



**THE RENEGADE DOCTOR
ADVENTURES**

Short Stories
**BEAST OF THE CRYSTAL
MOUNTAIN**

COLEMAN DEKKER

BEAST OF THE CRYSTAL MOUNTAIN

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Beast of the Crystal Mountain

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Typeset in Times New Roman

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CHAPTER ONE

TERROR FROM BENEATH THE SANDS

Greetings, travelers! I am the Doctor. Excellent to make your acquaintance. I haven't been on Earth for very long, and I hear your people have a fun tradition where you tell each other the spookiest stories and legends. So I figured I could; what's the Earth expression again? Ah yes, throw my hat into the ring with my own spooky story. Come on and grab a seat in my TARDIS. This one is pretty frightening, and it all begins before Susan and I escape from the planet Gallifrey.

So, fifty or maybe even a hundred years after I was stripped of my Time Lord status. As the story goes, I went to the Toyroom of the Crystal Guardian after stealing a TARDIS, which resulted in the deaths of two of my closest friends. Then, I was slowly but surely withering away in an abandoned family home in the Drylands, doomed to eternal exile. It wouldn't be for another four hundred years that I finally managed to escape my lonely predicament, thanks to my brother and Arkytior. Still, I had tried before. All I needed was a sonic screwdriver, but finding the correct components in a desert wasteland would be one hell of a hassle. Unfortunately for me, the most important one was a refined crystal from the heart of Mount Alopas. I would need to travel across the Drylands, reach the mountain's forest, and enter an abandoned mining site to get to the heart of Alopas.

It took about a day to muster up all my courage before embarking on this journey. I didn't have much at my disposal, just a few days of water that would hopefully last the trip across the desert. I wouldn't need water as much if I traveled at night, but with Pig-rats being most frequent when the sun sets, that was suicide. They still occasionally wandered around during the day. Still, the heat usually drove them back to their dens after some time. Beyond the rats and occasional backstabbing Time Lord rejects, any other threats were avoidable as long as I kept my distance. But what I didn't know about really sent this trip downhill fast.

"Alright, I've got three days' worth of water and enough equipment for maybe four torches at least," I said.

A loud rumbling came from a trunk in the back of the barn.

"Oh, don't worry, my friend. I'll be back in, hopefully, in three days. I promise I will find a way to get us off this planet." I almost forgot I even had the Hand of Omega at the time.

Once I left the old barn, to my luck, the weather seemed calm with clear, open skies. The twin suns were also beginning to rise, so the Pig-rats should have started heading back to their dens. Leaving then should have allowed me to reach the forest by sunset and find shelter before the Pig-rats woke up.

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Two hours went by right when I reached the giant rock bed, but passing through, I noticed a giant serpent creature with five heads burrowing itself in the murky parts of the sand. It took me a moment to recognize its true identity. It was one of Ushas's old Academy experiments; she spliced together a bunch of Batsnake embryos and just went wild with its DNA, then threw it out into the wild when it didn't win her the science award. She called it a mud hydra. Still puzzles me how that twisted witch even became a part of the Deca, even more so that the tortured thing managed to survive that long. Hell, it was still kicking when I met Arkytior. Probably has an absurd lifespan, thanks to Ushas's experimentation.

The sand beetles were surprisingly numerous, too. It may have been mating season for them, now that I think about it. I couldn't help but stop and admire the little gray arthropods for a bit; insects always fascinate me. But afterward, I noticed an awful stench, like something had rotted for days. Just behind one of the rocks, I could hear swarms of flies. To my horror, a Gallifreyan was slumped against the stone, half of their body submerged in sand, eyes missing, and the skin picked clean off the face. I could even see the inner flesh through tears in the robe; from the looks of it, they seemed like a Chancellery Guard. What one was doing in the Drylands is still a mystery to me. And to make matters worse, there was no way a Pig-rat could have done that. Their victims always end up disemboweled like meat in a slaughterhouse.

"Disgusting. What the hell could have possibly done this?" I said to myself in fear.

Luckily for me, their staser gun was still on a surface level. I usually would detest using a weapon like this, but if I were to survive the journey, I would need all the help I could get. Besides, at least it had a nonlethal setting that could induce severe pain in the target, giving me time to get away in case things got out of hand. Things were about to get out of hand indeed. As I inspected the staser, an ominous flapping sound filled the quiet air. This intimidating little bird was sitting atop the rock in front of me. Its singular eye was crimson red with a black center; its feathers were a dull dark gray with blackish blue horizontal stripes from head to tail feathers. It then began to chirp, and the more it did, the more birds started to appear, each sitting on top of the large stones, staring.

