**Aliens in Margate**

“Romana, might I say how well you wear the fashions of 1911,” The Doctor commented as they walked along Margate’s Fort Lower Promenade on a surprisingly calm day in September of that year. His always elegant and appropriately dressed companion was wearing a slim fitting ‘dress suit’ consisting of an ankle length pleated skirt and tailored jacket in russet red linen over a crisp white silk blouse and a small blue cravat at the buttoned-up collar. A wide brimmed hat in matching russet with a simple silk ribbon in blue, crowned the whole affair.

“The TARDIS Wardrobe offered several alternatives,” she admitted. “This seemed the most practical for walking by the sea.”

It was a sunny day, by and large, but the far horizon was a bank of pearly white cloud that might yet obscure the sun. A number of fishing boats could be seen on the water. All was calm. The promenade upon which they were ‘promenading’ was moderately busy with couples enjoying the sea air just like they were. Polite nods and ‘good morning’ satisfied the etiquette of this activity.

It seemed too quiet, too ordinary. Romana wondered why they were there. This was not a location of any of the Keys of Time, and there seemed no other reason to visit this part of Earth in this era of its history.

“We’re having a little holiday,” The Doctor told her when she asked. “Margate is a capital place for holidays. Aren’t you enjoying it?”

“It is very pleasant,” Romana confirmed. “But I’m not sure I completely understand the concept of a ‘holiday’. It seems to be a frivolous use of time.”

“That is exactly what it is,” The Doctor assured her. “Relax, breathe the fresh air, enjoy yourself. Be frivolous.”

“Not in this skirt. But… surely, Doctor, there is SOMETHING other than ‘holiday’ going on here? You brought us here because there is a mystery to investigate?”

“What makes you say that?” The Doctor asked her. He stopped promenading and turned to look at his younger Time Lord companion. “Do you sense something? Is it precognition? Foretelling? A prophetic vision of impending doom?”

“If it is… I’ve never had one before. I tried very hard at the Academy, but never managed it. Professor Gyrre said that precognition was a skill female candidates rarely managed and I would not be marked down for such inherent physical deficiencies.”

“You mean he thought you couldn’t do it because you’re a girl?”

“Yes.”

“Pompous fool,” The Doctor responded.

“Pompous, indeed. And ill-informed. He obviously hasn’t looked at the research by Lords Alves and Gamer which clearly suggests that precognition is stronger in female brains.”

“I am familiar with that paper,” The Doctor said. “It is, as I recall, five thousand pages long and basically can be condensed down to ‘Women know what you’re going to do before you even think about doing it.’”

“Well, I think there was a bit more to it than that,” Romana insisted.

“Possibly,” The Doctor conceded. “However, that axiom only applies to married women.”

Romana prepared to fire a riposte at that comment, but realised she didn’t have one. The Doctor smiled widely.

“But… getting back to the point,” he said after a long pause. “Did you have a precognitive or otherwise extra-sensory vision?”

“I couldn’t call it that, exactly. More…” She looked up from the lower Promenade to the late Victorian edifice on top of the cliff at the far end.

“That place up there… something about it gives me strange feelings… I think humans call it… ‘the creeps’.”

“That’s Fort Paragon Hotel,” The Doctor told her. “I stayed there once in my younger days – in the hotel’s younger days, too. I’m not sure if it’s even open at the moment. Successive owners have gone bankrupt. It’s too big and really not luxurious enough to pay its way.”

“It’s… I don’t know. Something… bothers me about it.”

“Should we go and investigate?” The Doctor suggested. “We can book in for the night….”

“Mmm.” Romana answered. “Well… all right. I suppose it’s the only way to find out if I’m just being paranoid.”

“Well, our feet are pointing that way, anyway,” The Doctor said, deciding the matter. They carried on walking past the neo Romano-Grecian frontage of the newly opened Winter Gardens and then up a set of steps cut in the cliffside. It brought them onto a promontory where the views were even more lovely. Romana looked at the fishing boats out to sea and at the Winter Gardens from above. She looked at the elegant crescent of well-appointed private homes and hotels that overlooked the sea from Fort Crescent.

None of those places caused so much as a tingle in her sixth sense.

