



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.

**HELIX TWO:
"THE THOUGHT THAT KILLS"**

NUCLEOTIDE 6: "Making Connections"

The Nuka-ki jetcycle reeked of overcharged Meissner antigravity units. Frobisher felt his lungs stab in protest at another sudden lunge of redirected momenta. The flexing burn of magnets oscillating against the loading bay storage floor.

The path before him and Tezuhyr glittered with death.

"Stop them!"

It was only Tezuhyr's stout indifference to any organic concept of self-preservation that drove them forward. Not around, not over, but *through* the guardsmen and their weapons fire.

"Get the runners!"

One clipped the side of the cycle and went flying hard against a green crate. Another, attempting to tackle them from their mount, Frobisher catapulted aside with the *'putt-tash!*' of a shape-shifter's boxing glove. Shock pulsed up his arm as the machine's balance wobbled with belligerent promise of capsizes. Tezuhyr reduced speed to compensate. Frobisher felt the velocity sweep like a tornado into the outer halo of his vision. A wider world made rapidly narrower.

"Is this going as well as you expected, Acquaintance Frobisher?" asked Tezuhyr.

"Well, I'm a pessimist and the day is young..." The whifferdill checked the markings on a nearby guidepost nestled between machine-stamped crates yet to be stowed in the major cells. Muddy silver under the industrial phosphorescence. "Overshot." The cicada rattle of a firearm underlining Frobisher's voice. *"Back and over—!"*

"By two rows, I understand!"

The burst of speed left two cigar-nub scorch marks in their wake. They cut to their left. Ribbons of cordite cut and slashed around the two beings' bodies. A swerve right. Frobisher's voice was almost lost in the cacophony, "We seem to be outpacing them. 'KO', 'LO', 'MO', 'MN', 'ML', 'M—'"

If he'd recognised the oil stench, he might have predicted the cargosuit.

The ceramisteel used to fabricate these Type-B magnecrates was strong enough to survive an orbital drop, but not one of the

machine's pincers. It tore through the wall as though it were a steak knife through a paper fan. Tezuhyr swerved. PolyVittle powder from stored cargo sprayed against Frobisher's face. The whifferdill spat and heaved. He caught it full in the beak. Nostrils pinching.

Through the bergamot tang, he could see the bodybuilding bulk of the cargosuit. The mechanised walker raised its pincers, each easily dwarfing the jetcycle, and reached out to rip Frobisher and Tezuhyr in half.

"Faster...!" Frobisher rasped to his driver.

The android released the clutch. The engine picked up speed. Just pure mechanised precision.

The arm missed, but only by the length of a boxer's swing.

Frobisher felt like a rabbit being dynamited from its burrow.

As they fled, wall after wall around them was torn away. The corridor screamed as its ceramisteel tendons came apart in guffaws of rending physics. Their opponent was cheating its way through the chase.

Despite each twist, turn, it kept pace.

The jetcycle's engines squealed.

"Sorry! Sorry," apologised Tezuhyr.

"Watch it, Tezuhyr!" Frobisher shouted.

By the L-section of alphabetised magnecrates, it had even managed to get in front of them. In an almost perfect arc, Tezuhyr spun the jetcycle around, Meissners spitting their blackened circles on the floor and doubled back. Frobisher nearly swallowed his tongue in a squark.

Left. Right. Right. Left. Right.

Frobisher had lost all sense of geography and he had a feeling he wasn't the only one.

"Where's it gone now?" he demanded from the air.

Tezuhyr was looking. "We can't keep this up for—"

The cargosuit's clamps closed the back of the Nuka-ki from around a blind corner,

The back of the jetcycle's chassis crumpled like a soda can. Only a pinch for the giant. But it was enough to overbalance the entire vehicle. Frobisher felt the bike begin to swing, tail first, into the air. He leant back to compensate. Ground them. Pin them. It wasn't working. Then, as if answering a private miracle, the jetcycle lurched back down, but he felt himself catapult forward.

"Frobisher?"

Tezuhyr's bark came from somewhere below Frobisher. He, meanwhile, kept going up, up in the air. The jetcycle's fairings far beneath the airborne whifferdill. It occurred to him that he shouldn't have been able to see the cassette deck in front of Tezuhyr. For one moment, Frobisher thought he was going to strike the heated chassis of the propulsion system. Stick like napalm and fry like a hare on a hotplate.

Instead, he overshot.

Tezuhyr threw up an arm to help. Frobisher tried grabbing it, but his reflexes were too slow. His time too limited. The whifferdill pulled his body tight. No time to shift—! A twist of pain flared through his left shoulder as he impacted the ground. The hoverplate glided past his foetal body. In parallel. Frobisher's mackintosh hissed across the floor as he slid. His flipper went to grab the nearest thing to lift him upward to stop his tumble.

He stopped.

Unfortunately, he realised his life raft was the leg of the cargosuit. He bounced up onto its ankle. His head smacking against its exoskeletal shin. Relentless, undaunted, the pursuing machine pounded after the jetcycle. Still in motion, swinging through its obstructions, its hydraulic arm came down atop Frobisher like a steel press.

"*Stop!*" he yelled, in reflex.

It was futile. Panicking, Frobisher shape-shifted himself flatter, leaner, his mackintosh dipping to the racing floor in a puddle. He stuck to the cargosuit like gum on a shoe. Typical. At his back, Frobisher felt a tug, then a sudden yank. Painful enough to send him into momentary shock. His body snapped rigid like a rubber band.

He looked down. The toe of the cargosuit's mechanical foot had snared the edge of the raincoat, dragging him down towards the crushing underside of its sole with each step. He was being fed into a makeshift crusher by his coattails. Each step brought him closer to the gruesome end, yet in spite of its seeming inevitability, the mesomorph would not yield. He wouldn't. He clung to the cargosuit's ankle through each binding step. Tight as he could. The fabric—he hoped it was fabric—of the mackintosh ripping beneath him.

He cursed its solid manufacture, cursed his sense of style, cursed—
With the final, freeing rip, the raincoat tore in half. It took a

second, which felt like an eternity, to register the change. An almost blissful sense of freedom returned to Frobisher. It drove him almost giddy. Propelled through nothing more than instinct, he began climbing up the knee, towards the cargosuit's back, avoiding the control cabin at its front.

The machine seemed to possess opposable limbs, but fortunately for Frobisher, the joints of its arms weren't designed to reach behind it. There'd be no point for a cargosuit. He was saved by a mechanical oversight. The whifferdill surveyed the cargosuit's bald top with a cautious pride. Adrenalin surged through his trembling form.

Abruptly, said form was thrown forward, bodily, with a shout.

Frobisher's small success didn't stop the cargosuit's pilot from trying to shake the struggling whifferdill loose. Failing that, scrape him from his climbing frame on passing objects. Frobisher felt each blow as keenly as a punch or a kick. He persisted. Even through the strikes that felt like his head hitting the side of a locked safe.

Somewhere, deep in his mind, Frobisher recognised that the cargosuit couldn't commit to the exercise too heavily. There was still a jetcycle to catch. The whifferdill was doing the one thing left available to him. He was slowing the pursuing walker down. Buying Tezuhyr just that little extra bit of time to plan and to think.

The android, purple blotches on his arms, looked to be using it well. Frobisher could hear him speaking to himself. "M19-K81', 'K82'..."

The whifferdill looked around. They had to be close—There it was! Magnecrate-K83. Positive identification embossed in painted stencil against its grimy surface.

Behind a pressurised door - the TARDIS.

Frobisher and Tezuhyr were so elated that it took a few moments for them to recognise something else. Their prize was also nestled in the crook of the passageway. Beyond it, there was no intersection, no adjoining accessway, nothing. Their mad dash through the ceramisteel maze was at an end.

A dead end.

Aika clicked the air conditioner to a lower setting and eased the flier beyond the high-lane, into the no-fly zone.

The studded visage of Gigan pondered the approaching vehicle with an impassive gaze. Small mechanical indicators tripped on the

dashboard. An orange, flashing square. On a conventional vehicle, one of the roosting transmitters would have locked the steering wheel so it could only turn to its immediate left or right. Instead, it continued straight through.

The flier's windbubble should be strong enough to cope with the impact, she mused, nay hoped.

She was now driving parallel to the level below *The Chasing Storm*.

Just a little higher—

Then again, perhaps not. The aquarium inside Gigan burst. A sound loud enough that she could hear it through a dozen layers of insulating glass.

It was impossible to miss the Doctor in his overcoat. Dressed like a posy of wildflowers. She watched him pull at his lapel and fling the left-half of his overcoat over his face and neck, as the rushing force yanking him by the waist; up and over the travelator and into his umbrella. Wrongfooted into a tiny fabric carriage.

His rubber-soled boots were the only thing that stopped him from being electrocuted where he stood. Hot-blue flames bit and snarled at his soles.

Others weren't so lucky.

Now, he had no control. He was rushing, a teacup in a tempest, headlong towards her. Soon to impact the wall in a hail of brightly-coloured chunks if the brunt of the wave caught up with him. His only saving grace was the dull pink of a protective energy barrier.

The case!

Glowing very faintly. Likely another one of its security measures. Only this time, used to defend rather than deflect. She had enough distance between herself, her objective and the wall that any attempt at obstruction was no issue. She did love the Stalwart, though. It had served her well many a time.

Oh, well.

She eased her foot down on the accelerator until it was flat with the floor, braced her arms for the resultant shock and drove straight in from the panorama of Ide Ward.

Impact!

Glass splintered in a perfect dartboard circle like gelignite under the river ice in spring. The engine block took the brunt of the shock. The grille and Golden Ghost bonnet ornament crumpled.

The flier's windbubble was surprisingly durable, cracks only

forming at the specially-designed stress points of the safety glass. The Stalwart remained committed. She could almost cheer its performance under unusual circumstances. Aika manoeuvred both her feet onto the brake pedal and squeezed with all her might.

Her sudden stop, the engine dying with asthmatic huffs, came only moments before the Doctor's velveteen form bounced against the wiper blades. At a tumble. The umbrella's steel wirework crumpled beneath him. He seemed to be trying to control the momentum of his sideward dive. His hand snatched at one of the blades.

Blast! It broke clear in his palm. He rolled over the canopy above her head. He was going out the shattered panel.

She undid her seatbelt, hand at the door-handle, taking a deep breath—

The chunk of black rubber, attached to a loose crank of metal, made a bayonet thrust through the gap in the Stalwart's car boot. Just at the top. Near the rim.

The Doctor's body shuddered, an unshakeable grip holding him in place. He crumpled against the back window. Shielded. The flood thundered around the forward section of the flier's windbubble in a tunnel of maritime fury. The Doctor used the side of the case to shield the crown of his head from the light drizzle that escaped the pressure.

Climbing across into the backseat, she could hear him speaking. More to himself than anyone else, but Aika could definitely hear it.

"A perfectly nice postcard image bludgeoned from existence." He shook himself down like a thunderstruck dog and glanced at the twisted remains of the umbrella on the front of the flier's windbubble. "Served its purpose, I suppose. Such a pity."

"Why aren't you dead?" were words that Aika thought she'd internalised until the Doctor replied.

"Hollow bones, my dear!" The water roared around them. "Hollow bones!"

On the balcony above, the distraction proved enough for Peri to bring her hands up inside her attacker's grip.

She could feel the electric-knife shred the feathered hair on her neck—

It missed, cutting at her nape. Another swing at her jugular.

Over the appliance's waiting bite, the botanist brought her hands

around the sides of the Zartician chef's head. One clap. On either side. The knife dropped from the chef's hand with a violent shout. Without thinking, Peri kicked it away with her shoe. Its serrated blades sawed across the deserted floor.

Peri's attacker, his hands were at her throat. His thumbs on her windpipe. Her consciousness fought like a rabid dog to stay aware. Stay alive. She punched him across the jaw. Blood trickled down his lip, but his blank features remained impassive.

Relentless, purple-black splotches spun their ugly web on the corners of her vision.

Something snapped.

Frobisher kicked himself up across the circuit breaker unit at the back of the cargosuit. Feet flat against its topmost side. He leaned forward, gripping one of the bars of the driver cage, just enough to see his and Tezuhyr's attacker.

What struck him was that the pilot was unremarkable. A typical Zoso prole. Squat, long orange beak, winged ears but with a fiercely... undeveloped look. Blank. Too simple, in its way. He wondered—

Tezuhyr pulled the Nuka-ki onto its hindframe. Hands tight against the controls. Hip against the cassette deck scattling through transceiver channels.

"This is the GBC—E-E-Electrodrive, live and coming at five!—For the cadia, he crowed, we live in terror—and now, some more music—"

Weighted to face the ground, it took considerable effort. Electronic display flashing red, it tried to rally back to some semblance of equilibrium. But Tezuhyr fought it, raising one of the struggling engines. He drove the jetcycle forward like a buzzsaw. The oscillating magnets clacked against the pinched clamp with a sound that Frobisher could only describe as a physics professor tugged backward down a set of stairs.

Simultaneously, Frobisher swiped at one of the cargosuit's control sticks from above. The right arm swung through the door of K83 magnecell, catching on jags of metal, rending a furrow of climate-controlled air. To compensate, the driver's hand seized the gumshoe's wrist and tried pulling him down and over. Clumsy. Staccato. Their fight only succeeded in causing more damage to the entryway.

A glancing slap from the cargosuit, hard enough to turn an organic's bones to wet celery, lost Tezuhyr his grip on the Nuka-ki.

Heedless, the cargosuit sliced through a line of piping with a grinding magnetic heel. A font of light erupted from the severed power-line. Tezuhyr pinned himself against the wall, avoiding the cable's snaking spasms and the vehicle's hieing protests.

Frobisher could hear the mobbing cries of the guards and disgruntled workers. They'd been found! His receptors, however, accounted for a new addition from inside the storage magnecell.

Frobisher could see Tezuhyr jerk his head abruptly towards the TARDIS. Encased on the other side of the K83 door, nestled in the painted 'AB' section, he wasn't alone.

Something was blocking the doorway into the box.

"Report to the Red Dalek—" It swivelled towards them.

A small tower. Topped by a single hating circle of light, roughly at about head height, that glowed in the darkness. About the size of the android's fist.

In that moment, it said nothing. Made no movements.

A needle of blue struck from its midsection with a slicing hiss.

Frobisher snatched himself free and, for a moment, he could see his retreating flipper through the driver.

Seconds later, the bones in the Zoso's arms turned to wax.

The sheer force of the ray shoved the cargosuit back with unnatural strength, knocking the support of its legs out from under it. The cabin burst with a cloyingly sweet stench that somehow managed to drown out the horror of the driver's scream as lung replaced heart, replaced liver, replaced bone. The cargosuit stumbled unnaturally. Like an elephant on its hindlegs.

The attacking shape fired again and again, bludgeoning down the workers trailing not too far behind the altercation. Just over half-a-dozen figures shook as their bones jumbled, hotchpotch, inside their flesh. Clothes aflame. All cracking against the ground. Dead.

The cargosuit fell towards the shooter, haloed in the pewter grey rectangle of the console room.

The Dalek, Frobisher realised.

He saw Tezuhyr reach for the power cable. The smell of an electrical current grounded through the metal in his nose and the roof of his beak. He had a brainwave. With all his might, he planted a foot against the control stick of the right arm. Extending the

appendage towards the Dalek.

“Advising caution, *mysir!*” warned Tezuhyr.

“Wait until the last moment!” It was precision or death.

If the Doc were present, he would’ve commended the pair for their apropos use of the Butterfly Effect. Another shot from the Dalek blew out the cargosuit’s knees. The cargosuit toppled, a claw outstretched, through the threshold of the TARDIS doors. Not close enough to crush its murderer, but graze its flailing clamp against the grille of its midsection.

A shovel-shaped cargosuit foot went up. Tezuhyr slid across the floor, the power cable in his arms in a fireman’s carry, touching what on a daintier machine would have been called a toe.

There was the whiff of a blue flaming surge, followed by a bitter tang tainting the air. The shell jolted on the spot. An uncomfortably large electrical load passed through into the control chamber.

In his mind’s eye, Frobisher could picture the mutant within. Frantic, trying to redirect the load back towards its source with onboard computers.

The circuit breakers on the cargosuit tripped and detonated. Patches of brilliant orange flame cratered the bloated rectangle of circuitry at the machine’s shoulders. Frobisher was flung sidelong into the side of the police box. He could feel the residual heat bleed through the floor as he collided with it. The force of the impact stamped the air from his lungs.

I’m dead, I’m dead, I’m dead! The trick’s blown, I’m—!

He rolled his neck. At the first hint of the current doubling back, Tezuhyr had rolled the cable from his shoulders. Letting the length drop like a constrictor snake, slithering aimlessly with sparking venom.

A frisson of panic rippled through Frobisher.

“Ex—?” A choked rattle of surprise tore from the Dalek.

The remaining three syllables were lost in the firework flash of energy that throttled its systems. Wafting black plumes of rotting mucus, gleet cigars, every other fetid and degrading misery of a smell... Frobisher had’d rifled through suspects’ trash, he knew the awe and offal that his senses could encounter without warning. But this smell... There was nothing in any solar system that came close. The urge to be sick mounted in the curve of his throat.

Finally, something seemed to almost sigh in the air. Then and only

then, was it over.

Frobisher slumped against the wood of the police box, rolling into the last weeding current of clean air. "...Dalek."

He let the word simmer in his mind for a moment. He knew shock. He'd encountered the feeling often enough when travelling with the Doctor. Somehow, it never got easier. His mind's eye conjured up what he'd seen of the Daleks.

Slave species shackled at the neck as they were forced on their blistered knees on a death march over the bodies of kith and kin.

Ashen, boiled earth clinging to the forearms of any who fell prey to exhaustion. The sky above their heads slashed open with the sabre wound of weapons fire. Their population centres reduced to a handful of barbaric survivors. Clinging to scraps of vittle as meagre as stone or, worse, starved to the point of tearing the wet flesh from one another's bones. The prison camps often remained in circulation on the tape-relays. Images were precious and few.