As I gazed at the haunting sight, I remembered Borusa talking about an incident in the Badlands before I was banished. An entire team of Time Lords out to retrieve crystals from Alopas flew into a severe storm that stranded them in the desert. To the Capitols' shock, none reported back despite the minor crash. So, a rescue team was dispatched under the impression that a hostile group of Shobogans were the culprits. Only one returned. And all they could say while questioning was if the 'Death Ravens' set their gaze upon you. The 'Snatchers' would come from the depths and take you to the next life. The Time Lord was so traumatized that hardly anything they said added up. Ultimately, they committed suicide sometime later. Time Lords have spent so much time in the Capitol over the past millennia that it's not hard to believe some new things may have evolved that they haven't even bothered to go and discover.

Slowly, I began to step backward, keeping my eyes on the ravens. Suddenly, they started to chirp loudly, but they didn't attack. As the chirping continued, I could almost hear some grumbling beneath me. I quickly panicked and bolted for the nearest rock I could climb. In my

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panic, this scaly mammalian hand burst from below, grabbing my leg. Slowly, I was being pulled into the sand. Desperately, I fired a staser shot, but the scales were too tough to penetrate, so I took one of my fire sticks, broke a sharp enough piece off, and stabbed it just where the creature's claws met the finger. A muffled shriek came from below just as it let go. I quickly stumbled up a large rock till I reached the top. The ravens took to the air and intensified their hellish chirping.

"This journey was a horrible idea!" I said to myself in terror. "I've got to get back to the barn!"

From below, the Snatcher lobbed chunks of sand upward to knock me off from the top. The ravens joined in as well, with dive-bombing pecks. It was in that dire moment that my circumstance had dawned on me: if I ran home or toward the mountain, surely these creatures would hound me all the way there, most likely even kill me. So, I would have to make a stand.

"So, you flying fiends make all this racket, so the gentleman below does all the dirty work for you." I thought to myself.

For a brief moment, I caught a glimpse of the Snatcher as it dug through the sand. Its skin was covered in scales almost perfectly camouflaged with the sand. I could see two small, black, beady eyes on the front end of its cylindrical body. They were so tiny that it became evident that the creature had poor eyesight.

"That's it! Your eyesight is so poor that you rely on these birds to find your food as much as they rely on you to kill theirs! Now, if I just scare you off somehow, the ravens can't do squat." I said confidently.

Since the beast could effortlessly burrow through the sand, I would have to even the playing field by getting it onto solid ground. Just across from where I stood, there was a rock that was far more submerged. The ravens continued to dive-bomb me just as I leaped to the next rock, nearly slipping off as I landed. The Snatcher lobbed another chunk of sand upward; some of it got into my eyes, and in my temporary blindness, one of the ravens latched onto my shoulder and tried to peck at my eyes. I swung my arms around in a panic and swatted the flying assailant away. Sweat and small streaks of blood began to run down my wounds inflicted by the raven.

"Just one more jump, come on, Theta!"

Leaping downward onto the smaller rock, I immediately drew the staser gun, wiping away the intense sweat and blood from my skin. The ravens flocked over, sat on the other stones, and intensified their shrieks. Luckily, this stone I stood upon was wedged between several others, so the Snatcher could only come from one direction if it were to attack. The sand almost moved toward me as the animal dug through the substrate. The creature stopped just at the tip of the stone. One of its scaly hands slowly inched out of the sand, beginning to feel around with its five-fingered appendage, sharp claws scraping the stone. As the hands got close, I stepped backward until I was up against a rock wall. The Snatcher tried reaching further to no avail; its hand quickly sank back into the sandy terrain.

For a moment, there was an eerie silence. The ravens stared downward. They knew I was cornered, so what would have been the point of making any more ruckus. I turned on the staser

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and set it to the non-lethal setting just as the sand slowly rose up, revealing this intimidating mammalian being. Its full cylindrical, almost worm-like body was in full view. Its four backward-facing feet dragged it forward onto the stone surface, its short, stubby tail sliding around on the sand. Two small scales just behind its beady eyes opened up, revealing ear holes; it patiently turned its head left to right, listening for any sounds.

