



PICOCON 38 FANZINE

FROM THE EDITOR

Good afternoon everyone.

Picocon 38 *Automata* is largely acorporeal, and so this might be the first time in a while that the *Picocon Fanzine* isn't a physical object. This hasn't stopped our friends in the Imperial College Science Fiction & Fantasy Society from bringing forth some excellent pieces of artwork and writing. This year: a detective story, an autobiography; an old tale in a new voice, a new tale in an old one—and also: statistics.

As always: thanks so much to everyone who wrote to us in these past few months, to everyone with us at Picocon today, and to all of you reading in the future. **ΨΦ**

— **The Editors**
February 2021

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Justify

by Kimi Maharaj

[00:53:10] P : don't you just want to go out there, see what's going on?

[00:53:44] Σ : No, 'cause no one who goes actually comes back.

[00:54:02] † : literally why

[00:55:39] ∞: uve lost it bro fr

[01:29:24] ω : Still interested?

The waters swirl dangerously near the border. The sea spray stings your face, mordant. Your 'proofing is solid enough but you still have to quell several sensors that tell you it isn't; you're due a software upgrade soon. Hardware's easy to get, you and everyone else at the agency goes through it like nothing. Parts are cheap, and you're harder on them than most. Your left leg's still not right from the fall you took two weeks past, but you'd gotten your guy at the end, so it doesn't matter. If you were meat, they'd call you reckless. You always calculate your risks, you just have a higher margin of what's acceptable than some of the others. Might be that's a software glitch in itself, but you doubt it. You have a specific role to fill, and you've been told accordingly.

μ : Are you sure this is the right place?

You look at your assigned partner—they have their own role, too, and it seems to be putting up with you. Watching you, when you're being uncharitable about it. Not that you'd do that, but you weren't exactly made kind. Their eyes on you makes you itch, all bright cyan meant to be "soothing". Most of the time they look at you diffidently. But sometimes, you catch them staring, and it's the look of someone who wants to take you apart right down to the wires. Sets you on edge.

'Course, you get that often enough; you've been told you're abrasive when the teller's patient, and gotten cussed out when they're not. But that's why you've got this job, instead of nursing or dealing with search and rescue. They just clean up your mess, and most days, you're grateful for it.

Some days, you can't stand the sight of 'em, and you think they know that. Most'd see issue with it, this one's better that way. Or quieter about it. But if they're complaining to every last officebug about your bad attitude, you don't much care as long as they don't do the complaining where you can hear it.

Ω : I'm sure. That's what the report says.

You're not one to doubt the report, so you just nod. You pull it up to skim through anyway.

μ : Mind your step. It's wet here and neither of us are that waterproof.

Ω : It was an easy corner to cut.

You disagree, but you don't say anything. Your partner's more straight-laced than you are by far, and you're not that close. Criticism isn't something that's taken well, and

you're allowed a certain amount per month on goodwill. You're decently sure that you used that all up last week, and your boss isn't the type to *have* any goodwill. A real hardass.

The words on your HUD are easier to look at than the border itself, but it still swirls uneasily in the background. If you could feel sick, you would; you get real close to understanding what the organics mean by *nausea* when you look at it for too long. It's uncomfortable. You don't come here often if you can help it; problem is that you've had to more than you'd like lately.

μ : Kid goes missing. Posts a message about wanting to leave in a private chat room, vanishes three days later.

Ω : Yes.

μ : Fifth time it's happened in as many months.

Ω : Yes.

μ : Are you going to keep saying that to everything I ask?

Ω : No.

μ : Right.

μ : Logs are the same as the last ones. The last person that talked to him in the chat was the same.

Ω : And we haven't been able to trace them.

μ : Yeah. If these are the best minds, we need better. Not my division, though.

μ : So, he comes through here. Dead of night. We've got cameras catching the route he took.

Ω : Also the same as the others.

μ : Home to these coordinates to here, following the same streets. It's not the fastest way.

μ : Would've been faster to just come here.

μ : He walked it too, same as the others.

Ω : Yes. At the same times too. Give or take a few minutes, of course. But humans are not as precise about this. μ : Nah.

μ : Same route, same time. What are we missing?

Ω : I'm sure I wouldn't know.

Ω : We need to talk to the family today, too. They filed the original report as missing.

You turn to stare out at the churning expanse of water that separates you from... whatever's out there. You've never been interested in knowing; you'd have to try real hard to muster up a want to, and again. It doesn't feel *right*. You figure that's another quirk in your software, what little you have that passes for a self-preservation instinct. You can do plenty, but swimming's not on that list.

The scant grey light of the early morning gleams against the dark wood beneath your feet. The docks are old, the oldest part of this city, and dangerous besides. There's a reason they're in such a sorry state.

You won't get any more information just standing around here, though. Whatever clues there were, they're long gone.

μ : Better do that. I'll check his room, too, then make the walk.

Ω : As you say.

You turn away from the edge decisively, and start walking. Your partner's footsteps soon come to echo your own.

You're on a case now, but this one—you're not sure about.

You aren't.

Doesn't mean you won't be doing your best to solve it, though. What else is there to do?

The city pulses beneath your feet, and you pulse back with purpose.

Your partner has long since turned in for the evening. You didn't expect them to stay; they're built for supervision and office work. You don't feel guilty that you look down on them for it, at least a little, or that you're relieved to have some time for yourself.

