



DOCTOR WHO

EDEN BY ANNIHILATION by ALAN CAMLANN



THRILLING ADVENTURES IN SPACE AND TIME

DOCTOR WHO

EDEN
BY *ANNIHILATION*

ALAN CAMLANN

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

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PHASE FOUR

STAGE 13: “Jacklights for Jackanapes”

A distinctive chain of dots and dashes flickered as a stabbing pain on the interior of Solta’s eyelids. It had been the singing earlier that had woken him up. Keeping him awake now was...

Can’t be, he thought. Could it?

Something swam up from the inky twilight of his mind. Training. Etched into his consciousness since his first day at the controls of a jet-booster. His mind wrested him from the pleasure of his half-sleep to focus the flashes into a recognisable order.

The first was an ‘A’... Then an ‘N’... A ‘Q’? Badly timed—no wait, it was a ‘Y’... An ‘O’ followed... Eventually it spelt out two words on a repeated cycle, A-N-Y-O-N-E—T-H-E-R-E-?

He decided to cry out. Shout. Prove that he was still alive. He didn’t expect any sort of reply to what was clearly one last and desperate spasmodic phantasm of meaning to his fraying psyche.

Except that wasn’t the end of it.

C-A-N-N-O-T—H-E-A-R-.—A-N-S-W-E-R—O-N—P-I-P-E-.

His ears flopped down. It was so difficult to concentrate. He barely remembered what the previous code had been. He removed his boot and slammed it in arrhythmic code against the downpipe. C-O-P-Y-?

W-E-L-L—D-O-N-E! The reply was bountiful with glee. A-M—F-R-I-E-N-D-.

P-R-O-V-E—I-T.

That would give his mysterious communicator something to think about.

H-O-W—C-A-N—I-? It responded in unusual earnest.

File cards? Tape-relayed biographies? However else? They knew everything and anything about the man except his face and that had been the only thing that kept him alive. There was a few minutes hesitation, then his “fellow prisoner” signalled back, S-O-R-R-Y—W-H-A-T—D-O-N-E—T-O—Y-O-U—T-E-R-R-I-B-L-E-.—S-A-V-A-G-E-R-Y—A-L-L—T-O-O—I-M-A-G-I-N-A-B-L-E-.

Solta sighed.

N-O-T—Y-O-U-R—F-A-U-L-T-, it added.

He growled. K-N-O-W—T-H-A-T-.

B-U-T—D-O—Y-O-U—F-E-E-L—I-T-?

A creeping alarm burrowed its way through Solta's heart. This could easily be a trap. Some pretence to worm out any further information from his aching mind. He felt guilty. He felt ashamed. He took pleasure in the fantasy of his own annihilation. No more burdens. No more horrors. No more remorse. Just blind and blissful peace in the emptiness of the closed room.

K-N-O-W—T-H-E-R-E—I-S—S-T-I-L-L—H-O-P-E-. The quasar light continued flashing in assurance.

He nearly coughed up a lung. "*Hope?*"

K-N-O-W—N-A-M-E—O-F—C-A-P-T-O-R-?

He slammed his boot irritably against the piping, feeling the muscles in his ears tightening with each punctuated clang. If he bought into the illusion, perhaps it would more swiftly leave him alone. *V-O-G—M-U-R-*.

On the other side of the condensation-slick wall, the Doctor frowned, repeating the name to himself.

"As in, the guide of that fictional country satirising Federation society? What was that book called again...?" He gave up. "How trite, like calling yourself Winston Smith."

He flashed the penlight again. W-I-L-L—G-E-T—Y-O-U—O-U-T.

"But how...?" the Doctor held his hand to his chin.

"There was-will be a way," Azovka mumbled between eager bites of a melting moment. She gulped and dipped her head. "You won't like it though."

"Telegenesis."

"If I get fearful, angry or—"

He dropped to the floor, dusting off his shoulders. "Sit, if you may."

"S-Sorry?"

He patted the space before him. "Sit. We'll figure this out together using a Zuma meditation technique. Very intuitive, I assure you."

She gave a quizzical nod, the cold systemic vibration of the ship nuzzling its way up her fingers through her palms.

"Now," he folded his hands together, "what tends to trigger these episodes of yours?"

She shook her head. "Bad, *bad* memories."

“And what about the good?”

She picked at her fingers. “I don’t think I have—”

“Now, why don’t I believe that? Life is all about variety, Azovka,” he tapped her knee, encouragingly. “Surely you must have some happy memories from your past?”

“It was-will be not easy to say...”

“True, true, but we are nevertheless the sum total of our lives experiences. Both good,” he held up one finger, “and ill.” He held up another. “You would not be here if not for that good. The memory doesn’t need to be perfect, but Time is a bacchanal fighter. Push it and it pushes back. The good *must* exist somewhere amongst that vicious hive of squalor.”

She sighed and turned away from him.

“I understand. It’s difficult, I know,” he persisted. “At times, it can seem impossible. But if you don’t try, trillions of lives will be lost in the sterilisation of this entire constellation. Moreover, we ourselves will die here in this cell together, having lost everything we’ve achieved. Could you perish knowing that?”

She couldn’t meet his gaze. “How will I know it was-will be the right one?”

“It will have the strongest emotional resonance. Something you remember almost in spite of itself. Something special, wonderful and beautiful. A humble, fair weather thing.”

A tiny smile tripped across her features. “Alright.... Alright, there is one. It was back... Well, a-after the mill, but b-before all of this. The tarp we used to keep out the rain in the monastery’s living quarters had blown out to one of the turrets. I thought I could handle it, get it back before anyone woke up, but a floorboard had been rotted out by the rain and I fell through. Scared Lije witless, I think she tore out a bit of the old stonework with her bare hands trying to get to me.”

She scanned her fingernails, searching the room for any sort of environmental resonance. The closest she had come was making the hairs on the backs of the Doctor’s hands stand on end. “Don’t leave me hanging, Azovka,” he teased. “I’m interested to hear if our heroine survives.”

She laughed. “Well, I wasn’t as badly injured as I could have been, but I had an allergic reaction to the Scyphozoan ivy that left me with a rash bad enough to keep me bedridden for days. Not like me

at all to stay in one place for so long, nor her. So, we talked. I don't know what it was about those long couple of days, but it wasn't about getting past the patrols or finding out what had broken on the purifier that day. We... talked, about the summer rain. And, of course, the t-tarp came loose and flew away again after the first couple days, but high up in the sky above us were these balloons."

"Caught on the wind?"

The smile broadened. "Yes, they'd been released from a festival somewhere far below and had drifted up to us. It was painful, but I was determined to grab some for Lije. I could remember reaching out, while she held one of my arms to steady me on the embankment."

"How high up was the room where you were staying?"

"The people below were no larger than gnats."

A small current pooled in a tiny circle in the centre of the room. He could faintly smell the musky, pleasant aroma of geosmin in the dust and grit dancing in a funnel around them.

Imperceptible, if he hadn't been searching for it.

Each mote of spacedust waltzed back and forth in invigorating eddies like a wassailing crowd. She could see them in her mind's eye. A concourse of red-and-purple, oscillating confetti below a sweptback horizon and grey-sugared trees. With their private flotilla of balloons drifting lazily over the bulwark and the ivy sting on her skin she could visualise as rubies and rock salt. And when the mind rebelled, she reminded herself what the alternative would be. To never feel the warmth of the suns—the heat of the sky!—on her hands or the exhilaration of a gallery view from the devils' attic. The memory was like a heartbeat. A pulse. She found it difficult to concentrate. It fluttered in arrhythmia. A jolting mass of distended sensations in a kaleidoscope. She could feel it slipping through her fingers from moment-to-moment. "I don't think I can do this..."

"You can," encouraged the Doctor. They were too close now. "You can, you have the ability to see Time as few others do..."

"No, I can't—" Its aching beauty terrified her. The pressure sitting on her stomach was liable to burst. "I need to stop now."

Before she could relent, the Doctor's head snapped from his study of the sirocco around them. "Is fear all there is to your life? Someone once said that fear is pain arising from the anticipation of evil. Are you evil, do you consider yourself such?"

“No. No, I don’t think so.”

The deck plating began to blister where Azovka sat.

“I don’t believe you are either. What evil lurks at the heart of this happy memory then, *hm?*” he persisted. “Are you afraid of being happy?”

She tried to block him out, but some part of her mind wouldn’t let her. It was as though he’d mentioned her name across a crowded room.

Suddenly, she could hear every word that he was saying. “You have endured through much, Azovka, and in enduring grown as strong as your fellows. Even stronger. Yet, you’re willing to throw all of it away because of your... your *fear?* What is it in this memory that so terrifies you?”

The colours faded.

Azovka felt...

Lije’s free grin as she pulled down the kite on its length of string. Dellevar smirked, bemused, as he opened the door, returning from his day of study in the archives. Friends, family, home.

But those images, too, spiralled out of her control. The memory turned half-circle to the cruel horrors of everything aboard the Weapon.

She knew what she feared.

Vog Mur scuffed her four legs and bowed her head. The mace-shaped helmet by her side rasped like swamp gas. The technological insects skittered around them both in fear for their lives. Enemies, adversaries, isolation.

“They’ll burn it all away,” Azovka’s voice was raw, her fingers tightening. “All of it and crush any potential for something better to grow from it. With their ignorance, prejudice, and they don’t care.”

There it was. The pressure point they needed. The Doctor reached forward with his diction and squeezed. Hard.

“Then,” he said, “you have something to fight for, don’t you?”

The whirlwind in the cell, and the woman at the heart of it, caught their breath. “Yes.”

“We cannot remain here.”

Azovka blinked. “Yes.”

The Doctor threw his arm out to the wall. “Fight for it, Azovka. You have the will. You have Time and Mind on your side. *Fight!*”

Mesmerising in its blue, green and red tinctures, the agitated windstorm became a force for life.

“You—are—free!” the Doctor bellowed.

Impact!

The Doctor threw himself from harm’s way. Flat against the floor.

Azovka’s mind altered the screeching matter of the cell wall in a roaring yellow-purple flash that would have blinded them both had they been looking.

Its molecular structure crumpled beneath everything that old memory represented. The pressures of the mind. No longer failing and desperate, but cast as though a bolt from a crossbow. The result was a devastating void—burnt metal and smoke—carved through the cell door and wall.

“Water into wine. Well done!” the Doctor congratulated.

And they were. They were free.

If Peri had known of their good fortune, she’d have likely wished she could say the same thing.

From her vantage point, up against the forward viewport, she could barely see the Ordoheed begin work on the roof above. She clamoured up over the—now horizontal, rather than vertical—backing of the pilot chair.

The botanist’s vision swam. “They’re welding the MEV to the deck plating of the ship!”

“Sealing us in...” determined Frobisher, grimly, from his inverted position against the chair’s back.

Mæstric reported, “Tylial’s out cold.”

“Mæstric, we must stop them,” Dellevar rumbled. “We’ll never free ourselves otherwise.”

Peri held her arm out and was pulled effortlessly upward by the votary. Nursing her leg, she turned her attention to his companion. “Got any neat toys in the attic?” she asked, brightly.

Mæstric eyed Dellevar for confirmation. He nodded. It was no longer time for secrets, not when a well-meaning omission could claim their lives through nothing more but poor fortune.

The blue-haired punk helped Peri climb towards the door, waving her on. “This way, move it!”

“Frobisher?” asked the young botanist.

“Y’know...” the whifferdill slid downward to sit from his neck onto his shoulders. “Just for once, everything looks right.”

Reorienting himself, his familiar avian features transfigured into a carmine balloon that began floating up towards Peri.

She looked disappointed. “No joy?”

“Takes time to mimic these things perfectly. A long time.”

She remembered. Peri braced herself against the floor/wall and pulled. “Where’d it go?”

“Slipped through my dew-beater flippers. It’s down there somewhere.” He gestured with his tapering string. “Beneath the console. I’ll have to find it later, I can be more useful to you here, in this moment.”

“*Loy*, we might not have a later,” Mæstric warned.

“One robot alone isn’t going to convince the rest of the band to blow away the bad guys, jack,” rebutted Frobisher. “It’s our only way through that bulkhead to the TARDIS.”

Steel-capped boots sounded and shuddered high in the topsyturvy loft near the airlock door. They clamoured around with all the diligence and captivation of Antares liquidators picking over a quarantine zone.

The wall sighed and groaned as something clamped its blender teeth against the vehicle’s exterior.

The technology was far removed from what she’d used in the 20th-century, but to Peri, it sounded like a diamond-grade industrial drill.

Normally, the MEV would be protected by forcewalls and sonic breachers, but this had been a brutal war of attrition from beginning long to its end. Their only means of egress would soon be reduced to the constituency of burnt paper and their opponents would be inside. Better armed, better prepared and overwhelming in terms of manpower, if not in training.

“Way things are going at the moment, guys, I don’t think we’ve got a now,” said Peri.

Mæstric bowed her head. “Should we start to move to the TARDIS? Dellevar?”

Not too far below, observing all under impassive eyes, Dellevar hesitated. His mouth tightened and his eyes began searching the ground. He was the closest thing they had to an authority here. Mæstric wouldn’t jump without his say so. She trusted his judgement too much for that.

But Mæstric couldn’t tell if he was thinking or stalling.

“They’re almost through...” hissed Frobisher, shifting back to a penguin.

“*Sudar?*” she insisted.

Dellevar stared at the three, with bowl-shaped carmine eyes, before placing one of his four hands across his face. He opened the door to the forward compartment.

“Find Tyliat, take him to the commissariat,” he said. “Mydame Mæstric, accompany me.”

“Now, wait a moment,” Peri barged through into the room, “what are you—?”

Mæstric held her lasgun unsteadily to the botanist’s hip, but it was too late. She’d already seen. It was the MEV’s missile room—filled with conveyor belts and two sealed missile hatches—with one important accession.

It reminded Peri of a NASA lunar module, roughly the half the size of the room in diameter and a glossy, fatalistic black. One person could theoretically carry it from the room, albeit with no small degree of difficulty. Peri knew precisely what it was. It was the same across all cultures and all times. The question died in the back of her throat as the Haloster L235 autobomb rattled in its magnetic cradle. There was a black ichor leaking from the base of the living nightmare. *Through* the partition into the cockpit far below. It would only be a matter of minutes before the atmosphere was breached.

Everyone in the upturned transporter scrambled towards the airlock, desperately clamouring over whatever starsuit supplies were left. The weapons rack was covered in splashes of molten residue like pillowed magma. Mæstric disappeared into the commissariat with her things, just as the power packs beneath sounded off like firecrackers.

Peri chased after her. “Forget the food. We need to get out of here!”

