

# BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

Life sentence

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Escape from the lunar prison of Holmena IV was impossible, they said. Utterly impossible.

You didn't believe them at first. You were young. Naive. You knew the Holmena State System was wrong, that it didn't have the interests of the people at heart; you had been arrested for protesting that very issue. But the worst of it would never touch you. You'd be all right, in the end. Sure, all sentences were life sentences, but protest was perfectly legal. This whole mess was just a misunderstanding.

And the prison seemed woefully easy to escape from. No walls. The only "guards," if you could call them that, may as well have been statues, standing perfectly still at all times. They wore metal and plastic uniforms that covered every inch of their skin. If you didn't know any better, you'd think them mannequins from the ancient times of the original human homeworld. They were unnerving, and they smelled bad, but there was no reason to think they'd be a real problem.

Your name is Mazala, and you held out hope of release, or hope of escape.

Well, until your second week, that is.

On your second week, a young man, one who had only just arrived, ran. He moved as fast as he could, considering the hardware he was burdened with—the same hardware that covered all the prisoners from toe to neck, topped with a loose-fitting open-faced helmet. His heavy waddle seemed a little silly, frankly. And the guards did nothing to stop him.

He was really going to do it. He would show all those spineless cowards who said it was impossible. You were ready to follow him into the darkness when about 60 seconds later he stopped. He suddenly collapsed. He twitched a few times, in what almost looked like agony. The newest prisoners around you gasped. The older ones paid the spectacle no mind.

Suddenly, he got back up.

He turned around, and slowly walked back.

*Why is he coming back*, you wondered, almost aloud. As he got closer, though, you noticed he looked different. Thinner. The bulky outfit was suddenly a lot less bulky. The helmet was almost form-fitting now, and he suddenly sported a mask.

In fact, he looked an awful lot like... the guards. With those tear-drop eyeholes and everything. The only difference was that his eyeholes were leaking a thick, red fluid.

After that, you pretty much lost hope.

Things went from bad to worse when, a few months later, your sister Kiylan turned up. She had been there before, protesting right alongside you. She escaped then, but they got her too eventually. Gods, you dragged her into this mess. Only sixteen. Not a child anymore, but not an adult either.

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There had seen several more escape attempts, and each time the results were the same. So you minded your business. You mined that organic material, and you turned it into plastics for Holmena Prime to play with and wear and eat.

What little hope you still had, what had kept you going, was that Kiylan was out there. Maybe she could live relatively all right, away from this cold hell. And now even that hope had been dashed.

The two of you had always been rebels of a sort, even if only because of your basic empathy. Your parents had always instilled a sense of selflessness and hope. They would always tell you and your sister that “if you have only a small amount of energy to give, give it to another,” a phrase they allegedly got from a tourist. Not the stuff of legend, then, but it sounded nice enough.

Kiylan never gave up that sense of hope. Even after she saw first-hand what happened to escapees. She insisted that escape was possible, or that someone would rescue you both, and everybody else on that moon. You figured she just needed something to keep herself going, like you had needed before. It broke your heart to think that she might actually believe it.

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Your name is Ace, and you’re starting to get really tired of the Doctor getting you into these sorts of messes.

It seemed innocent enough: a stop by the beach world of Holmena Prime for a brief vacation. Sure, you were troubled to see the sand was mostly plastic. Worse still, so was the water. But the Doctor had plastic-proof sunscreen. “A necessity on more worlds than you would think,” he told you. “Your world is due a healthy dosage of microplastics in your near future anyway.” With a faraway look, he continued: “Now, the plastic mutants that come a few hundred years later ... they were mildly annoying to deal with.”

Unfortunately, some cop had seen you both stepping out of the TARDIS, and quickly arrested both of you for “possession of unauthorized material.” Owning wood was illegal in the Holmena system, apparently, and to the untrained eye of a cop, that’s what the professor’s mobile home looked like.

“We’re visitors, you know,” the Doctor snapped.

“Ignorance of the law is no defence,” the cop predictably growled. “And then there are these clothes—” He roughly prodded the Doctor’s jacket, tie and scarf, pullover, shoes, and hat, with a clunky scanning device. “Linen, silk, silk, wool, leather, and straw.” He turned to you and made the same appraisal of your Doc Martens, bomber jacket, T-shirt, and jeans.

