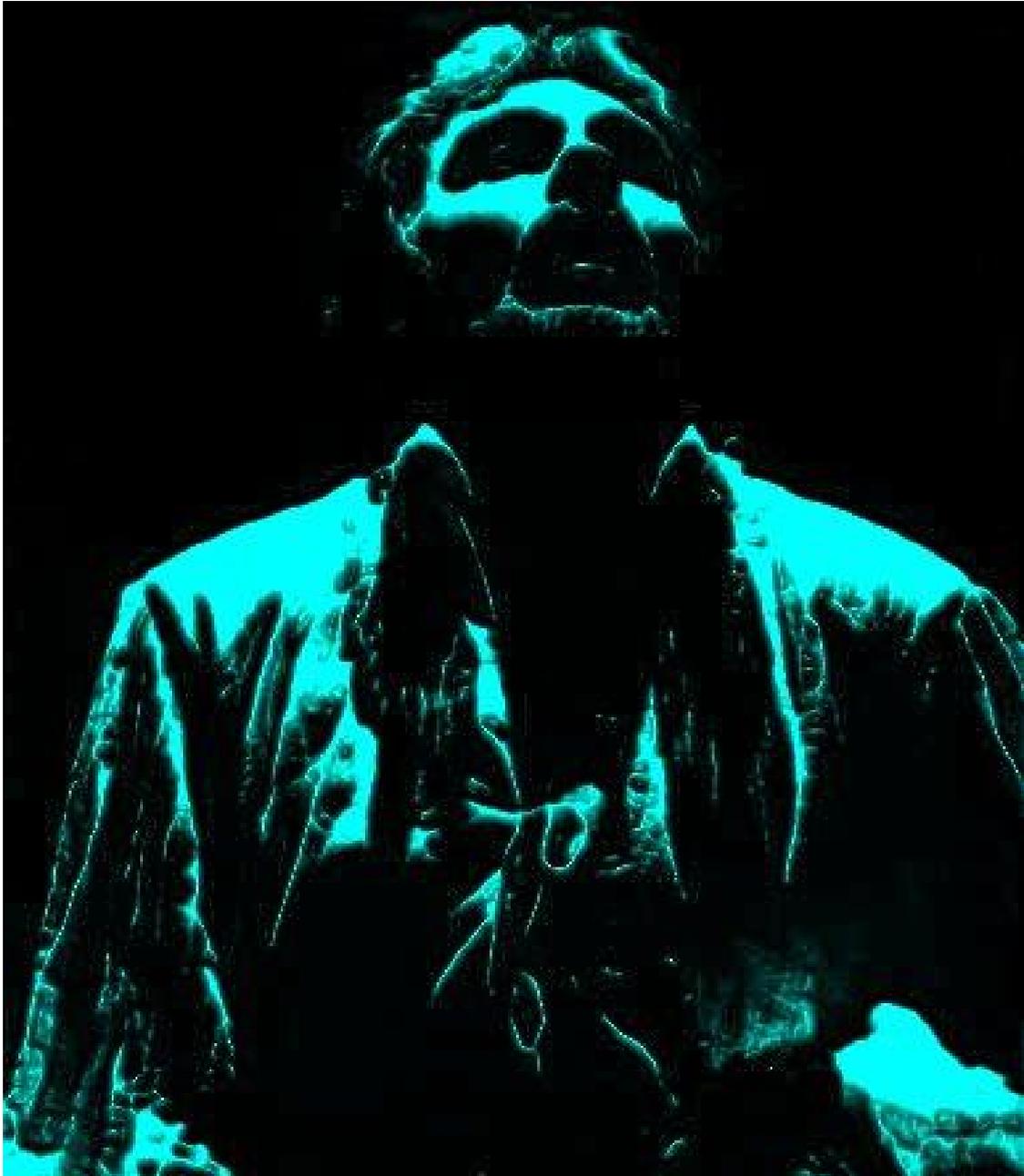


DOCTOR · WHO

Under the Stairs

Chris McKeon



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Rose Tyler leaned over the banister of the bronze spiral staircase and looked up, counting the innumerable levels of floors inside the TARDIS' Wardrobe Room, each cluttered with all types of clothing and analogous apparel. She then cast her gaze downwards and tried to count the number of fabric-laden floors beneath her, but the thick darkness surrounding (what must have been) the base of the staircase made her heart beat and her mind swirl with dizziness and unease.

