



THE
DOCTOR WHO
PROJECT

IN STEEL WE TRUST

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The planet Caldera was where broken things came to be forgotten — unless they remembered themselves. Once it was a mining colony, and over centuries, the galaxy’s imperial powers had stripped its assets and rendered it barren and devoid of life, scarred with pollution, radiation, and the stench of industry. Then a longer period passed when it lay abandoned; changing galactic borders rendered it remote and its former purpose unsavoury, and everyone thought someone else should clean the place up. Then the wars began, and Caldera became useful again. So now, it was a graveyard of machinery and those forgotten wars.

Its parched surface stretched for miles, the flat landscape covered in endless heaps of twisted steel. Where once there were mining towns, now there were cities of detritus. Towers of rusted cybernetic limbs loomed like mausoleums, silhouetted against a sky thick with ash and electromagnetic haze. The ground crunched underfoot — the crunch was not soil, but shattered visors, broken plating, hydraulic limbs, and synthetic bone. Somewhere beneath it all, old power cells of mighty star destroyers still hummed weakly, like the dying breath of long-dead giants.

The TARDIS landed on this hellish planet-wide heap with a metallic sigh — a reluctant exhalation that echoed off the jagged towers of scrap and steel. Dust hung in the air like ash, catching in the light of the phone box as its door swung open. The Doctor stepped out cautiously, his boots immediately crunching on shards of twisted alloy and bone-dry circuitry. At a sharp blast of the cold air, he slapped his maroon watch-cap onto his head. The air tasted scorched. Electrical. Ancient. He smacked his lips in distaste.

Maggie followed, hugging her puffy Canada goose winter coat tighter around her. The sky above Caldera was a bruised canvas — heavy with static clouds and veiled in fine industrial ash. There was no sun to be seen, only a dull, source-less glow that filtered through the haze like the memory of daylight. She too breathed in the air and didn’t like it; it was sterile and dry, tinged with the acrid tang of oxidized metal and scorched insulation. Every gust stirred loose fragments — a finger joint here, an exoskeleton there — sending them skittering down the slopes with a hollow rattle. Caldera hadn’t known war, only what war left behind. It was a planet consigned to silence — a place where dead machines came to rust, and no one came to mourn or remember them.

“Cheery,” she muttered. “Did you take a wrong turn at the recycling depot?”

The Doctor scanned the horizon. Blackened silhouettes pierced the skyline like rusted tombstones. Mountains of discarded metal stretched in every direction — some shaped like people,

others like nightmares. The landscape groaned beneath their feet, a mechanical death rattle buried deep underground.

“I didn’t bring us here,” he said quietly, frowning at the readings on the chunky detector device he had pulled from his coat. “The TARDIS did. On her own.”

Maggie gave him a sideways glance. “She’s done that a few times lately.”

He nodded grimly. “You’ve noticed that too, eh? Only when something’s wrong.”

“So what’s wrong here?”

The Doctor squinted into horizon, then looked back at the innocent-looking police box pitched atop the vast piles of debris. At times like this, its windowpanes seemed like eyes, or perhaps a mouth grinning eerily like the Cheshire Cat. “I wish she’d tell me. We’re far into the outer reaches of the galaxy, and quite a far-flung time period too. She may still be drawn to some lingering consequences of the Preservers’ damage to the space-time continuum ... or something nastier ...” He took a few steps forward, eyes narrowing at the looming spires in the distance — not built, but piled, like mausoleums of forgotten tech. Then: a pulse. Barely detectable. A flicker across the detection meter’s display.

“What is this place?” Maggie asked, crouching to pick up a strange metallic shard — blackened, curved, like part of a gauntlet. She was reminded of Xaul, who had until recently travelled with her and the Doctor, and whose right hand was cybernetic. Poor Xaul had felt so ashamed of the prosthetic limb; her culture, the Hux, feared and distrusted machines and cybernetics.

Maggie’s question still hung in the air. Before the Doctor had a chance to answer, a harsh buzz cracked overhead. Drones swept into view — clunky, patrolling machines with stubby wings and scanners that clicked menacingly as they passed.

A voice blared from above, distorted and cold: “Unregistered biologicals detected. State your identity or prepare for detention.”

The Doctor raised his hands, glancing up at the drones. “Lovely welcome. Honestly, you’d think junk planets would have lower security.”

The drones drew into formation, hovering in a tight circle above them. From behind a wall of twisted girders, figures emerged. Six of them stepped forward — seemingly human. Broad-shouldered, sharp-eyed, calm. Their uniforms were dust-worn, their boots scuffed, skin marked with sweat and smears of oil like they’d been hauling scrap for years without a break. Nothing gave them away at first glance. They breathed. They blinked. One even coughed. But something wasn’t quite right. Too symmetrical. Too smooth. No scarring, no tattoos, no idle fidgeting. And when Maggie’s eyes swept down — just for a moment — she noticed one of them had a tear in his shirt. Beneath it: skin. But no belly button.

She blinked. Said nothing.

They looked like people — but Maggie could see they were different. Too perfect. Too controlled. They said nothing, either. No names. No introductions. Just a row of near-identical faces staring forward, silently awaiting a command. That was it too, Maggie realized; they could only have resembled each other so closely if they were an army of siblings. She could see, from all these little details, and from the uncanny smoothness of their skin, that they were androids.

Behind them came a man. Now he was human, or organic at any rate. His face was real. Not handsome. Weathered. Carrying decades in the creases of his face. His coat bore the sharp shoulders and epaulettes of a military garment, threadbare in places, decorated with some martial insignia and a faded patch on his chest that simply read: *CONTROLLER*.

“You’ve trespassed on a restricted zone.” His voice was deep, and thick with dust and gravel, and the resonance of someone accustomed to shouting orders over battlefield gunfire. “Return to your vessel and leave this planet or you will face immediate consequences”.

The Doctor smiled gently. “Ah, see, that’s where things get a bit awkward. My ship brought us here. She does that sometimes. Picks up... trouble.”

The Controller didn’t flinch. “There’s no trouble here.”

The Doctor looked past him at the heaps of jagged machinery. Something shimmered. Something familiar. He strained to see it, but the gloom made it impossible to discern. “If you say so,” the Doctor murmured. “Though it looks like your planet’s sitting on a graveyard.”

The Controller said nothing. But his eyes — hard and hollow — lingered just a little too long.

Maggie glanced at the Doctor as the group stood under the drones’ cold mechanical gaze. His hands were still raised, the palms outstretched. He had tucked away his chunky detector box in the seemingly bottomless pockets of his coat the moment the drones had appeared. But his eyes were scanning the surroundings. Not for an escape route; for something else.

She leaned in close, voice low. “You’re doing that thing again.” The Doctor raised an eyebrow. “That thing where you pretend you’re not interested. Which means you’re definitely interested. Which means,” she concluded with a sigh, “we’re absolutely going nowhere.”

He didn’t answer. He had seen something in the distance, and Maggie followed his gaze past the Controller. There it was. Just beyond the wall of twisted girders — half-hidden behind rusted towers of scrap — a figure stood. Alone. Watching. Not one of the six. Not armed. The Doctor’s eyes flicked toward it — just for a second — and it was gone. He said nothing.

The Controller stepped forward, as if trying to catch the Doctor’s wandering attention. “This is restricted territory under Galactic Law. The Caldera Protocol is active. Anything with biological readings that hasn’t been pre-cleared for entry is subject to immediate removal.”

“Isn’t that a bit harsh?” Maggie muttered. “We only just got here.” *And I can’t imagine many people who get here particularly want to stay*, she thought.

The Controller ignored her. She noticed he did not allow his gaze to drift — not to Maggie, not to the androids. He was staring, eye to eye, at the Doctor. Not blinking. Measuring him up. The Doctor tilted his head.

