FICTION BY STEPHEN HATCHER

Do You Think That's Wise?

A CHRISTMAS STORY

The dry heat of the desert hit Turlough the moment he stepped from the TARDIS. He paused and took in the scene. The night was light enough for him to make out groups of men sitting around small fires outside large brightly coloured tents, each clustered next to palm trees beside what appeared to be a small lake. From each group came the murmur of quiet conversation, punctuated with bursts of laughter. As well as the men, he could see the shapes of what appeared to be some sort of large quadruped, shuffling and grunting noisily.

He turned to the young-looking blond man who had followed him out and who was also making strange noises, chuckling, seemingly in equal measure amused and irritated. "Have you any idea where we are, Doctor? I think I might have been here before. One of the desert planets in the Calicon System?"

"The Calicon System? No, oh no. We're back on Earth. By my calculations, we're around two thousand years before your time at Brendon, Turlough. As you can see, we're in one of the planet's desert regions, probably in the area often referred to as the Middle East." He gave a brief smile in satisfaction.

Turlough looked up into the clear night sky from where a billion stars shone down onto the little oasis. One particular object caught his eye. With a long, wide tail trailing behind it, an exceptionally bright light dominated the heavens. "Have you noticed that, Doctor?" Turlough indicated the object.

"Oh yes, it's a comet. How delightful – and an important event. In ancient Earth civilisations, comets were often taken as warnings of great things to come, for good or evil." The two travellers stood in silence for a moment, taking in the spectacle of the comet and the tranquillity of the oasis, until the peace was shattered by the raucous bellowing of an animal and the loud shouts of a man.

Turlough turned to see what was happening just in time to dive out of the way as another of the quadrupeds that he had noticed earlier shot

past, missing him by the narrowest of margins. Behind the creature, screaming in terror and fury at the animal, a young man was being dragged, grasping tightly to the creature's reins in an effort to regain some sort of control and avoid being pulled to the ground by the strap that had become twisted around his waist. "Turlough," the Doctor called out, somewhat redundantly, "mind that camel."

Turlough said nothing but gave his friend a meaningful look. Meanwhile, the camel with the man in tow had crashed into a tent, sending its occupants flying, and was now enjoying a quiet drink from the lake. The young man emerged from where he had ended up under the water and, having disentangled himself from the camel's reins, was making his way to the lake's edge, all the while attempting to placate the angry crowd whose tent had been overturned.

Without thinking, Turlough rushed over and solicitously asked if he had been hurt. The man assured him he hadn't been injured and, distributing some coins to the angry mob, who melted back into the gloom to repair the tent, he introduced himself as Caspar. It was then that Turlough noticed this appeared to be no ordinary Bedouin traveller. Although soaked through and rather bedraggled, his fine silk clothes indicated he was a man of some wealth.

"And what is it, may I ask, that brings a man like yourself to such a place on a night like this?" asked the Doctor, having apparently held back before deciding to approach.

"Can't you guess?" answered Caspar enthusiastically and pointing with one finger to the comet in the sky. "The star. Some of us have been following it. It's terribly portentous, you know. Death and disaster, or some great victory or something like that… Well, look, I'm not sure exactly what it signifies, but it's very important. To be honest, I really don't know what it's all about. Melchior and Balthazar know the full story. Following the star was their idea and I sort of came along for the ride – for a bit of a laugh, really. We're astrologers, you see – well, the other two are, I'm just an amateur. We've come an awfully long way and Melchior reckons we've about reached where we're going. Something about a baby, I think. So, there you have it." He ended with a warm smile.

The Doctor and Turlough gave each other a puzzled look, then smiled back at the instantly likeable young man, who was clearly on the adventure of a lifetime. At that moment, another man approached, of similar age and appearance to Caspar and equally well dressed. He rebuked the young man gently, "Caspar, what have you done now? You're soaking wet – and this poor camel looks exhausted. We've told you before about getting involved with camel racing – it always ends badly. And who are these two? Not more of your racing buddies?"

"Buddies?" the Doctor smiled. "Racing? Not at all, in fact we've only just met your friend."

Caspar cut him off. "Sorry, Melchior, it won't happen again. These two gentlemen were kind enough to help me out of the water." He turned to Turlough and the Doctor. "Chaps, this is my friend, Melchior. Have you eaten? Come and join us. But I don't know your names."

The two travellers introduced themselves and, thanking Caspar for the invitation, readily accepted his hospitality and followed the two men to their tent by the water's edge. There they were introduced to the third member of the group of astrologers, Balthazar, who was preparing a delicious-smelling meal of some sort of stew. All five sat on the ground outside the tent and tucked into the food, which tasted no less delicious than it smelled.

As they ate, the group chatted amiably and got to know each other. Turlough found their three new friends to be delightful company. Melchior did most of the talking. He was clearly the leader and came across as a little brash, but rather likeable. Balthazar, on the other hand, was

a more serious, bookish type, a little younger than the other two. He nodded furiously at Melchior's every word and was clearly keen to please his older friend. Caspar confirmed the first impression of being uncoordinated and accident prone, tipping his food down himself and inflicting a mild burn to his foot by leaving it too close to the fire, causing him to leap up, startling the Doctor who had started to doze.

"So, Caspar tells us you have followed the comet… the star, that is… and are looking for some baby or other," enquired the Doctor. "Tell me, what's so important about this child?"

Melchior paused for a moment before answering, as if considering whether to trust the stranger. "According to our readings, this child will grow to be a great king. We intend to bear witness to his coming and pay homage to him. We're expecting to find him when we get to Jerusalem, tomorrow morning."

The Doctor merely smiled enigmatically but said nothing.

It was Caspar who spoke up, excitedly. "Yes and we've brought some great presents for him – some gold, a nice bottle of incense and… have a look at this…" He took out an object from his bag. "It's one of those nice leather belts with a buckle in the shape of a camel's head." He showed it to the Doctor and Turlough, who both murmured in feigned approval.

"Shush, Caspar! Keep your voice down, for goodness' sake," whispered Melchior in alarm. "You don't know who might be listening, there are all sorts of dodgy types around here – thieves, bandits, pickpockets. If you start mouthing off that we're carrying gold…"

"Sorry, quite right. The last thing we need is for someone to help themselves to this belt."

"Never mind the belt… oh, I give up." Melchior shook his head in exasperation.

Left alone for a moment, as the three astrologers busied themselves clearing away after the meal, Turlough turned to the Doctor and whispered urgently, "Doctor, you realise who these three are, don't you? We were taught about them at Brendon."

"Yes, the three wise men, also called the Magii. Well," he smiled, "I can't say they seem that wise to me? But anyway, they are three very important figures in Earth mythology. Fancy that."

"So, Doctor, can't we—?"

"Stay around and see what happens? Really, Turlough. You know better than that. How dangerous that would be."

"But Doctor, I would really like to—"

At that moment, Caspar, Balthazar and Melchior drifted back over. The Doctor gave Turlough a warning look and whispered, "We'll talk about it tomorrow, but really we should leave and not get involved."

As the group of now five travellers moved into the tent to settle down for the night, none noticed the shadowy figure that had remained concealed behind a bush, just beyond their circle – the figure of a man whose eyes had lit up at the sound of the word 'gold' and who was even now leaving silently to return to his disreputable band of companions, to report what he had overheard.

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None of the five travellers heard anything of what happened during the night. Morning saw Turlough wake first, disturbed by a slight breeze on his cheek. He opened his eyes to discover the breeze was coming through a neat cut that had appeared overnight in the fabric of the tent, just big enough to have allowed a man to gain entrance and to leave again, in possession of the three astrologers' bags.

"Wake up! We've been robbed." Turlough shook his new friends, who were awake instantly. Together with the Doctor, they took in what had happened and rushed out of the tent, tripping over the remains of the looted bags as they did so. The strong scent of incense and a

yellow oily puddle on the ground told the story of what had become of one of the three gifts – although Balthazar was quick to reassure his friends that he had plenty of spare gourds full of incense in the bags by the camels.

Caspar, having rifled furiously through his discarded bag, emerged triumphantly holding the belt with the camel-head buckle. "Yes! They didn't find it!" he exclaimed in evident relief.

Melchior's face alone told his friends what little solace he drew from this news, and that he had been less lucky. "It's the gold," he said in a near whisper. "They've taken it all."

