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DOCTOR WHO

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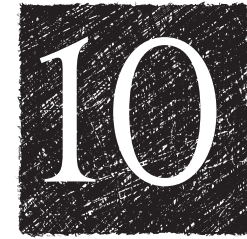
DOCTOR WHO

TALES OF
TERROR

Illustrated by Rohan Eason



PUFFIN



THE TENTH DOCTOR
BLOOD WILL OUT

Written by Richard Dungworth

Nancy hurried along the narrow, gleaming corridor towards the next junction. With only her intuition to guide her, she turned left . . . and found herself face-to-face with a grotesque mockery of a human child. Its body was outlandishly long and thin, drawn out like stretched dough. Lank, spindly arms drooped at its sides. The features of its bizarrely long face were ghoulishly misshapen.

Nancy halted in front of the mirrored wall that blocked her path. She paid little attention to her distorted reflection. Instead, her eyes darted anxiously around the edges of the mirror's warped image. She was seeking what she thought she had seen out of the corner of her eye in several of the other mirrors: a flicker of movement at the very edge of her vision;

a fleeting glimpse of something blood red, right behind her.

There's nothing there, silly, she told herself firmly. *Just me.*

But the unpleasant sensation of being watched still prickled her skin. She turned away from the dead-end and tried her luck in the other direction.

Nancy dearly wished she had spent her pocket money on any one of the fair's many other attractions. Right now, it seemed that only she in the whole of Farringham had opted to experience the MIRACULOUS MIRROR MEGA-MAZE. She had done so because of a strong sense that she was *meant* to. As she had walked past the sideshow, images of its glittering, labyrinthine interior had flashed across her mind's eye. Nancy knew better than to ignore her mind-pictures. Grandpa – the only one who knew about them – had told her to treat them as a kind of guidance; her own special sixth sense.

So Nancy had bought a ticket and entered the mirror maze, unsure why she was supposed to, but hoping that its 'Mind-bending, Rib-tickling Reflections!' might make her laugh – *and* give her the opportunity to admire her brand-new dress.

In reality, wandering the deserted maze alone was proving more frightening than amusing. All Nancy wanted was to find her way out, as quickly as possible. She wanted



her big sister. Ruthie should have finished her ride on the dodgems with that boy from the posh school by now. She had promised to take Nancy for some candy-floss.

As she picked a random path through the corridors of silvered glass, Nancy found it impossible not to glance into each of the mirrors she passed. A host of weird and wonderful Nancy Latimers peered back at her. A freakishly short, squat Nancy. A scrawny beanpole Nancy. A Nancy whose face sagged and drooped like melting wax. At one spot, a pair of facing mirrors on opposite walls created two infinitely receding lines of identical eight-year-old girls in canary-yellow dresses.

To her relief, none of the mirrors held what she feared they might.

I imagined it, she thought, feeling a little reassured. How could anything live in a mirror?

On a hunch, Nancy took another left turn . . . and pulled up short, her heart suddenly in her throat. A smooth silver wall blocked the way ahead: a plain, flat mirror. Her true reflection stared back at her from it – as did that of the little girl standing right behind her.

Nancy spun round. The corridor was deserted. Pulse thumping, she turned back.

The girl in the mirror looked about Nancy's own age.

She was dressed for winter, in a rather old-fashioned woollen coat, scarf and gloves. There was a pretty silk bow in her hair, and she was clutching the string of a bright red balloon. She had the forlorn look of someone lost, lonely and frightened.

Reason dictated that the mirror-child must be just another of the maze's clever optical tricks – but all Nancy's instincts told her otherwise. Her initial swell of fear gave way to pity. Screwing up her courage, she approached the mirror. Slowly, she reached out and laid a hand flat against it. Both girls in the mirror reflected her nervous movement, the stranger's hand merging with that of Nancy's reflection. They stood palm-to-palm. The glass between them felt icy cold.

