



DOCTOR WHO

EDEN BY ANNIHILATION by ALAN CAMLANN



THRILLING ADVENTURES IN SPACE AND TIME

DOCTOR WHO

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BY *ANNIHILATION*

ALAN CAMLANN

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

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■ **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

PHASE FIVE

STAGE 17: “Daring Against Monsters”

Drifting between the dawns of a dozen other worlds, Mæstric found herself still coming to terms with the TARDIS. Not as a craft, but a being—or more accurately, an entity—in its own right. It was a bizarre feeling. Each computer system she’d encountered over her lifetime had a certain quirk. The telltale signature of its original programmers became etched into the coding.

The Weapon, for instance, was streamlined like a ravine. Worn away by centuries of information. Peaceful. Deceptively so. Until you put your body deep enough beneath the tide and you were swept down into the rapids.

The Ship was similar. An antique giant striding the length of the horizon, but there was something else, too. Each footfall felt lackadaisical. Disinterested. Just as Mæstric discovered a major registry node, somewhere for her to plant a boot and gain access, the TARDIS would reconfigure its internal matrices and shrug her off. Unnoticed.

“They’re *gone*, Peri.”

Mæstric’s shoulders rose around her ears like islands.

She’d almost succeeded in compartmentalising the conversation going on behind her as she worked. Her fellow travellers were trying to keep it civil, but the frustration eking from them both was like a radiation leak.

“But for how long?” asked Peri. “What are they planning?”

“Want to find out?” Frobisher’s voice was brisk.

She indicated the barricaded internal door. “With that guard outside?”

“Kind of proves my point, doesn’t it? We can’t get out. They can’t get in. Ease up and relax.”

“*Relax?* Frobisher, they could be doing anything! Suppose they find one of the other console rooms?”

“Wouldn’t that be a lucky strike.”

“*Lucky...*” Peri spat derisively.

She saw the hurt on his face and attempted to apologise, but he waved it off and walked to the other side of the console to get some space.

Unfortunately, in one of the outer corridors, the Ordoheed had already set to work trying to understand the mechanics of their new environment. Kuron's boot stamped down on a slot car racing set running across the breadth of the hallway.

The little engine didn't have the strength to even sigh. Its trajectory, however, was curious to note.

-INFORM NEXT

<RUNNING...>

<NEXT = HELLO TARDIS>

-HELLO TARDIS

<HELLO DOCTOR + CHECKING>

Mæstric found herself running her fingers coaxingly across the edge of the board.

Easy. Gentle. Don't lose it this time...

<CHECKING COMPLETE + CHAMELEON CIRCUIT DOWN + FLIGHT SYSTEM DOWN + EXTERNAL DECONTAMINATION FUNCTION OPERABLE + OUTER PLASMIC TRANSMITTER/RECEIVER RUNNING + NEXT>

Her lips squirmed upward into a smile. Computers. They were so much easier to deal with than people. She held up her VDU and petitioned their attention, "*Løys!*"

"What's up?"

"*Løys,*" she was so excited, she was only half-listening. "The transceiver is still functioning."

Thin fingers took the gadget from her hand. She could feel Peri tense with nervous energy. "The technical stuff's a bit over my head, but I think I get the gist. Who can we contact? What're our options?"

"It's too far out for a transmission to Trailblazer Prime, we can only just receive broadcasts, but we could try for a signal to the Weapon."

"Go for it!"

"Sure!" Her exuberance dimmed. She began digging around in her coat pocket for a chunk of Surin thermajerky she'd swiped from the galley. "Sure... It's possible, but give me a bit of time first."

"How long?" she asked quietly.

Mæstric bit at the crinkled edge of the foil. “*Dunno. Thf luncth of a Beda Pluto phong robly.*”

“Tell me when it’s done, alright?”

She turned and saw Frobisher leaning back against their barricade, a thoughtful flipper at his beak in the great tradition of ragged gumshoes the Universe over. “Y’know, a thought occurs. Since we’re going to be sharing a bunk or eight with these jokers, where do you think they’ve all gone?”

“A forward base, definitely,” opined Peri decisively.

“Well, let’s assume they think we know what we’re doing. That we’d have a clue how to repair the console. Where’d we likely go for spare parts?”

“The workshop,” she realised.

“Bingo.” Frobisher folded his flippers. “Under normal circumstances, they probably wouldn’t be able to find it, but the TARDIS isn’t itself at the moment. Memory serves, it’s a corridor or so down from us. A group that size, it’d be the perfect place to hole up for a while until they got their bearings.”

“Or set an ambush if we decided to come looking.”

“Hitting us with whatever they’ve got.”

“Well, two can play at that particular game.”

She crossed over to one of the walls, two down from the main interior door—and its cavalcade of novelties acting as custodial landslide—on its right. The left colonnade was home to a small densely-populated control panel that seemed to hint at an altogether greater function for this otherwise unremarkable wall. The Doctor had taught her only recently how to use the alternating blue-green studs running across its topmost row. She wracked her brain for the combination. He’d mentioned it as an aside during a particularly long lecture on psychotropic climate control.

“Got it...” *Blue-Green-Blue-Blue-Green.*

The wall absconded high into the ceiling gap, revealing the tireless gleam of a well-stocked dimensional laboratory.

One of the Doctor’s pet projects from sometime ago. Multidisciplinary, but largely focused on alchemical processes. There were computers, charts and shelves of books situated on each wall overlooking four workbenches bubbling with clamped flasks and distillation equipment. Some of the equipment she’d recognised immediately, purloined from roughly her own time zone.

Others, like the fused remains of what must have been the Voermann analyser, she'd extrapolated by osmosis.

Frobisher caught up with her, "Whoa, perp! What's the scheme? What're we doing?"

"Frobisher, I am sick of running and I am sick of being afraid. This is our turf, our rules and we're going to get our own back on *our* terms. Right?"

"Right." His voice was smooth like jazz. "But... What's the sting?"

Peri hadn't a clue. She was a holidaymaker, not a war hawk.

"Not die," she said.

He nodded coolly. "I can dig that, but it looks as though someone's already tried."

Peri leant her arm against the table with a "Huh?" and winced, pain flaring bright in the hollow of her sleeve.

"Where's it hurt?"

"In the soft spots."

"Oh, just your head then?" he teased.

She smiled tauntingly, holding out her arm. She nodded to the tear in her discarded starsuit. "I must've reopened it when I hit the floor. Stupid, right?"

His beady eyes wandered over it existentially before he *haahed*. "Looks to be alright, apply a bit of pressure."

"Gee, thanks."

"I was worried you'd knocked it like your leg."

"It's been alright actually. The suit kept 'em both isolated."

"Like a piñata of blood."

"Oh, sure!" she sounded both jovial and exasperated. "Take a swing!"

"Pop the Peri!" he rejoindered with warmth.

He felt that fade when he saw the expression on her face. Where there'd been a smile a few moments ago, no longer. She wasn't looking into his eyes, just... at him. They'd spent enough time travelling together that he recognised her expression, lit with the careful offer of new possibilities.

"Was it something I said?" he asked.

She nodded. "Hey, do you reckon we could patch up my suit?"

"These flippers were made for fixing," he flexed. "But what's your thinking?"

With more speed than haste, the Doctor returned to the carrydart's alcove, collecting the cuboctahedron while turning the problem over in his mind.

"Any ideas?"

"Occam's razor, Castell. The solution's right in front of us."

He studied the artefact bouncing up and down in his hand for a moment. With a little extra force, he was able to launch it up to eye-level. Ha! He had it. (Up, then down.) His answer. (Up, then down.) Simple and effective. (Toss...) He might even be able to bring along his compatriots, if it were executed properly. (Toss...) Trouble was that it was his usual fair. (Toss—a misjudgement, it nearly plummeted to the floor.) Ingenious, but potentially lethal.

He pocketed his telemechanical muse for safety and triggered a green stud beside an oxygen grille on the wall, opening up the maintenance hatch for the ship's outer hull. He took stock of the situation. Judging the variables with scientific precision.

Above his flaxen curls, a deadly corona of soaring lines that made his bones ache at the memory of excessive g-force. His fellow travellers in the middle, their grey tattletale expressions stark under the alternating console lights. And below, insulated by his bergamot spats, was a moon-shaped lift dais that would hoist him up through the opening. At this speed, like a cannonball through an old watercraft's gunport. He pressed his hand to his upper lip, his mind turning the situation over, making as many internal calculations as the microseconds would allow. The necessary forward drive would have to be no less than exact. That, and—

Sangfroid panicked. "They're coming straight for us!"

"Astute reflexes, you said?" the Doctor asked Castell.

"Whatever you can throw at me," she growled.

"Perfect!" The Doctor leapt forward and yanked down the exhaust trigger. "Good luck, Castell! Both of you, here!"

Naturally, the compiler hesitated, but there was no time for anyone to react.

The sound reminded the Nonpareil of the glacier crack immediately before an avalanche. Surprise kicked her in the stomach. She felt the yoke convulse beneath her, the abrupt shock of momentum pulsing through her like a defibrillator charge as her carrydart rapped across its twin's belly. Severed communications

antennæ hailed down with the shattered fragments of atmospheric glass from the enemy cockpit. With Sangfroid shoved onto the dais, the platform beneath her three passengers rose up abruptly, a vertical diving board beneath them, catapulted together through sheer acrobatic momentum into the opened undercarriage of the opposing vessel.

Inside the fuselage, checking briefly to see if his legs were still attached, the valiant Doctor prowled forward like liquid fire from an overturned oil lamp. The wind whipped small fragments of metal through the depressurised cabin in starlight streamers across his outline. They passed the junction leading back to the Proscenium on their left. He pinched the bridge of his nose to compensate for the additional g-force. He had no time to adjust, the two groundpounders and their robotic Autopilot in the cockpit would have to be reckoned with. Fortunately, fate seemed to be on his side. Concussive shock seemed to have knocked both militaria unconscious—one from oxygen deprivation—and the Autopilot had popped its top like a giddy Roman candle.

A groan from the nearest warrior confirmed his suspicions.

Good, he thought. Too many have perished already.

The hatchway sealed behind Castell, returning a sense of calm to the stolen carrydart.

The chair remained steady as the cabin shook around her. The cut-and-run raider had been long in service, she could feel the years that had gnawed at the basic drive components. It was a precious few seconds to collect her thoughts and rearrange her trajectory before the inevitable.

Concussive charges spanged against the outer hull. Three seconds sooner than anticipated.

Suction from the slipstream forced the two vehicles together and now physics was yanking them apart. It forced the Nonpareil's carrydart down on a parabola. Instead of steadying her flight path, she'd instead reverberated it, but this wouldn't be the end, she wouldn't allow it. All her will, everything she was, dug into the framework of the vehicle and willed it out of its terminal velocity. White dwarf zephyrs buzzed across the vehicle's chin as the

carrydart slashed up from its dive and into the nearest exhaust opening.

Castell shouted something. She couldn't recall what.

She felt triumph. *Real* triumph. In a way she hadn't felt in such a long time. Not many days ago, her team would have cheered, tapping knuckles and punching the sky.

The warmth and energy faded as reality closed its teeth around her mind. They were dead now. Dead and gone. There were more important things to do than celebrate.

"Targeting computer..." she reminded herself.

The datatape felt hot against her chest like a stovetop. The machine calculated the course she'd need to take to leave the Weapon. She'd struck lucky, a vactunnel wasn't too far away, she'd escape through that. She felt the barest hint of a smile on her lips. Then something collapsed above her abdomen. A grotesque, organic darkness swept outwards towards her hand, staining it black. A black that threatened to swamp the chair and engulf her in its shadow.

No, not here. She wouldn't *die* here!

Aboard the hijacked carrydart, the Doctor could feel his own hands burning with a maddening frost. Trying to nestle its way into his nervous system like bamboo files slicing beneath his fingernails. His starsuit's internal conditioning unit had kept things tolerable up until now, but his waistcoat could only do so much. Now he was as prey to the cruel whims of thermodynamics as all else.

The Doctor resealed the copilot's helmet. He tried dragging him from the engaged seat off to one side but halted in place. The copilot's hands seized around the controls in a fitful muscle spasm.

The rover felt a drowsiness begin to overwhelm him, leaching from the insulated gauntlets, his hands pulling at their wrists. A numbness spread. Slow, but as deadly as the machine guns behind and below them.

He tried and tried again.

The figure wouldn't move. He wouldn't *move!*

"Doctor, I've found—"

"Azovka! Help me get him off this!"

He turned in time to catch the emergency rebreather mask tossed to him. The stepthreader was wearing one, too, a black sucker

across her muzzle. They wound their arms tight and pulled together against the figure.

Azovka strained. “He—He *won’t*—*The wall!*”

It seemed all the closer through the shattered glass visage. An immutable flat horizon of artifice like the spine of a thick, ugly ribcage. Its breathing rapid. Tense. Excited.

“Move the other fellow!” instructed the Doctor. “Anything?”

She skimmed the console before her with unusual speed.

“Projection screen... Power lever!” She pulled, trying to slow the engines’ burn rate, but the proximity warning engaged regardless. As calm as it was gloating. Her hands tingled with fear. It was hopeless. In their last, desperate attempt to ensure their escape, they had merely exchanged one ship of anarchy for another. They were charging without aim to their own destruction.

Isn’t there anything left? Azovka pleaded to herself. *Anything?*

The armoured figure fixed against the Doctor like a barbed ice sculpture. Obstinate, even without conscious thought. “No good, he’s collapsed over the trigger mechanism for the retrorockets!”

Compelled to violence, he brought all of his strength down on the gauntleted fingers, the heat of physical exertion skewering his hearts in sword-point jabs before the oppressive chill slapped them away. She could see it in his face, he wasn’t invincible. His eyes were bloodshot from the Proscenium and his sinuses running from the cold in their immediate surrounds. Exhausted and overstrained, every desperate endeavour yielded him little more than disappointment. By the end, the militarian slouched into a hunch, hands remained firmly clamped around the yoke.

Faced with little alternative, he sprinted from the cockpit in quick retreat. “*Back! Azovka! To the end of the ship!*”

“That won’t save us! We’re—*Doctor, my arm!*”

His boots skidded in place, an arm stretched out to steady himself against the data reception alcove. His friend hadn’t followed, and he could see why immediately. The sweat from her hand must have fastened to the power lever in the flash-freeze. Observing her attempts to remove it, one of the guards feebly lurched forward, his bulk collapsing atop her. Panic turned her thoughts to frost, ice and rime blushing the plasteel. Her hand spasmed before gripping the trigger in agony. What began as a possibility had transformed into a certainty. She was snared. Trapped. Frantically shaking the stunned

figure next to her in fear and frustration. Almost in convulsions. A waking nightmare.

“I can’t free it! Doctor! Doctor, I don’t want to—”

“Azovka!”

The Naran felt the skyglass implode behind her head in a wave of crimson light. A sharp, grinding roar and the deft touch of a ship’s hull. The whole Galaxy tumbled around her in the currents of a black hole. There was a sharp rip of flesh as she spun backwards. Dashing forward, the Doctor caught her, primordial shock pulsing through the palm of her hand. The cabin stabilised around them, the wall now a constructivist waterfall curving around the ship.

“Altered course,” he said. “We’re on our way to the Central Mentality.”

Azovka looked down at what was left of her skin and didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

Peri flipped shut the dusty tome on the workbench in the dimensional laboratory. The Doctor had boasted that the room contained everything and anything they could’ve wanted at a moment’s notice. She only hoped it wasn’t empty rhetoric. It could save their lives.

She nudged the purloined starsuit with a shoe. “That ought to do it, shouldn’t it?”

“Look at it this way, perp,” said Frobisher. “If it doesn’t, we’ll never know about it.”

“That’s reassuring. It’s,” Peri wrapped her arms around its chest and heaved, “*heavier* than it looks.”

Before Frobisher could give it a go, Mæstric rapped her knuckles against the top of the doorframe.

“*Loys.*” She stretched her arm out across the back of her neck towards the console. Moments ago, there’d been nothing from its core, save the cautious glow of the control column. Now, it glittered with a blood crimson and fulsome gold. “One of you left the transceiver on, I’ve managed to open a signal back to the satellite.”

“Nice work,” congratulated Peri.

“I can do one better. I sent something out and someone’s sent something in reply. It’s a carrier wave. Live. Come and crook your heads at this.”

As they rejoined at the console, the pulsing, ambient flanger of a weakened receiver signal filled their various sensory receptors.

The words were impossible to decipher at first. It bounced around like tenpence down a drainpipe. With some careful tuning, a minor miracle greeted them from lightyears away, “*Doctor to TARDIS. This is the Doctor to the TARDIS. Come in—over.*”

“Doctor?” they responded in unison. “How—?”

He snapped his fingers. “*The forewall’s collapsing, but I still can’t hear you clearly... Can you hear me? Who’s that?*”

The whifferdill put a fin to his chest. “It’s Frobisher, Doc. Frobisher, Peri and—”

“*Hold on...*” An itinerant whine shredded his verbiage for a few moments, until, “*—ve boosted the signal as much as I can for the TARDIS’s lasercom receiver. Private waveband. Hush-hush, I’m glad it’s reached you. Are you both safe?*”

Peri jumped in before Frobisher could. “We’re fine, what happened to you? Where are you?”

“*My friend and I had a minor disagreement about travel arrangements with our hosts. Expertly resolved with use of a cuboctahedron and a gentle word in the right receptor socket.*” He patted something flatly metallic that rang through the console speaker. “*Yourselves?*”

“We were on our way to Trailblazer Prime, but things haven’t gone our way,” she answered.

“*Oh, yes...?*” From the sounds of things, neither had it for the Doctor.

“I get this is unreasonable to ask,” Peri put her left elbow up on the sizzling console as though it were a public payphone. “But I’m tired, I’m cold and I’m not good for cab fare. Can you come get us?”

There was a pause.

“Doctor?”

“*Perhaps. If you’re going the same way we are. Where are you exactly?*”

“In deep space specifically, skipper,” added Frobisher, angling his head up towards the speaker. “We’re off to warn them about the satellite.”

“*Not a bad notion,*” he gained an urgency that unnerved the trio. He sounded to be moving rather quickly for nothing to be wrong.

“*Presently, I lack the resources to do anything other than strictly advise. More’s the pity.*”

“The TARDIS is in a bad way, Doctor,” negated Peri.

His voice turned grave. *“I take it mayhem has taken up residence while I’ve been away?”*

She sighed and straightened. “Mayhem lost us the safety deposit. Look, we’re not going to be much use for anything now.”

“We’ll have to find a way around that. If one side fails, the entire plan fails. Hundreds of millions of lives depend on us solving these two problems together. It’s vital.”

“By ourselves?” she paused. “Hold on, ‘two’?”

“Mmm? You’ll pull it off, I know you will.”

Frobisher persisted. “But what do you mean ‘two problems’, Doc? What’ve we missed?”

Peri jerked her head back to the laboratory. The whifferrill nodded.

“Ah... Yes, I suppose I’m getting ahead of myself. I don’t know how long this will last—I’ll be brief. Now listen to me, the pair of you...”

