

I had asked grandfather why we must take a train. Why can't we jump around the planet in the TARDIS like crickets, grandfather?

Ah, because crickets make too much noise, he replied. Crickets are always going to get stepped on, one day or another.

## The Kings of Akhaten

by Jake Reynolds

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The Akhatrain had begun its journey; we sat side by side on red, plush seats, bordered with gold lace. The carriage was awfully church-like, I said aloud.

"Ecclesiastical," grandfather pointed out, narrowing his eyes as he looked up at the domed roof and the stone gargoyles, their expressions frozen in rock grimaces. We had only been sat there for a few minutes; I asked him to give me a history lesson. Every time we visited a new planet, I would sit cross-legged, rest my head in both of my hands and ask grandfather for a history lesson. Often he would check his watch or wrinkle his nose, as if to say not now, child; I am busy. Yet every time he would succumb, put his weight on his stick and take joy in giving me the account of the planet's history.

"Akhaten," he proudly announced, ducking his head to look at the amber skies outside. Perhaps they reminded him of Gallifrey. "There is a belief that every atom in the known universe originated here, Susan, in the Akhatenian rings. Akhatenians believe that – Susan? Are you listening?"

I always had to maintain eye contact with grandfather when he gave history lessons. The beauty of Akhaten had momentarily distracted me.

"Yes, grandfather." I beamed up at him and he nodded faintly.

"Akhatenians believe that because the universe started here, it is a place of insurmountable significance. It is a holy place for many! Species across the universe come on

great pilgrimages here to stand on the oldest rocks they have ever known.”

“Is that why we are here? Is this our pilgrimage?”

“No, my dear child, no,” he chuckled, grinning broadly as two other passengers boarded the train. “We are here simply to observe and appreciate. There are some truly majestic sights here – sights you will never see replicated anywhere else!”

We had arrived by the Waterfall of Silver Faces, or rather, at the top of it. The TARDIS had materialised on the ledge, a good ten feet from the barrier whereby visitors could lean over and see a waterfall of pure silver tumble down into a shining pool. We leant over the railing, squinting our eyes whenever a torrent of silver caught the sun’s reflection. Despite its beauty, he said, the waterfall is deadly. Grandfather gravely told me of how just the dipping of a toe in the waterfall would result in certain death. Sometimes the most inviting sights in the universe are in fact the most deadly, he warned.

He told me that sometimes he could not believe that I was his granddaughter; since I was so pretty he thought I must be some kind of trap. I blushed – oh grandfather, you only say that because I am your granddaughter! I am only pretty to you by default! “Not at all,” he had said, looking out across the waterfall. “Not at all.”

The Akhatrain had arrived shortly afterwards. I had exclaimed that it was surely bigger on the inside, but grandfather had dismissed this as a cheap illusion.

We took our seats. For the first few moments we were alone, until a young, slim lady came on board and took a seat opposite us. Her hair was dark and cut to her ears. She wore a flimsy lilac dress and walked with grace. Grandfather stared absent-mindedly out of the window, and I struck up a conversation with the lady once the silence had become nearly unbearable.

“Hello,” I said, catching her eye. “I’m Susan. What’s your name?” She faintly pressed a hand to her chest as her thin eyebrows rose and her thin lips curved gently into a faint smile. “Susan,” she said. Her voice was delicate. “That’s my name, too.”

“Oh!” I exclaimed. “What a coincidence!”

“Not at all,” grandfather assured us, smiling dreamily at us both. “Susan is in fact one of the most common names in the Universe! I think Earth was the third planet to use the name, if memory serves me correctly. Gallifrey came second.”

“Well,” Susan smiled, “I am indeed Susan from Earth. It’s such a shame that I fall into

the broadest of categories. It's pleasant to meet you both. Are you grandfather and granddaughter?" I told her that we were. "That's nice," she said. "I don't remember my grandfather."

"Oh, that is a shame."

"Yes, I suppose it is." She smiled, smoothing the dress over her knees. "Have you ever been on the Akhatrain before, Susan?"

"No," I replied. "Grandfather will barely tell me anything. The excitement is torturous!" Grandfather smiled; he may have been looking away, but he was always listening. "Have you?"

"Oh yes," she said. "A long time ago now. It didn't look anywhere near as beautiful as this, though."

"Ecclesiastical," I said.

"That's a very nice way of putting it," she smiled. "The last time I was here it was just like a train from Earth, where I am from. The tracks were suspended in the air, then. None of this flying business," she laughed.

I was about to ask why she had come on the Akhatrain for a second time, when the conductor walked out from a little room and presented us all with leaflets. He looked just like a regular Gallifreyan but with two short, hardened horns on either side of his chin.