'Are you . . . trapped?' asked Nancy, wide-eyed.

Needles of pain suddenly stabbed into her outstretched hand. With a cry, she tried to jerk it away from the mirror's surface – but found she couldn't. It was stuck fast.

The little-girl-lost look had vanished from the mirror-child's eyes. She smiled a slow, sly smile.

'Not any longer,' she replied.

With a grating, splintering sound, a crack split the mirror's length, running through the point where the girls' palms were bonded. Nancy watched in helpless horror as the child behind its fractured surface closed her eyes and let out

a deep, satisfied sigh. A long wisp of luminous green vapour came snaking from her mouth. It spiralled towards the crack in the glass and began to seep through.

‘Right – I’ve got one!’ said the Doctor, at last. ‘And it’s a belter!’

‘About ruddy time!’ Donna sighed. ‘So – animal, vegetable or mineral?’

‘Nope!’ The Doctor beamed. ‘Next question.’

‘What do you mean, “no”?’ Donna gave him a look. ‘It must be *one* of those, you numpty. Or do you mean it’s a mixture?’

‘Another no! Two down, eighteen to go!’ Folding his arms, the Doctor leaned back against the TARDIS’s console, looking even more pleased with himself than usual. Behind him, the time rotor rose and fell in its luminous central cylinder. ‘You’ll never get it.’

‘But it *has* to be animal, vegetable or mineral. That’s how the game works.’

‘Really?’ The Doctor’s smug smile slumped into a sulky frown. ‘Well, that’s rubbish!’ he protested. ‘That’s ontological incorrectness gone mad! I mean, if we’re restricted to primitive Earth-bound classification categories like those, I can’t use *any* of my best ideas!’

Donna gave another sigh. She’d thought a game of Twenty Questions might help to pass the time, as she and the Doctor passed *through* time. She hadn’t expected it to prove quite so problematic.

‘Maybe we should try I Spy.’

Before the Doctor could reply, his entire demeanour underwent a sudden and alarming change. He lurched forward, one hand grabbing for the handrail at the edge of the console platform. The other flew to a sideburned temple. Grimacing, eyes screwed shut, he let out a grunt of pain through gritted teeth.

‘Doctor?’ Donna laid a hand on the stricken Time Lord’s arm – and could feel the tension in it. ‘Doctor! What is it?’

A moment later, the spasm passed. The Doctor’s body visibly relaxed. His eyes flew open – wide with shock. He met Donna’s anxious gaze.

‘A scream,’ he told her shakily. ‘Proper blood-curdler.’

Donna frowned. ‘*I* didn’t hear anything.’

‘Wasn’t on the audible spectrum.’ The Doctor shook his head, as if to clear it. ‘It was a mind-cry. Only perceptible by those with psychic sensitivity.’

Donna’s frown became a scowl. ‘Not blockheads like me, you mean?’

‘Human minds are remarkable, Donna,’ the Doctor said

earnestly. ‘Even psychically latent ones like yours –’

‘Even mine? Well, thank you so much,’ Donna huffed.

‘– but, however splendid *Homo sapiens* might be, only a handful of your generation are telepathically mature.’

‘So now I’m immature as well as insensitive?’

The Doctor had already turned to the control console, and was consulting its unique hotchpotch of dials, gauges and indicators.

‘I’ve never known a mind-cry of such intensity. Looks like it came from the Vortex itself. The telepathic circuits picked it up. Relayed it to my brainstem, full blast.’

‘A cry for help?’ suggested Donna.

‘It didn’t *sound* like a scream of fear. Or of pain. More like a mental ululation.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘A wild psychic howl. Of triumph, I’d say.’ The Doctor frowned. ‘And there was something familiar about it.’ A spark lit his dark brown eyes. He pushed up the sleeves of his suit jacket. ‘If I’m right –’ his fingers began to dance across the console’s primary interface – ‘I should only have to isolate a telepathic signature . . . cross-reference it with any psychic profiles archived in the databank –’ he entered a final command – ‘and we *ought* to get . . .’

