



## THE GREAT NOVEL(la) OF DOOM(ish)

by Aron Toman

### Prologue

Once upon a time.

*“No, no, no”, he says to himself irritably. “That won’t do at all. I mean, can you say ‘cliché’ any clearer?”*

*He stares at the blank piece of paper, willing it to produce the best response for him. Perhaps some divine intervention will come down from above (or below, he’d take offers from anywhere these days) and give him the perfect opening. Something truly wondrous and inspiring to begin the adventure. That’ll set the tone of the story perfectly, hook the readers in and keep them hooked until they get to the last page, at which point they will pause for breath, before returning to the beginning to repeat the process. And so on and so forth until the book is suddenly considered the most perfect piece of prose ever created.*

*All in that first, perfect opening. No wonder he’s having difficulty.*

*The Doctor gives the page another extra long hard look, glaring at it, daring it to give him inspiration. A quote? A character? An action? A band of evil ninjas ready to chop whomever they see into itty bitty little pieces without rhyme or reason?*

*“You know, this wasn’t anywhere near as hard when I was helping old Bill out all those years ago. Just get portentous and write about taking slings and arms against outrageous forces, tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, and so on. But that was different – Shakespeare’s supposed to be portentous. I’m writing for me.”*

*The Doctor takes another attempt at a start...*

It was a dark and stormy night

*...and instantly screws up the piece of paper he wrote on. He then proceeds to bash his head on the desk. Then again. Then again. Then again.*

*“You know, that can’t be healthy.”*

*The Doctor looks up and sees Astra walking into the room. “Bashing your head on the table. You know, I swear that’s how the Computer got the way she is.”*

*“She bashed her head on a table?”*

*“No, somebody kept bashing a table onto her. Whatcha doin’?”*

*The Doctor gestured to the ever-growing pile of scrunched up paper around him. "NaNoWriMo."*

*"Bless-you."*

*"Funny. National Novel Writing Month. Every year, a whole lot of people get together and write an entire fifty thousand word novel in a month."*

*"What, one novel? Can't be too hard, get fifty thousand people together, each of them writes one word, bingo, one novel."*

*The Doctor pauses for a moment.*

*"Not one novel together, everybody does their own individual ones."*

*"And despite your insanely busy and crazy lifestyle, you decided to sign up for it?" Astra says.*

*"I figured I've had more than enough spare time recently. And even though I'm technically three-hundred and twelve years, five months late for the one I signed up for, what's time in a time machine?" He looks back down at his blank piece of paper before him. "I just wish I could work out how to start it."*

*Astra sighs, then bends down to pick up the latest piece of screwed-up paper, and gives it a quick examination. "So, what's wrong with this one?"*

*"It's an irritating cliché" says the Doctor. "Do you know how many stories start with an opening like that?"*

*Astra shrugs. "Well, sometimes when you have to write, a good cliché can be useful. Besides, you have to get fifty thousand words written in thirty days, I don't think you can afford to waste time with muttering over clichés."*

*The Doctor reaches over and takes back the scrunched up opening. "So you think I should use this one then?"*

*"Why not? Is there anything in the rules of this-" she pauses, deliberately making sure she pronounces it right in her head "- NaNoWriMo that says you can't get help from someone else?"*

*The Doctor thinks for a moment. "No, I don't think so. There is a rule that says you -"*

*"Right, then. I'm helping" and before the Doctor can protest, Astra grabs a chair from over the other side of the room, unceremoniously dumps the technicolour coat and the excessively long scarf slouched on it onto the floor, and places herself onto it beside the Doctor, staring intently. "We could be the next, umm, umm, I just realised, I can't think of any famous two-part writing teams"*

*"Pip and Jane Baker?"*

*"Please don't use that language in front of me" says Astra. She taps at the paper, impatiently. "Come on, what are you waiting for? You've got your opening, now for the next line."*

*The Doctor gives Astra a Look. "This is going to be one of those things where I try and have fun on my own, and you interfere and annoy me isn't it?"*

*"Looks like. Are you writing or not?"*

*The Doctor sighs. What on Gallifrey is he opening himself up for, he thinks. Never mind, it can't be helped, he decides, as he opens a fresh sheet of paper, dips his quill into the inkpot and begins the story.*

*Astra coughs. "Umm, Doctor? You've misspelt "dark"."*

## **Chapter One – Travellers and Trucks**

It was a dark and stormy night. Or at least, it was as dark and as stormy as the time-space vortex was likely to get. In fact, you could probably describe it as being constantly dark and always stormy, as various time streams and continuities thrashed and bashed together in an insane and apparently illogical fashion, pushing chronovores, time ships and any unfortunates who had accidentally slipped through the cracks between the now and the now through twists and turns and utterly unpredictable directions through the

*“Doctor, you’re rambling.”*

*“Sorry. But hey, it boosts the word count.”*

*“But I’m getting bored, get to the point already.”*

But one time ship had a very definite view on where and when it was supposed to travel to. It’s pilot was an expert at handling it, as spun its way down them temporal highways. With its light above it flashing rhythmically with the pulse of time, a wheezing groaning echoing through the corridors of history, the ship faded from view, heading towards its intended destination. Earth, London, November 3, 2013.

Almost as soon as the ship wheezed into existence on the asphalt, the door swung open to reveal a cheerful face about to step out into a new world. Almost immediately following this, the door slammed closed, to avoid the hover car whizzing past it. It screamed abuse at whomever had landed there, as did the next one, and the next one, and the one after that.

Which, as any bystander could tell you, is the likely result when you land a TARDIS in the middle of an intersection in a time zone known for its high speeds and crazy driving. The TARDIS’s owner poked his head out of the ship carefully, wondering how he was going to get out of this one.

Thankfully, the lights changed, and half of the cars ground to a halt as bemused pedestrians crossed the road, trying very hard not to notice the time machine suddenly sitting in the middle. The time traveller used his chance to race across the road and onto the curb, hoping his ship wouldn’t be too badly harmed sitting where it was.

“Excuse me, mister” came a small voice beside him. That’s all I need, he thought, someone’s actually got the courage to ask about the TARDIS. Or his unusual clothes, either one, he didn’t really want to have to deal with that today.

“Umm, yes?” he asked, resigned to the fact that if he didn’t respond, the kid wouldn’t go away.

“Is that yours, that box out there?”

The time traveller sighed. He knew it. “Yes, I’m afraid it is. Why?”

“Well, aren’t you worried it’s going to get smashed to pieces?”

Despite himself, the traveller smiled. “Oh, I don’t think so. I think you’ll find it’s indestructible.”

“Really?” the kid had a coy smile on. He couldn’t be much older than about eighteen, probably playing hooky from his exams or some such. He pointed. “Then you shouldn’t be worried about the truck barrelling down the hill at it then.”

They watched, as a huge milk truck rolled down the hill at a speed both of them knew shouldn't be allowable for a vehicle of that size. It sped down the hill, its horn blasting over and over, but there was nothing either of them could do. It went through the box like it was cardboard, breaking it apart with ease. There was a blast of light that came from within it as its shell burst open, dazzling everyone with its brightness, before vanishing completely, leaving a very few pieces of shrapnel around.

The truck, blinded by the light, swerved across the road and collided with another car or two, sending them through a shop window. Alarms blasted, sirens wailed, but most people stood about in shock for a second, before leaping into action, calling ambulances, police and anybody else who might be necessary to deal with something like this.

Only the traveller and the kid stood quietly for a moment longer, examining the damage.

"Indestructible, eh?" said the kid eventually.

The traveller gaped. "Well, it was rather old. I guess it couldn't take as much as I thought it could."

"And what was that whole fireworks thing?"

"Oh, just the remaining artron energy dissipating into the atmosphere. Shame about the mess."

"Uh-uh" The kid turned to the traveller. "You might want to get away from here, the police will be around any minute and might want to ask you some questions. I know a place I can hide you out at too."

The traveller blinked. "Oh? And why would you, a complete stranger, be willing to help me out, considering the carnage I seem to have caused?"

The kid shrugged. "I'm not too fond of the police myself, or at least they're not too fond of me. Besides, you look like a priest or something, and I always heard it's good to be nice to priests."

The traveller laughed. "Oh yes, my attire. Well, I'm not so much a priest, more a monk. Which is what you can call me, I suppose, the Monk."

The kid held his hand out. "Not bad. I'm used to dealing with titles. They call me Kid."

"My, how appropriate. As in the case of 'Billy the' or"

"Nah, just Kid. My parents weren't particularly original, at least not with the sixth baby. You should hear what my little sister was called."

The Monk chuckled. "Well then, Kid, I suggest we take up your offer and adjourn to a more appropriate location before the authorities begin to request we assist them with their enquiries, as it were."

Kid shrugged. "Yeah, but I think we'd be better off getting out of here before the cops get us. I got a place, are you coming?"

The Monk smiled, then laughed. "By all means. Lead the way, Kid, lead the way!"

*"Wow," says Astra, "like you couldn't see that one coming."*

*"You thought I was writing about me, didn't you?"*

*"Oh, by the Spirit, no, you went on for way too long with the whole "the time traveller" bit, it couldn't possibly have been you, otherwise what would be the point. Oh, and I don't buy the whole 'TARDIS destroyed by big speeding truck' bit either."*

*The Doctor grins. "You never know, I might resolve it later."*

*"And great originality, calling the kid 'Kid'. That's what I call inspiration."*

*"Thank you."*  
*"That was sarcasm, by the way."*  
*"Yes, thank you, I got that."*  
*"Good."*  
*"Shall we get back to the story now?"*  
*"Please, let's."*

Kid's place wasn't anything to write home about, the Monk decided. Not that home is anywhere that the Monk would be willing to write to at the moment, but that was irrelevant. As somebody who had lived in the absolute best Gallifreyan accommodation available, near presidential standards, this was utterly despicable in comparison. But still, he reasoned, if you've lived in one of those Gallifreyan monasteries, you can live anywhere.

It wasn't really what you could call a home, technically, more like a hole in a wall about three blocks from the accident. Some leftovers from a forgotten construction site, a half-made office building or some such. A concrete floor, covered only by a thin rug as insulation, a few pillows in various places, a sleeping bag in the corner, and (in an attempt at some ambient lighting, no doubt) a stand-up lamp glowing to itself in the corner. Where he got electricity from, the Monk had no idea, but it was enough to be just liveable in. Though where he got most of these things, he didn't really want to think about.

Certainly not playing hooky then. At least, in the sense that you can't play hooky from school when you don't actually go.

"So," said Kid, after a few moments, "what do you think?"

The Monk paused before giving his answer. How should he react? Tell him what he thinks, or actually be nice? He opted for a point somewhere mid-way.

"Umm, it's very Spartan."

"Gee thanks" said Kid, glumly. Obviously he'd had some education, if he knew Greek history that well. "You try doing better with no job or no money"

"No, no, it's quite nice" said the Monk, strolling around to get a better feel for the place. "Just not exactly what I'm accustomed to."

"There's a kitchen of sorts out the back there." The Monk peered through the dim light and noticed the half-finished doorway for the first time, going into darkness.

"Whatever they were building here before they gave up, they'd already installed the water system. It's not much, but there's a bathtub, a sink for washing and if you can find a cup somewhere, you can get water on tap."

"I see," said the Monk. "And I see you have electricity."

"Yeah, not much though. Too much more than the odd lamp or kettle on at once and whomever has to pay their bills might get suspicious."

"Very ingenious" the Monk mused, giving the lamp a close examination. "Of course, it is totally unacceptable."

Kid snorted. "Well, if you don't like it, find somewhere else to stay then, I don't care."

"Oh, not for me, I meant totally unacceptable for you."

"Huh?"

The Monk spun around and looked at Kid square in the face. "You're a bright, resourceful lad, as your set up here indicates, you're worth so much more than this rather ordinary and, may I say, primitive lifestyle. I'll wager you go hungry most nights than not, yes?"

Kid shrugged. "Sometimes."

“Then allow me to help you with that. You could be so much more, Kid. Why not try for it?”

Kid laughed. “You, help me?”

“Yes, why not?”

“Because going by your fancy dress costume, you don’t seem much better off than I am. And considering you looked like you lived in that box that’s now scattered across Piccadilly, no offence, but I doubt you can help me.”

The Monk gave a coy smile. “You’d be surprised.”

“Yeah? Well I’ll think about it.” Kid said it in a tone that suggested if he did think about it, it would be a passing thought if that. “Meanwhile, I’ve had one of those days, and I think I’ll go take a bath.”

“Do you get hot water?”

“Sometimes.”

“You know, if I help you, you’ll always have hot water.”

Kid rolled his eyes and strode towards the bathroom. “Yeah, yeah, yeah.” He slid his jacket and T-shirt off (revealing a lean, athletic torso, suggesting an active lifestyle) and dumped them on the floor near the door. He stepped into the darkness beyond and effectively disappeared. A moment later, the Monk could hear the sound of running water and steam drifting out of the doorway.

The Monk smiled to himself and decided to sit down on the sleeping bag and wondered what poor Kid did to amuse himself when he wasn’t out ‘making a living’ as it were. There was no television that he could see, unless it was in the bathroom, just the light, the sleeping bag, the pillows and – oh yes, the Monk thought, a pile of books in the corner.

“Definitely not a dummy” said the Monk to himself, as he crawled across the concrete to the pile and had a quick look at them. They weren’t exactly the books you’d expect a young lad like Kid to be reading, very occult in style, a range from Stephen King to a rather old copy of *The Demonic Eradication Chronicles: 1762-1801*.

“How very curious,” muttered the Monk to himself.

“Oh, yes, very curious,” came a voice from behind him. It wasn’t Kid, it was too old, but one quick glance from the Monk told him exactly who it was.

It was him. Looking insubstantial, transparent even, and he’d obviously regenerated a few times since he last saw him, but with most certainly the Doctor. And he wasn’t pleased.

“So you thought you could step back into history again, did you?” the apparition said, every word dripping with menace.

“D-Doctor?” the Monk said incredulously. “It’s not possible, you can’t be –”

“Oh, but I am!” said the spectre. “You made a vow, and you haven’t kept it. Time to pay the price!” And the image grew, became larger and fiercer, until it dominated the small room.

And the Monk screamed.

## **Chapter Two – Pythia Pox**

The Doctor glared with an angry intensity. Then he sneezed with a ferocious intensity. “Ahhhh-chooo!”

“Bless you,” said Destina calmly.

The Doctor wiped his nose. “Othering Omega, I hate being sick!”

“And we hate you being sick. Open up.”

The Doctor dutifully opened his mouth and let Destina put a thermometer in his mouth. He sat there glumly for a moment, mentally daring his companions to say something, anything, that would be enough to rip the small object out of his mouth and fling it across the room at them. It wouldn’t achieve much, but it might relieve some of the stress.

It was Frobisher who ended up saying something. With a coy grin on that stupid beak of his, he said “So, Nurse Destina, does the Doc need to see a Doctor?”

“Eut ut Obie-er!” the Doctor muttered.

“Eh? Sorry, didn’t catch that.”

“He said ‘Shut up, Frobisher’” said Destina still quietly. “Ok, you can open your mouth again now.”

The Doctor let his draw drop and Destina removed the little metal piece of torture equipment (well it was! After all, don’t you always feel sicker after using one?) and held it up to the light, gazing at it intently. After a moment of tense anticipation she sighed, and placed it down on the table.

“So?” asked the Doctor, before sneezing again. “What’s the diagnosis?”

“You’ve got a fever. Sixty-eight to seventy, going by that piece of primitive measuring equipment down there.”

“Why?” asked Frobisher. “What’s normal?”

“Sixty” came Destina’s response. “He’s not a healthy little chappie.”

The Doctor rolled his eyes. “Enough with the patronizing and tell me what I’ve got.”

Destina sighed. “Well, I can’t be too sure, you being the one who’s the Doctor and all, and me being the one who, well, isn’t, but it looks like you’ve got the classic symptoms of Pythia Pox.”

“What?” asked the Doctor. “Ahhh-chooo! Sorry, what do you mean? I can’t have that, surely?”

Destina nodded. “I know, I know, it’s generally not seen in adult Gallifreyans, especially at your age. Usually everyone gets it out of their systems while they’re Time Tots. You, obviously didn’t.”

“But that’s just it, I’m sure I had it” said the Doctor. “Actually, I’m pretty sure I’ve had it on more than one occasion. Ahhh-choo!”

As Destina handed him a tissue, Frobisher asked “So, this Pythia Pox, is it serious?”

Destina shook her head. “Oh no, it’s just like a standard influenza, just native to Gallifrey. Just an ordinary childhood disease, nothing to be concerned about.”

“That’s what I thought about my monomorphia,” said Frobisher. “It’s not fun.”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you” said the Doctor stifling another sneeze. He wasn’t successful. “Ahhhhh-chooo. Right, that’s it, there’s only one way I can think of to deal with this sort of thing.” He swung his legs up onto the bench he was sitting on and lay flat on his back.

Destina looked on in dismay. “A complete coma?”

The Doctor looked at her. “And why not? It works with most other sicknesses I’ve had. About twenty-four hours ought to do it.”

“And you do this all the time?”

“Of course” the Doctor nodded. “Sorts me out in no time. If you two could just amuse yourselves for a while until I’m better, then –“

Destina rolled her eyes. “Well no wonder why you’re still getting the Pox when you’re so old, you’ve never got it out of your system. You can’t just go into a coma with this one, you have to ride it out, let it work its way through your lungs and hearts. A coma just sends it back down deeper into yourself.”

The Doctor stared at Destina for a moment. “Rubbish, it’s always worked before.”

“No, it’s just suppressed it before. And all you’ll be doing is suppressing it again if you go into a coma now.”

The Doctor pouted. “But I hate being sick! This is a quick way out.”

Frobisher, still sitting in his corner, laughed at this. “You, finding the quick way out? You, who once upon a time used to formulate obnoxiously complex traps and plans to get rid of the bad guys when very basic simple ones would have done? Ha!”

“Well, that was several regenerations ago, I’m literally a different Doctor now. And I much prefer to take the easy way out. I miss singing my karaoke, and I can’t when I have a sore throat!”

Destina grinned. “Well, lets be thankful for small mercies then, it can be a rest for all of us. Now, drink this, it might soothe the pain a bit.” She held up a glass of something red and sugary looking.

The Doctor looked at it for a moment. “You know, I’ve found a spoonful of sugar has always helped the medicine –“

“Just shut up and drink it,” said Destina with a forcefulness that surprised herself, making the Doctor take the glass and drink it without question. Once he’d emptied it, Destina took it back from him and placed it on the table. “Now, as your unofficial doctor, Doctor, I am prescribing bed rest. But no coma. A coma is not of the good, understand?”

The Doctor sighed, then nodded.

“And if I come back in here and find you’re mysteriously comatose, I will wake you up, and as you know, being a Time Lord myself, I am very familiar with how to wake you up without killing you, but to cause you as much pain as possible, get it?”

The Doctor nodded again, too shocked to respond. Frobisher, however, wasn’t.

“Well, go Destina, way to take charge!”

“Shut up, Frobisher, don’t get me started on you. Now, lets let the Doctor have his rest, we’ll be right outside if you need us.” She started leading Frobisher away to the door. “And I want to hear more about this monomorphia of yours...”

“What, oh, it’s nothing, just something I had a while back, hey, you’ve got that evil glint in your eyes, stop that, don’t think I can’t see it...”

As his two companions left the room and closed the door, the Doctor sighed and rolled down onto his back again, staring at the roundelled ceiling. No coma, he told himself. “A coma is not of the good.”



He sighed again. Destina was right, he'd just have to ride out the sickness, get rid of it from his body, rather than suppress it as normal. And with nothing much going on at present, there really wasn't a better time to do so.

It didn't mean he'd have to enjoy it, though.

*"Doctor, I don't remember Destina being quite that forceful."*

*"Well..."*

*"I mean, I know I didn't meet her for very long, but you've got her here as a super-great wondrous Doctor-slapping bitch monster of death, when I saw her as more as a wet tissue."*

*The Doctor sighs. "Well, you never saw her true nature, she had a lot of inner strength and, umm, stuff. And... and, alright, I'm embellishing a bit, I mean, who wants to read about some wet tissue, hmm?"*

*"And while I'm in a complaining mood, why have you dodged the cliff-hanger?"*

*"It's a narrative device, called misdirection. Letting the audience build up tension with a scene they don't want to hear while waiting for the one they do."*

*"That's not what misdirection is, and you know it. And I suspect you just have no idea how to resolve that cliff-hanger either."*

*"I do too!"*

*Astra scoffs. "You do not. You've got no idea how to get him out of it."*

*"I really do, it's easy."*

*"Alright then – prove it!"*

*"Fine!"*

Meanwhile, in another part of the universe, the Monk was facing a giant apparition version of the Doctor, laughing evilly over him. Suddenly, with a flash, the Monk found he was standing in the shower of his own TARDIS once again.

"Oh, goodness me!" he said to himself. "It must have all been a dream."

*Astra hits him – hard. "That's cheating."*

*"It is, since when?"*

*"Since always. It was annoying when Dallas did it, and it's just as annoying now."*

*"It wasn't annoying in The Wizard Of Oz!"*

*"Yes it was, just ask all those fans of the books. Dream sequences are bad."*

*"Well can you think of any better solutions?"*

*"I can think of about sixty better solutions. Any solution is better than 'he woke up and it was all a dream'."*

*"Well if you're going to start forcing me to resolve cliff-hangers..."*

*Astra holds out her hand. "Ok, give me the quill."*

*"What?"*

*"You're obviously proving yourself inadequately able to use it properly, so I'm going to take over."*

*"Hey, whose story is this anyway?"*

*"Not yours, if you start doing stupid things like reboots."*

*"Alright, alright, fine, I'll do it properly."*

*"Good. See that you do."*

Kid sat in his bath and soaked up the warm hot-watery goodness. He was lucky to have hot water today, he decided, it was a rare occurrence. Perhaps this Monk guy might be bringing some good luck after all. But managing to will the hot water system to work was one thing, improving his current life status, a whole other ball-game. It's not as if he'd managed to make any major changes of late on his own. And besides, he's a Monk, what could he do besides pray to God and hope for the best? He'd taken a vow of poverty, for goodness sake, he should by all rights be as worse off as he is.

Kid sighed. It was no use getting his hopes up like this, they never worked. Better to just let things roll along as usual and if he must expect anything, then expect the worst. That way life keeps giving you lots of little pleasant surprises, rather than the other way round.

It was the scream that ruined the bath for him. Coming from the 'living room', as he called it, obviously the Monk. His reflexes reacting without him even thinking about it, Kid was out of the bath and grabbing a grubby towel to slip around his waist. Hey, the Monk was in trouble, but there was no way he was going to expose himself to whomever had decided to drop by.

Racing into the living room, he found quite a surreal sight. The Monk was still screaming, cowering on the floor from – well, the best word Kid could give it was a ghost. The ghost of some guy, not bad looking, wearing some not too stylish clothed that Kid would have considered filching, if the guy wasn't incorporeal. The point was, it wasn't exactly the sort of thing that reduced people to shivering wrecks on the floor.

Which was beside the point, the Monk was obviously distressed, and Kid had to do something. With ease, he leapt into the air and allowed time to slow around him as he focussed on his target. Then, using a force that could shatter wood (and he had done so on occasion, he threw a perfectly-executed sidekick at the ghost. He sailed straight through it and landed cat-like between it and the cowering Monk.

The ghost barely blinked, didn't even seem aware of his existence. So, maybe not a ghost, might be a hologram.

Kid threw a few punches at the apparition, then a few kicks, still no reaction. The thing was still laughing its evil, silly panto-laugh. Then, as if it was suddenly bored, it faded away, Cheshire Cat style, with its laughter being the last thing to disappear.

Behind him, the Monk stood quietly, having stopped whimpering and appeared to have regained a bit of composure. "That was quite a display" he said, quietly.

Kid shrugged. "Ahh, well, holograms are easy, just wait 'till you see me fight something with flesh."

"I mean your abilities. They're not in the range human capabilities."

Kid spun around and gave the Monk a quizzical look. "What? I just did some kicks and punches."

The Monk returned the look. "You don't know what you did?"

Kid shook his head. "Something special?"

"More special than I think you realise."

Kid gave him another confused look, before breaking into laughter. "I think you're a bit dazzled, mate. I know how to take care of myself, but I'm nothing special. Would I live here if I were something special? Anyway, what was that?"

The Monk gazed at the spot where the ghost stood. "Just phantoms from the past, Kid. Or possibly the future. In my line of business, it's often hard to tell."

“Hmm,” said Kid. “You know you’re a bit weird?”

The Monk, despite this, smiled. “Not as weird as some others I know of. What’s the time?”

Kid shrugged. “No idea. No clocks.”

“Then I suggest we go out. You, my boy, once you’re properly attired, although while I suspect where I’m thinking of taking you you’d probably be accepted like that, I’d rather not, we shall go for a little journey.”

“We are? But it’s getting late.”

“Exactly. Which is an excellent reason. You’re living in one of the greatest cities in the world.”

Kid glanced at the darkening doorway to the street outside. “I am?”

“You are. I think it’s time I introduced you to the London nightlife.”

Kid couldn’t help but laugh at this. “You? Show me parts of the London nightlife that I haven’t already seen? Ha, you’re a Monk, what could you know?”

The Monk smiled. “Oh, Kid. I am far more than just another monk...”

### **Chapter Three – Singing For The Soul**

“Hello, all my sugar-cakes, I hope you’re all enjoying yourselves tonight,” he said, gazing out at the crowd before him. It was quite a mixed crowd, but nothing he couldn’t handle. After all, once you’ve worked the Vegas crowd, you can work anything.

*“Doctor, you’re doing it again” says Astra. “That annoying ‘let’s not tell the audience who this character is for an awful long time’ thing. Who is it? The Master? You?”*

*The Doctor grins. “Not quite...”*

“I hope you all enjoy your time here tonight, there’s a wide range of beverages that Scott will help you with over at the bar and, most importantly, we’re here to have some fun. And I mean some fun, am I right guys?”

The audience roared with approval, as he clutched the microphone tightly, quietly revving himself up. “Ahh, you guys, why, you’re making me feel more welcome than a pussy-cat in a twine factory. I never got this sort of crowd in LA, I’m telling you now.”

The audience roared again. “Oh, oh, you’re too kind. Anyway, shall I start the ball rolling with a song that’s very dear to my heart. Yes, I know, my heart is in my left buttock, but don’t let that put you off. It’s an oldie, but a goodie, and I dedicate it all to you.”

The audience cried out for joy, as he held the microphone high and waited for the music to build to the crescendo of the introductory bars, and hit his first note.

*“I called out your naaaame!  
In a mystic dream last night...”*

*“No, Doctor.”*

*“No what?”*

*“No, you are not turning this story into a musical. It’s bad enough that you somehow make everybody sing songs in real life, doing so in this story would be too awful.”*

*The Doctor spins around to give Astra a severe look. “How do you know this is going to be a musical? They’re in a karaoke bar, singing is perfectly natural there”*

*“But I know you, Doctor, and at the slightest opportunity you’ll take the chance to be part of a musical.”*

*“And even if I did, why shouldn’t I write it as a musical? Whose story is this anyway?”*

*Astra pauses for a minute. “Yours.”*

*“So I’ll do what I like. So there.” He blows her a raspberry.*

Kid didn’t really know what to make of the bar. The club. Whatever it happened to be. Going by the big green humanoid (mostly) up on the stage singing some old sappy song, it looked to be a karaoke bar. Only the difference was, this guy ... or, thing ... whatever it was, was good. As in really good. As in, why isn’t this guy on Broadway good.

But of course, thought Kid, how could he be on Broadway? He's green, for pity's sake!

The audience wasn't much in the way of human either. Oh, there were plenty of humans about, but they didn't make up a large percentage of those attending. The rest of them were a surreal mish-mash of beings with slime, antlers, tentacles, bumps and thumps and other weird deformations, all surreally knocking back drinks and allowing themselves to get drunk enough to possibly go on stage later. Or leave the place to go sacrifice some virgins to an evil god, it was quite possible given the looks of some of them.

Kid turned to the Monk next to him. "So, what are they? Aliens?"

The Monk smiled. "Oh, no, no, no. Well, yes, in a way, but no. Not aliens in the sense that they come from another planet, they're all from Earth. Just think of them more like a range of animals that most humans don't know about, with a few special abilities."

Kid watched a suspicious looking monster with a giant beak (or something) and orange slime dripping off him sit at the bar and order a bitters and squash. "Ease up on the bitters, I'm driving home tonight," Kid swore he heard him say.

"Are they dangerous?"

"Oh no. Not here at any rate. Our delightful host has seen to that."

Kid pointed. "Our host being Mister Kermit The Frog up there on the stage, I guess?"

The Monk nodded. "That would be him, yes."

"And we are here because..."

But the Monk wouldn't answer. He put his fingers to his lips in a "shh" action, and began applauding as the host came to the end of his song. The Green Guy took a brief bow, and blew kisses out to the audience. "Thank you, lovelies, oh, you're too kind. Enjoy the range, now who'd be interested in coming up next? Anyone? Ah, thank you kind sir. Oh, look everyone, a Chaos Demon, doing karaoke! Let's give a big hand to --" he paused as he got the demon's name "-- Bzhiggglisll!"

The audience applauded as the Chaos Demon took the mic and proceeded to badly sing *Lady Marmalade*, with a few rather depressing attempts at vocal gymnastics at all the wrong parts. Kid shuddered -- it was bad enough when humans did it, a monster with three tongues and still couldn't stay on key was horrible.

"Ok, I've had enough" said Kid. "I'm off to see who's got some food I can nick."

"Wait," said the Monk. "I'd like you to meet our host, come along" and with that, he grabbed Kid's hand and led him through the crowd, where the host was watching the demon sing on stage with an almost intense focus. The poor soul.

"What a singer, eh?" he said, Kid assumed it was to them, despite not taking his eyes off the nutter on stage. "Could kill the birds stone dead from the trees. Still, with what he's been up to, it might be him getting killed stone dead by the time he gets home" he chuckled, and the Monk joined in.

"Lorne, I'd like to introduce you to Kid, Kid, this is Lorne"

The green guy turned away from the stage and shook Kid's hand firmly. "Nice to meet you, Kid, oh, I just love the name. Welcome to Caritas II"

Kid smiled. He so didn't want to be here. "Umm, II?"

Lorne smiled. "Yes, I used to have a similar setup in LA, until some friends of mine... Anyway, long story, sugar dumplin', how do you like the place?"

Kid glanced around. "Well, it's umm, different."

Lorne grinned at the Monk. “Not used to the demonic lifestyle, eh?”

“No, I’m afraid not.”

Lorne turned back to Kid. “Well, not to worry, Kiddo, we’ll get you up to speed in no time. You’ll be speaking like a native before you can say, well, Bzhiggglisll.”

“Kid’s here for a reading” said the Monk, switching to the point.

“Oh?” asked Kid. “You’re a seer?”

Lorne gave another smile. “Of sorts. I tend to run a business of putting people on their correct path in life. Their fortunes, if you will.”

“So you could see my future, then?” asked Kid. “Assuming I’ve got one, of course.”

“Oh, now is that a way for a strapping young fellow like you to think? Everyone’s got a future. Most people that is, Mr Bzhiggglisll might find his slightly shorter...”

Kid stared him straight in the face. “So, then, what’s my future?”

“I’m afraid it doesn’t work quite like that,” said the Monk, putting a hand on his shoulder. “You have to bare your soul, first.”

“Bare my ...” Kid looked at the Monk, then at Lorne, then at the demon currently attempting to sing three vocal ranges at once and failing dramatically. And he noticed the fact that while they’d been talking, Lorne had kept one eye on what was on stage.

“I’m going to have to sing karaoke, aren’t I?”

Kid stood on the stage, holding the microphone tightly, almost too frightened to move. He hated the spotlight, he was a thief, a pickpocket, designed to be there and then not, to not be noticed. Being on stage about to sing some song he didn’t know was the opposite of being noticed. He’d have to kill the Monk later for this, there was nothing else for it.

He saw Lorne and the Monk sitting towards the back of the room, and Lorne gave a little wave. “You’ll be fine” the wave told him. “Just read the words, attempt to stay on key, and you’ll do wonders, Kiddo.”

