Raven’s Last Conversation

Yasmin shivered, even though the room was at an ambient temperature.

It was a prison, and they always made her shiver. It didn’t matter that she was merely escorting a prisoner to or from court or some other police duty. The thought of big doors that locked behind her always made her shiver.

This prison was a million light years from Earth and five hundred years in her personal future, and the atrium where she and The Doctor were waiting looked like the foyer of a five star hotel, but it certainly was a prison. The TARDIS had materialised in the shuttle hangar in the lower level of the Tri-ZonicA Maximum Security Penal Space Station had passed through three automated security checks already. Now, The Doctor’s credentials as an agent of the Shaddow Proclamation, and Yasmin’s as a resident of a neutral space and time were being checked once more by a humanoid with four arms, the hands flying across a three foot wide, ergonomically curved keyboard as information scrolled across three screens.

“Other Tri-Zonica civil service admins use direct psychic interfaces,” The Doctor explained. “No typing needed. But too many of the prisoners come from species with psychic powers. They can’t risk a telepathic breakout. Miyt-Sonicans are the best typists in the sector. Some even get a third set of limbs surgically attached to be more efficient.”

“We could use a few of them for the custody paperwork at South Yorkshire,” Yasmin remarked. Then the clerk held up one hand with what looked like a plastic comb with the teeth welded together. The Doctor took it from him and nodded to Yasmin to follow her through the last of the security doors.

“I’m trying not to say ‘wow’,” Yasmin said as she stared around the vast space. ‘Room’ was too simple a word for it. Arena, even stadium seemed closer, though this was no concert or sports venue. It had an opaque roof high above letting in diffused light. The roof was a vast oval, so Yasmin assumed the walls formed an oval, too.

But she couldn’t see the walls. Except for one long central broadway that they walked along, Yasmin silent, The Doctor murmuring what sounded like a long co-ordinate to herself, the whole vast area was filled with what looked like glass coffins, ten tiers of them at a time in long aisles. If undertakers had megastores like B&Q, they might just look like this.

They weren’t coffins, of course. They were cryogenic prison cells. Yasmin had seen enough science fiction television to understand the concept without asking too many silly questions.

“It’s not exactly what you imagine,” The Doctor had explained while they were waiting. “The prisoners aren’t just frozen in time to be woken up young and healthy and ready to be a criminal threat to a whole new generation. They age within their cells at the normal rate. Most of them will die here of old age.”

“Whole life terms,” Yasmin had said, understanding the point. “And they are aware of the passage of the years, just as a ‘live’ prisoner is.”

“They are in a kind of induced sleep, but at a level where they are able to reflect upon their crimes and rue the consequences.”

“Or plot escape and revenge?” Yasmin asked.

“They can plot. But carrying out such plots is virtually impossible.”

“Virtually?”

“I was on the Titanic, once. I try to avoid absolutes like unsinkable, unbreakable, inescapable. And I’ve done enough ‘impossible’ things myself to be very wary of that one. It is just possible that a very strong-willed prisoner might, one day, beat the system, but not today.”

They reached a place near the apex of the roof, so presumably about the middle of the area. There were comfortable chairs and a table on which refreshments were laid.

That was all very well, very hospitable and very nearly cosy. But a tea guest was already there, in her cryogenic coffin placed on a stand beside the refreshment table.

 Yasmin looked at the face of a very old woman with hair so white it was impossible to guess at the original colour.

“It was black,” The Doctor said as if anticipating the question. “She is known as Raven. Her prison record has her full birth name on it, though there is no need for us to worry about it now.”

“She is a friend of yours?” Yasmin asked. This question had been on her mind ever since The Doctor had announced that they were going to be prison visiting.

“Not at all,” The Doctor answered. “Raven was a very dangerous young woman and I had to bring her down for the sake of the galaxy.”

“I almost defeated you,” said a quiet, cracked voice that came through a small black sphere sitting on the coffee table. Yasmin was startled, to say the least.