With a toast-popping alert sound, the viewscreen flashed

up a positive search result.

‘A match!’ The Doctor beamed.

A moment later his smile evaporated. He stared at the displayed data.

‘What? Nooooo. No-no-no. That’s not possible.’

He lunged to his right to release a tiny brass catch. Something sprang from the console like a cuckoo from a clock – a small, Bakelite-framed vanity mirror on a concertina-style arm. The Doctor hurriedly dragged it in front of his face. His eyes eagerly searched the reflection within.

‘Come on, come on . . .’ he muttered anxiously. ‘Where *are* you?’

‘Doctor?’ Donna was looking on in bemusement. ‘It’s a *mirror*. The only one you’re going to see in there is *you*.’

The Doctor continued to study the mirror for several more seconds before pushing it aside with a look of grim resignation. ‘I’m sorry to say you’re right, Donna. Which is *not* good. Not good at all.’

Hurriedly turning his attention to the flight controls, he commenced a rapid and energetic sequence of dial-twists, crank-winds and lever-pulls.

‘Hold tight, Ms Noble . . .’

A final expert switch-flick with his right sneaker completed his urgent resetting of the TARDIS’s space–time

destination. The craft lurched violently as the course change took effect.

‘We’re jumping the tracks!’

PC Mallik was sure he had just caught the sound of breaking glass. To a police officer’s mind, it was a noise that spelled likely trouble. It was hard to pinpoint its exact source, thanks to the hubbub all around him – the blaring pop music of the thrill rides, the yells of sideshow hawkers, the piping of the antique carousel’s fairground organ, and the whoops and screams of high-spirited fairgoers – but Mallik had an idea of the rough vicinity. He made his way through the throng in the direction of the MIRACULOUS MIRROR MEGA-MAZE. It wouldn’t hurt to take a look.

The weather – which, for late autumn, had been glorious all day – was fast taking a turn for the worse. A chill north-easterly breeze had picked up, and an ominous bank of grey cloud was advancing across the darkening sky.

Shame, thought Mallik. Nothing quenched the fun of the fair quite so fast as a downpour.

As he approached the mirror-maze sideshow, a little girl in a bright yellow dress emerged from its exit. It was the youngest granddaughter of old Timothy Latimer, the Farringham veteran who played poker with Mallik’s elderly

father once a week – and was a devil to beat, by all accounts.

Mallik gave her a warm smile. ‘That’s a very fine balloon you’ve got there, Nancy. Having a good time?’

Nancy Latimer didn’t reply. She returned his friendly look with an intense, searching stare. Mallik found it peculiarly disconcerting – even more so when she tilted her neck sharply to one side and continued to appraise him, unblinkingly, with her head at a most unnatural angle.

‘Everything all right, young lady? You don’t look quite yourself.’

The little girl’s mouth slowly curled, as if she found this remark somehow amusing. Her strange smile – it was more of a sneer, in truth – only increased Mallik’s sense that something was amiss. It struck him that when he’d last spotted Nancy, at the Hook-a-Duck stall, she’d been with her elder sibling, Ruth.

‘Have you lost your sister?’ he enquired gently.

The cold, scornful tone in which the girl replied was as out of character as her unpleasant sneer. ‘Sister?’ she hissed. ‘I have no sister.’

Mallik’s concern deepened. She was clearly confused. With his best reassuring smile, he held out his hand. ‘Come along now – let’s you and I go and find your family.’

Nancy regarded the proffered hand with obvious disdain,

then fixed him with that unnerving stare once more.

‘I do not require assistance.’

She took a sharp, hissing intake of air through flaring nostrils, as if seeking a scent. Her mouth curled unpleasantly again.

‘I know *precisely* where to find them.’

