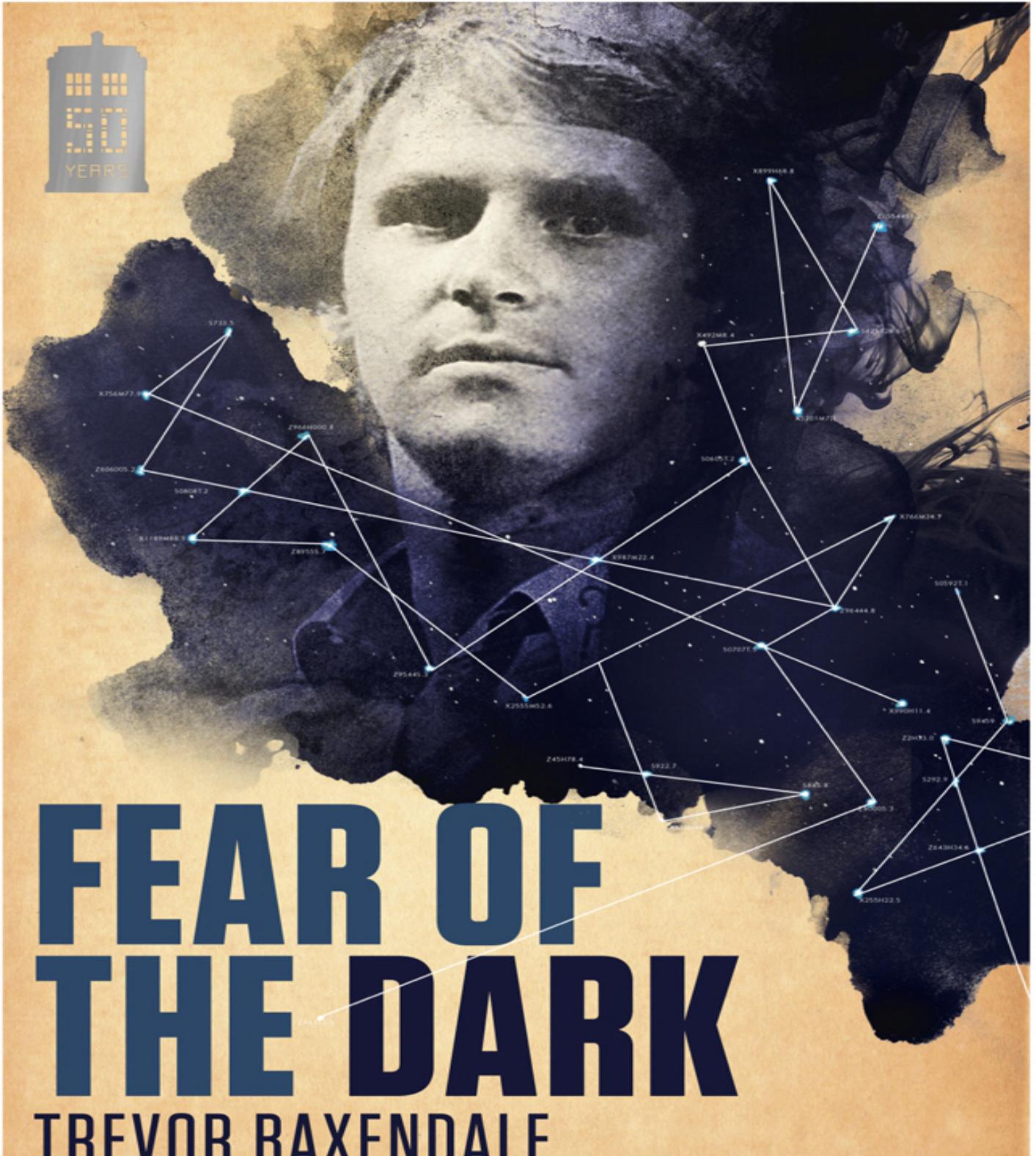




FEAR OF THE DARK

TREVOR BAXENDALE

BBC
**DOCTOR
WHO**



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About the Book

On a moon of the ruined planet Akoshemon, an age-old terror is about to be reborn. Something that remembers the spiral of war, pestilence and deprivation - and rejoices in it. The Fifth Doctor joins a team of archaeologists searching for evidence of the planet's infamous past, and uncovers more than just ancient history. Forced to confront his own worst fears, even the Doctor will be pushed to breaking point - and beyond.

