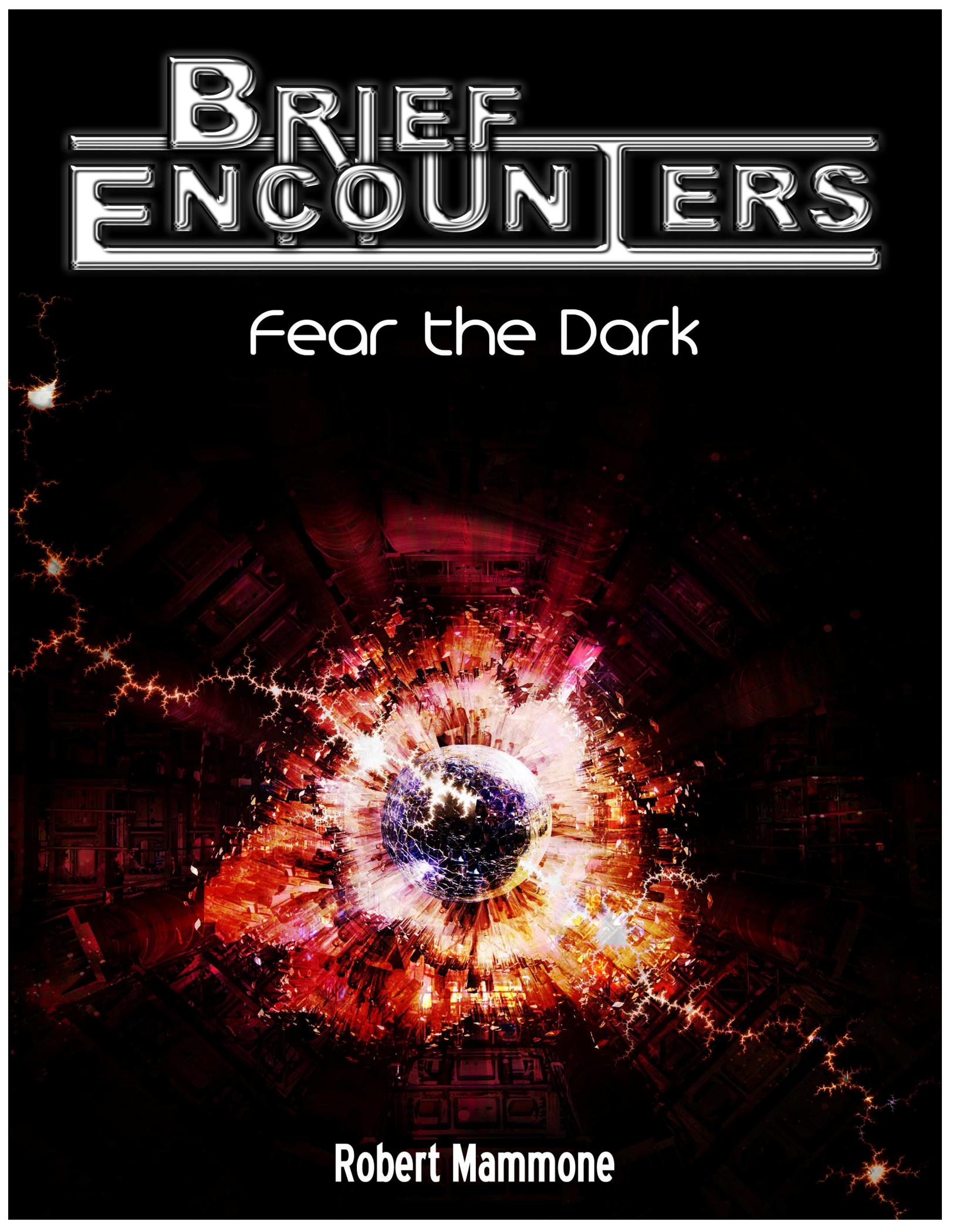


# BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

Fear the Dark



Robert Mammone



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*Fear The Dark*

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Meliandara rubbed her eyes, gritty from lack of sleep and constantly pulsing light. She allowed herself the tiny luxury of keeping them closed for a moment. Sighing, she opened them and saw Stavros emerge from the haze of light, his face split in an excited grin, dark beard bristling.

Striding to the Focus, he hurriedly pulled on his goggles. Mel began tapping at the keyboard, readying the systems for his signal. Stavros inspected a panel, making minute adjustments with a tool pulled from his belt. While entering the data, Mel allowed herself a wistful thought about Daran, who, as much as Stavros and herself, had earned the right to be there.

At least the plasti-grafts had taken, she thought, shrinking away from the memory of the burnt flesh, glistening blackly as Daran thrashed on the floor, the sound of Stavros' voice distant like the roaring ocean. Another week and she would be back on her feet, her smiling face no doubt hiding the memory of the accident. An accident, which, a nagging thought reminded her yet again, should never have happened at all.

"Sixty seconds." The computer's sterile voice dragged Mel back to her task. Watching Stavros climb into the booth opposite, Mel felt a chill shudder run up her spine, at odds with the sense of exultation surging through her. Months of grinding work and endless tests had come down to this final trickle of seconds. Unbidden, her mind turned briefly to the last trial run, that had ended with Daran screaming on the floor, her body a smoking ruin.

"Skyfire satellites on line in three, two, one."

Mel braced as a sharp lurch jolted the booth. Cables that ran from the ceiling into the Focus spasmed wildly and the hum lifted to a howl. Heat rose in waves off the Focus as energy poured into its power cells. Her readouts spiked again and the distant throb of coolant being pumped into the carapace surrounding the Focus echoed sullenly.

There was a click in her earpiece, and she heard Stavros' voice.

"Ready to make history, Mel?" His gravelly voice was heavy with strain.