It wasn't uncommon for the Daleks to shoot down spy satellites sent to expose the atrocities. Conquests that split planets like the atom. Somehow, they were perceived to be more palatable than the exterminations.

Life always took the side of life. He'd known that from the gutter, but there was a sinewy tableau he'd recalled since childhood. The earthmovers the Daleks had built for Spandau-7. The size of those duralinium-fired atmospheric processors on Titan. They festered a honeycomb of bone and corpseflesh. The holes got bigger. The populations got smaller. And somehow, somewhere in that perverse Gordian knot of Dalek psyche, that was *right*.

And they were here.

Those far-off murderers were here aboard the TARDIS.

"Dalek!" Frobisher jerked upright. "Tezuhyr... *Doc!*"

"Aika?" As Dargaud descended, smoke billowed between the teeth of the travelator. "Aika, I'm not well prone to violence, but if you're dead, I'll find myself terribly upset, so I will."

The Doctor removed a sodden boot and coaxed a maffick eel nibbling at his ankle to a nearby dustbin. He slipped down from his fair weather sanctuary onto the Stalwart's bumper, clutching the wiper blade like a conductor with their baton.

The Prolixcase's speaker shivered and popped.

The Doctor let his lungs fill with the open air. "Quite bracing!"

A font of blue smoke puffed from the side of the case.

"Oh, dear, there goes the camera. Among other things. What a pity." The rover turned and called to Aika, "Need an elbow?"

"No, no." She admitted defeat on the jammed side doors and struggled up towards the sunroof's controls. Stopping only to open the glovebox and gather the briefcase key into a pocket. "I'd prefer to spare the flier any more grief."

Aika once saw Dargaud upend an entire baboyab mangrove to help a waddle of stoyevsk fish muddle their way across the wetland thicket. Ripping away a car door would be comparative child's play.

"Dargaud." The Doctor waved the shieldmother over. He proffered the missing sketchbook from a pocket. "I wondered if you had disappeared with the rest of the crowd. Take that for me."

"Thank you..." she grumbled. He had a shieldcrone's demeanour.

Dargaud realised the book felt unnaturally dry on her hands. Almost moth-bitten. It had only been in the man's pocket for a few minutes, at most. Flicking the page, she discovered that an entirely new sketch had been made on a separate sheaf to her own. With a note:

Compliments to the artist; a solid rendition of a fond friend.

"Thank you," she repeated, more genuinely.

With a grateful nod, the Doctor proceeded towards Peri and Meje.

All three of the women had suffered cuts and bruises from their ordeals. Slash marks from a serrated edge. He quickened his pace.

Between them lolled the likely cause of their attack. A dizzied-looking Zartician. Carried with the same caution as a sofa down a flight of stairs. His chef's whites suggested he'd come from the back kitchens of *The Chasing Storm*. He was clutching his purple mottled skin and moaning something to the tune of a concussion.

The Doctor waved the wiper blade. "Dargaud's handiwork?"

"Not without cause. Just *paf!*" Meje imitated a sledge-sized fist.

"Across the gentleman's skull and down, down, *down* he went."

"Like a mallet on a mud crab," said Peri. "God, I'm hungry."

"Fear will do that." The Doctor noted the bruise on her neck.

"You're injured..."

"I'm alright," she dismissed, timidly.

“You don’t look to be—”

“*Doctor.*” An edge of warning entered her voice.

“Very well, if you insist, but mark my words, young lady,” he wagged a finger.

“Marking, marking...”

He patted her on the shoulder and passed the Prolixcase into her grasp, reaching out to check the Zartician’s pulse. “*Ab...*”

Peri pressed against the red lines on her forearm. “What’s up?”

“The hairs on the back of my hand. Look.”

“Like back in the meat locker?”

“Precisely.” He discarded the blade, rubbed his fingers together, and felt for any bone fractures (or electronic tricks) under the immaculately-groomed fur of the old Zartician’s body. From his wearied warthog snout to the points of his hooves. “Only at the head. That’s odd. A riddle for you, what’s in the skull that exists nowhere else in the body?”

Peri’s eyes fluttered in thought. “Uh, the brain, the eyes...” She stopped and looked at him. “The implants. Do you think...?”

“The theory fits with the behaviour of the children,” Meje bandaged her wound with a grunt.

The Doctor straightened his neck. “I’m sorry?”

“There were children,” Peri gestured to the upper level.

“Friends of Tezuhyr,” Meje clarified.

“Yeah. They helped get the skimjet up into the air and, before we pulled apart the controls, we thought they might be piloting it. As it turned out, they were just stooges.”

“‘Stooges’...?” countered the Doctor.

“Well, as soon as we showed up, they all turned statuesque.” Peri nursed her hip. “We couldn’t get a word out of them before the head chef here attacked me.”

“They ran off into the crowd,” Meje added. “We’ve no idea where.”

The Doctor placed a hand in a pocket. “Doubtful that they’d remember anything themselves. That leaves this fellow as our only link in this adversarial chain.” He examined the chef’s face. “The burst capillaries point to some kind of blood-based stimulation.”

“A sudden rush of hormones, you mean?” asked Peri.

“To push the body beyond its natural limits, for a time. Look where it’s most prominent.” He pointed to a blackened rash, centred around a quicksilver square at the nape of the neck. “Here.”

Peri studied it. “Is that the psychocircuit?”

“Yes, I have a nasty feeling these people were ‘activated’, Peri. Hijacked by some external force. They’ve been monitoring us for a while, I think. Passing information from one to another, to another, until their controllers felt time enough to act.”

“So, they could be anyone?”

“Anyone at all, Peri.”

Peri’s throat constricted to a soft whisper. “Doctor, that’s horrific...”

He glanced at her briefly. “Then, I shall keep the remainder of my suspicions to myself...”

In Command Central, a Dalek drone—much like any other, by outward appearances—rolled down the deadly hallway towards the main tracking gallery. The nerve centre of Dalek power on Mandusus.

The drone paid no heed to anything in the featureless olive-black space. The golden electronic squares were its only source of external illumination, but its mind was purely on the task at hand. Therefore, it was startled when the sonic resonance bars—installed high above its dome—seemed to release an alarm, shrill and invasive, in the air.

“*Detain it!*” came the shrill bark from the tannoy.

Each wall, on either side of it, filled with the image of the Red Dalek. The Psyche Dalek sat at its shoulder with its adjutant, the hypnotic arch-puppeteer scheming and writhing in its own ambergris. Their unblinking eyestalks burned with hatred. Cocooned in their focal point of power on the other side of the door.

The hidden magnetic plate below the visiting drone’s fender activated with a whine. It was galvanised in place. Opposite the sealed shutter, members of Execution Taskforce K-7 cut off the drone’s only means of escape.

Their weapons smouldered, still warm from the deaths of K-5.

The drone’s eyestalk swung in alarm. A jolt of panic surging into its cerebral cortex. It raised its silcronian gunstick instinctively, prepared to defend its superiority. Dalek or no Dalek.

“*All weakness must be purged from our ranks,*” flashed the Red Dalek’s lights on the vidscreen. “*Obey. Surrender yourself to the Daleks.*”

The command was unquestionable. “It will be done.”

The drone’s weapon lowered with a snap. In turn, the magnetic

plate beneath it was deactivated.

“You will be escorted to the recovery room for interrogation.” He stared.
“Move or die now.”

Among the overpowering stench of brine in Gigan, the Zartician chef slipped out from under Meje’s grasp on wobbling knees.

The mechanic wasn’t to be deterred. “Alright, let’s try again, on your feet.”

The Doctor observed, “He’s looking the worse for wear...”

“Have you seen this sort of thing before?” Peri asked.

“Yes, I have, in Roboman Controllers.” He didn’t elaborate further.

“We call it blow-out,” Dargaud approached behind Aika.

“Elements of the psychocircuit supercharge the adrenal glands of the body. Pushing it beyond its limits. Some are more prone to it than others.”

Peri inquired, “Why use them, then?”

“Why drive a flier, if you know there’s a possibility you’ll crash?”

Aika shrugged.

“The inherent benefits of certain brands also outweigh the potential risks,” added Dargaud

The Doctor snapped his fingers. “That’s it.”

“What is?” Aika asked.

“Certain brands.” The time-traveller turned to the oldster. “Can you hear me?”

“Ssr̥h?” His species’ consonantal snort had returned. “Don’t shout.”

“Where exactly did you acquire your implants?” asked the Doctor.

“Why do you wish to know?”

“Let’s say, I’m in the market. Where? Come along, I’ve perfect pitch.”

“They’re leftovers from my work teaching xenolinguistics. Nothing wrong with my ear, just your tone.” He seemed to be regaining his vitality. “I’ll have you know—”

“Quite a lot, I’ll wager, but before you reacquire your grip on the state of things, I need to know who supplied them, *h’m?* Who?”

“Virtuosity Astrotech, of course,” he said, truly taking in his surroundings for the first time. The Zartician rose with the bluster usually associated with well-bridled panic. “I—I appreciate the candour of your rescue. But t-there are vidcalls I must make.”

“Naturally, old chap, and who are we to stand in the way of fine dining?” The Doctor slapped a drawstring coin purse into the man’s hand. “May you live a long life.”

“May energy shine on you from the Five Suns.”

“And may you call a physician and have yourself checked out for lesions on the brain.”

Whatever confidence the Zartician chef had regained died in a lift-shaft plummet to his chest. He nodded in increasingly rapid cycles before hastening, quite violently, to chase up the *Storm*.

“He didn’t recognise me,” Peri whispered to her friend.

“No...”

“Was that legal tender?”

“*Franc à cheval?*” He cocked an eyebrow. “Fit for a king’s ransom, my dear. Literally. Aika, Dargaud, are your implants the same?”

“From Virtuosity, he means,” Peri clarified.

“Dargaud?” Aika granted permission.

“We supplied our own from Kuwabatake Interstellar Limited,” the shieldmother reported. “Higher-fidelity reception of signals.”

“Vital in our line of work,” concluded the tamer.

“There we are,” the Doctor pointed. “That’s our missing link. Different organisations, supplying different wetware with different designs on their consumers.”

“Right,” Peri understood. “Aika and Dargaud, you weren’t affected, both the others were.”

“People died because of that influence...” The Doctor paced back and forth. “Someone or something from Virtuosity wants this case. That’s their method of dominion. The psychocircuits via lucionic surgery.”

“In that case...” Aika’s shoes slogged against the flooded floor as she circled the flier. “I don’t envy getting swept up in the crowd on the way out.”

Meje shook her head. “No luck there, I’m afraid. That engine block’s creamberry chowder. I can tell from here.”

Something chirped in Aika’s sleeve.

“We’ll remove the plates and wipe down the upholstery for prints,” decided Dargaud.

“Doctor?” Aika tapped him on the shoulder with a handheld communicator. “Tezuhyr and Frobisher are back. They’ve just found your mobile crate. The TARDIS, wasn’t it?”

He absently thumbed a pocket, speaking into the receiver.

“Frobisher? Tezuhyr?”

“Present, Friend Doctor.”

“Listen to me carefully. We believe that whatever temporal distortion is transpiring, it has a direct link with Virtuosity Astrotech and its merchandise. Now, it’s vital that wherever else your trail takes you, you stay away from that organisation. Understood?”

“It’s a bit too late for that, Doc,” replied Frobisher.

“What have you learned?” There was a grave edge to the Time Lord’s voice.

“What’s got an eyestalk, two indicator lights, and goes bump in the night?”

Peri felt the Doctor go cold beside her. The word dropped from his mouth like a neutron bomb.

“Daleks!”

NUCLEOTIDE 7: "Everyone Remembers Spandau-7"

The Red Dalek observed, virtually, the Mandusan authorities' efforts to contain the Gigan attack.

His operatives within the police, local newscasters and even among those who died in the assault were all acting as demanded.

Termination warrants were already being issued.

THE DOCTOR <NONAME> (NON)
PERI <NONAME> (NON)
AIKATERZINE VAS MAGYAR-TELEKI (FILED)
MEJAMINE OSEKI (FILED)
DARGAUD (FILED)
IMPERATIVE: SHOOT TO KILL.

Three were familiar to census records. Two were alien.

Intelligent life proved pernicious, aggressive, but he had one of many distinct disadvantages. The will and questioning nature of the individual was diminished with the application of greater numbers. The fallacy of populism. Numbers, rather than logic, legitimised channels of subjugation. It was a common tactic employed by the Daleks who employed Robomen Controllers to maintain control over their inferiors.

One day, these... *creatures* would learn of the superiority of the Daleks, but for now, it was better to wait until Operation: Mindnet reached its completion.

The Red Dalek deactivated its connection to the main tracking gallery and returned to the activities of the recovery room.

He felt a familiar burning pulse of a killing deferred in his shell's scar.

The Time Lord's arrival during such a critical phase had proved a considerable source of ire. Precautions against his interference were instigated immediately upon identification of the TARDIS time-machine. He was monitored through various operatives throughout the ward. Him and his associates. Such a prominent disruptor, however, commanded meticulous and personal study.

The Red Dalek, however, possessed personal insight. He had last

encountered the Doctor on the planet Voltac, attempting to sabotage the Seismatron, a geographical disturbance machine designed to keep the Voltaciax distracted from the summit-cities of the Urtaka during their aerial assaults.

“Remain!” screeched the Red Dalek. “Remain or you will die!”

“It’s no good,” shouted Machine Head, one of the Freefall Warriors. “He’ll never make it in time!”

The Doctor stumbled, half-blinded by laser fire. His fingers clawed back the ignition switch on the mobile command box. The Voltaciax screamed through the air behind them, its biomechanical lungs perforated with gravel from the avalanche. The platform rocketed up beneath their feet—

The Red Dalek remembered the fall down the newly yawning chasm. Battered on several cliff-face outgrowths, obliterating his hover unit, before main power was cut from his locomotion system.

The ground came suddenly.

Trapped on the canyon floor, for quite some time, Rels passed into megs until each and every tick itself had no meaning. Left as little more than a lump of olive green neuron cell bodies. His nutrients remained in steady supply, his weapons systems defending itself against animal predators and inferior lives while the slow conversion of machine parts began.

The Red Dalek eventually developed a transmitter capable of contacting others of his kind. Daleks searching for survivors who could inform them as to the nature of their defeat on Voltac.

There were four others recovered. He was spared extermination simply by being the sole candidate to survive the temporal journey to Savro Jaida. Sane and salvageable. What’s more, during his long disablement, he had analysed his encounter with the disruptor in great detail. Collated with other skirmishes of the past.

The Red Dalek *knew* the Doctor.

Consequently, the Mandusan reports—delivered by coded pulse to his information retrieval systems—had almost distracted him from the interrogation.

At the moment, there were more immediate problems than the Doctor and his cohort.

Disgust overrode the Red Dalek’s control mechanism. “Be silent!”

The clamped drone’s screams choked back to a gargle.

“It is beginning,” ground the Psyche Dalek.

Nothing from the technical manuals or battle computer relays had

quite prepared the Red Dalek for seeing the enhanced interrogation of the hypnotic arch-puppeteer. Necessary, after the initial lie detector test. The first stage was mechanical verification. The second was telepathic. To set a comparable metric that could be analysed at a later date.

The Red Dalek knew the Psyche Dalek's telepathic abilities were the careful product of drug control. Forced cellular evolution to the point where form outweighed psyche. The Red Dalek adjusted his thermal regulator several times before realising that the chill had come from without. From the Psyche Dalek itself. He could feel it now, doing its work. Making incisions with its scalpel-mind until the lesions bled truth from weeping falsehoods.

The Red Dalek writhed with anticipation.

"It has seen suspicious activity within its Execution Taskforce," reported the Psyche Dalek. "Thought to be a side-effect of time-warp sickness from prolonged exposure to interstitial Time."

"Was the behaviour monitored by the scientific division?"

"Yes. Each Dalek was administered an augmented dose of metaxy."

"How was the anti-vortex stimulant augmented?"

"Unknown. It was issued from the assembly plant to permit further work."

"The effects of the modified drug would have been logged," the Red Dalek realised. It moved closer to their prisoner. "Why was the assembly plant not searched? How was this not foreseen? You will answer!"

Their captive's voice box broke with a fitful shriek. Heaving, ugly noises that transgressed all communication.

"*How?*" the Psyche Dalek repeated.

For a moment, it seemed larger than the Dark Fleet dispatched from Hyperon. Larger than the traitorous claw of Davros. Larger still than the Radiation Range's tallest peak.

The Psyche Dalek split open its victim's mind like a fire axe into the cranium.

It forced its way into the neural pathways of something that called itself loyal and single-minded.

Its victim never questioned. Never wavered. The interloper steamed its way through memories of incubator pains, patrol encounters and fitful exterminations, leaving careless burns of presence on the creature's psyche.

Between the candle and the match, an indescribably violent shape formed in the air above the transparent globe. An apparition distinct from the Psyche Dalek's body and far more terrible. It was foetid, misshapen and in constant motion. Slicing greens. Stabbing yellows. Tearing blacks. Like choking smoke consuming asbestos walls. In the dark, at the focal point, sat primordial, upsetting images that caused even the Dalek prisoner to scream.

Such things were rumoured, but never seen—it was the mind of the Psyche Dalek.

More specifically, perhaps the mind of what lurked at in heart of every Dalek's shadow. The id. Beings unshackled by the limits of their empire. What the Dalek race could become once the corruption of an impure cosmos was swept away.

“Answer?”

The Red Dalek didn't notice the blackening scent from the interrogation subject's grille. The charring burst of flame, clinging to the underside of its dome, rushed forth in seconds. The creature within beat a frantic pulse against its chamber.

The prisoner crumpled. Its protests stopped.

