

Snowfall

Station Pressure, By Gavin Collinson

The Doctor pushed the barrel of the laser rifle to one side. 'There's no need for that.'

Max swung it back. 'I'm afraid there's every need.'

They stood in an ante-chamber of the Palace of Whispers, a small wood-lined room full of guards, sensors and security cameras.

Max was a short but powerfully built man who looked roughly human from the nose down. Of his three eyes, only his central one functioned, his other two covered by eye-patches. His face was a collection of green, red and blue scars and some believed he only got the job of captain of the guards because his right cheek resembled the Royal flag. His teeth were yellow and jagged and his hair looked like it had been cut with a knife and fork. Even his close friends agreed that his eye-patches were his best feature.

'Just let me through, Maxie. The Empress and I are old friends.'

'There's nothing more dangerous than old friends, Doctor.'

'Ahh, now. That's one of those lines that sounds quite good but is actually a bit rubbish. Lots of things more dangerous than old friends. Daleks, Cybermen, not washing your hands before baking scones-'

'What news?' Max was addressing a young guard who had just bounded into the room.

'The Empress has granted him an audience!'

The door was pushed open and the Doctor stepped into the Palace of Whispers' court room, a mile-high chamber carved from gold and ice. The Doctor could hear murmurs zipping through the air, ricocheting off the walls and ice-columns. These were the whispers of the long dead, the former leaders of this world whose wisdom still guided the empire. The Doctor glanced back at Max. 'Must get on your nerves after a bit.' He brushed past a couple of guards and sauntered to the front of the chamber.

Big Jack said, 'I thought that whole vampire thing had been a publicity stunt for those American movies...'

'Nope.' David shook his head. 'It was real enough.'

They sat in the refreshment room of the train station where moments earlier, David had finished recounting the tale of the vampire hurricane.

They faced each other in silence for a moment. 'You know...' Big Jack took a deep breath. 'I hated you, Dave. Mum was ill for three months and it was left to me to do everything. I thought you couldn't face it. Thought you were being a coward but after hearing that...'

'Sometimes the big heroic stuff is easy.' David's eyes were filling up. 'The tough stuff is the day-to-day things. And when a family is in trouble... The person who's big enough to step in, sort it out, keep going... Well, they're real heroes. Like you. Goh! You know, after you disappeared after the funeral and I had to sort everything out, I guessed you couldn't face it. But someone who risks their life like you did. No coward.'

'We should have talked more.'

'Mum couldn't shut us up when we were kids.'

'*Thick as thieves* she us to call us!'

David stared at the table. 'So. Can you forgive me?'

'Can you forgive me for leaving after the funeral?'

The two brothers shook hands.

The girl with red hair and the man in the porter's uniform watched the scene from behind the tea bar. 'Not exactly the warmest re-union was it?' she whispered.

'They're brothers.'

'Yeah, still. And their trains arrive any minute.'

He straightened his tie and took the porter's hat from her head. 'That's the way it works sometimes,' he said. 'I'll tell them to get to their platforms.'

The snow fell. As it had done for aeons, it fell to Earth, falling on the good and the evil, the troubled, the content, the loved, the lost and the lonely. Some saw the snow and perceived beauty. Others recognised the problems it brought and for some it was simply a sign that they had survived another year.

The ugly intercity trains pulled into platforms one and two at the same time. David and Jack shook hands again. Awkward nods.

'Let's get together in the new year. Some time.'

'Yeah. Let's not leave it another ten years.'

They turned and boarded their respective trains.

'They won't keep in touch,' said the girl. She was leaning out of the refreshment room window and sounded angry.

'He did his best.'

'Why didn't he come? He could have knocked some sense into them! *Why didn't he come?*'

She shut the window and her friend could see tears in her eyes. 'Hey, hey, come here...'
They heard the trains depart. 'That's the way it works sometimes,' he repeated.

The snow fell on Big Jack and David Kershaw. They faced each other on the station platform, both men having alighted before their trains pulled out.

'I'm so sorry, Jack!'

'I'm sorry I left!'

When the girl and her friend stepped from the refreshment room they were in time to see the brothers embracing.

