



VERA STRONG

With friends like these... Ryan finds himself in double trouble
Doctor Who, BBC1 7.30pm

7.00pm Mighty Morphin Flower Arrangers

In *The Grass is Always Greener*
 The Arrangers find themselves at the mercy of giant radioactive crabgrass.

7.30pm Doctor Who

Starring Jon Thaw

In *Dead Ringers*

Part one of a four-part adventure by
 EDWARD CHAN and
 BRAD CONNORS

Episode one:

Grave Consequences

There isn't time for tourism when the Doctor, Sue and Ryan land in 1994 Minneapolis. They stumble upon a morbid plot where no one is as they seem. As the TARDIS crew struggle to find the truth that's out there, they learn that they can trust no one.

The Doctor..... JON THAW
 Sue Novak..... CATHLEEN TURNER
 Ryan Parnel..... JON RITTER
 Malcolm Varner..... ED ASNER
 Mr. Will..... MATTHEW FREWER
 Erin Varner..... MEGAN FOLLOWS
 Yorik Christopherson DAVID BANKS
 Phoenix Moribund..... BOB HOSKINS
 Stephanie Winters..... SARAH POLLY
 Wendy Jones. CHARISMA CARPENTER
 George..... TED KNIGHT
 Martha..... SUSAN ENGEL
 Doctor Polson. WILLIAM SHATNER
 Doctor Prophin..... LARRY LINVILLE
 Vaughan..... QUENTIN TARANTINO
 Colonel Jameson..... TOM BLENKARN
 Colonel Parker..... HARRY MORGAN
 Incidental Music DAVID BELL
 VFX Producer RON THORTON &
 FOUNDATION IMAGING
 Costume Designer JAMES ACHESON
 Stunt Coordinator RAY AUSTIN
 Script Editor CHRIS KOCHER ●
 Designer MARTIN F. PROCTOR ●
 Producers JOSS WHEDON and
 DAVID GREENWALT
 Executive Producer TERRY NATION
 Director ROB BOWMAN

● True credit

■ FEATURE: page 18

☎ CEEFAX SUBTITLES

LETTERS

The Shattered Clocks was an unsatisfying conclusion to the trilogy begun in *Twilight's Last Gleaming*. It feels like nothing more than a lot of running around, with only the last twenty minutes bearing any real relevance to the plot. On the other hand, the unexpected return of Random Chance is welcome, and the new development in Ryan and Sue's relationship bodes well for a new dynamic in the program.

Shannon Sullivan
 St. John's, NF
 CANADA

The Shattered Clocks is no less than the fourth story in TC to be set mostly in a nightmare/VR world. A surreal story is hard to write, for the author has to provide us with not only the story line but with the logic by which the story progresses. Nobody's done that yet, so the VR stories of TC tend to be a bit plodding, or a bit confused, or (in the case of *Jabberwocky Dreams*) reliant on the sheer force of the imagery to push the plot along. *Shattered Clocks* doesn't create a logic either, but it gets by without one better than most stories. The ruined Gallifrey of *The Shattered Clocks* is genuinely nightmarish, and it gets inside your head. Wow. As Jung would say: Spooky.

Erin Noteboom
 Omaha, NE USA

8.20pm Who in Review

Replays *Pyramids of Mars*

Starring Bom Taker

The Doctor and Sara arrive on an alien planet and are immediately confronted with the mystery of Egyptian-style pyramids completely made out of a popular Earth candy bar.

SERIAL 9J

The new co-producers of *Doctor Who* must have felt themselves baptised by fire, for on their first day on the job, the story that should have filled the third position of the season, *Andromeda Sunset*, collapsed, and a replacement was needed. *Dead Ringers* was hastily composed to fill in the gap and, fortunately, enough time remained following the filming of *The Shattered Clocks* and *Yesterday's Avatar*. The writing team of Edward Chan and Brad Connors were commissioned for this story, but the names were obvious pseudonyms. Some speculated that Josh Whedon and David Greenbelt had "pulled a *City of Death*".

The cast and crew flew to Minneapolis for four weeks in June to produce this eight-part (traditional measurement) tale. Upon the debut, controversy erupted, with some complaining about the heightened level of violence, combined with the humorous approach of the story. Some felt the effect wasn't something the show should emulate.

Part one debuted on Sunday, October 19 with 9.7 million viewers, good for 28th place.

Dead Ringers was partially rewritten, with scenes taken from the aborted BBC Books submission *The Dead of Winter*.



DEAD RINGERS

—Written by Edward Chan and Brad Connors—

The sun never appeared for Stephanie's funeral.

The rain dulled the autumn trees against the backdrop of the black and grey skyscrapers of Minneapolis. The departing mourners wore black and breathed clouds of white vapour against the chill wind.

As the mourners were stepping into their cars, a hearse screeched up to the nearest curb with a lurch. A fat little man popped out of the passenger's side and hustled up to the priest who lingered by the open grave.

The priest turned to meet him, his hands stuck into the sleeves and vestments snapping like flags in the wind.

"Father Blinkiron," said the portly man.

"Mister Moribund," the priest replied, sourly extracting one hand from where it was tucked underneath the red cuff of thermal undershirt under his opposite sleeve.

Moribund clasped the priest's hand between both of his and shook it as if blending a milkshake. "Sorry I'm late," he said. "There was a terrible accident on I-35 and, well..." He shrugged.

You had ambulances to chase, thought Blinkiron.

"Good weather for a funeral, I think," said Moribund. "Autumn's days are fading, and soon we shall be in the dead of winter." He nodded to the crowd, glowing like a potbellied stove. "It was a good turnout. A nice crowd."

Blinkiron looked past the funeral director to where Stephanie Winter's mother staggered under her grief. Her husband caught her up and helped her into the limousine. "She was young. Eighteen."

"Ah, yes, the first ingredient in a grand funeral. Young – and pretty, I believe."

"Good day, Mr. Moribund," said Blinkiron, pushing past Moribund. The mourners filed into their vehicles. There was the starting of engines and, one by one, the cars left the cemetery.

Moribund snapped his fingers. The doors of the hearse opened and four men wearing formal clothes jumped out, one from the driver's side, another from the passenger's side, and two from the back. They strode to the pile of dirt beside the grave and peeled the tarp away.

As they worked, Moribund stared at the straggling cars that made their way out of the cemetery. When the last car passed through the gate, he snapped his fingers again. The gravediggers dropped their shovels.

One gravedigger clambered into the grave. Taking a coffin key from his pocket, he opened the top half of the casket. The head and upper body of a young woman were revealed.

The funeral director stared down. Stephanie Winters was pretty. Her skin, though pale in death, hinted at a lustrous life. She had long, wispy, blond hair and fine eyelashes. She was dressed in a red blouse and jacket. Her slender hands were clasped across her chest. Her lips were slightly parted.

Moribund blew clouds of vapour in the chilly air as he eased his portly frame into the grave. Kneeling on the lower half of

the casket, he unbuttoned Stephanie's blouse and pulled it back, exposing her shoulder.

Moribund then pulled a vial from his pocket. It contained a translucent grey liquid. Motioning for the gravediggers to give him room, he filled a syringe with this serum and pressed the needle into the girl's shoulder. The serum injected slowly. Then he knelt back and waited.

The area around the injection turned scarlet. The skin rose just enough to be noticed. Then the lump spread.

Moribund nodded to himself.

The lump followed veins and arteries, down Stephanie's chest, up her neck, and over her face. The girl did not move as her skin twitched. The scarlet diffused over her body, changing her skin from pale to a lifelike pink. Then the reaction stopped.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then there was the sound of an intake of air through loosening passages. The girl's chest rose, then fell, and a stream of vapour issued from her lips.

The girl's eyes opened.

Moribund smiled.

Episode One: Grave Consequences

The storm rolled in from the west, a squall line that dwarfed the city's skyscrapers. Lightning flashed, and the rain fell, slowly at first, then in torrents.



Inside a tower of black steel and tinted glass, employees were hard at work goofing off. In one office, Malcolm's fingers tapped against his desk in time with the raindrops' beat. His other hand idly twirled a silver fountain pen between answers as he filled in a questionnaire.

The intercom buzzed. The secretary's voice was piped through. "Your niece, Erin, here to see you, Mr. Varner."

"Send her up," the Malcolm replied, barely looking up from his survey.

"Evil weather," the other man, lanky and balding, commented.

"Thank God for underground garages and automatic garage door openers," Malcolm muttered. "I won't be getting wet, at least."

"The perks of privilege, Mr. Varner. Almost finished?"

"Yes; here, Mr. Will." Varner handed over the form and the fountain pen.

Will took the paper but refused the pen. "Our compliments."

Varner's eyebrows rose. "You can't make money giving away freebies like this!"

Mr. Will smiled. "But we can. We at Advantage Marketing have helped many companies achieve a competitive edge in this harsh economy. We've doubled the profits of 90% of our clients and all have been grateful."

Varner chuckled tersely. "You haven't been helping Vaughan Industries, have you?"

"No, sir, we haven't," Will replied seriously.

There was a knock at the door, and a young woman entered. She had auburn hair and wore a smart, green dress. She was brought up short by the sight of Mr. Will. "Oh! I didn't know you were in a meeting—"

"No," Mr. Will strode past her to the door. "I was just leaving." He stopped and handed her a business card. "You're Erin Varner, regional representative, right? I hope you will consider our services for your company."

Erin gave him a sour look. "Thanks, I already have your card." Will chuckled, embarrassed, and left.

Erin turned her attention to Mr. Varner. "Uncle?" He was staring out the window at the darkened sky and didn't respond. "Uncle?" she tried again. "Malcolm!"

Malcolm came back to reality with a start. He smiled up at his niece. "Oh, hello, Erin. How's Omaha?"

Erin looked hard at Malcolm. "Uncle," she said. "Why were you meeting with Mr. Will?"

Malcolm didn't meet her gaze. "Why should you care about whom I choose to meet?"

"Malcolm, Ad Infinitum is a marketing consulting firm," said Erin sternly. "Given our company's situation and the decisions before the Board of Directors, it is inappropriate to conduct such business without the permission of the Board."

"What makes you think I don't have the permission of the Board?" asked Malcolm defensively.

"Uncle, would the board of directors of a company facing bankruptcy or buyout consider opening a major business venture with a major marketing company?" asked Erin. "Even if the rest of the Board did approve, we don't have the cash in the bank for it. I'm surprised Mr. Will bothered to show up to see us."

Malcolm's gaze rose to meet hers. "I was hoping you'd back me up on this, Erin," he said.

Erin bit her lip. Malcolm turned away and stared out the window. A tense silence followed.

"Uncle," said Erin finally. "We don't have any choice."

"No!" Malcolm thundered. "I will not sell out!"

Erin took two steps back, but pressed on. "Uncle, face facts. Vaughan has a clear edge in our stocks. We don't have the time or the money to purchase the remaining stocks to stop him. His offer is quite lucrative, and more than that the majority of the Board supports him. All we can do in opposition is stall the deal, and we'll still have the creditors knocking."

Malcolm rose from his chair. "I will not sell out to some fly-by-night operation!"

"Vaughan Industries is hardly a fly-by-night operation—"

"Oh, no?" Malcolm shouted. "Then where were they a year ago? How could they come out of nowhere and steal Nanosystems Technologies right out from under us? Is it any coincidence that our earnings went to hell since that happened? They think they can just march in and snatch a company out from under a person's feet, without any thought to the sweat and tears put into it. Well I won't have it!"

Lightning speared the sky. Thunder rumbled. The young woman stared warily.

Malcolm took a deep breath. "Erin," he said. "You're my niece; I trust you more than anybody else on the board. Help me! Find us a way out of this. Surely you care about the company?" He waited for an answer. "Don't you care?"

Erin winced. "I do care, uncle. I care so much that I can't ignore the fact that we're heavily in debt. Our company's nearing bankruptcy, uncle, so we have to take Vaughan's offer seriously."

"You're letting industrial spies win," Malcolm growled.

"That is a serious accusation," said Erin. "I'm as surprised at Vaughan's luck in the markets as you, but I remind you that unless you have evidence to take to the board of directors, you'd better not make those accusations in public."

"Do you think they don't know that?" Malcolm shot back. "That's why they chose them to be the spies."

"Who?"

"The board of directors!"

Erin swallowed hard. "Uncle, don't you think you should sit down?"

"Don't patronize me!" Malcolm shouted. "They're all in with Vaughan Industries, working to bring this company down!"

"Three industrial spies on a board of five directors, that's not espionage; that's a finished take-over," Erin snapped. "How can you say this? Joe and Andrew have been on the board since my father brought me here during my school breaks—"

"You're a regional representative, Erin; you don't see them every day." Malcolm darted around the conference table, grabbing Erin by the shoulders as she tried to back away. "You don't know how they've changed! Somehow they've managed to bring this company down. But I refuse to give in! I refuse!"

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A bell chimed, and the elevator doors parted. A tall, gangly man of over six feet stepped out. Striding out of the elevator lobby, he stepped up to the secretary's desk. The secretary was hard at work at her computer. She shivered, then looked up. She forced a smile. "Hello."

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The intercom buzzed. "Mr. Varner, Mr Christopherson wishes to see you."

Malcolm hit the switch. "Tell him to go to Hell!"

Erin paled. "You can't say that to your own vice-president!"

"I can do what I like!" Malcolm shouted, bounding up from the desk and marching from his office. As he left the room, he shook as if from a sudden chill.

Christopherson was waiting for him at the reception area. He stood up. "Mr. Varner?" he asked.

There was something about Christopherson that left Malcolm ill at ease, and he had come here to think. That would be impossible with Christopherson around. Malcolm turned for the elevator bays. "I'm not ready to talk to you, Christopherson."

Christopherson followed him. "Malcolm, you're being short-sighted. You may have great plans, but you have to be a realist. Varner Inc., in business circles, is little more than a minnow, a small fish in a sea of sharks."

Malcolm glared. "How dare you—"

Christopherson raised his hand. "You know I'm right. If we try to fight our enemies we'll lose. There's only one way for a fish to fight a shark, and that is to dive into its maw and attack from within."

Malcolm looked at Christopherson's smiling face and a shiver trembled through him again. He turned on his heel. "You're mad, Christopherson!"

The displays at the elevator bays showed that no cars would be arriving soon. Too restless to wait, Malcolm shoved open the doors to the stairs and stepped onto the landing.

A hand clamped onto his shoulder. Malcolm's heart leapt. Christopherson twisted him around. "We must consider Vaughan's offer."

"Let me go!" Malcolm shoved him away. They scuffled, and Christopherson slipped. He toppled down the flight of stairs, landing heavily, with a sharp crack, at the bottom. Malcolm stared in horror.

Christopherson must have caught his arm on the railing, and the force of his fall had torn it from his body. It lay beside him, the severed end oozing blood. Christopherson groaned.

Then, as Malcolm watched, the blood stopped trickling from the arm, and reversed its flow, seeping back into the open wounds.

The severed arm twitched, and Christopherson sat up. Taking his severed arm with his other hand, he pressed it against his shoulder. The skin rejoined, becoming a red seam that began to fade. He stood up, flexing both arms to compare them, then fixed his eyes on Malcolm.

He advanced up the stairs. "Pull yourself together, man," he said grimly. "You are going to pieces."

Malcolm stumbled back into the elevator lobby and pushed the button for a down vehicle. Nothing happened. Then heard the stairwell door open and ran. The only door left was his office. He darted in, knocking Erin over. Her briefcase fell open, scattering papers everywhere. "Uncle!" she shouted. "What the hell— what's wrong?"

But Malcolm was already on his feet, looking for a place to hide.

A chill shook Erin. She looked at the office door and gasped. "Mr. Christopherson, you're bleeding! What happened?"

"He knocked me down the stairs," Christopherson replied, nodding at Malcolm. "Something's wrong, he's in a panic. Get security and ask for a doctor."



"No, Erin, don't leave!" Malcolm cried, placing his desk between him and Christopherson. "He's going to kill me!"

"Get security," said Christopherson emphatically. "I'll try to calm him down." He took a step around Malcolm's desk.

"No!" Malcolm cried and swung up the chair to strike Christopherson. In his haste, it slipped from his fingers. It struck the window, which shattered with a roar.

"Malcolm! Please!" cried Erin.

Christopherson advanced.

"No! No!" Malcolm turned to run, and stumbled over the fallen chess pieces. The fall carried him through the shattered window.

Erin and Christopherson ran to the window, ignoring the driving rain as it soaked their clothes. They stared in horror at Malcolm's crumpled body on the sidewalk, twenty stories below, surrounded by a crowd of shocked pedestrians.

Christopherson stared down at the floor, and saw the cracked remains of Mr. Will's pen. Malcolm must have stepped on it during his mad dash to the window. "Damn," he muttered.

Erin was still staring out the window. She began to cry

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Erin held a handkerchief to her nose, wincing at the tears as she stared at the closed casket containing her uncle's dead body. The lights were dim, and a woman was singing "The Lord is my shepherd" as the casket rolled slowly toward the doors of the crematorium.

As the crematorium doors closed behind the casket, Stephanie ended her song and sat back, watching the mourners.

Erin looked up and nodded as fellow mourners offered condolences. Then she shivered and looked behind her. Moribund was there, offering his hand.

"I am sorry for your loss," he said. "But it was a fine service."

"Yes, it was," Erin managed.

"Listen," said Moribund, leaning close. "I realize this may not be the time, but there is some paperwork still to fill."

"Can't it wait?" asked Erin. "My lawyer has been handling everything."

"Yes, but since you're here—"

"Thank you, Mr. Moribund, but no," she said. "I've got to go now. Sorry." She joined the line of people filing out of the chapel. Moribund watched them depart.

When the last guest had gone, Moribund glanced at Stephanie, who got up and closed the chapel doors. Then she followed him to the crematorium, where he pushed aside the opening and clambered in.

The coffin sat there, unburnt. The gravediggers surrounded the casket, waiting patiently. At a signal from Moribund, one of the gravediggers unlocked the casket and opened it.

Moribund took off his hat shook his head at Malcolm's body. "Ironic, isn't it? You spend all this time trying to get information on a fellow, and he dies on you. What a waste of time and money."

"Can't you revive him?" asked Stephanie.

"No." Moribund shook his head. "Not as we did you. He landed on his head, poor fellow. I'm afraid his brain took too much damage.

His mind is gone. But at least we can still make use of his body." He snapped his fingers.

The gravediggers closed the casket. Standing three to either side, they lifted it onto their shoulders and carried it out of the room at a respectful pace. They strode calmly through the hallways, out the back of the funeral home, where waiting hearses were subtly labelled for the Phoenix Moribund Funeral Home.

There was a noise of a garage door opening. An ambulance was waiting outside.

The six set the coffin down and opened it. One opened the back doors of the ambulance. Lifting the body up, they chucked it in the back of the emergency vehicle as though it were a sack of potatoes; then they slammed the door. The ambulance driver gunned the engine and drove out the driveway, wheels screeching.

The six men sealed the casket, and took it to the empty hearse. Reverently, they laid it in the back and closed the door.

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Two roads diverged in a yellow wood and I... I took the one last traveled by." Nicholas Thanitopsis closed the poetry book and mused a moment. Then he decided.

"I hate Robert Frost!" He tossed the book aside. It sailed over his desk's nameplate identifying him as the hospital mortician for Pheifferlife Memorial and knocked over his clock radio. He found the resulting clatter rather satisfying; the radio had told him only moments before that it was five in the morning.

Why wasn't the coffee working? A yawn made his eyes water. He rubbed them blearily, and then looked up in surprise.

Two orderlies were passing his desk, wheeling a gurney. With the detachment of fatigue, he stared as they pushed open the doors to the morgue and stepped inside.

Something wasn't right about this, but Thanitopsis couldn't put his finger on what. He stood up shakily and was walking towards the doors when the orderlies shoved their way out with a shrouded body on their gurney.

Finally, Nicholas found his voice. "Um, excuse me?" He stopped the lead orderly. "What's going on here?"

The orderly stared at him blankly, then nodded at the shrouded body. "Another one for the morgue."

Nicholas blinked. "Oh." Then a realization struck him. "But this *is* the morgue!"

"The other morgue," the orderly replied.

Nicholas blinked again. "Oh." The orderlies pushed by. Nicholas sank into his seat, watching them go. He was blinking away the shrouds of sleep when another realization struck him. "But there *is* no other morgue!"

The alarm woke Thanitopsis with a start. He staggered to his feet and stumbled around his desk to retrieve his clock radio. It read 7:00 a.m. He'd fallen asleep on the job again. Good thing his boss didn't catch him at it. He sighed, rubbed the sleep from his eyes and took a swig of his coffee. He grimaced. Cold.

The memories of last night came back to him. To calm his nagging doubts, he stepped to the mortuary doors and pushed them

open. His eyes ran over the bodies in their shrouds. Then he covered his mouth in horror.

He rushed to the phone and beat in the numbers. He fidgeted while it rang. Finally someone picked up line.

"Stan! We've got a body missing here!" said Nicholas frantically.

"What?" said Stan. "Are you sure? Did you count?"

"You bet I did!" said Nicholas. "I had eight bodies when I took shift, and now there's only seven!"

"Seven? Are you sure?" Stan's voice was noticeably calmer.

"Of course I'm sure!" Nicholas shot back.

"Nick, you only had seven bodies at the beginning of your shift," said Stan patiently.

"No," said Nicholas. "Look, I have the names right here and—" He picked up a clipboard. On a second glance, he stopped and stared.

"Seven names, right?" Stan chuckled. "Nick, when was the last time you were on vacation? Did you think you were an extra on *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*?"

Nicholas shook his head. "I guess you're right. Sorry I bothered you."

He slammed down the phone and slumped in his seat. He rested his head in his hands. Maybe he did need a vacation.

Then something caught his eye. He leaned forward and brushed his desk with one hand, gathering the scattered white material into the other palm. He fingered the debris of an eraser.

Thanitopsis stared down the corridor where the orderlies had gone.

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"Eccentric, me? Ha! Eccentric, indeed!" The Doctor strode down the corridor of the shopping mall, his two companions in tow.

"We had to think of something," said Ryan.

"That was a police officer we were talking to," said Sue. "We were standing in an alleyway, beside something labelled 'Police Box', and we wouldn't give straight answers to his questions. He had the power to lock us up and would have if Ryan and I hadn't shown our ID."

"Never mind that what you did was dangerous," the Doctor growled. "Never mind that the F.B.I. might take notice when they hear Minneapolis police reporting that two F.B.I. agents showed their ID at exactly the same time those same agents were in Chicago. Never mind all that, why did you have to say that I was an eccentric working for you and that my TARDIS was really my special tool box?"

Ryan shrugged. "Well, the officer didn't give us much time to think of a better story."

"At least he bought it," Sue added.

"And you have to admit your dress sense isn't exactly what one would call normal for 1994," said Ryan. "Unless you were heading to a costume ball."

The Doctor just glowered. He strode on.

Ryan glanced at Sue. "Do you notice how he goes beet-red when teased?"

"His previous incarnation wasn't like that at all," said Sue. "Too restrained."

The Doctor's face grew redder. He pulled ahead. Sue and Ryan

glanced at each other and laughed. Sue's eyes caught Ryan's gaze, and the laughter stopped. Ryan shifted uncomfortably. Without a word, he darted after the Doctor, leaving her staring after him before following.

Behind them, a man wearing a dark overcoat and glasses peered at them from behind a newspaper. He glanced at his partner and got no response. Then he realized that his partner was engrossed in an article, entitled "Stress Related Illnesses Up 50% in Metropolitan Area," and he elbowed him to his senses. His compatriot looked up, startled, then nodded.

Behind them, the newsstand manager cleared his throat. "Does this look like a friggin' library?"

The two hurriedly paid for their purchases, then rushed after the Doctor and his companions, not noticing a businessman look up from his newspaper and stare after them.

Down the corridor, Sue hurried to catch up. "Doctor, where are you going?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, are you ready for a serious conversation?" he snapped.

Sue folded her arms. "Oh, how mature."

The Doctor winced. "I'm sorry," he said. "I was being too sensitive."

Sue's glare softened. "That's all right. So, where *are* we going? I didn't think we were going to stay long here. Don't take this the wrong way, but you were trying to get us home."

The Doctor gave her a smile and resumed his walk. "I thought we'd all like to stretch our legs. Fresh air, a chance to see new sights—"

"But what about the chance we might meet ourselves?" asked Ryan.

"You're in Chicago," the Doctor replied quickly. Then he frowned. "I mean to say, you were in Chicago. I mean, you are in Chicago now, but before—" He waved his hands in frustration. "You know what I mean! As long as we keep a low profile, there's no reason why we can't be tourists, is there? I've wanted to see the University of Minnesota's Museum of Natural History. I like catching their mistakes."

Ryan groaned.

"Consider this an opportunity to broaden your mind," said the Doctor.

"Actually, Doctor," said Sue firmly. "If you don't mind, Ryan and I would like to see the sights by ourselves."

The Doctor gave her a perplexed look. "What could possibly be more fun than a fascinating afternoon in a natural history museum?"

Sue smiled. "Doctor, we're Americans, and we're in a mall. What do Americans usually do in malls?"

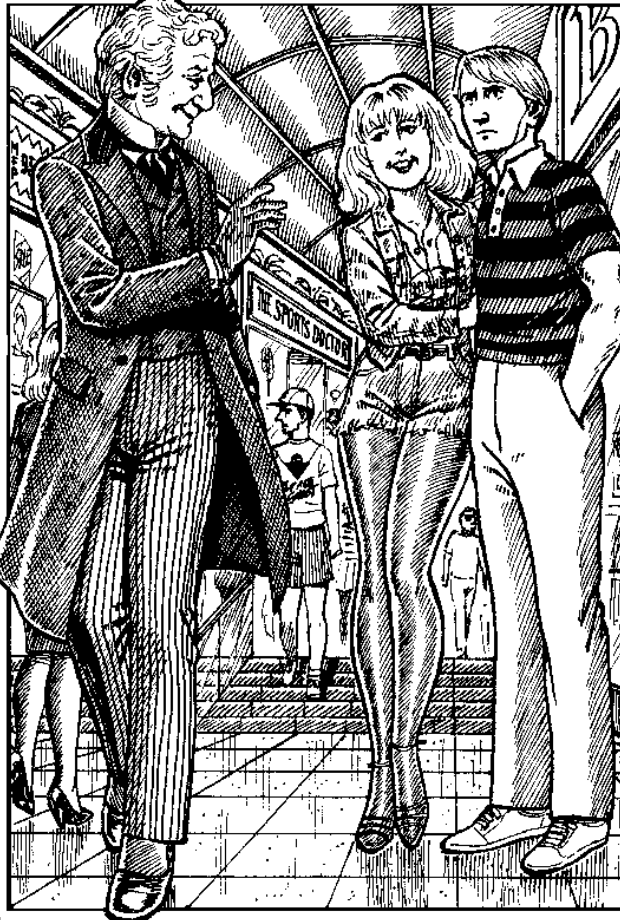
"Cruise for chicks?" Ryan muttered. Sue elbowed him in the stomach.

