

DOCTOR · WHO

# The Big Crunch

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**The Doctor stood within the Nobles' pristine abode and felt the walls closing in** around him.

"Itchy feet", one of his former travelling companions had called it. But after nearly a fortnight stuck in just one place and time, the Doctor felt like he had itchy **everything**; so much so, in fact, that he subconsciously felt the need to give the area under his chin a big old scratch.

The Doctor's difficulty was that his current travelling companion - go-getting red-headed supertemp Donna Noble - had suddenly been struck down with a particularly nasty case of **domesticitus**. They had recently got involved with a spot of bother that, for Donna, was even closer to home than usual, and ever since she'd be reluctant to stray far from her family homestead.

The Doctor paced fervently around the living room as the Noble family gathered around the television. 'Is it the new **Red Dwarf**?' the Doctor asked excitedly, making a mental note to nip back a month or so if not.

Donna turned round and fixed him with a hard stare. 'Shuttup, skinny boy' she chided, before turning back towards the television.

'Why, what's going on?' asked the Doctor, pulling his 'brainy specs' out from his capacious inside pocket and swiftly spinning on his heel to face the television.

'Where've you been, *spaceman?*' snorted Donna mockingly. 'It's been all over the news. Every single day. Credit Crunch. End of the world as we know it.'

The Doctor looked at her quizzically. 'This-' he said, taking off his specs and using them to point at the television (which was at that precise moment displaying a pie chart), 'this is planet Earth's idea of news? They'll gloss over Slitheen and Sycorax and Racnoss but-'

'Hey, it's serious Doctor,' interjected Wilfred, Donna's grandfather and exuberant confidante. 'Our Sylvia's been going spare. House prices round here've gone down thousands already!'

The Doctor shook his head, not really looking at anyone; his big brown eyes staring at the wall. 'Last six months, this planet has been riddled with Adipose and Sontarans!' All of a sudden the Doctor became animated. 'You've even had the Mandragora Helix! I mean, do you know how *rare* that is?' The Doctor looked rather startled when he realised that he was waving his spectacles right under an awkward-looking Wilfred's nose.

'Still,' he continued, popping his specs back in his pocket (and then patting the pocket to make sure that they were safe), 'interesting though. Recession in 2009. That's not supposed to happen. Economy should be booming.'

'Tell it to the banks,' scathed Donna, shoving a slice of toast into her mouth before using both hands to pick up her unwieldy holdall and shuffling backwards towards the door.

'Can you manage with that, sweetheart?' asked Wilfred. Donna crunched in the affirmative before blowing her grandfather a crumbly kiss. She was out of the door and into the taxi before the Doctor even realised that she had gone – he was too busy pacing again.

Wilfred stared at the Doctor for a moment. The superficially young man was pacing back and forth, mumbling under his breath and counting on his fingers. But he wasn't human, Wilfred reflected. He was an *alien*. An alien space adventurer from another planet, right here in his living room.

And now, just like everyone else, he was stressing about the economy.

'She's gone *where*?' the Doctor exclaimed, incredulous. He was sat on the worktop in Donna's mother's kitchen, kicking his filthy sneakers against the gleaming cabinet doors.

'She did say, Doctor,' scalded Wilf. 'She needed a break after all that Royal Planetary Society business. So did Netty. It'll be nice for Netty to get to know the family properly, don't you think?'

The Doctor raised both his eyebrows. 'Yeah...'

'You fancy a brew, Doctor?' asked Wilfred.

'A brew?' asked the Doctor, his eyes suddenly wild. 'Wilfred, what day is it?'

'Tuesday.'

'Oh no, no, no, no...' the Doctor exclaimed, slapping his own forehead hard.

'What's wrong?' Wilfred look panicked. 'What is it Doctor?'

'Tuesdays are rubbish!' the Doctor sighed, the urgency gone; replaced by a whinging tone. '**Universe ends on a Tuesday!** Even Thursdays are better than Tuesdays. I can't believe your granddaughter has left me here on a Tuesday while she goes off with her mother and your new fancy piece-'

'Oi!'

'Your... er... lady friend, I mean.' The Doctor sniffed and looked round from side to side. 'So what we doing then?'

'Eh?'

The Doctor extended a long, skinny arm around Wilfred's shoulder. 'What we up to? All lads together, and all that. A whole great big Tuesday of adventure is waiting out there for us, I reckon.' The Doctor gestured out of the window theatrically.

'Well my programme's on in a minute...'