“Oi! Buzz off with that thing,” you snapped, waving away the antenna and wishing you’d brought your baseball bat. Still, it would just be one more piece of forbidden material, likely.

“These all seem to be of Terran origin ... how on Holmena did you get them out this far?”

The Doctor straightened his tie and shrugged. “I know a decent tailor on Nellipix Maxima who appreciates the feel of a nice organic fibre.”

“Do you have special dispensation for any of these items? One or two might be acceptable with the Chief Governing Executive’s or one of the other Planetary Shareholders’

permission, but all this ...” The cop trailed off, as if a crime of the magnitude of your clothing was beyond his ken.

“I’ve heard of the fashion police, Professor, but this is ridiculous,” you snap at him as you’re roughly led from the beach.

After a rough night consisting of summary trial and sentencing, you and he were shipped out to one of its moons. You learned this moon, Holmena IV, was abundant with the remains of past civilizations and thus rich in organic materials for use in the Holmenan plastic. Honestly, the whole idea made you sick. Talk about a capitalist nightmare: the cheapest material possible, plastic, was the byproduct of fuel production, and thus turned the biggest profit. The notion of the substance being so thick on the ground it was in the sand and the water of Holmena Prime laid bare the extent of the nightmare. And it didn’t take a Time Lord to figure out that the stuff couldn’t possibly be healthy for the people.

Yet as tired as you were of this turn of events, you weren’t too concerned. Strangely, this all bordered on routine: everything seemed to be going routinely, an average arrest-and-capture. It felt as though you’d been through it a hundred times by now. Well, until you saw the guards.

A feeling of dread as though your stomach had fallen through the ground accompanied the shining visage of the knights of the dead that were the Cyberman.

“Professor—” you started, but the Doctor quickly shushed you.

“Yes, yes, I know.” He indicated the other new prisoners, and your police escorts. “But these people don’t. And I’m not entirely sure the Cybermen do either. Best to keep quiet about it until we can learn more.”

You weren’t exactly a fan of that idea, but the Doctor tended to be right about these things. And besides, your only other idea was to lob that can of nitro-nine you were able to smuggle. But with all those people around, you couldn’t blow the lot up without killing other prisoners. And considering the flimsy charges against you and the Doc on, you’d be willing to bet most of them were innocent—morally if not legally.

You turned to look at them. Some were older. Grey faces and grey hair and grey hearts, their faces displaying their lack of hope for all to see. The younger ones still had fire in their eyes and hope in their posture, from the biggest and most defiant to the smallest and most nervous. You knew which bunch you’d rather get to know.

And some of them were just children, the youngest around twelve. They were mostly frightened. The other two groups probably were too, but they were better at hiding it behind masks of apathy and of hope. It wasn’t an altogether alien concept to you.

You turned back again, where the Doctor had been standing. But like that blue box of his, he was suddenly nowhere to be found. In his place stood an old woman, clearly uninterested in your inner monologue. Oh brilliant, just your luck. You knew he was close by, about to hatch some brilliant plan to get you out, and probably everybody else too. He did enjoy the odd bit of rebellion, despite that stuffy professorial look you kidded him about (although you could say that question-mark jumper was its own act of rebellion). But being left in the dark was old hat for you, and it was more and more frustrating every time.

You reached into the hidden pocket of your bomber jacket, where you hid the can of nitro-nine. It was gone too. You were sure you had zipped it in there as soon as things had gone south. Had you left it on the planet? Had the Doctor confiscated it? Not like it mattered now. Just your luck, you had been left without any defences.

As you got to the end of the informal line, you really hoped he had something clever planned and quick, because what you saw ahead chilled your blood. A row of open Cyberman suits, with officers shoving new prisoners inside them. You were clearly going to wind up in one too.

*Oh Professor, you thought. What'd you get me into?*

\* \* \* \* \*

Manual labour with some twenty kilograms of metal strapped to your body isn't easy. Your younger sister took the weight pretty well, all things considered. "Mazala," Kiylan would say. "This is nothing compared to all those protest signs you used to make me lug around." She would say it smiling madly, knowing (and knowing you knew) how insane she must be to take it in stride. Maybe she genuinely found it amusing. Or acting like that made her feel better about herself.

This was certainly one hell of a place to self-actualize.

Personally, you could barely find it in yourself to do the work at all. You did only as much as required to avoid conversion into a guard due to subpar production. She did too.