Before Mallik could respond, Nancy turned and headed away through the crowd. The baffled police officer watched her go, wondering whether he ought to follow, but strangely reluctant to do so. The little girl’s red balloon bobbed wildly after her in the stiffening breeze. Mallik told himself that the same chill wind was responsible for the icy shiver that suddenly ran through his body.

There was definitely a storm coming.

‘Doctor! Slow down, will you? Where are we going?’

The raging wind drove cold, stinging rain against Donna’s face as she fought against it to catch up with the Doctor, who was pressing on up the slope ahead, oblivious to her yells.

‘If you insist on dragging me on some midnight hell-trek to God knows where –’ Donna’s soaking hair lashed across her face, and she flicked it away angrily – ‘till I’m half drowned and up to my ankles in cowpats –’ in light of her

growing sense of dread, she was employing her preferred coping strategy: get steaming mad – ‘the *least* you can do is to have the decency to tell me *why!*’

Donna liked to think she didn’t scare easily these days. Since travelling with the Doctor, close encounters with a wide variety of terrifying alien creatures, from war-mongering Sontarans to fire-breathing Pyroviles, had left her little choice but to toughen up. It wasn’t so much her present circumstances – the dark, the storm, the deserted countryside – that had set her nerves on edge, though. It was the Doctor’s brooding mood. Since the baffling business with the vanity mirror, he had been grave-faced and withdrawn. Donna knew that if *he* was worried, there was something serious – and probably terrifying – to worry about.

The gusting gale had stolen her tirade. It brought something tumbling across the rutted field, out of the darkness, to bump against her leg. As she looked down to see what it was, a fork of lightning stabbed from the night sky. Its electric flash momentarily lit the gloom, eerily illuminating the thing at her feet.

It was a grisly imitation of a head, made of straw-stuffed sacking. Hollow black eyes and a grotesquely stitched mouth leered up at her.

A violent crack of thunder, following close on the

lightning flash, drowned out Donna's scream.

'Doctor!'

The Doctor had finally come to a halt, not far ahead. With a shudder, Donna kicked the straw head away and hurried to join him. As she saw what he had led them to, she felt another wave of foreboding.

It was a tall wooden cross; two rough timber stakes lashed together. It stood in the field like a vacant crucifix. Scraps of hessian sacking and spilt straw littered the ground around it. Recognising a rudimentary arm, Donna realised that she was looking at the remnants of a straw-built human figure. She thought of the grinning head. The bare stakes must originally have held a scarecrow, now reduced to scattered body parts.

The Doctor had already drawn his sonic screwdriver from his overcoat and was busy scanning its flickering blue tip along the timbers. He seemed oblivious to the wild forces of nature doing their best to batter and drench him. The fierce intensity behind his eyes suggested he was a far greater force of nature himself.

'What is it, Doctor?' asked Donna, raising her voice over the wind and rain.

The Doctor deactivated his sonic screwdriver.

'She must've released him after she freed herself,' he

shouted back. His frown deepened. 'And if she has the power to do that – to break open a temporal suspension envelope . . .' With renewed urgency and purpose, he turned back the way they'd come. 'Come on!'

'Not so fast!' Donna grabbed his arm. '*Who* released *who*?'

The Doctor turned a grim face to hers. 'It's the Family, Donna,' he told her. 'They're loose again.'

'The family?' Donna assumed the Doctor was *not* referring to Mafia mobsters. Or his own Gallifreyan relations.

Another flickering lightning bolt forked across the sky.

'The Family of Blood.'

A thunder crack rumbled through the cold night air.

The Doctor set off back across the dark, storm-lashed field towards the spot where his TARDIS waited. Donna hurried after him, her mind brimming with questions – including whether all Time Lords had such a flair for dramatic timing.

Back in the quiet, dry haven of the TARDIS's console room, the Doctor swiftly set about programming their next destination.

'Where now?' asked Donna.

'Not far. Tiny spatial hop. We could've gone on foot, but I want the old girl close.'

