told him cheerfully. "Don't worry, it's out now; given how often my machine emitted sparks, I've always kept a goodly supply of fire extinguishers down there. Just as well, eh?"

"But what did he do?" Jo asked.

"Those creatures had got between us and the hologenerator, but the Sergeant managed to get behind them. That put the apparatus between him and them. When they tried to stop him turning it off, one of them touched it – and..." Sir Aldwyn's shoulders and eyebrows both rose as he conveyed the inevitability of the outcome.

"Bang," said the Doctor succinctly.

"As you so rightly say, my dear fellow – bang," Sir Aldwyn agreed happily.

Jo looked up at Benton, her eyes huge and shining. "So if it wasn't for you..." she said. "You saved us all, Sergeant!"

"I think the Doctor had more to do with it than I did," Benton disclaimed, but the Doctor wasn't having any of that.

"You're the one who tricked them into destroying the hologenerator, Sergeant," he declared. "Jo's right – you saved us."

"Well done, JB," said Terry warmly, grabbing Benton's hand and shaking it vigorously. Benton put his free hand to the side of his head and grimaced.

"Thanks, Terror, but do you think you could thank me a bit more gently?" he said plaintively. "I've got a whopper of a headache."

"You great softie," Terry teased cheerfully.

"I know what you need," said Jenny confidently. "A nice cup of tea. That'll make you feel better. Come on, everyone." She began to lead the way to the kitchen, Terry, Sir Aldwyn and a still slightly shaky Benton following in her wake.

The Doctor and Jo watched them go.

"A nice cup of tea," repeated the Doctor softly, smiling. "The unfailing British remedy for all crises."

Jo chuckled, but after a few seconds her expression became more sober.

"What *were* those things, Doctor? If that was Earth, but in an alternate universe, where did they come from? They weren't human, were they?"

"No, they weren't human," the Doctor concurred. "As far as I can tell, they seemed to be part corporeal, part energy. I think it was that that caused the hologenerator to explode. It was being activated by a different type of energy, one that was incompatible with theirs. When the two came into contact, that was that. No, wherever they come from and whatever they are, I think they're as alien to their Earth as the Axons were to ours."

"Do you think Terry was right? That they were hostile?"

The Doctor tugged at his earlobe thoughtfully. "I don't know, Jo. They certainly seemed to behave that way. But they still might simply have been curious about what was happening, and the first two invited all their friends to come and see what they'd discovered."

"But they surrounded us," Jo objected. "They tried to stop us getting away."

The Doctor looked at her, one corner of his mouth lifting in a half-smile. "If you were a shepherd wanting to examine a flock of sheep, you'd drive them into a pen and keep them there till you had. It wouldn't automatically mean you intended the sheep any harm, would it?"

Jo shrugged, rather sadly. "I suppose we're never going to know."

"I suppose we aren't," the Doctor agreed, putting an arm around her shoulders. "Well, while we come to terms with our ignorance, what about that cup of tea...?"

As they began to move away, Jo suddenly stopped short and pointed. "Doctor, your detector's still on! Shouldn't you turn it off?"

The Doctor looked round, then smiled down at her. "Yes, I suppose I should. After all, we don't need it any more, do we? Pull the plug for me, will you, Jo?"

Next morning, Jo and the Doctor were saying their farewells to Sir Aldwyn and Jenny while Benton and Terry manoeuvred the last box of the Doctor's equipment into Bessie's boot.

Benton straightened up, puffing a little. "Okay, Doc, that's the lot," he said.

Terry was surveying Bessie with an experienced eye.

"Nice little motor you've got here, Doctor," he said appreciatively. "No wonder JB's been talking it up so much. He likes a good car; always has done."

The Doctor looked at Benton and raised his eyebrows. "Really? I wasn't aware that was a particular interest of yours, Sergeant."

"The Brigadier generally keeps me too busy to spend much time on it," Benton said with a shrug.

"Never mind, pal," said Terry. "Plenty of time for that when your military career comes to an end. I turned gardener when mine did. Maybe you'll turn into a car mechanic. Or a salesman, perish the thought," he added, as an afterthought, grinning widely.

"Why perish the thought?" the Doctor enquired. "I'm sure Benton would make an excellent car salesman, if he turned his mind to it."

