

Chill

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The wind blew, hard and sharp, across the window. It was an oval window, with a thin transparent shutter that did nothing to keep out the heat. It was a soft window, designed to be ringed with ivy and to transport from outside the sweet perfume of night-blooming flowers and the sounds of laughing children. Now, however, it was a window that looked out onto hell. Fire rimed the sky. Overhead, instead of the pale shuttered blue of a tended artificial horizon, there burned a searing cloud of hot dust, whipped up from the sterile ground by the dry air pumping out of the throat of the atmosphere towers. Beyond the organically rounded shapes of the modular buildings, instead of lush fields and cool, shaded streams running through budding forests, there was bleached stone and dry, desiccated wood.

Fifteen weeks, Morgan thought. Fifteen weeks had reduced the colony to the very edge of nothing. And he didn't think there was anything he could do about it. Death hovered at his elbow, a dark and terrifying presence in his mind. Morgan wiped his brow and tried not to think about it; tried to imagine that there was some way of getting to the other side of this nightmare unscathed. His hollow face reflected back at him in the thin transparent window, rippled from the heat outside. It had been a handsome face once, full of confidence in himself and his abilities, full of ambition, full of certainty. Now the eyes were ringed with darkness and tinted with a haunted despair. His cheeks had burnt raw under the searing wind that whistled from the towers, his hair dried and thinned to straw under its withering heat. He looked dusty - and thin despite his muscled bulk. The nightmare had baked him and left him empty.

He turned away from the window and the bleak scene outside, retreating back into the relative cool of the shadows at the back of his office. He sat down at his desk and rummaged in a drawer. A bottle. It was frightening how easily he had come to rely on it, frightening how much sense it seemed to make to dive inside its tranquil amber glow and curl up inside it until the end. He poured himself a ration with shaking fingers, willing it to fill the dark, bitter hollow inside him.

Cornered in his own office, like a fox before the hounds, Commander Poynt Morgan sat trembling in the heat, sobbing quietly in panic, waiting for death to finally release him.

* * * * *

"The Grand Canyon," Tamara guessed, settling her Evoite sunglasses more firmly on her nose.

"The badlands of Urmico XII," Grae said.

The Doctor shook his head at both suggestions, "No - and no."

Tamara looked around her at the bedded sandstone-like rock piled on every side, "So where, then?"

The Doctor squinted behind his own sunglasses. Tamara shuddered. His glasses were disgusting things with too many sequins, which Tamara felt sure he had nicked from Elton John. What's more, they failed completely to match the sombre tan duster jacket and broad-brimmed hat he'd donned. The Doctor gazed up at the rolling clouds of dust and sand overhead.

"Believe it or not, this is supposed to be the planet Micaur-Omega, otherwise known as McKinley's world - an earthlike world now in the grip of a major ice age." He kicked the sand underfoot and wiped the sweat from his forehead, "Or, at least, that's what the TARDIS databanks say."

Grae frowned, "Your databanks appear more than usually unreliable, Doctor."

The Doctor shrugged, "I suppose it is a little unlikely that this is actually the middle of an ice-age," he admitted.

Tamara pulled a pair of binocs from her jacket and scanned the boulder-strewn landscape with the digital lenses. There was not a single sign of life - no plants, no insects, no animals, and no birds: just rocks, sand and the unbearably hot dust-choked air. Wait -

"Hey!" she said, "A building!"

"Building? Where?" asked the Doctor, curiosity and enthusiasm pricking his voice.

"A mile away, perhaps," Tamara said, adjusting the binocs and taking in the readings, "Yeh - about a mile. A low stone structure of some kind. No sign of life, though," she finished, dropping the binocs from her eyes and handing them to the Doctor.

He scanned the horizon, "Hmm. Difficult to say what kind of buildings they might be - so much dust in the atmosphere."

Tamara watched him, hands on hips, "Well?"

The Doctor handed the binoculars to Grae and slipped his horrible sunglasses back on, "Well what?"

"Well what next?"

The Doctor crooked an eyebrow from behind the flashing sequins.

"Do you really need to ask?"

* * * * *

Dark shadows sheltered in the crook of a large boulder watched the trio move off from the blue box in the direction of the empty farm. One shadow hissed.

"We should take them - feed on them."

"No," a second shadow restrained the first. It addressed the group - a female voice "These are different to the others. They are not colonists - how did they get here?"

"The box - a matter transport of some kind," interjected a third from the group.

The first shadow hissed again, blue multi-faceted eyes glinting in the raw light, "What difference does it make - they are human: we should kill them before they join with the colonists and swell their ranks."

The second shadow deepened its grip on the first. Its voice was strong, authoritative - "No. We watch them first, listen to them - discover who they are and what they are doing here." The face of the second shadow turned slowly, left and right, as if catching a scent, "I say again: they seem... different."

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They descended through the tumbled rocks in a wide curve. Around the building stretched a waste of desolate sand. The building stood alone and silent in the seething dust.

"A house?" Grae wondered.

"A farm, perhaps," the Doctor corrected Grae, pointing at the plasteel fences that stretched around one side of the building.

They made their way to the building's front door. Something pale lay just over the threshold. Humanoid. Metal.

"A robot!" Tamara exclaimed. The Doctor knelt down and brushed dust from the blasted remains of the head.

"An android, technically," said the Doctor. He noted the ceramic plate epidermis, the blank, sculptural face, and the serial code pattern in black on the neck. "Imperial era multi-function, Teller series android, circa the twenty-seventh century."

"Hnh. Gives us some idea of the where and when," Tamara said, "So - a human settlement possibly."

They stepped over the corpse of the android and entered the main room. There was no one in sight - no one inside the building at all. Furniture and possessions were scattered over floors, as if toppled in panicked flight. The Doctor bent down and picked up a small, dust-coated object. He blew the sand from it gently: a cloth doll in a check dress with long braids of yellow wool and old buttons for eyes.

Humans," he said softly, "Unmistakably humans."

"Doctor!" called Tamara from the back of the building, "I think you'd better take a look."

Grae and the Doctor stepped carefully through the scattered contents of the house and made their way to the back door. Tamara stood by the open entrance, pointing into the fenced area behind the building - and at a collection of corpses.

They were animals. Three porcines, stretched out immobile, their skin stretched tight and crisp over their skeletons. The Doctor knelt and prodded one body with the tip of his boot. He sniffed.

"No decay," he said, with some surprise.

"No decay?" Tamara repeated, crossing to look for herself. It was true. The animals were husks, desiccated to the point of being naturally mummified.

"No obvious signs of violence - or disease," Grae noted.

The Doctor nodded, "Indeed."

"So what killed them?" she asked.

"Heat," the Doctor replied, "It's almost a hundred and twenty degrees out here. I think they were left here when the occupants of the house left and simply died of heat exhaustion. The heat dried them before decay could set in, and -" he waved at the three bodies and stood up.

The dust swirled around and parted, and the Doctor pointed to other fenced paddocks. "Look."

There were more of them. Scattered carcasses dotting the enclosures. Pigs, sheep, horses, large birds like Turkeys - all dead, all desiccated by the heat.

"So the human farmers living here ran away for some reason, and the animals they left behind to die, is that it?" asked Grae.

"Farm?" the Doctor kicked the sand, "You don't raise animals on this scale in temperatures like this - or on soil like this. Where are the plants?" His kicking unearthed a root ball of something. He bent and picked it up, and it crumbled to dust in his fingers, blowing away on the never-ending wind.

"I wonder..."

Grae shook his shoulder, "Doctor - Doctor look!"

On the other side of the farm fences, the dust recoiled in a sheet and parted, and for a minute, the trio glimpsed an impossible scene. Behind the dust, snow piled up in soft, cold pillows, blue and white. Behind the snow, enormous shards of ice glinted with highlights of green and pink and retreated into silent, deep blue depths.

Tamara raised an eyebrow, "Curiouser and curiouser...", she muttered.

"Plagiarist -" the Doctor murmured, "That's my line...", He vaulted with ease across the fence and headed for the wall of snow and ice beyond the veil of churning grey-red dust.

Tamara and Grae followed him. Behind them, dark shapes crept with predators' precision through the sandy shadows of the abandoned farmhouse - watching, listening, and smelling...

Grae pulled on Tamara's sleeve as the ice reared overhead, "Something is not right here," she said.

Tamara half-chuckled, "Picking up the Doctor's love of understatement, are we?" she asked rhetorically.

Grae shook her head, "No - I mean: can't you sense them?"

Tamara stopped and looked around her, those hunter instincts probing the alien landscape. Of course things felt not right - they always did. But perhaps Grae was right - that something was out there. Something watching them.

There was a thumping sound. Tamara and Grae turned to watch the Doctor pounding on the ice - no, not on the ice, on something translucent in front of it.

"A dome!" the Doctor shouted. Tamara wanted to tell him to shut up - that there were things out there, watching them. But she felt suddenly silly.

"What?"

"A dome - an artificial dome, made of one of those Ferro-resinous compounds your descendants were always so fond of using in the late thirties." The Doctor tapped the semi-transparent wall, "And outside -"

"Micaur - whatever," Tamara said, looking at the towering wall of snow and ice resting against the dome wall. Far above she could make out a night sky, with the faint pinpricks of stars faintly visible hanging there in the velvet darkness. How strange, she thought - how strange to be standing here in the unbearable heat, millimetres away from bitter, bitter cold. It still took her breath away, sometimes - this strangeness that both the future and past were filled with.

"Micaur-Omega," the Doctor corrected her, tut-tutting. "Micaur-Omega in the grip of the ice age its supposed to be having."

"And this dome?"

The Doctor shrugged, "A colony, I suspect - a human colony, at that. Sealed, environmentally secure, climate-controlled -"

"You mean, not controlled," Grae interrupted.

"Hmm, yes..." the Doctor considered, turning his gaze from the ice outside to the baking desert inside. "It does have all the characteristic appearance of a failed environmental control system, doesn't it." He grinned, flashing a broad smile underneath his sparkling sunglasses, "I bet you anything they could use a hand fixing it, too."

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They walked for almost another mile through a Dantean landscape of burnt fields and desiccated forests. Nothing had survived the baking heat. Every last drop of life and moisture had been sucked out of the land, and the remains had crumbled and collapsed under the tearing force of the winds. They passed more farmhouses, each one as hollow and empty as the first. In the dusty courtyards and paddocks around them, the now-familiar dust shrouded hummocks of animal carcasses. To their left, they followed the surreal curve of snow and ice that marked the wall of the dome. Then, through the swirl of wind-borne snow outside, they saw a change.

The dome they were in appeared to intersect with another dome. Abutting the translucent wall was a doorway, cast of the same concrete-like artificial compound as the houses.

"Another dome!" Tamara called. The Doctor nodded. The doorway was dark and shadowed, the door within it jammed open with a large boulder. The Doctor kicked it lightly - thoughtfully. He ran his fingers over the metal surface of the door.

"A seal-door - like an airlock, to protect the complex should the structure of one dome fail."

"But jammed open," Grae pointed out, "Overriding the door's potential defensive capacity."

The Doctor nodded.

Tamara crouched down in the thin shadow of the doorway and gazed into the dark corridor beyond.

"Do we go on?"

The Doctor nodded, "We do. There's a mystery here, Harry," he murmured, deep in thought.

Tamara rolled her eyes. The Doctor was prone to slip back and forth a little. She prodded his shoulder.

"Hey - have you got any more of those heat injections?" They had all taken them before setting out - a combination artificial UV-absorbing polymer that migrated towards the skin, and a rehydrant enzyme. The polymer formed a near-watertight seal across the top surface of the skin and the rehydrant pumped up water manufacture from unbound oxygen. 'Let me know if your skin starts to itch', the Doctor had said, 'The injections should keep you from feeling the worst

effects of the heat, but it's hard to predict how your individual body chemistry will react to it. Tamara - you may need an additional injection every few hours or so until the process stabilizes.'

