

RETROZINE

Two Fandom
Elders,
One More Time!

Spring 2024 * Issue 11

In This Issue:

A new Whovian story by T. E. Hodden

Blathering by Germaine Swanson and Fara Shimbo

And the Adventures of the Trouble begin anew!



RETROZINE 11

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Got questions?

Contact us!

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In This Issue:

[Obituary: Ave et Vale, Mark Merlino](#)

by Fara Shimbo _____ 4

Retrospective (*Fan Fiction*):

[...Than the Devil You Don't: A Tale of the Vampire Wars](#)

by T. E. Hodden _____ 8

[TROUBLE BREWING: Episode 2, Part 1:](#)

By the Crew _____ 43

[The Ghost House: Chapter 18](#)

by Fara Shimbo _____ 53

Obituary: Mark Merlino

By Fara Shimbo

I first heard of Mark Merlino when he contacted me in 1979, after the publication of *Snow on the Moon*. On the back of that zine was a photo of one of my main characters wearing an Astro Boy T-Shirt. Mark's club, the Cartoon Fantasy Organization, had the US rights to that shirt, and he wanted to know where I'd gotten it. To be honest, I don't remember which con I got the shirt at, but I was very fond of it. Mark, I learned later on, was very fond of *Snow on the Moon*. He even had a bunch of "Fara Maki Fan Club" T-shirts made, and sent me one. I had previously decided to kill the character off. That changed my mind.



Mark and I soon became friends, and it was through this friendship that I was introduced to the large West Coast fandom. Mark and his future husband, Rod O'Riley, kept up a running correspondence, giving me much encouragement as I went on to write *The Rogue Falcon* and publish *It Takes All Kinds*.

The friendship lasted decades. Mark amassed a large collection of my artwork, and gobbled up every new story I wrote. We met at several conventions over the years. Later on, Mark became one of the founders of Furry Fandom, and, a couple of years ago, he told me something I was absolutely not prepared for. Apparently, he had noticed that I was perfectly comfortable in what would now be called my "fursona." "I decided I wanted to meet other people like that," he said—and so, Furry Fandom was born. I had no idea.

I last saw Mark in 2021, when he and Rod visited my house and were entertained by Mocha, a black cat who is really a manic ferret in a cat suit. We had arranged for *Snow on the Moon* to be re-published, but as so often is the case, Life happened, and that plan was put on hold.

We did keep in touch, though, and had many wonderful Skype calls and Zoom meetings. Last year, Mark contributed a great article to *Retrozine*, which kept me chuffed for weeks. *Snow on the Moon*, he said, "changed my life."

Mark Merlino died at 2am on 20 February, 2024, after a short illness. I will miss him terribly. His energy and encouragement kept me writing, and drawing (while my hands would still permit it), for many, many years. His enthusiasm was an enormous part of my own life, and he will be terribly, terribly missed.

May his memory forever be a blessing.





... Than The Devil You Don't

A Tale Of The Vampire Wars

by T. E. Hodden

It is the dawning of the Age of Rassilon and the Dark Times.

Gallifrey's Empire has spread amongst the stars. The third of Rassilon's wars with the Vampires draws to a close, but already he is preparing for a fourth and final push to eradicate his enemies...

At home the ruling Trifactorate of Rassilon, Omega and Ouroboros are close to creating their time fleet.

Omega believes that their success, and the "Eternal Empire" is already proven by the countless humanoid species scattered amongst the stars, evidence that Gallifrey's lesser caste has at some point, colonised and populated the cosmos.

He believes he will spearhead the coming golden age.

Ouroboros is yet to decide the future of the Venators, aliens uplifted from a terrible war-consumed world, under the promise that if they help defeat the Vampire Threat, Gallifrey will intervene and finally bring peace to their world... A promise Rassilon made but never intended to keep.

And Rassilon investigates a new threat to the Empire, a race of monstrous creatures from the distant future, of time travellers who have declared a war of extinction upon the future Gallifrey, the Lords of Time.

One Today

After three days my patience was rewarded.

There was a flare of energy on the edge of the system, as a Phase-Gate opened, ripping a hole in the fabric of time and space, some of the nebula's energy of hyper-space spilling out of it as a whirlpool of pinky-blue light.

I focussed in on the gate, and watched through the Minerva's sensors, as a Titan Class freighter emerged from the vortex of light and energy, fingers of lightning raking its cylindrical hull, as it passed the threshold.

Thirteen of the sleek, hornet-like drones peeled away from their patrols of the debris fields, falling into an escort formation as they flew out to meet the freighter.

I waited, and watched.

The Hadal System was a long way from the shipping lanes, right out at the edge of the universe, in the vast darkness between the spiral arms. There was only one planet, a craggy, rocky little Terra-Class world, lost in the ocean of fragmented rock and icebergs that surrounded a faded cinder of a star.

Hadal Prime was according to official records, uninhabited.

And yet now the entire planet was shrouded in Harmonic Shields, that disintegrated any asteroids or comets that threatened to rain down on the planet, but were just as effective against unauthorised visitors, or heavy artillery.

Somewhere, far away, that small part of me that was flesh and blood, that sat in the *Minerva's* control throne tensed, its heart pounding hard and fast, as the freighter and its escort passed close by, navigating a winding path through the ever moving, ever shifting, tides of the debris.

Their sensors passed over the *Minerva...* over me. I could feel them tingling against the hull, but they showed no sign of detecting me. Their weapons systems remained cold, and their sensors remained on a broad spread, rather burning into a the tight focus of a weapons-lock.

I waited until they had passed, then released the *Minerva's* grasp on the iceberg, drifting over, with only the slightest puff on the manoeuvring engines, taking me close enough that I could clasp onto the hull, like a limpet).



My ship, the *Minerva*, is a Ballista Class gun boat, a squat, brutish, vessel with something of the crab about its heavily armoured hull. During the war, Ballista Squadrons were rightly feared by the enemy, as terrible ambush predator, nearly as small and manoeuvrable as fighter or heavy shuttle, armed with cannons to rival a destroyer, and cloaked with stealth fields.

There were compromises of course. Optimising the stealth field meant that the shields were underpowered, hence the additional armour, and engines built for silent running meant that we were slower than the fighters escorting our targets.

We would lay in wait, undetected, and strike when the target was so close we could punch through their shields in a single volley, then we would hope to slip away, in the confusion, before the escorts could get a good lock on us.

But our biggest advantage wasn't the stealth fields, or temporal cannons.

It was the PSI-Link controls.

When I sit in my control throne, my mind meshes with the ships control systems. It became an extension of my body. I could see through her sensors, feel her engines, plot my course simply by thinking of it, and react in the same instance I was aware of a threat. I can feel every circuit, every rivet, and every servo, I can feel the prickle of her shields, the dull throb of her heat sinks, and the heartbeat of her engines.

We are one.

In a Ballista Class vessel, flying becomes less about calculations and drills, and much more about...instinct and imagination.



My body held its breath, and waited, tensed up so my fingers dug into the armrest, with white knuckles.

There were no alarms, and no reaction from the drones.

So, I sat and waited, my misgivings and fears weighing heavily on my shoulders.

The three hours that the freighter spent navigating the debris field stretched out for an eternity, until they were frayed and threadbare, but eventually we approached the planet.

A portal opened in the Harmonic Shields, a vast octagonal hole.

The freighter drifted through, and settled in a low orbit.

As soon as we were past the threshold, I detached from the hole, and dropped, unseen down towards the surface.

I doubt the sensor arrays for the Anti Aircraft platforms protecting the small colony habitat detected me on my way down, but if they did, they would have registered the Minerva as little more than some debris slipping through in the wake of the freighter.

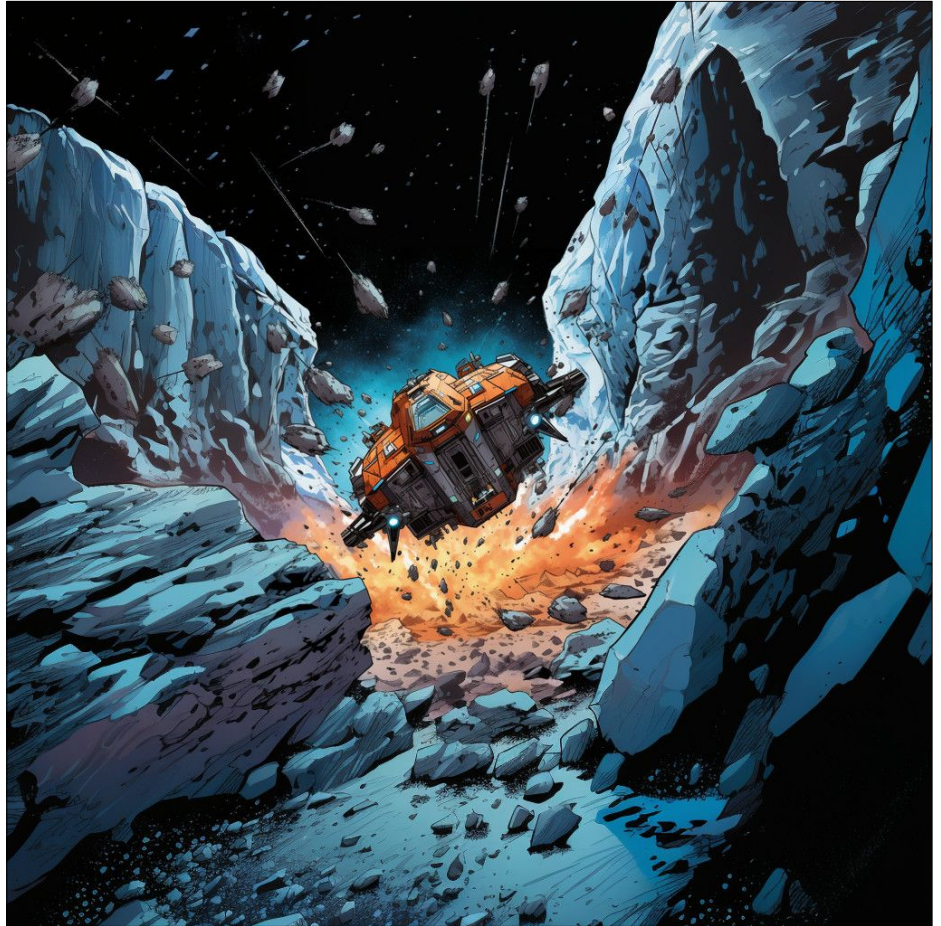
The Minerva dropped, the pressures and heat of re-entry burning against her shields in a searing halo of flame, that gradually faded as I plunged into the thick soup of clouds, fog and drizzle that shrouded the planet.

Once I was out of range of the anti-aircraft platform's sensors, I fired the engines, and levelled out, slowing my descent down into the ruins of the Old City, the shattered remnants of the pre-war colony.

I found a nice deep crater to hide in.

The engine wash rippled the surface of the tar-black water as I set the Minerva down, resting gently on her clawed feet.

Slowly I untangled my mind from the Psi-Link, cramming myself back into my flesh and blood.





I drew a deep breath, as I adjusted back to my human form, and unplugged myself from the nutrient drip and life support, rising shakily to my feet. My head was pounding, my back ached, and my craw felt like it was full of sawdust.

Hadrian chirruped at me urgently.

“I need a coffee,” I told it, stepping around the droid, and off the flight deck, into the tiny cubby hole of a kitchenette. The hot water tap was meant to be hydrating ration packs, but the water was close enough to boiling to make a passable coffee. I charged my glass press, and dug out my least chipped enamel mug.

Hadrian scuttled after me, beeping and whistling.

Back in the war my Psi-Link would have extended to the droid, so I could have directed it to perform maintenance and repairs while my mind was meshed into the controls, and I would have *understood* the chirps, beeps, and

warbles.

