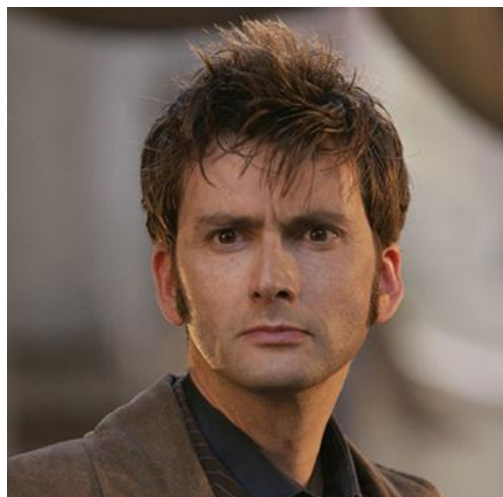


Doctor Who

THE GIFT OF VELLOSSIA

A Tenth Doctor short story
by
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Donna Noble was standing with her arms folded.

Donna Noble was beginning to look grim.

Donna Noble was losing patience.

Unfortunately for the Doctor, he'd failed to notice any of the signs. No sooner had the TARDIS landed than he'd dived under the central console to investigate a slight knocking noise he'd heard coming from behind one of its panels, and he was still there, tinkering with leads and levers.

Donna decided she'd had enough.

"Doctor," she said tautly. No reply.

"Doctor," she said again, loudly and more pointedly. This time, the absent-minded, half-enquiring grunt of someone not really paying attention.

That did it.

"OI! SKINNY SHANKS!" she roared, at a volume that would have put Stentor to shame.

The Doctor's head shot up into view, a look of extreme indignation on his face. "Oi yourself!" he retorted.

"How much longer are you going to be messing about under there?" Donna demanded.

"I don't know!" he snapped, sounding aggrieved. "Not long! Why?"

"Cos you promised me a trip home to do a hit-and-run visit to Grandad and it's not happening and I'm getting fed up with waiting for you to untangle your fingers and thumbs and *get me there!*"

"Note to self – next time, don't pick a travelling companion with an attention span of three seconds," said the Doctor tartly. "It's not like Wilf's expecting us! If you want something to do, why don't you go and have a look outside while you're waiting?"

"Because you haven't even told me whether I'd be able to breathe out there," said Donna with saccharine sweetness.

The Doctor bounced to his feet and checked the readings. "Course you will. Anyone who can breathe fire as well as you do shouldn't have any trouble with ordinary atmospheres!" He cast another look at the console. "You'll be safe," he confirmed. "Not sure I can say the same about anything that runs into you, of course." With which Parthian shot he vanished under the console once more, thereby missing Donna's out-stuck tongue.

"Right then, I'm going," she announced, and without waiting for him to reply – which, in fact, he didn't – she strode down the ramp and threw the door of the TARDIS open.

She stepped out into a small clearing set in a forest landscape of trees and bushes, but a forest the like of which she'd never seen before. The leaves were not the leaves of trees on Earth; instead, many were thin fronds that emerged from the central point of their twig and grew round and round into flat spirals that ranged in size from fingernail up to dinner plate, while others extended delicate fans of tendrils like soft feathers. On many of the plants, in a myriad of hues, what were recognizably flowers grew on up from the centres of the leaves, sometimes individual blooms, sometimes clusters. The cloudless sky overhead was pale blue tinged with a hint of mauve. From everywhere around her came a chorus of strange sounds that included long-drawn out pops and musical-sounding stutters, unfamiliar but somehow unthreatening; she guessed they were being made by the equivalent of the local bird population.

But as she stood listening, a different sound began to impinge on her consciousness, and this one was familiar. Running feet, drawing closer by the moment, and the sounds of branches and leaves being pushed aside at speed. Someone was running toward her through the forest. Not just one person, either; she could detect two sets of footsteps, and somehow they conveyed an urgency that told her that the footsteps were those of pursued and pursuer.

Next moment, the pursued had burst out of the trees into the clearing. A woman, her face set in lines of desperation, her mouth open as she gasped for breath, her eyes wide and staring. Taken by surprise, she skidded to a halt, her eyes widening even further as she saw Donna standing there. She flung a hasty glance behind her, then began to run again, toward Donna.

"Run! Hide!" she gasped. "Keep out of his way!"

Donna gaped at her, but then her attention was taken by the figure that had emerged from the forest in the wake of his quarry. The woman – short, disordered fair hair, hazel eyes, probably in her mid-thirties – was identifiably human, and so, presumably, was her pursuer, though this was less obvious, encased as he was in black armour, the helmet a featureless black orb. Of more immediate concern was what he was carrying – a long silver tube that was unmistakably a weapon of some kind. And unlike his prey, the hunter hadn't hesitated; without breaking stride, he was raising the weapon in the direction of the woman fleeing toward Donna and the TARDIS.

Instantly Donna picked sides. "Get inside!" she snapped at the hunted woman, who had now almost reached her. Then she took one pace forward and raised a stern forefinger toward the pursuer, her mouth opening to warn him off. But she never got to say a word, because at that moment, just as she heard the woman reach the TARDIS door, the hunter fired his weapon, and the world exploded in a cascade of silver.

The fugitive burst into the TARDIS through its open door, which she instantly slammed shut behind her. For a few moments she stayed leaning against it, gulping for air. Then an awareness of her surroundings began to grow, and she turned to face into the control room. For a moment, as her eyes grew huge and round, it seemed she'd forgotten to breathe at all. But then she jumped, recoiling instinctively as the man outside began hammering on the door. And then she jumped

again, gasping in momentary panic as the Doctor unexpectedly shot upright from behind the console.

“Donna...” he began, then stared at her, as dumbfounded as she was. “What?” he said blankly.

Instantly and instinctively she decided this stranger wasn’t a threat, and there was something she had to know, and know *now*. “Is that door locked?” she demanded urgently. “Can he get in?”

“*What?*” repeated the Doctor.

“Stop saying ‘what’, and answer the question!” she bellowed. “Can he get in?”

“WHAT? No!” the Doctor snapped automatically. He looked at the door, which was still being hammered on, and back at his surprise visitor; he had his own urgent questions. “What’s going on? Where’s Donna?”

“Don’t worry, he’s not after *her*.” She said it hurriedly, almost as if she wasn’t giving him the full story. But before he could challenge her on that, she went on, “But if he gets in here, I’m dead,” and the flatness of her tone carried conviction.

“Why – ?” The Doctor began, then broke off and looked at the door in some annoyance, where the volume of the percussive thuds had, if anything, risen. “That is *really* inconsiderate,” he announced crossly. “How’m I supposed to conduct a sensible conversation with that racket going on?”

He took a couple of strides round the console to stare at a small screen. His unexpected guest ran up the ramp in front of her to join him, anxiously looking over his shoulder. She found herself looking at the scene outside as if from a camera pointing down from the roof. The black-helmeted man was energetically attacking the door with repeated blows from the butt of his weapon.

The Doctor frowned, and reached up to briefly stroke the glass column that rose from the centre of the console. “Oh, you won’t like that, will you?” he said, almost as if he was addressing someone she couldn’t see. “That’s a lot of noise he’s making. Let’s see how *he* likes it!”

He took another couple of paces around the console and reached out toward one of the levers, then paused to send his visitor a warning look. “You might want to put your hands over your ears,” he advised, and threw the lever.

It wasn’t a reasoned response to his comment, it was instant and pure instinct that made her push the heels of her hands as hard against the sides of her head as they’d go and screw her eyes tight shut, as a piercingly, painfully shrill high-pitched whistle assailed her ears. And, given that the noise was evidently being broadcast outside rather than inside, and so in here she must to some degree be being shielded from it, she couldn’t help but wonder whatever it must be like to be out there and directly subjected to this blaring assault of sound.

It had worked, though. The pounding on the door abruptly stopped, and when she opened her eyes the screen showed the man outside clutching at his helmeted head with both hands, his weapon lying at his feet. Only a few more seconds, and the assailant had had enough; he scooped up the weapon and stumbled hurriedly across the clearing to vanish into the trees.

“He’s gone!” she said, still wincing from the pitch of the sound. The Doctor reversed the lever, and the whistle subsided into silence. He came back round to join his unknown visitor at the screen,

but jolted to a stop. She immediately realized why: the camera angle had changed to follow the retreat of the attacker, and a second figure had come into view. The Doctor's eyes went to it and widened with alarm.

"Donna!" he exclaimed, and instantly ran to, and through, the door. Calling out anxiously, "It's all right, she's not dead!", the intruder followed him.

Outside there was still a lot of noise – the distress calls of the hundreds of birds that had risen in alarm from the forest and were now circling in the sky above the trees. But the Doctor paid them no attention. He ran straight to Donna.

She was standing with one foot forward, as if frozen in mid-step – literally frozen, covered in a strange, glimmering sheen that intermittently sparkled with small points of white light, as if she'd been encased in clear ice.

The Doctor stared at her in dismay, and whipped out his sonic screwdriver. He stared at it for a few moments, then rounded on the intruder, eyebrows drawn ferociously together over darkened eyes in a formidable frown.

"You," he said angrily, driving one forefinger towards her in a gesture of attack. "Who are *you*, who is *he*, what's he done to Donna, and what's this all about?"

"Ebra. The man who was sent to hunt me. She's been shrouded. And before I tell you everything else, we need to get ourselves and her inside, quickly!" she returned promptly; for the first time the Doctor noticed she had a lilt in her voice not dissimilar to a Scandinavian accent on Earth. "If he comes back, we could all end up like that." She nodded expressively at Donna's motionless figure.

The Doctor stared at her for a moment, then nodded, almost savagely.