She turned to look at Fort Paragon Hotel and at this close proximity her psychic nerves were stretched like harp strings and playing a discordant tune.

“It’s… not exactly impending doom,” she admitted. “But this is Earth… a dull little planet with no offworld contact in this era. Very few of its indigenous population have any psychic powers….”

“Unless they are married women,” The Doctor interjected.

“Yet, I feel as if there is something in that hotel… something not of this world.”

“Then, despite being the proverbial pot calling the kettle, we certainly ought to investigate.”

It didn’t take any extra sensory perception to know that things weren’t quite right at Fort Paragon Hotel. But that was mostly because it was a building in severe decline. The term ‘shabby gentility’ was often applied to people or places that were past their best. Here, the emphasis had to be on ‘shabby’. The deep red wallpaper in the foyer was peeling at the edges. The mirrors were spotted and the picture frames were rusting. The sofas where a few of the guests were enjoying mid-morning tea were at least fifty years old with fading fabric and threadbare patches.

The same, with charity, could be said of the guests.

“Here we are,” said the pale, skinny deputy manager who had already introduced himself as Mr Samuel Brown. He handed over two keys. “Two balcony rooms with adjoining doors and private bathroom facilities. Do you need any help with your luggage, sir, madam?”

They had no luggage, but before the deputy manager could assume anything about the adjoining doors and how long they planned to stay he met Romana’s deepest, hardest stare. “If there is anything else you need….”

“Nothing,” Romana said shortly, taking one of the keys in an independent manner. She turned towards the lift and studied the wrought iron gates and the lift gear visible in the five inch gap. She turned from it and headed for the stairs.

The Doctor took the lift. Romana was already checking out the bathroom facility when he came through the adjoining door.

“The lift has been working for at least fifty years,” he said. “There’s no reason why it should break today.”

“I’m taking the stairs. We’re only on the second floor, anyway. What do you think? Is there something odd here?”

“Mr Samuel Brown is odd,” The Doctor confirmed. “For one thing, I don’t think ANYONE is really called Samuel Brown. Whether he is odd enough to be dangerous is another matter. People have the right to be odd as long as it doesn’t affect the rights of others who don’t want to be odd.”

“Perhaps asking the oddest graduate of the Prydonian Academy to define ‘odd’ is a bad idea,” Romana commented.

“Speaking of odd, have you seen this? There’s one in my room, too.”

The Doctor picked up a book from the bedside table and flicked through the pages before passing it to Romana. She flicked the pages rapidly, reading at a rate of two pages a second.

“Odd,” she agreed. “Some of it looks like advice for a visitor from abroad, given this planet’s multiple cultures. But there is other information… like how many hours are in the day, days in a year, the fact that the sun sets in the west….” Romana nodded. “I often get that bit confused. On Gallifrey it is the opposite way around. This… is a guide to Planet Earth… for people who need to know such basic things.”

“Exactly.”

“But… why….”

“Perhaps they are VERY good at tailored hospitality,” The Doctor suggested. “We ARE both aliens, after all. We might have needed the advice.”

It was not a particularly good explanation, but Romana couldn’t think of a better one just now. She felt as if the musty wallpaper and dull, heavy furniture was suppressing her imagination.

She went to the French door that opened onto the balcony. The paint on the railing was flaking, but standing there was pleasant enough and the slightly oppressive feel of the hotel room was lifted.

The sea view was lovely. There were the white sails of several pleasure craft as well as the fishing boats, now. The pearly white clouds were spreading, but they didn’t really spoil the late summer feeling.

She turned her attention to the view across the Winter Gardens, appreciating fully the way the huge ballroom complex had been built in a scooped out hollow so that the terrace above the semi-circular amphitheatre was at ground level. Apparently, this was because the owners of the nice houses on Fort Crescent didn’t want to lose their sea view.

Romana thought that was a good enough reason for the unique architecture.

She could see and hear a chamber orchestra playing music in the amphitheatre. She watched people on the terrace all around the top of the semi-circular structure either walking or sitting at outdoor chairs and tables where they were served tea and cakes by waiters and waitresses in neat black and white uniforms.

It looked far more enticing than the lounge downstairs in this old looking, old smelling, dingy hotel that hadn’t just seen better days, but didn’t seem to have ever HAD better days.

