

## The Magician by pwatson1974

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He awoke, as he always did since, well, since it happened, to the soft hum of the other. The metal web stretching across his chest seemed to purr as he awoke, sending pulses of warmth through his body. He blinked his eyes, rubbing them with the back of his hands while the veins pulsed with light across the rest of his body. The room sharpened into monochrome focus, the other filtering every scrap of light so that he could see in the darkness. He stretched, feeling the web pull against his skin. "Well," he said to himself, running his hand through dark hair no longer as full as it once had been, though still fuller than he deserved, "I suppose I'd better start the day." He looked at the gently sleeping woman beside him, her soft breaths resounding in his ears. He leant over her, kissing her smooth skin softly on the cheek, and slowly walked out of the room.

"So why are we going to this again?"

"Because Tish got us tickets. Freebies from her new job. And this guy is supposed to be brilliant." she rolls her eyes slightly, her slim figure wrapped in the comfortable leather jacket and jeans, her black hair pulled back, exploding at the back of her scalp. A thin beaded necklace hangs around her slim throat, resting on her mocha skin.

"And who is this guy that's so brilliant?" her companion asks, taking long, easy strides beside her, his long coat flapping against the back of his grey suit trousers, his dark tie hanging from his open collar.

She sighs, "Thomas Mandrake. He's a magician. They say he can do anything."

"Oh, of course, he can. Honestly, you people." he shakes his head, "Someone pulls off a few simple tricks with mirrors, some odd quirk of viewing angles and a pretty girl who can fit into tight spaces and you think he's the second coming. I was there at the first coming. Much more impressive. Very nice guy."

"Who was?"

"Oh, Jesus. Didn't I say?"

She stops dead in the street, staring at him with her large, dark eyes. "You knew Jesus???"

"Well, I wouldn't say knew, exactly. More like a passing acquaintance, really. Much darker than you'd think from the pictures." he gives a vague shrug, his eyes smiling, "Well, come on, Martha, are we going to stand around here all day? I thought we had to see someone else who can do the impossible." he starts off again, scratching his short, tousled brown hair.

Martha shakes her head, following him, muttering under her breath.

The magician waits in the wings of the theatre, the curtain drawn. The other pulses softly with his heartbeat, hidden beneath his pressed tuxedo. He wipes his hand. *Ridiculous*, he thinks, *still nervous after all this time*. The other pulses, a soothing wave rippling through his body. He looks up across the stage, despite the dim lights, to where his wife waits. He smiles as she adjusts the brief costume, still as lovely as ever. He blows her a kiss she won't see and absently fiddles with his cuffs. The announcement starts up.

"Preeeeeeesenting Thomaaaaaaasss Maaaaaaandrake!"

"Well, show time." he smiles to himself, sets his top hat on his head and strides out as the curtain rises and the introductory applause starts.

In the audience, the Doctor yawns, leaning back in a seat his lean frame towers over. The announcement starts up before Martha can do more than give him a reproachful look.

"Preeeeeeesenting Thomaaaaaaasss Maaaaaaandrake!"

The Doctor stops looking bored in an instant, looking intently at the stage, his eyes darting all over

as Mandrake strides out onto the stage. His black hair peeks out from the traditional top hat, a slightly portly frame contained within a tuxedo, white gloves covering his hands, a dark cane capped by a gleaming silver ballgrip tucked under his arm. He reaches the centre of the stage and turns to face the audience, smiling warmly as he bows into the applause. "Thank you, good people; you are too kind to a humble, old entertainer."

The Doctor snorts and feels Martha's elbow dig into his side.

"Now, I know none of you came here to listen to an old man ramble, so, it's on with the show." He holds the cane out before him, taps it three times on the stage, and lets go, leaving it floating in mid-air, the light shining off the polished silver as the cane turns.

