

THE

DOCTOR WHO

PROJECT



AGE OF THE ICE WARRIORS

Matt Tovey

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The Tournament

“Jousting?” Maggie said incredulously.

“Jousting,” the Doctor repeated, beaming. “How about it?”

“I mean, sure. It’ll make a change from that Who concert.” Amazingly, they had made it to 1970s Toronto, but had been called away by a summons from the Doctor’s good friend Carl Sagan. That had been a peculiar business, but this did seem like the right change of pace. “Seems a bit...medieval though.”

“Why? You should know by now there are alien worlds without space suits and laser guns and teleport pods? Even in one time period, there are countless Golden Ages and Dark Ages and dawns and dusks playing out across the universe. There are worlds out there far more advanced than Earth in your time, it’s true. But that’s just one side of the coin. There are also worlds far more primitive. Soma is one such a place. I should warn you – it’s decadent, it’s superstitious, it’s dangerous if you scare the locals. But it’s got its charms. The weather is spectacular, the food is gorgeous...and once a year, every year, the Kingdom of All has the most marvellous summer fayre, complete with a jousting contest. You’ll see, we’re about to materialise.”

Maggie had her doubts. “How’s things for women there? I’m not gonna be married off to a warlord or anything, am I?”

“I should say not,” the Doctor chuckled. “In the time period we’re visiting, All is ruled by a woman. Queen Jessalyn. Under her protection, you’ll be safe.”

“Under her protection?”

“That’s right. We’ll be watching the jousting from the royal podium, overlooking the lists.”

“We will?”

“We will.”

“Okay...how are you gonna wrangle that?”

“A good question,” the Doctor smirked. He rummaged around in the pocket of his coat, and withdrew a strange, brass badge which he attached to his lapel. It was a bird of prey similar to a raven, with its wings unfurled and its head turned to the left, its curved beak ending in a sharp, safety-risk point, and its eye represented by a glittering blue sapphire.

“This is the sigil of Hespys,” the Doctor said, tapping the badge and beaming at Maggie, as though bizarrely expecting her to know who that was.

She patiently pointed out that she hadn’t a clue, and he chuckled. “Of course not. Well, in the Trantsyan theology of the Kingdom of All, there’s a great wizard. A mighty warlock and wiseman, by the name of Hespys. Though absent most of the time, now and again Hespys returns to All. Just a handful of

times each century, once or twice in a lifetime. The best part is that he always looks different. He's a shape-changer, he can wear any form that he likes. Convenient for me, that is."

"Okay. But you aren't actually this guy."

"That's true. I've been mistaken for more than a few legendary figures over the centuries."

"Does he even exist?"

"I'm not sure."

"Right. But..."

"Relax, Magster. It normally works out fine. I go to Soma once a century or so for a change of pace. You can grab a decent rest there, and it's livelier than the Eye of Orion. We'll stay a while after the fayre, if you're agreeable."

"You're the boss," she shrugged. There was a sudden surge of wheezing as the TARDIS began to materialise. Goosebumps erupted on Maggie's forearms as the visceral sensation of being in two places at once – and nowhere at all – washed over her, bringing a broad grin to her face. One never got used to that feeling. How many times had she experienced it now? Countless. And yet the excitement never wore off.

The Doctor rushed through the doors as soon as they landed. They were at the edge of a thick forest, with a city sprawled before them across an empty expanse of lush green fields, the blades of grass positively sparkling beneath a sun that shone bright and swollen, larger and more golden than Earth's. Though the streets were hidden behind a wall, a gargantuan – and frankly hideous – castle loomed fat over the city, towering high over the battlements. It was comprised of seven or eight towers, some short and stout, others slender and standing greater than ten stories high, all connected by viaducts and drawbridges. The tallest tower was surely the ugliest, its turrets sprouting like unsightly growths from its cylindrical body.

"Meade Fortress," the Doctor exclaimed, throwing his arms wide. "Better known as the Needles. What do you make of it?"

"Impressive," she conceded. "But pretty ugly."

"Isn't it though?" he laughed. "It was built over more than a millennium by a series of successive architects, each one making little to no effort to maintain consistency with the work of his predecessors. The result is that. The grandest, largest, pug-ugliest structure on this side of the universe."

"Indeed," she said, shielding her eyes against the glare of the sun. Despite the intensity of the light it emitted, the temperature was pleasant, neither hot nor cold. A keen breeze blew across the landscape, rustling the leaves of the trees behind them.

"Lovely, isn't it?" the Doctor said, as though reading her mind. "Fun fact – that sun isn't strictly a sun at all. It's not a star. It functions exactly the same as a sun, but it's a part of this planet's own ecosystem; it's within the atmosphere of Soma, as opposed to beyond it."

"A private sun."

"A private sun." The Doctor grinned. "And they couldn't survive without it. Soma has no star of its own. It's a traveller. This entire world is hurtling through space at a thousand light years an hour. Not orbiting anything; just falling. Nobody knows where it started its journey; nobody knows where it will end. That's always the way with travelling planets... even the best minds find it difficult to study them. They don't stay still long enough to be studied. Ha. But anyway, enough history. I believe we have some festivities to attend."

Though the air was kept somewhat fresh by the breeze, Maggie could not help but notice a thick, sour aroma of spoiled foodstuffs and inadequate sewers as they approached the city. But the fayre was enough to distract her from that. Tents of striped canvas fluttered in the wind, while the crowds surged through

the loosely defined pathways between them. Traders advertised their wares, and Maggie found herself enticed and repulsed in equal measure. For every vendor selling luscious alien fruits, ripe and bursting with every colour, or casks of summer wine and spirits, another sold grey chunks of suspicious meat skewered over a grill, or great, sweating wheels of cheese, the stench of which put the stink of the city to shame.

"It's hot," exclaimed a small man in a grease-stained, sweat-sodden, beige and brown tunic that was originally white. He was standing outside a butcher's stall and thrust a curly green sausage on a stick under the Doctor's nose.

"So it is," the Doctor said. "What's the meat?"

"It's juicy," the vendor insisted.

"Yes, but..." the Doctor considered, and then shook his head. "You know what, never mind. Hard pass."

They hurried past as the vendor shouted insults. Maggie laughed, and they linked hands for safety; the crowd was getting thicker, rowdier, and the smell of alcohol hung in the air. Looking around, Maggie had to keep reminding herself that she was not on medieval Earth. There were little giveaways here and there – the fruits on sale were unrecognizable, several of the Somans had yellow, red or purple eyes, and one stall sold an ornate globe displaying a geography far removed from Earth's. Yet beyond that, there was little to distinguish it. She had to keep reminding herself that these were alien beings - humanoid, yes, and wearing clothes of an analogous period in Earth's history...but not human. Patrolling them, keeping an eye out for troublemakers, were men in white plate armour which dazzled in the sun. They had suits of mail underneath, with swords sheathed at their hips and kiteshields at their backs, and they wore full helms with lurid blue feathers on top.

Finally past the tents, the Doctor and Maggie found themselves thrust into the jousting stadium by the force of the crowd, filtering toward two cordoned standing pens on each side of the lists. Along the stadium were private galleries with seating, and taking pride of place in the centre of the lists was a taller and wider gallery, adorned with flags bearing an animal like a badger, albeit with a red stripe in place of a white. From a distance, Maggie could spy a handful of people sat in it: a woman in white, several armoured guards, and a few additional lords and ladies.

"That's us," the Doctor said brightly, leading Maggie towards it. He walked with his back straight and his nose in the air, as though he were the owner of all that he surveyed, leaving Maggie to trot helplessly in his wake. Ducking under the wooden posts, he came to a halt at the foot of the royal gallery and delivered a sweeping bow to the woman in white, throwing Maggie a look to indicate she ought to do the same. She offered a clumsy curtsy and felt like a fool.

"Your Majesty!" the Doctor exclaimed. "A great honour to meet you."

One of the men in armour – intense, with wiry black hair and piercing royal blue eyes, obviously important to judge by the gold trim on his plate – made his way down from the gallery, his hand covering the hilt of his sword.

"And you are?" he demanded. His thin lips curled in a suspicious frown.

"It's me," the Doctor said, showing him the brass sigil on his breast. "I am Lord Hespys, and I have come to call on the realm once again. I would sit with the Queen if she would allow it. I'd like to enjoy the sport with her."

"Would you?" he said. He nodded at Maggie. "And her?"

"My apprentice. Weitzar."

"Hi," Maggie said meekly, uncomfortable under his scrutinising gaze. It was as though he were undressing her with his eyes, though not in a bawdy way; rather as though assessing what threat she posed, what weapons she might have concealed.

“You are not the first to falsely claim that title,” he told the Doctor. “You will not be the last. You say you are Lord Hespys; I counter you are at best a charlatan, at worst an assassin. Prove yourself, as only Hespys could.”

The Doctor tapped the badge on his shirt once, twice, three times. Incredibly, the brass bird stretched its wings and turned its head briefly, the sapphire eye vanishing momentarily as though it had blinked. Stretching its neck and opening its beak, it gave an audible caw, before freezing in its original position.

The guard’s frown faltered, and there was applause from up in the gallery. It was the woman in white.

“Captain Marter, that’s good enough for me. Bring them up. Search them first if it would set your mind at rest.”

“It would,” Marter said, seizing the Doctor and subjecting him to an unduly rough pat down, before grudgingly allowing him into the gallery. He was a lot gentler with Maggie, but even then she was left with the impression that he was a man of great strength. Satisfied, he allowed her up into the seats, and directed her between the Doctor and the woman in white – Queen Jessalyn, Maggie was sure.

“Your Majesty,” she muttered. The queen looked to be in her mid-twenties by human standards. She had dark curls, half-hidden beneath a white feather hat. Her petticoats were white. Her leather gloves were white. White boots poked out beneath the hem of her white skirts. A penchant for white, it seemed. She was a pretty thing, with a sweet round face and comically round, acid-green eyes, and buckteeth that were just small enough to be cute, that slight imperfection lending her greater beauty, making her a real, imperfect person instead of some pristine, fleshy doll.

“Weitzar, was it?” Jessalyn said. “Unusual name. And unusual dress sense, to be frank. Wherever did Lord Hespys find you?”

Maggie squirmed, feeling a trifle underdressed in her off-shoulder blue top and jeans. “Um...”

“Jussier, on the eastern continent,” the Doctor said promptly. “That’s the way they dress over there. Peculiar, I know.”

“Your own outfit isn’t so normal,” said the young, rat-faced man on Jessalyn’s other side. He wore a black smock with a frilly round collar, and knee-length black boots. He didn’t look to be enjoying the festivities one bit. “Where is your mail? Your jerkin? Your tunic?” he added, gesturing disappointedly at the Doctor’s thin collarless Henley shirt, black rope trousers, and lace-up boots.

“My husband,” Jessalyn said shortly, nodding over her shoulder at him. “Prince Morgan Valery, the Royal Consort.”

“Pleased to meet you,” the Doctor said, to which Morgan did not reply. Maggie and the Doctor exchanged a smirk, and Maggie had the distinct impression that Morgan and Jessalyn’s was an arranged marriage. There may have been love between them at some stage, but it had withered with age, like spoiled fruit on the vine.

“I beg your pardon,” said a feeble voice behind them. An old woman in black robes leaned forwards to shake the Doctor’s hand. She had flowing white hair and notably poor teeth.

“Lady Parrott,” Jessalyn said. “My Prime Minister.”

“Charmed,” the Doctor said airily, with all the grace and flattery of a visiting dignitary. If Maggie hadn’t known it to be a lie, she’d have been totally sold by his performance.

“Oh look!” Jessalyn said. “The first competitors!”

From tents at opposite ends of the lists, two knights emerged on horseback. One’s gleaming plate armour was tinged blue, with an intricate feather-topped helm. He rode a small black mare. The other wore rusted chunks of studded iron with a square helmet like an upturned dustbin. He was the larger man and his warhorse dwarfed the mount of his adversary.

Both men stopped before the royal podium and opened their visors, smiling at the queen and bobbing their heads. Jessalyn raised a gloved hand in acknowledgement, her smile bringing out her weirdly

endearing buckteeth. The Prince Consort nodded sullenly, lounging back with his feet propped up on the vacant seat in front of him. Maggie, unsure of what she ought to do, smiled uncertainly at the knights. The Doctor grinned down at them and waved enthusiastically.

“Lord Guy of the Duggan Estates has entered the lists,” bellowed an announcer, to which the big man raised his hand. “He duels our honoured guest, Lord Luxley Farrow of Callows Island.”

The knights parted, galloping towards opposite ends of the list, where each accepted their lance from a squire. An eager hush fell over the stadium.

“On your go, Your Majesty,” Captain Marter muttered.

“I know,” Jessalyn said mischievously. “I like to build suspense a little first.”

Finally, she got to her feet and stuck her left arm in the air, hand open and fingers spread apart. Maggie felt self-conscious; the eyes of the entire stadium were upon their podium. Her grin widening, Jessalyn waited a moment longer before clenching her fist tight and resuming her seat.

Low thudding reverberated in Maggie’s eardrums as the knights spurred their horses on and galloped down the lists at each other, separated by the wooden fence, their lances erect and aimed at each other. The low rumble of cheering grew ear-splitting as they closed in. Closer...closer...

There was an almighty clash of oak and steel as lance struck armour, the two knights galloping on down the lists.

“Point to Lord Duggan,” shrieked the announcer. The knights turned around for a second pass. Maggie hadn’t been able to work out how or why Lord Duggan had won the first round, but there could be no doubting his victory on that second run. She couldn’t help but let out a little scream as his lance caught Farrow dead centre in the chest and sent him flying, his own lance soaring through the air and landing feet away. He landed painfully on his back with a metallic clatter, and feebly raised his arm.

“He’ll be fine,” the Doctor assured Maggie. “See Duggan’s lance? Notice how it’s splintered? They’re designed to disintegrate on impact like that, otherwise the blows could indeed be fatal.”

Duggan dismounted and rushed over to help Farrow to his feet. They clasped forearms, and Farrow clapped Duggan on the shoulder, evidently offering his congratulations. Their chivalry made Maggie smile; they truly were like two knights out of a fairy story. They walked from the lists chatting amicably and were replaced immediately by the next two competitors: Sir Iain Barlow of Dynbury and – to the gasps and audible “ooooo” of the crowd – Lady Mallorie Yudore of Chelmos and Fambridge.

Possibly it was the indignity of being beaten by a girl, but Barlow took his defeat with none of Farrow’s good grace. Unseated on the first pass, he wrenched off his helmet and spat in the dirt, storming from the lists to jeers and catcalls. Mallorie turned to the royal podium and sunk into a flourishing curtsy. Jessalyn was on her feet and screaming with delight as she returned to her tent to raucous applause.

Nobody lost his saddle on the third match, and the victor was decided by points alone. The fourth match was settled on third pass, where one of the competitors went flying from the saddle, landing painfully on the wooden fence, which splintered under his weight.

As he was helped from the lists by his victorious opponent, the two of them limping slowly towards the tent, Maggie first registered the screaming.

She didn’t think anything of it. The tournament was rowdy and boisterous, and full of people stewed on beer, mead, and wine—and in many cases all three. The market was still in full swing. Noise and hijinks were only to be expected.

And yet when she listened – *really* listened – she couldn’t help but think that the screaming didn’t sound very merry after all.

It sounded scared.

“Doctor?” she murmured.

“I know.” He was rigid in his chair, like a cat preparing to pounce. His wide eyes were scanning the stadium for the source of the trouble. Maggie did the same, and though she couldn’t identify it, she saw more people looking anxiously around and wondering what was happening.

“It’s coming from the market,” the Doctor said. By then Jessalyn and the Prince Consort had noticed too, as had Captain Marter, who with a sinister, metallic hiss, slipped his sword from its sheath.

“Your Majesties, please stay here,” he told Jessalyn and Morgan. “Copper, Wynn, Draynor – protect them.” He turned to the Doctor. “Warlock. With me.”

“Right,” the Doctor said. “Mag... Weitzar, you stay here with Her Majesty.”

“Fat chance,” Maggie said, getting to her feet and following the Doctor and Marter from the gallery.

“Fall in!” Marter bellowed, racing across the lists with astonishing speed for one so heavily armoured. “Guards, watchmen, competitors – on me.”

Dozens of men in white formed up behind Marter, their armour clattering like so many tins of baked beans in a washing machine. From the competitor’s tents, knights spilled out like ants from a nest, clutching swords, lances, and spears.

They emerged from the stadium straight into a nightmare.