The botanist found her rotating one of the supply crates towards the door, stomach against the weathered lid.

The datathumper shook her head. “That’s still full. C’mere! Help me!”

Together, the two got it through where it dropped with a painful clang to the cockpit window. “Perfect. Few more of those and we’re through!”

“Yeah,” Mæstric remembered Azovka. Her desperate desire to reshuffle rations, even though she didn’t quite understand why herself. “Yeah, it’s perfect...”

In the hallway, Frobisher could see the door peeling away in strips of pliant metal.

The drilling outside had begun to cycle down. It wouldn’t be long now before the MEV swarmed with groundpounders.

Frobisher tore the cabling from the ceiling and began whittling at its non-conductive sheath. A sharp argent-black beneath the plasticine blue.

He sighed. “It’ll have to do.”

“What are you making?” asked Peri.

“It’s not much,” he said, “but maybe it’ll buy us a few more moments.”

Aboard the *Accomplishment*, the Doctor crossed over to tend to the twisting mound couched against the opposing cell floor for safety.

His gait was briefly interrupted by an orphaned L-shaped object on the floor not too far from his fellow captive. Inert. It piqued the more macabre side of his personal curiosity.

It had once been one of the Ordoheed’s arms.

Not too far away was a malformed hand, viscous sapphire instead of dull emerald. Together they made a patchwork pair. He gave a culpable huff, self-condemnation a breath away on his lips.

“Have you found something?” asked Azovka.

The limb was slid aside with a surreptitious toe. “No, nothing.”

If she hadn’t guessed, then she didn’t need to know. It was out of sight and thus unable to drive her out of mind. Unfortunately, he couldn’t say the same for the poor fellow before him. He seemed barely lucid, his head lolling from side-to-side.

The detainee was an Oncan, one that had born into a phyle that still embraced the ancestral rites of Haasvil, judging from the maturation tattoos on his snout. Must have been the prisoner he’d been communicating with earlier. His eyes were unshrinking and large. Far more than stunned, far more. The Doctor gave the man a gentle tap on the face with the back of his fingers. “Can you hear me?”

The liberated prisoner nodded, mutely.

“You’re free,” he continued. “Free and clear. We can leave now.”

“They...” Solta’s mouth was dry, his throat felt like burning chaff. The words came out in heaving sighs, “They... will... have... heard...”

“No, no they won’t have,” coaxed the Doctor. “The alarm-tape used to trigger the sensors are in the doorframes themselves. No opened door, no trigger. It will take some time for them to notice. We have a chance. Now, can you tell me your name? Can you stand?”

“te-Varriq...” he replied reflexively, placing a hand on his face. “I don’t know.”

“Well, never mind that.”

Solta’s furred ears rippled laxly as he was helped briskly to his feet, a supporting arm holding him up under each shoulder. He looked like a particularly weather-beaten and sad velveteen rabbit. Azovka intently watched the crook of the hallway for any further signs of activity.

“Do... you...” he swallowed dizzily, “...out?”

The stepthead pointed, eyes wide and electric with activity, a small tearaway on a sugar high.

“Other way,” the Doctor jerked his head. “Further into the ship. We’re looking for a floor-plan to lead us to the Records Room.”

“Right.” She wasted no time, she was on the move again.

“Someone must have heard that.”

“Not necessarily, it’s a rather large ship. Azovka?”

“Doctor?”

“Congratulations on founding the Zuma meditation techni—” They rounded the blind corner. “*Back!*”

A guard! Of course there had to be another guard! It would have been foolish to assume otherwise. They wore the same uniform as their fellows, the sham Tyrikan colours with the Ordoheed assay-marks likely hidden somewhere underneath.

Gun raised. Head lowered. Haunting sneer.

It was a clear field of fire, nothing prevented them from mowing down the thornless unfortunates with the first clip. He must have been too consumed in formulating a strategy to have noticed their approach. Breathless and against every conceivable instinct, honed over time with experience, the three figures froze against that corner like ruminants in jacklights.

They were going to die in this place. To the terrible sound of footsteps drawing nearer...

Every moment in this confined space was becoming agony for Frobisher.

He heard an Ordoheed groundpounder cut straight through the fence of copper wire with his gauntlets. Electrons crackling and fizzling in their cheated ire like raindrops on a barracuda's scales. The five militaria swarmed through the upturned transporter, careful to avoid the trickle leading from the forward compartment down through the caterpillar tracks. Escaping its casing, it'd begun gorging itself on everything its virulently acidic spittle could taste. Even the Haloster L235 autobomb itself wasn't immune.

From where he sat now, the whifferdill felt as though he were gazing up through the wrong end of a sewer grate. With a great deal of strain, Frobisher could hear the staccato voice on the opposite end of the soldier's Vidphōn as he stormed through the upturned hallway.

By now, he would likely be able to see MEV's cockpit windows had been punched open with crude physical force. They were down past the shattered edges of translucent teeth. In the dark. Waiting or having fled, that he would have to work out for himself.

Frobisher saw the soldier enter the forward compartment with the skill of an experienced mountaineer, the gainsaying commander and his conversation partner were making the same assessments that the Lonewatch had made only minutes before.

"Liquid nitrogen canisters. Hoverjets. Missile assembly. Autobomb," an underling reported, out of sight.

"You," Kuron ordered, "check the next room. Commander to base, we've found the device."

The level of ease with which he and his colleagues were navigating was rather disconcerting. Only the occasional slick wipe of a misplaced boot hinted at any possible handicap.

"*Check the trigger mechanism,*" Frobisher heard from the Vidphōn. "*The ignition fluid—*"

"Is leaking from the casing, little man. Aided our adversaries though it might, it's useless now. What I want to know is whether the thermal valve is secure. Can you do that?"

A spasmodic hiss. “*The diagrammatic photofile says the indicator is located on the casing’s arming panel. Operable by electronic destructor key.*”

There was the sound of his heavy fingers running along the sealed edges of the panel. “The key has been removed. Deliberately.”

In one slow, synchronous movement, the charcoal shape of Mæstric’s lasgun cast the slimmest glint as she raised it shakily before her face.

There was no chance of their enemy operating the device without the key, but their attention would now be directed elsewhere.

Frobisher could feel them glowering down through the serrated portal into the darkness.

Hunkered down in the gloom of the sealed hollow, beneath the cockpit, Peri, Frobisher and the Lonewatch huddled together like children in a cramped cellar.

The tugboat’s suffocating confines were made all the worse by the blistering malodour that broiled through the delicate nostrils of the shape-shifting urbish.

The acid from the autobomb had corroded the transporter’s windscreen and permitted them an alternative means of egress. Assisted in no small part by the upturned and empty boxes from the commissariat which had helped to shorten the fall to the ground quite significantly.

Their utility had been curiously obvious to Mæstric. Supernaturally so.

Mæstric pulled her arms tight against her chest.

Peri watched as the acid sluiced down from the overhang above, biting, chewing and spitting at the flooring at their feet to little avail.

We must be above the reactor section now, Frobisher theorised.

At his feet, the unconscious Tyliar groaned through one of Dellevar’s hands. It wasn’t a particularly loud noise, but for those that hunted them, it proved more than enough reason to direct their search towards the pit of their wedged metal quarry.

“Flare,” instructed Kuron.

Frobisher tensed his anteater-like quills, voiceless with dread.

It cracked alight, brilliant green in the black web of metal and dropped. Peri couldn’t help it. She remembered the Autopilot—shoulders cracked back, legs uncoiling, shrieking in agony—and panic lashed itself to her lungs. She tossed back like someone had dropped a match down the back of her blouse. Silent in voice, but

not deed. It sealed the commander's suspicions. She and Dellevar had responded in the same moment, both had their hands around the blazing candle and threw it back up into the armoured figure's face.

A flash! A shout. Hailed by a great many in return. Gunfire filled the small cavity and the two figures seized in place, rigid, then dropped to the ground with their strings cut. Ricochets. Chunks of the tugboat's skeleton raining down from above.

Frobisher could taste the burning radiation of their lasers in his dirigible-like lungs.

It all happened too quickly. Far too quickly for either him or Mæstric to react. Lights danced down from the attic above, flicking across the Lonewatch bodies as the Ordoheed assessed the damage.

"One target identified and downed," reported one of the guardsmen.

Frobisher didn't let his mind react. He buried that horror deep. It was him and Mæstric now. Just them. He was starting to panic. There had to be a way out! There had to be! The datathumper was already crawling over her mentor's body, up towards the heavies in a blind rage. The whifferrill stopped her, forcefully pulling her back by the lockbox on her belt.

They fell back together with the sound of dry, cracking paint. Coming to rest beside Peri's body.

STAGE 14: “Burden of Proof”

Pressed against the silver reflective finishes of the brig’s end wall, the Doctor opened his eyes one-by-one and found to his delight and bewilderment that he was still alive.

The outcome wasn’t unwelcome certainly, but it struck him as being in defiance of conventional logic.

After a few minutes, the tang of sterile metal settling in his senses, the Doctor decided to step a metre or so closer to their assailant.

He triggered a movement.

An arm, clearly on a wind-up mechanism, launched up to stop him in one jagged uppercut. The pre-recorded patter of footsteps soon accompanied it. The four eyes within the helmet lacked the glistening activity of life. Organic or artificial.

“You’ve nothing to fear.” The Doctor tore the helmet from its head and tweaked its nose with a pointed finger. “It’s a dummy. Literal and actual. Satellite-manufactured from the looks of it. They must use them to bolster their ranks.”

His complacent smile vanished when he saw Solta. Crouched to the ground in a squat, hands clasped over his face. Shaking. Little more than a quailing animal.

“I can’t...” Solta couldn’t stop shaking. “I can’t.... *move... I... can’t...*”

Azovka hated the instinct to recoil from him that she felt in her chest. She recognised it all too well. People she knew, people she’d liked, had perished needlessly from such a combat delirium. Like culture shock, it paralysed and distorted. He was weeping and that unfortunately was a good sign. If he could weep, he could still feel.

“I understand you’re tired, but... this was-will not be the time for self-pity,” said Azovka as kindly as she could.

“You’d make a poor psychologist, my girl... It’s... I’m... *disgusted.*”

“Now steady, old chap,” encouraged the Doctor, placing a hand on his tremulous shoulder. “Steady. It’s alright now. Truly. They can’t hurt you anymore. We won’t let them, will we?”

“We won’t,” she repeated with a swallow.

“Too late. Too late for Berenorah too...” his vision widened with truth. “I need a minute... A... *Czerny*.”

“We should l-let him recover.”

“As much as I would like to, we may not have time for that,” the Doctor tapped one of the nearby doors with the dummy’s helmet as though perusing a library shelf. “Perhaps there’s something in these other rooms that could help even things out. Look after him.”

“I will,” she assured him.

“My coat.”

“Here...” she handed it to him softly, a final hinting waft of sweet vanilla and grassy notes. He pulled it tight around his shoulders, clutching his lapels and left Solta in the girl’s care.

Above the pit, beneath the MEV, one of the monsters cried, “There’s another two!”

“I see them,” said Kuron, coolly.

“What is that with it? A rodent?”

“A being. Like any other.”

Frobisher glowered.

He barely caught Kuron’s murmur, “Be wary, we need something left with enough wit for interrogation.”

The whifferdill repeated an abbreviated version for Mæstric’s benefit. The paint must have masked her. Kept her among the living.

Living, the word stuck in his head. Frobisher regarded the two bodies as they had fallen. There was something nagging at him. *Living... Alive? Live fire.*

Where were the wounds? The scoring and holes that’d cut their suits to garlands?

Sensing his scrutiny, Peri carefully rolled her hand out towards the lifeless orbot and Tylial.

Of course! The trajectory of the shots had been all wrong, even the most precisely calculated ricochet would have only struck the lining above their heads. Frobisher felt like a fool. A relieved and condemned fool. It’d been a good plan, but like all good plans, the unpredictability of its players had made it impossible for it to survive the first engagement. Mæstric saw the movement and froze in her tracks, mouthing a disagreeable, but eased *loy* in the

playacting botanist's direction. Alright. He and Mæstric were targets now.

How could they change this situation back to their advantage?

Neither of the faux deceased moved any further than they already had done. Surprise was still there. No demonstrable knowledge of Mæstric's lasgun either. Although they likely had their suspicions, they were keeping their distance.

How do I get those slime to merry jaunt down here?

Frobisher couldn't change into anything particularly gargantuan. They would shoot him down before he had the chance to complete his transformation. Perhaps something small then? His shape-shifting wasn't a subtle ability, but at least, it would leave them with less to pink. He had to do it away from Peri and Dellevar, an unpredicted act such as that would doubtless lead to their deaths. Warriors. They had no appreciation for a fellow's flair.

They unloaded what sounded like a beam-choked shotgun into the vacuum.

Frobisher's ears rang and he slumped to the side out of sight, feeling his levelling jaw taper like plasticine into proboscis. In a few moments, he had adopted the form of a Rijar heaterbee. Mæstric pointed her doddering sidearm towards the lowest concentric hole in the acid-glutted floor.

A silent question.

He conceded it was a good idea.

Between them, it was decided. He wouldn't bring them to her, he would go to them. There had to be something onboard to draw them away. His mind pored over every detail he'd gathered before this moment. The girl mouthed something else and, in a moment, he had his answer.

Liquid nitrogen. For the doors.

They'd forgotten all about it in the exodus, there had to be some aboard, but where? He arced over their assailants, darting through panoptic towers of fouling smoke. Kuron was moving towards the front of the vehicle, examining the cockpit's controls in greater detail.

One of his heavies returned from their explorations. Two-headed and muscular. Frobisher kept his distance to avoid being swatted aside.

“The gems must be down,” started one head, “there with the Lonewatch,” finished the other.

“I suspected as much. Fortunately, we have all we need here,” Kuron’s grille burbled thoughtfully. “Search for the weapon release control. We’ll blast them out.”

Frobisher buzzed above the grille. The hardsuit was self-contained, its ventilators wouldn’t fit anything larger than a microbe. He’d find no respite here. Perhaps in the Map Room?

From such a minute perspective, the main table resembled some ashen lost valley, consumed by industrial decay. He could hear the weapon banks charging up for a missile salvo. How many did the MEV have left stored away? A dozen? Half?

Just one is enough, he reminded himself.

There they were, looming over him in sleek, pockmarked argent—the nitrogen injectors. His next morph took a great deal of effort, stretching his molecular structure to suit the armoured figures that had stalked them. The whine of motors as it forced the projectile forward into the tube was all-consuming, it masked his transformation well. In a few harried moments, he had acquired one of the cylinders and begun moving back down towards the tattered windscreen.

Unfortunately, he was immediately noticed by Mister Big himself.

