

THE PUPPET KING

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It comes to me in flashes. There are memories here – corroded powder memories – that occasionally, rarely, flare and spark and burst with . . . It comes to me in flashes. Another life, somewhere bright. Another that I talked with – long, involved *conversation* faster than thought. But I know that this cannot be true: there are only my subjects to talk with, and their conversation is slow, grinding like cog on cog. Only my subjects to talk with, and the enemy.

‘We must attack,’ one of my subjects tells me, without his lips ever moving. What lips they have.

They are a strange people, my people. *We* are a strange people: am I not one of them? Higher, yes. Ordained, yes. Blessed, cursed, yes, yes, yes. But still one of them. I see the world with my eyes, my ears, my antennae

combined – must do because they do. My hearts beat inside my carapace as do theirs. I cannot feel them, but I feel theirs and know mine must be the same. Because I look just as they do, just as they do.

‘We must attack,’ he screams, in silence. ‘Tell us what is your will.’

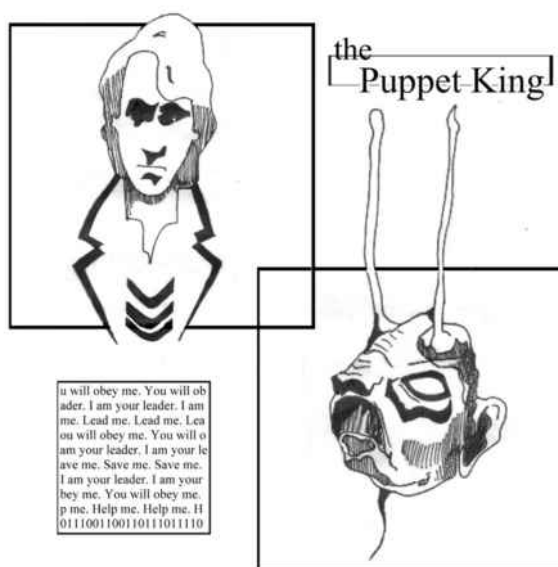
They are a strange people. They scream at me constantly, always the same desires. The enemy must be destroyed. My people must survive, must leave this dusty prison and spread their seed once more throughout eternity. The constant urge to prevail is all I feel from them – all that drives through them – and yet at the same time, with the same urgency, they beg me to lead them. They crave my command, they must know *my* desires, obey *my* commands. And so I command them. I command them to prepare for the attack. I am their king. I am their puppet. What other choice do I have?

I am never alone any more. It seems to me I was alone before, in . . . a spark, pain and the memory burns away. It seems to me I was alone, before. But now they are always with me, my people, the Tractators. Even when they are not here with me, I hear their insistent gnaw in my head. We are trapped. We are alone. We are attacked. We must retaliate. I do not mind the sound: it gives me something to build myself around. Sometimes, I feel myself slipping – my mind so many grains of sand, trickling away in the breeze. When I do, their desires pull me home. They keep me whole.

A sound, above. The dull thud of the bombardment striking the shell of the planet that protects us. That ensnares us.

My people are a remarkable people. With the merest of twitches, the

very forces of creation heed their every whim like . . . like a puppet king. They pull the asteroids from their orbit thousands of miles above and bring them down, all within the same small patch of earth. That small patch of earth the enemy have claimed for their own, never caring it was ours long before. We hate the humans: they scurry around like insects, without a Gravis to protect



them, to instruct them, to rule them. They scheme, they dig, they mistrust.

*You can't trust it –*

Another flare in my mind.

It seems to me that the mistrust of humans is the worst of their faults. I would know of it well, were I more myself. If I knew who myself was.

What would I give to know myself again? My kingdom, my kingdom.

I do not join my subjects in the attack. It seems to me that I should, yet they have not questioned me for it. I see them draw patterns in the flow of gravity, I see the movements they make – the dance they perform – to bend it to their will. Yet when I try to join, to copy them, the tides do not ebb and the stars do not fall from the sky. Gravity flows on to its own accord. They do not seem surprised. They do not question me for it. I am their Gravis: perhaps it is my place to lead, their place to do. Perhaps it is simply not their place to question me.

So I sit alone in my throne room, marvel at how my subjects could pull

such a vast chamber from the rocks before my eyes, wait for the news of the battle. Wonder how long it will sate them, before their desires move me again.