The market had been torn apart, tents laying in rags and bodies trampled into the dirt by the stampeding crowd climbing over itself in a lethal crush. Spilled ale and squashed food splattered the scene, and copious amounts of what looked horribly like blood.

The source of their terror was visible from the other end of the market. The fact they could be seen over the heads of the terrified was a testament to their height. They had to be greater than eight feet tall. They wore green helmets, with what appeared to be red visors covering their eyes. Their mouths, visible through gaps in the helmet, were surrounded by green scaled skin. Great clumps of matted fur, like seaweed, sprouted from the gaps in the armour.

“It can’t be...” the Doctor gasped, his eyes wide with fright. “Ice Warriors ...”

They were shooting, killing people wholesale. Though their armour looked vaguely medieval (though too reptilian), they did not wield swords or shields, nor bows and arrows, like the hapless guards trying in vain to halt their advance and being shot down in droves for their courage. They had lasers of some description built into their wrists, and the soldiers’ plate armour offered no defence.

“Have at them!” Marter cried, raising his sword. Maggie shrieked as his makeshift army charged, weapons raised. Many got nowhere close, shot down amidst the wreckage of the market and joining the dead among the debris of what had been a joyous day. Among them, Maggie saw Lady Mallorie take a shot directly in the chest. Her legs folded in on themselves and she collapsed on top of the remains of a tent, killed instantly. Leading the charge, Marter was under constant fire, but his kite shield was up, and his reflexes deflected each beam that came at him.

“There’s nothing we can do,” the Doctor told Maggie. “We’ve got to get out of here.”

And then the entire world went white, and an intense, burning warmth, hotter than the sun, hit Maggie. The hairs on her arms stood erect, and gooseflesh erupted not only on her forearms, but revoltingly over her whole body. It was followed in short order by a tingling all over her body, then a burning ache, and then downright agony gnawing to the deepest marrow of her every bone. For a frightful moment she couldn’t see, couldn’t hear – the white light had faded, but only blackness replaced it. Sight and hearing throbbed back into being, and for the briefest moment of time Maggie knew – understood – that she had just been shot by one of the green knights’ lasers.

She had just enough time to be terrified because she knew what happened next.

She felt herself falling, the world spinning and darkening around her once again, and then everything was gone.

The Needles

"I'm sorry," Queen Jessalyn told him. Her eyes were red and watery with tears, the bloodshot whites in stark contrast with the acid green irises.

The Doctor shook his head. Mistake. The motion sent his throbbing brain on fire, shooting agony thundering through his skull. The sickly-coloured council chamber – a round room at the top of one of the towers, with blue carpet and a starscape painted on the ceiling – was spinning nauseatingly around him. There were few worse hangovers than those caused by sonic weapons.

"It's not your fault." He quivered, his empty stomach contracting, causing waves of pain and nausea. Though the room was perfectly warm, he couldn't stop shivering; he sat wrapped in a blanket, rocking back and forth at the table with Jessalyn and her councillors, terribly aware that he looked awfully far from the mighty wizard he was pretending to be. In pots in the corners of the chamber sat plump, orange and purple cacti which gave off a cloying flowery aroma, compounding his nausea.

"It appears the weapons were set to stun," he said shakily. "Or at least, set to such a strength that they only killed at close range. In any case...we survived."

"Many did," Marter said. "Yet we waded through the dead and found no living women. Only men. And there are women unaccounted for, several of them."

"Including my friend," the Doctor growled. "We went down together; I remember that much. We were hand in hand, running."

"Then they've taken Weitzar with the other women," said Parrott. "And alas – Your Majesty, my lords – this is what brings us on to the gravest of news. It pains me to report that our northern neighbours have claimed responsibility for today's abhorrent events. And north is where the women will have gone."

"What's north?" the Doctor demanded.

"The Kingdom of Sal'jik," Parrott spat, as though the words themselves were sour. "Ruled by King Yaevar. A foul creature; a foul realm."

"The northerners are Mazmorian," piped up one of the councillors. The council numbered about ten, all apart from Jessalyn, Morgan and Marter elderly. "War is their way of life."

"But why would they do it?" Jessalyn cried desperately. "We've lived at peace with them for decades..."

"With respect, Your Majesty, I beg to differ," Marter said firmly. "Our relations have always been hostile with only the briefest interludes of stalemate ceasing the conflict. And Yaevar is no longer a young man. Near the end of his life, past the peak of his powers ... I shouldn't like to speculate, but one suspects

“now or never” may be his thinking: a last, great crusade against the peaceful people of a Trantsyan land. Something for history to remember him by. Sending those creatures to our tournament, taking the women hostage...that’s his way of throwing the gauntlet down, daring us to retaliate. More attacks will follow. They will invade. They will march as far south as they can get away with, burning everything in their path. They will push as far as Ylymm if they aren’t stopped.”

Jessalyn sobbed. The Doctor longed to reach out and comfort her, but thought better of it. It didn’t seem appropriate when her husband stared ahead in stony silence and the rest of the council looked awkwardly away. But he did pity her. She might have been a woman in age, but one raised in the lap of absolute luxury. She’d never endured, she’d never wanted, she’d never had cause to mature. And there she sat, thrust into a position of the utmost power and responsibility without a clue how to deal with it. To her credit, she recovered quickly. Pulling a lace handkerchief from her sleeve, she dabbed her eyes and blew her nose, and then in a quiet, miserable, yet steady voice, said, “Then what would you advise?”

“I advise war,” Marter said simply. “Your Majesty, let me organise a counterstrike. Let me write to the lords, knights and landowners of the realm on your behalf. We’ll assemble a mighty army here in Ylymm, and we’ll march north.”

“Concur,” Parrott said at once, thumping the table with her bony fist.

“Aye,” Morgan growled. The rest of the council murmured their assent.

The Doctor felt many conflicting impulses. On the one hand, he wanted to join Marter so he could venture north and rescue Maggie, and secondarily work out how the Ice Warriors penetrated the many insuperable barriers that kept Soma hurtling through space without harming its inhabitants.

He remembered, too, the ethos of his first incarnation, taking a back seat and observing—in this case the best way to understand the situation.

Ordinarily he would have used the TARDIS, but alas that wouldn’t work on Soma: the physical and gravitational forces involved made moving it within the planet’s atmosphere impossible. It would burn out the navigational circuits. Even hopping out and back in wouldn’t help. One could only make a safe landing once every few centuries.

“Will you join us, Hespys?” Marter asked, grudgingly. “Your skills as a wizard will be an invaluable asset, no doubt.” The Doctor didn’t like the way he said it, nor the captain’s cold, knowing look.

“No doubt,” he said calmly, looking Marter in the eye. “Yes - I will come.”

“For you to march out, and help us so,” one of the councillors said, looking at him with admiration. “I can only imagine your apprentice means an awful lot to you.”

“She does,” the Doctor agreed. He hesitated. He didn’t want to ask the next question, but he had no choice. He had to know.

“In the meantime,” he murmured. “Will she be all right? This Yaevar – are there any grounds, any at all, to hope that he might keep his prisoners well?”

The men looked away, and a heavy silence fell, broken only when Parrott – as though unable to bear it a moment longer – quietly said, “I think... that the preparations for the journey north should begin without delay.”

Yaevar

Every morning, she woke in hope.

Every night, she lay down to sleep in crushing disappointment.

Where was he? Why didn't he come? Hour after hour they were marched in chains through field and valley, enduring rugged terrain and lashing torrents of rain, with those monsters, those Ice Warriors, flanking them on all sides, beating any prisoner who stumbled and fell. Some did not rise. She watched women die daily, watched their party of fifty grow smaller, the dead left behind on the side of the road, no doubt picked over by the alien birds circling patiently overhead.

Hour after hour she listened out for that wheezing groan, that ripple in the air, that pulsing light that preceded the shape of a blue box materialising. The sound of rescue. The sound of freedom. The sound of hope.

And hour after hour it didn't come. She started to fear the worst. She'd survived the blast, yes...but what if he hadn't? What if the Doctor had taken the brunt of it, what if he'd somehow sacrificed himself so that she might live? It was the sort of thing he would do. And she couldn't bear it. She couldn't bear not knowing, she couldn't bear the thought he might never come.

She'd all but given up hope by the time they passed through the last of the arable farmland, bountiful flatlands giving way to covered woods and forest, and a foul, swampy region where the Ice Warriors bade them halt at a castle called the Mud Gate. It was a handsome keep in spite of its name, square and built of beige brick, with a turret in each corner on which flags fluttered in the wind. The mire behind was hidden behind a large wall that ran a few hundred yards in each direction, ensuring that none could access the safe road through the mud. Here was a settlement they could not avoid.

They were lined up at the drawbridge, where a man in rusted mail rode out to greet them.

"His Majesty King Yaevar commands...passage for his servants and captives," one of the Ice Warriors hissed. Their voices were high-pitched gasps, painful to listen to, as though every word caused them terrible agony. The Ice Warrior paused to suck in a gassy lungful of air. *"Lord Tadzu...must comply."*

"His lordship guards these lands in the name of Queen Jessalyn," was the guard's response. *"You are enemy agents, and those women your captives. Lord Tadzu should slay you where you stand and free them."*

"And yet," said a silky voice from above. Maggie and the other women craned their necks and saw a peculiar figure in pied silk robes of white and green directly above the portcullis. Tadzu, she presumed. He leaned over the parapet with his gloved hands resting on the stone. Even from a distance, he deeply unnerved Maggie. White hair fluttered wildly in the wind, yet his face was that of one in his twenties. His

eyes glowed yellow in the semi-light; Maggie noticed some fellow captives had similar eyes. “We cannot fight such creatures without dooming ourselves, and the women too. They shall pass. I command it.”

And so Maggie and the others were led through the courtyard and out the other side, where they spent two, horrific days traversing a region as foul as any she’d visited in her time with the Doctor: the air dense and close and suffocating, swamp-trees with acid green leaves loomed on all sides, whilst off the narrow road, thick pools of rancid mud bubbled in the pungent, clammy air. Noxious swamp gases rose formed a greenish canopy through which the sun could not shine, though beneath which humidity built to uncomfortable levels. She and the women were plagued by vicious headaches and streaming eyes, and the Ice Warriors moved even more sluggishly than normal, spoke far less, and became crueller.

Clear of the swamps and marching into the windswept hills and valleys that lay to the north of them, they felt the temperature decline drastically. The night air took on a distinct bite so that when Maggie woke from thin fur sheets, in whatever ditch they’d laid camp in, her bones ached, her hands red raw and chapped, knuckles splitting and bleeding with every clench of her fists. The Ice Warriors – clearly now in their element – marched them harder and faster. By that stage of course, the women were at their weakest and succumbed to hunger and exhaustion faster. There was no doubt in Maggie’s mind that pre-Doctor she’d have died right along with them, probably within the first day or two of the march. She was not young, and before her travels had never been particularly fit.

The journey took a week, all told. Finally, their path began to incline, rising into the mountains, where the first snows lined their route. The thicker furs were nowhere near good enough to ward off the cold. The air was thin and bitter, and she developed a racking cough, her ribs throbbing sharply, her nose streaming endlessly, her upper lip sore and swollen. Her clothes – the same clothes she’d had on since the day of the tournament – were sodden rags clinging to her diminishing frame, her top greyed and hopelessly creased, her jeans splattered and caked with mud, her boots more filth than leather.

For all that they were deadly and for all that she suffered, however, she could not deny the beauty of the mountains. By night it was never truly dark, the brilliant, swollen moon always full, reflecting off the craggy peaks and valleys thick with untouched snow. And though the sun failed to convey much heat by day, it gave ample light, the landscape dazzling like a diamond, white snow bleached almost painfully whiter.

She knew that the end of the march was unlikely to bring any respite, but it was a relief just the same. The immaculate city was nestled at the foot of a mountain. They walked through a maze of cobbled streets, the salt underfoot keeping the roads and pavements devoid of snow and ice. The homes and establishments were mostly squat and close and built of thick, insulating stone, to retain heat. Smoke billowed from a thousand chimneys, while steam poured up from the wells and fountains on the street corners. Either they were on top of a hot, volcanic spring, or else these people knew basic plumbing and heating. She was struck by how clean it all was, its silent citizens well groomed, as they stood to the sides and allowed the Ice Warriors and their prisoners to pass: a far cry from the rowdy, drunken rabble in Ylymm.

They were taken to a tall, black-brick tower with a moat of steaming hot water. Craning her neck, Maggie could make out some sort of sigil cast in gold on the battlements high overhead. It was like the letter W, albeit with the middle rise less pronounced. As to what it represented, she hadn’t an inkling. The Doctor would know, of course...she thought of him then and longed for him, and dared to hope that she might hear, suddenly, that wonderful wheezing, as she was led under the portcullis and into the courtyard, through a door and into the dungeons. The door slammed shut behind them. There was no wheezing.

Of the fifty or so who’d set off from Ylymm, only twelve women were left alive. Those twelve, including Maggie, were bundled roughly into a barred cell. All but one of the Ice Warriors ambled from the dungeons immediately, leaving the women alone with a single guard. The dungeons were dark, and the walls were dripping with damp, the air fetid and somehow colder than the outside.

Talking had been prohibited on the march, with the exception of answering a direct question from an Ice Warrior. It was only now that Maggie could speak freely.

"Where are we?" she asked her companions, her voice croaky and alien to her through lack of use. "Why have they brought us here?"

"To marry," one of the women said bleakly. She was young and raven-haired and would have been very pretty on the day they were taken. "Or to die. We'll be paraded through the streets, sold to the highest bidder, to live and die as Mazmoriam wives. Those that can't be sold off will be killed; sacrificed to appease Mazmoriam. There are several festivals in the Mazmoriam religion, and the nature of the sacrifice depends on the occasion. Sometimes it'll be burning. Sometimes it'll be drowning."

"There's one where they take your eyes," another woman, older, said. "Rip them out, so they do, and sew them onto a monolith. If you survive that, you get to live. Whether you'd want to live after that is a separate question."

"In short," mumbled another. "There are no happy endings. Not for us. The fortunate among us are the ones lying dead on the roadside between here and Ylymm."

Maggie could have burst into tears, breaking down, curling up on the floor, and smashing her head against the stone to lose consciousness. Again, pre-Doctor, she might have precisely done that. But it wouldn't accomplish a great deal. She needed to keep faith. The Doctor *was* coming, of course he was. She survived the blast, and he had too. He *had*. And he *would* come. It was up to her to be alive when he did.

It took all her strength to get back to her feet and limp towards the bars of the cell, stepping over several of her fellow prisoners who lay exhausted over the flagstones. She rapped on the bars.

"Guard," she demanded.

There was a sinister rhythmic hiss as the Ice Warrior slowly turned its cumbersome bulk to face her. Behind the red lenses in the eyeholes, she saw lizard-like pupils glowing. The scaly green flesh of its skin flexed, and it opened its mouth only so far, the tips of its black teeth poking out between green lips.

"*You will be...silent,*" it wheezed. "*Food and water...are...coming.*"

"Good," Maggie replied. "But may I ask you a question?"

"No."

"How dare you call yourself warrior?" she said, her heart racing. "What's your name?"

It took several wheezing breaths before answering. "*Ssal.*"

"Well, Ssal. What kind of warrior butchers helpless peasants, drags a bunch of women across a country in chains, cutting them down where they fall? You are a soldier without honour. A disgrace. And I demand to speak to your leader."

Enraging him so seemed like a surefire way *not* to stay alive until the Doctor arrived, but she'd seen him do it countless times. Do whatever it takes to get to someone in authority, and then charm them. The Ice Warrior thumped the bars. It had thick pincers, not unlike the claws of a lobster. The clang as it struck the steel made everyone in the cell back away, as though keen to prove that they were in no way associated with Maggie.

Too late, it crossed her mind that what worked for the Doctor may not apply to her. The Ice Warrior clenched its pincers and made for the door of the cell.

Then –

"No."

The Ice Warrior stopped. Maggie stared around, confused, and saw a figure standing in the shadows at the foot of the stairs. A large man, judging by the bulky silhouette. Very large.

"Bring her," he told Ssal. His voice was a deep, booming burr, silky smooth and pleasant to the ear.

Ssal let out a reptilian hiss of disappointment but inclined his head just the same. "*Yes...Majesty.*"

Stepping out into the courtyard, wincing at the sudden change of light, Maggie was ushered through a large set of double doors at the front of the tower, and then shown directly through another set into a large entrance hall, its ceiling rafters more than thirty feet overhead. Ssal shoved her into a long chamber with several tables and bench seats; there was a dais with a small table at its head.