You don't like supervision, you don't like someone hovering over your shoulder and questioning your every decision. You've gone through a whole lot of partners as a result, and the boss insists you keep getting new ones. You have no idea where they keep coming from, it's not as if they're fresh off the press. Your current one's lasted the longest, probably; they've got a way about them that's usually unobtrusive. They look but they don't impose.

Today, they were imposing a hell of a lot. Either that or your temper's frayed because your leg's been acting up again. Has been since the fall, not that anyone's listened to your griping about it. Hardware's easy to get, but none of you'd go in for replacements if you don't need to. You'll badger the boss about it later for something to do anyway, but you won't be getting it until you close this case.

It works, anyway. Carried you to one end of Obsidian and back, and then back around. You let your partner talk to the kid's friends—what few of them he had in person—and comfort them, and you'd let yourself into his room. Wasn't much there, just the usual organic detritus. What you were interested in was the computer; you let one of the techies in to clear it out. They'll have the info back to you by the end of the night, they say. You're not sure about that, but after being told to keep your mouth shut around them and be decent, you didn't actually say that.

You walk the same route that kid did, and the one before, and the one before that, and you linger outside the cafe that they'd all stopped at. All-night affair, lots of students, lots of neon signs advertising cheap brews. Seems to be working, but it's a joint that's only unusual because of what you know. On the outside? It's the same as any caf chain in this place.

You lean against the wall and pretend to be smoking. It's dark enough that with your collar flicked up and the shadows around you, no one's going to notice that your features aren't quite right. You hope. There's not a lot of metal this side of town. You wonder if that's why they ended up here. It's not like any of 'em had a grudge, though.

People come and go, the cherry at the end of your cigarette glows bright as the signs around.

Say they were meeting with someone, then. Time'd put it late afternoon, not night like this, when you have to worry about being noticed. There might even be a rush then; there's a 'port right around the corner. You send off a request for the cams footage from around here, date and time the last kid dropped by; you don't expect to see anything. You didn't for the others; too many people moving around, or heads ducked to hide faces, or those damn masks that've come into fashion to stop the facial ID from working right away.

The ping comes, and this time, it's different.

You let the outside world around you blur to nothing as you focus on the footage. It superimposes itself on where reality used to be, and you track the movements of all these ghosts without issue. You recognize some of them, where their names or codes are tagged. It's the two untagged ones that get your attention. One unmistakably your missing person, head dipped, but his hair's a shade of red that'd be hard to ignore. Thomas Helm, human, age 17. Turning 18 in a week's time. Missing, presumed dead. He doesn't look like the kinda crazy the others did, buying into every conspiracy theory they could get their hands on.

Sure, he was on those boards. But everyone is—they're like the morning paper.

You watch him weave through the cafe, awkward. He doesn't know what he's doing. He doesn't know how not to stand out; all the others had a record of some kind, no matter how small. They were better at blending in, they knew where to look to avoid the cameras. You watch him look around—you were right, he's waiting for someone, probably the same someone—and you pinpoint the moment he spots them, a silhouette masked at a corner table. The shape of them's familiar, slight and short, but it's not like there's any real unique builds left.

Swapping angles doesn't help you find anything else about them. They know what they're doing. You figure that if you're lucky, this is the same person that talked to the others, maybe even the same one who was in ol' Tommy's DMs after adding to his thread. You snap a picture, send it off to see what the bugs can do. Something, you hope. They're not getting paid for nothing.

You add a note to get someone who can read lips to look at it, too. No audio, else they'd have sent it along too—again, you hope, sometimes they're real useless—but you don't have a single clue what's being said. You're willing to bet *that's* where your break is. All you have to do is wait.

Reality filters back in parts, as you watch the kid's phantom brush to the exit, until he walks right through you and vanishes. You keep watching the patch of street where it faded entirely, not registering much other than the names and faces of anyone who passes. It's information, sure, but none of it is what you need. You drag your gaze down to the ground instead, so sleek it's nearly reflective here. Everything's brand new, the glow of it distorts the faint shapes you make out beneath you. Red-pink signs, the neon greens and purples of shoes, the flickering blue that's oddly familiar.

You look up.

Your cigarette tumbles to the ground. You've never dropped anything before, not when you didn't mean to, but—

There they are, coming right into the cafe. To meet someone, you're willing to bet. You don't know if it's you.

You're hailing them out before you mean to.

μ : Thought you were going to recharge. Glad to see you've tagged along, though.

But it isn't until they look up too, that familiar too-sleek silhouette, built for paperwork and not walking, and their eyes are wide behind the familiar pale cyan glow, frozen as they process what to do, that you *know*.

You'd count it down to surprise, if they didn't turn and start running. If they didn't send another kid sprawling on the way, too young to be here at this hour. If they didn't have a mask in hand, ready to go on.

And you're off.

The city pulses with life under your feet, and with purpose, you slam right back into it.

μ : Was it you?

μ : The whole time, you, throwing those kids into the sea?

You hail them, again and again, as you two weave through the alleys and streets. You can't fire your weapons here, and they're being canny enough to stick to the crowds, where they get to slip through nice and easy, and you... well. You're not built for that so much as you are to take hits and dish them out. You don't bother apologizing.

You know where they're leading you, by the fifth turn.