An adventure featuring the Fifth Doctor as played by Peter Davison and his companions Tegan and Nyssa

About the Author

Trevor Baxendale was born in Liverpool in 1966. He has been contributing to a variety of *Doctor Who* fiction ranges for both BBC Books and Big Finish Productions for over ten years. Trevor is a regular contributor to BBC Magazines' hugely popular *Doctor Who Adventures*, scripting the further exploits of the Doctor in comic strip form. His *Torchwood* novel, *Something in the Water*, was a national bestseller.

The Doctor Who 50th Anniversary Collection

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FEAR OF
THE DARK

TREVOR BAXENDALE



*For Martine, Luke and Konnie - three very bright lights in
the darkness*

INTRODUCTION

It's always an honour to write a *Doctor Who* book; it's an even greater honour to have it revisited for the programme's 50th Anniversary celebrations.

Fear of the Dark was an unexpectedly personal novel. Until this book, I had written exclusively for BBC Books' then current Eighth Doctor range. Those books were taking the series forward at a time when it was no longer on TV. It's almost impossible to believe it was ever actually off TV now.

So *Fear of the Dark*, starring the Fifth Doctor, was my first 'past Doctor' book. I don't really have a favourite Doctor - it usually depends who I'm watching at the time - but most people have a soft spot for the Doctor they saw first, often as a child. I grew up with Jon Pertwee and Tom Baker as the Doctor, but Peter Davison's Doctor was just as special to me: he was the first Doctor I watched as a grown-up (as I liked to think of myself then...), and my critical faculties were in full flow. The stories, the scripts, special effects, companions - all fell under my unforgiving and supercritical gaze.

But I could never find fault with the Fifth Doctor himself. Youthful, energetic, courageous, trainer-wearing, cricket-loving, quietly clever, unfailingly polite, and - above all - *fallible*.

This Doctor made mistakes. Not everything went his way. Sometimes he was just plain unlucky. But he never gave up, never gave in, and held fast to what he believed in.

He had all the best attributes of the Doctor, but he was also vulnerable. There was a charming humanity to the Fifth Doctor that has never been replicated.

In other words, he was a hero. And I loved writing for him. There was a fantastic sense of joy and privilege, to be returning to this hero and his friends and times and inventing new problems for him to solve and new enemies to overcome.

The Fifth Doctor had already been tested by the best: Cybermen, Daleks, Silurians and Sea Devils, Omega, the Master - even the Black Guardian, for goodness' sake - had taken him on and lost, so I had to come up with a new challenge. Something that would allow the best of this Doctor to shine. Often, in the TV series, he would come up against some of the bleakest and meanest of worlds: mercenaries and machine guns, voracious corporations, cold-war computers - and they were just the product of human beings. Our most 'human' of Doctors was often faced with our species at its most *inhuman*. How painful, how depressing, how cruel that must have seemed - to always be so very, very far away from a game of cricket on a sunny afternoon.

But the Fifth Doctor stands out brightly in a glut of harsh, unforgiving futures, and never more so when battling against the violent and the extreme.

And so I decided to take him back into just such an environment, as far from civilisation and cricket and a nice cup of tea as it's possible to get; an absolute hell for him, in fact, where lives are lost in appalling fashion, where the humans are fighting for their lives and willing to do anything to survive, where the monsters are implacable, savage and unknowably alien. Where the Doctor must finally stand toe to toe with death itself: the great unknown, the lurker in the dark.

To be truthful, our dear old Doctor quite goes through the mill in *Fear of the Dark*. It was deliberate. I wanted to

take this most vulnerable of heroes to breaking point – and beyond. To take away those tiny little nuggets of humanity that he craves, to remove his options and his hopes, and to bring him physically, and metaphorically, to his knees.

