**Children of the Circle**

“Doctor, can you please slow down and not drive as if you want to kill somebody,” Sarah-Jane Smith begged. She was wearing a seat belt, but she still felt the need to hold onto parts of Bessie, the open-topped vintage car that The Doctor had souped up into a speed demon.

The Doctor touched the gear stick and reduced pressure on the accelerator. The car slowed by about ten miles per hour. Sarah-Jane felt a little safer.

“That’s better. It’s not as if we’re in any hurry, after all. The Brigadier just said ‘pop down to Bridge Nateby and scout around’.”

“It’s the ‘pop down’ bit I object to,” The Doctor growled. “As if I’m at his beck and call the whole time.”

“You ARE U.N.I.T.’s scientific advisor,” Sarah-Jane reminded him. “So you ARE at his beck and call, in point of fact.”

“For investigating alien incursions, not checking out ‘something a bit funny going on’ down in Devon – as reported by The Brigadier’s lady friend Doris’s maiden aunt.”

“I think you’re being very mean about maiden aunt’s,” Sarah-Jane told him. “My aunt Lavinia would be very cross with you.”

“Exactly why I avoid the species,” The Doctor responded.

“Nonetheless, this might be important.”

“And it might be a wild goose chase.”

“At least it gets you out of the lab and in the fresh air. And Devon is nice.”

“Hmph,” The Doctor replied and glowered at a sign that told him they were entering the parish of Bridge Nateby. There was a little girl standing by the sign. Sarah-Jane waved to her. The girl looked back with an expression that made her blood run cold.

“Charming,” she remarked.

“What was that?” The Doctor asked.

“Nothing. Look, there’s the hotel. The Bridge Inn. And there’s the bridge right next to it. I do like place names that make sense that way.”

The Doctor made another ‘hmph’ sound and neatly parked Bessie outside the hotel. As he did so, another child – a boy this time – moved out of the porch where he had been watching their arrival and hurried away down the road.

“Anyone would think we were being observed,” Sarah-Jane commented. “That’s small places for you. By the time we’ve freshened up in our rooms and gone back down to the bar everyone will know we’re here.”

“Yes,” The Doctor managed to say.

“Oh, come on, you.” Sarah-Jane grabbed her suitcase and handbag and headed towards the door. The Doctor followed with a smaller bag containing his own essentials for a weekend in the country. At the door, he turned and noticed another child watching from the bridge. There was something strange about the child’s expression – something downright sinister, even. The Doctor felt the hairs on the back of his neck prickly.

“Stuff and nonsense,” he told himself and went inside to see Sarah-Jane already signing the register and a young man taking her suitcase from her to carry up to her room.

“This is Barney,” she said to The Doctor. “The Brigadier’s Doris’s nephew. Miss Brydon, who is The Brigadier’s Doris’s maiden aunt, is his great aunt. She has left a message to say that she will meet us later for tea and a chat.”

The Doctor ‘hmphed’ again. He really didn’t do maiden aunts. But he had no choice now he was here.

Sarah-Jane finished ‘freshening up’ in her room and came back downstairs to find Miss Brydon already sitting in the otherwise empty lounge. A pot of tea and a two tier silver stand with cakes and sandwiches were on the table before her. Sarah-Jane greeted her politely and accepted a cup of tea and a finely cut cucumber sandwich as a way of breaking the ice.

“I’m afraid The Doctor seems to be taking his time,” Sarah-Jane apologised.

“That’s quite all right. I think we can manage without him. Doris said that you were very good, Miss Smith.”

“She did?” Sarah-Jane was surprised. She had only met Doris Brydon once, at a U.N.I.T. Christmas ball.

“She said you were the woman to talk to about strange goings on.”

“Well, The Doctor is the expert on ‘strange’ things,” Sarah-Jane replied. “In fact, many people consider him strange in himself.”