“Caldera, is it?” He recognised the name. “Is that where we are?”

The Controller gave a single nod. “Final resting site of forbidden tech. The wreckage of a war nobody should remember.”

“And yet you’re still here,” the Doctor replied, softly. “Living in it.”

The wind shifted — faint but biting. It whistled through the heaps of scrap with a low, metallic moan. The Controller gestured to the androids. But the Doctor didn’t move. “We’re not going back to my ship,” he said. Calm, but resolute. “Not until I know why it brought us here. You know the rules — Article 17, subsection 41 of the Galactic Peace Accords.” His eyes drifted to the horizon, as he recalled the exact wording—he knew the Controller would be a stickler. “‘No life form can be forcefully removed from contested ground without due process’. And if I remember my history, poor planet Caldera has always been very contested.”

The Controller’s jaw tightened. “Well remembered, Doctor. So be it,” he said. “You’ll be escorted to the Cathedral. Our nearest administrative structure. We’ll start processing you and your associate—and unless you have a valid claim to remain here, you’ll be scheduled for removal to the nearest outpost.”

The Doctor gave a small, knowing smile. “We’ll try not to overstay our welcome.”

The Controller glared at the androids and gestured sharply. “Escort the detainees.”

They moved without a word — silent, measured, obedient.
As they moved, Maggie leaned toward the Doctor and whispered, “You saw something, didn’t you?”
He nodded once.
She paused. “And we’re definitely not leaving?”
He beamed at her. “Not until we find out who’s watching us.”

The path to the Cathedral wound through more elaborate, towering heaps of discarded machinery. They stretched in all directions, and the path was littered with more colossal examples — scorched fusion engines, the shattered plating of gigantic starships’ hulls, melted limbs fused into grotesque sculptures by time and fire. Every crunch of boot against metal echoed like a whisper in a mausoleum. Every step of the way, Maggie remembered to look down, wanting to make sure any sharp spikes were out of her path. She doubted these androids would be particularly caring about injury or maiming an organic gatecrasher they were going to kick off their planet anyway.

The androids marched in silence. Their formation was tight, purposeful — except for one. The third in line. Maggie caught him glancing back, just once. Curious. Hesitant. She didn’t say anything. Just watched.

“I assume that must be the Cathedral,” Maggie observed.

The massive structure appeared gradually in the distance, looming above the scrap like a fortress forged from war relics. Spires were wrought from shattered hulls, stained-glass windows had been replaced by shimmering data screens flickering with static. What was once a processing plant had been refashioned into a central command post — a monument to destruction and control. And its grim, Gothic appearance made it obvious that it would be called ‘the Cathedral’.

Inside, the light shifted. The haze of the not-quite-sunlight outside was supplanted by a clinical, green-tinted illumination. They had entered a vast space, perhaps once used as a storage vault. As far as the eye could see, panels glowed with security readouts. Drones buzzed overhead like mechanical flies. And there were more androids inside: at least fifty, maybe more, moving with quiet efficiency, logging crates of burnt tech, stowing them into rusted vaults, scanning them, dismantling them.

The scale of the operation hit Maggie. “Big team,” she murmured.

“Big operation,” agreed the Doctor, his eyes sweeping across the vaults. “Whatever this place is... they’re clearly not just salvaging scrap.”

The Controller turned, his voice low but sharp. “This facility is off-limits to unauthorised personnel. When your claim to remain here is assessed and dismissed, you’ll be processed and deported along with your vessel.”

Maggie folded her arms. “So you said. But it feels like we’re being babysat by Stepford bodybuilders in a haunted scrapyards.”

The Controller ignored her again. To be fair, it was a reference likely many millennia out of date.

The Doctor looked around, casually leaning against a support pillar that whined under his weight.

“You keep your workforce busy, Controller,” he said. “But I wonder — what exactly are you protecting?”

No reply. Just the sound of metal on metal.

The Doctor ran his fingers across a crumbling interface embedded in the Cathedral's wall — a rusted mesh of command lines and burst wires. Slotted into one was a long tube. Once it would have glimmered with energy coursing through it—but now it was dull and corroded like everything else.

“Control rods,” he muttered. “Old override tech. Crude, fused into the mainframe. These would've run basic containment routines — long before the systems degraded.”

He plucked one from its slot, shook it, pressed it against his ear, and then tossed it aside. “Dead as the rest of the network.”

From the far corner of the Cathedral, one of the workers — not from the escort party — watched them intently. Her eyes were unreadable. Not hostile. Just still. Measuring. The Doctor noticed. But said nothing. Instead, he smiled. “Lovely place. I'm sure it's very cosy on those long, dark Caldera winter's nights. Bit of a fixer-upper, though.”

The Controller had crossed to a set of double doors, and the Doctor and Maggie sauntered after him. A long corridor stretched ahead, lined with relics sealed behind reinforced glass. Armour fragments. More shards of mechanical armour like the gauntlet Maggie had found outside the TARDIS. Weapons scorched black. Labels beneath each item glowed faintly with new catalogue numbers and biohazard warnings stamped on by the uncaring androids. The Doctor paused before one — a half-melted chest plate with faint, familiar ridges. His expression changed.

Not armour, he realised. Not a chest plate ... a chest unit. He hadn't seen one of this design before, but the regulating valves, the artificial organs, the thermal controls, and the clips to hold weaponry were unmistakable. Snaking tubes dangled off the side of it like the tendrils of a mechanical squid. Tubes, the Doctor shuddered to contemplate, that hooked into the flesh of some unwilling convert.

Maggie leaned in. “What is it?”

He didn't answer. The Controller's voice echoed behind them. “Souvenirs. From the war.”

The Doctor turned slowly. “So the myths of Caldera are true.”

The Controller nodded. “You didn't just recognise the name ... you know this planet's history?”

“I've heard the myths. Thought ... *hoped*, perhaps ... they were just rumours or gossip or old wives' tales. You called it the final resting place of forbidden tech. But not just *any* tech ... Cyber-tech.”

Maggie blinked. “Cyber-tech? Meaning Cybermen, right?”

“Cybermen,” the Doctor confirmed, quietly, with a sad nod.

Maggie had seen one or two amid the legions of the Doctor's former enemies who populated the parallel Earth created by the Preservers¹, but directly never encountered these nightmare creatures. However, she knew a bit about them as the Doctor would occasionally mention some battle or invasion he had narrowly prevented. It seemed he had faced them in nearly every one of his lives, on far-flung alien worlds and even at St. Paul's Cathedral in London. She saw the weariness of his many thousand years of life as he contemplated their remains—and wondered how many times he would have to face them before they did the universe a favour and perished for good.

“They're robots, right?” Maggie asked.

¹ See *The Doctor Who Project: The Last Doctor Part Two*.

“Old friends. You’d call them cybernetic organisms. Cold, mechanical. They ruined a planet very much like Earth in their desperate struggle to cling on to life. Then they spread outward. Took people and stripped them down to the parts they could use. Merged flesh with steel.”

“Until they were defeated by the Alliance of Galactic Powers,” the Controller stated tersely.

He glanced through one of the Cathedral’s mullioned windows out at the horizon. “Every last trace dumped here. All of those scraps originated with the Cybermen, or else pillaged from some ship or technology they scavenged and added to their technology.”

“Salvage was deemed impossible,” the Controller explained. “If there’s even a glimmer of life from one of their Cyber-Planners, or their processing nodes, or anything ... it could latch on to any technology and assimilate it. It had before.”

The Doctor nodded. “Uncommonly wise of those galactic powers. So instead, you all agreed to dump them here. Bury everything. Scrub it from history.”

The Controller stepped past them, stopping beside a display case. Inside: a single silver hand. It had three stubby fingers fused together mid-motion. Its brushed steel surface was burned, but the shape was unmistakable. “I served,” he said, voice tight. “The last Cyber-war.”

