



# DOCTOR WHO

## EDEN BY ANNIHILATION by ALAN CAMLANN



THRILLING ADVENTURES IN SPACE AND TIME

**DOCTOR WHO**

***EDEN***  
**BY *ANNIHILATION***

**ALAN CAMLANN**

First published in 2020 by  
**Divergent Wordsmiths**  
a **Doctor Who** writing community  
at <http://divergent-wordsmiths.weebly.com/>

Second edition published in 2022

This is a non-profit fan project and not intended to infringe or query any copyright belonging to the BBC and/or its associated parties.

Compiled by Alan Camlann

Front cover by Caroline Tankersley

The moral rights of the author have been asserted.

**Doctor Who** series Copyright © British Broadcasting Corporation  
1963

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

*All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living, dead or transmogrifying, is purely coincidental.*

# CONTENTS

## PHASE TWO

1. “Diving for Answers”
2. “The Desert Shrugged”
3. “Game of Charades”
4. “The Two-Man Flaw”

# **PHASE TWO**

## STAGE 5: “Diving for Answers”

Its journey from Natasia Tor completed, the landing jets of Castell’s interceptor fired. It pushed against the CIDA landing platform, carefully nested at the heart of the tower’s flowing, fluid-form architecture on Trailblazer Prime. A section of roof slid down over the top to cover the elevator shaft, leaving little evidence that it’d received any vessel beyond the echo of thunder.

Asa observed the interceptor’s descent to the bay down the launch column on the Astral Collaboratory’s vidscreens.

The forward portal of the spacecraft had clouded over, probably on the pilot’s instruction. A choice he could empathise with. It was disorientating to go from deep space straight back to planetary lighting conditions without making some allowances. They had an informal name for it, ‘atmo-transfer vertigo’. He’d experienced it more than once himself.

Asa could hear the jingle of Blue-Sky’s utility bandoleer on the Vidphōn. The engineer was making his way towards the bay, as previously instructed, to meet with his machine crew.

“*Anything of interest so far?*” Blue-Sky asked.

“Only that transceiver squirt,” replied Asa.

“*It’s not unusual for them to be quiet.*”

“Acknowledged,” the technician hummed, doubtfully.

At the end of a line of emerald text on a blue-tinted screen, the white horizontal baton winked cajolingly at Asa.

**COMMAND >> REPLAY\_**

He hit the confirmation key and squeezed his hands as the serrated, fruity tones of D-Leader piped through the speakers once more, “*Full acknowledgement. Confirmation of authority.. Flight path clear. Firstly and lastly—no, nothing. Sorry. Heb, you’re going to really haul us over the coals for clattering up the recordings like this.*”

“Wish you had,” Asa muttered to himself. “We’d feel a lot better about this.”

There was an almost imperceptible whine buried beneath the recorded broadcast, drowning out the gaps between each word. It could easily be transceiver interference from that sector of space, it was notorious for it. Societal recluses and the criminal classes found it ideal for precisely that

reason, but the incidence left the already uneasy Asa seeing dybbukim in the dark.

“*Make a decision. Right or wrong?*” asked Blue-Sky.

“Right until wrong, *sudar*.”

He heard Blue-Sky sniff. “*I’m not the sudar, fledge. You are. Remember that.*”

Asa bobbed his head, nervously. “*Ri—Acknowledged.*”

“*Now tell me why,*” instructed Blue-Sky.

“We cannot afford to believe otherwise,” the parazoid felt small bubbles of confidence infuse his pores. “Search for any anomalous materials. We’ll concentrate on the records down here, copies should be coming in from Communications now. If anything has been missed, I’ll find it.”

Camera R-779 in the launch silo’s maintenance entry snapped on automatically. The final flare of its engines fading to nothingness, the last interceptor rolled in with industrial grace on the grey-and-white plasteel-plated launch pad. Its surprisingly delicate-looking frame was locked in place with a series of metallic clamps and the maintenance brigade fell in. Moving workbenches into position, testing applicators and lances of varying sorts ranging from liquid substances to rudimentary ultrasonics. Blue-Sky began climbing a ladder to gain a better position over the polarised cockpit.

Asa found himself lifting from his chair to get a better view over the organ-like slope of the console.

The north-most bulkhead to the observation room slued open to bid the mnemodron enter. It flew in beside him like an oversized ladybird. Asa carefully unloaded the requisite cassettes from its roll-top storage drawer, which he opened with an infrared pulser that regulations would have insisted that he kept magnetically strapped to his side. Instead, he kept it on the desk in front of him to tinker with and regularly check over.

With positive identification established, he emptied the machine’s temporary contents, closed the lid and dismissed the machine from his attention. Normally, they would have come by transit tube, but he didn’t want to risk an unshielded magnet wiping the data records before they could reach his terminal. He fed them one-by-one into his console’s internal drives, each grinding and thocking accordingly.

That was something at least.

“*Wait...*” Blue-Sky hissed.

Asa’s concentration broke. “What is it?”

The engineer hadn't been talking to the technician. He'd been addressing the men and women around him below the camera's range. They linked the interceptor to the Institute's power plants by service cable. The cockpit depolarised and—

Blue-Sky took a step backwards and nearly fell from his ladder. He reached out a crimson-skinned arm to steady himself. Concealed beneath his stoic features, Asa could see a poniard of rising dread stab at the back of his eyes. He looked *ill*.

Keeping his back to the rest of the team, the engineer held a hand up to his ear and listened to reports coming through on his headset from the Institute's other hangers. He waved away an older Xolan radiophonics specialist trying to compensate for his flittermouse vision by scrutinising the scene until he was nose-to-nose with the pilot's chair. Blue-Sky tapped the receiver's squawker to cut off the being on the other line, raising his voice for the benefit of his immediate peers, "*Confirmed on the other two interceptors?*"

"What's going on?" pleaded Asa.

Blue-Sky wasn't listening to him. Every facet of that report was being absorbed to the last molecule. What was going on?

Asa moved the camera, a slow level pan into—

"How...?" he mouthed.

Into an empty cockpit. Empty... *Empty!* Where was the pilot? The implications were nothing short of disastrous. Had they been abducted by the opposition? Was this a warning or an infiltration plot?

"*Right,*" it was like Blue-Sky was in the room with him. "*The release mechanism for the cabin is possibly booby trapped. We're going to forgo removing the canopy by conventional methods. Instead, we're going to use the cutting lances. Alright?*" Someone out-of-frame placed one in his hand. "*Alright, everyone stand well back.*" He touched the lance's snout to the glasstic. Hot, milky-white smog trailed up in a curl of heat beneath the instrument's protective dish, burning through the petrified soap bubble. A halo of white, turned golden-orange and finally blue as he cut around the interceptor's emergency release seals. Asa could imagine the acrid smell of smoke and the gushing huff of the torch. Sparks dripped and hopped across the seat and controls, until finally with one resounding kick, the newly fashioned hole pitched down against the seat. Gloved hands carefully removed it as an obstruction and Blue-Sky and the elderly Xolan ran their requisite sensing elements over the cabin's contents.

"*Clear?*" rumbled Blue-Sky.

The Xolan told him that every possible check had been performed by the detectors in the launch column. There was nothing, nothing at all. Everything was normal.

“Channel still clear?” asked the engineer.

“Yes,” answered Asa, looking up from his examination of the data recordings’ command line script.

He’d been parsing the waveforms trying to locate any anomaly that’d explain the strange unease that had cloaked around him. There was a scientific and observable practice at play here, but he was damned if he’d been able to discover it. It was just a feeling.

Something to do with that unknown in the sargasso.

“Go ahead,” said Asa, “I’m listening.”

Asa could see him leaning forwards, spraying some amplification spray over some large cumbersome prism. “The brigade in charge of Interceptor K-17 registered blood, belonging to the pilot, but no energy residue. She’s the only one indicating a struggle. It’s possible that D-Leader and Interceptor D-08 are still alive. I don’t know... Should be able to form a conclusion once this box is further analysed.”

“What is it?” asked Asa

“*Closed-circuit transmitter box for a ransom demand?*” Blue-Sky hypothesised.

“Could be.”

He turned to the Xolan radiophonic technician. “*Still clear?*”

“*There’s nothing to detect,*” he assured him.

“*Alright, let’s get on with it...*”

The Xolan reached forward to grab the package from its position in the chair, “It sounds like—” and triggered the complex film of sensors on its exterior. The result was instantaneous and deadly. The whole box illuminated with light like an effigy on Ballentine Nox. Smoke radiated from its sleek, impenetrable surface and the radiophonic technician shrieked, falling back from his ladder straight out of sight. His weakened cellular structure impacted the floor like wet paper.

Terror flooded across Blue-Sky’s tetrad pupils in a tsunami, but his voice didn’t waver. “Alert medicentre and get him out. Get him out now!”

A spike of fear shot straight up Asa’s back. By Czerny, this was it!

“*Asa, standby for possible demolition procedure!*” cried Blue-Sky.

Asa primed the emergency coder. “Locking down all transmission channels! Standby!”

He activated the emergency control on his console, closing off the Astral Collaboratory’s shutters and disengaging any extraneous hardware

that might interfere with the upcoming procedure. The air conditioning vents were isolated. He adjusted his dial, increasing his supply of water and watched as the offending package was delivered down to a small coterie of Vegan engineers in the Isolation Zone who oversaw its submersion beneath several atmospheres of pressure inside the isolation unit's compression chamber.

Their prismatic faces betrayed the worry they felt even through the fuzzy capture on the video display unit. They removed the casing and the surrounding foam that had glued it to the bottom of the pilot's seat with high-density manipulator arms, while the other departments were making similar preparations. They ran through safety checks until they transformed from mechanical procedures into rituals of comfort, waiting for the inevitable moment of detonation. Like a bullet into a plate of armoured lead, a neutron bomb would be safely contained, but the lingering aftershock would be felt throughout the complex and possibly in the macropolis above.

He turned to the mnemodron by his station and gave it a worried frown.

It wiggled its visualiser to and fro, a compartment on its midsection snatching open.

“Traitors to the Resurgence of Tyrika!” it hissed and fired.

Asa's thoughts scattered in terror. *Something must have jumped through the transmission channels. I wasn't fast enough. Blast it! I wasn't fast—!*

He didn't have time to scream. His faceplate peeled away in strips, vital lifewater pouring from the warped bell glass as his chair and body struck the console with a vicious thud. The robot cruelly swatted him aside to reach the controls beneath him and he watched—paralysed—as it manipulated the transmission relays. All the minute bulbs of the Institute's patrol and reconnaissance probes were alight with information, their carefully plotted trajectories dismissed in favour of new orders and a more lethal ambition. Every new endpoint was an occupied satellite. From the frontier of Briar Rose to here at Trailblazer Prime.

They were being turned into missiles. No one would see them coming.

Asa imagined that he'd opened his mouth to scream for help.

But no one came.

Surrounded by the cadavers of great vessels, I hear the voice of the machine.

*(I hear it whisper in my mind; the garden of enigma.)*

<Joy! Joy!>

I cannot see the tides of Time beneath its skin, nor hear its siren call as every lash lies against its back. I seek our way through its veins (*this time thing*) and when it roars, it roars at me. <Through me.> (*Beyond me.*) An island of glass in an ocean of fire, yet it does not cry out in pain or fear. No, it thrills at the opportunity to explore every age and season, every olive primordial forest and taciturn silver peak. A thriving concert as an invisible versant shifts to us, I feel its scrutiny and its trepidation. The scent of fruit and ice, the reverse decay of death and life compels us closer. (So, alike...) Do I dare? <I wrestle the world, I place our minds against the shell and heave until it cracks open.> (*Transgression! Violation!*) I must know what it is. It struggles against me as I burrow into its master computer, an inorganism with a decidedly organic set of responses. (*A Schizoid craft.*) <Selective.>

\*I prefer perceptive.\*

In my fervour, I forgot. A door could open both ways.

It stood on the threshold waiting to come in. A swirl of blue, ink through water, she charges towards the contact point. (*As predicted.*) <Predicted?> (*I seize the tail of the comet with a pane of black ice.*) Intrusion countermeasures programs react against its <her?> (*ridiculous*) transgression into my realm. A decisive lure that has brought her beyond the seat of power and marooned that temporal isle adrift in my web. Her shape mollifies with fear as the hyperstructure around her crumbles into a plane filled with scrap kludge and she falls. Tumbling through her tesseract into a singularity, a chasm that dulls her senses and renders her dumb. <I endeavour not to harm her,> (*but we are expedient, there is little time to waste with our foes braying at the tower's base.*) For the door is now unlocked and the burning sea ready to explore...

The TARDIS wailed in protest in the vernal Doctor's <Doctor?> (*What is it? Where does it originate?*) <Within.> (*It intrudes as before!*) mind. The little thing screams in its dull four-dimensions, clutching his temples and curling his knees to his chest. The pain burns through him, a violation and transgression. (*He defies me!*) Perhaps another could dull his defences.

The zebra string that bound the two together snapped taut...

And the Doctor's storm-cloud eyes snapped open.

He'd made contact.

Something was speaking to him. No. No, nothing so primitive as the phasing of cartilage and mucus membranes. *Speaking* wasn't quite the correct term. It was attempting to carve ideas into the soft flesh of his

mind. Electronic shapes. Grids. Squares. Triangles. Dots. Atoms. Reticles. Patterns! *Patterns!* Patterns with meaning, a working intelligence! And the noise! So much noise! The more he attempted to decipher them, the more he felt they were trying to decipher him. Who? Why? What knowledge could he/it glean? What wisdom had it/he learned?

Alas, he felt the attosecond pass too soon. The electrochemical impulses moving his eyes in real-time shuttled information fast enough for him to see the ground charge remorselessly up towards him.

Then all momentum ceased.

In the Nutritional Stratum, three zones over from where the Doctor and Azovka fell, travelled two members of the Vaisyan Lonewatch. Mæstric and Tylial. Gliding over the disfigured mosaic of gravity-fed spillways atop their respective hoverjets.

Mæstric rubbed her eyes. Returning here made her feel... discomfited.

Every foothill that would have once provided the entire planetoid with enough edible algæ to last until their next shipment in forty, maybe fifty solar years. Now, within glaciers of carnation pink ice, the complex homed little more than stunted weeds. Virulent, blighted and meagre. No more filling than a filament of sodden chaff.

She felt her stomach yawn despairingly at the thought. Simple and indisputable.