Kid didn’t believe the wave, and wished the floor would open up and drag him to some other dimension.

Then, with three introductory beats, the music began, and the first line of the song appeared on the screen in front of him. Here we go, into the plunge.

And he sung.

“It’s a little bit funny, this feeling inside  
I’m usually the type to scamper and hide.  
Yet here I am singing, and you know, here’s the twist.  
Who knew that a place like this could ever exist?”

“I’m looking for guidance, be told where to go  
Despite my suspicions that I already know.  
I don’t have a future, my options are doomed.  
Yet I’ll sing this song, anyway, as you asked me too.”

“So you can tell any future, when they sing a song?  
It sounds so insanely simple that I’m sure that it’s wrong.  
I hope you don’t mind, I hope you don’t mind,

When I tell you I know  
My future is empty, I've nowhere to go.

"I thought as a child, the world can be cool,  
When all of the problems were gone, like parents and school  
But the world grows harsher as I gather age.  
Who'd want to read the ending, when there's no last page?"

"No food in a cupboard, or a cupboard at all  
No room for it in a house that's a hole in the wall.  
No carpet, no television, not a stove to be seen  
What kind of life is that, if you get what I mean?"

"So you can tell any future, when they sing a song?  
It sounds so insanely simple that I'm sure that it's wrong.  
I hope you don't mind, I hope you don't mind,  
When I tell you I know  
My future is empty, I've nowhere to go.

"I hope you don't mind, I hope you don't mind,  
When I tell you I know  
My future is empty, I've nowhere to go."

*The Doctor stops writing and gives Astra a look. "Well?"*

*"I'm not saying a word."*

*"Oh?"*

*"Nup. I told you not to turn this into a musical, and you ignored me entirely, so I doubt anything I could say to you now would help whatsoever."*

*The Doctor's eyes light up suddenly. "Does that mean you'll be going and leaving me in peace?"*

*Astra grins. "Not a chance, Doc. I'm staying put."*

*The gleam in the Doctor's eyes fade, and he turns back to the paper. "You're starting to sound like Frobisher."*

*"Speaking of him, when do we get back to the bit about him and Destina helping you get better?"*

*"In a bit, I haven't finished this section yet. Lorne hasn't given Kid his reading yet."*

*"Hmm. He doesn't want his reading, he's convinced himself he has no future, let's let him think that and get on to characters that are actually interesting."*

*"Like me, for instance?"*

*Astra cocks her head to the side, in mock thought. "No, actually I thought like me."*

*The Doctor snorts. "Tough, I'm telling Kid's story, not yours."*

*"I have mentioned how much I'm not a fan of the name, Kid, haven't I?"*

*"Yep."*

*"And you're not changing it?"*

*"Nope."*

*"Just checking."*

The Monk sipped on his drink while Kid came to the end of his song. The audience got all predictably excited, but the Monk could see the poor guy going bright red even from back where they were. Not that the demons would pick that up, most of them would assume it was his normal colour.

“So,” he asked Lorne beside him. “What do you see?”

“What I see is a kid who could really do well in the music industry. He has no idea on how great his voice is, I mean with that number he’d knock both Elton John and Ewan McGregor off in a shot. And look at that physique, phew, he’d be a lady killer without a doubt.”

The Monk rolled his eyes. “Yes, that’s nice, but what did you read? What’s his true path?”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you, plum pudding, he’s got the potential to do anything he wants, and I literally mean anything. He’s just lived through such a hellish and unfortunate life that he’s closed his mind off to any opportunities. I tell ya, I know what it’s like when you’re knocked down so often you find it’s impossible to even be bothered trying again. He’s had a whole life full of knockdowns.”

“But is that all? Anything else?”

“Well, there is something else. Something big. He’s got a significant role to play in the destiny of the universe, but what that role is I couldn’t say.”

The Monk boggled. “It was too grand for even you to digest?”

Lorne shook his head. “No, I just decided when I saw it coming up to avoid reading that part. Really, Mortimus, you of all people ought to know that I had enough of reading people with huge futures and specific apocalyptic destinies back in the noughties. I came to the good old United Kingdom to avoid that.”

“But surely, if he’s –“ began the Monk.

“Look, sugar-cakes,” said Lorne, standing up from the table, “my suggestion? Go with the music contract thing, that’s the best path I can give him. These apocalyptic champions destinies are never of the good and they hardly ever end well.” He looked up at Kid, climbing down from the stage and making his way across the floor towards them. “Give my love to Kid. I hope he makes it. Ciao, baby” and with that, Lorne disappeared towards the bar.

As Lorne wandered off, Kid came up to the Monk and glared at him. “I never, ever want to do that again” he said. “As it is I should be killing you on the spot.” He looked around. “Where’d Lorne go?”

The Monk gulped. “Umm, he had to go off. Somewhere. Else.”

Kid boggled. “What about my future? I better not have done that for nothing!”

“No, no, he told me it. It’s quite interesting, actually.”

“Isn’t there a doctor/patient confidentiality thing?”

“Not with demons”

Kid sighed. “So what’s this future then? Presuming I have one?”

The Monk grinned. “Oh, you have one. Kid, I’m gonna make you a star!”

*“This had better not be the end of the chapter,” says Astra. “Any more chapters that end with the Monk giving a slightly altered clichéd line is going get tiresome.”*

*“It is?” says the Doctor thoughtfully. “Well, I’d better end this one the other way.”*

*“Oh?”*

*“Yes. With a cliff-hanger.”*



Lorne stepped up onto the stage and grabbed the mic. “Let’s hear it again for that wondrous Kid!” The audience applauded. “I’m sure we’ll be seeing great things from you later, Kiddo. And now, someone else who’s in desperate need of a destiny. Anyone? At all? Come along, don’t be shy now...”

Before any of the demons could get out of their seats to embarrass themselves with some off-key melody, they were rudely interrupted with the wall opposite the bar suddenly crashing down as something large and heavy barrelled through it. Patrons leapt out of the way in panic as the debris fell about and dust flew everywhere.

“What’s going on?” Kid asked, as demons and humans alike began to panic, but the Monk stayed perfectly still. Only he heard another sound amongst the collapsing wall. A wheezing groaning sound.

Somebody had opened the doors of the club, and people began pushing their way out to the street outside. The dust began to settle, and only the Monk, Kid and Lorne himself were still enough to notice what it was that had actually rammed itself through the wall.

It was a double-decker bus. A red one, number 22, apparently heading to Putney Common.

“Got a bit off track, it seems,” said Kid, attempting a bit of levity.

“It most certainly did, dearie!” came a cheery voice from within. As the doors to the bus swished open, a largish, middle-aged woman, wearing a bright floral dress and matching handbag stepped out.

“That bus of mine can be a real bugger to steer, sometimes.” She gave the three of them a little wave. “I’m Iris Wildthyme, lovvies. And how are you?”

## Chapter Four – Cyberman Slayer

*“Hang on,” says Astra, “before you start let me ask you something. Is anything actually interesting going to happen in this chapter?”*

*The Doctor holds the pen poised over the paper, then glares at Astra. “What do you mean anything interesting? Plenty of interesting things have happened!”*

*“Oh yeah? Like what?”*

*“Well...” the Doctor floundered for a moment. “Well, Iris has just turned up, hasn’t she? She always brings chaos and confusion in anywhere she turns up.”*

*“Yes, I remember, and all I can say is that if she’s arrived it’s pure desperation on your part.”*

*“And there’s the whole mystery of Kid and what that big thing about him that Lorne read –“*

*Astra interrupts again. “Fairly typical and standard chosen one routine. If I recall correctly, Lorne himself went through the same thing with Angel’s unnaturally born son, and it wasn’t all that great then either.”*

*The Doctor opens his mouth to give another example, but Astra stops him. “And don’t bother bringing up that whole ‘Doctor is sick, Destina plays nurse’ storyline, because we both know that’s not going to actually go anywhere.”*

*“How do you know?”*

*“Because I know you.” Astra sighs, expelling a bit of her bluster and anger. “Look, Doctor, you’re great, and I usually think you’re wonderful, but this story is going nowhere and it’s going nowhere fast.”*

*“Well,” says the Doctor sheepishly, slightly hurt by her comments, “it is only the beginning. I’ve got fifty thousand words to write and I’ve just gone over ten percent.”*

*Astra ignored him. “What it needs is something exiting, something brilliant. Something that could take the story, spin it on its head and make it a brilliant piece of fiction. Something witty, something charming, funny heroic, something like ... something like...”*

*The Doctor gives her an arch smile. “Something like you?”*

*Astra grins. “Exactly. Move over, Doc, Astra’s taking over the reigns.”*

*The Doctor sighs and hands over the pen. “Fine, fine, you write for a spell. Time for me to be the irritating voice in the background telling you how badly you’re doing things.”*

*“Me? Do things badly?” Astra scoffs. “It is to laugh!”*

*“We’ll see who’s laughing when you realise that writing isn’t as easy as you think it is.”*

*“Shh!” says Astra. “I need to think of an opening line.” She stops, as she examines the biro in her hand. “Wasn’t this a quill when we started?”*

*“Mort, look out!”*

Mort ducked as the Cyber-hand slammed into the wall beside him. Feebly he grabbed it and attempted to do that thing Astra showed him – you know, that throwy-flippy hip thing – but it wouldn’t budge. Metal and plastic, usually very difficult to shift.

“I’m coming!” came Astra’s voice from afar, followed by her latest incarnation of her war-cry (just because Xena has one, she had to find one. Which would be fine if she stuck with any particular one), but Mort had a suspicion she was

going to be too late. The Cyberman retracted its arm from the concrete wall like it was butter, and simply shifted its position to clench its big Cyber-fist around Mort's very-flesh and bone throat.

And it squeezed.

Mort bashed at the Cyberman's arm feebly, in a desperate attempt to make it move, but he should have known better, a Cyberman won't move for anything. It was all he could do to squeek in a pathetic manner, attempt to attract somebody's attention who could help him out.

"A-Astra..." he gasped, as tiny pinpricks of light began invading his vision.

Suddenly, to Mort's surprise, the Cyberman loosened his grip on him, and stepped back. It began to moan, cry out in something that its emotionless brain considered to be pain, before toppling forward past Mort and on to the wall, where it slid down and stayed still on the ground. In its back was a rather large hole, which started to leak green fluid.

Behind it was Astra, holding a long pointed shaft of gold. She grinned her evil grin. "I'd like to see a vampire slayer do that!" she said.

*"Oh, very nice" says the Doctor sarcastically. "If it were that easy to slay a Cyberman they wouldn't be half the threat they are."*

*Astra shrugs. "Oh well, anything for a lovely image."*

*"And do I need to mention the fact that for the entire time I was travelling with Frobisher and Destina, you weren't out in the universe with Mort fighting Cybermen, but stuck on Pendor with that annoying Widow Twankey?"*

*"Hey, it could be a flashback to before I met you."*

*The Doctor looks coy. "But you hadn't met Cybermen then."*

*Astra looks at him for a moment, then at the paper.*

*"Well, then, umm. Oh, shut up."*

Suddenly it was Mort's turn to call out a warning as another Cyberman loomed up behind her, ready to throttle the life out of both of them. They were lucky he'd managed to hack into the Cyber-computer and installed that energy dampener, otherwise they wouldn't bother with the thrashing and crushing and would have just used their weapons from afar. The downside was that they had no weapons either, and thus had to use their fists and feet as well. And Cyber-fists were stronger than people-fists.

Astra spun around and managed to dodge a punch from the Cyberman, then proceeded to grab its shoulder, heave him over and give him a knee into the chest. It had next to no effect, it merely staggered back slightly once Astra let go and took another swing. Astra chose that moment to swoop down in a low spinning kick that swept the Cyberman off its feet. She was back onto her feet the moment the monster came crashing down, brandishing her golden stake with glee. She plunged it into its chest-unit, approximately at the place where its heart would have once sat.

The Cyberman moaned, then died.

"You know", said Astra, as she retracted her stake from the Cyberman's innards, "it's a pity these things don't go 'poof'. Couldn't it be so cool if they went 'poof' and disintegrated once you shoved a gold stake through their chest units, huh?"

Mort nodded. "Yeah. You know what also would be cool?"

"No, what?"

"If that hanger door hadn't opened and that whole army of Cybermen weren't about to come trampling over to us."

Astra spun around, saw the mass of silver warriors lumbering across toward them, and swore quietly. "I'll never take all of them."

"And I'll never take any of them" added Mort.

Astra gulped. "Has that virus you installed taken effect?"

"It's started to. Otherwise they'd be firing at us."

"So it's probably going to go the whole way?"

Mort nodded. "If I've set it right."

"Good. Routine number 1 then."

"Run back to the *Telstra* as fast as possible?"

"On the count of three. One, two, three!"

The *Telstra* doors swung open, as Astra and Mort raced in, out of breath and nearly collapsing. Astra fell onto the console and began pressing buttons frantically, forcing her time machine to disappear. Accompanied by a strange whispering, shouting noise, the two rings in the centre of the console began to glow and orbit each other, letting them know they had escaped. They could relax.

"Mort..." said Astra, getting her breath back. "Mort, open the ... the ... what do you call it, the scanner thing. I want to see it happen."

Mort waved his arm aimlessly in the air from the position beside the console he'd collapsed in, but made no move or effort to get up. "Can't reach. Too tired."

Astra rolled her eyes and walked across to the appropriate control. She switched on the scanner, a screen that revealed a huge space-station hanging amongst the stars. For a moment it sat there calmly. Then, with a rather loud bang that made the scanner's speakers crackle, the space-station burst into flame, then into tiny little pieces scattered about the cosmos.

Astra found the energy to leap for joy at the sight of it. "Yes, it worked! Well done Mort!"

Mort waved an arm about in a sense of exhausted acknowledgment. "Yay me."

"Now the Cybermen can't launch their plans to use that Cyberizing virus of theirs onto the entire universe, their whole research records are completely destroyed. It'd take them some time before they can get to the same point they got to again."

"Whoo-hoo" Mort deadpanned.

Astra was positively bouncing by now, suddenly having revived all her energies. "Oooh, that was fun. What should we do now? Fight some pirates? Zap some Daleks?" She marched around the console to where Mort was lying on the floor and bent down over his face to give him an upside-down view of hers. "I know – let's go to Sunnydale. If we get there early enough, we can kill a few vampires before Buffy moves in and starts keeping their number down!"

Mort gave her a look, and resolutely refused to get excited. "Astra, we've just spent an entire forty-eight hours fighting off Cybermen and trying to stop their plans of universal domination. I'm exhausted. And you want to go kill vampires?"

Astra nodded.

"Before the Slayer moves in and makes it easier?"

Astra nodded again. "Wouldn't be a challenge otherwise, if Buffy'll just step in and help us out."

Mort gave her a long, hard stare. "Ok, you know you're crazy, don't you?"

Astra grinned and nodded again. "So come on, whaddaya say?"

Mort shrugged and shoved his hands behind his head. "You can go slaying, I'm staying right put where I am and sleeping for a week."

Astra stood up and began to press buttons. “Ok, fine, be boring.”

“I will.”

“Good.”

“And don’t expect me to invite you into the *Telstra* once you turn into an evil drone of the undead domain either.”

“I’ll keep it in mind.”

“Good.”

There was a beep from the console. Astra crossed to the appropriate control and had a look to see what it was. “Oh. Now that’s annoying.”

“Buffy’s gone and slayed them for you?”

“No, not that. We’ve got a distress signal.”

Mort sighed and sat up. “From who this time?”

“No idea, there’s no message, just the signal being beamed our way.”

“Well are we going to answer it?”

Astra pressed buttons. “I don’t think we have all that much of an alternative, someone obviously needs our help, I think we’d better help them.”

Mort sighed, and stood up to join her at the console. “So, back into the fray again?”

“Seems like – oh, how interesting.”

“If you’re going to tell me it’s coming from Sunnydale, I won’t believe you.”

“No, no, it’s not where it’s coming from that’s interesting. It seems it isn’t a broad-spectrum message, it’s being targeted, at us. Whoever’s in trouble wants us, and wants us specifically.”

*Astra drops the pen and smiles smugly. “So, what do you think?”*

*“Terrible” retorts the Doctor. “Or at least no better than my attempt. Move over, I’m taking back the reigns.”*

## **Chapter Five – Uncharted Territories**

Destina opened the Doctor's door quietly, trying very hard not to disturb or bother him. The room was in darkness, and silence, but she decided she'd better not turn on the light, just in case.

"Well?" whispered Frobisher behind her. "How's he doing?"

Destina tried peering into the darkness. "I think he's sleeping. I think."

"It's not a coma is it?"

"It better not be," said Destina darkly. "Because if it is, he'll get a big talking to when he wakes up."

"Yes, because that always manages to make him change his way" Frobisher said, his voice thick with sarcasm. "Maybe we should go in and check or something?"

Destina shook her head. "If he's just sleeping, then I don't want to wake him up. Sleeping's good for Pythia Pox, it's just comas that isn't."

She closed the door as quietly as she could, and they both began to stroll down the corridor toward the console room. "Still," she said, "I've never seen anyone as old as the Doctor get it before. Who knows what's good for him?"

Frobisher shrugged, which being a penguin with no shoulders to speak of, is no mean feat. "Isn't it just a basic flu? You know, vomiting, sneezing, sore throat, and all that?"

Destina nodded. "Most time-tots get over it after a few days. But everyone usually gets it out of their system well before their first centennial, and the Doctor's well over his first millennium."

"But he'll be fine, surely?" For a change, Frobisher's outward witty and detached façade was down, he was genuinely concerned. "It sounds like the chicken pox, the older you are when you get it, the worse it is."

Destina nodded. "Pretty much. But the only way he can get over it is to go through it."

"Are you sure?"

Destina sighed, as they approached the console room door. "Well, I would be, but I'm not a doctor."

She opened the door to the console room and strolled in to check on the console, Frobisher not far behind. The central column was moving up and down rhythmically, as if it were totally unaware of it's owner's troubles.

"Perhaps that's what we need?" suggested Frobisher, leaning against the arm of a chair in the corner. "A doctor?"

Destina smiled, half transfixed by the rising column. "We have a Doctor. He's the one having the nap, remember?"

"No, no, I mean a proper one. Someone who can take a look at our Doctor and decide whether he's actually in any trouble or not."

Destina thought for a second. "The best medics to deal with this sort of thing would be ones versed in Gallifreyan diseases. And the best experts on those would be on Gallifrey itself."

Frobisher's eyes lit up. "Gallifrey, eh? Well, you did say you wanted to get back there a while ago, and I could do with a visit to the oldest civilisation in the universe..."

"I'd rather not get back there, actually. Odds are we wouldn't be allowed to leave again. Or at least I wouldn't."

Frobisher shrugged. "Fair enough. Anywhere else then?"

Destina was silent. Then she had an idea. "Computer? Ahh, Computer, are you in there? Could you wake up? Umm, please?"

There was a series of beeps, and a shrill electronic voice with an irritating American twang came across the speakers. "Hello there! How are you, Destina? I'm doing veeery well!"

Frobisher moaned. "You had to wake her up, didn't you? Just as we were getting a bit of peace and quiet..."

Destina ignored him. "I'm doing fine, Computer, thanks for asking. The Doctor, though, isn't doing quite as well."

"Aww," said the Computer, "that's so sad! It's never nice to have viruses in your system. And I should know, because I've had lots of them in my time..."

"And how many of them were deliberately installed?" Frobisher asked.

"Frobisher, be nice" said Destina. "Computer, we need your help. We want to find someone who could help the Doctor, someone to check to make sure he's not going to die or anything."

"A doctor for the Doctor?" asked the Computer. "Hee-hee-hee, that's so funny, a doctor for the Doctor!" she started laughing hysterically.

Destina waited patiently for the Computer to calm down. "Yes, that's what we need" she said, as nicely as she could manage. "Do you have any ideas?"

"Hmm, well, let me see now" she said, drawling slightly. "We could always go to Gallifrey and find out what they say?"

"Nope" said Frobisher abruptly. "Next?"

"Well fine, if you don't like my suggestions, then you can just make up your own then, I'll just go do something else..."

"No, no!" said Destina quickly. "Please, we want to hear what you think. You've got direct access to the TARDIS databanks, you can find out the best place for us in an instant. Please?"

The Computer paused, and they could just tell that her electronic brain was thinking it over. "Well, I do have another suggestion. It's far away from any humanoid civilisation, but it could be useful."

Destina grinned at Frobisher. "Oh, good, we'll take that then."

"Oki doki" said the Computer, and on cue a chime rang out through the console room. "We're here! Welcome to the Uncharted Territories!"

Frobisher and Destina stepped from the TARDIS to examine their surroundings.

"Oh look" said Frobisher. "A ship. A biiiig spaceship. You know, we're quite lucky, for a minute there I thought we were going to land somewhere that was, you know, boring, but wow, we're on a spaceship. And it's just like every other one I've ever been on too, how's that for bonus?"

Destina, meanwhile, had a different perspective as she looked around in awe. "Well, it's nothing like any other ship I've ever seen."

"Is that a surprise? You've spent your entire life on Gallifrey and been on the TARDIS for only about a month. Destina, to be honest, I don't think you've had that much experience on ships."

"I've done research, though" she protested. "Granted, my field wasn't really in construction of interstellar transport, but I don't remember seeing many who's designs were so, so..."

"Grand?" suggested Frobisher.

“No, organic.”

Frobisher looked about him again. “Yeah, I can see what you mean. It does have that sort of grown look rather than built. Hey, maybe we’re on a Zygon carrier, the Computer thinks some medial Zygon could make the Doctor better.”

Destina shook her head.

“Not that I have anything against them, I mean, blobby they are, they are shape-changers, and I’ve always maintained, let Zygons be Zygons...”

*Astra moans. “Stop that Doctor. Any more puns of that quality and I’m going to have to hurt you very badly!”*

“I don’t think that’s it,” said Destina, wisely ignoring the pun. “The Computer said we were looking for someone called Pa’u Zotoh Zhaan –”

“Bless-you.”

“– whoever that might be.”

“Knowing the Computer, it’s possible it could be an abandoned piece of toast lying butter-sided down somewhere – with her you never know.” He sighed. “Well, with a ship this size, it probably would be a good idea to split up and cover more ground, but as we know how well that always turns out, I think we should stick together.”

“An excellent suggestion” Destina agreed.

“Now, judging from what I know of space liners, we’re in their closest equivalent to a docking bay. So I’d say those big giant doors over there would be our best option”

“I agree” said Destina. “Especially since those are the only doors out of this room, unless you’re keen to go out the big whole into open space over there.”

“Leave the sarcasm to the expert, Destina. Well, after you?”

Destina looked at the door, then to Frobisher. “Oh no, umm, after you. I insist.”

“Captain Crais!”

Crais turned from his thoughts as a young female officer smartly marched up to him and saluted. He returned the salute promptly before commencing to give them his trademarked authoritative glare, guaranteed to make any underling shiver.

“What is it, soldier?”

“Intruders, sighted on tear three, near the hanger.”

Crais raised his eyebrows at this. It was unheard of, intruders on a leviathan under Peacekeeper command. “On screen!” he commanded, and a holoscreen lit up before him, showing two figures walking down a corridor.

“How did this happen?”

“We’re not sure, sir.”

“Well I suggest you get sure. If they’re escaped prisoners I want them recaptured, punished and returned to their appropriate cells. If they’re outsiders then I want them brought to me for questioning.”

The underling pressed a few controls and the picture zoomed in on the two of them. “They don’t appear to match up to any prisoners we have on board, sir.”

Crais looked at the screen carefully. “That one is a female Sebatian, though a bit young for space travel. The other is an avian-based species I’m not familiar with.” He turned from the screen. “At either rate, they are infiltrators to a Peacekeeper base, and must be dealt with accordingly. Capture them and bring them to me at once.”



“Sir!” the soldier saluted, and marched off to implement Crais’s orders. He would not tolerate such interference here. Not on his ship. There was a reason he was so well regarded within Peacekeeper ranks, and he was determined to keep that reputation at all costs.

“You know what, Frobisher?” Destina said idylly. “I think this ship is alive.”

Frobisher turned around and gave her a goofy grin. “What? Come on, as if.”

“Really, look, it seems organic and everything, and I’m sure I can hear some sort of heartbeat.”

Frobisher cocked his head to the side. “I can’t hear anything.”

“Must be my super-Gallifreyan hearing then.”

“Or your super-Destina-sized imagination. Who’d every heard of a living ship? It’s impossible, we’d all get digested if we were inside something living like that.”

“Hey,” said Destina defensively, “I’ve found that with the Doctor just about anything can be possible. Aliens that like to look like penguins for example.”

“There’s a reason for that,” said Frobisher.

“It’d be nice if you explained what that reason is one day” Destina replied.

Before Frobisher could give an appropriate retort, he was interrupted by a mechanical whirring noise. Both of them turned to see a little yellow robotic ball with two long black antennae for eyes zip down the corridor towards them.

“Oh, look, Frobisher, isn’t it so cuuute!” said Destina, her voice gravitating towards silly-baby talk.

Frobisher wasn’t impressed. “It’s just a maintenance drone. Or something”

“Oh, who’s a cute little droney woney?” burred Destina. “Who’s a cute little drone?”

Frobisher rolled his eyes. “Oh, please, Destina, what are you, five?”

“I think it looks cute. Don’t you?”

“No” came a voice from nowhere, surprising both of them. “And neither should you, if you value your life!”

Destina and Frobisher froze perfectly still, with the only sound in the corridor being the little yellow drone whirring to itself.

“Ok” said Frobisher, eventually. “Who said that?”

“I did!” came the voice. It was harsh-sounding, almost old, and very impatient. “The DRDs are not cute, in the right one of those little pincers they have there is a very potent little blaster which will knock you out in an instant.”

“Ok,” said Frobisher, “I believe you. Now where are you?”

“Over here, of course, in the cell! What are you, challenged or something?”

Destina and Frobisher gave each other confused looks for a moment. Then Destina noticed something. “Look, a cell door!” She pointed and rushed across to get a closer look. It wasn’t like your traditional cell, this one had bars criss-crossing in a waffle-like manner. It immediately put Frobisher in mind of baked goods.

“Are you in here, Mister, umm – aaahh!” Destina jumped back, as its occupant marched over to the door.

“Stay back, you. That’s close enough. I don’t want a frelling Peacekeeper like you that close to me, thanks. You Sebatians make the place smell awful.”

Destina blinked. “Frobisher, I found him. It’s a giant talking frog.”

“A what?” said the thing, its little eyes popping up in indignation. He was only about a foot high, and wore some form of bluey-purple robe that had seen many, many better days. Instead of feet and hands he had strange chicken-like claws,

and his face seemed to be all mouth, with a long extended white moustache giving him an attempted air of authority.

Frobisher suppressed a giggle at anyone that size being anywhere near authority and decided to settle on a superior-than-thou attitude for Destina. “Come, now, Destina, just because he looks a bit like a frog doesn’t mean he is one. What’s your name, little fella?”

The thing took a deep breath in sheer frustration. “I am not a little fella! I am his royal highness, Dominar Rygel the Sixteenth, ruler of the whole Hynerian Empire!”

Frobisher blinked. “So, what, we’re supposed to bow or something?”

Rygel huffed and puffed a bit more. “I am insulted! Frelling insulted! I expected as much from the Sebatian there, but from another non-Peacekeeper like you I thought maybe you’d have more sympathy!”

“Hey,” said Destina. “I’m not Sebatian, I’m Gallifreyan!”

“I don’t care which regiment you’re from. But…” he lowered his voice slightly, looking around conspiratorially. “If you help me get out of here, I can make it worth your while.”

“Help you?” asked Frobisher. “How’d you get in there anyway?”

“What do you mean, how did I get in here?” Rygel was suddenly loud again. “It’s a prison ship, I’m a prisoner. You work it out.”

“A prison ship?” asked Destina. “Well, I guess that explains some of the insignias and decorations we’ve seen.”

“If you’re a prisoner, why should we help you out?” asked Frobisher.

Rygel grinned. “Because I can give you a reason to.”

“Oh yes?”

“When I get back to my galaxy, I can give you in excess of fifty million credits as a reward for restoring their rightful Dominar to the throne.”

“Fifty million?” asked Frobisher. “That’s a lot of credits.”

“Sixty million! A hundred million! What’s money to a monarch?”

Destina looked nervous. “I don’t know, Frobisher, I’m sure there’s a reason he’s been locked up.”

“Look, we’ll help you under one condition.”

Rygel hesitated for a moment. “Name it and I’ll consider.”

“We’re looking for someone called – what was it?”

“Pa’u Zotoh Zhaan” supplied Destina.

“Yeah, what she said.

“Hmmm.” Rygel thought for a moment. “Sounds Delvian. I wasn’t aware of any Delvians on board.”

“If we help you escape, will you help us find her? Or him, whichever the case may be?”

Rygel laughed. “The moment I escape from here, I’m planning on being on the first transport pod out of here.”

Frobisher shrugged. “Ok then, your choice. Just stay there then.” He stood up and began to lead Destina back down the corridor.”

“Wait!” called Rygel. “Alright, if you let me out, I’ll help you find the Delvian.”

“Oh, thank you, Rygel!” exclaimed Destina happily. Frobisher began to examine the door opening mechanism.

“Well there’s no room for a key, it seems to be password-based. Wouldn’t have a clue how I’d break it, I don’t know any of these symbols.”

“Pass me the DRD” said Rygel. “I can use pull it apart and use it’s databank to search for the codes.”

Frobisher looked around. “A DR what?”

“DRD – the little yellow drone on the floor out there, you yotz.”

Destina tutted. “Now I’m sure that’s not a word one uses in polite company.”

“I’ll get it” said Frobisher, as he wandered over to where it was sitting, watching them carefully. He briefly wondered about who was watching on the other end, but didn’t worry too much about it. Whoever it was, it had seen enough of them already by now that it’d be too late either way. He picked the thing up and watched its wheels underneath spin crazily. He took it over to the cell door and passed the little metal rodent through the gaps where Rygel grabbed it and set it upside-down on the floor, it’s wheels spinning in the air.

“Thank you, thank you so much” he said, in a tone that suggested he wasn’t exactly thankful, but that their actions were to be expected. He prodded the thing a bit and it beeped in reaction.”

“Well, that’s our part” said Destina. “Now get the door open and help us.”

Suddenly Rygel was pushing the DRD out of sight in as subtle way that he could. “I don’t think so, somehow. It seems that you’re in just as much trouble as I usually am.”

Frobisher gave him a stern look. “Why?”

“Look out behind you!” Even for an alien frog, Rygel was able to look very smug. As Destina and Frobisher turned around, four humanoids dressed in black military garb were holding high-energy weapons pointed at them.

“Freeze!” called out the leader. “Move and we will be forced to shoot.”

Frobisher blinked. “Umm, ok. Not moving. See us? Moving we are not. See anything that’s moving about, watch us do exactly the opposite.”

“Frobisher, shut up” said Destina.

“You have illegally boarded a Peacekeeper prison leviathan and are to be taken to Captain Crais for questioning in his command carrier. Do you understand?”

“Oh, perfectly” said Frobisher. “Well, except for one thing?”

“What?” asked the Peacekeeper.

“The bit where Destina and I RUN!” he shouted, and he tore down the corridor towards the hanger where the TARDIS was, Destina close behind.

“After them, shoot to kill!” called the Peacekeeper, setting the troops into pursuit.

Rygel, now alone in the corridor, waved at the departing escapees and laughed. “Bye! Thanks a lot!” He patted the DRD happily. With the information he could gather from in here, it’d be simplicity itself to open the door, then use those codes to release every other prisoner on this ship. Then together they’d overpower the Peacekeeper force holding them, and get the frell out of this area, and back to Hyneria where he belongs.

Things should have progressed nicely, Destina thought afterwards. It should have been like any other escape attempt, but how it went wrong she couldn’t tell, everything became blurred and confused. She knew they both got as far as the TARDIS at least, all the while little yellow bolts of light sizzling the air around them. Destina distinctly recalled leaping to the TARDIS door, key in hand and forcing it open in record speed.