“You,” pointed Kuron. “Your countersign.”

Shock cannoned its way through Frobisher.

“There was no one in that section,” continued the commander, levelly. “All guards report in! We have an intrud—!”

Kuron’s rifle disappeared beneath a burst of cryogen from Frobisher’s injector. The weapon’s first shot erupted in the firing chamber and the gun exploded in its owner’s hands. Frobisher levelled the injector like a soda siphon and sprayed the second soldier across his two visors. The heavy slipped. His heads caught in a noose between one of the chairs and the wall where he flailed helplessly.

Frobisher drove himself through the confusion into the cockpit.

The three other heavies searching around the MEV were responding as quickly as their circumstances allowed. The gumshoe felt a hand pushing down on his shoulder at the same moment the world uncoiled like a catapult. His footing! His leg collapsed beneath him as a shotgun blast flared over his head.

His arm, flailing to remove the offender, instead caught the bottom of the console. He could feel the serrated teeth of the windscreen chafing against his ankles.

A flash from below went wild. Mæstric.

Pinned by his attacker, Frobisher attempted to reach for the release control. Kuron tried to push him down, away from... There! He threw his elbow down against the fascia. Smoke and a buzzing click. Then, a horrific, bone-scraping wail from the missile room. Emergency lights began flashing their moribund shade of red behind a text-riddled rectangular panel.

"The automatic reloader..." realised Kuron.

Another shot from Mæstric impacted the ceiling above. This new unanticipated aggressor in the dark prompted a backhanded gauntlet that freed the whifferdill's grip in a bolt of pain.

Frobisher could hear the mayhem above as he fell.

One of the conveyors in the compartment had been activated before the tube was opened, the nose of a missile was grating unhappily against one of the sealed hatches.

The injector clutched tightly to his chest, Frobisher landed with a bestial *crack!*

While he lay winded and sighing, he asked of the gunslinger, "Would you prefer hardboiled or poached...?"

Mæstric's eyes darted searchingly from side-to-side. "Frobisher?"

He groaned in the affirmative.

Peri sprang to life and began applying the injector to the acid-bitten flooring. Dellevar likewise, throwing himself against the weakening gateway with his four fists.

Peri heard a thunderous crash behind her. A shockwave surged down through the shaft and knocked her off her feet, the injector still tightly held in her hands.

"That was the wall of the tunnel outside... We must have collided with it!" she realised.

"We may not have to hide aboard, after all."

"Get moving!" she urged. "The chance won't last forever."

Dellevar struck the floor again with a sumo-like stomp.

With a grunt, the whifferdill let himself slip back into the comfortable frontispiece of a penguin and crawled over to Mæstric. She was pulling Tyllal across the ground, an arm under each shoulder as his legs spooled out beneath him like electrical tape.

She shook him, agitated and afraid. “Tylial, wake up. C’mon, this is no time to be so quiet, we’ve got to...”

She stopped. Dropped him where he sat. Where was the rise and fall of his chest? Mæstric pressed her head to his heart. He was so cold. He was...

Her eyes closed, her mind burying itself beneath an awful wave of disgust and shame.

Frobisher sighed, he knew that expression all too well.

Mæstric crossed over to Dellevar and squeezed his shoulder. “Tylial’s gone...”

Dellevar stopped and gazed through her with an expression she didn’t know faces could make. It was the eyes, that terrible moment where the light within became aware of all the darkness surrounding it. Anything he could say, anything he could think, it all felt worthless as an epitaph.

Single-minded in her focus, Peri continued to kick a foot against the floor. The fold came loose in a lazy slide like so much broken wickerwork. She descended, her feet clattering against its surface.

“What are you waiting for?” queried Peri as Frobisher followed through. “Where’s...?”

Frobisher touched Peri’s arm, the lifeless orbot tucked under one flipper and she understood immediately. Her teeth unclenched, her eyes searching the ground before they could meet Dellevar.

Everyone here knew what they would have to do. They couldn’t take the body with them, it would have to remain here.

“Father Sky laughs,” Dellevar reflected, bitterly.

Mæstric insisted, “He’d want us to go, *sudar*. It’s just his body, not him.”

He nodded, simply. The stretching roar of gunfire bayed angrily in their wake as the quartet fled.

As if on a morning stroll up the Academy’s main stairs, the Doctor passed each sealed *Accomplishment* door in turn. Candidly, he noted the resonant differences in their sealed contents with the helmet, his makeshift tuning fork.

Some were empty. Some were so tightly packed that he decided against being overcome by a hoarder’s worst impulses.

One—its door flexed ajar from the force of Azovka’s earlier pyrotechnics—stored a small repository of laboratory specimens

from the Weapon itself. Raw silicon from the stores, hæmofluid in translucent canisters, fauna preserved in sterile vacuum tubes and an assortment of tainted and untainted samples he didn't care to examine. Notation scattered the floor in a tundra of paper and visicorder plates. That was one strong possibility. He'd double back once he'd reached the access passage's end. A further three sealed doorways greeted him as he tapped past, each as empty as the last. The fourth was much the same, but with a keen difference. The resonant clang was met with a twin. Someone on the other side answered.

Oh? Curious. Two prisoners, not including us... the Doctor considered. Why two? Separate members of the same party? Different parties? With technology from Trailblazer Prime... Mention of an Institute... Perhaps they're abducted members of CIDA's scientific retinue. Is she herself one of their number?

Too many immediate questions. Not enough answers.

A belligerent clout from the helmet dislodged the housing of the sealed door's entry coder, its innards sluicing untidily from its capsule-shaped socket. The Doctor skimmed it approvingly and began his mechanical legerdemain on the mechanism's ground wires working upwards.

At the same time, careful not to stray too far from her charge's side, Azovka examined the mannequin's sidearm more closely. Putty puckered from where they had filled the barrel with sealant, the trigger mechanism removed with an expert snap of pliers. She gripped the gunstock and gave it an experimental, hockey stick swing against its leg, whereupon it caromed off, causing the figure to wobble unsteadily as if drunk. It raised its mindless arm in offence. Up and down. The armour was badly dented, but there was no sign that it'd been pierced.

Azovka exhaled, sharply. "It'll have to do."

Behind her, the doors to their newfound mystery slid open, heralded by a subtle, but triumphant *ba!* from the Doctor. He couldn't quite parse what was inside though. Primarily as there was nothing there. It could have been an empty meat locker for all the glamour it'd been afforded. Identical to their own accommodations. Sterile. And still...

"Couldn't be..." the Doctor said, assuredly.

He took a step inside.

The emptiness descended on the Doctor from the ceiling like a metric tonne of sound shingle.

He reacted to the shape faster than he could identify it.

He bowed, using the middle of his back as a cowcatcher. Classic *bartitsu* manoeuvre. Instead of ramming him full in the chest, the figure went upwards and sideward.

The Doctor spun around.

It was a woman, her face tortured by rage. This was her one last bout of ferocity before death. She must have thought they were the firing squad.

Using her cudgel as a barrier, Azovka got away with little more than a graze, but Solta, dulled by drugs and a prolonged period of isolation, became the figure's hostage.

His arm was twisted behind his back. The figure's fingers poised over his cranial orbits.

Solta could hear his fellow prisoner's voice at his ear. "*I'll kill him!*"

Recovering quickly, the Doctor rebelled. "We're unarmed! *He is unarmed!*"

"*So, what?*" snarled the woman.

"We're prisoners like yourself."

"And why should I believe that?"

"Just look at us! *Look!*" The Doctor thought his made-to-measure *modus vivendi* would speak for itself. "Use your intelligence!"

"You're my way out then," she said. "He for me."

The Doctor's expression darkened. "Are you truly that callous?"

"I'd say I have a mission, but I know that means nothing to you. Your sponsor killed my commanding officer. That is not something that I will forgive." Her voice was low and level. "I also have three children. If my boys are dead, I'll kill all of you. I swear I will."

The Doctor raised his hands amenably in surrender. "Before your rapid transport undertaking, may I ask, who you are and where you come from?"

"You know already," deflected Castell.

"So, there's no point not telling him is there?" winced Solta.

The Doctor frowned. "What a terrible double negative."

"Castell. Nonpareil. Stationed on Trailblazer Prime," she answered.

He turned to Solta. "And you?"

“I was born on Tyrika.”

“You—” Castell’s grip on his arm tightened.

“*Stop it!*” the Doctor snapped. “Don’t be foolish! Put aside the old prejudices, they have no place here. He’s as much a victim of this appalling debacle as we are.”

“Where are you from, girl?” asked Castell.

“Briar Rose.”

Solta’s ears shot up, alert. “Briar R—?”

“She’s unimportant then. You’re wrong,” Castell cut him off, addressing the Doctor, “that woman is as Tyrikan as he is. A defector to them. All wrapped up in their pre-recorded fakery like the coils of a swampsnake.”

“From CIDA?” asked the Doctor, searchingly.

“Yes.”

“Soft ‘C’ or hard ‘K’?”

“What?”

“This Vog Mur, did she pronounce the acronym, CIDA, as *seeder* or *kidder*?”

“Who cares?” A pause. Her eyes shot to the side, unable to resist the gainsay. “*Kidder*.”

“Who else would know that nickname?”

“Outside the Institute, no one.”

“*She* was aware, wasn’t she?” said the Doctor, calmly.

“And so are you, but I sure as hell don’t recognise you. Maybe she was a deep cover plant for this counterfeit sortie. A sleeper. Maybe you’re her controller.”

“As told to the cat’s tail,” he rebuffed, succinctly.

Azovka’s butterfly eyes flitted uneasily. “There’s no way she’s a Tyrikan. Sympathiser or otherwise.”

“Can you prove that?”

“No, I can’t. The evidence was-will be taken from us.”

“But then, even if she could, I suppose all Tyrikans are the same, aren’t they?” the Doctor jeered, condescendingly. “I suppose all believe in the Resurgence. All scraping for those purple windflowers, lichen stonework and statue-seamed bronze sky. All willing to recreate that picturesque and perpetual hamlet a billion times over.” He advanced step-by-step, word-by-word. “Oh, yes, so obsessed with that beauty they covet so keenly, yet so ignorant of its presence that they must force it into being time and time again.

No nuance. No deviation. No matter the cost to the living beings that get in their—”

“*Shut up, of course not!*” she snapped. The silence was like watching the tide recede back out into the sea. The words sunk into the wet sand and through Castell’s single-minded determination. It made her think. It made her understand. The Doctor and her were squared off, nose-to-nose. “Czerny blazes, *of course not*. I’m no fool. Do not treat me as one.”

The Doctor lowered his hands disarmingly, examining her uniform. “I’m relieved to see that there’s no monopoly on common sense, Nonpareil.”

Solta licked the fur on his muzzle, nervously. Her grip was still as tight as before, but something had changed. It was in the way her stance had shifted. He could feel her turning over what he’d said in her mind. The Doctor could see it, too. Wrath had boiled over into reason.

The faux surgeon decided to ask, “If Vog Mur’s not representing the interests of either bloc, why are we here? Why us?”

“For one simple reason,” the Doctor took a step back, addressing the general assemblage of personages. “Insurance. I would say at the base of her reasoning, Vog Mur was looking for two hostages she could use to shield herself and her fellows if someone stumbled upon this place before they were good and ready. One from each side of the war, Affiliation and Tyrikan. The distinction to her was—and I imagine, still is—irrelevant. *That*, I believe, will be our advantage. Allies can come from all sides.”

“There were three of us. Where is my crewman?” asked Castell.

Azovka spoke up, her head bowed in sadness. “Dead.”

“Did you kill him?”

“No,” she said, forcefully.

Castell turned her attention back to Solta. “You?”

“They killed my friend, too,” he said softly. His anguish likewise seemed genuine. There was no sudden surge of energy after a feint where he tried to break free from her, he... sagged towards the floor. She forgot his arm and instead tried to hold him upright. Proud and tall. Like a captive should be, whether the jailer was there to see it or not. How else were they to know they were alive?

“And mine,” added Azovka.

“How many is that now?” asked the Doctor.

“I...” her eyes flicked up and down, apologetic and troubled, “I genuinely don’t know.”

The Doctor erupted like a runaway locomotive. “*Senseless!* We must put an end to the callous butchery that has been perpetrated by this woman and her crawlers! We *must!* We can do it together. I’ll find a way to make it happen, I promise you.”

“But only if you let us,” insisted Azovka.

“I’ve no reason to trust you,” demurred Castell.

“Nor I you, but I do trust *him.*”

“And I should you?”

“You’re alone,” interjected Solta.

“And there are three of us against one of you.” Azovka made it sound less of a personal threat and more like a complaint against the weather. “Would you really like to take those odds?”

“You and he can barely stand.”

The Doctor fostered a catlike smile. “That matters?”

“The ship is sealed. No one can get through into the upper decks without authorisation. You need them,” insisted Solta.

“And you?”

“I’m their surgeon. They’re... they can falter. I can tell you how, if you’ll listen...”

“We’ll see,” said Castell. “Move. Now.”

“Where did you have in mind?”

“To that horrible woman. To bargain for my life. Whether or not I believe you is... irrelevant now. People need to know what happened here. I will kill him if you try to stop me, I promise you.”

“Indeed, but perhaps, I might help to even out the odds somewhat?” The Doctor took a step forward, his spat a countertenor against the well-worn flooring. His head lowered hospitably and gestured back the way he’d come. “I know of at least one room we can visit freely. This will be a nice opportunity to get to know one another. Tell me... What do you think would be the worst thing to catch fire in a laboratory?”

Castell gave it some thought. “...You?”

The Doctor tutted disapprovingly at her as he walked.

Sitting cross-legged against the Weapon’s floor beside the bulkhead, Peri watched as the Mulean tugboat’s great shape was gored like a charred walnut by the Weapon’s tendrils.

It had looked so sturdy and commanding, even in its derelict condition. It'd survived the worst of the sargasso, even discovered its own resting place.

To see it now, rent asunder in a complete betrayal of its sturdy industrial origins sent a chill down her spine. The narrow discs of light from the carrydart's underjets kicked that acidic fear up into Peri's stomach.

It prompted a conversation no one—not the wayfarers, nor the Lonewatch—wished to discuss.

"That bomb..." said Peri. "If they find a way to arm the mechanism on it—"

"They still need this." Mæstric produced the Haloster L235 autobomb's destructor key between her thumb and forefinger from a pocket.

Dellevar hadn't moved from the ridge where he stood.

"Regrettably," he rumbled, "they likely possess the equipment necessary to bypass that. Once they return to base, they'll have a fully-functioning armament. To use as they please. And we gave it to them."

