

Dear Diary

It is often said by the slower-witted and unimaginative quarters that a truly heavy sleeper would not be awoken by a bomb going off. I can't vouch for that myself, but it is quite a surprise at just how sleepy one can get following such a detonation. I've blacked out at least twice and my short term memory has temporarily deserted me. I'm not sure how I got to where I am, in both terms of geography or the events that occurred prior.

I look at my surroundings for the umpteenth time. The glowing discs on the pale walls are evidence I'm inside the TARDIS in what appears to be some kind of changing room. There are rows upon rows of clothes hanging from metal railings and draped from overflowing racks, hundreds of different outfits in hundreds of different styles in no kind of local order. The vast store of costumes must have taken decades to accumulate in this attic-like clutter, but the yellowing music hall posters stuck to the walls make it feel more like the back of an ill-organized theatre.

Yes, I came here from the console room for some reason, looking for someone...

A head of unruly red hair pokes out from behind a modesty screen and stares at me with pale green eyes. "Nearly done!" says the bright, giddy voice. "Just got to get the right blend of garments, you see. A fitting ensemble, a suitable suit – you've got to make the right first impressions, haven't you?"

He ducks back behind the screen and I realize for the first time that I'm splattered almost head to toe in dried, crusty mud and dirt – unlike the ginger-haired man behind the curtain, who is completely clean. I must have been showered in muck by the explosion, but I can't quite remember where that happened. Or when.

"You know, I still can't believe what happened," says the redhead, shuffling through a box of costumes. "It's embarrassing apart from anything else. At least the whole process went smoothly this time. Probably down to practice. Of course it'll take some getting used to, but it beats being dead any day..."

"Well most things do in my experience," I say absently, running a hand through my filthy hair. I'm not quite capable of dealing with this strange man and remembering what just happened simultaneously, which is hardly a recommendation for a graduate from King's College Cambridge, is it? I have a horrible feeling I'm overlooking something obvious...

The redhead steps from behind a blind and spreads out his arms. "Well, what do you think? How about this?" He turns on the spot. "Stylish, don't you think?"

I look him up and down. Stylish is not a word I would use to describe this man's new look. Rumpled, yes. Threadbare, certainly. He's dressed in a brown tweed suit, and a mustard-coloured knitted waistcoat. There are no shoes on his feet, just ill-matching white socks. The overall effect is

that he's dressed from a pile of his grandfather's clothes that the charity shop refused to accept as a donation.

"Definitely a change for the better!" he says and smiles a warm smile.

I can't help but smile back. "I heartily concur," I lie. "Um, not wishing to run the risk of sounding thick but who are you, again?" I ask him politely.

His face falls, crumpling in disappointment. "It's me, the Doctor!" he says, hurt.

Negative Influence

by James Kyle

The delayed shock or concussion or whatever caused this ghastly amnesia's faded now, enough for me to piece together events. I, Raine Creevy, was traveling with the Doctor in the TARDIS – on our own since Ace left. Things are still a bit blurry, like a bad dream I haven't quite awoken from, but I remember we were on Skaro, and then dealing with the Pantheon of Discord, before we ended up in the trenches of the Great War. There was that military academy that the Doctor had been suspicious of...

And when it was all over, somehow the TARDIS had been dumped in the mud of No Man's Land and we'd had to run the gauntlet through the wastelands to get back to it. I remember the question-mark handle of the Doctor's umbrella wrenching me backwards; it transpired we'd wandered into the middle of a minefield. Berating me for not looking where I was putting my foot, he steered up to the doors of the police box.

Then, upon unlocking the doors, he'd unthinkingly taken a step back to allow me to enter the time machine. Ladies first; one of those gestures that keep him on the right side of endearing. But as he stepped back, he stepped on a mine and then there was that horrible explosion that left me caked in hot mud, skull ringing and barely aware of what was actually happening around me.

Needless to say, I was doing infinitely better than the Doctor. His whole left leg was missing, and the rest of him was black with soot and bloody shrapnel. His clothes were burning rags and his

hat, umbrella and pullover had been incinerated. The remains of the Doctor had been flung through the doors into the control room of the TARDIS.

In a daze, I stumbled inside after him. I must have managed to close the doors, maybe even set the TARDIS moving, but I can't remember any of that. I just remember being crouched over what was left of the Doctor's body, numb and shocked.

Then I noticed something odd about his lifeless face. It appeared for all the world to be glowing, like pinpricks of yellow-orange lights were gathering together under the surface of his skin, until the glow engulfed his entire face and then his hands, and what was left of his leg as if he was gradually bursting into ever-brightening flames.

And then the "gradually" part was totally forgotten and there was the second explosion in as many minutes. Wave after wave of burning amber light whipped out from the Doctor's body in a shimmering, humming cacophony before just as abruptly clearing and dissipating like it had never happened.

The man lying prone on the floor wasn't the Doctor, but he was still wearing the Doctor's filthy clothes – his intact left leg sticking out from the ragged, bloody checked trouser. He sat up, eyes open, feeling his face and saying something about crossing a great divide and I'm fairly certain that was the moment I keeled over in a dead faint.

I wasn't out for long, I think, but in a daze I went looking for the stranger and finally found him in the wardrobe section putting on a tweed suit. I asked him who he was and, bring events neatly up to the present moment, he told me he was the Doctor.

"It's me, the Doctor! Can't you tell?"

"Of course, how silly of me not to realize."

You understand, of course, I'm speaking sarcastically – because the redhead doesn't.

