**The PX52 Deception**

“Where are we, Doctor?” Tegan Jovanka asked as she glanced up at a huge glass roof enclosing what looked like a futuristic vision of an airport terminal. Departure information was displayed on hologram boards that floated in the air. Intending passengers sat waiting for their flights on chairs that looked like giant marshmallows moulded to the individual’s shape and posture for the optimum comfort. Silver robots drove near silent hover vehicles that moved freight about or brought refreshments to the customers - no queuing in self-service lines for Styrofoam coffee and limp snacks.

“Would you believe, Heathrow Airport?” The Doctor replied with a grin.

“No, I wouldn’t,” Tegan answered.

“Then you’d be quite wrong. This IS Heathrow in the year 2225. It’s the age of hypersonic travel. It takes thirty minutes to get to Australia and flights leave every quarter hour. The world is a short stop away.”

“Impressive,” Vislor Turlough remarked.

“I would have thought people in the future would just zip around by transmat or something,” Tegan commented. “I’m surprised they need airports.”

“Transmat terminals were tried in the mid twenty-second century,” The Doctor explained. “But many people didn’t like the idea of being disassembled and re-assembled at molecular level. A couple of accidents where the reassembly went disastrously wrong finished off that mode of transport for all but bulk freight. Humans prefer hypersonic flight.”

Tegan tried to find something else to think about instead of the possible ways a body could be mangled by a transmat that went wrong. She heard an announcement and watched a group of people extricate themselves from their seats and make their way to a hover ‘train’ driven by a robot.

“The moon?” she queried. “They’re going to the moon? Is that the new Australia – the long haul destination?”

“Not at all,” The Doctor answered her. “The moon is more like Benidorm… but with nicer hotels. The REAL long haul is what we came here for. I thought you might enjoy it, Tegan. Come on, it’s this way.”

The Doctor led his two companions through an automated check-in and into a smaller, more exclusive waiting area. They stepped from polished marble floor to plush carpeting and sat with two dozen other passengers on deep red marshmallow seats with gold trim while the service robot brought glasses of champagne and fine canapes. Tegan sipped the complimentary drink and looked around at the other people. Most of them seemed to be executive types and their spouses. The executive men wore sharp suits and their spouses designer dresses, except in one case where the spouse was also a man. The executive women wore formal skirt suits and their spouses casual suits, except in the two cases where the spouses were also women. The twenty-third century was rigid about business attire but flexible about relationships.

There was a woman wearing a pink-purple dress and a little tiara. She looked more like a beauty queen doing a personal appearance than royalty, Tegan thought, with a woman’s instinct for other women. There was a family consisting of mum, dad and two children all wearing ‘country club’ clothes and a group of teenage girls in silver-grey and blue candy-striped school uniform blazers who looked excited to be on this trip. Their teacher-cum-chaperone looked travel sick before she even left the ground. Twice she headed to the executive class conveniences leaving the girls to chatter and read hologram magazines without censure.

“We won’t be waiting long,” The Doctor promised. “Ten minutes, tops. Just time to get into the right mood for a trip like this.”

“A long haul trip that’s further than the moon?” Tegan thought about space travel in her own time. Even with the shuttle it still took about three days to get to the moon. Everything else was science fiction. Two hundred and a bit years later ordinary – if well off – people could afford to go beyond the moon.

There was only one other possible destination she could think of.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” said a stewardess in a pristine uniform of red and gold that made Tegan just a little envious. “Your luggage is aboard the PX52. If you would like to follow me to the embarkation elevator you will be taken directly to the premier class lounge on our inaugural flight to Mars Metropolitan Space Port.”

“Mars! Impressive!” she murmured as she kept pace with Turlough and The Doctor. The school teacher emerged from the bathroom and hurried to catch up with her charges who were giggling madly with excitement, now.

It WAS impressive, even though she had been much further with The Doctor. But this was her own species, without benefit of time travel technology, reaching out into their own solar system.