“That was her?” She looked again at the wizened face. It didn’t seem to have moved – not even a lip tremor.

“She is aware of us. She can speak through the sphere. That is why we are here. For conversation.”

“Oh…” Yasmin cleared ber throat. “Then… I suppose I should introduce myself. I’m Yasmin, Yasmin Khan. I’m from a place called Sheffield on a planet called Earth.”

“I know of that world,” Raven answered. “It has spawned people who are worse criminals than I am.”

“Yes… I suppose so,” Yasmin admitted, thinking of Adolf Hitler, Pol Pot and Slobodan Milošević as three humans she wouldn’t wish on the universe.

“What do you do on Earth?” Raven asked.

“I’m… I’m a police officer,” Yasmin admitted. “But… I’m travelling with The Doctor just now and I’m well out of my jurisdiction. I’m not here about you. I didn’t even know about you until The Doctor brought me here.”

She wondered afterwards why she felt the need to say that. Why should she feel guilty or apologise to a criminal for being a police officer?

“The Doctor is not one to talk about herself,” Raven explained. “To tell of my defeat would mean bragging of her triumph. It is not her way.”

“So… what should we talk about?” Yasmin asked. “What do you usually talk about?”

“Pudding recipes, book recommendations, best episodes of Sex in the City,” The Doctor said. There was a cold chuckle from the sound sphere.

“Perhaps, in honour of Yasmin’s visit, and as it will be the last time, we should talk about me,” suggested Raven.

“I’ve tried some new custards since last time,” The Doctor tried, but half-heartedly. She knew what was coming.

“I was third in line to the Crown of Paeteran. My two brothers were in the way. I dealt with them. Phelnus deserved it. He always treated me as inferior to him – even though I WAS older than him.”

“By three minutes,” The Doctor added.

“You killed your twin brother?” Yasmin addressed her appalled question to the frozen face of Raven rather than the sphere. They told her in police training that eye contact was important, and even if the eyes weren’t moving she thought it should still apply in this case.

“A riding ‘accident’,” Raven answered. “Breknuk was even easier. Poison in his breakfast porridge.”

“He was seven years old,” The Doctor pointed out. Yasmin exclaimed in horror, but Raven took no notice.

“After that, I just had to get rid of my weak, foolish, pushover of a father.”

“King Bhodoi was a kind, compassionate ruler,” said The Doctor. Raven ignored her and continued talking.

“I didn’t actually shoot him myself, of course. I hired an assassin. Had the hitman executed for regicide once I was queen, of course. Mother was a bit of a worry. She suspected what I had done. I had her put in a sanitorium on Regulus X. I had the royal psychiatrist diagnose her as having crazed delusions of being royalty and the nurses were ordered not to be taken in by her ravings. I didn’t visit, but I video-phoned once or twice a year.”

“And now you were in charge of a whole planet.”

“One planet, to begin with. The other three inhabited worlds of the Paeteran system soon fell in line as part of the greater empire. The cold, outer planet became a work colony for those who opposed my rule. Yes, Doctor… and their families. I know you were going to point that out. Well, it didn’t seem righttosplitchi’dren from their parents.”

“Work colony?” Yasmin queried, ignoring the coldness of that last comment. “You mean….” She turned to The Doctor. “She means a concentration camp, doesn’t she?”

The Doctor nodded. Yasmin turned back to Raven with a disgusted expression.

“You are an evil person,” she said. “I’ve never had the opportunity to say that to any of the evil people from my planet. So I might as well take the chance to tell it to you – on behalf of all the other evil people I’ve never been introduced to. You are foul. You deserve your punishment.”

“You haven’t heard the worst of it, yet,” Raven answered.

“That much is true,” The Doctor confirmed.

“Why? What else did she do?” Yasmin asked.

“Oh, just the usual thing tyrants and dictators always want,” The Doctor answered.

