

# THE MAN IN THE SUIT

## Dale Smith

"Is everything set?" Professor Bennett asked.

A technician checked a bank of computers, looked down at a clipboard and gave a cautious pause. He couldn't help but glance over at the dais in the centre of the laboratory nervously. Bennett coughed to draw his attention, and then instructed him rather tetchily to carry out the pre-experiment checks again. Five years he had worked getting this experiment ready, and still he had to convince people he was really going to go through with it.

"Start recording the control readings now," he called to his assistant, Weakes.

"Without the data, the experiment is worthless."

"Ha!" came a derisive snort from the corner of the room.

Bennett closed his eyes for a moment, and ignored it.

"I don't know why you're being so unhelpful about all this," a strident female voice scalded. Bennett tried to carry on his final checks. "The Professor is trying to prove the existence of parallel universes. I would have *thought* that was something you'd appreciate."

"On the contrary, Miss Smith," the imperious voice objected, loudly. "This is exactly the sort of dangerous charlatanism I've denounced from one side of the universe to the other. This isn't science: it's suicide."

"You made your objections quite clear at the proposal stage," Bennett snapped.

"And I shall make them again, sir!" the Doctor bristled.

Bennett looked at him. And old man with a hooked nose and an Inverness cloak. Why the UN's funding body placed so much credence on his word Bennett couldn't begin to imagine. But he didn't have to listen to him any more.

"Your UNIT pass may mean I can't ask you to leave, Doctor," Bennett said coldly, "but it doesn't mean I can't have you gagged. Please stop disturbing my preparations."

"Your preparations are very disturbed indeed," the Doctor wouldn't be stopped now. "The quantum machine gun is a purely theoretical experiment. The idea that anyone would think to attempt it in reality . . . Why would you, man?"

"I'm not endangering anyone else," Bennett objected. "As you well know, I intend to be the only subject."

"Wait - endangering?" the Doctor's assistant, a small dark-haired young woman who Bennett seemed to recall was also a journalist, chipped in. "I thought that thing was rigged to jam?"

She pointed at the dais in the centre of the room. Everybody looked, nobody could help themselves. The machine-gun stood there on its tripod, glowering at them. It looked icy cold to the touch, heavy with menace and portent. Wires ran from it to a small computer independent of the measuring instruments. In a few moments, Bennett would find himself staring down the barrel of the gun.

"The apparatus is designed to fire or jam based on a quantum event," Bennett explained, as he had a thousand times before. "Imagine a coin toss: heads it fires, tails it jams."

"So it could still fire!"

"Of course! That's the whole point of the experiment," Bennett's voice was calm, which only seemed to horrify the Doctor's assistant more. "When I stand in front of the apparatus - if there are alternate universes - then it will jam again and again and again,

and my machines will record any fluctuations in the ambient readings. I won't come to any harm."

"Well, that's alright then, isn't it Doctor?" the girl asked, cautiously. "I mean, we know there are alternate universes, don't we?"

"That's not the point, Sarah-Jane," the Doctor said, eyeing Bennett. "The quantum machine-gun only works from the subject's point of view, do you see? No, you don't see. Listen - with each quantum event, there are two alternate universes: the one where it happened, and the one where it didn't. The coin lands on heads *and* tails. But you can only see how the coin lands in a universe where you're alive: that's how the experiment works. With each quantum event, the machine-gun jams *and* fires, but because the subject dies whenever the machine-gun fires, they can only observe the result in the universe where the weapon jammed."

"So they stand in front of the gun, and it seems to jam every time," the assistant said, understanding. "No, wait a minute -"

"Exactly," the Doctor said. "Only the subject travels between the alternate universes. We will still be here in this universe, watching Professor Bennett getting gunned down by that infernal machine."

"That's horrible!"

"It's inevitable," the Doctor intoned. "If the experiment works, the Professor Bennett must die in this universe, and a million others across the multi-verse."

"I'm aware of the implications," Bennett answered sharply.

The Doctor turned on him, eyes blazing.

"Are you?" he growled. "I seriously doubt it, sir. You have a child's understanding of the structure of the multiverse. Do you suppose that it's only alternate universes you might find? There are layers upon layers of nether dimensions out there, any one of which would

be beyond your ability to comprehend. And if you go crashing through the barriers, you have no idea what you might allow through.”