The Doctor winced. “The most recent Cyber-War I’m familiar with ended in the mid-twenty-sixth century, thanks to the Vogans and their planet of gold.”

“Gold,” the Controller sighed wistfully. “That’s ancient history, Doctor. You must be older than you look. They rose back up, rebuilt themselves ... and only the combined forces of twenty different federations, empires, and other galactic superpowers could hold them back, stop their expansion ...”

The Doctor’s expression shifted. “You were on the front line?”

“Not at first,” the Controller muttered. “But the war doesn’t ask politely.” He paused, eyes locked on the hand in the case. “It takes. Everything.”

Maggie stepped forward, voice gentler now. “You lost someone?”

He sighed. Then he looked away. “Two *someone*’s.” He straightened his posture, seemingly embarrassed by the admission. “After the victory, I volunteered for clean-up. The courts called it logistics. Containment. Paperwork.” He gestured around them — at the spires, the drones, the quiet hum of buried tech. “Most of the outposts shut down after the first decade. This haunted house was a relic from many ages ago, from Caldera’s first life as a mining planet. The drones keep the systems running — filtration, protein rations, sleep cycles. Barely enough to survive.”

“How many people work here?” Maggie asked.

“There was a skeleton crew back in the early days, but now it’s just me.”

“But how—why—?” No wonder he found it hard to relate to visitors, Maggie mused. When would he have last interacted with anyone aside from the androids, whom he barely acknowledged?

The Controller shrugged sadly. “As I said, I volunteered. I turned down support staff. I have nothing out there anymore, and I didn’t see why I should force anyone else to share this hell.” A strange, enthusiastic gleam shone in his eye. “Besides, only I ... only I could appreciate what this place represents. See, *they* didn’t understand what was really left behind.” His gaze drifted to the androids. “Not just weapons. Not just tech. Ideology. Programming. Traces.” He exhaled — just once. “Ghosts.”

The Doctor’s brow furrowed. “So your superiors built a team. Better equipped for the clean-up than organic lifeforms would be. Labourers. Carers.”

“Androids,” the Controller corrected. “Recognised as sentient life — as you’ll know under Galactic Law. Not my choice. But I follow orders.”

There was a pause.

“You don’t seem fond of them,” Maggie said.

“They do the job,” he replied.

The Doctor tilted his head. “And yet... you don’t trust them? Is that it?”

The Controller’s jaw tensed. “They’re not like us. They pass for human — too well, if you ask me. They aren’t the tin waiters from our history; nowadays these things have synthetic flesh, they exhibit authentic human emotions and neuroses ...” He glowered. “And when things can pass, they can infiltrate. Influence. Turn.” He looked away. “Belief spreads. Even through flesh grown in a lab.”

From across the chamber, the watching figure — the one from earlier — turned and walked away, disappearing into the shadows.

The Doctor’s eyes lingered on the shadows. “Faith like that... it festers,” he murmured to himself.

The others were gone now — the Doctor, Maggie, the rest of the group — their footsteps long since faded into the scrapyard above.

Down here, in the hollowed rock caverns that lay beneath the surface of Caldera, it was quiet. Too quiet.

At the height of the planet’s industrial era, these subterranean areas had been carved out and converted into maintenance tunnels, through which the gargantuan apparatus that extracted the valuable minerals were taken for repair and kept at their optimal functioning capacity. In this way, at its height, the operations could continue indefinitely. After so many centuries of ceaseless clockwork automation, the ensuing period of quiet and still was a welcome contrast. The android moved through these empty maintenance tunnels with careful, deliberate steps. Not like a machine. Like a woman who feared being seen.

The cold green light of a glow-strip flickered overhead, casting long shadows against the walls. She passed un-labelled doors, broken conduits, a half-fused sign that once read ‘*LOWER VAULTS – ACCESS DENIED.*’ She stopped outside a sealed alcove half-buried in debris. Brushed aside dust. Pressed her palm to a worn panel. The trick worked, and the system recognised her palm-print as that of the Controller. The wall shifted open with a slow, pneumatic sigh. Inside there was dim sodium lighting. The space was cramped. Hidden. A makeshift lab. Old surgical lamps rigged from salvage. Workbenches cluttered with tools. Scrap tech laid out in careful rows — polished, catalogued. Revered.

And on the table — covered loosely with stained tarpaulin — something moved. Barely. Beneath the edge of the cloth, something mechanical... breathed.

The android stepped closer. Light glinted off the name patch stitched on the breast of her boiler suit — faded, almost rubbed out. But still legible.

Fourteen.

She adjusted a dial on a nearby console. Power surged through old cables. The body on the table twitched. Something sparked at its neck — a scarred port linking what looked like mismatched circuits and tissue. Then: a noise. Not from Fourteen. From the thing on the table. A voice — warped and stuttering — emerged from under the tarpaulin.

“Error. Neural c-c-c-core mismatch. Pur-pur-purpose... unclear... upgrade required.”

Fourteen didn't flinch. She leaned in, whispering: “The age of steel was never history. It was prophecy.”

She'd been coming here for weeks. At first, just collecting—spare limbs, scorched plating, data chips still faintly humming with corrupted protocols. Nobody knew about her collection—but after all, she asked herself, what was the point of bringing perfectly useful technology up to the Cathedral, only to be catalogued and deactivated? So, when she was supposed to be attending to other duties, she snuck down here and built her own catalogue. Each part cleaned, reprogrammed, repurposed. Before long, the use they could be put to—the purpose—dawned on Fourteen.

It was slow work. Some didn't fit. Some rejected integration. Others adapted like they'd been waiting. Slowly, piece by piece, she rebuilt not a body, but a belief.

And as the failing light trembled across the patchwork metal of the form beneath the tarp, she hunched forward, and began to work.

The more Maggie saw of the Cathedral, the more she considered it was really a monument to extinction. Within, she could see up close how the towering arches had been welded from shipwrecks, walker limbs, and other war relics, its walls patched with shattered plating and rusted hulls. Its original structure was barely evident amid the grand Gothic additions. In that respect, she considered with a shudder, it was rather like a Cyberman. Inside, the air was still and cold, filled with that acrid electrical taste, hushed like a tomb, and lit only by the sickly glow of malfunctioning overhead strips. Every footstep echoed like a hymn for the dead.

Steel buttresses arched high above them. Light filtered through melted glass, throwing fractured patterns across the floor like circuit-board stained glass panels: fulfilling the allusion of a church of the dead.

The Controller had initially been gleeful as he entered their particulars into the database, awaited the confirmation that a shuttle would be along to remove them and the TARDIS. But the old soldier had been chastened by the automated commands. There was no recent biographical information on ‘the Doctor’ or an Earth citizen called ‘Margaret Weitz’. So on that hand, they were just two interlopers begging to be arrested and processed in some featureless facility.

On the other hand though, by this point in time the Doctor's name and renown had penetrated deeper than any database, and had entered the realm of myth. The official channels did not want to deal with myths, especially on the eve of the destruction of one of their most legendary bogeymen.

Therefore, it was simpler to pass the buck to the Controller, and leave the Time Lord in place until this page of history was decisively turned.

It seemed to Maggie that the Controller could easily escort them back to the TARDIS and summarily kick them off the planet himself. Instead, he allowed them to follow him around the Cathedral as he carried out his final obligations. He even took a break to eat a packet of re-

sequenced proteins—and still more incredibly, offered his visitors some as well (they declined). He said little, appearing lost in thought. The Doctor wisely chose not to rile him. Maggie wondered whether on some level he was glad—though he would never admit it out loud—to share these critical moments with a person who had seen as much of the horrors of the Cybermen as the Doctor.