He accepts me at my word and starts sifting through clothes on racks, stuffing things into the pockets of his jacket. "It's quite a common mistake," he says cheerfully. Not just everyone can regenerate when mortally wounded by stepping on a landmine, can they? No, it is the gift of a Time Lord. Don't worry about it everything will be fine now. There are a few differences in the new body, but I doubt anyone will notice them..."

"Well, I notice them," I point out, mimicking his good humor through gritted teeth, "but then I have always had an uncommon eye for detail."

"Yes, you have indeed," he agrees merrily, pinning a yin-yang badge to his jacket lapel.

I suppose in the right light you might think he was the Doctor, as long as you'd never seen

the original before. He's slightly shorter than he used to be, barely reaching my shoulder height, with a square avuncular face with visible laughter lines framed with wild ginger curls. There's not a trace of the mischievous Scotsman I once knew.

"Oh by the way, Wayne, how do you like the new face?"

"Raine," I correct him coolly.

He looks up. "In here? That's unlikely. I don't think I need an umbrella any more."

"It's Raine," I repeat. "Not Wayne."

The stranger stares at me with a look of comical concentration as he very visibly tries to work out how to explain that faux pas. Those green eyes aren't as warm and friendly as the Doctor's, but they're just as mysterious. Eyes full of secrets.

"Hello Raine," he says at last, with a waggle of fingers at me before he changes the subject. "Anyway, until I find some more clothes in my size these are all I have to wear. I wonder where I put that sewing kit? Anyway, I think the outfit works."

"It's not the outfit I'm interested in," I tell him. "You're wearing a different body!"

"But I'm still the same man underneath," he says, sounding offended. "The very core of my being, my soul if you like, is still here."

"So what happened to the Scottish accent?"

He frowns, puzzled. "Scottish? I always thought I was doing Geordie..."

My patience is starting to wear thin, as being covered in stinking mud and the blood of your good friend is never conducive to a good mood. "Let me just clarify this. The old Doctor died when he stepped on the landmine and you're his replacement?"

"I haven't replaced him, I *am* the Doctor!"

"So where has the old Doctor gone?"

He's getting quite upset on his point. "I haven't gone anywhere! It's still me, I've still got the same memories... this face, these arms and legs, they're just different packaging! Just because I've got a new body doesn't mean you can't accept me!"

I feel a desire to retort that this means nothing of the kind, but that desire is drowned out by the urgent need for a bath and a fresh set of clothes. At the moment, I can almost envy the redhead. He looks so young and refreshed in comparison to how I feel. "Well, if you'll excuse me, I really do need to freshen up," I say and stumble out of the wardrobe section in the vain hope of retracing my steps to my room.

I'm uncertain if the strain of events is what's exhausting me so, or maybe it's just my

consciousness compensating for a somewhat violent wrench of expectations. Either way, I give up looking for my room and settle for an unoccupied set of living quarters, in particular the en suite bathroom. It has one of those shower cubicles where a switch causes water to come from nowhere, and a very rough towel.

A lot of pounding hot water later and the brown stinking mud, along with a combination of blood, sweat and tears is all gone like a dream. Clean and dry at last I step from the shower and, eschewing the sticky, filthy clothes I've shed, find a cupboard with some jeans and a top that leave me decent enough to go back to the wardrobe section and find some better fitting clothes. The new Doctor isn't there, thankfully.

It's very gauche to disrobe and then get dressed around friends of the family, is it not?

How long has it been, I wonder, since that mine went off? Hours? Days? Of course now the TARDIS has moved again there's no way of telling; it could be in the past or the future. Nonetheless it still feels painfully recent.

When I reach the console room, the ginger-haired Doctor is leaning against the console which he's covered in a heap of jackets, coats and hats and is trying them on. A fisherman's cap, a deerstalker, a fez, one of those Australian hats with dangling corks, each is tried and then mercifully discarded.

As I enter, he notices me and says with childlike good humor "Hello, Raine! Feeling better? Feeling right as rain?" He seems inordinately proud of the pun, as if puns are anything but the lowest form of wit.

I do the only decent thing and ignore it. "I've felt better, but after surviving a waltz through a minefield in No Man's Land, I suppose it's a moot point." Deep breath. "Can you change back? Go back to your old body?"

He blinks owlshly. "No. Besides, I like this one."

"So we're stuck with this new you?"

"It's still me," he groans petulantly. "It's always been me!"

"Until the next time you change?"

His mood instantly turns troubled. "Oh yes, that's a point. Mind you, I don't have an infinite supply of regenerations. You only get twelve and I've done it ten times! No, wait, seven. No, make that twelve." He looks thoughtful. "Or was it sixteen?"

"When you only get twelve?"

“Well, you know me, Raine, I am nothing if not a special case.”

I shake my head. “I’m honestly unable to tell if you’re being serious.”

“I’m always serious!” he huffs, putting on a plastic Viking helmet with huge horns, before adding, “Well, apart from when I’m kidding.”

“So,” I say, remaining the consummate professional, “what now?”

“Now?” The Doctor shoots a significant look at the glass column connecting the console to the ceiling, where the time rotor now hovers still. The TARDIS has clearly arrived somewhere in the meantime. “Now, Raine, we explore!”

“Explore? Explore what?”

“Where we are, of course!”

“Don’t you know?” I’m thoroughly perturbed. We never used to arrive anywhere at random; even if the Doctor didn’t have some master-plan under way he always had some deliberate destination in mind. “Don’t you have any idea?”