The Doctor rolled his eyes. "Shopping, right?"

"Of course!" said Sue brightly, gripping Ryan's arm. Through her smile, there was a message in her eyes. Ryan looked uncomfortable. The Doctor looked from one companion to the other, and understood.

"Ah." He gave them a smile. "Fine. Meet me back at the ship in four—no, five hours. See you then."

Ryan made to follow the Doctor, but Sue steered him away. They took a branching corridor lined with shops. Behind them, the two men in dark overcoats stopped at the junction. They hesitated a moment before following the Doctor out of the mall.



A couple sharing coffee in a nearby restaurant turned in their chairs to watch the company depart.

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The gravesite lay open. There were no mourners. Father Blinkiron said his final prayer alone.

"Forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God of his great mercy to receive unto himself the soul of our dear brother here departed; we therefore commit his body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ; who shall change our mortal body, that it may be like unto his glorious body, according to the mighty working, whereby he is able to subdue all things to himself."

The service ended. The six gravediggers put their hats on in unison and advanced on the casket, lifting it up to carry it to the open grave.

Moribund stood by a tree and watched the work. He nodded at Father Blinkiron as he approached.

The priest sighed. "It is always sad to bury someone and have no mourners attend the funeral."

Moribund smiled. "But he wasn't alone, Father. We are here. We'll remember."

Father Blinkiron gave him a look of respect. "I appreciate the trouble you go through to make these types of funerals. They can't be profitable."

"I like my profession," said Moribund. "I consider it my civic duty to provide this service to all people. Everyone deserves a decent burial, and I intend to give it to them."

As the gravediggers brought the casket over the grave, one of them lost his footing on the slippery ground. He fell, and the coffin tilted alarmingly with a loud rattle. Silently, the other five gravediggers compensated and righted the coffin before it touched the ground. The sixth got back onto his feet and resumed his place.

Blinkiron stared hard at the coffin and the gravediggers. He shivered, but he attributed it to the wet and cold wind. "It has been a busy month for you," he noted. "What has it been? Twelve burials in the past seven days?"

Moribund shrugged. "Perhaps it's a sign of the stressful society we live in."

Blinkiron smiled, then turned to leave. A shiver trembled through him again, and he quickened his pace towards the shelter of his car.

Moribund stiffened. Without looking behind him, he said, "Good afternoon, Mr. Will."

Mr. Will stepped out from the trees. "It was unfortunate about Malcolm. He managed to fill out the survey, before he died."

"I agree. It was unfortunate," Moribund replied. "But we must anticipate these small deviations from our plan. What about his niece?"

Will shook his head. "No information on her. Refused to take our survey and refused to open or accept all promotional materials."

"I haven't convinced her to sign the funeral paperwork, yet, either," Moribund shrugged. "The girl is stubborn like her uncle. We'll have to find out other ways to get the information we need."

"Why waste our resources?" asked Will. "We can count on four out of the five board members. Isn't that enough?"

"No," Moribund replied. "It's the same reason why we can't kill her. We may have eighty percent of the board of directors, but we need her to get more than fifty percent of the shares." He sighed. "I'm afraid Erin is a loose end. More than that, she is a resourceful and intelligent loose end. I will feel much better once she is tucked away. But surveys aren't going to do it, I'm afraid. I think you've done all you can with Varner Incorporated. Let someone else handle that for a while. Concentrate on new leads instead. Any ideas?"

"There is a trade show coming up in a couple of weeks," said Will. "Lots of great high-tech and bio-tech attendees. We could set up a booth, hand out promotional literature, lots of free pens. Ad Infinitum has an option on floor space."

"Exercise it," said Moribund. "Sounds like a good marketing campaign." He looked at Will with interest. "Why didn't you call this information in?"

"Didn't I tell you?" asked Will. "I used to work in that area, investment broker. I didn't think it wise to stay there for too long. It wouldn't do the operation good if I ran into someone who attended my funeral."

Moribund nodded and started to follow Will out of the graveyard. Then he paused, and stepped along a path a few feet, approaching a particular grave. There, he plucked the flower that was pinned to his lapel and placed it on the gravestone dedicated to Malcolm Varner.

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Sue steered Ryan into a seat outside an indoor mall café. "Two coffees," she called to the waiter, before sitting across from Ryan.

"I thought you wanted to go shopping," said Ryan unenthusiastically.

"I do," said Sue brightly. "But first I want to talk."

Ryan shivered. "Does it have to be here? I feel as though everybody's watching us."

"Nobody's watching us," Sue replied, "and, yes, it has to be here."

"Oh."

There was an uncomfortable pause as coffee was brought to them. It lasted many minutes after the waiter departed.

"Ryan, what's wrong with you?" said Sue finally.

"What do you mean, what's wrong with me?"

"You know what I mean," she replied. "You haven't been comfortable around me for the past few days. Not since..." Immediately, Ryan's face reddened. To Sue's disgust, she could feel herself blushing as well.

She thumped the table. "Dammit, Ryan, we're friends! We've shared secrets we didn't tell our parents! There's no reason why we can't deal with—" She suddenly became conscious that the eyes of café patrons were on her. She leaned closer and lowered her voice. "We're friends, right? If we want to stay friends, then we have to deal with what happened back there."

"Like put it behind us and forget about it?" asked Ryan.

Sue blinked. A flash of disappointment crossed her face. "No!" Then she hesitated. "Well, not quite. It happened, but it's not some great disaster, is it?"

Ryan cleared his throat. "Sue, you don't understand. I thought it was over between us. We both agreed when we ended up assigned to the same department—these sorts of things don't work. And yet, well... I treasure our friendship, I don't want to lose it, but what happened back there... brought back memories." He searched for the right words. None came. "Oh, you don't understand."

Sue shook her head. "Actually, I do. But we can't keep avoiding each other. If this had happened in the bureau, one of us could have applied for a transfer, but until the Doctor gets us home, we're stuck with each other. Therefore, we have to come to terms with it. We have to agree that it happened, and we have to agree that it won't affect our friendship." She held out her hand. "Deal?"

Ryan clasped it. "Deal."

"Unless we want it to affect our friendship," she muttered.

Ryan's grip on her hand tightened. "What?"

Sue's eyes darted past Ryan. Her face lit up, first in disbelief, then in delight. "Erin?"

As Sue stood up, Ryan tried to pull her back down. "No, wait! You said something!" But Sue wasn't listening.

"Erin!" she called. She was waving to an auburn-haired young woman, lugging a cardboard box and looking depressed.

Her head snapped up when she heard her name called, and her eyes widened in shock. "Sue?" She ran forward and the two friends greeted each other with a hug.

"Erin, it's been years!" Sue cried, looking the woman over.

Erin frowned. "Actually, it's only been two months."

Sue did a quick calculation. "Um, yeah," she said hurriedly. "Well, it feels like years!"

Erin wasn't listening. "What are you doing in Minneapolis? I thought you'd transferred to Chicago to work with that man you liked so much, what was his name—"

Sue yanked Erin to her table and made her shake hands with Ryan. "Erin, this is Ryan, my superior. Ryan, this is Erin Varner. She was my roommate at college. I lost touch with her before we left." She emphasized the last sentence with a strong look.

Ryan frowned. Sue's toying with a time paradox. He gave her a perplexed look, which was met with an obstinate glare. She turned back to Erin, all smiles as she bid her sit down. "Erin, how's your job doing?"

This made Erin's smile disappear. She slumped in her seat, dropping her cardboard box on the floor. It klinked. "Terrible. Just terrible. I've been suspended." Her voice took on a sarcastic tone. "No, sorry, 'asked to take a paid leave of absence.' It means the same thing, the board of directors don't want me around. First my uncle dies and then this!" She kicked the box in frustration.

"Your uncle died?" asked Sue, shocked.

"Yes," Erin sniffed. "They're keeping it quiet for the good of the company." She snorted at that. "Didn't I tell you that in my last letter?"

"I never got your last letter," said Sue grimly. "Tell me more."

???

Father Blinkiron hauled his tray through the dinner crowd of nurses and doctors until he located a free seat. He made for it and sat down hurriedly. It was only when he was settled that he looked up at his tablemate. His gaze brightened in recognition. "Nicholas! You're here early. Your shift doesn't start until 11 p.m."

Thanitopsis gave Blinkiron a warm smile. "I couldn't sleep. And the only place I can read in peace is at work. So, I thought I'd come in early. Perhaps get some overtime to save up some funds for a vacation. How about you?"

Blinkiron laughed. "Oh, busy! You think doctors stay up all hours at hospitals? They should make hospital chaplains do internships to prepare them for their daily grind. Over and above the work for the hospital, they've farmed me out to the funeral home across the street. It's run by an odd chap named Phoenix Moribund."

"Oh, man!" Nicholas winced. "If he does any evil in this world, he's not entirely at fault. But they've been keeping you busy?"

"Lots of funerals. I gave my twelfth this morning," Blinkiron sighed. "What a world we live in."

"Well, I'm not the one who has been pushing work your way. It's been slow for me," Nicholas shook his head. "I don't mind it when I have a good book to peruse, but I made some bad choices this week. Staying up all night with only bodies for company is hard enough, but there are fewer bodies coming my way. I'm going insane with boredom."

Blinkiron regarded Nicholas thoughtfully. "Really?"

"Yes," Nicholas laughed, then leaned close. "Last night, I fell asleep on the job and had the oddest dream. I dreamt that two orderlies walked right past me and took one of my bodies away. No authorization, nothing. Just a case of boldfaced body snatching. I think my boss is right. I do need a vacation."

Nicholas waited for a response, but found none. He looked up at Blinkiron and found him deep in thought. "Father?"

Blinkiron came back to reality with a start. "Oh, what?"

"Perhaps you need a vacation, too?"

Blinkiron smiled wanly. "Maybe I do."

???

After the Doctor crossed the Tenth Street Bridge over the Mississippi, he paused by a window. Glancing past his reflection, he saw the same two figures that had left the mall with him, standing on the other sidewalk, watching him intently.

Don't jump to conclusions, he thought. I thought that taxi-driver was also regarding me with more interest than he would normally give a potential fare, but that was just me being paranoid. Then again, just because one was paranoid didn't mean that people weren't out to get him. The Doctor turned right at the next street, then left at the one following. A casual glance behind him confirmed that he was still being followed.

As he debated confronting them, a car slid into the parking lane beside him with a squeal of brakes.

"Get in," said the driver. It was a young woman with dark hair and dark eyes.

The Doctor looked at the passers-by on the sidewalk, then pointed at himself. "Who, me?"

The driver let out an exasperated sigh. "You're the Doctor, right? Silurians, Autons, Cybermen, Crazy Magical Knights from Camelot and Yeti? Need I say more?"

The Doctor blinked, then shrugged. "I guess I'd better get in. I hope you're heading to the Museum of Natural History."



The car smelt of air freshener, a sign it was a rental. The Doctor sat, looked in the side view mirror, and saw his two shadows reacting with alarm. They signalled a taxi, which sped past without slowing down. As his car pulled away, he saw them kick and stomp on the sidewalk in frustration.

The taxi followed the rental car at a discreet distance; its driver glanced at the Doctor, then at the license plate before turning left at the next intersection.

The Doctor looked curiously at the woman beside him. She was young, in her late twenties. Her dark hair fringed a pretty, pale face with a small nose and small lips set firm in a serious expression. She carefully steered through an intersection, then gave him a glance.

"I was monitoring police radio. I heard someone send a message to their dispatcher about a police box and a man matching your description, so I put two and two together."

"I'm afraid you have me at a disadvantage. I don't usually monitor police radio, and I doubt they'd radio about a young woman minding her own business. Who are you?" he asked. The woman passed him some identification.

The Doctor looked. The face of the woman smiled cheekily back at him from her picture. His eyebrows shot up. "Lieutenant Wendy R. Jones, United Nations Intelligence Taskforce?"

Wendy twisted the wheel. "Before we go any further, let me just tell you that I prefer to be called Jones, sir. Nothing personal, I just hate that first name, and my parents never gave me any good middle names to use as alternates."

"I won't call you Wendy if you don't call me sir. I prefer just 'the Doctor'. So, what are you doing here? Watch that car!"

Jones applied the brakes suddenly. She switched lanes and accelerated. "Roll up your window," she said crisply.

"Are we that paranoid?"

"Yes. Please?"

"Fine." The Doctor did as he was told.

"I'm on an investigation," Jones growled. "Before you ask, it's covert. If the U.S. Army catches wind of it, we're in trouble. That's why it's just me, not an entire squadron. Officially I'm a British soldier on exchange with the Canadian Army, on leave from C.F.B. Winnipeg to visit friends and relatives in Minneapolis. They didn't even ask me about that at the border. Northern US customs officials are nowhere near as strict as the southern ones."

"And, unofficially, why are you here?" asked the Doctor.

"Nine months ago, unexplained meteors were sighted on NORAD radar. Once NORAD confirmed that it wasn't a Russian missile attack, or one of their own experimental planes, they passed the information onto us—" she gave the Doctor a sardonic look, "—three months later. As you can expect, UNIT went on alert. While the bulk of the force waits in Canada for US clearance to land, I was sent with a group of a few others to different cities to do reconnaissance. I was assigned Minneapolis. So far, nothing has shown up in my area. We suspect some of those meteors were decoys; they covered the entire country, including targets like Des Moines, which have no strategic value whatsoever."

"So why is the US stalling in granting clearance?" the Doctor asked. "Go straight through this intersection, please."

"The US never found any landing sites. They maintain that the meteors probably burnt up in the atmosphere. Really, they just don't want to be bothered by us."

The Doctor nodded. "The U.S. Army is notoriously obstructionist when it comes to UNIT activities. How long has it been since they forced UNIT to abandon their offices at the UN's New York Headquarters? Right at the next light."

"Fourteen years," Jones replied, twisting the wheel firmly. "I'm not sure I blame them. I know I wouldn't want an international body investigating UFOs I may have put into orbit myself. Still, the delays open up a major hole in Earth's International Security network."

"How do you know there is anything behind the meteor activity at all?" the Doctor asked.

"The meteors made course corrections on their way down."

"Ah," said the Doctor grimly. "Turn left here – watch out for that pedestrian!"

Wendy glared at him. "Do you know that I really hate back-seat drivers, particularly when they sit in the front seat?"

"Watch out for that pedestrian!" the Doctor repeated.

"I said—" Wendy began.

"Watch out!" The Doctor pointed. Wendy jammed on the brakes, and managed to stop inches from a wild-eyed man who had jumped into traffic. He was staggering as he ran, and he slammed his hands against the hood to stop himself.

"They're everywhere!" he screamed.

"Hey!" shouted a police officer. At the sight of him, the man took off, weaving through stopped traffic. The officer ran in pursuit.

The Doctor and Jones stared after the madman. Then they looked at each other.

"Welcome to America," said Jones.

They started up again, the driving on for a moment in an uneasy silence. Finally, Jones said, "So what have you found?"

"What makes you think I've found anything?"

"Why else would you be in Minneapolis? Not for hockey, surely; the team left for Dallas a year ago."

The Doctor glared. "Contrary to popular belief, trouble does not follow me around."

Jones gave him a dubious look. "If you say so." She sighed. "That puts my investigation at a standstill. Not that this is much different from the past week."

"There, there," said the Doctor. "Tell me something, you said you were alone? Is that standard UNIT procedure?"

"When operating in the U.S.?" She nodded. "Yes. Or sometimes with a partner, but never with a large entourage."

"Then your investigation may not be at a standstill after all," said the Doctor. "There were two people following me before you picked me up, and they didn't look to be working for the US government. Now, what other reason do you think they'd take an interest in me?"

Jones broke into a smile. "That sounds like a lead."

"Good. Make a U-turn here."

Jones tensed. "I've just driven you to the Museum of Natural History, and now you want me to make a U-turn, on a divided highway?"

"Well, if we're to begin an investigation, there's no time like the present, I always say. I'll need my companions, so we have to go back."

Jones brightened, and turned her car across the grassy median.

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All this has made me think my uncle may have been right," said Erin between sips of coffee. "He was clearly under stress, but still—"

"What are you talking about?" asked Sue. Ryan listened uncomfortably, feeling very much the odd man out.

"I never wrote about this in our letters," Erin replied. "But for the past six months, my uncle had been feeling the strain of running the company. There were even bouts of paranoia. He was certain that every member of the board of directors, except me, were against him."

"But you were practically family," said Sue, appalled.

"You'd be surprised at how quickly things fall apart in bad times," said Erin. "We were hit hard when two of our directors had to go to the hospital in the space of a month. Heart trouble,

both of them. Fortunately, both made quick recoveries, and our stocks recovered as well. It looked like the rough spot was over, then Daniel suffered a nervous breakdown. In fact, right about then was when Malcolm started getting tense. Daniel had to be replaced; news leaked out again despite Malcolm's efforts to keep things quiet, and the stocks got hit again. Then we lost our bid for Nanosystems Technology to Vaughan Industries. It was at that time that Christopherson was voted aboard as our Vice President. I wasn't at that meeting, so Malcolm was outvoted two to one.

"Things didn't get better with our stocks. I still don't know why; as regional representative, I know our regional sales were at their best since the recession. Privately, Malcolm started blaming the rest of his board of directors, particularly Mr. Christopherson. Then his bouts of paranoia increased, and his criticism of his fellow board members became more public. Then, as I told you, he fell out his office window." She drew a shaky breath. Sue gripped her hand firmly.

Erin continued. "I didn't believe my uncle's accusations, but now that I've been back to Minneapolis a while, I do think something strange is happening. Mr. Christopherson was voted president, and they voted in another person from outside the company, a corporate lawyer of some sort, to fill the vacancy. The four of them have been voting as a bloc, and no one told me I was on the opposing side. Now Mr. Christopherson has been pressuring me to take a paid leave of absence, to help me get over my uncle's death, he says. I know when I'm getting the brush off. What I don't know is why."

Ryan shivered again; this caught Sue and Erin's attention. "What's wrong?"

Ryan looked at the passing crowd. He had to laugh. "It's silly, but I keep on getting this feeling that I'm being watched."

Erin glanced at the crowd. "Well, you're not being followed, Mr. F.B.I. agent." She gave him a grin, which turned serious. "I can tell. I've been keeping an eye out; I thought at one point that the company had hired someone to tail me, but I couldn't see anyone. I learned my street-smarts from Sue too, so—"

"Following you?" repeated Sue incredulously. "Whatever for?"

"I'm thinking of leaving the company," Erin replied. "I don't have the energy to fight four men on the board of directors. Were I in their position, I'd hire someone to keep an eye on me to make sure I don't take company secrets over to some rival, but they clearly haven't. Sometimes, though, I can't escape the feeling. I can't explain it, but the board members give me the creeps."

An alarm beeped on her wrist, and Erin checked her watch. She sat up and drained the last of her coffee. "I've got to go. I have to pack and arrange a train back to Omaha. I'll be staying to attend to a few things, then heading back soon after. I may have a couple of hours, though, so give me a call."

Sue stood up with her, and they hugged. Erin shook Ryan's hand. "Till later, then." Then she was off.

Sue watched her go, and drained the last of her coffee. "Now, that's so strange."

"What is?" asked Ryan.

"What happened with the company. It was practically a family operation, and it went to pieces."

"I don't think that's so strange," Ryan replied. "I've heard of bigger scandals in the pages of the *Financial Post*."

Sue shook her head. "You won't hear much about Varner Inc. in the *Financial Post*. It's a small company. I knew a lot about it through Erin. I almost took up her offer to join that company when I got out of college." Sue sighed. "I wonder what happened?"

"I can't understand why you're interested," said Ryan. "It's just a company. They have these power plays all the time."

"But what about Erin's story?" asked Sue crisply.

Ryan paused at Sue's glare. He chose his next words carefully. "That woman was upset over her uncle's death. It's possible she exaggerated—"

He broke off as Sue stood up angrily. Without a word, she left the table and walked out of the café. Ryan paid the bill and rushed after her.

The waiter came over and picked up his tip. As he pocketed it, he stared after the two agents as they left the mall.

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Erin left the mall and stepped onto a street corner. She strode across the street with the crowd of pedestrians. Suddenly, she was brought up short with a shiver. She searched the departing faces for someone she thought she recognized.

"Excuse me?" a Tennessee accent cut in. Erin turned with a start. Her eyes fell upon a mature couple. Their clothes were too warm for the weather. "We're tourists; would you mind taking a picture of me and Martha?"

"Now, George," Martha whispered under her breath, "You don't want our camera to be stolen!"

"Martha, nobody does that in Minneapolis; it's just like Canada only less boring." He passed the camera to the startled woman, who accepted it mutely. She stepped back, raised it up, and focused. George put his arm around Martha's shoulder, and the couple posed.

Erin paused, and peered over the camera at something that had caught her attention through the lens. She felt a sudden sensation of dozens of people watching her.

The screech of wheels broke her reverie. She saw the car out of the corner of her eye, too late. The wind left her suddenly. Before she hit the ground, she realized that the car hadn't been skidding on the street. It had deliberately hopped the sidewalk. Doubtless, her next of kin would take comfort in that fact with the lawsuit.

George scrambled forward and snatched the camera from the ground. "I hope the film's all right," he muttered.

Sue left the mall, with Ryan at her heels. They both looked up as they heard the screech of wheels and a dull thump, followed by cries of shock and anger hurled at a vehicle departing at high speed. They shouldered through the gathering crowd to look. Sue recognized the prone body and she sprang forward. "Erin!"

"Somebody call an ambulance!" Ryan shouted.

Erin groaned in pain. Sue shushed her gently. "Don't try to talk. The ambulance is on its way."

"No," Erin gasped. "I saw — my uncle — Malcolm." She grunted as the pain increased.

"Erin, don't talk," said Sue firmly. "You're going to be all right."

The people turned as they heard the sirens of an ambulance. The vehicle pulled up. As Sue watched the two orderlies expertly place Erin onto a stretcher, she drew her arms around herself and shivered. As they placed Erin in the back, she strode up.

"Step away, please," ordered one of the men.

"I'm her friend," Sue replied crisply. "I'm going with her."

For a moment, the attendant looked ready to argue. Then he waved Sue inside. As she made to enter, Ryan stepped forward but Sue waved him back. "No, one of us has to wait for the Doctor."

The door slammed. With a blare of sirens, the ambulance drove off.

One of the remaining officers turned to the crowd. "Right, who witnessed this accident?"

Every hand in the crowd went up.

The officer nodded. "I want everyone to meet me at the Minne Java back at the mall where I'll take everybody's statements."

One of his partners stepped up to him. "John, could I take their statements while you help Bill secure the accident scene?"

"No," said John patiently. "I made the call first, so I get to go take their statements."

"You took statements last time," said Lars. "I want to take witnesses' statements. You can go shiver in the wind!"

"Now, look, you—"

Bill cut the two officers short. "Stop arguing. I'm the senior officer of this patrol, and I get to decide who secures the scene and who takes statements. And as senior officer, I decide that I'll be the one to take the witnesses' statements. Do they have cappuccino?"

Ryan stepped to the curb. There he stood, momentarily lost. What did he do now? He had some time to wait until the Doctor returned.

The noise of another siren brought him around with a start. Another ambulance careened up the street and screeched to a halt at the intersection. There, the driver and a group of paramedics jumped out, and looked around in surprise. The evidence of an accident remained, broken glass on the pavement and spots of blood, but no patient. Seeing the police officer, they strode over and began to argue.

Curious, Ryan ran over. "What's the problem?" he asked.

"There's some confusion, that's all," the officer replied quickly — too quickly. "Nothing to be alarmed about."

"We're from General Hospital," the ambulance driver cut in. "We got a call to pick up an accident victim. It's our jurisdiction. No other hospital has a right to go stealing our patients!"

"What's he talking about?" asked Ryan firmly.

"That other ambulance didn't come from General Hospital," the officer replied. To the driver he said, "It's probably just some computer dispatching error, that's all."

Ryan stared down the street in the direction the ambulance had gone.

???

Stephanie dreamed of driving. She was driving along a highway as twilight deepened, exhilarating in the freedom of the roads. The black asphalt slipped beneath her; the black trees beside the road flew past. The wheels hissed with water, and lightning flashed overhead, but she felt safe in the warmth of her car.

She frowned as a pair of headlights filled her rear-view mirror. The person behind her was driving far too fast for the conditions. Then the headlights slipped to the left, and a sleek black car burst out of her blind spot behind her. It raced ahead in the opposite lane, then cut in front of her, sharply. Stephanie jerked the wheel and pressed her foot on the brake. Her car swivelled, still driving forward but this time on an increasing angle. She jerked the wheel again. The car wouldn't straighten itself, and it wouldn't stop. She was atop a long bridge, and she was flying towards the railing.

And the metal and the glass and the flames. In her dreams, Stephanie screamed.

Stephanie's eyes snapped open. She was sitting bolt upright on a swivel chair, her hands at her sides, and her cheeks strangely wet. Curious, she reached up and touched her cheeks with her hand, and

stared at the moisture as if she had never seen it before.

Then her gaze hardened. She wiped her face dry with both hands, and she cleared her nose with a sniff. She turned back to the computer.

The phone rang. Stephanie picked it up. "Phoenix Moribund Funeral Home?" There was a pause. Then she nodded. "I see. Fine. I'll tell him." With that, she hung up.

She turned, and suddenly found herself facing Moribund. "Let me guess," he said. "The Doctor's arrival has been confirmed."

Stephanie frowned. "How did you know?"

"This operation has been waiting for him ever since it began," said Moribund. "We're trouble, and wherever trouble goes, the Doctor is sure to follow." He snapped his fingers, and a gravedigger appeared from behind a doorway. "The latest delivery has arrived," he said, nodding to the garage. "Considering the recent arrival of the Doctor, I think it best that we rush the remaining orders."

The gravedigger nodded, and turned back to the door through which he had come. Seconds later, he returned, five others in tow, and the headed for the garage.

Moribund turned to Stephanie. "Notify the others." Stephanie nodded.

The gravediggers returned, bearing the delivery on their shoulders. They carried the coffin through the room and towards the steps that led to the basement.

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High up in an office tower, a young man, in his late twenties, tapped at a keyboard. His clean-shaven face accentuated his boyish features. He frowned at the screen. "Very interesting," he muttered.

He picked up the phone, which was lying off its cradle, beside the computer. "Jack, it's a shame you lost him, but at least you got some information. He's only been there an hour, and already he's hooked up with UNIT. He can't have gone far; you two keep an eye out for him. Shadow his friends; they'll lead you back to him, but be quiet about this. Thanks."