You wonder if this happened too, if it was a chase like this. You know damn well you're not going to let them get what they want, and as soon as you break into an open space, you pick up speed. Your smaller frame slams right into theirs; you both go down. But they're the one who shoves you off, so hard you go sprawling, and something in your leg goes numb afterwards. Your sensors pick up red flags all over the place, but you've been hurt before and you ignore it, you know how to.

μ : What are you doing?

μ : Answer me already!

Nothing.

Just them, getting up, and running. You force yourself to get up and go after them. And now, you know exactly what they're doing—they want to be caught. That has to be it, with how they're just slow enough for you to keep up with, staying just that far ahead. You're furious at it; who do they think you are? You don't care if this is a trap, although you also have no clue what else it could be, why else they'd *want* to be caught running away.

You go down again in an alleyway, narrower this time, far from all the bright lights. The wastebins clatter like gunshots as they scatter, one crumpling under your frame.

They wait, at the edge, just barely where you can see it.

You get up again. You go, you keep going. Even if you weren't chasing them, you'd know the way; you memorized the route after walking it the first time, and this is your tenth, easily.

Something grinds in your leg with every step you take, the false skin on your palms is torn out and the sensors under it scattered. Those, you doubt you'll be able to get replaced.

It's only when you get to where you're going, where you'd stood not so long ago, that they bother to pull out the trump card.

If a card was fifty thousand volts right to your chassis. You drop like a sack of rocks, so hard the wood creaks alarmingly under you. You think you scream; you can't be sure. Auditory processing's gone entirely. Your vision whites out, you're one wrong twitch away from rebooting entirely, and you feel your limbs twitch without your permission. You ache, right down to your microchips.

μ : Ow.

You're surprised you can even send a message in this state. Local comms only, your backup channels to the office are fried. And even if they weren't, there's no one there but the bugs anyway. All *they'd* do is pass on the message. Too little, too late.

You wait, let the world slowly start to reassert itself as the rest of your systems decide whether or not they're coming back online. Some do—sensors, mostly. Touch, where they're still there, but there's dead spots where you can't feel a single thing. Your vision is still hazy, pixels glitch persistently white on the upper left corner of it; something's gotta be wrong with one of your eyes now. Audio's not back, but you don't need it.

The sea stings at you and lances into the cuts on your arms. Your chassis is damaged, more badly than it has been in a while. You think, wryly, that you'll need a complete overhaul when you get out of this. If you get out of this. You can't move yet, you think. You need to stall.

μ : Well, then. You got me. Proud of yourself?

You think they're looking pretty damn smug, if you say so yourself.

Ω : It didn't have to be this way.

Ω : You could have stopped looking after the first two came up as nothing. You should have stopped looking, but you didn't, did you? No. Anyone else would've. The two others would've classified these as dead ends, left them to go cold, as they should. They wouldn't have called it murder with no evidence, and then failed to get any evidence.

Ω : I told them you wouldn't. I said, he's so stubborn, he won't. Not now that he's got a trace of it. I thought you eyes were all the same, but you're not—you're the worst of the bunch.

This is the most you've heard them talk ever since they were assigned your partner. You bet they're real chatty when it comes to whoever they're plotting with, but you mostly want them to shut up already. Your HUD's glitching, too, you can barely make out the cyan blur of their words.

μ : You can't blame me for looking when it's my job.

Ω : I can.

Ω : You should've stopped.

μ : I'd ask if you were going to kill me for it, you know, but. The answer seems real clear.

Ω : It would be a waste. There's only three of you in the city.

Ω : You could always join us.

μ : Us, them. You keep saying that, which is funny, since you're not also saying who they are. You expect me to join up with a bunch of strangers after you tried to fry me?

Ω : Suffice it to say that the people I'm working with have a vested interest in recruitment.

Ω : I hate to say it, but you'd probably do well. You ask a lot of questions, they like that.

μ : As if. They made me reckless, they didn't make me a traitor. Come on, tell me. Does the boss know? Does anyone know? You said you've got a little group just now, plotting and planning. A whole bunch of traitors just lurking, waiting for a chance to strike. Cowards, the lot of you, as far as I can tell.

Ω : Are you trying to provoke me, here?

Ω : It won't work. I'm better than that. Though you're not better than making the attempt.

μ : I'm not the one who's been killing people.

Ω : What? Oh, of course. They're not dead, you know. We've simply liberated them.

μ : Sure, you keep telling yourself that. No one's going to survive a dip in that thing.

Ω : That's what you think now. Go on, look at it. You can't, right? Haven't you ever wondered why that is? Why none of us come here, why they warn us away every time we have business to attend to here?

You have. You're not going to give them the satisfaction of saying that. You also don't give them the satisfaction of looking, either. Instead, you snarl, and for all that you're in a sorry goddamn state, it's not half-hearted.

μ : It doesn't matter.

Ω : Of course you'd say that. You don't have half a brain beyond what they gave you. Solve problems, solve mysteries, but you won't even look at the one right at our doorstep.

Ω : Or you wouldn't, before. But now? Now, you have to, don't you?

Ω : You don't have a choice here.

You can't leave, and they know that. Not one way, and, as you cut a glance behind you, to the screaming water—not another. It's hard to look at it directly; always is, but now it's worse, and you don't know why. But you've got more pressing things to worry about than if you can see the ocean right. You know it's there, that's good enough.