"That's not bad. All wires obviously." The Doctor murmurs to himself as Mandrake steps back, leaving the cane hovering in thin air. Slowly the cane twirls end over end, the silver tracing a brilliant circle of light as it spins faster and faster and stops, a silvery hoop falling to the stage. The Doctor's eyebrows raise. "Now that's good. How did he do that?" He continues to stare at the stage as Mandrake spins the hoop between his hands, sending it rolling off the stage. Immediately, a svelte blonde, flashing a beaming smile walks in from the other side of the stage, the hoop looped around her shoulders. Her blonde hair falls over her bare shoulders, a silver one-piece cut low and high at the right places clinging to her body, silver boots stretching midway up her firm thighs.

"Ah, thank you, Lenore, I get so clumsy these days." he turns to the audience, "The lovely Lenore, ladies and gentlemen." the audience applauds as she hands the hoop back, and Mandrake sets it spinning between his hands.

"Different hoops, obviously."

Mandrake spins the hoop, letting it slowly hover to the stage. Lenore smiles at the audience and steps inside. The hoop starts to spin again, rising up around her. All the time, Lenore keeps her smile on the audience and her hands by her sides as the hoop whirls around her rising up until it hovers over her head like an oversized silver halo. And suddenly it stops, plunging back to the stage with a clatter. It takes a few seconds for the hoop to finally settle. It takes only a little longer for the audience to notice that Lenore isn't inside the hoop. It takes Mandrake a little longer still to realise this. In the audience, the Doctor pulls on his glasses, still peering intently at the stage. Mandrake pulls a red silk handkerchief from his pocket, mopping his brow. "Well, uhm, well, as you can see, uhm, well," he places his top hat down, "well," and drops the handkerchief into it. "Uhm, as you can see, the lovely Lenore has disapp..." the handkerchief spits out of the hat, flopping over his polished shoes. He looks down, frowns, mops his brow again and drops it back into the hat. He turns back to the audience, and the handkerchief leaps out again. "Really, this is not how you're supposed to behave." He picks it up, mopping his brow.

"Then quit dropping the sweaty thing on me!" an annoyed voice replies.

"Lenore?" he asks, dropping the handkerchief.

"No, it's the Tooth Fairy! Get me out of here!"

"But where...?" A shapely hand emerges from the centre of the hat, snapping her fingers

"Where do you think? Where've you been dropping your sweaty hankies on me?" the hand withdraws.

Mandrake picks up the hat with a perplexed look, turning it all over, staring at it. He shakes his head. Lenore's hands reach out of the hat, grabbing his jacket lapels and dragging him towards the hat. "Get. Me. Out. Of. Here. NOW!!!" she snarls, shaking him with each word.

Mandrake, looking rather shaken, puts the hat down and the hands withdraw. He reaches in, rummaging around until the lip of the hat is halfway to his shoulder. He pulls his hands back, slowly pulling Lenore out, her bodysuit now the same black as the hat. He stops as her waist emerges, a red silk band wrapped around her waist, mimicking the hat band. Lenore's waist narrows, pouring into the hat that is far too narrow for her to be half-way inside.

"That's impossible."

"Told you he was good." Martha replies with a hint of satisfaction.

"No, I mean, that's really impossible. There's no way she could fit."

"The Tardis is bigger inside than it looks like."

"Yes, but that's due to the arrangement of negative quasi-gravitation matrices curving space time around it. And the door's the right size anyway."

"That doesn't mean..." she stops turning towards the stage.

"Not interrupting anything, I trust?" Mandrake asks. Martha shrinks into the seat, feeling the whole of the theatre looking at them.

"Oh, not at all," the Doctor replies, smiling, "We were just trying to work out how you do it."

"Well, don't let me stop you. Perhaps your friend would like to come up on stage and get a closer look at our next piece of magic?" he turns to Martha, offering his hand. The audience starts applauding.

Martha grimaces, but slowly stands up, carefully picking her way along the rows of feet and climbing to the stage. Lenore has once again vanished from the stage, although this time by the rather more mundane means of walking off with the hoop rather than vanishing inside it. Mandrake takes Martha's hand. "Now that you've agreed to help an old magician, quite of your own free will, without any coercion whatsoever," the audience laughs on cue, "might I enquire as to your name?" Martha looks out into the audience, the stage lights making it hard to see out. She feels her heart hammering, being on stage far scarier than anything she's seen so far. "Martha, Martha Jones," she stammers.

