

The Magpie's on Capaldi Street was ablaze.

Windows were smashed. Packets of batteries and recordable DVDs were strewn across the floor. A lone DAB radio was impaled on a bollard, its guts on display to the world. The sound of alarms rent the air, and the detritus of once-were-sales-displays littered both the cheap nylon carpet with the black-and-white bird motif and the pavement outside. Broken, unrecognisable shards of electronics were surrounded by security glass shattered so that it glistened like diamonds.

Hoodies, laughing, gripped flat-screen TVs and Blu-Rays and ran in every direction away from the eviscerated store. The noise of police sirens in the distance – *safely* in the distance – was utterly drowned by the carnal joy of the looting.

The boy, no more than seventeen, hood raised over his head to hide his face from the CCTV, nervously approached the breached electrical store. He wouldn't normally do this. Honest, he was a good boy. But his Nan, she really wanted a DVD recorder so she could watch Midsomer on speed-dial, and well, everyone was doing it, weren't they?

Most of the other looters, the professionals, had gone, nothing more now than distant shouts and laughter. Safe to go in, pick over whatever was left. He was a vulture rather than a lion.

Nervous, he shuffled into the Magpie's, grabbed the nearest Sony and jumped back out. He was about to leg it, but suddenly had second thoughts. Guiltily, he ducked back into the store and gently placed the recorder back on a shattered shelf. Then he grabbed a Bush instead. Cheaper model, his Nan wouldn't notice. And he was a good boy, honest; leave the shop with the best of what remained, that was fair.

He looked left, then right, checking he'd not been clocked, and then ran for all he was worth. Down Capaldi Street, round the corner into Market Road, and slap bang into...

...a Bentley?!

What the hell was a Bentley doing here? A Fiat, the odd Skoda or two, yeah. But a Bentley? He nearly dropped his spoils in surprise.

Suddenly he felt a strong hand grasp his shoulder – the pain from its grip was almost unbearable – and he struggled to get released. But he couldn't shake his assailant off, and nor could he turn to see who it was. The best he could do was get a glimpse of the hand that held him: the sleeve of a sharp, blue suit, and black calf-skin gloves. Ill-fitting, but quality.

"Oh, drop him Robert," a woman's voice said, and the boy swung his head back in surprise. The woman facing him was exquisitely dressed too, in a two-piece suit, and attractive – for someone so old. Late thirties at least, he guessed.

She was holding a baseball bat in her right hand, and smacking it into the palm of her left.

“Drop him, I said,” she repeated, and to the boy’s relief the pressure on the bones of his shoulder suddenly relaxed. “He’s not going anywhere. Are you, sonny?”

“N... no!” he replied – and to his surprise, he realised he wasn’t. She had authority, this woman; and one thing his Nan had always taught him was to respect authority.

“So, what do you have there?” the woman asked, baseball bat slapping. “Fancy a DVD, did we?”

“No!” he said again. “Least, it’s not for me. It’s for me Nan.”

“Aw, a conscience!” the woman sneered. “We’ve got one with a conscience here, Robert. Only loots for a good cause.”

“I’ll give it back,” the boy offered. “I’ll buy her one instead. I’ve got some holiday money saved up...”

The woman looked at him thoughtfully. “I think you don’t want to be part of this,” she said, after an eternity.

“I don’t, miss,” he said. “I really don’t.”

“Good for you then,” she said. “Cause it’s not a riot, this. It’s an embarrassment. It’s a travesty.”

The woman turned away from him, and opened the door to the Bentley. She gestured at him and the car, obviously inviting him in. Without being able to fight it, he did what she bade him. Bloody Nan and her attitude to authority!

To his panic, she climbed in after him.

“Robert,” she called to the boy’s erstwhile assaulter and now obviously chauffeur, lowering himself as he was into the driver’s seat, “take us round the block a few times. Show the police what they’re missing.” She turned to the terrified boy, and grinned. “Buckle up, sonny,” she said. “I’m going to tell you about a *real* riot. A riot that actually meant something.”

The Terrible Babel

by Al B Dickerson, with interference from Nic Ford

for George Potter

Utter silence fell as the woman pulled the door shut.

The boy looked around, impressed despite his fear. He'd never been in a vehicle like this. It was huge inside, impossibly posh but as solid as steel. Even the click when he succeeded in buckling in sounded more rich and real than that in Nan's V-reg Astra. As if satisfied his charges were secure, Robert nodded. The Bentley purred to life and began to move.

Here, inside this tank of an auto, the boy felt insulated. Outside, the riot overwhelmed the senses with noise and smells and adrenaline. But now it was only pictures, a distant thing happening to other people.

Maybe the woman sensed his thoughts. "Let's crack the windows, Robert," she said. "We don't want to forget why we're here."

And like that, they were back in reality. The boy gripped the belt across his chest as the situation sank in. As *his* situation sank in.

"Never take a ride with strangers, that's what you're thinking," the woman said. "Am I right?"

He nodded.

"Got an escape plan yet?"

"Not there yet, miss."

"Still wondering if we're deviants, or Miracle Mutilators, then?"

They could be. These were crazy days and he'd heard the rumors. "Maybe, miss."

She laughed. "Don't worry – what's your name?"

"Ryan, miss."

"Ryan. Don't worry. Sometimes you have to trust strangers who offer you lifts."

"You didn't exactly offer, miss."

"Didn't I? No matter. You're here now and I've got a story to tell you. In a way it sort of started out like this, with a lift from a stranger. His name was the Doctor but she always called him Professor."

"'Doctor' ain't a name. And who's this 'she'?"

"Her name was Ace."

"That's not a proper name, either."

"Shut up. Names are what you're called, proper or not. And their names were Ace and the Professor."

"Ace and the Professor. All right."

"Good. One more thing," she said, "before I start. I probably don't have to ask this anymore,

but where do you stand on... weird stuff?"

"I bloody knew it! Let me out."

She laughed. "No, not that weird stuff. I mean planets in the sky, ghosts that are silver giants, miracles. That stuff."

"Oh. I'm not one of them deniers."

"Terrific. Then it's okay to tell you that the Professor was a time traveling alien who met Ace on another planet where she'd been blown by a time storm?"

The boy glanced at Robert's reflection in the mirror. The driver smirked at him.

"All right," he said. "I'm good with that."

"Relax, then. That's a fridge there. Have a pop if you like."

He held the cool can, watching as she composed her thoughts. Outside, a Panda raced past and far away someone screamed with outrage. As their circuit passed the Magpie's again the orange fire light danced across her face and the boy thought she looked somehow natural amid chaos.

That's when she began the story.

"Ace and the Professor were on holiday, just relaxing after sorting out the Daleks in 1963. Ace needed a rest. She'd been betrayed by a boy she fancied, you see, a boy she thought she knew. And she was so young in those days, and thought she needed to put on a brave face for the Professor.

"But he was distracted and probably didn't notice. He wouldn't tell her anything, of course, but that never stopped her asking. Just to annoy him for fun, you know. He finally gave a vague answer - he'd noticed a pattern. He was good at that, seeing patterns in things that normal people would never notice. We'd deliberately been visiting safe, boring planets. Tour the ruins, listen to space jazz, haggle in the marketplace. Like visiting Greece except the natives have antennae, you know."

She gestured out the window.

"None of this, no excitement. Ace thought it was strange. She'd travelled with the Professor enough to trust his instinct for landing them in trouble. There *was* something he wasn't telling her. He *was* investigating something. She..."

The boy interrupted. "You ain't telling this properly."

"What?"

"Stop saying Ace like she's somebody else. You ain't telling a story about someone you know, you're remembering. You said, 'we'. You're that Ace."

She looked at him in frank surprise. Suddenly it felt like the whole world had chilled. 'You could cut the atmosphere with a knife,' that's what his Nan would have said – and her knives were cheap Asda ones so blunt they had to talk bread into slicing itself, so it meant something coming from her.

A beat, and then another – before he realised it was his own heart he could hear, cacophonous against the silence. He wondered for a moment if she were going to smack him down.

Instead, all of a sudden she laughed. "Ha!" she guffawed. "We've got a live one here, Robert! Too clever for his own good, this one. All right, Ryan, we'll play it your way."

And then the story proper, all the stranger, began...

Boredom, irritation, anticipation, exhilaration, terror. That's the order of things when you travel with the Professor. My memories of all those placid worlds ran together until I couldn't remember what had happened where. Meanwhile, the Professor was on a case and that meant lots of frowning at video screens and ticker tapes and ignoring his companion. He'd clammed up after admitting he was following a pattern, you see. And that was my cue to leave him be – the less he disclosed, the more interesting life would become. So I left him tutting at the console and trekked to the ship's laboratory. There I made my own, um, blunter preparations in anticipation of the chaos to come. Several cans of it. With improved – I hoped – fuses.

I'm not a total Glitz, you see. I was the Professor's muscle, but I'd long ago caught on that he wanted me to think, too, figure stuff out. I'd been around a bit of trouble and survived. Iceworld, California in the 1890's, California *again* in the 1970's, bloody Shoreditch in the 1960's. Kane, the Brakeman, Luuna, two species of Dalek. I beat 'em all, boy, and they're just the ones that spring to mind. There were more, believe me. Maybe some day I'll tell you about the Man in the Black Maria, or the Fifth of Beethoven, or the Happiness Patrol. Oh, hold on. That one hadn't happened yet.

So I cooked explosives and bided my time until the day the Professor poked his head into the lab and tersely announced we'd arrived.

Cue the exhilaration, am I right? Hah! I should have known by then, never try to anticipate the future when you live with the man who wrote it.

Was our next stop an exotic world where mad factions clashed in riots of explosions and sloganeering? Did we infiltrate the secret base of a power mad super villain (don't smirk, boy – they exist) with eldritch plans to rule the galaxy? Did we travel to the far future, the distant past or

some forgotten alternate world where zeppelins were all the rage?

She paused. They glided through the chaos. What was she waiting for? Ryan waited, but nothing was forthcoming.

“Well, what then?” he demanded eventually.

“Guess.”

“Oh! Um, that secret base of power mad super villain one?”

“No. Emphatically no. This was a far future trip.”

That sounded very interesting, he admitted to himself, but her tone implied he'd be disappointed.

“Um, that sounds cool.”

“You'd think so, wouldn't you? Jet packs, laser rifles, air cars, moving sidewalks, shiny polyester jumpsuits?”

“Well, yeah.”

She sighed. “Well, all of time and space is a lot of ground to cover, so I'm betting there's places out there exactly like that. All shiny and new, like Dan Dare. But you know what? An awful lot of the future looks like the present. Dusty, run-down and rubbishy, full of forlorn hope and men with guns standing between you and hope's fulfillment. Which basically describes planet Thistle Dew.”

“Sounds pretty.”

“It does, doesn't it? That's what Ace – me, I mean – that's what I said.”

“So, this planet. Didn't meet expectations? Boring like those others?”

“Oh, anything's better than boring. Thistle Dew wasn't boring. Thistle Dew was *nasty*.”

Was it hot next to the fire back in that TV shop? Imagine that on a planetary scale. We stepped out of the cool, comfortable Tardis into a blast furnace. A dry, dusty wind. A big red sun the size of a football smouldered in the brown sky. It wasn't all that bright but your eyes hurt anyway. Some invisible wavelength, I guess, streaming through the dust clouds.

We were on the edge of a town. On one side a flat plain, the horizon dissolved by shimmering heat haze and broken only by the towers and sheds of some sort of mining operation. I saw vehicles, trucks and buggies, kicking up dust trails on the distant road.

On the other side, a long, low building amid the usual collection of trash bins and abandoned transport. Drab buildings the size and shape of council blocks loomed above the roof.

Everything appeared to be built out of some sort of kit, prefabricated panels and such.

I'd already decided this was the bleakest, worst place the Professor had ever dragged me to when I realised we were not alone. The company only reinforced my opinion.