She glowed with pride at her species’ ingenuity.

The elevator had the same deep plush carpet on the floor and walls that shimmered with gold flecked brushed metal. It rose silently and with a smooth movement. The Doctor said it utilized gravity cushion technology. Tegan guessed what that meant rather than asking for an explanation that was bound to get technical.

The elevator stopped smoothly and the doors opened onto a matching carpet and walls of the same brushed metal with the flecks of gold. Wide, comfortable seats that could be adjusted to any position around low polished tables were a far cry from the tightly packed rows of aircraft seats with hardly any legroom that Tegan associated with a passenger plane.

As the passengers found their seats a holoscreen popped up to show a man standing in front of a large window with the Mars landscape outside. He introduced himself as Brian Annersley, Chairman of World Aerospace. The recorded message went on to welcome them all aboard this inaugural flight and promised to meet them all in person at the end of the journey. Then the screen snapped off again and the head stewardess went through the ubiquitous safety announcement. It sounded, to Tegan, even less convincing on a craft that was heading out to the vacuum of space than one flying through the sky at a thousand feet. Either way accidents were usually fatal no matter what safety measures were taken.

“It really is the lap of luxury,” Turlough commented as he settled down in one of the seats and felt the contoured back against his spine. “Very nice.”

Tegan sat opposite him. She agreed about the comfort. She was puzzled by the lack of seatbelts, though.

“Anti-grav technology again,” The Doctor explained. “When we take off there will be a specially targeted gravity cushion to hold you in place. It will dissipate once we’re outside the Earth’s atmosphere and the micro-gravity comes into effect.”

“That’s a lot of gravity,” Turlough noted.

Tegan said nothing. It had just dawned on her that this wasn’t an executive jet but a spaceship. Of course she had registered that they were going to Mars, but even so she was still thinking in terms of air travel, the thing she was most familiar with.

Of course, she had travelled further in space than any other Human within this cabin, but in the TARDIS it was different.

Just before take-off there was a strange sensation, not exactly of weight, but of a restraining pressure against the body so that it was impossible to stand up again. Tegan disliked it for one obvious reason – she felt as if she was held against her will. With an old fashioned seatbelt that she fastened for herself, she knew she COULD, if she chose, unfasten it again. Obviously she wouldn’t during take-off, but still she knew that the catch was there to release her body from restraint when she chose, not when somebody else decided.

The excitement around the cabin was palpable. The school teacher reached for an executive sick bag with the red and gold company livery on it and held it over her mouth as the engine hummed surprisingly quietly and smoothly.

“Excellent sound proofing,” The Doctor remarked. “And very good inertial dampening. I calculate we’re taking off at something like Mach Three, which from stationary ought to turn us all into squashed tomatoes.”

Tegan looked sympathetically at the air sick teacher and considered grabbing a bag in case The Doctor was going to be any more graphic about these things.

“Vertical take-off, of course. Runway acceleration can’t possibly generate those sort of speeds.”

That did impress Tegan. In her time vertical take-off off was strictly for military aircraft like the Harrier Jump Jet.

“Up to something like Mach Nine, Ten, now,” The Doctor added. “And we’re outside the Earth’s atmosphere… in less than three minutes.”

Tegan and Turlough both looked at their watches. So did several other people who had overheard The Doctor. That they were outside the atmosphere and the gravitational pull of Earth was obvious. Loose objects started to float away from the unwary. Pens were grabbed by executives. The beauty queen had to clamp her hand down on her tiara to stop it pulling out of her hair. The smallest child of the country club family nearly lost her doll. Her father plucked it out of the air before it floated away. The – mercifully empty – sick bag became a balloon that drifted up to the brushed metal ceiling.

Then everything began to obey the laws of gravity again, making everyone very thankful that the sick bag was empty when it landed on the beauty queen’s head. A stewardess came from the galley with champagne and caviar while another announced that the micro-gravity was now in effect and passengers could walk around.