But... Hadrian wasn't my maintenance drone, it was my Minder, and... it wasn't my mind it was connected to, and reporting to.

I could make a good guess at what it was complaining about from the tone. I rubbed the top of my nose. “I didn't say I *want* a coffee, I told you I *need* a coffee, to function, to clear my head so I can do my job. I am no use to you, if I have a brass band playing in my skull, and I get shot, am I?”

Hadrian hunched up, in that way where, even with no eyes, I was sure that it was watching me.

My Minder looked like an upturned fishbowl, full of a constantly stirring white fog, and an ever-changing swarm of red and orange fairy-lights. It walked around on eight spindly brass legs.

I sipped my coffee slowly, letting my head clear, and most my aches and kinks ease out. After a few minutes, when I was feeling less like a zombie, and a little more human, I put on my helmet, ensured it had a good seal, pulled on my long multi-camo trench coat, grabbed my gun, and stepped out into the dank, soup thick grey of the morning.

Hadrian scuttled after me.



Two Today

Three hours later, I settled myself behind the jagged boulders on a hilltop, overlooking the platforms and prefabricated modular buildings of the planets only settlement. My multi-camo coat flickered, as the pattern adjusted, matching the lichen, moss and heather that blanketed the hill.

Hadrian warbled, as it climbed up one of the boulders, to get a clear line of site at the six anti-aircraft towers that surrounded the settlement (an awful lot of firepower, for so few buildings).

“Can you do something about those?” I asked, folding out the stock of my carbine, and powering up the holo-sights.

Hadrian made a scoffing noise, like he didn’t need my permission to hack into the settlement systems.

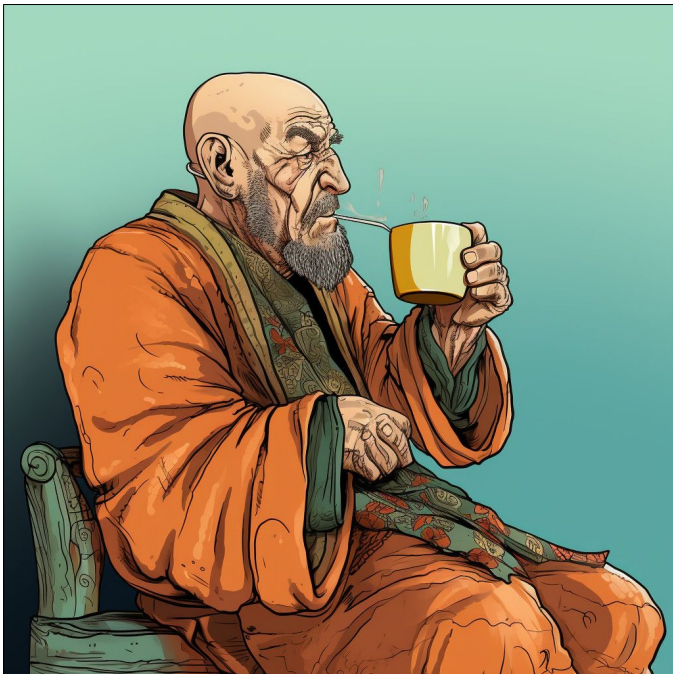
There was a banshee howl of engines, as one of the freighter’s shuttles passed overhead.

“Okay,” I muttered. “Here we go.”

My carbine was a Corsair Pattern telecine-carbine, a compact, lightweight model that looked like it was cobbled together from scrap and spare parts, with a stumpy body, and a long barrel wrapped in a splined heatsink that gave it a chunky, front heavy appearance.

Seven figures marched out of one of the prefab buildings and onto the rusting, moss covered landing pad to greet the shuttle. Six of them were husks, reanimated corpses in threadbare body armour, carrying bardiche vibro-axes, and elegant, antique combat rifles.

The other was a hefty, elderly man, wearing a dressing gown, socks, and carpet slippers.



During the war, Count Obard St Germain had been one of the Schism’s most feared officers, an imposing, operatic presence, in a high collared tunic, and an elegant black cape, with a hard stare that could make anybody freeze in their tracks at a thousand yards.

Now he was podgy, balding, and gone to seed, unkempt and unshaven, warming his fingers on a teacup.

He was almost pathetic.

Except I knew what was aboard the shuttle that was coming about to land, on a hurricane of engine wash. And I knew that if I adjusted my holo-sights through the sensor modes, I would see the Rebus Parasite that gave him his vampiric powers, rooted deep in every tissue of his body, rewriting his entire metabolism, but clustering in leathery folds about his heart and brain.

Hadrian chattered excitedly.

“No,” I whispered. “Not until I am sure. Whatever I think I know, I have to see it, and I have to be sure, before I do your dirty work.”

The loading ramp of the shuttle unfolded, and six spacers in grubby overalls emerged, each guiding a skimmer-sled, loaded with a cryogenic casket.

Hadrian projected a holographic display, its scans of the caskets. They were kind used by most bulk freighters for the cheapest passenger tickets, for those who couldn't afford the luxury of a stateroom or cabin, travelling in suspended animation, without a need for expensive food, water, or oxygen, floating in a soup of cryogenic jelly, attached to a life support harness.

Each of the caskets had been subtly adjusted, sabotaged, leaving the occupants brain dead, but their bodies alive, and their blood fresh.

I knew from my investigations that all traces of their passage would have been scrubbed from the freighter's logs.

Hadrian chattered again.

“I know,” I told him, focussing my sights on St Germain.

The count opened one of the caskets and studied it, apparently satisfied. He gestured for his husks to take the living corpses into one of the buildings.

The biggest and meanest looking of the spacers flicked her pony tail, and stepped forwards gesturing that it was time to discuss payment.

I adjusted my aim, took the slack from the trigger, and swallowed back all my misgivings and inhibitions.

I pulled the trigger twice. The barrel spat two searing blue flashes that boiled the drizzle and fog around them, as they flashed through the air. I adjusted my aim, the slightest fraction, and fired off a third.

The Count never knew what hit him. By the time he registered the two shots that hit him in the heart, a third struck him in the head.

The Husks howled out, with shrill electronic banshee wails, and turned on the spacers.

The Spacers didn't hang around to be killed for the apparent betrayal of the Count. The shuttle's engines were already cycling, as they ran aboard.

Hadrian burred something that might have been a cold, electronic chuckle, as the anti-aircraft turrets turned on the shuttle, hitting it with a volley that detonated its power core in dazzling white implosion.

The guns turned on the freighter.

“No,” I snapped. “That is unnecessary! There is another way—”

A barrage from all the towers tore the freighter to pieces, and the shrapnel rained down over the valley.

Anger boiled in my heart. “You didn't have to kill them.”

Hadrian rose to its feet, and scuttled back down the hillside.

“Please tell me that you at least have a way of shutting down the shields?” I demanded.

There was a *whumph* of an explosion, and a gust of acrid heat across the valley. I turned to see the lump of flaming wreckage that had just landed on the shield generators, obliterating them in an umbra fireball.

Hadrian warbled with obvious satisfaction.

I folded my gun away, and walked on. “This is why I would be better off working alone.”

The walking fishbowl strutted ahead without a care.

I grumbled under my breath, wishing I could still swear (and not for the first time), as we trekked back to the *Minerva*.

Three

Then

I still remember the first day I flew in *Minerva*.

It was maybe twenty five years into the Long War, and my original craft, The Minotaur had been lost when the carrier ship *Aquila Fortress* had been destroyed. Our forces had regrouped on Enetsen, a lush, tropical world teeming with life, and we had been billeted in grand pyramid temples that had been repurposed as the Sector HQ.

Meshing into her systems came easily, and as I soared over the azure seas, testing her limits, I felt like I could make her dance on a pinhead.

After twenty five years, I should have been middle aged, but the Processing I underwent, to make me able to use the Psi-Link had awoken some of the dormant genes from my father’s side of the family tree, gifting me some small measure of his immortality and his superior healing. Other than some grey hair, and more than my fair share of scars, I still looked to be in my mid-twenties.

It’s more than a century later now, and I have some more grey hair, and those scars have faded away to nearly nothing, with maybe one or two more in their place, but I still don’t look any older.

But I digress, because... our new gunships were not the only thing that arrived when the Raptor Fortress anchored in orbit over Enetsen that day.

It was the first time I saw Faris.

She was only the Lady Faris then, and not yet the Contessa, but still demure, dollish, and regal, wearing a heavily embroidered uniform, and her autumn brown hair in a complex weave.

When I first saw her, she had not yet introduced herself to the squadron, and was instead watching us from a walkway over the hangers, with the superior frown of an Overseer etched onto her brow.

“So,” one of the Command Officers said, addressing the squadron. “What do you think?”

Ajax slapped his gunship with a meaty palm. “They’ll do, lad. They aren’t pretty but they will get the fuzzing job done.” His brow furrowed. “What? But I said scuttling not fuzzing...” He grimaced. “What the dripping kegs is going on.”

Andraste looked up at the Overseer on the walkway. “What the cudgel have you done? Why can’t we grouting swear?”

Faris straightened up. “I am Lady Faris Claudius of House Tiberius. I have been assigned as Sector Commissar, which means you, and your squadron now fall within my battle group. I understand that the Venators have always been... somewhat cavalier in their approach to warfare, wildcards and renegades. Personally, I do not expect low born citizens of the Empire to ever be mistaken for Overseers, but...” She raised a finger. “Neither will I have those under my command appear to be the savages and ignorant thugs some would assume you to be. While you wear the colours of my house, your conduct will be gentlemanly and becoming, even if I have to make it so.” She smiled. “So... I adjusted the parameters of your Psi-Links. While you are representing my Noble House, your language will be... moderated, until such a time that you can learn to present yourselves as... more becoming.”



Talon glared at her. “You can’t ballasting do this? What kind of a squire are you?”

Faris grinned. “And yet I have.”

I raised my hand.

She looked at me, her nose wrinkling as though she had smelt something. “Yes...Dusk?”

“Ma’am,” I said, evenly. “Are you sure this is wise? You may not like the... unconventional attitudes of our squadron, but these are the elements that make us effective. Our...colourful attitude is part of the creativity that allows our tactics to be-”

“Enough,” Faris snarled. “The decision is made.”

She realised her mistake within days, while we were still shaking down the new vessel, and adjusted her attitude, at least for the rest of the squadron, but it would be a good many years—by which time the programming was burned in and could no longer be changed; before she *admitted* her effort...



Wait, there is another moment I should tell you, before her apology.

It was maybe a decade or so after I first met her, not long after she had been promoted, well away from my squadron and into Omega’s retinue in the admiralty. I had never expected to see her again, but my squadron was

aboard the Dux Fortress, being transported to the launching point for a mission into the Wotan Cascade, a mission we already expected to cost us dear, even if it was successful.

I could not sleep, so I lay on my bunk, reading the Intelligence Brief over and again, studying it, memorising it, when there was a hammering on my door.

“Callan!” Faris roared. “Callan Dusk! Open this door.”

I did as I was ordered.

Faris was drunk. Her face was purple with rage, her eyes were out of focus, and she was wavering in her boots. The stench of Nebula Brandy hung around her. She grabbed me by the throat, and shoved me back into my room, slamming me against my locker, her fingers digging into my throat. She drew her kine blade, and held it ready to stab me, a killing blow direct to my heart. “I know what you are! I see what you are!”

“Put down the knife,” I told her gently.

“You aren’t one us!” She snorted. “And you aren’t human are you? You *look* it, but... but... You are es evil as that world you come from. You hide it well, I’ll give you that, under sharp creases, and polished boots, speaking softly, and feigning kindness, but... this is all you are, isn’t it? A horrid little man, with a talent for killing. Well, we... I... might need you now, but know this... You will never be recognised as *my* father’s blood, and when this is done, I am sending you back to that poisoned wart of a planet? Do you understand. If I ever... If I *ever*... see you in the Palace, if you ever set foot on Horus, and I know of it... I will *kill* you, Do you understand?”