Her skin itched now - a tickling sensation that buzzed just under the surface. The Doctor placed the hypo on the side of her neck; there was a quick hiss, and the itching melted away.

"Thanks," Tamara said, rubbing the cold patch on her neck where the hypo had been.

"Better?" Grae asked. Tamara nodded.

The Doctor led the way, stepping carefully over the boulder and into the dark corridor beyond, slipping his sunglasses into an inside coat pocket. It was cooler beyond - but not by much. After the red light of the outside, the darkness stung the eyes. Tamara blinked. Something dark - darker than the surrounding blackness - shifted up ahead in the shadows. She grabbed at Grae, pointing at the movement.

Grae frowned, squinted, but saw nothing. Tamara hissed at the Doctor.

"Doc - there's someone up there!"

The Doctor froze, "Someone - or something?" he whispered. He looked around - to their right, a second corridor branched off from the first. "Down there," he said quietly, "Let's see if we can do this without -"

There was a sudden burst of light from in front of them, the hissing sound of a chemical flare and a bright purple-white glow blossomed around them. Shouts, and then the rattling snap and buzz of energy discharges erupted from the light. The walls around the trio buckled and exploded as hot pulsar beams slammed into the metal plates.

"Duck!" the Doctor shouted, suddenly all too familiar with the scenario. He pushed Grae to the ground - Tamara had already rolled out of the main passage, past the supporting column and into the safety of the adjacent corridor, her combat instincts smoothly kicking in. Grae yelped as droplets of molten metal-sprayed outwards from the damaged wall panels. The Doctor grabbed her and dragged her with him around the pillar that stood out of corner and into the second corridor. Its smooth junction afforded them little shelter; the three blinked to clear the afterimage of the flare from their eyes. Tamara squinted and tried to assess their position.

"A dozen of them," she shouted to the Doctor over the static din, "In two groups - I think we got caught in the middle of an ambush!"

The light of the flare had dimmed to a rough reddish-purple light that sent wavering shadows flickering through the metal tube of the corridor. It was a staggered cross-junction - the corridor Tamara, the Doctor and Grae were sheltering now continuing onwards twenty or so feet further down the entrance corridor. Up there, dug-in behind a makeshift barricade of plastic crates and metal plates torn from the corridor's walls, were the first group of combatants. In the purple light they seemed to be humans - six or maybe seven of them, ducking and firing energy weapons into the cross-junction of corridors. The second group of combatants clung to the edge of the cross corridor, shielded by the corner's pillar and returning fire. These were not human - but they were humanoid. Tamara saw pale flesh and bright, jewelled eyes without irises behind a motley camouflage of dirty rags. They seemed thin and fragile, but full of energy. She felt something radiating from them - cold maybe, heat perhaps; it was something desperate that hung like a veil in the air over the small group.

Someone on one of the sides threw something that exploded - a grenade-type device that bounced into the middle of the two combatant groups and detonated. The tunnel shook, cladding panels dislodged and smashing to the ground, pipes and wires spewing from the gaps like entrails from a sliced belly. The Doctor and Grae lost their footing and were blown like stray leaves down the corridor from the blast's shockwave. Tamara saw the explosion coming and rolled into a ball, skidding away from the junction and quickly leaping to her feet.

"Come on," she shouted over the screams and shouts coming from the junction, "We've got to get out of here - whoever they are, they mean business."

The Doctor brushed his hair from his face and opened his mouth to speak when another explosion erupted into the small space. Darkness, smoke and the twisted wreckage of the corridor

engulfed them. Deafness like a cotton glove squeezed their heads, wrapping them in a fog that splintered meaningless shards of light and nothing around them.

* * * * *

The darkness drifted slowly aside, like fog lifting from a sullen sea. Underneath the darkness, Grae became slowly aware of light, shapes and motion. Sound returned like crashing waves falling against a distant and harsh shore. The first thing she became aware of was pain. Jagged bars of feeling scraped against her shoulders. Her first instinct was to wince away from them - which only caused them to grate even more. She let out a tiny cry and then bit it off; the shapes and shadows in the darkness around her moved at the sound. Blinking forced her eyes to adjust. She could see more now - a labyrinth of rubble piled up and around her, fragments of tunnel panelling now resolving themselves in the dark.

Forcing the pain to a hollow somewhere at the back of her consciousness, she twisted around to see more clearly where she was. A ledge. Below, a darkness that seemed without shape or end; above her, billowing smoke lit by the ragged red edge of flame. Under the growing orange glow, her situation resolved itself. The rubble formed a funnel, its wide mouth up above her ringed with a raging fire; below it disappeared into dark cold nothing. She became aware of cold air rushing up past her into the growing inferno overhead. Whatever was down there had atmosphere at least.

She wrenched herself to a sitting position. The pain lurched and tore across various injuries, but she could tell they were only bruises - nothing severely cut or broken. She glanced down at the pit below her and then up at the growing fire. She had to go down - seek shelter from that roaring blaze overhead. The pain settled sullen and dull deep inside her as she swung her self-up to stand on the cracked ledge. Clawing at the broken sides she skidded down the angled incline. Cold air whistled past her, sucked upwards into the fire. The pit resolved itself into a flat bottom - darkness extending away from her. Another tunnel? It wasn't part of the colony complex, it was natural, roughly hollowed out from the layered bedrock. Grae peered into the darkness, hesitant.

There was a cracking sound from above, and Grae glanced upwards - and then leapt into the safety of the tunnel mouth as clumps of burning rubble crashed down from the fire overhead. She lay with her back to the tunnel wall, gasping with the sudden exertion. More cracks and crashes, and more burning debris plummeted downwards, showering the tunnel with hot sparks and ash.

She grabbed a plastic-coated support strut with a smouldering web of insulation netting caught at one end. A torch - and a weapon. She waved it in front of her, trying to make out the extent of the tunnel through the gathering smoke. Not particularly inspiring - lots of sharp angles, lots of unforgiving, splintered edges of stone. But she had to get moving - smoke and burning debris would do her far more damage than an empty tunnel.

Grae took a deep breath - as deep as the dull pain coiled inside her would allow - and began to gingerly edge forward.

Minutes passed, she lost track of exactly how many. It may have been an hour or slightly more before the sputtering insulation smouldering at the end of the smoking support arm finally guttered and died and left Grae alone in the cold blackness of the tunnel. It had been a fissure - a natural split in the bedrock that led down, down into the heart of the planet. But still the cold air came, a sure sign that the fissure led somewhere.

But she had gotten nowhere, and in the last dying glow of her torchlight, Grae swore blackly.

The shadows closed in. She blinked, but they remained, solid and cold.

Now what?

Forward, that was the only answer. She couldn't go backwards; forward until she could go forward no more. Hands outstretched, she edged further down the fissure.

A sound. Grae froze. Surely her ears were playing tricks on her. Now that she had no light, she became aware of ticks and pops and cracks and other tiny, invisible sounds that seemed filled with terror. She shook her head slightly. There was nothing there - nothing but the sound of her own footsteps and the sound of the icy chill around her. She closed her eyes - for some reason that made the darkness seem less real, easier to deal with. She inched forward once more - one step, two, three, five, ten... and then her hands touched something that wasn't rock.

Her eyes snapped open, and in the pitch darkness inches in front of her, two cold blue, multifaceted lenses stared back at her.

* * * * *

"Superficial, superficial - thank you," the Doctor murmured.

Morgan nodded, his smile fixed and somewhat frantic.

"You were lucky indeed that your injuries were so light, Doctor," he said once again. "I would not want to lose one more..."

The Doctor looked up from his examination of his battered jacket and searched Morgan's face. The older man's eyes darted left and right, as if he expected to be overwhelmed by shadows; he was edgy, panicky. His rapid acceptance of their presence was too quick, too filled with relief to be the reaction of a well-balanced man. But then again, the Doctor reminded himself, Morgan was not a well-balanced man, was he? No, he was a man who was living right on the very edge of sanity - a man pushed well beyond his limits, a man face to face with that old dark spectre Death. Not an enviable position for anyone to be in - let alone an aging agronomist.

The Doctor glanced around the room at the other colony members gathered in Morgan's office. They were a pinch-faced, terrified, pathetic bunch - men, women and children pushed unexpectedly into a battle for survival. He looked gloomily into their hollow eyes, and couldn't really see much there that gave him hope that they would make it.

"One more?" he asked Morgan. Morgan swallowed, his Adam's apple a sharp accent in his fleshy throat.

"One more - one more of us. One more human," he said, his eyes fixed, "We have lost too much. I will not lose one more..." but something about his promise rang empty. The sorrow and deathly exhaustion in his face belied his inability to do anything.

"What about our friend Grae, Mr. Morgan?" Tamara asked quietly.

Morgan's face became even more lined, "The fire will burn itself out shortly, Ms. Scott," he said, the formal edge betrayed by a quiver in his voice, "But the Ty'lychan would almost have taken your companion with them if she -" he left the conclusion to his sentence hang, uncomfortably, in the air.

The Doctor coughed to break the tense fragility in the air, "Yes, well - we'll worry about her later, shall we?" he said. He clapped his hands together and rubbed them in a theatrical gesture, "Let's have a look at these generator plans, shall we?"

Morgan paused, nodded and went to a set of filing shelves on the far side of the room, rummaging amongst the plastic film sheaf's stored there.

Tamara grabbed the Doctor's elbow and jerked his face close to hers, "Doctor," she hissed quietly, "What the hell are you doing? Forget the stupid generator - we need to find Grae!"

The Doctor glared into her eyes with an icy calm stare, "Tamara," he said quickly and precisely, "These people are on the very edge of what they can take -" Tamara followed his quick glance at them, "And people like that are extremely dangerous. We can do nothing for Grae until we get their cooperation - and that's what I'm trying to get." His voice became softer, "We know at least that she didn't get caught in the explosion and the fire. If Morgan's right and the Ty'lychan have taken her, then they've taken her down that tunnel - and that tunnel leads to the power station. So agreeing to go on an expedition with Morgan down to the station is the best way we

have at the moment of trying to find her. Believe me, Tamara," and a note of sad and infinite concern crept into the Doctor's voice, "There's nothing I want more than to see her safe."

Tamara bowed her head and looked away, breaking contact with the Doctor's icy silver gaze. He was right, of course. The colonists that had pulled them from the rubble had seen Grae tumble down into that exposed pit before the coolant rupture had caught fire. The Ty'lychan too, had vanished somewhere down in that hole. She was down there - with the Ty'lychan, and the half-starved, frantic colonists were their only ticket down there.

Safe, the Doctor had said. He meant alive, Tamara told herself, and shuddered.

She stood and walked to the large window on the far side of Morgan's office and stared out bleakly at the blasted, hellish landscape outside. The colonists' story was a nightmare. Tamara gazed out over the hobbiton-like cluster of organic pre-form buildings nestled in small, cloistered courtyards. She tried to imagine what it had been like when they had first arrived five years ago - a verdant paradise, lush, temperate and fertile. A miracle of power engineering - the creation of an oasis of plenty in the midst of a world killed by the chill grip of a permanent ice age. McKinley's world could not be terraformed - its sun lay dull and brown and cold, its self-sustaining atomic reaction fading slowly to a useless, deathly pulse. It would never collapse into a black hole, but neither could it be engineered to ever again generate power enough to provide light and heat to the five earth-type planets in its system. Then an Imperial scientist, Dr. Olivier, created a power source that drew its energy from the very icy grip that choked McKinley's world and the other four planets. Cheap, efficient - the power source would give life again to five worlds in a galaxy crying out for new land and new space. The colonists on McKinley's world were Olivier's final test subjects, there to run the power source through every possible living test.