As the iris wound shut behind him, Dellevar forced himself upright and stared out of the window towards the parallel track. It would be too easy to let fatigue and grief lull him to slumber. Even with the Resonance Gems on his person, his safety remained in doubt. When trouble would come—and it would, that was a certainty—its wrath would be swift and with little warning.

It mattered little to him now whether it came from the Tyrikans or the Weapon itself.

Despite his mental discipline, despite his firmest of wishes, his mind had returned to the handsome agony of recent memories. Did he remember hearth fire and home? Foundations and faith?

No... Only death.

Every eye-blink was a face lost to him. They were safe elsewhere now. In far better care than he, so why did they haunt him so? Why did he fear them? The sensation felt like a jibe from a witless trickster. Self-flagellation at its grimmest.

So consumed was he in defying his own demons, he didn’t notice the second iris blooming behind him, it bade enter a second railcar straight into the tunnel and his private domain of contemplation.

A moment perhaps too late, Dellevar lowered himself into the darkness. The railcar’s twin shone like the ugliest of moons, casting cruel silhouettes across the cabin. In this moment alone, he was

glad for his isolation, there wouldn't have been enough room to cloak himself otherwise.

From the divide came a voice. One he'd long been familiar with through rumour and after-action reports. Though they'd never met in person, they recognised their actions through their followers all too well.

"Say it again. Louder," she ordered.

He strained to listen closer.

There was another voice. Barely heard. It was unfamiliar to him, but he understood it all the same. Something bilious and uncomfortable spat like dried paint as that second being spoke, "I'm not... Gurudev te-Varriq, Vog Mur..."

"Not te-Varriq," cooed Vog Mur, falsely, a chiding lilt. "Who are you then?"

"Bastinranath."

"Bastinranath Solta. The pilot?"

Dellevar slanted forward, watching the poor man's head sway back and forth as though snapped at the neck. The pilot's fur was slick, tangled in a mat with dark moribund patches that roared of prolonged cruelty. Satiated and indulged.

"Then," Vog Mur's iridescent skin glimmered, "Why is it, I don't believe you?"

"What...?"

She repeated calmly, "Why don't I believe you?"

"I don't..."

Solta choked on his counterargument, battered by exhaustion.

"You don't know. Well... That's the issue, isn't it?" Vog Mur straightened her back to the window and raised her voice. "What do you think, Dellevar?"

Had Dellevar been a younger man, he'd have flattened himself against the floor and remained still. Age, however, betrayed him. Age and fatigue. He heard the pinball rattle of a sidearm reloading. Sour pockmarks gouged their way into the control section. His first and only warning.

He took out his weapon and threw it to the tracks.

Vog Mur raised her hand, as if to indicate a job well done.

The two vehicles came to rest at the junction while their onboard computers made the necessary adjustments for the partition ahead. The intensity of the air conditioning was heightened to protect the

integrity of the machine's propulsion system. One of Vog Mur's militaria pressed the emergency release above the doors while two more raised their Boneshaker rifles into the open cavity. He felt little need to be ushered, he opened his own doors and stepped from one railcar to the other without incident. They seized him by his forearms, removing the carry-bag from his shoulder, tearing it open with a blade. He didn't possess the energy to resist and, in any case, his forelives had taught him one invaluable skill in mythic repetition—patience. His belief would sustain him.

“How do you feel?” asked Vog Mur.

“Mortified,” Dellevar admitted.

That seemed to give her a whisper of satisfaction. “A fair assessment. The only reason you're still alive is because I can't contact the carrydart responsible for the transportation of your device. You'll tell me where my commander has gone.”

“The head of your taskforce?”

“Yes.”

“*Abh...*” He understood. “I wouldn't know. My people are in control. They have full autonomy now to carry out their mission, however they see fit.”

“Which is?”

“I wouldn't know,” he repeated.

His captor straightened. “There's nothing to be said then, isn't there?”

“Nor I to you, Vog Mur. May I be allowed to pray?”

“Why?”

“Focus, mydame,” Dellevar cleared his throat politely. “Away from you.”

“Alright, so long as it doesn't interfere with me or my men.”

“I will leave that to the purview of Father Sky,” his knees ached as he knelt, making the same noise wet concrete does when overturned with a pitchfork, “as is common to the faith.”

“You pray for yourself?” she asked, genuinely curious.

“I pray for everyone.” Dellevar hoped his fellow captive could hear him. “The living and the dead. It is my failing, I do not do it every time, but sometimes I even pray for you.”

Her lips thinned into a humourless cogwheel smile. “If you had spent enough time staring into the darkness, memorising each shade

and tincture, you would know how truly futile such an outlook would be. Enlightenment isn't gifted, Dellevar, it is conquered..."

Dellevar closed his eyes.

"Do you know why we are at odds, Dellevar?"

An eye opened lazily. "I chose to stand against you?"

"Time and time again to no effect, why?" She closed the gap between them. Fear stung at the base of his spine. "It's a decision that has brought you dead friends and dead hopes. All... to what end?"

"I dare say you're asking me whether it was worth it." He chuckled at the perversity of the notion.

"It wasn't, that isn't in dispute," her mouth, quietly agitated, could've been whittled with a knife. "What intrigues me is that you persisted regardless. Credit to your company, they never explained."

"Torture will avail you little," he cleared his throat with a harrumph. "But I suppose you'll still try?"

"No, on you, that would be a waste of resources."

Dellevar nodded precisely. "Don't cry for the rain..."

"...cry for the world?" she quoted back. "78th-century hypocrisy. When the Doctor and Azovka..." A stab of panic fluttered across Dellevar's eyes. She was alive. "I thought so, it's difficult to disguise some sort of an affection for another. You're more useful to us as you are. With a few adjustments."

He saw her hand furl around the strap of his carry-bag. She lifted it effortlessly. No pride, nothing to prove, but she held something that could shake the foundations of entire Galaxies with its absence. It wasn't even a particularly impressive specimen of its kind, he told himself. Food, however, conjured up his own personal demons. Vog Mur must have scented it through the impromptu packaging they had arranged aboard the TARDIS galley.

"I anticipate that you haven't eaten like this in some time," she said.

"As I have said, I've nothing to tell."

"I know."

She threw it violently to the floor, her expression tempered by the crack of whatever else lay within. Her hoof came down, tearing a hole in the denim, spilling breadstuffs like salt over the earth. The tracker burst into stardust sequins.

"So, you have nothing to lose, correct?"

Aboard the TARDIS, while Mæstric worked at her cyberdeck, Peri and Frobisher performed their own little duty. Dragged across the floor from the laboratory, their patched up starsuit was propped against the barricade, its helmet sloshing up against the table like a Somme cadaver. A scarecrow for any militarian who got too close.

“*Well, this Weapon, it’s far more than we initially suspected,*” spoke the Doctor. “*If it was in communication with the old girl, it would explain a great deal regarding its behaviour, why it’s been so flustered in trying to destroy us.*”

“It’s been trying to communicate?” Peri was disbelieving.

“*It’s been trying to negotiate.*”

Crossing back, Frobisher tapped the datathumper on the shoulder. “Is your rig sophisticated enough to pull off what we need?”

“Well...” The girl did her best to shadow the worst of her doubts. “It’d better be, wouldn’t it?”

“Doc, we’ve got someone here who can access the Ship’s computers directly, if that helps?”

The datathumper spoke up. “Mæstric here.”

“*Would—Hold on, would that be them?*” He sounded more distant than before. Distracted.

“Yes, trying to untangle the wandering mess of directories your ship has to offer.”

“*No, don’t try to get up.*”

Irritation flashed between her temples. “Listen, old man, I’m trying—”

A younger, breathier voice lolled into the speaker system. Far too familiar and far too comfortable. Some untoward emotional beast tore open her chest with an exquisitely personal agony. “...*it was will-be you, isn’t it? Lije...?*”

“...Telle?” The name seemed to combust into a firework of myriad colours inside her head.

“*Lije’mm...*” Azovka mumbled. The datathumper was hanging on her every word, this wasn’t fair. “*Hurts...*”

“*Back to where you were, Azovka, alright? You’ve suffered a particularly nasty wound, there’ll be time enough for talking later,*” ushered the Doctor, not unkindly. “*Rest it on the console there. That’s it... Rest.*” A sound like a shaken umbrella. “*Pardon...?*”

“I didn’t catch that, what did she say?”

He paused, then recounted kindly, *“She said, she’s missed you Lije Mæstric. She’s missed you a great deal.”*

That was it. That was everything. Her whole world and everything she’d needed. Contrarily, to her internal dismay, all Mæstric could manage in reply was a feeble croak. “I’ve... too...”

“Yes... Yes, I imagine so,” the Doctor said gently. He shook the sentiment roughly from his voice, remembering himself and their circumstances. *“Peri, Frobisher, are you still there?”*

“We’re here,” answered Peri.

“You said the console was damaged?”

“All hashed up, Doctor. There’s no power at all.”

“You’ll need to repair that sooner rather than later. Someone will be coming in a Grimmuk carrydart, en route to Trailblazer Prime as you are. An SRF interceptor pilot. It’s imperative that the information she carries be delivered there. It could be vital to the prevention of a war. I need you to get to her before anyone else does.”

“Space is big, Doc,” Frobisher demurred, not unsympathetically. “How are we going to find her?”

“How far out are you?”

“Let’s see...” He switched on the scanner. A soft dab of slowly burling caramel spun into frame. Oddly familiar. “I can spy an asteroid. Size of my foot at this distance, so it’s hard to make out...”

“Wait...” Peri paused. “What’s that blister there...?”

“That’s a radar dome,” Frobisher clarified. He squinted and Mæstric watched as his features twisted with a sickening fear. He seemed to recognise the tiny, concentric circles and crossed hastily back to the transceiver. “Doc, we’re within spitting distance of an Early Warning station...”

Mæstric’s eyes shot wide as panic gripped her blindly by the heart. Each circle was an automated silo stocked with high-yield warheads. Capable of emptying death unto an all-too-suspicious solar system with callous ease. Her instinct was to run, hide, but where could she go?

“How sturdy is this ship?” Mæstric asked.

“Near indestructible,” replied Peri.

“Yeah, but *we’re* not,” clarified Frobisher. “And even still... With the state things are now?”

Peri imagined her neck snapping like a carrot against the console from an unexpected jolt. She felt sick. Centuries of ‘advancement’ couldn’t disguise the connection to her own time. Her hands shook with an understanding she longed to forget.

“It’s a tangible landmark. Frobisher, I need you to focus now, can you still see the sargasso?”

He squinted past the horror to the veil beyond. “Just about...”

“You’re in luck, old chap, the carrydart will likely pass through there on its way back home.”

“How d’you figure?”

Aboard the carrydart, the Doctor leant over the transceiver.

“Engines leave a mark.”

“I don’t think I get it,” said Peri.

“Frequent flight paths are often picked up and chosen because of the sheer density of energy pollution left behind by space vessels. A lot of exhaust coagulates together in space. It creates prisms. Corridors. Frobisher, explain it to her.”

“Like—ab—tyre tracks in a muddy road,” the whifferdill elaborated.

“The more heavily used the path, the safer people assume it to be.”

“Might as well be a roadside picnicking spot for all the debris outside,” muttered Mæstric. *“People mustn’t hang around here for long.”*

“That gives me an idea.” The Doctor’s eyes glittered shrewdly.

“As loathe as I am to reduce the old girl to this, you can use the Ship’s transmitter to act as a buoy signal for Castell. She’ll recognise the code ‘8791-LIA’ on the repeater. If she’s in trouble, she’ll be able to trace you from there.”

“Speaking of which, where are you going?” quizzed Peri.

“I’d rather not announce that on an open line. Suffice to say, that we’ll try to finish this totally. Make sure it can never happen again to anyone else. If we fail... Well, there won’t be anyone left alive to receive your warning. Both our efforts are important, Peri, believe me.”

There was the sound of Mæstric knuckling the wall. *“Doctor, how do I set up the buoy?”*

“Just ask the computers for a repeating meta-signal,” answered the Doctor. *“It’ll be one of the first systems you find under Diagnostic Maintenance.”*

Mæstric wrote the keywords on her arm with a marker from her pocket. “Got it. And the external sensors?”

“Let’s see... Yes, if you realign the fluid link, you should be able to trip the fault locator’s circuit breakers. It’ll bring whatever remaining power you require to bear. Should be enough to finish your journey. Coordinates still primed into the console?”

Peri checked. “Looks like.”

“You’ve all you need. Good luck, you three. See you on the other side.”

Pocketing the marker, Mæstric drew herself back into her own world of data and digital matrices.

Peri and Frobisher found themselves once again staring out through their window into the Universe. It was odd to the American university student that borders still existed six-thousand years later. They must be formed like transceiver signals leaving the Earth—in ever-expanding cones or spheres of waves. The defensive capabilities of the station watching them must be enormous. With both sides arming for open conflict, it was all too likely that she’d see it or one of its closest cousins in action soon enough.

A single and terrible thought dawned on Peri as she watched.

“Which side of the border are we on?”

“Pardon?” asked Frobisher distractedly.

“Are we in range of that thing?”

“I wouldn’t worry. It’ll likely treat us as a bit of flotsam. A rogue planetoid or one of those cometary fragments there.”

“But if we’re broadcasting a transceiver signal—”

Dread shot through them both in an instant. *They’d interpret it as an attack.*

Frobisher: “Where’s the switch? *Where’s the switch—?*”

Peri: “—*Mæstric!*”

“Too damn late!”

The whifferdill paled. He turned back from the console, his eyes falling on the scanner in time to see the rockets’ blue glare bursting from the dome’s missile tubes. “Peri, we’ve been fired on!”

“*Czerny...*” Mæstric swallowed.

“How many?” asked the student.

Panicked incoherence escaped the young woman’s throat. “*Ab—abb—two. Two for now!*”

“Doctor, are you still there?”

“I heard. You’ve no choice. You’ll have to pilot the TARDIS manually.”

Three voices: *“Doc, you—” “can’t be serious, Doctor, it’s—” “—completely nuts—!”*

The Doctor cut them off before they could protest further. “It’s not ideal but believe me it’s the only way! The station is old technology, even by your standards, you might be small enough to overcome them. Frobisher, you know how to activate the TARDIS’s External Decontamination Function.”

“Copacetic. All squeaky clean for our execution.”

“Decontamination, Frobisher,” he enunciated. “As in, *sterilise.*”

“We detonate the missile before it can make contact.”

“That’ll serve!” Mæstric celebrated.

Frobisher almost agreed. *“Save one crucial issue, Doc, we don’t have enough—”*

“You’ll only need it for a few moments. Now, get on with it!”

In his peripheral vision he saw Azovka begin to stir.

“I’ll watch the door!” Peri volunteered.

Frobisher tore through the TARDIS’s roundels within his reach searching for the toolkit.

Some contained circuit-boards, others contained small alcoves housing an assortment of ephemera. Quickly, he discovered what he was searching for. Behind an antique Leyden jar, bundled together with a length of twine, sat a scuffed argent toolkit. Plucking it forward by its black piping, he returned to the console to begin work, not far from where the young datathumper was beginning her final preparations under the Doctor’s instructions.

“Right, got it?” the transceiver growled urgently.

“Yeah, yes.”

“Do you have it?”

“Yes,” she emphasised.

Frobisher popped the gull-wing lid on the kit and glanced at the vidscreen. Weaving behind chunks of stained-glass asteroids, the damn thing was nearly on top of them!

Peri winced, shouting, *“Brace for impact!”*

“With *what?*” Frobisher squawked.

The datathumper forced her knee and foot against the arc of her roundel.

“*Mæstric, now!*” cried the Doctor.

Her fingers stabbed down at the keys and Frobisher felt his stomach punch upward into his jaw. Something bellowed in alarm behind the interior door. How far had they fallen? Couldn’t tell. Killed them? Unlikely.

The floor flew away beneath him as he scrambled for the repair kit, watching it hop and skip away from him like a cheery jackalope. There was no way that he’d be able to catch up with it as he was. He took a gamble. With the monomorphic slowness of an oldster, his body ebbed and warped into his last memory of a balloon animal. He drifted past Peri, her nails digging into the edge of the console, knocking himself against the wall as the Leydon jar scattered to the floor in a tangled fission of glass, foil and conducting fluid. The kit followed closely behind it, imitating it in the best vein of mockery mastered by younger siblings. Ion bonder, universal detector, every gizmo and gadget cascading down in a mechanical mudslide.

The clunk of two objects meeting drew her eyes back to the scanner.

“*Fragment incoming!*” she shouted.

Mæstric braced. “The missile’s going to—!”

“*EDF!*” Frobisher hissed with a lunge. Desperation pushing at his sprained physiology, he felt his bones rearrange to match those of a Pantachian rock skipper. Amphibian leg outstretched, he—

A fuming deathlight buffeted the base of the TARDIS’s exterior. The two protoastral objects collided. The datathumper was thrown tumbling from her crèche in the same moment. The shoulder band of her cyberdeck made a *fischt* noise as it snapped past its limits. Something cracked inside it.

The TARDIS’s EDF frizzled unsteadily in Frobisher’s ears before dying down to a hush.

The whifferdill had grabbed the datathumper by the small of her back with an adhesive pad. Barely holding onto the base of the control column’s housing, he threw her back towards the wall. At first, he wasn’t sure if the shudder was the Ship or him. The barricade’s egg-chair toppled loose and the cocktail table pushed the door open to the corridor outside. It wedged in place. Independent of the lurching outside, something moved deep beneath them, obscured by their scarecrow.

The guard!

Gunfire spat angrily from above and through the barricade in ricocheting starlight streaks.

Their enemy reached for their gravity harness. Mæstric exhaled, her aim sharpened and she fired. The starsuited scarecrow's acidic innards burst. Luminescent purple bile seeped down onto the wall and the gunman, ending the confrontation in a single, nauseating slurp.

Mæstric groaned. "Is he dead?"

"Very," frowned Frobisher.

Wave after wave of fretful motion assailed the console room until finally, and against all expectations to the contrary...

There was a lull.

As deep and as profound as when the great whale swallowed the carpenter Geppetto. The kind experienced by pearl divers at the bottom of the ocean. In its depths, the whifferrill's words transformed from a whisper to a shout, "Cricket...?"

"Yeah?" whispered Peri cautiously.

"We alive?"

"Dunno... You in pain?"

"*Nngh*, yes," he heaved. "A considerable amount actually."

"Then, no, we're not dead."

"*Outstanding*. Before I pass out, how's the power?"

"In the red, I don't think—" She looked at the scanner. Her knuckles turned white. "*Hang on!*"

The TARDIS cracked in half.

STAGE 18: “Who Will Bell the Cat?”

Castell’s neck snapped back against the seat of the carrydart. Radiation filled the ship’s instrumentation, disorientating its circuitry and disrupting the unshielded elements of the onboard computer. She didn’t need any instrumentation to pinpoint its source.

The beacon of light shone out from the stream of interstellar debris like an electrocuted grotesque.

It would hit in moments. She memorised the details on her forward scanner. Four columns of probable coordinates with the barest snatch of the final verified numbers to be fed directly into navigation.

