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Doctor Who: The Art of Destruction

Stephen Cole



The
Art
of
Destruction

BY STEPHEN COLE

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Contents

[Cover Page](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Collect all the exciting new Doctor Who adventures](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[About the Author](#)

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The darkness played tricks on you, down here. The red light of the torch barely lit the surroundings, and in the cold blackness pressing in beyond it was easy to imagine you could glimpse things moving. Not the bats, nestling high up in the cave roofs in their thousands, but silent, looming creatures, waiting patiently in the dark to get you.

Kanjuchi shivered, and was cross with himself for feeling afraid. He must have made a hundred trips beneath the volcano and all he had ever encountered were the bats, their slimy filth on the floor and Fynn's precious fungus, which grew in it. But then, the caves and tunnels stretched on for kilometres, and so far they had only farmed a few hundred metres west and barely touched the eastern network. Now, with the early tests showing good results, they were excavating deeper and deeper...

'Come on, Kanjuchi. Get a move on.'

Adiel's voice made him jump. He turned to look at her.

'I've got stuff I need to do tonight, OK?' She was short and sparky, with hair in dreadlocks and a smile that was warm like a child's.

No smiles today. She seemed on edge.

'Sorry,' he said. 'I was just... just...'

'It's OK. This place gives me the creeps too.' She patted him lightly on the shoulder. 'Let's just get on to the new chambers and check how the 'shrooms have taken.'

Kanjuchi nodded and quickened his step along the stone pathway through the centre of the fungus. The red light didn't disturb the wildlife or the 'shrooms, but it made everything that bit creepier. The cave narrowed and the

ceiling sloped down, and soon he was leading the way into one of the connecting tunnels.

‘I hadn’t realised Fynn had gone so deep,’ Adiel murmured.

‘Take a two-week vacation and this is what happens,’ Kanjuchi replied.

‘Progress?’

‘Desperation. Results aren’t satisfying the sponsors.’

She scoffed. ‘No kidding.’

‘He’s had to step up the programme.’

The tunnel snaked from side to side. Kanjuchi tried to keep looking at the ashen ground ahead of him. He hated the tunnels most, relics of the route taken by the seething lava as it drained underground thousands of years ago. Now, in the dull red light from his torch, the formations left behind seemed like hideous faces screaming in pain. Stalactites hung from the roof like scores of teeth, forcing you to crouch lower and lower as you made your way along. The air was stale and cold, and Kanjuchi longed to be back in the scorching African sunlight above ground.

‘This is the first of the new chambers.’

Kanjuchi stood aside to let Adiel through first. The narrow opening was between two boulders; she, of course, slipped gracefully into the cave without touching the sides. Kanjuchi sucked in his paunch and squeezed through after her with embarrassing difficulty. Damn Fynn and his corner-cutting, and damn that junk about preserving natural habitats – there should be clear ways in and out of the farm chambers.

‘Why does he insist on following this line of research?’ Adiel murmured, shining her data-get on the large, fleshy arrowheads. The data-get beeped to signal its survey was complete. ‘He’s obsessed. But if he thinks –’

‘What’s that?’ Kanjuchi’s torch beam had caught on something on the walkway beyond the fungal field. ‘It’s sparkling!’ He crossed closer to see a nugget of metal just lying in the middle of the walkway. ‘Looks like... *gold*.’

‘Come off it. How can it be?’

‘I don’t know, but...’ He shone his torch beyond and gasped. ‘Adiel, look, there’s more of it here! The whole pathway’s littered with the stuff. It’s sort of glowing.’

‘It can’t be *real* gold,’ she said, sounding uneasy. ‘Let’s settle this right now...’

But Kanjuchi wasn’t listening. He stooped to pick up the nugget for a closer look. It was glowing like a coal in a furnace. Suddenly it flipped and rolled closer, as if propelled by some invisible force.

As if it was eager to be held.

Astounded, Kanjuchi snatched his hand away. But he wasn’t fast enough.

The glowing blob somehow *stretched*, darted forwards like a snake, touched his fingertips. Sucked at them. He cried out in fear.

‘What the hell...’ Adiel took hold of his shoulders. ‘Kanjuchi, what *is* that?’

‘Help me!’ he shouted, trying to shake the blob free. But it was clinging on, beginning to distort and flow over his fingers like thick glue.

‘Stop playing around -’

Kanjuchi gasped as a hot, searing pain shot through his palm. It felt like his fingers had been bitten clean off. But there they were in the dim red light, gleaming, flexing and twitching as if with a life of their own. Mutely he held them up to show Adiel. She backed away, staring at him in horror.

‘Oh, my God,’ she croaked.

