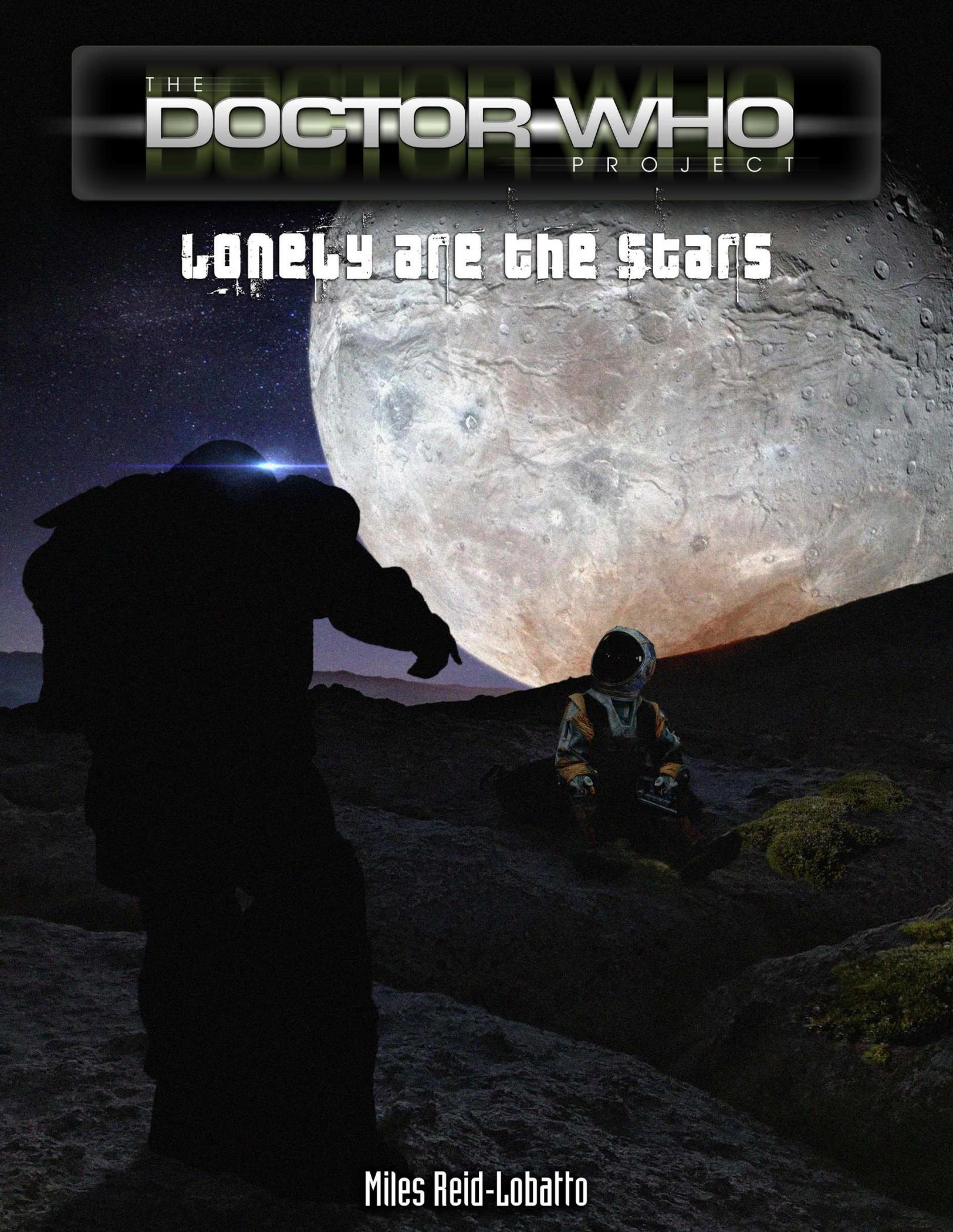


THE
DOCTOR WHO
PROJECT

LONELY ARE THE STARS



Miles Reid-Lobatto

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CHAPTER ONE

It was chicken-flavored protein gruel again.

In theory, it was chicken-flavored.

Bob Jennings poked at the pale, shivering mass on the plate before him. The fork penetrated the mass, but it slowly bounced back and continued to wobble in defiance of its eventual devouring. Cutting off a piece of the protein ration, Jennings closed his eyes and shoveled it down his mouth. Three years of meat-based protein when your only flavor options were chicken, beef and turkey had gotten tiring quickly. Space on the Boundless was more valuable than platinum and so, no meat that could spoil. With the exception of what they could grow in the hydroponic gardens, every single thing—every cookie and chocolate bar—had been prepared in a factory long before.

This was part of the grand experiment of being out here. Beyond the grandiose goal of their mission, there were all the little fiddly bits: physical experiments, psychological experiments, everything.

Finishing his disgusting mess, Jennings stood up and grabbed his tray.

As soon as he turned around, he was standing in a star-field. The ship had disappeared, every single crewmember vanished, and Jennings was standing alone in the cosmos. Biting the urge to scream, Jennings closed his eyes and counted to five. Upon opening them, he saw the ship had returned and the crewman sitting on the table next to him had reached over to tug at the sleeve of his uniform.

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” Jennings smiled and gently pulled himself free. “I’m fi-”

The scream caught both their attentions. On the other side of the ship’s canteen, a fight had broken out. The two men clawed at each other, falling over the furniture that was bolted to the floor. A few people were trying to break up the fight, but far more were baying at the violence, enjoying the hard crash out of the same routine.

When you and your hundred and twelve crewmates are the farthest human beings in the entire solar system, things start getting tense.

* * * * *

Eating alone had been one of Captain Julia Cornelius' few pleasures in the last year. After two years, the atmosphere of the mess hall had gotten stifling. The chicken was tasteless and the meal half-finished, but the moment that Buskirk deVan burst into her quarters, it had become the most valuable thing in the world to her now. Maybe she should always have people enter her quarters unannounced during mealtimes, she considered with a smirk; it might make meals feel worthwhile.

“Are you listening to me, Captain?”

Cornelius looked down at her food and back up at Buskirk. The man was pacing her quarters angrily, not directly looking at her.

“I was,” she lied. “It's quite a problem.”

“That's the sixth such fight in the last few days.” Buskirk finally stopped pacing. Cornelius knew this, since she had reports of every bit of strange behavior that had occurred on-board ship since they had left Earth. It had been as they passed Jupiter that things had started to go strange. There had been a change of mood as the isolation and routine had eaten away at even the toughest of the crew. The fights, the nervous breakdowns, at least seven attempted suicides and one incident of public nudity. “We need to do something, Captain.”

“And do what?” Cornelius recognized the tone in Buskirk's voice, recognized that what he was actually saying was 'I'm passing the buck, you deal with it.' Having designed the ship and organized its mission, Buskirk deVan knew where his talents lay and where his shortcomings were. That was why Cornelius had been picked to captain the Boundless, while deVan could sit back, tinker with the ship's space-fold star-drive and get his name in the history books. “Tell the crew not to feel overwhelmed with isolation and confinement? Tell them not to be human? Ooh, I know!” She jabbed the air with a finger for emphasis. “How about to just bottle their feelings deep down inside?”

“I hired you for your leadership skills, not your sarcasm.”

“Tough. It was a package deal.” Cornelius tried smiling, but Buskirk was utterly disinterested. The man could tell a joke, and at times in the last few years, she had even enjoyed his company. He hated the joke being at his expense, she'd learnt the hard way. “Look, I understand it's frustrating, but it isn't just the technical stuff we've got to collect data on.” She tapped her forehead. “Because your star-drive isn't going to be worth spit if we're just not prepared for things like this up here. Or in here.” She tapped at her chest.

“I was never a psychologist,” snapped deVan. That, Cornelius decided, was obvious. The man had no emotional and psychological depth worth speaking about. “So you'll deal with the manner, Captain?”

“I'll do my best.” With a sigh, Cornelius stood up and moved around her desk, fingers gently grazing the harmonica that was one of the few passions available to her on the Boundless. “For our second order of business. Pluto.”

“Yes.” deVan's eyes lit up. “I wish you'd let me go-”

“No. You and I already got to take our first steps on Pluto. Let some of the crew stretch their legs. Besides, you've got to get the star-drive ready for its first test. Haven't you?” She fixed him with a stern look. “And it's going to work, right?”

“The BV-Drive will work.” deVan looked at her cagily. “But I've gotten some readings from Pluto that I absolutely must check out.”

“And what readings on Pluto could possibly help with the first test of the BV-Drive?” They had come so far because of Buskirk deVan's whims. He had first presented the theoretical papers seven long years ago in Zürich. There, he claimed that due to dealing with quite a few unknowns,

the drive's maiden voyage would have to be far away from both Earth and Mars, due to their populations and away from Jupiter, due to its mass and gravity. Despite her numerous qualifications, Cornelius could never wrap her head around the BV-Drive. Something about folding space around a ship to cross its vast distances. She had done the reading, but even then, some of it didn't make sense.

“Get the drive ready,” she said. “We may not have a schedule, but if you want the crew's mood to improve, maybe the actual completion of her mission would help.”

“Maybe I will,” said deVan airily. Stepping backwards, he stood in front of the door. “Thank you for your time, Captain.”

Cornelius smiled. “I’ve said before, you can call me Julia.”

The door slid open and deVan stepped out to the ship's flight deck. Shaking her head, Cornelius leaned across the table to pick up the harmonica, got comfortable, and began to play.

* * * * *

“She's at it again.” Commander Carl Wendir, the Boundless’ second in command, grinned as the first few notes could be heard through her office. As deVan saw the officer lean down to the crewman at the flight controls to mutter, “Blues or folk?”

“We’re out this far in space, man.” The crewman leaned back in his chair. “It’s always gonna be the blues.” deVan nodded curtly at Wendir, but didn’t stop to speak. Instead, he strode as quickly as he could off the flight deck. She knew something was up, he could tell. Beneath all that military training, Captain Cornelius was far cannier than he had first assumed.

Worry consumed him until he reached the huge chamber at the rear of the ship that housed his life’s work, the crowning pinnacle on a lifetime furthering the boundaries of humanity’s knowledge. The BV-Drive would be his greatest gift to humanity.

The stars themselves.

Only a select few came in here, on his strict instructions. The Boundless’ standard impulse engines were housed and controlled elsewhere. When the time was right and the Drive was finally ready for its maiden test, then engineers could get in and get to work. Until then, this gave him a nice little sanctuary, to ponder his thoughts and desires. Taking a seat at his usual console, deVan’s fingers slipped across the touch screen, pulling up a series of charts and screens. While he worked, he caught a glance of his face in a blank monitor screen. He looked terrible: he rarely exercising and not taking care of himself had made him greasy looking.

The signal was still going strong.

The signal that came from Pluto. The one only he knew about. The closer they got to Pluto, the more he had been able to pinpoint its exact coordinates. It was close to the spot he had chosen for the survey teams: a flat outcropping of rock and stone so perfectly formed that it might have been designed for that purpose. What he would find down there, he honestly didn’t know. The prospect thrilled him, just as it had all those years ago. Spine tingling with delight, deVan considered his next move. Maybe he should have told the Captain, maybe she would understand. More than likely, she would not, privileging some nonsense about the crew’s safety, as if that mattered anything at all. Every single crewman had volunteered, knowing that their lives would be expendable to the cause of science. New and different information, new and unexpected discoveries; why would that make them any less expendable?

* * * * *

Buskirk deVan watched the pattern of the signal dance and twist on the screen before him. He touched the screen gently, his fingers tracing the paths of the signal.

“I’m coming for you,” he whispered. “I will find you.”

And when he found what he had come out all this way to find, then everything would have been worth it.

Then, he would have the stars.

CHAPTER TWO

Jennings tugged at the collar of his spacesuit, finding the multiple layers of plastic and fabric stiff and tough to move.

“It's too tight,” he muttered to himself.

“Come off it!” cried Tober from the chair next to his. “Been in space three years living off gruel, the last thing you could've done is put on weight.”

“It's just tight. Feels stuffy.”

The shuttle left the Boundless' dock slowly. The mission commander, Mikhail Simonson expertly manipulated the controls while Kalim, the survey team's second-in-command, sat at the ready in case of emergency. The moment they were out in space, Jennings felt tense, his fingers squeezing the arms of his chair. Electric touch-sensors in the bulky gauntlets he wore would send all sorts of data back to the ship.

“I'm pulling us into a turn,” said Simonson with a casual charm that was almost smug. Almost immediately, the shuttle jerked violently to the left as the impulse jets propelled it away from the Boundless. For a few moments, all they could see through the main view-screen was gunmetal gray that seemed to go on forever. As they got farther from the ship, the eight-man shuttle crew could only gasp with amazement at the sight of their home.

* * * * *

The Boundless lacked any real aesthetic beauty. Two miles of welded metal blocks ended in a flat snub. Dotted along its surface were several rotating sections which created gravity close to Earth-standard. The ship receded, swallowed up by the space all around it. Jennings tasted blood in his mouth. He had been biting his lip.

“Well,” said Tober with a grin. “We're now officially the loneliest human beings in the universe.”

“Shut up,” snapped Jennings.

“Everyone get a good look?” Simonson looked back to the rest of the shuttle-crew. “Because here comes the next view.”

The shuttle spun violently then, like the world's worst roller coaster. Before Jennings could

react, the Boundless had disappeared and was replaced by a gray mass of ice and rock. Pluto hung before them, growing ever bigger.

“Hey,” Tober leaned in and whispered to Jennings. “Look, I’m sorry-”

“It’s fine.”

“Are you okay?”

“Fine. Just fine.” Jennings’ could feel his hand try to make a fist, but thanks to the suit’s gauntlets, the best he could do was a bird-like talon. Forcing a smile, he looked back at Tober. The man’s concern was genuine, but in that moment, Jennings found himself filled with irrational hatred. “Probably just something I ate,” he softly growled. “Don’t worry.”

* * * * *

The landing had been bumpy, but they were down safely. Simonson was still apologizing as he unstrapped himself from his seat and stomped over to the inner door of the airlock.

“I’m quite a boring pilot,” he said. “I like landing on planets with atmospheres.”

“He says that every time,” Kalim laughed as he got up from the co-pilot’s seat. Simonson lifted a hand as if to slap the man, but laughed and ran a hand through his hair. Despite the bulky gauntlets he wore, he slipped the band around his shaggy hair with astonishing dexterity. Amongst the crew, a lot of hair and beards had grown out beyond acceptable military standards. Since the entire expedition was a private venture, nothing had been done beyond a few posters in the Boundless’ common room areas.

“Okay, everyone, helmets on. If this is your first time, remember your training and buddy-system!” As Simonson finished, he slipped his helmet on and his voice muffled. Jennings grabbed his own helmet, affixed to the backpack of his spacesuit, and slipped it over his head. The brief sensation of smothering flooded him with adrenaline, until the helmet’s automatic first seal made the connection as helmet met suit, tripping the sensor that began the suit’s oxygen flow. Whispering to himself, going over the procedure in his mind, Jennings reached up to locate twin tabs on either side of the spacesuit’s collar and pulled them towards the front where they met in the middle, completing the second seal. When he was done, he looked to Tober, his assigned buddy. The two met like awkward lovers, their hands reaching for each other’s faces and throats. Space is dangerous, no matter how safe the ships or advanced the technology. Despite all the precautions, one mistake—either your own or bad cosmic luck—and you’re a dead man. Jennings touched his buddy’s helmet, running his fingers over the two seals. Now his helmet was on, the sensors in the fingertips were feeding information directly into the top corner of his visor. As he did this, his buddy was also touching his neck-seals, checking for any faults that could cause oxygen leakage or worse. Both satisfied, the two flashed each other a thumbs-up. That was the other reason for checking. In space, you should never be alone and this was one method of psychological reinforcement.

One by one, the survey team filtered through into the airlock and waited as the inner door leading back into the shuttle closed, and the outer door turned and opened.

* * * * *

Pluto was a beautiful sight for a dead planet. The mountains of ice and stone caught little pinpricks of light from the stars around them, making it come alive with a shine. Jennings dropped down from the shuttle and onto the surface of an alien planet. The ground crunched beneath him, a

thousand sensors in the boots simulating the feel of the ground. The spacesuits were like huge, inflated suits of samurai armor. Their exo-skeletons were designed to pick up all the small intricacies of human movement, to make it as easy as possible to move in such encumbered conditions. As he moved around the shuttle to the equipment lockers, Jennings felt an itch on his nose.

“Look up there!” Simonson was pointing at the horizon in a direction his suit was telling him was close to northwest. “You can't see it, but the Earth is in that direction, an invisible dot on an invisible dot.”

“Wonderful!” Kalim exclaimed, pulling down a case of survey and digging equipment. “If we're here long enough, I'll know which direction I'll need to pray in.” With the pressing of a button on the side of the case, there was a snap-hiss of a vacuum seal breaking. Kalim reached down and pulled out a prayer mat adorned with beautiful fabric stars. “The first Muslim to pray on Pluto,” he chuckled. “I'm sure they won't mind if I keep my shoes on in this situation.”

Jennings realized he was the only one who wasn't laughing as Kalim respectfully put the prayer mat back in the case. He wasn't even listening to Kalim and Simonson's good-natured argument about sneaking a prayer mat in a case of delicate equipment (“Just think of it as extra protection,” he could hear Kalim retort). The itch in his nose was spreading. He wanted to scratch his back, his armpits, everything. Earth was there, off in the horizon, even if he couldn't see it. Friends and family were so far away, they might as well be dead. All he could see was the Boundless, an ugly stain on infinity.

“Jennings.” A hand touched his shoulder, making him spin around, ready to strike. Tober was standing there, his helmet's illuminated faceplate showing his concern. “You're not okay. You've just been standing there this whole time. I'll tell Simonson, maybe we can sort something-”

“I'm fine,” snapped Jennings. People were starting to look at him now. Only, there weren't people, not really. Due to the size of the suits, they were nothing more than crude shapes, sculpted from plastic, metal and cloth.

He was the only real one, surrounded by... things.

Closing his eyes, Jennings shuffled back to face the shuttle's equipment locker and pulled out his equipment case. Rock samples. He was a geologist after all. Even if probes had passed Pluto and made their guesses and analysis, they needed actual samples. That was why he had come all this way; that was why he was so lonely. Placing the case on the ground, Jennings opened it with the touch of a button.

All alone, but he would do his job.

All he had to do first was to put the drill together.

* * * * *

Back on the ship's bridge, systems and screens displayed the information transmitted from the shuttle crew's space-suits: brainwaves, heart-rate, every vital sign. Nothing in Jennings' brainwaves indicated that anything was wrong at first.

By the time a bridge officer saw something going wrong, Al Tober was already dead.

By the time the officer had called for Commander Wendir's attention, another one of the shuttle-crew was dying.

In the time it took for Captain Cornelius to start running to the bridge from her quarters, Simonson and Kalim had already been dead for a minute and just now, the scanners were playing

catch-up to tell a crew that couldn't do anything that something had gone horribly wrong.

By the time Captain Cornelius had thrown herself through the doors demanding a situation report, only one person was still alive from a shuttle crew of eight.

The view of Pluto on the main screen had been replaced with a feed from one of the suit-cameras, a view of the stars. The name ASIMO was printed in the top right corner in green text. A shape moved into view over the camera and brought its boot down on the face plate, again and again.

“Get me Jennings’ feed,” said Cornelius. “He's the only one still alive, right?”

The view changed and now, from their point of view, the boot was theirs. The bridge crew watched helplessly as Jennings’ boot cracked Asimo's faceplate. Seemingly satisfied, Jennings stepped backwards and the eye line of his camera moved across the horizon.

“Oh God,” Cornelius heard someone moan. “I think he used the drill.”

“We're recording all this, right?”

“It's all automatically recorded,” said a voice. “This is just the live-fee-”

The view-screen immediately turned to static. Jennings had deactivated his camera-feed. A few seconds later, the view on the screen returned to that of the planet below, as if nothing had happened.

CHAPTER THREE

Hannah felt the TARDIS door close and lock behind her. Letting go of the handle, she stepped forward, bouncing gently.

“So at this point? Is Pluto a planet or not?”

The Doctor's gave out a long, tired sigh. “Typical humans. I take you to the very edge of your own solar system and your first question is about nothing more than its status on a piece of paper!” He flung his arms wide. “The very edge of the solar system, humanity’s cradle, and you're worried about a technicality!”

Chuckling, Hannah made her way to join him, her weighted space-boots crunching with every step. “You don't actually know right now and you’re trying not to sound stupid, aren't you?”

“Honestly?” Even through the tinted fishbowls that the two wore, the Doctor's sly smile could still be seen. “You found me out.” Slowly and grandly, the Time Lord pointed in four different directions. “That way, we have rock and ice. *That* way, there’s rock and ice. Over that way, there's some lovely bits of rock and ice and over here-”

“An information kiosk?”