There were residual quivers in its dalekanium fortress, but these were only echoes from the overcharged locomotion system of the machine itself. Hiccuping through its death throes. Once the Psyche Dalek released its grip, then—and only then—was the subject stilled in death.

“It did not know,” the Psyche Dalek concluded.

“Satisfactory. Convey your findings to the scientific division and report further discovery.”

As the force retreated, back into its shell, the Red Dalek could almost feel something else occupy the Psyche Dalek's concerns.

“You have other duties?” asked the Red Dalek.

“How long until the intruder control gas for Command Central has been developed?” the Psyche Dalek replied.

“The Doctor's presence has complicated the composition time of the gas. However, installation is already underway.” A private alert reached the Red Dalek. “Report.”

“Heavy distortion from the dematerialisation of Gallifreyan time-machine.”

“The TARDIS has been reacquired by the Doctor's assault force?”

Aboard the TARDIS, staring into the warp of an ancient hourglass,

Tezuhyr was trying to give each grain of sand a name. He began with the more ostentatious. The grand. The mythological. Slowly, however, he found himself using the names of friends, fellow students... No family, though. He'd never really known anyone that close outside of Meje and... and, well, if he admitted it, Professor Boynton Audley-O'Shea.

The reminder and a chime from the console distracted him.

Huddled underneath, Frobisher had his flippers to his ears.

The whifferdill squeezed his eyes open. "Oh."

"The sledgehammer crash back to reality...?" asked Tezuhyr.

The Doctor slammed open the exterior doors in an avalanche of colour. They cracked grotesquely against the roundelled walls behind them. The TARDIS's two passengers jumped. The time-traveller flipped the Prolixcase up onto the central column and stalked over towards them.

"Of course... Psychocircuitry would be child's play thanks to their Roboman Controllers. Mandusus must be their laboratory. The whole of it. This is it?" the Doctor asked. "This is the only one?"

"The only one we could find, Doc," assured Frobisher.

The Doctor stared into the fallen eyestalk, hands clutched to his lapels.

"What is it?" Tezuhyr asked.

He clenched his teeth. "A feeling, my young friend..."

In Command Central's recovery room, the dying spasms of the Dalek scientist's onboard computers were observed by the Red Dalek and Psyche Dalek. On the vidscreen, the same clutched lapels and defiant stare of the Daleks' most dangerous enemy.

"Just a feeling..." The final image died in a grey-black static.

The scientist reported, *"Communication has been lost with the Dalek scientist."*

"Were final checks on the Psyche Dalek's telepathic pulse successful?" snapped the Red Dalek.

"Its last report confirms success."

"Continue to monitor for the scientist's distress signal. Kill any who may have witnessed its presence in the arcology. Total extermination."

"Request dispatch of Execution Taskforce K-7 to retaliate against the Doctor."

The Red Dalek agreed. "Once the temporal trajectory of the

TARDIS has been re-established.”

“*I obey.*”

“Calculate the new materialisation vector and await further instructions. Where the Doctor and his associates appear, so too will the despatch box. Study their patterns, learn their ways and, once they are within the power of the Daleks—exterminate them all.”

The command net closed and the two Daleks were left with their hateful schemes. One pertinent question eluded the arch-puppeteer.

“The theft of the time-machine does not concern you?”

“No.” The Red Dalek recalled the echoing *vworp-vworp* in the empty canyons of Voltac. “I understand the Time Lord’s mind.”

The Dalek machine, inert and defeated, stretched its sucker arm out as far as it could. Its fingerless nub clawing at the TARDIS floor. To its left, the Doctor held up a length of eel-black piping. The remnants of its gunstick, snaking from the fist-shaped hole in its midsection.

No reaction.

“Dead as a Dal,” said the Doctor. “*Zeg.*”

Frobisher rubbed his fins. “What?”

“It’s an old Dal word meaning ‘worker’ or ‘inventor’. ‘Dalek’ comes from the same language.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning ‘Gods’, Frobisher. What mad fools mistake wicked monsters for. And it’s *here...*” The Doctor dropped the piping in disgust. “Ripped from the cyclopean deep. Here, aboard my TARDIS.”

“Well, y’know, it’s always darkest before it’s pitch black...”

Char on the Dalek’s shell cast acid shadows over the seaweed regorge of the creature inside. Indistinguishable from the mutant itself. Roasted from a glossy-green to an arroyo-brown. Grume bubbles foamed on the edges of its body.

“*In there?*” asked a dubious voice from outside.

Tezuhyr turned. “...Aikaterzine?”

“*Have a look,*” suggested Peri, her arm through the doorway. “*You might be surprised.*”

The Doctor, shoulders arched, was already rattling a tattoo into the console.

When he crossed to punch down the door control, he looked up to see Peri, accompanied by Aika and Dargaud, had already done so.

“I...” Her head to the ceiling, Aika began to laugh. “I can’t believe it! It’s...”

“Unfathomable,” growled the Doctor, uncharitably. “And, in theory, inviolable.”

“Doctor?” Peri’s eyebrows quirked together. With a tilt of the head, she saw the deadened shell. “The Dalek got *inside*? How?”

“I’ve no idea, Peri. No idea at all.” He slapped a toggle on the console. “Hold on!”

Their dematerialisation was ungracious. Pitted and pockmarked with unsteady juddering that sent Meje swinging into Tezuhyr for stability. They held onto one another like Samu bog-wrestlers. The rest of the room ended up sprawled against various items of furniture and the far wall.

“How does it work?” was the mechanic’s first question.

The android smiled. “Intermittently, was Frobisher’s explanation.”

As the floor stabilised, they levelled themselves against the wall.

“I’ve something to tell you...” Meje began.

“I know... I saw the records from Virtuosity,” Tezuhyr confessed.

“They have my friends from the Academy.”

Meje began, “Tez, I know you’ll want to go to them—”

“I cannot,” he shrugged, simply. “I know I cannot. If I do, I put them in... Well, a danger we don’t really understand yet.”

“On the subject of things to be kept safe, about my jetcycle...” Meje frowned.

Frobisher leant around Tezuhyr. “It’s had its day, ace, sorry.”

“Nothing’s irreparable,” she rebuffed. That was, until she saw the mechanical cadaver for herself. The jetcycle in sad repose. “Although, that’s certainly trying its best...”

The TARDIS console chimed again.

Peri hit a switch which opened up a scanner vidscreen in the wall. “Back to the garage?”

“Get the megaputer operating again,” snapped the Doctor to no one, in particular. “I want to check out your mystery signal, Peri.”

“Should we move that outside?” Dargaud pointed to the Dalek.

“No!” The multicoloured pilot spun around, irritable. “The shell will already be emitting a distress signal. Inside the TARDIS, it’s deadened. Take it outside and you’ll be starting a carnival.”

Aika’s eyes narrowed at the machine. “Is that... that... is *it* quite dead?”

“As dead as we can make it,” reassured Frobisher. “The gunstick is inoperable, at least.”

“I understand that no one wants to be the first to say it...” Her attention moved around the assembled group. “Saying it, perhaps, makes it more real, but... That’s from Spandau-7, isn’t it? At the very least, it’s... Well, it’s...”

Aika couldn’t bring herself to say it.

Cadia passed in silence. No one seemed to have the courage to say the name.

Breaking the deadlock, Peri elected to open the doors with a shiver. “The meat locker. I’m sure we will be more comfortable in the main section of the life capsule. Anyone want to join me?”

“I’ll be there in a minute, if that’s alright, perp?” nodded Frobisher.

The two travellers looked at one another. A private conversation, as well as a sheaf of rolled-up papers from the arcology, passed between them. He pulled his ripped mackintosh tight again. A nod.

“I wouldn’t say no to a light supper,” Dargaud tapped her stony fingers together. “Got a larder?”

“I can... Probably arrange something,” Meje nodded.

Dargaud raised an eyebrow at her dubious tone.

“We’re not big eaters here,” she excused.

“Everyone outside. Now.” The Doctor pointed to the doors abruptly. His face was masked with a dark aura. Something akin to anger and violation. He wasn’t taking any social prisoners. Led by Peri, the group made their way from the console room into the garage. The Doctor, holding the Prolixcase in his hand, formed up the rear.

“Fzzzzzzzz...” its speaker hissed.

Looking over his shoulder, Tezuhyr saw Aika reach into her pocket.

“Doctor, would this be any—” The TARDIS’s wooden doors slammed shut. “—use?”

Aika was left holding the briefcase key in her hand.

Somewhere in the quick exodus, the Doctor had discarded the Prolixcase onto the side table next to the necropsied prusten cadaver. Rather than react with fear, disgust or any other emotion, Aika looked wonderingly to Tezuhyr.

“Why?” the green eyes asked.

“A terrible accident,” he answered.

Frobisher, he noticed, was staring hard at the TARDIS. “Doc...” he chided.

The whifferdill decided he’d had enough. He pushed open the doors and walked straight back inside. With all the casual accountability of an old friend. Peri paused in the doorway. She thought of doing the same, but shook her head.

“Let’s look at that signal, like he asked.” She walked to join Meje in the next room.

Neither Tezuhyr, nor Aika felt they could intrude. They were tempted to join Peri’s group in the main garage, but something was keeping them there. An unspoken... *something*.

“Are you here on company business?” asked Tezuhyr.

“A little.” Aika’s fingers glided in thoughtful silence through the prusten’s fur. “Does this link to your vigilante do-gooderism?”

“A little,” he replied.

“We’ve reached the spearhead of our fear, I do think.”

Tezuhyr crossed over to the cadaver. “There is a lot to be afraid of with the...”

“Yes,” Aika cut him off.

The Prolixcase crackled, feebly. “Xxxxzyzzxxx...”

Tezuhyr watched her begin to search the room, asking, “What do you hope to achieve this evening?”

“Cheat fear.” Aika pulled and replaced a series of drawers on the wall.

“You cannot.” The android shook his head. “Not forever. Fear returns for you tomorrow. I know this from experience.”

“I don’t think I can ever get you to understand.” Eyes studied him for a moment, then she inquired, “Don’t you ever get...” she fished for the word, “hungry?”

“I...” Tezuhyr fumbled, “possess chemoreceptors?”

“That’s not quite the same thing,” she smiled. “Don’t misunderstand, I don’t mean hungry in the sense that Dargaud means. Hungry in the sense of wanting more. Dreaming for more. Reaching for more. Does that spark ever come to you?”

Tezuhyr’s face pinched, quizzical. “I... am enough. Although, there are moments that generate a reaction synonymous with surprise. That response is processed and allotted to my programming. I... am capable of learning.”

Aika scratched her cheek with the briefcase key. “What then is your

solution to fear?”

“To overcome fear, you must embrace it,” he answered, simply.

“I see.” Aika gestured to the Prolixcase. “Do you understand what this is?”

He shook his head gently.

“Fear.” She placed the burbling briefcase key against the lock.

A warm, almost tropical glow greeted the Doctor as he opened the first of two doors in the TARDIS.

Peri’s room rekindled old memories of a plant nursery he’d visited in Stockbridge.

The far wall, nestled around an alcove—fitting vinyls of Elton John and Walkman cassettes of *Clannad*—held the young lady’s pride and joy. A circlet of shelves dedicated to the various plant specimens and species she’d uprooted in course of the TARDIS’s cosmic voyages. All hydroponically sustained. Healthy as when they were first discovered.

Ordinarily, the Doctor would have smirked. He’d given Peri some of his own botanical inventory from his younger lives. When he’d studied more acutely, typically in laboratory conditions, the plant and soil samples of those pebble worlds.

Instead, his eyes stabbed at her desk, adorned by a small bell-jar garden of propagated plants.

The heat lamp from the solarium glowed with an uninterrupted certainty.

He moved onto the second room. The dry Antarctic air would have given the Earth explorer Oates pause, but the Doctor simply readjusted his overcoat. Whereas the other room had all the makings of a flat, Frobisher’s digs were closer to a bedsit the Doctor had once staked out in Soho.

There was an authentic Persian rug, coddling a partially dismembered cast-iron chandelier. Its cracked phosphor lamps glowed with a lazy fog-green hue. Beside them, a bottle of discoloured lens cleaner next to the heated reels of an Intra-Venus dictaphone; still spinning the latest Venerate potboiler, *A Coffin for Dravidia*, the Doctor had suggested from the library. The Doctor’s fingers rapped at the door-handle. He could see Frobisher had taken up his suggestion and gotten *The Perennial Ivan Asimoff* off the shelf, as well.

Nothing was disturbed here, either.

The Doctor felt a tightness in his hearts. So the Daleks had maintained their interest predominantly in the console room. He didn't know whether to be relieved or more distressed.

Something jabbed into his spine gently, "Doc?"

He leapt and spun around to face Frobisher.

"*Dalek*," snarled the Doctor. "Why is everyone so frightened of the word? In the console room, within the inviolable confines of *my* Ship, is a *Dalek*. A *Dalek*. Face it. Or be destroyed by fear of it."

The gumshoe was silent for a moment, then, "Everyone remembers Spandau-7 in this zone of space, Doc. Not to mention Moli Velaine... Teth... Lirrip—"

"And what about you?"

"Me?"

"*You*," he jabbed his diminutive friend in the chest feathers. "We all have our secrets, but when did the word 'Dalek' contaminate your lives—life, Frobisher?"

"I was eight when we received word from Spandau-7," the whifferdill began.

Back when Frobisher's dough mitts sat rough against the roof gutter in Vlazerev. At home on Xenon. A row of Telefax screens chattering neon blue disasters to passersby like ticker tape. Each nightward warning like a bark of doomsday from a soup kitchen soapbox.

Frobisher continued, "The apex species on that world were so thoroughly blasted from existence that all we ever got were computer-generated projections of their most likely appearance. Nothing concrete beyond scraps of literature. Come to think of it, there was a word for the Daleks there, though. Unpronounceable or at least, I can't flex my beak around it. Shortly translated, it means—"

"The alchemists of fear'." The Doctor studied him.

"Those who'd turned those firestorm hills to salted plains, who stole their children, who burned their homes, who lied to their people, who butchered every creed alike for daring to be unlike." Frobisher caught his friend's eye. "And they came here into our home, I'm sorry."

The Doctor thumped his fist against the wall. "I should've followed my own wisdom. Something was wrong with Time. I should have naturally anticipated that the TARDIS would be in danger."

“So, what’s actually in the case?” asked Frobisher

“Blood.” The Doctor’s hand stiffened on his lapel. “Thick as Somme mud and twice as dark. If we’re dealing with Daleks, it’s the blood of however many people led to our Prolixcase ending up in a small alleyway in Goda Ward. My imagination abhors the possibilities...”

He felt a wet pinch against his hand and raised it from his lapel. His thumb had drawn blood against the pointed ears of the blue-eyed Siamese on his brooch.

“Jeez, Doc...” Frobisher tutted. “You don’t always have to live life like a Neptunian grand opera, y’know? We know the dangers as much as you do.”

The Doctor raised an eyebrow with a wide smirk. “You’re a shrewd polymorphic shape-shifter in your moments. You’re certain you didn’t see anything, nor hear anything during your encounter?”

“The Dalek out there reported to a Red Dalek—”

“*Mm*, important, but no,” the Doctor quibbled, “rather anything to do directly with the TARDIS.”

“Blind and deaf, me.” Frobisher shrugged, smiling. “We were lucky to get out of it alive.”

“Well, I’m running a fault location scan now. If there’s any immediate issue, it should register on a console readout.” He squeezed shut his open wound. “Still, I’d prefer something a bit more concrete to pursue. What were the circumstances of the altercation?”

“Eyewitness accounts are notoriously sketchy,” demurred Frobisher.

The Doctor rolled a touting hand. “But you do have something?”

“I can tell you we had to push it from the doorway to start the Ship.” The penguin closed his eyes, pressing a flipper to his beak. “Makes you wonder what it could’ve been up to on its way out, doesn’t it?”

“Describe it.”

“You know what—”

“Frobisher,” insisted the Doctor.

He sighed. “Reflective silver with black orbs. Two red lights on the top, shaped like ovals, its eyestalk focused tight—” His eyes snapped open. “Hey, I’d forgotten about that!”

“Tight on what?”

“It was carrying a box,” Frobisher answered, excited. “Something

about the size of my head.”

“Could you see anything inside it?”

“It got blown to pieces when we destroyed that Dalek. It was a foam-lined container for something...” He struggled. “I don’t know. Scientific, maybe? That’s all I remember.”

“Add to that, also...” The Doctor ushered Frobisher through from the sitting room into the outer corridor. “They were able to pinpoint the TARDIS’s geographical location, they weren’t confident about operating her dematerialisation protocols. What does that tell you?”

“That, for one reason or another, it was better to get her on the back of a lorry. Transport her conventionally. Knowing you, knowing the Daleks... Either they thought it was too much of a risk to try activating the power system—”

“And so they should worry.” The Doctor raised his nose. “There are mechanisms in place to prevent hostile action of that vein.”

“—or they thought the TARDIS would interfere too much with another operation they had in place.”

He lowered his head. “Something disturbed by time-warps?”

“What, too crazy?”

“It’s more feasible than you realise. The major source of such phenomena would be a time-machine.” The Doctor seemed to almost hunch. “An *active* time-machine. One being used at this very moment.”

“Connected to the Daleks?” Frobisher almost popped with alarm. “*That’s* a secret they keep for the upper crust.”

“Privileges of a best enemy, Frobisher,” the Doctor remarked.

But the whifferrill could see the dangerous gleam beneath his friend’s heavy brow.

Peri spent a few minutes checking Troubadour Zipway outside and the launch tube below. Monitoring for any sign of the Daleks. After a quarter of an hour, her group had sealed Wheezy’s Garage and settled into siege conditions.

A annoy in the zipway whistled. “*Curfew is now in effect.*”

Meje busied herself away at the megaputer. Dargaud rummaged around for a power outlet for the hotplate taken from the life capsule’s repurposed food station.