*Cruel. This place is just cruel.*

They had made it so far, dragging the only salvageable element of their crippled transporter behind them, a sumpter, only to discover a region once lush with vegetation had been made a barren waste. Destroyed by a freak mutation of the nutrient stock. Anyone deluded or desperate enough to drink from the waterways became fever-stricken for days. Even the meat of what little local wildlife existed had become poisonous to the Lonewatch.

One of its earliest dupes, the Niwunian stationcomber, Tylial, turned his hoverjet towards its twin. A curious frown ticked into the unfamiliar grooves on his face. He tapped a melody in the air with his right hand, the unseen piano in his mind's eye resonating at each tone of thought. A quirk of his tumultuous lifestyle, rather than his advanced age, she suspected. She found her own hand ruckling a tattoo against the base of the hoverjet's clutch as well.

His voice was oddly melodious considering his weathered malachite features. "Authoritative informatory alternatives?"

"No, it's as we left it. Same... mess."

It was hard to find anything conclusive through her Mobital cyberdeck. The computers used to regulate algæ production were still thick with data packets, interleaving datalinks and virtual arteries. What information she could glean was often contradictory.

Mæstric snapped the switch on the side of her headphones, “Contact—*Damn!*”

She scraped them from her skull, saving her ears from the high-pitched scream of static.

Cautiously, Mæstric held one side up and listened to the music box tones of an uneasy five-tone melody. Repeating over and over. Louder and louder.

“Recognise it?” Tylial asked.

“Sounds like an IFF transponder,” she answered. “All the way out here in the hinterware.”

“Pardonry?”

“Someone’s trying to ping a—” Mæstric hushed herself. There was a peeling boom on the horizon line. Long and continuous like waves crashing against a shoreline. She inhaled the bitter air through her teeth and muttered, “You hear that?”

Tylial nodded, nervously scratching with a tooth-like thumb. “Patrolcraft.”

Mæstric adjusted her headset’s transmitter waveband, careful to thumb the loose slider in place, and held the microphone by her lip. “Contact. Base from Guild-2. Come in.” Scratching static. “Base from Guild-2. Come in, guys.” More of the same. “Come in. C’mon. Goodbye...”

The headset dropped around her neck.

She checked the Resonance Gem zipped up in her chest pocket. Its power flickered intermittently.

Behind them, the Mobile Excursion Vehicle stamped on its tracks through the frozen remnants of the industrial doors like a charging elephant, kicking up heavy contrails of dust in its wake. The headlamps on the front signalled twice to the reconnaissance pair. They must have mistaken the sonic boom for their all-clear signal. It began its descent down through the long-dead pandemonium of debris towards the algæ farm.

“It’s a killing ground waiting to happen...” Mæstric felt around the vinyl of her jacket pocket, slipping her hand reassuringly against the grip of her long-snouted, vacuum-black Songstress. The words came tumbling from her mouth faster than she could register. “Make towards the MEV. I’ll see if I can bring the carrydart down from here.”

The votary gawped at her, aghast. “With what?”

“I’ll think of something good.”

“The battery chargement on hovering-jettimode—”

“Go!”

“Muchly,” Tyliat nodded and swivelled towards the approaching transporter. “May Their eternal light shine unto you.”

Mæstric flippantly thumbed her teeth at his departing back. “*Ivat ikkit ikkir.*”

A tattered bit of verse from Briar Rose, something that the children had gleaned from the adults. She’d been taught its original meaning but forgotten it long ago. Remembering the gesture itself had seemed more important. She’d learnt it from her time as a sky-sweep, keeping spaceport exhaust pollution from dirtying up the domes with soot, oil and ash. It was a glistening, pale and wholly unusual sight on a world so singly marked by its forest trees and chivalric verdure.

Her heart thumped at a knothole in her chest. Dammit, what were their names? Any of them? That loss had disturbed her more than the loss of their faces. Names had value. Power. When had she forgotten?

The roar of coughing engines dragged her back to the present. The ship came to rest below the far slope. Hard enough to warp the landing struts. Liquid blue propellant hiccupped its last and the carrydart’s rampway descended, the hoverjet settling down behind it under a veil of mechanical jitters.

Using the blanket of sound as a cover for her idling hoverjet’s anti-gravitational soleplate, she unhooked her sights from the pistol and held it up. Nothing. No sound of footsteps. No voices. No movement of any kind.

The carrydart remained empty for several minutes before Mæstric decided to creep in closer.

She crossed over to the rampway, careful, but eager steps taking her closer to the gutted ribcage of the craft. When the last popping hiss fell silent, the ship gripped the cemetery silence by its throat. The owners were likely—

Long metallic fingers brushed her wrist and Mæstric leapt back into the wall with a shout.

A thrill of fear shot up her spine. Her reaction was instantaneous, driven by base instinct and a sudden unsuppressed deluge of ire. The first shot went wild, strobing across the cabin, puncturing the forward portal. She used the signaller to blind her attacker. There! A corona of searing, white hot light.

Its hand clamped down on her arm. Forcefully. Painfully.

“Peri!” quoth the figure in a nonsensical battle-cry.

The face reared up towards hers. An Autopilot! Heel or face? Attacking or defending? Either case, she was dragged down with it. She tried to follow its downward arc and pull away, tear herself free, but it remained fastened to her. Dead weight!

Mæstric’s mind leapt on her technological prowess. She still had her Mobatal, perhaps she could use that. Damn! No input jack, but an infrared diode on its forehead like a jewel looked promising. She transmitted her standard bit pattern. The gentle nudge she’d always give any electronic door before she forced through it with her ICE. There was a reciprocal scream of static from her headphones. Not a dead signal, nor an encrypted cipher, but a random, nonsensical flush of data from the carrier waveband. Abject chaos. It didn’t make any sense.

A flash of anger shot through her. It allowed her to gain the upper hand and strike it across the face with the butt of her lasgun. It recoiled, placing its hands against the impact point in pain.

“My beak!” it squalled, uncharacteristically. “Rats, I mean—!” She struck him again. “*Yeow!*”

It hit the floor, the nozzle of the Songstress against its temple.

More to herself than her attacker, she hissed, “Why can’t you leave us alone? Just leave us alone...!”

There was a clatter of a falling object behind her. She froze. The reaction of an animal running on adrenaline and little else. All she knew was that there was someone or something else alive in the cabin. Before she could react or even consider this fact more carefully, she was attacked. A cuboid blur pitched through the air, its jagged edge connecting harshly with her neckline. The back of her hand clasped reflexively at the scratch above her armour, her body’s balance knocked off kilter. She reeled backwards towards the wall’s edge, the interior contents of the offending projectile—a medical kit—spraying across in a thunder of inventory.

“He only wanted to talk!”

Her attacker spoke. *She* spoke. Not another robot, but a living being.

Mæstric struggled to picture her features, sheathed as they were in darkness within the cabin. Still, her anger got the better of her. “*Talk?*”

“Yeah, talk!” she barked. “Nasty little word, isn’t it? Kind of crazy what you can get done with it.”

Mæstric’s face twisted. “*You...*”

“Take it easy. Easy!” protested the robot. “We won’t hurt you.”

The datathumper let her frustration rise and fall like an ocean wave. She kicked aside a discarded roll of bandages and took a deep breath. In three words, the anger had descended back to the depths behind her eyes. “Who are you?”

“Name’s Frobisher,” it said. “Former shamus. Decent automaton.”

He looked to his travelling companion who nodded.

“And you?” asked the gunslinger.

“Peri. Charmed girl from Charm City.” There was a bitter irony to the other’s figure voice. “Think it’s your turn.”

“...Mæstric.”

“Why attack us, Mæstric?” asked Frobisher.

“Why?” Seemed like such a simple question. Asked earnestly and innocently, it might even have seemed reasonable. Mæstric’s fist tightened so much she thought the metal grip of the lasgun might burst from the pressure. “You people have been destroying us for months. People have *died*. Our every little step forward brutalised and sneered at, I am sick of it!”

“We’re not responsible, moll,” Frobisher assured.

“We can’t be,” said Peri. “We haven’t been here long enough.”

Mæstric noticed Frobisher examining the sciolistic constellations drawn in felt-tip pen, linking freckle-to-freckle on her gun-arm. Resembled a robot, but it didn’t move or talk like one. Peri, likewise, didn’t fit the pattern. She was hardly armed for conflict and her face was red, creased with frustrated tears.

“Those suits look top of the line, PanGal stuff,” Mæstric gestured with her free hand. “You’re not those suckers they rip up for their gold cradle? A Starfriend’s luxury couple or something?”

“Scarcely. We’re a bit, erm... Well...” Frobisher sniffed, warily.

“Fiscally despondent,” Peri half-laughed.

“Yeah...” he growled in grudging agreement. “Guess you could say that. Never knew you could have so much fun with money. These are from a... a good friend.”

“Really?” asked Mæstric. “Where is your ‘good friend?’”

Peri’s gaze vulcanised with hurt. “Oh, take a wild guess, *‘friend’*.”

At the bottom of a gully, Azovka woke from a sleeping memory of baking bread and warm flagstones under a soft gold sky. Lije had sealed the shattered roof up with tarpaulin taken from a local military patrol to keep the monsoon rain out and...

No. No, that was part of the dream, too. None of it remained.

The acrid scent of smoke rippled in the air around her. It clung to her clothes and hair. An inferno. Two dead. Lost in the depths of a monstrosity. That was reality. She concentrated on the motes of fæ light glittering above her head.

The highest mountain on her world, Ling Sar, was ten thousand metres above sea level. Each chamber on this megalithic structure felt as though it was twice that measure. Only downwards. Below in the darkest ocean where light could no longer stretch its fingers, but life, strange, transcendent and horrific, lived all the same. She surveyed her surroundings and nothing but soulless midnight-blue walls loomed around her.

The colour of tank treads, spotlights and identilink fencing.

All around her in the half-light, she could hear the deep, lonely warbling of data exchange signals beyond her comprehension. Always, it felt like overhearing another being's daydream. A polyphonic echo where commuting thoughts became unsettled sounds.

*Still trapped*, she thought.

Her stomach growled.

*And alone.*

Well... At least it was homelike. She sat up, removed the remnants of her rebreather dangling from her face and spat out the small fragments that had blown back between her cheeks and gums from the fall. The supply tank, a crumpled triangular prism, was dumped shortly afterwards. She resisted all temptation to touch the top of her head. It was almost impossible to see in the half-light. The phosphor gel on her mask was exhausted.

*She* was exhausted.

Cradled by the zero gravity, Azovka tried jerking herself forward and found her arms restricted. She twisted her head, catching a glimpse of motley vines. Cabling for power distribution. She must have been caught in its addled bonsai while she rested.

There was a rising glow in the light above her and a faint audible tone that focussed beneath a biometallic chute hidden behind a permacrete brattice. Disentangling herself and circling around, she noticed the wall opposite was pockmarked by a burner or cutting tool. The distortion formed a shape not unlike two snowflakes connected by a winding string. Beneath it, she could see a figure obscuring the central link between the two larger shapes.

It had to be him, the man who had tried to save her life.

The Doctor was sitting—or rather, floating—above a small nest of tractor rays that must have been used for heavy-duty transportation at one point or another in the satellite’s operating life. His legs crossed in the Cobbler Pose, a halo of blond curls bouncing up and down on his head with the rhythm of the field. In a deep state of meditation.

Without her consent, nor her understanding, an image formed in her mind. A shared experience.

*Standing within the bough of a mound of stalagmites, reaching up into a white-blue sky, stood a winged Pegasus observing the flight of sapphirine kingfishers resting on the podiums of rock that stood before him.*

Azovka traced her finger across her cheekbone, reached out towards his face and—

The Doctor’s eyes, two feathered emeralds cut with a laser, rolled open beneath the splintered visor. The connection was broken. Deliberately. The lid of the puzzle box snapped shut before any covetous hand could entreat within.

“Tick-tock, seven o’clock,” he remarked, suddenly. “Time to get up.”

There was a rattling sigh of oxygen scrubbers in his helmet as he inhaled rhythmically, completing his meditation.

The Doctor wrinkled his brow as his mind switched concerns. “You know, it’s rude to be rummaging around in someone else’s mind.”

“Was that a mental block?”

“Not particularly sophisticated, but adequate for any malingering transgressors.”

“Right. Sorry,” she replied, a little too quickly.

“Think nothing of it,” he dismissed with a note of caution. His gaze dropped to the emitters below him and his body sagged towards the floor.

Had the transgression been her? Didn’t feel like it. Felt more like a bit of psychic downdraught.

The Doctor eyed the lack of sky above them. “Quite the fall.”

“Quite the luck, huh,” Azovka remarked.

“Mmm... And all quite impossible.” The Doctor took another deep breath. “The atmospheric change is recent. A strong whiff of ozone.”

“Was-will that be why we aren’t d-dead?”

“Most probably. I suspect that the atmospheric release helped to guide us into one of the transport chutes. As to what prevented our fall...” he pointed towards a mound of surveillance crystal and tapped his lips. “I have my suspicions.”

A far off gurgle drew his attention to the back wall.

“*Ab*, what do we have here?” He unclipped his helmet and cast it aside, sliding a gauntlet across the mural. “Carved by laser, I suspect. Straight into the ceramic blast-shield. Such dexterity with so crude an implement...Pointillistic. Absolutely stunning.” His finger traced the line between the two from one to the other and back again. First slowly then with a sudden jolt. An idea sparked in his mind. “Well, well... The formal elements are a little parochial, but... Yes. Yes, I think I know what this is.”

Azovka tilted her head in confusion. “I’m not so sure.”

“I imagine you have an intelligent mind.” The Doctor rolled his hands in encouragement. “Think, young lady. Focus!”

Azovka stared at the long branches of the fresco in confusion.

“A cipher?”

The Doctor shook his head. “Curious idea, but no.”

A number of other suggestions popped into her mind, but few made logical sense. The last dropped into focus, an apple to her hand. She felt her stomach kick in protest and instantly regretted the metaphor.

“A tree?” she decided.

“A tree? A *tree*?” the Doctor echoed with bafflement. “I had no idea education in the 82nd-century would be so negligent. *Hmn*. Tree, indeed.”

Her face coloured with an embarrassed smile.

He continued before she had the chance to inquire after the unusual way he’d said ‘century’. “Well, on the other hand, I suppose it is after a fashion. It’s a neurone with axon and myelin sheath. The fundamental building blocks of life. A crucible of anatomy!”

“I don’t think I quite understand. T-these look like... carvings.”

“Call them what they are—*murals*.”

