



DOCTOR WHO

THE ALCHEMISTS OF FEAR by ALAN CAMLANN



THRILLING ADVENTURES IN SPACE AND TIME

DOCTOR WHO

THE ALCHEMISTS
OF FEAR

ALAN CAMLANN

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

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WHO'S WHO?

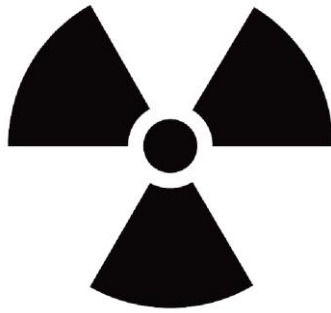
Born from a fatal case of blood poisoning, the Sixth Doctor has made for the most unpredictable incarnation of the infamous Time Lord to date. Passionate and boisterous, his apparent egocentrism and irascible demeanour belies a genuine care for his friends and the peoples of the planets he visits.

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

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

“Commander, intelligent life are very useful.
They can fly through the stars and kill with a word.
But they have one defect, just one:
They can think.”

– **BRECHTEL BROTT**
“THE DESTINUS TRIALS”



RADIOACTIVE

**HELIX ONE:
"MALICE ON MANDUSUS"**

SOLVE ET COAGULA

On every world, the word ‘Dalek’ means death.

The 82nd-century. On the furthest most asterism of the Mandusus constellation, it was said that silence and darkness proved the most valuable of things. For what emerged from that silent darkness—that was most precious.

Approaching a star in the Hirano sector, the slowship Mandusus Chi swam through the long night of space. An oasis in a stellar desert. Its engines, as large as five moons, buffeted the black eternity on a journey that would span generations of time.

A blue crate, infinitesimally small in comparison, reflected in a comet-like arc against its vacuum-proofed dome before vanishing. So swiftly, and silently, that Flight Control’s Astrogator computer hadn’t the time to adjust for it.

Beneath the dome, the gilded arcologies of the Corporate Cluster clawed their coal-black shadows through the cubist neon of the zipways. Traffic and energy flowing like circuit-boards of electricity.

The occupants of Mandusus Chi had yet to see a natural dawn for nigh on eighteen-months now. The excitement among the slowship’s inhabitants was palpable. So, too, was the trepidation. The fear for that Fifth Horseman, Progress, who had accompanied the push into so many unusual new Galaxies.

It had brought feast and famine. Psychocircuitry and isolation.

Only now, a few decades after three-hundred years alone, had Mandusus returned to the wider Galactic community. This dawn-sight was important. With it, the slowship could finally take its first step from the long dark back into the light.

There is a saying. *Wheresoever the corpse lies, there will be mutants gathered.*

On every world, the word ‘Dalek’ means death.

Even this one.

The chemical constitution of the TARDIS galley’s ceiling was an excitonic marvel. Composed entirely of a material alien to most periodic tables, it held itself as stainless, dustless and virtually impervious to harm.

Somehow, in the course of a standard hour, the Doctor had managed to perform the extraordinary. Its constituent components consisted of a culinary creole. Pancakes, strips of marinated tofu, a

custard Danish pastry and tomatoes from the Ship's Falloean Gardens. All carefully prepared in a non-stick pan. Exquisite.

And all presently stuck to the ceiling. In a cobweb of char to rival the London smokestacks of Conan Doyle's time.

"Very well, old girl. Very well." He placed the pan back on the stove. "I concede you may have a point. Just this once, mark you."

An opprobrious scuffle outside the main double doors brought his attention to his two travelling companions. One donned in a cork hat. The other carrying a ceramic milk jug.

Both went flying.

The first was a young American botanist called Perpugilliam Brown. Peri to her friends and enemies. She had joined the Doctor what seemed like a lifetime ago. At the present, she was falling on the second. A whifferdill gumshoe. Monomorphic, on occasion, but nevertheless pleasant. Before the TARDIS, he was known as Avan Tarklu. On their travels, he was called Frobisher.

In a vain effort at chivalry, Frobisher had asked Peri into the galley first. Not to be outdone, she'd returned the gesture and beckoned the whifferdill to enter instead. In the ensuing disagreement, both had tumbled through the doorway. Abashed and feeling more than a little conspicuous.

The Doctor's mouth flicked a cat-like smirk.

"Certainly one way to work up an appetite." The rover picked up the cork hat, dropping the milk jug into its inner lining, and placed it next to the stove. "Good morning."

"Hi..." greeted Peri, painfully, climbing up to her feet. "The study was getting cramped."

"With ripe expectations, yeah." Frobisher righted himself. "Still no go, Doc?"

The Doctor placed a hand in his pocket and flourished the other arm at the disaster site around him.

"At my best, I could give you the finest delights of Billions Major and Billions Minor. A beautiful bonhomie breakfast to salivate the senses. From their native creamberry cakes to imported Gethen beer." He slapped the counter. "Alas..."

"How—?" Peri stopped, cleared her throat and started again. "How long has that been up there?"

The Doctor followed her gaze to the ceiling. Small embers of flame, like molten rock, ebbed on the edges of the vulcanised ceiling

crêpe.

“Oh, quite some time now,” he smiled, sounding quite accomplished.

“*Ooh...*” Peri winced. “Now would be a really good time to move, Doctor.”

“*Mmm?*” asked the time-traveller.

Peri and Frobisher pulled him beneath the relative safety of the doorway. From a stand just outside the door, Frobisher handed the Doctor a sky-blue umbrella which the latter deployed with casual disinterest. In the span of half-a-minute, the veritable feast for the travelling trio rained down to the galley floor. String-like eggs, tomatoes with a kinship to gravel and cured custard peelings all embraced the sweet release of gravity.

“You’ve got egg on your face,” observed Peri.

“That’s an understatement...” the Doctor admitted.

“No, no... Frobisher, you’ve actual egg. On your beak.”

“What?” The whifferdill looked down at the end of his face. “Where?”

Although, it smelt how it looked, he couldn’t quite find it. Peri knelt down onto her haunches and sponged the offending material away with her thumb.

Typical of the Doctor’s cavalier piloting, the TARDIS materialised with a floor-shuddering hiccup. Arms clutched at nearby fittings. Shouts were uttered.

A chime resounded from the console room to signal the danger had passed.

“Ah, splendid.” The Doctor released the umbrella with happy aplomb. “We’ve arrived. Come along.”

Hooking it over a forearm, he departed the scene with a breezy rendition of what sounded to Peri like Patsy Ann Noble’s *Accidents Will Happen*.

Peri and Frobisher studied the tableau in silence. Still clutching the umbrella stand, Frobisher dusted himself down and followed. Peri opened her mouth to say something, shook her head and let her legs carry her after the boys.

Emerging from the TARDIS’s external doors, the Doctor took in his surroundings. They’d landed in the shade. Beneath the bulging slope of an artificial outcropping. The bustle of a thriving city

crackling far above—and below—their heads. They'd arrived on a shelf of tangicrete. One of many. Stacked like gargantuan Petri dishes in a laboratory.

A tang of static electricity salted the air.

Quickly, the Doctor could see why.

His Ship had chosen to land among an undergrowth of aërials and antennæ that nestled shoulder-to-shoulder. Lifelines of power trailing down to nearby electronics stores and maisonettes. He was unconcerned, judging the tensile strength of the main overhead cables—and their overburdened tangicrete service gantry—looked sturdy enough to withstand a nudging from the old girl. In fact, so confident was he in the theory, he tested it by jumping on the nearest cable. A tightrope walker. His umbrella, a baton for balancing.

He was soon joined by his two friends, who remained by the TARDIS.

Peri untucked a sock from her denim jeans. With a hand, she smoothed the collar on her black-chequered blouse. Frobisher flipped up the collar on his soot-grey mackintosh. He experimented with the damp tangicrete beneath his webbed penguin feet.

“Cool, but—*eh*—not unpleasantly so...” Frobisher cupped his flippers. He called to the calico funambulist looking down into the colourful commute of the inhabitants way below. “What'd you say this place was called again, Doc?”

“Mandusus Chi, Frobisher.” The Doctor leapt from one foot to the other, keeping perfect balance. “*Hah!* Triumph!” He chuckled to himself. “A satellite in the constellation of Mandusus.”

“Ah, yes, Europe, the capital city of Europe,” Peri drawled with a sarcastic smile.

“Which came first?” Frobisher wondered.

“No one's quite sure.” The Doctor tilted the umbrella from side-to-side. “The prevalent theory at the moment is that it has become the latest victim of universalisation, but it's equally possible that the name was chosen to honour its newly christened flightpath. Only eighty-years-old now... This constellation and I have something of a history, so I thought I'd pop in again and gather my bearings.”

“This place have any other names?” Peri inquired. “Y'know, for simplicity's sake?”

“The—*whoo-op*...” The rover wobbled on one leg. “*Ab*. The slowship itself, Peri, was originally commissioned under the name,

MRS-7 Ostrea.”

She bit her lip, eyes searching. “Ostrea... Why does that sound familiar?”

“Good hunting for Earth sea otters...” the Doctor pursed his lips, “and daring avians wishing to try something beyond their ‘humdrum synthesised treehouse’, as one put it...”

“Still sore about that, is she?” Frobisher glanced at the TARDIS. “I did apologise. More than once. For that and the Mars Bar incident.”

Peri curled an eyebrow at him.

“*Incidents...*” The final consonant hissed from his beak as an afterthought.

“Let’s just say...” The Doctor clicked his tongue, doubling back to place a hand on the whifferdill’s shoulder, still balancing. “We’ll be trying takeaway for a while, just to be safe.”

Peri frowned in concentration. “Wait, *ostrea*... You’re not talking about the caramelised clams are you?”

“Fresh from the Renogolian seas’,” the three quoted in unison, as the Doctor resumed his act.

“Hey, they were good!” protested Frobisher. “Rare time you ever let me near a stove...”

“Stomach cramps for days...” Peri stuck her tongue out and mock shivered. “In all seriousness, though, never again. Neither one of you are allowed in the galley again. Not after the arsenic cake.”

“A small conflagration of little importance,” the Doctor waved a hand.

“You could teach the Addams family a thing or two, the way you run that TARDIS.”

Frobisher shook his head, a smile to his voice. “So, why name the slowship after a sand gaper, Doc?”

“Observe...” The Doctor deployed his open umbrella on a gentle arc skywards. A lecturer with a pointing stick.

Little droplets of rain caused the blue pigment of the umbrella’s canopy to shift and alter to green ultraviolet trails. A pretty enough novelty on its own, but one far eclipsed by the main event happening above.

Beneath these strange auroras, the long-extinct prusten, however, felt nothing but fear.

Lost and alone in this new closed circuit of wilderness, the animal

could still scent the promise of violence in the air. It ran, driven by survival instincts—confused by its unaccustomed role as prey—from an act of brutality so potent it could be swallowed in a thought. The prusten had escaped once before. Yes, against all odds, it had lived. But, the only thing kindred to the predator, from its own world—beyond the monsters—was made of plasteel and a piping growl.

It came now.

Above the animal, spotlights from zipway attractions, heavy with traffic, freckled the snow-globe curve of the dome. Both subtle and spectacular. The animal was fortunate. Although it could not know that the shape it tracked was a Silver Mead R-Type Matic flier, gliding on auto-drive, the low speed and height made following easy. The flier remained low on its departure course from Corporate Cluster.

Other hunters would hunt—both the predator and the flier.

The prusten couldn't have known of the bigger picture, but then, that was by design.

Unknown to the prusten or even the Doctor himself, the transdimensional auroras of the time vortex—far beyond that of Mandusus—were occupied.

The natural state of the temporal vortex was a difficult one to describe with the five senses familiar to the peoples of Earth. It had no perceptible form to the naked eye. At least, not immediately.

There were no waves to crash against with a *whooshing* clash. No taste of salty brine, as one would sense with an ocean. No sound like the whip-crack of atmospheric pressures or the chilling wind, as with a sky. Nothing that one would recognise from their own terrestrial experiences within the bounds of Space and Time.

Nonetheless, life is a curious thing and efforts are always made to understand the inexplicable. Even in places seemingly beyond understanding. For example, when prompted by Peri and Frobisher, one Samhain aboard the TARDIS, the Doctor had gifted them with an offhand explanation that suited their interpretation of the chaotic Universe.

Valid, in its way. Simple, to comprehend. True... To an extent.

However, they'd pressed him further. In the spirit of ghouls, ghosts and the unknowable.

"What was his view?" they'd asked.

After a period of no-time, the Doctor had acquiesced to his friends'

questions.

He had sat back against the console—legs crossed, Neptunian Yaksh tea at his ankles—and offered his insight.

“Now, I want you to follow me carefully...” he’d began.

It was... Like sitting at the bottom of a flowing sea, watching the currents through varicoloured fish, gazing up through the gaps at the light of the Earth’s Moon.

The vortex wasn’t a vacuum like outer space. Such a view belied its starstorm chaos. The energies that even some Time Lord cartographers had mistaken for a living awareness. It was far more than that. Closer to the structure of a hyperspace prism beyond even the supraconscious. A tesseract of temporal eddies, warps and spirals that curled in neon mazes.

It was... Time.

He confessed that Space, naturally, was a difficult simile to use for Time. It was no straight comparison. To speak of pure Time to beings that dwelt predominantly in Space was a lot like trying to rationalise a circuit-board to an ant.

There were exceptions to the rule, of course, he clarified. After all, the trio had come into contact with such things in their own travels. Rare circumstances where the Third and Fourth Dimensions intermingled in such a way as to produce fissures and openings into the vortex. Open wounds dominated by the crystalline rust of Time ‘oxidising’ in contact with Space.

Time-machines mitigated such risks. In theory.

In the vortex, one such vessel capable of dimensional transference was approaching its destination point now. Among the butterfly-spatter pathways of a changing time spiral, it was impossible to see the elongated oval-sided prism. Its engines thrummed as though it were a living thing.

The time-machine was returning to Mandusus.

The machine’s crew were born in the blast furnace of a dying world. Its forests ripped clear of life by a neutronic Medusa. The land’s cities harrowed to a silence, n’er even broken by the living hum of the planet’s core.

Such a place was now home to nothing. Save the empty watchword of a natural mother now long dead. Its babes, cursed and evil, nursed in the wilds of other lands. Far greener. Easier to exploit. After all, monsters must wait for the dreamer to sleep before they can intrude

on their nightmares.

The mutants had come a long way. A singular purpose to mind.
Extermination.

NUCLEOTIDE 1: “Dawnsight”

Dawnsight. Behind the balancing Doctor’s umbrella, it arrived to Mandusus. Self-conscious and shy, at first. Not from east, nor west on any horizon line, but from a horizon *point*. A torchlight glow, slowly approaching closer. The geometry, alien to the expectations of planetgoers, left Peri and Frobisher rather giddy.

Peri shook her fringe from her eyes and peered up as hard as she dared.

“Mirrors...” Frobisher heard Peri mutter, then more confidently, “Hey, they’re mirrors!”

Starlight, not too far from Mandusus Chi’s current position, struck at the centre of what was shaping out to be a massive array of reflective petals held parallel to the dome’s lattice-shell. Tessera upon tessera building into a complete mosaic that captured the pure corona of an unfiltered star.

“A complex panoply of photovoltaic reflectors,” the Doctor clarified, “implemented via computer control to detect and, well... You can explain it, can’t you, Peri?”

The glow spread across the micrometeorite pocks, solar wind shear and the lasting wounds of other voyaging phenomena to encompass a mudcrack sky. Thin lines of shuttlecraft and freighters trickled like Zarbi across a microwave dish. Unbroken unity shattered by centuries of wear, but still as vibrant and beautiful a spectacle as it had been before its metaphorical wrinkles.

Peri looked quizzical. “I can?”

“Artificial chloroplasts.” He spun a hand. “Away you go.”

“Oh,” she smiled. “The chloroplasts absorb sunlight and generate a pigment or whatever its man-made equivalent is here to create its own variant of chlorophyll. Those mirrors, in this case.”

“Or chevalium. A similar mirror-like element,” clarified the Doctor.

“Collecting solar radiation to power the slowship.”

“And the remaindered energy is siphoned for transmission in low-grade sunlight to provide a natural day-night cycle to its inhabitants. Much like what’s done aboard the TARDIS.”

Frobisher was still entranced by its glow. “What’s the name of this local star?”

“It’s 8187, so... The systemless sun of Savapandit. Expected to be a passive source of power for the next half-century, at least.”

“Sounds a lot like living near the Arctic Circle on Earth,” observed Peri. “Six months of darkness before the sun returns, right?”

“Rather apposite, my young Peri. We’re on the edge of Mandusus constellation. In this particular arm of the Galaxy, stable stellar activity is few and far between,” the Doctor elaborated. “If not for Flight Control, the slowship would never have lasted as long as it has.”

“Flight Control?” she inquired.

“Mandusus Chi’s local Government,” clarified the Doctor. “Well, I say Government... It’s an age of corporativism now, really.”

“The big open secret.” Frobisher hummed at the dome. “It really is a bright old ball of solar light up there.”

“And will hopefully remain so for quite a time yet. Now...!”

Stowing his umbrella in the crook of his arm, the traveller rubbed his hands together. He hopped down from the aerial cable to join his companions back by the TARDIS with wilful abandon. “I’ve always wanted to visit Mandusus Chi, but now that we’ve shored, I find myself at an unusual loss for specifics.”

“You, the walking wordfinder?” japed the penguin.

“It has been known, Frobisher,” the Doctor smirked, reaching over him to pull at the Ship’s door.

The whifferdill’s foot scuffed the remains of a poster left sodden in a puddle of coolant.

“How about, ‘Get fit, get healthy’...?” Frobisher read.

“Healthy? *Healthy?*” The thought gathered momentum in the Doctor’s psyche. “Well... I suppose a stroll wouldn’t do us any harm. Let’s be tourists.”

“For once,” added Peri.

“Yes.” The Doctor beamed. “It’d make a nice change.”

“How do we get down?” asked Frobisher.

“I think there’s a crawlway under the gantry. Over there.” Peri buttoned her blazer, pointing. “We can climb down it. My worry...”

“Yes?” asked the Doctor.

“Is the TARDIS going to be alright here?”

“Circumspect enough for our purposes.” The Doctor gave one of the smaller antennæ a waggle, altering its buzzing frequency into a dragonfly shiver. “I doubt anyone will notice her among the bric-a-

brac. Perhaps they'll start counting electric sheep...?"

His eyes twinkled with wicked mischief as he led his party into the wider zipway below.

If anyone was paying close enough attention to R Tezuhyr, they would have perhaps noticed the curious optical illusion that were his eyes.

Like his friends, he was young, his clothes a commonly pragmatic mix of hooded jacket and long trousers and—on the tandem jetcycle—he seemed to be exerting just as much effort as the others to keep the homespun invention in the air.

It was only the eyes that gave him away.