That was my chance. If I fired a staser shot onto soft tissue, the pain would cause it to flee. As monstrous as it looked, it was still just an animal.

“Come on, just a little closer.”

I gently tapped the butt end of the staser on the ground to draw it closer, and the Snatcher started to inch closer. Its two grabbing hands were positioned on the front like a mask stretched outward, revealing its circular mouth underneath. Clearly, it could not chew, so it must have used the small teeth within to create a big enough opening and possibly suck soft innards out of its victims? Of course, I didn't want to find out.

“I’m sorry, but this may hurt a bit.”

I fired a staser shot into the Snatcher’s mouth. Immediately, it let out a loud, gurgly yelp. It began to violently thrash around in pain, slamming into rocks on either side of it. It flopped around the sand like a fish out of water for a moment before submerging again. I could faintly hear it still vocalizing as it dug away. I stared at the still-silent death ravens, ready to fire my staser. Luckily, they all quickly dispersed now that their muscle had fled. I breathed a sigh of relief and slid down to the ground, my hearts still racing.

After a momentary rest, I pulled out one of the small custom water containers I had made, opened the tiny top, and poured some on my face to wash off the blood. Small glimmers of time energy began to heal my minor wounds.

“That's enough unexpected surprises for one day. Now, to get to Alopas.”

I looked up at the two suns, and a sudden sense of dread quickly consumed me; it was getting closer to dusk.

“Damn! At this rate, it will be nightfall before I even reach the forest! And there's no shelter out here except my home a few hours back.” I paused for a moment. “No. I have to continue on. My ticket out of here is in that mountain, and I will not squander this opportunity!”

After a moment, I pressed onward, staser in hand, with only one thought in mind, ‘What could possibly go wrong next?’.

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CHAPTER TWO

BEST LAID PLANS OF MICE AND MEN

Like a bat out of hell, I ran as fast as I could toward Alopas—the fastest I've ever run in my life, really. The twin suns inched closer to the horizon by the minute. I panted rapidly, sweat streaming from my pores. And there it was! The forest of Alopas at the edge of the Drylands. The Cadonwood trees stood tall, the light reflections on their silver leaves dimming as the suns set.

The darkness of night began to creep up behind me. Just faintly in the distance, I could hear the nightmarish shrieks and squeals of Pig-rats awakening from their slumber, ready to pillage the land in search of prey. My hearts pounded rapidly in terror as the wretched sounds reached my ears. Quickly, I ran into the dense forest. Its floor was covered in tall yellowish-red grass that was about waist-high. Some branches and rocks were scattered around, with some red bushes here and there.

I sipped some water momentarily before continuing; some Gallifreyan tree spiders jumped across the treetops. These spiders were about as big as a house cat; their thorax and abdomen sported a silver hue similar to the leaves and faint blue stripes down each of their eight legs. I watched their two mashing mandibles pulverize Ulanda fruit, and their small single fangs extended from between them to suck up the juices. Some of the arachnids gazed back at me, jittering their mandibles to create a clicking sound; one even inched down from a branch using a silk strand. The arachnid cleaned its eight dark eyes with its little pedipalps, tilting its head curiously.

Looking back on this incredibly brief interaction, it was actually quite a nice one, considering that those arachnids were the only things that didn't want to kill or eat me that night. Haha.

Anyways, back to the story. I tilted my head sideways, following the spider's head; we both studied each other for a bit before I picked up a Ulanda fruit from the dirt and slowly reached out my hand. It seemed nervous for a moment, but once I decided to look away, its mandibles gently took the fruit from my palm. The others began to do a social clicking sound, jittering their mandibles 3 times in a quick rhythm. I was honestly touched that those insects were so gosh-darn friendly, so I then found myself clicking my tongue in a similar rhythm, and they all started climbing down the trees to get a closer look. One even let me pet it on the head. Clearly, they had never seen a hominid creature like myself, which would explain their curiosity; I couldn't help but smile at my temporary acquaintances.

A loud shriek from the woods immediately caused the spiders to zip back up the trees and disappear in the leaves. The hair on my arms stood up instantly, and without hesitation, my hands readied the staser. The forest went ominously quiet after I heard the Pig-rat call; not even the lowest of creatures would gamble, giving their position away. Hastefully, I dodged between trees,

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checking around the corner before I moved again. I could faintly hear the Pig-rats getting closer, their monstrous calls growing louder by the second.