"Right – I'll take her shoulders, you take her legs," he ordered.

Together they lifted her and progressed somewhat awkwardly into the TARDIS.

"Next time you call me 'skinny shanks', Donna Noble, we are going to discuss exactly how much you weigh," the Doctor muttered between clenched teeth.

"Which begs the question – what should I call you?" his new companion enquired, slightly shifting her grip on Donna's ankles as they shuffled through the door.

"Me? Oh, I'm the Doctor."

Ebra quirked one eyebrow. "*The Doctor?*"

"Oh, yes!" A swift sideways jerk of his head was added for further confirmation.

Together they laboured up the ramp and carefully stood their burden upright next to one of the railings that surrounded the console platform. Ebra immediately ran back down the ramp and slammed the door shut again. Then, expelling a long breath of relief, she leaned back against it and looked about her, for the first time having the opportunity to fully survey her surroundings. The Doctor, watching her narrowly, noted the lively intelligence in her eyes as she took in the dimensional disparity of the TARDIS. Unlike most first-timers, she wasn't gobsmacked into incoherence; instead she was intensely interested and visibly impressed. Somehow he had the

feeling she wasn't going to come out with the usual *"it's-bigger-on-the-inside"* comment, and the next moment she proved him right.

"This is *clever*," she said softly, in a tone almost of awe. *"Really clever. This is seriously impressive engineering. Your doing?"*

"Me? No," the Doctor said levelly. "I didn't build her, I just travel in her."

"Whoever built her, I repeat – seriously impressive." Ebra's eyes wandered around the control room once more, then came back to the Doctor. He'd reached out and touched Donna's frozen face, with a gentleness that told her much about this stranger's real feelings for his friend. Then he dropped his hand and turned back to her, his face grim.

"Sorry," she apologized. "You want explanations, I know. But..." She gestured almost helplessly to indicate the need to express her wonder.

"Transdimensional engineering," the Doctor said shortly. "The exterior and interior exist in separate dimensions."

"And someone found a way to link them," she breathed. "Extraordinary..."

The Doctor once again tried to use his sonic to analyze what had been done to Donna, but the readings didn't make any sense, which only added to his rising sense of frustration.

"Donna," he said tersely. "You said she'd been shrouded. Explain."

The tone of his voice told Ebra she'd be wise to start concentrating on the matter in hand. She turned her gaze away from the Time Rotor and focused it on him.

"It means she's been put into a kind of stasis," she said gravely. "She's not been harmed, she's just – well, immobilized."

"It can be reversed." The Doctor made that a statement she'd better not contradict.

"It must be able to be reversed," she said, choosing her words carefully. "I don't know how shrouding is done, so I don't know how it can be undone. But it must be possible. You see, what happened to your friend was meant for me. She was just unlucky enough to get in the way. But the person who ordered it to be done wouldn't want me permanently disabled. I have something they want, and they couldn't get it if I wasn't able to give it to them of my own free will. Therefore it must be reversible."

"So who knows how to do it?"

Ebra studied him for a moment.

"Look, you want explanations," she said. "And you'll have them. But there's something I need to know about you, first. Because it'll make a difference to how much I need to tell you. I know a lot about my world," she said, apparently digressing. "I haven't been to every area of the planet, but I do know them, and all their different cultures. But – forgive me – you and your friend don't seem to belong to any of them. So before I start, I need to know – where are you from, and how did you get here?"

The Doctor studied her for a moment, once again registering the keen intelligence in the frank hazel eyes. She must be used to a fairly high degree of technology; once the initial surprise had been

got over, she'd taken the concept of the TARDIS in her stride. It was almost as if she was accustomed to the unusual and the fantastic. He decided not to prevaricate.

"The TARDIS is my ship. It's how I get around. She uses advanced temporal technology to travel in both space and time."

Ebra's eyes widened. "And time? That's..." The sentence trailed off as she strove to encompass the concept.

"Donna and I travel together," the Doctor continued. "Donna's a human, from another planet – Earth."

For a moment, her eyebrows lifted. "Earth?" she repeated. "According to legend, our ancestors came from a planet called Earth. It's a real place, then..." She looked at him keenly. "But it's not where you're from. Or you'd have said 'we're from Earth'."

Yes, definitely intelligent. "Ever heard of Gallifrey?" the Doctor enquired.

Ebra shook her head. "No. Sorry."

The Doctor shrugged. "I'll forgive you. It's a big universe."

"I'm not being gratuitously curious," she said earnestly. "I needed to be clear about who you were before I start an explanation of what you've got caught up in. Since you're not from here, it'll make a difference to what I tell you."

"And where is here, exactly?"

"Vellossia. That's the name of the planet. This is the First Continent. This part of it is Vyrnis-Oldor, the oldest and most prominent of the Estates. It adjoins Velloss, the planetary capital." Her face was suddenly expressionless. "This is the place that was my home. Until I had to leave. Very suddenly."

"Because...?" the Doctor prompted.

"I told you. I've got something that somebody else wants, and the fact she's got no right to it won't stop her harming me, or anybody else who gets in her way, in order to get it."

"But Donna did get in the way." The look on the Doctor's face didn't bode well for the person responsible, Ebra thought...

The Lady Vyrnislyr, Exquisite Daughter of the House of Vyrnis-Oldor, was in the room at the top of the central tower that rose from the Keep of the same name. The Keep itself was bounded by thick stone walls, and surrounded by the sprawl of buildings which made up the ancestral residence of her family. She was looking out of one of the windows, across the vast expanse of fields and rivers and forests that constituted a mere fraction of her estates, in the direction of the horizon where stood the distant aggregation of elegant white domes, pyramids and pinnacles, only just on the edge of visibility at this distance, that was Velloss.

Yet the sight of so much beauty evidently gave her little pleasure. She was regarding the distant city with a black frown. Vyrnis-Oldor was the largest and most powerful of the House Estates. As Exquisite Daughter she ruled over a vast area, thousands of people, immeasurable resources. But it

wasn't enough. Her ambitions weren't limited to a mere part of the First Continent, no matter how large a part. She wanted all of Vellossia – all of it – and nothing less.

Scowling, she turned back to the commscreen, and regarded the featureless black helmet of her underling with displeasure.

“So you fired, but accidentally hit the wrong target. You're absolutely sure she's still in the blue box, Byrnil?” she demanded.

“Certain, Exquisite Daughter,” he confirmed. “As soon as the sonic deterrent ceased I immediately returned to observe covertly. She and the man were just carrying the shrouded woman inside when I got there. No-one's emerged since.”

“What is it, this box? A vehicle?”

“I can't say, Exquisite Daughter. It's not large; barely large enough for three persons, I would have said. What the structure's purpose and function are is something I'm unable at this time to effectively assess.”

Vyrnislyr stood in thought for a moment. Byrnil watched her in silence from within the privacy of his helmet, studying her dispassionately. A woman who should have been beautiful, but the beauty she had was spoiled by the hardness in her eyes and the line of her mouth, a default hardness that only disappeared when she wanted to project a mask of friendliness among her peers, the Exquisite Daughters and Excellent Sons of the other Houses. There were other lines beginning to appear, too, hinting at the inevitability of the ageing process – something this one would resent bitterly, he thought. When dealing with her, it paid to remember that she was constantly angry, very powerful, and insanely ambitious – a dangerous combination. As he always did, he kept his counsel, and waited.

At last she arrived at her decision. “Very well. Keep watch. I'll send a flyer with a squad of six and the necessary auditory protection in case they try to use that defence again. If you still can't get the door open, don't worry. Just bring the box back here. I've many tools I can employ to open what's closed.” The look on her face was not a pleasant one. “Ebra will soon discover that a mere locked door won't protect her from me for long...”

The Doctor stood with folded arms, skewering Ebra with an unsettlingly intense look as he waited for her explanation.

“So who exactly is this Exquisite Daughter Vernal-whatever-it-was-you-said?” he prompted.

“Vern-iz-leer,” Ebra corrected, suppressing a momentary smile at his mispronunciation before she became serious again. “Just about the most powerful member of the Convocation – the ruling body of Vellossia, made up of the heads of all the Houses. Very clever, very intelligent. A brilliant scientist and a very ambitious woman. And – an inventor.”

The Doctor's eyes went momentarily to Donna. “An inventor?”

Ebra had seen that brief movement of his eyes. “Yes. She invented the shroudmaker,” she said, confirming his suspicion. “But she's managed to keep it out of the general public consciousness. Of outsiders, that is. Although, quite a number of members of other Houses who opposed her over

various matters have mysteriously vanished over the years. So there are rumours, of course, but no-one's ever had the courage to ask her about it directly. In case they're forced to confront the fact that it does exist. And that they might be the next person she decides to use it on. But in Vyrnis-Oldor in particular" – she was evidently choosing her words very carefully – "too many people have – disappeared – for it not to be true." Her shoulders drooped slightly, and her eyes had become unfocused.

"People you know," the Doctor deduced.

"My parents, among others" she said tightly. "Some years ago. When I came into possession of the thing that Vyrnislyr covets. She's never admitted anything openly, of course. But there are two more reasons why I think there's hope for your friend, beyond the one I've already given you. One is that there are stories of one or two who were once shrouded but were then restored because she found a use for them. And she implied that if I gave her what she wanted, my parents might be – 'found', was the word she used. So the three things together give me hope that shrouding can be reversed. But if it can, Vyrnislyr's the only person who knows how to do it."

The Doctor brooded. "And you say she's ambitious."

"She doesn't want to be the ruler of Vyrnis-Oldor only; she wants to rule the entire planet," said Ebra flatly. "And what she wants from me would – she thinks – ensure she realized that ambition."