Behind him, Frobisher's study of the inert orbot's eggcup interior was almost complete. A bizarre scramble of cubist wiring. All enmeshed together like teeth in a comb. It was difficult to entirely parse every connector and breaker without going a bit cross-eyed, but he considered himself well-versed enough to understand what would and wouldn't trigger security.

"Can't wait to be rid of this place..." he murmured.

She approached. "How's it going? Remember, if you're not perfect—"

"I know," Frobisher gestured to the maintenance passageway in the bulkhead where the orbots shuttled through. "I'll griddle like an ugrat in a junction box. Copacetic..." He transmogrified, his limbs vanishing in embryonic reversal, until he was the very model of the murderous home appliance. "Peri, what d'you think?"

The two girls studied him. Dellevar didn't appear to hear.

"You'd fool me," admitted Peri.

"Right, well, I'm off then."

"Frobisher," she dug around inside her suit and produced a pinkie-length gold emblem. "Key."

"Drop it in the top."

“Alright...” she said. It clinked and clattered down the cavity in the robot’s construction. She gave him a sidelong glance.

“It’s gone to a good place,” he assured her.

“I can see why those creepy vines exist.”

“Yeah, these don’t have any opposable thumbs,” Frobisher sidled side-to-side. “Picking stuff up seems beyond them.”

“Seems a dumb question to ask now,” interjected Mæstric, sagging from the maintenance opening to sit beside Peri, “but how do we know this is genuine and not some mad jackal hunt?”

“You’re asking us now?” the whifferdill hummed, dubiously.

Peri whispered in his audio receptor. “They’ve nothing now, can you blame them?”

The orbot bobbed in understanding.

“You can bring something back, can’t you?” she asked him at normal volume.

“Sure. The Doc eats sugar cubes like biscuits when he’s repairing the—*ah*—whatchamacallit... The dytron catalyser. Covers up the smell. You’ll be here when I get back, right?”

“Look at it this way,” the datathumper sucked her teeth. “When the pumps were broken, we’d collect water from an old-fashioned well, right? Well, I kept forgetting to put the capstone back on to keep the rodents out. I was young and it was pretty damn heavy, so after a while I didn’t bother. Dellevar warned me about things that could scramble up into the courtyard. Rats bigger than me.”

“And that scared you straight?” Peri helped the faux orbot into the biochrome maw.

Mæstric huffed an older chuckle. “You’re kidding, right? I spent three nights sitting by that well waiting to catch whatever came back up.”

“Well, this rat might be running, so you’d better have a good catch,” echoed Frobisher. “Y’know, I’m getting an ancestral memory, cramped doesn’t even begin to cover this...”

He caught the last seconds of the derelict as it was pecked to pieces like ducks at a lump of mildewing bread in the park. Living or husk, this place had more than enough firepower behind it to make life hostile for anyone unfortunate enough to uncover it. It vexed his faceless brow as he went on his way into the cavity and swiftly from their sight.

Vog Mur knew that the answer rested somewhere among the rotary of possessions before her.

Normally, they would have been removed to storage, like the technology they had salvaged from those deceased Lonewatch. There was no telling when such artefacts could become useful again and, she confessed in private to herself, that there was something gratifying about examining each new possession in turn.

This puzzle eluded her, however.

The girl's *vaishali* bore no subtle signs of hidden compartments or alterations beyond its regular purview. Her transceiver had already been thoroughly dissected by Sangfroid and his compilers to locate her fellows, its contents already spirited away with the disgraced commander on his errand. That left the stranger with the air of mystery about him who had prompted this reassessment to begin with. It wasn't doubt, she wouldn't tolerate that self-deception, merely a reappraisal.

Numerous objects had been divested from his starsuit and coat, each met with an increasing aggravation—an out-of-date annual, an empty Golden Wonder variety pack, three arcade tokens for the Repton Starcross and a blue-stained paintbrush still dripping as though to be freshly applied. No identification, no standing orders... *Nothing!* He was a frustrating anomaly, this Doctor. He knew far too much for a man who possessed so little.

But then, the greatest weapon in space is perception, she reminded herself. *Alter perception and you alter truth.*

This was a feint, just like hers and she would uncover it. She was certain of that.

She felt Sangfroid approach from over her shoulder. “The satellite is n-now capable of motion, but...”

“Speak.” Her nose twitched and she added in a mutter, “If you have the mettle.”

“Be assured, all preparations can be handled from here. Unfortunately, a living being is still required to activate the temporary cut-out at Mindcore-3 in A/0-127-129. We are also currently working on an alternative. There is also... well...”

“Also?”

He continued to blubber. “Excellency... T-This cannot p-possibly....”

She turned sternly, planning to scold him for his reluctance of thought, but her eyes instead fell on a nightmare. It was a polyhedron with fourteen faces used for the storage of sophisticated computer information and it should have died with its owner in the silicon desert. Buried. Irretrievable. The desert claimed all and gave nothing back. There should only have been the trap.

A trap for whom?

“I...” Vog Mur swallowed the thought.

Sangfroid cringed, on the verge of panic. She was going to strike him again. She could see him recoil at the phantom pain in his chest.

“Delighted to remake your acquaintance!” greeted an insipid voice. *That* voice. Coming from the entranceway to the *Accomplishment*. “Thought I’d pop round, see how you were getting on. Not too busy, I hope?”

She spun around to face the Doctor, the cuboctahedron in her hands. Abruptly and painfully, she reared upwards onto her hind legs. Her face stung as though she’d walked into a wall of creeping ivy. The room swallowed in a wave of darkness. They’d stolen away in plain sight... She’d been blinded!

Octopus clouds of mauve-black ripped their tentacles across her vision in white dwarf flares. Her other senses heightened to accommodate the privation, the horrific smell being the most obvious. Something familiar. Cloying. She was too distracted by the pain and alarm to really place it yet. There were four shapes in the murky water pond before her. All coming from the direction of the ship.

The seven Ordoheed militaria alerted in turn. There was great anticipation, perhaps even elation, at the assurance of violence. Tethered to that thought, her next words, seemingly disconnected from her mouth, entered into the chamber of their own accord.

“Cut them down!”

“Run, everyone! Run!” shouted the Doctor.

The escapees bolted, as did the handful of compilers still within the room. Two flanks. One spearhead. A classic flying wedge.

Fright caused Sangfroid to fly backward into the nearest control. The consoles encircling him began moving on their independent ring. A carousel of tombstones providing every combatant with a

continued source of health and hazard both as they made their move.

Her guards reacted to their abrupt egress in their usual manner.

What was already a frenetic atmosphere exploded with bullets and phase fire alike, tearing into the marble with the ferocity of an erupting dam to a wood-hut village. They missed the soft flesh of their intended targets as they sprinted to cover the no man's land between the airlock door and the first tabletop. Who were they...? She could just recognise the rounded face of te-Varriq and sharper features of Castell as they threw themselves beneath their nearest source of refuge. The other two...

Explosive rounds shelled Orm's Lilliputian jewelscape like tilled farmland, flecks of plastic raining down on the hiding Castell and te-Varriq. Beige fibreglass shone ingloriously from beneath the coloured glass.

Vog Mur could see the closest groundpounder begin to sweep the leg, trying to drive them out.

What must've felt like the blinding white flash of a meteor erupted at the nape of the soldier's neck. The groundpounder sagged like an uprooted tent to one side, arms raised to block another strike.

Instead, Azovka fell against her.

The two locked together and became an inseparable one. A mess of clasped hands and hateful screaming.

Vog Mur felt her motor memory take effect, the wooden contours of the deedbox were instantaneously recognisable. The controls a clammy cold beneath her scrabbling fingertips. Vital moments were ticking away in distraction as dangerous figures scattered to and fro.

There!

The warm tingle of static electricity. One click, then another. Its initial electronic response was instantaneous and one she hoped would be gratifyingly deadly. Table-mounted turrets hacked grotesquely in deafening, ragged bursts.

"Azovka, down!" shouted the Doctor.

A cry of pain. Alarm. Shock. The closest of the two figures locked together were potholed with crude shot from the assault battery.

The nearer figure, fingers tightening around the lasgun grasped firmly in their opponent's hands, slackened as the pair listed drunkenly to one side.

It flashed! Chaffs of plating dislodged from the ceiling above.

Azovka, lively as ever, was dragged down with the warrior. She tore the club from her enemy's incapacitated grasp and haled it hard into the head and legs of another opportunistic soldier.

A *scream* distracted Vog Mur from the ongoing skirmish. It was Sangfroid, fleeing behind one of the terminals in a self-serving scabble of limbs.

Moments later, she understood why as a stray ricochet blew apart her miniature assault batteries.

The calico figure of the Doctor was approaching across the centre, face shielded with the empty hæmofluid canister stolen from the *Accomplishment's* laboratory, bullets racking angrily against its durable casing from the awkwardly-held phaser of another trooper. The militarian hiding behind Nieradzik's stellar pirates fired off two more rounds.

One found its mark, skimming across the intruder's jawline. The jackanapes threw the container into the groundpounder and vaulted at the awkwardly held weapon, knocking it from his grasp. The militarian spasmed back. Lasgun fire skipped between the lightpails of the suicidal Qualar cherubim on the diorama.

The soldier felt the bone in his wrist snap back out of alignment from its poor resetting. Its safety off, the sidearm fired indiscriminately into the æther before settling against the blighted table. But, the soldier pushed through the pain and shoulder charged the Doctor.

The two belligerents struck the nearest console.

Vidscreen sets splashed across the flooring in a concerto of decimation. Their disgorging innards wedged themselves between the rotating platform carousel and the complex pulley system beneath.

Jammed! The carousel lurched abruptly to a halt.

Seizing his opportunity, however reluctantly, the Doctor forced his adversary forward. The groundpounder's helmet cracked hard against the unforgiving corner of a terminal before the rest of him tumbled to the ground.

Another militarian tripped over the Doctor's outstretched bumblebee pant-leg in his haste to fill the gap left by his counterpart's failure.

Overbalancing, the militarian collided with the downed remnants of his fellow in an unenviable heap.

The Doctor bowed. “You’re falling down on the job, gentlemen.”

Vog Mur locked her deedbox for safety, then snatched up Azovka’s gas-propelled dagger, aimed and fired.

The blade stung his corsage of blonde curls, but impacted fruitlessly against the far neon wall with a thwarted crack. The remaining Ordoheed were fighting on through the confusion across various fronts—both figuratively and literally—but she could tell it was already over.

The Doctor had reached his objective.

Vog Mur raised a hand, “Cease fire!”

He was right beside her.

On one flank, shielded from their field of fire by the solid mass of her Haviraph chair. On the other, a nearby computer terminal. One that had manoeuvred into place by the damaged revolving platform carousel.

“Shall we talk?” asked the Doctor.

STAGE 15: “The Doctor Deals”

“How long do you think he’ll be?” inquired Peri.

Standing before the disintegrating Mulean tugboat was Dellevar. Eerily quiet, even for him. His eyes traced the stepping stones of debris back out towards their original point of egress. It had passed on by in the night.

Mæstric was coming to understand—slowly, but inevitably—that somewhere in that bloated hulk was everything they had ever brought with them on this journey. Every trinket and memory. Had the MEV already fallen with the empty reactor or would it remain there as a perverse monument to be rediscovered by some confounded future archæologist?

“Sorry,” said Peri.

“What for?”

“You’ve lost everything today.”

“Yeah...” Mæstric rested her chin on her knees. “Not an unfamiliar story, although I didn’t exactly come into this alone.”

Peri remembered the words. “She’s not no one.”

“You said you’d lost someone, too.”

“Might have,” the botanist admitted. “I haven’t really thought about it since we started trying to cross this gap. That was supposed to be impossible, but we managed it.”

“This is different... She’s...” she shivered.

“Talking helps,” offered Peri. “If nothing else, it’ll make us feel a bit more human—I mean, like ourselves. And I want to think about something other than the fact we could die in the next half-hour.”

“Telle and I are in a bit of a rough patch.”

“How so?”

The frustration came out in a dragon-like spit of condemnation. “I don’t think she gets that some things can’t *be* fixed. When it’s broken, it’s broken. You don’t keep clinging onto it. You rip it out and find something new.”

“Maybe...” conceded Peri, lightly.

Mæstric fell silent, watching the flotsam dissolve harmlessly in the vacuum. The Resonance Gem cartridges scraped softly against the floor as she readjusted, putting her arms out behind her and

exhaling. Peri played with her fingertips as the quiet became a deafening roar. It felt... *wrong* to leave this unattended.

"I can relate. Occasionally, the Doctor, Frobisher and me—" she could just hear the Doctor's know-all grammatical correction in her head. "And I, end up in... situations, where we can't *make* a difference. We have to stand back and watch."

Mæstric didn't quite follow. "And, what? You fall in line every time?"

"Whoa, no," protested Peri. "Definitely not. You know how many arguments we've had since I asked to stay? It never gets easier knowing there's nothing that can be done."

She rattled her fingers against her hair. "So, you *don't* listen?"

"Sometimes," Peri nodded. "When the situation calls for it, when there are things that can be changed. Little things that end up meaning a lot. At least, to me, personally. But most of the time, I choose to trust his judgement."

"I don't get it. You said, you argue."

"Well, sure," Peri nodded. "But the trick of any *good* friendship isn't necessarily a lack of arguments."

"What is it then?"

"It's that it thrives *despite* the arguments every time."

"You need each other?"

Peri shook her head. "We *want* to be around each other. He's my best friend, I couldn't have seen what I have without him. I was meant to be abroad for a couple of months. Canary Islands, then back through to New York. Shoot in and out, right? Well, I've been seeing every corner of the Galaxy for a couple *years* now. Places with cephaloclouds and fungi jungles. I don't regret it."

"You..." Mæstric let her knees sink to the floor. "You trust him? Completely?"

"Yeah, of course. My choice. He respects me and I respect him. More than that, we like each other. We never gave up on one another. Never really." Peri's eyes shone, meaningfully. "Right?"

"I don't—"

A sound like hollow thunder heralded the opening of the bulkhead door. On the other side, stood the form of their shape-shifting seafowl.

"Tag, you're it," he muttered, passing the white paper bag to Mæstric as he walked past. She peered inside the white bag at the

small cubes inside. They looked porous and inedible, like a resin composite. The pretence of food. Her fist tightened around the bag in a calm, measured chime of panic.

Peri was overjoyed by his success, but she couldn't grasp the stillness of her companion. Not until he looked at her. *Through* her. Beady as they were, the dread soaked into their pitch-black centres made the familiar blue box appear as unsettling and alien to Peri and Frobisher as it likely did to the two Lonewatch. He had the dead-eyed stare of a youth roused from a night terror.