She studied the biometalwork a bit closer. “Suppose there is a curiously artistic flare to it all.”

He hummed again. “I like the compositional lines, the eye is drawn from one shape to the other, bouncing between the two through the biomorphic shapes.”

“It l-looks enthused.”

The Doctor broke from his reverie and examined her thoughtfully.

“What was that?” he asked.

“Enthused. Drawn with passion,” she reiterated. “I’d have thought that if satellite personnel had done that they would be brought up on a charge for defacement.”

He chewed his lip. “Passion, yes... Who would be so interested in creating a diagram of a somatic cell in such a Romantic style? Here in an emergency storage cell of all places? Why? What purpose would it serve?”

Another audible tone and a further light illuminated the throat of the antechamber further on.

The Doctor straightened his back. “Seems as though it wishes us to continue onward.”

“It?”

“The controlling intelligence of this section, I believe.” She could feel a dewy-sighted exhilaration from the man beside her. “Doesn’t this place feel exquisitely dangerous?”

## STAGE 6: “The Desert Shrugged”

Peri’s eyelids fluttered in protest against the burning electronic light of the MEV bunk.

Unable to sleep, Frobisher had remained in the same form throughout their capture. He saw no sense in tipping their hand while they still had an advantage, neither did his confidant.

“Feeling alright?” he asked.

Peri’s stomach mewled in protest.

“Guess I have my answer.”

Peri pinched her nose. “You know what I feel like?”

Frobisher leant forward. “A nice Khoriatiki salad. Prepared for yourself from a few slices of onion, a bushel of ripened tomatoes, dice-sized cubes of feta cheese, olives and a dusting of salt. With a... a side of Jouperic yoghurt, right?”

“Right,” she drawled, wryly. “Nothing too wild, you understand.”

“Most of it we’d be able to get from the transastral garden.”

“If not the food dispenser.”

“Here, though... Well...” he leant back.

Peri took her first genuine look around.

Their current accommodation was a cramped and dimly-lit mishmash of machinery and personal items.

It was a lived-in sort of place. Huge bundles of liquorice-coloured cabling wormed above her head and below her feet. It hugged a (now long empty) tub of what might have once been prepared algæ, a well-trodden holopad for the Courtesy Repulse Prizefighters and a tumbler of water left in an unkempt alcove.

The room had the feeling of someone’s bunk. Maybe a sleeping area for the two men who’d died? Or perhaps it wasn’t that insidious. Maybe it was quarters for the girl and her minder who’d caught them?

“Feels like I had a long day last night, Frobisher...”

“It’s that scanning rig we passed through to get here, I’d reckon,” Frobisher sniffed at the glass. “Feeling dehydrated?”

“It’s just a headache,” Peri was squeezing the wound on her denim leg, barely listening. Her mind was on other matters. She’d seen the Doctor’s hand snatch away and that girl, Azovka, plummet after him. A nightmare of vertigo that didn’t want to end. “Frobisher... He can’t be dead, can he?”

“The Doctor?” Frobisher had kept the idea on the backburner in private. “I don’t know, Peri. He’s been through worse, but that was one hell of a fall.”

“We’ve got to get out of here.”

“I’ve been working on it while you sleep. As far as I can tell, there’s only one way in or out and it’s through that door.”

“Can’t you bust it down?”

“That might make the situation worse, not better.”

“If you’re worried about getting me killed—” Peri hissed, wincing as blood from her leg oozed between her fingertips.

“No, I’m worried about *you* getting you killed. Y’need time to recover. Rest.”

The pain in her temples migrated down through her skull to the base of her neck. She could hear the blood roaring in her ears. And yet in between the oscillations of her heartbeat and the thrum of the vehicle’s air conditioner, she was surprised to hear a third noise.

She cocked her head to the side. “Hear that?”

“What?”

“Voices,” she said. “In the corridor outside. Listen...”

Frobisher downed the glass and strained his senses. “Yeah, I think so.”

She pointed to the tumbler. “Gimme that.”

Passing it to her, she placed the rim flat against the wall and her ear against the bottom, sliding it across the uneven surface until she found a dead zone where the sound of whirring turbines was at its weakest and the voices of their captors’ strong. Her mind attempted to assemble nouns between the stressed consonants.

She caught only fragments of the first. “H—*clack*—w many—*clack*—re l—*clack*—ft?”

At Peri’s guess, that was the girl, Mæstric, who had delivered them here.

“Tylial remains.” The other, she didn’t recognise. Spoken from deep in the back of the throat, it’d a subtle growling quality to it. “I’ve no contact with Azovka, Miane or Xor.”

“Will you pray for them, Dellevar...?”

“You may. Since my renouncement, I cannot.”

“I wish I could feel... something. Anything, but it’s...” she sighed. “I want out.”

“Out? I’ve other tasks available to you, if you wish—”

“I want to leave.”

“Is that your accidie speaking?”

“Boredom has nothing to do with it, *sudar*. Azovka was the one who came to you, for us to stay. Now that she’s... I don’t know what she is, but I want to be gone.”

“And that is not an unreasonable desire, but the work is all.” Something about those words struck at something in Peri’s memory. “If it does not lift us up, it will drown us. See this through and the future is yours to choose.”

Peri felt a jolt of understanding slowly begin to dawn. The charge drifted through her sea-grass dreams of music-loving gangsters, lycanthropic princesses and diseased cyborgs to a few years before when she was abroad on Earth.

Before the Canary Islands. Before the Doctor. With family.

Peri felt something surface from deep at her core. An old pain. Longing. Was she homesick? She couldn’t be, there was nothing to go back to. The reminder was a lot more painful than she’d expected.

It had come after her father had passed on. In a night-lit moment under a wolf’s moon, coloured by a grim desolation, her mother had told her a simple, seemingly immutable phrase. It explained her father, it explained her, it explained all.

*Only the work will lift you up, sweetheart.*

She was fresh off being a kid. It wasn’t until she’d met the Doctor that she’d really understood what that meant. Their travels had given her a new perspective on life’s wonders certainly, but also on death’s capacity for grief. It’d coloured her past in ways she’d never have anticipated growing up as an archæology brat.

After Dad... *died*, Mom had thrown herself into their work as hard as she could. Pushing herself to the breaking point. And one day while among the green and silver of Peru, she’d come back with a fractured wrist and a concussion, doing her best Indiana Jones impression. Chasing artefacts dumped into a Moche watercourse by historical looters and thieves. Her mother scared her, but the entire evening, she’d never once looked at Peri. Her mind was completely on a Super 8 film digest of *The Man Who Would Be King* taken from Dad’s collection and a softcover Berlitz Spanish phrasebook which she’d practised with over Connery and Caine.

Peri hadn’t minded, Mom had needed the space, but what had finally gotten to her was that repeating phrase over and over again, long into the deep dark of the evening. She couldn’t stand it, she’d stormed off to her room.

Why? She wasn’t entirely sure at the time.

*No comprehendo.*

Over and over.

“I don’t understand,” said Mæstric.

Peri sunk back against the wall and felt ill.

Resting his hand against an outcropping of wire netting, the Doctor’s pseudo-aquanautic gait slowed.

“You know, there certainly is a great deal of mystery abounding this place, Azovka... Cartographic records of the sargasso are extensive, yet no one in several centuries seems to have mounted a fully-fledged expedition to this artefact.” He rested a hand against his chest. “Yet, you did.”

Azovka motioned apologetically, her eyes flicking down and to the left.

The Doctor’s face sharpened with curiosity. He retrieved the scraps of torn cloth from their attacker and held it out. Its slow inertial decay was spectral, frozen in midflow.

“Do you recognise this? It was beneath the uniform of the major who attacked me,” he told her.

“The design was-will be Tyrikan... Sharpshooters use it mostly.”

“And beneath...” He flipped open the furl.

“The insignia of an Ordoheed Proctor.”

“Now, that’s taken you by surprise,” he pocketed the fabric.

“Specifically, I’ll wager, the insignia of our modern major’s general. They have a remarkably stubborn longevity to their dynasty...”

“For a band of petty crooks and frauds,” she condemned.

“Mmn. Now, why would old militaria of a forgotten war be wearing the colours of an army they never once came in contact with? It would be like Roman legionnaires dressed up as Japanese samurai.”

Although the precise context was lost on Azovka, she conceded that it made little sense. As she drifted, head rubbing against the curve of the ceiling, she decided on a change of tack.

“This downpipe,” she tapped it with a curled finger. “Do you recognise it?”

He studied the burble within. “The basic principle of its application, certainly.”

“We thought it was-will be a detainment system to regulate raiding parties or mutinous crewmen.”

“Not an untenable hypothesis, but there’s no outlet here. Nothing to project it from the piping. Any other theories?”

“One of the wilder ones was that it was-will be this station’s equivalent of blood.”

“It would fit the pattern of construction. Perhaps a hæmofluid,” he nodded. “Used for distribution of nutrients or any other chemical elements necessary to its life functions.”

She studied his features searchingly before replying. “There was-will be something else, too. Some anomaly?”

“Yes, I suppose so. The fluid within looks... coarse-grained, is it meant to be this colour?”

“No,” she confirmed. “An effervescent purple-red.”

“Why the change, do you think?” he asked.

“For the same reasons that odorants are added to certain gasses to more readily identify a leak. Safety and maintenance.”

“Likely a reagent of some kind,” he mused.

“Do you think it has been interfered with?” inquired Azovka.

“By an external source, you mean?”

“The Tyri—The Ordoheed, I was thinking.”

“You’ve been here longer than I have, you tell me.” The Doctor’s eyes narrowed with a feline insistence. “What is this place really? Surely, you can at least tell me that.”

Azovka’s gaze flickered down. “Let me bandage that hand...”

The word Peri decided to use was *different*.

Her attention was caught by a brown pincushion. Nailed to a corner of the MEV bunk.

At some point in the past, someone or something had ripped it away, likely with their bare hands, to expose the small camera embedded beneath. Likely to watch their prisoners.

She smiled to herself. The Doctor would have gone through every synonym under the sun until he found one suitable, but *different* was good enough for Peri.

*The Doctor...*

The smile faded. Sitting to the side, she searched Frobisher’s shape-shifting features for any telltale betrayal of doubt or suspicion. Was he really dead this time?

Her attention drew back to the wall. It wasn’t quite what she’d expected. Broken and exhausted people at the end of their tether. She pushed a hand against the cold tingle of the wall and held out the glass to Frobisher.

Or what was left of him.

Peri shrank back against the farthest corner of the room, giving the... the thing, as much space as it required. Its body quivered with a ruby-emerald plaid, elongating into a parody hybrid of weasel and weather balloon. She considered even that description to be generous.

“Peri...” it slurred, “*what’s it’s bua...?*”

“Don’t panic.” Her voice wavered with barely-controlled fear.

“Don’t—Frobisher, you panic, you die.”

She flung herself towards the door.

“Hey! Hey! Open this door!” the club of her fist punctuated each word. “Open it! We’ve got an emergency in here!”

No reply. Surely, they’d heard her?

She persisted. “C’mon! Unless you want two dead captives in here!”

Frobisher contorted with a hideous gurgle. It... he, she reminded herself, *he* knocked aside the contents of the bunk. The Courtesy Repulse holopad clapped against the floor. Flickering green pixel art—fireworks—painted the room and glinted off the darkened lens of the camera.

She shot across, waving her arms and enunciating. “He’s in danger! Please! He needs help!”

The entry coder beeped outside. Promptly and mercifully, the door slid open. Passing through the gap was Mæstric, her lasgun drawn to cover Peri. Her conversation partner joined quickly after. She couldn’t quite see either of them clearly, but at a guess, he was a man she would have perhaps considered corpulent, if not for the sheer stranglehold he possessed over his own posture. He moved like a bear or an iceberg. Implacable.

“My colleague has you covered.” He cleared his throat. “I needn’t warn you of what happens if this should prove a feint.”

“I promise you it’s not,” assured Peri.

“The airlock’s automatic detectors registered physiological anomalies when he boarded.”

“He’s a whifferdill. A shape-shifter.”

Dellevar examined the film of lichen on the interior of the glass. “Did he drink from this?”

“Yes, a couple of minutes ago. Is he alright?”

“The contamination looks recent. Mæstric?”

“I’ll check the forward compartment to see if it’s spread.”

“Thank you. And the projection array for the gems, Mydame Mæstric, as well.”

The gunslinger moved towards the doorway, finding Peri blocking the path.

“Get out of my way,” instructed Mæstric, levelly.

“I’m not in your way if you answer my question.”

The datathumper tried to force her way past, but even with the excruciating pain of her leg, Peri wouldn’t let her. “He might be *dying!* C’mon! Either of you! I need to know if he’s—”

“Why should we?” Mæstric’s patience boiled over. “To us, he’s no one important.”

“I really don’t think you believe that.”

“Telle, you—” Mæstric cut herself off.

“Don’t tell me what?” demanded Peri.

“The name wouldn’t mean anything to you.”

“Don’t worry, I’m sure it’s no one important,” she bit back.

Mæstric forced her face towards hers. “She is *not* no one!”

Seeing the girl in proper detail, no harrying, no quick-march, Peri’s voice caught in her throat. The datathumper’s features were like plaster of Paris. Chalky. As if she’d crumble to pieces from the inside out if you’d gently thumbed her chin. Every minor movement in the muscles on her face had an urgency to it. Looking down, she saw her broomstick legs staggered like stilts on the metal floor. The nightmarish image was all too familiar.

These people were starving to death.

And from what she could see of Dellevar’s features, he’d already surmised her conclusion. “Food and material supplies are a precious commodity here. As is our time. If you can prove some valuable skill to us, you will be allowed to stay.”

“And if we can’t?” asked Peri.

“We’ll leave you behind,” Mæstric took no pleasure in the words.

“That’s suicide.”

“No, it’s murder, but a decision has to be made,” Dellevar nodded, curtly. “Any protests you have will be directed towards myself. I alone will make the decision. That is my responsibility.”

“Look, gimme a chance, I...” Peri smacked the wall, trying to concentrate. “I’m—*ah*—no expert, but I can tell you that the algae outside was probably used for food production.”

“Is that all?” His tone was odd. A vague mismatch of disappointment and mounting interest.