“An information kiosk made out of rock and ice.” The Doctor lowered his hand. “Just give me twenty minutes and an ice-pick.”

“Actually ... ” Hannah was pointing upwards. “I'm more interested in that.” The Doctor looked up. The spaceship in orbit was small enough to be visible to the human eye. The Doctor squinted as a flicker of light separated from the ship and started dropping towards the nearby horizon. He had picked a random year in the early-to-mid 22nd century; early enough that mankind's reinvigorated attempts at exploring their solar system had reached as far as Mars.

“Perhaps there's a tourist trap over yonder and we just didn't see it.”

“Wonderful,” said Hannah dryly. “I wonder if there's a Space-Hannah stuck behind the counter.”

“We'll go and see.”

“And tell them what?” Hannah looked about them. “For all we know, they might be the only people here... and how're they going to react if they find the two of us here?” She flashed him a resigned smile. “How do they always react when they find strangers in places where they don't expect company?”

The Doctor wanted to protest, but couldn't. Instead, he started to climb, looking for a way to get a better view.

* * * * *

Captain Cornelius could still hear deVan begging to be brought along as she programmed the landing co-ordinates for their shuttle. They had found the closest flat surface to land and she was just tapping in the last readings. No one was talking, everyone consumed in their own thoughts. A few of the crew, herself included, had military training, but the Boundless was not a military vessel. As such, it had no real armaments.

She was glad of the opportunity to leave the ship. Word of the massacre had spread and the already tense situation on board ship was getting worse. Cornelius had put herself in charge of the manhunt, as much as she didn't feel ready for it. She had trained to kill, but training and actually pulling a trigger were two different things. If Jennings could be caught, what would she do? Earth hadn't responded to their message yet and even then, they might still have to work it out for themselves. Out this far, there was no court or justice system, just a small collection of human beings already wound far too tight.

"I think I saw something move!" Carson cried in her ear. He was sitting in the co-pilot's seat, looking over sensor data of their descent. As good as the shuttles were, one unseen piece of rock could still carve them open like a tin.

"In our landing zone?"

"No, Ma'am, but nearby. It could just be a trick of the light though, it didn't look like Jenn..." Carson shut up, not finishing the name. It was already starting, Cornelius noted. He wasn't quiet, dependable Jennings anymore, he was a killer.

A monster.

* * * * *

Once they had climbed the safest outcropping of rocks, the Doctor and Hannah surveyed the horizon. After so many strange and wonderful planets, Hannah couldn't help but feel a little disappointed. She wouldn't tell the Doctor, maybe not until later.

"There's another shuttle over there."

"Think there's trouble?" Hannah was glancing back at the TARDIS.

"Always." The Doctor held up a finger and ran it across the sky, charting the descent of the landing shuttle in his mind. As soon as he did, he quickly ran the calculations, taking into account gravity and how easy it would be to move across-

* * * * *

There is another mind.

It stirs from its physical slumber. Even if it is always conscious, the body still needs rest. This is the first mind, the only mind in this entire gulf of time that has interested it, intrigued it. There have been others, coming towards him all this time, closer now than before, but even in their great mass, they have been nothing more than insects struggling to survive in an ocean. They have not concerned him, yet.

But this one.

This one is different, as ancient as stars, his mind reeking of the stench of time. All it can do is try to touch this new mind, to make contact. But it cannot. Something is in the way.

* * * * *

Without warning, the Doctor shot bolt upright, his body stiffening. The sudden movement almost made Hannah fall backwards onto the rocks.

“What is it?”

“Something is watching us.” The Doctor turned, his lips pulled back into a snarl. “Just now, some... something.” He looked to Hannah, asking if she felt anything. She shook her head, still looking up at the Doctor with worry.

“A mind,” said the Doctor. “Another mind, some power... touching against the fringes of my consciousness.” Taking one last glance at the landing shuttle, the Doctor turned to the TARDIS. Instinctively, he knew that the safest thing would be to return to his ship. Whatever this mind was, he doubted that it could penetrate the defenses of the TARDIS.

* * * * *

Malak senses the second mind then, the mind that is, and also is not, a mind. As Malak reaches out with his consciousness, but it holds him at bay. Like a mind, yet not. A consciousness? Definitely, but artificial. A thinking, self-aware device? A psychic machine? They had such devices long ago on his planet. There were some here, but even the power of these machines has limits.

Intriguing.

It could disrupt everything.

For the first time in centuries, Malak physically reaches out. His arm, calcified by eons, pulls free and twists at the air, his mental commands at work.

* * * * *

The Doctor and Hannah felt it before they saw it. There was no air on Pluto, so they did not hear the rumbling of the rock, but they felt the ground beneath them. The Doctor stopped and turned back, helping to steady Hannah. The Doctor looked back at the TARDIS.

The rock moved, spreading up and around the ship. The sight was surprising, but the Doctor’s mind quickly filled with ideas and suspicions. The other mind was no longer poking at him now. He guessed its attention must have been drawn from him to the TARDIS. That same mind, he now speculated, was somehow able to control the rock and the ground around them. With another shudder, the TARDIS was entirely covered by rock and dirt, even its light on top snuffed out.

It should be easy to dig out, the Doctor thought to himself. *Perhaps if I modify the sonic screwdriver, or even use one of the tools in the spacesuit’s utility belt, we might be able to dig the door open at least.*

The Doctor and Hannah didn’t get a chance. Like a magician pulling away a sheet, the mass of ground and dirt covering the TARDIS shot back down into the ground, swallowing the ship. The shaking beneath their feet finally stopped. Now able to run without the fear of falling, the Doctor threw himself at the spot where the TARDIS once stood. The ground had sealed perfectly behind itself, as if it had never split open and as if the TARDIS had never landed there.

* * * * *

“The tremors have stopped,” said Carson. “We can land now.”

With a sigh, Cornelius tapped in the final commands. The shuttle had been just about to land when their sensors picked up the seismic disturbances, forcing them into a holding pattern. The landing jets burst into life and Cornelius landed the shuttle with textbook precision. As soon as the jets were off and the engines started to cool, she jumped from her seat. The rest of the shuttle crew also rose, with none of the usual exuberance from a successful landing. The severity of their mission has squashed all that. Try as they might, none of them could muster any enthusiasm for a manhunt. As Cornelius stepped to open the equipment locker, she saw that Carson was the only one who remained at his post.

“What is it?”

“Umm...” Carson’s face was pale. “I was fiddling with the communications, trying to get back in contact with the Boundless. But as I was doing that, I came across a second frequency. It’s a little way off and short-range.” Stopping to swallow, Carson looked at the others. “There’s a signal out here. And it’s broadcasting.”

“That’s not possible,” Cornelius heard someone say behind. The laugh Carson made was a nervous one.

“Hey, you can listen if you want. Even better, they’re speaking in English. One of them’s even got a British accent!”

* * * * *

“What happened?” Hannah was beside the Doctor now as he patted the ground with his palm. It seemed just as firm as before, just as impossible as the ground swallowing the TARDIS deep under the surface of Pluto.

“I don’t know, “ he found himself confessing again. Unlike before, he wasn’t smiling. From his belt he pulled a small energy-scanner. Normally, the scanner was programmed to detect radiation, but could be changed to pick up different readings. Whatever he was picking up now wasn’t radioactive, but the scanner was too primitive to give him the information he needed.

“Is Pluto inhabited?”

“I never considered it,” said the Doctor. “But right now, I can’t deny the possibility.” Hopefully, he looked at the small wristwatch device strapped to his spacesuit. He was glad that he had decided to dig out the old TARDIS homing beacon before leaving on their little jaunt. Its needle was spinning wildly and unhelpfully. Perhaps the make-up of the rock was jamming the signal; perhaps the intelligence that had taken his ship was doing it. The mind was now fully gone and even with his own telepathic potential, the Doctor could only perceive a psychic itch on the very edge of his mind. Still kneeling, he looked up at Hannah, hoping that she didn’t see how afraid he was. She was clearly scared enough for both of them.

“I don’t know where the TARDIS is.”

“More importantly,” Hannah said slowly. “How much air have we got left?”

CHAPTER FOUR

Things had blurred for Jennings after he... after he...

Running on Pluto wasn't easy, especially with the bulk of the spacesuit, but the more he ran, the easier it became. There was no destination in mind, on a rational level he knew that, but if he could just keep moving, they wouldn't find him and ...

Why were they looking for him?

Jennings stopped running. As he slumped against the nearest rock-face, panting, his fingers reached out for a nearby piece of rock.

“They can track you, Jennings,” he whispered to himself. “Suit beacon, emergency suit beacon.”

He picked up the rock, he squeezed it, testing its weight in his hand, turning it over until he found the sharpest edge. Switching off the beacon was one thing, but that probably didn't mean much for the people looking for him. The emergency beacon was built into the huge backpack of life-support and computer apparatus—left shoulder, if he remembered. The rock cracked against the beacon again and again. After a good three minutes, he let the rock slip from his fingers. Quite easy really, thanks to the blood on his...

...hands.

There was blood on his hands. It couldn't be his, it just couldn't be. If there was a hole in the suit, one that penetrated deep enough to cut him, wouldn't he be...

... It probably wasn't blood, Jennings thought to himself as he started to run. He was probably just imagining things. Much like that voice on the very edge of his hearing. Just like the idea that the Boundless would be sending people to track him down after he had ki...

Keep on running, Jennings. From everything.

* * * * *

“You sure this will work?”

Walters held up one of the long, bazooka-shaped devices he had stored into the second shuttle's cargo hold before they had left the ship. On both sides were two canisters with tubes that fed into its barrel. “I don't see why it wouldn't, Captain. These things are designed to be quick to

spray and fast-acting.”

Since the Boundless had no weapons, the crew had been forced to improvise. Choosing a distant slab of stone, Walters lifted the bazooka and fired. A jet of beige-colored liquid spurted from the nozzle in a messy stream. Upon hitting the rock, the liquid spread and hardened. The substance was designed to deal with leaks or fractures in the hull of the ship. A fast-acting emergency sealant foam, it hardened quickly and became almost unbreakable.

Just what you needed when dealing with a psychopath, thought Cornelius. With a tired smile, she took a seal-gun and checked the gauge. The seal-guns were quickly distributed to everyone, apart from Carson, who had volunteered to stay behind on the shuttle.

“Still getting those strange signals?” Cornelius asked into her suit's communicator.

“Yeah,” said Carson. “Although I don't understand what they're saying.”

* * * * *

“What if they don't believe us?”

“Then we'll be charming,” said the Doctor, trailing behind Hannah. “I can do that.”

“I don't think you can.” Hannah reached a steep incline of rock before and began to climb. They were closer to the shuttle already parked on the horizon than the one newly landed. For the most part, the Doctor was occupied in thought, off-handedly answering some of Hannah's questions and ignoring others as he muttered through the problems. As they got closer to the shuttle, every few hundred steps, Hannah found herself stopping and gazing up at the sky.

“Which direction's Earth?”

The Doctor absently pointed in a northwesterly direction.

“I can't see anything.”

“Not from this distance you can't,” said the Doctor. “Not even the sun.” He stopped and strained to look. Hannah couldn't see what he was pointing at. “A dot on the horizon.”

“I'd hate to live here,” said Hannah. “I'd probably go mad.”

“It is a problem.” The Doctor walked along a narrow slope, not much larger than two meters wide. “It's one of the things mankind has to deal with in the early days of space travel. That need for companionship.” Stopping, he tapped the slope with his boot. “Doesn't this seem a bit too manufactured?”

“It could just be the wind,” said Hannah, wondering if there was wind on Pluto. Since the Doctor hadn't corrected her, she assumed there was. They kept walking in silence until a sharp turn brought them to the shuttle.

And the bodies.

* * * * *

Malak hasn't physically moved in centuries. Just pulling itself out of its huge stone throne is an exercise in agony as ancient bones snap and crack with the force of movement. The same environment armor that protects them moves with them. Two cables descending from its chest attach to its side and legs, moving and contracting as he moves to and fro around the chamber.

The first one is arriving soon. Malak can feel his consciousness close by. He seems agitated, but Malak does not know why. Scanning the creature's mind would be preferential, but not until he is here. It might be dangerous for the human otherwise.

* * * * *

It had been a long time since seeing death had really shaken Hannah. When, she realized, had she had become used to the constant death that the Doctor seemed to forever be stumbling across? Now? Who knew? All she could do was stand off to the side while the Doctor moved from body to body.

“There are tracks going off in that direction.” He pointed at the ground. “A trail of blood.”

“Great,” said Hannah, trying her best to keep her voice level. “That’s... that’s... yeah... great.”

“Well, it means he’s not here,” the Doctor pointed at a large blood-covered drill apparatus. “And he didn’t take his favorite toy with him. Pretty clean, the spacesuit probably kept in a lot of the really nasty stuff fro-”

“Doctor!”

The Doctor froze, looking at Hannah and coughed awkwardly. “It could have been worse, Hannah.”

“They’re still dead.”

“I know, and they’ll be mourned. Later.” The Doctor spun around toward the shuttle. “Perhaps we can send a message, notify the proper authorities, get some fresh oxygen before-”

The jet of thick liquid hit the Doctor in the side and sent him off his feet. Hannah remembered the gravity here was a fraction of Earth’s and all she could do was watch him fly across her eye-line like a leaping ballet dancer. The Doctor’s helmet hit the shuttle’s bulkhead, the liquid hardening around him. Not looking to see what had been fired at him, Hannah ran towards the Doctor. If the helmet had cracked, he’d be done for.

“Don’t move!” a new voice called in her ears. Shrieking in shock, Hannah saw the group of suited figures for the first time. From their bulky frames, for a moment she thought they were aliens, but her mind quickly caught up with her instincts and she realized that they wore the same suits as those lying dead around them. She held her left arm up while pointing to the prone figure of the Doctor with the other one.

“Don’t shoot! We’re nice.”

“Speak for yourself,” said the Doctor with a groan. “Gave me a nasty knock on the head there.”

“They look human enough.”

“They speak English,” said Carson. “So at least we can communicate with them.”

“Yeah, but who are they?” Walters trained the nozzle of his seal-gun on Hannah now.

No other humans should be here, Cornelius thought. They may look human and sound human, but that didn’t mean anything. Thanks to Carson, they had been able to tune into the strangers’ communicator frequency.

“Listen,” said the human-like-man struggling against the thick brick of foam. “I know what you’re thinking: dead bodies, strangers, ooh look, they must have done it. Believe me, it happens more often than you think. But my friend and I, we’re stranded on this planet and we need your help.” The man’s tone of voice, Cornelius decided, was very unaccustomed to humility and much more used to getting his way.

“It’s true,” said the young maybe-woman. The spacesuits were flimsy things, almost like something from an old book, even with the fishbowl-like helmets. How they weren’t freezing to death was astounding, given how much of their suits were packed with heating units. Whatever

this young woman really was, she sounded a lot gentler than her friend. "I'm Hannah."

"American accent," muttered Carson. He didn't realize that he was still talking on their frequency. This got him a glare from the young woman.

"Yeah, I'm American." The being calling herself Hannah sounded angry. "Like I didn't get asked about that enough back home."

"I'm the Doctor. I honestly want to help. I honestly also want to move, so maybe you could let me go?"

"Want me to blast him again?" said Walters, but Cornelius made him lower the seal-gun with a wave of her hand. She stepped forward, switching herself over to their frequency.

"Where's Jennings?"

"I have no clue who that is," said the Doctor. "But there's a trail of blood going in that direction. I don't think it was his," he said quietly.

There were options to weigh. Cornelius considered the least ludicrous. "Can you cut him down?" she asked Walters. Walters nodded and started to make his way forward, attaching the seal-gun to a hoop on his suit's backpack and producing a small chemical spray. Cornelius started to make her way to Hannah, slowly lifting the visor of her suit so the young woman could see her face.

"Hannah? I'm Julia. Julia Cornelius. I have to ask again... are you human? Because your being here raises a lot of very troubling questions."

"I assure you," said Hannah with a weak smile. "I am human."

"That ship up there? We're the first manned ship to make it to Pluto in the whole of human history. You must understand, there's no way you can be here."

* * * * *

Hannah could hear the Doctor complaining as he was slowly freed from his sticky bonds. Julia was looking at her with very tired eyes.

"There's an explanation," she said, looking at the Doctor. "But I don't think you'll believe it." She looked down at the bodies. "I can help... you know... bury them."

The smile she got in return was comforting, but she could see Julia shake her head. "No. We'll have to do a full investigation before we take them back to the Boundless. We can deep-freeze them to return to Earth, or we can bury them in the stars. Not here. Humanity just got here, I'd rather we didn't already stain this planet with death."

"Captain, there's no damage to the shuttle." Despite being inside the shuttle, Carson's voice made him feel like he was standing right beside him. "We can take off at any time."

"Good," said Cornelius. "Then we'll all go back to the ship."

"But Captain," began Walters. "Jennings-"

"-is still out there. But by my calculations, he's got about thirteen hours of oxygen left. We can wait for him to come to us." It wasn't the plan they had decided before and she could already hear Walters start to voice a complaint. "I want these two back up on the ship. You stay here with the rest of the team."

Walters frowned at this, but he gave a slight nod.

* * * * *

The Doctor looked over at Hannah and gestured to his communicator and turned it off. Once

Hannah had done the same, he gently rested his helmet against hers. Captain Cornelius and the others were focused on the shuttle lift-off and getting back to their vessel right now and the Doctor had, for once, kept silent throughout the trek.

“They won't hear us now,” muttered the Doctor. “But as long as our helmets are touching, the vibrations will carry and we can talk without being listened to.”

“Do we have a plan?” asked Hannah.

“I've got those energy readings. Even if their ship is primitive by my standards, I'll be able to knock together what I need.”

“So we're going to what? Rob them blind?”

“No. We'll be very charming. Then we'll... borrow the equipment we need.”

“Doctor.” Hannah was unconvinced, she was all too familiar with the nebulous boundaries of what the Doctor considered borrowing. “Are they dangerous?”

“They're humans, 'nuff said. But I think that we can trust them. Especially if we help them in return.” The shuttle shook violently and the Doctor and Hannah fell back against the couch. It didn't take a glance out of the main view-screen to see that they had left the atmosphere and were now heading towards their home-ship. The ship was impressive, the Doctor had to give it that.

“It's quite a fascinating period, technologically at any rate. You're on the verge of properly cracking FTL and warping space, but not just yet.” As the Doctor's eyes fell over the ship's hull, he saw something that made him sit up with a start. Jumping from his chair, he was moving towards Cornelius wildly, but one of the other crewmen moved from his seat and knocked the Doctor back into the couch with a push, letting zero-gravity do the rest.

Gently sitting himself back down, the Doctor fumbled for his communication's circuit and switched it on.

“Captain—” he began.

“Little busy,” Cornelius grunted.

The Doctor stopped and considered options. He sat back down and gave a weak chuckle.

“Sorry,” he said. “I really should have won my seat-belt.” He switched off the comms again and looked to Hannah.

“What's wrong?” she asked, once more talking helmet to helmet.

“That ship.” He indicated the slender nodules at its far end. “That ship is built with a type of space-fold technology that mankind... I don't think ever successfully invents.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Buskirk deVan's quarters were, at best, unpretentious. Most of the crew had adorned their quarters with posters, plants or other knick-knacks to replicate the sense that they were at home. deVan on the other hand, kept his room as unfurnished as possible. Let the masses consider him as some minimalist genius. The truth was ... deVan had very little he honestly cared about bringing with him. His computer and his personal tablet contained all the media he needed, so any decoration would just be effort. The farthest wall of his room showed a rainy, American skyline, his preferred view when trying to calm himself down.

Cornelius was right, of course. That was irritating enough, but the idea that a member of the crew would finally snap and murder five other people? That would ruin everything. Everything this project would achieve, everything he had been building towards. All people would remember were the grisly murders.

Plebeians.

The familiar trill of his communicator-watch snapped him out of his mood. Reaching across the bed, he grabbed it and answered it. Only one person had the right to him on the entire ship.

“Yes, Captain?”

“You should get down to the shuttle bay, now.” Cornelius’ tone was commanding, which he didn't appreciate.

“If you've caught Jennings, then I trust you-”

“It's not Jennings. You need to come here now.”

* * * * *

“Thank you,” Cornelius leaned in to say to the Doctor. “No matter how much trouble you're going to give me, you've given me the greatest sight in the world.”

deVan's jaw had dropped. His perpetually smug expression vanished. A small crowd gathered as the news spread through the ship. The message to the Boundless' bridge had spread from crewman to crewman like wildfire.

“I hope you put the kettle on,” said the Doctor, gesturing to himself and Hannah. “I'll take some Darjeeling and Hannah-”

“Americano?” offered Hannah with a smile.