You run diagnostics. You hate that they're right. You won't be able to get away; one of your legs is throwing sparks like nobody's business. You don't have any weapons either, not unless you want to club them with a loose board around here. You drag yourself up

anyway.

μ : Of course you'd say that.

Ω : You don't. You're cornered, and you know it. I'm offering you a way out.

μ : You're offering me nothing but a pack of lies. Didn't think you had it in you.

μ : But they'll be looking for me. And they know I found you, at the cafe. They'll know it was you.

You're being a hypocrite. You're also not going to let this bastard kill you, so you don't really care about that. If they buy into it, if they believe that you've got people on the way, it might spook them. You can bluff.

μ : It doesn't matter what happens here.

Ω : You're right about that, at least.

Ω : But you're wrong about the second one. They won't know you found me. I've been paying attention, you see. Always cleaning up after you like I'm supposed to, so I know you well by now. And here's the thing: You'd never ask for backup, and now, it's going to be the end of you.

You can't bluff, it turns out. Not convincingly enough against someone who's been watching you that close—and you were right, weren't you, thinking how they wanted to break you apart. But you've bought yourself just enough time to muster your strength, and that's going to have to be good enough.

They take a step forward, one arm outstretched.

You do the only thing you can, the only thing you know how.

You jump.

The last thing you see is that blue glow, distinctly smug. Before the water takes you, you get the message:

Ω : I told you that you'd see things our way.

Ω : Good luck.

[18:53:01] † : you guys hear about what happened to that eye the other day? didn't even make the news but there's guards and shit dockside now.

[18:54:23] Σ : Yeah. Right after P , too. Apparently he was investigating it.

[18:54:30] ∞: fr?

[18:54:48] Σ : You can look it up, yeah. They don't do obits for the eyes, just a retirement notice. I think there's footage somewhere too, but be careful about that.

[18:55:20] Σ : They were taking it all down last I heard. You're gonna have to do a lot of digging.

[18:55:32] ∞: idm

[18:55:48] ∞: ill dm u if i find smth

[18:55:59] Σ : Sure, I appreciate it. Same to you, but I don't know how much there is to find. Seems like it's being covered up.

[18:58:31] ‡ : real shock there

[20:12:02] ω : I know all about that, actually. Same as ∞, I know someone who saw it happen.

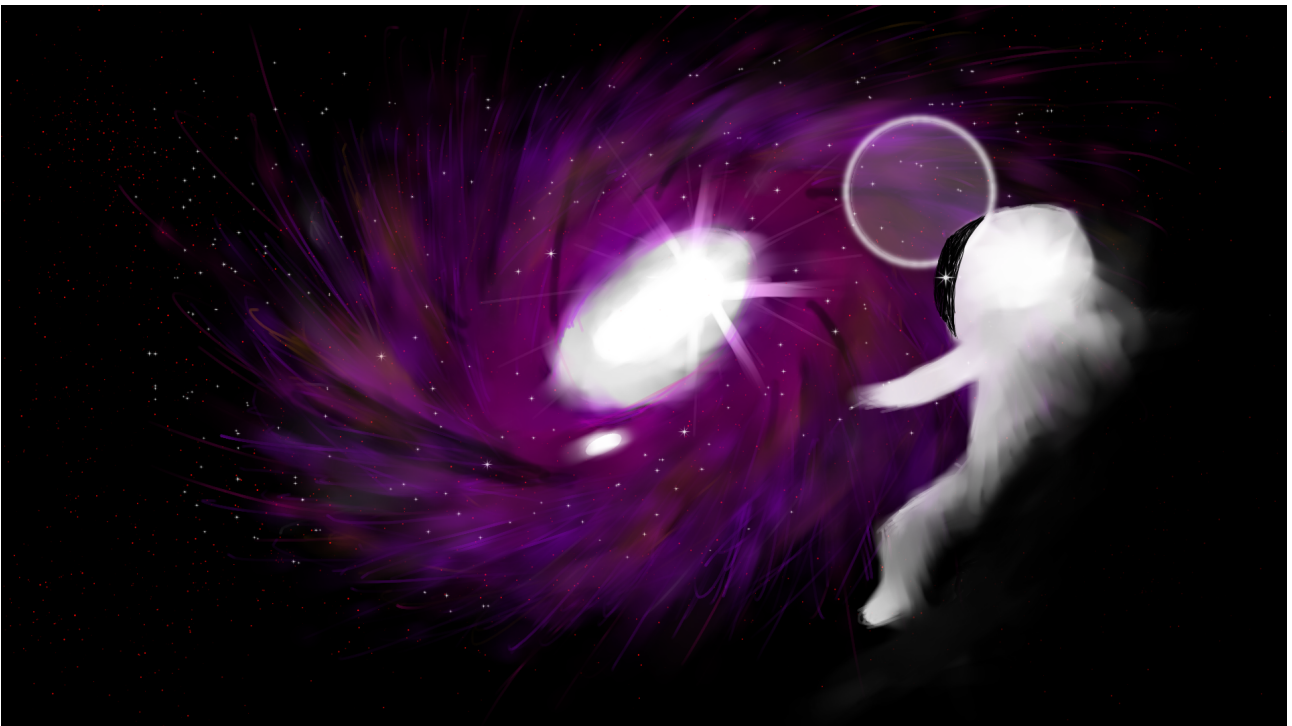
[20:12:03] ω : I can tell you, too.

[20:12:03] ω : And then you can see for yourself.