And then - disaster.

"There was no warning - none at all," interrupted a thin, harsh voice at Tamara's elbow. She turned. It was one of the colonists who had pulled her from the rubble in the service tunnel. She was a pale woman, her face baked unnaturally red from the heat outside. Her name was Ellen Praeger. She may have once been pretty, but now she was thin, haggard and her eyes twitched and darted nervously.

"They rose up against us without any provocation," Ellen continued, staring blankly over the ruin of her world outside the window. The hot wind stirred her brittle hair. "It was all over in a matter of days. They went first to the power plant and reversed every setting it had. Dr Olivier was their first victim. Within the space of six hours, the atmosphere towers were sending out a wind so hot it dried the grasses and the crops where they stood and set them alight. By the end of the first day, all surface water had evaporated, and the Ty'lychan had killed almost half the colony. By the end of the first standard week, there was not a living plant or animal outside the core compound. Their fury is unquenchable, their ferocity without end..." she trailed off, lost in her own despair.

Tamara frowned. She had heard of social revolution, but this was crazy. Ellen was right - the fury of the rebelling Ty'lychan seemed by all accounts to be almost frenzied; even if they were virtual slaves to the humans, the uprising seemed too sudden, too violent to be a simple working-class revolt. Something in the back of her mind - an little voice borne of too many trips with the Doctor - told her there was more to the story.

She looked at Ellen's drawn face, silhouetted by the red light drifting through the patched window. Three months ago, she had been a bio-technician, a planetary surveyor, a person whose world was bacterium growth in micro-environments. Her science was done in the safety of the laboratory, her experiments contained within Petri dishes and gene banks. She had been part of the soft, privileged, catered-for elite of the Empire - one of billions for whom life was an engineered sphere of challenge without danger, opportunity without risk. Now she was a soldier, a survivor, with blood under her fingernails and terror branded into her heart. A husband, a child - all had vanished in the tide of violence that had swept the colony. Three months ago, she had everything; now, she had nothing.

"Well, I think that's fairly straightforward," came the Doctor's hearty voice, rolling across the bleak little room like a thunderstorm.

He turned on his heel and surveyed the group, turning finally back to Morgan, "Tamara and myself are ready to depart the moment you are, Mr. Morgan. Neither you nor I have any time to waste."

Morgan blinked, licking his dry lips uncertainly, "No - no, of course not, Doctor. I - I will assemble a team immediately," He blinked once more and then hurried from the room accompanied by a knot of colonists. The Doctor watched him go, his eyes dark with concern.

Tamara walked back to the Doctor and looked at the plans scattered across Morgan's desk, "Well?"

"As can be expected," the Doctor replied in a distant murmur.

Tamara scowled, "I mean 'well' as in 'well what's happening now?'"

The Doctor tapped the plans, glancing at Tamara and Ellen, "Battle stations. Morgan says that the colonists will split into two groups. The first will stay here, in the central compound, while the second comes with us, down to the power station."

Tamara looked at the plans, "Are these the plans of the power station?"

The Doctor nodded, "A survey of the cave system in which the station is embedded, conducted by the late Dr. Francis Xai Olivier."

Tamara frowned, "They don't look very detailed," she said, a note of worry edging her voice.

The Doctor sighed, "They're not. We should be able to reach the power station without too much difficulty, but finding Grae might be slightly more of a problem." He stared off into the distance, his eyes searching some unknown horizon, as if he could see his Timelord companion there. "I just hope she's looking after herself..."

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Grae stared at the machinery that filled the huge, cylindrical cavern. A long gantry led from the entrance to the tangle of half-carved, half-natural passages she had been led through. It led from the hole in the side of the enormous cavern's wall to a splay of grilled metal floor panels that spiralled in two levels around a lazily revolving metal cube some ten or twelve metres to a side. The space around the cube shimmered and rippled, as if the normal laws of physics were held in suspension by its movement. Radiating outwards from the upper level were twelve upright metal structures, like domens. The side that faced inwards towards the spinning cube was a translucent panel that glowed a soft blue. Pipes, conduits and cables snaked from the structures to a bank of metal blocks surrounding the free-floating cube, then down to radiate outwards from the bottom of the entire structure and disappear off across the vast opening towards its rough-hewn walls. On the upper gantry level, three-metre diameter spheres studded with graphic readouts and banks of command circuits acted as a control area.

It was an impressive structure, both in its engineering and in the apparent sophistication of the technology it employed. Grae wasn't quite sure what to make of it - but the floating, turning cube hinted that the constructors had understood artificial gravity and dense-geography baryonic physics.

It was almost enough to make her forget about the two creatures that had led her here. No - Grae corrected herself - not creatures: beings.

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"Two hearts," the voice had said in the darkness.

Grae swallowed, her gaze fixed on the twin patches of blue that shone in the inky blackness inches from her face.

"I - I beg your pardon?"

"Two hearts," the voice said again. It was liquid and deep, a male voice. "I can see it in the pattern of your body heat: a lower respiratory rate, a lower heart rate and a lower body temperature. And two hearts."

There was another voice, as liquid and icy as the first, but lighter - female, "You are not a human."

"No," Grae whispered. Then stronger, "No - I'm not. I'm a Gallifreyan - a traveller. We arrived on this world without knowing where we were."

A soft light flared into a cold ball of pale green luminescence in the darkness.

There were two of them. Their skins were pale and laced with blue. Their hair - not hair, almost like quills - was long, shaggy and streaked white and black. Their eyes were faceted, refractive corneas splitting visible light into other wavelengths, the irises behind the lenses all-engulfing, filling the eye with cold, piercing blue. They wore ragged clothing that might once have been drab work uniforms, draped now with ammunition belts and fragments of energy-dissipating body armour, decorated with pendants, bandages and talismans. The male stood in front of her, his angled features sharp and crisp. Two broad pink scars ran across his lips from septum to chin. In his hand he held a light-device of some kind - a metal sphere with a plate that shed a pale green glow. The female stood behind him and to one side, taloned hands clutching at the wall, suspending her like a blue, rag-clad spider, her braided hair scooped up into a knotted bun at the nape of her thin, pale neck.

Grae smiled, faintly, "My name is Grae." They had been part of the combatant group in the tunnel, clearly - she recognised the rag-tag armour, the pale blue skin, the eyes.

"You are not human, then?" questioned the male, stepping back a pace.

"No, I'm not," Grae repeated, "I came to this planet with two companions - we didn't know what to expect -"

The male glanced at the female, "But not this?"

Grae hesitated, unsure how to reply. She felt like the male was testing her.

"Look," she said, taking a deep breath and ploughing ahead, "I don't know what your argument with the humans is - it's nothing to do with us. We're not here to make problems - we try and solve them."

The male blinked, "A problem-solver? An Adjudicator?"

Grae hesitated, then nodded.

"And not a human one, either," murmured the female, dropping from her wall-clinging stance to the tunnel floor. "Scarr - this may be what we have been waiting for." She turned to Grae. "My name is Frost - this is Scarr. Come," she indicated the tunnel ahead of them, "We have something to show you..."

* * * * *

The assembled party moved cautiously into the heart of the central complex. This was the centre of the colony - a broad circular building, with an organic dome pierced by long ovals. Flowering vines and blushing creepers should have crawled up its smooth walls, butterflies and bees should have brushed softly against the inlaid glass of its windows. Instead, blood-tinged shadow crept into every hollow and arch, staining the dome with the colour of death. Dust swirled in its cloisters, choking the doorways and rattling the dry brown ropes of withered plants that sagged from the walls in dead loops. Inside, the open space had been designed as a combination meeting hall, control room and recreation area. Holographic pictures on the walls played scenes of fifty distant worlds the colonists once called home. With power fluctuating through the building's damaged infrastructure, those pictures fluttered with static, endlessly looping fractured glimpses of forgotten worlds.

Every table, chair and computer console here had been smashed and fragments of metal and plastic littered the floor. The party of eight colonists, led by Morgan, the Doctor and Tamara, crossed the still, battle-scarred hall in silence. They made their way to a large alcove on the far side, an elevator cubicle sat inside, its doors blasted open and raked with the burns of pulsar fire.

The Doctor peered through the twisted doors into the darkness. He pulled a metal globe from a satchel at Tamara's side, twisted it, and dropped the ball of light it had become down into the open lift shaft. The globe of light fell slowly, illuminating the empty pit. Then it came to a halt fifteen feet below, hovering in its own glow.

Tamara watched the globe and raised an eyebrow, "Neat," she said.

"Very," the Doctor agreed. "Touch the blue triangular plate on your way past it and it'll drop for another fifteen feet." He pointed at the climbing rungs the ball's glow illuminated, "Ladies first."

Tamara grimaced, pocketed the pulsar and started to climb down the shaft. Morgan and the rest of the colonists followed in stealthy silence. The Doctor watched the ad-hoc commando group descend and took a deep breath. Guns and creeping around in dark tunnels - he had a bad feeling about all of this. He followed the last colonist down the ladder, feeling unseen eyes watching him.

Tamara touched the light-globe as she climbed past it, and the ball dropped. The party followed it down, down away from the heat and into a blessed coolness. Tamara dropped the globe again, and then a third and a fourth time before they reached the bottom of the lift shaft. So, Tamara thought, about sixty or so feet. The group gathered in the base of the shaft. Morgan activated the command sequence and the lift door juddered open despite the damage. The colonists' pulsars followed the opening of the door, nervously covering the darkness beyond.

The darkness was empty - a shadow broken by the distant flickering of lights set into the walls of a corridor cut into the rock and lined with cables and conduits. Morgan led the group forward. They advanced in a pool of cold fear, their eyes searching the shadows for any sign of Ty'lychan. The silence stretched around them, inflating each close-throated breath, each cautious footstep into gigantic, oppressive sounds that scraped against nerves already raw with tension. Tamara could feel the barely suppressed panic around her, pouring like musk from every colonist. She hoped - prayed - they didn't meet anyone. Anything. The panic would overwhelm them. She licked her lips nervously and stuck by the Doctor's side. With aching slowness they made their way down the corridor.

Minutes ticked away and their advance continued. Then, the corridor expanded into a broad C-shaped chamber cut from the rock. A single metal doorframe pierced the far, convex wall of the chamber. The door was half-shut across it, and a triangular patch of darkness could be seen behind.

The eight colonists moved slowly into the chamber, pulsars darting from one empty corner to another. They took up a rough defensive position around the door, guarding it against the corridor they had just travelled down. The Doctor and Tamara peered into the room. Tamara chucked a glow-ball inside. The room beyond was circular - like a squashed sphere. The far wall was made up of a five door-sized blank metal panels set into stone alcoves. In the centre stood five tall computer control consoles in a shallow semi-circle facing the blank wall. Light flickered across their graphic panels - they seemed undamaged.

The Doctor hurried over to the control panels, pulling Morgan's plans from his pocket and unrolling them over one of the panels. Morgan and Tamara followed him in, leaving the colonists on guard outside.

"Are these the power plant controls?" Tamara asked. The Doctor frowned, his gaze travelling along each control bank, then flashing back to the plans, then following the graphics of the computer banks once more.

"Yes, yes," he murmured, "These are the controls that govern the power distribution nodes. From here we can shift and align the power harmonics generated within the atmosphere

towers." His hands flowed over the panels, and a holograph fluttered into view in the centre of the room. It was a sphere - oscilloscope lines tracking the graphic measurement of energy arcing across it in pale lines.

"There...", he said softly, concentrating on the image that had materialised, "That's a graphic representation of the harmonics in the atmosphere towers - see," he pointed to the intersecting lines, "Temperature, wind speed, dew point, humidity - it's all generated here."

His fingers flew over the controls, and the graphic lines responded, "Although -" They shifted into new alignments.

"Although what?" asked Tamara.