“They're humanoid... and they speak English?” deVan was walking around the two, looking like he was going to reach forward and poke them in the face.

“I could speak French if you want,” said the Doctor. “Care to give us a lesson in basic Lakota, Hannah?”

“Han.”

“Well,” said the Doctor. “I guess not.”

“And you found them... on Pluto?”

Cornelius nodded. deVan looked around at the crowd, suddenly remembered his place, and the surprise and shock went away. “Quite an intriguing little problem. Do they have names?”

“They do,” said the Doctor. “This one here is Hannah and this handsome individual here is known as the Doctor.” The Doctor could already tell that he wasn't going to like this person. “They like to be spoken to as if they're not stupid, if you don't mind.”

“Very well,” deVan pinched the bridge of his nose. “We'll get to the bottom of this. Have them taken to decontamination and we'll go from there.”

“I was going to do that,” Cornelius said under her breath. She took a quick look at the crowd and her next words were a loud bark. “If you're on duty, get back to your posts, if not, then just be off-duty elsewhere.”

The bay emptied quickly, leaving deVan looking strangely at the Doctor.

“So. Someone else was heading an expedition to Pluto? Hmm? Do I have spies in my company? Who was it? International Technologies? JET-Space?” The Doctor looked bemused and shook his head.

“I don't work for anybody, Mister...” Looking the man up and down, the Doctor could see that he was used to being powerful and treated with some degree of respect. “Captain.” He didn't look over at Cornelius. “Who is this man?”

“That's... you're joking right? That's Buskirk deVan, one of the heads of Boundless Technologies.”

“Never heard of them.” The slight smirk stabbed into deVan's ego. “Never heard of him either.”

deVan took a deep breath and kept his hands kept behind his back. No-one spoke to him like that, but the one thing to do was not to rise to it. Instead, he stepped out of range of the Doctor and whispered to Cornelius: “I don't know who they are, I don't know what they are, but I want them tested and I want the results brought to me. Any luck finding Jennings?”

Cornelius fed him a lot of nonsense that didn't interest him. All that concerned him was getting down to Pluto, but he still had to keep that under wraps. After telling her to keep at it, the genius inventor turned and strode out, feeling the Doctor glaring at him until the doors shut. It had to be a trick; it just had to be. Everyone had heard of him! If someone else had secretly funded and set off a Pluto expedition without telling anybody, it would cause problems. As he stepped back into his cabin, his anxious mind had sorted itself out. He was getting too caught up in accolades that didn't matter. Let them have Pluto. it wasn't even a planet, just a tiny rock in space. It would be the star-drive that would overshadow everything.

The star-drive and what he knew was waiting for him, deep inside Pluto.

* * * * *

“He's charming,” Hannah whispered to Cornelius as she escorted the travelers through the

Boundless. The ship's corridors gleamed with a polished plastic look. The smooth synthetic bulkheads, softly carpeted underfoot and tastefully upholstered in primary colors, put Hannah unhappily in mind of their recent tangle with the Autons in northern England, at Ted Kenworthy's plastic-coated Georgian squire's manor. Noting with approval a distinct lack of deadly nurses or killer baby-sheets, Hannah returned her thoughts to the design sensibility of the twenty-second century.

In her time with the Doctor, Hannah had seen many types of spaceships and always looked for something unique about them. Her starkest impression of the Boundless was the contrast between its outer and inner appearance. Perhaps it wasn't as marked as the TARDIS, but its outside had looked so ugly and blocky, Hannah anticipated a rusty old factory within, perhaps with Sigourney Weaver in overalls to welcome them aboard. Instead, its interior was all curving, clean and sterile. It was not the sterility of a hospital, but of would-be chic designer luxury. An Armani spaceship, she considered with a shudder.

"He's not so bad once you get to know him." Cornelius gave a little chuckle and Hannah picked up the subtext immediately. "But with everything going on, you can forgive him being so anxious. After all, everything here he designed and funded personally. This is the farthest humanity has ever reached, after all."

"Not a word, Hannah," said the Doctor, walking with hands behind his back, looking at everything warily. "So. Space-travel as Corporate venture? How disappointing. The first trip from Earth to Pluto, sponsored by Sugar Smacks cereal!"

"It's not like that," Cornelius snapped. "Despite everything, we're not doing this for profit."

"You're doing it for free?" countered the Doctor. Rounding on him, Cornelius glared.

"Listen. It has taken us three years to get here. It might take us another three years to get back. That's six years without seeing my husband, or our children. You don't think I'm doing that without making sure they are set for life? I'm all for noble aspirations of science, Doctor, but none of us can eat noble aspirations, can we?"

The Doctor held up his hands and looked at her apologetically. "You're right, I'm sorry." With an awkward smile, he lowered his hands. "I want to help. We want to help."

"That's right," Hannah stood beside Cornelius. "Captain... Julia. We need to help each other."

"Thank you for apologizing." Cornelius pointed down the corridor. "I'll meet you after the decontamination tests. I need to get out of my spacesuit." Carson led them to the decontamination lab while she ducked away back to the shuttle-bay. It was getting too much and she just needed some peace and quiet or her head would probably burst. With her quarters too far away, she had to make do with the locker room outside the shuttle-bay. Finally alone, she stripped from her spacesuit and pulled out a crew-suit, sealed and wrapped in plastic. The suits had no insignia and, while claiming to be one-size fits out, were a little snug in places. Better that than the spacesuit—which, in the Boundless' gravity, was a nightmare to wear. In the loneliness of the locker-room, Cornelius sighed and sat down on the nearest bench. It had been weeks since she had bothered sending a message back home and snapping at the Doctor had brought all the guilt flooding back. The last message that she had received had just felt off, stilted. Her two children were growing up without her.

In six years, she may as well be coming home to alien strangers, creatures that almost looked like her children. Her husband would have done everything right. She had always been the one who had worked and brought in the money. He cooked, cleaned and tidied up like any perfect house-partner would, and the money she was earning for this would keep him from having to be

away from the children by working.

It wasn't enough though.

Julia Cornelius desperately wanted to see her family, her friends. On the Boundless, she was always CAPTAIN Cornelius, always on-duty, always reserved as best she could because she had to be a professional. All she wanted was a few hours to be Julia, to drink a beer and tell one of the bawdy limericks she had read in school. She wanted to let her hair down. Laughing bitterly at that thought, Julia ran a hand through her short back and sides. She didn't let herself grow it out.

Be professional.

Be on-duty.

Be Captain Cornelius.

And all she wanted to do was to go home and ... *not* be.

* * * * *

Hannah shook out her hair, glad to remove the spacesuit. She and the Doctor had gone through the decontamination process, scanned for any sort of bacteria and radiation as safely and as efficiently as the ship could. Now, she and the Doctor were waiting in a small room for the test-results. The Doctor sat Buddha-like in one corner of the room, also in his regular clothes. His long jacket was back in the TARDIS and without it the Time Lord looked slightly diminutive, his cream shirt and waistcoat making him look more like a cafe-frequenting hipster. Eyes closed, the Doctor was mouthing words under his breath.

"Penny for them."

"There's something bothering me," said the Doctor, not opening his eyes. "In fact, there's a lot bothering me. Not just the ship and its anachronistic engine-design, not even just the TARDIS. Can you feel it?"

"Actually, yeah." Hannah sat on the bench beside him. "Something in the air, a kind of... tension." It reminded her of back home, when a thunderstorm was approaching, pressure and tension running down her spine. "The people on this ship-

"-are ready to explode." Absently, the Doctor scratched at his forehead. "But that would be understandable. These people have had to work, eat and live together in cramped, stressful conditions for all this time. Tensions flare up, people hate each other inexplicably for a few days before it all returns to normal. That's standard for long periods of space travel."

"Is it?" asked Hannah.

"You've never had to live it, Hannah. Not like this. Sure, you've been on spaceships and alien planets, but you've never had to exist in those conditions for months or years at an end. There are psychological journeys you have to make, just to cope."

"No, I understand. Being with you has made me go through a few too many psychological journeys."

The Doctor's left eye flickered open and he grinned briefly. "Mankind is a social creature, forever craving the new. But that's just a normal side-effect of space travel, but here..." He tapped at his forehead repeatedly. "It's being exacerbated."

"That mind you felt before? Before the TARDIS was taken?"

"Yes. I think it's affecting the crew as well. Maybe even those murders."

"Then what do we tell them?" Hannah got the feeling they wouldn't get far if they tried to tell Cornelius and the rest of the crew the truth of who they were and where they came from.

"I'm playing it by ear," said the Doctor, his eyes closed, his face in deep thought.

The medication went down his throat, followed by a drink of water and a groan of exasperation. Carson's headache had been bad for the last few hours—stress, he assumed. Now it was reaching boiling point. Alone in the decontamination-control room, he had been sitting, focusing on a single spot on the wall while he waited for the computer results of the tests. His dinner lay half-eaten on a small folding table beside him. Through the tinted glass, he could see the Doctor and Hannah talking, but didn't feel like eavesdropping. Despite the situation, Carson wanted to trust the two. There was probably a rational explanation for everything, Jennings would be found and everything would be okay in the end. A chime from the computer told him that the tests were finished and being uploaded to his tablet. Picking up the tablet, Jennings swiped the screen into life and accessed the conclusive reports. Looking at the screen made his head hurt. Hopefully the medication would kick in soon. Hannah's test seemed perfectly normal.

The Doctor's results though... a haze settled over Carson's mind, like being thrown into deep-water. The phrases 'unrecognized blood-type' and 'two hearts' didn't seem to register as Carson felt himself reaching for the dinner-tray.

* * * * *

“Hi folks—no, that doesn't sound right.” Julia stopped the recording, erasing it immediately. Clearing her throat one more time, she started again. Attempt seventeen. “Guys, it's Mo—” She stopped and stared at the wall for five minutes before she snapped out of it and stopped the recording. Attempt eighteen.

“Darrel, I'm sorry this is late getting to you. It's not just the time delay from Pluto to Earth—”

Attempt twenty-seven.

“I don't know what to say. I've not been sleeping well, I eat on my own, I've finally listened to Ornette Coleman enough times to be bored of them? I miss you. I hate myself. I hate everything. No, no, that's not- argh!”

Attempt thirty-three.

“This isn't working.”

Direct conversations were pretty much impossible with Earth due to the five hours it took for a signal to travel from the Boundless to Earth. It made asking Earth for solutions to problems impossible, another factor that increased the crew's sense of isolation. Pre-recorded messages were the norm and they were transmitted back twice a week.

Julia hadn't sent a message home in three weeks.

Three weeks since the last message from them, and it had all sounded like nonsense to her. The kids were doing well in school, the weather was nice for that time of year, looked like it'd be a pretty chilly winter, but everything they said seemed to make less and less sense to her. The farther she got from Earth, the less context anything possessed. No sports games, no political events, even soap operas were months behind. Sometimes, when she was doing really badly, Julia had nightmares about the Earth blowing up, leaving them alone with truly nowhere to go.

Idly picking up her harmonica, Julia briefly put it to her lips and blew it. The discordant note died alone in the confines of her room. She had nothing.

* * * * *

“As soon as they let us out,” said the Doctor. “I'll set to work locating that signal and then—”

Their attention was caught by the door to the waiting room opening, Carson stumbled in, his face a placid smile.

“Carson!” the Doctor jumped up, clapping his hands. “I’m sure you’ve got some questions about my test results, but-”

Hannah noticed the knife first. She cried out, jumping towards Carson as the knife flashed up towards the Doctor’s chest.

CHAPTER SIX

The three seemed to collide at the same time.

His arm shooting out, the Doctor grabbed Carson's knife and forced it away. Slamming into Carson, Hannah knocked them all off their feet, slamming Carson into the bulkhead. Carson's head snapped up with frightening speed, his glassy eyes falling on Hannah and then the Doctor.

"Sorry, old man." The Doctor pulled back his fist and brought it straight into Carson's left cheek, spinning the young man to the floor in an awkward pile.

"What's going on?" Cornelius was standing in the doorway. The Doctor didn't respond, instead reaching down to pluck the knife from Carson's hand, and then showing it to Cornelius.

"Your man just tried to kill me." It wasn't an accusation, merely a statement of fact. Kneeling beside him, Hannah looked at Carson's prone body and then at Cornelius, confirming the Doctor's story. Pushing the knife handle into Cornelius' hand, the Doctor dropped on his haunches and pulled the energy-scanner from his waistcoat pocket.

"If it makes you feel any better," he muttered, waving the device over Carson. "I don't think he was doing it deliberately." Tilting the readout in Hannah's direction, he said. "The same energy wavelength as before... also... I can feel that same mental presence, but it's not focused."

"What are you saying?" asked Cornelius. She stepped toward the trio, but stopped herself. She had just remembered about the quarantine.

"Captain," the Doctor slipped the scanner back into his pocket and pushed himself back on his feet. "I think there is more going on here than... your man, Jennings, the one who snapped... he's not been the first one, am I right?"

"We've had fights and other... disturbances," said Cornelius. "But they never turned as violent as this. We just assumed that it was the psychological effects of the mission."

"And to an extent, I would agree." The Doctor tapped his forehead. "But have these events become more frequent the closer you've gotten to Pluto?" He watched her expression shift before continuing, not giving her a chance to speak. "Exactly. Something, some force is down there on Pluto, something very powerful. It's that force, that... energy, that is affecting your crew, taking all their tension, their loneliness, all that powerful emotional energy, and pushing it over the edge."

"Is that even possible?" Cornelius looked at Carson.

The Doctor nodded.

“The universe is a garden of terrors and delights, Captain Cornelius. Humanity will learn this lesson time and time again until it comes to the greatest conclusion out there: everything is possible, deal with it.”

* * * * *

He couldn't remember how he had found himself in the cave, but it was as good a place to hide as any. Jennings looked down at the oxygen gauge, still covered in blood. He wiped at it with a finger, smearing blood across the tinted surface. Time had seemed to lose meaning. Jennings could turn and return to the shuttle, or wait in the cave until he died. Slowly, his hands began to explore the various surfaces of his spacesuit, looking for where the pipes funneled oxygen to him. It was all built into the suit itself, but the memory of his emergency training was a haze now, like most things, except the murders and Jennings' own loneliness. Gently tapping the wall, a small spark in his mind made him consider taking matters into his own hands.

He could always lift up the visor.

That simple.

Just lift and take a nice, deep breath of methane atmosphere. It might even be quick.

Just lift.

Deep breath.

Quick.

Then he could see his family again, he was sure of it. Whenever he closed his eyes these days, he saw his family. He dreamed of simple things, laughing over a coffee and enjoying each other's company. His brother, his parents (both dead) were always there at the back of his mind, whispering, encouraging. Death was a form of sleep, wasn't it? Sleep forever and see his family one last—

Jennings lifted the helmet, opened his mouth to inhale—

—and he smelled flowers.

* * * * *

Cornelius strode into the waiting room once more. In her hand was her tablet computer, its screen showing the reports from the decontamination. Carson soon came around with no memory of having attacked the Doctor and Hannah. As he was taken under guard to the sickbay, Cornelius stayed and consulted the findings in the other room.

She didn't look at either of them at first. “As far as I can tell, clean bills of health, no evidence of any disease pathogen, although...” Her eyes finally fell on the Doctor. “Two hearts?”

“Good grief!” The Doctor stood up and clutched his chest. “Really?” His wild expression resumed his passivity. “You can trust me, Captain. You have to trust me.”

“You can,” said Hannah. “Or at the very least, you can trust me.”

There was nothing out of the ordinary with Hannah's report and with everything going on, Cornelius wanted to trust the Doctor. “Don't make me regret it,” she said.

The Doctor smiled and looked to Hannah.

“We could probably use a bite to eat, perhaps show us to the—”

A scream from outside sent them all running. Five crewmen were falling on each other in a mass of fists, screaming and kicking. A sixth member was trying to break up the fight as best he could, but after a solid punch to the face, the Doctor and the others could only watch helplessly as

he too gave in to the violence.

“It's getting worse.” The Doctor pulled out the TARDIS scanner. “That thought-energy? It's concentrated on this ship, if I'm right.”

“You there!” Cornelius stepped forward. “What are you doing?”

The six seemed to snap out of it at once. With equal embarrassment, they separated and looked at each other and the crowd watching the fight.

“You six are confined to quarters. The rest of you? You'd better all be off duty or I'll have you cleaning all the bathrooms with your toothbrushes!”

Even the Doctor had to admire how the observers had all but dematerialized when Cornelius finished. With a sigh, she looked back at him.

“It's getting worse, isn't it?”

“I don't know,” said the Doctor with a wry smile. “At least they weren't trying to stab each other.” Noticing the computer display screens set on the wall, he activated one with a swipe of a finger. A map of the ship appeared on the screen. A red dot showed where they were.

“I need a laboratory, somewhere with a computer and equipment I can use.”

Cornelius pressed a part of the map and highlighted a second button. Across the wall, a red arrow moved across the wall. The Captain explained that the arrow would guide him where he needed to go. The Doctor was about to rush off, but something occurred to him and he looked back at Hannah.

“What do you want me to do?” asked Hannah. A loud gurgle escaped from her gut and she smiled weakly. With a smile, Cornelius patted her on the shoulder.

“The canteen is nearby. I could do with some food myself.”

* * * * *

“More precise details!” deVan growled to himself as he smacked his computer screen. The display of the energy signature was unchanging. It was down there on the planet that he had to be, not wearing a hole in the carpet up here. Cornelius had the murder and those infuriating strangers to deal with, but she probably had every remaining shuttle under guard and would never let him venture down until after all the emergencies had passed. deVan considered the possibilities and each time came up with the same answer.

Right now, nothing could be done up here.

It had been a long time since deVan had felt powerless and it was a sensation he despised. He had spent his entire adult life with power and influence. There was no politician, no country he couldn't buy off to get his way. The construction of this ship had been a miracle of international cooperation done simply by waving his checkbook and promising jobs. Intelligence could only get you so far, but a fortune could get you anywhere. Anywhere, that is, until you found yourself facing a problem you couldn't buy off.

With a growl of anger, deVan forced himself to smile. There had to be an answer and he would find it. He was the most intelligent man on Earth, and even out this far no other intellect could match him. He'd just have to find the solution.

He only wished that finding the solution would eventually feel invigorating.

* * * * *

“So how did you get here?”

Hannah smiled meekly and plunged her spoon into the thick broth that Cornelius claimed was chicken. She wasn't sure how much the Doctor would want her to divulge. Even if he did feel that Julia Cornelius was trustworthy, Hannah didn't want to do it with everyone staring at her. Eating in the canteen had been a mistake. The moment she had entered, trailing behind Julia, every single pair of eyes, both male and female, were on her. Not that Hannah could blame them. She was a stranger.

She was, to them, an alien. It was kind of funny actually, there had been a few times in her travels with the Doctor that she had been forced to stop and stare at the strange sights around her. Sometimes the Doctor had chided her that it was rude to stare. But how could she not? To the Doctor, a thirty-meter tall slug with three heads and a lisp may have been perfectly normal, but to her, it wasn't. Fantastic. She had always wanted to draw heads, but not like this.

"Why're you laughing?" Julia tilted her head as she looked over at Hannah.

"I was thinking about my high school prom and how lonely it was." Hannah ate the spoonful of broth. Sure, it tasted like chicken. "But I'm guessing that's kinda rude of me."

"Why?"

"This ..." She indicated the ship. "All this. No wonder you're all going crazy."

"Adaptation," said Julia between mouthfuls of food. "It's mankind's greatest skill, but our desire not to adapt, whether through self-interest or plain stubbornness, is probably our greatest failing. We've all had to adapt on this ship and it's not all going to be for the best. If mankind can't adapt to what we're doing now, then we're never going to end up any farther than our own solar system, maybe not even past Mars." Julia let her spoon drop. "Maybe it's for the best that we don't." She looked down at her plate. "If this is the result. This voyage of discovery was meant to be about discovering the possibilities of our future, not murder and insanity."

Sympathy flooded Hannah and she suddenly wished to hold the woman before her and tell her the truth. Humanity would make it, one way or another. The sacrifices and pain they were going through here was only the tentative first steps. The Doctor probably wouldn't appreciate her saying so, even if Hannah knew that he felt the same way. Instead, Hannah gently took Julia's hand and patted it.

"It's worth it," she said, so quietly that only Julia could hear. The two women's eyes met for a moment and Julia carried some understanding.

"You've... you've seen things, haven't you? Just then ... you seemed older than me."

With a shy grin, Hannah brushed hair out of her eyes. "I've seen a lot, Julia, that's all I can tell you. But don't ever doubt that what you're doing here is the start of your future, *our* future."

This was her future too, Hannah thought. Sadly, whenever she returned home, it would be one that she could never tell anyone. Julia and the crew of the Boundless would be in her head until the day she died, bursting to get out.