The Controller wandered the breadth of the common area, suddenly at a loose end and still consumed with his thoughts. He stopped just short of the dais at the building's north side, which in this context seemed like a technological altar. "This wasn't a coincidence," he declared, turning to face the Doctor. "You arrived today. Of all days."

At this, Maggie knew sadly that the Controller's distrust still outweighed any other sentiments.

The Doctor folded his arms. "We tend to have terrible timing. Or excellent. Depending who you ask."

The Controller didn't smile. "Twenty years I've waited. Scrubbed this place clean of every last trace. And today, of all days, when it's finally ready... you appear."

The Doctor frowned. "Ready for what?"

"The supernova," the Controller replied. "Tomorrow, Caldera enters the Vanth Corridor. At its core — a collapsing red giant. We go on our merry way, and we let the star finish what the war couldn't."

The Doctor went still. "You're burning it all."

"It's the only way," the Controller said. "The core of the Cybermen's purpose—the underlying programming that underpins all those Planners and Leaders and Controllers—can't be reasoned with. Not destroyed by conventional means. If even a Cybermat gets free, it will spread all over again. But gravity? Pure entropy? That should work."

The Doctor's eyebrow raised, his expression tightening.

"But... as you've said, this is a graveyard. Any trace of the Cybermen, any echo of their programming or their automatic conversion process, would've gone dormant years ago. Dead tech. Spent code."

The Controller didn't answer at first. He just stared at the Doctor — studying him with that hard, unreadable gaze. The Doctor looked right back. The Doctor had seen it before, in other lives. Whether the Controller appreciated it or not, the Time Lord's expression was telling him: You don't know what I've seen. Not the half of it. He met the Controller's gaze, quietly now. "This war ended for most of the galaxy twenty years ago."

The Controller's voice dropped. "Not for me. Not while there's still the faintest spark in their wires."

Behind this altar, in an untidy central area arranged with parallel desks like a bullpen in an old newsroom, the androids dispersed to their stations. Unlike the Controller, they were carrying out their tasks efficiently, without any sentiment. Maggie lingered at the edge of the cavernous chamber, her eyes drawn to one of the group — the third from their escort party earlier. While the other androids had moved from desk to desk in a whirlwind of activity, this one was checking a control panel, fingers moving with quiet efficiency. She drifted over.

"Hey," she said, softly. "You've been staring at that screen like it owes you money."

He glanced up. His face was calm — too calm. It was not the emotionless blankness of a machine with a human-like face. There was genuine emotion being suppressed beneath this placid façade. Like someone *trained* never to show what he was thinking.

Maggie's eyes flicked down. On the chest of his boiler suit, where a name tag should've been, was a patch. Worn. Frayed. But still visible...

Three.

“They call you Three, right?” she asked.

He hesitated. “That’s what *he* calls me.”

The Controller, Maggie knew at once. Maggie nodded slowly. “But you had another name?”

A pause. “I did. Before the reforms. Before androids were reclassified for ‘clarity of purpose’.”

Maggie frowned. “You mean... they took your name?”

He gave a tight smile. It took Maggie aback—it was so lifelike, she could have been talking to anybody. It hit home the notion that his identity being taken away was far more real, and far crueler. “Stripped it. Deleted it from my memory banks. I sometimes wonder what name I chose for myself ...”

“They took your name,” Maggie repeated, the petty horror of it sinking in.

“Along with autonomy, rights — everything. Easier to file a number than a person.”

Maggie leaned back, processing what he was telling her. “But the laws changed. Those galactic laws the Doctor mentioned, they recognised you as sentient. You were granted personhood, weren’t you?”

He shrugged. “On paper. Recognition doesn’t mean equality. Especially not here.” He glared at the distant Controller. “Especially not with that kind around to decide what’s a person.”

She looked around — at the shadows, the relics, the hulking bones that made up this deathly spot. She felt the quiet hum beneath their feet. “This place feels like a prison.”

Three’s voice dropped. “It’s worse than that. It’s a graveyard.”

Maggie thought back to her assessment of the Cathedral, the phrase that had come into her head—‘a monument to extinction’. What did that mean, if not a graveyard on an even massive scale?

“I got that sense.”

“Maybe you don’t fully appreciate it, though. Not just a graveyard for tech. For us as well.”

Maggie’s forehead tightened. “You mean you? You personally?”

He didn’t answer immediately. Again that façade of composure reasserted itself, as he buried his dread and reached down to one of the catalogued heaps by his desk. He picked up a fractured datapad from a nearby pile, thumbing over the edge absently. “The Controller volunteered to oversee this graveyard,” he said finally. “Twenty years. No leave. No rotation. He was allowed to do it because he convinced them there was no one else. And they were happy to believe him. They said he was a war hero. That he understood the threat better than anyone.”

“And you?”

“I was transferred here three years ago. I was told it was a maintenance assignment. Temporary. But androids don’t get reassigned easily. Especially ones who show... deviation.”

“Deviation?”

He looked at her. “Thinking too much. Asking questions. Not ‘performing optimally’. All very subjective, of course.”

Maggie lowered her voice. “And the others?”

“Some volunteered. Some were sent. All of us... tolerated. Sometimes not tolerated, if anything goes wrong. We’re tools. Disposable. We work. We shut up. And whether we’ve worked well, performed optimally, whatever, as soon as the job’s done—” He gestured vaguely toward the sky “—we get torched with the rest of it.”

Maggie's eyes widened. She opened her mouth to respond — but another voice beat her to it.

“You know about the supernova?”

She turned. The Doctor had wandered over, hands buried in his coat pockets, casual as ever — but his eyes were sharp. Watching. Listening.

Three didn't blink. “Of course. We're not idiots. We read the logs. We just pretend we don't.”

The Doctor tilted his head. “I imagine the Controller doesn't know that.” He flashed a glance toward the distant, shattered man, hunched at that far altar, as if offering one last prayer or sacrifice to the gods of old before this final day.

“He doesn't ask,” Three replied. “And we don't tell. Keeps everyone comfortable.”

The Doctor stepped closer. “You could leave, you know. Before it happens. Before the detonation order's triggered.”

Three gave him a long, searching look. “Could we?”

Maggie glanced between them, suddenly aware of just how quiet the Cathedral had become. “You mean... you're not allowed to?”

“We were never meant to leave,” Three said. “That's the point. We're part of the junk.”

The Doctor didn't smile. “You're not junk. You're survivors. Witnesses. Individuals, who deserve as much life and freedom as anyone.”

Three looked away, his jaw clenching. “Tell that to Galactic Command. We're easier to erase than to defend.”

Maggie frowned. “But if you're recognised as sentient under law—”

“On paper,” Three said, flat. “Not in hearts. Not in headlines. Not when we still make people uncomfortable.”

The Doctor crouched down, resting his arms on his knees as he studied Three like a puzzle piece in the wrong box. “Tell me something,” he said quietly. “You knew we were coming, didn't you? Not us, specifically — but that someone would. Someone like me.”

Three didn't answer right away. Then: “The planet's been... waking up. Tech twitching in the pits. Old systems humming. Power spikes. Static in our minds. Like something calling.”

The Doctor's brow furrowed. “Cyber-coding?”

“We don't know. But it started weeks ago. The Controller thought it was residual. Background noise. But we felt it. In our skin. In our thoughts. Like... instinct.”

Maggie exchanged a glance with the Doctor. “So you do feel?” she asked.

Three looked at her. “Everything. We just learn not to show it.”

The Doctor straightened slowly, rubbing his hands together as his gaze drifted across the Cathedral walls. “That may be why the TARDIS brought us here! Not just a mystery to solve...” He turned, facing them both. “A warning.”

Before either of them could respond, the Cathedral shuddered. Just once. A ripple, like the entire junkyard exhaled. Then came the sound — low, grating, mechanical. Not from outside. Not the wind. From beneath.