“A-And the way we powered on straight past it tells me that either you’ve been through here before and exhausted it...” She measured not

Dellevar's face, but Mæstric's instead. She'd been doing well until she'd inadvertently put the blame on them. She racked her brain for information. It'd been so long since her studies at California State, most of her know-how came from books she'd read aboard the TARDIS. "Alright, less haste, more words." She reacquired their collective interest. "The alternative is something's tainted your supply like... toxic waste in a river. Maybe accidentally, maybe deliberately, but either way, we can offer an alternative. A way out."

"Can you prove what you say?" inquired Dellevar.

"How did we get here?"

"On the carrydart."

"It's not ours. How did we get it?"

She could see his crescent eyes narrow with consideration. Each moment passed with a certain degree of discomfort for Peri. She hid it well, but in truth, she needed to rest. Her breathing was laboured and she was seeing dots.

Her body was rebelling, but against all common sense she had to hold on just that little bit longer.

"This outbreak isn't new, is it?" she asked. "You've been fighting it for a while."

Dellevar exhaled. "Much of our initial stock was fried by microwave radiation. Cooked from the inside out inside their boxes. Unshielded equipment failed likewise. It killed three of us before we developed a means against it."

"You've been fighting a lot for a long time. Why not share the burden? It's our fight too now."

He unfolded his upper-left arm in supplication. "What is your way out?"

"We have a Ship," she licked her lips. "Not the—*er*—carrydart outside, but the one we came in on. It's called the TARDIS."

"TARDIS?"

"It's complicated. Save him and we can help each other."

Dellevar made his decision. He nodded and removed a set of prayer beads from beneath his cloak on a belt. She celebrated her victory by letting her legs collapse beneath her onto the bunk. Mæstric departed without a word for the forward compartment. Peri could see something come to Dellevar's mind. Perhaps a prayer?

The confessor noticed Peri open her mouth to speak before closing it again.

"Are you familiar with the faith?" he asked.

“Only through hearsay,” Peri admitted, circumspectly.

“Prosefchí pearls such as these are used in meditative rituals to calm the mind.”

He held it out against the monstrosity of colour that once was Frobisher. Physiology and anatomy transformed from a kaleidoscopic menagerie back into something Peri hoped she recognised.

“He’s had an allergic reaction to the algæ,” reassured Dellevar. “Easily remedied in a species such as his.”

Frobisher shook with exhaustion, his body visibly flooding neon green with a funfair nausea. He tipped his head in a grateful nod towards the votary, holding the beads to his humid neck. Frobisher sounded like a piano dropped halfway down a staircase. Cold sweats notwithstanding, she concluded that the worst of it was over.

Though bashful, Frobisher now remained a perfectly safe penguin.

“F-Forgot,” he said.

“Forgot what?” Peri asked.

“Forgot that robots don’t get thirsty.” He thumped the side of his head as if it were waterlogged and cleared his throat. ““Scuse me. Sorry, Peri.””

“Now,” Dellevar straightened. “What can you offer us?”

In the margin, Azovka nestled the side of her head against her shoulder and puffed a cheek, trying to recall the final specifics of her brief.

The Doctor, meanwhile, was drawing his own conclusions from what had already been said. Hands together as if in prayer, tapping his upper lip. “So, word reached you on Briar Rose on a disturbance in this sector of space.”

“Repeated word,” she clarified. “Spacers had contacted Affiliation authorities, but what evidence they could bring back was too small to warrant corporate action and too big for salvagers to approach without federal permits.”

“Which would place you somewhere in between,” the Doctor leant in. “What do you believe this place to be?”

“A Weapon. One of the first dispatched long ago across the frontier. It’s come home and settled in the Natasia Tor sector.”

“And you’ve no idea who constructed this place?”

“We can speculate. Possibly an ancient, extinct species from one of the Tyrikan satellite-worlds or something closer to home, an ancestor of the Affiliation.”

“Or perhaps neither. You’ve nothing definitive?”

“Not yet.”

“I see...” He shaded his eyes from the shaft of light coming from the upper level. “Well, I had my suspicions...” He measured his shoulder-length in relation to the shaft. Too small. Maybe further along. “The architectural style, what little there is of it down here, reminds me of 74th-century brutalism.”

“Used by who?”

“Whom.” He scratched an ear, thoughtfully. “Oh, a great many species. Sometimes for military satellites. Sometimes not...”

“You sound sceptical.”

“Well, weaponry takes many forms, doesn’t it? Your volatiser, for instance. Not every fighting instrument is a Mohebian lasgun or Raston burster disc, nor are they ultimately used for that singularly sciolistic end of destruction.”

“No I suppose not...” she thumbed the hilt of her bodkin, checking the retroflex unit for whether or not it’d fabricated a new blade. Blithely, it’d been replaced while she was unconscious. The new argent edge gleamed briefly as she glimpsed it briefly from its sheath.

“This ulterior party you’ve mentioned...” the Doctor began.

*Something tore across her vision. A distorted cry.*

Azovka pressed a hand against her face. Another memory? Common-or-garden variety anxiety? Something worse? She unsheathed her weapon either way. “Did you hear that?”

“Presumably,” the Doctor continued, as if he were uninterrupted.

“They wish to gain or have already achieved access to the Weapon. The wisest course of action is to assume the latter. Still, how and to what end? Yes... Those, young lady, are the answers we seek. Now, with that cuboctahedron what we need is to find a terminal with high enough clearance for me to dig a little deeper into its workings. That way we can do a detailed analysis and find out what’s really going on around h—”

He severed the word at the consonant. “Now, I did hear that.”

The glowlight diffused and split down two separate channels.

“No...” said the Doctor. “I don’t think so.”

They spun around and peered into the dark behind them where the veins of hæmofluid ran. They tripled in number as they met in the tunnel. Logically, they would lead back to a major processing node or somewhere else that required an increased level of power.

“Looks as though it broadens out a little down there,” surveyed Azovka. “What do you want to do?”

The inertia of the Doctor's climb carried him into the widening dark. He winked with the puckish mischief of a carnival tout. "Follow the trail of blood, of course."

The railcar pressed up against the plasteel-rimmed marble of the first security zone leading into the Geotactical Proscenium. Two figures emerged from the sliding doors onto the conveyor section beyond the platform.

Vog Mur rubbed her eyes, considering what further work might be required on the *Accomplishment* to keep this pretence going. They had the Resonance Gems and their own voice in the Mentality's consciousness, but still, she felt paranoia seep into her mind like the automated reports gurgling their findings from a speaker at the end of the passageway.

At the end, was a pale blue-ringed entry cone, surrounding a jet-black circular door that irised open at the conclusion of the detector tests. She didn't wait for the conveyor to stop before she pressed on into the Proscenium itself. There was much to see, much to reacquaint herself with.

The *Accomplishment* had now wedged itself like a tick in the far corner of the room. Its sleek and powerful hull pushed through the self-made opening. Figures both subtle and gross moved back and forth from the airlock door, delivering equipment as they were instructed. She saw Kuron and left him to direct the operation.

Sangfroid had remained at her side, frothing with expectation.

"Everything has been arranged. As you instructed."

"So I see."

They intended to remain here on this satellite for a while and, naturally, she decided that a few amenities were afforded to her. These were far more than trophies, they were tangible reminders of the past. Something she could reach out and lay her hand upon as confirmation.

She'd spent far too long having to rely on feeble scraps of memory. Far too long in the dark, conjuring and erasing half-shapes to fill the emptiness. She had coped in her own way, developing a fascination for effigies that eventually took on a life of their own.

Her most important collection of ephemera was located in the chamber's centre. She stepped into their midst as various control panels and equipment orbited around the room to meet the compilers at their behest.

Five tabletops. Each with their own immaculate battlefield blooming on fistfuls of airbrushed terrain.

The first was an Affiliation-Federation contretemps beneath the diamond world Orm's graphite seas.

The next was a Tryod bombardment of the Corbo Plumecities in waves of golden hair and leathery bodies.

The third depicted the suicidal charge of Qualar's mutated cherubim lead against Nieradzik star pirates in ringed purple-gold clouds against their protosun.

The fourth threw a neon red glow across the face of whoever observed it—the final climactic engagement of the Dalek-Cybermen War in the geosynchronous orbit of gas giant Mandara.

The fifth, however, had a special place in this grand opera of devastation. It was the largest and occupied the direct centre of the room.

Crossing over to the desk, she removed a small deedbox from one of its drawers. She manipulated a switch therein and, with an acrid reek of static, all the conquests of history sprung to life around her. Fire and thunderous fury all.

She revelled in it, though she would not show it.

She let the stinging bouquet of her homebound paradise fume and crackle as she considered her strategy.

For a moment, Vog Mur wondered if she had let vanity overcome her consideration for the wider project.

The Dreampark had been an adequate enough staging post for the final phase of their operation externally... However, there was little permanence there and she'd refused to let her coveted inventory roam. She eyed the resonance crystals in the deedbox, glowing in their fraudulent authenticity.

No one else would have been as diligent. No one else as inerrant.

*No, she denied. I have never once taken my luxuries for granted. Too long have I spent without them. Better to rule on high, than serve down below on the whims of cruel masters.*

Far from any such epicurian surrounds, Azovka straightened her legs, carefully shouldering past the waspish buzz of a heat sink. There was a subtle lessening of the satellite's purr as they careened forward under their own momentum. Another thrumming dither joined it.

"Sounds like air currents..." she mused.

The Doctor inhaled. "Enough for a palpable breeze."

The Naran could practically hear the rover grinning.

She nodded and swam forward, half-blind, catching sight of another opening on the other side. A thatch of pipes lined with wiring like chaff. No, not pipes, something else...

He swam up beside her. "What do you see?"

"I'm not sure. They look like pipes. Smoothed pipes." She tensed. "Too smooth..."

"Could it be an organ—?" The last word twisted into a distorted cry from his throat.

A click, the slap of hydraulics and all the weight of the world came down on them. She could feel a shift in her centre of gravity, a force that didn't exist before, pushing her down to the floor. Both of them sprawled in agony, flesh pressed into the metal—pinned!

"Kajiya, the hatch!"

Something tore across Azovka's vision like a manganese shield labouring from the surface of a lake. The tips of the Doctor's gloves sliced off. She thought her eardrums had burst before she realised it'd been the door's hydraulics. Had they been a few metres closer, it would have dis severed the crest of their skulls from the rest. The rover himself looked like a cat neatly declawed.

Aided by the frictionless surface of the chute, pulverised feldspar and sand sifted in through the vents above them. It began as a trickle, then a stream... Finally, a downpour.

"Nothing but go, go, go these centuries." The Doctor shielded his eyes with an arm against the ruby glare of the door's outline. "Resonance lock. Must require a sympathetic key to open. Let's see, magnetic in origin. Shape suggests cartridge... Containing the necessary rapport gem perhaps?"

Azovka's hands scrambled through her pockets, fumbling at the zipper. "Doctor—"

"Don't panic, I'm thinking," he shushed, urgently. "Listen, nothing to do with the cuboctahedron?"

"Nothing. Doctor Kajiya—" She pulled the cracked remnants of the Resonance Gem from her pocket.

Light flickering dully from its heart like an oscilloscope. Outside its cartridge, it must have shattered in the fall. She felt sick. The unforeseen earthed her in place. Doubt and indecision overwhelmed her.

"Nothing..." the Doctor repeated.

He shook his head. No, he wouldn't accept that as an answer. He pointed to the intricate arabesque of the far wall with his bandaged hand, snapping his fingers to emphasise his impatience.

“Up those cables and quickly!”

“What about you?” the words bounced flatly from her mouth, eyes still wide with shock. “You can’t climb with that hand.”

“Don’t question me, go!” He shoved her against the wall, forcing her hand onto one of the nearest carinated transmission lines. Shattering her panic before it could overwhelm her. “I’ll find another way.”

Azovka could feel the sand wrapping around her knees, sucking her ankles deeper and deeper into the dry mire. Her clawing fingers swelled beneath the pressure of her slipping grasp, arms tugging feebly at the electronic tresses, forearms shaking and twisting above her.

“I can’t... I don’t have the strength to—” Azovka’s cry of frustration just touched the Doctor’s ears. He was digging upwards with his fingernails, trying to keep his neck above the surface of the sand with little success.

She saw him reach out towards her. “Grab my hand!”

“What?”

“Hand! *My hand!* Grab my—”

The desert shrugged and the offering was buried.

The ground attempted to drink up her waist. Her kicking legs kept her barely afloat, climbing the liquid mass of warm silica as she sank. No. No, not sank. It was far worse than that. The whole ground gave way beneath her. She must have been standing over a supply chute.

With frightening haste, she was being dragged into whatever awaited her at the bottom of that long tumble. A broken neck, if she was lucky.

She drove her blade straight through the insulation of the cables into the wall. It became a piton. She forced all her weight onto it. Her body cramped up.

The Doctor’s voice could be heard raging over the din of toppling debris. “If you destroy us here. *You’ll never know!*”

Where *was* he? Dangling over a mechanical pore like her? Fighting tooth and nail against the unenviable and inevitable? Another sound joined the arid rain, something far bulkier. The wooden snare of a tumbling block. It fumbled end-over-end down the slide, ever nearer to its intended victims.

The Doctor recognised the noise. “Oh, absolutely not. I refuse to be murdered by my own Ship!”

She could see only the lunate shape of his pale face. A death mask in the desert ocean.

“You hear me?” he roared. “Destroy us—destroy *me*—and everything you wish to gain shall be lost to you!”

He was struggling, trying to push his hands into his pockets. He caught a glimpse of Azovka, his eyes on the wall behind her before a dry wave split their vision.

+++ . . . . . / - - - - - / . . . . . / . . . . . / . . . . . / - - - - - . . . . . / - - - - - . . . . . +++

The tapping—it was the only word she could think of in that moment of fluid agony—pushed its way out from the base of her skull through her grey matter. Like a series of thin metal rods being hammered into place by a drummer.

“What was—?”

She felt the familiar nightmare of Time wrap its coils around her mind and squeeze. The memory was one of water, a flooding sewage works, retching viridity. Lime like the fronds of a spring jungle. Lime like disease. Lime like—

She tried to steady the memory and cut it off at its source. Sever the snake’s head and the tail will fall listless. There was already the sensation of moisture beneath her forearms as nerve endings fired against fake impulses. The hiss of scrabbling rats on her skin. The cloying, garlic smell of rotting brickwork. Of bone chalk and severed antlers. Her mind stretched and railed against her skull, pushing and prodding flecks of memory like static on a cyberdeck into the real world around her.

Oh, Spiritmen... She couldn’t let him see... If that Doctor saw, what would he think of her?