‘It’s eating my arm!’ he screamed, staring terrified as the stuff kept flowing, over his wrist, up on to his forearm. Panicking, he brushed at it with his other hand – and the glowing, flickering metal began to devour that too. ‘No!’

‘I’ll get help,’ Adiel told him, slipping back through the narrow gap in the boulders.

He tried to follow her, but got wedged in the opening. ‘Adiel, come back!’ He turned sideways, tried to squeeze through. But now his red-gold arms were rising from his sides of their own accord, anchoring him against the cold, distorted rock, trapping him there.

Through the gap he could see Adiel fleeing away from him down the sinuous passage. Only his screams followed her.

Engines rasping like a giant’s dying breaths, the TARDIS forced itself into existence in the middle of the crop field. It grew solid only slowly, as if exhausted by its long voyage through time and space. Finally, there it stood, improbable and serene under the baking sun – an old-fashioned police box, like a big, blue blot on reality.

But if the incredible craft seemed a little worn out, its owner was most definitely not. He sprang from the box with the grace of a gangly gazelle, eyes wide and dark, brown hair bouncing over his brow. He grinned at the sight of the tall, fleshy plants pressing all around, then shook one by the leaves as if introducing himself. He puffed out his cheeks. ‘Flaming hot, isn’t it? Quite literally. Sauna in the Sahara sort of hot.’

He struggled out of his brown pinstriped jacket and flung it through the open TARDIS doors – just as a slim girl with shoulder-length blonde hair came out. She dodged aside yet still caught the jacket with the casual air of one

who spends most of their life ducking whatever fate might throw their way.

‘Thanks for that, Doctor,’ she said, smoothing out the fabric.

‘Rose Tyler!’ He gave her a crooked smile of appreciation. ‘You really are something special, aren’t you? Help me save the universe every other day, make sure we never run out of milk – and even offer a quality clothes-care service!’

‘Don’t thank me till you hear how much I charge.’ Rose smiled sweetly back and tossed his pinstripes on to the TARDIS floor. ‘It’s boiling out here.’ She smoothed down her light blue T-shirt so that it covered the waistline of her short denim skirt. ‘Where are we this time?’

‘Not sure,’ the Doctor admitted, rolling up his grey shirtsleeves. ‘Lots of weird alien static about when we dropped out of space-time. Whole area’s polluted. Clogged the sensors.’

‘So this is a planet that sees a lot of space traffic, then?’ She stepped out and looked round at the rows of towering crops, listening to the way they rustled in the warm wind. ‘Seems quiet enough. These plants are weird, though. Kind of like fat corn.’

‘Sort of,’ the Doctor agreed, taking hold of a fleshy leaf and tearing it. A gloopy liquid oozed out. ‘Allo, allo! Or rather, *Aloe barbadensis*. Aloe vera!’

‘Don’t call me Vera.’

‘Ha, ha. Oh, but it’s lovely stuff. Good old aloe vera. Good for the skin, and *great* for sunburn.’ He glanced reproachfully at the blinding sun, smeared some of the ooze on the back of his neck and set off along the nearest line of crops. ‘So, high-yield corn that also produces aloe vera, what does that tell you?’

Rose closed the TARDIS doors and hurried along after him. 'That this planet sells magic seeds?'

'That here be humans - probably future humans. Or at least, future human plants. Could be a colony? Dunno, though.' He stopped and jumped up and down on the dry soil. 'Feels like Earth. *Earthish*, anyway. Thought we were in the neighbourhood...'

'But what about the alien pollution stuff?' Rose asked, sniffing the air. 'Has everyone got their own spaceship in this time?'

'Seems to me -'

'Don't move,' snapped a low, warning voice close by.

'As I was saying...' The Doctor held obligingly still as gun barrels pushed out from both sides of the foliage, and glanced ruefully at Rose. 'Seems to me we're in something nasty and smelly - but probably very good for the crops here.'



Rose had half-expected alien nasties to reveal themselves holding the high-tech rifles, so it was with relief that she saw they were very definitely human and probably as scared as she was. Two black men. One was in his thirties, wearing light khaki shorts and a sweat-stained shirt. The other was around her age and good-looking. He filled a muscle T-shirt quite successfully and wore a straw hat to keep the sun from his bare shoulders.

‘How did you two get in here?’ asked the older man.

The Doctor nodded cheerily to the plants waving around them. ‘We often just crop up.’

‘Answer me.’

‘We found a gap in the... force field. No? Crack in the holo-shield? Wrinkle in the neutronic partition?’

‘There was a hole in the fence,’ Rose explained. ‘But we didn’t know we were trespassing. Where are we?’

‘Like you don’t know.’ He looked at the younger man. ‘Basel, do you recognise them?’

Basel sounded defensive. ‘Why should I?’

‘You spend enough time at the aid camps.’