"Secondary systems are ready, Stav," she said, the implanted microphone in her jaw transmitting her voice. She slipped on her goggles, reducing the actinic stream of light to a tolerable glare. Then, the moment came. Stavros stood a little straighter, reached across his instrument panel and pressed a switch.

With a distant clunk, the Focus rose smoothly, poised for a moment like a hawk, then jerked towards the crystalline wall at the far end of the room. Light emerged from the turret, forming a corona around the entire device. In Mel's ear, the final countdown began to unwind.

"T-minus ten seconds." Her pulse quickened in response to the surging roar. Light spilled across the chamber, rising in intensity until the room dissolved into an aching white void.

"Five seconds."

Barely audible through the howl of energy, Mel thought she heard Stav yelling something through her link. Her head jerked in astonishment. At the centre of the crystalline lattice a stain slipped sinuously into the chamber, an impossible streak of darkness. Mel reached for the abort button, but stayed her hand, mesmerised as tentacles of shadow reached out and settled around Stav's control booth.

"Fusion." The Focus jerked and bucked and the light blazing from it was like staring into the heart of a supernova. In her ear, Stavros screamed, his booth a pitch black well of darkness that, against the universe of light surrounding them, looked like a cancerous black hole ready to devour them all.

Uncomprehending, Meliandara reared back when the shadows swirled out of the light towards her. Her hands flailed uselessly across the keyboard as the Focus' roar increased and quickly, the screaming in her ear was matched by her own frenzied cries as the darkness consumed everything.

## TWO DAYS LATER

Podgor frowned at the flickering light strip over his head, wondering how long the back up generators would last. Reluctantly, he returned his attention to the screen. He touched an icon in the bottom corner and a military stanza swelled through the speakers. Whistling tunelessly along with it, Podgor rapidly scanned the vid spools playing across the screen.

The music brought back memories of the propaganda breaks that enlivened the usually dull viewing on the telescreens in barracks. Ruschenko called them dumb theatrics, but his blood still pumped at the images of sacrifice and heroism running through them like a thick vein of gold. And anyway, what did Ruschenko know?

His thoughts turned to the mission. Irritated, he stabbed at a button, momentarily freezing the image. No one, not even the old man, rest his soul, had known what had gone on here. Communications lost three days before, a frenzied ride backtracking through enemy held territory leading to a near fatal crash landing on the surface of this forsaken rock. And then? Nothing. No one alive, unless you counted the wreck of humanity floating in the regen tank in the med-bay. Podgor touched the controls again and the image flickered back into life. Leaning back in his chair, he scowled at the fuzzy screen. He scowled. How could he possibly know what he was looking for if his commanding officer hadn't been adequately informed? State secrets? What sort of state secrets could be hidden here, in this of all places?

The front line was better than this, he thought. At least, that was what he had been told. One day. Stretching his arms, he looked around the room, scowling once more, this time at its boxy utilitarianism. The room was a rectangle, with the control booths at the rear. Hardly a heroic bunker from which to come to grips with the rebel scum.

His eyes passed incuriously over the device sitting in the centre of the room, squat and powerful like a slumbering troll. Cables as thick as his thigh ran from the ceiling into the machine. A pipe on either side rose from the floor before being bolted into it. Some sort of focussing lens was pointed directly at the far end of the room, which seemed to be composed of an opaque pane of thick quartz stretching from wall to wall, floor to ceiling.

A change in the image on the monitor caught his attention. Turning down the music, he increased the recording's volume. Two figures, a heavily bearded man and a short, thin woman appeared on the screen. Dark goggles hung around their necks. Even through the hazy visuals, Podgor could sense their anticipation as they inspected the data arrays. He could hear them murmuring to one another, before they separated, the woman entering a booth, the man moving to inspect the far wall. A chill ran up Podgor's spine as he glanced from the booths on the monitor to their empty counterparts along the back wall.

Pausing the recording, he reached for his comms unit. A brief crackle, then the steady hiss of static.

"Ruschenko, do you read me?" Podgor's voice was tinged with excitement. Here was a chance to go one up on the woman who, by blind chance alone, was his commanding officer.

The empty hiss continued for a span of seconds, then a woman's voice, blurred but unmistakable, came through.

"I read you, Podgor. Find anything of use on those vid spools?"

Podgor smiled. He was going to enjoy this. By dint of enlisting one day earlier than him and with their captain spread across the smashed remains of their craft's flight deck, Ruschenko was the commanding officer of this little farce.

"Most of them are corrupted. Must be related to the power surge that blew out the relays. I've managed to reconstruct the most recent one. I can see Meliandara and Stavros on the screen now. Judging by the time-stamp it must be just before the final experiment."

There was a pause, then, "Good work, Podgor." Did he detect a flicker of annoyance in her voice? He thought he did, and smiled broadly. Before he had time to preen and press home his advantage, Ruschenko cut him short.

"I'll get back to you. The proximity alert has just gone off." The urgency in her voice was unmistakable. "Maintain comms silence until you hear otherwise." There was a click and the static resumed its unceasing hiss.

Podgor sat stunned; his mind overwhelmed with a dozen questions. He itched to call Ruschenko back but knew doing so would be a mistake. His hand stroked the weapon holstered at his hip. Screwing up his face, Podgor forced himself to remain seated. Stabbing a button, the image on the screen began to run.

Distracted, Podgor realised he'd heard something only after the words had faded. Rewinding the recording, he increased the volume and concentrated.

At this point of the recording, the image was in a constant state of flux – disappearing in a haze of pixels before reforming into a crystal clear picture. Stavros stuttered across the room and into his booth like a broken puppet. An audible hum steadily rose from the speakers, a strangely ominous sound linked to the increasing energy levels depicted on the screen in a series of wildly increasing numbers. There was a terrible flash of white and amid the roar of energy coursing through the Focus a faint scabble of words emerged before being obliterated by a high pitched whining.