Nearby, Peri took the opportunity to relax. Her bare ankles felt cool against the floor of the retrofitted life capsule as she studied a

deck of cards.

“Alright.” She pulled her ankles tight as Dargaud joined her. “I’ve committed the cards well enough to memory. Now, what?”

“Now...” Dargaud plugged in the hotplate. “We play the game, I suppose. Although, I’m not sure, why...”

“I’m terrible at waiting around to die.”

“*Ai*,” nodded the shieldmother as she dealt the cards.

The roughshod atmosphere reminded Peri of being out on that paddle-steamer in the seas of Zazz.

Those last few moments, as the tide rose from the column of fire on the island. An aftershock of steaming salt. She felt an apple grow in her throat. Raw dread. As hot as the phosphorous-white of the explosion. The seafoam rising higher than the peak of the paddlewheel.

All they had to do now was wait for the crush.

“Four... Five...” counted Dargaud.

Peri teetered from one knee to the other, biding her time, thinking. “Meje, you’re sure these are Major Arcana?”

“Passed down from my father and rarely does it ever lie.” She offered a non-committal shrug. “To me, anyway. Shouldn’t you be looking at those papers?”

“I’m not sure how floor plans can help us, at the moment. This’ll help me think...” Peri picked up one of the face-down cards from the packet and stuck it onto her forehead. “Haven’t played with a decent set of tarot since... Greece, maybe. You’re sure I can’t help?”

Meje shook her head. “It’s easier to concentrate on my own.”

“Alright, as you say.” The card’s laminate, cool against Peri’s skin, began to attract a layer of condensation from the steaming hotplate. “That’s got quite an aroma, Dargaud.”

“One of a handful of mean zipway delicacies that Mandusus Chi is known for,” she salivated. “A mazuma-vendor meal. Excellent for new arrivals. New Ebok style.”

“Could I...?” ventured the botanist.

Dargaud chewed a portly thumb. “You’re playing the game, aren’t you?”

“That figures.” Peri rolled her tongue against her teeth. “What’s in it? All the basic nutrients for life?”

“Oh, lots of things.” Dargaud counted on her fingers, “A protein brick, a boiled appledew, two cans of Cusack’s nous soup, half a

cistern of PolyCheeze...”

“Hence, the kick,” Meje mumbled from her station.

“All poured together into a delightful pile.” Dargaud tapped her stomach with satisfaction. “Protein fit for a heavyworlder. Passed through the shieldmother line for generations.”

Peri caught another whiff and couldn’t help but think of eating chowder and crab cakes on the picnic tables in Fell’s Point. Mom’s favourites during the botanist’s upbringing in Baltimore.

“Your Dad’s kept these tarot in remarkable condition, Meje,” said Peri.

“They were one of his few pleasures outside of, well...” Meje flicked a switch on the megaputer, “Not eating, but certainly *preparing* a luncheon.”

“A planner, not a builder, huh?” asked Peri.

Meje laughed. “*Sey*, it’s true... Father could be an astonishing cook under the right circumstances. Unfortunately, he had a tendency to work overtime in the mortuary to the exclusion of all else.”

“All work and no play... Speaking of which,” Peri settled in. “Are we going to start?”

“Whenever you’re ready,” urged Dargaud.

She tapped the card on her forehead. “Am I... ‘the Spectre?’”

“No.” Dargaud directed her question to Meje. “Who looked after you if not your father?”

“Oh, I was never neglected and the morgue would be the perfect place to gain a fascination for how things work. Musculature. Eye fluid. Embalming practices. That sort of thing. I was just...”

“Dismayed?” offered Peri.

“That’s not a card in the ta’Alembert deck,” Dargaud prodded her soup.

Peri sighed. “Well, at least offer me some hints.”

“Intrigued,” Meje answered. “I was intrigued. Have you ever seen the mummification rituals used on Warworld? The mechanics of bodies are fascinating, but living matter is so...” she pinched her fingers in the air as though pulling tendons and stretched the vowel in, “*slick*.”

“*Ick*,” the botanist wrinkled her nose. “Hence, mechanic, I guess. All the requisite practice with none of the yuck.”

“Yuck?” smiled Meje.

“It’s a kind of topsail,” Peri quipped. “Dargaud, am I ‘over it?’”

“I’d say that’s your judgement call to make.”

The botanist peeled the card from her face. “This game stinks. How’s yours?”

Dargaud shrugged her shoulders and scooped up the bowl of meaty pastry soup from the live hotplate. Peri nearly shouted, but stifled the opening syllable with a hand. The heat, and assumably the pain, didn’t seem to affect Dargaud in the slightest.

“Quite done,” assessed the shieldmother, calmly. “I’ll wager.”

“Well, that’s good...” Peri replied, dazed.

“Likewise here.” Meje wrinkled her brow at her station. “I’ve had the opportunity to concentrate, now that the door is locked.”

“I still rather resent that,” sniffed Dargaud through mouthfuls. “I do not go snooping. I’m not a snooper. Ask anyone.”

Peri approached Meje’s slouch of electronic gadgetry. “What are you looking for exactly in this signal?”

“I’m looking for a comms-squirt,” Meje scratched her head.

“That’s, *sey*, a communications packet, in lay-language. Something that can be delivered through the mindcasts like a bulletin on a noticeboard.”

“I get you.” She nodded. “Back home, a phone call only works by a series of audio tones sounded into the lines.”

Meje looked at Peri as though she lived in a treehouse. “Similar. This packet is particularly formidable as it has the same prefix code, but keeps jumping ciphers without a care in the Universe. Always received. Always visible wherever it goes.”

“So, you got curious?”

“If we can receive it, it’s not an official squirt, which means they have encryption and capacity on par with that of the police or...” Meje shifted her weight, “or the Corporate Cluster.”

Peri understood the implications well enough.

“You think it’s coming from the Daleks, don’t you?” she asked.

In the TARDIS, down the hallway leading from the power chambers, the Doctor and Frobisher began what the pair might have generously agreed to call a stroll. To an outsider, it resembled more a near-sprint.

“The power cells, the energy distributor, the emergency booster...” The Doctor’s hands were in his pockets. “That’s the lot.”

“Nothing immediately catches the eye, Doc,” shrugged the

gumshoe.

“No... I don’t see any spy devices or override mechanisms that could slave us to another time-machine.”

“Right, right, and this would be a ship *directly* controlled by the Daleks?”

“Correct.”

Used to wheels within wheels, the idea left the gumshoe uneasy. “Doc, how often do they use these machines? Could they be operating right now? For how long?”

“Too long, whatever their use. I don’t like to think the damage they’ve done already,” frowned the Doctor. “Mind you, the power requirements to sustain such time-machines are gargantuan. They’d have to be very discerning in its usage.”

“How gargantuan are we talking? Storage cells the size of space amoebæ?”

“Well, there was a time, my penguin chum, where the only place you’d find flawless enough zeiton crystals for a TARDIS were back home. Heavily rationed, of course.”

“Course,” Frobisher sounded dubious. “Sounds like Conglomerate bendium.”

“Or De Beers diamonds,” the Doctor scratched his ear. “Rumours abound over whether the scarcity was down to the scientists, enforcing the shortage for political capital, or if there really was a legitimate lack of the element.”

“Do they form naturally on Gallifrey?”

“In deep-time rents beneath the planet’s crust. Not unlike high-pressure seams in the ocean floor. Zeiton are to vortex crystals what diamonds are to white sapphires.”

“If we’re going to be digging around for sabotage, you might as well have told me what they look like.”

“I had other things on my mind, Frobisher. I haven’t told you?”

“You might’ve told Peri.”

“*Ab*, yes, after Varos when she helped me swap over the spent zeiton,” he deflected. “*H’m*, well, zeiton crystals are a sort of holly-green coral that delights in confounding even the brightest of minds. The best transmineralogists have spent millennia trying to develop a synthetic alternative.”

“None the wiser?”

“Fortune foundered the fickle. Mind you,” singsonged the

enigmatic rover, “there are exceptions to every monopoly if one knows where to look...”

“Doc, do you suppose that’s why the Dalek was here?”

“To harvest enough vortex crystals for their own vessels? Plausible, and yet...”

Frobisher ticked his mouth. “Why send one Dalek to the TARDIS when it would be better to send a squadron?”

“I think we have a rather ugly investigation ahead of us, Frobisher old chap,” the Doctor frowned. “We need to unseal that shell and have a rummage around inside.”

“It’s not a dustbin, Doc.”

“But like any good dustbin, it contains a multitude of smelly secrets and rancid enigmas. Have faith, Frobisher.”

Frobisher smirked. “You’ve only led me astray with the best of intentions?”

“Naturally, naturally.” The Doctor’s face tickled with a grin.

Peri unfurled Frobisher’s sheaf of papers onto the floor. The material itself was transparent. Not unlike plastic. The inked lines, however, glowed with an iridescent red that threatened to leave pale shadows on the interior of the botanist’s eyelids.

Meje pulled off her headset, curious. “I thought you said there wasn’t anything to those?”

“Maybe there is. You’ve given me an idea. What would you need in a communications room to make it operable?”

“*Sey*, I’m more fliers, Peri.”

“And I’m a plant scientist, but people still ask me about rocks.” She tapped the map. “Try anyway, Meje.”

“Well...” she pursed her lips with a shrug. “They’d need a control terminal, vidscreens, translation equipment, an antenna to catch the signal...”

“Sure, but how would you reach any of that?”

“All of it would be allocated to the room itself. Untraceable. Except...” she leant forward. “Except you’d need a crawl-way to the antennæ for maintenance. Very distinctive.”

Their eyes swept at the cross-sections of higher floors in the complex.

“There,” said Meje. “Something like that. We follow that to its natural end up above. Not there... Not there either... No... That

leaves...”

“*Ha!*” Peri grinned. “There’s the aerial. A ‘Virtuosity CCB3702 relay-booster mast’.”

“That would do it. It’s capable of receiving both mindcast and transceiver waves.” The mechanic peered at it. “Looks like someone wanted to replace corroded elements in it. The parts don’t quite fit.”

“Where’s that?”

“This bit of poulet scratch. ‘New Grade-E dampers in magnecell Q14-X01-AA to here. Use Iman; for Hate’s sake, fire Rotulle.’ Yesterday’s date is there.”

Peri stood up.

“Surely, you’ve got something in here to overcome someone else’s slapdash job? Collector like you...?” she let the challenge rest in the air.

Meje loosed one of her bohemian laughs and leant past Peri to the comatose Nuka-ki jetcycle, nestled on the vehicle hoist. She tapped the old Virtuosity-brand cassette deck. “I thought so.”

“What is it?”

“Frobisher and Tezuhyr must have hit the auto-scanner when they visited the arcology. It’s still tuned in. Disconnect the headset for me, we’ve got our way in.”

Peri felt a tap on her shoulder. Dargaud passed her the mystery tarot card with a fanged grin.

It was ‘*The Diviner*’.

Searchlights flashed across the windows of the garage above.

NUCLEOTIDE 8: "The Canal Route"

The Doctor and Frobisher were unaffected by the cold of the garage's makeshift necropsy room. Pale currents of mist settled against the icy steel levitrolley. Frost collected in the furrows of the prusten decedent.

Sat next to it, on a small table cleared of equipment, was the open mouth of the Prolixcase.

"It's a computer terminal," Frobisher observed.

Accompanied by a miniaturised printer and VDU for external access. All embedded into the end of its luggable innards. The keyboard was fixed in the detachable lid beneath the handle

"Its secrets now bare for all to peruse." The Doctor's expression changed. "Ye Gallifrey... Is that what I think it is?"

"I think so, *mysir*." Tezuhyr proffered the uniquely-patterned paper. "To read these, I need a Flight Control security clearance so high, I have to dismember myself if I remember having it."

The Doctor snatched away the paper. He frowned, wiping his hand on his overcoat, before flicking through the black flexiback pages.

"*I will remain disarmed for thirteen cadia.*" The case's damaged speaker burred. "*Thirteen cadia remaining.*"

"Back with us?" asked the Doctor.

Aika put down the soldering iron. "Intermittently."

Frobisher furrowed his brow at the collection of print-outs. The Doctor leant down. Reading through the transparent page from behind, Frobisher felt the feathers on his neck stand on end at the first line of text.

He swallowed. "No kidding? Is that...?"

"It's a despatch box," confirmed the Doctor. "You are looking at a Federation-issue despatch box, used to transport encoded information to the Government of an allied planetoid. No wonder everyone was after it!"

Aika took the pages, her voice brimming with excitement. "I knew it had to be something."

"This is more than *something*, Aika..." He gestured to the VDU of the case. "Star charts, authorisation memos, with all this we'd have the power to alter the course of Mandusus. Quite literally. Where

were you supposed to take this? I assume not the Astrogator in Flight Control?”

“No, back to the Virtuosity arcology,” she replied.

“Back?”

“Yes...” Her eyes glittered with realisation. “They did say ‘back’. It must’ve been there once already.”

“And you? Tell me, my little *condotierre*,” he rounded on her, “*did* you know you were in the employ of the Daleks?”

“Don’t be an idiot!” Aika swallowed, mouth levering open with a gentle shake. “Do you think we knew? Any of us...?”

He softened. “Then, I’m sorry. You’re in more danger than you can possibly imagine.”

She nodded. “We always take precautions, but this time... It wasn’t enough.”

“It couldn’t have been. Sounds as though there was more to it than just following orders, though.”

Her mouth opened soundlessly. She looked to Tezuhyr.

“You can trust him,” he said.

Aika sighed. “Anyone can be manacled, these days, Doctor. It needn’t necessarily be in iron.” From her purse, she drew out a few flimsy panes of intaglio-printed polyplastoid. “They pay us in script.”

“A Virtuosity fund for Virtuosity outlets run by Virtuosity employees.” The Doctor understood the principle. “All internalised. No chance of escape. Immoral bureaucracy, I’ve always detested it.”

“Worse than that, it should be illegal,” Frobisher creased.

“It is illegal,” confirmed Tezuhyr. “For all that matters.”

“But we’ve no avenue to dispute it.” Aika’s words could slice open steel. “This box could’ve done it for us. Cut through their accordance. If only...”

“If only your employers hadn’t been the Daleks,” concluded the Doctor.

“Yes. They don’t give a damn about the money.”

“It’s just an effective means of subjugation. A time-honoured practice, unfortunately.” The Doctor’s face lightened. “Time... The dates. Despatch box, I’d like you to report on the interval between the beginning of current dispatch and the previous instance held in record.”

“I’m restricted in my ability to relay that information accurately.”

The Doctor chewed his lower lip. “You mean, you’d lie?”

“*Lie* is such a strong word...”

“Give me... The present-day stellar usance, then,” he persisted. “Just the dawn-sight star of your current dispatch.”

“Pardon?” asked Frobisher.

The Doctor gave him a look, then tapped the dispatch box. “The present day.”

“*Eruditānik, 8107. Entry orbit. Contemporary time,*” answered the Prolixcase.

“Well, that’s not right. We arrived in Savapandit’s orbit only a short time ago.”

“*You’re mistaken.*”

“The Doctor is not,” bobbed Tezuhyr’s head.

“As these documents will attest in their own right, you see.” The Doctor brought up the computer record. “Genuine. Impossible to imitate. It takes 300 solar rotations for a new course to be selected. Can you explain the discrepancy?”

The case buzzed with an affectation that might have taken as an “*Oh...*” or its nearest equivalent. “*Can you prove what you’re saying?*”

The Doctor swept his arm through the open TARDIS door to inside the console room.

On one of the opposing wall panels was a glowing LED counter. Each digit the size of a house-builder’s cinder block calculating the decay of a perfectly and perpetually suspended singularity. A step beyond the atomic clocks used to measure the passage of Time elsewhere.

Frobisher had only seen something like it in the Doomsday Clock at Amtor.

“The Chronometer of Absolute Time is inviolable,” the rover assured the box. “Failing that, Prolixcase, I’ll give you the opportunity to calculate the constellations from outside.”

A small patch of ridged lights cycled on the case’s side.

“*Unnecessary.*”

“Then, you know that you, my dear Prolixcase, are a product of Mandusus’s past.” The Doctor folded his self-satisfied arms. “I think you were intended to be delivered personally to Flight Control after your secret layover in the Virtuosity arcology and *that* we can use to our advantage.”

“Doctor!” Peri practically flew through the outer doors on a gale of excitement. “We’ve got it! I don’t know how, freak accident

probably, but—”

“Peri... Peri! Slow down,” allayed the Doctor. “Tell me what you’ve discovered.”

She gulped down a breath. “We think we’ve got access to a Dalek carrier-beam.”

“Did you say...?”

“Yeah.”

“Their Master’s Voice,” he rubbed his fingers together. “How uncharacteristically meretricious of them. Why are you so out of breath?”

“Just came down from the roof, readjusting the aerial.” She rested against the console and exhaled. “*Whem*. It looks like *Coat Hanger* by Michælangelo.”

“Ah, where better to hide a tree than in a forest?” mused the Doctor.

“So,” measured Tezuhyr, “we’ll be able to hear them coming now.”

“Yes. And, perhaps, not just hear.” The Doctor ran a finger across his muzzle, his focus returning to the extremophile in the room. The Dalek maintained its gruesome air even in death. However, even then, it possessed an unusually pristine quality to it. A rictus of biomechanical life that almost tricked the eye into believing it were still alive.

“A wire brush to clear the flash-fried offal from between the dome and the grille...” The Doctor’s tone was musing. “A magnetic clamp to disarm a few of the anti-handling mechanisms... Ply out the recognition codes...”

Frobisher nudged Peri. “You recognise it?”

“The look? *His* look?” she replied.

The penguin nodded.

The Doctor mumbled, “We can determine specifics from the prusten and despatch box with the temporal spectrograph in the TARDIS... Yes, I think that’d work...”

“What specifics?” Aika tilted her head.