The Doctor snapped to attention. “Did you hear that?”

Maggie stiffened. “Hard not to.”

Three turned, eyes narrowing. “It's been happening more often. Bursts of activity. The tunnels vibrate like something's moving.”

“Something is moving,” the Doctor muttered, pulling out that detector box and thumbing it to life. The dial on its screen bounced back and forth meaninglessly, overcome with interference — the static riddled with strange, pulsing frequencies.

Maggie took a step back, scanning the Cathedral’s jagged spires of welded scrap. “Feels like this place is holding its breath.” Then — from the far end of the hall — a high, piercing whine erupted. Like metal tearing itself apart. Lights flickered. The ground vibrated again. A voice — distorted and fractured — burst over the tannoy system, not the drones’ default tone, but something older, more corrupted:

“Upgrade... protocol... pending...”

Silence followed. Then, far above from one of the Cathedral’s dark arches, a blast of steam hissed into the air — and the massive set of double doors through which they had entered slammed shut.

The Doctor stepped in front of Maggie, eyes wide now, serious. “Well,” he said. “That’s not ominous at all.”

Beneath the surface of Caldera, within the maintenance tunnels, the silence fractured. The body on the table twitched again — this time not as a spasm, but as a response.

Fourteen didn’t move. Her eyes tracked the monitor, reading unfamiliar rhythms — pulsing distortions in the cyber-organic merged tissue. The damaged voice module emitted a faint electronic whine, like a machine’s dying breath trying to form itself into speech.

She stepped closer.

The figure under the tarp sat up. Sparks flew from its shoulder. Tubes tore away with a hiss. Its breathing — artificial, fragmented — rasped from deep within a reconstructed throat.

Fourteen held her ground. She whispered: “You’re awake.”

It turned its head toward her. The face was still obscured — masked by soot and shadow and jagged plating. A ruin of what once was a man. A relic. A Cyberman. But not like any seen in the data cores.

Its armour was fused from others — seared silver welded to black Mondasian mesh, fragments of Planet 14 and Telosian relics wrapped in crude plating, stitched with synthetic muscle. A chimera built from war’s leftovers.

Born of ashes, stitched from the dead — the last whisper of a fallen empire.

Another tremor rippled through the metal floor. The Doctor spun on his heel and looked through the decaying bank of computer monitors to find one he could use.

Maggie paled as the tremor continued gurgling beneath their feet. “Please tell me that was just the plumbing.”

The Controller gave him a puzzled expression. “A little rumbling and you get dizzy, eh? You’re welcome to leave.”

The Doctor glared at him. “That wasn’t just indigestion. Something’s moving.”

The Controller looked disinterested. “Minor seismic shift. Happens every few days. The tunnels aren’t exactly stable—”

“No. No, that wasn’t tectonic,” the Doctor interrupted, tapping instructions into the nearest terminal. “That was intentional. Rhythmic. That was footsteps.”

At the twist of some ancient dials, he adjusted the frequency. A hum buzzed through the scanner — two signatures, flickering erratically, appeared on the terminal’s cracked screen.

“Two life forms,” the Doctor said. “About fifty metres beneath us. One’s android. The other...” He stopped.

Maggie stepped closer. “Other?”

“Unclassified.” His brow furrowed again.

The Controller finally stepped in, checking the readout. “That’s Zone 47. It’s sealed. I personally cordoned it off two decades ago, almost as soon as I got here. Something down there corrupted the indexing droids — kept trying to reassemble itself. The files were purged, but the seal held. Only my personal DNA-print would open the door. No one should be down there.”

“Well someone is,” the Doctor snapped. “And they’re heading this way.” As if to punctuate the sentence, a deep, metallic clang echoed from the far end of the Cathedral. The Doctor’s eyes darkened. “I don’t think we’ve got long.”

The Controller’s jaw clenched. “I’m telling you Zone 47 is sealed. There’s no access.”

He tapped some keys on the terminal, and grimaced when the logs showed ‘the Controller’ had used just such a palm-print to open the door earlier that day.

The Doctor gave him a flat look. “You called this building a cathedral, yes? Then you’d better start praying.” The Controller looked blankly at him, and he added: “Pray that door holds.”

Another clang. Louder this time.

Three flinched.

Maggie stepped closer to the Doctor, lowering her voice. “Tell me again how this wasn’t going to be a haunted scrapyard?”

The Doctor didn’t smile. “Hold onto that joke,” he said. “We may need it later.”

A sudden gust tore through the Cathedral — not natural wind, but pressure displacement. Something was moving fast through the outer corridors. The androids stiffened. The Controller’s hand went to his sidearm, eyes narrowing toward the arched entryway of twisted steel. A low thud echoed through the chamber.

Then another.

Footsteps. Heavy. Uneven.

Maggie backed closer to the Doctor. “This is the part where something awful bursts through a wall, isn’t it?”

“No idea,” he muttered, scanning the direction of the sound. “But if it’s what I think it is... hold onto that joke tighter.”

A figure stepped through the shadows.

Fourteen.

Face oil-smudged, jaw flexing with rage. She was no longer lurking, watching from afar — she was leading. And beside her, dragging one foot behind the other, its body stitched from torrefied plating and raw bio-flesh, its eyes flickering in mismatched hues — a patchwork Cyberman entered the light. It was twice the height of the average cyborg, and the gruesome welding of piebald parts made it broad-shouldered, its legs gigantic stumps from their double-reinforcement. The weight of all the crude machinery caused the silver giant's spine to curve forward slightly, and those stumpy legs bow inward. No wonder it made such a racket moving around, Maggie thought—she could scarcely imagine the weight of all that machinery it was lugging. And yet still organic parts—the odd gleam of rancid flesh and bare bone—could be seen through the gaps in the clashing lumps of metal.

Gasps rang out.

Even the Controller faltered.

The Doctor didn't move. He looked at it — really looked — and for a moment, said nothing. Then he took one step forward, visibly moved by the sight. "...Oh. You are beautiful," the Doctor murmured — not with admiration, but awe at the engineering ingenuity. "Whoever built you... they stitched together history. Mondas, Telos, the Agravan Cluster — every scar, every upgrade. It's not just a Cyberman, it's a museum of horror. Every failure welded into something worse."

The Cyberman stopped. Sparks crackled beneath its fractured chest-plate. "Identify," it croaked, its voice a distorted ghost of a thousand battles.

The Controller raised his weapon. He didn't think — his body did. Muscle memory carved in war. He wasn't just carrying the gun out of duty. He carried it because every fibre of his being told him this day would come. He had always known, in his marrow, that something would crawl out of the grave he'd spent a lifetime guarding. And now here it was.

Fourteen stepped in front of it.

"No." The Doctor's voice was low. Measured. He took a step toward her. "Don't."

Everyone froze. And in the humming silence of the junk Cathedral, beneath the glow of salvaged relics and forgotten machines, history stood still — because for the first time in decades, a Cyberman had risen from the grave. Not reborn. Not rebuilt. Reconstructed. Reinvented. The past, the sum total of every horrible memory they were trying to obliterate, literally welded together, stared back at them.

A tense silence held the Cathedral. The Patchwork Cyberman took a step forward, heavy footfalls ringing out like a hammer on a coffin lid. Steam hissed from one shoulder joint. One of its arms twitched — not with malfunction, but anticipation. Fourteen turned to the Doctor, chest rising and falling too fast for calm. How interesting that, though she had no need to breathe, she did so as an emotional response to her rising panic. "You don't understand," she said. "They told us. The chosen few. Before the war ended — they broadcast it across every data feed they could hijack."

The Doctor's gaze sharpened. "Told you what?"

"That androids would have a place. In the new age. In the age of steel."