The Doctor noted the caveat. "She *thinks*. So why does she think that? What's this thing you've got that she wants?"

Ebra studied him for a moment, evidently assessing him in some way. Then, having arrived at her decision, she leaned back in her seat, her expression quizzical.

"It's strange, really," she said conversationally. "I've known you for about – what, ten minutes? And yet for no logical reason I feel I can trust you, Doctor. I have no idea why I should, but I do. So I'm going to tell you something that isn't exactly a secret, but it's something that Vellossians don't talk about. All right?"

"Yep," the Doctor acknowledged.

"Vellossia is not what you might call an *ordinary* planet," Ebra continued, now choosing her words with care. "There's something here that can't be seen, can't be *proved* to exist, but *must*, otherwise certain things that have happened in its history couldn't be accounted for. You follow me?"

The Doctor's head moved in the tiniest of nods.

"I'm going to assume that what I'm about to say won't sound impossible to a man who travels through both space and time." Ebra eyed him keenly. "You see, there's something about Vellossia – or on it, or in it – that's alive. And not just alive. Intelligent. And" – she took a deep breath before delivering her punchline – "it can grant wishes."

The Doctor's reaction justified her expectations, because he merely nodded thoughtfully. "Interesting," he commented casually. "I met a genie¹, once. A creature who could genuinely grant

¹ 'The Stone Rose' by Jacqueline Rayner, BBC Audio, 2006 (read by David Tennant).

wishes. And before that a Chronovore who sometimes did requests². And I've come across a sentient sun³. So a self-aware planet, if that's what we're talking about, isn't that much of a stretch, really."

Ebra's face lit up with genuine delight. "I *knew* you'd believe me! I just *knew* it! You're quite someone, aren't you, Doctor?"

"Not 'quite'," the Doctor contradicted her, flashing her one of his widest grins. "I'm *absolutely* someone!" Then, getting back to the point, "So how does the wish granting work?"

"Perhaps I shouldn't have said 'wishes'. Requests would be a better word. Of a very specific type," she amended. "I've no idea how it started, or when. Perhaps when humans first peopled Vellossia. But no records survive from that time. All I can tell you is that at some point, the Gift of Vellossia came into being."

"Gift?" the Doctor repeated, his eyebrows arching in invitation of further explanation.

"There's always been a Guardian of the Gift. Each Guardian can use the power of the Gift only once, to make one request. And once they've used it, they have to pass the Gift on to a successor. They themselves can never use it again." Ebra leaned forward, intent on her explanation. "The thing about the Gift, Doctor, is that what you ask for has to be a benefit or safeguard for the planet or its people. Once there was a massive volcanic eruption that threatened the lives of thousands on the Third Continent. The Guardian at the time asked for the eruption to stop and the lava to flow in a different direction, so no lives would be lost – and that's what happened. But you can't use it for anything that causes direct harm to life. There've been a few Guardians in our history who've tried that, and they simply lost the ability to use the Gift and had to pass it on without ever achieving what they were asking for. And there are some Guardians who've never needed to use it at all."

"And so far, you're one of them," the Doctor deduced. "Plus you get to choose the person you pass it on to. All of which adds up to Vyrnislyr wanting to get hold of you and force you to pass it on to her, so she can use it to make herself all-powerful over Vellossia. Which wouldn't bode well for the length of your lifespan."

Ebra regarded him impassively. "Just so," she said levelly. "But she'd have to be careful how she framed her request. You have to foresee all the consequences of what you ask for, think of everything that might result, and make sure you'd covered all the possibilities as part of the request. Otherwise you might intend to do something good, but in solving one problem create ten more you hadn't thought of. You can't just blurt something out; you have to think it through carefully. Some Guardians haven't managed the responsibility too well, and I don't want to be one of them. Once there was a terrible drought on the Second Continent, and people were dying. The Guardian at the time asked for it to rain. But he didn't think to ask for the rain to stop once there was enough water. His successor's tenure as Guardian was extremely brief – almost immediately she had to request for the weather to return to normal. But in the meantime, the worst floods in the history of Vellossia..." She shrugged expressively.

² 'The Time Monster' (episode 6) by Robert Sloman, BBC Television, 1972.

³ '42' by Chris Chibnall, BBC Television, 2007.

“The Law of Unintended Consequences,” the Doctor nodded. His eyes went to Donna again.

Ebra had evidently followed his thought process. “Yes,” she agreed, as if he’d spoken it aloud. “Not what your friend intended at all. She was trying to help me. So...” – she took a deep breath – “...I think we’d better see about finding a way to undo what’s been done to her, don’t you?”

The Doctor got out his sonic screwdriver again and rescanned the glistening sheath that covered Donna, but the readings didn’t help much. They told him what had been done, but gave no clue to how, nor how he could reverse it.

Ebra glanced from him to Donna. “She’s been a bit unlucky, your friend,” she said sympathetically. “Getting caught in that pose. I hope,” she added politely, “it’s not indicative of her normal self?”

The Doctor looked at Donna. Her fixed eyes were glaring belligerently; the mouth was frozen around a half-spoken castigation; her right forefinger was being brandished in a ‘don’t-even-*think*-about-it’ gesture.

“Well, no, actually, that is very Donna,” he admitted.

“A rather determined lady, I take it.” A thought seemed to strike Ebra, and she cocked an eyebrow at him. “I wonder if she can hear us?”

“Hope not,” the Doctor said fervently, looking alarmed. “If she can, I’ll be a dead man walking.”

“That might be a weighty argument for being careful what you say,” Ebra suggested, one corner of her mouth quirking upwards.

“A weighty argument,” the Doctor repeated, his eyes mirroring the mischief in hers. “Donna,” he said without turning his head, raising his voice slightly, “that sounds so much like you, it’s like you were in the room.” He paused exaggeratedly, then looked over his shoulder. “Oh, you *are* in the room!”

He was projecting light-heartedness, but Ebra knew instinctively he was using it as a front to mask his real feelings, and she could have wept for him. She watched as he whirled away and around the console.

“Right!” he said decisively. “We need to pay your Exquisite Daughter Vyrnislyr a visit, so I need to know where to go. Which means I need you to give me directions.”

Ebra’s forehead wrinkled. “How? You don’t know Vellossia. Any reference points I give you will be meaningless to you, won’t they? And in any case, we need to get inside the Keep of Vyrnis-Oldor – without being seen, while we’re at it – and avoid all the guards she’s set around it. Not just men, but automatic detectors as well. It can’t be entered by anyone without her knowledge.”

“Oh, yes, it can!” the Doctor contradicted energetically. “If I weren’t very clever, and didn’t have a very clever ship, you’d be right. But I am and I do.”

“But – how...?”

“You latched onto the ‘travel in time’ thing quite quickly. The ‘travel in space’ bit seems to be taking a bit longer to sink in,” the Doctor observed.

Ebra stared at him. “You mean...”

"I mean I can materialize in any space big enough to contain the TARDIS, yes," the Doctor agreed. "So, like I said – you need to give me directions."

"So, like I said – how?" Ebra retorted. "Point and hope?"

"Telepathic circuits," said the Doctor succinctly. "All I've got to do is connect you with the TARDIS, and she'll do the rest."

"Your ship is *telepathic*?" Ebra stared up at the Time Rotor with the same expression of delighted awe she'd worn before. "*Seriously* impressive!" she repeated. "She's just *brilliant*, isn't she?"

The Doctor reached up to briefly touch the Time Rotor with one fingertip. "Yes, she is," he agreed, a whole gamut of emotions masked in those three brief words. Then, getting back to business: "There isn't a direct physical interface at the moment – I keep meaning to put one into the console, but I haven't got round to it yet. So the easiest way is for you to connect to me, and me to her. That should do it."

"Very well," Ebra nodded. "What do I do?"

The Doctor stepped close to her and put his fingertips in contact with both sides of her head. "Okay – I want you to look at me," he said. "Only me. My eyes. Just look at me, keep looking, and concentrate on where it is we need to go. But keep looking at me while you do. Can you do that?"

She regarded him with an actively mischievous spark in her eyes.

"Oh, I don't think I'll find that too onerous a requirement," she said, the corners of her mouth fighting not to break into a smile. "You're quite easy on the eye, you know."

For a moment the Doctor looked slightly alarmed. Then he realized he was being teased. His eyebrows went up for a moment above deliberately widened eyes, then he grinned.

"Hope you heard *that*," he said to Donna gleefully.

Byrnil regarded the squad of six men who had followed him out of the flyer and now stood to attention beside it in the tiny clearing in which they'd landed.

"Our target lies about half a mile that way," he said, with a brief gesture in the appropriate direction. "We've grounded far enough away for them not to realize we're here. As of now, silent approach only. Once we've located it, we surround it. Nobody gets out of it, you understand? Then Sergin" – he indicated the pilot, who was paying close attention from his seat at the controls of the flyer" – will join us and by means of the winch cable our quarry will be attached, lifted and flown back to the Keep. Any questions?" He paused, and scanned the faces in front of him, but nobody spoke. "Very well, then. Follow me."

With a minimum of noise, the squad proceeded through the forest in his wake until he raised his hand for them to halt, just on the edge of the clearing he'd had to leave in such a hurry earlier. Yes, the blue box was still there. Silently, he gestured the men behind him forward, making a circling motion with his hand. Obediently, they spread out and began to encircle their target, only to halt abruptly as it started to emit a strange sound. Not the piercing shriek of noise that had driven him away before. No, this was a labouring, grinding wheeze...

At first Byrnil didn't realize what was happening. But then, as the sound increased, the box itself began to fade, become insubstantial, until it finally vanished entirely, and the sound with it. In the spot where it had stood there was only silence and emptiness.