The man from the dungeons was there. He looked about six foot three, possibly six foot four. He was twice the width of a normal man, but most of that bulk was muscle. His arms bulged beneath his black leather tunic. His black hair was long and wild, his goatee flecked with strands of grey. Maggie would put him somewhere between fifty and sixty. He stood behind his chair, his hands on its backrest, looking at her for a long, excruciatingly tense moment. Yet despite her fear, she detected a certain tenderness about him; his eyes were a calming ocean-blue, and the look he gave her was one of curiosity, not hatred.

"Thank you Ssal," he said, his booming voice echoing across the room. "Leave us."

The Ice Warrior bowed and turned clumsily towards the exit. Maggie watched him go, and only once the doors slammed shut did the man finally address her.

"Well, sit," he said, gesturing towards a chair. "Are you hungry?"

"Starving," she admitted.

"We'll deal with that presently," he said, sitting down opposite her. "Do you know who I am?"

"Someone important," she said. "Beyond that, no."

He scoffed. "Of course you do. There isn't a child in All who doesn't know my name. I am King Yaevar. You will address me as that. Or as Your Majesty. You will never speak to me as you spoke to Ssal just now. But your words did stir me. And I admire your courage. Remarkable creatures, the Ice Warriors. But heavy-handed. They should have treated you better on the road."

"I assume they're under your command? You sent them to the tournament?"

"Yes."

"You instructed them to slaughter innocents, to kidnap people."

"Yes. I specifically commanded the womenfolk be spared, where possible. You speak as though I ought to be ashamed of my actions?"

"You should be! Your Majesty, I'm sorry, but...but..."

"Speak your mind," he insisted. "If you will do so politely."

"Well, if you have to have it explained why doing such things is wrong, then there's really no point trying."

Yaevar gave her a thin smile. "Are you Trantsyan? The people of All mostly are."

"No. I'm not from All."

"Hmm. Well, I am Mazmorian. What do you know of our religion?"

"Nothing at all."

"Then let me explain," he said. "We Mazmorians love and respect the natural order of things. The Trantsyan way is to forever chase peace, to forever strive for change. They dream of a world they think they ought to have, as opposed to loving the one they have. But not us. It is our belief that our world is perfect as it is. That all in nature is as it should be. And the world is one of blood, and war, and chaos. Always has been, always will be. Of the strong thriving and the weak crumbling to dust. Of expansion and conquest. The beasts of the forest feast on each other. The runt of the litter is left out in the cold to die, that the others might suckle and thrive. The way of things is to kill or be killed. This is the truth of Soma. And therefore, it is good. It is perfect. The attack on the tournament was a challenge, a provocation. And it worked. Already, my spies report a great army amassing in Ylymm, from all over the country. They will march north. We will march south. And glorious battle will be done, and to the victor will go the spoils. Naturally, I intend that the victory shall be ours. I will tear down their temples, I will enslave their women. I will slaughter all those who will not bend the knee. To you that is distasteful. To me, that is duty. I am an ambassador of a world of bloodshed. I live by those standards."

What could be said in response to that? Instead, keen to change the subject, Maggie brought up a more pressing concern.

“What happens to me, then? And the others?”

“A good question,” Yaevar said. “What do you *want* to happen to you?”

“I wasn’t under the impression I had any say.”

“You could ask. Try me.”

“You could feed us, clothe us, and send us with warm furs and enough supplies safely back to Ylymm.”

He smiled. “That, I couldn’t do.”

“I thought not.”

“But you don’t necessarily need to come to any harm. Those who are willing shall be married. Those who will not – or those whose childbearing years are behind them – must join one of the many nunneries scattered about these mountains.”

She blinked. “Is that it?”

“Yes,” he said. “Those who will not comply will be killed, of course. But I don’t wish that to happen.”

“The others told me you did sacrifices...awful things...”

“Hah,” he said. “Typical childish ignorance. Some sects of Mazmorianism practice human sacrifice. But we are not primitives here, you know. You’ve seen our city.”

“I have.”

He considered her for a moment, frowning as though she were a puzzle he was trying to decipher. “What’s your name?”

She raised her eyebrows. “Margaret Weitz. Maggie.”

“Well, Margaret Weitz. Maggie. I happen to find you attractive. Oh, don’t look at me like that. I loved my late wife too much to ever contemplate another in that way. But just the same, it would be nice to have a pleasing face, better still one with a sharp mind behind it. Why not stay with me and serve as cupbearer? I should be glad to have you.”

She frowned. It was framed as an invitation, but she felt the need to clarify. “I *can* say no?”

“You can,” he said. “And a nunnery will await if you do, or indeed death if you will not agree to that. But it would displease me to kill you.”

Maggie thought about it, but not for long. Staying close to Yaevar was as close to safe as she was likely to get. And if they shipped her off to some glacial nunnery halfway up the mountain, surely rescue would be even less likely...

“I’ll serve,” she said.

Yaevar nodded. “Good. So be it. Then in no particular order, might I suggest you bathe, change into something less foul, and report to the kitchens. Tell them to serve you a hot meal. I will arrange food for the others. After that, you can serve me my dinner. I eat here with my closest advisors, and you will wait on us. And after that...”

“Yes?”

“After that, preparations will commence immediately. I will lead our campaign in the south, and as my cupbearer you will accompany us.”

“Okay,” Maggie said, uncertain if she ought to be happy. On the one hand, south was the direction the Doctor was in, and thus was the best way to go. On the other hand, that didn’t fully negate the terror in the pit of her stomach, as she contemplated embarking on some medieval campaign of brutality with this man, and the grotesque Ice Warriors who served him.

Glowe

The weather on Soma could be highly unpredictable, and it wasn't long before the Doctor got a taste of that. The first two days of their march out of Ylymm were plagued with grey skies threatening rain, and Marter forever fretting that a downpour would turn the roads to slush. But on the third day the clouds cleared, giving way to brilliant blue skies and golden sun bearing down warm and intense. And then came heat like the Doctor had seldom experienced, the temperature pushing fifty Celsius by day and twenty-five by night. Such heatwaves were fairly common in the southern parts of the continent, and the Doctor seethed. If only it had arrived a few days before, the Ice Warriors would have been paralysed, Marter's army could have caught up, and he could have rescued Maggie. They could have been on the other side of the universe by now.

The temperatures remained stubbornly high by the eighth day. The only thing worse than riding for days on end across open fields beneath a scorching sun was doing so wearing a chainmail byrnie and a heavy studded gambeson. Whilst the Doctor could regulate his body temperature better than most, the heat was utterly excruciating. His eyes stung constantly with sweat. His arm ached, so frequently was it flying to his forehead to mop his streaming brow. Beneath the gambeson and mail, his thin cotton shirt clung to his chest like a damp cloth. He had a constant thirst which no amount of water (foul tasting, from a leather waterskin) could quench. His head throbbed incessantly from a combination of dehydration and squinting against the overpowering glare of that merciless, golden sun.

He rode beside Captain Marter at the head of the army. Stretching behind them, lords and nobles from all over the kingdom rode resplendent in their assorted colours and armours, their banners displaying an array of sigils. Each lord commanded a garrison of peasants. Whilst the gentry had horses—litters in some instances—these peasants followed on foot, wearing light leather and clutching rusted weapons they barely knew how to swing. Each night came reports of thieving and fighting, disease, drunken disobedience, even killing. Shadowing the army were hordes of robbers and highwaymen, prostitutes and black marketeers keen to sell food and ale at extortionate prices to the hungry, heat-exhausted masses.

"There's no discipline," one of the lords grumbled one night in the command tent, where the Doctor, Marter and his most senior men dined on the honey-roasted meat of one of Soma's many beasts, swilled down by a fine wine made from red lialaberries, one of the planet's sweetest, most succulent delicacies.

"The troops are eating pottage for the most part. Half of them are too weak to march. It's the heat, sir. It couldn't have come at a worse time. We've got men collapsing on the roadside, dying. The rest fight amongst themselves. Soldiers desert in scores, and we can only hang so many."

“Dreadful,” Marter said, between mouthfuls of luscious, honeyed meat. “I don’t blame the peasants for poor discipline. I blame those who command them.”

“But what can we do?” the lord insisted. He was a young man with a distinctive nasal whine that seemed perfectly tuned to irritate. Though the Doctor tried to remain above all this, he could not deny a rising annoyance from listening to him. Perhaps he was being infected with the simmering aggression of these people.

“You’ll have some of my men,” Marter said. “For the night. Let’s see if they can’t instil some order. But thereafter, you’ll have to manage things yourselves. And if you aren’t able, perhaps we’ll have to find somebody else.”

He bowed stiffly and left. Marter watched him go with a shake of his head.

Marter said matter-of-factly: “Mark my words, with craven green fools like that in charge, something bad will happen.”

Nothing, however, could have prepared the Doctor for just how bad that reckoning would be.

“The northern savages and their demons have declared war on us,” Marter told the assembled crowd. The village of Glowe was little more than a selection of mud huts and thatched cottages, sandwiched between flat fields on which an orange, corn-like crop swayed in the hot breeze. There was a tavern, a Trantsyan temple, and a small market in the village square with a smattering of tradespeople.

“These lands are our lands,” Marter told the villagers gravely. “And these barbarians are not coming simply to take your lands, oh no. They are coming for *you*. For those who would survive their onslaught, only slavery awaits. Will you be slain in your own homes?”

“We will not!” the villagers cried.

“Will you be slaves?”

“We will not!”

“Will you fight to your last breath, for your lands, for Trantys, for Jessalyn, our queen?”

“We will!”

“Men of fighting age, report to any of my sergeants by dusk,” Marter said. “Those who can pick up a sword, must. And tonight, I pray, extend us your hospitality.”

“What are you doing?” the Doctor cried, stepping out of the furnace-like tavern to see a makeshift gallows in the market square, nooses hanging from its wooden beams.

“Cap’n’s orders, m’lord,” slurred a brute of a man with a shaved head and a corrosive stink. “This li’l lot’s fer any men who could fight, but won’t. Cowards. Traitors.”

“I think not,” the Doctor protested. “Do you know who I am?” He tapped the sigil of Hespys, still bright and gleaming on his tunic.

“Why, y’be Lord Hespys. Sorry, m’lord. Even a magician don’t outrank Cap’n Marter. Orders are orders.”

“We’ll see about that,” the Doctor said, marching back into the tavern, where he found Marter draining another tankard of ale with his sergeants.

“What are you doing?” he demanded. “The gallows?”

“Potentially, hanging people. But I hope not. Why do you think we’re building them where the whole village can see them? I doubt we’ll have anyone refusing to enlist.” He took another swig of beer and smirked. “But tell me – Lord Hespys – if you disapprove, why not simply step outside and tear the

gallows apart with your magic? Why come to me at all? On a related note, why haven't you done anything about this damned heatwave?"

The Doctor said nothing.

Marter nodded. "A shame. I was hoping you might peddle some farcical excuse about it being rude to display so much power. I think it's important we understand each other, my lord. You see, Jessalyn is my queen and I love her with all my heart. I would lay down my life for her in a moment. And she tries to be a fair queen, tries to be a good queen. With the help of her advisors, she broadly succeeds. But has she ever been what one might describe as clever? Honestly? No. And always too trusting for her own good. You've convinced her and that weasel-faced husband of hers that you are Hespys. You've convinced that crone Parrott and possibly the rest of the woolly-brained councillors too. But I am trained not to trust, I assume the worst in everyone, and I think a badge and a cheap conjuring trick are ill proof. So, I give you fair warning. You might be of some use, so I'll maintain the charade and keep you around. But if you cross me, then you will vanish. That's what Hespys does, so no one will question it."

He slapped the Doctor bracingly on the arm, and thrust his drinking horn at him, allowing most of the ale to slop over the front of his gambeson. "Drink up, my lord. You're looking a little peaky there."

The Doctor took a swig of the ale, winced on the repellent, bitter taste, and cleared his throat.

"Captain Marter. You would be welcome to try. Many have. And I'm still here."

Marter's strut was a little less certain, but the captain attributed that to drunkenness. He would not let Hespys and his conjuring tricks spoil his certainty of purpose.

Contrary to any hopes expressed by Marter, the village of Glowe was ransacked. As the tail end of the army caught up in the small hours, a great crush of thirsty men descended on the tavern, all demanding food and ale in too great a quantity. The Doctor would later learn that in the course of this initial chaos, a punch was thrown. That single spark ignited a wildfire of violence and looting, which in turn led to an actual fire breaking out. The smell was of acrid smoke, and the flickering light that spilled through the flap of the command tent indicated that at least one building was ablaze. He heard the whisper of men just outside, muttering in husky undertones as they compared the loot they'd pilfered from the homes, the silver they'd taken from the temple, the women they had cornered and the husbands they had slain.

The Doctor awoke groggily, a bitter chemical taste stinging his tongue. That ale he'd taken. Marter must have drugged it. What did he want the Time Lord to sleep through, he wondered with horror?

The devastation was shocking. Half of the village was charred and warped by fire; the other half had been outright demolished. The smell of smoke was eye-watering, and no amount of spluttering could clear his throat. Black soot coated every surface, right down to each individual blade of grass underfoot. Walking into what remained of the village square, stepping over broken bodies all the way, he saw a great hole in the wall of the tavern. The Trantsyan temple was missing the silver star of Trantys from its spire. Part of the gallows had been torn down, though two ropes remained swinging from the rafter, bodies dangling until they were unceremoniously cut down and dragged away.

He pushed through the jeering crowd and found Marter at the foot of the gallows.

"What happened?"

"Exactly what it looks like. An uprising in the ranks," Marter said grimly. "Several of the nobility lost control or were slain. But me and mine are back in control now. I've already issued a general pardon. Those involved have been graciously allowed to return to their ranks and resume the march. But not the leaders. The commanders are the worst offenders. The men who started the unrest, the men caught with the most loot, the men committing the worst atrocities."

In addition to the two on the gallows, ashen-faced as the nooses were prepared, Marter's men had at least fifty lined up. Many were weeping, stammering apologies and pleas for mercy, citing wives

and children and dependents at home. As the Doctor watched, one of the captives – a lord by the look of his fine, gilded armour – tried to press a gold trinket into the hands of one of Marter’s men. The soldier pocketed it, whacked the lord hard to the ground, and then kicked him incessantly.

“Rudd,” Marter said sharply. The soldier turned to face him.

“You will kick far harder than that next time.”

“Very good sir.”

The Doctor cleared his throat. “Captain Marter – there is honour in mercy.”

“I’ve shown it,” the captain replied. “Have I not just said that most were spared?”

“But you must ask yourself – are “most” and “all” *really* so far apart?”

“They must be punished.”

“Indeed, they must,” the Doctor said gravely, a heavy silence replacing the jeering as the crowd looked on and strained to listen. “But tell me - do you know what comes after death, captain?”

“No.”

“Do you fear it?”

“Not much.”

“So what you fear is primarily the pain of death, not whatever comes next.”

“Yes ...” Marter concurred impatiently.

“So by your standards, the punishment for these men will be over the instant the noose is dropped.”

“Not if their necks don’t break,” Marter said with a sickly smile. “*Aha!* This is what you ask of me? So be it. Boys – drop them slowly and drop them carefully. I don’t want to hear a single neck snap.”

“No,” the Doctor said hurriedly. “I am no sadist. And even then, their suffering would be over in seconds. The suffering of those they have hurt will continue for weeks, months, even years to come. Real justice, *real* justice, would see these criminals putting right what they have done wrong. Captain Marter, leave these men behind. Let them *fix* that damage! Let them sow the surrounding fields, let them toil while the villagers rest. Let them strive from dawn till dusk making repairs. And why stop at repairs? Improvements could follow.”

An elderly man stepped from the crowd, his face like a shrivelled prune, tanned from a lifetime in the fields hunched over a cane. A mane of long, silver hair hung down to his waist.

“I been in this village for all me life,” he warbled, his voice badly mangled through a mouthful of missing teeth. He spat at the Doctor’s feet, and then at Marter’s as well. “You, wizard, ‘aven’t the right to say they should be spared. You, soldier, ‘aven’t the right to hang ‘em. Me and mine should be the ones to choose. This is our soil! *We’re* the lords ‘ere.”

The Doctor and Marter shared a glance.

