**Death in the Keys – Part One**

Peri was completely happy with The Doctor just for once. He had brought her somewhere absolutely spectacular and non-life threatening.

And on Earth, too. It seemed a while since she had been on her home world.

She stretched out on what would, ordinarily, be a sun lounger. This WAS the Florida Keys and the sun was shining down hot and humid on the Sunshine State, but she was relaxing by a pool that was actually twenty-eight feet below sea level and the heat and light didn’t quite penetrate this far. The temperature matched that of regular hotel facilities above the waves thanks to an environmentally friendly renewable energy system that provided all the heat and light she could desire without the risk of sunburn.

She hadn’t quite decided what was more incredible – a fully functioning underwater hotel or the fact that such a thing was possible within her own lifetime. This was twenty-twenty-six. In linear time she would be….

She hadn’t actually finished that sentence, even to herself. It was a little scary to imagine being that old. But thanks to the TARDIS she could bypass over thirty years and enjoy these facilities while she still had the figure to wear a bikini.

The idea of a swimming pool containing warm, chlorinated water on the sea bed was a bit mind boggling, too. This whole communal area was enclosed in a huge, upturned, lozenge-shaped bowl of specially toughened glass that allowed her to see the sea life outside. Most of the time the fish swam in leisurely shoals. Only occasionally did they scatter in a panic when something predatory approached. The underside of a tiger shark was an impressive sight to view from a sunlounger. A handy brochure told her that it was one of nine different sharks that frequented the Keys. The fact that a couple of them were known to attack humans was just a bit disturbing.

A waiter brought a long, cool drink with fruit and a paper umbrella. She sat up to drink it and watched a huge spiny lobster moving slowly across the sea bed. There was a list of crustacean species native to the area, too. Spiny lobsters shared the sea bed with quite a lot of other odd-looking things.

Especially jelly fish. The water beyond the glass, which was specially treated not to collect condensation that would ruin the view, contained a plethora of ghostly moon jellies drifting with the current. Their sting was mild, the brochure said. It was too late in the season for the deadly Portuguese Man of War that was sometimes blown up from the Caribbean in winter storms.

Small mercies

While Peri relaxed, The Doctor was on one of the scuba tours, swimming out there in the company of those nine shark varieties and the mildly stinging jellies as well as many other wonders.

It had been a long time since he did anything like this. A long time and several lives, all of them slimmer than this one, he had to admit. Still, the underwater hotel hired out wet suits in several sizes, and the skills were very much like riding a bicycle – once learnt, never forgotten.

He was enjoying himself, exploring the reef a half a mile or so out from the dry land part known as Key West, getting up close and personal with shoals of brilliantly coloured fish with exotically descriptive names like Queen Angelfish, Mahogany Snapper, three different Butterflyfish, and his personal favourite, the Puddingwife. Some of his fellow divers were trying to check them off on laminated boards with underwater pens. He did it with a carefully memorised image of the board and Time Lord efficiency. Either way, the ‘fish bingo’ game was a way to spend the allotted dive time. He wasn’t prepared to call it a ‘great’ or ‘fun’ way to do that, but it was a ‘way’ to use the time.

The main object of the dive was a ship that had been sent to the sea bed in the nineteen-eighties. Forty years of accumulated barnacles and assorted sea vegetation had encased the man-made shape and created a reef of amazing shapes and colours that was home to rare marine life. Many of The Doctor’s diving companions had brought underwater cameras to record the sightings of a grazing reef octopus and a juvenile hawksbill turtle among other wonders.

The Doctor didn’t bother with cameras. His eyes took in the wonders and his mind stored them for recollection any time he chose. A thousand years from now, he might sit in a comfortable chair aboard the TARDIS and relive every moment of this pleasant interlude in exquisite detail.

There was one thing that bothered him. He looked carefully at the anomaly and wondered if he should alert somebody to the problem.