The man hung up the phone and pressed the button on his intercom. "Rodney, any messages?"

"One, Mr. Vaughan," said his secretary. "Mr. Will at Ad Infinitum called, asking for an appointment."

"You already know my answer. Under no circumstances do I want to talk to that parasite. Did you tell him that?"

"Uh, yes, sir. Sort of," the secretary replied. "Maybe not those exact words..."

"Whatever gets the job done, Rodney," said Vaughan.

"Oh, sir?" Rodney cut in. "Mr. Christopherson of Varner Incorporated is here for his meeting to discuss your buyout proposal?"

Vaughan smiled. "Good. Send him in."

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Ryan paced outside of the TARDIS. Not for the first time, he strode up the alleyway and glanced down the street. He perked up at the sight of the Doctor. "Doctor! We've got to come quickly, Sue's in the hospital! Well, she's not in the hospital really, but she met a friend and now her friend's in the hospital—" He launched into his story at lightning pace; Jones couldn't understand a word, but the Doctor listened patiently.

Then Ryan became aware of the young woman at the Doctor's side. He stopped in mid-sentence and stared at her in puzzlement. "Um, forgive me for being blunt, but who are you?"

Jones and the Doctor exchanged a glance. The Doctor nodded, and Wendy turned back to Ryan. She offered her hand. "Lieutenant Wendy Jones of the United Nations Intelligence Taskforce."

Ryan's eyebrows shot up. "Shouldn't you be in the United Kingdom? Does the U.S. Army know you're here?"

Jones' stare was grim. "Shouldn't you be in Chicago right now? Does the F.B.I. know they have an impostor in their midst?"

Ryan coughed. "Point taken, but as I'm sure you know, I can't help being here, two years before I was picked up, what with the Doctor being responsible." His face darkened. "What's your excuse?"

The Doctor placed himself between the two. "Now, now, we've more important things than jurisdictional squabbles. You said you lost Sue after she went in some unknown ambulance with an injured friend."

Ryan snapped back to the present. "Yes," he replied. "The police are calling all the hospitals and finding if Sue or Erin are listed as having arrived. It's taking some time, but if we get back to the police station now, we might find some answers waiting. Come on." He led the way.

The police station was five blocks away. Ryan strode to the front desk. The on-duty officer recognized him immediately. "Mr. Parnel, I think we found the information you're looking for." He handed him a slip of paper.

Ryan barely glanced at it. "Pfeifferlife Memorial Hospital. Thanks, do you know how we can get there?"

"I've written the directions," the officer replied.

"So you have," said Ryan, glancing bemusedly at the paper. "Thanks again. Come on, Doctor, let's go." The three hurried off.

The police officer stared after them. "Doctor? First the patient gets sent to the wrong hospital, and now her doctor needs someone to show him where that hospital is?"

They piled into Wendy's car and drove off. Behind them, a black car pulled out of a parking space and into traffic. One of the two dark-clothed men was behind the wheel, keeping the car in sight, until he was cut off by the van which pulled into his lane. He hit the brakes and leaned on the horn, cursing. Switching lanes, he sped up, trying to make up for lost time. The taxicab was barely in sight ahead of him.

Inside the car, the Doctor nudged Ryan. "Don't look behind us, but we're being followed," he muttered.

Ryan's blinked. "You would have made a good F.B.I. agent, you know? Who's following us?"

"Two men, in a black car," said the Doctor quietly, after glancing ahead in the rear view mirror. "They're the same two men who followed me out of the mall."

"That's interesting," said Ryan. "I've had this sense of being watched, almost since after leaving the TARDIS. Erin also mentioned making sure she wasn't followed. You think we've stumbled onto something?"

"Yes," said the Doctor. "As for what, I don't know. You say you felt as though you were being watched, but I can only identify two people actively shadowing us; those two in the car behind us."

"So what do we do?" asked Jones. "Confronting them?"

The Doctor shook his head. "No. We'll let them think that they're following us, and see what they're up to and who employed them."

Ryan sighed. He opened his mouth but before he could speak, the Doctor cut in, "And, no, you are imagining things, trouble does not follow me around!"

Ryan and Jones just sat in their seats and stared ahead, not saying a word.

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Father Blinkiron sat on a stool by a counter in the coffee shop, staring at the sun as it sank over the park and the lake. Before him, cars and trucks crept forward along the street while pedestrians stepped quickly along the sidewalk, shielding their faces from the rain. Finally, darkness set in and rush-hour traffic eased. Blinkiron left a tip and stepped out onto the street.

He crossed the park. The sounds of the cars faded behind him. At the other side of the park, he crossed a quiet street. Phoenix Moribund's funeral home was a hundred metres to his right. A graveyard stretched before him.

He surveyed it warily for a moment, wondering if his greater fear was of being caught at what he was about to do, or of something less rational to do about the graveyard itself. Or both.

After a moment's indecision, he put his doubts behind him. He'd checked the municipal death records of the past week. Five people dead from exposure. Another six dead from natural causes. Seven had been buried at other graveyards; the remaining four were still to be buried. And yet Moribund had buried twelve people here. Blinkiron had even seen the coffins.

He stepped through the gate and left the streetlights behind. Pausing for his eyes to adjust to the dark, he made his way with difficulty over the soft ground to the darkened administration building in the corner.

The door was locked, but Blinkiron was prepared for that. Using a lockpicking tool, he had the door open after a few minutes. He

cast his eyes heavenward guiltily for a second, and then went inside, pulling a flashlight from his pocket.

In the front room, a map of the graveyard was on the wall, showing the placement of new plots with the precision of a military campaign. The front desk was neat and empty. The door to the next room stood open, and a coffin was just in view.

Blinkiron drew himself up and stepped into the back room. He eyed the coffin for a moment. "No room at the inn?" he muttered grimly. He grabbed hold of a corner and shook it gently. There was no mistake. The coffin rattled.

"Just like the last," Blinkiron muttered. "What are you burying, Moribund?"

He tried the casket lid. It was unlocked. Taking a deep breath, Blinkiron opened it.

His eyes widened. The casket wasn't empty, but occupying it was nothing that he'd expected. He was staring at a pile of metal and plastic, including ball-bearings, rusted sheets, recycled bottles and scrap from model kits. There were even pieces of machinery, ground down to almost bite size.

"Scrap," Blinkiron breathed. "What is he doing burying scrap metal and plastic?"

He suddenly felt unsafe where he was. Closing the lid, he sped out of the office, barely remembering to shut the door. He scrambled past the gravestones, the soft ground sucking at his feet. He felt a dozen eyes watching him, though he could see no one at all.

Then he slipped and fell, catching his arm on a gravestone. He lay on the ground, wincing in pain. Then he tried to pull himself to his feet, and found that he could not. It was as though his foot was caught on a tree root, but Blinkiron realized that he wasn't near any trees. He turned his body as best he could and gasped in horror.

He was lying on top of a grave. From it, two tendrils, gleaming in the moonlight, were wrapped around his ankles and pinning them to the ground. More tendrils were sprouting. The ground was coming alive, entwining his body. "God help me," he breathed.

He saw a figure step up to the gravestone. It was Moribund, shaking his head disapprovingly.

"Moribund!" Blinkiron cried. "Help me!"

"You know what they say about curiosity and cats," said Moribund. "And unlike cats and us, you only have one life to live. Well, it's your fault for digging too deep."

"Moribund! Please! Help me—" Blinkiron's yell cut short when another figure stepped up to the grave and lean on the gravestone. It was Stephanie, holding a flower, staring at him with clinical interest. Blinkiron was dumbfounded.

Stephanie turned to Moribund as more tendrils reached from the grave to bind Blinkiron. "Why don't we use him?" she asked. "Seems appropriate given his profession. Besides, there's a risk he might be missed."

"You're right," said Moribund. "There is a risk. But while we can always use new bodies, we are on a budget. Blinkiron was unfortunate enough to learn too much just when we needed more raw organic material. Besides, he lives alone, and has no family. We can depend on some of our contacts to help keep his disappearance quiet. So, I think this is worth the risk."

Moribund snapped his fingers, and the tendrils around Blinkiron began to pull. Blinkiron let out a final scream. It was cut off as soon as the ground closed over him.

Stephanie stepped forward and laid a flower on the grave.

Episode Two: Death and Taxidermy

The Doctor, Ryan, and Jones strode up to the emergency desk of Pfeifferlife Memorial Hospital. Ryan briefly flashed his ID to the duty nurse. "My name's Ryan Parnel; there's a friend of mine visiting her friend who was in an accident?"

The nurse barely gave him a glance. "Name of patient?"

"Erin Varner," Ryan replied.

"Erin Varner," the nurse repeated as he typed in the key words. The computer screen flashed and information scrolled down. He blinked in astonishment. "Hit on the corner of Second Avenue and Cedar? That's well out of our jurisdiction—"

"Yes," said Ryan patiently.

"But she is here?"

"She shouldn't be," the nurse muttered. "Who was the idiot that dispatched the ambulance?"

"Look," Ryan growled. "You're not going to move her, so can we put the jurisdictional issues aside and see her? It took us a while to track her down."

"Room 403, down the left corridor," the nurse replied, still staring at his computer. "Who the heck sent out the ambulance?"

Taking an elevator to the fourth floor, they found the room and bumped into Sue in the corridor. She almost dropped the coffee she was carrying when she saw them. "What the hell took you so long? I was beginning to worry—"

"We'll explain later," said the Doctor. "How is she?"

"The doctors say she's bruised her ribs. Nothing serious, but she should stay the night for observation."

"Can we see her?" asked Ryan.

Sue nodded. "She's sleeping at the moment, but as long as we're quiet..." She motioned them inside.

As they entered, Sue shivered. Hospitals were so cold, she thought. Then all four were brought up short by the sight of a doctor standing over Erin, clipboard in hand.

"Excuse me," asked Sue. "Is there something wrong?"

The doctor turned around with a start. He was tall, bulky, and balding and had a scruffy toupee topping his square face. "Oh. You startled me," he said with a staccato-like voice. "You must be Miss Varner's friends. I'm Doctor Frederick Polson, plastic surgery."

The Doctor frowned. "Plastic surgery?"

"What are you doing here?" asked Sue warily. "Erin doesn't need plastic surgery. You're not adding any bits to her; she's going out of this hospital with the same pieces she went in with!"

"You needn't worry," said Doctor Polson. "Your friend is going to turn out just fine. I'm always contacted whenever a car accident victim comes in, to see if surgery is needed. Some people think that plastic surgery is all about liposuction, fake breasts, and facelifts. It isn't. There's plenty of reconstructive work involved as well. We could be talking about replacing a ligament with an elastic cord or artificial skin to a burn victim. Eventually, there may not need to be any surgery at all. Nanotechnology, when it comes, promises the opportunity to use machines no bigger than blood cells to repair damage at the cellular level. We could re-grow lost limbs, repair broken bones faster, and generally make bodies better than they were to begin with!"

"I see," said Sue neutrally.

Doctor Polson grinned nervously. "I'm sorry. I love my work, you see, and sometimes I have the tendency to proselytize. I'll leave you with your friend." He ducked between them and out the door. Ryan stared after him, puzzled. He was about to ask what the Doctor made of this, but he and Sue were already at Erin's bedside.

"Are you okay?" asked the Doctor.

"She's sedated," Sue replied. "She won't be up for a while."



"I was asking you, Sue."

She looked surprised. "Oh. Fine, I guess." She glanced at Erin, and shivered. "She was a good friend, but I lost contact with her about a year before I came on board the TARDIS. Now I end up meeting her out of the blue, and she ends up in an accident. And for a year, when I wasn't writing, I didn't know."

"You needn't feel guilty, Sue," said the Doctor sympathetically. "At least you still managed to visit her, a couple of years too late for yourself, but right on time for her."

Sue laughed at that. "Thanks."

"What do we do now?" asked Jones.

Sue blinked. "Who are you?"

The Doctor cleared his throat. "I think I'd better start by telling you what Lieutenant Jones of UNIT, here, told me." For the next few minutes he described his meeting with Jones and the information she'd provided him. When he was finished, Sue shook her head in disbelief. "It's shameful how we hog-tie UNIT here," she said. "Not only shameful, but dangerous. I'm sure aliens will extend us the courtesy of waiting while our international defence forces go through a whole set of red tape before attacking."

"It's not as simple as that," Ryan cut in. "I'm not sure if I'd want all my nation's defences left up to some people in Geneva—"

"Since when do aliens care about borders?" Sue quipped.

"Speaking as an alien," the Doctor interrupted, "the point is, something's going on, and we're getting entangled in it. It could get difficult as I've crossed your timelines. Do we want to get involved? It's your planet."

Sue and Ryan glanced at each other, then back to the Doctor. "It couldn't hurt to look," said Ryan.

The Doctor drew himself up. "Then, Ryan, as we've located Sue and Erin, you and I will go back and contact Lieutenant Jones. We'll just talk to her, no major investigating yet. Sue, you can stay by Erin. It's more important that she have company, now."

Sue nodded. "Thanks."

The Doctor took the time to bid the sleeping Erin good night before departing. Sue watched them go, then sat back in her chair, keeping an eye on her friend.

As the Doctor, Ryan and Jones strode out of Erin's room, they didn't notice Doctor Polson behind the floor's reception desk. He watched them depart down the elevator, then eyed Erin's door.

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On the phone, Stephanie turned to Moribund and Mr. Will. "The Doctor, one of his friends, and the UNIT woman have left the hospital. The Doctor's woman friend is still there with Erin Varner."

Moribund frowned. "How firm is our hold on that hospital?"

Stephanie spoke into the phone. "How is our security there?"

At the other end, Doctor Polson replied, "If Ms. Novak yells, as I suspect she might, the wrong people could take notice. Ask me two weeks from now, and we'd be fine, but..."

Stephanie turned back and shook her head.

"Tell them to wait and move on Miss Varner at their first opportunity," said Moribund. "That's all we can do."

"There's something else we can do," said Will. He held up his pen. "We could get her autograph..."

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Jones twisted the wheel as she made a left turn. Her passengers were pushed into the backs of their seats as she accelerated, then they were jerked sharply to the left as Jones veered right, wheels screeching.

"I hate driving in America," she hissed under her breath. "Why can't they drive on the left side like sensible people?"

"So, what do you have on the case?" the Doctor asked. "Turn right here."

"There's a file folder beside your seat." Jones nodded to it. "Have a look for yourself."

The Doctor removed the file folder and glanced through it. He passed each page to Ryan as he finished reading it. "The most you have are the meteors' trajectory," he commented. "Since then, no activity?"

"No," Jones replied. "We followed the standard procedure; we checked for unusual activity in plastics factories in case of Auton invasion. We didn't find anything: no unusual buyouts, no major

new product entering the market, although the Autons didn't use their standard procedure the last time they invaded."

"True, we shouldn't rule them out," the Doctor commented. "Although they're a cautious race. If they're beaten three times, they tend to steer clear. Turn right here—"

"Stop the car!" Ryan snapped.

The car screeched to a halt at an intersection. Jones pressed her head against the steering wheel. "Great! Now I have *two* back seat drivers in the car with me—"

Ryan wasn't listening. "Doctor, take a look at this map." He passed a sheet forward.

The Doctor looked at it. "It's the map detailing possible landing sites for the meteors," he said.

"Or, rather," said Jones, "the possible sites had they followed their trajectory; we were never able to identify exact landing sites. It's almost as though someone caught those meteors."

"Notice how those dots form an almost perfect hexagon?" asked Ryan. "What's at the centre of that hexagon?"

The Doctor looked. "A few things, a park, a church, a hospital—"

He stopped short. "That's Pfeifferlife Memorial Hospital."

"The place we just left?" said Jones in disbelief. "How could that be?"

"What if Pfeifferlife, or something close to it, was the target?" asked Ryan.

"Then why doesn't it show up as a landing site?" asked Jones.

"What if the six meteors were decoys?" asked the Doctor. "What if they were blown off a central meteor that was shielded from radar?"

"We'd better investigate." Jones twisted the wheel and turned the car around. Ryan and the Doctor were pressed into their seats again as she accelerated.

"Doctor," said Wendy, "there's a device in the glove compartment. Take it out."

The Doctor opened the glove compartment and removed a small, hand-held device not unlike a radar gun.

"That's a meteor detector," Jones explained. "I've had to recalibrate it somewhat to compensate for the high iron content of the local soil, but it detects the Ferro-magnetic fields associated with—"

The Doctor raised his hand for silence. The device was beeping steadily. "I've found something," he said.

Wendy looked ahead grimly. "And, we're at the hospital." She pulled into a parking spot by the curb. They got out and the Doctor aimed the device at the hospital building.

"Well," asked Wendy. "Is it the hospital?"

The Doctor frowned as the beeps slowed. "No," he said. He turned in a circle and stopped when the beeps sped up. He looked up and his perplexed expression deepened. "It's the graveyard!"

Jones and Ryan turned and stared behind them at the graveyard fence.

"The graveyard?" Jones echoed. "They buried it?"

"Let's have a closer look." The Doctor started forward a few paces before he realized that he wasn't being followed. He turned and looked at Wendy and Ryan, who were holding back. "Coming?"

"He can't be serious!" Jones muttered.

"Don't tell me you're superstitious," said Ryan.

"I don't have to be superstitious," said Jones. "I'm in UNIT! Vampires! Werewolves! Demonic possession! You name it, I've shot at it."

"So," Ryan pressed. "You're not afraid to go into a cemetery; you just think it would be a tactical error."

"I don't see you leading the way, boyo," muttered Wendy, striking off after the Doctor.

They strode into the graveyard, following the directions given by the clicking device. The sky was clear, and the moon made shadows out of the gravestones and the thickening mist. Despite himself, Ryan shivered. He still couldn't shake the feeling of being watched.

Stephanie stepped out from behind the cover of a tree and stared after the trio.

Ryan quickened his pace, bumping into the Doctor who had stopped abruptly. They were in the centre of the graveyard, staring around.

"What's wrong?" asked Wendy.

"I can't pinpoint the source of these readings," the Doctor

replied. "Levels are constant throughout the graveyard."

"What?" said Wendy. "Did the meteor vaporize?"

"I don't think so," said the Doctor. "It wouldn't make sense to go through so much trouble to shield a meteor from radar, only to have it destroyed on impact."

"Well, what then?" Wendy persisted. "Did more than one meteor land here? Or does the meteor cover the entire graveyard?"

"I don't have the answers to everything, you know!" the Doctor snapped.

As the Doctor and Wendy argued, Ryan stopped by a gravestone. He stared and took a step back. "Doctor..."

"What is it?" the Doctor asked as he and Wendy stepped to his side. Ryan pointed.

Wendy blinked. "Oh, sick! Who'd make a snow-angel in the dirt of a grave?"

There was a depression in the soft ground of a recently dug grave, roughly body shaped. There were footprints leading to the grave.

Wendy frowned at the silence. "What am I looking at?"

"Three people came to this gravestone," said the Doctor, pointing to each set of footprints in turn. "Two walked away. The third that didn't, was running when he reached this spot."

Wendy stepped closer to the impressions in the soft ground. "No blood. No sign of a dead body, at all. The third person must have left."

The Doctor shook his head. "No third set of prints leaving."

"Well, maybe he backtracked over his own footprints, or the footprints of the other two," Wendy persisted.

"No sign of that," the Doctor replied. "His footprints or the others would have shown signs of a double impression. There is no sign that the other two were carrying an especially heavy load when they left, so he wasn't carried off."

"So, what happened?" Jones laughed nervously. "Did the ground just swallow him up?"

There was a silence for a few seconds. Then Ryan abruptly turned around. "I think I would like to finish this conversation on the sidewalk." He marched off.

"Now who's superstitious," Jones muttered, but she too was taking a step or two back. She turned back to face the hospital. The building loomed over them.

"Misdirecting Sue and her friend here seems less and less like an accident," she said.

"I agree," said the Doctor. He looked up towards Pfeifferlife. "Come on. Let's get Sue. Suddenly I don't feel safe, here, either."

"When did you ever feel safe in a graveyard at night?" asked Wendy, following him out with relief.

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Sue rubbed her eyes and wondered what time it was.

It was almost nine in the evening. Visiting hours should be ending soon, she reflected, but no one had come to turf her out. In fact, since the last check up, nobody had turned up at all. Sue thanked the fates for this. The hall was quiet; Erin had a chance to sleep peacefully, and she'd been allowed to stay close to her friend.

Her head snapped up from its drowsiness again. She rubbed her eyes harder and yawned. If she didn't do something, she'd be asleep herself soon. She stood, stretched, stepped to the door, and peered out into the hallway. Wondering where the nearest vending machine was, she decided to go and look.

The sound of Sue's footfalls retreated into the distance. For a moment, there was silence. Then a bell dinged and elevator doors opened. Out came the sound of more footsteps, and a gurney being wheeled. They approached Erin's door. One person entered as the rest stood guard outside.

Erin woke, dazed. She took a breath, and winced as her ribs protested. She glanced around the room, squinting against the remaining haze of her sleep. A figure loomed in her vision.

Her eyes widened. "Uncle?" Her next words were cut off as the figure planted a pad touched with chloroform over her mouth and nose. Erin squealed, tried to struggle, but fell unconscious within seconds.

At a signal, two orderlies entered, wheeling a gurney. They gently took Erin from her bed and placed her on the stretcher. When the woman was secure, they wheeled her out of the room and down the corridor. Their footfalls faded into the distance.

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When Sue's search carried her through the corridors to the reception area, the duty nurse called her over. "Ms Novak? You arrived here with Erin Varner, right?"

Sue approached. "Yes, I'm sorry, I know visiting hours must be over."

"Not a problem," the nurse said. "I only called you here to sign a few papers."

Sue sighed. "More paperwork. Well, let's get it over with." She felt her pockets. The duty nurse offered her a pen with the clipboard. Sue barely glanced at the paper she was signing before she handed the items back. "Here you go. Do you know where I can get a cup of coffee around here?"

"I'm afraid the coffee shop is closed," said the nurse. "However, there is a vending machine at the end of that corridor there." He pointed.

"Thank you!" Sue walked off.

In the waiting area, Mr. Will set down his newspaper and stepped up to the reception desk. He exchanged smiles with the duty nurse as he retrieved the pen Sue had used to sign. Then he headed for the elevators.

Down the corridor, Sue was tapping her foot as she waited for the coffee machine to dispense her drink. The cup shot into its slot and a viscous liquid not unlike motor oil dribbled in. Sue pulled out the cup and sniffed it suspiciously. Then she tasted it, winced, swallowed, and let out a groan of revulsion. She considered throwing it out, then decided that the bad taste of the coffee would keep her awake as effectively as the caffeine. She sipped, then winced again.

Then a thought struck her. Her gaze sharpened. "If Erin's ambulance was sent from here by mistake, how did it manage to arrive first?" Her eyes widened. "It was a fifteen minute trip from the accident site to the hospital, but the ambulance had arrived in five minutes! It had been dispatched *before* the accident!"

A nervous feeling gripped her stomach. She ditched her coffee in the nearest garbage can and ran back to Erin's room. She shoved open the door, and stopped dead. She hesitated only a second before looking around for assistance. "Nurse? Nurse!"

She ran to the floor desk. The duty nurse had left, to be replaced by a younger, shyer man, Thanitopsis by his name badge. Moments later, she was dragging Nicholas down the corridor by his elbow.

"But I'm not a duty nurse, I tell you!" he shouted. "I'm just the hospital's mortician!"



She showed him Erin's room.

For a moment, Thanitopsis stared at the empty bed. He stepped in to check the chart, then looked at the bed again. The colour drained from his face. "Oh, no!" he breathed. "Not again! Lady, please say you're not with the press!"

"No, I'm F.B.I.," Sue replied quickly. "More importantly, that was my friend."

Thanitopsis reeled. This was all too much for him. "I'm sorry, I— Oh, God, I need a smoke!"

Sue grabbed his arm. "Listen carefully," she said firmly. "You did not misplace your patient; she was kidnapped. You are going to raise the alarm, and I am going to find my friend." She pointed down the corridor. "I was getting myself a coffee, so they didn't get past me that way." She pointed in the other direction. "Now, if you're carrying a body down this corridor, where would you go?"

Nicholas thought hard. "Well, they'd probably use a stretcher not to attract notice. There's an elevator, third corridor to the right; it leads to the loading bays—" He didn't finish his sentence, for Sue was already running at top speed.

"Third corridor!" he shouted. Sue stumbled, and skidded on the waxed floor. She scrambled up, ran back to the side corridor, turned sharply, and disappeared from sight.

Nicholas turned, and gasped in fright. A white-coated doctor was standing directly behind him, flanked by two orderlies. Nicholas touched his chest. "Doctor Polson, you scared me!"

Doctor Polson smiled.

Nicholas frowned. "Doctor Polson?"

One of the orderlies swung up his arm. There was the sound of a whip cracking, and then Nicholas slumped to the floor, his head at a rakish angle from his body.

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The hallway met another corridor in a T-junction, and she wildly looked left and right for any sign of Erin's kidnappers. She heard an elevator door start to close. Turning left, she dashed forward, arriving just as the doors slid shut in her face. She thumped the control panel in frustration before she spotted the door to the stairwell. She was two flights down before the door swung closed.

She emerged onto the ground floor, just as the elevator doors closed again. She heard distant footfalls and a wheeling stretcher pushing open a pair of swing doors, and she ran in the direction of the sound. The corridor became darker and less clean, until she met a pair of utility doors. Pushing through, she emerged onto the loading bays.

There she stopped, looking around frantically, but somehow her quarry had disappeared. She listened hard, but the only sound she heard were crickets chirping in the distance. No sound of screeching rubber or an engine revving down the street.

She shivered, and not because of the cold. She tried to stifle the pangs of guilt, and failed. You failed, Sue. You failed to take her fears seriously, you failed to prevent the car accident, now you've failed to prevent her kidnapping. You're nothing more than a big failure. Furious, she kicked at the concrete platform.

Her eyes caught sight of a dark house directly ahead. There was a car in the garage and Sue could just make out the lettering on its side. "Phoenix Funeral Home?" she muttered. Then she blinked in astonishment. Beside the hearse, shrouded in shadows, was an ambulance, the same design as the one which had picked Erin up from the accident.

"Oh, no you don't," Sue muttered. "Find some other way to

increase your business!" She jumped down from the loading platform and ran across the parking lot to the iron fence. She spotted the gate without much difficulty. The hinges were well oiled, and she was able to enter the grounds silently. Her feet quiet on the grass, her body camouflaged in shadow, she made her way towards the home. A back door was close by, but locked. However, the handle and lock shone like new, and the porch showed no signs of disuse.