The Doctor cocked his head to one side. ‘Why should you think we come from the aid camps, Mr...’

‘Chief Overseer. Name’s Solomon Nabarr.’ He eyed the Doctor mistrustfully. ‘You speak Arabic.’

He gave Rose a wily smile. ‘Course we do.’

Or rather, the TARDIS does, she thought. The ship was telepathic, it got inside your head and could translate any language you liked – as well as those you didn’t.

‘Now, you were saying about the aid camps...’

‘Aw, come on, man. This is Chad –’

‘Chad! Oh, fab! How cool is that? How *hot*, I mean. We’re in Africa, Rose!’

‘– and don’t get me wrong but from the colour of your skin and speaking the language, you’ve got to be one of three things – aid worker, journo or activist.’

‘Intelligent reasoning, like it.’ The Doctor grinned. ‘Completely wrong, though. Never mind. We’re travellers, that’s all. I’m the Doctor – not as in camp doctor, though some might say I have my moments – and this is Rose. You don’t look very comfy holding that gun. Why don’t you put it down and we can –’

Solomon wasn’t to be put off. ‘Only place you could stay without drawing attention is in a camp with the aid staff,’ he maintained, ‘unless you’re being hidden by activists. So which is it?’

‘They’re not activists, Solomon,’ Basel said, tightening his grip on the gun.

The Doctor looked at him enquiringly. ‘How do you know?’

He shrugged. ‘Activists wouldn’t act so weird. I reckon they’ve escaped from somewhere.’

Escaping from here would be nice, thought Rose, who was busy angling her head to check out Basel’s watch. It was a funky holographic digital thing, and obligingly told her it was 16.47 on 11 April 2118. She felt a familiar tingle

of disbelief – to these blokes, her time was as dim and distant as the Victorians were to her. She wondered at all the things that must have changed since her own day.

But as the sound of screaming tore through the sweltering afternoon, she knew that some things would always stay the same.

Basel's head jerked sideways towards the screams. 'Sounds like Adiel.'

'Or like our cue,' said Rose, snatching away his rifle.

Solomon turned at the sudden movement and the Doctor disarmed him just as easily – before handing the weapon straight back with a brilliant smile. 'Shall we see if she's all right, then? Lovely! Come on...'

Shoving Basel's rifle back into his arms, Rose promptly took off after the Doctor and Solomon, crashing through the thick, waving stalks and leaves. As they broke the cover of the crop field Rose caught her first proper look at her surroundings. A huge mountain loomed like a thick shadow against the pristine blue of the sky. A futuristic building hugged the ground beneath it, all metal frames and dark windows. A stretch of red, desert landscape lay to her left, but right now she was running over bark chippings or something, and a short black woman in overalls that had seen better days was running frantically to meet them, some *Star Trek* tricorder-style gadget in her hand.

'Kanjuchi,' she panted as she all but fell into Solomon's arms. 'The tunnels... Something happened to him.'

Basel barged angrily past Rose to reach the girl. 'What happened to him, Adiel?'

'Where is he now?' asked Solomon urgently.

'New growth chamber, he was screaming. We found some weird gold stuff and it...' She pulled free from Solomon and buried her face in Basel's T-shirt. 'It *ate* him.'

‘This sounds *right* up our street!’ roared the Doctor with embarrassing enthusiasm.

Adiel didn’t even seem to notice. ‘He’s stuck in the chamber, couldn’t get out!’

‘Rose, help Basel look after Adiel,’ the Doctor instructed.

‘Just quickly.’ She took hold of his shirt collar and pulled him close towards her. ‘It’s 2118. Is that future-ish enough to explain that space pollution you picked up?’

‘Nope,’ he said simply. ‘Right then, Solomon, show me the way to these tunnels.’

Solomon shook his head. ‘You’re staying here.’

‘Stop wasting time! I’m not!’

He raised the gun. ‘You *are*.’

‘It’s not even loaded!’ the Doctor protested, grabbing it back off him and squeezing the trigger. Shots rang out, and Rose and Basel yelped as several stalks of aloe corn met the reaper early. The Doctor hastily chucked the rifle way into the crop field, out of reach. ‘All right, then, it *is* loaded. But aren’t we wasting time? I think so. Now – tunnels! Adiel was running in this direction, *ergo*...’ He started to run off towards the mountain.

‘Come back!’ roared Solomon, taking Basel’s rifle and chasing after the Doctor. ‘Send some manuals to search the fields,’ he called back over his shoulder. ‘Check this pair haven’t damaged the crop. They might have planted something!’

‘Like what,’ Rose called after him. ‘Magic beans?’ She shook her head as she watched the Doctor sprint away through the shimmering heat haze, Solomon hard on his heels, waving the gun. ‘See ya, then.’

