

THE
DOCTOR WHO
PROJECT

STROMBOLI'S COMET

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Published by Jigsaw Publications/The Doctor Who Project
Vancouver, BC, Canada

First Published December 2011

Stromboli's Comet

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A TDWP/Jigsaw Publications E-Book

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Typeset in Palatino Linotype

Logo © 2005 The Doctor Who Project

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PROLOGUE

The blistered sphere of rock struck out against the unforgiving vacuum of space, its vast elliptical course intersecting a planetary system here and a stellar nursery there, never slowing or resting, a ceaseless traveler caught in a perpetual trajectory spanning half a galaxy.

The comet's mass was considerable. Nearly the size of a small moon, its bulk cast a long shadow upon sun-lit worlds, whilst in the dark recesses of deep space its electromagnetic field could be felt long before its gnarled, pitted form became evident. Born out of a collision of stars more than a billion years earlier, this insentient voyager possessed the rare quality of being almost entirely composed of fluvium, an energy-rich mineral with the capacity to resist the most sophisticated of probes. It was this particular trait that was the reason why its once intact body now played host to an uninvited entity, nesting undisturbed in its senseless interior.

Extract from: 'Priority One Incident Report on Drilling Rig *Urkübl*' by Tar Paarseen

*...at 0700 Standard Time an encrypted missive was received from the Rogos Conglomerate Drilling Rig *Urkübl*, indicating that it had made visual contact with its target comet Gamma-Alpha-Theta, commonly known as Stromboli's Comet. At 0920 the *Urkübl* announced its intention to make comet-fall and commence exploratory drilling. Shortly after this message was received communication frequencies failed – for reasons unknown – and no further contact has been made.*

At this time, additional survey probes have been launched to intercept Gamma-Alpha-Theta and ascertain the status of the Urkübl. However, whatever condition the drilling rig is in, it must be assumed that given the time elapsed no survivors will be found...

Tar Paarseen rubbed his bloodshot eyes as he pored through the conclusion of his incident report for the umpteenth time. No matter how hard he tried he couldn't bring himself to finish his last sentence. It was too final, too bleak; the crew of the *Urkübl* had to be alive. He simply refused to draw the awful conclusion that Rogos had lost yet another drilling rig crew; it would be the fourth in less than two years, and all in the name of netting the biggest known fluvium field in the galaxy.

Leaning back in his chair and surveying the jumbled mess that constituted his office desk, Paarseen caught his reflection in the screen of his computer terminal. He preferred to use a vintage solid-screen monitor as opposed to the standard holographic model, but it did have the drawback of reflecting his somewhat tired features. Self-indulgently he considered his appearance: his green eyes were now tinged with grey, his once lustrous black hair was lost amidst a mane of near-white locks and his bronzed skin reduced to a slack, leathery appearance that was a natural consequence of too many holidays on the light-rich world of Helios Major.

Putting aside the irksome matter of his ageing frame, Paarseen returned to the issue at hand. Somehow there had to be a way around this publicity landmine; another lost rig crew could spell the end for Rogos' comet-mining rights – its most lucrative revenue stream – and authoring the incident report which triggered the loss of those rights would see to it that he never worked in the industry again.

With fatigue steadily blunting his focus Paarseen looked at the drilling schedules, his only possible window of escape. There were two drilling rigs within a month's travel time of Gamma-Alpha-Theta's current position; the only rescue options available. The first, the *Obrov*, was part way through a serious job which had taken more than a year to get off the design floor; but the second, the *Lokev*, had just finished a mineral sweep of the Polaris Asteroid System and was due to be assigned a new contract upon making dry dock. The opportunity was too good to miss. Paarseen turned to the small intercom unit next to his computer and asked for a direct line to the Rogos CEO. If the captain of the *Lokev* could be persuaded to take on a mercy run to Gamma-Alpha-Theta, it might just be possible to hold off on the incident report long enough to have the people who mattered forget all about the ill-fated *Urkübl*. Suddenly Paarseen's eyes didn't feel quite so bloodshot anymore.

Solar winds buffeted the otherwise motionless frame of the *Lokev*, its skeleton-like body of high-density cabling and fugue steel restlessly twisting in the ether like some gigantic insect, somehow not content with its orientation. As a drilling platform with multiple drill heads and storage bays, the cuboid-structured vessel also carried a sizable crew's quarters, in the form of a pyramidal unit set into the very centre of the platform. Inside, a crew of seven coordinated the machinery and equipment which could strip a comet of its precious minerals in a matter of days.

Aboard the *Lokev* its captain, Pavel Komen, surveyed the bridge with an exacting eye. His diminutive stature belied his considerable physical strength, and his icy gaze met all-comers in the intensity of its stare. At seventy years and three months, Komen was Rogos' oldest rig captain – and the oldest rig captain in any fleet since the business of comet chasing, as the rig crews called it, had begun a hundred years earlier. Amongst his fellow captains Komen was a rare breed: he chased comets with the same ferocious obsession as the Old Earth mountaineers had scaled new heights. Landing a fluvium-rich comet meant a king's fortune for a rig crew, and Komen had the rare boast of having achieved the feat twice in his career. He could have retired from the business after the first strike, never mind the second, but that wasn't Komen's way. He wanted to land comets for the sake of it, for the challenge and for no other reason. His longevity in a dangerous industry was largely due to his skill as a captain, although the occasional piece of luck had not gone amiss.

One of his qualities was his eye for a smooth-running bridge. Surveying the banks of monitors and instruments which lined its interior, it was patent to Komen that the *Lokev's* systems were running at optimum, which was no particular surprise given the maintenance service it had only just received. Of course, it would have undergone a complete overhaul, but a new contract had been made available at short notice, one which Komen could not resist. It had stipulated that more than twice the usual bonus would be available, plus extended drilling rights, if he could make contact with a downed rig on a nearby comet, Gamma-Alpha-Theta.

A look of intensity came across Komen's face as he considered the path which lay ahead of him and his crew. *Stromboli's Comet* had become the single-biggest prize for the comet chasers since it was first discovered almost fifty years earlier. Since then its legend had grown, along with the number of attempts to claim it for one energy corporation or another. For Komen, *Stromboli's Comet* had a very personal – and deeply private – association. Yet, incredible as it seemed, he'd never had the chance before now to go after it as a rig captain.

Turning his attention to his helmsman, Komen's lips became dry as he uttered the words that he'd waited his entire career to say. "Mister Kreuz, all systems are clear, set course for *Stromboli's Comet*."

PART I: COMET-FALL

It had been a long day for Tom Brooker. In fact, it had been a long week. Even after a good night's sleep he was still somewhat exhausted. Dealing with bug-eyed nasties can really take it out of you.

The Doctor was arguing with Val over something Tom hadn't been paying much attention to. The pair had been over the same ground dozens of times, and now they were so uninteresting that Tom had nothing but blank space with which to entertain himself. Unconsciously his right hand wandered towards one of the console's many odd-looking controls. As he came within touching distance the Doctor slapped his hand away and went back to arguing with Val.

"I have had *centuries* of experience with these controls, Miss Rossi," the Doctor explained. His latest incarnation was still a little prickly at times, and he had made a habit of referring to his companions by their last names, unless he was in a really dapper mood. Tom was sure someone could find it professional, but he just found it creepy.

"You can't even land on Earth without getting caught in some time-storm or other and being hurled to the other side of the universe!" Val retaliated.

The Doctor had no response. He glared at Val for a moment before once again hitting Tom's wandering hand away from the console, jerking him back to full consciousness as he drew away his twice-bruised fingers.

"Unless you want your hand severed, scanned, and destroyed if it harbors dangerous chemicals, I'd suggest you stop touching that," snapped the Doctor at Tom before immediately turning away and continuing the argument. "Besides, I need the console clear in order to demonstrate my competence at piloting this ship." He brought up the scanner and began setting new coordinates.

"Where are we going?" Tom asked, now too afraid to drift off.

"I will land the TARDIS at a location which only a true master could reach," he paused for effect, "by materializing here." He pointed to the screen as he continued to input the necessary travel data.

Val leaned in, but could only see the dark void of space and the dim light of distant stars. "I don't see anything." She half expected that the Doctor was about to tell her that only a *true* pilot could notice wherever they were going to land, and seriously hoped against it. Tom held down a laugh, as if he'd just understood some reference utterly lost on her. He was definitely a little more comfortable with this Doctor than she was, and that troubled her.

"That's because it hasn't arrived yet," the Doctor told her as he continued his work.

"What is it?" Tom asked, having walked over to look more closely at the monitor.

"A speeding comet, Mister Brooker. One of the fastest natural objects in existence composed of rock, dust and ice. This particular one is known in the thirty-first century as *Stromboli's Comet*."

"Like the pasta?" Tom asked.

The Doctor glared intensely at Tom before returning to his work.

Val leaned over to Tom and whispered, "the volcano."

Tom nodded vaguely, remembering something about an Italian volcano he'd heard had been the base for a smuggling racket. *Funny*, thought Tom, *this comet would be ideal for shuttling dodgy goods from one side of the galaxy to the other*. Returning his thoughts to the present, he noticed that Val was clutching the console with both hands, and indicating for him to do the same. As his hands clamped on to the nearest handle-like structure, the Doctor's eyes rose from where he was working and somehow managed to lock both Val and Tom in the same steely gaze.

"Your confidence in my skills is really quite touching," he observed, a strong note of sarcasm in his voice, "but there again..."

Before the Doctor could finish the TARDIS lurched violently, upsetting the hat stand and sending Tom tumbling. Somehow Val managed to maintain her grip until the disturbance had subsided, whilst the Doctor appeared entirely untroubled by the commotion.

"Odd, most odd," commented the Doctor as he gave one of the console's control panels a particularly hard stare.

"What happened?" asked Tom, groggily untangling himself from the hat stand.

"I'm not sure, but it seems that we may have encountered an unexpected visitor in the vicinity of the comet. And there's no better way of finding out than firsthand experience. Miss Rossi, would you like to lead the way?"

Val looked across at the TARDIS doors, and gave the Doctor a rueful glance. "I'm the test pilot, then?"

“Well, you were keen to test my piloting skills,” replied the Doctor. “Now we’ll see how your investigative qualities have fared since you joined me.”

Val smiled, accepting the Doctor’s point. Checking the console’s readout on the exterior conditions she noted that air and gravity were both Earth standard. Content that she wasn’t about to enter the vacuum of space she made for the door. As she did so, however, Tom quickly moved to join her. “I was equally questioning, so I should go with Val.”

“A just observation,” remarked the Doctor. “I’ll be with you both shortly.”

Giving each other the most reassuring expression they each could muster, Val and Tom exited the TARDIS.

As the *Lokev*’s first drill pilot and second steersman, Catria Slavnik was perhaps the single most important person aboard the rig, after its captain. She was responsible for supervising every detail of the drilling process: from the chemical lubricant which kept the drill turning, to the particular drill piece best suited to the conditions. If she made a mistake she could cost her crewmates not just their bonuses, but also their rig and ultimately their lives. And she loved it. More, her ambitious streak may have given her a somewhat ruthless demeanor, but her natural spontaneity made her good company and she absolutely lived off of the buzz her job gave her. Captaining rig? No way. The drill pilot post was much more critical.

Straightening her standard issue overalls and brushing her unkempt brown hair out of her eyes, she smartly made her way down to the storage deck. With the comet within touching distance she needed to recheck everything was where it should be. With this particular comet she’d be unlikely to get another shot at it.

Suddenly a sound struck her, reverberating along the dull metallic corridor which led from the crew quarters to the storage deck. It was a very odd sound, as though a musical organ had collided with an elephant, and the elephant had come off worse. Checking her walk, Slavnik considered what it might be, and a cold shiver ran down her spine. *It wasn’t an hallucination, I don’t get Space Shock* she thought to herself, determined not to be spooked. Drawing her handgun from its holster, she activated the personal comlink built into her collar.