Bennett simply glowered.

“I am one of the finest minds humanity has ever produced,” he raged, stabbing a pointed finger into the Doctor's chest. “Albert Einstein himself said there couldn't be more than two people alive who understood the structure of reality better than me. Did he say the same about you, Doctor?”

The Doctor smiled thinly.

“When I said you didn't understand the multiverse,” he said slowly, “I was talking about *humanity*.”

Bennett gave an exasperated cry, and stormed away.

The machine-gun stood in silence, waiting.

"Five," Weakes called out.

Sarah-Jane watched with a strange feeling growing in the pit of her stomach. The Doctor had insisted that she leave before the experiment began, and so of course she had insisted that she stay. After all, this was a story. So what if a man was going to kill himself right in front of her eyes: she was a journalist, and there would be many more terrible things than this that she would have to stand by quietly and watch if she was going to be a success. That was how you got ahead in this game: taking notes while all about you lose their lives.

"Four."

"You're not just going to let him kill himself, are you?" she asked the Doctor.

"Of course not," the Doctor hissed.

"Three."

He was standing in his normal imperious stance, his hands in his jacket pockets . . . but as Sarah-Jane looked at him, she could see that his hands weren't still. He was fiddling with something in his pockets."

"Two."

"If I can just set the sonic screwdriver to reverse the polarity of the . . ." he muttered.

"Aha!"

The Doctor's pocket gave off a high-pitched whine.

"One."

Sarah-Jane glanced nervously at the machine gun in the centre of the room, as did everybody else in the room.

*Click!*

The assistant gave a nervous gulp.

"Any movement on the readings?" Bennett asked excitedly.

"Nothing, sir," Weakes answered. "Beginning countdown again. Five."

Bennett resumed his place, standing calmly in front of the machine gun, waiting for it to fire. The Doctor whispered triumphantly to Sarah-Jane:

"If we can just keep this up a few more times, he'll have to assume that it worked.

He could spend months trying to find out why his readings failed, while we get the Brigadier -"

"What's -" Weakes suddenly shouted. "He's got a *gun!*"

Sarah-Jane's head snapped round, and saw to her horror that he was pointing straight at the Doctor. The Doctor quickly pulled his hands out of his pockets, his right revealing the odd tube of the sonic screwdriver, but it was too late: all over the room, people were either rushing towards him, or away from him, terrified of this grey-haired assassin in their midst. Only Bennett stayed exactly where he was, his attention torn between the Doctor and the machine gun.

"Weakes: the countdown!" he shouted. "Stay at your post!"

But Weakes was already diving to tackle the Doctor to the ground, barrelling past Bennett with clumsy determination. As he moved, he clattered into one of the recording devices, which in turn span and tumbled hard against the machine gun. In cautious slow motion, the weapon turned until Sarah-Jane found herself - just for a moment - staring down its cold black muzzle.

Sarah-Jane closed her eyes.

*Click!*

For a moment, there was silence.

"No change in the readings," came a nervous voice.

"Are you alright, Miss Smith?" asked a familiar voice.

Sarah-Jane opened her eyes.

"Brigadier? What are you doing here?"

The Brigadier gave her a tight smile, and turned to address the rest of the room in his clipped military tones. All of them were looking at him, from the technicians manning the recording devices, to Bennett standing on his stage, to Weakes . . . Sarah-Jane felt a slight lurch: Weakes was standing back at his post, calmly reading out the numbers as if he had never moved.

"This experiment is at an end," the Brigadier was saying. "Close it down, now, by order of UNIT command. Is that understood, Professor Bennett?"

"Brigadier?" Sarah-Jane asked. "Where's the Doctor?"

"Don't worry, Miss Smith," Lethbridge-Stewart smiled. "You're quite unhurt."

The Doctor was nowhere to be seen.

The Brigadier arranged a staff car to take Sarah-Jane home, jumping into the back with her after issuing a last few orders to the men he left behind. The car sped off, taking a route that Sarah-Jane found herself not quite able to follow through the heart of London. The Brigadier looked at her with a paternal kind of smile.