“None whatsoever,” he replies, holding up a leather jacket to examine it. “The TARDIS landed automatically – the curiosity circuits overrode the linear sprockets. The old girl’s found something amazing and flung herself into an unknown area of time and space and it is up to you and I to get to the bottom of it!”

“Is it?” I asked doubtfully. I never volunteer without knowing what I’m getting in for. Apart from that time it turned out my fairy godfather turned out to be a face-changing alien time traveler with an allergy to landmines.

“Of course it is!” the Doctor replies, flinging a companionable arm around my shoulders. “It wasn’t mere chance that allowed us to arrive here. We’re destined for great things, Raine – great things!” And with that, goes back to trying on coats.

Shaking my head, I move around the console and press the viewer button. The square panel on the wall lights up, showing our new surroundings. Thankfully there’s no sign of that grotty wasteland enlivened by barbed wire and the occasional corpse.

Instead we appear to have landed in the middle some kind of primitive village built into a valley, composed of a mixture stone arches and woven bamboo walls. Upper levels are covered with tent-shapes of canvas and tapestry, and reached by wooden ladders. Murals are painted on the sides of the grassy pathways and everything is bathed in glorious sunshine. The people that I can see all have long hair and necklaces, dressed in loose silken robes resembling brightly-coloured dressing gowns. It looks for all the world like some New Age hippy commune full of

dreamers and disillusioned drop-outs.

Not really my ideal site for rest and recuperation, but after all those soldiers and chaos demons it will make a nice change where the only real danger is a lentil casserole and some dodgy incense candles. Still, I can't for the life of me imagine why anything – let alone the TARDIS – would consider this place amazing.

“Don't suppose that picture rings any bells?” I ask wearily.

The Doctor is more interested in a tatty brown overcoat with camel-hair lining. He spares the viewer a brief glimpse. “Don't know. Can't say I've ever been here before. Definitely not Earth,” he goes on, waving at the console. “Gravity's all wrong. And the radiation level's a bit odd. Or rather, it's getting higher all the time. Still, it'll be quite safe for a good few hours yet. Let's have a gander, and see what it's like!”

Half-inside his afghan coat, he pulls the door lever and strides through the archway and out of the TARDIS. Hot dry air floods through the doorway and I feel as if I've been blasted by a gigantic hairdryer; the last moisture from my shower evaporates. I step out of the police box and see the Doctor hastily pulling off his coat and throwing it back through the door. He pulls a shapeless brown hat from his pocket and puts it on.

“My, this is a bit warm, isn't it?” he asks me, puffing and flushed.

I don't reply right away, looking up at the bright bronze sky ahead. Square kites rather like pillow cases dance from the top of the buildings. I can hear birds shrieking and animals howling in a panic. And... gunshots?

“So we're definitely not going to be met by a bunch of people you've retrospectively arranged to meet us and sort out some disaster or other?” I check.

“Of course not!” he huffs. “No, no, I've had my fill of all these ontological causality loops and bootlace paradoxes. From now on, things are nice and simple and straightforward.”

“HALT!” booms a deep, metallic voice behind us.

We both turn and see, standing beside the TARDIS, is a tall figure dressed in elegant silver armor with a Y-shaped carapace covering its torso and shoulders. The rest of the body is covered with a cross between chain-mail and bubble-wrap, woven in with translucent tubes. The head is a sleek metal helmet shaped like a stylized human head wearing massive headphones. Its face is a polished metal mask with blank holes for eyes and a rhomboid groove for a mouth and jaw. It looks oddly fearsome, like a corpse's face scowling down at me. The voice emerges from a kind of triangular codpiece speaker, but it'll be a long time before I find that as funny as it might seem.

“DO NOT MOVE,” the creature says, advancing towards us. “THE CYBERMEN ARE WILLING TO TRANSFORM YOU. TO MAKE YOU LIKE US. YOU WILL BECOME IMMORTAL, FREE FROM PAIN. EMOTION. DEATH. BECOME LIKE US.”

I look at the Doctor. He’s already got his hands up in surrender. Mind you, so do I.

“Yes, I’ve heard this sales pitch before,” the Doctor says, not as cool and composed as the other Doctor would have been. “Maybe you should save some time and get some pamphlets printed up. What do you want?”

The metal creature looms over us. “THE CONVERSION TECHNOLOGY IS READY AND WAITING. DO YOU ACCEPT THE OFFER OF TRANSFORMATION OF YOUR OWN FREE WILL?”

“I certainly do not!” the Doctor yells up at it. “Do we, Raine?” he adds quickly.

“Well, I don’t want to commit to anything at this early stage, but...”

“REJECTION ACKNOWLEDGED,” declares the robotic figure and turns away from us, heading down the path as if losing interest in us entirely.

The Doctor looks incredulously from between his raised arms. “You mean that’s it?” he asks, puzzled. “You’re just going to accept that and get on with your life? What sort of self-respecting Cyberman are you?”

The Cyberman as the Doctor calls it turns to face us. “TIME IS RUNNING OUT. ONLY THOSE WHO ACCEPT CYBER-CONVERSION WILL BE TAKEN.” With that, it turns and heads off again.

“I take it that’s not normally how they behave?” I ask, lowering my hands.

“You take it correctly, Miss Creevy! Consent’s very low on their list of priorities when they go round turning innocent people into animated tin corpses like themselves!” he tells me, raising his voice so the Cyberman can hear the insult.

I look to the Cyberman. Will it take offense?