Tegan felt the gravity cushions release her, but she still felt a little resentful of the lack of control over the function and kept to her seat.

Turlough immediately stood and went to what he assumed to be a row of windows with plush curtains across them. He drew one curtain back and was surprised to see an indented rectangle of the same metal the walls were made of.

“No way of looking out?” he queried.

“Windows as you understand them are not possible in super-hypersonic craft,” said a stewardess who appeared at his side. “The body of the PX52 is based on the monocoque principle. The stress of the immense speed we are travelling at is borne by the external skin of the ship which is made as a single, seamless unit. Windows, even of the strongest exo-glass or even transparent aluminium would be a weak point.”

“Try to imagine the perils if the windows all shook loose at Mach One Hundred,” The Doctor added helpfully. Several people other than the already unhappy schoolteacher looked towards their personal sick bags as they imagined it all too well.

“Also, the view when at maximum speed does tend to be a little upsetting,” the stewardess added in a quieter voice. She reached to touch a series of coat button sized indentations in the ‘frame’ of the non-existent window. The rectangle turned into a high definition video screen with a slow motion simulation of the view on the way to Mars and useful information about the average speed of the ship, the distance from Earth and time left until arrival on Mars – a little under nine hours.

“Very interesting,” Turlough commented. “But I’m not sure it is as good as being able to look out of a window, especially when we’re getting near Mars and there’s something worth looking at.”

He turned away from the screen and sat down to indulge in the caviar and canapes that were being served by the very efficient stewardesses. Tegan noted that there were touch screen computer terminals built into the tables, too. The children were playing interactive games that made low pinging noises from time to time. The beauty queen and the teenagers indulged in gossip magazine material. Some of the executives were checking stock exchanges and other business activities.

Tegan remembered that she had not actually seen the ship from the outside. She used her terminal to look up information about the PX52.

“The latest and most exciting craft to be built by World Aerospace,” she read aloud as The Doctor relaxed in his seat and listened to her. “The PX52 brings together luxury executive class travel and cutting edge technology to provide the first daily service to Mars Metropolitan Space Port, Earth’s first commercial exo-planetary destination. World Aerospace have made evolutionary leaps in super-hypersonic speeds combined with passenger comfort and safety, condensing a journey of six weeks into a mere nine hours, including take-off and landing. The commercial and industrial benefits of Mars colonial expansion are brought closer to Earth by the PX52.”

The sales pitch went on for much longer, but Tegan stopped reading and looked instead at the images of the PX52’s test flights. She saw that the monocoque hull spoken about by the stewardess was shaped a little like a squashed bullet with two small fins partway along the sides and something like a giant sports car ‘spoiler’ at the back. The ‘spoiler’ supported four huge cylinders like washing machine drums. These were, in fact, something far more futuristic and impressive, the exhaust nacelles of the super-hypersonic engines.

“It looks pretty,” Tegan said. “But I don’t really know what super-hypersonic means, really, except that its obviously very fast.”

The Doctor leaned closer and touched a small, nearly invisible hyperlink. A page with closely printed words and technical diagrams instead of glossy images resolved. The Doctor scrolled down the information at eye watering speed.

“Mmm,” he remarked when he was done. “Interesting… to a scientific mind, anyway. Your talents are in different spheres. “Very fast” is about as much as you really need to know.”

“That’s a tad patronising, Doctor,” Tegan remonstrated.

“I don’t mean it to be,” he replied apologetically. “My intention in bringing you on the inaugural flight of the PX52 was to show you the future of your chosen profession.”

“In the future, it looks like the stewardesses know a lot more than we’re expected to know,” Tegan remarked. “That stuff about monopops or whatever it was….”

“Monocoques,” The Doctor corrected her gently. “That concept is nothing new. It was introduced very early in the history of aeroplanes, and in your own era anything from a London bus to a formula one racing car is built on the principle. But your interest in planes is more about the fact that they DO fly, from one exciting place to another, than HOW or WHY they fly. Besides, that stewardess didn’t know much more about monocoques than I’ve just told you. Most of it was memorised spiel just like the ‘in case of accident’ routine you know by heart.”