“I say the wizard is right,” he said, wagging a quavering, shrivelled finger at the Doctor. “Real justice sees ‘em fixing up our town and fixing up our crops. But the captain is also right to want ‘em all dead. Repairs ain’t enough. After they do ‘em, you send ‘em back to Ylymm for fair trial. The Queen decides their final fate.”

Marter sighed. “Then so be it. There you go, Lord Hespys. You’ve got what you wanted. They’ll still hang, most likely. You’ve simply brought them a stay of execution. Well done. Are you sure you’re not a sadist?”

“Tomorrow is promised to nobody,” the Doctor replied, loud enough that the crowd of condemned could hear. “But if there’s a choice – die today with a tainted soul or die tomorrow having partially regained it – then the latter is surely best. Or perhaps Jessalyn will prove more merciful.”

“Knowing her, she will,” Marter said.

“Oh, one more thing, Captain,” the Doctor called, as the captain turned away. “There’s a split in your trousers.”

Marter looked from the loose threads of his hessian to the Doctor's sword. Somehow as he was talking, the wizard must have slashed at his clothes. As he reached for the garment, they fell away, leaving his bare legs exposed. Even Marter's most loyal men joined in the cacophony of laughter.

"If you drug me again, I'll do more than embarrass you, you pathetic butcher. I hope we're understood."

Marter nodded ruefully as he backed away, a truly pitiful sight, clutching at his britches while the miserable town of Glowe united in mocking him.

Into the Mountain

Maggie found the journey south altogether easier, riding on horseback as opposed to slogging it on foot. Maggie had been mightily frightened by the prospect of riding at first, but Yaevar had shown her the ropes.

"If you show the horse you are scared," he had told her. "You won't get any respect out of it. It is not enough to sit on its back and hope for the best. You have to own it. To show it who commands."

Easier said than done, and she made such a spectacular hash of it at first that Yaevar took pity on her and commanded a man to lead her horse by the reins while she held on for dear life. As the days wore on, however, her confidence grew. The musty stink of its short brown coat had repulsed her at first, but gradually she came to enjoy it. Four days into the ride, Yaevar ordered her to feed it and groom it herself, and looking into its long-lashed, beautiful eyes, the first sparks of a bond had formed.

On the fifth day of their voyage, Yaevar invited her to ride with him, and she found herself quite at ease. It felt surreal, to be riding at the head of a force so large. Behind, Yaevar's closest cronies rode in formation with their most senior servants and squires. Behind them, five thousand men marched on foot, their steel armour padded with black leather to ward off the cold. They had identical red kite shields slung over their shoulders, and black scimitars with razor edges and lethal points. They wore identical red capes, and black steel helmets with red feathers on top. They marched in lockstep in several single-file ranks, the spikes attached to their boots ensuring that despite the snowy terrain, no one lost their footing. Supplies and equipment glided along in sleek, decorative black wagons at the back of the convoy.

Maggie never saw the Ice Warriors during the daytime journeys, but according to Yaevar a handful marched at their own pace a few hours behind. At night, when the march was brought to a halt and the tents were pitched, sometimes one would appear and report to Yaevar. Her skin crawled in their presence; the sight of them, coupled with that gassy, hissing breath, brought back memories of the journey north. In their absence, thankfully, that week had become a twisted blur, a nightmare one barely remembers upon awaking.

"I'll need you," Yaevar told her. "By sundown I hope to reach the home of a dear friend, a former hunting partner of mine. I intend to honour him with a good meal, and you will serve it."

"I can do that," she said indifferently.

"This man is not a king. He is not a lord. He holds no rank or title. But he is my friend, and you will treat him with the same respect you do me and my council."

"Got it."

He nodded his approval and looked her up and down. "Warm enough?"

“Just,” she said. She wore a grey fur cape over the ugly beige shift they’d given her to replace her modern clothes. She wore a sickly orange waistcoat over it, and a skirt that came down to her ankles. She had on thick woollen stockings over warm, fur-lined boots, and matching fur gloves. Despite all of that, she wasn’t warm at all. She’d broadly forgotten what being warm was like. She guessed the temperature hovered around freezing by day, dropping to frankly dangerous levels by night. Snow fell near constantly, the valleys between the hills more clogged by the hour. The roads were strangely clear, which had confused her at first, until Yaevar explained an army of servants were marching about a day ahead, clearing the route.

They arrived at the home of Yaevar’s friend just after dusk, and despite having been told he wasn’t a man of any status, Maggie was shocked that any friend of a king could live in a shack so wretched. It was nestled in a basin between two craggy hills and constructed of rough grey stone which looked very thick. The windows were notably tiny, presumably to keep in the warmth. The light of a fire flickered through them, and smoke billowed through a dilapidated chimney.

“He isn’t expecting us,” Yaevar said, with a rare smile. “His face will be a sight indeed.”

“Splendid,” Maggie muttered, following Yaevar and his councillors down the slope and into the basin while the main force laid camp. A lone Ice Warrior accompanied them – Ssal no less, whom she had tormented in the dungeons that day.

Yaevar hammered on the door of the hut, and the sound of hurried movement was audible from within. Maggie started as the door burst open, and the point of a loaded crossbow stuck out to greet them. The man wielding it was broad and shaggy, with a wild mop of brown hair and a sprawling beard. He wore a patchwork outfit made from a variety of furs.

At the sight of Yaevar he burst into laughter and set the crossbow down. Yaevar grinned and the men locked forearms before pulling each other into a tight bear hug.

“You look well,” Yaevar told him, withdrawing from the hug and shaking him bracingly by the shoulders.

“You’ve gained weight,” the man replied, his grin revealing teeth that were a mixture of black and brown, with several missing altogether.

Yaevar chuckled. “Age, my old friend. Age and overindulgence. I try not to overeat, but with chefs like mine that’s easier said than done.”

He turned to Maggie and the others. “My lords – Ssal – Maggie – may I present Oagor. These are my councillors. The woman is my cupbearer. Ssal is a representative of the Ice Warriors.”

“An honour,” Oagor said. “Well, come in, come in! We’re letting all the warm out.”

The hut was smoky and stifling. A cauldron bubbled over an open fire in the centre of the dirt floor and a bed of furs nestled in the corner. Along the walls hung an array of strangely shaped animal skulls and various pieces of bone, with cuts of alien meat and pelt hanging out on hooks to dry. There was a nasty smell of ammonia, presumably from whatever preservatives Oagor used. A cache of traps and weapons lay in the corner, steel glinting in the flickering firelight.

“What’s cooking?” Yaevar asked, nodding at the pot.

“A black-striped frost beast I brought down last week,” Oagor replied. “The animal was malnourished, and very old. I have a feeling the meat will be stringy.”

“To the ether with your stringy meat,” Yaevar said. “We’ve brought several legs of wild kurping, fried in their own juices and glazed with honey. They’ll be cold, though we could always heat them over the fire.”

“That would take time,” Oagor laughed, his eyes wide at the prospect of a good meal. He removed the cauldron from the fire and poured the contents outside in the snow, and then sat cross-legged on the floor with Yaevar and his men, one of whom passed Maggie a hamper of food. She served up, giving Yaevar and Oagor the choicest cuts of the strange meat before moving onto his advisors. There was bread in the sack, and a small cask of wine. She found crockery in a chest of drawers beside Oagor’s bed, and several

stained drinking horns for the wine. When nobody was demanding more bread or holding his drinking horn out for wine, she stood dutifully and silently in the corner beside the weapons and traps. In the opposite corner beside the pelts hovered Ssal the Ice Warrior, standing in deathly silence aside from the occasional rasping hiss of his breath. One of his pincers opened and closed slowly, and his head was drooped so that his chin disappeared beneath the collar of his armour shell. He appeared to be dozing; she remembered how slow the heat had made the Ice Warriors during the earliest days of their journey north, and suspected he was suffering in the warmth of Oagor's hut. It occurred to Maggie that she and the Ice Warrior felt the same at this moment: outsiders on the fringe of Yaevar's schemes; useful to him but not one of his kin.

Only once the meal had finished did the conversation make Maggie's ears prick up.

"So," Yaevar said, smothering a belch with his fist. "What's their condition?"

"Frozen solid," Oagor said. "As they have been for centuries. Old friend, I know you say otherwise...but I am certain they are dead. I've been down there plenty over the years, and they've never shown the slightest sign of life."

"Ssal?" Yaevar said, turning to the Ice Warrior.

"*My people...survive,*" Ssal wheezed, his voice a hoarse croak between hissing gulps of air. "*The cold cannot kill an Ice Warrior. They will wake for one...of their own.*"

"There, you see," Yaevar said brightly. "You lead us there, Ssal will raise them. How far is the climb?"

"Three hours up the hill," Oagor said. "Will you make it?"

"I will not dignify that with an answer," Yaevar said. "We will rest tonight and ascend at first light before the sun warms the ice."

Oagor offered Yaevar his bed, but Yaevar wouldn't hear of it and took up a space on the floor beside the fire with his men. Oagor tossed Maggie a fur pelt from his rack, and though it repulsed her utterly, she needed its warmth. She lay under it in the corner for several hours, yet despite her fatigue, sleep eluded her. Finally, unable to bear the monstrous snores of Oagor any longer, she rose and crept from the hut to take in some fresh air. Ssal the Ice Warrior had already fled its warmth, slumbered standing up just outside the door and thrust his weapon in her face as soon as she emerged.

"I'm not gonna run," she said, shivering as the cold seeped straight into her bones. Snow fell thick and fast, and the summits glittered in the light of the swollen moon. "Where would I go?"

Ssal hissed, showing his sharp, black teeth. He slowly lowered his gun.

She slouched against the hut and wrapped her arms around her abdomen, stamping her feet to ward off frostbite. "What do you get out of this?" she asked. "My friend knew what you were the moment he saw your people down in Ylymm. You've got laser guns. What are you doing, fighting for a bunch of primitives?"

"*These mountains are our home. And Yaevar is...our king.*"

He turned his back on her and let his head loll forward into the collar of his shell.

"That's it, is it? Not the conversational type?"

No reply.

"Well, fine. I don't like you either." She stood behind him a while longer, admiring the scales on the curved back of his shell. They were an appealing shade of green, faintly shiny. For all that she had hated them since arriving on Soma, there could be no denying that they were magnificent creatures. She couldn't tell whether the shell was indeed just armour, or whether it was a part of the creature like the shell of a tortoise. The red lenses in the eye sockets were certainly artificial, as was the weapon attached to his forearm.

"Night, then," she said once the cold became too much to bear, retreating into the hut and tiptoeing to her corner, where she buried herself in the fur and after another hour or so fell into a light, fitful sleep.

Oagor estimated that the ascent would take three hours, but in practice it was closer to five. By the time they reached the cave – having struggled up the steep, snow-clogged path through the hills, ramming their crampons into the terrain with every step – Maggie feared that she wouldn't have the power to descend. Really, she ought not to have gone. Yaevar hadn't ordered her to, but morbid curiosity had overtaken her good sense. Though reasonably sure Yaevar wouldn't actually harm her, if she slipped and broke a leg, or simply collapsed from exhaustion halfway down, she grimly suspected that there she would remain, and there she would die.

The entrance to the cave was located on a shelf near the summit of the hill. The view was spectacular: Oagor's hut was a speck in the basin far below and the camp in the foothills of the opposite mountain was a toy town of tents, figures the size of ants bustling. Maggie stood as near to the edge as she dared and drank in the beauty of the mountains, her breath coming out in steamy gusts, and her lungs burning in the thin air.

But any hope that the caves would offer respite was swiftly dashed. They squeezed through the narrow entrance, little more than a fissure in the side of the cliff, and found themselves in tunnels that were painfully narrow and bitterly cold. There was a constant grinding as Ssal's armour scraped on the ceiling and the walls, which looked to be solid ice. Only Oagor seemed to know where they were going; the place was a labyrinth of white and blue, its endless, identical passages making Maggie's head spin. Her teeth chattered uncontrollably; her exposed ears singed with tender, biting pain. Most embarrassingly, her nose wouldn't stop streaming and she had nothing with which to remedy that except her sleeve.

She was close to tears by the time the tunnels finally widened. Ancient black brickwork replaced the ice. There was a long, wide corridor with some sort of altar at the end, and several passages leading off left and right.

They peered into each of the chambers in turn. Most were empty, though some contained treasures so beautiful that they made Maggie forget her woes. Golden cups gleamed in the flickering light of their torches, gems of every colour glittered like so many spilled sweets in a candy store, gilded swords and scimitars shone proud and glinted as if sunlit. All of it was discarded carelessly, like so much old, forgotten tat. Maggie was astonished when Yaevar marched past without a backwards glance.

"The treasure is cursed," Ssal explained. *"Only he who...owns it...may lift it from this place."*

"Who owns it, then?"

"Nobody knows," Oagor called back. "I have never removed any of it, I fear the curse. But I've certainly studied it. All of it is Trantsyan in origin. There haven't been Trantsyans living in these hills for millennia. The people who built this place died centuries ago. In any case, we're just passing through."

The final chamber was devoid of treasure, but a segment of its far wall clearly concealed a passageway, the bricks a lighter shade and considerably less weathered.

"Ssal," Yaevar said. "If you'd be so bold."

The Ice Warrior lashed out with a clenched pincer. The wall crumbled to rubble and dust under his strength, revealing a narrow shaft.

"There's a ways to descend yet," Oagor warned them. "Are we fit to continue?"

The Ice Warrior hissed in reply and bowed its head. Yaevar confirmed that he was. Maggie nodded sullenly.

"We'll have to go in single file," he warned them. "I'll lead."

"Yes," Yaevar said. "You, me, then Ssal. Maggie will bring up the rear."

With a groan, Oagor wedged his none-too-graceful body into the passageway. Yaevar followed, stepping through the narrow gap more nimbly despite his size. The Ice Warrior was another matter. After much furious hissing and the excruciating, nail-on-blackboard scraping of his armour, and with Maggie

pushing and Yaevar pulling, they finally managed to cram him through the gap, where the tunnel mercifully widened. Once, Maggie would have found it a funny spectacle, but she hadn't laughed for a long time.

She shook her head glumly and made to step through the passageway after Ssal when the hairs on the back of her neck stood suddenly at attention. Her skin began to crawl.

She heard nothing; there was no disturbance. But she felt the visceral sense of eyes upon her back. Trembling, she backed slowly out of the passageway and turned around.

There was a man standing in the chamber behind her. He wore a jewel-studded robe of gentle lilac and curly-toed slippers, and his hands were hidden in the folds of his flowing silk sleeves. He was grossly underdressed for the cold of the temple, yet looked perfectly comfortable, even warm, his chubby cheeks flushed. His bald pate shone in the torchlight. He fluttered the long lashes of his pretty blue eyes at Maggie.

"My lady," he purred in a high-pitched voice.

"Who are you?" she stammered, glancing back down the passageway. Though Ssal's broad back was only a few feet away, he gave no indication he'd heard the man.

"He can't," the stranger said, as though reading her mind. "None of them can hear me, Miss Weitz. It is you I wanted to talk to. Please – don't call them for help. I won't hurt you."

"But who are you?"

"Oh, I've had countless names in my time, and none," he said airily. "I'm nobody important. Just a traveller, passing through. But I come here sometimes. To Soma, I mean. Alas, I fear not for much longer. A reckoning looms. Its long voyage at last nears its end. And a new age is upon it. The age...of the Ice Warriors."

"Okay...but why are you here? What do you want?"

"I wanted to give you a message. A message of comfort, I hope. For the pretender survived. As you march south, he in turn marches north to find you. Know that. Keep strong. And good luck to you both. Good luck indeed, dear child."

He turned on his heel and marched silently from the chamber.

"Wait," Maggie cried, following him. She emerged expecting to see him marching back out into the ice tunnels towards the surface. But there was not so much as a footprint on the floor. The stranger was gone.

She clapped a hand to the back of her neck to calm the bristling hairs and pulled her fur cape tighter around her shoulders. She felt as though the temperature, already frigid, had dropped several degrees. In a daze, she staggered back into the chamber and through the passageway, where she caught up with Ssal and the others. Before long, the tunnel began to slope at a sharp, downward gradient, leading them further yet from the surface of the planet, and the relative safety that it offered.

Why did I do it? she asked herself furiously, her ears popping constantly from the pressure. *Why ever did I agree to come?*

The city at the bottom of the tunnel was ice. Every street, every building, every brick of every building, right up to the spiky ice palace at the north end of the city, reminiscent of a building Maggie had seen on a visit to 2020s London before the recent, enforced break in her travels with the Doctor...the Shard, if she recalled correctly: an eyesore if ever there was one, but magnificent in its way. The whole city was nestled in a gargantuan cavern of ice, a world of blue and white and bitter cold. It was like standing in a diamond. The sparkling walls shone so bright with natural fluorescence that it was practically daylight.