“Come on! Just a little further, damnit!” I quietly said to myself in fear.

My paranoia grew immensely the deeper I got into the seemingly endless forest. My only beacon of direction was the highest peak of Alopas, which stood high above the trees.

After a few tense minutes, the sight of the Alopas Mining Complex brought a few fleeting moments of relief. Ages of decay had covered the place in an ugly mixture of rust and gold, with holes littering the exterior. Half of the domed structure extended outward from Alopas; there were even some sockets on the walls with automated turrets, but they had fallen into disrepair.

I hastily entered the entrance where the security door had fallen off its hinges due to centuries of rust, leading into a small structure with several rooms. Occasionally, I would hear the infrastructure creak when I took a step. The interior was barely lit, with the only light source coming from the twin moons that managed to shine through the holes. Just before the large elevator shaft at the end of the hall, there was a small room where I could see a broken screen and some symbols indicating it was a security room, likely where guards watched over the cameras. Of course, I took a quick peek to see if I could find anything useful; I discovered some ammunition for the staser and an old hypercube. After tinkering with it, the cube played a voice message.

“Security Chief ZorGINZA, personal log number thirteen. The storm has worsened, and we’ve just lost contact with the crew coming to extract us from this dreaded place. There are now only fifteen of us left, and the only thing keeping us alive is the lights. That’s all we even know about IT. We do not know what it looks or even sounds like. Just that it will not stray close to the light. To anyone who finds this log, leave this place while you still can. Once you are in the shadows... there is no hope.”

I could feel the hair on my body standing up instantly.

“This place wasn’t abandoned...” I could hardly move. My limbs began to tremble.

Anxiously, I looked around the room to see if they had no clue what killed them. I had no idea what kind of danger to look out for. I aimed my staser, my hands shaking uncontrollably.

“Wait, that was a hundred-something years ago. Whatever did this has to be dead! Just breathe, Theta, breathe!”

Some faint yelling echoed through the complex, making me jump momentarily. Of course, that further added to my spectacular failure of a plan, knowing that other Gallifreyans had gotten there first. I stared at the old screen and brainstormed for a moment afterward. I took one of the staser ammunition batteries out of my pocket. I ripped off old metal covers, revealing some wires. I then hotwired the battery to the interior, and for just two minutes, the screen came online. Some cameras were broken entirely, but with a camera positioned at the highest floor where the mine entrance was, I could see at least twenty armed Gallifreyans waiting at the entrance. What puzzled me was that they were arguing about something. Still, in the corner of the screen, the camera that looked like it was positioned in the hallway on my floor detected

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some movement. The screen was static, so I could hardly see anything except a faint image...a male Pig-rat. It was entering through the same door I used to enter the complex; I most definitely noticed its imposing tusks. I quietly gasped in fear as I heard its snorts just down the hall, followed by a barking sound. I saw several hog-sized rodents, one additional male, and several females sprint inside afterward. The females lacked the dangerous tusks and full black coats, but they still had monstrous teeth and made up for it in vast numbers.

It was no question to me that they could, in a way, smell my fear. The Pig-rats scoured the rooms, knocking over shelves and tables, and I could see one of the male's shadows just outside the door, its pig-like nose continuing to snort loudly. A hatch led into a vent network in the corner of the room. The opening was just big enough for me. None of the adult Pig-rats would be able to fit. So I quietly crept over to the hatch. Despite the rust, I couldn't pull it off without making noise. After I took a deep breath, I hastefully ripped the hatch from the wall and threw my backpack into the vent ahead of me so I could push it through. Everything went silent immediately after, and then, without warning, I could hear the Pig-rat mischiefs' claws scraping across the floor as they sprinted full speed down the hall, not making a single sound other than that.

Just as I climbed in, I could hear one lunge for the opening, followed by a loud clang. I was so terrified that I pushed through the vents as fast as I could; at the end of the shaft, the network went upward. I had to pull myself up and spread my legs to inch up to the next few floors. The Pig-rats viciously tore through the bottom floor, looking for a way to pursue me and some faint voices from the Gallifreyans on the top floor.

"It's them! They are here!" yelled one.

"No, we can't be sure of that," said another.