“Are you finished?” I asked, gently.

“Do you understand?” She demanded.

“I am not your father’s son,” I told her, quietly.

She nodded, and let go of my throat to pat my cheek. “Good boy.”

I waited for her to put her knife back in its holster, before I explained further, taking the letter from our father from my desk. “You do not understand, My Lady Contessa, I... have not been your father’s son for a year, since you were placed in contention for your promotion.”

Her purple rage subsided. Her scowl did not soften, but the cadence of it changed. “What do you mean?” She snatched the letter from me, and dropped to sit on my bunk. “To Warrant Officer Callan Dusk, of the Sixteenth Venator Squadron, it is my duty to inform you that the Trifectorate has had cause to study your lineage, and have decreed that you are not, and will never be, identified as an heir apparent to the House Tiberius, nor recognised as blood relation or kin, to any member thereof. We appreciate your service, and grant you only the same rights to wear colours or crests of the House while...” She stopped. “You... you will never come home?”

“I have no home,” I told her simply. “Congratulations. You won.”

She nodded. Then she threw up over my boots, and sobbed herself to sleep.

I rolled her on her side, made her as comfortable as I could, and left a blanket over her whilst I cleaned up.

She did not wake before I had to leave, to report to the flight deck.



The apology came after the war, in those strange days, between the Great Victory being announced and my squadron being demobilised. We were stationed for a while on Horus, the throne world of House Tiberius.

I was billeted for that time, in the Palace, and... it was first, and only time that I had seen inside the seat of my bloodline's House. My access was limited, of course, to the barracks, the hangars, and the gardens.

The gardens were beautiful.

In my long, long, life, I had seen anything like it. My childhood was spent in bunkers, running messages as artillery shells thudded and echoed through the dank, overcrowded tunnels. What little I saw of the surface of my world was a scorched and blasted wasteland.

My adult life had been spent on battlefields, in space ships, and military fortifications. I had explored vast wildernesses and jungles, wastelands and plains, but I had never seen flowers and trees cultivated for beauty.

I spent too many hours in the North Garden, watching the fish teeming in the fountains.

"Callan!" Faris shouted my name as she came hurrying across the garden, shaking me from my thoughts.

It took me a few seconds to recognise her. Partly because she looked different now, fuller figured than she had been, she carried herself in a looser, more...comfortable kind of a way, and was wearing embroidered robes, and a loose silk dress that fitted her infinitely better than a military uniform, but mostly... mostly because in none of our occasional meetings and crossing of paths, she had never, ever, been pleased to see me.

I rose to my feet, snapped to attention, and bowed my head. "My Lady Contessa."

She placed a hand over my heart. "Warrant Office." Her smile grew two sizes and she grabbed me in a hug. "When did you get here?"

"Nine days ago."

"Days?" She shoved me playfully. "How on Earth did you convince father to keep *that* a secret?"

"I have not told your father," I said simply.

Over the years I had become very good at hiding my feelings behind a polite smile.

"My father," Faris said, quietly. "But... Callan, that decision was politics, gamesmanship, surely you don't believe-"

"I believe," I said softly, "what a prominent member of House Tiberius told me she would do, if she ever thought I was abusing the privilege of her family." I stepped away. "I mean no insult to you, and if-"

She grabbed me in another hug. "Oh, Callan, that wasn't about you. That was..." She drew a deep breath, her head against my shoulder. "That was very difficult to explain. Please. Please... I insist. You must come and see us."

I opened my mouth to answer.

"If you do not have time now," she said, quickly, "then soon. I promise... You will be welcome, and he will want to see you."

I sighed. "As you wish."

"Or," she said, with a grin, "you could tell me to sod off. I suspect you will have been wating to do that a long time."

I shook my head. “No, ma’am, I can not, and... probably will never be able to.”

The realisation made her stagger back a step. She put a hand to my head. “Was it never turned off?”

I lifted her hand away. “No. And now, My Lady Contessa, I will always have something to remember your leadership by. If you wish to see me, I will, of course, be at your service, but... you will excuse me if I do not seek out your company.”

She nodded, and withdrew her hand. “Wait... Callan, when you De-Mob, where will you go?”

I shrugged. “The Trifectorate stopped House Tiberias from interfering at home, from bringing about the peace, so... Maybe I should go back, and do... whatever I can there.”

Faris shook her head. “No! Please... Faris, you can’t go back there. This... This your chance to make a life, a good life, somewhere...” She smiled. “We have orchard worlds, quiet little moons where you will never be afraid, or hungry, or...”

I stared into her eyes. “And I just pretend that my world isn’t burning?”

She closed her eyes. “It isn’t like that Fairs. It’s... complicated.”

“No,” I said, turning away. “It really is rather simple.”

She opened her mouth, but found no words.

So, I walked away. I made it most the way to the archway, before she hurried after me, or at least ‘hurried’ as best as one might, in flowing robes and a long dress.

“You were right, that day, that first day!” She shouted.

I stopped and looked back.

She tottered over, and took my arm. “If I had cared about doing my job, rather than where I was headed, I would have realised that. It... it took me a long time to realise that the Academy had not told me how the Universe is, only how a good Overseer should want it to be. I thought I was superior to a warband of outsiders, not even Imperial Subjects, from a world we left well alone. I was so in love with Omega’s Eternal Empire Theory, and the implications of the time travel experiments, and...” She sighed deflated. “And I... I didn’t even hate you. I hated that you existed. I hated that it might sabotage me. That you might try to sabotage my career. You... you were always astute, and...”

I sighed. “You were not the enemy.”

“You... were mine.” She looked away. “And what I did to you... that I did not even think about it in all these years... It is unforgivable. Please. I can’t make everything from all these years right, but...” She touched my arm. “I can’t make that right, and maybe I can’t fulfill the promises our father made, but... I can do something. Please. Please trust me... Come see our father. Please?”

Four Then

My father's rooms were high in the palace, looking out over the ramparts to the edge of the mountain plateau, to where the lakes tumbled over the cliff edge, in a series of cascades. The rooms were as spacious as a cathedral, the alcoves around the edges of the room decorated with statues, paintings, or bookshelves.

I had seen museums and libraries before, but most had been cleared to make room for gun emplacements, or emptied, the artworks and books buried in deep bunkers for their protection.

Faris left me in the care of their servants, as she vanished deeper into the rooms in search of our father.

I took one of the books from the shelf, and flicked through the yellowing pages.

It was printed in a language I had not seen in more or less a century. Some of the images were familiar too. I stopped, on a page with an illustration of the Nightmare Briars, walking plants that haunted carrion rich battlefields, whose thorns would slowly mutate a victim into one of the monstrous Briars.

Somebody cleared their throat behind me.

A lean, gaunt, man, with a young old face, striking eyes full of intelligence, and a friendly smile, was leaning against one of the columns, his hands deep in the pockets of his jet black robes, intricately quilted with scarlet stitching.

He was watching me intently.

“An interesting choice of book,” he said in a warm, theatrical voice. “Hardly what would draw the eye of most people. Tell me... is it morbid curiosity, or are you looking for new and interesting ways to deal death upon your enemies?”

My cheeks burned. I snapped the book closed, and returned it to the shelf. “Sorry. I should not have-”

“Oh, never apologise for appreciating a book.” He pointed a finger at me. “Nostalgia. You were drawn to the text of your own people.”

I nodded. “You know my people?”

The stranger flashed me the kind of smile that didn't answer the question at all, but gave the impression that he knew far more than he was going to tell me.

“Who are you?” He asked.

I stood to attention. “Warrant Officer Callan Dusk, of the Sixteenth—”

“Ah!” The stranger said, his brow folding into a frown that was not unkind. “The bastard. Interesting, that you happen to be in the quarters of the man we very definitely told you was not your father, and from whom you were not entitled to expect any favour.”

“I am here at the invitation of a superior officer,” I informed him. “Would you rather I had refused the order?”

“Me?” The stranger grinned. “Oh no. I am only surprised that it took nine days for you to find your way here.”

There was something... disconcerting about his mercurial smile. I was suddenly unsure if being here, or not having been here was a problem to him, or both, or neither.

He reminded me of the ancient trickster gods who were supposed to have lived in shadows, caves, and forests, back when the world was young, and there were fewer stars in the sky. Seeing his smile, I could too easily believe the tales of people trapped between the words of an unbreakable promise.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“Who is whom?” My father asked, emerging from the inner chambers.

I stared at the Trickster.

He smiled back at me, and waved.

My father frowned at me. “Who... are you talking to?”



The world blurred, for a instant of dizzying nausea, and I staggered to maintain my balance.

The Trickster was gone. Too late it dawned on me that he had never been there.

Koschei, my father, was taller than me, and powerfully built, with a kind face, receding hair dashed with silver, and a neatly trimmed beard. He wore a long, loose coat over a black high-necked sweater, and leather gloves that disguised the scars from an old misadventure.

“Are you okay?” He asked gently.

I nodded. “I just need a moment.”

“What happened?” He whispered.

“There was somebody in my Psi-Link,” I told him. “A spy, or...”

He laughed. “Or more likely an old friend who never could control his curiosity. You will be fine. He means no harm.” Dismissing the thought he gestured me into his inner sanctum where Faris had already made herself comfortable on one of the couches. “Did you ever acquire a taste for tea, or do you still prefer coffee?”

I hesitated. “I would not want to put you to any bother.”

“Astrid?” He addressed one of the

servants waiting at the side of the room. “Coffee, please.”

She nodded and stepped back, seeming to vanish into the shadows.

Koschei gestured for me to sit. “Please. I have been gifted so few chances to know you... Sit. Join us. I... wish to talk.”

“I am sorry,” I said sitting. “I know this must be a surprise, and—”

“Quite the opposite,” Koschei admitted. “I have rehearsed and prepared for this moment so many times, over and over, and yet... Now I don’t know where to begin.”

Faris patted the seat beside her. “Here.”

I sat beside her.

Koschei settled in a deep wingback chair, and steepled his fingers. “I did not lie, Callan, when I recruited you, when I recruited the Venators. I had been made promises and assurances. I truly believed...”

“I know,” I told him. “I was there, remember.”

He smiled. “Of course. But...things have changed. What I promised is now not possible.”

I frowned. “By which you mean the Trifectorate will not allow it?”

Koschei shook his head. “By which I mean... intervention to end that war is impossible.”

Faris leant over, and lay her hand on my leg. “It was always impossible. We now know... they always knew what was to become of your world. That it was tied to a fixed, immutable point. Altering it would do catastrophic damage to the timeline.”

“Time,” Koschei said, “is a fragile web. Damage a nexus point and countless connections snap. I did not know Skaro was one such nexus point...”

“But,” I whispered, “somebody did?”

Faris and Koschei shared a look.

Koschei nodded, but dared not say it aloud. Instead he said: “Do you remember what I once told you of Omega’s theories?”

“The Eternal Empire?” I asked. “Of course. He believed that the reason so many species in the cosmos are essentially humanoid, evolving outwards from a single pattern, was proof that their time travel experiments will be a success, that Gallifrey’s Empire will extend to the very dawn of time, and colonise every habitable world. He does not use the word God, but...”

It was the Eternal Empire theory had brought my father to Skaro all those years ago. He had proven that the two warring peoples on my home world were not divergent branches of a species, but had evolved on entirely different tracks. The uniformly blonde haired, copper skinned Thals bore only a passing resemblance to us Kaleds. And Kaleds, though vastly different from Gallifreyans, had, in their genes, the markers that Omega had identified as the standard pattern of Temporal Colonisation.