“Travelordinates, Aika. Travelordinates. We can follow its time path back to its nearest point of contact. After its home time-zone, but before it arrived here. That missing gap.” The Doctor continued to scheme. “We’ll need to tune into that transceiver mindcast and wire it through with some assistance from you, Tezuhyr. Think you—” the Doctor paused, strangely for a moment, an eye

momentarily flickering to the smear on his overcoat, “—can reprogram a Dalek battle computer?”

The android nodded. “I can try, *mysir*.”

“What are you up to, Doctor?” Peri asked.

She followed his stare to Frobisher who, in turn, was giving himself the most self-conscious appraisal she’d ever seen from the shape-shifter.

“Oh, wait...” The idea clicked in her brain. “Wait, are you...?”

Frobisher sounded eager. “It could work, y’know, perp.”

Wreathed in possibilities, the Doctor’s trickster grin played merry hell with his companions’ dawning realisation. In conspiracy there were three.

Tezuhyr asked, “What is it?”

For the benefit of the others present, the Doctor elaborated.

“Tonight, with venomous intent, we are going to join the ranks of the Daleks.”

Minmay Bay glistened in the starlight like some interstellar highway. The spotlights of the Corporate Cluster sneered down, throwing shapes against the water’s surface. It was impossible to escape the ambient thrum of the ward, but at the dockside, hidden beneath layers of neglect, the cityscape pretended to turn a blind eye.

In the bioluminescence growing in the graffiti paint, light from the Zaha hoverlorry’s headlamps gathered into a subtle glow. Black-light and gently beautiful. The hoverlorry hunched, idle like a smoking bear, in the alleyway. Its chugging lines harrumphing on a ragged purr.

Meje and Dargaud had been tempted to take to the airways. As with any other commuter. Meje, however, didn’t trust the old jalopy to sustain its Meissner units. There was no telling where a poorly-timed gear change would upend them into the water. Plus, there was also the added benefit of a surreptitious journey. It allowed them to avoid any surveillance trackers set up to monitor air traffic.

Dargaud engaged the wipers to smudge clear the salt winds from the bay outside.

Meje rolled her head. “I can feel it between my teeth...”

The shieldmother raised a hand from the steering yoke to scratch her back. “My fur’s beginning to itch...”

“You know, long time ago—”

“How long?” asked Dargaud.

The mechanic puzzled. “It’s 8187 now by the Galactic Calendar, so that would be... Eighty-years? *Long* time ago, the lake used to cause rashes and burns on the skin.”

“Oh, how delightful.”

“Oh, yes.” Meje blew a raspberry. “Product of the heat and salinity.”

“Sounds like early teething troubles with weather control,” Dargaud hummed, disconcerted. “What a way to ruin a perfectly good body. I take it there are ways around it?”

“Body butter and motorised water-sleds helped, apparently, but it explains why no one’s still willing to go swimming. Especially on a mirror day. Must be something like an ancestral memory.”

“How do you know all this?”

Meje smiled. “It was a family business.”

“The Oseki?” asked Dargaud.

“That’s right. They were one of a handful to harvest in excess of sixty-thousand metric tonnes of salt from the basin during the Pratihalent II era.”

“Must have been tough work.”

“You would have been perfect for it. In days past, the whole thing was buoyant enough that any attempt to dive simply raised the body back up.”

“*Oohm*, I think I’ll pass. It’s a disconcerting line of work, really,” pattered Dargaud. “Water that flays you alive.”

Meje pulled her arms behind her head. “No pleasure beach to retire, either.”

“No, just sheer cliffs.”

“Somewhere around here, *sey*...”

Through the alleyway, the Zaha came to a grumbling slow halt at the top of the dockside’s retaining wall. Though, one could easily have been fooled otherwise. In theory, they were meant to be looking down. However, the whole thing looked otherwise level. It was hidden, quite thoroughly, behind a hodgepodge of food scraps, upturned burner bins and bramble patches of broken ale bottles.

The refitted gearbox in the levilorry ground an unhappy tune under Dargaud’s instruction.

Diligently, Meje rolled up her window.

It took only a nudge from the bumper bar to send the trellis of

garbage tumbling into the sea.

Dargaud killed the engine. Taking in the sheer incline, the distance smeared by the filthy windbubble, Meje seemed to almost sway with vertigo.

The two climbed from each side of the driver's cabin. Boots crunched atop the spent leavings of Mandusus inhabitants. They levered open the back doors and lowered their tarp-covered cargo to the zipway.

The incognito soon-to-be jetsam hit the ground with the slow jostle of a hovercraft's air cushion.

"Easy to forget, isn't it?" noted Meje, tugging on one of the arms.

Dargaud rotated herself behind their burden. "How's that?"

"We don't even have the salt piles any more."

"They're just a diamond memory."

"Sometimes, though, I feel like I can almost..." she grasped with her fingers, "taste it. In the air."

"The history of the place, you mean?"

"I suppose you think that's wildly irrational..." she sighed.

"Mmmmm..." Dargaud gave an almighty shove, starting the object forward on a slow trudge. The shieldmother's head danced an equivocating gesture. "Perhaps, perhaps not. Then again, who am I to say either way?"

"You're worryingly servile."

"You're confusing servility with loyalty, *stroika*."

"Now, I'm curious," Meje swung her head. "Why do you work for her? Aika, I mean."

"Why do you work for R Tezuhyr?" replied Dargaud.

She flicked an eyebrow. "Together, on three? One... two..."

"Friendship," they answered together.

Dargaud tongued her canines. "Irreconcilable viewpoints."

"Yes..." Meje spun back around and continued pulling their cargo. "Shame."

They reached the curb of the cliff's edge. The cap block was all that separated them from the bruising waves below.

Meje shook her head to clear it. The mulberry purple-blacks of the restless surface were fathomless in depth. The two women held the dome-headed tower, level with their faces, one on each side.

Hunched canvas rippled in khaki against the cutting breeze.

Together, they must have looked like children about to toss over a

steel wagon.

Meje tapped it on the object's dome. "Ready?"

Silence replied.

"I don't think he heard me."

Dargaud brought her fist down on the same spot. "You ready?"

The thing squirmed under their grasp for a moment before a hollow *thrak-thrak* answered back.

"That's a yes," Meje wiped her forehead. "Alright..."

"Careful not to hit anything on the way down."

"We'll be... *kchb*, lucky to get it over... the... *edge*." The muscles in the mechanic's arms burned as she lifted their cargo. "Jings—if you're not lifting, we're going to have words, you and I..."

"Legs, not arms," the shieldmother noted, daintily.

"*Shift*, you—!"

When Meje was very young—and perhaps a tad bit foolish—she'd pulled a locker to the top of a stairwell, tied together the doors and rode down in it like a toboggan. There was a noise, a hiccuping burp of impacting metal the locker made as it struck that first step and cantilevered out from beneath her. The locker had pitched end over end until it crashed with an almighty thud at the bottom. *She* was left on the steps. Bruised, frightened to tears, but alive.

Now, as the freed Dalek flew clear of its tarpaulin covering, it smacked against its dodgem rim and span in a dizzying circle across outlets and bricked ledges. She could almost feel the mind inside rattling against its cage. A nauseating blood-red experience. It slid for twenty metres before striking the bottom lip and upending into the bay.

The thunderous splash came almost as a relief.

"Jinging noise...!" growled Meje.

"I wonder if he's alright? The plan only works if we haven't killed him..."

She slapped the shieldmother on the arm. "Back in the levilorry before someone comes to have a look. C'mon, go."

Neither one looked back as they climbed into the forward compartment of the Zaha levilorry. The engine turned over, their brake lights again startling the iridescent graffiti on the way out. Meje considered switching on the radio, but decided against it. It was too easy for them to attract unnecessary attention. Dargaud thumbed the cap from her handheld communicator and began speaking.

Try as they might to ignore it, they could both thought they could still hear it. Even over the engine.

Water hissed in a fine spray as the Dalek machine slowly sank beneath the bay.

Plup-crubrrp-drup... Plup-crubrrp-drup...

Beneath her, Peri felt the gondola cut through the night like a knife.

Sat, in front of her, Aika's voice was a whisper. "If all goes well, Danny Boy, we'll link up with the levilorry and return to base."

"*Be on your guard, Broadsword,*" replied the Doctor. "*The Daleks have more up their tentacles than your average laser bolt. And Miss Beige?*"

Peri perked up. "Yes?"

"*Do as I would do, but more so.*"

"You make it sound like a suggestion."

"*Think of it as another lesson.*"

Peri's hands tightened around the oar. "Don't get yourself killed either, alright? If nothing else, I'd be really upset."

"*Try to be inconspicuous.*"

Wanted posters were sadly not an unusual occurrence in Peri's time with the Doctor. She found Frobisher tended to photograph best. Every time she saw one, though, it sent a spike of apprehension up her spine. Every second glance, every private gossiping word looked like trouble. They couldn't all be, but it was hard telling friend from foe. They needed a solution that didn't stray too far into the public eye.

To wit, the Doctor had fished an oar from the TARDIS with the phrase, "*Sophistication and subtlety needn't go hand in hand.*"

And he'd been right, in this case. In the aftermath of Gigan, all eyes were on high-tech gizmos. Gaudy gadgets that turned kids toys into murder weapons. No one was looking for a hand-powered boat piloted by a California State undergraduate on a tour of Minmay Bay for a Virtuosity talent scout.

"Hey, no worries." Peri answered. "Back home, this might've qualified as a weekend away, rather than a careful subterfuge."

There was a pause. "*I have to go. Take care, place value on your own lives. Remember, the contingency is there should you ever need it. Danny Boy out.*"

"Broadsword out." Aika capped the handheld communicator. "You know the Flight Control floor plan?"

Peri nodded. "Well enough."

It was all there, taken during Frobisher and Tezuhyr's joint burglary and crammed into her head with the megaputer before starsight had fallen. Peri hadn't been so wired since California State. In an odd sort of way, she missed the feeling. In the same way that she'd missed her favourite swing at the playground or the cabinet where she'd ferret snacks on her Dad's ship. A numb sort of longing on the edge of memory.

She scratched her temple, shaking the thought away. There were more important things to be worried about. It had only been a glimpse, but Tezuhyr had pulled the medical records of workers in the loading bay area. Sealed, initially. It had taken the Doctor a few hours to crack them open.

When cross-referenced, a large percentile produced one commonality—chronic illness. Death by hæmorrhagic fever or, at least, that was the story. Something possibly linked to their Virtuosity psychocircuits. The inconvenient had all died in the zipway, at home or in a hospital bed. None the wiser. Every link between them and their employer was suppressed.

Peri had felt sick. Worse, she felt angry.

None of them had known what was happening to them until it was too late. They were just wound up like tin soldiers, sent to work and returned without knowing what monstrous thing the Daleks had set them to do.

How many people had attacked friends, co-workers, maybe even family, and never known it?

The silence was punctuated by a crunch as Aika bit into an appledew from a crate taken out of the gondola earlier.

“Continuing our earlier conversation.” Aika cleared her throat.

“Are you quite certain?”

Shifting gears, Peri couldn't help but whicker good-naturedly. “You get what you pay for and, in this case, I'm not for sale.”

“You've thought about it, of course?”

“Of *course*,” she fibbed.

“Think about how little sentimentality will ultimately buy. Think about your potential. Then, think about me.”

“You talk like old money.”

“Ironic, isn't it?”

Peri smirked, pushing on the oar. “Really, though. I'm a brownstones girl.”

“Truly not looking to be recruited?”

“*Nub-ub*. I’m on sabbatical. The longest of my life, come to think of it.”

“Says who?”

“Me, mostly. I had a lot of words with my last employer, but I distinctly remember the last two being ‘I’ and then somewhere after that ‘quit’.”

Aika laughed. “And from that point, you joined up with the Doctor and the...?”

“Penguin, yeah. That’s about the size of it.” The botanist’s feathered ends danced in a passing air-vent that smelt of chlorine.

“Can’t really complain about the company.”

“You joined for friendship, not money?”

“Yes.”

“Well, in that case, can’t we,” Aika fluttered her eyelashes, “be friends?”

Peri chuckled. “Oh, *now*, and this works?”

“On all, but the initiated. You know what your problem is, Peri?”

The botanist fluttered her eyelashes back. “I’m a wide-eyed Romantic with too many dreams and not enough commitments?”

“You let reason get in the way of a good investment—” In that moment, Peri saw Aika’s face fall. Amusement fled from her features.

“Aika?”

When she spoke again, there was a severity to her voice Peri had never heard before, “Peri... How far are you willing to take this?”

Peri answered slowly. “How far are you, Aika?”

“I asked first.”

She exhaled, shrugging her shoulders. “I won’t run out on you, Aika. That’s not how we do things.”

“I’m just thinking...” The planes in Aika’s face sharpened. “How many people have I sent to Virtuosity? How many have I sent to places like it? To *them*.”

“You’re talking about the Daleks, aren’t you?”

“More than that.” She looked Peri in the eye. “They were my people.”

Peri tilted her head, frowning her brow. “It’s not just a paycheck in the mail for you, is it? It’s... personal.”

“My life has been... Well, a menagerie.” She laughed. Something light and airy that you could cup in your hand like water from a

wellspring. “Often quite literally. I’ve travelled since I was knee-high to kaiyuki. Always in the back of caravans, wagons... But, I slept in the cages just that little bit too long when the solar day waned.”

“And that was often?” Peri discerned.

“I always slept in the cages. After a while, you start realising that the animals always stay, but the people...”

“They’re the ones that go.”

Aika waved a hand. “They fill and empty the stands like a tide, but *where* do they go, Peri? Back to their own cages.” Aika ran a tamer’s hand through the starlit water, casting ripples in its wake. “Their complicated lives. Show me an existence that knows of neither pride, nor envy. Salt, nor sugar. Who can be anything to everything without the... *confinements* of intelligent life.”

“It’s not always like that.”

“No? Wherever I go, there are bars. We confine ourselves and then we do it to the animals who never deserved it.”

“I get it.” Peri nodded.

Aika looked at her.

“No, I do.” Peri insisted. “You worry you’ve become the sort of person who puts kittens in hessian bags and drops them in the river.”

The talent scout’s hand flinched from the bay.

Peri sighed. “Aika, you weren’t to know.”

“It’s a poor excuse for killing one’s friends, Peri.”

“Think about it.” The botanist leant forward, the oar *clump-clumping* against the canal wall. “*Did* you know?”

With a slow admission, Aika shook her head. “No, I didn’t.”

“Then make it *right*. You know now. You know what they’ve done. *Make it right*. That’s all you can do.”

She swallowed. “How?”

“Look at the world with a different eye than before.”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

Peri looked to her side. Silent for a moment. “You know what scares me? The idea that one day, I’ll show up in a Galaxy somewhere where nobody has never heard of flowers. Not a one. It’s a mean old Universe out there sometimes, there’s always a chance...”

“But?”

Peri’s face ticked a smile. “They’ve still got planter boxes in the shoulders of a giant robot. Gigan’s vines and ferns. *Real* plants. Not artificial. The search for and preservation of more life, it’s still not

over yet. Not even out here on the slowship to nowhere. It can seem like such a nothing worry, but life's all about those little things. It's all about—" she stumbled for the words.

Aika understood. "Small victories?"

"Yeah." Peri nodded. "Sometimes that's all you can ask for, Aika."

She smiled. "Well, I—" Her face snapped to a frown. "Wait a minute..."

There was something behind Peri.

The gondola pulled in under a bridge sequined with electronic lights. It took a few minutes for the Baltimore girl's eyes to adjust to something beyond that. Out across Minmay Bay itself. Something which could only be a collection of headlights on the shore. Bodies eclipsed the thumbnail moons like flickering shadows in a surreal campfire.

"Is that them?" Peri whispered.

Aika shivered. "Yes. They could shoot us from here..."

The way that her passenger settled into the gondola reminded Peri of passing through Checkpoint Charlie into East Germany. That hand on the throat, pulse in the chest, when the boom gate rises and the car rolls into a narrow patch of modern-day Somme.

"I don't think they know we have the Prolixcase," Peri muttered. "Not yet."

Aika turned to the bow. "Akane-Vibist Point. We should hit the checkpoint for Obari Ward soon."

Peri could see it. "Alright..." She looked up and crossed her fingers. "Dazzle me with science, Doctor. You always do."

Aboard the TARDIS, the Doctor was examining the contents of a newly acquired duffel bag. One of the few items of luggage from Meje for their trip aboard the TARDIS. He ripped open the zip, dug around between the gravity spanners and probes, and held up the first of a dozen cylinders.

"A tin of..." he squinted. "Globulan jambalaya. You're a long way from home, aren't you? From a small chain established Mandusustime... 8160. Well, we can't have that."

He ran a careful thumbnail under the wrapper and ripped it clear. Another item, a bag of crisps, he scanned its nutritional information and threw it over his shoulder like a fist of salt.

Meje was less than amused. "Hey, *hey!* Vandal."

“Ah, the post-modern Roman! No more or less destructive than any other culture, but blamed for their ‘barbarian’ part in the destruction of ‘civilised’ Rome. One of the Renaissance’s blindspots.” He sniffed at an appledew. “You know, you can make a rather good custard with this.”

“Picky eater?” the mechanic crossed her arms, smirking.

“I’m merely attempting to prevent the introduction of any traceable anachronisms, Meje. Your history is littered with exotemporal influences already. I don’t want to add to any more. Especially, if it should include...” He grimaced. “*Ooub*, Tangerine Sunrise biscuits.”

“You can throw those,” she relented.

He clicked his tongue, contented, and did just that. “What is all of this anyway? The regular oil change of the bedevilled mechanic?”

“You’re familiar with the theory of physical displacement?”

“Yes.”

“Like a boat dropped in a bay?”

“Yes?” The Doctor began to nod, impatient.

“Well in order to place your heavy-hitting friend, Peri, and that Kamenkost, Aika, in said bay, it was necessary to displace quite a lot of the gondola’s supplies.” She gestured with her foot. “These are some of the favourites.”