A trio of dusty, ragged, bearded men were picking through the rubbish. As always, they didn't seem to see our arrival as anything unusual. But after registering our presence they idled hopefully in our direction, interest blooming on their faces.

The Professor frowned. "Come along, Ace," he said, "Nothing to see."

But they'd already formed a rough circle around us. "Excuse me, sir," the cleanest of them said, "If I could have a moment of your time?"

"I highly doubt it," said the Professor. "My time is of great value."

Now, this was a bit Your Lordship for the Professor; he's usually more sympathetic. The man wore an eye-patch and leaned on an improvised cane. I saw old, crippling injuries on the others. These men were victims who didn't deserve the Professor's haughty attitude.

"Professor..."

I saw the spokesman's face stiffen. "Oh. 'Professor', is it? You're a company man?"

"We are here on business, yes." Still the clipped, officious tone but that 'we' told me he was being devious. I should play along.

"Official business," I added.

I saw anger lose to fear on the man's face. "I didn't know you were with the company. Sorry, sir."

"Don't apologize to me," said the Professor, "You've done nothing wrong. I am the Doctor and this is my friend Ace. And we are assuredly not with the company, though you might say we are here because of the company."

That was more like it.

"Why were you afraid just now?" I asked.

I don't know what the man would have said because one of the others said, "Don't, Herschell!"

"It's okay," I said, but the little man squinted hatefully.

"You two are rats for the 'forcers."

I wasn't sure what he meant but I didn't like the sound of it. "That's not true! Me and the Professor are here to help!"

Herschell said, "Well, that may or may not be true but if Handy's serious about getting us some third shift PT then I think it's best if we don't talk any more. Begging your pardon if you're on

the level but it just ain't worth the risk. Come on, fellows."

We watched the dejected trio return to the bins. "The company," the Professor murmured. "There's always a company."

A gleam came into his eye and I smiled to myself. "*Go get 'em, Professor.*"

As we continued to the front of the prefabricated building we engaged in our usual routine. That is, I mildly complained and the Professor made a speech.

I shed my jacket. "Peter O' Toole! Professor, this place is a right dump. Where are we? Tunisia in a heat wave? And why are we here?"

"The time, Ace," he said, "is the 24th Century and this 'dump', as you call it, is planet Earth Q."

"Earth Q'. Boring name."

"Yes. By now they've run out of Terras and they've started on Earths. This is the seventeenth in the Earth series so it's Earth Q. Or, colloquially, Thistle Dew, in recognition of its dominant species of flora and its sole form of precipitation. And we're here because, in one week's time, there is going to be held a lottery."

"A lottery? That's nice, innit? Lucky winners and all?"

He gestured behind us. "Herschell and his friends?"

"Yes?"

"They didn't win."

It was around that time I began to notice a clamour from the front, hundreds of voices chattering away, and a mechanical sort of huffing underlying it. We rounded the corner, leaving the trio behind. The side was narrow and the Professor quickened his pace.

"What do the winners get?" I asked. We entered hot shade, cast by the huge council blocks that were now in full view.

He was saying, "I think they get to leave," as we rounded the front.

That's when I realised what this building was. It was a train station. Straight lines of bright metal – three of 'em, the only futuristic detail – a slumbering train, chuffing mildly, and a veritable mob of chattering people. I saw passengers, bulls – sorry, conductors – armed guards and peddlers. All of 'em talking at the top of their voices so they could be heard over the engine. It might have been India, or Britain on a busy day. But you know, all the movement, all the noise, that great engine, it kindled some excitement in me and made me forget my questions about the lottery. I suppose I was grinning when I asked the Professor if we were going on a train ride.

He grinned back. "You might say that," he said, and went to procure tickets (not sure how – he generally doesn't carry money) while I waited outside, soaking in the energy of the mob. The first thing that struck me was the Englishness of it all. You'd expect everyone on a desert world to be bundled up like Bedouins, right, or those blokes in Dune, but instead of robes and turbans I looked out onto a sea of t-shirts, khakis and baseball caps. I saw a man wearing jodhpurs and a safari hat, for pity's sake, and several wearing traditional farmer's suits, or business wear and bowlers. The only real adaptive clothing I saw was a prevalence of goggles and handkerchiefs tied robber-style. So, with a few exceptions, the general impression was human and British.

"That's good then, innit? I wonder what happened to the Yanks?"

"They developed indescribable accents and went into transit, actually."

"Serves 'em right."

Anyway, that's my impression of the general populace. The Professor was probably standing in the wrong queue, knowing him, so I had time to watch individuals and groups.

Here was a young family, faces weathered and hands calloused, clutching duffel bags and train passes. Here was a clean businessman nervously ignoring the clutch of a scruffy old woman. Over there a glad-handing poozer hawked Musk Lizard sandwiches and well water from a tray but also lugged a suitcase. Three stoic blue aliens conferred in low whistles over there. Just people then, all with their own concerns and agendas but somehow, jammed together like this, losing their identities in a sort of gestalt. Footie fans, right?

And forming a backdrop to it all was the train itself, a great grey wall of coaches, pitted and scoured by the elements but still awesome. I saw the engine, a chunky workhorse belching black smoke, and a 24th century coal tender, of all things, coupled behind her. Then a buffet car, a dozen or so of the weather worn carriages and, at the end of the chain, a nicer one that had seen recent paint. First class.

Then the Professor was standing by me. Not sure how long he'd been there. He took my arm as an ugly klaxon sounded and everyone surged forward. Some entered the doors, others clamored atop the cars. We strode to the rear and displayed our passes to a trio of uniformed men – the company employed an all-purpose jack-booted thug as rail personnel, police, army and, for all I know, temporary secretary. They didn't ask who we were. I guess we had dust on us.

I stowed my ruck overhead and bounced on the hard seat, excited to be on a train again despite recent experiences. Don't ask, Ryan. The first class carriage filled with slightly less dusty

denizens of Thistle Dew and the doors hissed shut. Then opened a few inches with a groan. Apparently it happened to every door on the entire train, and we had to wait until a man came and adjusted something. My enthusiasm rekindled as I heard the klaxon and we lurched forward. Soon we began to move through the flattest, most barren, most mind numbingly tedious landscape I've ever seen. And I've seen a few. You've probably got a picture in your head of a big desert, right? I guess it was, technically, but what it really looked like was the universe's biggest gravel quarry. More hot dry dirt than sand, you follow? Anyway, the new world novelty wore off in minutes and my emotions sunk from excited to merely interested to blasé to stone bored to irritated. Next to me the Professor sat with an expression of interested watchfulness. But he didn't fool me. On occasion he'd turn and sigh apologetically.

And that, my young friend, is how we spent the next week.

"A week?!" the boy demanded. "Trains don't take a week to go nowhere!"

"All right," the woman said. "It was a load of trains. For six days, every day, we'd get on a train in the morning and get off again at night, poke around wherever we'd disembarked, and then do it again the next day. Like we were waiting for something to happen, only the Professor, he wouldn't tell me what. I found that out on the seventh day.

"But believe me, it was only one train," she said, sighing deeply with what the boy thought sounded like the noise he made when he'd pissed off his Nan. Dread, that was the word. "One train. Cos they all look the same. And smell of BO the same. And numb your bum the same."

"Same as Virgin, then?"

She nodded. "And the sandwiches, they're the same too." She leaned in close. "That's not 'look the same', the sandwiches. No. They actually *were* the same. There was only ever one sandwich sold on a train – cheese and pickle, made in 1982 by British Rail, that's my theory. It was too horrible to eat, so it just kept getting sold. Eventually, it followed humanity to outer space. Mark my words, after the universe implodes on itself, the end of everything, y'know, that British Rail sandwich will just move on to the next universe. I tell you, there's a branch of quantum physics based on the universal ubiquity of that British Rail sandwich."

She leaned back in the seat, brows knit as if she were contemplating the horrors of the sandwich.

"Do you wanna get on with the story, then?" the boy demanded, feigning boredom while he worked out what universal ubiquity was.

"Course," the woman said. "Sorry. But it really was a bloody awful sandwich."

On the second day, in a crowded cafe in the transient sector of the planet's capital city, I discovered the internet. Or, at least, this century's version. A girl named Taylor T, just arrived from another colony called Terra Alpha, helped me work the computer while her uncle and the Professor conferred in a corner. "It's not very good," she said, "I think the company censors everything."

So. Thistle Dew. Seven settlements. Prospect is the capital. The spaceport's outside Prospect, an off-center dot on the map. The other six towns are arrayed on the endless plain in a rough big circle about 200 K from the centre, each at the end of a rail line spoke radiating from the hub at Prospect. We'd landed at the rail depot outside the coal mining town Diligence. The other five were Enterprise, Adventure, Brave Heart, Freedom and Swindon (for some reason), though the colonists had taken to calling them all Grit North, Grit South and so on. Each consisted of a rail depot, a huge but shabby complex of bunk houses that resemble council flats, a company store, an administrative complex and some sort of industry, usually a thistle farm. Turns out the fruit of the thistles, rendered into a paste, is a valuable lubricant. Keep that in mind.

All of this was owned, part and parcel, by IMC, the Interplanetary Mining Corporation. Who also, you'll have to know, held the immediate fate of the people living on Thistle Dew in their well-manicured grasp. Keep that in mind, too.

On the third day I watched the only available channel on a small black and white telly in a rented room in Enterprise. The Professor fiddled with a can of thistle oil he'd taken to carrying.

After repeats of Steptoe and a horrid local talent show came the live presentation of the first round of the lottery, where the prize was, you guessed it, lottery tickets. The company spokespersons, a motley crew of vapid talking heads whose smiles didn't reach their eyes, optimistically assured the residents that this quarter's Lottery would be the greatest gala event yet. They rattled off a list of bands and celebrities I'd never heard of.

Then a slick dick in a daisy suit and a bimbo in bikini and miner's helmet took the stage. The man recited the rules while a ticker ran beneath him, moving too fast to read. The fine print.

The bimbo pulled a lever on a prop slot machine and numbers began scrolling past.

I heard shouts of exultation from a distant room.

On the fourth day I relaxed on the porch of a rented cottage on the fringe of Adventure and listened to the tinny sounds of a small radio. IMC public radio. The only station. Mellow greatest hits of the previous centuries, market reports, news about the impending lottery and story after story about how miserable life on Earth was and how wise it was for the listeners to have emigrated. Earth was

a polluted, overcrowded mess in the 24th century. Billions of people jammed together on every continent. London was gone, swallowed up, and was now Central City. Earth wasn't even in control anymore. Now there was something called Galactic Centre. Humanity had moved on but didn't seem to have learned from its mistakes.

The evening of day five was spent in Brave Heart. I read the newspapers. They were proper paper newspapers, too, though made of pulped thistles, both the official IMC propaganda rag and the semi-legal Pioneer. The IMC paper, The Good Friend, was practically worthless for the matter at hand. It had the expected profit reports and inter-company promotions, but the rest was aimed squarely at the colonists -- success stories, optimistic projections of future opportunities, all that same, tired jazz. The company is your friend, you know?

The Pioneer had an opposing, but carefully-worded, point of view. It was abuzz about the quarterly lottery and, if you read between the lines, the wretchedness of life on Thistle Dew. No-one, it seemed, wanted to be here. More to the point, they didn't think they should be here.

On the evening of day six I followed the Professor into the wastes. The lights of Freedom receded and we saw a tiny spark in the distance.

The Professor was in a serious, sober mood. "These are frightened people, Ace, doing a dangerous thing. Their precautions may be extreme."

"So, don't thump anyone?"

"Correct."

"What about those two following us?"

"Don't thump them either."

"Gotcha, Professor."

The spark grew to a flicker and after an eternity we arrived at a campfire. Masked figures searched us – and I did want to thump one of them - and interrogated us about our origins, our purpose. We'd been seen, noted, contacted. And finally, far from company ears, we were to learn the truth.