“We don’t need a man interrupting all the time. Things are too serious to deal with their egos. That’s why I never married, you know. I couldn’t be bothered with pandering to a man and having to put what I needed to do second to his attention seeking.”

“My Aunt Lavinia is of the same mind,” Sarah-Jane said, warming to Miss Bryson on that basis alone. “But… the serious things….”

“I’m getting to that, dear, just as soon as we’ve lulled them into thinking we’re just two women, chatting. That’s the other reason to leave your Doctor out of it for the moment. A Doctor! Bound to be single minded about things, and a single mind is too easy for them. Better a busy mind with lots going on so that they can’t focus on anything. More tea, my dear? Try one of the macaroons. My nephew’s wife is a dab hand at cakes and biscuits. She hates to be stuck in the kitchen doing nothing but baking, though. She learns languages on those cassette tapes while she’s working. That’s another way to keep them at bay – doing more than one thing at once.”

“Keep who at bay?” Sarah-Jane asked, wondering if Miss Brydon was absolutely brilliant or absolutely bonkers.

The Doctor was, indeed, single minded about his science, but he was also quite capable of running two or three thoughts through his mind at the same time. Confusing those who really couldn’t manage more than one line of comprehension at once was a minor amusement during his time on planet Earth.

He was also quite well aware when something or someone was trying to break into his mind. The intelligence currently pressing into his consciousness was having to contend with his recitation of the Laws and Ordinances of Gallifrey, the complex lyrics of a Venutian love song – sung to three different wives at the same time – and a list of the bridges over the River Exe, one of which he was looking at right now from the window of his hotel room.

He was thinking of everything except the attempted intrusion on his mind. Only when it stopped did he turn his attention from the bridge to a feature just beyond it that he felt was at the heart of the mystery.

He watched for a while before consulting the card on the back of the door that indicated the nearest fire exit. He wanted to slip out without anyone observing, either inside or outside the Bridge Inn.

“Sending a letter to Doris really was a last resort. I wasn’t even entirely sure it was the right thing. But the last time she visited, she mentioned that her Alastair dealt with ‘unusual’ matters. She really shouldn’t have said anything, I suppose. It is sort of hush hush, isn’t it? But there were a couple of things – the Devil’s End affair a few years back. Alistair rushed off from a dinner to deal with some kind of mysterious death and rumours of devil worship. Then Doris herself witnessed an attack of snowmen one Christmas. Snowmen from outer space, of all the damned cheek.”

Sarah-Jane wasn’t familiar with the incident, but she loved the idea of any alien incursion written off as ‘damned cheek’.

“Anyway… have another sandwich, dear… I think our problem fits in with that sort of thing. But I told her it was best kept quiet. Bringing in the army mon-handed wouldn’t do.”

“And you think it’s the children?”

“I know it is. Everyone knows it. Everyone is afraid of them. Parents are scared of their own children. They have a strange kind of hold over everyone. The school is closed. The teachers both quit. Miss Daniels... she has taught the junior class since nineteen fifty-one. She left overnight without a word. Poor Miss Argyle, the infant teacher… she ran out of the school one afternoon, screaming incoherently. She’s in the hospital in Tiverton, now. I dropped in to see her, but she just lies there, staring at the ceiling, saying nothing. Her expression… you’d think she had seen a devil or the like. Of course, nobody will talk about it. They won’t admit there is a problem, but there is. The children….”

“All the children?” Sarah-Jane asked, her journalist instinct prickling. “Is there an age range?”

“Yes,” Miss Brydon admitted with something like relief that somebody was taking her seriously. ”Yes, the babies, the toddlers, the under fours, those dependent on their parents, are unaffected, and the older ones… from about fourteen or so…. Most of them aren’t here, now. The parents have made arrangements for them to stay with friends or relations in Tiverton. It is hard on them, but it is safer than being here. The fear was that an older child would be harmed by one of the affected ones.”