The friends had quickly agreed there was little to be gained from remaining at the oasis, the thieves having no doubt long fled the scene. So, having fed and watered the camels and gathered together what remained of their bags, they took to the road and headed westwards, guided by the brightly shining light of the comet in the sky. Despite the Doctor's warnings, Turlough was all the more keen to see how this quest would end and, after much discussion, he had managed to get his friend to agree that they should stick with the three astrologers, at least for now.

Melchior and Balthazar were clearly confident, experienced camel riders and chatted animatedly as they rode; Caspar, somewhat less secure in the saddle, lagged a little behind. Bringing up the rear, clinging precariously to the spare camel, which they were sharing, the Doctor and Turlough were only just about managing to avoid falling off. It was to Turlough's great relief that after little more than an hour's travel, at the point where the dry shrubland began to give way to cultivated fields, they came to a fork in the road where they paused to consider which direction they should take. The comet held its position in the sky, over the left-hand fork, leading up a minor track towards a little town in the distance. The right fork was a continuation of the main road towards the city of Jerusalem.

"What would be the point of going there?" asked Caspar. "You can see for yourself, it's just a little place in the middle of nowhere."

"Well, okay," answered Melchior, "but we've followed the star all this way and you can see where it's leading us now."

"This baby," interjected Balthazar, "he's a king, isn't he? That's what you said?"

"Yes, or at any rate he's going to be a king."

"Well, I don't know about you, but it seems to me that we're far more likely to find a king in a city like Jerusalem than in some one-donkey little place like that."

"Balthazar's right," concluded Caspar. "I've been looking forward to seeing the sights of Jerusalem. The nightlife there is supposed to be absolutely the best around. Let me at those bars! In any case, we haven't got any idea how to find the baby. It strikes me that the best idea is to knock on the door of the Royal Palace and see if anyone there knows anything."

Turlough, listening with interest to the debate, noticed the Doctor wince at this suggestion.

Melchior was no less unimpressed. "Seriously? You think that's a good idea, do you? We should just roll up to the king's palace and ask old Herod if he can point us towards a baby, who may well end up replacing him as king? That would hardly be tactful, would it? Honestly, you two! We've followed the star all this way and you want to change that now, when we're in sight of the end of the road, just because you fancy a night out. The last place we should go is Jerusalem. And besides, have you forgotten? All our money has been stolen. We need to sell some of the spare incense and get some cash. We'll be able to do that in that little town – what's it called?" He consulted his map. "Bethlehem. And as to finding the baby, it shouldn't be too hard. We can make some quiet enquiries, without attracting

the attention of the king's guards. We can call in at all the hotels, inns, boarding houses – someone is bound to know something."

That settled the discussion. Turlough heard the Doctor give a little chuckle to himself. As they remounted the camels, he noticed the comet appeared to be shining just a little bit brighter.

It was still only late morning when the travellers arrived in the little town. It was a more promising destination than it had looked from a distance and the little main square was busy with shoppers, anxious to get some final bargains before the market stall holders began to pack their wares away and went for lunch, before making their way back home.

Turlough, the Doctor and their new friends took in the scene. Turlough noticed the Doctor seemed very much at home. "You've been here before, then, Doctor?" he asked.

"Well, certainly I've been to this region of Earth on at least a couple of occasions – but not to this exact place in this particular time. It's very familiar, though. One could come here or to any of the towns hereabouts, at any time over a period of about three thousand years or so and still see very much the same things."

The Doctor's musings were interrupted by Melchior asserting his authority. "Right, no time to stand around and behave like tourists, we have things to do. Balthazar, markets are always a good source of gossip, why don't you spend some time here and ask some of the merchants if they've heard anything."

"I'll go with you, if that's okay," Turlough addressed Balthazar. "I fancy a look around."

"Fair enough. And Caspar, you make a little tour of some of the inns, see if they've seen anything of a baby or a pregnant mother."

Turlough couldn't help but notice the delighted smile that came over Caspar's face at the news of this assignment.

"I'm going to visit some of the more upmarket hotels and do the same. I rather think I'll fit in better there than either of you chaps," he smirked at their outraged expressions. "Do you fancy coming with me, Doctor?"

"I would be delighted to, Melchior. Lead on."

"Well let's meet up back here in… three hours. I need to find a replacement gift for the gold we lost. So we'll need to sell some of that spare incense and see what we can find. Is everyone clear what they need to do?"

Balthazar nodded seriously, while Caspar, seemingly in a hurry to get away, waved back with a quick, "Yeah, yeah," and headed off towards the nearest inn.

"Watch what you're doing," Melchior called after him, "and stay out of trouble." He turned to Balthazar and Turlough. "I'll see you two later. And remember, discretion!"

Dismissed, Turlough and Balthazar turned and set off into the market.

Turlough had visited many markets on many planets and while they certainly shared many features in common, they were also all very different, reflecting the culture of a particular place and time. He could never work out why he liked visiting them so much, but he never tired of finding a new market. Despite what the Doctor had said, he was sure he could return in no more than ten years and find many tiny differences, never mind in three thousand years. This market was a particular delight, with its great variety of fresh produce, its treasury of spices, all sorts of clothes and fabrics, the rich aroma of cooked meals and the strange sounds of the many small animals and birds in cramped cages – Turlough had to remind himself they were almost certainly being sold for meat, and moved on quickly.

While Turlough took in the sights, sounds and smells, Balthazar began interrogating the stall

holders. At first Turlough let him get on with it until he happened to overhear his friend's opening gambit as he approached a stallholder. "Hello you, my man! Yes you, merchant."

The stallholder looked up in surprise, clearly unused to being spoken to in such an abrupt manner. "Can I be of any assistance, sir?" His smile dripped insincerity.

"I hope so. Now look here, we're looking for information about a baby."

"A baby, sir? As you see, I have no babies on this stall. Chickens, yes; ducks, certainly; some young pigs – even a goat round the back. But no babies." He turned his attention to the next customer, but Balthazar wouldn't give up.

"Now you know that's not what I mean. I'm looking for information about a baby who's going to be a king." When the man showed no sign of resuming the conversation, Balthazar raised his voice, "A baby who is going to be a king, I tell you." The gasps from the crowd made it clear to Turlough that Melchior's instruction to be discrete had been quickly forgotten.

The whispers in the crowd were becoming threatening.

"What's that he said?"

"He says he knows a baby who's going to become king."

"But what about Herod? He's the king."

"This baby must be going to topple him – lead a revolution or something."

"But that's treason."

"You're telling me it is. Someone, fetch the guard. We don't want none of that. Revolution is bad for business. What did revolutionaries ever do for us?"

Balthazar, unaware of the commotion he had caused, continued to harangue the merchant, then turned his attention to the next stall and continued in the same vein. Before Turlough could react, things had moved quickly and the sound of running boots heralded the arrival of five enormous and heavily armed men. "'Ello," the leader of what was evidently a party of the king's guards said, fixing Balthazar with a steely look from his one eye. "What do we 'ave 'ere?"

"He was talking treason," called a voice from the crowd. "Says his baby is going to lead a revolution."

"Is that right? Well, m'lad." The captain of the guard grabbed Balthazar roughly by the arm. "We don't like revolutionaries around here. You're coming with me." With Balthazar protesting loudly, the guards dragged him away. There was nothing Turlough could do. At least, he reflected, he himself was still at liberty and would be able let the others know what had happened.

It was then that another call came from the crowd. "He's another one." An old woman was pointing at Turlough. "He was with him."

"Right, you two." The Captain turned to two of his men. "Grab him!"

Turlough didn't wait to be grabbed and, vaulting over a stall, took off into the maze of alleyways beyond. The two guards were less athletic but more powerful and simply brushed the stall aside, hot on Turlough's tail. He had the advantage of speed and was soon able to slip out of sight under a stall selling sheep's wool. He hadn't lost his pursuers, though. From his hiding place he could hear them, challenging merchants who might have seen him and overturning stalls.

The guards approached where he was hiding and asked the wool merchant, "Have you seen a man, trying to hide?" From beneath the stall, Turlough could see the terrified man indicating his hiding place to the guards silently with his eyes. The stall was overturned and Turlough was exposed. Slowly he stood to face his pursuers.

The two guards regarded him suspiciously. One asked him, "Have you got anyone else hiding under there?"

In the moments before the guards had kicked over the stall, Turlough had grabbed a handful of wool and arranged it around his face into a makeshift false beard. He shook his head furiously, keeping his eyes averted.

The guards seemed satisfied. “Well, that’s alright then.” They turned to go, then suddenly paused and turned back to Turlough. One of the guards grabbed him by the throat and whispered threateningly, “But just you watch it.” Then, to Turlough’s relief, they released him and moved off to resume their search.