“Power,” Yasmin guessed.

“One solar system wasn’t enough. She wanted more and more power over more and more people.”

“And I would have had it, too, if it hadn’t been for The Doctor,” Raven insisted in the same tone as an unmasked Scooby Doo villain bemoaning the meddling kids and their dog.

“When was that?” Yasmin asked The Doctor. “In your time, I mean.”

“One of my more handsome incarnations,” The Doctor answered. “It was a time when I was travelling by myself, which was rare enough. Usually I had a couple of friends with me from somewhere, but not on this trip….”

The Doctor held out her hand, waving it in a circle above the coffee table. A roughly circular piece of the air shimmered like a plasma tv coming on without any signal, then resolved into a picture that would have the technicians at LG and Hitachi weeping into their coffee cups.

“The amount of loose psychic energy around here, I might as well show rather than tell,” The Doctor explained. “This was my arrival on the planet Hgania, a populated world in the Tatnicus system, which had the misfortune of being within warp shunt reach of Paeteran. I arrived a week after Raven’s ships had first appeared in their skies.”

Yasmin watched the psychic screen as the familiar police box materialised in a devastated city. What had once been towering habitations and magnificent public buildings lay in ruins in every direction. Fires burned and the sky was a livid red streaked with black smoke.

There was no sign of any living thing moving in that apocalyptic scene until the TARDIS door opened and a man stepped out. Yasmin agreed with The Doctor’s opinion that this version was quite nice looking. His clothes were decidedly odd, belonging to no obvious period of fashion, style or even common sense, but the face looked open and friendly, if distinctly concerned about the state of his surroundings.

The Doctor went back into the TARDIS and returned shortly with a large first aid box that he slung over his shoulder. He walked carefully across the debris strewn ground, following what might have been a wide city street until it was attacked. He eventually reached a building that had suffered slightly less than others. There were still a few floors still standing. He carefully approached what had once been impressive double doors with an illuminated fanlight now shattered and ruined. One door had fallen in, the other hung loosely from its hinges. He stepped over the fallen side.

The image until now had been following The Doctor. As he stepped inside the building it changed to his point of view, as if he had brought a steadycam into play.

“The TARDIS recorded my movements while I was outside,” The Doctor explained. “This is taken from my memory as submitted to the Intergalactic War Crimes Court.”

Raven made a sarcastic noise.

“Enough of that,” The Doctor told her. “Memory submissions are legally acceptable in the Court when at least two of them corroborate each other. There were five hundred thousand depositions in all from the conquered planets. The Court had to limit the evidence to a hundred representatives.”

Yasmin kept to herself her thoughts about a war crimes court hearing that much evidence. It must have been quite harrowing.

On the psychic screen The Doctor made his way along corridors strewn with shattered glass from blown in windows and remnants of fine plasterwork broken off the cracked ceiling. He saw nobody until he reached the top of a wide stairway to another set of once grand doors.

Two men guarded these doors. They were dressed in what should have been impressive guard uniforms but were now torn, dusty and stained with blood. The men, with ragged beards and tired eyes held bastic rifles that they trained on The Doctor.

“I come in peace,” he said, raising his hands. “Take me to your leader. Really, please take me to him, if he’s still alive. We’re old friends.”

“You’re a damned ‘Vader,” one of the guards accused him. “My brother was killed by your patrols…. I should shoot you where you stand.”

“I have my hands raised,” The Doctor pointed out. “To shoot me when I’m surrendering would be against Intergalactic law.”

“He’s right about that, Clem,” said the other guard. “Besides… we’re not ‘Vader. We’re better than them.”

“You should have been a politician, Erik,” Clem responded, still glaring angrily at The Doctor.

“Look….” The Doctor tried tp interrupt, but Clem was not giving up his defensive position.

 “Come on,” Erik decided, quickly overruling his comrade. “We’ll take him to the king, and see what he has to say.”