In any living thing, a pupil dilated as Tezuhyr's did. The texture of the iris, however, remained more or less steady in consistent light. Not in Tezuhyr. The pattern of the iris, sometimes its entire colour, changed dramatically depending on where one was standing. With Tezuhyr, they swirled like two foil-cards with every measured twitch and sweep.

Presently, he was checking between the ground below and the captain of the jetcycle, signalling with the wave of his arm. "Alright, I can see an open patch of ground now," the other boy called. "Slow down, everyone! One-two-one-two-one-two..."

Gently, albeit not entirely gracefully, the hulking red contraption came to rest. Over Akiyama Ward. One of the many conurbations that segmented the slowship's dish. The party settled into a no-hover zone on the tiled rampart between the Ide and Yatagai Wards.

Crowds milled and parted with sharp disapproval, Tezuhyr bowing repeatedly in apology as he slid from his seat. His voice was clear through the protesting commuters. "There should be enough left in the capacitors to get you all home!"

"Thanks again, Tezuhyr!" The young girl at the front cast a lazy salute, yawning in his direction.

The four began peddling, once again taking to the skies.

Away from the site of their minor disturbance.

Navigating his descent to the next level, Tezuhyr's hand hovered over the steep companionway railing. On the way, he passed through the drowsy layer of electrostatic fog, filtered to a lime-green by the harsh chemistry of overworked air purifiers and cryogenic coolers.

Eventually, his red boots touched down onto the grease-stained

Troubadour Zipway.

Built above Launch Tube 2734, Wheezy's Garage sat hunched in wait.

The name was one of Mejamine Oseki's little jokes. The garage slouched against one of the largest purifiers of the zone. It thus had some of the cleanest air one could find in the Ward. Enough oxygen content to make a Lavoiseel bloom down to its delirious tubercles. Its foundations lay in a life capsule, left inactive for long enough for the gas in its catapult to become inert.

Tezuhyr entered through the tangicrete structure, around Meje's latest automotive patient, and down into the repurposed life capsule.

As he approached the mechanic, he began making the same tortured whine of the dismantled flier. In the back of his throat. It took half a cadia for her to notice his presence and deactivate the ignition. She snapped her fingers against her ear, working her jaw.

Tezuhyr leant down, arms behind his back. "Have you made it better or worse?"

"What did it sound like when you left?" she asked.

"...The squeak is gone?" he offered, as consolation.

"And I think I've gone deaf..." Meje cleared her throat with a stuck rasp. "How did your day go? Any problems?"

"No. Everyone liked the jetcycle."

"You didn't stay?"

Tezuhyr shook his head.

Meje sighed. "A conversation with them won't kill you, Tez."

He shook his head again, swinging his arms back and forth. He changed the topic. "No messages from any clients, Meje?"

"Nothing in the datascape. Worried?"

"No. They are all likely focused on dawnstight." Tezuhyr's features broadened with open-mouthed interest. The sprawl of sync-jockey hardware that lay nestled, an avalanche of purchases, in one far corner was trilling like a cyclorat. "The megaputer sounds wrong. Has a circuit-board come loose?"

"The megaputer?" Meje closed the drawer of gravity spanners on her tool-chest and clicked her fingers. She winced at herself. "Right. *Right*, the megaputer..."

"You had forgotten about it?"

Meje rummaged around in the next drawer down for a pair of suitable pliers to take to the problem. "I wanted the second opinion

of your, *sey*... augmented tympanic membranes.”

“Sure, if you say please,” he smiled.

Salvaged from nightclubs, pubs, bars and more besides, the megaputer now functioned as a pirate mindcast station for those in the know. The initial nightmare of meshing a Camellia Industries patchboard with Kuwabatake Interstellar Limited high-response headsets and Virtuosity Astrotech psychocircuits, had long been remedied.

Primarily, through trial and error. Mostly error. Lately, however...

Tezuhyr asked, “Is it the same problem as before?”

“No, different this time.” Using the pliers, Meje twisted the bare hub where a dial once lived. “Same bandwidth, but new frequency. It only happened a short while ago. I can’t say what it could be exactly, but something’s definitely...”

“Altered, yes.” Tezuhyr could hear it. “I wonder if we are the only ones who have noticed?”

“You mean, someone else has this migraine?” Meje sniffed, scratching her eye with her elbow, “Well, that makes me feel a little better.”

“Did you try the headset?”

“The images were... You know how some describe the old zipcranes...?” Meje wriggled her fingers. “How, in memory, they look nothing like the genuine article?”

Tezuhyr slumped, sticking out a lip.

“*Sey*, so *young*,” Meje pinched his cheeks.

He rubbed a cheekbone, smiling. “*Sey*... Not that much older than you!”

“Well, the signal’s almost like telestatic, but not quite. There’s something in it. Discernable. I couldn’t switch the megaputer off, otherwise I’d lose our other port, so I had to work on the flier through it...”

“Perhaps rest will clear the head.” Tezuhyr. helped her up, he gestured to the interior door. “To the meat locker?”

“I had a very long solar day last night, I’d prefer not to sleep like that again.”

“How about a walk? A walk will clear the head.”

“Whose?” she pouted.

“Ours.” He craned his head past the flier above to examine the lights of the Corporate Cluster through the upper level’s window.

The company palisades across Minmay Bay. Their reach so high, he could imagine them touching the lattice-shell, like an outstretched coronet of gold. “Do you not think this bears investigation?”

“There’s that word again,” she groaned.

Tezuhyr’s eyebrows tilted, politely questioning. “Which one? There were many.”

“Investigation’,” Meje clarified. “Let’s go somewhere quiet, this time?”

Tezuhyr bobbed a gentle nod, steepling his fingers to stretch.

“Quiet we can do, of course. Where does the signal come from?”

“Eventually? Akiyama Ward.”

“*Hey, Peri?*”

Perpugilliam Brown stiffened like a wet cat in a winter breeze and looked around.

Walking from Akiyama Ward to Goda Ward, she realised she’d been mistaken about the architecture. She’d expected bland prisms and brutalist boxes inside the slowship. But the reality of the matter was that the closer you got to the minutiae, the more its texture began to sing. This was not a place of towers, but pyramids. The rotisserie windows above them were almost like stained glass. Beautiful arches emphasised by gold leaf lines and opal-shaped dewdrops. Glowing with a soft, dignified light that she might have found in old art deco buildings saved from the ‘30s on Earth.

The signs themselves were a combination of facets. Gaudy holograms for the more modern institutions, like pharmacies, but anything of class had a weather-proof sticker plastered over embossed metal.

“Peri,” directed a gentler voice.

The Doctor had located the source of the shout. Just behind her.

A wallscreen, the size of a billboard, filled with living shadows prowling across a neon backdrop.

One singularly detailed figure emerged from the silhouette closest to her like it was a stage curtain. He was handsome. Classically so. A young man not too far removed from her own age. The video unit focused on his features. Styled. Confident. Proud yet approachable in that paradox only accomplished through marketing.

“*Between employment prospects, I see.*” A sound like a tape player engaging. “*This is my ward, Peri, and I’d love to show you around. I have some*

of the best openings that the Corporate Cluster can offer to you at a fine time like this."

"Fine time being unemployed?" the Doctor sounded sceptical.

"*Tuttety-tut*, old bean," uttered the whifferdill.

"*Mmn*. Drawing a *very* long bow," the Doctor mimed.

"C'mon now, boys..." Peri tamed, smiling.

A series of colour-coded rectangles flashed up onto the screen at eye-level. Nine in total, with a bevved gleam.

"Must be a bulletin board," concluded the Doctor. "Logical, I suppose. Why expend resources bringing the applicants to you, when you can go to the applicants?"

"At likely half the cost," Peri remarked.

"I've no loving thoughts for these crackerjacks." Frobisher gave the virtual tout a jab in his nose. The only reaction was the *tink* of glass.

"All they ever do is hassle you whenever you're trying to be discreet."

She tilted her head away from it. "How does it know my name?"

"It must have heard us earlier and picked up your name from the conversation." The Doctor cupped a hand against his chin. "It could easily have been Frobisher or I, but you must have happened to be closest. More than that, actually, you must have fit the profile-catcher. They're improving, you know. That's rather alarming."

She put him between herself and the beaming tout. "Aren't there laws about this sort of thing?"

"Such things are the purview of those with too much leisure and too little intellectual stimulation, Peri." He tapped her arm reassuringly. "I know civilisations who prefer this sort of thing because it gives them diversion."

"They can't talk to each other, so they talk to the wall instead," groused Frobisher

"Yes..." The Doctor scratched his cheek. "They're commonly found in waiting rooms and reception areas to dispense information, here..." He leant across to a brightly-marked keypad and thumbed a beige stud corresponding to the coloured box on the screen marked: 'LEISURE.'

"*Interested in work in an industry of rest and recuperation in the Ide Ward? I'd be happy to oblige.*" A further series of shapes, this time all of identical tinctures, zapped onto the screen. "*Now sponsored by Virtuosity Astrotech, Gigan offers a range of—*" A button press. "*Earn the chance to relive the opera holographique saga of Wicked Alloys as a—*" Another. "*The*

Flettor zero-gravity skating rink has an opening—” Another. *“And why not visit, the Chasing Storm? A premier Zartician sushi dining experience opposite the—”*

“Mmm...” the Doctor dismissed.

He was absorbing the didactics faster than the creator of the unit would have appreciated. Eventually, his repeated badgering yielded a changeless smile from the wallscreen’s spokesman. They’d come to the end of their rota.

“All of these presently open positions are less than thirty standard days old.” It clicked again. This time with a noise that sounded like an ant chewing on a power cable. *“For the fee of two-hundred UniCred, directions can be—”*

Frobisher let out a note of disgust. “It’s a scam, perp. Nothing official on these things would use slang for Universal Credits. Someone has reprogrammed the terminal to whack a few mazumas from the poor sap unwary enough to step down a blind alleyway.”

“Us, you mean?” she nudged his shoulder.

“This ain’t exactly a nice neighbourhood,” replied the penguin, waving towards the watchman of the nearby restaurant. The latter continued to scowl at their apparent indecorum of being present in the zipway. “The likelihood of us getting into a joint like that without a private reserve of gold are scant.”

“Nevertheless...” The Doctor squared his shoulders against the screen. “It sounds as though this Gigan could be their equivalent of Tivoli Gardens. A fine place to spend the first morning in sometime. We could have breakfast.”

Peri didn’t seem particularly fussed. “I could go for sushi.”

“Consensus?” He turned to Frobisher, who nodded, then added, “Sushi, it shall be. However, I’d like to remonstrate with this electric confidence trick before we get underway first.”

Peri bowed her head closer to the machine. “What makes it Zartician?”

“Ah,” the Doctor tapped his nose. “It might be more accurate, my dear Peri, to ask what makes it sushi. The TARDIS’s translation circuits have simplified what is fundamentally a—”

Something in the dark surged forward. A hydraulic piston of organic heat, power and muscle shot into the roadway. It had identified the chariotteering flier as another predator and had decided to stand up and face the opposition.

Peri could see a tinge of empathy in the Doctor’s eyes before abject

horror.

“*No!*” he shouted.

The animal crumpled against the bumper of the Silver Mead flier.

The vehicle’s auto-drive attempted to adjust for the collision by swinging to the side and slowing its momentum. Unfortunately, its onboard sensors couldn’t compensate enough to prevent an impact it would never have had with a normal pedestrian. This powerful, proud creature was now dead, but it would not enter its hereafter alone.

The flier kept going.

In the space of those few seconds, they’d registered the voice, “*This way, c’mon! Over here!*”

They were already moving — in the wrong direction.

Correcting themselves, they scabbled to the middle of the roadway as the vehicle sliced into the wallscreen where they’d just been standing.

Rending metal. Sparks.

The guttural crunch of chrome shredded like aluminium foil, as a needle shriek of protest slashed across Peri’s eardrums. She could feel the heat thwack against her skin.

The flier tipped on its side. A deck of spilt playing cards.

Behind them, the restaurant’s watchman retreated inside. Industrial shutters rolled down across every external access point. It took Peri and Frobisher, both, to stop the Doctor from marching headlong into the scene of the carnage.

“*What on Gallifrey do you—?*” he protested.

“You can’t help anyone if you’re dead, Doc,” insisted Frobisher.

“You—!”

“He’s right, Doctor,” Peri refuted. “Listen to us! Doctor, *please just listen.*”

The Doctor huffed and puffed, but given a minute or so, his dudgeon began to settle. Peri saw the apologetic look in his eyes, directed between his travelling companions. It was enough. She and Frobisher were right, he could tell. They unwound their respective holds around him.

Panting through the smoke, two strangers jogged up, shielding their eyes from the stinging heat.

“You!” the Doctor shouted to the newcomers. “You, over there!”

The red-booted youngster gestured to his friend, “Meje Oseki!”

then himself, “R Tezuhyr! Where—?”

“Names later! Help us! The occupant may still be alive!”

The Doctor charged into the flames.

One ward over, the TARDIS sat thrumming among the forest of aërials.

A remarkable machine, it operated by a series of complex internal and external mechanisms that maintained its equilibrium across Space and Time.

Some of these devices were quite mathematically complex. The scanner vidscreen, for instance, which allowed a view of the outside environment. The gravitational regulators, for another, adjusted for the relativistic masses of space bodies; allowing the Ship to materialise without incident. Functions such as these and others, were largely governed by the TARDIS’s onboard computers. They generally operated with little bother.

There were, however, elements that existed purely on a mechanical level. The safeguards of the locking mechanism on the outer doors, for one.

Any attempt to force the surface-level lock on its chameleon exterior would deliver an electric shock to whoever was unfortunate enough to be holding the lockpicking set. An invisible flash of agony. Like swallowing a flaming rag.

If the interloper succeeded further, somehow damaging the tumbler in the process, the whole mechanism interfacing its two entry points—from within to without—would fuse into insoluble matter. A lump. Something typically only repairable by the Time Lord scientists of the Doctor’s home-planet.

Unfortunately, as is a universal surety—the more complex the device, the easier it becomes to subvert by primitive means. Highly primitive in this case.

In his eagerness to disembark, the Doctor had pulled shut the police box door and left. Nary a backward glance. A gesture he’d done countless times before and, he earnestly believed, he’d accomplish countless times again in the future. However, among the thrum of the antennæ, he and his companions had failed to notice one crucial detail.

The idling whirr of the Ship at rest. Usually only heard inside the console room itself.

The door was unlocked.

And, in Akiyama Ward, the TARDIS was observed.

The crashed Silver Mead refused to finally die. Wedged in the narrow zipway of Goda Ward, its engine whirred in agonised pulses. The final piece of programming to bring its restless bulk to peace—obliterated.

The same, however, could not be said for the poor beast struck by it in the zipway.

“Fire’s out,” called Peri.

Frobisher patted his smoking tail feathers.

“Mostly,” she added.

Sliding off the bonnet, the Doctor took his first proper look at the prusten’s body. He placed a gentle hand on the animal’s feathered brow, soothing the ruffled mane of Dalmatian swirls, like freshly cast autumn leaves. He inhaled slowly, closing his eyes. Deeply. Ignoring the ringing in his ears. Observing the moment as only a Time Lord really could.

In its final moments, leading up to the collision, the prusten’s soul had followed the nimbus of starlight across the ward. Drawn just as eagerly as the Doctor, Peri and Frobisher. Trying to outpace the night and arrive in the new morning.

“The police will arrive in fifteen cadia.” Tezuhyr bounced on his red-booted heels. “How fast can you work?”

Meje answered, “Faster than fifteen cadia.”

“Right. I will keep an eye on...” his voice trailed away, as his footsteps crossed to the body.

The prusten was a beautiful animal, once. Before its silken fur had become matted with azure-ichor. Bones snapped. Like chalk sticks. Gums bared back, cut and bruised. No longer paws pounding, heart thrumming. Had fear driven it to the narrows? Forced it into confrontation with an obstacle it could never have matched, never mind bested, through no true fault of its own? Or had it been, perhaps...?

The Doctor shook his head.

He opened his eyes to find Tezuhyr, expression wide and mouth slightly agape, blinking at the creature. “Whoa...”

“We’ve not been formally acquainted.” The traveller extended a hand. “I am known as the Doctor.”

“That is a Southern Chey prusten...” muttered the android.

“Why do you say it like that?” asked the Doctor.

There was something off about the young man’s expression. It was cherubic, true, but there was an almost painted clarity to the minor details of his face.

Tezuhyr frowned, confused. “Like what, *mysir*? It is, is it not?”

“No, no, like how my young friends there,” the Doctor gestured to Frobisher and Peri, “would say ‘squamous galbrain’ or ‘woolly mammoth’.”

Tezuhyr cocked a questioning eyebrow.

“Each are an extinct species,” elaborated the Doctor.

“So is this.” The android placed a hand against the creature’s ruffled brow, smoothing the fur from its eyes in rigidly careful motions. “I have seen one.”

“How, precisely?”

“In an exhibit of the natural history museum. Prusten have not resided on Mandusus since the 6000s, at most.”

Interest tickled the Doctor’s voice. “Well, well, now...”

“Doctor’...?” Tezuhyr registered the name. “Do you know a Professor Audley-O’shea, *mysir*?”

“Can’t say I do, young man.”

“Oh.” The android looked almost disappointed. “You needn’t be involved in this. We are more than capable of taking over, if you wish?”

“Oh, falderal.” The time-traveller smiled. “Many extremities make light work. We’ll stay.”

He closed his eyes, beaming. “Alright.”

The Doctor rose, climbing over the bric-a-brac and diodes, towards the stuck flier as Meje was easing herself onto its roof. She orientated herself down towards the front bonnet, turning her collar up on her jumpsuit, buttoning it beneath her chin.

Meje was soon joined by Frobisher. “Need a hand?”

She craned her neck. “I’d prefer to keep my own, if it’s all the same to you. Less of a danger if I just do it myself but,” she bobbed her head, “thank you, all the same.”

Peri tried the door-handle, “Stuck,” and blew on her hands, “Hot. What are you looking for?”

Tezuhyr answered, arms behind his back as if reciting a textbook to the class. “The Silver Mead R-Type Matic model of vehicle should

have a choke valve in the fuel line, located between the gearbox and static reservoir for its power steering.”

The mechanic’s fingertips wriggled beneath the heat-resistant grille and gave it a tug. “The crash obviously fused the panel shut.”

“Careful, it’s hot,” Peri warned again.

“Thanks.” Covering her hands, Meje’s sweating palms gained full purchase on the metal, but however hard she yanked it, it wouldn’t budge. “It’s stuck.”

Frobisher slid down onto the bonnet. “Lemme get some of this stuff out of your way.”

He tossed pipes, junction boxes and whatever else was weighing down the canopy off onto the ground.

In fits and starts, Meje was finally able to get the bonnet open. Unfortunately, just as she did, a chunk of tangicrete slipped into the cavity and wedged itself in the gap. Meje fingers played on its surface like a stubborn pianist, but once again, it remained obstinate.