"Now, Miss Smith," he said. "Do you still want to see a doctor? That new Sullivan chap seems pretty good: we can stop off at UNIT HQ?"

"But what about -" Sarah-Jane stopped herself. "Aren't there any other doctors on UNIT staff?"

"I know what you mean," the Brigadier chuckled. "It's pretty odd when your doctor's younger than you are."

Sarah-Jane glanced out of the window, and saw Buckingham Palace pass them by, quickly followed by the Post Office Tower and a sleepy little lane she felt sure was in Foxglove, where her parents had lived.

"This isn't the way to my home," Sarah-Jane said.

"Don't be silly, Miss Smith," the Brigadier replied. "We're here."

The car pulled to a stop halfway down a tree-lined driveway, and the Brigadier stepped out, Sarah-Jane following nervously. At the bottom of the lane, half-cloaked in shadow, was a small thatched cottage that had seen better days: Sarah-Jane recognised it instantly as her Aunt Lavinia's home, which usually resided several hours drive away. She looked at the Brigadier, but he was looking around nervously.

"We'd better get inside," he warned. "Night seems to have fallen."

Sarah-Jane was about to argue, but when she looked up through the trees, she saw that the sky was indeed black, and speckled with a handful of unfamiliar stars. The Brigadier took hold of her arm and marched her towards the cottage. The lights inside looked warm and inviting, but something prickled at Sarah-Jane's back, and her heart started to jitter.

"Is there someone following us?" she asked, trying to turn her head.

"Eyes front, Miss Smith," the Brigadier answered. "That's not *someone*, I'm afraid."

Sarah-Jane could hear the soft sound of static. Her skin crawled.

"Brigadier?"

"Don't run. For pity's sake, don't run. Not far now."

Sarah-Jane kept her eyes fixed on the front door of Aunt Lavinia's cottage, and her ears straining to hear whatever was behind them. All she could hear were the Brigadier's military steps on the path, and her own keeping a steady pace beside him . . . and just below that, perhaps the hint of the static hiss growing louder? Then she heard a quiet slither, the noise of a snake flicking its tongue out to taste the air. She looked up at the Brigadier, and he set his face.

"Change of plan, Miss Smith," he said.

Without any discernible effort, the Brigadier scooped Sarah-Jane into his arms like a husband carrying his new bride over the threshold.

"Don't look," he told her.

She buried her head in his shoulder, and the Brigadier ran for the cottage. Behind them, something angry hissed - a sound which quickly melted into a solid wall of static noise. Sarah-Jane felt certain that her ears would bleed, just as the Brigadier reached the cottage door and forced it open with one solid kick. He quickly deposited Sarah-Jane onto the floor before drawing his pistol and firing five rapid shots into the darkness outside the door. He quickly holstered his pistol as he slammed the door shut, leaning back on it with a sigh.

"Damned nuisance," he said brightly. "Now: who's for a spot of cocoa?"

Sarah-Jane sat curled up in an armchair by a roaring fire in Aunt Lavinia's front room. There was, however, no sign that her aunt had ever lived in the cottage: the clumsy muddle of awards, textbooks and Petri dishes that she remembered from her childhood were gone, and instead there was the same jumble of press clippings and dirty clothes that littered the floor of her flat. The one thing that definitely wasn't hers was the bright pink dressing gown that the Brigadier had changed into soon after arrival. Nor were the fluffy pink mules that he wore on his feet.

He handed her a cup of hot chocolate, and took a sip on his own.

"Well," he said, the bottom of his moustaches stained brown with chocolate, "thank goodness that's all over."

"What was that out there, Brigadier?"

A shadow passed over the Brigadier's face.

"Best not talk about," he said.

"Alright. So what happened at Professor Bennett's experiment?"

"Ah, that. Same old story there, I'm afraid. Silurian splinter group infiltrated Bennett's team. Programmed the Browning to take a pot shot at any UNIT personnel in attendance. Quite like to know how they got it to recognise us, actually. Anyway, could have been very nasty if it hadn't jammed like that."

Sarah-Jane closed her eyes for a moment.