Ssal drew a breath, and Maggie started when she heard him speak. Gone was the strained hiss. Instead, a deep, gravelly voice reverberated around the cavern.

“They are in there. My people sleep, but they have slept for long enough. They shall rise, ready to fight. But this place is hallowed ground. To raise an Ice Warrior from his slumber is a sacred right. I must ask...”

“That you go in alone?” Yaevar finished. “That you perform it yourself? Of course.”

They marched through the silent city, its tall and wide buildings and streets clearly designed with bulky, lumbering Ice Warriors in mind.

“His voice?” Maggie remarked to Yaevar when Ssal was out of earshot.

“Sorcery, no doubt,” Yaevar remarked. “The city must be alive with it.”

“More like a pressure change,” Maggie remarked, more to herself than Yaevar. Some ancient science still lingered in this place, reducing the atmospheric pressure to levels more suitable for the Ice Warriors. Maggie was feeling the effects of it herself – her joints were starting to ache, and she felt blood rushing to her face, her lungs slightly strained.

“It’s not dissimilar to the Needles,” She pointed to the palace. “Back in Ylymm.”

“I suppose you are right. Perhaps the Needles were based on it.” He chuckled. “Maybe our people owe more of our culture to them than we might think.”

“What happened though?” she asked. “What drove them into hibernation?”

“Our planet travels through the ether,” Yaevar said. “I have studied the stars for all my life, and they have changed beyond recognition in that time. There are those who say it is the stars themselves that move, but it has been my long-held conviction that in truth it is we. The Ice Warriors concur. They believe that at some point during its long voyage, our world must have passed through a fireball of some sort, a part of the emptiness so very hot that they simply couldn’t survive on the surface. The temperatures drove them underground.”

“But even then,” Ssal boomed, evidently not out of earshot at all. “The heat was such below the surface that hibernation was the only recourse.”

“They slept for millennia,” Yaevar said. “Only in the last decade have temperatures been sufficiently cool to allow them to rise. They came to me. Ssal and his tribe slumbered in a shallow hive below Paemonhynn and reached out to me when they rose. They claim there are thousands of cities like this dotted beneath the mountains.”

They reached the wall of the palace, its entrance sealed by a portcullis of ice bars. Only Ssal proceeded, smashing the bars down with the same ease that he’d dismantled the wall in the temple, shards of ice flying everywhere. He waddled into the entrance courtyard, leaving Maggie, Oagor and Yaevar standing awkwardly outside.

Yaevar and Oagor made small talk while Maggie sat down on a kerb, using her fur cape to protect the seat of her skirt from the ice. Alone with her thoughts, she found herself picking over what the stranger had told her up in the temple. The pretender lived. He could only mean the Doctor. For that, she felt a surge of relief, but it was tempered drastically by the stark reality that alive or not, he was still far away. And by marching towards her, he was marching into the jaws of danger, right into the path of Yaevar and his army. That they were both alive for now by no means guaranteed a reunion, let alone a safe return to the TARDIS.

Finally, after what felt like an hour, Ssal emerged from the palace.

And he wasn’t alone.

There were hundreds of them, following him through the portcullis in a lumbering march. The warriors were nearly identical, differing slightly in size and the hue of the matted fur protruding through the armour. A couple had helmets of another design, with wider craniums and smaller holes for their mouths. They came to a halt in three separate lines, with Ssal standing at the front. As one, they raised their right pincers and rapped them against the chest of their shells.

“We rise,” they bellowed. “We serve. We reave!”

“My friends,” Yaevar called, his smooth burr echoing through the cavern. “Welcome to the modern world. A world of blood, and chaos and slaughter – and Mazmoria teaches us that it is perfect. These mountains are mine. You are all free to leave; but fight for me, and you are welcome to stay. Share in the glory of my clan, share in the spoils. And let us build a new Sal’Jik and a new world! Man and Ice Warrior, fighting and living and basking in glory as brothers in arms. I will now lead you out of these tunnels and into the light. Our lands have cooled, the snows fall thick and fast and settle deep, and the ice has never been stronger. Come! Walk with me. Feel the light of the sun on your scales, bask in frozen air. And follow me into the perfect glory of war.”

A heavy silence fell. And then Ssal raised his pincer and beat his chest. After a second, he beat it again. Another Ice Warrior joined in. Then another. Another. Smiling thinly, Yaevar unsheathed his scimitar and raised it in the air, to which the drumming grew louder, more insistent. Yaevar turned, scimitar still raised, and marched from the palace. Oagor and Maggie shared a quick glance, then hurried after him. She wondered how Oagor squared this revival with his conviction, the previous night, that they were all dead. He looked a little haunted to see so many of them up and about.

A single tear spilled from Maggie’s eye, which she angrily wiped away. She would not cry, however much she felt like it. Yet if the Doctor truly were coming for her...then this was the opposition he was going to face. No matter how well he knew these monsters, he was marching headlong into the jaws of death. And there was nothing she could do to warn him.

Goblins

“Are you sure we can’t go around?” the Doctor urged, riding on horseback besides Marter through a wooded area, the leaves forming a green canopy overhead, shielding them from the golden glare of the sun.

“You may, if you like,” Captain Marter replied coldly. “And we will see you in the north perhaps a month overdue. Moryk Mire is vast. Going through will not be pleasant; it will not be easy; it will not be fast. I am not happy about it myself. But to try and go round is not an option.”

“So be it,” the Doctor said grimly. “But we can get through alive, I suppose?”

“If we move quickly. The swamp gases are debilitating, but not deadly. But it’s not them I’m worried about. In order to enter Moryk Mire at all, we need to pass through the Swamp Gate. It guards the only path through the mud that is even remotely passable.”

“I see. And you say that like it’ll be a problem?”

“It will be. The Swamp Gate is the castle of Lord Tadzu of House Sugo’Hai.”

“Sugo’Hai,” the Doctor repeated. “A Mazmorian name?”

“Yes. The only Mazmorian lord in the Kingdom of All, and the only lord in the Kingdom of All who didn’t answer Queen Jessalyn’s call to arms. Worse still, my spies report that a small party of Ice Warriors were freely waved through some weeks ago, with a group of captives in tow.”

“Weitzar? And the others?”

“I’m certain of it. Tadzu allowed them past without so much as a challenge. His loyalties do not lie with us. He has granted us an audience, but I’ll warn you now that he’s unlikely to yield so readily for us. We may need to spill some blood to get through the Swamp Gate.”

They arrived at dusk, and Tadzu received them on the drawbridge, flanked by a couple of guards. Up on the battlements, archers leered over the parapet with loaded crossbows.

Tadzu was without a doubt one of the most striking men the Doctor had ever beheld. He walked hunched over an intricately carved walking stick, his green and white robes baggy upon his withered frame. He had long, white hair. Yet despite everything pointing to a man of great age, his features were smooth, youthful, and flushed, devoid of so much as a laugh line or a crease. His eyes glowed yellow in the faint light.

“Lord Tadzu,” Marter said briskly, taking a step forward. “We hope to find you well.”

“No, you don’t,” Tadzu said at once. “What do you want?”

“Very well, straight to business,” Marter said. “You’ll allow my army through the Swamp Gate. We need to cross Moryk Mire immediately. Do this, and Queen Jessalyn is prepared to pardon you for allowing our enemies through.”

A cruel smile tugged at the old man’s sinister, youthful lips. “Would you care to explain what I ought to have done instead? I heard what those creatures did in the capital. You are not the only nobleman in All with spies, Captain.”

“You should have died at your post, rather than betray your country. This treason, coupled with your failure to provide fighting men for our campaign, gives me every right to take your head here and now.”

“You would be welcome to try,” Tadzu replied, “but you would be foolish. I have no wish for violence, Captain Marter. Take your men and leave this place. I will not try and stop you, but if you want to go north, it will not be through my lands.”

“My lord,” the Doctor said. “You are Mazmorian, we know this. And it is certainly true that Marter and his army oppose your beliefs. I understand your conflict, truly. But so what if you share a religion? They massacred unarmed civilians on what should have been a joyous day. A holiday. A festival. You might be Mazmorian, Lord Tadzu. But are you *that*?”

With a groan, Tadzu took a couple of shuffling steps towards the Doctor. His men placed their hands on the hilt of their scimitars and stepped forwards with him.

“I am *not* that,” he told the Doctor. “The world is a place of blood and chaos, this is true. And that should be embraced, it must be embraced. For it is the cornerstone of our belief, above all else, that chaos is the way of things, and the way of things is perfect. But that does not, should not, mean violence for the sake of violence. It should not mean every day, and it certainly shouldn’t have been that day.”

“I agree,” the Doctor said. “But if that is your interpretation of Mazmorianism, then do you believe they would spare you? I don’t think so. They would deem you a false Mazmorian and treat you as such. I’ve met enough extremists in my life to know that. It’s their way and nothing less.”

“I agree,” Tadzu said. “And my differences with them, and my loyalty to Jessalyn, prevent me harming this army. Leave here freely and in peace, and ideally very soon. But when all is said and done, they are worshippers of Mazmoria and so am I. To allow you through my land? To aid you? I simply cannot do it.”

He turned to leave but halted as the metallic hiss of Marter’s sword being drawn cut through the still air. On the battlements, crossbows were trained immediately in their direction. Tadzu’s guards drew scimitars and put themselves between Marter, the Doctor and their aged lord.

“How did you imagine this going?” Marter said. “You thought we would shrug our shoulders and leave? Do you know how many men we’ve brought? If you will not open the Swamp Gate, we will open it ourselves.”

Tadzu smiled coldly, the cheeks of his unnaturally smooth face shining against the setting sun. “Lay siege if you would like. But we are not some defenceless village like Glowe. We have provisions for a year. Do you have a year? Take some advice from an old man, Captain Marter. Walk away and go round Moryk Mire.”

“My lord,” the Doctor said, cutting over Marter before the situation could escalate. “You understand who I am, don’t you?”

“They say you are Hespys,” Tadzu said.

“I am,” the Doctor said boldly. “Then if you understand who I am, you understand what I can do.”

“A threat?”

“Quite the contrary. If you open your gates and let us through Moryk Mire, I will cure you. I will restore you to full health.”

There was a ringing silence. Marter and his men looked nonplussed, but the yellow eyes of Tadzu widened.

"There is no cure," he finally whispered.

"Oh? Who told you so? Don't tell me – every apothecary, physician, healer and wise man whom you've ever consulted. But I am better than all of them combined."

"One of you begin making sense," Marter snapped. "This traitor looks in rude health to me."

"Show us what you're hiding under that mask," the Doctor commanded the old lord. "Go on."

Tadzu hesitated, his controlled demeanour replaced by stooped shoulders and a haunted look. Finally, reluctantly, he raised his gloved hands and pressed thumb and forefinger to his cheeks. There was a hideous sound of slurping as the pretend flesh began to peel away in his hands.

The stench hit them immediately, worse than an open grave full of ripe, swollen bodies. Mould and mildew and rancid food filled the air in a sickening fug. That smooth face peeled clean away. Beside the Doctor, Marter looked on, his skin turned the colour of sour milk.

However fearful the smell was, the sight was worse. The real face of Tadzu Sugo'Hai was nothing more than thick, festering mould and spores, a weeping sore seeping gangrene and pus, his features hidden and distorted by the fungal growths and slimy grey skin. Some were small, whitish-blue patches of fuzz peppering his skin like stubble. Others were practically mushrooms. The largest clamped his left eye entirely shut. Staring through the vegetation, the right eye glowed yellow, defiant.

"What is it?" the Doctor said, fighting to keep the quiver from his voice.

Tadzu glared at him. "You claim you can cure me, yet you don't even know the affliction."

"Tell me what it is and help me match it to a cure," the Doctor said.

Tadzu handed his mask to one of the guards, who gingerly clasped it between thumb and forefinger. The fluid seeping from Tadzu's skin could have been condensation from however long trapped in the mask, though the Doctor had a hunch that it always wept like that.

"This malady comes from these very swamps," Tadzu said. "You would be unlucky to catch it, few men do. I grew overconfident in my youth, failed to take precautions, became too familiar with the terrain and strayed too often from the safe path. One day I stumbled into a bog and stuck fast. There I would have died, had my men not found me and pulled me free. Lucky me...or so I thought. It took a fortnight for the first discolouration to show. Just a patch, on my thigh. The next week, it had a furry texture to it. And the week after that..."

He trailed off and a heavy silence fell.

"Why do you live?" Marter asked bluntly.

"Because the only alternative is death."

"But doesn't it hurt?"

"I have lived too long in pain to remember life without pain," Tadzu replied. "It is all I know. It is who I am."

"I can produce a potion," the Doctor assured him. "Not here, not now. You don't have the ingredients I'd need. But allow us to pass through the mire and I will return and make you well again. You will enjoy what life you have left and show the world your true self."

"Even then, I cannot voluntarily open my gates for you," Tadzu said. "But tonight, I am going to ride out on a hunt with most of my men. I expect I will be in the litter for most of it, I cannot sit on a horse long at my age. During my absence, the drawbridge, the portcullis and the Swamp Gate will somehow be left open."

The mire was repulsive, its oozing stink horribly akin to the fungus under Tadzu's mask. The footprints of the Ice Warriors and their captives remained in the filthy sludge road, with not a ripple of wind in the

suffocating air to obscure them. One set had soles of a more intricate pattern, and the Doctor's spirits lifted at the sight of them. Those were made by more modern footwear. Maggie was alive and among the captives. Though he forced himself to keep his expectations in check, he felt altogether less hopeless than he did at the start of the march.

That night they laid camp, and he spent a gruesome night spluttering on the swamp gases. His nose and throat were sore, and foul taste lingered in his mouth.

It was approaching nightfall when the goblins came for them.

"Captain," cried a sergeant, "Men approaching from the north."

"Yaevar's?" the Doctor breathed. Through the greenish fog he could see stout figures approaching. They clinked as they walked, indicating armour, and the shadowy outlines of spears and pikes waved beside them.

"Those aren't men," Marter said. He stepped forward and raised his sword. "In the name of Queen Jessalyn, stop where you are! No further."

"The girl queen's name means nothing here," came a harsh reply. "These swamps are ours. You have trespassed. Lay down your swords and your deaths will be merciful."

"I think not," Marter said. "I assure you that we are no small party. Our procession stretches back a mile. How many are you, goblin? I see perhaps twelve. Are there more hidden away, or is this the sum of you?"

The goblin drew closer. His skin was a dirty green, and he walked hunched over a spear, his back painfully crooked. He had long, pointed ears and a pointy nose with a wart on its end, with eyes sickly yellow and his twisted leer revealing four rows of razor-sharp, jet-black teeth. Standing five feet in height, he wore ill-fitting cloth and rusting armour, all likely taken from a variety of sources over the years. He had greasy black hair tied up in a long ponytail.

"I am Karrow," he barked, planting his spear in the mud. "I am the leader of my tribe. I will approach you unarmed. What are you doing here?"

"We are marching north to defend our territory from King Yaevar of Sal'Jik," Marter replied. "We have no business with you; and no desire to remain in your swamp a second longer than we need to."

"I expect not," Karrow growled. "Your kind cannot thrive here. Feeble humans with feeble lungs."

"So it is," Marter said flippantly. "And you have nothing to fear from us, for we have no reason to harm you and no ability to make use of your lands. We seek only to continue on our way."

Karrow's shark-like smile widened. "Yet one of you claims ownership of Moryk Mire."

"Tadzu is not one of ours," Marter said firmly.

"He is like you. Your kind presumes to own our swamps, and we answer that with blood whenever you cross our path. We are the masters here. My tribe numbers five hundred in total."

"We are more than five hundred, I promise you," Marter said.

"If I might speak?" the Doctor said.

"Who are you?" Karrow spat.

"I am Hespys," he replied. "Does the name mean anything to you?"

"Oh, we know it. We know all your names. Jessalyn and Parrott, Yaevar and Hespys, and Tadzu and – though he didn't feel the need to introduce himself – we presume this to be Viscount Marter, the queen's favourite toy soldier. We spit on all these names."

"Listen to me," the Doctor said. "Tadzu Sugo'Hai might think he's the ruler of these swamps, but what of him? A sickly old man, not worth a thought. The people of All do not mean you any harm, Karrow. But the people of the north, of Sal'Jik? Oh, they do. If we don't stop them, they'll ravage these mires. They'll kill you all."