“Well...” He bounded up onto his feet. “You can sort them out for me while I calculate the travelordinates. Do you know what you’re looking for?”

“Anything with an establishment date printed on the box.”

“And anything with an expiration date, either.” The Doctor’s emphatic finger tapped down on the first row of console switches nearest to him.

The Dalek influence aboard his Ship was still causing a certain degree of consternation.

The Doctor tried counting out the attoseconds between each oscillation in the TARDIS’s resting hum and found himself distracted by a steady drumbeat from the other side of the console. Two fingers. “Little drummer boy?”

Tezuhyr’s wide eyes blinked. “*Mmm?*”

The Doctor repeated the beat. “If you may? My concentration is not what it was.”

“*Au...*” He pulled his hands behind his back. “Right.”

The old rover smiled. “She is a remarkable vessel, isn’t she?”

“I...” the android huffed a chuckle. “Barely have the words. I have been trying to think of an analogy, but the closest I am been able to come to is *The Mysterious Seas*.”

“Mindcast?”

“Flexiback fiction.” He wrinkled his nose. “I did not care for the films. The series is not bad, though. What I have been able to see of it.”

“*Mmm*, if you have the option, do you think you’d go back?”

“In a time-machine?” Tezuhyr smiled, smirking dubiously on one side. “I’d rather do it for something important.”

“You do believe me, then?”

“I have to... It is important that I do... Therefore, I do.”

“That’s remarkably straightforward of you.” The Doctor’s jade-cut eyes distorted through the translucent PfDCP filament of the time rotor. “You and Meje both understand the inherent risks?”

Tezuhyr scratched his jet-black hair. “Frobisher was talking about another time-machine. One belonging to the Daleks.”

“Our main opponent in this transtemporal joust.” The console *trenweep*-ed. “That’s part of why these preparations have to be so precise. We’ll be charging down a time spiral where they could be waiting around the next fractal.”

“We are going to try and sneak past?”

“No. We’re going to go straight through them.” The citadel of gilded-red in the rotor shone all the brighter. “Hopefully, a battering ram approach will disrupt their course enough to land in Command Central with them a few days—or decades, if we’re lucky—astray of us.”

“Giving us breathing room.”

“Of which we’ll need plenty.” The Doctor rubbed his hands together and reached for the materialisation switch.

He hesitated, coiling a finger back against his palm.

“What is wrong?” asked Tezuhyr.

“I won’t know until I press this switch,” the Doctor admitted, slowly. “That’s the trouble, you see. All that scrutiny and analysis... And I don’t know what will happen. Perhaps, that’s their goal?”

“Paralyse you into inaction, you mean?”

“Fear.” The Doctor ground his teeth. “It’s the Daleks’ stock-in-trade. What they can’t kill, they try to humiliate and humble into capitulation. Well...” he resolved, “I shan’t play their ridiculous

power plays. I will not be terrorised in my own TARDIS. Ready, Tezuhyr, Meje?”

“I’m ready here,” Meje called.

Tezuhyr steadied himself against the console. “Ready, Friend Doctor.”

The Doctor stabbed decisively down at the stud.

What happened next wasn’t at all conventional. The trap lain by the Daleks was far too intricate for that. They understood their enemy all too well.

It wasn’t an explosion in the combusive sense.

At first, the Doctor’s nerve-endings interpreted it as an electric shock. Cackling white-blue. That, alone, however, had been the contact point between his form and that of the TARDIS. Through their conjoined symbiotic nuclei.

What came next was a weirding pain he had never felt before in his lives.

Something dark, violating, corroded through the databanks like a fluorescent oil spill.

In the Doctor’s own body, the taste of formic acid erupted in the back of his throat at the base of his brainstem. Molten honey, the colour of a black hole, poured over his shoulders and down his spine. Spitting. He felt every bone in his body splinter outwards like matchwood. Crackling. The sting was spreading through his ribcage. Burning. Agony in a frothing giggle punched through his waistcoat like taloned fingers. He could feel his organs were beginning to shut down.

Feebly, desperately, the Doctor pulled his hands up against his howling face to shield himself.

Against what? The damage was already done.

As the floor dove away beneath him, he felt rather than saw, Karel Capek’s ancient hourglass—a gift from the Doctor’s time in Czechoslovakia—split open, a rotting melon. The desert sands of Ozymandias in a constellation of glass. A work of ruin to inspire the deepest despair.

The attack came from a psychotoxin. Chemically sustained. Injected into the TARDIS systems by the dead Dalek scientist and kept alive by the Ship’s own telepathic circuitry. It shot into the Doctor’s nervous system like an extrasensory narcotic.

A piece of hate from the Psyche Dalek itself.

The Doctor tried to scream against it.
It wouldn't let him.

NUCLEOTIDE 9: "Who Killed the Doctor?"

In Yatagai Ward, a shriek from beyond the world wounded the dead air between mindcasts.

It sliced through the soft tones of Hairspray Hurricane, the latest mindcast of *Selkie and Mister Queen*, and an urgent appeal from the Save the Zyglot campaign.

It was an attack. All communications between the residents of Yatagai Ward were jammed simultaneously. It had to be. Something from the local gangs. It was so violent, vicious, that it couldn't possibly be anything else.

However, for those with even a rudimentary understanding of warp matrix engineering, it was something far worse. The indescribable white noise of a dimensional transference gone awry. Temporal disasters that made Chernobyl and Riktis look like the popping of a child's balloon.

At its epicentre, stood the TARDIS.

Surreptitious and often unremarked, the blue box in Wheezy's meat locker shed its anonymity. Ionised shadows, bright as a solar furnace, pulsed in time with the microwarps writhing in the atoms of its outer plasmic shell. An amethyst halo against the garage's browning-blue walls.

Calibrations for the gravitational harmonics necessary to stabilise its presence on the slowship were compromised. As was any effort at dimensional relativity. The temporal tides were pulling it away. Dragging its drowning computers beneath the tides of time. Towards dematerialisation or destruction, the Ship couldn't rightly tell.

The TARDIS clung, with an effort that could rip open mountains, to the nearest bulk of Space it could find.

And held on.

The Dalek continued monitoring the garage. Observing, but unobserved in the subdecks' maintenance channels underneath the derelict shopfront parallel to Troubadour Zipway. It moved past the exterminated body of the maintenance worker with something approaching glee. The massive time-warp marked Phase 2 was now in progress.

It activated its infrared lens and studied the phenomenon as ordered.

The recording was transmitted directly to the Red Dalek.

The brutalist grunge of the garage's upper level was no match for the TARDIS.

Around the blue box, the building's reinforced industrial contours crumpled like a paper read-out. Pulled inward. Towards a single gravity well. The time-machine's engines rasped and hissed. It cocooned itself in tangicrete that crumbled into a thick powder from the pressures.

It tried to remain calm, but something cold and ugly was spreading through its systems.

At the centre of the temporal seism, the TARDIS's transference point, a geyser of groundcar twisted up into the rapid circulation of temporal forces. Its bodywork and innards extruded into strange and impossible shapes.

Time washed over the garage.

Crystalline rust, oxidising spacetime meeting its pure dimensional counterpart, snapped and popped in the empty spaces that made up doorways and rooms. Wheezy's filled like a crystal cave. From top to bottom. Even parts of the launch tube itself weren't immune.

Determined, the TARDIS still held on, but the gesture was rapidly becoming futile.

The more energy it maintained trying to remain in conventional spacetime, the more was diverted from the resources necessary to keep its occupants alive. To keep its *pilot* alive. The time-warp was reaching its critical point of no return. Soon, the elastic band would snap.

The TARDIS calculated there was no choice. It would have to take a gamble.

The time-machine did the only thing it had left.

It let go.

Wheezy's Garage had survived much since its construction. Between the jurisdictional byplay between the Kamenkosta and the Doppeldares, it had transformed from a functional life capsule to a creatively-engineered shopfront. It stored everything from cuts of meat to the skeletons of machines. It smelt of tangy fuel cells and acrid recycling systems.

To Tezuhyr and Meje, it was home.

Now, as the TARDIS materialised, the time-machine pulled several-hundred square metres of Wheezy's with it. It tore the meat locker from the life capsule's innards and stole it away into the dark firmament of the vortex.

The outer protective layer of Frobisher's Dalek creaked and moaned under Minmay Bay's gravitational stresses. The only sound coming from the shell's reactivated distress pulse.

Frobisher had heard of shy, but this was ridiculous.

His feet tight against the bowl of the environment chamber, he imagined this was what dog food in a tin can felt like. His breath had barely enough time to escape the pit of his throat before it crawled back in. The roof of his mouth was dry and abrasive. His limbs staggered in a foetal hug to fit his Antarctic pelt. All for a purpose, of course. Not practical, but... important, nonetheless.

He'd refused to change to a mutant until the very last moment.

There were things that a shape-shifter could or could not do that only other shape-shifters really understood. He'd heard it once referred to as 'bending the willow', walking that fine line between taking on faces and becoming them. That was where a whifferdill could lose himself. Too long in the state of a chair, trying to be that perfect chair, that they'd forget who they originally were. He was the only penguin in their motley TARDIS crew who got caught out thinking that maybe that fence on the horizon had once been somebody. As real an existential fear as the Doc's concerns about his People or perp's worries about her world going up in an ecological sigh.

Frobisher worried that given enough time, he would begin to see things. Awful things. Things like the cistern of the Dalek beginning to tighten around him, to squeeze him out of his stolen fortress in a fine paste. His body pressed into some macabre red book as they extruded him from the cracks.

He focused on the silence. It swam around him. A deafening hiss of pressure.

The whifferdill wasn't quite afraid until he felt something clamp down on the exterior of the Dalek. Locking it in place. That sent a thrill of *knowing* through him. That sinking pressure against the heart and acid drip in the throat he'd felt when some burglarious clown

had kicked in his office window and ransacked his desk. The disturbance of somewhere sacred by a stranger. He could almost hear the Daleks scheming. Grinning. The tiniest press of their mechanical vice enough to break the shell and finish his life utterly.

Frobisher felt the machine begin to rise under another being's power. The Kamenkosta trawled him from the deep for their unseen controllers. Through his periscopic vision, the world was a sloshing, analytical red. Tainted with Skarosian symbols singling in on the silhouettes of living beings he could kill.

Five divers. One looking straight into the eyestalk with a knowing smile.

He felt like heated shot being loaded into a cannon.

None of their faces were familiar, but it was inescapable to think that these people had colleagues, friends, even family. It was a sleepwalking world acting without any conscientious thought. Any need to question. The smile itself was only knowing as far as the skin. Cut through to the bone and there was nothing. Just nerve impulses following an external drive. They were slaves without knowing.

Fear gripped at him. Threatened to shake him apart.

Just one little tug, a reflex action, and Frobisher knew he could blow that diver's head clean off.

He held his breath.

A decision that Peri wished she made four or five steps ago.

The Flight Control main lobby was, in theory, the first port of call for anyone seeking the central Government of the entire slowship. A window into the nerve centre of every meaningful policy choice that had ever been made since their first launch. She'd expected a sort of piercing opulence. Grandeur. Something of the palaces, castles and stately homes she'd visited in her time. Solid marble staircases that led down from dark oak-panelled walls with a rigid Secret Service guard at every door.

This place, however...

"This is the grungiest-looking Government House I've ever seen," observed Peri.

Aika swung the despatch box as she shrugged. "With everything automated, it's not necessary to keep the place pristine."

"*Ohhh...*" Peri kissed her teeth. "That's an understatement."

The smell alone brought Peri's limbs out in unpleasant gooseflesh.

It reminded her of the Bronx in New York. Boiled shoe leather for chewing and stale beer for throwing. She'd learnt how to swing a purse like a bolas with considerable ease during her time away from the TARDIS there.

Unfortunately, the state of Flight Control made a lot of sense. With every fine ounce of the time, effort and financial clout going into the Corporate Cluster, it wasn't remarkable that Flight Control was left to rot and ruin.

She could almost feel the magnetic eyes of the building's regulars. Society's fringe lurkers. Little flicks of motion on the edges of her vision, warming at her neck.

"Back, *back*..." she hissed, pushing them against the nook of the door.

The creeping spotlights of an armoured flier swept across the frosted glass. Outside was alive with police, ordered to detain and kill by Virtuosity Astrotech. Gunfire and desperate cries riddled the zipway as they passed. She heard bodies fall, the flier accelerate to catch up with them. Away from them. Off to whoever they'd just shot down.

Peri released an unexpectedly held breath. "Time to put some of that Culper blood to good use..."

"What?"

"Culpers. I had a relative part of the Culper spy ring during the Revolutionary War, somewhere on Mom's side." She put her hands in her blazer. "Y'know, I'd normally ring the bell, but I—*ah*—wouldn't know what we were looking for."

"An enquiry terminal. About this big." Aika indicated the length of her arms. "Attached to a wall. Something to direct us to the members lobby."

"Could be over there."

Aika pointed. "Next to the...?"

"Yeah, past that stairwell. I'm assuming it's on this level?"

"Should be."

Askance from the stairway was a wall lined with cylindrical alcoves. Not unlike a batallion of phone booths at the train station or starharbour. Peri and Aika would've likely missed them if not for the rubber-sealed grooves cutting clear through the graffito.

"It's all so impersonal," Peri commented.

From the bulletin board, she'd seen that the Virtuosity arcology at

least had a receptionist. Housed in a desk punctuated by vidscreens, each terminal embedded in a steep alfresco ziggurat of varnished hardwood. Flight Control, however, had little to indicate its importance to any tourist without a local guide. It could have been any old derelict, if not for the sheer attempt at scale.

Peri considered its epitaph. “Like a burnt-out movie set...”

Aika explained, “The playactors report in conferences hosted by Camellia Industries. I’ve been as a representative. Good champagne, but politicians are not much for conversation.”

“*Hub*. I can imagine. It’s not too dissimilar on my world...”

Aika knocked against various sections of the alcove-riddled wall.

“*Tap-tap. Tap-tap. Tap...*” The talent scout’s efforts gained a hollow echo. “*Rat-a-tap-tap*, I think it’s here.”

Peri waved an arm at the sensor above the door. “Looks like the way in has been busted.”

“Can you see a way around?” asked Aika.

“No. Dargaud’s not arrived, yet, do you think she might heft it open?” Peri suggested.

“Good point.” Aika looked it over. “If I ask nicely, she might deign to—”

“*You.*”

Peri and Aika galvanised to the spot. The voice around them was alien. More alien than anything either of them had ever known. A nauseous sound that sent the hidden faces around them scampering into the walls and hideaways.

“*You,*” it began again, “*are in possession of a Federation-issue despatch box, acquired from Flight Control in the 8107 time-zone.*”

“Back...” Peri hissed. It was just on the edge of the upper balcony. She could see, between the fearful whispers and chalcedony gloom, stood something hostile to all life.

Aika breathed, “That’s a—”

“Dalek,” Peri exhaled, reaching to unlock the despatch box.

“*You will relinquish the despatch box to us.*”

Aika spoke up. “Impossible, we can’t.”

“*It is the failing of inferior lifeforms to defy the Daleks.*”

She snarled, hiding a shiver.

“Where are you, huh?” Peri raised her voice, keeping herself pressed against the zipway art fresco. “Up in the rafters somewhere?”

Aika jerked an eyebrow. “My guess, also.”

“Hard to tell from the echo, though, I’ll admit...” Peri admitted, *sotto voce*.

“Could we trap it from here?”

“No,” Peri shook her head, pulling her hand clear from the despatch box. “And I think it’s counted on that, damn...”

“So, what do we do?” asked Aika.

“*You will answer.*”

Peri glanced at Aika. Her blue eyes, hazy with concentration. They were wheeling through the possibilities together. Where did it come from? How many in total? Could they bargain? What would amount to a fatal misstep?

One thought coaxed her forward. *Keep it talking.*

Peri spoke again. “Look, if you won’t come out, there’s no reason why we should.”

“*You do not exist as equals to the Daleks. It is unnecessary to bargain. Place the object on the ground.*”

“Why?” Aika’s word echoed back into Peri’s ears.

“*If you disobey, we will ensure there is a consequence.*”

Aika whispered to Peri. “I don’t understand. Why hasn’t it just killed us?”

Peri’s right ear, so dominated by the talent scout’s voice, had inadvertently sharpened her hearing to the left. At first, she thought she heard some kind of jetcycle engine, but the growls were too arrhythmic. Too natural.

Peri recognised the edge of each ragged breath with upsetting familiarity.

From the front of the crashed Silver Mead in Goda Ward.

Dalmatian swirls among lapis lazuli ichor.

“*Your window for compliance has expired.*”

“Because it doesn’t have to try—” Peri bolted for cover. “*It’s another prusten?*”

“*Over here!*” shouted Aika to the creature.

In her free arm, the talent scout picked up a chair from the assembled hodgepodge and swung it towards the darkness. Something grim, nasty and with far too many teeth severed Peri’s thought. Aika screamed in pain. The chair ripped from her hands. Upholstery and frame reduced to a varnished confetti. Her voice sliced away, an arm twisted to an unnatural angle, she let go.

Peri caught a glimpse of the thing. Only a glimpse.

The animal pulsed through the air like a subway train. The stink of cysts, antiseptic and dead skin cells writhing in its wake. The creature collided with the wall. Peri grabbed Aika and tugged her away. Feet snapping against the marble floor. Their attacker reorientated itself, its powerful arms ricocheting from one edge of the corner to the next—

Peri saw something move outside the main door to the zipway. It was a Dalek. No escape. She twisted her head towards the empty stairwell. There was their opportunity! “*Go!*”
—straight back towards its targets.

Out of control, tumbling through a relative time spiral, the TARDIS’s journey was marked with considerable transdimensional incident. Whirlstreams of interface, tearing between the dimensions, left corrugations of light pulsing down the vortex. Cloud-like striations dissipated into the absolution of Space kowtowing to Time.