The stallholder gave the lad a quizzical look. “Thanks a lot,” said Turlough sarcastically. He handed the man a few coins for his new beard and set off to wait for Melchior and the Doctor.

With his false beard still in place, Turlough settled himself at a table outside a bar, near to where he had last seen the Doctor and Melchior; confident the guards had given up searching for him and that they probably hadn’t got that good a look at him in any case. He was concerned for Balthazar but there was nothing he could do about that on his own. So he might as well relax, have a drink and wait for the reappearance of the others.

Turlough was enjoying watching the last of the merchants clearing away their stalls, listening to the animated chatter coming from the groups of stallholders and customers sitting around tables outside the various taverns, and taking in the aromas of undoubtedly delicious food being cooked and served, when his reverie was disturbed by a loud commotion from a bar across the square. He looked up from his drink to see a naked man being forcibly ejected from the bar. Turlough began to smile at the ridiculousness of the sight, but his amusement was curtailed when he realised the identity of the man. It was Caspar.

The unfeasibly large man who had ejected Caspar shouted after him as the young astrologer picked himself up from the dusty earth, frantically trying to preserve his modesty with his hands. “If you don’t like losing, you shouldn’t play cards. Those gentlemen are regular customers of mine. They played fair and square – and you lost. Now clear off.”

Turlough began to get to his feet to go to his friend’s aid, then hurriedly sat down again and hid behind his drink as the same group of guards who had been pursuing him earlier ran into the square and grabbed Caspar, dragging him off by his arms. “You’re under arrest, my lad,” declared the one-eyed captain. “Public nudity and being drunk in charge of a camel.”

”But I haven’t got a camel,” Turlough heard Caspar reply.

“Oh, trying to get off on a technicality, are you?” The Captain was having none of it. “Let me tell you, that won’t do you any good at all. You’re a villain and you’re going down.”

Turlough watched as his friend was dragged from the square. That was two of them in jail now, and he had been lucky to escape himself. He could only hope that the same fate hadn’t befallen Melchior and the Doctor.

He was relieved to hear a familiar voice at his side. “Ah, Turlough, what was all that fuss over there? Some drunk disturbing the peace? And what’s that wool doing on your face? Do take it off, you’ll draw attention to yourself.”

Turlough turned to see the Doctor with Melchior at his side, clearly looking pleased with themselves. Absent-mindedly, he complied with the Doctor’s request. “You didn’t see who that was, then? That was Caspar being taken off by the guard; and Balthazar was arrested earlier.”

They joined Turlough at his table and listened while he recounted the whole story, Melchior becoming increasingly exasperated as he heard how his friends had allowed themselves to fall foul of the guards. The Doctor tutted quietly and muttered to himself, “That does pose a problem. But anyway, Melchior and I have better news. Do tell Turlough, Melchior.”

He explained that after visiting no more than two or three establishments, they had managed to find what they had been looking for. One

particularly chatty hotel receptionist had told them how a young couple, from Nazareth he thought, having not been able to find a room in the town, had taken up residence in the barn at the back of that very establishment – and the young woman was heavily pregnant.

"So have you seen them?" Turlough asked.

"No, we came back to find Balthazar and Caspar. It wouldn't be fair on them to charge in without them. And we managed to find a replacement present, too." Melchior placed a small bottle on the table. "It's myrrh."

Turlough looked puzzled. "Myrrh? What's that? It looks like more incense."

Melchior didn't look too convinced of the idea himself. "Well, yes, it is – but it's different. It's used for embalming corpses."

"For *what*? And you think that's a good gift for a baby?" smiled Turlough, then noticed the Doctor silently motioning for him to be quiet.

"Look, it's fine," concluded Melchior. "At least, it'll have to do."

"If you say so," Turlough laughed. "Now, what are we going to do about Balthazar and Caspar?"

The Doctor spoke up. "Melchior, it's probably for the best if you stay here and keep out of sight. We already have two wise men in jail – we shouldn't risk the same thing happening to you. So, leave King Herod to me.

"Turlough, you and I shall go and see him and I'm sure we'll be able to persuade His Majesty to release our friends." Turlough knew from the look the Doctor gave him that he was anything but sure.

It had been a short camel ride to Jerusalem and the king's palace. Turlough never ceased to be astonished by the ease with which the Doctor always seemed to be able to talk his way into wherever he needed to be. On this occasion, however, it quickly became clear there was no possibility they were going to be granted an audience with the king himself.

After much insisting, the two friends were ushered through the palace gates with the promise they could speak with one of the king's officials. They were taken to a small, sparsely decorated room with a floor-length curtain at one end. After no more than five minutes, a slight, thin-faced figure emerged from behind the curtain and introduced himself as Manaen, a minor functionary in the administration of the King's Justice – albeit, he insisted, one with the power to decide the fate of prisoners.

"My Lord Manaen," began the Doctor, "You have here in custody two of my friends. Two young men who have behaved in a most unfortunate manner this afternoon, in the town of Bethlehem, and have been arrested by His Majesty's guards."

Manaen began looking through the two scrolls he was carrying, then seemed to find what he was searching for. He looked up at the Doctor. "Ah yes, I see. Balthazar and Caspar. Are they the friends you're talking about?"

The Doctor confirmed that this was so.

Manaen frowned. "And you've come here to plead for their release? So, who are you, then?"

"I'm the Doctor."

"A doctor, are you? I see, I see." The man nodded thoughtfully, all the while looking through the scrolls. "Well, Doctor, in the matter of the man Caspar, I don't see a problem with releasing him. His was a fairly minor public order offence and he would have been released tomorrow morning in any case."

The Doctor smiled in satisfaction. "Thank you, sir." However, Manaen's next words caused his smile to freeze.

"The case against Balthazar is a much more serious one. Potentially a matter of treason. Apparently, your friend was claiming he has a baby who is going to overthrow His Majesty the King. I hope you appreciate how serious that is."

"But he didn't say that at all," blurted out Turlough. "He hasn't even got a baby."

The Doctor gave Turlough an irritated look and shushed him urgently, but his words had caught the attention of the official.

"No, Doctor, let your servant talk. Were you there at the time, young man? Let me guess… were you the mysterious other man whom the guards chased around the market but lost?"

Turlough realised he might have made a serious error. "Well, I'm not his servant," he blustered, "but yes, I was there, and Balthazar definitely spoke no treason."

Manaen looked at him for a moment without saying anything, clearly weighing Turlough up.

The Doctor interjected, "Sir, my friends have travelled from the Far East. Like many people from distant lands, they and their countrymen believe many things which to us civilised people can seem rather strange. To make matters worse, these people are astrologers, more used to spending their time staring at the stars than to talking with ordinary people. I can assure you they have no interest in politics at all, never mind the politics of this kingdom."

Manaen considered for a moment, then screwed up the two scrolls and threw them onto the floor. "Very well, you have convinced me, Doctor. I will order the release of both your friends. Please wait outside the gate and they will be brought to you."

As Turlough and the Doctor were ushered from the room, the latter still thanking Manaen profusely, neither noticed a taller, more regal figure emerge from behind the curtain. Manaen bowed to the king.

"What do we make of that, then, Manaen?"

"Clearly, Your Majesty, the two prisoners and that young man are idiots who have no idea what's going on here."

"And what about that Doctor?"

"I'm not sure, Sire. He has – how can I put it? – a dangerous air about him."

"Hmm, you may be right. In any case, all this talk of a baby confirms the prophecies that we've been following for a while. This might turn out to be nothing, or it could be something more. Manaen, get some of your men to follow them. See where they go and who they meet. If there does turn out to be a baby – any baby at all – they are to kill it and them. We can't afford to take any chances over this."

Manaen, the king's chief advisor, nodded thoughtfully once more.

Having collected a somewhat quiet and shamefaced Caspar and Balthazar at the palace gate, the Doctor and Turlough brought the two former prisoners back to where Melchior was waiting, at a camping ground on the outskirts of Bethlehem. As night was falling, the group, complete once more, made their way together into the town. It was then that Caspar was hit by a revelation. "I haven't got a gift." He slapped his forehead in exasperation, "I lost the belt with the camel-head buckle." It was true, Melchior and Balthazar had the two varieties of incense to give to the baby, but Caspar had nothing. By now all the merchants had shut up shop for the night.

Taking pity on the young man, the Doctor rifled through his capacious pockets, emerging with a handful of coins. "Here, you can have these. I would say they're a good substitute for gold – some of them might even have some gold in them." He gave a smile as Caspar thanked him and pocketed the coins.