The Cyberman, its metal-mesh back to us, stops abruptly.

I tense, ready to run.

And then a limp body plummets from overhead and smashes into the stone pathway right in front of the Cyberman, who simply steps over it and resumes walking as if nothing had happened. It turns around a corner and out of sight.

The Doctor runs over to the body and checks it over; a middle-aged man with a big mane of black hair that makes him look like some heavy metal rock star. He looks dead to me, and I look up to see where he jumped from. There’s an overhanging balcony directly above and next to it is a beam from which hangs a noose, and from the noose hangs another body. The glare of the

sunlight makes it hard to tell if it's a man or a woman, but I can see red words were daubed on a canvas nearby.

Beside me, the Doctor straightens up from the body to follow my gaze, peering up through his ragged fringe. Before I can ask, he is reading out the words which he of course can see perfectly. "'Sorry, had to check out ahead of time.'"

"Why's everyone killing themselves?" I demanded.

"No idea, but if it's that or becoming a Cyberman I say they've made the right decision. What's more puzzling is why the Cybermen are even giving them a choice..."

"The Cybermen can't be that bad, can they?"

"Oh yes," he says gloomily. "In fact, they can be worse. Far worse than Daleks."

"I thought you said there was nothing worse than the Daleks."

"Yes, well obviously I was lying then, wasn't I? Come on!" he grumbles impatiently and hurries on looking for the Cyberman. We head through an open-topped tunnel shaded from the sunshine by interlaced banyan trees, and then onto a balcony overlooking a courtyard. Directly ahead of us, one of the locals is jumping around a hanging garden of bells, beating out a tune in a musical frenzy and hasn't noticed our arrival at all.

It really is quite a performance, leaping around like a spider monkey on amphetamines attacking bells of different weights, sizes and shapes dangling on strings. It's definitely being appreciated by his audience, because in the enclave below is something like an open-air rock festival. It's full of people dancing and cheering and beating the air over their heads. Most of them have shed their robes and some are even naked as they dance and drink and cheer – but I look closer and see some are weeping, others are screaming in rage, more still throwing glitter in the sky. But they're all bouncing up and down to the strange glockenspiel sound that is clearly rave music in this society.

"Is that what the TARDIS detected?" I ask the Doctor. "A bipolar planet."

He frowns. "Most planets are bipolar," he reminds me.

"I'm referring to the fact everyone seems to be either killing themselves or partying..."

"...like it's the end of the world?" the Doctor suggested with a grimace. "Yes, there is something rather apocalyptic about this. I mean, just look at the sky!"

I look up at the glaring golden dome above us. "It's not supposed to look like that?"

"I don't think so," he replies, shaking his head. "It's the middle of the night, for starters."

I refuse to admit how frightened I feel. "Is it something to do with the Cybermen?"

“Of course it’s not!” shouts the carillonneur, and we turn to see he’s actually given up on his performance and looking at us with a slightly deranged fury. “What are you two doing up here? It’s performers only! It’s the end of everything – is it too much to ask for groupies not to wander backstage for the sheer hell of it?”

“Sorry,” the Doctor replies with no hint of apology in his voice. “We’re just passing through. The apocalypse has rather caught us on the hop.”

The bell-ringer stares at us incredulously. “I’m going to be dead very soon and you want me to interrupt my performance to answer stupid questions?!”

“I do apologize,” I say. “But if it’s our last chance to be a nuisance...”

A strange metal howl, like feedback from a microphone rings out. The Doctor, the bell-ringer and myself look down at the dance-pit. Some of the dancers are distracted for a moment, but not longer than that. Standing on a rise overlooking the hedonistic display are a squad of Cybermen, untouched by the blazing heat. Their leader’s helmet has black headphones and when it speaks its voice seems to boom out of an unseen PA system.

“INFORMATION. THIS PLANET’S SUN HAS ENTERED THE FINAL PHASE. AT THIS MOMENT THE STAR IS EXPANDING TOWARDS THIS PLANET AND WILL IMPACT WITHIN THREE STANDARD TIME UNITS. IT CANNOT BE DELAYED OR DIVERTED. TOTAL PLANETARY EXTINCTION WILL OCCUR.”

Not one of the dancers is paying the Cybermen any attention. The leader of the Cybermen swivels to look at the Cybermen on either side, as if unable to believe the lack of reaction. Or maybe checking that none of its subordinates find this funny.

The leader speaks again. I might be imagining it, but the metal voice almost sounds irritated. “THE INHABITANTS OF THE NORTHERN HEMISPHERE HAVE ACCEPTED OUR OFFER OF ASSISTANCE. IT IS LOGICAL TO ABANDON THIS WORLD AND COME WITH US. YOU WILL BE LIKE US. YOU WILL SURVIVE.”

“Is that as creepy as it sounds?” I ask.

“Worse,” says the Doctor bluntly. “That armor they wear is a kind of total-survival framework, improving the weaknesses of the flesh. They don’t need food, oxygen, emotions... Just raw material to plug the gaps in the machine. Those people down there are far wiser than they look to reject the offer.”

“THIS IS YOUR FINAL OPPORTUNITY.” No doubt about it, the Cyberman leader is definitely getting annoyed at the lack of response. “THIS BIOSPHERE WILL BE STERILIZED IN TWO POINT FIVE STANDARD TIME UNITS AND COUNTING. THE CYBERMEN OFFER YOU CONTINUED EXISTENCE. ALL

THOSE WHO REJECT THIS OFFER WILL SUFFER AND DIE.”