"Welcome," he said, "to the VIP branch of the Akhatrain." I looked up at grandfather inquisitively. VIP branch? He certainly hadn't mentioned that! "This journey will take you to all ten peaks of our glorious home world. At each peak, as promised, the King of the Peak shall greet you all briefly and welcome you to his province. My name is Algar-Sek and I am your conductor for today. Should you require refreshments, simply ask the gargoyles and your chosen item will arrive through their mouths. Please note that gargoyles with beaker racks deposit liquid refreshment only. If you have any questions, I'm just through this door." I liked Algar-Sek. His voice was comforting. And, yes, he was quite handsome too.

Smiling, he bowed courteously and returned to the driver's cabin. I turned to grandfather, who was already smiling in expectation of my surprise. Susan laughed gently through her nose. "Another history lesson, grandfather! Please!"

"On what, dear child?" he asked, chuckling to himself and shrugging as though he had no idea what I was talking about.

"VIP branch? The kings of Akhaten? Do explain it all!"

“Very well.” He settled back into his seat and twirled his stick in his hands. “Now, Susan. What is the planet we are circling called?”

“Akhaten.”

“Very good. But why in the world is it called that, you may wonder? Well, you see, when these rings were merely drifting rocks, they were referred to simply as Akha. Now, as they cooled down and became inhabitable, civilisations grew and matured. The rings were shaped in a very particular way; at ten perfectly distributed points, there are wonderful peaks in Akhatenian rocks. And as civilisations spread, a king was appointed per peak. They became the ten kings of Akha.”

“So the name comes from the ten kings! Akhaten!”

“Yes. Ancient scripture spoke of the tenth planet within the rings, but so far only seven have been found.”

What a wonderful story. Few other places had such interesting names. I decided not to tell grandfather this, because I’m sure he’d make himself tired proving me wrong.

We passed cliffs of great red chalk, golden halos of paper villages and the Great Bridge of Mourning, where Akhatenians gathered to throw pebbles into the Akhasea and hold complete strangers in warm embraces. Many people bonded over their grief, Algar-Sek told me. He came out and sat by us, reeling off all sorts of information with wide eyes and an enthusiastic smile. He sat with his legs apart and his elbows on his knees, gesticulating as he retold particular events in Akhaten’s history with unique precision. I know his knowledge was so precise because grandfather never interrupted him; he just sat there, nodding and smiling as if to confirm the stories as fact. “I feel now I should have made more use of the Bridge of Mourning when one of my fathers died. I just stayed indoors for weeks. He was the conductor of this very train, you know. Ungar-Sek, his name was.”

“Oh my word,” Susan said, gently pressing her long fingers to her mouth. “Was he a – forgive me – rather portly man?”

Algar-Sek laughed nostalgically. “You’re being too delicate,” he replied. “He was an enormously fat man. We always teased him because once one of his shirt buttons popped off and hit one of the passengers in the eye. That’s why,” he patted his fleece, “we use zips now.” He turned to Susan. “Did you know him?”

“I saw him,” she said. “The first time I caught the Akhatrain.” Algar-Sek smiled fondly.

“He was a good man.” His smile broadened. Yes, it seemed to say. Yes, he was.

We stopped briefly by the Choral Chasm, where Algar-Sek said that the Akhatenian Choir were preparing young children for the grand unveiling of the start of the Long Song after centuries of rehearsals. Two people got on the Akhatrain – a married couple, I later found out. Their names were Meega-Hep and Meega-Hop. They were related to one of the Princes of Akhaten, Meega-Hep later told me. “Which one?” I asked, intrigued.

“Oh, now that would be telling,” Meega-Hep grinned.

“Do you think he’ll remember us?” Meega-Hop asked.

“He’d better,” Meega-Hep replied. “We always send him a birthday card.”

All this time, grandfather had been smiling pleasantly out the window, adding only the odd remark to conversations. I wanted to catch Algar-Sek and ask who his friend was, the one he met on the Bridge of Mourning, but he was too busy.

This is the point in my story where things take a turn for the worse. I almost feel guilty as I write this; why can’t stories all be as pleasant as the stories Algar-Sek told us when our journey started? Why can’t this story break free from the carriage and circle mountains, dive into pools and soar over clouds?

This story is unpleasant. It is linear and firmly imprinted in my mind. I have difficulties remembering some of the specifics, but at the same time the tiniest details resonate in my mind. I hope that writing it out, in full, will be cathartic.