Peri waved in front of Frobisher's face. "Frobisher. Frobisher, talk to me. What'd you see?"

"Peri...?" He looked at her as though he'd noticed her for the first time. "Peri," he said with more conviction. "There's something *inside...*"

"I'll go see."

Frobisher grabbed her by the lapel. "Don't... go in there."

"Show me." She shook herself loose, glimpsing Mæstric. "C'mon, Frobisher. Come with me."

"No..." He was lost again. Eyes unseeing, grasping at the air where his friend had once been.

The datathumper rose wearily to her feet, lasgun in hand.

"It's a trick," she said.

Peri shrank back. "Mæstric?"

"You lied to us. To me... It's too small to have what we need..." She couldn't hide the disappointment in her voice. "Oh, and I liked you, too."

Peri shrank back from the gaping, toothless mouth of the muzzle. She was suddenly aware of just how far the situation had fled beyond her control. Her mind tricked her into an excuse that sounded feebler than it should. Fear made her nearly panic. "I swear, it's nothing to do with us. We didn't know. It's bigger than it looks!"

"I wish I could believe you."

"I..." She shied, eyes wide as flight outfought her instinct to fight. "I can prove it! I can prove we're not liars!"

Peri ran.

Mæstric trained her lasgun on the unseeing Frobisher, but the botanist sped on regardless towards the blue obelisk on the other end of the repair shop bayou. It was irrational, but then mistakes

often were. Peri needed answers, proof that her faith hadn't been misplaced and Mæstric needed to slow her down. Stop her before she could harm her and Dellevar.

A shot between the shoulder-blades would finish her.

Mæstric exhaled. Time lost all meaning in that moment. She was in a no-space all of her own which existed between each cycle of breath. Only the unsteady tremor in her arm registered in this sharp tunnel. She gave into the rhythm, allowed that warm, copper buzz to sink into her fingers. She waited for the light bulb crack of Peri's chest exploding, the shot tearing through her bone and organs.

Peri was still running. The gun remained unfired.

The blue-haired punk slapped her face. *What the hell are you doing?*

Peri wouldn't stop. She was deliberately putting them in danger. Mæstric was hesitating—for what? A traitor? Someone trying to abandon them there in the midst of nowhere? She'd used them. Mæstric had every reason to hate her—she wouldn't stop, just stop, just *stop*.

She pushed her blue hair from her face, the scope casting the world in a premature red. Peri looked back, her elfin face encircled with brown hair.

The sight only made her sprint all the harder.

Pain struck expertly at Mæstric's chest. She flinched back, the lasgun twitching in her palm as bile clung to the fundament of her throat. Her body convulsed. She was going to be sick.

Every other memory had passed into indistinctness. Nondescript and toothless. But Peri? Hers was as vibrant and unconquerable as the flames of a glass foundry. It would have been so easy a day or two ago to kill her. Just a stranger. Another shadowface. Now, she had substance. Her existence was an insoluble truth. To kill her would be to kill a—

Reality came back into focus for Frobisher. He saw Peri. He saw Mæstric. He saw the gun. *"Hold it, stop!"*

Mæstric realised her mistake as the trigger clicked into place. The lasgun winked proudly with an aureate glow. Shortly after, Frobisher's arm connected with the barrel. Then with the girl's shoulder. The power pack's megacity bloom faded impotently at one end of the open circuit. She'd forgotten to switch off the safety trigger.

Peri was alive.

Relief forced the whifferdill to the ground. “Golly.”

“Indeed,” rumbled Dellevar with a modicum of ease.

Her face downcast, Mæstric made a noise halfway between a grunt and a croak. Mangled verbs that sounded like, *Did I...?* but he couldn’t be sure.

That did it, that one fortunate mistake. Her internal balance tipped and Mæstric retched behind the mask as though she’d swallowed a putrefying reptile. The votary placed a hand on her shoulder, studying the retreating figure of the stranger. He was proud, in his way. His charge had learnt an important lesson and one that he himself had been incapable of teaching.

Dellevar’s eyes never left Mæstric. “I think that unpleasantness has been definitively resolved, Mysir Frobisher.”

“Really? Well, I might have to revise my answer...”

“Oh?” he sounded surprised. “Referring?”

“Our little powwow about intent versus actions. If I were a betting shifter, I’d think the wrong mook had hit the floor. You stood there and watched.”

“I had every faith that no harm would come to your friend,” he tugged at his jowl. “A wary eye and all that. Speaking frankly, do you think you’ll be able to convince her we don’t mean any further harm?”

Frobisher watched Mæstric’s mouth open and shut soundlessly for a few moments.

“I might,” he decided.

“*Mmm.*” Dellevar gestured, rakishly, towards the time-machine. “Our refuge lies in that?”

“Don’t be fooled. We’ve more than enough of what we need. Guarded now by something far...” the former private eye turned, his voice lowering as he cleared his throat. “...*far* scarier than you...”

The lantern at the TARDIS’s summit winked its halcyon glow at Peri. Beckoning her forward. A kind, rewarding warmth flooded her chest and up into her eyes at the sight.

As the time-traveller got closer, something about this lone blue column of safety had changed. And not for the better. Peri felt like a fox from the deep of woodland, scenting city bitumen for the first time. She realised it was a sound. Something that was pushing its

way through the audio receptors on her suit. Through the closed wavelength folds of her transceiver.

Nothing she knew could make such a terrible noise. Nothing she *knew*.

She could show them, right? Show them that she meant what she'd said. They were telling the truth. That had been more important to her than the world—even her own life. And yet, as she pushed through into her home, the concern seemed all so far away. The violation of sanctuary felt indescribable. Otherworldly even to the alien nature of this ship. It clung to her lungs trying to squeeze out every last morsel of terror. And there was that sound.

That sound, that sound, that sound...

That sound!

It was monstrous. Callous. A grotesque babble of inhuman noise so loud that even the familiar hum of the engines themselves seemed to shrink from it. It was like an auditory sandstorm. It blocked conscious thought from the mind and drove one to hungry animal despair. She wanted to flee, but the Ship—in its desperation—wouldn't let her.

Her own voice—her own voices—screamed inside her head as she drowned.

The delirious voice warned that she should not have returned/pleaded for help.

"I don't know how!"

Something else joined them both. (*Lie down,*) <*sweet, little thing.*>

No... Peri felt her vision blur, concrete reality turning into soft fantasy.

It was too late to run now, it knew she was there.

The thought curled like smoke. (*Lie down and die.*)

She wouldn't let it. She placed her hands over her ears trying to block them out. A futile gesture, but it helped her to concentrate. She unfastened the belt of stones around her waist and let them fall into the mire of her subconscious. Letters in a language she knew she could never comprehend sliced into her eyes like a psionic undertow. Dragging her down... down... down...

As she kicked and fought against it, it screamed. *She* screamed. Who...?

She opened her eyes, unaware she had closed them.

It was the TARDIS. The TARDIS was screaming.

The Proscenium ached with silence broken only by the rattling *click-clack* blush of a lasgun power pack charging up.

“An ideal little foxhole, wouldn’t you say?”

Turning her head, Vog Mur could see the Doctor holding up the offending weapon for the benefit of the Proscenium’s greater audience. Careful to demonstrate the indicator on the side. Presently a dull ruby.

His other hand was clenched, thumb extended and gently rotated it towards the floor in the classic *pollice verso* of a Roman Colosseum. “We have the advantage over you, I fear.”

Vog Mur examined the weapon more closely. A minute smirk tracing her lips. “You’re not a good liar, Doctor.”

“Oh?”

“That is a Musadas-R, deliberately chosen for its ability to fire in a vacuum. Puissant certainly, but whatever the conditions, its power pack can’t fire a body-penetrating shot in the red. The worst you’ll accomplish is a few gratuitous sparks. Then, you will die. It will be over.”

“Doctor...” te-Varriq hummed, worriedly.

“Is it a deception?” taunted the motley prisoner elect.

Vog Mur thumbed her eye as the rest of her vision cleared. Even bunkered under the battlefield, she could see the surgeon’s face. He had neither the calm of the Doctor, nor the relish of Castell. His expression was as simple as it was understandable. Plain, open-faced dread. Fear that could be scented by the darkest of animals. The thought drew her back to the distracting smell of the muck tossed onto her in the initial moves of his ambush. The rank odour of a cremating ants’ nest. The sickly glow. The surgeon’s fear ultimately proved justified.

It had come from the *Accomplishment* and there was only one substance that matched its description. She was covered in hæmofluid from one of the laboratories and while repulsive in and of itself, the chemical composition of the tainted samples made it a dangerous inflammable compound.

“Azovka and I examined your notes,” remarked the Doctor. “I believe you’re familiar with the chemical processes involved. If I press the firing stud most carefully like so...” As he mimed the action, she felt an involuntary tightening in her chest. “You’ll

vaporise like an effigy on Guy Fawkes Night.” He paused. “I do hope for an intelligent answer.”

Vog Mur was silent for a moment. It appeared that whatever happened next was ultimately down to her slow graces. “As a method of persuasion it’s crude... But, nevertheless, rather practical.”

“I’m glad you agree, Vog Mur.”

She held up the cuboctahedron. “Where did you find this?”

“I suspect you know. On a dead body in a mineral store.”

She made a light, agreeable sound. “You should have been killed.”

“We must all learn to accept life’s small disappointments, mustn’t we? Who was she?”

“A coward.”

The Doctor tilted his head. “A friend?”

She left the question unanswered, instead surveying the disappointing conduct of her troops. She looked down on him.

“No one was killed. A regrettable miscalculation on your part.”

“Inaction does not correlate to incapability.”

She smiled at that. “And should I not believe you?”

“I may yet surprise you.” His eyes flared with defiance. “Young biped to my immediate right, you’ll find my peripheral vision is excellent. Continue with your forward perambulations and you’ll be able to serve what little remains of your paymaster in a teacup.”

The heavy obeyed, but neglected his retreat.

Vog Mur lowered the cuboctahedron to below her eyeline. “I take it you wish to negotiate?” There was a twang of disapproval in her voice on that final word.

“I’m one of many. The foremost and most vocal with her grievances is Nonpareil Castell—” Harshness entered his voice.

“*Step away, now!*”

The Hylonomeide’s eyes met with the presence beneath the masked soldier. He halted his advance. There was perhaps a certain bravery, perhaps even gallantry worth commending in his attempted deception. However, not only was it dangerous, it would ultimately be unnecessary. They had all they required there to win back their advantage. All they needed to do now was wait. Wait and speak.

“I believe the expression in this situation, Nonpareil, would be... ‘Tell her your demands?’” he rubbed his bandaged hand against his throat “Get brave.”

Vog Mur had an evenly delivered counteroffer. “Get dead.”

Strange and otherworldly symbols, glyphs in a language that no one could readily identify, steamed and broiled through every screen in the TARDIS console room. A clawing stream of consciousness feeding into every diode, every mechanism the Ship could muster.

Holding her palms over her ears didn't seem to make much of a difference for Peri, nor Mæstric, Dellevar or Frobisher who had begun searching the console.

A small, inexplicable nudge as if from a voice in the æther told Frobisher to press and hold one of the green studs on the panel closest to him. Sounded like the Doctor's voice. Clear as a singing nightingale in his head.

He obeyed. The sound went from a cacophonous flood to a more manageable clanger. There was an absence now. The Ship lacked her expected warmth. Secure, they might have been, but it didn't feel safe.

Peri, at least, could hear herself think again. “Thank goodness.”

Dellevar removed his rebreather. “What *made* that?”

Frobisher had the answer, he didn't quite know why. “That thing outside's been squawking at the TARDIS. Hanging an ear out and rifling through the mainframe for information.”

“What information?” asked Mæstric, tapping her lobe.

“Well, what would you look for in an information system?”

“What's going on outside.”

“Is there any way to find out what it's seen?” inquired Dellevar.

“I can try,” answered Frobisher, he struck his flipper against a control and frowned.

The gentle nudge vanished into his subconscious and the idea became adopted as his own. Small red squares faded and glimmered at him from the ship's orientators as he stood in quiet puzzlement. Had he known, he would have probably have characterised the TARDIS's reaction as ‘bemused’.

“What was I doing...?” he muttered.

Peri addressed their two weary guests. “Wait here.”

Crossing to the opposing side of the room, she leaned open the interior door with a shoulder, craning her head up and down to measure the distance of the main corridor. At its far end was a pair of twinned swing doors leading to the galley, illuminated by the

ringlets of light glittering from the food dispenser that sat squat, like some bantam Trafalgar column.

“We’ve only power for one trip, two at the most,” he called to her.

“Anything else?” she asked.

“Can’t tell.”

Frobisher leant closer to the control console, inexpertly prodding its instruments. He muttered to himself snatches of words.

“Transceiver’s dead... Wait a minute, no, there’s a signal. Faint through all that static, but it’s there. It’s a voice. Indistinct, though. Niminy-piminy and kind of crisp, like a GBC telecaster... News report?”

Peri closed her eyes and let the feeling of relief soak into her pores.

Mæstric opened her mouth to speak, before her eyes fell shamefully to the floor. A few glorious minutes passed in quiet serenity before the botanist realised that their two visitors were still standing there.

Patiently waiting.

“Sorry. It’s through here.” She cricked her head towards the interior door. “Down at the end of the corridor. I’d better check with Frobisher. I’ll leave the door here open and catch up.”

“We will wait for you here,” answered Dellevar.

Peri rubbed the back of her neck.

“Alright,” she said and crossed over back to the console.

There, Frobisher looked uncharacteristically maudlin. He tapped away at controls here and there as if scrawling up an invoice on a mechanical typewriter. He seemed tense.

“Alright,” Peri tapped her fingers against the console. “Spill.”

Frobisher didn’t look up. “I spent three weeks living in a doghouse tracking down a lost puppy adopted by sadrakists, until I realised it was the wrong kennel. Client gave me hell for that one.”

“I’m not a trained dolphin, Frobisher. Don’t dodge. You’re setting new travelordinates. Where? Why?”

“I’ve got to get to Trailblazer Prime,” a stud pressed here, “where we were originally heading before we got caught up in this mess.” A switch flicked there. “I told you, we’ve got to warn them that there’s trouble brewing out here in Natasia Tor. It might even stop a war.”

“Nuh-uh.”

“They have a right to know.”

“No way,” she insisted. “The Doctor needs us now more than ever. We’ve got to find him, he’ll be hurt. He might even know how to get that bomb back.”

“We’re not even certain that he’s still alive.”

“N-No,” Peri paused, uncertainly. She shook her head. “But there’s still every chance. He’s come back from much worse than this. I won’t abandon him.”