Byrnil was glad that his helmet was hiding his astonished expression from the squad, just as theirs were hidden from him. For a moment all of them stood frozen, trying to comprehend what they had just seen. Then they all began to turn to him, waiting for his reaction.

He remained motionless for a few seconds. Then, slowly, he reached for his communicator, and activated it.

"Well? Report!" the familiar voice snapped.

"Your pardon, Exquisite Daughter, but" – he wondered exactly how to phrase what he had to say – "there's been – an unexpected development..."

The Doctor looked distinctly unimpressed as he took in the location where the TARDIS had materialized. They were in a huge room, built of a dull grey stone. The TARDIS stood against the back wall, at the furthest point away from what was apparently the only door. The entire space was obscurely lit by flaming torches housed in black iron sconces positioned at regular intervals along the walls.

"So Vyrnislyr can invent something as technologically advanced as the shroudmaker but chooses to light her basement with torches," he observed rather sourly. "She's definitely read the manual for sociopathic power freaks. The illumination levels – always a dead giveaway."

In the middle of the room stood some sort of machine from which a central pillar rose to a narrow point from which a black cable emerged to vanish into a small round hole in the ceiling; a power cable, the Doctor guessed. All around the machine, obscuring its base from where they stood, were rows of irregular glass-like shapes.

"Hullo," said the Doctor. "What are those?"

He glanced at Ebra, but she said nothing. She was staring with horrified eyes at the shapes, and the Doctor suddenly realized what they were.

People. Row upon row of utterly motionless people.

Up in the tower, Vyrnislyr felt a slight vibration against the skin of her wrist, where she wore what looked like a bracelet of opalescent squares of silver metal, each with a small orb of clear crystal embedded in the centre. She raised her arm to look at the bracelet.

One of the tiny crystal orbs was flashing red.

The Doctor's eyes swept grimly over the rows of frozen figures. They might have been statues, the work of a sculptor whose aim was to portray fear and despair. But they weren't statues. Every one of them was entombed in the same shimmering ice-like casing as the one that covered Donna. Some of them were leaning slightly back, their hands raised defensively; some had their palms

spread forward in gestures of protest; some were covering their faces with their hands, as if to shut out the knowledge of their fate. Either terror or anger stared out from every pair of eyes.

These were the Shrouded.

Ebra's breath caught in her throat, and the Doctor remembered that according to Vyrnislyr Ebra's parents were among this horrifying collection.

"That's gross. Oh, that's gross," he said matter-of-factly. "So let's find the off switch."

He threaded his way through the dreadful formation to the machine in the centre of the room; it was evidently what controlled the imprisoned figures. There were two racks, one to either side of it, both full of silver tubes like the one that had been used on Donna.

"Shroudmakers," he muttered with distaste, and headed for the central console. He began to study it, then realized Ebra was no longer with him. He turned to see what she was doing, and his eyes were suddenly touched with compassion.

She was going along the rows from figure to figure, peering with desperate intensity through the sparkling shrouds at each face before passing on to the next.

The Doctor turned back to the console; if he could work out what it did, he could free everyone in the room. He used the sonic to assess its functionality, and gradually it began to make sense. If he was right, if he pressed *that* switch, it ought to...

"You won't find them, Ebra," said a voice coolly from the doorway.

The Doctor looked up sharply. Behind him, Ebra whirled to face the speaker.

A woman, exotically gowned, coldly beautiful, regarding Ebra with a disdainful expression. In one hand, ready for use, was a shroudmaker. In her other hand she was holding something else, but it was so small that with her fingers wrapped around it it wasn't visible.

"Ah. You'll be Vyrnislyr, then," said the Doctor casually.

She flicked him a cursory glance. "You, whoever you are – as long as you make no attempt to interfere, you are of no account in this matter."

"Can't say that says a lot for your character assessment skills," said the Doctor, a slight edge in his voice.

"Your opinion is of no interest to me," said Vyrnislyr dismissively. "Make any move to hinder me, and you'll join my little collection of malcontents."

"Oh, that's me all right. Very malcontent, me," the Doctor assured her.

"And very talkative." Vyrnislyr regarded him with more attention. "I'd advise you to curb your chatter. I need to have a talk with Ebra about a very important matter. If you keep interrupting I may have to take steps to ensure you don't." She made a slight gesture in his direction with her shroudmaker and met his eyes with a merciless gaze. The Doctor decided she meant it, and moved his forefinger and thumb across his mouth in a zipping gesture, but his eyes were now as implacable as hers.

"As for you, Ebra," Vyrnislyr said, raising her voice a little, "if you think to use the Gift against me, your companion here will pay the price. And so will your parents."

Ebra had been standing as frozen as the Shrouded who surrounded her. Now she moved, slowly, walking toward Vyrnislyr, but when she would have passed the Doctor, he put out his arm to bar her way. She stopped, but her eyes didn't leave Vyrnislyr.

"Where are they?" she asked in a low voice.

Vyrnislyr smiled unpleasantly.

"Oh, I'm sure you'd like to know," she purred, and began to move toward them with slow but confident steps. "Perhaps they're in here, Ebra. Or perhaps they're somewhere else. Wherever they are, they're my insurance against your using the Gift to oppose me in any way. Because if you do that, you'll never see them again. But there *is* always the alternative."

"What alternative?" Ebra enquired stiffly.

"The one where if you hand over the Gift, she lets your parents go free," the Doctor said levelly. His eyes were locked on Vyrnislyr's face, and for one brief moment he saw a faint hint of an expression combining triumph and amusement flicker across it. That was when he knew for certain.

He felt Ebra tense, as if she was about to step forward, but he kept his arm where it was, preventing her from moving.

"Except she can't," he said flatly. "Because they're already dead, aren't they, Vyrnislyr? You're trying to trick Ebra into giving you the Gift for nothing."

Ebra looked at him with agonized eyes, but when she returned her gaze to Vyrnislyr, the latter's expression told her that the Doctor was speaking the truth.

"I told you to curb your chatter, or I'd take steps to make you," said Vyrnislyr viciously. "Who are you? What are you to Ebra?"

"Me? I'm the Doctor," he declared expansively. "Ebra's my friend. And there's something you should know about me. I don't like it when people start threatening my friends. I start taking steps myself when that happens."

"Whatever they are, they'll be ineffective," Vyrnislyr sneered. "*My* steps begin with *this!*" As she spoke, she lifted the shroudmaker she held, aiming it at him.

Instantly, before she could fire it, he brandished the sonic in reply. It emitted a brief burst of energy; when Vyrnislyr tried to operate the shroudmaker, nothing happened.

"What have you done?" she screamed at him, trying again and again to get the shroudmaker to function, without result. Then, realizing it was no use, she raised her other hand. It held a tiny projectile weapon, and she fired it.

But not at the Doctor. At Ebra. Who cried out and clamped her right hand to her left arm. The Doctor didn't like the look of triumph on Vyrnislyr's face as she saw that she'd hit her target.

"Time we got out of here," he snapped.

"But you can't," Vyrnislyr crowed. "There's only the one door, and outside is a squad of my men." She raised her voice. "Guards!"

Immediately a dozen helmeted men with weapons poured in through the door and began to advance, fanning out among the rows of motionless figures.

"You see, Doctor?" Vyrnislyr said mockingly. "You're trapped. Both of you."

“Yes, well, I’m sure it seems that way to you,” said the Doctor. “But the thing is, you see, there’s something you’re overlooking.”

“What?” Vyrnislyr snapped, beginning to sense that something was wrong.

“We didn’t get in here by the door,” the Doctor informed her cheerfully, and jabbed a thumb over his shoulder.

Vyrnislyr’s eyes followed the direction he indicated, and she gasped as she realized what she was looking at.

“The blue box that vanishes!” she exclaimed. “The one Byrnil told me about!”

“That’s the one,” the Doctor agreed cheerfully. He stepped across to the nearest rack of shroudmakers and picked one up. Vyrnislyr flinched in alarm, and once again tried to use her own, but still to no effect.

“Oh, don’t worry, I’m not going to use this on you,” the Doctor said. “I’m better than that. But I’ve had a look at that control console of yours and I’ve worked out how this little invention of yours does what it does, so I need to take one with me. Your friend – Byrnil, was it? – used his on my friend Donna. A little reverse engineering on this one and she’ll be back with us again.” He turned to Ebra. “Time we were leaving. You lead the way. I’m going to do a bit of walking backwards for Christmas, so I can keep an eye on Vyrnislyr as we go. She’s definitely the type to still have some tricks up her sleeve.”

Still clasping her wounded arm, Ebra nodded, her eyes full of pain not just for herself, but also for her dead parents. She spun away from Vyrnislyr and began to hurry back towards the TARDIS.

Vyrnislyr’s face contorted with frustration. Suddenly she raised her arm and brought it slashing down again, screaming “Stop them!” at her men. As the guards raised their weapons, she shouted again, “Don’t kill *her*, whatever you do! But *stop* them!”

“Ebra – *run!*” the Doctor yelled, and followed his own advice. Following their instructions, the guards concentrated their fire on him. Fortuitously, it seemed one quality of a shroud was that not only did it keep its prisoner in, it kept other objects out. Sparks flew everywhere as the projectiles from the guards’ guns ricocheted off the rows of the Shrouded between them and him. No time to use his key; he snapped his fingers, and the TARDIS door promptly swung open just as Ebra reached it. She darted in, the Doctor on her heels. A hail of projectiles bounced off the TARDIS’ surface all around him as he made it in, slamming the door behind them.

Ebra was gripping the handrail at the foot of the ramp, supporting herself as she gasped for breath. The Doctor ignored her and ran up the ramp to the console, checking that the TARDIS’ defences were all working as they should with one hand, the shroudmaker still gripped in the other. Then he relaxed slightly, and looked over at Donna’s frozen figure.