Full of a strange, creeping dread, Podgor leaned forward and rewound the recording to the point before the whiteout obliterated the image. He hesitated, finger poised over the controls. Flicking his eyes around the room, he was relieved to see he was alone. Scowling, he stabbed the image into motion.

Again that bone aching hum. White light flashing like a thousand lighting strikes. And amid the torrent of sound, words like drowning men in a heaving ocean emerged, *they're coming through*, then a thin, whistling scream as the screen went white and by the gods, what was that, that black thing sliding through the furnace of light, so dark and hideous and...

A rising terror gripped him and he scrambled away from the screen, trying to put as much distance between himself and the image. He crashed into the Focus, and yelped as the metal dug into his back. Panicked, Podgor whirled around and then screamed. At the far end of the room, where the lattice held and bent the light back on itself, something dark had emerged. It crawled across the quartz, blinking in and out of existence in hideous, jerking movements that impossibly suggested life. With nerveless fingers, Podgor scrambled for his comms unit. He dropped it and held his breath as it clattered across the floor. Was that another one? He found himself viewing events through a fog of raw panic. Juggling the unit in his shaking hands, he thumbed the switch.

"Ruschenko. Sweet Gods, Ruschenko!"

His voice was a thin whistle of pure fear.

A crackle. "Podgor? This had better be good. I've got my hands full with two spies who may be more than they app-"

"Shut up," he yelled, voicing cracking with fear. "They're here! Oh gods, they're hea-"

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## TEN MINUTES AGO

Ruschenko crept along the corridor, feeling faintly ridiculous. There's no one here, a voice chided. She told it to shut up before ensuring that her weapon was holstered within easy reach.

If someone had asked her why patrolling the corridors of an ostensibly empty research station made her jumpy, Ruschenko knew she lacked the words to coherently answer. But feelings, well, that was another thing. There was definitely a weird atmosphere. The lighting was bad. Sounds echoed oddly down the corridors. There was an oppressive feeling, a mixture of menace and anticipation. Almost like a living organism, the asteroid seemed to be holding its breath waiting, watching...for what? she wondered. Sighing, Ruschenko turned the corner and almost jumped when her comms unit flared into life.

"Ruschenko, do you read me?" Ruschenko sighed inwardly. That prat, Podgor. Again. His voice, so eager, reminded Ruschenko of a puppy yapping all day long. She briefly considered not answering, but duty forced her hand onto the receiver button.

"I read you, Podgor. Find anything of use on those vid spools?"

"Most of them are corrupted. Must be related to the power surge that blew out the relays. I've managed to reconstruct the most recent one." He sounded especially pleased with himself. Grinding her teeth, Ruschenko waited for him to continue.

"I can see Meliandara and Stavros on the screen now. Judging by the time-stamp it must be just before the final experiment."

Interesting, she thought, then relented a little.

"Good work, Podgor." Her voice trailed off as she became aware, to her very great astonishment, that the proximity unit had begun to softly bleep.

"I'll get back to you. The proximity alert has just gone off. Maintain comms silence until you hear otherwise." Quickly scanning the readout, she carefully made her way up the gloomy corridor, ignoring the chill which coursed through her.

At the corner, with her heart wildly beating, she leaned forward, hoping to catch any sound.

"You know, Sarah, there isn't a world of difference between scientists and journalists." The voice was commanding, with a hint of gentle mockery. There was a pause, as if he was sizing up a likely response.

"Go on." The lighter, female voice had a distinctly icy tone.

"Curiosity, my dear girl. Always asking the right questions."

"All right then, so where exactly are we?" This time the response had a touch of weariness, as if the question was yet another in a long line of similar queries.

"Asteroid KL-17-A1. Sounds fairly dry, don't you think?" Ruschenko froze at hearing the classified designation uttered aloud. At home, such a thing invited ten years in a re-education centre. Who was this man?

"Tell you what, Doctor; perhaps we should give it a real name, like "Fred", or "Elvis"? Oh, don't pout, it was only a joke."

Her curiosity piqued, Ruschenko risked a quick glance.

A thin strobing beam of light arced around the figures of a man and a woman. Tall and gangly, the man dressed in the most ridiculous set of ruffles and velvet Ruschenko had ever seen. His face, lost in shadow, was surrounded by a halo of greying hair. Her alarm began to mount when she saw him pull a flat rectangular device out of his jacket pocket and fix it to the wall next to a relay switch with a loud 'snick'.

The woman, slim with a short bob of dark hair, leaned in, interested.

"A Halox scanner." He gently tapped the unit. "Capable of running a systems check on any powered device in the galaxy." He paused and in the dim light, Ruschenko watched a smirk creep across his face. She eased her weapon out of the holster.

"For obvious reasons, this little beauty was banned on the forty three casino worlds of the Helder Cluster."

"Oh, obviously," Sarah responded. "You wouldn't have tried that in Monte Carlo, by any chance?" She laughed at her own joke, then her smile grew larger and her eyes widened when the Doctor's face began to flush.

"Who told you that? Was it Yates? Lethbridge-Stewart? Joan in the canteen?"

"I do so enjoy it when you start to bluster, Doctor." She patted him on the arm, then stiffened as the dismally familiar sound of an energy weapon powering up filled the corridor.

"Blast," she muttered as a uniformed figure leaped into the corridor and yelled at them.

"Freeze!"

Rubbing his nose, the Doctor puzzled over the results streaming across the screen, ignoring the commotion further up the corridor.

"Life support. Lighting. Comms. All the relays have switched to back up. Now what is this?"

"Ah, Doctor?" Sarah tapped him on the shoulder.

"Yes Sarah, I've eyes to see, just like you. But this is far, far more interesting." He leaned in, lips pursed. Tapping further instructions into the unit, he raptly watched the screen. His mouth widened in astonishment.

"Good grief. Look at that power spike. What have they hooked the generator plant up too?"