"We use no names here," said the leader, shadows flickering across his mask, piercing grey eyes above, "we see no faces. The company cannot learn our identities until victory is assured. Now listen and learn, if you are serious about alerting the galaxy to our plight."

So yeah. Dead serious space rebels. The Professor can sure sniff them out.

Thistle Dew was on the verge of exploding.

IMC's settlement policies and the harsh way the company enforced them were like throwing petrol on a campus stove or Nitro-9 at a chumblie. For days the company enforcers had stopped, searched and arrested colonists all over the seven cities. The night before a crowd had gathered in Enterprise - Grit Northeast - when a woman, an outfit captain, was stabbed and her group's lottery ticket was stolen. The crowd saw the police apparently doing nothing to help. The spark was struck and the kindling smouldered. Our informant promised us that soon, soon, would come the explosion. I didn't follow this at all.

"Hang on," I said, "I don't understand. Are you mad about crime or the company enforcers being berks? What's an outfit captain? If you don't want to be there, why are you people here? And what's the deal with the lottery?"

"Doctor, you haven't briefed your companion. Very well, young Ace, I shall explain." He gestured to the sky. Even here next to the fire there should have been stars, but the night sky on Thistle Dew is a uniform dark brown. All that dust, you see.

"We were promised the stars. You've seen Earth, that teeming, diseased anthill. That's where most of us were born, raised. Where our childhood dreams crumbled to the harsh reality of slag and despair."

"He was well dramatic," said the boy.

The woman rolled her eyes.

"He was just warming up."

"We saw the military, the elite, the moneyed shoot off into space to new lives as we festered in the ruins. Outer space! Full of the fresh air of freedom and the elbow room of opportunity, beckoning to us. So we organized into colonial outfits; a handful to hundreds of honest folk pooled their money for transport to a colony world. A captain is the elected representative of an outfit, Ace.

"It's expensive to send rockets to another world, of course, so the outfit captains naturally looked for the best deal. And IMC offered a cherry. Low rates, experienced crews, hundreds of worlds to choose from. How could we resist? But as we learned after signing those iron-clad contracts, an IMC contract contained a bugger-all mess of fine print the devil's own solicitor couldn't decipher.

"Most pertinent to our plight are the words on page 79, sub-clause 678, that state, '*a colonial outfit may be subject to routing and scheduling delays for indeterminate periods of time,*

the length of which are determined pursuant to the fiscal and logistic requirements of IMC and its subsidiaries’, adding that the colonists were fiscally responsible for their own well-being during any stop-overs that may occur. Earth Q, with its huge spaceport, was one of these stopovers.”

“You’ve been bugged!” I said, to an accompaniment of grunts around the fire. The pieces were starting to fall into place.

“Hmm. I see you’re beginning to understand. Once on the planet, IMC would carefully explain that, what with the horrible complexity of space travel logistics, it might be months or years before there was an available rocket pod. But they had good news! There were available facilities here for market-comparable prices!”

“Pfft!” I said.

“‘Market-comparable’. You guessed it - everything on Earth Q is ruinously expensive. Any savings we had left after buying our flight soon dried up. We were effectively stranded with three poor options. One, have more money sent from Earth, took months to make happen even if it were at all possible. The second, try to reroute. That is, return to our abandoned lives on Earth or gamble on a closer world and pocket the difference. Option three: go to work for IMC.”

“Cruel and unusual!” I said.

“Yes. ‘Luckily’ for the colonists,” he made air quotes, “the native thistles here can be rendered into a first-class space lubricant and all we need do to afford our unexpected residency was go to work as a gatherer, or toil in the factories, until our berths could be arranged.

“About ten years ago, the company announced an exciting new opportunity – outgoing flights would no longer be processed on a first-come, first-serve basis. No, from now on there would be a lottery every fiscal quarter and the winning outfits would immediately be shipped out providing, of course, they had no outstanding debt to IMC.”

He looked at his hands. So did I.

“So there’s no-one you can turn to.” I said, “No way to report the truth.”

“We know the truth. We speak the truth in whispers. IMC is simply importing cheap labour. IMC hires recruiters to pose as outfit captains. IMC sends lottery winners to other stopovers after this to labor on quarry worlds. The entire operation is a complete swindle. We know the truth, and the truth will someday set us free.”

“What happens when you speak out?” asked the Professor.

“It is a breach of contract, of course, to complain. You and your entire outfit could lose your outbound seats. So even if one person becomes angry or dissatisfied, honor prevents him from speaking out. So it goes, year after year, and Galactic Center does nothing because it is all entirely

legal.”

“But it’s an outrage!” said the Professor, to another chorus of assent.

“Now you know. The revolution will come!”

Things became a bit less rhetorical after that, and someone produced a teapot. When the conversation degenerated to complaints about salaries and management the Professor and I silently agreed it was time to take our leave.

The Professor promised to do what he could and we began our journey back to Freedom. About half-way, when neither town nor camp was visible, he stopped.

He looked sad. “They’ll never do anything,” he said.

“You saw that fearless leaders hands, didn’t you?” I asked.

“Oh, very good, Ace.”

“That berk’s never done a day’s labor in his life. So what did we just see?”

“I believe we just saw a company-designed pressure valve. Bring the disgruntled here, let them air their grievances, let them go back home, feeling better.”

I shook my head at the deviousness of IMC, but part of me now admires their skill. Those colonists were beaten and deep down they knew it, but the company engineered it so that there was nothing that could be done. It was far too risky to complain, let alone throw a brick or two.

“So we’re here to take down the company then? Where do we start?”

The Professor turned to me. I couldn’t see his face in the darkness.

“I’ve tangled with IMC before, but that’s not why we’re here. These people will have to sort things out on their own. It’ll happen, and it’ll happen peacefully.”

He searched the dull heavens. “At least, that’s what history says. I don’t know...”

That ‘I don’t know’ sent a chill down my spine.

“Professor? You’re frightening me. What’s going to happen?”

He took my wrist. “Pick an appropriate metaphor, Ace. Ticking bomb, powder keg, hornet’s nest... whatever. There is great potential for violence and death here, can’t you sense it? The company has kept a tight leash on people’s actions but not their minds. And months and years of righteous resentment have reached full boil. All the situation needs is someone to light the fuse or poke the nest with a stick. An agent provocateur hungry for blood and chaos.”

I followed his gaze skywards.

“The universe provides, Ace,” he murmured, “the universe provides.”

Lottery Day arrived.

In four hours the ceremony would be simulcast to the entire world, all 30,000 souls. The event itself would be held in Prospect Centre Stadium, where 5,000 gathered.

The Professor and I squeezed aboard the train in Freedom. Not only was every seat filled, but there were people standing in the aisle and sprawled atop the cars. We'd somehow acquired event passes; I didn't ask how and the Professor didn't volunteer the information. He was on edge, in one of his moods, not talkative. I sat there, feeling constricted by the press of bodies, and wondered about what he'd said in the desert last night. I imagined all these people crying for justice, or blood, and shivered again.

The Professor's head turned slightly but he didn't say anything. That's when the train started and a ragged cheer broke out. Remember, most of the people here had won round one and some of them expected to win their freedom today. Poor sods.

Oh! Speaking of poor sods, there were a couple aliens in the seats facing us. It's amazing how many space aliens look human – just accept it – but these guys were different. They were kitted up in turbans and robes and smelled like an explosion in a spice factory. Their thin faces were the color and consistency of a bee's nest, all leathery or papery-looking. They seemed to find me very interesting and it was starting to creep me out a bit.

The Professor, he'd gone to the buffet car. Took a gadget he found in his pocket with him: said he wanted to run some experiments on the sandwich selection, something to do with 'atomic temporal juxtaposition'. The usual tosh.

And this creepy alien couple, I got the impression wanted something from me. Only, I couldn't tell what. Started off okay; they were just looking out the window. But as the journey went on, they got more agitated. The female reached out her long arm and tugged my sleeve. Kept asking me something, only not in a language I understood. And the Tardis wasn't around to translate for me like it normally does. Oh, yeah, the Tardis...

"I don't care," said the boy, dreading another pseudo-science lecture and actually enjoying the story now that it had properly started. "Just tell me what happened with those foreigners."

"Please yourself," the woman said, sniffing. She paused. "I guess compared to everyone else they were foreigners. Where do you stand on foreigners, by the way, Ryan?"

"Nan's mate Morag says they should go back where they came from," the boy replied. "But Nan says most of 'em came from Peckham, and Peckham ain't got enough room for 'em all, so they might as well stay. And anyway, Morag comes from Galashiels, so she can't talk. 'Sides, who else is

gonna have a shop open at 3.00am where you can buy a melon as big as your head?"

"Good boy," the woman said. "Ignore what you get in the Daily Mail."

"That's what Nan says," he replied. "Unless it's cod."

She laughed, and continued.

So, they kept grabbing me and asking me something. I can still remember it. The man, he kept saying, "Umbada ha loca? Umolo quoto ha loca?" And the woman, she kept jabbing her finger at him, and holding his arm for dear life, and saying, "H'nry s holo panda! 'Umbada ha loco pish!". But I didn't know what they meant.

It was distressing, and I guess it showed on my face because the female suddenly stopped jabbering and smiled, tired but kind. Maybe she realized I was just a kid out of my depth, I don't know. I said something to her, "I'm sorry!" or some such, and decided to see if the Professor could sort them out.

It was weird and unsettling, not understanding her. Ever since Iceworld – that's where the Professor found me – I'd understood every word said to me, no matter who or what was talking. Gordon Bennet, Iceworld. When I first arrived there it was a nightmare.

You ever go abroad, Ryan?"

"I've been to Tower Hamlets..."

"Very funny. You know what it's like then – well, that was Iceworld. I stood there, the contents of my room scattered around me, and a bunch of officious pricks in white uniforms shouting and I was confused and afraid and getting angrier by the second. I mean, I'd just been in my room in Perivale, just deciding to nip out the window and see what Midge was getting up to, when suddenly me and my stuff are whirling through space and time to this place. Finally someone had the presence of mind to crank up the station's old translator and we all settled down. I got a sleep treatment for the local lingo, found a crappy job."

"What's a 'sleep treatment'?" demanded the boy sullenly, knowing he was going to regret the ensuing lecture but giving in to his curiosity nonetheless. "How's that different from the Tardis thing?"

"I don't know the technical side of it, really. On Iceworld the language was downloaded into my brain. It's still there, in fact – 'Kanish sauchish mu nitu.'" She chuckled but didn't translate. "The Tardis, though. It makes you understand. In fact, it makes you not notice that you shouldn't understand. It sort of, I don't know, bypasses language? Lets you speak every language, too,

though it does weird stuff when you curse.

Anyway, it wasn't working then, there on the train, and I suddenly felt like I'd lost something, like a privilege. The people around me sounded different, like English had changed through the centuries, and suddenly all those comfortable space Brits felt like outsiders and strangers, like aliens. I needed a familiar face, a familiar voice. I went to find the Doctor.

He was two carriages away, standing by a pair of empty seats and squinting intently at the device. He was surrounded by curious bystanders. I pushed my way through. I waited for him to notice me – but of course he didn't, so I tapped him on his shoulder. He nearly jumped out of his skin.

"Oh! Ace! There you are!" he said, fumbling the device and nearly dropping it.

"Wotcha, Professor!" I said, grinning – although a grin was actually the last thing I felt like doing. The lack of translation had unnerved me. "What's going on?"

"According to my friends here," he nodded at a puzzled pair of young girls, "they suddenly had a strong desire to vacate their seats. They dimly recall two people suddenly appearing there but don't seem to have been interested."

He gestured around to the nearby gawkers. "No one remembers anything."

"Someone teleported onto the train?" I asked, but he seemed lost in his thoughts and didn't directly answer.

"I regret to say, my suspicions are being confirmed," he replied, the words long and drawn out in that way he had. His accent was Scottish for some reason – no idea why, he came from a whole different galaxy, not Galashiels – and he managed to stick an extra 'r' into every syllable, even the ones that didn't have 'r's in. Hell of a trick, still don't know how he did it.