“You mean it’s all show?” Tegan smiled ironically. “That’s kind of why I didn’t do so well as an air hostess, you know. It all just felt a bit like I was putting on a front, pretending I was calm and professional while demonstrating what to do in the event of a catastrophe that I wasn’t sure I’d be particularly calm and professional about, and then serving drinks and peanuts like a glorified waitress. After the TARDIS, it was all a bit dull, anyway.”

“So you don’t aspire to being a stewardess on the PX52?”

“Is serving caviar any more interesting than serving peanuts? I think I’m happier as a passenger.”

With that she loaded a canape with the very fine caviar and made a good pretence of being somebody who ate such food all the time. She noted that the beauty queen was unused to luxury nibbles, too. The schoolgirls had eschewed the expensive fish eggs altogether and their teacher wasn’t even looking at the plate near her.

There was only so much caviar anyone could eat and with or without a window view a flight to Mars got as dull as a flight to Australia after the first couple of hours. Tegan adjusted her seat into a lie back position and put the complimentary eye mask on. She settled down for a nap, lulled by the distant and muffled sound of the super-hyper-hypersonic engines – or however many hypers it was.

It all sounded like too much hype.

She woke up feeling the dull-headed muzziness that comes from sleeping at unusual times of day. She looked at her watch and noticed that she had been asleep for three hours.

Almost everyone else had slept, too. Turlough was unfurling himself from a rather ungainly position. The beauty queen was adjusting her tiara which had slipped sideways as she slept. Even The Doctor looked a bit tousled.

“Ladies and gentleman, luncheon will be served in the dining cabin shortly,” said a stewardess. A door slid open in the wall to reveal a beautifully appointed room with a table set with silver cutlery, bone china and crystal glassware on fine linen tablecloths. It was the last thing Tegan expected on a plane, let alone a space plane.

“Very nice,” Turlough commented. “I could get used to this executive class travel. Much better than scrabbling about in the TARDIS kitchen for a sandwich.”

The Doctor scowled at the unfavourable comparison with the TARDIS, but Tegan thought there was something else bothering him, too. He could not talk about it even if he wanted to over lunch. They were all separated at the table. The Doctor was sat between the schoolteacher and one of her students. Turlough had the company of the country club family. Tegan was seated with the beauty queen and one of the executives.

She found them better company than she expected. The beauty queen’s name was Tara Blair and she was the current Miss Europe. The trip to Mars was part of her queenly duties for the year of her reign. She was excited about seeing a new planet. Tegan tried not to sound too experienced about such things.

The executive was named Antony Harrison and he was Australian. It seemed a long time since Tegan had talked to anyone from Australia. She found herself chatting easily with him. She found out that he was travelling to Mars in order to invest in the planet on behalf of the Real Estate company he worked for. He planned to buy a hundred square miles of land which had been zoned for luxury housing. The company would stand to make a fortune when the colonisation began in earnest.

“But as I understand it there isn’t any atmosphere on Mars,” Tegan pointed out. “At least, not a breathable one. Do people who can afford luxury houses really want to live on Mars under exo-glass domes?”

“They do now that World Aerospace can get them there in nine hours. Before this, it was just too remote. Now, it’s almost possible to commute. Those who can afford it will snap up the chance.”

“Well, each to their own,” Tegan remarked. “From what I’ve seen of Mars its bleaker than King’s Canyon.”

Harrison laughed. Tegan was surprised. She didn’t think her comment was that funny.

“Oh,” he said. “I thought you were talking about the prototype city they built in Watarrka National Park when the first Mars project was underway. You know, the exact replica of what the space port and retail centre would look like. It was a bit of a tourist attraction in its own right for a while. I heard World Aerospace had bought it, though what they want to do with it….”