We had just left the Ivy Rock Tower when the Akhatrain shuddered gently. Grandfather frowned. Then it shuddered again, this time a little more violently. Grandfather turned his head, looking around with a furrowed brow. He was just about to get out from his seat when a large bang sent sparks flying across the carriage like fairies made of pure light.

The sparks had come from the driver’s cabin, and instantly I thought of Algar-Sek. The carriage wobbled violently from side to side, and grandfather held my shoulders and kept me close to his side. He held my shoulders tighter when he felt them trembling.

Susan got to her feet and walked over to the driver’s cabin. “I wouldn’t,” Meega-Hop warned her.

She ignored the advice, and wrenched the door open. She turned to me and walked inside. “Stop!” I shouted, my voice sounding a little feebler than I thought it would. “What is it?” I asked grandfather. The carriage was now flinching, as if it were a wounded animal

being struck by a malevolent predator.

“Not now,” he hushed me, looking around sternly.

“Are we going to die?” I asked, the cracks of my palms lining with sweat. Meega-Hep and Meega-Hop certainly held one another as though they were going to die. Grandfather turned to face me.

“Nonsense,” he said, “I shall hear no more of that, Susan! No more. Do you understand?”

I did, so I nodded. Grandfather always disliked it when I said things like that out loud. As he stood up, the whole carriage shook violently and he was thrown back into his seat. A bright light shone from the small office door and the entire Akhatrain was filled with a dreadful, dreadful scream.

Meega-Hep and Hop were clutching each other in the corner as grandfather opened the door abruptly. A torrent of smoke poured out, and none of us could see what was inside. He coughed violently into a handkerchief.

“Susan!” he called. I knew he was talking to Susan in the lilac dress, but it felt as though I saw him call out to me as I watched from a lofty peak.

A figure emerged from the smoke, but it was not Susan. It was a hideous creature.

I struggle for words to try and explain it; such was its grotesque form. But it must have been six feet in height, taller than grandfather, with pastel lilac skin. Yet the skin was taut on its bizarre bone structure, and with every movement it looked as though it was close to tearing. Its forehead was crested with a skeletal crown, and beneath it two bright yellow eyes darted between grandfather and myself. Its mouth was littered with peg-like teeth and its muscular arms swung like lead weights by its knees. I could hardly contain the scream that forced its way out of my mouth as I rushed over to grandfather’s side.

Meega-Hep and Hop crept towards the back of the carriage in horror, my own hands were shaking like winter leaves and Algar-Sek was probably cowering in fear with the driver. Grandfather, however, was smiling pleasantly. He clutched his lapels, stroking the fabric of his jacket with his thumbs as he addressed this creature.

“And what exactly might you be? A late arrival, hm?”

“So pleasant to be cordially addressed. I am Sentimentana.” The fact that the creature was so eloquent made it all the more disturbing.

“Where’s the young lady?” Meega-Hep asked with a shaky voice. Grandfather turned

to the couple, frowning as though he thought everybody had realised what he considered to be obvious.

“Why, have you not realised? This creature *is* Susan.” With that, Meega-Hep promptly fainted.

“It hardly seems possible,” I whispered.

“Mm, yet not as improbable as you may think,” he replied. “The Sentimentana are shape-shifters, Susan! They can adopt the form of a humanoid.”

“What are you doing here?” I asked the creature. Grandfather inhaled slowly, frowning at the creature as though he had asked the question himself.

“I feast,” the creature drawled, “on sentimentality.” The clue is in the name, I thought.

The wonder of Akhaten and the downfall of the Sentimentana – all in the name.

Yet, thinking back, it is interesting to note that grandfather never told the Sentimentana his name.

“And in Akhaten,” grandfather said sternly, “sentimentality is currency.” He turned to me to explain. “No coins, no credits, just what is sentimental. That which has sentimental value has monetary value, Susan. The Sentimentana are creatures that require sentimentality in order to survive. Now, that’s all very well and good... but you, dear fellow, look perfectly healthy to me.”

“You were so kind,” I said, my voice broken. I felt betrayed.

The creature cooed mockingly and rolled its head to one side. “And you so gullible,” it crooned. “You were the one that gave me my second identity. You say your name is Susan, my name is Susan. And you, old man... you mention Earth, which becomes my home world. It’s all about replicating what you hear to build your own identity.”

That horrified me at first. But now I ask myself, is that not what we all do?

“What are you here for?” grandfather barked. “What is your business here?”

“The train is under my command,” it hissed. “We shall pass every king of Akhaten. I shall feast on the souls of every single one and gain inconceivable power and immortality.”

“You’re going to gorge yourself on innocent souls,” I said, clarifying it in my mind. The ineffable nature of such monstrosity was forming in my head when the carriage juddered violently to a halt.