Of course, he takes his friends with him: the Fifth Doctor's very best companions, Tegan and Nyssa. Tegan was the brash, no-nonsense Australian air hostess, and Nyssa was the quiet, contemplative young scientist from the peace-loving alien world of Traken. Both had known tragedy. Both were travelling with the Doctor by choice. Both would be tested in *Fear of the Dark* along with their friend. There would be no hiding places on the blighted moon of Akoshemon.

Then there is the supporting cast: Jyl Stoker, the no-nonsense leader of the humans, trying to hold her team together as disaster strikes; Bunny Cheung, big, powerful, but soft-hearted; Vega Jaal, the gloomy alien mining expert (take a look at Vega Nexus in *The Monster of Peladon* if you want to know what one of his species looks like), the ancient scientist Ravus Oldeman, Captain Lawrence, Silus Cadwell and the crew of the *Adamantium*... these were all characters who became people to me as I wrote the book, who did what I thought was impossible: to surprise me, to make unexpected decisions, to affect the story as I wrote it. The plot is always paramount, but these characters, these people, felt unnervingly real to me. There's even a love story in there.

Looking back on *Fear of the Dark* now, two things immediately strike me: how proud I am to have written this story for the Fifth Doctor, and, blimey, how small the print was. Maybe I'm just getting old, but in the original paperback version the type size is *tiny*. The word count must have been huge, though I didn't notice it at the time. I must have really enjoyed writing it.

There was a problem with the original cover: the design I'd requested was for a plain black cover, and a simple,

monochrome image of the Doctor's face, with one side slightly shadowed but visibly that of a skull. It looked very striking on the proof copy – but on the final version the Doctor's face was too much in shadow and the skull became an almost subliminal presence. Some people have told me they preferred it that way, and I think I can see why: the Doctor's face is almost consumed by shadow, and rightly so. The Dark takes no prisoners.

Ah yes... the Dark.

If you're still reading this then you may notice that I haven't said anything about the monster in this novel – and that is deliberate. I'm not going to give you any details about that now: you should discover it for yourself, like many of the characters in the story, alone and in the dark, moment by horrific moment...

Trevor Baxendale
August 2012

PROLOGUE

Every dream exists on the precipice of nightmare. Nowhere else but in the subconscious is the divide between comfort and horror so narrow, and so fragile. It is almost as if a dream is just waiting to be toppled, its hopes dashed, its promises broken.

Nyssa sometimes dreamed of Traken, but the dream always tipped over into nightmare.

And the nightmare always ended the same way: she would be hurrying through the gardens and cloisters, calling for her parents, warning them of the disaster she knew was coming. But no one could hear her.

Worst of all, she couldn't even find her parents.

In her dreams, her mother was still there, a half-remembered face made dear by the imagination. But in the nightmare, Nyssa couldn't find her. She ran and ran, and searched every secret garden and grove, all the while knowing that time was running out.

Her father had disappeared too. In his study sat a man with a dark beard and even darker eyes. He would laugh at her when she arrived, breathless and soundless, at the very moment Traken vanished from the heavens.

And she saw *that* as if from a distance, the whole planet fading away into the awful blackness of space as if it had never existed.

Nyssa woke up, breathing raggedly, the bed sheets tight around her sweating body. She was shivering, although it wasn't cold. It was dark, but she had her eyes shut anyway. There was something nagging at her memory, something

she had read in one of the books in the TARDIS library. Nyssa usually stuck to the extensive science journals and textbooks, but she had come across this slender, dusty volume of Earth poetry wedged between *Wisden's Almanack* and *A Brief History of Time* only a few days ago. It said 'Keats' on the spine, and it had fallen open on a page where two lines had been circled in green ink:

*The thought,
The deadly thought of solitude.*

For some reason it had stuck in her mind, and now she realised why. When Traken was erased from the cosmos, it had left her the sole remaining person from that world in existence.

She had felt so very alone.

She felt alone now, sitting on her bed in the dark, listening to the hum of the TARDIS around her. With nothing else to distract her, she was able to concentrate on that noise: the soft reverberation of distant, mysterious engines powering the vessel through the space-time vortex. If she listened carefully, she could imagine that the engines were made quiet only by distance, that the almost subliminal hum was just the final echo of massive, churning machinery. Somewhere deep in the TARDIS, its ancient dynamos thundered with terrific, unending exertion. Nyssa found the image quite disturbing.