"You two get down there and find out what's making that racket. Shoot to kill." A third said.

As I reached the top, my legs were sore from holding myself up. I could see another vertical shaft that ended with another hatch. I hoisted myself up and took a quick breather as the Gallifreyans continued chatting.

"We need to get the hell out of here, Sennix!" A young voice yelled.

"No! We are not leaving Heddan in those mines! We wait until he comes out." Sennix said sternly.

"But it's been an hour! The Pig-rats are out. If we don't leave now, they'll..."

I could hear Sennix punch the terrified Gallifreyan.

"We are waiting until he comes back! I will not let a few ugly rodents spoil the chance for a prized bounty. Just a few of those crystals are worth a fortune! We have guns; they are just mindless beasts." Sennix assured.

I slowly inched my way to the hatch as the two of the twenty Gallifreyans powered on the elevator and proceeded down to the bottom floor. Unlike before, this hatch was not secured to the wall, so I could easily move it aside. Still, a slight creak alarmed the Gallifreyan pillagers.

"Someone's here; find them! This prize is ours alone!" yelled Sennix.

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I quickly climbed out of the vent and hid behind some of the old machines used to refine the crystals. It was like one giant assembly line room, with parts of huge machines designed to smash the crystals into smaller pieces and then long mechanical extensions with laser tips to meld them into the necessary shape for sonic screwdrivers, although the equipment was worn down to function correctly. The Pillagers scoured the room as I snuck between each mechanism, and the old elevator shaft creaked loudly as it descended.

“Come on out! You’re only going to make things worse if you don’t!” One of them hollered.

For a moment, I had nowhere to move. There were two of them on either side of the last bit of machinery I hid behind. I was sure I would be caught until a terrifying saving grace greeted all of our ears.

The elevator screeched to a halt at the bottom floor immediately; there was staser fire followed by a quick, eerie set of screams. The pillagers stopped in their tracks; I could see their hands tremble with fear, even though they knew what was coming. There was this loud metallic tearing sound, and then I could hear the Pig-rats climbing up the shaft. Unfortunately, the elevator shaft on the top floor had no door, and I was relatively close to it, so I had to dash for safety. Staser fire lit up the room as I bolted. Pig-rats swarmed through the shaft; they moved so fast that they were impossible to aim at unless you were an expert marksman. One of the males stabbed a pillager through the leg with its tusks. They collapsed to the floor, yelling in pain as the Pig-rat started to violently tear into their flesh while they were still conscious. Their body began to emit a time energy glow, but the attack was so violent that their body wasn’t able to regenerate since they were constantly being damaged and dismembered, which goes to show why these things are so incredibly feared. I looked away from the carnage and swiftly approached the mine entrance. Some of the pillagers didn’t even have time to react before they were tackled to the ground by the savage predators. Screams filled the room, and Sennix tried to rally his men.

“Keep them back! Do not falter!” He ordered.

“Damn this all to hell! I’m out of here!” One of the pillagers yelled before fleeing into the mine.

“Get back here, you coward!”

More Pig-rats charged up the shaft, eviscerating their hapless prey. Sennix managed to kill at least two before one of the males pounced, knocking him to the floor. He tried desperately to hold the creature away with his hands by holding on to the tusks, but one of his arms ended up being scraped. He let out a blood-curdling scream before it bit down on his arm and thrashed him around like a dog with a chew toy. For a moment, it dropped him. But Sennix could only flip himself over to crawl away before the Pig-rat bit down on his head. I almost gagged at the sight, truthfully.

Just as I got close to the mine, some of the Pig-rat females noticed me and gave chase, but when I ran into the opening, they stopped. The rodents sniffed the air and let out a nervous hiss. Even one of the males who stepped out in front was too petrified to follow. For a moment, I took a moment to regain my composure and light a torch. I was relieved, of course, that they

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were too frightened to follow. But that is what started to spook me. One of the most ruthless species on my planet was terrified of what waited within the mines of Alopas, the mines that I was about to enter.

CHAPTER THREE

THE SHADOW BEAST

I remember it in my dreams, that cold and hopeless feeling as I entered the dark abyss. Not since the toy room had I felt such unease. The caves were so dark that I could only see two steps ahead with the torch I held. Every fiber in my soul begged me to turn around, the darkness growing in depth, and the only sounds that could be heard were my footsteps and faint squeaks from bats.