“Let’s go out,” she said. The Doctor didn’t answer. He was fiddling with his sonic screwdriver, which was certainly not a metaphor for the sort of thing the deputy manager was assuming when a couple booked in mid-morning without luggage. He was ‘humming and hahing’ and ‘hahaing’ to boot as he aimed the sonic apparently randomly around the faded walls.

She looked across the Winter Gardens terrace again and noticed something even more out of sorts with sunny Margate than Fort Paragon Hotel.

There was a mist coming up from the sea. It wasn’t connected to those pearly white clouds still spreading along the horizon. It just seemed to be coming up from the surface of the water and moving towards the ‘Fort’ area of the seafront.

“Doctor!” she called out more urgently. He looked around as if surprised to discover that he wasn’t alone, then, registering the tone of her call came to the balcony.

“Very odd,” he said. “It almost seems to be ‘guided’. Mist doesn’t usually do that.”

“I should say,” Romana answered him.

“There WAS something I encountered a few years ago.…” The Doctor added. “A few regenerations ago. There was a nasty, toxic and semi-sentient seaweed attacking gas pipelines in the North Sea in the late nineteen-sixties. But that hasn’t even happened yet in linear time. It’s only 1911.”

“But… what is it?” Romana asked. “And what is it doing to the people down there?”

The mist had completely engulfed the Winter Gardens. The music from the amphitheatre stopped raggedly. The faint voices that could be heard from the terrace were silenced. This mist was certainly doing SOMETHING to the people.

“Come on, Romana, that mist is doing something to the humans down there,” The Doctor announced as he turned and ran for the door.

“I know. I was trying to tell YOU about it,” Romana began, then gave up. She followed The Doctor to the end of the second-floor landing where he pushed open a door leading to an iron-red fire escape. He took the steps two at a time. She was a little more careful. HE wasn’t wearing an ankle length skirt that threatened to snag and trip her at every step. Even so she was only slightly behind him as they reached the ground level and raced towards the Winter Gardens.

The mist was receding by the time they reached the Terrace. At first glance everything looked quite normal. Only the absence of sound or movement told of a supernatural occurrence.

“They’re alive,” Romana confirmed as she touched the shoulder of a young woman in a blue feathered hat who was sitting at a table, her hand on a tea cup. Beside her a waiter was in the act of setting down a plate of hot buttered muffins. The Doctor took the plate from his unresisting hands and moved him aside as if he were no more than a shop mannequin.

That was another story, he thought as he examined the waiter thoroughly with the sonic screwdriver in biological analysis mode. He was certainly not a plastic replica. His body was warm. There was a pulse. He was breathing. There was even pupil dilation. He was just utterly unaware of what was going on around him.

“We’re the only people moving,” Romana noted.

“Not quite all,” The Doctor answered her. He pointed out two other people moving along the terrace. The thin young man was Mr Brown from the Fort Paragon Hotel. He was accompanied by a slightly older woman. Mr Brown stopped by a table and took a teapot out of a gentleman’s hand while the woman pulled his chair out to avoid scalding hot tea spilling into his lap. It had already overflowed the cup and saucer and was running across the table. Next, the woman took a fully laden tray from the hands of a waitress before a similar accident involving hot liquids occurred. She put the tray on a nearby table, leaving the waitress with outstretched but empty hands.

“Don’t stand there staring,” Mr Brown called out to The Doctor. “Catch that perambulator.”

The perambulator, with an unmoving, silent child inside, was rolling away from an immobile nanny and heading, inexorably, towards the Terrace steps. The Doctor lunged forward and halted it with his foot just in the nick of time. Romana quickly pushed the perambulator back to the nanny and pressed her unresisting hands around the handle. She prevented any further movement by pushing a cakestand against the front wheel.

The baby was quite unaware of the drama.

“Come on away,” said the woman who accompanied Mr Brown. “Everyone is safe, now.” She found an unoccupied table and invited The Doctor and Romana to join them.

“Some of it is a little funny,” said Mr Brown. “Now that we’ve prevented any nasty accidents. Yesterday afternoon there was an old lady teetering at the top of the steps and a man lighting his own beard instead of a cigar. But mostly it is hot tea mishaps.”