“I didn’t know that,” Tegan assured him. “I was just thinking of the reddest part of Earth I know, seeing as that’s what Mars is like.”

“I think they might have had some ideas about light intensity and humidity as well,” Harrison suggested. “But yeah, they must have thought Kings Canyon was pretty Mars-like.”

“Good job they didn’t build it near Cairns, then,” Tegan joked in a way only a Queenslander was allowed to joke about Queensland cities. Harrison shared the joke as a fellow Australian.

Later, when they all went back into the Executive lounge there was a much livelier atmosphere. People were talking to each other much more instead of being confined to their own groups. A buzz of animated conversation continued.

It almost felt an anti-climax when the stewardess announced that they were landing shortly and advised passengers to resume their seats. Tegan felt the pressure of the gravity cushion again and still didn’t like it.

The Doctor looked out of sorts, too.

“What’s up?” she asked him.

“The sky is up,” he answered. “Or it will be when we land.”

“Hahaha,” Tegan responded. “Very droll. Note sarcasm.”

“How long do you think we’ve been aboard the PX52?” he asked.

“A bit less than nine hours,” Tegan answered, glancing at her watch. “A half hour until we get there.”

“Does it feel like nine hours?”

“No, actually. I suppose because it’s been fun. Travel is always easier if you’re enjoying it.”

“Mmm. There is that. But I’m a Time Lord. That’s not just a title, you know. My body clock is difficult to distract, and it feels like less than half that time to me.”

My watch is running normally,” Tegan pointed out. Turlough confirmed that his wristwatch was synchronized with hers. The Doctor didn’t wear one. He never did. His body clock was infallible, or so he thought.

“I remember reading a short story about body clocks going wrong,” Turlough said. “There was this astronaut inside a one-man craft with no windows, pitch dark. He was meant to go into an induced sleep for the duration of a long, long flight – one that would take years. Just after take-off, though, something went wrong. He didn’t sleep and all the instrument panels were dead. The ship was on course, but he had no way of reading his speed or anything. He had no choice but to stay in his seat and wait until the ship got to its destination. So he did just that, fed intravenously, day after day, month after month, year after year, the same terrible boredom, nothing to do, no distractions. Eventually the ship landed on the destination planet, but the same malfunction meant that he couldn’t get out and explore. All he could do was wait until the pre-programmed flight back to Earth began. The same distance back, months, years, passing. At last he landed again. The hatch was opened. He crawled out, his muscles atrophied, a long beard and hair, his eyes blinking at the unaccustomed light. The ground control people were astonished to see his condition. They showed him the ship, still on the launch pad where it had been stuck, engines roaring, vibrating madly, but going nowhere – for half a day while they managed to shut everything down and get him back out.”

Tegan listened to the strange tale and glanced at The Doctor, waiting for him to tell her that it was just a creepy bit of science fiction.

“Power of Suggestion and a very distorted sense of reality, it could happen,” he said. “To a Human. But my body knows the difference between three hours and nine, usually.”

“Some sort of time dilation on account of the super-hyper-hyper-hypersonic?” Tegan suggested.

“Super-hypersonic wouldn’t do that. It would take unprotected warp drive to confuse a Time Lord’s instincts for the passage of time. I can’t explain it.”

“The obvious explanation is that your instinct isn’t as good as you think,” Turlough told him. “You’ve lost track of time. Your body clock has stopped!”

The Doctor didn’t really believe that, but he had no other explanation except that everyone else’s watches were fast. Besides, if he was right that would mean that the PX52 was faster than claimed, and that was just puzzling in itself.

The landing was smooth and uneventful. In lieu of windows they watched the descent on a huge holoscreen. The red planet at first appeared as an ochre coloured sphere, then filled the screen entirely. They started to see mountains and valleys, natural features that the schoolgirls pointed out excitedly having done Mars geography thoroughly to win the trip on the inaugural flight of the PX52. Soon the - as yet – only non-natural feature loomed large – the four-mile-wide exo-glass dome covering the Mars Metropolitan Space Port.