“Peak one,” the Sentimentana exclaimed, mimicking Algar-Sek’s voice. Algar-Sek who,

I later learned, along with the driver... had been killed!

There was no way of stopping it. Every time the Akhatrain stopped, it would take Meega-Hep with it and promise to us that if anyone even touched the carriage door, she would die a painful death. And one by one, the great kings of Akhaten were loaded onto the Akhatrain like products at a factory.

Each king's face was paler than the last.

Grandfather tried the controls, stepping over the dust of the bodies of Alger-Sek and the driver, but they were all defunct. Nothing, he assured me, would be able to operate them except the Sentimentana.

Our situation was a helpless one. As we sat in our prison, grandfather could only shout and shout at the creature that executed its evil so calmly:

"You are a butcher of souls! These people are just as precious as any other, regardless of their status! Stop this immediately!"

"This reign of terror will bring you no glory! No greatness shall come from this!"

"You think this brave, hm? You dishonour your people. There are ways of attaining happiness without exploiting others!"

Once a prince was made a king of Akhaten, their previous identity was wiped clean. So, for example, if a certain Prince Algar-Sek became a king of Akhaten, the records of Prince Algar-Sek would be destroyed, since he would never have existed according to Akhatenian Law. Algar-Sek was not a prince, of course. But by lending his name to the hypothetical situation I hoped to give it the grandeur that I believed it deserved.

Therefore, the kings became known as numbers alone. One through to Ten. One was the first, and oldest, and he was a crotchety old thing. Ten was younger and sprightlier. Between them were an assortment of other characters, all bound by the title of king. The kings were handcuffed and made to sit opposite grandfather, Meega-Hop and myself.

From the very moment that One entered the carriage, grandfather descended into what can only be described as something of a stupor. He sat with his head bowed but with his eagle eyes darting to and fro. His body looked exhausted at having to house such an agile mind. He would only speak occasionally to offer the aforementioned outbursts.

I only managed to speak properly to Three; he was a comforting type, and to try and calm me told me a story of his own. Stories are the greatest distractions from the darker



things on our minds, he said.

That is why I am writing this.

“Now listen,” he said, “this isn’t even the most horrific train journey I have been on.”

I could scarcely believe it.

“How can anything be worse than this?” I asked.

“I was a Prince, then. Prince... well, naturally, I forget. I was being escorted to my crowning as King.”

“But I thought Princes were crowned as Kings shortly after birth? That’s what the leaflet says.”

“Oh, they are.”

“Then how can you remember?” I asked, frowning. He smiled.

“I am Akhatenian,” he said. “Age does not hinder my memory. I can remember the first colours and shapes I saw with accurate precision. The only issue is confusing stories with life; fact with fiction.” He smiled gently at my awed expression. “Anyway,” he continued, “The Akhatrain was not quite this grand or this luxurious. It was a basic little thing – an aisle, some seats, a low ceiling.” I immediately thought of how Susan had likened the old Akhatrain to an Earth train, just before her hideous transformation. “My fathers cradled me and then there was a terrible babel coming from all around. All of my representatives scurried past us and crowded around something on the floor.”

“What was it?”

“A dead man.” He said this flatly, as though he preferred to dwell on fact alone rather than delve into the confused feelings a baby would have of the event. “A man in white. A white coat, a white hat. Hats like that were rare in Akhaten; this man was an outsider. We didn’t know him. Yet he had died. Then, I remember, all of the people looked towards the end of the carriage. Something was there.”

“Can you remember what it was?”

“I couldn’t see. I was only small, held tightly by one of my fathers. All I could hear was this awful rattling breath. And then I saw something at the other end of the carriage. There was a girl... older than you, but still just a child... she wore this ludicrous jacket.” He pulled at his cuffs as if to accentuate them. “A big, puffy old thing. And it was littered with... I never knew what they were. Advertisements? Insignia? Badges, maybe? Anyway, I was the only one to see her, peeking at her through a gap between two chairs. She saw me.” He frowned,

narrowing his eyes. “Yes, she saw me. She looked at me and I stared right back at her. And – *help me*, I thought. Please help me. I am lost and confused and scared. And it was as though she heard, you know. And she smiled at me. Then she got up and I couldn’t see her because the rest of the chairs were in the way.”

“And you didn’t know her, either?”