"Like Nan's mate Morag," Ryan interjected. "It's weird! You know, once she bought this tin of..."

"Am I telling this story, or you?" the woman demanded. Ryan slumped back into his seat, scowling, and the woman continued.

The Professor tapped the machine against the back of a steaming chair, and held it to his ear.

"Hm," he said. "Very strange. Very strange indeed."

"What's strange, Professor?" I asked.

"Yes, what?" said a curious voice from the onlookers.

"Tell me, Ace," he asked with an admonishing glance at his audience, "what you make of

this.” He proffered the machine to me, and I took it gingerly. He gestured me to raise it to my ear, like he had done – so course, that’s what I did.

It was voices. Hundreds and hundreds of voices, all on top of one another so you couldn’t make out what any of them were saying. Some of them were English – but not many, truth be told. Most were talking or shouting or singing, even, sometimes, in languages I’d never heard before. But they were definitely voices.

Angry ones.

“What is it?” I asked him.

“I’m not sure,” he replied, “but I think it’s a mental projection. Or a temporal projection. Or both. Those voices, they’re from all across time and space, but superimposed on here and now.”

“Why?”

“A very good question,” he replied, and our friends agreed.

He beamed at me for a moment but the weariness didn’t leave his eyes.

“Well?”

“Hmm?”

“Professor! Why?”

“Oh. Why indeed,” he said. “I believe, to invoke a riot.”

“A riot?!” I demanded, and my hand went for my baseball bat, conveniently stuffed into the rucky on my shoulder. A murmur ran through the carriage. My mind raced. Everything made sense now – our travels, the things I’d heard and seen and read. With so much resentment, such a visible object – the company - to vent their frustrations, a riot on Thistle Dew would be a disaster. And someone or a couple someones had just appeared. Could they cause these people to riot? Could it really happen here?

“Oh, there are riots all across the galaxy at the moment,” said the Professor, reading my thoughts. “All happening exactly simultaneously – or as simultaneously as the laws of physics allow, which is to say, not at all.”

“I don’t see anyone angry enough to riot, though, Professor,” I said, looking around. A couple passengers also looked around, shrugged at me. They didn’t see any, either.

“Oh, I’m afraid you will,” he replied sadly, and took the device back, then turned on his heel and set off up the aisle, all the while studying its screen. I followed him, gesturing at the others to stay. I wonder how long it took for any of them to brave the empty but slightly steaming seats?

“We’re here, Ace, by the way,” he said, “because I spotted a time signature.”

“A time signature,” I repeated. “What’s one of those, then?”

"A ripple in the fabric of time and space that stands out. That shouldn't be there. That shouldn't be *here*. That announces... something."

"What?" I asked. "Or who, Professor?"

"I have no idea!" he snapped, and I could tell that it was this lack of knowledge that was frustrating him. "There's something – someone, yes! – that has no right to be here! But I can't tell what! Or whom!"

"You'll figure it out, Professor," I said, "You always do."

He stopped and turned. His face was so serious, Ryan, but the train had built a good head of steam and his hat was doing a little dance on his head. I couldn't take my eyes off it and I knew I'd laugh in a second, so I had to get serious.

"Professor, that gadget of yours..."

"Hmm?"

"Those voices in that seat..."

"They aren't in the seat, Ace. That's just where I got this thing working. See, they're here, too."

"Hello, there they are. So I figure they have a whatchamacallit, a source."

"Yes, some device or person."

"Well, what are we waiting for? Follow the signal!"

He frowned at his slapped-together gizmo.

"That's the problem, Ace. If I had three of these--"

"You could triangulate the signal!"

"I could triangulate the signal, yes. Don't interrupt."

"Sorry. Won't it be stronger the closer you get, though?"

"That's another problem. It's everywhere, spread out. I think it's hiding."

We stood there a second, then resumed our walk down the aisle. That's when I had an idea. Pretending to think out loud, I said, "So that time autograph, that's something different?"

"Time signature. Yes, that's something different."

"So why don't you look for the time signature instead? You're a Time Lord, you keep saying. Should be right up your alley."

He straightened up a bit. I could almost hear him think.

"Ace, would you do something for me?"

Ha. I gotcha, Professor.

"Course, Professor," I said sweetly. "Anything you want."

“Would you go back down the train, and see if you can spot... something? Someone?”

“What am I looking for?” ‘What’ being the source of the voices, of course, but it was good to let him think it was his idea.

“I don’t know!” he snapped again. “But I’m sure that a girl of your resourcefulness will know it when she sees it!”

And you know, even though I was doing my best to manipulate him, that got me goat. I knew he didn’t mean it, that it wasn’t me he was angry with, but I was a hot headed kid and it stung regardless. I’d long forgotten why I’d come to find him in the first place and now my hackles were well up. “Course, Doctor,” I said, probably a bit coolly. “I’ll recce and report.”

He didn’t even glance at my snappy salute. Bit disappointing, that.

Heading back down the train was weirder than it had been coming up. ‘Course it always is, walking down a train instead of up it. Going up, you’re going in the right direction. But going down? You know that odd feeling you get when your peripheral vision notices the landscape receding and you get that feeling that you’ll never arrive? It was like that.

The Professor had been near the front of the train so I had a bit of walking to do. Despite being rather cheesed at him I intended to do a good job, so I went slow and tried to do the Sherlock. You know, that ‘life story at a glance’ stunt.

Almost everyone had an armband or badge that identified their outfit so, assuming our teleporters wouldn’t have any type of outfit insignia, I looked for folks who wore none.

That bloke there had mud on his boots and a bandage peeking out from his left sleeve. He was dressed in old army surplus except for a clean white shirt.

The old lady further on was knitting and humming to herself, a proper English gran, but the scarf she was working on was an awful lime green. Her eyes were puffy and red.

The couple who napped, heads together, were uncomfortably turned away from each other. His hands were in pockets, hers clutching a ragged hand bag.

So... the bloke was a miner (mud instead of dust) who’d just been in a fight. He’d blocked a blade with his left hand. Something had happened to the gran’s granddaughter. The couple had grown apart but didn’t want to admit it yet.

Yeah, I thought, this is dead easy. Then the train hit a loose coupling and the couple’s eyes snapped open. And something very, very strange happened.

“Are wee their yet?” said the girl, and I heard it as ‘Are word-for-tinkle word-for-someone else yet’.

“Hang on!” said the boy, “I can hear it like that right now! How’re you doing that?”

The woman chuckled. “One of the tricks I’ve picked up. Just roll with it.”

“Bloody weird, innit.”

“You should have been there. Anyway, to continue...”

“Watt?” said the man. “What?” I assumed he meant.

“Eye said ah oui they’re yeht?”

He just stared at her for a minute, confused and angry. Part of him thought she was having him on, but another part knew that wasn’t possible. Then he noticed me, hovering.

“Dew yew mined? Weir halving uh miss under standing hear!”

“Wot?” I said, “This is blur dee strange, innit?” I chose my words carefully, then pointed to my ear and then to him. His girl looked on, bewildered. He nodded. Smart fella.

“Words...” I ventured.

He nodded and I continued.

“Sound...”

He frowned.

“Sound? Sound?”

One of those worked.

“Wrong?” I finished.

“Yes, they sound right but I’m hearing them with different meanings!”

His girl brightened. “I heard you just fine there, cookie!”

“Good grief!” he said, “that was bizarre.”

“It must be because we’d just woken up, don’t you think?” said the girl, trying to assert normalcy. He scowled.

“Except our friend here-”

“Ace.”

“Except Ace was wide awake and walking.”

“But what else could it be?”

“Lamb, relax,” he said patiently. “Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, *however improbable*, must be the truth.” She frowned and I laughed.

It was a nice encounter. She was dim but nice and he was a good bloke. Just normal people. When I was younger I wouldn’t have given them a second glance, dismissed them as ordinary. But

traveling with the Professor was making me appreciate ordinary folk more and more. The tough, trouble-making kid he'd found was changing.

"Well, Sherlock, I'm off to investigate," I told them. Then I added, "Aisle sea ewe inner wile."

It was back. We looked at each other and grimaced.

"Oaffer thugs ache!" he said.

I got back to where I'd been sitting. All through the train people were trying to talk but the terrible babble was on at full force. People were afraid and irritated and growing hostile.

I hurried. The foreign couple had left – probably realised they'd have been better off at Disneyland Paris and legged it – and been replaced by...

Well. Here's the thing, Ryan. There was something wrong, only I couldn't tell what. Where the foreign couple had been, now there was just a bloke and a girl. No outfit tags. Hell. Not dressed for the planet. They stuck out as bad as the Professor and I. They weren't covered in grit, for one thing.

She was your age or thereabouts, and probably pretty if you like that sort of thing. Thin, all dark hair and darker eye-shadow and pale, pale skin. Cold blue eyes. Tight, short black dress, black leggings. And sullen, really sullen. Emo you'd call it these days; then, we just called it poorly. Not enough lard in the diet. She was cracking some gum in her jaw with regular monotony, and now and then blowing pink, torpid bubbles. They'd burst against her face, and she'd lick the whole lot back inside and start cracking again.

I smiled at her. She made eye-contact once, but immediately looked away like I wasn't even worth being properly rude to. Cow.

The bloke beside her was sort of normal. No, not normal, exactly. Not normal at all. He was forty-ish, and thin as a rake. Three day's growth of beard, slightly less of hair, if you know the sort I mean. And the way he was breathing! It was like he had a monkey on his back! He was grinning the whole time, but always moving, always agitated. Scratching most of the time, but like he was trying to hide it: a little scratch here, a little there, arms and torso and scalp. And always, always the grin.

He was wearing a blue track suit that was slightly too short, some sort of thick wristband he kept scratching under and a gold chain around his neck. And he wouldn't. Stop. Grinning.

I hated that grin, Ryan. Hated it. Everyone around was being driven mad and this berk was smiling like it was funny. I suddenly wanted to wipe that grin off his face and was on the brink of accosting him when something, some instinct, made me stand in the aisle behind them instead. A second later my instinct proved correct.

“Jesus, Babs,” said the grinning fool in a weird accent, sort of American but part something else, “why haven’t we done this on a train before? It’s like Spam in a can here.”

(This, while at the same time someone behind me was declaring his ‘knots’ weren’t happening and across the aisle someone else wondered why ‘know won’ was stopping the ‘care ridge’.)

“Stop distracting me,” she replied in a lazy Mancunian drawl. “Just shut up and enjoy it.”

“Sure, sure. But, man! All packed together. I *like* it.”

“Jest wait ‘til we getta the city.” Something was very wrong here.

“Oh, yeah!” he said, then he started singing to himself. “*We gonna rock down to Electric Avenue/And then we’ll take it higher...*”

That sorted that, Ryan. I’d found the source of the voices *and* the time autograph *and* the looming riot. All at once and all too easily. Obviously, since they were unaffected by the babble effect that was going on around us, they had to be the source of the riot voices. And in a flash I understood that the homophone confusion was just the beginning. People were bewildered, irritated and scared but not quite ready to blow. Something else was coming.

Oh. The other thing, the thing that tipped me off was that damned song. ‘Electric Avenue’. Do you know it, Ryan? Yeah? Do you know what it’s about? No? Well, I’ll tell you – it’s about the ‘81 riots. Electric Avenue is in Brixton. Smiley was singing a song about riots. I’d have gone for White Riot or Guns of Brixton, but that’s just me.

I stood there, sort of looking away but listening. And then I became aware that something was intruding in my peripheral vision and a blanket of dread settled over me. No longer feeling clever or pleased, I forced myself to look.

The girl was kneeling on her seat and staring over the back at me, her head tilted like a cobra about to strike and an expression of deadly amusement on her face. I was pinned to the floor.