“Still here, then, Donna,” he observed flippantly. “Very still, in fact – ”

He broke off as a suddenly flurry of violent blows hammered against the door. Ebra instinctively recoiled and retreated up the ramp.

“Don’t worry,” the Doctor assured her. “They can’t get in.”

Ebra gulped. Tears were trickling from the corners of her eyes. “No. Sorry. Of course they can’t,” she agreed, visibly trying to regain control of her emotions. Not easy to do when her long-cherished hope had been obliterated, and she knew with crushing certainty that her parents were dead. But the conflict between her and Vyrnislyr wasn’t over yet, and she knew that, too.

“Think I’d better have another word,” said the Doctor, and switched on the scanner. Ebra came to join him, and saw that the screen was showing Vyrnislyr, flanked by her men surrounding the TARDIS.

“Hello, Vyrnislyr,” the Doctor greeted her expansively. “Was there something you wanted to say before we leave?”

Vyrnislyr’s lip curled. “This is not over, Doctor. There’s nowhere you can go on this planet where I cannot find you. Ebra still has the Gift of Vellossia, and I mean to have it, despite all your efforts.”

“Oh, you’d be surprised where I can go,” said the Doctor smugly.

“Perhaps I would,” Vyrnislyr agreed. “But this time it’s you who are overlooking one thing.”

The Doctor frowned. He didn’t like the sound of that. “What?” he demanded.

“You were so intent on disabling my shroudmaker you didn’t pay any attention to this, did you?” Vyrnislyr raised the hand in which she still held the small weapon with which she had wounded Ebra. “Do you know what this is? Do you know what it does?”

“Not until you tell me,” the Doctor admitted. “Something you think is rather clever, obviously.”

“A device that fires small capsules that penetrate the skin,” said Vyrnislyr smoothly. “When a capsule enters the bloodstream it releases millions of nanobots that spread throughout the body. They can never be removed. And I can track the signature of those nanobots and locate the person who carries them, wherever that person is. So as of this moment there’s nowhere Ebra can go on Vellossia without my being able to find her. You might have rescued her for now, Doctor. But not for long, I can assure you. I still have many shroudmakers, and I can make as many more as I need. No matter where you take Ebra, I can find her – and by extension, you. And then your reverse engineering of the shroudmaker will count for nothing, because even if you succeed, I will always be able to re-shroud those who obstruct me. All your efforts to thwart me have achieved precisely nothing.”

“Really?” The Doctor grinned unpleasantly. “Don’t go away, will you? I’ll be getting back to you on that one.”

He switched off the scanner. “Better check if she’s telling the truth,” he said, and used his sonic to scan Ebra. Moments later, he nodded.

“She’s right about the nanobots,” he reported sombrely. “Sorry, Ebra. They’re in you now, for good. Which is, in fact, not good...”

“She’s right about more than that, Doctor,” Ebra said despairingly. “All you’ve done, she can undo any time she likes. And now I’ve got no chance of escaping her.”

“Oh-h-h, I wouldn’t say that,” the Doctor contradicted her. “Well, I can’t do anything about the nanobots, but there’s definitely a way to stop her Shrouding anyone else whenever she feels like it.”

“How? With your reverse engineering of that?” She indicated the shroudmaker.

The Doctor lifted it up and regarded it for a moment, then chucked it casually onto the floor, kicking it out of the way. “Nope,” he said. “I’ve thought of a better way.”

“What way?”

“This Convocation of yours. You said they don’t want to risk taking Vyrnislyr on because of the possible consequences. But is there anyone who’d be willing to do that if they weren’t at risk of being shrouded?”

“Yes. All of them! They all fear what would become of Vellossia if Vyrnislyr gets the power she wants.”

“Which of them would you trust the most?”

“Thist,” said Ebra immediately. “Excellent Son Thist of the House of Morrefay. He and my father were close friends. I’ve known him all my life – and I’d trust him with it, utterly.” Suddenly she gave him a weak smile. “Just as I do you.”

The Doctor shrugged the compliment off. “If I put you in touch with him, could you get him to arrange an urgent meeting of the Convocation?”

“Yes. But why?”

“So you can tell him, and all of them, that Vyrnislyr won’t be shrouding anyone from now on.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re going to stop her. With the Gift.”

Ebra stared, perplexed. “I can’t use it to harm her,” she reminded him.

“You won’t have to,” the Doctor said. “Not if you ask for *this*...”

Vyrnislyr stared vengefully at the blue box. There had been no further communication from the Doctor, but nor had the box vanished. What was that interfering stranger doing in there?

Suddenly a voice spoke from the doorway.

“Exquisite Daughter,” it said. She turned to see Byrnil walking toward her, his face as impassive as always.

“Byrnil,” she acknowledged, and turned back to face the TARDIS. “This is the box of which you spoke?” She was in no real doubt, but it did no harm to make sure.

“Yes, Exquisite Daughter.” He masked his inner relief. Throughout the journey back he’d been dreading the possibility that she might have held him responsible for the vanishing of the box, something which he couldn’t have prevented; she was quite capable of it. But she merely nodded, obviously choosing to focus on the current situation.

“How do things now stand?” he ventured to ask.

“Ebra’s inside that,” she said, gesturing at the blue box. “Along with a man called the Doctor. They made the mistake of leaving their refuge, and Ebra now carries tracker nanobots in her body. Even if the box does vanish again, I’ll be able to tell you where she has gone, and you’ll be able to pursue her and capture her. When you’ve returned her here to me, she will – not ‘can’, but ‘will’ – be persuaded to transfer the Gift to me. She already knows her parents are dead, but there are

many other forms of pain I can inflict upon her. When she reaches the point where that pain becomes more than she can bear, she will at last have to submit to the inevitable.” Vyrnislyr’s tone was level, but inside Byrnil shuddered.

He’d witnessed the infliction of those ‘forms of pain’ on previous occasions where others had got between Vyrnislyr and what she wanted. He could never admit it, but the idea of yet another victim being subjected to them troubled him profoundly. Just for a moment, he found himself thinking that if he had known how his life would turn out, he would never have entered the service of the House of Vyrnis-Oldor. If he hadn’t, he wouldn’t have become subject to this hateful, domineering woman and been forced to do things that had long ago lost him his self-respect, a self-respect that could never be restored. He dreaded living on a Vellossia ruled by Vyrnislyr. But what could he do? To oppose her was to die – or worse than die.

“What are your orders, Exquisite Daughter?” he enquired impassively.

Before she could reply, an unexpected sound began to emanate from the blue box. Byrnil recognized it instantly.

“It’s going!” he said sharply. “That’s the noise it made before, when it vanished. It’s going.”

Vyrnislyr’s eyes widened in astonishment as the box faded away to nothingness. The scientist in her stood in genuine awe of such a level of technology. But that appreciation was almost instantly overridden by her obsession with the Gift and how to obtain it. She brought her face back under control and schooled her voice to detached interest.

“Fascinating,” she murmured. “When the Doctor is at last on his knees before me, I shall look forward to learning the secrets of his mysterious blue box.” Her tone hinted at the means she intended to use to unlock those secrets. “But the priority remains to capture Ebra. Let’s see where she is now.”

She whirled around and strode to the central console. Byrnil followed her, and watched as she operated some of the controls, bringing a large screen embedded in the console to life. On it he recognized a map of the entire First Continent of Vellossia. Close to the centre of that a small white spark flashed on and off. Vyrnislyr zoomed the focus in on that spark, and it quickly became obvious to Byrnil where it was located. Velloss, the planetary capital. He watched silently as the image continued to zoom in, closer and closer, until it came to a halt on one specific building. He looked quickly at Vyrnislyr. She was studying the screen with hooded eyes, a slight frown on her face.

“The Hall of the Convocation,” she said slowly. “Of all places, why there...?”

Byrnil watched her, keeping both face and voice impassive. “What are your orders, Exquisite Daughter?”

She didn’t look at him, but continued to stare at the screen. “Patience, Commander. I must give this careful thought...”

Excellent Son Thist of the House of Morrefay, a tall, impressive man with dark hair greying at the temples and an innate air of capability and authority, swept the Room of Assembly with his dark, intelligent eyes. Yes, all the heads of the Houses of Vellossia were here. Though that wasn’t quite

true; there was one who was absent, but that was something of a relief. A loud hum of conversation rose from the gathering; clearly they were speculating about the purpose of this unscheduled meeting.

“Excellent Sons, Exquisite Daughters,” he said loudly. “As Coordinator, may I thank you all for responding so promptly to my request. Let me summon you all to the Hall of Convocation.” He turned and began to walk along the short corridor that led to the Hall; the other members of the Convocation followed, still discussing this irregular event. As the group approached the wide double doors that gave admittance to the Hall, attendants pulled them open, and everyone entered, but then stopped abruptly, and stared.

At the far end of the circular chamber, a tall, blue, rectangular box partially blocked the steps that led up to the imposing Speaker’s Rostrum, from where the heads of Houses traditionally addressed the Convocation. In front of it, surrounded by the ornately decorated House seats that ringed the room, stood two people, one of whom Thist recognized, the other of whom he did not. The latter was a tall, slim man dressed in brown clothing of an unfamiliar style, with dark hair and eyes. The other he did know – Ebra – but he was shocked by her appearance; her face was so drawn and tense, her eyes so full of grief. When he’d received her call requesting this emergency meeting of the Convocation, he hadn’t seen her face, only heard her voice, though even that had been enough to convince him that it was a matter of vital importance. Now he knew that with even greater certainty.

“Ebra!” he exclaimed. “Who is this man? And how did that – that *box* – get in here?”

