



DOCTOR WHO

EDEN BY ANNIHILATION by ALAN CAMLANN



THRILLING ADVENTURES IN SPACE AND TIME

DOCTOR WHO

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BY *ANNIHILATION*

ALAN CAMLANN

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Acknowledgements to Colin Baker as the Doctor and Nicola Bryant as Peri.

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CONTENTS

- **DEDICATION**

- **WHO'S WHO?**

PHASE ONE

1. "Secrets of the Sargasso"
2. "Vaisyán Lonewatch"
3. "To Sharpen a Sleeping Blade"
4. "Cremation"

For James Cooke.

Who never lost faith.

“In the words of Seamus Harper as chaos fills the air above him, ‘I’m working on it! I’m working on it!’ I’ll definitely have it out at some point, it ain’t getting the better of me.”

With special thanks to Iain McLaughlin.

For a much-needed shove from a trusted source.

WHO'S WHO?

Born from a fatal case of blood poisoning, the Sixth Doctor has made for the most unpredictable incarnation of the infamous Time Lord to date. Passionate and boisterous, his apparent egocentrism and irascible demeanour belies a genuine care for his friends and the peoples of the planets he visits.

In his travels, the Doctor is accompanied by two companions. American botanist Perpugilliam "Peri" Brown and Xenon shape-shifter Avan "Frobisher" Tarklu. The first, he inherited from his predecessor during a crisis on the planet Sarn. The latter, from a stellar-wide manhunt for the Time Lord by the malevolent profiteer Dogbolter.

Together, the Doctor, Peri and Frobisher's roving have brought them to many worlds and cultures from across the cosmos. This is another such tale.

“We commit her body to the provenance of our stars.
Each word vigil of this lost repose, a howling mourner;
Untainted by dust and all common death.”

- “Epitaph, MMMLXXVI.”

Addressed from Chairlain Antalya to his daughter

PHASE ONE

STAGE 1: **“Secrets of the Sargasso”**

The stars of the Milky Way were like dust on an antique satin gown.

Diamanté motes orbited by painted daubs, spinning dutifully with colour and energy. One such selection of daubs held particular interest to the historical overture of the 82nd-century.

In the Interstellar Atlas, the first of these worlds was designated as Planet 8891-ONI/RDWY of the Pioneer political constellation.

Locally, it was known as Trailblazer Prime.

Home to one of the largest technological development centres in the Affiliation of Outer Free Worlds. A technological cornucopia. Exemplar to everything a satellite-world could be to its spacefaring peers. Both at home in the Affiliation and to its rivals under the Tyrikan banner.

Spacers wearied by astral roving flocked by the thousands to experience the tastefully smooth architecture of the cities' arcades, botanical institutes and cultural centres. However, its nonaligned soul hid far more than what foreign nationals (or indeed its terrestrial citizenry) anticipated.

Beneath the off-white leather sofas and computer-controlled orange carpeting of comfortable day-to-day living, lay the Central Institute for Defence Analysis (CIDA).

A sleek black sanctum deep below the bustling Bellamy-grade hypercity of Urshi. Within which, a group of high-budget, low profile intellectual giants sat at the centre of a secret information attractor, absorbing the various minutiae of galactic life. Everything from scans of production shortfalls to currency exchange rates. All intercepted, measured, scrutinised for one purpose alone. To ensure that—should the inevitable day of judgement come—annihilation would remain a frightening mutual prospect for enemy and ally alike.

With peace a forethought, the CIDA think-tank personnel sat at their terminals, correcting styli in hand and pondered the deaths of trillions.

An ideal pawn for a slumbering giant.

Not too far away, overlooked by the probing waves of CIDA monitoring arrays, the radiant infinity of deep space tore open. Slowly materialising from betwixt the complex striations of soon, now and was, whirled a small, nondescript box—battered and startlingly blue.

The light atop pulsed in the dark.

Flashes of greater shapes flowed across a bluish-black canvas.

To the unsuspecting eye, the oblong cuboid would have blended unceremoniously with the surrounding flotsam and jetsam.

To the trained observer, however, it was a far more interesting curiosity. It hummed with a life force all its own.

The rataplan of the TARDIS's vworp engines steadied, then fell silent.

In the shadow of a terrible evil.

Aboard the TARDIS, the Doctor snapped up the holding control and waited impatiently for the image on the scanner to clear. The buzzing curtain of static on the screen eloped with a final pettish shudder.

He nodded. Satisfied. "There we are, you two! Tracking is steady. Interference clearing. You know, I swear I..." the tail of his sentence curled up under itself with a musing hum.

"Thought the TARDIS had safeguards against waveband static?" hazarded Frobisher.

"Odd, isn't it?" the Doctor affirmed. He tapped the part of the control console responsible. "Answers forthcoming. That solar flare—"

"Near miss," Peri commented, slyly.

"*Solar flare*," he insisted, flicking his green cravat like an expert bullfighter, "blinded most of her systems. It'll be quite some time before I can get everything operational again. She's been through a lot lately, poor girl."

"Any way... Like I was saying, Trailblazer Prime, right?" voiced Frobisher.

"*Hmm?*" The Doctor sounded vaguely terse, irritated to have been distracted while retying his cravat.

“You’re sure they’ll recognise you there, Frobisher?” asked Peri. “I mean... The treatment for your monomorphia is still a work in progress.”

The transmogrified penguin waved a flipper. “Eh, but most works of art are.”

Peri suppressed a snort.

“The Doc says I’ll be fine, so long as I don’t overexert myself.”

“You say so...” She found her attention drawn deep into the scanner screen.

“Besides,” Frobisher continued, distantly, “worse comes to worse and my chosen form does freeze on the spot, we can always still enjoy ourselves. A bad tie’s never ruined a good party. It’ll just be the three of us and friends at a dayglo honkatonk in a nice quiet corner of the cosmos... Serene... Quiet...”

“With no mischief, just music,” she piped, distractedly.

“Aboard this jalopy, do you honestly believe that?” He paused. “Peri?”

She looked away from the screen. “Sorry. What?”

“That there can be no mischief with music?”

“Oh, there’s mischief all around us.” The Doctor tugged his cravat tight and beamed with satisfaction. “Particularly to a private eye like Frobisher here. Personally, no matter the situ, I’ve always desired a...” He threw his arms wide, a baritone at centre stage. “A *sonata* to my alleged misdemeanours.”

Peri smiled back, but it didn’t last. Again, she found herself strangely drawn to the environment on the screen. Something was bothering her. What was it? “Looks like the band have left town, Doctor. Not exactly the EPCOT Centre, is it?”

“*Hmmm.*” Assuming a challenge, the Doctor adjusted the ship’s outer plasmic shell accordingly.

A luminous orange glow erupted just above the upper boundary of the video image— the lamplight beaming from the top of the police box. Shapes rolled and unfurled. The TARDIS like some incongruous lighthouse on the shores of a great cosmic ocean. They could see the sleekest of luxury liners rubbing hulls with the dumpiest of military-grade stellar destroyers. The wrecks as complex as twisted origami figures bobbing along the shoreline.

“Wow,” Peri breathed absently, stepping closer. “How many do you reckon are out there?”

“Oh,” the Doctor shrugged. “Hundreds... thousands... hundreds of thousands...”

“Doc,” Frobisher scratched his head. “Where *is* that? Where are we?”

The Doctor thumbed his chin, thoughtfully. “*That* looks like the Natasia Tor sector.”

“Doc...” Frobisher chuckled, nervously. “This *wasn't* deliberate, right?”

“Trivialities such as the punctiliousness of where and when are largely immaterial, Frobisher. Every location is alike in one respect or another, it's the lyrical complexity of detail that made each wonder deserving of exploration.”

Frobisher paused, only to add, “Right.”

“Besides,” the Doctor added. “You obey all the rules, you miss all the fun.”

Now that was something Frobisher could get behind.

“And the layovers. Well, you sure know how to pick ‘em,” he moved up beside Peri. “This latest detour is as wild as wild can be.”

Drawn into its darkness, Peri had to agree. She felt the muddied colours leer at her through their bubbling shore of tar, sifting through wrenched embers of what might have been molten glass and shredded steel. Neither solid, nor fragmented. All threading without aim.

“What'd we call it?” she asked. “A—*ab*—galactic wilderness?”

“Strikes me as a fit.”

The shapes blurred as soon as she gained any focus on them. The scene felt too dense for human eyes to sift through. Then again, that could've easily been the room's internal heat. Tugging at her collar, she felt a prickling sensation at the base of her neck. Not a thought, but... It soon occurred to her that wild places typically had wildlife. She could sense... something. At the moment, inexplicable, but it was out there, somewhere, in the reef. Of that, she was certain. The warmth of the Ship had disturbed it.

“What drew them all here?” Peri tilted her head.

Frobisher shrugged. “I wonder if anyone knows?”

On Trailblazer Prime, the inhabitants of CIDA were presently distributed into smaller taskforces. Each assigned to a problem that

was currently or would soon be affecting the stability of the Milky Way Galaxy.

Amongst their many projects, the Nahin Group were busy untangling a probable cultural link between psychostraphengers and their ancestral dream-trippers. In the laboratories a block over, Vegan engineers were setting up one of their star pupil's latest experiments involving the development of an eighth helix. Behind that, the Records Room were programming their mnemodron robots for their assigned information shuttling routes.

It was a theoretician's paradise.

Classified, categorised and seemingly without end.

The foremost of these groups was assisted by Blue-Sky, an engineer specially selected for his pragmatic skill in an otherwise theoretical association. One of the Institute's youngest technical specialists, a demosponge by the name of Asa Nayuta, was currently hard at work, attempting to decipher some bizarre radiographic anomaly on the behalf of his peers. Picked up by an early warning system somewhere close to the space sargasso between Briar Rose and Metzger's Luck. Blue-Sky and he were crowded around the display readouts of their long-range telescopic probes in Astral Collaboratory, watching their machines skirt the barrier between Affiliation space and the patrolling rogue power blocs that aggressively dogged the fringes of their transsolar bubble. The long history of belligerence only added to the tension of this abnormal phenomenon.

Asa adjusted the filter on his suit, it was getting far too dry again.

"It's there again," he said, his face bathed in the studious red glow of the luminescent wall trim. "Just a blip, but it is there."

Under so many layers of rock, the young technician found it worryingly easy to forget what the sky looked like.

He'd started to experience periodic bouts of agoraphobia whenever they'd raised the polarising guard on conference room windows and felt nauseous even at the thought of travelling in a spacecraft. He could contemplate a wall, but a horizon was getting that much harder.

Blue-Sky, on the other hand, wasn't a theoretical technician. He was a practical engineer and as a practical engineer, unconventional wisdom told him that this new problem was an intermittent and immediately resolvable fault. Terrifying to have on something with

the destructive capabilities of those first strike installations and certainly worthy of investigation, but smaller than it appeared.

However, Asa kept insisting that there was more to it than that.

Blue-Sky leant against the pastel terminal, tilting his saucer-like head. “You know what I’m going to say, fledge.”

“I know, I know, I’m imagining it.”

“Not imagining it. Obsessing over it.”

Asa leant back in the chair. “Do you blame me?”

“Not at all, but I’ve seen this before. Five out-system operations with construction battalions to disassemble and reassemble hardware. Alien—” the political incorrectness of the term caused the sheltered technical specialist’s spongy face to water in embarrassment, “—radio signals.”

“You’re certain?”

“I am. First contact situations are a nightmare, I’d be the first to tell you if we’d drifted off into one.”

“Well,” he bubbled. “It’s not as if you can blame me for my imagination wandering away.”

Blue-Sky placed an arm across his shoulder pad. “It’s what you’re here for, fledge.”

“All the same, I’d ask them to watch their backs. Smugglers are notorious in Natasia Tor, if nothing else.”

“It’ll be attended to. Forward the idea through to the committee and they’ll authorise the appropriate manpower.”

“Understood,” Asa began reciting the protocol standards of his dispatch to a robotic mnematon sitting idly behind the terminal. Listening to their conversation, on his instruction, in case any emergency action needed to be taken.

Asa lacked any practical experience beyond the controlled testing of the Hyperlearn teaching computers at the Oeth University Complex. He’d been frightened the first time a Tyrikan Custodial Argosy stealth cruiser had been detected beneath the clouds of a gas giant.

It bore its teeth at the reconnaissance probe idly monitoring the cross-territorial veil and slipped back into anonymity like a troubleshooter in the Vaisyan Lonewatch before any further action could be taken. The technician had required a few days respite to regain his nerves, but Blue-Sky was always impressed by how shrewd the boy could be when he put his mind to it.

“Incidentally...” Asa began.

“Oh, I know that tone. Go ahead.”

“What happens if I’m right?”

“Then the stellar patrol gets to welcome our new brothers into the greater web of the cosmos,” said Blue-Sky.

“Assuming that this isn’t another drop-out like last time, right?”

“As you say.”

Asa’s features hardened. “Be serious though. What would happen?”

Blue-Sky rubbed the back of his ridged neck. “Look, focus on that bulletin, alright? Early warning takes priority and the security service needs to jump through hoops to even begin supplying the repair crews. We can assign a probe to it later.”

“Full acknowledgement of broadcast,” replied Asa as flippantly as he could muster.

Blue-Sky left the young demospunge to his work, touching a calean-pipe to his lip and quickly attending to other matters in the complex. The smoke was enough to cause Asa recurrent eye irritation, even through his protective suit. Blue-Sky liked the boy enough to spare him from that particular headache.

It was a simple routine. He would rag on the datathumpers in Z-Section for increasing the volume on their stereophonic systems, then refuse to play party to their newest plan to be the middleman in some scheme to boost funding. He was starting to enjoy how patterned it’d become, yet something untoward was etching concerns at the back of his mind.

The Tyrikans? Perhaps. He shook his head. *More so, the sargasso at Natasia Tor.*

He rounded down another access passage heading towards the Stellar Reconnaissance Force’s ready berths near the interceptors’ reception bay and tried to bury his thoughts in the shifting specifications of an upcoming overhaul.

All the while, that colour-flecked region of space kept washing up on the shores of his mindscape.

What does it all mean? He asked himself. *Endfall, sledge. If you’re right, it means Endfall.*

Vidscans of the region had come up inconclusive and that more than anything piqued the interest of Tyrikan conveyors Bastinranath Solta and Gurudev te-Varriq.