She brought her eyes level and spied something appealing: a white t-shirt with a Union Jack emblazoned on its front and back. *That's more like it*, she thought to herself. Rose had felt in need of an image change for a while now, ever since that relationship misstep with Adam, and then later, meeting her Dad after he should have been dead. That was something she had changed, and something that had nearly destroyed the Earth. Rose knew the Doctor had forgiven her for what she

had done there, but as for forgiving herself...since that adventure she definitely had needed something to boost her mood.

She stepped off the staircase onto the desired level (although she had no idea how the steps managed to merge onto the required floor) and retrieved the shirt, along with a pair of jeans just her size. Rose smiled and patted a nearby coral-shaped support column.

'You and me, TARDIS or whatever you really call yourself, we do all right together, don't we? I just hope you don't mind sharing the Doctor.'

Rose thought of him as she walked back to the staircase and started her descent to the level with the entryway that led back to the Console Room, where she had left him. He was so amazing, so fun, so strange, and so...mysterious. Rose wished she had always known him, always travelled with him; her life until now would have been much better. ***But at least I have him now***, she mused as she reached the doorway and passed through. Rose paused: the corridor looked different somehow, darker perhaps, with more shadows. She was not completely surprised; the Doctor had informed her that the TARDIS was alive, and sometimes liked to shake up its inside layout. Even so, the shadows made her uneasy and as she closed the door Rose kept her arm stretched out to let her fingers brush along the roundels inset within the corridor's wall, just to keep her bearings.

Suddenly, the door clicked behind her; Rose tugged at the handle; the door was locked. Then, very quickly, the temperature began to drop. What was the TARDIS playing at? Rose stopped and looked upwards.

'All right...old girl, Ship...this isn't funny anymore. I've done my shopping and found my new clothes;

I just want to get back to the Console Room and the Doctor, our friend. Well...your friend and mine.'

The temperature continued to drop; the metal walls creaked with the cold. Rose shivered and held her arms close to her body, and as she inhaled a shuddering breath, the surrounding shadows seemed to darken and draw in closer. Something was wrong: this was not the TARDIS playing games, this was some other power. And then she heard it, coming out from the shadows: something was chuckling.

'Doctor!'

Rose was about to break into a run, if only to be going somewhere, anywhere, but then a thought came to her: *Okay, so something's mucking about down here, but I think this is still the same way I came. So before you go rushing around in the dark, think, Rose, stick to the plan, the way you came. So what was that, what were the directions the Doctor gave you...directions, directions...Yes! First left, second right, go third on the right, go straight ahead, under the stairs, past the bins, fifth door on my left. Right, so...*

Rose let go of the wardroom door's handle (the skin of her fingers clung for a moment to the frigid metal) and, moving quickly but steadily and keeping her hand near the wall, she counted the doors on her left as she moved past: **Fifth, Fourth, Third, Second, First!** Rose looked forward and gave a small laugh: there were the bins, large, black, rubber and smelling of...bananas? Moving past the containers,

Rose kept her eyes peeled for the staircase: nothing at all like the one in the wardrobe room, this one was carved from black oak varnished smooth, with burgundy carpeted steps leading to some upper floor...she saw it, straight ahead. Rose hurried beneath and saw out of the corner of her eye a black double door with a white roundel near its top on both sides, set into the wall under the stairs. She cried out in terror as the doors swung inwards and a powerful inrush of wind pulled her inside. She dropped the Union Jack shirt and the jeans, which flailed in the air as she fell while the doors slammed shut, plunging everything into darkness...

The Doctor was hunched over the console, using the scanner to monitor the artron energy saturation levels within the core of the TARDIS. The recent incident on Earth with Pete Tyler and the Reaper caste of Chronovores had drained some of the machine's power but it would be quite a while before she would be in need of refuelling. His concentration was interrupted by a deep chime resonating throughout the Ship.

'The Cloister Bell? What's got you so jumpy, old girl?'

At that moment there was a subtle but notable change in the time machine's atmosphere, as if the air had grown heavier, colder. Something was stirring within the TARDIS, something very familiar. Then, from the corridor leading out of the room, there was a sharp cry: 'Doctor!' The Time Lord immediately recognised the source.

'Rose!'

The Doctor dashed from the console, to the exit door, out into the rest of the Ship. The air was even colder in the corridor and the lights were dim and flickering. The Doctor called for Rose but heard no reply. Where had she been heading? The Wardrobe Room. The directions were easy enough; the Doctor hurried through the passageway and took the first left...