The PX52 touched down vertically onto its designated rectangle of concrete, then descended into a special airlock which closed over the ship, plunging the screen into darkness until the artificial lights came on.

The suddenly quiet engines were a surprise after several hours of their low hum. The head stewardess told the passengers to gather their hand luggage and led them to the elevator they arrived on. They descended into a corridor with the same plush carpet and brushed metal walls. A hover train with a robot driver was there to receive the VIPs. In a few minutes they emerged from the subterranean arrival point into the dome.

It was an impressive sight. A whole business and retail sector equivalent to the centre of a major city had been constructed under the exo-dome. Multi-level shopping centres and entertainment complexes stretched around plazas where fountains cooled and moistened the recycled air.

Above it all the glass dome rose a full quarter of a mile at its highest point before it screened oxygen breathing Humans from the airless Martian atmosphere. The Doctor noticed that the sky far above the glass appeared red. It reminded him just a little of sunset on Gallifrey, though that was not something he ever felt nostalgic about.

Tegan thought the deep ochre colour reminded her of Australia, still, and perhaps she felt happier about that than The Doctor did about being reminded of his home planet, even though both had left for much the same reason – to explore new places and have exciting new experiences.

“Come on, Tegan,” Turlough called to her. “There’s a VIP reception for us in the World Aerospace building.” He waved towards a curiously shaped multi-storey building of steel and glass. At the front it was an ordinary vertical plane likes any skyscraper. The back wall was a part of the curving exo-glass wall of the dome. Its conference rooms boasted unparalleled views over the Martian landscape.

“Reception… as in food and drink?” Tegan queried. “You know, I’m not sure I’m hungry. Between the caviar and champagne and the luncheon aboard, I’m stuffed, still. It doesn’t seem like five minutes since the meal.”

Well, not five minutes, but not the three or four hours it was meant to be, either. She was sure she ought to feel a little bit hungry.

Perhaps it was the excitement of being one of the first people to have the privilege of travelling to Mars by the PX52 – as they were assured they were by Brian Annersley, Chairman of World Aerospace, who was there to greet them in person.

She didn’t feel excited, either, just not hungry. Still, she followed the crowd to a glass elevator that brought them to the Elite Suite at the top of the building.

It was a sales pitch, of course. Huge holoscreens depicted the proposed residential domes that were possible now that Mars was so easily accessible. It was what Harrison had come for, along with the other executives, and the country club family who might well be among the first to buy the luxury houses.

Tegan wasn’t interested. She turned to look at the buffet. It was an Elite Suite spread of luxury foods like dressed salmon, savoury roulades, cracked crab and lobster, piadina wraps, parma ham and brie. The desserts were mouth-watering. Still, nobody had appetite to do it justice except for the schoolteacher, who was looking better now that she had arrived. She filled her plate and attacked the food relentlessly.

“I hate travel,” she said to Tegan between mouthfuls of light crab puffs. “I don’t even like going to the moon. I get sick there. Funny, really. I don’t feel that way here. I thought I wouldn’t feel better until I got back to Earth, but I’m actually starving.”

Tegan smiled and left her to her banquet. She found Harrison and Miss Europe. They were both looking out through the section of curved exo-glass wall that passed this floor.

“It STILL looks like King’s Canyon,” she heard him comment. Tegan was surprised when Miss Europe agreed.

“I went there the first week after winning the crown,” she said. “They took my picture up on the top of the mountain, with my tiara and an evening gown. I was freezing, but the pictures were fantastic. I’ve got one blown up in a frame in my bedroom. I know, it’s a bit self-centred having pictures of myself on my walls like that, but I was so thrilled when I won the contest, and I loved having pretty things like that.”

Tegan listened half-heartedly, Harrison a little more patiently, smiling warmly at her naïve but harmless chatter.