“Slavnik to bridge, link corridor, possible intruders in the storage deck.”

Val and Tom looked quizzically at each other. Outside the TARDIS there was no barren landscape of rock and ice. Instead, their vision was filled by a cavernous, gunmetal grey deck containing several large, worn-looking machines. From Val’s experience, it was a

cargo bay. She turned and stared at the Doctor, who had followed the pair almost immediately and was busy surveying their surroundings with a decidedly odd-looking eyeglass contraption.

After a moment he pocketed the eyeglass in his plain brown jacket and began exploring. "Come along," he called back to his companions.

With a shared look of apprehension Val and Tom followed him.

The storage deck was slightly dirtier than those the companions could remember, and large pieces of machinery were haphazardly strewn about the area. Occasionally, the Doctor would pause and inspect one, declaring what it was for. He'd call a large crane straight out of an arcade machine a 'Soil Sampler'; an opaque vending machine lined with tubes was an 'Anti-radiation Precaution Apparatus'; giant space-bulldozers were affectionately termed 'Malmen's Militia'.

Val shook her head. It was clear to her that the Doctor was wasting time, which meant that there was a good chance that he was sulking over his failed attempt at materializing the TARDIS on a comet. Tom, on the other hand, was just glad for them to be walking around outside of the TARDIS, even if they had no real idea of where they happened to have landed.

Finally the Doctor came to a halt at a door which was locked. Producing his sonic screwdriver he quickly made short work of the lock and the door shifted along its metallic grooves.

Beyond was a small gangway which rounded a corner. The Doctor passed through the hatchway walked round the corner without saying a word.

"Do you know where we are?" Val whispered to the Doctor.

"Not a clue," the Doctor whispered.

"Stop right there!" the voice came from behind them. The three turned around, hands raised in a familiar position.

The woman in front of them was carrying a handgun, pointed determinedly in their direction. Her stern gaze was betrayed by her youthful complexion, but there was more than enough brute strength in her dark-brown eyes to discourage even the Doctor from staging a diversion.

"Excellent," said the Doctor, "you've passed our inspection test with flying colours. Now would you be so kind as to take us to your captain?"

"By all means," the woman replied, her tone just as sardonic as the Doctor's.

Kreuz looked up from his command console, a worried look on his face. "Captain Komen, I can't identify the energy signature, but it's definitely electromagnetic – and a heck of a lot stronger than any of the naturally occurring frequencies. It seems to be directed at our reception terminal, as though someone were trying to signal us."

“Or hack into our communications, eh?” Komen ventured, turning back to the viewscreen. *Stromboli’s Comet* was now within visual contact, and it had crossed Komen’s mind that the energy discharge which had just rocked the *Lokev* had coincided with the appearance of the comet on their screens. *The two events must be connected,* Komen pondered, *but no human technology could generate that sort of energy, could it?*

As Komen turned to speak with Kreuz again, the bridge hatch slid back and three strangers appeared, two men and a woman, smartly followed by Slavnik who was covering all three with her handgun. Komen gave each of the newcomers a long hard glare. He could only assume that they were stowaways.

The older of the two men greeted him with a simple, “Hello. I’m the Doctor.” His face was serious, and his eyes calculating, but neither he nor his companions said anything else.

“What are you doing on my rig?” Komen asked in a clipped, matter-of-fact tone.

“We were just stopping by,” remarked the Doctor as he surveyed the design of the bridge. It looked like one of the older models, popular in late thirtieth-century deep-space drilling rigs, complete with a series of compact command stations intended to minimize space usage; very utilitarian, much like so many things in the 3000s.

The Doctor’s answer did not inspire confidence in Komen, who was steadily losing his patience with the intruders.

“When did you stowaway?” he asked through barely clinched teeth.

“We didn’t,” the Doctor replied. “We were heading for a nearby comet when our craft... malfunctioned.” At the last word he shot a glance at Val.

Craft? Komen wasn’t familiar with any craft that could deposit someone aboard a mining vessel as easily as a comet. A transmat beam might work at a push, but there was too great a distance between the *Lokev* and the nearest comet for teleportation to be a safe option.

Moreover, the three strangers weren’t equipped with any protection from the void. If they stepped foot on *Stromboli’s Comet* they’d be dead in seconds, yet that had to be where they were heading since there were no other available comets in the sector.

So they’re liars, then; stowaways trying to get to Stromboli’s without a ship or any equipment. Komen was disgusted. Parasites like these wouldn’t think twice about sabotaging his rig and murdering his crew.

“This appears to be a mining vessel,” the Doctor concluded after a brief interlude. “Tell me, what’s its heading?”

“You know just as well as I do where it’s headed,” Komen snapped, a sharp edge entering his voice.

“Humor me.” The strange man’s expression was now one of cold annoyance. Had Komen been less experienced, he might have been intimidated by it.

“*Stromboli’s Comet,*” Komen answered in a lowered voice, as though to announce their target openly would risk jinxing the whole venture.

The Doctor's expression suddenly shifted into admiration. "Well, I wasn't too far off," he commented, directing his gaze at Val and Tom, of whom the former simply sighed in resignation.

Before the Doctor could say anything else Komen spoke again. "I understand precisely why you're here, and I'll not allow you to compromise the *Lokev's* mission."

"What's the *Lokev*?" asked Val.

"This ship," Slavnik responded icily.

"Ah," the Doctor said, as though a puzzle were steadily unveiling itself to him. Before he could follow up on Val's question, however, another crew member hurriedly entered the bridge. He was broad shouldered, with a wide face and open blue eyes. His hair was grey and although he looked to be closer to sixty than fifty he still sported the physique of a man half his age. This was Stig Bol, the *Lokev's* security officer and second engineer.

"I've just come from engineering. There's been an accident," Bol announced, clearly making an effort to control the concern in his voice.

"What's happened?" Komen and the Doctor asked, simultaneously.

"Something went haywire with the rig's integrity controls; we've ejected the medical bay unit."

Komen spun around and fixed Kreuz with a hard look. "Why weren't we alerted?"

Kreuz surveyed the internal display units. "There's no indication of damage, Captain, but it's possible the energy wave that hit us earlier blanked out the rig's integrity sensors. If it did, and we're not reading that, our software may be compromised."

Komen turned back to Bol. "Were the doors sealed?"

"Yes, Captain. And Mister Poreč is working on retrieving the unit now. He launched an emergency tow cable to reel it back in."

"Then why did you rush up here to tell us when you could be helping Mister Poreč?" asked Slavnik with a barely concealed note of criticism.

Bol fixed Slavnik with a piercing stare. "We can't get it back fast enough. Doctor Strega's inside and the oxygen supplies won't last the distance."

Komen silently contemplated the news, suddenly aware of the true risk entailed in hunting the untouched comet which was so near and yet so far. Considering how best to act, he noticed that the stranger calling himself the Doctor was looking intensely in his direction.

As much as he tried, Josip Poreč was finding great difficulty remaining calm. Sending Bol to the bridge had been the only course of action he could think of taking given that

he had well and truly run out of ideas, and now the wait for help was stretching his nerves to breaking point.

It had all happened so quickly. Strega had been on his way back from the medical bay when the ejection alarm had sounded. Instinctively following emergency protocols, the medical officer had flung himself back into the apparent safety of the medical bay until the ejection order could be countermanded. Only it couldn't be. Rushing to the engineering section, Poreč had tried every subroutine available, even going so far as to rewire part of the hardware, but without success. Now the medical bay was drifting some five kilometers off of the starboard side of the rig, steadily being towed back in by the emergency tow cables Poreč had launched as a last resort. At least the cables had held, and were steadily bringing the oval-shaped medical bay unit and its occupant back to the *Lokev*. But set adrift from the rig, the bay only had a few minutes of independent oxygen available to it. Hence, Strega would run out of air long before the unit could be returned and unsealed.

As Poreč looked on with horror at the viewscreen displaying what appeared to be his crewmate's final moments, Komen came charging into the hold with a trio of complete strangers, followed in turn by Slavnik and Bol, each holding a handgun in the direction of the new arrivals.

"Hello, I'm the Doctor," said the Doctor as he inspected the panel Poreč had been working on when he had tried his rewiring trick. Quickly lifting the panel clear to expose the circuitry behind it, he proceeded to detach a spaghetti-like mass of cabling from its motherboard, which he then rearranged into a neat plait before reattaching it and returning the panel to its original position. Turning to the control console located just above the panel, the Doctor began frantically pounding at the keys.

Watching the strange man with one eye, and the viewscreen showing the medical bay with the other, Poreč noticed a large section of material had begun to sprout from the rig's superstructure, forming an umbilical cord of metal which was linking itself to the medical bay. In less than a minute the cord had locked itself onto the unit's main hatch. A moment later and a series of short beeps from the control console indicated that air was being transferred down the cord and into the medical bay.

"There," murmured the Doctor, turning away from his handiwork to observe the events on the viewscreen.

Komen snapped round and pointed at Slavnik and Bol. "Get Strega out of there, now!"

Barely nodding to acknowledge the command, the pair sprinted for the medical bay. Meanwhile Poreč's face was still glued to the viewscreen, a stunned look etched across it.

"I... I don't believe you just did that."

The Doctor smiled. "It was a simple matter of displacing some of the excess plastics of the rig's exo-shell. Anyone could have done it if they'd had the chance to

study fifth-dimensional engineering. In any case, you don't need to believe me; go see for yourself."

Poreč finally tore his gaze away from the viewscreen and took in the three strangers before him. "Who are you?" he asked, confusion and relief mixed together.

"I'm known as the Doctor, and these are my companions, Miss Rossi and Mister Brooker. We're here because a malfunction in our ship forced us to land."

There was silence as Poreč let the Doctor's answer sink in.

"But, I don't understand. That doesn't make any sense. The docking points are closed and all the entrances are sealed. How did you get in?"

"We landed in the storage deck," the Doctor replied.

"Oh. Transmatters," Poreč said the word as if it meant 'hippie'. "I wonder why Komen trusts you so much." He gestured to the panel.

The Doctor's expression hardened. "I volunteered."

Poreč considered this, and a mild feeling of irritation filled the air between them.

Unaware of any friction, Komen turned to the Doctor, Val and Tom. "I don't know who you three are, or what you're doing here. For the moment, that doesn't matter. You can remain aboard until the mission's complete, and then we'll drop you off with a distress signal at the nearest habitable planet. But make certain you stay out of our way, or I'll be forced to take more serious measures." With that he strode out, giving muffled orders into his comlink informing the rest of the crew of this development.

Val looked nervously at the Doctor and Tom. "Let's leave," she suggested.

"Not yet," replied the Doctor.

"Why not?" Tom asked.

"Something bad is about to happen. *Stromboli's Comet* is important. I just can't remember... Ah, that's it!" the Doctor suddenly shouted, "I remember now! It's renowned both now and in the future as the only comet impossible to mine!"

"Does that mean these people are going to die?" Val asked. She didn't want to think that she'd become used to death since meeting the Doctor, but it certainly didn't hurt to be blunt with the Time Lord from time to time.

"No," the Doctor said. "Maybe. The problem with historical documents and stories is that they tend to be less truthful the more they're passed around. Information tends to decay over time."

"Okay, so people might've just forgotten about this trip," said Tom. The Doctor nodded in response.

"Then what makes you think that something bad is going to happen?" Val continued, determined to get to the bottom of the Doctor's cryptic comment.

"My finely-tuned sense of intuition, Miss Rossi." And with that the Doctor left in the direction that Komen had taken.

Tom looked at Val. "I guess we follow, right?"

"I'm not sure we have a choice," observed Val, heading in the Doctor's direction.
"Too true," said Tom to himself and followed after Val.

Once the alarm klaxons had cut out, and her viewscreen had shown the medical bay safely returned – how precisely she couldn't tell – Petra Vremščica had finally been able to return to her work in the rig's drill deck. As the rig's second drill pilot she was busy replotting the percentages of mineral deposits on *Stromboli's Comet*. As she did so, however, she was certain she was making a mistake; the comet was always too light for its scanned mass. She considered that the scanners may have been faulty, but that wouldn't account for such a vast difference in projection and conclusion.