Only then did she realise that normally, on her waking, the TARDIS would automatically activate the lights in her room. Softly at first, gradually increasing the lambency as she threw off sleep. But now it was pitch black. She couldn't see a thing. And yet she had the feeling, growing in intensity, that she was not alone.

'Is there anybody there?' she heard herself asking plaintively.

There was no reply. Nyssa pulled her knees up and wrapped the sheets around her more tightly. She peered into the gloom, hoping that perhaps her eyes would soon grow a little more used to the dark and she might be able to see something. Her ears strained to pick up the slightest sound, but all she could hear was her own heartbeat and the deep, alien breath of the TARDIS.

'Wh-where are you?' she asked the darkness. There was no reply. Nyssa immediately decided that she had imagined a half-formed phantom left over from her dream of Traken. The perspiration was cold on the exposed skin of her back now, and she felt a droplet trickle down her spine like an icy caress.

Why wouldn't the lights come on? Perhaps the TARDIS had malfunctioned; it wouldn't be the first time.

Her eyes were indeed now more accustomed to the blackness. She could just make out the bedclothes in front of her as a dull grey rectangle in the gloom. Staring, Nyssa picked out the edge of the bed itself, although beyond it there was nothing but the dark. It was exactly the same darkness that Traken had left in its place. Nyssa experienced a nauseating sense of peering into an abyss; of her bed floating like a miniature island in an ocean of night.

And then she saw it.

At first it was just a smudge of black against the greyness that marked the end of her bed. Then it inserted itself like a dark finger into the sheet, plucking at the material as it was dragged along the edge of the mattress.

Nyssa stopped breathing. But she could hear a low, rasping susurration in the air around her. There *was* something in her room with her. Something that breathed.

Rigid with fear, she watched the finger of blackness spread out into something the size of a hand. Then it started up the bed towards her, expanding like a dark stain across the bedclothes.

She cringed as the darkness approached, convinced it would feel cold and wet to the touch. And as the blemish crept up towards her, so the shadows gathered around her, above her, behind her.

Soon she would be submerged in the blackness.

She opened her mouth to cry out, to call for the Doctor and Tegan. But at the last moment she halted, frozen by the sudden, sickening fear that her voice would be as silent as it was in her Traken nightmare.

The darkness rose up and engulfed her like a shroud. The loss of vision was so absolute that, for a long moment, Nyssa thought that her eyes had been taken from her.

She sat, blind and paralysed with fear. Then something in the darkness touched her.

MESSAGE STARTS

‘OK, sweetheart, you can start talking now.’

‘Is it on?’

‘Yes, it’s running. You can talk to Daddy now.’

‘Will he hear me?’

‘Sure he will. When this gets to him. It’ll take a little time, it’s got to go a long, long way.’

‘How far?’

‘To the edge of the galaxy.’

‘What if it goes too far and falls off the edge of the gaxaly?’

‘Galaxy, not *gaxaly*! Now speak up and Daddy will be able to listen to your message later.’

‘OK. Now? OK. Hi Daddy. It’s Rosie. Mummy says you’ll see me on your viewer when you get this. She says I can talk to you later, too. And then you’ll be able to talk back. That will be better, because I want to ask you some things. I’ve been having bad dreams at night again. Last night I dreamed a bear and a lion were chasing me and I was scared. Is it silly to be scared of dreams? Mummy lets me sleep in her bed at night but it’s still dark. I don’t like it when it’s dark. Mummy says there are no bears or lions here but how can you tell if it’s so dark? Mummy says you work in caves where it’s dark all the time and you’re not scared one bit. Is that right? How come you’re not scared? What if a bear or a lion comes? Please come home soon, Daddy. I don’t like it when you’re away. Neither does Kooka. His arm’s come loose again. Mummy says it’s going to drop right off soon, so you’d better come back home and fix it real quick. I’m out of time now so I’ve got to say bye. Oh, but Daddy, be careful you don’t fall off the edge of the gaxaly. We miss you. Bye.’