“*Sej*, we’ll never get those out...” she groaned.

Frobisher tapped his beak. “There might be a way...”

“That may prove unnecessary—here.” The crook of the Doctor’s umbrella tapped Frobisher on the shoulder. “Should prove sturdy enough for your needs.” He paused, adding, “If used with care.”

“Extra special care.” Frobisher passed the instrument across to Meje.

Holding it by its shaft in a stranglehold, she stabbed down at the obstruction, poking the tip through one of its smaller gaps. Meje turned to Frobisher. “I only hope it’s insulated.”

“Otherwise?” he queried.

“I’ll be drinking my own tongue.” The mechanic gave the umbrella a quick twist and flick. In a manner which caused the Doctor to ponder just how difficult it would be to replace.

The engine’s piteous whine died in the back of its throat.

Frobisher and Meje opened one eye, then the other.

The penguin exercised his jaw and called to the Doctor. “All clear, skipper.”

“Very well.” The Doctor shed his overcoat, holding it by his thumbs. He held up the particoloured hotchpotch to the nearest side window of the Silver Mead flier. “Peri, Tezuhyr, if you will?”

The pair usurped his position as impromptu stagehands.

“Excellent. Now, safety glass is designed to shatter in a very

particular sort of way. Normally, I'd defer to the manufacturers, but given the circumstances, I'm far more comfortable taking this simple precaution." The Doctor unlaced one of his pear-green shoes. He wriggled his hand inside, and curled his fingers into a fist for safety. "I shan't want to desire for a hospital visit myself, after getting this poor fellow out. Hence...!"

The Doctor punched the impromptu motley safety curtain. Heel first. A satisfying crack yielded beneath it. Another thump sent his arm through the Silver Mead's window. He pulled it back against his chest, preventatively emptied out his shoe in case of stray shards; and laced it back onto his foot, none the worse for wear.

"Well done!" Tezuhyr commended.

"Too kind, too kind." The Doctor took his overcoat back from Peri and Tezuhyr and gave it thorough shake. "You know... I was once threatened by a being called Gumbolt Grimm. 'Twenty rounds with me, *beggarkin*, and you'll have your freedom!' he cried that day to the masses. He seemed far less eager when I'd stolen his power gauntlets and buried them in the desert." He shook his head. "Never one to fight fair."

"You or him?" asked Peri.

"Yes." As he slipped his overcoat over his shoulders, the Doctor turned to the descending Frobisher. "Do you think you can fit through there without slicing yourself open?"

The whifferdill inhaled, "I'll think thin thoughts. Any advice?"

"Be careful." The Doctor helped him through. "There's more to this than first seems."

Tezuhyr turned to Meje. "Do you see anyone?"

"Nothing so far." She shook her head, peering down the street. "But don't rely on me to keep it that way."

The electronics store owner in Akiyama Ward was an old and kindly woman. Her time away from her native planet had left her scales dry, like a sequined dress, but she'd long cast off any notion of vanity. She was more than happy to keep to herself.

In fact, she showed no interest to the Kamenkost convoy that had congregated among the aërials above her roof. Nor had she seen the Stalwart Phantasm flier, its ground-mode tracks pressed against the deck-plates, and rolling away from her establishment. At a guess, towards the Rhizopodium.

It paid, sometimes substantially, to look the other way.

She had.

Besides, there was nothing unusual about the blue box at all. She hadn't recalled its presence there. No one could. But...

Her skull ached with the old pain of a migraine. Yes... There was nothing worth considering about the box. It was already on its way to the Corporate Cluster and no longer her concern. The old woman soothed her skull clear of the rattling thought, a conceding smile on her tired features, and returned inside.

She failed to recognise the note of fear, in the box's thrum, that left with it.

NUCLEOTIDE 2: **"The Curious Case"**

Peri keeled her head. "What do you suppose they're up to, Doctor?"

The Doctor's eyes flicked, mischievous, to Tezuhyr and Meje. The two newcomers were having a private conversation beyond the time-travellers' ears.

"Considering whether this latest fiasco will impact their cost of living?" he smiled at her.

Peri put her hands on her hips. "You already know, don't you?"

"I've a fairly good idea. They mentioned the police in unfriendly terms." He thumbed his cat brooch. "Curious, isn't it? He, the young man, exhibits all the hallmarks of your conventional android."

"A robot?"

"Yes, while his young friend there—"

"Is a mechanic, I understand all that," followed Peri.

"Very good, all the same," the Doctor congratulated.

"There's nothing illegal in that, is there?"

"Legality has very little to do with morality, my young Peri."

"So I've noticed." Peri had lost count of how many injustices across the Universe were technically sanctioned under the law. She'd seen it in every other shackled dungeon, electronic deathtrap or starving slum. Tyrants never broke any of their own twisted rules. It reminded her of a quote from home, "Mister President, do not let so great an achievement suffer from any taint of legality..."

The Doctor flicked a finger at her in recognition. "Philander Knox."

"Yeah, Roosevelt's Attorney General. Studied dollar diplomacy for a school project." She blew at her fringe, eyeing Tezuhyr and Meje.

"Those two seem nice enough, though. On the level, y'know?"

"On the level?" The Doctor failed to recognise the colloquialism.

"Genuine," she clarified. "They help those who can't help themselves."

"Always nice to know you're not alone in the cosmos, isn't it? Here..." He crossed over to the dead prusten, trying to gain purchase beneath its bulk. "Follow my lead, Peri."

"Don't I always?" she teased, gently.

The Doctor smiled and raised his voice to address Tezuhyr and Meje. “I can find out what you want to know, but my requirements are twofold. Firstly, a quiet workspace to perform a necropsy. Secondly, somewhere to store the body. Both before and after.”

“There is the Wheezy’s Garage?” offered Tezuhyr.

Meje elaborated, “In Yatagai Ward. Not far from here.”

“Before fliers, visitors came for cuts of meat. We still have the meat locker.”

Peri jostled his arm. “It’s a good option, Doctor.”

The Doctor turned back to the newcomers. “Very well. We accept.”

“Why are you interested?” Peri asked the pair.

“We help those who can’t help themselves, but the prusten...” answered Tezuhyr. “Centuries-old rarities like that don’t happen every day, Acquaintance Peri.”

“They do around us,” she replied.

A flash of light and a puff of acrid smoke pulsed from the interior of the flier.

Frobisher squawked, flapping his flippers and coughing like a bellows. “Mayday! Mayday! Bird down!”

“*Stop! Thief! Brigand! Malcontent!*” The voice was prim and unfamiliar.

Peri moved toward it. “Frobisher, are you—?”

“*Your voice does not match any vocal print I have available in my current memory. Unless you can justify your existence, I’ve been programmed to activate self-defence protocols. See if I don’t.*”

Its source was smaller than the average whifferdill. Something that could be thrown—unceremoniously and rather violently—through the shattered window frame.

“*Oh, the ground is filthy!*” it declaimed. “*Madam, can’t you do anything about this?*”

Peri stared. It was a briefcase.

“*I am authentic plasticouture, you know! That means, ‘very expensive’ in the working box’s tongue. No licence has been given to you to hurl me into the mud. I may not stain, but the grit—are you listening to me?*”

An extremely *vocal* briefcase.

Some traditions can seem invulnerable.

In the days of wooden frigates on the planet Earth, it wasn’t uncommon for vessels to take on rats as part of their ship’s company.

As its inhabitants moved to space, interstellar travel proved no different. In fact, in some quarters, it was considered a curious source of pride to have a vacuum-proofed vessel capable of sustaining vermin in its narrows. However, these were sailors who'd never seen the rats in their walls to mutiny.

And, in mutinous assembly, there were far worse things to find than rats.

The Mandusan arcologies of the Corporate Cluster grew up around the Environmental Control section of the slowship. Inbound. Within Ide Ward and at the so-called 'pearlpoint' of the MRS-7 Ostra. Environmental Control was the source of cleanest air and the strongest atmosphere. Both metaphorically and literally.

It was, therefore, unsurprising that Virtuosity Astrotech would establish their base there. In a structure that steeped together like folded hands. Its teeming charcoal-grey fingers veined with the blue windows of offices, laboratories, conference suites and salerooms. Its facilities were exquisitely maintained, the company's personnel immaculate.

In theory, Dalek Command Central should not have existed.

Yet there it was. At the heart of commerce.

More than eighty years ago, relative to the present day, a comprehensive strategic infiltration had been orchestrated by one of the most lethal members of the Dalek Hordes.

The Red Dalek.

He, alone, had recognised that obsolescence, more than anything else, was their greatest ally in securing the Daleks' position onboard Mandusus Chi. Every disused strongroom, every neglected crawlspace, every seemingly superfluous hallway in the arcology had been cannibalised into a cat's cradle of Dalek technology.

To move through every gap, chamber and grime-thick deck was to crawl through an ants' nest. The structure's bold shapes, initially designed to herald and command, silenced by the vicious intricacy of their refits.

The scheme had all begun with a simple impulse. Easily exploited.

Greed.

Like an introduced species, a battlecruiser of dubious heritage was set adrift across the spaceways. Its distress signal long dead. Its crew annihilated.

Such vessels were not uncommon, but the drudgery required to

examine them proved costly. The balance of risk and reward was clouded in the extreme. Some crews were fortunate. They discovered shipments of hermetically-sealed grain, as though fresh from the spaceport. Others, stolen artwork. Plundered from the blazing galleries of a dozen other wars.

The truly unlucky were greeted with empty bulkheads. Spacecraft long scuttled, shamed or gutted by other starlarks.

Eventually, the decomposing battlecruiser came into contact with a veteran force of space pirates. Eager to bear the risk for a reward. On contract with Virtuosity Astrotech's research division. Their loyalty was ensured by hook and crook.

It had taken some persuading on Virtuosity's part to allow their talent scouts direct access to the vessel. Stern measures had to be applied. Pensions annulled. Next of kin informed. Eventually, the pirates' leery obfuscation proved remarkably self-evident.

Within the battlecruiser's hold was a fortune. Enough ore, gems and precious materials to overturn the Galactic economy several times over. However, as the organisation was hardly in its infancy, Virtuosity knew how to handle its finances well. This new boon was introduced slowly. Methodically. Until eventually, psychocircuitry could be found everywhere from Altair to Nara.

No one within Virtuosity Astrotech could have anticipated who their generous benefactors actually were. If they did, the bribe kept their suspicions well hidden. Any questioning employees were disappeared. Their research destroyed.

No one would have believed that it came from that deathworld, Savro Jaida. That they, the Daleks—the evil that had conquered that world—had wormed their claws into the very minds of every Virtuosity emblem holder.

And slowly, with all the certainty of death, these vicious and terrible minds beckoned others of their like close. Seething. From places of Dalek victory. Teth, Spandau-7, Moli Velaine, Lirrip and others. Murders, killers and psychopaths. Envious of Mandusus's society of sleepwalkers.

The Dalek presence was everywhere. Unseen.

Watching, scheming and hating.

The Red Dalek dispatched the local authorities to investigate the lost flier.

Peri reached down for the case's handle. Knuckle first, as repeated experience in the TARDIS had taught her. On contact, she felt a shock of blue flame. Her arm catapulted into her abdomen.

"*Ouch! Ough...!*" She nursed her fist.

Frobisher called from inside the flier, "Anyone hurt?"

"Fine! Mechanical prig." She kicked the case.

It was a roll-top black with sterling silver latches and a perforated grille for the speaker embedded in its construction. Exquisitely posh.

"*Oof! Fine lady, that.*"

"Careful, it has your spark," Frobisher warned.

Peri pulled him through the window. "Thought it was customary for a gentleman to carry a girl's things?"

"So my chiropractor reminds me every day." He was struggling. "Rats."

"You stuck?"

"No, no... Just..." His webbed feet kicked against the upholstery inside. "There's not a lot to stand on, is all."

"Right, I have you..." She strained and, in a tug, aided by Tezuhyr, Frobisher was free.

"Acquaintance Frobisher, where is the passenger," asked Tezuhyr. "Still inside?"

"That's the curious thing, kid." The whifferdill picked up the case with discoloured rubber flippers. "Lots of damage, but our doobry in the Silver Mead is the only thing aboard."

"You're lucky you didn't cut yourself on anything," Peri commended.

Tezuhyr gestured at Frobisher. "Are you well, *mysir*? Have you burnt yourself?"

The whifferdill looked at him strangely, then realised. "Oh, the flippers. No, jack, I'm a whifferdill."

"The shape-shifters," Peri clarified.

"Long time away from home." He morphed his flippers back to their feathered selves. "Saves the cost on a tailored suit by a galactic spatial, I'll tell you what."

"What's the tailoring like on Xenon, anyway?" Peri asked.

Frobisher looked pained. "*Expensive*, perp."

"Ah, you've got it, at last." The Doctor cast an eye over the briefcase. "So, *this* is our occupant?"

"Yeah, must have been why the Mead was put on auto-drive," said

Frobisher.

Tezuhyr examined it, too. “I wonder what the programmer’s main objective was?”

“Any attempt at information retrieval is restricted to those with a recognised voiceprint. I daren’t say a word more on the subject.”

Peri let a brief moment of retribution show. “I wonder if it’ll rattle if I shake it?”

“I’ve far more surprises up my latches than you’re prepared for,” threatened the briefcase. *“I doubt any among you are prepared for what fiendishly devious reprisals I have in store for you, yes sir. None may even guess at it!”*

Frobisher peered closer. “What’s that on its side?”

“...Are you guessing, yet?”

Lime-green spray paint coloured a prominent graffiti insignia on its lid.

“That’s the sign of the Kamenkosti,” Meje said.

“Bad news?” inquired the Doctor.

“You could say that,” Tezuhyr muttered.

“Well, then, we should know what’s what, shouldn’t we?” From one of his many pockets, the Doctor produced a segmented metallic rod. “Vibrating piklok. Let’s get this open.”

“Careful there,” warned Tezuhyr.

Frobisher murmured, “Easy does it, Doc...”

The piklok was technically illegal in most civilised Galaxies. However, like many an outlawed implement, it wasn’t uncommon for it to appear in the arsenal of a strontium shop robber or Venusian safecracker. The Universe had long since moved on from the skeleton key of twentieth-century Earth. The piklok contained a complex assortment of mechanisms no larger than the head of a pin. Each modelled on a distant descendant to the lock-pick set and the tension wrench.

Most horologists would have examined its attoscopic marvels with blushing professional embarrassment. The Doctor, well-versed in its construction, delicately adjusted one of its rings and approached the case. There was a small click as the piklok changed settings. From spyglass to electric-knife.

The time-traveller eased himself close to the case like a sedative needle for an Alsatian.

“Here goes...” He pressed his tongue against his upper lip and—
The piklok’s hum was rebuked with a flash of white-hot blue. The

Doctor shouted. Staggered back. Fingernails of electricity carved, sharp, across his hands.

“*Jings!*” swore Meje.

Peri tugged him away. “You alright?”

“*D’oogch...!*” The Doctor sucked his thumb, returning the piklok to his pocket. “The mystery deepens!”

“Yeah, his Lordship’s *aces...*” exhaled Frobisher.

The distant popcorn clap of firearms put paid to any further quips the party had to offer.

Peri rallied, “That’s our cue.”

“Agreed. Frobisher, you can pick up the case. I’ll handle the prusten here. Better to—*oof*—” the Doctor hefted the prusten’s cadaver over his red shoulder in a fireman’s carry, puffing his cheeks, “—let the local authorities deal on the matter without our direct involvement. We’ve bigger concerns to worry about. Make haste. Quiet as company permits.”

“This way,” urged Meje.

The small party of four, led by Tezuhyr and Meje, slipped through one of the alleyways and down two flights of right-angled stairs. Unrecognisable detritus, mounds of green sand and purple candyfloss, dotted every third or fourth step.

The Doctor halted.

Peri collided with him and nearly tipped them both off-balance. He paid her little mind, however. His neck was extended to something he could barely see between the gaps of habitation. The time-traveller made a curious sight. Head high, framed in the outline of an embossed, almost Mayan, pattern on the wall. Peri couldn’t tell if it was a mural or graffiti. For all she knew, it could be both.

The Doctor, however, was far more interested in the gold of the Corporate Cluster.

“Doc?” asked Frobisher.

The Doctor shook his head. “Something’s coming...”

Solar decades ago, Ecopod-4 in the Corporate Cluster had been used to supply a rich counterpoint to the stale oxygen content of the slowship’s air purifiers.

Now, officially, it sat inert.

Unofficially, it had never been livelier.

The interior of its silo was dimly-lit, through what looked like the

horizontal slats of pallets. Gardens and pollinating flowers, never needing sunlight, nor solace, sat untended in their forgotten cocoon.

In that cocoon, sat the Slurry.

Not for the first time, the creature half-dreamed of who it once was. It'd been a person once. Restless in their thoughts, shifting in the plump hush of their anxieties, but undeniably someone... someone—

“Arrival from Savro Jaida, 8187 time-zone, anticipated,” Ecopod-4's tannoy barked above it,

Jolted from its sleep, the Slurry extruded itself from the pond. It resembled a fried egg. The water, displaced beneath and above its non-Newtonian mass, poured in to fill the gap where it had been resting. Past the caged ladder, its scent and texture of black-green liquorice melted across the machined stonework. Curious. Fearful.

“Twelve... Eleven... Ten... Nine...”

Shrouded in the dark undergrowth, it paused to survey its surroundings further. Much of the flora and fauna around it was reacting to the otherworldly vibration in its own way. Closest to the Slurry was a millipede. It skittered onward. Attracted by a strange electrical tension that scratched raw the climate-controlled air.

“Eight... Seven... Six... Five...”

The Slurry left a portion of itself behind to monitor the cabinet's materialisation. Just an eye, suspended on a globular hand. A zombie leftover. The main bulk of the creature, its remaindered body, vanished bodily beneath the dross of the pond.

“Four... Three... Two... One...”

Beneath the water, the Slurry focused on its hand-eye. The image was faint in primary colours and scattered tessellations, but undeniable. It'd seen the machine before. On one of the briefing screens in the complex. The apparition was a ship, fading into existence from another plane entirely.

It was a Dalek time-machine.

“Zero. Arrival at zero.”

The Slurry's hand-eye scried the millipede's journey toward the fading whistle of a metronome. Heavy in the air. Its source, invisible, but nevertheless, coming closer. The cabinet's engines, it suspected. With a final shunt, the ship materialised in all its unforgiving glory.

As the whistle faded, a cruel monotone shouted from within the vessel, *“Materialisation complete. Quarantine procedures have been observed.”*

“Personnel count required to proceed,” responded the tannoy without.

A new procedure, the Slurry knew.

The ship responded, *“All crew present and accounted for.”*

“Execution Taskforce K-5 will depart vessel to enter the Debarkation Zone.”

The Slurry cramped with pensive dread and rage. It was painful to think of anything beyond the whirlpool of immediate sensations, but its survival instinct kicked in. Thoughts came as a lightning brew.