She was just starting to run over the numbers again when Bol entered the deck.

"Hi, Mister Bol." Vremščica's voice held a trace of amusement, as though she were preparing a joke at her colleague's expense.

"Er, hello, Miss Vremščica." Bol was always awkward when he was around her.
"There are two," he paused, "no, I mean three new arrivals."

"I just heard. Who are they?"

"Stowaways, we think."

"What's the Captain doing with them?"

"Nothing, really," Bol shrugged.

"Why hasn't he had them shot?"

"One of them, called the Doctor, he saved Strega. I don't know how. I think Komen's repaying him for that."

"So there are three stowaways walking around the ship unsupervised." It was more a summary than a question.

"Yes," said Bol, ignoring Vremščica's rhetorical tone.

"Thanks for the update," she replied, a touch coldly. Some part of her was aware that her mood was starting to swing, but mostly she was just seeking out reasons to be angry. The Captain was acting unprofessionally, there were potential saboteurs aboard, and they were heading towards a comet that had a reputation for swallowing rigs.

Great.

"We're approaching," Komen said as he entered the bridge and took up his position in the centre of the chamber. Kreuz, seated at the command console, nodded and began routine checks of the rig's landing gear. A moment later Slavnik appeared and took up her post at the secondary command station.

“All right, we’re nearing comet-fall,” Komen observed. “We just need to ease her down gently and stay on target. We’ve got ourselves a landing zone within a two-mile radius of the *Urkiibl*. Just take it slow and we’ll get there.”

A red circle on the main viewscreen indicating the landing area floated in the air as the rig entered comet-fall. Silently the bridge doors slid open, but none of the three turned to inspect who had arrived.

The Doctor, Tom, and Val quietly entered and went to stand at the far wall to watch proceedings. Komen was issuing orders to adjust the trajectory whilst Kreuz and Slavnik were performing a series of maneuvers honed over years of comet-fall practice. This time, however, they moved with even greater precision and calm, no doubt a reaction to the growing proximity of the legendary comet.

Then, suddenly and terribly, something went wrong. The red circle disappeared and the main viewscreen shut off. Meantime, Kreuz’s and Slavnik’s attempts to control the rig came to naught.

Recovering from oxygen depletion had not taken Strega as long as he imagined it would. A few minutes in the secondary recuperation chamber – the one external to the medical bay – and his oxygen levels had quickly normalized. The fear that had coursed through him in the minutes before his rescue would take a lot longer to recede, however.

In an effort to take his mind off of recent events, Strega had decided to return to the medical bay to inventory the supplies, just routine monitoring before comet-fall. As he reached the bay hatch his heart briefly quickened and he found himself pausing at the threshold, his hands rigidly gripping the opening mechanism. As he took a long, deep breath and prepared to enter, the gangway lights fluctuated and finally cut out. A moment later and the somewhat dim emergency lights activated, bathing Strega’s face in a soft blue hue. The twilight set his mind racing again: he remembered the feeling of his oxygen steadily thinning; he remembered the doors closing as the medical bay suddenly detached itself from the *Lokev* and began drifting out into deep space.

Rubbing the back of his neck, Strega tried to shut out the memory by focusing his mind on restoring the gangway lighting. After all, it had to be a local power failure, hadn’t it?

Then, he felt the sensation of falling.

Bol and Poreč were in the engineering section, looking over the panel.

"I knew that the rig's walls were self-replicating, but to use them like that..." Poreč said, only partially speaking to Bol who had nothing to contribute to the conversation. In amongst reversing the Doctor's handiwork, Poreč had been intermittently attacking the Doctor's attitude and praising his intelligence, creating a somewhat polarized portrait of the strange man who they barely knew.

Suddenly, the lights cut out, and the panel became unresponsive.

"Power failure," Poreč said to himself.

Then, the ship started tumbling downwards.

Vremščica cursed as the lights went off. She'd done the calculations for the umpteenth time and had come to the same answer: the comet's mass was changing. But it just didn't make any sense. Worse still, now the rig was within the mass influence of the comet, making their situation critical; one false move and the *Lokev* would be dashed against *Stromboli's Comet* like a piece of driftwood tossed against the rocks.

She cursed again as she felt the rig gain momentum. Something had gone badly wrong. She was probably right about the stowaways being saboteurs all along. Then she felt herself pressed even harder against her seat as the momentum grew.

A tangle of electrical discharges spun and spat around the rig's skeletal frame, transforming its hurtling form into a fiery blaze of light. Soon, as it grew closer to the hurtling mass of fluvium it was intent on netting, its lightshow began to blend with the even more impressive pyrotechnics of the comet's vast tail, which projected an arc of searing blue-green light across the otherwise still blackness of space.

Komen's eyes were fixed on the bridge's one functioning viewscreen, its half-lit display depicting the comet's scarred and battered surface in ever-increasing detail. If its trajectory held, the *Lokev* would crash within reach of the *Urkübl*, another casualty of the impossible comet.

I can't lose again, not after all these years of waiting, Komen thought.

As he desperately tried to coax a response out of his rig an idea struck him, inspired by instinct as much as reason.

"Mister Kreuz, initiate the landing gear."

"We're flying blind, Captain, the undercarriage may be damaged if we release..."

"Do it!" yelled Komen, his voice raised in a rare fit of temper.

Tom and Val, gripping hold of whatever they could find, stared incredulously at the Doctor, who was standing and staring at the viewscreen, seemingly unmoved by the danger unfolding about him.

“Doctor!” shouted Tom above the growing din of the rig’s engines.

The Doctor ignored the call and continued to stare in mesmeric fashion, as though locked in a single thought and unable to recognize anything else.

Tom turned to Val and gave her the most reassuring look he could manage. “We’ve survived worse, remember,” he mouthed to her.

Val simply nodded and turned to the Doctor’s unmoving figure as the *Lokev* continued on its fatal course towards the comet.

PART II: THE RESCUE

Stromboli's Comet had travelled across half the galaxy. It had swept past newborn suns and super novae, asteroid belts and gas giants. Its origin was buried in the birth of the universe, and its first blazing steps had long since been extinguished in the unrelenting cold of space. In all those long years of solitude it had lent its fiery shape to the endless void, contrasting the near-infinite emptiness with the substance and velocity of its gnarled hulk.

In recent years the comet had encountered a new sort of fellow traveler, in the form of energy-prospecting rigs, intent on drilling into its untapped fluvium fields and triggering a fluvium rush amongst the energy conglomerates of a power-hungry Earth.

Now, only weeks after the disappearance of the *Urkübl*, yet another rig had embarked upon the seemingly impossible task of making comet-fall on this rare celestial body. But one of its passengers had a rare gift for the impossible.

Val's eyes remained fixed on the Doctor's static form as the *Lokev's* engines reached breaking point. Her disbelief was tangible; there was simply no way she could imagine that he would just passively watch as death rose up to meet them.

Unable to keep her relentless stare trained on the Time Lord any longer, she allowed herself a slow blink, the pressure of the rig's momentum finally getting to her. As her eyes opened again she realized that the Doctor was gone, or rather that he'd moved. Looking towards the centre of the bridge she could see that he was now standing over Kreuz, energetically gesticulating in a manner Val knew only too well.

Kreuz's voice was barely audible above screeching of the engines. "That's... that's impossible, Doctor, you're asking us to commit suicide!"

"Trust me," replied the Doctor with complete confidence.

Kreuz gave the Doctor a hard look which belied the fear coursing through him. What he was being asked to do was ludicrous – but what alternative did he have? As things stood, the rig would be smashed into a thousand pieces in less than a minute, so he had nothing to lose by following the seemingly absurd advice of this strange man.

Returning his gaze to his command console, Kreuz inputted a series of coordinates and allowed his right index finger to hover over the execute key.

"What the hell are you doing, Mister?!" bellowed Komen. "Stay on this course, that's an order!"

"Don't worry, Captain," snapped the Doctor in a voice that somehow travelled despite the screaming of the engines, "we're not deviating a single inch."

With that he slammed his fist down on the execute key.

And everything stopped.

The wreck of the *Urkübl* resembled a child's scattered jigsaw puzzle. Cables lay strewn about the rocky bowl into which the rig had crashed, forming a jumbled mass of knots which no amount of untangling would ever resolve. The main body was splintered into near-melted blocks of deformed fugue steel, whilst long shards of equally superheated framing lay utterly ruined in a bizarre series of concentric circles, as if in the chaotic aftermath of the crash there had been some unearthly order at work.

Incredibly, the crew quarters had remained more or less intact. Battered and scored by the landing, the box-like structure had been propelled over a dozen miles of the comet's pitted surface, before finally coming to rest on the edge of an intimidating ridge. Remarkably the life-support system had continued functioning, thus sustaining the *Urkübl's* one surviving crewmember that had entered a cryogenic capsule to conserve what little power was left. Now all he had to do was wait for rescue.

Tom stared with utter astonishment at the *Lokev's* freshly rebooted main viewscreen. It displayed a jagged, rocky landscape, illuminated in the foreground by the rig's external lighting, and given an additional eerie lighting by the glow of the comet's tail. In all, it was a standard visual report for a rig that had made a successful comet-fall, which was why Tom looked incredulous.

"How..." began Kreuz, equally stunned by the apparently miraculous conclusion to their nightmare approach to *Stromboli's Comet*.

“Your rig was set for a linear landing course, as per standard procedure,” observed the Doctor. “But this comet happens to generate an extraordinary electromagnetic field; the very same one which interfered with your ejection protocols and set your medical officer adrift; and which made your navigational systems think that you were heading for a much smaller mass. Hence the discrepancy between what your rig was preparing to land upon and what it was actually heading towards. It’s not unlike misjudging the trajectory of a falling object – like failing to catch a ball because of faulty depth perception. All I did was to instruct your computers that the comet’s mass was even greater than it is in reality, which cancelled out the mistake and gave us a relatively smooth landing.”

“He’s right, Captain,” observed Slavnik. “Aside from a blackout on our external communications net, all our systems are running well within endurance limits. We’re in good shape.”

Komen shook his head. In all his years as a rig captain he’d encountered pretty much everything deep space could throw at him, but this Doctor person was something else.

“Who are you really?” asked Komen, giving the Doctor a searching look. “No ordinary person could have saved Strega, and then the entire rig the way you just did. So *who* or perhaps *what* are you?”

“As I said, my name is the Doctor. I’m a traveler, and these are my, well, associates.”

“That barely answers my question.”

“Considering what’s just happened, it’s more than sufficient for the time being.”

Komen eyes blazed for a moment, and then another look crossed his face, as though some truth had suddenly dawn on him. Slowly he nodded. “I appreciate your actions, Doctor, and I’ll respect your... anonymity for the time being. But remember, you weren’t invited aboard my rig. Is that clear?”

The Doctor’s expression remained deadpan. “Understood, Captain Komen, and of course they do say bad luck comes in threes, so given that I’ve helped you out twice I’ve no doubt you’re still due one more ‘good’ turn, as it were. Now, are we going to explore this uncharted comet of yours or not?”

Komen hesitated for a moment, momentarily taken aback by the Doctor’s question. At last he answered. “We’re not here to start charting and prospecting just yet. Another rig came down on the comet some days ago and we’re to check for survivors before we commence drilling.”

“Another rig?” asked Val, “I thought this comet was unreachable?”

“It is, or rather it was before now,” explained Kreuz. “But that hasn’t stopped rigs trying, and the one before us, the *Urkübl*, managed to make comet-fall but then lost contact. The last scan we took showed it to be pretty badly beaten up by its landing, but

the crew quarters were intact. That particular section is relatively close to where we've managed to come down."

Kreuz checked his console and then pointed at the main viewscreen. "It's in that direction, about four kilometers from our present location.

