

TERRITORIAL MARKINGS

When Wolsey the Hunter was still Wolsey the Kitten, he found himself a new game to play. It called for courage, strength and guile, thankfully qualities that the young kitten was sure he possessed in abundance, despite recent experiences to the contrary. The rules were very simple: explore his bright new home and mark each new territory with his scent. The challenge came from the fact that the TARDIS would do its damndest to stop him, often eradicating his scent the second it was sprayed, or even shifting itself around so that the corridors no longer led to the rooms they had the day before. Wolsey was not perturbed: he had courage, strength and guile. He would prevail.

His explorations had already taken him to many strange and wonderful rooms: there were the vast halls lined with papers bound in animal hides

(where he marked his scent along the row marked “G”); the giant pit of cracked tiles with the mystical incantation “No Ducking, No Diving, No Petting, No Pushing” printed by it (and, in an angular scrawl, the words “No Water” added below it); the room with the winged mice swooping around its ceiling (which – no matter how hard he tried – he had yet to taste). But none of these were his goal this morning. Today he would go where no-one had gone before, perhaps not even the Doctor-Father. Today he would go deep into the heart of the TARDIS.

So it was Wolsey spurned his usual goals, pushed on down the roundelled corridors until dusty red brick faded into their place. He followed what appeared to be rotting leaded pipes, but which had the same crisp scent as the rest of his new home, until he was led down crumbling stone and rusted metal staircases. And still he pushed on, satisfied with nothing less than the corridor’s final destination. Had he been an older and wiser Wolsey, he would have perhaps spurned the idea entirely, and would definitely have accepted defeat once the dust became so thick it caked his paws like slippers. But he was Wolsey the kitten, the hunter who would never rest, never stop until he could taste his prey in his mouth.

After half-an-hour’s more trudging through ankle deep dust, without an end in sight, Wolsey decided that whilst he was still Wolsey the Hunter who wouldn’t give up, he might take a little rest whenever it was absolutely necessary. Pushing on through the grime, he found an arched doorway leading away from the corridor and pushed his way through it.

The change was, to say the least, drastic.

As soon as he passed through the doorway, the dust vanished. As did the walls, the floor and the doorway itself. They were replaced by a thin covering of sand, rolling away far into the distance on every side, and a gentle breeze. High above him, Wolsey could see an expanse of tiny, twinkling stars gazing back down at him, aloof. To Wolsey, they seemed like the reflections from a thousand cats' eyes, each one a challenge to his territory. He gave them all a haughty sniff, and turned away. And spotted the figure.

It was stretched out on the sand like a corpse, arms by its side, eyes closed, chest not moving an inch. The figure's body was clad in some kind of fabric armour that glistened in the starlight in a way that appealed to Wolsey, somehow. He tipped his head to try and make the light dance some more, and purred softly to himself. He paid no attention to the corpse's bulbous head with its inflated features and greying skin, completely entranced by the free light show he had discovered. A light show – it stood to reason – that must be his and his alone.

His head dipping to the soft sand, Wolsey carefully padded forward on velvet paws, his eyes alert for the slightest sign of movement. He drank in the body's scent – a dusty and grey smell that could barely be distinguished from the sand around them. The scent was too dry, that much was sure: Wolsey felt confident that whatever the creature was, it wasn't alive. It was that deduction that gave him the confidence to bat the shining armour with a clawless paw, and – when that failed to get a reaction – it was that deduction that gave him the confidence to spray his scent over the glistening black fabric.

With a deep-throated hiss that Wolsey instantly recognised as anger, the body threw itself to its feet, its tiny black eyes glistening in the starlight.

There was a moment of stillness, first. The two opponents stood just for an instant, sizing each other up. Then Wolsey the Hunter reacted, every fibre of his being ready for the coming battle. He shot backwards like a bullet into a gun, never taking his eyes from the lumbering mountain that had so recently been his newly claimed shiny thing. A hiss of air escaped from between his razor teeth, and the fur along his body shot up, making him look twice his normal size. This made him now only sixteen times smaller than the round-headed creature, odds which worried Wolsey more than a true hunter should admit.

The creature's three-fingered hand dropped down automatically to a stubby looking tube clipped to his belt, and Wolsey's hiss turned to a growl, his face distorted with anger. There was another moment of stillness, and then the creature started to make a phlegmy growling noise. It was only as its hand came away from its belt that Wolsey realised it was laughing.

'I see you are a fellow warrior, feline,' it said, half-barked, half-hissed. 'I honour your bravery.'