It was why we were supposed to be welcomed into the benign and peaceful brotherhood of the Empire.

Koschei nodded. “What if discovered somebody else had the same idea? If we knew an enemy, a terrible threat from the future had decided it was the rightful ruler of the cosmos? If one day, they would discover time travel, if they would have the ability to conquer all worlds, and shape the whole of history in their image? If...” He swallowed. “If they knew the dangers of altering fixed points, if that destruction was part of their plan...”

I stared at him. “What kind of an enemy?”

Faris trembled. "One of their vessels crashed on the Serenity Steppes. There were six of them aboard, sent back to kill Rassilon before his plans come to fruition. Six of them. They slaughtered five companies of Praetorians, our weapons platforms, our... everything, before Omega and Ouroboros were able to contain them."

I thought on this. "And what does this have to do with Skaro?"

Koschei sighed. "I dissected it myself. The technology was... bewildering. The genetics were heavily modified, but it had some very distinctive markers."

I thought a moment. "From Omega's army?"

Faris shook her head. She had the same fear in her eye as she had that drunken night.

What had she said I was, that night.

"Kaleds," I whispered. "Those things are...Kaleds?"

She nodded. "They are... what your people will become."

"And," Koschei said, "they are fixed point, in our future history. They are destined to be. Maybe not for centuries, or thousands of years, but one day..."

I rubbed my face. "But... The Trifectorate are building time travel to... have dominion over our future. It can't be changed?"

Koschei shook his head. "Rassilon does not believe it can."

Faris shrugged. "Ouroboros disagrees. He thinks it is one branch of what may yet be. He hopes that perhaps we can perform surgery on the timestream, carefully altering points and fixing them, to keep the web stable when we remove this foe."

Koschei drew a deep breath. "And Omega believes we should destroy Skaro now, or in the past, eliminate it entirely so the monsters never emerge. He believes that if we do it early enough the web will naturally compensate..."

"They would destroy my home?" I asked, spluttering. "What of the common wealth? What of everything we fought for?"

Faris cupped my cheek. "They say it will still be built, but will take time, and... And that some difficult choices will be necessary, for the greater good too prevail."

Koschei shifted uneasily. "And of course... It is one world, of...lesser beings. Many Overseers would see it as such a small price, it will not affect them at all. It will be... unnoticed." He met my gaze. "Please, my son... Do not go home. I know what I ask is terrible, but..."

"But, I may be returning to a doomed world?" I asked.

Faris smiled. "Perhaps, or... perhaps it would be a waste to send you into that cauldron of war, while you still might do some good. There may be an...opportunity to take here. In my work with Ouroboros, we have learned that is stubborn, but no fool. If we could show him evidence that proves Ouroboros is right, if we could find that evidence..."

"How?" I asked.

Koschei smiled. "By asking the monsters."

I shook my head. "And if you could do that, you would have already."

Faris smiled. “We can not get close to the monsters. But... But Rassilon maintains a network of spies and intelligence that he calls his Shadows. One such agent is already intrigued to know what would happen if the monster saw... you. If it saw itself in you. If it might be more inclined to...discuss its plans.”

Koschei smiled. “I do not know if there is still hope for Skaro, Callan, but if there is even the slightest chance, surely we have to take it? Please? I beg of you...”

I nodded. “It is my duty to try.”

Five Then

And so it was that three days later I met Jaynas Thorne for the first time.

We met in the Waterfall Garden, on one of the pretty little bridges over the larger of the rock pools. She was a striking, and handsome kind of beautiful, with a taut, serious face, dark eyes, and thin lips. Her dark combat fatigues, leather gilet, and riding boots felt alien amongst the elegant finery of the palace.

Her eyes narrowed into a feline scowl, and her nostrils flared as I approached. “You are a strange one aren’t you. Half your scent is Gallifreyan, half... something else. Not human, or a servitor race, but... One of Rassilon’s little menagerie of war, his strange bedfellows. A... Venator?”

I nodded. “Ma’am. Callan Dusk, of the Sixteenth.”

Her smile was not warm, nor kind. It was the smile of a shark.

I leant against the balustrade. “And some might consider a Vampire to be the strange bedfellow, given the last three wars.”

Jaynas lay a finger to the long, stiletto bladed dagger at her hip. “Will that be a problem?”

“No,” I said. “My war was with the armies of the Black Fortress. I have no wish to seek another war with the noble houses of the Southern Reaches.”

Jaynas smiled. “Good. We have a long journey ahead, and... I did not look forward to spending it with one of the ‘suffer not the blood witch to live’ types. Have you been to the Rift before?”

I shook my head. “No. I have heard the stories, but...”

Jaynas nodded, apparently weighing this. “Very well. Come along then. My ship is this way..”

She lead me away from the palace, and the hangars, out of the palace, and down a narrow, rocky path to a concealed cove of the lake.

Her transport was a Bowship, one of the older designs from the first of Rassilon’s Vampire wars. Her crew were Husks, rearing armoured flight suits, their mummified skulls visible behind the fog of their visors.

The air within was cold and tasted slightly of perfume and decay.

The engines roared, and we soared up into the darkness of space, phasing hyperspace with a shudder that echoed through every deck plate.

I stood and watched the nebulous energies strafing the hull with lightning bolts.



My dreams have always been full of noise and fury.

Most my memories- and I carry far more than anybody should- were full of violence and war. I was conscripted at fourteen, a boy cadet given a gun and told to be a real soldier, to defend an isolated city from the enemy, as life collapsed into chaos and ruin around me.

By the time my father found me, and offered me, and a hundred others, a chance to really make a difference, I had already lost count of how many people I had killed. Most were at a distance, from within the cockpit of a sky-skimmer, but... far too many had been more personal. With a gun. With a knife. With my bare hands.

A white hot flare in my thoughts woke me.

I sat up in my bunk, my carbine already in my hand.

The Husks never slept or rested, so I had the barrack room to myself. The other bunks were all empty. The lights were dim and red.

Somebody stood watching me.

Except, as before, the Trickster was not really there. He was figment, a projection in my thoughts through me Psi-Link.

I dropped the gun. It's not as though I could kill a ghost, is it?

"How are you aware of me?" The Trickster asked.

"Why are you in my head?" I demanded.

He sat on another bunk, "You know, it really is quite remarkable. The other Kaleds have no ability for the psychic beyond what I engineered in you, through the Programming for your ship. But you... You have inherited a smidgeon of Gallifreyan blood, genetics that should be watered down and polluted, from a father with... mundane psychic potential at best, but... Somehow the mixing of genes performed some strange alchemy, and your potential is incredible."

"Who are you?" I demanded.

He flinched. "I am known as Ouroboros."

Ouroboros, the 'Little Brother' of the Trifectorate who ruled the Gallifreyan Empire.

There had always been rumours and whispers around the Empire, that one day, sooner or later, the Trifectorate would have to give way to one Emperor to rule them, one voice, one hand, one mind. People argued if Rassilon The Just And Dauntless, or Omega The Great And Powerful would eventually sit upon a throne, but it was almost universally agreed that Ouroboros would be the eventual ruler's sage and soothsayer.

I choked on a laugh. "And why would Ouroboros, the Wise and Cunning, be interested in my dreams and thoughts?"

The Trickster puffed out his cheeks. “I want to understand the new threat. I want to understand Skaro. I want to know what it is to be born in war, to only know war...”

“You could ask,” I said.

His smile grew toothier. “Perhaps, but... then I would only have known what you chose to tell me.”

I shuddered. “My mind is my own.”

“Very well,” he said, his voice cold and even. “As you wish. Do your job, talk to the monster. I will... be in touch.”

My perceptions blurred, and the Trickster was gone.

Six

Today

A shudder echoed through the ship, as it phased back into reality. Something was wrong, the shudders were too strong, and lasted too long.

I hurried up the steps to the bridge, and found Jaynas already in her command throne staring at the holo-displays. A quick glance told me that the local gravity fields was a maelstrom of dangerous currents and tides.

Jaynas smiled at me, and pointed to the view ports. “Welcome to the Rift.”

I stared out into the void.

The sun at the heart of the system was bleeding a stream of matter into a vast, bloated space station that might, if one squinted and used a little imagination, have looked like a jellyfish. And beneath the space station, at the very tip of its longest tentacles was the Rift itself, the eye of a wild gravity storm, a hole torn in the fabric of time and space, a wound torn into...

I had no idea.

I still have no idea.

It was not hyperspace, nor was it reality. It was... fascinating and terrifying. A big wibbly, wobbly hole full of complex physics and nonsense mathematics.

“That,” Jaynas said, “is why you should be afraid of the Trifectorate.” She narrowed her eyes. “When they built that station, and sliced open that...”

“Wormhole,” I said, quietly.

“That...wormhole... They had no idea what might happen, if it might have consumed the whole of the cosmos, in a blink of an eye...” She aimed her smile right at me, and held me in her gaze. “But they did it anyway, just to see if they could.”

I nodded. “They say it can only be Rassilon’s work, because it is so beautiful.”

“Do they?” Jaynas choked on a laugh. “No. It has a good, sensible name. That was built by Omega’s hand. You mark my words.” Her tone hardened a little. “You better take a seat. The waters out here tend to be... choppy.”

It was not long before I learned what she meant.

The next four hours were spent navigating the turbulence and shockwaves emitted from the wormhole, as we made our way to Rift Station.

We came about, and into one of the hangars to dock.

A telescopic pylon reached out and clamped onto the ship, over the airlock, with a sound that reminded me far too much of the old temple bells back home, that rang out to warn of air raids.



A spidery droid greeted me as I emerged from the airlock, and escorted me down through the passageways and elevators of the Rift Station.

It was an ugly place, haunted by the shadows, and echoes of distant machinery. Its architect had tried to capture the beauty of High Gallifreyan Baroque, and perhaps a touch of the gothic, suggesting vaulted passageways and cloistered courtyards, but rendered in rust-free alloys, and pocked with rivets.

Eventually we reached a set of doors that suggested a bank vault.

They lumbered slowly open, to greet me.

The spider gestured for me to enter, but kept its distance.

I straightened my greatcoat, and was about to step through when my perceptions blurred in the corner of my eye, and the Trickster appeared to haunt me.

He put a finger to his lips, and urged me to go onwards.

I hid my misgivings behind my smile, and made myself walk on. The Trickster followed me, a step behind, and one to my left.

“Once more into the breach,” he whispered.

The outer doors closed, and inner doors opened onto a vast spherical chamber, tiled in heat-scorched ceramic plating. There was some form of iris-like hatchway taking up a section of the floor, directly beneath a complex mast structure hanging from the ceiling, some kind of...emitter? Or a focussing away.

And then the Trickster’s grim pun made sense.

I had the terrible feeling I had just stepped into some part of the machinery that fed and processed the matter siphoned from the star, the energy projector that had sliced open the Rift itself.

There was a robot waiting on the other side of chamber, a primitive looking thing, squat and bulky, wrapped in armour the colour of a shell casing, reinforced with some kind domed half-globes like rivets. There were two holes in its chest, where something, maybe arms, tentacles, or weapons had been removed.

Two lights on its domed lid, and a third in a multi-optic sensor pulsed with the sounds of its rasping, grating, metallic breath.

So, the machine was not the monster. It was a vessel, or a life support unit, or some combination of the two.

“Hello?” I said.

The domed lid shifted so the eyepiece stared at me. I had the uncanny sense of it scanning me.

“My name,” I said approaching it, “is Callan Dusk. I was born on a world I know of as Skaro. Does... this mean something to you?”

“You Lie,” the creature within the robot snarled, in a voice like unoiled gears grinding together. The lights pulsed as it spoke.

“My people,” I said, evenly, “are known as the Kaleds. We are fighting a terrible war, that has lasted for generations, and *will* last for generations. I... I have not been there for many years. I fear what of my world has been lost in my absence.”