'Wilfred! Help me out here. Don't leave me on me tod on a Tuesday; I'll go barmy. Come on, let's go for a mooch into town. There's got to be something going on. Usually is.'

Wilfred looked at his armchair, the faint outline of his form impressed into the fabric. And beside his chair stood a small coffee table, his freshly made

cup emitting an inviting spray of steam, causing the three digestives appetisingly balanced on the edge of the saucer to moisten ever so slightly.

‘Come on Wilfred, *allons-y!*’ the Doctor barked, strolling out the door without looking back.

Wilfred sighed just as the theme tune for *Gardener’s World* filled the room.

The Doctor almost marched down Chiswick High Road, the wind gusting up beneath his long brown overcoat, blowing his coattails into Wilfred’s bedraggled face as he struggled to keep up with the spaceman.

‘Boring, boring, boring,’ the Doctor grumbled periodically, Wilfred’s expression hardening all the more each time. ‘This is probably even more boring than Boritious. You can ask Donna about Boritious. It was dead boring. She hated it.’

The Doctor suddenly pulled up sharp and spun around, a guarded expression on his face. ‘You smell that?’ he asked his elderly companion.

‘Oh sorry, Doctor,’ said Wilfred humbly. ‘It’s all this dashing about. When you get to my age, see-’

The Doctor cut him off before he embarrassed himself further. ‘No, it’s not that. It’s more... sort of...’ The Doctor licked his lips exaggeratedly, drawing a few disapproving stares from passers-by. ‘*Salty.*’ He paused, looking forlorn. ‘You sure you can’t smell it?’

Wilfred shook his head, prompting the Doctor to roll his eyes and march off again in the opposite direction.

As soon as the Doctor and Wilfred were out of sight, the top of a wheelie-bin opened and the small, completely featureless head of a tiny alien creature emerged, its head rotating as if watching them as they walked off towards the fast food emporium.

'Hang on,' said the Doctor, throwing his quarter-pounder back down onto the greasy tray from whence it came. 'This is all wrong.'

'I only get a pension, Doctor. It's all I can stretch to.'

'No, no... not that. **Although...** I could swear I'm supposed to be vegetarian. No, I meant all that you were saying. Your government propping up the banks, slashing your interest rates to practically nothing. It should be working. Why isn't it working?'

'Don't ask me Doctor. Before Donna made me get this fancy new Pillion thingymejigummy, I only ever used the Post Office.'

'Pillion? Now where've I heard that name before? Pillion... Pillion... Pillion,' the Doctor mouthed the word in all manner of grotesque fashions, as if he were playing with the word; trying to learn its secrets.

Well if he was, it worked.

'Pillion!' he yelled at Wilf. 'As in **Pillion and Pillion!**' he shouted again louder, slapping his own forehead even harder than the last time (and leaving a

nasty red mark); mad eyes wide. 'Oh! I'm such an idiot. *Stupid, stupid, Doctor!* It's been right under my nose all day.'

'What has, Doctor?' asked Wilf.

'The Pillion, Wilfred. All those building societies we've walked past. And your big old credit crunch. This isn't just your usual recession and boom; no. Like I said, it should be working. Things should be righting themselves. But they're not. And why?'

'Why?'

'The Pillion!'

'Hold up Doctor, I'm not quite as quick as some you knock about with. Who are the Pillion?'

'A funny lot, Wilfred, if truth be known. A race of parasitic mercenaries from another universe that I met once before. Well, I say "a race", but... I heard they'd got stuck here during the War; ended up allying themselves with a Usarian Banking Clan. Low key profiteering, that's all. Nothing this big.'

'From another universe?' Wilfred's face had clouded.

'*Well...*' hands in pockets, the Doctor rocked from side to side. Exposition mode. 'Not in the quantum sense, though I suppose it's as good a description as any. You see, you have an infinite number of quantum realities – parallel worlds, if you like – but then you've also got your cosmologically parallel universes like the Saraquar Infracrion, Exo-Space, and the Spherical Ontloverse of Jihabaloom. They get called "parallel universes" just because they're so far away. The Pillion's realm was so far outside even my people's

sphere of influence that they classed it as another universe – the farthest universe, come to think of it.'

The Doctor looked troubled. 'It was said the Pillion's unique power came from living so close to the edge of the creation,' he went on.

'Their power?' asked Wilfred cautiously.

'Ah...'

said the Doctor nervously, before taking a big suck of milkshake through his straw. 'Yeah...'

'Doctor?'