There was the sharp staccato rap of booted feet then a figure emerged from the gloom.

"I don't go in for second warnings," the voice rasped, an angry buzz that unnerved Sarah.

"Raise your arms and move away from the device." Sarah hurriedly complied, noting the exhausted, drawn face glaring at them.

The Doctor's mouth curled into a broad smile.

"Such clever clogs." For the first time, he looked up at the woman pointing her weapon at them.

"Hello m'dear." He nodded to the screen. "Quite a lash up you've going here. I wonder what it's..." A sudden thought occurred to him, one he found profoundly unsettling.

"What for, indeed? Such a colossal...They'd have to drain most if it... And now that it's gone down..." His face blanched. He abruptly turned to Ruschenko, whose weapon wavered slightly when she saw the fury in his eyes.

"Are you responsible for this?" He paused, taking in the uniform. "Obviously not, since you're clearly military and they lack the brains for this sort of unbelievable cock up. I demand to see the scientist in charge immediately."

Such was the Doctor's commanding tone that it took all of Ruschenko's resolve not to comply.

"It may surprise you." she said through gritted teeth, "That I'm in charge here."

"Why, because you have a weapon?" The Doctor's voice was heavy with sarcasm. Like a cobra pouncing on its prey, he shot out an arm and quickly, cleanly, disarmed Ruschenko. With a quick snap, he had the power pack out and on the floor. To her horror, Ruschenko watched him crush it under a booted heel.

"Impressive, if showy." Relief washed Sarah's face.

"Now we can start on a reasonable footing." The Doctor's tone was relaxed. "I would appreciate it if you would be so kind as to allow me to speak to the scientists responsible for the disaster about to engulf us?" His companion looked at him sharply, but subsided when he motioned to her with one hand.

Humiliated, exhausted, enraged and just plain curious, Ruschenko did something that startled even herself. This man, with his bizarre clothes and offhand, but intimidating air of authority, genuinely intrigued her. And to be frank, after a day moping around the gloomy, empty station, she was at her wit's end in knowing how next to proceed. So, when she invited him and his friend to accompany her, there was a feeling of relief and even excitement that at last, something, anything, might happen.

"You understand you are in my custody until I decide otherwise?" Ruschenko held the Doctor's gaze and he nodded gravely, though she was sure there was an impish look in his eyes. She glowered at him, then quickly turned on her heel and marched down the corridor, the Doctor and Sarah hurrying along in her wake. She heard the woman, Sarah, the man called her, whispering urgently to him. He muttered some soothing platitudes, but Ruschenko was sure his friend wasn't appeased in the slightest.

They turned a corner and were abruptly confronted with an open doorway. A sickly green glow leached out into the corridor. Sarah felt uneasy. Stepping inside, Ruschenko slapped a switch next to the doorway and a faltering light emerged from the ceiling. The Doctor followed, stopping short and staring into the far corner. Tentatively, Sarah followed him into the room. She saw Ruschenko's strained grin and shuddered.

"Well, Doctor, this is the only scientist we could find when we arrived. Perhaps you know a method of getting from her what we've upended this place looking for?" Following her gaze, Sarah gasped.

Floating inside a tank of green viscous fluid was the naked, badly burned body of a woman. His face white, the Doctor spared Ruschenko an angry glance. Her grin slipped. He approached the tank and bent for a closer look.

Lines and tubes crisscrossed the naked woman, who floated on her side, arms and legs curled around each other. Sarah struggled to tear her gaze away from the shocking state of the body. The legs and most of the torso were badly blistered, but the rest of her was a ruin. The arms and face were blackened. In places the burnt flesh had floated away, revealing a thin tracery of skin stretched tight across the bones. The eyes, with their rolling, milky orbs, were the worse, drawing Sarah's sickened attention again and again.

"Full thickness burns," the Doctor breathed, his forehead creased. "I've not seen the like in many years. By rights, she should be dead." He rested one hand against the tank. "Perhaps you should be," he whispered, wincing at the terrible injuries.

"What could've caused it?" Sarah's voice was thick with nausea.

The Doctor was silent for a moment, gnawing at a thumbnail. Sarah could almost hear his mind ticking over. Watching them, Ruschenko felt utterly excluded and a sense of shame at her taunting trick grew.

"A liquid accelerant would've soaked her clothing, leading to more widespread damage. But you can see how the worst of the injuries extend only to parts of the body normally exposed." He sketched the areas with a blunt finger.

"Laser burns, perhaps?" His voice was heavy with doubt, and his eyes tracked up to the lights. "Or something much, much brighter?"

He looked at Ruschenko and the woman quailed. "Who is she?"

"Daran Eltsina." Her voice steadied. "Nothing more than a dirty traitor to her people in our war with the rebel worlds."

"Traitor? Did you do this to her then?" Sarah sounded disgusted.

"She did it to herself and I've the evidence to prove it. She sabotaged an experiment, nearly killing herself in the process."

"So, what will happen to her?"

Here Ruschenko's grin returned. "She'll be allowed to heal, then interrogated, then shot."

"That's monstrous."

"No, that's war," Ruschenko said, puzzled by the woman's response. Where had these two come from?

Her radio suddenly crackled into life and Ruschenko snatched it from her belt. There was a burst of static followed by a torrent of words.

"Ruschenko. Sweet Gods, Ruschenko!" Sarah crossed her arms uneasily and was startled to feel goose bumps.

Ruschenko looked alarmed, but aware of the strangers watching her, quickly composed herself.

"Podgor? This had better be good. I've got my hands full with two spies who may be more than they app--"

"Shut up. They're here! Oh gods, they're hea--"

Ruschenko ran out of the room trailed by the static's empty howl, with the Doctor and Sarah hot on her heels.