'We're not waiting till the New Year!' said David. 'You and the family are coming over tomorrow! The wife always cooks too much and you've got to meet the kids. You'll love Zuzu! She's a bit bolshy! So, just like her uncle, then!'

'Oi, Dave-ster! But, it's a deal, as long as you're not cooking! We've a lot to catch up on!'

As they embraced again, the girl said in a pseudo-serious voice, 'That's the way it works sometimes!'

A full thirty seconds later her friend said, 'Trouble is... How's he going to get them back, now? The time thing he rigged up only worked for those trains. They'll be stuck here for –'

Wooo-woooooo!

The man in the porter's uniform looked down the track. 'I do not believe it...'

In the Palace of Whispers, the Brakari Empress looked down on the Doctor. 'Hello, again,' he said. 'It's been a long time.'

From the thousands of whispers that danced and tumbled through the chamber, the Doctor discerned her reply.

'Well, that's very kind. And yes. When we last met, all those centuries ago in the theatre, there was a man – braver than me – who helped save your life. He needs your help.'

Again, he sifted through the whispers to hear her response, eager to assist.

'Your capacity to transfer energy is remarkable. I need you to help me transport something through time and space...'

All four people on the platform turned to see the oncoming train, a beautiful 1950's locomotive, whistle blowing and white smoke billowing into the deep blue night. It slowed down, sliding to a halt in the station. The driver leant out of his cabin.

'Hop aboard, fellas!' he called to the brothers in an American accent. 'First stop Waterloo. Then Paddington!'

David shouted back, 'Trains don't stop at Waterloo *and* Paddington!'

'The Doctor's involved,' Jack reminded him quietly.

'This one does!' the driver confirmed.

Big Jack and David climbed onboard. The noise of the steam engine was thunderous but the two observers on the platform could still hear the brothers' laughter and gabbling excitement as their train surged majestically into the darkness.

'You're crying again!' said Rory.

'Am not,' snapped Amy. 'Must've got something in my eye. Bit of coal dust or something.'

The Doctor appeared between them, an arm around each of their shoulders. 'Try opening your eyes as wide as they'll go and then blowing your nose.'

'Doctor!'

'Actually, don't do that. That's terrible advice!'

'Where, *where* did you get that train from?' asked Rory.

'Ahh, well. Popped back and met a man called Joshua Lyttle. Railway magnate and all round good egg. He developed the Hawke. The engine you just saw, and the reason he became known as 'Hawke' Lyttle. Later Hawke Lyttle the First.'

Amy laughed. 'And he just lent you his train?'

'Told him about his grandson and suggested he owed me a favour. He didn't believe me at first but I showed him Hawke Lyttle the Third's watch. Which was also his watch. At the same time. If you see what I mean. *Accidentally* borrowed it last time we met. That seemed to convince him. *Anyway!* He was delighted to drive and using power from the Brakari the train will deliver Jack and David and then head back to the 1950s.'

Amy brushed snow from the Doctor's shoulder. 'You were lucky, mister!'

'Rory! Nip back and get the biscuits, would you? Time we were on our way!'

'Sure!'

The Doctor and Amy were alone on the platform. 'You look worried,' she said.

'Do not.'

'You so do. You're doing that thing you do when you're worried but you don't want me to worry. It's a rubbish thing, by the way.'

'General Marze had help. The readings I took in the lift... I just double-checked them in the TARDIS.'

'And?'

'The Council of Dead. I thought they were just an urban legend. A gothic make-believe scaring people round the camp fire and –'

'Here we are!' Rory had returned with the biscuits.

The Doctor's expression changed. Genuine joy this time. 'Good man! We can have them in the TARDIS!' A carefree Christmas smile. 'En route!'

'En route where?' asked Rory.

'I have no idea! Brilliant, isn't it? Ha ha!'

As they trudged down the platform, Amy said, 'Why didn't you just turn up and talk it through with them?'

'They're friends of mine who needed help, Amelia. That's all.' As they walked further into the distance, the falling snow began to obscure them. 'If there's one thing I've learnt in all my travels, it's this...' The distant sound of the Hawke's woo-woo whistle interrupted him momentarily. 'You don't need to see your guardian angel,' said the Doctor, 'to know they're watching over you.'

THE END