She turned and hissed, “This one knows!” and then turned to pin me again. Her eyes were now unamused and predatory. But in that second of broken contact I was able to shake free.

“Yore a timed raveller! And your anneal eon!” I shouted as I struggled through the passengers. Smiley grabbed a trailing rucksack strap and my momentum pulled him to his feet.

“Git off mi!” I said, giving him the old elbow to the face. He staggered, too stoned or too weak to keep his grip. Then I was free and moving.

I pounded up the aisle, trying to dodge passengers. “Sore rhys, cues me! Sari!” They were wrought up. One even took a swing at me but I let it go. I had to find the Professor, tell him what

I'd found. Behind me I could hear Smiley in pursuit. He was less polite.

Slowest chase ever, but I kept my lead.

I'd fled through three cars when I felt the train slowing. I glanced out the window but we hadn't arrived at the city. Had someone pulled the emergency brake?

Then I saw, in the window, the IMC enforcer's convoy waiting by the tracks.

I passed Sherlock and Lamb. They sat quietly, a notebook on her lap. I paused long enough to acknowledge them and Lamb scribbled a quick message: *Righting is fun E2*.

"Grate!" I said, not slowing. "Ewe take hair!"

"Urine t'rubble?" he asked, standing.

I pointed back at Smiley, who'd just jostled his way into view.

"Bad guise 'alf ta mi!"

Bless him. He immediately stood and blocked the aisle.

The train had shuddered to a halt once I found the Professor. He stood in the foremost carriage, clutching his corny but sort of cool umbrella. He was staring out the window at the soldiers.

"Hello, Ace," he murmured with a faint twinkle in his eye. "Find the alien or the time traveler yet?"

"Won is write bee hind me," I said. "Eye doughnut nowhere the other one is."

On cue, I heard a ruckus at the door behind me. The Professor peeked over my shoulder.

"Yes... I expect that's him, there. Interesting... I'd like a better look at that wristband, should an opportunity present itself."

I scowled at his ability to speak coherently (he seemed smug about it) but let it pass, because like he said, Smiley had arrived. There was something small but evil-weapon-looking in his hand. He was still smiling, damn him, though I was cheered to see he was also winded.

He raised the weapon. I moved to protect the Professor but he was doing the same for me and the result was a brief, awkward waltz in the aisle. As we sorted ourselves out I noticed Smiley stashing the weapon, alarm on his face. An enforcer, an officer from the look of him, climbed aboard and surveyed the carriage. I glanced back at Smiley and saw Babs the Cow now stood beside him, eyes narrowly measuring the Professor. He measured back, expressionless, then deliberately turned away.

The officer cleared his throat and the Professor smiled. "This should be entertaining," he said.

"Attention all passengers! This conveyance is henceforth commandeered under

Interplanetary Mining Corporation regulation 224, clause R56, sub-paragraph 3. Please do not be alarmed! There is no emergency and we apologize for the inconvenience. Your arrival at the lottery drawing will not be severely delayed! Please move to the rear of the train!”

“That was disappointing,” said the Professor. He nodded back to our suspects and was rewarded by a smug smirk from Babs that swiftly turned into a frown. I can’t explain how I knew, Ryan, but she’d just failed to read his mind. A look passed between them and her expression turned venomous. He brightened and tipped his hat with a little chuckle.

Then passengers began to stand. Most obeyed orders and soon the aisle was packed with people moving to the rear of the train. But it wasn’t orderly. I could see resistance and resentment. The presence of so many enforcers, so many weapons, just compounded my sense of impending doom.

Ryan chuckled at that. “‘Impending doom’?”

The woman frowned, but there was a twinkle in her eye. “Oi! Don’t mock your elders, sonny. If you’d been there you’d know exactly what I mean.”

“I was there. I mean, I was *here*. Yesterday. I know what you mean but you sound like Harry Potter. ‘Impending doom!’”

“You’re a rotten kid. Do you want to hear this or not?”

“Sorry. Yeah... so I guess you ratted out your suspects to the rozzers?”

I think that’s what the Professor intended, probably, but it didn’t work out that way.

He pulled me into an empty seat. I wanted to deal with Smiley and Babs right there and then, and said so, but he just relaxed and said, “Patience, Ace.”

“What’s the plan, Professor?”

He tapped his nose and nodded at the enforcer general – I think he was an enforcer colonel, actually – and I assumed he meant to have a word after the car cleared out. That was a bit disappointing, mind you, because I was keyed up for a personal role in the excitement, but I decided to not argue.

Instead, I watched the enforcers file in. A couple shot us glances as they filed past. They didn’t look very friendly; I expect they were wondering why we hadn’t moved. But in they came, filling the seats behind us in an orderly manner, and I was wondering idly what I’d look like in a soldier’s kit and actually feeling calm for the first time since the words went mad, when I saw the Professor sit upright.

“Ace...” he began, and I was startled to the here and now by the unwelcome sight of Babs – she’d disembarked and run forward – talking urgently to the colonel and pointing directly at us.

“That’s them! The girl has explosives in her backpack!”

“Ha! They ratted on you instead!”

“Yeah, Ryan, they did.”

They were well-trained, I’ll give them that. The colonel barked an order and instantly a dozen enforcers were pointing their weapons down at us. We stood, hands raised, and were marched off the train. The Professor paused as we passed Babs. I couldn’t see his face but her grin vanished and she trembled. Then an enforcer prodded him along and we stepped down onto the plain.

I saw we were outside a fenced enclosure, A sign read IMC Security Headquarters. A low building topped with an array antennae, a line of barracks and a small fleet of vehicles baked in the heat.

The colonel approached, his men let him through. He held out his hand and I passed him my rucksack. He fumbled with the catches and peered inside.

“These cans are some form of grenade?”

“Just hairspray, sir. I suffer from split ends.”

“Your hairspray appears to be equipped with fuses.”

“Very tenacious split ends, your excellency. Sometimes I have to get tough with them.”

“Charming,” he said, passing my rucksack to an enforcer, who gingerly accepted it.

“Inventory this,” he said.

“Now, sir, I trust you are prepared to be more cooperative?”

The Professor was frowning at the train and was annoyed at the interruption. He waved his hand. “Yes, colonel. Anything you say. I’ll cooperate,” he said with an air of faint dismissal., “Just answer a question for me.”

His eyes hadn’t left Babs, who stood in the open door.

“I think you’ll find I’m the one in position to ask questions,” said the colonel.

“Who is she? And how did she know the contents of a buckled-up rucksack?”

“Surely your friend made some childish boast...”

“She and her companion teleported to this train only moments before a large-scale outbreak of metal control nearly caused a riot. Surely you sensed the mood when you boarded? Not the jubilation of prospective winners, was it?”

He finally locked eyes with the colonel. “*Was it?* Ask around, interrogate the passengers. You’ll see.”

Then the Professor moved closer. He was a full foot shorter but seemed to tower over the colonel.

“Orb 22, five years ago! Strike 3, four years ago! The insurrection on Hephaestus Prime! Black Tuesday on Star Rig Blue!”

The names meant something to the colonel. “It was you. You’re the informant!”

“I am the Doctor and this is my friend Ace! We are here to help! We’ve followed a trail of mayhem and bloodshed across the galaxy that ends here! We are not your enemy! She is your enemy!”

That last bit would have been a sight more dramatic if the Professor hadn’t been pointing at empty air.

“Bugger me, she’s scarpered!” said an enforcer.

“No, she’s run back there!” said another, his finger tracing the path of the fleeing Babs, “She’s back on board!”

“We have to catch her!” I yelled, and damned if the colonel didn’t nod.

“See to it, men!” he said, and enforcers began to hustle toward the train. Some began to exit the train, follow outside, but then the doors shut and the train rumbled and began to move.

“What?” cried the colonel, “I didn’t give orders to get underway!”

“It’s her,” said the Professor, “controlling the minds of the crew.”

“Impossible! The train is remotely controlled from Prospect City station!”

“Are there manual controls on board?” I asked.

“Yes, of course, for emergencies.”

“Gordon Bennett!” I said, “Quick! Before she gets up to speed!”

I didn’t wait for the colonel’s permission, just started sprinting. I had a terrible suspicion.

As I ran I heard others crunching the gravel behind me. An enforcer, a tall thin bloke with a kind face, overtook and passed me, side-arm out. “Slow,” he smiled as he passed. Then he drew level with the rapidly accelerating engine. I saw him point his sidearm and then –

And then he was just gone. I didn’t even see a flash. He and his kit were reduced to a swirl of ash, while his gun and buckles and such, carried by momentum, dropped further on like faintly smoking meteors.

I faltered and it saved my life. Smiley leaned out the engine window, pointed his gizmo and a hole appeared at my feet. I went down, hard, on the hot gravel. At my original speed I’d have run

right into the invisible ray.

I suppose I was expressing my grief loudly at the rapidly receding train, because I didn't hear the buggies until one hurtled past me. Dust exploded everywhere as vehicle after vehicle raced past in pursuit of the train. I coughed in the blinding dust, cursing the real possibility that I was missing the action, when out of the cloud a hand grabbed my arm and the Professor laughed, "What are you waiting for, Ace?" and offered me a pair of goggles.

"Ace!" I said. I leaped on the running-board and gripped the roll-cage. There was my rucksack on the seat. I saw who was driving and added, "Hit it, Colonel!" and with a sideways skid of spinning wheels we were off.

"Oi, that's Thunderdome, innit? You're having me on, now!"

"What the hell is a Thunderdome? Oh! I see. No, not a movie. This really happened. Now just shut up, will you?"

"That would be Smiley, then," I yelled over the roaring engine, quickly telling the colonel about my encounter. In turn, he confirmed my guess – a quick call to Rail Control established that remote guidance was disabled. Between bounces and mouthfuls of dust he told me, "They promised to continue working on the problem at their end, but now's the time for direct action!"

He was a company man, symbol of everything I hated, but I found myself liking this colonel.

These goggles had some sort of vision enhancer and as we closed the gap I had a good view of the battle. A few buggies had matched speed with the train and I saw men shooting at the engine. I couldn't hear the shots, but I saw impact points sparking on the engine's armored hide. The squatters atop were moving aft, while a few enterprising enforcers on the train tried to move forward.

Smiley was returning fire – I saw holes appearing in the embankment and the buggies weaving to avoid his shots. Then one buggy sharply veered off and as we passed I shuddered to see no-one aboard, just a dissipating eddy of dust.

As I cursed his marksmanship I saw two more buggies collide and, locked together, disappear under the grinding steel wheels. A small explosion blossomed and debris flew, but the massive train didn't so much as falter. Three buggies remained.

"Hold tight!" cried the colonel as he turned the wheel and we hurtled across the tracks to the other side of the train. Smiley couldn't shoot in two directions at once. Good thinking, colonel.

It was rockier over here and we were frequently airborne, but I was formulating a plan. I

gripped with all my might with one hand and fished a can of Nirto-9 out of my ruck. The Professor scowled but didn't try to stop me.

"Not in the cab!" he shouted. Thanks, Professor – I'm not an idiot.

"Get us alongside!" I yelled to the colonel. He saw what I was carrying and gestured *hold on tight!* before flicking a toggle and grasping the wheel. Flames shot out our exhaust and we surged ahead at breakneck speed, the colonel using tiny movements to finesse us under control. Within seconds we'd pulled even to the engine and I saw the window on this side was open.

"Not in the cab!" yelled the colonel. These men, honestly.

I looked aft and forward. The top squatters were well back, retreating from the shooting. Forward I saw straight track and the shining towers of the city. So close! Through the window I saw Smiley's back as he rose from cover and shot. He hadn't seen us.

I muttered a silent prayer to the goddess of munitions and teenage bombers and twisted the cap.

Ten second fuse.

I was in full concentration mode now, gliding on rails, barely conscious of anything but my target and the ticking canister in my hand.

Five.

Four.

Three.

That's when the colonel swerved to miss a rock and the back of my hand struck the roll bar and the can jumped from my hand.