As the Doctor handed the 'gold' over to the young man, Turlough noticed the coins seemed to originate from any number of planets in any number of galaxies. "Let's hope they never turn up in the hands of some future archaeologist, hey Doctor?" he chuckled, but his friend seemed distracted and kept glancing furtively behind. "What is it?" he asked.

"Do you see those three men, Turlough? Half a street length behind us, in the shadows?"

"I see them."

"I'm sure the one on the left was the man who took us in to meet Manaen at the Royal Palace."

"And another of them is the Captain of the Guard who arrested me earlier," added Caspar.

"Come on," insisted Melchior, "let's speed up a bit and try to lose them."

After ten minutes of ducking and diving through the backstreets of the town, down dark alleyways that in other circumstances Turlough would have much rather avoided, the friends emerged onto a square. They paused and looked around but there was no sign they were still being followed. "Thank goodness for that," sighed Melchior. "And look, Doctor, that's the place." He pointed towards an imposing building on the other side of the square, with a large painted sign that proclaimed it to be The Fatted Calf Hotel and Restaurant.

No sooner had the friends entered through the grand portico, into the hotel lobby, than the unmistakeable sound of boots could be heard on the square outside. All hope that they had escaped their pursuers was lost. "Quickly," hissed the receptionist, "we don't want any trouble in here." He motioned for the group to go through behind the reception desk and into the kitchen, from where they went out into a small courtyard, off which they took shelter in what appeared to be a stable. Turlough and the Doctor watched through the crack of the closed door, hoping not to see the soldiers coming after them. From inside the hotel, they could hear the guards quizzing the receptionist about them and whether or not there were any babies currently staying in the hotel. Clearly the receptionist was used to being discreet because he revealed nothing and, after a moment, Turlough heard the guards leave to continue their search elsewhere.

"That was a close call, Doctor," he whispered, but the Doctor wasn't paying attention, having caught sight of the scene within the stable. Turlough turned to take it in. A plump, healthy-looking baby was lying in a feeding trough, gurgling happily, his mother and father looking down with pride on their newly born son. The stable's regular occupants, two donkeys, were chewing on hay, apparently unconcerned by this disruption to their routine. Melchior, Balthazar and Caspar, caught up entirely in the moment, had taken to their knees and were reverentially proffering their gifts, to the apparent mild consternation of the new parents.

The Doctor and Turlough watched in silence for a few moments, then slipped out without disturbing the scene and began to head back to the TARDIS. As they walked through the near-deserted streets, Turlough's attention was caught again by the comet, still bright in the sky, directly above the little town. He couldn't help but think that its tail seemed to point directly towards the stable from where they had come.

"That seems to have all turned out well in the end then, Doctor."

"I suppose it has," the Doctor laughed gently. "Although I can't help but think the events of tonight are going to lead to a great deal of trouble." He gave Turlough a look. "Oh and Turlough…"

"Yes, Doctor?"

"Merry Christmas!" ☰

FICTION BY MICHAEL CROUCH

The Last Shore

"Incredible!" exclaimed Krinolt, lowering his binoculars. "I would never have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. What do you think, son?"

Tuvold smiled broadly, his shorter arms and legs scrambling to inch forward and get closer. His father clamped a claw about the youngster's carapace and hauled him back.

"Patience, son," he said. "Let's understand what we're dealing with first."

Crarvo nodded. "Precisely why I brought you out here, Senator Krinolt," he said. "It is absolutely vital that we cease landmass destruction until we can study these animals and learn more about them."

Senator Krinolt was already shaking his head as he said, "Out of the question, Professor Crarvo. There may be enough time for us to round up a few specimens for study, but the expansion work must go on. The planet's population is rising fast. We must create new deep-water spaces to expand our kelp farms if we are to feed everyone."

"But, Senator," Crarvo cried out, his voice cracking to a desperate whimper, "a few specimens outside of their natural habitat will avail us nothing. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to observe our planet's ancestors in situ. You must see what a discovery of this magnitude represents?"

"I'm not an imbecile, Professor," the senator snapped, releasing his hold on Tuvold. "I've seen the fossils and the surviving skeletons of these things. The great apes were thought to have become extinct over a million years ago—"

"One hundred and eighty-five million years," the Professor interrupted.

"One hundred and eighty-five million years ago," the Senator acknowledged. "And yet, here they are, in one of the last unexplored landmasses on Perlazul. A lost species surviving into the modern age. It's historic, it's monumental, but this discovery cannot come at the expense of our own species."

The professor hung his head low, raising a tentacle to brush the tear running down his left eyestalk. "Then on the same day that we discover a lost species, we must also declare it vulnerable to extinction."

"Look on the bright side," the Senator quipped. "One hundred and eighty-five million years and they're still just a bunch of primates hanging about in the trees, while our crustacean ancestors returned to the sea, survived and prospered. The great apes have had their day. Perlazul belongs to us now."

It was at that moment that Krinolt felt a gut-wrenching realisation: his son had gone.

✦

The great coral doors to the hall were pushed open by the guard of honour and a fanfare of conch shells was sounded as the parliamentary assembly filed in. Councillor Krinolt followed sombrely. His heart felt heavy with the weight of loss and this last chance to

find his son. He put a gentle claw against Professor Crarvo's carapace and ushered him in.

"I'm just nervous," Crarvo was saying. "This is our final opportunity to save the island and I'm not used to addressing this many people."

Krinolt smiled. "If it helps, just imagine them without their shells on."

"Councillor, it's been five years since our discovery," Crarvo went on. "Do you really think we can change their minds and force a U-turn?"

Krinolt clacked his claws involuntarily and said tersely, "We have to. Not only have I lost my senatorship in my defence of it, I also lost my son there – or have you forgotten that?"

"Councillor Krinolt and Professor Crarvo," called out a voice from within the hall. There was another brief symphony of conch shells and the two crustaceans entered. Over two hundred other councillors, senators and governors sat in curved rows overlooking the stage. A hush descended as they waited for the address.

"No carapaces," whispered Krinolt and gave Crarvo a nudge and a wink. "Now, take a deep breath, speak slowly and make our case. With luck, the Senate will approve at least a ministerial visit to the island and we can save those apes and find my son."

✦

Gingerly, the Doctor trod along the sloping corridor, its metalled surfaces covered in years of corrosion and green slime. He bent down and wiped his fingers across the slime, bringing them to his nose and took in a deep sniff as Tegan and Turlough drew up alongside him.

"Decayed vegetable matter," he said, holding his slime-covered fingers up to the noses of his companions. They both winced and took a step back, happy to take the Doctor's word for it. "And oxidation in the vessel's fabric suggests it has been in a state of decay for some while. And either the gravitational alignment systems are on the blink or this vessel is lying at an angle. A crashed starship," he announced with boyish glee.

"I don't know what's so exciting about a heap of old metal," grumbled Tegan.

Turlough and the Doctor exchanged a knowing glance. "This 'heap of old metal', as you put it, was once an arc ship from Earth, Tegan," the Doctor said. "Seventy thousand light years away."

"An arc ship?" asked Tegan. "You mean like Noah's Ark?"

"Only instead of a flood, the population of your planet were fleeing the global devastation your species had inflicted upon their own world, thereby making their own ability to survive there intolerable."

"So what is it doing out here?" she asked.

"Not a lot," smirked Turlough. She ignored his sarcasm and looked to the Doctor.

"A long time ago, Earth sent arc ships full of people and other terrestrial lifeforms to seek out new worlds to inhabit. They spread out far and wide. Some made it, some didn't."

"And I'm guessing this one didn't," said Tegan.

"Not necessarily," the Doctor replied. "The ship is decayed but the main structure looks like it didn't suffer too badly on crashing. There may have been survivors."

It was Turlough's turn to grimace. "And I suppose that means you want to go out and take a look around?" he asked with a distinct lack of enthusiasm.

The Doctor placed his Panama hat on his head and said, "If you're not keen on exploring, why don't you stay here and see if you can get the ship's systems back online? The data it holds might tell us something." Then turning to Tegan, he smiled broadly and said, "Shall we go?"

✦

Tegan followed the Doctor over the forest paths for about half an hour before he stopped and declared that, despite the tall

forest canopy and limited field of view, they were near the coast. "The level of ozone and scent of saline are unmistakable," he said.

"I wouldn't mind a short beach holiday," Tegan mused. "Although with you around I don't imagine it would stay quiet for very long."