What she also distinctly remembers is hearing the single shot, and the sound of a penguin calling out in pain.

She was about to step across the threshold into the TARDIS console room, when the noise made her spin around. She was there just in time to see Frobisher's eyes glass over, his features turn blank. His webbed feet buckled beneath him as he toppled forward, his blank eyes staring at her the whole time. As he hit the ground, his back oozed green blood from the messy hole from one of the Peacekeeper rifles.

She thought she called out. She wasn't sure, but it felt like something she probably ought to have done. She remembered rushing out to grab him, help him into the TARDIS, somehow ignoring the chaos around her as the Peacekeepers caught up to them. By now Frobisher's shape had changed, he was no longer a penguin but had reverted to his natural shape, an almost humanoid form with a blank, green, egg-like head and a pair of glasses perched on his non-existent nose. It made him bigger than he usually was, but that didn't stop Destina managing to drag him into the TARDIS.

The Computer was confused when she got there – which made little difference since she was always confused. Destina wasn't quite sure what she was doing by this point, but she recalled trying to revive him, breathing life into his now lifeless body.

“Regenerate!” she remembered saying. “Come on, why don't you regenerate!”

The first clear memory she has after that moment when they began running in the corridor, is a voice behind her and a bony hand touching her on the shoulder.

I'M AFRAID HE ISN'T GOING TO REGENERATE, it said. YOU SEE, HE'S DEAD.

## Chapter Six – A Deal With Death

*Astra is stunned. “I can’t believe you just did that.”*

*“What, bumped him off?”*

*Astra nods. “You haven’t just ‘bumped him off’! You’ve killed one of your longest running and favourite companions on a whim!” She suddenly grins. “I’m going to tell him you did that, now.”*

*“Astra sit down. I doubt he cares anyway, he’s too busy fishing somewhere.”*

*Astra sits primly. “Of course, with this, anyone who reads it knows that it’s a work of pure fiction.”*

*“Oh?”*

*“Yes. Frobisher didn’t die. He’s still alive and waddling.”*

*The Doctor gives her another one of his coy smiles. “Really? But who’s to say that’s permanent?”*

*“Death usually is. Unless he’s changed his policy last time I met him”*

*The Doctor shrugs. “People have died before and been around to tell the tale. I’ve done it myself on several occasions. Actually, weren’t you there the last time I—“*

*“Yes, Doctor, let’s bring up those painful and distressing memories as much as possible.”*

*“Fair enough. Point is, just because someone dies doesn’t invalidate it.”*

*“Hmm.” Astra prods the Doctor’s paper. “Well, come on, do the next bit. I want to see what happens next.”*

*“You’re really into this, aren’t you?”*

*Astra curbs her enthusiasm slightly. “Well, you know, so we can get to the good stuff about me again.”*

*The Doctor grins. “Oh, admit it, that’s a good cliff-hanger. You’re just dying to see the conversation Death and Destina have over Frobisher’s corpse.”*

*“Oh, I do not!” Astra scoffs.*

*“You do too!”*

*“Can we please get back to the story, Doctor?”*

In a mystic field somewhere beyond the rainbow, east of nowhere and beside the back of beyond, lies a field. In this field, nothing lives, besides the reams, and reams of grass, the greenest, purest grass you have ever seen. Every day, the grass welcomes the sunshine, basks in its rays, and continues working on the day’s task with its usual efficiency – growing. To begin with, each blade grows an eighth of a millimetre in unison, stretching toward the sun in the sky, as a kind of warm-up as it were. After that point, each blade works individually, growing at whichever rate they find comfortable. Some blades are able to continue growing at twelve metres a day, yet the occasional sapling, or baby-blade can only crawl along at a pace that

*“Very good, Doctor, I know you’re just writing about grass growing to irritate me because you know I want to get to the juicy stuff. Get to the point already!”*

*“Aww, but watching the grass grow is so –“*

*“Doctor!”*

*“Ok, ok, I’ll behave. Right, back to the TARDIS.”*

Destina looked up into Death’s skeletal face for a moment, then back down to Frobisher. “No, no, no, he can’t be dead, he can’t be dead...”

DON'T TAKE IT PERSONALLY, NOW, he intoned.

Destina wasn't listening. She had flipped him onto his back and began pounding both sides of the whifferdill's chest, in an attempt at double-CPR. It wasn't until her fifth go it occurred to her, through her tear-streamed face, that Frobisher didn't in fact have two hearts.

"He can't be dead." She turned to Death and screamed. "*He can't be dead!*" She then sat on the floor beside her friend and howled.

After a moment, when Destina had calmed down sufficiently to be reasonable, Death spoke again. DO YOU FEEL BETTER NOW? WANT A HANKY?

"Why did you have to take him?" she asked quietly, now too tired for tears. "Why did he have to die?"

Death was silent for a moment. YOU MAY BE SURPRISED TO HEAR, BUT I'M NOT EXACTLY SURE HOW EITHER. BUT AS ALWAYS, I COME WHERE I'M NEEDED AND PERFORM MY DUTY.

"But did you have to do it here?" asked Destina. "You knew him. You knew him more than most people you've, you've ... collected. Couldn't you have made an exception?"

AND ALLOW HIM TO ROAM THE UNIVERSE AS A DISEMBODIED SPIRIT FOR ALL ETERNITY, CURSED TO OBSERVE BUT NEVER TO INTERACT WITH THE WORLD AROUND HIM? Death sniffed, no mean feat when you haven't got a nose. UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES, I THINK I DID HIM THE BEST SERVICE I COULD.

"Under the circumstances..." muttered Destina. Then she stood up. "Well, under these circumstances, I won't allow you to take him. Either his spirit can return to his body, or, or ..." she faltered. What could she do? "Or, I'll, I'll fight you for his soul.

Death chuckled, which Destina didn't like very much. It resembled the clanging and bashing of a coffin-lid, which while appropriate was rather unnerving. YOU WISH TO CHALLENGE ME, THE UNDISCOVERED COUNTRY, FROM WHOSE BORNE NO TRAVELLER RETURNS? EVEN IF YOU WERE TO WIN, WHICH IS UNLIKELY, YOUR REQUEST IS UNREASONABLE, SINCE WHEN YOU RETURN FROBISHER'S SOUL TO HIS BODY HE'LL BE LITTLE MORE THAN A ZOMBIE, WHICH IS NOT AN EXISTENCE I THINK HE'D APPRECIATE. He paused, probably for dramatic effect. BESIDES WHICH, YOU'RE FAR TOO LATE FOR THIS. FROBISHER DIED BEFORE HE EVEN ENTERED THE TARDIS. I RELEASED HIM ON THE SHIP.

Destina looked sadly down at Frobisher's ... his corpse. "So there's nothing I can do?" fresh tears began to form.

Death's hand gently touched her shoulder, almost uncertainly, as if showing compassion for the bereaved was something he was unaccustomed to. THERE, THERE, he said. I ADMIT, I LIKED THE LITTLE FELLOW MYSELF. BACK WHEN THE DOCTOR WAS IN MY POSITION AND FEELING THE EFFECTS OF MY ROLE, SO I WAS FEELING HIS, AND I KNEW WHAT FROBISHER MEANT TO HIM AND OTHERS AROUND HIM. BUT YOU MUST UNDERSTAND, THE UNIVERSE MUST TURN, AND PEOPLE WILL DIE. IT'S A PART OF LIFE.

Destina looked up suddenly, the obvious thought only now coming to her. "The Doctor. Oh no, how am I going to explain it to him? Frobisher was his best friend, and, and..."

"Umm, excuse me?" came a voice from within the console.

Both of them turned. Destina had forgotten about the Computer too, in her grieving state. "What?" she asked, not really in the mood to deal with stupidity right now.

“Well, I don’t want to sound silly,” she said. Her usually shrill and excited voice was very subdued and low, reflecting the moment. “But I’m sure there’s something that can be done.”

NOTHING said Death. AND BELIEVE ME, I WOULD KNOW.

“But what about the quests and journeys into the underworld that I keep reading about?” asked the Computer. “All those ancient heroes, visiting the world of the undead to restore their loved ones to life? And surely if Xena can resurrect herself and just about everyone else she knows on a weekly basis, can’t we restore Frobisher before the Doctor wakes up and starts yelling at us?”

Death was silent for a moment. I SUPPOSE ... THERE IS ONE OPTION.

Destina’s eyes lit up. Some hope, after all? “What’s that? You have to tell me!”

Despite having no muscles or ability to create facial expressions whatsoever, Death had an air of hesitation about him. IT IS NOT A DECISION TO BE TAKEN LIGHTLY. WITH ALL EXCHANGES OF THIS NATURE THERE HAS TO BE A PRICE. WHAT THAT PRICE IS MAY NOT BE DETERMINED UNTIL LATER, BUT THERE WILL BE A PRICE NONETHELESS.

“What do I have to do?”

THERE IS A PASSAGE, A QUEST IN A WAY, WHICH YOU MUST UNDERTAKE. THINK OF IT AS A TRIAL. IF YOU’RE SUCCESSFUL, THEN FROBISHER WILL BE RESTORED TO HIS FORMER GLORY. IF YOU FAIL, THEN HE WILL REMAIN AS HE IS, AND YOUR LIFE AS WELL WILL BE FORFEIT.

Destina paused for a second. “What’s the nature of the quest?”

IT’S NOT FOR ME TO SAY, he replied. IT CHANGES DEPENDING ON THOSE WHO UNDERTAKE IT. BUT BE WARNED, FOR ONCE YOU BEGIN YOU CANNOT STOP UNLESS YOU COMPLETE IT. OR OTHERWISE.

The Computer suddenly piped up again. “I don’t know, Destina, I’m having second thoughts now. I mean, if you die too, then how do I explain that to the Doctor?”

Destina shook her head. “I don’t care. It’s my fault he died, so I have to save him.”

Death stared at her with those small pinpricks of blue light in his eye-sockets. HOW IS IT POSSIBLY YOUR FAULT? HE WAS THE ONE WHO DECIDED TO COME HERE, IF I RECALL CORRECTLY.

“Could you please not ruin my current state of selflessness with actual facts? I want to rescue him, I want to help my friend. So could you please start this thing already?”

Death shrugged. VERY WELL, YOU KNOW THE RISKS. He raised his scythe and swung it around as if it were a sword. The infinitely thin blade whooshed and whizzed as it glided through the air, leaving a trail of blue light behind it. As he swung the blade, the light trail gradually got longer and longer, until it caught up with itself and became a swirling funnel of light, which, as Destina soon realised, was an opening to some form of vortex or wormhole. Some mystical gateway at any rate.

WITHIN THERE LIES YOUR DESTINY, said Death. I WISH YOU LUCK, MUCH GOOD WILL IT DO YOU.

“Thanks, I think.” Destina took a deep breath, and looked down at poor Frobisher, his skin now turning from green to a pale aqua. “Give my love to the Doctor, Computer,” she said. “Tell him I’ll be back soon!”

And with that she leapt into the vortex, and felt it close up behind her.

The next thing Destina was aware of was the rushing of a bluey light that literally went right through her. It coursed through her veins, her arteries, every muscle, every organ, every bone, both her hearts, her superior brain, everything, until all her senses felt almost numbed. Then, before she could take no more, or before she became part of the blue light itself, it stopped, her senses came grinding back into sharp relief and she was forced to examine the new world she found herself in.

It wasn't quite the underworld she'd pictured. She'd expected lots of fire and brimstone and possibly some annoying red lighting. Tortured people pushing rocks up hills and tied to walls as they were tickled with an infinite amount of feathers. What she didn't expect was to be amongst high-rise buildings, concrete streets and graffiti'd brickwork, while the sun readied itself to rise behind the horizon.

"Well," she said to herself, as she stared around at her new surroundings. "I suppose that this is hell for somebody. Insane, crazy church people who like the quiet life, maybe, but still..."

It could be anywhere on Earth, Destina surmised. Except the colours seemed slightly wrong. It wasn't anything specific, nothing you could definitively put your fingers on, but it was as if the walls were shaded just the wrong shade of orange, or the ground was decorated in the wrong version of pink. And the brick road was most definitely too yellow for her tastes.

Destina blinked. "Yellow brick road?" She looked around again, then wandered up to the path she'd landed beside. "Now, this is ringing a bell or two. Either we're doing a literary reference, or Elton John's releasing another single." She looked down the road in both directions. One way lead directly to a brick wall, where a big circle with a line crossed diagonally through it was spray-painted onto it above where the wall stopped. No use going that way. In the other direction it led on and on over what appeared to be a really big bridge and what could have been a theme park. Or a city, with this weird dimension you'd never know.

"Oh well, a yellow brick road. What else does one do, but follow it?"

So she did, putting one foot in front of the other, heading towards the park. And as she did, she sang herself a little tune to keep her company. She wasn't sure where it came from or why it suddenly came to her, but it made sense. And she did like to sing.

"There's a feeling here inside  
That I cannot hide, and I know I've tried,  
And it's turning me around.  
I'm not sure if I'm aware  
If I'm up or down, if I'm here or there.  
I need both feet on the ground!

"Why do I feel like I'm drowning  
When there is plenty of air?  
Why do I feel like frowning?  
I think the feeling is fear.

"Here I am in a different place,  
In this different time, in this time and space,  
And I don't want to be here.  
I was told I could find my friend  
I could take him back and avert his end,



As long as my friend is there.

“Maybe I’m just going crazy,  
Chasing up ghosts for a fright?  
I’m acting just like a baby  
But he’s gonna be alright,  
Soon as we get home,  
As soon as we get home!”

At this point, the sun began to rise, and Destina could see things better. And she altered the tune of her song slightly.

“In a different place, in a different time,  
Different people around me.  
I would like to know of this different world  
And how different they find me.

“Just where could he be, is he sad, is he scary?  
If I find where he is, will my friend even know me?  
How will I know then  
If we’ll ever get home again?

“Here I am alone, though it feels the same,  
I don’t know where I’m going.  
I’m here on my own and it’s not a game,  
And a strange wind is blowing.

“I am so amazed by the things that I see here  
Don’t want to be afraid, I just don’t want to be here.  
In my mind this is clear –  
What am I doing here?”

Destina sighed, the sun was properly up by now, and she could see the world in its technicolour glory. What was she doing here? Was Frobisher really worth her life? Should she have waited for the Doctor to wake up before acting? She didn’t know, and she was coming to the end of her song.

“I wish I was home…”

## **Chapter Seven – Ice Cream and Iris**

Astra prodded at the bowl before her. “Sure you’re not going to eat this?” she asked.

Mort shook his head. “Take it, please, otherwise I will. And I shouldn’t.” He patted his stomach, pointedly.

Astra shrugged, grabbed a spoon and began to shovel it into her mouth. “Fair enough. I’ve never had any problems with eating ice cream and getting fat.”

“Not everyone’s got your metabolism, Astra. Everyone wishes they do, but no one does.”

“Since when have you been so concerned about your weight anyway?” she asked between mouthfuls.

Mort shrugged. “I dunno, just sick of being unfit I guess.”

Astra grinned. “Excellent choice. As soon as we finish up with this, I’ll get you onto an exercise regime. We’ll get you trim and terrific in no time, and I could always use a training partner.”

Mort shuddered, he knew what Astra’s training regimes could be like. He subtly changed the subject. “Speaking of finishing up here, when are we going to, you know, start?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, we got that distress call yesterday, and since then all we’ve done is landed here, wherever here is –“

“London, 2015,” supplied Astra.

“– and we’ve done nothing to actually work on finding out who’s called us and all that.”

Astra took another bite of the ice cream. “I thought you wanted a break, you know, after the Cybermen.”

“I did, but I’m bored now. And surely someone’s in big trouble or something?”

“Hmm,” Astra began to twirl her ice-cream and mix it with the topping.

“Well, I thought I’d go into it slowly. That signal was beamed at us, so I’m just being a bit cautious, is all.” Her eyes lit up. “Besides, holiday, fun, lots of ice cream for us to eat.”

“For you to eat,” Mort corrected, “I’m cutting back.”

“Well just because you want to be boring, doesn’t mean I have to be too.” She took another ice-cream bite, and Mort decided that she was only another three mouthfuls in rapid succession away from the biggest of all ice-cream headaches. “We’re in one of the funnest cities in the world, just as the century’s really hitting it’s stride, I say we party!”

Despite himself, Mort smiled. “When you put it that way, I think I agree with you.” He grabbed the spoon from Astra and took a mouthful of the ice-cream, and noticed she’d nearly finished it all off.

“What happened to the diet?”

Mort shrugged. “We’re on holiday, I’m taking a break.”

Astra laughed. “Ha! I make that a total of three minutes and eighteen seconds before you caved in from your diet. A new record, I think.”

“Probably. But that’s what holidays are for, aren’t they? Although we all know how our holidays always end up –“

“Uh, no!” said Astra, waving her palm in his face in a ‘stop’ gesture. “Don’t even think about jinxing us with this, Mort, I will not have it spoiled!”

“I’m just saying...”

“Nonononononono, I’m not listening! She pressed a button on the café table and allowed the music in their booth to start playing louder, making sure Mort couldn’t be heard. She poked her tongue out at him and ate yet another mouthful of ice-cream.

“You’ll annoy the other customers” he said, admitting defeat.

Astra shook her head. “There’s a light energy field between all the tables, designed to cut down on noise from other people. We could go quite a bit louder before we annoy anyone else. That’s the beauty of holidaying in the twenty-first century, the technology’s improved enough to be tolerable.” She cocked her head and listened to the music for a moment. “What a pity their music tastes haven’t improved since the eighties.”

Mort shrugged, then did a little impromptu bop to the beat. “I dunno, I think it’s quite catchy.”

“It’s yet another cover of that *Fame* song. You know, ‘I’m gonna live foreeeever!’”. She giggled as the singer neatly echoed her. “This must be, what, the twelfth version of it by now? At least they’ve changed it by getting a guy to do it for a change though.” She paused for a second, listening. “Assuming it is a guy. Could be Anastasia now that I think of it...”

Mort shook his head. “Nah, it’s a guy, I’m sure. I can usually pick these things.”

“He’s crap, whoever it is” said Astra definitively, finishing off the last of the ice cream.

Mort shrugged. “I dunno, I like it. Something about his voice that’s pleasing to hear.”

Astra laughed. “You would think that, Mr I-don’t-think-anything’s-awful-ever.”

“That’s not true. You’d never catch me hearing Macy Grey voluntarily.”

Astra laughed, and the singer wrapped up his song. “Aww, he’s gone away, poor Morty.”

“Shh, I want to hear who sung it” said Mort, hushing her up and listening carefully. The radio played a brief station identification sting, and the deep voice of the announcer came over.

“And that was the latest single from Kid, the new UK pop sensation taking the music world by storm.”

Astra scoffed again. “What a name, huh? Can you say ‘stuck in the eighties’?”

“Shh!” Mort shushed again.

The announcer continued. “And for all of you Kid fans out there, and really who these days isn’t, he’s still appearing at the newly opened *Theatre Royale* for the rest of the month, and we’ve been told by his managers that a whole new wing of tickets have just been released, by pure chance mind you, due to a late cancellation, so for those of you who missed out before, here’s your chance to go see him in person, but, ah, of course, these are limited, so you’d better hurry before they’re gone. Thanks to Mrs Wildthyme out there for calling this in, too. We appreciate it. And now, here’s a word from –“

Astra didn’t listen. She’d suddenly stood up and turned off the radio. “Come on, we’re leaving.”

Mort blinked. "Eh? What?"

Astra pulled out a couple of notes and dropped them in the mechanical robot that trundled down the aisle towards them. "I think I've worked out why we're here. Though what she's doing managing a star..."

Mort sighed. "So no holiday, then?"

"Not for a bit, I'll have to follow this up." Astra suddenly grinned at Mort, as she usually did when preparing to have a dig. "Though you should be glad, you might be able to get a meeting with your new favourite pop idol!"

"Thank you, sir, I'll pass that onto him. Yes, thank you. Goodbye." Corén pressed a button on her computer and waited for the next call to transfer through. She heard the click over her earpiece and immediately switched on *The Voice*, the tone she had practiced over and over to make it sound like this was the very first call she'd had all day and she was ever so excited to hear them.

"Good afternoon, welcome to *I & M Enterprises*, this is Corén Idle, how may I direct your call?"

She listened carefully a moment, really, really bored but didn't allow it to show in her voice. It was just some wanker wanting to order one of the new tickets for the Kid concert, she'd be getting them all day since the announcement over all the media outlets. Millions of people trying to get a glimpse of the new kid on the block. She couldn't see the appeal, just another pretty teenager somebody shoved a microphone in the hands of and said to sing, no greater than the Britneys or the Robbies that plagued the airwaves in the last decade. And look what happened to them.

"I see, sir, well, if you could please hold while I transfer your call to Sales and Merchandise, they will be only too happy to assist you further." She paused, as the twit on the other end kept talking. "Yes, yes, he is very good isn't he?" she lied, keeping the fake enthusiasm in her voice. "Yes, I agree. If you could please hold" She pressed a button and the caller was regulated to some inane muzak for them to get irritated by until Sales could be bothered answering them. Serves them right for living such boring lives that they'd call someone like them.

Just as the phone lines seemed to have quietened for the moment and Corén thought she might get to have a moments peace before the next one, the glass doors at the end of the foyer opened and a young couple walked in and headed towards her desk. Wonderful, someone else wanting help, probably tickets, the girl was about that age.

It was as they got closer when she realised that they were dressed a bit oddly. The girl had a silvery top tied up with a gold sash and a matching gold mini skirt making her look almost like an anime character. The boy looked almost normal in comparison, in a tatty red jacket which had seen better days and was now stretched out of shape, a plain white T-shirt and tracksuit pants. They couldn't be here for tickets, she decided, they couldn't possibly afford them.

The two approached the desk and Corén switched on the smile and tried to pretend they were actually worth speaking to. "Hello, welcome to *I & M Enterprises*, how may I help you?"

The girl blinked. "I & M, eh? I wonder what the M stands for?" She shook her head. "Nevermind, I'd like to see Iris please."

Corén's smile never faltered. "I'm sorry?"

“Iris. Iris Wildthyme. You know, bigish woman, weird hair, has a tendency to say ‘dearie’ and ‘chook’ a lot, handbag fetish. I was told by some reliable sources she’s in charge of this place.”

Corén sniffed. Credit to them for being new at least. “Ms. Wildthyme is in charge of this company, yes.”

The girl grinned. “I knew it. I’d like to see her please.”

Corén still refused to let her smile waver. These people may be original, but they were stupid. “Do you have an appointment?”

The girl’s grin wasn’t wavering either. “Like I’d need one for her. Just tell her Astra’s here to pay a visit and we’ll just go on up.”

“I’m so sorry,” said Corén, the words dripping like syrup, “but I’m afraid I can’t let you see her without an appointment. Ms. Wildthyme has a very strict schedule and nothing will interrupt that.”

The boy standing behind her sighed. “I told you.”

The girl gave an icy stare. “Very well, then, we’ll play it her way. I’d like to make an appointment, please.”

Corén sighed. Silly, silly girl. “I’m afraid she won’t take an appointment from just anybody, she has a very strict schedule and has better things to do than deal with every person who walks in off the street. And she does have certain ...” she sniffed for effect. “Standards.”

The girl’s eyes boggled. “Standards? Her!”

“Yes. You are, of course, quite able to speak to anyone in our Complaints and Comments department, and they can refer you to the appropriate department with which will be appropriate to your needs.”

“But I don’t want to see complaints, I want to speak to Iris. She’s an old friend of mine.”

Corén resisted to urge to roll her eyes. “I’m sure she is. Still, if you would not like to go through the appropriate channels, and if you have no actual serious requests, I’m going to have to ask you to leave. We’re quite busy at the moment.”

“What, painting your nails? Congratulating yourself how pompous and self opinionated you’ve been today?”

Corén felt her smile flicker slightly. So she was getting nasty was she? “I’m sorry for the inconvenience. I’m now formally asking you to leave.”

“Why? What are you hiding here? What’s Iris up to, eh? I’ll find out, you know, I’ll stop it too.”

Corén dropped the smile, it was no use now. “You’ve been warned, I’m calling security.” She reached down and picked up the red phone in the corner. She shouldn’t have to put up with this.

The girl fumed then said, “fine, fine, I’m going. But you haven’t heard the last of me you know!” She was shouting, but her friend had noticed she was acting irrationally and was dragging her out the door. Probably back to whichever home she’d come from. Corén put down the phone and turned back to her computer, as the next calls started coming through.

“Bitch” she said to herself as she adjusted her headset. “Hello, this is *I & M Enterprises...*”

“Bitch!” Astra swore as Mort led her out to the street. “Why is it all receptionists are evil and mean and not actually helpful to anyone?”

“Well, I did tell you it was useless” said Mort, letting her go. “If she’s in charge of a big corporation she’s never going to see just plain nobodies off the street.”

“That’s just it, she’s not the sort you’d expect to see in charge of a corporation. She lives in a bus for the Spirit’s sake.”

“She’s like this Doctor guy, isn’t he?”

Astra nodded. “A Time Lord, or so she says. She tends not to be the most reliable of sources. Which makes the idea of her running a multi-million dollar business a bit surreal. She must have help.”

“This ‘M’ guy in the name?”

“Yeah.” Astra looked up at the tall sky-scraper before them. “Well, we tried the nice way, politely walking in and asking to see her. Now we get mean.”

Mort turned and looked at his friend. “What are you thinking, Astra?”

“Well, I’m thinking setting a neutron bomb off in that lobby there to make that receptionist suffer, but that probably won’t be productive. No, I can’t think of much else. Time to bring in the big guns.”

“What, so pyrotechnics is out of the question, but heavy artillery isn’t?”

Astra took a moment to process this. “Not real guns, you big twit, metaphorical ones. I’m going to call up the Doctor, he knows more about Iris than I do, could give me an idea or two.

“You can just call him up like that?”

Astra shrugged. “Well, we both travel around in telephone boxes, it can’t be that hard. I’ll head back to the *Telstra* and see what I can do there. You stay here, see if you can get behind the building and get into a back door or something. Anything you can find could be useful.”

“Ahh, yes” said Mort. “I’ve been down this route before, you run off while I go exploring, I get kidnapped and you have to rescue me.”

“Exactly, it’s a tried and trusted method.”

“And what if I’m exterminated by a squad of Daleks?”

“Then thank them politely for me.” Astra giggled. “Come on, it’s a corporation run by Iris Wildthyme. It can’t be *that* great. You’ll be fine.”

Mort sighed. “Ok, I guess. But you know if I die –“

“Then you’re never speaking to me again. Good, go, snoop. I’ll be back later.” And with that, Astra headed down the street to hail a taxi.

Mort turned back to the imposing building, and sighed again. “Right, time to snoop. This should be fun.”

*Astra rolls her eyes. “Oh, yeah, as if.”*

*“What? You wouldn’t leave Mort behind to face whatever dangers lie behind the doors of Iris’s corporation?”*

*“Oh, no, I’d totally do that. I meant as if I’d need to go ring you up for help in dealing with something so trivial as this. I could just set the *Telstra* to land in whichever floor she’d happen to be on and confront her face to face. If I could be bothered facing her at all, if she wants to run her own business that’s her problem.”*

*“What about that whole Time Lord non-intervention policy that she’s deliberately breaking?”*

*“It’d be more important to me if I was actually a Time Lord and could care less about their policies. If it were real, Mort and I would be back to our holiday in an instant.”*

*The Doctor smiles. “And that, Astra, is why I keep saving the day and you don’t.”*

Mort strolled around behind the building casually, looking for anything resembling a secret entrance or some such. He decided he probably could have been a bit more subtle and sneakier, but really couldn't be bothered. If somebody was going to catch up, tie him to a chair and use him as a hostage while Astra beat them up, then they were going to do it anyway if he snuck about or not. Besides, Astra told him once that the best way to snoop around is to pretend that you own the place, and he decided to give it a try.

Right now he was owning the side of the building, and he was realising why nobody else really wanted it. It consisted of a blank wall, a blank double door with no handle (designed for people to exit from rather than enter and a big blue garbage dumpster in desperate need of an emptying. Mort was carefully deciding whether going through a huge pile of rubbish was anywhere in his job description.

He sighed. What did Astra think he'd achieve by hunting around here? He couldn't get into the building, and if they were smart, anything in the dumpster would be there for a reason, that it was safe to get out of the building. He figured he could wait for Astra to bring back whatever advice she had from the Doctor and follow her then, like he always did. Unless he'd been captured and tied up by then, at which point, refer to plan a).

It was around this point that the door without the doorhandle began to swing open and Mort, not being stupid and didn't really want to be captured if he could help it, scurried behind the dumpster and peered out to see who it was.

It was a kid, a guy probably a year or two older than Mort, about twenty or so he guessed, wearing a blue hooded jumper and some plain black tracksuit pants. He peered out of the door carefully, looked behind him to check no one was following, and crept out of the door, closing it as silently as possible behind him. Checking around again to be sure that nobody could see him, he casually flipped his hood over his short, blonde, newly cut hair and covered his face, before strolling out towards the street beyond.

A thief?, thought Mort, a burglar of some description. But don't thieves generally take stuff with them? Whoever this guy was, he didn't have anything with him besides the clothes on his back.

Mort peered out past the dumpster and shifted his position slightly to get a better look on where he was going, which is when he made his next mistake – Mort wasn't the most agile of people, and as he moved, some long-forgotten metal poles moved with him and tumbled down the back of the dumpster with an almighty clatter that it'd attract attention to anyone.

"Bugger" Mort whispered, as he swore he heard a cat or two scream at their abrupt awakening and scarpers off to somewhere else.

The guy had stopped before reaching the end of the ally, and turned around to stare at the dumpster's direction. There was no way he couldn't have heard the noise, and to Mort's dismay, he watched as the thief began to march towards him.

"Good one, Mort" he muttered to himself. "Don't get captured by the evil corporation, get caught by the ruffians casing the place instead..."

He figured as the thief was going to find him anyway, he may as well give himself up and save himself the humiliation of being dragged out of hiding by his ear. He rose to his feet and tried to look as innocent as he possibly could. "Umm, hi."

The thief stopped in his tracks and gave Mort a looking over. "Great," he said, miserably. "So, what are you, a fan, an admirer, wanting an autograph or something?"

Mort blinked. "I'm sorry?"

“Skulking around out here waiting to catch a glimpse, eh? Well, take a good look,” he raised his arms out to his sides and gave a little spin, “that’s the best you’re ever going to get, so I hope you took good notice.”

Mort didn’t know what to say. “Umm, ok, thanks. And I should be happy with this because...”

The burglar sighed. “Ok, you want money, then? To keep your mouth shut about me creeping out unannounced, eh?” Before Mort could fail to react to this, he found himself grabbed by his already-stretched jacket and slammed against the wall. The thief brought his face within centimetres of Mort’s and spoke in a low, threatening voice. “I’ll just tell you now, you won’t get a penny, and if you ever, ever repeat what you saw here, I will find you and beat you into such a bloody pulp you’d wish you’d never set foot within a zillion miles of this place, got it?”

Mort struggled feebly in the vice-like grip and could feel the muscles bulge in the guy’s arms and shoulders. He could pulverise him in an instant if he wanted to.

Mort realised he was expected to reply. He thought for a millisecond about whether he should just nod feebly, or perhaps be silly and goad him a bit further. Deciding that Astra could sort him out later if necessary, he picked the latter and prepared himself for the intense pain.

“Yes, of course, because thievery of a highly profitable business is something one should always keep quiet about, especially when one has bruises to prove it.”

The thief looked at him, his expression changing from anger to confusion. “What?”

“You can’t touch me, I know what you look like, I know what you’ve been doing in there – well, ok, I don’t know what you’ve been doing, but considering you have money I’d assume you’ve been robbing their vaults or safes or whatever. Point is, if you harm me in any way, I’ll just go to the police and have you caught and imprisoned.” Mort was feeling brave now, so he added. “So there.”

The guy looked confused at him again for a moment, then released him. As Mort started rubbing his sore shoulders, the thief continued asking him questions. “So, you don’t recognise me then?”