In the turquoise glow of the central column, the time rotor began its rhythmic rise and fall. The craft's cavernous frame vibrated as its ancient engine extracted it from normal space.

Donna pressed for more information. 'This Family of Blood – who are they?'

The Doctor squatted and dragged aside a segment of the console platform's grilled floor, revealing a storage area below.

'Four sociopathic predators acting in psychic union,' he answered, as he delved through a jumble of equipment. 'Mother, Father, Son and Daughter.' He hauled out a coil of rope with a grappling hook at one end. 'In their native form, they're green, gaseous entities – but they have a nasty habit of hijacking the bodies of others. Their last hosts were human.'

He slung the rope over one shoulder, replaced the grille, then hastily checked the instrument readings.

'You'll have seen one of them before. Many times.'

'What?' Donna's brow creased. 'When?'

'When was the last time you looked in a mirror?'

Donna flushed. 'Well, *that's* nice, I must s—'

'Never noticed anything odd in the reflection?' the Doctor pressed. 'Someone *behind* you?'

Donna fell silent. She stared at him, wide-eyed.

'You mean . . . the sweet little girl? With the balloon?'

'That sweet little girl was the Daughter's host,' said the Doctor grimly.

Donna had long ago decided that her glimpses of a child in the mirror could only be her imagination playing tricks. The news that the girl was real was a bombshell.

'The Family will stop at nothing to extend their own fleeting lifespans,' the Doctor told her. 'And there's only one reason they crave more time: to create more bloodshed and chaos. Given the chance, they'd spread war across the stars.' Anger burned in his eyes. 'That's why I locked them away.'

Donna raised an eyebrow. 'I might not be psychic, but I'm picking up a strong "this is personal" vibe.'

It was a moment or two before the Doctor replied. 'It was my fault they ever came to Earth,' he said bitterly. 'To England, in 1913. They were hunting me – for my Time Lord lifespan. They went on the rampage.'

'But you stopped them, right?'

'Not before precious human lives were lost.' A shadow of grief crossed the Doctor's face. 'Including mine.'

His last words baffled Donna. Before she could seek an explanation, the jolt of a heavy landing shook the TARDIS. Its double doors sprang open. The Doctor went bounding down the ramp towards them. Donna followed, hoping their 'tiny hop' had taken them somewhere rather less wet and windy.

The TARDIS had rematerialised in a deserted tunnel. Square in cross-section, it had a variety of pipes, ducts and cables running along its walls. Weak strip lights in the ceiling cast a sickly glow. From the pressure in her ears and from the chill, musty air, Donna had the strong impression that, wherever they were, it was deep underground.

As the Doctor set off purposefully along the tunnel, she kept pace, quizzing him as they went. ‘If you locked the Daughter in a mirror –’

‘In *every* mirror,’ the Doctor corrected her.

‘– what about the other three?’

‘I suspended the Son in time,’ said the Doctor. ‘Inside that scarecrow back there. His sister must have found a way to free him. The Mother I trapped in the event horizon of a collapsing galaxy.’

‘And Dad?’

The Doctor came to an abrupt halt. Just ahead, there was a large square void in the tunnel floor: the mouth of a vertical shaft.

‘He’s the reason we’re here.’

He unslung the rope, secured its hooked end to a sturdy section of ducting, then tossed the rest down the shaft. Donna watched the rope tumble away into inky blackness.

‘You left him down *there*?’

The Doctor’s expression was without a trace of pity. ‘Bound in unbreakable chains.’

Not for the first time, Donna felt somewhat awed by her alien friend’s quiet, righteous wrath. ‘Remind me not to get on your bad side.’

At the foot of the shaft, the darkness was absolute. The glow of the Doctor’s sonic screwdriver reached only a few metres. Beyond that, all was pitch black.

Casting the light around revealed no sign of the chained Father – only the opening of another tunnel.