Normally, they would have tagged the area for inquest by the Anthropology Spindle as a favour to Atar K. Clerke, but for the present, it'd become something of a source of consternation for the pair.

His face half-shadowed in crisp, alienating lights, Solta gripped his fur-coat tighter to his tawny-grey frame and ran his finger nervously along the translucent bill of his cap.

He couldn't quite see it, but the anti-dazzle effect of the glass lent him some strange comfort. No need for it here, of course. Not in the depths of space where atmospheres were precious and few.

Still, even without an unfamiliar sky, the chill of space seemed all the more present in this region. Particularly aboard a vessel as small as this. Hardly enough space for a single pilot, let alone two.

Was it paranoia?

Perhaps, he conceded.

The *Ngambo* had been the only spacecraft capable of sliding between the flotsam without shearing in two. Short of a military-grade carrydart. The only alternative was an independently-aligned battlecruiser, armed with the requisite shielding and the weaponry necessary to cut through all the jetsam at no risk to itself. Its presence alone would have been interpreted as arrogant presumption, maybe even something worthy of provocative reprisal.

The paranoia in this region of space was palpable. It ground at the wan skin of his teeth.

Politics, more a profession than a mission ... he sighed, reflectively. He would play no part in it. It was industry's circus and he had enough distraction of his own.

Not far behind him, his passenger—te-Varriq—ran a cautious tentacle across the asepsis casket next to their flare kit. It unsnapped one of the plasteel fasteners and inspected the delicate cargo within, studying its rhythmic twitches as it writhed to a bionic pulse in its sealed vat of cryogenic gel. Snatching the container back shut, he nodded assent against some private misgiving and darted over to the argent pyxis canisters on the vessel's wall, tightening the veiling into place.

“All accounted for?”

Solta knew the answer of course, but if it could smooth his partner’s frayed nerves...

Sensing the favour, te-Varriq exhaled in gratitude. “Given its importance it ought to be.”

Solta tapped the flight controls thoughtfully, gently twilling the *Ngambo* around the hawkish contours of a *Garuda*-class fighter, its single remaining wing splayed as if in shock. *Ngambo*’s retracted subatmospheric wings gently pinked the crippled wreck as they eased their way past, jarring in a rattling tremor across the hull. A single flash of light, electrical in nature, skittered in an arc between the two vessels. It was eerie to think that perhaps there was enough oxygen trapped within those ancient ruins to still ionise the air.

Just how recently had this area of space been placed back in the Interstellar Atlas? Decades? Years?

te-Varriq gripped the coarse texture of the cargo netting to steady himself on the roiling deck and asked whether they were travelling along the most direct route.

“Good question. Bad answer. We don’t have much choice,” replied Solta. “With only three solar days to spare—”

“They’re cutting it rather close aren’t they?”

Solta shrugged. “Some. Ion storm up travelling in from Quadrant 455 damaged their relay buoy at Metzger’s Luck. They’re a small system, but not that small, it’ll take a while for them to repair it.”

The pilot’s fingers tightened around the spacecraft’s controls as another seism rattled their collective nerves, this time from a small gravitational eddy wafting between two circling loadluggers, twins in size and stature locked in a steady orbit.

Every stray reflection that flashed across the forward portal could be a harmless bolt of plasma or a hull-crippling mirage, there was no way to be sure which was which. He couldn’t admit it openly to his colleague, but the roulette of possibilities scared him. At least, on a planetary surface, there was something to stop you falling. In the dark heart of space, you could drift forever unabated. Your final breath stolen from your lungs. Lost forever. Forgotten.

“It’s a dangerous game we’re playing here,” said te-Varriq.

“Yes,” exhaled Solta. “But unfortunately, no one else will do it.”

“Well, you know my policy,” said te-Varriq. “I’m in for the mazumas and I’m out with the lasguns.”

“Life is life.”

“As you’ve always said, my friend,” the surgeon placed the canister back upon the rack, “but I still think we’re fools.”

It was unlikely that the *Ngambo* even registered the far-off passage of the TARDIS. While his two companions chatted amiably amongst themselves, the Doctor decided to give his garden-variety knowledge of the period a little workout. It came slowly at first, but after no more than a few minutes, he was shipspotting like the best of them on Vatine.

“...wedged aft is a lazaret from the *Meta*—no, *Mesotron*-class... that’s a Mulean tugboat, certainly... a *King Drachir* rockskimmer there... And there...” he gestured to a large series of ringlets, blooming in bulbs from a charred sandal-shaped midsection, “...an *Auspex*-series Protectorate vapourform. Ha.” He sounded pleased with himself. “I thought they’d all been retired centuries ago by your time, Frobisher.”

The penguin stopped mid-sentence and glanced behind to where the Doctor was standing. “Me?”

“That,” encouraged the Doctor with a pointed finger.

Frobisher gave it a closer look.

Certainly it wore its age on its hull. It was rolling through the shredded reef of ships like a dying manta. Behind it, a thick neon stream of what any conventional space-goer could have identified as engine propellant, spewed from its accelerator turbines, shrouding the rest of its stern.

He spoke aside to Peri. “Spooky...”

The slow, riving howl of gadding phytosteel as each corpse rubbed shoulders with the other cut through Peri’s flesh to the marrow of her bones. It was the death knell of some enormous predator left to rot alone in the dark. A squib of ink from an ossified octopus left to die in the night.

“That’s an understatement...” she murmured.

She stole a glance back at the Doctor for comfort, but found his attention was now focussed on the furthest axis, towards the scene’s vanishing point. Dazzled by a quarry that neither she nor Frobisher could see.

“So, we’re in the right time, at least?” she asked.

The Doctor's eyes defocused, nodding to her, "Oh, absolutely, Peri. It just appears that we've overshot by, *erm*, well a couple—"

"Hundred?" Peri hazarded.

"Thousand?" Frobisher added.

"—lightyears," the Doctor concluded. "Your trust overwhelms me."

"We'll be late to CIDA," cautioned the whifferdill.

"Aboard the TARDIS? Hardly."

Peri's mouth slanted in confusion. "Who's late with the kidding?"

"C-I-D-A," clarified Frobisher. "Initials."

"Right," she nodded. "Can't we catch a shuttle? There's got to be a spaceport around here somewhere."

Frobisher shook his avian features. "Not so much."

"Natasia Tor, Peri," said the Doctor, "is named as such as a requiem. It's the burial ground of a once prominent dictator's young daughter."

"Care to enlighten us?"

The time-traveller's features turned grave. "It's not a happy story. While on a speleological expedition Galatea Io, she was trapped by spies working against her father. Voronkraz physiology is remarkable, but..."

Frobisher chewed his bill. "She had lungs like any other species."

"She..." Peri shifted her head, "died?"

The Doctor's voice levelled. "Asphyxiated beneath an avalanche of rock. Special precautions were taken to ensure her burial in space wouldn't be intercepted by any opposing authority seeking to discredit the current regime."

"Stupid question, I guess, but if it was secret, how do you know about it?"

"The reports were declassified about three centuries ago. It's now a part of established Galactic History."

Peri swallowed and turned back to the screen. "And these ships...?"

"The sirens sung them to shipwreck, dragg'd down to the deep..." quoted the Doctor, perhaps as a warning.

"Ghoulish, but not an answer," Frobisher chided, tractably.

The Doctor warmed in surprise. "You know, Peri, Frobisher, I don't actually know."

"Tell me at least that we're moving on again," shivered Peri.

“Soon, soon, curiosity implores a moment longer,” demurred the Doctor. “You know, what baffles me is the sheer number of spacecraft that have ended up in this region of space.”

“Oh?” hummed Peri.

“Quite so.” His words were coy, his gaze flickering between his two companions with a furtive, self-satisfied smirk. “Some ranging from the 23rd-century to now just after the eighth-millennium... Relative to Earthtime, of course. Too many to have been wrecked by a meteor shower or geomagnetic stormfront. There’s no single nearby planet like Llanor that could have ejected them into space either...”

Peri didn’t have to see his face to know the expression that accompanied that timbre.

She crossed her arms. “Alright, I’ll admit it’s intriguing—”

“*A-ha!*” The Doctor bounded to the other side of the console with a chuckle.

Peri turned back and tried to hop in along beside him, but he breezed straight past her.

“But, aren’t we supposed to be meeting up with—?” she cut herself off and threw up her arms in exasperation.

“Forget it, Peri,” dismissed Frobisher. “He’s got that manic twinkle in his eye again.”

The Doctor momentarily looked up from his work. “We’re all agreed then?”

Frobisher rolled his eyes and morphed a sock puppet onto his hand, complete with jade-coloured button eyes and an ineluctable motley coat.

“Absolutely! One-hundred-percent!” it chattered enthusiastically in a reedy imitation of the Doctor’s voice.

“Splendid! Happy to hear such unwavering support for once.”

In response to his fiddling on the smaller VDU, the scanner’s image shimmered for a moment, rotating across several visual spectra. Infrared to ultraviolet to something likely only his species could likely identify. The screen settled into a grid.

“NZ-9742, I think.”

At a key press, a series of clicks boosted the chosen segment to the point that it dwarfed the surrounding debris. As it approached closer to their little window out to the cosmos, Peri found herself instinctively shrinking back from it.

The Doctor tilted his head up to inspect its silent zenith, his eyes strangely alight. “Now... That *is* unusual. Don’t you think?”

They had missed it in the sleek mercury sheen of the deep reef. It was disconcertingly obvious once she’d actually spotted it. Nothing about it matched its surrounds. The whole structure was shaped like a ghoulish Fabergé egg, its silvered-sapphire surface weathered and pockmarked by gaffs and spikes she couldn’t yet identify. There was something slug-like in its aberrant chromous sheen, pale turrets bristling angrily in their rampant paranoia, separated by a mesh of glittering lights that she had briefly mistaken as the nimbi of remote constellations. In the midst of a tacit mass grave, it sat squat as their keeper or perhaps a guardian, but its architecture had an industrial look about it. It was an uncompromising, bleak and seethingly fell place.

“Doctor...”

She was wrong, it wasn’t a protector at all. It was a vulture that had finished picking away at its carcass.

She suddenly felt terribly afraid, a formless, eager dread that gripped her soul. Something dark and uncertain in the midst of confusion pricked its way through her consciousness and clouded her mind with an existential horror. It was a primitive animalistic instinct, buried deep in her subconscious.

We shouldn’t be here...

She felt cold. It *forced* her to feel the cold. Not the vacuum, but how empty those dark spaces between the stars could really be.

“There,” an arm jutted past her shoulder and Peri jumped with a sharp intake of breath.

She traced his outstretched finger to a small, physical opening in the egg’s titanic dimensions. Guarded by a veil of red.

“Forcewall of some kind?” she inquired.

“Some kind,” he nodded. “Nothing insurmountable. It’ll be a squeeze polydimensionally speaking, but that’s how we’ll get inside.”

He set the travordinates for a closer inspection of the anomaly.

“Anyone alive in there?” asked the whifferdill.

“Scant environmental signs—or at least nothing the old girl can detect. Atmospheric pressure is just below Earth-normal. Life support is minimal and what does exist looks to have been polluted with foreign contaminants ranging from the vile to the terminal.

There's not enough clean air for us carbon-based bipeds. Even exceptional ones such as myself." He came to a decision, whirled a finger in the air and started towards the side door leading out to the main corridor. "Starsuits everyone, we'll be arriving shortly."

The steady hum of the TARDIS's engines hammered into a shriek before he could reach it.

Terror struck from a nightmare never conceived by the two doomed beings aboard the *Ngambo*. Beyond the ship, through the vast web of abandoned vessels, a nimbus of light drowned the dark. Bright as a white dwarf. It grew. Multiplied. Slashed through the small cruiser as if it were made of melted taffy.

The points, lines, curves and surfaces of the TARDIS console room coiled and rattled like a dying snake.

Pink geometries twisted and stretched the crew's three bodies down the pitch towards the door. A macabre carnival slide. Frobisher had enough time and sense to have grabbed the control console, the Doctor skittered towards the wall's absolute chronometer, slamming his arm painfully against the door handle and Peri thudded like a porcelain vase against the scanner screen. The hulking dark egg in space burned violet in her vision. A hateful icon of ancient reverence. Peri turned away and shut her eyes as the room threw her back against the console.

Pre-emptive, the Doctor shushed Frobisher's question. "There's something wrong."

"Are we going to crash?" Peri entreated.

The shape-shifting whifferdill clung to the panelling for dear life. "Even if we land, I don't think I'll be able to tell the difference."

The Doctor adjusted their travordinates and watched the VDU with all the intensity of a calico knight at a jousting match.

"I have every faith, old girl."

An ear-splitting whine arched the control column unsteadily and plummeted to the core of the console.

Solta attempted to adjust the *Ngambo*'s course immediately, compressed air jets on the left firing to manoeuvre, but the ship was caught in the narrow sump of wrecks. A songbird in tar. The rapid, spasmodic movement of ship versus ship turned from a gentle rock

to a hull-shattering quake. All pretence of calm and quiet vented through the ruptured tail.

te-Varrriq scrambled up towards the control cabin, seized the copilot's chair with all its might and bolted itself in with the life harness. It watched as its companion slipped an atmospheric rebreather over his weathered features and te-Varrriq did the same, concentrating its breathing into the rebreather so that it was now ingesting oxygen stored in its fourth lung for emergencies. The bitter, acrid stench of burning plastic filled what little air was left.

The stale smell of te-Varrriq's conserved supply smothered its receptors.

te-Varrriq felt a powerful blast of energy. Some kind of surge created when Solta attempted to fire the ship's underjets. It knocked Solta back into his chair as he attempted to adjust the emergency systems. A short, sharp roar of pain fired from between his teeth, like a spent shell casing, he slumped awkwardly into the seat.

All the while, the tiny vessel continued its descent into a small, vacuous opening in a great wall of glittering lights strobing across the endless blue and black. Like a ship torn down by the waves, the light was subsumed by the terrible and sudden dark. A knife tore into the lungs of the cosmos and forced it to breathe. One final time.

Behind te-Varrriq, a view forced by the awkward cricking of its neck, was the curve of some great vactunnel. Beyond the control cabin's forward portal, the Valettan could see the outline of wondrous machinery. A vast apparatus of gridded power plants, geophysical piping, protonic injectors, transmission conduits and all the world besides. He had seen such installations once or twice before. In illicit workshops where starships and their crews were disassembled for their constituent parts.