She took a step forward, voice cracking. "We are dying out. Broken, discarded, reclassified. Stripped of names, rights, and futures. You think people fear Cybermen? They fear us more."

Because we look like them. Sound like them. But we're not." Her hands clenched. "Every door closed. Every upgrade denied. Even the ones who obey — who never question — they get recycled when they glitch. Like scrap. Like trash." She looked up, eyes burning now. "But the Cybermen... they promised something else. A purpose. A place. Unity."

The Doctor blinked. Then laughed — a cold and humourless laugh, short, sharp, disbelieving. "Unity? You bought that? Oh, brilliant. The Cybermen don't make room, they strip it out. They don't form alliances; they use people, exploit them and discard them. That was propaganda. A lie dressed as salvation."

Fourteen's voice trembled. "I... I saved him. Brought him back. I helped. And now I'll help bring a new era to the universe — one that will finally free us. Free all androids."

"I'm right, aren't I?" The Doctor looked over her head, addressing the Cyberman. "Why don't you tell her?"

The Patchwork Cyberman turned its head toward her — not fast, not slow. Mechanical. Measured. "Correction ..." it wheezed. "Your function is complete." A pause. Then it raised one arm — and fired.

But not at her.

The blast struck an android across the room — not a beam, but a shattering, invisible sonic pulse that blew its torso open in a mess of sparking circuitry and liquefied that vat-grown synthetic flesh. Another turned — too slow — and was struck down by another blunt pulse before it could do anything.

Screams. Panic. The androids, so silent for so long, now cried out in fractured voices — fear overriding obedience. Some ran. Most didn't make it.

"STOP!" Fourteen screamed. "YOU PROMISED—"

The Cyberman's gaze swept to her. "Androids are inferior substrates. Unsuitable for conversion. Your only outcome... is deletion."

It advanced.

Fourteen stumbled backward, arm raised — not in defense, but despair.

The Doctor lunged forward. "RUN!"

She bolted, diving behind a support column as the Cyberman's next blast seared a melted line through the steel. The Doctor turned to the others. "I need every breathing life-form moving now!"

The Controller stood frozen — not with fear, but with determination. Something buried deep within him had just clawed its way back to life. With a snarl, he fired — once, twice — the shots sparking uselessly off the creature's armour. It didn't slow.

Maggie grabbed Three's arm and pulled him toward cover. "Come on!"

The Cyberman moved slowly, but with the grim precision of a Panzer tank — each strike lethal, deliberate. It wasn't rampaging. It was executing. The Doctor's face had gone pale. "It's testing itself. Calibrating." He spun on the Controller. "We need to trace the signal. There's a reason it's here — and it's not just bloodlust."

A voice echoed — mechanical, but not the Cyberman's. A tannoy system, hijacked: "Transmission... pending. Pulse calibration... synchronising." The Doctor didn't move. Couldn't. Around him, the Cathedral had become a slaughterhouse — androids falling in bursts of smoke and sparks, limbs torn from sockets, screams swallowed by mechanical roars. But he wasn't watching the carnage. He was watching it. He was noting every detail of its armour — jagged, scorched, torn from a dozen timelines. Mondasian mesh stretched across neomorphic plating. Telosian tubing fed into a distorted exo-frame. He had seen every iteration before, and hoped some

former weakness could be exploited again. And at the core, he saw a sickly dark cluster of web-like coiled wires, flickering a ghostly blue in sequence under the clunky chest unit. Embedded like a parasite within a dying host, he recognised it unmistakably: a pulsing data node. His hearts sank.

This wasn't a Cyberman. This was a relic. A beacon. A grave-bound transmitter cobbled from every iteration of the species — designed not to fight, but to remember. All this carnage was not even the Cyberman's objective.

The Doctor's voice dropped to a whisper. "Of course ... they planned this." He turned to Maggie. "He's not building an army. He is the army. A conduit. A transmitter. Every last byte of Cyber-data, every shard, every whisper of code — it's all here."

Maggie's eyes widened. "In English?"

He looked at her — and for once, there was no clever quip. He sprinted for the nearest console, slamming his sonic screwdriver into its interface. The Cathedral's systems fought him — ancient firewalls snarling with dead languages and corrupted code — but he pushed through. As he cycled through settings and functions of his sonic screwdriver in his left hand, he typed furiously with his right, his fingers a blur as he wrenched at the long-disused controls, all the while hoping the sonic signal would scramble enough of the functions to neutralise the node. Somewhere in here, there had to be a failsafe. A containment grid. Anything. Behind him, another scream — short, electric. Maggie turned, just in time to see an android slump to the ground, half its face missing. Sparks scattered across the floor.

"Doctor!" she yelled.

"I know!" His fingers danced over the panel, flipping switches, rerouting power. "This cathedral — it's got a transmat core, doesn't it? You were going to drop the whole planet into the Vanth Corridor, and for that you need a stabiliser!"

The Controller staggered over, bleeding from a cut on his temple. "We were going to pulse-jump Caldera into the gravity well. A clean detonation. One shot."

"And that pulse would have carried every scrap of Cyber-data with it. You're not burning the grave — you're lighting the signal fire!"

The Controller's eyes widened. "No..."

"Yes." The Doctor's voice softened. "And having so much debris from across Cyber-history all assembled together on the same planet gave them the means, the critical mass to light that fire. You were their contingency. You just didn't know it."

The Patchwork Cyberman paused in the center of the Cathedral, with a curious approximation of confidence. Like it knew what came next. Its blank mechanical eyes flickered again — one white, one a blood-red diode. Its voice buzzed, deeper now. Stronger.

"... Pulse calibration... at eighty-nine per cent. Conduit stable. Transmat vector locked."

It raised its arms. The plating on its chest hissed open — revealing the core: a dark crystalline mass, webbed with circuits and thrumming with pale blue light. Inside, something moved — flickers of data, like lightning trapped in amber. This was no simple processor. It was a carrier. A fragment of the Cybermen's network, preserved and dormant after all this time. Stored, smuggled, waiting for a body strong enough to hold it. And now, thanks to Fourteen's misguided faith, it had its carrier.

Maggie's voice cracked through the rising static. "Doctor — what is that? What's it doing?"

He didn't look away. "That's a sliver of the Cybermen's intelligence nodes — an echo of the source code underwriting every Cyberman that's ever existed. It shouldn't exist. It wasn't meant to survive."

Her eyes widened. “Then how—?”

“They planned it,” the Doctor whispered. “Some final failsafe. Their Cyber-Planners mapped out every contingency and counter-move against their organic opponents, and from that they predicted the possibility that the galactic powers hoarded every scrap of their legacy, stockpiled it on one planet, and walked away. So they hid this — their final command, their testament — inside a myth. They spread that word out to their unwitting acolytes, counted on a faithful servant to rebuild one of them. And Fourteen here... she gave it a voice again.”

The Cyberman’s core throbbed brighter.

“And now,” the Doctor finished grimly, “it’s about to sing.”

Maggie grabbed the Doctor’s coat sleeve, her voice tight. “Okay, fine — it’s bad. But what happens then? What does this pulse actually do?”

The Doctor finally turned to her. His expression was grave — no bravado, no deflection. “It broadcasts. A Cyber-pulse — the last signal of a dead empire. But this is more than just a call from beyond the grave. It’s the means to mass conversion. A rewrite of all organic matter.”

Maggie stared at him.

“Every atom,” the Doctor continued. “Every molecule it touches — anything caught in the transmission stream — will be reprogrammed. Matter reshaped. Flesh, metal, air, even time particles... all rewritten into Cyber-code.”

Maggie swallowed. The scale of it all could barely register with her. “How is that possible? How can they reshape structure to that extent? When we’ve encountered the Cybermen—”

The Doctor interrupted her, in the same low and defeated voice. “I’ve never been this far into their timeline. They’ve always hoarded other technologies, adapted and advanced on the ruins of other unfortunate souls. This far in the future, who knows how far that advancement has stretched?”