"Get suited-up Mister Kreuz," ordered Komen, "I want you with me on the rescue team – if there's anyone left to rescue, that is."

"You're leaving the rig, Captain?" Slavnik's inquiry contained a trace of criticism.

"What of it, Miss Slavnik?"

"I mean no disrespect, Captain, but regulations state that the rig captain is to remain aboard at all times to coordinate operations both internal and external to the rig."

"Duly noted," replied Komen, "but *Stromboli's Comet* has made rig regulations look pretty useless up until now, and I don't plan on jinxing us by breaking with that tradition. You're to take command and to remain on the bridge to monitor our progress; Miss Rossi here can help you. Doctor, I want you with me. Your other associate, Mister Brooker, will be escorted to the drilling section where he can assist Miss Vremščica with our drill preparations."

As Val and Tom made to protest the Doctor gave each of them a warning look and subtly shook his head. Looking at the Doctor, and then briefly at each other, they remained silent and waited.

Komen activated his comlink. "Doctor Strega, you're needed at hatch number three. Come fully suited and with three medical kits."

"Three?" asked the Doctor.

"We don't know how many survivors there could be, and there will be four of us on this mission: Mister Kreuz, Doctor Strega and you will each carry a pack."

"And you?"

Komen gave the Doctor a knowing look. "I'll be personally attending to our security arrangements, Doctor. I can assure you, I will be equally weighed down."

"I appreciate your concern for our safety, Captain. Perhaps you'd like to lead the way?"

Komen ignored the Doctor's remark and looked towards Slavnik. "Stay alert, and at the slightest sign of trouble, start the primary phase of the liftoff sequence. We may need to leave here in a hurry. Miss Rossi, you are under Miss Slavnik's supervision. Mister Brooker, you'll follow us to the drill deck where you'll be working with Miss Vremščica. I can assure you that you'll be in expert hands, so please don't consider anything rash."

Tom had had enough of Komen's accusing manner. "We've done nothing wrong, Captain Komen, aside from the Doctor here saving your medical officer, along with the medical bay and then the whole rig. Why are you still so suspicious of us?"

Komen's gaze became as hard as stone. "We're light years from the nearest habitable world, and just as far from the space lanes. Yet you and your friends turn up on my rig as we're about to make comet-fall on the biggest fluvium field in the known galaxy. Yes, I am suspicious, and rightly so. Follow my directions and we'll remain cordial. Fail to do so and I'll see to it that yourself, Miss Rossi and the... Doctor here, are returned to whichever realm you were conjured up from. Clear?"

"Conjured...?" began Tom.

"We understand, perfectly," interjected the Doctor before Tom could finish his question. "A comet of such repute no doubt carries with it certain, shall we say, legends?"

"This far from civilization, Doctor, nearly everything becomes a legend. Now, as you said, I'll lead and you'll follow."

Turning smartly, Komen left the bridge. The Doctor gave Val a reassuring look. "You'll be fine here Val. Stick close to Miss Slavnik and little will go wrong."

"You don't usually call me 'Val', at least not since your regeneration. I hope that's a good sign."

"Hmm," mused the Doctor "that's an interesting point. Let's see, shall we?"

"Yes, let's see. Good luck then, Doctor."

"And to you."

The Doctor strode after Komen, whilst Tom hung back for a moment to speak with Val.

"I'm not sure what we've got into here," he whispered, "but try to keep an eye on the Doctor. If anything starts to happen we'll head back to the TARDIS."

"And do what?" asked Val, unable to hide her lack of confidence.

"Help the Doctor, of course. It's a better plan than just watching him on a viewscreen landing up in all sorts of trouble."

"Maybe, but I'd rather not get this rig crew anymore suspicious than we..."

"That's enough," snapped Kreuz, "we need to move, Mister Brooker."

Tom nodded and looked at Val. "Remember what I said," he mouthed at her, just out of Kreuz's line of sight. Then he headed in the Doctor's direction, with Kreuz just behind him.

Val turned to Slavnik who had been too preoccupied taking surface readings to notice the exchange. "Umm, I guess that just leaves us then. I'll try not to get in the way. My name's Valentina, by the way, although my friends call me Val."

"If you avoid asking me anything you'll do fine, Valentina," replied Slavnik, barely lifting her head from her console."

"Gotcha," said Val, "I'll just watch the, err, screen then."

Settling herself in front of one of the smaller monitors Val prepared herself for a long vigil.

Poreč couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"You've got to be kidding! There's no way the Captain wouldn't choose me for a recce; I'm the rig's Security Officer. There's simply no way."

"That's how it is," observed Strega as he finished kitting up. "The Captain is taking this Doctor person with him, plus Kreuz and me. That leaves Slavnik and this Rossi woman on watch duty, Vremščica setting up the drilling platform with the other new arrival, Brooker, and you and Bol on guard duty. Clear?"

"No, it's not clear and I'm not satisfied with the Captain's reasoning. I think these 'visitors' have hypnotized him. Either that or this ruddy comet is turning his brain to mud.

Strega gave Poreč a hard look. "These so-called 'visitors' saved my life, and then saved all of us from being smashed to smithereens on this rock. That's two very good reasons for me – and at least one for you – to give them the benefit of the doubt. Plus, no-one has ever landed on this comet and told the tale, never mind stepping foot on it and perhaps even getting a drill head or two sunk into it, so we should be counting ourselves very fortunate. In any case, allowing two security specialists to remain aboard a rig during a recce is a luxury most crews can ill afford. Keep your eyes open and wish us luck, I'm sure we're going to need it."

As Strega exited, Poreč nodded as though he had been convinced by the medic's words, before silently making his way to the security hub, where the camera feeds for the rig's surveillance cameras were housed. Now quite alone, he allowed his real feelings to surface as his expression turned to one of burning resentment. Reaching the hub, he operated one of its comlinks. "Bol, I need to see you at the security hub, it's urgent."

Tom gazed at the cavernous interior of the drill deck. Its vast, grid-like network of girders and columns was interspaced by enormous snaking tubes which came together at several drill heads positioned across the deck. Vremščica was at a console centrally suspended about five meters above the deck. She looked down on Tom and gave him an exacting look.

"The Captain has assigned you to work with me, correct?"

"Yep, but I..."

"Don't know anything about comet drilling?" Vremščica made no attempt to hide her sarcasm. "Well, let me tell you this. The first thing you learn is never to spend any time on the deck platform, especially during a drill-head cross-check."

As she finished her sentence, a high tension cable swung past Tom, nearly making contact with his head. Backing up against the nearest wall he warily surveyed the deck, waiting for the next piece of industrial machinery to take a shot at him.

Vremščica wore an almost apologetic smile. "Do you see the ladder hung against the far wall? Head in that direction and I'll pick you up."

Tom gave her a questioning look before making for the ladder. As he reached it he noticed that she had tracked her console along the railing from which it was suspended, and had lowered it to within a couple of meters of his position. Shimmying up the ladder he swung himself into the console's booth and took one of the spare seats.

"Welcome aboard – Mister Brooker, isn't it?"

"Yes, but I'd prefer it if you'd call me Tom; I'm not keen on formality."

"Me neither. Call me Petra, unless Komen's around, in which case it's Miss Vremščica."

Tom shook his head. "I can barely pronounce that, is it Russian?"

"Russian? Do you mean Old Slavic?"

"I guess."

"Well, you're close. My surname, amongst other things, belongs to a mountain in Slovenia, one of the old Slavic republics before the Great Migration. Strangely enough, a few of us have Slovene names, including Komen, although his is simpler to pronounce."

Tom gave Petra his most winning smile. "I went to Slovenia once, to the capital, Ljubljana. I was on a stag party and we ended up stuck inside a cellar in the castle on the hill."

Vremščica's expression became quizzical. "You must be older than you look. Ljubljana was razed to the ground in the Second Pan-Balkan War – seven hundred years ago."

Tom swallowed hard and nodded. "Yes, well, travelling with the Doctor sort of messes up your sense of time. Either that or that stag party really wiped my memory."

"Right," said Vremščica, her expression no less curious. "Look, I'm incredibly busy but Komen has put you with me and until he say's otherwise that's the way it is. So, however old you might be, if you're half as bright as you look you should be able to monitor those feeds for me."

She pointed at a series of monitors displaying energy levels in the various drill heads. "There was a really odd mass reading earlier, but I think it was just a ghost in the machine – perhaps all that electromagnetic traffic we were hitting on entry. Anyhow, the power mustn't drop below the four hundred mark. If it wavers in the slightest tell me straightaway, clear?"

Tom nodded. "As crystal."

"Pardon?"

"You're clear, completely and utterly. Okay?"

"Okay, Mister... I mean Tom. Let's get to work."

Making a mental note to avoid slang expressions or any reference to his time travelling, Tom's eyes began to explore the bank of controls making up the mobile

command unit which Vremščica used to steer the rig's vast drill deck. "I imagine you can dig up a lot of stuff with all this equipment, right?"

"We can strip out around fifty thousand tons of ore per hour on a good day."

"Per hour? That much?"

"It's not a lot by the standards of most drill platforms, but we're hunting fluvium, which is a more delicate business. But it pays in the end. The energy efficiency of a kilo of fluvium equates to about a thousand kilos of regular carbon."

"So fluvium is the gold of the energy industry, then?"

"You could say that. Which I guess makes us..."

"...stinking rich? Do you really think it's just about money, Bol?"

Bol's face remained impressive. "I don't understand what you're after, Poreč, if it's not a claim to whatever's on this comet. And a legitimate claim amounts to one thing: wealth."

Poreč took a long, deep breath before responding. He was well aware that time was not on his side, but he needed Bol with him if his plan was to work. "Listen, man, for the last time, just give it some thought. Komen is off on some so-called mercy mission, which you and I both know is just an excuse to get on and make the claim. It's how he always does it. You've been with him long enough to know that, surely?"

Bol slowly nodded. It was true that Komen usually claimed the comet rights, and often with a small contingent of the crew as witness. But in twenty-odd years of comet chasing together, Bol had never known Komen to be anything but honest when dividing up the bonus amongst his crew. Still, maybe Poreč was onto something.

Sensing his colleague's hesitation Poreč went in for the kill. "But this time it's no ordinary comet, no ordinary bonus *and* we have visitors. Doesn't all that make you just the slightest bit suspicious of Komen trekking off with his stooge, Kreuz, plus Strega who's clearly under the spell of these strangers, and this Doctor person who's broken pretty much every rule in the pilot's manual by landing us here?"

Bol remained silent whilst keeping the same unblinking expression fixed on Poreč.

"I've been scanning the wreck of the *Urkübl*," Poreč continued. "There's an odd energy signature being given off this side of the wreck. It's barely a kilometer away. Very likely it's the beginning of a fluvium vein, and who knows how deep it runs. We can use the secondary shuttle to check it out and be back before Komen has had the chance to complain. All we need to do is radio to Slavnik that we're worried about the connections to the medical bay and we're heading out for a quick look. If there's nothing there, there's no harm done. But if it's what I think it is we make the claim. That

way, when Komen gets back he'll have to agree with us about divvying up the fluvium rights. What do you think?"

Bol considered Poreč's proposal. He didn't like going behind Komen's back, but there again Poreč would probably go ahead by himself if he turned him down, which could well be the greater of two evils. The decision was clear. "I'll come with you, but if there's the slightest sign of trouble we head back, all right?"

"Completely, Mister Bol. Now, let's suit up. I reckon we've got less than an hour before Komen and his clique reach the wreck."

The Doctor gazed across the comet-scape with a look of wonder. The eerily-lit surface was pitted with the debris of space collisions over millennia, unchecked by the softening effects of an atmosphere. Considering that point, the Doctor was grateful that not only was the comet's present position relatively distant from asteroid belts or solar storms, but also that Komen's party was travelling via a heavily-armored comet shuttle: a single-chamber vehicle which skimmed across the comet whilst projecting a highly-powerful shield, fuelled by its parent rig.