MESSAGE ENDS

PART ONE INTO THE VOID

Thoughts are but dreams till their effects be tried

William Shakespeare

CHAPTER ONE

THE DUST HADN'T settled yet. It hung like a miasma of filth in the cavern, and Stoker thought she was going to choke. She managed a dry cough and picked her way through the men clearing away the debris, until she reached the edge of the rock fall.

A large, broad-shouldered man was helping to shift fallen rocks out of the way, and Stoker tapped him on the shoulder. He turned round slowly, eyes fierce above a big jaw covered with a four-day beard. His hands were big and solid, covered with dust and scratches. Stoker wasn't the least bit bothered. 'What the hell d'you think you're playing at, Cheung?'

She only ever called him Cheung when she was really annoyed, and he had the good grace to look abashed. 'I dunno what went wrong, I'm sorry.'

'You're supposed to be my explosives expert,' Stoker said. 'It'll take days to clear up this mess.'

'It's not as bad as it looks.'

'Oh, I forgot, you're the expert!' Stoker laughed harshly. "'Ex" as in *not any more* and "spurt" as in *a drip under pressure*.'

She saw the wounded look even through her anger, and realised it was time to turn it down. They didn't need any more fireworks at the moment. 'I'll see you later,' she told him, with slightly less rancour.

Cheung nodded. 'How are the casualties?'

'Lucky. The woman's just cuts and contusions. I'm on my way to check on the other two now. They're probably filing

a massive compensation claim as we speak.'

Cheung smiled grimly.

Stoker watched him turn to pick up another rock and said, 'Leave that, you big lummox. Go and help with the analysers, they could do with your muscle.'

The big lummox pulled a face and stood up, towering over her. Stoker was tall, an easy six feet, but Cheung was like a giant and he could, quite literally, bend iron bars with his bare hands. The other men loved him because he combined that kind of physical power with a surprisingly gentle manner and good humour.

'Go on,' she told him, whacking the knuckles of her left hand against his shoulder. 'Scoot. I'll handle this.'

Cheung mock-saluted her and moved off. Stoker pushed at a rock with the toe of her boot. It was half buried and wouldn't budge. She let out a sigh of frustration, then gagged on the dust.

A figure appeared in the haze: tall, horned, with a sharp-looking face and huge, staring eyes.

'Oh, it's you,' Stoker muttered after an initial flutter of panic. She distracted herself by fixing her blonde hair back in a short ponytail. She guessed she looked a mess.

'This is not good,' said the homed figure ominously.

'Tell me something I don't know, Jaal.'

'I warned you that this was a Bad Place,' Jaal insisted. 'I can sense the evil around us, living in the rock, waiting for its chance to strike.'

'Give it a rest, Jaal. The situation is bad enough without your endless prophecies of doom. Don't let me catch you telling any of the others that rubbish, d'you hear?'

Vega Jaal looked at her balefully. Stoker couldn't tell if she'd hurt his feelings, but she needed him on her side. 'Come on, Jaal: I know it's not *possible* for you to lighten up, but we all need to muck in here.'

Vega Jaal gave a solemn nod, the best she could hope for.

'Right,' Stoker said. 'Where are the casualties?'
He pointed back into the swirling fog of dust.
'OK,' she said. 'Leave this to me.'

Stoker walked across to where a camp bed and a power lamp had been hastily set up. The dust seemed to have thinned out a bit here, and for a few seconds she just stood and watched the Doctor attending to his patient. He was tall, almost boyish with his fair hair and smooth skin, but he had broad shoulders and an intelligent look in his eyes. The white running shoes he wore indicated an active lifestyle, but the rest of him - pale striped trousers and a long fawn-coloured jacket, presented as much a mystery to Stoker as his name.

She was determined to keep an open mind, however. Stoker's nose had been broken in a bar fight twenty years ago with the result that she now looked a hell of a lot tougher than she really was. She played up to the image when it was useful, but it had taught her to never judge by appearances.

'How's she doing?' Stoker asked, crouching down by the camp bed. There was a girl lying on it, she could only have been twenty, with long chestnut curls and very pale skin. There was a nasty gash on her forehead, which the Doctor was dabbing gently with a white cloth.