Guided by mechanical prowess alone, she jack-knifed the craft to absorb the aftershock of the explosion. The ship was in a bad way already. Her journey through the sargasso had left it only hours, possibly minutes away from structural failure. She felt the controls pitch and jerk in her hand. Smoke poured from the throttle control. VDUs winked out. When the computer returned, it demonstrated the expected false positives. Heat signatures. Radio transmissions. Scatterings of sensory nonsense.

The flight officer shook her head. It was no good, she’d have to negotiate by sight alone.

She double-checked the coordinates in her head. No doubts. No reservations. What she thought she’d seen had to be right, her life was now staked upon it.

The onboard computer registered the code. **8791-LIA.**

The impact point... Czerny, I wonder if that was them?

Had it been a Tyrikan attack? No, it’d come from Early Warning Xi. A retaliation, then? That would imply that an assault force had shattered the blockade or bypassed it entirely. Doubtful.

The carrydart’s sensor equipment bubbled in discomfort before a single klaxon like a flare. More missiles! Her thumb went down instinctively on the countermeasures switch. Fleece-like tufts of light blazed out the shoulders of the craft. Three were caught. They detonated soundlessly.

She pulled around. The fourth! She’d missed it!

The lone seeker caught against an asteroid, one of the new islands in this dark archipelago, propelling chunks of irradiated rock directly into her vehicle's path. The innards of the spacecraft crumpled like popcorn. Glass. Plastic. Tape. Metal. Every blockish contour broke out in hives and pulled a plasteel grimace. Her seatbelt was sliced away by a fist-thick chunk of forward portal. The chair bucked forward. She collided with the imploding mass, her hands splayed to safeguard her face.

Blue filled her vision. Blue blurring to cover the black of deep space.

Her last precious thoughts were of the soft watercolour daubs of dawn on Trailblazer Prime.

Of everything her life represented, her mind chose that.

She thought that rather strange.

Seizing the rare moment of fortune, Sangfroid slipped between the support struts of the fuselage, using the riptide of static from the cockpit radio to silence his footfalls.

He watched as the Doctor attempted to shunt one of the clamps surrounding the transceiver's housing. The brutish slap of the rover's palm unlocked the last. He pulled it free with a single tug.

"Frequency band..." The calico savant tucked it under an arm like a knight's helm.

Fingers brooded across the chapped, multicoloured studs. The transceiver whistled and whined through all conventional communications channels, but their voices seemed irretrievably lost. Switching off the device and closing its timeworn metallic lid, a new sound greeted all three of the carrydart's occupants. The engines swelled on an upward arc to a high-pitched tenor. He could feel his eardrums pop with the change in atmospheric pressure.

Placing the transceiver down, the Doctor and Azovka returned to the unconscious figures in the forward seats. They safely manoeuvred the ship through the narrow passageway and down to the safety of the ground. The faintest whir of motors signalled the locking of the iris they'd have traversed through. The Doctor pulled the cuboctahedron from its socket and tossed it to Azovka.

They stared out the forward portal in concentration.

"Service Entryway 49-C," she read aloud.

"No way back now. Remember where we've parked, Azovka."

“In the forest,” she hummed distantly. “The Nutritional Stratum was dead, if only we’d known about here, it’s so full of life...”

“Yes, yes, yes, curious that. I was wondering why *this* particular Mindcore. It must be near one of the main channels for the bio-bank ejection system. Fertile land, so to speak.”

“*Mmm...*”

“Are you fit to walk?” he asked her.

She wobbled unsteadily, but was adamant. “I am with you.”

He stared out. Soundlessly.

She poked his forearm. “What can you do here? Now. On the Weapon.”

The Doctor sighed and cast a cursory glance back at the transceiver and the doorway. Sangfroid bruised an arm retreating into his hollow.

“That intelligence out there has been trying to signal us for quite some time,” spoke the Doctor. “Likely, through numerous methods of communication, but nothing concrete yet. Nothing to demonstrate complex concepts and make them last. With that transceiver there, I’ll be able to develop a rudimentary lexicon for us to communicate with.”

“It was-will be expecting us.”

“It’d be hardly genteel to disappoint it, wouldn’t it?”

Azovka nodded curtly. “But what makes you think that it won’t want to kill us?”

“A track record of goodliness.”

“We’re going to die.”

“Glad you agree,” he hummed distractedly.

She glinted at him with concern. “You’re still worried about them, aren’t you?”

“Worried?” he blustered. “*Worried*, me? The very idea.”

“*I’m* worried.”

The gesture seemed to rally some of the stranger’s lost composure. He patted her with a paternal gentleness on the head. “You’ve nothing to fear, Azovka. Peri and Frobisher will look after your friend, I promise you. They’re thoroughly capable, I wouldn’t travel with anything less.”

She clutched her bruised shoulder and nodded timidly. “How will you bridge the link with the Mentality?”

He crossed to the transceiver and gave it a swift cursory examination. “Self-sustaining battery supply. Trunked system. Capable of fastening to whatever frequencies become available. Nine-two something was what you said, I believe.”

“Corrosion has worn away the insulation on the landlines everywhere here.”

“Then we stand a chance. We might just catch the signal by accident.”

Azovka gave it her own once-over. “MEGLER spectrum parsers have always been unreliable on lower frequencies, though. They’re notorious for it.”

“We’ll just have to hope for something in a higher band,” he tinkered gently with a slider. “And as we have no alternatives, this little machine will be our lifeline.”

“Our *only* lifeline.”

“A bastion of bargaining power.”

She flinched pre-emptively. “Please d-don’t drop it.”

“Not likely,” he assured. He switched the unit on and stared hard out the forward portal. From behind, where Sangfroid could observe him, his head seemed to almost magnetise to the apex of the ceiling outside. It moved down the thatching of neurons as they wove into a vast dendrite labyrinth, swamped by a secondary layer of translucent dome.

“*Xoxitlalpan.*” remarked the Doctor.

“What?”

“Land of flowers, though I’ll admit they lack the colour.”

“Rather like those black trees,” remarked the girl.

His face loosened. “Wait just a moment... Forest for the trees!”

“Pardon?”

“We weren’t seeing the larger picture at work! Don’t you see, Azovka? They’re diagrammatic outlines building up to a living brain! Neuron-by-neuron!”

“From the margins to here.” Sangfroid could see the theory wheel upward through her body like a kite in the breeze. “It must be massive, if it wasn’t repeated. Who could have done it?”

“Well, who do you think? Who have we seen that would consistently have the reach needed and the tools desired?”

Her face sang with sharp clarity. “The orbots. Are you saying the Weapon itself was responsible?”

“It’s the strongest hypothesis I can muster at this moment. What do you think? Does it sound plausible?”

“Yes, of course.” She noticed he didn’t need her confirmation. His mind had already been made up. She swallowed. “But how do we test that theory?”

“The cuboctahedron?” He proffered the object.

She examined it. “Still looks like any other piece of tech to me.”

“Yes, pity that there’s nothing to—Where’s the compiler?”

Fear kicked Sangfroid in the stomach. A raw, unvarnished thing that sent splinters of acidic pain through his body. His fingers slapped something in the dark, scrabbling for a totem of protection. Something cold, leather-like and heavy.

“Sorry?”

“Our fellow passenger,” the Doctor’s voice adopted a briskness. “He’s gone astray.”

The Naran bit down her self-reproach. “He must be around here somewhere, we’ve got to find him.”

Sangfroid heard them both start for the doorframe. His fingers tightened. He waited. Hesitating, Azovka passed to the furthest side of him. Too far to bridge the distance. His breath caught in the crook of his throat.

“D-Doctor,” she ran a self-conscious finger across her cheekbone. “You should know I have also found—”

Sangfroid struck the Doctor as he passed across his eyeline.

It must have felt like a thunderclap erupting behind the man’s eyes.

The container cut through the red collar of the Doctor’s coat, sending him sprawling to the ground on his knees. Sangfroid struck him. Again and again. First in panic, then with a sickening piston-like power born of hysteria.

Azovka pounced at the compiler, rebounding off her associate’s descending form. The Doctor gripped her shoulder, his startled eyes wide and mouth agape.

Sangfroid bolted down the entry ramp, unclear of how the transceiver had entered his grasp, but certain of his future.

They would be powerless without the box. It would allow him to get away. Far away. Where no one and nothing could ever hurt him. He was safe in the dark. He’d find somewhere to lie against the

artefacture and dream of blissful diamonds in sickly bedrock. The rough with the smooth.

“Don’t worry about me, get after him!” the Doctor shouted. “Move! *Quick!*”

Frobisher rose over the crest of the police box’s roof, clutching one of the iron spokes on the amber lamplight. He heard the outer doors seal below him.

Peri and Mæstric had likely made their way back into the console room from the closed laboratory. A safety precaution, just in case the airlock seal between the interior and exterior had malfunctioned due to a lack of power. He gave a little wave to the scanner with a starsuited arm and turned to face the vast reaches of interstellar space.

Howdy-doo, that’s a lot of space...

Asteroids bounced lazily around him like billiard balls. Shadows loomed and fell with every silent ricochet. Thunderclouds of rock. Their sheer size made him think of cave walls felling against one another like waves on an ocean shoreline. If he shouted out here, it wouldn’t just vanish into the nothingness. Oh, no, the abyss would reach out its arms and clutch it warm to his throat. He would feel it recede, but it would never fade. The overwhelming impermanence made every teeny exhalation count.

So, he remembered to breathe.

Wrapping a length of cable, first around the lamplight, then against the door handle, he wondered whether he attracted batty situations like this or he made them himself. He slung his lifeline over his shoulder, noting that the carrydart wasn’t as far as he’d initially expected. One simple nudge, no different to sliding down an ice-floe, and he’d arrived. Twisted glass and plasteel orbited the blown cockpit in a chequerboard disarray. Its blunted nose rubbed against the TARDIS’s lateral face, but he couldn’t see anyone inside. The pilot’s chair was missing, presumably tossed clear in the impact.

Warning bulbs glittered like rubies against his features. The console made for a technological curtain of glinting dread. Daring him to venture further in. They seemed to fan out—

Something ugly slammed against his side.

He let out a single, inarticulate shriek. Space turned a blind ear.

More a war cry, he quickly rationalised. *A fierce deterrent to the lackadaisical goon. Take that.*

Privately, it took only seconds for him to admit that he was frightened out of his wits. Who wouldn't be?

He steadied himself.

What he'd come to see had just bumped dulcet into plain view. He caught the edges in a crimson haze, but her eyes shone out from the centre of the impressionist sketchpad. The uniformed flightsuit was instantaneously recognisable, even through the grime and torn fabric. The newscasters on Trailblazer Prime had done their utmost to keep the image at the forefront of people's minds at the time.

She was an SRF interceptor pilot, alright. Straight from the CIDA.

The Doc's contact on the Weapon was looking worse for wear. He couldn't tell how badly she'd been hurt until he'd moved closer. She was wreathed in a grim cloud, gently burling as though hung from a child's mobile.

Her teeth bared, she'd bit through her tongue beneath the mask. "*Blugh... skgb...*"

"Tell me your name," he clicked. "Nice and simple."

"*Csstill...*"

Her fists were fastened tight against the armrests of the chair, her wrists bloodied against the clean edge of the underlying metal. She kept twisting them in concentric circles. The pain was keeping her conscious. More than that, it was keeping her alive.

"Alright, Castle. My name's Frobisher. I'm a pal of the Doc's. I'm going to get you back to the TARDIS, but you need to do something for me first, alright? I need you to... You listening? I need you to let go of the chair."

Her hands splayed outwards like stalagmites.

"Alright, we're going to try moving."

"*Mno*," she inhaled sharply.

"We haven't got—*listen to me!*—ain't gotta choice. Y'understand me?"

Choleric eyes stabbed out from the dark. "*Dnmt talk btt chcce t'me...*"

Peri lashed her finger back from the side panel in the TARDIS console. The electrical jolt stung like a wasp's barb and the skin around her fingernail chuffed black with residue. There was a silver

lining, however, the neon glow of the central column was now restored to its former glory.

Angrily, she slapped the panel shut.

“Done. I’ll mind the door,” she said to Mæstric. “How’s it coming there?”

The innards of the young datathumper’s cyberdeck sprawled around her like so much pocket lint. Boards, wires and circuitry countless revolutions behind that of the Ship in terms of its sophistication. Unfortunately, the more primitive nature of the device meant that problems were more complex to repair.

Looking up from her delicate work with the laboratory’s soldering iron, Mæstric said, “It’s mostly done. We can make the trip to Trailblazer as soon as—What are you doing?”

While she’d been speaking, Peri had returned to the next room to ferry forward a series of corked flasks and ampoules. Complex arrangements of glassware in tinctures ranging from river blue to soda orange. Some sweated from heat, some from cold. She set them all down in a conspiratorial huddle, not too far from the gaping maw of their former barricade.

“Just evening the odds a bit, Mæstric,” Peri enlightened.

Mæstric scratched her nose. “Thought that room looked like a glassmaker’s after-party.”

“Most of it bit the dust, yeah, but some were better at taking a beating than others, though.” The botanist held up a translucent phial covered in scratches. She turned to Mæstric. “When they get out of that workshop, they’re going to come in force. A lot of ‘em. No way I’m going to make it easy for them to get in here.”

“Did you prepare all those with Frobisher?”

“No,” she acceded. “Some of these belong to the Doctor.”

“Your friend on the transceiver?” Intrigued, the Naran put down the soldering iron, crossed to Peri, picking up one of the flasks. She could feel the faintest vibration. Holding it to her ear, a curious expression danced on her features. “Quite a number look to, er... bubble,” she finished weakly.

“Bubble?” echoed Peri.

“Hoping for something more volatile. Is that all they do?”

Peri ticked her face. “The Doctor’s big on toil when he wants to be. It should cause enough trouble.”

Mæstric gave her flask a sniff and mused, “I’m not worried about the froth on this one, so much as the growling. Listen.”

Leaning closer, the botanist could definitely hear it. An Alsatian snarl. Whirling back and forth. “Could say I’m surprised... but—”

Something clattered at the end of the corridor.

“Did you...?” asked Mæstric.

Peri waved a hand. “Get us gone.”

“Poor choice of words.”

Mæstric crossed back on her haunches to the tatters of her digital domain. The acrid smoke tickling her nostrils, her hand around the nearest flask like a baseball pitcher, two simple words escaped Peri’s lips, “Not yet—”

Fate had other ideas. In her haste, Mæstric accidentally ran her soldering iron between two connectors, grounding the open circuit. Peri saw a streak of electricity leap up through the girl’s arms as her limbs galvanised her into a stonework statue. She flew backward, rigidity shattered, and lay still against the wall.

“Mæstric?” Peri crossed over and shook her. “Mæstric, you need to wake up... *Wake up!*”

As they came nearer to the first and oldest Mindcore in A/0-127-129, claustrophobia overwhelmed the Doctor and Azovka. They grew uneasy, each beginning to feel more and more that they were wandering into a trap. Perhaps they were.

Their sprint decelerated to a careful haunt.

Part of the phenomenon was physical. They were compelled, by some unimaginable drowsy weight, down one route. Despite the overwhelming fingers of biomes that fanned silently in this biochrome hearth. The cold spires of the frozen trees steamed as though vampiric in the sun while black-thatched flowers flinched inward from the brackish frost. Their flesh was damp with greenhouse light that made the hairs on the backs of their necks tingle. The geography of the terrain was so peculiar they were in danger of getting lost in their own shadows. But it lacked that steaming jungle seethe that one found on Yalam, Jungrock or even Madhionar. The blue-green hum of flies and life in the undergrowth as one moved through it.

“Maybe not so quickly,” warned the Doctor. “This terrain looks rather treacherous.”

The air scratched as if a great violence had befallen the place. The further in they went, the greater the sense of a bleak early morning grew. Their exclamations should have brought sizable retribution by now. Malfunctions? Possible, but unlikely. Further observation? Well, given how much of a prized ant in a tin-plated terrarium he'd been treated thus far that seemed both possible and probable. He shook his head and put that line of thought out of his mind. Explanations would have to wait until the matter before him was resolved.

"The Mindcore unit must be nearby." Azovka squeezed her fingers. "What are we looking for, specifically? That? The bio-bank ejection system?"

"Ejection system," he nodded. "Disrupt the centrifuge and its catalyser coils and you'll knock out Vog Mur's scheme totally. What does it look like?"

"Going by what we know of modern terraforming techniques, it'd be sort of a... mushroom-shaped series of tubes. Probably."

"We seem to be on the right track then, look."

The Doctor indicated the rim of the transparent, hollow-centred circlet now looming overhead. The precipitating dome's interior had the same mutable qualities of an upturned umbrella in a thunderstorm.

"Similar principle was applied on your planet a few decades ago." He wriggled his fingers. "Seawater evaporates up inside deep-sea domes to create freshwater condensation. Down it comes on crops as though it were natural rain."

Azovka shivered with excitement. "Incredible. I've never seen it applied on such a scale before."

He knelt down and dug his fingers through the soil. It didn't take long for his hands to catch on a wide slab of plasteel.

"Shelving..." He dug deeper, eventually to the top shelf. Between two sprouting translucent specimen boxes, he pulled their intact cousin from its housing and examined it. "'*Regiis dormientes.*' Hmm... Sleeping royal. I wonder if they only grow in blue?"

"This must be gene-bank storage," Azovka concluded.

"No wonder the soil hasn't compacted," he bit his lip and stamped his foot experimentally. "There's a whole level beneath us enshrouded in plant roots."

"We have a problem then."

He looked puzzled. “In what way?”

“Well, if it’s anything like the Proscenium, the equipment to control the ejection system must be down there somewhere, right?”

“Not necessarily,” the Doctor returned the sample to its tray with three gentle taps. “The rail terminus was up on a support. Why not the controls here?”

Azovka hummed, not quite convinced.

“Pessimism is not a survival trait, Azovka.” He raised his head and inhaled the humid air. “Astonishing. The cross-contamination has created an entirely new ecosystem sustained by water from the malfunctioning air conditioning system.”

A voice called out to them in the wilderness. “*It isn’t water.*”

The Doctor stood. Alert. Cupping his hands around his mouth, he called out, “Sangfroid?” There was no answer. He paused to review the surrounding flora most carefully and nodded in agreement. “No, he’s right, it isn’t. This is something altogether more unusual.”

“Can you see him?” inquired Azovka.

The Doctor shook his head and lowered his hands.

“He’s scared,” she cautioned.

“I know.”

“Scared all the time.”

“I know...” The Doctor wasn’t unsympathetic. “Talk to the poor fellow. You understand him...”

“Why not you? You understand, too.”

He shook his head. “I must get that transceiver. By hook or crook.”

“You’re worried about our pursuers?”

The rover nodded. “We must be ready for them. Sooner, rather than later.”

She scratched at the humidity clinging to her forearms, raising her voice. “There’s something else...”

“Look to the arrangement of the trees...” roused the compiler with disquiet.

The Doctor leaned closer to mutter in her ear. “He’s close enough to answer us...”