“Funny?” Romana queried. Then a cymbal dropped out of the hand of the percussionist below and there were discordant sounds frommmmmmm the rest of the orchestra. The conductor dropped his baton and quickly recovered it before restarting the music.

Around the Terrace there were cries of disconcertion as people found themselves in strange positions. The waitress looked at her empty hands before searching for her tray. The man who almost had the hot tea in his lap wondered why he was suddenly so far from the sodden table. The nanny bent to see what was blocking the perambulator and was surprised by the incongruous cake stand.

“These muffins have gone cold,” complained the woman in the blue feathered hat. “Bring some more at once.”

The waiter picked up one of the muffins with rapidly congealing butter on top. He examined it critically, certain that the butter was nicely hot and runny the last time he had looked at it.

Then he pushed the muffin into the woman’s face and dumped the rest of the plate into her hat. Before she had time to scream in outrage he had swept off his apron and thrown it down in a puddle of spilt tea before walking away.

“That WAS funny,” The Doctor confirmed. Romana, who was wearing the sort of hat that might be subject to the same abuse wasn’t quite so amused.

In any case she was noticing the behaviour of other people affected by the mist. The man with the spilled tea was crying, despite having been moved to a clean table and given complimentary tea and cakes. There was a loud and bitter row going on between a couple who had looked quite happy to be with each other when they were immobile. Many other people were angry or upset. The nanny, obviously a lady of impeccable good character before now, had secreted the silver cake stand inside the perambulator and added two lady’s handbags and a gentleman’s wallet to her haul while the owners of those items were busy abusing the waiting staff.

“It was worse, yesterday,” said the lady who accompanied Mr Brown. She had introduced herself as Georgina Brown, sister of the deputy manager and another slightly fictitious choice of name. “They had to arrest a man who started to take his clothes off in front of the orchestra. It’s lucky nothing has reached the local paper, yet.”

“I think the mayor could be putting pressure on them not to print anything derogatory about the Winter Gardens,” Mr Brown added. “He put a lot of effort into getting it built as an attraction for Margate. If it fails, it looks bad for him.”

“Municipal politics,” The Doctor noted. “Definitely not something I get involved with as a rule. What’s your story?”

“We just make sure nobody gets hurt. Scalds, burns, butter knives in unfortunate places, unattended perambulators… We first noticed the mist about ten days ago and knew we had to help.”

“It doesn’t affect you?” Romana asked.

“It wouldn’t,” The Doctor told her. “Mr and Miss Brown aren’t human. Segalian, if I’m not mistaken. The slight purple tinge to your irises and the flattened thumbnails are distinctive traits.”

They nodded in confirmation. There was no point in denying it.

“And yourselves?”

“Hapless wanderers in the fourth dimension,” The Doctor answered cautiously. Segalians were a peaceful race, but he still wasn’t quite sure what was happening and though his instinct was to trust the ‘Browns’ he decided to keep his and Romana’s exact species quiet for now.

“Why are Segalians running a shabby hotel in Margate?” Romana asked.

“That’s a long story,” Georgina said.

“Perhaps not as long as you imagine,” The Doctor told her. “I think I’m starting to understand about that. But it can wait. This business with the sinister mist is more important, and since you are the only people in Margate likely to be any help in the matter, we should certainly co-operate in the investigation.”

“We’re investigating?” Romana queried. “With them? I thought they were doing it….”

“Not at all,” Mr Brown insisted. “We really shouldn’t even be involved, but we didn’t like to see people hurt.”

“That tends to be my philosophy,” The Doctor agreed. “You know, I don’t believe we’re going to be served at all. They seem to be running out of staff.”

Two of the waiters were having a fist fight. The waitress had run off in hysterics. Chances of any more tea being served that day were very limited.

“We have two packs of Jaffa cakes in the TARDIS kitchen,” Romana pointed out. “Let’s put our own kettle on.”

The Doctor led the way down the back steps from the Terrace to the Lower Promenade. The TARDIS in its usual guise of a police box that wouldn’t be seen on English streets for a few more decades was not attracting very much attention. Everyone who might have noticed it was watching another punch up between two well-dressed promenaders egged on by their ladies who were poking all comers with their delicate lace parasols.