She pulled out a hairpin, muttering, "Always be prepared," and set to work on the lock. Within a minute she was inside.

The interior was exactly as she pictured it to be, remembering another funeral home visited much earlier in her life. Her mind raced. This was the only place the kidnappers could have taken Erin. If they were an organized group, and their efficiency suggested so, then her entry here must have been too easy. Where were the booby traps? Or was the funeral home just a convenient place for the orderlies to race to?

As she pushed open another door, she shivered involuntarily. Before her, blocks in the darkness, sat three coffins, waiting. Sue was about to close the door when she spotted the light at the other end of the room. There was another door, and she heard people behind it, talking.

Without another thought, she crept in, keeping the coffins between her and the door as cover. All the while, her ears strained to listen to the conversation. Finally she was at the coffin closest to the door. There was no more cover. She hesitated. As she eavesdropped, she unconsciously leaned against the casket.

It struck her then that her hand was resting on something soft. If that something soft was in a coffin, it was logical to assume that she was resting her hand on a corpse. She drew back involuntarily before another thought struck her. This 'corpse' was still warm.

She leaned close, and her heart leapt. "Erin?" she breathed. She felt for a pulse and was relieved to discover one. "Erin?" she whispered, giving the woman a shake. Erin began to mumble.

"Hmm, wha- wh, wh- hmmmph!" Erin's words were cut off as Sue clamped a hand down on her mouth. The woman was drugged, and any loud noise could attract the kidnapper's attention. She looked up as the conversation resumed in the next room.

"She's in the next room, ready for the operation," said one voice.

"Any trouble bringing her here?" asked another voice.

"We were followed," said the first, "but I think we lost her."

"How?" asked the other.

"We were fast. We ran across the parking lot to get here. She couldn't have had time to find us."

"Then why is Moribund standing behind her?"

Sue blinked. When somebody cleared their throat, she turned around.

Moribund stood with his hands clasped before him, smiling pleasantly. "May I help you?"

Sue opened her mouth to say some excuse and apology, but no words came out. Just what sort of excuse could you come up with after being found following kidnappers into a funeral home? "Um..." was the best she could manage.

"Would you please come with me, Miss?" Without waiting for her reply, he took her arm and led her away. Sue's mind reeled. How did he know she was here? How did the others know he knew? What in the world has Erin gotten caught up in?

Moribund was pulling her to a stairway leading to the basement. At the bottom, she saw six gravediggers stepping up purposefully.



Then her mind cleared enough that she decided to struggle. Moribund's grip tightened desperately as she caught him off guard. For a split second, the two were teetering precariously at the top of the stairs, then a final punch sent Moribund over. He rolled over the steps with a clatter and knocked down the six gravediggers on top of him.

"Strike!" Sue yelled. Then she ran back to Erin's coffin. She debated slapping her awake, then thought better of it. The woman has bruised ribs, she won't get far. She probably wouldn't take kindly to being carried, either. Sue looked over the casket desperately for inspiration, and brightened. The coffin was on a trolley, and there were no steps to negotiate between here and the garage.

Pushing hard, she steered the coffin out of the room, while she heard shouts emanate from the stairwell. She ran to the back door and into the garage. It felt like an eternity while she struggled to open the back of the hearse, manhandle the coffin in, and get behind the wheel. She was busy hot-wiring the car when she heard raised voices from the hallway.

"Please," she breathed. "If anything I learned in my misspent youth is to count for something, let it be now!"

She gasped in delight as the engine chortled to life. Alarmed voices rang out from the funeral home. Sue put the car in gear and executed a quick three-point turn in the back yard, flooring the accelerator as Moribund and the pallbearers ran out. They hesitated for just a second before diving out of harm's way. The hearse careened onto the road and screeched away.

It wasn't long before she saw activity in the rear view mirror. She spotted a second hearse charge out of the funeral home's driveway and set off after her. The ambulance followed it. She shoved the accelerator hard to the floor and turned sharply left at the next intersection. The coffin slid to the right, hitting the side of the hearse with a thump. Erin let out a groan.

"Sorry," muttered Sue grimly. "But I'm not going to let this be the drive to your funeral!"

Two tourists, returning home from a night at the theatre, spotted the approaching vehicles and stepped back onto the curb. They stared in disbelief as Sue's hearse careened right at their intersection at over sixty miles per hour.

"Late for his own funeral, do you think, Martha?" George muttered.

The ambulance roared past.

Martha blinked. "Business must be competitive! What did they do, snatch the body before it was dead?"

The second hearse rushed by.

George shook his head in disbelief. "I've heard of ambulance chasers, but this takes the cake!"

A few blocks away, a police officer pointed his radar gun at an approaching red Porsche. The display read "40".

"Over," he said to his partner.

His partner looked up from behind the newspaper. "Not worth it."

Another car passed. 50. "Over."

"Not worth it."

Another car. 45. "Over."

"Division superintendent, on his way home," his partner replied, waving to the passing vehicle. "You want to tell him he's busted?"

"Look, the law is the law," the young man began.

"I'm not training you in the law, son" said his partner. "Just how to use the radar gun"

The trainee heard rather than saw the next vehicle. He pointed the radar gun and looked at the display. 84.

Then he looked up.

He and his partner stared dumbfounded as the hearse, the ambulance and the second hearse passed in quick succession.

"This, we check out," said the older officer. Wheels squealing and sirens blaring, the police car roared into pursuit.

Sue heard the sirens over Prince's voice and glanced in her rear view mirror. She cast her eyes heavenward. "This is all I need!"

In the police vehicle, the officer in the passenger seat picked up the radio. "Headquarters, you are not going to believe this!"

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Jones wheeled her car down the street. The Doctor stared ahead grimly. Ryan was frantic. "Where the hell could she be? There's no way we can find her in this city—"

Beside Jones, a two-way radio came to life. "Headquarters, you

are not going to believe this. We're in pursuit of a high speed car chase."

"What's so hard to believe about that?" the dispatcher asked.

"Well, sir, the lead car is a hearse, its pursuer is another hearse, and both are being pursued by an ambulance. The ambulance is not responding to an emergency, sir, repeat *not* responding to an emergency. It is clearly in pursuit of the hearses."

"Guys, I know I'm new here, but I've already had my fair share of initiation pranks," the dispatcher replied.

The Doctor and Ryan looked at each other. "Sue," they said in unison.

"Quiet," said Jones. "Where did they say the chase was?"

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Sue pressed the accelerator to the floor and kept an eye out for the next intersection. She darted right and spotted a laneway. Wheels screeching, the car dove inside. Sue prayed that it wasn't a dead end.

To her relief, she realized that she could see to the next street, and jammed the accelerator down. A glance in her rear view mirror showed the pursuing hearse driving past down the street. Hope rose in her heart. Then she saw the ambulance turn directly down her lane. It hadn't been fooled. The hearse came back and tried to turn down the lane after the ambulance, just as the police car arrived. The two screeched to a halt, inches apart.

Sue nodded grimly. Two down, one to go.

Her hearse roared out of the laneway onto a main street, barely avoiding a city bus. She wheeled around it and took off down the right lane. The coffin thumped against the side of the hearse again. Erin groaned. Sue muttered an apology.

In her rear view mirror, Sue saw the bus limp forward, before being almost rammed by the ambulance, which screeched to a halt. At the sight of the emergency vehicle, however, the bus driver accelerated as fast as he could to allow the ambulance to pass. Sue clenched her teeth in frustration.

Movement caught her eye, and she looked right. Behind a row of buildings, a freight train rumbled. Sue's hearse was slowly overtaking it. She could see the tracks stretching ahead. One by one, the protective arms of the crossing gates came down across the side streets.

Sue hesitated. She was barely a few kilometres per hour faster than the train, and not only did she have to catch up, but she had to overtake it with time enough to clear the crossing, or else she would be driving Erin to her funeral after all. Then she remembered the kidnappers' words "ready for the operation," and she pressed the accelerator to the floor.

Sue kept one eye on the road and the other on the train as she slowly overtook the trio of green Burlington Northern locomotives. When she was sure of the distance, she twisted the wheel and careened to the right. The cross buck had already descended across the side street, but Sue didn't care. She could see the headlights of the train converging on her hearse. Twenty feet. Fifteen.

The 4000 horsepower diesel locomotive blared its horn as the hearse smashed the crossbuck and dove across the tracks. The engine cleared the car by two feet. Sue let out a cheer. A glance at the rear view mirror showed the ambulance forced to wait as the long freight train rumbled through the crossing.

All three down. Now to get Erin to a proper hospital. Sue spotted a likely looking building on the horizon and made for it.

She pulled her hearse into the emergency driveway entrance of Minneapolis General Hospital and screeched to a halt. In the distance, she could hear sirens wailing, but she couldn't see from which direction they were coming. Darting around to the back, she yanked out the coffin and wheeled it on its trolley through the front doors.

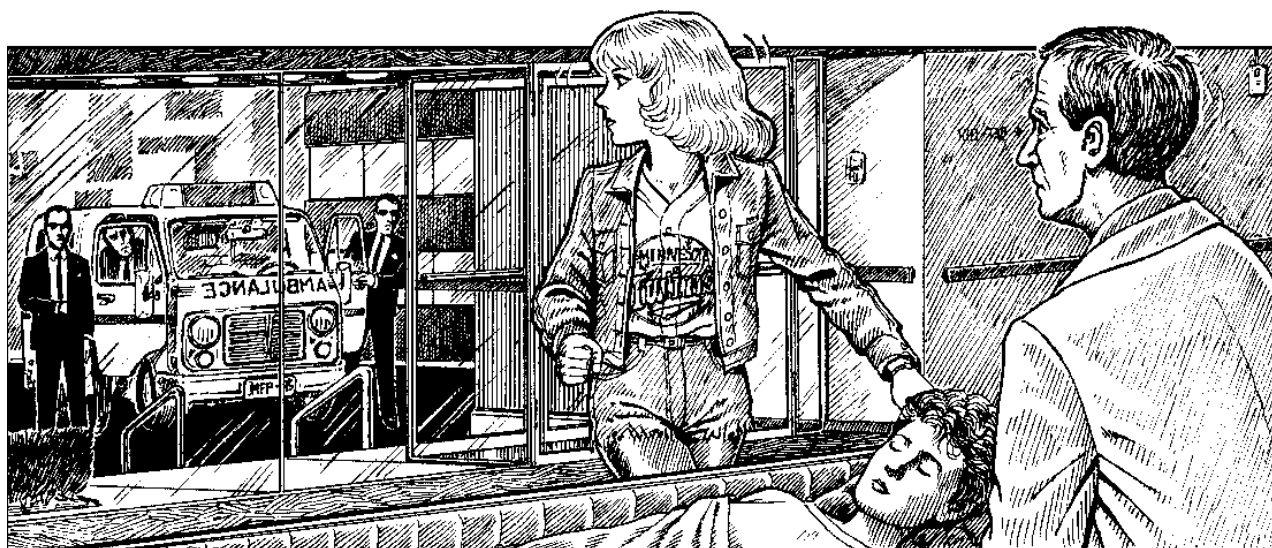
The orderly looked up in surprise. "What's the meaning of this?"

"Admit this woman at once!" Sue demanded, indicating Erin.

The orderly stared at Erin and the coffin in disbelief. "Aren't you a little late?" he managed.

Erin mumbled as she struggled awake. She glanced around at the coffin around her and her eyes widened in horror. "Oh, my God!"

Sue glanced at the orderly who was staring, mouth agape in shock. She shrugged. "She got better?"



Without a word, the orderly fainted. Then a sound made Sue turn to the coffin; she darted forward, but before she could reach her friend, Erin had fainted too.

Sue looked from the orderly to Erin in indecision, then choose the orderly. She pulled him to his feet and slapped his cheeks. "Hey! Wake up! Wake up!" When the nurse was awake enough to see her, she showed him her ID "I'm an F.B.I. agent, and my friend's in trouble. You've got to help us."

At this, the orderly pulled himself together. He pressed the intercom. "Paging Doctor Prophin, to the emergency desk, immediately!" He turned back to Erin. "What happened?"

"Car accident and kidnapping," Sue replied, looking over Erin. "Some drugs were used in the kidnapping."

A young man in a white coat ran over from one of the hallways. He strode over to Sue. "I'm Doctor Prophin, what's—" He stopped short at the coffin. "Aren't you a little la—"

"Don't say it!" Sue flashed him her ID. "Take this woman to a safe place. She's injured, and criminals are after her." Her heart sank; outside she heard the roar of an engine. Her sixth sense told her it wasn't anybody good. "Get somebody to call the police." She glanced out the door.

"What's going on?" asked Doctor Prophin, perplexed. "That isn't our ambulance! What's it doing in our jurisdiction?"

"It's not a real ambulance!" said Sue frantically. The ambulance had spotted the hearse and had parked opposite the street to the hospital. "Listen to me, you've got to hide my friend, or she's dead!"

She saw the doctor's look of shock. Turning back towards the door she saw that the people driving the ambulance had stepped out. It was Moribund and two of his pallbearers, all dressed in black. One of them felt his inside pocket. She smiled grimly. That would be all the convincing the doctor would need.

"They've got guns!" the doctor gasped. He gestured frantically at the orderly. "Put her somewhere, the next empty room. Get somebody to watch her and, for goodness' sake, call the police!"

Sue's mind raced as the pallbearers spread out from the ambulance and approached the emergency doors. Instinctively, she reached for her gun, then cursed the Doctor for having taken it.

"Come on, think!" she berated herself. Then an idea struck her. "The lights are on behind us, right?" she asked Doctor Prophin. Not waiting for an answer, she muttered, "that mean's we're in silhouette to them; they can't see details. Here, take this—"

Prophin blinked as Sue touched his hand as though to pass him something, but there was nothing there. "What are you doing—"

"Don't show them your hand is empty," Sue ordered. "Just do exactly what I do."

She placed her hand in the pocket of her jacket and held it away from her body. Curious, the doctor mimicked her. To Sue's relief, the pallbearers stopped dead, then started backing cautiously towards the cover of the ambulance.

"What did you do?" asked the doctor.

"Ever see The Godfather? I made them think we were armed," she replied. "Don't faint on me."

"Oh, dear God," Prophin breathed. "What if they start shooting at us?"

Sue's glance at him wasn't very encouraging.

Prophin slumped against the door. "Why did you get me involved?"

"If they know we're unarmed, there's nothing to stop them from marching in, snatching Erin and perhaps a few hostages. We have to bluff them out."

Then Sue noticed that the pallbearers had turned and were staring down the road away from the hospital. Without a word, they darted into the ambulance and drove off in the other direction, wheels screeching. As the doctor and Sue looked on incredulously, they became aware of the sounds of sirens in the distance. A police car appeared on the horizon and approached the hospital. Sue and the doctor breathed a sigh of relief.

"You attend to Erin," she said to Doctor Prophin. "I'll handle things from here." The doctor nodded gratefully and ran off into the hallway, eager to get away.

The police car screeched to a halt outside the emergency entrance. Three officers jumped out, two men and a woman. They approached as Sue stepped out to greet them. "Thank God you've come—" she began, but the police sergeant cut her off.

"We hear that you've been menacing people with a concealed weapon," he snapped.

Sue shivered under the malevolent stare of the two male officers. The female officer stood behind the pair of them, dwarfed in both size and in bearing.

"I don't have a gun," Sue began nervously.

"We've got reports of you standing here, waving a weapon about," the constable interrupted.

"If you let me explain—" Sue began to reach into her jacket pocket. She stopped short as the officers tensed, placing their hands over their guns. "I'm a federal agent," she continued clearly. "I'm reaching for my ID." She pulled out her ID carefully, keeping her hand in the officer's view. She passed it to the sergeant.

The police sergeant gave her ID a cursory glance, as did the male constable. The female officer peered over both their shoulders for a better look.

The sergeant pocketed the ID "Would you come with us, please?"

Sue blinked. "What are you talking about? I'm here to protect a woman from kidnappers. You can't take me off my post!"

The female officer piped up. "Sir, what are you doing? She's F.B.I.!"

"Don't get above your station," the sergeant snapped. "If I believe this woman is using fake ID, I can take her downtown and call the bureau to check out her story. Would you like me to do that?" he asked Sue.

Sue paled. One call was all they needed to make her life extremely difficult.

"Sir," the female officer interrupted. "If you're wrong, the penalties are severe. You could be interfering with a federal investigation!"

The male constable looked Sue up and down. Despite herself, she shivered, and not just in light of the two's strip search suggestion.



He glanced disdainfully at the female officer. "We're not interfering with a federal investigation."

"How do you know?" the female officer persisted.

"The same reason we're the duty officers, and you're the trainee," the Sergeant replied. He turned back to Sue. "You're coming with us." Sue began to back away. The two male officers held their hands ready over their guns as they advanced. They gripped Sue's arms and hauled her towards the police car.

The screech of wheels and the roar of an engine brought them up short. A car wheeled into the emergency driveway and halted just behind the police car.

Lieutenant Jones jumped out. "What's going on here?"

"Who are you, ma'am?" demanded the police sergeant.

"Why are you arresting this woman?" Jones persisted.

"They think she's impersonating a federal agent," the female officer replied. She couldn't mask the disdain in her voice.

"I ask again," the sergeant shouted. "Who are you?"

"I'm Lieutenant Jones of the United Nations Intelligence Task Force." Jones carefully reached into her pocket and showed her ID "And I vouch for this woman personally. Let her go."

The female officer frowned. "UNIT? What's going on? Do you have jurisdiction here?"

Wendy's car door opened and the Doctor stepped out. "What's going on?"

The police sergeant stared at the Doctor. Immediately the two officers released Sue and stepped back. "I'll take your word for it, ma'am," said the sergeant to Jones. He gave Sue a glare. "Just don't cause any more trouble."

As he turned to go, Sue cleared her throat. She held out her hand and tapped her foot impatiently. The sergeant paused, then yanked out Sue's ID and tossed it back. Then he strode for his car.

The female officer looked around in confusion as her two male colleagues got back into the police car. She followed and climbed into the back seat. With the screech of wheels, the police car roared off, leaving Sue, Ryan, the Doctor and Jones staring after it.

Ryan stepped to Sue's side. "Are you all right?"

Sue realized that she was holding her breath. She let it out slowly. "I think so," she replied. "That was scary. I got the distinct impression that those two officers were out to get me."

"What happened?" asked the Doctor.

Sue described her experience. When she finished, all three had to shiver, even the Doctor. "That is frightening," said Jones. "If we can't trust the police, then who can we trust?"

"And how did those particular officers know how to find me?" asked Sue. "If they were part of some conspiracy, whatever it is, then who contacted them? When they left, the police arrived, just like that." She snapped her fingers. "Even if they used a radio, that squad car would have to be waiting beyond the next corner to come so quickly."

"We're grasping at straws here," said the Doctor. "We've come upon something or someone who's cast his net very wide, indeed. We stand a good chance of getting ensnared if we aren't careful."

"I think someone should take a look at Pfeifferlife Memorial Hospital," said Jones. "That seems to be a centre of operations, but

from your description it doesn't appear to be completely involved. They had to remove Erin's body as quickly as they could to some place out of the way."

"That's a good idea," the Doctor replied. "Ryan, do you want to do that?"

"I'll do it," Jones volunteered. "Before I do, though, I'll contact UNIT. If we can't trust the police, we're going to need backup."

Ryan blinked. "Won't that take some doing? Doesn't UNIT deployment on U.S. soil require a local state of international emergency?"

"My friends in Geneva can work that for me," Jones replied. "In fact, I'm due to report in a half hour, so I'd better head back to my hotel room. I'll tell them what I've found, and Geneva will do the rest."

The Doctor, Sue and Ryan bid their temporary farewells as Jones stepped into her car and drove off.

"What about us?" asked Ryan. "How do we investigate something as large as this?"

"I don't know," said the Doctor. As if in search for inspiration, he cast his eyes down the street. "But I can think of a place to start. Those two people who have been shadowing us are out there again."

Sue tensed. "What are we going to do? Confront them?"

The Doctor sighed. "Why not?"

Ryan frowned. "But earlier you said—"

"I'm sick of playing these games," said the Doctor.

Sue and Ryan turned in unison. With the Doctor behind them, they stepped onto the sidewalk and strode purposefully towards the two dark men loitering by a street lamp. The two looked up, perplexed, as the trio approached. They began to back away. The Doctor, Sue and Ryan continued their advance. The two men turned around and began walking away nonchalantly, feigning innocence. A glance behind them told them the trio weren't fooled. The two men took off at a run.

"Get 'em!" the Doctor shouted, and Sue and Ryan darted forward, catching up with their quarry and knocking them down with good football tackles. Within seconds, Sue had her victim in a hammerlock while Ryan held his man in a painful wristlock.

"Ow! Ow!" cried Ryan's victim. "Hey, can't we all just get along?"

"Let them go," the Doctor ordered.

Sue blinked. "Why?"

"If you haven't noticed," the Doctor replied. "They're not armed."

Sue and Ryan glanced at each other, then shrugged. They dropped their victims and left them laying on the sidewalk, clutching their respective injuries.

The Doctor smiled down on them. "Now then, my dear chaps, why have you been following me?"

The man clutching his arm answered back. "The boss told us to keep an eye on you. He said nothing about harming you or your friends."

The Doctor raised his eyebrows. "Why ever for? And just who is your boss?"

"I don't know why," the man replied. "Only the boss knows."

"And who is your boss?" the Doctor repeated patiently.

"He'd dock our pay if we told you," the victim of Sue's hammerlock croaked.

"Oh, dear," the Doctor replied. "That's too bad. The U.S. doesn't have adequate hospital insurance, I hear, and here are two friends of mine eager to practise the latest wrestling moves. I suppose your salaries include a good medical plan?" He made a point of holding Sue and Ryan back, who leaned forward menacingly.

"Vaughan Industries," stammered the man with the sore arm. "Quentin Vaughan gave us our orders."

"Vaughan Industries put in a bid to take over Varner Incorporated," Sue explained to the Doctor. "Malcolm Varner, Erin's uncle, was almost the only board member to oppose the deal."

"I see." The Doctor helped the two men to their feet and brushed the dust off their clothes. "I think I should pay a visit to this Quentin Vaughan. Could you arrange that?"

"Doctor, is this wise?" asked Sue.

"Certainly," he replied. "You'll stay here to guard Erin, while Ryan and I will visit Vaughan. I suspect he knows something about me, more than he's letting on. He may also have a bird's eye view of the corporate world and what's happening to Varner Incorporated."

"But these people are bodyguards," Sue protested, "They were sent to keep an eye on you, and now you're walking into the lion's den!"

"Not really," the Doctor pointed out. "Remember, these men weren't armed. I find this Vaughan to be an interesting man already, and I want to see more. Are you with me, you two?"

After a moment's hesitation, Ryan nodded. "All right."

"You two take care of yourselves," Sue ordered.

"Yes, mother," the Doctor replied. He turned to the two perplexed shadowers. "Take me to your leader." He flashed a grin at Sue and Ryan. "I've always wanted to say that."

Ryan cast his eyes heavenward as he followed the Doctor and the two men to a car. Sue watched nervously as the vehicle drove off and disappeared from view. Then she shivered, feeling a presence. She looked around; the only person she could see was the silhouette of a man behind a window in the house across the street, and he was aiming a telescope at the clear night sky. She dismissed her irrational fears and turned back.

The telescope focused on Sue as she re-entered the hospital.

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The two men drove the Doctor and Ryan to a skyscraper in downtown Minneapolis. Getting out, they led the two into an austere lobby towards an elevator bay. Choosing a particular elevator, they punched a special code into a keypad and inserted a magnetic card.

Ryan tensed. "Doctor," he muttered. "I've got that feeling of being watched again."

The Doctor glanced around the lobby. It was late evening, but there were still a number of people walking in and out of a gourmet restaurant, entering the elevated walkway connecting other buildings in the downtown, or pausing at a news-stand.

"We can't deal with that at the moment," he told Ryan. "We have other things to investigate."

The elevator proceeded directly to the sixtieth floor. When the doors parted again, the Doctor and Ryan walked out into a carpeted reception area. A secretary sat at the reception desk, calmly sanding his nails. He looked up as the party approached.

"Guests to see Mr. Vaughan, Rodney" said one of the men. "They don't have an appointment," he added as the secretary reached for the appointment book. This brought a glare from the secretary.

"You're always bringing in people to see Mr. Vaughan who don't have appointments," he grumbled. "What is my job here to you? Why did you hire me in the first place if it wasn't to book appointments? Do you know he types all his own work? I'm useless here! The only thing I ever do is answer phones, and they're all for him anyway! I know I'm getting paid \$12 per hour, but my job's got to mean something, too, you know! I get no respect around here!"

As they led the Doctor and Ryan past the reception desk and into the office anteroom, the man in the lead shrugged apologetically. "It's another week to his vacation." They knocked on the door and were greeted with a "Come in!" from the other side. They entered.

"Mr. Vaughan," said the lead man, "the Doctor and Agent Ryan Parnel here to see you." The man behind the desk nodded and the two men left, closing the door behind them.

"Come in." Vaughan beckoned the Doctor and Ryan towards two plush chairs before his desk. "I hear you gave my two information gatherers the fright of their life."

"Well, they were acting rather suspicious," the Doctor replied, looking the man up and down. The man behind the desk was young. His dark hair was slicked back from a cherubic face that grinned mischievously almost every time he was at rest. He stood up to shake their hands warmly before sitting down.

An uncomfortable silence followed, which Vaughan broke. "You're probably wondering why I put a tail on you, Doctor."

"That I am," the Doctor replied.

"In the corporate world, one only gets ahead by keeping one's eyes open," said Vaughan. "I do a lot of that. It's a competitive business world these days, so when interesting things develop, I want to know more. For instance, why

would a corporate executive like Erin Varner make contact with members of the F.B.I. and someone from UNIT?"

The Doctor frowned. "How did you find out that I'm associated with UNIT?"

Vaughan's smile was brief. "Unofficial sources."

"Did your sources claim me to be a member of an organization known collectively as 'The Doctor'?" the Doctor asked.

"They did make mention of that, yes," Vaughan replied.

Ryan bristled. "That's a CIA file you've seen, there!"

"Ryan, calm down," the Doctor ordered. "I don't think he meant any harm." He glanced at Vaughan. "In fact, I don't know what he means by getting all this information. Why are you interested in this?"

Vaughan paused uncertainly, and then drew himself up. "I'll tell you. My company has appeared almost out of nowhere on the corporate scene. I got here by producing that one piece of software that everybody needed; they just didn't know they needed it until I told them. But I knew that to stay ahead, I had to be aggressive, diversify, and all that, so I immediately channelled my profits into making my company grow. I first locked horns with Malcolm Varner when I acquired Nanosystems Technologies. Varner was looking to invest in this newly established biotech company, but he was a little conservative. He kept delaying the deal and offering only a small amount of cash. I know nanotechnology is going to be the next big thing, so I doubled Varner's offer. Since then, I've also been trying to buy out Varner itself and my bid was going well, until something cropped up."