And she would be able to tell no one. In that way, she would always be alone. Her knowledge of the future would be a terrifying secret all her own.

* * * * *

He wasn't dead.

In fact, he was starting to feel like he had never been more alive in his pitiable life. Down here, in the caves, there was breathable air, not just breathable, but air that smelled just like he remembered on Earth. Not everywhere was as polluted and disgusting as the major population areas. Some countries had even worked on preservations of flowers and plants. Once, long ago,

when he was studying at the University of Paris, Jennings had gone to one. The flowers were stretching up to grasp at the sun and the sight was beautiful. Visor still raised, Jennings breathed in great lungs-full of air, proper air, not the artificially scented, recycled air of the Boundless or his spacesuit. Could this be another delusion, part of the madness? He had killed those men, he remembered that now, he didn't deserve—

—this.

The flower garden seemed to stretch out to infinity. The cave walls shone with eerie phosphorescence and the flowers grew in every type and color that he remembered from that garden, and many more besides. Roses and orchids he recognized, alongside new, strange flowers, creeping tendrils with budding offshoots that seemed to sparkle when he looked at them in just the right way. The grass grew beneath his feet and, after working to bend and pull free a handful, Jennings realized then that it had been the smell of this grass that had filled his nostrils the moment he had pulled his visor free, exposing himself to the elements of Pluto.

“I'm dead,” he stammered to himself. That was the only answer. He was dead, and this was... illusion? Heaven? A cruel joke of fate?

“You are not dead.”

This new voice rang in his head, deeper and far more ancient than any he had heard before. If a being such as God existed and were capable of speech, Jennings instinctively knew that God spoke with this voice: ancient, warm, and yet alien.

From out of the infinity of flowers emerged a figure, as tall as two men and as just as broad. It wore armor, but the bulk didn't detract from the creature's strange and lithe grace. Its face was hidden beneath a huge helmet.

“Hello, Jennings.” The figure reached out and gently cupped Jennings' face in his hands. “I've been waiting for you.”

“Not me!” Jennings babbled on the verge of tears. “I killed—I killed my crewmates, my friends, I hurt them... not me...” The tears finally started to flow. “Not for me.”

“I've been waiting for you,” the armored figure repeated. “I've been waiting for people from your beautiful little planet for time you cannot begin to count. I am Malak and I will help you.” With a final caress, the figure calling himself Malak withdrew his hand. It had been so warm and comforting that its absence nearly made Jennings go mad again. “I will help all humanity. For I have watched you and I have loved you, but I am so very, very disappointed in you.” With that, Malak waved a hand in front of Jennings' face, and the wretched man stiffened and fell backwards. He didn't hit the flowers, but landed on the air, six feet above the ground, stiff as a board. With a casual twist of Malak's finger, Jennings' body slowly turned towards him until Jennings' head was presented to Malak's hand.

“But I will help you,” said Malak once more. With one last gesture of his finger, he opened up Jennings' head and skull as if they were paper wrapping a present.

Malak started to get to work.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Doctor had a problem entirely of his own making. That was one of the problems with time travel: you had to either pretend to be impressed with every single scientific advance or just spend the rest of your life finding different ways to say ‘Aw, that's cute.’ The Boundless was an advanced ship in the 22nd century, but it was two steps above steam-powered to the Doctor.

The Doctor's scanner was connected to the computer systems and he was copying the various signals and readings he had gotten since he had arrived on Pluto. On the other side of the room, the crewmen he had sent scurrying to the corner were looking at him warily.

“So... this incredibly advanced spaceship, why is it out this far?” he asked, trying unsuccessfully to sound casual. “Round trip to Pluto, or is it the super-duper warp drive you've got welded to your hull?”

The warp drive on the ship was indeed a mystery. Humans would be close to cracking FTL and hyper-drive in a couple of hundred years, but the space-fold system this ship boasted wouldn't ever be invented in all of human history. He could have been wrong, or else history had never ended up noting this achievement. That would not be a good thing and the Doctor didn't want to waste time worrying about it.

“It's a space-fold system,” corrected one of the crewman, the name DUXLEY on his crew-suit. “Professor deVan invented it.”

“Oh, did he now?” the Doctor smacked the scanner and it finished copying the information. “Good for him, I suppose.” Turning to look at the two properly, the Doctor gave what he thought was his most pleasant grin. “I don't suppose you know how it works?”

“I've read the papers,” said Rivett, giving Duxley a glance.

The Doctor clicked his tongue at Duxley and pointed. “You see? He's read the papers.”

“It's not my field,” said Duxley. “I tried. It never could stay in.”

“Does it work?” The Doctor was working over several hundred hypotheses in his head.

“Dunno yet.” Rivett shrugged. “We've not turned it on.”

“No?”

“Yeah,” Duxley chimed in, clearly wanting to be useful. “Apparently deVan isn't pulling his weight or something. He's the only reason we're out this far, something about... something about...” Snapping his fingers, the science-officer was deep in concentration trying to put thoughts

into words.

“He's worried about the fold-field.” Rivett was clearly exhausted watching his friend make a complete idiot of himself. “Something about not wanting to get the Earth or anything important caught up in the field the star-drive's meant to generate.”

Placing the scanner on the computer station, the Doctor walked to Rivett. Duxley moved to defend him while Rivett shifted backwards. Stopping and holding up his hands, the Doctor put on his most reasonable expression. “Hey, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to worry you. All this honestly sounds fascinating.” He had time to kill while the computers deciphered his readings. With a grin, he looked at Rivett and wagged his eyebrows. “Could I see the reading?”

* * * * *

The hydroponic garden was beautiful, but somehow just as sterile as the rest of the Boundless. Hannah looked at its plants and flowers in wonder. Beside her, Julia was explaining how the gardens maintained the freshness of the oxygen, provided some small amount of fresh fruit and vegetables, and gave the crew a little glimpse of home. The garden stretched out before her for half a mile. Out of curiosity, Hannah ran a hand through the nearby grass and felt the dew on her fingers.

“A lot of this is small-scale compared to what humanity will need in the future,” said Julia. “A test-bed for larger exploration ships, maybe even generation ships, where families will grow, live and die before reaching a habitable planet. Maybe the scale makes the difference. If entire communities live on a ship, maybe that'd arrest the emotional and psychological effects on the crew.” She sighed. “That's if deVan's space-fold doesn't work as promised. The trip won't be for nothing, even if Buskirk disagrees.”

Their lunch had turned into a guided tour of the ship. Hannah felt bad for taking up so much of Julia's time, but Julia was constantly getting updates on her communicator. Every time she had to take a call, Hannah could see the difference in her posture and voice.

“Julia,” she finally said. “I can manage exploring the ship fine by myself. Besides, I should find the Doctor—”

An alarm sounded. Before Hannah knew what was happening, Julia was running for the door, screaming about unauthorized airlock access.

* * * * *

Tapping the tablet, the Doctor looked across at the two men. “And this is it? The whole of deVan's space-fold theory?”

Rivett nodded. With a slight murmur of appreciation, the Doctor placed the tablet on the computer. It was a very interesting theory; indeed, he could see how everything should theoretically work.

The truth was that it wouldn't, but none of these people would know it. How could they? The technology was beyond them, and the Doctor only had to look at a few of the calculations to see where it was wrong. The starting hypothesis and end result were sound, he couldn't deny that, but someone had clearly started at the end and then rushed to fake all the working-out.

While deVan's space-fold star-drive couldn't work, they had built this ship, he had funded all the research, constructed it and was willing to pay every single crewmember a small fortune. It would have to be discovered eventually. Not even deVan would do something so costly just for

scientific curiosity, the crew would tear him apart the moment they—

The Doctor stopped and looked back at Duxley and Rivett. “Where can I find the space-fold system?” He smiled. “It looks very interesting.”

“He won't let you in,” said Duxley. “deVan doesn't let anyone look at it.”

“I'm not going to worry about that,” said the Doctor, tapping the trouser pocket containing his sonic screwdriver.

* * * * *

They had passed the inner-airlock door on the way to the garden. As they returned, the door was slowly creaking closed. Julia reached it first, Hannah already winded as she struggled to keep up. Grabbing the turn-wheel in its center, Julia tugged, but the wheel didn't turn. “It's already locked from the inside,” she said to Hannah, jumping to the control panel next to the door. “I'll try an override. Try and talk to them!”

Hannah slammed her hand against the single porthole that looked inside. Locating a button labeled ‘TALK’, she pressed it.

“Hey!” She shouted. “Can you hear me?”

The face that popped into view was boyish, eyes shining with fervent mania.

“Hello,” said the face. “I don't think I've ever met you before.”

“Y-yes,” said Hannah. “I'm just visiting.”

“I wish I was visiting,” said the face. As Hannah watched, he stepped to one side of the room and slammed a fist against the controls. “But I've been stuck here. Stuck here for so long.”

“Rassock!” Julia pleaded. “This is your captain, can you hear me?” Julia pressed in the last of the overrides, but nothing happened. Keeping her voice as calm as she could, Julia continued to talk while she worked. “I need you to open the inner-door and climb out. It's not safe.”

“Oh, it's perfectly safe, Captain.” Rassock tapped his fingers against the glass, smiling at Hannah. “I just thought ... well, I just thought I'd go home. I'll just step outside and walk home.”

“That's a bad idea,” said Hannah.

Rassock shook his head.

“I think it's a very good idea.” Their voice had the eerie calm of the truly disturbed, Hannah realized with a shiver. “You seem like a very nice young woman.” Reaching out to the control panel, Rassock pulled a switch. Behind him, the airlock door slowly opened. “But I want to go home, you see, and the voices... the voice tells me that I can go home. I don't like it here, Captain, I'm just so lonely.”

Julia's hands fell uselessly to her sides. “There's nothing more I can do. Once the airlock starts to open, these controls are locked out.” Hannah twisted away, not wanting to see what happened next. The smile on Rossack's face was enough. She closed her eyes and fought back tears until Julia said blankly.

“It's over.”

* * * * *

“What are you doing here?”

The Doctor looked up from the open panel. It set into the base of the rotating series of glowing conduits and energy collectors that made up the deVan star-drive. Buskirk deVan glared at him, tightly gripping a paper cup of coffee. Casually, the Doctor kicked the panel closed, made

his way to deVan and snatched the cup from his hand.

“I wanted to talk.” He sipped the coffee experimentally, almost spitting it back into the cup. “A bit too milky.” He handed the cup back to an increasingly reddening deVan.

“You. Wanted to talk.” deVan dropped the coffee straight into the bin. “Is that why I find you in my private work chambers, without my express permission, fiddling with experimental devices?”

“Yes,” admitted the Doctor. “You weren't here. So I let myself in, like you said, without permission.” No point, the Doctor thought, admitting that he had been waiting for deVan to leave before he broke in. “I just decided to have a look because you and I know something very important.”

“Which is?”

“This doesn't work. Not in the way it's advertised. Oh, I know you've told everyone it's a super-duper form of warp-drive, capable of folding space to traverse great cosmic distances. I know that it runs off an energy source that only you have managed to collect and harness, but none of this, none of any of this actually works as a fold-drive. So I have three questions. One, why have you built an advanced energy-collector? Two, why did you bring it to Pluto?” The Doctor picked up his scanner and tapped the screen. “Then, there's the third and most important question, why do the energy-signals this thing puts out match the energy I've been picking up from Pluto, that have been affecting the crew? And why are you tracking them yourself?”

CHAPTER EIGHT

A change came over Buskirk deVan right before the Doctor's eyes. His arrogance slipped away, replaced with pure curiosity and joy.

“It was you, wasn't it?” He darted towards the Doctor, but the Doctor stepped out of his way. “You're the one who sent me the message. Oh, I knew it!” He punched the air. “I knew it!”

“I sent you nothing,” said the Doctor. “I ended up here purely by accident.”

deVan gestured at the space-fold star-drive.

“I did everything you told me. I built the device, I brought the ship here to Pluto, for you, as you told me in my dreams.”

Casting a wary eye, the Doctor crossed his arms. These could just be more acts of insanity. They didn't have to be restricted to violence. But there was a calm rationality in the man's voice beneath his manic joy.

“I'm not whoever it was that sent you, Buskirk.” Speaking slowly, calmly, the Doctor approached deVan. “But I'm looking for whoever did. They took something very important. I want it back. I need you to help me.”

“You'll help me?”

“Of course,” said the Doctor. “Just think about it, if I'm able to discover what you know, we can put our minds to it and solve everything. You understand?”

“I do.” deVan grinned boyishly. “I've wanted to tell someone for so long... but I couldn't, I was too scared to.”

* * * * *

Buskirk deVan had been a genius at eighteen, the owner of his own company at twenty-seven and one of the richest and most important tech wizards on the planet by thirty-six. At twenty-five, he was, as far as he was concerned, the first man to be contacted by an alien intelligence.

It had been the night of his twenty-fifth birthday. The party had finally wound down and it was just him, alone in his old studio apartment. At first, he'd thought it was just a dream, but as the next few days unfolded, he realized it was far more.

That night, Buskirk deVan dreamed of the stars: not just in the sky, not just the pitiable

solar system, but everywhere. He had hurtled through planets and galaxies that were only the sight of dreams, ancient and completely inaccessible to man. As all this was happening, he heard the voice telling him, offering him everything.

* * * * *

A beam of energy, broadcast directly into the human mind, the Doctor considered. Such things were possible, although it would take technology and mental strength beyond even the Time Lords. deVan was sitting at his workstation, excitedly babbling everything at the Doctor. He was describing a gas cloud igniting, its flames stretching across an entire galaxy, burning all that space out of existence as if it were nothing.

“When I awoke, I developed my theory right there and then, I sketched out the first calculations on a cocktail napkin, but the idea never stopped coming. I knew—” He gestured at his head. “Even if I couldn't put it into words as much as I'd hoped. I understood that what I have could change, would change everything. Mankind would have the stars and maybe we could finally joining all the life that exists out there. Something was calling to me and I wanted to be called to it.”

* * * * *

His company had already been working in the space-exploration market, but it took an afternoon in the boardroom to persuade the directors of the next step and where it would take them. The truth, though, he had never revealed, not in thirteen years. He was content to let people think that everything had been designed by him, and him alone.

* * * * *

The Doctor nodded, not replying. He worried that anything he said might affect deVan. The man wallowed in his own arrogance. Of course he believed that alien intelligences would only contact him.

* * * * *

It was as he was building the drive that he realized the main problem. The space-fold drive as told to him in his dream just wouldn't work. He spent five years working at it, building it, only to realize, in the end, it was nothing. He almost killed himself right there and then, but then he made his second, secret discovery.

* * * * *

“And that was when you discovered the Pluto signal?”

“Yes!” deVan pointed to the drive device. “Something in the energy collector resonated with a signal whose source was this very planet. With that discovery, everything finally slotted into place. The dreams, the message, building this... thing, it was all part of a test.”

“A test?”

“Yes! What if out there, there was a race of beings whose job was to observe humanity, to push us, prod us in the right direction, towards some desirable end-goal? What if the whole of

human history was just that, to guide us from the cave, to the wheel, to cities and to the stars themselves? My dreams? They weren't just dreams. I was the final step in mankind's evolution. It was only when I built this and discovered the signal that everything made a final sense to me.”

With this, the Doctor said nothing. In truth, human history had been interfered and guided by so many different alien intelligences who acted like self-proclaimed gods, it was a wonder humanity could even stand on its own two feet without help. What was one more?

He simply pointed to deVan’s screens. “Do you think you can properly pinpoint the exact location of this signal?”

“Why, Doctor, I've already done it.”

The Doctor flashed a smile. Now that he was able to help him achieve his goals and fuel his belief that he was the most important human in existence, Buskirk deVan was being far nicer to him.

CHAPTER NINE

Julia Cornelius took everything deVan and the Doctor told her calmly. When they were done, she stepped around her desk, grabbed deVan by the collar and threw him against the wall of her office.

“You brought us out here... for this?” she hissed.

“There's something o-out there!” deVan stammered, brushing away a fallen strand of hair. “Even if the space-fold drive doesn't wor-”

“That's not the point!” Cornelius pushed her face right against his, staring at him with pure rage. “You have lied to everyone about this. People have died. Every single person on this ship... six years sacrificed for your ego—”

“My discovery,” deVan corrected her.

“Your discovery, your praise, your ego!” She slammed him against the wall once more. “What, you didn't think that people would be interested in discovering—”

“No!” deVan confessed. “Humans don't care about alien life. Nor about the potential of making peaceful contact.”

“Peaceful contact?” Cornelius' voice was eerily calm now, its anger burned away, leaving only icy fury. “Six men were murdered on Pluto. Another killed himself only an hour ago. The crew is slowly being driven mad, possibly because of the influence of this creature of yours, and you're patting yourself on the back for being more broadminded?” She grinned before uttering her verdict. “How would you like to be flushed out into space... without a spacesuit?”

“Okay,” said the Doctor, pushing between them. “No one else is being thrown into space today if I can help it.” Gently, he tugged Cornelius' hands from deVan's suit. “Captain, your anger is very justified, but we need to look forward. This intelligence on Pluto might be benevolent or it might not, but we have to investigate for ourselves.”

“I'm not entirely happy with you, either,” said Cornelius. “How do I know you're not the source of these transmissions to Buskirk? How do I know you won't just leave after you find your ship?”

“Trust me,” said the Doctor. “Telepathic jiggery-pokery isn't my style. And as to the second point, I don't want to see any more deaths on this ship, but I'm probably also your best bet of solving anything.” He flashed a courteous smile. “Besides, how can I leave Hannah behind?”

“Leave me behind?” Silent and brooding this entire time, Hannah heard those words and

looked up. “What do you mean?”

“When I go down to the surface,” said the Doctor, “you’ll be staying up here.” He sighed, his face grim. “You have to be my insurance to persuade the captain that I won’t leave her and the crew high and dry. It’ll be for your own safety too.”

“Fine by me,” said Hannah, curling up on the chair surprisingly amenably.

The Doctor looked back at the Captain and deVan. “We have the readings, we found a landing zone. All we need is permission to use a shuttle.”

“You have it,” said Cornelius, tapping a button on her desk. A few seconds later, the door opened and Commander Carl Wendir stepped inside.

“Carl. I want the second shuttle prepped to head back down to the planet. Until I get back, you’ll be in charge.”

“Of course,” said Wendir, looking puzzled. “Are you going to help with the hunt for Jennings?”

“No,” said Cornelius. “I’ve... received some information that is very important to this mission.” She glared at deVan who looked away awkwardly. “Information that would have been appreciated earlier, to be honest. The Doctor and deVan will come with me, I want it to be a small team. In fact, get them on the comms and tell them to come back up here. Don’t want too many shuttles on the surface if we can avoid it.”

“Very good, Julia.” With a casual salute, Wendir stepped out, already giving the orders as the door shut.

“Th-thank you,” said deVan, but Cornelius snapped a finger in his direction. “I’m coming with you because, honestly, I trust the Doctor far more than I trust you. After being stuck with you and your excuses and complaints for three years, and now being told all this ... well, it hurts.”

* * * * *

The Doctor was busy climbing into his spacesuit.

“I’m doing this for your own good,” he said. Hannah was close by, looking away. “No, that... that sounds wrong—I—”

“I understand,” snapped Hannah. The Doctor took a seat beside Hannah, and though his spacesuit wasn’t as cumbersome as the Boundless crew’s models, he still had to sit at an awkward angle.

“Captain Cornelius told me what happened.” His voice was soft. “It’s perfectly normal for that to rattle you. Death... we see too much of it on our adventures and it’s easy to become... used to it. But then there’s one, just one, and it feels like the first time we’ve experienced death all over again.”

“It was horrible. The look on that poor person’s face...” For a moment, Hannah looked like she was going to throw up. “I didn’t tell Julia this, but in the last second before Rassock got sucked out. A change came over them, like, in the blink of an eye, their reason returned and in that moment, they realized they were going to die.” She looked at the Doctor for the first time in hours. He was shocked by how old his young friend seemed. “Death should be quick, unexpected... not like that. No one should have to experience that. There’s no dignity in it.”

“Death is very rarely dignified. It’s slow, quick, brutal. The only dignity in it isn’t for the dead, it’s to reassure the living.” The Doctor patted Hannah’s hand.

“Everyone’s walking on egg-shells,” said Hannah. “Don’t you feel it? It reminds me when my parents argued when I was a kid. Sometimes it wasn’t the shouting, but the absence of the

shouting. Someone enters a room and you're scared that this, this is the moment all the screaming is going to start again and there's nothing you can do to stop it.”

“That's the other reason I want you up here,” said the Doctor. “I want you to keep an eye on things. Whatever is affecting the ship's crew, I think we're both immune to it, or at the very least, it's not affecting us.”