Transmaterialisation focused beam curious dangerous fear murder in the dark hide hide hide hide...

The hand-eye halted, daring not to venture closer, but the millipede persisted in its gait. Perhaps some great animal felled. Sizeable carrion to feast upon before retiring to safety. The Slurry stayed while its guide lead carelessly on. Neither entity caught immediate sight of the first shapes to move from the ship.

The vessel’s speaker continued, *“You will attend the Psyche Dalek.”*

The newcomers were shrouded in half-light, but the centre of their attention was most distinctive.

The Psyche Dalek was unusual among its brethren.

The main body of its shell ballooned into a translucent globe filled with a grotesque hump of scalped tissue. Seaweed-green. Grown, warped, from the mutant housed in the central silo below through a careful regimen of drug control. Condensation layered the interior of the globe in a hothouse sweat. The product of an irrigation system from nutrient tanks running overtime, the Slurry suspected.

The mutant gargled a strange ululation as it advanced. Peeling exertion caused by the sheer weight of its hypergrown lobes clamped above the rest of its bulk. Its eyestalk was surgically implanted directly into the lobe mass.

It was the monster among monsters. Obeyed without question.

“Secure the area immediately,” the vessel’s voice continued.

Accompanying the Psyche Dalek emerged three other shapes. Stouter. Thinner. The rank and file of Mandususforce operations. Responsible for duties as broad as surveillance to assassination. They gave their charge a wide, if deferential, berth.

One of the guards barked, *“Begin debarkation of consignment.”*

As the Slurry drew closer, the millipede hissed into a stonework sheathe. It did the same.

Behind the Dalek, from within the Dalek time-machine, came a line of computer-guided khaki-green magnecrates. Type-1. Smaller than

those in the arcology's loading bay. Each moving through to the shutter with the march of a laboured hum. In tight formation. Supervision by the drones was unnecessary. Authority had already been given over to those in the main tracking gallery.

"Caution," warned one of the other Daleks.

A further Dalek entered from the door made a total party of five.

"You will accompany me, Psyche Dalek. The Red Dalek awaits you—*u—oo...*" Something jolted within the messenger. The lens of its eyestalk squeezed tight. Pained. Its voice slowed to a wary crawl. "Yes... It is understood. No Dalek without prior authority will be permitted to approach the Dalek time-machine."

There was a pause. A draining chill filled the air.

"Data regarding potential subversive elements will be made available directly from the main tracking gallery. The Red Dalek must be informed of all attempts at access to the scientific division. You are to attend the main tracking gallery."

The Psyche Dalek's lens widened with a burble that made teeth itch. Something flickered in the air between the two Daleks. A shape. Awful, terrible—but only for a moment.

"There... is—*no* further... data," grated the messenger, almost relieved by its own ignorance. "You will report to the Red Dalek. *Immediately!*"

The bulbous Psyche Dalek shifted its gaze to its retinue with yet another pause.

"We obey," they chorused and snapped into position outside the vessel's doors.

The Psyche Dalek and its adjutant were led by the Dalek messenger through the overgrown conservatory. Some of the more dangerous plant specimens pressed their blooms and vines against the bell-jars that held them at bay. Like a macabre dancing parade. Midges and other dipterans bit against the dalekanium shells. No more than electrostatic pinpricks against armour. Futile.

The Dalek messenger departed through the door, but the Psyche Dalek and its adjutant were halted by another drone in the outer corridor. The drone's sucker arm was extended to five feet. "You must undergo scans for anomalies in shell design."

The Psyche Dalek jerked forward with a burble. That bone-scraping chill again. Not even the ticking of the power-line in the passageway outside could disguise it.

“The procedure has been running accordingly.” The drone did its best to disguise its self-conscious flinch. “No further irregularities to report since your departure from Savro Jaida. You will proceed.”

Something crunched like a chewed grasshopper just out of the hand-eye’s view. The Slurry skittered to the stiff remnants of... yes, the millipede. Half-eviscerated beneath the Meissner antigravity units of the crates as they single-filed out the doorway.

The animal whipped in its death agonies as the Slurry stretched to cover the mass.

The smell hit Peri, before anything else, the moment she entered Wheezy’s Garage’s meat locker.

It was the rank cocktail of cloying decay sweetness and gunpowder sulphur. Overwhelming to the senses, if she hadn’t been prepared for it. She closed her eyes, pinched her nose shut to breathe and focused on the sound of her feet crunching against the layer of rime on the floor.

“Peri...” The Doctor seemed unaffected by the cold. He’d discarded his overcoat on a nearby meat hook, rolled up the silk white sleeves of his undershirt, and was currently busying himself clattering instruments to and fro between a steel tray and a makeshift necropsy table. His back was squared to her, but his voice was kind. “It’s hardly necessary for you to be here...”

“What? And leave you here with your morbid thoughts? No *thau-aa-ugh*,” Peri clamped both her hands across her nose and mouth. “*Nmm...*” she persisted. “I know how you get. I wanted to see if you were okay.”

He didn’t reply.

“Are you okay, Doctor?” she asked.

“Humour is the gadfly on the corpse of tragedy,” he quoted.

“Longfellow?”

“My law tutor.” The Doctor tried widening his shoulders, shifting to cover what remained of the animal’s profile from Peri’s view via the doorway. It blocked what little light he’d gained by the newly reopened door, but he didn’t seem to mind the fact. “How are the others?”

“Frobisher’s keeping them occupied, what *hau-aa-ve* you found out?” she gulped.

“It’s not an artificial construct.” The Doctor pulled at his collar and

crossed over to the young botanist, offering his cravat. “Neither meretricious, nor oblique. No augmentation or signs of manufacture.”

Peri tied the polka-dot cloth to her face. “Not a robot?”

“Not a robot, no.” He turned back to the table.

“Could it be a clone or a shape-shifter, maybe?”

“Nothing so straightforward as the former and I’ve seen enough of Frobisher’s genetic makeup, dealing with his monomorphia, to exclude the latter. No, what we have here is an authentic specimen from Mandusus Chi’s pre-Eruditanik period. Possibly even before that, during the flyby of Pratibhalent I and II. Mandusustime 6000 or thereabouts. Analogous to your Earth’s Babylonian era.”

“Which should be impossible.”

“Unless, my dear Peri, you are like the three of us and can travel unabated through the Fourth Dimension.” He frowned. “It paints a grim picture, doesn’t it?”

She shifted uncomfortably. “I don’t suppose it did it on its own?”

“It lacks anything like a time core to allow it to dive in Time and shield it for travel. There’s also another factor at work here...” The Doctor crooked his finger and led her over to the subject on the table. They skirted the open red-pink underbelly as much as they could, circling around to the length of its blue spine. He gestured. “Run your hand through its fur, just there.”

Peri did so. It was still soft even after *rigor mortis*, except...

“That’s... what is that? A burn?”

“Quite astute.” He went to put a bloodied hand on his lapel, remembered his rubber gloves, and instead rested them rather awkwardly on the table. “Those are a series of burns commonly seen under concentrated laser-blaster fire.”

“No animal should have to go through this...” She caught his expression. “That’s not all, though, is it?”

He studied her face earnestly. “You can’t sense it, can you?”

“No...?”

He held up an exposed forearm, the hairs stock upright. “That sensation of a needle stuck through a cork yawing in the open sea. The moment when—” he slapped his hands together, “—the magnetic pole of the planet pulls it true north or south. I can feel it here, I feel it with that case. There’s something terribly wrong here, Peri. Things out of Time.”

“It worries me that I know what you’re talking about,” said Peri. “So, whatever it is, it already has enemies that wanted to see it dead. Powerful enemies. Possibly... I don’t know, time-travellers, like us?”

“Possibly. They’re certainly linked to whatever that briefcase is carrying. And, I’ll wager, they’re determined enough not to have given up the search so easily. Body or no body.”

She looked up at him. “Are they going to come after us?”

“Peri...” the Doctor began, gently.

“Never mind. Stupid question. Of course they’re going to come after us.” She blinked at him. “Are we going to be alright?”

He placed an equally gentle hand on her shoulder. “How are the rest getting along?”

The life of a whifferdill was often spent observing the Galaxy from unusual perspectives. They made great philosophers, photographers, painters and, occasionally, startlingly good neurologists. However, Frobisher decided to devote his life to a much humbler calling.

Gumshoe.

To that end, Frobisher had spent many a night sitting behind his mahogany desk. Absorbed in every facet of an office two mazumas short of foreclosure. He loved, honoured and despised that office. He’d known it well. Every knickknack and whatnot.

Therefore, in Wheezy’s garage, in the lower level retrofitted from a life capsule, Frobisher metamorphosed into a tapering white kettle. One of his prized possessions that had steamed him through thick and thin.

The whifferdill cheated a little with two beady eyes near the handle. He wanted to observe Tezuhyr’s negotiations with the Doppeldares on the level above.

The Doppeldares were dressed in synthetic flak-red vests and silver studded black shirts. The lead speaker had a crooked smile. Her disciples feigned disinterest.

Tezuhyr sat up from the front bonnet of the flier in mid-repair, pumping his arms with controlled swings, as he walked. He bowed to each of the hulking figures as they left through the garage shutters. One corporato attempted to grasp at Tezuhyr’s jacket. The android intercepted the hand and shook it with vigorous cheer, instead.

Once they’d disappeared through the garage shutters, he pressed a stud on the wall.

“Alright,” he whispered to the air. “All clear.”

Frobisher blew his spout with a whistle. He extruded himself back into his more familiar penguin form. Haplessly, he kicked the makeup box on the table with him to the floor.

“Rats. I’ve got it,” he picked it up and placed it back.

Tezuhyr climbed down the ladder from above to examine its disarranged innards. He began carefully resorting the various blushes and foundation. It must have belonged to him. Frobisher had seen similar objects in the dressing room of Holowood starlets. Suppose it made sense, a little blush to hide the chrome.

“Nosy neighbours?” inquired Frobisher.

“The Doppeldares, you mean?” Tezuhyr stuck out a thoughtful lower lip. “They were interested in the purpose behind the Silver Mead crash. I told them that we had no idea.”

“Did they believe you?”

“No. However, I also asked them whether they knew anything about it.”

“And they said, ‘no.’”

“There is something transpiring with that crashed flier, *mysir*.” Tezuhyr punched his hand with a whirl of motors. “If the Doppeldares care, then the Kamenkosts must, also.”

“We do have that Kamenkost briefcase,” nodded Frobisher.

“Stinks of fish to me, kid.”

“My designation is Tezuhyr.” Tezuhyr corrected, he then blinked.

“And I do not understand.”

“‘Stinks of...?’ Oh. Old saying. Means ‘suspicious behaviour.’”

“I will add it to my memory.”

“Who are the Kamenkosts?” asked Frobisher.

Tezuhyr closed the lid of the makeup kit, climbed the ladder and rapped his fingers on the flier’s bonnet. There was a click from inside. Meje inhaled a small gale of breath and swung the briefcase onto the floor.

“Next time, Tez...” Another gasp. “*You* get to play hide in the seek.”

“We are discussing Aikaterzine and Dargaud,” informed Tezuhyr.

“Must we?” answered the mechanic.

“I take it,” Frobisher scratched the underside of his beak, “that you’re not on good terms with the Kamenkosts?”

Meje’s answer came with a slam of the bonnet. “They’re

corporatos. Thieves. They take anything and everyone wetware. Whether it's a bionic arm of a sync-jockey's psychocircuit. They pick the bodies clean."

"There is no on-sell value to organic materials, so organs and bone are discarded." Tezuhyr tapped his thumbs together. His eyes canted up in what Frobisher could almost imagine was discomfort. "You can understand, Acquaintance Frobisher, they are unpopular."

"That must be an understatement. I'd feel real swell about a mugger who took *only* my fingers." The whifferrill was feeling sardonic. "What does the insignia on the briefcase's side mean?"

"*I must be returned to a Kamenkost satrap or to the Virtuosity Astrotech arcology immediately,*" the briefcase answered, prim.

Frobisher scratched behind his head. "Back under the surgeon's scalpel it goes, then."

The case yawned. "Try, try again, but I really wouldn't bother, you know. We'll be at it all cycle and you'll have only scuffed my hinges."

"It's all been explored." Meje nodded, a hand on her face. "Cutting it, blasting it, sweet-talking it, irradiating it..." She sighed. "Father had easier autopsies."

A sympathetic klaxon trilled from the megaputer.

Its hodgepotch bulk glimmered like the windows of skyscrapers at night. Powerful motors whirred beneath cable jacks. Braided and held in place by clamps strong enough to stabilise a spaceship's turbine. All of it maintained, scrupulously, from the looks of things, by the good graces of its operator. Meje sat down by the machine like a pianist at a concerto.

"What was that noise?" asked Frobisher.

Meje frowned in concentration. "Someone's made an inquiry to census records about the identities of those at the Silver Mead's crash site"

"That was the ping back," Tezuhyr elaborated.

Frobisher cocked his head. "D'you reckon we can hook the case up to this thing?"

"Only if you want it to start competing with the latest hits of *Hurricane Hairspray*." Meje upped the tuner volume to demonstrate.

Tezuhyr started bobbing his head, jaggedly, from side-to-side in an imperfect imitation of a playful shuffle. Peri would have called it adorable. Android imitating life.

Frobisher listened. "Sounds like bebop and reggae went ice

skating...”

“No, no, connect me by all means,” huffed the case on its speak-and-spool. “Between the vulgarity here and the violence out there, I’ve almost forgotten what a real conversation sounds like.”

Tezuhyr picked the briefcase up.

“Gently, gently!”

And lowered it to the floor.

“What’s the opposite of a *brief*-case?” asked Frobisher. “Y’know. Brief.”

“Sey... A ‘verbose-case?’” offered Meje.

“A Prolixcase.” The Doctor returned with Peri in tow, discarding his gloves on a nearby table.

The Prolixcase piped, “*Him, I like. A word for every occasion.*”

Ide Ward’s Rhizopodarium. A building devoted to the keeping of unusual animals.

Aikaterzine vas Magyar-Teleki watched a Janus candleclew pitch backward. The teacup amoeba levered itself towards the feeder. Its head apparently held upright in defiance of whatever predator may have considered it fancy quarry.

But, like much of nature, the candleclew’s initial appearance proved deceptive.

The shape of its apparent head, on closer inspection, was rather unusual. Even for a creature hailing from Ocedar. The amoeba’s charismatic patterning drew all attention to this actual tailglob. Arrayed in such a manner as to mimic the skull of a more resolute entity. All the while, the candleclew’s ‘tail’, its actual head, sapped at the cylindrical feeder.

Aika slid her used PanGalactica boarding pass—‘ANKARA’ to ‘MANDUSUS CHI’ (GATE 17-I)—under its tearaway stub with a powder-blue finger. “They were imported just under eighty years ago, you know. On just the same shuttle-line. Private charter.”

Dargaud had missed her Kamenkost dependant at the starharbour by a matter of cadia and was determined not to make the same mistake a second time. The shieldmother pinched the bridge of her nose under a skull-sized palm, smoothing back the harried fur of a boulder-sized head. She adjusted her giant shoulders with rigour into the backrest of the tiny chair. Her two ears, like deep-violet sails, twitched with fatigue.

“You’re not remotely interested are you?”

Aika smiled at her. “I’m fascinated, but... What else is there to know?”

“The same, again, Aika,” Dargaud persisted. “There was no fault with the lens or any other element.”

On the wrought-iron table, an image from a square the size of a wallet’s picture frame. Static smothered the holocorder’s tableau into a profile of dull purple-green. The colour of dead channels and unscrupulous conjuring tricks.

“Again.”

Another window into her activities. Emulsion in the photographic image had left its focal point black from underexposure. Three additional attempts, all of varying sizes, had produced the same issue without fail. A small grotto of antennæ with a lump of shadow at its centre.

“And again.”

The radiophonic plate, taken from inside a short-range multispectral scanner, was a muddied beige. Defying x-ray, infrared and every other wave and particle of scrutiny that could be thrown at it.

Aika leaned back, an eyebrow ticked, intrigued, with the final piece in her guardsman’s collection.

“And all you have to hand is this?” she asked.

“Correct.”

A sketchbook. Primitive, by comparison, but oddly more evocative than the supposedly more true-to-life mediums. She held it leisurely between her forefinger and thumb, running her teeth across her lower lip with a hum.

“Well, it’s certainly...” Aika began, but she stopped herself. “I’ve never seen anything quite like it.”

“It reacts like nothing I’ve ever encountered. Each recording device functioned perfectly.”

“You were thorough?”

“Of course. We checked the playback immediately after each scan and shot. None seem to have lasted the journey here, barring my sketch and, even then, I can’t recall specific details. The object simply cannot be examined for its contents.”

“Certainly not reliably... *H’m*, in much the same way as...” Aika looked at her friend. “You believe it to be the same technology as the

briefcase, don't you?"

"You would know more about that than me."

"It's still marked with the Kamenkost tracking paint, isn't it?"
verified Aika.

"We're triangulating it now."

"The same technology, you say..." Aika demurred. "I don't know. My instincts tell me this is something altogether different."

A snotjay swooped down towards the distracted candleclew, taking a potshot at an 'eye', and found its otherwise perfect assault disarrayed by a design of biology. The 'tail' of its apparent quarry snapped it in the face with an attack spike.

It reeled back with a cough of displeasure.

The candleclew fled. Like water droplets when transferring from zero-g to terrestrial gravity. The amoeba climbing down towards the woodchip floor. A chagrined blob.

Hidden, or so it thought, in the shadow of the light-grid above, as the Janus candleclew screeched its displeasure.

Aika examined the sketch again. "It's a good effort. I like the shading."

Dargaud's face lengthened with a soothed nod. "Oh, the shading, yes..."

Aika tapped the book against her chin, wafting the humid scent of feathers. Her imagination circled its prey. "A crate... Blue. Taller than the average being with an indicator light adorned to its very top. Inscribed with the phrase: 'Enforcement Admass Prompter Terminal'. No other distinguishing features?"

"None. Not even a sign of whether or not it's contraband for Mandusus. There's nothing in the database."

She shrugged her eyebrows. "It could be similar technology to the case. The signal interference from the antennæ stations would only account for so much... What do we know about its proprietors?"

"On the back," the shieldmother gestured. "Verified as far back as we could ascertain."

The sketchbook flopped to one side. Eyes twinkled. "Now, that is unusual."

"Should they be considered persons of interest?"

Aika absorbed every detail. "That depends quite a lot on said object's origins."

"Bandages has agreed to the adjustment and our equipment is in

the car boot of the Stalwart.”

“Very well.” She tossed the book back to Dargaud, extricating herself from a chair a third of her size, who caught it in her palm.

The candleclew, startled by the catch, scattered from its feeder. It rose high above the hydroponic flora. Too high. Nesting in the eave of a glass panel was a paleshrike. Aika had never appreciated them. Horned, wretched things that stuffed its carrion into larders of reeking slimy hollows. For all the Janus’s ingenuity, there was nothing to disguise the eyeless panic it felt at being under such a predator’s gaze.