“I won’t abandon them either. We’ve our own crisis, perp, we need to bring them in on this. We get to Trailblazer and we’ll have all the power we need.”

“What about the forcewall?”

“We got in, we can get out.”

They both stood on either side of the control console, the scanner behind him and the doors behind her.

“I’m going to hit the dematerialisation switch,” said Frobisher, carefully. “Don’t try and stop me. It’s not personal, alright? Just the right thing to do.”

“You’re serious?” Peri clenched her fist behind her back.

The gumshoe tensed, then relaxed. “No. No, guess I’m not serious.”

Her mouth quirked with self-admonishment, she turned away. “Look... I’m sorry.”

“For what? Hey, look, you’ve seen worlds shrug and civilisations fall, right? If it were your backyard, wouldn’t you want to do the same thing I’m doing, perp?”

“Yeah, I suppose so,” she leant against the console and sighed. “What am I talking about? I have.”

“We can search for the Doctor’s brain pattern with the scanner,” Frobisher offered, pitching at a blue stud on the console.

“Do that.”

“Already started.”

“You going to wait here?”

“I—*ab*—need to think,” he seemed bashful. “That alright?”

“Yeah, sure.” Her eyes flicked down to the console. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“Ha-ha.”

She turned back to address their two visitors, but Mæstric had already left. Dellevar was intently tracking her movements from the

doorway, keeping it open with his upper right arm. Either she'd gone ahead to see if the coast was clear or more likely, she had grown impatient and decided to strike out on her own.

"We will hurry? This is not a moment I would enjoy missing," said Dellevar.

Peri nodded amenably, "Sure."

Vog Mur took Castell's conditions seriously enough.

"That is all?" she asked.

"All," Castell repeated.

"Succinct."

"And hardly unreasonable, you would agree?" added the Doctor.

Vog Mur shook her head. "Unfortunately, I cannot acquiesce."

"Oh?" The Doctor tutted. "She told me about the false broadcast to CIDA. You've been skirting the issue, but at the least, you would have the recorded holotapes. Data records that will still have the artefact of wear left by most methods of tampering."

The young girl, Azovka, hummed in agreement.

She found her eyes meeting unexpectedly with Sangfroid's halfway across the room. A wheedling moment of recognition from him. He forced himself to look away from her to the digicorder deck where the recordings were stored.

"They're over there," Azovka piped.

Sangfroid shoulders hunched forward. The iron chain of shame knotting in his stomach. She had done him no favours. She regretted that, but... There was something in his eyes that she recognised. Shackles came in all shapes and creeds.

He had the demeanour of someone whose will had been beaten to clinker. His very nature—good or ill—crushed beneath the steel caps of another. He'd been cowed and exploited into believing that he wanted to be here.

"You will have to reach them first," warned Vog Mur with the imp-like scuff of a hoof. "And you have no proof you'll carry out your will. Prove to me you're capable of killing."

"Why?" the Doctor snapped.

"Before I came here, I spent decades in isolation. Tethered to an abraded chunk of debris... Watching the starline for any signs of life... I don't appreciate uncertainties and you, Doctor, seem to do nothing but provoke them. Worse, you promote the suffocating

bloat of life. You've no power here, your threats are meaningless." Her voice rose to meet the waiting receptors of the Ordoheed. "He's l—"

"I've discovered who you are, Vog Mur."

Vog Mur's eyes swelled. "The Tyrikan—"

"No, not the Tyrikan lie. The truth."

The word shattered in her throat. Breached consonants heaving like so much dashed glass. "You can't possibly know..."

His eyes glided to each of his three fellow prisoners. "A little trust and cooperation go a long way. You're a CIDA research scientist from Trailblazer Prime. The very place you attacked not so long ago. You have a comparatively small expedition. Well-worn fighters. Dedicated, but fatigued."

"What else do you know?" her fingers gently crawled across the table to the cuboctahedron as he answered.

"A secret to hold my own, I believe," he deflected. "You have opened a door thought long closed and shunted a rocket through it, so you will help us close it. Permanently."

"By taking me to the authorities? You haven't the ability."

"No, but you may."

(Azovka shifted, moving towards Vog Mur and the mushroom shape of the Corbo Plumecities.)

"Assuming that you had a method of transportation at your disposal, which incidentally you don't, you'd cross open space in the middle of a war? You've demonstrated a willingness to throw away your own life, but these others here? I don't think you'll risk them."

(The girl continued from cover-to-cover, each groundpounder within firing range carefully measuring her movements. She scratched absently at her neck.)

"You're quite correct," admitted the Doctor, "however it wasn't the Affiliation I was thinking of."

Vog Mur played dumb. "To whom, then?"

"The ultimate authority of this world. The Central Mentality. I was thinking it was time we met face-to-face in earnest." He looked to gesture with the lasgun, thought on it, and decided instead to point with his free hand. "You and your chief technical specialist will unlock the secure sections of your space vessel and pilot us directly to the focal point programmed in that cuboctahedron."

The Naran flicked her safety pin into Vog Mur's hand and jumped forward, knocking the object from the Hylonomeide's grasp into her own among a circus of falling accoutrements. Her body was interposed with that of her jailer. If anyone fired, the shot would pass straight through her—or around her if she was quick enough—and into their sponsor.

“Sorry,” said Azovka, reflexively.

Vog Mur flexed her hand, letting the pin drop from the dot of blood on her knuckle.

She spoke as if Azovka weren't even there. “Straightforward, Doctor, but you're faced immediately with two complications.”

“Just two?” he asked.

“Firstly, you'd have to cross the security zone to reach the monorail, which can only be operated by those with the necessary codes. Something I am unwilling to give you. Should you instead choose to use my ship, you'll expose this section to the vacuum of space with our departure. Killing everyone here.”

Castell's breathing shallowed, her face slowly reddening with strain.

“That it would,” the Doctor briefly conceded. “However, you are deliberately overlooking the ship's carrydarts, aren't you?”

Vog Mur folded her arms with a slow and half-grudging nod of acceptance. He was an unfortunately clever man. “You seem to have this all reconciled. It's a pity really.”

“You'd have preferred me ignorant?”

She tilted her head, eyes narrowed. *Well, obviously.*

Peri picked up the key knocked to the floor of the TARDIS corridor and replaced it back in the lock. Inside, next to the door, sat a Tiffany floor lamp with a box kite shade. A small measure of antiquity to offset the veritable wall of appliances and gadgetry.

What outside may have first appeared a product of mishap, turned into the first inkling of a frenzy.

Forgoing the food dispenser, Mæstric had ripped open compartments C2 through C7, tearing open boxes, containers and much more besides in a delirium. Crackers and berries gummed her soles. Sachets puffed with water now sagged empty. Short, sharp breaths. Croaking like a reptile.

Peri crossed to her, kneeling down in her starsuit and saw her face. Eyes thin slits, mouth sack-like, she was laughing. Crying. Her body shook with joy. True joy, the kind that made a mockery of diamonds or gold.

To the girl on the floor, all this food—everything they took for granted, really—seemed the richest aspiration of all.

“You’ll get sick,” said Peri. “Eating all of that at once.”

Mæstric seemed dazed. “You didn’t lie...”

“No, no, I didn’t,” she smiled.

The young girl looked at herself. Food ran like dried clay and engine grease down her front from her mouth, a Monet curtain vibrant with proteins and carbohydrates. In some small way, it broke her from the haze of emotion.

“Listen, I’m not good at...” she snuffled, her eyes still red with tears. She choked out a laugh. “By my eyes, how can you *tell*? You... Really do care, don’t you?”

“Guess I do.” Peri decided that wasn’t good enough. She rubbed Mæstric’s back in a circular motion, something her Mom always did with her when she got upset. “There are people out there that do, y’know? There are always people who care. Nobody’s insignificant.”

The datathumper looked expectantly to the votary. “Aren’t you going to eat something?”

Peri did the same. She could see his attention wasn’t focussed at them, but instead *through* them. Something was on his mind. Something big.

“Go on,” Peri encouraged. “Try.”

Dellevar searched the contents of the counter and floor.

“What do you suggest?” he asked.

It was like a mess of toys in a child’s playroom. Among the patchwork, she found a cracked plate of smoked ham and salami, two cobs of purple corn, deep-fried potatoes that had imploded, and mashed beans from an overturned Tupperware container.

Eventually, she was able to offer him two unblemished slices of toast in a rack by her ankle. “Here. Eat.”

“Could you perhaps instead find a carry-bag for it?” he asked.

Her mouth stuffed with food, Mæstric nearly choked on the word. “*Carrm-blayg*? What... *Yeugh*... You can’t go back out there.”

“I must.” That look again. The one of waves crashing against the shore. “That autobomb was my responsibility to carry. It’s now mine to retrieve it.”

Frobisher entered from the outside corridor. He looked rather reserved. Sullen. “Doing it on your own is a good way to get skived, though I guess you know that.”

“Who said he was going alone?” protested Mæstric.

Peri crossed her arms and addressed Frobisher. “Thought you were searching for the Doctor?”

“I got distracted, perp...” he said slowly, careful to temper his wording. “I’ve tapped into a public broadcast from GBC. The Affiliation is at war with the Tyrikans in this sector.”

Mæstric looked panicked. “*What?* We’re at war?”

“As of when?” asked Dellevar, urgently.

“As of when one of their interceptor squadrons returned from here in Natasia Tor,” he said.

Peri sewed her eyebrow. “That’s too much of a coincidence not to mean something.”

“Y’think?” philosophised Frobisher.

Dellevar’s face was thoughtful, if a little stern. He certainly wasn’t disagreeing.

“I’ve got friends at CIDA,” insisted the penguin. “Scientists and engineers, they’re supposed to deal with apocalypse scenarios like this lost world here. I can’t contact them on the transceiver, so we’ve got to go meet them in person.”

“Looks as though you’re the best shot we have at making sure the Doctor is alright, Dellevar,” said Peri.

“Why trust us then, Mydame Peri?” It was an earnest question. “We’re the enemy.”

“As of yesterday.”

“Never mind that we’re not actually Affiliation,” added Frobisher.

“There is one thing that still concerns me...” rumbled Dellevar.

The detective looked up. “Yes?”

“How did these Tyrikan commandos find the MEV so quickly?”

“They were listening in on our waveband,” clarified Mæstric.

Peri’s gaze flitted between the three. “Where would they get access to that frequency?”

“Azovka’s party,” the votary realised.

“The girl he tried to help... Aw, nuts...” Frobisher put a flipper to his head. “The Doc’s with them. The bomb and he will be in the same place.”

STAGE 16: “Impasse”

The shoulders of Castell’s uniform grew heavy.

The repressed returned. Memories of home on Trailblazer Prime. She’d blotted out all but the most innocuous. It would be secondnoon about now. Her children adored those awful ice pouches from the Spacer couple in the kiosk. It wasn’t a meal until someone nearly choked, but any argument contrariwise only brought disappointment and sulking.

Guilt blackened her thoughts. She should be with them.

“Records, *now!*” she barked.

“*Here!*” Sangfroid frothed like baking powder. “They’re here!”

Azovka countered, “Leave him alone!”

Vog Mur sensed an opening. “Dissension?”

“Common decency,” Azovka rebutted.

Castell could already feel her breathing begin to shallow. They were hanging onto this situation by their fingernails, but they were already beginning to lose what little control that afforded them left. She could scent it in the air.

Another opportunistic lurch from one of the stalking heavies strengthened Castell’s worries. “*Stay there!*”

If she died, her children would have to live without their mother.

How much longer could they maintain this ramble of a tightrope?

Solta spoke up from his position in the Proscenium. “What about us? My people? The Tyrikan Krata will know nothing of this, they’re too preoccupied with trying to control the borderworld wildfires, and I can’t go to the press with hearsay. They’ll never believe me.”

Sangfroid unfolded his hands, apologetically. “There is only one copy, te-Varrig.”

“Make another, there’s a good chap,” soothed the Doctor.

“I can’t...” Sangfroid choked.

Vog Mur was staring at him, waiting.

“I—”

“We don’t have time for this. Listen, I know what it was-will be like. To be collared and chained.” Azovka held up her wrists as if they were manacled, surprised by the volume of her own voice.

“The cold metal digging into your skin, the oppressive feeling of hunger. I-I *know* how it feels to be a slave to others.”

Sangfroid was paralysed. There was something to Azovka’s eyes, some power he couldn’t rightly identify. Hypnotic, almost. Castell understood. It’d been so long since another living being had expressed empathy to him that he mistook it for something ulterior. To him, it was only some ability, some sway that pushed him away from Vog Mur’s influence.

He shivered, the sensation made him ill and he recoiled from her.

A look of hurt brushed over Azovka’s face.

“The records, my good fellow,” insisted the Doctor. “Sooner rather than later.”

Vog Mur nodded her eyes at the compiler.

“It will...” His voice trailed away with a sigh.

There was no use arguing. He began spooling another record into the dictatape recorder. He watched his swelling hands work, delicately and deliberately, on a task performed countless times before.

Not too far from his position, Azovka sneezed and almost choked on it.

She knew now. It wasn’t fear, but something else.

“I can’t...” The sound of her half-swallow was awful. “C-Can anyone else feel that?”

“Yes.” The Doctor rubbed a hand against the torque on his jugular. “A certain tightness of the hearts. Shuddering density to the blood as it rushes to meet the brain. Commonly symptomatic of...” His hand fell away from the invisible noose. Eyes driven wide by an alarming realisation.

“Oxygen deprivation.” Castell came to the same conclusion. “They’re going to choke us.”

Vog Mur smiled. “What an enemy, to talk itself to death.”

Sangfroid jolted forward at Azovka as though he were a tree felled in an autumn forest. His smile was excruciating to witness. Facial muscles twisted and turned unaware of which way to really pull. “You still have a chance. Return to the cells aboard the *Accomplishment* a-and you’ll live. Please! She’ll let you live.”

Panic sunk into Azovka’s throat. “By my eyes, you’re begging. Begging for *us*.”

“He’s right. No further harm will come to you, if you...” Vog Mur sought the correct word. “Relent.”

Castell saw the Doctor trying to crawl out from behind the chair.

If he could only get across the floor to that control box of hers.

The crack of an automatic weapon galvanised him to the petrified roe sculpture. The sponge-like surface hugged at his back. His teeth chilled under a sharp intake of breath.

The Doctor cursed himself, inwardly, for his lack of speed.

“No one knows we’re here,” reminded Vog Mur. “No one is coming to help.”

“Fortunate then that I am my own being...” he muttered.

“I’m not going to die here...” growled Castell. “I... *won’t* die here!”

Solta snared her collar with a hiss. “Castell, wait!”

“Let me go!”

Azovka paled, beginning to sway on the spot.