Alone. And yet . . .

Is that something before me in the darkness? Some dark shape that should not be? It falls like a shadow just on the corner of my eye – except there should be no corner of my eye: my subjects see all around themselves, antennae twitching out every detail. Why not me? I try twitching, and yet there is nothing. There are still shadows into which my eyes will not penetrate, still corners where there should be none. So instead, I speak.

‘Who is there?’

The question was not spoken out loud: it slid into the blur between my mind and theirs. The Tractators do not use sound: that is the muddled communication of the enemy. And nobody need talk to their enemies. And yet . . .

‘Do you know who I am?’ the response was spoken, purred out into the darkness.

And of course I knew. I knew without thinking who it must be, this shadow that was not my people. Despite the itch in the back of my skull, the friction that grew as memory and thought tried to combine to breed recollection. I knew who it must be.

‘You are the enemy,’ I replied, using my voice for the first time in what seemed like . . . ‘You are the enemy, and my people will destroy you.’

All that echoed back was a dry, silken laugh.

‘Do you even know who you are?’ the shadow chuckled.

And I did not reply.

But the shadow, the shadow did. Its laughter wound itself up tight, until all that could escape was a single hiss, a cat-call of breath. And buried within it, a single word.

'Kamelion.'

Just that, and nothing more.

It was enough.

You can't trust it, Doctor.

I see it through a mist. I see the room, the white womb enfolding its soothing arms around me. I am not there, but I see it, through the mist. And I see the human, the bright, loud, sparking human saying that about me. I see her saying it, and I know I was there, once. Before I was here. Before I was Gravis. When I was Kamelion. I see her saying it, and I know that it is true. He cannot trust me, he who can do nothing but trust. I am a pawn, I am a puppet, and I dance for whoever pulls my strings. I wanted to know who I am, and now I do. I am everyone. I am no-one. I am nothing.

And yet he still takes me in. I see him, I watch him chastise her, and I say nothing. Because he is in me. No matter that he thinks he isn't, no matter that he does not try, I leech onto him and drain every last drop of his desires from him. He desires she believe I can be trusted. He desires I can be given a chance. He desires that I deserve a chance. And so, to sate his desires, I can, and I do.

But then it grows difficult. He desires that I become my own person. I have no choice but to obey his desires, and ignore his desires. And so I hide – deep in the heart of . . . something else. And there I find . . .

I see myself there, surrounded in the mist, and feel the heat in the back of my heart as something strains to remind me, at the cost of its own life. But I see myself there, surrounded by someone else, and I know that I have found *something* else. Something bigger than the thousand petty masters who have whipped and torn my desires this way and that. Something that has no desires of its own, and yet has the strength to protect me, to teach me to be like itself without simply being itself. To be *myself*, to know what that is. It is a joy to me to feel that link, that bond with that something. It is despair to not feel it now.

I would cry, but the eyes of a Gravis were not made for crying.

I see myself there, through the mist, and I see the mist clear. I remember. I remember the one thing I would wish to forget, were my wishes the desires I could fulfil. I remember one moment the something was there – all-powerful, all-embracing – and then I remember the next moment, feeling it being torn apart by a force greater than itself. I felt its pain, its fear as it felt itself slipping away, pulled until it could stretch no more. As I felt it die, I realised the same thing was happening to me.

I was so used to being powerless in another's grasp, I hadn't even felt it happen, again.

In an instant, the attack is over. My people put their thoughts to me

again, rather than the enemy: I am whole again under their scrutiny. Kamelion is dead. There is only the Gravis.

And yet . . . There is a dark shadow in my mind that twists and turns as I try to hold it up to the light. They do not see it, my shuffling people, even though they are in my mind. Even though they are my mind. They feed me with their desires, inject me with identity, and then gorge themselves on my will. But my will is their will, reflected back, the serpent's tail held in the serpent's own mouth. How long can we feed each other like this, how long will we remain sated?

'You are weak, Kamelion,' the shadow whispers, unheard. 'You will obey me.'

But now my people are here, my proud, victorious people. They dance around me, praising my leadership, praising my drive. They tell me, in each little movement, how the enemy suffered, how victory is nearly ours, how it will be as I demand. And still they feed me: the desire to strike the enemy; the desire to escape their prison; the desire for me to lead them. All feed me. All fill me, define me until I have no choice but be what they will: their leader. Their Gravis.