### THREE MINUTES LATER

The Doctor tapped Podgor's remains with a metal probe. Sarah grimaced at the leathery, hollow sound. Ruschenko, her face pale and her lips white, stared fixedly into the middle distance. She had retched when she had seen the husk of her comrade. Unable to meet her gaze, Sarah looked over at the miraculously returned scientists standing to one side. She couldn't decide which was more disturbing; the strange, hungry look in their eyes, or what was left of poor Podgor.

They huddled against a console, eyes intent. The man, a hulking figure with a bristling beard, smiled at her, which sent a shiver down her back. On an otherwise blank face, his grin sat like a badly hung painting. The woman was no better.

"What do you think, Doctor?" Sarah asked, eager for a distraction.

Chewing his lip, the Doctor glanced up. "What do I think?" he repeated, eyes switching from the two scientists, to the Focus, to the far, glassy wall.

"I think we're sitting on top of Vesuvius. I think that our range of choices are now so limited we should do what needs to be done to survive. Anything." With a quick flick he pulled Podgor's weapon from its holster and tossed it to Ruschenko, who caught it smoothly, her face a mask.

Grabbing her, the Doctor pulled Sarah between himself and Ruschenko.

"Lieutenant, as much as I loath weapons, they are a useful tool. Keep a sharp eye on those two, if you please." Nodding, Ruschenko clasped the weapon in both hands, and as its power cell cycled in a buzzing whine, raised her arms and aimed down the sight at the scientists.

Sarah looked wildly from the Doctor to the duo. They had drawn back, their faces sallow in the flickering light, eyes mirrored pools of darkness.

"Come now Sarah," the Doctor chided at her unspoken questions. "You enter a room and find two scientists who have been missing for days standing over the husk of a man who was screaming for help not three minutes before. Can you doubt that there is something sinister about them?"

Sarah could only nod and stare at the unsettling pair. They watched; mute, as the Doctor ventured to the far end of the room, where he gave the Focus a quick examination, before moving to the crystalline wall. He pulled out a jeweller's glass, popped it into place and peered closely at the material.

"What's he up to?" hissed Ruschenko, never taking her eyes off the scientists. One, the female, edged forward and Ruschenko lifted her chin. "Easy now. Wouldn't want to accidentally blow off your head, now would I?"

"I'm sure the Doctor has a plan." Sarah sounded dubious. "Though what it is, your guess is as good as mine."

There was a grinding crunch behind them, shockingly loud in the tense atmosphere. Ruschenko risked a glance behind and was rewarded when the female scientist lunged at her, fingers curled into claws, lips working soundlessly. Without hesitation, Ruschenko fired. A bolt of light struck the woman in the chest, dropping her to the floor. Green energy crackled over the body before flickering out of existence.

Sarah caught her breath while even Ruschenko looked shocked.

"Quickly." Sarah looked around and with a start, saw that the Doctor had repositioned the Focus so that it pointed towards them, not the back of the room. The turret, a wide, stubby tube covered with a thick lens, yawned darkly at her. A glimmer of energy crawled within its depths. Ruschenko pulled her across the room until they stood beside the Doctor.

The heavy machinery loomed over them. Cables connected it to the ceiling and ice rimed pipes ran up from the floor and twined themselves over the dull grey carapace. Watching the Doctor working frantically at the controls, she could feel the steadily rising throb of power surge into it. Ruschenko hissed in amazement.

The woman, to all intents and purposes dead, struggled to her feet, arms and legs twitching like a marionette. Smoke rose from her clothes and a charred circle stood over her breastbone. Her dead eyes glimmered like pools of oil, and her face twisted into a look of pure hate. Joined by her companion, they advanced on the others.

"Stand back and close your eyes," the Doctor barked. The throb of power rose to a howling shriek. With her hands across her face, Sarah spun away, fear clutching at her stomach. There was a soundless explosion of light and for one frightening moment, Sarah was able to see the small bones in her hands. The light gradually faded and silence fell across the room. Blinking furiously to clear her eyes, Sarah looked around.

The devastation was total. Most of the equipment had been reduced to slag, while what still stood looked like a blow torch had been applied to waxen models. The heat in the room made Sarah's skin prickle painfully. Between the remnants of the control booths, two dark stains, stark against the white, marked the walls. Sarah was sickeningly reminded of the photo-essays she had seen detailing the human victims of the holocausts inflicted on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. She looked up at the Doctor, bewildered.

"Is it too much to expect an explanation?" She fought to control the tremor in her voice. "We've been here barely ten minutes and already we're up to our necks in it."

"Oh for the quiet life, eh Sarah?" A wistful smiling crinkled his face. "There was sufficient residual energy in this device to offer an adequate defence." He looked around the ruined room. "More than adequate, it seems."

He turned to Ruschenko.

"Well, Lieutenant, perhaps you could bring all of us to date? Just the essentials, if you please." He looked quickly at the crystal wall, mazed with cracks. "I very much doubt we have the time for a leisurely discussion."

Amidst the destruction, Ruschenko holstered her weapon, noting absently that the Doctor hadn't tried to disarm her. Straightening her back, like she was reporting to a superior officer, she composed her thoughts and began.

"Our patrol was tasked with monitoring all military or civilian traffic in this sector. Our job was to ensure this station is not discovered. Two days ago we detected a break in the normal automatic transmission broadcast from this location." She raised a hand when Sarah started to ask a question.

"Much as you may not want to, believe me when I say that we had no idea what was going on here. Little of what High Command decides trickles down to us in the lower ranks and what we knew

about this place was nothing more than barrack's gossip. Plus, given the nature of the war, open discussion of military assets is frowned upon. Whatever it was they were doing here, it was covert and known only by a very, very few people at the top."

"Making our final approach, a surprise rebel attack crippled us. We fought them off, but crash landed on the asteroid's surface. Podgor and I escaped in our atmos suits and crossed the surface to the main airlock." Ruschenko paused, her gaze momentarily distant.