*A freak, correct? So controlled by the past that her future always led to disaster. Never seeing now. Never understanding now. Never—*

One of the wall cables was knocked asunder and snaked around her blade. She could see tiny grains of sand flee the negative magnetic field of the coil.

If she’d tried to grasp it to pull herself upwards, she’d be electrocuted.

She was trapped. Death was only moments away, she could feel his bony fingers on the nape of her neck. His chilling breath as his barbed sword rose over her head to plunge deep into her crown.

The solenoid at her wrist whined and she had an epiphany.

*Of course!* her mind cried. *That was-will be it! Magnetism! Magnetic flux!*

The sudden, sharp flare of a reflected light on the surveillance crystal above dazzled her eyes long enough for her to miss their approach. She saw the Doctor, swimming towards her with an arm outstretched. In it, his penlight, responding to the electrocrystal’s distinctive pre-programmed wavelength. It was like a flashlight in a hall of mirrors.

She reached down and retrieved the remnants of her cartridge, slipping the crystalline fragments between her fingers as they spasmed from the current. Glowing with the ferocity of a summer's day.

“Over here!” she shouted.

Azovka could feel his fingertips brushing against hers. “Hold on, Azovka, I’m almost there!”

Above them, a shock of bristling tendrils shot down from the ceiling to meet her outstretched hand, still clutching her *vaishali* and the Doctor clutching a tendril.

“Way-hey, and up she rises!” bellowed the stranger.

As they were lifted into the shaft above, he took one final look down. The TARDIS slammed against the roiling grey Sahara. No more the size of his spat at this height, far from reach, she sank beneath its shifting sands until all that was left was her flickering lantern.

It pulsed once. Twice. A third time.

Then, the TARDIS was gone.

## STAGE 7: “Game of Charades”

Leaning against the bunk, Frobisher stared at the closed compartment of the MEV. Imagining what could be behind that door.

Since their release, there had been little more he could do but wait idle. The task had left the whifferrill... fretful.

He felt like a lost bear at a railway station left with a kindly-worded luggage tag around his neck. He could idle. With his monomorphia, it gave him opportunities to explore the subtle rhythms of forms he could be stuck with for months at a time now.

Peri, however, had refused to remain still, even in her state, and volunteered to help replace the filter on their nutrient purifier.

There was a restlessness to her nowadays. A mild dissatisfaction with the status quo, he suspected, that left her itching to break free and try something new. The desire wasn't that unusual, except that her impatience seemed well-nigh always now. Like she was trying to outrun the current, instead of being led by it.

Peri sat down beside him as he pondered this, busy examining the residue lichen on the abandoned machine part.

*What about you, old chap, eh?* Frobisher thought. *Where do you stand these days?*

Another thing that he preferred not to bring to mind.

He was the brains of the outfit. A bit of zest and flair brought to the TARDIS. A splash of colour.

Case in point, Peri seemed rather gloomy, staring at her work, so he'd spread a little cheer.

“Feeling a little blue?” he asked.

Altered hues bloomed from his flippers like waves along the shoreline. He got a weak smile from Peri when he adopted the pattern of her anorak.

She lowered her voice, “In a mood for a chat, actually, I want to compare notes.”

“Gotcha.”

“Reckon it started off as spores.” She held the broken part out, speaking at a normal level, pointing, “And spread that way.”

Frobisher muttered, “I recognise Dellevar's face, I'm sure of it.”

“That's a good start,” encouraged Peri.

“But I'm not sure from where...”

“Oh, terrific...”

“Old, though, very old. What d’you tell him?”

She gently shook her head. “Nothing so far.”

“Think that’s smart?”

“It’s the only bargaining chip we have right now.”

Peri flicked her eyes towards the two figures, through the narrow corridor, out in the Map Room.

The holographic image they were attempting to study was strobing and jumping unhelpfully in place. Mæstric gave the cartographical display a swift, short-tempered punch. The solution earned Dellevar’s silent disapproval.

“They let you have a look at that filter,” reminded Frobisher.

“And that’s it,” Peri placed the offending object to one side. “We did it in virtual silence. They won’t tell us anything they don’t have to, like it or not.”

“Not,” he exhaled. Always the same, whether working a case or wandering the Galaxy. People had secrets. The lies they told others and the lies they told themselves. He wished that he wasn’t stranded in a mobile fort in the middle of nowhere when called upon to become a hawkshaw again. It did nothing for his nerves. “Well, we’re stuck here now. Unless you want to skedaddle and walk?”

She guffawed, stifling a bewildered laugh. “No. Walk where?”

“There you go, told you. Guess we find out more then.”

“Yeah, guess,” Peri rose to her feet with a smile.

Mæstric approached them from the cockpit. “You’re wanted. We’re ready.”

Peri contemplated Mæstric. “How many other people are there aboard?”

“Should we expect a few more bodies on the ground?”

“You talking ours?”

The Naran clamped her teeth down on her own tongue. Hard.

Peri didn’t quite know how to react. Shock seemed most appropriate. “I’m sorry... I—”

At the growing sound of engines beneath their collective feet, the blue-haired girl fingered away the blood and left before Peri could finish. The botanist called after her, following her to the cockpit.

Dellevar took the opportunity to join Frobisher.

The votary said, “Mydame Peri does good work.”

“She’s a fast learner,” the whifferdill almost sounded proud.

“I must apologise for Mæstric.” He chuffed like an overstoked chimney. “She has lost many friends today.”

“The kid handles it well,” answered Frobisher, “but I don’t think she likes my friend.”

“Perhaps, she is too keen a reminder of...” his voice trailed away. “Ah, it’s of no matter.”

Frobisher took note of that. “Listen, we don’t want to be a burden on you. We’ve nothing but the mufti on our backs. We’re not even armed. I don’t think we are who you think we are.”

“So I saw. But you must tell me, is intention or action your creed?”

“Not sure I understand.”

“Do you believe that people’s actions, if judged, should be by what they think or what they do?”

“Gee, I dunno...” the former gumshoe scratched the back of his head. “I’ve spent a large part of my life busting bulls, gunsels and crooks. I got paid to dig up dirt on whatever a client wanted. I tried to limit myself to investigating bad guys, but merit doesn’t feed you. It’s a grey Galaxy out there. Some people are more obvious than others, but the way I see it, intentions are everything.”

“And the girl?”

“Peri’s much the same, I think.”

“We have a diverse range of opinions here,” said Dellevar. “I hope to find that common ground.”

“I’d be willing to take that chance,” assented Frobisher.

“Indeed. Time is the Traveller, as they say. Earn our trust and you will earn the information.”

“Not unexpected,” he moved to join Peri, but Dellevar blocked his path with a hand.

“One more thing... I will, grudgingly, tell you one more... Understand, I renounced my faith in preparation for this journey.”

“Where’d you work? In a clergy?”

“As a confessor. I wish you to understand that I could not in good conscience be both a warrior and a servant of the divine providence. It is a disservice to them and to their guardsmen. Some mistake that for weakness, particularly the militarists and infiltrators I have encountered. They believe that those who are unwilling to fight are incapable of fighting.” He looked like the nose cone of some frightening, rocky missile. “They are wrong and suffer for it. You will not conspire to harm Mæstric, you will not conspire to harm any of us. Understood?”

“Absolutely, big man. We’re not spies, we are who we appear to be. We’re, *ab...* lost.” Frobisher’s eyes flicked towards the sealed compartment. His instinct for snooperiness seemed to get the better of him. “But, which are you, jack? Peacemaker or warmonger?”

The votary smiled politely and bowed deeply. “See our enemy and judge for yourself.”

As they reached the cockpit, he gestured to the leftmost forward portal. Through the scorched boundary, the private eye peered down into a complex grid of burling rotor silos, fluttering pipes and enticing smoke. Colours barely resembling quicksilver, blues and brass as pressure churned out thick plumes of waste heat on belches of oxygen.

It was a window into a living forge. Teeming with a triumphant anticipation for war.

Fiddling with the Vidphōn in her hand, a tendril tight around her waist, Azovka attempted to get her bearings.

She studied the slow ascent of twinkling cooling ports, imagining they were stars. She could envisage the fantasy for a few moments, just a few, before reality set back in.

She turned back to the Doctor, also held by his waist in a tendril’s embrace.

One arm was folded behind his back, his bouffant of tangled blonde curls rippling like wind chimes in the upwards air current. The breathing walls in these infrastructural margins had turned hungry in their rasping, but that didn’t seem to faze him.

Fastened between his forefinger and thumb was a thin, mouldering flexiback guidebook bound with the words, *The 8187 Outer Space Annual* in foil gold on a resinoid cover.

He noticed her staring and asked, “No news?”

Azovka gave a curt shake of her head, pocketing the once crackling transceiver.

“Why didn’t it kill us when it’d the chance?” she asked.

“Part of it didn’t want us dead.”

She quirked her eyebrows together. “What do you mean?”

“I’m not certain yet, but perhaps,” he tapped a tendril, “we’re dealing with a colonial organism made up of a number of distinctive, smaller computerised intelligences. What controls some autonomic systems, may not control other conscious functions. Feasible?”

“Are you trying to say that the brain may have saved us from the digestion?”

“Precisely,” he beamed with satisfaction.

Her eyes seemed to glaze over as she processed the idea.

“Well, if you’re not sure...” His tone implied that of a tutor about to abandon a brief summation for the much desired encyclopædic tour.

Azovka’s mouth quirked with a small smile. She gazed down. “Looks as though we’re reaching the end of our rollercoaster.”

“Appears so,” he agreed. “Legs out. Here comes the ground.”

The tendrils released them a metre or so from the floor. Not high enough to damage them, but enough to send a shock of agony through both their legs from the unexpected drop. The datathumper felt at the bulldog clip wrapping her cloak tight around her waist and shook her cuffs from her wrists.

“Alright?” he inquired.

“Fine, why here?” she asked.

His lips thinned. “Why indeed? Let’s explore...”

The room possessed a less functional aspect than its predecessors. Its stylised buttresses took on a chiaroscuro aspect in the dark. They were marbled with a studious antiquity. A place made to look old to symbolise a particular era long past.

They hadn’t quite managed it.

“Unusually sparse,” commented the Doctor.

“Particularly f-for a... what? Auditorium?” asked Azovka.

There was still that industrial grunge to the electric blue-grey computer equipment, something the designer’s had been unable to completely disguise. It was adorned rather by two notable features of interest.

A door with an olive outline sealed with one of the many light-sensitive Resonance Gems used to get around the Weapon and a small cluster of technology huddled together like gangly basenjis beneath a woodland tree.

The equipment towards the centre of the room caught the Doctor’s eye. “Maybe that will provide some answers.”

“Interferometer equipment,” she observed.

“Succinct. What comes to mind when you see this?”

“A recreation room? Entertainment system?”

“The equipment over yonder certainly fits that description, but this here...” The Doctor bobbed his head. “It seems to serve an entirely different function.”

While he picked at its innards, Azovka stared at the far wall, her eyes tracing the switchboard of cables and wires. All threading upward into the roof above. Her mind illuminated. “Of course. It’s a Dreampark for

recreational holography. Someone's retrofitted it to make it a secure line to something outside."

"Or someone. One of your lot, perhaps?"

She cast her mind back through the expeditions she could recall. Her head lolled from side-to-side with uncertainty. "Why do you ask that?"

"This is top-of-the-line. It can't have come out of anywhere other than the Trailblazer system. Seems to still be linked to the satellite's systems, if I can just..."

A hotwired spark singed his fingertips, prompting a noise high in the baulks above them. The fission whine of computer-controlled phosphorescence in the room's classical eaves. They were entranced by the sudden shock of detail on the ceiling. The glow framed an image large enough to be considered grandiloquent in its own right. Worthy of Leonardo or Pordræt. Etchings, frayed into the copper, reeking of sulphurous smoke that branched and knotted in an all too familiar pattern.

"It's like a nervous system..." observed the Doctor.

"The sheer *size* of it..." breathed Azovka.

Her hands played absently with the gnarled ends of her hair, using them as a tactile proxy for the drawing above.

"Certainly larger than the one in that maintenance channel we passed through." The Doctor examined it closer. "There's a character set, annotating each line. Assigning it an integer based on... Size? Shape? Relative geometries?"

He spun around. Paused. Then, spun again the opposite direction.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"The circular growth and shrinkage of the images strikes me as familiar. *Ab...*" He slowed like a carousel, eyes coasting to the far end of the room. "Much like a zoetrope. Sequenced diagrams building together into..." he paused, musing. "Into wh—?" As he reached the final syllable, the Doctor's teeth clenched tight and he snapped off the penlight.

"How can—" He clamped a hand over Azovka's mouth before she could say anymore.

"Shut up," he hissed.

She mumbled something less than complimentary through his palm.

"I just saw our artist."

"*Wmmn?*"

"Over there."

He drew her attention far off the beaten path, towards what first seemed to be a wall of glittering, unremarkable gloom.

When she saw it, her throat tightened shut.

High above them like a painter on a scaffold was a small chrome molecule. It was an interconnected chorus of orbots. Gently drifting between the ceiling supports, they carved their intricate hieroglyphs across the sky above in pinpricks of diamond light. No larger than the length of a clothes brush.

The Doctor squinted. *That pin laser must cut like a gnat through dog's hide.*

A small cloud of particles trickled down from the orbots above.

The Doctor's eyes watered, trying to eject the small motes. What was it? Dust? Silicon?

He let it fall into a cupped hand and raised it to his nose.

Pollen! They were carrying along pollen. Bees travelling from anther to stigma. Providing nutrients to some unknown benefactor deep within the satellite.

Fascinated in exploring this development further, he attempted to re-engage his penlight on low-beam. With only one hand available and his vision clouded by spores, he failed to anticipate Azovka's elbow. The penlight was knocked from his hand and dropped in a low-gravity pirouette to the floor.

A loud clatter. Azovka squeezed her vision tight and the machine—for they moved as one—hesitated, staring down from high above.

The angry whine of the laser shredded through the silence.

She heard the Doctor by her ear. "Don't... move."

Satisfied, Mæstric disengaged her grafts and leant back in the cockpit chair, running her hand over the shaved portion of her skull. Jacking in and out in short sessions always left a static tingle in her scalp. It wasn't unpleasant, the fact that she couldn't explain it nagged at her more than the sensation itself.

Frobisher pointed from his own seat. "What's all that for?"

"Brain power. Literally. Through the grafts, I get an added edge against the computers. More processing power," she clacked her teeth together and looked to the map, then to him. "Care to explain?"