“What a dreadful thought.” Sarah-Jane shuddered. “And when did it seem to begin?”

“It was….” Miss Brydon reached for the teapot and found it empty. She summoned the bar tender to have it refilled.

The Doctor slipped out of the side door and quietly walked across the carefully manicured hotel lawn. The road bridge over the Exe was to his right, but he knew the children would be watching that. He wanted to get across the river unobserved.

The trouble was, the next bridge was five miles downstream, connecting two fields of wheat stubble.

All the same, instinct told him to keep looking, and just beyond the rear car park of the Bridge Inn he found what he was looking for. It was neither a bridge nor a ford, but something between the two. It was crude, it was an accident waiting to happen and clearly built by children. A motley collection of old planks and boards had been strung across the river, supported by scarcely submerged rocks.

It was a bridge to the playground that lay beyond the river, nestled at the bottom of a slight rise that might be called a ‘hill’ by the very generous. At the top of the hill was something older than the swings, slide, roundabout and climbing frame combination. It was a collection of standing stones, ancient and mysterious relics of a long past way of life.

The Doctor crossed the precarious bridge with an agility unexpected of a man of his apparent age, his cape flying as he hopped from one unsteady footing to another. Some of the boards tilted as he put his weight on them. Some sank into the water a few inches, covering the soles of his strong leather shoes. More quickly than he might be expected to do so, though, he had crossed the river. He walked through the empty playground and without even appearing out of breath he strode uphill towards the stones.

He didn’t do so completely unobserved. The sun was starting to go down in the autumn evening. It cast everything into sharp relief, especially something that stood out so distinctly against the sky. As he paced the circumference of the six stones in their surprisingly well-chosen positions, he noticed the children approaching – six of them, one coming to stand next to each stone as if daring him to cross into the centre.

He had no intention of doing that – at least not until he was better equipped. He just wanted to confirm a suspicion.

“Isn’t it getting near your bedtime?” he asked a red-haired boy who watched him especially hard.

“We don’t have bedtime,” the boy replied coldly. “We have no rules.”

“No rules? Indeed? That sounds good… in theory. But I hope you obey a few guidelines – no running with scissors, playing on railway lines, staying away from electrical wires, the Green Cross Code. We all need those sort of rules.”

“No rules,” the boy insisted. “No bedtime, no punishments… no rules.”

“I see. Well… I still think the Green Cross Code is a good rule. But have it your own way. I’ll be off.”

“Wait,” the boy commanded as The Doctor walked away towards the official bridge. “Who are you?”

“I’m The Doctor,” The Doctor replied, knowing that his nomenclature could be of no use to them. He walked on, ignoring the group gathering behind him. He whistled a portion of a Martian love aria and did simultaneous equations in his head to ward off the attempted mental intrusion. If they decided to attack physically he was less sure about what to do. Even if these children weren’t entirely what they ought to be, they were still children. He wasn’t about to start using his Venutian Aikido moves on them.

But they let him go. He reached the bridge safely and headed towards the Inn where he hoped Sarah-Jane was safely taking tea with The Brigadier’s Doris’s Maiden Aunt.

“It all began when….”

Miss Brydon stopped speaking mid-sentence. Her expression froze along with her words as she turned to look out of the window.

There was a child there.

It was a girl. She was about nine years old, with pigtails in pink ribbon bows and a pink and white dress. She was looking right in through the window at Sarah-Jane and Miss Brydon.

There was something in her expression that was completely horrifying. It was hard to define just what it was – the cold eyes, the set of the jaw, the thin lips pressed together, but it was a face of pure evil.

“Don’t look at her,” Miss Brydon hissed. “Miss Smith, don’t look her in the eye. Nobody must do that. Here, have another cup of tea.”

Sarah-Jane didn’t want to look, but she felt compelled to do so. It was a struggle to turn away and take the teacup, pretending that they were having a ladylike conversation about doilies and sewing notions.