"Distance, Mister Kreuz?" asked Komen.

"Two kilometers and closing, Captain. We should have visual contact now."

All four pairs of eyes flicked towards the solitary viewscreen fitted just above Kreuz's console. The rocky ridge it was displaying suddenly gave way to a clear horizon and the egg-shaped crew quarters of the *Urkübl*. Strega issued an audible sigh of relief. "Thank goodness it's still intact. I was worried that our long-range scan had missed something."

"Life signs are still strong," observed the Doctor, looking over Strega's shoulder to his medical display. "It seems we really are on a rescue mission, Captain Komen."

Komen gave the Doctor a hard look. "I take it that that was a rhetorical question?"

"Quite right," replied the Doctor, presenting Komen with an equally direct gaze. "And as such I expect we'll be well on our way back to the *Lokev* in no time, correct?"

"I'm not sure where your questioning is leading, Doctor, but if whoever's still alive in that wreck managed to get to a life capsule we will indeed be able to operate this rescue rather speedily."

"Which will mean that you can get on with some serious fluvium hunting?"

Giving the Doctor a blazing look, Komen didn't answer.

"Is that light meant to be flashing?" inquired Val.

Without bothering to respond, Slavnik turned to the sensor and pressed down on the button below it. "Slavnik to Shuttle Two, please verify yourself."

"Bridge, this is Poreč. An energy spike has come up just beyond the rig, near to the medical bay bulkhead. Mister Bol and I are running a routine recce. We'll keep you informed. Out."

Slavnik ran a scan of the shuttle. Two suit transponders were activated: Poreč's and Bol's. Pausing for a moment, she reopened the comlink. "Mister Bol, please confirm your position."

"Bol here. I'm with Mister Poreč. I'm sorry, there wasn't time to contact you before heading out. The energy spike is fluctuating and we needed to get a fast fix on its location. Out."

Slavnik watched the comlink go dead for a second time, her expression one of deep concern.

Determined to build some sort of rapport with her icy colleague, Val decided to pursue the situation. "What's wrong?"

Slavnik hesitated before replying, absentmindedly pushing a stray strand of yellow hair behind her ear. "Bol's a bit of a loose cannon occasionally, but he's fiercely loyal to Komen. He wouldn't head out without an important reason. And that's the part that's worrying me."

Pushing her luck a little Val ventured another question. "How so?"

"If Bol is heading out on what might be a rather dubious recce with Poreč, it means that the latter may well be up to something."

Val looked at the bank of monitors surrounding the bridge. "Can you check his story?"

Slavnik pointed at a display screen set above the Science Officer's console. "I have. It checks out, but it's still suspicious. After all, we're on a comet no-one has successfully drilled, and this far out from the space lanes you tend to get more cases of Space Shock."

"Space what?"

"Space Shock. It's a common problem in deep-space travel," explained Strega as he checked the seals on the Doctor's suit.

"So you think that's what's kept this comet clear of rig crews for a century?" asked the Doctor.

"I'm almost a hundred percent positive. This far away from any form of known civilization, human or otherwise, and the brain can manufacture all sorts of illusions; it's not an uncommon phenomenon, these days we call it Space Shock. The way that

you retrieved the medical bay, for example, and then landed the rig safely on this comet – prime examples of Space Shock.”

The Doctor raised an eyebrow as he ran a critical eye over Strega’s suit seals. “You don’t think you were rescued?”

“Oh yes, absolutely. And I also believe you landed the rig in one piece. But on both occasions you saw what the rest of us didn’t, and I think that part of the reason why we failed to see the whole picture was caused by Space Shock. Sometimes it creates illusions; sometimes it blinds us to reality. And it could be getting worse, hence Komen’s decision to bring you with us. Being outside the rig on an unknown comet makes us the most susceptible group.”

The Doctor nodded. “Doctor Strega, you might just have a point. Now, shall we see how far your theory holds?”

Komen was signaling to the pair to move to the airlock hatch, indicating that the shuttle had docked with the crew quarters. Strega gave the Doctor a knowing look and headed for the exit, the Doctor taking up the rear.

At the hatch, Kreuz activated the depressurization control and the air contained in the shuttle’s single chamber was evacuated into a series of vacuum-sealed storage bells. A moment later and the hatch slid open, revealing a beam of light which the shuttle was projecting into the space beyond.

A deep gloom covered the interior of the wrecked crew quarters, as though the light from the shuttle were being eaten up by some sort of malignant force, intent on devouring any form of energy. Into this suffocating blackness Komen strode forward, his gait firm and his pace measured. Kreuz signaled to Strega to follow behind and headed after Komen.

Entering the wreck, the Doctor’s hearts sank as he noticed the half-eaten food packets and open documents strewn about the living quarters. There had been life here once; a microcosm of human pleasures and pains, discourse and drama which now lay dead at their feet, victim to an unknown calamity.

Komen was at an alcove a little distance away, his inbuilt suit torch splashing a beam of white across the dark recess. A vertically positioned coffin-sized unit, with a transparent portal in the upper section, could be clearly made out; it was a cryo-capsule, and its bank of monitors revealed that it was supporting a living occupant, whose head and shoulders could be dimly glimpsed through the portal.

Strega dashed across to it and began studying the readouts. Meanwhile Kreuz and Komen had moved towards a computer terminal and were unfastening a dull, box-like unit about the size of a document case.

“Black box recorder?” asked the Doctor, making his way over to the cryo-capsule.

“Right first time, Doctor,” replied Komen. “With this we’ll have a full rundown on what felled this rig – the info jackpot in comet-chasing history, *if* we can get its data transmitted off of this rock, of course.”

The Doctor considered Komen’s last comment before looking over Strega’s handiwork. The medic had activated a sequence which had seen a series of levers gradually lower the cryo-capsule onto the deck, ready to be hoisted away. Kreuz, having finished detaching the black box recorder, joined Strega and began assembling a simple frame around the capsule.

“Is that what I think it is?” the Doctor asked, peering through his helmet visor at the tangle of wires Kreuz had attached to the frame.

Kreuz’s tone was matter of fact. “Cryo-reboot? Yes, it’s a field revival kit. We’ll get this fellow conscious, and if all goes well we’ll then transport the capsule back to the shuttle where we’ll finish the procedure and get him or her out of this thing.”

Kreuz nodded to Strega. “It’s all set. You can begin revival procedure.”

Kreuz pressed a series of buttons on the cryo-capsule’s computer unit and stepped back. As he did so the figure inside began to convulse and jerk, its eyes wide open revealing a bright red pigment all-but covering the cornea. The spasm reached its climax as an electrical aura began to surround the capsule’s occupant. As the energy faded the now fully-conscious figure started to punch at the portal, risking contact with the deadly vacuum of the ruined crew quarters.

Pushing aside a frozen Kreuz, the Doctor rapidly unplugged the revival device and began entering a new sequence into the computer unit. Strega lunged forward in an attempt to stop him only for the Doctor to check him with a simple move of his hand, which propelled the medic backwards with a force which brooked no further argument.

Komen rushed at the Doctor, but came to a skidding halt when he saw the capsule’s occupant momentarily become rigid and then flop into a lifeless conclusion. Staring at the motionless figure, a look of horrified recognition flashed across his face.

The Doctor made one further entry into the computer and then pointed to the hatch. “We need to leave, now.”

Komen nodded, fully aware that there was no choice implied in the Doctor’s order. Grabbing Kreuz, he made for the exit. Strega, now recovered, looked towards the Doctor in horror. “You’ve just killed a man,” he spat.

“That was no man. After you.”

The Doctor thrust a thumb at the exit, his eyes glowing with certainty. With little choice, Strega made for the hatch.

As all four re-entered the shuttle and its interior was repressurised, the Doctor took the helm and fired the shuttle’s forward engines. Rapidly the craft took off and performed a brief flight before settling itself down behind a large crag barely a kilometer away from the wreck. A moment later and the shuttle’s viewscreen lit up

with a terrible white light, followed close behind by a shockwave which nearly upturned the shuttle.

Tearing off his helmet, Komen glared at the Doctor. "What on Old Earth have you done?!"

Equally helmetless, the Doctor gave Komen a hard look. "I redirected the high-energy burst that was fuelling the cryo-capsule's revival mechanism into the emergency fuel stacks of crew quarters. The stacks were even less stable than I anticipated, but the result was the same: intense light and heat, just what the physician ordered."

Kreuz was stunned. "You've just destroyed what might have been our biggest clue to cracking this comet, and killed the only survivor of the *Urkübl* – a rig court martial would have only one verdict."

"Before you quote the law at me, Mister Kreuz, I suggest you ask your captain what he thinks. And while you're about it, you might like to jog his memory about his previous encounter with this comet. Does that sound reasonable, Captain Komen?"

Komen's face became dead calm as the Doctor's words sunk in. He was about to reply when the shuttle's comlink indicator began to flash. Doing his best to keep his voice neutral, he activated the comlink. "This is Komen, go ahead."

"Captain, Slavnik here. Mister Poreč and Mister Bol have taken the secondary shuttle to investigate a power fluctuation close to the *Lokev*. I've attempted to make contact with them several times and received no reply."

"Understood, Komen out."

Strega and Kreuz looked towards Komen for an explanation. Komen simply took his seat and stared vacantly at the instrument displays set into his command console. Taking a slow breath he finally responded to the silence around him. "Mister Kreuz, set a course to rendezvous with the secondary shuttle, maximum speed."

"Those men are in serious danger, aren't they?" asked the Doctor.

"Yes," replied Komen, who appeared to have visibly shrunk since hearing Slavnik's message.

"I think it was high time you told us what happened all those years ago, Captain. Your experience might just help to save you and your crew."

Komen slowly nodded.

"Strange, the readings just went up," said Tom.

Vremšćica looked across at the screen Tom was monitoring. "That's impossible. The readings can drop but they can't go up."

"Why not?"

"Because to go up would mean that the fluvium deposit had just moved – which is pretty unlikely, wouldn't you say?"

Tom nodded, and then shook his head. "Unless the rig has moved, right?"

Vremščica checked the *Lokev's* position. "Nope, we're stable. So the monitor must be on the blink."

Leaning under the console's instrument bank, Vremščica began checking the hardware for loose connections. Meantime Tom continued studying the energy readings. "They've spiked again, to over seven hundred."

Nearly banging her head on the console, Vremščica shot back up and looked at the monitor. Shaking her head she switched on the comlink. "This is Vremščica to all crew members. A serious energy spike has been registered, indicating the fluvium deposit could be unstable. Recommend immediate evacuation."

"Recommendation acknowledged," barked Komen, his voice barely audible over the static which was flooding the external frequency. "We're rendezvousing with the secondary shuttle in four minutes and will be with you shortly. Out."

"It's serious?" Tom asked.

Vremščica face had taken on a slightly paler complexion. "It's serious. An unstable fluvium field means this comet is hosting an energy frequency which is distorting its infrastructure. Perhaps that was what hit us before we made comet-fall, and scrambled my mass calculations. In any case, unstable fluvium puts the likelihood of us successfully launching this rig into real jeopardy."

"The Doctor will sort it out, Petra" replied Tom, attempting to put her at ease.

"I hope so," she answered, looking still paler.

"It's incredible, really incredible."

Poreč's words didn't even begin to cover what they had discovered. Their shuttle had halted on the edge of where the energy reading began to significantly climb, and the pair had then disembarked. Ahead of them lay a canyon which opened up to reveal a vast maze of pillars and channels, worn out of the comet's surface over tens of millions of years by the work of solar winds. Moving deeper into the extraordinary complex, the energy around them had grown so strong that their comlinks only operated between the two of them, hence they were deaf to what was happening aboard the other shuttle and the *Lokev*.

Approaching a particularly steep shaft, Poreč suddenly lost sight of Bol, who was cautiously surveying the line of pillars which ran to what looked like the deepest section of the canyon. Feeling his nerves get the better of him, Poreč made for where he had last seen Bol. As he reached the line of pillars, however, he could see no sign of his companion. Panic beginning to set in, Poreč made for the shuttle, intent on using its suit tracker to locate Bol.