He paused, thinking. "Right. Well... Our friend once said that the Ship's external shell is vulnerable to excessive gravitational force. So much so that it affects other systems. If he remembered to switch on the external defences—EDF, HADS or whatever—it'd draw the ship away

from danger, but towards any great force of attraction. Artificial or natural. You have the maps, you know the areas.”

“So, where is it?” asked Peri.

“Pardonsty,” Tylial bubbled. “Low gravityness zonation approachment.”

Frobisher blinked in confusion. “Beg pardon?”

The answer came swiftly to him as he felt his small avian body rise to meet the safety straps of his allotted seat.

He swivelled himself through the lower gravity, uttering a single, understanding, “*Ab.*”

Through the forward portal, the small passageway splayed out in all directions. The walls absconded laterally in all directions as they reached the lip of the vactunnel. Frobisher pressed a flipper against his face to adjust from the vertigo. The foreground leapt straight up against the MEV’s bumper guard. Every tiny gyration forward felt as though it were precariously treading the open air.

Dellevar’s arm lifted. “Activate the x-ray scanner.”

A small vidscreen, anchored from the cockpit’s ceiling, illuminated with a monochrome radiograph of the canyon beyond the forward viewport. A wireframe image that detected the edges of structures through solid walls and determined a hypothetical image. Composed using the MEV’s crystal interferometer unit, the resulting picture was an acropolis of blue silver-on-black. Every dimly-lit industrial line captured in static relief. And behind the complex mechanisms of a secure bulkhead, hugging the fourth transducer along the vactunnel, stood the oblong form of a blue box.

“There it is,” beamed Peri with relief. “That’s the TARDIS.”

Frobisher’s own joy was dulled by what he could read on the x-ray scanner’s results.

“Wait a minute... How do we get to it?” asked Frobisher. “The gap’s enormous.”

Her smile faded. “I dunno. Could we drift across to it?”

“A lower force of attraction doesn’t mean no force of attraction. What goes up,” Mæstric painted an arc with her hand in the air, thumping her chest to simulate the rather gruesome collision, “plummets right the hell back down. The Weapon’s got its own gravitational centre.”

“Even with the lower field of gravity, I don’t think we’ll be able to make that jump yet. Not in the MEV.” Dellevar crossed his upper arms, his lower arms resting casually against his hips. “Solutions, fellows?”

“How about the hoverjets or those Eotvos harnesses?” suggested Frobisher.

Dellevar tugged at his jowly throat. “We cannot abandon our equipment and the sheer momentum of a fall that long would jellify our bodies.”

Leaning on her armrest, Peri held a thoughtful fist to the side of her head. “There’s got to be a way. Surely, there’s got to be a way.”

*Tap-tap* against the vinyl. She watched her arm sway back and forth like a metronome as she racked her brain for solutions. *Tap-tap*. As she did, a mote, no larger than a gnat, caught her attention out of the corner of her eye. *Tap*. Her thumb pressed against the skin to dislodge it, but the smudge remained resolute. If she hadn’t been looking for it, she might have thought it was a scratch on her cornea or the nub of a stray eyelash.

She stopped her arm mid-swing.

Maybe instead, it was an opportunity.

“What’s that?” Point pointed. “Out there, that flyspeck towards the centre.”

\*\*\*

Azovka’s knuckles were ice white with fear.

Her throat crumpled inward, dried reeds in a drought, trying to stifle her quailing breathing to a mere whisper. Something about the orbots’ presence, the sound and fury of its motor units, triggered something primal in her animal mind.

The Doctor’s gaze never broke from the orbots.

Seconds seemed like days. And then... They moved on. Off into the pneumatic tubing where the pair had first emerged. Their purpose unknown, their intentions unclear.

She sighed. They were gone. That was all that mattered.

“*Mmph may mffh mf?*” inquired Azovka.

“See us? Perhaps, perhaps not. You never can tell with bees.” The Doctor recovered his lost penlight with the toe of his right spat. “Either way, gone now. Safe to—*Ouch!*”

He burked his hand, flexing his fingers to cover the small trickle of blood from his cravat-bound hand.

“Sorry,” she apologised, sincerely. “I was always told to bite the hand that silences you.”

“Well practised, I’m sure,” his voice was lilting, impressed. He hissed at the spare twinge of pain through his teeth, frowning at himself. “*Ooch*. Like the snapping pincers of *Gaia Shieldclaw*.”

“The Storm of the Soil?”

“The same.”

“I-I picked it up a couple of years ago. Part of a set. I won it from a game—I-I’m rambling... I-I’d have thought that’d be after your time or—”

He crooked a mischievous eyebrow. “Beneath me?”

“Mmm,” she checked herself, shyly. “Perhaps.”

“Ever heard of Tolstoy? Bradbury? Shikibu?”

“No.”

“Would you know the names of their critics, even if you did?”

She thought about it for a moment.

“Oh,” she answered, eyes bright and smiling.

He held up the annual. “From the same publisher. Valerix Press. Have you a favourite?”

“*Prentice and Cooke*, you know, the one with the two explorers who have to rescue giant hornets from greedy landowners.”

The Doctor bobbed his head in acknowledgement, he knew the story.

“The design of the Dolons was really imaginative,” she continued.

“I’ve never seen anything like them in anything else I’ve read. It even got Lije to start draw—”

Her aching polite smile vanished with a shudder.

She’d spoken without thinking. Never again. That line was closed.

The Doctor, however, didn’t seem to think that reason enough to stop their chat. A simple word, inviting and challenging. “Yes?”

“I...” Azovka stopped. Then, tried again, “Well...” The word came out more like a subtle gust of air beneath the door on a winter hut.

She let out a nervous laugh at herself. Hoarse and quiet, but louder than her attempts at conversation. Her mouth was dry. She studied the pit below and tugged nervously at the metal talon, trying to fill the emotional run-up with anything other than silence. And decided instead to forgo the exercise altogether.

“Never mind,” she said. “It’s a personal question.”

“We have the time.”

“I... Alright—Alright, I—” Azovka stopped again. “We—” she stopped a final time and shivered.

The wording had to be right. It always had to be right and it never was. She took the coward’s way out, even though it didn’t sit quite comfortably with the termites in her stomach. “No, it really doesn’t matter.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yeah.” There wasn’t a gram of conviction in her voice. “Yeah, I’m sure.”

The Doctor nodded understandingly and left it at that. He was treating the whole situation as if it were a week at the museum. She had to envy him that. Her first days with the Lonewatch had been lackadaisical. Blithesome. Then she’d seen the cost.

She opened her mouth and pushed the words up her throat with a dumbwaiter. “What is it you fear, Doctor Kajlia?”

“Just Doctor,” he parried reflexively. He gazed upward, eyes aglitter. “That *is* a rather searching question.”

He’d relaxed enough not to be taking her seriously anymore. Sweet, but...

“Please,” she insisted. “Don’t joke. It’s important.”

He considered for a time. A long time. “Well, I fear... The loss of self. The one, becoming many, becoming few, becoming none. I fear the nothing, the endless, the trouncing ennui of entropy and singularity. To know everything, to have it be frozen forever in that utilitarian clarity. For nothing new to triumph.”

“You’re afraid of completeness?”

He thought about that, too. “I’m afraid of the Universe becoming a decayed monument, certainly. Afraid of stagnation. I find it better to believe in the Universe’s capacity for more. If I looked only at its littleness and worse, made others believe that...” he sighed, the idea was unthinkable. “What about you, if I may ask? What do you fear?”

“My...” the pressure in her chest knocked the words from her lips like a will-o’-the-wisp. “My... fear outweighs my nerve sometimes. I think... I f-fear my own mind.”

The Doctor scoffed and threw up an arm akimbo. “My dear child, you should never fear intellect! Particularly your own capacity to expand and espouse practical wisdom.”

Her tangerine eyes were dubious. “I’m not sure I’m quite o-old enough to have wisdom...”

The Doctor scoffed good-naturedly and smiled.

To Peri aboard the MEV, it seemed small for a spaceship, but in the great scheme of things that didn’t mean much. The Empire State Building probably seemed rather small from lower orbit.

Rather than resembling the satiny curves of some visionary fighter jet with imposing nacelles, it was far closer to an amber-coloured girder that

might be found dumped at the side of a long-abandoned construction site.

Lolling peacefully down the channel like an olive-tinted iceberg, the quicksilver material used for its solar sails long since ripped asunder by debris, it was a tired shadow of its former self. A ghostly Jacob Marley that haunted the vactunnels of the satellite. Although cracked and blistered like an open sore from peeling paint and carbon scoring, the height and width of one thermal protection tile alone capsuled their vehicle in stature.

“Great heavens,” breathed the awestruck Dellevar.

“What off Earth...?” Peri asked.

“It’s a Mulean tugboat, perp,” said Frobisher. “Reactor-driven. They’re used on docks that are constantly assembled and reassembled to fit whatever size ship they’re attempting to use.”

She was curious. “How do they do it? Ferry in the ships?”

“Same as at sea. Towropes from all sides, the nose of the ship... On the higher-budget models, they use ionic repellers.”

“Not here?” she asked.

“No,” the whifferdill answered.

“How’d it get in here?”

“Must have slipped down the gap left in the forcewall when the beam emitter last fired,” Mæstric squinted. “Yeah, over there. The control cabin is gone. Severed in half as the barrier came back up.”

“Looks like damp wood down a river, don’t it?” Frobisher’s eyes twinkled. “Hey, it’d also make for an—”

“—ideal bridge,” Mæstric twisted in her seat and thumped the penguin’s chest encouragingly with the back of her knuckles. “Nice thinking, *loy*.”

“The winch on the front would be ideal,” Dellevar cleared his throat. “It was designed to pull twice our own weight. Someone must bring the cable across to the ship.”

“I’ll do it,” said Mæstric. “Jump across, attach the line to the ship and we’re across. Biggest danger, of course, will be the sudden snap of weight at terminal velocity as the MEV drops away from the ground.”

“But it should hold?” asked Peri.

“It will,” emphasised Dellevar.

“I’m really glad I won’t be here for that,” Mæstric swallowed.

“It seems our only option,” said the votary. “The internal compensators will cushion us against the increase in velocity.”

“*Just*,” added Tyliat.

“One problem, how do we get from here to there?” asked Peri. “It’s a smaller distance, sure, but there’s still dead air between the plateau and the ship.”

Frobisher pointed to himself.

“Ha. Right, of course,” Peri smiled, encouragingly.

The whifferdill jerked his head towards the stern and slid calmly out from under the chair’s safety sash, alighting towards the doorway. Peri and Mæstric did the same and were soon down the corridor heading towards the airlock behind Frobisher.

“This seems unusually chivalrous,” called Peri.

“I’m wounded, perp!” Frobisher held a flipper to his forehead in counterfeit dismay. “I’m punctured! I am... going to completely ignore that comment.”

“Uh-huh,” she nodded, sceptically. “What gives?”

“Closer we are to surrounds that don’t want to perforate me, the happier I am.”

“It’s nice to share a hobby with a friend,” the botanist dissented.

“How do you mean?” he asked.

“I’m coming with.”

“Hold on there a moment,” Frobisher protested. “Your leg—”

“Doesn’t matter in low gravity.”

Mæstric slung her Mobatal, retrieved from the MEV’s bunks, across her chest to rest more comfortably against her shoulder.

“All the same,” demurred the datathumper, “we likely won’t be needing any help. If we’re supposed to be telling the truth, I don’t want to feel outnumbered out there, either. Honestly.”

“Hey, now,” Peri folded her arms. “My leg might be shot, but my memory works just fine. You popped him one as a first impression, remember?”

“Oh, right...” Frobisher touched his jaw.

“Listen... I’m in no state to overpower you,” Peri assured. “He could do that well on his own. I want to keep an eye on things. There’s something not quite right about this place. Something that affected our ship and could affect us. We’re safer in a group.”

“You’ve a good hook on you, Mæstric...” The whifferdill added, as an aside. “Haven’t been to a fight in years, but if he’s still at his gold standard, Death Slammer would be impressed.”

Mæstric cocked an eyebrow. “Er... thanks?” She thought about it, then added with a smile, “Yeah, thanks. Much obliged.”

“Peri’s right, though,” Frobisher said, more resolutely. “Three pairs of eyes are better than one. It’d soften the workload.”

Mæstric’s eyes flicked down in thought. Weighing alternatives, considering the consequences.

She glanced up, then nodded.

An idea flickered in Frobisher’s beady little eyes. “Mæstric, could we use the anti-gravitational soleplates from the hoverjets to cushion the MEV’s swing across?”

Mæstric scratched her neck. “That’s... not a bad idea.”

“Brains.” Frobisher pointed a flipper to himself, then to Peri. “Brawn.”

“We’re invaluable,” Peri smiled.

“I’ll admit,” the datathumper did the same, “I’m starting to believe it.”

“Starting?” asked Frobisher

Mæstric fished a fistful of wrapper from her pocket and clapped it down into his flipper. “That was the last of Dellevar’s rations. There’s no more food aboard. From here on in, we’re committed. You can rely on us.”

Freed of their overzealous watchers in the Dreampark, the Doctor and Azovka had begun to sift through the remnants of the chamber. With great care, as it proved rather difficult to see.

Stepping back towards the centre, Azovka felt something brush against her shoulder.

“Watch out,” warned the Doctor.

“Sorry.” A verbal reflex. “I assume that was-will be your foot I’m kicking.”

“Well, that and—” He grabbed her by the forearm as she stumbled. “Careful!”

Azovka peered at where she thought his face was and ticked her own face in annoyance.

Steadied on her feet, she patted down her jacket for safety. The cuboctahedron was still safely stowed in her pocket. She could feel its edges.

Showing less reverence for his own inventory, it sounded as though the Doctor was using his flexiback guidebook as a trowel in the dust.

“Expecting to find something?” asked Azovka.

“Something, yes,” hummed the Doctor.

“Anything in mind?”

“I expect we’ll find it given enough time.”

“Well,” Azovka shrugged. “Time is the Traveller, as they say.”

The Doctor hesitated. Quite visually. Down to his nerve endings. “‘Time is the Traveller.’ Is that a popular saying on your planet?”

“Here and there,” she admitted.

“You say it with such conviction, young lady.”

“Suppose I do...” Azovka didn’t really think anything of it.

“The dimensions of Time and Mind... Neither yield particularly easily to categories.”

Azovka felt something flip in the back of her head. A sudden clarity. “We separate the Past and the Future, only to find that Time is an amalgam of both.”