It stared at me.

“Does this mean anything to you?” I asked.

“You Lie.” It repeated.

I shook my head. “Scan my heart beat, monitor my metabolism. You will see I am being truthful.”

“I See Your Metabolism. You Are Not Kaled. You Are...A Hybrid. You Are Impossible.”

I stepped closer to the robot shell. “Why impossible?”

The iris on the eye stalk shrank closed a little. “There was no alien contact on Skaro before the Age of Davros. No alien could be born on Skaro. You are lying.”

I shook my head. “My father went to Skaro, to study our people. He traded weapons and supplies to the Kaleds, in exchange for volunteers to aid in a greater war. He...” A thought occurred to me. “You are from our future, yes?”

“Yes.”

“And,” I said, tapping my lips with a finger. “You believe time and history are changeable. You came here to change history, to kill Rassilon, or Omega, or... to otherwise divert Gallifrey’s destiny. Am I correct?”

The robot stood, still and silent.

“Correct.”

I smiled. “If a war is being fought through time, if the past is...mutating as each side moves the chess pieces around, how can you be sure I am impossible? Perhaps, in your past, Skaro went unnoticed by the Empire. In *my* past the Gallifreyans surveyed the system because the sun showed potential for one of Omega’s experiments. What would it take to change that? One agent accessing the right terminal, and a few lines of code? If it was a deliberate change, and not some unintended consequence of another change.” I smiled at it. “Perhaps even your actions. Perhaps when your mission fails, your commanders will send somebody even further back, and their mission will cause events to flow away from your own sense of history?”

There was a low rasping breath from the grill of the machine.

“Deviations that threaten the history of the Daleks will be ex-term-in-ated.”

"I see," I said, trying not to let my fears show in my voice. "But, of course. If let me exist, who knows what might happen. If Rassilon keeps the promises, and the Kaled people are protected, as subjects of the Empire? What then? We might never become... you."

"We will prevail," it said with a snarl. "The conquest, and final victory of the Dales is... inevitable."

The Trickster coughed, for my attention. "Ask it how it thinks the future will change now I have studied it."

I stared at the eyepiece. "And now there will be more changes. Ouroboros has the wreckage of your vessel. He has the remains of your comrades. He is studying your weapons, your technology, your genetics...How many centuries will he have to now prepare for your war? How does the future change, now you have gifted us everything we need to know about you?"

The Dalek's rasping faltered and seethed. "Our mission has not failed. We will persist. We will prevail. We will-"

"Exterminate us?" I asked.

The robot trundled towards me, slowly, and jerkily, still ranting at me.

I stepped back away.

The Trickster gestured to the door.

"Goodbye," I said, walking away from the Dalek.

It stopped ranting and looked up.

The focussing array on the pylon was glowing red hot.

The doors swung closed behind me.

The spidery robot was waiting for me. A hologram shimmered above its head, between its mandibles.

It showed the inside of the spherical chamber as the pylons glowed white hot. It showered stellar matter into the dome. The howl of the dalek, as it was incinerated, and washed down the plughole in the bottom of the chamber is a noise I will not forget any time soon.

I winced, and looked away.

The Trickster stared at the hologram, his face set in a scowl. "So..." He said, quietly. "What have we learned?"

"Not to mess with the Trifectorate," I whispered.

He puffed out his cheeks. "And?"

"And..." I shuddered. "That thing was from a future, but not necessarily ours."

"Yes..." He said thoughtfully. "And that they will ensure your home fulfils what they consider its destiny."

I sighed. "That was not lost on me."

His smile remained in place, but was terribly sad. "I know your service record. Somebody with your skill will be useful in the fight to come."

"What happens to Skaro?" I asked.

“For now...” The Trickster gave me a serious look. “For now Omega will dispatch the fleet. Oh, it will be right up his street, playing the peacemaker, and threatening an orbital bombardment, then lots of ceremonial negotiations of peace, with lots of pomp, ceremony, and jackboots. He will be in his element. For the future? Time will tell.”

Perhaps I was mistaken, but I was sure, so sure, I saw a twinkle in his eye.

“Of course,” he said, lowering his voice, “a man of your abilities could do an awful lot to secure the peace, to give it a fighting chance at survival. Wouldn’t you say?”

“What do you want from me?” I asked.

“Me?” The Trickster gave me a sorry look. “I want you to go home and enjoy a hard earned peace. But *he* wants you to put your...particular gifts and skills to good use.”

He pointed past me.

A door opened behind me.

I... I struggle to remember what happened in the seven days between that moment, and my moving into my new quarters on Horus, five days later.

Sometimes, if I don’t look at it directly, I am...aware of a memory, in the corner of my vision. A suggestion of a broad, powerful man, with intense eyes, long dark hair, and a full greying beard, of a gloved hand carrying jewelled rings, and an ageless smile.

Or perhaps it was a dream, and my Lord Rassilon was not there at all.

Seven

Today

The *Minerva* shuddered as I phased out of hyperspace, and back into reality, into the Skaro System.

Although my life was now firmly rooted in Horus, part of me still thought of Skaro as my home. From as far out as the Phase-Beacon that marked the jump point, I could see Omega’s fleet anchored in Outer Orbit over the world, and I could see the extent of the changes in my lifetime, how far the Reconstruction had spread, and how much green was spilling out into the charred greys and yellows of the war-burned world, as the ecosystem healed itself.

The Fleet aimed their sensors at me.

I cranked down the Stealth Shield, and made myself plainly visible.

An ARC transmission buzzed against my awareness, with hailing frequencies.

This is the Dux Fortress. Identify yourself. Faris stated, bluntly,

I blinked open the link. “Dux Fortress, this is the *Minerva*, requesting permission to dock? Transmitting my credentials now.”

Permission granted, Faris responded. *Welcome home, Little Brother.*

She sent me a docking path, to a berth upon the Dux Fortress.

Omega's Fortress was six times the size of any other vessel in the fleet, shaped like a dagger, sleek and dangerous, it's forwards facing sun-killer cannon running the length of the ship's spine.

A docking berth folded open, and a pylon reached down to make contact with the Minerva, drawing her up into the Fortress.

I drew myself back into my body, and took a deep breath.

Hadrian followed on my heels. It didn't chatter, or try to bully me, but it watched me in its sulking, disapproving way, as I made myself a coffee, and took it with me, as I left the drab greys of the Minerva, and stepped out into the grand, airy white corridors and passageways of the Dux.

Koschei was there to greet me. "Callan."

"Sir." I bowed my head.

He put a hand on my shoulder. "It was a terrible business, but it had to be done."

I shook my head. "There should have been another way."

"He left us no choice," Koschei said, gently. There was something about his voice, about the sage wisdom and soft tone, the understanding in his eyes, that always quietened my misgivings, and nightmares. He looked into my eyes. "I am sorry. I know it was much to ask of you, but..."

"It was necessary," I agreed, "for the Empire."

Koschei nodded, and released my arm. "It is good to see you again."

I gestured out the window. "So... Have you been looking after Skaro for me?"

His brow furrowed. "The world is healing, but it is stubborn. If it is not the slither migrations, or the mutations from the great lake, it is some other nightmare. Vargra thorns keep straying past the defensive line, and encroaching on the Thal orchards in the Northern Pass. I don't suppose you would want to help take care of that?"

"Perhaps," I agreed. "Once I have had a hot bath, and slept for a few weeks."

He chuckled. "Well, unfortunately my Lord Omega already asked what I would need to find the source, and I already suggested your help would be very helpful... But... We can talk about that later."

I nodded, and stepped into an elevator.

Layla, my Artificer, was wearing a very particular smile as she opened the door to my apartment, in the starboard-aft sector. It was thin, dangerous, and full of mischief.

I smiled right back at her. "Layla."

She bowed her head, and took my coat from me.

Layla was a prim, austere, Draconian woman, speckled patterning around her soulful, keenly intelligent eyes. She tended to wear a silk scarf over her blue tunic waisted dress, to disguise the scars that her slave collar had chewed into her throat.

Some years ago now, I had been undercover, in one of the Border Principalities, and my work had followed my prey into an auction. I had bid on Layla to maintain my cover, and had freed her as soon as my target was... no longer in a position to threaten Omega.

Layla could have gone anywhere in the Empire to make her own life.

She had asked to stay at my side.

Her smile became a dimpled grin, as she straightened my tunic, and pointed to the reception room.

I squared my shoulders, and stepped through the inner door.

Jaynas was lounging on my couch, drinking my wine, and reading one of my antique books.

I closed the door behind me, and caught the titter of Layla's laughter, as she stepped out of the apartment, to go about her own life. (There was a Thal amongst the Liaison Council, with whom she was always able to find an excuse to spend time with).

Jaynas did not look up from the ancient book. "Your Artificer seems under the impression I am here to seduce you."

"Is she wrong?" I asked, finishing my coffee.

Jaynas licked her finger to turn the page. "Can she be trusted?"

I nodded. "Layla is very good at noticing other people's secrets, and very good at keeping them. I trust her with my life, my soul, and... everything I hold dear."

At last Jaynas looked up. "Now what have I told you about sentimental attachments?"

I gestured with my mug. "And yet here you are."

Her smile widened, revealing her fangs. "And yet here I am," she agreed, rising to her feet. "How long are you here for?"

"A while. Koschei has me earmarked for a problem down on the surface, and..."

She stepped dangerously close, close enough that I could smell her perfume, and the tang of her musk beneath. She took the mug from my hand, and set it aside. "And when will you be coming home?"

"As soon as I can," I promised, my hands finding her side.

She caressed my fingers. "Good. Do not make me hunt you, whenever I want..."

"When you want...?" I asked.

She pushed me playfully away. "You need a wash."

"And to sleep for a week," I agreed.

"You can do that," she said with a purr, "when I let you. Go and shower."

I showered.

By the time I was done, Jaynas was in my bed, wearing only the smile that showed off her fangs.

Eight Today

Jaynas had grown sentimental these last few years.

She was still in my bed, curled up against me, her hands tangled from mine, when I surfaced slowly from the deep, dreamless sleep that followed when we made love, and she drank deep on my life blood, when the warm and fuzzy bliss of her venom washed away all my thoughts.

She kissed at my neck, her lips finding the new scars that were already healing.

My fingers found the spot on her back that always made her purr.

The outer doors of my apartment hissed.

Jaynas glanced at me. "Layla?"

I shook my head, as I grabbed my dagger from under my pillow.

Jaynas hopped to her feet, her nanite-bodysuit flowing over her skin like mercury, her crossbow appearing in her hand with a click of her fingers.

I pulled on my trousers as we tiptoed to the door.

Something was moving in the hallway.

I pressed myself against the wall, beside the door. Jaynas flanked it on the other side.

The door hissed open, and Hadrian tottered through.

Jaynas let the tension out of her body, and flicked away crossbow.

My Minder chattered at me.

I held up my hands. "Let me guess... My Lord Omega commands me to join him?"

The robot chattered some more.

"Us," Jaynas corrected me.

I stared at the robot. "You can wait in the hall."

It squawked.

"No. I have never refused a mission," I told him. "I am not trying to escape, I just don't want to be watched, when I dress."

It warbled at me.

Jaynas glowered at the robot. "Leave us."

It took half a step back, then tottered away.



Lord Omega liked to meet his shadows on the Observation Deck, where he could look out upon his fleet of spear-shaped battleships, and the smaller vessels that swarmed around them.

Omega was a giant of a man, a towering hulk, built like a wrestler, but made more imposing by the segmented breastplate and angular helmet he wore over his robes, to hide some unsightly war wound, from his first crusade against the Vampires.