As she turned from the window she physically jumped in fright, the tea cup smashing to the floor messily.

There was another child standing there beside the tea table.

“Martin Addison, you should not be in here,” Miss Brydon said, summoning her courage to speak to the boy. “This lounge is part of the licensed premises. It is not a place for you. The police would take a dim view of….”

“The police cannot tell us what to do. Constable Hanny has been sent away, just like Miss Daniels. Sergeant Drury dare not raise his hand to us. He will go away soon. It would be better for you if you went away, too. Parents will be tolerated as long as they obey our rules, but we have no use for other adults.”

“This is my hotel,” Miss Brydon managed to say. “I was born here. My father ran this place, and his father before him. I will not leave it. Why should I?”

 “You are not required. You should go. We have no quarrel with you. You should go while you can.”

“What does that mean?” Sarah-Jane asked. “While she can….”

“Who are you?” the boy demanded, his gaze turning fully on Sarah-Jane. “Strangers are not wanted here.”

“I am a family friend,” Sarah-Jane replied. “Not that it is any concern of yours. You should have more manners. Talking to….”

“No, Sarah-Jane!” Miss Brydon cried out.

Sarah-Jane stood up and then dropped to her knees, unable to hold herself up. Her brain was buzzing as if it was full of insects. She couldn’t think. She could barely see the child’s face through tears of agony.

“Martin, no. Don’t hurt her. She didn’t know the rules. She doesn’t understand what to do.”

Sarah-Jane almost passed outs as the pain seared her brain. She couldn’t even scream properly. She felt as if her vocal cords were being strangled.

“Stop!” Through the haze of distress Sarah-Jane heard the one voice nobody ever disobeyed – except possibly the Brigadier. “Stop this, now. Leave that woman alone. Who gave you the right to punish anyone, let alone an innocent victim who knows nothing of you? Stop this instant or you will all be sorry.”

The pain went away. With her ears still ringing Sarah-Jane clambered onto a chair and took a cup of tea from Miss Brydon in her trembling hands.

“Stay there!” The Doctor demanded as the boy, Martin, started to move away. “Stay right there. I want to speak to you.”

“I do not obey adults,” Martin replied. “I belong to the Circle and I am free.”

“That is a contradiction,” The Doctor replied. “I’ve been to your Circle. It doesn’t offer freedom, just an illusion of it while you are held in a grip of slavery.”

“I do not have to listen to you, or any adult,” Martin insisted. He turned his stony gaze fully on The Doctor, but he looked back with even more force of will. Martin gave in first. He turned and ran from the lounge.

“Doctor, what is going on here?” Sarah-Jane asked. “What are the children up to? They have everyone scared witless. The police and their teachers have been driven away. Their parents and everyone else in the village lives in fear of them. And what is this ‘circle’ that Martin spoke of?”

“It’s right over there,” The Doctor answered, waving his hand towards the window. The lounge had the same view as his room above, though from a lower elevation. There was the river and then a grass covered rise. There was the children’s playground on the other side, in deep shadow now as the evening drew in. There was the circle of stones at the top, still distinct against the dusky sky.

“The STONE circle?” Miss Brydon was astounded. “But that has been there since prehistoric times. Since before there was any sort of settlement here. It’s been studied by archaeological types every so often, but it isn’t very important from their point of view. Even the mystic sorts don’t think much of it. It isn’t on a major lay line or anything. We tell the children not to go up there in case of accidents, but they don’t listen, of course. To them it’s a fort or a castle, a fun place to be.”

“In other words it has always been a place for the children. Adults don’t go there much. But what happened to make it more than just a place of make believe? What was the catalyst? Don’t worry. They can’t interfere with you, now. I’ve projected a psychic shield around us. You can speak freely.”

Sarah-Jane wondered if that was the truth. She had never heard of The Doctor doing such a thing before, even though he did have some powers of hypnotism and other strange, unearthly traits. Had he said it just to make Miss Brydon open up more fully, in the belief that it was safe to do so?

