

By Joni Smith



Open the door. Turn it around on its hinges, like a dancer. Breathe in air. It's fine, bit more neon than usual... Duck under a branch of a tree coral, looking up as you do at the purple-blue sky.

Because you're still going, you know. You're still running. It's almost only the *shape* of running, like pressing a joystick. But the springy air warms your skin, and the leaf-moss is soft on your nerves, so it's worth it, in the end.

There's a building. You step inside, barely stopping to acknowledge the half-baked security measures. Someone gives you a cape of soft, feathery wings that ties itself snugly around your neck. Thank gods you've got bypass, just in case. You feel that *something's* wrong, but you're not sure *what*; you're too used to ignoring it 'till it bites you.

The corridors go round and round in glass-blown transparency. You slip, and fall, and pick yourself up, and taste the floor — traces of metallic, rust-like dirt — and continue. That's when you get asked:

'What are you running *from*?'

And:

'You look shaped. You look so shaped. Come on, I know a place, go down with me.'



Somewhere along the route to the ground you realise someone is holding your hand.

Shake your head. Turn a few knobs and dials and bring your mind back into focus.

‘What’s your name?’

You ask with a cheerfulness that’s largely your default setting these days. A cheerfulness you haven’t actually *used* in years.

‘Up-name or down-name?’

‘Down-name, probably.’

‘I’m the Singer of Lightning in Outstretched Carols. You?’

‘I’m the Doctor.’

(The pause is because you’re again unused to introducing yourself. To talking, person-ing, *being* a being with a name. It’s still yours, but it’s dusty and creaky, like it was left in an attic amid boxes of childhood things.)

‘Nice one. Short and to the point.’

Turn around rapidly; almost break into a flutter before you remember you *can’t* fly. Useless thing, cos they wouldn’t want to give anyone *actual* power, just the appearance of it. Running’s almost as good, though.

But before you start, you’re pulled aside again.

‘Hey. Hey. I know you’re running from something, but it’s safe here. There’s barely any patrols anymore. You’re safe.’



They hug you, tightly, warmly, *surprisingly* unexpectedly given that you're expecting anything at this point.

'Stars, you look *exhausted*.

'And don't look like an upperling. Why were you up there, exactly? What's your story?'



This is usually the place where a story would skip over an explanation of all the *context* the reader already knows. Bit of a problem, though. There isn't any explanation.

Not-going-to-be-one, you grumble. And aloud, it's just:

'Complicated.'

And then, a breath as something shifts into place, and you remember that you sometimes have to verbally express interest to people for them to believe in it. You follow up, a little late:

'What about yours?'

'Not here. I know what I said about the patrols, but they're still monitoring their sound filters here.'

They are suddenly serious then, their neck tensing and fluffing up the downy feathers a little.

The two of you walk down the hardwooden floors, your feet trembling with every step, theirs quiet. The place is... you've started *noticing* it again... sounding like a hollow acoustic instrument, like a trembling singing in ~~your~~ body. Body. Which



exists. Right, you'd forgotten about that when you dissolved yourself into it.

And the evening is nigh.



'So what *is* a shape drain? What does it *mean* by "shape"?'

Noticing things again. And that means — trying to *figure things out*. Define them. The Singer of Lightning answers:

'All the decisions you make.'

It's a small underground cavern, splattered with purple moss, decorated in a sharp, triangle style. A group is sitting around a soft campfire — some people even lean inward and bathe in the fire their hands, feathers, whatever other limbs they have.

You keep listening. Someone says,

'...I had a friend once. Ae was this wonderful, bright person. Then they returned, once, and... they're not *anything* anymore. Just, path of least resistance. Or, path of never having tried to resist, even though I've *seen* aer so.'

You should say something, probably, in terms of person-ing. They seem to be fine with remembering that, though. Nothing to say, really. You try and wrench your face into a suitably morose expression, hold it for a moment.

But you still have *questions*, don't you?

'Where does it *go*? The self-material? Cos you can't just *get rid* of it. Too potent.' I've seen it tried.



‘That’s about right.’ It’s your new friend from before. ‘The upperlings use scraps of it for their own charisma, appropriate it.

The rest’s to be somewhere in storage... does anyone have thoughts on this?’

And they almost cry out these last words, so everyone hears.

Alissa, unsure and tired, known only by her up-name, raises a hand. Her awkwardly-fitting standard wing-cape gets into her leg-eyes for a moment... she winces, but continues:

‘Y’know, people used to make stories where the societies do that with memories. The real ones’ve just cut out the middleman, I suppose.’