Mort rolled his eyes. Some people thought they were just wonderful, but how could he recognise him, he couldn’t be expected to know every low-life in the city, especially since he’d only been on the planet for the afternoon. “No, should I? Are you some super-duper king of thieves or something, face on every wanted poster? Sorry, don’t study those much.”

The guy still had that baffled expression on. “So you think I’m – of course, yes, a thief. You should pay more attention, I’ve been in the news all week.”

Mort sighed. “Not much one for TV. Ok, so how about you go your way, I go mine and we can both –“

He stopped, as he suddenly noticed the greenish glowy hazes surrounding them. There were about six or seven points where they glowed and shimmered, as if waiting to form into something, anything. And Mort didn’t like the look of them.

Mort noticed that the thief had noticed them too and had turned around from Mort to look at them. As they watched, the green hazes grew more solid, more tangible, and they reshaped themselves into a specific and familiar form. Domed heads, three protruding appendages, one at head level, two at the chest, and a skirt with a regulated bump pattern, Mort knew what he was facing all too well.

The mists faded away, and Mort and the thief were facing one of the worst scourges in the universe.

“Ex-ter-min-ate them! Ex-ter-min-ate them! Ex-ter-min-ate!!!!”



*“No, Doctor”*

*The Doctor throws his pen back down at the desk and sighs. “What is it now, for Rassilon’s sake?”*

*“No Daleks, please.”*

*“Why not? They’re big, bad, scary, and I need a cliff-hanger to end this chapter on.”*

*“Because their getting old, Doctor” Astra exclaims. “I’m bored of them, you keep running into them over and over again and it’s getting predictable.” She paused for a moment and brushed away a strand of hair from her face. “Besides, you know you’re going to make them sing sooner or later, and that never ends well.”*

*“But it’s so funny! Dancing Daleks, singing in a harmonic chorus...”*

*“No it’s not, Doctor. Don’t use Daleks, try something new. Believe me, the story will work so much better.”*

*The Doctor sighs, then reaches for his pen. “Oh alright then. I’ll think of something new...”*

As they watched, the green hazes grew more solid, more tangible, and they reshaped into a more humanoid form. The mists faded away, and they found themselves surrounded by about six or seven ninjas in complete black costumes, swinging swords that sliced the air with their sharpness.

“- we can both die horribly by this weird group of ninjas that have appeared from nowhere” said Mort, and gulped loudly as they moved in toward them.

## **Chapter Eight – A Friend From The Stars, And A Star Of A Friend**

“Where’d they...” asked the thief, not quiet believing what he was seeing. Mort could sympathise, weird stuff can be difficult to deal with when you first encounter it. He just hoped the poor guy could deal with it quickly enough so they could escape in one piece.

“Umm, ok, when I say run, we –“

The closest ninja suddenly raised its sword and swiftly swung it down towards them. Mort was barely able to squeal, before he realised the blow hadn’t connected, the thief had managed to reach in under the ninja’s sword, grabbed his wrist and deflected the blow. With ease, he gave the ninja’s wrist a sharp twist, there was a sickening crack and he dropped to his knees, nursing his hand.

A second ninja approached, but this one failed to even get his sword above waist height before the burglar had delivered a sharp kick to his chest, cracking a rib or two, following through with an elbow and a back fist to the face in rapid succession. A third ninja was dealt with in as much ease when the thief grabbed his lapels and threw him over his shoulder into an undignified heap on the ground.

Mort was glad he hadn’t made this guy *really* angry.

The thief wasn’t anywhere near finished as two more ninjas came at them. Without blinking, he punched one of them before he could raise his sword, grabbed his top and threw him into the second, sending them both down together. Another one went down as the thief leapt into the air and threw a spinning kick, forcing the ninja into the wall.

“Where’d these guys come from?” he muttered, barely out of breath.

Mort stepped forward and looked at the scattered bodies heaped on each other. “Not sure, teleported in I think. They could be human. Or they could be...”

He was interrupted yet again, as all the ninjas stood up in unison, all their apparent injuries gone, as another greenish glow surrounded them.

“Ok, not human then” he concluded. Mort decided this guy wasn’t going to be the only one showing some sort of initiative, and he spun around to grab the poles he’d knocked over earlier. Long and metal, with a pointy bit at one end – he had no idea what they were used as before and why they’d been thrown out, but they were perfect when fighting off evil ninjas who don’t get hurt. He grabbed two and threw one over to the thief who caught it almost as if he hadn’t realised it. Mort stole a glimpse of him swinging it like an expert staff fighter, deflecting the sword blows and knocking them off their feet like it was second nature. But then Mort realised he had his own fighting to do.

A ninja bore down upon him, ready to split his skull with his sword. Mort, trying desperately think back to all the times Astra had tried to give him self defence lessons, raised his metal staff and blocked the blow. He then proceeded to block and parry the next swing of the staff, moving slightly and trying to keep him off-balance, then the next one and the following one. The blows were coming thick and fast, but somehow Mort held his ground.

“Keep moving the line, keep moving the line” he repeated to himself, as he parried another blow and stepped to the side. Taking a gamble, he parried yet another blow and followed it through with a blow of his own, to the ninja’s head sending it down to the ground. Without thinking, he rammed the point of the pole into the ninja’s head. It instantly glowed green and dispersed into the mist it once was.

“Wicked,” said Mort, as he spun around to find himself sword-to-staff with another one of them. Mort gave him a kick, which unlike the thief’s failed to break anything, but managed to push the ninja’s sword away enough for Mort to clock the baddie with his staff and repeat his action of knocking him to the ground and punching a hole into his head before it turned to mist.

Mort looked around for another enemy, now pumped and excited, but noticed, to his dismay, that the thief had the remainder covered. He’d somehow lost his staff to one of the other ninjas who was nursing a broken up further back, and he was dealing with the one he faced with a series of spinning kicks. The ninja, somehow remaining standing through this, swung his sword high, when the thief grabbed his arm, allowed it to continue through its intended direction, yet neatly stepped aside to let the sword impale the ninja and let it and its sword dissolve.

Only one ninja remained, its arm newly healed, and it charged the thief with its sword held high. With a grin, the thief casually grabbed the ninja’s lapels and rolled down over to his back, kicking the ninja over his head and into the wall. Mort, thinking fast, took his staff and pinned the ninja through the chest, upside down, to the wall. It wriggled for a moment before it too joined its brothers in the greenish air.

The thief leaped back onto his feet and turned to Mort, an excited grin still on his face. “All right!” he exclaimed, literally bouncing with enthusiasm. He rushed over to Mort and held up his hand, “give me five!”

Mort smiled and reluctantly patted his hand. He knew exactly how he felt, he was feeling a bit buzzed himself, the adreneline still pumping through his system.

“That was ... that was unreal!” continued the thief. “I’ve got no idea what those things were or where they went, but I haven’t had a fight like that in ages. God, it was...” he let out a short roar-like grunt, which Mort guessed possibly suggested his lack of words for what it was.

“I guess it was pretty good” said Mort, trying to make conversation.

“Pretty good?” asked the burglar. “It was awesome! It was, like, it was ... oh, I am so itching to go beat something else up now, it was spectacular?”

Mort grinned. “So I guess you had fun then?”

“God, did you see how they just dissolved like that? I mean, how cool is it? And how I got both of those ones with that spinning kick –“ he gave a quick demo, still unable to stay still.

Mort nodded. “Yeah, I saw bits. Was busy fighting my own battle of course, but still...”

The thief stopped kicking and gave Mort a look. “Yeah, I saw that. You’re not bad, you know?”

Mort laughed at this. “Ha, you found me on a good day I think. Usually in a fight I get knocked out and left to the side for most of it. Not sure where that came from...”

“No, no, you were good. Hey, what’s your name, anyway?”

“Mort.”

“Hi, I’m Ki-erm, Kane. Nice to meet you, Mort.”

He held out his hand and Mort shook it, his hand frozen in the vice-like grip. “Nice to be met. Oh, you’ve ripped your jumper, by the way.”

Kane looked down at his ripped top, his neckline now plunging low enough to show a glimpse of a smooth and tanned well defined chest. “Oh, yeah, oh well, I’ve got plenty. Hey, do you want to go get a drink or something? My skin’s just crawling with excitement, and I’ve got nothing else to do.”

Mort shrugged. “Yeah, me neither. Why not.”

Kane grinned again. “Great!”

With a whispering shouting noise, the *Telstra* materialised in the office amidst a shower of blue lightning that brightened up the room no end. It was still shaped as an Australian telephone box, there really hadn’t been much point altering its shape for something like this. She was there to deliberately attract attention.

As soon as the lightning and the noise had ceased, the door swung open and Astra stepped out. She took in a stagey deep breath and marvelled around her. “Just got to love that office-building simulated fresh air. Not!”

She paused, waiting for a response. She didn’t get one, which wasn’t surprising since she was the only one in the room. Perhaps she’d landed in the wrong office, she thought to herself, or maybe even in the wrong building. “I’d better be on the right planet” she added to herself aloud, just to fill in the silence a bit. She hated it when there was nobody about to pay attention to her – it’s what Mort usually came in good for. And for causing trouble too, hence her leaving him behind.

*“You’re writing for my point of view!” Astra exclaims in annoyance. “How dare you write what I’m thinking?”*

*The Doctor sighs. “The same way I write for Frobisher’s and Destina’s and the others – I’m making it up. It’s called writing fiction, look it up some time.”*

*“But you can’t possibly know what I’d be thinking in a place like that. Get out of my head, Doctor, get out now.”*

*“Make me. You’re the one who demanded I write you into the story, if you’re going to appear, you’re going to have to have some scenes written from your point of view.”*

*“But –“*

*“Besides, it’s a scene in which you’re alone, so I’ve got no-one else to give the point of view from, and it’s boring writing from an omniscient one. So there.”*

*Astra grumbles to herself. “Alright, I guess, but you’re doing it under protest!”*

*The Doctor sighs. “The story of my life...”*

Astra sighed and began her

*“Just a minute,” Astra interrupts again.*

*“What now?”*

*“I’m just thinking about this title you’ve given it.”*

*“Title?”*

*“Yeah, the one at the top of that page. The Great Novel of Doom. It’s a bit, I dunno...”*

*The Doctor puts down his pen again. “What? Boring? Dull? Generic?”*

*“Well, yes, it’s that, but it’s also wrong.”*

*“Wrong? How’s it wrong?”*

*“Well, it’s not exactly a novel, is it? I mean, at fifty thousand words, it’s really more of a novella than a novel, it’s not long enough otherwise.”*

*The Doctor rolls his eyes. “Yes, but The Great Novel of Doom sounds better than The Great Novella Of Doom.”*

*“But it’d be more accurate. And what’s this about doom? I haven’t seen much in the way of doom here yet.”*

*“Frobisher?” suggests the Doctor pointedly.*

*“Well, him, maybe, but one death doesn’t really make a story qualify for being a story of doom. Doomish, maybe, but not doom itself.”*

*The Doctor sighs. “Ok, whatever, I’m not all that fussed about what the title is before I’ve even finished the first half of it.”*

*Astra grins. “Good. Give me the pen.” She reaches over and pulls the Doctor’s pen from his hand and scribbles on the top of the first page. When she’s finished, she returns it smartly to the Doctor. “There.”*

*“Finished?”*

*“Yep.”*

*“Good, can I get on with the actual story now?”*

*Astra nods. “Yep.”*

*“Thank you, you’re too kind.”*

Astra sighed and began her search of the room. She wasn’t entirely sure what she was looking for exactly, documents, videos, anything incriminating or otherwise, something that might suggest what was going on here. Not that she had any business doing so, she admitted to herself, but anything Iris was up to in this sort of capacity had to be dodgy at some level.

She switched on the light and noticed for the first time the huge poster on the wall beside the desk. It was of a young blonde guy wearing some fashionable top, leaning over a bench in a subtly suggestive manner. A logo saying ‘Kid’ was dominating the bottom right corner.

“So that’s what the infamous Kid looks like” said Astra. She sniffed. “Not sure what’s so special about him.” She shrugged and wandered over to the desk where she started flicking through papers and files. Not much there, she soon realised, memos to various departments, memos from various departments, tour schedules that needed going over, appointments for photo shoots, beautician visits, shopping centre appearances, the usual thing one would find on a manager’s desk.

Certainly nothing that Astra expected to find on a desk belonging to Iris Wildthyme, certainly, but she also realised this wasn’t Iris’s desk. The memos and letters were all addressed to a “Mr M. Monk”.

“So this is the mysterious ‘M’ guy then” she muttered, glancing at a request from a clothing line about the star modelling their wares. “I wonder who he really is?”

She walked around to behind the desk and began to get ready to go through the drawers. They were locked, of course, but Astra had made a habit of it recently to bring a set of skeleton keys with her wherever she went, just in case of trouble. She went to pull them out of her pocket, but as they caught on the edge of her dress, she fumbled and dropped them onto the floor.

“Bugger,” she swore, as she dropped to the ground to collect them. As soon as she had them in her hand, however, she heard the door click open and two sets of footsteps come in. She could have stood up and announced her presence as she was planning to, but she figured that while she was down here in hiding, she may as well stay. She was going to get caught anyway, and she could find out something interesting before then.

“So he’s run off again?” said a male voice, Astra assumed it was the mysterious Monk.

“I swear, you’d have to tie down that boy with a pair of nails in the feet to keep him still, I tell you, he was there one minute, I left the room and whoosh, he was gone!” Astra knew that voice – she’d recognise Iris’s shrill tones anywhere.

“Doesn’t he realise it’s not exactly safe for him to –“ he stopped. “What’s that?”

“Just a minute, dearie, let me get me specs on. Ooh, my. It looks like one of those telephone booth thingummies.”

Bugger, thought Astra. She’d forgotten about the *Telstra*.

“I know what it is, Iris, I’m not blind. How’d it get here?”

“Ooh, I dunno, might be a present from someone. I’m always getting presents from various people, so you never know – just a moment. Just a small infinitesimal moment, I think I recognise this.”

“I know,” said the Monk patiently. “It’s a telephone booth, you’ve just told me.”

“No, no, no, it’s more than that. That word on the top, ‘Telstra’, it’s a name that floats upon the memory it does...” Astra heard her snap her fingers. “Of course, one of the Doctor’s little friends had one!”

“She had a telephone box?”

“Well, the Doctor has one, dearie...”

“Are you saying this is a TARDIS?”

“No, no, no, I don’t think so, love. I think she said it wasn’t Gallifreyan or something. What was her name, Alice, Ace, no Ace was a different one. Alison? Amy?”

“How about Astra?” said Astra, rising from her hidey spot. She’d had enough.

“Ooh, no, it wasn’t a silly name like that, it was – oh. Umm, hello deary?”

Astra smiled. “Hi.”

The man was fuming. “How – how did you get in here? Don’t we have security here any more?”

Astra shrugged. “I just arrived the standard way, I just materialised.”

The Monk guy suddenly went pale, and he stepped back. “You’re not from – you’re not from *them*, are you, because I won’t go back, no matter what they say, I won’t –“

“Oh, don’t be such a silly sausage” Iris said, patting Monk on the head.

“Astra’s not from the Time Lords. She’s from the Doctor, aren’t you dear? Where is he, by the way, I’m quite keen to catch up on old times, you know, see what he’s been up to.”

Astra shook her head. “I’m not with the Doctor at the moment, I’m here as a free agent.”

Iris tutted. “Aww, well, look, nevermind, I’m sure you’ll patch things up eventually...”

“We didn’t have a –“ Astra paused, refusing to let Iris wind her up. “Look, what’s going on here? Who’s he? And why is a Time Lady who travels around in a dilapidated old bus suddenly managing a teen pop idol rise up the charts?” She leant over the desk and let her features darken into what she hoped was a scary snarl. “I want some answers, Iris, and I want them now.”

“Ooh, of course, chook!” said Iris, totally unaffected by Astra’s dramatics. “Let’s go down the caf and have a bit of tongue-wagging in there, eh?”

Despite their rather odd introductions, what with being thrown against a wall and threatened and all, Mort found Kane to be pretty good company. After leaving the alley, they’d gone for a walk around the city, taking in a few of the sights of London and just generally hanging around. For some reason, Kane had insisted on wearing his hood up and putting on sunglasses, which was a pity Mort thought,

because he wasn't exactly unattractive and shouldn't need to hide, but Mort assumed that he'd probably be wanted by a few authorities for various illegalities. It was about then that Mort wondered if he was doing the right thing in hanging out with a criminal.

They'd eventually settled down in a bar somewhere, drinking tall glasses of soft drink through curly straws while making small talk as a band played music on the right side of being too loud. They'd made some small talk, chatting about general things, but Mort had the problem that he couldn't really talk about his past all that much – tell the poor guy he was an alien from the planet Pendor who travelled about in a time machine with his overbearing best friend and he'd either burst into laughter or run away screaming. Either way, Mort didn't want to break up what they were building together.

The problem was, Kane wasn't being too forthcoming about himself either. They'd spent a few hours together since beating up the ninjas and Mort knew just a little about him now as he did then. All he'd got was that he was homeless and had no parents and managed to get by stealing things. But something about his story didn't gel with Mort – he'd been around the universe meeting a wide variety of people and had managed to learn a bit about body language. There was something Kane wasn't telling him.

“So,” said Mort, starting up a new topic. “Where'd you learn to fight like that?”

“Like with the ninjas?” Kane asked, as he took another slurp of his soft drink. “I dunno, I just picked it up somewhere. You tend to learn how to fight when you're on the streets, it's like a survival thing. Can't defend yourself and you end up hungry, you know what I mean.”

Mort nodded, sipping on his straw. “But still, some of those moves were pretty high-tech. They were really like martial-arts standard.”

Kane raised his eyebrows. “You think?” He shrugged. “Well, I've snuck into my fair share of kung fu films. Maybe something rubbed off?”

“Maybe.” Mort slurped on his drink a bit more, thinking of something else to talk about. It's rather hard to push conversation when both sides are being silent. “Any films in particular?” Mort inwardly cringed – he was in 2015, he had no idea of any of the movies in that era, how could he discuss any of them?

Kane shrugged. “Nah, nothing really specific. Just whatever happened to be on. Jackie Chan wasn't bad, you know, before the accident.” He shook his empty cup. “Wanna refill?”

Mort shook his head. “Nah, I'm good.”

Kane raised his hand and called a waitress over. “Hi, I'd like a refill please...” He paused, as he noticed the girl's suddenly glasseey stare. “What?”

“Oh. My. God” said the waitress. “Oh my god, it's ... it's ... it's you, isn't it?”

Kane laughed nervously. “Umm, I'm not sure what you mean. I'd just like a –“

“Oh my god, I am such a big fan of yours!” said the waitress, almost entirely forgetting she was supposed to be doing a job. “I've got all of your CDs, and I really, really want to go to your concert, except I haven't got as many tips as I'd like recently, but I just think you're the best and...” she paused, going slightly red, “if I might say, all my friends and I think you're really, really hot. Oh my god, I can't believe I said that!” she screamed and giggled.

Kane was trying his best not to be embarrassed. “Umm, I’m sure you’ve got me confused with someone else…”

The waitress ignored her. “Oh, I just can’t wait to tell them all, I got to serve Kid! *The Kid!* Oh, I can’t believe it. Oh, would you please give me your autograph, please, I’d be every so grateful!” She held out her waitressing notepad and pen to him expectantly. “Make it out to Nerissa, that’s with two ‘s’s” she giggled.

Mort looked expectantly, seeing what Kane would do. To his surprise, Kane sighed, took the notepad, gave a little scribble, then gave it back to the waitress. “Here you go,”

“Oh, thank you so much. Oh, while you here, you just have to sing for us. We’ve got a band and everything, oh you can’t leave without giving us a performance!”

Kane shook his head. “I’m sorry, I’m really not supposed to, I’ve got contracts and stuff –“

“Oh, please!” cried the waitress. “You have to, it’d mean so much to me, you’re my idol! It’d be publicity for your tour, and, and, well it’d be so cool!”

Kane sighed again and rolled his eyes. “Oh alright, whatever. One song. That’s all.”

The waitress was positively bouncing up and down now. “Oh my god, thank you! Thank you, I can’t believe it, Kid’s going to sing! Stay right there, I’ll just go tell the manager!” she rushed off to a back room screeching. “Uncle Rory! You won’t believe who’s here! Uncle!”

The crowd around them suddenly stopped talking about their own lives and interests and it seemed to be discussing them. Mort tried to ignore it and leant in close to Kane. “Umm, sorry, who are you exactly?”

Kane sighed, then took off the sunglasses and the hood. “I’m afraid I haven’t been honest. I’m Kid, that famous singer guy everyone keeps talking about.” He looked around at the staring crowd. “Unless you haven’t guessed.”

Mort blinked. “You’re Kid? The guy I heard singing on the radio a while ago? I don’t believe you.”

Kane – or Kid, whatever his name was, smiled at this. “Don’t believe me? Well then I really do have to prove myself, don’t I?” He stood up and walked through the crowd towards the stage, where the waitress and her manager uncle were beckoning him over. Mort watched as he shook hands with the manager, then got up on stage and took the microphone.

“Umm, hi everyone. I guess you all know me, but unless you’ve been under a rock, I’m Kid, and I guess I’m going to sing you a song.” He turned around and had a brief word to the dumbstruck band, and they began to play.

And the moment Kid started singing, Mort realised he was telling the truth, it was the same voice he’d liked on the radio. He sat there enraptured throughout the song.

“People, look at me,  
And tell me what you see.  
You ain’t seen the whole of me yet,  
Take a look, and tell me if you can’t guess.

“I’ve got more in me  
Than you thought there’d ever be!  
I can catch the moon in my hand –



Don't you know who I am?

"Remember my name!"

"Fame!" the band echoed.

"I'm gonna live forever!  
I'm gonna learn how to fly!  
I feel it coming together,  
People will see me and die!  
I'm gonna make it to heaven,  
Light up the sky like a flame!  
I'm gonna live forever,  
So baby, remember my name!"

"Remember, remember, remember, remember" the band intoned, and Mort found himself bopping to the beat.

"People, see this sight –  
A star that's shining bright!  
Watch me shooting straight to the top,  
See me take and give all I've got to give

"People, are you tough,  
Or have you had enough?  
I can ride this trip till it breaks –  
Ooh, have you got what it takes?"

"Fame! I'm gonna live forever!  
I'm gonna learn how to fly  
I feel it coming together,  
People will see me and die.  
I'm gonna make it to heaven,  
Light up the sky like a flame.  
I'm gonna live forever,  
So baby, remember my name."

The girls were screaming, the band was rocking, awed to be playing with such a star, and Mort couldn't help but be swept up in the atmosphere as his new friend started working the crowd and launched into some very carefully controlled vocal gymnastics. He laughed, as Kid began taunting the audience with some skin, threatening to slip his top off and the girls were going wild.

And Mort kept grinning. He'd made friends with someone famous and who wasn't Astra. How good was this?

Sadly, however, his good mood was spoiled when he noticed the green haze that was forming amongst the crowd. The haze shifted to mist, and began to collate around various specific points amongst the crowd and slowly began getting form. Nobody but Mort seemed to notice it.

The ninjas were returning for another round...

## **Chapter Nine - Dorf**

“Sweet thing, now we’ve told you ‘bout  
The world and the way things are-ah  
You’ve come from a different place,  
And I know you’ve travelled far-rah.  
Now that we’ve told you what it is, (da-da-dada-daaa!)  
It’s time to let you take a squiz!”

Destina watched in awe, as the monsters, demons and other inhuman beings danced, sang and back flipped around at the end of their bid production number. The music around them was swelling, the monsters approached their final positions, and in unison and perfect harmony, hit the big finishing line.

“Yes it is!”

And the final chord hit, the number finishing. Destina almost felt like applauding, only she really suspected that would be a bit surreal, even for this.

“Ok,” she said eventually. “So the underworld is really a musical one? I can deal with that. I mean, I’m sure it’s hell for somebody.”

It was starting to feel like hell for her, that was certain. Destina liked musicals probably more than the average person, but standing there for a whole ten minutes as these creatures of the night leaped and pranced and danced as if they were in some satanic Broadway show, dance routine after dance routine, she was getting bored. And now they froze, their song finally over, staring out at their very tiny audience with fake and impossibly happy grins stuck on their faces (or at least, on the ones who could be said to have faces). It was almost scary.

Destina kept still, not entirely sure what she was supposed to do now. What does an audience do when their performers stop performing. She shrugged, and wandered away from their surreal tableau. If they weren’t going to go away, she would. That yellow brick road still had plenty of mileage in it, and she had to find Frobisher.

She hoped he wasn’t singing.

She hadn’t got far before she decided to glance back behind her and see if the monstrous troupe had moved or flickered or anything. Which is when she found herself surprised by the fact that they’d vanished entirely, no trace of them ever being there remaining. She sighed. This sort of thing was beginning to get monotonous. At least in the real world, things tended to stay where you left them.

Suddenly, Destina felt a tap on her left shoulder. She turned around with a jump to see who it was, and instantly relaxed. It was a strange short man, with thin eyes – Chinese, Destina guessed, the ones from that Asian continent on Earth. He smiled at her.

“Oh, umm, hello,” she said. “You gave me a fright there. Can I help you?”  
He smiled. “Dorf.”

Destina blinked. “Ummm, ok.” She really didn’t know how to react to this.  
“That’s, erm, nice for you. What’s your name?”

“Dorf!”

“Ahh. Yes, indeed. And, umm, have you been ‘Dorf’ for long?”

“Dorf.”

“Good to know.” Destina smiled, despite the lunacy. “I’m sorry, obviously we’ve got some communications problem, a language barrier of sorts. Where I speak Gallifreyan, you, my dear little man, can only speak...”

“Dorf.”

“You could put it that way, I suppose.” She sighed. “I didn’t even know ‘dorf’ was even in the Chinese language.”

“Dorf.”

“How did I know you were going to say that?” The weird little man had no idea he wasn’t making any sense, he just stood there, a silly grin on his face, seemingly happy to just exist. A need to communicate just didn’t even enter his mind.

“Dorf!” he said again, cheerily.

Destina rolled her eyes and sat down where she was on the road. “I’m bored of this now, I’m literally getting nowhere on this quest of mine, just a long stream of silliness and stupidity, and you, my silly little nutter, are just the latest.”

“Dorf.”

“I’m no closer to finding Frobisher, I haven’t even got the vaguest clue on how to start. Oh, Death told me it’d be difficult, but I’m surely supposed to have something to go on, surely?”

“Dorf.”

“And you’re not helping, little Dorf man. You know you’re very useless? I mean, maybe as a Chinese man who can just say ‘dorf’ you the very model, but –“ She stopped as she heard the sound of a piano playing a chord eight times in rapid succession, followed by an introductory tune so well known, even Destina recognised it. And as the Dorf man began to sing, Destina realised she probably should have chosen her words more carefully.

“I am the very model of a Chinese man who just says ‘dorf’,  
I’m much more entertaining than a monster, imp, or grubby dwarf.  
I visit every narrative from *Moby Dick* to *Narnia*,  
Annoying the protagonist and making him go barmier.  
I serve no proper purpose but to irritate and waltz about  
While providing enough padding to increase a story’s word count  
I like to think my presence can be quite amusing and such fun.  
Except my repetition which goes on and on and on and on.”

A chorus of voices from nowhere appeared and joined in the song.

“And on and on and on and on and on and on and on and on and on.  
And on and on and on and on and on and on and on and on and on.  
And on and on and on and on and on and on and on and on and on and on!”

And then the Dorf man resumed the song.

“And yet I manage to appear despite the lack of use I bring  
It’s quite a task to up the words of every single written thing.  
Yet somehow with my general use, my character will never morph,  
I’m still the very model of a Chinese man who just says ‘dorf’.”

“Although he’s used generically, his character will never morph,

He'll always be the model of a Chinese man who just says 'dorf'" sang the chorus.

As the music bridged over to the next verse, Destina could see the Dorf man really getting into the music. To accompany his second verse, he did a little dance.

"There are a zillion places where a guy like me can be of use  
Approaching deadlines often are the major times when I'm let loose.  
But occasionally a writer will introduce me just for fun  
A warning to his characters – they should behave or I'll have fun.  
I have a million uses in every tale you have ever read  
Provided that it makes use of vocabulary limited  
You'd be shocked of the potential when you have just one word to say."

He paused, thinking for a moment. Then he shrugged.

"Well I can't think of any now, but trust me there's a zillion ways."

And the chorus jumped in:

"We can't think of any just now, but trust him there's a zillion ways,  
We can't think of any just now, but trust him, there's a zillion ways  
We can't think of any just now, but trust him, there's a million, zillion ways!"

"I'm very quickly running out of things to sing about my life,  
Which isn't good, as I've still got another verse to lyricize.  
Yet keep in mind before you think to throw me off the nearest wharf,  
I am the very model of a Chinese man who just says dorf."

"Don't you think it could be fun to throw him off the nearest wharf?"

There's something that is rather sad about this guy who just says 'dorf'." sang the chorus, and Destina found herself agreeing. But the music slowed down, and the Dorf man slowed the speed of his singing to accommodate.

"But when I have the conscious need to expand my vocabulary.  
When I appear in every tale from Earth to distant Gallifrey.  
When I persuade the writers to make use of my ability  
To stretch a novel closer to the word count of infinity.  
When I can find an actual use that makes them want to write me in  
When I can find a great excuse to sing and dance and dance and sing  
In fact when I am promoted from cameo to central role  
You'll hear the tale of the greatest ever adventure that's ever told.

"You'll hear the tale of the greatest ever adventure that's ever told,  
You'll hear the tale of the greatest ever adventure that's ever told,  
You'll hear the tale of the greatest ever adventure that's ever, ever told!"

The Dorf man smiled, and continued:

"And so, to finish up this song, I've just one thing to say that's true,  
I'm far more than a silly man who says one word and annoys you.

And now I need a final rhyme, so give me a salad waldorf  
As I'm the model of a Chinese man who just says 'dorf'!"

And the chorus wrapped up the song:

"He's run out of a word to use that rhymes so perfectly with 'dorf'  
Oh isn't he a silly little Chinese man who just says 'dorf'?"

*"I can't believe you just did that," Astra says, shaking her head.*

*"I think it's quite an achievement, three verses about somebody who only says a single word."*

*"It's a cheap way to pump up your word count and you know it."*

*"Yeah, but look, seven hundred and forty-five extra words, and I've crossed the half-way mark."*

*"And meanwhile, Destina's story's ground to an utter halt while you indulge in this surreal and depressing 'dorf' song."*

*The Doctor shrugs. "At least it wasn't the doom song, we'd be here for hours."*

*"Admit it, you don't know where this story's going, do you?"*

*"Well, maybe not the Destina one. I know she has to go through some sort of ordeal, I'm just stuck for ideas for the moment. So I'm doing some time-passing."*

*Astra sighs. "I doubt anyone cares anyway, I know I'm more interested in what's going on with the other storyline."*

*"Just because you're in it."*

*"Of course."*

*"To be honest, I think I'd rather write about that one too. I mean, I've set up an excellent cliff-hanger and – ooh, ooh!"*

*Astra shuffled her chair. "Did I squish your toe with my chair-leg again?"*

*"No, no, I just got an inspiration moment. I know what to do with Destina!"*

Destina didn't know whether to stand there and laugh at the twit, or back away slowly in case he pulled out a really large chainsaw. "Umm, how nice" she said.

"Dorf."

"Just the word I was looking for." She glanced around her surroundings and thought of possible escape routes. She could try going around the Dorf man, but that might be difficult. And going back the way she came might not be a particularly intelligent route, if she wanted to find Frobisher in a place she hadn't been before. Of course, she could always go off the yellow brick road into the wilderness beyond, but she recalled plenty of stories that said never to stray from the path, and the heroine always did to her peril. Destina wasn't too keen to do that.

"Dorf!" said the little man, suddenly insistently.

"What is it ... now?" She trailed off, as she noticed he was pointing to a place on the road behind him. Where there had once been simply nothing now stood a plinth with a large green crystal sitting on it. Around it a green haze hovered, or was it mist? Destina wasn't sure.

She approached it carefully, still aware the Dorf man was hovering behind her. She took a close and careful look at it.