"Although it's not entirely clear how," the Doctor finished, concentrating more on his recalibration.

"How?" Tamara repeated.

"How," the Doctor replied firmly. He knelt and opened a panel on the side of one of the columns and dug around in the fluid-optic cables. "The atmosphere towers are molecular condensers - standard particle physics things. But the source of power, that's the how that's not clear." He paused and furrowed his brow, his face illuminated by the pulsing cables in his hands. "You see," he explained to Tamara with a kind of intense abstraction, his gaze off somewhere else, "Atmosphere towers are a very primitive kind of technology. They're slow - they evolve the atmosphere by -" he wrapped his hands around an invisible ball, flicking cables here and there, "Shifting the components of the atmosphere gradually - an increase in temperature there, a minor adjustment in moisture content there, creating winds here and precipitation here - that sort of thing." He dove into the column, forcing tubes into new combinations. "And even that requires an immense amount of energy to sustain. Billions of terawatts worth every hour. Usually towers like those are powered by indirect microwave transmission of particle energy from some quantum-atomic source - a star, say."

He stood up, brushing fluid from his hands that dried instantly into sparkling dust. He turned his attention back to the control panels and made some more flickering adjustments. The lines in the graphic moved in tune with his fingers.

"But these towers are operating at a capacity the likes of which I have never, ever seen. Untold amounts of direct - not indirect - quantum energy are surging into the towers from Olivier's power plant, allowing atmospheric alteration to take mere minutes rather than months or years. Weather patterns, climactic conditions, environmental parameters can be created in the blink of an eye -"

He pressed a final control and the graphic settled into a balanced pattern.

"Rather like that." He grinned.

"Is that it?" Tamara asked.

"That's it," the Doctor replied, shoving his hands in his pockets and smiling beatifically at the revolving graphic demonstrating his handiwork. "The towers upstairs are even now altering the climate and atmosphere. Time to buy bulbs - it'll be spring soon."

Something made Tamara glance up, towards the door - something that made her realise that things were not quite as simple as the Doctor thought.

"Doctor...", she murmured.

The Doctor sailed on in his train of thought, mumbling out loud, characteristically oblivious to everything else around him.

"A baryonic energy source - a natural phenomena, perhaps? Something natural to this planet - or something brought here? The flow patterns - organic? An organic quantum energy source?"

"Doctor," Tamara repeated, jabbing him in the ribs with her elbow, "Pay attention."

The Doctor blinked and looked up.

"Oh dear...", he murmured.

Morgan stood on the other side of the computer consoles, his pulsar raised threateningly, his eyes glowing with a deeply disturbing fire. Behind them, on the door side of the chamber, four of the colonists matched Morgan's stance, their weapons raised in concert. Ellen was among them.

"Not spring - winter," Morgan said.

The Doctor shook his head, "Morgan - I know what you're thinking, but - "

"Do it," Morgan said, quite simply. His still, calm voice terrifying under those shining, sanity-drained eyes, glowing in the darkness.

"Do what?" Tamara hissed, "Make it winter? What the hell will that achieve?"

The Doctor sighed and rubbed the back of his neck, "I'd forgotten," he said in self-chastisement.

"Forgotten what?" Tamara asked, uneasily aware it was neither the time nor the place for explanations.

"The Ty'lychan - I'd forgotten about the Ty'lychan." The Doctor stared at Morgan, seeing other times and places through him, "I travelled with one once - for a while. They're interstellar gypsies, vagabonds - slaves. Their home world of Dreilos was a harsh planet, and engendered a race that matched it in harshness. The Ty'lychan evolved a curious parasitism - heat absorption - that eventually became their sole source of energy intake. They lived on heat. Before humans came to Dreilos, the Ty'lychan lived by hunting and draining wild animals of their body heat. But with an average body temperature thirty degrees higher than the average Dreilosian mammal, humans became a much more attractive food source."

"They ate the humans?" Tamara asked.

"No, just drained them of body heat. Once internal molecular motion has been taken to a critical level, a mammal dies. They massacred the human explorers by draining them of heat. After that, humanity declared war on the Ty'lychan and bombarded Dreilos from space with atomic weapons designed to create a planetary nuclear winter. As the surface temperature plummeted, the Ty'lychan grew weaker and weaker until they were easily enslaved. The race was shipped wholesale across the galaxy in a Diaspora as cruel as it was unnecessary. Fission implants removed the need for predation, but still the Ty'lychan remained the Empire's slaves - their initial attack on humanity never forgotten, or forgiven."

The Doctor focused back on Morgan and his wild eyes. "What did they do, Morgan? Rise up against you in revenge? Or did something else spark it off?"

"We had grown complacent, Doctor," Morgan whispered, "Three centuries had blinded us to the danger these animals presented. They worked in our fields, drove our trucks, prepared our food, repaired our machines - but underneath that servility, there bubbled a well-spring of hate that we pretended didn't exist. When the towers failed and we were at our weakest, they struck." He aimed his pulsar at the Doctor's head, "And now we have the opportunity before us to strike back, to remind them that we are the masters, and that we have not forgotten what they truly are. Savages. Beasts. Animals. You will do it Doctor - now..."

He swung his pulsar until it pointed at Tamara, but his eyes stayed fixed on the Doctor, "... or you will watch your companion burn in front of you."

Ellen Praeger's pulsar followed Morgans. She looked sadly at Tamara, "I'm sorry."

Morgan's face twitched, "But I am not. I will not let these creatures take one more of my people, Doctor - not one more. And I will do anything to ensure our survival."

The Doctor clenched his jaw, "I'll do it Morgan. I'll do it," he said quietly. His hands fluttered across the panels in front of him. Between him and Morgan the holographic display wavered, and then changed. Wave lines twisted, altered and bent into a new pattern. A long, silent minute passed, and then the Doctor lowered his hands and looked again at Morgan with quiet sadness.

"That's it. Winter," he said, "Temperatures are plummeting, atmospheric moisture is condensing, and the wind levels are rising. It will reach freezing in ten minutes or so - temperatures which will weaken the Ty'lychan enough for you to find and destroy them all."

Morgan smiled, "Excellent." His pulsar flashed back towards the Doctor, "And to ensure that you do not alter these settings -"

A scream cut through the room, followed by a staccato burst of pulsar fire. Blue and red light flashed through the half-closed door into the control chamber. Confused voices shouted from the antechamber. Attack - under attack!

The Doctor dived to one side of the arch of control panels - Tamara rolled to the other. Morgan, distracted, fired wildly at the far wall, sparks and goutts of steam erupting from severed cables and pipes. The deafening sound of gunfire mixed with the screams of injury and terror cascaded across the room. There was a muffled 'crump' as a fire burst into blazing life at one side of the chamber.

Morgan shouted orders, firing randomly into the smoke, uncertain where the Doctor was. Tamara rolled again through the gathering steam, barrelling into a colonists' legs. They yelled and tumbled forward into the confusion by the door. A pulsar went skidding out of someone's hands - Tamara grabbed it and fired it over the consoles towards Morgan, showering the room with sparks as the beam hit something and exploded. Blue light began to creep into the room from the direction of the alcoves on the far wall. Tamara heard the Doctor shout her name. A colonist grabbed her shoulders. She snapped her head backwards and felt a face crunch under the impact. Her shoulders were free, and she dove around the other side of the consoles towards the Doctor. She felt a hand grab at hers, and knew it was him. Through the smoke and shouting she heard his voice in her ear.

"The wall - doors! Through them!"

Someone's shot must have shorted out an opening mechanism. The metal panels at the back of each of the five alcoves had risen up a scant half-metre, and faint light smoked in from behind them.

The Doctor led the way, scooting underneath the partly-raised door panels like a lizard. Tamara followed, a barrage of pulsar shots shaking the panel over her head and spitting slivers of red-hot metal on her back.

The floor beyond was not rock, but metal plating - a walkway. Dimly glowing light-spheres set into railings on either side shed faint illumination. The space beyond was draped in uncomfortable shadows, but Tamara had the impression of somewhere vast and cold; a cave, empty save for the wide walkway stretching away from the five doors into the darkness. Shouts, explosions and screams echoed into the dark openness from the partly-opened door panels behind them. The Doctor looked back through the gaps.

"Tamara - I have to get back in there. I have to reset the atmosphere controls!"

Tamara grabbed his arm, "Wait a minute - wait a minute. You'll get yourself killed. Let's just hang on -"

A splintering explosion rocked the chamber on the far side of the doors, spilling boiling plasma through the gaps. The metal panels shuddered, creaked - and dropped down with a resounding metallic clang.

The Doctor leapt for them, scrabbling at the edges. They were sealed.

"No way back through there," he hissed. "Come on - let's find a way out." He raced down the walkway, Tamara followed.

The walkway raced on ahead of them into the chilly shadows. Tamara suddenly became aware of a rock face to her left, as the gantry became a shelf attached to the face of a natural fissure in the bedrock. Still they ran on.

There was a flash of something darker than the shadows overhead. Tamara stopped running. Something again. Something scampering overhead, towards the ceiling of the fissure.

She turned. The Doctor stood just ahead - still. She trotted up to him - he raised his hand for her to stop.

"We are not alone," he murmured.

"No," Tamara said, checking the pulsar to see if it had some kind of battery or power pack reading, "I saw it too."

The Doctor glanced down at the pulsar in her hands, "I don't think you'll need that," he said softly.

Tamara looked down at the gun, then back up again - to a rough circle of half a dozen pale faces. She jumped in alarm - they had moved so quietly, so quickly. Unnaturally.

The six were tall, thin, and faces pale as ice. In those cold faces, their eyes were pale blue, with corneas ridged so as to appear multi-faceted, almost like those of an insect. They wore the black overalls of servants, but embellished here and there with scraps of body armour stolen from the colonists. Their hair was rough, and piebald black and white. They cocked their heads in a bird-like manner, their multifaceted eyes glinting in the pale light. Ty'lychan.

One of them stepped forward - a female. She stared unblinkingly at the Doctor. "You are the Doctor." It was a statement, not a question. The Doctor nodded. "You must come with us - now," she said.

The Doctor smiled grimly, as if something had just occurred to him. "Yes - of course."

* * * * *

It was not a retreat, it was a rout. The Ty'lychan seemed to swarm through the narrow tunnels after the panic-stricken colonists. Ellen saw first one, then two, then a third of her fellow drop, stunned by pulsar blasts and then pounced on by the dark, daemonic creatures that shrieked and scampered in the shadows. Long limbs grabbed and the air rippled as they drank the heat, the living warmth, of the fallen colonists. Ellen fired and fired until her pulsar hummed red hot, dangerously close to overload. Then, they were at the elevator shaft. In a blur of fear and exhaustion, Ellen climbed with the others, firing down, into the darkness, into the shadows - into the nightmare.

But then, at the surface - cold. Blessed, blessed cold. It ripped through Ellen's lungs like a swarm of ice, chilling her frail, battered frame almost beyond what she could endure. But she welcomed it, embraced it. For as much as it pained her, it would not kill her - but it would kill the Ty'lychan. As Ellen Praeger fainted in the swirling snow in the main room of the central complex, her mind and body starved and battered into unconsciousness, she held onto one, sweet thought: that the cold that gripped her now would wipe every last Ty'lychan off the face of the planet.

* * * * *

The cube swirled ceaselessly inside its metal cradle. Around it, space and time blurred and shifted, creating a shimmering bubble of subatomic uncertainty. It was hard to look at the cube, Tamara realised, because it was almost not there. Surrounding the cube were twelve metal boxes, each hard-edged and cruel. Their inner face was translucent, glowing slightly from within with a faint greenish glow. Unfortunately, it was all too easy to see what each of the boxes contained - all but one, however; one box was dark and empty.