Reaching the shuttle Poreč gave out a sigh of relief. There, at the hatchway, was the familiar figure of Bol. He was leaning against the external hatch cover and appeared to be breathing hard.

Poreč put a hand on Bol's shoulder. "Stig, what is it?"

"Obvious, isn't it?" replied Bol in a flat tone, all the while keeping his back to Poreč.

Poreč was curious. "Do you want to head back?"

Bol straightened himself up and stepped away from the hatchway, still keeping his back to Poreč. "We must reach the rig. That must be our priority. Understood?"

Poreč nodded, but as he did so a wave of uneasiness came over him, as though he were not really looking at Bol. *It could be Space Shock* he thought to himself, following Bol into the shuttle.

As they entered, and the airlock hatch sealed behind them, Bol suddenly swung around and Poreč's world went black.

PART III: THE HOST

“It was my first rig, my first deep-space tour,” began Komen. “I was nineteen and fresh out of the academy; a real greenhorn, but as keen as they come. The rig was called the *Horizon* and its captain, Tor Helsengaard, was a first generation comet chaser and one of the best. He’d either surveyed or stripped out half the comets in the Inner Systems. To serve under him was an honor.

“We were about a month into the tour and had already harvested a belt of asteroids on the edge of the Outer Systems when we received notice from a Rogos deep-space probe that *Stromboli’s Comet* would be within striking range of our location in a matter of days. Helsengaard held a conference and we all voted to go after it – we would have been mad to turn down such a chance. We were only the second rig to get a shot at it, and back then – fifty-odd years ago – no-one understood what a challenge the comet would be.

“Just a handful of hours away from comet-fall and the *Horizon’s* systems began failing. First just peripheral stuff, then mainline circuits, navigational software and finally life support. At the finish, Helsengaard took the next-best option and pulled the rig back to a safe distance whilst launching a manned shuttle to make a strike on the comet, crewed by Helsengaard and two of his most experienced officers. As the shuttle made comet-fall communications went dead. We waited nearly sixteen hours. When communications came back online we saw that the shuttle was on its return flight. And that was when we saw what had happened to our captain and his crew. One of the shuttle’s interior cameras fed us all the details in perfect definition. The two officers were dead, and Helsengaard was... not Helsengaard, leastways that’s what I’ve always thought. It was as though his body was possessed; his eyes... they were red, totally red.

“Our stand-in captain, the senior drill-pilot Lomax, ordered immediate evacuation and the *Horizon* moved off at full speed. But not before releasing a salvo of mining charges directly into the shuttle’s flight path. Strong shields a rig shuttle may have, but not enough to withstand an energy blast from industrial mining explosive.”

The Doctor, Strega and Kreuz remained silent, taking in Komen’s tale. It was Kreuz who finally spoke.

“What do you think had happened to your captain and his crew, Captain?”

Komen’s gaze became distant as he pondered the question. “I thought it was an extreme case of Space Shock, the sort of delusion that sees one crew member murder another. Yet, as the years have gone by, and more and more crews and rigs have been lost, I’ve begun to think that there is something on this blasted piece of rock, something that doesn’t want us here.”

“And knowing that, you still led us here, in full knowledge of what we might be facing?” Strega’s question was shot through with accusation.

“Yes. I was determined to break the jinx and make a landing so that we could save whoever might have survived the crash of the *Urkiubl*. The drilling was secondary, whatever the Doctor here might think. Plus, with the *Urkiubl*’s black-box recorder we might still manage to salvage something from this mess.”

The Doctor shook his head. “That recorder will only tell you what our former frozen friend wanted you to know. And if I’m right, we only got out in one piece because of the way the damaged crew quarters forced ‘it’ to enter a cryo-capsule, otherwise it would have been fully mobile and we would have been in fatal trouble.”

“You sound as if you know what you’re dealing with?” Komen’s voice was a mixture of respect and trepidation.

The Doctor nodded grimly. “The electrical ‘halo’ given off inside the cryo-capsule is indicative of one particularly warlike species, collectively referred to as the Rutan Host, and caught up in an age-old conflict with another, equally vicious race known as the Sontarans. I’ve encountered the latter on several occasions, but the Rutan Host... let’s just say that they seem to be rather more camera shy in my experience.”

“So these ‘Rutans’ are a humanoid life form, like us?” asked Strega, thinking back to the body in the cryo-capsule.

“No, more a sort of amphibious frame actually, but individual Rutan can shape change, so they’re usually difficult to detect at face value. Their somewhat wooden acting soon gives them away, however. On this occasion I’m assuming the red-eye problem was a leftover of poor shape-matching, probably caused by environmental conditions, which is decidedly helpful for us. More importantly, we need to retrieve your two compatriots and get the *Lokev* space borne. If *Stromboli’s Comet* is playing host to the Rutan Host, we’re in deadly danger.”

“Looks like you’ve got the chance to confirm your story, Doctor,” observed Kreuz. “We’ve just made visual contact with the secondary shuttle.”

The silence in the bridge was suffocating. Val rubbed her eyes, trying to maintain her concentration. Ever since the call from Vremšćica her nerves had been on edge, but somehow fatigue was still winning the battle. Her tiredness wasn't helped by the shifting readouts on the countless monitors, plotting any amount of data and equally mesmerizing. Possibly that was why she hadn't noticed the two humanoid shapes slowly emerging out of the darkness on the exterior airlock feed. Rubbing her eyes again, she finally registered the change and swiftly turned to Slavnik.

"Slavnik, the main airlock camera is showing two figures approaching – or rather one is being carried by the other."

Slavnik looked across at the screen and gave Val a sharp look. "That's Bol, carrying Poreč. So where on Old Earth is the secondary shuttle?"

"It's empty, or at least it is now." Kreuz's voice echoed over the comlink between the two shuttles.

Aboard the primary shuttle Komen's expression betrayed nothing. "What do you mean by 'now'?"

"The login circuit shows that Bol and Poreč were aboard, but there's no sign of them, Captain."

Strega, standing alongside Kreuz, continued their findings. "There looks to have been a struggle of some sort. Equipment is displaced, or simply strewn about the shuttle chamber, and there's a sealed space suit lying by the outer hatch."

"That's enough. Get the black box and return directly. We're heading back to the *Lokev* and getting off of this damn comet. Komen out."

Cutting in, the Doctor reactivated the comlink. "Doctor Strega, check the suit. It's essential you check the suit."

"Captain, do you confirm that direction?" Strega, ever the pedant, was not going to act without his captain's say so.

With a sense of calm he didn't feel, Komen responded. "Do as the Doctor asks, out."

Turning to the Doctor, Komen's face flickered with anger, but the Doctor's voice remained firm. "Everything must be checked, Captain, everything. The story's not over yet. If we are indeed dealing with a Rutan agent, it won't let us leave while we're still breathing, especially after what we've learnt. More than that, I want to know the significance of this comet; the Rutan Host wouldn't station its agents on it without a very serious reason."

"You think sating your curiosity is actually important?" asked Komen, incredulous.

"Rig crews have died trying to catch this comet. I think making sure that that never happens again is exceptionally important, and my curiosity happens to dovetail with that ambition beautifully – don't you think?"

Komen gave the Doctor a very long look. "Who are you? I mean, after all that's happened I think my crew and I deserve to know who you and your friends *really* are."

The Doctor paused before replying. "Perhaps you have a point. I'm a Time Lord, one of a race of alien beings who possess the capacity to travel in time as well as space, amongst other skills. My friends are ancestors of yours – twenty-first century humans who travel through time and space with me. You could also say we're your biggest ever Christmas present; we've saved you and your crew twice, and we're the best bet you have of making it three times lucky. Does that tell you enough?"

Komen slowly blinked, taking in the Doctor's words. Before he could reply, Strega's voice came over the comlink. "Captain, the suit is occupied. It's Bol. He's still alive but we need to get him back to the medical bay, fast."

Keeping up with Vremščica took some doing. Tom had matched her pace from the drill deck to the main airlock, but it had taken every ounce of his energy – and pride – to do so; and all because the power fluctuations had shorted out the rig's transit system.

Approaching the airlock Vremščica spoke into her comlink. "Slavnik, Vremščica here. We're at the airlock, about to pressurize." A red light illuminating the airlock chamber began to flash as air was pumped into its sealed confines. With the procedure complete the harsh red had been replaced by a calming green.

Tom turned to Vremščica. "What happens next?"

"We wait. Bol and Poreč will enter, the light will flash again and change from green to white to indicate they've been admitted and the outer hatch is sealed. Here we go."

The green hue was now alternating with a plain white light. Finally it succumbed to the white. A moment later and the inner seal slid away to reveal the still-helmeted figure of Bol. Slumped next to him was Poreč, unconscious. Vremščica dashed forward to check on the slumbering figure, oblivious to the fact that Bol still had his helmet's mirrored visor engaged. Tom, on the other hand, found something familiar about the mirror-faced figure, who seemed a distant relative to the space-suited Apollo astronauts he'd read about as a child. Stepping up to Bol, he raised his hand in a gesture of greeting.

"Good to have you back. Find any fluvium?"

As Tom finished his question he noticed a blur of movement and then felt a sensation of falling. When he came to he realized he'd been knocked to floor by his hero astronaut, who had proceeded to step over his prone body and make for the bridge at a brisk pace.

Leaning over Tom, Vremščica rapidly took his pulse and checked his pupils. "This is Vremščica to the bridge and the shuttle. We have a rogue crew member aboard. It's Mister Bol – or at least that's who I think it is. He assaulted Mister Brooker and appears to be heading for the bridge. At his present speed he'll be there in less than thirty minutes. Recommend he's apprehended at the first opportunity, out."

Kneeling down, she took a look at Tom's right temple which now sported a growing bruise. "I think you'll survive, but you'd better take it easy. You may have a touch of concussion. Best you stay here with Poreč."

Tom gingerly touched his temple and groggily clambered to his feet. "No deal, Petra. You may be quick on your feet but that walking suit thing is going to need some stopping, and the two of us stand a better chance than one, right?"

"Two? In your state I'd say one and half. But still better than one, though. Okay, we'll hunt together, but the slightest sign of you feeling off color and I drop you, clear?"

Despite a banging headache Tom still managed a smile. "Sounds like a date. Sure, I'll go with that. Shall we get moving, then?"

Vremščica knelt briefly to check on Poreč. "According to his suit readings he's been severely concussed, and I can't tell what else might be wrong. I've no choice but to activate his suit's cryo-protocol. We won't be able to revive him for at least twelve hours, but he'll be safer that way, and given his condition it's pretty unlikely he'd be of any use to us anyway, wouldn't you agree?"

"You're a tough cookie, Petra. Remind me not to get seriously injured when you're around."

Vremščica gave Tom a mock glare. "Okay Tom, let's see where our rogue has gone."

As the shuttle approached the rig the Doctor finished his examination of Bol. "This doesn't make one ounce of sense."

Komen wasn't interested in cryptic observations. "Explain yourself please, Doctor."

"This man, Bol, he's still alive, but his body is giving off massive levels of static electricity. Fortunately for him – and us – his suit is earthing that power otherwise he'd be long since dead. What's strange, however, is that if it was a Rutan agent who did this to Bol, he ought to be dead, unless keeping him alive is helping the Rutan, it's the only

possible answer. Perhaps Bol being alive helps it to maintain its shape-matching of him. That could be it."

"Captain, we've made rig entry," announced Kreuz.

"Thank you, Mister Kreuz. Doctor, I'm afraid your conjecture is going to have to wait. According to Miss Vremščica we have a rogue crew member – identified as Mister Bol – aboard the rig. However, given that Mister Bol is lying unconscious aboard this shuttle, I must conclude that our rogue is an imposter. But I'm not taking any chances. Doctor Strega, please use the real Mister Bol's suit to put him into cryo-quarantine, just in case he's not what he seems."