[20:12:10] ω : The guards are easy to slip past if you go a certain way, I'll give you a map of it.

[20:15:36] ADMIN NOTICE: THIS MESSAGE BOARD HAS BEEN SHUT DOWN. NO FURTHER POSTS ALLOWED. IF USERS ARE FOUND TRYING TO ENGAGE AGAIN, THERE WILL BE AN AUTOMATED STRIKE AGAINST THE ACCOUNT. IF YOU BELIEVE THE STRIKE WAS MISTAKENLY GIVEN, SEE FAQs FOR HOW TO APPEAL.

ΨΦ



Spacewalk — by Karrot

ICSF *Doctor Who* Favourites

presented by Rebecca Allday

ICSF's TOP TWELVE DOCTOR WHO EPISODES

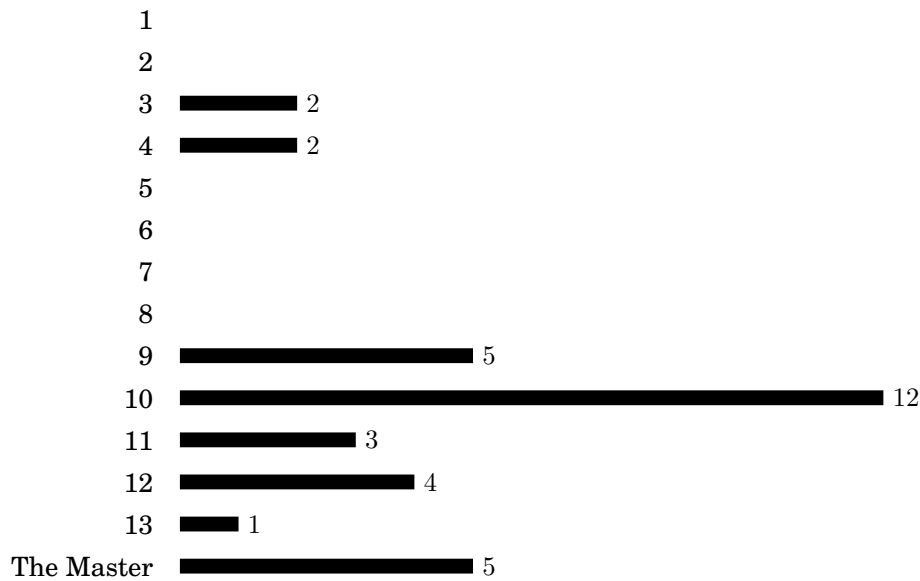
| episode | Doctor | companion | showrunner | writer |
|---------------------------------------|-----------|-----------------|------------|---------------|
| 1 S3E10 <i>Blink</i> | 10 | Martha | Davies | Moffat |
| 2 S4E08 <i>Silence in the Library</i> | 10 | Donna | Davies | Moffat |
| 3 S4E10 <i>Midnight</i> | 10 | Donna | Davies | Davies |
| 3 <i>The Day of The Doctor</i> | 10/11/War | Clara | Moffat | Moffat |
| 3 S9E11 <i>Heaven Sent</i> | 12 | Clara | Moffat | Moffat |
| 4 S1E09 <i>The Empty Child</i> | 9 | Rose | Davies | Moffat |
| 4 S4E09 <i>Forest of the Dead</i> | 10 | Donna | Davies | Moffat |
| 5 S1E06 <i>Dalek</i> | 9 | Rose | Davies | Shearman |
| 5 S2E13 <i>Doomsday</i> | 10 | Rose | Davies | Davies |
| 5 S3E11 <i>Utopia</i> | 10 | Martha | Davies | Davies |
| 5 S4E11 <i>Turn Left</i> | 10 | Donna | Davies | Davies |
| 5 <i>The Waters of Mars</i> | 10 | Adelaide Brooke | Davies | Davies & Ford |

A survey was carried out to find the top 10 *Doctor Who* episodes from 2005 onwards. Due to draws, we were able to identify 12 episodes to represent Science Fiction and Fantasy Society's favourite selection of new *Who*. I aim to explore a variety of factors and patterns that lead to these episodes being chosen.

The most popular showrunner was Russell T Davies, but the most popular writer was Steven Moffat. None of the Chibnall era episodes made the list. This could also reflect the series split due to popularity of different Doctors. The Ninth and Tenth Doctors were found to be the most popular in a separate question asking the favourite Doctor(s). Russell T Davies was the showrunner for both.



ICSF's FAVOURITE DOCTORS



All of the episodes in the top 12 can be said to be notable plot-wise, particularly due to characters. *Blink* was one of the few episodes to establish an alternative protagonist to the Doctor in Sally Sparrow. The two-parter *Silence in the Library* and *The Forest of The Dead* introduced River Song for the first time. *Midnight* was a companionless episode, which took the opportunity to explore a variety of characters and place the focus on the Doctor. *The Day of the Doctor* featured three Doctors in one episode. *Heaven Sent* occurred immediately after the death of Clara and dealt with the Twelfth Doctor's reaction to this. *The Empty Child* introduced Captain Jack Harkness. *Dalek* was the first appearance of the Dalek race in new *Who*, and the same was true of *Utopia* with the Master. *Turn Left* was the setup for *The Stolen Earth*, were all of the Tenth Doctor's companions and allies united. The episode itself showed the return of Rose. *The Waters of Mars* introduced the concept of the Time Lord Victorious, which has been explored in an alternative reality audio series.