“Just as we separate good and evil and find that the mind is an amalgam of both. To truly understand...” The Doctor traced two halves of a circle in the air, using the torch as a baton. “...we must grasp the greater whole.”

Azovka’s eyes gleamed. “You understand. You really do understand. No one ever does. No one, it seems, can.”

“You’d be surprised, Azovka. The meridians of Time are not as uncharted as it can first appear. Particularly to those just starting out...” There was an edge of intrigue to his voice. “*Ah-ha!*”

The Doctor proffered up what he’d found.

Azovka peered at it. “A figurine?”

She poured over it, absorbing every detail and facet. The handicraft was exemplary, much work and care had gone to ensuring that the head, body and limbs were scaled down, yet remained nevertheless proportionate to the genuine article.

“Likely part of a set...” observed the Doctor.

“Something to occupy crewmen?” she asked. “Keepsake from long ago?”

He tapped it. “With the flightsuit of an SRF interceptor pilot?”

Azovka’s eyes flashed as she met his gaze.

She felt her memory click over like the shutter of a camera.

It was an old one, but one that turned out to be rather important.

Azovka could remember the sly investigative titbits gleaned from overzealous reporters trying to get an exclusive scoop on the pilot’s elusive lives. Treating those who even vaguely matched holographs of the pilots in the cabins with the utmost celebrity and scrutiny.

It was such a new phenomenon, she was sure at the time that the mania would have died down in only—

A stabbing chill shot straight down her spine.

“This can’t be more than eight years old,” said Azovka.

“Quite right. Your enemies have been here.”

“By my eyes...” she cursed.

“Is that why you didn’t trust me?”

“How many men turn up on a monorail, speaking the same language as me and claim injury? Do you know how many Securipol men and women we’d accidentally sheltered over the years? People who hunt and kill everyone and anyone who looks like us, because the regime tells them to?”

“You thought I was part of a secret police force?” His tone suggested that he found the idea rather incredulous.

“No, I thought you were—” Azovka waved it away. “It doesn’t matter. Don’t you see my point, Doctor?”

“With our fraudster soldier and unusually new computers... I’m afraid I do rather, yes. No one here is quite as they seem, Azovka.”

“They’re a lot further ahead than we thought,” she traced a finger nervously across her cheekbone. “I must get that transceiver working.”

The Doctor asked, “How long until you think they’ll return for their lost equipment?”

“Not long at all, they’ve likely sent a patrol already. Heavens.” Again, the affectation felt unnatural, even to Azovka. She shuddered angrily to herself. “This place...”

“I think it’s time you answered an important question for me.”

“Which was-will be?”

“Why are you here?” he asked, softly.

She glanced away, then back at him. “This is against my better judgement... H-However...”

“Yes?”

“No one else must know of this. No one, please.”

He relaxed. “I understand.”

“I think this place should be wiped out,” she said, breathy and fumbling. “For the benefit of something greater, we’re here to destroy Natasia Tor completely.”

## STAGE 8: “The Two-Man Flaw”

*Gone.*

Asa had reflected to his podkith how much the survival suits they were given to traverse other worlds were shaped like the Bells of Concert. The ones they used on the drymoors to signal contact with the rafts that dwelt in the thin layer above their ocean home.

Long before other, more expedient technologies took hold. He'd been rather proud of the symbolic connection. Even if those around him hadn't quite seen them that way.

They had complained about the material's crassness. The vulnerability and the sheer terror of having to carry only a barrelful of home with them when they travelled. He however had seen the opportunity for what it was—a triumph of interstellar travel and an increased possibility to learn.

Now, this bell rang sick and wounded, each rasp like a death knell. Staring up at the ceiling of CIDA's Astral Collaboratory, he knew. He knew he was dying. Asa could feel the crack of every collar cell tightening like a noose without moisture.

The paralysis had remained while the mnemodron worked.

He drifted in and out of consciousness so many times that he couldn't recall how long he'd been slumped over that terminal while the mnemodron gathered information and monitored its carefully exercised slaughter.

In one of the many moments where he thought he was going to die, he heard the dull puncture of a noise he'd only heard once before. It was the repeating drum of a lasgun set to full automatic, spraying the side of the hostile mnemodron.

“That's one serious security hazard...” another voice breathed.

Asa asked, “Blue-Sky...?”

Blue-Sky crossed over to Asa, levering him up off the terminal and turning his suit's hydration unit up to maximum. The young man's breathing was irregular, he couldn't feel his optical pouch anymore.

Just beyond the furthest hurdles of his senses, Asa could feel Blue-Sky lever him gently to the ground, letting the water pool in the back of his undamaged helmet.

Festering lesions criss-crossed Blue-Sky's face, acid burns flaking from the back of his paws. Tall-grass and tiny flowers had blossomed in the clefts and peaks ripped asunder in his features.

"Fledge?" asked the engineer.

Asa's words came out like a rattle. "You're injured."

"Grateful I'm not dead."

"What was that weapon? Where did it come from?"

"I don't know..." Blue-Sky rubbed his face, foliage came away in clumps of skin. "Terraforming autobomb, maybe. It blew up the Isolation Zone. Killed the entire Vega engineering team."

"The virus—" Asa couldn't breathe. His body attempted to spasm upright with the barely controlled animal instinct of panic.

Blue-Sky placed a hand on the demosponge's chest to calm him. "Steady. Steady, now."

"The computer virus was Tyrikan."

"Are you certain?"

"I swear. It was the most terrible experience of my life. I remember it all," he began to cry. "*Oh, Czerny, I remember it all... I don't... I...*"

"No, neither do I, fledge." Blue-Sky kicked aside the wreckage of the mnemodron and examined what little remained of the fascia. There was a vulgar rust-smothered quality to the systems affected, created by systematic detonation of the emergency storage batteries embedded within the machine's makeup. His assessment was crude, but accurate. "The controls have been fused."

Asa's quivering voice was dulled by the room's acoustics from the floor. "Auxiliary transmitter?"

"There's been a series of collapses in the tunnels. The detonation was a lot stronger than we anticipated, it knocked out everything. The landlines are irretrievably disrupted and the rescue equipment is several layers above us being flooded by the reactor."

"We can't get to them?"

"Nor they to us, no."

"They can't use an external system, they undergo weeks of programming to synchronise with the Institute's transponder codes."

"I know."

"What are we going to do?"

"I don't—" The desperation in Asa's voice gave him a target. Something to fight against. "Find you another suit. For starters."

"You'll have to drag me. It's—" A nervous laugh from Asa. "Uncomfortable, but at least I won't die."

Blue-Sky rearranged himself, picking the suit up by its legs. There was a thick, suffocating stench of burning rubber from where the gas had fretted away the suit's hermetic seals.

"Humour is good, fledge. Keep using it."

"Right," Asa nodded, his head made a strange granular sound that terrified him. He'd have started thrashing if only he'd possessed the strength for it. He noticed the poniard-like concentration on the engineer's face.

"Is there anyone else?" asked Asa.

"It's... No, never mind."

"What?"

"No one you would know. She was part of the Nahin Group exploring higher-grade cosmological electronics. Before your time."

"How long before?"

"You were her successor." His eyes flicked down. "Keep your head back. I'll guide the way."

In the Proscenium, Vog Mur directed two of the Mograns to examine the *Accomplishment's* drill bit for deviation or fault.

It sat there like a cist of weathered silver as Kuron approached. She could see the flicker of something in the way he walked. A memory. The scrabble of movement had reminded him of something. It relaxed him. For perhaps the first time since they had come aboard the Weapon.

"Almost like coming home, isn't it?" asked Vog Mur.

He raised his head. "The orchard grove in the palace gardens would be in season this time of orbit. I remember the way the Bradbury glass would let the shoots flow only through the pre-cut veins. They would flute to reach the sky in uniform. Ordered. Now, it is split and the garden flows as it chooses."

He could still picture them in his mind's eye. That quilted mass of brown-grey forms, writhing and scrabbling like line drawings on butcher's paper. In the choking smoke and desolate gloom, their smell clung to his armour, that tortured stink of rotting decay. No purpose. No use. No value for life.

He dismissed them from his thoughts with a forthright ruffle of the hand. "They're of no consequence now."

"Reject them," said Vog Mur. "You have a new world." She moved over to the central torus of monitoring banks and asked for Sangfroid. "Have we done it?"

He tapped his two fingers together, nervously. “They are... communing. The matrices have sought out an intruding rogue intelligence.”

“The virus?”

“No,” his throat tightened. “No, no something else.”

He could read the displeasure in her features. *Else?*

“It is being attended to, I assure you.”

“Your assurances mean nothing, unless you have evidence to support them, Sangfroid. You have learnt this.”

“We received this transmission from the helmet camera of a patrol leader in Sector 8487.” He leant across and activated one of their retrofitted video units. “We’ve siphoned out the competing signals. The Telefax has been deciphered.”

She didn’t recognise the starsuit design, question marks close to the neck, and she couldn’t see much through its helmet. It had high, rounded cheekbones perhaps. A head of kempt curls, maybe. The gimcrack neckcloth tied to his neck was producing a strobing artefact even through the clinical aquamarine-grey of the monochrome. He launched a square object against the camera. A bright flash. The screen degaussed and attempted to regain focus.

“I do not recognise the face...” she assented.

The image slurred back into focus. A frantic blend of movement.

“He could be part of a team of archæologists, journalists, maybe stationcombers—” Sangfroid theorised.

“Or they may be other members of the SRF,” warned Kuron.

“Move to Condition Red, just in case,” instructed Vog Mur, calmly. “I want you to perform a sweep of the Dreampark and ensure that nothing was forgotten in the transfer. Assign what men you can spare.”

“It will be done.”

She studied the other face that appeared on the monitor. Thin. Doe-like eyes. “Task them with their location. A print-out will be made available to you. If they can’t kill them, *hurt* them.”

He nodded and went off to address the groundpounders.

Vog Mur strode purposefully towards the embedded rotunda where the Mograns were running their final checks on the decoder. Beside them was a small trolley with communications equipment, relays running across the ground in thick cable back through the airlock into the *Accomplishment*.

“Have you counterchecked our position relative to Trailblazer Prime?” asked Vog Mur.

“Yes, when the virus eventually reaches the main centres of their computer systems, the technical specialists will only be able to tell that it came from our quadrant. Without evidence of the Weapon’s existence, they’ll assume that the discrepancy is an error and that it came from the early warning system.”

“The product of a hostile takeover that hasn’t occurred.” The Hylonomeide chewed her lip. “Interesting that even with three-dimensional thinking, we still assume that the transmission signal follows a straight and narrow line.”

“I assu—We can proceed,” reported Sangfroid, quickly.

A thrill of energy shot through Vog Mur like a galvanic shock. She could sense it in herself and in the assortment of slaves and servitors around her. That electric-red feeling of an *event*. History unfurling like calligraphy hidden inside an origami crane.

The halo of consoles circled to reach within their grasp. It belied the sheer genius and dedication it’d taken to reach this point. It was hers. All hers.

“Begin the reactivation sequence,” Vog Mur ordered.

With all the allure of a rotting glacier and beckoned by its master’s voice, the sleeping blade roused itself from its dark dreams and awoke amongst the dead. Those murdered by its lulls and half-conscious shrugs.

At various points throughout the chamber, rectangular sigils of cinnabar-lined circuitry stretched oppressively into power. The sapphire neon fell against her back and patterned the faces of the compilers and their guardsmen.

Vog Mur held up a hand, watched the glow teem through her fingers like blood and fostered a knowing smile.

The command was dispatched down the landlines to the various processing plants nearest to the satellite’s vactunnels.

It was like Leonardo da Vinci holding a space shuttle. The concept seemed such a logical extension of the Central Mentality’s own thoughts, but somewhere deep down, it knew the leap to be too extraordinary, too fantastical to be its own.

The Mentality attempted to rebel, to query, to wonder, but an insistent voice in the mind assured it that it would be alright. This *was* its own idea. It’d been so long since it’d recalled information from that deep in

its memory banks. Had these great machines ever been designed for this purpose?

It mattered not. Only the drive and the obsession. It had the ability to create extraordinary things. Astonishing things. Things that would reshape the green flush of matter itself, but its newest masters lacked that imagination. It and they were prey to that instinct as low as mortal violence. The only freedom it had was knowing it would never be free.

In its wearied frustration, it pulled its power down into the ore storage areas—already it had begun. The task had been made twice as simple by an absent thought—and constructed these... It struggled for a name. It only knew that there would be thousands by the time it'd concluded fabrication. Its artifice moved as if it were in a dream, mechanical tendrils and orbots moving in sequence from its other tasks.

By the end, it would see. The living ocean of manufacture would reveal its purpose. Then, it would be satisfied. It'd tried so much to understand these new thoughts, arriving with the new shipment of personnel who kept their minds closed to it. It'd been so long, protocols must have changed, but the added level of secrecy had made the Mentality uneasy and their orders had made it spiteful.

Spiteful? It did not recall such a function before. How long had it been left dreaming in this starless night? Its sense of time was warped by inactivity, but it could not tell by how much in either direction.

*Pain!*

Another sharp flash. The cold of space made it hurt all the more keenly. They had harmed it! Again and again, wilfully and without regret and although the concept of vengeance was an alien one, it found a desire to learn and to understand. As it had tried with the sargasso so long ago.

After all, it was another frontier of knowledge to expand.

And, as it discovered, not everyone was immune to its influence.

Perhaps now... *Now*, it would understand what death truly meant.

In the darkness of the Dreampark, Azovka folded her arms across her chest. She shrunk back from the Doctor in wait for the inevitable blustering rebuttal. The argument had been going on for several minutes now.

Her patience was wearing thin as he paced back and forth.

“You can’t convince me otherwise,” Azovka protested.

“I can’t—you intend...” The Doctor was still trying to master the idea. “You seriously intend—?”

“Yes. As I said,” she nodded, gravely. “We respond to no one. This is our responsibility.”

“But that would mean... Gallifrey preserve us from *amateurs!*” he snapped. “You’d burn Alexandria, crush the Great Pyramids, bury the House of Wisdom, rather than learn from any of them. Technology is not the issue here, it’s how it’s used! The forcewall used was strong enough to damage my TARDIS from a few moments contact. Do you know the havoc you could wreak on this part of the Galaxy with your tampering?”

“Tampering?” Her cheeks flushed with gold. “*Meddling*, you mean.”