"Brigadier," she said, her voice shaking only a little. She tried to recall the exact expression the Doctor had used. "Has UNIT ever had any experience of nether realities?"

The Brigadier put down his cocoa.

"Well, you'd be the one to tell me that," he said. "You *are* our biographer."

"I am?"

"Why else would we have a reporter on staff?" he answered, walking over to a door that Sarah-Jane had never seen before. "Why don't we check the archive?"

He opened the door, which as far as Sarah-Jane could tell should lead him back out into the darkness outside. Instead, he ushered into a large darkened room, lined on three sides with metal shelving from ceiling to floor. On each shelf were thousands of A4 notepads, each with a title scrawled on a piece of masking tape and stuck over the spine. Sarah-Jane walked in and looked at them, her mouth hanging open.

"These are all UNIT's cases? There must be thousand of them!" She picked one at random from a shelf and read the title aloud. "*UNIT and the Time-Travelling Space Troll?* Shouldn't these have more official sounding titles?"

"They help us categorize them easily," the Brigadier explained. "If we find ourselves up against dinosaurs in Tooting Bec, we just have to run in here and grab *UNIT and the Dinosaur Invasion*, *UNIT and the Dinosaur Men* and . . . ah! *UNIT and the Other Type of Dinosaur Men*. Now, you wanted to know about other realities? Let's try Row C."

Sarah-Jane went to follow the Brigadier, but as she stepped out of the light falling on the shelves, she spotted something hidden in the darkness by the doorway. She felt a slight chill, and tried to look a little closer.

"I wouldn't pay him any mind, if I were you," the Brigadier warned.

In the corner by the door was a large leather armchair, of the kind that looked like it longed to be by a roaring fire in a gentlemen's club in the Eighteenth Century. Sitting in it appeared to be a man. The corner was dark, and Sarah-Jane couldn't quite make out the detail, but there seemed to be something man-shaped there. Something dressed in a dark blue zoot suit. Sarah-Jane shivered as she realised she knew - somehow - that under that suit, the man had no skin. Just red rawness that ached and wept.

"Here we are: *UNIT and the Way Out of the Suited Man's Reality*," the Brigadier was saying. "Was that the sort of thing you were looking for, Miss Smith?"

"I'm sorry, what?" she said.

The man in the chair's eyes flicked open.

"Ah, now I'm afraid that's torn it," the Brigadier said, sounding nervous. "You wait here, Miss Smith. I'll bring re-enforcements."

"What?" Sarah-Jane said.

But the Brigadier had already marched over to the door back into the house and disappeared. The man in the chair didn't even turn his head to watch him. His eyes stayed locked on Sarah-Jane Smith, glinting in the half-light. She felt them creep gently over her skin, and suddenly she realised that they were set wrong: the man's right eye was where his left should be, and his left where his right should. For some reason, that unnerved her more than the sight of him heaving himself out of his chair and standing to block the doorway.

He took a step forward.

Sarah-Jane couldn't turn, but she knew she had to find the book the Brigadier had mentioned: there had to be some way out of this crazy reality she had found herself in. The book had to be lying loose on the shelf somewhere . . . unless the Brigadier had taken it with him when he left. She backed away from the man slowly, her hands feeling for the shelves behind her.

The man stepped forward again.

"Sarah-Jane?" the Doctor called from the darkness behind her.

Automatically, she turned.

"Doctor?"

There was no-one there, just a door. She looked behind her, and saw that the man was only inches away from her, his raw hands held casually in his pockets and his mismatched eyes staring straight at her. Sarah-Jane felt her heart jump into her throat, and she pushed in a panic against the door. It opened silently into more darkness beyond. She didn't hesitate.

She pushed through.

Sarah-Jane moved as quietly through the corridor as she could. It was in almost complete darkness, but her eyes had quickly adjusted and she could make out the grey shapes on the walls. That was all there was. There were no other doors, and even the one behind her had melted into the darkness as soon as she'd taken a few steps. She knew that she had to get back to the part of the house she recognised, but also knew that the world was operating on dream logic now: the more she tried to get back, the less likely it was. Onwards seemed like the only real option.

"Doctor?" she whispered at random points.

No-one answered.