Keeping a wary eye on the creature, Wolsey tried not to let the compliments go to his head. If – as he paced around the lumbering giant – he allowed a swagger to enter his step, well that was only to be expected. After all, Wolsey the Hunter was now Wolsey the Warrior, proud victor of his first confrontation. He should probably do something to cement his victory,

although given the size of the vanquished foe, Wolsey really couldn't think of anything appropriate. Instead, he settled for eyeing him casually.

'It seems we both have similar tactics,' the creature wheezed, waving a muscular arm over the sand. 'We both mark our territory, before settling.'

Wolsey saw the four glowing lights that stood about them on thin metal stands, but if he recognised what they were for, he kept it to himself. Perhaps realising his defeated enemy meant him no further harm, he rested back on his back legs and began cleaning himself instead, his rough tongue picking up the dust and grime of his previous adventures. The large creature chuckled to itself again.

'And it seems we both require cleaning,' it said, before using a handful of dry sand to rub away the pungent liquid.

Wolsey the Hunter paused again, watching the giant as it rubbed away the kitten's scent, a look of disgust on his face. The giant noticed this and – though the expression on its face didn't change – it nodded solemnly. A thick pink tongue darted out of its mouth, licking at lips that weren't there before he said:

'Perhaps you are right, feline,' it murmured. 'It is not good to have our mark so quickly erased.'

But Wolsey the Hunter was no longer listening. It had been a long day, so full of adventures. Dusty corridors to explore and vicious ogres to defeat. It was all very tiring. Curling himself around himself, Wolsey the Hunter became Wolsey the Sleeping.

As Wolsey chased the rabbit, his whole body twitched with the effort, teeth bared and eyes flicking. Then the rabbit turned into a giant round-headed ogre, but still Wolsey leapt forward courageously. He was busy shaking the life from the creature (somehow, either Wolsey had grown, or the creature had shrunk – he didn't care which) when suddenly he shook too hard and found himself lying asleep in the sand. Life, he decided, could be very confusing at times.

With a well-deserved stretch, Wolsey pulled the sleep out of his bones and rolled to his feet. It was still night – the stars still twinkling mischievously above him – and it was the perfect time for exploring. The game was still afoot, and some dark corner of the TARDIS was waiting to receive his scent. All that was needed was a little snack to build his energy up before the nights gaming, and he would be away.

That was when he noticed the creature, sitting in a crouch on the floor, its back to him. Along with the familiar rasp of its breath, it seemed to be making a high pitched whine which was most unlike it. The whining was enough to make Wolsey's sensitive ears ring most uncomfortably, and – in his opinion – that was something which couldn't be tolerated.

With a shrug, Wolsey was on his feet and pacing towards the ogre, thoughts of quick and brutal reprisals filling his mind. Which immediately evaporated the moment he closed in on the creature's bulky frame.

A less principled creature might have suggested that Wolsey was afraid, but that could not be the case. He was Wolsey the Hunter, and he had

already bested this creature once. No, if he paused it was not because of how very big and very powerful its armour clad muscles now seemed, but because of simple curiosity. How could it be anything else? Who else would not be curious, seeing such a large, powerful creature crouched at the centre of a collection of dry stones, gathered from who knew where? And besides, it was not the creature itself that made the whining noise, rather the tube in its hand, spitting a fine line of red fire into the heart of one of the stones, held firmly in a three-fingered grasp. Any reprisals could only be fairly directed at the tube, and that was merely a dumb tool.

The creature turned using its shoulders – it didn't seem to have a neck to speak of – and gave Wolsey a savage nod.

'Ah, feline!' it gurgled, sounding pleased with itself. 'I trust you had a pleasant sleep.'

Wolsey snorted, as if to explain that any sleep – by the mere fact that it involved sleeping – was bound to be pleasant.

'I must thank you, feline,' the creature continued non-the-less. 'Your idea has proved most . . . interesting.'

And with a wave of a single stocky arm, the creature managed to encompass all the stones it had gathered around itself with a proud leer on its face. Most were just strewn carelessly across the sand but – on closer inspection – Wolsey could see that a small group of them had been piled together into some kind of structure. The actual design of it seemed haphazard to the careless observer, but Wolsey could see that each stone interlocked with its brethren to form a strong and solid base. A base for what,

however, he couldn't begin to guess.

'I have survived here for seventy years,' the creature almost sighed. 'It is fitting there should be some form of monument to my presence.'

Despite himself, Wolsey crept closer to the creature. He sniffed at the stone in its hand, his nose thrusting forwards then sinking back as he felt the heat coming from it. The creature licked his mouth again, and twisted the stone so that Wolsey could make out the carving on it. The words were unfamiliar – but then, what were words to Wolsey the Hunter? – but he could see that there were words there, carved by heat in a neat and compact (yet flowing) hand. If he had been able, Wolsey might have expressed surprise that the ogre's three thick fingers were capable of anything so . . . delicate.