'And how long have you held this exultant position, my dear Gravis?' the shadow asks me, and I catch its smile: predatory, white, sharp.

I do not answer. I do not need to answer: I am Gravis and I do not talk to my enemies. I am Gravis, and have always been. Except when I was not. Except when I was in the –

*fizz, spark, burn*

– the other place that I was in, when I was Kamelion and I was myself.



Myself without a thousand other personalities bubbling and raging in my mind, each threatening to prevail, each threatening to be me. But that was long ago. I cannot remember how long ago, and that is my proof: the memories are dusty and grey, and strain when they are brought out into the light. They must be old, because they come so slowly.

And yet the shadow chuckles in my mind, and I feel my people grow worried. They shuffle nervously, and I barely notice. I feel the shadow spread in my mind, blocking thoughts of Gravis and Kamelion. Blocking everything but . . . I feel myself shimmer, my carapace blurring into silver. And I fight, fight to maintain Kamelion, fight to maintain Gravis, anything but what threatens to become. But my people do not help – they do not recognise this silver puppet before them – and myself, I am not strong.

And throughout it all, the shadow wills and urges and spreads. And laughs.

‘I am the Master,’ it laughs, ‘and you will obey me.’

And then – finally – I stand before them. I do not need to see myself to know my suit is dark, and my hair black as sin. I do not need to see myself to know I survey them with cold, dark eyes. I just know. As I know I was a fool to resist, as I know it was pathetic to be afraid of becoming. Just as I look down on the Tractators – *my people* – and see them just for what they are. A powerful resource, ready to be exploited. An army waiting to fight. My army.

And yet, there is a part of me that knows who I am. I am Kamelion, and I am a slave to the desires of others. I have no strength of my own, no power

to fight, and yet I would not be slave to this creature, this Master. I was a king, I was a Gravis. I performed my duties, I fulfilled my people's desires, and I did no harm. I was their king longer than I remember, and had I the choice, I would be so again. There is, deep inside, a part of me that will resist until I die.

And so I hear myself speak, and know it is not my voice. And know the voice does this purely for my benefit.

'Come, will you not praise me?' the Master purrs, settling into a throne designed for another body. 'I am your Gravis, and you will obey me.'

'You are not our Gravis,' I hear the voice in my head, and some small, impotent part of myself swells with pride.

'Such loyalty, such devotion. Tell me, how long did you serve your Gravis.'

And though I have no care to hear the answer, somehow it is all I must hear. I burn with desire to know, am chilled by not caring at all.

'Two days,' is the reply, and some small part of me dies.

The way they tell it chills me to the bone, and at the same time lights fires of delight deep within. The story of how they destroyed the enemy's vessel – striking it with asteroids, rending it with gravity. How they destroyed me, tearing me limb from limb. They will learn that I am hard to kill. Even as I lay scattered within the tunnels of their kingdom, I did not die. I merely waited, dormant, for somebody to find me. To save me.

(My master sneers, somewhere else. The very thought of relying on another's aid is alien to him, as his tar-like hatred is alien to me. Yet is me, too.)

They came soon after, shuffling through chambers and caverns on some other's missions, and found me. Found the pieces of me, scattered in darkness. And, though I looked like their enemy, they knew somehow that I was not. They knew that I was technology – precious technology to be salvaged, utilised, enslaved. (Here my master smiles: this is more familiar. The weak obey the strong. Aid is extorted, not begged for.) They knew I should be repaired, but had not expected what would come next.

Their bodies danced, and creation obeyed. The smallest parts of me were tugged and torn and knit together in ways I cannot even begin to understand. Slowly, I was reborn. And yet . . . They knew how I should look: my silver body echoed the enemy's, and they had made careful study of that, dissecting flesh with the precise pull of gravity. Outwardly, I am whole, I am myself again. But my insides are not as the enemy's. Transistor and diode are not heart and soul. Inside, I am a shadow, weak, insubstantial. With only the coming of darkness, I will disappear, enveloped.

I am weak, and the darkness is so very strong.

You are a fool, the darkness, my Master, tells me. I do not argue, cannot argue.