The cackling pain, at first, seemed to be coming from inside Tezuhyr’s own skull. It ground the filaments in his jaw down into what felt like a fine paste, but the punishment was coming from all around them. It was in the air itself.

The atmosphere of the Ship, this TARDIS, was vibrating at a frequency hostile to its passengers. To the very pulse of the machine itself. Almost as if it were moving through a transitory state where a block of ice became a pool of water. Tezuhyr could *feel* the water in his capillaries.

Time was unravelling like the woven scales of a moonworm-eaten waistcoat.

“*Meje!*” his call was swallowed by the static.

Tezuhyr’s hooded jacket, black with a piped-green trim, was now a static-filled white. The green bled as lines of light in the air. Solid enough that he could pluck at them like cello strings. His hands were clasped over his ears. An attempt to block out what his body could only interpret as overwhelming noise.

The android winced, his thoughts peeled taut like polymagnetic tape. “*A new beginning for a small deception,*” offered Boynton. “*I know that can sound sinister, but you’ll find no pretence from me. I’m desperate, Tezuhyr, and you’re dying. If not now, then certainly when the money dries up.*”

She wasn’t here. It was his memory centres firing off random

information. Mnemonic pareidolia. The past patching over the nowhere of the present.

“I can hardly dispute that. Who are we deceiving?” Tezuhyr flicked his eyes, immobile in the hospital bed.

She snapped the band of her fedora. “Anyone. Everyone. Does it matter, really? You’ll get what you want.”

“I don’t know...”

“Just one, one single lie, lie to build a life to seek out a dozen new truths.”

Through the gauss, somewhere beneath the web of stars, the Doctor fought to remain attached to this dimension. At least, that’s what Tezuhyr could discern. If the TARDIS travelled through Time, as a shuttlecraft would through a nebula, then it wouldn’t be inconceivable that it would have to change states to do it. Ice to water—and back again.

“I act as the prototype...” He puzzled out the offer. “In exchange for being able to stay at the Daicon Robotics Firm?”

“At your new home,” Boynton corrected.

“As your... I do not understand. What? Understudy?”

Tezuhyr squeezed his eyes shut against a temporal eddy that tore at his senses. It boxed him around the ears. Rendered him insensate.

“This project could revolutionise psychocircuitry as we know it. What more do you need to know?”

“Just one thing, mydame.” He croaked. “There is not much of me left... Why choose me?”

Under the whine he could almost hear, “Tezuhyr...!”

“Why not?” Boynton tilted her head over the hospital bed. “I promise, I’ll use what I can to help you. I want this to be more than a business transaction, I want this to be a new chance at life. For both of us. Otherwise...”

“Tezuhyr!” it called more insistently.

“Otherwise, what?” asked Tezuhyr.

In waves of solarising static, where rainbow shadows cast a terrible pale against agonised features, stood the Doctor. Their last intersection with the world they’d just left. And the hell that threatened to drown around them.

Boynton smiled, sadly. “Otherwise, both our lives and livelihoods are at an end.”

“Tezuhyr?” Meje pulled him into her corner.

“I’m here, I’m here!” His eyes refocused. He added, darkly, “I’m still here.”

“How are we going to get out of this?” Her eyes darted, angry and anxious. “C’mon!”

He nodded. Resolved. The benefit of Tezuhyr’s augmented eyes were that he could focus his analysis like a jeweller’s loupe. It was useful before, it was essential now. As far as he could discern, the real-world Doctor intersected with pearls of distortion. Points of focus that registered as light.

“Can you reach him?” the android asked.

“I think I can—” Meje strained her arm, uphill, toward the console. “It’s no good, I can’t get any purchase on it...!”

Under ordinary circumstances, he’d have asked her to jump on his shoulders. The slope, however, was sheer and insurmountable.

He accidentally elbowed the roundel behind him. “Does this come loose?”

They tried. The material was made of something easy enough to gain purchase on. With each roundel they removed, a new handhold became available to them. The vibration in the walls nearly cast them loose, but before long, they reached the console itself.

“Here goes!” Meje leapt and collided, painfully, with the side of a control panel.

Her foot slammed against part of the fascia, a large pewter-grey panel disgorging free from its undercarriage. “Jings!” she cursed. “Over to you!”

“*Please...*” In that single entreaty, a hundred leylines of digitised power drew from Tezuhyr’s bioelectrical rhythms to produce a light of hope.

With a trill, the brave tweaker in arcade-green entered the base of the console.

Delirium. The Doctor stood at the brink of an open door and dared himself to jump.

*Who exterminated the Doctor?
I, said the Psyche Dalek,
its killing high-tech,
I exterminated the Doctor.*

Lifetimes ago, he’d been made aware of Samizdat’s Dæmon. A phenomenological event explained to him once by his mentor.

(Desperate to involve the youth in his own enrolment process at the Academy.) He had explained it in terms of the Old Time. When Gallifrey was but a spacefaring empire and travel through the Fourth Dimension was still in its horse-and-cart phase.

*Who found his overcoat?
I, said Peri,
hunched low and wary,
I found his overcoat, no...*

His mentor explained: the longer that a time-traveller remained abroad, the greater the strain it placed on their own mind. In much the same way that those who spent prolonged periods in lower-gravity environments, such as astronauts, lost bone density. If taken to a world with higher forces of attraction, their tibias snapped like twigs in their first bold step onto conventional *terra firma*.

*Who'll dig his grave?
I, said the Whifferdill,
swallowing his bitter pill,
I'll dig his grave, skip...*

The danger had enticed him and—when youth had waned away—eventually come to worry him. The TARDIS, fortunately, offered protective safeguards to its pilot to mitigate such damage. Temporal exposure took millennia to manifest in any problematic detail.

*Who'll make the shroud?
I, said Tezbyr,
shadowed by his own fear,
I'll make the shroud, mysir...*

At least, that was the claim.

The Doctor once knew, quite keenly, the delineation between reality and illusion. Ever since recent events, the encounter with Voyager and the Antarctic blizzard that called him from his Ship... He was far less certain.

Who'll bear the pall?

*I, said Meje,
her movements tetchy,
I'll bear the pall, Jings...*

For a time, long time ago, his People isolated him to the Earth. An effort to force him to play the penitent and reconsider his views. The change to him in that time had been subtle, but felt none the more keenly than one autumn morning. He awoke in an ordinary bed to an ordinary backwash of sensations.

*Who'll read the eulogy?
I, said Aika,
sat alongside those like her,
I'll read the eulogy, just so...*

A serum of subconscious fantasy. Dreams. The Doctor had been dreaming.

*Who'll carry the sarcophagus?
I, said Dargaud,
her voice booming loud,
I'll carry the sarcophagus, so I will...*

The Doctor explained it to the fellow inhabitants of that planet and they'd thought none the more on it. For him, though, it was the first sign he'd spent too long on the Earth. He was becoming tethered. His powers waning.

*Who'll toll the bell?
I, said the TARDIS,
from my cloisters, mark this,
I'll toll the bell, vvorp-vvorp...*

It was then, in that moment, that the Doctor committed wholeheartedly to his escape.

He brought his hands together in a thunderclap and delirium around him began to spin.

The TARDIS walls convulsed. Each roundel was twitching like the

suckers of some enormous octopus.

Meje gasped, “Look out, my hand’s slipping...!”

It was more than that. She could see right *through* it.

Tezuhyr couldn’t hear her. His vanguard program spread through the ice-black circuitry of the time-machine in careful pulses. Too far, too quickly, and it would lose conductivity and simply dissolve. For safety, another tweaker donned in amethyst-purple sat by the castle keep to extract its companion at a moment’s notice.

Meje knew better than to break the connection. Under the circumstances, however—

“If I can—” She dropped with a shout. Her hands caught on the sloping hood of a VDU. It saved her life.

The android’s eyes remained shut. Almost in prayer.

The mechanic hadn’t experienced the sensation of Tezuhyr’s efforts first-hand, but that didn’t mean she was unaware. Usually, after returning from a grateful client, Tezuhyr’s schoolfellows visited an Akiyama food stall. He was old. Thin-skinned like Arcturan membranes, but undeniably a Tellurian. Likely, one from Ankara. At his advanced age, the cook would dip his hand in a bucket of ice water and proceed to grill his meals under a flamethrower. An extraordinary feat. The torch was his conductor and the ice his insulator.

Pulling herself up as far as she could, Meje suddenly recognised the parallels.

The TARDIS was acting as a conductor. The Doctor, in his best efforts, was the insulator.

Tezuhyr’s sweat-veined face grimaced. A halo of arcade-green bloomed behind the seams in the machine’s instrumentation. It swayed and waved, seasick, lolling from one end to the other—No. No! She could see the parasitic darkness bubble beneath the fascia.

The tweaker was being chased

The Doctor’s two arms, like blades in a falling propeller, spiralled in a stardust oubliette through cobwebs of shattered glass.

The zęęs go marching six-by-six! Hurrah, hurrah!

In the beautiful nothing, his body was aflame.

The zęgs go marching six-by-six! Hurrah, hurrah!

Paralysed with a sensory overload.

The drones go marching six-by-six! The mutant will stop to blast its way through!

Nevertheless, his keenly honed preterenses were certain he could hear an ice pick.

And they all went marching! Down to get out of the storm! Hup-hup!

Chipping away at the pale-green ice blanketing every rational detail in delirium.

Down to get out of the storm! Hup-hup!

The Doctor shook his head. No, it had to be a desperate attempt at pareidolia. His psyche was stretched so thin trying to contain the worst of the attack on the TARDIS and himself. He knew it was unreal when he saw Peri and Frobisher, stood at the head and foot of his open grave. Still and solitary chief mourners. Caught in the twilight between life and dust. Flesh and skeleton. Separated by a thunderstrike.

Chip...

Chip-chip...

Chip-chip, chip-chip—br-tak...

Chip. Chip-chip. Chip, chip-chip—gcrk-

fzżk...!

Something cracked. The Doctor held his hands to his skull and felt his brainstem unspool like magnetic tape.

<RUNNING>

He knew now. He was stumbling in eternity.

—HELLO TARDIS

His senses fumbled like sand from Capek's shattered hourglass.

<HELLO DOCTOR + CHECKING>

There was no wider a smile than for the secretive eyes of Schrodinger's cat. The Doctor was losing his mind. The Time Lord's living remains wouldn't receive a sarcophagus, a headstone, nor even

a eulogy. No, the rover was bundled up by an inconceivable wind into an ordinary hole of dust and sand. Earth, if he were lucky.

<FLIGHT SYSTEM COMPROMISED>

He could feel the rats gnawing at his one heart. The maggots gnawing at the other.

<SYMBIOTIC NUCLEI COMPROMISED>

Paralysed, the Doctor lay, an arm behind his back in an unnatural contortion. Harry Houdini would have blushed with discomfort. The Time Lord's face was a rictus of agony, but no matter. The deaths of wanderers were hardly presentable occasions.

<DIMENSIONAL INTEGRITY COMPROMISED>

This no-place was a comatose isle. The time-traveller knew it was. If he looked anywhere but where he was supposed to, the realm filled with a coal-black darkness. Stars streaking like comets. They whirled through the abyss on an axis of thought. The TARDIS was trying to protect him.

<HELP ME>

No, the Doctor was determined, he should be protecting her. He tried to find Kasterborous, but it was such a long way distant now. There was somewhere else he'd visited recently. It began with an... 'N'? No... What happens once in a minute, twice in a moment, but never in a thousand years? The constellation beginning with—

Manifesting in the gloom, a dissimilar star, green and newborn, burned with Time's knowing candlelight.

<TIME...>

The tweaker curled from the heavens above in a question mark. No more games.

The Doctor needed to wake up. They were all in terrible danger.

The Daleks were manipulating the fabric of Mandusus history to create a bolthole for themselves. A hostage situation that prevented the present of 8187 from interfering with the past of 8107 without disrupting the interconnected tissue in between.

They would ransom the past to imprison the present.

No one else could fight that kind of strategy but them. No one else had access to Time and understood the menace of the Daleks quite like him. With that brilliant madman Astrolabus, long ago now, he had learnt to outrun the clinging, cloying terror of inner space and he had to do so now.

Lives depended on it!

He pulled the brightest star of the Mandusus constellation close to his hearts.

Wake up, Doctor... Wake up... Wake—

NUCLEOTIDE 10: "Power Trip"

"—*up!*" bellowed the Doctor.

Something blue-white clenched at the base of the Doctor's skull. It tried to strangle his consciousness back down into catatonia, but with every fibre of his will, he fought back. It spread in a bubbling, corrosive ease through his body.

Foam, thick like pomegranate seeds, flecked from his mouth.

The rover threw himself against the console onto the hot coals of electrical disturbance. The shocks were enough to force his mind back to the conscious world. The pain threatened to swallow his thoughts. Glib and chiding with their hot poker agonies.

He managed one word, though. Just one. Through the Ship herself.

"Owwwt...sssiide..."

Tezuhyr could see the tips of the Doctor's fingers were smoking. Star-white. His fingernails liquefying under the strain of the psychotoxin. The rover struggled through the unnatural wind. The console seemed to almost sag under his weight. He couldn't reach the red materialisation switch. It was there, only a metre or so away, but to them, it might as well have been one of the Lost Worlds.

"Maaaattteerrriiaaalliiissee..." The delirious voice seemed to gasp from everywhere.

Tezuhyr's concentration broke.

The arcade-green tweaker, the Doctor's lamplight in a fog of seaborne darkness, died. Its photozoid wave-particles dissipating through the TARDIS's super-intelligent circuitry.

The amethyst tweaker trilled sadly.

The Doctor's arm was outstretched over one of the panels nearest to the scanner vidscreen. By sheer determination alone, the veins of light harassing the console were absent on that section of the machine.

"Meje, there!" Tezuhyr pointed out. "That panel?"

"Watch for it! She's listing!" she called back.

The time-traveller's influence was already waning.

Already too late to save its fellow comrade, Tezuhyr instructed the tweaker to provide a buffer in the one opening to the TARDIS's inner workings they had left. The lilac sprite bloomed to cover the

vital edges that led to the materialisation switch. It sputtered and fizzled, but held its ground.

Its rapidly diminishing ground.

“Meje! Where are you?” strained Tezuhyr.

She was already at work. From the duffel bag, now buried in one of the external doors’ circular hollows, she retrieved a gravity spanner. The tweaker’s boundary grew smaller. The mechanic used it like a pickaxe, climbing the softer incline of the chamber. Tezuhyr’s influence became an icecap on a heating hotplate. With a few scrapes and bruises, Meje reached the console and pulled herself up to the studs and toggles themselves.

The mechanic levered open the fascia and squeezed the dematerialisation switch’s housing until it—

“I’ve done it! Unlatched!” she crowed.

Soundless, choked, the Doctor’s lungs emptied with the rawest scream that Tezuhyr and Meje ever heard. It was a wail suited to seeing the edge of the cosmos and weeping. The Ship joined with him. A strange and otherworldly union that turned pain into anger.

“Out there...” the Doctor whispered to the console, hoarse. “It’s out there, on that time-machine... Leering at us...”

Tezuhyr was afraid to ask. “...What is, Friend Doctor?”

Across the void, beyond the mind, in the empty space that circled Time, the Psyche Dalek sat in utter darkness. Poised. Like a child with an eye-dropper of acid over the beating heart of a vivisected toad.

The other Dalek scientists in the time-machine had pulled back to its fringes. Not studying it, not loathing it, but with their minds terribly empty of thought. As if frozen in supplication. Staring.

Such a telepathic assault was a delicate operation. It had been necessary to quieten the other drones.

The Doctor’s head slugged to and fro, as if rising from a deep sleep. The telepathic circuits were slotting impressions into his consciousness. Stretched out in their thick warble. Just glimpses. But enough to recognise their texture.

They came from a Dalek mind.

The Ship found—*A room—Daleks—Unlike—A meeting.*

The crackle of the Psyche Dalek's lobes, like frying fat in a pan, could be heard throughout the time-machine. In the walls, the floor, the minds of its crew...

"This Ship..." it gurgled. "This... TARDIS..."

It made an inarticulate noise like bones cracking.

As if struck by a bolt of lightning, the Doctor suddenly reanimated. "Great Gallifrey!" He dove for the console. "We're shipping time winds!"

Rather than rest, he was going to use the last remaining vestiges of energy to correct the damage. His hands and wrists waggled like sine waves through the warping dimensions. Skin smouldered against the console's switches as he worked.

A series of clicks resounded beneath him.

Tezuhyr felt his feet touch the floor. The actual floor.

Meje slid from her crook onto her knees.

"I've freed the transitional elements! Now, if only I can—Hold on!" The juddering beneath the Doctor's feet felt like the cables on a lift unbraiding. "We're breaking the materialisation cone!"

"Meaning?" asked Tezuhyr.

"We're moving clear of the time-machine—and the Psyche Dalek's influence!"

Without warning, the room plunged into darkness. The Doctor's death's head features were illuminated by the pale-blue of one of the surviving VDUs on the console. His arms were shaking under their own weight. Stabilised. If that was the right word. Each breath of his was laboured, shivering.

Tezuhyr and Meje crept up to their respective sides of the console.

The android was nearest to the vidscreen. "Galactic travelordinates..."

"I don't understand, you're taking us away from Mandusus?" divined Meje.

"Not away..." The Doctor's movements across the controls were slow. "Back. We're already g-going—going back in Time. We're in no fit state to take on the P-P-Psyche Dalek... We'll have to—*have*... what?"

"Our heading, Doctor!" urged Tezuhyr.

"Adjusted. Added insurance. We're heading into your past. Hopefully changed the where, if not the when."

Meje watched the central column with pained deliberation. “Where *is* the Dalek time-machine?”

“Can no longer tell... Time-trace has crossed itself several times.”