"No point in giving them any more than necessary," she would also sometimes say with that wry grin. But for you, it was less about an ideological drive for small acts of rebellion than deep apathy. You didn't want to die, but it was getting more and more difficult to care. But the horror of what death truly meant on this gods-forsaken moon kept you going. You had nightmares in which you were the mindless metal monstrosity, tasked with killing Kiylan for her acts of revolt.

You could not allow for any such possibility. As apathetic as you had grown, you still cared about Kiylan.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mazala would come around. Your older sister turned you into an activist in the first place. And you had to face that you both knew this was a risk from the start. You weren't part of the rebellion, but the rebellion's existence made any protest, legal or otherwise, a theoretical threat to the Holmena System State. And though they had made many a claim that peaceful protest was still protected, the law had been modified to count any spoken word on the part of protestors, at or near a protest, as "violence of the tongue." When the two of you had attended a silent protest outside the walls of Holmena Prime's capital city, Fumegate, a fellow protestor coughed. That was all it took.

As far as you were now concerned, there was no point in taking this lying down. You'd do your work for the time being, but as soon as you saw a genuine opportunity for escape or revolt, you'd take it. It wasn't like the government had gotten any better or worse since your incarceration, so what right did you have to abandon your values the moment you were the one being stepped on? Grinning and bearing it whilst working to undermine the boot, even if in small ways, had been your life since your mother was sent to another of the prison moons all those years ago anyway. It was Mazala's life too; she had just forgotten it in her heart. You didn't blame her. It sure was frustrating though.

Each shift was 17 hours, and there were only seven hours between shifts (24 hours total, a fact you kind of considered presumptuous given the only reason for it was that 24-



hour days were the system used on your people's original homeworld). One of those seven hours was for eating and recreation, and the remaining six were reserved for sleep. Prisoners also got one unscheduled half-hour break they could redeem at any time per month, although they'd get converted if they spent 60 seconds over that allotted break time. Prisoners could sleep in any of the bedrooms they wanted, but no more than two prisoners were allowed in a bedroom at any given moment. If three or more prisoners remained in a room simultaneously, for 60 seconds, they would all be converted. This was to discourage any kind of organization, of course, which the Holmena System State justified to the public by saying that it was to prevent gangs. For prisoner safety. Bit funny to say that about a measure that automatically kills prisoners, but then the system's citizens weren't privy to what conversion actually was.

"Aren't you tired?" It was a question Mazala asked you semi-frequently. It had been three months since your arrival, and both of you were on your off-hour. The answer was yes. Of course you were. The work was backbreaking. But how could you say that when all you wanted was return that revolutionary fire she had when she was free. Free? As if either of you had ever been free. But then that was part of the point.

"Nope," you responded with a tone you knew sounded resolute. A face of defiance came naturally to you.

"If you say so," she sighed back to you. You couldn't tell whether she knew how much effort it took for you to remain optimistic. "I just don't get how you aren't absolutely exhausted."

"You should know. You're the one who taught me not to quit."

"That was different."

"How?"

"We were free."

You sat up, filled with frustration anew. Mazala was lying on her bed, on the opposite wall to yours. She was turned on her side, facing the wall. "So what? You think we should just abandon hope?" You knew you shouldn't have gotten so angry so quickly, but for all your posturing about optimism, you were very much on your last nerve.

"What hope?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper. If she was as mad as you, she didn't want to show it. Or perhaps she just didn't have the energy for it.

"Hope that things can get better if we can outsmart or outman our situation. It's what you always taught me."

"Yeah, well, maybe I was wrong."

"So, what? You lose your revolution the moment things get a little more difficult? Huh? If everybody had that attitude, the rebels would have never taken Holmena V."

"The rebels are on the outside. They have freedom of movement, if nothing else. They're free."

"They're no freer than we are. Nobody in this system is. Look how easy it is to wind up in a place like this. All it took was a cough!" You were yelling now, your voice shaking. "If all that separates people from hell is a cough, they're already in it. The next circle of hell up is still inferno. So I'm not going to write us off if they haven't given up either."

No response from Mazala, except a defeated sigh. What a shame. You were certain that would have convinced her. In fact, you had been practicing that speech in your head all day, just in case she said anything.