“Not at all. It’s a mystery how they got on board. The next thing I saw was this girl standing up, her jacket on the floor, wearing the white coat and the funny hat. She stared right at this unseen creature. I realise only now that the creature may be this dreaded thing. They breathe the same way, like twigs in spokes. Anyway, she looked right at the creature and muttered something I couldn’t quite hear or understand, and my crowded representatives all moved forwards a little. She said something more and the creature was gone.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that. I remember it clearly, although my fathers later told me that I might have been taking influence from various storybooks. But the outline was the same, I can assure you. And as I grew older I pieced things together and drew accounts from my representatives together until I had the nearly completed jigsaw in my mind. Every decade since, I’ve visited the Bridge of Mourning to remember him. I remember my doctor once asked, ‘why in Akha do you do that? The man was of no importance to you!’ But I always say, yes he was. He was the first man I saw die.” Three cleared his throat awkwardly. “That always stays with you. But I made a good friend, once. Ten years back. That’s what the Bridge exists for. New friendships.”

He looked down at me, and all I could do was hopelessly smile, ever so faintly. I didn’t think grandfather was even listening. “The dead man was of great importance to the creature. His death was a problem for the creature, I believe. And by donning the man’s clothes, the girl thought she could trick the creature into believing that he had somehow been resurrected.”

“Surely the creature wouldn’t have fallen for that.”

“You’re only judging that by your own circumstances. This creature may be visually impaired or may depend on colour recognition.”

“Some of the most intelligent life forms in the universe are fooled by deception so basic it is undetectable,” grandfather said plainly. I hadn’t realised he was listening.

“We simply don’t know,” Three said. “So the girl took on the man’s form, in the creature’s eyes, and told the representatives to make the creature book a meeting.” By now I was truly lost. A meeting? Why? “Because – and this is just based on assumption – it would get rid of the creature temporarily and allow the girl to deal with it at another time. At a better time, one would imagine. You cannot always defeat your enemies, but sometimes you can postpone them. The rest, to me, is a blur.”

“When one has an enemy so precious,” grandfather said, “one may be agreeable to one’s enemy’s terms. Hm, interesting.” He chewed thoughtfully on the inside of his cheek. “Very interesting.”

How strange, I thought, that a creature could be fooled by such a simple trick. I looked up at the fearsome Sentimentana as it lumbered towards the carriage with its next hostage, and wondered if the two creatures really were the same.

Grandfather wandered off towards the driver’s cabin when the Sentimentana was blackmailing Seven, only to return with a message for us all.

“I have managed to send a message to every connected platform across the rings,” he said gravely. “Local defences are being put to use. It is the best I can do given the circumstances.” One to Six bowed their heads in gratitude.

“Local defences?” I asked. “What for? What’s wrong?”

“Oh, my dear child,” he sighed, sitting down once more and stroking his forehead. “The Sentimentana has committed an abhorrent act.”

“I know,” I nodded. “It’s vulgar.”

“Not just that, my dear. Not just that. You see... the seven planets and the dozens of asteroids that make up the rings of Akhaten are bound to one another like houses in a street. One neighbour may wish to visit the other to borrow sugar and vice versa. Yet for this to work on such a scale, you need an airfield. If there is no oxygen for the Akhatenians to breathe, they would never be able to travel across to other planets and rocks within their system.”

I understood what he was saying, but failed to understand how this applied to our current situation and the acts of the Sentimentana, who was now hoisting Seven, handcuffed and with a bemused expression on his face, onto the Akhatrain. Grandfather sensed my confusion.

“There is a system that keeps a constant airfield in place,” he told me, locking eyes with the Sentimentana as the doors closed and the Akhatrain continued its rickety, one-way journey. “That system is comprised of the kings of Akhaten. They sit upon a throne, and their presence upon those thrones form one-tenth of the connection of the airfield. If you take any one of them away... the airfield will cease to operate.”

“You monster,” I spat at the Sentimentana.

“We are approaching the eighth peak,” it replied coolly.

“Just take them,” grandfather ordered, standing to attention. He circled his left forefinger around his thumb impatiently. A film of sweat was growing across his forehead; he took a handkerchief and dabbed his brow vigorously. “Take them and spare the other three, at least.”

All six heads of the kings raised in unison. Those six men had sat upon a throne all of their lives. They were never destined for greatness; it was forced upon them from the moment they were born. They had been cared for by the same people; the four tutors, the six assistants, the three doctors. Their faces were painted with a horrified expression, as though they were incarnations of the same person.

Our lives are, to an extent, as one.

“Grandfather?” I asked cautiously. I was starting to worry for them.

“Take them!” he shouted, visibly irritated by the satisfied smirk on the creature’s face. “Take them, spare the others! Or send five of them back and take one! Or – or – take me!”

Silence fell. The Sentimentana’s smirk faded, and he realised that he had not yet asked this man who he was.

“Take me,” he repeated, his voice crackling like a tinny radio. “The rings of Akhaten are on the edge of destruction, and you can save it by returning these men and taking my stories.”