“It seems to affect emotions,” Romana commented as they invited the Browns over the TARDIS threshold. “Anger, especially, but people crying, pushing cakes into other people’s faces, taking off their clothes….”

“Yes,” Georgina Brown agreed. “I thought so, too, but what is doing it, and why?”

“Two excellent questions that I usually expect Romana to ask,” The Doctor said. “Let’s have that tea and see if we can find out.”

Tea in the console room of a TARDIS was a unique experience for the Browns. The view on the big wall screen as Romana passed around the Jaffa cakes, was, at first, the sea front at Margate, complete with fishing boats and pleasure craft, just what anyone would expect. But The Doctor had set the TARDIS on an automatic course while he had his tea.

The TARDIS rolled down the beach like a bathing machine, and into the water. The sea rose up, gradually covering the exterior camera that produced the screen images. At first, a pale green sunlight filtered through, but soon the lamp on top of the police box was illuminating the sea bed. Startled fish scuttled out of the way as they moved through the water like a brick shaped submarine.

“What’s that?” Emily asked after a while. “That shape up ahead. Could it be the source of the trouble?”

“No,” The Doctor answered. “Sadly, that has not been a source of trouble for a good sixty years. It is the wreck of the steam paddle ship Adelaide, a shuttle service between Ireland and Britain that sank in bad weather taking many souls with it.”

Even Romana, who had learnt Detachment at the Prydonian Academy was solemn as she looked at the remnants of the huge paddle wheel amongst less durable wooden parts of the wreck.

The Doctor had taken Detachment as an academic subject, too, but rejected its practical application.

“It was this tragedy on the notorious Tongue Sands which prompted the purchase of a Margate lifeboat,” he said. “Humans don’t like to sit idly by and watch such things happen. It is one of their redeeming traits.”

“Quite right,” Romana agreed. “But... These Tongue Sands.... Might they be significant?”

“They very well might,” The Doctor answered. He had finished his tea and put the last Jaffa cake in his mouth whole before going to the console. Romana followed with a paper napkin in case of crumbs, but he had already eaten the confection as he adjusted the environmental scanner and examined the Sands using several different filters at once.

“Ahaah!” he exclaimed triumphantly. The others hurried to look at what he had discovered.

On the main screen there was nothing but a mound of weed covered sand supporting colonies of crabs and other crustaceans.

But the deeper probes from the TARDIS systems revealed something more. It was a flattened circle about the size of the lost paddle steamer they had passed already. That made it small as spaceships went. All four non-humans could confirm that.

The TARDIS computer confirmed that it absolutely was alien, giving a list of the elements that formed the alloy making up the outer skin of the craft. Four of them weren’t produced by any mine on planet Earth.

“But a spaceship underwater?” Mr Brown asked. “Is that… likely?”

“Where better to hide a spaceship?” The Doctor asked. “I’ve seen it done a couple of times.”

He may or may not have been thinking of the Zygon ship hidden beneath Loch Ness.

“There don’t seem to be any life signs aboard this ship,” Romana said. “Perhaps it isn’t anything to do with the mist. It might be another sunken wreck just like the Adelaide.”

“I think we should take a look, don’t you?” He looked at Romana, but also the Browns who were on their first adventure of this sort. They might have been a little puzzled about how the TARDIS was going to enter the spaceship, but they were ready to find out.

In fact, the TARDIS materialised on what, in any other ship, would have been the bridge, the control centre with a captain, navigation officer, radio operator and possibly a tactician in control of a weapons array.

There was nothing like that, only banks of computers with thousands of LED lights blinking and an annoying hum of servers running at full power.

“There are no monitors displaying the data,” Romana noted.

“No chairs,” Georgina added.

“No doors,” Samuel pointed out. The Bridge filled a large part of the ship, but it was surrounded by empty space.

“This ship belongs to a race who don’t need chairs or doors, or to read data from a screen,” The Doctor said.

“Well… what sort of race is that?” Georgina asked. “We know hundreds of species through our work. We’ve never met anything like that.”