In the moment it took for Aika to blink, all that remained of the Janus candleclew from its brief notice was a single sliver of rigid jelly. An attack-spike cut clean from its gelatinous base. Marked only by a curt and uncouthly descent.

She plucked the spike from the tabletop, twirling it sadly in her hands, then slid it behind her ear.

“Where’s the briefcase now?”

NUCLEOTIDE 3: **"Time on Our Hands"**

In the upper level of Wheezy's Garage, one of the vehicles squealed into unwelcome life. The Nuka-ki jetcycle dismounted from its support, rearing up like some frenzied Savannah animal.

The Doctor attached by a plastic-bitten cuff to the throttle.

"I have it! I have it!" he protested. "Whoa, there! Whoa!"

Tezuhyr vaulted forward, trailing the scratch-marks being spun up the closed garage shutter. Before jetcycle could complete a full arc and fall back on the traveller, Tezuhyr and the Doctor had wrangled it back down.

"Whoa and felled, fair steed!" huffed the Doctor.

"You are pleased?" Tezuhyr pinched his twin cowlicks.

"Sublime automation!" He thumped the young man on the back. (Frobisher measured a flicker of intrigue wrinkle the Doctor's mouth.) "Though I admit I'm somewhat out of practice with its use. Over here, let's make sure it's secure this time."

"Doctor?" Peri prompted.

"*Mmm?*"

"What do you think of Frobisher's plan?"

"Oh, yes, quite reasonable." The Doctor hummed with approval as the Nuka-ki clicked back into place. "It's a sound enough scheme for now, though one addition, if I may."

"Go on, Doc," nodded Frobisher.

The Doctor's overcoat swirled as he parted his arms between the case in Peri's hand and the meat locker in the repurposed life capsule below. "I want to divide our investigations. One to confront the interested parties of our mysterious Prolixcase here. One to examine the origins of the anachronistic prusten body down there."

"Shouldn't we stick together?" Peri asked.

The Doctor shook his head. "I know, but... Not this time, Peri. There's something more to this. Time travel technology in the Mandusus constellation is still the providence of private agencies and..." His lecture caught the stares of Tezuhyr and Meje, "...other concerns. Yes?"

"Time travel?" blinked Tezuhyr.

"It's a big idea, I know, but bear with us," Peri reassured them.

“We’re convinced that’s where the prusten body’s come from. Not a laboratory, but the past.”

“Our past?” Meje asked.

The Doctor pointed a finger. “That, my friends, is what we need to find out.”

“What do you need to know about the stiff, Doctor?” inquired Frobisher.

“When and where, precisely, in the past, it’s come from.” As the Doctor retrieved the case, his furrowed brow flickered upward with a new thought. “Actually, why don’t you handle that task, Frobisher?”

“Me?”

“Why not? Investigation. This task seems eminently your area of expertise.” The calico visitant cocked his head towards the Prolixcase. He held it up to his head. As though draining water from his ear. It was an odd piece of body language that Frobisher couldn’t place.

Curiously enough, Tezuhyr was performing the same tilted head gesture, too.

“Interesting. And I’d also be interested to see,” the Doctor continued, “if the original owners of the case have a connection to the unfortunate creature in there.”

“The Kamenkosta?” asked Meje.

“The *original*,” the Doctor corrected. “Whomsoever sent it on its mad dash to oblivion in that flier. Someone tried to steal that object, I want to find the thief or where the thief took it from.”

“I thought we were here to sightsee?” asked Peri.

“And see the sights we will, Peri, but with an ulterior motive.” He nudged his chin with clasped fingers. “I want to be conspicuous. Draw them out. Once we meet them or a representative, we can find out more.”

Peri nodded, slowly. “Alright. That makes sense. I wanted to find out why the prusten ended up here, anyway. In 8187, I mean. It’s one thing for an animal like that to die senselessly—”

The Doctor placed an arm around her shoulders. “Peri...”

“It’s another to discover that it shouldn’t even be here in the first place.” Peri rested her face on his collarbone. “It’s not good or just and I want to find out *why* it happened. It reminds me of my dog back home, Whiskey, I had him when Dad was still around.” She looked up at the Doctor from his waistcoat. “I’m going. With you. Someone has to keep an eye on you.”

“You’ll brook no argument from me, Peri.” He tapped her on the shoulder. “Frobisher?”

“I’ll stay here. I’ll have to dig up a few clues on the who’s who of Mandusus Chi...” Frobisher scratched his brow. “That megaputer could work, but I’m a bit sore on how to operate it.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask...” Peri pointed. “What the heck is that? It looks like a mixer on a sugar rush.”

“Independent mindcasting,” answered Tezuhyr.

The Doctor clarified for Peri’s benefit. “A sort of two-way pirate radio station.”

Oh, she mouthed, as a way of thanks.

“From your mouth to the mind’s eye,” said Tezuhyr.

“God’s ear,” Peri corrected.

“Sorry?”

“Never mind. Is the demand for pirate stations high here?”

The Doctor turned to Peri. “Psychocircuitry offers you, at a very rudimentary level, Peri, a Walkman inside your head. Imagine if you could hear nothing but advertisements for fast food, antacids and corporate slogans, *mmm?*”

“I’d probably go absolutely nuts,” Peri waggled her head.

“We offer a helpline to those in trouble, as well,” explained Tezuhyr. “This way, everyone gets a voice. Even when it doesn’t suit the company brand.”

“Especially if it doesn’t suit the brand,” Meje grumbled, louder than she thought.

“Copacetic.” Frobisher slid down the ladder. “That gives us all sorts of avenues. We’re looking for sightings of the flier. Names, places, dates, whatever.”

At the megaputer, the android flipped the headset up onto the penguin’s crown where it dangled like an old war helmet on a child.

Frobisher asked, “Wait, will this work with someone *au naturel* like me? Sans implants?”

“We’ll adapt, my penguin chum.” The Doctor patted the helmet. “The top-grade of innovation doesn’t halt us from performing a few generously genius tricks of our own.”

The Time Lord travailed down, producing his vibrating piklok. Barely breaking his stride, he shunted the instrument against the megaputer’s housing. There was that electric-knife hum again. In a few moments, rather than an unhealthy flash, the Doctor was picking

apart the metal like it was a deck of cards.

“Just a small adjustment or two. A tinker here or there.” The Doctor hummed, indecisive. “Nothing too comprehensive, I imagine...”

Above and below, Peri and Frobisher exchanged a set of looks across the garage cultivated by years of such ‘small’ alterations to the TARDIS.

“Oh, good... If you’re confident...” Peri hummed, dubiously.

“Always. Although, that said...” The Doctor tapped his lower lip. “You know what would streamline our logistical peregrinations?”

“What?” Tezuhyr asked.

“Occam’s razor. How best to open a lock?”

“With a key,” said Frobisher and Tezuhyr together.

“Quite right.” The Doctor clapped his hands together. “Best keep an eye out for that. Now, let me see... Green with a yellow stripe, goes into the purple with an orange hatch...”

Aika wanted to watch the war and Dargaud was able to provide it.

The engine of the Stalwart flier idled on the edge of 41-79G Expressway in Goda Ward. Just in the blind spot between the video-scan cameras overlooking the six lanes of aerial commuters. A sound vantage point for the stage below.

Aika’s arm rested against the flier’s back passenger door. Near a stairway leading to the ground, the talent scout listened to—amongst other things—the steady *threep* of the transceiver set built into its frame.

The briefcase was still being triangulated, but there was no sense simply waiting around.

“*Confirmed for Patrol Two-Two in Goda Ward,*” buzzed the police scanner. “*No personal effects, no personnel. Looks like the Silver Mead flier suffered a ghost-jack or computerised malfunction. Over.*”

“That could prove annoying...” Aika’s hand dug into the backseat pocket and produced two ridged black canisters.

Dargaud’s voice could be heard from the driver’s side door, “Problem?”

She offered one canister to her robust enforcer. “You were right. We were just about to hit a police cordon.”

A number of voices thrummed through the scanner’s glossy static. “—*and their statements?*”

“Witnesses says they saw a group of four or five interfere with the Silver Mead on the scene after the crash. There’s loose agreement that the driver, if they were one, went with the group.”

Looking below, Dargaud clenched an impatient fist around the second canister. “When are they expected, Aika?”

“Following our instructions...” Aika crossed to the tangicrete barricade.

Vertically, it separated the expressway from several levels of dead air and an abrupt visit to the deck-plate below.

Where other sections had been heavily retrofitted for living habitation, this remained clear to allow for the elastic-arrestor escape lane sitting flat beneath the Stalwart. In an instance of danger, the elastic could catch a flier falling from the lattice-shell and prevent the vehicle’s terminal velocity from becoming very terminal indeed. She knew personally. A recent altercation with Tezuhyr and Meje had turned that theory into an unshakeable fact.

As Aika’s enforcer joined her, glowing flashes kicked at the narrow intersections of alleyways below. Pops of laserlight. Some purple, some blue. They warred against one another.

“...Now.” Aika tapped the barricade.

The zipway fight was far below. Distant, topographically speaking, but held no less impact for the two onlookers than if they were waist-deep in the battle themselves.

Aika could picture the tactics of the Kamenkost satrap well enough. She had, after all, selected their specific talents for just such a purpose. It was a perfect counterpoint to the thoroughness of the Doppeldares. A blitzkrieg firefight that their opposing number would feel compelled to answer and annihilate.

“There they are,” pointed Dargaud.

The first band of Kamenkosti engaged with the Doppeldares. No one at ground level could see the former group pull back towards waste disposal units on the borders. Anyone who did would have taken it as poorly executed ambush tactics. Too conspicuous. Amateurish.

Aika was still listening to the police scanner in the car.

“In addition to that, some kind of animal was driven into the vehicle. Either it was killed on impact or was only stunned and taken away with them. Could be poachers, I suppose.”

Resting their elbows on the tangicrete, Aika and Dargaud flicked

the safety catches on the two cylinders and let them plummet from their hands to the ground below. The impact alone was enough to shatter the objects in four, but not before their dispersal drums engaged with a hollow yip. A blushing cloud burst like spun sugar through the two groups.

“Not our business, inspector. We’ll contact Virtuosity and let them know they lost a vehicle.”

Aika wrinkled her nose at that. Typical of the law. No courtesy or consideration taken for the poor creatures caught in that lethal slicer of intelligent life. No mention of the prusten whatsoever.

Dargaud scratched her chin. “It’ll take a moment for the stun gas to clear.”

“We’re in no rush,” Aika replied.

The respirators of the Kamenkosti below, unwrapped from their hidden caches in the local garbage, eased and wheezed quietly in the deafening silence of the skirmish cut short. The last recalcitrant Doppeldare’s arms scratched at their throat, trying to tear the soporific from their lungs, before collapsing, knees-first, against the gravel.

Aika’s corporatos picked at what looked to be the leader of the assault force. He had presence enough and had led the initial charge. Pockets were patted, jackets tossed and re-examined, but no luck.

“Anything else to confirm?” itched the transceiver. *“Any stolen property or missing vehicle parts?”*

“Nothing,” reported the officers.

The Kamenkosti eventually found what they were looking for on one of the younger jesters.

A wave from the strongest of three pipe-thin arms signified success.

“That’s the briefcase key,” tapped Aika on the barricade, “and ties up the leak in the company’s transportation branch.”

“How did it end up with the Doppeldares?” asked Dargaud.

Aika shrugged. “Someone sneaked into the loading bay and stole it from around the recharging stations, I’ll wager. It must have fallen out of the flier door. Whoever moved the case was obviously in a hurry. They didn’t stop to check.”

“We’ll have to increase security.”

“It’s not a bad idea...” Aika rested a fingernail against her chin.

Dargaud tapped her fingers together. “I’ll bring the key up here.”

“I eagerly await your return,” Aika returned to the transceiver ticking away. Her fingers plucked a small input jack from flier’s transceiver unit on an extension cord, yanked it tight, inserting it into the port by her ear. The handshake between wetware felt, as always, like a cold shower after a humid jungle day. Stinging icicles down the spine.

Dargaud paused on the nearby stairway. “Should I ask them about the case itself?”

“I... No. Hardly any need, by all accounts.” Small gold diodes illuminated Aika’s features against the upholstery. “The tracking paint has finally begun to register. We have a fix.”

“Where is it going?”

Aika turned to Dargaud. “To Gigan, would you believe?”

“It’s going shopping?” The shieldmother cocked an eyebrow.

“*Mmm*, what better place to sell it? Tezuhyr and Meje, it seems, have taken an interest. Well, that was inevitable... Time for more direct methods, I believe.” She flicked the transmitter dial from the intercept-receiver to a separate transmitter. “The mindcast carrier-beam is open. It’s me, again. Can you hear me?”

Dargaud moved off to the stairway.

“You can? Well, excellent. Always a good starting point.” Ever the talent scout, Aika couldn’t help but smile affectedly. “Now, although this is a secure subaural frequency, I’m not willing to make my identity known, as yet. However, I do have something of interest to you. A proposition on the behalf of my employers. They are in accordance with an idea which I think you’ll appreciate...”

The Slurry pulled its way through the nutrient-pipe in shallow breaths. The space was no thicker than the length of an average humanoid’s arm. In the intervals, between each work cycle, it would be flooded with a protein slurry. The creature had to be quick.

The Psyche Dalek and its adjutant arrived in the recovery room unannounced.

At a guess, the Slurry supposed it was to determine the efficacy of operations without preparation. Daleks didn’t impress, but everything in Mandususforce’s power had been done to curate the chamber to the arch-puppeteer’s specifications.

It was well-staffed, for one. Tentacle-picked members of their scientific division, specially chosen for their knowledge of the Dalek

shell.

The Chief Scientist was at its post. “Ready the subject.”

The Slurry choked at the heavy grind of machinery that would have deafened other lifeforms. A hydraulic vice on a solid crossbeam lowered the object of the chamber’s focus to ground level.

The Psyche Dalek’s eyestalk swung to it with a knowing recognition.

The charred Dalek shell was inverted to allow better inspection of the locomotion system sphere and its balancing globes that allowed free movement of the travel machine. Each a solid bronzed quicksilver. The Slurry could see inside it. The gash that had been blown from its side was like a fissure. It would never be remoulded again.

It was clear, this was the Dalek equivalent of an autopsy.

The chamber reeked of an odour not unlike rotting fruit.

Beneath the hanging silver body, the roe-black orbs of the shell had been pried loose with laser cutters. Individually. Like teeth. They sat in uninterrupted rows on the table. Less obvious components of the Dalek shell were removed to accommodate electrode cables for diagnostic measurements of the onboard computers. The cartridge-belt of stimbank injectors, the protective diskettes inside an eyestalk, and so on.

The Psyche Dalek moved into the chamber with its adjutant. Silent. No announcement, no appeal, it required neither. The hypnotic arch-puppeteer simply approached the mechanical vice as if it had always been there.

The Chief Scientist’s eyestalk rose from its work and swung violently to face the newcomer.

It sounded alarmed. “Your presence—”

Bubbles rippling through its translucent globe, a low moan issued from the Psyche Dalek with a wealth of meaning.

“Of course, of course, you are permitted,” kowtowed the scientist.

Situated where it was, the Slurry couldn’t tell where the Psyche Dalek was looking.

Whatever answers it had, lay within the deadened machine.

The Psyche Dalek stared deep within the blasted silo, scrutinising the life-support chamber. Cut open like a metallic kidney with meticulous precision.

So, it was true. The spy was long since gone.

“All information is available from this terminal,” gestured the Chief Scientist.

With a turn, the Psyche Dalek pressed its arm against the access socket. A stream of collated facts and statistics poured into its battle computer.

It disengaged and stared a telepathic pulse at the Dalek Chief Scientist.

In reply, the Dalek Chief Scientist said, “The final report is arriving now.”

The Psyche Dalek observed it on the nearest vidscreen. It could see the shell was damaged, but not irreparable. Normal operational procedures would have mandated its return to the recasting furnace. Volatile raw dalekanium would be depleted and melted into the original shell. A new mutant taken from the incubator vats in the assembly plant, aware and fully programmed, and assigned the detail.

However, the shell bore greater interest than simple obsolescence.

The blue-domed hatchery guard, responsible for the hypodermic extractor, turned to the Psyche Dalek. “Genetic variance testing will conclude shortly.”

Observed with a harried patience, the swab underwent its final set of rotations within the centrifuge before microscopic analysis. Both the Psyche Dalek and the Dalek Chief Scientist loomed over the subordinate. The wheezing gurgle of the hypnotic arch-puppeteer caused the head of section to squirm.

“Negative.” The scientist double-checked the results. “Complete negative on Test 100. It is impossible to determine the genetic markers of the saboteur.”

“The possibility of complete disintegration was considered as a potential outcome of combat,” added the Dalek Chief Scientist.

A shrill bark brooked no debate. “*The traitor is alive!*”

“Arrival of the Red Dalek!” announced the scientific division’s head.

The Slurry’s body sank back, crushed, at the sight of the Red Dalek.

The Red Dalek was Operation Mindnet’s designated Systems Coordinator, responsible for every strategic determination made by the Dalek Mandususforce. A Dalek of considerable rank. Equal to that of the Black Dalek and second only to the Dalek Emperor on

Skaro.

Rumour was that he was centuries-old.

In that time, he had overseen the conquest of Teth, Moli Velaine, Lirrip, Spandau-7, and a hundred other worlds besides.

His very presence granted Command Central considerable authority and resources.

His eyestalk swept from side-to-side. Always watching. Always monitoring. The Slurry couldn't shake the sense that he was aware of everything. As though, at only a glance from the searing lens, his victims would be incinerated.

The only concession to personal weakness the Red Dalek possessed was a crack on the front of his dome. Just below the base of the eyestalk, like a scar across the eye. A blow to the shell that had seen numerous attempts at repair fail in the recasting furnace.

It seemed that some scars lasted forever.

As if sensing the thought, the Red Dalek's attention swung across the vent. The creature suppressed its natural instinct to cry out. It congealed its vocal cords into a strangling gelatinous lump. Fortunately, unseen.

Every Dalek, paused over their blue video display units, turned and raised their sucker arm.

"Red Dalek!" they chorused.

The Slurry's skull-like yolk bobbed with a kind of involuntary hysteria. Why, it wondered, does fear paralyse? It understood the penetrating hypnotism of a Dalek. The stare of an eyestalk being not too dissimilar to the glare of a vidscreen. But, surely, there was an overriding part of the mind that drove living things to run or fight?

Otherwise, what purpose did fear serve?

"Return to your duties," grated the Red Dalek.

The battlefield agitation of their current duty period trebled in the Red Dalek's presence. Introductions were unnecessary. Everything was explained in their respective dossiers. Readily accessible on carrier-beam through their onboard computers.