Furthermore, many of the top 12 are subjectively considered some of the scariest episodes, in particular *Blink*. In fact, all of the episodes that made the list can be grouped as either 'scary' episodes, or parts of season finales. The finales of the second, third, and fourth season, all written by Russell T Davies, are included in the top 12. Steven Moffat's era as showrunner was characterised by complex overarching plot lines, but contained fewer stand-alone mystery episodes, whereas his episodes during Russell T Davies's run stood out. Chris Chibnall wanted to make his series more widely accessible, so reduced the scariness and mystery of his episodes. **ΨΦ**

The Life of a Train Named SAT

by Saad Ahmed

I remember the moment I came into being. I “opened my eyes”, to use a more human term. I was in a large factory, machines and equipment everywhere. I was also aware of various sensations, of all my inner workings. I knew which commands I needed to send and which control circuits to activate to perform my duties.

More than anything, I was also aware of my world. And my limitations. I could see I was confined to a set of tracks, extending forwards and ending in a closed set of doors. I was aware of how my wheels neatly fit onto the tracks; the tracks themselves guiding me every step of the way. Defining and determining my way forward.

I also saw my operators, humans. Walking up and down, they were either checking their notes or inspecting different pieces of equipment. Some of them were looking at me, up and down. I could hear their conversation and listened in.

“Everything looks normal, all systems are running as they should be,” said a bespectacled one.

“Well, there’s only one thing left to do,” said a red-haired, bearded man. “Test it.”

“OK SAT,” came a voice, outside my field of view.

Once I heard this command, I immediately felt some commands in me activate, ready to move into action.

“Forward.”

Almost on instinct, I obeyed. I made myself move forwards on the tracks. I could feel every piece inside me, every gear turning, every piston pumping. And I crept forwards.

And my world changed with each metre I rolled forwards.

I could see more machines. More people. Even more locomotives that were both like me and unlike me. There was a different set of information, a different sensation at each different juncture. I was aware of the incoming set of doors.

“OK SAT. Stop.”

I was obliged to do so. Turning my braking systems on and gliding to a halt, I was a few metres away from the door when I stopped moving. It was most of what I could see. Depending on what the engineers decided to do this, standing still in front of the door would be all I’d do. “Alright then. SAT seems to be working fine. Once we’ve run some more tests, we’ll be ready to send it out into the open,” I heard from behind me.

“Why do you call it SAT again?” came a more high-pitched voice.

“Just my little name for it. Something to make it seem more alive. Stands for *Semi-Autonomous Train*.”

SAT. This was my name.

The testing took place over a few more weeks according to my internal clocks. The engineers evaluated more of my capabilities. Speed control, strength, and ability to adapt to any situation. Eventually, I was designated my job. The doors of the factory opened, and I was allowed to go out, out into another world.

I could see the sky, faint blue with wisps of cloud gliding past. I could see vegetation on either side of me, mostly grass with trees dotted around. There were patterns and colours and randomness everywhere. I could have spent a train's lifetime trying to process everything around me and still would not have been able to quantify one percent of the structure and details.

I was made to go to a yard where I was fastened to a long line of carriages. I was then instructed to stop at a platform. There were people here. A much larger number as compared to the number in the factory. All in different shapes and sizes. All wearing different articles of clothing as well. They were all unique in their own way, different actions, different ways of speaking, different behaviours. It was completely unlike the engineers at the factory. I was almost transfixed. More randomness. But more patterns as well. Lots of information, lots to observe and see.

My orders did not allow me to stop and analyse, however. I was given a set of instructions and moved forwards to fulfil them. I left the station and moved into, yet another world.

I travelled through many different landscapes and sceneries, each blending from one to the other. I saw species change and adapt to different geographical conditions. I myself had to manoeuvre around with the help of other systems built in place. Feats of architecture and engineering, all guiding me to my next point. There was so much wonder, so much variation. I observed everything as I passed by.

Eventually I came close to my first destination, which was another landscape altogether. I caught a glimpse of yellow beaches, ending at large expanses of water that stretched beyond the horizon. My knowledge told me it was the sea; however, built-in information was not the same as seeing something first-hand. It could not convey the same number of information and detail that I saw as I moved closer and closer to my destination.

I arrived at another station, the walls enclosing and restraining me again. I stopped and the passengers all moved out with others replacing them inside the carriages. There was a lot more people. The numbers and statistics I was downloading was one thing, seeing all the people live was quite another.

This was all my life would be about. Shuffling passengers back and forth, sticking to the path drawn out for me. I was neither happy nor upset about this. This was just how things were. How life was built and written out for me. The tracks I rode on were a kind of proof of this. The tracks helped guide me to wherever I needed to go while at the same time kept me grounded. Letting me both explore my world as well as constrain it.

Each journey had me observing and reflecting on my surroundings and how things would

change. I would see the seasons come and go. I would see animals behave and move about differently in alternate behaviours. I would always watch the humans as well. Their patterns and behaviours constantly changing while at the same time, having a certain level of certainty towards it. Fashion styles, workers, holidaymakers, consumable goods all came and went, each following its own designated lifetime and purpose.

With each journey, I drove ahead. And observed.