"I wonder what it is? It's not a natural thing, that's obvious. That green haze doesn't look too healthy either."

“Dorf” said the man again, and pointed at the plinth it was sitting on. Destina noticed something she’d missed before – engraved beneath the crystal was the words “Break Me” in very fancy lettering.

“How very curious” said Destina, before she realised she was acting like a literary character. She stopped herself in time and forced herself to act rationally. “Well, obviously something is going to happen if I break it – but is that a good something or a not-so-good something. I guess either way, doing nothing won’t achieve anything.” She closed her eyes and raised a fist above the crystal, and prayed to whomever was listening she was doing the right thing.

Suddenly she found herself shoved aside roughly, as the Dorf man raced up to the plinth. “No!” she called, as he picked up the crystal and, still wearing his goofy grin, he held it above his head.

“Dooooooooo!” he screamed, and he shattered the crystal on the ground at his feet. It exploded in a green light, but the Dorf man was unharmed by it, besides an odd mist remaining from the explosion.

Destina stood up, and watched the Dorf man keep grinning, and nodded as if asking for approval. “Dorf?”

Destina smiled herself, and was about to say something appropriately witty, when she noticed something. The mist had stopped being mist, in fact it had clumped together in three separate entities surrounding the Dorf man, and was growing steadily more solid. Before her eyes, Destina saw the mist gain form and definition, becoming less like mists and more like humanoid beings with edged weapons.

Ninjas.

Destina screamed when she realised the poor Dorf man was surrounded by them, the grin on his face finally disappearing. Before she could even move, the ninjas raised their swords in perfect unison, then swung them across the Dorf man’s next level.

She couldn’t watch, at the moment of impact she heard a sickening rip, and a stomach-crawling bounce on the ground, followed by the collapse of a body. Tears started flowing again at that point – she didn’t know the poor man, in fact he was less than useless, but she hated the fact she had to stand there as he died, and she couldn’t do anything about it.

“How ... how could you?” she screamed at the ninjas. “What did he do, he just broke your stupid crystal, just before –“ she paused. “Just before I could break it myself.” It suddenly occurred to her that the silly little Dorf man had sacrificed himself to save her life.

But she found that her feelings of guilt were going to have to be set aside, the ninjas had finished with their first victim and were ready to slice up their second. They stepped over the Dorf man’s body and advanced on Destina.

And Destina, unarmed and unskilled in the ways of combat with swordsmen and martial artists, realised she had only one single option open to her.

She turned from them and ran off the road and into the wilderness.

## Chapter Ten - Fame

It was nonsensical, or at least, that was Astra's initial summation of it. She sipped her tea under the gaze of the two of them, Iris and the Monk (she'd got corrected on that, it wasn't Mr Monk, it was simply *The Monk*. Just in the way that there was *The Master*, and *The Rani* and *The Valeyard*. The definite article, *The Doctor* might say). She'd heard their story, sitting there quietly, and now they waited for her reaction. So, she deliberately drew it out as long as possible, just to keep them on the edge of their seats.

Forget saving the world, she should have gone into dramatics.

Very carefully, she placed her cup back down onto the table, then gave both of them a cold hard stare. "Ok, now, let me get this straight. You're both renegade Time Lords, yes?"

The Monk nodded, but Iris smiled and said "ooh, not quite the whole story with me, darling, but it's close enough, go on."

Astra continued, "and for some unfathomable reason, both of you managed to crash and disable your TARDISEs here in London about two years ago and have been stuck in this time zone since."

"Well, they haven't invented the right technology yet" said the Monk.

"I see. So in the meantime, you both picked up some kid off the street, coincidentally called Kid, and decided on the advice of a demon karaoke singer that you should put him into show business and make him a pop icon."

The both nodded silently, as if this were the best idea ever. Astra took this in and continued her recount. "So, you set up this new business corporation named after yourselves – I & M being Iris and Monk I'm assuming – using money you'd invested about three hundred years ago and now can collect interest on," the Monk looked very pleased with this idea – of all the things you could do with time travel, he uses it to make lots of cash, "and proceeded to manage this kid through to being the international star that he currently is, bringing you fame and fortune and a big super-corporation that hires rude receptionists and organises tours for one of the biggest pop stars in the world."

The Monk and Iris couldn't have looked any more pleased. "So," said Iris, "what do you think?"

Astra paused for a moment. "Ok, you both know you're utterly insane, don't you?"

They didn't know how to react to this, so Astra continued. "As the Doctor would probably tell you if he were here now, what's it for? What's the point of doing all this?"

Iris shrugged. "Well, it seemed like a good idea at the time, lovvie. Taking a poor unfortunate off the street with no future and giving him a chance to really succeed in life..."

"Oh, yes, very charitable I'm sure," said Astra, "but that certainly doesn't sound like you, Iris, and from what I gather it doesn't sound like you either, Monk. You lot never do anything without an ulterior motive, it's like programmed into your Time Lord DNA or something." A thought occurred to her. "Speaking of the Time Lords, don't they have some non-interventionist policy or something?"

"Oh, well, they don't know we're here," said the Monk quickly. "Or if they do, they don't care. With our TARDISEs disabled, we're as good as in exile and

that's what they like to do with us meddlers. We've become stuck in time rather than oblique to it, so we can't really alter them."

Astra gave them a sideways look. "Still, I'm fairly sure you're not telling me everything. I know you, Iris, you're always planning something."

They both looked shifty, not letting themselves look Astra in the eye. Eventually the Monk caved in and began to confess. "Well, you see, it's something about Kid..."

To Astra's frustration, the Monk was unable to continue, as they were interrupted by the arrival of some receptionist person (not the evil one she'd met before, thankfully). "Excuse me, sir?"

The Monk looked up, "Yes, what?"

"Sorry to interrupt, I have an urgent note for you." She handed him a piece of paper, which he unfolded and glanced over. "Yes, so, a riot in a bar. Hardly anything that should interest me, let the police handle it."

"Umm, they have sir. It's why they've asked for you – it's about who's involved."

The Monk sighed, and scrunched up the piece of paper. "I'll kill him" he said plainly.

"Oh, goodness me, I wonder what he's done now?" Iris muttered.

"Thank you, Liz" the Monk told the receptionist, standing up. She nodded and scurried away. Iris rose to her feet as well, so Astra decided it'd be impolite not to do the same.

"Come along, Astra" said the Monk as he strolled across to the door. "Leave your tea, we'd better get down there. Time for you to meet the infamous Kid, I think."

Kid still had a whole lot of adrenaline pumping through him from the fight at the alley, and getting up on the stage in an impromptu performance hadn't really brought him down off his high. So when another bunch of ninjas appeared in the audience, Mort surmised, he wasn't just ready for them, he couldn't wait to deal with them.

He'd noticed them about the same time Mort had, and stopped singing instantly. He leaped off the stage and knocked the first one down before it had even completely materialised, but in dealing that one, he wasn't able to deal with the others. And Mort, sitting near the back, was too slow as he tried to rush through the tables and chairs.

So there were casualties, and the bar floor started running red. The poor unfortunates had no chance against these expert ninjas as they sliced and diced, and in the crowd, even Kid appeared to be having trouble. Mort, unable to get close enough amongst the panicking fans, noticed his new friend skewer a ninja with its own sword, reducing it to mist like the others, but he wasn't doing anywhere near as well as before. And the ninjas kept coming.

And somehow, before the carnage became a full-on massacre, Mort heard a scream amongst the screams. He assumed it was a ninja war-cry of some kind, but what type of ninjas scream "dooooorf!" as they impale their victims?

Whatever it meant, the ninjas stopped fighting as they heard it, and instantly dissolved themselves. Leaving a bloodied dance-floor, lots of confused and frightened patrons, several bodies, and a very excited Kid.



Which didn't go down well when the police arrived minutes later to see Kid wound up as tightly as a coiled spring, so pumped he was likely to explode at any moment.

Which is why they were now sitting together on the back of an open police van while the police dealt with the chaos. They'd called Kid's managers and they were heading down to deal with, what Mort realised was probably a publicity nightmare.

Kid had calmed down somewhat when he realised the casualties and that people had died. He had the grim face on, but Mort knew underneath he was still itching to go toe-to-toe with something else, get the rest of the adrenaline out of the system. His clothes had been ripped even further, and Mort could now see more of his muscles, tensed and coiled, ready to pounce on anything.

Mort smiled, and began to muse to himself. "I wonder where those ninjas came from?"

Kid gave him a look, like he'd said something silly again. It was a look Astra always gave him, so it didn't phase him, and he shrugged. "I mean, that's two attacks in one day. And both of them seem to be wherever we are. I think that's suspicious."

Kid nodded. "Oh yeah. And the way they seemed to just come from nowhere, literally."

"Oh, yes, that too." Mort sighed. "When are these managers of yours showing up? I get the feeling I ought to be discussing this with Astra."

Kid gave him another funny look. "Astra? Who the hell is Astra?"

"That would be me!" Mort looked up and noticed a familiar face striding towards them, someone else close behind. She didn't look impressed. "By the Spirit, Mort, what do you think you're doing? Who's this – oh, it's that Kid guy."

Kid grinned. "Cheers" he replied dryly.

Astra ignored him. "Mort, what's going on here?"

Mort pointed to the taped-off bar. "Evil ninjas. Appeared from nowhere. Started killing people. Very messy."

"You ok?"

Mort nodded. "Yep. Kid here can more than take care of himself, can't you?"

Before Astra could respond, a large woman in a floral dress bounded up behind them. "Oooh, Kid! What in blue blazes are you doing here? Oooh, you had the Monk and I worried half to death, you did, sneaking off like that!"

Kid rolled his eyes. "Hello Iris."

"Getting into pub brawls, running off doing silly things. And just look at your clothes, goodness, you're an utter mess!"

Kid looked down at what was left of his jumper and shirt and shrugged. "I've got plenty more. And I'd like to see you keep your clothes in tact when fighting of people with big long sharp swords."

"Nevermind, dearie, we'll get you cleaned up in time for tonight." She pulled out a handkerchief from her sleeve, spat on it, and began rubbing some of the dirt off Kid's face, much to Kid's irritation. "The Monk's going to go absolutely crazy, you know. You've messed up his entire schedule, we'll be lucky if we get you home and ready for the concert!"

"Yes, yes, thanks, Iris, you can stop cleaning me. Iris!"

Mort grinned, as another figure, a man in a hooded robe, not unlike a monk's costume came over to them. His face was simultaneously jolly and grave, and was currently trying to emphasize the grave parts. "I've just spoken to the police, they've agreed to keep quiet about your involvement, I let them know you weren't involved."

“But we were involved,” Mort interrupted. “Well, as much as anyone there was.”

The Monk blinked. “Who are you?”

“He’s with me” said Astra and Kid, simultaneously. There was an awkward pause.

The Monk looked down at Kid. “Is he now? You’re lucky this can be covered up. Otherwise there’d be real troubles. We’ll get you home again, we’re behind schedule already.”

Kid rolled his eyes. “And that is a problem because?”

“Because if you’re late for your performance, you break your contract, and if you break your contract –“

“I know, I know, good-bye fame and fortune, hello career-ruining law suit.” Kid sighed. “Ok, lead on Macduff.”

“That’s ‘lay on’” the Monk corrected. “If you’re going to quote the Bard, do it properly. Come on, onward.”

He propelled Kid forward in front of him, Iris to his side. To Mort, it almost looked like a couple of parents escorting their young child home after he’d been caught stealing sweets. Well, except for the fact his ‘parents’ seemed an unlikely couple, and Kid was technically old enough to be a parent himself. Mort turned to Astra and realised she’d had a similar thought, judging by the grin on her face.

“So,” she said, “you’re with him, eh?”

Mort chuckled. “I found him sneaking out of the back of the building, we shared some quality death time with some evil ninjas, then we decided to hang out together for a while. Until we got here, and then there was more of the death time.”

Astra nodded. “I’m sure, I mean, it’s not every day you get to hang out with a big superstar.”

“Honestly, I had no idea – I thought he was a thief until half an hour ago! He let me believe me, I guess he thought I’d go all gaga if I found out he was a famous guy.”

“And the fact you were so enraptured with his song on the radio before is totally irrelevant, yes?”

“Yes – will you stop looking at me like that, Astra, it was all totally innocent.”

Astra nodded, still grinning. “Yeah, yeah. Of course, when it comes to his managers, I’m not sure innocent is the word I’d use.”

Mort looked over at them frog-marching Kid down the street and dodging photographers. “Why, what’s wrong with them?”

“Plenty. I’ll tell you about it on the way, we’d better catch up to them or they’ll never let us back into the building.”

“The building? Why do we want to get back in there?”

“That’s where the *Telstra* is.”

Mort blinked. “Forget what I’ve been doing, Astra, what have you been up to?”

After catching a taxi together back to the I&M building, Mort barely got to say two words to Kid before he was swept away for make-up, hair styling, costuming, last-minute rehearsals, and Iris and the Monk had their own things to do, which rather left Astra and Mort at a loose end. They were quickly told they could use the Monk’s office to relax and entertain themselves in, since that was where the *Telstra* had been parked, but they couldn’t expect any sort of entertainment from their new hosts.

“You are, of course, invited to the show” the Monk had said, before leaving them alone. “the limo will leave at six.”

And so Mort and Astra used the opportunity to give each other details of their day’s discoveries and for Astra to go through the wardrobes in the *Telstra* to find a suitable dress to wear to such an occasion. And for her to decide what Mort should wear. Astra had chosen a full-length gold number and had used some machine thingummy in the *Telstra* to wear her hair up in what she decided was a stylish fashion for the 2010s. Mort had finally decided to go with a simple blue shirt (which Astra loudly didn’t like, saying that electric blue was very 1990s) and black dress-pants. Astra had pushed for him to go with a full tuxedo, but as Mort pointed out, it was a rock-concert, not a formal dinner.

Promptly at six, a call came through to the phone on the Monk’s desk asking them to come down to the limo waiting out the front. They’d dutifully took the lift, Astra asking every few seconds if her hair was ok and each time Mort wishing she hadn’t forced him to use gel in his. They soon reached the bottom and, as expected, a long black limo was waiting for them, a smart-looking chauffeur holding the door open for them.

Inside, Astra and Mort found Iris and the Monk already waiting and sipping champagne. The Monk had managed to abandon his usual habit and adopted a simple suit, Iris meanwhile had predictably not just dressed to the nines, but had gone somewhere around the sixteens, with a lavish and expensive looking mink coat, a leopard-skin shawl and a glittering gold handbag.

“Ooh, ‘ello, loves!” she exclaimed as they climbed into the limo. “Park your best features in here, that’s it.”

“Where’s Kid?” asked Mort, looking around him.

“He’s there already,” the Monk replied. “Lots of make-up, lighting tests, rehearsals and everything to prepare for. You can go now, Nagel.”

The engine started, and the limo began trundling out. Astra reached over to the ice-cooler and pulled out a long skinny bottle. “Oooh, champagne!” she said, grinning. “Good, I was a bit thirsty.”

“That’s for after the show, lovvie” said Iris. “Then we’ll all have one to celebrate!”

“Is it his première?” asked Mort.

“You mean ‘opening night, dear, it isn’t a film. And no, it’s not. But, well, I’ve never been one to turn down an opportunity for a good old booze up, if you know what I mean, eh? Eh?”

“No, I remember,” said Astra, putting the champagne back. “So, how long is it to this place?”

“Not long” said the Monk. “It’s just down here a bit, looking over the Thames. It’s not an old building, only erected a few months ago. Kid had the opportunity of christening it when we were last in London.”

“Ooh, and what a night it was!” said Iris, getting all nostalgic faced. “All the crowds, cheering for him, calling his name...”

“Paying you money” said Astra.

“Well, that too yes, can’t say that was all that bad either.”

Mort pointed out through the tinted windows. “Is that it there?”

The Monk took a glance and nodded. “Yep. The *Theatre Royale*. You can tell, by the long line of fans waiting to get in.”

As they drove past, Mort and Astra could indeed see a massive crowd of teenagers and others getting excited and waving banners with Kid’s name or picture

on them. They rushed past them quickly, but it was clear that he wasn't likely to have an empty auditorium.

"Ooh, such a pity seeing that" said Iris sadly. "We sold out for tonight months ago, most of them will get sent away..."

"So how'd you get him so popular?" asked Astra. "I mean, he was a street-kid with no money or an actual house to call his own. Usually you don't get far past that sort of thing."

"Ooh, that's where the Monk's lots of lovely money helped us out."

The Monk nodded. "You can buy just about everything these days when you have the right amount. Setting up a recording business was nothing, everything's made and distributed in house. We do our own publicity, our own merchandise, our own everything."

"Yes, yes, but plenty of people have done that," said Astra. "But most of them don't get quite this much success. Why's he so popular?"

The Monk smiled a coy smile. "I think we can attribute that to Kid's natural charm and likeability. Ahh, here we are."

The limo pulled up to the rear of the theatre and let its passengers out before backing into a garage not too far away. The four of them entered the building and went up the stage to the whole backstage area. It was bustling with excitement, lighting and special-effects guys rushing around making sure that their wares would all go off safely and securely, sound engineers securing the fact the audience could hear the star perform, a few dancers and backing singers stretching and warming up and whinging that their costumes didn't fit quite right.

It was a very different world than what either Astra or Mort had ever really been involved in before. Of course, Astra had done performances, she was famous on Pendor for having a beautiful singing voice, but nothing on this scale, and certainly without such primitive technology.

They walked around to the dressing-rooms wing and the Monk knocked on the one with the big yellow star emblazoned on it. Then they opened it and entered to find Kid sitting on a chair before the mirror as a hair stylist expertly made sure every hair on his head was in its correct position.

"How are we doing?" Iris asked gleefully.

"Terrible!" exclaimed the stylist in a Russian accent before Kid had a chance to open his mouth. "First, ze subject is delivered to me late, zo I has to rush through all of ze prewashes and ze treatments, and zen zere is interruptions and interruptions, and I zimply cannot work under zese conditions!"

Mort shrugged. "I think his hair looks fine."

The stylist threw her head back in a defiant gesture. "Hmph! And vhat would you know? I am an artiste! I have standards!" And to complete the primadonna act, she closed her work-bag and stormed out of the room.

"Lovely lady" said Astra.

"You've got no idea, she's been playing with my head for fifteen minutes" said Kid, looking at the result in the mirror. "It's short! What can you do with it?"

"Whatever she did, you look smashing" said Mort.

Kid nodded. "But try doing this every day and see if smashing is worth it." He stood up and whipped off the smock he was wearing to reveal a blue long-sleeved silk shirt, unbuttoned down to his navel so that his well-shaped chest and abs were very much on display. He had tight dark leather pants leaving very little to the

imagination and the horrid suspicion that the slightest move would force them to split into several little pieces. Which, Mort thought, was probably the point.

Kid caught them eyeing his clothes and grinned. “Don’t worry, there’s another six I have to switch into before the end of the night. And before you think this looks good, I’ll let you know that there’s no room for underwear in these pants and I’m risking my dignity every time I go out there.”

Astra blinked. “Ok, just a *little* too much information, thanks.”

“Are we ready?” he asked the Monk, who nodded.

“Should be. All we await is the star of the show.”

Kid grinned. “Can we get him to do it then, so I don’t have to?”

“Get moving, go on. You know you love it” the Monk said, ushering him out of the room. The others followed him out as he went over to the wings and onto the stage, taking his position before the curtain went up.

“Break a leg, dearie!” called Iris. “Ooh, doesn’t he look gorgeous, dears?”

Astra shrugged, and followed the others to the wings to watch him. “A bit too Baby Tom Jones for my tastes.”

“But the audience loves it” said the Monk. “Look.”

They could hear over the speakers a voice welcoming them all to the *Theatre Royale* and thanking them for coming. Then they were politely asked to put their hands together for the one, the only, the international sensation, Kid, and the curtains rose. And the hall was filled with people waiting in anticipation and the slow building of music.

Then there was an explosion, as the pyrotechnics went off, lighting the stage and revealing Kid on a raised podium, back to the audience surrounded by a group of scantily-clad men and women who danced around him. He spun around as the music kicked into high gear and the dancers got into their routines, and the audience went wild. And he sung.

“People, look at me, and tell me what you see...”

Astra groaned. “He’s singing *Fame* again. Doesn’t he know any other songs?”

“It *is* his current single” said the Monk pointedly. “It’s what they’re expecting from him.”

Astra nodded. “I know, but please, any song but that one. It was bad enough the first time.”

Mort deliberately ignored her, he was entranced by Kid’s dancing and singing, working the crowd as he progressed through the song. As he reached the chorus, and the dancers chorused the word “Fame” at the appropriate points, more bangs and flashes went off on cue, sending the audience into an absolute frenzy. They couldn’t get enough of him. And, as Mort realised, neither could he.

While Kid was whipping up a storm on stage with dance moves that just had to be exhausting, though he wasn’t showing it, he became aware that Astra and the Monk had been having a conversation behind him.

“...so, I think I’d appreciate it if you could hang around for a while” finished the Monk. “Might sort some things out.”

“I agree. Besides, you’re not telling me everything. There’s something going on here, and I plan to find out.”

Mort smiled, but not because of Astra. Kid was reaching the apex of the song, and his shirt had slipped off his shoulders and he was now performing his song with a bare torso, the rest of the shirt trailing around his waist. Several girls in the audience

had fainted, and everyone else was just as excited. And the song finished, accompanied by more pyrotechnics, and he sung out the final word.

“Fame!”

And the audience screamed.

## **Chapter Eleven – The Mysterious Superstar**

“Cheers!” they said, and clinked their glasses together and giggled.

After the show had finished and Kid had gone through several more costumes that, before the end of the night, were so drenched with sweat they would never be useable again, he’d put that much effort into performing it, they’d all returned to the I&M building where Kid was able to shower and get cleaned up, and Iris could open her latest bottle of champagne. And now in the special dining room on the eighteenth floor, three glasses along, they were still celebrating the end of this night. Not a special night in particular, but as Iris said, who needs an excuse to get sozzled?

However, despite Iris’s usual habit of not just ending up under the table, but under just about everyone of the opposite sex as well, they’d all managed to limit themselves to being only slightly tipsy. Except Astra, who had decided she needed a clear head and had regulated herself to water.

*“Ha, unlikely!” Astra exclaims. “Someone offering me free alcohol and I didn’t need to be anywhere else important later? I’d be at it in a shot.”*

*The Doctor sighs. “I try and make you the responsible one, and look at the thanks I get...”*

“That, that was so cool, you know. That, that ... whatchamacalit you did, it was good!” said Mort, before hiccuping. Since they’d started drinking, Mort had taken to praising Kid every few minutes, and Kid wasn’t the type to turn it down.

“That flippy thing?” he asked, taking another sip.

Mort nodded. “Yeah. A-astra does stuff like that, but, you, you looked good!”

Astra sighed. “Mort, I’m starting to think I’ll have to cut you off.”

“I’m not drunk!” he hiccupped.

“No, but you’re getting tipsy, and I’d rather you put a stop on it before we end up with a paralytic Pendorian on our hands.”

Mort unsuccessfully tried to stifle a giggle. “Paralytic Pendorian, heehee...”

“Ooh, let him have his fun, dearie” said Iris, her words slurring more than anyone else’s. “It’s not every day he gets to drink with a superstar, eh? Here’s to the wonderful kid!” She held her glass high in the air, suggesting everyone else do the same in yet another toast. They did, and toasted their resident celebrity once again.

“I make that eight toasts to you in the last fifteen minutes,” said Astra, dryly. “I suppose you must be feeling really proud of yourself, Kid.”

The star shrugged, not seeming to be quite as drunk as the rest of them (he was probably still wound up after the concert, Astra decided). “Well, it doesn’t suck, I’ll say that.”

Astra raised her eyebrows. “Yes, I’m sure.”

“Stop picking on him, Astra,” said Mort, uncharacteristically defensive. “It’s not his fault we like him so much.”

Astra smiled. “No, I guess not.” She decided she’d better change the subject, she’d realised she was turning into the responsible and boring party-member, and she couldn’t have that. “So, are all the concerts like that?”

“Like what?” asked the Monk.

“Sold out and a complete success?”

“Oh, that” said the Monk, taking a sip from his glass. “Well, yes, pretty much, yes. I mean, you get the odd cancellation and you’ll have about five or so empty seats in the audience, but that’s got to be the worst we’ve seen.”

“Kid is a complete suss... suces...” Iris took a deep breath, taking a third go at getting the word right. “A successessess – he’s really, really good!”

Astra grinned. “Iris, say chrysanthemum.”

“Bugger off.”

“It’s true, though” said Mort. “Everyone loves him, and it’s hard to see why. He’s got the voice, the looks, the really nice blonde hair, the muscles.” Mort paused for a moment. “You must have to work out all the time.”

Kid laughed. “Oh no, I’m just naturally gifted.”

“Really?”

“Mort,” Astra warned, “if you’re going to toast him again, I’m going to hit you so hard you’ll wish you were drunk.”

“I’m not going to toast him, Astra” he said. “But if you’re just like that normally – damn, you look good.”

Kid laughed again. “Thanks. Toast to me?”

“Let’s not” said Astra, before taking a drink of her water.

“The girls love it either way,” said the Monk. “It’s why it’s one of the emphasised elements of our publicity, blonde hair, buff body, tends to drive them wild.”

“Oooh, yeah” said Iris, dreamily.

Astra shrugged. “I dunno, with me, too many muscles tends to turn me off. You can keep your Schwarzeneggers and what have you, usually they look like a balloon full of walnuts.”

Kid smiled. “Oh yes?”

Astra nodded. “Yup. There’s something that irritates me about guys who are fitter than I am.”

Kid was silent for a moment, as he calmly placed his glass on the table. He rolled up his sleeves slightly and rose to his feet. Then, letting out an almighty roar, he tensed every single muscle in his arms and shoulders, letting them bulge and ripple for all to see. Then he sat down again, grinning inanely.

Astra refused to be impressed. “Finished?” she asked.

Mort, on the other hand, had still to pick his chin up from the floor. “Wow, that was amazing. Didn’t you lot think it was amazing?”

Astra glanced at the others, and noticed Iris was wearing a strange expression on her face. “Excuse me!” she said in a squeaky voice, before getting up from the table in a hurry and scurrying across to a door nearby, which she closed behind her just as quickly.

The Monk sighed. “You’ve done it again, you know. We won’t see her again tonight.”

Kid kept smiling. “Sorry.”

Mort was confused. “What? She doesn’t like it when he does that?”

“Well I wouldn’t say she *doesn’t* like it” said the Monk. “And you’ve split your shirt again, that’s the second one today.”

Kid glanced at the ripped seams and shrugged again. “As I keep saying, not like we have a shortage.”

“Not exactly the point. People in third world countries would love to have clothes like that.”



Kid shrugged again, and slipped his newly-ripped shirt off and threw it across the table to the Monk. "Fine, then, let them have it." He stood up, stretched and flexed his now-well-on-display muscles for the show of it and yawned. "Well, it's getting on to two AM, and I'm off to bed. See-you in the morning!" And with that, he strolled out of the room towards the lift.

Mort watched him stride away, his eyes half dropping out of their sockets. "By the Spirit, he looks..." but he was lost for words.

Astra rolled her eyes. "Ok, Mort, I have now decided you're so drunk you're getting excited about everything. Time for bed, I think."

"But, but, but," he started, but Astra was over next to him and helping him out of his chair.

"No, don't speak, you'll say something you could regret later." She turned to the Monk. "Is there anywhere we get to stay?"

The I&M building was set up to be not only a place of business, but an excellent piece of housing as well, with not only living space for Kid and his two managers, but there was a whole floor dedicated to guest rooms and accommodation, for any visiting clients or some such. The Monk took Astra and the getting-very-sleepy-now Mort and gave them the two rooms closest to the lift opposite each other. Nobody but Astra and Mort were visiting, said the Monk, so they had the whole floor to themselves.

After Astra and the Monk had put Mort to bed, where he'd succumbed to the champagne and fallen asleep instantly, they checked he was secure, then left to get Astra's room prepared. They stood in the hallway as the Monk fumbled with the key-card outside her door.

"I notice you don't seem to be as drunk as the others?" Astra commented.

The Monk smiled. "That is where a Gallifreyan metabolism comes in handy, I can sober up in next to no time when I filter all the alcohol out of my system."

"Oh, that's handy," she said. "But Iris was really far gone, and she's a Time Lord."

"Ahh, but she actually likes being drunk. Not sure why." He typed in a code, and the door clicked as it unlocked. The Monk swung it open and gestured in theatrically. "Your chamber awaits."

Astra sniffed, archly, peering in to the room. "Not bad, I guess. Very hotel-esque."

"That was the point"

Astra nodded. "I guess." Then she turned around to face the Monk. "So, I'd ask if you'd want to come in for coffee, but I a) don't know if there's any in there and, b), it's your place and inviting you anywhere here would be pointless."

"I did want to discuss something with you."

"If it's to travel around the universe in your TARDIS, then thanks, but I've had my fill of eccentric and arrogant Time Lords."

"Did you notice anything about Kid's performance back there?"

Astra looked blankly at him. "Do you mean the concert?"

The Monk shook his head. "Not that, the showing off in the lounge."

Astra shrugged. "Apart from the fact he's an exhibitionist with an ego the size of Everest, not really, no."

"You didn't see the aura around him? That purple haze he had when he split his shirt, like he was tapping into some inner power?"

Astra shrugged. “Oh, that. What’s so weird about that, I thought that was normal for him.”

The Monk sighed. “Well, it is, for him. Just nobody else besides Iris and I have been able to see it, until you just now.”

Astra shrugged again. “Let’s just say I have some immortal blood in my veins that makes me more aware of what’s going on. But what’s so weird about it? I’m sure there’s plenty of species in the universe that can call on primal energies like that, what’s so –“

“But that’s just it,” the Monk interrupted. “Kid’s human.”

Astra paused. “Are you sure?”

“As human as anyone else on this miserable little rock. Believe me, in this business, health reports and checkups are just about mandatory, and if anything alien was in his system, it’d be found and splashed on every tabloid from here to Vanuatu.”

“But they found nothing?”

“Nothing. Well, the first examiners we visited were surprised at how fit he was – his whole life living on the streets with next to no food or satisfactory conditions, and he had the physique and the health of an athlete, but that was easily explained through lucky genetics and an active life. But he’s still a perfectly normal human being.”

“Who can seemingly draw on unknown energies that can split his clothing in a heartbeat.” mused Astra. “Interesting.”

“Well, I think that was the muscles flexing that split the shirt, but yes, that’s the idea.”

“Does he know any of this?”

“He doesn’t have a clue” the Monk replied. “When I first found him, he was convinced he had no future and was destined to stay a street kid. His power was a complete mystery to him. I only saw it by chance at one point.”

“Which is why you took him into your care and put him where he is?”

The Monk squirmed slightly. “I didn’t want to see him suffer, and I saw his potential. And as I said, I got some advice, met up with Iris and we made him a star.”

Astra looked at him. “I’m not sure making sure he’s one of the most recognised faces in the world was your best route. But yes, it is weird, especially if he doesn’t know what’s going on.” She sighed. “I’m glad we decided to stay, this does need investigating.”

The Monk gave a slight bow. “I’m glad you can spare the time.”

Astra shrugged, then began to yawn. “Well, it was either spend time with a famous billionaire in his luxury apartments, or stay in the *Telstra* floating about the vortex. And we both wanted a holiday.” She yawned again. “Anyway, as nice as chatting here in the corridor is, I’m tired and going to get some sleep before things get exciting tomorrow. Goodnight, Monk.”

“Yes, yes, goodnight my dear” he said, waving as she closed her door in his face. He stood there for a while, a smile creeping over his face.

Things were going according to plan...

## **Chapter Twelve – More Than A Friend**

Mort awoke later that morning with, well, he described it as a slight headache, but he had a suspicion it was something more than that. He swore he hadn't drunk that much, but then perhaps Astra had been right. Or he was a cheap drunk, which was also a depressing option.

It took him a moment to work out where he was – the events after Kid had made his dramatic exit got slightly blurry as his final drink kicked in, but he guessed he was in a hotel room somewhere. Judging by the décor, he was still in the I&M building, which means Astra and the *Telstra* weren't far away. And neither was Kid.