She looked at Basel. Not having a gun meant he could put both arms around the shivering Adiel, and he had

wasted no time doing so. But his dark eyes were rooted on Rose.

‘I won’t give you any trouble,’ she promised him. ‘But maybe you should make her a cup of tea for the shock or something, yeah?’

‘Or something,’ Basel murmured. He seemed to reach a decision. ‘All right. Come on. Help me get her inside.’

Solomon Nabarr pelted after the intruder, the stitch in his side tugging hard with every step. ‘Stop!’ he shouted for the tenth time. The Doctor was a good twenty metres ahead of him, nearing the entrance to the underground network now, and the gap was widening. Solomon fired a warning shot into the air.

The Doctor skidded to a stop and turned indignantly. ‘Look, Solomon, I’m not being rude – well, maybe I am – but how about you get your priorities right? I reckon I might be able to help. If it turns out I can’t, you can wave your gun about, chuck me out, all of that. Deal?’ Not waiting for an answer and ignoring the raised gun, the Doctor jogged over to the steel doors gaping open in the rock. ‘Through here, is it?’

Warily, Solomon nodded. ‘All right. But you’re going in ahead of me so I can keep my eye on you. I’ll direct you.’

The doors gave on to an access tunnel. The temperature dropped sharply, which was welcome after the run. The lights were turned almost as low as the jagged roof above them, but slowly Solomon’s eyes adjusted to the crimson glare.

‘Lava tubes!’ the Doctor declared, staring all around as he walked. ‘Molten lava pours down the volcano, the outer layers cool and solidify, but the core stream continues to flow – and evacuates itself completely to leave behind empty tube-ways through the rock.’

‘I did actually know how the tunnels come to be here,’ said Solomon wryly, as they reached the first of the caves. He took two torches from their hooks on the wall and passed one to the Doctor.

‘Blades, helictites... Geologist’s dream, this little lot. How far does the network stretch?’

‘Several kilometres, Fynn says.’ As he hurried on through the enormous cavern, Solomon’s shoe squelched in something wet and smelly. He grimaced and wished for protective clothing. ‘We’ve only cleared a few hundred metres so far. The tubes are very fragile to the east. We’re trying to shore them up but resources are limited...’

‘What resources? Aha!’ The bats rustled and chattered up above as the Doctor’s exclamation echoed round the cave. ‘I get it. You’re farmers!’

‘This is Agricultural Technology Unit 12.’

‘Farmers farming fungus inside a volcano! Genetically modified, is it, like the crops?’

Solomon grunted, continuing onwards. ‘The world needs food and there’s precious little land left in which to grow it. Global warming, desertification...’

‘So you’re using your “agriculture technology” to grow grub in the less obvious places.’ He considered. ‘Yep, under a volcano, that’s not at all obvious. And if we’re in Chad, we must be walking about underneath Mount Tarsus, right?’

‘You expect me to believe you don’t even know –’

The Doctor skidded to a slithery stop on the slimy walkway. ‘Hang on. Tarsus’s still active, isn’t it?’

Solomon didn’t stop to wait for him. ‘No eruptions for eighty years.’

‘Then aren’t you overdue one?’

‘How’d you think the agri-board beat them down on the land price?’ Solomon muttered. ‘Come on. It’s just through

there.'

He gestured with the gun along the passage that led to the freshly excavated growth chamber. The Doctor rounded a turn in the passage – and came to a sharp halt.

'No tricks,' warned Solomon.

'Tell *him* that,' said the Doctor quietly, moving aside so Solomon could come forwards.

He stared in disbelief, as if what he was seeing could be a trick of the red torchlight. Standing in front of the entrance, arms wide open, was what looked to be a golden statue. A statue of a man. The features were twisted and warped, but it was clearly –

'Kanjuchi,' Solomon whispered, feeling his stomach twist. He started forwards, but the Doctor took hold of his shoulder, held him back.

'No. Don't touch him.'

'But he's been hurt!'

'I'll examine him. I'm the Doctor, remember?' He advanced warily on the statue. 'Though even from this distance, I'd say he was dead.'

Solomon felt his legs sag beneath him, leaned against the rough basalt wall and tried not to be sick. 'Who would want to...' He shook his head. 'It's like he's been painted all over. Is that what killed him?'

'Like in James Bond, you mean? *Goldfinger*, that was the one.' He beamed over at Solomon. 'Who's playing Bond these days? Cal MacNannovitch was my favourite – it's always the one you grow up with, isn't it?' The Doctor's smile dropped. 'But no. Urban myth. People don't suffocate when you paint their skin. Something else killed this man.' He gingerly tapped Kanjuchi on the arm and a dull clang rang briefly round the tunnel. 'This stuff is way heavier than paint. It's holding him upright. And it's still warm.'