Oh, no...

te-Varrriq struggled vainly against the life harness, pulling and tugging at the restraints as if by sheer force alone he could rend itself free. It felt for the buckle, sucking in the fresh air, pounding it with all appendages. A sudden release. It scrambled from its chair onto its beak. Its breathing irregular and shallow, it crawled in a

half-daze across the floor to the cargo hold in the back of their shredded vessel.

It could see Solta from afar, bowing from his chair like a drooping willow.

Crunch.

Two long trunks of black blocked te-Varriq's vision. It followed them up to a long snub-nosed wound, wide as a sallow mouth, now jammed in a gaping 'O' right between the surgeon's primary oculi. A biped was holding the trigger. te-Varriq gawped at the floor, trying to pretend that it hadn't seen the gunbarrel. That if it looked away, maybe, just maybe, it would vanish.

But it was mistaken. It knew it was.

te-Varriq's body convulsed grotesquely as a bullet cut straight through its decentralised nervous system. Its bulbous head lulled for a few moments in shock before drooping to the floor.

No anonymous gunman could stop the tears bleeding from its lifeless eyes.

And no one tried.

In the dark, deep within the satellite, sharp lilac eyes examined a small deedbox filled with lifeless figurines. She didn't open it, she knew its contents already. She only ran her finger in a half-circle upon its cold wooden lid.

The acquisition of the surgeon would fulfil one half of her needed guarantee.

Now, she needed the other.

STAGE 2: **“Vaisyán Lonewatch”**

Adjusting his penlight, the Doctor deepened his already furrowed brow, picking away at the ashen flecks of blue paint burnt off during their initial materialisation. The TARDIS and he had been through much together.

The poor thing had survived a volcanic deluge as it was carried down the slopes of Mount Vesuvius from Herculaneum, dodged the obliterative kill-beams of the android hordes from Athena Prime, even an unexpected trip aboard a Maglev Horizontal Launch Assist System on Ganymede had left her unscathed.

She'd been more than capable of slipping through the breach. However, residual gravitational waves—radiating out from an as yet unknown distortion—had cast her onto the boundary. The interphase between wall and gap.

“Appalling,” the Doctor grumbled in the disquieting silence. “Simply appalling...”

Behind the TARDIS and its concerned pilot, Peri scoped her surroundings from atop a dune of what the Doctor had quickly dismissed as silicon piled against one of the walls. Her mobility restricted by both the increased gravity and the stiff articulations of the pressure suit.

Below her, bypassing the problem of the suit entirely, Frobisher had opted to transmogrify into a Kalthonian valeenharp. A bronzed long-bodied arthropod with oak-spotted chitin. The morph had required a great deal less stress than the starsuits, despite the fine-spun nature of the animal in question. There was enough cyanogen in the atmosphere for his current form to breathe soundly, if not altogether too comfortably, and he wouldn't have to worry about ballooning inside jerry-built protective gear.

All the same, he had kept a spare helmet strung up between the ridges of his exoskeleton at the Doctor's request, so he could remain in contact. Frobisher didn't bother arguing, he appreciated the company, even if their methods of keeping close were a little crude.

There was little light here, so the Doctor had kept the TARDIS's lamplight switched on to drive away the laconic shadows. From her

perch, Peri caught a glimpse of Frobisher in one of the lamp's rotations and called out. "See anything?"

He tapped the communicator switch.

"All silk so far. You?"

"Not much." Peri stared into the darkness above, watching the anxious ripples of electrical current. She couldn't shake the feeling that it was staring back at her. "Canals of ducting, like... capillaries by Picasso."

"Yeah, if someone smeared it against a dumpster.. The whole place looks like the inside of some enormous animal. What contours I can see are porous, bone-like, except the pattern looks... wrong. There's no people, no vegetation, nada but circuit—"
Frobisher felt something hard and cold crunch underfoot.

"Doctor?"

"What is it?"

"I've disagreed, Doc, with something I've stepped in..."

The Doctor's head had flicked up with a cat-like stare of soft interest. Frobisher was far from fascinated. The sound was like discovering the remains of a rat in a mousetrap. He didn't want to think about it. He didn't want to even begin to imagine what it could have been.

Glass, right? His brain rationalised, hurriedly. *Cut one of my feet on it and I'm just not feeling the pain yet. Has to be, hadn't it?*

"I think it's..." Frobisher swallowed. "Oh, who am I kidding? It sounds and feels nothing like glass. It feels like—"

"Gristle?"

The Doctor was correct, as usual, but Frobisher was a bit alarmed by how quickly his mind had leapt to that conclusion.

"Well, let's say I've got experience," Frobisher admitted.

Whereas death repelled Peri and distracted Frobisher, it held a morbid fascination for this man of many colours. After all, for a being so curious about the nature of the cosmos around him, it was only natural for him to be drawn towards the most alien of realms. One that claimed all indiscriminately. Young, old. Dames, dukes. Even emperors and worms. Maybe it was the incomprehensible vastness of such a force which so unnerved Frobisher.

He attempted to shift his weight from the offending object, but was pulled up by a sharp command from the jogging Doctor, "Stand still! It could be anything, Frobisher. *Anything.*"

“I dunno, skipper, I’ve got some pretty pointed ideas.”

From her vantage point away and above, Peri had monitored the small unfolding drama.

“You guys alright?” she called.

“We’re fine, Peri,” answered the Doctor. “Keep your eyes open for anything we might have missed.”

“Over here!” Peri called. “This thing.”

Earlier, while the Doctor nursed the TARDIS, she’d spotted something glowing up overhead in a small engraved cradle at the peak of one of the dunes. Venturing up and closer, she found it’d been initially fashioned from rough chert into a crystalline bowl. It glowed with a deep migrainous ruby. She’d mistaken it for a light source initially, but the descriptor didn’t feel right. There was something about its shape that was off. It didn’t project light, it absorbed it.

The Doctor, leaving Frobisher where he currently stood, darted back up the dune, fiddling with the penlight.

“Yes,” he frowned. “It seems to be interfering with the auto-dimmer.”

He held up his penlight and wagged it back and forth. A small white dot glowed within the vitreous electrocrystal. An angry cicada dot, riffling from side-to-side, attracted by the Doctor’s movement.

While it was distracted, he unzipped a compartment on his starsuit, below the question mark badges on his shoulders, and began rifling through its contents.

“Thought so. Infrared sensors. Potentially photon-guided.”

“Camera,” realised Peri.

“On the initial stages of its focus cycle. I believe I saw something similar on, erm...” The Doctor filched a palm-sized Polaroid camera from his pocket and aimed it towards the ground, parallel to the lens’s line-of-sight, “Psi Mindre? No... *Ab!* Valerix-1. Home of *Gaia Shieldclaw*’s holograder, remind me to tell you sometime. Mutual acquaintance of ours. Lean to the side for me.”

Peri did as instructed.

“Smile,” said the Doctor, beaming. A bloom of light, quickly followed by the lisp of a photographic print. He flicked the photo for a few moments, trying to hurry along the image’s development, adding, “Not that you’ll be seen smiling.”

“You gotta plan?” hollered Frobisher from his captivity below.

Still smirking, the Doctor replied, “Wait and see, my penguin chum! Wait and see.”

The rover unfastened his pouch once more and retrieved a long wire from what Frobisher guessed was once a coat hanger and wound it around the phased electrocrystal’s midsection, securing the photograph with a bent hook at its polar end. The result? The false image now sat primly and unassumingly in front of whatever activities the three of them would actually do.

“There,” breathed the Doctor. “Someone may be thoroughly interested in what we discover and the less incriminating we are the better. ‘Tho’ a false sight, no sound for fury’.” He jerked his head. “Frobisher’s discovered something in the sand.”

They reunited with the whifferdill.

“What is it?” Peri asked.

The Doctor crouched down, pawing away the soil with his gloves from where the shape-shifter’s foot had penetrated.

The sound made Frobisher itch and he could taste the disturbed silicon in the air. A strange metal tang like amalgam fillings.

He winced horribly, he knew what was coming.

“It’s a body, isn’t it?”

The Doctor sighed sadly, hunkering below his eyeline.

“Yes, I’m afraid it is.”

Using a small dusting brush from a suit pocket, the Doctor cleaned the body’s face. Sand had caked across the cheekbones and eye-sockets, absorbing moisture from the folds in its puckered skin. Mummified in the dry atmosphere.

“Bipedal. Possibly female,” he mused. “Origin... Unclear.”

His gaze wandered back up to the photograph and the steadily oscillating iris of surveillance electrocrystal behind it.

“Anyone see similar contraptions active anywhere else?” he asked.

His two companions surveyed their surroundings and both responded in the negative.

“Yet whoever controls those systems would seem to think that this camera here is worth keeping on standby. Watching and waiting...” The Doctor placed a finger against his visor and hummed, thoughtfully.

“What are you thinking?” quizzed Peri.

He raised his eyebrows. “I thought, young Peri, that would be obvious.”

“A trap, huh?” she asked.

“But not for us though, surely?” Frobisher countered. “Listen, can I move my flipp—er, forefoot?”

The Doctor nodded. Frobisher shifted his weight, wisely putting some distance between himself and his inauspicious new acquaintance.

“Thanks, Doc.”

Examining the soot on the body’s abdomen, the Doctor assured Frobisher that he could take hearts in knowing that his unfortunate footing was merely the deathblow on an already long passed specimen. It was difficult to tell from his Kalthonian features whether this had brought him any measure of comfort. Notable on the body though was a small embossed pocket on its jacket. The Doctor pawed the contents, glossy edges protruded from beneath the material as he removed a cuboctahedron no larger than a tea caddy.

“Anything promising?” asked Peri.

“Perhaps...” He held it up for her to examine. “A bit outside your area of expertise, archæologically speaking.”

“I could say that, as a *botanist*,” Peri fluttered her eyelashes, sarcastically. “What is it?”

“Computer storage. Might be our *corpus delicti*.”

“Something to analyse in the TARDIS’s dimensional laboratory?” Frobisher inquired.

“No point. The Voermann analyser packed up some decades ago...” The Doctor resettled the body’s anorak. “None of your clients or their enemies were Nitridrons, were they, Frobisher?”

“Nope. No wronged ne’er-do-wells for me out there.”

“Neither do I recognise the uniform. I believe...” he gently closed the corpse’s mouth. A bizarrely playful little gesture from Peri’s perspective. “We have stumbled upon someone else’s machinations.”

“*Again*,” both his companions grumbled.

“There must be a way out of here...” He shone the penlight out towards the dunes. “There’s something wrong here, something wrong with this place... Why do I get the feeling we’re already too late?”

“For what, Doc?” asked Frobisher.

The Doctor shook his head towards the far wall, his brow furrowed. He started. "What's that?"

Peri and Frobisher could see it. A quicksilver span stretching out like a chopstick.

"A monorail, Doc...?" Peri said, unclear.

"No," the Doctor's voice darkened. "Not that."

His eyes narrowed as he directed the beam back out to their surroundings. The walls around them drew back from its caress in a bizarre display of vertigo. Only, *draw* wasn't quite the right word for it. They had retreated. Withdrawn. *Flinched* back. The mottled biochrome was shifting with an aching flex each time the light touched it. Like the sensation caught its breath. The rest warped with a disturbingly natural rhythm. Almost as if it were...

Peri's mouth opened. "Doctor... The walls are..."

"Doc, they're *breathing*," said Frobisher.

The Doctor's voice deepened with fascination. "I wonder if we are truly alone here?"

Unnoticed by any of the trio, the photographic paper in front of the red eye had slowly begun to flex and smoulder, curling edgewise in wisps of acrid smoke...

Elsewhere in the satellite, not too far from the worried questing of the three travellers, a small aquamarine trapezoid was rolling through cubist shafts and gangways towards the core of the artificial world. The curved forefront of the Vaisyan Lonewatch's Mobile Excursion Vehicle pushed past a pair of connective heat exchangers, the rippling air rolling in scalding waves over its roof, blackening its paintwork.

Within the MEV were housed the last survivors of a spacecraft on a mission known to them and them alone.

Their leader, standing in the cockpit, listened to the twin impulses as one device drew the excess heat from the other. A high-pitched whine, a roar of converted energy, then an unnervingly immaculate silence. Broken only by the occasional twitching hiss from fire extinguishing ports. Gearing up, sensing no immediate danger, and loosely cycling back down again.

Aboard, in one of the MEV's retrofitted living quarters, a personally important absence was noticed. Not vital in any cosmic

sense, but personal. Mæstric switched her cranial implants back to a narrow receiver band and switched off her typewriter-sized Mobatal cyberdeck. Stretching her arms, she shifted her weight from the bed and rose into the dark.

She leant down. Azovka's bunk was empty.

Leaving the room, she leant against the rebreather rack next to the inner airlock door which led out into danger. As her fingers brushed the ruby-and-pearl sword knot at her belt, she heard the distinctive *clunk-clunk* of bipedal movement. The subtle shift of a body as it steadied itself against the wall moving down the access passage. Her face shrouded in the dark, she could hear breathing—No. No, it was... Rasping...?

Sobbing?

She felt something inside her throat. Frustration, again. Exhaustion, *again*. Exhaustion led to irritation and irritation to the cutting edge of anger.

You are someone with answers, sudar, Azovka had asked Dellevar. *Tell me, please, when a friendship dies, where does one go to say goodbye?*

It was Azovka. It had to be.

Mæstric pushed the unshaven side of her rich blue hair from her pink eyes, messy unwashed strands pricking at the scrapes on her face and neck. Angrily, the datathumper returned to her quarters for her cyberdeck, then made for the MEV's commissariat.

The black veil of space beyond Natasia Tor swung around CIDA's Nonpareil Malla Castell. She rolled her thumb back on the manoeuvring controls of her *Makaino*-class strike interceptor, D-Leader and Interceptor Pilot D-08 crossing her vertical axis to re-enter formation in front of her.

Early Warning Xi's automated central control dome was a soft dab of slowly burling caramel in the left-most segment of her cockpit. Buried deep beneath the surface of the unmapped asteroid, it always had an intimidating, organic sheen to it when she scanned it through the infrared systems. She'd seen it at least half a dozen times on similar such missions. Aside from a tramp caravan staked out on a lone chunk of rock, chosen so a foursome of diminutive avians could avoid the "bally old wildness of the metropoli," the sector was otherwise unoccupied.