‘Stay close,’ whispered the Doctor as he led the way. Donna didn’t need telling.

After only a few paces, the Doctor stopped, crouching down to examine a vague shape against the wall. It was a heaped coil of heavy chain. The link at one free end had been sliced cleanly through so as to be parted from the other.

‘Not *that* unbreakable then,’ observed Donna.

The Doctor frowned at the severed link. ‘This was cast in the heart of a dwarf star,’ he muttered. ‘What cuts through star-forged alloy?’

As he continued to pore over the broken chain, Donna noticed something odd. Her own shadow was visible on the wall before her. That meant a light source *behind* her . . .

A noise made her blood freeze.

Both she and the Doctor spun round to find three figures silently observing them from the gloom. The smallest clutched the string of a red balloon, which glowed with an eerie crimson light.

As Donna took her first horrified look at the three members of the Family of Blood, they, as one, fixed their cold eyes upon her. All three inhaled vigorously through flaring nostrils. In uncanny synchronisation, they tilted their heads sharply to one side, appraising her malevolently.

The human unlucky enough to host the Father was a thickset middle-aged man with a large, bushy moustache. He wore the tweed jacket, waistcoat and breeches of an Edwardian gentleman farmer. The Son looked like he had stepped out of the same period drama. He had stolen the form of a tall, dark-haired, arrogant-looking young man in the smart wing-collared uniform of a public-school boy. There was a hint of madness in his fixed smirk and widened eyes.

But it was the Daughter who, despite being the youngest and smallest, had the aura of command. She stood slightly forward of the other two, who flanked her like henchmen. Balloon apart, she did not, Donna saw to her surprise, look like the little girl she had spied in her mirror.

‘Got yourself a fresh body, eh?’ growled the Doctor,

eyes narrowed. ‘What about your last host? Young Lucy Cartwright?’

‘Expended.’ There was no hint of remorse in the Daughter’s reply. ‘These human shapes are *very* fragile.’ Her superior tone was wholly un-childlike. ‘They do not sustain us for long.’ She smiled a malicious smile. ‘I have changed in many other ways, too, Doctor, since we last met.’

‘So I see. Head of the Family now, are we?’

The Daughter did not reply – only extended her free hand. A crackling bolt of blazing white light burst from her fingertips. It hit the Doctor square in the chest. He sprawled on to the floor of the tunnel. His sonic screwdriver skittered away into the shadows.

‘Doctor!’

As Donna crouched over him, the Doctor stirred feebly. He was badly stunned, but alive.

The Daughter stepped forward, keeping her hand trained on the Doctor. Donna turned on her, trying to suppress her terror. ‘Any nearer, missy, and I’ll . . . I’ll . . . pop your balloon!’

‘Brother of Mine! Father of Mine!’ snapped the Daughter. ‘Bind them!’

Donna dared not resist as the Son and Father obediently advanced, manhandled her and the semi-conscious Doctor

into a back-to-back position, and bound them tightly with the heavy star-forged chain. She recoiled as the Daughter let loose another energy blast – but its aim was precise. It fused the severed link of the chain into an unbreakable whole once more.

‘Telekinetic hadron excitation,’ murmured the Doctor, beginning to recover. ‘Impressive. Where’d you learn *that* little party trick?’

‘Thanks to *you*, Doctor, I have acquired many new powers.’ The Daughter smirked. ‘By locking me away, you set me free.’ She moved to stand over him. ‘I have watched, alone, from every mirror in existence, across all time – as you decreed I must,’ she said bitterly. ‘From the looking-glass of the Prime Imperator; from the mercury mirror-pool of an Ulgron arch-mage; from the blood-polished obsidian of a Ch’Sok spirit-glass; from the mirrored walls of the great Sanctum of Reflection; from –’

‘Yada-yada. From a lot of mirrors,’ the Doctor interrupted, scowling. ‘We get the picture.’