Beyond the translucent face of the other eleven, a thick, viscous liquid floated gurgled silently. And within each bubbling vat of liquid drifted a tangle of hundreds of thin wires like technological seaweed. And in the grasp of that bundle of wires, lay ensnared the still, unmoving body of a Ty'lychan. The wires burrowed deep under each body's skin, drilling down into the core of their being.

"Are they dead?" Tamara asked.

The Doctor shook his head, "Unfortunately, no."

Two of the Ty'lychan had brought them here - the remainder had vanished into the maze of tunnels, presumably to return to the fight with the colonists. The Ty'lychan pair circled the floating cube now, gazing plaintively into the green boxed hells that held a comrade.

"Not dead?" asked the male Ty'lychan.

"Then alive?" asked the female.

The Doctor leaned against the gantry railing, his arms crossed, his back to the slowly revolving cube. He didn't answer, his eyes dark and deep in thought.

A few still and silent seconds passed. Tamara gave the Ty'lychan pair a brief wry smile and held out her hand.

"Look, I'm Tamara." She received no response, just unblinking stares. Tamara glanced at the Doctor and then back at the Ty'lychan, "You'd better just let him get on with his thinking. He could be puzzling this one out for quite some time."

The male Ty'lychan narrowed his eyes and said nothing. The female circled around until she came to stand just feet from Tamara. She smelled dark and musky - of pain and fear. She cocked her head, as if summing the human up. Then her face softened slightly.

"Frost - this is Scarr," she said, indicating the male with one taloned hand. "Grae told us you would come."

Tamara jumped slightly, "Grae? You've seen her? She's safe? Where is she?"

"She is safe," Frost said, "At least... We -"

"You left her here, didn't you," interrupted the Doctor. He smiled that grim smile again, "I wonder - I really do wonder," he murmured.

"I hate to ask the obvious - but if you left her here, then where is she?" asked Tamara.

* * * * *

"Ah - let me see. Day 143, Journal entry supplemental...,"

Grae stared at the holographic figure that buzzed and snapped with static but otherwise stood solid in front of her. It was a human - a man, late middle aged, a bit paunchy around the waist, hair black and thinning and supplemented by an untidily long and wispy goatee, his eyes a distant, watery blue. He wore a fawn one-piece, like the colonists, and over that a long white coat. He gripped his lapels and addressed his diary entry to the empty air.

"The extraneous baryonic readings continue to puzzle me. I cannot isolate them from the regular readouts, and am forced to either one of two conclusions. One - that they are a natural phenomenon, perhaps the result of lingering stellar dynamics in the gravitic space-time environment, or two - that they are somehow being generated within the power system itself. If it is the former, then this is most unfortunate - because the experiment cannot succeed unless local space-time is more stable. But my preliminary surveys of this system did not reveal any such variances, so...," he thumped one holographic fist into a holographic palm, "I believe that the latter may be more likely. If so - if so...," the figure tapped his chin, his watery eyes deep in thought, "This may be of more significance than the actual experiment. Not just a new power source - but a source of new power. However, conclusions will have to wait for more investigation." The hologram flickered and vanished, only to reappear again and continue its narrative, "Day 144, Journal entry. I have -"

Grae tapped the control button that had initially started the whole thing off and looked around her. Olivier - that had been the man: Dr. Francis Xai Olivier - was a genius. A brutal and twisted genius, but a genius nonetheless. To listen to his journal entries was to take a trip into almost bottomless cruelty perpetrated in the name of science. Grae shuddered, partly in horror and partly in revulsion. She had not known sentient beings could be quite so merciless.

She looked at the metal boxes, each one containing a floating Ty'lychan. She knew she had to do something - and she knew she had to do something now. Frost and Scarr would

find the Doctor and Tamara and bring them here. The Doctor would be able to do something - he always could. But for now, she would have to start on her own.

But where?

Grae turned back to the holorecorder. The answer lay with Olivier himself.

* * * * *

Ellen Praeger woke with the curious sensation of warmth in coldness still wrapping itself around her. She blinked and cleared her eyes. The world came slowly into focus. A face hung over hers.

"Ellen? Ellen? Are you awake?"

Ellen nodded. It was Wu Ji van Gilder, his face creased in concern. Ellen looked around her. She was in bed. She struggled to sit upright. Wu Ji eased her up and placed an extra pillow behind her head.

"Wu Ji - what's going on?"

Wu Ji smiled, "You collapsed - you were exhausted. But you are safe now."

"Where are we?" she wasn't sure she recognised the room.

"We're in the agronomics station - in the greenhouse. It has a heater."

Yes. She smelled it now - the familiar scent of fertiliser and compost.

Wu Ji handed her a cup. Something steamed in it.

"We have re-taken most of the central complex. Last night we took back the kitchens, and so we have been eating properly once more - there is plenty of food."

Ellen sniffed the cup. Yeasty, bready, meaty - an energy drink she thought she'd never smell or taste again.

"Where are the Ty'lychan?"

Wu Ji's smile broadened, "They have retreated to the spaceport, and are barricaded in there. We think they are probably using the shuttlecraft's reactors to generate enough heat to survive. But there are only a dozen of them at most - the rest are dead. The cold has killed them all."

Ellen Praeger wept, tears drifting quietly from the corners of her eyes. A day ago she believed she was hours from death - but now... Her tears fell in pain and grief for her murdered daughter, her murdered husband - and in quiet hope that in spite of all that, she had a future once more.

Ellen drank, ate, dozed and then finally got out of bed several hours later. She dressed in warm, clean clothing fresh from the recaptured distributary and joined Wu Ji at the insulated glass wall. Outside, snow fell to cover the dead, dusty ground. It gathered in drifts and stands where there had once been dead rock and dying plants. Her world was gripped in a shroud of white - but it was a shroud tinged with the icy clarity of revenge.

"Morgan is dead," Wu Ji said.

"Dead?"

"He didn't make it up the elevator shaft," Wu Ji replied.

Ellen nodded, "Who's in charge now, then?"

Wu Ji said nothing, but looked into Ellen's eyes. It had been Morgan's ferocity that had seen them through the past fifteen days. Morgan - who had lost two sons, a brother and a wife. His loss gave him the authority to command. Now, with the curious logic of the broken and the vengeful, loss conferred that authority on the next most bereaved. Of the remaining dozen colonists, that was Ellen. The dark chain of command now passed to her.

She nodded again, her eyes cold, her mind set. "Then let's make plans."

* * * * *

"How do you obtain energy from heat?" the Doctor asked, staring into the heart of the revolving cube.

"No idea - how do you obtain energy from heat?" Tamara replied.

The Doctor pondered, "What is heat, anyway? It's energy generated by molecular motion. Every molecule generates heat - sometimes not very much. Organic bodies generate a great deal - mammalian bodies even more. Imagine," the Doctor said, turning to face Tamara and the Ty'lychan standing behind him, "That you could create a field that would interact with that molecular motion at a quantum level - in other words, a field that would tap into each molecule's fluctuation in probability. Under those circumstances, the energy created would be sucked into the field with no loss in power or concentration - in fact, if you had it set up properly, you could actually bypass one of the basic laws of physics and create energy: the energy output of the field would be larger than the energy input. Wouldn't that be amazing?"

Tamara nodded, "I suppose so...,"

"Well, it would be - and it is," snapped the Doctor, grinning, "Impossible as it may seem, the Ty'lychan do it naturally. The bioelectric field of Ty'lychan cells interacts with molecular motion around it in precisely that way. Heat - any source of heat - becomes energy for the Ty'lychan. And once captured by those bioelectric fields, that energy enables the cells to live, reproduce, function - in short, to carry on going. Heat is to Ty'lychan biology what food is to human biology."

"And a warm-blooded mammal is their equivalent of a six course meal at the Ritz," finished Tamara.

"Yes, yes," the Doctor waved his hands, "But that's not the issue here. No - what's important is that Ty'lychan biology can do something that is very difficult - fiendishly difficult - to reproduce. And yet -" he turned slowly, hands outstretched, to indicate the complex in which they stood.

"Wait - Doctor," the male Ty'lychan, Scarr, said suddenly, his eyes flashing, "Are you saying that this is a machine that does what we do? Draws its power from heat?"

"Ah -" the Doctor held up a warning hand, "Not quite. Yes and no - it's always yes and no. If this machine did that, then there would be no problem - well, apart from the strain it would put on the fundamentals of physics. No: what we have here is an abomination - a setup that simply taps your natural ability; steals it."

"A mechanical vampire feeding on a living one, eh?" said Tamara wryly.

The Doctor nodded, "It's simple - diabolically so. Inside each tank is a chemical mixture producing low-level heat. Inside each chemical mixture floats a Ty'lychan, whose cellular structure is absorbing that heat and converting it into a quantum form of energy - energy that fluctuates in a quantum state between is and isn't. Powerful stuff. Then, sticking into each bundle of cells in those Ty'lychan are condensed-matter conductors capable of withstanding such quantum exposure, transmitting the energy -," he pointed at the revolving cube, "Here."

"The cube is the heart of the machine?" Tamara asked.

"A three-dimensional image of a mathematical singularity. It's magnetically locked to this exact space-time location - a completely stable point in a shifting universe. The quantum charge contained inside it must be... well, astronomical."

"And it's powered by Ty'lychan," Tamara murmured.

"By Ty'lychan blood, by Ty'lychan bone, by Ty'lychan life." The Doctor stared off into the distance, mesmerising himself with his own horrific vision. "If this was allowed to continue, the entire Earth Empire could become a giant Ty'lychan machine, breeding them as living batteries."

Frost buried her face in Scarr's shoulder, horrified.

"It's not just parasitism," the Doctor said quietly, staring at the revolving cube, "It's predation - brutal, unnatural predation."

"Slave power," said Tamara, at his elbow.

"Literally," the Doctor agreed. He turned to Frost and Scarr, "But tell me about the revolt. Who started that - and why? Did you know all this?"

Scarr shook his head, "We had no idea - no real idea."

Frost looked up, "No one knew of this place - not the humans, and certainly not any of us. We knew that Olivier was running an experimental power plant on this planet, but no one knew anything about it. In the three months after our arrival, there were several Ty'lychan deaths. No one paid particular attention to them - accidents always happen to indentured labour - but there was unease among our people because the bodies were never recovered from these accidents. Then, fifteen days ago, I was working in the central complex when Olivier suddenly appeared, stunned me with a pulsar and dragged me here. He had two androids working with him. While Olivier strapped me to a medical tray here on this gantry, the two androids took a dead Ty'lychan out of that cabinet -" Frost pointed to the empty metal box, "And dumped him over the side."

Tamara glanced involuntarily over the edge of the metal walkway. Even if the Ty'lychan hadn't been dead going over, it would have been once it hit the hidden floor of the cavern.

Frost continued, "Olivier examined me. At first he was pleased, but he flew into a rage when - when -" Scarr touched her shoulder in an infinitely tender gesture. He turned to the Doctor and Tamara.

"Frost carries our child," he said simply. The Doctor nodded.

"I noticed that Frost was missing," Scarr said, "And I went into the service areas of the central complex to find her. I too, ran into Olivier, who stunned me and had his androids take me here. Frost was chained up to the railing. When I saw her there, I broke through the stun and attacked Olivier and the androids. I released Frost, and we fled back to the surface."

"The revolt then gained a life of its own," Frost said quietly, "We had no idea what Olivier was doing - all we knew was that he was taking us one by one, experimenting on us, killing us, and hurling our bodies into an empty cave. Three hundred years of anger exploded, Doctor."

"One of us had some knowledge of the atmosphere controls," Scar explained, "And we reset them to our benefit and the humans' detriment. We were determined to wipe them out."

"Hmm," the Doctor nodded thoughtfully, "And you would have - had I not come along and been persuaded by Morgan to help him change them back."