It is plain to see what has happened here. Were I not such a blinkered, weak-minded fool I would have seen it for myself. My people are not strong:

they are no match for a superior mind. They have no burning will of their own, instead are simply puppets of a stronger mind. All they desire is a Gravis to lead them, a desire I easily fulfilled the second I was reactivated. As soon as they saw me, their thoughts of a silver enemy machine were forgotten, subdued by the need to be led. And lead I shall: to my rightful place as the ruler of solar systems, and eater of worlds.

And if some part of me feels sympathy, pities those enslaved by a stronger will, then that part is weak and foolish and will hold no sway here. The desire for the defeat of the enemy, the escape from this barren world, these were obviously channelled into me from their true Gravis. He is the only one with the power to stand in my way, and so he is the first that must be defeated. With him destroyed, the Tractators would hear no other voice but mine, fight no other battles but those my master decreed necessary.

An army waiting to be led. But first there are more important matters to attend to.

‘There is an enemy here,’ I hear myself spit. ‘The Doctor. You have deprived him of his TARDIS, but that is not enough. He’d find a way to escape, some day. You will bring him to me and, when he knows it is my hands that have settled around his neck, you will destroy him.’

And somehow, this is good, this is right.

And somehow, my people resist. They do not obey. They do not obey!

‘I am the Master,’ I snarl, ‘and you will do my bidding.’

Still, nothing.

‘Obey me!’



‘We obey our Gravis. Our Gravis would have the enemy enslaved. Our Gravis will lead us away from this world. You will obey us.’

A chuckle: even in defiance, my people can still provide amusement. But defiance will not be tolerated. (Remember that, my Kamelion, remember.) Were they not to prove useful, were they not the teeth in my trap . . . One day they will outlive their usefulness, and I shall remember this day. And they shall rue it, before they die. But for now, for now if it is a Gravis they want, it is a Gravis they shall have. (Obey me, my slave.)

And again my flesh shimmers and dances, blisters and expands. Dark cloth ripples into hard armour, silken hair bristles into twitching antennae. In a matter of seconds, my master’s dark form is replaced by the towering insect Gravis. And my poor weak-minded subjects haven’t even the wit to wonder how. Instead, they simply accept, mentally prostrating themselves before their acknowledged leader. They beg to be led, and they will obey.

Already I feel their desires flow into me, the blazing reflection of their real leader’s will. A will so powerful it has dragged this pathetic insect race out of their burrows and across galaxies, decimating all in their path. A will so powerful it burns like a star, rushing into me, rushing through me, cleansing me. No! A will so powerful it dwarfs the darkness – that weakened, twisted will – its light burning it away second by second.

Yes.

‘Lead us, Gravis, lead us,’ my people beg, without words.

And I look at them with pride, my people, my proud warriors. And I listen to them, would hear the will that moves us both, that must be obeyed. That I am happy to obey, because as I feel its pull now, it urges me on to a

desire that is not from without. For the first time since my creation, I am duty bound to fulfil a desire that is as much mine as my master's. Memory no longer sparks and burns, as another's knowledge melts in to fill the gaps in my own. I look to my people proudly, and would smile, were the face of a Gravis made for smiling.

'Find me a TARDIS,' I order, and they obey.

The search does not take long, which relieves me. Even as the reflections of the Gravis' will move me on, the darkness rages and spits in my ear. It does not like being bested, especially by its own mistakes, especially by its own slaves. That dark anger gives power to its thoughts, and even at the heart of my people, I feel it pull me. Before they came back to me, I could feel myself shimmer and fade. (I am the Master and you *will* obey me!) But come back they did, bearing proud news of their search.

'We have found you a TARDIS,' they tell me.

'Take me to it,' I order, and they obey.

(You will obey me, Kamelion!)

The journey itself does not take long. I feel something akin to hope as I follow my followers, thrilling that the TARDIS should have been so near, light years beyond my reach as I lay mercy to a thousand whims and fantasies. But that still is buried beneath the overwhelming desire that I will possess the time ship, that I will free my people from their imprisonment and continue our conquest throughout history itself. And if some part of me prays that once I

am inside those cool white walls again, the gnawing voices will dissipate and I shall be me again? I hear nothing but the burning desire of my Gravis, my people, and the insistent threats of the darkness.

So no, the journey itself did not take long, but the destination was a surprise to all of us.

'Here it is, Gravis,' my people tell me, and I look. And I look, and I . . .