“My friends!” He said, greeting us with an open armed gesture. “There you are!” He marched forwards and crushed my fingers in a handshake that could have crushed a diamond. “Callan! Welcome home! Well... not *home* but... You know what I mean! It was a good hunt I hear? Well, as far as these things go... Look! I have a problem. Koschei keeps complaining about the damned fool cannibal plants wandering about the orchards and threatening to kill the locals, and bugging with my plans. But...” He summoned a hologram with a gesture of his hand. “The thorns are contained here, in this valley. They are accounted for. And their movements suggest they are coming from the East, where there shouldn’t be anywhere for them to come from. It’s all lifeless desert out there. So...”

“Where are the ones in the orchards coming from?” I asked.

Omega nodded. “The thirty seventh will clear the orchards and burn away the problems. We, are going to accompany Koschei, and find the source of these beasts, and if needed, burn it away at the root.”

“We?” Jaynas asked.

Omega tilted his head in a way that suggested a smile. “Well... The alternative is a High Council meeting, finalising the inter-imperial shipping tariffs... But I consider the food security of a population under my care a more pressing matter.” His tone suggested that watching paint dry would have been a more pressing matter if he couldn’t have found a more convincing excuse not to be on the meeting. “We leave in an hour, requisition whatever you need from the Quartermaster.”

“My Lord,” I said, bowing my head.



I banked the Minerva so that Omega could get a good look at his troops from the Thirty Seventh moving through the neatly ordered orchards on their wing-boards, hunting down the nightmare-thorns, and incinerating them with tachyon-lances.

“Head East,” Omega said.

I brought us about, and headed East, towards the hornet buzz of the Harmonic Shields that protected the Green Zone from the toxic, radiated, ruined air of the war-scarred lands beyond.

Something prickled on my long range scanners. The bit of me that was flesh and blood spoke out, as I displayed the readings on a hologram. “There is something out there. Some kind of radiation I don’t recognise.”

“Interesting,” Koschei said.

Jaynas shifted on her seat.

Omega rose to his feet. “Then let’s go take a look.”

I made a brief ARC contact with Skaro Planetary control, and they opened a hexagonal portal in the shield to let me through.

Once the Minerva was through the shields, I adjusted our heading, towards the source of the energy.

Jaynas looked at the shields closing behind us. “How could the thorns get through that? They have no technology, they have no intelligence, they are... instinctive hunters.”

Omega looked at her. “Suggesting they had help, which makes their presence a deliberate act of sabotage.”

The overspill of green gave way to the ash, rubble, and mud, of the war-scarred world.

There had once been lush rainforests in the valleys warmed by volcanic vents. Chemical weapons had reduced the valleys to a desert, and countless nuclear exchanges had turned the desert to glass.

The desert had always been thought to be lifeless, and yet... Whatever the radiation was, it was making it hard for my scanners to get a reading. “I think the radiation is some kind of cloaking field. I am compensating.”

It took a few seconds to fine tune the sensors.

Life signs blazed in my awareness. A forest of nightmare thorns, then there were slithers, and...

My heart stuttered.

My blood ran cold.

“No...” I whispered. “Oh no...”

Koschei stared at the holographic display. “What are those.”

Omega knew. His breath rasped through his helmet. “Take us in as close as we can be sure the Stealth Field will protect us.”

I did as I was ordered, and took us in towards the source of the radiation.

A city rose over the horizon.

It was neither the brutalist utilitarian designs of Kaled architecture, nor was it the graceful art-deco of Thal design, nor, for that matter, was it the gothic architecture of Gallifrey. The towers and spires were all simple shapes, with smooth, flowing lines, and a minimalist, purely functional, aesthetic.

Koschei tapped at the holograms. “So... I see... Paradox Power Sources, the radiation is coming from those five towers, and... Ah... and I think that pyramid is a Shield Disruptor.”

“Scan it,” Omega said, leaning in for a closer look. “Every inch.”

A small skimmer-kite detached from one of the spires.

“Callan,” Jaynas whispered.

“They haven’t seen us,” Omega assured us. “Show me the dome.”

The dome was at the centre of the city. It was a seamless, bronze structure, at the heart of the city, and... as soon as I turned my sensors on it, I saw it wasn’t a dome, it was a sphere, half buried under the glass surface of the desert, a sphere of something impossibly dense, that my scanners couldn’t get a clear read on.

Omega drew a sharp breath. “A Mavick Sphere!”

“A what?” Jaynas demanded.

“A theoretical device for crossing between dimensions,” Omega said. “A sphere containing hyperspace matter, used to bend time and space until-”

Jaynas grimaced. “And it transported those...daleks between realities?”

“It transported the city,” Koschei said. “And it must be... anchoring the whole city here.”

“Not for long,” Omega promised. He tapped his helmet to open an ARC Link. “Faris. I want you to target my current location. On my mark unleash a full bombardment, on a four Hex spread.”

Yes my Lord, Faris reported.

Omega glanced at me. “You will want to get us clear, Dusk.”

I brought us about, and headed out onto the plains.

“Open fire,” Omega barked.

The fleet overhead opened fire with their tachyon lances. Burning white rays rained down on the city, but never made contact.

In the instant that the lances seared through the upper atmosphere, a bubble of dark red energy enveloped the city, and a swathe of the desert, including us.

The bombardment shattered against the shield, in fountains of sparks.

I made frantic adjustments, but I didn't have time. The shield had materialised too close. All I could do was fight to minimise the impact and the damage.

We hit the shield with the portside of the Minerva. Her armour buckled, and superstructure caved in, with an agonising screech of complaining metal. The starboard engine burst into a fireball of white flame.

The pain of it all stole my breath in a scream.

We tumbled in freefall, trailing smoke.

I wrestled to level us out, and bring us down as safely as I could, carving a deep trench through the glass of the desert, as we jolted and bounced, before coming to a rest.

Minerva died around me. The cold darkness closed in about my thoughts, driving them back into the small part of me that was flesh and blood.

“We're alive!” Koschei said, leaping from his seat. “We're alive!”

“For the time being,” Omega agreed. “But we should not be here, when the Daleks come looking. Are any of you wounded?”

Jaynas pointed at Koschei. “His leg.”

Koschei scoffed. “I will be fine. I just need a moment.”

Omega hoisted my father over his shoulder. “We will not have a moment. Trust me, they are already on their way. We move out, now.”

I grabbed my carbine, and flicked up my hood.

Hadrian chattered urgently from its cubby hole. Two of its legs were mangled, and a third had been ripped off in the crash. The robot's sphere was cracked.

I grabbed the robot and dragged it with me.

Outside we ran, as best we could, for the hills of the valley.

Two Daleks on skimmer platforms shrieked down from the sky.

“Keep moving,” Jaynas snapped, ducking behind a rock. “Dusk?”

I crouched in cover behind a charred boulder, and folded out my carbine. “I’ll take the one on the left.”

She clicked her fingers, and summoned her crossbow. “As you wish.”

The Daleks circled over the wreck of the Minerva.

“The Ship Is Gallifreyan,” the silver and blue Dalek reported. “There are no bodies aboard.”

The red and gold Dalek with the clawed hand swivelled to scan the desert. “Find The Occupants And Exterminate Them.”

“Exterminate!” The silver Dalek confirmed.

Jaynas clicked her fingers, bringing her crossbow to hand.

I hurriedly unfolded my carbine, and tapped open the holo-sights.

The two Daleks turned and swept low across the desert towards us.

Jaynas gestured that we should concentrate our fire on the silver and blue Dalek first.

I nodded, anticipated their path, and planned my shot, drawing a deep breath and trying to steady my racing heart.

Then I moved, ducking out of cover, finding my aim, and firing three rapid shots into the grill of the silver Dalek. It screamed, black smoke and orange sparks belching from its grill. Its gun arm adjusted, taking aim at me, and fired off a neutron blast.

I ducked aside as the blue bolt chewed a chunk out of the boulder.

Jaynas glanced at me with a dangerous smile, as she reached around from the rock, and fired off a crystal bolt from her crossbow. It struck the silver Dalek in its eyepiece.

The results were instantaneous. The Dalek exploded in a dazzling fireball, and its wreckage tumbled to the floor, trailing thick oily smoke in its wake.

The red Dalek opened fire, unleashing a rapid salvo of blasts.

Jaynas pressed herself into cover, as the blasts tore deep craters from the rock.

I crept low, took aim, and adjusted my sights, finding the biological blob in the heart of the machine. My finger took the pressure from the trigger, and I fired off a bolt.

The Dalek’s gun arm went limp, and it pitched forwards, its skimmer diving down into the ground.

Jaynas and I ran, darting from cover to cover, one of us watching the horizon, with our finger on the trigger, as the other moved, following Omega and Koschei up the hillside.

Soon the Daleks were swarming out of the city and across the desert.

Omega was waiting for us further up the hillside, in a cave, a narrow crack in the rock, that seemed too small for a Dalek to pass through.

As we ducked inside, Jaynas touched my arm. “I’ll keep watch. Check on your father.”

I nodded and hurried to where Koschei was resting, against the wall of the cave.

He looked up at me, hiding a grimace of pain behind a confident smile. “Well, I shall have to stop telling what a good pilot my son is, now...”

I dug in my pockets for my emergency first aid kit, and set about binding the wound on his leg in an adaptive dressing. “Should you admit to telling people that?” I asked, nodding at Omega. “The decision is still in place.”

“I can’t recognise you, or name you my heir,” Koschei said, pointedly, “but I will never not be proud of all you have done for our House, and the Empire.”

Oh.

I looked him in the eye. “Koschei, you don’t need to talk like that. Your leg will heal.”

He smiled. “Yes, well, we are also trapped within some kind of dimensional-shield, with an army of Daleks, so you will forgive me, if I say the things that should be said, while I have a chance, before they squawk exterminate, and one way or another, we lose the chance. I am proud of you. Your sister adores you. So much of her mother in her.” He patted my hand. “And so much of your mother in you. Oh, how she would have wanted to have been here, Dusk. Do you...remember much of her?”

I shook my head. “Very little. I was so young when she was... When she...”

He nodded. “I should never have left, but... I could not refuse the summons home.” He looked at me, his smile changing. “Of course, when the Empire becomes Eternal, when time and space are ours to explore, why should we not see them again? We can not change history, but what use is absolute power if we can’t look on their faces one more time and say goodbye?”

“How’s this?” I asked.

He examined the dressing. “It will do for now.”

Omega turned to look at us. “I have a plan. I want to sabotage the Mavick Sphere, to dislodge their anchor, and cast them back into the great Void between realities.”

“How?” Jaynas asked.

Omega cocked his head. “We will use their Disruptor on the sphere’s containment field. As soon as the hyperspace material leaks out...” He took Hadrian from me. “Is that something you could do, my friend?”

Hadrian chattered happily.

“Good,” Omega purred.

I rubbed my face. “So, we head for the pyramid and throw a spanner in the works. How long will that give us to get clear?”

Omega shrugged. “A few minutes. Maybe less. Koschei should stay here. You will be safe enough.”

I glanced at Jaynas.

She nodded. “Nobody is safe while those things have a bridgehead here.”

Eight Today

We crept quickly and quietly through the Dalek city.

The camouflage on my coat bled between shades of grey and dark blue, as it adapted to my surroundings.

Omega was surprisingly stealthy for somebody with such a hefty build, clad in armour. He marched briskly, ducking nimbly between corners and doorways.

Eventually we found our way to the pyramid structure.

We crouched behind a low wall, and waited as a patrol of Daleks swept past. Once the coast was clear, Omega gave us the nod.

Jaynas went first, as we ducked over to the door, and glanced within.

There were four Daleks at the control pillars.

Jaynas gestured two each, and for me to take the ones on the left.

I nodded, took a breath, buried my misgivings, and set my carbine to fire in three round bursts. Ready or not, I moved, ducking through the door, and putting three blasts through the heart of the nearest Dalek, slaying the biological component. Before the second had a chance to find its aim, I turned and put three shots through its power core.