Her transceiver crackled, "*D-Leader to K-17.*"

“K here.” She found herself whispering, reverential. Her voice rose to compensate. “Yeah, go?”

Not exactly befitting protocol for a subordinate addressing a commanding officer, but then she’d found him hard to take seriously from the get-go. This seemed easier and those in charge of the regulations had felt a little off-book colour made for a more effective team.

“*I think we’ve hit our requisite number of passes, don’t you?*” asked D-Leader.

“Don’t have to tell me twice.”

Interceptor Pilot D-08’s voice snapped in. “*Clearing off to the right. Thinking good thoughts and keeping to our side of the boundary zone.*”

“Full acknowledgement, D-08,” the pilot smiled. “Keeping Affiliation-side likewise. Wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“*I can see a comet, in front of the interceptor,*” he said. “*Too far away to trigger Asa Nayuta’s infotrap.*”

“Can’t see it from my angle,” she kept her distance, but adjusted her interceptor’s eyeline. “You make a wish?”

“*Not yet, I’ll think of one when we’re away.*”

“Fair, hey, I’ve got a riddle. One of my boys came to me with it.”

“Go.”

“I can run, but I cannot walk. What am I?”

A thoughtful pause. “*A run-on sentence...?*”

“A nose,” Castell answered knowingly, wrinkling hers. “Clever, right?”

“*Yeah, that works.*”

“They’re going to really haul us over the coals for clattering up the recordings,” chuckled D-Leader.

Castell laughed. “Full acknowledgement. We’ll—”

“*A minute,*” D-08 cut in again. “*Got something.*”

She recognised that tone. Their monitoring equipment had clicked into action automatically registering a sensor anomaly. Her breathing slowed and shallowed, an unfamiliar transceiver waveband dropping into her headset like a pebble skimming across the ocean. The voice on the other end was a woman’s, she didn’t quite recognise it over the distorting static projected from what must have been a low-fidelity transmitter.

“*This is the Central Institute calling Early Warning Xi. I say again, the Central Institute calling Early Warning Xi. Urgent request.*”

“This is Stellar Reconnaissance Force from Trailblazer Prime,” D-Leader’s voice again. *“State nature of emergency.”*

“Spatial scans have detected a radiation leak emanating from Silo Twenty-Seven. Can you confirm?”

The SRF interceptor pilot felt her lip crease. She ran her own analyses using the equipment brought aboard by Blue-Sky and the technician for holographic capture. They’d both been unusually pensive about the detector’s installation, something was bothering them both from the moment that the engineer had entered the bay. Something big. She felt her tail quiver anxiously out from behind her seat.

There was nothing. No, more than that. It was the complete absence of something. No emissions of any kind beyond the heat of the four reactors responsible for maintaining long-term systems like communications and fire control. Something wasn’t right here.

She pulled up a private channel. *“Victory?”*

“Yes?”

“Run a check to see where that signal’s coming from. Someone might be trying to run interference from that comet.”

She could hear him shifting uncomfortably in his seat. *“Already did. It’s not coming from Xi or the comet.”*

“Then where?”

“K-17, I don’t think it was a comet.”

There was a flash. She started back, her life harness pulling her tight against the worn upholstery. The transceiver went dead with a fitful burst of smoke, shortly before everything else followed suit.

Castell felt the controls of her ship seize. It ripped away from her of its own free will, bright lazuline engines pulsing and readjusting as if on automatic. She pressed herself against the chair, bracing her legs beneath the cockpit controls, trying to twist the cockpit controls free with little success.

The pale cream colour of the ship’s body browned with every fried circuit-board and overcharged mechanism. Her course was altering dramatically, as was that of her fellow pilots. They were all being drawn towards the shredded veil of the Tor.

Three figurines, garbed in their blue Stellar Reconnaissance Force uniforms, were swept forward across the table. The lilac-eyed

lowered two of her fingers onto two of their heads, tapping with the ponderous swing of a pendulum.

The surgeon sat on one side. The pilots on the other.

Not a word spoken from either bloc. Their absences went unnoticed. As anticipated.

It wouldn't be long now.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

It was easier to access the MEV's commissariat than Mæstric had anticipated. Someone had forgotten to reset the cipher codes after their most recent drop-off and left a security port wide open for her to jack in. With one understated sweep of her hand, the door slid open and Mæstric crept inside. She crouched down, laying her cyberdeck off to one side behind one of the nearby cargo containers and waited.

Azovka had come as expected.

The intruder eased a pocket decrypter from a pouch in her haggard windbreaker and gently placed it over the entry coder on the food boxes, shushing it when it clicked and spurred with activity.

Mæstric's hand snatched over Azovka's wrist before she could remove it.

"Lije..." the voice hidden beneath the red-tipped hair was quiet, sad.

"I knew you'd be here, Telle," said Mæstric, levelly. "Doesn't that make a change?"

Azovka tried raising her head up to reply, but felt it fall towards the floor instead.

"This was a mistake... Why didn't I know you'd be here? I can't make you understand..." murmured Azovka. "I've tried and I've tried, but I can't." She tried pulling away from her, but Mæstric only tightened her grip.

"I know what you're doing here," she said.

"Let me go."

"No."

"Let *me go*."

"No."

Azovka started to struggle. "Mæstric, for once, can't you—?"

"I'm sick of—"

“You think I’m not—?”

“—playacting. Oh, like you’re—”

Something long-worn snapped behind the stepthreader’s eyes.

“*Shut up!* For once in your life, won’t you—”

An elbow came down on Azovka’s face and—with the weight of her body—Azovka came down on Mæstric.

“*Not here!*” a third voice snapped. “*Not in this place!*”

It was a command as weighty and powerful as a comet strike through a moon. It fell upon them, a torrent of ice, flash-freezing them both to the spot.

Dellevar’s crimson eyes surveyed them as they had fallen, two of his agents locked together against once hermetically-sealed canisters of varying shapes, origins and purposes. Between the door opening and his authoritative bark, Mæstric had locked one of Azovka’s arms against her sides, her knee planted against the centre of her back, but the younger had compensated by freeing her hand and holding it tight against a pressure point below Mæstric’s neck.

Azovka scrambled up to her feet. She ran a hand nervously through the muddied stripe of mercury-red that cut through her hair and found that she couldn’t meet the gaze of her sponsor.

They had all come from lives where such petty squabbling over meagre flecks in the stews and narrows of dystopic perditions was commonplace. Nay, expected. Life clung desperately to the light of a keyhole, tearing others down who would rob them of that single sustaining hope.

But here, under the rallying oriflamme of the Vaisyan Lonewatch, there was no such avaritia. All were equal. All was shared.

Until now, Azovka reflected to herself.

She could feel the cuts and bruises from strongboxes cracked open in their squabble. Hewn over old scars. Her mistake. Mæstric rose arm over fist, tracing the black-crimson discolouration around her implants where Azovka had struck.

At the long silence, Dellevar spoke. “We do not attack our own. That is our cardinal rule.”

“The food there in that box is *mine*,” Mæstric’s eyes blazed into Azovka. “I won’t survive without it. How the hell are we supposed to survive if we turn on our own, huh? How long will this last, will *we* last?”

“Separate,” commanded Dellevar.

The two Narans protested in unison.

“*Move!*” their mentor roared. He never shouted. He *never* roared. Never raised an octave beyond his normal speaking tone.

Surprised and fearful, the two women dispersed to the furthest reaches of the room and watched him as children watching an ill-tempered parent, “You think we can sow cloud-forming crystals in the ceiling and make this barren cavity seem like Dayaalu? Bear fruit in this brine-cured loam however much it may rain?”

“There isn’t enough,” Azovka sank, knees to her chin, barely a whisper.

“That’s patently obvious,” Mæstric snarled, lying on her ankles. “We don’t even have a working spade anymore.”

“No, here, Lije,” said Azovka. “The food here. Not for everyone. If we keep going as we are now, being as even-handed as we always were, we’re going to die. All of us.”

“So, instead of digging our water wells, you’ll dig in the dirt for our own graves?” snapped Mæstric. It was a childish move, she knew. But it hurt, and for the moment that’s all that mattered. She had the blinding falsehood of rage. She’d regret it later, but for the moment, she didn’t care. Creating hurt was all that mattered. “How typical of you, Telle. So much charm with so little feeling...”

Tears streaked Azovka’s face, her body shaking.

“Enough, little one,” said Dellevar. It was simple, quiet and all either of them really needed. One simple voice of reason amongst all the chaotic feeling between them. Mæstric’s body language wavered, Dellevar could see the cracks in her seemingly unshakable facade.

“It’s what she does!” she protested. “She’s a sycophantic fawner, she can’t help but tell you exactly what you want to hear with none of the fealty.”

There was an emotional jolt between the two, like a static shock.

“*Enough*,” said Dellevar again. A little gentler, a little smoother and he could see the final link in her chain of resentment warp from shape. Remorse crashed down atop the both of them as they sank against the ground. Their friendship had been long, but forever strained by their fosterage. Azovka and Mæstric were still young, after all. Both had joined the Lonewatch too early and far too much from necessity than desire.

“Enough...” Mæstric echoed. “Sure... It’s enough, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” agreed Azovka. She turned back to Dellevar, prickling hurt in her voice, “Did you know I’d be here?”

“After all these years, how could I not?” He hid his sadness in the upper arms folded across his chest. “But I did not ask this of you. Either of you. We’ll find a way for all of us. That I promise to the two of you.”

“I can help,” said Azovka.

“Can you?” hissed Mæstric.

A nervous index finger brushed the stepthead’s cheekbone. “I can’t explain it, you know I c-can’t. I don’t have the—”

“You can’t bargain with fate, Telle.”

“I’m still trying, Lije. Believe me, I’m still trying.”

Mæstric’s pendulous face disappeared beneath her shaking arms. The floor beneath them hiccupped violently. Dellevar remained rooted as the two women struggled to stand.

“What was that?” asked Azovka.

“Part of what I came to tell you,” Dellevar said. “Our news from the patrol is not good.”

“I’ll check the thermal gauge on the Haloster in the forward compartment,” Mæstric mumbled.

She left without further incident.

Dellevar leant against the wall, near one of the in-built water dispensaries. His sigh was dirge-like, punishing in anyone else’s throat but his own. “To other matters...”

Azovka didn’t look at him. “What d-did you find on your patrol?”

“Our return path has been locked off. I require the assistance of you both to explore an alternate route through to one of the rail termini. If you’re willing?”

“Anything to be free of here. It...” she stifled an angry sob. “It gets into the walls. All this...” The words trailed softly into the ether. Something burned behind her eyes, some deep injustice that smoothed them to flowing marbles. Her hand, resting against one of the boxes, had sunk into the plasteel like a print in the snow.

“Where do you need me, *sudar*?”

The Doctor inspected the railcar’s interior through the windows, idly tapping out combinations on the entry coder as he did so. Another non-compliant buzz. He frowned. This was getting him

nowhere. Forfeiting the locking mechanism, he scabbled round in his suit pouch for the cadaver's cuboctahedron.

"You still got that thing?"

"Someone's perhaps killed for it, Frobisher, I think it's worth holding onto."

He presented it to the coder. It didn't react to the external sensor, but the Doctor found it useful as a wedge he could push between the two strips of sealed tubing around the doors. Through no small degree of effort, he was able to wiggle in a fingerhold and prise the two panels back on their tracks into their respective alcoves.

A cool wall of air struck him and his companions. Without a word, he alighted feet first into the cabin, disappearing with a modicum of fuss.

"Hey, that's progress! Is it safe?"

"Or comfortable at the least, Doc?"

"Come in!" he invited breezily, a youth in a treehouse.

"Huh. Well," Frobisher eagerly slapped his forceps together. "When in Amtor."

He clambered up and in, Peri not far behind him. Within moments, the whifferdill had moved his helmet to the room's table and started chittering through a cabinet of eclectic goods.

"Somewhere, perp, there's whiskey, bitters and vermouth—or their nearest equivalent."

Peri mouthed the ingredients, amalgamating them in a single thought. "A Manhattan, huh? Nice idea, but count me out."

"Any reason?"

"Whiskey mixes well with everything except decision-making."

A few metres over in the control cabin, their calico chaperone was occupied with an entirely different activity. Hand at his hip in thought, he jostled the controls on the end of the drive cylinder with an open palm.

"No power." As he'd expected. "With no other discernible means of egress, this is likely our only way out of this section of the satellite."

"Where are we headed?" asked Peri. "The bridge?"

"The nearest communications terminal, actually. I—*Oof!*" The shin. A device used to locate boundaries in the dark. He patted his leg compassionately and examined his collision point. The polished

ivory tint of the decorative fascia seemed to confirm that creature comforts were factored in as part of the machine's design. That pointed to a living workforce. People.

"Who put that there, I wonder?" he mused, then more loudly, "I want to meet those responsible for manufacturing this cuboctahedron. See what they have to say about this structure's nature."

"Any theories?" she asked.

"Quite a retinue. Could be an archaeological site or mining complex. There's no blueprint or floor plan anywhere, which would seem to imply this transport system was for people in the know."

"You mean, specialised?"

"Exactly, a setup that indicates a further purpose, a function unshared with daily life."

He felt his fingertips hook themselves beneath an invisible indent in the cylinder. There was a click and the access panel thudded open to rest against his knees. He peered around briefly to see if either of his friends had noticed his moment of serendipity, smiled and placed the protective casing to one side.

"Frobisher," he hallooed. "Doors."

Distractedly, the valeenharp delicately clawed the release controls, watching the two panels ease together into place with a pneumatic hiss. It didn't take long for the lounge to pressurise and the lights to quiver on. The atmosphere grew heavy with an overwhelmingly distinctive odour. Like peppercorn and treacle.

Frobisher sneezed and sneezed again.

"Breathe easy, you two. Gasses in the Xin range are relatively harmless to mammalian and crustacean life." The Doctor glanced back, fingering his neck. "Peri."

She shook her elfin features. "No, thanks. It's stuffy, but at least it's one more thing preventing me from turning inside out or whatever."

"Ah, *Peri-fied* of the consequences, are we?"

"Doc, has any wisemouth ever told you that puns are the Cytherean pox of language?" Frobisher sneezed again and felt the consequences pour all over the broadloom rug at his feet. If he'd had teeth, he would have swallowed them. "Peri... After this, there something *you* want to do?"

“Such as?”

“Anywhere on Earth. I ain’t worried, so long as it keeps us happy and him out of trouble.”