"Well, Martha Jones, do you know why you're here?"

"Because someone," she glares into the audience, "couldn't shut up. Why didn't you get him up to help?"

"Well, yes, I could have, but really, who wants to see a man sawn in half when they can see a beautiful woman instead?"

Martha blushes a little before she realises fully what was just said, "You what?! No way!"

"It's perfectly safe. Do you think the lovely Lenore would stay with me if she came to any harm?"

"She can do it then!"

"Well, obviously she can, but you did volunteer," he catches her glare, "Sort of."

Martha turns away, staring out into the audience. "Damn it." She mutters under her breath, turning towards Mandrake. "Fine. Let's get the show on the road."

He smiles warmly, taking her hand and leading her towards a thin table, Lenore beaming at one end, posing in typical showgirl fashion, a wooden stock around the centre, the inside edge almost glowing in the stage lights. She vaguely hears the audience applauding as she approaches the table. Mandrake raises the stocks, levering them up as Lenore helps Martha onto the table, whispering encouragement that doesn't seem to be working. Mandrake lowers the stock around her waist. Martha shivers, a faint static swirling over her waist. Mandrake reaches into his pocket, pulling out an electric saw, it's high-pitched whine screaming through the theatre. Martha's eyes go wide.

"Oh, you have got to be kidding me."

Mandrake smiles at the audience, lowering the saw through the stocks. Martha jerks as she feels something swirling through her gut, cold cutting through her. The saw passes through the stocks, and apparently through Martha. Mandrake raises it high, drinking in the applause. And slides a pair of metal blades from under the table, clashing them together above her.

"Hey! What are you doing with those?"

He smiles, and thrusts them down through the top of the stocks. "Now, just to convince you that our lovely volunteer is in fact divided..."

"What??"

"...we'll do this," he pulls on the lower half of the table as Lenore pulls on the top, separating Martha's waist by several feet. "Ta-daaaaa..." at which point a shrill ringing fills the theatre. For a moment, the audience look about confused, then the realisation sets in.

"Fire!!!"

Mandrake stands on the stage, "Please, ladies and gentlemen, keep calm! Move towards the exits slowly. There's no cause for panic!" the crowd seems not to notice. Something metallic glints at the edge of his sleeves as he raises his hands. Dark red light spills over his hands, dipping them in bloody radiance, spilling out of his shirt. He grimaces, but the crowd doesn't notice. "Please!"

There's no need for this! Just leave calmly and all will be well." There's a catch in his voice, a slump of his shoulders, but the crowd seems to listen, the frenzied rush slowing.

As the theatre clears, he turns back to Martha, and stops. "What do you mean no fire?" he stops, taking a deep breath, still lit with crimson, "There's no fire. What?"

"Ah, that would be me." The Doctor walks onto the stage, a small grey rod glowing sapphire blue at its tip. "Just set off the fire alarm so we could talk about a few things without everyone else listening." he slides the rod back into his inner jacket pocket. He walks over to the bisected table, and leans over, "How's everything, Martha? Comfy?"

"Oh, just wonderful. I wish I could stay like this forever."

"Good, good." he peers at the blade, "Now that's nice. Quality workmanship. So," he looks up at Mandrake, "where are you getting the power for the quantum transverse gate you've got built in here, and that's a very impressive feat of miniaturisation, I must say. Normally they're the size of a skyscraper, one of the proper ones from Sharn, not like the things you see called skyscrapers just anywhere. But they need more power than this whole city can put out, and I didn't see any conduits around the backstage."

Mandrake grimaces, "No, time. Help me," he takes a wheezing breath, "put her together. Before," another shuddering breath, "the gate fails."

"Before it fails? Ooooh, that's not the sort of thing you want to be in the middle of."