“Just one crystal—that’s all I need—and then this nightmare will be over,” I kept telling myself.

Some signs were embedded into the stone walls; one pointed onward with the label, ‘*Primary Resource Deposit, Watch Your Step!*’ and the other pointed backward with the label ‘*Mine Entrance.*’ I pressed ahead into the dark catacombs, trembling in fright. I wondered what could have killed all those people who worked here; the thought worsened my fear. Of course, the only thing that somewhat remedied that feeling was telling myself that whatever had to be long dead. It had been a hundred years since the mines were “abandoned” after all.

I eventually found myself at an edge deep in the mountain. The drop was steep, leading into a pitch-black chasm. To my left was another rocky walkway with an opening leading deeper into Alopas at its end. To my shock, I could hear what sounded like flowing water. The crew had stumbled upon a subterranean river network, which fascinated me since only a little is known about the underground world of Gallifrey. Carefully, I walked along the cave walls. Some bats flew past my torch as I moved along, hoping not to fall into the dark pit. As I approached the opening in the wall, I could hear a voice call out.

“H-help me.” It said in a faint, almost painful manner of speech.

I hastened forward, slowly peeking my head and torch around the corner. My torch revealed just a tiny amount of a large cavern. Some torn-up robes and broken tools were strewn about the stone floor, along with some small streaks of dried-up blood. The hair on my arms stood up instantly as my hearts began to beat with intense speed.

“I-is someone there.” The voice said again.

“Where are you?” I whispered.

“O-over here.”

I nervously entered the cavern. The first thing to greet me was this awful stench, like rotting flesh. Immediately, I tried not to vomit out my innards. The musky smell grew worse as I approached where the voice came from. I started to notice a faintly glowing mass just ahead of me.

The voice started to stutter in pain. “I’m right... here.”

My torch revealed a significant fungal growth that had a gold bioluminescent glow. Right in the center was a Gallifreyan absorbed by the fungus; only his right arm and mouth stuck out clearly. His head had almost been completely covered in the growth; it was one of the most

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horrific sights I had ever seen. In an instant, complete horror overtook me, and I let out a terrified scream. The fleshy growth oozed and pulsated at it, slowly consuming its captive.

“Help me. Kill... me.”

Small mushroom-like stalks started to push up from underneath their fingernails, causing them to fall off. The stalks proliferated until a fleshy bulge formed at the top of each one. All of the bioluminescence began to suddenly flow to the stalks. As they did, I noticed my hands started to emit a similar glow. And that is when I realized what was happening: the fungus wasn't producing its own form of light; it was glowing from all the energy it had absorbed from the Gallifreyan. And it was breaking down their body to reprocess both it and the energy into these stalk growths.

I backed away in fear. All around the cavern, I started to see more of the masses, all of them with their own entrapped victims. Tentacle growths, almost like giant veins, encapsulated most cave walls, oozing with disgusting biomatter sludge. I couldn't hold it in any longer; my stomach contracted, causing whatever food and water I ate to erupt from my mouth onto the stone floor. After the concoction of bodily fluids smothered the ground, I noticed that some of the mushroom stalks had fallen off the growths. Still, these ones appeared to have been torn up as if they had been eaten. At that very moment, I started to get this unsettling feeling, like I was being watched. I slowly turned to face the opening I had entered through and stared at the pitch-black hole. Not a single sound, just a faint noise of water flow.

“There's nothing there, Theta. It's just the dark,” I said to myself in a feeble attempt to calm down.

Paranoia started to cloud my thoughts. Was something actually there? Or was the darkness getting to me? I nervously turned my back and found a large crevice blocked by boulders. Luckily, there was a small enough opening for me to crawl through, but before I did, I thought back to the Hypercube message I had found earlier.

“Once you are in the shadows, there is no hope...”

As a precaution, I firmly placed my torch on the ground behind me before crawling through the crevice. Pushing my bag through first, I slowly started to inch through the claustrophobic space, unable to turn around. On the other side, as I moved through, I felt the sudden wet sensation of water; terror engulfed my mind as I noticed the bag had been soaked. I stumbled out of the crevice, leading into another network of pathways, and started to sift through its contents. The makeshift lighter I had been using would no longer ignite due to the moisture, and most of the cloth I had was soaked, too, all but one. That was when I heard a faint echo throughout the caverns, like a deep-pitched hiss. Quickly, I grabbed a stone, dried it off with my old coat, and desperately scraped the wall to create any spark. I heard footsteps getting faster and a persistent breathing sound getting louder by the second.