Looking behind her, Sarah-Jane could see no sign of the man in the suit. She knew, with that impossible to argue with dream insight, that he was following her. Sarah couldn't help but remember the Doctor's warning to Bennett, his concern that something might creep through the hole he'd left between realities. She allowed herself a moment to stop and catch breath. Then she dug her nails into the palms of her hand. It hurt, but nothing more. Another breath, two, then she sighed and slapped herself hard across the face. Nothing: again. Still nothing.

"Alright," she told herself. "So it's not going to be that easy."

She looked behind herself again, and - just to be on the safe side - in front as well. There was still nothing but grey twilight corridor. She remembered her UNIT orientation, talking to the regimental psychiatrist about whether she ever dreamed she was running down a corridor with no end, chased by some unspeakable monster. Apparently it was a recurring dream amongst UNIT soldiers, since it happened so often in their day-to-day lives. Because that's how dreams worked: the things that were in your head left their mark on them like fingerprints.

An idea occurred to Sarah-Jane.

If this reality was as like a dream as it seemed, it might work.

It had to work.

She sat with her back against the wall and rummaged in her pockets. Eventually, she managed to find the ordinary-looking Yale key that the Doctor had given her. She held it tight in her hand - it felt almost warm already - and thought about him as hard as she good. His hook nose, his shock of grey hair, his absolutely ridiculous dress sense. Every smile he had ever given her, every time he had arrived in the nick of time to save her from her own stupidity. And his absolutely ridiculous dress sense.

The Doctor. The Doctor. The Doctor.

"Sarah-Jane?" the Doctor said.

"Doctor?" she gasped, opening her eyes.

The corridor was empty, still. She heard sharp claws skittering over the wood of the floorboards, and something brushed against her arm. Instinctively she pulled away, and turned to see a skunk-like creature rearing up beside her: its head was perfectly human, a rough approximation of the Doctor's, complete with shock of grey fur on top and a white ruffle around the neck. It hissed at her and swung with a large paw: Sarah-Jane let out a cry and fell back against the floor. As she skittered backwards, more of the skunk-creatures joined the first, forming a pack that scurried round her, nipping but never quite close enough to strike.

"Sarah-Jane," they squeaked. "Sarah-Jane."

Sarah-Jane pulled herself to her feet and ran.

The skunk-creatures tagged behind her as she moved down the corridor, still holding back but giving her no choice but to keep moving. As she did, she gradually saw

some sunlight enter the corridor: at the far end was a heavy and battered wooden door, standing half-open, and the light was coming from beyond it.

As she got closer, she saw past the door into another wood-floored corridor, with crumbling concrete walls and arches overhead. It was bathed in brilliant sunlight, because at the far end was another door. Its broken glass panels looked out onto a glorious summer day in a garden filled with green grass and gently swaying trees. Sarah-Jane could smell the sunshine on the breeze, and thought for a moment that the garden was one that she had played in once as a child.

She knew it was an escape.

"Sarah-Jane," squeaked the skunk-things behind her, and she stepped into the room.

To her left was an empty fireplace and a broken piano, both of which held some vague memories for her. She ignored them both to walk towards the exit, and out into the garden. But as she stepped closer, someone moved into the doorway, a dark silhouette blocking her way out. Behind her, the skunk-things skittered. The man in the suit looked at her with those misplaced eyes, and said nothing.

Sarah-Jane realised that there was no escape. She had never been so completely lost as this: she wasn't even in the same universe as the Doctor any more, and back there she was already dead. Her only hope of escaping this crazy dream reality was to be killed again by a quantum event, but she didn't even really understand what one of those was, let alone how to recreate one. And if she did, who could say that the next reality would be any better suited to her than this?

"Alright," she said with a sulk. "You win."

She plonked herself down on the ground, and tried to decide whether it was worth holding back the tears. The man in the suit didn't move, but the skunk-things edged excitedly closer. Two of them scuttled onto the piano, hanging over the bare workings to

let their hooked noses poke excitedly at Sarah-Jane. She put her hands in her head, closed her eyes so that she wouldn't see what happened next. She could feel the man in the suit take a step.

"Sarah-Jane!" hissed one of the skunk-things, with such anger that Sarah-Jane twitched. "Sarah-Jane!"