“Nor have I,” The Doctor admitted. “Not exactly like this, anyway. I wonder…”

He examined the banks of flashing lights carefully and then reached into his pocket for his second most useful tool after his sonic screwdriver – a silent dog whistle. A few minutes later K9 emerged from the TARDIS.

“Master?” the robot dog said inquisitively.

“K9, did you enjoy your rest in the zero room?”

“I have no concept of ‘enjoyment’,” K9 answered much as The Doctor expected him to do. “However, the period spent in a null space environment has been beneficial. My systems are fully rebooted.”

“Good. See if you can talk to this spaceship.”

K9 extended his nose probe and connected with the computer array. The LED lights flickered faster and more urgently for several minutes before he withdrew.

“Master, the ship is from Soylarain in the Thurn galaxy. The Soylarain are a non-corporeal intelligence. They are here to gather information about corporeal intelligences….”

“You mean humans?” Romana queried. “Why?”

K9 extended his nose probe again. The lights flashed even more intensely and a section of the floor began to rise up. It was roughly the size of a coffin, and that analogy was even more apt when the cover slid back to reveal a more or less humanoid figure inside.

“A child?”

“The semblance of a child… about eight human years. Or she will be when she’s finished.”

The ‘unfinished’ nature of the ‘child’ was obvious. The skin was chalk white and almost transparent. The eyes when The Doctor gently pushed back the lids were all white with no iris of any kind. He put his hand gently on the fragile looking forehead and tried to read the mind inside.

“There’s lots of information in there. Everything a being would need to get along in life. But there’s no context. The instincts and emotions that drive the intellect are missing. She is, so far, merely an organic computer.”

“Yes.” Romana knelt and touched the child’s mind, too. She could see it all very clearly. “Yes, I understand. They have existed in isolation for so long. They seek to make contact with other intelligent species. This is their way of doing that… by creating an organic body. But to complete her they need to harvest those indefinable things… as you said, Doctor, emotions, instincts, hormonal responses. That was what the mist was for. The behaviour of the affected people was merely an unintentional by-product.”

“They meant no harm?” Mr Brown asked.

“There is a fault in the programming,” K9 announced. “The ‘harvesting’ was meant to cover a much wider area of the populated area, taking only a fraction of a second to complete the ‘harvest’ and causing negligible effects on the subjects.”

“Can the fault be repaired?” The Doctor asked.

“Affirmative,” K9 responded. “It is a simple misdirected subroutine. I can rewrite it in a nano-second.”

“Then do that,” The Doctor ordered him.

“Wait…” Georgina said. “Is there anything there… in the programming… to tell the girl what to do when she’s ‘finished’? Where is she supposed to go? Who would look after her?”

“Negative,” K9 answered after a brief rummage through the subroutines. “They expect her intellect to suffice.”

“They’ve never been cold and hungry and alone,” Georgina remarked.

“As non-corporeal beings, that is obvious,” Romana countered, though not unkindly. “Do you have an idea?”

“Yes, I do. Let your robot dog tell the computers this – when she’s ready, she should come to Fort Paragon Hotel.”

“It’s what we do there,” Mr Brown added. “When you two booked in… I thought you were some of our ‘special’ guests.”

The Doctor and Romana both looked at the Browns. They both had an inkling of what they were going to reveal, but it was worth the wait.

“The hotel is a… a sort of halfway house… for aliens seeking to make a new home on Earth. We help them to understand human culture, habits, how to blend in and not draw attention to their differences.”

“In short… the very thing this young creature needs,” The Doctor acknowledged. “Capital idea. K9, if you’ve repaired the faulty sector, introduce that factor into the main programme.”

He closed the lid over the unfinished girl and allowed the cabinet to fold back into the floor. K9 swiftly completed the alterations to the programme.

“Now, let’s leave her in peace. Back to the TARDIS.”

They returned the TARDIS to the lower promenade. The sun was shining and people were peacefully promenading as if nothing strange had happened.

A man with a cart was selling ice cream. The Doctor purchased four cones. The quartet of non-humans ate them in contemplative mood.

“Humans are the only race who ever thought of freezing sweetened milk and making ice cream,” The Doctor commented. “Make sure our unfinished girl learns about ice cream before anything else.”

“We’ll do that,” Mr Brown promised.