Suddenly, an unexpected sound, like a throat being cleared, rang out from the doorway. You and Mazala both turned to find the source, and you were pretty confident she was just as confused at the sight. A short man in a tan and brown ensemble of fashion several centuries out of date, with vivid checks on his trousers and swirling patterns on his scarf and tie, and a jumper covered in what you recognized as an ancient English symbol for mysteries. No metal, no plastic. No trace of materials that Holmenan clothing is made out of. Not only was he not a prisoner, but he was from another system altogether!

"Sorry to interrupt," he said, looking at Kylan, "but I heard your little speech." He grinned. "And I couldn't have put it better myself."

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Being inside a Cyberman was quite different from blowing one up. You had never wondered what it was like being a canned sardine before, but you definitely knew the answer now. You could feel your neck and belly being poked by metal: not hard enough to break the skin, but hard enough for discomfort. Even Harry Houdini would find this claustrophobic.

You began your first work shift less than an hour after you arrived. Apparently the last shift had only just ended, so there you were. You were really hoping it would be your last. Maybe this would be one of the times where the professor had already laid all his traps ahead of time so he could get it done quicker? With your luck, it would be more of an improvised adventure. You had little doubt he'd have something up his sleeve, but you didn't do very well with waiting.

Less than an hour in, one of your fellow new arrivals, a woman barely older than you tried to pull a runner, yelling something about not being part of a rebellion. You figured out the point of the Cyberman suits when she crumpled as if the only structure remaining was the metal exoskeleton, only for her to pop back up like nothing had happened, just a lot slimmer. You had grown accustomed to death in your travels with the Doctor, but this felt particularly brutal. Unfair. An inescapable prison with no walls was a big, bitter tease. As if those who built the thing got some sick satisfaction out of giving the prisoners hope only to snatch it away, turning them into tin zombies in the process. The casual greed that fuelled the system made those at the top cruel.

No wonder the Doctor had come here. He wanted to be captured. He wanted to be taken here. So he could destroy it all from the inside. You probably would have wanted to too, if only the Doctor had trusted you enough to ask honestly.

"Looked like she had a fair bit of leg strength," said a short and burly prisoner of middle age, whose accent—best described as cockney with a Texan 'R'—took you a moment to get used to. "What a waste that was."

"Yes, well, you can hardly blame her," another prisoner, an elderly woman, replied. "I almost did the same my first day. Decided not to, now look at me. Sixty years later. I consider not running to have been a miracle. Kept me alive this long."

To call that a miracle, you think, is cynicism of the highest order.

"I considered it," the man admitted. "A year into my sentence. Heard from some bloke that the conversions were triggered by a program in the computer room, that you might be able to turn them off if you got there in time. I probably woulda done it if my git of a roommate hadn't 'a done it first."

You chimed in with a “what happened?” The man didn’t seem particularly bothered with you butting into his conversation.

“Oh, he made it in all right. The computer room is only just barely outside the allotted area for prisoners, and you get a whole minute out there before you get converted. I could even hear him through the open door. He couldn’t figure the computer out though. Apparently it took two people. Two computers. At the last three seconds he panicked and tried to get back in the safe zone. Got himself crushed just outside the line.”

“Good lords,” the woman said, paler than before.

“Yeah. Gotta respect the madman, but they wouldn’t ‘a put the computers there if they weren’t sure nobody could figure ‘em out. They just wanted to tease us. You’d need a genius to get them working properly without knowing how they worked already.”

A genius, huh? Now there was an idea. You were sure the professor could work those computers. You just needed to get out of your shift and find him, which wouldn’t be too difficult. You had only just got there, meaning you had one free break. Since you didn’t plan on being there for more than a day, much less a month, that seemed as good a time as any to redeem it.

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“And who are you supposed to be?” you asked the strange man who interrupted your conversation with Kiylan. It took a moment to register that he wasn’t wearing the metal uniform. So he wasn’t a prisoner. But where did he come from? You cycled through likely options. Perhaps he was a member of the Holmena System State, there to interrogate rebels? It hadn’t happened before, but then again you hadn’t been there long, so it was plausible that you just hadn’t been here yet when it last happened.

But this man didn’t seem to be associated with Holmena. For one thing, there was his fabric clothing. Only the very rich from other worlds would visit this corner of the universe dressed in actual fabric rather than the plastic stuff. Even Holmena Prime’s Chief Governing Executives and their families would generally wear plastic, so as to seem more down-to-Holmena. Poor immigrants were rare in the system, and when they did come, their fabric clothing would usually get them in trouble for possession of unauthorized materials. They couldn’t usually afford to pay the fine like the rich could, so they got life sentences. It’s how a fair amount of the prisoners on Holmena IV got there.