The Doctor feigned a look of hurt.

"Brave heart, Tegan. This area doesn't appear to be densely populated and that craft came down a long, long time ago. Chances are there's no-one living around here at all."

At that moment the pair were startled by a sudden rush of movement from the undergrowth. They found themselves surrounded by six men armed with clubs and spears. They looked hostile, frightened even, although Tegan was grateful they didn't seem to be attacking them.

"Oh great," she said. "You were saying, Doctor?"

The Doctor gave a little shrug and tried to smile apologetically.

"Hmmm, yes, it looks like there are inhabitants after all."

"Don't move or I'll kill you," said the leader of the group, thrusting a spear within touching distance for emphasis. "Who are you? Where do you come from?" For all his bravado, the man looked terrified, Tegan thought, almost as if they'd never seen other people before.

"Please, we mean you no harm," the Doctor tried to reassure them, holding his palms out in the universal gesture of peace. He was relieved to see the men relax slightly and back off.

"We're … we're from an … another province," Tegan pleaded.

"Liar!" the leader snapped. "This is an island. There are no other provinces, only the sea."

"Well then, we come from overseas," Tegan replied half-heartedly. Truth be told, even she wouldn't buy that.

✦

Turlough had been clambering through the crashed spacecraft for some time, carefully scrutinising the hull integrity and internal infrastructure. He theorised from the damage that the landing was unplanned and probably perilous, but somehow the pilot had successfully landed her in one piece. It would never fly again, but much of what it carried was more or less functional given a bit of repair work.

Eventually Turlough's exploration brought him towards the rear of the craft, most of it buried into the ground so that it sat at a steep angle. He was in a huge cargo bay. The hull walls didn't appear to have suffered too much damage and the contents were securely locked in place. He ventured in further for a closer inspection.

Some of the technology here was not so different from that of Trion, his own world. There was hydroponic equipment, cellular generators, tractors and large-scale propagators. The people who had landed on this world clearly came with the intention of farming. What's more, the nuclear core of the ship that would have fed this technology was uncompromised and held enough power to run them for 500 years or so. All Turlough needed to do was a few patchwork repairs, a bit of hoisting and moving, re-cable the power supply and switch on. Within a day or so this ship could be synthesising enough crops to feed a population of around 5,000. Scaled up, there was no reason why it couldn't feed the entire planet.

"Well I might as well get on with it," he said to himself, rolling up his sleeves.

He was wondering if the Doctor and Tegan were having as much fun as he was when a movement and flicker of daylight caught his eye. To the rear of the hold he saw an emergency escape hatch flapping in the breeze. It wasn't large, just three of four feet square, and every time a breeze caught it, it moved and creaked and he could see the forest canopy and the sky. He also caught a strong whiff of something, like

the ocean, perhaps fish or seaweed. He surmised that the craft had landed close to the sea, but as he crawled through the dark interior towards the flap, he began to realise the smell was coming from inside the craft.

He found a working light panel and switched it on. What he saw was a large round area, matted with greenery, some of it damp and turning slimy. There was a large tank filled with water close by and in the middle was an arrangement of rocks forming a kind of bowl inside which was saline water and bundles of thick kelp. It puzzled Turlough why someone would go to this much trouble to harvest seaweed when the ship still had functioning farming equipment that could do the job so much more easily, and with a thousandfold increase in production. Perhaps the people who had crashed here had simply lost their memory of how these things worked. Or someone else had found it but didn't understand how it all operated.

Turlough scanned the area thoroughly, looking for any movement or other sign of life, but there was none. Whoever was responsible for this was either long gone or out. He gulped and returned tentatively to his previous work, to take his mind off his fear if nothing else.

✦

"Is this your doing?" asked the tribe leader.

The Doctor and Tegan looked about the small encampment they had been brought too. There were a number of huts and a fire pit, all made from the resources to hand in the forest. The locals wore dresses and tunics made from dyed plant fibres creating a kind of soft sackcloth material. They were certainly a pre-technological society but not an entirely primitive one. A few children ran about and played, and the atmosphere seemed to be generally cordial and happy – except, that is, for their immediate company.

Below them was a large pool about a hundred feet long by twenty wide. Huge wooden posts were dug in along each side and criss-crossed with a series of beams on each of which hung large sheets of dark, green kelp. Above the frame, which was around thirty feet high, was a kind of tarpaulin roof hanging like a hammock. At the far end, an Archimedes Screw-like construction rotated, drawing water up onto the tarpaulin where it pooled, slowly seeped through and dropped like non-stop rain. The Doctor was marvelling at the ingenuity, know-how and ambition of what was essentially a multi-storey kelp farm. A ready supply of protein-rich food grown in multiple layers to maximise the crop and feed the most number of people. For Tegan, it might have been truly breathtaking had it not been for several lower sections covering about a tenth of the pool that had been badly damaged, the posts askew, the frame leaning precipitously, denuded of whatever kelp had been growing there. The pond bank around it showed signs of removal, troughs of wet earth torn up as something had pulled the kelp away.

"Well?" the leader snapped.

"No, no, this is not our doing," the Doctor said. "We have plentiful food resources of our own, we'd have no need to raid yours."

The tribespeople close by looked at the newcomer with suspicion. He was strangely dressed and had hair of a kind they had never seen on another human, straight and blond. All the tribal people had dark hair, thick and wavy. The leader's face softened and he looked uncertainly to his people.

"I believe him," he said. "But if these people are not the one's raiding our farm, then who is?"

Tegan stepped forwards a little nervously and leaned over the edge of the pond. She pointed to some marks in the damp earth around it.

"Could these tracks here be a clue?" she said. She looked anxiously at the Doctor, hoping he'd have a positive answer.

"You know, Tegan, I think you might be right. Those look like claw marks." He knelt down for a closer inspection, lifting up bits of damaged kelp and examining the edges closely. "Yes. These look as if they've been cut through with something sharp."

"Scissors? A knife?" Tegan suggested.

"I was thinking pincers," said the Doctor.

There was an immediate ripple of response from the tribespeople gathered about them. They exchanged looks and muttered to one another, nodding, fear in their faces.

"There have been stories of monsters that come up from the sea," the leader said. "They wear armour and have claws and pincers which they use to devour their victims." There was a collective shudder from the group.

The Doctor smiled benignly. "That's very interesting, but I really don't think you have to worry about them devouring you. I'm pretty certain they're plant eaters."

"How do you know?" asked Tegan.

"If something like that can raid a village without being seen, a village full of human bodies to pick from, why would it go for the kelp?"

Tegan shrugged. "I suppose that makes sense," she said.

At that moment there was a sudden roar in the air and the villagers ran in panic to their huts, certain some monster had come to harvest them. Tegan looked up in alarm and turned to the Doctor, sure he would know the cause.

"Some kind of airborne vehicle," the Doctor said. "I don't think this tribe are the only people living on this planet."

✦

Turlough was on the cusp of connecting up the power supply to the newly repaired hydroponic tanks when he heard the distant rumble of an engine. It had been several hours since there had been any sound other than the clanking and creaking of the ship's outer body and the equipment he was working with, and the hairs on the back of his neck bristled. The vessel's fragile structure rattled and clanged louder as whatever it was passed low overhead and came down a mile or two away. He made a mental note to go and check it out as soon as he had finished repairs.

In a dark corner of the bay, a slight movement caught Turlough's eye. It was accompanied by a muffled, clacking sound, like shells being tapped together. There was another sound, a whimpering.

"Hello?" Turlough called out. "There's no need to be afraid. My name is Turlough. I mean you no harm." He clutched a metal bar behind his back just in case he was mistaken.

He waited. Still the quiet whimpering but no movement. Turlough kept still and stood in the light so whatever it was could get a look at him and hopefully gain some reassurance.

The ploy worked. Something rose up slowly, cautiously, from behind one of the giant packing crates, something with an exoskeleton, claws and a pair of staring eyes on stalks.

"I'm Turlough. Please don't be afraid. I want to help."

The creature, not unlike a crab on Earth, was no taller than a young human. It clawed its way up onto the crate where it could be seen, its eyes never moving from Turlough. He was surprised to see that at the base of the eyestalks, tucked into the shell, was a flesh-like face with gills and a mouth. Its expression betrayed its terror.

Turlough stepped forward slowly and held out an open hand in friendship.

"I'm a friend," he said softly. "Can you tell me who you are?" He wasn't certain the creature could communicate with him, but from his travels with the Doctor he learned it didn't hurt to presume. To Turlough's astonishment, the creature replied.