“You can’t!” I shouted out, rushing in front of grandfather. He held my shoulders firmly and prised me away.

“My dear child, it is the only option at present. Goodness knows how many people are dying below. We must be hasty with our resolutions.”

“Who are you?” the creature growled.

“I am a Time Lord.”

What followed was an unbearable silence. The clattering of the Akhatrain only made the silence more deafening. A Time Lord was not exactly the same portion size as ten kings from a sacred world, yet with grandfather I never knew what would happen or be said next. I always thought that the savages of the universe had been bloody murderers who delighted in gore and horror. Yet at that moment I believed I had seen a true savage. A clever savage. A savage that was powerfully intelligent and yet wasted its intelligence on fuelling a base desire.

There was no grand adventure. There was no elaborate scheme to defeat the foe. There was just grandfather, hands trembling, eyes wide, trying to bargain his way out of the situation. As I write this, I feel as though I am betraying the usual adventures grandfather and I have. I feel as though I am betraying the intrigue and careful development. Yet I am relaying the event as it happened. All was linear, and very little was respectable. Fury held hands with bargaining; emotions ran high and there was no time to consider what had happened or what may happen next.

In fact, there was barely any time for anything. My memory still fails me, from time to time.

The Sentimentana raised a heavy hand and waved it gracefully in front of grandfather's body. After a few seconds, the creature sneered at grandfather as though he was insane.

"You have very little value," it said, "in comparison to these men. And yet..." Grandfather lifted his head, furrowing his eyebrows and moving his hands up to his lapels. "And yet there is something sentimental about you. And this object is precious. It has insuperable worth."

"She is not yours to have," the Doctor spat immediately, pointing an outstretched finger at the being. Immediately my stomach lurched, as though the entire world had stopped to look at me in the middle of my own nightmare. Aside from Meega-Hep, I was the only female on the train. And I was certainly the only one who was associated with grandfather. I was no longer comforted by grandfather, since I could tell that he was as deeply concerned as I was. The film of sweat on his brow had beaded, and ran down his face like the waterfall we had seen when we arrived. The Sentimentana barely looked at me; it glared at the Doctor as if it had unconquerable power. Once or twice I saw grandfather's

eyes flicker over to me.

“Then I shall feast,” it assured, “on the Kings of Akhaten.”

“Not her,” grandfather repeated sternly.

“Do you think I am lying?” it sneered, taking a large stride over to grandfather and towering over him, his hair quivering with every loud breath from the vile creature. “I will take their minds until they are husks,” it said. “I will fatten myself on their tales. Their identities, experiences and relationships will become meals for me. Their worth to every other person in this system and beyond will be my feast.”

“Do it,” Meega-Hop said, again not daring to look me in the eye. “It’s one person or millions. Do it.”

“Silence!” grandfather barked. “I shan’t have a halfwit telling me what to do!” Not today, he seemed to be thinking. Not today.

Calmly, grandfather wiped more sweat off his brow and looked out of the window. His voice lowered and he sounded more like my grandfather again when he spoke.

“Turn this train around,” he said, “And take it across Pearl Ribbon, right where I am pointing.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s the quickest way back to the Waterfall of Silver Faces,” he said calmly.

“And why do you think that is of interest to me?”

“Because that’s where you shall find her,” grandfather sighed. “That’s where you shall find my ship.”

What followed was relief on my part, tinged with a self-conscious feeling of guilt. Why had I immediately assumed that the creature was talking about me? Why hadn’t the TARDIS come to mind? I was glad that I had said nothing, because I was blushing to myself as it was. I had been a fool. A self-important fool.

Grandfather and the Sentimentana quarrelled for quite some time. Grandfather ordered the beast to let the current kings off the Akhatrain at the Ark of Ages, a nearby stop where the authorities could be alerted and the rescue team would be able to take them back to their rightful places. At one point the Sentimentana tried to seize power and told grandfather that it would feast on both the kings and the sentimental power of the TARDIS. Grandfather dismissed this idea casually, stating that taking one or the other would render

the other redundant. The Sentimentana seethed, so it must have been true.

Eventually, after what felt like an age of bitter silence, the creature stopped the Akhatrain at the Ark of Ages and told the kings to leave. One by one they held grandfather in a funny, one-armed embrace and muttered words of prayer into his ear.

Three walked over to him after shaking my hand goodbye. "It is only now I truly realise," he said, "that it was the Sentimentana, all those years ago."

"And what makes you so sure?"

"The glory it sought in all of us," he said. "And the way it breathes. Like the rattles I had as an infant. I just wanted to ask you something, sir."