But no rich man would be here, voluntary or otherwise, so who was he?

He doffed his hat, woven from some leaves by the look of it. “I’m the Doctor, nice to meet you. And you are?”

“Kiylan,” your sister blurted excitedly. She had clearly done the same mental calculation to determine that this guy was, at the very least, probably not with the state. She probably thought him a rebel, but you weren’t so sure. The rebels did have medics, you supposed.

“I’m Mazala, that one’s older sister,” you said as you pointed towards Kiylan, trying to establish a protective dynamic in case he was not as benign as he seemed. “Just ‘the Doctor’?”

“Yes.”

“Seems a bit suspicious,” you poked.

"Yes, I'd imagine. Still, there are plenty of secrets in a place like this. I'm sure keeping one's name secret is low on the list. Especially for someone in the business of rebellion," he said with a grin and a wink.

Kiylan jumped from her bed. "Rebellion? You're part of the rebellion?"

"Well, I'm not directly associated *with the* rebellion on Holmena V, but we certainly have enemies in common."

You didn't like how vague he turned. "Okay, so what are you actually doing here?" you prodded. There was something off about this guy.

"Oh, that's simple. I'm here to start a prison riot. Would you two like to help?"

As Kiylan excitedly exclaimed "absolutely," you simultaneously stated, "no way." The two of you swung your heads to look at each other and locked eyes.

"You can't trust him," you reasoned. "You think some random man in fabric is gonna pop in suggesting revolt without something going on? At best he's an idiot, and at worst it's a trap."

"It isn't a trap," the man chimed in. This did nothing for your opinion of him.

"Oh come on Mazala, this is our chance! There might not be another like it!"

"There already isn't! It's too good to be true and you know it."

"The hell I do. If we miss this, we'll spend the rest of our lives working, and wallowing in our sorrow, wondering where it all went wrong. You might be able to live like that, but I can't. I won't. Maybe this is a trap, but we're working a life sentence. We're dead either way. May as well die trying." She walked past the Doctor and into the hall before you had a chance to respond.

"You. You're pulling something," you spat, glaring at the Doctor.

"I can only repeat this isn't a trap." You've never heard an accent like his, and to emphasize the strangeness, he chose to roll the 'r' in 'trap'.

You nodded. "I believe that. So you're a fool. A fool who's dragging my little sister into his lunacy."

"I promise you, I'm not. I'm just trying to help."

"Well, why don't you take your help somewhere else?"

His jovial façade dropped, and he declared in a low growl, "Because this abomination of a prison cannot be allowed to continue. Most prisons are brutal, too many handy sources of slave labour dressed up in the needs of civility. They have no place in a reasonable society, at least not this far in time. Pragmatism, I understand, but this one ... contorting humanity, brutalizing not just the bodies, but the very souls of its inhabitants. All while laughing at their ambitions of freedom. It must be destroyed."

You didn't have much to say to that.

"Now, you can help. I hear you used to be quite the protestor. You can provide the path to freedom for countless innocent people. Or you can dig your head in the sand and pray the demons that hold dominion over you will show you the mercy of labour." He finished, coldly, "I won't make that choice for you."

The Doctor left the room. He took your anger with him, and you were left alone in your mind.

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As you waited for the Doctor (and hopefully, your older sister) to come out of the room, a girl around your age came running up. "Oi," she called to you, "Have you seen a short bloke, calls himself the Doctor?"

"Yep," you responded. "He's just in that room I came out of, talking to my older sister. Why?"

"Brilliant! I'm Ace, a friend of his. I've got something important to tell him."

"Oh? Something... Rebelliousy?" Rebelliousy? Really? Why didn't you just say 'rebellious'? Well, there's a reason you usually rehearse things you wanted to say beforehand.

Ace didn't seem to mind the weird verbal slip-up. Instead, she smirked. "Very rebelliousy."

"I'm Kiylan," you said through a huge smile. "Nice to meet you."

"Ah, there you are Ace," the Doctor said over your shoulder. "I see you've already met my new friend Kiylan."

"Yes, yes, but professor," Ace exclaimed. "I know how to get us out of here."