"My name is Tuvold."

✦

The panic was instant. Men, women, children were shouting, screaming, running, hiding, seeking any refuge from the roar of the monster that tore across the sky. The Doctor and Tegan were trying desperately to calm everyone and reassure them but they quickly discovered there's no way to mollify a people in the midst of fear-induced hysteria.

"We'll have to let them settle their fears in their own good time," the Doctor said. "In the meantime, Tegan, I think you and I should go and meet our fellow travellers."

Tegan huffed but she knew the Doctor well enough not to argue with him when his mind was set and, on the face of it, there was probably little else they could do for the moment.

Not too far away, the strange craft that looked like a cross between a tank and a boat with a pair of short stubby wings sped across the forest canopy as Crarvo wrestled with the controls, looking out for a clearing to put down in.

"Not too low," Councillor Krinolt called out. "We don't want to crash into the trees. We don't need a stampede of monkeys, either."

"Not monkeys," Professor Crarvo snapped. "Bipeds, yes, but they have clearly out-evolved their ape ancestors."

"Whatever, just land this thing. I need to find my son before the terraformers get here and destroy this island forever." If my son is still alive, he thought, but he couldn't bring himself to suggest it out loud. It had been five years. Realistically, what were the chances?

The roar of the vessel's engines dropped to a low whine as it descended into a clearing a couple of klicks from the village they had spotted as they passed over. The two stubby wings drew back up onto the sides of the craft and a hatch slid open at the front. A moment later, Krinolt and Crarvo stepped out onto solid ground.

"Hello, I'm the Doctor and this my friend, Tegan. How do you do?" The Doctor greeted them with a slight bow and a doff of his hat.

Tegan smiled, drinking in the surprise and astonishment writ large on what appeared to be their faces, trying not to react too adversely to their crustacean appearance.

"P-p-professor C-crarvo? How is this possible? Surely the apes cannot have evolved so far as to have developed language?"

"It would seem that they have, Councillor Krinolt. See how they dress themselves. Their manner. Remarkable."

The two pairs of round eyes on stalks standing up from a carapace and scrutinising them closely felt just a little bit yuck to Tegan. She grimaced and tried to hide her fear.

"Professor Crarvo, Councillor Krinolt," said the Doctor. "We are not actually inhabitants of your world, although we did meet some of the locals earlier. Not that I think they're indigenous either." He smiled as the two crustaceans tried to take in what they were witnessing. They gazed at him intently, hanging on his every word. The Doctor loved an audience. "I'm rather surprised that you haven't encountered them before. Perhaps I could introduce you?"

"We have been aware of their presence for some time," said Professor Crarvo, "but—"

"Enough, Professor," Krinolt snapped. "There's no time for that now."

Tegan was watching the Doctor, trying to anticipate his next move. Here they were in a first encounter with two intelligent crabs, and a village load of primitive humans running and hiding, scared for their lives. And there was something else. The Doctor had sensed it as well. A rumbling from below their feet. Something big and heavy was in motion nearby.

"I think our troubles are only just beginning," said the Doctor.

"Rabbits!" said Tegan.

At first it felt like an earthquake. The ground rumbled and a noise like thunder seemed to emanate from below the surface. The next moment there came the deafening crashing of

waves as the sea along the shoreline began to boil and bubble into a raging torrent. A shape emerged from the foam, a mechanical beast on two enormous legs and from the sides sprang six robotic limbs with various implements attached: drills, shovels, grabbers, claws, pulling and tearing at the land as it drew up out of the sea. The entire thing stood about four storeys high and it wasn't alone.

"There are three more coming up behind it," yelled Tegan. "Doctor, what are those things?"

"Terraformers," said the Doctor, appalled at what he was seeing but vaguely fascinated by the intelligence that could have devised such a thing. "I think they intend to destroy this island and have the land reclaimed by the ocean. They're finishing the job of turning this planet into an ocean world."

"Finishing the job?" queried Tegan. "You mean this whole planet has been manufactured by those things?"

"Not those things but the creatures operating them," the Doctor said.

"Don't they care about the humans they're going to destroy in the process?"

The Doctor was shaking his head and looking around, frantically trying to see some way that he might stop things progressing, or at least put a pause on events.

"I don't imagine humans are high on their list of priorities, Tegan. Councillor Krinolt, Professor Crarvo, I assume these things are the work of your people? Can you call them to stop their progress, at least temporarily?"

Professor Crarvo's head hung low as he replied. "I have been petitioning the government to suspend land clearance for years but they do not listen. Building new homes, providing bigger lagoons for food production to feed our planet's populace is all that concerns them."

"As a Senator I might have had some sway," said Krinolt, "but since my demotion to Councillor my word carries little weight."

"In that case, I have something that might help," called out a voice from the tree cover.

"Turlough!" exclaimed Tegan. The group watched as another figure stepped forward from behind him, a small crab-like figure whom Krinolt recognised immediately.

"Tuvold!"

"Your son has been giving me the lowdown on the situation here," said Turlough as father and son embraced, their carapaces clacking. "And Doctor, I managed to get some of the ship's farming equipment working again. There's enough tech on that vessel to feed thousands if it's utilised properly."

"Excellent work, Turlough," said the Doctor proudly. "You can tell me all about it while I try and communicate with those things. Councillor Krinolt, I could do with your help, please."

Krinolt let go of his son and stared at him for a moment, almost unable to believe that this was really happening. Many had told him to give up the search, spelling out the odds of survival, sometimes making him doubt his own conviction. But he had held fast and his dream had come true. His son was alive and well and they were reunited at last.

"Councillor, there really isn't much time left to waste," the Doctor called out.

✦

The four mechanical beasts loomed above the forest canopy, their claws and grapples pulling and tearing at the rock and the forest, uprooting trees with ease as the land beneath lay hollowed and barren. Apart from the human colonists, no birds or animals were to be seen fleeing the carnage, presumably already rendered extinct through previous terraforming activities, the Doctor thought.

He ran straight towards them, shouting and waving for them to stop, seemingly with no regard for the extreme danger into which he was placing himself. Krinolt watched with a mixture

of awe and wonder. Who knew the great apes were capable of such bold acts? Perhaps Professor Crarvo had been right all along and there were important things to be learned from these primitive creatures. The multi-storey farming platform had been truly inspired and Krinolt could see it as a solution to his planet's food crisis were the idea to be scaled up, but they would need a powerful source of energy to run such a vast operation. The boy-ape, Turlough, who had rescued his son and returned him, had spoken of just such a source elsewhere in the jungle, one that the apes of the past had brought with them.

Krinolt became aware of all the screaming ahead of him, the noise waking him from his thoughts. He saw Tuvold scuttling forwards to join the Doctor and his friends, the four of them standing resolute before the onslaught of the giant terraformers. He saw the huge robotic foot of the leader rise up and start to come back down, threatening to crush the protesters underfoot like shrimp. He had only just had his son returned to him after so long and the panic and ache in his heart was too much to bear.

"No! Cease this activity at one," he cried out, racing forwards to put himself in front of his son and immediately below the descending foot. The pilot of the lead terraformer recognised the dignitary immediately and there was a tremendous grinding noise as pistons ground to a halt and the entire mechanical beast became still, its foot frozen mid-descent. Within seconds, the other three terraformers had stopped in their tracks too.

"I may not have the political power I once held," said Krinolt to the Doctor, "but my status still stands for something. Be assured, all future terraforming of this island will cease."

"Not before time," the Doctor replied, letting out a long sigh of relief. "The humans your race were about to wipe out may just hold the key to your population's survival."

Krinolt bowed his head, acknowledging the truth and feeling the shame of the atrocity that had almost occurred here. He caught the smirk on Professor Crarvo's face but ignored it. He didn't need to hear the words 'I told you so'.

✦

"So what will happen now?" asked Tegan as the TARDIS crew began to retrace their steps through the forest.

"With Turlough's work on the old starship power supply, there should be more than enough power to maintain all of the machinery and farming platforms they took from the ship's hold for some considerable time," the Doctor said. "The increase in yield will be phenomenal, enough to feed the whole of Perlazul."

"Habitat loss is a crucial issue for many species on many worlds," said Turlough. "Population growth, exploitation and food production have brought many to the brink of collapse."

"It does seem to be a pattern in species development," the Doctor agreed. "Although on this occasion, it makes a change for the humans to be losing habitat and facing extinction rather than being the cause of it." He and Turlough exchanged looks and smiled, but if Tegan felt the jibe being aimed in her direction then she didn't show it.