'You've gotta remember though Wilfred, this was a long time ago, relatively speaking. Things were different back then; the cosmos was more... *mutable*. The Pillion's power is useless now, thanks to the War. Nowadays the Pillion just sit at the heart of their Banking Syndicate, using less renowned races to bring in their revenue. They're not up to that sort of thing anymore.'

'What sort of thing, Doctor?'

'The worst kind of cruelty.'

'Are you sure this is the only way to find them?' Wilfred pleaded.

The Doctor rapped on his left temple several times. 'Think about it, Wilfred. You're a tiny alien parasite without eyes, ears or noses, living inside some poor host's intestine. You're now in control of the largest Banking Syndicate in Mutters' Spiral. You're up to something on a primitive world where – against all the odds, it has to be said – the population doesn't really believe

that aliens exist. Given those circumstances, would you work as a cashier in your own bank?’

‘Well, I suppose not. But see-’

‘Never waste time on a “but”, Wilfred,’ the Doctor smiled, pulling a stocking over his head and tossing Wilfred a slightly grubbier looking one.

‘Where d’you get these from anyway?’ Wilfred grumbled as he struggled to negotiate the mucky stocking over his own head.

‘Never you mind,’ chided the Doctor. ‘I’m sure she’s got plenty.’

Life on Chiswick High Road bustled along as it did on most days when the planet wasn’t being besieged by aliens. Indeed, were it not for an utterly incongruous stocking-clad head poking out of the alleyway by the side of the pizza shop, the residents of Cheswick could have been forgiven for thinking that this was any old Tuesday.

One would think though that shoppers’ suspicions might have been aroused when the aforementioned incongruous stocking-clad head (which, for the avoidance of doubt, was securely fastened to an aged but nonetheless sprightly body) tumbled into the middle of the pavement, followed in short order by an apparently younger but equally awkward stocking-clad head (and, for the sake of clarity, body), especially when this bizarre occurrence coincided with yells of *‘Now Wilfred!’* and *‘Whoa, watch it Doct-’*

But as the apparently younger stocking-wearer helped the elder to his feet, they both realised that the shoppers’ of Chiswick couldn’t care less what

they were up to. Old ladies shuffled along behind their unfilled shopping trolleys, lost in their hollow reveries; children played, as they always will; and those plugging the years in between flitted urgently between shops, hunting for bargains but too unnerved to actually capitalise on any.

The brown-suited man dusted himself down and started quizzically at his luminous yellow water-pistol, which appeared to have earned itself a cracked barrel in the fall. He shrugged his shoulders and stared silently at his companion, who returned the gesture.

The Doctor stood to one side of the entrance to *Pillion and Pillion Building Society*, Wilfred at the other. And then, with a lack of coordination that could be construed as comic, both charged through the doorway, water-pistols first.

‘Nobody move!’ yelled Wilfred, his eyes clenched tightly shut and his own water pistol aimed inoffensively in the air, teetering on the edge of discharge. When no reprisal came, Wilfred dared to open one eye.

The bank was empty, save for one inanimate Cashier who looked like she’d been freeze-framed.

The Doctor pulled off his stocking and strolled right up to the Cashier’s window. The Cashier didn’t so much as flinch as the Doctor examined his reflection in the window, licked his hands and then used his spittle to rebuild his usual bedhead of hair. ‘Do you know,’ he said to the Cashier indifferently, ‘no-one would ever believe how much effort it takes to look this messy.’

Still nothing.

The Doctor suddenly snapped his fingers.

Nought.

He turned to Wilfred, who was still stood by the entrance, entranced by the security camera.

‘It’s alright Wilfred,’ the Doctor said gently. ‘Something tells me that the Pillion weren’t overly alarmed by our dramatic entrance.’

‘But... the Police and that... our Sylvia’ll go spare if I end up on *Crimewatch*,’ Wilfred stuttered, backing slowly away from the camera until he backed right into the Doctor.

The Doctor raised his eyebrows despairingly. ‘Now then Wilfred, your Pillion account-’

At that, the Cashier sprung into life. ‘Good morning sir. Welcome to *Pillion and Pillion Building Society*. Please may I take your Pillion account number?’

The Doctor yanked out his sonic screwdriver and held it directly in front of the Cashier’s face. The blue light shone straight into her eyes and the device emitted a high-pitched whirr, yet she didn’t even blink.

‘I don’t have a Pillion account,’ explained the Doctor, ‘I just popped in to-’

‘Good day, sir’ said the Cashier with finality. Her expression remained immutable.

The Doctor gave up, deactivating his sonic device.