* * *

Rose opened her eyes; she saw only dull shafts of light. She had not quite lost consciousness as the wind had pulled her into...wherever she was now, but she almost had, enough to make her head ache and her body wish to keep down on the floor, but she had to stand: the Doctor was sure to have noticed the TARDIS turning balmy and she had made sure to scream loud enough for him to hear. He would find her, and until he did, she would do her best to make the search easy. She stood, rubbed her eyes and took a deep breath to steady the throbbing in her head.

'You'd better not have dropped me in the dungeon,' she said to whatever part of the Doctor's ship might be listening. Then she looked around to where the TARDIS had taken her: a large, dark room lit with occasional pools of soft light, like the one directly before her. What was standing in the light? Stepping closer, Rose saw it was the portrait of a young woman with red curly hair, smiling enigmatically

like a Mona Lisa in bottle-green velvet. Or at least Rose thought it was a woman with red curls dressed in green: the paint was so old and faded that the colours presented almost seemed to merge into a uniform grey. Rose stepped back and saw many other framed portraits, of many people, although some were clearly not human - one almost looked like a penguin. This was some kind of art gallery, Rose realised, but who were the subjects - friends of the Doctor, perhaps?

No matter whose portraits they were, this gallery had seen better days, Rose thought. It was like a museum no one had taken care of or kept clean, except... A well-lit area not too far away within the vast room caught Rose's eye. She turned to get a better look, and saw, beneath a single, cold white light, a collection of large paintings mounted on ornate stands of black iron. Rose approached the montage and examined the pictures. Unlike the other, faded paintings she had just seen, these were clean and well-preserved, with colours rich and striking. Nevertheless, the predominant colour in each portrait was black, but what portraits they were. On each canvas- half a dozen or so in number -was the full body image of a man, a different one for each, all incredibly handsome. Rose stepped close to examine them.

On one canvas was stencilled the figure of a young, devilishly handsome man with long, sharp sideburns and a thin, beard length moustache. His hand vainly clutched at a strange medallion hanging around his neck, as if clinging to the only power in his possession, while a dark, misshapen shadow stretched behind him, like two bodies mashed together. Another featured a suave, older man with a dark

goatee, dressed in a black Nehru style jacket and trousers, his eyes radiating a fierce, evil intelligence wrapped in charm. The next portrait was oddly designed: a triptych, which featured in its centre another man with a goatee dressed in a bizarre, music-hall black velvet penguin suit. Flanking him were two images of the same hideous, skeletal-faced cadaver, on one side dressed in a tattered black cloak and hood, on the other in a majestic black jumpsuit with a deep purple cape. One other portrait revealed a young man, similarly bearded, in a black tailcoat edged with silver at the collar, a blue waistcoat and green cravat, with a lean face, aquiline profile and shoulder-length black hair. Yet another image presented the frightening figure of a man with dark, swept-back hair and yellow snake-like eyes, dressed in a two-piece black velvet jumpsuit with a gigantic cloak the hue of coagulated blood. Rose gazed closely at this man's image: at first it seemed he was the only one of the lot without a beard of some kind, but then she saw a very thin goatee squaring a cruel mouth. She stepped back from the collection and gazed at the presentation in total, and wondered, despite the care and pride of place clearly given to the portraits, if the images were of the Doctor's friends, or foes.

Then Rose noticed a painting she had missed, although she was not sure how she could have. It was a long, rectangular image of yet another bearded man with dark swept-back hair, wearing a leather suit so jet-black it looked almost shiny; on the finger of one gloved hand was a ring with gold circles etched into its flat jade surface. What struck Rose the most about the image, however, and perhaps more than any of the others, was the man's eyes: deep hollows, filled with shadow and

malevolence; at the centre of both were piercing circles of deep blue, so penetrating and dark...

Rose blinked and looked away. She still needed to get out of there, find the Doctor and find out what had been going on. She stepped to the side to walk past the canvas, and froze with surprise: there was something standing behind the painting! Rose was on the verge of jumping back but noticed the figure, draped in the shadow of the canvas behind it, had not moved at all when she had come into view. There was no way it could miss her; why was it keeping still? Keeping her distance, Rose called to it.

'Hello? Who are you then?'

There was no reply, no movement, no sign the figure was registering her presence. Then Rose noticed something very important: the figure was not even breathing. It was some kind of statue, she realised, no danger at all. But a statue of what?