It tried to jump for her, but one of its fellows got in its way, and instead it tumbled into the workings of the piano, its sharp claws scraping the strings as it tried to stop itself falling. The sound was . . . Sarah-Jane felt her heart give a little flutter. The sound of claw on strings wasn't anything she had ever heard before, but it was also so nearly like something else. Something strange and indescribable, and wonderful, so wonderful.

"Get away! Get away!" Sarah-Jane yelled, jumping to her feet and yelling at the skunk-things. They scattered to the edges of the room, startled. "Get away!"

Sarah-Jane ran to the piano, kneeling behind it. She needed something, something sharp but not sharp enough to cut. The TARDIS key still sat warmly in her palm. Of course: what could be more perfect? She looked up, and saw the skunk-things edging nervously towards her again. The man in the suit stood only a handful of steps away, not moving, just watching her with that terrifying gaze. Sarah-Jane said a prayer silently under her breath that this was going to work.

She scraped the key down the piano strings.

She moved wildly, frantically shifting from the high strings to the bass notes completely at random. The sound that filled the air was nothing like music, so strange and discordant that the skunk-things all jumped back with a screech of "Jehoshaphat!". But Sarah-Jane kept scraping like a woman possessed, the sound striking chords deep down inside her that set the dream world ringing like a crystal. The man in the suit didn't move, didn't reach out a hand.

And then the sound was joined by another.

A strange, wheezing, groaning whine of impossible engines.

Sarah-Jane didn't dare stop the key moving, but she looked frantically around and saw - yes! Over at the other side of the room, something tall and blue was struggling to appear. The skunk-things all scattered at the sight of it, and scurried out into the garden and oblivion. The man in the suit gave it a cool glance, and then began to pace slowly over to Sarah-Jane. She didn't dare look at him, didn't dare take her eyes from the TARDIS as she willed it to materialise, her fingers still running the key down the piano strings in a wild random rhythm.

The TARDIS landed with a thump, and the doors flew open.

"Sarah-Jane! Quickly!"

It was the Doctor - the real Doctor - standing in the TARDIS doorway and holding his hand out to her. His eyes fixed on her and urged her to look at him, to keep her eyes fixed and not look back. She pulled the TARDIS key into her fist and was up and running before the sound of the engines even died away. She could feel the man in the suit calmly reaching out for her, feel the dread whisper of his fingers against her back. But her hand reached the Doctor's, and he pulled her safely inside.

The TARDIS dematerialised.

"Doctor!" Sarah-Jane sighed. "I thought I'd never see you again!"

"Well, you might not have, if you hadn't set up that psychic beacon for the TARDIS to latch onto," he said, flicking switches on the TARDIS console as she juddered a little in flight. "We've been trying to follow you for weeks now, but the quantum barrier was proving impossible for us to sidestep."

"So I really was in an alternate universe?" she asked in disbelief.

"Well, yes and no," he said, scratching his nose. "Professor Bennett's experiment should have sent you to a parallel where the only difference was you not getting shot by the machine-gun. Up until that point, the two universes would have had exactly the same history, you see: like a stream branching in two directions when it hits a rock."

"That universe wasn't anything like ours," Sarah-Jane said emphatically.

"That wasn't any kind of reality you're used to," the Doctor said gravely. "The nether realities are all too easy to fall into once you start trying to jump quantum tracks. That's why I was so against Bennett's experiments in the first place."

"Oh, Bennett. What happened to him?"

"The Brigadier's had him charged with manslaughter. Although I imagine the charges will have to be dropped once we get you back. The English judiciary of the nineteen-seventies might not be as advanced as some planets, but even they won't imprison someone if their victim is still up and about."

Sarah-Jane felt a slight lurch in her stomach.

"Doctor?"

The Doctor looked at her with a raised eye-brow.

"Sarah-Jane?"

"I'm from nineteen-*eighty*," she said.

The Doctor stared at her in disbelief for a moment, as the TARDIS engines came to a stop, bringing them both back . . . home? Then he looked sheepish, rubbing his nose again and giving her an embarrassed smile.

"Ah," he said. "Let's worry about that later, shall we?"