Either way it worked. Miss Brydon sighed deeply as if a huge weight had lifted from her mind and started to talk without any diversions with tea of macaroons.

“I think it was Jimmy Russell,” Miss Brydon answered. “He was always a bit worrying. Miss Daniels kept him in at school often for mischief – small things like pulling girls’ pigtails, throwing chalk. One afternoon on the way home from school he went too far. He threw a stone at a duck of all things and broke a window in the police station. Sergeant Drury brought him home to his father who gave him six of the best with his leather belt. It was the sort of short, sharp shock that ought to have set the boy on the right path from then on. Boys in my day would certainly have behaved after that.”

“You would think so,” Sarah-Jane agreed. “The Brigadier always says the youth of today needs that sort of discipline.”

The Doctor said nothing, but there was a look on his face as if ‘six of the best’ was a tradition on his planet, too, and he knew all about it from his childhood.

The Doctor as a child was too extreme an image, though. Sarah-Jane shut down that thought and gave her attention to Miss Brydon’s tale.

“Jimmy resented the punishment. I suppose because the window WAS just an accident. He ran off after the spanking and nobody could find him for hours. There was a bit of a panic and a search for him. Eventually, it was Miss Daniels who found him up there on the hill, inside the circle. She tried to be kind to him, but he acted quite strangely. As she told it to us later, the boy spoke to her as if he was some sort of child rajah from an Indian potentate or the like. He said that he was free of all rules, and no adult would punish him again. Then he looked at her and it was as if her heart had been frozen. She ran away from him in fear. Jimmy went home and his father suffered the same treatment.”

Miss Brydon reached for the tea pot just for a respite from her story.

“Well,” she said between sips of tea. “Jimmy’s rebellion didn’t end there. Soon all the other children were saying the same thing… that they belonged to the circle and they were free. They wouldn’t go to bed when told, or get up in the morning. They wouldn’t go to school, or church, though a few parents tried at first. They struck fear into the hearts of every adult in the village. Now nobody dares say a word to them. The children do as they please. When they’re hungry they go to their homes and demand food. There are no ‘mealtimes’ of any sort – no rules about clearing their plates or eating their greens. Nobody dares to cross them. They know what happened to Miss Argyle. They don’t want their minds turning to jelly like her. Or worse….”

“Worse?” Sarah-Jane queried.

“I really think they could kill somebody. One of us… one of their parents. They could do it if they were angry enough. And that would be so terrible. I don’t know what made them like this, but they ARE still our children, the village children, children that we want to cherish and nurture, with discipline when it is needed, to keep them safe and honest, but mostly with love, as it should be. We cling to the hope that this may yet end without any more harm to anyone. But if it goes that far… if there is a death… then there may be no way back.”

“There is a way,” The Doctor assured her. “It will need some of you to have some courage in the face of the fear you’ve been feeling. Will you help, Miss Brydon?”

“Of course, I will. There have been times when I’ve doubted my own strength, but you’ve reminded me of what I am. My mother was a suffragette, you know. And I was a WRAF in the war. During the blitz I had to share an air raid shelter with airmen. And after all that, I still managed to stay my own woman, independent…. In short, that very thing that men have long feared - A Maiden Aunt.”

“Not on my planet, madam,” The Doctor replied. “We don’t allow such things.” Then before Miss Brydon had chance to think about what he had said he outlined his plan.

It wasn’t midnight. It wasn’t the solstice or the equinox, Samhain or Beltline or anything mystical of that sort. It was just before ten o’clock on an autumn night with a hint of rain in the air. On such an ordinary night a dozen adults of Bridge Nateby, those who knew it was time to rise above their fears and try to resolve their problem, gathered at the nameless stone circle that had been an innocuous feature of their local landscape until now. They brought battery torches. None of them even knew where to get the flaming kind that gatherings at stone circles suggested.