But who? Certainly not the dive leaders. They were too busy telling everyone that it was time to go back up top. He could have tried explaining that his alien anatomy was immune to compression sickness and he could remain underwater for hours, but that would have complicated things even more. He joined the others to ascend to the dive boat, determined to look further into the matter later.

All right, Peri admitted. She probably would take a scuba diving trip tomorrow. Apart from the fauna, which the brochure ASSURED her posed absolutely no risk, there was plenty of fascinating flora amongst the third largest coral reef in the world.

Today, she was enjoying the opportunity to do nothing at all.

Then something happened to upset her idyll.

It upset everyone’s idyll.

In fact, Peri was probably the only one who didn’t scream. She certainly could reach levels of shrillness equal to those around her, but the body that had drifted down onto the glass roof above her was upsetting, grisly and unpleasant, but not shocking enough to warrant a scream.

Life with The Doctor must have been toughening her up, she reflected as she noted that it was a man in his mid-thirties, wearing rags of a wetsuit and scuba gear. Parts of his body were horribly burnt and there was a horrific expression on his dead face as he bumped against the toughened glass.

“Don’t just stand there,” she told one of the waiters. “Go and get him.”

Of course, that wasn’t possible. It needed a boat and a dive team. Those things were close by since diving was the predominate hobby of hotel guests, but it took a while to organise. Meanwhile, the management got everyone into the hotel bar where the roof was of solid material and the side window views were mercifully free of dead bodies.

Peri accepted one quick, complimentary drink to replace the one she had left outside by the lounger, then went to look for The Doctor. She was relieved to find him amongst a group who came down one of the glass elevators that connected the underwater complex to a floating ‘pontoon’ on the surface - the usual way of getting to the hotel.

She told him what she had seen in a flurry of jumbled words, then at his insistence told it again more slowly.

“How very upsetting,” he said in a nearly nonchalant way. “Do you think it was a hotel guest?”

“I have no idea,” Peri answered. “Anyway, I don’t imagine they’ll bring him in here. I suppose they’ll take the body away to the nearest morgue. It must have been an accident. Maybe his boat caught fire or something. That would explain the burns.”

“Yes,” The Doctor agreed readily. “Yes, it would. A tragic accident. But nothing the local authorities can’t deal with. I expect boating accidents are as common as road fatalities in these parts.”

He was right, of course. It was a macabre bit of poolside excitement, but over, now. The Doctor declared himself hungry after his dive trip and steered Peri towards the restaurant.

This was another part of the hotel with an all round view, but it was on the opposite side of the hotel from the pool and there was no sign of the marine authorities recovering the body.

Seafood was a popular choice on the menu. Peri had chicken. She didn’t want to eat anything while its cousins were watching outside. The Doctor chose a similarly neutral meal. As they ate he talked about his dive.

“What I don’t get is that most of the wrecks around here were deliberately sunk to make wildlife preserves,” Peri complained. “It’s kind of… fake.”

“Fake?” The Doctor queried.

“Well, it is. Especially seeing as we’re slap bang in a hurricane zone. There ought to be plenty of real wrecks without creating more. Still… I suppose… it’s less nasty. At least nobody went down with the fake ones.”

“Quite so,” The Doctor agreed, then changed the subject to the dessert menu. Peri didn’t need to dwell on death at sea after what happened.

His own submarine mystery was one he could dwell upon with one part of his superior mind while keeping up a light, conversational tone with his lunch companion.

Because there was something disturbing going on around the waters of the Keys. He knew it for certain.

He knew it even before he overheard the hotel manager speaking to the maître-d. It was obviously not something he was meant to hear about as a guest. The manager was most anxious that guests DIDN’T dwell on the matter. The maître-d asked him how he was going to keep it quiet since ‘that was the fifth one pulled out of the water this week.’

All right, it MIGHT have been innocent. It might have meant that baked spiny lobster was off the menu.

Or it could have meant there had been five deaths at sea this week.

Or five unexplained deaths, anyway.