'Is it a robot, Doctor? Is it an alien?' asked Wilfred urgently, tugging at the Doctor's sleeve. 'It is, isn't it? Has it got one of them Pillion in its belly? Living in its guts like you said...'

The Doctor's bottom lip protruded as he ruminated. 'Nothing so exciting, Wilfred. The stench would give it away if that were the case.'

'But look at her Doctor,' said Wilfred, knocking on the glass in front of her. 'Dead to the world. It's like she's turned off.'

'That's because she is, *sort of*,' the Doctor replied, his brow furrowing. 'Didn't you think it was a bit odd? I mean, before today? The frozen Cashiers? Surely you must have noticed when you came to get your pension out?'

'I've not been before, Doctor. Our Sylvia takes care of all that for me. I do remember her saying though that the service here was a damn sight better than in most places.'

The Doctor scoffed. 'Everything's relative, I suppose. Right then. Onwards and upwards. Well... *downwards*.' And with that, the Doctor pointed his sonic screwdriver straight at the ground beneath his feet and started to resonate concrete.

Wilfred coughed. Not your usual old man cough, mind - Wilfred was coughing because of the prevalence of dust in his immediate vicinity.

Wilfred then clasped his knee and cried out in anguish. 'Oww! Doctor! My knee...' Again, not your everyday old man with a bad knee in need of a

physician – more your spirited old man who has just fallen down a large hole and landed in an unceremonious heap inside a cavernous, subterranean alien dwelling. Oh yes – and he’s surrounded by a horde of animated, four-inch tall gingerbread men that look like somebody has licked all their icing off.

‘By the cringe, Doctor!’ Wilfred yelled, pulling himself to his feet.

‘Are these the swines? Are these them Pillion? ***Away with yer!***’

The Doctor also pulled himself up. ‘Yes... but don’t expect much banter. These Pillion don’t have hosts. They’re not even fully mature.’

The Doctor reached out to one of the creatures and tickled its midriff gently, as one might a cat or a dog. The creature didn’t resist, rolling on its back and stretching out its tiny, tendril-like arms in a display of gratification. Much to Wilfred’s disgust, the Doctor licked his fingers straight afterwards.

‘They’re Pillion alright,’ said the Doctor as he pulled a strange face, as if he had eaten something particularly pungent. ‘We must have fallen into their bak-’

The Doctor was disturbed by a small, rough-skinned creature poking the butt of a weapon into his leg. ‘The Manager wants to see you,’ it squeaked.

‘A Graske!’ exclaimed the Doctor. ‘Well I’d never. What’s a Graske doing working for the Pillion?’

The Graske shrugged. ‘No other jobs.’

The Doctor stifled a laugh. You really knew your economy was in the decline when even migrant alien mercenaries couldn’t find work.

The Graske ushered the Doctor and Wilfred into the Manager's office. The Doctor registered Wilfred's look of disillusionment as he took in how ordinary everything looked; how *human*.

And then the Pillion Manager entered the room, the sight of which caused Wilfred to pass out.

\* \* \*

Wilfred nursed his head as his senses began relaying information to his brain once again. It took a few moments for his rapid heartbeat to kick in though as, just for a moment, he'd forgotten where he was.

It seemed that the Doctor was talking to – or rather talking at – the Pillion Manager.

The Manager's appearance made Wilfred want to vomit. Never mind a human being with a little alien feller sitting in its guts; this thing – this Manager, or *mother* or whatever it was - was a *monster*. Though it had a head, a torso, and four limbs, just like a man, it must have been eight-feet tall, and its skin was covered in a glutinous, thick gingery membrane. Its long, handleless arms thrashed about wildly like voracious vines, constantly furling and unfurling, every movement punctuated by a spray of viscous jelly and an even more repugnant, noxious stench. Wilfred was so revolted that he had to really focus to listen to what the Doctor was saying.

'...you lot before, back in the eighties. A load of your Death Merchants had cordoned off two realities and were selling the living counterparts of one universe's dead to their bereaved in the other. It was one of the cruellest and most distasteful schemes I've ever had the misfortune to stumble upon. But I stopped your Death Merchants, just like I'm going to stop you now.'

'The eighties...' the Manager responded, his voice reverberating around the room, but not traceable to any specific location.

'So... you must be the Time Lord they call Doctor.'

The Doctor beamed. 'That's me. *'ello.'*

'Do you want to know what our historians call you?' asked the creature as it loomed menacingly over the Doctor.