They stood around the stones, shivering a little from the cold and from the knowledge that the children were following them, forming an outer ring that bristled with menace.

“Why are you here?” demanded one of the children, the red haired boy who had challenged The Doctor. “This place belongs to us.”

“Aren’t you the one who said there were no rules, Jimmy Russell,” replied The Doctor as he stepped right into the circle and felt the power of the entity the boy’s wrath had awoken. “That surely applies to the grown ups, too. There are no boundaries. Every line can be crossed. You decided that, Jimmy. You can’t change your mind, now.”

Jimmy was visibly affected by that logic. He took a step backwards from The Doctor and looked at him with eyes that had lost some of their hardness.

“The thing about rules,” The Doctor continued. “They’re not made just to spoil everyone’s fun. They are made to keep people safe. Bedtime for children is to make sure they don’t get over tired. Eating your greens is for your health. School is important for everyone. So is obedience to the law. Without that, people get hurt, and people HAVE been hurt, here in Bridge Nateby. Miss Argyle, a good, decent teacher who looked after all the children, taught them to read and write. Why did you hurt her?”

At first there was no reply from the children, then one little boy found a voice.

“We wanted to play out, but she said it was time to come in.”

“You wanted to play out,” The Doctor repeated. “And you HAVE been playing out for weeks, now. No school, no bedtime, no sitting down at the table for meals with your families. Are you enjoying your freedom?”

“Yes,” Jimmy Russell insisted. Several other children said the same, but there was a little bit of hesitation, a touch of uncertainty about some of them. They weren’t quite sure.

“Have you enjoyed hurting the people you love? Have you enjoyed making your mothers cry and your fathers despair? Is the freedom you have worth that?”

Again, Jimmy and a few others were adamant, but among the others the uncertainty grew. Here and there children had stepped nearer their parents. One boy actually slipped his hand into his father’s.

“The trouble is you haven’t been free. You have all been under the influence of an alien intelligence that has been ‘living’ here among the stones for a long time. A very long time, in point of fact. Something like three hundred years. It was dormant for most of that time.” He looked at the blank faces around him. “It was asleep. It was awoken by an angry little boy who thought that rules weren’t fair, who thought he shouldn’t have been punished. Jimmy Russell, you might not have meant to break the window. It WAS an accident. But if you hadn’t been throwing stones at a poor, innocent duck you wouldn’t have accidentally broken the window. Your punishment was perfectly fair. But you had a ball of anger inside you, still. The entity saw that and it promised you revenge. It promised you the end of rules. It gave you and the other children the power to stop grown-ups telling you what to do. But that wasn’t freedom. You were just slaves to the power. And are you really happy? I wonder if you are. I wonder if some of you really would like to go to bed on a cold night like this, tucked up warm with a cup of cocoa and your mum reading a bedtime story?”

Two more children drew close to their parents as he said that. But The Doctor wasn’t finished.

“We all need rules. We all have to do things we don’t want to do. The reward is the things we DO want at the end of it -cocoa with bedtime, pudding after eating your greens, painting hour after sums. People who still love us even when we’ve done wrong. Mr Russell, you still love your son, don’t you?”

“Of course, I do,” Mr Russell answered. “The window…. Of course I was angry. I don’t want my son to be a juvenile delinquent. I punished him. But that was the end of it. There’s still so much I want to do with my boy. We were supposed to go fishing. There’s a kit to put together… a model spitfire with real working parts. I do the glue because it’s not safe for him, but he does the rest.”

“Glue, that’s another good rule. Jimmy, isn’t that an important rule? Wouldn’t you like to spend the weekend making a spitfire with your father with a few little rules for your safety?”

Jimmy had tears in his eyes, now. Not tears of anger and resentment, but tears of longing for the things that were warm and close and reassuring.

“Just go to him, Jimmy,” Sarah-Jane whispered. “Go to your dad, and this will all be over.”