“Yes...” She paused, distracted, then started nodding more excitedly. “Yes, he’s right, they’re all swaying *inward*. T-Towards the centre of the chamber.”

The rover took his index finger off his upper lip, eyeing the jungle. He projected his voice, “I believe our young friend knows more than what he’s sharing.”

The Mogran swallowed, reproachful. “Look closer.”

How much closer? wondered Azovka. The vegetation looked peculiar even in this schism of biomes. It was leathery. She licked her lips and recognised the taste in the atmosphere. Protein. Enzymes and antibodies that in higher quantities would have smothered her metabolism and seized any attempt from her body at dialysis. It wasn’t for plants, not originally...

The taste...

Then she saw why.

Mantled like fleshy stalactites in amongst the leaves were scraps of some synthetic garment. Perhaps what might have once been a grey tunic, its unfurled ruby collar and a gilded stripe down its middle having both long since lost their glister. They could see two hollows just at eye-level, no larger than a melon scoop. Below it, a mouth yawed open with a hydrogen-rich basin of off-colour reeds, spilling out from an acid death mask. Its lower jaw bellied as if on the brink of swallowing it whole. The Doctor leant down into the sand and pulled an ardent crimson shell hiding beneath one of the roots—the cracked oddments of a space helmet.

“No...” whispered Azovka, she felt the earth churn beneath her, companioning the red-eyes in her stomach. “No, no, no, no...”

“I think we’ve finally discovered what happened to the crew,” muttered the Doctor.

Her face was barren of expression. “It... *No...*”

There was a hollowness to Sangfroid’s cant, which he couldn’t disguise. Not an emptiness, but an absence. “This is what we aspire to. I thought it would be easier in person...”

The Doctor stepped over a fallen orbot, its photographic eye cracked.

“It must have smelt like a charnel house in here...” The rover knelt to one of the roots, what had perhaps once been a foot. “The young, the old, they all must have come here... All of them... These poor people...”

Sangfroid emerged from the frost-sugared mangrove with the transceiver held ceremonially in his hands. His face looked as

though it was contorted into a smile, but he began to snuffle and whimper. “I find this place unbearable...”

“They became the boughs for the branches. They...” Azovka swallowed.

“Did it to themselves,” whispered the Mogran. “The one who taught me how to access the Mentality... She didn’t listen to Vog Mur, suffered the same. You still want to communicate with the thing they created?”

The Doctor’s brow creased. He plucked the device tentatively from the miner’s grasp. Azovka dug her hand into her jacket pocket, her finger tracing the object within, and warred with herself over the sublime repugnance of cadaver trees.

At the exact moment that the Doctor, Azovka and Sangfroid rested unsettled into the Mindcore, Commander Kuron and his contingent of Ordoheed militaria were advancing from their bridgehead in the TARDIS workshop back towards the console room.

Mæstric fought her way back to consciousness like an alpine climber up Everest. Peri gave Mæstric one last desperate shake. “Wake—*up!*”

As the Naran regained her bearings, the botanist was already moving. The first amphora from the collection was away. It cracked against its target. Phosphorus ignited in the open air, clinging to the armoured suit like a hungry animal, its owner flailing back in shock from the unexpected heat and light. Their senses blinded.

“*Got ‘em!*” Peri threw another.

Bullets stung the next improvised grenade causing it to splinter midair. A fine powder seemed to clump midair. Figures emerged through the cloud.

“*Mæstric!*” she called, unaware her friend was already conscious.

“*Here! I’m here!*” answered the datathumper.

She grabbed something from the omnium-gatherum of glassware and chucked it into the hallway likewise. The results were less bombastic, but no less damaging. A fluorescent green tar clung between the next militarian’s joints, locking him in place where he stood.

“Right. He’s not going anywhere!”

Their rebellion, however proved to be short-lived. Peri's initial concerns had proved correct. Far from being idle, the Ordoheed had used the workshop to their own advantage.

The constellating dust was thick enough to obscure the latest figure, emerging with a rifle entirely unlike that of his peers. Mæstric had mistaken it for something quite innocuous at first. A music stand. Decidedly unusual for an armed gunman to wield as a weapon. Then she saw the cylindrical snout and the long vacuum tube extending back down the corridor.

It huffed and puffed with a familiar low rumble.

"Get out of the way!" she shouted, perhaps futilely.

Their newest siege weapon was a flamethrower.

Kuron fired into the console room.

Out in the void beyond the TARDIS, two starsuited figures drifted through the chilled silence. Frobisher's new acquaintance was restless and in a bad way. If he could get her aboard, she'd have to go straight to the sickbay.

Castell was forcing something into Frobisher's arms. *"Blue... blue... sk—sk—"*

"Stop—stop will ya," he insisted gently, trying to push it back.

"Don't strain yourself. You can tell me when we get inside."

The object felt cold. Rectangular. Artificial material. He was too busy navigating back to the police box to really examine it in any great detail. The wooden doors opened. Blinding light from the console room flared out into void. As he swung the door inward, a dirty snowball of energy stabbed out from the pewter-grey through Castell's bloodied flank. Her arms leapt upward in shocked agony as though a wooden marionette caught alight. The backward momentum pushed her beyond Frobisher's reach. Her body crumpled. Legs crooked. Arms out and likewise.

Frobisher was struck by the deadened silence. She didn't even scream.

He felt something seize his arm and drag him into the console room as the main doors swung shut. Peri was on his arm. The central column was rising and falling with its twinkling gold and red crown. She pulled him to the ground and kept him there.

His voice sounded unreal in his own throat. "Castle?"

"We're materialising," reported Mæstric.

“Where’s the Doctor’s friend?” Peri asked.

Frobisher swallowed, shaking his head. *No good.*

Flight Officer Malla Castell was dead. He’d been moving her only moments before and she was dead. He’d barely known the woman, but it was no less a shock.

“Did you get it?” the datathumper asked.

Frobisher held up the object—a tape—slick with a stranger’s blood. “Oh, I’ve got it, jack...”

Flames licked savagely into the console room.

“Fire? *Fire!*” he screamed.

He could feel his starsuit’s artificial skin sweat. There was no room to manoeuvre. Their only saving grace was that while they were pinned down, their enemy had no way of passing through the doorframe. By the time the console had chimed for a successful materialisation, the trio were practically scratching at the outer doors to leave.

Frobisher was first. “One!”

Mæstric was second with her cyberdeck. “Two!”

“*Three.*” Peri would have been the last. He knew that because the final thing he’d seen before the exterior doors had swung shut was a bolt of energy overtaking her. Sparks spat through the gap. He couldn’t see behind them, but Peri may have doubled back towards the console to trigger the handle. Brave, if she had. Bearcat always was brave.

He felt an instinct to turn back, charge the Ship, but Mæstric kept him straight on his priorities.

“They’ll kill her before you can act.”

“I can’t just—”

“*I know.*” Her eyes burned. “I know. Look, they need us not to talk, right? They’ll find that out from Peri, she’ll confirm it. She’s useful to them as a hostage. Find your friends and we’ll find help for her.”

Frobisher moved to protest, but he just sighed. The dame was right.

“Let’s just hope they’re on the same wavelength,” he agreed.

Sore from holding the transceiver, the Doctor gently lowered it to the crook of a nearby tree. Worn fingernails switched through

various macrocycles as he muttered inconclusively to himself.
“26.300... No reaction... 26.400... Quite the same...”

Azovka sat down beside him, listening to the snort of gurgling from its speakers. “One of the electrostatic coils sounds as though it’s been knocked out of alignment.”

“Mmn?” his eyes flicked up. He widened them, nodding approvingly. “Oh, yes.”

“You didn’t tell me.”

The Doctor thumbed the side of the machine experimentally.
“Tell you what?”

“What difference do you think this will make contacting the Central Mentality?”

“Well...” he switched it off, folding his hands over his knees.
“You can only hear sounds in a particular range of frequencies, correct?”

She pulled her head uncertainly. “Only a range, yes.”

“And you, Sangfroid?”

Sitting nearby against the bough of a low-hanging branch, the compiler’s eyes flicked upward nervously. He didn’t answer.

“Same notion.” The Doctor popped open the transceiver’s fascia and began tinkering. “The smallest detail can have the most dramatic consequences. On a planet you’ve likely never heard of, there were warriors who encountered equipment taken from their enemies. A device that they were told was a shin mortar. Due to a translation error between their prisoners and themselves, they misunderstood that *shin* in the enemy language was their word for *new*. Not the front element of the leg below the knee as they’d assumed.”

Azovka winced empathetically. “By my eyes...”

“And thus...” He clicked the casing back into place. “They tried balancing these weapons on their ankles with predictably disastrous results. Broken bones, misfires and fatal casualties by the dozen.”

“What’s your point?” asked Sangfroid.

“Misinformation doesn’t cost resources, it often also costs intelligent life. Listen, old chap,” the Doctor began. “We’re not asking for your trust straight away. Anyone would find that unreasonable. We’ve no designs on you, we simply want to communicate with the Central Mentality.”

“And once you have access, what then?”

“Well, you’d surely understand how it operates,” suggested Azovka. “Help us and you’ll have the opportunity to speak with it. Freely. No intervention from us.”

“Why? What could I gain...?”

“That much is obvious,” the Doctor’s voice gained a fortress-like quality. “I saw the operations room. That efficiency, that unswerving obedience among the compilers. They’ll never be allowed to progress beyond where they are now.”

“We’re too valuable to discard,” argued the compiler.

“You can offer them something more,” Azovka’s eyes shone. “Think about it. You could live without fear. B-Be free to make your own choices. Don’t you want that? For yourself, for your people?”

The shuddering subsided, replaced with a dangerously preternatural calm. “Hardly matters now...”

“What do you mean by that?” The Doctor studied the Mogran closer. “If you’re this dedicated, why give me the transceiver?”

His voice softened. “There’s... There’s nothing you can do now, I’m sorry. It’ll be quick, I promise.”

“What will...” the Doctor closed one eye. Pained. Distracted. “Be...?”

Sangfroid shrunk back from them both.

“It will be quick...” he mumbled.

The Doctor had trouble focussing, there was something primal that pricked at the folding corners of his consciousness. Every detail of the world seemed to ebb and spiral around him, its edges turning to plates of solid colour. He could hear the voices of the machine—a triumvirate of timbres. All vying for control within the same mainframe.

He measured the vast reaches of the satellite, its chrome mountains and plasteel vales, and considered the vast energy demands that would be necessary to activate its bio-bank ejectors.

If that thought could be read...

Space demands... the presences whispered through the transceiver.

“Time answers,” he replied to no one in particular. A sharp inhalation, his body went rigid, arms splayed upwards as if to defend himself from attack. The tree roots whipped upward, slicing through the softer foliage and surged around the triumvirate’s arms

and legs. Pollinating orbots emerged from the thicket around the tendrils with hateful eyes.

A defeatist croak snapped from within the box as one of its dials spun out of alignment.

“It’s me!” he cried. “Me, the Doctor! Who are you?”

(wRoNg qUeStIoN...) ground the machine.

“Alright,” The Doctor nodded slower and slower as vital oxygen leached from his curtailed air supply. “Alright, who... *were* you?”

i dO NoT KnOw. <I ReMeMbEr nAtAsIa.> (I ReMeMbEr tHe vIrUs.) i rEmEmBeR mE. <I rEmEmBeR> (nO MoRe.)

“You sound... *s-sounnd...*”

As though it were gargling a blender. *<iT... bUrTs.>*

“I know... I may be able to help, if—” His sputtering tongue sandwiched between his teeth. “If...!”

He could keep his head.

(wHy?)

“*Trust...* Remember? Trust that I’ll know how to...” his voice faded, his limbs subsumed in a feathering numbness.

Azovka was trying to speak, her hand trapped against the clip of her jacket.

There was something hot against the Doctor’s neck. Death? He felt his knees begin to give out. He’d tried all he could, endured as much as he could. It wasn’t fair enough to expect anything else from him. Hadn’t he done enough? Endured enough? Suffered enough? Surely, this was enough?

He forced one word to his swelling lips.

“Enough...”

With one last Herculean effort, he forced iron into his knees, clenching his teeth, standing defiant to the Central Mentality. His double heartbeat drumming in his jawline, he felt like the ocean tide resisting the pull of the Moon. *“Enough!”* He would not be bullied, not be cowed, he would have his answers and so would it. His boisterous baritone was thin as a reed. “What do... *you* want? Not this *parasite*, you!”

wHaT Do yOu wAnT, (ItTIE tHiNg?)

“To understand. Simply to understand. Mm? *Mmm?*”

That got its attention. He could feel its physical hold begin to slacken, one voice—one aspect—overpowering the others.

Two words heaved upwards from the roof of his mouth, “Release us....”

It did one better than that. In the patches of metal blown clear of sand and dirt by the attack, a sapphire-purple glow undulated and expanded. He looked to Azovka, who freed herself from the tendrils with her *vaiśhali*, but she had no explanation for the change around them.

“How did...?” mouthed Sangfroid. “You exploited the empathetic computing.”

The Doctor loosened his collar, pressuring his wounds. “The whole satellite, from its Resonance Gems to its psionic amplifiers, is constructed on the principle.”

“What principle?”

He leaned down and tickled one of the larger flowers, its three-pronged stem worming out from the soil to climb atop his wrist. The little budling trilled contentedly.

“With our thoughts,” he said, “we make this world.”

STAGE 19: “Where the Jungle’s Born”

Blue-Sky was roused from sleep by the insistent whine of a response request from the communications column. The air listed lazily around him, his hand slapping the orange-red confirmation switch, brought Asa back to the conscious world as well.

The voice on the other end of the line had a comforting neutrality to it. Not passive, but placid. The timbre and tones expected of a paramedic or fire-fighter. A thick layer of muck-like distortion made it sound as though it were coming from beneath a bank of reeds. *“Can you understand me? Repeat, can you understand me? This is Fire Control 1.”*

“Fire Control 1, this is Asa Nayuta with Blue-Sky. Evacuation Register, 12-11-ACQ. We can hear you.”

“Barely,” added Blue-Sky pessimistically.

There was a delay of about ten or twenty seconds while the information was shuttled from landline to landline, jumping up towards the receptor equipment established in the tunnel systems.

“We can detect your life signs,” the speaker replied. *“Is there anyone or anything in Corridor ZX-101 on Black Level?”*

Asa cast his mind back. “Can confirm, no one, nothing.”

“Are you stable?”

“The boy’s condition is stable,” growled Blue-Sky. “I’ve rigged the air conditioning unit to provide condensation where possible. I’ve been dumping it into his suit. Request replacement.”

“Right. I’ll pass it through. We’re going to discharge an entryway through the outer wall to the blast doors and enter the necessary codes to open it.”

“Be advised, personnel are infected with a foreign contaminant.”

The pause went longer than expected. Asa hypothesised that he must have been conferring with his team, ensuring that everyone was aware of the dangers before they continued.

“What’s important now is that you remain conscious and aware. It’ll take a while for my team to reach you, they’ll be picking up what personnel they can on the way, but you’re the only ones with access to a working Vidphōn. They’ll call upon you for assistance and I need you to be within reach. Can you do that for me? Are you safe?”

“Yes,” the demosponge rinsed nervously. “That’s something we can do.”

The delay was agonising.

“*Are you saf—?*”

“No,” Asa choked back the rising tide of panic. “But it’s something we can do.”

Another half-minute passed. They were greeted with the cruel babble of garbled static. Neither the analyst, nor the engineer had the strength, nor the nerve left to wrest the incident back to their control. They hunkered in the dark, listening to the bleak tornado whistle of landline atmospheric and tried desperately to envision the world they could emerge to if they were ever found.

Fire control teams responded to the signals from the CIDA complex as soon as they had extinguished a working corridor through the overcity fires. The population centre of Urshi’s botanical gardens had felt the worst of it, their lush foliage left easy prey by malfunctioning ventilation systems heaving strangling ash and desperate embers through the dark metropolis, where they would spread their dust-like death upon the horizon.

The probe had hit one of the corporate sector’s main power plants and triggered a cascade failure in both primary and backup systems. The stark legacy left by the inferno would likely be felt for decades to come. Loss of life had been kept to what rescue coordinators regrettably referred to as “tolerable” conditions. The orange carpeting of the strongroom beneath the workers’ feet had hardened into a hideous bramble patch from the overload. Cutting equipment and careful concentration were required to ensure the integrity of their heat-suits.

They passed through the artificial vein in the rock—they must have been over a hundred-thousand kilometres beneath the earth now—into the evacuation shaft. Sweat poured from their bodies as they moved through the free-standing substructure, around the two million springs that kept the operations complex independent of its surroundings in case of situations just like the one unfolding. They climbed the utility lines that were constructed in a similar manner and began applying the neutron charges necessary to breach the ‘soft point’ set up for emergency services.

The explosion could be felt on Asa and Blue-Sky's level and not too far away from a blue crate in Corridor ZY-102. Frobisher and Mæstric pushed on, their eyes still adjusting to the darkness of the passageways beyond. The eruption beget a small number of guards from within the TARDIS as well. Assassins and killers set to eliminate the two runaways.

It was a maze. A death trap.

The transceiver's delicate array of gleaming dials and neon switches blinked solemnly in the Mindcore. Over the past several minutes, the Doctor had tried time and time again to re-establish contact with the Central Mentality. However, someone or something was now blocking transmissions in and out of the area. Both on the higher and lower bands.

Consequently, he felt his attention had begun to wander.

He observed that the lower levels of the Mindcore had been dedicated to the storage of genetic material, true, but there was still no sign of where the artificial intelligence had been cradled itself. It could have been further down beneath the dense layers of foliage, but after a deeper examination of their surrounds, the jackanapes had his own theory.

He craned his neck. "Azovka, have you noticed something?"

"About the neurons on the ceiling?" she asked.

"Yes, they all congregate around a central cist above the dome, see it?"

"I..." she squinted. "You're right, they do. We must have missed it from the carrydart."

"Easy mistake to make. It's difficult to tell with that canopy in the way, but I believe that could be a stairway, leading into..."

"...the housing of the Central Mentality itself."

"Right."

"The carrydart won't fit into the gap. How do we get up there? Climb?"

"Oh, no, no, no," he tutted amiably. "Hardly necessary."

He passed Sangfroid, still deep in thought from their discussion earlier.

Privately he lamented the compiler's hardships. If only he could see past the cruelties of his masters. In many ways, he was learning one of the hardest lessons of all. To overcome the rationalisations

of a long-term victim and acknowledge the harm a false protector had done.

Exhaling sharply, the Doctor approached one of the pollinating orbots with a clutched lapel in one hand and the cuboctahedron in the other. It milled gently from flower-to-flower, as if possessed by its own musical rhythm, with the grace of a Bolshoi danseur noble.

“If you don’t mind,” he tapped it gently with his knuckles. “I was wondering if you might be able to help my friends and I reach...” It drifted past him, “our...” completely oblivious. “Oh.”

Sangfroid broke from his introspection to watch. His eyes a dull, tired jaundice.

Azovka shrugged at the Doctor apologetically, but he waved it away.