"But Grae told us you were an Adjudicator," Scarr said, "And you, like her, are not human. You must help us, Doctor. You can see, even more clearly than we could, the injustices we are suffering here."

Tamara frowned, "Adjudicators? But -"

"Ehem, er -" the Doctor coughed, interrupting Tamara, "Yes - well. Injustice is right," he said, nudging Tamara into silence and rubbing his hands together. "Not only is Olivier's power system here an unspeakable abomination, it's also got a major flaw."

"A flaw?" Tamara asked.

"Well," the Doctor said airily, "You didn't imagine even someone of Olivier's ability could get away with flouting the Laws of Thermodynamics indefinitely, did you?"

"It hadn't really occurred to me," Tamara replied wearily, "So what's the flaw?"

"The flaw is, I imagine, that the power system is beginning to feed on itself - killing off the Ty'lychan in the process. I don't suppose Olivier saw this as much of a problem, believing he could simply keep replacing the Ty'lychan components as they, er, expired. However," he turned to Frost, "He had to reject you because your pregnancy no doubt altered your bioelectrical chemistry beyond the narrow tolerances of his little set up."

"So what do we do now?" Scarr asked, "How can you help us, Doctor?"

"He can't," came a voice, echoing across the cavern.

They all turned. A man stood on one of the upper gantries, by the spherical computer banks. He was short, tubby, and wearing a fawn suit under a long white lab coat. His chubby face was topped and tailed by wispy combed-over hair and a faint goatee.

"Doctor Olivier!" cried Scarr, "But -"

"Not Olivier," the Doctor said, "A holoform."

The tubby man smiled, "Indeed, Doctor - such am I." The man began to walk down the gantry stairs to their level.

"A what?" Tamara whispered.

"A holoform," the Doctor replied, "A projection. A sprite. Not a real person at all - just a sophisticated version of a video game character. Computer-generated out of databases: personal information - journals, diaries, medical records, etc." He frowned, "A shallow imitation of the original, to be sure, and -"

"Oh I am no shallow imitation," Olivier reprimanded him, standing at the foot of the curling stairs. "I am the sum of a lifetime's work into bio-energy research - a compendium of all Dr. Olivier's knowledge, a summation of his greatness, a true reflection of his genius -"

"And a sorry comment on his arrogance," finished the Doctor. The Olivier holoform smiled thinly.

"You cannot provoke me, Doctor. My work is almost finished, my place in history complete. You cannot bait me with your petty jibes."

The Doctor scowled. Tamara knew that if there was one thing he hated, it was being out-classed by a computer.

"Tell me what you want, Olivier, before I find your off-switch," the Doctor barked.

The holoform smiled and clasped his hands behind his back. "I am here with an invitation, Doctor."

"An invitation? What on earth are you talking about?"

"An invitation... from your friend Grae," Olivier finished smoothly. He licked his holographic lips, clearly pleased with the drama of his delivery.

"Grae! Where is she?" Tamara asked, "What have you done with her?"

Olivier blinked in hurt surprise, "Done? Done? Why, nothing, of course. I'm a holoform - I can't do anything. No - where Grae went she went willingly." Olivier frowned, then continued through gritted teeth, "As much as it pains me -"

His face and body blurred with static, then shifted, becoming thinner - becoming Grae. Scarr and Frost jumped back in alarm.

Tamara stared, "Grae! Grae?"

The holoform Grae laughed, "Not quite, Tamara - just think of me as a particularly souped-up answer phone message. And don't worry about the real Grae; she's - well, not far away."

"Message," Tamara corrected her, with a smile, "Answer phone message."

"Whatever," Grae responded cheerfully. She turned to the Doctor and her smile dropped, "Now listen, Doctor - Olivier's on to something here. He's gone beyond just developing a particularly horrible power source. He's discovered something about the nature of the derived energy focused in the quantum core - the cube. I'm pretty sure he's compressing it inside a gravitic envelope to create -"

"A singularity," the Doctor finished, snapping his fingers. "Genius!"

"Genius, yes," the holoform Grae agreed, "But Doctor, I think it's un-"

"Unstable. Yes, yes - unstable," the Doctor finished again.

"I do wish you'd stop finishing my sentences, Doctor," Grae pouted, "It's a very annoying habit."

The Doctor laced his fingers in front of his lips and pursed them, deep in thought.

"Well what now, Doctor?" asked Tamara. The Doctor didn't reply. "Grae?" Tamara addressed the holoform, "What now?"

Grae looked over at Scarr and Frost, "We haven't much time. The Doctor and I are going to have to start work on the reactor right away. We're only going to have one throw at it -"

"One shot. What do you mean, one shot?"

"Whatever - one shot, then." Grae grinned, "Do you really want me to explain?"

"No - I suppose not. I've had more than my fill of technobabble for today, thank you."

"Well then, we'll need you to concentrate on the other side of this equation," Grae stared hard at Scarr and Frost, "All of you."

* * * * *

The spaceport was a thick plascrete cylinder with a broad level apron stretching out on one side. Behind it, a short connecting tunnel led back to the cluster of bio-domes. At the juncture with the dome was the cargo loading area, a wide arcing warehouse with a large arched doorway leading to the connector tunnel at one end and an open mouth looking out into the main dome at the other. Snow blew on the edge of a chill wind in through that open mouth. The doorway was barricaded with metal crates and plastic loading racks. Behind the barricade, a transparent door sealed the tunnel from the warehouse.

Tamara stood with Frost and Scarr around a humming powerstack that had been hurriedly ripped from the belly of the colony shuttle. It had been set dangerously high, and the unit pulsed rhythmically, by-product heat shimmering around it. The fifteen remaining Ty'lychan huddled as close to it as they could, drinking in its meagre heat. Tamara was uncomfortably aware that she looked mighty tasty to the assembled Ty'lychan right now.

A young male Ty'lychan shook his head, "It is worse than we could have ever imagined, Scarr. The colony's power source was a generator made from - from us?" A bleak look haunted his face, "We are nothing to them - we are worse than nothing to them..."

An older female looked up at Frost and Tamara, "And you are telling us not to fight them? To make peace so that we can leave this planet together?"

Tamara gritted her teeth, "I know it sounds...", she searched for a word that would fit, "...wrong, but it's the only way."

The young male slammed his fist against the floor and jumped up, "Wrong? Wrong!? These human scum have brutalised us for generations and now see us as having no value except as fuel? Wrong? They call us animals because of the way that we are - because of how we would feed. What does that make them now that we are no more than - than powerpacks? They are worse than animals. Their unholy power plant is set to destroy this planet? Let it. Let us leave now and abandon the human scum to their fate!"

"We can't, Raas," Scarr said, wearily, "None of us has any idea how to pilot the shuttlecraft. The colonists do. If we are to live, we need the humans."

The older woman spat, "Why live then, if it means we must depend on humans. We have tasted freedom - you expect us to put our chains back on again? I would rather die!"

Raas sneered, "We have a chance to kill them all - let us take it. There is nothing better the future can offer us."

"There is," said Frost, simply. She stood up and opened her armoured coat. The bulge of her belly was clearly visible. "I bear a child. A child conceived in bondage, but destined to live in freedom. That is what the future offers us - a chance to escape the pain of our past and find something new: a living freedom that is real and true - not a false freedom that ends in nothing else but our deaths." She buttoned her coat and turned to Tamara, "I am ready to negotiate with the humans, because I have a freedom worth living for. Tamara, if you, Grae and the Doctor can guarantee as Adjudicators you will not allow us to be transported back into slavery, I am willing to lay down my weapon for the future of my child."

Tamara swallowed nervously. She felt the eyes of all the Ty'lychan on her, hungry for her promise - or hungry for something more if she failed to deliver.

"I can give you that promise - on behalf of us all. We won't let you be taken as slaves again."

"Then are we all agreed?" Scarr asked the group, casting a cold eye over them. His gaze halted on Raas. "Well?"

The assembly nodded. Raas hesitated - then snarled acquiescence.

"All right then," Tamara said, breathing deeply and turning up her collar, "Let's go and face the colonists."

* * * * *

"Doctor, I said I'm sorry," said Grae plaintively.

The Doctor stroked the furred blue surface of the gothic window frame and stared at the boiling sea of lava that surrounded them and frowned.

"Probability is not a toy," he scolded her gently. "You could have been badly hurt."

Grae sighed, "It seemed a lot easier than it actually was - I won't do it again."

A herd of miniature green giraffes trundled past them on the candy-striped spiral stairs, yellow bluebells popping into existence in their wake.

The Doctor frowned, "I'm not sure that yellow goes with this blue," he murmured.

He and Grae sat in a window seat in a niche in a mediaeval castle chamber made entirely out of blue fur. The close cropped fur had an unpleasant polyester-like sheen to it. Outside, a Hadean landscape revolved around them, always spinning, but always presenting them with the same chocolate cookie mountains, Lava-flow Rivers and endless fields of lizard-headed men crucified on drinking straws. The scent of strawberries and motor oil filled the air.

"I take it this is nothing to do with you," the Doctor asked, hopefully.

Grae sighed, "No. It's Olivier."

"So this is where he got to!" the Doctor exclaimed.

Grae nodded. "It seems that Scarr pushed him not over the edge of the gantry, but into the quantum core. Olivier's will was just enough to grasp the dynamics of the self-contained singularity before it ripped him apart into mathematical conligotti," she said.

The Doctor frowned, "You meant 'confetti', I think, but the metaphor actually works better your way. He told you about his run in with the Ty'lychan, did he?"

Grae nodded, swatting away a floating swarm of chlorophyllic green plant cells that drifted across the room and out through the window, "He did - or, rather, I got him to tell me. He's completely unhinged. A genius, of course, but about as stable as a blancmange."

The Doctor grinned, "I like that one - you're getting quite good." He glanced around the room, taking in the statue made of Bolognese sauce and the cluster of disembodied arms in the corner. "His subconscious certainly seems to be a mess."

"His control of the singularity is... tenuous, to say the least," Grae remarked.

"Mm. By the way, that trick with the holoform was well done."

Grae smiled, "Thank you! It was easy enough -"

"Ah, but done with style, all the same," the Doctor grinned. "I take it you entered the core voluntarily."

Grae nodded. "I did. I knew the solution to the problem lay inside it - I thought I'd come in and prepare the ground for you."

"Heh - let me do all the real work, eh?" the Doctor asked in mock despair.

Grae smiled weakly, "You know as well as I do that you're far better at this sort of thing than I am..."

The Doctor waved depreciatively, "Oh, it's all a matter of experience. You'll get there soon enough, I'm sure." He glanced up in alarm as the furred ceiling sprouted eyes on cables that began roving around unblinkingly. "So what now?"

Grae tapped the window tracery, "He's been here longer than I have, so his grasp of the singularity is better than mine. I managed to grab onto you after he pulled you in, but I suspect he

has the others. Doctor," Grae insisted, "We have got to wrestle control of the singularity from him somehow and then dismantle the generator. This core is like a bomb waiting to go out -"

"Off."

"Off, out - who cares," Grae huffed, "My point is -"

"You're right. You're right," the Doctor nodded emphatically, "You're absolutely right. Unfortunately, I'm all out of ideas. You can't dismantle a quantum core as unstable as this one without some fairly dramatic side-effects - and we've still got two dozen assorted humans and Ty'lychan out there to think about as well. If they haven't all killed each other by now."

Grae sighed, "If only we had access to the TARDIS from here -"

A white thing - the bottom half a giant chess piece, the top half a porcelain doll carrying several multiple-bladed weapons in its monkey arms - erupted out of the blue fur floor.

"Your presence is requested, Time-travellers," it cooed.

The room faded and reassembled itself around them. Grae and the Doctor stood inside an enormous soap bubble made of newspaper. Wobbly jam stick-men who smelt of strawberries stood guard on either side of them. A fried egg Chamberlain with lobster-claws and a luscious be-lipsticked mouth quivered in front of them and pounded the floor three times with its golden mace.