Two.

The Professor, moving faster than I'd ever seen, reached for the can. It bounced from his fingertips and the three of us watched it hang in the air above the open buggy.

One.

Crack! Suddenly the Professor's silly umbrella whacked the can and it flew true to a spot just outside the cab window and detonated. Wicked! The Professor was pleased with himself, I was pleased I'd gotten the fuse right and I suppose the colonel was pleased that Smiley had been rendered *hors de combat*. He spoke in his walkie and ordered an enforcer to climb forward onto the engine and enter the cab. It was hard to see from my perspective but soon the man was there, giving a thumb's up. The colonel swore softly in relief.

Then his walkie crackled and he grunted. He fiddled with the volume and told his man, "Say again."

"I said there's been a change of plans, *sir*," I heard the enforcer say over the radio. "Babel wants us in the city and she wants you to keep back. The girl and the Doctor can come aboard to play but if any attempt is made to stop the train the men on board will start shooting. Tell Rail Control the train is theirs again but they'd better deliver it to the city or else. That's it."

Then the enforcer turned to us and, well, *flowed*. For just a second Babs saluted sardonically from the window. She raised the walkie again.

"Oh, and *gotcha*."

She stooped below the window frame, then reappeared with Smiley hung limp on her shoulder. We saw her hands flow and she clambered out the window and along the body of the train like she had suction cups on her hands and feet. At the first window she stopped and hung there. The window opened. Hands reached out and drew Smiley inside.

She paused and looked directly at us. She crooked her long finger – 'come here' – and scuttled inside. The window slid shut.

All I could think at that moment was that the train was a great bullet aimed at the city.

"We have to get on there!" I cried, but the Professor was already shouting instructions to the admirably cool colonel. There was a small railed balcony at the end of the first-class carriage. The colonel slowed, let the train outpace us, then drew alongside. We were expected – a pair of innocuous passengers waited there, offering their hands, their faces expressionless. After the mad chase, the transfer between moving vehicles was almost routine and in moments we were aboard.

"Kid? Are you still with me?"

"You're going to bloody kill me, aren't you?"

"I can't, remember? Miracle Day? This will drag on for a time, yet, until it's sorted out. One of your old colleagues, wasn't it, Preston?"

"Don't remind me of that cheeseball, ma'am."

The boy interrupted. "But you're that Babs. And Babs, she's that Babel, the bitch on the train. Isn't she?" It was an assertion, not a question. "And him there..." – he indicated the man in the driving seat – "...he's that Smiley!"

There was a beat.

"Now why do you say that?" the woman asked quietly.

"That bloke there," the boy nodded at the driver, "he ain't no chauffeur. Me Uncle Les was a chauffeur. A chauffeur don't listen and nod and grin at his bosses' conversations. He also don't wear a bloody uniform that don't fit proper. Your sleeves are too short and I can see the wristband

thing you're wearing."

"Huh!" said the not-quite-Robert. "Not bad for a primitive."

"Shut up, dear ape, or we won't go to the Gravitron protests," the woman purred. Then she turned her attention to the boy, who cowered against the door, DVD box clutched across his chest. She sighed.

"All right. Was it just Preston there that gave me away? Let me take a look, and stop being afraid."

The car rolled on in silence as something crawled inside Ryan's mind, calming his emotions and analysing memories and opinions.

"Oh, I see. Not as nice as the real one, eh, and my shape shifting clinched it?"

"It's just the real one, the real Ace, seems like she'd have been nicer. And you started the story like it was about someone else, and it was, but then..."

"Oh, I assure you. I've delved deep into Ace's mind and that was exactly the way she'd tell it."

"You took it all out of her head?"

"No, not exactly... it's more in the manner of a channelling than a recitation. That is, I'm hearing the story at the same time as you. She's sort-of telling all of us."

The boy leaned forward. "She ain't dead then? Ace ain't dead?"

There was a muffled thump from the boot and Babel laughed. "Oh, she's alive and awake. Do you want to meet her?"

Ryan liked the real Ace immediately. She was bruised, disheveled and a bit older than Babel's impersonation of her, but he immediately saw warmth and quiet strength in her eyes. Her grip on his hand was firm but gentle.

The small lot between the two warehouses was an oasis, a quiet spot in the surrounding riot. Ryan helped the real Ace – Dorothy McShane – from the cramped boot as the others conferred quietly. They waited as she stretched. Ryan had the thought she was limbering up for a fight, that she might make a sudden move. But instead she simply looked up and down at Babel with peculiar distaste.

"Take it off," she said, and Ryan felt mild nausea as the creature's features and clothing flowed into the shape of a young Goth girl.

Babel smirked and curtseyed. "A pleasure, I assure you," she said, "to have that old thing off. Almost as great a pleasure as vacating your narrow little mind."

This must be what she'd looked like when Ace met her, Ryan thought. Was this Babel's real form? Or was this someone she'd met in the past? He wondered if the original had survived the encounter. For that matter, how had Ace?

"Excuse me," he said, "but what are we going to do now?"

"Hmm?" said Babel, "Isn't it obvious?"

"No! Nothing's been obvious tonight. Stealing that DVD wasn't obvious, getting into the Bentley wasn't obvious, the story wasn't obvious, you being this Babel and Ace being in the boot weren't obvious. Now we're here and that's not obvious. What is obvious would be you two using his wrist thing to take Ace somewhere you can kill her."

"Can't. Not yet," said Preston, tapping the wristband with the barrel of his weapon, "This little beauty's recharger is on the fritz." He displayed the gun. "*This* little beauty is fully charged, though, so no sudden moves. 'Sides, there's a riot goin' on. Why would we wanna leave before the tank is full?"

"So we're just going to sit here? That's your obvious plan?"

"Not at all." Babel pointed to a small circle of crates set in a ring around a charred rubbish bin, a transient camp. "Have a seat," she said, "We're going to finish the story."

"Seriously?"

"Don't you want to know what happened next?"

"I could live with not knowing."

"Are you sure of that? Absolutely sure?"

"Babel, stop messing with the kid," said Ace. She sat and patted the crate next to hers. "Come on, Ryan. I'll tell you the rest of the story while we wait. And you two, sit there."

They sat. "Isn't this nice?" smirked Babel, and Preston giggled.

Ace took Ryan's hand and winked. "Relax, kid. Where there's life there's hope, right?"

"S'pose," he said.

"That's the spirit. Now, where were we? Just getting on that train, right?"

Okay. First things first. I don't know about you, but the two things I hate in a story are dream sequences and long passages about people's feelings. Honestly, I skip right over 'em if I see some dialogue or action coming up. So the next bit's tricky. The whole thing seemed like a dream, thanks to Miss Prissy-pants here. And my emotions were ringing like a bell the whole time. So I'll keep it short. What happened in the city, that's what you really want to know about, anyway.

Standing on that little platform I got the weirdest vertigo. Babel's two drones turned and

entered without a word and my gaze followed them. The connecting doors were all open and I could see all the way down the train, hear the shouts and screams, loud near us but further and further down the carriages blending into a, sorry, a babble. And I suddenly felt like I was standing at the lip of a deep well, looking down towards the centre of, not the world, but something else.

I took the Professor's arm and he turned to me. There was thunder in his eyes, that ancient anger I saw when we confronted the Daleks. A man, forehead bleeding, stumbled past us and nearly pitched over the rail before we grabbed him. He cackled maniacally, and the Professor and I locked eyes over his convulsing form. Without breaking contact he brushed the man's forehead and he fell limp. We set him on the platform.

"Ace," said the Professor, pointing at his head, "I'm going to be fighting with this but I need to get close to her. I have to concentrate, so you need to keep me safe. Do you understand?"

"You're the brains, I'm the muscle. Old news, Professor! Let's get going!"

My adrenalin was still flowing from the buggy chase, but I was terrified, trying to sound brave. If we didn't start moving I was afraid I'd be paralyzed.

"Watch out for the man! She's afraid of me but he isn't!"

Get a shift on Professor, I was thinking! But all I said was: "Right!"

"The Tardis is in the city! The closer we get the more I can do! Do you understand?"

Out of words, I nodded. He nodded back, once, and took position at my back, hands on my shoulders like a blind man.

And we jumped.

It was immediately horrible. The train was packed. It was standing room only before, but now add a squad of armed enforcers and the crush was claustrophobic. It was hot, smelling of dusty bodies and thistle oil residue. And Babel had their minds.

I heard the homophones from before, but at a lesser level. There was a new element – people were shouting and arguing in dozens of languages. It was disconcerting – I still had the gift of tongues but for the first time I heard the actual foreign words overlaying my understanding of them. I heard a couple arguing in French, but French corrupted by homophones. They were lucky, though – most of the people hadn't a clue what was being said to them. I don't think the speakers even realized that they weren't being understood. They were okay, but everyone else was being infuriating, you know? Beneath the confusion I felt emotions running raw, like all my glands were draining into my mind. I felt angry, terrified. But I was able to maintain a semblance of calm – the Professor was helping me.

An enforcer was using his rifle butt to pummel a man in a suit. Onlookers shouted

encouragement, argued about how to punish him next. A miner tried to take the enforcer's weapon and it discharged. I don't think anyone was hit. The Professor's grip on my shoulders tightened, pushed. I began to shove my way through the press, used the bat to pry through tighter spots.

I watched for the enemy. She could be right here, or she could have an enforcer shoot us. But I didn't think either of those things were correct. I think she was as far away from us as possible. I think she was afraid.

"Not afraid," said Babel. "Wary, maybe. I couldn't see into his head and that worried me. Meant I couldn't make him dance. But I wasn't afraid yet. Just biding my time, letting him wear himself out."

Whatever. He was beating you, I know that. I saw it happening as we moved forward. The enforcer and the miner stopped struggling. The two drones who'd pulled us on board suddenly stopped in their tracks, bewilderment on their faces. The people in the aisle didn't push back as much and it became easier to progress. Whatever the Professor was doing, it was working. We made the exit to the next carriage, crossed over.

I felt the Professor's right hand leave my shoulder. It tapped a panel by the door, then pried it open. The hand felt inside, pulled a chip, bent a connector. Sorry, I'm saying it like that because it was like the Professor himself was occupied elsewhere and this hand was moving on its own. I know that's not true but that's how it felt.

Anyway, the hand displayed the chip to me, making sure I understood, and then reinserted it into the panel. With a staccato series of hydraulic snaps the connecting sheath folded into the carriage, leaving us in the open air. Then with a distinct pop the first class carriage detached and began to recede as its momentum died. I watched it shrink, hoped everyone was okay.

We were at the back of the train again. Both hands on my shoulders. Move. The first attack came in the third car. I'd just detached the second carriage when a sudden movement caught my eye. I threw up the bat just in time to deflect a blade. A middle-aged woman with an outfit captain's insignia howled and stabbed again. I grabbed the woman's arm. Not as impressive as it sounds, because she wasn't trying to hurt me. She was reaching around me at the Professor. I gave her the classic knee-to-the-vitals and she dropped the blade. I kicked it under a seat. She lost interest, looked away.

The homophone effect faded as the confusion of tongues increased. It was like the UN, or

Tower Hamlets, or gods forbid, the UN relocated to Tower Hamlets. I could feel the Professor's control slipping a bit. Words, phrases and entire exclamations eluded my understanding.

The aliens were in the fifth car. They had badges.

I'd dealt with two more attacks and had a bit of a cut on my arm and what felt like a black eye. The Professor's grip was weakening and my entire body was trembling from the exertion of pushing through the throng. I was becoming afraid, and wishing I had help, when suddenly they were there.

"Do you understand me now?" shouted the female.

I nodded.

"Excellent! You are here for the telepath?" That was the male.

I nodded again.

"Excellent! We are Shadow! We know of the Doctor who you bear. Allow us to assist."

The Professor's hands tightened, once, twice.

"Yes," I said.