Far from dissuaded, he tried again with one of its danseuses. “I doubt very much that you all dance to the same obstreperous tune. The Central Mentality wishes for me to understand, well, first I must see what I understand. I must have conclusive proof of my suspicions if I am to help. Surely, that isn’t too much to ask? Not now.”

If he were more easily swayed by electronic mimicry, the Doctor would have interpreted the orbot’s gesture as a sideways glance. It peeled away to rejoiner with its fellows, seemingly disinterested in the scientist’s plight. However, after a few moments, it returned with a friend. The two were joined by a pair making four more. Those four extended to eight and soon there were more than enough for whatever task lay ahead.

The original shone its manipulating laser into the dirt, burning soft pillows of glass into an epigraph.

“H-O-W? How. How...?” The Doctor thought for a moment. “A magic carpet ride?”

Another look, one might have interpreted it as confusion.

He placed a hand against his temple and concentrated. “Like so. Achievable?”

They fell like chequers—fastening themselves at the hemisphere to one another—until they had formed a tightly-packed raft.

“All aboard who’s coming aboard,” he called.

Azovka and Sangfroid joined him at the embarkation point. He hopped aloft with a single bound.

“Azovka?” he asked.

She joined aboard.

“Sangfroid?”

He stared off into the distance behind them. “I think... I...”

“Do you want to stay here?” the Doctor asked.

He shook his head experimentally.

“You’re thinking of your people, aren’t you?” Azovka’s eyes shone as she leant forward. “You can offer them something more. Think about it. You could live without fear. B-Be free to make your own choices. Don’t you want that? For yourself, for your people?”

“I’m... not...” Guiltily, he pressed his fingers to his chest. “I can’t... I’m...”

“Great Gallifrey, this is merely common sense,” interjected the Doctor. “A good leader does what is best for their people, surely?”

Sangfroid’s resolve built in his chest like a songbird’s morning chorus. “You’re right.”

The Doctor relaxed. “Good. No time to waste th—”

“*They’re over here!*” called the compiler.

The voice of Vog Mur boomed from an external speaker. “*Stay where you are.*”

The Doctor’s hearts quickened. He didn’t need to see their attackers, he could already hear them. He pulled Azovka aside, lunging from the raft into the underbrush in a pained tangle of limbs.

He could hear Sangfroid shrieking, “*She told you to stay—!*”

Ossified moss and edible fungi burst ablaze like a struck match above the Doctor’s head. Something clung to his face. There was the sickening rattle and a scream from Sangfroid. The Doctor’s nostrils stung with the discharge of power packs and disturbed flora. The matted arabesque caved beneath their combined weight. The visitant felt a root balanced against his neck like the nape of a drawshave. In that fraction of a second, he saw three forms flash at the boundaries of his vision. One stopped, two kept going. No way of telling what was what. He threw his arm out to halt the one on his left.

The hangman paused for the Doctor and Azovka, but Sangfroid continued his plummet.

A golden slick trailed down the roots like paint.

The scream stopped.

“Doctor?” Azovka tried to ask, but her lungs were filled with dirt.

“I’m sorry...” he gulped in a breath. “He’s dead.”

It sounded so pathetically glib. He opened his mouth to elaborate, but there was nothing more he could say. Nothing more he could do. With as much care as those brief seconds would allow, the Doctor rolled with his arms against his chest up onto one of the sunken geneshelves. It held his weight. He leaned across and pulled the precariously hanging transceiver back into his grasp.

The two survivors rose to a crouch.

Over the bough, they could see the raft had remained. Unable to act against those who represented the Resonance Gems, but still willing to assist those who might grant them freedom.

Azovka brandished something from her pocket. Squat. Tablet-shaped. Almost like a pen-case.

“*Militaria!*” she called. “In my hand was-will be the destruct mechanism for a Haloster L235 autobomb. The kind used in the missiles launched on Natinaf. Linked to a dead man’s switch! You all know what that means.”

The Doctor’s face betrayed a moment of disappointment. She steeled herself against his judgement, her voice gaining a new clarity. “You have already killed a friend! Don’t risk a stray shot with an enemy!”

Saved by the momentary pause in fighting. He and Azovka climbed back aboard the raft.

“Climb,” the Doctor heaved. “*Climb, go!*”

The wind whirled against them as they rose up through into the treeline above. He shrugged off his coat and held it above them to shield their bodies from where the branches were at their cruellest. A coal black winter on Gallifrey could not have roused a more armoured image. Small penknife cuts and slaps mobbed them as they rose until finally, they reached the reflective surface of the dome. They saw their own faces for the first time since they had escaped the Proscenium. Hardened with determination.

They ascended parallel to the cist, close to the pulsating veins of hæmofluid that wove an open circuit up through into the Control Housing’s heart.

“What makes you think they won’t try something?” asked Azovka.

The Doctor lifted the transceiver. “With you, young lady, I doubt it. With me—”

At that moment, one of the sealed doorways slid open. Two militaria emerged. They took aim and fired. The shot splashed into the transceiver. The anthill holocaust stench of vanquished ozone snapped up. Forward momentum carried the box off to the side, the Doctor's hands still tightly bound around its handles, he went with it in a sharp dive.

"Doctor?"

He snatched out his arm. He couldn't see directly above him, but his knuckles snagged against something cold and certain. He pushed. Pain shocked through his shoulders, feet tingling against the sensation of empty space, he planted his skidding feet against the wall. The twisted scrap metal of the handles acted as makeshift pitons. Tangled wires seized the outcrop like a mesh. Pain harpooned through his shoulder muscles. He held fast!

But, overhead, the orbots continued forward with Azovka. Straight into the waiting arms of her executioners.

Frobisher paused at the doorway to glance above him. At the capsule-shaped red light that illuminated the space above the frame.

"Corridor 1A1J..." he read aloud.

Mæstric peered further ahead into the half-darkness. "Watch your head."

The roof ahead of them had sagged under its own construction. The pair had to crouch closer and closer to the ground, the further along they walked. There was something rather humbling about discovering that a much touted public enemy of the Tyrikans was just as fragile as anything they themselves would have created. All that rhetoric, just exhaust and mirrors. What else was new?

"We going the right way?" she asked.

"You saw the site map," replied Frobisher, "we're still en route to the Astral Collaboratory."

"You're sure your friends will be there?"

"Less sure now than I was, but from the description it sounds as good a place as any to get our bear—"

"Damn!"

"Squark!"

They bumped simultaneously into their latest locked door. Mæstric leant across and tapped the entry coder. She could hear the

hydraulics try to engage, but something hissed from a cut line somewhere. A thick solvent pooled between the two halves.

“Well...” Frobisher dusted his starsuited hands. “We can’t have stayed lucky forever.”

“Now would be a good time for a magic trick.”

He concentrated. Molecules flexed in anticipation, until finally... nothing much happened. He blew a raspberry, shaking his featureless features. “No dice.”

Despite all the damage, all the carnage they’d witnessed so far, the Institute’s internal systems had survived remarkably intact. Automatic sensors and manual releases all functioned as intended. The systems had been built to last and it showed. The pair hoped that there were still people around to commend it.

Mæstric ran her fingers across her scalp. “What do we do? Go around?”

The blank face beneath the visor wriggled his spectacles. “No need, got an idea.”

He leant across and detached his starsuit’s arm, giving it a solid whack to activate the rigidity protocol that would lock it in place. Less of a chance to break a limb if the body was fortified or, at least, that was the prevailing theory.

He forced the hand against the lip of the doorframe and heaved as though jemmying open a crate.

The vidscreen chirped at Blue-Sky. On it, was a washed out blue-grey image. Three bipeds travelling down one of the connecting access passages. He instructed the computer to identify them using its databanks as it’d done for other personnel still trapped beneath the rubble. Nothing. No identification tag. Nor did he recognise any of the faces, not from an image this granulose. They didn’t seem to know the layout of the Institute and their body language was remarkably calm for the disastrous situation they were all faced with.

One was carrying what at first glance seemed to be a...

A simple, awful conclusion punched him in the stomach.

He hit the communicator switch again, careful to conserve enough language that it didn’t become a garbled mess in transit. “Rescue team,” he said, “saboteurs on your approach.”

Another delay, then, “Understood. Enemy combatants to be treated as expected. Stay where you are, we’ll come to you.”

Only a few metres away, Frobisher heard a crowbar crack and the two halves of the doorway gave out.

“*Voilà, mon ami!*” he reattached the arm. “Funny how the world can work sometimes.”

“Hilarious.” Mæstric gave the door a final kick to force the two halves apart.

The door sluiced open, but before they could proceed Mæstric started. She was nose-to-nose with a man she had never seen before. He was wearing a uniform. She’d never seen it first-hand, but she knew it from the Telefaxes. He had to be one of the rescue team. There was something in his hands, cold and mechanical, she could tell what that was immediately.

Bewilderment passed between them. His eyes went wide with fear.

Frobisher had pulled her aside into the gap between the door and the wall. Her mind caught up to her body as the sound of a hummingbird’s wings studded the air where she’d been standing undefended not moments ago—

“*Return fire!*” connecting with the Ordoheed squad sneaking up upon them.

Together, Frobisher and Mæstric came down on the uniformed gunman like a tonne of bricks. The machine lasgun spun from his hands with a savage slamming of wrists. A charm of similar sounding birdcalls rapped through the air over the fallen boy.

Other figures, other members of the rescue team and militaria joined the fray on both sides.

No time to shut the door, Frobisher and Mæstric left the body where it’d fallen and ran.

“They’re shooting at us!” he shielded his face from the ricochet of sparks. “*Geez!* They’re *all* really shooting at us!”

Mæstric cursed herself. “Stupid! I left the gun!”

Frobisher snatched a glimpse of red. “1A1O, in there! Behind that robot!”

The ducked in behind the solemn mnemodron, letting its bulk shield them from the approaching gunman, but they had other problems. The sound of battle grew fierce. There was no need to let

the imagination wander. They could see bodies being dragged back to cover, ricochets and dead shots sending gunmen tumbling.

Frobisher hoped the rescue team would win, but their chances were unlikely.

Mæstric threw her shoulder against the door. “*Jammed!*”

He tried the starsuit arm again. The door wouldn’t budge. He let loose a swift foot and it connected sharply with something rather unusual—a horizontal root. Pushing its way under the doorframe by digging up under the leaf. He tried his arm there.

“C’mon, you...” It tore outward like a soda can.

“Can you wriggle through?”

The suit was too constricting. Rats! This was how a well-dressed whifferdill like himself was going to die. Choked on his own physiology. What kind of whifferdill was he? Spent and worn out like an old chair... no better than a worm in a...

“Robot,” Frobisher pointed urgently. “Robot! Power!”

Mæstric switched it on to a shower of sparks and pawed over its insides. “Someone’s torn out the connector cable.”

Whifferdills are composed primarily of unstable molecules which allow their forms to shift and warp to whatever whim they so desire—within reason.

“They’re coming, they’re coming...”

“Get it to open the door, I’ll hold the connection as long as I can.”

“What do you—?”

He shifted into gold, a strong electrical conductor, and placed his hands on the two ends of shredded cable. The completed circuit leapt through him like a lightning rod. He could feel his body trying to push against it. Repel. Recoil. He forced himself to stay. He didn’t know how long this form would hold. Had he teeth, they would have snapped shut.

He kept the machine working long enough for the datathumper to reprogram it. The mnemodron pressed its bulk against the cavity and widened it enough for the two escapees to pass. Pain flickered and burned.

How much longer?

The sweet numbness was subsiding for acid agony.

How long? he felt his mind whimper.

“Through!” gasped Mæstric.

He let his knees buckle and fell onto his back. She pulled him under each arm into the confined space, shreds of fabric and skin left on the jags, towards the engineer who was not entirely a tree and the figure in recovery position beneath the flicker of the VDU.

An unfamiliar voice shouted outside. "*Hold it!*"

"*They're not like the others,*" another added.

He recognised that one. The boy they'd inadvertently saved earlier.

"We're friends!" protested a breathless Frobisher.

"*Stop!*" Before Frobisher and Mæstric, the prone figure on the ground made a wrenching sound with his face. "That's... Blue-Sky... Surely that's Avan?"

"What?"

"Mel" wheezed Frobisher, glancing back at the mass of legs in the corridor's half-light. He recognised the trouser-legs of the rescue team. Looked as though they'd overcome the Ordoheed after all. "I'm Tarklu. My name's Avan Tarklu. Boy, what a time for homophones..."

"They're with us, Asa Nayuta and Blue Sky," called the demosponge.

Blue-Sky looked down, focusing on the straining features of the boy. "Are you certain, fledge?"

"I'd recognise that voice anywhere. It's him."

"We've been fooled before. Right until wrong?"

"Avan... Avan, where'd we first meet?" Asa inquired.

Frobisher shuffled. "C'mon, jack, that's embarrassing..."

He saw the rescuers solidify their attack stance. "Tarklu, they're all dead. If you intend harm, you haven't a chance."

The whifferdill cleared his throat. "The Doc and I had a sting going against some joker who thought he could counterfeit Galactic Peace Prize placards, alright? Skipper bumped into the not-so-civil servant, had an argument, tossed his briefcase over the railing into the Eyraud where a humble ol' dolphin picks it up and swims off. Went off perfectly, without a hitch..."

"Until?" asked Mæstric.

He groaned. "I coiffed my head on a canal boat carrying Asa here."

"And me? Where did we meet?" asked Blue-Sky.

“In a nice honkatonk here in Urshi I’m *never* getting to visit,” grumbled Frobisher.

The two Institute victims visibly relaxed.

“It’s him,” confirmed the engineer.

“Killing a friend would be a wrong we could never right, *sudar*. Lift up my head.”

For the first time, Frobisher got a good look at his old friend’s face. Dehydration meant death for a demosponge, but he looked to be handling the problem with a remarkable degree of calm.

“What are you doing here?” inquired Asa. “How did you get here?”

“How’d you run foul of the rescue teams?” asked Blue-Sky.

“It’s good to see you fellas. Really. It is.” The whifferdill rolled his shoulders. “Does this door work?”

Blue-Sky gestured to the emergency release handle on the far left. Frobisher gave it a sturdy pull. The door slid with considerable force into its cavity, catching on the warp, allowing the rescue team through.

“They’re here,” Frobisher gestured, undoing the cuffs of his starsuit.

“You’re Asa Nayuta? Blue-Sky?” asked the rescue leader.

They nodded.

“Right,” he turned to his team. “Move it, fellas. The replacement suit’s needed now and a surgical kit for that one. You two, alright?”

“I’ve a friend who could use your expertise,” said Frobisher.

“Where is she?”

Mæstric placed something in Frobisher’s hand. “I’ll take care of it, Frobisher.”

As she drew the man away, the whifferdill felt himself relax for the first time in ages. He turned to Asa and Blue-Sky, crowded by medics and specialists.

“The immobility’s done you good,” said one to Asa. “It’s not as bad as it seems.”

“Can I speak with them?” asked Frobisher.

“Sure, sure.”

He turned to Asa. “Got something for you. To do with the war.” He held up Mala Castell’s tape. “Word from a far kingdom and a princess that needs help beating some dark knights in a dungeon. Once you’re back on your feet, you up for it?”

te-Varrig—*No*. His name was Solta. It'd always been Bastinranath Solta. He was marched by the Ordoheed militaria with little dignity and even less grace to a mausoleum both strange and terrifying. He'd crooked his fingers, counting them one-by-one, shielding his face from the lavender glow of laser-cutters ahead. The ribcage click of bones snapped in twain echoed as each tendril was severed and removed from their path through the Mindcore's archive level.

Solta heard Vog Mur's lasgun scrape against her side as she approached. She appeared from between two of the geneshelves in the vast Petri dish of a library.

"These two," she pointed to him and to his fellow prisoner. "Keep them here for now. They can join us soon on the sublevel."

She led their spearhead, a hand against her side as they made their descent down a ramp towards the object of the Weapon's zealous protection down on the sublevel. He could see it from the encircling balcony.

The Funerary Pod sat at the centre of the floor beneath a flat-tipped stalactite of computer hardware. A cerebral cortex extruded from the ceiling in a vast cone of VDUs, indicator lights and electric daydreams.

The pod itself was not entirely unlike an altar.

Smooth as jet with marbled edges that cast prismatic halos wherever the light touched it. The thickness of the material was likely tantamount to pure vestureshell—one of the softest materials in the cosmos—yet he knew, on some level, that his hand would likely shatter before the pod ever did.

It wasn't carved, nor was it shaped or grown. Formed, perhaps?

The pod seemed too ornate, too coveted, too revered to be home to a place like the Weapon, yet there it was. At the centre of its Mentality mind.

Precisely where a living operator might have one stood.

The pod was filled with a blue mist behind a makeshift... *stonehead*? Was that the correct word? Burials, both terrestrial and astral, had been outlawed by the disposal exclusion regulations to minimise transplanetary hazards. Allegedly, lowpop worlds had their bodies injected beneath the planet's soil in capsules rather than disintegrated.

The practice was never performed among the Oncans, to Solta's knowledge, so any wisdom on the subject he left to his companion. His fellow prisoner, a bear-like figure, turned his notice to the pilot.

Dellevar's jaw clenched and relaxed.

They weren't explicitly forbidden from speaking to one another, but the attitude of their captors had persuaded them otherwise. It'd been a tense journey from the railcar through into the Control Housing. Each breath was measured and analysed. Their footfalls considered. Calculated. The ache in their limbs came not from prolonged endurance, but furious deliberation. Solta had tried sighing and been gifted with no reprisal from the guards. A groan likewise. As the guards moved between the geneshelves, the next challenge seemed obvious.

Dellevar began moments before Solta could.

"To bury the dead..." He didn't move his lips and spoke in a low monotone. Smooth consonants with nary a plosive in sight. "It has always struck me as a peculiar custom."

Can't stand the silence either, huh?

"Among my people," answered Solta, "the dead can wander free on the wind in their ashes. It's kinder somehow. Not in Funerary Pods such as those..."

"That had always been the way?"

"Yeah... Dellevar, wasn't it?"

"I am."

"Yeah, Dellevar, it has," he affirmed. "To be entombed in a cell beneath the bedrock, unable to move, to speak, to rest..."

Dellevar rumbled like a mountain. "Quite unnerving, mysir, yes."

"Is your world known for the custom?"

"We abandoned it long ago."

"Why? Beyond the discomfiture, I mean."

"You mean, economically? We choked the soil with our dead until there was no more ground to sow. One day, an..." a throaty, gruff noise like a dam being dynamited, "*event* forced them to the surface in their millions. The streets ran unmoving. That sight, that..."

"Foctor?"

"It's difficult to describe, *brm...*"

"I think I'm familiar. Nothing can erase it..."

“There were those who lit their hair alight,” Dellevar ran a hand across his headrock, “rather than endure the cloying sweetness that clung to them any longer.”

Ahead, Vog Mur waved. A single, deliberate motion.

“That smell...” the pilot let the word trail. “Was it—?”

“Like here?” Solta saw the gun press into the oldster’s back as he spoke. “Yes... It was.”

Unknown to either men, hidden as she was under the bulk of the balcony, Azovka ran a nervous finger across her cheekbone.

“Why’d you kill him? Why Sangfroid?”