After stumbling out of bed, a nice long and hot shower restored his senses a bit, dulled his headache, and he started thinking more clearly, and as he pulled on his own clothes which had been conveniently cleaned and hung up in the wardrobe (when did they have time to do that, he wondered briefly) he decided what he'd do today. Astra would be up, he guessed, she always seemed to be, but he didn't really feel like rushing to her side just yet, especially when she'd likely be full of hangover jokes and lectures about the dangers of poisoning one's body with copious amounts of alcohol.

He'd much rather spend some time with Kid instead.

Stepping out of his room, he wandered quietly over to the lift and pressed the appropriate button.

While he couldn't remember much about the later parts of the previous night, Mort had been given all sorts of information about the layout of the building they were in earlier on. While the lower floors were dedicated to offices and general administration things, the upper floors were self-contained apartments for those in management (specifically, Iris and the Monk). Kid, being the money-maker and the star attraction, was granted the privilege of having a whole floor to himself. The top floor too, allowing for great views over the skyline of London. Mort was almost jealous at the thought of having such a place to live in.

As the lift came to rest on the highest floor, Mort wasn't sure if he ought to have been disappointed or not. The corridor was much the same as all the others, nothing to indicate that he was in a celebrity's world at all, except the presence of extra windows, giving the place a lighter feel. He thought for a moment he could be on the wrong floor, and was about to pop back into the lift to check, when he heard a noise coming from one of the rooms. A slight motor running. Deciding he may as well check it out, he traced the sound down the corridor, found which room it was coming from, then opened the door.

Inside was what had to be the biggest private gym that Mort had ever seen, although that didn't amount to much considering the amount of them he had seen. It all looked very professional, almost like a commercial gym, with one wall completely covered in a mirror, and the other open to the morning sunshine and the London view. There were lots of different types of training equipment, dumbbells, barbells, big pin-loaded machines and other such fitness wonders. Too much for one person, Mort guessed, but Kid wasn't an ordinary one person.

What caught Mort's attention, however, was Kid himself. He was on one of the treadmills, jogging away happily wearing a simple black tank-top and matching tracksuit pants. A slight sheen of sweat gleamed off him in the light, making him quite a sight to behold.

Kid looked up and noticed Mort, waving happily. Mort returned the smile and crossed the gym to the treadmills.

“Hey,” said Kid, only slightly out of breath. “What do you think?”

“I knew it” Mort said, still grinning. “I knew you weren’t naturally gifted.”

Kid laughed, still jogging. “Yes, well, I’m gifted in the art of lying, let’s put it that way. What do you think?”

“Of the gym or your ability to be dishonest?”

“Well, both, if you like, but I’d rather we discussed the gym.”

Mort shrugged. “It’s a pretty good setup, I have to say. You’d never get bored in here.”

“That’s the point. You wouldn’t believe the amount of working out I need to do to keep in shape.”

Mort nodded. “Well, it works, you have to admit. As you were quite happy to prove to us last night, if I recall.”

Kid chuckled again. “Yeah, that was fun.”

“You know, I half expected to come in here and find you working out naked after that display.”

Kid shrugged. “It can be arranged if you want.”

“I’ll pass I think.” Mort looked about briefly and took a seat on a bench-press. “So, how long have you been on that thing?”

“Nearly finished now” replied Kid. “Thirty minutes cardio every morning without fail.”

“Ouch.”

“Oh yeah. Still, running while the sun rises in front of you, can’t beat that really.”

“No, I suppose not.” Mort looked out the huge windows at the morning sun. “It’s a great view.”

“Yeah, it is the first time. Thing is, seeing it every morning tends to make it lose its novelty.” He punched a button on the treadmill console and grabbed his water-bottle as he came to a sudden stop. “I tend to prefer looking at people, these days.”

Mort nodded, and could see why. Any view would get dull after seeing it too often. But still, it was a magnificent view.

Kid stepped from the treadmill, raised up his bottle, but instead of taking a swig of it, he allowed the water to pour over his head, drip down his broad shoulders and marinate his arms and chest. He shook the water out of his hair, giving him a very rugged and, Mort had to admit, appealing look. He flashed his million-dollar smile at Mort wickedly. “It makes me hot.”

And Mort had to agree.

“So,” said Mort, starting a new conversation. “You do this every day?”

“Day in, day out.” Kid grabbed a towel and began patting himself down a bit, heading over to the dumbbells. “The public demands it, generally. You gotta have a six-pack and biceps, or they don’t wanna know you.”

Mort followed him over and watched Kid sit on a bench with a dumbbell in one arm and start doing curls. “I gotta admit, this is rather impressive. I know I couldn’t keep up with you.”

“Heh, sure you could.” Kid said, still focusing on his bulging bicep. “You’re not all that bad yourself, you know.”

Mort had to laugh at this. “Me? The unfitest person ever? Well, unfit compared to you anyway.”

Kid stopped curling and gave Mort a stare. "Are we going to have another session of you telling me I'm wonderful again? Cause I'd much rather say how you're wonderful instead this time."

Mort blinked. "Oh, sorry."

Kid grinned and changed arms. "Heh, don't be. I like getting praised, boosts my already inflated ego. But don't sell yourself short, Mort, you're not that bad. You're fairly trim, a bit soft round the edges, but with a simple program you could get fairly ripped in no time."

Mort looked down at himself. "You think?"

"Yeah! A few weeks training, pumping some iron, getting some definition, you'll be wowing the ladies at the beach easily. I mean, you're already fairly fit."

"I'd have to agree there. Astra and I do, well, lets just say we do lots of running."

"What, exercise?"

Mort shook his head. "No, running from monsters."

Kid laughed, stood up and put his dumbbell back in its place. "You know, a few years ago, I'd never have believed you. But I managed to meet a few monsters myself since then, and suddenly I could believe that."

"Oh, they're real alright" said Mort. "Astra and I have been fighting them off for years. Like, the other day, we were on this Cybership, fighting of huge armies of Cybermen."

"Cybermen? Like, internet people or something?"

"Nah, more like emotionless robots with super-strength."

Kid chuckled. "Like me then? Only without the emotionless part."

Mort rolled his eyes. "I thought you didn't want to talk about you anymore?"

Kid shrugged and said, "well, yeah, but I can be so fascinating sometimes."

He began stretching his arms. "Sorry, I'll try and keep myself to myself."

Mort shrugged. "I'm happy either way. We can talk about you if you want."

"Nah, I'm always talking about me." Without warning, Kid dropped to the ground and began doing push-ups like they were nothing. "So, you and Astra. Are you, like, together or something?"

"By the Spirit, no" Mort laughed. "No, no, no, we're just good friends. We've known each other since we were kids, and we kinda stuck together. I guess she felt sorry for me or something, having no other friends and stuff."

Kid stopped doing push-ups and leapt to his feet. "Oh, I dunno, I think she saw the same thing that I'm seeing now."

There was a pregnant pause, Mort not knowing exactly how to respond to this, and Kid seeming like he didn't actually know why he said it. After an embarrassing moment, Kid coughed and said "Umm, do you want a drink? I'm afraid I've only got water in here, you know, being a gym and all."

Mort shook his head. "Nah, I'm fine." He took in a deep breath. "So, what's this about me getting all buff and butch like you, then?"

Kid laughed. "Oh, you'll never get like me. I'm too fantastic for comparison"

"Oh, I'd believe that. I mean, I'd never get that flippy thing I saw you do last night."

Kid shrugged it off. "Oh, flips are easy. I can show you later, if you like, there's the matt over there which is perfect for that sort of thing. It's all about making sure you don't cave in and think you can't do it. Like fighting, you know about that."

Mort laughed. "Ahh, yes, fighting, another thing you're much better than me at."

“You’re selling yourself short again, Mort. You were good yesterday, honestly.”

“I held my own, you were the one whoopin’ ass.”

“I’ve had lots of practise.” Kid glanced at the clock on the wall. “Hmm, I’ve got some time, want some pointers?”

“Pointers?”

Kid pointed over to the corner. “I’ll get you on the bags for a bit, show you how to do it.”

Mort gave him a look. “I’m not sure, Astra’s tried teaching me stuff, it tended not to go well.”

“Well, you haven’t had me training you, have ya?” Kid said, grinning. “Come on, we’ll start you with the basics, you’ll soon catch up. What have you got to loose?”

Mort kept looking at him, then laughed. “Oh, why not. Show me how to fight, Kid.”

“I thought you’d never ask!” Kid grinned, and lead Mort over to the punching bag, then handed him a couple of gloves. “Don’t want to rip your knuckles apart, do you? Come on, off with the jacket, you can’t practise with that getting in the way.”

Mort laughed and slipped off his jacket, then put the gloves on his hands, Kid helping strap them on.

“Right, now give the bag a punch. Don’t be shy, the bag doesn’t mind.”

Mort took in a deep breath, and hit the bag. It barely shuddered.

“Come on, Mort, you can do better than that!” exclaimed Kid in a mock-harder trainer style. “Hit it hard, smash it! Pretend it’s a ninja or a Cyberguy.”

“Cyberman.” Mort corrected.

“Them too, give it hell.”

Mort grinned and gave it another punch. It swayed slightly, but not much.

“Better,” said Kid. “But that’s not going to slow anyone down. You gotta really hit them, give them a reason to never try touching you again. Like this.”

Kid exploded at the bag, throwing a rapid fire set of punches, his muscles contracting and exerting masses of power, sending the bag swinging that Mort had to dodge to avoid being knocked over by it. Kid caught the bag and held it still.

“Easy for you, Mr Van Damme,” said Mort. “But I don’t happen to have arms and bulging biceps that makes Popeye weep.”

“Popeye?” said Kid, boggling. “I’m offended. Anyway, this isn’t about brute force or strength, it’s about technique. Come one try again.”

Mort sighed, and gave it another go, this time the bag moved ever so slightly further, but nothing like what Kid did.

Kid stood there for a moment thinking. “Hmm, I think I see the problem, you’re not holding your arm out properly. You have to, umm, no. Oh, wait a minute”

Kid turned and moved round to behind Mort, stepped in close and reached over his shoulders to hold Mort’s arms, putting them into position. “Now, you want to hit the bag right here.” He moved Mort’s arm to the right point. “Don’t lock your arm out when you get there, leave yourself some room to extend. You want to be punching to behind the bag, not the front.” He stopped, and Mort felt him get slightly closer.

Mort gulped, and hoped Kid didn’t notice. He could feel Kid’s torso pressed up to his back, his chest and every single ridge of his abs imprinting themselves along Mort’s spine, while his firm grip held onto his arms, making Mort feel secure and safe. He had a distinctive scent, and Mort felt himself immersed in it. Below the

sweat and the water, he could almost taste it, a sweet aroma of roses and daisies, yet it was somehow very masculine, much more masculine than anything else he had known before.

“God, you’re tense, Mort,” said Kid quietly, making Mort’s body shiver with the vibration. “Relax a bit, you don’t need to be that stiff to get the bag moving.”

Mort suddenly broke away from the hold, and rapidly began pulling off his gloves. “I’m – I’m sorry, I gotta go.”

“Huh?” Kid was confused. “Why, what happened?”

“Nothing, look, sorry, I just – I gotta be, umm, away...” He dropped the gloves to the floor and rushed over through the door, swooping his jacket up on the way, leaving Kid alone in the gym.

“Was it something I said?” he asked, slightly ironically. Then he shrugged and began punching the bag playfully, with force, but nowhere near the passion he had before. When Mort was there.

It was when he turned around and found a ninja standing directly behind him, sword at the ready, that he realised he had to get that passion back.

*“Doctor, are you going where I think you’re going with this?” Astra interrupts.*

*“What, it’s just me ending yet another chapter on a cliff-hanger with psycho evil killer ninjas threatening a main character.”*

*“That’s not what I mean and you know it. That stuff with Mort. Mort and Kid.”*

*The Doctor smiles. “Well, rest assured, I’m going somewhere with it.”*

*“That’s what I’m afraid of.”*

*“Oh?”*

*Astra shudders. “Well yeah. I mean, it’s so, well. Icky.”*

*The Doctor turns and raises an eyebrow at her archly. Astra looks away quickly. “Well, not that there’s anything wrong with that, of course.”*

*The Doctor chuckles to himself, then turns back to the paper. He pauses.*

*“Umm, where was I?”*

*“Evil ninja making Kid Kebabs.”*

*“Yes, yes, I know, I was going to go somewhere else after that, I can’t remember where now.”*

*“Oh.” Astra looks at the paper. “Oh well, just start a new chapter, it’s about time for that and change scenes.”*

*The Doctor shrugs. “Oh well, couldn’t hurt I guess.”*

## Chapter Thirteen – Closer and Closer

“By the Spirit!” Astra exclaimed, looking up at Mort across the table. “I don’t believe it! I mean, how could he do such a thing?”

Mort shrugged. “I dunno. To be honest, it wouldn’t have been that bad.”

Astra’s eyes looked as if they were going to leap out of her head. “Not that bad? You’re kidding right? It goes against everything I believe in. Everything you should believe in. Certainly something I wouldn’t want to hear anyway.” She glanced down at the book in front of her shaking her head disappointedly. “To have recorded a cover of *I Will Survive*, I just can’t take it in...”

“It was very successful, though,” said the Monk over his tea. “Brought in a lot of new fans, pushed sales up.”

“I thought *Fame* was pushing it far enough, but he did *I Will Survive* as well? It’s *I Will Survive*! You’ve sunk to new lows, Monk, I couldn’t look at you in the eye again.”

“Actually, it was Iris’s choice that time.”

Astra snorted. “Well colour me entirely not surprised.”

“So, umm, that’s a record of Kid’s career, is it?”

Astra nodded. “Yeah, his portfolio. Pictures and stuff from his concerts and video clips and things.” She looked up at the Monk again. “Can’t quite tell how he’s done so well. He can sing, yeah, but some of the motifs...”

Mort didn’t say anything, but merely sat hunched in his chair focusing on the untouched cocoa in front of him. Astra wasn’t sure what was up, he’d come into the lounge fairly quickly, slightly troubled, but Astra had put it down to the big night last night. Probably champagne-induced nightmares or something. He’d been uncharacteristically quiet when he’d sat down, but she was sure he’d snap out of it.

“So, has he won any awards? Grammys, Arias, and so on?”

The Monk sipped his tea, then replied, “Not as such, no, he keeps slipping through the red tape cracks there. His first single went platinum a while ago, though.”

“And what was that one? *YMCA*?”

The main door opened, and the star himself came in, slightly out of breath, his tank-top shredded to pieces and barely hanging off him. His pants weren’t much better.

“Actually, perhaps I should make that *Macho Man*” added Astra dryly. “Do you take every excuse possible to get your clothes off?”

“I was attacked again. By another ninja thing” he said, ignoring her.

“What, so you decided to strip-tease for him?” asked Astra, refusing to be ignored. “Did it work?”

Kid gave her a glare. “I almost didn’t stop him. Just one of them, and he nearly cut me to ribbons. Look.” Astra looked in closer and realised his chest and stomach had very light scrapes across them. They weren’t deep enough to scar and weren’t bleeding, but they looked like the ninja had gotten close.

“They’re getting stronger.” Kid concluded.

Astra paused for a second. “Hmm, so it seems. So, how’d it go? At first you were afraid, you were petrified?”

“Astra, stop it” said the Monk.

“Sorry,” she grinned, “couldn’t resist. Still, you did survive. Hey, hey.”

“Could you take this seriously please?” asked Kid. “I could have died!”



“Sorry, sorry, I’ll behave. But you didn’t die, although after that cover, you should have.”

“So what are you going to do about it?”

Astra shrugged. “Travel back in time and kill Gloria Gaynor? Oh, you mean the ninjas. Well, I’m investigating it.”

“Well, investigate better, it’s not working.”

Astra gave him one of her patented Cold Hard Stares. “Would you like me to stop? I don’t need to be here you know, Mort and I can take off whenever we like and leave you at the mercy of whatever’s attacking you.”

Kid glanced over to where Mort was sitting, noticing him for the first time.

“Oh, umm, I didn’t see you there.”

“Hey” Mort said quietly.

Astra decided it was time they paid attention to her again. “Look, Kid, don’t stress, this is everyday stuff for me and I know what I’m doing. I’m having breakfast and doing some research and then I’ll start doing proper searches later. Just relax, get dressed, please, and leave it to us.”

“But –“

“No, no buts!” Astra interrupted. “Go on, go. Walk out the door. Just turn around now, cause you’re –“

“Astra, find a new theme, please?” asked the Monk idly.

“But this one’s so much fun!” she retorted.

The Monk proceeded to ignore her and turned to Kid. “Have you finished your workout?”

Kid shrugged and began striding over to the buffet. “Well, I was interrupted by a passionate and wild sparring session to the death, but I think it was pretty much the equivalent of half an hour’s weights with the amount I had to do to save my life, so I guess I’m done.” He grabbed a bowl of cereal and sat down next to Mort, who subtly shifted his weight away from him.

“So you’re not getting changed then?”

Kid gave her a grin. “Nope.”

Astra sighed. “Pity. I’ve had enough of looking at your rippling abs from your portfolio here.” She turned another page to see another poster. “You think I need a new theme, you’ve replayed the open shirt one for two years now.”

“What works, works, my dear” said the Monk, taking another sip of his tea.

They sat in silence around the table for a moment, Astra looking over her book, the Monk reading his newspaper and the others eating their breakfasts. Then, quietly, Astra heard Kid speak to Mort.

“Hey, you ok?”

Astra didn’t look up, but kept listening. It wasn’t she was an eavesdrop, but she liked to stick her nose into other people’s business.

“Yeah, I’m fine” was Mort’s reply. He seemed a little edgy, ready to leap out of his own skin.

“Cause when you ran out, you –“

“No, no, I’m fine, honest.” Mort replied quickly. “I just had to, umm, do something.”

Kid seemed to understand, even if Astra didn’t. “So we’re cool then?” he asked.

“Hmm. Yeah. Yes, of course we are.”

Astra could hear him smiling from the opposite side of the table. She had a feeling she was observing the birth of a new friendship, which didn’t sit comfortably

with her, since one of them was an egotistic twit who seemed to like to remove his clothing at every opportunity. And despite Mort's grin, he didn't seem too comfortable with it either.

"Did you say something, Kid?" asked the Monk.

"No, no, nothing." He replied, jumping back into his cereal. "So, what's today's plan?"

The Monk didn't look away from his newspaper. "Same as usual. Vocal coaching at ten, followed by a meeting with the managers of Little Sis at eleven."

"Little Sis?" asked Astra.

"Another pop artist, bright young girl, working her way up in the charts. We're organising a duet album between her and Kid for Christmas, which is why after the meeting you two will be rehearsing some carols and developing some ideas for remixes."

Mort looked up. "But it's barely July."

"Have to get in early" replied the Monk. "Anyway, after that, Kid, you'll be appearing at one of the local shopping centres to open one of their music-stores – the media plan to be there, so it shall be good publicity – which brings the inevitable signings and fan worshiping and so on. After that is your second vocal session, and then –"

"Then more weight training before going to bed, safe in the knowledge that another day has been completely used up by someone else's schedule." Kid sighed.

"You had yesterday afternoon off, if I recall" said the Monk, coldly. "And without my consent, which means today you have to play catch up. The meeting was supposed to happen yesterday, but Little Sis was kind enough to push it back to before today's rehearsal. Everything else has been stretched out across the week. You run off like that, you have to suffer some consequences."

"Why do you think I ran off? You already were keeping me busy all day with no time of my own. Never become famous, Mort, you end up having no time."

The Monk remained calm. "If you don't like being rich and famous, Kid, just say so, and we can just as easily put you back in the hole in the wall you lived in before we found you. Just say the word."

"You can't," Kid snorted. "We built this building over it, remember?"

"We can always find another, they're not that hard to find."

Kid sighed, then stood up. "I've had enough" he said pointedly. "I'll get showered and changed, then get thrown into the ongoing grind of a celeb's life."

He started to dramatically stagger across to the door, when Mort, seeming to come to a decision, stood up and rushed to his side. "Umm, can I come too?"

Astra glanced up. "To watch him shower? Kinky."

"Shut up Astra. Well?"

Kid shrugged. "Umm, sure. I guess. I mean, if you want to."

"Yeah, yeah," said Mort. "I want to show you something you'll like."

"And still I say kinky," said Astra.

Kid ignored her. "Well, ok then, why not. Provided you can fit it into the Monk's schedule."

Mort grinned and followed Kid out into the lift, as the doors closed. "Oh, don't worry. This'll take no time at all. Literally."

Astra rolled her eyes. "We'll have to keep an eye out on those two. Very suspicious..."

The Monk turned a page on his newspaper. “Nah, it’ll do him good to hang out with someone his own age. He’s got billions of fans, but besides Iris and I he doesn’t exactly have friends. And never has, as far as I can tell.”

Astra laughed. “I wouldn’t exactly call Mort best friend material”

“He’s your best friend, isn’t he?”

Astra shrugged. “Yeah, but we’ve been friends since we were babies. It takes a fair bit to get to like the current-stage Mort. Most people aren’t prepared to put in the time...” She paused for a moment.

“What?”

“No time at all. Literally” she quoted quietly to herself. Then she leaped up off her chair and screamed down the stairwell, hoping her voice would carry to the Monk’s office.

“Mort! Don’t you dare touch a single control on my *Telstra*! He is not to leave the planet, you hear me? Mort!”

The planet Xuberance had been considered at one time to be one of the greatest wonders of the universe, until some po-faced boring judges deemed it too frivolous and silly for such an important-sounding title. Yet many took to ignore them over this and deemed it one of the unofficial wonders, something that everyone with space travel should visit at least once in their lifetimes, if not more often. After all, how many planets have converted themselves into a huge, global, permanent theme park?

The planet was covered in rides of all description, from basic Ferris wheels to hovering roller-coasters, to the latest in riding technology such as Remote Activated Discombobulating Projectors and Disentangling Molecular Cell Irregularators. And the Zipper, as no park no matter how big can do without a Zipper. You could spend your entire life on Xuberance and never take in all the rides, and in fact there were a few cases where people have landed on the world and never left due to a form of addiction to fun, so the planet came with a series of warnings. Lines were virtually non-existent, with such a variety and range of rides and amusements, there was never any troubles finding a ride to frighten you to your core.

Of course, it was a few thousand years into Kid’s future when the Earth Empire had expanded to be a formidable force in the galaxy, but that was a mere irrelevancy when it came to the *Telstra*.

Mort had almost been disappointed at Kid’s reaction to Astra’s dimensionally transcendental time machine, he’d taken it in his stride, letting Mort know that after what he’d seen in recent times made him able to expect just about anything. But Mort was soon to have the reaction he wanted, when he opened the doors to reveal a long line of rides of all types stretching out to the horizon. Kid’s expression wasn’t one of surprise and shock as such, but of sheer and utter joy.

And unsurprisingly, as they wandered about the park and checked out the weird and wonderful rides marvelling at what fun they could bring, Kid’s enthusiasm didn’t abate – he wanted to ride all of them at once, and then do it again, and only physical constraints of how impossible that would be stopped him from doing so. Mort could almost see the electricity rising from him, he was so energized, much like he was the day before when they’d first fought the ninjas in the alley. Kid had spent most of his life either living from day to day in a hole in the wall, or as a superstar with his life meticulously planned from moment to moment. He never had the opportunity to simply hang loose, especially on an alien world in the future where he’d never be recognised, and he couldn’t get enough on it.

Eventually, to satisfy Kid's desire, they began to get on rides at random based on whether they looked fun or not. Mort insisted they start with the Zipper, since that was a tradition between Astra and himself, then moved on to other similarly thrilling and gravity-defying rides. While Kid seemed to be lapping up the sheer freedom, Mort felt just as happy spending time with his new friend. There was something about things like rides when both members can be reduced to screaming in both terror and excitement when the ground comes rushing at you, experiencing it with another could bring you closer. Rather like life or death situations, only without the resulting danger, they bring two people down to the same level, both feeling the adrenaline, both feeling the terror and both sharing the fun. And when you're locked in a small cage with somebody in such a confined space, you can't help but feel closer to someone.

And Mort was feeling very close to Kid that day.

They'd gone ride after ride after ride until they were staggering around the field their legs reduced to jelly, and then they got on another ride or two. Kid's energy, like his enthusiasm, was limitless and Mort almost felt like he was sharing it with him, since Kid was making him spend longer on the rides without resting than Astra had ever done. Mort had to admire Kid's passion when it came to things like this, it was something many have difficulty attaining, yet Mort suspected Kid would keep his forever.

Eventually they came across a roller-coaster, or the high-tech equivalent at any rate. It had no wheels or tracks as such, but hovered above the ground using antigrav technology, and flew through the air along a predestined path rather than followed visible tracks, making the experience much more thrilling when you can't see what's holding you up when it flips you upside down. Mort had often been too frightened to try this one, but Kid never broke his stride. Mort decided it was possibly a very good opportunity to face his fear and strapped himself in next to Kid.

The ride took off, and in typical roller-coaster fashion, it slowly trundled up a hill (granted, an invisible one), before plunging down into a looping, crazy, insane path, throwing them about the carriage and flipping them so often Mort wasn't entirely sure which way was up before long. He found himself gripping Kid's hand for support, his fears starting to get to him, and glancing over at Kid, he realised Kid felt the same way. Only Kid enjoyed it.

His enjoyment seemed to fade when Mort glimpsed a snatch of a brown robe at his peripheral vision. He heard a ripping sound and looked above Kid, where he saw a ninja for a split second, standing on their carriage and holding his sword high. Mort screamed, but nobody heard him. Everyone was screaming already.

In that split second Mort was looking, the ninja swung his sword and appeared to have missed, as the carriage flipped onto its back in another loop. Mort's attention suddenly shifted to Kid's grip on his hand, suddenly tightening, as to his horror, Kid's seatbelts strapping into the seat split, sliced cleanly by the ninja's sword.

Mort's grip was useless, as the carriage completed its flip upside down. Kid was strong, but not strong enough, as he let go and plunged down to the ground far below.

Kid hit the ground with a bone-breaking thud, and moaned involuntarily. Good one, he thought, marvellous way to end the perfect morning. Get thrown off the best ride ever and end up paralysed. What's this going to do to your career?

Kid looked up at the roller-coaster which was looping away into the distance above him, almost oblivious to its lost passenger. He almost considered trying to get

up and make his way back to the loading bay, meeting Mort when he got off, but he'd probably be better off staying still, he realised. Wait for the paramedics to arrive and to check he hadn't shattered any spinal columns or other important bones and ligaments.

It then occurred to Kid that after a drop like that, he probably should have been dead.

To pass the time, lying there in the dirt, he started to carefully try and work out exactly which bits of him were damaged. He could wiggle his toes, so he figured paralysis was less possible, and he felt sure he could move his legs if he needed to. His hips he wasn't too sure on, he wasn't game to move that too far in case he did too much damage. His fingers seemed fine too, as he moved them slightly. He could feel them and wiggle them, so he guessed he'd come out very well.

"Get up"

Kid looked up at the source of the voice, but from his position flat on his back he couldn't see who it was. He wondered if he imagined it.

"Kid, get up."

He didn't imagine that one, and was tempted to tell whoever it was that he can't get up, he's too busy being paralysed, but something in its voice sounded as if you denied a command from this person bad things would happen, so Kid forced himself to obey. His muscles screamed and he was sure he was going to resemble a patchwork quilt of black and blue patches, but he obeyed.

His new commander wasn't a person at all, in fact Kid was tempted to rethink its status as a thing. It had form, but was closer to a focal point of energy than an actual being. If Kid ran at it, he'd go through it he'd wager, though he'd never dare.

"Wh- what are you?" he dared ask, hesitantly.

"Unimportant" came the calm reply. "You are all I am concerned of, Kid."

"Me?" Kid had the surreal thought that it could be an extra-terrestrial fan wanting an autograph. "What about me?"

"You think you know what you are? And what's to come? You haven't even begun..."

And with that, the energy engulfed him, filling his mind with new knowledge. And he understood.

And he didn't like it one bit.

Mort had panicked through the remainder of the ride, fearing for his friend and worrying that the fall had killed him. As soon as the carriage pulled into the dock, he'd untied himself and ran off to find Kid, or his body at least, knowing it had to be somewhere beneath the invisible tracks. It was when he'd followed them for five minutes that he realised there was an awful lot of area to cover, and wondered whether he'd have been better off calling in some professional help before tearing off this way.

"Kid!" he called out loudly as he saw another carriage twirl away above him. He was starting to fear the worst, and he'd never get a reply to his call. And may the Spirit save any ninjas he met afterward if he didn't.

Mort then almost jumped as he heard a scream from a familiar voice further along the track, and he raced off to meet it. He rounded a corner and saw Kid. He was alive – very battered and bruised, but most certainly alive.

Mort called his name and rushed up to him, then stopped. There was something about his stance, the way he held himself that made Mort worry for him. "Are you alright? Anything broken..." he asked hesitantly.

Kid turned around, his face dirty and streaming with tears. His expression seemed to be a cross between horror and grief, as if he'd just seen his mother run over by a psycho driving a train. He stared at Mort briefly.

"Mort..." he muttered in disbelief.

"Hey, what's up?" asked Mort, concerned. "Did you hurt yourself when you fell, should I get someone?"

Suddenly Kid fell into Mort's arms, wrapping him in an embrace that Mort felt obliged to return. He could feel Kid's body shuddering as he held onto him close, sobbing and weeping. It was a complete transformation from the powerful and awe-inspiring person Mort had met the day before. Mort held him in return, and patted his head soothingly.

"Shh, shhh, it's alright," he said, almost feeling silly. "It's ok. We'll get you some help, get you all fixed up, then stick to the smaller rides for a while."

"No, no..." Kid said, his face muffled by Mort's shoulder. "No more rides."

Mort rubbed Kid's muscular back in a similar soothing manner, noting how oxymoronic the situation felt, someone with Kid's physique and strength suddenly so weak. "Ok, ok, we'll go back home then, we'll get you into the *Telstra* and take you back."

"No," said Kid, and he lifted his head and looked at Mort. "Just hold me. Please."

So Mort stood there and held him, supported him, while Kid howled and sobbed and wept. He didn't say anything, didn't ask why he was so distraught, just gave him the support he needed unquestioningly.

Which probably brought them closer than any ride ever could.

## **Now We Will Pause For A Brief Musical Interlude**

*Astra began clapping her hands slowly, interrupting the Doctor's train of thought. "Yay!" she says. "Something happening at last!"*

*The Doctor drops his pen and delivers Astra yet another look. "What are you on about?"*

*"We've finally stepped forward in finding out what's going on with him, given another hint and stopped running on the spot like we have since the concert."*

*"Running on the spot?" The Doctor cannot believe it. "I have certainly not been running on the spot, there's been lots of things going on!"*

*"Such as?"*

*"Did you miss all the stuff between Kid and Mort, their growing friendship, Astra – I mean, this version of you, her distrust of Kid..."*

*Astra rolls her eyes. "Ahh, boring character-based stuff, that's not moving a plot. I'm more interested in what Kid really is, where the ninjas are coming from, that sort of thing. Until now you've been just, I dunno, spinning in mid air."*

*The Doctor sighs dramatically. "I guess you're right. I mean, all this is starting to seem so hard, so difficult. I'm just spinning in mid-air, like you said. Just..." his eyes take on a familiar twinkle "...going through the motions."*

*"Going through the ..." Astra mutters. "Doctor, don't you dare sing!"*

*But he does:*

*"Every single day, the same arrangement,  
I sit down and write the book.  
Still I always feel the same estrangement,  
Every line confused, every word mistook.*

*"I've been spending days and I'm amazed  
I haven't hit 'erase',  
Since I'm just going through the motions,  
Writing cardboard parts.  
Nothing seems to penetrate my hearts!*

*"Once I used to write with prose astounding,  
Now I find I've lost the flame.  
My characters are dull and thick and boring,  
Singing songs from Fame,  
Using silly names,  
And Astra's just the same.*

*"She does pretty well with fiends from hell,  
But lately we can tell  
That she's just going through the motions,  
Faking it somehow.  
She's not even half the girl she –" Astra hits him "– ow.*

*"Will this novel ever finish?  
Find a climax and diminish?  
Is this story great? Oh I wish.*

*My how can I be,*

*“Going through the motions,  
Jotting down the words.  
I don't even know  
Where the story's gonna go.  
This novel just seems so ... absurd!”*

*“Do you want me to hit you again?” asks Astra. “Stop singing already and get back to writing this thing. We’re almost at the forty thousand word mark.*

*The Doctor breaks his dramatic pose suddenly and sits down to examine his work. “Really? I didn’t think we were that far ahead.”*

*“Yep. So enough of this supposed character stuff and get to the plot.”*

*The Doctor thinks for a moment. “Yes, well, you may have a point. Ten thousand words left, I’d better start winding things up.”*

*“Good” says Astra. “Besides, you may think you’re going through the motions, but I’m not. ‘Faking it’ indeed.”*

*“Well, I was referring to your literary equivalent in the book.”*

*Astra pokes out her tongue. “Well then you’ve got it doubly wrong, since that character hasn’t fought any fiends from hell, that’s Destina remember. Speaking of which, isn’t it about time we got back to her part of the story?”*

*The Doctor nods. “Funny, you read my mind, I was about to cut to her and find out what she’s up to.”*

*“About time” says Astra, leaning back into her chair and lounging. “You know, I’m keen to find out how you’re gonna tie these two storylines together,”*

*The Doctor chuckles. “Oh, you’ll be surprised.”*



## **Chapter Fourteen – The Eight Faces Of Judgement**

The console room was silent now, and had been for quite some time, only the simple rising and falling of the central column giving the room any form of movement whatsoever. Lights on the controls blinked away quietly to themselves, totally oblivious to what its owners had been doing and were going through.