The Doctor gave a toothy grin and clapped his hands. "Perfect timing, Ace. Tell me on the way."

"Hold on," a voice came from the doorway. "I'm coming too."

Mazala stepped from your cell with a look of resignation. You felt a combination of pride and amusement. A reluctant revolutionary doesn't exactly speak with fire, but you supposed even embers were a step up.

"That's the spirit," the Doctor said in a tone that could almost be mistaken for gloating. "Come along."

\* \* \* \* \*

As you explained what you had heard, the Doctor looked at you as a teacher might look at a student giving an answer to a science question. It wasn't an uncommon look from him. You knew he considered you something of a surrogate daughter. He used to have a family, even grandkids. He didn't talk about them often, and you often speculated what might have happened to them to leave him alone and leading this madcap life. You hardly complained about the dynamic. You were flattered that he might consider you a Time Lord in training. It was a little weird, as you and parental figures had a history, and he was hardly perfect in that area himself (again making you wonder what fate had befallen that family of his), but you knew he wanted what was best for you.

"Very good, Ace. Hacking into the security system and shutting down those death traps you're wearing shouldn't be an issue."

"Well," you added, "I almost forgot, but apparently there are two computers in there. Takes two to operate it. That's fine though, I'll come along. You can walk me through it."

The light in the Doctor's eyes suddenly dimmed. "Absolutely not. Under no circumstances are you to leave the safe zone."

"But professor—"

"No!" The Doctor paused, seeming to consider the situation better. "We might need you out here." He pulled your can of nitro-nine from his sleeve. So *that's* where it went.

"You're some pickpocket," you grumbled, considering that hidden pocket.



"Needs must, Ace. Think about it, what do you think would have happened if the authorities found it?"

You nodded and patted the uncomfortable synthetic tent you'd been sealed up inside. "I'd have lost it the moment they slapped me in these Cyber-togs."

"Exactly. What a waste." He gave it a reckless toss, and you caught it in midair. "Just in case we need a boom."

You suspected all this was just a way to keep you safe. Well, safer. But it was clear you were fighting a losing battle. So you pocketed the can. "Fine."

The Doctor exhaled. "Now then, Mazala," he said. "What do you know about Holmenan computers?"

"Well, they're highly restricted for the lower class, so basically very little. It's probably why nobody else tried after that last guy."

"Hm." He tapped his chin and sucked air through his teeth. "That may make things a touch difficult. I could probably extend the time until conversion using one computer as we go to give you more time to learn, but it would only be temporary."

Kiylan sighed impatiently. "Oh, sod it," she said, and sprinted directly out of the safe zone and towards the computer room. Mazala and the Doctor both yelled "NO!" at once and ran after her. You grabbed Mazala and held her back, knowing minimizing the lives at risk was the way to handle this, as the Doctor tried to catch up.

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You could hear the suit clicking the moment you stepped out of the safe zone. The Doctor said he could extend the time until conversion, and since the whole situation was predicated on you putting your trust in this relative stranger, you may as well trust him on this too.

"STOP!" the Doctor hollered from behind with a power you hadn't thought he possessed. But you didn't stop. You were too stubborn.

"I'll stop when we get these stupid costumes deactivated," you said. "Now come on and help me. Sixty seconds, Doctor. No time to argue."

He grumbled as you both entered the computer room, but he didn't argue.

Like Ace had said, there were two computers. He got to work quickly, explaining as he went. You barely understood what you were doing, but all you had to do was to hit the buttons he said, so it wasn't difficult. You guessed he had already extended the time you had, because you started to think that there was no way it had been less than a minute. Still, he had said it was temporary, so you didn't waste time by asking.

"Just one more step," he said, borderline out of breath. "Click the 'OK' button. Now." He looked right at you, panicked. You went to press the button.

Nothing happened.

"Oh no!" the Doctor sighed through gritted teeth. "The computer system is locking down. It isn't working properly."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"Not unless you happen to know how to rewire that mess." He pointed underneath the desk, to a pile of wires he had pulled out with his right hand while he'd been hacking with his left. You wouldn't even know where to start.

He bent down and started fiddling. "It's Cyber-technology, fused with its human—well, Holmenan—equivalent. None of this is meant to go together, it's all jumbled up." He

groaned in consternation as the computer terminal began bleeping. “You need to hit the ‘Enter’ key on that computer every ten seconds, to stop it locking you out.”