“Why?”

The Doctor tried to scratch his nose, but his spacesuit's arm didn't stretch that far. With a wry smile, Hannah scratched his nose for him.

“I think the isolation has weakened their mental fortitude to some degree, made them more susceptible. But I think there is something else. The TARDIS generates a telepathic field, a symbiotic link that you share some small part of.”

“I remember you saying that once,” said Hannah. “It's how I can understand different languages, right?”

“Exactly. But I think that the field is filtering out the worst of it, or the telepathic influence is too small to get to us.”

“But I've been-”

“Telepathically influenced before, yes. But that has always been intentional and directed. What if, this intelligence, this... being... is just mentally beaming a telepathic energy signal at Earth and this ship the whole time, but didn't stop to consider that the harmful side-effects to a ship of humans cut off from homes and families, struggling with feelings of isolation and loneliness every day for nearly three years, and *that's* broken them down, even if it's entirely benevolent. Like... like a hand gesture that to you is a greeting, but you're performing it to a species to whom it's an insult.”

“That theory presumes one thing,” said Hannah. The Doctor stood and picked up his helmet.

“I know,” he said. “I'm hoping that this intelligence *is* benevolent.”

* * * * *

The shuttle was ready to launch. As the Doctor and Hannah waited, the shuttle-bay's inner doors opened and Cornelius and deVan shuffled in, fully clad in their bulky spacesuits.

“Good luck, Julia,” said Hannah as Cornelius passed. Cornelius smiled back and climbed into the shuttle. deVan looked briefly at the Doctor and wordlessly climbed in himself.

“I don't think he likes me anymore,” said the Doctor. Hannah muttered something about not understanding why, patting the Doctor on the shoulder. The Doctor put his hands up behind him, ready to pull down his helmet, but he stopped and looked at Hannah, saying quietly, “I'll see you soon.” One of the crew called to Hannah to move away from the shuttle so they could vent the artificial atmosphere. She watched the Doctor slip his helmet on. A few seconds, he was gone from Hannah's view as the shuttle ramp closed behind him. Then she was in the observation area, the safest place to watch the shuttle leave. As the doors sealed behind her, Hannah remembered the instant shift in expressions in the crewman whose death seemed to have no effect on anyone except her, a total stranger.

The shuttle gently flew out. In that second, Hannah understood a fraction of the loneliness that was plaguing the crew of the Boundless.

CHAPTER TEN

“Someone's been here.”

The Doctor bent down, running his hand across the ground. In the crushed ice of Pluto's surface, he could just about feel the small indent of bootprints. “I'm assuming one of your people.”

“None of us ever made it this far,” said Cornelius, glancing at deVan. “Jennings, maybe?”

“Are you going to make us turn back?” asked deVan.

Cornelius thought about it. They had landed as close to the signal as they could, and the shuttle was still easy to get to on foot.

The Doctor stood up. “We should go on ahead. If we find Jennings... we'll do what we can to help him.”

“He killed six men,” said Cornelius.

“Are you suggesting we kill him, Captain?” the Doctor accused.

“No, I just think we should be careful.”

The Doctor smiled. “Don't worry, Captain, I'll go first.” Before Cornelius had any chance to reply, the Doctor had disappeared into the cave. It was a slight incline, reaching down into the depths of Pluto. Hearing the two behind him, the Doctor silently reached out to steady himself on the cave walls. The ice and rock wasn't too slippery. In fact, it was... The Doctor stopped and stroked the wall experimentally. It was smooth, too smooth to have been shaped through whatever natural erosion occurred on Pluto. The climb down also felt as if the entrance were readied for them. Remembering how the ice and rock had pulled the TARDIS underground, the Doctor knew that whatever they would find down here, they were definitely in the right place.

* * * * *

He is coming.

Malak stirs in the darkness. The consciousness from before, the alien mind he had tried to touch, is back again. Coming for him in the darkness. They had been so distracted by their operations on the human, brimming with excitement for the first time in millennia, that their focus had been pulled from the world outside them.

The human called Jennings hovers in front of him. The operation is complete. With a gentle

smile, Malak waves a hand and seals Jennings' head on such a microscopic level that there is no scar or evidence of his actions.

"Jennings," Malak whispers softly, setting him on his feet.

Jennings opens his eyes and smiles beatifically.

"Yes?"

"We are about to have guests."

"Are we?"

"Yes, Jennings. You will bring them to me."

"But..." The placid smile disappears. "I did the bad thing. They'll want to punish me. Like I deserve."

"They will not punish you, Jennings. Not if you bring them to me first."

* * * * *

"Something's odd with my readings." Cornelius tapped the display screen of her wrist computer.

"You getting the same, Buskirk?"

deVan took quick glance. "That can't be right. There's no way there would be oxygen down here."

"What?" The Doctor consulted his own readings, telling him exactly the same. Oxygen: not just a random pocket but the precise combination needed for humans to live and breathe. The planet's atmosphere was a concoction of mostly methane and carbon monoxide, yet those didn't seem present now. The Doctor looked back the way they came. The tunnel leveled out after nearly a mile and there had been no visible change around them. Telling Cornelius and Buskirk to stay, he walked back, steadying himself and keeping his eyes squarely on his instruments. After a minute of backtracking, the display suddenly changed to show the atmosphere of Pluto. Waiting for a minute to see if his instruments made any change, the Doctor took ten steps back. The read-out changed again: oxygen atmosphere, an Earth-type reading. From the equipment-belt on his suit, the Doctor pulled out a metal hook and drove it into the ground.

"There's an invisible line I think." He pointed at the hook. "On this side, we're told that it's nice and safe to breathe, on that side... like a septic tank."

"Is that possible?" asked Cornelius.

Before the Doctor could respond, deVan burst out.

"Terraforming! Don't you see, there *is* an intelligent presence down here. Something capable of altering the atmosphere for us to breathe!" Before anyone could stop him, he put his hand on the visor of his helmet and pulled it up. Cornelius was on him in a second, but deVan pushed her back, taking in a deep breath.

"You took a huge risk," snapped Cornelius.

"I had to believe that this intelligence wouldn't deceive us." There was a smug air to deVan's voice as Cornelius lifted her visor. Pulling off his round helmet, the Doctor attached it to a hook on his suit's belt. Shooting deVan a glance, he pointed farther down the tunnel. He felt the presence again, closer and stronger than ever. There was also something else down there, and the Doctor knew it waiting for him.

"Well, let's just hope, Mr. deVan, that your faith isn't going to be sorely punished." Gesturing for them to follow, the Doctor led them in. The light on the walls around them started to glow. At first, the Doctor assumed it was the natural phosphorescence of whatever life occupied the caves, but if a creature had the power to create an invisible bubble of oxygen, light would be

child's play. It unnerved the Doctor, although he would never admit it, not even to Hannah if she had been there. His own people had godlike powers, although those had been tempered by the rules that imposed on themselves. Other beings he had encountered in his adventures—Daemons, Osirans, the Great Intelligence, and others from beyond time and understanding—possessed powers that could be godlike. Each of them ranked among his most challenging opponents. deVan wouldn't understand, even if he took time to explain it. The man was searching for something that might blow up in his face and he would step into danger willingly, even if that path smelled like flowers.

“Smells like flowers?”

The moment the smell of flowers and grass struck his senses, the Doctor stepped back. The others also smelled it, around the next corner. When the Doctor reached the turning, his jaw dropped in amazement.

The subterranean field of flowers stretched on, the flowers reaching for a light that seemed to surround them. Stepping forward, the Doctor tentatively picked the closest flower he could, a white rose. Putting it to his nose, the Doctor sniffed, savoring the perfect aroma.

“Like a field in England...” he muttered with a smile.

“Now do you believe me?” brayed deVan. He held his arms out, daring them to challenge him. “Benevolent! Intelligent! Powerful! Yes, I lied about everything, but this? Isn't this worth everything we've sacrificed?”

Cornelius looked dumbfounded, her mind searching for a reaction.

“You've arrived!” cried a new voice. Dropping the flower, the Doctor looked at the figure stumbling towards them like all this was perfectly normal. He was dressed in the same Boundless spacesuit.

“Jennings!” Cornelius cried out. “Stand still and put your hands above your head!”

Noticing her for the first time, Jennings stopped and saluted like an overeager schoolboy.

“Captain! Yes, Captain! I'm sorry, I did some terrible things, but I'm all better now.”

“I'll be the judge of that,” said Cornelius, marching towards him. “Where is your helmet?”

“I don't know. I think He took it.” Grinning far too widely, Jennings tapped his temples and chuckled. “I'm better now. Please believe me. He fixed me.”

“Who?” The Doctor stepped between Jennings and Cornelius. “Who fixed you?”

“Clearly the one who summoned us,” said deVan, moving past. “Is it this way?” he asked. With a delighted clap, Jennings ran back the way he came. They followed him, keeping their thoughts and suspicions to themselves. The garden ended with an ornate gate cut into the cave wall. They passed through the gate, Jennings ahead, guiding them excitedly. The Doctor followed him to the next chamber. What lay beyond just as confusing and beautiful.

The second cave also seemed to stretch on forever, but instead of flowers and beauty, there was machinery and equipment of a type the Doctor could only guess at. The machines had no buttons, switches or screens. Instead, their surfaces were adorned with curving designs and geometric patterns that moved and changed like liquid being poured into new shapes every few seconds. It was all so alien, that the Doctor's head was starting to hurt just trying to comprehend every single sight. This wasn't just advanced alien technology. It was almost beyond understanding.

But nothing was more incomprehensible than the figure in the center of the room. A giant in scarlet armor, its helmet adorned with multiple ridges and grooves that the Doctor wasn't sure were ceremonial, decorative, or part of a function alongside the equipment. The same designs trailed down the armor, stretching into cursive patterns of mathematical shapes that left afterimages

on the Doctor's eye every time he took his gaze away. From the figure's chest, two thick cables stuck from each breast, running down his sides, his legs, and across the floor towards a huge apparatus that took up an entire corner of the massive chamber.

"It's my warp-drive," deVan's voice was breathless. If what they were looking at was enough to hurt the Doctor's perceptions, what were they doing to the human mind? "It looks completely different, hewn from the living rock, or built into the mountain, but the designs, the energy inside it."

"Yes," the Doctor mused, not sure whether to investigate the twin of deVan's drive, or the figure that impassively watched them. Jennings was dancing around the figure, pointing at them, happy to have accomplished his goal. "Was he always so obsequious?"

Cornelius shook her head. The Doctor filed this away before his eyes fell on the one thing that could tear him from all these wondrous sights.

The TARDIS was in one corner, hidden between great stalagmites resembling Greco-Roman pillars that rose from the ground as he watched. He ran toward it, but the figure raised his hand, stopping the Doctor in his tracks. The figure turned and spoke.

"You are not human." The voice was deep and carried great age. Instinctively, the Doctor felt a little afraid.

"No," he said. "I am not a native to this solar system. I don't believe you are, either."

The being chuckled. "I have watched their planet all this time. The first fire, the first wheel, the first murder, I was here." He pointed at Cornelius and deVan. "And I have waited for this moment. Long have I watched the Earth and cared for it."

"Oh?" said the Doctor. "And why have you done that?"

"My name is Malak... and I was put here to decide if the Earth and humanity are worthy."

"Worthy?" Cornelius' voice contained a slight stammer of fear, which she held in check. "Worthy of what?"

"Whether you will continue, of course." Malak indicated her and Buskirk deVan. "And what can be done to improve you."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Continue?” said the Doctor. “That's a very loaded statement.”

“Where are you from?” asked Malak.

Casually, the Doctor rattled off the galactic co-ordinates of Gallifrey, his mind racing to play for time.

“I am aware of the planet, a trivial footnote. You command such technology. Your box fascinates me. It is alive, in a way ... but no matter. My brethren and I walked the universe when it was still forming. Our civilization reached its apex when clouds of gas were colliding to form planets. We were great, but we were alone.”

“Did you come to our planet?” asked deVan. “Did you help the ancient civilizations grow?”

“Seriously?” said the Doctor. “Most of those ancient civilizations grew perfectly well on their own.” The knowledge of the Time Lords ran far back and forward in time, but even they feared traveling to the early eons of the universe. Maybe that was why this Malak and his race had slipped through the cracks of their records.

“We did not come to your planet, we saw the influences of others and chose a different path. Instead, we waited for races to come to us.”

“You... observed human history?” stammered Cornelius. The Doctor had to admire her. She was doing her best to take all of this in stride. Malak simply nodded.

“I did and it both pleased and disappointed me.”

* * * * *

Hannah felt something was going to happen. Honestly, traveling with the Doctor, it usually did. The eerie calm aboard the ship was that same thunderstorm-tension she felt earlier. There hadn't been any more fights... or other tragedies. In her heart, she hoped that the news about Rossack had done something to the crew. Wendir had shown her around the bridge and she was doing her best to look interested. This wasn't her first starship bridge, after all. The various crewmembers stood at their post, leaning against standing chairs, taking readings of Pluto and the stars.

“Commander,” piped the communications officer.

Wendir turned and flashed a charming boy-band grin. To Hannah, he had that same sort of

personality and charm.

“Hey.”

The officer smiled and pointed at the screen. “It’s Walters and the shuttle. They want permission to come back up.”

“Of course.” Wendir cracked his knuckles. “We’ll get them back up, have the shuttle refueled and let the search party get some food and rest.” His smile faded. “Any word from the Captain?”

Silently, the comms officer shook his head. The door slid open and Carson stepped onto the bridge. Instantly, his eyes fell on Hannah and he looked back at the closing doors, regretting his decision. Waving Carson over, Hannah felt Wendir looking at her.

“I heard what happened,” he said. “You sure?”

“I’m sure,” lied Hannah, walking to meet Carson. Carson was looking directly at Wendir, telling him that Tamika, the ship’s doctor, had given him a clean bill of health. At any rate he wanted to return to work. As Hannah watched, she saw that Carson was making a clear effort to ignore her. Wendir listened to everything Carson had to say before slapping him on the shoulder and telling him to take his station. The young officer smiled back and took the communication position.

“How much longer are we going to wait?” asked Hannah. Arms crossed, Wendir simply looked out at the dead planet before them.

“I don’t know. It’s not as if we’ve got a lot of options.”

* * * * *

“And what do you do to races that displease you?” asked the Doctor. Malak was ignoring him, focusing on the two humans. With a shrug, the Doctor decided to make his way to the TARDIS.

“I was sent here to observe your race and it was wonderful.”

“How old are you?” asked Cornelius. “Nothing could live as long as human history.”

“I am ageless and eternal.” Malak gave a sound that sounded like the wind blowing through mountains. “My people are static, which is why we chose to observe others. I was sent to this planet, the one you call Ploo-tow. Our name for it would translate to be ‘A Memory of Sun’. Our name for your planet would translate to ‘The Potential of Monkeys’.

“That sounds like an insult.” The Doctor reached out to touch the TARDIS.

“Shut up!” snapped deVan. “For all your intelligence, all you do is blather like an idiot. This. *This!*” He held his hands out to Malak. “This is history right here!”

The Doctor’s hand touched an invisible wall. The TARDIS was contained inside an invisible screen with no way in. Exploring the forcefield, the Doctor looked back at Cornelius. She had torn her eyes from Malak. If deVan had drunken the proverbial Kool-Aid without hesitation, she was clearly far more wary.

“Why did you observe us?” she asked. The Doctor smiled. At least one human was asking the right questions.

“To see if you would survive.” Malak turned to the Doctor. “Your ship is interesting, but I do not wish you to regain possession of it just yet.”

“Very courteous,” scowled the Doctor.

“Of course,” said Malak. “Where are my manners?” He waved his hand and from out of nowhere, a plate of fruit and a jug of water appeared on a table before deVan and Cornelius. “It will refresh you, do not worry.”

“I notice you haven’t answered her question,” said the Doctor, moving back towards Malak. “There’s one more question I want to add.” He pointed back at Jennings, sitting cross-legged, apparently content to remain alone and separate from the conversation. “What is wrong with him?”

“There is nothing wrong with him,” said Malak. “Indeed, if I may be so bold, I have improved him.”

“Improved him?” asked Cornelius, a glass of water at her lips. Another sigh came from the great figure.

“He killed his fellows, I saw that. To see such bloodshed over millennia is one thing, for it to happen so close that you can almost taste the blood yourself... it is horrible. I was able to heal him, remove the impurities from his mind.”

“Impurities,” said the Doctor. “I see.”

“Enough about Jennings,” snapped deVan, pacing the chamber, caring more about the alien devices. “The star-drive, the message, did you beam all that into my head?”

Slowly, Malak reached up, putting his hands against the sides of his helmet. With a loud click, the helmet turned and began to break apart. They watched as the helmet disappeared into the neckline of the armor section by section, revealing the face underneath. Malak’s face was as gray as marble, the skin ancient and elephantine. The face possessed no mouth or any sort of slit for a nose, but deep within were two small eyes, sunken beneath the contours and folds. Eyes, all too human, brimmed with tears.

“Yes, Buskirk deVan... I sent the signal across the vast boundaries of space, to you.”

deVan put a hand to his mouth, choking back tears of his own. “Then... you can help me? You can help me finish the star-drive?”

“I will,” said Malak with a fractional tilt of his great head. The Doctor and Cornelius shared another look and Cornelius held up a hand, waiting for the creature to glance her way.

“And what do you get in exchange?” she asked.

“I will return with you to Earth,” said Malak. “I have been alone all this time, forced to wait here and watch your planet. I want to come to Earth and help guide you to be your best selves.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Of course!” said deVan without hesitating. In seconds, the Doctor had crossed the chamber at a dead sprint, looking from deVan to Malak.

“Now hold on, Buskirk, surely we can talk about this!”

“I don't see how this concerns you,” snapped deVan. “You're not human, you're not part of this expedition. The help you have given me is invaluable, I will grant you that.” He emphasized each point with a chopping motion with his hand. “But you have no say in matters that concern us.” He looked to Cornelius, looking between the two awkwardly. “Isn't that right, Julia?”

“The Doctor has helped us,” said Cornelius. “At the very least, we can hear him out.”

“I don't see why.” deVan crossed his arms petulantly. “Anything he has to say is null and void as far as I'm concerned.” For all his supposed intelligence, deVan still acted like an entitled child, only wanting his own way. Like so many other humans, he carried a sense of superiority to everything around him.

“Malak, we should let these humans discuss matters amongst themselves. Can we talk privately?”

Malak considered the Doctor's request and finally nodded. Without another word, he walked back to the garden in the other cave. The two cables leading from his chest to the power-core in the corner stretched longer and longer with every step. With one look at the cables, the Doctor glanced to Cornelius before following Malak. He had the Captain on his side and didn't want to risk her talking to deVan. Soon, he was standing beside Malak in the garden. The flowers bobbed gently in the windless cave.

“I have to say, Malak, that your garden is quite beautiful. I have one like it on my own craft.”

“I could sense its power.” Bending on one knee, Malak picked a bunch of flowers and let them be carried along the non-existent wind. “My people have some familiarity with the idea of transcendental dimensions, even if not along the same lines as your own.”

“Oh, don't worry. I think much of your people's technology would put mine to shame.” Lowering his hand, the Doctor ran it through blades of grass. “How do you keep the flowers alive? Do you melt the ice deep beneath Pluto's surface?”

“I create it mentally. Telepathically manipulating the atoms that make up the universe to

whatever I desire.” Absently, Malak waved a hand and the Doctor watched a long spoon appear out of nowhere. Grabbing it before it fell, the Doctor admired the spoon, wobbling it between thumb and forefinger. “That’s impressive,” he confessed. With the spoon, he pointed back the way they had come, back towards the TARDIS. “I could take you wherever you want to go.”

“I want to go to Earth,” said Malak.

“I could take you home, to your own planet, your own people—”

“I don’t want them.” Malak’s voice had changed, just a little, but enough for the Doctor to pick up on. “I haven’t seen a single member of my race in an eternity, my memories of home are all but dust, my people all but dust themselves. In my loneliness, in my empty home which is nothing more than a prison—all I have had is Earth and its beautiful, ugly little people!”

* * * * *

“I don’t see how you could disagree with this!”

“I’m not, but I don’t think we should be rushing into anything we don’t understand.” Cornelius looked back at deVan, arms clasped to his chest petulantly. He looked about them at all the wonders in that cave and sniffed. “I didn’t take you to be so closed minded, Julia.”

“Oh shut up,” snapped Cornelius. “You only call me Julia when you want to get your own way. You’re a damn baby. There’s more going on than we think. Doesn’t it seem a little too convenient?”

“He contacted us.”

“He contacted you, and that’s it, isn’t it?” She pointed at the faint smile that betrayed him. “You’re loving this, Buskirk deVan, the man contacted by an alien with powers we can’t even dream of. No one back home is ever going to stand you up for dinner again!”