Jaynas moved like she was dancing, putting a bolt through the 'heads' of the two on the right. There was a pop of internal explosions, and they belched acrid smoke.

Satisfied, Omega followed us in, and set Hadrain on a control bank. "There you go, my friend. Do your worst."

The lights within Hadrain's bowl flickered and danced, as the readings on the screen shifted and changed.

I crossed the room, and opened the window, looking out onto over the bronze dome of the Mavick Sphere.

The air over the dome shimmered and distorted. Lightning flickered over the surface.

The whole city shook, with a sound like Skaro itself screaming in pain.

Omega nodded. "I think that will do nicely."

Something moved in the corner of my eye. One of the Daleks that Jaynas had felled, still belching smoke, raised its gun-stick with a shuddering, pained movement.

I tried to shout a warning, but didn't have time.

Jaynas was already spinning on her toes, and bringing up her crossbow, when the neutron blast hit her. For a moment her being flashed blue, too bright to look at, so bright I could see her skeleton within. Her body was dead, even before it crumbled away into dust and ash.

I blasted the Dalek, peppering its living component with a flurry of shots.

Omega put a hand on my arm. "We can not stay here. We have to go."

I shrugged him off, and crouched over the pile of dust and ash. There should have been words, for the loss, and the anguish that tore at my soul, but there were none.

“I’m... sorry,” I muttered, knowing it wasn’t enough.

“Dusk!” Omega said, urgently, but... not unkindly. “We have to go.”

I nodded and grabbed Hadrian.

We ran for our lives.

The city shook, as the buildings began to crack and crumble.

Daleks shrieked and cried, opening fire at us.

We didn’t slow, or look back.

We just kept running.

As we reached the foot of the hill, and another entrance into the caves, there was a sound like a banshee howl.

I looked back over my shoulder, as...the world warped and twisted, and hole tore open.

It wasn’t a hyperspace portal, it was... Something different, a tunnel that went on forever. I only glimpsed it for a a fraction of a second, but that second felt like it could have touched all of time, and all of space. It called to me. There were drums in that tunnel, a heartbeat, and it called to me... to step away from this little world and see somewhere new, somewhere different, somewhere... nobody had seen before.

The city, the Daleks, the sphere, the energy shield... it all dissolved into sparks and light, sucked into the hole, into the... *vortex* beyond, like water swirling into a plughole.

Then it was all just gone.

Dust settled over the glass desert.

Silence fell upon us.

But the drumming remained.

“Callan!” Koschei came hobbling out the cave. “My Lord! Did... did you see it?”

Omega’s breath rasped in his helmet.

“What was it?” Koschei asked, his voice...awed.

Omega turned slowly to face Koschei. “It was the void... the vortex between realities. It is... real. It can be navigated and travelled.”

Koschei stood before me. “Callan? Are you okay?”

I nodded. “I...” The sound of the Vortex drummed in my ears. “I lost her.”

“Jaynas,” Koschei whispered, understanding. “I... I am so sorry.”



Faris sat with me, in my apartment, and poured the tea. “So... What will you do now?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I have no ship. I lost Jaynas, I have... little left. Perhaps... it is time to go to Horus, and make a life for myself in the Palace, or to see Gallifrey itself, or...”

Faris nodded, and smiled. “You could come with us. Omega’s scouts have selected a viable sun to turn into the eternal power source. If we succeed, it will be the first page of new history. Come with us. Be part of it.”

I shook my head. “I want to find somewhere that feels like home. Besides... one of us has to keep Koschei out of trouble.”

Faris nodded and sipped her tea.

The console on my wall chimed.

I reached over and tapped to accept the message.

It was from... no... that couldn’t be right.

“Rassilon?” Faris whispered.

I nodded.

One did not refuse an invitation to Gallifrey from Rassilon.

“Well,” Faris said, with a smile. “I guess maybe you don’t get away that easily.”

Epilogue

When I closed my eyes, and lay back on my bed, I was in my new little apartment on Gallifrey, but now... now I am not.

I am strapped on a surgical table in a room the size of an aircraft hangar.

The distinctive gothic-heavy-metal must be the Rift Station.

Somebody looms over me. He speaks in a voice as old as time, long, historied, and austere. “You are unique, Callan Dusk, no longer of Skaro, nor of House Claudius. A mongrel, so much greater than the sum of your parts. A unique soldier, a talented agent...”

I glance to one side.

There is the wreckage of a Dalek machine, deconstructed over a workbench, and... I think the squid like thing in the tank is the Dalek creature.

“Ah yes,” Rassilon purrs. “One path your race could take, down the cascade of evolution. An engineered evolution. And a...portent, a glimpse of the dangers we will face when Omega’s mission succeeds and we become the Lords of Time. We...I... will need something more than soldiers, or... Shadows, to fight. Something greater.” He patted my shoulder. “Well, I say ‘we’ but of course... You can never be a Lord of Time. I am afraid Callan Dusk will die, and be forgotten. You... or part of you... will have to become something more. You will have to evolve.” There was a chuckle. “Still, there is nothing that can be engineered that I can not improve. Now, this... will not be without discomfort, but... my Shade will remember nothing of it.”

I try to talk, to scream, to beg and plead, but... I can not open my mouth, and my voice will not form words. Something clamps down on my will, and blocks those thoughts from reaching my lips. I thrash against my

restraints, desperate to break free, as something... not a helmet...some vast black sphere, that shines like darkness, is brought down over my head, and the mechanisms within worm their way into my skull and into my mind.

I try to howl in pain and horror, but can not.

I can feel my thoughts, my self, my memory, fading into cold darkness around me...

Nothing but *Trouble*

Episode 1: Troubling Developments

1 BRIDGE OF THE TROUBLE

1

The left doors open and the CAPTAIN walks in, looking like someone who woke up too early in the century. She is followed by ROSIE the Robot, carrying a tea tray.

SANDOR
(Rising from the Captain's chair)
Captain on the bridge.

Everyone stands.

CAPTAIN
Oh, sit down already, why don't you. It's too early in the morning for formalities.

ROSIE
Your tea, Ma'am.

CAPTAIN
English breakfast, 18 sugars?

ROSIE
(huffily)
Only two.

CAPTAIN
At least it's tea.

CAPTAIN
(Sitting down, blinking and sipping)
So... how much Absolutely Nothing has happened in the last twelve hours?

SANDOR
All of it. Except we're closer to Earth than we were.

CAPTAIN

Good. I need some real Italian food that I didn't make. Ah, tea...

The lift doors open again and DORCAS and the ADMIRAL enter. ADMIRAL is carrying a folder/tablet. DORCAS is now decked out in her breeding feathers and is very fancy indeed. Some joker starts humming "A Pretty Girl Is Like A Melody." The ADMIRAL sits and accepts a cuppa. DORCAS struts.



ADMIRAL

Captain, may I see you in your ready room, please?

CAPTAIN

(turning, looking suspicious)
Are there donuts?

ADMIRAL

Now?

CAPTAIN

(Sighing, standing up, pours another cuppa)

Dorcas, you have the com.

CAPTAIN and ADMIRAL leave the bridge.

2 INTERIOR, READY ROOM

2

The Ready Room is once again the Pirate Cabin. The CAPTAIN and ADMIRAL sit. ROSIE sets down the tea tray, leaves some donuts, and exits. ADMIRAL hands the folder to the CAPTAIN.

ADMIRAL

New orders for you.

CAPTAIN

Okay, as soon as we get you home, or is someone still coming to pick you up?

ADMIRAL

This first.

ADMIRAL hands the tablet to the CAPTAIN, who takes it with a sigh, opens it, and reads it.

CAPTAIN

Oh, they are kidding me. They are SO kidding me. Do you know about this?

ADMIRAL smirks.

CAPTAIN

I mean! *Ma cosa stavano pensando, quei bastardi? Cosa sta succedendo qui?*

(pours another cuppa and guzzles it down)

I mean, why me, of all people? This is a job for someone like you. You like people. I... whose idea was this anyway?

ADMIRAL

What exactly does it say?

CAPTAIN

(reading)

"You are to proceed to the star system APON-4553 and make contact with a civilization we believe to be there. You are to contact them personally, and write a full report of your experience so we can determine their suitability to join the Federation."

"Suitability?" Of all the inane drivel! So,

"Infinite diversity in infinite combinations" is out, then, is it. Should have figured.



"In addition, you are the turn the Murchee called 'George' to Starfleet headquarters by special messenger immediately upon receipt of this directive so that it can be studied properly." The hell I will! George was given specifically into my care, number 1. And number 2, I am a Ph.D. zoologist and I know what I'm doing. I will publish first, thank you very much. Don't think I don't know what's up here.

ADMIRAL

You're in a particularly bad mood today.

CAPTAIN

You know what I got this morning? Right when I woke up? A "directive" from Starfleet saying that I am to arrange to have George the Murchee sent to headquarters immediately. And why? Because they want him in the hands of "qualified persons" who can

"study him properly and maintain him in a suitable environment." In other words: I, a fully qualified Ph.D. Zoologist, shall not publish first and thus, hopefully, shall perish.

(Captain puts her head in her hands and growls.)
This whole universe sucks and will continue to suck until someone has the guts to do away with Publish or Perish.

So, I guess we're not taking you home, then?

ADMIRAL

Hmm. It appears my presence is assumed. I'll have to check on that.

CAPTAIN

Oh, so it's a test, then.

I'm sorry, I... I don't mean to be rude. I just don't trust Starfleet. As I'm sure you know. They are sending exactly, exactly, the wrong person to do this and I want to know why. There are people in Starfleet who have wanted the *Trouble* to fail from the beginning. Trying to make sure it happens, I'll bet. It's that Mayell guy, I'll bet.

ADMIRAL

I agree. That would be a good reason to keep me involved. I'm the one who pushed for this type of ship and crew. We didn't prove it can't work last mission. They are trying another approach. Research crew as amateur diplomats: How could that possibly go wrong?

I'll check with my people for more information about this mission and about which side of politics they want us to be on. Instinct says it be the opposite side of thee one that seems right,

CAPTAIN

I don't care what side they want us to be on. I'm on the "I don't care who started it, just stop it" side. Which they know. Now, if you need someone to control a group of Italian cousins, or manage a baseball team, I'm your girl... but... I'm getting too worked up about this, aren't I?

ADMIRAL

Perhaps. Better to get it out of your system now than when you meet with Starfleet to discuss the mission.

CAPTAIN

Unless you order me otherwise, I've got my job and I'll let them know when I'm done.

CAPTAIN gets up and returns to the bridge.

CAPTAIN

Ria, we need to go somewhere near APON-4553. Just sit where they can sense us, and we'll see if anyone comes out to say hello.

RIA

Will do.

CAPTAIN

Donuts. I need donuts. Rosie!

ROSIE appears with more tea, and donuts

CAPTAIN

(to ADMIRAL)

Any news from Mark's group?

ADMIRAL

They're still surveying the planet, looking for artifacts. He's under sealed orders, couldn't tell me any more than that.

CAPTAIN

(Nodding)

Groovy.

ADMIRAL

Sort of miss having him around.

CAPTAIN

I hear you. Bob's off helping debug a new engine. Don't know when he'll be back.

ADMIRAL

(shrugging)

Such is the life of the two-career Starfleet family.

CAPTAIN

So, once again we get to sit here in these chairs while we zip through hyperspace and be bored to tears in the process.

DORCAS

You can always admire my new feathers!

CAPTAIN

I am insufficiently caffeinated to admire anybody's feathers.

DORCAS

(Disappointed)

So, no D&D then?

CAPTAIN

Dorcias, your shift is over. Go to sleep.

DORCIAS

You never let me have any fun.