“Surrender,” commanded Vog Mur, plainly.

The Doctor’s brow narrowed. “The idea seems rather uncouth in the present moment.”

“You have little choice,” she extended a leisurely arm towards the airtight militaria—holding the deedbox to her chest like a bouquet of flowers—and settled in. Her eyes glittered with an unforgiving glory. “It will take longer for that tape to copy than for the oxygen to remain. Stay, by all means. I’m curious to see how long each of you has left.”

Aboard the TARDIS, Frobisher gave the scanner swivel control one final, stern twist. In an alcove, not too far from the droop of a refuelling pump, was a familiar sweeping sheen.

“You found a monorail terminal.” Dellevar pulled the carry-bag up around his shoulders.

“Had to be one, ace,” said Frobisher. “You’re sure about this?”

“It is not everyday we’re given the opportunity to see Dayaalu,” he puffed a half-syllable of mirth. “She will understand.”

“Understand what?” The question came from Peri, strolling back into the console room with a damp green towel against her face.

Frobisher leaned down from the console, trying to look casual.

“How are you feeling?”

“Oh, you know,” she dumped her starsuit on the nearby cocktail table. “Nothing like a warm shower after a cold day in hell. How’s the power?”

“Should be enough to get us there. We’ll jump through normal space this jaunt round. Safer. It’s calculating the flight path now.”

She tweaked an ear. “You know what the irony is?”

“The longer the jump, the more accurate landing?”

“You got that spiel from the Doctor, too, huh?”

“He’s explained it once or twice. If our luck holds, we might be able to hit the bullseye and rock up to the Institute no sweat.”

Her fingernails fumbled through her knotted perm. “It’d be nice for the TARDIS to be reliable this—*Oop!*”

A brown hairbrush slipped from one of the folds in her towel, its clatter thin against the ground.

Mæstric awoke in an ungainly sprawl on the egg-chair in the far corner of the room.

“Sorry,” said Peri.

Mæstric was too groggy to notice. With an Alsatian yawn, she pulled a damp towel off her face and swung her legs off the foregathered cocktail table before her. “All set? Are we moving on then?”

“Myself, yes.” Dellevar squared his body to her. “Not you.”

The remark fell like a missile against the girl.

“Tyliar’s dead. Dead and cold. Killing yourself won’t change that,” she protested.

He stared knife-like at her with concern.

She bit her lip. “That’s not... *sudar*, what I mean is—This isn’t fair, springing this on me as I’ve woken—”

He placed a hand on Mæstric’s shoulder—the single-most trusting gesture he could afford—and said, “I have no such intention of perishing in this place, but there is still my duty to complete. You wished for an out, this is it.” He gently lowered his head, she turned away. “You will not refuse it.”

Her mouth twitched. “Can’t I shout? Scream? Tell you not to go?”

“For as long as you’ve known me, would that work?” he asked, gently.

“No...” she laughed with a bittersweet futility. “Dammit, no, it wouldn’t.”

“May I have the destructor key?”

The datathumper pulled it from her pocket. She held it out, trying not to let her hand shake. She thought of putting it down on the table before her, but instead, she placed it directly in the centre of Dellevar’s palm. She closed his fingers and gripped his wrist tight, a tear stinging her right eye.

“Just so,” he nodded understandingly, wiping it away with a fatherly thumb. He turned his attention back to Peri and Frobisher. “When I escape, I will find some way to contact you on Trailblazer Prime.”

“We’ll come to collect you,” said Peri.

“You can count on us, Del,” added Frobisher.

Dellevar turned to leave, but had one final modicum of comfort for Mæstric. After this, he would likely never see her again as she was now, so the greatest secret had to be the last. It was important to him that she knew.

“Father Sky laughs,” he said. “Not at us, but with us. Farewell, Mydame Mæstric. For now.”

“For now,” she repeated, hopefully.

And, then he was gone.

“You alright?” Peri asked Mæstric.

“No,” she answered, perhaps a bit more acceptingly than she had expected. “But that’s alright.”

“I hope he lives.”

“Me, too,” Mæstric closed her eyes, pinching the bridge of her nose. “*Damn it...*”

Peri nodded. Her eyes fell distractedly on the cubist mosaic of the orientators. With its initial calculations complete, complex thought-circuitry was now working towards the collective intent of its occupants. “How long until the flight computer’s calculated the planet’s position?”

Frobisher considered the VDU. “Eight more minutes. Maybe less.”

“Is there any way to lock those doors?” asked Mæstric, warily.

Peri turned. “Why?”

“Just a feeling... Probably nothing, but y’know...”

“I’ll do it,” said Frobisher.

Peri crossed her arms. “I should go with him.”

“You have that feeling too?” said Mæstric.

“Need you here for the TARDIS, perp,” he turned his back to the open doors. “Besides, I don’t think—”

Frobisher was flung back by an explosion.

At first, he found the kick was painless, the pewter-grey ceiling above sliding down before his face like a carnival mask. It all seemed unreal. Then, his beak connected sharply with the floor in a clap that sent his earholes ringing. Pain swiftly re-established his connection to reality.

What had hit him? A volatiser. Near enough to almost kill.

Where? Outside.

He caught a glimpse of Peri attempting to throw herself across the console towards the door control.

Her hairbrush slipped under her foot from the detonation. The ground beneath her suddenly became suddenly frictionless. She fell beneath the console.

For Frobisher, on his back, he had a direct line of sight with the exterior doors. The door jamb, between them and the ceiling, was filled with the same beryl green armour of the figure that had revealed the whifferdill to be an impostor on the MEV.

The Ordoheed commander walked across the ceiling of the TARDIS with impunity. He raised his weapon. The room shrieked with the grasshopper clink of his cannon.

On the floor, Peri swept Mæstric’s legs out from beneath her with a kick.

An act which promptly saved her life.

The datathumper swiftly returned the courtesy. Using the console as cover, the bursts from Mæstric’s Avaritia made the commander hesitate.

Mæstric fired, missed and fired again. A direct hit. He stumbled back. She kept firing, would keep firing, until the lasgun’s power pack was exhausted.

Under that covering fire, Peri thudded whatever control on the console was in reach above her.

Cheep-whirdeep-whuum...!

A melanised smog began to pour from around the gaps in the console. The exterior doors closed. The control column began to move. The console room vibrated.

The Ordoheed commander dropped from the ceiling with his men.

“Frobisher, Mæstric, c’mon!” Peri shouted, ushering them towards the interior door.

She, Frobisher and Mæstric threw themselves into the TARDIS corridor, lunging towards the doorframe. The sound of weapons fire stopped. Replaced by the persistent thudding of bodies, trying to force their way in from the console room.

Peri slammed it. “Frobisher, help us get the door!”

“Trying! This old jalopy’s hitching like crazy!” he squawked.

The whifferdill transmogrified into what Peri could only describe as a salmon pink teddy bear with the face of an angler. It shimmered and writhed in a way that left his fellows uncomfortable. His features were rounding into crude plasticine shapes. Detail and texture lost to a cue ball sheen.

“I’m losing it!” he shouted.

Peri was appalled. “You can’t be—*Now?*”

“Yes, now! *Now!*” The whifferdill slipped and fumbled. “What’d you press on the console?”

“*Something!*” Peri forced her full weight up onto the doorframe.

“*Rgh*, some switches above me. Felt like a couple of the square red keys. Did you see?” Her feet slued awkwardly across the shuddering floor. “*Frobisher?*”

“No! Mæstric? *Mæstric!*”

“Eyes away, I’m thinking... It was...” The datathumper struggled. Against the door and to remember. “It was something on the middle-right panel, as you enter from outside! Did you guys see Dellevar? Did he make it?”

“Little chance of finding out,” answered Frobisher. “State of temporal grace is in effect.”

“What does that mean?”

“It’s a safety measure. Kind of remote trip switch. Jams guns, but it means we’re in flight—”

Peri cut through. “*I can’t hold it!*”

The three bodies were flung back against the wall.

Charnel smoke erupted from the doorway like an overstoked chimney.

Mæstric pulled the two travellers clear. Her early life as a sweep had trained her for such situations. She navigated towards the corridor’s nearest doors on her left by touch alone.

The first was cold against her hands. Locked. Key missing. Next? Warm. The handle was loose. She kicked it open with the jack of her boot and the three stumbled through.

Peri swung it closed behind them.

They paused to catch their breath.

The groundpounders, living up to their moniker, marched from the smoking console room through the corridor outside into the wider TARDIS.

Led by Mæstric, the trio crossed over to the opposite side of the empty corridor. Opening the opposite door a fraction of an inch, Peri could see they had emerged onto the other end of the main corridor in a loop.

Mæstric felt a sharp pain in her head. “That’s not... possible...”

“Later!” Peri grabbed her. “*Move it!*”

The trio re-entered under the haze.

“How do you magnetise the door?” asked Mæstric.

“Small stud in the crook of the handle,” instructed Frobisher.

The small collection of furniture sat unnoticed beside the doorway.

The whifferdill grabbed the egg-chair and forced it under the door, jamming its silver handle.

The door locked, Peri and Mæstric assisted.

The cocktail table slid clumsily beneath it in a wedge forming a complex barricade.

Mæstric gave the assemblage a final kick to ensure its sturdiness. “That should do it.”

Something thudded, angrily, against the outside of the door in return.

“Whoa!” She stepped back.

The stocks of rifles struck and scraped like the heaviest of mauls. Table adornments shook, surprised, but the table itself remained steadfast.

Frobisher gently eased his weight off it. “That should do it for a while. Until the power leeches out.”

“Then what?”

A snarl of anger came from behind them.

Peri tried to undo the carnage she had wrought. Moving from section to section, her eyes traced the white-hot controls. Electrical

current looped in blue zigs. It had the look of a diving bell about to collapse.

“Maybe it was this... Or... this...?”

Her wounded arm elbowed what she believed to have been the source. Sparks spat her away.

“Easy!” Mæstric pulled her clear.

Peri clutched at her sleeve. “I’m alright...”

“At least the juddering stopped,” said Frobisher.

“Yeah...” The botanist’s eyes swung back and forth. She held her breath. “It’s all stopped. Listen.”

With all force brought to bear, Kuron gave the entry door a final kick.

It held fast.

The commander pointed to each of his militaria in turn. “Check for munitions. Check for explosives. Check for power packs. They’ve activated a dampening field that is preventing high-energy weapons from discharging, but the same may not be true for kinetic attacks. Once we have an answer, one that we can apply to our strategies, we can begin our infiltration. Be aware of conventional and unconventional means of defence. Assume that we no longer have the element of surprise.”

The enemy’s first instinct would have been to blockade the door from the other side and lockdown what sections of the base they could.

That said, they were a diminished opposition. Their reduced numbers and damaged equipment would work in the Ordoheed’s favour. That much was certain.

The damage done to the control terminal in the transfer room may have reduced their resources even further, but to rely solely on that notion was a foolish assumption.

A caged animal was sport. A wounded animal was dangerous.

The following period would determine if the Lonewatch were one or the other.

“In either case,” Kuron added aloud. “Accept no quarter.”

If the territory here would not be theirs, it would belong to no one.

As the TARDIS's air conditioning systems purged the fumes from the console room, the extent of the damage became disturbingly obvious.

"Wrecked!" Peri sucked in a breath, trying to calm herself. "Oh, the whole thing's wrecked..."

"I might be able to do something with the console," Mæstric slung her Mobatal to the floor and began pawing at the roundels on the wall. "Where's a jack?"

"I don't think the technology's compatible," Frobisher rubbed his neck. "Should be alright. The auto-repair systems should kick in soon."

"*Should.*" Peri's fingers clenched tight against her palm. "The TARDIS *should* fix itself, you *should* be able to change, we *should* be out of danger. But we're not."

"It's my fault, perp," he confessed, earnestly. "I wasn't fast enough."

"And I was too fast, I didn't think." The botanist's mind blazed with all manner of anxieties. "Do you think they've found one of the other console rooms yet?"

Frobisher couldn't answer her.

Peri's eyes were caught by the column. "It's sinking. Why—Why is it sinking?"

"Maybe it's—" He cut himself off.

Both expected the whine of a strangling gearbox. Instead, there was a thud, followed by a hissing chime.

"Peri," said the whifferdill. "We've materialised..."

One of the roundels popped open with an equally pneumatic hiss.

"That's it. That's what I'm looking for." Mæstric began stringing her cord between the deck and the chromium-plate alcove within it. "What's that noise mean?"

"We've landed," answered Peri.

"That's good, right?"

Frobisher pointed. "We never closed the scanner. Look."

Distorted by their passage from the Weapon, it took awhile for the image to focus.

"Oh, no..." Frobisher muttered.

There was no sleek Institute hallway, no overwhelming metropolitan spires, not even a violet-red marble as viewed from orbit.

Just the insurmountable vastness of outer space. Blue, yellow and green satellites glittered as bright as any cut diamond, mocking them through their window into the beyond. Some would be stars, others planets and a few phenomena unknown to sciences of either the 20th or 82nd-centuries.

As agonisingly beautiful as any galactic wilderness.

“That’s...” the whifferdill breathed.

“Nowhere near where we need to be,” Mæstric stood.

“How long until they figure out they can use their guns?” asked Peri.

Death flashed from behind the door, splatting in vicious, eye-searing moulding. A staccato neon frame.

The central column heaved, sinking until it nestled stagnantly in its silo. Yellow and beige lights faded like a snuffed candle. The last remnants of the Ship’s flight power were now gone. Its departure heralded only by the acrid stink of an electrical fire.

Frobisher slumped forward, his expression grim. “That’s it. We’re dead.”

Concentrate your attention, Doctor, they need you... Breathe in... Hold... And out...

The importance of the inner eye could not be understated when it comes to performing the Tibetan *anapanasati* meditation.

Similar to the fisheye lens on a photographic camera, the meditation technique offered a foreshortened view of the mind’s immediate contents. It allowed the Doctor to distract the lower impulses of his hypothalamus away from the interstellar holocaust yet to spark and focus on a simple, unburdened task—the assembly of a foxhole transceiver set.

Concentrate and breathe... In...

He hadn’t tried to construct such an antiquated machine since the 20th-century. It was proving difficult. He was applying the finishing touches to it now.

And out... Yes, just so. In...

The Doctor scooped up Azovka’s *vaishali* from the floor, binding it in the gutted remnants of a monitor to form a solenoid. The speaker rested neatly on his ankle like a youth at Christmas. Stripping out one of the diodes, he reached as far as he could from his position on the floor and jammed the ground wire into the

arcing dale of the conveyor belt, using the celestite fillings in his teeth as the antenna for the remaining ground wire. He held it together between his gun-arm—what an unpleasant noun—and bandaged hand.