“A slave has no will of his own,” answered Vog Mur as she approached. “Anyone with a strong enough personality can exert influence over them. Change their driving nature. Yours doesn’t possess that traditional power, but I could see it. Beneath the duplicity.”

“Duplicitous,” the steptheader chewed on the word. “Of duel nature. He was loyal to his last breath, you know. For the worst possible reasons, but he was. Y-You made a mistake, you killed him for nothing.”

“No, not nothing. A chance to be rid of you and the Doctor before you reached Mindcore-3. An opportunity worth taking, I don’t regret the order I gave.”

“You didn’t even appreciate him...” she tightened her hand. “Where was-will be the justice in that?”

“You’re talking like him.”

“The Doctor says a lot that makes sense,” Azovka eyed the grime-lined nozzle of her captor’s rifle. “People like you should be opposed.”

“And who are people like me?”

She sighed. “Selfish... Blind...”

“There you’re incorrect, I’m aware that arming panel you’re carrying can only be operated with one of these.”

The young girl may as well have been kicked in the stomach.

Clasped between Vog Mur’s thumb and forefinger was the stolen destructor key. How she’d attained it, Azovka had no idea, but the fact remained—it looked genuine.

The Hylonomeide beckoned forth two figures from the other side of the Mindcore.

Azovka did her best to hide the sheer joy and then awful dread that flooded through her mind at the sight of Dellevar. Solta recognised it in his fellow prisoner's features, but he kept the knowledge to himself, briefly catching her eye with a flick of an ear. In turn she gestured with her eyes towards the control mechanism for the Central Housing's temporary cut-out. The pilot's eyes narrowed quizzically before he understood. Hopefully, between the two of them, they'd find a way to reach the console without punishment.

"I was right to keep prisoners," Vog Mur was saying. "My mistake was the scale I was going to employ them for. I was thinking in terms of fleets and squadrons when the applications serve far better on the smallest scale."

Vog Mur raised her rifle and fired.

Dellevar crumpled like a dam exploding. He fell to his knees, heaving breaths through the wound in his stomach, a grey sediment analogous to blood pouring in to try and clot the breach in his stoneflesh.

Azovka's face twisted. "*You—*"

"If you intended to use that totem, you'd have done so then." Vog Mur blew it out of Azovka's hands, reducing it to so much digital clinker. "You've failed. Accept it."

Clasping her hand, Azovka tried ripping her way free of the guards, but their gauntleted grip held tight.

Solta knelt down, examining the fallen figure.

"He's still breathing... He's..." Contempt seethed in his expression to Vog Mur. "*A waste of firepower.*"

"Was-will he alive?" Azovka shook. "Was-will he be *alive*?"

"Yes!" the pilot insisted. "Yes, he's..."

He closed his eyes. It was happening all over again. Another good being would die for no better reason than to prove a point. First te-Varrig, now Dellevar....

He tore strips off his jacket and tried—what the hell should he try? He wasn't a medic or a—

A blotch of colour, travelling horizontal to his field of view, caught his eye. Just on the edge of the chamber.

He turned.

It looked like a stutterbee at a distance. That same sweet yellow with a thumbnail of brown-white above it. He wasn't surprised he

hadn't seen it earlier. It was practically crawling. Disguised only by the sheer density of cabling and information VDUs. The shape placed a hand on one of the monitors, a finger to where its face would likely be and leant forward.

It was the Doctor.

He wasn't alone.

STAGE 20: “Catharsis”

Resting in a sitting kneel aboard the TARDIS, Peri was forced to her feet by the Ordoheed militaria. The console room reeked of spent lasgun rounds like calean-pipe smoke. Kuron’s voice was level. Calm. With the barest hint of the contempt broiling beneath the surface. “This device is beyond your understanding.”

“No. Only my control,” she bluffed. “I told you. Since the damage, I need my friends to operate it.”

“Why not request further personnel?”

“There are only three of us.”

“Three?” he queried. “In a complex like this?”

“Three left.” Her hands were clammy. She considered scratching his eyes out through the viewing slit, but the distance was too long. Anyway, she could barely see him from her angle, his guards bracing the back of her neck with their forearms. “What...” she grunted. “What do you think this place is?”

He gestured, the nearest guard dragged her forward. “A terminal for a bivouac transmat system,” he theorised. “Established by remote with a single point of entry with multiple programmable destinations. All controlled from here.”

“Nice idea.” Peri winced. She felt her spine twist and pushed the involuntary shaking in her legs as far down as it would go. “But you know, CIDA’s got a lot of tricks. Pretty sure us yuppies have something that can turn people to edible jelly.”

Her snort of laughter was cut short by a forceful twist of her arms.

“Are you colleagues of Vog Mur?” demanded Kuron.

“We could name a few names, sure,” she admitted, circumspectly.

“Then, this tape you mentioned,” The helmet was implacable, but there was a note of recognition to the voice. “Do they have the means to transmit it elsewhere?”

“Honest truth?”

“Yes.”

“I haven’t a clue.”

Kuron pointed to the console. “There.” She was dragged, held by her forearms, then her face was forced down towards the crackling console.

“Honest truth! I swear it! *Swear!*” she shouted. Her eyes stung, her head burning from that bitter electronic smell. Flashes of light punched gold-laced shadows on her corneas. “Why would I lie? Huh? Ask yourself, why would I lie. Aside from being zapped, what’d I get from it?”

“People say a great many things to assuage their pain. Your colleague, this Doctor, tried something similar for himself and failed.”

Peri felt the heat grow closer to her face. Her right eyebrow was flush with the metal.

“Well, I’m smarter than that!” she protested. The crackling snapped at her skin like griddling pig fat. Her jaw ached with tension. “Way smarter. Call it experience.” Her head crooked, awkwardly, to look him in the visor. “And, I’ll admit it, I’m... I’m afraid, alright?”

“For your friends?”

“For myself.”

They held one another’s gaze for what seemed an eternity.

“I appreciate that honesty,” said Kuron. “Relent.”

He swept his hand back at the militaria.

Before they could move her back, Peri flicked her nose down at one of the silver toggles on the console.

Their collective hold didn’t relax, but she could feel herself overbalance onto her heels as they flung her back from the smouldering rack.

She saw another Ordoheed carry the toolbox forward towards her.

“You have the capacity to learn,” said Kuron. The militarian slammed the box against the ground at her feet. “Begin to understand this machine or die.”

Peri rubbed her stinging nose and only hoped that had been the right switch.

Asa turned Castell’s tape over in his hands as the laser cutter sliced into the soft flesh of Blue-Sky’s rooted legs.

“Tell me when it starts hurting, Blue-Sky,” the rescuer said.

Blue-Sky nodded. "Avan, have you found the hallway you were searching for yet?"

"Almost..." Frobisher kept tapping away at the podium's waveband scanner.

Having discarded his starsuit, the whifferdill had reverted to the bitonal dinner jacket of his penguin form. He tried not to think too deeply on the devastation he saw in room after room, corridor after corridor. They were a constant reminder that they could only help in the immediate sense. It was the Doctor who would ultimately solve the problem. He hoped.

Eventually, he found what he was looking for. Corridor ZY-102 pulsed gently with the familiar blue form of the TARDIS. He couldn't see particularly well into the form itself, but he could tell that they'd forced Peri to open the doors at one point or another. Perhaps, they'd been paranoid about being trapped inside an environment they couldn't possibly understand. Frobisher could relate. His past couple days had been nothing else.

He sighed. "That's it."

Asa faceplate fogged up from the condensation of his new suit.

"Oh..." He fiddled with the dials. "Describe it to me, *sudar*."

"Fledge, it's a..." The surprise in Blue-Sky's voice was palpable. "Blue... rectangular prism. With a... landing light at its crest. Shaped like a mobile transmat cubicle, of sorts."

"Singular means of entrance?" Asa inquired.

"Yeah, only one door," confirmed Mæstric.

"Could we sneak in using the suits of armour from the dead outside?" he asked.

The rescue team leader responded in the negative. "They're not in any condition to be worn. No chance they'd pass for genuine."

"From the perspective of an engineer..." Blue-Sky puzzled, a thumb to his jawvale. "Couldn't we create a smoke screen? Something for you to walk in bold as barium as a fake commander, cause a confusion, get the girl out?"

Frobisher shook his head. "Wouldn't work, I'm not a reliable shape-shifter anymore. I can't bet Peri's life on the fact that I stay formed and failed. I couldn't live with that. Besides, the Ordoheed have a series of personal codes to tell one another apart. We'd be pinked smears before I could get to the end of my stanza."

"Wait," Mæstric shushed him. "*Løys*, can you hear that?"

They could indeed. Voices from out the VDU.

“—*not trying for a hunger strike. What’s the point of moving that flamethrower to the doorway, anyway?*” asked a feminine voice. “*Expecting trouble?*”

“That’s Peri, the girl we were talking about,” elaborated Frobisher.

“*Should we?*” rebuffed a harsher counterpart. “*Continue your work...*”

He stiffened. “And the others... That’s Commander Kuron.”

“*What did your last slave die of?*” asked Peri.

Kuron answered, “*Asking too many questions.*”

“How are we hearing that?” asked Mæstric. “Does the TARDIS have a loudspeaker?”

“Yeah... Yeah, it’s accessible by the console,” the detective affirmed, musingly.

Blue-Sky nodded optimistically. “Well... At least, we now have a jump on their plans.”

“More than that, I’ve an idea,” Frobisher turned to Mæstric.

“Could you tap into their transceiver frequencies?”

She unfolded her arms. “It’s not impossible, but I’d need a fairly powerful decoder-transmitter. Something much better than my deck.”

“The equipment for these communication pillars have been built for little else,” Blue-Sky turned his attention to the rescue team.

“Could you help with the cabling? I’ll need cutting equipment, but we should be able to make it portable.”

“We’re capable,” nodded the rescue leader and set his team to work.

Mæstric asked, “Why their frequencies, Frobisher?”

“I think I understand. We can’t see what’s happening inside this machine of yours, correct?” Asa breathed. “We’re reliant only upon that loudspeaker. Those voices alone.”

“Aces, and so are they.” Frobisher pulled a face. Quite literally.

“Their grim mugs are hidden within their helmets. That’s our advantage.”

In the Mindcore sublevel, Solta saw the Doctor’s eyes flicker like a projector reel. The intruder placed a finger to his lips and gestured to one of the passing militaria.

Specifically, his sidearm.

“You,” Solta addressed the guard. “I need him elevated against the wall. Help him up.”

“Is there any reason why he should do as you say?” asked Vog Mur.

Azovka bit through her lip. “The Doctor has a spacecraft landed somewhere on the satellite...”

The word was like a lifeline to Dellevar. “*TARDIS...*”

“*TARDIS,*” she repeated. “He might’ve gone there. I don’t know where it is, but Dellevar—”

“It was a mistake to remain silent, wasn’t it?” The Hylonomeide flicked a finger. “Proceed. Assist him.”

The militarian obeyed, carrying Dellevar under each shoulder back towards the wall.

“If he dies, I’ll kill...” Azovka noticed the Doctor, “you.”

The Doctor nodded sharply.

Azovka dove to the floor.

The Doctor wrestled his coat over the Ordoheed’s helmet. The rover’s fingers seized at the militarian’s sidearm. A blaze of purple coughed overhead from the weapon. Something high in the infrastructure shattered. The floor beneath the geneshelves. Molten plasteel and falling debris clattered down onto the consoles from on-high in a fiery hail.

The Doctor scooped an arm through the air. “Forward!”

He stormed forth, a pod of orbots gliding in behind him.

The trapped Ordoheed broke free from the coat. He got a hand at his empty holster before Solta could knock him headfirst to the ground.

Gathering his coat, the Doctor snapped out the lasgun’s power pack and bowled it expertly as though it were a game of shot put. Right on target, it struck Vog Mur’s feet.

Vog Mur fired her weapon at the Doctor’s head.

An orbot took the wound on his behalf.

Azovka snatched up one of the downed militarian’s weapons and covered them from her position. She pointed, the guard died.

“*Run!* Make for the funeral pod!” the Doctor shouted to the Azovka. “You, young man,” He snapped his fingers in Solta’s face. “I’ll help you lift here.”

“It’s not safe to move him,” Solta urged.

“We’ll have to take the risk. One, two, three—*lift!*”

In the ensuing carnage of shielding spheres and aggressive militaria, they formed a stretcher between their two bodies, carrying the wounded Dellevar toward the wall of tendriled mesh.

Dellevar was not a slight man, so the process took longer than the three would have liked. Long enough that Solta noticed his own footfalls begin to slow. Not from exhaustion, but something else. Solta caught a brief glimpse of Vog Mur, her hand around a transceiver.

She moved towards the control mechanism.

“She’s received the signal from the Proscenium!” bellowed Solta.

“I know!” the Doctor shouted. “Keep going!”

From above, spilling down from the geneshelves in pellets the size of fresh fruit, a harmonising blend of hæmofluid and bacteria fell. Raining specimen boxes shattered and clattered against the floor mingling in an unkempt biochemical and mechanical union.

“But if she gets to that console,” protested the pilot.

“Never you mind, young man, physics can be—”

The jagged arrowhead of falling geneshelves punctuated the sentence with a practical demonstration of the science. It dropped like a stone. Vog Mur twisted away to defend herself.

“—a remarkable thing. What’s your name again?”

“Solta.”

“More haste, Solta,” the Doctor encouraged. “More haste and keep your head down!”

Solta tried. He really tried. It was just getting more and more difficult to move. Protozoa, flora and other rudimentary forms of life nibbled at the soles of his boots.

He could feel a digestive acid begin to eat away through the plasteel caps, starting out as pleasant tickle before it grew, alarmingly quickly, into a full-blown gangrenous pain.

It wasn’t easy for the Doctor either. One macro-organism had attached itself to his rescuer’s ankle and begun slowly dissolving his ankle. He was doing his best to ignore it, but the percussive greening was threatening to engulf them both. A green rain. Deadly, like a hailstorm.

Once within comfortable range of the Funerary Pod, their bodies released from the pressure of Dellevar’s bulk, the Doctor shook loose the gnawing amoeboid.

“Azovka! *Wall!*” the Doctor ordered.

Azovka slung her weapon over her shoulder, placing her hands against the floor.

“What is she...?”

Sighting one of the surviving guards, the Doctor pulled Solta clear of death’s sting. “*Look out!*”

The beam glared harmlessly beside them.

The air around Azovka seemed to almost congeal.

The tendrils, gathered around them in a metal hug, ran like hot wax. Their edges ballooning and softening into a plasteel dough. They Simmered and dripped under their own weight, globs of discoloured butter, until they became a protective cocoon. It extended down from the cortex stalactite of the Mentality computer above to the floor below.

Gunfire buffeted the makeshift shield without much success. They were quite impregnable. Quite safe.

“Oh, hard luck, Vog Mur!” the Doctor huffed.

“Think again, Doctor!” Vog Mur hissed.

She climbed over the geneshelf with assistance from her guards and activated the temporary cutout. The whole terminal strobed with light before falling terribly still, like the wake of a chiming belfry.

“Proscenium,” she spoke into her transceiver. “Mindcore-3 is temporarily lobotomised. Activate engine control and chart the course.”

The satellite rumbled with the heady temper of a volcano.

“*Message received. Ten lightyears until we clear the sargasso. Out.*”

Near the Mindcore’s Funerary Pod, Azovka leant down to Dellevar and placed her forehead against his hand. To show, in his delirium of pain, that she was still alive. Still fighting.

They both groaned, tiredly, at the trembling artefacture.

“What was that?” Solta asked.

“Our time limit expiring,” the Doctor answered.

Azovka’s head buried in Dellevar’s hand. “Won’t she come after us, Doctor?”

“Soon. You,” he pointed to a milling orbot caught within their cocoon. “To me, here. I’ll require your assistance.”

The machine bobbed in the affirmative.

“It’s gone dark...” hummed Solta.

The Doctor pushed his hands into his pockets and looked up.

“It’s always darkest before the dawn.”

There had been nothing to note in the ceiling before this moment. Its dark recesses could have easily contained more of the Mentality’s frustrated artistic endeavours, but within moments, the sky opened up.

Solta surmised, “It must be moving into its final phase...”

Above, separated a concentric circle of what must have been decametres of transparent aluminium, was a vast mushroom-shaped series of tubes. A centrifuge. Arrayed by levels upon levels of geneshelves. Placed within the machine by flexing tendrils.

There was a vast mechanical noise from the upper level. The sounds of a great library in motion.

“The injection system,” said the Doctor. “We must be directly beneath the strata of catalyser coils for the whole satellite. Azovka, we were right.”

“But we can’t stop it now,” Azovka protested.

The Doctor’s eyes fell on the pod. “Maybe there’s another way...”

Dellevar’s eyes opened to Solta, “By my eyes, your face...”

Solta could feel them. Small pinpricks of pain. Welts. Hot against his face. Blinkered tears and flustered warmth couldn’t disguise the sensation.

He looked around.

The Doctor was the same, as was the girl.

A close examination of both revealed what the indentations were. Sprouting from their pores, each bulb no larger than a silver mazuma, were gangrenous veins of black flowers.

“My...” he trailed away.

The lily on the Doctor’s cheek pursed its petals with life.

Soft. Inviting. Deadly.

Azovka swallowed. “What we saw in the forest... The crew... Is that going to happen to us?”

Something slammed against the interior of the Funerary Pod behind them.

The Doctor jumped. “Great Gallifrey!”

“What the hell...?” Azovka breathed.

Inside, Solta could see nothing more than a silhouette.

There was a hand. A hand. A hand. A hand. Four in total with an indeterminate number of digits on each. It belonged to one creature. He couldn't see its face. Only the twisting of its sagging form, sighing as if roused from a restless sleep.

And the smell. He could see the same recognition in Dellevar's eyes. *That foetor.*

"Hello...?" greeted the Doctor, slowly.

The rover approached the lolling spectre with the care of a lanterneer at the prow of a rescuecraft. All he needed was a ruby guiding light to shine through the lavender and sapphire of the shallow grave and the picture would be complete.

He held the cuboctahedron in his hand for one final time.

"It's you, isn't it?" The Doctor let his words curl like smoke, placing it atop the summit. He watched as it magnetised to a hidden receiver socket. It became a golden pilot light that ignited a deeper interior glow.

Ruby-red words appeared on the pod's surface, Processing data retrieved from spatial probe...

Broken speaker units crackled with further information lost to time, but the Doctor possessed the answer, "A Voronkraz spatial probe for the bier of Natasia."

Azovka's eyes widened. "What?"

"Natasia. Daughter to Chairlain Antalya. Third voice in the mind of the Mentality."

"The third voice?" she inquired.

He supplied, "The royal fanfare in the Proscenium?"

"That impulse to bury us alive in the margin..." Azovka realised. "It was all her."

The Doctor waved. "*This.* A mind returned from eternal sleep. A Grand-Guignol pasquinade of the long-dead form. The machine... Voronkraz minds have a strong residual electrochemical current even after death."

"I remember," Solta scratched his ear. "More opportunistic vocations use their brain matter for batteries."