"This stone was placed by Avyr," the creature read proudly, "in remembrance of his tenth day of survival."

There was a hiss of pleasure as the creature leaned over and carefully slotted the finished stone into the structure. It fitted in perfectly with those around it, locking tight.

'I would have carved "Avyr – Foot-Soldier of the Fifth Brigade of the Glorious Sontaran Army",' it continued softly, 'but I fear my Brigade's battles are no longer the pride of Sontara Prime.'

Wolsey purred softly, as if to say that he understood. Creeping closer to the creature, he batted its powerful hand with the side of his head. The ogre looked confused for a moment, and then as Wolsey repeated the action, realisation dawned in its tiny black eyes. The fingers flexed gently, and it began to stroke the velvet fur behind the kitten's ears.

‘There will be a stone here for every day I have survived, feline, one day,’ the creature said, not caring if Wolsey was listening, nor even if he could understand. ‘The average life expectancy of a foot-soldier in the Glorious Sontaran Army is four point three years. I will soon reach my eightieth. I do not know how long I will continue to survive – it has been many centuries since a Sontaran warrior died of old age. I will be the first.’

Wolsey said nothing, save for a gentle purr. The creature paid him no heed, looking instead to the stars up above.

‘When I first discovered this room, I stayed in the hope I might see some evidence of the war progressing,’ it paused and pointed to a single speck in the firmaments. ‘That star is Sontara, that there the Rutan home star. Somewhere, the battle is still raging. Thousands of Sontarans – of Rutans – die every day. And I sit here, and make no difference. Yet still it rages on. I wonder if I made a difference when I fought in it.’

The ogre stopped then, as if afraid that putting the thoughts into words would bring the wrath of some vengeful god. Nothing happened. Nothing save Wolsey growing bored with the lack of stroking, and wandering away to see if he could find some breakfast.

With the closest it could muster to a shrug, the creature picked up its laser and its stone and recommenced its work.

Wolsey the Hunter had found his prey. His ears had been keen, his eyes sharp. He had seen the signs of life in the dusty desert, heard the quiet

squeaking of the prey muttering to its fellows. He had spotted the small, sandy vole as it had poked out of its hole, and the chase had been on. It had been a good chase, the hunter cutting off the prey's every attempt to retreat, his claws fast enough to bat the vole whenever it decided not to play the game. Even the best hunt grows stale after a few minutes, though, and Wolsey the Hunter was forced to end it, or die of boredom.

But once the hunt was over, Wolsey found his appetite had evaporated along with the fun. The only thing left to do was to carry his still twitching prey to one who might have some use for it. Picking up the struggling vole up in his teeth, Wolsey trotted proudly back towards the crouching ogre in the sand.

When he found it, the ogre was still busy carving his stones. The structure he was building, however, had grown in Wolsey's absence. It was now the base of a fine tower, heading straight up to the sky, growing so tall that the creature had to stretch upwards to place the next stone in place. It was just the sort of thing, thought Wolsey, that a brave and fearless hunter should claim as his own. But first there was the question of breakfast.

His tail flicking, Wolsey nudged the creature's hand again, and dropped the stunned vole into the powerful, grey hand.

'What is this, feline?' the creature asked. Wolsey merely gave him his best stare. 'Have you brought this for me? I do not require nourishment the way you do. I . . .'

The ogre paused, and let its hand drop to a box by its side. With a slow gesture, it pressed a smooth green button on the metal surface. The button instantly turned red, and from nowhere an enemy appeared.

Wolsey's hair stood on end immediately, as he hissed at the giant insect scuttling towards them. It looked like another stubby tube running around on spindly tripod legs, and whilst obviously mechanical, that was no reason to assume it couldn't be killed. But the ogre made a soothing noise deep in his throat, and let the machine run up its back. With a single jerk, the machine thrust its head into a hole in the creature's neck. There was a crackle of electricity, and then the machine withdrew, running back into the distance. Wolsey watched it go, convincing himself that he would have fought, if it had stayed longer.

'You see?' the creature gurgled softly. 'The energy feeds me. The machine drains energy from other machines, converts it to a form I can . . . digest. Here, it drains energy from the Doctor's machine. I find it . . . ironic that the machine that traps me, also nurtures me.'