They were soon to find out, as the interior door swung open, and out stepped the Doctor, fresh-faced and refreshed, all sign of his sickness gone. “Yoo-hoo! Frobisher? Destina? Where are you? I’m all better, look?”

He paused for a moment, nobody responding to his new condition. He waited for a moment for somebody to say something, but the room being devoid of life rather put that possibility to rest.

“Is anybody going to comment on how better I am? Hello?” Still nothing. “I’ll start singing karaoke if nobody pays attention to me, you all know how much you love it when I do that. Hmm?”

The Doctor shrugged and strolled around the console. “Well, I’ll just land somewhere, see if that draws them out. You know, I think a couple days on the planet Xuberance is called for...”

Before he could press his first button, a series of beeps shrilled out and the Computer’s voice buzzed over the speakers. “Doctor! Oh, hi there, umm, how are you? You’re looking better, I didn’t expect you to be up so soon...”

The Doctor smiled. “Ahh, so I’m not the only one on this TARDIS, good to know. Yes, Destina, I am up, healthy and wealthy and wise and all that.”

“And so quickly too!”

The Doctor shrugged. “Yes, well, I’m a quick healer, a small dose of Pythia Pox can’t keep me still for long...”

“You went into a coma, didn’t you?”

He didn’t answer for a moment. “Are you doubting my abilities to self heal myself, Computer?”

“Don’t dodge the question, Doctor, Destina told me all about why you shouldn’t do that, and you did anyway.”

The Doctor paused. “Possibly.”

“You’re gonna get in trouble!” the Computer sang out playfully.

“Well you try sitting there on a bed for hours and hours doing nothing because sitting up makes you dizzy and want to vomit! It’s boring! And a simple half-hour in a coma flushed it out of my system with ease and I can get back into enjoying the universe.”

“It didn’t flush out, you know, you just suppressed it.”

“Oh shut up, who’s in charge around here anyway?”

“You...” said the Computer sadly.

“Exactly. It’s my TARDIS and I’ll go comatose if I want to!” The Doctor chuckled. “They should have made *that* into a pop song. Anyway, speaking of being in charge, where is everyone, hmm?”

He busied himself with idly setting coordinates while he waited for the Computer’s reply. When he realised he wasn’t getting one, he looked up and said, “Computer?”

“Umm, look, Doctor, you don’t seem quite yourself today, you’re probably a bit sick still, don’t you think you could spend another hour or so sleeping in the –“

“You’re avoiding the question, Computer, and doing it badly. Where’s the others?”

“Umm...” the Doctor could just sense the avoidance in the Computer’s digital voice. “Off doing, well, their own thing...”

The Doctor looked around the console room, and noticed a shoe sticking out from behind the interior door. “What’s this over here...”

“No, umm, Doctor, you don’t wanna look in there...”

The Doctor strolled over and swung the door closed, a body sliding to the floor from behind it. A body the Doctor recognised.

“Othering Omega...” he muttered quietly. He bent down to check the body’s pulse. “Frobisher, no... Computer, what happened? Where’s Destina?”

“Doctor, you really shouldn’t worry –“

“Tell me what happened!” he yelled.

Destina had almost reached the point where she’d had enough. After running for what felt like hours (but she couldn’t tell in this surreal dimension), she had finally shaken off the three ninjas that seemed determined to slice her up into several very small pieces. She’d found refuge in a small hole in the ground, probably caused by some earth-burrowing creature of some kind, and had waited for the ninjas to pass her by. The problem was, she hadn’t counted on the depth of the hole and had found herself tumbling in slow motion down a vertical tunnel lined with shelves and bookcases.

Once she’d hit the bottom, she’d faced a surreal conversation with a door-knocker, a pair of rude and obnoxious twins and a whiting and snail double-act asking her to walk a little faster. She’d happily obliged, especially when she’d heard a turtle singing a song about soup of some kind and couldn’t really deal with much more musical nonsense just now. Frobisher was still undead, and she was sure Death had put a time limit on her mission to resurrect him to the world of the living.

So Destina kept running, figuring she’d long since lost the yellow brick road by now and thus it really didn’t matter which way she went. She hoped the journey would still be the same and she’d come to the end of it no matter which route she used.

It didn’t help, she’d decided, that she’d long since realised she wanted to go home, and thought that perhaps working through her grief with the Doctor and the Computer would have been easier.

She was now wandering through lots of dark tunnels and creepy underground corridors with enough creepy and scary atmosphere to make the Dark Tower on Gallifrey look like a crazy fun-fair. She’d been stuck down here for what felt like an hour, and figured something new had to happen soon. And if it didn’t, well, she didn’t fancy starving to death at the end of the tunnel, miles underground in an alternate universe. She’d have to take drastic action.

Of course, what that drastic action would be had yet to be determined.

Eventually, she found herself at the end of the tunnel, and instead of a blank web-encrusted wall as she’d been expecting, she found herself facing a rather ornate house door, decorated in white and gold.

“Ok,” she said to herself. “Not exactly what you’d expect to find in a dark, spooky tunnel. At least this one doesn’t talk. I think.”

She reached at the doorhandle tentatively, hoping it didn’t give her a stream of abuse for twisting its nose off like the other one did. Thankfully, it was silent, so Destina gave it a turn and swung the door towards her to reveal...

Another door. Slightly smaller, but decorated in the same style. Quite bizarre. “Ok, that makes no sense. Why put a door behind a door?” She reached over and opened this second door to reveal a third one, smaller again, still looking very similar.

“Curiouser and –” Destina refused to finish the sentence, realising she was turning into a literary cliché by the second. So without a word, she opened the third door to reveal a smaller fourth, then a fifth, a sixth and a seventh. When she opened the eighth door, now only half her height, she’d been expecting to find either another door or a brick wall. Instead, she found it actually lead to an opening, a bright white space she couldn’t see properly from within the gloomy tunnel. Deciding she’d may as well continue on, the other option was staying in the tunnel for eternity, she bent over and crept into the room.

The room wasn’t much to speak of, a chess-board floor, white walls with doors of various sizes placed around them at regular intervals – if she’d found such a room while exploring the TARDIS she’d have merely shrugged and moved on to the next one. Whereas here there was no next room to try, she was forced to stay in this one. Especially since the door had swung closed behind her and instantly locked, trapping her within.

This did not look good.

It was then that she heard the laughter, a group of male voices that sounded almost familiar, laughing quietly to themselves, as if they’d seen something amusing. She hoped that whoever it was wasn’t laughing at her.

Then she noticed them, and wondered why she hadn’t before. In the centre of the room, eight monks stood in a circle facing each other, the robes hooded over their heads to hide their features. No, wait, Destina realised as she looked closer. They weren’t monks, their hoods were cut differently from a monk’s habit. These were different, and she’d seen them before. They were ninjas.

Destina gulped as she heard them chuckle again, and began to back away to the wall, hoping it would open up and release her from what seemed to be her certain doom. As she bumped into it, she realised it was solid, and wasn’t going to be helpful whatsoever. Stupid wall.

The ninjas turned from their circle and stood facing them, their hoods still hiding their faces. As one, they reached over to their backs, drew their swords and held them ready at Destina for a moment. Then they paused.

For a whole minute, they stood there like that, the ninjas in ready stance, Destina too petrified to move a muscle. Then one of them spoke, in an old man’s voice.

“Destinaliciaronna. You wish to claim the life of the one known to you as Frobisher?”

Destina blinked, then gulped. “Umm, erm, yes, actually.”

“And do you understand what such a quest requires of you, my dear?”

“I – I think so. Yes. No. I don’t know.”

“Well make up your mind, girl,” said another, a deeper more cultured voice. “We haven’t got all day, you know.”

“Many lives hang in our balance,” said a young voice.

“Yours is not quite as imperative as you may consider it to be,” said yet another, with a Scottish burr, rolling his ‘r’s.

“Which is it?” said the first.

Destina gulped again. “Alright, I want him. I want Frobisher returned to life.”

They were silent for a moment. Then the leader said “Good” and shook off his hood to show his face. “For a minute there, I feared ... feared the worst for it’s much more fun when we have to deal with life and death, otherwise we’d have had to kill you straight out.”

Destina looked at the leader’s face for a moment. He was old, probably in his seventies by human terms, an aristocratic nose, sharp blue eyes and shoulder-length silver hair giving him an almost hawk-like appearance. And he looked familiar.

“Do – do I know you?”

“Most certainly not” came the reply. His words were informal, but there was an edge to the way he said them that made her weary. And he still didn’t lower his sword.

“I do say, old chap” said another voice, old sounding, but huskier, and with a slight lisp, “could we please get on with it, we do have others to see.”

“Indeed, indeed.” Said the leader, and his sword was gone from his hands. Not vanished, not disappeared, just that Destina had noticed it wasn’t there any more. He raised his hands up. “Let us commence!”

The walls suddenly collapsed outward, leaving all of them standing on a chequered platform in the middle of a swirling void. The sight of infinity stretching around her made Destina feel slightly ill.

The remainder of the ninjas lowered their hoods to reveal similarly unexpected faces. A shorter man with black hair, a much taller one with pure white, a man with curly hair and a toothy grin, a man with sandy-white hair and blue eyes, a larger man with curly blonde hair and a noble brow, a shorter man in a white hat, and a man with a mane of brown curls and a playful smile. And they all seemed as familiar as the first.

“The page of coins comes to us for guidance, direction and judgement” began the silver-haired one, as from his hand a large playing card rose and hovered in the air and began to orbit them.

“Page of what?” asked Destina.

“You will be silent!” commanded the one with blonde curly hair.

“You will have your place to speak, my dear” the one with the toothy grin continued.

Silver hair resumed his speech. “The life and well-being of another hangs in the balance. The Page of Swords shall be played!” Another card hovered in the air and joined its orbit, showing a man holding a sword at the ready.

“Why should we restore the page of swords to the deck, page of coins?” asked the one with the white hat and the Scottish burr.

“Because, well, because he’s my friend” said Destina feebly, hoping she was following the metaphor.

“Unimportant!” cried the short one with dark hair.

“Many people loose friends, girl, why should you be any different?” said the tall one with white hair.

“Frobisher’s different. He’s, we’re ... he’s like part of the team, I guess.”

“Ahhh!” said toothy grin. “She wishes to claim to complete the deck!”

“There is something else,” said silver hair. “There is another card at play. Behold the Magician!”

Another card appeared, showing a male figure holding a staff, and it joined the orbit.

“You wish to please the Magician?” asked the young fair haired one.

“You fear his wrath, should the deck be incomplete?” asked the one with the brown mane.

“Umm, I – who’s this Magician?”

“Who’s the magician? Who’s the magician?” cried curly-blond hair loudly.

“Oh do use your brain, there’s a girl!” said curly-white hair, disapprovingly.

“This deck is still incomplete” said silver-hair, shaking his head disapprovingly. “The Queen of Staves should be in attendance.” And another card joined the other three, causing quite a breeze as they flew past.

“What does all this mean?” asked Destina, very confused.

“The page of coins comes for the page of swords” explained dark-hair.

“Based on advice from the queen of staves,” continued fair-hair.

“To please the magician” finished white hat.

“But the page of coins is selfish, oh yes, she is” said the silver-haired one, glaring at her. “She knows the magician will understand, she knows the queen of staves gives inaccurate advice. She asks of us what is denied by all.”

Destina could feel tears beginning to form, though she didn’t know why, she had no idea what they were saying. “But Death said –“

“Death!” they chorused, and another card appeared showing a cowed skeleton wielding a scythe. It joined the other four.

“Death knows his place,” said brown-curly-mane.

“Indeed, he does his Duty” replied curly-white-hair.

“And he does it exceedingly well” said toothy grin.

“It is mortals who wish to disrupt the order of the game, to reinstate cards that have since been played” said fair-hair.

“Please” said Destina. “He said there was a price, something I –“

“She asks of the price?” asked fair-curly-hair. “She, a mere stupid girl thinks she can pay us for what she asks?”

“Do not irritate us with this silliness” tutted silver-hair. “You cannot pay it, you haven’t the skill.”

“But I can! I promise, anything to have Frobisher back. Besides, he can still do good in the universe, help people.”

“Cards have been lost before” said fair-hair. “Cards will be lost again. They will always be replaced.”

“Wait!” called out curly-mane, forcing all the others to turn their heads to his direction. “We are disturbed, another comes, a card already played.”

He pointed as the magician’s card slowed from its speedy orbit and hovered a short distance behind Destina. She could here a wheezing, groaning sound, as a familiar Police Box shape faded into existence in the card’s place. Destina couldn’t help but smile.

“The Doctor!”

“He does not belong here!” called silver-hair. “He has not undertaken the trial.”

The door opened and the Doctor stepped out, looking about him surprised. His eyes were red, as if he’d been crying, and Destina realised he had. He rushed out and gave Destina a hug.

“Oh, Destina, I thought I’d have lost you too.” He held onto her for a moment, then looked up at the ninjas. “Umm, so, who’s your very good looking bunch of friends?”

Destina stepped back. “They’re going to bring Frobisher to life again. Death told me –“

“Death is getting a good swift kick up his bony bottom next time I see him” said the Doctor angrily. “Sending you through a hell dimension for –“

“Doctor, I have to save him.”

“You can’t Destina. He’s ... he’s dead, and you can’t –“

“Can’t? Can’t?” called out toothy grin. “There’s no such word as can’t!”

“Oh, throw yourself off a radio telescope” the Doctor retorted. “I don’t care what you’ve been feeding her, you won’t dupe her into –“

“The page of coins would not be able to pay the price” said the young one with the curly mane. “But perhaps the magician could?”

“He certainly has that air about him” agreed silver-hair.

“We agree. The card will be returned to the deck.”

There was a blinding light, a clap of thunder, and one of the cards dropped from the orbit, the page of swords. The ninjas bowed their heads solemnly.

“Do not ask this of us again” they chorused.

“But wait!” called Destina. “What about the price? Don’t we have to –“

“There is always a price. Another game has been played, and other cards will be lost. The ace has launched its pawn, and the king of swords will be reversed. The Knight of Staves will not be enough.”

“The ace has...” the Doctor muttered. “No, no, you can’t ask that price! If it releases –“

“Enough!” the chorused again, with another clap of thunder. “Your request has been granted and the price has been set! Be gone from this place!”

And they vanished, leaving the Doctor and Destina alone on the chequered platform in the void.

The Doctor reached over and grabbed Destina’s arm. “Quickly, inside, we have to go.”

“But –“

“This place will disintegrate any second, inside, now!”

Destina didn’t argue, she dove into the open door of the TARDIS and heard the Doctor rush in behind her, a blinding light suddenly filling the doorway as the dimensions imploded. The Doctor rushed to the console and began to press buttons, the central column rising and falling almost instantly.

Destina was going to rest for a moment, but found she was astounded by what she saw before her. Standing near the hatstand was a familiar penguin shaped friend, and he was smiling.

“Hey, Doc, Destina, what’s going on? God, I think I just had the most weirdest, strangest dream...”

## **Chapter Fifteen – The Price**

Destina's eyes lit up, and she rushed across the console room to make sure she wasn't dreaming. "Frobisher! Frobisher, you're alive! You're alive! You're alive!" She grabbed him in a tight bear-hug and spun him around, much to his irritation.

"Yeah, yeah, I like you too, Destina. Umm, you wouldn't want to let go now, would ya? Air becoming an important issue over here..."

Destina let her friend go and just smiled. "I thought I'd lost you forever."

"Ummm, yeah..." Frobisher gave Destina a quizzical look. "Destina, have you been nipping into the vroxnic again? Because we have talked about this."

"Don't you remember?" Destina exclaimed. "You were dead, you got shot by those Peacekeeper people, you died on the floor."

"I was wounded by the Peacekeepers" Frobisher corrected. "Nothing much, just a scratch, I'm better now. And speaking of better, the Doc seems pretty much up and about, don't ya?"

Destina didn't know how to respond. A claim of "but you were dead" felt fair redundant, yet she couldn't think of anything appropriately witty to respond with. So she turned to the one in the room who could. "Doctor?"

"Let's just say I get over sicknesses quickly and not mention it again."

Destina shook her head. "Not you being sick –" she paused, and added, "we'll discuss that later. Frobisher was dead, wasn't he? I went to the underworld and everything."

"Destina, what are you on?" Frobisher asked.

"Oh no, she's quite right. You were dead, Frobisher" said the Doctor, still not taking his eyes off the rising and falling central column. "From what the Computer tells me, Death himself turned up and everything."

"See!" said Destina, as if proving Frobisher's recent mortality was some major achievement.

Frobisher gave her a sideways suspicious glance. "Nah, getoutahere, I couldn't have been dead. Dead people, you know, go to heaven or wherever."

"But I did a deal. With a bunch of grumpy old guys who liked their playing cards too much."

"They were far more than that, Destina" the Doctor added, still not moving.

"You recognised them?"

The Doctor smiled. "Technically. But I also know what it really was. And while I'm glad Frobisher is back with us again, I'm more concerned about the price."

"Oh yes, that. Well it can't be that bad, can it?"

Frobisher was confused. "Price? What price?"

"To retrieve your soul and restore it to what it once was, Frobisher, Destina had to do a deal with the sheer forces of the universe. A divine act of goodness has been made, shifting the balance of the universe, so to restore it, there must be allowed one divine act of evil. That is the price."

"Eh?"

Destina sighed, revelling in the fact that Frobisher was the clueless one for a change. "You got resurrected, but we have to give something in return."

"Not just us, Destina, the whole universe does. That's the trouble with making deals of these kinds, they can't end well." He sighed. "Welcome back, Frobisher."

"Not sure I want to be back, after that..." he muttered quietly.

“But still, how bad can this price be?” asked Destina, desperately trying not to let go of the hope that she’d done the right thing.

“It can’t be good, letting chaos have one free turn. ‘The ace has launched its pawn...’” He sighed. “If it’s what I think it is, we could be in for a battle.”

“What’s this ace thing?” asked Frobisher. “Don’t tell me Dorothy McShane’s going to be making a reappearance?”

“Not that Ace, Frobisher” the Doctor scolded. “At least I hope not. They spoke in metaphors, the ace is a metaphor. And I think I know what.”

The Doctor’s companions stood watching in anticipation. “Well?” they chorused.

The Doctor sighed. “Have I ever told you about the force from the dawn of time, spawned from the big bang and still remains to wreak havoc and evil to this day?”

The console beeped and the Computer’s voice reappeared. “Doctor! I found it, a major divergence to the timeline. It’s made its move.”

“Good!” said the Doctor, abandoning his explanation. “Where?”

“Early December, 2015. In London.”

“Ooh, dearie, don’t you just love Christmas? All the presents, the lights, the goodwill...”

Astra rolled her eyes. “Spirit save me from Gallifreyans and their surreal fascination with the holidays.”

Iris flicked on an indicator and swung the bus around a corner in the extreme sport way she had a habit of doing. “You don’t like Christmas, chook?”

Astra looked sideways at her. “Did the Doctor ever tell you about the last time he tried getting me to celebrate Christmas?”

Iris thought for a moment. “Nope, don’t think he did.”

“Let’s just say you just haven’t lived until you’ve seen Daleks and Cybermen singing carols in unison while firing at each other.”

Iris laughed. “Oh, my, it sounds like fun.”

“It’s not. Believe me. Anyway, as I told the Doctor then, Christmas is fun as far as the presents go, but as for the rest of it, the superficial silliness, selfishness and commercialism, well you can keep it.”

“But there’s the snow!” protested Iris. “And the carols! And the window displays!”

“Not to mention the drunken parties, crowded shopping centres and the insane death toll. Speaking of which, wanna slow down, Iris, lest we decide to add to it?”

Iris slowed the bus down marginally. “I was just putting the old girl through her paces. It’s taken me six months to get her up to this standard, you know.”

Astra nodded. “Yes, yes, I know. You’ve told me about a hundred times. You still haven’t got the dimensional stabilizers going though, have you?”

“Well, no, but they never worked anyway.”

“And you certainly haven’t got the time vector generator in any sort of order, otherwise we wouldn’t need to drive through the snow to this place, we could just dematerialize.”

“Oooh, but driving’s so much more fun, don’t you think dear?” said Iris.

“Your high-brow dematerialisin’ may be quicker, but a simple motor and a set of wheels is much more homely.”



Astra shrugged, not really wanting to get into this argument again. “Not sure why we’re bothering. I doubt this lead is going to be much better than any of the others we’ve dealt with in the last six months here.”

“Ooh, don’t lose hope, darling” said Iris. “I mean, when you’re like me and live forever, barring accidents, then six months is nothing.”

“You might be near-immortal, Iris, but I’m not. I have to admit, I’m sick of the twenty-first century already and would be quite happy to move on, except the Monk wants me to find out more about what Kid actually is.”

Iris chuckled. “Ooh, yes. But Mort seems to be enjoying himself here.”

“Oh yes,” said Astra. “Another thing that worries me. Oh, wait, pull over, there’s the shop over there. Iris, quick, we’ll miss it!”

The door tinkled as it swung open, and Astra wondered if she could really be bothered with this. Yet another dingy little shop in the back streets of London, full of nick-nacks and ancient books to glance over and discover the mysteries of the universe. They’d found about twenty of these sorts of shops scattered across the city. She wouldn’t be surprised if they had some sort of network, coming together for conventions and such. Probably compared notes about people like Astra and Iris coming in and asking surreal questions.

Iris boggled at some of the trinkets she saw around, but then regained some focus and marched up towards the counter, where she pounded on a little bell. “Shop!” she called happily.

From a back room a short little Chinese man stepped out and smiled strangely at them. Astra was not remotely surprised to see him, that sort of shop owner came with the sort of shop. “Yes?” he asked politely.

“Ooh, allo there!” Iris cooed. “Me friend and I have a few questions we need to ask.”

“Oh? I will be happy to help if I can” the shop owner said in a thick accent.

Iris looked like she was about to jump for joy, as she dumped her handbag on the counter and rummaged through it. She produced a photograph and handed it over. “Do you recognise this boy?”

The shop owner studied the photo for a moment, then grinned. “Oh yes! I know this boy! This is Kid!” he began to do a little dance. “I’m gonna live forever, I’m gonna learn how to fly...”

Astra rolled her eyes. She’d told Iris that asking people to identify a photo would be useless when dealing with Kid, he was on every billboard all across London. If you didn’t recognise him, you must have been living on the moon, or elsewhere.

“He’s got a new CD out, yes? Carols with Little Sis, yes?” continued the strange little shop-owner.

Iris nodded. “Oh, yes, but that’s not what I’m here to ask, I’m –“

“You don’t have any books about supernatural energies housing themselves in humans, do you?” asked Astra, trying to put an end to the nonsense. “Accounts of strange abilities to draw on energies, purple auras, that sort of thing?”

“Ahhh!” said the little man. “I may have just what you are looking for.” He reached down under the counter and produced a thick leather-bound book that looked as if it were about a hundred years old or so. “The Grimoire of Ancient And Extra Ordinary Beings. Very few copies exist, it may have the answers to which –“

Astra sighed. “Thanks, we’ve read that one. Doesn’t have anything new. Thanks anyway. Come on, Iris”. She turned on her heel and headed for the door.

“Bye-bye, dear!” called Iris on the way out. “Make sure you buy Kid’s CD! It’s out tomorrow, big launch at HMV!”

Astra grabbed Iris’s arm and dragged her through the door and onto the street. She let go once they were outside, and Iris began brushing herself down.

“Well, I didn’t think it could hurt to try and get another fan there.”

“He doesn’t need any help, you know it’s going to be packed” Astra scolded. “Anyway, that was a wasted trip, nothing new whatsoever.”

Iris sighed and pulled out the key to the bus. “So back to square one then.”

“Square one? It’s more like square zero. Six months of following leads and we’ve come up with nothing. Even catching that ninja and questioning it didn’t help, it just disintegrated.”

“Oh, well, dear,” said Iris, opening the door. “Tomorrow’s another day. We may have better luck.”

“That’s what you said five months ago.” Astra sighed and followed the Time Lady onto the bus. “I hope Mort’s having more fun than I am. Where is he anyway?”

“I think he said something about going to the beach, dear, with Kid.”

Astra shivered. “In this weather? At night? What are they, crazy?”

Iris smiled. “The beach on the planet Aridius, dear.”

Astra sighed. “Oh.”

The twin suns pounded down on Mort, as he grabbed the shoulders of his opponent and attempted to throw him over his shoulder and pin him to the sand on the ground. It didn’t work, the other fighter was much stronger than he, broke free from Mort’s grip with ease, then dropped to his knees to sweep Mort’s feet from beneath him. Mort reacted, leaping into the air and diving over his attacker’s head, falling into a roll, coming back onto his feet, and turned to face his opponent.

Kid gave him a wicked grin. “Not bad. Not as good as this, though!” Kid leapt into the air into a back flip, kicking as he went in an attempt to knock Mort off his feet. Mort feigned back, then grabbed Kid’s foot, throwing him off balance, forcing him to land awkwardly.

Mort took his chance and threw a punch, as Kid rose to his feet and blocked it with perfect timing. They stood there, throwing violent and strong punches at each other, both of them managing to block the blows the other threw, neither of them landing a single punch. Eventually, Kid grabbed Mort’s arm, and before he knew what was happening, Kid twisted it, sending Mort into a spin as he flipped over and landed on the ground on his back. Kid stepped over Mort and straddled him.

“So, who wins?”

Mort grinned and sighed. “You do, I guess.”

Kid returned the grin, and smugly added, “as always.” He reached down to tweak Mort’s nose, but Mort, deciding not to give in, grabbed it and twisted Kid’s wrist, sending his arm in the wrong direction, forcing Kid to roll off Mort’s chest and land on his back beside Mort. They both lay there, side by side for a moment, out of breath, basking in the sunlight.

“You’re improving” said Kid eventually.

Mort shrugged and replied, “I’ve got a good trainer.”

They lay in silence for a bit, as they regained their strength after their sparring session. Kid was right, in the past six months Mort had improved and was almost a different person than who Astra had brought to London in July. Having trained with Kid for half a year, following his regime, Mort had shed a few pounds of fat and gained some muscle definition. While he didn’t look anything like Kid did, as Mort

compared their shirtless torsos while they lay on the beach, Mort had to admit he'd got some muscle tone, and didn't look half bad. Good enough that he was confinement enough to strip to the waist in his presence and fight him.

His fighting skills were improving as well, which did well whenever a ninja visited to try and slice them up, Mort was able to lend a good enough hand to dispose of them quickly. They hadn't seen as many for a while, but they'd been dealt with in record time when they did arrive.

And so, while Kid improved Mort's physique and well-being, Mort had in turn showed him various places around the universe. They hadn't returned to Xuberance, at Kid's request, but they'd seen other worlds and planets, much to Astra's irritation when they stole the *Telstra* without asking. But Kid enjoyed it. Today, when the weather in London was rather cold and miserable, they'd decided to land somewhere warm, and then decided to strip off and work on getting an early tan for summer, practicing their sparring.

And by the Spirit, Mort said, he couldn't think of a time where he'd had as much fun.

"Mort?" asked Kid, breaking Mort's rambling thinking. "Do you think anyone can be evil?"

Mort thought for a moment. "I dunno. I've seen some really nasty guys around the universe. Some gods I'd call the personification of evil, like Rabane was, and there's one or two nutters I'd swear haven't got a good bone in their bodies."

"So it's possible, you think?" he asked. "Someone has no shred of decency in them whatsoever?"

Mort shrugged. "I guess. Why?"

"Oh, no reason. Just thinking about stuff, is all." Kid turned his head, and tapped Mort on the chest. "So, wanna go again?"

"Another round?" Mort cried. "Come on, give a guy a chance to recover from the last one."

Kid laughed. "You're scared I'll whoop your ass again"

"Hardly," Mort glanced at his watch. "Anyway, we probably ought to head back, big day tomorrow and all."

Kid groaned. "It's always a big day with me. Oh well, I guess you're right. At least now we don't need to do the night's workout."

"Much to your dismay, I know how much you like punching that bag."

"Who needs a bag, when I've got a Mort?" Kid laughed, punching Mort on the arm, and Mort returned it.

Kid rolled back onto his shoulders and sprang up onto his feet. "Oki doki, if we're going we'd better get going, otherwise I might get tempted to get sparring with you again. We'd be here all night."

He reached down offering Mort his hand, which Mort accepted and pulled himself up. They glanced around looking for their discarded shirts, which Kid collected as Mort wandered over and unlocked the *Telstra*. He held the door open for Kid. "After you?"

"Oh, you're too kind" he said, punching Mort on the arm again. Mort gave him a playful look, and raced into the *Telstra* after him, the door swinging closed behind him. Then amidst a hail of blue electricity, the *Telstra* disappeared.

But the beach was still not empty, and their departure hadn't gone unnoticed. A cowed figure had stood watching them fight each other, then saw their playful silliness as they left.

And the cowed figure was not happy.

## Chapter Sixteen – Awakening

*“Doctor!” says Astra suddenly. “Look at that, you’ve just hit forty-five thousand and five-hundred words exactly!”*

*The Doctor checks his document quickly. “Really? Oh good, only four and a half thousand to go.”*

*“Not much.”*

*“Yes.” The Doctor cracks his knuckles. “Right, time to hit the climax...”*

Across the universe, the various pieces on the great cosmic chessboard slid through their moves and got into place. The traps were being prepared, on both sides, for one to take the king of the other and dominate the board. A board so large, only the greatest of beings could begin comprehend it.

In the vortex, the *Telstra* spun its way back to London, 2015, to the very place and time it departed from, to deliver its cargo back into the hands of his managers. Tomorrow was to be a big day, in the simple sense that he was to launch a new album that day with a Christmas theme, but also in a grander, more powerful and much more important cosmic sense that nobody could see coming.

In another part of London, a double-decker bus sped through the city streets from another fruitless mission to discover truth. While Iris Wildthyme chorused to herself to the tune of various ABBA songs, Astra merely rolled her eyes and awaited the return to the I&M building, in which she planned to go straight to bed and sleep, conserve her energies. For all she knew, she was only going to a pop singer’s event tomorrow, but something within warned her to be prepared.

As the *Telstra* arrived in the building, a one-time Monk and currently a troublesome meddler pondered on the next day. He of all knew what he planned to happen, and his plans stretched far further than simply organising fans to get autographs. He had a debt, and was about to repay.