A liquorice cat's cradle whose eel-like ebb slithered about his fingers...

In—Breathe! Concentrate!

Fortunately, the components available to him were a bit more sophisticated than those had been in Anzio that time. Where on Earth he would only have hit the Axis propaganda machine in Rome, the several centuries of development since then would allow him a far greater reach. The electro-acoustic vocoder would snatch up his phonations and transmit them through whatever relay system would take him into outer space.

Now, if only he could rally enough oxygen to his throat to speak.

He was fighting his own autonomic responses. It would be ironic if the reflexes evolved to protect him ultimately proved his demise.

His sweat froze to his scalp, his hands felt so alien to him. They were as blue as the sea... The deep sea... deep... blue...

In! In! Concentrate or they die, Doctor! In!

He laboured each squirt of air through his seizing trachea. It didn't matter where the signal went, so long as it fled beyond the satellite. His lips were turning a darker shade of regal violet.

“Enemy... combatant! Enemy combatant in Natasia Tor! Allied vessel in distress! Allied vessel in... *distress...!*”

No response.

Not enough power!

It wouldn't reach past the blanket of noise generated by the satellite's own systems. Not unless...

He aimed his lasgun at the console nearby. There was a sound like a drum punctured with a brick. The gridded viscera of the block spilt out before him. Chancing the gap between the chair and its neighbour, he pounced through the narrow margin, still carrying the components of his transceiver.

Knuckles burning, he punched open the tiger stripes of marble, flouting the splash of white-veined chalk dust and orange roe against his face. The wires were spliced into the ganglia braid of fibrous-optic cabling with ruddy fingertips.

He could hear Azovka providing covering fire. A blast intended for her, reduced one of the cherubim's bloated lightpails to a fuming abstract sculpture. Pockmarks like calean-pipe burns tangoed around her as she returned the act in kind.

The groundpounders had already begun to close in—the standoff was ended, but if he could get enough power to transmit.

“Nonaligned vessel in distress! Can anyone hear me?”

The crown of darkness swirling around his vision seemed to skitter and chirp alongside the black static coming through the speaker. There was a slipperiness to his muscle control. Movements seemed to happen long following the initial impulse from the brain.

An embossed purple elevation dislodged from the table and spun at Azovka, who was forced to catch it with the front of her arm before it met with her eyeline. It softened beneath her stepthreader fingers, allowing her to chuck it back in mudblots.

“*Unidentified craft, this is hospiceship Death's Rival of the Tyrikan Custodial Argosy. What is your present situation?*”

The Doctor's hearts leapt into his throat. At last! Against all expectation, perhaps even against established protocol, his respondent had deemed his cry into the wilderness a worthy endeavour. Ha! All the more laudable given they were almost certainly to be from one of the soon-to-be warring fleets. Sodden with pips, it crackled as if downed in the pouring rain. “*Say again, this is Death's Rival responding to your distress call.*”

“*Death's Rival, lock in on our travelordinates,*” he calculated the diction of each word with the utmost care. “Medical assistance urgent! Hostile hijack of secret armament. Approach with cauti—”

He rolled out from a pot-shot taken at what must have been his newly visible skull. The ground wire was ripped from its moorings by the sudden spasm of activity and the whole varicoloured apparatus went up in a puff of spent electrons.

Dashing out behind his attacker, he saw Vog Mur's eyes flare with a daring question—*What have you done?*

He couldn't resist. Pocketing the transceiver's remains and Azovka's *vaishali*, he declared triumphantly, “Parasitised the parasite. No more lies, Vog Mur!”

“Him! *Now!*”

“Solta! The airlock door, man!”

The Oncan rushed towards the *Accomplishment* and pulled the release switch. A shock of oxygen flooded into the depressurised chamber like a Scottish gale.

A second wind.

Pandemonium reigned unchecked in the Proscenium between the practised killers and the Doctor's own hodgepodge band of rebellious prisoners.

His own party was now at a sizable disadvantage against the groundpounders. He could see it in Azovka as she holstered her weapon and went straight through Sangfroid, pulling the twinned data records from their mantle in the dictatape vocoder.

One of the militaria levelled his weapon to fire. The Doctor leapt across and knocked the rifle off-target. Gunshots popped like a series of rubber balloons in the near airless vacuum, shattering the grid of paragravitic and optical lighting regulators in the scarred ceiling above.

The room went dark.

The *Accomplishment's* airlock shone in the gloom. Malfunctioning lights strobed against the darkness. Cruel snapshots.

A chance! The soldier's aim and sight were both distorted, now he would remove it completely. He disarmed his opponent, sending the gun windmilling into the open air, and pushing against their bulk to catapult himself forward towards the jammed carousel of terminals.

In the corner of his eye, he could see Vog Mur pluck up a rifle from one of her nearby fallen and begun firing.

A shot thudded over his shoulder as he punted as much debris free of the platform carousel as he could. Its motors pleaded and chattered at the brief respite from their Sisyphean-like endeavours and ground forward.

"The conveyor! Here!" he called. "It'll take us toward the airlock!"

His party gathered from their respective positions, holding tightly to the orbiting terminals. He gathered Azovka from the tables, Solta jack-knifed back into the cover of the terminal—A dark shape swam in the Doctor's peripheral vision with all the economy of a crocodile.

He heard Castell. "*Stop!*"

Vog Mur's eyes narrowed with considered annoyance across the table. Her rifle shifted from what had only moments ago been the Doctor's back to Castell and fired.

The Doctor reached out to Castell's right shoulder and swung her aside. The smell of burnt ions flared in both their senses. The shot only appeared to graze her stomach. She was propelled into Sangfroid, who she seized opportunistically with both fists.

"Let me go!" the compiler protested.

"The airlock!" Solta called.

The Doctor could see the militaria had already crossed the distance and moved towards the access panel. Solta propelled himself forward, pitched his arm through the air like a windtrap and brought it down hard on the Ordoheed before they had the opportunity to close the door.

"Go on, Doctor! *Go!*" shouted Solta.

Unfortunately, the fight was long beyond fair.

Solta was soon overpowered by his opponent and seized from behind by the throat. Solta kicked back against the wall, propelling them both away towards the tables.

Now outside the airlock, the Doctor pulled Azovka, Castell and Sangfroid inside on a living paper chain. A stray shot from one of the other soldiers went straight through his coat sleeve. Ushering each member of his party through, he saw Vog Mur focus her aim to the airlock.

A Krakatoa flash of light!

The spinning lasgun, dislodged from the Doctor's earlier opponent, connected with the wall.

Instinctively, Vog Mur turned and emptied her lasgun into the freak phantasmagoria. Blasted chunks of marble and neon lines pumped from the shattered wall. The lasgun's owner seemed rather dumbfounded, relieved not to have been the accidental target of her employer's wrath.

By the time Vog Mur had realised her error, between the shutter flash of the failing lights and the rifle, her ex-prisoners had sealed the entranceway.

Sangfroid watched the Doctor thump his fist on the surface of the inner airlock door.

“H-How—How—” The oxygen croaked in Azovka’s lungs. “How close?”

“Against our favour,” he cursed himself, placing her knife back in her hands. “Without the pilot we have no way of convincing the Tyrikans.”

“We’ve got to go back for him then,” she insisted.

“Not the time...” Castell entreated.

“*You*,” she nearly choked on the word, “t-ried to help him.”

“Shut up.”

Castell tried to look away, but Azovka bolted forward and viciously grabbed her arm. She refused to let the issue rest.

“Not too long ago, you looked upon him as less than a dog-bitten *sciara*.”

“Better!” the pilot struck her hand away. “I looked on him better than that. He tried to stop me from—It doesn’t matter. Maybe—I don’t know...”

“Perhaps we’re not the dire monsters you were led to believe. Perhaps we love our children as much as you do yours. Don’t you *dare* judge us as monsters when people like that outside exist.”

On the surface, she was calm and in control. Beneath, betrayed by the barest splash of colour in her eyes, the girl’s sudden insight had startled the pilot.

Azovka noticed. Castell narrowed her eyes warningly.

“Castell,” the Doctor tapped her on the shoulder. “How good is your flying?”

She blinked, shaking her head. “I—*ab*—performed with the *Venturer* when the Tyrikans were doing their buzzard skims above Metzger’s Luck. During the joint orbital parades a couple years back.”

“What does that mean, exactly?”

“I moved fast enough that there were no head-on collisions. We roughed each other up a little, but the engineering team only had to refuel and strip off the interceptor’s service stripes.”

“Oh? Untouched to flaunt again for the public at future celebrations?”

“Untouched and gleaming. No casualties. No fatalities.” There was no pride in her voice, only a statement of the facts. “Give me a solid ship and I’m good.”

“Fortune favours the florid, I suppose,” he straightened his coat and turned his full attention to the hook-nosed compiler. “To the flight bays, lead on.”

Vog Mur unlocked the deedbox and reinstated atmospheric to the Proscenium. A plump, life-giving blue rasp. She buried her anger deep in the repository beneath her gut, where no one could see. More than anything she appeared embarrassed. “Looks as though we’ll have to advance our plans. Move to the security zone, we make for Mindcore-3.”

“What about this one?” asked the groundpounder.

“Where?”

They thrust the figure’s head forward into the light’s flipbook flutter.

She examined te-Varrig with a bloodied hand to her face.

“Him? He—” She paused, noting the mountain range of red at the bottom of her vision. The wound ran deeper than she had initially thought. No, it would be a waste to kill him. He still had other uses. “We’ll take him through to the Central Mentality. We still need him to catch that jackanapes and his carrion.”

“And us...?” squeaked one of the compilers.

He was hushed by another of his number who clutched at his emaciated arm.

Vog Mur hadn’t forgotten them.

They parted for her as she moved towards the roused oddments of the communications terminal and its shored-up inner workings. She nodded to them casually, “Begin the Weapon’s move through Natasia Tor to the fleets’ positions.”

“Why not wait?” queried te-Varrig.

“The Doctor and the girl survived long enough before they came here. If they reach the Central Mentality...” she let the unspoken words linger in the æther.

“There’s no guarantee that Sangfroid will help them,” her prisoner persisted.

“Sangfroid was and shall always be a slave. Here or with another, it is his nature.”

“What about his hesitation to make those tapes?”

“Simply the fallout of his own terror,” Vog Mur dismissed.

A new boldness welled in his chest. “Mydame, I think you’re wrong.”

“I have the gun and that proves I’m right. That is the reality of power.”

With a few carefully made adjustments and the snap of a communicator switch, the transceiver returned to life.

The argument concluded in her favour.

Clipped and with allotted force, she spoke, “Returning gunship be advised, rogue patrol craft en route from main base. Destruction immediate. Understood?”

“Full acknowledgement of broadcast. Destruction assured.”

In the main cabin of the carrydart, the Doctor adjusted the cuboctahedron delicately to sit within the convection dais. It whirred into place with a click

Castell grunted, painfully, from the pilot’s seat.

Azovka leant forward to help.

The pilot kept her distance, as part of her training and personality, slapping away the helping hand. “Don’t touch me, I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine,” Azovka resisted.

“My torturer said I should try a new regimen. Ignore it.”

The Doctor was behind Castell’s head. “Let me see.”

“No,” refuted Castell.

“You’ll be in no condition to help anyone if you’re dead.” His tone suggested that he wasn’t in the mood to allow her any requests. “I’m familiar with ship’s workings, I could take over if the situation requires.”

“It’s too important... It...” Castell heaved a shaky breath, her body was beginning to come down from the adrenaline. “If you don’t step back right now, I will kill you.”

The pilot could feel his jade eyes frigid with scepticism. “Using what particular method of persuasion?”

Castell produced the item in question from beneath the ship’s steering column. Its glint in the half-light not unlike a cutthroat razor.

She half-turned to face him.

The pilot could see the Doctor’s reply in his expression. *The gun, of course. Of course, the gun.*

Vog Mur crooked a hand at the cowering olive figure. “I need you here to monitor any further transmissions with whoever the Doctor contacted.”

The Mogran complied, albeit with a wary nod, crossing over to her with crunching bandaged feet.

The carrydart detached from the *Accomplishment’s* docking ports, one of a small row puckering from the vessel’s surface, flaring with an effervescent warmth.

“You and you,” she pointed quickly to her militaria. “Get that door open. Check the ship for any traps or damage they might have left behind.”

“There’s...” the compiler twitched nervously. “The resonance frequency band continues to blanket the Proscenium. We remain undiscovered. But the damage done by the Doctor... It will take time to recover.”

te-Varrig looked empathetically to the Mogran, who returned his gaze with trepidation. The pilot’s eyes fell self-consciously to the floor.

Having manoeuvred to position, the cut-and-run raider made a break for the main serviceway. Gunfire from the groundpounders rose like plumes into the baulks of the ceiling above. She shielded her eyes at the concluding flare of its propulsion systems as it shot beyond her sight.

She lowered her hand with careful measure.

“Understand this,” she addressed the huddled compilers. “It is now necessary to move towards the Control Housing in Mindcore-3. The final stage of our operation is now in effect. However, the intruders have damaged our control to the transceiver beam. The forcewall is open. Anyone can find us. They will try to stop us and they will not take us alive.”

“We...” the Mogran licked its lips. “We will send you the signal when the equipment has been repaired. We will be ready.”

“Good. You know my policy, you know my methods. Continue the operation. Now.”

Castell’s free hand was tight around the stolen carrydart’s controls. She licked her lips, head pulsing with pain, but showed no signs of relenting.

“You’ve more important things to do, Doctor,” she said. “I’ll take you through to the Central Mentality, like you said. After that, you’re on your own. Unless you can tell me this isn’t important.”

“I can’t.” The Doctor looked to the side quickly. “As it rather is. How do you expect to get out past the forcewall?”

“I came in through a shaft that bypasses it. I’ll scan for a similar break and head for that,” she said, tuning the ship’s instruments. “Even if it is the only one, I’ll find it. Count on it.”

“And how long will that take, *hm*? In your condition?”

“I don’t have a choice. The sooner this gets back home, the sooner we can end this war before it starts.”

“Alright, I have friends who might be able to help. How will they know you?”

“8791-LIA.”

“Identicode?”

“My eldest’s highest score on *Ghouls of Azzod*.”

“I’m impressed! Right, you’ll find them in—” The calico visitant’s finger shot forward in alarm. “*Through the window!*”

It could have been their mirror image, the same scabbard-shaped snout, emerging with sleek precision from one of the service shafts puckered across their skyway. A predator leaning into the morning light to see the startled features of its prey.

“It’s another carrydart...”

“On a return journey to the main ship!”

Like some predatory raptor, it closed in for the kill.

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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