"Can we get away from here now and find somewhere more peaceful to go?" she said.

"Preferably somewhere with something to eat that doesn't come from the sea," Turlough agreed.

The Doctor smiled, placed his hat back on his head and led the way back to the TARDIS. ☰

FICTION BY NATHAN MULLINS

The Artefact

A ship of Mondasian origin was heading towards Earth.

"Leader," said a Cyberman, standing by the controls. "We are now in stealth mode, undetectable to radar."

As the ship approached the planet, a signal was received.

"Weapon identified."

"Where?" asked the Cyber Leader.

The Cyberman hit a key on the console and a holographic view of a city came up.

"There," said the Cyberman, stubbing its silver index finger on the image of a building being studied from all angles.

The Kensington Museum was built from red brick and Portland stone, its style influenced by the Italian Renaissance, with the addition of terracotta for its decorative flourishes. Its courtyard, a square at the heart of the museum, was edged with fig trees. The building was filled with all manner of things, from wall tiles to furnishings, mosaics and architecture, paintings and sculpture, as well as gold and silver.

Opening hours were between 10am and 6pm, when all but three security personnel worked the night shift. They were Robert Bishop, Simon King and Jess Jones.

Robert Bishop had no prior experience of working in security. This was all new to him, and he enjoyed coming in to work in the evenings when everyone else had gone home.

Simon King had twelve years' worth of experience in security and had worked in a number of similar organisations. He loved his job and had a family to provide for.

Jess Jones had a more senior role, working in the control room. She oversaw everything via the CCTV system across the entire museum. If something were to happen, unexpectedly, she would know before anyone else did.

Jess watched the monitors absent-mindedly. Everything was as it was supposed to be, when suddenly a sound filled the control room. She studied the monitors again.

"Control to security detail, are you receiving me?" she called into a walkie-talkie.

"Go ahead, Control," answered Robert earnestly, pausing in his patrol.

"Go to the Silver Gallery immediately."

"Received."

Simon had overheard the message and also responded. Jess arrived after them, shielding her eyes just as they were doing.

"What is it?" blurted Robert.

"I've no idea," answered Jess. "It was emitting some sort of signal."

They stood over a case in the Silver Gallery. Its contents were glowing brightly. The artefact itself was a silver disk with protruding nodules that flashed repeatedly. The curators had been perplexed over its origins and had placed it in the Silver Gallery until further investigations could be carried out.

"I've informed the authorities. A UNIT task force has been dispatched."

"But that's the military, isn't it?" asked Robert, surprised by this development.

"Yes, they picked up the signal too," said Jess. "According to them, this goes beyond anything of earthly origin."

At that moment the entire building trembled. They each grabbed hold of whatever they could to stay upright.

"What was that?" panicked Simon.

They hurried over to the windows, looking out onto the courtyard below. There, at its centre was a spaceship, straight out of a science-fiction movie. It was silver and elongated, with lights all over. A hatch opened and the security team's eyes widened.

"What the actual…" Jess stopped herself from swearing.

"What are they?" uttered Robert, as tall silver metallic figures emerged from the craft.

"We'd best pray that UNIT turns up fast," said Simon, "or else we're done for."

The hatch remained open as the creatures gained access to the galleries, smashing windows to free themselves from the courtyard.

"I think it's pretty clear they're headed here," said Jess. "We've gotta get out of here."

"And the collection?" uttered Simon.

"We don't have weapons, and you can bet that they do."

They turned to run, the lights from their torches bouncing off every case in the vicinity, but in the distance they could hear the heavy footsteps of the silver men, and they were getting closer.

"Hide!" shrieked Jess.

They ducked low behind a case and watched as a group of silver men marched past.

"That was close," breathed Robert.

"I'm not going to sit here and watch them escape with the artefact," said Simon. "I'm going to stop them."

"You don't stand a chance," said Robert.

"You do what you want to," said Jess.

She and Robert made a run for it. Instead of going with them, Simon followed the Cybermen back in the direction of the artefact.

✦

Turlough slumped on the console while the Doctor meddled beneath it. They were still mulling over their last adventure.

"Why did Tegan have to run off like that?" Turlough huffed.

"She was tired of it all," said the Doctor, crawling out from under the console, "and I don't hold it against her. After everything we've been through, I understand the need for whatever normality looks like from Tegan's perspective, and I realise this isn't it."

But Turlough was listening to something else. "Doctor, you can hear that, right?"

The signal the artefact was transmitting had now breached the TARDIS.

"Yes," he answered, "though it's faint. We'll trace it to its source."

Within a few moments, the TARDIS landed. Stepping out, the Doctor and Turlough clocked a museum map on the security control desk in front of them, which read 'The Kensington Museum' and was dated 1984.

The Doctor observed the bank of monitors. One caught his eye. It showed a group of Cybermen standing over a case, but he couldn't see what it contained.

✦

"Hold it right there!" yelled Simon, as the Cybermen looked around.

"Who are you?" bellowed the tallest of them, distinguished by black detailing on its square-sided head.

"I'm responsible for the collection."

"Then if you do not wish to die tonight, you will open this case for us or be destroyed."

"You would kill me if I refused to cooperate?"

"We would."

Simon thought about running. He thought about what his colleagues had said. How stupid he felt now, not knowing what action to take.

"What do you want with the artefact?"

All the time, he held down a switch on his radio, broadcasting the conversation he was having. Jess could hear it clearly over her walkie-talkie and, having escaped with Robert by her side, they'd run into the UNIT taskforce, who were also listening in.

"The artefact, as you call it, is a weapon of mass destruction. We will use it as it was intended to be used."

"No, you won't," shrieked Simon.

He lunged at the nearest Cyberman but was overpowered in seconds. His screams were heard over the radio.

The Doctor had also overheard everything, as all radio calls passed through the security control room.

"We must stop them," he said determinedly.

"And we will," said a voice behind them, one the Doctor recognised.

"Harry Sullivan, my dear fellow!"

Harry stepped forward. "Doctor? Is it you?" He was guessing, but the tall blue form of the TARDIS gave him a clue.

"Indeed," replied the Doctor, rushing to shake his hand.

"You've changed your appearance again."

"That's regeneration for you," he smiled.

"I dare say I approve of your wardrobe this time around. You always had a flair for eccentricity, didn't you."

The Doctor blushed, thanking him for the compliments, and introduced him to Turlough.

"What are you doing here?"

"The Brigadier sent me down with a few UNIT chaps. The moment he heard the signal this artefact is transmitting, he put me in touch with the security detail in charge here. And now that I know that it's the Cybermen, I think he was right to put me on the case."

"I would never have expected to see you leading your own taskforce."

Harry simply beamed.

"How is Alistair these days?" asked the Doctor.

"Busy," replied Harry. "If he's not in Geneva, he's in Peru."

"Um, a man's just been murdered," Turlough reminded them.

"My men have taken explosive charges aboard the Cyber ship," explained Harry. "We'll detonate them once it has left Earth."

"Leaving isn't what the Cybermen have in mind," the Doctor informed him.

"What do you mean, Doctor?" asked Harry.

"As soon as they get their hands on the artefact, they'll use it without a moment's hesitation. I know the Cybermen, as do you Harry. They're ruthless."

"Well, old boy, what do you advise? I can't authorise a mass evacuation of London, can I?"

"I suggest you get acquainted with the floorplan," said the Doctor. "Around the corner from the Silver Gallery is one filled with gold. And if you remember, Harry, that's what the Cybermen are susceptible to."

"But Doctor, we can't just make use of the collection as we please. It's priceless."

"Harry, if we don't, there will be nothing of any value left on Earth."

Harry frowned. "Point made." He turned to the two security personnel, who had been waiting in the doorway. "I'll need keys to access what gold there is in the museum's collection."

"It's my handprint you'll need," said Jess, "so I'll have to go down there with you."

"Are there many layers of security regarding each individual object?" asked Turlough, as they made their way from the security control room and out into the museum's corridors.

"Seven stages altogether," said Robert, "so gaining access will be no easy feat."

"Excuse me, sir," said a UNIT soldier, stepping up to Harry and saluting. "The charges have been placed aboard the Cyber ship."

"Good work, corporal." Turning to the Doctor, Harry asked, "What's the plan?"

"We need to create a distraction."

"Right," agreed Turlough. "Draw the Cybermen away from the artefact. But how?"

"How about the ship?" suggested Harry.

"Yes," agreed the Doctor.