“The thing is, though, it really DOES look like the same place. Those mountains… apart from being a lot redder… they really do look like the mountains on my photograph. But how can Mars really look THAT much like Australia?”

“You’ve never been to Cairns,” Harrison joked with a wink at Tegan. But she was thinking hard, putting pieces together.

“It really didn’t feel like nine hours,” she said. “The Doctor said it felt wrong to him. And he DOES know time. The PX52… no windows. We had no terms of reference except the holoscreens. We were nearly as cut off as the man in Turlough’s creepy story. The teacher… she gets sick on the moon, but here she’s eating like food is going out of business. And it really DOES look like the Northern Territories out there.”

She pressed her hand against the exo-glass.

“You know, if I didn’t know better I’d think this glass was tinted red… to make the sky, the mountains, look more alien than they are.”

Harrison nodded then turned from Tegan to Miss Europe.

“Tara, are the gems in your crown real diamonds?”

“Yes,” she answered. “I had to sign an insurance thing to be able to keep it with me.”

“May I….” To her utter surprise Harrison gently took the tiara from her hair and turned it until he found the largest and sharpest jewel. He scored the glass in a wide circle.

“Exo-glass shouldn’t do that,” Miss Europe said. “It can’t be broken…”

“This isn’t exo-glass,” Harrison replied. “It’s much cheaper than that.”

Tegan slowly grasped Miss Europe’s hand while holding tight to a steel pillar that held up the ceiling of the wide conference room.

Just in case.

Harrison stood his ground, the mental certainty with which he did billion-dollar real estate deals standing him in good stead now as he staked his life on a hunch.

“No!” Brian Annersley, the World Aerospace Chairman, shouted his alarm and tried to cross the room in time to stop Harrison from breaking the window, but he was too late. Weakened by scoring with the diamond it only took a heavy tap to shatter the glass.

On Mars, with no atmosphere, there should have been sudden and catastrophic decompression. Tegan, Miss Europe and Harrison would have been the first to be sucked out, probably followed by Brian Annersley and anyone else who didn’t grab a handhold.

But if there was air outside, then there would be a sudden cold wind blowing the other way, back into the conference room. Tegan gasped and pulled Tara back from the edge as the wind nearly knocked them both off their feet. Harrison turned and stalked across the room towards Annersley. The Doctor and Turlough both joined him as two of the other guests tipped up a table and pushed it against the broken window. It didn’t quite cover the gap, but it cut out most of the noise and wind.

“We’re NOT on Mars.” Tara Blair, Miss Europe, a girl admired for her face not the brain behind it, expressed what everyone else was slowly starting to realise. “This IS Australia.”

“It’s the prototype space port,” Harrison said in explanation.

“I wondered why the shops were so quiet,” said one of the schoolgirls. “After all, there are loads of people living at the Mars station and nowhere else to buy stuff. It should have been crowded.”

“I missed that clue,” Tegan admitted. “I still haven’t figured out how the time dilation works either, or why.”

“It wasn’t anything as sophisticated as time dilation,” The Doctor explained. “Just some sort of electronic pulse that made all your watches run fast. They couldn’t keep sling-shotting around the moon for nine hours. They just about got away with it for three. That’s how long we were really aboard the PX52. Just long enough to go around the moon, orbit Earth and come back down in Australia.”

“But why?” Everyone looked at Brian Annersley. He stepped towards the elevator but Turlough blocked him.

“I’d stay here if I were you, chum.” He was backed up by the country club dad who glared angrily at the chief culprit.

“I think I know what part of it was about,” Harrison said. He picked up one of the real estate prospectuses and spilled out the glossy photographs of barren red land, charts indicating profit margins and smiling images of Annersley welcoming investors to Mars. “It was a con, a scam. Everyone was here to invest – all of us serious travellers, anyway. Miss Blair, Tegan and her lot, the family and the school kids - I’m afraid you were all just window dressing. The idea was to make us businessmen think that daily Mars trips were possible. I said it myself when I was explaining the project to Tegan. Nobody would buy property on Mars if it was like living in Sydney in the sailing ship days, months away from home.”