I expect it to put its hands on its hips in a huff. But no one's prepared to stop dancing, groping, kissing or sobbing. Which, from the sound of it, they'd have to do on a permanent basis for the rest of eternity if they go with the Cybermen. It all sounds very life-affirming and noble, but I can't quite disagree with these northerners who've decided to take a chance and turn themselves into robo-cops instead.

“MESSAGE ENDS.”

The Cybermen turn on their heels and stride off. They're not sulking, of course not.

“You said they don't often give people a choice,” I remind the Doctor.

“They don't,” he says quickly, almost defensively. “But there are probably only a few dozen Cybermen in this solar system, not nearly enough to conquer a population this size. Given the imminent apocalypse, they assumed that if they just offered the locals the chance to be cyber-converted they'd all automatically agree out of pure logic. They don't have much of an imagination, they never thought people would turn them down.”

“So they're not lying about the supernova?”

“It's not exactly easy to fake. And that would explain the increase in radiation we detected in the TARDIS,” the Doctor says thoughtfully, fanning himself with his hat. “And the suicides. Plenty of people choose to make it quick and clean, die on their own terms instead of waiting for the inferno to catch up with them...”

I find myself understanding that all too well – not being able to stand waiting for oblivion. I wonder if I would have been one of the suicides or down there in the party? I look down again at the writhing mass of sweaty bodies. It should look like some naughty fun, but now I know they're all waiting to die it's an oddly repellent sight.

“So when all the panic runs out and the riots are over, this is all that's left? A shameless, hedonistic carnival for the end of the world?” I sigh.

The bell-ringer glares at us both, thoroughly exasperated. “Oh, listen to her! All right, my lady, given there's an extraordinary super-flare of 100K macro-rads about to kill this biosphere and every living part of it in the next couple of hours what do you think we should be doing?” he challenges me.

Now, I detest being bullied as you know and some bell-jangling insufferable oik just brings out the sadistic streak in me. “You should be doing a darn sight more than drowning out that racket with the noise it makes! Making some kind of effort to survive, seek shelter perhaps? Surely

there must be a cave system or something..."

"Hide in caves?" the bell-ringer repeats.

Suddenly he staggers back, eyes wide and then falls his knees in front of me.

"Oh merciful mother!" he cries, cowering from some holy sight. "I cannot bear to look upon thy countenance, for yours is the true blinding face of pure genius! Don't stay on the surface to perish but shelter beneath it to survive? Oh, the scales have fallen from mine eyes and I see it so clearly now! Oh what misery it must be for you to be compelled to walk amongst mere mortals!"

By this point, he's kissing my feet.

"Could it be that we overlooked so obvious a solution? Or could it be that we, ourselves, decided not to do such a logical and sensible course of action? What possible motive could we have to act so crazy and random? Could some tiny part of our miniscule little minds have thought that the radiation wave will penetrate the planetary crust down to its core, and therefore there are no caves deep enough to shelter within?"

"I *think* he's trying to tell us something," says the Doctor, face twisted in concentration and tweaking his chin. I can't tell if he's being sarcastic.

I can, however, tell that the bell-ringer *is* being sarcastic. "All right, so shelters won't work," I say, gently kicking the groveling local away. "Are you saying that there isn't any way of surviving this? Not a single hope?"

"You want hope?" sneers the bell-ringer, getting to his feet. "Go and pray at the temple in the divine light of the stone sun!"

The Doctor tries and fails to hide his sudden interest. "Is that near here?"

"Cave on other side of the valley. You can't miss it. Or if you can, I don't care."

"Thank you!" says the Doctor. He looks at me cunningly. "A stone sun with divine light? Sounds like the sort of thing that would grab the TARDIS's attention!" He looks back to the bell-ringer. "Do you want to come with us?"

"I can't tell you how much that offer means to me," he says flatly, turning away.

"Look," I blurt out, "we've got a way off planet. You could survive."

"No thanks," he says, heading for his bells to resume the performance.

"You'd rather die on your own?" I say, disbelievingly.

"I won't die alone," he says pedantically. "I'm dying with everyone else."

"Oh, my entire worldview is turned on its head," I say dryly and turn the Doctor. "Shall we go? People too stupid to accept help when offered are probably better out of the gene pool when

all's said and done."

The insult does not, as I hope, prompt the bell-ringer to reconsider. Instead he starts off around his carillon, not sparing us another glance.

We head down the walkway out of this part of the commune. I notice a body sprawled nearby, surrounded by empty bottles. I can't tell if she's dead or just drunk. We pass by and at the next corner is the body of a man, bleeding from the mouth, still alive but probably not for very long. By the time I've seen the lifeless form of a little girl sprawled on the edges of a path, I resolve to stop looking.

Out of this section and into an upper layer with more tents and huts, which seem to be the place to be if you're not dancing in the bacchanalia downstairs. With extinction due at any moment, with now tomorrow and no consequences, everyone seems to have their own idea of how to spend their last moments alive.

We pass a group of men and women, boys and girls of varying ages standing in a semi-circle; a family in solemn prayer over a body lying in the dust. An old man in a white robe daubed with red symbols strides down the hill, waving in evangelical joy. Some kids no more than six years old are knocking back what is obviously hard liquor. Two middle-aged men are beating each other up while a woman runs for her life. Another bunch of young teenagers are smashing up an overturned carriage, beating it in a fury. (I can't help but wince in sympathy for the carriage's owner; I wouldn't want that to happen to my Bentley, that's for certain.) Noises from tents and huts give clear hints of exactly how other denizens are busy spending the rest of their lives.