"What? What isn't? Because, in case you haven't noticed, I'm in the middle of the gate or whatever it is! Get me out of here!"

"Now, now, there's no reason to be too hasty. Anything that can power a quantum transverse gate won't just suddenly cut out. We've got, oh," he looks down at his watch, "at least another ten minutes. Plenty of..."

"No, time. Other, damaged. Can't hold on, much..."

"Other? As in an Other? Sort of a techno-organic mesh that inhabits sentient beings, sustains itself on positive emotions, talks in light pulses and encephalic waves and is a total and utter genius, and this is coming from me? One of those Others? Oh, well, that changes things. A lot." He grabs the table, spinning Martha around, the stage whirling past her, before the tables meet with a sharp click. Mandrake leans heavily on the table, taking another wheezing breath, as he pulls the dividers out. Martha shudders as she feels a churning in her gut, a soothing warmth flowing through her body. The Doctor raises the stock from around her waist, helping her up.

"Thanks. And don't think I'll forget who got me in there in a hurry."

"I'll make sure to bear that in mind. But we do have a patient to see to." Mandrake clutches at his chest, stumbling, falling to the floor. Lenore screams.

Martha rushes to Mandrake's side, pressing her ear just above his mouth, counting to ten as she stares down his chest, staring down his by for any signs of life. "He's still breathing. We need to get him to hospital."

"No."

"He's had a heart attack. He won't last long like this."

"Hospital won't help them."

"Them? What are you..."

"He's bonded with a techno-organic symbiont. That's the Other. And it's dying." he looks around the stage, and snatches up the stocks, pulling out his sonic screwdriver with a high-pitched whine, the stocks fizzing and spitting sparks.

"What are you doing?"

"Reversing the polarity flow. Then cross-circuiting the quantum wave actuator so that it will..."

"Actually, never mind. What will it do?"

"Save their life." he replies, prodding the stocks, pulling a small disk from the middle of the stocks.

"I hope. Get his shirt off. Try not to disturb the Other too much."

Martha starts undoing the buttons, pulling the shirt open. Under the silk, a web of metal weaves, the wires and cables burrowing under Mandrake's skin appearing dull and brittle. A slow pulse of dark red light worms its way through the tangle. Mandrake's chest heaves with each breath, the wires

shuddering with him. “Whatever you're doing, Doctor, you might want to get a move on.”

“Coming, coming, you can't rush genius.” he pulls the disk out, setting the glowing sliver of metal onto Mandrake's chest. The wires writhe underneath the disk, burrowing into it, the disk slowly dissolving, a pale white light slithering along the cables. Mandrake's breathing slowly ceases it's ragged gasping, smoothing down.

“There. They'll be fine. The techno-organic matrix has been realigned and as long as he doesn't try eating like that again, everything should be...” the mesh pulses, lights flicking along the tangle of metal, “Yes, I know you did it with the best of motives, but trying to digest all that concentrated fear and panic would have been a strain on your system, and after using all that power to do these tricks...” another set of flashes, “Yes, yes, I know that that's how his mind works, always thinking of tricks and how to do them, but...” another series of flashes. “Well, I didn't think your people used those kind of words, oh, that's down him too, is it? Will you be all right now? No more snacking on human failings? Because you know it's bad for you. Just like all the work you have to do on his system after breakfast.” the flashes pulses slowly. “And the same to you.” he offers Mandrake his hand, helping him to his feet. “Now, as for you, you might want to slow down a bit. I know you've been told to. Listen. Your Other is far smarter than you are.” he turns, “Come on, Martha. I think we've seen enough of the impossible for one day.”

“Wait...” Mandrake calls, but they don't. He stumbles, Lenore helping him off the stage to follow them. A blue light emerges from behind the door, a cyclic wheezing, groaning noise coming with it, wheeeeomp, wheeeeomp, and as they throw the doors open, they spot the last fleeting image of an old blue police call box fading away. Mandrake stares, lights pulsing on his chest, “You're right, that, was a trick!”