“How dare you assume this is all about ego!”

“It may not all be.” Cornelius folded her arms. “But it’s definitely part of it.”

“What do you want me to say? Yes? I admit that what you’re saying is true, but this is beyond my ego. This could change our world, forever.”

“Exactly,” said Cornelius. It was easier to think without Malak looking at her with those eyes. For all his charm and benevolence, there was something in the eyes she didn’t trust. “And do you think that our new friend is going to come to Earth and get a house and a nine to five job?”

* * * * *

“But why?” said the Doctor. Malak raised a hand, and the wind around them began to turn into a rumbling of the ground.

“I have watched Earth for its entire history. Its people, its songs, its art... it kept me... it made me belong.”

“Why are you here?” asked the Doctor. Malak looked away.

“I told you, Doctor. Merely to observe.”

“And then what?” The Doctor rounded on Malak then, grabbing his arm. “What are you observing Earth for?”

The psychic blow sent the Doctor flying across the garden, skidding and landing in a patch of sunflowers. The Doctor barely dented the flowers, and he realized his landing was softened and slowed by Malak.

“It doesn’t matter, Doctor.” Malak lowered his hand. “I’m sorry. You—you made me do

that.”

The Doctor climbed onto his feet. “Oh, did I?”

“If I desired, I could simply unmake you with a thought,” said Malak. “I have not. Yet. I have seen you, Doctor, Time Lord. Weaving in and out of history without a care, with your many faces, walking through their world like it means nothing. I want that. I want to be where the people are.”

Climbing to his feet, the Doctor decided not to ask what this alien creature had thought of ‘The Little Mermaid’. Ageless Malak may have been, but eternity could wear down even such a being. It was one of the benefits of regeneration, he supposed, to renew his mind and soul when it was weary. Just like the people on the Boundless, deep down, all weary at heart.

And that was when it clicked into place.

“You won't let me have my ship back if I try to stop you, will you?”

“If you were to try and stop me.” Malak raised his arm again and the flower garden exploded into a snowstorm of dust and ice crystals. “I want this, more than anything.”

The Doctor believed it. Malak would do it on a whim. He would have to play this another way.

“Then I won't stop you.” The Doctor brushed down his spacesuit. “But I would like the TARDIS back.”

“In time.” Malak rested his eyes on the Doctor. “When I am convinced that you will not try to stop me.”

“How could I?” The Doctor picked up a handful of dust in his hand. “I don't want to end up like this.” He let the dust drift to the ground. “It wasn't a star-drive, was it?”

Malak's eyes flitted in and out of sight in a subtle blink. The Doctor picked up one of the ancient being's connecting cables. It pulsed with power that the Doctor could feel even through his insulated spacesuit. “This keeps you alive, or powered in some way, doesn't it? But you can't take this life-support machine to Earth with you... this cavern is all part of whatever structure you came to this planet in, isn't it?”

“Over the centuries, the ship has grown into its surroundings. When I am gone, it will wither and die.”

“The particles it creates, this same cosmic energy... it's a food source for you, isn't it? As the power of your people grew, it came with a great cost.” The Doctor clapped his hands together. Malak hadn't responded. He had to have the answer, or at least part of it. There was always a cost, somewhere. The power to travel through time and space came with the rules of the Time Lords and Malak's near-omnipotent powers came at such a cost that it rendered him a prisoner of his own ship. “You can create flowers at a whim, but the power to do so is more than your body handles. Your ship cannot fly and you cannot fly away without it.” The Doctor grinned at Malak smugly. Slowly, Malak nodded.

“I lied to him, for my own survival? Is that an inherently cruel act, Doctor?”

His face falling, the Doctor looked down at his feet. “No. It's not.”

The silence was broken by deVan and Cornelius stepping into the chamber. DeVan's arms spread wide. “Malak, we have decided to take you home with us,” the scientist proclaimed. The sound that the being made was low and terrible, but as Malak raised both fists in the sky, the Doctor realized that it was a cheer of joy. Letting the cable fall to the floor, the Doctor scrambled over to Cornelius, looking at her quizzically.

“He wouldn't listen to me,” said Cornelius sadly. “And honestly? He's right, this is a tremendous discovery and no matter what...” She pointed at Malak. “Could you honestly condemn

this creature to remain here alone?”

The Doctor looked at Malak. He knew what it was like, to be trapped and exiled in a world completely unlike your own. He couldn't help but distrust Malak, but he also understood him. For once, the Doctor wanted to be wrong, but everything in this situation was telling that his wary distrust was, for now, right.

* * * * *

“We've just gotten a message from the surface!”

Hannah had been resting in an empty chair for the past few hours. Every time she tried to close her eyes and let the background hum of the Boundless send her to sleep, she was startled awake by that eternal sense of unease. Wendir was muttering that it was about damn time as he went to stand beside Carson at his communication's console.

“It's Captain Cornelius, she says that all three of them are safe and they'll be returning to the Boundless in an hour...” With a look of disbelief on his face, Carson looked up at Wendir. “Apparently, they won't be alone.”

“Maybe they found Jennings,” said Wendir, looking to the bridge crew. Sitting up, Hannah listened as best she could. “Can you get a direct line, Carson?” Wendir patted the man on the shoulder.

“No... she's signed off again.” Carson pulled the headset he was wearing off. “What do you think she means?”

“I don't know,” said Wendir. As Hannah looked at the two men, she could feel their unease. She could feel it amongst all the bridge crew, that same sensation she had been feeling ever since she had arrived on the Boundless was starting to scratch at the very corners of her mind. The Doctor had been wrong, Hannah thought to herself. Whatever was affecting the crew, it was gaining in strength and might even start to affect her.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

News spread fast on the Boundless. By the time the shuttle had left Pluto's atmosphere, inter-crew messages and private transmissions on personal servers brought everyone running into the observation lounge, all aware that another discovery had been made. As she walked with Carson and Wendir, Hannah let herself become part of the crowd, even if her clothes made her stand out.

“Okay, everyone!” Wendir's voice caught the attention of everyone scrambling and pushing into the observation lounge. “I get that you're all wondering what's going on, but I need you all to make room!”

“Come off it, Chuck! We were here first!” cried a voice.

“Yeah, and I outrank you, Kent!” Wendir snapped back. “So I'm making this an order and not a request!”

“Make me!” cried Kent. He was strikingly handsome, and his casual sneer indicated all the hallmarks of arrogance and privilege to Hannah, grown up used to these things in America.

“Seriously, Kent? You want to do this right now?” Wendir's sigh carried across the room.

“You know what? I think I do,” Kent growled. A circle quickly formed around the two men. Pushing his way between them, Carson held them apart with both hands. Kent was already swiping ineffectually at the air while Wendir stood back, unimpressed. To her horror, Hannah found that she had pushed in with the rest of the crew.

“Kent, seriously,” said Carson. “You need to calm—”

Kent grabbed Carson by the collar and pushed him into the crowd, sending a small portion into a heap on the floor. Stepping back, Wendir held out his hands pleadingly. “I don't want to fight—” Kent lunged at him immediately, looking to punch the Commander in the face, but all Wendir did was casually step aside, leaving his foot outstretched for Kent to trip over. The crowd gave a boo as Kent hit the floor, but quickly climbed to his feet. This was it, Hannah thought, this was what the Doctor was afraid of.

“Hey!” she slammed her hand against the observation glass loudly. Everyone's attention immediately fell on her. “The shuttle's landing!”

The fight ended as everyone watched the shuttle land and the shuttle-bay pressurize and filter in a breathable atmosphere. Everyone was on tenterhooks as the shuttle door opened and Buskirk deVan stepped out, followed by Captain Cornelius. A small wave of comfort washed

through Hannah as she saw the Doctor follow them out. Without a word, Cornelius walked to the back of the shuttle to open the rear door, normally used to lift out large-scale equipment. No one was prepared for the giant figure to step out of the shuttle, and it was then that everyone lost it. Hannah watched as the Doctor and Cornelius left the shuttle bay and pushed their way into the observation room, Cornelius telling everyone to make room in the corridor. The collected crewmen obediently flattened against the walls as the huge figure walked past, following deVan down the corridor. Hannah looked at the figure with amazement, before looking back at the Doctor, his expression enigmatic. As soon as the figure disappeared into a lift, Cornelius held up her hands.

“I'm sure you've all got—”

The voices of every crewmember exploded at the same time with a litany of questions.

“Please!” shouted Cornelius, trying to be heard above the din. “Please! I need you all to *be quiet!*” The last two words were shouted at the top of her voice and did the trick. “I will prepare a general statement to inform the crew of our discovery. Suffice to say, as you can tell...” She indicated the alien figure. “Yes, we've found an intelligent form of life. Its name, is Malak.” She glanced down at the Doctor before continuing. “As far as we can know, Malak is benevolent and wishes to be taken back to Earth.”

“What about the space-fold drive experiments?” asked a few people at the same time.

After a sharp intake of breath, Cornelius gave her answer: a full briefing would be given later concerning the unexpected developments in the Boundless mission. Ordering the crowd to disperse, Cornelius stumbled out of the observation lounge. As she marched down the corridor, she remembered something, and snapped her fingers at two crewmen who weren't as quick as disappearing as the others. She pointed them towards the shuttle.

“Jennings is still in there, I almost forgot. I want him taken to sick-bay and have Doctor Tamika look over him.”

Captain Cornelius knew why his presence had slipped her mind. There was something about Jennings that was off-putting enough to make her want to forget he was present and sedate after killing six men.

It was the way he smiled. Vacant.

* * * * *

“Do you trust Malak?” Hannah asked the Doctor when they were alone. As the crew had filed off, the Doctor circled back to the shuttle-bay, Hannah trailing behind him. Pulling off his space-suit, the Doctor was more interested in trying to get to the back of the shuttle than whatever she had to say.

“Doctor—” Hannah repeated.

He tutted irritably. “Yes. No. I want to,” he said in quick succession. “But, as I've been made very aware, my concerns must be kept to myself and not taken into account, according to the very clever Mr. deVan.” The spacesuit was finally on the floor and the Doctor was smoothing down his linen shirt. Without stopping to pick it up, he climbed into the back of the shuttle, gesturing for Hannah to follow. He pointed down apologetically.

“Bring that with you.”

Picking up the spacesuit with a sigh, Hannah followed the Doctor inside. Within, shrouded in sterile lighting, was the comforting sight of the TARDIS. They wouldn't be leaving yet, Hannah knew. The Doctor walked around the blue box, patting its frame affectionately. He looked deep in thought, contemplating the events unfolding around them.

“But Malak can't reach Earth?”

“Because you've been to the future? Come on, I'm sure I've explained it to you enough times.”

One day, Hannah considered, she would tell the Doctor that even though he did his best to explain the ever-shifting nature of time to her, it never actually made any sense. Now was not the time.

“We need to be cautious, Hannah. I don't fully understand what we're dealing with.”

* * * * *

By the time they had reached deVan's laboratory, Malak was starting to stumble and soon, deVan had to keep close to stop him from falling on the floor. Malak's weight was greater than deVan was prepared for, and he was already red as they moved through the doors. As his eyes fell on the star-drive, some of Malak's strength returned and, straightening, he approached the glowing apparatus. Placing both hands on the energy collectors, Malak exhaled, life returning to him. Slumping into the nearest chair, deVan helped himself to a glass of water.

“Does it work?”

A contented moan of pleasure sounded in deVan's head. “It does, Buskirk deVan. It works perfectly. You built it exactly to my design.”

Turning to face the scientist, Malak moved the collectors so that he could easily stand between them, bathing in their energy. “It will take some time to alter the device to feed the energy directly into my body, but it will suffice for the return to Earth.”

deVan looked at Malak. This would put his name in the history books for certain, just like he hoped. There would never be a name as important to the annals of scientific discovery. They would have to let the failure of his star-drive go.

A sly thought sneaked into his head and he asked, “Malak, the star-drive... can we build it here? On the ship?”

“Hmm.” Malak scratched his chin. “With the right equipment, it would be simplicity itself, but I think it would be better to build it back on Earth. How I long to set foot on Earth!”

“I don't...” deVan began, but he stopped himself. He didn't want to waste three years returning to Earth. Who knew what would happen in that time? If he could build it now... then Earth would be nothing. They'd be able to take the Boundless to the farthest galaxy and back in half the time. *That* would be an accomplishment. “I'll see what we can do, Malak.”

“Yes.” Malak slouched where he stood. “I am tired, Buskirk. Leave me.”

As Buskirk left the lab, he looked back at the resting giant. The Doctor didn't know what he was talking about. They could trust Malak.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Cornelius was reading Wendir's report.

"Good work, Wendir." She smiled and sat in the captain's chair, placing her tablet on the armrest. He was still standing there, looking at her expectantly. "Do you want me to do a song and dance? You're relieved! Go take a break." She spoke up so everyone could hear. "Everyone! Wendir here didn't kill us!"

The initial disappointed groans soon turned to raucous laughter and brought a smile to Cornelius' face. Maybe things would be turning around for them, even with seven—no, eight—souls lost. Sighing, she picked up her tablet and considered memorial procedures for their lost crewmates. Some of the crew had gotten officiated by their respective faiths before leaving Earth. It had caused a minor scandal, but most religious leaders agreed that this had never been written about in any holy book worth respecting.

Once more, Cornelius thought about Malak's mouth-less face and the way it looked at her when she was speaking. Perhaps the churches were going to be a lot busier with their findings than any of them had considered. A chime on her personal communicator caught her attention, the name DOCTOR TAMIKA blinking on and off.

* * * * *

The Doctor stopped and sniffed the roses. These were real, but didn't smell as beautiful as the ones in Malak's garden. Perhaps if Malak had created the flowers from the atoms surrounding him, they would be only based on what he wanted: *more* real than real.

"Out of the two gardens I've seen today," he said to Hannah, "this is my favorite."

Hannah grinned and sat down. "This ship is amazing in so many ways, but this..." She patted the ground beside her. The Doctor took her up on her invitation. "Maybe sometimes, I just need to be reassured that in the future, there's still going to be grass and flowers. Is that wrong of me?"

"Never." The Doctor stretched out, looking up at the ceiling. The surface of the hydroponic dome was covered in hundreds of solar collectors, storing sunlight that had taken hours to reach this distant point, to supply the dome with light and heat. "Maybe next time, we'll go somewhere

lush and filled with jungles. How does that sound?"

"When do we leave?" asked Hannah. The Doctor didn't reply, instead leaning across to the tray of food beside Hannah and tried to steal a biscuit, getting a slap on the wrist for his attempts. "You should have brought your own!" she chided. The Doctor harrumphed and retracted his hand. Hannah looked around and said, "This ship is so advanced, I'm surprised we've not come across something similar."

"It's advanced, but expensive. As much as deVan thinks he's revolutionizing space travel, everyone back home is going to look at his designs and work out the best way to cut corners and make it come in under budget. A few less giant gardens and plenty of poorly lit sheet metal."

Hannah took another bite of her biscuit. "Since this is a corporate gig, I'm surprised that didn't happen here."

"And risk upsetting their CEO? I'd be surprised if deVan wasn't observing every inch of the construction like a hawk to make sure they didn't compromise."

The door to the garden opened and Carson ran in. The Doctor instinctively jumped to his feet, already preparing to dart out of harm's way.

"I don't want to hurt you!" said Carson, sounding irritated between breaths.

"Can't blame me for being cautious," muttered the Doctor. "How are you Carson?"

"I'm fine, but Cornelius wants to see the two of you in the sick-bay. Dr. Tamika finished her examination of Jennings and... I don't understand it myself."

* * * * *

As they entered the sickbay the Doctor noticed that the medical crew were scrambling around, the medical beds all filled with struggling patients.

"You seem rather booked to capacity," said the Doctor to Carson.

"We've had some fights break out, another suicide attempt, and an accident in one of the zero-gravity cargo bays," said Carson.

"Any attempted stabbings?" The Doctor's eyebrow arched.

"At least three," replied a nearby nurse, pointing at a set of double doors. "The Captain and Doctor Tamika are in the isolation ward."

Dr. Tamika was rubbing her hands in sanitizing gel as the three entered. Cornelius had her back to the doors, looking over a series of charts and scans on the computer screens. In the center of the room, strapped down to the medical-scanner bed while a half-dozen different probes and scanners ran over his body, was Jennings. Jennings was looking at the ceiling, eyes wide, still smiling. Tamika looked at the Doctor and Hannah.

"Is he the one with two hearts?" she asked, pointing at the Doctor.

"I am." The Doctor joined Cornelius. "What's the problem?"

"Tamika can explain," said Cornelius. "I'm not qualified in medicine at all."

Without even looking at the Doctor, Tamika pointed at the first of the screens.

"How familiar are you with the human brain, Doctor ... ?"

"Just Doctor will do. I'm pretty qualified, by human standards." Stroking his chin, the Doctor peered at the screen. "Wait a second... that can't be right." He pointed at something on the screen that Hannah, no matter how much she looked, just couldn't understand.

"Exactly," said Tamika.

"Did you do it?" asked the Doctor.

Tamika scoffed.

“I only ask because it used to be quite a popular roadside attraction.” The Doctor broke into a deadpan impersonation of a carnival barker. “Come to town in a van, bring your ice-pick, bring the kids, have a wonderful time for such a horrible—”

“Do what?” asked Cornelius. The Doctor circled one particular area of the screen.

“That's the frontal lobe, or rather where the frontal lobe *should* be. He's been lobotomized”

Tamika bit her lip as she shot a glance toward Jennings. Hannah was looking down at him, trying to avoid the intensity of his eyes. He didn't look like other killers she had met in her travels.

“But here's the thing,” Tamika continued. “I looked and I can't find evidence of any operational scars.” The Doctor grabbed a medical-scanner from a nearby equipment bench and slipped it over his head as he knelt beside Jennings. From his waistcoat, he produced and donned a pair of plastic gloves and started to run his hands across the man's head, parting the hair gently.

“It's there.” He tapped Jennings' head. The man's giggle made them all jump.

“He can't be awake,” said Tamika. “I doped him up to the eyeballs.”

“I don't think he can feel it,” said the Doctor. “There's microscopic scarring right here, so deep down that you can't see it unless you know what to look for.” He looked up at Cornelius. “Captain, what was it that Malak said?”

“That he... fixed him?”

“Oh, he was fixed all right,” growled the Doctor. He stood, pulling off the gloves so hard that they all but snapped in two. Placing the medical-scanner in Tamika's hands, he marched to the door. Hannah followed, but he spun around and pointed at her, still walking for the opening door.

“You stay here, Hannah. Captain, I want you to show deVan this. I'd better have a word with your new guest.”

Hannah followed the Doctor out of the sick bay.

“I mean it, Hannah!” The Doctor kept walking. “I want you to stay as far away from Malak as possible.”

“But what about you?” said Hannah. The Doctor stopped, but he didn't turn back around.

“Malak isn't evil... or at the very least, I have to hope he isn't intentionally malicious. But he's powerful, Hannah, in ways that terrify me. I've met beings of extreme power before, creatures that control minds or destroy planets with the flick of a wrist, but Malak... he has that power, but I don't think he understands the effect he can have on this crew... and if he could just open a man's head and do ... that to him without a qualm?”

“But he was a murderer, wasn't he?”

“That doesn't matter,” said the Doctor. “He deserved to be treated fairly and humanely. From what I gather... something in him just snapped, like everything else around here ... but Malak deprived Jennings of the good within him, as well as the bad. Now he's just a grinning shell...” The Doctor finally turned to Hannah. “And that's why I want you here. If something goes wrong, you'll know what to do.” He smiled in a way Hannah knew was not natural but purely to reassure her. Not surprisingly, it didn't work.

Then, he added, “You always do, Hannah.”

And with that, he stepped into the lift and was gone.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Malak was alone when the Doctor arrived. The Doctor entered wordlessly, watching the ancient creature while he stood waiting to be acknowledged.

“Ah, Doctor.” The small eyes shone at him, twinkling. “I didn’t expect you to come.”

“I wanted to talk about Jennings.”

There was no reaction, not even a twitch in the eyes. The Doctor grabbed the nearest chair and sat down, looking at Malak intently.

“What is there to talk about?”

“We found out what you meant when you said you ‘fixed’ him.”

“He is no longer violent. He will not kill again.”

“He won’t do much again.” The Doctor crossed his arms, glaring at Malak like a disappointed teacher with an unruly pupil. Except this pupil could erase its teacher from existence with a wave of a hand. “Is that what constitutes justice in your race?”

“My race did not commit murder,” said Malak. “When you could communicate by pure thought, the idea of such an act is abhorrent.”