The portrait was slanting back and over the statue-which Rose by now could tell was in the shape of man-and blocked most of the light bathing the entire display from above. Rose reached behind the figure, grabbed the obstructing picture's supporting iron stand and pushed it back from the statue as best as she could; portrait and stand were both very heavy. She managed to clear the light's path and the statue was revealed. Rose blinked in surprise. It was an exact and very life-like replica of the man in the portrait: the same perfect, swept-back black hair, the neatly trimmed goatee beard, the smooth black leather suit and gloves. Every

detail was re-created, even down to the eyes, so dark and piercing and...and...mesmerising...pulling her in...down into the shadows of the eyes...*what?...the ring? What ring? On the finger. It's there, just like in the painting. It's so beautiful, so pretty. I just want to touch it...*

Rose reached out her hand to the ring...

The Doctor's feet clanked quickly on the metal grating beneath him as he hurried down the corridor. The air was freezing cold, and he sensed the familiar presence in the space around him; something had reached out here, reached out and pulled, but where?

Just as he was about to pass under the stairs, the Doctor noticed something on the floor before him, and stopped. A Union Jack t-shirt and a dark pair of jeans lay crumpled on the ground, just in front of a large double door set into the wall, black with two white roundels near the top. A pair of doors he had sealed himself, to keep inside...

The Doctor flung open the doors and crossed the threshold, his fingers clenched...

Rose's hand reached forward, her fingers touched the surface of the ring on the statue's hand, and she jumped back with a sharp cry as an electric pulse slid up her arm. She swayed on her feet, her mind felt hazy and unfocused. The fog in her

mind cleared as she witnessed a bizarre transformation: the statue was awash with its own light, a light somehow dark and dense. Rose gasped - the statue, the man was moving, and smiling...

The light faded. The man blinked and his dark eyes focused and fixed upon Rose. His smile, with no trace of kindness within it, widened and he spoke.

‘Thank you, my dear child. You have ended a most unwelcome slumber.’

‘What are you talking about? What did I do?’

The man stretched his neck and limbs. ‘I should have thought your actions were clear - you broke the stasis field binding me when you touched my ring; it was the focus point of the energy, you see.’

‘But...but you were in my head, I heard you. Wait. It was you, wasn’t it? You brought me here.’

‘Yes, I must admit some complicity in your arrival, and also some surprise: after all these years of bondage in the darkness,’ - the man’s voice grew harsh and venomous - ‘I had worried my hypnotic abilities would have atrophied beyond retrieval, but now I find they have only grown stronger through the frustration, the inequity, of my imprisonment! I reached out through the TARDIS, discovered your presence - a simple, childish mind - and I lured you, gripped you, to free me so that I, at long last, can face the Doctor once more, and collect the final dues of my revenge!’

The light overhead dimmed and stuttered; the room grew cold, even colder than the corridor outside had been. The man advanced upon Rose with eyes blazing, coming to a halt less than a foot in front of her, and smiled once more.

‘Has fear so gripped you that you can’t even speak, girl?’

‘I’m not afraid of you,’ Rose retorted, even as she heard her voice quake and her skin go numb. ‘So you’d better tell me who you are, before the Doctor finds you.’

The man laughed a frightful, jeering chuckle. ‘Oh, how wonderful - you don’t even know who I am! Well then, allow me to announce myself. I am the Master, and you have restored me, and ensured the Doctor’s final destruction!’

Rose drew herself up with anger. ‘And just who are you to the Doctor?’

‘He’s one of my people, Rose. He’s a Time Lord, aren’t you, Master?’

The Master stiffened at the voice-the Doctor’s voice-from behind. Then he rubbed his hands together and turned around to face his fellow man, whose silhouette stood still amongst the portraits and the shadows.

‘Yes, Doctor, as always. Not even death can alter that; I speak from vast experience.’

‘Yeah, well, from my vast experience I know it’s rude to turn off other people’s lights, so...’ the high-pitched whine of the Sonic Screwdriver warbled and a large column of light suddenly brightened the immediate area, revealing the Doctor standing mere feet from the Master and Rose. The Doctor extended his free hand.

‘Come here, Rose. My company’s better anyway.’

‘But I think it’s mine you should attend to, Doctor,’ the Master said, as Rose joined the Doctor at his side. ‘I have waited a good many years to have yours again.’

‘You can wait a bit longer then,’ the Doctor sneered as he turned to Rose. ‘Are you all right? He hasn’t hurt you?’