“They would be welcome to try,” Karrow said.

“Spoken like a warrior,” the Doctor said. “Because that’s what you are, isn’t it? That’s what the goblins of Moryk Mire are. Fighters. Do not attack us. March with us. Come north and reap the rewards. You, Karrow, would be forever remembered as the captain who took the fight to the enemy.”

Karrow regarded him thoughtfully. “We *could* do that,” he said. “But where our air is ill-suited to you, so your air is ill-suited to us. We become breathless away from our lands. Our lungs begin to ache. Oh, it will not kill us. It will not even slow us down. But it will not be enjoyable. If you want us to fight alongside you, it will cost you fifty percent of all the treasure gained.”

There was a ripple of derision from Marter and his men.

“We are not marching north to profit,” the Doctor reminded them. “Treasure is not our objective.”

“But it is an incentive just the same. I cannot possibly agree to give away half.”

“Forty, then.” Karrow spat.

“Twenty.”

“Forty-five.”

“Thirty, final offer.”

With a grotesque gurgling, Karrow hawked into his palm and offered it to Marter. Marter removed his glove, smeared his hand in the mud underfoot and took Karrow’s filthy, skeletal green digits.

Ore

“There’s no precise border between Sal’Jik and All,” Yaevar explained to Maggie. “Just a no-man’s land of hills and valleys, claimed by both sides, yet enforced by neither. But it is generally accepted that once you reach the town of Ore – a day’s ride ahead – then you are within the Kingdom of All.”

“Right,” Maggie said, slumping on her horse. They were in the lower foothills, and the weather remained damp and frigid. Her clothes had become soggy and unkempt, her hair lank and hanging freely about her shoulders.

“Naturally my ultimate aim is to seize Ylymm,” he went on. “But if I cannot, a clear border will be imposed as far south as we can reach. The map of our continent is to be drastically redrawn.”

Maggie wondered whether she was expected to find his tedious displays of power impressive. She said nothing, sniffing with cold.

“Ore will be the first to bleed,” he said. “I would have you kept far away from it; I know that violence offends you. But the men marching behind us are lusting for blood. They have spent years training, preparing for this quest. This is their war, not mine. This is their glory.”

“If only I could persuade you not to hurt people who have done you no harm. But I can’t, can I?”

“You can’t,” Yaevar said. “But I do wish you wouldn’t think me an evil man.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“No,” he said. “But your tone makes it abundantly clear, as it has throughout this fortnight. There is no such thing as evil, Maggie, there is only good. Conflict is a part of nature, and so therefore it is good. Now, let’s ride harder. I am keen that our glorious work should begin in earnest.”

They arrived at the gates of Ore at dusk, forming up on an empty, sloping plain to the north. The walls were thick, coarse grey stone, the enormous oak gates barricaded shut, the drawbridge pulled up. It looked impenetrable, a fortress. The roofs of the town’s taller buildings poked over the wall, but everything beyond was hidden behind this protective shell.

“People of Ore – the Army of Sal’Jik is upon you,” Yaevar announced in a carrying voice, standing alone between his army and the walls. There were helmets visible poking up over the parapet. “Anyone that flees will be branded a coward, hanged until they are almost dead, drawn and quartered, then fed to the frost hounds. But it would grieve me to pass such a sentence. Whilst I would accept an open gate and an unconditional surrender, instead I implore you to fight! I will give you until dawn to decide. Whoever

dies fighting may be assured of a clean dispatch. He may be further assured that his remains will be treated with dignity.”

He turned to Ssal. “I trust the walls are nothing your people cannot handle?”

“On your command, so shall they fall,” Ssal hissed.

“Excellent.” Yaevar turned to Maggie. “You may go now. Pass the night in the archer’s tent, on the western flank. I shall send for you once we are done.”

At first light, the wall went down.

It happened with all the ease that Ssal had promised. From the hill, Maggie watched the Ice Warriors lumber to the front of the army, saw the whitish-blue flashes of their guns, the wall cracking, splintering and shaking apart in multiple places. Much of their fire was directed at the drawbridge, and with a metallic shriek, one of the two supporting chains took a hit. The drawbridge listed, and then the second chain was destroyed, collapsing it outright. Beyond, the powerful wooden gates were blasted to timber by the Ice Warriors, caving in as though struck by the fist of a giant.

The people of Ore spilled from the ruined gates like bugs emerging from a trampled nest. They brandished swords and hatchets, and pickaxes, and even from a distance Maggie could have sworn she heard Yaevar’s delighted cry of attack. He surged ahead, slicing his scimitar through the air, outstripping the fastest of his men and ploughing straight into the fray without any obvious care for his own safety.

“Loose!” cried the captain of the archers. The men fired at will, bowstrings thwacking, arrows soaring into the city or the back end of the emerging force. Yaevar’s men caught up with him, and Maggie watched the sickening crunch as flesh and mail and sword came together in a writhing crush, the cries of defiance mingling with the shriller screams of agony. She turned and walked further up the hill, doing what she could to blot it all out.

It was over quickly. But whilst Yaevar had spared her from the battle itself, he did not spare her from its aftermath, and summoned her shortly after the fighting had ended.

Walking numbly through the carnage, Maggie arrived at the longhouse in the southern quarter of town. It was a narrow hall roughly the length of a sports field, with several smouldering marks on its thatch roof and a chunk missing from its wall. The inside was hot and smoky and lit by a great firepit, running the length of the room. Though it smelled richly of fine food, the benches were empty. At first Maggie could not work out where the smell was coming from, but then spied the charcoaled remains of a roast chicken in the firepit. Had the lord and lady of Ore burned their banquet out of spite? Had they destroyed whatever food they hadn’t the chance to eat, rather than allow Yaevar and his men the pleasure? It appeared so, and Maggie couldn’t begrudge them.

She found Yaevar in quarters at the far end, partitioned by a curtain. He mightn’t be dead, but a thick gash ran from his bearded chin to his left eyebrow, deep and bleeding freely, but Yaevar was beaming.

“Maggie,” he said, ignoring the woman. “I had already slain the man who gave me this. My scimitar was in his gut, the life draining out of him. But whilst the dead are harmless, the dying alas are not. I was negligent. I didn’t see it coming.”

“It will leave a scar,” the old woman said brusquely. “You’ll be disfigured for life, a freak.”

Yaevar only laughed. “I hope so. A warrior looks far better with a scar. I’ve got plenty, but this shall be my first in plain view. A badge of honour, and a personal reminder never to let my guard down.”

“Course, you Mazmorian all think it’s perfect to be sliced and diced in battle. All’s right with the world.” She looked sadly out the longhouse window at the rubble that used to be her town.

Not wanting to enter a theological debate, Yaevar became irritable and waved the old woman away, assuring her grandly that neither she nor the surviving townsfolk would be mistreated.

“Indeed,” Maggie said, though she lingered in the longhouse after the old woman stalked away. Quietly, she pressed, “You *will* treat them right?”

“But of course,” Yaevar said. “They fought well, and in defeat graciously sent a healer to tend me. Honourable enemies deserve honourable treatment. With me as their lord, they shall have it. Now go.”

Maggie took her leave, and upon emerging from the longhouse was hit again by the stench of death and burning, the reek as foul as anything she could describe. She leaned against the wall of the longhouse and retched and would doubtless have vomited if she’d eaten in the past twelve hours.

“Hurry, Doctor,” she whispered, staring at her feet and trembling. “Please hurry...”

Effram

The town of Effram was nestled a few days north of Moryk Mire. On the other side of the forests lay a rugged expanse of hills and valleys that extended right the way up to the snow-capped mountains of the Kingdom of Sal’Jik. The sight of those mountains made the Doctor emotional. Was Maggie still within them? Was she still alive? What had those hill-dwelling barbarians been doing to her in that time? Could he be too late? Had all this trauma, all this pain, been for naught? Or would she be another companion dead? Another young soul, swept away by the current of his deadly life?

He didn’t remember Katarina especially well. His memory of his first two lives was incomplete and fuzzy and devoid of any colour, with whole periods missing entirely. He attributed this to his capture and exile; in stealing the secrets of the TARDIS – wiping all knowledge of piloting it from his mind – the Time Lords had done irretrievable damage to his memory of the events before. Now and then, bits and pieces came back, but he doubted, sadly, he would ever have a complete set of memories from before his exile.

He vaguely recalled Katarina. He had barely rescued her from Troy before she had died. There was Sara Kingdom as well, but his memories of her were just as hazy. The pain and sadness of their deaths, and his inability to save them—he remembered that too well; it still stung him, reminded him that he was all too powerless sometimes.

Adric was another story. Adric, he remembered. Just a boy. An irritating know-it-all, sulking and full of arguments, alone even among his friends in the TARDIS, yet with a heart of gold. Gone. That pain was sharper—the shock, and the endless, crushing guilt that plagued him for the remainder of his fifth life. He sometimes wondered whether his sixth persona was partly a result of Adric. Was crazy old Six born so callous because to feel as keenly as Five hurt too much? It was a question he would have liked to put to some of his old tutors at the Academy, all of whom had differing views on how far the subconscious influenced the regenerative process.

And as for Tamara, there was an episode he wasn’t liable to forget, however long he lived. He’d never forgive himself for it. To die is one thing; to never have existed is even worse.

He *could not* lose another. He could *not* lose Maggie.

She might already be lost, hissed a spiteful voice in his head, perhaps the voice of those earlier selves judging him for his carelessness, for not learning from their pain. As the days wore on, that voice – those voices – grew louder, and his hopes faded.

They arrived outside the walls of Effram exactly twenty-five days after the attack on the tournament. Twenty-five days of uncertainty, pain, suffering, and the agonising knowledge that whatever his own troubles, Maggie’s were surely far worse.

The Doctor, Marter and Karrow rode ahead to the south gate of the town. It was guarded by a wall at the north and south end, flanked between two hills to the east and west. Karrow – the leader of what now comprised a substantial chunk of their force – declared himself worthy of a seat at Marter’s table, and Marter was too weary to argue. The Doctor suspected that he’d been feeling unwell ever since the swamp, though he did his best to hide it. The goblin had been eating and sleeping in the command tent, sitting in on all their meetings, and riding at the head of the convoy with his chest puffed out and his back straight, and a general air of insufferable pomposity.

A pasty-faced man in a surcoat and mail, a scabbard at his hip and a crossbow over his back, rode out to greet them. His weaponry made clear the kind of hospitality on offer.

“You’ll have to forgive the precautions,” he told them. His eyes were vivid green with silver pupils. “I am Guy, eldest son and heir of Lord Iain of Effram.”

“Charmed,” Marter said listlessly, his voice weak. “Do you mean to tell us we aren’t welcome here? Frankly, we’re getting used to that.”

“Not at all,” Iain said. “You’ll find few greater patriots than the Lord of Effram and his people. We are keen to defend our homeland, die in the process if we must. You know that Ore fell a few days ago? The savages cannot be far away, and we will surely be next. But we’ve heard disturbing reports from the south. From Glowe. We understand that their hospitality was not accepted. My father wishes me to convey a message: we are larger than Glowe, and better armed. We earnestly wish to welcome you, but we can defend ourselves if we must.”

“Soman scum,” Karrow rasped aggressively. “Open the gates, now, or my goblins will prise them open by force.”

“Thank you, Karrow,” Marter said. He unsheathed his sword and dropped to one knee, planting the blade in the dirt. “On my honour, Lord Guy. What happened in Glowe will not happen to Effram. Nor anywhere else.”

“Up, my lord,” Guy said. “I do not doubt your sincerity, and nor would my father. But you did not choose to tear Glowe apart. You lost control, and failed to regain it until it was too late. You swear that our town will be safe, but ultimately, that decision rests with your men.” Guy looked at the Doctor. “My lord father requires a surety, to ensure that the peace is kept.”

“What did he have in mind?” Marter asked, smothering a hacking cough.

“Oh, not what,” Guy said, still staring at the Doctor. *‘Whom.’*”

The Doctor blinked. “Excuse me?”

“They say that Lord Hespys himself rides at the head of this army,” Guy said. “This is he?”

The Doctor exchanged a glance with Marter, wondering if the soldier would give him up out of spite. He hesitated a moment. “Yes.”

“Father insists that Lord Hespys surrenders himself into our custody. Whilst with us, he will be treated as nothing less than royalty. And so it will remain – provided your men keep the peace.”

The Doctor cleared his throat. “Lord Guy, you overestimate the value Captain Marter’s men place on my life. I think it’s fair to say he’d be glad to see the back of me.”

“You are a figure of legend, my lord, however much you humble yourself. Our reasoning is that few men, however depraved, would bear responsibility for anything happening to you. You will accompany me back to the palace. Once there, the gates shall be opened, and the army shall be permitted to pass through and lay camp on the plains to the north. We will supply food and ale, and the fighting men of Effram will be honoured to join the campaign. I shall lead them myself. And provided all passes without incident, you will be free to go.”

Marter turned to the Doctor and shrugged, smirking.

“See what I mean, Lord Guy?” the Doctor said. “Very well. Lead the way.”

In the event, the Doctor's captivity didn't last long.

All was unfolding as Lord Guy had sworn it would. After a cordial meeting with the ageing Lord Iain in the palace, the Doctor had been shown to glorious quarters in one of the towers. He had a circular room with a midnight blue rug, a hearty fire, a great four-poster featherbed, and an oak bathtub hidden behind a wicker partition. They'd drawn him a bath, steaming hot water glittering in the candlelight. It had been far too long since he'd washed properly. Stripping out of his mail with the help of a maid, he eased himself into the water and sighed, holding his breath and submerging before rising. To his surprise, the maid did not leave. She sent his clothes away to be washed and stood dutifully with a brass jug.

"Could I help you, my lord?" she said. "I could scrub your back. Or...elsewhere. If you'd like."

"I can normally manage," he replied, smiling. "Long arms. But thank you."

She smiled back, fluttering her eyelids at him in a peculiar way. Did she have something in her eye, he wondered?

"You're handsome," she told him.

"Yes, I suppose I am." Her cheeks were flushed faintly pink. It was hot in the room. "Do you know, I've never had a face I didn't like. I was a bit unsure about my third to start with, but it grew on me. They say regeneration's a lottery, but I've been lucky thus far."

She giggled. "I don't know what you're talking about, my lord. But aren't you going to say something nice to me in return?"

"Um..." he said. "Well, yeah. Yeah. Did you draw this bath? It's lovely. The temperature is *just* right. Hot, but not scalding."

She set the jug down and gave him a scornful look. "Summon me when you're done." She left the room and slammed the door shut.

He shrugged and chuckled sadly, sinking back into the water and shutting his eyes, lying perfectly still.

He might have dozed off, had it not been for the ethereal cry of a horn. He rose grudgingly from the bath and the maid rushed back in with a coarse fibre towel and fresh clothes, bottle-green trousers and a loose-fitting silk shirt that was dazzling white.

He raced barefoot from the room with the shirt hanging open, water still glistening on his chest. He made his way up to the roof of the tower, where a bitter north wind slapped him hard in the face. The watchman blew again into the horn, the noise ear-splitting at this proximity, and it wasn't long before Marter arrived, and Lord Iain and Guy, and Karrow too. They looked to the windswept grey plains to the north, the distant mountains of Sal'Jik congealing with the clouds on the horizon. The Doctor spied the snaking progress of the army, the camp a few yards from the northern gate. Lord Iain accepted an eyeglass from the watchman and squinted north.

Grimly, he handed it to Marter. "They've made good progress. That's too big to be an advance party."

Marter took a brief glance through the eyeglass and nodded. "Oh yes. That's them. All of them."

He handed it to the Doctor. He had already deduced what he would see, but the sight still came as a shock. There were so many of them, camped no more than two miles to the north on a flatter expanse of land. Tents of blood red flapped violently in the wind. The Doctor saw figures in black marching between, and thought he spied the green bulk of an Ice Warrior or two here and there. Hundreds of tents. Thousands of troops. And even from a distance, it all appeared so orderly, so disciplined; it put Marter's ragtag rabble to shame.

"It's time," Marter growled.

“Someone’s watching us,” Yaevar said. He was standing outside the command tent, peering at the town sandwiched between two hills to the south.

“How can you tell from this distance?” Maggie demanded.

“On one of the towers. I can see the wink of the sun, reflecting off a lens. Someone is watching us through a scope. Scouting us, perhaps attempting a count. Well, let them count, and despair.”