“Come on!” I yelled.

The stone finally created a spark, which ignited the torch. I held it up, screaming with dreaded anticipation, waiting for something to leap from the darkness and maul me. But as soon

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as the torch lit up, there was no sound, breathing, or footsteps. Was I starting to go mad with fright?

To my right was one pathway, and in front of me was another; as I stood up and walked forward, I heard a brief pattern of footsteps. I froze again, waiting for something to attack, but nothing happened. I took another step, and again, I heard footsteps. The beast's faint, gurgly breath rattled throughout the cave walls, sending intense shivers down my fragile spine. My fear caused me to buckle and step backward; the creature moved again, and I could hear its claws scurrying across the stone.

My mind began to crack. Was it on the ceiling or the floor? How big was this inconspicuous terror? Better yet, what did it even look like? Thoughts of death began to cloud my mind. Perhaps this would be my just-deserved end, down in the dark depths of a cruel world, forgotten to all of time? The guilt of what happened in the Celestial Toyroom that cost the lives of two of my closest friends came flooding back. I was powerless to stop the Toymaker; what could I possibly do against this beast of the shadows? But a tiny sliver of hope dwindled in my thoughts; this was not some unstoppable force of nature like the Toymaker. This thing that used the darkness to significant effect was merely an animal, and all animals feared something.

I mustered up all of my courage and stood tall, holding the torch firmly in front. Then I violently swung the torch upwards and hollered as loud as I could into the caves. I could see a brief scatter of claws scrapping across the stone. The beast was momentarily startled, and in its brief moment of fear, my courage began to rise immensely. The light was my ally, and the darkness was its. I started to march forward and soon found myself chanting a phrase I had not spoken since my days in the Academy.

“Never give up, and never give in!” I chanted with each step I took.

As I advanced, the beast's breathing changed to a defensive grumble. The tide was beginning to turn in my favor. The beast suddenly scurried away more profoundly into the caverns. Courageously, I followed with my torch firmly in hand. The flames lit up the pitch-black corridors, and old, decayed fungal mounds became more common. Several bones from a variety of organisms littered the floor. The ancient remains crunched and snapped under the weight of my boots, the sounds echoing through the caves. The mold mounds crumbled to dust as I walked through them as well. For a moment, I had to stop a cough with all the dust floating about. As I descended deeper, I tore off pieces of my clothing to leave as breadcrumbs. A loud scream echoed further ahead, which temporarily stunned me, most likely the last of the pillagers meeting an untimely fate.

Before long, I reached a honeycomb network of pathways. I got turned around so often that I lost track of how long I had been down there. To my surprise, there were no signs of the shadow beast, so I kept my guard up just in case of any surprises. Sometime later, as if it were a literal glimmer of hope, there was a slight ruby-colored shimmer ahead of me. It was a crystal bed!

“At last!” I said to myself joyously.

DOCTOR WHO

Then I heard the beast's gurgly breath again, and both of my hands grasped the torch firmly. Except this time, I had yet to learn which direction the beast was waiting in. The sounds echoed through the caves so much, and there were many more directions that it was almost impossible to do. But what puzzled me was that the beast had fled explicitly to this exact location when it could have attempted to ambush me elsewhere. Perhaps it had learned that many of its victims descend into the dark depths in search of these valuable minerals?

My hands stiffened upon realizing my adversary was more intelligent than I anticipated. Then I suddenly heard a sort of hacking sound as if it was trying to vomit, and a stream of water quickly followed, just barely missing the torch. For a moment, I was stunned by a splash hitting my face; I quickly turned to where the water came from, narrowly avoiding the beast's grasp. I saw an ugly webbed hand with green translucent skin and four clawed fingers that retraced back into the hand before the beast scurried away. I hastily approached the crystal formations only to find that it was covered in fungal growths; whenever I tried to reach for a sliver, tendrils from the growths would extend outward, attempting to pull me in. Desperately, I tried to think of a solution, my breath quickening by the second.

"Wait, the staser!" I said to myself.