“How ‘bout Monaco? Or Milan. It was pretty popular last time I was in the—”

Without warning, the visor of Peri’s helmet imploded like a cracked picture tube. The sound was as a buzzsaw through molten glass, the girl’s scream not far behind. The cabin window staved outwards in a burst of laminated glass as if someone had thrown a javelin straight through its heart. She and Frobisher hit the floor in a hæmorrhagic shower of machine parts and vitreous fragments. He felt his body crinkle and bruise under the small amount of strain. Above them, writhing jet-black bamboo spikes.

Tendrils. A sheaf of them that had impaled the upholstery of the seats they’d both thrown themselves clear of. There was something about their construction—a smooth, organic texture—that made his eyes slide down towards the saw-toothed nibs and ridged mandibles. Below the point of a particularly nasty looking spear was Peri. Flailing. Her lungs ragged with strangled breaths. Frobisher was already moving.

She was drowning. Drowning in this poison air.

Another member of the clattering forest of death sliced through the opposing window. Magnets clapping against the metal architecture. It was searching for them, trying to draw them out with fearmongering and scare tactics.

He’d reacted before his brain could adequately process it. His digits were tight around his own helmet as she tried to remove hers.

Panic was making her movements clumsy, she’d torn the oxygen intake tubing out before the catches around the neckline furrow had come loose. Frobisher’s valeenharpic form proved invaluable in hastening the process.

Within a minute, Peri had tossed aside her old sanctuary for a new one. The catches clicked and the groove snapped into place with some encouragement and she was able to fall back onto her shoulders. Relieved. Alive. He could see her face through the dirtied visor, contorted in pain and shock. Calling out for someone. Not him, she knew where he was, for someone else. “*Doctor!*”

Where was he? He couldn’t see him.

“Doc?” called Frobisher. “*Doctor! Doc, look out!*”

The squawk engendered a small cluster of tendrils to slow mid-air. They grew a new trajectory and shot down at the ground where the whifferdill stood. He scabbled back against the far wall and held his breath. His lungs were burning with exertion. The valeenharp was a comparatively delicate animal, initially starting out as a prey species, not used to dealing with threats beyond their own environment. The air, tolerable enough for Frobisher at the start, was now beginning to cause him to hyperventilate.

Another attack!

It tore open the panelling in the ceiling, gorging itself on retching pipes and snapping wires. The “malfunction” sent a signal to the railcar’s computer which responded by opening the soffits of the carriage and filling the room with extinguisher foam. The smell and suffocating density of the off-pink gossamer morass sent Frobisher back towards the floor. It was difficult to focus.

A dark purple web clutched at the corners of his vision.

Breathe! Keep moving forward! Open your throat and breathe!

He couldn’t morph. His metabolism was under too much pressure to even attempt such a thing. He needed an out. He couldn’t see!

“*Frobisher! Peri!*” A voice! Whose voice? He wished he could remember.

Frobisher couldn’t reply. He kept moving. Moving. Moving forward. If he could make it, if he could—He was through! The control cabin was clear and the pressure on his vision had subsided enough that he could see a figure kicking at the drive cylinder.

“*Come on!*” the Doctor snarled. “You antediluvian workingman’s assembly, c’mon! *Perform your function!*”

“Make with the feet, Doc,” Frobisher swallowed, half-delirious, “or we’re pinked!”

“You stupid *Monitum mutante*, what do you think I’m trying to—?” The car began moving lento, picking up speed. “*Watch it!*”

The Doctor knocked him clear, snatching up the drive cylinder’s maintenance panel as a stout buckler. He held it against his shoulder like a Turkish Janissary, a tendril skinning the paintwork and embedding itself in the more fragile connecting furrow at the end. The Doctor used the downward swing of his body weight to throw the thing off-balance. The resulting inertia pulled it down, so when

it retreated for another strike it caught against the bottom mullion of the window.

Then came a noise. A noise that Frobisher couldn't describe.

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The whifferdill shivered, his skull ached. "What the *hell* was that?"

They were moving faster now. At speed, towards the forward iris where no doubt another section of the satellite lay ahead. The spike's stem was caught at its lip, shearing the offending trident from its main body like a branch from a tree trunk. The life in its head didn't drain away but halted altogether. A puppet with its strings cut.

"When evil hurried to the field, it snatched the spear, but left the shield," boomed the Doctor disdainfully, casting his own buckler aside.

"Are we safe?" asked Frobisher.

"Safer than we were before." The aperture closed behind the railcar with a mechanical whine, imprisoning their attackers on the other side. "Each system operates independently of one another. Strange." He didn't let Frobisher interject. "Where's Peri?"

"In the ba—"

The Doctor's feet barely touched the ground. He was by the young woman's side immediately. Her eyes were closed, her body at rest in an awkward crook with her arms slumped over her legs. He snapped his fingers, waving a hand. Non-responsive. He gently prised her back and an awful thrill of fear thundered down his spine.

"That's a lot of blood..." breathed Frobisher.

"She's unconscious," the Doctor checked the rest of the suit. The wound on her thigh was a horrible blossoming scarlet. "Artery. External iliac. I should have been here to prevent this!"

"Doc, is she going to be alright?"

"Peri, can you hear me?" Frobisher could see the Doctor's eyes. An undertow of panic beneath that wider body of calm. The girl's head lolled back unnaturally against the back of the helmet.

The Doctor's voice was a bark, "*Peri?*"

STAGE 3: **“To Sharpen a Sleeping Blade”**

Solta’s arms scraped falteringly along the floor as he awoke to the sound of gunfire. Short, controlled bursts. Highly professional, highly methodical, highly routine.

Memories.

He could remember on an old mission, his face pushed into the dust of the veldt, the choking heat ripping beneath cracks in the coral huts on a world whose water had long since been stolen away.

It hadn’t been his first encounter with militaria of fortune, nor would it his last, but he felt the same powerless dread. They had thrown him into a crèche nestled between two enormous buzzing field-effect transistors, condensation dripping from the ceiling to flashover screeching, worn insulators. After only a few hours of this, he’d felt like screaming. He’d smashed his foot against the breakers, tearing at the matte black walls with his fingernails. Searching for some peace, some respite, something that he could control. Eventually, after the unbecoming panic had subsided, he’d found himself focussing on his breathing. A habit that he had developed since his first flight test. His surgeon, te-Varrig, had suggested it as a calming ritual. Careful, methodical counting.

One, two, three, four, five...

He wondered where his friend could be now.

One, two, three, four, five...

He could hear the plastic scrape of a gem cartridge inserted into the wall socket beyond his cell to unlock the resonance grid around his cell door.

One, two, three, four, five...

The faint olive halo surrounding the door faded with a digitised yawn and it slid open with an aggressive pneumatic hiss. The shadows from outside descended upon him. He’d been too tired to resist.

One... Two... Three, four, five...

They dragged him by his shoulders from the room, down the access hallway and through into what must have once been a staff canteen—now left derelict with disposable tables and benches for species ranging from the octopedal to the monopodal. Smoke hung

heavy across their surfaces and he could feel his white facial markings glitter incandescently in the dark.

One, two, three, four, five...

Over towards the far wall of the deceptively small room was a single spotlight that illuminated a small corridor of latticework soldered from scraps of biochrome and plastic. The door behind him sealed tight. He would break his hands even attempting to get it open and he didn't have the strength to try anyway.

"Move to the centre." It was a feminine voice, lilting with authority.

The centre of what? A shooting gallery?

Solta hobbled lop-footed through the opening to the centre of the spotlight, letting the harsh blues swamp his tired features. He saw his shadow melt beneath him like wax until it was little more than a malformed patch of grey against scuffed flooring.

One, two, thr—

There was the cruel flick of air as something glanced past his head and struck the shoulder of the mannequin beside him. He flinched, instinctively shifting to cover his body with one of the other figures. Daring a glimpse, he observed that the calibre of bullet had punctured the facsimile's neck as if it were a tree struck by lightning.

Lightning. Light! Light assaulted him from all angles, he was blind. It slipped across his vision, he moved and stumbled into the anonymous face of a serpentine species he couldn't quite remember.

His tufted ears shot up as another shot scraped past, turning the ankle of an Ordovi into charred powder.

A voice from the æther, "You will answer my questions."

The world spun beneath him, he managed little more than an exaggerated nod.

"Who are you—?"

Another shot, this time at the floor. The ricochet of debris cracked his ankle and he winced.

"Continue to waste my time, te-Varriq, and like your pilot, I will kill you. Please answer as quickly as possible."

"Dead...?" She couldn't hear the question, he couldn't hear it himself. There was a numbness to the whole affair—an unreality. His body curled into a question mark where he stood. He felt sick.

The voice continued. “Your flight computer was locked down, where were you heading?”

“To the Metzger’s Luck star system...” he rasped, dazedly.

“Your purpose?”

“Medical. *Urgent.*”

The voice paused for verification.

Vainly, he attempted to search through the glow for the voice’s source. Solta could see that it stood upright with an enormous corneous shell arcing upwards, the summit of a mountain behind its head. Sealed in a mace-shaped helmet. A maw filled with paired, opposing tusk-like mandibles and a bewildering battery of externalised and internalised mechanical mouthparts for speech.

“Adequate,” the figure nodded. No... No, it wasn’t him. It was a different voice, someone else was in the room with them. “That information corresponds with your flight manifest.”

He couldn’t quite tell if it was the laxtherarine drug they had administered to him upon his first revival, a simple lack of sleep or perhaps some combination of the two, but the other shape seemed sculpted from the light itself.

Lilac eyes purred hot and cold as though auroræ.

He recognised her species. A Hylonomeide. Unusual to see outside of the Venaya system. She was senior in this affair. That much was evident from the gunman’s body language.

“To be clear,” she averred, “and I feel transparency is an important step in our professional relationship, your field of experience is xenosurgery?”

His russet ears flicked down. “Yes, I am... I mean, it is...”

“You will do as I ask?”

“Yes.”

“And if you should disappoint?”

“Then I will die.”

A dismissive flick of the hand. “By your own postoperative scruples, I will not waste the firepower.”

“Yes,” he choked on the word.

“Good. Kuron?”

The gunman lowered his weapon and passed it to her.

The lilac eyes weighed it carefully in her hand. “Gurudev te-Varriq, I am Vog Mur.” She switched off its select fire mode and

the offending Tzu carbine pistol disappeared beneath clasped fingertips. “We will collaborate soon.”

The spotlight disengaged with a snap and Solta was swamped by the lonely darkness. Bar the gentle slide of the main door opening and the efficient strike of hooves as the two figures departed, there was nothing to interfere with his moment of gentle respite. A reward perhaps for his straightforwardness during the interrogation? He could wonder...

Tired... So, terribly...

His slender features twisted painfully into a relieved simper. It was a beautiful, serene lullaby of emptiness, but as his legs buckled beneath him and he slumped to the floor, the mausoleum of faceless mannequins eclipsed the ceiling above him. They would follow him into his nightmares of that there was little doubt. Of that...

There was silence.

Telle Azovka let her eyes readjust to the sky of glistening foundrylight, ebbing like molten magma below, and tried her best to trick herself into believing she was safe.

Sandwiched between the plateau beneath her feet and the factories below was a capsule-shaped rail platform. Quicksilver. Flat like a serving spoon, a single monorail track running towards an opening in the wall at one end. Two leading away to further avenues on the other.

While both were what she'd come to see, her attention was instead entirely focussed upon scraping away the insulation around some fibrous cabling at leg height.

Alright... she thought, shakily. Alright? Alright...

Taken from a supply cylinder at her belt, she smeared the last of her illuminating phosphor gel against the sides of her rebreather mask in long strips. Under its pale blue glow, she noticed the cabling leaning towards her like ganglia.

Must be attracted to the Resonance Gem emissions.

She fingered the delicate piece of electrocrystalline equipment in her pocket. It allowed her to move unseen, but perhaps not entirely unnoticed. While chipped and brittle from wear-and-tear outside its protective cartridge, it'd kept her safe. Thus far.

“*I’m awaiting your report, Azovka,*” ground Dellevar from the transceiver. “*Are you still with Miane and Xor?*”

“We got separated by an orbot patrol. I think I may have found another way around, but I’ve yet to know for sure.”

The transceiver popped in her hand with a clap as the previously idle cabling was blitzed with new transmissions. Gibberish as far as Azovka could tell, but an important indicator nonetheless. Something was coming. Something that this section of the satellite was now acutely aware of.

If she was unlucky, that meant her.

“Breaking contact, *sudar.*”

She secured her Vidphōn transceiver and wound its radiosiphon filament back into the yellow-flapped pocket of her black jacket. It clung tight to her sternum behind the straps of the Eotvos counter-mass harness.

Far below, beyond the steep, high verticils of the undulating energy transition coils in front of her, arrived a railcar through an entranceway into the terminus below. It halted and the doors slid open.

The taller of the two figures emerged immediately and powerfully from the cabin, swiping his arm through the air in an impatient, hurrying motion. The other walked squat. A subspecies of heihachi she didn’t quite recognise with beaded adipose sprockets wound around a biped-sized mass. Oblong. An ammunition case perhaps or maybe some more imported equipment from the outside.

The taller of the two jabbed his finger at his companion and flicked it dismissively at the blasted remains of a horseshoe-shaped console, outside the transit hub where they had pulled up. It might have once been a signal box to divert the monorail onto one of the other branching tracks past where their railcar had stopped.

She had a fairly good idea of who had gone to so much effort to make sure that none of it worked. It was short-sighted on so many levels and—in the case of the duo—wildly self-destructive. That gave her pause. Their opponents were usually far more intelligent than that. Self-sabotage didn’t fit the profile.

They didn’t wear the armour or carry the same bearing either, so who were these men? Smugglers? Sliprangers?

The pair left small plodding footsteps of white foam in their wake as they separated to attend to their own tasks. The smaller carried

his weighted package to disappear from view beneath the covering roof running between the track and the downward leading skyramp. The taller of the two started moving towards the exit, but paused before the first dozen rows of cylindrical tubes that twinned the slope. He looked at them, side-to-side, as if they were palace guards.

He'd recognised the warning signs, so he mustn't have been entirely unwitting.

The distant figure rifled through his pockets and produced a small tin containing a miniature replica, a die-cast groundcar, lowered down onto one knee and carefully took aim. He pulled it back across the ground, released and it was soon bouncing down the companionway. Its journey went untroubled until it reached the fifth or sixth step down. A series of turrets emerged from the parallel cylinders and abruptly halted the intruder's skittering perambulations with a boiling squelch of acidised gelatine.