The Dalek Chief Scientist waited in silent obedience for its dismissal.

"The deficient escaped from its stolen shell in the biowarfare laboratory before it could be exterminated." The Red Dalek's scar pulsed. "It is either at large or has hijacked another shell."

“It is imperative that we further narrow down the parameters of this spy,” the Psyche Dalek insisted. “Before it has the opportunity to strike once more. The security of Mandususforce operations is paramount.”

“I am aware,” the Red Dalek countered, “The likelihood of success has increased considerably with arrival of the consignment from Savro Jaida.”

That was a depressing statement to the Slurry.

Once, the planet Savro Jaida was known as an artistic centre of excellence.

Its graceful scenery and wildlife attracted hordes of artists and sculptors to its surface. Preliminary scans revealed the planet’s orbit to be an ideal lightning rod for biodiversity and a prime candidate for the trade route of prominent corporations, such as Star’s End, in the region. The Savronans welcomed their tourist artisans with open globules, provided they adhered to a strict moral code.

Infringements were dealt with severely, but it had a strong reputation in the gazetteers and guidebooks for a genuine beauty and elegance.

The name ‘Savro Jaida’ had meant little to the Psyche Dalek, however, beyond tactical data.

To the Daleks, it was simply a rock infested with inferior species.

Like all quarry of the Daleks, it was subverted, altered by playing upon the weaknesses of its inhabitants. Their society grew militant and cannibalised its own beauty. Nowhere was that clearer than in the Daleks’ choice of forward base—a picture house for hologanda. Tape-relays of unbeatable enemies who only ever stumbled if they lost sight of their leaders’ dogma. One of the many dogmatic war machines that had depleted Savro Jaida beyond the point of recovery.

Those with enough wealth or influence fled. Those who remained, either too poor or too stubborn to leave, perished in the population crash that came from the loss of imported topsoil and alkalising agents to stabilise the seas.

By the time the Daleks’ main invasion force had crawled from the space mists it was too late.

An accelerant, cyanocalis, developed in their biowarfare laboratories, was released into the atmosphere. It dissolved bonds in

both matter and mind. The inhabitants tore themselves apart in a last desperate bid for survival. Blaming one another in paranoid fits.

The saucers landed unhindered.

Realising too late, the Daleks asserted their supremacy over the population, exterminating the surviving rabble at little challenge. In the span of a month, the population of the planet had shrunk to a mere thousand. All Dalek. It was they who fed the iron lung of a planet, like an addict, its delirious perpetual dark. Nothing could breach the mesosphere and survive the cyanocalis corrosion. Not paint, not charcoals, not marble. Nothing.

Savro Jaida was now hostile to all but Dalek life. The Dalek ideal. Empty and dead.

“Scientific division will leave us,” barked the Red Dalek.

A cold silence blanketed the computers as their operators emptied the recovery room. All that remained was a steady heartbeat. The Red Dalek moved to toggle the dial that disconnected the conductors from the blasted shell before addressing the arch-puppeteer.

“Has Execution Taskforce K-7 been cleared for further operations?” he asked.

The Psyche Dalek replied, “Their performance under close examination has proved satisfactory.”

“Excellent. The Dalek time-machine will be contacted to return from Mandusustime 6087 to assist Taskforce K-7’s operation.”

“Recommendation.”

“Speak.”

“Taskforce K-5 should be exterminated for their failure to locate the intruder. Equipment malfunction does not justify the risk to Dalek operations or their inability to transport consignments from the Monogenesisist bloc without complication.”

“Agreed,” the Red Dalek grated with predatory concision.

“Taskforce K-7 will be assigned as an execution squad. They will act as replacements for the continuation of the Mandusus mission.”

The protomatter of the Slurry sang in its own ears. The utter loneliness of being sat, trapped and helpless, among the monsters. Watching their world unfold without a finger to raise against them. This division only made them more terrifying. It was difficult to disguise the paranoia raking its way through the Dalek ranks.

There were many candidates to consider as potential saboteurs.

“Is the Dalek Accordance to be withdrawn?” demanded the Psyche

Dalek.

“No.” The Red Dalek crossed to one of the VDUs. “It has been agreed that the delay will continue until the spy’s body has been recovered. They remain in Mandusustime 6087.”

“I have learned,” the arch-puppeteer’s telepathic lobe twitched, “that the biowarfare laboratory was breached.”

“Your information is obsolete. This vulnerability to our systems was remedied with maximum force.”

“What of the rogue prusten?” it asked. “It escaped Command Central.”

“The attempted hijack was countered,” replied the Red Dalek. “The animal was hidden in the booster room of the time-machine. It could not have been more than a decoy. A lure for the weak-minded. It has since been exterminated. The Monogenesisist Daleks were informed as to its pathetic fate.”

The Monogenesisists of Spandau-7 had already exchanged tokens of sound strategy in advance of the Dalek Accordance. Animals weaponised for war, like the two Southern Chey prusten specimens.

“There will be reprisals,” warned the Psyche Dalek.

“They will not act against us. There is a more pressing threat.”

“Yes?”

The Psyche Dalek could see the Red Dalek weigh up its conversation partner for a moment. Silently, it moved conspiratorially to the other side of the dais. “Temporal scanners have noted evidence of distortion similar to that of the Gallifreyan TARDISes.”

The pressing gurgle of the Psyche Dalek seemed to deepen. “What is to be done of this?”

“Identity trace. Our operatives have already been alerted. They are working covertly to deliver the time-machine into Dalek grasp for experimentation.” The Red Dalek’s scar crackled as it turned to the vice-gripped shell. “This equipment is forfeit. It has been corrupted by the presence of the traitorous deficient.”

He activated one of the nearest terminals and the machinery whined into life.

The Psyche Dalek squinted. “What of the stolen artefact?”

“All who come into contact with the case will die.” The ruined shell compacted with a glassy crunch beneath the vice’s jaws. “That is the easement of inferior lifeforms.”

A stranger to Mandusus Chi could easily be forgiven for missing the reclining figure of Gigan.

The statue sat in Minmay Bay separating Yatagai and Ide Wards. Nestled among the prismatic arcologies. A titan of weathered fairground blue heavy metals. Legs crooked and arms to steady its back. The dawning starlight glinted off its welded red vest looped across each shoulder like the technical illustration of a nucleus in a scientific textbook.

It once stood with cool serenity. Its head level with the cubist termite mounds of the arcologies surrounding it. A star of the Ochanomizu Exposition. However, the spectacle of its birth had eventually dwindled to stark pragmatism.

The sweeping gesture of good faith, programmed to delight the crowds, grew smaller in its allotted ambitions. It ceased being a symbol of tomorrow and instead became a thing of triumphs superseded. A veritable white elephant. Attention surrounding the figure shrank in the public eye until eventually it was mooted that the makeshift Ferris wheel it had become would be dismantled altogether.

However, Gigan had existed long in the memory, and the people of Mandusus Chi responded.

Now, athletes of commerce competed in its every arena. The needs of its championing population honeyed its exterior with eateries, booksellers, jewellers and vendors. Its legs performed the long jump between interstellar traders as retrofitted depots. Shoulders nestling the burden of storage. If it was a luxury item and it came from the starharbour, it arrived at Gigan

Cargosuits, levilorries and fliers shushed in waspish columns across the open air of the dome's lattice-shell arc as cargo was shuttled to and fro from ward-to-ward. And, finally, the heart and head of Gigan intertwined with patron and sponsor. Offices, parks and restaurants. Some of the oldest manufactured for the structure.

It was an innovation of robotics that had been championed, tooth and wire, by its organic admirers to become something else beyond its natural lifespan of *lusus natura* exposition attraction.

The Doctor, Peri and Meje spent the early part of the day exploring much of what it had to offer. Parading the Prolixcase through every prominent district they could muster. Across counters, around bulletin boards, even a brief pass outside a gymnasium.

Gigan was a behemoth in every sense of the word.

Frobisher and Tezuhyr felt comparatively rather small.

Exhilaration was a funny thing to Tezuhyr. In organics, it existed on that thin threshold between excitement and fear. It seemed to be all about control and yet, he'd never been able to quite replicate it in the same way as his other friends. The sensation felt a bit too precise. A bit too 'clean', as one of his schoolfellows had noted. For him to truly experience it, he had to put himself beyond his safety margins and disable some counter-checks that were fundamentally hardwired into his system.

"So... Like us organics, then?" Frobisher had noted when he had expressed the thought.

Tezuhyr had felt better after that. They'd taken the Nuka-ki jetcycle that had attempted to maul the Doctor earlier. The one with the booster plates the size of miniaturised stadiums on either side. A swifter means of transport than any ready alternative to hand and one that had gotten them past Gigan on the bay in little under an hour.

Tezuhyr resisted the urge to pull back his head and just let the slipstream wash over him.

"It is almost like riding on the roof of a mass-transit lift, hey, *mysir?*" There was no response from behind him. "*Mysir*, are you well? You have gone quiet."

"Yeah..." It sounded as though Frobisher was catching his breath. "I feel great. I haven't done this since I was a kid. Gets right under the blubber to the heart, words to live by."

The world slowed to a walking pace as the traffic halted to accommodate a green walk signal. The zipway momentarily filled with a gaggle of pedestrians ranging from the plenty of bristles to the innocuous of tentacles.

"Where do you suppose they are going?" asked Tezuhyr.

Frobisher shrugged, "All stepping out into their own lives, I expect."

The pause allowed the pair to collect their thoughts.

Over the course of the few previous hours, the Doctor had reconfigured the megaputer to provide a vocal readout of important occurrences prior to dawn-sight. Together, Frobisher and Tezuhyr pored through periodicals, classified advertisements, the working period's top of the pops and far more minutiae besides.

Finding the mainstream categories too broad and bland for their purposes, they'd narrowed their focus down to more innocuous morsels of journalism. Anecdotes trickled like drops of water through the netting of major news outlets. They'd been lucky and found a trace.

The trail of the prusten, lithe and hurried creature that it was, spanned across three separate wards. Its trajectory held together through little more than eyewitness accounts and hearsay. Innocuous, in the extreme.

Its meander had begun with complaints about Yatagai Ward's nightlife to a mindcast agony aunt and led from there.

Frobisher and Tezuhyr left Wheezy's to greet a mellow Uxani starfreighter captain, an acquaintance of Tezuhyr's decompressing after a long haul that he'd recognised by voice. Groggy, staring up at the dome's lattice-shell, he was vague, but his answers were promising.

From Yatagai to Hayashi Ward, where a Rhedian salaryman and a Bolmarii froth seller were able to direct them to rumours in Obari Ward.

There, Frobisher and Tezuhyr encountered a young pugilist. Fists the size of small erasers, but numbering in the close hundred and eager for a pummel. He reputedly knew something of the beast, but his older sibling—busking with a hurdy-gurdy—rebuffed such a claim as one of his tall stories. Kids... Finding no witnesses beyond the boys, the Frobisher and Tezuhyr began to wander.

Dead end after dead end.

Eventually, they hit upon a Padarian protozooner. Quite literally. In a stumbling collision en route to the Rhizopodarium. For their chivalry in assisting an oldster, overburdened with tattered bags of notebooks and leaking feedstuff, she linked them with an electronics store owner who'd taken footage of the prusten over a nearby footbridge from Ide Ward.

The jetcycle now had crossed through the main concourse into the Corporate Cluster. Shaped like a harpsichord with skyscrapers instead of strings. From certain angles, the buildings reminded Frobisher of rearing spiders competing for territory. "Where are we now, kid?"

"Tezuhyr," he corrected. "Not too far from the arcologies, *mysir*. We do not tend to come here often."

"Can't fault you there. Bit too clean for my tastes."

“No, we simply do not have much cause for it. The people we help are often trying to fix problems that originally stem from here. The whole place was originally designed as a Free Merchant Zone, a Flyday, where traders from the starharbours could congregate and sell their wares.”

“Originally?” Frobisher swivelled his head. “I take it, they do things differently these days?”

“The bigger corporations—”

“That’d be... Camellia Industries, Kuwabatake Interstellar and Virtuosity Astrotech, yeah?”

“That is right,” Tezuhyr affirmed. “Their predecessors began to assimilate more and more stalls under their banner, hundreds of them, until the area was transformed to fit their own monopolies. Everyone has their own district now. Territories dedicated to each company.”

“Do they have normal trading hours or is this,” he jerked his head, “all for the employees?”

“No, they allow customers in here, as well.” They drove past a stream of shopfronts. “We are currently travelling on the commercial ring, just after opening hours. We would not be allowed here otherwise.”

“There a curfew?” asked Frobisher.

“A strict one,” replied Tezuhyr. “The only people allowed after hours are employees.”

“Doesn’t look like the kind of area where people offer info for free,” Frobisher observed. “If I were a proud beast of nature, where would I have started?”

Tezuhyr canted his eyes, thoughtfully. “In a zoo? A safari park?”

“A laboratory?” suggested Frobisher.

A green light.

They pressed on. Frobisher turned his head to the side. There were a group of children pulling faces at him through their groundcar window. He returned the masquerade in kind. His body wobbled like jelly as Tezuhyr pulled the jetcycle clear from a pair of—

“Cargosuits,” recognised Tezuhyr.

Now, that caught the whifferdill’s eye.

The cargosuits were each roughly the size of a bodybuilder. Mechanised walkers. Industrial, rather than military. They travelled in single file with a consignment of magnetically-bound PolyVittle casks

clamped safely against their control cabins. Held tight in a metal grip that likely rivalled their zipcrane predecessors.

Each cask had the logo of Virtuosity Astrotech laser-engraved onto its side.

Frobisher tapped Tezuhyr on the shoulder. “Hey, kid, where do shipments from the starharbour go?”

“*Tezuhyr*,” corrected the android. “Each complex has its own delivery ring.”

“Industrial lifts, I’m guessing?”

“Yes. Repurposed from the mass-transit lifts of the old days.”

He gave the labourers another glance. “Suppose those polyplastoid casks could have carried the bulk of a prusten?”

“Illegal trafficking in animals isn’t unheard of... They will be heading to the ring now, we could check to see if there’s anything unusual in the manifests?”

“It could help narrow down how our problem was imported to begin with,” said Frobisher.

“There is just one thing... They are going to notice us as soon as we walk in.”

“Well, not to worry, kemosabe, I’ve a solution in my back pocket that’ll blend us in like punch clocks.”

“*Tezuhyr*,” he twitched. The android gunned the engine to keep pace with the escorting cargosuits. “And if they find us?”

“We’ll lie dorny ‘til they—watch it!” They stooped under the lowering tangicrete barricade.

A jet of air, an aseptic sort of musk, fired out from beneath the lip of the passageway to remove any detritus that might jam up the mechanism. The android measured the oscillations in the air with distaste. The former gumshoe tried to balance how to emote his disgust, while still maintaining a cool detachment. He gagged, politely, pulling a face.

It sealed behind Frobisher and *Tezuhyr* with a heady clunk as the cycle rode on.

NUCLEOTIDE 4: **"From Hell to Breakfast"**

The first miniature steam gondola of *The Chasing Storm* was no larger than one of her arms. Meje rested her temple against the chilled glass of the restaurant's window. They were on the thirteenth floor of the culinary quarter. Peri sat in a chair next to her. The mechanic's feet ached from the hours beforehand.

The Doctor sat opposite, picking at his knuckles. "I knew a Mars chap so fond of model railways, he eventually constructed the full-scale thing..."

"Hold on," queried Meje, "I'm lost, what's a Mars?"

"It's a kind of caramel and nougat chocolate," he supplied, unhelpfully.

"No," Peri persisted with patience, elongating the vowels, as she'd done through the whole conversation. "The planet. The red planet. *Mars*."

The Doctor held a mountebank's smile. "Bringer of war?"

"Ignore him, Meje, he's trying to be cute."

"And distracting. Don't 'alf forget to remember that."

Peri pursed her lips to hide her smile, but she wouldn't be deterred. "For real, if you could bring anything to a brand new world, what would it be?"

Coloured lights around the main dining area dimmed in time with its bantam chime. A signal for the beginning of a day on the canals. It was the first of many likely vessels to announce its presence from the back kitchen.

From above, on the second level of the bar, Meje observed the convoy's steady passage towards them. "A map," she answered.

"Huh..." It caught Peri by surprise. "Right on, that's pretty pragmatic actually. Anything else?"

On the boats, dawn-sight dishes emerged to the pleasure and impatience of gannets, gourmands, snackers and noshers. Each table received its own seedpod boat nestled in an alcove beside the condiments. There, it would wait patiently for its cargo to be unloaded. After that, a pressure plate on the carriage would trigger its return to the blue riband kitchen staff of the day.

"A pen to mark the places wrong on the map." Meje shrugged

extravagantly with a grin that could easily have broken into a cackling laugh at the right moment. “Or something very much like that.”

The Doctor tapped his fellow patron on the shoulder. “Here they come now.”

The recent renovations had puzzled Meje as to how the gondolas would attend to their higher customers. No longer. They ferried up to the top floor through and around an astonishing paper recreation of the Zedphla Seamount. Lit within by artificial candlelight, as they would have years ago.

The wooden struts circling the mountain loped as many boats as there were likely colours in the Doctor’s overcoat. A cross-cultural pollination of the oriflammes of Zartician Demesnesses and the beautiful Mandusian designs of the Naiad. Intricate as any gallery piece.

Meje switched the safety lock on her interfacing panel. She felt a static flick in her skull, between her implant and the black square, that pushed like a repelling magnet. “They’ve redone the paintwork since I was last here.”

An indicator light signalled to be ready to collect their arriving plates at the table.

Peri reached across. “Let me.”

“Set a further place, will you?” requested the Doctor.

“After four restaurants and three cafés, I don’t think we’re going to strike lucky here.”

“*Three* restaurants. *Four* cafés.”

“Ever the pedant,” she smiled.

“Would you have it any other way?” he charmed.

She grinned. “I plead the fifth.”

A long trunk of red sleeve obscured her view as he took breakfast into his hands.

“Remarkably clever, these machines,” the Doctor opined. “There’s a city on Mars, Ylla, that will have something very much like it in a few centuries. Part of the Martian tourist initiative near the nest at Shsurr Hadus.”

“We should visit,” said Peri between the clatter of plates. “I’d like to see the canals you mentioned.”

“I feel like I’m trapped in a conversation only the two of you understand...” Meje’s face pinched.

Placing down the plates, the Doctor rifled through his overcoat. “I

think I might have the tickets here somewhere...”

Distracted as they were, all with the machinations of a morning meal, they failed to notice the approach of a new face to their table. She arrived with a butterfly’s flutter. Familiar. Perhaps overly so. With features that Meje had once thought were made for the bell-jar arcs of hand-blown glass. Pillowed like ossified magma.

With grace, Aika lowered herself down on the empty seat.

Her colleague, a figure with shoulders broad enough to span the table’s side, arranged for her own chair from one of the robotic drudgers.