“Good questions,” said the man quickly, “but not what you need to be focusing on at the moment. I’m the Doctor. And you need to hear what we’ve got to tell you.”

Thist met the intense dark eyes with his own, and studied them for a moment. Then, having made his assessment, he nodded once, briefly, and turned to his fellow Convocation members.

“Excellent Sons, Exquisite Daughters, please take your seats, so we can learn the reason for which this meeting has been summoned.”

The group quickly dispersed around the room to their seats and fixed their attention on the two in the centre of the Hall. When everyone had taken their place, Thist rose from his own seat and was about to speak, but a man off to his left spoke first.

“Coordinator, the Convocation is incomplete,” he said, indicating an empty chair opposite him. “Exquisite Daughter Vyrnislyr of the House of Vyrnis-Oldor is absent.”

“Good thing, too,” said the Doctor emphatically. “It’s what she’s been up to – and *is* up to – that you need to know about.”

His words fell into an utter silence, and Thist could sense the sudden tension in the room, a tension he felt himself.

“You are correct in reminding us of the Exquisite Daughter’s absence, Excellent Son Haringen of the House of Pryador, but we are nevertheless quorate, and it appears that what the Doctor has to say is of great concern to all of us,” he said gravely. “Please, Doctor, Ebra – share it with us.”

The Doctor looked at Ebra in implicit invitation for her to take the floor, but she shook her head. “You speak for me, Doctor,” she said in a low voice, but not so low that Thist could not hear the trust for this stranger in it. Thist knew Ebra well; if she trusted this man, he was predisposed to follow her example. He looked at the Doctor, and nodded his agreement. The Doctor nodded back, and began to address the entire room.

“I’m a visitor to your planet,” he began bluntly, “but Ebra’s told me a lot about what’s going on here. She’s told me she’s the current custodian of the Gift of Vellossia.”

A startled buzz ran around the circle, and every eye turned to Ebra.

“Members of the Convocation!” Thist rose and made quieting gestures with his hands. “Please, allow the Doctor to speak. This is clearly a matter of importance!”

Reluctantly, the buzz died down.

“My thanks,” said Thist. “Doctor, please continue.”

“Ebra’s also told me about Vyrnislyr’s ambitions, which threaten not only you here in the Convocation, but every person on the planet,” the Doctor went on. “And I know about the Shrouded, imprisoned by the weapon she invented and calls the shroudmaker.”

Another stir of unease went round the room.

“You’ve all heard the rumours,” said the Doctor. “And you know that if they’re true, any or all of you could be in danger. You’re afraid she could shroud the lot of you and just take over, aren’t you? Not knowing whether the shroudmaker really exists is what’s been holding you back from confronting her. I’m here to tell you it does.”

“You have proof of this?” Thist demanded.

“Oh, yes,” said the Doctor grimly. “Ebra and I are going to show it to you. Now. Ebra?”

She nodded, and the two of them vanished into the blue box. A few seconds later both its doors were flung back and the Doctor and Ebra reappeared, carrying something large and evidently fairly heavy between them. Silently they set it upright and stepped back from it, surrounded by gasps of horror as every member of the Convocation realized what they were looking at.

“That’s my friend Donna,” said the Doctor, his eyes dark and angry. “And this” – he reached inside the blue box again, and held up a large silver tube – “this is a shroudmaker. Not a rumour. A real weapon. With real victims. You’re right to be afraid, all of you. Vyrnislyr has lots of them. She has only to equip her men with them and send them after you – collectively here, or individually on your estates – and she’ll be free to wield ultimate power over Vellossia.”

“How do you know all this?” Excellent Son Haringen challenged. He sounded angry, but he was using that tone to mask his real emotion – fear.

“Because we’ve been in her Keep,” said the Doctor flatly. “Earlier today. In the room where she keeps her shroudmakers, and the machine that powers them. And that’s not all she keeps in there,” he added ominously.

Thist gave him a look that showed he could tell what was coming.

“Ebra?” he prompted, gently.

Ebra gave him back look for look.

“All the people she’s shrouded,” she said sombrely. “Hundreds of them. All lined up like some grotesque inspection parade.”

“And...” – Thist hesitated – “your parents...?”

She let out a short, abrupt gasp that conveyed more than any words could do, and shook her head, her eyes shining with incipient tears.

“Not there,” the Doctor confirmed. “Vyrnislyr told her they’d been shrouded as a means of applying pressure. If Ebra transferred the Gift to her, she’d get her parents back.”

“But all the time they were already dead,” Thist deduced sadly.

“And that’s what you’ll all be, if we don’t do something about it,” the Doctor said flatly. “Vyrnislyr can track Ebra’s location. She’ll know by now that she’s here, talking to all of you. She’ll need to go on the offensive as quickly as possible, now she knows you know the shroudmakers are real. You’re all in danger, unless we stop her.”

“But how *can* we stop her?” one of the women exclaimed, panic in her voice. “We don’t have anything that could protect us from her!” Once again the buzz of voices began to rise around the circle, echoing her panic.

“*Oh, yes, we do!*” the Doctor thundered, startling everyone into silence. “Ebra’s going to do it. She’s going to use the Gift.”

“But how?” the same woman wailed. “She can’t use it for harm!”

“I won’t harm her,” said Ebra, and suddenly there was a note of authority in her voice that got everyone’s full attention. She turned to Thist, but she was speaking to everyone. “I can’t take her life, I can’t cause her physical injury, I can’t even stop her wanting to rule Vellossia. I can’t stop her being an ongoing threat because of her ambition. But I can make it so that you don’t have to live in fear of her shroudmakers. If she doesn’t have that advantage, you’ll be able to deal with her on equal terms. If you unite against her, agree a way to constrain her, perhaps even find a way to indict her for abuse of her rank as Exquisite Daughter and install a new ruler to replace her, perhaps we can all live in hope rather than fear.”

“All that is true,” said Thist, speaking over the murmur of approval now circulating around the Hall. “But how do you propose to achieve it?”

Ebra glanced at the Doctor. “You tell them, Doctor,” she said. “It was your idea.”

“Ebra’s going to use the Gift to ask that all shrouds are deactivated, all means of causing them disintegrated into their component atoms, all knowledge and memory of anything to do with shrouds wiped from everyone’s minds, and no-one ever rediscovering the concept and inventing them again in the future,” the Doctor announced. “She’s right – it won’t solve the problem of Vyrnislyr’s ambition, but it *will* make it easier for you to resist her. Then Ebra’s going to transfer the Gift on to her successor, but no-one’s going to know who that is until Vyrnislyr’s no longer a threat to any of you. How long that takes is up to you,” he concluded flatly.

At first there was silence. Then heads began to nod, and a murmur of approval ran around the circle.

Thist rose, and the murmur subsided. “If this strategy succeeds, we’ll all be in your debt, Doctor. Ebra, your father would be proud of you. You’ll be remembered as the worthiest of Guardians. Though” – reluctantly, he corrected himself – “perhaps not. If your request is granted, it seems we won’t be able to remember why.”

The Doctor gave one brief nod of acknowledgement, then looked at Ebra, ignoring the fact that her eyes were bright with unshed tears. “Let’s get Donna back inside,” he said matter-of-factly. “I’d like her to be in the TARDIS when she’s unshrouded.”

The Convocation watched in silence as the Doctor and Ebra carried their burden back into the TARDIS. Then Ebra reappeared, alone. She pulled the door to behind her and took her stand a few paces in front of it. She didn’t look at anyone, just closed her eyes and stood motionless. Everyone gazed at her intently; none of them had ever seen a Guardian use the Gift, so none of them knew what to expect.

At last Ebra moved. She overlapped the palm of her right hand over the back of her left, and raised her arms so that the overlapped backs of her hands masked her eyes, the underside of her forearms and the palm of her left hand facing outward. After a few seconds her lips began to move, forming soundless words for a while before closing again. She continued to stand motionless, her arms still raised, her eyes still hidden behind her hands.

There was a long pause.

Then, almost imperceptibly, everyone saw that tiny rainbow-hued speckles had begun to fill the air. No-one saw them appear, but there they were, everywhere, appearing out of nowhere, filling the Hall of Convocation. At first they just hung suspended where they appeared; then, slowly, they began to move, converging on Ebra until she could no longer be seen, enveloped in a huge ball of undulating colours.

Then, with shocking suddenness, the ball exploded outwards, spreading in an ever-expanding series of circular multi-coloured rings across the Hall and out through its walls, speeding across Velloss, across the entire First Continent, on and on until they had covered the whole planet.

And then they vanished.

Blinking, Thist lowered the arm he had raised to protect his eyes against the sudden flare of colours and swiftly scanned the Hall. All the other members of the Convocation were doing the same, reassuring themselves that no harm had come either to themselves or their colleagues. From the rising level of conversation it was clear that they had all felt a strange sensation in their heads as the spreading rings had passed through them.

Frowning in concentration, Thist realized that he knew what had just happened, but he couldn’t remember why it had happened. Ebra had used the Gift, but he no longer knew what she had done with it, or why. What he did know was that something important had changed, and it was to do with Vyrnislyr. Somehow they had been freed to act against her in a way that, for some reason, they hadn’t been able to before.

He focused on Ebra. She was still standing in front of the blue box; her hands had dropped to her sides, and her eyes were staring, as if focused on something invisible to everyone else. Then she relaxed. Turning her head slightly to meet Thist's eyes, she nodded, once, and somehow he knew she was saying goodbye to him. Then she silently went back through the door and closed it behind her. The volume of the hubbub in the room began to rise as everyone else registered the fact that she had left.