They gave us an elixir to drink, something like honey and flower tea. Energy flowed into my limbs. It was good. I dribbled some into the Professor's mouth. He drank it greedily.

They had been trailing Babel for years. It was they who contacted the authorities. They were immune to mental influence, having weird blue alien brains or something.

I told the female our plan, my mouth next to her ear in case Babs was listening. They stood by as I removed the Professor's coat and hat. I put them on, hiding my hair and pulling the hat low. I brandished his corny umbrella. Let me be attacked, not the Professor. The male alien moved in front of me. I followed, the human target. The Professor took his spot and the female followed, alert for ambushes. We moved. One after another, uncoupled carriages fell behind.

The language confusion abruptly ended, shut off like a light switch. This was, oh, two carriages before we caught up with her. Babel.

For a ten count we chugged ahead in silence, like everyone had forgotten how to speak at all. The Shadows peered around, alarmed but ready. The Professor's grip became painful.

"Do you mind not squeezing so hard? I'm sick and tired of being hurt 'cause of you!" I said, then covered my mouth. What the hell? I'd thought that, sure, but to say it out loud?

The grip lightened a bit, became a fatherly caress, and I leaned back and patted a hand. He knew I didn't mean it; this was some new Babel thing.

"The company is enslaving us!" came a shout from ahead. And then came others, the raw vocalizations of years of unspoken resentment.

“We were tricked!”

“The company are crooks!”

“I hate it here!”

“Kill them! Kill them all!”

And so, after being cut off from each other, after being unable to communicate, after Babel primed them to desire nothing so much as to belong, the minds of the throng on the train were stripped of every filter and every consideration and now, now, they were primed to think, speak and act as a single entity.

Almost.

A man in a shiny suit emerged from under a seat, tie askew. With horrified abandon on his face he shouted, “It was the perfect plan, you suckers! Oldest trick in the book and it still works! I’m rich! I’m rich!”

The mob fell on him. We hurried past.

Sherlock and Lamb were in the next car. It was deafening, a bedlam of chants and slogans and threats, but they sat together, foreheads touching, his hand stroking her arm. They were an island. And they were speaking honestly for maybe the first time.

I hated to interrupt, but sharp Sherlock saw us approach and I was spared. He said something to her and she nodded. They stood, waiting.

“An evil alien is turning everyone into football fans. Me and these three other aliens are going to stop her. Want to help?” I asked.

“You look cute in that hat,” said Sherlock, “And I’d do you in a second, but Rachel is the only woman for me.”

“Terrific!” I said, “I’ll take that as a yes.”

We moved on.

“And then you found us,” said Babel. She frowned at the smoky sky and shrugged. “It wasn’t a bad plan, as plans go,” she said, “but every carload you detached meant I could focus more on those who were left.”

“We wondered about that,” admitted Ace, “but decided to take the risk, save as many as we could.”

“Isn’t that sweet of you. I guess that part worked. The thing is, you really didn’t understand what you were dealing with. Maybe your Professor did.”

The woman Ace said, “Let me guess. You are more than just an alien. Evil from the dawn of

time, perhaps? Bizarre elder being? God of erragonerrrock?"

Preston chuckled. "Worse than that. What you see there is one hundred percent human being."

"You're kidding!" said Ace. Babel bowed modestly.

Ryan said, "No way! You're human but you're a mutant, right? Is that what you really look like?"

"No and yes," said Babel. "What Preston here hasn't told you is that I'm from what you'd call billions of years in the future. I was one of the first 'true' humans after, well, other forms of being. Back to basics."

"That's where I found her. I was a cop, a time cop..."

Ryan saw Ace roll her eyes.

"...and an accident with my Vortex Manipulator sent me far into the future, far past what was dreamed possible. I was on a secret mission, charged to investigate the future of the agency. There were individuals who wanted to secure their power base, you know?"

"Okay, Preston. Enough about you. Me. I was a cop too, in what sort of passed for the future version of his org. Crowd control was my remit. I've got extra bits sewn in, you understand? Attachments and all. But there was nothing to do. Most people were still shades of blue flittering around philosophizing and scolding us for inflicting pain on the atmosphere. By breathing."

She rolled her eyes. Preston smiled – an actual warm smile.

"Babs was the first person I met."

"Long story short, Pres," said Babel.

"Okay. The people in her time wanted to take me apart. We escaped to my time and the people there wanted to take her apart."

"And you've been causing riots all over space and time since?" asked Ace. "What the hell? Why?"

"Yeah," interrupted Ryan, "why are you doing this? Listen to all that noise out there. People are dying, their houses are burning, they're being ruined. That's a pretty nasty way to behave, ain't it?"

"Weren't you listening? My people and her people, they tried to kill us. It's me and Babs against the universe, man. Screw the universe. Let it burn."

Then he grinned that Smiley grin.

"Why are we doing this? Simples. First time we were trying to be clever, change time, throw off pursuit. That was a complete washout, but we discovered something about riots. All those

people, all that emotion, all that rage... It's a rush."

"You're a couple of berks, you are. So all this stuff on the train was just you getting your rocks off? You pair of total c...!"

Babs flexed. The boy, abruptly interrupted in his flow, jumped to his feet and seemed to swell. An exultant light leaped into his eyes. For a moment he stood still, panting through a grin. Then he struggled, batting invisible insects.

"Okay I get it! Get it out of my head!"

Babs flexed again and he sagged.

Babs smirked at Ace. "Want another taste? For old time's sake?"

"Don't do it," said the boy to Ace, and turned to the two future police. "You're a couple of bloody coke-heads, that's what you are!"

He sat heavily. "Bollocks to this!"

"He's starting to get it," said Preston. "Want another shot, kid? In the spirit of scientific inquiry, of course? Just to see if it's like you remember?"

"Go to Hell," said the boy, but just for a moment hopeful hunger gleamed in his eyes. He realized what he'd revealed and bowed his head, ashamed. Ace stroked his back.

Don't feel bad, kid. When we burst into the final carriage that's the first thing I felt. Bab's direct attack. I was huge, alive, ready to shame the universe. Suddenly I wanted to chant, to march, to throw a brick. I wanted blood on my knuckles, weapons in my hands. I wanted noise and heat and chaos.

We'd entered the city now, rushing past shiny buildings, and I wanted to smash them, see them shatter and melt. I utterly forgot the Professor. All I could feel was the imperative to destroy, because somehow destroying would make me happy. Whoever 'me' was.

That's when the Professor saved me. He spoke for the first time in hours. One of his hands left my shoulder and rummaged in the pocket of his jacket – I was wearing it, remember – and re-emerged in front of my face. It held that can of thistle oil he'd been carrying around.

Somehow I managed to ask, "Um, Professor? What good is that?" and I heard a small exasperated groan. The hand rummaged again, emerged.

Now it held that gadget, that time detector thing he'd had earlier. It looked like a piece of retro junk, really. All his gadgets did. But it had time in it. And time was his food.

"Ace," he croaked, and pushed a button. As my mind exploded, he embraced me in a strong hug, his ragged breath on my neck, as I sank to the floor.

I saw things. Many things, all at once. Or maybe I was many places at once. Or both. I don't know.

He was the Doctor and I was the companion. He was old, I was young. He was brains, I was brawn. He was alien, I was human. I think our immediate surroundings coloured the visions, because all of this happened on trains. We rode them over and over. But *things* rode the trains, things that changed faces. There was a pattern, an etching like the lines left on the black part of a magic slate. The Doctor and companion, the shape shifter. Over and over again.

“Good Lord, Babel! You were there peeking, weren't you?” Ace said accusingly. “I just remembered! You were in my head at the time!”

Ryan saw the girl nod, once. Ace looked at her, frowned and continued.

“Well, they're gone now, all but the last. But I remember that one well enough. Still puzzles me, even now...”

A girl of perhaps fourteen, in a simple dark blue dress with long sleeves and a full skirt. Dark stockings and worn shoes. All her clothes look like they are in need of a wash, as if she's been travelling a long time. Her hair is pulled back from her comely face, streaming behind her. She raises her hand against the wind, blinking as if blinded for a moment by ashes and soot and swirling starlight. The noise of a train rushing over unseen tracks is deafening. They are hurtling impossibly through space. She is clinging to a man's hand. The Doctor? Seems like he might be. The train they are standing outside of, on a carriage porch, is racing at a fearsome speed. The girl looks terrified, all her attention focused on the man.

He lets go of her hand and jumps from one carriage porch to the next like there's nothing to it and holds out his hand.

“Come with me,” he says, but she only stares at him, unable to move. He obviously expects more, but she's riveted to the spot. In her eyes you can see that she expects to be left behind and it isn't the first time. What she needs is a second chance.

And then, just like on the telly, everything went wavy and the familiar lines of the train carriage appeared before my eyes. The volume knob went to eleven. I felt myself again. I was angry, but it was my anger. I was back. Me, Ace! And, if you like, with a second go at it – just like I'd just seen.

I surveyed the scene before me and surged to my feet, lifting the Professor easily. Only a few moments had passed. The female alien was under a press of bodies – I saw her throwing them

off with, I guess, alien strength. The male, a few meters ahead, was struggling with Preston. You looked awful shaky, there, but I have to admit you were holding your own. Sherlock and Lamb were down for the count; they'd been hit by Babel's happy blast and didn't have a personal Professor to sort them out. I hoped I wouldn't have to hurt them.

The passengers who weren't piled on the alien lady cop began to stand and move toward me. I felt like a sole Liverpool fan who's turned a corner to meet a mob of drunken Man U supporters. This was going to be ugly.

Babel was backed up against the far door. She was motionless, her hands raised like an Old South preacher. Her eyes were clamped shut, her teeth clenched, her face was contorted with effort.

The Professor pushed me forward. I imagined him behind me, face all scrunched in concentration. Did he even realize there were nearly thirty passengers, not to mention a dog pile, between us and our quarry? I was about comment on this development when, with a hum and a hiss, the carriage shuddered and slowed. It was suddenly dark. We'd arrived!

The train entered the station at exactly 4:53 Thistle Dew mean time. The Lottery was scheduled for 5:00. The arena was a ten minute walk toward city center.

A moment's distraction was all Preston needed. I heard a shot. My alien friend crumpled. Not disintegrated, thank goodness. Preston grabbed Bab's hand and shouted, "When I say, 'run', run!"

Babs nodded. As the train crawled to a halt, she screeched, "The company lies! You have been tricked! Destroy them all! To the arena!" And her timing was impeccable, because the train halted and the doors opened at that very moment.

Into the city came the mob.

It was breath-taking. As the rioters erupted from the train and began their race to city center I saw that Babel's influence had reached even here. Wounded and dead enforcers, company men and settlers littered the platform. The rioters trampled them where they lay.

In seconds the train was empty save for myself, the Professor and the two cops. He was okay, just grazed. She pulled him to his feet and slapped him. He steadied. She fed him some of that elixir. He stood straight.

They looked over to us, anxious to resume the pursuit. I gave them a hand-wave – wait. I was utterly exhausted, mentally and physically. The Professor looked the same. We cracked weary grins, leaned on seats, panted. "She's too strong," he said wonderingly. "Too strong."

It was disconcerting to see him in this state. I'd seen him alarmed but never discouraged. But that spark was still there. He wasn't defeated.

Then she was there, proffering a small vial. "You need revitalization, I observe," she said.

"C'mon, Professor," I said, "Let's grease our wheels and get moving. The fat lady hasn't sung yet."

I drank, then he drank. He stared at me the whole time like I'd said something important. Then, a brilliant I'm-a-genius grin.

You know, the light from that grin made me want to hop and clap my hands. I was too cool for that, of course. Instead, I just said, "That look. You've thought of something!"

He grabbed my hand and we ran.

They don't have YouTube in the future but there's similar. And for months one of the most popular clips was the Thistle Dew lottery ceremony. Millions of hits. Trillions. And I shot it.