‘D’you know,’ you say, ‘could someone *rebuild* themselves from this material, if they’d got their hands on it?’

It’s tentative, and you’re not even *sure* if they *could*, but the silence breaks and you realise that it might not have even *occurred* to anyone. As a thing which is possible. This is precisely what ~~you’re~~ the Doctor is *for*. Hiya.



The group have organised something. They’re moving slowly and methodically and linear, and you’d been running at the top speed this body can muster, but now you’re tagging along with them anyway.

...almost miss the pleasant numbness of that running. No, no, that’s *entirely wrong*, not you at all... *Numbness*? You should precisely be *noticing* the universe. Paying all the attention you have. It’s too interesting to let it pass by.



Correction: not *Doctor* at all. That's different. What's ~~you~~ is...

Gone. *Again*. Maybe you *do* have only your decisions to look after you. *Not* good company, these, you know that.

A gust of wind brings dry, distant sand — not a lot, no match to the nerashoakey ~~you remember from~~—

— but it makes you wonder what happened in that direction. Or will happen. Time's like that.



They're — *you're* crawling through a maze of cold glass, to somewhere, if not somewhere you know of. There's a chatter of the shape drain machinery operating. You can see it, but it can't see you behind the queue of people scheduled for it.

The sky's dark red now. The only lighting's the faint yellow pulses of idea draining away, so the group can easily split in two unseen. One up and to the left, another continuing on forward... You flip a coin, mentally, and go left for now.

And in another moment there's a flash and a psychic cry, the queue moves on, and you suddenly realise what their plan is. The other half — they're all wasting themselves for a distraction. You turn around, jump in, noisily, elbowing your way through the queue, using the wing-cape-thing to get a few more seconds in the air, not useless after all, see? Leap into the thing with a—

'I wonder what a me-without-me-ness would look like!'

Use a guardrail as a foothold to stay in—



'Maybe it's *nothing*. Can your machine deal with that? *Can* it?
Let's find out, cos I *really do* wonder.'

Watch the door-thing close with a grin on your face.

Worth it.



And when the smoke clears — there's just a tiny shining *spark*
floating in the air. It isn't even clear how much of a metaphor it is.
What *is* clear is that

it

wants something.

You'd expect the *something* to be 'running'. No... half the running
is in the built-up walls, in how impossible ~~you've~~ made any *other*
way to exist. The direction isn't *kindness*, or *connection* either, or
control or *chaos* or anything as put-into-words-able as any of
those. But there's a tiny moving flicker in that spark, still, and it
does...

It's *not dead*, is what **you** mean. It's not dead.

The Singer of Lightning picks up the shape drain controls and
smashes them to pieces.



‘-so, then, you’d expect the chaos to subside once the other installations are down?’

‘Chaos? Subside? *Never*. But you get the idea. And now that we know that the machines *can* be overloaded, it’ll be much easier to figure out *how* to-’

‘-I know someone that decided to learn photonics a while back! Maybe ze can-’

They’re sitting down with **you**, later, fumbling with an old neck brace. The surface is full of people chattering. It’s full of *people*, full stop. That’s absolutely brilliant, seeing what **you’ve** seen here. They’re all almost done with the restorations — some people have a couple philosophical problems to sort out — but most are just *celebrating*. And **you** love an impromptu festival. And a metric ton of carefully shattered glass to play around with. The TARDIS has already stolen some.

The moss-leaf is a bit drier from all the walking. **You** still lie down for a while. Oh, Ryan would’ve loved this. *Would* love this, once **you** bring the fam here a bit later. Maybe a decade or so, give it time to settle. And pick a quieter corner, for Yaz’s sake, probably.

‘So, what *are* you like,’ they’re asking.

‘Not important. You?’

‘I’ve lived here for a while... I really do like singing, literal *and* metaphorical. It *is* important, though!’ They pause to preen and think of a phrasing —



you cut them off, even. 'Ah, is that what your name's from? Neat! And what about the carols? *Are* there carols here?' And this is what **you're** for the other half of the time. Noticing noticing noticing. Being *interested* in the universe, because it isn't going to be interested in itself, is it?

'Just *think*. I meet a person, what seems like... someone tired and running, which happens a lot over here. I bring them down home, so they can escape whatever they're running from, and *the same night* they break open the shape-drain glass with their sheer constructedness. Of course I'd be curious! About **you**, about how it's at all possible.

'...It's fine to talk, I promise. Come on.'

Or maybe it *is* going to. If we're all part of it.