Mind you, can I judge them? How would I react facing the end of the world – oh what a ridiculous-sounding expression that is! Would I panic as the curtain fell from the fiery heavens? Would I show the best of the Creevys, right to the very end? Would I curl up on the bed and waste the rest of my life cursing the unfairness of it all? And if I did visit all my family, learn those languages, play those musical instruments, what then? As the final precious minutes tick away, like they have been ever since the dawn of time, would I hang on to the very end, clinging to every scrap of life left? Or choose to go out with some panache, avoid the common Armageddon for something more personal?

It's hard to concentrate on a train of thought in this dazzling not-daylight sunshine. At last we reach the edges of the community, with arid scrubland with the trees and bushes petering off in all directions. This civilization is a vast oasis in the middle of an even vaster desert. On the horizon fires are burning, so fierce I can't even tell if it's some kind of bushfire or maybe another

village that's ablaze. Looking back the way we came, it's now clear the village is all but deserted. Did they take the Cybermen up on their offer? Or have they run off somewhere to hide?

At that moment the booming toneless voice of the Cybermen rings out through the lightly-sizzling air, rolling out across the sky. "INFORMATION. THE SUPERNOVA IS IMMINENT. ALL CYBER FORCES ARE NOW DEPARTING. WE HAVE CHOSEN TO SURVIVE. YOU HAVE CHOSEN EXTINCTION. MESSAGE ENDS."

The Doctor snorts. "Good riddance."

In the distance there is a whirl of turbines. A squad rhomboid shape – like a gigantic silver warehouse with go-faster stripes – lifts up from the horizon and hurtles up into the hot glare of the sky. In moments, there's no sign it was ever here.

"Maybe we should be leaving now," I suggest, breaking the silence. "I mean, of even these Cybermen don't think it's safe to stick around any more..."

"Don't be so wet, Raine!" He giggles stupidly. "You see what I did there?"

I give him a look. Some of his sobriety rather wisely returns.

"Anyway, for the Cybermen to get out of range they have to leave now. We've got a good half hour left easily. And we're at the cave. Come on!"

And of course we are. In the hillside directly ahead of us is a rough and unnatural-looking entrance, rather like an enormous bullet hole in the landscape than some natural formation. It certainly doesn't look like any religious types have been here in a while.

Not too far away I can hear a teenage girl in hysterics, screaming that she's so scared and she doesn't want to die. I look back and see a huddled shape bent over a kind of jigsaw with triangular pieces – it's barely half-done. She won't live long enough to finish it.

"Doctor – what will happen when the supernova hits?" I ask.

"They'll put the clocks forward," the Doctor mutters. "What do you think will happen? Imagine an orange being peeled. That's what it'll be like. Except the peel is fire, ripping away everything on the surface and exposing what's underneath."

"Will they suffer?"

"Not for long," the Doctor says. "These firestorms are incredibly fast – by the time anyone's nervous system will realize they're melting, the rest will already have been vaporized. I want to say they won't know what hit them, but they clearly do."

"And there's nothing they can do?"

"Even if anything survives being scoured by the heat the atmosphere will be blown away. It'll

be a burnt-out, lifeless husk of rocky radioactive wastelands. And that's assuming the planet doesn't flat out boil away into space."

I swallow my rising nausea. "Have you seen it happen before?"

"Seen it? I've caused it once or twice. It's very quiet," he adds softly. "Like a duster wiping a blackboard clean. All the buildings and mountains and oceans and people and plants and animals... all just crumbling away in near-silence. Not with a bang but a whisper. The faint crackle of dying embers, the sighing wind..."

"Sound almost romantic."

"Oh, it looks good," the Doctor assures me, then adds, "from a distance."

"And there's no help we can offer these people?" I asked hopelessly.

"Such as? I mean, I'd love to save them all but I don't see how – even if everyone was in the right state of mind for a mass evacuation, even if the Cybermen don't get in the way, there's not enough time to get everyone into the TARDIS and away."

We're at the cave mouth now, and out of the stifling sunlight. It's cooler here but not noticeably darker. The cave is lit with a dancing light, probably some incense burner or some-such. The Doctor drops nimbly through the entrance and I follow.

Well, can't you go back and set up everything to do just that like you always do?

I've hardly met this man and I can tell when he's rolling his eyes when he's facing away from me. "Firstly, Raine, I am a new man and that predestinative playing chess on a thousand boards business no longer appeals. Secondly, if I was going to do that, wouldn't we have arrived here with everyone packed and ready to go?"

Good point. "Oh," I say out aloud, not having much to add.

"This is something even a Time Lord can't prepare for."

"That's not a reassuring answer."

Despite the crumbling cave-mouth, this is definitely a temple. The circles and hemispheres that seem to define architecture on this world are in abundance, like some half-finished piece of Swiss cheese made out of sandstone. Not the best analogy I've made but this acrid sweltering claustrophobia is really rather distracting. Especially when I know it's not going to improve ever again.

The light source I noticed earlier is a soft glow, coming from a large irregular-looking emerald sitting atop a stone pillar. There's no cage or security; clearly it's an object of great reverence or zero value, because no one is expecting it to be stolen. I don't know if all the emeralds on this

planet have that dull glow... I can't quite work out what colour the glow is, it's like the rainbow gleam of an oil-slick swimming across the jewel. Was it an emerald? It certainly seems golden now, like amber...