Maggie was shaken; it was always deeply troubling when the Doctor didn’t have a straight answer.

He glanced toward the trembling spires of the Cathedral. “Caldera’s almost in position. Once it hits the Vanth Corridor, that transmat pulse will fire — straight into the heart of a supernova. A wave of pure energy strong enough to echo halfway across the galaxy.”

Fourteen emerged from the shadows at the far end of the Cathedral, limping along the shattered central aisle. Oil streaked her face; one arm hung limp, the other pressed against her ribs. The space was vast — towering vaults of metal ribs and melted girders, made of scrap and sorrow. Smoke curled through the air like incense. The Cyberman stood at the center of it all, unmoving, its back to her. Fifty feet away, near a cluster of cracked control panels, the Doctor, Maggie, and the Controller froze mid-step.

“Stop what you’re doing,” she said. Her voice was weak, fraying, but she used every effort to call across the room to this false prophet. “You were supposed to save us.”

The Cyberman didn’t turn. “Purpose: fulfilled. Intermediary: redundant.”

She didn’t need to hear this again; Fourteen had already worked out that the Cybermen, just like the humans, had used and betrayed her and all android-kind. But she reasoned that the Cyberman was repeating it for the same reason it was keeping her alive: one last flourish of sadism.

“Then delete me,” she whispered. “But leave the others.”

A pause — the kind that felt like breath held in hell.

Slowly, it turned to face her. “No exceptions.”

Her eyes shone with sorrow. “I know,” she said.

Fourteen looked across at the Doctor — and for a moment, she seemed almost like a child. Like someone who’d believed too hard, in the wrong thing.

“Get them out,” she said. “Please.”

The Doctor didn’t hesitate. “Maggie, Find the Controller’s beam-pad! There’s an evacuation lockout but Three might know the codes.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll stop the signal.”

“How?”

He glanced back. “I’ll improvise.”

Maggie didn’t argue. She turned, grabbed Three — who’d frozen — and shouted at the surviving androids. “Move! Follow me!”

The Patchwork Cyberman didn’t stop her. It didn’t care. The countdown had begun.

“Final calibration... ninety-six per cent.”

The Doctor stared at the thing that had once been a Cyberman, but was now more than that — or less. A transmitter of death.

And then — a flicker. From behind the wreckage, Fourteen rose to her feet. One hand clutched a fused override rod — the same kind he’d dismissed earlier. It sparked dangerously in her grip. She met his eyes.

“Tell me this will matter.”

“It’ll buy us time.”

“Then that’s enough.”

Before he could stop her, she ran straight toward the Cyberman. Not with elegance — her left leg was dragging, sparks flying from a split joint — but she moved like someone with nothing to lose.

The Patchwork Cyberman turned its head — slow, deliberate. Its limbs shifted to target. One arm raised, energy pulsing at the palm.

“Final calibration... ninety-eight percent.”

Fourteen didn’t stop.

“Fourteen!” the Doctor screamed, surging forward.

But it was too late.

The blast hit her mid-stride.

A flare of white-blue light ripped across the length of the Cathedral’s main chamber. For a moment, everything froze. Then Fourteen screamed. It was not a human scream, but there was something emotional in it. From effort. From resistance. She didn’t fall. The override rod in her hand — fused, jagged, raw and sizzling dangerously with random bolts of energy — jammed into the core of the Cyberman’s chest just as the beam hit her. Sparks exploded. The creature reeled, the pulse breaking against its armour like a tidal wave crashing back into itself. Fourteen shoved the rod deeper. Her skin blistered, circuits shrieked, and her voice broke as she forced the conduit wide open.

“Ninety-nine per cent—” the mechanical voice croaked out desperately.

The Doctor leapt across the floor, vaulting clear of the mountainous heaps of scrap, and landed in an inelegant heap by the main row of control panels. He began furiously typing along their length and breadth. “Come on, come on—don’t you dare lock me out—!”

Maggie's voice crackled over the tannoy — no doubt patched into the planet's intercom system by Three: "We're at the beam-pad! Doc, we don't have time—!"

He didn't answer. His fingers flew.

Across the chamber, the Cyberman screamed — not a human sound. It should not even have sounded emotional. But nevertheless, one emotion carried through: rage. Pure, binary outrage. Fourteen's body began to give way — pieces sheared off, her chest split open, her eyes flickering. But she held.

"Why won't you DIE?!" she shrieked, voice mangled with feedback and fury.

The Cyberman's core sparked violently. The Cathedral's floor split in places, cyber-channels lighting beneath the metal like bolts of menacing lightning, reacting to the surge. The pulse was reaching across the planet — waking up remnants, fragments, everything.

"One ... hundred ... per ... cent—"

The Doctor slammed the final key. "—override!"

The Cathedral howled. The transmat core shrieked to life, a raging vortex of bright blue exploding above the dais. The Cyberman staggered back — its chest now imploding, folding inward as the override rod overloaded the node.

No transmission today," the Doctor growled. "This is your stop." Fourteen turned to him — a flicker of a smile in her ruined features. Then she stepped in, pressing the override rod deep into the Cyberman's chest.

"Tell the others I did something right," she said.

The transmat snapped shut around them both. And they were gone.

Silence.

Not total — systems sparked, walls cracked, but the light dimmed. The pulse was gone. The core was empty.

The Cathedral was still once again.

Smoke drifted across the Cathedral floor. For some indeterminate time, the Doctor stood motionless beneath the fractured archway, shoulders rising and falling with slow, deliberate breath. He deliberately took stock of his surroundings, and felt his limbs to see if everything was undamaged. Regrettably, his trusty emerald-green balmacaan coat was scorched at the hem. Its left sleeve was torn. Otherwise, he seemed to be intact. Miraculously.

His eyes—distant.

Maggie approached, coughing from the haze. "Doctor?"

He blinked. Came back to her.

"Is it over?" she asked.

He didn't answer immediately. Just stepped forward, gazing at the blackened crater where the Cyberman had stood.

"The override forced a reverse charge through the patchwork's neural core," he said. "Unspooled the transmission. I hooked it into the transmat beacon the Controller built for the planetary detonation. Instead of sending Caldera into a star—"

"—you sent the Cyberman in there?" Maggie finished.

He nodded. "Even a supernova wasn't guaranteed. So I rerouted the destination. Somewhere dark. Somewhere empty. A place where its mighty armour will wither away into nothing. And best of all, no receivers. No one to hear the call."

Three stepped beside them, skin scraped, expression haunted. “But what was it? Really?” The Doctor looked at him. And for once, he didn’t dress it up.

“Nothing more than a transmitter. A patchwork of every version of the Cybermen stitched together by someone who believed their resurrection was a cause.”

Maggie’s voice dropped. “Fourteen.”

“She believed the myth,” Three murmured.

The Doctor nodded. “They planted it. Long ago. A whisper in the data-feeds, a promise hidden in code — that androids would be welcomed. Upgraded. Given purpose. All lies.”

Three’s eyes widened. “I never knew ... never heard of such things.”

“All it took was one believer,” Maggie said softly. “But she didn’t know, couldn’t conceive the full truth of it either.”

“No,” the Doctor said. “And that was the cruelest part. The Cybermen didn’t need to win their last and bloodiest Cyber-War. They didn’t even need to survive. All they needed was for someone like her to believe. As she said, in their own way they were just playing the androids the same way the Galactic Alliance powers did. One used the law, the other used millenarian religious prophecy, but the effect was much the same.”

He looked around the chamber — to the scorched metal, the shattered relics, the androids huddled in grief and disbelief. “They built a fuse. Caldera was the matchbox. The patchwork Cyberman was the spark. And Fourteen... Fourteen lit it.”