“Crossed...” Tezuhyr hovered, timid, near the rover. “You mean, back and forth between 8187 and...?”

“8107.” The Doctor’s nodding gave him a headache. “The Daleks are more familiar with the time-zones than I am. It’s all I can do, all I can... do...!”

Tezuhyr caught him before he could fall. “We need to get out of here. Do you remember?”

“Yes... No longer safe, no longer... She’s gone from me. My Ship, my TARDIS...!” Tears welled in his eyes from the pain. “She’s... I can no longer sense—” The Doctor stopped. His attention drawn to his grip or, rather, the granular texture beneath it. He furrowed his brow like a mark discovering a confidence trickster’s conjuring trick.

The Doctor stared at Tezuhyr.

Tezuhyr stared back.

The sheer panic in the young man’s eyes evaporated as soon as it appeared. Not nearly soon enough to avoid the Doctor’s notice. The rover’s hand held tight against the greasepaint on the android’s arm.

“I knew, you know.” The Doctor was nodding, almost frantic. “As soon as you made contact with the TARDIS, I knew.”

“Of what?” Tezuhyr tugged his sleeve down over his wrist.

“Tezuhyr, why are—*are*...?” The time-traveller swung back before he could reply.

Tezuhyr lunged forward. “Meje, help me, he’s about to—!”

The walls shimmered in a terrible desert mirage.

The Doctor, whether by hook or crook, succumbed to the full extent of his transtemporal wounds.

As he slid from the mortal plane, his two passengers caught him about the shoulders. Gently, they lowered him to the floor. He exhaled, almost blissful. Around them, a plummeting shudder blushed the roundels with a violate purple. Bruises in the architectural skin.

A sense of weightlessness tingled through the soles of their feet, then... *Impact!*

Neither one of them dared to move for several minutes.

One voice dared against the midnight gloom. “I’ve adjusted for the darkness, Meje.”

“We’ve got to get out of this death trap,” Meje shivered. “Where are the door controls?”

“That red lever, *sey*... there.”

“Where?”

Meje felt her body spin, gently, as Tezuhyr reorientated her.

“There.”

“Right. I’ll try not to trip over him.” She took a wide step, the Doctor wrestling with a fitful nightmare, and felt a sudden urge to address the fatalist’s question. “Tezuhyr...”

“Yes?”

“I can feel it...”

Tezuhyr could feel the presence like an icicle against his spine. “It’s still here, somehow...”

“Jings, what did we agree to? What’s happening to him?”

He shook his head. “Whatever it might be, we cannot stay here.”

Gripping the console, he twisted the scanner control and steeled himself against whatever lay beyond.

What awaited him was devastation.

Dalek-047 was no one. It was dead since before the latest dawn-sight.

However, that did not stop it from causing a great deal of harm.

Many wars against the Daleks’ inferiors could be won through force of arms, strength in battle, but some required a more subtle approach. Operatives who were willing to lie, cheat and exploit in order to further the aims of the Dalek Hordes.

To that end, the Dalek spy had become known as Dalek-047. Its induction had been simple. The infiltrator had enlisted in its new garrison by strangling the infant in its cradle. It didn’t think too much on the subject itself. The act had proved necessary. More than that, pertinent.

Now, with the Psyche Dalek temporarily outside of Command Central, it had time to plan.

Admittedly, its assignment had begun with a mistake.

Before it could successfully wipe the anomalies in its presence from the time-machine’s manifest, Dalek-047 had come under attack in the biowarfare laboratory. It remembered. The shutter in Command Central opened and spat death. In a concentrated barrage reminiscent of the cullings on Drakmar.

In that moment, the spy was unprepared and, under concentrated attack, the front of its shell imploded.

Within, 047 seethed in outrage from its blistered remains. The machine was one of a handful to be remoulded in the shape of the enemy. Scrupulous spy probes and reconnaissance work by the true Daleks. Indistinguishable from the genuine article. Wasted outright.

The spy would punish them for this.

In the barrage, 047 stopped only to tear the liquid nib of its stimbank cartridge-belt and the active ECM unit from the shell's burning innards. Electronic countermeasures and conventional smoke disguised its tactical withdrawal.

Undiscovered, it climbed, bodily, into one of the exhaust ports on the wall.

The infiltrator remained there until the security alert was cleared.

It was nearly comatose with shock.

Slowly, very slowly, it reorientated itself outside the impurity of its own shell. Before long, it dredged itself upward through the duct on slime trails. No larger than a Kaled's skull. Hating its enemies. Hating the failure of its own scheme.

The baked flesh aroma from the exterminators' radiation burns became omnipresent. It could have suffocated on its own bile, let the cramping pain cause it to tumble down into the grim wherever, but it was fanatical. It was supreme.

The accusation from its attackers about attempting to alter the work log was nonsense. It had spiked the system weeks ago. The log was already compromised. From the moment that the spy had been smuggled in from the starport. It knew the layout of the facility well enough to direct itself towards the hot cell where the incubator vats burbled away under close guard.

They were Dalek-047's objective, but its infiltration was anything but a straightforward exercise.

Dalek-047 possessed a rudimentary control over the shutters of the complex. The rogue prusten was released from the Monogenesisists' biowarfare laboratory. Directed specifically to draw away the hatchery guards. Weaken their patrol patterns with too many units stretched thin to adequately compensate.

With this new time, the spy could exploit a fault in a leaking nutrient-pipe. Existent before 047 had interfered, but not without its uses.

Today, especially, was pressing. With the intruder control gas being manufactured for distribution into Command Central's air conditioning supply, it had to move now.

The infiltrator collected the laser cutter it had secreted into the tube during its "repair". It made an incision on the wall of the pipe from the exhaust duct running beside it. A small flick disengaged the circuit breaker.

Suction from its appendages tore the hole clear without a sound.

047's presence in the pipe would trigger an automated response.

The mutant flowed into the plant dust of the nutrient-pipe, soaking in the nourishment, before making another cut on the other side.

"Obstruction. Investigate immediately."

It had rels.

From above, it listened to the tannoy continue. *"Taskforce K-4 to reinforce Taskforce K-5 in Section 5. Repeat—Taskforce K-4 to Section 5. Priority extermination in your zone."*

Dalek-047 climbed across the ceiling rungs and support struts. It lowered itself down towards the broiling vats of aerosolised protein. Incubators searing hot to the touch.

With a punch, it ululated as its claw drove deep through the transparent aluminium.

An ugly 'V' of rot-scent hæmorrhaged through the gap. The mutant within lashed out. Tried striking with a vestigial tentacle, but Dalek-047 was driven by more than just survival. It was driven by hate. Hatred of these things that pretended to be the true Dalek race. Hatred of their arrogance. Their presumption. It stabbed the nib into the embryo. To the underdeveloped organism, the metaxy stimulant was as deadly a poison as sulphuric acid.

The thing's will buckled.

Under 047's grip, tightened around its lungs, the incubating Dalek curled like a desiccating spider. Lifesigns ceased. The indoctrination tape humming into its cradle stopped. The embryos in the incubators at either side grew agitated at the hush.

Dalek-047 knew that a silent alarm bulb would illuminate on the main observation computer terminal. One in hundreds. A hatchery guard would be dispatched to investigate immediately. It watched, impatient, as the drug from the nib did its work. 047 pulled the limb through the opening, just enough to mimic a strike from within the vat, and waited.

The hatchery guard arrived, empty carry-net in manipulator, and checked the toxicity levels.

Hidden above, Dalek-047 observed.

The guard appeared to draw the nearest logical conclusion. In their absence, the embryo had punched its way through its incubator. Irregularities caused by a lack of steady nutrient had introduced anomalies into its genetic structure that had resulted in its body essentially homogenising. It suffocated.

The guard felt no pity. No remorse. The weak perished and the strong endured. If it could not conform, it was only right that the embryo had died. It yanked its remains, wanton and ruthless, through the wreckage for disposal in the furnace.

What it had failed to anticipate was the presence of 047.

In the four megs before the arrival of its fellow guard, the intruder used its ECM unit to force open the blue dome of guard's shell. Locked the latches in the 'open' position. Within the grilled silo, sitting in its control chamber, the intruding Dalek had clubbed the mutant to death before it could send the thought impulse for distress.

Its final breath was marked by a red wash from its sensor lights.

Dalek-047 set to work. Its installation was cramped, and now fetid with corpseflesh, but since then, it had limited access to the assembly plant. A sizeable complex of factory floor. Fully utilised. The production lines, the recasting furnace, the dalekanium extractor, among other facilities.

Dalek-047's access was subject to security vetting, of course. Plus, an unannounced genetic test instigated by the Psyche Dalek. It provided the necessary tissue from the carcass hunched tight against its shoulders. The occasional shot of immunising agents from the life-support computer helped compensate for any disease caused by the putrefaction process.

It had sustained that guise for several days now.

When the intruder control gas poured through the vents, it proved too late.

Far too late.

By now, Dalek-047 was like any other member of the hatchery guard. It checked the incubator vats. Resupplied the embryonic fetuses with nutrients from the time-machine consignment. In between its duties, however, it maintained careful watch over communications. Anything going in or out of Mandususforce

operations.

The report came again. *“Zero. Arrival at zero. Rematerialisation complete. Quarantine procedures have been observed. Personnel count confirmed. Psyche Dalek to the main tracking gallery. Urgent.”*

So, it was true—the Psyche Dalek itself was on Mandusus. That changed everything.

The arch-puppeteer’s presence catalysed a reaction not entirely unlike fear.

Worse, the Doctor was now at liberty on the slowship, set to interfere in Dalek operations. Consequently, patrols were doubled around the incubator vats by the Red Dalek. The noose was tightening. All Dalek-047 could do now was monitor and obey. Obey its *inferiors*. The thought made it bilious with rage.

Any attempt to interfere with the inferior genetic material in the assembly plant would only bring further suspicion down upon it. However easy it would be to use the dalekanium extractor to explode the vats. Worse, these inferior Daleks would gain the satisfaction of its death in an, as yet, futile escape attempt.

There was still much to be done. It couldn’t remain anonymous. No, Dalek-047 had another task to perform now. One that took a greater priority. It was clear that it couldn’t be accompanied alone. Not under such scrutiny. Dalek-047 needed resources.

That same tannoy issued its proclamation. *“Dalek-047 to attend the Decontamination Chunnel. Repeat, Dalek-047 to attend Decontamination Chunnel.”*

Dalek-047 gave one final lingering glance at the incubator vats. Silent, it mobilised to receive new orders.

Blind. With the fading warble of the metronome, the Dalek’s voice came as a shock to Frobisher.

“Psyche Dalek, you are required—” It wasn’t another speaker that cut the drone off. Rather, it was a sound. A hum in the blood vessels, like fat sticking to an oiled frying pan. It crackled with angered purpose.

“Understood,” replied the Dalek in haste. *“The Red Dalek will be alerted to the delay for recuperation.”*

The bulbous whine faded. It was barely close enough to graze Frobisher’s mind, but like radiation sickness, it clung to his bones. Churned his stomach.

“Continue your work!”

“Scans confirm locomotion system are operable,” reported another shrill growl. *“Lifesigns stable.”*

“Deactivate the seals.”

The khaki-green Type-A magnecrate opened to Frobisher’s first undiluted view of Command Central.

The first thing that struck the whifferdill was that it was dark.

The hexagonal slats of the corridor walls bled a dim phosphorescence. Intended for underpaid maintenance workers, technobots, other eyes that ran contrary to the popular idea of a happy Mandusan lifestyle. Very clearly still taken from the slowship’s heavy-alloyed resources. Wood from the steel forests, so to speak.

The view from the eyestalk, in its blood-red, painted everything in a utilitarian grotesquerie. Heavy-duty. Functional. Uniform. But it wasn’t always so. There was something in the architecture he found vaguely familiar...

Before him, two Daleks waited, impassive and armed.

Alright, the moment of truth. The Doctor had briefed Frobisher on Dalek psychology. Meje repaired the shell as best as the available resources allowed. Tezuhyr reprogrammed what he could with his tweaker programs and Peri helped him test out those initial first oscillations.

He moved staccato. Sometimes too slow, sometimes too fast. The Doctor mentioned something about telekinetic force, so a certain degree of concentration was necessary for movement. Frobisher felt the shell stop and start several times. The shell pattered like a frozen engine block. Its sucker arm spasmed.

“What are you doing?” demanded the first Dalek.

Frobisher felt his vocal cords bulge in their ambergris.

“Malfunction.”

“Silence! Move or you will be exterminated!” barked the second.

He broke out in a cold sweat. Panic motivated him out of the magnecrate onto the main floor. The base of his shell connected to it with a clicking pop of static. Sluggish movements became more decisive. The two drones could see every miscalculation and overcompensation now.

The scientist gestured. “You will move through the Decontamination Chunnel.”

Two metres away, as measured by onboard sensors, was a section of passageway. Adorned on its sides was an emerald-green funnel.

Ten metres in depth. Tiled in kaleidoscopic squares that rippled and shone with their own radiating light.

No way up, around or down. His only path was through it. Like all Daleks.

He began to move.

As he did, a red haze covered the glassy prism with a high-pitched whistle. Above him, a hidden tannoy issued the first assessment.

“Biocontaminants neutralised. X-ray analysis—clear.”

At two metres in, nozzles pursed from the wall and sprayed Frobisher’s shell in a glossy laminate. It sizzled against the armour with a chemical heat, but Meje and Dargaud’s repair skill buffered under the strain. He felt the twinned gunsticks at his back. Any deviation would result in immediate execution. Their silence deafened the hallway, but where was the scientist? He swung the eyestalk around. There, maybe?

“Shell core integrity remains stable. Infrared analysis—clear,” it continued behind the observation pane.

Four metres along, a strobing light bombarded and savaged the shell. His shadow, and that of his minders, jumped and skittered across the green squares. Diamonds of white-dwarf light in the walls flared off his gunstick and sucker arm.

The scientist seemed, briefly, to be in conversation with another Dalek beside it.

Frobisher had never seen anything like it. 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.

It was wrong. Something about it was wrong. Even for a Dalek.

“Insulation remains uncompromised. Health risk assessment—clear.”

At six metres, the globed Dalek was moving away now. As it did, another took its place from the opposite side of the room. Its replacement waited for quite some time—out of reverence, perhaps?—before it moved up to the observation window.

Frobisher heard it speak through the glass. Barely. *“Dalek-047 reporting to Section 17.”*

The newcomer had a blue dome and an unusual attachment on its sucker arm. Frobisher couldn’t see what from here. His vision busied

with a dead-air snowstorm of static. The Dalek might've been a... No, it was. A hatchery guard. The Doctor had mentioned them in his overview.

"Shell capable of withstanding exoatmospheric pressures," reported the Dalek scientist. *"Hostile energy assessment—clear."*

By eight metres, through clouds of smoke and steam, the hatchery guard discarded its net for what appeared to be a... what? The whifferdill needed a better angle. Nine metres gave him a quick glimpse of a hypodermic extractor.

The discomfort he felt before trebled.

At ten metres, the scientist barked, *"You will identify."*

Frobisher pushed the words out. "Dalek-777. Scientific division. Assigned to the Gallifreyan time-machine prior to loss of transceiver contact."

There was a pause. A long pause.

As long and soundless as when a gutter urchin of Xenon went up and asked for mazumas from the fancy-dress buckazoids. Arroyo silence that filled its gaps with nasty self-judgements. Salted with suspicion and an air of disgust from others. Frobisher kept the worst of his in check from bitter, personal experience.

He saw his judges in the concentric red of his eyestalk.

"Clear."

Frobisher needed to hear it again.

"Repeat: Dalek-777 cleared of all checks from the Decontamination Chunnel."

Frobisher couldn't quite believe it. He'd made it! Alright, he had to focus on what came next. There was likely to be a—

"Halt."

Fear. Marble-cold fear punched the former penguin in the head.

"You will submit to the Psyche Dalek's supplementary procedure, as ordered."

Just past the Decontamination Chunnel, one of the wall panels of Dalek Control slid open.

The ramp within led up behind the observation pane. The hatchery guard descended, its hypodermic extractor glinting in the half-light. Frobisher's instinct was to turn away, but then he remembered the two Daleks behind him. His chaperones who never left.

"Unseal your shell," ordered the hatchery guard.

It was then, in that moment, that Frobisher's mind reminded him he had volunteered for the job.

The brain was a funny thing sometimes. There was a difference between intellectual and emotional recognition.

Intellectually, he'd understood the risks. Emotionally...

Avan 'Frobisher' Tarklu was a whifferdill of middle-age. His was a life well-lived and certainly not one devoid of incident. He'd slept in the gutter. Fallen in love. Lost that which was dear to him, through no fault but his own. Let himself become cynical, let the cynicism mellow into something more... him. Travelling with the Doc, there were lives and lands he'd never thought he'd see. From the rebirth of Natasia Tor to the cosmic fringes of Time, where logic was a mere spinning top, playing its spindle on a broken record.

Frobisher had known fear, bravery and all the emotions in between.

And he'd never felt as alone as he did before this Dalek.

The Dalek didn't wait. "Override."

The mechanism above Frobisher's body came away freely. The faux mutant shrank into himself, trying to press down into the gaps of the shell. If he metamorphosed now, he was as good as dead. However, if he stayed as he was, he would—

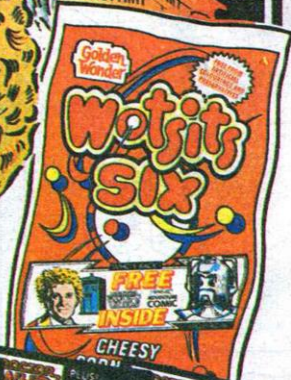
His last, fatal thought hit him like a brick.

Ah, of course, he reflected to himself. Life was what happened while you were making other plans. Why would death be any different?

The hypodermic extractor stabbed into the soft flesh of Frobisher's body and filled...

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