‘No, he only just woke up. Oh Doctor, I’m sorry - I got pulled in here and found him just standing there, and then I just heard his voice telling me to touch his ring...’

‘It’s all right; it’s not your fault. The Master’s a genius at hypnotism, but I never knew him to be so extensive in his persuasion.’ The Doctor turned on the Master. ‘Did you tie into the ship’s telepathic circuits to get to her then?’

‘You speak as though you doubted my abilities, but you should know their extent by now, and my power, the power of a Time Lord, the power we both wield!’

Rose gripped the Doctor’s arm and whispered, ‘But you said all the Time Lords were dead; you knew it in your head.’

‘Yeah, I did. I still do, see?’ The Doctor tapped his head and grinned. ‘Same head, same certainty.’ The Doctor stared at the Master, and Rose could have sworn there was true sadness in his voice when he spoke next. ‘And I know you’re really dead.’

‘Don’t be so preposterous, Doctor, I clearly live! Or have you finally lost your senses?’

'No, but you will.' The Doctor raised his Sonic Screwdriver and pressed a control, which emitted a soft, fluting sound pulse. The Master blinked and convulsed slightly before standing motionless; the blue of his eyes dimmed. Rose stared at the Doctor in shock.

'Did you kill him?'

'No, Rose, he was never really alive.'

'And is he really a Time Lord?'

'He was. A great one, the most evil one, but great too. I knew him all of my life.'

'And he was your friend?'

'Yep.'

'But he became an enemy?'

'Yep.'

'Then what is he now?'

'Let's find out.' The Doctor took a moment to prepare and then toggled the control on the screwdriver once more. The Master shook as his eyes brightened like miniature headlights. He blinked rapidly and stared hard at the Doctor.

'What happened to me?'

'I turned you off, Master. I deactivated your systems.'

'Deactivated...my systems? What do you mean?'

'I mean I shut down your electronic pathways, what else - you were never this thick when you were alive.'

'You lie; this is some sort of trick to confuse me!'

'Well go on then, if you won't believe me, see for yourself; take off your glove, the one on the hand without the ring.'

The Master sneered at the Doctor's instruction, but obliged, fully expecting to see nothing but smooth skin beneath the leather. All too soon he felt all his expectation drain away as the material slipped off to reveal a mass of gleaming metal and intricately woven circuitry studded with miniature lights. The only resemblance it had to a hand was its shape, and even that, to the Master, seemed unfamiliar. After a few moments, he spoke again, his voice flat and dull.

'So it's true. I am some kind of android.'

'Yeah, you are: the first and last of your kind.'

'What 'kind' is that, my dear Doctor?'

'A prototype Gallifreyan consciousness receptacle, an artificial body for a living mind. When the Time Lords retrieved you from within the TARDIS' link to the Eye of Harmony, they constructed a bio-mechanical drone to house your consciousness, at least until a new body could be woven for you.'

'How industrious of them, although I never knew the Time Lords to be so concerned with the aesthetics of appearance,' the Master interjected, gesturing to his face.

'Yeah, well, it was decided to imprint your future incarnation's appearance upon the receptacle, enough to make it an easier transition for you.'

'Ah, yes, I see. Your voice in the matter, no doubt. I find it almost amusing and contemptible that you felt there was any situation I would find traumatic, particularly resurrection. You should know me better, Doctor.'

'I'd hoped to have known you in a new way, a new beginning.'

'It's the ending I'm unsure of - you say this...container for my mind was built simply as a waiting cell until a true new body could be formed for me. Were the Time Lords successful in this?'

'They were, for all the good you caused them.'

'I expect nothing less from myself. And I also expect that you will now tell me that you kept this technological design as a memento of your kindness to me, even when something of mind still resided within, trapped and caged in the darkness?' There it was again, the feral rage hardening the Master's voice. His hands clenched tight. The Doctor noticed this and approached this echo of his oldest friend and enemy, with pleading in his voice.

'No, it wasn't like that! The Time Lords told me there was nothing left of you inside the machine, not even a trace.'

'And you never bothered to confirm.'

'Of course I did! There was nothing I could detect, nothing remaining.'

'Ah, but there was, I made sure of it. Just one thought, one consideration, Doctor: the thought of your death. That primary concern, that shard of my will I left behind in this vehicle for the right moment when I could inflict it upon you, as you had inflicted it upon me.'

'I tried to save you.'