He inspected the cloth, noting the red blotches with a sigh. 'She's unconscious,' he told her. 'I won't really know until she wakes up.'

'Which will be when, do you think?'

'I don't know. She's badly concussed.' There was a note of accusation in his voice.

'I thought you were a doctor.'

'Not that kind of doctor, unfortunately. And even if I were, head injuries are notoriously difficult to diagnose properly.'

Stoker thought for a moment. 'We need to move her.'

‘Must we?’

‘It isn’t safe here. There could be another rock fall. I’ve got men moving equipment out of harm’s way, but...’

‘All right,’ said the Doctor impatiently. ‘I’ll see what I can do. Where’s Tegan?’

‘Back there with the others,’ Stoker indicated the rear of the cavern. ‘She wanted to stay with you, but the cut on her leg needed attention. One of my men, Jim Boyd, is dealing with it. He’s got a medkit.’

‘Will it have synthetic skin patches?’ asked the Doctor.

‘Yeah. Jim was looking for one big enough to cover your friend’s mouth last time I looked.’

The Doctor smiled despite himself. ‘The words “patient” and “Tegan” don’t go together easily. If you could arrange for some of your fellows to help me, Miss Stoker, we can try to move Nyssa here to a position of greater safety. Who knows, there may even be something in Mr Boyd’s medical kit that might help.’

‘Sure.’ Stoker stood up. ‘I’ll get a couple of my “fellows” to come over.’

‘I’d appreciate it.’

Stoker backtracked through the rubble, feeling dusty and confused. She needed a drink and some fresh air, but above all she needed these complications *gone*. She checked her wrist chrono again and quickened her pace. As she neared the back of the cavern, where the rock opened out a little and the dust hadn’t quite reached yet, she heard the voice: an unfamiliar, twangy accent with the sharp note of rising panic buried somewhere inside it.

‘Never mind the booze, just take me to the Doctor. Where is he? I want to see him.’

Stoker clambered down the rocky slope that led into the work area. Jim Boyd was just finishing up, and Cheung had stopped to offer a hand. ‘OK, Jim, you can go,’ Stoker said. ‘We’ll handle this.’

‘Are you in charge here?’ demanded the woman sitting on a supply crate. She had short auburn hair and a determined look. She was young and pretty, underneath all the anxiety.

‘Yes,’ said Stoker. ‘Your Doctor friend is coming over now.’

‘What about Nyssa?’

‘I’m going to send a couple of men over to help. They can’t stay by the rock face, it’s too dangerous.’

‘You’re telling me it is!’

‘I’ll go,’ said Cheung, straightening up. ‘We’ve stacked all the analysers now, they’ll keep for the time being.’

‘So long as we can get them when we need them,’ cautioned Stoker, fighting down the urge to glance at her chrono again.

Cheung spread his hands and grinned his infuriating grin. ‘I told you, it’s sorted. Now let me go and help with our two new friends over there.’

‘OK,’ agreed Stoker. ‘But don’t take too long about it, Bunny.’

He moved off, his long legs scrambling quickly and confidently over the loose rubble.

‘Thanks,’ said the girl, Tegan. She sounded genuine. ‘Your mate’s a real trooper.’

‘Bunny Cheung, my right-hand man,’ said Stoker. ‘Strong as an Ogron, soft as a puppy. But he’s no fool.’

‘Bunny?’

Stoker smiled. ‘He’d prefer it if we called him “Tiger” or something.’ She paused to take a slim cigar from her jacket pocket and lit it with an old real-flame lighter. ‘Don’t want all that muscle going to his head, though, so Bunny it is. Fancy a smoke?’

Tegan shook her head. Stoker blew out a cloud of blue smoke and noted the look of irritation that crossed Tegan’s face. ‘I don’t want anything except the Doctor and Nyssa.’

‘Persistent, aren’t you?’

‘It has been said.’

‘How’s the leg?’

‘Awful.’ There was a large patch of Synthiskin stuck to Tegan’s left thigh, where she had been cut during the rock fall. Stoker stared in puzzlement at the pale material of Tegan’s shorts; she was wearing a camisole top and a thin jacket to match. What the hell was she doing around here dressed like that?