"Your Greatness - I bring before you the Doctor and his companion Grae," the fried egg boomed in the tones of an American sports commentator.

An origami throne made of moving photographs unfolded itself from nowhere. Floating above it manifested a giant cube of shuddering pale flesh, stapled together with metal brads and cables. From every fleshy side of the cube there peered a fat face - the face of Dr. Francis Xai Olivier.

"Welcome all," six voices cried from the cube, "We have looked forward to your arrival with great anticipation, Doctor, ever since we were informed of your arrival by your companion, Grae."

The Doctor nodded, "I gather she - like us - was an unwelcome guest in your... domain?"

"I plucked her from beyond my little event horizon, yes. I can still perceive the world outside through my connection with the Ty'lychan gestalt that powers this quantum universe."

The Doctor smiled, "How convenient. A bit like television then, only perhaps not so dull."

The six voices laughed. The cube shook like a jelly, "You amuse me, Doctor. Of course I do not find the world beyond dull. It is my home - the reason I exist. I have learnt much here in this raw universe, but I still have ambitions to realise in the wider one outside."

"Perfecting your Dreilyn-power system? It still has a few bugs in it, you know."

"Mmm," Olivier's six faces smiled with smug satisfaction, "Oh yes, Doctor. It was flawed from the beginning, but I see it so much differently from here. I realise fully its limitations now."

"You must know you can never overcome them," the Doctor told him.

"Overcome them? Overcome them?" The Olivier-cube laughed again, long and loud. The jam stick-men and the fried egg Chamberlain laughed along with him, "I do not want to overcome them - not at all, Doctor!"

The Doctor frowned, "But the Laws of Thermodynamics can't be held at bay indefinitely, Olivier - sooner or later the universe demands that the energy you create be deducted from somewhere."

"Exactly, Doctor. Exactly. As the flaw increases, so the heat-consumption of the system will increase - exponentially. Eventually, the entropic effect will envelop the entire planet, and the energy of a whole world will be sucked away."

"But it won't stop there," the Doctor insisted, "Once that kind of entropic reaction is engendered, it will become self-sustaining! The energy demands of the system will continue to increase!"

"Naturally," said the six voices, quietly, "First McKinley's moon, then the outer planets, its asteroid belt, its gas giants, and then its useless sun will be consumed. Then the outer comet clouds, then the interstellar dark matter surrounding the system. All will be consumed. Then the next star system, and the next, and the next. Then the galaxy's heart, then the next. Then the local galactic cluster, and the next one - and so on and so on and so on. An unstoppable chill gripping the very heart of the universe itself, Doctor."

The Doctor felt his own heart grow cold. Olivier was not just unstable, he was completely unhinged.

"And all that energy sucked into here, Doctor. Into here. Into this universe. Into my universe. Into Me. Me. I. I. I. I will consume the old universe to feed this one. In the old mythologies, Doctor, the gods ate the universe so that it could be reborn. I will be God, Doctor. I am God. I. I. I."

The soap bubble became a cell, became a drop of water, became an eye, became a dinosaur-like creature, became a terrifying behemoth that strode between stars.

"I, Doctor!" Olivier bellowed from the star-monster's tentacled jaws, "I will consume the universe to create the universe! I will be not so that I will become! I. I. I! No being will ever have been more powerful than myself, no creation will be so self-creative, so fully in command of all that ever was or shall be!"

The behemoth became a world, became a solar system, became a galaxy, became a universe - stars roaring blue and red in all directions, energy pouring and flowing and multiplying.

Olivier roared. The universe spasmed, collapsing into chaos and rippling outwards into order again and again and again. Olivier's triumphant screech ripped like a tidal wave of madness through all of creation. The Doctor clapped his hands over his ears, barely able to suppress the sheer barrage of power -

Silence. No, not quite silence. Faintly, the sound of an old gramophone playing a tune. The Doctor took his hands off his ears. When I'm Sixty-Four. Perfect. He looked around. It had presumably once been an elegant room, but now the furniture was covered with white dust-sheets and the windows were shuttered. Sunlight filtered through the gaps at the edges of the shutters, dust motes playing in the thin bright beams. The gramophone stood by itself on a simple wooden table in the centre of the room. Grae stood beside it, blinking and confused.

"What happened?" she asked.

The Doctor grinned, "Old Olivier's not quite all there, I'm afraid. But I still am."

"You're in control of the singularity?" Grae asked.

The Doctor shook his head, "Not entirely. It's small, raw and flexible enough at the moment to respond to two masters - particularly if one of them is more than a bit distracted."

"Can Olivier do what he said?" Grae asked quickly, "Kill our universe to feed this one?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so," the Doctor said darkly.

"And he must be stopped," Grae said.

"Yes, he must. The problem is, we'll only have only one shot at stopping Olivier. If we mess up, it's bye-bye McKinley's world."

"To say nothing of the rest of the universe. So how do we do it?"

The Doctor lifted the needle off the gramophone, "Ever heard of the ouroubous?"

Grae shook her head.

"It's an ancient symbol of creation - the snake eating its own tail. It's a symbolic expression of a self-contained system where generation and death are all part of one, never-ending cycle. It's a fairly good model of our universe - nothing leaves, nothing gets added in."

"But Olivier's universe doesn't conform to that model, right?" asked Grae.

"Exactly. It's like a snake eating... another snake. What we need to do is take the tail of Olivier's universe and shove it right down its own throat."

"The cube," Grae said suddenly, "The cube - the quantum core."

"Exactly," the Doctor replied, "it's the three-dimensional expression of the accumulated quantum energy sucked out of the Ty'lychan. That's the tail - and, in fact, the mouth too. All we really need to do is bring that cube in here - into this universe."

"You do realise," said Grae, frowning, "That's the easy part. The hard part is going to be getting away fast enough afterwards..."

The Doctor sighed, "It always is."

* * * * *

"Time is running out, Ellen!" Tamara shouted.

Another volley of pulsar shots ricocheted off the doorframe of the central complex. Tamara ducked back behind the metal edge as sparks flew off into the snow from the impact of the energy pulse.

"Dammit," Tamara snapped, "She won't listen."

From the far side of the central complex Ellen looked over the barricade. The Ty'lychan were holed up in the main hall, sheltering behind the large open door. Wind blew snow across the shrouded buildings now half-buried. The cold bit like a knife - surely it would slow the vampires down. Ellen ducked back behind the pile of snow-choked crates. There were half a dozen of the vampires - perhaps eight, she estimated. She looked at the reserve indicator on her pulsar greedily. Plenty of power, more than enough to cope with a few shivering Ty'lychan. She smiled a thin, hungry smile. The faces of all those she had lost crowded in at the edge of her mind. At the front, Morgan's haunted eyes bore deep into hers.

Kill them all, Ellen; butcher them as they butchered us, slaughter them as they slaughtered us. Avenge us, Ellen: avenge our loss - your loss. Avenge us - avenge yourself.

She grimaced. The pain in her head subsided. A cool certainty drifted slowly across her seared psyche as her resolve hardened. Yes, she said to the dark empty presence of the dead inside her mind, I will avenge you.

Beside her, Wu Ji touched her shoulder nervously. His face was twisted with bewilderment and concern.

"Ellen?" he asked quietly, "Ellen - don't you think we should at least listen to her?"

Ellen turned to face Wu Ji slowly and precisely. Her voice was dark and red, "Listen to her? Listen to her say what?" Her eyes narrowed, "Listen to her lie, do you mean? Listen to her try and hide the murder of an entire colony? Listen to her whitewash the death of my friends, my colleagues, my husband, my daughter?" Her voice rose in pitch. Her trigger finger twitched against the stud on her pulsar. Wu Ji watched it out of the corner of his eye and swallowed.

"All I'm saying, Ellen, is that there may be more to this than we think. Morgan...", he hesitated, looking back at the small uncertain knot of colonists behind him, "Morgan hated the Ty'lychan without question, without reason. Somewhere there must be an explanation for this horror - and I...", he hesitated again, and then drew strength from some deep reserve, took a heavy breath and plunged on, "I think that this girl Tamara might be able to give us that explanation."

Ellen hissed, "Explanation? Explanation? What explanation do you need? What explanation do you want?" She raised the pulsar and jabbed it towards Wu Ji's chest, "They're vampires, murderers - nothing more, nothing less. They kill for pleasure, tearing us apart in a heartbeat to feed their depraved appetites. We don't need any explanation - we don't want any explanation. They're animals. Animals! Animals!"

She finished in a scream, the pulsar raised high above her head and pointed straight at Wu Ji's skull. Despite the searing cold, sweat trickled down his pale, clammy face.

"Ellen?" shouted Tamara. Something was wrong - more than just the fact that Ellen had been tipped over the brink into a particularly dangerous form of insanity. That was understandable, Tamara thought. But they were running out of time. Madness or no madness, she

had to get everyone to the colony's spaceport, there simply were no other options. She felt the Ty'lychan behind her stir uncomfortably.

"We are wasting time," Raas murmured, "Shoot her and let us take the others captive. They can then pilot the shuttlecraft as we direct."

Scarr shot him a dark look. Raas half-snarled and fell silent. Tamara frowned and sighed sharply. There was nothing for it - it was the direct way or nothing.

She stood up and walked out from behind the doorframe and stood, silhouetted in the dark maw of the Central Complex's main entrance. The Ty'lychan gasped and made belated attempts to drag her back under cover. Tamara hunched her shoulders forward as the snow spit against her face and started to walk forward, slowly and deliberately. A tiny, terrified voice inside her shrieked, what the hell do you think you're doing? But she kept going.

"Ellen? Ellen, can you hear me?" Tamara shouted into the whirling snow, "It's me - Tamara."

There was no reply, just vague howls from the half-hidden barricade that might have been the keening wind. "Ellen, I want you to listen to me - I want you to trust me. We have to get off this planet right now - all of us. Olivier's power experiments are going to destroy this planet, and we've got to get away."

On the other side of the barricade, Ellen stopped in mid-shriek. The hand holding the pulsar trembled. Tears stuttered down her cheeks. Inside her head, the black holes of the dead breathed their litany of hate and despair.

Wu Ji, frozen still, whispered her name, "Ellen - Ellen. Let it go... let it go..." Tears and sweat dampened his face.

Ellen didn't hear him. Faces revolved around her - laughing faces of bright living souls interspersed with the dry, cold corpses they had been reduced to. She wept in confusion. The snow swirled around in front of her, blowing into patterns and ghost-shapes. She heard her name over and over again: Ellen, Ellen..., Ellen...

She turned from Wu Ji, stretching her arms out towards the shapes: her husband, her daughter. She waved her arms, welcoming them to her, welcoming them to her desperate embrace and pulling them out of lifeless horror to life. It was all right - it was over. She had won. The laughter was her husband and her daughter - and they were coming back. Despite everything, they were coming home.

Then darkness rushed at her, snarling. But Ellen smiled - she could do this, now. With her family and the light around her once more, she could defeat the dark. She raised her pulsar and pointed it at the advancing darkness. Tamara stood directly in its line, frozen in sudden terror.

Everything happened in a single instant. Ellen's pulsar roared, as Tamara felt something cold and hard and shouting hurtle into her from behind. As she fell into the snow, she heard more pulsar fire, then silence. She stood up, slowly, not entirely convinced she wasn't dead.

The snow whirled around the final scene; Raas and Ellen, each other's victims, lay sprawled on the frozen ground, Ty'lychan and Human blood splattered together in a random rose-coloured fingerprint across the bone-pale snow.

* * * * *

Outside the room, it was dark and still. Olivier had exhausted himself. His universe was empty, awaiting the reawakening of his will. A single pool of light fluttered in the darkness. Within its glow floated the six-faced cube of metal-bound flesh that was Olivier. The eyes on every face were closed.