"Oh, no sir. Not I. I'm no sir. But yes, please, feel free."

"The man in white. Was it you?"

"No," he said firmly. "This is my first time on the Akhatrain, I'm afraid. Do remember, Three, that your childhood memories are like patchwork quilts. Elements of truth are stitched alongside absolute fictions."

"Perhaps you're right." He swallowed and blinked. He cleared his throat. "Thank you."

"No matter, no matter."

"Will you save Akhaten?"

"I should hope to, yes." With that, Three bowed his head and left. Four briefly touched grandfather's arm.

"You are young," Four said, "for a Time Lord. I am sure you are destined for great things. Were you here on a mission?"

"No mission," grandfather replied humbly.

"A mission to the unknown, then," Four smiled. "You simply aren't aware of your goal yet. May the Old God bless you."

By the time we arrived, it was just grandfather, the Sentimentana and I. We left the Akhatrain and walked over to the Waterfall of Silver Faces. It still looked as dangerous and beautiful as when we had left it.

The Sentimentana stood before the TARDIS, salivating. It held out its hand.

"Key."

Grandfather rummaged in an outside pocket; peculiar, as I had never seen him use that pocket to keep the TARDIS key. He drew out a key that was silver and far shinier than

the one I was used to, and gave it to the Sentimentana.

“Grandfather, you mustn’t,” I opined, tugging gently on the sleeve of his jacket. “That beast could do terrible things.”

“Quiet, Susan,” he said calmly, as the Sentimentana opened the TARDIS door. “Quiet.”

“A TARDIS,” it rattled triumphantly. “The chase is over, young Time Lord. And the havoc I will create will be colossal.” With that, the TARDIS doors closed, and it materialised into nothing.

“Well,” the Doctor said, a faint smile upon his face, “I suppose that’s him dealt with, hm?”

I could scarcely believe what he was saying. And why was he smiling? Our only mode of transportation had been stolen. Not only were we left alone; we had given a powerful time machine to the Sentimentana. And he was just *smiling*. “Why are you smiling?” I asked. “How can you smile?”

“Because we are well, my dear child! We are healthy and happy! Look!” He wiggled his limbs and patted me on the head. “We escaped unscathed. Ah, now look at that view. Delightful, hm?” He walked over to the barrier of the waterfall and leaned over, smiling.

“I’m not happy,” I said honestly. “And I’m positive you can’t be, either. Nobody has died yet, but with that creature having control of the TARDIS... surely only death and destruction will come of it? No good?”

“Oh, that won’t happen,” he assured me casually. “Not at all.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because I am your grandfather,” he said, turning to face me, his eyes flickering behind me as the TARDIS materialised once more in exactly the same spot. “And I will never let you down.”

He drew the real TARDIS key from his inside pocket, flashed it to me briefly and returned it as the doors of the TARDIS opened and smoke billowed out alongside the Sentimentana.

“You locked the co-ordinates!” it shouted.

“Indeed I did. Trick key! When anyone uses that key, my dear TARDIS is alerted of the fact that it is being robbed. The key triggers a system that locks the TARDIS co-ordinates to the very spot it is parked in. You could only swan off for a moment or two before being redirected here. A little present from a friend of mine.”



"Which friend?" it growled. Grandfather answered coldly.

"King Three of Akhaten." I didn't understand. I asked him what he was talking about.

"Oh, you heard, dear child!" he cried. "The fellow made a friend on the Bridge of Mourning."

"But he never said who the friend was."

"Because he remembered, very suddenly, what the friend said." Grandfather looked over at the key, which lay discarded on the floor. "And the friend said 'take this, keep it safe. You will meet me again but I shall not recognise you. Pretend you do not know me. Give me the key, wish me well.' Or, at least, I am positive I shall say something similar. It hasn't quite happened yet."

"So the trick key was a gift from yourself," I said.

"Precisely."

"But – grandfather – isn't that a paradox? Doesn't the key logically cancel itself out?"

"Oh, Susan. It is a *trick* key," he reminded me. Even when he didn't know it, grandfather was always thinking ahead – such is the nature of time.

"No matter," the creature grinned, extending its arms like a grotesque albatross. "No matter! Do you not see?"

"Oh, enlighten me," grandfather beamed, his eyebrows arched as though he was talking to a child having a tantrum.

"Foolish Time Lord," the creature spat. "The locked co-ordinates are no matter. I was able to absorb the spirit of your machine without the need of the box itself." The Sentimentana walked forwards, over to the top of the waterfall as it looked out across the world before it. "Now I know immortality," it announced. "Now I am omnipotent."