But the degree of their consternation was nothing compared to the pitch to which it rose when the entire vehicle, to the accompaniment of a most outlandish mechanical wheezing noise, completely vanished from view.

Ebra rested her forehead against the surface of the closed door for a moment. She felt a mixture of strange, unexpected emotions. She'd used the Gift, and now in some indefinable way she sensed keenly the absence of the ability to use it ever again. It felt oddly like a bereavement.

But there was something else. Something that hadn't happened, which surely ought to have happened...

She turned to ask the Doctor why, but, looking up the ramp, decided not to interrupt the reunion taking place beside the console. The Doctor, a huge grin lighting up his face, was gripping the shoulders of a rather dazed-looking Donna, who was holding her head between her hands and repeating rapidly, "I'm fine! I'm fine! I'm fine!" in a way that instantly told Ebra she wasn't feeling as fine as all *that*. Ebra summoned up a smile and walked up the ramp to join them.

"Donna, this is Ebra," the Doctor announced. "It's thanks to her you're back with us again."

"And you're the lady who saved me in the first place," Ebra said. "I'll never be able to thank you enough."

"Well... you know... you're welcome," said Donna a little uncertainly.

The Doctor dropped his hands from her shoulders and turned to Ebra, but as he saw the expression on her face the grin on his morphed into a look of concern.

"What?" he queried swiftly. "What is it?"

"I don't understand," she said. "Has something gone wrong? I can still remember everything, Doctor! About shrouds, and all those people Vyrnislyr shrouded. But you said all memory of anything to do with shrouds was going to be wiped from everyone's minds..."

The Doctor nodded. "Everyone who wasn't standing inside the TARDIS's forcefield at the time," he said, as if that should have been obvious. "Which I extended to cover you when you were outside the TARDIS. And Donna and I were in here. So we're the only three people who still know." He met her eyes soberly. "You saved Vellossia today, Ebra. You deserve to remember what you've just done for everyone on your planet. I wasn't going to take that away from you."

She wasn't sure what she thought of his deciding that without consulting her – it meant she retained the knowledge of what had happened to her parents, and the grief was still too new and raw for her to be sure he'd done her a favour. But it was done now, and he'd respected her right to her own memories. She contented herself with a slow nod of acknowledgement.

Donna was obviously still struggling to come to terms with what had happened to her. “One or two details I’m not quite clear on...” she began.

“Time for details later,” said the Doctor briskly. “Right now, Ebra’s got a very important appointment to keep, and we need to get her there right now. Ebra, where are we going?”

Ebra’s expression was suddenly anxious.

“Have you forgotten, Doctor? Wherever I go, Vyrnislyr can locate me. That means that the next Guardian will be put in danger, too, because she’ll know more or less where they are, and she won’t give up until she finds them.”

“Don’t worry, Ebra. None of that’s going to happen, because she’s not going to know where to look,” said the Doctor smugly.

Ebra’s frow creased into a perplexed frown. “But how...?”

The Doctor grinned.

“Space *and* time, remember?”

Vyrnislyr’s eyes stared, unfocused. Then, with a jerk, she came back to full awareness. Something had just happened, but what? She had a strange feeling of loss, as though something important had in some way been taken from her. But what? She tried to focus on the faint, rapidly receding awareness she could still sense in the far reaches of her memory, but no good – whatever it was, was gone...

A conviction swept over her that something fundamental had changed. Where she was standing seemed different. The control panel in front of her – there were blank spaces between some of the controls. Had those spaces always been there? Had she designed it like that? Or had there been things there that now weren’t – things she couldn’t remember? No, that wasn’t possible! She must be imagining it.

A voice was speaking. To her. Someone she knew. Byrnil – that was it – Byrnil. “Exquisite Daughter! What should we do?” he was saying.

She turned her head to look at him, and became aware of the odd combination of confusion and urgency in his voice.

“About what?” she said, realizing that she sounded as bewildered as he did.

“About *them*, Exquisite Daughter!”

She looked around her. People, hundreds of them. All looking around them in complete bewilderment, as if they were wondering – as she was – how they’d got there, and why. As she stared around at them, beginning to recognize faces, the ‘why’ began to come to her. These were her prisoners, people who’d opposed her. She’d... She’d what? She’d done something to them, but what? The memory eluded her. But whatever it was, it was clear what had to be done now.

“Get them out of here,” she commanded, recovering her usual air of authority. “Lock them up. I don’t know how they got in here, but I want them imprisoned, immediately. See to it, Commander!”

Byrnill nodded and issued the necessary commands to his men, but he wore a slightly distracted air, as if he, too, was aware of something changed, something gone. When the room had been cleared, he returned to her side, registering the intent way she was continuing to stare at the control panel, a faint frown furrowing her brow.

“All prisoners confined as you ordered, Exquisite Daughter,” he reported. Then, tentatively, “Are you well, Exquisite Daughter?”

“There’s something...” she murmured. “Ebra. And that man. The Doctor. They’ve done something, and I don’t know what it is.” She shook her head, and as she continued speaking her voice rose to its normal volume. “But as soon as they’re found, I’ll find out exactly what. And they’ll regret it, whatever it is!”

“Are they still in the Hall of the Convocation?” Byrnill enquired.

Vyrnislyr looked down at the screen where the white spark had landed on the location of the Hall.

“No. But she can’t have got far. I’ll reset the locator...” She manipulated controls, and the map display zoomed back out until it displayed the whole of Velloss. “There!” she crowed triumphantly, as the white spark flashed in another part of the city. “Commander, take your men – “

But he cut across her, pointing at the screen. “Exquisite Daughter! Look!”

She was about to blast him for interrupting her, but then she saw what he was pointing at, and her mouth dropped open in astonishment.

Instead of just one white spark, another had appeared. Then another – another – another; they were appearing all over the city, all at the same time, their numbers continuing to grow. There must be well over a hundred already, with more all the time.

“How is that possible?” Vyrnislyr demanded. She checked the control panel; it was working perfectly. “She can’t be in all those places at the same time!”

Then they both gasped. All the sparks vanished. Every one. From hundreds, to none.

For a long moment, there was silence. Then Vyrnislyr smashed her fists down on the control panel and uttered a long, wailing cry of anger and frustration.

“How can I find her? I *must* find her! How? How? *How?*” she shrieked.

While she raged, Byrnill kept silent, trying to school his face to the impassiveness he had taught himself to cultivate during all the years in which he had effectively been imprisoned in service to this monstrous woman. But just for a few moments, he failed.

He didn’t know what had happened today, and he had the feeling he never would, but that didn’t stop a brief, secret smile breaking out on his face, and a feeling of quiet, unnamed satisfaction sweeping through him.

“There! Told you. Space *and* time,” the Doctor crowed as he virtually danced around the console. “Hundreds of different places, all at the same time. Not usually a good idea to cross your own timeline like that, but safe enough on this occasion. And d’you know why? Because I’m brilliant, that’s why! Giving her too many places to look, and she can’t look at them all at once. And no-one

else saw you and your friend. It was just the two of you, in secret. She'll never be able to tell where you were when you passed on the Gift. So your successor's safe. And she'll never be able to find out who they are or where they are. Brilliant? Oh, you can forget brilliant! I'm *super*-brilliant, I am!"

"Oi, Mister Modesty," said Donna trenchantly. "When you've *quite* finished blowing your own trumpet...!"

The Doctor stopped dancing, looked at her in surprise, then followed the direction in which she jerked her head. Ebra was sitting on the pilot's chair, looking forlorn.

"What? What is it?" the Doctor asked her, perplexed. "You've used the Gift the best way you could, and now you've passed it on to someone else. Not your responsibility any more. You're free!"

Donna gave him a withering look. "Is she? Is she really? You've told me what that Vernal-whatsit woman's like. Do you seriously think she's the type to ever give up on trying to pay Ebra back for putting a spanner in her works, even if she doesn't remember exactly how she did it? She sounds about as likely to give up on getting Ebra as the Daleks are on getting you!"

"They've never managed it yet! But... Well, yes. Right. Good point," the Doctor conceded, chastened.

"Donna's right, Doctor," Ebra said despondently. "Everyone on Vellossia's safe now – except me. I never will be. I don't regret stopping Vyrnslyr, but – I don't see myself having a particularly long life expectancy. Do you?"

There was a short, awkward silence. Then a smile began to spread across the Doctor's face, and his eyes began to dance. "Oh, I wouldn't say that," he demurred jovially, and energetically began to operate the controls on the console.

"Why not?" Ebra frowned. "Vyrnslyr can find me no matter where I go, remember?"

"Ah, but can she? Can she, though?" said the Doctor triumphantly. "If you stay here on Vellossia, yes. But not if you're on another planet in another galaxy right across the sky from here...!"

13 Bannerman Road was almost totally silent. Sarah Jane Smith was alone in the house save for K9, who was up in the attic, and at that moment the only sound was that of computer keys being operated, as she sat at her desk, drafting her latest article.

She reached the end of a paragraph, and began to read through what she'd written thus far. But then, with a sudden movement, her head went up. She could hear K9 calling her.

"Mistress! Energy signature detected!"

She was about to ask what kind of energy signature, but then a familiar noise began to impinge on her hearing – faint at first, but then increasing in volume. A very, very familiar noise.

Her eyes widened, and an excited smile spread across her face. Then she was bolting up the stairs and through the door – and, yes, there it was, as it had been once before, after the Doctor had rescued her from the Trickster, sadly at the cost of her losing the man she had intended to marry.

Peter Dalton. She felt the same frisson of grief she always felt when she remembered him. But that was the past. This was now, and the TARDIS was once again parked in her attic. The familiar blue door was flung open, and Sarah's smile grew even wider.

"Doctor!" she exclaimed delightedly.