"Once inside, we quickly ascertained that other than the traitor, we were the only living things on board. The escape shuttle is still in its bay and the vid logs confirm that the three scientists aside, there were no other visitors to this station"

"So what did you do?" Sarah asked.

"We did our duty. We maintained radio silence, patrolled the corridors and waited. Given the length of our absence, I'm confident another patrol will arrive shortly, perhaps as soon as twenty four hours."

"We barely have twenty four minutes." Looking sombre, the Doctor nodded at the charred wall.

Sarah suddenly felt very, very cold. Hesitantly, she turned. Beside her, Ruschenko sucked in a startled breath, hand scrambling for her weapon.

For a moment, Sarah thought it was the after effects of the burst of light. But unmistakably, the shadows on the wall began to twitch. As she watched, they moved with increased vigour, rippling and twisting frenziedly.

"I suggest we retire to the med lab." Grabbing Sarah's arm, the Doctor ushered her out of the room. Nearing the writhing shadows, Ruschenko drew her blaster.

"That's no use." The Doctor held up his pen torch. "But this is." Flicking on the light, he shone the narrow beam against the twisting shades.

When the light hit them, they convulsed, frantically shrinking away from the pale glimmer playing across them. Shaking her head, Ruschenko eased passed the Doctor into the corridor and they slipped away.

Sarah found the eerie green glow of the regen tank comforting after the bizarre events in the control room. Sucking in a deep breath, she composed herself and turned to the Doctor.

"What are those things?"

Standing next to a console, the Doctor placed the Halox scanner against the side of the unit. As it flared into life, the Doctor began tapping away at the keyboard, intently watching the screen. Conscious of her duty, Ruschenko uneasily looked on as the station's secrets spilled across the screen.

"They are creatures of the void, of the realm between the universes." He paused, fascinated by a piece of data.

"And?" Sarah's impatience was palpable.

"And that's about the limit of my knowledge. Void or vortex, whatever you want to call it, there are creatures that live within that howling wilderness that are inimical to life in our universe." The Doctor turned from the screen, his face ghostly in the silver light.

"I must say, Lieutenant, those scientists of yours were brilliant. No idea about the consequences of what they were doing, but absolutely brilliant. A human weakness, I suppose." He caught Sarah's glare and hurried along.

"This entire project appears to serve one purpose. The device in the control room is an incredibly powerful focusing instrument. I can only imagine it is powered via a series of linked Skyfire satellites orbiting the asteroid?" Ruschenko started and looked uncomfortable.

"Come now, Lieutenant, there can be no secrets between us. Not when the universe is at stake."

Ruschenko wasn't sure whether to take the Doctor seriously. One moment, he had the commanding air of an Inquisitor, the next he spouted all kinds of random nonsense. But mention of the

satellites chilled her. Only someone with top level clearance knew of their existence. Was he an agent of the Council? A sense of self preservation dawned. Best not to cause any ripples that might end up drowning her, she decided.

She nodded. "You're correct, Doctor."

"What's their significance?" Sarah asked.

"They draw solar energy from the nearest star, collecting and channelling it into that device in control room. The energies are colossal." He pointed to the screen to emphasise his point, then moved to a bank of lockers. He sprang the locks on several with the aid of a metal probe and began rummaging through them, talking as he did.

"Coupled with the additional focussing properties of the crystal lattice we saw at the far end of the test room, the scientists here succeeded in punching a hole in the fabric of reality. Quite remarkable, really." Collecting an armful of odds and ends, he dumped them onto a bench and began sifting through them.

"And the reason?"

Glancing at Ruschenko, the Doctor pulled out his sonic screwdriver and began fashioning something with the parts before him. Sarah watched with interest, while Ruschenko moved to the doorway, her weapon held by her side.

"How goes the civil war, Lieutenant? Not as well as the propagandists would have the general populace believe, I wager." He stood back, admiring his handiwork. He had affixed a blunt looking instrument to a piece of metal cowling. Nodding, he quickly began work on the rest of the parts.

Ruschenko chose her words with care. "We have had some...setbacks."

"Setbacks? An amusing euphemism. I imagine your High Council has decided that any sort of crash programme to expedite the end of this bloody little insurrection is worth the risk." He held up the second device, inspected it with a critical eye, then placed it on the bench.

"You see, Sarah, one of the maxims of war is the expeditious application of the greatest amount of force on the enemy at a given point. With faster than light travel in this era unknown, the war has reached a point where the original cause is lost to history and the wreckage of it scatters the skies of the planets involved. How am I going so far, Ruschenko?"

Ruschenko had moved out of the doorway and stood at the corner, her attention snagged by something further up the corridor. Was it a trick of the light or was something moving in the darkness? She looked back at the Doctor.

"Given your level of insight, Doctor, if I didn't know better I'd say you were a spy after all."

The Doctor shared a wry smile with Sarah. "Flattery. Now there's a new experience."

"So, punching a hole through reality effectively creates a wormhole, expediting space travel immensely. Suddenly, you could have your fleet hovering over the home world of your enemy in a matter of days, not years. Complete capitulation would be the result and medals all round, I'm sure.

"Unfortunately, the final experiment was clearly a disaster. Instead of opening a portal for them, all they did was build a bridge for those creatures to enter our universe. I'd hazard that with sufficient opportunity to rampage across the galaxy, your friend Podgor's fate would be shared by billions more." While the others mulled over that, the Doctor picked up both of the devices he had built and, testing their weight, nodded to himself. Watching as he put them aside, Sarah thought he looked like a cowboy from Wild West, packing a pair of six guns for a meeting at the OK Corral.

"What I'm interested in is a way to stop them," Ruschenko growled, her eyes glued to the far end of the corridor.

The Doctor paused, gathering his thoughts. He clicked off the console and pocketed his scanner.

"The answer to that lies beneath us. I imagine you wouldn't know this, Lieutenant, but at the heart of this asteroid is a black hole."