"What?" the Doctor asked.

"My bid with Varner is going easily, almost too easily," Vaughan replied. "There have been strange movements in the Midwestern marketplace. Companies have been going under, while others have seen their stocks skyrocket. It doesn't make sense, even with the naturally unpredictable nature of the stock market. Something tells me that there's a big player out there, behind the scenes, playing with people's money, but for the life of me, I can't quite see who, or even why."

He nodded to the pair of them. "Then you two arrived, and things got really strange. You link up with Erin Varner, an executive of a company that's been shaken apart by the malicious stock market. I've heard about Erin's accident, and I've read enough gangster books to realize it was arranged. I've also heard about Agent Novak's hearse chase, which suggests to me that she was protecting Erin from some imminent danger."

He sat back in his chair. "I'm in a bit of a predicament. I've been going after Varner stock for a while, and Malcolm Varner, who never forgave me for upstaging him on Nanosystems Technologies, fought me tooth and nail until he fell to his death a couple of weeks ago. Now Erin, the only executive member left who opposes the deal, gets into a convenient accident. The involvement of UNIT and the F.B.I. strongly suggests that there's a conspiracy afoot regarding that company. If bad things come to light, I'm an automatic suspect."

"Putting a tail on us didn't allay that perception," the Doctor put in.

"I know," Vaughan replied. "But I needed to know more about what was going on. My deal with Varner Incorporated goes through tomorrow at midnight. If I'm buying the corporate equivalent of a time bomb, I want to know about it!"

"Corporate politics bore me," said the Doctor with a sigh. "So much ado about money. Erin just happens to be Sue Novak's friend from her college days, that's all. We're dealing with what Ryan would call a 'Classified Operation', operatives of which aren't likely to indulge in corporate take-overs—"

"Doctor," Ryan cut in, "You're forgetting the Autons."

The Doctor blinked. "You're right. They've indulged in corporate take-overs before."

"You know the amount of money big business controls," Ryan added. "Enough to outspend two or more developed nations. Gain control of that, and you've already gained control of a piece of the world."

"Whoa, there!" Vaughan laughed. "I don't want to take over the world—"

"But there are plenty of others who do," said the Doctor. He leaned forward, pursing his lips in thought. "I'm sorry to say that I don't know how I can help you. If you were to become a suspect, which I doubt, simply telling others what you have told me should be enough to clear you of suspicion, but it doesn't deal with the greater conspiracy. If somebody else wants Varner stock, who and why? Were there any other major buyers?"

Vaughan shook his head. "Many backed off when they heard that I was moving in. Since I heard about this conspiracy, I've also been looking for suspect companies who may have been destabilizing Varner stock, but I've had no luck."

"Why did Varner's stock drop?" asked the Doctor.

"A variety of factors, I think," Vaughan replied. "It started after I beat them on Nanosystems Technologies, but for the most part, they were unlucky. Health problems on a board of directors is something most stockbuyers don't want to hear. However, they've also missed a number of opportunities in the market place. Except for their regional sales, which are handled by Erin, profits have been down across the board. For that, I can only blame lax management." He chuckled. "Sometimes I think they wanted to be taken over."

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Sue sat by Erin's bedside. She took a sip of her cup of coffee and grimaced. "I wonder if they make it this bad to keep the visitors from staying too long," she muttered.

She felt a presence behind her and she whirled around. She caught herself and laughed off her alarm. "Oh, it's you. You startled me."

Jones stepped into the room. "I'm sorry," she replied. "I didn't want to disturb you."

"Did you contact UNIT?"

Jones' attention was on Erin. She didn't register Sue's question for another second. She snapped up and said, "Oh, yes."

"Are they coming?"

"Yes," Jones replied. "I'll meet them at my hotel room; we'll organize things there. How are you doing?"

"Fine, just watching my friend. She's sleeping comfortably. Also, I've talked to the doctors; they're keeping a strict eye on who goes in and out of this room. There'll be no more kidnapping attempts, not while I'm around."

"How do you know you can trust them?" asked Jones.

Sue frowned. "I just do," she replied, finally. "I talked with each one of them personally... I just feel as though they're trustworthy, not like that Doctor Polson at Pfeifferlife." She grinned. "I know, female intuition and all that sexist garbage, but—" She shrugged. "Besides, I'm not letting Erin out of my sight this time." Just then a yawn caught her so hard her eyes watered.

"You haven't had any rest," Jones noted. "Are the doctors going to let you stay here all night?"

"I've arranged it with them," Sue answered. "There'll be no problem." Another yawn shook her again.

"If you want to stay up longer, you'd better get up and walk around a bit," Jones suggested. "Try some coffee." She blinked. "Oh, you already have!"

"And it's going into the nearest potted plant as fertilizer," Sue finished. "You know, I haven't had a decent brew of mocha since coming on board the TARDIS. God, I'm homesick," she added semi-seriously. Then she stood up and stretched. "Would you mind keeping an eye on her? I'm going to throw this stuff away and get something else. Hospitals may have terrible coffee but they can't mess up a normal chocolate bar!"

"They can be stale," said Jones.

"If they are, then we definitely need proper Medicare," Sue quipped, smiling. Jones smiled back. She watched Sue step into the corridor and peer this way and that for a vending machine. None were in sight. Finally, Sue turned right and followed the directions to the cafeteria.

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She still has a visitor?" asked Moribund into the phone. "And she's being watched by the hospital staff?" His fingers tapped the desk. "Abort this. Let's concentrate on the Doctor's companion."

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Vaughan glanced at his watch. "Our conversation has been most illuminating, Doctor, but we're going to have to continue it another time."

"A hot appointment?" the Doctor asked.

"You might say that," Vaughan replied. "I'm to meet with the interim Varner Incorporated president to finalize the deal."

Ryan frowned. That would be Christopherson, wouldn't it? He couldn't blurt that out here. Vaughan may have opened up to them, but how far could they really trust him? While he pondered this, the Doctor was already on his feet. Ryan had little choice but to follow.

As Vaughan led the Doctor and Ryan into the elevator lobby, past the secretary who was muttering, "Nothing ever happens in this job," he did a double take. "Haven't you guys finished fixing things yet?"

He was glaring at two maintenance men in front of an elevator door open to an empty shaft. They had tool kits out and a panel open. One of the workers shrugged. "I'm sorry, Mr. Vaughan, but we're working as fast as we can. You can't rush things when safety is a factor."

Vaughan sighed. "That's the express elevator from the lobby and the underground garage," he said to the Doctor. "It's accessed by a special code I give to my guests. Since it's down, my appointment's going to have to use the normal elevators, and they take their sweet time getting anywhere."

"I'm sorry to hear that," the Doctor replied. "The miracles of modern technology, hmm?"

"Tell me about it," Vaughan fumed. "Given the traffic on those elevators some days, sometimes I think it's better just to walk up. But then, we're on the sixtieth floor."

As if on cue, the door to the stairwell opened, and Christopherson stepped out, looking none the worse for wear from his journey. He closed the door behind him and stopped dead. He stared at the Doctor and Ryan in astonishment.

Vaughan frowned. "Do you two know each other?"

Before the Doctor could say no, Vaughan was knocked aside as Christopherson barrelled into the Time Lord. The wind left the Doctor painfully, and he landed heavily. He barely ducked away as Christopherson's massive fist slammed the floor where his head had been. Ryan jumped into the fray but was casually knocked into the wall by a backhand.

The Doctor scrambled to his feet, only to be tackled again. Planting his feet on the floor and getting a good grip on the Doctor's neck, Christopherson manhandled the Time Lord toward the gaping elevator shaft. "Going down," he hissed.

Vaughan darted forward, grabbing Christopherson's arm. "What are you doing?" Christopherson flailed, pitching Vaughan back, but that was the only distraction the Doctor needed. Desperately, he kicked forward just as Christopherson lunged back for him. The Varner executive was pitched over the Time Lord and into the open elevator shaft.

The Doctor got up and stared down the elevator shaft in stunned horror. Ryan joined him, as did Vaughan after he called security and (rather optimistically, Ryan thought) paramedics to the basement.

"What happened?" Vaughan stammered. "Why did he up and attack you?"

"I wonder what this does to your take-over of Varner," said the Doctor.

"How can you think of something like that when a man has just died?" Vaughan stormed. Then, more calmly, he continued. "What do you think? Questions are going to have to be asked; police will have to be called in. The deal's off or at the very least delayed. If news about this gets out, my own stock will take a hit." He shook that thought out of his head. "What am I saying?"

Vaughan's secretary called to him from the reception desk. "Sir, security wants to talk to you!"

Vaughan darted over and took the phone. "What is it? You what? What? What do you mean he's not there?!"

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In the basement, one security officer spoke into the phone. His partner just stared, stunned, at the empty floor of the elevator shaft, criss-crossed with cracks. "Just what I said! There's no body! Either he walked away, or he was moved. Come down here and see for yourself if you don't believe us!"

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Vaughan sighed. "Fine, we'll be right down."

The ride down in the regular elevator took ten minutes. At the basement, they were met by a security officer who guided them to the scene where all three stared in disbelief.

"Any landing you can walk away from is a good landing," Ryan muttered under his breath. The Doctor elbowed him in the stomach.

"Maybe somebody removed the body?" asked Vaughan.

"They wouldn't have had time to clean up the blood," the Doctor replied. "At that height, he'd splatter the walls up to the second floor."

"Thank you, Doctor, I really wanted to know that," said Ryan.

"But he's right," said Vaughan. "Nothing even remotely human could have survived that fall, and yet it would be physically impossible to remove the evidence!"

"Nothing even remotely human," Ryan echoed. "But why attack you right off the bat, Doctor? What did you do?"

The Doctor shrugged. "I have no idea. Perhaps it was because he saw me with Vaughan; perhaps he was worried that I'd spilled something or was about to. But it's hardly a logical reaction." He turned to Vaughan. "You understand the corporate world better than I ever could. I need your help."

"You've got it," said Vaughan immediately.

"Ryan, get over to Sue," the Doctor continued. "They've attacked Erin Varner before, and they could do so again, especially if they're worried about my presence. If so, Sue will need some backup. Also, somebody's got to fill in Lieutenant Jones and her UNIT friends when she gets back."

Ryan nodded. "Fine. I'll go now." He turned away from the elevator and headed straight for the stairs.

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Sue sighed as she waited inside the elevator car, watching the lights on the floor panel descend to where the cafeteria was located. Alone with her thoughts, she ran over the events of the past few hours. They weren't dissimilar to the events of the past few weeks. Although much less frantic than the pace set in that first week, it amounted to the same thing: she was trapped in an ongoing adventure she had never planned.

Her life had been at risk frequently; this had been true when she was just Sue Novak, F.B.I. agent, not Sue Novak, time traveller, but at least when she was just an F.B.I. agent, she had a home to

go to, and friends to talk to. She wondered how Fayette could have handled this life for so long. Now she had only one friend to confide in, but there was emotional baggage in the way.

A bell chimed, and the elevator shuddered to a stop. Sue made to step out, but a glance at the floor display made her pause. The car was on the third floor; somebody else was getting on. She stepped back and waited patiently.

The doors parted, and the colour drained from Sue's cheeks. Framed in the doorway was Doctor Polson, flanked by two orderlies.

"There she is!" Polson cried. "Get her!"

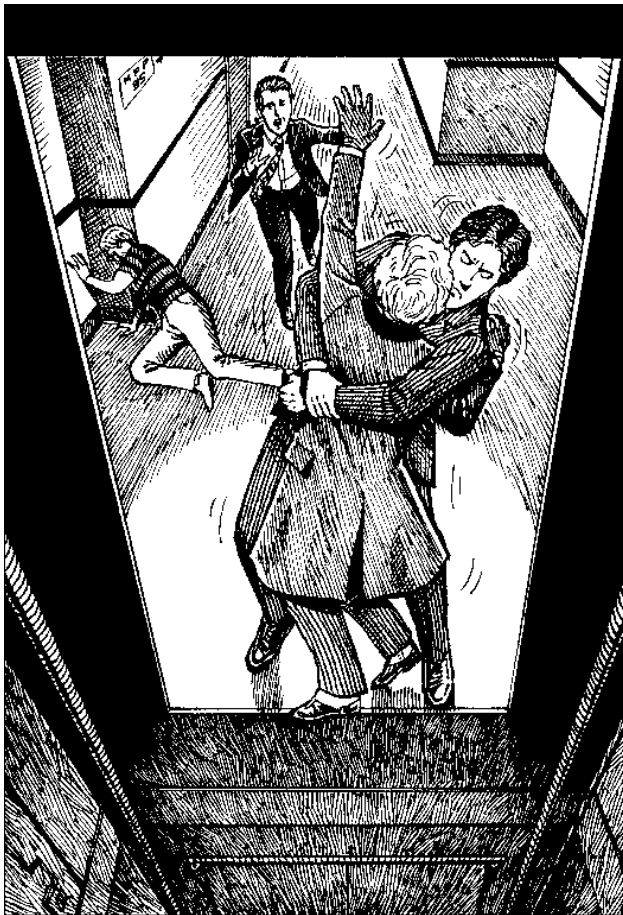
Sue was knocked back into the wall as the orderlies dove in. Polson followed and reached for a button to close the doors. Sue began fighting back, clawing and kicking the orderlies. She saw an opening between them and dove through. She rolled onto the floor of the elevator bay and was soon up and running.

The orderlies dove out, running face first into the closing doors. They fell back in a tangled heap. The doors slid open. The orderlies gathered themselves and made to dash out as the panels started to close again, clipping them on the shoulders. The doors opened. Finally, Polson found the "door open" button and held it down. The two orderlies darted out in pursuit.

Sue ran through the corridors of the hospital. They were deserted. Every second light was off and all the doors were closed. Obviously this wing had been shut down, "Damn budget cuts! Damn it, where is a doctor when you need one?"

She heard voices behind her and in front of her at the same time. She knew that the orderlies and Doctor Polson were behind her, so the voices in front offered hope for help. She knew she could run fast when she wanted to. Even though she was wearing pumps, she was still surprised when, barely fifty feet from an occupied waiting room, an orderly tackled her from behind. She fell to the floor with a grunt. Where did he come from? She didn't hear him catch up!

The orderly began to haul her back into the darkness. Sue gathered her senses and began clawing and kicking at her assailant, yelling at



the top of her lungs. This caught the attention of those in the waiting room, and some came to look. This, Sue thought, would save her.

Polson noticed the people approaching. He chuckled nervously. "Psychiatric patient," he called out. "You'd better stay back."

"Don't listen to him!" Sue hollered. "I'm an F.B.I. agent, and this man is a kidnapper!"

Polson grinned sheepishly at the curious onlookers. "See?"

A man began pulling his wife to the safety of the waiting room. "Martha, we'd better do what the doctor says." Martha was already backing away. Sue's heart sank.

She elbowed her assailants in the stomach. They shuddered and their grip slackened. Sue wriggled free and scrambled up. A quick glance told her that the orderlies were between her and the waiting room. The only escape route was back the way she'd come. She ran. Polson was in her way. She knocked him aside. The orderlies took off after her.

Sue darted into the elevator bay and hit a button. She didn't trust the elevator to arrive on time and began looking for alternate exits. The stairwell looked promising, so she dashed forward.

A large hand grabbed her shoulder and swung her around. She flew face first into the wall. Again a part of her mind wondered how he'd caught up so fast, again. Then the orderly grabbed her and manoeuvred her into a hammerlock. Sue's mind switched back to her training, and she ducked away, delivering an elbow and a backward kick to knock her assailant back, buying herself precious room. She whirled around and swung at her attacker with a karate blow, and was stunned to see her wrist caught and held in a vise grip.

The orderly shoved her back into the wall and grabbed her by the neck. Applying tremendous pressure, he lifted her off her feet.

Sue tried to breathe in, but no air could get through. Short, sharp, choking sounds escaped her lips. Her feet flailed desperately, to no avail. Blackness crept into the edge of her vision.

"What are you doing?" Polson shouted. "We can't damage the merchandise!"

The orderly let go. Sue fell to the floor and lay limp, gasping in the air. Polson knelt by her side and gave her a cursory examination, checking her neck, and then the pupils of each eye. He breathed a sigh of relief. "She's fine, for now. The plan continues. Take her."

The orderlies dragged her through the darkened corridors. Dazed and winded, Sue could do little to resist. They took her inside a room where discarded equipment lay pushed up against one wall in a haphazard fashion. A layer of dust carpeted the floor.

"Put her in this," Polson ordered. Sue felt sleeves pulled over her arms and suddenly they were yanked to her sides so hard, she again found it hard to breathe. Clarity set in with a jolt; they were wrapping her in a straitjacket.

"What are you doing—" she began, only to be cut off by one of the orderlies shoving a cloth in her mouth, followed by a strip of surgical tape to seal it in. The second orderly pulled the last fastener so tight, Sue flinched. Then they shoved her forward. She stumbled into a wall and fell to the floor.

She didn't try to get up. She just lay there and stared as Doctor Polson knelt close again and checked that she was secure. Then he nodded to his orderlies. "Guard the door outside. I'll handle things in here."

She finally got a clear look at the orderlies as they nodded and left, shutting the door behind them. She blinked in surprise. They were six feet tall, but thin and lanky. One of them wore glasses. They were not the heavy-set brutes she had expected. And yet they had beaten her so badly she was now at the mercy of Polson. How?

When they were gone, Polson looked down on her with a smile. The fiendish edge to it made Sue shiver.

"You're probably wondering why I went through such lengths to bring you here," he said. Sue could only grunt. "Well," he replied, "you're going to have a little accident. But, don't worry. You won't be missed. You won't be missed at all."

Those last words made Sue's eyes widen with horror. What did he mean? An impostor? What were they going to do to Erin now?

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Ryan knocked on the hospital room door before entering. He peered in and smiled. "Ah! Do you want to know what the Doctor and I were doing while you were waiting here, all safe and sound?"

At Erin's bedside, Sue raised an eyebrow. "Do tell!"

Episode Three: Double Indemnity

Doctor Polson pulled a trolley from the stack of equipment by the wall. Setting it beside him, he pulled out a zippered pouch not unlike a manicure case. Opening it, however, revealed a variety of surgical knives, needles and drug bottles. Sue watched in horror as he began assembling a hypodermic needle.

"You may be interested to know," he said as he worked, "that we're no longer interested in your friend. It makes our efforts to bring her to hospital a wasted journey, but one must know when to cut one's losses, particularly when one finds a much more attractive alternative."

Sue granted inquisitively. Polson understood her question.

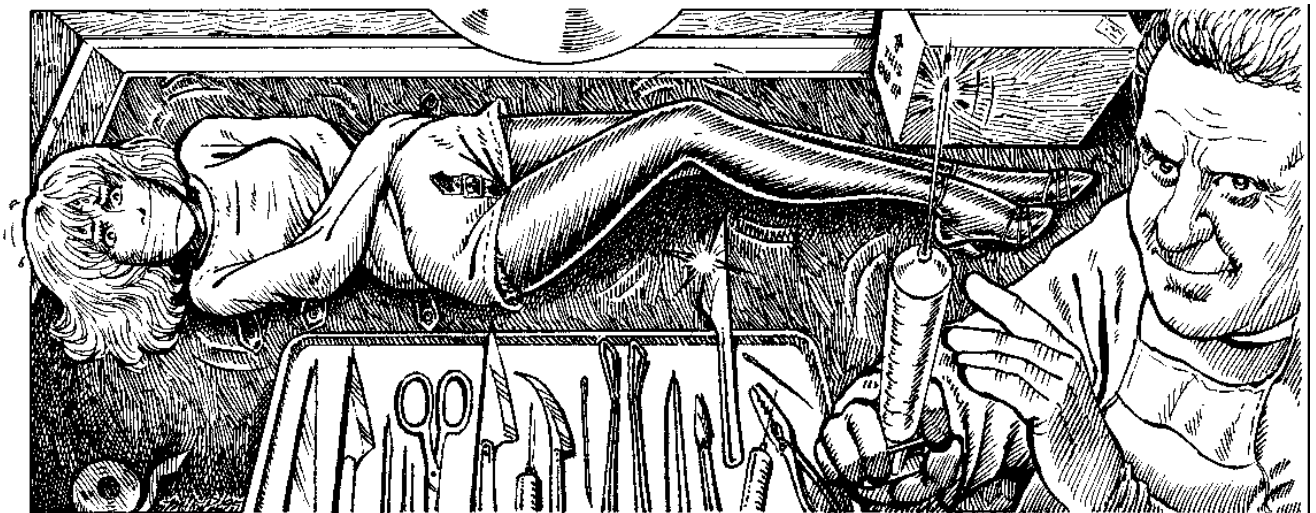
"It is true that you're a close friend of the Doctor," he said. "With you out of the way, we'll have access to one of the greatest threats to our operation." The needle was ready. He glanced at his bottles for the right drug, and frowned. "Where did I put that digitalis? Digitalis, digitalis... Drat!" He twirled the bottles in their holsters to check their labels. "No digitalis. Oh, well, how about morphine? Darn! There must be something I can use!"

He slapped the case closed in frustration. "I'd lose my head if it wasn't screwed to my shoulders." He turned to Sue. "As you've probably guessed, we are going to kill you. Now, my men could have done that in the elevator lobby, but we prefer something much cleaner; something less damaging to the mind and body, particularly the mind. You see, we don't want you for your body, lovely though it is; we just want to pick your brains, literally. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got to find some digitalis or something." He strode to the door, reached for the handle, paused and turned back.

Sue saw the look in his eye. She winced and braced herself.

"Don't go away," he quipped, and then he stepped through the door, closing it behind him.

She groaned. Then she looked down and took stock of herself. A test of the straitjacket didn't yield promising results; the thing was



made of strong canvas, almost impossible to tear, particularly in her position. The leather straps were at their tightest, leaving her arms with absolutely no room to move, and, of course, the fasteners were behind her back. She was too far away from friendly people to call for help in her gagged state.

But if I don't get out, I'll be as good as dead when he comes back, she told herself. She planted her feet on the floor and slid back against the wall, using it to brace herself as she slid herself up into a sitting position. Taking a moment to catch her breath, she braced herself again, and slid up the wall until she was standing.

She looked around the room, taking stock. Despite the equipment scattered about, there was no place to hide. There were no windows and only one door, guarded, of course. She wracked her brain for ideas, but none came. She sighed and drooped. This is a fine pickle you've put yourself in, she thought.

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I might be able to help you," said Vaughan. He waved the Doctor to his side of the desk and pulled his computer's keyboard forward. "This is another piece of software I put together just before forming this company. It searches the World Wide Web, accessing news sources and piecing together coincidences. What you're looking for is a series of coincidences that could point you in the direction of a conspiracy. I learned early that it was to my advantage to look for any coincidences and take advantage of them. In this industry, few things are really coincidence." He flashed the Doctor an impish smile. "Don't tell anybody else I have this, okay?"

"Fine." The Doctor peered over Vaughan's shoulder. "Access everything you can about Varner Incorporated's recent history; interesting coincidences that happened within the last six to nine months."

Vaughan tapped the keyboard, muttering as he put the words together. "Varner, nine months, newsworthy activity..." He hit the Enter key and sat back. "This could take a while."

The Doctor tapped his foot for a minute before the screen lit up and scrolled words down the page. Vaughan hit a key and the scrolling stopped. In unison, he and the Doctor leaned closer to the screen. "Nothing I didn't know already," Vaughan muttered. "They took a hit in their stocks. They've gone through four sick executives in the past six months; two of them had to be replaced."

"Tell me more about them," said the Doctor.

"As you wish." He moved the mouse and highlighted the four afflicted executives' names. The screen flickered, then reformed with more information. Vaughan read it out loud.

"Joseph Keeping and Andrew Flint, both hospitalized due to bad heart conditions six months ago. Recovered, returned to the board of directors. Daniel Bishop suffered a nervous breakdown that led to a heart attack, four months ago, replaced by Mr. Yorik Christopherson. Malcolm Varner, president of company, fell to his death in an accident five days ago." His brow furrowed. "That's interesting. Christopherson also attended a hospital about six months ago."

The Doctor straightened up. "Name of the hospital?"

Vaughan checked, then shook his head. "Pfeifferlife Memorial."

"Ah, now we're getting somewhere." The Doctor pointed at the screen. "What's that line after Daniel's name? What does it mean, 'nervous outbreak'?"

Vaughan clicked on the phrase and the screen changed. It was a newspaper article. Vaughan read it out. "Hospitals are reporting a rash of nervous breakdowns occurring in the Twin Cities area." He skimmed the rest. "Company executives, police officials, some hospital staff. Blamed on a serious case of seasonal depression.

That article was dated a few months ago. So that's what Daniel fell victim to."

The Doctor read the article more closely, muttering off the symptoms. "Paranoia, depression, extreme nervousness..." He blinked in astonishment. "That sounds like robophobia!"

"What?" Vaughan frowned.

"Nothing," the Doctor muttered. "Are there any other connections?"

"I can produce a list, but it'll be extensive," Vaughan replied. "The software picks everything." He manoeuvred the mouse and clicked on an icon on the screen. The Doctor peered closer, almost shouldering Vaughan out of the way.

"What's this?" he pointed. "Why are all these companies listed?"

"They're companies Varner Incorporated has had more than one independent dealing with," Vaughan replied. "You know, like it buys discounted supplies from one subsidiary, but sells discounted products to another subsidiary of the same larger company? It's good to look for things like that, sometimes it indicates illicit co-operation, the sort of thing the ICC would consider monopoly trading and discourage. Most of the time, though, it's a case of one company's

right hand not knowing who its left hand is shaking hands with. You can get some weird combinations. Let me show you." He clicked on another icon and information flowed.

The Doctor chuckled. "That's efficient! It's purchasing paper from York Mills Stationary and selling scrap to a recycler owned by the same company, who sells it back to York Mills as finished paper products."

"You get a lot of things like that. It comes in handy during recessions; with no business coming from outside, we produce it amongst ourselves." Vaughan glanced at the screen and frowned. "There's one I didn't catch. The two dead directors of Varner Incorporated had their funerals arranged by Phoenix Moribund Funeral home," Vaughan replied. "Moribund owns 49% of Advantage Marketing; they were attempting to get a contract to handle Varner's advertising until Malcolm Varner's death. Malcolm himself was laid to rest by Phoenix Moribund. I remember Advantage Marketing; I had one representative, a Mr.