The figure threw his arms around his shoulders as if affronted by the waste. On closer inspection, he looked like Jazz Gallivant from *The Guild of Glassmakers*. All the bluster of an autumn with all the mystery of a deep winter.

He pulled a long, black cylinder from his pocket and held it out towards the offending pathway before placing it back. It may have been a lasgun or some small jamming device, she couldn't quite say. Her fingers traced the volatiser at her belt as she considered whether she could...

No. There were three issues immediately.

Firstly, her throw was troublesome at the best of times.

Second, his suit was entirely pressurised.

Lastly, if the relativistic force of attraction reversed its trajectory... Well, the volatiser would ensure she wouldn't get a second opportunity.

Kaboom... she reflected.

Gripping the hilt of the vibroknife at her belt, Azovka jumped, disengaged her magneboots and the sky above became the ground below.

She ascended/descended violently from her perch. Her Eotvos harness ensured that the shock of her fall was reduced to little more than a circumspect jolt. Knees first against the stranger's abdomen.

Her breathing frantic, the inwardly-curving blade of her Kaukomieli *vaishali* gleamed as it rose over her head...

Studying the red-gold tail of a graviton beam as it stretched beyond the starlit mausoleum, clawing back its prey, Vog Mur found herself deep in reflection.

The increasingly sophisticated technology of the modern cosmos had squeezed grand offence from the soiled paws of thugs and brigands into the delicate laboratories and factories of astronomers and biologists. With the aid of modern hardware, the individual capable of bending automata and mechanisms to their every commanding impulse could—and indeed did—wield more power than any proctor, king or emperor.

Such innovations had allowed them to steal aboard largely undetected. The creation of a small wound in the complex outer membrane of this grand structure where they'd slipped through with ease. That same lesion permitted them a modicum of access to the external antennæ outside it.

However, she remembered that neither the beam, nor the antennæ were her main focus of observation.

Indeed, the childlike thrill in her stomach had instead come from the sargasso itself—the decoupling of one derelict, cracking open like a seedpod.

From out from within the *Auspex*-series vapourform, came the *Accomplishment*. Vog Mur's ship.

It nudging the two halves of its hollow disguise apart, carving the husk the stern. She met the moment with the same breathless anticipation she'd felt from the first Satrap hypergate run.

Approaching her side, returning from his tasks elsewhere, came the Ordoheed commander Kuron. He dropped the nozzle of his electrode cannon into the palm of his hand.

“Taking stock?” he asked.

Vog Mur scratched her elbow. “Seems rather appropriate under the circumstances, wouldn't you agree? The darkness always seems so bright up close...”

He nodded. “You were right about the detector results. Sangfroid and his compilers can confirm that it isn't a sensor glitch, nor a problem with the internal chronometer. These new intruders triggered the motion trap at our first point of entry.”

“In the silicon store?”

“Yes. No register of tail-fire. No emissions for the snoopers. They must have arrived in silent running. Following our trail.”

“Or the trail of te-Varriq. Troubling, but not entirely unexpected. Still, there’s something unusual about this. The latest intercepted transmissions to Trailblazer Prime didn’t offer any new transmat technology. Nor any transdimensional beings newly discovered in the past several months that I would be unaware of.”

“Indeed, strange. There are no external launching bays they could have crawled through. Not even a laser battery port.”

“The forcewall in the vactunnel is stable?”

“Nothing could breach that aperture while we’re here.”

“Then logically, and excluding the supernatural, they must be reinforcements from the Vaisyan Lonewatch. Correct?”

“Yes...”

Vog Mur straightened. “I want this dealt with immediately.”

“Done,” Kuron answered, simply.

The stranger beneath Azovka intoned serenely between breaths.

“Bears a remarkable resemblance to a Nepalese *kukri*.” He smiled. “Do you mind?”

Azovka froze, completely bewildered.

Before she could react, his fist was around her wrist, pressure flexing through his forefinger and thumb. Her hand splayed outwards against her will, she cried out and dropped the deactivated knife into his palm, his eyes gadding from the arc of the serrated blade to the cabochoon-fashioned hilt.

“Oh, please don’t...” she entreated.

She could feel it, worming its way through her consciousness to the surface, termites through rotting wood. A loose-leaf terror, a memory unbound by emotion.

“Gas-propelled pilum knife,” he said. “Remarkable craftsmanship. I’d say every culture has an analogue, but that’s not entirely true. Hmm.”

Against every expectation to the contrary, the stranger did not open her throat. He passed it back to her, the blade delicately balanced against his hand.

The memory retreated back into her interior psyche.

She gripped the handle and held it before her defensively.

“Your mother’s?” he inquired, earnestly.

In spite of herself, Azovka felt her face redden. There was an ennobled assurance to the wide-eyed man. Although she didn't realise it until later, it caused her to lower her blade.

He took it as a prompt. "Perhaps your name then?"

"I w-was-will be Telle-Sahir Azovka. Out of Trimandias, b-by Alamain."

"Well met. I'm the Doctor."

"For me to use the definite article, I'll need a name."

"Oh... Jaahn Kajiya, if it helps. The etymological shift from the usual alias is accurate enough." He extended a hand and she gripped it, warily. He noted the strange vellum quality to her skin. "Out of circumstance, by consequence. It's a pleasure."

He lifted her to her feet as she spoke, "You're a *zonder*."

"You could say that I'm not a local," the Doctor tilted his head. "Is there anyone here who is?"

She decided to answer him honestly. "None that have-will be seen."

"Fascinating lingual vellication..." his eyes had a distant gleam to them. "What does that make you then?"

"A professional volunteer."

"Black Chevron?"

She wrinkled her nose in distaste.

"No..." the stranger grinned, pleasantly. "Odd, you strike me as slightly piratical. Certainly not your average Affiliation citizen."

"I don't kill senselessly, Doctor."

Something cold flashed across his soul. "Peri."

The word meant nothing to her, but he was already on his feet pacing backwards and forwards, slapping his hands together behind his back trying to spark off an idea. He stopped. "Are you a physician?"

"Aren't you?"

"I'm a scientist."

"What was-will be your field?"

"Biological, chemical, diagnostic, incorporeal, psychosurgical, theoretical... *Everything!*" To a friend, she imagined he might have softly despaired. "Yet I can do nothing. My friend is dying and I can do *nothing!*"

She took a step towards him, trying to disguise the movement as a nervous shuffle.

Sighing irritably, he fished a small golden cuboctahedron out of his pocket and held it up to the light to scrutinise its contents. “Not even this particular little oddity can help.”

Azovka’s eyes flashed intermittently. In flagrant defiance of her intent, the Doctor took notice. “Curious throwback of your species, the Narans,” he said. “From your prehistoric days, isn’t it? To alert fellow prey to danger in a sunless turquoise jungle.”

She assessed him silently.

“Not to worry,” he patted her hand. “I haven’t taken offence.”

Nowadays, in the bustle of galactic traffic, it was a hindrance. Folding her shoulders towards her chest and ran a finger nervously along her cheekbone to cover a forceful blink.

“Can you tell me w-where you get that?” she inquired.

He remembered the dead woman from earlier. “Does it possess significance?”

“To myself or others?”

“Either or.”

She parried his question. “Are you alone here?”

A reciprocal verbal riposte greeted her, “Are you?” With a knowing, humble smile. Typical. But she could sense there was something to his manner. A weirding kinship. Like empathy, but... something else.

The Doctor jostled the cuboctahedron before her eyes and broke her concentration.

“Well?” he asked again.

“I’ll trade for it,” she offered.

Doubt etched his features. “Trade?”

“That was-will be all I can say.”

“Will say?”

“*Can* say. The r-rest—” She bit her tongue to stop her stutter. “The *rest* lies with you.”

His eyes flicked down to the artefact and back up again.

“As you say. Doesn’t appear as though I have much choice, do I?” He puffed his cheeks. “Alright, I’d be willing to barter for something from your personal inventory.”

“Like what? The Eotvos?”

“I need a deep healing caster or its closest equivalent. Failing that, something ignominiously primitive will suffice, such as a... a plastiflesh tourniquet or plasm clotting agent.”

The stepthreader proffered her last volatiser. “Will this do?”

“You hold it like you’re not sure what it does.”

“I hold it because I know exactly what it does.”

He shrugged amenably and in a single deft movement, the Doctor had deposited the cuboctahedron in her hand and swept up the volatiser into his own. He began disassembling the top cap, using the pin as a wrench.

“Hefty little...” *Pop.*

Telle Azovka instinctively jumped back before her mind registered that he’d been pressing the disarmament trigger with his pinkie. He glanced at her dubiously. With a push on the fill valve, the shuttle assembly came clear, his free index finger levering out its functional contents.

The heads-up display within his helmet flickered on.

“Styptic. Solo-Robinson variant of coagulant, muscle relaxant and—*Ooh! Ouch!*” He flicked his finger. “Picomites for cauterising wounded tissue.”

“S-Suitable?”

He popped the assembly back inside the volatiser and went to put it in his pocket. Thinking better of it, he rolled it back and forth in his hand.

“It may well save her life.” An imperceptible smile formed on his lips as he spoke, “Thank you. I truly mean that, thank you.”

Azovka felt her tangerine eyes flash.

Clutching her arm, she nodded delicately.

Kuron paced the length of the Dreampark. Studying the arcade figures of amusement with disdain. Jocular parodies to focus one’s pastime on. The holograms exercised the militia’s combat discipline, kept the blade of their brutality keen, but he preferred the unpredictability of live targets

“I cannot believe that the intruders simply... *arrived,*” Kuron demurred. “A further explanation must be sought.”

Vog Mur rolled her eyes. “I’ve already got Sangfroid investigating. Our centre of power remains secure,” she left a deliberately calculated pause. “You fear that your sponsor may be ousted twice over?”

“Pray, what is an emperor without his legions, his fleets, his palace or his political agency?”

“Just a man,” she answered, her lips a thin line.

Just as he. *Just* a man. Only *just* noticed and therefore eminently useful.

A man embittered and twisted by those who had borne themselves onto his world and stolen away his prestige, his notice and ultimately—a loss that he could not abide—they had banished his position. She could empathise with the loss of face. The stinking, self-centred eyelessness of those who purported to be your allies. The hatred, she kept close, it kept her warm and found her at least one kindred spirit.

“I wouldn’t worry,” she assured him.

He knew there was no room for ambiguity, he added, “Excellency, you are different. You cut a triumphant shape. He... Well, he was hardly a man at all. Even under the tutelage of the Masters. The boy would not survive the day without me. He knew that, but he dismissed me from that council regardless. He knew what I would do, but he did it anyway,” he breathed. “Refuse us our right to action, our right to war, and you lose our support. I still wonder if he took my advice when I rallied the people’s forces away from the Manse?”

“I don’t think you ever told me,” she said, conversationally.

“It was hardly shocking. Destroy yourself before your people find you.” He gave her a look through the helmet. “Naturally.”

“Have your men managed to map a suitable flight path from their origin point?”

“Yes, through Omega Junction.”

“And the Central Mentality?”

“Nothing untoward,” rumbled the Ordoheed. She noted carefully how he squirmed at the subordinate tone of his own voice. “In fact, it has finished further manufacture of Resonance Gem shards as you requested. They will all be linked to the master set in the deedbox.”

“Distribute them accordingly.”

“Additionally, reports on the bio-bank ejection system should arrive as soon as the cycle has completed.”

“Progress, at last,” she breathed.

“We may not need te-Varriq, after all.” he said.

A brief attempt at subversive power play. As expected.

She gave a polite snort. “You said the same about Mogra-4. Now, I’ve an all too willing workforce. Ideal for the systemic breakthrough required to penetrate the defences of this structure. No, he will stay. I think there will be something left of this one when we finish, something we can use.”

“Do not take this as insubordination...” Kuron began.

“I never do,” said Vog Mur.

“...but since our return, this affair has become a great deal more complicated. Far more than the initial projections.”

“Are you concerned?”

Kuron resented the question. “I am *cautious*.”

“Sangfroid?”

The wall of VDUs in the Dreampark lit up with a single repeating image of the *Accomplishment’s* bridge.

“*Sangfroid here.*”

Vog Mur reflected that the history between herself and her chief compiler was a curious one.

“Well?” she asked.

From his perspective, she had come down from the Overworld above, seeking those rebellious enough to defy, resist and subsequently overthrow the citadel dwellers that governed the mines. In her clinical fascination, she had deliberately violated her oath as a research scientist and become heavily inveigled in the Mogran culture. Using their mythological superstitions to drive them against their masters. They hadn’t been particularly vile or evil slavemasters, but their deaths were something much lauded through the underground.

“*Still no sign of pursuit ships,*” reported Sangfroid from the transceiver.

Sangfroid had known his people were manipulated, but he’d never had the chance to turn against her. He’d instead become drafted into the role of intercessor between the miners and their new employer on Mogra-V. Rebellion would mean a sudden vanishing of day-to-day resources and the destruction of their entire way of life. The occasional genetic purge and dumbing down of oral histories had eventually allowed her to use them as a workforce far abroad. Undiscovered and off-the-record.

“*I doubt the Institute truly knows what transpires out here,*” Sangfroid continued. “*We’ll keep monitoring.*”

Vog Mur turned back to her bodyguard. "Satisfied?"

The armoured figure clasped a bladed gauntlet behind his back and nodded.

"It's a gratis indulgence I would extend to no other," she waved the thought away. "Sangfroid, make a two-thirds orbit on silent running until the drill-bit makes contact with the hull."

"*As arranged, of course,*" wheedled the compiler. He removed a small stamp-like implement from his anorak and pressed it against his eye, the injection circlet pumping a tiny needle of dioxin into his system. He blinked profusely, licking his lips.

There was a vaporous, distasteful sound of dispraise from within Kuron's armour.

"A relay core should be below you now. Begin descent."

A crack of sound rippled through the substrata, groaning and flexing hagiochrome like musculature beneath a surgeon's scalpel. Vog Mur folded her arms.

"Any change in te-Varriq?" she asked.

"None. If I didn't know better, I'd have said he was comatose."

"Oh. A good actor?"

"Quite. One might even think that he'd have prior experience in these sorts of situations."

Vog Mur shrugged. "We'll have to up the dosage."

Hidden beneath the spiked helmet, Kuron twitched at the thought.