"Did you hear that, Susan?" the Doctor asked, smirking. "He says he is omnipotent! All powerful! Ridiculous, isn't it?"

"Completely," I said meekly, not quite understanding where this conversation was going.

"Not at all," the creature replied. "The Universe is mine. I shall feast and feast and feast."

"I do not believe you," grandfather stated plainly. "Prove your immortality."

"Are you even more of a fool than I first thought?"

“Prove your immortality! Come on! Be a good sport. Put on a show. Jump into the Waterfall of Silver Faces.”

After a brief pause, the Sentimentana replied, “Do you not understand? I will survive,” it said darkly.

“We don’t believe you! Prove it to us!”

And, with a graceful knock of the creature’s arm, the railings were destroyed, and the waterfall was bubbling below. I remembered about how grandfather had said that the most inviting sights in the world were often the most deadly. The Sentimentana crouched by the edge, ready to dive in.

“I can only thank you for your recommendation,” it scoffed. “Now I shall roam the universe in a coat of silver. You have given me armour.”

With a streamlined dive, the creature fired like a bullet down into the waterfall of pure silver, disappearing in the glistening torrents and staying completely silent. I was still looking nervously over the edge as grandfather returned to the TARDIS.

“You can’t just leave!” I shouted to him.

“Why not? He’s dead,” grandfather told me.

“He’s immortal, did you not hear him?”

“No, Susan,” he said, walking over to me and placing a hand on my back, “He’s dead. He didn’t absorb the “spirit” of the TARDIS at all. That’s nonsense.”

“But he said he did! He must have felt he did!”

“He merely absorbed the energy from the time vortex that took the TARDIS up and back down to this very spot. It bloated him momentarily and he mistook it for a feast on sentimental worth. Besides! The TARDIS is of very little sentimental worth to me.”

I frowned. How was this so? I told him that surely the TARDIS was very valuable in terms of sentimentality.

“No, my dear child, no,” he reassured me. “The TARDIS is very dear to me, that is true, but she and I have barely had enough adventures as of yet for her to have any true sentimental worth to me. Perhaps when I am older that value will increase.”

“But the Sentimentana sensed its worth.”

“Not a jot. The Sentimentana sensed worth about me, something close to me, and I led him to the TARDIS. Do you not understand, Susan? Do you not remember Three’s tale? The sentimental worth it was sensing was you. You are of insurmountable sentimental value

to me. You are my granddaughter.”

My guilty feelings from before resurfaced and were distorted until they were nearly gone. I hadn't been wrong or self-important in my first judgement. Grandfather had saved me.

“I lied,” he said, “and directed the creature to the TARDIS. And my actions were regrettable.” He looked out over the waterfall. “But this was his second chance. And he killed the driver and conductor.”

“Algar-Sek,” I said faintly, remembering him fondly.

“When Three told you that story, Susan, I took in every last detail. I heard of the game of deception. Now, I have no knowledge of the mysterious man or his large-jacketed associate, but I do know one thing; the Sentimentana can be fooled if you pull a face straight enough. Back then it thought a child in man's clothes became the man himself. And when it told me about the sentimentality nearby, it sensed you. But I deceived him. I wore a cloak of my own, one might say. A cloak of royal blue. That story told me one very important thing; only trickery would save us.” He nodded into the distance. “And it did.” He turned to face me. “His death would have been instantaneous and painless,” he said.

I didn't know if he was telling me the entire truth.

Quietly, we walked back to the TARDIS. But as we were about to enter, a young man in scarlet robes stopped us.

“Excuse me sir,” he said. “What's your name? The rescue crew said they saw you after you saved our kings.”

“Oh, forget me,” grandfather said, smiling modestly.

“Please, sir. We would like to offer our eternal gratitude, and we would like to attach our gratitude to a name. Plus we can offer you an unlimited pass to the rings of Akhaten.” He looked almost embarrassed at this offer, holding out a thin silver bar. “You'll be able to return here for free whenever you like. The Long Song is starting soon. It's sure to be a treat.”

Grandfather walked over, took the bar and slipped it into his pocket, shaking the young man's hand.

“I am the Doctor,” he said, before we walked back into the TARDIS.

“Grandfather,” I asked. “Do you think you'll ever return to Akhaten?” I nodded

towards the silver bar which he had now tucked away somewhere.

He simply smiled at me as he operated the TARDIS once more. Maybe, he thought. Maybe.

I was not allowed out on our next trip. We went immediately to the Bridge of Mourning, and grandfather left to deliver the trick key to Three, ten years into his past. But I still peeked out of the doors.

There he stood, white hair blowing in the wind, looking over the bridge, silently mourning the creature he was there to defeat.