You reached over and started tapping the key every few moments, unable to see what was happening below aside from showers of sparks every couple seconds. The clicking noise in your suit intensified in both speed and volume. The sensation of tightness was growing more uncomfortable, and you couldn’t convince yourself you were imagining it. You couldn’t have had more than a few moments left.

Preparing for the end, you began to recite something your parents used to tell you, back when your family was actually a family. Not a prayer. Not really. But as close as you’d probably ever get. That mantra that you still believed, sincerely and without the cynicism or apathy all around your society and the whole damned system.

“If you have only a small amount of energy to give, give it to another.”

You heard a thump, which you guessed was the Doctor hitting his head on the desk. “That’s it! Kiylan, you’re a genius! Where’d you hear that?”

“My parents used to say it. Said they got it from a tourist they met once. Does it matter?” You didn’t think your tragic backstory was particularly relevant at that moment, as the clicks in your suit grew more urgent, and the pressure on your body more painful.

“Yes, it does.” He continued working, as you could hear shuffling and movement below. “These computers have a few moments worth of backup power. If you unplug them entirely, they won’t turn the security systems off, but they will siphon power off from other functions, including the emergency malfunction lockdown, to stay on that little bit longer. They take what little energy they have stored up, and give it to the most important function!”

The loudest and largest burst of sparks from below came as the Doctor yanked the wires so hard that, when they came unplugged, the little man flew backwards. He scrambled to his feet, and took his computer back, all ten fingers dancing across the myriad rows of buttons, inputting what you assumed—and hoped—to be the last critical commands, before signalling you to try hitting the key again.

As your metal-gloved finger touched its plastic surface, you heard a sudden, loud SNAP.

Every bone in your arms and legs was displaced near instantaneously by metal tubes, and crushed into powder between the tubes and the metal sleeves on the outside of your skin. A series of beams and crosswires suddenly found themselves inhabiting the same location in space as your guts, as central and graphical processing units were cannonballed through your ribs in order to replace your internal organs. The space they freed on the way there was now filled with plastic bags, like accordions, connecting to a series of tubes that replaced your veins and arteries, the contents of which had been boiled by the heat created by such incredibly rapid movement.

The liquid in your ear canals that allowed you to balance was still there, trying to inform you that you were no longer upright. But that liquid was gone long before your brain could perceive that shift, as a series of bolts connected to a mask made their way from the front of your head, through either side of your skull (and ear canals), and into the back end of your head, where they were fastened into the back of the helmet. The mask had slid in front of your face and was now being pressed very tightly against it, until the pressure crushed your nose and burst your eyes.

The hardware now implanted in your torso connected to your spinal cord, as your back and neck had only been reinforced rather than destroyed, unlike the rest of your bones.

Through your spine, the mechanical pieces connected to your brain. The last thing that went through your mind before you were replaced with a Cyberman was excitement at the idea of having proven your sister wrong, and the image of both of you walking free again. You were gone long before your brain even had the time to perceive your nerves being sheared off.

\* \* \* \* \*

When she got back, you'd give her an earful. Running off like that was insane. Impatience was the worst enemy of a revolution, no matter how fiery Kiylan was.

You knew the two had been successful, because you felt the suit loosen immensely all of a sudden. All those who had been converted fell over; no more guards, now they really were just a bunch of tin-can mannequins. So she had been right, but that was no excuse for being so rash.

Your heart fell when you saw the Doctor come back out. No Kiylan in tow.

"What happened?" you demanded.

"I'm so sorry, Mazala," he offered pityingly.

*"What. Happened."*

"I tried to keep her suit from activating. We just needed a little more time."

You lunged at him. How dare he? How dare he give Kiylan hope, only to kill her? It didn't matter how hard he tried, she was dead because of him. So you would return the favour.

Only you wouldn't. As you lunged forward, a CLUNK rang out, and you fell on the ground, unconscious.

\* \* \* \* \*

You figured hitting someone over the head was probably the safer use of nitro-nine, given the circumstances. You could hardly blame Mazala. You were frustrated by the professor too. But you knew better than to act like it was his fault. He would have scrambled until the last second to prevent the Cybermen from taking Kiylan. He may have seemed conniving and scheming and untrustworthy, but he cared, so he would have done everything in his power to keep Kiylan alive.

You and the Doctor quickly fled. Mazala would wake soon, amongst her fellow prisoners who would likely quickly figure out they were free again.

