

PENALTY PHASE

The guards snapped to attention when they saw the Doctor coming. He didn't bother to show them his ID, they didn't bother to ask. They made room for him to stand in front of the door.

"Has he said anything?" The Doctor was whispering, even though the door was quite sound-proof. "Has he asked for anything?"

The senior of the two shook his head.

The Doctor slid back the spyhole cover and peered through. The prisoner was sitting in the shadows, away from the sickly yellow sunlight pooling in the centre of the room. He wore the darkness like a child's blanket. His eyes stared blankly into the deeper shadow. He was the Master. That name had never sounded so ironic. Somewhere else, they were deciding whether to take his life.

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The Master betrayed no reaction when the Doctor came in and sat down on the unused bed. The Doctor tried to make a gentle empathic contact, but the blinds were down. Time Lords could interact on such subtle levels that when they were together in any numbers they had to fight all the time to stop losing themselves in the group mind. That was why so many of their people led a solitary life. It might even have been why the Doctor went on the run in the first place. The Master had been on the run too, but he had refused to bow down when he was caught. Imprisonment had been like a game to him at first. He towered over his captors with effortless, innate superiority. But even he had weakened. At first his attempts to hypnotise his guards were a game because he knew he would win. They became a torture when he realised he could not.

He was a Time Lord of the first rank. His dignity was all he had left. He got up, stretched, and stood facing the Doctor.

"I wasn't aware I was allowed visitors."

"They let me in. They always do, I suppose. How are they treating you?"

"They aren't. I haven't seen anyone since..." Since the verdict. "Oh well, I suppose that idiot of a lawyer will be turning up again sometime soon. She's going to ask me to fall on the mercy of the court, I imagine." The Master tried to laugh, the way he used to laugh. It didn't sound very convincing.

"The lawyer's gone."

"Where?"

"She... she left. No-one knows where. I've come to replace her."

This time the Master really did laugh. The irony of the situation was too much. "You? You'd see me dead tomorrow."

"Only if you don't listen to me."

Time for one, final game then.

"You could listen to me instead."

"All right."

There was no point in euphemism now, no point in circumlocution. "Suppose... Just suppose, I was to offer you something."

"Your TARDIS" said the Doctor, as if it meant nothing.

"My TARDIS is just the start." There were hours, days before the final scene of the courtroom drama was to be played out. But the Master's words were falling over themselves. "Why did you want to travel in time, Doctor?"

"Well, I..."

"You wanted to help."

"Yes."

"But you soon found out you couldn't."

"I could sometimes."

"You were as powerless against the tide of history as the poor souls you claimed to protect, Doctor! Go on, admit it!"

"I could help sometimes," the Doctor hissed.

"When *they* let you."

"I fail to see what all this has to do with your case. And what do you mean, when they let me? When who let me?"

"It has everything to do with everything, Doctor! Why do you think they didn't show my future at the trial? That is standard judicial procedure, is it not? They didn't show it because they have no idea what it is. I make my own future, I decide when to change and what to change and *I can do it*. They have no hold over me."

The Doctor had to listen and the Master knew it. Something of the old twinkle, just a hint, was returning to his eyes. The Doctor had begun by trying to make eye contact with him. Now he was avoiding it, fiddling with his paisley handkerchief instead.

"Mass in motion has momentum, Doctor. Mass moving through time has the greatest momentum of all. You can't change its course by poking it with your finger. But you can if the Time Lords bring their weight to bear. You walk among the peoples of the ancient Americas and claim nothing can be changed. But every time you move an object, you make a change. A slight change, yes, but who knows what will happen further down the line? You saved a priest who would have been tortured to death by the



Spanish. What do you think he did with his new life? He wasn't that old. Maybe he married. What do you think his descendants did?

"You criticise Ace for leaving 1980's technology in 1960's London and then abandon fifty or sixty Dalek travel machines there. But the timeline barely changed. The Time Lords came and cleared up your mess."

"How do you know this?"

"Because your adventures are common knowledge. They show them on the Public Record Video on Gallifrey! The Time Lord establishment shows them to inspire their subjects. You think you're a rebel but you do their bidding every minute of every day. If you go to a place where there is something they want changed, they isolate it from time and let you work. It takes the entire resources of Gallifrey to smooth out the changes to the timelines – all of Gallifrey, Doctor, just for you. That's why the Time Lords don't intervene. There's only enough power for one at a time!"

The Master paused to let that sink in. Then he pressed his argument home.

"If you go somewhere where they want things to stay the same, they minimise the effects of your stay and let history, more or less, take its course. Or they might redirect your TARDIS altogether. You convince yourself that your journeys are random but

every stage in them has been precisely worked out. They knew where your first and second incarnations were all along. They didn't exile you to Earth in the interests of *justice*. To them, it was nothing more than an interesting bit of plot development."

The Doctor stared blankly ahead.

"But it doesn't have to be like that, Doctor. You can be the master of your own destiny. As I am."

"How?"

"Release me and I'll tell you."

The Doctor - the seventh Doctor - got up and went over to the door. Then he turned. "I could be my own Master," he said. "But that's the kind of power no-one was meant to have. I can't predict the results of my own actions. Even my TARDIS hasn't got the processing power to do more than guess. Maybe it's better for everybody if I have a safety-net."

The Master looked scornfully at him. "You want to be a slave forever? You want to be a pawn?"

"Even if I had all that power, I couldn't go everywhere and do everything. And if nobody watched me any more, what would be the point? I can't go everywhere but maybe my name can. Maybe my *image* can. And maybe that in itself can do some good. You're offering me a life of nothing but darkness. I want people to see me in action. My greatest fear is what might happen when they can't."

The Doctor put his finger on the switch which would signal to the guards that he wanted to be let out. "And if I am the hero of the Public Record Video," he said, "then have you ever thought that you might be the villain of the piece? You might be a character too."

"If that were true, Doctor," said the Master, "then those Time Lords you serve so faithfully would be responsible for all the evil that I have done. Do you remember Logopolis? The entropy I released destroyed over thirty percent of all the life forms in the universe. Did they let it happen? Would your gods do that?"

The Doctor pressed the switch. "I'll do what I can for you," he said. The door closed. The Master slowly drew the blankets on the bed around him.

Outside, one of the guards stopped the Doctor. "What did he say?"

"It doesn't matter," said the Doctor. "He'll say anything to save his own skin." He almost sounded convinced. "I must go."

They say he listened calmly as his list of evil crimes was read.

Seven Doctors attended the trial on Skaro LXIV. The third spoke in the Master's defence. It was a long and impassioned speech but the court wasn't in a mood to listen. The Master was dragged out to the place of sentence. An dispassionate medic injected him with muscle relaxant, but there was no need. He hadn't struggled, he hadn't said anything since the trial had resumed.

He was put into an execution chamber.

Somewhere in the distance, a handful of disarmed Daleks cried out in vain as they awaited transport to the Time Lords' eternal prison.

Millions watched.

Matthew Peacock