“Doctor… are you listening?” Peri asked.

“Of course I’m listening,” he answered truthfully. He just hadn’t been listening to HER.

“So, you’re ok with me going shopping in Key West for the afternoon?”

“Yes, of course,” he at once assured her. “Shopping, perfect.”

It WAS. It provided an excuse to get out of the hotel and find out some things.

Peri had a good afternoon shopping. She almost forgot about The Doctor. The cost of clothes and fashion jewellery in the twenty-first century and the use of swipe technology with credit cards was the only thing that was strange to her about the afternoon.

But as she got out of a taxi at the marina, clutching her shopping bags, she saw something that HAD to be connected to him. A US Navy jeep was parked beside the hotel launch and three officers were waiting. As she approached, nervously, the senior officer, a Captain with a badge on his jacket identifying the Naval Air Station, Key West as his home base stepped in front of her. He identified himself as Captain Ed Andrews and asked her if she was Miss Perpugilliam Brown.

“Yes… but what is this about?” she asked.

“We need you to come with us,” Andrews answered her. “Please….”

He brought her to the jeep. His subordinates carried her shopping and it was all very polite. She didn’t feel as if she was under arrest or anything, but it was strange, all the same, and The Doctor HAD to be involved.

“What’s he done?” she asked, but nobody was prepared to tell her until they were inside the Navy Base a few miles along the coast from the marina and the tourist spots. She was brought to a room with a large window looking into another room where The Doctor was pacing up and down, studiously ignoring what was obviously a mirror from his side.

He looked even more peculiar than usual because he was wearing a bright red wetsuit and flippers which slapped the floor comically as he paced.

She repeated her simple question.

“He was caught in a secure area of the beach inside the base compound,” Andrews answered. “Swimmers and divers do turn up sometimes, despite security measures. Ordinarily, we’d just take fingerprints and throw them out. But he insisted he didn’t have any other name but ‘Doctor’ and he wouldn’t explain himself except… when we asked if anyone could vouch for him… well, this man has the craziest credentials I’ve ever known….”

“Crazy, how?” Peri asked.

“He gave a phone number… a British one. We tried it, and it turned out to be Buckingham Palace. Apparently, this man… with no other name but Doctor… has the King of England AND the British Prime Minister as his personal guarantors.”

“You spoke to the… King?” Peri asked. “And the PM?”

“And the President. I’d only just put the phone down when the White House called. They all said that I’m not allowed to interrogate him, and if he doesn’t want to tell me what’s going on, then I have to let him go and forget he was even here.”

Peri was only slightly surprised by this news.

“Then… why did you need me?” she asked.

“Because he also said to contact you… and I thought, maybe you were his… I don’t know… his responsible adult. King or no king… he looks and sounds like a loon. I just needed SOMEBODY to stand here and assure me I’M not going mad.”

“You’re not going mad,” Peri assured him. “What was The Doctor doing on your secure beach?”

Andrews didn’t answer. National Security overrode some aspects of this strange case.

“Look… we’ll get you both back to your hotel. But try to keep him out of trouble.”

“If I could do that, I’d have a quieter life,” Peri answered with feeling. “I’ll do my best.”

With that promise Andrews brought her to the other room to be reunited with The Doctor. She said nothing to him, making do with a scathing look as if she was bailing a troublesome teenager out of juvenile detention.

The Doctor turned to Andrews.

“If you value the lives of your staff, keep them away from the reef,” he said. “You’re straying into matters beyond your remit.”

“This is the US Navy,” Andrews answered. “The sea IS in our remit.”

“Not this time, I assure you,” The Doctor argued.

“Come on,” Peri said impatiently. “Let’s go. Before he changes his mind and puts you in the brig.”

The Doctor opened his mouth to speak. Again, she glared at him.

“If you don’t come, now, I’LL change my mind and put you in the brig,” she added. “Come on - and keep a low profile until you can change out of THAT outfit.”