A sergeant rushed up and dropped to one knee. “Your Majesty...Captain Marter’s army are assembling north of the town.”

Yaevar’s grinned, his new wound straining grotesquely as the stitches shifted. “Then let’s begin!”

“I’ll be leading the vanguard,” Marter said. “Karrow – can I count on your people to join me?”

Karrow grinned wickedly. “If that’s where the thickest of the fighting is, that’s where you’ll find us.”

The Doctor frowned. “Captain Marter, the vanguard is almost certain to put you in the direct path of the Ice Warriors. You won’t stand a chance.”

“I may not be much, but I ask nothing of my men that I would not do myself. I *must* be on the frontlines.”

The Doctor nodded solemnly. “I understand.”

“Do you?” Marter exclaimed. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’d better get started. Karrow, with me. Goodbye Lord Hespys. I doubt we’ll meet again.”

“You’ve never much liked me,” the Doctor noted sardonically. Marter looked hurt that his dislike meant so little to the Doctor. “And I’m afraid the feeling is mutual. But all the same – good luck, captain. And to you Karrow.”

“And to you,” he said, turning on his heel and marching unsteadily downstairs with Karrow.

“Majesty,” Ssal croaked.

“What is it?” Yaevar said. He had donned red plate armour trimmed with gold, over a full suit of black mail. Cloaked in a black cape and holding two scimitars, his fearsome bearing was completed by the golden spaulders, on his shoulders, shaped like dragon heads. He wore gloves of red mail beneath spike-fingered gauntlets, and a helmet shaped like a dragon. Sheathed on a studded leather belt around his waist were a sickle, a dagger, and a nasty curved hatchet. Through the slits in his helmet, his baby blue eyes were alive with excitement. With the grey of his goatee concealed, he gave off the air of a far younger man—perhaps even a child.

“*Most of the...Ice Warriors are here...we stand ready...*” Ssal wheezed. “*Yet a unit has...fallen behind. Permission to...fall back...and assist?*”

“What’s happened?” Yaevar said, barely listening. “Sickness? Injury?”

“Age,” Ssal said. “*Those farthest...behind...are the oldest of us...the slowest. But still armed. Still eager to...fight.*”

“Then go,” he said carelessly, prancing around the command tent like a grossly oversized, armoured toddler in a candy store.

“This is it,” he said. “I may or may not survive. That doesn’t matter. This is the one I’ll be remembered for, Maggie. If we can punch through Marter’s line and cross Moryk Mire, the road to Ylymm will be clear. We could take the entire realm! Alive or no, I will be the King who conquered All.”

Maggie nodded, wishing as she had so many times that she could make Yaevar aware of the paucity and barrenness of his vision. “Your Majesty...”

He chuckled. "Don't tell me – there's nothing you can say to that?"

Maggie shook her head. "Not much."

"Hmm. Well, I have left orders that in the event of my death, you should not be harmed, nor touched by any man."

Maggie nodded, thankful of the sentiment but grimly aware that a dead king would find it awfully hard to enforce his orders.

He stepped out of the tent and issued an almighty battle cry, the roaring of thousands of men reverberating in Maggie's eardrums, making the soil beneath her feet vibrate.

Grimacing, she glanced south. There was nothing she could do now but wait.

Contact

Viscount Marter grew up in the lush orchards of the Biggon Estates, at the southernmost tip of the kingdom of All. Raised as a peasant boy and later orphaned, he had been brought up in the light of Trantys, flitting between monasteries and abbeys, until he reached maturity and threw himself headlong into his studies.

He was given his habit in his seventeenth year. He was a monk.

Perhaps he ought to have stayed a monk.

He would never have found the glory and riches that a place at the King's (and later the Queen's) table provided. It would be a world where the name Marter would have meant nothing, a world where he would have been known to only those select few with whom he brushed shoulders in life. Depressing indeed.

On the other hand...if he had stayed a monk, he surely wouldn't have found himself here.

Being in the vanguard didn't feel brave any more. It felt stupid. Could he flee? Probably not. Having spent so long advocating for total warfare, pushing men past the brink, bringing violence on those who did not obey his will, only sparing the life of that fraud Hespys due to his silver tongue ... now, at the moment it mattered most, did he really care about setting a bad example?

The odds didn't look great. Lined up a quarter mile north across the plains were battalions in red and black, accompanied by numerous Ice Warriors in deep green shells. Marter realised he commanded the inferior force: larger, yes, but the larger side wasn't always the victorious one. Worse, his was several armies merged uneasily, their numbers inflated by ill-trained peasants and brutish goblins. Across the way stood a force that bowed to one man, a force with one purpose and one objective. The enemy was simply better, even without their Ice Warriors. Add the green demons into the mix, with their vastly superior armaments and knowledge, and the disadvantage increased.

And yet at the eleventh hour, backup had arrived in the unlikely form of Tadzu Sugo'Hai. That frightful creature had decided to do his duty and arrived in Effram with less than an hour to spare and a five-hundred-man battalion. The cynic in him suspected Tadzu's motives were purely selfish, to maximize the slim chance of victory and secure his prize from Hespys...or whoever he was.

For a long moment, nothing happened. Marter briefly forgot he was in charge.

He sighed and flipped down his visor. He believed there was such a thing as a good death, but this wasn't going to be it.

"On!" he bellowed, raising his sword. There was an ear-splitting roar as the men surged forwards, all of them – including him – quickly overtaken by the goblins. They moved with astonishing speed for

creatures so crooked, screeching and jeering and whooping as they rushed headlong into the barbed embrace of death.

There were flashes of blue from the approaching enemy frontlines, and men began to fall all around, struck dead before they'd even crossed swords. Many goblins went down, being the closest and easiest targets.

That Marter himself was not struck and killed before the two sides impacted was sheer dumb luck. He found himself lost in a churning sea of flying steel and crushing bodies. Blades of all shapes and sizes flew and whipped and tore through the chill evening air, screams of rage were drowned by howls of agony, the earth underfoot churned to mud by countless, stamping feet. It was as if the world had been turned inside out, as though reality itself had been pulped and boiled and turned into a maelstrom of chaos and death.

He parried, he deflected blades that cut his way, thrust at targets that he hoped to be his foe. Plans, order, and discipline were all part of that other world. This was a world where nothing made sense, a world without rules. A world where friend and foe were one and same, and what did it matter either way? A world where whatever moved was worthy of a blade to the heart.

He had no idea how long he lasted, nor did he feel the sonic blast that spelled his end. He'd survived a scimitar to the chest, his breastplate stopping its curved blade, when a nearby Ice Warrior aimed his gun and struck true. Marter glanced down to see the armour glow red hot. But despite the heat, he felt no burning.

He didn't feel anything much...

Oh...how strange. He was lying down. Hadn't he been standing a moment ago?

The end, then.

But I did my duty, he thought. I did it and I did it well. And that's –

Syylorg would never admit as much – it was a gross dishonour for an Ice Warrior to even contemplate fear – but he couldn't help but feel a trifle uneasy about those small, wiry creatures.

The humans didn't faze him one bit. Weak, breakable specimens, susceptible to injury and disease. And deception.

But for all their paltry size, those companions were hardy beasts. He saw one leap onto the back of an Ice Warrior and wrench him to the mud by his neck, hacking clear through his shell to the defenceless flesh beneath. Syylorg had killed it with a blast to the face, but from then on had done whatever he could to avoid those creatures, to engage only the humans in combat.

He succeeded for a little while. But then one came at him. This particular one, in an ill-fitting byrnie, was swinging a flail so fast that the chain was scarcely visible as it whipped through the air, the ball a blur. Syylorg raised his arm and fired. The creature dodged, and the beam struck a nearby human instead. Syylorg fired again. The creature dodged a second time. And then, bursting into laughter, it threw itself at Syylorg, flail swinging, ready to smash him to pulp. But Syylorg was ready. As its feet left the ground, Syylorg fired a third time, and this one struck true. Caught in midair, the creature was blasted back by the force of the beam and fell dead to the mud, where it was trampled underfoot by the crushing tide of combatants.

Syylorg was proud of himself. A good shot.

The pride did not last. The sword through his back put paid to it, driven straight through his armour shell with incredible strength by another of the small creatures, the blade emerging glistening green through his chest. Hissing, Syylorg collapsed to his knees and pitched forwards onto his front.

It was said that Ice Warriors loved the cold; in fact, it wasn't strictly true. They just didn't feel it. They favoured a cold climate not because they enjoyed the chill, but because it was the only climate in which they felt comfortable, neither hot nor cold.

But Syylorg was cold now.

For the first and final time in his life, Syylorg the Ice Warrior thought that he'd really like to warm up a bit.

It was just so co –

Royce was on the verge of deserting after what happened in Glowe. Not because he was a coward (though goodness knows, he was afraid) but because the barbarism of his fellow men broke his heart, and destroyed his faith in the cause. They were marching to war to beat back the savages; if they became themselves the savages, what right did they have to survive? Why shouldn't Yaevar and his barbarians take power in Ylymm? What would be the difference?

Why didn't he flee? The fear of getting caught and executed, primarily. But beyond that, he told himself that the Kingdom of All was not the sum of those guilty men. The Kingdom of All was better than that. *He* was better than that. And he would not desert his realm on account of a few lowly men.

Now he was here, however...he rather wished that he had.

One of his fingers was already missing, sliced away by the scimitar of a Mazmorian heretic. He was splattered head to toe, sporting cuts and grazes all over while the stump of his finger smarted particularly as it bled thick and free, dirt congealing in the wound. Even if he survived the battle, infection would surely take him.

He wasn't a soldier. A farmhand is all he'd ever wanted to be; a good and honest man, toiling hard to support the family that were his world. He had never wanted grandeur; he had never sought honour. It was folly to think you could simply stick a sword in a man's hand and expect him to fight well.

A shocking force hit his neck from behind. Dropping his sword, he was lifted bodily by the throat, his hands desperately scrabbling to relieve the pressure. His neck was caught in some sort of a vice. Looking down past his flailing feet, he saw the strange, reptilian hooves of an Ice Warrior. It had him by the gullet. His eyes bulged in their sockets, and he tried to kick backwards in the vain hope that the creature might drop him.

But the Ice Warrior's grip grew only tighter, the sharp edges of the pincer cutting into his flesh. Tighter, tighter, tigh –

Aartek was dying already. It was why he fought so hard, throwing himself into the thickest of the fighting, ramming the enemy with his armoured bulk while he chopped incessantly at them. He used his pain as fuel, turned it into rage, which, in turn, kept him on his feet when truly he ought to have been in bed.

He wasn't scared. Death was a part of life. There was no denying that his time was coming to an end in any case, and with that he had made peace. The weight loss, the gnawing pains in his gut, the blood that accompanied his bowel movements, the bloody vomit that sometimes came up after he forced himself to eat something...well...he was no physician, but he was learned enough to suspect that a tumour in his bowels ailed him – and to know that there wasn't any cure.

Then what was left to lose? Better to die sword in hand than soiling himself in bed. A good, Mazmorian death at the end of a devout Mazmorian life.

And then, suddenly, there was a dull thud in his chest, followed by an odd twist of discomfort. Something hot, wet and sticky dribbled down his torso. He glanced down, expecting a blade. There wasn't one. Just a wooden shaft, still vibrating faintly. The archer responsible was standing a few feet away.

"You coward," he bellowed, waving his scimitar in the air. "Strike a man dead from a distance, would you? Craven weasel! Face me. Put down your bow and..."

And the archer nocked another arrow and drew back the string and -

As far as Skarr could tell, he was the last goblin standing. That didn't make him sad. He'd join the others in death soon enough. And whichever side prevailed would sing songs of his tribe, tell tales of how hard they fought. A legacy is all one can hope to leave behind. Wouldn't it be wonderful if he himself were mentioned in the songs, the lone goblin, fighting on ferociously while his fellows lay fallen?

As last stands went, his didn't last long. He was already bleeding from a score of wounds, his armour caked in green blood. And without warning, as he raised his mace to take out another enemy, that something inside him simply *gave*, and his legs folded under, bringing him tumbling into the dirt. He tried to rise. His legs failed him. He tried to use the mace to pull himself to his feet. It was hopeless. The pain of some grievous internal hurt overwhelmed him. His vision blurred. Before he lost consciousness, he took inventory. Scores of dead lay in the dirt all around, but of those left alive, at least in the immediate vicinity, he couldn't help but think that they were mostly the Sal'Jik men.

Would they win the day, then? Maybe. He just hoped there would be room in their tales for a courageous enemy such as -

They were all just meat, weren't they?

The closing moments of a battle were among the only times when Yaevar's steadfast faith in the teachings of Mazmoria faltered, the only times he paused to think, to doubt...to wonder if, after all, all around him was not perfect; if his way might *not* be the right way.

He and his people were creatures of breakable flesh and gushing blood, distinct from beasts only by their intelligence. Doughy flesh held up by flimsy bones, base animals, a far cry from the noble entities Mazmoria supposed them to be.

Just look at what they had done to each other...

And this time, there were no winners. Though the battle had yet to end, Yaevar knew its outcome. Though his force had come off better, the losses were such that the campaign had ended. They couldn't progress farther south with so many men gone. The enemy had fought with greater gusto than he'd expected (and he saluted them for it), and their vicious scrawny goblin allies had proven a formidable counter to the Ice Warriors.

It was over. A handful remained standing on either side, but the vast majority lay broken and dead.

All that was left was to survive. And perhaps to take out a few more of the heathens in the process. Perhaps some of the traitors under the command of Tazdu Sugo'Hai, that wretched false Mazmorian.

His faith might be shaken momentarily, but never would it be vanquished.

"For Mazmoria!" he bellowed, as the last of his men locked swords with the last of Marter's.

Aftershock

"It seems we have no reason to detain you any longer," Lord Iain told the Doctor gravely. "Marter's force is a diminished wreck. They'll not be hurting anyone ever again."

The Doctor nodded. "And Yaevar?"

"I inspected his lines through my scope, over the thousands of dead between us and them. They too have been decimated. The two sides essentially wiped each other out. Only a couple of hundred left on either side. I never thought I'd say this – let alone think it – but Effram is indebted to Tadzu Sugo'Hai. Without his men, Yaevar's army may well have got the edge on us and won."

"Indeed," the Doctor said. "Now you should, theoretically, be safe."

"For now," Iain agreed. "But with half our menfolk now dead – including my son – I have a great deal of work to do. But we *will* rebuild. You are welcome to stay and help – but free to leave."

The Doctor bowed his head. "My condolences, lord."

"Thank you. And if you aren't staying, I'd advise you to ride south. Only the dead and the soulless lie north of here."

"I must go north," the Doctor countered. "Because even now, I live in hope that you're wrong about that."

He found Tadzu Sugo'Hai sitting alone in the hall of Iain's castle. The journey north had taken it out of the old man. He sat perched on one of the bench seats with the remnants of last night's melancholy feast. He looked up at the sound of the Doctor's footsteps and managed a twisted half-smile.

"I came for myself. Not for Jessalyn. Not for you. And certainly not for Marter. A good Mazmorian is honest. He does not lie to himself, nor to anyone else. I came here with my men to secure my prize. I trust you are here to deliver."

"I believe that Lord Iain has the ingredients I need," the Doctor confirmed. "While Marter and Yaevar were seeking this pointless glory, I whipped up a sample of an antifungal solution." He handed the desiccated lord a small vial. "I've left instructions for his physician, so that he can produce it in bulk. Do not expect an immediate improvement, my lord. But over a few days, you should start to notice a difference. And in a few short weeks, I think you will have no further use for that mask."

Tadzu slugged back the vial. He already felt better, but knew that it was merely the desperate and false hope of the perennially sick. Using this new burst of vitality, he struggled to his feet and placed a gloved hand on the Doctor's shoulder. "I will not forget this. Your debt to me has been paid a hundredfold."

"Which makes you in my debt," the Doctor said. "And as it happens, there is something you can do for me."

“Name it.”

“Yours is not an inherently evil religion. It is one that can be twisted to evil designs, but what religion can’t be? Mazmorianism does not require the baseless spilling of blood, or war for war’s sake. You know that, you understand that. Spread that message far and wide. In the time you have left, ensure that the proper way of Mazmorianism blooms and Yaevar’s bloodthirsty beliefs die out.”

“I swear it.”

“We’ve increased our territories,” Yaevar informed his councillors in the command tent. “We did not reach Ylymm, we did not conquer All. And yet the past month has seen us make gains, gains upon which future generations of Sal’Jik warriors will surely build. I am satisfied, as should all at this table be.”