I blink rapidly. I don't know if the gemstone is hypnotic or it's just heatstroke, but I need to stay lucid enough to get out of this alive. I look to the Doctor, staring into the fiery depths of that crystal, his new face enthralled.

"What is it?" I ask, my voice sounding oddly feeble in the quiet.

"A Cyressandri Lattice," he replies. "Which is very different to Cyressandri Lettuce, which is lovely on brown bread with ham, tomato, cheese and wholegrain mustard. These crystals were the ultimate creation of whole realities far greater and older than even the Time Lords. I thought they'd all been destroyed long ago, with the empire that used them but apparently not. You learn something new every day."

"What does it do?"

"Anything and everything you can think of. This crystal resonates on the frequency of the universe itself. Alter the crystal frequency, and you alter the universe. The way things were, the way they are, the way they can be..."

"Like a genie in a magic lamp?"

"Just, but unlimited wishes and none of that fiddly polishing required."

"And it's just lying here and no one's used it?" I ask doubtfully

"Well, it's a precision instrument, Raine. Very dangerous unless you know exactly what you're doing – it could reduce the mightiest race in the galaxy to a band of homeless nomads, which is actually what happened to them. Reduced plenty more to less than legends or myths. The trick is not to disturb the balance and equilibrium, otherwise the turmoil from the result could destroy everything..."

"But no one here has even tried to use it to stop the sun exploding?"

The Doctor steeples his fingers beneath his chin. "Well, the crystal can do that with no problem. But it's not as if we can just ask it politely. You need a very complicated quasi-transdimensional interface to do that."

My eyes widen. "Something like the TARDIS perchance?" I ask lightly.

The Doctor nods, and then it hits him and he looks at me. "Yes! Of course! We use the TARDIS to program the crystal to disperse the firestorm and save everyone!"

I look down at the swirling depths of the crystal. "And what do we do with it then?" I ask,

unsure if I'm understanding this correctly. If what the Doctor says is true, we're being given the powers of all gods combined on a platter.

"Well, put it in a plant pot or something I suppose," he shrugs in answer. "Oh, you mean with the power to remake all of creation down to our every sordid whim? I've no idea. We should probably write down some sort of list..."

The strange pulsing from the lattice accelerates, casting weird shadows across the room. There is a noise from outside, like a volcano rumbling directly overhead. A burst of scalding wind blows through the cave entrance.

"Perhaps we should worry about this after we save the world," the Doctor suggests quickly. "Fancy legging it back to the TARDIS with this crystal of all-power?"

"I thought you'd never ask!" I reply.

The crystal isn't so much heavy but awkward and it takes both of us to carry it to the exit. Through the entrance, I can see the clouds smeared across the glowing night sky are pulsing with heat, ready to ignite in all the lightning storms crackling across the sky.

A bird falls out of the sky and dropped to the ground in front of us. I stare down at it; it is beautiful, as much butterfly as parakeet and it twitches as it dies. I've always had a soft-spot for animals, but somehow this innocent creature's death seems so much more immediate than the apocalypse breathing down our necks.

A young man and a boy wave desperately to us, calling for us to come and help them with something urgent. It could be a trap of some kind, or a genuine plea for assistance but either way it is ignored and we move on. Maybe we'll be able to come back after we've saved them from this unavoidable destruction, when we've got control over nature again and there are suddenly options left to take...

Holding the crystal with one hand, I take a chance to wipe the sheen of perspiration from my brow. I can't quite believe how fast the temperature has risen while we were in there. I can smell the sweat dripping off the dancers at the carnival, like the air itself is starting to boil around us as we stumble back to the village.

It's so hard to breathe, and I'm not much of a runner at the best of times. But I get the feeling time is blissfully unaware that it's running out.

It's raining by the time we reach the TARDIS, a lazy drizzle like droplets of lukewarm tea that seem to be evaporating even as they fall from above. I can't see any rain clouds, just the billowing black

smoke from the spreading fires.

And above that a kind of aurora borealis in broad daylight, all muddy browns and reds as it snakes through the sky. There's no music or bell-ringing now, just a background clamor of panicky screams. The brightness overhead reflects on the spray, making everything misty and unreal.

Once we're through the police box doors, it's like waking up from an unpleasant dream. Everything seems solid and safe and deliciously cool in compassion. "Goodness, this place really needs some redecorating, doesn't it?" the Doctor says, looking around the TARDIS with freshly-regenerated eyes as the outer doors whirr closed.

"Oh yes, let's focus on the décor rather than the impending immolation!"

"Ah yes, of course!" he says briskly and hurries over to the console. We put the crystal on the flat work-surface encircling the control desk and the Doctor wrenches out some wires and cables, attaching them to the gemstones by what look like bent paperclips.

"So if we control this thing, we can do whatever we want?"

"Oh yes," he says absently, busy with the fiddly work. "You just need to have a full understanding of cause and effect. The want of a nail and the war was lost and all that, otherwise you could end up wiping yourself from existence..."

"But that aside..."

"Yes, we can do anything. Reality is clay in our hands – we can undo wars, bring people back to life, get rid of parasitic wasps and the like." He stops abruptly. "Mind you, we'd have to be terribly responsible. All power corrupts."

"Can't we just change that too?"

He stares at me. "Good idea! Besides, we can't let this fall into the wrong hands. And our hands might be the wrong hands, but at least we worry that our hands are the wrong hands, which means our hands are better than the wrong hands. Speaking of hands, Raine, put yours out for me."