Ruschenko almost laughed, then saw the serious look on his face.

"Come on, you can't be serious. A black hole? You'll be trying to sell me a bridge on Denovia 3 next."

"Use your brain, Lieutenant. I'm talking about all those satellites channelling the raw fury of a star into that device in the test room. Only a scintilla of solar energy is utilised, so where do you think the remainder goes? Without a conduit to take the overflow, exactly how long do you think this asteroid could survive? Have you ever poured a jug of water into a thimble?" He paused, taking a deep breath.

"It's likely the black hole is man made. There are ways of creating them so that they don't grow at an exponential rate. However, with a bit of tinkering..."

Sarah had a dawning sense of what the Doctor proposed. Against her better judgement, she felt compelled to ask.

"So how can 'tinkering' with the black hole help?"

"A black hole of this type would be constrained by a number of surrounding limiters. Remove them and the black hole would quickly gobble up the asteroid and take our shadow friends far, far away. Permanently. And to do that," He raised his hand to forestall Sarah's next, anxious question.

"To do that, I'll have to descend into the centre of the asteroid and remove the limiting fields myself."

Ruschenko was stunned. "Are you mad? If what you say is true, removing the limiters will kill us all."

"Well see, that's the tricky part. For us to survive, the Focus has to be powering up. The fields can be manipulated in such a fashion that while the black hole is consuming the excess energy, one field can hold the black hole in stasis. Set a timer on the Focus and once it switches off..."

The silence, like the dark outside, was palpable. The body in the regen tank twitched and rolled to one side, exposing more burned flesh.

"No objections? Excellent. Now here's what we have to do..."

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Self doubt wasn't something the Doctor had much time for. Too much time wasted pondering the hare brained things he got up to would lead to entire days spent in bed and that would never do. Still, riding the shaking elevator into the asteroid's depths, he did have time to examine the wisdom of his current course of action.

"Needs must and all that," he muttered to himself as the elevator shuddered to a halt. Pulling open the door, he peered out. An odd luminescence shining from the walls lifted the gloom a little. The Doctor hefted the bag of tools and made his way down a short corridor.

He soon came up against a bolted door. Testing the handle, he was relieved to see that it was open. He entered a small, tight room, dominated on the far side by a complex instrument panel. One wall was taken up entirely by a window, which looked out onto massive spherical hole carved into the living rock.

The Doctor paused, feeling slightly queasy. The room stretched, then quickly returned to its normal shape. He hadn't wanted to go into the specifics of the nature of the black hole with Ruschenko or Sarah, but he knew that being so close to one, no matter the limiter's strength, placed him in an extremely unpredictable and chancy environment. Still, standing on the threshold of one of the universes most awesome and frightening phenomena, the Doctor paused to marvel at the audacity and daring of the humans in harnessing such a unique feature of creation.

"I somehow doubt old Omega would've had the temerity to do even this," he said to himself as he busily stripped away the console's panelling, revealing the workings in the half light. He reached for the comms unit buried within the bag.

Thumbing the call button, the Doctor flinched at the queer, high pitched buzzing that issued. Again the queasy sensation almost overcame him and he staggered to his feet.

"Sarah, do you read me?" He was panting now, almost faint. A rising wave of burbling static obliterated the first words, and then Sarah's voice came through loud and clear.

"...et up here, Doctor. We've had a few hairy moments, but nothing we haven't been able to handle." There was a blast of static which seemed to mimic her words, then he could hear her again.

"...ituation down there?"

"As normal as one can expect when you're bang up against a point of singularity," the Doctor said. He looked around, relieved to have regained his composure.

"Now listen, Sarah. It's imperative that you and the Lieutenant stay only as long as is necessary. In a minute or two the power from the satellites will begin to come through. Once the readout reaches fifty per cent, get out. Any longer than that and you risk being caught up in the energy turbulence." There was more static and the Doctor waited for a response.

"Understood, Doctor." This time it was Ruschenko. "Fifty percent and then we clear out. Hang on, there's..." A flurry of static erupted and despite his best efforts, the Doctor couldn't raise them again. Frustrated, he returned the unit back to the bag, and began to work on releasing the limiters.

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Sarah held the reflector steady, eyes intent on the crystal lattice. The unit was beginning to overheat, and she bit her lip against the pain in her hands. Beside her, Ruschenko entered the final instructions into the console built into the Focus, before discarding the piece of paper containing the Doctor's crabbed instructions and joining Sarah.

"I hope you're friend knows what he's doing." Ruschenko took aim at a shadow writhing free of the lattice. There was a dull buzz and a burst of dazzling light erupted from the reflector. The shadow flashed negative and vanished with a shriek. Already another was emerging from the lattice's depths and Sarah steadied her arm.

Standing next to each other in the control room's slumped remains, Sarah and Ruschenko watched with mounting anxiety as the darkness behind the lattice grew. After the Doctor had left, Ruschenko had painstakingly entered the Doctor's calculations into the Focus, with Sarah looking anxiously on. It was then that the first of the shadows began to emerge from the lattice. She had found her hand shaking on the reflector, a crude energy weapon formed from a laser scalpel and a few other odds and ends that was the trademark of the Doctor's haphazard technical genius. Taking comfort from the belief that he wouldn't let her down, a strange sort of calm had descended, and when she had fired on the creature and saw it vanish, she found she could breathe once more.

Now, she found that sense of panic welling up again. Not knowing Ruschenko didn't help either. Without the familiar reassurance of the Doctor's presence, facing the unknown horror of the shadows left her feeling lost. The Doctor's absence made her keenly aware of how she had so recently come to depend on him. She wasn't sure whether she liked that idea, but pushed it aside.

"Come on Doctor, hurry up."

She almost jumped when the comms unit crackled.