The Daughter glowered back at him. ‘*Infinite* mirrors, offering windows on countless worlds,’ she hissed. ‘An eternity in an instant to watch – and learn.’ Her eyes shone. ‘I learned how to escape my prison. And in the moment of my release, while I still existed across all time, I sent a psychic cry into the

Vortex –’ her mouth curled nastily again – ‘and brought you running, Doctor, just as I’d planned.’

The Doctor held her vengeful stare. His strength was returning, his eyes filling with contained fury. ‘So – which of you gets the big prize, eh? A Time Lord’s lifespan. Or do I get to host the whole Family?’

It was the Son who answered this time – in a manic, mocking tone.

‘Oh, dear, sir! *No*, sir! You mistake our intentions, sir!’

‘We no longer need your shape, Time Lord,’ snarled the burly Father.

‘Through my watching,’ the Daughter continued, ‘I have seen more . . . *desirable* hosts. Creatures of the Vortex that can offer us eternal life,’ she sneered. ‘For you are mortal, Doctor. I have watched you die – many times.’ She turned her chilling gaze on Donna. ‘And seen this one’s futures, too. The part she might play, at the End –’

Donna frowned. ‘What end?’

‘– were it not that *we* have determined a different destiny for you both.’

The Daughter turned expectantly to the Son. ‘Do you have it, Brother of Mine?’

‘Yes, Sister of Mine. I have it here.’

He gleefully produced and displayed a familiar brass

door key.

‘Doctor!’ cried Donna. ‘The TARDIS key!’

The Son had evidently picked the stricken Doctor’s suit pocket at the same time as binding him. He smirked tauntingly at his victim. ‘You, sir, and your feeble human friend –’

Donna bridled. ‘I’ll feeble *you*, you stuck-up –’

‘– will share the fate, sir, that you so *cleverly* devised for Father of Mine.’

‘You’ll rot here,’ growled the Father. ‘Slowly. Bound in the darkness.’

‘While *we*, sir, will use your grubby little Vortex craft to liberate the last member of our Family –’

‘And pursue our prey at will!’ crowed the Daughter. With a sudden jerk of the neck, she threw back her head. Her upturned face glowed with a sickly green light as she voiced her wild psychic cry.

‘We come, Mother of Mine!’

She cast a final, triumphant leer at the Doctor, then turned and led her family away, taking the balloon’s crimson light with them.

Left in total darkness, bound so tightly it was hard to breathe, Donna struggled to keep panic at bay.

‘What now, Doctor? What do we do?’

The light-hearted tone of the Doctor’s reply threw her completely. ‘How about that game of I Spy?’

Donna really couldn’t see a funny side to their present predicament. ‘Hilarious,’ she hissed. ‘Just to be clear, this is *not* my idea of a jolly lark. I’m not crazy about seeing out my days at the bottom of a miserable pit!’

‘I’ve seen *worse* spots. Mulphlux Four, for instance. Now that really is –’

‘Doctor!’ Donna was baffled by his sudden lack of urgency. What had got into him? She felt a pang of dread. Had he given up? He never gave up . . . did he? ‘We can’t let the Family get away! “War across the stars”, you said. We have to stop them!’

She felt the Doctor’s body wriggle, heard him utter a soft grunt. The pressure of his back against hers released.

‘Doctor?’

There was silence for a few heartbeats – then a familiar buzzing sound. Blue light blossomed in the darkness, and Donna found that the Doctor was now standing over her. His face, lit by the glow of his recovered sonic screwdriver, wore a steely expression.

‘Oh, I’ll stop them, Donna, don’t you worry.’

Donna gawped. ‘How did you . . .?’

‘A little technique Harry Houdini taught me.’ The Doctor began loosening the chain looped round her. ‘I might not have spent eternity eavesdropping –’ he helped her free of the heavy coils – ‘but you don’t live to be nine hundred without picking up a trick or two.’

Donna looked at him expectantly. He seemed in no hurry to move.