“But humans can’t exist like that. Their minds are locked in, alone. The few who have the potential of telepathy are genetic quirks.” The Doctor worked at keeping his voice as calm and collected as possible. “If you’ve observed Earth for so long, you should know this. Earth is—”

“Do not talk to me of Earth!” Malak raised his hand and the Doctor felt himself flinch. “The death, violence, war... it is all distasteful to me. To watch it helplessly, like a parent unable to help a child in need, I can’t do it anymore. Just watching them die ... when I arrive, it will be halted.”

“It can’t,” said the Doctor. “Humanity cannot be shepherded to their utopia. I’ve seen the future. Humanity will rise to greatness and they will fall, time and again, pushing and pulling against the best and worst aspects of their nature in an eternal cycle. But that is humanity’s greatest gift, that it has the capacity, at times, to learn from their mistakes and achieve something incredible. This ship—”

“I brought them here,” said Malak. The Doctor could sense irritation in his voice now.

“No! You brought deVan here.”

“Don’t speak to me of him... To touch his mind, to see nothing but thoughts of himself, it

disgusts me. If anything, he is the perfect example of all that is wrong with mankind. He could have saved the Earth a thousand times before if he so wished, but for all his greed and thirst for power.”

“But you used him, didn’t you? Poor, helpless Malak, who just wants to help the humans be better... you’re quite willing to abuse the things you claim to be so high and mighty about in order to get what you want.”

Malak's voice was a low growl. “He is here for my design, all this—”

“No!” The Doctor slammed his hand down on the console. “You may have planted the seed in deVan's head, but you didn’t design the ship, you didn’t take the risk of approving the voyage, you didn’t weld the metal together yourself. Hundreds, thousands worked on this ship. Many of the people who built this ship would never get to fly it themselves. The people who crew this ship, the people who volunteered to leave their homes, their families, to fling themselves out into the abyss, to the very edge of sanity, they didn’t do this for you, they didn't do it to bring you back to Earth. They did it because they believed. Yes, they believed that this ship and this mission could change the course of human history. They came for the stars, Malak, and you cannot take that away from them!”

“The stars are nothing more than dead pinpricks of light,” Malak’s voice was a low, irritated rumble. “I have been among them for eons and I know this all too well. But the humans will have the stars, once I have come to Earth. They will be guided, kindly and firmly, away from violence and greed.”

“And that can’t happen!” The Doctor jumped up from the chair. “The only way you could ever do that would be to tear it out of their heads like you did to poor Jennings and that won’t be saving humanity... you will have gelded them!”

* * * * *

“I fail to see the problem,” muttered deVan. “He was a killer, after all. At least now he can't endanger the mission.” Dr. Tamika looked horrified at his reaction. Without giving the man another thought, deVan looked at Cornelius. He unzipped a pocket of his tunic and pulled out a small tablet. “I have been working on the calculations to return to Earth.”

“I have the calculations,” said Cornelius. “But we won't be returning just yet.”

“There is nothing more to be found here. This mission is completed, so we should leave.”

Cornelius arched an eyebrow. “And we’re not leaving until I say so, until I’m satisfied ...”

“And why, Captain, are you dissatisfied? Because of the merciful act of a wonderful creature towards this pathetic wretch?” deVan scoffed. “He would probably have been killed upon his return to Earth. That is, if members of the crew didn’t already throw him out of the airlock en route.”

“For God's sake,” said Tamika. “That's a horrible thing to say.”

“He was a killer, I wouldn’t want killers on my ship.” deVan looked to Cornelius, glaring back at him hatefully. “So, we won’t be returning to Earth?”

“Not until I'm satisfied with the situation,” repeated Cornelius stonily.

He could threaten to withhold her pay, deVan thought. That would bring her back into line. Such a possibility should have been obvious. She had too easily relented to his demands to bring Malak on board. Of course, she wanted to command the situation, not him. She wanted the respect and glory. Captain Cornelius, commander of the Boundless, the woman who brought Malak to Earth. No, she wasn't like that though, he considered. But she was nevertheless threatening what

he wanted. It was all about glory. Otherwise why would she be using Jennings like this? Probably the Doctor's fault as well, overwhelming her with claptrap about risk and danger. Slipping the tablet back into his tunic pocket, he turned and walked out without a word. deVan didn't return to his quarters. Instead, he headed to the bridge.

* * * * *

“I must return to Earth.”

“No!” The Doctor drew his face level with Malak's. “I can take you to your people.”

“My people are dead.” Malak's voice was on the verge of angry tears. The Doctor steps back, shocked.

“You said they were im—”

“Immortality has its limits, even for those as ageless as we. As the eons passed, some succumbed to sickness, others to injury. Inexplicably at first, then all too routinely, one by one, I felt their lives blink out in my mind. My friends torn out of my mind, one by one, until one day I, Malak, was left alone, watching the Earth. My mind had no other mind to touch. The survey mission was meant to have picked me up, but even the full power of my ship could not have taken me as far as I needed.

“I did not know what to do. So I waited. An eternity. Alone. While you got everything I wanted.”

Malak's eyes glowed fiercely. The Doctor jumped back from his chair, his arms instinctively raised to defend himself. “Like I said before, Doctor, I've seen you jump in and out of history time and time again. You had it all. It's not fair. I waited alone for so very long and I get to remember all of it.” Malak pointed at the Doctor. “I want you to understand what I had to endure while I was here. Understand my loneliness. Remember all of it.”

And the Doctor did.

In the span of seconds, he experienced an eternity of waiting, of loneliness. Stars blinked in and out of life, and all he could do was watch it. He watched everything, waiting, hoping that one day, he could reach out and touch someone else's hand, and have it be real. This was what Malak had felt for eternity, needing another hand to hold, another hand to tighten around his own. To hear a voice say “You're not alone anymore.”

And in that moment, even with his mind telling him over and over that it was just someone else's memory, that it was a mere echo of real experience, not a real one at that moment ... in that moment, the Doctor went mad.

In that moment, nearly everybody on the Boundless went mad.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Thinking back, Hannah was never uncertain how she knew. Maybe it was an innate sixth sense, maybe simple experience from her travels with the Doctor, she would never be able to put a finger on it. But there had been a subtle change in the atmosphere on the ship and as she turned to ask Julia if she felt it, she saw, out of the corner of her eye, Tamika slipping a scalpel from the tray next to her and creeping behind Julia. Without hesitation, Hannah grabbed the nearest chair and threw it at Tamika's legs. The medical officer screamed as she fell backwards over the chair, the scalpel slipping from her fingers and flying into the air. Instinctively, Hannah leapt backwards herself, looking up at the scalpel arcing in the air. With a loud thud, Tamika's head hit the equipment tray and slumped where she lay. The scalpel landed conspicuously with a clinging sound.

"Is she okay?" asked Hannah as she regained her footing. Julia already knelt by the unconscious doctor, fingers probing the back of her head.

"There's a little bit of blood," Julia wiped the fingers on her jumpsuit. "We should get one of the other doctors to—" She was glancing out at the sickbay behind Hannah's shoulder and her face paled. "I think there might be a problem."

Slowly turning, Hannah could see the chaos unfolding outside the transparent door. Some of the medical staff were attacking each other, while some huddled in the corner. Automatically, Hannah's eyes fell on the patient with the multiple scalpels in their chest—if not dead, then dying. Julia pushed past Hannah for the door, but Hannah grabbed her by the shoulder, holding her back.

"I've got to help them!"

"I don't think we can," said Hannah, unsure how to describe her suspicions. "I think it's as the Doctor said... Malak's mind was affecting the crew. Now he's on the ship..."

"Then we have to stop him," said Julia.

"I don't think we can." Hannah tightened her grip on Julia, scared that the woman would break free at any second. "I think we have to leave it to the Doctor."

"Then what do we do?" Julia pulled her arm free. She pointed at the carnage going on outside. "Just let them tear each other apart?"

Then, the reason the Doctor insisted she stay behind finally snapped into place for Hannah. *If something goes wrong, you'll know what to do. You always do, Hannah.*

“We need to leave Malak to the Doctor, while we try and stop everyone on this ship from tearing each other apart.” She looked at Julia. “You’re the captain. How do we do it?”

* * * * *

The buzzing in his head was bad, thankfully not as bad as before. Carson leaned against the wall of the lift, watching the numbers on the display count down. When he had been discharged, Dr. Tamika had told him that if he started to feel like that again, to come straight back to sickbay. Hopefully she'd have something for how he was feeling. Carson suspected that he'd probably be plugged into some piece of medical kit and get his brain scanned instead. That would be fine, as long as he was kept away from grabbing any more sharp objects.

With a jolly chime, the lift doors opened at the right level and Carson stepped out. It was as he was standing between the doors that he saw the long trail of blood across the pristine white deck. The trail ended in one dead body with a crew-woman huddled over the body, a knife held tightly in her bloody grip. Holding down a choke of revulsion, Carson stepped back into the lift before she saw him.

Her head snapped up to look at him, eyes filled with hunger.

Carson had caught her eating the dead crewman. His finger stabbed at the lift buttons, not caring which deck he went to. The woman charged, knife held high, the blood coating her face like a lurid mask. Carson began screaming as the doors started to close. He threw himself into a corner of the lift, thinking about what he could use as a weapon.

The doors closed.

But she was in the lift with him.

Her knife, Carson noticed, was buried deep in his chest.

* * * * *

Malak looked down at the Doctor, writhing and screaming on the floor. He hadn't meant to do that, had he? He only wanted to show the Doctor what it had been like for him. He hadn't meant to hurt him.

“Endless...” The Doctor's body contorted. “It just never ends!”

A sudden scream from outside caught Malak's attention. He slowly moved past the energy collectors to the door. As it opened, Malak looked out to see two humans fighting on the ground. One grabbed the other by the hair and was grinding their face against the bulkhead.

Malak raised his hand. “Stop! I command you to stop!”

The crewman let go, looking up at Malak. His eyes widened and he screamed, falling backwards onto the floor to scramble away. A new sound entered Malak's ears, a horrendous guttural screech that he couldn't understand. The way the human was looking at him, afraid, trying to run away from—

“No!” With his mind, Malak reached out and grabbed the human, pulling him back towards him, lifting his legs high into the air so he couldn't run. Malak had to make him see that he wasn't dangerous...

The human flailed at the deck, digging his nails into the floor hard enough to leave scratches. He just wouldn't stop screaming.

Just.

Wouldn't.

Stop.

And that was when Malak realized the second sound he heard were his own screams. Before Malak could stop himself, the struggling human disappeared, leaving only dust and the smell of flowers.

* * * * *

As he strode onto the bridge, deVan chose to ignore the chaos all around him. That couldn't be two of his hand-picked crew brawling in the corner? Of course not. The stress of the last few hours was just getting to him; that was all. Looking at the captain's chair, deVan examined its occupant, Wendir. The second in command was stripped to his underwear, writing on his arms in black marker.

"What are you doing?" he asked. Wendir held up his arm and grinned excitedly. His eyes looked glassy, deVan noticed. Drinking on the job perhaps? Maybe he could bring it up with Cornelius later, that was something she could deal with.

"I'm writing a novel!" said Wendir. "It's about a little sailboat captain and-"

deVan cut him off as he thrust the tablet into Wendir's chest. "These are the return coordinates for Earth. I want them implemented immediately."

Taking the tablet, Wendir looked at deVan, deVan stared back down, his hands clenching and unclenching. deVan looked over at the brawling couple in the corner. They had battered each other unconscious. Most unprofessional, he considered, getting blood everywhere. Maybe that was what Wendir needed if he decided not to obey him. Instead, Wendir jotted down a full stop on his forearm and jumped up.

"Okay!" He skipped over to the helm. "Let's all get back to Earth!" Wendir grinned guiltily at deVan. "Can I write my novel on the way back?"

Taking the captain's chair, deVan waved dismissively. "If you must. If you want." As Wendir got to work, deVan closed his eyes and took a deep breath. They'd be going home.

Home and glory.

* * * * *

"She's getting back up," said Hannah, pointing. With a sigh, Julia fitted the injector-gun with the syringe and pressed ten milligrams of anesthetic into Tamika's neck. Almost immediately, Tamika's eyes rolled up into her skull and she crumpled onto the sickbay floor. With an exhausted look, Julia examined the injector-gun. "That should keep her unconscious for a good few hours. Pity I'm not going to be able to do that to the whole crew."

"Maybe we could!" Hannah jumped back from the door. She had been able to barricade it, but everyone on the other side was turning their attention towards the isolation room and its handful of occupants. They were hammering on the doors, and Hannah was afraid to ask if they would hold. "If most of the crew has gone insane... couldn't we knock them out?"

"How do we do that?" asked Julia. Then, a moment later, she realized. She pushed past Hannah to the nearest computer terminal.

Hannah asked her what her idea was, but Julia held up a hand, shushing her as she typed furiously. Soon, she slumped where she stood.

"I can't access it from her," she said. "If I could access the oxygen controls, I could lower the levels of oxygen through the ship. In their heightened states..."

“They’d burn through the oxygen that much quicker and they won’t be able to keep this up!” Hannah finished the sentence for her. “That’s a brilliant idea.”

“It’s risky,” said Julia. “There are two ways of doing it. One is—”

Everything suddenly shifted to the right, throwing the two women against each other.

“What was that?” cried Hannah. Steadying them, Julia ran back to the console.

“No, it couldn’t be that.” As Julia worked, Hannah peeked outside. Everyone in the sickbay had also been thrown to the deck, with just a few picking themselves up.

Julia’s fist slammed against the console with a growl of anger. “That was a gravity shift! The ship moved off its predicted course before the gravity generators could compensate!”

Hannah looked over Julia’s shoulder. The screen showed a crude graphic of Pluto and the Boundless with a dotted path-line showing her present course and eventual destination. Hannah and Captain Cornelius both wished that the eventual destination of the Boundless wasn’t directly into the surface of Pluto.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The course had been laid in. The Boundless would crash onto the surface of Pluto in an hour. The computers, upon discovering the new navigational data, did as they were programmed: warned the bridge crew of the danger and recommended changing course. In normal circumstances, the crew would get to work, the fault would be detected and rectified, and the ship would be safe. But normal circumstances had abandoned the Boundless and its crew.

Wendir was ignoring the problem, far more concerned with continuing the novel on his right arm. In his head, deVan had already safely returned to Earth and was hearing accolades and praise. The computer's alarms just sounded like the endless applause he would be receiving. With a smug smile, deVan closed his eyes and prepared to give the speech he had planned years ago, long before he left Earth. The speech would sound even greater than it did in the shower, he knew. They would lap it up and nobody, absolutely nobody, would ever say anything bad about him or his intelligence again.

All the ship's computers could do in this situation was to keep sounding the alarm, keep the ALERT displays flashing on all the screens and count down the time on their personal chronometers until the ship would enter Pluto's gravity, resulting in a crash that would kill everyone on board. If anybody survived, the planet's atmosphere would definitely finish them off.

"Terminal navigation," the computer plaintively informed its crew. "Warning, terminal coordinates have been entered. Recommend immediate manual override."

With that, deVan opened his mouth. "Ladies and Gentlemen, please, please. Your applause-"

* * * * *

With a desperate pull, Julia Cornelius pulled off the entry hatch to the service duct. She called for Hannah, who was untying Jennings.

"We can't leave him," said Hannah. "Besides, he should be able to get me into the computers."

"I can get into the computers when we reach the environmental control center."

Julia had explained it to Hannah as they had worked to get the service hatch open. The

ship's oxygen was controlled from the hydroponic garden. Once there, it would be simplicity itself (and the safest place) to control and reduce the levels of oxygen flowing throughout the ship. To do it from the bridge would require wasting time with breathing apparatus.

"You need to get to the bridge." Hannah finished the last straps and Jennings tilted his head to look at her. He didn't seem at all aware of the danger around them, and he sat, smiling. Hannah felt sorry for him at that moment. Despite what he had done, which in any case may have been due to an outside influence, she felt he should want to face death on his own terms. She knew she would. "There's no point in trying to save the crew if we're just going to face-plant into Pluto."

"You're right," said Julia. "But I wish there was another way."

"There's no time for other ways." Hannah pushed past Julia to kneel by the service duct, looking inside the small, cramped space. Forcing a smile, she waved at Jennings, who waved back. Understanding her, he got to his feet unsteadily and made his way after her into the duct. There was enough space to move a little, but it was still too cramped for her liking.

* * * * *

Malak reached out with his mind and all he could sense filled him with fear and dread. The minds of the mad and the dying were not pleasant to experience. The madness that infested the crew felt like a stain on everything, a wretched, oily contamination, making base violence appealing. As Malak touched the minds of the dying, he felt himself shake. When his people had died and their whole lessened, it had felt like something crumbling and drifting with mournful peace to nothingness. But here, with the humans, it felt like something chaotic opening beneath Malak, threatening to pull him down into their last, dying moments. If he could, he wanted to reach out and comfort them somehow, as he had always done with every one of his fellows. Death wasn't so bad when your entire race is lowering you to your end gently. But in the humans, even through those last moments, even as their minds burst free of their insanity in one, last desperate gasp, there was something else, something Malak couldn't understand.

It was a feeling of unfairness.

It was then that the Doctor finally stopped screaming. Malak wanted to reach out and touch his mind. The Doctor's mind, though, was unlike the humans and alien to Malak as well.

"Doctor?" Malak's voice was a quiet tremble. The Doctor rolled onto his back, coughing dryly.

"Malak..." he rasped, throat raw from the endless screaming. "I saw it all... even as my mind told me it wasn't real..." He coughed again, forcing him to repeat what he'd been saying. "It was for you. And so it was for me."

Stepping forward, Malak held out a hand, but the Doctor rolled away from him, slowly staggering to his feet. As their eyes met, Malak saw that the Doctor's intelligent, defying eyes also held a small hint of fear.

Fear of him. Humans were primitive creatures. Despite accomplishing so much, their fear he could understand and in some limited way, accept. From the Doctor, though, that same fear felt like the greatest rejection.

"The humans..." Malak lowered his proffered hand. "They have gone mad. I can feel them killing each other all over the ship."

"Of course they have!" snapped the Doctor, moving to the porthole. Malak hadn't looked outside since he had disintegrated the crewman. As the Doctor looked from the pile of fragrant dust in the corridor back to Malak, the fear was paired with anger.

“Your handiwork.”

“I didn’t kill him,” said Malak, trying to think how to make the Doctor understand.

“No, but you might as well have done.” Running a hand through his hair, the Doctor struggled to find the words. “You don’t see. Of course you don’t. How could you? All you’ve wanted, for so long ... was to be ... alone no longer. That’s natural, no one ever wants to be truly alone, not deep down, but your mind... you could never live amongst the humans. No matter how much you could try. You nearly killed me.”

“An accident. I never—”

“That accident has sent the crew insane. They endured so much to come here, to this place ... you can’t control yourself. You’re a psychic creature, your race, from what you’ve told me, existed on telepathic levels that could work with each other. But with humans, it won’t. Just being in orbit around this planet was wearing at their souls. A psychic tantrum from you has driven some of them to hopeless violence. Can you imagine the slaughter if that happened on Earth?”

“As you said,” said Malak. “They are alone and vulnerable out here, it wouldn’t happen again.”

“No?” challenged the Doctor. “But you’ll be on their planet... one stranger amongst trillions. No matter what you did for them, no matter how you helped them, you would be something alien and frightening to them. Most would hide it, deep down, like Julia Cornelius did. But in their souls, in the very core of their beings, would be that apprehension towards you, a fear you would feel every single day for eternity ...” The Doctor looked at Malak with pity, his rage and fear gone. “Because as lonely as you are now, Malak ... on Earth, you would be lonelier than ever. The loneliness of the outcast is far more terrible than exile here on Pluto.” The Doctor blinked back tears. “There would be no place on Earth where you would feel safe. You would have to build a great tower, or bury yourself deep underground, and be alone forever ... living like that drove you to the point of madness here... you cannot tell me that you could endure a different isolation.” The Doctor reached out and gently touched his arm. Malak recoiled as if the Doctor had slapped him. “You know that, don’t you?”

“I know,” said Malak. “But what can I do?”

“Return to Pluto.”

“I cannot.” Malak gestured to the energy collectors of the Boundless’ fake space-drive. “Without my construct on Pluto... I would not last long. I would die.”

“And if you do not leave this ship,” said the Doctor. “All the humans will die. And what then? Could you take this ship back to Earth?”

“I ... I might.”

“And then what?” pressed the Doctor. “Then what? The human race would try to destroy you out of fear. Do you fight back? What do you do?”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

As they climbed from the hatch, Hannah shushed Jennings as he landed flat on his backside. With a grin, Jennings echoed the sound back to her.

“Are you sure about this?” asked Julia, sticking her head out of the tunnel. The corridor leading to the hydroponic gardens and the environmental controls was quieter than the others they had crawled past. With a shudder, Hannah thought of some of the sounds she had heard on their journey.