"Sarah, do you read me?" The Doctor's voice seemed panicked. She scrambled for the unit, almost dropping it in her haste.

"All set up here Doctor. We've had a few hairy moments, but nothing we haven't been able to handle." She paused, spooked by the buzz of static which seemed to mimic her words. "What's the situation down there?"

"As normal as one can expect when you're bang up against a point of singularity." Sarah was relieved to hear that his voice sounded stronger.

"Now listen, Sarah. It's imperative that you and the Lieutenant stay only as long as is necessary. In a minute or two the power from the satellites will begin to come through. Once the readout reaches fifty per cent, get out. Any longer than that and you risk being caught up in the energy turbulence." Sarah felt a tap on her shoulder. She handed the unit to Ruschenko.

"Understood, Doctor. Fifty percent and then we clear out. Hang on, there's another one." Dropping the comms unit, Ruschenko took aim and fired.

Events escalated quickly. As energy began pouring into them, the cables hanging from the ceiling began to writhe. Ignoring the insistent tugging at her arm, Sarah watched in disbelief as a gyre of darkness formed behind the lattice, pressing up against it until Sarah was sure that the material was bulging. There was a sharp report and a deep crack formed from floor to ceiling. A spill of darkness, then a horrible, whistling shriek, as if from far away, filled the air.

"Come on." Ruschenko yelled into her ear over the steadily rising noise. There was a moment of stillness, then darkness exploded into the room. Blindly firing behind them, Sarah and Ruschenko bolted from the room, the echoes of the coming of the shadows racing with them down the corridor towards the TARDIS.

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It was only when he saw a shadow crawl up the wall nearest to him did the Doctor understand the terrible danger he was in. Carefully, he disentangled himself from the nest of cables draped over his shoulders. Finding the correct connections, he quickly joined them, stepping back as the constant hum diminished. Through the window, he could see several of the field's dim, until there was only the dull glow of the single functioning limiter. The asteroid rocked, throwing the Doctor to the floor. He skidded close to the wall, finding himself looking down his nose at an angular shadow that had paused in its restless search for escape.

"Mass balance out of alignment," he muttered, dragging himself back to his feet.

Again there was the strange stretching sensation, stronger than before. Looking through the window, he thought he saw a distortion in the centre of the chamber. There was a sudden burst of light and a crackling beam of energy descended into the chamber, penetrating into the heart of the distortion.

"That's it, time to go." Turning to leave, the Doctor stopped, stunned by the crawling darkness that hovered just beneath the surface of the wall opposite.

"Reality's fracturing." The idea fascinated and appalled in equal measure. A thin tendril of darkness began to emerge from the wall. Edging towards the door, the Doctor exited. Running down the corridor, he had the sensation of being watched every step of the way. He only felt safe when he stepped into the elevator and slid the door shut.

A minute later he leaped from the elevator, chased by a horde of shadows that chattered and shrieked as they slid across the walls and ceilings after him. Careering wildly down the corridor, the Doctor skidded around a corner and saw the TARDIS a short distance away. Hearts hammering, he leapt for the doors, flinging them open and falling inside, just as a shadow detached itself from ceiling and flew at him. Howling, it slipped off the slammed doors, merging once more with the ravaging pack.

Inside, the Doctor's face lit with a smile when he saw Sarah. She returned it, but noted his anxiety as he crossed to the console.

"Did you do it?"

His hands flew across the controls and the central column began to rise and fall. He caught Ruschenko's gaze and nodded.

"Yes. And not a moment too soon. The wormhole's effects have begun to spread. The shadows are breaking through right across the station." The TARDIS rocked, and they slid into a wall. Groaning, the TARDIS righted itself, the engines bellowing like a dying beast.

The Doctor stabbed a button and the scanner opened. Sarah saw they were in orbit over a vast oblong of rock, its surface pockmarked with countless craters. A series of satellites, linked by lines of fire, circled the asteroid like a necklace strung with diamonds.

"Look." Sarah gasped, terrified. A section of the asteroid had vanished in a maelstrom of darkness, which rapidly spread, radiating across the surface with frightening speed. Almost as suddenly, the asteroid crumbled *inwards*, vast cracks opening up and swallowing the darkness in moments. There was a concussion of light, then, in a matter of seconds, the asteroid was gone and with it, the darkness.

Slowly, the Doctor reached across and pressed the scanner button, feeling the weight of his years. The scanner closed with a hum, the room falling silent. Looking up, the Doctor noticed Ruschenko standing beside the regen tank, the green glow spilling over the console.

"Aah, I see you did as I asked. Thank you. You didn't need to but I thank you nonetheless."

Ruschenko simply nodded at the scanner.

"What about all that?" Her voice was raw.

"Gone. Black holes are funny things. An old, old friend of mine once called them magical. I think by then he was more than a little mad. It seems more likely that the singularity simply cauterised the damage to the fabric of reality."

"So, the shadows are gone."

"Not gone, Sarah. Never gone. Only sealed away."

In the regen tank's dim glow, the trio looked at each other silently for a long while. Finally, the Doctor pressed the dematerialisation switch, and the TARDIS vanished, leaving only the brooding darkness in its wake.

## About The Author

Robert Mammone's first publication with *The Doctor Who Project* was "*Dreadnought*", the second last tale of Season 36. Before this, he was published way back in DWM 214 with a story called "*Roses*". Since then, he has seen publication in fanzines such as "*Circus, Sonic Screwdriver, Time/Space Visualizer*". His next long form work will be the opening story for Season 37, "*The Web of Time*".

# BRIEF ENCOUNTERS



## An asteroid in Deep Space

When a secret experiment designed to create a wormhole goes terribly awry, the research crew vanish.

The Third Doctor and Sarah Jane arrive to find the station seemingly deserted, but quickly discover that they must find a way to restore the damage done to the fabric of the universe, or else watch everything in it consumed by creatures from between the dimensions.

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