Clem reluctantly agreed, but he satisfied his suspicions by taking the first aid kit from him and searching it for weapons - of which, of course, there were none.

“I brought that because I thought it might be needed,” The Doctor said. “Bandages, antiseptics, analgesics ….”

“Thank you,” Erik said, quite sincerely. Clem grunted and took the bag away, hopefully to put the contents to good use.

There was certainly need for it. Through the doors, in what had once been the receiving hall of the palace, a makeshift hospital had been established.

“My first thought was how much it resembled Scutari… Before Florence Nightingale arrived to sort it out. But this wasn’t just wounded soldiers. Children, mothers, old people….”

Yas thought The Doctor had never sounded more like an actual doctor, her tone full of compassion for the victims of the bombardment instigated by Raven, the woman whose lack of such compassion had already been noted.

 On the screen a doctor was exactly what her former incarnation made of himself. Even before he could be brought to the king he stopped several times to help the wounded, doing the ordinary practical things like setting splints or bandaging arms, but also, where it was needed, putting his hands on the foreheads of trembling, frightened, hurting people and, somehow, drawing off the pain and fright and leaving them calm and quiet, able to sleep and recover themselves.

“Does it hurt you doing that?” Yas asked. She couldn’t see the other Doctor’s face but she imagined he must be drained a little each time he performed that little act of kindness.

“It is something I can do,” The Doctor answered, not really answering the question. “A small, small thing with so much to do.”

Erik stood close by each time The Doctor stopped to give aid, but eventually he ran out of patience and urged The Doctor on through the crowded chamber to an inner door.

This led to the council chamber where the king met his government in times of peace. Now it looked more like a council of War with several uniforms that, like the men wearing them had clearly seen combat.

The king was wearing a uniform, also showing signs of attrition, though he looked old enough, in his sixties orvseventies, to have justifiably taken a back seat in the war that had come to his kingdom.

“Steven,” The Doctor said as the king and his senior men looked up from their work. “It has been a while.”

The king remained puzzled tor a few moments, then a thin smile shone through the anxiety on his face.

“Doctor… is it really you? Is it possible… just when we need you most….”

“I’m here,” The Doctor admitted. “What has happened?”

“So you knew a king by his first name?” Yas asked.

“Steven Taylor… travelled with me for a time. He was a space pilot from twenty-third century Earth. When we came to that world it was in dire need of a strong leader, and Steven chose to leave the TARDIS and step up to the challenge. I rather expected a presidency, but the people chose to make him king. I visited once before this and he was doing well. This time… not so good.”

“So I see,” Yasmin commented, looking coldly at Raven, though, of course, she was unaware of that and stayed quiet.

Steven quickly explained to his old friend how the attack had come out of nowhere. He had just received the Queen of Paeteran – on a diplomatic mission. The very night after a grand banquet, when the Queen had returned to her royal space barque the major cities, the space port and strategic military outposts were attacked along with defensive satellites in orbit around the planet. In a few hours the peaceful world had been subjugated.

“It was a bit like Independence Day,” The Doctor told Yasmin. “Raven’s mothership and a half dozen more battlecruisers were in orbit over the major population centres. Demands for unconditional surrender were being resisted and the King was discussing ways of fighting back with the remains of his own military force.

“We’re not utterly defeated,” Steven insisted to The Doctor. “We have been able to regroup. We have squadrons of fighter ships….” He talked hopefully about the plan.

“it was a good, sound military strategy,” The Doctor explained to Yasmin who got rather glazed eyed listening to the details of the proposed strike back. “It had maybe a forty per cent chance of success. It would have sacrificed a lot of people, and Steven was fully prepared to be one of them.”

“Your friend….” Yasmin murmured.

“He was a pilot before he was King. And he’d fought against Daleks. He wasn’t scared to put himself in danger. I wanted to find another way, but I was out of ideas until something else came up that changed the odds considerably.”