And in the vortex, a battered blue Police Box made its way to Earth once more, carrying information that would prove crucial before the following sunset. For all actions there is a price, and Destina was to learn the very nature of hers. The world works in mysterious ways, and takes its toll in unusual and different forms, and only the Doctor would be able to stop them. If only he wasn’t going to be too late.

All in all, the next twenty-four hours were ones that none of those involved would ever soon forget.

The lift pinged as it hit the floor and the doors slid open before her. She was angry – after all the carry-on the Monk had given the night before when she and Iris had returned about making sure she was up bright and early to help organize the launch that day, the star guest had apparently slept in and needed someone to go get him up. It was typical, she has to put in the hours while the ones everyone looks to get a free ride. She could kill him.

Striding through the corridors on Kid’s private floor, she put on her ‘I’m very pissed off, so don’t even think about giving me lip, boy’ face as she strode towards his bedroom door. She rapped on it loudly, not caring if she was disturbing anything.

*“Kid! Open up, or I break down the door!”*

She only had to wait less than a minute before she heard the door unlock and open. Kid stood in the doorway, wearing only a towel, his hair wet and slicked back. He glistened with droplets of water.

“Yes?” he said. His usually bright and cheery demeanour was somewhat subdued, quite out of character for him. Astra decided to ignore it – if he wanted to be serious all of a sudden, then let him, she was on a mission.

“Do you have any idea what time it is?” she asked, not letting her face falter.

Kid held up his bare wrist. “No watch.”

“Well, it’s late, and you’re due at HMV in an hour. The Monk is going spare, get dressed and get out there or else.”

Kid broke her gaze and glanced at his feet. “Sorry, I was in the shower. I won’t be long.”

Astra, suddenly, was worried. There was no sharp retort, no insulting comment thrown back at her. For a change, something was wrong with Kid.

“Is Mort in there with you?” she asked, deciding Kid’s problems were something that could wait.

Kid paused for a moment, then said, “I was in the shower, why would he be in here?”

“I dunno, you two seem pretty-much stapled together these days. Downstairs, ten minutes, or else.”

Kid nodded. “See you there.”

And with that he closed the door in her face, leaving Astra alone in the corridor. Irritated that she didn’t get the chance to be at least verbally violent with him, she spun on her heel and marched over to the lift to break the news to the Monk. She hoped ten minutes would be enough for him.

Kid closed the bedroom door quietly and Mort found he was able to breathe again. “Is she gone?” he asked.

Kid nodded, making his way across to the wardrobe. “Yep. I’ve got ten minutes before they pull out the battering ram.”

Mort sat there, twiddling his thumbs. “Are you sure you actually want to do it? I mean, after –“

“Do I get a choice?” Kid pulled a shirt out of the cupboard and slipped it on, doing the buttons up slowly. “I’ve lived with it for the last six months, why should today be any different?”

“Yes, but now you’ve told me” said Mort. “Should change things at some level.”

“Makes me feel a bit better. Do you think I should leave it undone this low?” He gestured the buttons only done up to just above his navel.”

“Put the pants on and we’ll see” Mort replied. Then he sighed, thinking. “Are you sure about what the ... the thing said? It wasn’t talking about something else?”

“It wasn’t talking at all.” Kid whipped off his towel revealing, well, Mort didn’t really want to say, but he barely flinched as he pulled out a pair of underwear and slipped them on. Then he hunted for some jeans. “It was more it came in and just, I dunno, uploaded some new files. It didn’t tell me, I just knew.”

“So you couldn’t have been mistaken” agreed Mort. “Well it paints what happened on Xuberance in a clearer light. I suppose it couldn’t have been a weird ride that they were trying out...”

“What?” said Kid, turning around. “A ride that tells you that you’re ev-“

“Don’t say it” said Mort. “You’re not. Believe me, you’re not.” He stood up and walked across to Kid, and held him by the shoulders.

“You’re the most ... perfect guy I’ve ever known, Kid. If what that thing said is true, then what hope is there for the rest of us?”

Kid smiled then, almost embarrassed by the sentiment. “Thanks.”

“I mean it.”

They stood there looking at each other for a moment, before Kid shook himself away. “God, look at us, we don’t have time for this. Astra’s put us on a time limit...”

Mort stepped back and let Kid pull his jeans on. “Yes, Astra, we probably should tell her about –“

“No!” said Kid quickly. “No, we can’t tell anyone else. They – they wouldn’t understand.”

Mort had to laugh. “Astra, the girl who’s seen more than most people on the planet, not understand? You can’t be serious.”

“She already doesn’t like me, something tells me this’d just be proof.”

“She’s researching it already, she’ll find out eventually. Besides, Astra’s not that kind of person.”

Kid still shook his head. “No, I can’t. I can tell you, you’re different, but...”

Mort nodded. “Ok. I understand.”

Kid smiled. “That’s why I can tell you.”

The rest of the morning had passed fairly uneventfully, Astra had to decide. Just under ten minutes after she’d gotten back into the lounge, Kid and Mort had arrived in the lift, Kid still adjusting his very-low cut silk shirt. There was no time for him to have any breakfast, Iris gave him a protein bar to get him through to lunch, then they all rushed down to the limo which would take them to the signing.

Astra was still convinced something was up with Kid. He still wasn’t as peppy and full of energy as he usually was, which she knew would not go well on stage when he launched the new album. She also knew from the look in his eyes that Mort knew exactly what was up, and she made a mental note to sit back and quiz him about it later.

As the limo sped through the city streets, its occupants were treated to a playing of the new CD. For a change, the CD wasn’t original pop songs but a variety of Christmas carols performed in a modern style. Kid had sung half the songs while Little Sis had taken the other half, with a select few done as duets. The title, *The Kris Mix* had been Astra’s idea. And she had to admit, as Kid’s youthful and melodic voice played over the limo speakers crooning *God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen*, it wasn’t a bad album. But anything was an improvement over *Fame*.

The Monk had persuaded Kid to attempt to sing along to the CD before they got there. The plan was to announce the launch of the CD to the fans, a brief performance from both him and Little Sis (who would be meeting them there), a short interview for the press, then a few hours signing CD covers for the crowd of fans who would undoubtedly be crawling over each other to try and attract their idol’s attention. And with Little Sis’s equally large fan-base in attendance as well, Astra had no idea how the HMV staff were planning to cope.

The crowd stretched from within the shop to near around the block, and all of them screamed in a cacophony of noise as the limo swung past the front of the store and headed to the back entrance. Once inside, Kid was quickly taken to the stage-area that had been set up, his hair quickly reset to look perfect, his clothes adjusted to sit right, and a quick reminder of which song he was to sing. He was going to go on stage first, sing his song, after which Little Sis would follow to do hers, then they’d do their duet.

Kid didn't know why, but these events always terrified him. Performing at a concert was one thing, the stage was usually very high and security was extra tight. Here, in a claustrophobic shop filled with twice as many people, he always feared he'd have dozens of crazed fans trying to rip off his clothing and take samples as mementos or probably flog them for lots of money on Ebay. He idly thought they could probably sit buckets beneath him and fill them up as souvenirs, he was sweating so much. He hoped those make-up ladies didn't mind.

Working on breathing techniques to calm himself down, he heard the Monk approach behind him. He turned and grinned. "I never seem to get used to this" he said, trying to keep himself composed.

The Monk wasn't smiling. "It's time."

Kid spun around to check the stage-manager. "It's not, is it? They said I had five minutes."

The Monk took a step forward. "Not for that, for something else. Your destiny."

Kid gave him a look. "Monk, are you ok?"

The Monk closed his eyes, then opened them again, staring straight into Kid's with a passion. When he spoke, it was almost a chant. "∇ΣΩ ς∅ χℵΣ Ω ϕφ ε ϑΩκϯ".

Kid felt something explode behind his eyes, and his vision brightened. Things became clear, much clearer than they ever had been before, and his senses didn't quite know what to make of them. As his brain adjusted, taking in what he saw, what he felt, what he suddenly knew. And in his brief confusion, he staggered backwards and onto the stage.

Astra looked at the crowd around her and despaired, wondering why these poor souls had nothing better to do with their time but flock together just to catch a glimpse at someone who's total assets were good looks and a decent voice. Their lives must have been so empty that they gather to all but worship someone they barely knew, idolizing a mere image rather than the person himself. She wondered what religionists would have to say about that.

She was broken from her philosophical meanderings when the audience screamed, Kid had stepped on stage and into the spotlight. They had their glimpse of their little god, and they couldn't contain themselves.

The screaming and appraisal soon faltered, when they all realised something wasn't right. Kid wasn't standing tall, gripping the microphone and working the crowd as he should be, he staggered, not seeing, not processing what was going around him, touching his forehead gently as if in pain. He dropped to his knees before his audience, he face contorted not quite in agony, but he wasn't in the best of health.

She felt Mort stand up beside her, ready to race over to the stage to help him, but Astra gripped his arm and held him fast. There were medics closer to him that would help and Mort would simply get in their way. Besides, Kid had appeared to regain his composure, and stood on one knee, slowly and deliberately rose to his feet, filled with a new sense of energy. The crowd didn't quite know how to react to this, quite an unusual way to step onto a stage.

Kid had held his eyes faced down as he got back on his feet, but when he suddenly snapped his head up to face them, Astra physically jumped, as she was sure the audience did to. His eyes had changed colour, from being the standard type with blue irises, to being a bright red, glowing unnaturally and disturbingly.

The audience muttered and grumbled to itself, as Kid, still staring ahead, held out his arms and tensed every muscle in his body, letting out a primal roar. His shirt split again, as did his pants, and Astra again saw an aura of purple and blue electricity surround him as he drew on his mysterious power. Then she realised, to her horror, that everyone else around her could see it too.

Kid's muscles remained tense and defined, yet he moved fluidly, as he pointed at his audience. He spoke, and his voice had taken a deeper sense, matching his new pyrotechnics. "Let the chains shatter! From above you I devour!" He held out his hand, and a ball of purple fire formed in it, and hovered there for a moment. Astra held her breath, as the audience caught on to what it meant to them, and began screaming.

And then the massacre began.



## **Chapter Seventeen – I'm Gonna Live Forever**

The first firebolt struck about five members of the audience in the front row and seared the flesh from their skin, leaving a sickly pork-like scent in the air and five sets of charred skeletons that fell apart without any skin or muscle tissue to hold them together. Those around them suffered severe burns and screamed with pain, as panic set in and the crowd began trampling each other to get away. Away from the figure they once worshiped.

Another fireball hit the audience, roasting several more fans and increasing the panic, the fear rippling through the audience like a wave. The screaming was little more than noise now, as they stampeded to the what now seemed to be a very small shop-front. The counters shattered, the displays toppled over and were ruined underfoot in the mass hysteria and the din. Nobody could hear the music still playing over the speakers, of Kid ironically singing *God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen*.

Astra found it difficult, but kept her calm, and stared at Kid on the stage, seemingly feeding on the fear radiating from his audience. He held out his arms and casually directed bolts of blue and purple lightning at the audience members, incinerating them. She watched as a small boy felt his older sister shudder beside him, her hand turning from flesh to ash in his own, and saw Kid take in the fear like a drug. And he was grinning, which was the scariest bit, as it was exactly the same grin she had seen on him many times before for much more innocent things.

To Astra's surprise, it took her a minute of massacre to realise that this was exactly why she was here, this what, after all, what she did. She let Mort go and began to make her way to the stage, shoving hysterical teenagers aside to get to the source of their fear. Her passage was surprisingly easy.

When she got to the stage, she could see Kid much more clearly. Pyrotechnics and glowy eyes aside, he looked the same as he always did, but he now managed to incite fear, an unnatural unknown fear that even Astra had to fight against to face him. As he grinned and threw more firebolts into the crowd, she leapt up and kicked him in the face, hoping to send him to the ground.

Kid didn't even flinch. He merely turned his head and held up his hand at her.

"I've wanted to do this" he growled, as Astra felt a burning sensation somewhere within her chest. She felt something explode and she flew backwards to the ground, winded. She silently prayed to the Spirit that he hadn't detonated a main organ within and heard more people screaming around her.

She raised herself painfully to her elbows, hoping she wasn't causing herself more damage, and surveyed the chaos. A few people had made it to the exit, but not many, while several burnt and blackened piles reminded anyone looking back of their fate. Kid threw another firebolt and another, taking glee in his work. It made Astra feel sick.

Still without strength to move, she saw the curtain behind Kid sweep aside, and the Monk stepped out, unafraid and almost happy at what he saw. Astra watched him step up to Kid and whisper in his ear. And yet, despite the noise of fear, she heard the Monk's instructions.

"Go. Perform."

Kid nodded, still grinning and held his hands wide in a crucifixion position. He looked towards the ceiling with exuberance and Astra watched his features loose distort, as if he were on a camera lens that had been take out of focus.

Astra found her strength then, as she predicted what was to come. She sat up and screamed. “Mort! Get down! Get down now!”

She hoped she was in time. Kid’s body took on a transparent element and stretched the width of the room. With a roar, he became wind and swooped down on his audience forcing everybody to stop in their tracks.

They let out a powerful, piecing scream, then an awful silence. Astra suddenly felt very ill, and very sick.

She looked up after a moment and saw the damage. In his dramatic exit, Kid had been sure not to let a single being live before him, or if they were to live they wouldn’t last long. He appeared to have abandoned incinerating them and had restricted himself to a bloody massacre, blood scorching the walls, body parts lining the floor in a disgusting and horrible pattern. Whatever he did, he didn’t leave anyone alive.

Astra shuddered, feeling a vomit session coming on, but held it back. She didn’t have time to deal with it, she had to stop Kid before anything else happened. It was then she realised she could still hear a voice, a quiet sobbing from behind the curtain. It was Iris, Astra found as she crawled across the stage, her eyes red with tears and fear.

“He – he was so nice...” was all she could say between sobs. “How could he. How could he...”

Astra forced herself to look at the carnage on the floor, and held back her own tears. “Mort?” she croaked. “Mort are you there?”

She saw a limb move, something pushing it from beneath, and she saw a hand waving that she recognised. Acting on pure instinct, Astra leapt to her feet and raced across to it, and pulled her friend out from the muck. Mort was covered in blood and ash, his eyes too shocked to cry.

“Astra” he said in a quiet voice. “What happened?”

Astra hugged him, still not letting the tears come. There’d be time for shock later, she had things to do. “I don’t know, Mort. I –”

She stopped when she heard another noise. On the stage, behind the Monk (who, since telling Kid to go, hadn’t moved), a wheezing groaning sound began building volume, and a familiar blue box appeared, the light flashing hopefully on top. As soon as it was solid, the door sprung open and the Doctor stepped out followed by a penguin and a brunette girl a year or two younger than Astra.

The Doctor grinned, but then took in the view before him, wiping it away just as quickly. “Sorry, am I too late?” he said sadly.

*“Hang on,” says Astra, “you’ve got Destina and Frobisher there.”*

*The Doctor nods. “Yes, and?”*

*“I hadn’t met them until just before Destina departed company, remember. I shouldn’t know who they are yet.”*

*“Call it dramatic licence. I can hardly leave them in the TARDIS, now can I, that’d be rude.”*

*“I’m just letting you know, you’re damaging your credibility here with these continuity inaccuracies. And by the way, did you have to be so gory?”*

*The Doctor shrugged. “Well, I have to justify the use of ‘doom’ in the title, don’t I?”*

*“‘Doomish’” Astra corrected.*

*“Whatever.”*

Astra let go of Mort and rushed to the stage. “Doctor! Doctor, oh, by the Spirit, I’ve never been so glad to see you!”

The Doctor turned and looked at her gravely. “What happened here?”

“Hell broke loose. Literally. It was ...”

“Horrible? Disgusting?” asked the penguin. Astra probably should have been shocked about a big talking bird, but had other things to be shocked about.

“Nevermind, Astra, I think I have an idea.” He suddenly turned to the Monk standing nearby. “You!” he called.

The Monk turned, looked at the Doctor, still standing in his trance. Suddenly the Doctor was upon him, grabbing his arm and twisting it up his back, slamming the other Time Lord against the wall, painfully.

“Nice to see you again, Doctor” said the Monk almost conversationally. “Ooh, that hurts...”

“Good, it’s supposed to” said the Doctor, without smiling. Astra hadn’t seen him this cross often. “You know what’s going on, and I think you’re going to explain. Now.”

“I’ve never seen the Doctor do that before...” muttered the brunette to the penguin.

“Isn’t that what I’m usually around for?” added Astra.

“Oh, the Doctor’s very good at fisticuffs, Astra,” said the Monk. “Just ask him sometime about what he did to me in Egypt –“

“Enough chatter, start confessing” growled the Doctor.

“What makes you think I know what’s happening?”

“Because I saw you say something to Kid to make him go” said Astra.

“And because I know you, Monk, and I know you’re never up to good. I did some research before I got here. *I&M Enterprises*, isn’t it, and don’t worry Iris, I know you’re around there somewhere, I’ll deal with you later. Now I know you’re never the philanthropic type and wouldn’t help a homeless kid like that without an ulterior motive, so start talking or I break your arm.”

“Ok, alright, I’ll confess, just let me go!”

“To let you do a runner? No thanks.”

“Doc,” said the penguin, “how do you know he’s the baddie here? I mean, couldn’t he –“

“He knows, because he’s my agent.”

There was silence in the hall for a second, even Iris’s sobbing stopped, as everyone registered the new presence in the room. Standing on the stage behind Astra and the Doctor’s new companions, was a short, plump young woman with long reddish-blond hair down her back. Her face wasn’t one anybody could describe as pretty, almost pig-like. She wore a permanent scowl.

“It’s about time you showed up,” said the Doctor, letting the Monk go to face his new enemy.

“Doctor?” asked the brunette, timidly. “Aren’t you going to introduce us?”

“Evil” he replied, simply. “Evil from the dawn of time, the personification of everything bad, wicked and horrible in the universe. Whether you call it Fenric, Fenriswolf, the First, Dahak, Satan, or whatever, it always exists, always survives, always tries to reduce the world to chaos, despite what name you give it. You know, I think today I’ll call you Willisa, just because I can. I mean, in this form you look like a Willisa.”

The brunette attempted a smile, but couldn’t hide her fear. “Nice to meet you.”

“You still like to mock me I see Doctor, I hope you enjoy it,” said Willisa, her voice taking on a slight lisp. “But considering who was the one who caused the bloodbath you all are currently waddling in, I fail to see why you’re laughing.”

“But Kid caused the bloodbath,” said Astra. “Unless I was watching something else.”

Willisa smiled. “Yes, I believe you’ve met my son. Strapping young lad, lots of potential, out causing chaos in the streets of London – he takes after my side of the family, you know. I always wanted a child.”

The Doctor, despite this, laughed. “I thought so. So, having failed to enter the universe through your other attempts to use vampires, hermivores and other undead methods, you’ve gone back onto old habits through bringing forth a messiah. It didn’t work in ancient Greece, Willisa, and I doubt it’ll work now.”

“Oh, but it is working, or have you missed the bodies?”

“Hang on, Doctor” said Astra, catching up. “Kid’s been the spawn of pure evil this whole time? And the Monk *knew*?”

“When did you find out, Monk?” asked Iris, having stopped sobbing and now glaring.

“I think you’ll find he knew the whole time” said the Doctor. “Right from the moment he landed in London, he was looking for him. Doing Willisa’s bidding, and seeking the world’s new destroyer out.”

Willisa grinned. “Don’t look so miserable, Doctor. You knew it was coming, you were told about the price.”

“Eh?” asked Astra.

“But that only happened a few hours ago!” muttered the brunette. “This plot has been going for two years, the Doctor said.”

“Time is relative, Destina, especially when Willisa’s concerned. Step backwards in time, sew the seeds she now has the permission to, and reap the rewards here in 2015.”

“Seeds?” Astra shook her head. “Doctor, I’m confused now, what’s going on?”

The Doctor sighed. “Ok, from the beginning.

“Not long ago, Frobisher here met with an accident, a fatal one. Destina, stricken with grief went on a journey through the underworld to retrieve him and restore his soul to his body. She was successful, but these things come with a price.

“As the universe had to give one free turn to the light side, as it were, to restore a life, then to maintain balance, one free turn had to be given to the dark. Now, Willisa has many, many pots sitting on backburners all over the universe, from hellmouths to portals to agents to cultists, but generally she’s not allowed to use them until the balance shifts and she’s granted permission.

“Kid was one of these, a being formed specifically by her, in human form, placed as a child to grow to maturity and spread her word. But the powers that be, whoever they be, were able to keep his potential for evil untouched. They gave him a conscience, and forced him to live a life of a beggar, deliberately extinguishing his desire to live, to become greater than what he is.

“It was the Monk who awoke this. Under Willisa’s command, he travelled to Earth, met up with Kid and awoke in him a sense of purpose, the desire to have a future.”

“Which is why he became a pop-star” muttered Astra. “Something for him to aspire to.”

The Doctor nodded. “For two years, his indifference to life decreased, thus allowing Willisa to empty him of the cup of human kindness as it were. And today, the price has been paid, as the Monk completed his task and awoke in him the power he was born with. The power of evil.”

“But why?” asked the penguin. “I mean, who’d want to cause such carnage?”

“Because I made a vow, that’s why” said the Monk gravely. “It got me out of the latest jam the Doctor left me in, and I owed it. It merely called in its debt.”

“But why am I here?” asked Astra. “Mort and I were practically summoned, a distress signal sent directly to the *Telstra* –“

“That was me too,” said the Monk. “To keep me on my task, it destroyed my TARDIS on impact. I was promised when I completed my task, your ship would be mine.”

Willisa suddenly began an ironic clap, surveying the group of people before her. “Well done, such an excellent information session, I do hope everyone is caught up. So, it’s the Doctor’s new assistant’s fault, the Monk set the plan in motion, and the rest of you are just depressingly sad little pawns. Everybody happy?”

“Not as much a pawn as Kid is” said the Doctor sadly.

“Oh please, you should have seen his face, Doctor, he was thrilled. He loves what he does now. Like mother like son.” Willisa sighed wistfully. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’m done gloating with you lot now, I’m off to watch my handiwork take effect. I think that by the end of the day, at least this hemisphere will be nothing but ash and blood. Should be fun.” And with a flash, she disappeared.

“Lovely woman” said the Doctor, darkly. “Come on, we’ve got work to do.”

“Doctor, wait,” said Astra. “Something else doesn’t make sense. The ninjas, the ones that have been attacking Kid for the past six months, where do they fit in?”

“Ninjas?” asked the brunette.

“I suppose they’re supposed to protect him,” the Doctor muttered. “Keep anyone from getting close to – what is it?”

They weren’t after him, Astra suddenly realised. They were after the one who’d been closest to Kid the whole time.

She suddenly looked around the room, noticing the absence of one person. “Where’s Mort?”

Mort had had enough long before the Doctor had got to his mass explanation, he’d filled in the gaps enough and left to see what he could do. There had to be something.

Now he almost wished he hadn’t. The tears streamed down his blood-splattered face as he saw the carnage in the street outside. The buildings nearby were blackened, cars were overturned and on fire, the path tainted red as people lay in pieces. Those who could still do so sobbed uncontrollably, waiting for them to die and pass on to better worlds. Any world would have been better than this.

Mort walked down the road slowly, unable to take it all in and not really sure what he was doing. He couldn’t stand there and listen to the Doctor explain everything in such clinical detachment while his friend destroyed the world. He knew what was happening, Kid had discussed it with him only that morning, and something had gone wrong.

“Kid?” he called out feebly, realising how hopeless it was. “Kid, are you there?”

“I’m here” he heard the reply, and Mort, frightened yet concerned, turned around.

There he was, his best friend over the past six months, standing like the most magnificent and powerful being ever. His eyes still glowed their red taint, and the electricity still danced around him to such an extent that his shirt had been burnt mostly away, leaving him topless. Each of his muscles glistened with power and strength, and Mort thought he looked more beautiful than ever.

Beautiful, but deadly.

“Hey,” said Mort quietly. “Great weather.”

Kid smiled. “A nice day, yes.”

Mort sighed, happy to see him, but knowing he had to get serious. “Kid, what are you doing?” he said sadly. “What’s happened?”

Kid kept grinning, and began strolling towards him. “What’s happened? Mort, you can’t begin to conceive, the power, the strength I have. Watch”

He flicked his wrist, and a car nearby exploded, and Kid didn’t even flinch. Mort did, as he dodged the debris scattering the ground.

“And that’s just a taste” Kid continued. “I can feel it growing within me at every second. Everything at my command, my touch, my instant thought –“

“I’m happy for you,” continued Mort. “It must be great.”

Kid’s red eyes sparkled. “I wish I could show you how great it is, Mort, really. It’s such a rush, it makes being normal be just boring.”

“But have you seen what you’re doing?” asked Mort, pressing home the point. “You’re destroying things – you’re killing people! They’re dying in agony.”

Kid shrugged. “They’re just people.”

“Just people?” Mort boggled. “What’s so ‘just’ about people?”

“They’re nothing in comparison to me. I’m a god, Mort, my mother has made sure of that. I can’t see why you can’t understand that.”

“Because it’s wrong!” said Mort, fresh tears forming. “Why can’t you see that?”

Kid was silent, the grin on his face fading slightly.

“What happened, Kid?” asked Mort again. “You were a nice guy before, a bit arrogant, but still decent. Now you want to destroy the world?”

“The world sucks anyway.”

“It hasn’t done you much harm, has it. And look how you’ve repayed your fans?”

Kid’s eyes snapped up and looked at Mort. “Join me. I can make you like me, Mort. We can take on the universe together, just you and me, forever and ever.”

Mort shook his head. “I can’t.”

“It’ll be easy, I can fill you with power. We can be twin gods, ruling over creation in my mother’s name.”

“Why? Why me? What makes me more special than any of the others out here, dying on the pavement?”

“I ...” Kid faltered. “I just... you’re different.”

“How? How am I any different from the people you’ve murdered?”

Kid couldn’t answer. “Because, I ... I lo... Damnit!” He flexed his arms and a fireball flew from his chest in Mort’s direction. Mort neatly dodged it, and saw it blow apart a rubbish bin into tiny pieces.

“Ok, so do you want to make me a god or kill me?”

“Why are you making this difficult, Mort?” Kid yelled. “Things were simple before.”

“They were simple, because the evil in you made it so. But you’ve got a soul, Kid, I’ve seen it. You know this is wrong.”

“It’s not! You’re wrong, it’s not!”

“You’re not evil, Kid.”

“But I am!” he was getting angry. “I’m evil, I’m the personification of Evil!”

“You’re Kid” replied Mort simply. “A simple guy with a simple talent, handsome, great singer, charming person. And I love you Kid.”

Kid glared at Mort. “Do you? Do you really?”. The god began striding at Mort, strong with purpose, until they were face to face. “Well, then, lover, give us a kiss!”

Kid reached over and gripped the back of Mort’s head, firmly placing his lips on Mort’s, and they kissed. Mort felt himself held in Kid’s almost romantic embrace, the sparks of lightning still marinating Kid’s muscles and giving Mort a tingly feeling all over.

Then he felt it start, a power deep within growing and building, threatening to expand beyond what Mort felt his own body could contain. For a minute he thought Kid was killing him, forcing his organs to self destruct from the inside out, until he realised, this wasn’t death, it was rebirth. Kid was passing on some of his power to Mort, and making him a god.

The feeling was incredible, Mort agreed, as his senses started accommodating what Kid was showing him. He felt himself return Kid’s embrace and soak up the feeling of wonder he was being given.

And before Kid had a chance to squash his soul with the power, Mort used it to give Kid something in return.

In an instant, Kid broke from the embrace and threw Mort to the ground, who writhed in ecstasy as the power drained. Kid raised his hands to his head, tears starting to dribble down his face as his mind shifted.

Mort had transferred his conscience to Kid, and Kid was now feeling remorse.

Kid screamed, and held his hands to his head, crying and sobbing as everything he had done in the past hour came back to him in droves. He saw every face, every being and felt their pain. The electricity surged from his arms, making the ground ripple, as he took his pain out on the foundations around him. He dropped to his knees and continued screaming, the scream of a god deafening all those who chose to listen.

He stopped, suddenly, as he felt a strong pair of arms around him. He didn’t look, but knew instantly who it was. Mort held him and hugged him and whispered it would all be ok, as Kid’s screams changed into sobs and groans, crying into Mort’s shoulder. He could feel the power he gave Mort draining as easily as it had been given, his heightened senses telling him more than most could know, and started apologising to Mort, over and over again.

But Mort just held him, rubbed his back soothingly and sat in the street, even when Astra, the Doctor and the others arrived to find them.

The boy, embracing his friend who just happened to be a god.

## Epilogue

*The Doctor drops his pen. "There, that's it."*

*Astra blinks. "Huh? What, it can't be it! That's not—"*

*"Count them, if you like. Fifty thousand words, and some extra for good measure. I think I should be feeling pretty proud of myself."*

*"But, what about the rest of the story?" Astra exclaims, unable to contain herself. "What happens next? You can't end it on that!"*

*"Why not?" asks the Doctor. "I think it's a lovely image, the two boys in an embrace in the ruined street."*

*"But what about Kid, does he keep his powers? Is Mort ok? Does the Doctor stop Willisa from whatever she was doing?"*

*The Doctor grins. "Why do you care? I thought it was a stupid story?"*

*Astra stops. "But you can't—"*

*"I think it's quite a nice place to end on, really. I'll let the readers decide what happens next. That's all I think I'll do – until next year's NaNoWriMo anyway."*

*"But so many unanswered questions..." says Astra. "I'll hate you forever for that, Doctor."*

*The Doctor shrugs. "I didn't know you could get so worked up over something like this."*

*"I'm not, I'm just –" she glares at him. "Whatever, like you said, it's just a story. It's not real."*

*"Isn't it?"*

*Astra rolls her eyes. "Oh, come on, Doctor, I'm in the blasted thing, I think I'd remember if Mort's gay lover turned into an insane weapon of mass destruction."*

*The Doctor nods. "You'd assume so, yes."*

*Astra stands up. "Well, if that's it, I'm off to find something else to do. That was one of the biggest wastes of time ever, Doctor."*

*"You chose to stay here, Astra."*

*"I know, now I'm choosing to go away. I wonder what Frobisher's doing?"*

*The Doctor sits in his chair, a coy grin on his face, waiting for Astra to leave the room. When he hears the door close, he turns to the darkness.*

*"It's alright, you can come out now."*

*From the darkness comes a young man of about twenty. He's quite good looking, with blonde hair and blue eyes with an unnatural hint of red. He's wearing the remnants of a blue silk shirt, revealing lean and powerful muscles underneath.*

*"I thought she'd never leave" he says, quietly.*

*"Ahh, well, takes a bit to get rid of her, but she's gone now" says the Doctor. "She'll be off irritating Frobisher in the bathroom for a while now, probably hiding his rubber duck from him."*

*"Nice girl" says the young man. "I liked the story, by the way."*

*"I hope you didn't mind" the Doctor says. "First tale that came to my head at the time. I changed a few details, added Astra in there to keep her happy, but kept to the same basic story." He looked at the paper. "Though I expected her to get bored long before we reached twenty thousand..."*

*"Thanks," says the young man, slightly nervously. "Thanks for not letting them know I'm here –"*



*“It’s none of their business,” said the Doctor. “Nor should it be. You can stay here as long as you like, Kid, and I mean it. You can’t do that much damage in the TARDIS, and when you feel you can control it sufficiently, then you’ll be quite free to leave. Or not, whichever you like. Astra and Frobisher will never know unless you want them to.”*

*“Thank you, Doctor” says Kid. “I don’t want to hurt them.”*

*The Doctor smiles. “I know. You still have a fair way to go, and I’m happy to help if I can.”*

*He stops, when he hears a noise down the corridor. The noise of an angry little penguin throwing a teenage girl bodily into a pool. “Oh dear, seems like Frobisher doesn’t quite have my patience. I’d better go deal with them – are you alright?”*

*Kid nods. “Yeah, yeah, I’m fine. I’m a god, after all, according to you”*

*The Doctor smiles. “I’ll be back.”*

*Kid watches him leave the room, then looks down at the paper. He thinks, then smiles to himself, sits at the chair and picks up the pen. Checking nobody’s watching, he leans over and writes a final line, without which the story will never be complete.*

The End.