Using Simon's hand-print to unlock the first level of security, the Cybermen quickly realised there was more to do than they'd anticipated.

"Level one security protocol is now obsolete," said a Cyberman, busying itself with the codes.

"Phases two and three of security protocols are now offline," said the Cyberman, reporting to the Cyber Leader.

"Excellent," he said approvingly. "Soon the Cyber race will be victorious."

The Doctor and his friends were led by Jess and Robert to the unguarded spaceship in the courtyard. A couple of UNIT soldiers stood watch.

"How are we going to get the Cybermen's attention?" asked Harry, looking about twitchily.

"Oh, just watch me," said the Doctor.

They slipped in through the open hatch and the Doctor began pushing all sorts of buttons and pulling wires from control panels, until an alarm sounded.

"That's the noise we heard aboard the TARDIS," said Turlough.

"That's the Cyber frequency for distress, used by the artefact to summon the Cybermen to Earth. Now their ship is calling to be rescued."

"Now, as soon as the Cybermen are aboard, blow those charges," the Doctor said as they all disembarked. "Get to a place of safety – and keep an eye out."

"Right," said Harry, "leave it with me." He briefed his men and ordered them to prepare themselves. They scattered, keeping watch from the safety of the sculpture gallery, as Cybermen approached the courtyard, surveying their ship.

After they'd boarded, Harry carried out the demolition job. There was a colossal explosion, which shook those Cybermen that had stayed in the Silver Gallery to tackle the security protocols.

The Doctor, Turlough, Jess and Robert had also been thrown off their feet. The security protocols of every case within the Gold Gallery now read as disengaged.

"Looks like you won't be needing my help after all," said Jess.

"Will the blast have rendered the security of all cases useless?" asked Turlough.

"Hopefully not," said Robert.

"But with that in mind," said the Doctor, "it's as good a reason as any to hurry things along."

Harry appeared with his men, who looked pleased at having destroyed the Cyber ship.

"Did we do well, Doctor?" he asked, cheerily.

"Yes, Harry, but there are at least two Cybermen still at large. Once the artefact is theirs, they'll destroy this world as they always intended to. That's why the gold you see around you must be used to our advantage. I trust I can count on you and your men to make good use of what we have available to us?"

"Of course, Doctor," said Harry, knowing precisely what he had in mind.

"What will you do, Doctor?" asked Jess.

"Have a word with the Cyber Leader." He picked up a chunk of gold that lay on the gallery floor. "Failing that, take action against them, and get even with them – for Adric."

"Security levels four, five and six surpassed, Leader," said the last remaining Cyber trooper, whose task it was to access the artefact.

"One more phase until it is complete," said the Cyber Leader calculatingly.

"That's what you think," came a breathy voice, one the Cyber Leader recognised.

"Doctor!"

"Cyber Leader … how unfortunate we should meet again so soon."

"This time, Doctor, the human race has provided us with the weapon to destroy them."

"Yes, well, nobody's perfect. The explosion you may have felt was your ship going up in smoke, along with a few Cyber units for good measure. Sorry. Well, no, not sorry, actually."

"It is unimportant," countered the Leader.

"You don't care that by activating the weapon, you'll destroy yourselves?"

"In destroying this world, the Cyber race eliminates its oldest enemy – the Doctor."

"I'm afraid I've no plans to go quietly."

He lunged for the Leader, rubbing the gold into its chest unit. Struggling, he was thrown off and he darted back into the corridor.

"Continue working on the security protocols," ordered the Cyber Leader, then started in pursuit of the Doctor.

✦

Harry and his men, assisted by Turlough, Jess and Robert, broke off parts of the gold in the museum's collection.

"We need pea-sized gold bullets we can fire from our assault rifles," instructed Harry.

They chiselled away at the gold cups and saucers, grinding them down into small pieces.

When the Doctor entered the gallery, breathing heavily, the troops sprang into action. The Cyber Leader followed after him and Harry ordered his men to fire. The Cyber-suit was shredded by gold pellets, piercing its armour. The Leader clutched at the Doctor's lapels before falling to the floor.

"Oh, well done, everyone," said the Doctor. "To the artefact, quickly, there's still a Cyberman attempting to crack the security codes!"

They stormed through the corridors, hopping over the body of the Cyber Leader oozing gold liquid. When they reached the artefact's case, they found its contents had gone.

"Somebody, turn on the lights!" commanded the Doctor.

"They're on an automatic timer," replied Jess, "so no can do."

"Everyone, spread out," ordered Harry as the soldiers began their search.

"There!" said Turlough, catching a glimmer of silver armour in the moonlight streaming in through the windows.

"Fire!" yelled Harry.

Shots rang out as the soldiers approached their target.

"Weapon primed," uttered the Cyberman, who'd taken several hits. As it was about to activate the device, sparks enveloped the silver giant and it exploded.

Harry rescued the artefact from the charred remains of the Cyberman. "I think this will be coming with me."

"Think again, Harry," said the Doctor. "All this device has to do is signal to another group of Cybermen that happens to pass by and we'll be back at square one. I'll dispose of it properly."

"I'm not sure what the museum Director will make of all this in the morning," said Jess, surveying the damage done to the collection.

"I'm sure he'll be grateful to have a job," said Turlough.

"Heck, if it wasn't for the gold, we'd never have stopped the Cybermen," reasoned Robert.

"And furthermore, I'm very grateful to the Brig for putting you in charge, Harry," said the Doctor. "If nothing else, it's nice to catch up with familiar faces – the Cybermen not included!" ☰

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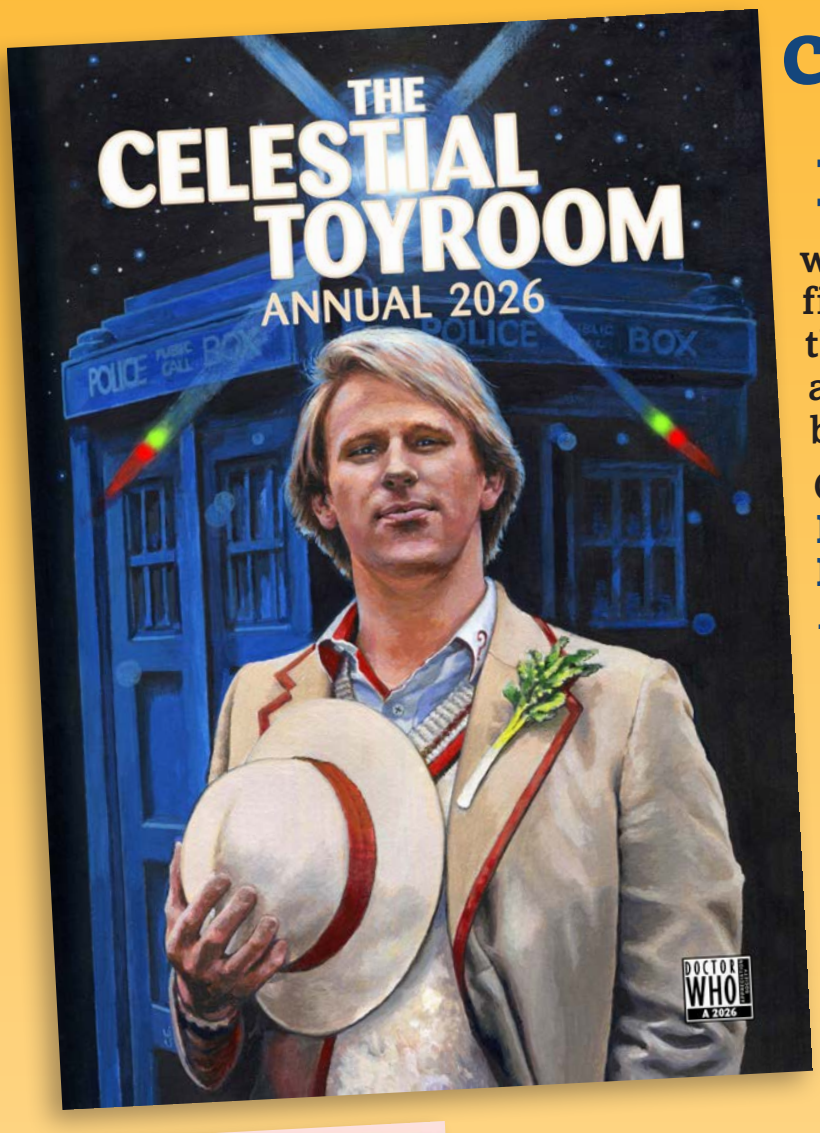

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