In fact, the more she thought about it, the more these people didn’t make any sense to Stoker. She never worked to what you’d call an actual *plan*, but this lot, at best, could only be trouble. At worst, they could constitute a real threat to her operation here. She took another drag on her cigar and sat down on the crate next to Tegan.

‘So. We’ve got a few minutes. Why don’t you tell me what you’re doing here?’

Tegan’s shoulders slumped in defeat. She was evidently tired and confused. ‘It’s a long story.’

‘Great.’ Stoker gritted her teeth around the cigar. ‘Let’s hear it.’

CHAPTER TWO

IT HAD BEEN Tegan's first morning back on board the TARDIS.

She remembered touching one of the softly glowing roundels that were arranged in columns around the console room and being rewarded with a warm, comforting hum that she could feel through her fingertips.

She had never believed that would feel so reassuring.

Soon after she had first blundered into that police call box on the Barnet bypass, Tegan had despaired of ever seeing 1980s Earth again. But just when she had resigned herself to a life of wandering through time and space, the Doctor had accidentally left her behind at Heathrow airport in 1982.

And then things had *really* started to go downhill. She'd lost her job, of course. And she had suffered recurrent nightmares, often featuring snakes. Depression had followed.

After a while, Tegan had realised what she was missing: the simple truth was that she had never felt more alive than when helping to defeat the Cybermen, or Terileptils, or the Master or Omega. Tegan was at heart a practical woman and more than anything she wanted to *help*. Travelling with the Doctor had given her adventure, excitement, and above all, the chance to make a *difference*.

Quite simply, she wanted to *do* something with her life.

Her enforced stay on Earth had turned into an epiphany of sorts. Whereas once she had longed to return to her original life, now she was forced to confront the prospect of

living a very humdrum human existence. And that, as Aunt Vanessa would have said, would simply never do.

Tegan had cut off all ties, and armed only with a sassy new haircut and the bare essentials she had decided to see the world - on her own. Looking back, it seemed almost like destiny, running straight into the Doctor and Nyssa in Amsterdam.

'Never look a gift horse in the mouth, Tegan my dear,' Aunt Vanessa had always told her. Tegan took the advice without hesitation; leaping at the chance to rejoin her friends in the TARDIS as if she had never been away.

And now this room, this humming white space, seemed more like home to her than any place on Earth.

'Good morning,' said the Doctor as he breezed into the console room, carrying a toolkit. 'You're up early.'

Tegan felt a rush of warmth at the banality of the greeting in such fantastic surroundings. 'Couldn't sleep. I'm just so glad to be back.'

'Er, yes, well... we're glad to have you back.' The Doctor dumped the toolkit on the console and flipped it open. He hadn't mentioned Heathrow at all, and it suddenly struck Tegan that abandoning her there could have happened a fair while ago from his perspective. She'd been stuck on Earth for months - but for the Doctor and Nyssa, it could easily have been *years*. It was an uncomfortable thought: they might well have been travelling around having adventures in time and space without her. The Doctor never seemed to age, and as for Nyssa - well, who could say? She was Tegan's friend, but she *was* from another planet. And maybe she *did* seem a little more mature now, come to think of it.

'You know, I really must get around to finding another sonic screwdriver,' announced the Doctor, holding up a couple of odd-looking instruments from the toolbox and comparing them. 'Repairing the TARDIS is going to be a long job without one.'

‘Is there something wrong with the TARDIS?’

‘That’s what I intend to find out.’ The Doctor reached underneath the control desk and opened an access hatch. ‘I’ve got the distinct impression that the Time Lords were poking around in here during my last little visit to Gallifrey. I want to make sure there’s been nothing added or taken away.’

Tegan crouched down to peer over his shoulder into the hatch. All she could see was a load of complicated circuitry and flashing lights. ‘Such as?’

‘Oh, the odd directional control unit, perhaps. Conterminous materialisation dampener. Possibly even a direct transfer blurgle ogler.’ The last bit was unintelligible due to the fact that the Doctor’s head was now completely immersed in the interior of the console. There was a series of concerned grunts and then he emerged, a smudge of oil on his nose. ‘I certainly wouldn’t put *that* past Maxil and his uniformed twits.’

