

BBC

DOCTOR WHO

Christmas Before the Last

A Prequel to **The Husbands of River Song**

by Kevin M. Johnston

"Pod Security, we have a Condition Beetroot in launch-bay six. I repeat, Condition Beetroot!"

Norbert Roc, the Secure-o-Tech™ agent designated to this deck, looked up from their holo-comic and sighed. Even with the warring alien ships and the blockade, there hadn't been an alert above Condition Snowshoe for twelve cycles, and they were beginning to get used to the quiet, having read all the way to issue #12,005 of *The Amazing Superior Ultimate Karkus* since arriving on the ship.

"LB6 cam," they called out, "Show me what you got."

The camera feed popped up in Norbert's left eye and showed them nothing but a flash of curls and the butt of a laser pistol before fizzing into nothingness.

"That's... not ideal," Norbert admitted. "Any pods affected?"

The computer played its customary loading jingle, then pronounced, "Intruder has entered Escape Vessel Germanotta and has initiated launch sequence."

"Why didn't you say that first?!" Norbert exploded.

Loading jingle, then, "No inquiry was made regarding this infor-"

"Computer, silent mode," Norbert grumbled. "Patch me into the comms of the Germanotta."

The computer did not respond, but rather cut into the channel a little too harshly, sending a burst of static directly into Norbert's auditory implants. The security agent rubbed their temples in an exaggerated show of pain, then announced to the intruder. "Intruder aboard the EV Germanotta, this is Secure-o-Tech™ Agent Roc in Launch Authority, do you read me?"

"Loud and clear," replied a silky voice, the kind that somehow made the words *loud and clear* sound positively salacious.

"Intruder, you are not cleared for launch."

And then the pod launched. Warning lights in shades of mauve and yellow glowed aggressively all over the room, with one or two firing up in Norbert's frontal lobe as well. Norbert switched to a visual scan and saw a small bronze cube detach itself from the mothership and float into space.

"Intruder, I said-"

"Intruder, intruder, intruder," the voice replied. "Please, call me River. And I can call you by whatever name you like."

"Secure-o-Tech™ Agent Roc."

"With the trademark and everything? No, I don't think so. I'll call you... Rocky."

"Intru- River, reverse your current trajectory and return to the shuttle bay."

"Hm," River replied. "Don't think I will. I've got places to be, people to dazzle."

"If you leave transmission range, the pod's motive power and brake will be deactivated. The only places you'll be are scattered all across the face of the planet below!"

"Well, lucky for me, that's exactly where I'm going. Date night with the husband. Say, will you be deactivating the music system?"

Norbert thought about this for a second. No-one had ever asked them that question before.

"Er, no, I suppose not."

"Good. Computer, mute the lovely Rocky and play, oooh," she said, thinking. "Let's say Blondie, *Live at New New New Wembley*, 3142. Track six. 'Atomic'."

A sudden burst of rhythmic guitar and drums shot through Norbert's skull, but the transmission began to fade before the vocals came in. Instead, the last thing the agent heard was the voice of the mysterious intruder.

"Rocky, one more thing, be sure to tell Tasha I'm sorry I didn't stop by!"

Then Norbert watched as the small bronze cube plummeted from the sky directly towards the surface of the planet Trenzalore.

When the pod collided with the ground, it had survived far better than Norbert had predicted, although it didn't resemble a cube as much as a half-mashed potato. The villagers of Christmas had initially thought it was one of the alien invaders they'd been seeing far too much of lately. But inside the pod, there were no Triskele, no Hoothi, no Mobox... just a human-looking woman with a surplus of curly hair and a fantastic pair of boots. She too was in much better condition than Norbert had predicted, although unconscious.

A young boy named Barnable had run to get the sheriff, but when the sheriff appeared, he showed none of his regular bluster. Instead, he was pale and almost speechless when he saw the woman.

"Get her inside," he muttered, then added more sharply, "now, not tomorrow, get a shift on!"

When River Song opened her eyes, she had actually been awake for about a minute. She had spent a few seconds trying to get her bearings - she wasn't manacled, that was a good start. In fact, she was somewhere comfortable. A bed made by a primitive farming culture judging by the home-sewn quality of the sheets. The rest of the minute was spent thinking of a pithy line that would make her rescuer smile. *Always make an entrance*, she thought.

"Well, I've woken up in some strange beds in my time," she began, then saw the face of the Doctor standing over her and she stopped.

She'd been half-expecting the Doctor to be the one to find her. She knew he was on this planet from rumours picked up at the Maldovarium and was quite sure she'd even been plummeting towards the proper city - and it would just be like him to stumble upon her pod, either through wild chance or some subtle manipulation of the timelines. But when she first saw his face, it looked so unfamiliar. Older, for a start. She'd never seen the Doctor so old.

Old-looking, sure, in some of those earlier incarnations, the ones she technically wasn't supposed to have met. But never as ancient as he looked today.

"The gray hair doesn't suit you," she said, joking off her unease. "You just look like a toddler dressed up for Halloween as his own grandfather."

"It's Christmas, actually," the Doctor replied. "Well, the town's called Christmas. I think it's mid-July. You dropped some very interesting reading material, by the way."