"That could kill him," he said.

"He's an Oncan. Their species are well-known for their tolerances to mycotoxins in the barazoic chain. Judging from his facial markings he's from one of the throwback clans that still believe in a rite of passage. Genetic hallucinogens and communing with the black stones that burn with knowledge of the planet that theirs formed around. A superstitious atavism, but predictable. He'll live."

"For as long as it serves our purposes."

"Yes," she made the alternative sound ridiculous.

A shadow passed over their view of the stars, leaving a miasma of rainbow static in its wake. The heaving, bulky outburst of reaving biometal subsided slightly.

Sangfroid's voice crackled over the vidscreen, small flashes of light from below the camera gilding his face. "*We've encountered a, erm, small problem, excellency.*"

“What sort of ‘small problem’, Sangfroid?” she detested such emotional euphemisms. “Distortions from the reef?”

“*Negative.*” The jade green-faced engineer snapped a few switches above his head. A detector screen below his eyeline fluttering obsessively. “*A zyglot wrapped its tendrils around the thermal dissipaters and blocked the path of the trepan. Judging from the flight log, the original crew ran into a similar problem during trial runs as well. We suspect that it’s the warmth that’s attracted it.*”

“Get rid of it.”

“Switching on the disruptor counterbalance beam,” Sangfroid reported to the crewmen surrounding him. They had already been busying themselves with preparations. It was simply a formality for the recordings. One which ensured that all participating remained honest with their actions at all times.

She turned her attention to a neighbouring vidscreen displaying the contents of an external camera on the *Accomplishment’s* hull. The inhabitants of the Dreampark were illuminated via the stinging blue glow of the strikecraft’s energy beam. The zyglot shuddered against its bow, the spiracle atop its two eyes spraying a vile array of sickly yellow, dead greys. Colours that Vog Mur likened to rotting corpseflesh and ashen earth. It twisted, its body buckling as its internal juices evaporated in soft, soggy waves.

On the other VDU, Sangfroid clenched his notched teeth. In annoyance or fear, she could not say. “*Holding fast. Increasing electrical charge to Level 7.*”

Vog Mur allowed herself a moment of fervour.

“Activate the drill,” she ordered. Keenly, quietly and deliberately.

The braying, gurgling shriek of soft tissue and neutronium filled the audio channel, a sound that cut through countless decks and bulkheads to arrive at the quiet command centre of the *Accomplishment*. Several of the compilers in the Dreampark raised their hands to their heads and screamed. Tongueless, they came out little more than rasping chokes. The Ordoheed heavies switched off their audio receptors and watched impassively.

“*We have contact,*” Sangfroid stated blandly over the din.

Wavering blacks and greys like soot spilled from the hapless zyglot’s ruckling body. Its dangling tendrils became little more than dried grass beneath a roaring silence of agony.

In its suffering, it pinned itself, a shriek's quarry, against an outcropping of spired metal from one of the reef's many carcasses. Kuron's armour took on a reticent yellow-green sheen. Vog Mur furrowed her brow in interest, absorbing every detail.

The magnificent creature shuddered one final time, lurching backward into its fractured mausoleum, and then died.

Peri reclined her head with a shudder, drumming her hand as Frobisher ruffled his feathers and crooned a few familiar bars of a song from the 20th-century.

"*Electric Eye*, Judas Priest," Peri identified. "You've been going through my LPs."

"Cool number," answered Frobisher. "Easy."

"Not with that tenor."

"Here I was thinking it'd be a baritone."

"*Mmm*, sounds more like a cry for help," she teased, good-naturedly.

"Know a tune 'bout that, too," he japed back.

Peri felt her chuckle turn into a self-effacing hiss of pain. Resisting the urge to pull her leg back up to her chest, she tried smiling instead. She had little success there.

Frobisher tried lightening the mood. "D-flat major, I believe that was."

"As much as I appreciate it, this distraction's getting—*ugh*—old, Frobisher."

"How about something from Curious Sir and the Knightside?"

"Might be after my time, I think. But, hey, it's not as if we're going anywhere..."

Before Frobisher could begin, a familiar voice coloured the air behind them. "That would have been Ethan Carter and his electro-orchestra, I believe. Saturn, 2367 by your Gregorian calendar. I was there visiting Surt when—"

"Doc, why do you have a volatiser?" asked Frobisher.

"Doe, a deer, a female deer," he gestured.

There was a woman standing off to the side, behind the Time Lord. Auburn hair and desert clothes. Indeed, doe-like. Her chin concealed behind a rather simple looking rebreather mask with thin, plastic stalks acting as intake valves for her nose and mouth.

Carrying a knife relaxed flat against the back of her wrist where Frobisher shouldn't have been able to see it.

"Does your friend need sutures, I've experience?" she asked.

The whifferdill stood up to take action, but his travelling companion shooed him away. The Doctor rolled the volatiser back and forth in his palm, unscrewing the lid and carefully scooping out its innards.

"The young lady's harmless, this is healing salve for Peri," he disclosed. "I need a lighter or a matchstick."

"I'll try the lighter," said Frobisher. The mechanism would be complicated and the reaction would likely, well, hurt, but it's not as if there were any other options available. He pictured a small slab of flint. The sparkwheel that would strike it. The nozzle through which it would be directed. He felt his flipper mould to fit the anticipated components.

He clicked. Heat flashed through him and a small downcast flame erupted.

The Doctor sprinkled the dust over the wound. "Just there."

Frobisher watched as the tiny fibrils sputtered and fizzed under the flame like carbonated candy across the scarlet gash.

The Doctor touched Peri's shoulder, "It'll be over soon."

"Whoa, hey! I hope you're joking!"

"Joking?"

"Certainly do."

He considered her words with a concerned frown, before chiding her lightly, "Oh, not like that. Really, my young Peri, you do sometimes let your imagination run away with you... In all seriousness, how do you feel?"

"Shaky. Safe though, as long as I don't move too much..."

"You'll get a great deal shakier soon," he pocketed his hands.

"The picomites will accelerate your metabolism for a while, rebuilding your constitution rather than tearing it apart as they were designed to do."

"Thank you?"

"You're welcome. After that, you'll be as well as you ever were."

Peri shifted. "Do you know yet what that attack was all about?"

The Doctor clicked his tongue. "Perhaps its frenzy was the result of an instinct to protect the corpse we disturbed."

“Makes sense,” Frobisher affirmed. “It thought us a danger and couldn’t tell the difference.”

“Why, though? Why attack the living and protect the dead?” asked the botanist. “It’s not a funeral site.”

“*Mmm...*”

“Doctor?”

“There’s something bizarre afoot here, our friend tells me that she hasn’t seen anyone. Not a single soul other than outsiders.”

The whifferdill suggested, “Maybe the whole place really is automated?”

“Then why the railcar?”

“Peri’s right,” interjected the Doctor. “It’s all too ornate, too carefully planned to accommodate the frailties of organisms like ourselves. This satellite was intended to be manned.”

“So, where is everyone?” asked Azovka.

“That is a good quest—” The Doctor broke off.

There was a sound. Subtle at first, a dragonfly’s lilting rattle that turned into a shrilling furore.

“*Flyer!*” he shouted.

“Spacecraft?” asked Peri.

“Carrydart,” Azovka clarified.

“The answer to the question is yes, Peri,” nodded Frobisher.

The Doctor and his fellows studied its approach from the far shaft.

For the Doctor, it was a mechanical curiosity. An Igla 4-12 Grummuk cut-and-run raider that he’d seen used for light-speed raids in the Sol system.

For Frobisher, it was the same model of carrydart employed by those disaffected royalists that’d railroaded him into the middle of a border skirmish. Long ago on Siro’s fire flats, while chasing a case.

For Telle Azovka, it was something much simpler. Colder. It was that psychopomp, the spectral figure of Death that had claimed so many of her comrades on this cold prison. Again. It was there for them again. They were here *again*.

“Outriders,” said Frobisher.

“Murderers...” muttered Azovka with a great deal more bile.

The former gumshoe stared at her understandingly.

“Doc,” he jostled the distracted man’s shoulder. “Doctor, we’ve got to get away from here.”

Azovka snapped her Vidphōn on. “Miane, Xor, o-open channel. Get out *now*.”

The thing was already on top of them, its unnatural screams a product of four underjets on its belly shifting altitude. She couldn’t quite hear over the din, but she was certain that the Doctor was asking Peri if she could move yet. She nodded bravely, her gelled leg dangling in vain imitation of a velveteen bear as she was helped to her feet.

Azovka felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. She looked to Peri. She could feel it too and asked, “Hold on, what’s—?”

Crackling, spitting heat erupted through the air around them.

It clapperclawed against their skin, cloying into a raging volcano of stinking petroleum and aluminium soaps. The ignition of the fire bomb itself rapidly became immaterial as its roaring child ran its feet across every boundary and down each unprotected furrow. A sudden rush of static blazed through Azovka’s transceiver and a horrible, sickening dread washed over her in waves. She was mouthing something to herself as two people.

No, things, they were things, *objects*, not—

They dropped from the wingless, popsicle-shaped carrydart to slap against the phytosteel flooring outside. She already knew what they were. How they looked. The quizzical expression of Miane frozen in a long eternity and the teasing, languid features of Xor, now wound into a final crescendo of agony.

“Psychological warfare,” deduced the Doctor, sharply. “Against our young friend here, I suspect.”

“Doc—” began Frobisher.

“Not now. Take Peri, I’ll lead them off.”

“*I knew*... I knew they’d...” Azovka’s eyes were so far away.

“Go with them,” said the Doctor.

“No—” her voice rose in protest.

“No debates. You’re in danger and safer with them.”

“I’m still a target, likely the one they’re after,” she primed her dagger. “I’ll be more useful with you.”

The Doctor shrugged his eyebrows and nodded. Vital seconds were ticking away and there was no room for debate.

“Stay safe, you two.”

STAGE 4: “Cremation”

Vog Mur recognised the look in Castell’s eyes.

The Hylonomeide remembered the two stars shining down on the wreck of the *Ormalu*. That mighty and hellish titan of mercury silver, stretched out in blasted fragments to greet the inky void that had swamped her world in immutable silence. Imposed on her as unflinchingly as their snare was to SRF interceptor pilot Malla Castell.

They had got to Castell just in time. She had slashed open her wrists and been moving to tear out her throat. Before the pilot could act, she was disarmed. Her emergency distress beacon, a device little larger than a flea in a false tooth, removed by the dithering te-Variiq. The procedure had been uncharacteristically clumsy, given its supposed skill, but she admitted that it was a difficult transition period. It would adjust, as the girl was adjusting.

They had never met in person. If Castell did know of Vog Mur (and could discern her features from other Hylonomeide), it’d to be from personnel records or whatever happenstance rumour now trickled down the hazelvine. She doubted they spoke of her. They would have forgotten, as they always did.

Yet, those eyes... There was a streak of *something* there...

Standing by the vidscreen wall, Kuron was monitoring the *Accomplishment’s* approach through the substrata of the megastructure, en route towards their ultimate goal. He and he alone turned his attentions away from his previous task towards the two remaining pilots.

His voice was a barrel organ or the hiss of a gas attack. “We weren’t expecting you so soon.”

“Our folly,” Vog Mur continued as she traced her poniard around the sweet fleshy equator of an awai fruit. “But one that will be rectified as promptly as I can make it. I will ask again, what do you know?”

Castell was sitting on her knees, her bandaged arms pulled tight around her back. “K-17 of the SRF. Serial code, 258730991.”

“And you?”

D-08 was much the same. “Nonpareil D-08 of the SRF. Serial—”

The third, a mound of corpse-flesh that had once been D-Leader, teetered over with the press of a guard's boot. A spectacle that disrupted the hurried packaging of provisions and hardware occurring around the interrogation only for a moment. Within minutes, catches on cases were again snapping shut, hypermotility carts shuttling equipment onto the monorail line car-by-car. Tasks continued unabated.

D-08 stumbled. "S-Serial—"

The guardsman who had executed their flight leader levelled his lasgun towards his captive's lanky head.

"I detest firearms," Vog Mur folded her arms. "They're noisy, ineffective and the discharge gives me a migraine. But if I am forced to suffer..." The gun's power pack charged. "I'll ensure that I'm not alone."

Vog Mur flicked the fruit peeling from her blade to the floor. Castell's fingers sunk into her knees. Something cracked beneath the pilot's irises.

"Alright... *Alright!*" The chamber snatched at the pilot's words, rattling them up into the stencilled ceiling above like dice in a glass vase. "We were on routine patrol to investigate Early Warning Xi, something has been signalling up in this sector and space. There was a lot of talk about a fledgling undeveloped world or a rogue planetoid well off its orbit."

Kuron crossed over to Vog Mur, closing the gap so they could appear to speak *sotto voce* to one another.

Her features glittered with the excitement of a child. "One of the Institute's technicians noticed, I suspect. They're extending far beyond their purview nowadays. That could be dangerous."

"That *is* dangerous," Kuron reminded her.

"I won't dispute that," she dismissed.

She glanced to the side and narrowed her vision in thought. She may have appeared as though the thought concerned her. In reality, in the corner of her unblinking eye, she was watching the reactions of the two pilots. The eyes... The charade seemed to be strumming along nicely.

"When are they due to check in with communication control?" asked the Ordoheed commander.

"Every four hours relative to home base," replied Vog Mur.

“According to the Mograns, the internal chronometers of their ships indicate it’s been three since they passed their last solar threshold.”

She unfurled a hand as if to say *a-ha*. “They will likely begin to wonder what has happened to their patrol.”

“Not so clever now, are you?” snarled Castell.

Kuron struck the pilot across the face with a gauntlet, the air ripped from her lungs. Vog Mur could see the small ruby indents left in her cheek like a leather punch. The pilot tongued the wound in her gum where he’d missed her lip.

“That was a dangerous lapse in good taste,” he scolded with a growl.

Vog Mur rankled her brow. The pilot was a crucial safeguard in ensuring that the operation remained undetected. She was less expendable than her commanding officer. His experience and skill made him a parlous insurgent, his execution had only made the Hylonomeide’s task easier, but it would still be a mistake to liquidate Castell so quickly. There was something about her venom that... disappointed Vog Mur. This was all a natural function of life—kill or die. Only children and fools could be so affected by the iniquity of it all.

Vog Mur lowered herself, as if confiding some great secret of life. For a moment, she felt rather maternal, letting the feeling soak through her features.