"Oh, yeah?" said Terry, winking at Jo. "Would *you* buy a used car off this bloke?"

"If I wanted another car, I'd be looking for reliability... efficiency... trustworthiness," the Doctor mused, stroking the side of his chin with his forefinger as he studied Benton. "Sterling qualities, whether in cars or in people. Yes, I really think I *would* buy a used car from this man."

Jo hid her smile; being a British male, Benton was fidgeting, trying hard not to show his discomfort at such a public compliment.

"Well, I don't think Sergeant Benton needs to worry about becoming a car salesman – or anything else! – for quite some time," she said firmly. "And you don't need another car just yet, Doctor. You've still got Bessie."

"Indeed I have. And I think we really had better use her to get going, now," said the Doctor. "We've imposed on Sir Aldwyn's hospitality quite long enough."

"Absolute nonsense, my dear chap," said Sir Aldwyn warmly. "But no doubt the Sergeant has to report back for duty, so we'd better not detain you. Do feel free to visit again, Doctor. This really has been a most interesting experience. And I'd always welcome your technical input on my future projects."

"I do hope you don't intend to resume development of your hologenerator," said the Doctor, a warning note in his voice.

"Absolutely not," Sir Aldwyn agreed promptly. "I'm not going to risk destroying the walls between alternate universes again! A pity, though," he said sadly. "I really did have hopes of developing superior training techniques using holograms."

The Doctor put his head on one side and studied Sir Aldwyn thoughtfully for a moment.

"May I make a suggestion, Sir Aldwyn? You might find it worth branching out into a different area of research..."

Sir Aldwyn cocked an eyebrow at him. "Abandon electronics in favour of something else, you mean? Did you have something particular in mind?"

"Well, you might consider turning your attention to the field of digital communication," said the Doctor tentatively, with what was intended to look like a casual shrug. "It's all at a fairly crude stage of development at the moment, but I think you might find there's potential for improved training techniques in that area. Eventually," he added, as an afterthought.

Sir Aldwyn studied him shrewdly.

"From a chap who apparently knows as much about time and the future as you seem to, that's a suggestion I might well take on board," he said, with a twinkle in his eye. He held out his hand. "Well, goodbye, Doctor," he said cheerfully.

The Doctor shook hands with him. "Goodbye, Sir Aldwyn. Goodbye, Terry. Thank you, Jenny. Come along, Jo." He turned to Bessie, inserted himself into the driving seat, and started the engine; Jo smiled farewell and climbed in beside him.

Terry, his arm round Jenny's shoulders, reached forward and shook hands with Benton.

"Thanks, JB. You really came through for us," he said fervently.

"Reliable, efficient, trustworthy," Jenny said with a smile. She leaned forward to give Benton a brief but fervent peck on the cheek. "We'll never be able to thank you enough," she whispered.

"Oi!" said Terry with mock indignation, pulling her back again. "You're *my* girl, remember?"

"That's her bad luck – she deserves better than you!" Benton riposted. He grinned as he clambered into the back seat behind the Doctor. "So long, Terror. Look after yourself."

"I will if you will, mate!" Terry called after him, as the Doctor put Bessie into gear and, with a final wave, set off down the drive.

"Well, that's that," said Jo with satisfaction, as Troake House disappeared into the trees behind them. "At least Terry and Jenny won't be seeing ghosts anymore."

"Do you think that's what all ghosts are, Doctor?" Benton enquired curiously. "Aliens in other dimensions leaking through into ours?"

"I think the majority of reports of ghosts are the results of optical illusions or misinterpretations of natural phenomena, or even born of wishful thinking," the Doctor summarized. "But some of them may indeed be – as you so succinctly put it – aliens, or people, in other dimensions leaking through into ours. As these particular 'ghosts' turned out to be. At least your friends won't be troubled by *them* anymore."

"Thanks to you, Doctor," Benton agreed.

"My dear fellow, don't mention it," said the Doctor affably. "A very diverting little expedition, for which I'm most grateful to you, Sergeant. Took my mind off that wretched dematerialization circuit for a while, at any rate. I don't suppose you happen to have any more friends with similar problems that need investigating?"

Benton had a twinkle in his eye as he exchanged a glance with Jo.

"Sorry, Doctor, not a chance," he apologized blandly. "Not even a ghost of one!"



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