I do so. "What is it?"

Still peering at the crystal, he pulls out a lump-hammer from his jacket pocket and then slams it straight down onto my unprotected fingers with a hideous crunch. I scream, not feeling the pain at first as the bones crack...

"And... hay presto!" the Doctor yells.

My fingers are fine. My hands are undamaged. There's no pain at all.

You understand that for a thoroughly-competent safe cracker and cat burglar like myself,

having fully-functional digits is vital. Mind you, I could be flipping burgers in some greasy fast food chain and still be disinclined to have my extremities crushed.

The Doctor grins idiotically at me. “You see? From now on, we choose what is cause and effect! Jack the Ripper can become an advocate for women’s rights! The Tasmanian Tiger never goes extinct! I could even change things so I didn’t regenerate from treading on that stupid landmine! The possibilities are endless...”

My attention’s gone back to the external scanner, which is flashing with rusty lightning. A searing hot gale is blowing through the village, sending junk and debris flying and wind chimes rattling. The pools and fountains are bubbling slightly with steam. I can imagine the planet outside on fire, herds of animals fleeing in panic, children crying for their parents... every living thing burning alive.

“We should really stop this, Doctor!” I remind him.

He holds up a hand. “Already on it, Raine. The apocalypse will now be canceled...” He fiddles with the console controls for a minute, then his face falls. He rechecks the displays and looks at me gravely. “Oh dear.”

“What is it?”

He runs a hand through his wild curls. “Well, at it’s simplest, this crystal needs a power source to function, yes? But it takes power not from electricity or radiation, but a historical event. The historical event we’re in right here, right now.”

“You mean, the supernova?”

“The supernova destroying this planet and everything on it! The chain reaction, the multiple probabilities colliding, total event collapse... that’s what activated this crystal, why the TARDIS homed in on it. Without the destruction of everything outside, the crystal has no power to realign the universe!”

“So we can’t stop the firestorm?”

He shrugs, disinterestedly. “Well, I suppose if we crank the TARDIS up to full throb it might be able to bridge the gap – but after that, the crystal’s just a paperweight.”

I feel myself sagging slightly as well. It’s like learning someone else has got to the magic lamp before you have. I won’t be able to get daddy back after all... I shake my head, refusing to be distracted. “Well, we’ll just have to do it anyway!”

“Yes, yes, you’re right,” the Doctor says, flipping switches. “We must put the needs of the many over the needs of the few. Just think about how happy everyone out there will be once the

world stops ending...”

“Yes,” I agree. “I’m sure they’ll be delighted. Well, apart from the fact all their friends and family are either dead or Cybermen and it was all for nothing. And they’re not exactly going to have much fun rebuilding civilization starting tomorrow...”

“No,” the Doctor says bleakly. “And the Cybermen will have all those new converts. They can easily invade the planet now to take up all the survivors they’ve missed. Those people out there won’t have a chance of stopping them.”

“Well, we’ll stop them, won’t we?”

“How?” he asks. “It’s not like we’d have a super-duper reality-warping crystal, is it?”

I can’t believe what I’m hearing, even when I’m the one talking. “Well, we can’t just sacrifice this world for the greater good, can we?”

“Is it sacrifice?” the Doctor wonders. “We didn’t ask for this, we didn’t trigger a supernova – mind you, I have actually done that before. But if we didn’t even arrive here, this planet would still burn, wouldn’t it? The Cybermen would still have their new army, wouldn’t they? We’re only really choosing whether to make the best of it.”

“But if we just let them barbecue when we could have stopped it...”

“I know, I know,” he says placatingly, and goes back to the controls. “It’s just I can’t see this place having much of a future even without the solar flares – but I can imagine the rest of the universe getting the benefit. Probably just post-regenerative, er, stuff.”

Everything on the viewer screen is now a hellish shade of dark, fiery red. Sizzling sparks are floating out of the sky like red-hot snowflakes. It seems to be getting darker, yet also brighter at the same time.

“Well?” I ask the Doctor.

He nods to the console. “One button. Press that, this planet is saved. Or I could hit the dematerialization switch, get us out of danger and we can start using this novelty lump quartz to deal with the Cybermen and improve everything.”

“It’s that easy?” I ask doubtfully.

“Well, not morally, perhaps. But yes, button or switch. That bit’s easy.”

“You’re not seriously considering it, are you?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” he replies warily. “Are you?”

“I asked first.”

“I asked best. I mean, I always try to do the good thing, that benefits the greatest amount of

people. But which is the greater amount of people? All the locals out there about to die? Or everyone else in the universe, past present and future? Should we really ignore what's better for the majority because we can't bear to see the minority suffer?"

"Well..." I begin to say, then stop. "That is a bit of a stumper, I must admit."

"I know," he nods furiously. "Maybe we should toss a coin?"

"It seems a bit flippant with all those lives at stake..."

"I suppose so. Oh, if only we had more time to decide..."

We turn, as one, back to the viewer. We can see a cloud of fire on the horizon looking like something right of hell, an all-consuming burning blackness with veins of pulsing blood. Words won't do this wave of death justice, there is no language that can describe the bright atomic frenzy burning closer and closer through the seething atmosphere.

"We have to make a decision right now," I insist.

"Indeed," he agrees firmly.

"What do you think we *shouldn't* do?"

"Well, I was actually going to ask you the same question, actually..."

What did we decide?

As if you need to ask!

We made the right decision, of course.