“We were let down,” one of the men at the table said. “Ssal and the rest of the stragglers never arrived. With their support, things might have been different.”

“Perhaps,” Yaevar said. “And they shall answer for that at the right time. As shall that heretic-lover Sugo’Hai, someday. But for now, my orders are for a division of men to remain behind and guard the border. The rest of us will return north.”

They assented and filed out, leaving Maggie alone with Yaevar, still clutching her decanter of wine. He turned and held out his goblet.

“Pour one for yourself as well,” he said. “Then set it down.”

She obeyed, and upon his invitation took a place at the table. She sipped the wine. It was dry and rich, so strong that it made her head spin.

“Well then.”

She shrugged. “Well.”

“Please, say what’s on your mind.”

“Very well, I shall. Many men dead. All because of you.”

“That’s right,” Yaevar said. “All because of me. And now, I think, it is time to go home.”

“Great.”

He chuckled. “The mountains are my home, and I long to see them again. But I suspect home for you is not – and never will be – any land of mine.”

She stared at him, trying to bully her exhausted brain into comprehension. Gradually it clicked, but she didn’t dare believe she was understanding him correctly.

“You mean...”

“I mean it is time to go home,” he repeated. “You don’t belong to the same life as me.”

Her eyes began to sting with tears. Her heart began to pound.

“You mean it?” she whispered.

He drained his goblet and nodded. “You have been a good servant and good company. And in recognition of that, I release you. Go.”

Shaking all over, she rose to her feet. “Thank you,” she stammered, darting out of the tent before he changed his mind.

“If you keep it clean, you’ll be fine,” the Doctor said for the twelfth time since arriving in the medical tent, briefly clasping the hand of the wounded man before moving to the next. Scores of injured lay on cots, stacked like sardines, torn limbs splayed and open wounds grinning toothless and red on naked torsos. There were screams as stumps were sizzled shut, the smell of blood and burning flesh heavy and metallic in the stagnant, canvas-trapped air. The majority would survive, provided they avoided infection.

“Let me,” he said grimly, seizing a lad by the shoulders and pinning him to the bed. His right leg was a mangled mess of blood and splintered bone. The barber stood over him, glinting blade in hand, whilst an old woman stood ready with a burning torch. The barber knew his craft, and it wasn’t long before the old woman was burning shut the stump that was all that remained of the boy’s leg.

“You’ll stitch him up too?” the Doctor asked the old healer.

“I know what I’m doing,” was her gruff reply.

As keen as he was to press on with the search, the Doctor’s good nature had compelled him to help the injured first. The medical tent was pitched just north of Effram, and stepping out into the sunlight provided little relief, the sight of the corpse-strewn battlefield every bit as torrid as the horrors inside the tent. Humans, Ice Warriors and Goblins finally lay united in death, lying still, and at peace as the flies and Soma’s enormous, red-winged birds of prey danced from carcass to carcass. Why did it have to be this way so often?

Across the sea of bodies, the Mazmorian frontlines were depleting, the enemy forces packing up and returning north. Movement north-west caught his eye. Most of Marter’s army – those still alive, and able to walk – had already started home. That poor soul was staggering for a sanctuary that was no longer there; unless they were a citizen of Effram, their lord would have almost certainly left without them.

For some reason, the Doctor could not take his eyes off the approaching figure. He didn’t look wounded at all. The closer he drew, the more certain the Doctor became that what he’d mistaken for a limp was simply them avoiding the bodies.

He was a small man. Very small...not a man at all, but a woman. An unarmoured woman, at that. What could such a person possibly be doing out there?

There was a dark-skinned man in a loose silk shirt and green pantaloons standing outside the gates of the city, beside a large canvas tent. Maggie thought little of him. Her main focus was on watching where she walked, avoiding stepping on any of the dead. There were some grotesque hunchbacked figures, whom she supposed must have fought for the southerners; she hadn’t seen anything like them during her time with Yaevar.

She glanced again at the man beside the tent. And for some reason, she couldn’t take her eyes off him...

The woman was looking his way. She was staring at him. He wondered why.

But not for long.

He was familiar. For the briefest moment, it didn’t click. She was sure she saw the glint of a majestic gold bird on his breast. The sigil of Hespys, surely it was! When it did click, she didn’t dare believe it. It was like being released all over again, she couldn’t accept what her senses were telling her, couldn’t bring herself to believe for fear of crushing disappointment. Yet when she blinked, the man remained. He was no illusion. He was real. He was there.

He began to sprint towards her. And she to him.

With a cry of joy, she threw herself into his arms. They laughed, they sobbed, they squeezed one another as tight as they could. Hugging him wasn't very comfortable on account of his armour, but that didn't stop her. Nothing would stop her. He lifted her bodily and she wept uncontrollably into his shoulder, trying and failing to find the words. There were none; for now, at least, their sobs were saying everything that needed to be said.

It was finally, finally over.

The Age of the Ice Warriors

A part of Ssal felt guilty.

He respected a good warrior, which Yaevar was. And good warriors deserve honest dealings, even if those dealings are adversarial.

Were it not for Yaevar's army, Ssal would never have been found frozen beneath the icefall. He would never have been thawed. And other men would have left him lying in the snow to die. He was weak, frail. Yaevar had no fear of him, no pity. Only fascination. He took Ssal in and gave him everything he needed to heal. Often he visited his sick chamber and talk to him, keen to learn more of his kind, sometimes for hours. Ssal grew fond of those interactions.

Were it not for Yaevar, he would never have regained the strength. Yaevar was the saviour of the Ice Warriors. The cost of his help was subservience, true, but it was his right. Ssal didn't begrudge him it.

So yes; a part of him felt guilty.

However, it hadn't the strength to bring about a change of heart, and nor would a change of heart make any difference now. If he tried to back down, his kind would simply kill him and press ahead as planned.

Yaevar was a clever man. Yet more prone to excitement than he cared to let on, so easily distracted by promise of battle and honour and legacy. The mind of man is so terribly limited. But even then, too much enthusiasm might have made him suspicious. Ssal was discreet. A little compliment here...a little encouragement there...and in due course the warrior king was riding to war, taking his army away from the mountains.

Ssal left camp to meet not with a few aged, struggling Ice Warriors, but rather a full battalion of two hundred. They were well on their way home by the time the battle on the plains north of Effram commenced.

The gates of Paemohynn were freely opened to admit them. Why wouldn't they be? The Ice Warriors were friends, after all. They had the confidence of the king, and thus of his people.

Posing as friends, they marched freely through the immaculate streets, their shells glittering with condensation from the steam rising from the warming currents cut into the pavements. The citizens of Paemohynn looked on as they marched through the city, covering as many of the spotless streets as they could, taking positions before the eyes of the hapless humans, the most intelligent of whom, too late, were starting to sense something amiss.

Ssal took the first shot, executing a baker stood outside his igloo-shaped shop. On his cue, the other Ice Warriors began to fire, the frigid air filled with the howl of their sonic weapons and the frantic

screams of peasants fleeing for cover, barricading themselves into their stout, heat-trapping homes to buy themselves a few moments more.

There was no honour in slaughtering peasants. Ssal hadn't enjoyed it in Ylymm, and he didn't enjoy it now. But it was a necessary evil. There was no place for these people in the new Soma; the Ice Warriors did not take slaves.

With the sounds of a city dying reverberating in his ears, Ssal led a small group of Ice Warriors north, heading for Yaevar's tower. There was no resistance. Yaevar, along with the great bulk of the city's fighting men were far away, carried by the Ice Warriors to the field of their false war.

The sentries on the battlements watched unfolding slaughter. The drawbridge was raised, leaving the steaming moat between them and the Ice Warriors. But they were fools to believe it would save them. Ssal fired twice, bringing down the drawbridge's supporting chains. Arrows rained from the battlements as Ssal led his comrades across, the shafts bouncing uselessly from their shells. Directly above the portcullis, two men were manning an enormous iron cauldron, thick plumes of ugly grey steam rising from its mouth. Ssal once again shot true, the vat exploding in a burning rush of scorching black pitch, showering the men. Screaming, burning, one collapsed and died on the spot whilst the other threw himself over the parapet and into the scalding moat.

The bars of the portcullis were no match for their strength. Locking pincers and prising them loose, a gap wide enough to admit them was carved out in seconds. Ssal went through first, marching into the courtyard, where he met with a pitiful excuse of a last stand: Yaevar's three advisors, all old men, leading a small band of aged guards and hapless servants clutching kitchen knives.

"Mazmorian to...the last," Ssal croaked at them. *"We salute your...courage."*

He raised his arm and shot down the court physician. The tower's final defence surged forwards, weapons raised, but every one of them fell before getting within five feet of the Ice Warriors.

The city was theirs; the tower was theirs. The whole of Sal'Jik would be theirs before long. Not that the whole of Sal'Jik would ever be enough.

"Our people lie frozen," Ssal declared. *"But we will...thaw them! The humans will fight...and we will slaughter them! The age is upon us. The age...of the Ice Warriors."*

A single, fat snowflake fluttered down in his line of sight. He craned his neck to see more falling, the skies above a brilliant white, a freezing wind starting to blow from the north, as though the weather itself were celebrating their victory.

"The Age of the Ice Warriors! The Age of the Ice Warriors!" hissed his comrades.

The Red Planet

“The captain died bravely,” the Doctor told Jessalyn. “They all did.”

He and Maggie were standing in the throne room. A great stained-glass window behind the Queen dazzled with a thousand colours. Mingling behind were members of the gentry, all listening gravely, all edging closer to the throne. The deaths of several knights and nobleman on campaign had left vacancies that needed to be filled, and to Maggie’s disdainful eye they were like a pack of hyenas creeping closer to their prey, eager to leech from the Queen whatever rank, holding, or title they might squeeze.

Maggie had only pity for the poor Queen, close to tears as she heard about the loss of her captain. The enormity of all they had risked, all they had lost, was barely comprehended by the young woman. She could not imagine what Maggie, or what the Doctor, had experienced on her behalf, still less what compelled Marter to go to such insane lengths to preserve the kingdom.

“You both leave with my blessing,” she said, her voice choked but steady. “But before you do, you may wish to know something.”

“Oh?”

Queen Jessalyn smiled despite her teary eyes. “I think King Yaevar will not trouble us again. Shortly prior to your return, my council received word from our spies in the north. Yaevar has tucked tail and fled to the frozen wastes. A greater threat has risen.”

Maggie and the Doctor exchanged a glance.

“The Ice Warriors.” Maggie said.

“Just so,” Jessalyn said. “The reports are not particularly clear, but insofar as we can tell, the Ice Warriors have sacked Paemonhynn and taken control. He marches his army north to retake the city. But that army is depleted and exhausted from fighting us.”

“In our opinion,” said Parrott, “his odds of success are low. It is our expectation and earnest hope he marches north to certain death, his kingdom forever lost.”

“Quite,” the Doctor said slowly. “Then if I might speak out of turn, Your Majesty?”

“Go on.”

“In spite of everything that has happened, I think you would be well advised to reach out to Yaevar and offer your support.”

A buzz of anger and shock sounded from the surrounding vultures, and Parrott was on her feet immediately, whispering in Jessalyn’s ear.

"I understand your doubts. But I would counsel thinking in the longer term. Do you suppose the Ice Warriors will stop at Sal'Jik? No. They will come for All next. In supporting Yaevar, you may help him prevail. And who knows...maybe someday, peace on Soma could be more than a dream."

"Do you think they'll listen?" Maggie asked, as they crossed the field back to the TARDIS, still parked unnoticed on the edge of the southern wood.

The Doctor smiled sadly. "I don't think so."

"Then you think the Ice Warriors will win? They will take over?"

"I'm afraid I do. But whether that's within their lifetimes, or in a few decades, or even a few centuries, I don't know. I never even knew this chapter of their history until now." His eyes gleamed with that explorer's enthusiasm. "One day though, this planet shall belong to the Ice Warriors. They're the more powerful species by far. As we said before landing here, different species, different eras, different levels of advancement. History is a bumpy ride. As I think we've had more reason to understand this time."

"Then Yaevar will die?" Maggie said.

"If he pitches himself against the Ice Warriors and leads from the front, then yes."

Maggie nodded, and wondered how she felt. He was the man who had kidnapped her, subjected her to horrors that would stay with her for the rest of her life. That one man should cause so much suffering to so many was appalling. And objectively, he deserved to die.

The Doctor gave her a sideways glance. "A touch of Stockholm Syndrome, Weitzar?"

She shuddered. "I don't know, Lord Hespys. But in himself...when it was just me and him...he never mistreated me, you know."

"Indeed," the Doctor said quietly. "You returned from his custody in better health than I dared to hope. And hey, I might have gotten it totally wrong. Perhaps Jessalyn will send help, after all. Perhaps they'll beat the Ice Warriors together. But I really think sadly not."

He sighed. "But this isn't their home planet, you know... unless of course it is."

"Eh?"

"They come from Mars. That's their ancestral seat."

"Mars?" Maggie exclaimed. "Our Mars?"

The very same," the Doctor said thoughtfully. "Not what you used to picture when you imagined a Martian, I'll bet."

"Not quite," Maggie said. "But I spoke to Ssal – one of the Ice Warriors, seemed to be some sort of leader – and he told me that *this*, Soma, was their planet."

"Did he indeed? Three options, then. Number one – Ssal was lying."

"Well, he was lying about everything else."

"Quite. Number two – I'm wrong. Perhaps they started here and conquered Mars later in the timeline. Seems unlikely somehow."

"If you say so," Maggie said. "And three?"

"Ah yes. Number three," the Doctor said, with a ghost of a smile. "Ssal was telling the truth. But I am also right. Soma and Mars are one and the same."

She stared at him. "This isn't Mars!"

"Isn't it?" he said thoughtfully. "A travelling planet, hurtling through space, eventually falls into the orbit of a passing star, and so their voyage at last comes to an end. Is it impossible?" He clapped her briefly on the shoulder and chuckled lightly.

"Nothing's impossible, right Doctor?" She felt a bit of that explorer's wonder herself, even after all this misery.

"Exactly!"

“And you’ve been coming to this planet all these times, not realising it was the one next door in the solar system, and that a race that hates your guts has been entombed underground all the while? And here I was thinking you were so observant, Doctor.”

“I’ve been known to miss the obvious.” He tapped his chin and looked out. “No, I won’t be able to figure it out overnight. I daresay if I stayed a little longer and did some studying, it’s a question I could probably answer. But I think it may be a question for another day, don’t you agree?”

“Very much.”

“Indeed. And not another day soon. I think I’ll strike Soma off my list for a few lifetimes at least. Let’s get out of here.”

As the Doctor firmly closed the TARDIS door, he considered the fourth option – one he would never voice aloud to Maggie. That the malign interfering presence dogging his footsteps these days—the same one who had helped Professor Erasmus travel through time and moved the Varanost into position to invade Durham, and had him captured by the Preservers¹ – was toying with him, altering history to tweak his nose, readying for their final confrontation.

As heavy a toll as their experiences on Soma had exacted, the Doctor reflected grimly, a still heavier reckoning may yet await them. He was happy to start the TARDIS engines and leave this planet far behind.

¹ See *The Doctor Who Project: The Horror of Count Wampyr, M.O.A.B., and A Mild Curiosity in a Junkyard*.

THE DOCTOR WHO PROJECT

The Doctor and Maggie land on Soma to attend the Kingdom of All's yearly joust. Despite initially enjoying themselves, the afternoon is soon upended by a familiar foe - the Ice Warriors, who waste no time in slaughtering countless locals and capturing several women, Maggie among them. In chains, they drag her north into the frozen mountains, delivering her into the hands of King Yaevar. A fearsome fighter, Yaevar has (apparently) brought the Ice Warriors into subservience, and plans to launch an attack on All. Taken in by Maggie's courage and resilience, he allows her to serve as his cupbearer.

In All, the Doctor joins up with the Queen's army, who march north to defend their territory from Yaevar. Led by the ruthless Captain Marter, the army proves to be an evil in itself, terrorizing settlements wherever it goes.

Riding south with Yaevar, Maggie accompanies him into a mysterious frozen cave, where an entire city of Ice Warriors are revived, ready to join the fight. Meanwhile, Marter and the Doctor have to traverse Moryk Mire, and the horrors that await them...

The forces collide and battle is joined...amidst the chaos, can the Doctor and Maggie keep themselves alive long enough to be reunited?

.....

This story features the Eleventh Doctor as played by Winston Adderly