‘Well?’ she prompted. ‘Shouldn’t we get after them?’

‘All in good time,’ said the Doctor. ‘Let’s give them a decent head start.’

Donna stared at him, flummoxed. ‘But . . . what about the TARDIS?’

The Doctor smiled slyly, a glint in his dark eyes.

‘It’s her I’m counting on.’

Donna stepped gingerly over the Father’s tweed-clad bulk. He was lying flat on his face, out cold, at the upper end of the TARDIS’s entrance ramp.

The Doctor, a few strides ahead, was negotiating a similar obstacle: the body of the Son’s human host, sprawled out on the console platform.

The Daughter was nowhere to be seen.

Donna scanned around anxiously, expecting to be frazzled by an energy blast at any moment. Then –

BANG!

A shred of bright red rubber, with a length of string attached – all that remained of the balloon that had just popped against the vaulted ceiling – came drifting limply down to land behind the console. The Doctor quickly ducked after it.

‘All clear, Donna!’ he called. ‘She’s here!’

Donna hurried to where the Doctor crouched beside the unmoving form of the little girl in yellow.

‘What happened to her? To all of them?’

‘They’ve been rendered unconscious.’

‘I can see that! But *how*?’

Delving under a floor grille, the Doctor quickly withdrew something from the storage area and held it out to Donna. ‘Here. Take this.’ It was an empty glass bottle labelled Zordn’s Original Astralberry Schnapps. ‘It’s already contained one evil spirit . . .’

Kneeling over the girl, he gently pushed back her lower jaw, then held his sonic screwdriver close to her face.

‘The TARDIS’s databank includes all the Family’s psychic profiles,’ he told Donna, in answer to her question. ‘They’re still on the primary system, from when I called up the archive earlier.’ Slowly, he drew a thin wisp of luminous green vapour from the child’s open mouth. It hung limply

from the screwdriver's buzzing tip. 'The moment they mind-spoke to one another, the old girl's telepathic circuits would have tuned in. Matched the profiles. Recognised them as known enemies – key or no key.'

'So . . . the TARDIS took out all three of them?'

The Doctor gestured for the schnapps bottle. As Donna held it steady, he lowered the dangling gaseous strand into it. 'She knows how to handle herself,' he said proudly. 'And, with surprise on her side, she'll have given them a nasty shock. Literally.'

He deactivated his sonic screwdriver. Taking the bottle, he capped it, then held it up in front of Donna's fascinated gaze. The gaseous green entity within was beginning to stir, swirling restlessly.

'Animal, vegetable or mineral, would you say?'

Donna gave the Doctor a look. 'Okay. Point taken.'

She eyed the bottle warily as he put it aside.

'Will that hold her? With all those new powers she was bragging about?'

'Powers schmowers,' replied the Doctor dismissively.

'Without a host, she has no corporeal agent to exercise them.'

He turned his attention to the unconscious child. As he scanned for life signs, Donna looked on in concern.

'Is she . . .?'

'She'll be fine. She's a lucky girl. She didn't serve as a host long enough to sustain any permanent neural damage.' The Doctor removed his pinstriped jacket, folded it, and slid it gently under the girl's head. He stood up. 'Just needs to sleep it off. Then we'll get her home.'

He glanced at the other two bodies lying nearby, then at the schnapps bottle. 'In the meantime, we should tidy up around here.'

'What are you going to do with them?'

Moving to the console, the Doctor reached for the flight controls.

'Perhaps I *was* a little harsh, consigning them to solitary confinement. They did seem awfully keen to see Mother.' The TARDIS's doors slammed shut. 'I thought we might drop them off at her place.' The time rotor stirred into motion. 'Of course, with "her place" being the event horizon of a collapsing galaxy, they won't ever be able to leave again . . .'

As the thrum of dematerialisation filled the console room, the Doctor flashed a wicked, bright-eyed grin at Donna.

'But it's good for family to spend time together.'