What happened was the sudden and very noisy arrival of Clem and a group of his men escorting three of the enemy ground troops. There was a quick explanation of how and where they had been captured. Whatever the air superiority of Raven’s forces, the men she had put onto the planet were, like many armies sent into urban war zones, disadvantaged by lack of local knowledge and the ambush and subsequent firefight had ended badly for them. Four of their number had been confirmed dead and one had been brought in and left in the field hospital to treat his wounds. Clem complained loudly about wasting their scarce resources on a ‘filthy ‘vader’. .

 ”Under Intergalactic law we have a duty towards any wounded enemy,” King Steven answered.

“Would they do the same for us?” Clem responded.

“I don’t think so,” said one of the military leaders before the King responded. “But that makes us the better people… the people we have striven to be since King Steven began to lead us.”

“Likewise, we shall treat these prisoners with firmness but not unkindness,” Steven added. “Let us see what they have to say.”

What they had to say at first was a selection of phrases and slogans in praise of Queen Raven.

V“Sounds like the sort of thing the Hitler Youth would spout,” Yasmin observed. She looked accusingly at Raven’s unresponsive face. “She could brainwash or hypnotise people to do her bidding. And don’t you snigger or laugh or anything. This is serious.”

“Yes, it is,” The Doctor agreed and looked back at the psychic screen, seeing what she had seen all those years ago. The view was a bit muddled at first as her earlier self looked into several pockets, pulling out all sorts of odds and ends before lifting what was either a small yellow crystal or a quite large gemstone to his eye.

“Just the thing,” he said. “Bring that man closer, please.”

Clem and one of his comrades pushed one of the prisoners forward. The Doctor held the crystal until it caught the light and reflected it into the prisoner’s eyes while moving it in a gentle rhythm. After a few minutes the prisoner blinked rapidly and cried out in distress.

“Easy,” The Doctor said in a soothing tone. “Nobody here will harm you. Can you tell me who you are and where you come from?”

The man sobbed as he gave his name and his planet – one of Ravem’s earlier conquests. He went on to say that he had been a farmer until he was captured along with dozens of men from his village.

After that had been a waking nightmare as his mind was filled with orders to fight and kill – orders he was unable to disobey, though the longing to be home with his family was always there, subsumed by the brainwashing programme.

The Doctor turned to the other two prisoners and found the same story, though they came from different conquered worlds.

“Each new planet gave her a new crop of soldiers, pressed into her service against their will,” The Doctor explained to Yasmin, though needlessly. She had already guessed what it was about, as had King Steven and his people on the screen.

“What can we do?” Steven asked. “I can’t launch a counter attack against mind-numbed slaves. These people are as much victims of the Queen’s ambitions as we are.”

“It is her weakness,” The Doctor said. “She couldn’t personally keep thousands of men under her glamour. There must be a programme of some kind, probably beamed into the battle cruisers en masse from the mothership. If it could be blocked….”

“CAN we block it?” Steven asked, seeing The Doctor’s idea at once.

“The TARDIS could,” The Doctor answered. “Leave it to me.”

“No,’ Stevrn answered. “I’m coming with you. Your technical help is welcomed. But this is my fight… My world… my people.”

“Quite right,’ The Doctor agreed.

In fact, a small force of Steven’s best military men accompanied them through the destroyed city back to the TARDIS. When they finally materialised aboard the Bridgd of the Queen’s mothership, they were hardly needed. The Doctor had already broadcast a blocking signal. Hundreds of men had woken from their nightmare and though they were farmers and factory workers on their home worlds, without any special fighting skills, their sheer numbers were suffice to subdue the Queen’s loyal officers .

“It’s over,” Steven said to the Queen as she and her Bridge crew were taken prisoner. “You are under arrest for war crimes against multiple peaceful and non-belligerent worlds and will be held to account.”