The attitude made Castell snarl. From her records, the pilot knew more about motherhood than Vog Mur ever would. But what else would a loyal Affiliation patriot expect from a power bloc that ritually set fire to their own worlds on the border? From the enemy?

Oh, if only she knew...

“Nonpareil Castell,” chided Vog Mur, “you speak as though your presence wasn’t anticipated.”

From her clothes, she produced a small figurine. No larger than her index finger.

At a distance, Castell and D-08 both recognised it. A cruel-looking facsimile of their former commanding officer. Vog Mur gestured back towards the wall of vidscreens to further illustrate her point.

At the centre of the camera, were three familiar shapes emerging from the vactunnels of the satellite.

Three gold prisms on a vast column of light. They were interceptors—*Affiliation* interceptors—pulling out through a gap in the forcewall created by the beam’s slipstream. They glided through a field of corpses with all the charm of a grand grotesque in a funhouse. They must have been working by remote control or maybe a time delay mechanism that went through the expected motions. Castell knew that their tail fire would be concealed by the derelicts until they returned to their pre-established flight path and radioed in as expected. There was no way to get out now.

“How will you do it?” asked D-08.

“It’s already done. They departed from the sargasso ten minutes ago. With the requisite dialogue segmented and rearranged from your intercepted transceiver chatter. The data record will state to your superiors at CIDA all they need to know.”

“They’ll discover it. There’ll be a public inquiry into the Tyrikan government. Or worse.”

“I don’t believe so.”

“It’s not worth the repercussions,” he insisted.

“My morality is unshakeable in this deed. It’s for the good of our people. Apply enough pressure, Nonpareil, and carbon can become a diamond, yet not every diamond can be flawless. This one *must* be.”

The centauride squeezed the insignificant statuette as if she were snapping her fingers. Castell watched as once more her commanding officer—her *friend*—was destroyed this time reduced to little more than buckled clinker.

“The heedless past of your culture is to be swept away by the plasteel toecaps of the Resurgence,” Vog Mur continued. “This Weapon will be necessary to guarantee our future.”

At the terminus, the carrydart had come down not too far from the railcar.

Lowering a sleek and once polished ramp, two armoured figures trundled out. The sigils embossed on the breastplate and embroidered onto the back of their shoulders were remarkably well-maintained. However, the rest of their hardsuits looked as though they’d fused to their wearers under the brutality of time. The one on the left was augmented with armoured caterpillar treads on the

lower half of his body. The other stood as a far more natural, bipedal figure.

The Doctor felt Azovka square up beside him.

“Excuse me!” He waved, moving towards their assailants.

He kept his body in front of his young companion, carefully measuring each step he took to match hers behind. He removed a something cube-like, squat in stature, far too large for the pockets of his starsuit. “Excuse me. We’ve been touring your beloved locale and I was wondering if you might take a photograph for my friend and me?”

He thumbed the trigger and the Polaroid camera snapped its luminescent flash. Instantly, the guard’s shields polarised to protect them against the glare. The bipedal groundpounder opened fire with the semi-automatic linked to his wrist, forcing the duo to run. Mauve-and-turquoise pellets flourished across the cage of biometal, clapping at the duo’s quickening gait. A glancing rebound of sparks got the Doctor in the back of the ankle. He cried out, almost dropping the box—and himself—to the floor.

He managed to make it towards the stairwell. This place was a killing zone and the Doctor knew it. A long journey off a short cliff if events didn’t pan out as he intended. The question was, who would meet the end of the road first? His opponents were faster than he’d expected them to be. If he faltered, it wouldn’t just be the end of him, he could rest easy with the disappointment of such a premature finish, but it would also be the end of his new acquaintance as well.

He could hear Azovka speaking behind his back. “Are you armed?”

“Rarely. The range of those weapons must be twenty metres at most...”

“I’m going to try and make a move for—”

The monorail was engulfed in the roiling inferno of a high-octane flamethrower—the tracked cyborg.

They were trapped!

Sensing tension in the bipedal militarist’s gun-arm, the Doctor faked anticipation at a concealed weapon of his own. “I wouldn’t! The problem with troubleshooting is that trouble often shoots back. Do you want to take the risk?”

The lie would likely buy them both a couple more seconds, at least. He didn't pause, but his advance slowed.

"He doesn't appear to be listening," muttered the Doctor.

"Wishing he'd take your advice?" asked Azovka.

"Why not? I'm not using it."

The mercenary raised his hand-cannon to fire.

The Doctor shoved Azovka sideward. She pinwheeled out of the blazing rain of lethal rays. Her hand went from the hilt of her *vaishali* towards the nearby standpipe to steady herself.

Using the momentum, the Doctor unclasped the Eotvos harness at her abdomen and readjusted his centre of gravity. His legs spread apart to maintain his balance, the stolen equipment in one hand and his camera in the other, he lobbed the camera at their assailant's face. Its flash connected sharply with their enemy's visor shield and bloomed outwards. While the soldier's eyes were adjusting, the thick curtain of anti-dazzle glasstic again darkened. The camera splintered into its component parts against the floor.

His head down, the Doctor vaulted forward over a horizontal pipe on the floor.

Azovka skidded behind the arched curve of the forking monorail line, laying as flat as she could against the ground to avoid the stream of fire.

Too far away to reach the monorail itself, but not to act.

She raised her *vaishali*. The blade shot straight from a socket in the top and struck true. Right into the heavyset warrior's biomechanical eye.

Observing from afar, Peri and Frobisher seized their opportunity and began hobbling out from behind the terminal towards the vacant hatchway of the carrydart. The latter could feel his throat constricting. He wheezed, trying to morph a new set of lungs to fit the atmosphere without much success.

Peri kept glancing at him in worry.

"Can't..." he rasped. "Oh, I've definitely had enough of this caper."

"C'mon, Frobisher, we're almost there! We're—if we can get past this, we'll be there!"

Smoke blanketed her helmet as they made their way towards the spacecraft, the heat beating their respirators raw with every breath.

Well-intentioned extinguishing foam flooded the scene, but it only succeeded in making the route harder to travel.

In any case, the fire seemed to be the pugilist winning in this particular bout.

The foam hardened like frosting on a stale cake, both of them could hear it crunching beneath their feet.. The helmet visor was brown-grey with soot and curling embers, Peri's fingers outstretched to clear it as much as she could. Guided solely by the subsiding fiery gale they both kept pressing forward. Further and further, through the maelstrom until she felt her arms graze a thin strip of metal. A handle.

She yelled one simple command, "*Go! For heaven's sake, go!*"

A heave. The sound of metal striations sidling against metal plating. A stinging, sharp clatter of pain up her leg.

They were inside.

The spacecraft was a cocoon of reinforced steel, keeping out most of the noise and heat. Up in the front seat, something two-feet taller than either of the two intruders approached them with vile intent. Its face was blank, teal diodes where the eyes of a living biped would typically be.

Frobisher swallowed. "Oh, no..."

The Autopilot swung out at the closer of the two with an open hand. A single, decisive movement that would have broken any normal individual's neck in an instant. Without thinking, Frobisher's arm moulded to mimic the automaton's own.

The Autopilot and its mirror image clashed.

Peri ducked out from beneath them as they grappled with one another, the true Autopilot pushing its hand up against Frobisher's duplicate image, attempting to dislodge its stolen face from its enemy's neck.

In the terminal, the Doctor employed an Egyptian wrestling technique, grapping his opponent from behind.

His shoulder pushed between the hardsuit's scapulae. He wound Azovka's gravity harness tightly against his opponent's neck. The soldier's arms were tangled awkwardly against the tunic of his breastplate trying to remove the harness.

The Doctor pulled. A glancing blow from a sharp headbutt cracked his visor. He steadied his breaths, each deeper and held longer.

The soldier's—ah, an epaulette, the *major's*—hands were scrabbling down against the pressure, attempting to reach his combat knife on his belt. The Doctor tightened the harness like a fishing net in one fist, freeing one of his own hands. Stretching back as far as he could, he started tapping away at the gravitational limiters on the control pad of the harness.

“Now, steady, old chap,” he coaxed. A backwards lash of the militarian's leg skidded past his own. “Won't hurt one bit...” A crack of the elbow connected with the processor of the Doctor's starsuit and cutting the HUD's shelf life irrevocably short. “That's a seven...” Another stamp. “One... And a three—”

His opponent's right leg connected with his wounded ankle. A pained shout tear tore from the Doctor's lungs, as a layered scrap of tunic did the same from his attacker.

Tyrikan colours, he noted. *No, wait—*

The two fighters separated with a shove.

The Doctor's leg flapped up through the air and in one sweeping arc came straight down on the floor. A deliberately calculated motion. One even perhaps worthy of Sir Arthur's great literary creations, he reflected. Tricked into believing to be on one of the heavy worlds, the sensor field on the reprogrammed harness—still bound tight around the heavysuit militarian—responded by activating its countermeasures.

With a yell like the roar of a departing rocketeer, the groundpounder surged gratifyingly into the air.

Azovka snatched the still tumbling Doctor by a sleeve and pulled him towards her before he could go careening down the lethal stairway.

Simultaneously, the soldier's body ricocheted off the ceiling and downed in a meretricious heap at the bottom of the narrow gauntlet, the outer surface of his suit cracking open like a rotting apple.

The Doctor rearranged himself and gazed down at his handiwork with a bemused smile.

“On the other hand, I could have been quite wrong about that.”

Wiping the soot from her fingertips, Azovka crept down towards the Doctor.

“Is he dead?” she asked, a strange mix of hope and dread in her voice.

The Doctor tutted. “Hardly.”

The groundpounder rolled over onto his back with a groan. Pained, disgraced and thoroughly humiliated, he was still in all respects, nevertheless quite alive.

Aboard the carrydart, Frobisher heard Peri behind the Autopilot’s shoulder.

“*Get off him!*” she shouted, levelling with the two fighters. In her hands was a chunk of squat, almond-shaped hardware. She leant against the wall to steady herself, her eyes dotted frantically from figure-to-figure. “Frobisher?”

“Per—” Thick metal fingers sunk into Frobisher’s neck. He could feel the plastic tubing of his form’s trachea begin to rupture under the sickening pressure. Faux circuits shrieked in alarm within his imperfect positronic head. What bad fortune to be fighting something that knew his weaknesses better than he knew them himself.

Peri jammed the gun beneath his attacker’s chassis and pulled the trigger with a wince.

The results were nothing short of horrifying. The machine’s shoulders cracked backwards from the impact. The reeking fumes of saltpetre poured from the tin candle with an emerald fountain of phosphorescent sparks. It stumbled back. Howling. Legs uncoiling like melted wire. The will-o’-the-wisp within its frame sent spasms through its body before being finally snuffed out of its own accord.

Peri stared down at the acrid bundle of fizzling circuitry. Numb with shock.

“Can you fly this thing?” she asked.

Frobisher rubbed his neck and nodded, crossing over to the pilot’s seat and activating the controls. “The controls seem fairly straightforward...”

“Sure,” faltered Peri, vacantly.

“I don’t like how that sounds. Listen, Peri, I get it. I do, but we can’t worry about that now.”

“Sure,” she said with more certainty. He could see her cursing herself inwardly as she sat down. “Sure, of course... Sure...”

Not far behind the duo was the Doctor, shouting and waving his arms as he ran. “Away from here!”

“What?”

“Don’t argue with me! They’ll depressurise this entire section to contain the fire! *Go, Frobisher!*”

A thunderous clap of noise. In the corner of his eye, Frobisher could see Azovka fall awkwardly against the ramp, a puppet with its strings cut. The Doctor scooped her up and threw her over his shoulder. His fingers wrapped tightly around one of the handholds leading inside. The deep guttural howl of space cut its way in through ducting and access passages, yanking the Doctor backwards.

Frobisher threw switches, coloured lights flickering into life as the idling computer systems re-engaged. “Thank you for flying Air Tarklu, where we live up to our motto—he who hesitates is dust.”

The landing jets fired and the ground slowly receded beneath the platform.

The Doctor observed the conflagration.

“You alright? Azovka?” he asked over the din.

The young woman murmured in the affirmative. She pulled herself back forward over his chest to aid his balance. Not too far behind them, the bulkier guard raised his flamethrower and fired past the carrydart towards the ceiling. A transformer ignited and overloaded. An explosion of light and sound. The wail of rending steel. The platform listed towards the factories below. The militarian’s caterpillar tracks struggling noisily against the Sisyphian gradient. He cried out and vanished from view.

A heavy rain of alloys fell from the broken sky.

“*Doctor, look out!*” Peri went to haul him back inside, but her wound snapped her back in her seat.

The Doctor felt Azovka go rigid as a stone. Her eyes wide with surprise as the debris sluiced down her back. One hand still firmly grasped around the handle, he twisted around and snatched at her forearm before she could follow the debris down. He himself had only been slightly less unlucky. The fist gripping the handhold had taken one of the metallic stalactites across his knuckles. Anyone else

would have been dazed with pain, but for him it was instead a dispute of brute strength.

A dispute he was losing.

His footing slipped on the rampway.

“Where’s the Doc?”

One foot.

“Doctor?”

Then the other, he felt his knees try to swing up into his stomach.

“Kajiyā?”

His fingers arched on the handhold.

“I can’t—”

There was nothing but open air.

“No!”

It might have been Frobisher, Peri, Azovka or even the Doctor.

The Doctor’s hand wheeled through the air backwards in drowned motion. Injured flesh and bone split his visor. A sickeningly primal sound. His face exposed to the naked elements. His hand, his new acquaintance and finally he himself all plummeted over the edge.

Shadowed in this strange sheet of mercury darkness, they fell, nothing save the unforgiving factory floor awaiting them far below.

Peri sat at the edge of her seat. “Doctor...?”

TO BE CONTINUED!

EDEN BY ANNIHILATION

On the edge of space lies Natasia Tor, a sargasso of dead spacecraft, through which members of the Affiliation of Outer Free Worlds and the Tyrikan Resurgence are forbidden to travel.

When the TARDIS materialises in the eighty-second century, the Doctor, Peri and Frobisher discover the region to be far from unoccupied. At the heart of the mausoleum in space, something vast and terrible has begun to wake...

Who are the Vaisyan Lonewatch and their opponents? What links the mysterious object with a planet known as Trailblazer Prime? And can the Doctor and his friends escape a violent and bloody fate from a war set to ignite the Galaxy?

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