CAPTAIN

Good. Suffer, already. It builds character.

DORCIAS

Fine. See you later. Oh, by the way, I just heard that James Kirk guy made Admiral.

DORCIAS leaves the bridge, and Chip enters.

CAPTAIN

(in an even worse mood, if such a thing is possible)
Oooo, the Cheater in Chief made Admiral, how nice.
Settle down, Fa, settle down.
Ria, what do we know about this system we're going to?

RIA

White star, fourteen planets, five rocky, the rest gas and ice. We occasionally intercept signals from there, but nothing constant.

CAPTAIN

Well, that's nothing to worry about. The broadcast window of most civilizations is pretty short. Long enough for a few years of reruns of *I Love Lucy*, then they go digital. So, chances are, it's an "advanced" civilization, whatever that means. Chip, you know anything about these guys?

CHIP

I will in a bit.

CHIP moves away to a station and begins tapping on various buttons and screens with her antennae.

3 EXTERIOR, the TROUBLE in orbit

3

The *Trouble* is parked in orbit around a gas giant, far from a Type A-4 star. Several planets are visible as bright objects in the distance.

CAPTAIN

(V.O.)

Lu Registru della Capitana, Jorru della Stelle,
2403.11.

We are in a parking orbit around a gloriously ringed planet, far out in system APON-4553. There are several small planets further in, and the usual gaggle of moons. Seems to be a good deal of traffic between all of the above, so we know someone is home. Our hailing frequencies are open (though as usual, we have no real idea what frequencies they use around these parts), and we're sitting here waiting for someone to come say hello, if they're inclined to do so.

INTERCUT: The Bridge

Suddenly, the CAPTAIN looks up. Slowly, an evil grin spreads over her face. She begins to chuckle. Everyone turns to look. They know that chuckle.

CAPTAIN
(getting up and heading for the lift)
I'll be back shortly.

The CAPTAIN disappears into the lift. There are a few seconds of silence.

SANDOR
So this is it, we're going to die.

4 INTERIOR, CORRIDOR outside the Captain's quarters

4

The CAPTAIN is standing outside the door to her quarters. MORIARTY is "hiding" behind the Palm Tree, and deliberately failing.

CAPTAIN
So good of you to come. Come in.

MORIARTY
Chirp!

CAPTAIN
After you.

The CAPTAIN opens the door, and MORIARTY trots in.

INTERCUT: Captain's Quarters

MORIARTY is sitting on the couch. The CAPTAIN sits next to sahn.

CAPTAIN
I have a little quest for you.

MORIARTY
Oh? Will I enjoy it?

CAPTAIN
I suspect you will indeed enjoy it.

MORIARTY
Do tell...

CAPTAIN
You're familiar with George the Murchee, yes?



MORIARTY

Comprendo, si.

CAPTAIN

I want you to steal George.

MORIARTY

(wrong-footed)

Oh?

CAPTAIN

I want you to steal George. Then I want you and George to get in my yacht, and fly to my home in Brooklyn.

MORIARTY

(Leaning forward)

Tell me more.

CAPTAIN

You are to take up residence in my home in Brooklyn, set George up with whatever he needs, and then you are to guard George from all visitors, uhm, police.. kidnappers, and other miscreants, by whatever methods you find most, shall we say, entertaining.

MORIARTY

Interesting. And what has George got to say about this?

CAPTAIN

I've already spoken to George, he's all for it.

MORIARTY

(after giving this some consideration)

I am to acknowledge that it was I who stole George, and Amelia.

CAPTAIN

Yup.

MORIARTY

I am also to maintain that we never had this discussion.

CAPTAIN

Exactly.

MORIARTY

(slowly grinning)

I knew there was a reason I liked you!

CAPTAIN and MORIARTY shake hands.

5 INTERIOR, the BRIDGE, Looking at the front viewscreen.

5

The *Trouble* is parked in orbit around a gas giant, far from a white star.
 b0Several planets are visible as bright stars in the distance.

CAPTAIN

(V.O.)

Lu Registru della Capitana, Data delle Stelle,
 2403.11.

We are in a parking orbit around a gloriously ringed planet, far out in system APON-4553. There are several small planets further in, and the usual gaggle of moons. Seems to be a good deal of traffic between all of the above, so we know someone is home. Our hailing frequencies are open (though as usual, we have no real idea what frequencies they use around these parts), and we're sitting here waiting for someone to come say hello, if they're inclined to do so.

CHIP

(Having taken over Dorcas' shift)

Captain, message from Starfleet.

CAPTAIN

On screen, please.

View switches to front screen. A grizzled Starfleet officer, Commodore Mayell, appears. He looks extremely annoyed, but that may just be Resting Bitch Face. Mayell and the Captain are old enemies for many, many reasons.

CAPTAIN

Greetings, Sir. What can we do for you on this lovely day?

MAYELL

You were instructed to return the creature called "George" to Starfleet headquarters. It's been two days. It's not here.

CAPTAIN

It's not here either.

MAYELL

What do you mean, it's not there?

CAPTAIN

It's not here.

MAYELL

What? Are you saying it escaped?

CAPTAIN

It is not aboard the *Trouble*, so I suspect "escape" is not the operative word.

MAYELL

You mean it's been stolen?



CAPTAIN

(utterly unfazed)

That's my guess.

MAYELL

(turning red)

You allowed an unregistered alien animal to be stolen from your ship?!

CAPTAIN

I was not consulted in the matter.

MAYELL

(sputtering)

You have extremely lax security on that ship, Shimbo!

CAPTAIN

(before Mayell can go on, and speaking in Big Sister Command Voice)

I had extremely good security on my ship, but in the middle of a mission, Starfleet re-assigned it off the ship without even consulting me.

MAYELL

I don't like your tone, Shimbo.

CAPTAIN

I'm telling you the absolute truth, in the manner appropriate to my Italian-American Culture.

Someone in the background snickers; it may be on either side.

MAYELL

(pinching his fingers)

You are this far away from being insubordinate.

CAPTAIN

(raising eyebrows, smiling benignly)

With all due respect, Commodore; shall I stand a little closer?

MAYELL

Mayell out.

CAPTAIN rolls eyes and goes back to her chair. Looks around, notices the bridge crew is staring.

CAPTAIN

(waving nonchalantly)

Oh, we have a long, long history. All the way back to 4th grade. Nothing to worry about. Where's my tea?

CHIP

Captain, we have a visitor.

TO BE CONTINUED...

The Ghost House

by Fara Shimbo

Chapter 18. Maddie's Story

"On my tombstone," Evelyn said to herself, "it's going to read, 'Finally done with the laundry!'"

She was carrying a basket of same as she walked past Phil's room, once again with its "ON AIR" sign. She stopped for a moment and heard:

"Sound check... sound check... okay, that's good, leave it there. Let me see now..."

"I think you should use this music clip," came Maddie's voice.

A short bit of bumper music.

And a snort or sneeze from Shiro.

And somehow or other, Evelyn realized, she had heard all this before.

The same words.

Said in the same way.

It turned out, Phil had not bothered to lock his door.

"It was at that very moment in her young life," Maddie declaimed, raising her arms expansively, "that she had realized that she, Esmeralda de la Belle-Fontaine, was destined for greatness!"

Léonie shook her head and rolled her eyes.

Maddie continued with *The Story of the Kitchen*.

"This would be the finest, biggest, hugest, most elaborate wedding cake of all time! It would glitter with those little silver-covered sugar balls you get. And if she could get the gold leaf out of that bottle of Goldwasser, how it would sparkle! None of those cheap, *tawdry* holographic sprinkles on this cake!" Maddie had just encountered the word "tawdry" and now used it constantly, regardless of how appropriate it might have been.

In the living room, Jade was regarding the painting of the dogs with great care. She'd pulled up a chair, and was running her fingers over it. The painting she saw was of dogs. But the painting she felt was not.

She ran her hands around the edges of it. Just here, a bit of paint was flaking off. She got it under her fingernail and pulled.

There was paint underneath, but it was a different color; a bright magenta, rather than the green (she assumed it was green) of the grass.

She wondered if she could get any more of the top paint off. Now that she could see, she was keen to see what was underneath this layer, of the only painting in the house.

"She opened the box. Yes, the spice company had sent exactly what she'd ordered: finest vanilla from Madagascar." (She pronounced it, "madra-gas'ker.") "Cinnamon from the Spice Islands. Cocoa from somewhere in South America. It was secret cocoa, so she didn't know exactly where in South America it grew, that's how exotic it was. And also, Essence of Jasmine from Egypt. That was the Ultimate Ingredient that would make the cake a success."

Léonie rolled her eyes. She'd always hated the smell of jasmine.

"Léonie! *Regardez encore l'image des chiens ici!*" Jade whispered.

Léonie realized that.. rather than watching her expressively emoting granddaughter, she had been looking through the pass-through between the kitchen and the living room. It didn't need to be there; she never allowed eating outside the kitchen or dining room. But it was either build a pass-through or patch the hole in the wall that ... well, never mind.

"*Que fais-tu là?*"

"*Je ... je ne sais pas ... il-y-a, bas de ces pigments...*" Jade wasn't sure she had the right words. "*Sous le tableau ici, est un autre image. Les couleurs ont ... mais, regardez-vous ici, s'il vous plait.*"

Léonie came and stood a bit closer, and examined the spot at which Jade was pointing. "*C'est rien, ma chérie. L'artiste vient jus'que de peindre sur une toile ancienne, c'est tout.*" ["It's nothing. The artist just painted over an old canvas."] She went back to the kitchen to hear the rest of Maddie's story.

Jade couldn't see the painting any longer; Léonie was watching Maddie now. But she could feel the painting, and methodically, with great care, she began to tease away more and more of the top coat of paint.



“Her sous-chefs were astonished! These ingredients! How could they possibly go together? Nobody added pepper to apricot essence! Especially not in a cake! But they all stood aside reverently as she put the pans in the oven, to be cooked until golden brown.

“Then, Esmeralda began on the icing! Oh, the icing would be a feast for the senses! Once the happy couple tasted this, they would want to get married every week just to be able to taste it again.”

Léonie held up a hand. *“C’est bien, ma enfante, mais... pour qu’une histoire soit bonne, il lui faut une intrigue. Jusqu’à présent, tout ce que j’ai entendu, c’est une recette.”* [“It’s well, my child, but for a story to be good, it needs a plot. So far, all I’ve heard is a recipe.”]

Maddie stopped gesticulating, looked momentarily abashed, and then said, “I’m getting to that!” and began again with a description of exactly how she was going to make the flowers for the cake.

Her monologue was interrupted by Shiro barking, and the sound of running feet. Phil practically dove through the kitchen window. “She’s coming!” he shouted.

“What?”

“Well, I think she is, but she went to the Jolies’ first.”

“Who went to my house first?” Maddie snorted.

“My mom!” Phil said, panting. “I went to the bathroom and put the tablet recording on loop and she heard it, she figured it out and she went running out of the house. We gotta leave! Sorry, Léonie, they’re gonna—”

“Oh, not NOW,” Maddie grumbled.

“Jade! Come on!”

Jade leaned through the pass-through. *“Léonie, regardez-vous maintenant le tableau! C’est importante! Depechez-vous!”* [Look at the painting now! Hurry up!]

Léonie moved to the living room.

“There isn’t time!” Phil whined. “If they catch us in here we’re done for!”

Léonie waved him off, and went to look at the painting. Now Jade could see what was under the area she had cleared. It was the neck and shoulder of a woman, in a surrealist style. She wore a satin gown of deep violet with magenta trim, and around her neck one could see part of an elaborate, ruby necklace. In the bottom corner was part of a signature: “agall.”

“*Mon Dieu,*” Léonie said, very quietly. “That necklace... it was mine! It was made only for me!”