I checked my bag to see if the staser weapon was still functioning; luckily, it was. Carefully, I began to tinker with the device, rewiring some circuits and removing some small pieces. I test-fired the staser, which now fired a continuous cutting beam. It effortlessly cut through the fungal masses, causing yellow puss-like fluid to splash and ooze everywhere as they detached from the wall. The stench the eviscerated fungus released was horrendous. Still, I was too close to the finish line to buckle, so I powered on.

Carefully, I aimed the staser where a crystal met the stone and managed to detach it. The back end sizzled slightly, so I blew some air to cool it down before placing the mineral into my backpack. The beast's gurgling returned, and before I could react, a jet of water spewed from the darkness, putting out the torch. Suddenly, I found myself knocked to the floor, followed by a sharp stabbing pain at the top of my right foot. The beast held me in the air while I let out a terrified and painful yell. In a panic, I fired the staser blindly, hoping to free myself, and just as quickly as it happened, I plummeted back to the floor. The beast's ear-piercing shrieks filled the cave walls. I even had to cover my ears for a moment as I ended up drenched in what I could only describe as the creature's white blood. I reached down to my foot and felt a claw embedded into my flesh. Hastefully, I removed it, which was not pleasant in the slightest. It was then I realized that I had severed an entire arm off the beast. But as my regeneration kicked in, I noticed a subtle gold hue similar to my own time energy in the dark. I could hear flesh reshaping and bones snapping into place beside my own. I thought back to the mushroom stalks and their golden hue. In horror, I realized the beast had absorbed time energy by devouring the reprocessed Gallifreyan flesh.

I hastened to my feet and rushed out of the crystal deposit and back into the maze-like caverns to get a head start. With the torch out of commission, I used the slight hue from the staser to find the pieces of cloth I tore from my clothes and find my way back to the entrance.

BEAST OF THE CRYSTAL MOUNTAIN

Sweat began to flow from my skin again, my breaths so rapid you would think I would faint. All that was left now was to escape, and this nightmare would end. Even with the cloth bread crumbs, the caverns felt endless, almost as if I was running through an infinite purgatory of caves. I reached the blocked-off walkway that I had crawled through earlier. From behind, the beast's haunting howl echoed; it was catching up fast. Instead of crawling through again, I fired the staser at the boulders to create instability. Then I pushed with all my might until they collapsed into various pebbles; the underground rivers flowing water could be heard again.

“Almost there, Theta!”

Still devouring their captors, the fungal masses throbbed and oozed as I ran by. I quickly but carefully walked along the wall back to the entranceway. And there it was, the morning daylight shining into the mining complex. The beast's rapid footsteps ramped up behind me as I bolted forward. With all the strength and determination I could muster, I leaped out of the caves and into the mining complex in the safety of the sun. I looked back and was met by dark eyes with no pupils staring back at me. Chills ran down my spine momentarily as I locked eyes with my adversary; it wouldn't dare stray into the light. I couldn't get a glimpse of the complete creature before its growls slowly began to quiet down, followed by its claws scraping against the stone as it returned down to the depths of Alopas. Finally, I was able to breathe easily. I sat down in the refinery room. Thankfully, there were no signs of Pig-rats; they had eaten their fill and moved on.

“Word of advice to myself: *Never* go down there again. Now to get... home,” I said, trying to catch my breath.

I had never been happier to see the twin suns rise over the horizon, banishing all night creatures back to their daytime slumber. The journey home was exhausting, and by the time I reached that old barn, despite everything I went through to get that crystal, I didn't do anything with it that day since there was only one thought on my mind...sleep. Sadly, it wouldn't be for another four hundred years until I got every component I needed to make a sonic screwdriver.

On one fateful night on my way home, I noticed a young woman being pursued across the Drylands by a Pig-rat. At first, I considered ignoring them and going on my way, but after what I saw the Pig-rats do on my trip to Alopas, it was simply a fate that I felt no one should endure. So, I rescued the lost child, a choice that would alter the course of my life forever.

And that is the end of my scary little story, and I hope all you travelers enjoyed my ramblings. What's that? Would you like to hear another? I'm surprised. I didn't think my tales were that intriguing, but you can stay a little longer if that's the case. Now, what other adventures of mine could I tell next? Ah, yes, it would be fitting to tell you all about my first-ever adventure on *your* world. Oh, what an adventure it was...

THE ADVENTURES CONTINUE IN... *PLANET OF THE DINOSAURS*