\* \* \* \* \*

The test had gone well in some ways. Poorly in others. That was your fault, mostly. You had a great deal of grand, universe-level responsibilities, and you generally managed to get them taken care of. But smaller responsibilities seemed to elude you. Rather different to many of your past selves. You had picked up something of a utilitarian streak of late, a far cry from the breathless young man who regenerated because he felt he had to risk everything for a girl he barely knew. But then, you pondered bitterly, he was the one who lost Adric, so what did he know? Who were any of them to judge you and your actions?

You felt bad about what had happened. Awful, even. As you always did, you hoped you could get in and out without anyone dying, but it never seemed that simple. But you had to

lock it away. If you spent too much time thinking about those you had failed, you'd lock up and never move again, frozen in guilt and shame for the rest of time. So you let Kiyran and Mazala fade into the shadows of your mind. May they stay there forever.

The ways in which the Holmenan prison system worked had come as quite the shock when you first read about it in a history book about the Holmenan Revolution written a few hundred years from this time. But then maybe it shouldn't have. It hadn't been too long since one of the many wars waged against humanity by the Cybermen. Only a few centuries. They had been defeated, of course, but the countless tombs scattered across the stars meant they could never truly die. This sad state of affairs was no doubt an attempt by the surviving Cybermen active in this part of the universe to gain a foothold in a major economic and industrial power, both to cripple humanity and to gain a constant supply of resources with which to build new Cyber-factories.

The other possibility—that the Cybermen were distant and unaware of this, and the whole barbarous apparatus was merely convenient hardware for the Holmenan establishment to torment and oppress the citizens their system and way of life had let down—was equally likely. But the Doctor liked to believe that even these people had more possibility, more hope, to improve themselves.

Not that the Holmena System State would care that they were using Cybermen, even if they remembered the wars. The conveniently frightening and cruel incentive to make prisoners work that little bit harder meant there would be more produced. And that meant more profit for those who owned the prisons. And of course, those who owned the prisons funded those who ran the State. It was all too easy for the processors of the Cybermen to exploit. It was a clever strategy. Sooner or later, the Cybermen could easily use it to rise again.

But not yet.

Ace was asleep. It would be better if she didn't know that you were about to set it all in motion.

You popped out of the TARDIS wearing a rainbow suit and blonde, curly wig. A disguise. You were on Holmena Prime. At a beach. Nearby, a similar police box was standing. You had the good sense to park yours out of sight, unlike that unwitting man in the question marked jumper over there. You got the attention of a nearby cop, and you pointed him over to the owner of the other box and his young companion.

A little while later, you found yourself in a familiar prison. You were searching for someone. A man with a strange accent, like a blend between cockney and American. You found him, and identified the person who must have been his roommate. You informed the roommate of a computer room, just outside the safe zone.

For your next trip, you had a little bit of a hunch. So you did a bit of research, and found a young couple on Holmena, newly married and expecting their first child. You wandered by them as they were taking a walk one day, and pretended to be a lost tourist asking for directions. They were splendid company, and answered every question you had. Before you went on your way, you gave them a piece of advice: "If you have only a small amount of energy to give, give it to another."

As you said it, you wondered if there was any way to embed some hint that might help you save Kiyran, give you that bit more time. But no; the message had to be simple, and time was something even a Time Lord ran out of.

Finally, you meandered outside the walls of Holmena Prime's capital, Fumegate. There was a sizable protest going on around you. They remained perfectly silent. They stared

at the riot police ahead of them, unflinching. It was enough to make you feel proud. It would be another century before the Holmena System State would fall, replaced by a utopia run by the people and for the people, but the seeds were being planted right now. In this protest. And in the near future, there was the Holmena IV Prison Break, which was historically considered one of the key moments in the revolution, destroying one of the State System's biggest sources of the plastic they made everything out of, including weapons.

You looked around to make sure you had a clear running path to the TARDIS. Then, very loudly and with the great burden of purpose, you coughed.





Prisons are meant to have walls. Prisons are meant to have a guard staff.  
Prisons are meant to have all sorts of security measures intended to keep those who have been  
detained within. The prison found on the moon Holmena IV has no such features,  
but it is no less inescapable. At least, not until the Doctor and Ace find themselves its newest inmates...

Life Sentence is a story about oppression, exploitation, and the sacrifices necessary for liberation.

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