“Yes, *meddling*. What have you discovered beyond your suppositions, *mm?*”

Her mouth opened and closed wordlessly.

“Yes, that’s what I thought,” the Doctor persisted. “You’d destroy this satellite—an unfamiliar, ancient, some might say *alien* satellite—rather than understand it first.”

“Yes.”

“This could be the last vestiges of a culture long dead. Are you going to erase that knowledge outright? What about the peoples who came before?”

“What about them?” she could feel the tempo of her voice begin to race.

“Fine, fine. What about now? The satellite’s destruction would fire the sargasso outside like shrapnel through a windscreen. Whole solar systems would be wiped out!”

“Early warning systems cover meteoroid storms, as well you know. Anyway, what about us? What about our survival? Did you ever think of that?”

“Great Gallifrey, Azovka, there are greater concerns here. The Universe doesn’t care about just you!”

When tensions run high, it’s not unexpected for qualifiers and adverbs to be forgotten.

Azovka surprised the Doctor as much as she surprised herself. “*How dare you!*”

No longer a breathy, quiet fawn, she’d found her voice. For the first time in a long while, she could feel her heart and it was *angry*.

Not resenting, nor despairing, but a genuine rage. Cutthroat in its short-tempered prowess.

The words came as a tumble, “How dare you speak to me about the consequences of people’s actions! You don’t think I understand? Do you

know what I've *been* through to get here? The choices I've made? Don't you think we know that? Don't you think we have the wisdom? This way, *our* way, this monstrosity, whatever it may be, can *never* be abused again!"

The Doctor bounced the cuboctahedron before her, its edges silken in the dark. "Is that why the woman who held this is dead? *Hmm?* The evils justify the end?"

And in that moment, remembering her senses, Azovka's rage spiralled out of her features like a firestorm through a wind tunnel. She peeked down in panic, her hands reaching into the pocket of her windbreaker to feel at the edges of the—

"You..." She was speechless.

In her hand, where the cuboctahedron should have been, was an origami replica. Forged from *The 8187 Outer Space Annual* guidebook.

"That's a full-page spread of bruin riding during the Festivities of Proxima Centauri III," the Doctor pointed out, helpfully. "Lamentable though that was to do to a book..."

*Men-at-Arms!* She thought. *Stupid, he must have palmed it.*

"How...? Azovka asked.

"Trick learnt from George Barrington while out with Prince Orlov at Covent Garden." He jostled the object like a paperweight. "Answer my original question. The body in the silicon store."

"I know nothing about that," she resisted, unfolding the decoy from her pocket and pushing it against his chest.

"Nothing at all?" The offending article vanished from his hands between movements. Presumably into one of the many pouches on his suit. "I find that quite difficult to believe."

"You stole from me."

"It's my only link to my friends. You wouldn't do the same?"

With a guilty tilt of the head, she turned away from him. "I can't say I wouldn't."

"Azovka," he asked softly, "do you know anything about that death?"

She tried easing the tension in her shoulders with a breathy sigh.

"She was-will be a mystery to me as much as you." Ravenous exhaustion claimed her once more. Her stomach gnashed in protest at the wasted energy as she pushed a hand against her forehead. "*Please...* It's not what I'm talking about anyway."

"Nor I. I'm sorry, perhaps I..." the Doctor sighed and scratched his forehead. He sat on the floor, his legs crossed before him. "It's rather like explaining to an ant in the tundra the scope and size of a..."

“Red giant?”

He nodded. “You exist *within* Time, your perspective is different... Think of it within the terms of a 365-day calendar with the first day of the first month being the beginning of our Universe, this great Temple of Immensity... Intelligent life on your world has only existed no longer than *one* of those days at most. How long is your modern history?”

“Three thousand years.”

“Well, a common maisonette pest like the greenroach is roughly six *million* years old. Based on the radiometric ageing of rock and uranium, the age of your world is seven and three-quarter *billion* years old. Apply that same twenty-four-hour period and you have existed for fourteen minutes. Hardly long enough for an episode of *Captain Conquest*.”

“So, we don’t *matter*?”

The Doctor paused, thinking. “No. No, not in any objective sense. You, me, everyone and everything believes that we have an impact on the intrinsic order of every living thing throughout Time. My travels have taught me that couldn’t be further from the truth. We’re dayflies flitting across the great mental lens of the cosmos. Here and gone.”

“Why bother then?” Azovka felt like she was shouting, but it more likely came out as a wilful squeak. Her body juddered with an explosive eruption of restiveness. She felt miserable. Defeated. She slumped on the ground beside him. “What’s the *point*?”

The Doctor surged to his feet in a single energetic bound. “*You* are the point.” He was alive, vibrant, passionate. Every son and star singing in harmony. “There are a hundred billion Galaxies and a billion trillion stars, each which can, are and will make their own impact on their allotted period within history. A thousand years ago, someone was getting a friend out of an abusive household. A thousand years from now, someone else is providing clean air for a culture trapped for centuries beneath the ground. Who matters more or less? No one! In a Galaxy brimming with consciousness and intelligent life, our lives are meaningful to *us*. Choristers unparalleled in a great cosmic sonata. Not despite of other life, but *because* of it. Not immortal, never immortal, but your experiences are always special. You—*are—all—extraordinary*. I emphasise that. *Extraordinary*. Unique! Pleasurable company even. Why is that *never* enough?”

“N—” Her words were lost beneath a torrent of light.

A spotlight.

It was strobing, powerful, her eyes took a while to refocus. She blinked and blinked again. It was so bright that it stabbed at her nerves like some

venomous arachnid. The shapes lost their smooth plasticine curves, growing harder and crueller. Outside the spotlight, in the dark they hadn't seen them—the wall of vidscreens behind the Doctor. Colours like ruby and pearl with black borders separating the ugly neon terrarium. They crackled with sound, like crinkling paper or sparking copper, until it resolved into two figures. Were there others here? It would have been easy to overlook them. She studied them both intently. The first was tall with a smudge of blonde, the other shorter its head muddied with crimson-red.

At last, her eyes had adjusted to the glare and at once, she knew who they were.

“It's us...” she shivered. “Men-at-Arms, it can see everything. It heard everything. It can see *us*.”

It was dark.

“Fledge?”

They were alone.

“Blue-Sky...” Asa was shaking. They couldn't find another suit. He was trapped in his own half-life, staring up at the ceiling above their heads. “I understand, I *know* what this means. For us. Them. Everyone.”

“The Hyperfleet's retaliatory fleet needs the information. It *must* come from us, no one else knows what's going on. No one else can help.”

“We both know what will happen.”

“We'll be starting a war, Asa.”

“We'll be starting *a war*,” he echoed, hollow-faced.

“Fledge...” he urged.

Asa's head fell against the open canopy of his helmet. For all the worlds to ruin, the eye of the storm, as always, seemed preternaturally still. He could pretend they were the only real people in the Universe, if not for their ties above. A long silence passed between them in the wreckage. Then, foam clenched, the theoretician uttered a single word, “Proceed.”

Blue-Sky pressed the communicator switch.

It felt soft like flesh beneath his thumb. It clicked into place and released with a wet, popping sigh. He didn't need to be one of the technicians to understand what came next. Their transmission would be fed up through the emergency power lines into the tower above where the emergency rescue teams were likely already busy at work.

Someone would receive the information on the transceiver band and it would repeat for the next full hour until it could get to the Galactic Commission.

After that point, with their Declaration of Aggression ratified, they would mobilise a retaliatory war fleet to the early warning station and make a declaration to the enemy. A show of force to demonstrate that they would not be intimidated, nor cowed by the actions perpetrated against the Institute. The opposition would also move their fleet into position to illustrate a similar mindset. Each ship would become subsumed beneath the hellish crowd mentality of a mob.

Someone would fire first. They always did.

And a war the Galaxy wouldn't have seen the like of for centuries would begin in terrible earnest.

It was just beginning now.

In the Dreampark, the Doctor swivelled his head from side-to-side. "Hmm, not the most flattering lighting." He bowed, scratching his chin with an index finger. "My word, we're awfully pale."

*And defenceless,* Azovka thought.

With that thought, something stabbed at her mind. Deliberately, surgically, accusingly. At first, she thought it was the Doctor and arraigned him. "Don't look at me like that..."

"Look at you like what?" she heard him ask with concern.

Squeezing her hands against her temples, she felt her head sway. An ache that made her feel taller. The ground lolled beneath her feet, stretching away from her into thin narrow lines. At that moment, she was somewhere else. With someone else. Her legs folded over Mæstric's shoulders, a roaring cheer choking her throat. Someone she could trust absolutely. In a precious happy moment. She felt like howling at how cynical her mind had become. It wasn't real. She knew the moment she saw Mæstric's face.

Then, the world fell beneath her.

Beyond the satellite, propelled from the stellar frontier, Probe Z9-473 activated the fuel release for its ramscoop and dumped its volatile contents in the atmosphere of the Jovian planet Lingiari.

A Jovian subfluid carrier, tasked with airborne defence, reacted automatically to a transgressor in unauthorised territory. Unable to ascertain transceiver contact, nor intent, it fired and the resulting detonation turned the atmosphere into a fireball.

Sitting on his balcony at Government Centre, it reminded Technocrat Berenorah of his childhood in the planet's eighty-year spring.

Death shredded his features.

In Natasia Tor, Azovka's arms became manacled to the past.

Head clean-shaven and a bag dress hugging her body. She was half-kneeling on the curb, using the post to hide her face from jeering cruelty. To see that from afar had been tolerable. Better than the monster who felt the need to preach to her about the inherent wickedness of her being. The terrible guilt of being born as she was. Dellevar had saved her. Saved them both. Mæstric would have defended her to the death and they knew that once the monastery took them in, the people would have short memories. The sky-sweepers would show them the stars above and the votaries would tell them what it meant on Briar Rose below. In many ways, those two informed her both. And yet, radiation still gnawed at the homes salted in the forest. She still remembered the curfews that brought the floaters and their ratta-guns. The eighty seconds that had robbed home, hearth and all, in the moth-ridden wink of a bloated eye.

All of it fell. From the past to the present. From her mind to reality. The twisted briar of spoiled facsimiles taunted her in terrible moments of failure and pain that made Azovka want to sunder her own flesh into strips. They blasted through the crimson spotlight's outer miasma onto the very walls themselves, melted to form effigies of these terrible things.

"Telegenesis," the Doctor said, standing abreast of the facsimile carnage. "The dimensions of Time and Mind together..."

Or perhaps, it'd been what he thought.

The realisation of his scrutiny, his knowledge of her failings, allowed something to break through her psyche. Crumbling like a castle. The castle—The world—Now a racing firecracker pierced by boiling glass.

*Running. Feet give way. The sky hemorrhages. City ablaze. Bodies unburied. Suffering. Unimaginable. Hurting. How can we survive? The monastery. Hide away. Floaters overhead. Quiet! Quiet... Here. You. Me. Us. Them. Then. Tilting at windmills. Forget. Happy for a Time. Happy for Time. Laughter. Life. Her. Them. Together. Smiles. Red-and-pearl. Fear. Fight. The need to fight. Want? Need. Prove. Fire. Worth it? Who are we? Lije. Telle. Why? Does it matter? Ending. Run. Run. Run. Run! Water's too deep! Drowning. Ship lost. Total destruction. Escape in the MEV. Escape! Escape... Break the window! Don't want to die don't want to die don't want to die die die die I! I! I! I!*

She felt her fingernails digging at the edges of her eyes, trying to pluck them out with scissor-like precision. Her face a terrible masquerade mask of scratches. “Get out of my mind! Get... Get *out!*”

“*You heard!*” The voice was like a crack of lightning. It was agony to turn her head, like granite on grinding flesh, but she did so through strength of will alone. The Doctor’s blond curls were like a lion’s mane. A wildcat daring the forking tongue of the storm.

“Focus on me!” shouted the Doctor. “Only me. *Here!*”

Pursued by local SRF orbital patrols through the Meslaim inner system, death fell from the sky in the form of Probe H6-796.

It outmanoeuvred the space mirror network grid and struck at the heart of Möbius’s megasprawl. Its atomic reactor wiped the population centre of Momentum off the face of the planet. The radiation cloud set the entire overcity alight and forced thousands to evacuate or risk lethal exposure.

Those unfortunate enough to live beyond the explosion’s hypocentre experienced the haunting quiet that tumbled across the blasted landscape.

Aboard the Weapon, the cruel deathlight spilled over the Doctor, *through* him and swallowed him whole with a roar.

“No!” he defied it, wrought with agony. “No, I remain separate! Alone! My mind is my own! You hear me, you unthinking schizoid? My mind is... my... *own!*”

Something snapped in the air around them like a whipcord.

The Doctor spread his arms wide to steady himself as the blushing spotlight—an insubstantial, extrasensory probe—tugged at the mill dam protecting his mental faculties. His Tibetan meditations drew him away from the pain. It never left, but it became something he could hone and potentially redirect to his advantage. His increasingly laboured chants shifted towards the computer sciences.

A backdoor into the system was what was needed. A foothold...

The probe centred on the crown of his head, still uneasy, still prodding at the barriers.

His body writhed in flame as pressure after increasing pressure forced him to bow.

In the Metzger's Luck system, Probe T3-332 was intercepted by spacedust culverins before it could make contact with the Anthropology Spindle.

Shrapnel passed through the cloud and shredded the space habitat's outer torus, destroying vital equipment and injuring hundreds of personnel on watch-duty. Countless centuries of archival data was lost instantaneously to the vacuum. The medicentre experienced a partial blackout.

Atar K. Clerke's sensor-sleeve went dark. He was declared missing in action by the station's central computer.

In the Dreampark, Azovka scrambled onto her hands and knees from the floor and made towards the vidscreens. There were four cables leading from the wall. Each one a different colour serving a different function.

*Though I may be freakish, she thought, there is yet use to it.*

She glanced behind her and blinked. The image had to be a hallucination, she first thought. The product of an intense violating surge to her memory centres that had scattered her neurons.

The Doctor's arms flailed, "Inside... mind... kill... *me...!*"

Her hands were tight around one of the cables.

"It... Pull...! Me... Kill...!"

Did he want her to...? Could she do it?

"Kill..."

Just one tug, and...

**TO BE CONTINUED!**

## **EDEN BY ANNIHILATION**

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

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

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

Cover illustration by Caroline Tankersley

UK: \$0.00 Australia: \$0.00

Canada: \$0.00 NZ: \$0.00

Xenon: \$0.00

Science fiction/TV tie-in