“The technology is close,” Brian Annersley managed to say. “The PX52 WILL work in time. But we didn’t HAVE time. World Aerospace overreached itself financially. We had to have investment now, not in five, ten years’ time.”

“This reminds me of another story,” Turlough said. “The one where they faked the first moon landing in some American desert.”

“Exactly right,” The Doctor confirmed. “Funnily enough I remember a far more dangerous con that nearly hurt a friend of mine. That time a group of people were fooled into thinking they were on a ship in deep space when they were just in a dark basement in Whitehall. I often wondered why they didn’t notice the lack of engine vibrations. Now I realise that if people want to believe enough… or if they have no reason to disbelieve… they can be fooled all too easily. Even I nearly was. Unlike Tegan and her two friends, I’ve never been to Kings Canyon.”

“Looks like you have now, Doctor,” Turlough remarked dryly.

“Yes, indeed,” The Doctor responded. “Well, there’s an old Earth expression… ‘fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.’”

The people gathered in this draughty conference room didn’t like being fooled at all. Brian Annersley was a worried man.

“So what do we do about him?”

“Chuck him out of that window,” somebody said. It was a woman’s voice, filled with seething anger. It might even have been the teacher, appalled at being so travel sick just to be ‘window dressing’ as Harrison had put it.

“No,” The Doctor insisted. “Absolutely not. Nobody is being ‘chucked’ anywhere, not even him.”

“We don’t have to commit violence to hurt him,” Harrison assured everyone. “The loss of investment from us will be enough.”

His fellow potential investors nodded in agreement. Billions of dollars flew out of the broken window in a heartbeat.

“If you do that one hundred and seventy-five thousand people will lose their jobs,” Annersley protested. World Aerospace will fold and they’ll all be redundant, with no possibility of severance payments.”

Everyone glanced uneasily at one other. They didn’t want to be responsible for that kind of widespread misery. But still, Annersley couldn’t be allowed to get away with such an outrage.

“That’s hardly the point,” The Doctor tried to say, but stopped. Maybe it was exactly the point.

“WE weren’t here to invest in Mars real estate,” said the executive whose spouse was another man as they both stepped forward and the crowd turned their gestalt attention to what he had to say. “I’m Martin Hammond, CEO of Boeing-Virgin. I came on this trip to see just how desperate World Aerospace were. Clearly the answer was VERY desperate. I’ve just put a call through while you were all so distracted and I’ve bought out World Aerospace for a lot less than it should have been worth. I can afford to wait for the PX52 to be ready to make the Mars trip for real. Nobody has to lose their job – except for you, of course, Annersley. You’re a liar and a cheat and you’re fired. Go quietly and avoid prosecution. Don’t even think of asking for a severance package.”

There was a surprised silence, then a round of applause for the man who had suddenly and unexpectedly stepped forward and saved the day. Annersley moved slowly to the elevator again. This time nobody stopped him. Martin Hammond looked around at his fellow passengers from the not so very super-hyper-hypersonic PX52.

“Its small consolation when you wanted to see Mars, but there’s a very good hotel in Alice Springs. I propose organising transport – something more mundane than super-hypersonic travel. Supper is on me. Then tomorrow we’ll have breakfast aboard the PX52 on the way back to Heathrow. We can talk about a reunion trip when the bird is ready to make the real trip to the Red Planet.”

That suited everyone except the school teacher who declared that she was never going to leave Surrey again after this.

“We can come back for it, can’t we, Doctor?” Tegan asked. “I’m kind of curious. It would be nice to see if it all works out like I think it will. Not just the PX52 getting to Mars, but… I think it’s entirely possible Miss Europe could be Mrs Harrison by then.”

The Doctor smiled. He was quite sure about that, too, but in his case it was because he could read timelines rather than female intuition.

“I’ll put the date in my five-hundred-year diary,” he promised.