"Is freezing this man going to help us?" snapped the Doctor.

"I don't trust anyone who's been in contact with this alien. Bol stay's cold until this thing is beaten."

"You appreciate you may be needlessly diminishing our manpower by doing this, not to mention silencing the only living person who may be able to give us vital intelligence on our foe?"

"Right now I'd rather have one crew member I can trust than a dozen who've been compromised by this Rutan thing. Now is that clear?"

"Perfectly, Captain. I just hope your reasoning doesn't come back to haunt us."

Komen nodded. "Your objection is noted, Doctor, now let's find this imposter before it's too late."

Trying the comlink again, Slavnik met with the same static reply; the internal communications net was malfunctioning and there was nothing she could do cooped up in bridge. Feeling equally frustrated, Val decided to voice her concerns.

"If there's a problem out there, sticking around here with no means of communicating isn't necessarily the best course of action. But if we could get to another communications point we might be able to find out what's happening. What do you think?"

Slavnik considered Val's argument. "I'm under orders to stay here, but with the comlink down our situation is compromised – and the nearest comlink to the bridge is only about twenty meters away... Okay, we could do a quick recce and see if the problem is isolated to the bridge. I don't think the Captain would argue with that. Let's move."

Activating the bridge hatch, Slavnik stepped into the adjoining corridor. It was at least a hundred meters long and terminated at a junction that housed a direct transit connection with the shuttle bays and the drill deck – at least it would if the transit system hadn't decided to go on the blink just after the rig had landed. *Another side effect of this jinxed comet* thought Slavnik.

Approaching the comlink, Slavnik activated the call command, but to no avail. The comlink was dead.

“Do we head on?” asked Val, determined to press ahead and find Tom and the Doctor.

“That would be stretching my orders a little too far, Valentina. But on the other hand... wait a minute, who’s that? I say, who is that?”

Slavnik’s last words had been directed at the figure that had appeared at the very end of the corridor. It was fully suited and its helmet visor was still activated, making it impossible to identify which crew member it could be. More, it made no attempt to reply. Instead it simply continued its steady march towards their position.

“Could be one of the two we saw on the screen earlier,” suggested Val.

“Yes, but if it’s Bol or even Poreč they’d reply. This is really odd. I don’t like it all, let’s head back to the bridge.”

As Slavnik turned towards the bridge the figure switched its march to an all-out sprint. Val’s eyes widened. “I, I don’t understand...”

“Run!” yelled Slavnik, shoving Val towards the bridge entrance. In the handful of seconds it took for them to reach it the suited figure had nearly caught up with them. As the hatch shut the figure’s hands came down like a pair of hammers upon the fugue steel of the bridge seal, sending a pair of deafening thuds reverberating around the corridor. On the other side of the hatch, Slavnik looked in horror at Val. “Either we have a dangerous case of Space Shock or something much worse.”

“What could be worse than a psychotic crew member on the loose?”

Slavnik’s eyes widened as she acknowledged what she was thinking. “If it’s not Space Shock then it’s quite possible that the person beyond the hatchway isn’t one of the crew at all...”

“All the comlinks are down, this isn’t making any sense.”

Vremščica’s frustration was mixed with a steadily building sense of anxiety. Tom was feeling little better. “So we can’t communicate with anyone – not the Doctor aboard the shuttle, or Val on the bridge?”

“Correct. We’re running blind. I guess our guest might have something to do with it. In any case, when communications are down crew protocol says we head for the bridge and secure command of the rig. Komen will be doing the same thing, so let’s get going.”

“What about our visitor?”

Vremščica upped her pace to a light jog, forcing Tom to nearly break into a run to keep up. “If he, she or it, is intent on causing problems, the bridge will be the target. It’s essential and if I were the intruder I’d want to control it or disable it. Plus, without

the transit system the route it took makes the bridge the obvious first port of call; the drill deck and crew quarters are further away."

"And when we find our 'friend'?"

"I have an idea, which might work if we can get close enough. Come on, if the comet's stability is worsening we don't have much time left."

Disembarking from the shuttle, Komen, Kreuz and Strega each drew a handgun from a nearby armory cabinet. The Doctor was unimpressed.

"Those weapons won't help, I'm afraid. If it's a Rutan you'll need considerably more than a hand blaster to put a dent in its confidence."

"Thank you, Doctor," commented Komen, "but if you don't mind I'd prefer my crew to be armed with more than just their bare hands."

"Please yourself, Captain. Just don't expect to be any better off than if you really did have only your bare hands to rely on."

Kreuz, Strega and Komen checked their weapons and proceeded to head for the hatch, the Doctor following smartly behind. The shuttle bay was positioned above the drill deck, a kilometer from the bridge. Checking the corridor ahead, Komen tried the nearest comlink. "Strange, the comlink is down. Thoughts, Doctor?"

"The Rutan has disabled your internal communications net in the same way it blocked communications leaving this comet when you first landed. First rule of war for the Rutan Host: deafen and blind your opponent. You've lost your rig's ears; what would you say is its eyes, Captain?"

"The bridge."

"So that's where our intruder is heading."

The minutes that had passed since they had become besieged in the bridge had felt like an eternity to Val. Gazing about the rig's command centre, it was extraordinary how the tension had made the interior feel as though its monitor- and instrument-lined walls were slowly closing in on her. Suddenly an odd sound caught her attention. It was an incessant bleeping, as though someone were hammering away at a keypad at a hundred miles an hour. Looking towards the noise she caught Slavnik following her gaze, towards the hatch of the bridge.

"The intruder is trying to crack the hatch code," gasped Slavnik. "But that's impossible; it has over ten million computations..." Her voice trailed off as she realized the first digit of the code had been identified.

Val visibly gulped. "There must be something we can defend ourselves with. Don't you have any weapons stored here?"

Slavnik shook her head. "Not on the bridge. But there may be something else, hang on." Looking under the science command console she retrieved a box from the locker built into its base. The box was the size of a fist and packed with spheres, each about a centimeter in diameter. Carefully taking out one of the spheres, Slavnik gently rolled it between her thumb and forefinger. "These are flash-balls, portable blocks of magnesium that we use to burn off excess oxygen around a drill head. We keep a stash in here just in case the drill deck has to be sealed off and we don't have access to the magnesium stored down there. If we load them together with a fuse, say a conductor from one of the light strips, we could ignite them in one go and blind our attacker. What do you say?"

"Let's do it," said Val, her feeling of tension somewhat relieved by finally being able to act.

Slavnik took the flash-balls and began attaching a wire to the box from one of the strip lights Val had opened. Then, placing the box about half a meter from the hatch, she and Val moved back as far as possible. Positioning herself by the light switch which corresponded with the conductor she'd cannibalized, Slavnik nodded to Val and waited.

Tom and Vremščica had reached the final gangway before the corridor that led to the bridge. Approaching the junction between the gangway and the corridor, Vremščica slowed her pace. As Tom also slowed he took advantage of the drop in speed to waste some of his breath on a question. "What will we do when we get to the bridge, if the spacesuit zombie is there, I mean?"

"The rig has programmable localized gravity fields, in case deep-earth drilling causes sudden shifts in the external environment and we need to lock things down fast. If I can get to the command unit for this corridor, and bypass the safety protocols, I might be able to disrupt the local gravity field and lock our friend to the ground he's standing on. Does that sound okay?"

"It's great, so long as the controls you need to re-program the gravity don't bring us eyeball to visor with the zombie."

"Keep your fingers crossed then, Tom, or this might be an exceptionally short plan."

As Vremščica finished they turned a corner and came onto the corridor leading directly to the bridge. Before they could look for the gravity controls, however, there was an intense flash of light from the hatchway to the bridge, and an inhuman groan echoed around them.

“What on Old Earth was that noise?” Komen barked, as he disentangled himself from his suit and took up the pack he had been carrying.

“It came from that direction,” answered Strega, looking across the shuttle bay to the exit leading to the bridge.

“Let’s move out,” snapped Komen.

Making for the exit, Komen was oblivious to the Doctor, who had produced a palm-sized disc-shaped device with which he was intently scanning the deck. Suddenly aware that the Doctor wasn’t moving, Komen called across to him, only for the Time Lord to look up from his analysis with a starkly grim expression.

“We need to find your crew members and my friends, and get off of this rig as fast as we possibly can; our very lives depend upon it. But that means neutralizing our intruder first, and I may just know a way of doing it. I’ll explain on the way.”

Komen had barely registered the import of the Doctor’s words when another yell came from the direction of the bridge, only this noise it was all too human in origin.

The speed with which the intruder had broken into the bridge had nearly flawed Slavnik’s setting off of the magnesium weapon. The flare which had followed, given off by the flash-balls, had been equally surprising in its intensity, the heat of the explosion blackening the metal of the hatchway and scorching nearby instrument panels.

“Run!” shouted Slavnik, barely able to see her way out from the after-glare of the explosion.

Val’s position had afforded her a little more protection from the flare, and her vision had been less affected. Looking towards the hatch she realized that Slavnik was about to run headlong into the intruder. Yelling a warning, Val dived forward, knocking Slavnik aside and landing just short of the hatchway. Looking up, she found herself gazing straight at the intruder, who was standing motionless as though surveying the interior of the bridge. Very slowly, Val began to crawl towards the hatch, all the while watching for the figure to react.

As she crossed the hatchway she glanced towards Slavnik, who was a few meters ahead of her. Suddenly there came a deep-throated call from further down the corridor. It was Tom, and he was frantically waving at them to move towards him. Picking herself up, Val began to run at full pelt, with Slavnik a pace or so in front. As she did so, however, she heard the metallic footfalls of the intruder; it was following them, and its speed was increasing.

Just as soon as the footfalls started, however, they stopped. Instinctively looking back, Val could see the figure had come to a complete halt, as though it were frozen to

the spot. Not daring to waste another second she sprinted towards Tom, hugging him in sheer relief. Meantime Slavnik and Vremščica were in deep conversation, studying the control unit on the wall.

Slavnik was glowing with praise. "You used a gravity lock! That's brilliant!"

"Thanks, I guess my drill pilot duties came in handy," answered Vremščica, a little taken aback by Slavnik's words.

"But not as brilliant as you might think," said another voice. It was the Doctor, followed by Komen, Kreuz and Strega.

"What are you talking about?" asked Vremščica, her feeling of success at snaring the intruder beginning to fade.

"The gravity bubble, or lock as you call it, may be ideal for non-metamorphic matter, but our guest is..."

"Changing shape!" exclaimed Val, transfixed by the now glowing space-suited figure, who was steadily becoming indistinct behind the energy building up around it.

"To the drill deck," yelled the Doctor. "And Komen, remember to make sure the drill heads are set to a frequency in the upper end of the light spectrum when we proceed, clear?"

Nodding in acknowledgement, Komen shouted at his crew to make for the drill deck, well aware that the precious time the gravity lock had bought them was rapidly draining away. The Doctor, meanwhile, held his ground, watching the alien figure morph into a shapeless yellow mass, which proceeded to move beyond the grip of the gravity lock. Once free of the trap it quickly reverted to its space-suited guise.

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. "I guess the humanoid form makes more sense in this environment, practically speaking at least. Plus, I imagine the suit is less complicated to reproduce, hence the helmet-visor combination. Easier than a fully-animated face, for certain."

The figure remained silent, regarding the Doctor.

"Oh come on, please don't be coy. I have some experience of Rutans you know. That is what you are, correct?"

A strangely unsettling voice responded, as though its owner was unused to verbal communication. "What can you know of the Rutan Host, human? You're limited technology is incapable of propelling your fragile life form into contact with our domain."

"Well, human or not, I've met your kind before, and your Sontaran sparring partners. Not a bad bunch, but I do wish they'd wear name tags, I just can't tell them apart."

The Rutan paused again, as though the Doctor's words had proven incomprehensible to it. "Your words are meaningless. Our affairs are far beyond the knowledge of your paltry species."