He pulled a battered blue book from his pocket and tossed it to River.

"You haven't been peeking, have you?"

"Course I have?" the Doctor said cheerfully. "No spoilers for me. Although some of that business with my past lives... and here I was thinking I first met you when I was the skinny little pinstriped one!"

"No spoilers," River muttered. "Then this really is the oldest I've seen you."

"Yes, it's not just the gray hair and wrinkles," the Doctor said.

"How does that work, by the way? When we spent the decade trapped in that Usurian hotel on Mercury, you didn't even get a tan, let alone a laugh line."

"The whole town's in a truth field," he replied. "Can't lie about your age here, not even to yourself."

River wasn't sure that made sense, but that was par for the course where the Doctor was concerned. She sat up to look at him, and he hobbled back to his chair. *Wait*, she thought. *Hobbled?*

"Doctor?" she asked. "Are you alright?"

"Of course not," the Doctor said, "I never am, really. I just make up for my massive insecurities and self-doubt by wagging my hands around and making silly faces."

"That's quite the truth field," River replied. "But I meant your leg."

"Oh," the Doctor replied, and it seemed like that would be his final word on the subject, until he rolled up a trouser leg, revealing a wooden post where his left leg should have been. "You mean this leg."

River whispered her next words with horror. "You can't regenerate, can you?"

"No."

"But... this is only your twelfth body. You get thirteen. That's how it works!"

"I've told you about the metacrisis before."

"That shouldn't count!"

"Well it does."

"What about when I-"

"Enough to save me from the Judas Tree poison, plus a little extra that I gave back to you in Manhattan."

"I told you that was stupid!"

"Yes, but where would the universe be if we never did anything stupid?"

River slid back on the bed and rested against the wall, looking up at the ceiling. A small crack revealed the snowy sky, with a flake or two occasionally fluttering into the room. She wondered for a moment how long the Doctor had been here, and didn't realize that the truth field had made her say it out loud.

"Two hundred and ninety-nine years, six months, give or take an hour," the Doctor replied. "But I've been here once before. In the future."

"Right. It's time you had a break then," River said, standing from the bed and stretching her hand out to her husband. "There's a ruthless dictator with a diamond stuck in his head. All I need is the TARDIS and we can topple his whole regime, you and me, and this fellow called Nardole who I fished out of the river Pylax on Desner 4."

"The TARDIS is gone. Vamoosed," the Doctor said. He took River's hand but didn't let her pull him to his feet.

"Well," River said. "Vortex manipulator then. We can improvise once we get to Mendorax Dellora."

"I'm protecting this planet. I can't just leave."

"We can be back the moment before we arrive. We're probably outside now, just waiting for us to get moving!"

The Doctor stood now and held River's shoulders. For a moment, they just stared at each other, then River saw the explanation for all of this in his eyes. There was something cosmic at play, something the universe needed the Doctor to do here on Trenzalore. She had an idea of what it might be and it terrified her.

"Is this where it ends?" she asked softly.

"Yes. I told you, I've seen the future of this world. Entered my own tomb, jumped into my own time scar and climbed back out again."

"But there's so much left to do," River replied. "You haven't even taken me to Darillium, and you've been talking about that for ages. Hang on, if this is the oldest I've seen you, is this the oldest you've seen me?"

"No," the Doctor replied, before jumping back from River and covering his mouth with shock. "Truth field. Spoilers. Forget I said anything."

He waved his arms as if to clear the foreknowledge from the air and lost his balance, narrowly avoiding a full collapse by grabbing onto a tatty old armchair. River leapt to his aid but he shooed her away.

"Just getting used to the new leg," the Doctor said. "Usually I get them two at a time."

"Let me stay with you," River said, grabbing onto his arm. "We'll protect this town together. Please. Promise me."

The Doctor let her hold onto him this time.

"I promise," he said and kissed her, before reaching up her sleeve to find the controls on her vortex manipulator. Then he finished his sentence. "I promise that you'll see me again."

Then River Song was gone, off to another adventure. Other worlds, other Doctors, and a library...

"And Darillium," said the Doctor to himself. "Funny how I never got around to that."

Perhaps that meant he would survive this after all.

"But then I'd have to survive Darillium," he muttered.

No, the more likely truth is that he'd been there with River, in his past and her future, and had wiped the event from his memory. The best way to say goodbye is to forget you ever said it. Then every goodbye is a *see you later*.

He heard the door open and recognized Barnable's awkward footfalls and wooden clogs.

"Barnable, my lad," he called out. "The French, they've got it right you know, *au revoir*!"

"What's a French?" Barnable asked.

"It's like an English, but with smaller portion sizes."

He liked to confuse Barnable whenever possible.

"It's almost sunrise, Doctor," Barnable said. "You said to tell you whenever it's sunrise."

"That I did!" the Doctor exclaimed. "Sunrise on Trenzalore!"

He patted Barnable on the back and they walked out into the short-lived dawn of their shared homeworld, with the night not far away.

"Every end has a beginning, Barnable," said the Doctor, but he said it so quietly that he was really only saying it to himself.

And somewhere in the future, a man with a velvet jacket and significantly memorable eyebrows heard a knock on the door of his police box...