Ryan, imagine a big arena with a glittery stage erected on one end. Three immense screens over the stage. Tiers upon tiers of seats, higher than we can build today. A big wide open playing field filled with a unruly, outright angry mob. Got the picture? Yeah?

Now imagine a tiny figure on that stage, his face hugely magnified on the screens. He walks out confidently, nods sympathetically to the disappointed singer who's just been shouted off stage, and gazes out at the assembled masses with a general air of knock-em-dead confidence and oily determination.

He grasps the microphone, glimmers at the crowd and proclaims loudly,

"We only care about your money!"

That, Ryan, was Garnerball Thuvius Macklesworth the 5th, head Public Relations Officer for IMC Thistle Dew and official emcee of the lottery. His co-host stared at him, open mouthed. A few musicians in the pit turned and looked. The audience roared. He cleared his throat.

Down below, peering through the viewfinder of the video we'd commandeered from a cooperative videographer, I yelled, "What's that? Say again?" I know, I shouldn't have. Three huge magnified faces peered directly at the camera. We could see his pores. Hell, thanks to the future internet and the live telly, the whole planet could see his pores.

"You are all very stupid!" he proclaimed. Oh, brilliant, I thought. You've got them in the palm of your hand. Right *there*.

It shouldn't have been funny but this chowderhead's horror at speaking the plain truth, thanks to Babel, was hilarious. Speaking of Babel, I wondered if the aliens had found her yet. She

was here somewhere. I wish I was out there helping. Why had the Professor insisted I stay here (on a little raised platform above the crowd) and operate the camera? And where was he? Oh, Garnerball was speaking again -

“What I meant to say was that we at IMC are very happy to provide you with unparalleled opportunities, but of course we’re just taking advantage of your greed!”

At this the arena exploded. My platform shuddered as a tidal wave of bodies rushed the stage. Three giant shaking emcees stared down in disbelief. I saw people topple into the band area, trampled by those pressing from behind. The co-host had had enough and fled. Then I realized I was filming that instead of the stage and I turned back to see something utterly unbelievable. The arena fell silent.

Without a sound, a tiny figure in a white suit glided across the stage. Its feet were together, showing no clue to how it moved. But it held an open umbrella, opened as if catching the wind. It cheerily doffed a hat as it exited, stage left. I got a close-up of that goofy smile just as he disappeared. I laughed out loud. The crowd, puzzled, murmured.

Oh, Professor, I thought. That’s... that’s...

Then he came again, this time on one foot in a perfect Biemann position. I filmed his wink as he pirouetted and executed a perfect Camel spin followed by an impressive axel jump. This was the guy who could barely keep his feet on Iceworld! How was he doing this?

I knew in a flash. Thistle Dew oil! The slipperiest substance in the universe! He’d put it on those stupid golf shoes of his!

I started laughing out loud. Garnerball finally realized something was occurring behind him and turned just in time for the Professor to grab his hands and spin him around.

Below me, I heard a chuckle. Then, further away, a guffaw.

Garnerball, already dizzy, stepped on a smear of oil and went down, smack on his dignity.

Around the arena I heard pockets of honest laughter.

The show went on. The Professor played spoons on Garnerball’s head. He caught him in a hydrant lift and a dance combination. He produced a bouquet from his sleeve, offered it shyly. Then he did a twizzle and a toe loop.

“You know an awful lot of skating terms for a tough bird,” said Ryan.

Ace grinned at him.

“Shut up.”

Two enforcers finally rescued Garnerball from the stage. He slid off easily. It was harder to catch the Professor. Soon an entire squad of enforcers were falling about like Keystone Kops on the glassy stage. The people loved it and I loved the way the Professor adroitly manipulated them. He was pulling their teeth, you know? Finally our friend the colonel appeared and ordered them off. Eh. You might say he was trying to preserve their dignity but I think he sensed the sea-change in the crowd.

The Professor pantomimed heartbreak at their departure, waving his hanky and blowing his nose (it made him drift backwards). But he returned the colonel's salute with some gravitas.

The entire arena was roaring with laughter. The blood lust, the rage, the hatred, all dissolved. Washed away by that other, stronger emotion.

Finally, seizing the moment, the Professor skated up to the microphone and flourished his hat. He hesitated in mild alarm for a moment and then grinned into the mike. His beaming face hugely magnified, by me. I waved and he winked.

"Hello, Thistle Dew! I am the Doctor!"

A chorus of 'Doctor who?' and 'Hullo Doctor' drifted from the audience. He waved, then hooked his umbrella on his arm and took the mike in both hands. He stared out at the throng until utter silence fell.

"Injustice." he said somberly. "Injustice endures."

A few cries of confusion drifted up to the stage.

"Shhh," he said, "Hush now. Injustice endures but justice prevails. And justice is won by peace, my friends. Not by destruction or rage or blind obedience."

He peered out into the assembly.

"Nor by silence."

You could hear a pin drop. He frowned and cleared his throat.

"Nor. By. Silence."

That got them. Ragged cheers grew into hearty chants. But it was different this time. That edge of hatred was gone, replaced by honest resolve.

"So no more silence, I say! Let your voice be heard! They've witnessed your strength, seen your muscle. They will listen now! The universe will listen!"

Hurrahs, clapping. The arena hummed with optimism.

"Today, here in this place, you have all won the lottery!"

They must have cheered for five minutes. The Professor let them have their moment. Finally, he raised his hand and got silence.

“Do you hear these people?” he asked Garnerball, who stood at the edge of the stage. I caught his solemn nod on the video.

“And this system will stop?” He nodded, hand on heart, and we all could see he meant it.

The Professor narrowed his eyes, then appeared satisfied. He pointed outward, upward.

“Then we’re done here, Thistle Dew.”

He repeated the name to himself. “Thistle Dew.”

He addressed the crowd. “We’re done, Thistle Dew. Or should we say what that intrepid explorer said when it was time to name this dismal world? Its real name, its founder name?”

He cupped a hand to his ear, inviting the crowd to respond and, in one immense voice, they did.

“This’ll do!”

The Magpie’s on Capaldi was burning low, fuel nearly exhausted.

Ordinarily, Ryan would have been keenly interested in seeing a familiar landmark reduced to ash, but he was too busy concentrating on his driving. He’d readily complied when Babel ordered him into the driver’s seat but now, carefully weaving through wrecks and checkpoints, his nerves were on edge. But not enough that he ignored the others.

Babel sat quietly, hands on the glass. Preston and Ace sat, each assessing the other.

“We came straight here, you know,” said the man. “Babs insisted. It’s been years for you but less than a day for us. I still have that damned grit in my socks.”

“How’d you find me?”

“It was that doohickey of the Doctor’s, that time thing. Babs caught a glimpse. Easy after that, you being famous and all. I was a time cop, you know.”

“Yeah... so what happens now? What’s she doing, anyway?”

“Watch. Drive around some more, kid.”

Ryan drove into the morning. He saw fires being extinguished, wounded being treated, quiet mobs dispersing in silence. It was ending. It was her. It was Babel. She was ending it. But why?

Finally, they were back where the story started.

The Magpie’s on Capaldi was gone.

“Stop here,” said Babel.

He opened the door and silence rushed in. Unthinking, he opened the rear doors as well.

They stood on the pavement, ash and debris scuttling in the mild breeze. Standing there with the two sombre criminals and the expectantly silent Ace, Ryan realized with only mild surprise that he was going to be okay.

“I thought you were here for revenge,” he said.

Babel, suddenly young and frail, smiled sadly. Preston put his hands on her shoulders, squeezed.

“You ruined everything, McShane,” he said, “you and your damned Professor.”

“Laughter,” murmured Babel, reaching up to squeeze his hand. She chuckled softly.

“Laughter! What’s wrong with us, Preston, that we didn’t think of that instead?”

“I dunno. What’s wrong with everybody?”

“You came to tell me you were done,” said Ace.

“I had to be sure, be you, tell the story. Lightfingers here was as good an audience as anyone.”

She looked out and Ryan saw something new in her expression.

“I expect we should be punished.”

Ryan was about to agree when Ace spoke.

“Just balance the books. Go on with you, now. Out of my sight. Go on your madcap tour of comedy clubs or whatever you’ve got planned.”

“Thank you. We’re off to quell the Gravitron protests, I think. Still want to go, Pres?”

“Ready when you are... Doctor.”

Ryan stared at the empty spot where the two had stood. That was way cool, he decided, though on the whole he’d rather travel by Bentley. But enough of that...

“Just balance the books?” he said, “What the hell was that, miss? Those two might be sorry and all but that’s getting off easy, innit?”

Ace laughed. “Says the looter. Relax, kid. I’ve been waiting for those two to show up for years. Babel wasn’t the only one to have a future vision, you know. I *did* give her a hint.”

“But they just left!”

“Straight into the null zone of the Shadow Proclamation. Space cops. Don’t ask.”

He stared at her. She laughed.

“Oh, okay. You’re asking. I have a lot of friends in high places, okay? Really high places, if you catch my drift. They put a memory block in my head (I’m just now remembering this) and remotely changed the coordinates on Preston’s Vortex Manipulator.”

“Right. So it’s Space Cops vs Future Cops then. Three dimensions vs one – they’re

outnumbered!”

Ace looked at him quizzically. Ryan coloured. “Shut up,” he said. “I got a GCSE in maths, yeah?” He paused. “So, I s’pose this is it, then?”

“How d’you mean?”

“I mean the story’s over, those two are gone. I guess I should leave the DVD here...”

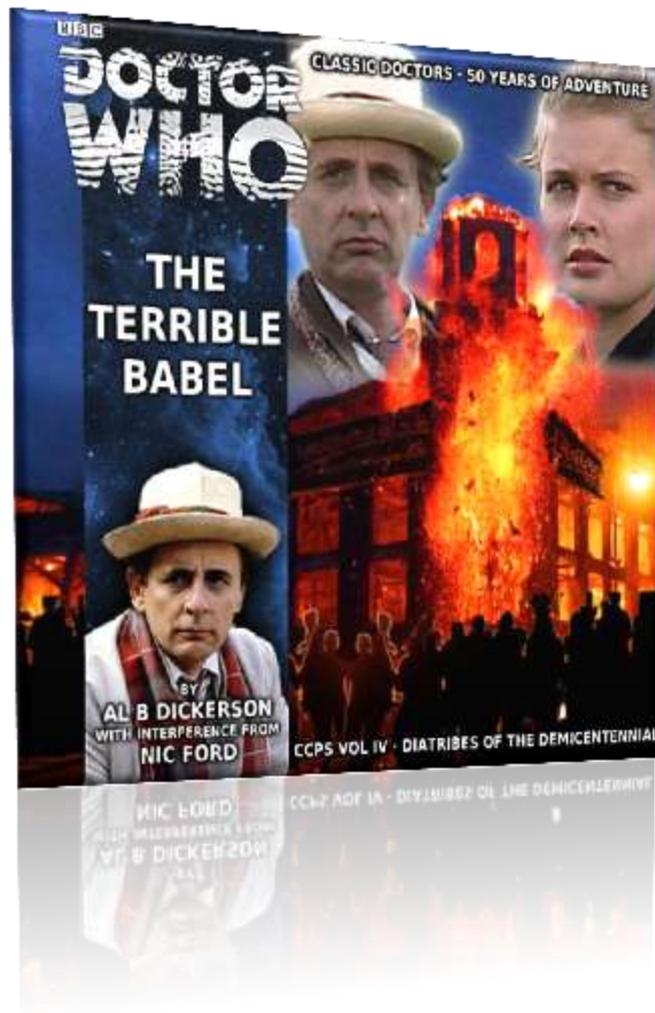
Ace laughed.

“C’mon, kid. You look sharp in that hat.”

He looked at her, at the Bentley. He thought about future stories.

Ace smiled.

“I’m not going to drive myself home, am I? How about it, kid? Want a job?”



**Doctor
Who**

CLASSIC DOCTORS - 50 YEARS OF ADVENTURE

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