“Affairs? Do you mean all that fluvium shifting itself around as though someone were tampering with its structure, causing energy spikes enough to rebuff prospecting rigs? Is that what it’s all about, playing about with energy wavelengths?”

As the Doctor pondered what he’d just said his eyes suddenly lit up. “Now, wait a minute, it’s beginning to make some sense. The concentration of fluvium on this comet is quite extraordinary, in fact extraordinary enough to be manipulated into generating a frequency, a very special frequency...”

His voice trailed off as he realized the awful conclusion he’d finally drawn. It had been staring him in the face ever since the *Lokev’s* malfunctioning navigation sensors had nearly smashed them all into the comet. All those downed rigs and lost crews, they’d never had a hope of snaring *Stromboli’s Comet*, not since it had been claimed by the Rutan Host and turned into a deadly weapon.

“That’s it!” exclaimed the Doctor. “It’s the Gamskar Wavelength; you’ve found a way of tapping into the fluvium to produce the Gamskar Wavelength – and Gamskar energy disrupts cloned organisms – so this comet is deadly to the Sontarans!”

“Your reasoning is rare for one of your species, human. This comet is the ideal means by which we will infiltrate the Sontaran Empire and contaminate the hatcheries and cloning colonies of our sworn enemy. Finally the Sontarans will be eradicated and the Rutan Host will be triumphant.”

“Of course,” the Doctor gasped, completing his deduction. “It’s a Trojan Horse. The comet will enter Sontaran space unmolested and you’ll be able to activate the Gamskar Wavelength right on top of their core worlds. You’d be able to devastate the Sontarans at a single stroke. It’s almost an act of genius. You must have been planning it for centuries.”

“Our plans do not concern you, human. But your presence here compromises our work, and hence it must be terminated.”

“I was wondering when you were finally going to say that,” muttered the Doctor, tapping a new program into the gravity lock control unit. “But this should give me a few seconds head start.”

Striking the activation key, the gravity lock mechanism restarted, once more binding the Rutan to the spot. As it again began to morph out of the lock the Doctor darted down the corridor in the direction of the drill deck, all the while keeping his fingers crossed that he had given Komen enough time to set the final trap.

“That should do it,” said Slavnik, standing back from the controls of the main drill-head grid. “Miss Vremščica, please double check the holding pattern, we can’t afford to have a misfire with all the drill heads centered on the same target.”

Vremščica surveyed her console and nodded. “It’s all good. We’re ready.”

Komen looked at Val and Tom. "If this works, your friend tells me we'll be free of this thing that's been killing rig crews. But it still leaves us trapped here."

Val shook her head. "The TARDIS, the Doctor's ship, will get us out of here in one piece, you can depend upon it."

The confidence in her voice was infectious, even to the rig-hardened Komen, who gave her a brief smile.

"I like your certainty, Miss Rossi. A good rig crew needs certainty. Okay, everyone head for the rear bulkhead and don't forget to keep your visors on if you don't want to be blinded."

Tom fingered the reinforced visor he'd been given by Strega. It was light, but its density offered serious protection and when the drill-head grid fired simultaneously they would all need it.

As they reached the rear bulkhead the sound of rapid footsteps could be heard echoing down the external corridor. A second later and the Doctor came running into the deck, pausing for a millisecond to judge the drill-head grid configuration before running over to join the others. As he threw himself behind the bulkhead and donned the spare visor Val had passed to him, there came the ominous footfalls of the Rutan. Entering the deck it came to a stop just inside the entrance and surveyed its surroundings. As it began to move off, however, there came the whirring of an energy charge and suddenly its body was caught in the combined laser beams of a dozen drill heads, each one directing a deadly stream of high-frequency radiation at the space-suited creature.

For several seconds the Rutan held its form. Then it began to morph, and for a moment it seemed that it would escape the inferno in which it was caught, just as it had the gravity lock. But this time things were different. Its shape twisted and convulsed before transforming into something vaguely similar to a jellyfish, before suddenly evaporating in a cloud of yellow gas.

Komen breathed a sigh of relief and directed Slavnik to disengage the drill-head grid. Somehow the *Lokev* had managed to pull off one last service for him and his crew, and he would never forget it.

The Doctor looked at the spot where the Rutan had once stood and then turned to the others. "The work's not done yet, I'm afraid. Captain, you need to collect your crew – including the pair still frozen in their suits – and get to my TARDIS. Tom will guide you. When you get there you're to sit tight. Is that understood?"

Komen nodded. "Yes, Doctor. But what are you going to be doing? I thought you said we needed to leave immediately."

The Doctor considered his words before answering. "We do, but this comet represents a weapon deadly enough to end an age-old conflict between two vast empires. Yet in so doing, it would leave one of the most aggressive species in the universe free to extend its domination to countless worlds, including the Earth and its

colonies. I can't allow that to happen. Val, I would appreciate it if you would accompany me."

Without saying another word the Doctor headed for the exit, followed closely behind by Val. Komen simply shook his head and turn to Tom, "Is your friend always so... enigmatic?"

"That's not even the half of it," replied Tom. "Now, let's get your refrigerated friends and head for the storage bay, that's where we landed."

Val was puzzled. She would have expected Tom to be chosen to go with the Doctor. Since the Time Lord had changed she hadn't felt so close to him, as though his new personality were somehow wary of her. At least that's how it seemed at times. But maybe things were changing.

Reaching the now deserted bridge, the Doctor took out a spanner-like tool and began dismantling the main communications console. As he did so he vented his frustrations.

"The Sontarans have murdered untold peoples, erased whole cultures without hesitation and brought pain and suffering to bear upon more star systems than I can remember. And I've got to help them, otherwise the Rutan Host, an equally nasty piece of work, will be left unchecked. Battling each other keeps their sordid little schemes away from the rest of the universe, at least for the most part. If, however, one finally defeats the other the balance of power will monumentally shift, and I can't allow that to happen. Not if it's within my powers to stop it. Does that make sense, Val?"

Slightly taken aback by the Doctor's second use of her first name in as many minutes, and its diminutive form at that, Val hesitated for a second before answering. "I, well, I think you're doing the right thing. I mean, if it's safer that these aliens are fighting each other you've got no choice, right?"

"Right, perhaps, but it still feels wrong."

Val watched the Doctor as he began pulling out wires and reinserting them as though he were redirecting telephone calls at one of the old pre-digital telephone exchanges. "What exactly is it that you're doing?"

"I'm reprogramming the *Lokev's* distress signaler to emit a low frequency neutrino wave. The wave will act as a warning beacon, telling the Sontarans, and anyone else for that matter, what this comet is about. I don't expect the rig will last much longer with all the energy fluctuations happening around here, but the beacon will survive long enough to get the signal space-borne and after that the Sontarans can work out the solution for themselves. At least they'll have a warning, and that will be all they need to shutdown this Trojan Horse."

“Well I still think it’s for the best, Doctor. You’re helping one race – however bad it may be – for the sake of possibly millions of lives. You’re doing something good, I’m certain of it.”

“Certainty is a rare commodity in some parts of the universe, Val. But maybe you’re right. Okay, the beacon is set. Let’s get back to the TARDIS and make sure the signal is running.”

Val nodded and followed the Doctor off of the bridge. Perhaps he was the same old Doctor after all.

“I, I don’t get it,” gasped Komen as he entered the TARDIS. Before him Strega and Kreuz were carefully placing Poreč’s cryo-frozen body on the stretcher Tom had brought up from the infirmary; Bol was already positioned on an identical stretcher.

“Yep, it takes some getting used to. But believe you me the swimming pool is even tougher to get your head around the first time you see it.”

Komen nodded absentmindedly, not really taking in a word of what Tom had said. As he continued to gaze around the console room, the TARDIS’ outer doors opened and the Doctor and Val entered. Looking at the befuddled rig captain Val grinned, remembering how she’d reacted upon first walking into the Doctor’s mysterious time ship.

The Doctor took a quick look at Bol and Poreč. “I think we’ll be able to resuscitate them a little earlier than normal if we use the Zero Room. Val and Tom, would you mind taking these two gentlemen there, I’ll join you in a few minutes.”

Without wasting a second the Doctor’s two companions each took a stretcher and headed for the interior door of the console room, leaving Komen, Kreuz, Strega, Slavnik and Vremščica to watch the Doctor as he busied himself setting coordinates and checking on the warning beacon.

“Well, we’re all set. The beacon is running, which means that the Rutan Host’s deception now has a big notice stuck to it telling the whole universe what it is. You’re rig, I’m afraid, will be breaking up under the stress of the energy spikes in only a few minutes. It looks like we only just made it out in time. ”

“The Rutan, Doctor, did we destroy it? For good?” There was a sense of a long sought-after justice in Komen’s voice.

“We eliminated two Rutan scouts, Captain. The one we encountered aboard the *Urkübl* left behind as a guard dog; and the one that infiltrated your rig disguised as Bol. However, given the significance of this comet to their schemes, I would assume that there are a good many more Rutan scouts left hidden away, no doubt close to where we found the secondary shuttle. Whatever their number, however, their little nest just went public. Now, much more importantly, where can I drop you off?”

Looking at each of his crew, Komen took a deep breath before replying. "I know I speak for all of us, Doctor, when I say thank you – thank you for everything. As for where we'd like to go, I think home would be a good starting point, don't you think?"

The Doctor finally gave Komen a smile. "Yes, Captain, I think you're quite right. Home is the best place to start."

EPILOGUE

The hurtling mass of rock tumbled and turned as it followed its endless, celestial ellipse across the heart of the galaxy. Its interior now lay quite empty since its guest had been disturbed, and the prospecting rigs from a distant Earth no longer risked its unpredictable nature for the price of a fluvium rush. In short, it was once more utterly alone in the cold depths of space.

Once, not so very long after its guest had left, a swarm of ships came to inspect it, their spherical frames spinning about it like so many infant comets in the orbit of their parent. But these nameless visitors did not stay long; it was enough for them to see *Stromboli's Comet* and to understand its danger from a distance.

With the whole of space before it, the comet sped across the void with neither impediment nor distraction. It was its own pilot again, with no other purpose than to be.

Extract from: 'Priority One Incident Report on Drilling Rig *Lokev*' by Tar Paarseen

*...all communication was lost with the Rogos Conglomerate Drilling Rig *Lokev* when it achieved comet-fall on Gamma-Alpha-Theta. Footage from a Rogos deep-space probe in the vicinity of Gamma-Alpha-Theta indicated that the *Lokev* landed intact, and remained upon the surface for several hours before breaking up due to factors unknown. Miraculously, all seven of the rig's crew members were retrieved from the deep-space container vessel *Trenova*. Only two cryo-suited casualties were recorded, both of whom had already been revived with only basic*

concussion traumas. As yet, no explanation has been given as to how the Lokev's crew arrived aboard the Trenova. Full interviews will be conducted when the crew reaches Earth.

Tar Parseen struck the 'send' button on his keypad and leaned back in his chair, a sense of relief gradually working its way through his tired frame. Sending the *Lokev* on a mercy run to *Stromboli's Comet* had nearly turned into the last straw insofar as his career was concerned. Instead, and nobody yet knew how, the rig's crew had made comet-fall in one place and then escaped the impossible comet with vital intelligence worth a king's ransom. Yes, thought Parseen, *this Christmas was going to start on a high note after all.*

In the thirty-first century,
energy prospecting has a new territory: comets.

Arriving aboard a deep-space rig, the Doctor, Val and Tom
are soon caught up in a battle for survival as its crew struggles
to make comet-fall on *Stromboli's Comet* in search of a lost rig.

But there is more to *Stromboli's Comet* than energy,
and uncovering the answers will lead the Doctor to confront an enemy
from his distant past...

ISBN 0-918894-28-X



This is another in a series of original fan authored
Doctor Who fiction published by The Doctor Who Project
featuring The Tenth Doctor as played by Laurent Meyer