“So sorry I’m late.” Aika’s eyes flexed with relaxed danger. “I understand that the reservation was only for four, but Dargaud looked so sore at being left out that I decided to bring her along.”

Meje felt the cool alloys of her eating utensils against her tightening palms.

“*Ab-bab!*” Dargaud slapped down the attempt. “No battle at the dinner table.”

“There’s no need to trouble yourselves,” the newcomer assured. “I’ve paid for the extension in advance.”

“That’s considerate of you...” Peri nibbled a pink celery stick, cautiously. “Here we thought we’d be out of pocket.”

“Are you well-acquainted with Mejamine, Peri?”

Peri straightened. Her name hadn’t been mentioned. “Well enough...”

“Then, you’d know I’d never do such a thing to you.” She plucked several dishes of increasing fiscal value from the sliding train and cracked open a packet of tableware. “Not when you’ve got such a fortuitous business proposition lined up for me.”

The imperceptible boot of the Doctor looped in front of the Prolixcase beneath the table. He hooked it against his ankle, pulled it under the chair legs, and smiled. “I find it always helps to approach this manner of scenario on an equal footing, don’t you?”

“How perceptive of you.” The newcomer returned the grin and introduced herself. “Aikaterzine vas Magyar-Teleki. Aika.”

The Doctor reciprocated with a gentlemanly nod. “If you know my friend’s name, I needn’t tell you mine. You’re already aware.”

“Just ‘the Doctor?’”

“The just Doctor, one hopes.” He folded his hands together.

Aika smiled. “And they say the old cavaliers are dead... How’s your

meal, Mejamine? Still warm?” She stabbed down at Meje’s half-finished plate and devoured her *namazu karaage*. “I assume we’ll be splitting the bill, but it’s intriguing to discover the tastes of potential business partners.”

“Corporato talk.” The mechanic was quietly delighted by the accuracy and plenitude by which she could spit her half-chewed tofu. “A Kamenkost talent scout and her shieldmother enforcer. Why bother us, Aika?”

“I’ve learnt recently,” Aika wiped a wrist, unperturbed, “that it’s crucial for such transactions to be done face-to-face. Less of an opportunity for... *Oh*, foul ups, I suppose you could call it.” She smirked. “If one was being crass.”

Meje frowned. “Crass is as crass does, corporato, pass the salad...”

“A word of advice for the future, if I may, Aika.” The Doctor held up a small bugging device the size of his thumb. “It’s difficult to disguise a plant like this when the object in question resents being monitored in the first place.”

“*I shared our agreement with the just Doctor here,*” confessed the Prolixcase. “*Your tracking paint certainly didn’t help matters, either.*”

“Oh?” Aika looked lightly surprised.

Dargaud’s mouth tightened. “That’s a serious breach of confidentiality.”

“*One with a greater purpose, I find. I’ve calculated on it for a while. I’ve decided the sooner I reach the waiting arms of my destination, the better.*”

“Wherever or whatever that may be.” The Doctor flapped a napkin.

“*I will let you know.*”

Aika leaned across conspiratorially to the traveller. “How did you know?”

“I’ve an impeccable ear, you see. Your conversation, while subaural and therefore private to most species, certainly isn’t to my own.” He dropped the bug into his glass of water, mixing it with an index finger. “Finding the source was child’s play with the right electronic sensor to confirm it.”

“That’s why he’s not here, isn’t it?” Dargaud rumbled. “The boy.”

“The *boy*, Dargaud?” Meje scratched her nose.

“Well, Tezuhyr was once.”

“Ah, the harum-scarum momenta of the young.” The Doctor sighed, wistfully. “Always missing the most important meal of the

day. Shan't be told. I should know."

"Simple details *are* easy to overlook," Aika conceded.

"Oh, undoubtedly."

"For instance..." She had only to glance at Dargaud for her to produce what looked like a heavily worn sketchbook. She snapped it rigid with an arm the size of a wooden bole and held it out for Meje's party to inspect.

"The blue box is already in our custody," informed the enforcer.

The image meant nothing to Meje, but she registered a guarded intake of breath from Peri and the Doctor seemed to straighten in his seat.

"The TARDIS..." said Peri.

"I doubt very much that you'd get much communication from the police were we to return it to its rightful owners. So, tell me," Aika flexed her fingers, "what can you afford to lose?"

"I think..." The Doctor's finger traced the rim of the glass with a soft hum. "We've rather reached the end of our polite dinner conversation. Don't you?"

Carried in Tezuhyr's arms, Frobisher couldn't help but note, privately, the stark contrast between the two halves of the Corporate Cluster. Frosted squares of safety glass separated the saleroom floor from the Records Room nearly half a level below it.

Bet they paid a mighty mazuma to thicken this old thing.

Frobisher felt an equally mighty urge to tap on it.

The scene beyond, in the saleroom, reminded the gumshoe quite vividly of a Hiram-Blake optometrist on Venus or one of those Mezieres jewellers on Xenon. Establishments he'd been either too young or too poor to truly appreciate in his lifetime. Boutique, beautiful and thoroughly out of his reach.

In grim contrast, the workmanlike narrows that he and Tezuhyr walked were functionally ugly. Tinged in an unpainted blue-grey and light-tubes that couldn't settle on a consistent wattage. The musculature between slowship decks and arcology retrofits clasped together on ready display. It set his beak on edge.

Well, it would have, if he still had his beak.

Frobisher felt Tezuhyr slowly lower him to the ground. The imprint of a *cthum-tok* noise as the polyplastoid cask kissed the shoe-worn deck-plates. The shape-shifter was halfway between his PolyVittle

guise and the familiar warmth of his avian blubber when he felt comfortable enough to turn his neck.

Set into recharge stations at regular intervals on the wall were the resting forms of six Silver Mead R-Type Matics. The seventh was missing.

Tezuhyr tapped him on the head. "Acquaintance Frobisher..."

"I see it."

"With a seventh in Goda Ward." The android crossed to examine one of the stations. "They can be programmed by remote control."

"I'd call that pretty definitive evidence, wouldn't you, kid?"

Tezuhyr nodded.

"C'mon..." Frobisher found the path ahead scattered with lukewarm efforts at uniformity, discipline and order that had entered fisticuffs over which was the more important. In the end, no one, not paperwork, nor schematics, nor stationary had won. "Grief... It's like a wet weivel down a coal mine."

Tezuhyr blinked. "A mess?"

"Such a mess," said Frobisher.

A boot gently tapped his waist before he could proceed. Looking up, he saw gold-pink flashes of analytical data tick behind the glass lenses that constituted Tezuhyr's eyes.

The whifferdill asked, "Time for another magic trick?"

Tezuhyr's eyelids clicked twice like the shutter of a camera before smiling. He placed two fingers against his chest, closing his eyes, and there was a spark. Swift. Diamond-shaped. It made a sound like the ripcord pulled tight on a set of blinds. Frobisher jumped. The small opening, shaped like the groove of a radiator on Tezuhyr's collarbone, whispered forth a blue will-o-wisp.

"How's it work?" The gumshoe watched it grow. "Your imaginary friend?"

Tezuhyr's whisper was measured. "Tweakers... Positronic impulses carried on photonic wave-particles... Photozoids... Takes a little power... My processors might be slower for a time..."

The digital sprite marshalled in a searchlight, riding its own light trail in wider and wider arcs, until it made for an unseen grove set into the grout of the wall tiles. A small opening. Easy enough to miss. Unfortunately, it was one of possibly a dozen embedded in camouflaged grey metal.

Frobisher scratched his ear. He could hear an ultrasonic frequency

drop down into the audible range of his polymorphic form.

The adjustment came with its own little surprise. The intersection lit up. Stabbed with sabre-upon-sabre of gas-fire blue kill-beams.

“Oh, c’mon, they *move*?” grouched the penguin. “Why’d they have to go and do a misfit thing like that?”

Tezuhyr pinched one of his cowlicks. “Sorry, *mysir*, beyond my capabilities. According to the tweaker, it’s a closed system.”

“After all the effort we’ve gone to, we’re going to be outwitted by a bunch of jacked-up piano wire?” Frobisher ruffled his feathers with a birr. “No gratitude to the common investigator. Fact, you know what I’d appreciate after a trip through the open air? A good old-fashioned mir—” His voice trailed away. “Hey, what constitutes a children’s book here on Mandusus Chi?”

“*The Mysterious Seas... The Cat Who Wore Cavalier Boots... Ken...* Have you... read any...?”

“I don’t know much about literature, but I’ve been told a lot about it.” He paced the length of their obstacle. “Matter of fact, a friend of mine recently introduced me to Brothers Grimm.”

“I don’t think... I know it...”

“Here’s a recent favourite,” Frobisher cleared his throat. “Mirror, mirror, on the wall...” His skull elongated, stretched and thinned in a lava lamp of pure motion. He’d grown four times his size. Slimmed down to the thickness of a newspaper. He hesitated for a moment. It had to be aligned perfectly. “...who’s the rarest of them all?”

Shaped as a mirror, he stepped into the nearest line as cleanly as he could. The beams struck its reflective surface, returning after each sweep into the emitter-receptors on the opposing side. An ouroboros of light swallowing its own tail. A cheap trick, but the more sophisticated surveillance systems were always folly to such things. There was a reason why mirrors were restricted items in places like these.

Frobisher steadied himself. “Now, careful about this next bit, alright? It’s one thing to shatter a mirror, quite another to be the mirror being shattered.”

“Bad luck...?” asked Tezuhyr, innocently.

He was conversational. “The worst, you’ll kill me.”

“Ready?”

“Now.”

With a single step, the android passed through cleanly.

They advanced through the killing ground to the pot-pourri of bureaucracy. The computer was under an overstacked pile of folders. Sat squat and loutish in studded silver and black. Almost belligerent, its keyboard a jutted chin. Frobisher dumped the manilla columns onto an adjoining table, poring over their contents, a good eye would reveal a lot. Tezuhyr, meanwhile, walked over to the terminal and set his tweaker to work.

Something alien to their immediate surroundings. A disturbance. It distracted them both.

It was the sound of a lift chime. Footsteps.

“Company,” they determined together.

Frobisher and Tezuhyr were correct. However, unbeknownst to either, a second industrial lift accompanied the first. It travelling unseen down to the storage cells. Its Dalek occupant, carrying a silver-black box, disembarked with a single, silent and deadly task...

At *The Chasing Storm*'s doorway, the scratch of the Doctor's peacock quill was somehow managing to cut through the thrum of both receptive restaurateurs and the idle milling of those outside on the Gigan concourse.

“No, no, no, this is all quite improper,” tutted the Doctor, revising Dargaud's sketch. “For one thing, it's *six* panels in a single window, not four. Now, really...”

The cashierdroid, a bronzed orb with friendly eyes, sat patiently waiting for input. “Thank you for dining with us at *The Chasing Storm*.”

“Our pleasure,” Peri beamed.

Aika caught a glimpse of ruby eyes and golden scales of the Zartician kitchen staff. The chef looked briefly to the cashierdroid and returned to supplying answers to the serving drudger robots. They huddled around him like ducklings going to and fro.

“Doctor...” Peri nudged him. “Say, thank you.”

“*Mmm?* Oh, indeed. A finer meal I've not had since... Well...” The Doctor smiled. “A finer meal, I've not had.”

“Although,” Meje made a sound between a hiccup and a burp, “I don't think I'll be eating for the rest of my life.”

“Want to change places?” asked Peri, *sotto voce*. “I've had my guard up so much, I think I might have missed the best on the menu.”

Aika's eyes lingered on the outside world. Her attention moved through the gentle tide of shopaholics, bargain hunters and the disinterested youth, until eventually, she spotted a picturesque standing pond. It was crowded with ornamental relics for variety, but it was truly noticeable for something altogether more simpler. Size. The pond was only the top of an aquarium big enough to be a standing wall in its own right. More than capable of carrying the weight of all concerned and then some.

"We'll make our exchange... over there?" Aika pointed, as if she'd just thought of it.

The case remained firmly in the Doctor's grasp. For the time present. "I agree."

"Why out there?" asked Peri.

"Easier to get lost in a crowd." Meje replied.

The mechanic had seen Aika and Dargaud attempt to get away with it before and why not? Between herself and the shieldmother, the pair of them had gotten rather good at it.

"Please, confirm your table," the cashierdroid instructed.

"Table No.6," informed the Doctor.

Checking their exits, Aika's eyes returned to the standing pond. There, the children were attempting to eschew the law of the land and likely that of their parents and guardians, too.

They carried what looked not too dissimilar from a radio-controlled aerospace vehicle. A toy skimjet. Recent design. Something that could have been found docked at one of the starharbours to take travellers away from Mandusus. The skimjet started with a whooshing flush at the central mass of children. Some held onto its struts, its engines tugging in their collective grasp. The appeal of such things were a bit beyond Aika, but then her childhood was a very different experience.

Meje asked, "What use is that case to you, Aika?"

"Yes..." the Doctor's eyes flicked up with a feline curiosity. "Both you and it are being terribly mysterious."

"We long to be enlightened," added Peri.

"Payment, please," asked the cashierdroid, polite.

Aika snapped open her purse. "I'm afraid you'll have to pay the morning's expenses."

"Disappointing," Meje groused.

"But not unexpected," Aika pointed out.

A small whistling chirp singsonged in Meje's pocket. She excused

herself.

“I take it your script doesn’t quite cover such an august establishment as this?” The Doctor flexed two unimpressed eyebrows at Aika, pocketing the sketchbook and reorientating the crook of his umbrella from wrist to palm.

Her chuckle was unusually bitter. “Monopolies rarely—”
“*Hit the ground, now!*” barked Dargaud.

Aika obeyed. That was, after all, what Dargaud was there for. A cicada rage of noise tore through the restaurant’s frontispiece. Her protector came down atop her like the dome of an anti-spacecraft turret. The Doctor, meanwhile, seemed to move in contradiction of the laws of physics. He pulled Peri down to the floor and Peri, by extension, yanked Meje.

The cashier-droid, screaming with a perforated speaker, disintegrated in a cloud of faux gold-alloy fragments. Its mainspring and sprockets disgorged onto the Doctor’s nearby party. Another body, not too far into the concourse, also dropped.

Peri’s startled eyes unhooded from beneath the Doctor’s overcoat. “That’s live ammunition!”

A fact not unnoticed by the rest of the congregating shoppers.

What first rippled through the crowd as confusion turned to blind panic. Some screamed. Others ran. Some found themselves locked in a state of frozen astonishment. The loop between recognition and response so lethal to so many lives. A Vek, an older gentlebeing judging from the tightened whorls of patterning his face, had also suffered the ill-directed gust of fire. An alloy—not quite blood, not quite jelly—pooled against the entryway floor.

The Doctor pressed a hand against the prone figure and shook his head, sadly. No heartsbeat. “Too late for this poor chap.”

“The robot’s gone, too,” Peri checked, sympathetic.

Aika tried peering through the concourse. It was just a mass of frightened bodies now.

“Where’d it come from?” she asked. “Dargaud?”

The shieldmother had no answer.

“Over there!” The Doctor’s arm shot forward like a crossbow bolt. “The radio-controlled skimjet!”

“It’s only a toy...” Meje’s tone was one of disbelief, but at the Doctor or at her own reaction, she couldn’t quite tell.

Peri lowered herself into a near crawl. “As much as I hate them,

don't any of you have guns?"

"Some laws," demurred Aika, "are more valuable to obey than others."

"This isn't the frontier, Peri," the Doctor reminded. "You can't just go, as you'd say in your vernacular, 'blastin' up this one-horse town'."

She took exception to his attempt at an accent. "'Blab-stin'?"

"Although..." Another wave of cracking gunfire pattered over their heads. "It will be 'blast-ed' if we don't find a solution soon. Peri, Meje, get these people out of here. I don't care how, just do it!"

"What are you—?"

But he was already gone.

Peri growled. "Oh, it's Liberty Weekend all over again...!"

She jerked her head at all the major landmarks in eyesight. A nearby planter box proved her best bet. On cautious knees and elbows, the botanist climbed up between the ferns, instinct keeping her head just level with the fleeing crowds.

"Meje, could we get to those kids with the controls?"

"No possible way." The mechanic shook her head. "Not unless you want the rest of Gigan to walk all over us."

Aika's eyes felt distant. Scheming. "How much do you weigh?"

"Lighter than you," Meje answered on a reflex.

Peri swivelled her head. "I think I know what she's getting at."

She followed the series of hanging planter baskets, tethered by rope at key structural points to a single point on overhanging beam. Dotted all in a row. At the closer end, it led to a wall of thick foliage not too far from the wheezing entryway of *The Chasing Storm* itself. She could see vines and shrubbery pulled taut by an aggressive gardener into a beautiful mosaic of geometric greenery.

Peri turned to Aika. "What were you in a past life? Tightrope walker?"

"Animal tamer." She flared her eyelids. Bemused. "Ever since I was young."

A life, not entirely in isolation, but one largely devoted to the service and happiness of animals. Lesser beasts, or so they'd said. After all, in the circus, someone had to feed Lefou vipers—whatever their mischief—and not everyone could approach a full-sized brontokerlew with open palms and eyes. In her youth, she'd found beauty in what had essentially been given to her as a menial task. An unwanted nuisance. Not unlike herself, chiefly. After sitting on the

edge of the ringmaster's lofty pulpit, watching the neevras thread their web through the rafters of a crowd-scarred tent, people didn't seem so glamorous or interesting by comparison.

Peering forward, Peri gestured to the hanging planters. "Is that going to support all our weight?"

"Yes," assured Meje.

Dargaud rapped her fingers against her abdomen. "How do you know?"

"Torque. Material. Weight distribution." The mechanic sounded decisive. Aika never doubted the inherent technical prowess. That was a mistake too easily made with Meje's deceptively chaise demeanour. Languid, but certainly not stupid. "It's all straightforward."

"Good enough for me." Peri crossed to the nethermost lip of the garden wall, tensed her legs and leapt upward; an arm stretched. Once, twice, a third time, to no effect. "Figures... Dargaud, right? Come over here for a moment."

"Why?"

"She wants to stand on the shoulders of giants for a moment." Meje followed Peri to the wall, offering a bent knee as footing. Peri began to remove her shoes.

As the shieldmother moved to assist, Aika caught her eye. She jerked her head towards the dodging Doctor and away. Far away. To the other side of the screaming crowds. Dargaud nodded. Aika patted her on the shoulder as the herculean figure moved away. Peri and Meje were already distracted. They wouldn't notice her leave.

Between one running body and the next, Aika was gone.

In the Records Room, the whifferdill gumshoe observed all the usual fare. Ledgers, daybooks, waivers and coffee-stained architectural plans. Informative, but standard information wasn't enough, they were looking for the unusual. He examined the calendar clock propping up a string of technical manuals and safety handbooks on the desk.

The torchlight drew improbable ghouls from the shadows. Looming, predatory shapes that distorted Frobisher and Tezuhyr's presence. The gumshoe's curiosity overwhelmed him. He backed up to the safety glass and hid behind one of the support columns. As close as he dared to the torch-holder. There was no doubt about it.