Will, pester me to pay for some advertising. I told him to take a hike, but he wouldn't go away; kept on sending me freebies, like this pen." He nodded at a silver fountain pen in his 'in' tray on his desk. "My secretary left it. It goes along with a survey. I haven't touched it, myself. I prefer to do my own advertising." He turned back to his computer, bemused. "He tried to get Varner into an advertising contract, and his parent company handled the man's funeral. They want our business, and they'll go right to our grave to get it. Does this help any?"

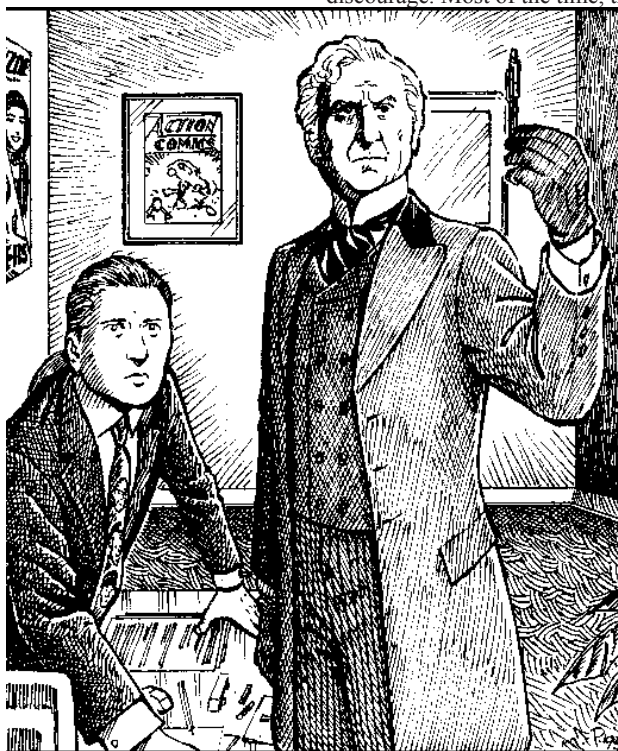
"It's a little too much information," the Doctor said with a sigh. "I'll never be able to wade through that to get a lead."

"If you give me a few more parameters, I could narrow the search a little," Vaughan suggested. "Let me switch disks, I'll upload this software I've been wanting to try out." He pulled the disk from its slot and placed it on the nearest available space he had, the top of his 'in' tray. While the Doctor watched him load up another disk, neither saw the first disk slide across the tray, as though pulled by an invisible thread to the survey form and the silver fountain pen.

"There," said Vaughan. "Now we reload the first program so the two can work together—" He groped for the first disk, and shoved it into the drive. He pressed enter.

The two stared at the screen, nonplussed. "Disk corrupted?" Vaughan repeated. "It can't do that! I designed it!"

"It worked fine a moment ago," the Doctor noted. "What could have corrupted it, a computer virus?"



"The only thing that could do this would be contact with a magnetic field or something," Vaughan fumed. "But it can't be that; I'm careful about these things."

"What could it have touched?" the Doctor asked.

"Oh, who knows; fortunately I have a backup," Vaughan cast his corrupted disk onto the 'in' tray. Immediately it slid up to the survey and smacked against its side, resting rigid. The Doctor reached forward and picked up the survey form. The computer disk dangled from the paper. Vaughan stared in astonishment. The Doctor opened the survey form. In the middle rested the silver fountain pen. "This pen is magnetic," he announced.

"Mr. Will must have done it!" Vaughan spat. "Careless bum!"

"And Advantage Marketing is owned by Phoenix Moribund, who performed the funerals, you say? This requires further study," the Doctor muttered. He took the pen and glanced at Vaughan. "Do you mind if I take this?"

"Yes, get it out of my sight," Vaughan snapped.

Just then, the intercom buzzed, and a woman's voice was piped through. "Sir, did you call a doctor? I've got a phone call asking for one who's in your office."

Vaughan shrugged at the Doctor's perplexed expression. "I work late hours; my secretaries work on shifts," he explained. He pressed the button on the intercom. "Patch it through, Patricia." The phone buzzed.

The Doctor picked up the receiver. "Hello? Ryan! You're back at the hospital. Is everything all right? Good! Listen, you have to tell me something; that funeral home beside the hospital, the one where Erin's body was stashed. What was its name?"

At the other end of the line, Ryan pressed his hand to his head, thinking. "Oh! Sue told it to me, what was it?"

"By chance would the first name of the place be Phoenix?"

Ryan perked up. "Yes, Phoenix Moribund funeral home."

"There's our connection," the Doctor muttered. "Ryan, we've found our man. You look after Sue. I'm going to check out a funeral home to see if they've been trying to drum up business."

"Doctor, wait!" The line cut off with a click, and Ryan slammed the phone in frustration. "Why does he always have to go running into the lion's den? Well, at least we're closer to the home than him; we'll have time to intercept him. I'd better go find Sue." He frowned. "Given how long she's been looking after Erin, I'd better get her a coffee, first."

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As the Doctor left the elevator and stepped out through the lobby, he tried to unscrew the pen. It was sealed shut, however, and took some effort, but finally, the Doctor cracked it open and peered inside.

His eyebrows rose and hovered. "Now this is an interesting refill," he muttered. "I wonder what colour it writes in. Perhaps it's time I draw my own conclusions..."

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As Ryan returned from the hallway with two steaming cups of coffee in hand, he couldn't help but shiver as he pushed open the door to Erin's room. His sudden movement sloshed the coffee over the rim of one cup and onto his thumb. He let out

a gasp of pain and set the cups on the nearest table as quickly as he could. Then he sucked his scalded thumb. "I've just called the Doctor," he said. "I think you and I are going to have to leave Erin. If I know him, he's going to go into that funeral home, alone, and get himself into trouble... Sue?"

Sue hadn't moved from Erin's bedside, not even to chide Ryan for his thumbsucking. Her face was set in a look of concern over Erin. Ryan thought this strange at first, but a look at Sue's expression made his heart go out to her. He picked up a steaming cup and gently touched her shoulder with his free hand.

"Hey," he said softly. "You'll wear yourself out, staring like that. Relax, and have a coffee, and then let's hurry up and get after him." He passed her the cup.

Sue gave him a warm smile. She took the steaming coffee.

As Ryan reached for his own cup, he added, "Careful, it's hot! I think the burn units of hospitals adjust those vending machines to drum up business—" He glanced at Sue again and stopped short.

Sue's cup of coffee was empty. She set it down on the bedside table.

"Sue?" asked Ryan incredulously.

She looked at him. "What?" When she opened her mouth, small wisps of steam trailed out. Ryan opened his mouth to protest, then thought better of it.

"Nothing," he replied quickly. "Nothing at all; just wanted to see how you were."

Sue turned back to Erin, leaving Ryan staring. He shivered again. Thoughts about going after the Doctor were pushed to the back burner. There was something sinister now in the way Sue hovered over her friend.

He gritted his teeth against the pain as another drop of coffee spilled over the side, scalding his other thumb.

???

Doctor Polson pushed open the door and strode inside the dusty room, medicine bottle in hand. Closing the door behind him, he began to fill the needle to its capacity. "There, now," he muttered. "This won't hurt a bit." He snickered. "Yeah, and Nixon wasn't a crook, either."

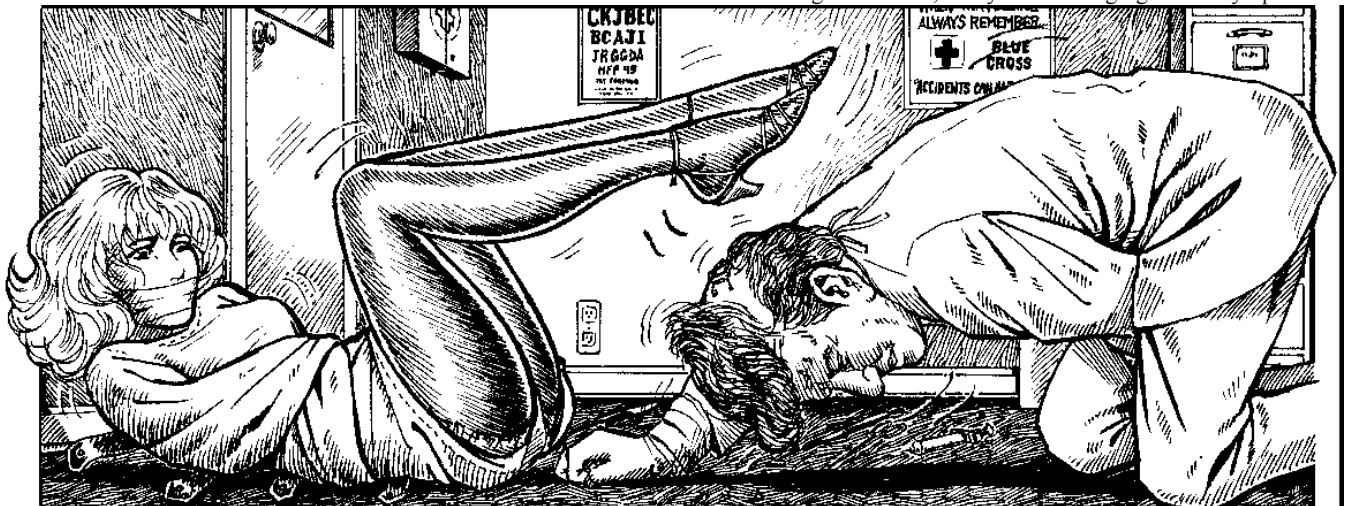
He stopped short. The room was empty. Sue was in a straitjacket, and there was only one exit to this room, guarded by his orderlies. That left only one place to hide.

He turned to face the door, just as Sue barrelled into him. The needle filled with digitalis went flying. Polson grabbed Sue and cast her aside. Still bound up in a straitjacket, she stumbled back, fell over a desk and landed heavily on her back. She struggled to get up, but was as helpless as a turtle on its shell.

Polson snatched the needle and jumped over the desk, arm raised to strike. Desperately, Sue kicked as he was sailing down. The blow caught him between the legs. He let out a grunt of agony, clutched the region, fell over to his side and moaned.

Then his eyes widened, and he looked down. Letting go of the needle, he saw that it had embedded itself firmly in his leg. The plunger was all the way down. His face went pale. "Oh, my!"

He began to choke and gasp for air. Sue stared in horror. Polson was clutching at his chest; his eyes were bulging; all the symptoms



of a massive heart attack.

Polson gasped his last words. "Why did they pick me? I'm a doctor, not a mechanic—" He fell back, limp, eyes staring at nothing.

Sue struggled to a sitting position. As she sat up, she caught sight of something that made her lean forward for a closer look. She gently nudged the body over with her knee and looked close. At the edge of Polson's receding hairline, she caught sight of something metallic. She couldn't see much in the dark, except for a faint impression of something imbedded in the man's scalp, running down to the base of his neck. She grimaced.

The door burst open. Sue stumbled to her feet in horror. The two orderlies stepped in; their eyes fixed on her immediately.

"Looks like she was more than the good doctor could handle," said one.

They advanced on her. Sue began backing away, aware that she would soon be bumping into a wall, with no other route of escape. Bound in the strait-jacket, there was no way she could fight these two thugs alone; gagged, there was no way she could call for help. She grunted as she clipped her leg on a desk.

"They said not to damage the merchandise," the other noted.

"But that was before she killed Polson," said the first one. "She could be too dangerous to use. So, let's dispose of her."

"How?" asked the second. Sue manoeuvred herself so that the desk was in their way. One raised his hand and knocked it out of the way as if it were an empty box.

"How about a tug of war, with her as the rope?" asked the first.

"Or would you prefer we made a wish?" the second quipped.

Sue gasped sharply as her back pressed against the wall. The two thugs stepped forward, arms ready to grab and maul.

One stopped in mid-stride, looked at the floor, and paled. "My God, Harry, the self-destruct—"

He never finished his sentence. An explosion knocked Sue to the ground, just as it blew a desk violently against the wall where she'd been standing. She found herself safely stashed within the chair recess. Finally, the echo of the explosion died away, and she decided to take stock of things.

Kicking aside a chair that had been rammed against the back bottom of the desk, she squirmed through the opening, struggling to her feet in one of the few clear areas left in the room. Stored furniture lay shattered. Glancing around, she caught sight of the two thugs and winced. An arm poked out from a pile of rubble, disconnected from the rest of the body, portions of which were poking out elsewhere. Sue frowned. What could have caused that explosion? Then she realized that the centre of the small crater was near where she had left Doctor Polson. The only thing that remained of him was his hairpiece, perched incongruously in the outstretched palm of one of the orderly's hands. She remembered the implant at the back of Polson's skull and wanted to be sick.

There was no time for that, she told herself. Ryan, Erin, and Jones were in trouble, and she had to warn them. First of all, she had to find some way to get herself out of this straitjacket.

It was harder than she'd thought. Even without the pressure of a deadline, her arms could barely move, much less contort in all the necessary ways to shake out of the thing. She was on the verge of giving up when she heard footsteps approaching the door. She tensed, then relaxed at the sight of Doctor Prophin, orderlies and security staff in tow.

When he saw her, he didn't seem surprised. When he stepped in and saw the extent of the destruction, however, he stopped short. It took Sue several indignant grunts against her gag to regain his attention, at which point he stepped over and reached for her gag.

He paused. "Slow way or fast way? Either way, it's going to hurt." Sue could do nothing but glare, so he reached for the gag. "I'll do it the fast way; then it's over and done with." He tore off the tape over Sue's mouth. She squealed. "I warned you," he added.

"Just get this off me," she grumbled.

"I came as quickly as I could," he explained as he undid the fasteners. "I heard a report about a commotion between two orderlies and a psychiatric patient on one of the floors. I thought immediately of you." He laughed as Sue glared. "That's not what I mean. First of all, we don't have psychiatric patients in this hos-

pital, and, secondly, none of our orderlies reported being in such a confrontation. From that, we knew that these orderlies were from outside this hospital."

Sue's stomach knotted. "That means they could have infiltrated this hospital as well!"

"I don't think so," Prophin replied. "We have records of everyone who works here—"

"What about the patients or the visitors?" Sue asked pointedly. "Are they likely to question the word of somebody dressed as an orderly or doctor? We'll have to gather the nurses you trust and hide Erin away at an isolated part of the hospital, fully secure—"

She stopped short as Polson's words rang in her ears. "My God, what am I saying? Erin and Jones are already in trouble! Hurry up and untie me; I've got to go back!"

"Not so fast!" Prophin objected. "You've been through a lot. I can see bruises around your neck, and you've been through an explosion. You could have other injuries I can't see at the moment; if you push yourself too hard, you could collapse—"

"This is too important!" said Sue. "Untie me and then send security to follow me. I'm going to Erin's room!"

Prophin saw the look in her eye. It would take a sedative to dissuade this woman, and he had none handy. He undid the last of the fasteners and Sue threw off her straitjacket. "Thanks!" she cried as she turned and dashed out the door. Prophin motioned to an orderly. "You, go after her and see she stays all right." He nodded and left.

When they were gone, Prophin surveyed the destruction and sighed. "And I've got to put a hospital back together, somehow."

???

The funeral home's front door clicked once, twice, three times before the lock gave. The Doctor pushed the door open and slipped into the front office. Moonlight streamed between the curtains and made glowing shapes on the floor. The place was deserted.

Closing the door behind him, the Doctor kept to the shadows and crept through the reception area and into the hallway Sue described as leading to the place where she had found Erin.

He pushed open the double-doors to the chapel. A coffin sat at the front, awaiting mourners, but otherwise the room was empty. He gathered his bearings and spotted a door, partially hidden by curtains mounted on the wall. Curious, he stepped forward, and tripped on a fold in the carpet.

His arms flailed out and grabbed at the only handholds available. The coffin jerked, rattling as the Doctor barrelled into it. Once he regained his balance, he took a moment to compose himself.

Wait a minute, he thought. Rattled?

The Doctor gripped the coffin and shook it. Its contents let out a metallic rattle. Without another thought, he lifted the lid and peered inside. No body greeted him. Instead, he saw a bed of electrical components and metal struts. He peered at one of the components. "Quite advanced too," he muttered. "But why bury it?"

The double-doors of the chapel swung closed with a bang. The Doctor whirled around. Standing on either side of the doors were Moribund and Stephanie, staring at him, arms folded.

Moribund smiled. "Good evening."

???

Ryan came to a decision. "Sue, can we talk?"

Sue looked at him, curious. "What about?"

"Not here," he continued. "Someplace private? They say the patient can still hear when she's unconscious."

Sue shrugged and stood up. "Lead the way."

He took her into the corridor, past the waiting area and into an empty utility room. There were drums filled with garbage near a disposal chute. Sue raised an eyebrow as Ryan motioned her in, but complied.

"What do you want to talk about?" she asked when he closed the door.

Ryan thought for a minute. "I was thinking about our conversation in the café," he said finally.

Sue shifted uncomfortably. "Ah. I'd hoped that we'd settled that—"

"You put a comment in at the end which quite unsettled it, if you remember," Ryan cut in.

"Ryan, we agreed, didn't we, not to push the matter?" Sue took a deep breath. "We didn't want to affect our working relationship, and perhaps even our friendship. Aren't you comfortable with that?"

"Things have changed, though," Ryan replied. "The Doctor's spirited us away on a magical mystery tour; it could be a long time before he finally gets us back to a time where we can report to the agency and only have to explain why we went AWOL. During that time, you and I are going to have to work together closely. If that's true, then we have to settle this once and for all. I know your worries, I don't want to hurt our working relationship and our friendship either. Whatever we decide to do must be mutually agreed upon, and we must agree with the decision 100%. Little comments like 'Unless we want it to affect our friendship' have got to be dealt with and put away. If you have any doubts, voice them now."

Sue paused. "It's not an easy decision," she said finally.

"It wasn't when we stopped, either," said Ryan, "but we handled it. And those were good times, weren't they?"

"Yes," she said without hesitation. "They were."

"Like the time on the Riviera, when we were both a bit tipsy?"

"Yes, like then."

"Sue, let your heart make the decision, and let's live with the consequences afterward." He stepped close.

Sue nodded. "Fine. Here's what it says." She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him firmly. He held her close and returned the kiss, and the one that followed.

Suddenly, Ryan twisted her around and held her from behind in a hammerlock. "All right, what did you do with her?"

Sue feigned shocked ignorance. "Ryan, what are you talking—"

Ryan tightened his hold. "Don't play with me! I know you're an impostor! I swear, if you've hurt her in any way..." Sue stayed infuriatingly calm and Ryan's blood boiled. "Where is she?" he shouted. "What are you doing to her?"

Sue glanced at her wristwatch. "Right now? Not much different from what I'm going to do to you."

Ryan gasped as Sue jammed her elbow into his chest. She ducked down and threw him over her shoulder. He landed heavily on the floor, but scrambled up, arms raised to fight. "Tell me, you witch!" he shouted.

Sue stopped before him and waited patiently. Putting his scruples aside, Ryan lunged forward, arms swinging. He was thinking the fight out in his mind, preparing countermoves in expectation of any moves she made to block him. To his surprise, she didn't move, and his fist connected solidly with her jaw. She stumbled back, regained her balance and smiled.

Ryan stopped and stared. There wasn't any sign that he had bruised her chin. He swung again with an uppercut. The impact echoed through the room. Sue's face was knocked to one side, but she turned back to him, all smiles again. Not even a kick had an effect. Ryan stood staring; he had run out of karate moves. Sue's smile widened.

Ryan swallowed hard. "I hope I wasn't out of line with that witch remark—"

The air left him painfully as Sue barrelled into him. Her arms clamped around him like vics and she casually tossed him over her shoulder. Ryan sailed through the air and hit the wall, shoulder first. He stumbled to his feet, dazed, and barely had time to duck away as Sue swung at him with a karate blow. Her arm made a whistling sound, like a whip cracking, as it passed over his head.

He looked up for some opening and saw another karate swing come at him. Desperately he threw up an arm to block it. The crack echoed through the room, followed by Ryan's scream of agony. He fell back against the wall, clutching his forearm. If it wasn't broken, it was most certainly bruised. The pain clouded his mind and dulled his reaction time. He didn't see Sue's kick until it connected solidly with his nether regions. He doubled over and lay on the floor, retching.

Sue picked him up and rammed him into the wall beside the garbage chute. She shoved open the panel and stuck his head inside. From here, he could feel the heat of the incinerator. Adrenaline rushed into him and he struggled desperately. He clung against the sides of the opening as Sue hammered his fingers. She grabbed his legs and hauled him up. He could feel his grip loosening.

Behind him, Sue smiled grimly. "Ashes to ashes..."

Then suddenly her onslaught relaxed. Ryan fell back onto the floor and saw what saved him. The real Sue was holding a chair, with a bend in the metal armrest roughly the shape of the back of the impostor's head. The impostor was turning to face her, clearly unharmed. Sue was staring incredulously.

The impostor chuckled. "Let me guess — you're beside yourself!" Then she lunged for Sue's throat.

Desperately, Ryan kicked at the impostor's legs. She stumbled. Sue joined in the attack, battering her look-alike about the head with the chair. The impostor's arm slashed out. There was another sound like a whip cracking and the chair snapped in two. A punch pitched Sue into the wall.

The orderly who had followed Sue darted in. He stopped short at the sight of the two look-alikes, and hesitated. The impostor elbowed him in the chin. He dropped like a sack of potatoes and lay still.

Ryan tangled his legs into the impostor's and she fell to the floor. She bounded up and whirled upon him, only to be struck from behind by Sue. She turned to face her. Ryan stumbled up and placed himself at the back of the impostor's legs. Sue caught this out of the corner of her eye and she barrelled forward into her look-alike. The impostor stumbled back against Ryan's legs and toppled into the panel covering the garbage chute. Ryan grabbed her legs, stood up quickly and tossed her inside.

The chute panel slammed shut. There were a few seconds of silence, and then deep beneath the

hospital, the incinerator roared. Sue and Ryan stared at the chute panel, breathing heavily.

Sue knelt beside the orderly, checking his pulse. "He's out cold, but should recover." She turned to Ryan. "Are you all right? What did she do to you?"

Ryan chuckled weakly. "She couldn't hold a candle to you." Then his adrenaline ebbed, and he collapsed.

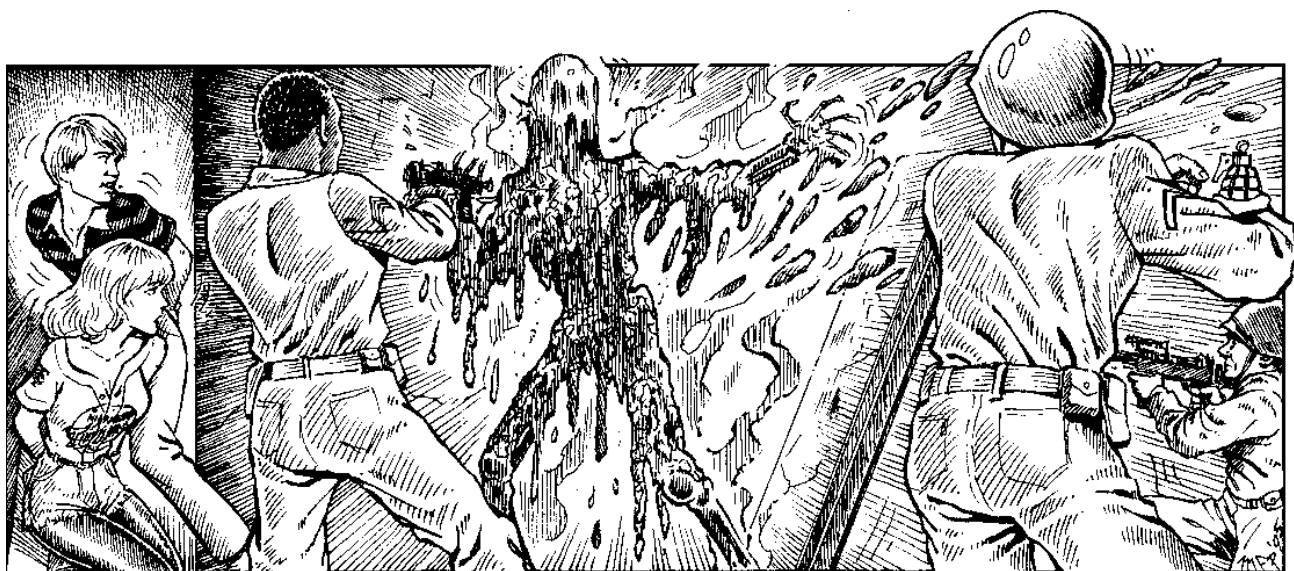
Sue grabbed his good arm and kept him from falling. She gasped at the full sight of his injuries. Among other things, his right arm was swollen. "I'm getting you to a doctor. How did you know she wasn't me?"

"I asked the right questions," he replied. "I went on about what we talked about in the café. She was good. I don't know how, but she seemed up on a lot of our recent conversation. However, I managed to convince her that we'd had a previous relationship."

Sue frowned. "We didn't, though. We thought about it, once, on the Riviera, but— so that's how you caught her out! Good plan!"

Ryan grinned sheepishly. "Then we kissed, and that's when I knew for sure."





Sue smiled. "I see."

"She kisses better than you do," Ryan chuckled.

Sue flared. "If you can make jokes like that, then you aren't hurt." She shoved him to the floor, then winced as he cried out in pain. "Sorry!" she said frantically, helping him to his feet again.

She took Ryan out into the hallway. Their path took them past Erin's room. As they approached, they heard voices chattering. Sue flashed Ryan a worried look and they darted around the corner.

They stopped short at the sight of a dozen UNIT soldiers milling about the hall. Sue stepped forward. "What's going on?"

One of the soldiers glanced at the two of them and then at a photo in his hand. He jumped up and cocked his assault rifle. "There's two of them!" he shouted. At once, Sue and Ryan found themselves facing a dozen muzzles. "Freeze!" the corporal roared. "As threats to international security, you are under arrest!"

Ryan knew enough not to challenge a dozen nervous soldiers hoisting assault rifles. He raised his hands.

Sue followed his lead. "Threats to international security? Us?"

"Don't try to deny it," said the corporal. His soldiers moved forward to handcuff the two F.B.I. agents. "We know your real selves are in Chicago."

Ryan grunted as the metal pinched his bruised wrist. "Look, we can explain—"

"You'll be explaining things soon enough," the corporal cut in, "like the organization of your duplicate ring."

The light began to dawn for Sue. "Duplicates? Let me guess, constructed duplicates! You think there's a plan to replace important people with walking dummies, right?"

The corporal gave her a sidelong glance. "We know all this. All we need to know is how and who."

"We're trying to find out the same thing," said Ryan. "We're on your side!"

The corporal snorted. "Take them away."

Sue struggled as the soldiers started to haul her off. "We can prove it! Your duplicates, have you confronted any?"