'I don't need your charity, Doctor, I never have. I only need your death.'

The Doctor stepped back, his face a mask of bitter disappointment. Then he gave a sad half-smile. 'Well, that's the problem, isn't it? Because, Master or not, you're still just a thread of thought in a metal suit. And we made sure not to give you any weapons.'

The Master smiled as he pulled the glove back onto his hand. 'Perhaps so; it is true I am simply a shadow of myself, and unarmed at that. You've already proven you can deactivate me at will, but your young friend, Miss Rose...'

'Tyler,' Rose answered, coming to the Doctor's side but keeping her eyes from the Master's face; she did not like the way he was watching her.

'Ah. As I say, Miss Tyler has also proven I can be awakened. What I had, in my mental delirium, assumed to be a stasis field which broke when she touched my ring, was in fact, I imagine, an on-switch. You can confirm this, I'm sure, Doctor?'

'Why should I?'

'Ah, thank you. That evasion will suffice.' The Master's fingers gripped the sides of the ring. 'I wonder if the energy input can be reversed.' The Master twisted the ring and a bright spark of electricity lanced to the Doctor, striking the fabric of his green jumper directly over his hearts. The Doctor howled in pain as he fell to his knees and his limbs and torso convulsed wildly, the line of energy sparking

and flowing into his body as the Master advanced upon him step by step, his mouth opened with a wide smile as he chuckled with loud laughter.

Rose, her body tense with outrage and shock, turned to the Master and screamed, 'Stop it! You're gonna kill him!'

Between harder laughs, the Master replied, 'Killing the Doctor has been my intent for more years than he cares to admit; nothing will stop me now...now...n-n-n-...'

The Master shuddered. The electric line connecting his ring to the Doctor's chest flashed and winked out. The Master's arm dropped and his body drooped, but his eyes remained bright. The Doctor fell back onto the floor, his jumper smoking and his face drenched in sweat. After a few moments, he coughed and wheezed the words, 'Not enough...energy to go...around, huh? Or to...finish the job. You've got...a limited power supply, Master,' the Doctor said with stronger voice as he lifted himself up his elbow, 'and once that's gone, well, you won't need me to turn you off.'

'Perhaps not, Doctor,' the Master sneered, his voice slightly slurring but filled with hatred, 'Nevertheless, I always maintain a fresh supply of alternatives!' With speed not born of flesh, the Master leapt towards Rose and clamped his hand around her throat. The Doctor tried to stand but the Master squeezed his fingers ever slightly and Rose's eyes bulged from the pressure.

'I have the strength of the strongest Gallifreyan metals, Doctor; it will take very little extra pressure to collapse the girl's throat permanently. Now you will take

me to the Console Room immediately, or young Miss Tyler will learn, first-hand, what it means to die as your faithful companion.'

The Doctor held up his hands in front of him. 'All right, all right! I'll come peacefully.'

'Very good, Doctor, and peacefully means no weapons of any kind, particularly your screwdriver.'

With a grimace, the Doctor looked at the Sonic Screwdriver in his hand and flung it away into the shadows of the gallery. 'There. Satisfied with the terms?' he asked with an insincere smile.

The Master smiled. 'Perfectly. Now move!'

Leading the way, the Doctor walked towards the gallery doors, with the Master and Rose just behind.

They entered the Console Room a few minutes later, and the Master, with Rose in tow, walked up to the console itself, surveying its design.

'You've made significant alterations to the machine's control interface, Doctor, and...if I didn't know better I'd say you've changed the energy requirements of the TARDIS itself, almost as if...it has a different power source. Your TARDIS is no longer connected to the Eye of Harmony, why?'

The Doctor shrugged his shoulders. 'Don't you remember?'

The Master set his jaw. 'No matter, I can find my answers where we are headed.'

'And where would that be,' the Doctor asked, keeping his eyes on Rose, reassuring her.

'To where I am, Doctor, to the location of my true self. We will trace the whereabouts of my TARDIS from here and then I will rejoin my full consciousness and start again. Now do it!'

The Doctor remained where he stood, and genuine sympathy appeared in his face.

'You really don't remember, do you? No, you wouldn't. **You** only remember what came before.'

'My memories are not your concern, but unless you want to carry the memory of your dead friend on your conscience then you will obey me!'

'I can't! Not the way you want. I can't **obey** you because there's no you left out there. I'm sorry, but what I said before is true: you're dead. The real Master is dead.'