“Like I said,” she said with a smile she hoped Julia would find reassuring. “We’ve got this.” Her expression set, Julia patted Hannah on the shoulder. Then, she pulled herself back into the service tunnel, Hannah shutting the hatch behind her. The doors to the garden were closed, and there was no sign that anyone was nearby. Stepping too close, Jennings cried out in shock as the doors whirred open unexpectedly. Hannah wanted to scream at him for his utter lack of caution, but she couldn’t blame him. With a final look down each end of the corridor, she pushed them inside, waiting for the doors to close. Just as Julia had instructed, Hannah security-locked the doors. Satisfied no one would come in that way, she turned to look at the garden.

Someone had been here.

The imitation gravel path was how she remembered it, but this collection of colorful flowers had been pulled out of the soil and strewn everywhere. Some of the petals looked half-eaten.

“Jennings?” Hannah asked quietly. “I need you to keep very, very quiet and follow me, all right?”

With a determined nod, Jennings looked about. A sad look fell over his face as his boots scuffed the destroyed flowers.

“That’s not right,” he said. “I liked these flowers. Made me happy.”

“Same,” said Hannah. “I need your help, Jennings. Can you do that?”

“Will it stop people destroying the flowers?” Jennings picked up some of the petals, stuffing them into the pockets of his crew-suit. “Stop more people doing bad things?”

“You heard them?” Hannah asked with a shudder. She felt guilty for not asking Jennings if he was okay. Instead, she smiled and patted him on the arm. “You were very brave.”

“They were doing bad things,” Jennings’ expression glazed over. “Just like I did. Couldn’t

someone help them like me...”

“We’ll try. But we need to get to the environmental controls and hopefully, we’ll stop them all hurting themselves.”

Something came over Jennings then, a little bit of focus seemed to return to his eyes. Maybe it was some vestige of the man he had used to be, though Hannah suspected that she would never really know. For her entire brief time on the ship, Jennings had been considered a violent murderer and not a human being. All she could do was watch him jump off the path and make his way across the grass.

“This way,” he said. “I remember a short-cut.” Without hesitation, Hannah took off after him.

* * * * *

A scream from outside made Julia stop and cover her mouth. With Hannah present, she had done her best to be brave, to stop the young untrained woman from losing her nerve. Now alone in these cramped, confined tunnels, Julia’s nerves had been left behind with Hannah. One of the foam-guns would have been useful, even if she would have had no choice but to drag it behind her. She would have given anything not to be completely terrified right now.

Terrified and utterly alone.

It would be simplicity itself to give up now, lie down in the tunnel and die as the ship crashed. Definitely a fiery demise worthy of the history books, but Julia knew, deep down, that she wanted to live, she *needed* to live. Her partner, their children; no matter what happened to her, their lives were set for a good while when she took the job as the Boundless' captain. But money would never fully make a happy life. The sacrifice of those six years would have to be worth something.

With that, Captain Julia Cornelius pushed on, swearing that if she got out of this alive, she would never tell anybody how close she came to giving up. Instead, she would tell them that she loved all of them and that love, despite the endless gulf between them, kept her strong in her darkest moments. It was easy to feel alone right now. They had all confronted it. But the survivors, and she would make damned sure there *would be* survivors, would bond together in ways no one else would ever be. They had come out here together, they had each other and that would be the strength to keep them going, for just a little while longer.

The tunnel finally ended with a small identification plaque reading ‘1-1-A’. Flipping the switch, Julia climbed out of the tunnel and onto her bridge. The service hatch came out at the rear of the bridge, where the navigational crew worked. Out of the navigators seemed both alive and conscious, the other stared at her with glassy eyes. Perfect. Sliding herself to the nearest computer, Julia fought the urge to stretch, instead getting straight to work. All she had to do-

The hands slipped around her neck without warning.

A familiar voice hissed in her ear. “I can't let you, Julia.”

Even as he tried to throttle the life out of her, Buskirk deVan still sounded like the smuggest bastard she’d ever met.

* * * * *

The Doctor sat cross-legged on the floor, facing Malak, unsure what to do.

“I could try to make the humans sleep.” Before Malak could finish the thought, the Doctor held up a hand.

“No, we can’t risk you doing anything worse.” He wanted to check on Hannah, but couldn’t get through to either her or Captain Cornelius. A thought came to the Doctor and he hated himself for it. Back on Pluto, Malak had been connected to his life-support system via a direct interface. Even the trek and shuttle ride to the Boundless had weakened him sufficiently. Perhaps if he disconnected Malak’s life support here—

He had still been powerful enough to drive the crew to madness and nearly take the Doctor with them. Malak wasn’t evil, he was just... a misguided giant who couldn’t help but break the things around him.

“Malak...”

“I understand, Doctor.” Malak stepped forward, out of the energy projectors. “Although I will need your help.”

“Help to do what?” The Doctor stood up, looking at Malak wearily. The ancient creature loomed over him, his eyes brimming with tears.

“I am hurting the people on this ship. All I wanted to do was help, but due to my presence, they have wounded and killed each other. They are a primitive and violent species... yet I have loved them. Watching them gave me solace. Their joys, their triumphs, I wanted to see them, to add to them. But... it was just a lonely and impossible dream, that I wanted to realize too much. The reality was much worse. I was alone and afraid to do the only thing I could.”

With that, Malak slowly departed the drive-chamber, the Doctor following him.

“Why do you need my help?” he asked.

Malak kept walking and didn’t respond.

* * * * *

The environment controls were inside what looked like a greenhouse, set up in the middle of the giant garden. From where Hannah and Jennings crouched, they couldn’t see anyone else, just the results of their carnage. More torn-up flower beds, and bodies. Forcing back a sob, Hannah patted Jennings on the shoulder. The man was shaking, his eyes wet with tears. Sounds from the distance made them both stiffen: shattering glass, followed by feral laughter.

“They might come back,” whispered Hannah. “It’s now or never.”

“I’m scared.”

“So am I,” said Hannah. “But if we just sit here... more bad things will happen.”

“I know.” Jennings played with his fingers absently. “But can I just be a little scared?”

“Fair enough,” said Hannah, as she stood and ran towards the greenhouse. She took care to run around the bodies and not simply jump over them as if they were nothing. Another scream caught her attention, adrenaline flooding her body as every sound rang with the possibility of danger. A cry sounded behind her. Jennings had tripped over one of the bodies. Hannah had just reached the door. Without a moment’s hesitation, she hit the door and sprinted back the way she had come. Kneeling beside Jennings, she gently pulled him up. He seemed fine, just shaken. With her help, he was able to keep moving.

Another scream sounded in the distance, but this time, Hannah swore it was a little closer.

Shutting the door of the environmental control hut, Hannah flicked through the control panel and pressed what she hoped was the lock. Jennings leaned against the glass wall. As Hannah looked outside, she could see the outline of a figure streaking towards them, a fragment of wooden bench in their hand. Grabbing Jennings by the arm, she pulled him away as the figure brought his makeshift club against the glass with all his strength. The window shook and vibrated, but didn’t smash. That didn’t mean anything, Hannah realized, and she made her way to the environmental

systems. Reaching out, she touched the screen, hoping to bring it to life.

Nothing happened, except for a single line of computer text that simply said-
'SECURE SYSTEM DOESN'T RECOGNISE FINGERPRINT'.

* * * * *

He was going to kill her, Julia thought. The strength deVan was putting to her neck was far greater than she would have expected from the man.

"You can't take this away from me," he hissed in her ear. "You won't. This is all mine. My ship. My glory. Mine."

With the last of her strength, Julia grabbed deVan's hair, snapping his head forward. With a cry of surprise, deVan pulled away and tumbled backwards, his grip on her neck loosening. Throwing herself off the side of the chair, Julia hit the deck, her right arm taking the worst of it. Rubbing his head, deVan struggled to his feet, but Julia grabbed the chair and hurled it into deVan's chest. Her lungs screaming for fresh air, Julia crawled forward, still waiting for the bursting explosions of light and color to fade from her sight. She could see the edge of the helm panel and was able to grab it and pull herself up at least. deVan was still struggling with the chair and as her eyesight returned to normal, Julia faced deVan and knocked him out with one punch.

"You can have the glory," Julia wheezed. "All I want right now is to live and return home." Standing over the helm, she quickly accessed the navigation controls. With a sigh of relief, she was able to enter the proper calculations to restore the ship to its original orbit. The Boundless shuddered again with a drastic change of momentum, and when Julia fell to the floor, she was tired enough not to care what happened next. It hurt to swallow, to cough, to move.

If she lost consciousness now, Julia hoped it would be because of Hannah's success than another pair of hands choking her.

* * * * *

"The ship's changing course," said the Doctor. "I wonder what that's about."

Malak didn't respond as he opened the nearest airlock. The Doctor had followed him for most of the way, steadying the giant when he faltered. He knew what Malak must have been planning.

"You're going to kill yourself."

"And get as far away from the ship and the humans as I can," Malak stated bluntly. "Just to be certain."

The Doctor wanted to think of another option, but couldn't. Too many unknown variables that he didn't have time to study or even understand. Instead, all he could say was—

"I'm sorry it had to be this way."

Malak gently purred in agreement as he shut the door between them.

"I wish I had gotten to know you better," said the Doctor. "I wish..."

"Doctor, you couldn't wish it more than I. Do it now, do it quickly."

Silently, the Doctor began to operate the airlock controls.

That was why Malak had needed his help, he realized. He was scared to do it himself.

Taking one last glance into the airlock, the Doctor could see Malak standing tall, his eyes closed, ready to embrace oblivion. Placing his hands on the emergency release switch, the Doctor silently offered his own version of a prayer and opened the outer airlock. There was the rumble of

the door opening and the air escaping into the vacuum of space. Malak serenely lifted off the ground for a second before he was sucked into the void.

The Doctor watched him slowly drift out of view and, satisfied he could no longer see him, he turned and ran to the shuttlebay.

* * * * *

Slamming her hand down on the controls, Hannah shot a glance at Jennings. “Do you remember how to use the computers?”

Jennings gave her a reassuring smile as he placed his hands on the computer. The screen lit up as he haltingly altered the settings. The thumping on the door and windows was getting louder and Hannah found herself looking for a weapon. If they were able to break in, it would just be up to her to defend them.

“Alter the airflow?” said Jennings, hesitantly.

“Yes! Can you do that?”

The window cracked, a spider-web expanding across its surface. Hannah grabbed a ceramic pot and held it ready. Jennings’ face was scrunched in deep concentration.

“I think I’ve got it,” he said, intently studying the screen. After a few more seconds, he gave a last, satisfied cry, looking back at Hannah, grinning excitedly.

The glass smashed and the crazed crewman crawled over the broken shards, his bloody face twisted in a violent leer. Hannah threw the flower pot at his face. The crewman stumbled back, growling as he came at her again, seemingly too far gone to notice the mixture of blood, ceramic and dirt coating his face. Falling back, Hannah scrambled for something else to defend herself with, but her eyes were transfixed by the crewman’s slowly raising crude bludgeon. A flash of movement and Jennings was between them, the club connecting with the back of his head with a sick thud. Grabbing the nearest flower pot, Hannah slammed it down on the crewman’s head, savoring his confused look as he fell backwards.

Jennings, though, was twitching on the floor, bleeding badly. Kneeling beside him, Hannah struggled to wake him while she still had the power to breathe.

Jennings didn’t wake up.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Malak was dying and, much to his surprise, he was fine with it.

He thought that, as the last of his race, he should hang onto life as much as he could, but instead, he had settled for inaction, struggling to find any unconvincing reason to carry on.

A lot of people had been hurt because of it.

As he floated through the stars, he could feel his body's energy slowly run down. Organs were shutting down, his armor's life-support systems started to freeze and deactivate for the first time in however many thousand millennia. Dependent on them for so long, he wondered if it would be quick. The stars blinked around him, all as dead and empty as he was. As his mind slowly faded, he could feel the minds of the humans on the Boundless begin to sleep. Hopefully, when they awoke, they would be returned to normal, his influence gone.

Gone, along with him.

"Malak?"

The Doctor drifted up to him, wearing his spacesuit with a bulky pack attached to his back.

"Sorry I'm late," he said. "I had to dig out this knackered propulsion system for my suit." He pointed to Pluto. "You'll be hitting that soon. I don't want to share that fate."

"That'll be fine. That planet was my home, only fitting that it also be my tomb."

The Doctor placed his gloved hand on Malak's. "It didn't feel right for you to die alone."

"Loneliness—"

"I understand loneliness, Malak. I experience it all the time. My people live, but are strangers to me. My only friends have lives that begin and end so quickly, and their world, moving strange and fast, is not mine. As much as I can understand its joys and pleasures... I can never truly fit in. I'm lonely too..."

"Thank you, Doctor." Malak's eyes rested on the sun. There, on the very edge of his vision, he thought he could see Earth, with its streets, its foods, its wars, and its endless beauty and potential. In better times, in better circumstances, he would have loved to walk those streets, and to be a part of its strange and exotic tapestry of life. How sad, he thought, to have his final thoughts be ones of regret.

"I have little time, Doctor. Tell me... tell me of Earth and what it's like. What it's *really* like."

“Well ...” the Doctor searched for the right words. “There's this little Chinese Restaurant in the East End of London, it's always crowded—”

Malak stretched out with his mind, a dying reflex. This time, though, the Doctor's mind accepted him willingly. An image popped into Malak's mind, a cobbled street in a city he had only seen from afar. He was walking in, just like the people around him. He was one of them, or rather, they thought like he was. Though the memory was the Doctor's, Malak saw himself stepping in. The owners smiled at Malak, and told him to take a seat. The voice that replied to them was his own. Everything smelt so beautiful and the people, all strangers to each other, all beautifully different, gathered here, to eat food and have a good time.

With one final mental gasp, Malak wanted to thank the Doctor, but, as the waiter placed the menu in front of him, it all end—

CHAPTER TWENTY

Hannah awoke to a familiar sound, the Doctor chiding her.

“Switching off the oxygen on a spaceship? I ask you! Next time, why don't you try opening all the doors and hoping the vacuum exposure doesn't kill you all?”

With a groan, Hannah sat up.

“You weren't around...” As her eyesight returned to normal, she could see him standing in his space-suit. He must have restored the oxygen levels to normal, but then she saw the look of sadness on his face and anything she had to say died on her lips.

“Jennings didn't make it. Either the force of the blow or what Malak did to him... I don't know.”

She saw his body lying on the other side of the environment controls, a tablecloth spread over his body. “He saved my life, even after everything.”

“Some innate vestige of his humanity, perhaps? Even if we never know, I'd like to think that.” The Doctor pointed at the crewman Hannah had knocked out. “He'll be fine, probably concussion. I think like a lot of people on the ship, in the days to come he'll have to come to terms with what was done to him...” The Doctor reached out with a hand and helped Hannah to her feet. “Malak's gone. Dead.”

“Did you have to kill him?” asked Hannah. The Doctor gave another weak smile.

“I helped. On his terms...” he gave a bitter laugh. “I suppose that probably makes it better. Assisted suicide.”

Hannah reached out to hug him, and the Doctor didn't fight her off.

“Malak wasn't evil, Hannah. Just desperate, and lonely ... I hope they remember that, at least.” The two left the environmental control hut and walked into the garden. The doors were open and people started to gather, looking at their bloody clothes or smoothing their hair. It was their looks that haunted Hannah. In all their eyes, they shared the same expression of dawning horror as the memories of their madness came flooding back to them.

“Can we go?” asked Hannah. She just felt tired of it all now.

“Soon,” promised the Doctor. “You'll want to say good-bye to Captain Cornelius, won't you? Besides, I just want to make sure that everything is properly working.”

* * * * *

With silent reverence, Buskirk deVan ran his hands over the controls. It would have been his triumph, his greatest moment, he would have changed humanity forever. Instead—he wrapped his hand around the lever and pulled it down. The energy-collector’s ever-present hum of power slowly began to whirl down.

“Turning it off?”

The Doctor stood in the doorway. deVan nodded and sadly tapped the last instructions into the computer system. “Don’t need it anymore. No Malak, no space-fold star-drive, no point.” Not looking at the Doctor, he tapped his head. “Even the information he beamed into my head, it’s slowly going. In no time at all, it will be gone, along with the signal. Gone with everything.”

“It had to be done.” The Doctor’s voice was unsympathetic. “Even Malak understood it in the end. He could never have lived on Earth.”

“I could have done something!” deVan’s fist slammed against the panel. “I would have done anything to keep him secure—”

“And keep him a prisoner?”

“No! Kept him safe...” deVan sighed. He didn’t feel like trying to justify anything. The moment he had recovered and saw the crew starting to pick up the pieces, deVan had ignored their turmoil and come here. He would be finished the moment he got to Earth. He looked to the Doctor, this other alien in whom Malak saw some of himself. Perhaps...

“I won’t help you,” said the Doctor coldly.

“But you know so much!” deVan’s hands reached for the Doctor pleadingly. “You have technology, knowledge... think about it! We could—”

“We could what? Sell mankind its future piece by piece?”

“Why not?”

The Doctor stroked his chin. “Would you offer me money?”

“I have a fortune.”

“Power? Fast cars? A nice little chateau?” The Doctor approached him conspiratorially. “My every wish granted?”

“Your every wish granted,” deVan repeated, extending his hand.

“My wish...” said the Doctor. “Is for you to learn from your mistakes. People died—”

“It was out of my hands! How was I supposed to know what would happen?”

The Doctor’s smile was cruel. “You’re Buskirk deVan, one of the smartest and richest people on the planet, so I’m told. According to your own ego at any rate. You’re telling me you never stopped to consider the cost? Not money, but life? How many people have died in the last few days?”

“I... I don’t know,” said deVan, his hand dropping limply.

The Doctor nodded sadly. “You’re probably going to be washed up after this. No company, no money, no power. Your name will be mud, because the families and friends of the people who died for your glory will come after you and if you even have spare change for a hot meal and a cup of tea after they are through with you... then I hope you’ll find that a price worth paying.” The Doctor turned to leave, his back to deVan. “I know why I’ve never heard of you, Buskirk deVan, because the true price you’ll pay is to live on as a mistake to learn from. Honestly? The only person I hope truly learns from this is you.”

And with that, the Doctor was gone. Buskirk deVan fell back in his chair and slowly considered the rest of his life. Outside the window, the stars twinkled and deVan bitterly knew that

they would never be his.

* * * * *

“Three years,” muttered Captain Julia Cornelius. “If we thought the trip out was mur...” She stopped and corrected herself. “... bad.” The Doctor stood by the TARDIS and nodded.

“A lot of introspection,” he agreed. “About space, about the future, everything.”

“It feels like it wasn’t worth it,” said Cornelius. A good quarter of the crew had been killed. Cornelius was still fighting with herself what to call it in the message back to Earth. And there would have to be a message. There would be lots of them, discussions with the authorities, video meetings with the families and loved ones of the deceased. The Boundless mission had been commenced under false pretenses and that alone would color everything.

“Where’s deVan?” asked Hannah, looking about.

“You didn’t think he’d say goodbye, did you?” said Julia. Buskirk deVan had barely even talked to her, instead dumping all the mess onto her and sulking in his cabin. Perhaps he’d get around to apologizing for trying to throttle her, but she doubted it.

“Julia,” the Doctor said quietly. “This isn’t the end. Just a bump in the road, but I assure you that humankind’s destiny lies in the stars. You’ll struggle, you’ll fight, you’ll fail, but no matter what, humanity rises to the challenge. Because... you humans instinctively know, no matter what your petty greeds and bigotries tell you, that you’re stronger when you’re not alone. It’s the loneliness, the isolation that you have to fight, or else it lets you give in to your darkest natures.” He gave her a weak smile of his own. “That’s the lesson you’ll learn from all this. And it can be learned.”

Julia wasn’t sure what to say, but Hannah stepped forward and held her in a tight embrace. As the two held each other, she heard Hannah whisper in her ear.

“I’ve been to the future. We make it.”

The two separated and, when the Doctor wasn’t looking, Hannah flashed Julia a conspiratorial wink as they stepped into the TARDIS. The sound of the ship disappearing out of existence put a smile on Julia Cornelius’ face. She then felt lonely for a second after Hannah’s departure. There would be a lot to do, but maybe the return journey wouldn’t be so bad, if they all tried. As she left the shuttle-bay, Julia pulled out her harmonica. She must have put it in her pocket when she was preparing to say goodbye to the Doctor and Hannah without realizing. She had always kept it to herself, the bridge crew never daring to bring it up. Deep down, she had always been worried that the crew wouldn’t respect her, or make fun behind her back. As she walked down the corridor leading to the bridge, she put it to her lips.

She started to play, for herself and the crewmembers around her.

She played folk.

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This is another story in a series of original fan authored Doctor Who fiction published by The Doctor Who Project featuring the Tenth Doctor as played by Laurent Meyer