"Yes, an ambulance driver—" The corporal caught himself. "Stop wasting my time!"

"And he fought back with inhuman strength, right?" Sue shot back. "Well, why aren't we fighting?"

"Perhaps you want to maintain your cover?" said the corporal.

Sue shook off the two soldiers gripping her shoulders. "That wouldn't work. If we were impostors, and you managed to keep us prisoner, you'd find out what you want very quickly."

"Then how is it you know so much about the operation?" asked the UNIT officer. Now he was looking at her with interest.

"We told you," Ryan snapped. "We're investigating this case ourselves."

"With the Doctor," Sue added.

"We just fought a duplicate of Sue, here," Ryan put in. "Why do you think I'm injured?"

The corporal strode forward. "This would explain why you're walking funny. Where did you fight this duplicate?"

"It was in the utility room back there," Sue nodded. "We knocked her down the garbage chute."

The corporal's expression soured. "How convenient."

"We're telling the truth!" Ryan shouted desperately. "It can't hurt to look, can it?"

The soldiers glanced at each other as the UNIT corporal mulled this over. He looked at the two agents once more, then came to a decision. "We'll investigate." He nodded to his men. "Bring them along."

Sue and Ryan found themselves herded along. They stumbled forward. Two soldiers remained to guard Erin's room.

Doctor Prophin ran into Sue, Ryan, and their UNIT escorts on their way to the elevator. He approached her at once, then stopped short at the sight of her handcuffs. "Again?! Do you have a fetish of some kind?" Finally he noticed the UNIT soldiers. "What's going on?"

"These soldiers have doubts that we're us," Sue explained.

"Where's the incinerator room?" demanded the corporal.

Prophin glared. "How dare you talk to me like that? How dare you come in here, disrupting my patients—"

"Doctor Prophin!" Sue stumbled forward. "Just do as he says, and we can get this settled faster."

Prophin glanced from the soldiers to Sue, then waved them forward. "Follow me."

After contacting a caretaker, they proceeded down to the basement where they entered a dimmer, dustier portion of the hospital. The caretaker led them to a utilitarian metal door. Producing a set of keys, he let them in.

They entered a dark room with black walls. Everyone felt the heat immediately. The air was tinged with a red glow. A huge metal furnace, purring to itself in the corner, dominated the room. Ryan wanted to mop his brow. "Are you sure you can't take the handcuffs off?" he asked. The corporal shook his head firmly.

The corporal turned to the caretaker. "Show us the inside, please."

The caretaker stepped to a metal hatch. "Don't expect to take anything out," he muttered. "We'll have to turn the thing off and wait for things to cool down for that." He undid the latch. "I can't see what you're expecting to find, anyway—"

One of the soldiers sniffed the air. "Smells like burning plastic—"

Just then, the hatch was thrown open. The caretaker fell back with a yell, clutching his arm. It was covered with plastic, smoking like paraffin.

A deformed shape burst from the furnace. It resembled a human being only in general shape. The hair had burnt away, as had its clothes, and its face and body had turned molten and started to run. Burning plastic dripped as it stood.

"That doesn't look a thing like you," the corporal stammered to Sue.

"She had a facelift," Ryan snapped. "Don't just stand there, shoot!"

The UNIT soldiers opened fire. As Doctor Prophin cowered in the corner, he mumbled, "It was a normal day till she came to my ward. Of all the hospitals in all the cities in America, why did she have to walk into mine?"

The melted impostor staggered back in the brunt of the fire, but braced itself against the side of the furnace. What used to be an arm flung out, casting a spray of hot plastic into the crowd.

The corporal threw a grenade, which imbedded itself in the centre of its chest. "Down!" he shouted.

Ryan flung himself against Sue, knocking her to the floor. The soldiers dove for cover. The monster stared down and plucked the grenade from its chest. It tried to toss it away, but it stuck to its melted hand, then to its other hand, which tried to pry it off. Then the grenade exploded, and a spray of plastic and steel shrapnel flew. Silence emerged, and the soldiers dared to look up.

Nothing remained of the impostor, save for a splash mark on the floor and the dented wall of the furnace. Casualties amongst the UNIT soldiers were minor, and Doctor Prophin, who led them out to where they could be treated, quickly attended to the most serious cases.

The corporal stared at the splash mark, shaken. "What was that?"

"That was my duplicate," Sue replied. "A little cooked."

"Nothing says lovin' like something in the oven," Ryan murmured. He grimaced as Sue planted the heel of her shoe on his toe. She gave the corporal a smile. "Now, can you remove our handcuffs?" she asked sweetly.

As the corporal unlocked their handcuffs, he said, "But I don't understand. Records show you're still in Chicago. How can you be in two places at once?"

"You obviously haven't met the Doctor," said a new voice. The others turned to look, and immediately the UNIT soldiers saluted.

A UNIT Colonel stepped forward to clasp Sue's hand. "Colonel Jameson reporting, Agent Novak, Parnel. Nice to see you again."

"Long time no see," Sue muttered.

"Longer for you than for me," replied Jameson with a chuckle.

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Erin stared, perplexed, at the two soldiers guarding her door and the one sitting in the chair next to her, watching television. She brightened when Sue entered. "Sue, what's going on?"

"Erin! You're awake!" Sue exclaimed.

"Yes, a few minutes ago, and that's when I discovered my armed escort—" Erin blinked at Ryan, who entered after Sue, his arm in a sling. "What happened to you?"

"Sue wasn't herself," he said. "They've told me not to worry, though; it's just bruised, not broken."

"What are you talking about?" Erin persisted. "Sue?"

"It's a long story," she began.

Colonel Jameson entered the room and Erin rolled her eyes. "I didn't have this many visitors when I had my appendix out." She glanced at Sue and nodded at her bed. "It looks like I'll have time for a long story, so spill it!"

"I wouldn't mind knowing what's going on as well," said Ryan. "I mean, how did you get here so quickly? We only had an inkling of what was going on, but you came prepared."

"After the meteor strikes put us on alert, we started watching the various target cities to find which ones were the invasion points and which ones were the decoys," Jameson explained. "While our group monitored Minneapolis, we noticed some strange goings on: a rise in stress-related disorders and, disturbingly, subtle changes in civic management. You probably don't know this, but the police beats have been rearranged, taking them away from schools, government buildings, and hospitals. We don't know why. Corporate decisions are being made that are having the effect of concentrating corporate power in this area."

"What have I got to do with this?" asked Erin. "What happened to me?"

"Somebody tried to kidnap you," Sue replied. "I thought it was your company, but I never understood how that could tie in with an invasion."

"Invasion?" Erin echoed. "Who, the Russians?"

"It's part of a bigger conspiracy," said Jameson. "To make the political and economic decisions that have been made, we suspect that many people involved have been brainwashed, or duplicated. When we got word that there were two F.B.I. agents

running around when they were still in Chicago, we settled upon the duplicate theory. That body in the furnace doesn't change our theory much, either."

"Duplicates?" Erin echoed. "Brainwashing? Talk about office-politics! I should have listened to Mother and become a physici-

cist."

"That doesn't answer the question of who's behind all this," said Jameson. "It goes beyond just one company. We've only gotten this far because our opponents have made little mistakes, allowing us to piece the records of many disparate, innocent looking events together into an entire conspiracy, but we can't wait forever for them to give the whole plot away."

Ryan blinked. "I've got a lead."

"What?" asked Sue.

"The Doctor's found a connection between everything that's happened at Varner Incorporated and Vaughan Industries. Everything seems to have been orchestrated by a Phoenix Moribund, the same person who owns that funeral home you visited outside the hospital. I would have told you sooner, but I was distracted."

Sue straightened up. "Don't tell me the Doctor is going down there to investigate, alone? Damn that fool!"

"What is this place?" asked Jameson.

"It's a funeral home outside of Pfeifferlife Memorial Hospital, where Erin was first kidnapped," Ryan explained. "We'd thought it was the centre of operations as it's near the centre of the impact points, and the conspirators managed to smuggle her out without much notice." He frowned at Jameson's blank expression. "Didn't Lieutenant Jones tell you about this during her report?"

"We never got a report from Jones," Jameson replied. "That's why we moved our forces in."

Sue's eyes widened. "Where is she?" A quick look around confirmed the lieutenant was nowhere in sight. "Something's happened!"

"Take me to this funeral parlour," Jameson ordered. "The Doctor could be walking into a death trap!"

Sue and Ryan bolted, leading the soldiers out of the room and down the hallway. Erin watched them go from her bed.

"Thanks for visiting!" She shouted after them.

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The Doctor placed himself behind the coffin as Stephanie and Moribund advanced.

"Um, good evening," he said. "Don't mind me. I'm just browsing."

"Can we tempt you with one of our specials?" asked Stephanie.

"Three funerals for the price of one?" Moribund added. "You and your companions? It pays to buy in bulk."

"I'm sorry, but no," said the Doctor. "Death's already paid several housecalls, one quite recently. She doesn't like to be called too frequently."

"Oh, but we insist," said Moribund. He and Stephanie stepped around the coffin.

"Unfortunately, so do I!" The Doctor lunged, swinging at Stephanie with his best Venusian Aikido punch.

Stephanie caught his fist. The Doctor could only stand and stare.

Then Stephanie began to close her small hand around the Doctor's fist. The Doctor gasped in pain. He swept out his leg, knocking Stephanie off her feet, and tried to jump over her to make it to the door. Moribund grabbed him from behind. The Doctor elbowed him in the stomach, but he might as well have elbowed a padded wall.

Moribund thrust the Doctor into a full nelson. Stephanie jumped to her feet and swung her fist at the Doctor's stomach.

The Doctor jumped up and kicked Stephanie in the chest with both feet, knocking the girl over the first pew. He slid out of Moribund's full nelson and rolled to his feet. He grabbed the first door he found and halted, realizing that it was not the door to the chapel, but a door opening onto a flight of stairs.

Stephanie lunged, kicking the back of his knees. The Doctor's legs gave way and he pitched head-first down the flight of stairs.

When he reached bottom, he lay face down on the floor, dazed. With great effort, he brought himself back to consciousness and

pushed himself onto his hands and knees. Then he realized that he was staring at a pair of shoes and slacks. He could hear Moribund and Stephanie coming down the stairs behind him. Who was this?

The Doctor looked up. He paled. "Jones?"

Wendy Jones dropped down to her haunches. She looked the Doctor in the eye, and smiled. "Hello." Then she grabbed him by the neck and hauled the Doctor to his feet.

"Wendy!" the Doctor croaked. "What happened? Why are you doing this?"

"I'm sure you have a lot of questions," she said. "We have plenty of topics to discuss, like your impending doom at the hands of the people behind this operation. Why don't we get you comfortable first?" Her hand still on his neck, she picked him up and shoved him into a recess in the wall. Moribund and Stephanie emerged from the staircase and watched. The gravediggers followed them. Together, they formed a semi-circle around the Doctor while Jones held him fast to the wall.

From his vantage point, the Doctor saw that Christopherson was one of the pallbearers. "So you managed to survive that fall, did you?"

Christopherson shrugged. "Membership has its privileges."

"Now that we have that little formality out of the way," said Jones, "let's put you in the picture." Then she smiled again; the impish nature of it which was so endearing the last time now chilled the Doctor's blood. "You want to know who's behind all this. Well, why don't you guess? Three chances. You'll never guess who came up with this idea."

The Doctor struggled to stare around at the control room, but Jones clamped a hand over his eyes, leaving him blind. "Go on, no peeking!" she said. "Guess!"

The Doctor swallowed hard. "Autons, right?"

Jones' smile widened. "Nope."

The Doctor started. He was sure it was the Autons, and Jones had no reason to lie. Who else could it be? "Kraals?"

"Nope!"

"Zygons?"

Jones laughed. "All wrong! Look and see." She removed the hand from over his eyes. The pallbearers stepped aside to allow him a clear view of the room. The place was filled with consoles and computers, the design of which was not human. Some screens displayed a map of Minneapolis, while others contained information the Doctor could not decipher from his distance.

The consoles were linked with thick bus-wires to a set of recesses lining the furthest wall of the room. The resemblance between these recesses and upright coffins was uncanny, as were the figures inside them to corpses. The Doctor's jaw dropped. "Cybermen?"

"You are surrounded by Cybermen, Doctor," said Wendy. "Those in the recesses are the old version, who have loaned their computer brains as the data storage necessary to carry out the operation. As for the rest of us, let us introduce ourselves." She spread her arms wide, indicating the pallbearers and herself.

"We are the New Cybermen."

Episode Four: Waking the Dead

Outside the funeral home, a column of UNIT armoured vehicles roared up the street. They screeched to a stop outside the house, and the soldiers jumped out, taking up defensive positions. When all was ready, Colonel Jameson glanced

at Sue and Ryan. "Get ready, we're moving in."

He stopped short as Sue gripped his arm. She nodded down the street in the direction they had come. "Wait!"

Lights were approaching. A taxicab screeched to a halt beside the convoy. The door opened and Erin stepped out.

Sue blinked in astonishment and darted forward. "You're supposed to be in hospital!"

"I checked myself out," Erin replied crisply. "The doctors say that I'm well enough to go home, as long as I don't overstress myself, so that's what I decided to do, after first visiting you to see what's going on. Besides, neither of the soldiers knew how to play Canasta."

Sue fretted. "Erin, don't do this, I don't want to have to knock you out to get you out of the way. This could get dangerous—"

"It's already been dangerous because of me," said Erin. "These people involved me in their great conspiracy; I want to see them get what they deserve!"

Before Sue could think of a comeback, a screech and the sound of roaring engines of a number of large vehicles interrupted her. The UNIT soldiers tensed as several headlights rounded a corner on the other side of the street and charged forward.

As the vehicles came into sight, Ryan recognized them immediately. It was a column of troops from the U.S. Army. The convoy screeched to a halt, and soldiers jumped out to cover the UNIT positions.

"I don't believe this," he muttered.

"This street is getting crowded," noted Jameson.

Ryan jumped out of the UNIT vehicle and ran towards the army trucks. "What's going on here!" he shouted.

An American colonel stepped out of the lead vehicle and approached Ryan. "I'm Colonel Parker. Who's in charge?"

Colonel Jameson stepped forward. "I am Colonel Jameson of the United Nations Intelligence Taskforce. What's the meaning of this?"

"I might ask you the same question, sir," Parker replied. "Who gave you authority to conduct a UNIT operation on American soil?"

"This is a matter of International Security!" Jameson stormed.

"Flushing out illegal aliens, I suppose," Parker quipped. "I'm sorry, Colonel, but you know the rules. The United States cares strongly about its sovereignty. Unless I have proof that we are indeed dealing with an alien invasion, or that you were given permission to operate on U.S. soil, I can't allow this operation to continue. Do you have that proof?"

Jameson glared.

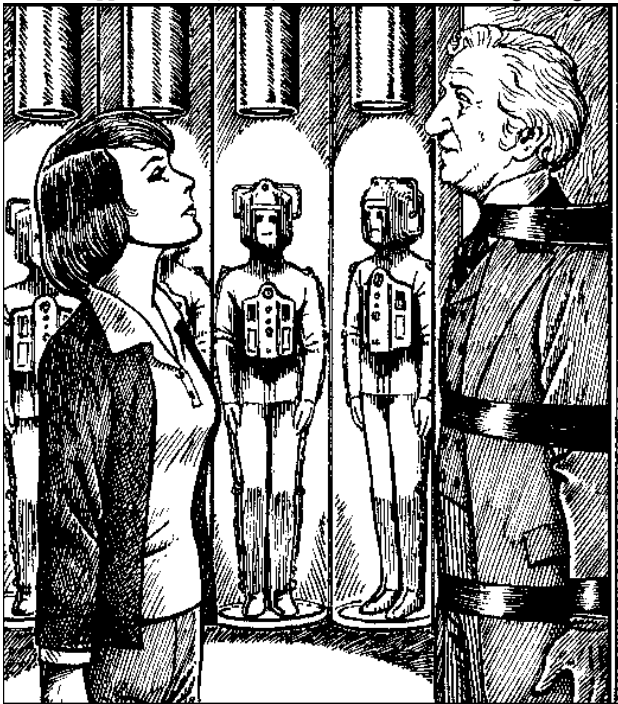
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The Doctor stared at her in disbelief. "But—that's impossible. You've got emotions, even a sense of humour—how?"

"Let me show you," said Jones. Still holding his neck with one hand, she pulled the Doctor's arm down and placed it in a shackle. The Doctor tried to struggle, but to no avail. The fingers gripping his neck felt soft and warm, like human hands, but they held onto him harder than a machine. Within two minutes, he found himself shoved into the recess and strapped in. Electronic equipment buzzed menacingly close to his ears.

Jones stepped back and admired her handiwork. Then she waved the pallbearers away. "He's secure. Return to your duties." The gravediggers nodded and left. Moribund and Stephanie stayed to watch.

Jones paused. "Oh, and before I forget—" She punched the Doctor in the stomach so hard he retched. "That's for all the back



seat driving!” Then she composed herself and adjusted a set of controls beside his coffin-like recess. “You asked how. You’re a smart man; you’ve probably guessed some of the story yourself. Tell me, where are you?”

The Doctor glanced around at the coffin sides. He swallowed hard. “I’m in a conversion unit.”

“Correct,” Jones chirped.

“You were recently converted,” he guessed.

“Correct again,” she replied. “It was soon after I left to go for UNIT backup that I was abducted and brought here. The conversion was swift, the pain subsided within minutes. I was returned, and no one was the wiser.”

“But you don’t look like a Cyberman,” the Doctor gasped. “You don’t even act like one.” There was a difference, he realized. Jones’ warmth was there, but it was constant and unchanging. It was like what one would expect a machine to do if it were called upon to perform an emotion. It remained, without flux, until the machine was ordered to put forward another emotion. Only then did it change.

“I told you,” said Jones, “I am one of the new race of Cybermen. Telos Control gave permission for my type to be constructed on an experimental basis. With my class of Cybermen, the Cyber Race hopes to re-enter the realm of flesh, blood, and emotions. We, the Cyber Race, still firmly believe ourselves to be the pinnacle of flesh and blood evolution. Our muscles are more efficient, our bones stronger, our internal organs less vulnerable to hostile environments. The facts can not be denied; a machine can be made to do anything that a human being can physically do, and the machine can be made to do it better.

“However, the Cybermen themselves can not deny facts that are placed before them, no matter how unpleasant they may be. It is a fact that the Cyber Race continues to diminish. After the destruction of Mondas, Telos Control came forward with a statistical conclusion that was as disturbing as it was inescapable. If we continued to follow our current way of life, the Cyber Race would become extinct within six hundred years. That was unacceptable. We must survive.” Those last words were said so emphatically that Jones’ warm demeanour dropped and the Doctor could see the machine she had become. He shivered.

Jones reached for the controls, and the Doctor’s hearts jumped. Keep her talking, he thought. “How are your differences going to help the Cyber Race? You don’t look as invulnerable as they are. Bullets might even be enough to stop you.”

Jones gave him a smile. “That is true, but what we lose in durability, we gain in ease of conversion. The number of Cybermen in operation in the galaxy is diminishing, and only part of that can be explained as resistance to Cyber control. It takes a lot of resources to convert a human being into a Cyberman. We can no longer afford to continue with the full conversion process for every human who comes under our power. When we landed, we were discovered by an aging funeral director. That was fortunate, for it gave us access immediately to raw materials with which we could add to our armies. From here, we moved to the hospital across the street, where we were able to identify terminal patients and give them new life.” Her smile was brief. “At the hospital, we were able to convert two Executive members of Varner Incorporated. Mr. Will then helped us attempt to convert the rest of the Varner board, plus the board members of other companies.”

“Grave robbing,” the Doctor breathed. “You would stoop that low?”

“And lower, if we could,” Jones replied with a laugh. “We were waking the dead. Spooky!” Her smile disappeared. “We need new bodies, Doctor, and we need resources to fuel our bodies. We must survive, and to do so, we need these things quickly, and so we have adopted this new conversion process. We work with what we have, rather than replacing the body entirely. I myself am almost human. My mind is connected to the Cyber database by an implant in the back of my neck.” She turned and drew her hair aside to show him. “This implant also controls my adrenal levels, which adds considerably to my strength when necessary, despite my comparatively frail frame. This will be your fate.”

The Doctor chuckled nervously. “You may have a problem with that. I’m not human.”

“We know,” Jones replied. She reached for the controls again.

“You have duplicates, though,” the Doctor stammered. “Is this another class of Cyberman? What’s the difference between you two?”

“Us three, actually. We have android duplicates, quick-and-dirty converts such as myself, and corpse drones. We are all related in part,” Jones replied. “Our first corpse drones, like Mr. Moribund—”

Moribund bowed low.

“—were primitive and rather expensive, full of machined parts – basically androids constructed out of steel and plastic. They were convincing enough for us to take over Varner Incorporated and give us a revenue stream. But then we stumbled upon an interesting new Earth machine called a nanite. From the sample we received during the discussions between Varner and Nanosystems Technologies, we were able to create molecular machines that repaired the corpses at the cellular level, using the body’s own materials to create a stronger Cyberman. Stephanie Winters was our first test of this nanite serum—”

Stephanie bowed low.

“Unfortunately, this technology only works on corpses,” said Jones. “Living tissue rejects the nanites, forcing us to kill the living tissue first. And these nanites are expensive. We used all we could, but we needed a steady source. The need to take over Nanosystems Technologies became even more pressing. Unlike Moribund and Stephanie Winters, I have not received the nanite treatment; only the necessary implants were added to bring me under Cyber Control.”

“Then why didn’t you just convert the directors of Nanosystems Technology?” asked the Doctor.

“They were in California. The bulk of our operations are here. Our contacts with them were limited.”

“And then Vaughan swept the rug out from under you,” the Doctor added. “No wonder you wanted him to buy you out.”

“We only had a small beachhead,” said Jones. “More executives were coming under our control. Our revenues were increasing. We could build an extensive workforce, but we didn’t have enough money to purchase Vaughan Industries and get the technology we needed.”

“So your army consists of zombies and brainwashed victims,” said the Doctor. “Is this any way to build an empire?”

“The corpses have their uses. As they are already brain dead, they don’t have much in the way of character to animate their bodies beyond what the Cybermen give them, but this varies from individual to individual. We set to work converting Mr. Moribund immediately after he died, and he has maintained much of his living creativity and has added much to our operation. With another convert named Mr. Will, they started Advantage Marketing, which has given us access to ever wider corporate markets.”

She turned to Moribund and Stephanie. “He’s secure. I can handle things from here.” Moribund and Stephanie turned and silently left.

“You realize that you’ve given the term ‘dead ringers’ a whole new meaning,” the Doctor muttered. He grunted as Jones abruptly punched him in the stomach.

“I tell the jokes!” she shot back. Then the anger disappeared as though it were switched off. “The Cybermen wish to conquer the human race from within. Unfortunately, some of its members are too healthy to go to hospital to be converted. However, there is an appropriate Muslim saying: if Mohammed can’t come to the mountain, the mountain will come to Mohammed. That’s where Mr. Will’s abilities, and our android construction techniques came in useful.”

“How?” the Doctor asked. Jones laughed.

“You’re so full of questions, aren’t you?” She tweaked his nose. “If we can’t wait to convert somebody to our cause, we copy them. We use special pens that scan the people holding them and download the physiological information so that a duplicate can be constructed. Very often, we sent out the duplicates to capture their originals. We took the originals back here and removed their brains, reimplanting the brains into the duplicate. This process enhances the ability of the duplicate to mimic the character of the original, although we get a lot of that information from the pens. It also makes sure

that the original is dead and unable to interfere in the duplicate's activities. It's not nanites, but when did a variety of weapons ever spoil an alien invasion?"

The Doctor snorted. "This is quite an undertaking you've got here." He grunted as Jones thumped him in the stomach again.

"I said, I told the jokes!" she snapped.

"Dig up any good plots lately?" the Doctor gasped defiantly. He grunted as she hit him again.

"You never learn, do you?" she asked. "Anyway, once we have Vaughan Industries, we will have the nanotechnology, and who knows what will happen from there. Perhaps we can enhance the machinery so the nanites can be self-replicating and spread through human contact. Imagine Cybermen that can spread and convert as effectively as a common cold. Or perhaps we'll just allow our companies to grow until our company is so powerful that we can start influencing governments by the force of our wealth. So many choices! The Cybermen have learned their lesson: if we try to fight our enemies, we'll ultimately lose. There's only one way for a small fish to fight a shark, and that is to dive into its maw and attack from within!"

She smiled that impish smile again. "Well, Doctor, I hope you had your fun trying to distract me until help arrives. Unfortunately, help won't arrive. I wouldn't have stood here, gloating and telling you all about the operation if I wasn't sure about this. You came here alone, fool that you are, and now you are in a secret basement inside a building protected by Cybermen. You haven't a chance. The last obstacle to Cyber domination of Earth will soon be removed." She reached for the controls.

"Is that what you really want?" the Doctor cut in. "A Cybernetic police state? Push button politicians? Automated martinis?" He forced himself to laugh. "You say the Cybermen have reintroduced emotions into the new converts. I can't believe that! They're not real emotions, they're the emotions the Cybermen allow you to feel. The Cybermen want humanity on their terms – cunning, imagination, insight – but they won't let you feel compassion—"

"Compassion is a weakness, an inefficient feeling towards others," Jones replied automatically.

"Compassion is one reason there are five billion humans on Earth and a diminishing number of Cybermen in the galaxy!" the Doctor shouted. "It's because humans help each other as often as fight each other that humanity has managed to survive this long! Acts of charity have prevented revolutions, stopped famines, and saved the lives of people who would later go on to invent something that could save even more human lives across the world! If you say that compassion is a weakness, then how can you say that the Cybermen are really reintroducing human emotions into the Cyber Race? Emotions can't be picked out of a hat! They're an expression of a human being's free will, and the Cybermen want to take that free will away!"

The Doctor saw Jones shudder. It was all the encouragement he needed.

"You say you still have emotions," he continued, imploringly. "If so, don't you remember how it feels to see a beautiful sunset, how it feels to love someone? You must remember how it felt to fight in a battle, to kill an enemy soldier—" These words made Jones flinch at a memory. "The Cybermen are turning you into a killing machine. The only emotions you will feel will be ambition to fight, imagination to win, and the thrill of victory. There will be no tenderness, no compassion, no emotional meaning to your life!"

Wendy gripped her forehead in apparent pain. "No," she gasped. "What have they done to me?" She cried out, clutching her temples. "Stop it! I will not submit!"

"Fight it, Wendy!" the Doctor shouted. "You're a human being, not a machine!"

Jones screamed, stumbled back, and collapsed to the floor, sobbing. As the Doctor looked on, she climbed to her feet. "I'm free," she gasped. The Doctor breathed a sigh of relief as, still sobbing, Jones hugged him.