The Master's eyes widened and he set his ring to Rose's neck.

'It is not in your interest to lie to me right now. Take me to myself!'

'I'm not lying! I'm being very hurtfully honest!' The Doctor's voice shook as he continued to speak, as if long buried emotions were rising from their resting place. 'I saw you die, in the Time War. Your TARDIS shattered in the focus of the Cruciform - I saw it happen, I saw you on the scanner and you saw me. And then

there was nothing but the time winds. You're all that's left of the Master, a broken off splinter in a metal shell. You're just a ghost of the past that should never have woken up.'

The Master stared daggers at the Doctor, disbelief and fury blazing in his eyes.

'I don't believe it,' he whispered, and then much louder, 'I won't accept it!' He threw Rose brutally to the side and fell onto the console, his fingers flying over switches as he activated the scanner and pulled its screen before his face. Then, even in the white light of the screen, the Master's face seemed to blanch.

'It's impossible...' he whispered. The Doctor, silent and grief-stricken, joined the Master by his side and placed a hand on his shoulder. 'I'm sorry, but it's true. It's all gone. Gallifrey's gone.'

For a moment neither man spoke. Then the Master began to laugh, but stopped when he noticed the Doctor's hand. With a snarl he slapped it from shoulder and threw the Doctor against the far wall of the room, who slid down nearly senseless.

'As if I care who died in that infantile conflict; I have survived! And therefore I must be out there somewhere, I must! I just have to find myself...'

The Master hurried around the console, searching for...*The telepathic circuits!* With a rush of anticipation he laid his hands upon the interface and, cursing his metal form, focused his will into the exionic circuitry, flooding the vastness of the Vortex with his consciousness, searching for himself...and found nothing. He

tried again, pushing harder. Still nothing. He boosted the power to the device, dispersing his mind as far as he could think, to all the places in the Cosmos he had visited: the planet of the War Games, London, Exarius, Spiridon, Terserus, Xeraphas, Sarn, Singapore, The Great Attractor, Perfugium, San Francisco, everywhere! But there was no sign, no memory, and no presence of the Master, other than himself. But still he refused to give up. The Master hissed as he poured more of himself into the TARDIS' telepathic circuits; smoke began to billow of the console, and his own body...

Suddenly the Doctor was at his side, yelling in his ear.

'You've gotta stop this; you're overloading the circuitry, you'll burn out your mind!'

'I never knew you were so concerned for my safety, Doctor, nor so unaware of my strengths! I am the Master, and I will succeed in spite of weaknesses, and in spite of you!'

Fire began to leap from the panels, engulfing the Master's hands and travelling up his arms, melting the leather upon them. He felt no physical pain from the assault, but his mind was burning as the mental stresses of his frantic search unravelled his thoughts. The Master screamed in torment...and then the TARDIS' engines roared into life, as the ship spun violently through the vortex, throwing the Doctor, who had only just begun to recover, to the floor. Only the Master remained standing, his hands clamped tight upon the telepathic interface. He began to laugh with abandon.

'You see, Doctor? Even your own antique ship obeys my command, and she has found me at last!'

'No, it's not what you think,' the Doctor shouted as he struggled to rise. 'The TARDIS is only reacting to your invasion of her systems. She's flying blind, trying to get away from you; if you don't let her go now she'll force you out, she'll destroy you!'

'Never, Doctor, never! I am a Time Lord, the greatest of all, and greater than you! I have overcome death itself, nothing more can harm...' The Master went silent as if hearing something within. There was a flash of blinding light as a tremendous explosion expelled fire throughout the console, sending the Master flying backwards into the main doors, screaming, wild and incoherent. At that moment, the room grew still and the central column ceased to move.

'What's happened, Doctor?' Rose asked as she stood and stared at the smoking, slumped figure of the Master.

'We've landed,' he replied, also rising and examining the console. 'Thankfully there's little actual damage done, but the destination settings are all scrambled; I don't even know where, or when, we are.'

'Well, let's take a look,' Rose said as she switched on the scanner and the two peered at the image on its screen: a breathtaking seascape of silver dunes like metal waves undulating as far the horizon sparkling in the distance. A massive spiralling nebula of silver fire and smoke hung in the sky, sifting and shimmering and twisting. The Doctor smiled wide.

'This is the Silver Devastation, Rose, one of most magnificent planets within the Isop Galaxy. It's also the homeworld of the Face of the Boe.'