"He's asleep," whispered Grae.

"I would have said unconscious," the Doctor replied, "His mind isn't really in any state to take on the unlimited potential of a singularity. It's like a kid in a candy shop, eating so much they make themselves sick."

They walked closer to Olivier. The cube was vast, towering above them.

"Are you ready?" Grae asked the Doctor.

The Doctor nodded, "You?"

Grae nodded back, "Of course."

The Doctor set his jaw, "Well, I suppose there's no time like the present, then - let's go."

A wooden door materialised in front of them. A black sign with white lettering on it read Exit.

Grae smiled, and stepped through the door. The Doctor took one last glance upwards at the slumbering bulk of Olivier.

"Let's hope nothing goes wrong," he murmured, and followed Grae.

* * * * *

"Welcome back!" the hologram Grae chuckled, "I knew the Doctor could get you out."

Grae frowned at her, "Come on - we've got work to do."

The Doctor materialised behind her. He glanced at the pair of Graes, "Come on, you two - stop dawdling. We have work to do."

A pair of solid footfalls made him turn. Two white ceramic humanoids stepped out of the shadows behind the revolving quantum core, pale faces virtually featureless in the glow of the containers. Androids. Grae stopped in her tracks - "What?..."

The hologram snapped, crackled with static and shifted. The image of Grae disappeared, and the image of Olivier reappeared.

"Come, come, my dears," the Olivier hologram purred as the androids closed in, "Surely you didn't imagine I wouldn't have a trick or two up my photonic sleeve?"

* * * * *

"You know he's - you're - insane," Grae shouted. An android held her in one immovable grip, cold ceramic-encased fingers gripping her arm deep and hard. The other arm gripped the Doctor just as firmly.

The hologram Olivier chuckled, "He wants only what he's always wanted, my dear - power: raw, unadulterated power. It's why he came to McKinley's world." The hologram looked up, "You don't imagine that he intended to simply hand over his new power source to the Empire once it was up and running, do you? Of course not. He intended to use it as the ultimate bargaining chip, and the prize would have been the Imperial Throne itself. Do not underestimate his ambition one bit."

"But he's got bigger plans than that now, Olivier," the Doctor insisted, "He's planning to drain this universe to power the singularity within the quantum core! He'll destroy everything - this planet, the Empire, you, me: the whole of space and time!"

The hologram shrugged, "What of it? It's not as if I have anything to lose, is it? After all, I'm not even real." He turned his attention to the second android, "The Doctor is clearly planning to disable this facility in some way. Your orders are clear: shoot to kill anyone that attempts to damage this facility."

The second android whirred. A pulsar flicked out of a compartment on either forearm, "Understood, Doctor Olivier," it replied in a calm, measured voice.

The hologram turned back to face the Doctor and Grae, "By the way, what were you planning to do? Have your Ty'lychan friends launch a suicide mission to extract their comrades?" the hologram waved a hand at the floating Ty'lychan bodies in their metal boxes. Grae and the Doctor were silent. Olivier smiled, "I could order the android to pop your arms from their sockets - you'd answer me then." Grae still said nothing. Olivier shrugged again, "It doesn't really matter, I suppose. There's nothing you can really do without destabilising the core - and if you do that,

you simply speed up the entropic collapse." Olivier smiled a smug, holographic smile, "And given that there's nothing you can do, we might as well all just sit back and enjoy the inevitable result."

* * * * *

Twelve eyes opened unsteadily. Six voices whispered in the darkness.

"Gone?"

There was no reply.

"Gone. They have gone. Disappeared. Escaped." The six faces of Olivier smiled in the darkness of the quantum core, "But what can you do, Doctor? How can you harm me? You cannot. You cannot stop me. You cannot win. I will feed, I will grow, I will spread a chill across the universe that nothing will be able to stand against. Through my genius I will be what I was always destined to be: God - nothing more, nothing less."

The flesh cube shivered deliciously.

"But why wait? Let us begin to feed now."

* * * * *

Grae struggled against the android. "Olivier, you've got to let us go! Let us go!"

The holoform fluttered into existence in front of her, "Ah, the plaintive struggle in the few remaining minutes before destruction - how predictably touching." He smiled, "Savour what time you have left, my dear, because -"

The cavern shook, a deep throbbing that pulsed through the very core of the bedrock. The shimmering bubble surrounding the rotating cube squeezed upwards, expanding and ballooning outwards. Something manifested within, above the rotating metal cube that was the quantum core - the enormous six-faced flesh box of Dr. Francis Xai Olivier.

The android holding the Doctor and Grae took several steps backwards along the gantry. The holoform Olivier looked up at his original.

"It's me," he said in a quiet, shocked voice.

"Yes. Yes. Yes," the flesh cube roared, "It is me. I. I. I. Let it all begin now. Let it all end now. We begin now. We feed now. All life, all existence, all creation - all will feed me. Me. Me. Me. I. I. I," it babbled.

Light flickered around the cavern. The bubble of warped space-time coiled, extruding tentacles of shimmering quantum variation outwards towards the cavern walls. They touched rock, splintering it into dust, sucking its very essence inwards towards the core - towards Olivier.

"I am all. I am the universe. I and I am Me am All am existence," shrieked Olivier, six mouths flapping and babbling away insanely to itself. The walls of the cavern puckered impossibly and tore inwards, vanishing into pure energy within the bubble.

The holoform looked on in horror, "I'm insane - I've gone insane," it whispered.

The Doctor shouted above the cracking, tearing bellow of destruction, "That thing is no longer you, Olivier! Contact with the singularity has warped it into something else! It's not you!"

"No, no," the holoform wept, "It can't be true - I wouldn't have gone insane. I wouldn't have - I'm stronger, I'm stronger than that, I can be myself, I -"

The pattern and image crackled with static and shifted. Olivier faded away, and Grae replaced it.

"Android!" the holoform Grae snapped, "Computer override - release your captives!"

The Android, programmed to obey the computer behind the holoform, released the Doctor and Grae. They stumbled forward, their arms throbbing in pain.

"What do we do now?" the holoform shouted. Overhead, the Olivier-thing bellowed and gibbered and writhed, and around it the cavern collapsed into the ever-expanding grasp of the

entropic tentacles. Static electricity snapped and coiled in arcs of white lightning across the cavern. A howl of destruction ripped through the air, a chorus accompaniment to Olivier's insane shrieking.

"Olivier has opened a direct gateway between the two universes!" shouted the Doctor.

"It's now or never, Doctor!" Grae shouted back.

Suddenly, there was pulsar fire. The androids aimed upwards at the flesh cube and opened fire, following their programming to defend the installation.

"Stupid machines," The Doctor looked - then up at the Olivier thing overhead, "Wait - Grae, we can still do it!"

Grae and the holoform Grae looked. "Do what?" shouted the holoform.

"Of course! Use the androids to destabilise the space-time lock on the cube - Olivier will suck it straight into his quantum universe: the tail in the mouth!" Grae shouted at her holographic self.

"What?"

The wind around them rose to a gale as all matter around them began the inexorable journey into the core.

"The core is locked in space-time - destroy that lock and it'll be sucked in by Olivier just like everything else!" Grae bellowed.

"How?" the holoform shouted back.

"Shoot it!" Grae and the Doctor screamed in unison.

The holoform turned to the androids and shouted an order, her voice lost in the howl of the wind. But the androids heard. They turned, they aimed their pulsars -

Light erupted like an expanding ball of living flame. A great wave of pressure exploded outwards, crushing, hurling, twisting, compacting everything in its path. The Doctor and Grae were flung against the gantry handrails. They grasped for something - anything to hold on to. Around them, metal and rock shredded under the force of the explosion, spraying into the walls of the cavern with shattering secondary explosions.

Then silence, and darkness. Grae and the Doctor lay bruised and battered in a world of blackness, cold twisted metal underneath them.

A light flickered in the darkness. Grae raised her head. The holoform Olivier materialised on the edge of the twisted metal gantry, its head bowed in sorrow - and shame.

"Twenty-seven minutes," it whispered.

The Doctor staggered upright, "What?" he said, groggily.

"Twenty-seven minutes," the holoform repeated. "The core has been absorbed into itself - and I calculate you have twenty-seven minutes before the energy loop destabilises and local space-time collapses around the singularity."

"Collapses?" Grae said, puzzled.

"A black hole - the quantum core is going to collapse into a black hole," the Doctor muttered, rubbing his head.

The holoform Olivier nodded. The Doctor grabbed Grae by the arm and they staggered vaguely in the direction of a way out.

"Doctor," the holoform called out after them. The Doctor turned. "I cannot forgive Olivier for what he did, but he was not an evil man; misguided, yes - evil, no. He believed he was acting for the best."

The Doctor stared back at the holoform, "I've never been convinced that's enough," he said hoarsely.

* * * * *

The background of stars twitched, then shuddered slightly. Without warning or fanfare, the Micaur-Omega system vanished, replaced by a dark shroud of nothingness - the event horizon of a black hole.

In the nothingness of hyperspace, the shuttlecraft's primitive onboard computer registered the loss. Shrouded in the claustrophobic darkness of the bridge, Tamara wept silently for Ellen and Raas, the final, confused victims of centuries of hate and despair.

* * * * *

Two hundred and thirty thousand light years away, on a small, temperate planet shrouded in dense forests and lapped in shallow oceans, orange light filtered through the warm summer air from a sun setting over a wide, empty ocean.

Tamara raised her hand and shaded her eyes, watching the sun set over the distant horizon. She knew somehow that today was their last day. She had climbed the hills east of the village one last time, to look out over the settlement she had helped to build. Grae joined her, puffing behind her from the final clamber up the slope. She flopped into the waving grass.

"I'm too old for this," she giggled. Tamara smiled. Down in the valley, on the shores of one of the many broad estuarine lakes, squatted a cluster of domed wooden houses. Their dark shingled roofs and red log walls melted organically into the surrounding grassland and the sandy lakeshore edge. Smoke drifted lazily from stone chimneys over the settlement. Paths wound through the grass to the waterfall at the far end of the lake. There sat the newly-finished mill, its wide wheel turning under the clear, racing waters of the lake. There would be beer, and milk-wine tonight to celebrate the completion of the mill.

It didn't seem possible - it really didn't. To think that down there, working, living and celebrating in those houses were the humans and the Ty'lychan who nine months ago had been tearing at each other's throats on McKinley's world.

Grae and Tamara turned to greet Frost as she rounded the crest of the hill. She had taken the softer, easier route up - and she had brought Hope. Little Hope, full of energy and life - conceived in bondage, but born in freedom. Grae jumped up and Frost placed Hope in her open arms. She came and stood beside them both, looking out over her new home.

"It doesn't seem possible, does it?" she said.

Tamara smiled, "You read my mind." She glanced at Frost, Hope in her arms. "What do you see when you look at them?"

"The humans? I see ourselves. I see people who have loved and who have lost, who were as much victims as perpetrators. It is like looking into a mirror. I had to make a choice, Tamara - we all did. We had to choose between life and death, between a future full of nothing and a future _"

"A future full of hope," finished a voice behind them. The Doctor came and stood beside them also. He grinned and wiggled his fingers at Hope and she cooed appreciatively.

"You didn't think they could do it, did you?" Grae said quietly.

The Doctor shook his head, "No, I didn't - and I'm surprised at the results. It's never easy for the master and the slave to invent a new life together. I had my doubts - in fact, to be honest, I still do."

Frost smiled, "I hope we'll continue to surprise you, Doctor."

The five of them watched the sun dip down and glide silently below the silver arc of the horizon. Gold light flooded the world, borne across the open ocean on the warm evening wind.

"I hope so too," the Doctor said, "I hope so too..."