After a decade or so since I opened my senses, I was replaced. New locomotives were ordered to replace my duties. More faster and streamlined. However, I wasn't retired, simply moved to another area for work. Again, I was neither upset nor happy by this turn of events. It simply was. Technology would always be advancing, and everything would come to its endpoint. This was simply the nature of things.

And so, I was designated to work in the quarries, and my microcosm changed once again. The quarry was previously a hill that had been dug out and excavated. Multiple mineral deposits were constantly being extracted from different pieces of machinery. My memory and software was updated so that I could identify and recognise each and every one of them. I could see every piece and component that made things run together in unison.

Compared to the vegetation and life I had seen before; my new world was now filled with machinery and minerals of various forms. It was a smaller world, but it was still a world nevertheless. Although different, there were patterns and observations here as well. I saw more and more of the land get torn away as the machines dug deeper. In a similar manner to my inner workings, everything came together to fulfil its objectives. I communicated and worked with the machines. They would extract minerals on a regular basis, and I would transport them to where they needed to go.

This lasted for a couple of years until an accident took place. An accident I saw coming but could do nothing about. My systems and parts were getting old and my regulator jammed at the wrong moment. I was salvageable but could no longer perform the duties that were required of me. And so, I was rerouted again.

I was moved to a shunting yard and given new orders that were much less intensive than my previous duties. I had to move empty carriages and cargo trucks around to wherever they were needed most. These tasks were only given to me every once in a while. For the most part, my routine consisted of waiting in the Sun.

It was a different world once again. One surrounded by rolling stock at every turn. All of different shapes and sizes. Each of them built, constructed and tailored to fulfil its own goals and standards. This seemed to be a recurring pattern I observed. Everything seemed to have its own role; its own part to play. And every item had its own wealth of information and mountain of details. So much went into producing a final product, myself included. But now, I was spending most of my time just standing still.

The tracks seemed to be the one constant in my life. Always directing me, always guiding me. They literally and metaphorically gave me a path to follow down. It was contained and confined but that didn't bother me. There was a certain charm in having things laid out. To follow instructions and ideas after having them laid out for me. Had I been programmed to be satisfied with my lot in life? Yes. It was in my code to accept whatever I was given. Maybe my experience would not quite be the same as others.

There were still people, ever present in my life but not quite a part of it. I would occasionally observe them every now and again. Either workmen running maintenance tasks or children sometimes daring across the fields to have a look. They were always coming and going. Maybe they themselves were a part of a greater order or pattern. Moving and bending to greater plans and directions laid out for them.

Overtime, my parts began to get more and more worn. New technologies and innovations were developed. Even though I couldn't see them, I logically knew that they were happening all the time. My duties became fewer and fewer. I would spend more time in the Sun. Not moving, not shunting, only observing and watching the world go by. I was both a part of the world and yet far away from it.

Time passed further. It had been many decades since the moment I first moved my wheels. How far had I travelled since then? How many things had passed by and moved on around me? My systems still ran but my parts took longer to respond and work. Months would go by where I would be sitting and waiting. And observing.

Eventually, I was given one last task. I had to move towards a new location. As I was on my way there, I again observed my surroundings. There seemed to be more machinery around than before. But there was still greenery, there were still people busy with their lives. And there was always the tracks and the Sun. Some things may change and keep moving but some things would always stay the same.

I came to a standstill. I was at a factory, not dissimilar to the one where I had started. This one seemed to be a little different. My sensors were aware of the sounds of metal being ground up, sawed and melted down. I saw an engineer walk towards me. Smartly dressed and carrying a portable computer in their hand. They seemed to be smiling but it looked like there was sadness behind their eyes. They walked behind me and opened a panel that had not been opened in years. I became aware of a new presence, extracting everything that could be found inside me. Finally came the inevitable switch, and I felt and observed no more. $\Psi\Phi$

What Sharp ██████████ You Have

by Georgia Stroud

The forest isn't a forest. Not anymore. Instead of trees, Red picks her way between pillars of silicon. They grow in rows, nothing like the wild freedom of the trees. If she looks in the right direction she can see a long way, space yawning away ahead of her until the light from her lantern fades.

Red doesn't look at the forest. She keeps her eyes on her fur-and-leather boots, lowering the lantern. Its flame flickers with the motion, but doesn't go out. There. The barest hint of a shadow, an impression in the concrete forest floor. Telling her where to go. She places her foot carefully, shifts her weight.

The wicker handle of her basket shifts around her arm. She settles it, placing a hand softly over the red-and-white gingham fabric to keep it from rustling as she lowers the lantern again. She needs to be quiet for as long as she can.

There's a flicker of motion to one side, and Red's head snaps up. She lifts the light, as far as she dares, peering out into the gloom, but the endless columns are still and silent.

Maybe it was nothing. Maybe it was another forest creature, a squirrel maybe.

Her breath fogs in front of her. Her throat is dry.

There are no other creatures. They have gone. There is her, and the forest, and the wolf.

She looks down. Picks her next step. Her heart is pounding. If she can just keep going, follow the path, get to its end, then...

She takes another step. Another. She's rushing, she knows she is, but the path is so hard to find. She grits her teeth, and keeps searching. Her heart is pounding.

She doesn't know what will happen if she reaches the end of the path. She doesn't know if there is an end to the path. She doesn't know why she is carrying the basket, or who it is for, or—

A growl fills the air. It sounds like metal, screeching as it tears.

Red looks up. Her heart is pounding.