"Hello, Sarah Jane!" he said cheerfully. "Hello, K9!"

"Master," K9 acknowledged imperturbably.

"Hope I'm not interrupting," the Doctor said briskly. "Got a favour to ask. Got someone with me who needs your help. Well, I say *'with me'* – actually I've dropped her off with a friend while I have a word with you first. But she does need your help – yours and Mr Smith's..."

Dusk was falling over the allotments, and Wilfred Mott, telescope at the ready, was already seated in his battered old folding chair, staring upwards. Near the horizon the clear, cloudless sky was still a pale pink, but overhead, where it was shading into an ever-darkening blue, more and more stars were revealing their presence. He never got over wondering how you could be looking at a patch of sky that was blank, and then suddenly there'd be a tiny point of sparkling white springing into being. He never got over the pleasure it gave him, either.

He was still mulling over the phenomenon when a familiar voice spoke from nearby.

"Told you this is where he'd be," it said.

Wilf swung round to see two people standing beside the battered old green shed where he kept his gardening tools, but all his attention was focused on the owner of the voice. Delight spread across his entire face, and he spread his arms wide.

"Donna! Sweetheart! Come here and give your old grandad the biggest hug of his life!"

Which she did, with a huge grin. As she stepped back, Wilf looked her up and down.

"Wherever you've been lately, you're looking good on it," he said proudly. Then, for the first time, he registered the fact that the other person with Donna wasn't the Doctor. It was a fair-haired woman probably only a few years younger than Donna, and Wilf immediately detected that behind the expectant, enquiring expression in the hazel eyes there was something of a forlorn look, too.

"Brought a friend to see me, have you?" he prompted. "What've you done with that Doctor of yours?"

"He's off seeing someone else at the moment," said Donna. "Ebra, this is Wilf. My grandad. Grandfather," she amended hastily, seeing the slight frown of incomprehension indicating that 'grandad' was not a term Ebra was familiar with. "Grandad, this is Ebra."

"Pleased to meet you, Ebra," said Wilf cheerfully, holding out his hand. Ebra looked at it, evidently confused.

"It's what we do on this planet when we're greeting someone," Donna explained. "It's called shaking hands. We take each other's hand and shake up and down a couple of times. Like this." She took Ebra's hand and demonstrated.

Ebra nodded, obviously storing the information for future use. "I see," she said, and smiling shyly at Wilf, shook his offered hand as instructed.

Wilf had joined the dots. “So, you’re – er – you’re not from Earth, then?” he suggested tentatively.

Ebra shook her head, and the sadness in her eyes became more visible.

“We had to bring her here to save her life,” Donna explained swiftly. “She’ll need a proper identity to stay here, so the Doctor’s off fixing that up with someone he knows. Apparently she’s got a friend called Mr Smith who’s going to see about giving Ebra a background and all the ID stuff she’s gonna need.”

“Mr Smith? Sounds a bit dodgy to me,” Wilf opined. “Still, the Doctor usually knows what he’s doing.”

“Sez you,” Donna retorted. Then, seriously, “Thing is, Ebra’s a stranger here, and she doesn’t know much about Earth, let alone England. She’s gonna need friends who can give her a steer on how things work here, Gramps,” she ended meaningfully.

“Well, she’s got one already, then,” Wilf declared. He reached out and took Ebra’s hand again, this time to give it a reassuring squeeze. “Don’t you worry, my darling. I’ll look after you. Anything I can do, anything I can help you with – you just ask, all right?”

His manifest kindness filled Ebra’s eyes with incipient tears, and though she couldn’t speak, the fervour with which she tightened her grip on Wilf’s hand spoke for her.

“And one day,” Wilf went on, “when you’re properly settled, you can come and visit me and tell me all about how you got here, and I’ll tell you all about everything Donna got up to when she was a little girl.” Wilf grinned mischievously at Donna. “Oh, I’ve got some stories that’ll make your hair curl, Ebra – you just see if they don’t! Stick with me, sweetheart – you’ll soon be at home here!”

Ebra looked into Wilf’s wise, laughing old eyes, and found her heart lifting. “I’m sure of it,” she said.

Then Wilf’s eyes lit up, as a familiar mechanical wheeze began to become audible, growing to fill the air.

“Know what?” he said gleefully. “I think your taxi’s here.”

The TARDIS completed its materialization and the Doctor popped his head out of the door. “Hello, Wilf!” he grinned. “Still hiding from Sylvia, then?”

“Enough of your sauce!” said Wilf cheerfully. “Just been meeting my new friend Ebra, thanks to you. Looking forward to hearing her story, when she’s got time to tell it.”

“Don’t forget to tell Wilf how Donna was petrified,” the Doctor said, redirecting his grin toward Ebra. “Not often you can say that, but it really suited her! Talk about giving you a hard look!” He saw the look Donna was giving him at that moment, and hastily changed the subject. “Anyway... I’ll just nip off and take Ebra to her new home. Give you and Donna the chance for a proper catch-up.”

“Oh, we’ll have a catch-up, all right,” said Donna ominously, but she wasn’t talking about Wilf, who grinned at the Doctor.

“Think you’re gonna catch *it*, rather than *up*, Doctor!”

“Some things never change,” the Doctor informed him. “Come on, Ebra! Someone you need to meet.”

“...And you must have a long talk with Luke,” Sarah Jane was saying enthusiastically to Ebra, clasping both her hands reassuringly. “He’s been through exactly the same process you’re about to go through. Learning about living on Earth – especially this bit of it, England. Picking up the idioms, understanding our eccentric English behaviour, that sort of thing.”

Ebra looked puzzled. “But isn’t he your son? You’re talking as if he isn’t from Earth, either.”

“Not in the way everyone else is,” Sarah Jane said cryptically. She smiled. “Don’t worry, I’ll explain later. And I’m looking forward to hearing all about you. The Doctor” – she flicked a glance at the TARDIS – “gave me the bare bones, but I’d love to understand the background and the details.”

They both looked round quickly as the TARDIS door was jerked open and the Doctor stuck his head out.

“Come on, Mr Smith! Haven’t you made her legit yet?” he demanded, looking across at the Xylok’s computer interface.

“I have just completed the final task, Doctor,” said Mr Smith. “All relevant systems and databases have been amended. Ebra Vellossian now exists officially.”

“And with a name like that, if anyone asks you you’ll be able to tell people quite plausibly that your ancestors came from somewhere in Central Europe,” the Doctor told Ebra cheerfully. “Once Sarah’s explained where and what Central Europe is, of course,” he added quickly, seeing the blank look on Ebra’s face.

“Don’t worry, Ebra,” said Sarah Jane, putting an arm round her shoulder. “I know you’ve got a lot to learn, but I’ll be here to help you, and so will Mr Smith. Won’t you, Mr Smith?”

“It will be my pleasure, Ebra,” said Mr Smith warmly.

“When you throw K9 into the mix as well, you’ll have more help than you’ll know what to do with.” the Doctor advised, with a grin.

“Negative,” said K9. “Excess would be inefficient. Information will only be imparted at the desired rate.”

“Course it will,” the Doctor said, exchanging a quick grin with Sarah Jane.

“I hope it won’t take too long for me to learn everything,” said Ebra, looking slightly anxious. “I don’t want to be any trouble.”

“Don’t worry, you won’t,” Sarah Jane assured her. “You can stay here as long as you need to. We’ll love having you here, I promise you.”

For a moment Ebra couldn’t speak, but in the brief silence that followed her eyes spoke for her. Then the Doctor sniffed, reflectively. “Well, I’d better be off, then.”

The expression on Ebra’s face changed to regret as she realized the moment of farewell had come.

“I can never thank you enough, Doctor, so I won’t try,” she said simply. “You’ll just have to work out for yourself how much I mean by those two words, ‘thank you’. I’ll never forget you.”

“Me? Forget me? Course you won’t!” said the Doctor briskly. “Who would? You just look after yourself, Ebra. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!”

And with that, he stepped back and shut the door. A few seconds later the TARDIS started to dematerialize.

Without taking her eyes from the fading blue shape, Ebra said, somewhat quizzically, “Somehow I have the strongest possible feeling that that still gives me quite a lot of room for manoeuvre.”

Sarah Jane smiled. “A whole universe of room!” she said, squeezing Ebra’s shoulders. “Isn’t that right, K9?”

“Affirmative, Mistress!”

Donna gave Wilf one last wave, shut the door, and walked up the ramp to rejoin the Doctor as the TARDIS started to take off. He was running round the console, resetting the controls.

“Where are we off to now, then?” Donna enquired. There was a very intent, focused expression lurking in her eyes as she regarded him, but the Doctor didn’t notice it.

“Oooh, somewhere between here and there and now and then,” he said flippantly.

“Right,” said Donna, but she didn’t pursue the matter. After a brief pause, she said, “I had a good long talk with Ebra, you know.”

“Yeah, saw you two chatting away in the corner,” said the Doctor, not looking up from the console.

“She was asking me what it was like to be shrouded.” To a discerning ear, Donna might have sounded as though she was manoeuvring the conversation in a particular direction. The Doctor’s ear, however, wasn’t currently in discerning mode.

“Oh, yeah?” he acknowledged absently. “And what was it like?”

“Bit like being drowsy, actually. Conscious all the time, though. Couldn’t move my eyes, or anything, but I could still see whatever was straight ahead of me. And things were a bit muffled, but I could still hear what everyone was saying.”

The Doctor suddenly realized where this was going, and straightened up, alarmed, to meet Donna’s now flint-like eyes.

“So then, Skinny Shanks,” she said ominously. “You wanted to discuss how much I weigh, yeah?”

The Doctor swallowed. Hard.

Now it was his turn to be petrified.



March 2026