‘Doctor,’ said Tegan, ‘I haven’t got a clue what you’re talking about. But it’s good to be back.’

He gave her his most winning smile. But the smile turned into a quizzical frown and he said, ‘Can you smell burning?’

They both started sniffing the air. ‘Phew,’ said Tegan. ‘Something’s cooking.’

The Doctor disappeared back into the console, sniffing worriedly. ‘If those nincompoops have touched the fluid-link bypass...’ he growled. Then there was a bright flash and the Doctor leapt back out of the hatch in a cloud of smoke.

‘Do you have a fire extinguisher?’ asked Tegan.

‘That was the telepathic circuit overloading,’ he said, managing to look both puzzled and affronted at the same time. He leapt to his feet and began to flick switches and stab buttons on the console. ‘Some kind of powerful psionic feedback...’

At that moment the interior door opened and Nyssa walked in. She was looking pale and ill, and was still wearing her dressing gown. Tegan immediately helped her to the wicker chair on one side of the console room. 'Nyssa! Are you OK? You look awful...'

'What's the matter?' asked the Doctor.

'Oh, Doctor,' Nyssa said, her voice strained and weak. 'I've just had the most terrible nightmare...'

With a sharp crack a section of the rock face fell away. Splinters of rock and jagged stone cascaded down the slope, throwing up more dust. The Doctor darted forward and pulled Bunny Cheung away, just as a large boulder hit the ground where he had been standing. The noise reverberated around the cavern like gunfire.

'Come on,' called Stoker from the mouth of the cave. 'Time to retreat.'

Bunny gently lifted the makeshift stretcher, with the girl still on it, and carried it away from the pile of fallen rock. The Doctor scooped up the lamp and blankets and hurried after him.

The mist of dust was fading slowly, leaving a flat, stony taste in the mouth. Despite herself, Stoker was impressed by the degree of devastation. When she took a moment to survey the damage, the mass of rubble and granite that now covered the cavern floor in a wide fan from the detonation point, it seemed even more amazing that the Doctor's little party had survived at all, let alone with only minor injury. But that was the thing with CG bombs: the whole idea was to minimise structural damage within a pre-set gravity field. Bunny might have cocked up the field setting but it had probably saved the lives of these people.

Stoker took the opportunity to watch the Doctor carefully as he picked his way across the fallen rock. He moved across the debris of the cavern with a sure-footed

poise, but his pale clothes looked curiously unsuitable and antiquated.

'Down here should be fine,' the Doctor said to Bunny Cheung, indicating the space where the analysers had been stored in the secondary cavern. It wasn't perfect, but it would have to do for now. The girl on the stretcher was starting to moan.

The Doctor immediately knelt down and rested a hand on her forehead. 'Nyssa! Can you hear me? It's the Doctor. Everything's all right. You're in safe hands.'

It was vague and not entirely correct, but Stoker couldn't fault the man's bedside manner. Nyssa's eyes were fluttering as she started to come around.

It was Tegan who spoke next, pushing past Stoker to be with her friends. 'Nyssa! Doctor, is she OK?'

'Ah, Tegan. Nyssa's as well as can be expected, I think. She's had a nasty knock on the head. How's the leg?'

'Painful!'

The Doctor patted her arm. 'Good, that's the spirit.' He turned to speak to Bunny Cheung. 'Thank you very much, I couldn't have moved her so quickly without your help.'

Bunny clapped the Doctor on the shoulder. 'Forget it. Always happy to help a damsel in distress.'

There was a thunderous echo as more rock collapsed in the main cavern.

'And just in the nick of time too, by the sound of it,' he added with a grin.

The Doctor returned the smile. 'Absolutely.'

Bunny turned to Stoker. 'Can I take that call now, boss? It's been waiting since before the blast.'

Stoker grimaced, suddenly remembering. 'Oh, hell, yes, if you must. But I haven't finished kicking your backside properly yet, Bunny. So get out of here while you still can.'

With a huge grin, which took in not only Stoker but the Doctor and Tegan too, Bunny lumbered off towards the equipment area.