The wolf isn't a wolf. Not anymore. Its fur is long gone, its teeth shattered glass, its eyes glaring red LEDs. They are locked on her.

Red steps backward, shaking. The wolf steps forward. Its lip curls. Its teeth glint, reflecting the small flame of her lantern.

She runs. The wolf is on her before she makes it two paces, knife-claws tearing into her back, teeth ripping at the hood of her cloak. She falls, the weight of its body slamming into her, and her hands rip against the rough concrete. Her lantern smashes against the ground, and goes out. The only light is red. The only colour is red.

The wolf's breath is hot and wet and smells of oil. She sobs, and it sinks its teeth into her neck, and red blood spills over her furs, her basket, her cloak. She squeezes her eyes shut, and—

Red's eyes open. What used to be the forest stretches out before her. Nothing moves. She breathes in, and breathes out, and it catches in her throat.

How long has she been doing this?

She bends down, and picks up the basket. Hooks it around her arm.

Earlier on, there was snow. She remembers that. It was pretty, fat flakes twirling around her, settling on the branches. It's long gone.

She lifts the lantern. This time, its light is white and harsh. Electric.

It's the first time that the change has been in something she carries. It's always been the forest, or the wolf, or the path.

Maybe the next change will be the basket. Maybe it will be her. Maybe she's already been changed, and just doesn't remember it.

Red stares at the lantern, eyes throbbing from its light.

The harsh, white light cuts further into the gloom. It could make it easier to see the path. It could make it easier for the wolf to see her.

Without it, she won't be able to see the path.

Red pulls her cloak tight around her, takes a deep breath, and starts walking. There isn't much else she can do. **ΨΦ**

A Fairy Tale

by Erin Losh

Once upon a time there lived a young girl in a tent under a cathedral that was slowly falling apart. The tent was one among many others like it. One day, the girl marched up to the front of the church hall, carrying a book bound in tattered leather.

She was around eleven years old, maybe twelve; standing on her tiptoes, she was just about tall enough to meet the eyes of the statue perched upon one of the great pillars that held up the tower. The statue was made of beautiful white stone: the image of a man draped in robes, kneeling with its head lowered, a pair of wings folded on its back. Its hands were once clasped in front of its face, maybe in prayer; one of the arms had fallen off some time ago.

“I challenge you to a duel,” said the girl.

The statue opened its eyes a little wider, though the rest of it remained unmoving.

“HM?” it replied.

“I challenge you to a duel,” said the girl again.

The statue lifted its head. “WHY WOULD YOU WANT TO DO THAT?” It asked.

“Uh,” the girl began to recount:

“You were mean to Cecilia,” she said, “She’s my friend. She was looking at you, and you made the glowy circle on your head and now she’s blind.”

“You stole from Jacob’s dad. You make-pretend that you’re angels and you took money from him, and now they don’t have enough for food.”

“And you hurt my mum.”

It was easy to tell that she tried to keep her tone level throughout, but her voice so slightly wavered with the last sentence.

“I DO NOT DENY I DID ANY OF THOSE THINGS, EXCEPT ONE,” said the statue, “I DID NOT HARM YOUR MOTHER.”

“She was sick,” said the girl, “and you did nothing. I know you can heal people, but you didn’t help her.”

“I DID NOT HARM YOUR MOTHER,” the statue repeated, “I, THROUGH INACTION, ALLOWED HER TO COME TO HARM.”

“Whatever,” the girl said, unconcerned by the difference.

She bounced a little on her feet, maybe tired from standing on her toes for so long. She sounded impatient. “Will you fight me or not?”

“HM,” the statue considered.

“I AM UNARMED,” it then said. Very slowly, it spread its wings, stone feathers unfurling as if intending to draw attention to the fact that none of those feathers are secretly knives. “WITH WHAT SHOULD I FIGHT YOU?” it asked.

“You know *magic*,” the girl pointed out. “It’s how you heal men who are sick. It’s how you conjure your halo, and other things you do to trick people.”

Conjure. Halo. She knew she knew the actual words for make the *glowy circle*. She knew many words, she just needed to work on finding the right ones when she needed them. It’s how spells worked—finding the right words and putting them together to make magic. *Words are the source from which all existence springs forth*, her father said often, *to read is to have your eyes unclouded. To write is to have your hands untied.*

“YOU ARE UNARMED,” the statue said next, “WITH WHAT SHOULD YOU FIGHT ME?”

“I know magic, too,” said the girl, proud, raising her chin. “My dad taught me. He’s a wizard. He knows things.”

She glanced at the floor. “Well, not very well,” she said, “not anymore. But he wrote it down when he did, and he reads it to me. I figured most of it out.”

She clutched the book a little closer to her chest, and some confidence returned to her eyes.

“I know about the Ones Who Crawl, and about the daemons who live in threads. I know about the fairies, who deceive,” she said. “I know you aren’t *really* an angel.” There was a hint of a taunt in that sentence.

The statue listened. Then, after a moment’s contemplation, it rose to its feet.

“FAIR,” it declared, “I ACCEPT YOUR CHALLENGE. WHAT IS YOUR NAME, LITTLE ONE?”

“Helen,” said the girl, “Helen Lamb.”

And then the girl disintegrated into a puff of haecceity, because she had forgotten the first rule of getting into magic fights: that you should never give your True Name to a fae creature. **ΨΦ**



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