'It's gorgeous,' Rose said, turning to smile at the Doctor. 'But is it safe?'

'Of course it's safe, completely visitor-friendly.'

Rose looked over to the TARDIS doors, and her smile vanished.

'Yeah, well, it's about to get an unfriendly visitor.'

The Doctor followed Rose's gaze: the TARDIS doors were open; the Master was gone.

'Come on,' the Doctor said as he hurried out through the doors.

Outside, the planet seemed less inviting, as cold air pressed against Rose's skin and dark clouds crossed over the sky; a storm was approaching. She and the Doctor followed the footsteps- and further on drag marks- of the Master, until the Doctor stopped in his tracks at the crest of a steep slope of silver sand. At the bottom of the valley, crumpled in the sand, lay the Master, his blackened face staring up into the rolling clouds. The Doctor raced down the slope, but Rose purposefully stayed behind- the Doctor deserved this moment alone. Then she noticed something not too far off to her left. She went over to get a closer look...

* * *

Down below, the Doctor knelt by the body of what remained of his once best friend and later greatest enemy, a cruel murderer, a being of pure malice, the quintessence

of evil. If only he could help him...The Master's eyes snapped open. He chuckled once more.

'I could never have let myself be nursed by you, Doctor, be cared for by you. I would prefer extinction to that courtesy. But this is not the end. You think you are the lone survivor, Doctor. You think you are the last. You are wrong, as always. I won; I found myself, and soon I shall be whole again. Just you wait...'

'But there's nothing here, nothing to find. You've only lost yourself forever.'

'Oh my dear Doctor, ever none the wiser...' the Master fell silent and his head slumped. The lights of his eyes sank down into the darkness. The Master was well and truly dead.

There was a flash of lightning and a torrent of rain began to fall from the heavy clouds above. The storm had arrived. The Doctor cradled the Master's head in his hands and felt his hearts overflow with emotion. But before any tears could fall, he heard Rose cry out his name. He looked over his shoulder and saw her standing at the top of the slope, carrying something wrapped in a dark bundle. The Doctor hurried up to meet her and to see what she carried. It was baby, no more than an infant, sleeping peacefully.

'I found this just over there, wrapped up like this,' Rose said. 'Doctor, who could have left this baby here all alone?'

'I don't know, Rose, I don't know. We've got to take it somewhere safe and warm. Let's go back to the...' The Doctor paused as something caught his eye.

Rose followed his gaze and saw them: a caravan of people, countless in number, travelling across the silver wastes. The Doctor smiled. 'Come on then, large groups can always use one more!'

The Doctor and Rose carried their little find to the head of the group, whom they discovered was leading a group of travelers away from their dying homeworld. They accepted the small child from the Doctor and Rose with gratitude, pleased to increase their throng of survivors. Leaving the mass of wanderers behind and fleeing from the increasing storm, the two friends raced back to the TARDIS.

Safe inside the Console Room, the Doctor set the ship in flight once more and began repairs to the flight path indicator.

Watching him, Rose said, 'I'm sorry for your loss, Doctor, even if the Master was monstrous; he was probably the last thing you had of home.'

'Yeah, he was. But he was dead to me a long time before that. Still, I have the TARDIS and I have my life.'

Rose smiled. 'You're all right then?'

The Doctor grinned. 'With you, Rose Tyler, I'm fantastic.' And the two continued on their adventures.

* * *

On the Silver Devastation, at the bottom of a shallow sandy valley, the charred remains of an android body smoked and sizzled in the rain. Then its eyes flashed and a mass of golden energy, like dust, rose from its head and flew into the air. It travelled some distance, towards a moving caravan of countless people, before settling over a naked child wrapped in black fabric. The golden dust flew down, not into the child, but into something hidden inside its blanket. The child's caretaker failed to notice all but a stolen glimpse of a flash near the child's skin. Reaching into the blanket, the woman pulled out a small golden circular object, covered in strange foreign markings, attached to a gold chain. For a moment, she thought of tossing the bauble into the sand. But her mind was soon overtaken by an odd and sudden blankness, her hand thoughtlessly placing the object back into the safety of the child's blanket, where it was left forgotten and forever unnoticed.

Some time after the caravan had departed the shores of the Silver Devastation, the rushing winds brushed away the imprint of their footsteps. The winds also uncovered a small buried object: a long, black tube, with a bulbous circle at one end, which bore an uncanny resemblance to a weapon a certain Time Lord had always favoured...