“*Guards*,” he mouthed.

It was difficult to tell their species through the glassy distortion, but they looked like a pair of gentlebeings from that particularly violent preoccupation known as the mercenary. They lurched through their patrol patterns. Committed, but grudgingly so.

“*They are too soon*,” returned Tezuhyr, soundless.

One guard slid an appendage across the length of a box in the saleroom. A display case. Hunting like a Shikari with a vibroprod and paralyzing net.

Squinting closer, Frobisher could see something in the display case.

“*The A-800*,” was, from what he could ascertain, a lucionic-installed psychocircuit roughly the size of a newborn’s hand. “*A premium psychological semiconductor unit aimed at serious application of transsolar sciences and communication systems operation. Inspired by Flight Control’s Astrogator technologies, the design is created for first-time and refit orders, providing the augmented with quality, protection and durability. Tap again for further specifications.*”

Dancing softly in reflection, the record computer vidscreen behind Frobisher flashed with a series of designations and their cargo:

YADKROW WEN GNINNIGEB—

Frobisher dared a whisper. “Does your tweaker have it, yet?”

“Almost. This will be today’s cargo movements... *mysir*...” Tezuhyr answered at length.

He nodded. “In that case, we’ll need to know where we’re going next.”

The penguin scavenged the piles of bureaucratic detritus for the monochrome gloss of floor plans. It was easier than expected, they were right at the bottom, being used as tablecloths.

“Nothing here... to do with... wildlife or robotics,” there was a note of disappointment to Tezuhyr’s voice.

Frobisher pressed a flipper to his beak. “Only a theory, but maybe the prusten came from inside the building?”

“You mean, it was grown here?”

“Yes. That’s one possibility, sure.” He mused, more to himself than Tezuhyr, “Time travel... You could drop off a lot of things from here in a time-machine...”

Tezuhyr swayed. “There are a number of shipments... intended for architectural remodelling. To be employed... by the workers... once they arrive for the day. Several elements of the foyer... on the ground

level... were damaged recently.”

“That would explain the plans. Odd, though...” Frobisher turned to the computer’s VDU, watching the identicards skim through the log for each storage magnecell. “Those are heavy-duty materials. This doesn’t strike me as a performance piece from some Mister Big overgilding the lilly. It feels a lot more like a seriously professional clean-up.”

“I had... a similar idea... It corresponds... with our window... of time.”

“I think we know where our prusten came from, at least. If not how.” Something flashed on the vidscreen. “Hey, hold on. Go back... three—no, four entries.”

Chbuduk-tack. Chbuduk-tack. Chbuduk-tack. Chbuduk-tack.

STORAGE MAGNECELL: M19-K83

DESCRIPTORS: CRATE. OBLONG. BLUE.

DOUBLE-DOORED.

Tezuhyr studied Frobisher’s profile with curious eyes. “You... recognise it?”

The accompanying image said it all. “That’s the TARDIS... That’s *here?*”

Frobisher moved back to the desk, pulling the floor plans clear with a magician’s flourish. In section ‘M19’, he drew his flippers from the X-axis of ‘M’ and the Y-axis of ‘K’ towards the appropriate travelordinates. The whifferdill stabbed it decisively. “It’s back the way we came in. On the other side of the loading bay floor.”

“This TARDIS must... have been taken... by the cargosuits... before we arrived.”

“The question is why. It’s not stolen property. Well... Not *their* stolen property, anyway.” Frobisher rolled up the plans and jammed them into his mackintosh.

“Come back... little fellow...” Tezuhyr cooed to his photozoid friend. The tiny tweaker program returned to Tezuhyr. “We’re not staying, are we?”

“How can you tell?”

“The tension in your larynx as you speak.” Tezuhyr gestured to the terminal. “There’s something else—”

The lifts outside pinged, spawning forth a legion of Virtuosity private security. Kamekostos, mostly. Elevated from zipway level by digital paycheques. Their footfalls drowning out the foyer's water feature. The patrol at large within the saleroom unbuttoned their own sidearms at their colleagues' arrival. One of the guards crossed to the far wall, rapping the butt of their laser-blaster against the safety glass.

"Face on the floor!" The bark came from the other side of the glass squares. *"Now!"*

Years of housebreaking in the name of steady coin and the decisive programming of the Daicon Robotics Firm, respectively, hastened a speedy retreat for Frobisher and Tezuhyr.

"And now, we run?" asked Tezuhyr.

"Run, slide, whatever gets us there faster. Back the way we came!"

Frobisher usually attempted to employ a certain grace and decorum when shifting. Under pressure, the results had the potential to be rather upsetting. He was fortunate that Tezuhyr was accompanying him.

They left the archive room and ended up back at the kill-beams. Frobisher had gotten halfway between the wardrobe mirror and the PolyVittle barrel, to once again pass through, before a question rankled his avian brain-pan.

"You have anything to hand I can use to talk to the Doc?" he asked.

Tezuhyr dug into his pocket and produced an object the size of a lipstick tube. A silver drum at one end. He passed it to Frobisher and sidled through the gap in the kill-beams at a brisk pace. In a matter of minutes, the archive room and its security were behind them. Trying not to count each step, the pair returned past the Silver Mead fliers. Still clamped by magnets the size of refrigerators to their recharging stations.

Frobisher pointed to the nearest flier. "Hey, kid—"

"Tezuhyr," he breathed. "Sorry, they are controlled from the arcology's main tracking gallery. It would take too long to override."

"I'd say I need to catch my breath, but, well..." He waved them on. "This way."

They sped past the interior door, through a stark airlock, out into the sapping cold of the main loading area.

Rushing footfalls punched the deck-plates behind them.

Still running, Frobisher raised the antenna on the handheld communicator.

“This is Frob—*Hell below!*” The first shots, clapping through the air, came *from* the parked Nuka-ki rather than from behind as anticipated. Frobisher shouted. He dove for cover. A compact mass of bulwark at the mesomorph’s left blasted to chalk dust.

He dropped, picked up a disowned chunk and threw it at the nearer of his attackers.

“Get that jetcycle running!” he clacked. “*Move! Move it, Tezubyr! Go!*”

The mesomorph dug deep into his retinue of mean zipway threats and pulled a face with a jackal’s lipless grin and the manners of a styge. A Noxian ashswimmer. Eyes wide like poached eggs. Stinking like a mop bucket of brine. It wasn’t a creature that invited a snarl, it lived it. All Frobisher had to do was smile.

A few of the guardsmen screamed in terror, the rest opened fire.

NUCLEOTIDE 5: "The Gleeful Executioners"

"Down, you fool! You want to be killed?"

The Doctor flung the poor fellow out of danger with an indelicate *whap* from his umbrella. The hapless bystander struck the ground on his tail. Pained, somewhat abashed, but alive. For now. That's all that mattered. It wasn't his fault. Sometimes the mind could react contrary to one's own survival, but this... This was rapidly turning into a disaster. The Doctor seen pitchfork-wielding mobs better organised than this. Sweat. Tearing clothes. The thunder of a stampede. Great Gallifrey, where was the exit! Any exit? Where could he—any of them—go? This wasn't one of Xeo's ice moons. Gigan was flooded with innocents who had no part in this duel. More people, just as undeserving, were going to die if he stood for too long contemplating his next—

"Attack bearing three-zero-nine. Adjust for twelve degrees," analysed the case. *"Oh, lally, here it comes again!"*

The Doctor could see the poor devils were too caught up in their own argument. *"Get out of the way!"*

And struck.

His second riposte was less graceful than even his first. The young couple ended up elbowed into the nearest fountain. He hoped that both had made it, there wasn't time to check. The crowd closed in like threading fingers. What was once an open gully of tiling had now turned into a flood of sentient life. All moving at speed. Ordinarily, the Doctor's sense of bearing was impeccable, but even he was beginning to lose his bearings.

He felt one of his bumblebee-striped legs swing traitorously out beneath him. The Prolixcase proved a saving grace between the floor and his ennobled brow. Pain slapped through his left palm as he rose. Widening his shoulders gave himself enough presence to part the crowd around him like a river. Pain stampeded through a bruised kneecap, but he persisted.

There! His fingers scabbled round in his pockets. A cable from the megaputer's many corporate families. Throwing down his umbrella, he clambered across to a metal safety cover beneath one of the animated bulletin boards. The advert was a flashy white-pink number

for some soda deal made with a fruit machine company. One jack went into the wall's maintenance port. The other into one of the small series of ports next to the leftmost lock of the case.

The Doctor clasped the Prolixcase as though he were nose-to-nose with a studio camera. "Where's your lens?"

"You're staring directly into it."

He scowled. "Any of this your handiwork?"

"Quite a time to ask."

"I'm confident that's not an answer."

"This..." it buzzed with confusion, *"Is outside this old thing's wafers."*

"I want you to use your output to tape over the advertisement for..." the Doctor craned his head. "Good grief, Hi-Roller Fizz. Up there."

He pressed the case up against a bench, careful to observe the rule of thirds and try to pick out his best side. With a straightened overcoat and a defiant chin, he was the very picture of a stationary target. When time came for advertising the next mirror-year's flier rally to end, a sleeve of red, cuffed in yellow, flourished to every major vidscreen on the level. The Doctor stood a story tall on the VDU. The attacking skimjet pulled back, compensating for the apparent sudden shift in proportions of its target. Feedback from the screen produced waves of strobing black in something or other.

The traveller stood as if reciting from a university lectern. *"Seeking apposite tranquillity from the dulcet melancholy of your psyche? A respite in which to fade, effortlessly, into an oubliette of peace and serenity made just for you? Try, the good Doctor's medicine. Guaranteed results, as ordained by the High Council of Gallifrey. A cautionary advisory, however, mild side effects may include—"*

"On high, Doctor!" Peri's voice.

One of the hanging planters came swinging across the divide straight into the skimjet.

"—headache?" The Doctor spat, as the skimjet span. *"Nausea?"* Dazed. *"And just a hint,"* he hoped, *"of processing damage. Always fortunate to have friends in high places. Thank you, ladies!"*

The Doctor ripped out the jack, picked up the umbrella and case, and kept running. The tactic had disorientated the deadly novelty, but knocked it clear? Far from it.

"Where is it now?" he exacted of the Prolixcase.

He kept running.

The case spoke, *"It's lolling... Doolally, it's losing altitude!"*

Running.

“Where?” His lungs were burning.

And running.

“It will only take a change in the flow of the crowd to—!” A purl of costumed mascots swept into the Doctor. He shouted in pain, eye-to-eye with an Ilgworm tairngir’s red-foam maw. He found himself swaying. Buffeted. The case, the only object keeping him orientated towards the ground. It was nearly knocked from his hands by the purple papier-mâché wings of a cailite. He was trapped in a macabre funhouse mirror of children’s characters. Holding him in place.

“Let me pass!” he shouted. *“Let me pass and get out of here! You’ll all die otherwise!”*

Limbs of all persuasions cracked and thudded against him. He wasn’t sure whether or not anyone had heard him. As he tried to pull himself clear, something cut against his snout. Metal? *Sharp*. He could taste blood at the curl of his lip.

“Get out!” Surely, they must have heard him? *“Get—!”*

Flashes of light from the deadly machine’s base, struck at a nearby businessman’s back as he tried to pull another being clear. Body fell against body. Crumpled like velveteen rabbits. Two, no, three dead. The survivor tried frantically to pull himself clear from out beneath them, but it was futile.

All sense of balance rent away beneath the Doctor. He deployed his umbrella to try and slow his descent.

Nevertheless, he fell. Backward. Against a sudden incline hidden beneath the stampeding feet.

One arm holding the umbrella above, one arm holding the Prolixcase below.

In the Virtuosity arcology, Dalek Command Central’s main tracking gallery writhed with hateful activity.

At its centre, sat the Red Dalek. He dominated the chamber from within his Cerebration Globe. To the uninitiated, a translucent bubble of highly-concentrated light and colour, set at the edge of a catwalk. Like an enormous fishbowl. To a Dalek officer, however, it was the most ruthlessly efficient means of collating battlefield information outside of a Brain Machine.

Thin cables linked to the lowest portion of the Red Dalek’s midsection like electrodes.

His duties were silent. No word need be spoken. The effects of his commands, however, could be heard all across the Mandusus constellation. Below, the trenches of the tracking gallery were far more lively. Scientists in communications, tactics, surveillance and reconnaissance all contributed towards the general operating efficiency of the Dalek thought-machine.

The Psyche Dalek observed each of them with unnerving interest as it circled the edges of the chamber. Slow. Methodical.

Each scientist spoke with another.

The first: “—communications blackout to be enforced—”

The second: “—workforce efficiency rating is nominal—”

The third: “—identified, awaiting confirmation—”

The fourth: “—information will be received now.”

The fifth Dalek scientist, controlling the skimjet in Gigan, tensed with anticipation. Hormonal implants from its stimbank were triggered to heighten cognitive functioning. Its response times couldn't be shortened more if it tried.

The Dalek beside it confirmed, “Locomotion system damaged, but operable.”

On the VDU before it, the resolution of the skimjet's microcamera was anything but superficial. It was revolutionary, in fact. If pushed, it could discern the pattern of microdust in a child's hand or, at closer range, the flailing bodyprint of a helpless Time Lord.

“Enemy relocated,” the fifth technician reported.

At that moment, the Red Dalek made positive identification on the subject of the attack. The result was a hideous ecstasy of fear and hate.

“The *Doc-tor* shall die, screaming vindication for the Daleks.” The Red Dalek's scar pulsed as it shrieked the Dalek credo. “*Exterminate the Doctor!*”

This hideous exaltation filled the main tracking gallery. Their desire to kill, torture, mutilate, dominate and destroy, flowed through the chamber like a volcanic eruption. It leapt in a telepathic current, intensified by the presence of the Psyche Dalek, from stormtrooper to stormtrooper. A rage and hatred brighter than a neutron bomb.

It was the frenzied cry of a mob. Of sadists. Of the Daleks.

The painted jaws of the reticle narrowed on the Doctor.

On the upper level, high above the struggling calico fleck in the

frantic crowds, Peri, Meje and Dargaud lowered themselves from the garden wall on the opposing side to the restaurant. Right behind the flight controllers and their makeshift strip of runway.

“Drop it!” Peri punched the floor with her discarded shoes. “*Now!*”

Meje stopped. A litany of names played silently on her lips with a growing sense of recognition.

Rather than look abashed or frightened, the flight crew simply turned in unison. A litany of blank looks. At first, Peri thought she might’ve shocked them into silence, but there was an unerring precision to their movements. The pilot, frond-like hands clasped around the controller, offered it to her freely.

Meje yanked it from their grasp.

Dargaud stood behind her. “Can you switch it off?”

“I work quicker without distraction...” She tried.

A toggle, here. A stud, there. Eventually, she went for Occam’s razor and simply pulled the power-pack with a snap. She jabbed her head to the sky. “No change...”

“Meje?” Peri’s voice was urgent.

“There’s nothing to try. It didn’t possess any power source to begin with.” She cleaved the two halves of the metal fascia in twain with a fork she’d hidden up her sleeve from the restaurant. “It’s a dummy, rather like us.”

“Could it be the Prolixcase?” asked Peri.

“It could be anything at this point.”

“That skimjet will kill more people unless we can stop it.”

Dargaud snapped a meaty finger in front of one of the children’s faces. “Excuse me, *malyit*, can you tell me your name? Any of your names? Who you are? Where your begetters are?”

“Do you know *where* you are?” Meje waved a hand. “It looks like burnout.”

“In little ones like this?” The enforcer sounded concerned. “You can’t expect me to believe that. Their minds...”

Peri shivered. “It’s a trap. Just not the trap we were expecting.” She pushed herself against the handrail of the balcony. “Can either of you see the Doctor?”

“*Peri, watch out!*”

Something grabbed the back of her head. She could hear the control drop from Meje’s hand with a shout. Dargaud fell heavily to the ground.

It had come through both of her companions to get to her.

Peri pivoted on the ball of her foot, swinging her fist towards her assailant's head. It connected, something cracked, but the figure kept coming. The whirl of an electric-knife in its hand. Instinctively, she pulled her arms back and lashed out with her leg. The blade kept coming closer. Off-balance, blinded by a faceful of hair, Peri was seized by her forearm.

The electric-knife carved down at her neck.

The Doctor was propelled downward onto the travelator's handrail. Hidden beneath the manic organic thicket around him.

"*One chance...*" The Doctor, gruff with exertion. "*Brace!*"

The case asked, "*Brace wh—?*"

The Doctor swung his lower arm upward. Rotating his torso like phials in a centrifuge. The motion was random. Chaotic. He felt the grip of the case slacken against his fingers and the muscles in his shoulder twisted out of joint as something connected. There was resistance. Force. Newton's discovery.

Impact!

The result was immediate and gratifying. The skimjet veered from its course like a meteorite bopped with a cricket bat. All pretence of elegant control was gone, the deadly machine spun and spun in an autumn leaf crash-dive onto the crest of the nearest display tank masquerading as a pond.

"*Yeeo-yi! Down the beggar goes!*" congratulated the case.

Momentum carried the Doctor down onto the travelator; arms draped over the black tongue of rubber, revolving stair-teeth at his knees. He felt the adrenalin surge wane with a shudder of hormones.

Shoals of particoloured fish gasped and sprinkled away from the descending skimjet. Silence, blissful and welcome, gripped the deadly toy. Drew it to the seabed at the bottom of the tank on a stream of hushed bubbles. It dropped like a stone.

Arms heavy on the travelator, the Doctor heaved a sigh of relief.

Noting his reflection in the wall of glass, he adjusted his cravat. "Into every life some rain must f—"

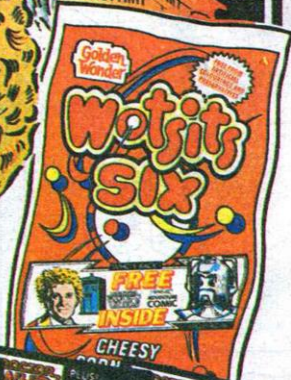
Without a hint of fairness, the seemingly docile menace erupted back to life with an exhaust of bubbles. It turned on a mazuma. Deep-sea engines engaged. The machine flooded the stillness with gurgling noise and launched itself at its reacquired target.

The Doctor's reflection. On the other side of the tank.

The skimjet punched through in a kilotonne tidal wave of broken glass.

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Traced by operatives of Virtuosity Astrotech, the Doctor begins to understand that there is far more at stake than lost property. His deadliest of enemies, the Daleks, are at large somewhere on Mandusus. Already, they have set to work on Operation: Mindnet, a project with hideous implications for the slowship's future.

The Doctor believes he can stop them. But can he? Led by the Red Dalek and propelled by the telepathic powers of the Psyche Dalek, they understand the Time Lord's mind.

This time, the Daleks are ready for him...

Cover illustration by Caroline Tankersley
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