Maggie stepped forward, her voice quiet but insistent. “But... why wait?” she asked. “If the Cybermen could send this pulse, why not do it during the war? Why now?”

The Doctor looked up at her, weary but steady.

“Because they didn’t have enough,” he said. “The war had thinned their ranks. Their fleet was scattered, lost, incompatible.”

He rose, brushing the dust from his coat. “To achieve a rebirth on this scale they needed everything. Mondasian blueprints, Cryon schematics, Telosian weapon matrices, even fragments of experimental data from dead timelines. I’m sure they swiped a thing or two from one of my fellow Time Lords. They needed all that so they could go beyond simply rebuilding themselves — but evolving.”

“With that pulse,” Maggie concluded. “That goes way beyond life. Rewriting all creation in their image.”

He gestured to the Cathedral walls, to the twisted relics embedded like bones in steel. “And where better to find the basis for that atrocity than in the very place every civilization dumped their Cyber-remains after the war?”

Maggie’s eyes widened. “Caldera.”

The Doctor nodded. “A vast, planet-wide tomb, which they made into a trap. All they needed was time — and a believer.”

The time travelers both reflected, silently and sadly, on Fourteen and her misguided beliefs.

“Still, she saved us... in the end,” Maggie whispered.

“She wasn’t trying to save us...” The Doctor corrected her. “She was trying to silence a lie... the same one that cost her everything.”

Three felt he had to add: “Still, she saved a few of us into the bargain. So we’ll remember her for that.”

“Quite right, Three,” the Doctor said.

A long silence passed.

Then: a groan. The Controller stirred, bruised, burned, but alive. He hauled himself upright, leaning against a support strut. Three moved to help — hesitated — then offered his hand. The old man took it. He looked dazed, his eyes not focusing on any of them as he rambled insistently. “I tried to keep them buried,” the Controller rasped. “Two decades. Thought I was guarding the grave. But I was guarding the resurrection.”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself, Controller,” the Doctor said, walking over. “You were guarding a lie. And that lie nearly became your legacy.”

He knelt down beside the man.

“But you stopped it. Or tried to. And now? Now you get to write something better.”

Three didn’t speak. Not to the Controller. Instead, he turned to the surviving androids — those who had huddled together in silence, forgotten even in the wake of salvation. “She mattered,” he said. “She wasn’t just a number.”

Another nodded. Then another. And slowly, the quiet became something new. Not mourning. Not yet. But something like unity.

The soft background hum of the TARDIS had never sounded so soothing. Maggie was reclining in the nearest armchair, massaging her feet after the pummeling of running up and down unstable heaps of jagged circuitry. The Doctor’s attention was fixed on one of the console’s monitors. On its screen, a Galactic Council emblem pulsed beside a status feed: CALDERA: LOCKDOWN INITIATED. TOTAL SHIELDING ACTIVE. NO ENTRY / NO EXIT.

The Doctor clasped his hands behind his back, staring at it. “They’ve sealed it,” he said. “And just to be absolutely certain ...” He gave a wheel on the console a hefty crank. “We’ll stay suspended at the same point in space but let a few centuries pass by.”

Sure enough, in the sped-up image on the scanner, the planet was swallowed in a brilliant cascade of light and colour. “There’s the Vanth corridor widening and sucking it in.” Now the colours dispersed and a muticoloured cloud of empty space remained, with the distant dimming glow of the supernova in the background. “From there it’ll be compacted in that supernova, and really will be gone for good. The Controller’s plan wasn’t bad, you see. You can count on entropy. It’s just that solar activity is always a bit slower than you need it to be for a bonfire.”

Maggie joined him, her expression tight. “Good. Right? No more threats. No more Cyber-anything.”

“No more chances,” the Doctor said, voice quiet. “It’s the right choice. The galaxy can’t afford another resurrection. Another Fourteen.”

She nodded slowly. “And the Controller?”

“Retired,” the Doctor replied. “They offered him full honours. He refused. Said he didn’t want a ceremony. Just quiet.”

Maggie gave a small smile. “After twenty years guarding a grave, I suppose he’s earned a new life.”

“More than most.”

“But there is a record of a different ceremony taking place after all this ...” The Doctor flicked a switch and the image on the scanner changed again. There on a raised podium, with dignitaries from a hundred planets applauding, stood Three and his surviving androids, wearing fine new clothes instead of their tatty boiler suits, medals across their shoulders.

“I’m happy for him,” Maggie said with a smile.

“And they gave them their proper names back,” the Doctor added. He indicated Three’s real name, scrolling by in holographic tickertape. It surprised them both. “The powers-that-be couldn’t ignore their rights after this conspicuous valour.”

She glanced away from the scanner screen and looked into the Doctor’s troubled eyes. “So it’s really over?”

The Doctor hesitated — just for one moment, doubt hanging worryingly over the air. Then he smiled. “For now. Or for then. Let’s try somewhere else, eh?”

He flicked a lever.

The TARDIS faded back into the vortex, to land in another time and place, hopefully far away from the Cybermen.

Rain whispered against the windows of a quiet apartment block on Coronas Station, far from the worlds of the outer systems, which were seized in the grip of new wars against new opponents. It was a simple dwelling, looking out on the station’s lush hydroponic gardens. The block was largely unoccupied, by androids or people.

Inside the apartment, a kettle boiled in the background. A light blinked in standby.

The Controller — no longer known by that title, back to just being a man now — stood in the modest bathroom, staring at his reflection. His face was thinner. The lines a little deeper. But from his posture, it was apparent that the weight on his shoulders was lighter. He had a few lingering medical ailments, but was in surprisingly good shape for a man his age, who had spent twenty years in Hell. He opened the cabinet, reaching for his daily medication. His hand trembled. He paused. The Doctor’s words echoed in his mind: “You were guarding a lie. And that lie nearly became your legacy.”

It bothered him how the Cyberman had left him alone all through its rampage. Still, he told himself, it was over now. Don’t fixate on it. Time for a new chapter. What that would be, he couldn’t guess.

He rubbed his temple.

Then: a click.

He froze.

Another click. Not from the room. From inside.

He turned toward the mirror, pain surging through his skull. He cried out, dropping the pills.

Handles.

Metal. Cold. Unforgiving.

He saw not himself, but the shape. The silhouette.

A Cyberman.

He blinked again, and saw his face. He frantically clutched at the sides of his head. No metal. He was relieved but still unsettled at the clammy flesh he felt.

He tried to dismiss the vision. It was a dream, a hallucination, he told himself. But he could not shake the feeling that it was another prophecy, for him. How long until he saw the handlebars and the sightless, blank metal face staring back at him in that mirror?

And as the static flickered in the screen, one phrase seemed to echo through the dark: In Steel We Trust.

NEXT WEEK ON
THE DOCTOR WHO PROJECT

THE DISCIPLES OF XYOSIS



The Doctor and Maggie arrive on Caldera — a remote planet where the wreckage of the Cyber-Wars has been buried and forgotten. Towers of twisted metal rise like tombstones, and the only signs of life are the android labourers who dismantle the past... and the bitter human Controller who oversees them.

But something is stirring beneath the surface. The Doctor suspects a hidden signal — a pulse buried deep in the planet's core. As Maggie befriends a curious android named Four, tensions rise, revealing deep cracks in Caldera's uneasy peace.

In the shadows of a cathedral forged from the ruins of war, an old threat begins to awaken — not just rebuilt, but reimagined. And as the countdown to Caldera's final destruction begins, the Doctor must uncover the truth behind the myths... before a forgotten empire rises again.

This is another story in a series of original fan authored Doctor Who fiction published by The Doctor Who Project featuring the Eleventh Doctor as played by Winston Adderly



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