Andrews was happy to let Miss Brown take charge of The Doctor. He had some real problems to deal with just now, and this was just a surreal diversion.

Then a message was passed to him. He read it carefully twice.

Apparently, Miss Perpugilliam Brown WAS a US citizen with no criminal record. Born in 1966, she was officially missing, presumed drowned, in Lanzarote, in 1984.

“Either that is one hell of a facelift, or I AM going mad,” he murmured before screwing up the message and dumping it in the wastebin. “Is there any news about our missing dive team?” He asked the question in the vain hope that his subordinate had something to report that he could work with. “Have we been able to make any connection with the dead civilians pulled from the sea?”

He wasnt completely surprised to find that there was no satisfactory answer to either question.

Peri said nothing to The Doctor until they were back underwater in the hotel. Even then she waited until a tray of afternoon tea had been delivered to the drawing room of the private luxury suite with all round sea views. The Doctor changed into a light, tropical version of his usual flamboyant style and she could finallt blot out the thought of the wet suit and flippers.

“What’s going on?” she demanded.

“If I’m right,” he answered. “And if the US Navy doesn’t start a war, first, a chance to make peace with a great race of indigenous Earth creatures.”

“Wow!” Peri responded. There didn’t seem to be any other response to something that portentous. “Who… or what…. Indigenous… How….”

The Doctor shook his head slowly. His expression was peculiarly hard to gauge. It was at one and the same time a smile and a grimace of extreme grief.

Then he told her an incredible story about beings who evolved long before humans, two different but related species, one living on the land, one under the sea, but both with technology more advanced than present day humans at a time when dinosaurs still walked the Earth. He told how both the mis-named Silurians and the even more badly titled Sea Devils had gone into deep hibernation because they believed a cataclysm was imminent. They slept through the extinction of the dinosaurs and the emergence of mammals as the dominant species. The vast majority of them, around the planet, still slept, unaware of the existence of humans. A few pockets had been disturbed by mankind’s activities, and battles had been fought for supremacy. The humans had won these battles, but The Doctor, strangely, did not consider those victories a matter of celebration. Instead he mourned the chance for the old and new masters of Earth to negotiate a way to share the planet.

“One of the worst battles is still in the future at this time,” he said. “It was a terrible act of carnage. There SHOULD have been another way. This could be the chance to do something.”

“Change the future… in favour of these… Sea Devils? They don’t sound like nice guys. And… and they’ve killed humans, haven’t they? The man who landed on the pool roof….”

“More than one. The Naval Base has a small collection of boats – three fishing boats and a pleasure yacht… and one of their own dive boats… all with burn marks on their hulls, the tell-tale signs of underwater energy weapons. Yes, there have been deaths.”

“Well… then… they’ve drawn first blood. Why shouldn’t we retaliate?”

“We?” The Doctor queried.

“Humans, I mean. Captain Andrews, I suppose, and his people at the Navy Base.”

The Doctor sighed deeply.

“Because that’s what humans always do, and there is no need. Somebody has to stop for a minute and remember that ‘an eye for an eye makes everyone blind’.”

“But…” Peri was trying to get her head around the idea that The Doctor was siding with these Sea Devils, against the human race. He had never seemed so alien to her before. It was a little frightening.

“No,” he assured her. “I’m not on either side. I want to make it right for both sides.”

“So… what are you going to do?” she asked.

“I’m going to meet with this Sea Devil group before your Captain Andrews finds out exactly what’s going on and does what humans always do – overreact.”

“You’re going down there….”

“Yes.”

“Well… then I’m coming with you. I get that the military would be a bad idea. And professional politicians would be just as awkward. But somebody has to represent humanity, and it might as well be me. At least I wont waste time not believing what I’m seeing.”

“It could be dangerous.”

“Since when did you bother about that? You’ve got me into all sorts of stuff. Daleks, cybermen, slimy creepy things galore. I’m coming, Doctor.”

“Of course, you are,” The Doctor accepted.