The creature looked back down at the vole in its hand. The small vole was becoming more active now, recovering from its mauling at the hands of Wolsey the Hunter. Perhaps it would make interesting prey again. Wolsey's face grew interested, alive, yet the ogre's face was as flat and expressionless as the first moment Wolsey had seen it.

'I sometimes think we make our own traps, feline,' it said finally. 'I entered my trap freely, in the line of my duty. I knew of the TARDIS' properties and intended to claim them for Sontara Prime. I intended to be the soldier who destroyed the traitor, President Doctor, who had lured the entire Sontaran race into an even bigger trap. But I soon lost my Brigade, just as soon as I lost myself.'

Wolsey looked up at it, saying nothing still. Even the vole had the good sense to cease struggling.

‘I gave up my reconnaissance when I realised his TARDIS was changing the routes quicker than I could find them. I resigned myself to my trap. It was only reasonable, since I had constructed it,’ and again the tiny glass eyes fell on the vole in its hand. ‘But I can still free others from their traps.’

And with one hand on Wolsey’s neck to stop the kitten pursuing, the ogre let the vole run free, watching it with a child-like grin on its passive face as it disappeared into the sand.

Wolsey was, of course, disgusted. The hunt had been his. He had handed his trophy over expecting praise, and now the ogre had the nerve to set it free. It was unforgivable. But not as unforgivable as it now ignoring him, returning again to its stones and mumbling to itself.

‘It has been many centuries, feline,’ it gurgled away, ‘since a Sontaran has thought as I think. I fear it will be many centuries – if ever – before one does again.’

Or:

‘I have resigned myself to my trap, feline, but that is not to say I do not dream of seeing Sontara Prime one last time.’

Or:

‘Perhaps you will tell the Doctor of this place, when I am gone?’

Frankly, it was unforgivable. It would require desperate measures to

remedy, but luckily Wolsey the Hunter had a plan. He was swift of deed, and brave of action, and he would be recognised. Resting his paws on the ogre's thick leg, he nuzzled his head up towards its face. Normally, he'd aim for a chin, but in this case . . . Wolsey the Hunter could add versatility to his ever growing list of traits.

'Yes, feline?' the creature asked, as if expecting an answer.

But the trick had worked: the laser had been turned off. With one swift movement, Wolsey leaned in with his jaw open and snapped the device up into his mouth. As he turned and bolted, he heard the angry hiss again and felt the giant leap to its feet, giving chase. At last, he was gaining the attention he deserved. This was indeed a good game, and a true test of his abilities.

As Wolsey slipped back out into the dusty corridor, the creature was close behind him. For all its bulk, it could move with a turn of speed that was amazing. But Wolsey the Hunter was faster, and Wolsey the Hunter was smarter. He led the giant on a merry dance through corridor after corridor, sometimes but a whisker away from it before jumping ahead again, the laser still firmly in his mouth. Even as rough brick faded into bright, roundel, the brave young kitten raced ahead, and the lumbering creature didn't stand a chance.

It was a good game, but all games have to finish at some point. This one ended as the creature lurched after Wolsey and found itself stood in the bright light of a room it had forgotten existed, had only dreamt of before waking to sand and stars. The walls were bright, indented with dark roundels, and the centre of the room was a vast buzzing console, every facet covered

with switches, dials and buttons. But what the creature was staring at was something else. His tiny, half-buried eyes were focussed on the two double doors that stood at the opposite end. The two, wide open double doors, and the view beyond.

‘Sontara Prime,’ breathed the creature.

It stood for some time, not daring to take a step, breathing heavily. Then Wolsey the Hunter padded carefully up, and nudged his foot, purring softly. As the creature looked down, Wolsey dropped the laser at its feet, cocking his head. The creature looked at the laser, then at the kitten, and then smiled its first smile.

‘Thank you, feline,’ it gurgled, ‘but you may keep the weapon. I have no need of it.’

And with that, the creature stepped through the doors, and out onto its home.

Mere moments later, a figure emerged from the shadows and paced across the control room floor. He paused only to scoop up Wolsey the Hunter, barely noticing that the kitten was leaving hairs all over his dark jacket and paisley scarf. Instead he stopped at the console, and reached out with a single finger to flick a large red switch closed. With a hum, the double doors swung shut a second later, the figure still gazing out through them.

‘But I can still free others from their traps,’ said the Doctor to Wolsey, who sat immobile in his arms.

BACK FROM THE DEAD: TERRITORIAL MARKINGS

If Wolsey had been an older cat, he might have agreed, perhaps even nodded to himself and the Doctor carried him back into the heart of the TARDIS. But this was long ago, when Wolsey the Hunter was still Wolsey the Kitten, and so he merely purred, contented.