After a minute, however, the Doctor started to get impatient. "Wendy, release me. We've got to move quickly!"

The sobbing stopped. "Now, why would I want to do that?"

The colour drained from his face. He stared down and saw Jones looking up at him, smiling broadly. She chuckled. "Fooled you!"

Fear knifed the Doctor's stomach. "No!"

"A convincing performance, don't you think?" she asked, twirling before him, then bowing low. "When I was young, I wanted to be an actress. I even joined the drama club at my school." She laughed again. "You should have seen your face. It's only now that the Cybermen have rediscovered a sense of humour that they're able to appreciate a prank like that. Yes, humour and sadism, two human attributes that, when combined, the Cybermen readily identify with. Now that I've had my fun, let's get on with business."

She reached for the controls one last time.

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"I can't believe this!" Ryan yelled at Colonel Parker and Colonel Jameson. "I never thought I'd see bureaucratic red tape taken to this level of stupidity—"

As the men argued, Sue spied movement at the front door of the funeral home. She darted over to the gate. Her suspicions were confirmed. Moribund was peering out the door. From her pocket she pulled out a pistol. "Freeze!" she shouted.

Moribund made to close the door, but Sue fired. The shot hit the wall beside his head, making him flinch. After a moment's hesitation, he pushed open the front door and raised his hands.

"Lady," Parker shouted. "Stand down—"

"No!" Sue shouted.

Parker brought up his pistol. "I said stand down, you can't just—"

"You'd better believe I can!" Sue shouted back. "I'm not a member of UNIT, I'm an F.B.I. agent, and I have reason to believe that this man may be involved in a kidnapping!"

Across the street, Sue heard a man say, "Look, Martha, it's that crazy woman again!"

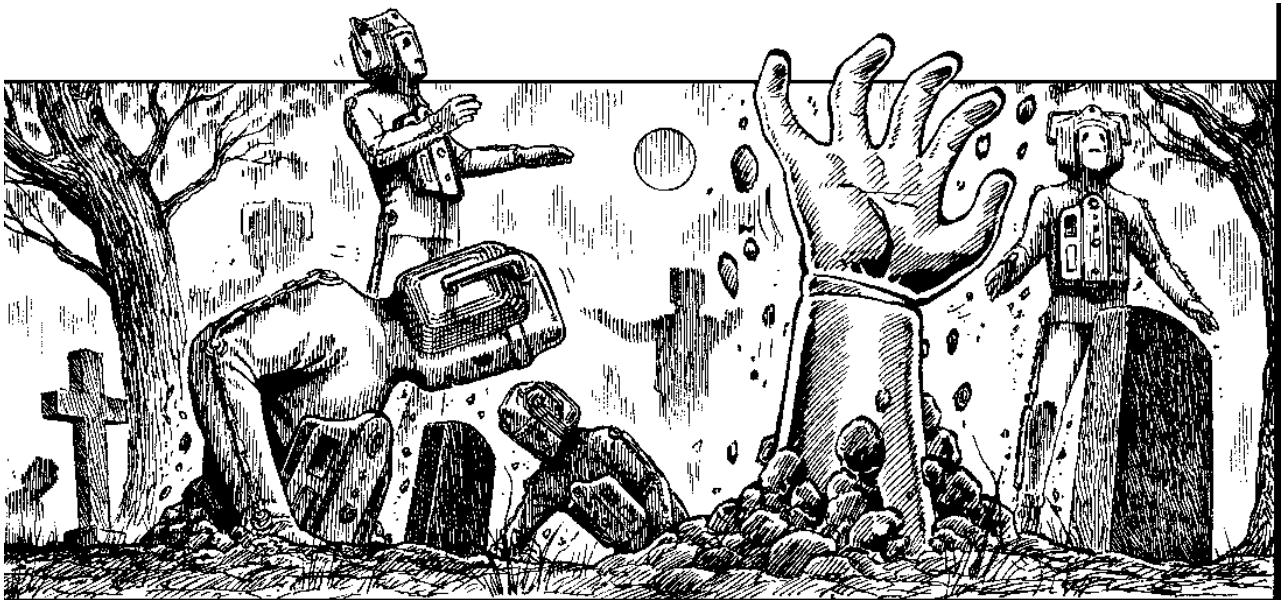
Ryan turned around and spotted the man and his wife. "Get them out of here!" he told Jameson. He turned back to Colonel Parker. "Sue and I have jurisdiction here, and we can arrest him if we want to. There's nothing you and your squabbling soldiers can do about it! If you want proof, then we're going to get it." To his satisfaction, Parker hesitated, then lowered his gun. Sue flashed Ryan a smile, turned back to Moribund and made to step through the gate.

To her surprise, Mr. Moribund cast his eyes heavenward. Then she realized that the eyes were rolling back, pulling up into his head. Two empty sockets now stared back at them, lined with circuitry.

"Oh, my God!" Sue gasped. She barely dove away in time as two laser beams lanced out of the sockets where the eyes had been, burning a hole into the telephone pole behind her. The pole toppled and crushed an empty UNIT Jeep.

"Fire!" Jameson shouted, at almost the same time his soldiers did fire. Frantically, Parker waved the U.S. soldiers into position, and they joined their UNIT counterparts in spraying the front of the funeral home with bullets. Moribund stumbled back as the bullets ripped into him, opening holes in his clothing and body. He fell to the porch and lay limp.





The soldiers stopped firing and covered the door as others stampeded up the walkway. An American private stepped over to the body. "This is crazy," he muttered. "If this is a machine, it must be bleeding motor oil—"

"No, don't—" Sue screamed, but it was too late. The laser discharged from Moribund's eyes, catching the soldier in the face. His scream cut off horribly. The other soldiers wheeled around and resumed firing as Moribund stumbled to his feet.

Jameson lobbed a grenade. "Down!" There was an explosion, and when everyone looked up, Moribund lay on the floor, in pieces.

Ryan glanced at Erin. She had dived for the ground at the first gunshot. He knelt beside her. "Are you all right?"

Erin looked up. "Ow."

"You stay here," he ordered. Erin wasn't in the mood to argue.

Jameson was pale. He took a deep breath. "Flush out this house, let's go!" The UNIT soldiers charged forward. The American soldiers hesitated, staring at their Colonel for guidance.

Parker waved them forward. "Go on, do it! This is a matter of international security, and you're now under UNIT command! Go!" Without another word, they charged through the front door of the house, into the hallways.

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Jones hesitated as she heard the distant explosion above her. Then came the sound of a steady bumping, approaching from the stairwell.

Jones stepped away from the Doctor and approached. Something bounced on the landing and rolled into the room, stopping at her feet. She picked it up.

It was Christopherson's head, severed at the neck in a jagged scar, skin singed from an explosion.

"Alas, poor Christopherson," Jones sighed, and then casually tossed the head over her shoulder. "But I didn't know him well." She typed in a sequence into a nearby keypad. She turned back to the Doctor. "However, it does seem that my gloating has cost me my chance to terminate you personally, but not for want of trying." The Doctor paled as she lunged for the controls.

"Freeze!" Sue cried, hoisting her borrowed UNIT pistol. "Don't even think of dropping your fingers and shooting at me, missy!" U.S. soldiers and UNIT officers joined her, all cocking assault rifles. Jones stepped away from the console, glanced at the soldiers appraisingly, then turned to face them, hands on her hips in a cocky pose.

"Wrong guess, Sue," the Doctor shouted from his bonds. "These aren't Autons, they're Cybermen."

Sue blinked. "What? Doctor, are you all right?" She glared at Jones, finger tightening on the trigger. "You let him out of there!"

"Jones, this place is surrounded," Jameson shouted. "You will stop this operation at once, and your forces will surrender." He waved a soldier forward who stepped towards the controls. Jones grabbed him by the throat and casually tossed him back.

She chuckled. "Do you think we'd crumble? Lay down and die? Do you think we weren't prepared with back-up plans?"

The equipment around her began to hum. Lights flickered faster

on the consoles. The soldiers looked around nervously. Jameson raised his gun. "Jones, I said, stand down."

She raised her arms, almost apologetically. "The operation is out of my hands. If you want to waste your bullets, go ahead and shoot me."

"What's going on?" yelled Parker.

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Across the street from Phoenix Moribund's funeral home, the graveyard lay shrouded in mist. The moon cut swaths of eerie light through the dense trees and onto the gravestones.

An owl hooted, and then came a rustling sound, softly at first, then louder. It was the slapping of wet earth and leaf litter, whispering like ghosts. The earth over the graves began to tremble, then a hand burst through.

Steel fingers clawed at the sky as the spectre rose from its resting place. In other graves, more hands followed, and the buried creatures pulled themselves to the surface. Finally they stood, and the moonlight gleamed off their steel bodies. When they numbered 25, with more still digging themselves free, the Cybermen began a slow march out of the graveyard, towards the funeral home.

At the front gate, a U.S. sergeant's jaw dropped. "What the hell's that?"

Erin stared. "Oh, my God!"

A UNIT soldier paled. "Get her out of here! Get all the civilians out of here!"

Martha screamed and ran, while George snapped a few photographs. "And they said Minneapolis was boring!" he cried, steadily clicking away. The UNIT soldier hustled Erin to a nearby car, but instinctively ducked back as the lead Cyberman stepped out of the graveyard and raised its arm. A laser beam lanced from the back of its wrist and caught the armoured vehicle broadside. The UNIT truck exploded, throwing everybody to the ground. Martha grabbed her husband by the arm; they ran for their lives.

There was no more cover on the street. The UNIT soldier yanked Erin behind the front gate. "We've no choice," he told his other soldiers. "Delay them as long as we can, then retreat towards the funeral home. Tell the others to escape by the back!"

The soldiers began shooting.

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"What do you mean, you're being attacked by steel zombies?" Parker stormed into his radio.

"I can't explain it, sir," came the reply. "The UNIT soldiers called them Cybermen, and they said they had no gold tipped bullets on hand. I don't see how that makes a difference, sir. The bullets we have don't have any effect on these creatures. We've caught them full in the chest and we've had to duck our own fire redirected back at us!"

"Hold them off as long as you can!" Jameson ordered into his radio. "We'll do what we can here and retreat out the back."

"Sir, I'm guarding the back door," said another voice from the radio. "Something strange is happening here."

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The corporal stood on the back veranda, warily eyeing the back gate. "There's a hospital behind us. When we arrived, some doctors and nurses stepped out to look. They've more than ignored our orders to stay away and have stepped off the loading platform and are approaching." He stared at the column of white-clothed men and women approaching methodically. "It's weird, sir. I don't like it."

A sergeant stepped out of the back yard and approached the doctors and orderlies. "What do you think you're do—"

The lead doctor raised his arm in a karate blow. There was a sound like a whip cracking, and the sergeant's scream choked off horribly.

"I don't believe it!" the corporal breathed. "Open fire!" he shouted.

The soldiers opened fire. Two doctors fell immediately and lay limp. The others stumbled back, regathered themselves and continued their advance. Soon, they were up to the back gate and entering.

"We're surrounded, sir!" the corporal cried. "We're trapped!"

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At the front gate, the UNIT sergeant pulled Erin back up the porch steps as the Cybermen advanced. Two UNIT officers loaded a bazooka. The blast caught the lead Cybermen full in the chest. It just staggered back, and then casually stepped aside, letting the others advance, while it squeezed off a couple of shots from its wrist gun before collapsing.

The soldiers frantically tried to reload the bazooka, but a Cyberman lunged forward, arm swinging like a whip. The other soldier didn't get away quickly enough. The Cyberman gripped the nozzle of the bazooka in one hand and tweaked it shut.

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Jameson and Parker glanced at each other helplessly as they heard the sounds of shooting upstairs and the ominous reports on the radio. The U.S. Sergeant pulled Erin down into the basement and left her with Sue while he reported to Parker. As with the rest, the news wasn't good. "We could use some reinforcements!" he said.

"I tried," Parker replied. "There seems to be some sort of interference; I can't raise anybody on my radio beyond one block from here."

Jones laughed. "I told you this wouldn't be easy!"

Jameson rounded on her. "Consider yourself on report, Lieutenant!"

"Ooh, I'm scared!" cried Jones sarcastically. "Somehow, I don't think you'll have a bad word to say about me in an hour's time, Corporal."

"What are you talking about?" demanded Parker. "You may have killed us, but I'd like to see how you can explain this shooting war to the local media!"

"I think you'll provide a convincing enough explanation," Jones replied. "A military exercise? The conspiracy theorists will go wild; the newspapers might be critical, but no one need know that an alien

invasion is in progress."

"What makes you think that I'm going to help you?" Parker shot back.

"You will," said Jones. Then she turned to the shadows. "Take them."

"No!" the Doctor gasped.

Immediately, pallbearers stepped from the shadows and advanced on the encircled group. Their faces were pale, like corpses. Sue realized that's what they were, all of them. Erin gasped at the sight of her uncle, staring blankly like a dead man. "My God, what have you done to him?"

Knowing that the guns were useless in these close quarters, Jameson lunged forward with his rifle, swinging it like a club. He caught one pallbearer, knocking him aside, before being attacked by another. Desperately, the other humans rushed forward on the attack. Erin watched in horror as her dead uncle advanced, arms outstretched to choke.

Sue dove in and floored him with an uppercut. Then she had to grab her bruised knuckles in pain. Malcolm calmly rose to his feet.

The Doctor watched the scuffle in horror. Jones was overpowering Jameson. Malcolm had Sue in a hammerlock. A pallbearer was powering Ryan to the floor. And he was powerless to do anything.

Or was he? He hadn't realized that he could move his left hand. Then he realized that, indeed, when he was first tied down into this coffin, he couldn't. His binding had loosened.

He didn't waste a moment. He pulled his left hand free and undid the strap holding down his right, then he hesitated. Now what? Tight bonds still held him to the coffin, and he couldn't reach these easily. He didn't have time to waste. He looked around frantically for some computer console within reach, but there were none. Malcolm was hauling Sue to another conversion chamber.

Then he remembered his pen and snatched it from his pocket. His look of elation turned to one of horror as he felt it slip from his fingers. He grabbed for it, bobbled it, and stared in horror as it fell to the floor, out of reach.

"Quick!" he shouted. "Somebody get me that pen! It's our only hope—" He stopped short as he felt a presence nearby. He looked up, and the colour drained from his face. Wendy Jones stood before him. The pen was beside her foot. She smiled, a lopsided grin of triumph. The Doctor's shoulders sagged in defeat.

Then Wendy bent down and picked up the pen. She placed it in his hand. She stepped back and eyed him grimly.

The Doctor hesitated only a moment, and unscrewed the casing. He felt the electrical components within begin to trickle out. Manipulating the components with his fingers, he snapped a collection into place.

At once, Jones clamped her hands over her ears and began to scream.

The UNIT soldiers guarding both entrances stared in astonishment as both the Cybermen and some of the doctors dropped to the



ground, twitching in apparent agony. At the rear door of Pfeifferlife Hospital some other doctors who had been watching the scene but not interfering, gripped their ears and began to scream.

In the basement, the pallbearers and Malcolm collapsed to the floor and lay limp. Only one convert remained alive. Jameson could only stare in horror as his former compatriot, Jones, sank to her knees in agony. The Doctor looked on grimly. Sue looked from the Doctor to Jones and her eyes widened.

"Pull out the plug!" she shouted over Jones' wail. "She's got something in the back of her head; pull it out or she'll explode!"

Jameson froze, as did some of the soldiers. Others cocked their rifles and took aim, while the less disciplined troops ran for shelter.

The Doctor leaned forward with his free hand, straining to grab the back of Jones' neck. He got a good grip on her shoulder and pulled her into him. The UNIT soldiers aiming to kill her hesitated. Parker paled. "What are you doing? She's a bomb!"

"I refuse to let her just die!" the Doctor shot back. Parting the hair at the back of her neck, he found what he was looking for; a piece of metal jutting from the base of her scalp. He got a firm grip and pulled as hard as he could.

The implant pulled free. Mercifully, there was only a touch of blood on the end of it. Jones' scream cut off with a choke, and she fell to the floor.

The Doctor tossed the implant at Sue, who caught it, and paled as she stared at the lights which were blinking more furiously by the second. "Get rid of it!" the Doctor shouted. "Ryan, untie me!"

Sue ran upstairs, clutching the implant as Ryan unfastened the straps binding the Doctor in. When he was free, the Doctor attacked a computer console, punching in codes and sequences. "We have one chance," he gasped. "If I fail, several small grenades are going to go off throughout Minneapolis! I saw Jones key in this code when Christopherson was killed, and he didn't self destruct; I only hope I can make this work for all the converts and duplicates!" He stopped, then straightened up, satisfied. "Ok., I got it. We're safe."

There was a crash upstairs. Sue rolled down the landing. The implant rolled after her and landed on her chest. She stared at it in horror.

"Sue," said Ryan, "it's okay, the Doctor's defused it."

It took a moment for this to sink in. When it did, her head sank back with relief. "Thanks for telling me so promptly," she said sarcastically.

The UNIT sergeant emerged from the stairwell and helped her to her feet. "I'm sorry, I didn't know you were in such a hurry!"

Sue brushed herself off. "It seems as though you've pulled our fat out of the fire in the nick of time."

"What did you do?" asked Jameson.

The Doctor pulled out the broken pen. "This was the device they used to construct their duplicate class of Cybermen," he replied.

"Yes, I know," Sue cut in. "It picks up information on whoever is holding it and radios it to a central database, right?"

The Doctor nodded, impressed. "Congratulations, my dear, go to the top of the class!"

"Show-off," Ryan muttered.

"They were a bit careless, there," the Doctor went on. "I know they were trying to duplicate as many people as possible, but leav-

ing so much valuable equipment like this around is still risky; you never know who might pick it up. This pen is on loan from Vaughan Industries, from the desk of Vaughan himself. After noticing some of its strange qualities, I took it apart and realized what I had found. It wasn't too difficult readjusting the components to overload the processor the thing was designed to send information to."

Jameson perked up. "You mean to tell me that you had that thing rigged to stop the Cybermen already and you didn't use it?"

The Doctor looked down guiltily. "Not quite. There were some adjustments I still had to make before it worked. Besides, I had to see how extensive their operations were. I'm sorry. But at least the Cybermen were beaten." He chuckled weakly. "Well, what do you

know? The pen really is mightier than the sword!"

Everybody in the room groaned. Ryan cast his eyes heavenward. "I should have left him tied up."

A groan from the floor caught everyone's attention. The Doctor rushed forward and helped Jones to a sitting position. She looked haggard, and the back of her neck still trickled blood. "Somebody, get her a doctor!" he shouted. Sue rushed forward and placed a handkerchief firmly against the wound.

Jameson knelt close. "Are you all right?" he asked.

Jones managed a weak smile. "I'll be ready to report to my court-martial in a week," she replied.

Jameson nodded. "Under the circumstances, I'd say that all charges will be dropped."

Wendy Jones just smiled. Then there was the sound of another falling body. Everyone turned to look. Erin lay on the floor in a faint, beside her dead uncle.

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Are you sure you're all right?" asked Sue.

"Yes," repeated Erin. "I wish people would stop asking me. I know I had to bury my uncle twice, but I can handle it." She took a sip of her rum and coke and finished more quietly, "after a few sessions of therapy."

"I'm sorry," said the Doctor; Erin just raised her hand forestallingly.

"Just tell me that it's over," she said firmly.

"For the most part," Jameson replied. They were sitting in the café; in the mall, two days later. "Yesterday, Colonel Parker waved an executive order under my nose, making the jurisdiction of this case revert back to the U.S. Army. They're busy hushing this up. The newspapers only printed a brief story on the shootout, saying it was street gangs."

Sue snorted. "How could they cover it up? All those converts screaming at once are bound to attract attention."

"But you're sure it's over?" repeated Jones, visibly shuddering and touching the bandage over the back of her neck.

"What do you remember of your experience?" the Doctor asked.

"I remember being hauled off, locked in the trunk of a car, and then strapped into a conversion unit. Then they pushed the button. The minute they did that, the rest of the memory flows ahead like a movie." She winced. "And yet everything I did had a place somewhere in my mind. They used my memories, my knowledge, and even portions of my character in ways that I wouldn't even wish on my worst enemies." She took a gulp of her scotch.

"It's over, though," Ryan emphasized. "We shut them down."

"Didn't we?" asked Sue. The two agents looked from the Doctor, to Jones, Jameson and Erin.

The Doctor said nothing. Sue did not like the nervous tension that was building up in her stomach.



"Think about it, Sue," said Erin. "From what you told me, this conspiracy was widespread, even affecting the police."

"It would be rather inefficient for all of the duplicates to shut down simply because we found their headquarters," Jones finished. "We never learned where they stored all their personnel."

"We severed their link with Telos Control, though," said the Doctor. "Any converts we didn't find would be without leaders. And I remind you, Jones, that a part of yourself was able to hand that pen to me, and those actions directly saved hundreds of lives. The conversion process isn't stable; the original character will reassert itself. It's the same problem with Dalek duplicates."

"And what if the character doesn't re-establish itself?" asked Erin.

"And if there are other links to Telos Control?" asked Jameson.

Sue winced. "No! It can't end like this!"

The Doctor sighed. He pulled his hand-held device and a sheaf of notes from his pocket and set them on the table. "Here," he said.

"What is it?" asked Erin, picking up the device.

"It came in useful on a number of occasions," the Doctor replied, "but I was a different man then. Literally. I've modified it. You see that light, there? If it goes on, it means there is an android or an artificial human construct in the vicinity. Absolutely foolproof. And I've supplied you with the blueprints."

Jameson looked over the notes. He whistled. "This is an impressive piece of technology."

Jones peered over Jameson's shoulders and nodded. "How do we make enough? Those components aren't cheap."

Erin cleared her throat. "I think I can work something out. Joseph, Andrew, Christopherson and their plant on the board deactivated as soon as the Doctor did his miracle with the pen. I'm now the sole owner of the company. We make a variety of things, including electrical components. We could send you a shipment of these devices, at a reduced rate."

Jameson nodded. "You'd do that for us?"

"Look at what these creatures almost did to us," Erin replied grimly, motioning to their various injuries. "If there are any left, we have to get those bastards, and I want to be a part of that. Deal?" She held out her hand.

Jameson accepted it. "Deal."

Erin glanced at the Doctor. "You're entitled to royalties, you know, Doctor."

The Doctor raised a hand. "Don't worry about that. In fact, don't mention that I gave it to you. To some less tolerant individuals, this could be called tampering. I would make one recommendation, though: include Vaughan in your group. He has some software programs that should really help in keeping an eye on things. That was the Cybermen's advantage this time; they were watching everything, relaying it to a central database; I think it's time we returned the favour. Well, we must be off." He stood up.

"Where to?" asked Erin. Then she raised a hand. "Somehow, I don't think I'm meant to know." She shook his hand, followed by Jameson and Jones. Erin and Sue hugged, carefully, and bid their goodbyes, after Sue warned Erin not to write until after 1996. Erin frowned, perplexed, but let it go at that. They split up, with Erin, Jameson, and Jones walking off to Varner's offices to discuss more about the arrangements while the Doctor, Sue, and Ryan walked back through the mall towards where they'd left the TARDIS.

The Doctor chuckled. "You know, I was just thinking. You realize that Minneapolis/St. Paul are known as the Twin Cities? Whoever organized this must have had a warped sense of humour."

"Whoever organized this?" Ryan echoed. "Didn't the Cybermen do that themselves?"

The Doctor frowned. "Good question. I must say that I've never seen the Cybermen as creative as this. In my other encounters with them, their methodical approach proved to be as much of a weakness as a strength. If the Cybermen indeed thought of this concept on their own, I'll have terribly underestimated them. The Cybermen have never abandoned their robotic form, even to resemble humans,

unlike the Movellans... or perhaps the Movellans were really Cybermen who changed their name?" He mused.

Ryan glared at the Doctor. "Illogical Cybermen? Perhaps they learned from that logical trap you left for them at Morandi?"

The Doctor looked hurt. "No! Morandi is in the Cybermen's future, when their numbers dwindle still further, and they're forced to take desperate action. But even their most desperate actions weren't as creative as this."

"Are you sure we should be leaving?" asked Sue. "Couldn't Erin and the others use our help?"

The Doctor shook his head. "We've done all we can, and more than I technically should have. If I keep you here any longer, we run a greater risk of you running into your younger selves, and that makes a Cyber invasion seem like a small worry by comparison. I promise you, however, we will keep an eye on things; if

need be, I'll try to land us one year later so we can monitor how things have developed. The Cybermen do attack again, in 1997, but their approach is different, much more open. Perhaps their lesson here pulled them away from their experiment with emotions, but people will just have to wait and see. Personally, I think Erin, Vaughan, and UNIT will do a good job of keeping watch. Freedom is only maintained through vigilance. Erin, Vaughan, and UNIT will be vigilant, as I think will others. Come on." He led the way to his ship. Sue and Ryan glanced at each other nervously, then followed.

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Outside the funeral home, two shadows eased open the broken front door and stepped in. High powered flashlights pierced the gloom.

They crept through the house, pausing at the bullet-riddled walls before following the corridors to the secret stairwell. They slowed their approach as they neared the control room, pausing at the

door. At the taller person's signal, they dove in.

"Federal agent! Freeze!" shouted the man. A woman jumped out behind him, also covering the darkness with her gun.

When they realized they were alone, they relaxed and took stock. They were surrounded by burnt out, mangled, and unrecognizable equipment.

"Something happened here," said the tall man. He had dark hair and a long face. "Look at all this equipment; this was a big operation."

"I agree," replied the woman. She was much shorter and topped with auburn hair. She glanced around the room disdainfully. "But we're too late, Sculder. They've all picked up and left."

"They can't do that!" Sculder stomped his foot in frustration. "You can't shut down a conspiracy like this overnight! I mean, police officers, hospital workers, and two people from the bureau! They can't have given up, Mully! Somebody must have told them we were coming."

Mully gripped his arm. "Let this go, Sculder. We're in enough trouble as it is."

They made their way to the stairwell. As they passed a desk, Agent Mully paused and picked up a pen.

"What is it?" asked Sculder.

"Just a fountain pen," she replied, looking it over. "Not a bad make, even if it is from Bic." She slipped it in her breast pocket. "No use letting it go to waste. Come on." They strode up the stairs.

As they left, they passed the sign in front of Phoenix Moribund's funeral home: a golden bird rising from the ashes and reaching for heaven.

Across the street, Stephanie stepped out of the shadows of the graveyard gate and watched the agents depart. She smiled, and held a cut white lily to her nose, inhaling its aroma. Then she cast it aside, and walked down the street towards the lights of downtown Minneapolis.

In the road beside her, a Bic truck rumbled past, delivering its supply of pens.

END.