Jimmy was hesitating, still. He looked at his father as if trying to make his mind up. He was the last. The others had all quietly joined their parents or gone off home to find the comforts they missed.

“Go on, Jimmy,” Sarah-Jane again urged under her breath. It had to be the boy’s decision, though. Nobody could make his mind up for him.

“Dad!” Jimmy ran to his father. The reunion was tearful on both sides. There was a collective sigh as if more than one family’s happiness had been riding on Jimmy’s decision. Sarah-Jane felt as if she had been holding her breath for hours. She let it out in one long exhale and then breathed in deeply of the cold night air.

“It’s not over,” The Doctor told her quietly before addressing the crowd around them. “People of Bridge Nateby, you’ve all shown just how much your children mean to you. Will you help me explain it to the alien entity that caused the problem?”

The people were reluctant. Their thoughts were on getting their children home in the warmth of their houses. There was, perhaps, an element of disbelief as well. Earlier when The Doctor had mentioned an alien entity they had all been desperately worried about their children and ready to believe any reason why the youngsters had been behaving so oddly. Now, that part of it sounded just a bit unreal.

But enough of them stayed for The Doctor’s purpose.

“I want all you parents and responsible adults to think about the loving rules you impose on your children for their own good. I want you to think about the rules of your own lives, too. Paying your taxes, buying a dog licence, obeying red traffic lights… all those little things that guide the pattern of your lives. Think how important all of that is, think very hard about it. Because the alien entity has forgotten about all that. It is a juvenile, a teenager by your standards, that never learnt to have responsibility for that sort of thing before it was separated from its tribe and landed here, alone. Its only understanding of ‘rules’ came from Jimmy’s mixed up and angry emotions. It doesn’t understand that many of the rules – not taxes, admittedly – are made with love and are an integral part of the fabric of life. It doesn’t understand that it is time to rejoin its own people and take its own place alongside its own family.”

Maybe they didn’t quite believe, but they understood about the fabric of life. Theirs had been ripping at the seams for a long time, so they certainly valued it all the more.

“I didn’t understand it, myself, for a long time,” The Doctor said in a lower voice, perhaps directly addressed to the entity. “I thought I could evade my responsibilities. But I couldn’t. Neither can you. Go on. Off you go. Catch up with them. They’re waiting.”

The Doctor stepped out of the circle. As he did, a strange kind of glow started to form around the short grass inside. Slowly, the glow brightened into a light that was almost too much to look at. It formed a rippling column that rose high above the heads of the watching humans. Then, in an instant, it streaked away up into the sky, leaving a dark stone circle and after images on everyone’s eyes. A few looked up and saw a bright star wink out as the entity left the solar system at incalculable speeds, drawn by a homing beacon out in deep space that it had ignored for too long.

“That’s it,” The Doctor announced. “Everyone go home.”

Nobody needed to argue with that order. Between the oncoming drizzle, the late hour and tired children they were ready to go. The Doctor and Sarah-Jane walked back to the Bridge Inn’s welcoming lights and the prospect of a late supper.

“You are a fine one to talk about responsibilities,” Sarah-Jane told him. “All that moodiness on the way here because The Brigadier asked you to come. And for that matter, have you REALLY come to terms with the rules your own people laid down? You don’t like them telling you what to do.”

“The rules the Time Lords expect me to live under are…..” The Doctor began. But Sarah-Jane had a point. He was probably a more recalcitrant child of Gallifrey than the entity he had sent on his way and he had been chastised more thoroughly and harshly than young Jimmy Russell could begin to imagine.

Perhaps, at last, he had learnt his lesson.

Or not.

“Come on, Sarah-Jane,” he said. “I do believe shepherd’s pie is on the menu. I’m quite in the mood for that.”

“As long as you eat your greens with it,” Sarah-Jane responded. “Or no pudding for you.”

.