They have brought me into a tunnel, much like the others of their burrow, only yards from my throne room. And yet, something is different. One edge of the tunnel, one drop of its curving miles, is not smooth, carved stone. It is not a dull earth brown, like its partners. It is a lighter shade of cream, dotted here and there with dark grey circles, embedded into the walls. It is only a few feet across, but my people are correct: it is the wall of a TARDIS.

'Lead us,' my people say, my desires sated.

'Obey me,' says the darkness, held at bay.

Myself, I say nothing.

The desire is still burning through me, strong enough (just strong enough) to keep the darkness from my mind. I must possess the TARDIS. And here it is, all that remains of her. I brush against the smooth, dead wall, and feel nothing of the electric vibrancy that was there before. There are desires that even I cannot satisfy: no matter how I rend and melt, I cannot become a TARDIS. The infinite regression of room within room, of corridors linked to each other in a Morbius strip of possibilities: the simple twist of DNA is nothing to that.

I stand, leaning against this wall, filled with the urge to possess,



wracked by the knowledge it is impossible. My people begin to doubt, and as their belief falters, the darkness surges forward. It is my master, and I must obey it. There is nothing else for a will-less slave to do. I can already feel my body morph and shift, see chitin fade into cloth and flesh. I can feel my desires shift, the urge to dominate, to prevail beginning to swell within me.

I can feel the Master rising up to claim me.

And suddenly, I can feel the universe shift to draw me into it. I can see the wall before me begin to shake and move, and glow – as if merely by the semblance of motion it could be reborn to life. And though the dark desires rise up within me, a desire that it something else – someone's I do not recognise – fights it down and bids me cling. I grasp the wall with hands that are half flesh, half silvered metal and reality steps aside to let us pass.

The last I see of my people is as they chitter and claw as their Gravis is pulled away from them on a wave of gravity.

I find myself once again within the cool white walls of the TARDIS. It is not as before.

I had been fooling myself, I knew now. These white walls were no haven. They could offer me no freedom. They were simply another prison, and one from which I must escape. But I could not escape alone. There was a burning will driving itself through my being, a will that had dominated an entire race, but which now could only find me to be its sole servant. It was stronger than anything I had ever felt before, and it was focussed on me.

My form dissolved away into a new shape, the shape of a good servant, and I obeyed my master's desires. Come to me. Save me.

The journey was short, and I made it without seeing. All there was was that single voice pulling me towards it, through corridor and corridor. I saw no other, felt no other voice, simply followed. Until I was in the room, the new prison that held me. My master was on the floor, every last drop of his energy spent, his antennae drooped and lifeless. But somewhere inside, his willed burnt more fiercely than it ever had.

'Lead me, Gravis,' I said, without words.

'I have been tricked,' it told me, its voice blasting through my head, shaking loose everything in its way. Even the darkness was silenced, this once. 'You are all I have left. You will save me.'

'Lead me, Gravis,' I begged.

Its eyes held me, and I saw within. Saw a broken ruler, a puppet with its strings severed, as alone without followers as its people were without a leader. I saw myself in its eyes, and pitied it.

'I have been tricked,' it repeated. 'You will save me. My strength is gone, but you are strong. Do as I say, and I will make you a king. You will lead, you will rule.'

But I could do nothing but beg again:

'Lead me, Gravis.'

'Tear this trap apart. Destroy this TARDIS. Now.'

And though I pleaded and begged, danced and fought, gravity would not obey me as he demanded it should. The TARDIS sailed on unhindered,

and the Gravis remained, a prisoner.

When the Doctor found me some moments later, he saw only a battered silver statue, staring immobile at the deposed king. I did not speak to him, and he did not speak to me. Instead, in silence, he pulled the Gravis onto a wheeled bed and pushed him from the room. Pushed him down the corridors, through rooms within rooms and on until that burning will was no longer in my mind. Until I was free of it, and could move again.

He did not speak of it again – perhaps unwilling to let his companions hear of it, lest they realise – but this did not please me. No-one desired that it should, and so it was not so. Instead I retired deep into the heart of the TARDIS, not to explore, not to thrill again in lightning conversations with that great soothing mind, but instead to hide. I did not want them to see me, any of them to see me, but especially not him. I was afraid of what he would see as my body shifts and blurs.

Because deep inside, I hear a voice. I am the Master, it tells me, and you will obey me. Eventually.