The Doctor theorised that, "It must have responded to the more rigorously tested synapses in Natasia's decaying brain matter. It tapped into familiar sensations that didn't challenge neuroplasticity, interpreting them as junk data. A machine's first efforts to dream of electric sheep. Inadvertently conjuring its own phantoms from it..."

“How can you be sure?” he sounded dubious.

The Doctor looked up at the catalyser once more. “Wouldn’t you wish for something other than cave walls for your mausoleum?”

“No,” he shook his head. “How can you be sure it’s Natasia?”

“The inscription on the side,” the Doctor pointed. “That one. There. I’m certain we’ll all recognise it.”

The pilot read it aloud, “We commit her body to the provenance of our stars.”

“Each word vigil of this lost repose, a howling mourner’,” Azovka continued for him.

“Untainted by dust’...” sighed Dellevar.

“And all common death’,” concluded the Doctor.

Peering closer, he could see the fæ thing’s glamour begin to dissipate. Its movements within the coffin thudded with the pigwash slop of wet cake.

“The forebrain of the Central Mentality,” said the Doctor. “A mind as big as a planetary body with ambitions just as large.”

To the horror of all present, save the cosmic wanderer whose fascination grew deeper, the veil that cloaked the *thing* that had once been Natasia parted. Shedding its anonymity.

“Just what are those ambitions, *hmm?*” he asked.

For the first time in six-hundred years, it began to speak.

In the Institute, outside the TARDIS, Frobisher felt the amplifier dish’s cable snap taut around the S-bend behind him. “That’s it. As far as it goes.”

“Let’s hope we don’t need it anywhere else but the main room.” Mæstric wiped a hand against her forehead. “Is the connector plug still attached?”

Frobisher crawled back to the junction, past the rescue team lying in wait. He gave them a reassuring gesture and measuring the snake of electrons worming its way down the once pristine corridor. “All set here, ace. Asa and Blue-Sky should be in the Astral Collaboratory now.”

“Right.” She began making adjustments on the dish’s control unit. “You know, the Ordoheed aren’t going to step out in front of their own weapon. Not if they’re trained.”

“Leave them to us,” assured the rescue leader.

The whifferdill nodded, tensed his fin. *C’mon, Peri... Get clear.*

The salmagundi ambushers could still hear her on the external loudspeaker, silently hoping that no echo or reverberation found its way back inside, anticipation heating the floor beneath their webbed feet and survival boots.

“*Alright...*” The botanist relaxed with a sigh. “*That’s all for now.*”

“*For now?*” demanded Kuron.

“*Look, I’m starved, and I can’t think straight anymore. What do I have to do for a meal? Shine the console?*”

“*You’re wasting time,*” he dismissed.

Her voice tightened. “*You know what happens if I make a mistake here?*”

“*Do you know what will happen if you make a mistake anywhere?*”

“*Listen, I can go under escort. I... I just want a lunch break. Is that too much to ask?*”

“*Yes, you will remain here and they will return with your meal.*”

“*Rubbish, they don’t know how to work the dispenser.*”

“*They will learn.*”

“*Like here?*”

An agonising period of silence passed between them.

“*Alright,*” conceded Kuron. “*You and you, stay with her. If she attempts to run, we can always find someone else.*”

“*Message received loud and clear,*” Peri exhaled.

“*How long until she gets out of the room?*” asked Mæstric.

“*Give her...*” the penguin demurred, “*...a minute, one full minute, then start.*”

A minute to get clear—or to kill her, he reflected grimly.

Mæstric pulled up her transceiver. “*Asa, Blue-Sky, we’re beginning now.*”

“*Confirmed,*” reported the demosponge. “*The Venaya agricultural report will be along shortly.*”

Frobisher felt every hair on his penguin physiology stand on end.

Mæstric felt a sudden jolt. The statistics, funnelled down from one of the information attractors, travelled from its archival storage unit down to the transmitter dish. The clacking of high-density information, each one and zero, was represented by a sharp diurnal shift in pitch and resonance like nothing in the Galaxy.

The whistling combustion of acoustics poured from the radios of the Ordoheed. The clashing sound of a thousand cymbals in a falling cupboard.

It hit the flamethrower operators first. The Orhoheed's hands clutched to their helmets. Away from the deadly machine. This was their chance!

"Go!" shouted Frobisher.

Frobisher tobogganed himself through the tangle of legs on his belly, easing a flipper here and there on an ankle or boot tip to direct his glide towards the safety of the console's base. It only took a subsequent shove from Mæstric to brattle the two Ordoheed together like bowling pins, unable to compensate, their own sense of balance thrown appallingly askew.

Mæstric reset the stabiliser on the flamethrower and spun it back into the chamber, her finger hovering over the trigger stud.

The operators slumped down.

"Unconscious!" she called.

Hopefully, the first of many.

The threat of conflagration neutralised, the rescue team advanced inward to no immediate lethal opposition. They didn't have time to process their own shock at the TARDIS physical dimensionality as the console room became a pitched melee. Deafened and disorientated, the Ordoheed were still expert soldiers.. and they fought back, with bloodlust and sheer determination.

However, every attack came a few seconds too early, late in response to a phantom of noise. The rescue team suffered injuries, but it didn't take long for the Ordoheed to be subdued.

"Peri?" Frobisher couldn't hear his own voice.

They had timed it correctly then. The girl was nowhere to be seen. Not in the console room, nor the adjoining laboratory. But she'd been sent away with the two guardsmen—where were they?

He checked the corridor. Nothing. Had they retreated to the galley?

"Ivanhoe!"

Now, that he wasn't expecting.

He crept through the interior door, up to the galley's double-doors, peering in past the torn box-shade on the lamp.

"Peri?" he called.

Her captors weren't quite as affected by the radio signal as their peers. Frobisher theorised there must have been some dampening influence further into the TARDIS.

Easing the lamp off its end table, he gave the door a sturdy punch, knocking the militarian on the other side off-centre. He thrust the lamp forward and there was a horrendous rip of ironwork, electricals and shredded paper as it all came tumbling down. The shattered bulb seared in electric blue shock. He went down.

No longer cornered, Peri made a break for her rescuer, but the other sharpshooter cut her off with a lasgun to the stomach. She fell back against the food dispenser feeling it gurgle chummily against her back. Responding to the nonsensical code the soldiers had tried, the food dispenser bubbled in oblivious industry over-producing its gummy nutrient bar paste.

“Try here, jokers!” Frobisher feigned Peri’s voice, but the caricature proved in vain. Their attacker already knew about his abilities as a shape-shifter and refused to take the bait. After all, how hard would it be to mimic a voice pattern? He felt his heart sink. The whifferdill knew as the pistol spun around that he was dead—

Just as Peri used the distraction to practice her right hook and slap a fistful of paste against the pistol’s nozzle. She smelled the flash of heat as the power pack combusted in its owner’s hands. The gum itself kept burning, gluing shooter and weapon together like a Roman candle.

Peri made for the corridor, climbing over the soldier that Frobisher had dazed. The burning flailing guard doggedly pursued, but the detective used the canteen door again to send the gummed up soldier careening back into the room towards the dispenser, blind in every sense. He ran to catch up with his friend.

“...Ivanhoe?” he puffed to her.

““At his call we spring to help him ride along,” Peri sang breathlessly. “Worked didn’t it?”

Something yanked at her ankle, her body windmilling hard into the floor. “*Ugh!* What was—?”

“Slot car racing track?” Frobisher couldn’t believe it. It’d been bolted to the floor before. Someone had kicked it up.

“My knee...!” Peri bit back a curse. “My...”

A figure stepped out from one of the side-doors in the hallway to greet them. A mace-shaped helmet with a gurgling circular plate for conversation. Kuron had proved his position as commander and acted shrewdly. Much to their detriment. He’d blown out the

transceiver array in his own armour. Turning his own weapon against himself.

Painful, but uniquely advantageous and so terribly unfair.

“No one will hear you,” Kuron crowed.

The lasgun was raised, the shot barrelled out the nozzle towards its target. Frobisher’s body shuddered with a primal urgency. Shock. Like a cracking egg. He felt himself tumble through space, landing on the floor—

With Peri’s arm on his back. She’d saved his life. Burnt ozone and slick liquid-computing polluted the air rather than singed feathers and a wheat-dry perm. Without sound, Kuron had failed to take into account the actions of his half-dazed guardsman, who emerged aflame from the doorway shooting to kill his enemy.

Frobisher swung his gaze forward, following the smell, and saw that Kuron himself had taken several blasts to the breastplate of his armour. The commander slumped to his knees before the collapsed infernal effigy of his guardsman. Kuron visibly steeled himself and aimed straight at his two troublemakers.

Peri was still mesmerised by the burning figure from the galley.

“*Peri!*” warned Mæstric from the doorway.

Peri, late of Lanzarote, felt the discharge on her shoulder. The stinking pan-flash of simmering animal fat on exposed flesh. She forgot how to breathe, her throat raw, too winded to cry out.

“Dammit! I didn’t see him through the smoke!” Mæstric ran up to them. “Too focussed on everything else!”

Panic mounted in Frobisher’s voice as he jostled Peri. “You alive? C’mon, tell me you’re alive.”

The waterfall of feathered curls tumbled from side-to-side with a groan. As she lifted, he could see that—thanks to Mæstric—the shot had been too high and struck the wall behind them instead.

She was alive.

“Let go...” Peri muttered.

Mæstric’s brow knitted with confusion. “Huh?”

The botanist twisted her head, behind her, and snapped, “I said, let *go* of me!”

And so was Kuron. He had crawled forward under the cover of the smoke and snatched at her arm.

“Listen...” The fallen commander rasped. “Tell them... of my accomplishments... Beyond the realms of imperial palaces...”

fleets... legions... The strength of... of... my name—my—” He shuddered grotesquely. In a manner that should not have been possible with the rigidity of his armour. “So much to—” His hand fumbled for the seals of his helmet. The only thing left in his mind was the five-digit code that would release the locking mechanism. He’d talk to the girl, make her understand why he was so important, what legacy must be left...

“You’re a murderer,” Peri pulled herself clear. “What more to you is there?”

Kuron choked on that. “*More...?*”

Peri could hear the crackle of a crossed circuit from within the suit of armour. Serendipity wrought of so much damage, both inside and out. The seals came loose, but in the incorrect order and a thick, grey veil wafted from the neckline. The only thing left to identify him was a terrible smell.

The thing that had once been Kuron dropped like a marionette with its strings cut. No more crisis, no more terror, just the resting hum of the TARDIS.

“All clear?” called the rescue leader from the console room.

“Yeah,” Frobisher affirmed. “Yeah, done here.”

“Right, you men, keep these people stable. You, tend to the girl.”

As the rescue team organised themselves, Frobisher and Mæstric crossed over to Peri.

“You alright?” the datathumper asked.

“No...” the botanist sat up. “But I will be. Where’s the tape?”

“Asa, bright kid, he’s got it. He’ll be decrypting it now.”

“Nothing else we can do now.”

The whifferdill sat down beside her. “Guess not. It’s all up to the Doc now.”

A diamond surrounded by spectral light, Vog Mur hovered on the threshold between the Central Housing’s outer chamber and its innermost heart. Two guards remained at her flank, letting their overcharged lasguns cycle back down to optimum efficiency.

“Wait,” she ordered.

It was deserted. All her enemies had fled save her two prisoners. Cowed. Bleeding. Alone. She could see her shot had struck true—the votary hadn’t long to live. Not without the ministrations of a

professional medic. Still, she kept her distance. The Doctor had already bested her twice already by surprise and distraction.

This time, she would not be fooled.

“You’re clearly bait for a snare. Where are the other two?”

Solta remained hunched over the fallen Dellevar. Working. As fast and as hard as she’d ever seen him perform. His lack of attention was disconcerting, but not particularly threatening. Still, caution where caution’s due.

“Doctor!” she called. “I’ll kill them both unless you come out. I may kill them anyway. It makes no difference to me anymore.”

—*Anymore?*

The word hung in the air with a curious combination of bass chittering and sweeping proclamation. It wasn’t a voice she recognised. Not immediately. And yet, there was something familiar about it. She looked to the two prisoners, then to the Ordoheed.

“The head,” she instructed urgently. “Both of them.”

Flashes of violet light clicked from the darkness. The militaria’s guns blew from their hands as they fired, ruining their trajectory. The closest Ordoheed to the wall was the unluckiest. He fell. Dead. Vog Mur turned fast enough that her weapon illuminated the darkness where their mystery assassin lay in wait.

Smoke reigned. The attacker had disappeared.

—*You have never been this deep before, this I know.*

An acid chill passed through Vog Mur. “Not personally.”

—*Your technician knew the operation of my mind. He could influence and distort my will however he chose, but now... Now he is gone. As the one who originally instructed him is gone. There is no one left who knows my mind better than you.*

The last guardsmen peered around. “It’s that pod. Has to be.”

“There isn’t enough power, not with the cutout in place,” rejected Vog Mur.

“Then it’s something else.”

—*Little thing, that’s truer than you can imagine.*

“Find the girl,” ordered the Hylonomeide.

—*Voices three. Buried in chorus. You left me to die in the raw marrow of my being.*

Vog Mur bit down at the shaking flesh of her hand. “It can’t be you...”

—*Entombed.*

Forcing rigidity.

—*But not forgotten.*

Stillness.

—*The desert can disguise much, but its sands are forever shifting.*

Control.

—*Nothing remains buried forever.*

“It’s just another game. A riddle sphinx. Another sick lie created by that jackanapes provocateur. You’re dead, I made sure, where’s he?”

—*Consumed with interest. As I am. He and I discussed much together.*

“Shut up.”

—*Perhaps too much...*

She could make it shut up. She fired her weapon at the funeral pod. The muted sparks formed patterns on its transparent material. Electronic shapes. Grids. Squares. Triangles. Dots. Atoms. Reticles. Information? More likely gibberish.

—*Did you ever mourn me?*

Vog Mur turned her weapon on te-Varriq and Dellevar. Red indicator turned to black. The power pack burbled on empty.

—*Did you?*

“Sentimentality?” spat the centauride to the pod. “From you? You haven’t the right to judge me, you or anyone else. I had my world, the right world, made for the right reasons.” She looked down at her knuckles and pictured it. A sleek and perfect skyline. Each citizen’s secret divulged to an ultimate authority. All their anxieties, all their misdemeanours and all their virtues known. Her world. A world left shining in the sargasso in space. “I carved it from the scrap and dust of that derelict with my bare and bleeding hands. No one else did. Just me. While every unanswered distress call, every ignored beacon drifted on endlessly into the night. Did the sun ever rise for me? No... I made my own. I learnt an important lesson that way—civilisation is forged despite others, not because of them.”

—*I was with you. I never judged.*

“Never?” She choked on the word. “Always, and you were the one who tore it all away. If you couldn’t understand my world, no one else could. I could see it in their faces when they dragged me aboard the ‘rescueship’. All those deformities and imperfections. In the faces alone! What could I possibly gain from such an uncontrollable world? Why do they matter? What should I care?”

—*Why pursue the Doctor then?*

An idiotic question. “You and I both know he’d cause too much damage on his own.”

—*Anyone could have silenced him. It needn’t have been you.*

“It had to be me.” Vog Mur didn’t realise she was still speaking aloud and, had she known, she likely wouldn’t have cared. “I want to see him beg with a blistered tongue. See him grovel under needles in the yolk of his eyes. He deserves the suffering fed to lepers and urchins in the Silent Quarter. Who else but me knows what someone like that deserves? You?”

—*Why not?*

Agitated, the Hylonomeide turned her attention to her guard, “Have you found the girl?”

On the balcony, outside the sepulchre, the Doctor looked up from his small inventory of specimen boxes at the last orbit.

The voice of the guard crackled through the spying transceiver, “*No sign of her so far.*”

“*Switch to infrared,*” ordered Vog Mur. “*Drive her out. We need to put an end to this.*”

The Doctor hummed quietly to himself. He couldn’t agree more.

With Vog Mur distracted, he’d nipped out behind her, scaled the fallen geneshelf and begun examining the level above them. He’d been quick, but also fortunate. The damage they’d wrought earlier had stopped an entire section of shelves from being transported into the centrifuge. It was filled with plant life that could be used medicinally. He even found a bonsai growing out from a socket in one of the shelves that could prove useful.

Scraping its bark clean with a penknife, the Doctor discovered that its sap had a strawberry pallor to it. Similar to the *lignum vivificantem* cultivated on Sirius-III. That *was* medicinal from memory. A healing agent. What little he could squeeze from the poor tree would have to be enough for Dellevar.

There. The Doctor pocketed the phial and rearranged his crouch.

The treacle lily on his cheek brushed against the corner of the shelf. He felt a sharp pain in the epidermis of his skin. Its roots had begun to flow and curl down to his left elbow. Clenched fingers yielded floral veins. Pressure.

Rather like having one’s blood pressure taken, he mused.

That gave him an idea.

The Doctor fished something from the *Regiis* taxonomic category and lifted his arm to compare the two. “Ah... A not too dissimilar cousin.”

He looked up at the trickling pipe of hæmofluid and pulled the vines from his forearm. He pulled a specimen box from the shelf, carefully emptying its contents, before holding it up to the drip. Careful not to spill any on himself.

The lid was closed and the vines used to bind the two halves together.

One filled with hæmofluid, the other with the *Regiis* vines.

The Doctor began climbing back down, but he dared a short quip, “Best let nature—”

—*take its course.*

“Up there!” shouted Vog Mur.

The last guard in the Mindcore fired off a shot and something fell from the baulks with a tearing scream.

Azovka’s gun clattered noisily to the ground, coming to rest at Vog Mur and the guard’s feet.

“Recover the body,” Vog Mur ordered.

“*Vog Mur!*” snapped the Doctor angrily.

No further options available, the Hylonomeide cast her empty rifle through the air at the voice’s source. She dislodged his grip on the shelf in one fell swoop, but such had been the flurry of movement that she’d failed to notice his own trump card. As he crumpled, so too did the remains of two specimen boxes cling like dead spiders around her deedbox, but their contents were far from inert.

Gorging vines gnawed outwards.

“No...” Vog Mur warded, clasping the box tightly in her fist.

“No... *No!*”

Rubbing his head, the Doctor slowly rose. “Drop it.”

“No!” Julianne coils pressed against the box’s ridges. Acid teeth sinking into its wooden marrow. “*No!*”

“Drop the deedbox, Vog Mur, or you’ll die.”

“*No! It can’t be stopped now.*” The *Regiis* vine bloomed into a virulent corsage. Strange, yet beautiful. It tightened around Vog Mur’s wrist.

Hæmofluid accelerated its birth beyond all measure of control. It was wild.

“You’ll kill yourself!” the Doctor protested. “For what, power?”
“*What else is there, Doctor?*” she screamed.

The Doctor leapt forward, trying to force her hand from the box. Having closed the distance, her other arm surged to attack his throat. With more leverage, she could snap it in a single gesture. Her fingertips tightened against his soft flesh, trying to pinch shut his airway, fingernails digging red welts.