“Not quite over,” the beautiful, young Queen Raven replied with more courage than might be expected of her in such a predicament. As she spoke, the mothership was rocked by a shockwave from a close proximity explosion. A second shockwave followed quickly.

“What have you done?” The Doctor demanded, grasping the Queen much more roughly than chivalry demanded.

“A simple order,” she answered. “Self destruct… in case of the kind of insurgency you have instigated.. If I am not released immediately to give a counter-command it will be transmitted by wormhole to every ship in my fleet, over every planet I have conquered. A million men will die – a million suddenly freed slaves who, like those you have just witnessed, will have no time to savour their freedom.”

The Doctor didn’t wait to discuss the matter. He ran back to the TARDIS leaving Steven and his officers to deal with the Queen. For several frantic minutes he fought the communications arrayon the console as if it were his enemy. Finally a signal on the screen gave him reason to sigh deeply with relief.

“You stopped the signal?” Yasmin asked. “You saved the ships?”

“Too late for those close to the mothership,” The Doctor confirmed with a regretful tone. “But the rest…. Yes. I stopped the self destruct. All over the quadrant, in ships over her conquered worlds, the men fought for their freedom. Some died in the fight, but most…. Yes, most survived. They were able to return to their homes and families.”

“But those you couldn’t save gave weighed on your conscience,” Raven rasped hoarsely, her cold chuckle as cruel as ever. “You allowed them to rebel, forcing me to take such drastic action.”

“No,” The Doctor answered. “Those deaths were entirely your fault. I was sorry to know there was such loss, but I never, for one moment blamed anyone but you.”

Yasmin wondered if that was true. She knew The Doctor regretted needless loss of life on any scale. But she was unlikely to admit that in front of Raven.

“That is the difference between us, Doctor,” the cold voice said. “I HAVE no conscience to trouble me.”

“That is not the only difference between us,” The Doctor countered. “But it doesn’t matter any longer.”

“No,” Raven answered. “It does not.”

Yasmin wondered what they both meant by that, but The Doctor didn’t explain. Instead she inserted the strange, comblike object she had obtained at reception into a slot on Rafen’s futuristic coffin. The evil woman gave a soft sigh as the psychic screen filled with a starscape coloured with greens and reds as well as black, the true colours of the cosmos as Yasmin had come to know in her travels. Slowly at first, then increasingly rapid the starscape changed as if travelling at something like the Starship Enterprise’s impulse speed. After a while a multi-hued nebula began to grow larger and eventually filled the view before it faded to black.

The Doctor reached forward and withdrew the ‘comb’. She sighed softly.

“What was all that?” Yasmin asked.

“Raven’s last virtual journey,” The Doctor explained. “like a dream. The prisoners are allowed to have them at the governor’s discretion. In this case….”

“Her… last?” Yasmin looked at the still figure inside the casket. There was no obvious change. But….

“You mean she’s….”

“It’s why we came. She has been dying slowly for the past decade, but today… she was at her end. One more visit, one more conversation, one last dream. And now it’s over.”

“Oh.” Yasmin looked again at the dead tyrant, her sentence finally served. She felt a little sad, though she wasn’t sure why. Raven was evil embodied. Why should she deserve even a moment of sympathy?

“It’s over,” The Doctor said again. “The civilisations she nearly destroyed have had time to recover. Even on her own world she is no more than a dark period of history. I had hoped for a last little bit of remorse, just a qord, but I’m not surprised that there was none. And now she’s dead, and even I can forget she ever existed. Come on. Let’s go.”

Yasmin stood and followed The Doctor back out of the jail, back to the TARDIS. She was glad to leave. She never liked prisons, even ordinary ones.

“Do you think you ever WILL forget her?” she asked as the TARDIS entered the time vortex, heading, so The Doctor promised, for somewhere they could get a nice lunch.

“Probably not,” The Doctor admitted after a few moments of thought. “Not till my own last dream, anyway.”