'So long as it doesn't hurt my feelings. I can be a bit sensitive sometimes, see,' the Doctor rabbitied, not taking his eyes off the creature's flailing, tendril-like arms for a moment. 'Still, sticks and stones and all that. Now there's a thought! You haven't got any sticks and stones on you, have you? 'Cos if you have-'

'DESTROYER OF MARKETS!' the Manager boomed.

The Doctor nodded his head in a so-so fashion. 'Fair dues, I've been called worse.'

Wilfred couldn't stay quiet any longer. 'Don't antagonise him, Doctor. What about them powers you said-'

The Doctor waved a hand dismissively. 'No need to worry about those any more, Wilfred. The Pillion's inimitable knack for dissecting quanta and

strolling between realities has long since deserted them. Besides, what they gonna do? Throw me into a parallel world?

‘Still, I would imagine that’s what this big crunch is all about. The Pillion having to come to terms with their new... *situation.*’

The Doctor turned to stare up into the disquietingly vacant face of the Manager. ‘Is that it? You can’t profit from setting one reality off against the other anymore? Can’t earn a crust on the back of human grief? So what...? You plant a Speculation Initiative of Drast, set them to manipulating the economic infrastructure of the planet, pull out the sub-prime underpinning and then... What? What’s your final move?’

An aperture suddenly opened in the lower half of the Manager’s formerly blank face, revealing two dazzling rows of sharpened, gold teeth in a twisted parody of a human mouth.

‘I wondered where that voice was coming from-’ muttered Wilf, to no-one in particular.

‘Without its economy the human race will soon relapse into war and savagery. And when it does; when it is so weak that it cannot withstand our might, we shall take the survivors as our new hosts!’

The Doctor’s face drained of colour. ‘Why?’

‘Since your War the layers of cosmic sediment have solidified,’ the Manager murmured. ‘Travel to the farthest corners of creation has become just as impractical for us as traversing realities. We can no longer reach our host breeding grounds on Bridon IV.’

The Doctor spoke up. 'So you've run out of hosts? So what. You can't use humans as long-term substitutes. You don't even have endothelium; the bonding wouldn't last more than a few weeks!'

The Manager's upper right limb suddenly lashed out and encircled Wilfred like a noose, leisurely drawing him in as the Doctor was taunted. 'That's why we need *lots* of humans...'

The Doctor's face was ashen as a long, golden tongue emerged from the Manager's "mouth", slavering all over its own face.

'Doctor! Doctor! Get this chuffing great thing off of me!' Wilfred cried.

The Doctor gazed at the Manager, his stare hard and pitiless. 'I'm going to give you one chance to leave this world in peace. Leave and never return.'

At that moment the Manager felt the touch of an apparently human hand on his arm. He spun around to see his Deputy Manager wearing the body of a human banker and a distinctly unpromising look. *Surely this coward couldn't be contemplating...?* But then the Manger remembered all that had been lost at the hands of the Destroyer of Markets. And he remembered the recently-amended golden rule of the Pillion – *you've got to speculate to accumulate... but don't mess with the Doctor.*

'We shall withdraw,' the Manager hissed abruptly, releasing Wilfred before shuffling away to pack up his things.

'What?' said the Doctor, a look of utter bemusement on his face.

'You are joking me!'

The Manager turned back towards the Doctor. 'Pillion never jest. You have given us the chance to cut our losses, and we are taking it.'

The Doctor was incredulous. 'But you... **can't!** It doesn't work like that... No-one has ever... I mean... What about your hosts? You'll need hosts!'

The Manager and his Deputy left the room without another word.

The Doctor sucked in a deep breath and then slowly blew the air out of his cheeks. 'Blimey,' he said. 'I didn't see that coming.'

The spring sun shone brightly as the Doctor and Wilfred sauntered back towards the Noble residence.

'Seriously though,' the Doctor lectured, 'you should see what you lot do to the future. Humans and money and corporations. There's not another race like you.' The Doctor paused, examining his reflection in a car window. '**Well... suppose** there might be one or two.'

Wilfred suppressed a chuckle. 'Do you think that's it then now, Doctor? Now these Pillion have gone, everything will just pick up again?'

The Doctor shrugged his shoulders non-committally, his hands in his pockets as he strolled down the road. '**Well...** it's hard to say. I didn't have this era down for any economic turbulence, and my economics is brilliant; really, really, brilliant. Four hundred years as a Scrutionary Archivist, don't tell me I don't know about economics!'

'So you think we'll be alright then?'

'I think so. A year or so from now and your planet won't be needing little old me to sort out its troubles anymore. You'll see.'

Wilfred smiled.