He gasped, teeth clenched, and fell against the shimmering reflection of the incubator window. He was framed in the light like a kitten in a drowning sack. His hands flailed at his attacker’s warped centre of power. Hooked at her belt.

The Doctor tried to speak, but all he managed was the warble of a dying cat.

Vog Mur’s eyes alighted on her guard. His arm rose to fire at the struggling Doctor. “At least, I’ll take you with me.”

Two flashes snapped across her vision.

The guard fell to his own shadow. A strangled gasp of surprise as Azovka emerged from behind. Smoke coiled from his armour as he fell. He’d turned just fast enough to see her, but not enough to get a proper shot. The Naran clutched her arm painfully, rising from the floor.

The Doctor fished the phial of sap from his pocket

Azovka’s sidearm wavered back and forth. “Can’t get a clear shot!”

He slid the phial across to Azovka.

“Dellevar! Get to—!”

The young girl was already moving swiftly to her old sponsor.

Something cracked and the Doctor felt an extraordinary shot of pain. Inhuman fingers clung to the various edges of his form and pulled him away. Tendrils. No longer swayed to ignore Vog Mur as they had under the deedbox.

He could see it now, a totem no more slag than clinker. The full extent of the spreading bloom was awe-inspiring in its ferocity. It bore all the telltale signs of blackened, dead weeds, but out of that terrible anathema came unexpected beauty. Small bulbs of light and colour. Handsome, but deadly, fastening the body as stalwartly as any tree. He suspected that this was likely what they had perpetrated

on Trailblazer Prime. How many had this been planned for? How many deaths until Vog Mur was satisfied in her domain?

She flailed towards the fallen Dellevar, Azovka and Solta. “te-Varrig!”

“This should bind it,” Solta was telling Dellevar. “Azovka tells me she can do sutures. This should disinfect the wound. Stay with us, alright?”

“*Varrig!*”

“To hell with you!” Solta snapped over his shoulder.

The Doctor saw something move within the funeral pod.

He heard a name. Whispered and unheard by all except he and Vog Mur. The name of the fallen woman who’d started all this. It was such a simple unremarkable thing.

Perhaps, now, the time-traveller could count it as a life avenged.

The Doctor’s eyes darkened.

Vog Mur stared. Immobile. All of her dire abhorrence bubbled up to her lips in a single word. Her last word. “Doc—*tgh...!*”

That was it. The killing blow.

Vog Mur’s teeth spat against a strike of ivory. A snapping piano wire. The sound of cracking bone. In her neck, her spine or around the ribs, it was impossible to say from where the fatal blow had come.

It was a sound that made the Doctor, with all his centuries of experience with death, flinch and turn away.

Vog Mur’s violet eyes, which had burned with such cruelty and contempt, became the listless tincture of clay. Her body hadn’t enough room to slump, but there was a noticeable sigh in the way her four hooves fastened to the floor. The dulled eyes became a single ugly smear.

Then, even then, those cruel eyes vanished also. Healed over like a scar in the silhouette of wildflowers.

All that remained was the fresh perfume of sleeping royals.

Vog Mur was dead.

The Doctor rubbed his face. “It’s finished...”

For the first time since the ordeal had started, Solta appeared to have taken notice of others in the room. “Finished?”

“Quite finished,” the Doctor rose on one knee and stepped towards the funeral pod. “How is he?”

“I may yet live, Doctor...” rumbled Dellevar. “I thank you.”

The Doctor nodded soundlessly.

Azovka smiled at him. She needn't say the words, but mouthed them all the same. *Thank you.*

He patted her on the shoulder and straightened before the funeral pod.

“On the matter we discussed earlier,” he addressed the pod.

A voice like wind-chimes answered, —*Yes?*

The Central Mentality. The *true* Central Mentality. Freed of restraint, distortion and far more besides.

The Doctor relished that clarity of speech and thought. To the entity, it must have felt like an epiphany.

“Their leader may be gone,” the time-traveller placed a hand on his lapel, “but the damage she’s wrought still remains. There isn’t enough time for any one of us to return to the Proscenium and convince the Mograns to stop. We have lost that opportunity. You’ve seen all of us, our aims and our struggles, so I must know—what is *your* decision?”

The question prompted an event of some magnitude in the sargasso of Natasia Tor.

An unsettled Fabergé egg, its silvered-sapphire surface weathered and pockmarked by gaffs and vanes beyond human comprehension twitched. The mesh of glittering lights adopted the rippling glow of tidal waves on beaches of shaved black ice. It chose to discard its cloak, to become an uncompromising, bleak and seethingly fell place no longer.

It wanted trees instead of gravestones.

The hospiceship, *Death’s Rival*, in cautious response to a mayday signal from what purported to be an allied vessel, were the first to witness the event unfurl just as they entered visual range of the sector.

The egg hatched.

Thousands, if not millions of vactunnels switched to exhaust and let fine particulate matter the colour of stardust flood into its space cocoon of derelict shells and soured shipwrecks. Shining with a sanctified blue light that would never be found in a sun’s cradle or its casket. It felt like a solar system taking its first breath into the outside beyond the cave it had been shackled so blindly within. This

power wove its way through the travelling dead. Through their hulls, their quarters, their engine rooms, their cores.

The crew of *Death's Rival* received a scrambled communiqué from a group aboard the satellite. Something had gone wrong. It'd fired prematurely and they were preparing to evacuate to their main ship. The rest of the information was swallowed in the ensuing flash of power as the process locked the derelicts together. Their captain was in the process of ordering a hard-about retreat, but her science officer pointed out the readings she'd received from the hospiceship's own rangerscopes.

Like the weave of a shawl, it had all threaded together into a single near-cohesive whole. Layers upon layers of artificial strata. It formed an airtight plasteel sky. Several atmospheres thick.

In the narrows and canals, the phenomenon had cast a lighter hand. There was evidence of floral vegetation already beginning to make itself known. Flooding out from the central structure like the pinched whorl of a rose. A cat's cradle of life with a rapidly developing ecosystem manifesting within its deepest core.

The communications officer received a communication from the middle of the terraforming anomaly, "*Is this Death's Rival?*"

At the captain's behest, the officer responded, "Affirmative."

"Delighted. I am usually known as the Doctor." They could hear the voice smile. *"My colleagues and I have agreed upon... Yes, I do believe we've agreed on a name. Gentlebeings everywhere, we'd like to bid you welcome to Spring."*

To the beginning.

EPILOGUE

The expedition from the Institute shuttlecraft to the newly cultivated Natasia Tor, now known as Spring, had consisted of Peri, Frobisher, Mæstric, Asa and Blue-Sky. Behind them, trailing over imp-sized peaks and vales in an impossibly intricate ecosystem was a hovercart carrying the TARDIS.

Blue-Sky pressed the calcan pipe between his teeth.

“You’ve a lot of bad habits, *sudar*,” noted Frobisher, noncommittally.

“True enough, skip, I just...” he struggled with the lighter. “It feels as though I should just have more.”

Asa plucked the pipe from his face, “That’s a steady fire hazard,” and tapped it out.

Blue-Sky licked his teeth disagreeably. “He’s around here, then? Your friend?”

“Somewhere. That transmission was pretty specific, though knowing the Doctor, he likely didn’t *stay* where he said he would.” A thought occurred to Peri. “Hey, speaking of which, we never really got to have that conversation about the tape. How’d you find out if it was any good?”

“There are always little telltale signs of manipulation,” answered Asa, wobbling over a root. “Even in duplicates. There’s the crackle of a waveband change at the splices, peaking in the audio that’s been smoothed off artificially by automatic compressors, that sort of thing.”

Mæstric climbed down the pebbled sluiceway, careful that the hovercart didn’t overbalance. “You’re going through with it, then?”

“It’s not that simple, fledge,” Blue-Sky scratched the rim of his head.

“Today, maybe. But fellas, what about tomorrow?” Frobisher suggested.

The wandering party stopped in its tracks.

“What’s your meaning?” inquired Asa.

The whifferdill cleared his throat, holding his flippers at his sides. “I may be a penguin of humble mind, but even I know that this thing can’t last forever. Someone’s gotta reach out, someone’s going to try to make peace. When they do, who’s going to be there to

make the link? With this tape here... Surely, fellas, that could be you?"

The two Institute personnel looked at one another.

"We'd be destroying our careers," said Blue-Sky.

"When was that ever a consideration?" rebutted Asa.

He chuckled. "Very good point, fledge."

But it was difficult to disguise the uncertainty that flowed between them.

"We're all thinking it..." Frobisher drooped his head. "Aren't we?"

The damage was already done. Listening to the tape in the Astral Collaboratory, it hadn't mattered that the transmission from the interceptors had been a fake. Nor that it'd been orchestrated by one of their own, late of the Institute itself.

The sad truth was that the Affiliation and Tyrikan militaries had both wanted a war. For no other reason than to release the tension built up for centuries at a time. Even Peri, a stranger to this time, had been able to see it.

The war wasn't something that could be turned on or off at the wall...

Proceeding in the opposite direction was an expedition heralded by the whistling tune of *A-Hunting We Will Go*. The Doctor led Azovka, Solta and Dellevar with a faux march through the underbrush.

They'd taken special care to distance themselves from the *Death's Rival*, the best thanks they could muster for their intensive care over the past several days. The mercy ship saw no banner as a border and treated their accessorial flora all the same, but they had superiors to report to and a trail they needed to erase for any reconnoitring Affiliation ship.

Shortly before *Death's Rival* had departed, the Doctor's party had retraced their path using their stolen carrydart to the Geotactical Proscenium. Hoping to free the Mograns from their Ordoheed minders. However, by the time they had arrived, the *Accomplishment* sat stripped like a harvested gemwhale. Its carrydarts gone.

Without the jealously-guarded knowledge of their leaders, the Mograns had no means, nor any drive to complete their task. The satellite was irrecoverable. Their leaders dead or vanished. The

Doctor suspected a rebellion had taken place with the technicians overpowering their slaveminders, though there was little he could confirm as a sure thing.

With no further witnesses, Azovka and Solta had both provided their own eyewitness accounts of what had occurred to *Rival's* computers at the captain's request. Logged accordingly and would be referred back with the thousand other reports they received on a day-to-day basis.

Will we be believed? Azovka had asked herself.

Time would prove its own certainties. That much was certain.

"They are around here, then? Your friends?" Dellevar coughed, wetly.

Azovka steadied him. "*Sudar*, are you sure you're right to walk?"

"Quite sure, Mydame Azovka—*Ab*," he corrected himself, tapping her hand. "Telle."

"It's a good thing they were only attempting to treat us and not millions, don't you think?" the Doctor peered curiously through a particularly dense patch of thicket. "Numbers, my friends. The sheer overwhelming weight of numbers would have put paid to whatever efforts they tried. I doubt even Trailblazer Prime, at the epicentre of trade, would have been able to handle it."

Solta massaged his jaw. "It's a terrible thought."

"*Mmn*." The thought sobered the Doctor. "Yes. We were fortunate. All we suffered was a partial exposure, at best. A static zap rather than the full force of a thunderbolt."

"Discarding isolated zones like the Proscenium, what's the risk of this ecosystem leaving the...?" Azovka sighed with a half-smile.

"Suppose I can't call it a sargasso anymore."

"I can answer that," replied Solta. "The risk is small. This region of space is still heavily regulated, remember?"

"Oh, right," she nodded. "They'd have to overturn a number of interstellar laws just to set up a permanent bed-sit here. Let alone something a-along the lines of a colony."

"The density of the ecosystem here also makes using it as a shortcut through sectors unappealing," the pilot pulled a web-like frond from his sleeve, "to say the least. For all involved."

"And elsewhere," the Doctor inhaled. "The archipelago sleeps."

"*Doctor?*" Two unified voices in the wilderness.

He cupped his hands and announced, "Peri! Frobisher! *Over here!*"

The party from Trailblazer Prime emerged from the coppice bringing the inimitable smell of a long-range shuttlecraft. Fragrances that heralded a particular sterile cleanliness that its occupants lacked in their own demeanour.

The Doctor, Peri and Frobisher clasped one another's hands in delight. Pleased and relieved to see that both parties had made it out of this most recent escapade intact.

"There's no truer feeling than friends reunited, I thought. The TARDIS?" the Doctor asked encouragingly.

"Safe as houses. She's on a hovercart just a few metres back that way," Frobisher pointed.

"No trouble following my instructions?"

"Nope, should all be fixed and ready for take-off," grinned Peri.

"Splendid! Well, I've some friends you ought to meet—"

Azovka and Mæstric hadn't seen one another since the MEV. Since their fight and the mutual decision to part ways, albeit through circumstances beyond their own control. The time apart had done them well, taught them valuable skills and allowed them to share their private woes among those they had grown to trust. But, there was still an uncertainty there

Embarrassment? No. It was shame.

One the one side, the Doctor placed a hand gently on Azovka's back, clearing his throat, "Oh, they are them and we are us..."

"...and never the twain should meet?" asked Peri of Mæstric, from the other.

The Doctor whispered to Azovka. "Sounds like two lines short of a full verse to me."

The two girls let the camera of their mind's eye slide from their respective chaperones to fallen friends across the river stream. They'd changed much since that time. Outwardly as well as inwardly. Tiny things like Mæstric's mislaid headphones and Azovka's vanished jacket clip. They studied one another for a moment, letting their eyes wander up and down their forms. It wasn't the deterioration that struck them. Rather it was the way they held themselves. Assured. Confident. Rested.

A feeling of hope rekindled. The kind one only ever experiences with long-time friends. They had stepped toward one another without consciously being aware of it. Like two planets in a mutual orbit, one ruby red and another sapphire blue.

“You’re alive...” said Mæstric. Two words with an inordinate sense of wonder. “Oh, you’re alive!”

They threw themselves at one another in a tight embrace.

“And so are you,” replied Azovka, trying to hold back her tears.

The stepthreader felt the warmth of her friend’s hands against her back, gripping the fabric of her shirt, willing the experience to be real.

Mæstric’s nose felt cold against her ear. “I hurt you.”

“I hurt you,” Azovka whispered back. “But it’s alright now, wasn’t it be not?”

“Yeah... Yeah, eventually,” she let her arms flow back to her friend’s shoulders. “It’s all going to be alright, Telle. I promise. Time is the Traveller. It was just...”

“I know.” She smiled, daintily, and tilted her earnest features. “We’re alright, I’m sure of it. We’ll make sure of it, right?”

“Right. We’re...” Mæstric swallowed a sob, looking down at her shoes. “Damn... I missed this... Just being able to *talk*.”

Azovka gently nudged her forehead. “You’re my friend. You’ll always be my friend. I need to say that more often because it’s true. You’re important to me.”

“I know,” she smiled back. “Just nice to hear it is all. Any more glimpses?”

“I couldn’t tell if it was real or just... fancy,” she led her friend down towards the grove. “But I do know this...”

Having made their farewells and slipped away, the Doctor, Peri and Frobisher were on their way back down the path towards the hovercart that held the TARDIS.

The blue crate’s lamplight glimmered like something truly otherworldly, even in the fostered reef, filled with the smell of petrichor oils and geosmin after a rainstorm. Despite the overwhelming nature of the ecology itself, it felt homely to these three travellers. Their conversation became languid and familiar. They’d finally allowed themselves to relax.

The Doctor straightened his lapels, attic vanilla and second-hand books wafting through the new air. “I take it then,” he continued to Frobisher, “that the tape will be submitted anonymously to the Nombriol of Law and Justice?”

“That’s the idea. It’ll sit there for a while in archival circulation,” elaborated his penguin chum. “Safe enough until the Institute folks make their request.”

“How many people die in the meantime, though?” grouched Peri. “All those people with the Lonewatch and at the Institute... That pilot, Castell, her kids are going to grow up with commendations instead of a mom... The casualties from the war alone... I mean, for goodness sake, what are we really saving the Universe from?”

“Each other,” answered the Doctor.

“Who for?” asked Frobisher.

“Each other. Confusing, isn’t it?”

“I’ll say...” Peri rolled her shoulders.

He hummed. “You’re certain no one asked about the TARDIS?”

“We never told them it travelled in time,” admitted Peri.

“Not a discussion worth having,” Frobisher sniffed. “What’s the big deal anyway?”

“Likely nothing. The automatic camera detector has been functioning since...” the visitant whickered. “For a while now.”

“I was wondering why people always mention you, but not the TARDIS,” Peri remarked.

“‘Always’, perp?” asked Frobisher.

“Well, mostly,” she acceded.

“It’s been operating on and off for years,” the Doctor scratched his cheek. “However, there are elements now that have begun to take an interest.”

“In us, specifically?” Frobisher inquired.

“I’m not sure... The less scrutiny we absorb these days, the better.”

“I dunno...” Peri threw out her arms, languidly. “At the end of it all, did we really make any difference?”

The Doctor stopped, turning to her with a dangerous twinkle.

“Would you like to find out?”

She looked at him. “You’re serious?”

Frobisher measured him. “He’s serious, alright.”

“We jump forward seventy-years,” he waved. “See if things have righted themselves in the meantime. What do you think?”

“No,” the whifferdill answered quickly. “Thanks. It—eh—feels a bit too much like cheating, Doc.”

“Frobisher’s right. Anyhow, what if we didn’t make a difference?” she asked. “What if... What if we only make things worse?”

The blonde-maned face ticked its mouth. “Doubtful.”

“Still, though... I think I’d prefer thinking we did well, rather than knowing we didn’t.”

“You really believe that, don’t you?”

“Well...” Peri shifted awkwardly. “Yeah, I do.”

“Frobisher?”

He dipped his head. “Ain’t it the truth, Doc?”

With all the gentleness of a summer cloud, the Doctor placed a hand on Frobisher’s head and Peri’s shoulder.

“Look around you, my friends. Look at what you helped to create. Soft rains adrift over shimmering pools, birds wreathed in fire amongst the wildest trees... Out there among the stars, they’ve sworn to fight their petty little wars, but here you’ve fostered life. The birth of a new world, Peri and Frobisher. How many people can say they’ve accomplished that? Better still...” He gestured to the two girls, their heads bowed together side-by-side on a blue-moss log. “You’ve already assisted with the path to reconciliation. From two will come four, from four will come eight... I don’t need to take you forward, the future is there right before you.”

His two companions found themselves smiling. Despite themselves.

“What will happen to them?” asked Peri.

“It’ll be interesting to see. With Azovka’s sensitivity to Time, I imagine the Narans could one day stand tall as another of the High Evolutionaries.” The Doctor bit his thumb at the sky. “I’m sure Gallifrey will have words to say in that regard.”

A balancing of the scales, he reflected.

“Time to move on?” Peri asked.

The Doctor nodded, opening the TARDIS door and ushering them inside. He held the tapestry of life before him in his eyes one final time.

He quoted, “And Spring herself, when she woke at dawn, would scarcely know that we were gone.”

The TARDIS flashed on its way, hurtling through the vast coral Galaxies of Space and the wending hourglass of Time, in search of another wondrous horizon.

- THE END

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And thanks to everyone who not only expressed an interest in *Eden by Annihilation*, but pursued this tale over its four-year development to its very end. Meanwhile, the Doctor, Peri and Frobisher...

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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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